

# Greenhouse Britain: losing ground, gaining wisdom (2006-09): case study.

FREMANTLE, C.

2018

## Valuing Nature Conference 2018

### Case Study

*Greenhouse Britain: Losing Ground, Gaining Wisdom* (2006-09)

Helen Mayer Harrison (1927-2018), Newton Harrison (b. 1932) (the Harrisons);

David Haley, Associate Artist;

Chris Fremantle, Producer;

Gabriel Harrison, Exhibition Designer

Wallace Heim, independent evaluator.

### Abstract

*Greenhouse Britain: Losing Ground, Gaining Wisdom* (2006-09) was a project resulting in a touring exhibition. It was created by the artists Helen Mayer Harrison and Newton Harrison (the Harrisons) and funded by DEFRA's Climate Challenge Fund (£186,500). The Harrisons are pioneers of the ecoart movement and key examples of artist researchers. They collaborated with the Tyndall Centre on coastal defence aspects, with Sheffield University on landscape design elements, and with APG Architects.

The work addressed the impact of sea level rise on the island of Britain and the transformation that this would effect. They proposed three strategies: of defence, of defence to enable withdrawal, and of withdrawal to the high grounds.

It opened up space for the audience in which the narrative of climate breakdown was fully present, and the challenges of adaptation/transformation were explored. The audience, including the collaborators who might be regarded as the first audience, were led to think about the values that need to inform and underpin adaptation.

The Harrisons' contribution to ecological research can be characterised in terms of 'imaginative engagement with narrative using metaphor and concept.' They took the existing narratives and the best science and, focusing on metaphor and concept, they provided a novel and integrated high level analysis and proposal.

### The Project

*Greenhouse Britain* was conceived of in response to a question, 'Would you consider doing a work that focuses on mainland Britain as one ecosystem affected by Climate Change?' posed to the Harrisons by David Haley at the end of an HLF funded, interdisciplinary conference, 'Evolving Futures', held in Shrewsbury in 2005. The Harrisons returned to the UK to undertake a series of workshops across Britain as a pilot study. Serendipitously DEFRA's Climate Challenge Fund (CCF) call for projects was open: the conceptualised project and informal consortium enabled a bid to be assembled quickly.

The Climate Challenge Fund was primarily focused on awareness of climate change and mitigation in particular. In 2008, both the UK and the EU's directives on adaptation were still to be published. The Harrisons' primary focus in *Greenhouse Britain* was on adaptation and this was apparent from the initial grant proposal.

The Harrisons proposed that the issue of the future changing shape of the island of Britain was a key way to engage imaginatively with climate change and in particular the effects of sea level rise on the island as a whole. They described sea level rise as a 'form determinant' – they say, "...the rising ocean becomes a form determinant. By "form determinant", we mean, the rising ocean will determine many of the new forms that culture, industry and many other elements of civilization will have to take."

They suggest that sea level rise changes the terms of the game, saying, "We think that the rising ocean is an opportunity for transformation, but it is exactly the reverse of a new frontier to overcome from civilisation's perspective. Now from the ocean's perspective, its boundary is perhaps a continuing, evolving transforming new frontier."

They proposed human response in strategic terms, taking on the overarching 'fight' metaphor which was in mainstream discourse and re-framing it. Thus, 'Managed Retreat', became "withdrawal with grace". In the face of the 'form determinant' they proposed three strategies: of defence, of defence to enable withdrawal, and of withdrawal to the high grounds.

The work was developed over an 18-month period working with the Tyndall Centre and in particular the then lead for Coastal Defence, Professor Robert Nicholls; and Professor Paul Selman of Landscape Research at Sheffield University. APG Architects of Bristol also collaborated on the work. The work on defence in order to withdraw focused on the Lee Valley in East London and was supported by a Bright Sparks Award from Gunpowder Park. Bristol offered the example of defensibility and the Mersey River Basin necessitates withdrawal.

The resulting work took the form of a touring exhibition.<sup>1</sup> This comprised a central figure, a large scale topographical model of mainland Britain onto which was projected sea level rise, including the impact of storm surge – data not factored into the mean level rise used at that time. This was completed by an audio track starting,

And for this island  
which is a much-loved place  
The news is not good  
and is getting worse

The audio spoke of the potential impact of the collapse of the Greenland Ice Shelf; of the need to decarbonise the global economy in 20 years; of the loss of forests under a 2 degree temperature rise; the methane in the Siberian Permafrost; the need for significant numbers of people to withdraw to high ground, potentially 10% of the UK population in the 200-300 years; the issue of tipping points for the major ice sheets and the potential for much faster sea level rise based on geologic record; and ocean acidity; i.e. they incorporated all the fears and interlocking complexities beyond what most scientists would be willing to articulate (in those days).

The voice goes on to talk about what might be enough and the uncertainty involved. It ends saying,

Finally understanding  
that the news  
is neither good nor bad  
it is simply that great differences are upon us

that great changes are upon us as a culture  
and great changes are  
upon all planetary life systems  
and the news is about how we meet these changes  
and are transformed by them  
or  
in turn  
transform them

This was surrounded by the exploration of the three scenarios (defence, defence to enable withdrawal, and withdrawal) in image, poetic text and video. The exhibition was toured to six venues across the UK including City Hall in London; and then to New York and Berkeley.<sup>2</sup> It is presently showing at Stanford University, some thirteen years later. This work is both contemporary and much studied still.

#### Evaluation

As part of the programme we commissioned Dr Wallace Heim to undertake an independent evaluation. Heim's main focus in her evaluation was qualitative, to understand how the exhibition worked with its various audiences though she also oversaw the quantitative element mandated as part of the DEFRA funding.<sup>3</sup>

Heim highlighted that for the majority of those she interviewed the exhibition was "...positive, illuminating, thought-provoking, reassuring, and optimistic..." even though it embodied most of the scariest narratives of climate breakdown.<sup>4</sup>

Usefully in the evaluation Heim draws out the difference between public service announcement type communications and the way art works, highlighting that art is "...personal, ambiguous, challenging, controversial..." but also that art has affect, is provocative and is a space designed to encourage the audience to think, to introduce new information and ideas, but also offer new ways of thinking.<sup>5</sup>

This characterisation of the space that the exhibition opened up for the audience, enabling them to imagine adapting, rather than being told things, might be usefully identified as a key characteristic of art.

Building on this, Heim's primary observation on what could have been done better was to build in more events and opportunities for discussion arising from experiencing the exhibition.<sup>6</sup>

Heim also comments on the interdisciplinary collaboration with the 'first audience', the scientists, urban planners and others involved in the creation of the work.<sup>7</sup> The most important aspect might be the opening up the artists' creative space to the other disciplines, and the value that this experience had for the individuals. They described the space as an informed, creative, reflective space where it was possible to imagine and rehearse possible futures. Respondents noted that the right questions were asked, opening up new ways of considering climate change, possible ways of adapting, going beyond conventional responses to climate change.

#### Learning from the Project

Turning to what can be learnt from *Greenhouse Britain*. The case study is relevant because:

- It involves public funding, albeit not (all) research funding, although the funding received was used in ways more akin to research.
- It involves artist researchers – the Harrisons fit any description of artist researchers – Professors Emeritus of the University of California, San Diego, they are fully engaged with the discourse in their field, analysing and making clear their intentions and methods in relation to their own practice and the wider context.
- it is a fully interdisciplinary example, involving mutual learning by all parties.
- It is completed and evaluated.

It is unusual in that it is artist-led, and the artists had at that point 30 years of experience developing their thinking on climate change, and fifty years of experience making exhibitions.

The final issue is to unpack how the Harrisons as artist researchers are contributing to knowledge. There are three aspects to this:

Firstly, they contribute to their own discipline's understanding of why and how to make work in the particular field of ecological art. They are actually a reference point in this.<sup>8</sup> This has been the focus of Anne Douglas and my writing on the work of the Harrisons.

Secondly, they contribute to understanding how to undertake work across disciplines. They offer approaches and as evidenced in Heim's evaluation, are a case study in themselves. They refer to this process as "post-disciplinary."

Thirdly, they contribute to ecological research. Their contribution can be characterised in terms of 'imaginative engagement with narrative using metaphor and concept.' They took the existing narratives and the best science and, focusing on metaphor (not of conflict) and concept (form determinant), they provided a novel and integrated high level analysis and proposal.

*Greenhouse Britain* took sea level rise as a given, explored the causes and interactions of sea level rise with other elements of the climate breakdown narrative. It developed ways of thinking about how we respond on the ground in different contexts (of defence, of defence to enable withdrawal, and of withdrawal to the high ground). Most importantly, it presented all of this in a form that encouraged all the audiences, including the collaborators in the work as well as the exhibition audiences, to engage in new ways of thinking. As David Haley highlighted the use of the word 'grace' is critical because it emphasises the becomingness required and reinforces the justice dimension.

How is this different from environmental communications and engagement? After all it was funded by DEFRA as communications.

- The narrative, the voice of the work, is that of the Harrisons, personally and specifically.
- They went beyond what reports and peer reviewed papers could say and collate.
- They synthesised it into a poetic 10-minute audio track accompanying a visual at a scale that enabled people to be able to see where they lived.
- The work combined climate breakdown with potential responses, but left it open for the viewer to formulate their own judgement.

The heart of the Harrisons' work is perhaps best summed up by the phrase 'losing ground, gaining wisdom'.

---

<sup>1</sup> The *Greenhouse Britain* project website was hosted by greenmuseum.org, but unfortunately that site has been hacked. It can still be accessed through archive.org at <https://web.archive.org/web/20120115182355/http://greenhousebritain.greenmuseum.org:80/> accessed 10 November 2018.

<sup>2</sup> The tour comprised:

Centre for Contemporary Art and the Natural World, 17 November 2007 to 20 January 2008;  
Darwin Festival, Shrewsbury Museums & Art Gallery, 1 February to 28 February 2008;  
Holden Gallery, Manchester Metropolitan University, 14 February to 14 March 2008;  
Knowle West Media Centre, 7 March - 4 April 2008;  
Greater London Authority City Hall, 14 May - 10 June 2008.

In addition, the work was shown at:

Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York, NY, January 10 – February 7, 2009;

Kala Art Institute, Berkeley, CA, December 10 – February 27, 2010.

Elements of the exhibition were shown at the London Wildlife Trust annual conference 9 and 10 November 2007

<sup>3</sup> In her report, Heim was critical of elements of DEFRA's core approach to evaluation which involved audiences responding to a set of statements. The statements were:

1. 'The world's climate is changing';
2. 'Climate change is the result of human behaviour';
3. 'Climate change is a natural occurrence';
4. 'Climate change has become more of an issue for me in this last year';
5. 'I personally can help to limit the effects of climate change'.

The full text of the evaluation can be accessed here

<https://web.archive.org/web/20111115124016/http://greenhousebritain.greenmuseum.org/evaluation/> accessed 13 November 2018.

<sup>4</sup> "But the majority of responses, across all open-ended questions was that the experience of the exhibition was positive, illuminating, thought-provoking, reassuring, and optimistic while recognising the reality and its consequences for the future as presented by scientific findings and observational evidence. It provoked thoughts about how to respond, the need to make decisions collectively and politically." p.4

<sup>5</sup> "It was art. It took place, as art, in offices, universities, while walking with architects through a city, in theatres and in galleries. If compared to a public service announcement or media campaign, the delivery was personal, ambiguous, challenging, controversial, and the audience members fewer. But it had effect; it provoked. Given the chance to think that an exhibition provides, there was the potential to take an audience into a new realm of knowledge. And not only might the information and ideas presented add to one's knowledge, the way of thinking about climate instability might have been changed." p.4

<sup>6</sup> "In my view, the strongest recommendation for how the experience of the exhibition could have been improved is to have embedded in it more occasions in which members of the public, or groups of people could talk about it, could enter into a dialogue about it and with it." p.3

<sup>7</sup> "The people interviewed had worked primarily with Newton Harrison, but also with 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 working practices, and had found it in some ways 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." p.9

<sup>8</sup> Their work is included in most significant exhibitions of environmental art since the late 1970s including *Fragile Ecologies: Contemporary Artists' Interpretations and Solutions* (Matilsky 1992), *Natural Reality: Artistic Positions Between Nature and Culture* (Strelow 1999), *Ecovention: Current Art to Transform Ecologies* (Spaid 2002), *Weather Report: Art and Climate Change* (Lippard 2007), *Radical Nature: Art and Architecture for a Changing Planet 1969-2009* (Barbican 2009), as well as exhibitions on art and research (Spurlock 1979) and is included in key texts on systems aesthetics (Burnham), dialogic aesthetics (Kester), art and environment (Kastner), and art and sustainability (Kagan).

# **Case Study**

## **Greenhouse Britain: Losing Ground, Gaining Wisdom**

**Chris Fremantle**  
Senior Research Fellow, Gray's School of Art



















# *Thank you*

*ecoartscotland.net*

*@ecoartscotland*

