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Making Poetry To Invent Policy: The practice of Helen Mayer Harrison and Newton Harrison

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Helen Mayer Harrison and Newton Harrison¹ are eminent conceptual and ecological artists. It is based on a study of their practice, and a period of two years working with the Harrisons and David Haley on a project entitled *Greenhouse Britain: Losing Ground, Gaining Wisdom*.^{2 3}



*Greenhouse Britain: Losing Ground,
Gaining Wisdom*

This project started with the Harrisons' observation that the shape of the island of Britain would change as a result of sea level rise. The artists understood this in terms of a concept around which meaning could be developed. They have been proposing new and alternative perspectives based on systems or ecological thinking for 35 years. In their terminology the objective is to re-orient beliefs towards eco-cultural well-being.

Greenhouse Britain involved extensive research in partnership with a number of institutions including the Tyndall Centre for Climate Change Research, and Sheffield University's Landscape Department as well as practising architects. It was enabled by a large grant from DEFRA. It resulted in an exhibition that toured across England to Exeter, Shrewsbury, Manchester, Bristol and London. It is going on to be shown in Taiwan and New York.



*Greenhouse Britain installed at the Centre for
Contemporary Art and the Natural World, Exeter –
Photo: Clive Adams*



*Greenhouse Britain installed at the Holden Gallery,
Manchester Metropolitan University - Photo: the Author*

The Harrisons are conceptual and ecological artists. In their case the 'idea' or 'concept' that is at

¹ Hereinafter I will use the Harrisons except where I am referring to quotes from either of them specifically.

² This paper is written in the context of practice-led research which is understood to be the means by which the practitioner articulates their practice in such a way that it is comprehensible to other people. This is partly achieved through the work, through self-reflection, but also through contextualisation and the application of theory. Dr Anne Douglas, Director of On The Edge Research frequently uses John Dewey's quote to emphasise this point:

“Activity that is not checked by observation of what follows from it may be temporarily enjoyed. But intellectually it leads nowhere.” (ref) Dewey Experience and Education 1938 reprint Touchstone 1997

³ All images are copyright the artists unless otherwise specified

the heart of the work is not abstract or self-referential. Rather it is, in their own terms, the 'ennobling' idea – the work which is devoted to the *prima facie* greater good:

“...the progression from an initial decision, made in '69-'70, to do no work that did not in some way look at ecosystemic well-being.”⁴

Helen Mayer Harrison notes that one of the contributions that led to this commitment was reading Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*, which documented the detrimental effects of pesticides on environment and in particular on birds.⁵ Their early works in the 1970s with a series entitled *Survival Pieces* which involve the construction and maintenance, in gallery contexts, of environmental systems such as fish farms and orchards.

The primary critic and theorist who has addressed the work of the Harrisons is Grant Kester. In his book *Conversation Pieces* Kester sets out the argument for what he calls a dialogic aesthetic.⁶ He argues that a raft of artists who develop their practices in the late 60s move beyond the aesthetic product and focus their aesthetic on the interaction between the work and the viewer. He describes this as post-Greenbergian, or post modernist. For these artists, the art intentionally lies in the engagement with the viewer rather than in the aesthetic of the object. The view is not passive in relation to the art, but expected to participate in it – it is intended to challenge their perception of the world.

He quotes Newton Harrison:

“I don't think about our art as product at all. As a guiding thought 'product' is counter-productive [G]enerally we make installations which stand for the place and as a meeting ground for discourse”⁷

It can be argued that the Harrisons work has modernist characteristics. They acknowledge a debt to the Bauhaus, understanding their own practice as located between the utopian and the practical. But Kester's fundamental argument is correct: the objective of the work to create the circumstances to engage the viewer in a dialogue.

Kester highlights the importance in the work of the Harrisons of moving away from dialectical thinking into discussion which accepts and values multiple points of view. The Harrisons, in creating a work, identify a 'field of play' in which they operate, in which conversations take place, within which an icon may be found, out of which an icon may be created, and in which synthesis of both scientific and historical/social knowledge can take place.

“There are many forces and voices operating in the conversation: you can play with them all”⁸

If the purpose of the work is to create “installations which stand for the place and as a meeting ground for discourse”, that is also the way that the work is created.

The work is made through intense investigation of contexts, places, environments. All of these words are loaded, and imply different values and focuses. The Harrisons challenge assumed social political readings of context, place and environment. They do this through two primary questions: 'How big is here?' and 'How long is now?' The Harrisons draw on both local knowledge and a range of disciplines including the environmental sciences and policy, architecture, economics and politics. They work with cartographers. They focus on the ecological answers to these questions. Collaborators have commented that one of the strengths of the Harrisons is 'knowing the right questions to ask'.

The work is a synthesis of huge amounts of scientific and historical/social knowledge. This is synthesised through storytelling. This storytelling is both visual and verbal. The aim is to develop a 'new narrative of place'.

The Harrisons have coined the term 'conversational drift' and I think this term represents both the

⁴ p.1, From There to Here, Harrison Studio, 2001

⁵ Ref

⁶ Conversation Pieces:Community and Communication in Modern Art, Grant Kester, University of California Press, date - 2004

⁷ p.64, Kester

⁸ p.65, Kester

sense in which the field of play for multiple voices operates, and also the way in which the work, when successful, takes on a life of its own, moving off into the world.

So firstly let us look at the conceptual construction of the work.

During the 70s they made a major work in seven parts entitled the *Lagoon Cycle*. The *Lagoon Cycle* is a meditation on their, and by inference our, relationship with the world. This work sets out the primary dynamics of their practice as it has continued over the following 35 years including the use of multiple voices, a concern understanding and addressing ecological systems, and a focus on the importance of beliefs. In the *Lagoon Cycle* the two primary voices are the Lagoonmaker and the Witness. This structure allows the work to be at once propositional and reflective.

I said
What would happen if I told you the story just as
it occurred

You said
How could you
Every time we recreate the past it is different

I said
Then let us reinvent ourselves

You said
We are always doing that anyway

I said
Let's do it publicly

You said
From one point of view or another
everything is visible and public⁹

The work is prophetic and raises fundamental questions concerning the relationship between human agency and the environment. The last section of the *Lagoon Cycle* demonstrates the prophetic nature of their work, and was used extensively by the Harrisons during the development of *Greenhouse Britain*.

And the waters will rise slowly
at the boundary
at the edge
redrawing that boundary
continually
moment by moment
all over
altogether
all at once

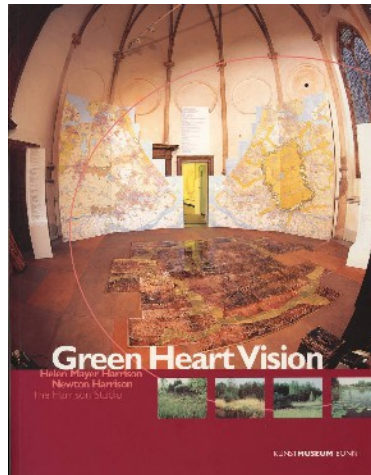
It is a graceful drawing and redrawing
this response to the millennia of the making of fire

And in this new beginning
this continuously rebeginning
Will You feed me when my lands can no longer produce
and will I house you when your lands are covered with water
so that together
we can withdraw
as the waters rise¹⁰

This paper focuses on the Harrisons' work *Green Heart Vision*, made in Holland and completed in 1995.

⁹ p.26, *Lagoon Cycle*, Cornell University, New York, 1985

¹⁰ p. ?? *Lagoon Cycle*, Cornell University, New York, 1985



*Cover of Green Heart Vision
Catalogue*

This paper will focus on *Green Heart Vision* because the original motivation to write this paper came from reading the text and recognising that it was at once a planning document and at the same time a poem. It appeared that in the language of planning the ideas contained within the work would have required hundreds of pages, but in this work it amounts to nine poems and perhaps a dozen images.

The *Green Heart Vision* is a work which was made at the invitation of the Cultural Council of South Holland. The Harrisons, in Newton's words, were invited to redirect a hundred billion guilder economic engine. The Cultural Council were concerned that 600,000 houses were going to be built on an area characterised by villages, farms and polders, what we would call greenfield.



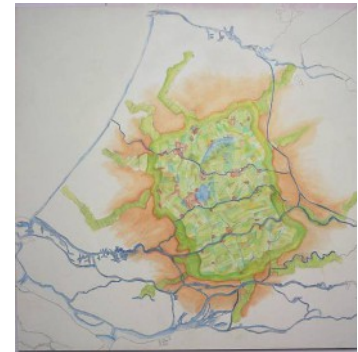
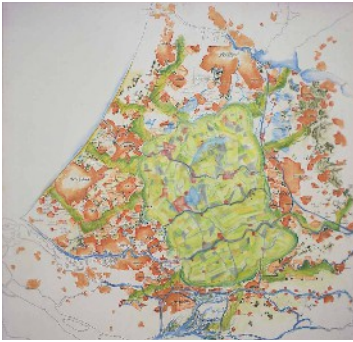
Green Heart Vision exhibition

Within the storytelling the Harrisons adopt and explore existing language. So in the case this case the answer to the question 'How big is here?' and 'How long is now?' became focused on the 'Green Heart' of Holland.

It had been named in the mid-thirties
by a pilot the founder of KLM
when he flew over the area.
He said
and everyone quotes him
"This is the Green Heart of Holland"¹¹

It is an area surrounded by the cities of Rotterdam, Amsterdam, Den Haag, Utrecht, Delft and others.

¹¹ p. ?? *Green Heart Vision*, Cultural Council and Province of South Holland, Harrison Studio, 1995



Green Heart Vision images

Green Heart became a metaphor in this work which was deployed both verbally and visually.

Seeing it as a metaphor
for yet another contest
as to who will shape the future
of this physical terrain
understood to be the Randstad
and the Green Heart.¹²

Kester notes the importance of the spatial imagination evidenced in the work.¹³ This is evident in the work:

Looking at the map of Holland
Seeing it as the expression of a moment
in 1200 years of contested history¹⁴

and

It was a large area
but nobody agreed on how large¹⁵

By focusing on the words Green Heart and the cultural history that was attached to the words, the Harrisons were able to begin to build up and attach a wide range of knowledge and understanding to the term. They also used it expressly as a metaphor, without drawing on the biological heart as metaphor, they articulate the metaphorical ecological heart.

A never before conceived
eco-cultural amenity
that acts also as an air purifying system
and as a water purifying system
and as a water retaining system¹⁶

This is juxtaposed with the threat of development and the consequences of 'Bad Government'

It happens.
An unfortunate reversal
can occur
where a system that has worked well
over time and over space
to the advantage of many
and the disadvantage of few
can slowly over time
begin to work against its own interests
to the disadvantage of many

¹² p. >> Harrison Studio, 1995

¹³ p. ?? Kester, date

¹⁴ p. ?? Harrison Studio, 1995

¹⁵ p. ?? Harrison Studio 1995

¹⁶ p. ?? Harrison Studio 1995

and the advantage of few¹⁷

I am not going to go into all the elements that build up the metaphor in this case, but you can begin to see that the Harrisons are drawing on cultural history, focusing on the ecosystemic scale, introducing the key values (of clean air and clean water), and articulating both the thing and the challenges within the work.

The Harrisons argue that by working with metaphor they are able to engage people's imaginations and draw them into the discussion on the artists' terms.

Metaphors allow them to make certain sorts of imaginative moves – in some cases flipping perceived expectations, and in others drawing out existing and intuitive understanding.

They seek to create an icon to encapsulate the metaphor. An icon is of course normally understood to be an image – the Virgin Mary for instance – but it is in fact a vessel for a much larger understanding fundamentally based on a story – in other words it is both words and images. An icon is also a focus for meditation on the subject of the icon, and meditation, intense reflective thought about something is the objective of the work.

In this case of the Green Heart of Holland, they enable people to begin to grasp their own circumstances and engage positively. It is not that the problems go away. Rather it is that the icon has the potential to enable people to break out of the deadlock of on the one hand overwhelming detail, and on the other hand apparent abstraction.

And in *Green Heart Vision* we find the practical experience of environmentalism summed up:

Some wanted to know
Where the money would come from
many others
how to stop development
others
how to stop
too many trees from being planted
others
how to stop
greenhouses
from overrunning their villages.
Others
asked why we were there at all
and how would we solve this
or that
problem
as there were so many.
It was as if the hope
engendered by this image
evoked a concomitant flow of doubt
then
doubt reversing
many
over time
offered intelligent suggestions
and support.¹⁸

The description conjures up in our minds many meetings about planning policy or environment issues. The last sentence highlights one of the key characteristics of the Harrisons' work, which is an understanding of the psycho-dynamics of people when faced with complex problems.

These texts are made to be performed and to be read. Although there are many texts in a work, each is intended to be read in a couple of minutes. Texts emerge from a distillation of the experience of the research. Although the form of the text is developed iteratively between the two

¹⁷ p. ?? Harrison Studio, 1995

¹⁸ p.19, Harrison Studio, 1995

artists, most of the content has been said before, either specifically where conversations are rehearsed, or more generally where ideas are expressed that have been developed over a period. The texts only become printed word at the point where an exhibition is put together.

The Harrisons acknowledge a debt to a colleague, David Antin who developed a practice of extemporised talk poems. They also acknowledge more generally the importance of ethnopoetics, the study of poetry in the context of aboriginal or first nation peoples, for placing priority on speech over the written word.

So in conclusion I'd like to quote Newton Harrison once more. Most artists place great emphasis on the form of the work. Newton tells the story that Green Heart Vision was enormously successful – it was adopted as policy by the Green Party. Helen reminds him that they had a review in the Dutch Financial Times. This success lasted a matter of weeks. There was an election and the Green Party lost. All the plans were shelved. Five years later they got a phone call. Politics had changed again, and their plan was being revisited.

“We found out that what they had done is – and this is a stunning thing – they had dismantled our icon... but they had accepted the working principles: that major cities will be separated by parkland, their way. The ecosystems will be made continuous, but in their way. Their way was not to make a biodiversity ring, but to widen the rivers, and in so doing, make long continuous bands ...

We found that we were really successful in a new way. We started to design our work differently. When we designed our work, we would invent our icon. The icon would explain the work. It would be powerful in the sense that icons are. But, to enable and enact this work, we made it so that it was able to be recreated, redesigned and dismantled and put together again.”¹⁹

¹⁹ Newton Harrison, public lecture, Gray's School of Art, Aberdeen, 24 March 2006