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How Big is Here? Space in the work of the Harrisons

Helen Mayer Harrison (1927-2018) and Newton Harrison (b 1932) (the Harrisons) are pioneers of the ecoart movement.

Professor Emeritus Anne Douglas and I have worked with the Harrisons for nearly 15 years and co-authored two published chapters (with a third in revisions at the moment) as well as papers. Anne has used the work of the Harrisons as a significant example in her many writings on improvisation.

The Harrisons first visited Aberdeen in 2006 during the development of their project, *Greenhouse Britain: Losing Ground, Gaining Wisdom*, (2006-09) [SLIDE circle map] when they gave a lecture at Gray's. I met them through my colleague David Haley who had worked with them on their earlier work, *Casting a Green Net: Can we be seeing a Dragon?* (1996-98) [SLIDE Casting a Green Net]

I was producer on *Greenhouse Britain* which was funded by amongst others a substantial grant from DEFRA's Climate Challenge Fund and toured to 6 venues across England.

Newton Harrison and the Center for the Study of the Force Majeure returned to the North East of Scotland in 2017 at the invitation of The Barn, Banchory, to help that organization develop a culture-led response to climate change and environmental change, in particular as manifest on Deeside in the floods of 2015. The resulting work, *The Deep Wealth of this Nation, Scotland*, developed in partnership with the James Hutton Institute, SRUC and SEFARI, has been shown in Banchory and Edinburgh and is included in the 2018 Taipei Biennale, Taiwan.

The Barn in working with the Center for the Study of the Force Majeure and Newton Harrison is asking what the role of a cultural organization is in relation to – global warming, the Anthropocene, hyperobjects... How does the Barn work in this context? It might begin to answer Jill Bennett's question in her small text on the Anthropocene written for the 2011 Documenta suggesting that cultural institutions need to focus on, "mobilizing a radical notion of the commons that reconfigures a great deal of current institutional practice."

I said the Harrisons are pioneers of ecological art and it might be worth unpacking what that means. It is worth highlighting, as Clive Adams does, the distinction between three words - nature, landscape and environment, all three of which are used in various ways in relation to art. (*Nature and I are Two: Reconnecting People with the Planet* 2005 RANE from CCANW website)

"The word 'landscape' itself only entered the English language at the end of the sixteenth century with reference to Dutch 'landskip' painting rather than the land itself."

"For the environment objectifies environment: it turns it into an entity that we can think of and deal with as if it were outside and independent of ourselves"

"...nature as a metaphysical concept through which humanity imagines difference..." and "...nature as a 'realist' concept which refers to the structures, processes and powers that operate in the world."

This latter leads us to a fourth word, 'ecology' - "the branch of biology that deals with the relations of organisms to one another and to their physical surroundings."

You'll note the importance of relation and difference in all of these - a different sense of relations ranging from - landscape (an articulation of visual quality eg picturesque), environment (that which is around us, objectified), and nature – (that which is not us, or the living world).

But the use of ecological is mostly focused on decentering the human, something none of the other words does. It is for this reason that it is used by a number of artists across artforms.

The Harrisons negotiation of a contemporary art practice in relation to this commitment is articulated in works and also in significant critical writing.

They have invested a lot of effort in talking about how the work works... in their case in particular how the work works in the world. So they talk about the same work working differently in galleries (where it looks like art) and town halls (where it looks like policy).

They talk about the work working as public policy and they trace its influence through public policy documents. They also talk about the work working when its principles are adopted even if its form is discarded...

How is it art?

The work superficially looks like masterplanning, including texts and images (maps, plans, aerial photography and other spatially oriented imagery).

I want to talk about how they work with space, in particular in relation to what we understand of working with space in art.

Framing

In their critical writing they highlight key questions which underpin their work, including “How big is here?” and “How long is now?” [SLIDE Peninsula Europe]

These questions establish the frame or boundary of the work, and the Harrisons suggest that this judgement is the same as the painter makes in composing an image on a canvas, apart from the question of scale.

For the painter, the field of play becomes a canvas, the physical boundaries are the edge of a canvas, the conceptual boundary conditions have to do with depth perception and field perception and of course, then, formal relationships and whatever narratives the artist wishes to convey, or in some cases, reduce. This works out sculpturally in roomsized installations, and so on. We define a field of play in much the same way, except that the scale-shift is profound; measured in orders of magnitude. Public Culture and Sustainable Practices 2007

[SLIDES Serpentine Lattice]

...any central images that appeared seemed to exist only for a moment and thereafter fade back into a pattern of moments grouped within moments. From There To Here 2001

Figure Ground

They work with figure ground relations in their images and texts in a number of ways - the terminology is perhaps fundamental to their project over 50 years.

They talk about "...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." From There to Here, Harrison Studio, 2001 p1 ,

So focusing on ecosystems first... [SLIDE POETRY]

THEN

A NEW REVERSAL OF GROUND COMES INTO BEING

WHERE HUMAN ACTIVITY BECOMES A FIGURE

WITHIN AN ECOLOGICAL FIELD

AS SIMULTANEOUSLY THE ECOLOGY CEASES TO BE

AN EVER SHRINKING FIGURE

WITHIN THE FIELD OF HUMAN ACTIVITY

The Serpentine Lattice, Harrison & Harrison 1993, pp 5-6

They say about the texts,

"The formal discipline was to condense, yet keep clear this much information and to imbue it with our thoughts and our feelings in about a 20 minute read. The idea was to present a vision that would explode in the mind of the interested person. The aesthetic discipline was to find the linguistic means to do it. The work is a chant and was made to be read aloud."

Another aspect of figure ground relation is the prioritisation of rivers and mountains over roads, but also playful approaches, eg in Holland with the country being planned backwards...

Nature redrawing

Their conceptualization of the Force Majeure (sea level rise, heatwave and biodiversity loss) emerged through the imagining sea level rise as a redrawing of the boundary.

[SLIDE Peninsula Europe III 2011]

This has existed in their work since The Lagoon Cycle of 1974-84, and is a key element of Greenhouse Britain: Losing Ground, Gaining Wisdom

[SLIDE Lagoon Cycle

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 rise (Lagoon Cycle, 1984)

[SLIDE Greenhouse Britain

I hope that this short exploration of the work of the Harrisons has
opened up a few elements of how the work works – I have not really
addressed how it works in the world in a larger sense.

There are other aspects that we have explored including their ways of
making metaphors work, their approach to improvisation which we have
explored in other essays. They are all on OpenAir.

Thank you

How big is here?

Space in the art of
Helen Mayer Harrison (1927-2018)
and Newton Harrison (b. 1932)

Greenhouse Britain

Losing Ground, Gaining Wisdom

As before storm surges

At 15 meters 7,900,000 people are displaced with 31,200 square kilometers of land flooded

At 5 meters 2,200,000 people are displaced with 10,000 square kilometers of land flooded

At 10 meters 5,200,000 people are displaced with 26,200 square kilometers of land flooded















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The Serpentine Lattice, Harrison & Harrison 1993, pp 5-6





IMAGINE THE RESEARCH IS IN THE NEXT HUNDRED YEARS OR SO. DROUGHT MOVES ACROSS EUROPE FROM PORTUGAL, ACROSS SPAIN AND FRANCE EVEN THE BORDERS OF GERMANY AND OF 2.5 MILLION SQUARE KILOMETERS OF TAIERLAND. HALF BECOMES UNPRODUCTIVE. IMAGINE THE WATERS RISE AND PRECIPITATE AT ABOUT 6 METERS. AN EXTREME, BUT NONETHELESS POSSIBLE. PRECIPITATION AND 10,000 KM. KILOMETERS OF LAND. THAT MEAN 2.5 MILLION PEOPLE WILL HAVE TO MOVE. LEAVING AS THE WORLD OCEAN REMAINS THE TERNINUMULA. WITH 1000 LAND AND 100000 BECOMING SEALED.

HOW WILL THE TWENTY REPUBLICS IN KINGDOMS AND ONE EIGHTY THAT ARE THE EUROPEAN UNION SURRENDER ENOUGH AUTONOMY SURRENDER ENOUGH? HELD PENDING TO CREATE COLLECTIVELY THE NEW FORM OF GOVERNANCE THAT IS ABLE TO MEET A MASS MAJOR OF THE MAINTAINANCE.

AGAIN IMAGINE THE RESEARCH IS RIGHT DROUGHT MOVES ACROSS EUROPE. THE TEMPERATURE CONTINUOUS TO RISE AT 25 PER DECADE. RACIAL MELT CONTINUOUS ACCELERATING. RIVER FLOW THAT DEPENDS ON RACIAL MELT BECOMES INTERMITTENT. FLOODING INCREASES FROM SEVERAL RARE. THE HALF-MILLION KM. KM. OF MOSTLY MONOCULTURAL GROUND BEHIND BEHIND DEVELOPED IN THE MAIN TO DROUGHT AND DISEASE.

IMAGINE THE EUROPEAN UNION SURRENDER ENOUGH POWER AND AUTHORITY TO CREATE TRANS-NATIONAL WATERBOARD AUTHORITY. EMPLOYED TO ACT FOR THE PEOPLE AND RIVERS THAT WOULD DEAL WITH INTER-TEMPORAL AND THE CURRENT ENVIRONMENT. THE DIFFERENT CURRENT AND WATERSHED TYPES.

IN THE NEW CLIMATE CONDITIONS THAT ARE THE FORECAST OF THE FUTURE MAINTAIN.

UNDERSTANDING THE WORK OF THE THERMIST AND THE WATERSHED IS TO CREATE THE OPENING PHENOMENA IN THE BARTS TO HOLD AND RELEASE SLOWLY THE WATERS THAT WERE ONCE THE WORK. COME BY THE TRANSNATIONAL CLIMATE. AN ADAPTATION AT GREAT SCALE.

THE WATERSHED OF THE FUTURE

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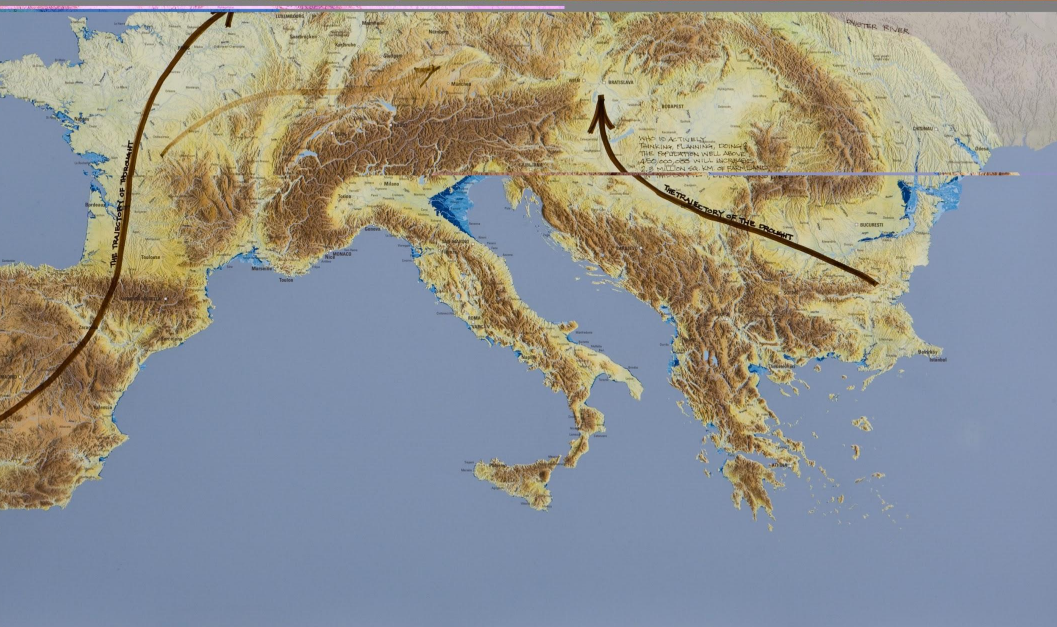
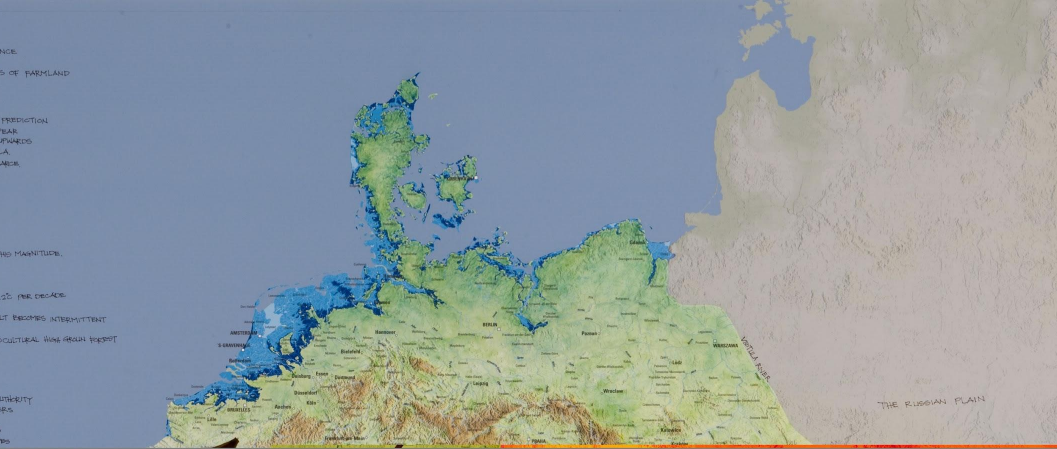
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