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Research: Knowledge and Method

Reflections on Helen Mayer Harrison, Newton Harrison and David Haley's practice

Chris Fremantle,
with assistance from Professor Anne Douglas and David Haley

This paper is by way of an initial attempt to articulate a set of thoughts that are still emergent. These thoughts are concerned with artists working in public life. They are concerned with the form of research that artists do. They are concerned with the uses of knowledge.

Greenhouse Britain: Losing Ground, Gaining Wisdom (2005-2008) was undertaken by Helen Mayer Harrison, Newton Harrison (the Harrisons) and David Haley, and which I joined as producer. More generally I tend to describe myself as a producer and researcher.

The research word has a number of uses and I am going to try and make a little sense of them first by identifying the various individual relationships with research.

Helen Mayer Harrison and Newton Harrison are Professors Emeritus of the University of California at San Diego, and have been involved in research on at least two levels for much of their career. *Greenhouse Britain* is typical of their work (as well as the work of David Haley) in that it involved working with scientists and others: people working on the ground with environmental issues such as farmers and water engineers.

They describe their practice in the following terms:

"Our work begins when we perceive an anomaly in the environment that is the result of opposing beliefs or contradictory metaphors. Moments when reality no longer appears seamless and the cost of belief has become outrageous offer the opportunity to create new spaces - first in the mind and thereafter in everyday life."¹

David Haley is a Senior Research Fellow at Manchester Metropolitan University, as well as being Programme Leader for MA Art as Environment. He is an artist and his research is integral to his practice.

My involvement in *Greenhouse Britain* was not as researcher, though I am now reflecting on the project as researcher. My involvement in research is primarily through On The Edge (OTE), a practice-led research programme based at Gray's School of Art in Aberdeen. I have over the past two years been working on *The Artist as Leader*.

The Artist as Leader seeks to draw out the role of the artist leading through practice, in juxtaposition with the current focus on cultural leadership which is largely focused on the leadership of cultural institutions. The Harrisons have been one of a number of reference points of artists leading through practice.

My research is therefore into understanding the ways in which artists work in public life, not in an art historical sense, but rather from a position as practitioner, albeit personally as producer rather than artist. I don't do this research in isolation. I work within a team. This team is led by Professor Anne Douglas who has a background as a sculptor and public artist. Other members of the team are artists and producers. I'll take this opportunity to credit both Anne and David for contributing to this paper in various ways.

The project *Greenhouse Britain*, as with all good research, is focused by the question,

¹ Quoted on www.theharrisonstudio.net accessed 10 November 2008

“The oceans will rise gracefully (accepting storm surges). Can we withdraw with equal grace?”

This question was developed through the work starting in 2005 with the Harrisons' keynote at the Evolving the Future conference in Shrewsbury and the subsequent programme of workshops including one held at Gunpowder Park. This was research, not in terms of what are the facts, or what is the method, but rather in relation to the experience of reality and the understanding of the cost of belief.

“Moments when reality no longer appears seamless and the cost of belief has become outrageous...”²

I'd like to suggest that the four of us are all involved in two senses of research. We do research that is required to make a work. This includes both what is termed primary and secondary research, i.e. both looking at other research to see what is known, and also undertaking research to collect new data.

We also reflect on our practices. We do this specifically, seeking to understand what we are doing. At On The Edge we frequently draw on John Dewey who said,

“Activity that is not checked by observation of what follows from it may be temporarily enjoyed. But intellectually it leads nowhere. It does not provide knowledge about the situations in which action occurs nor does it lead to clarification and expansion of ideas”³

A more specific construction of this was offered by Aslaug Nyrces in terms of practice led research needing three dimensions – a language with which to speak about our own work, an understanding of other practices, and a theoretical framework with which to interrogate the work.⁴

I am now going to turn to the image of what an artist researcher is to create a foil against which to juxtapose some aspects of the way we worked.

I want to suggest that there we often assume that the artist researcher is an explorer in an unknown territory, making discoveries for the first time, in awe of the world around them and the things they find, going where no-one has gone before. I would go so far as to suggest that this is our assumption about 'authentic' research.

I'd like to suggest that this is not the only way of understanding artists' research and that there are other important dimensions. I am going to focus on a couple of points – knowledge and then method.

Greenhouse Britain took place in the context of the ongoing discourse on global warming. This is a field that the Harrisons and David Haley know a great deal about. When I say they know a great deal about it, I mean they know a great deal about the science and the policy, as well as having made significant art works in relation to the subject.

I'd like to indicate the extent of this knowledge of science and policy by pointing to just one aspect of it.

One of our partners in Greenhouse Britain has been Jamie Saunders. Jamie is a 'policy wonk' working on sustainability in local government. He is also a futures person – by that I mean he has made a study of, and applies in his work, the discipline of futures. He has recently graduated with “an MA in Foresight and Futures Studies from Leeds Metropolitan University. A course that is unique in the UK and specifically tailored to the study of possible, probable and preferable

² Quoted on www.theharrisonstudio.net accessed 10 November 2008

³ Dewey *Experience and Education* 1938 reprint Touchstone 1997

⁴ Aslaug Nyrces, *Lighting from the Side: Rhetoric and Artistic Research*, Bergen Academy of the Arts, 2006

futures.”⁵

He fed us a steady stream of information on environmental science, policy and practice. I have a folder on my computer with 719 emails in this stream of knowledge – it is slightly less than one a day over two years. And this was only one information feed into the project.

So this project was informed on three levels, not only by 35 years of working on environmental issues; but also by an absolutely up to date stream of news about policy, science and practice; and by work with the Tyndall Centre for Climate Change Research; the University of Sheffield's Landscape Department; and APG Architects. The work with each of these partners involved 'research to make the work'. The Tyndall Centre modelled the impact of storm surges on sea level rise for the central element of the work. The Landscape Department at the University of Sheffield hosted a charette to develop ideas for *The Upward Movement of People*; and APG architects developed the animation for *In Defense of Bristol*, and elements of the work in the Lee Valley.

I am highlighting this because, through *The Artist as Leader* research, the importance of knowledge has been highlighted as a key construction of leadership.

Philip Schlesinger, Director of the Centre for Cultural Policy Research at the University of Glasgow, when we interviewed him for the Artist as Leader, said about knowledge and policy,

“And if you don't talk the talk, and you don't walk the walk, you're in a strange kind of state of total non-recognition which is probably equivalent to being mad – or being regarded as mad.”⁶

Schlesinger was talking about the artist needing to be aware of their circumstances, to pay attention to more than simply the work in the studio. But I think that it is even more true for artists who seek to work in the context of public life, whether that is the social or the political or the economic, or as is sometimes the case, a convergence of all of these.

Of course the real work is in knowing what to focus on and how to synthesise a meaningful work of art. The Harrisons articulate aspects of this process when they talk about the 'field of play' and 'figure ground' relations. They describe their work as fundamentally developed from art and design skills.

“We define a field of play in much the same way, except that the scale-shift is profound; measured in orders of magnitude. But, at whatever scale, the capacity of a work of art is to echo and re-echo not only as images in the mind but with what might be called the affect evoked by these images.”⁷

The 'field of play' in Greenhouse Britain was literally the whole island, but it was also the whole discourse about Global Warming taking place in the culture of the island. The aim was to focus on the cost of belief and to challenge existing metaphors.

Having talked about knowledge I am going to turn to method.

If we look at the Harrisons' practice and we look back to their seminal work, the *Lagoon Cycle*, we can see that this work is manifestly inductive and intuitive. They had already been making work together, and they had at least five years previously committed themselves to making work 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.”⁸

⁵ From Jamie Saunders' web site www.futuresedge.info accessed 8 November 2008

⁶ The Artist as Leader research interview with Philip Schlesinger 23 April 2008, 10:31

⁷ Helen Mayer Harrison and Newton Harrison, *Public Culture and Sustainable Practices: Peninsula Europe from an ecodiversity perspective, posing questions to Complexity Scientists*, Structure and Dynamics: eJournal of Anthropological and Related Sciences, Vol 2, Issue 3, 2008

⁸ p.1, From There to Here, Harrison Studio, 2001

If we track through the work since the Lagoon Cycle, a language and method clearly evolve. I've already touched on an element in discussing the 'field of play'. There is a distinctive aesthetic in the form of a process. But here its important not to become distracted by process in the sense of using workshops or involving certain sorts of people, or doing certain sorts of things to understand a place. Rather that process is about asking certain sorts of questions and focusing on certain sorts of things. We know what these are – they are writ large in the work They include the questions which the Harrisons are known for,

- How big is here?
- How long is now?

David Haley adds “Who is here now?” tying the first two questions to those may collaborate and those who would be impacted, human and non-human alike.⁹

These are devices for defining a 'field of play'. But we also see recurring in the work two other key aspects,

- Focus on the cost of belief,
- Pay attention to metaphors.

These are devices to focus on changing the way people think in order to change the way they behave. The Harrisons place particular emphasis on the importance of metaphor. This is reflected in Michel de Certeau's essay for the publication of the *Lagoon Cycle*,¹⁰ and also in the fact that they are specifically mentioned in the Acknowledgements of Lakoff and Johnson's *Metaphors We Live By*.¹¹

But the work is still open ended. Each work is a response to the circumstances and generates its own dynamic. All of the works are intended to create and open up a perspective, not on the meaning of life, but on a specific set of ecological conditions.

So there is a shift going on in the work, between knowledge and belief. The work is rooted in knowledge, but it is intended to change beliefs.

This can be problematic. An aspect of this that became very clear to me at the second workshop we ran at Gunpowder Park. The ecological knowledge from which the Harrisons make the work can lead people to assume that what is produced is a solution of the same order of knowledge. The work is fact-based, and often uses financial data, environmental data, and refers to policy. But the work itself is not of that same order. The work is not a factual proposal. Rather it is a provocation. It is a complex rhetorical device, rather than a simplistic planning document.

They use a wide range of rhetorical devices. Most obviously they are discussions between two or more people, meaning that there are always at least two views embedded in the work. But they also use questions, irony, fact, reportage, myth and proposal.

So the real answers to the questions posed about the Lee Valley and the island of Britain are the questions about the cost of belief and the use of metaphors. The “How many people...?” and “How much land...?” questions are there to provoke, just as the science fiction skyscrapers across the upper Lee Valley are there to provoke.

Or as Joseph Beuys put it in *Energy Plan for the Western Man*, ‘... to provoke is to evoke’.

Having talked about knowledge and method, I'd like to finish by highlighting how other people from outside the arts have responded to this process.

As I noted earlier some of the other partners in the research were the Tyndall Centre for Climate Change Research, the University of Sheffield's Landscape Department, as well as architects and

⁹ David Haley, Taipei, May 2007

¹⁰ Cornell University, New York, 1985

¹¹ *Metaphors We Live By*, ...

GIS specialists. I'd like to quote from Wallace Heim's independent report on Greenhouse Britain prepared for DEFRA, about her interviews with some of these people.

The people interviewed had worked primarily with Newton Harrison, but also Helen Mayer Harrison and Gabriel Harrison. Climate change is important to all of them; their level of knowledge is high. My questions were not to do with 'awareness' or perceptions, but with the qualities of the experience working with the Harrisons, and how it may have affected them. Their responses surprised me. They *all* reported that the experience was illuminating, informative, challenging, imaginative, liberating. Their respect for the cross-disciplinary knowledge of the Harrisons was high, including both the science, the land-use planning and architectural aspects, and including Newton Harrison's ability to ask 'the right questions.' Further, they had been taken on a journey, relieved of the strictures of their respective disciplines and work practices, and had found it in some way transformative of their way of considering climate change and possible adaptations to it. But, from their responses, the exercise was not just one of being relieved of limitations, but one which was highly informed, creative, and reflective, not just of their own methods of work, but of more conventional responses to climate change. They reported feeling supported, mentored, and reported an appreciation of what this kind of process of 'art' can achieve in providing the context, the time and space for imagining possible futures, for rehearsing what may happen.

This aspect of the Harrisons' work does not overtly enter the public realm, and I was very appreciative of a glimpse into it. The effect of these meetings and conversations may well continue to 'work' and influence people's wider perceptions beyond the exhibition dates.

So by way of conclusion I'd like to think that I have challenged the assumption that the artist researcher is only the explorer entering virgin territory with awe, and suggest that the artist researcher is also about working within a dense or complex discourse and in partnership with other disciplines, through a highly developed aesthetic, to change people's perspectives and affect their beliefs.

I did think it was interesting that when Boris Johnson announced his strategy for climate change for London he focused on adaptation rather than mitigation, which was of course one of the fundamental points in *Greenhouse Britain*, not that I am saying he was paying any attention to us.

In fact, he tried very hard to stop '...this radical artwork, expressing extreme views of climate change' from being exhibited at City Hall, at the time he took office.

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