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# What Poetry Does Best: The Harrisons' Poetics of Being and Acting in the World

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## INTRODUCTION

Simply paying attention guarantees the transformation from a nature supposedly asleep to the work that displays nature's strange vitality. Art is what attention makes with nature.<sup>i</sup>

This observation by Michel De Certeau, noted French philosopher of the everyday, writing the introduction to Helen Mayer Harrison and Newton Harrison's (hereafter the Harrisons) seminal work the *Lagoon Cycle* (1974–1984), gets to the heart of the Harrisons' project to understand and work with the agency of all things, and to recognize that attention is central to being and acting in the world.

A question arises about how our attention, as listeners, readers, and viewers, is drawn into a work of art, or more specifically, how the Harrisons draw our attention through their poetics.

One of the salient features of the Harrisons' work is attention to what is actually present, in the sense of suspending disbelief. The particular form of attention that the Harrisons exercise aligns with the forms of attention found in improvisation — being in the moment of an experience and using the materials at hand. They see improvisation within the rich potential of inconsistency and contradiction in human relations with environments. This acts as a stimulus to the improvising of new futures.

## A POETICS OF GAPS AND SPACES

In poetry, we experience the gaps between the words as much as the words themselves. In the visual we experience the space between objects or images as much as the images/objects themselves.

In *Atempause Für Den Save-Flüss — Breathing Space for the Sava River* (1989–1990) the Harrisons construct “breathing space,” which simultaneously describes an ecological issue, creates an opportunity for action, and embodies a metaphor worked through the visual and textual elements of the work.

*A New History for the Sava*  
Yet we know from having been there that a new story □  
A new history  
□ is being written for this river □  
A paper mill is the new history  
□ A coal mine and black water is the new history □  
An atomic energy plant and heated water is the new history  
□ A fertilizer factory and acid water is the new history  
□ Subtracting the floodplain  
□ and farming to the edge is the new history<sup>ii</sup>

The fundamental character of the Harrisons' poetics is one that invites seeing the world differently and offers the possibility for the reader/viewer to become an actor in that landscape. The Harrisons frequently juxtapose a likely future of increased

human impact on ecological systems, as in the example above, with alternatives of ecocultural well-being.

The example evokes the “new story”/“a new history” unpacking the content of this history through vivid and relentless forms of industrialization and their impact on water quality — a paper mill “writes” the history along with a coal mine and its black water, an atomic energy plant and its heated water, a fertilizer factory and its acid water. This new history “subtracts” the floodplain through new farming practices that also reduce biodiversity. The staccato rhythm of the text is mimicked in the cuts in photography that form an intrinsic part of the way the story unfolds. These in turn mimic the breathing in and out of a single living organism, creating momentarily “a break, a pause which renders routine viewing difficult and, for a moment, interrupts continuity.”<sup>iii</sup> This break constitutes an opportunity to change position.

The balance between word and image is by no means a given. Word and image cocreate the work of art. Their quality of relationship needs to be formed, judged with each project to avoid one overpowering the other.<sup>iv</sup>

The careful pacing and layering of word and image, idea, and experience in this work, its sense of a living body in the environment, is more like encountering music or a poem than reading a novel. All three — poem, music, and novel — involve a narrative that unfolds sequentially through time, but poetry and music bear a different relationship to time and the human imagination than the novel. It is impossible to understand them as a continuous sequence of events, even if we read the text or hear the stories in narrative form. Like a musical score, the meaning of the poem here is conveyed by bundles of events that appear at different moments in the text and its underlying story. To grasp their meaning, it becomes important to recognize the reoccurrence of certain themes, to connect what is being conveyed now with what was stated earlier, and to remain conscious of the whole. This resonates with Levi-Strauss’s understanding of the way myths operate. He observed that it is impossible to understand myth as a continuous sequence of events, even if we read the text or hear the stories in narrative form.<sup>v</sup> The Harrisons start stanzas with “It happened / that people here asked us if...”,<sup>vi</sup> or “And from this envisioning / a new image emerges...”,<sup>vii</sup> intentionally mirroring the structures of mytho-religious texts.

Just as in music, what is occurring in the poem is a continuous restructuring of the work in the mind of the reader/listener. The “new” narrative of industrialization in the Sava River work gives way to another, a new story that draws on and threads through a much older story, opening up yet another trajectory in terms of environmental recreation.

Such aesthetic principles underpin the Harrisons’ work within each work and across some fifty years of making art as an ensemble. The reoccurrence through repetition of familiar but not identical themes, of parallelism, of pace, and of interval, function to restructure the work and its issues in the mind of the reader/listener. The reader, in turn, needs to pay attention, noticing the difference between a first appearance and a later development.

## A POETICS OF THE PLAIN SPOKEN

Above all, as the Harrisons explain when speaking of their practice more generally, their aesthetic intention has been to present information purposefully but sparingly, in other words, to speak plainly and avoid the kind of specialized language that

excludes, and in particular excludes inhabitants of places. *Peninsula Europe: The High Ground: Bringing Forth a New State of Mind* (2000–2003) has been developed in three further iterations through to *Part IV* (2012). The work analyses the stresses and consequences of a warming climate on the landscape.

*For instance, the outcomes for the Peninsula of Europe are unfortunate  
The numbers have been crunched  
Revealing the trajectory of drought predicted to proceed  
From Portugal to the southern parts of Germany and beyond  
Reducing 2.4 million square kilometers of farmland  
That now feeds over 450 million Europeans, by almost a third within 75 years  
more or less<sup>viii</sup>*

The Harrisons draw into a shared space the ecological and cultural and knowledge derived from science along with ways of knowing that emerge from the arts. These focus on everyday incidental experience in the present, past, and future within timescales that can only be imagined. The timescales that the Harrisons address stretch deeply into the past as well as projecting far into the future.

This entanglement, enmeshing the reader in a struggle of contradictory forces, is distinct from the poetry of individual experience with which we are perhaps more familiar.<sup>ix</sup>

*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.<sup>x</sup>*

The Harrisons' intention is to deeply influence their audiences, and they draw on an understanding of the impact of the performed word, seeking to create a written form that encourages readers to "speak it to themselves." From the late 1960s/early 1970s David Antin and Jerome Rothenberg, both key figures in the ethnopoetics movement (along with Eleanor Antin, a seminal performance artist), were at the University of California at San Diego and Newton Harrison was Chair of the Department. Ethnopoetics focuses on how to represent in text and performance the aesthetic richness of indigenous peoples' storytelling, how to represent words that start in the oral and performative in a written form. The Harrisons' texts emerge from dialogue with scientists and inhabitants, first spoken and then written and then performed. The aim is to create texts that remain with the reader over long periods, enabling them to be and act in the world differently.

## A POETICS OF IMPROVISATION

The Harrisons challenge art to address what has traditionally been outside of art. This is a space of differing values and autonomies that cannot be rationalized into a false sense of resolution, "solved" as a problem.

*We hold that every place is telling the story of its own becoming, which is another way of saying that it is continually creating its own history and we join that conversation of place.<sup>xi</sup>*

Clarity of thought combined with the instability of language and meaning demands a particular kind of attention that is at once poetic and improvisatory.

The *Lagoon Cycle* is perhaps the metawork in the Harrisons' oeuvre. At the heart of the *Lagoon Cycle* is the understanding that improvisation is actually common to both nature and culture. Improvisation in nature shares the same qualities as improvisation in culture – conflict, coexistence, and cooperation perhaps equate to predation, parasitism, and symbiosis. Although the Harrisons work all over the world, and the *Lagoon Cycle* rotates around the life of a Sri Lankan crab transported to the West Coast of the U.S., the value of diversity is a critical aspect of their understanding and practice. The lagoon is selected because it is a place of high diversity, resulting from the mixing of salt and fresh waters. Both nature and culture are fragile in the face of unexpected changes. Both nature and culture strive for equilibrium by adapting.

The dialogue across the *Lagoon Cycle* includes two passages that speak of human and ecological improvisation.

*In The Lagoon at Upouveli, The First Lagoon, the Witness says,*

*But people are tough and resilient and improvise  
their existence as best they can very creatively with  
the materials at hand but the materials keep changing  
Only the improvisation remains constant<sup>xii</sup>*

*In The House of Crabs The Third Lagoon, the Lagoon Maker says,*

*Life in the lagoons is tough and very rich  
it breeds quickly Life all of us it must improvise its  
existence very creatively with the materials at  
hand but materials keep changing Only the  
improvisation remains constant<sup>xiii</sup>*

It is important to understand that improvisation here is not the performance of improvisation we find in jazz. The Harrisons' works as seen in exhibitions and books are carefully crafted, complex, and even symphonic in scale and intent. They highlight improvisation as the condition of a living world as opposed a specialist approach to making art. Life itself is unscripted. They encourage the reader/viewer to participate in improvisation. The Harrisons conceptualize this as "conversational drift." The drift references the unplanned journey and emphasizes that as authors of the artwork, while they do not know where or how, it is their intention that the work or its lessons will be taken up by others. This is exemplified in many of their texts, such as in *Casting a Green Net: Can it Be We Are Seeing a Dragon?* developed in England during the late 1990s.

*Many said,  
"Some of these changes are already happening,  
and can be seen here and there."*

*Others said variously  
"How could such a green net be actually done on the ground?"*

*And you said,  
"By shifting subsidies  
by modifying certain development patterns  
and by forming and funding a new category of infrastructure  
whose task it will be to birth the green net  
over the years.."*

*For instance  
imagine an act of generosity  
an act of consensus  
that would invite permit and value  
such an entity as a biodiversity net  
to come into existence at all?*

*I said  
if not here then elsewhere  
You said  
If here  
then elsewhere will know how to proceed<sup>xiv</sup>*

The final stanza highlights the intention of conversational drift, that whether the ideas embedded in the work are taken up in the particular locality or not, they are applicable in other places too.

Their observation resonates with that of Gary Peters, philosopher and free jazz improviser, who, in developing Theodor Adorno's critique of popular forms of improvisation, arrives at a different construct.

*A successful work... is not one which resolves objectives in a spurious harmony, but one which expresses the idea of harmony negatively by embodying the contradictions, pure and uncompromised, in its inner structure.<sup>xv</sup>*

Rejecting the more familiar understandings that privilege the contingency of a moment, Peters questions a closed conception of a past in which the past simply repeats itself in the present. Instead he locates the past as a point of origin, a point from which to reopen and reimagine the past in the present. The improviser undertakes this reopening and reimagining as an individual in order not to be trapped by the habits and expectations of his/her surroundings.<sup>xvi</sup>

In *Santa Fe Watershed, Lessons from the Genius of Place* (2002–2005), the Harrisons looked at the ecology of the arroyos, the disappearing tributaries of the Santa Fe basin with a view to finding ways to bring water back into the river and reestablish the biodiversity of the region. Simultaneously the work paid particular attention to topsoil regeneration.

*Studying the Tewa symbols  
Made in earlier times by people who lived here  
Not understanding these symbols  
But feeling their vitality  
We imagined an implicit narrative in them  
And that narrative wanted to happen  
So we asked our engineer  
If for instance  
A 40 foot zig-zag form  
Or bowl forms  
Or mountain forms  
Or serpent forms  
Could also be used in the riverbed  
As forms that would catch earth  
And forms that could create sinuosity in the river*

*Once the riverbed has been raised.*<sup>xvii</sup>

The Harrisons in this work are drawing on ancient farming systems of check dams, large and small, at different points in the arroyos to catch earth and water and pace the flow. This combined with understanding of how the piñon, an indigenous tree with a key role both while alive and also in dying, changes the watershed landscape. The ancient imagery of Tewa symbols provided the clue to a more radical intervention at scale — this is the zig-zag form they propose to introduce into the modern river course. In this way knowledge from the deep past of the region is rethreaded into a new conversation drawing in and expanding current ways of knowing that needed to take into account urbanization. Again the intention is to open up a different possible future.

The form of improvisation at work here is not a quality of the products that would normally identify a work as art (text, image, exhibition, and book) but of a much larger movement, a discourse that is never completed and of which the text, image, exhibition, and book are but a moment.

Going back to the metawork, the dialogue between the Lagoon Maker and the Witness establishes a form that reoccurs in and characterizes all subsequent works in different ways. *Atempause Für den Save Fluss* is almost wholly structured by an “I said” “You said” dialogue, whereas in *A Vision for the Green Heart of Holland* (1994) the dialogue is between two different futures, but the authorial voice is unified. The dialogue avoids exclusivity, sometimes specifically referring to named roles of witness, lagoon maker, or ornithologist, incorporating the wealth of perspectives that inform a work through knowledge of place. More often the roles are generalized to “I” or “you,” “some,” or “others,” in other words, indeterminate and inclusive.

This overt forming of multivocality in the text is in fact a deep, foundational principle of the Harrisons’ poetics. It engages the reader in a different sense of being and acting in the world. Multivocality is not conceived simplistically as a babble of competing viewpoints, nor merely as a principle of democracy. It is a means to an end, addressing an “ennobling issue” or an “ennobling discourse,” i.e., an issue or discourse that is shared but, importantly, not necessarily agreed upon.

*By “ennobling” we mean envisioned actions that most people would accept as prima facie good to do, whether or not they believed they could be done.*<sup>xviii</sup>

In this way, the Harrisons recognize the interconnectedness of the economic with the ecological and with the cultural, not as fragmented challenges for disciplines, but rather as an issue for everyone. The words *most people* and *everyday* are important because they position the “issue” or “problem” as a shared one, shared both by multiple disciplines and also by everyone participating in thinking critically in everyday experience. “Ennobling” is used to ask not for a unifying solution, but rather for shared recognition. The Harrisons are not seeking to remove friction between competing interests, or resolve inconsistency and contradiction. Instead, they are seeking to arrive at a shared sense of the common good, harnessing inconsistency and contradiction as a generative force. Their use of “ennobling” embodies empathy as an encounter with what is strange and foreign.<sup>xix</sup>

*We have come to believe that inconsistency and contradiction are generated by the processes of cognition, thinking and doing, and have the important role to play of stimulating and evoking creativity and improvisation, which are inherent in the processes of the mind that have led us to do this work.*<sup>xx</sup>

## A POETICS OF THE SCORE

We have alluded to conventional poetics in which the poet effectively authors a perspective on the world out of complex experiences and presents this to the reader. We have suggested that this is not a form of poetics relevant to the Harrisons' work. Instead their poetics is one open to a struggle with contradiction and inconsistency engaging multiple perspectives. This second form of poetics risks the possibility that no single perspective will ever be reached. Nonetheless each of the Harrisons' projects is situated in a real ecological crisis that urges action to address catastrophe.

We have also suggested that the potential for action is a quality of the way that the Harrisons imagine and form improvisation *as participation in a discourse*. This is a layered understanding of relationships between peoples and their relations to places that are at once intellectual, emotional, social, and cultural as well as practical. We have said that the texts are not in and of themselves improvised works. They are determined, fully crafted at the point of reception by a public, but nevertheless they function in the world as pivotal to improvisation.

The Harrisons were also at University of California, San Diego, with Allan Kaprow, who joined the department in 1974, and it is interesting to consider the relation between their poetics and the poetics of the score for an activity as developed by Kaprow. *Calendar* from 1971 can serve as an example.

### *Calendar*

*planting a square of turf  
amid grass like it*

*planting another  
amid grass a little less green*

*planting four more squares  
in places progressively drier*

*planting a square of dry turf  
amid grass like it*

*planting another  
amid grass a little less dry*

*planting four more squares  
in places progressively greener*

*Activity, A.K., California Institute of the Arts  
November 2, 1971<sup>xxi</sup>*

Kaprow and the Harrisons share in common a deep sense of human community as a state of being. Kaprow developed a form of artistic practice describing this as a blurring of art and life. They both want us to see the wonder of everyday experience through art.

In Kaprow's *Calendar* score the use of the gerund *planting* is open to be interpreted as a report on the experiential activity of the author, or an invitation to the reader to enter into an experience. In a parallel way, the Harrisons' texts, maps, and models enfold us into the work and its issues, even to the point of using complex and

eclectic linguistic forms, poetry as well as plain language, simple narrative and storytelling, and to using a certain kind of accounting, proposal writing, and anecdotes here and there as needed.

Kaprow's scores are not scores in the Romantic sense that determine note-to-note procedure, telling us how to move from one step to the next. They are scores as a starting point to improvisation. They encircle the complexity of the issues at hand, holding them temporarily in a space in which those issues can be grasped, felt, and understood.

The score in the Harrisons' work is assembled in a complex way. First they raise fundamental questions in a specific site: How big is here? How long is now? They move from these questions into a dialogue that gathers and draws on the experiences of those most knowledgeable about the ecology and culture of a particular place. They compose a work (text, image, still and moving, exhibition, book) to make sense of the unfolding discourse to this point. By sharing this "score," sharing an understanding of the issues, they reopen the circle to the chaos and complexity of a particular ecological challenge. This point of sharing is crucial to making possible forms of action and decisions.

## CONCLUSION

Imagining *The Force Majeure* as a score in these terms we can trace a movement that gathers together all the previous projects, in which each project itself is a gathering together of different local insights. We can then see how the score of *The Force Majeure* becomes a point of departure, and opens up the improvisation in the form of a new set of actions to come to terms with a changing climate and to improvise a future of ecocultural well-being even to the point of designing mediating strategies that address a sixth mass extinction.

In *The Force Majeure* the Harrisons are addressing the flows of energy within ecosystems, asking questions about entropy within whole ecological systems that scientists are not yet able to answer. Yet the Harrisons even suggest research design strategies to address large-scale complex systems.

The Harrisons' intention, manifest in the poetics of their work, is to enable readers/viewers to see the world differently and for that new way of seeing to stay with readers/viewers so that they work differently and go on to other contexts through conversational drift. There is a parallel between the Harrisons' understanding of the healthy transitions of energy through an ecosystem such as a watershed and the way that their poetry and image works on readers/viewers.

They say,

*In nature, mostly, the dispersal of energy from one system is put to use by another nearby. Hence with the free energy sources being the sun and the available waste of others, nature can and does grow. The differences between how nature works and human industry works is that nature uses the waste it creates and industry in the main does not. Above all nature does not charge a profit and as a consequence nature in general does not exploit, rather it takes advantage of opportunity.<sup>xxii</sup>*

The reader/viewer is precisely encouraged to take ideas (energy) from within the works, combine it with other ideas elsewhere in the work (and the nature of poetry facilitates that) to come to new realizations. These new realizations in turn connect

with unforeseen aspects of life. There is no waste in the Harrisons' work.

Our aim has been to open up the poetics of their work to deeper understanding because it not only merits such consideration in itself but also because it can inform others (as it always has done). The Harrisons demonstrate the ways in which artists can contribute to public life and the ways in which the practice of the arts (and by this we mean all of the arts, design, and landscape/architecture) can affect people in particular ways.

Critical writing that engages with the Harrisons' work has tended to address the work's ecological content in relation to a world under stress. Such writing has rarely addressed the poetics that underpins the Harrisons' artistic approach. It is this gap that we have sought to address in this particular essay.

We might ask where else other than in poetry could we find attention directed by plain language, integrated with storytelling, a certain kind of accounting, and proposal writing with anecdotes here and there to collectively carry complex ideas. Where else other than in poetry might we find empathy coexisting with the laws of thermodynamics? How is it possible for poetry to lead to action in the form of mediating strategies that address a sixth mass extinction, or design strategies that engage large-scale complex systems? Perhaps most important of all, where else might the environment become an interlocutor within a discourse that is situated between the human and nonhuman? In *The Force Majeure* the Harrisons create a dialogue with a watershed distressed by clear cutting, and with empathy ask how they may help.

*The entropy of the watershed has been increased by the dispersal of these energies. The energies so dispersed cannot be retrieved. What then, watershed, what then?*<sup>xxiii</sup>

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- <sup>i</sup> Michel De Certeau, “Pay Attention: To Make Art,” in Helen Mayer Harrison and Newton Harrison, *Lagoon Cycle*, New York: Cornell University Press, 1985, p17. Many of the Harrisons’ publications and associated texts, including most referenced, are available from their studio website: <http://theharrisonstudio.net>
- <sup>ii</sup> Helen Mayer Harrison and Newton Harrison, *Atempause Für Den Save Flüß*, Ljubljana: Neuer Berliner Kunstverein, Moderna Galerija, 1990, unpaginated.
- <sup>iii</sup> Ulrich Bischoff, “Shifting Metaphors: The Creative Technique of Helen Mayer and Newton Harrison,” in *Atempause Für Den Save Flüß*, Ljubljana: Neuer Berliner Kunstverein, 1990. Unpaginated. This is further discussed in Douglas, Anne, & Kathleen Coessens. Movement and Moment: In-between discreteness and continuity in The Somatechnics of Movement, special issue of *Somatechnics*. Vol. 4.1, 2014.
- <sup>iv</sup> In conversation Newton Harrison commented that the word /image relationship in the Sava River project was one of the most successful.
- <sup>v</sup> Claude Levi-Strauss, *Myth and Meaning*, London: Routledge, 1978.
- <sup>vi</sup> Helen Mayer Harrison and Newton Harrison, *Casting a Green Net: Can it be that we are seeing a Dragon?* 1998, unpaginated.
- <sup>vii</sup> Helen Mayer Harrison and Newton Harrison, *The Green Heart Vision*, 1995, p. 6.
- <sup>viii</sup> Helen Mayer Harrison and Newton Harrison, *A Manifesto for the 21st Century*, <http://theharrisonstudio.net/a-manifesto-for-the-21st-century>, accessed 2 May 2016.
- <sup>ix</sup> See Tony Hoagland, “Recognition, Vertigo, and Passionate Worldliness: The tribes of contemporary poetry,” *Poetry Magazine*, September 2010. Available from <http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/articles/detail/69578>.
- <sup>x</sup> Helen Mayer Harrison and Newton Harrison, *From There to Here*, San Diego: The Harrison Studio, unpaginated.
- <sup>xi</sup> Helen Mayer Harrison and Newton Harrison, “Knotted ropes, rings, lattices and lace: Retrofitting biodiversity into the cultural landscape,” in *Biodiversity: A Challenge for Development Research and Policy*, Berlin, Heidelberg, New York: Springer-Verlag, p. 14.
- <sup>xii</sup> Helen Mayer Harrison and Newton Harrison, *Lagoon Cycle*, Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, p. 37.
- <sup>xiii</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 60.
- <sup>xiv</sup> Helen Mayer Harrison and Newton Harrison, *Casting a Green Net: Can it be that we are seeing a Dragon?*, 1998, unpaginated.
- <sup>xv</sup> Gary Peters, *Philosophy of Improvisation*, Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, p. 77.
- <sup>xvi</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 2.
- <sup>xvii</sup> Helen Mayer Harrison and Newton Harrison, *Santa Fe Watershed: Lessons from the Genius of Place*, Santa Fe: Santa Fe Art Institute, 2005, unpaginated.
- <sup>xviii</sup> Helen Mayer Harrison and Newton Harrison, “Public Culture and Sustainable Practices: Peninsula Europe from an eodiversity perspective, posing questions to Complexity Scientists,” *Structure and Dynamics: eJournal of Anthropological and Related Sciences*: Vol. 2: No. 3, Article 3, pp. 1–2.
- <sup>xix</sup> This understanding of empathy is fully explored by Reiko Goto in *Ecology and Environmental Art in Public Place: Talking Tree Won’t You Take a Minute and Listen to the Plight of Nature?* PhD[[[I can’t insert comments in these notes. I don’t know what this (Phd) is doing here. Not sure what it refers to. Delete?]]], The Robert Gordon University (2012). Goto used Edith Stein’s work on empathy in an analysis that draws on a number of artists including the Harrisons.
- <sup>xx</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 23.
- <sup>xxi</sup> Allan Kaprow, *Essays on the Blurring of Art and Life*, Jeff Kelly (ed.), University of California Press, Berkeley, 2003, p. 120.
- <sup>xxii</sup> Helen Mayer Harrison and Newton Harrison, *The Force Majeure*, p. 472.
- <sup>xxiii</sup> Helen Mayer Harrison and Newton Harrison, *The Force Majeure* p. [[[missing page number]]]