

BETH AND ANNIE IN CONVERSATION, PART ONE: Interview with Helen Meyer Harrison and Newton Harrison



Helen Meyer Harrison and Newton Harrison, *The Lagoon Cycle*, 1974-1984.
Image Credit: The Harrison Studio

Introduction by Elizabeth (Beth) Stephens

Helen Meyer Harrison and Newton Harrison are two of the foremost artists practicing in the field of environmental art today. I first met them in 2007 when they moved to Santa Cruz from San Diego where they were emeriti faculty from UC San Diego. In the early '70's, they helped form UCSD's Art Department into one of the most powerful centers for conceptual art in the country. They mentored artists such as Martha Rosler and Alan Sekula. Pauline Oliveros, Eleanor and David Antin, Alan Kaprow and Faith Ringgold were colleagues and together they formed a nurturing community for art and teaching. In addition to their primary practice of environmental art, the Harrisons have also participated in a range of other historical and social movements, including the seminal west coast feminist art movement exemplified by works such as the 1972 installation *Womanhouse*. During that period they interacted with feminist artists and critics such as Arlene Raven, Miriam Shapiro, Judy Chicago and Suzanne Lacy. Even earlier, in 1962, Helen Harrison was the first New York coordinator for Women's Strike for Peace. Newton Harrison

served on the original board of directors of the *Third World College*, which Herbert Marcuse and Angela Davis initiated. Their roots in caring for the earth, its systems and its inhabitants run deep.

As chair of the Art Department at the University of California, Santa Cruz, I hired Newton Harrison as an advisor to begin developing a graduate program for the UCSC art department. We began creating a proposal for an MFA in Social Practice but in light of the University of California's instructions for new grad programs to "aim for originality," in addition to noting the growth in doctorate programs in the visual arts, we proposed a PhD program entitled *Art Practice: A Whole Systems Approach with a Global Reach*. In the process of the creation of this program I gained insight into the Harrisons' art and methodologies. I also gained a clearer understanding of the matrix of physical, social, economic and ideological factors that effect the Earth's environmental welfare. The proposed PhD program was designed to examine complex interactions with art and the environment by studying the history of repression, the history of radical art, ideas, practices and histories relating to the effects of economics, scientific thought, and methodology on the overall well being of the biosphere, as well as suggestions for an ecologically based whole systems approach to both teaching and human-induced eco-systemic stress. Students would learn to engage large-scale dialogues in order to affect governmental policies. In turn, these policies would have environmental consequences. This PhD proposal put forward that artists must have a firm grasp of a number of disciplines in order to intelligently and effectively engage large-scale projects that could make a difference in artistic, environmental, economic, and other social systems that determine the fate of the many living creatures upon which our existence depends.

The Harrisons have a longstanding and extraordinary grasp of these strategies. Their work is driven by a deep understanding and respect for ecological systems and is fueled by great empathy for the Earth. Works such as *The Serpentine Lattice* or *the Force Majeure* posit that unless artists, scientists, industry and government begin creating working environmental projects together, which actively acknowledge our future needs in light of our current environmental crises, habitable environments that can sustain future generations of life may not exist. Instead of simply illustrating ideas for the future, the Harrisons articulate and build the kinds of work and bodies of knowledge that may help us have a livable future on this planet.

Their working process is complex. It includes collaboration across a range of fields, allows for the expertise and bureaucratic structures necessary for the execution of their ideas, uses metaphor as a material, both visual and verbal, and asks questions such as "How big is here?" Their work combines text and image to explain, explore and map ideas and tell stories. This effort has culminated in the creation of several large-scale environmental earthworks. Early in their collaborative career, the Harrisons systematically learned how to make earth (*Making Earth* 1970). This taught them how grow things literally from the ground up. First they became urban farmers long before it was fashionable. Later, in *the Lagoon Cycle* 1974-1980, they researched the Southeast Asian Estuarine Portunid Crab *Scylla Serrata* Forscal as a sustainable food source. They conducted this project using combined scientific research methodologies and art techniques. The Scripps Institute of Oceanography awarded them a grant for this work, which then gained them recognition from the scientific community. In addition, they were able to let the crustaceans teach them how to think about the both the larger environment of the lagoon and also about how to create artificial environments that would nurture the crabs and allow them to breed in order to provide a source of food for humans. *Making Earth* laid the foundation for the later creation of an indoor series of "pastures," an orchard, upright and flat pastures, a potato patch, a crab farm, and a fish farm.

In 1974 they did their first work about global warming discourse in an atmosphere that did not appreciate such concerns. The Harrisons then began looking towards Europe in order to explore global warming, mass desertification, and the rising of the earth's waters. Their projects not only examine these problems but also suggest practical ecological plans of action. *Peninsula Europe III* posits planting ancient tree species

in order to create an array of specially formulated forests that will be able to survive future climate change. Their root systems can hold water. This spongiform root water storage system is intended to counter the massive loss of usable water from snow pack and glacial melt, which is one of the results of global warming. When oceans rise, covering massive areas of land near the water's edge of all continents and islands, the water that the root systems of these ancient tree species can hold will be essential to survival by guaranteeing that fresh waters will be in place, and that there will be ecological diversity.

This work provides hope for the environmental future by demonstrating how the Harrisons' own working systems can become an informed reality. As artists working in collaboration with communities, art institutions, scientists and even governmental agencies, they produce art that is informed by creative, intuitive and situated knowledge. The cumulative body of art that has emerged from their ongoing research and 40-year collaboration with each other, with communities, with scientists, and governmental agencies has produced meaningful maps, plans and places that may allow life, as we know it, to have an imaginable future. Not only have I been mentored and inspired by the Harrisons, but I have come to realize that addressing environmental issues in my collaborative work with Annie Sprinkle is critical.

Elizabeth Stephens and Annie Sprinkle in conversation with Newton Harrison and Helen Meyer Harrison July 4, 2010, Santa Cruz, CA.

SPRINKLE

So, how can environmental art impact the crisis that's happening? How can art influence policy?

N HARRISON

Our most recent work, *The Force Majeure*, is about that. I think that art needs a seat at the table, where decisions are made. And the only way to get a seat is by outthinking so-called accepted belief. You have to come up with better ideas than anybody else, repeatedly. Like Helen will tell you, we've gotten to the center of governments of small countries a number of times as a consequence.

HM HARRISON

And won awards for it too.

N HARRISON

We got to work with the government of Holland for the *Green Heart* work. An agency of the British government funded *Greenhouse Britain* and another agency gave us an award for it. We talked to the EU delegates on our *Peninsula Europe* work...

SPRINKLE

So you are mingling with policymakers through being artists.

N HARRISON

Oil companies, builders of houses, all built stuff is the consequence of people of power in a place taking action. Those people, whether they talk about building a town or drilling a well, talk to each other about it. And they tell each other stories, "If we owned every well in the world, we could be the richest people in the world! Never mind that we might cause a little trouble, we'll get by it." So they tell each other these

stories, and in due course the stories become proposals, the proposals get funded and environmental action takes place.

HM HARRISON

If you look at our work from a certain angle, you would see that we tune into these stories but we set about the business of veering them in another direction. That's what we propose with the *Force Majeure* work. We succeeded in Holland. We succeeded in some other places too, that's why we got the Chartered Institute of Environmental Management (CIWEM) Prize in Britain. We succeeded in the former Yugoslavia. In Japan we won the Nagoya Biennale prize...

N HARRISON

It has to do with making manifest something others don't see, and making absolutely clear that what you've done is in the interest of the whole. Everybody's got to know what your benefit is.

HM HARRISON

And, of course, their benefit too.

N HARRISON

Yes, their benefit and yours. You can't have people thinking that, as in our government, there are people getting some secret benefits behind the scenes, or someone's paying us to do this to benefit them. That's why we publish what we make – we get paid up front, and we're careful about who pays us.

SPRINKLE

Does that make a difference, who pays you?

N HARRISON

Well, here's the answer. We're talking to some people from the Dutch parliament, they say, what makes you think you can do what we can't do? What makes you think you can do this? We say, well you tried it – you gave us eleven books, and each book was a story where they, the people, failed. So you can't do it. But what makes you think we can't? And in any case, we're a cheap date, we don't cost that much. *(laughter)* And the other thing is, the *Green Heart of Holland* is our client – that's a way of saying the environment is the boss here, not you, or us.

SPRINKLE

The environment's the boss, I like that!

HM HARRISON

The idea is that if they don't like what we're doing, we're perfectly willing to pack up and go. If we don't like what they're doing, we are also free to pack up and go.

STEPHENS

Do you inform them of that, right from the get-go?

N HARRISON and HM HARRISON

Yes. That gives us a lot of power. And it's also absolutely straight. And that's what we try to do, and be.

SPRINKLE

So there's a lot of contract stuff worked out before you start a project?

N HARRISON

No, our contracts are the shortest in the history of contracts. It's a handshake, and we agree to do A, B, and C and they agree to do this, that and the other. It's written up in two pages, and then we go about beginning.

HM HARRISON

The handshake is the main thing.

N HARRISON

For example, the head of the *Kunst und Ausstellungshalle* in Bonn made a contract with us, which says, "You artists will do the best work you are able to do! And you'll do whatever you need to do to make it work." And that's what we signed. We'll do whatever we need to do. And from that agreement, they got *The Endangered Meadows of Europe*, a quarter of a million people came to see it, and all kinds of good things happened.



Helen Meyer and Newton Harrison, *Endangered Meadows of Europe (Meadows Transplanted)*, 1994.
Image courtesy of the artists.

STEPHENS

What do think about the power of poetic gesture in your work?

HM HARRISON

I would say that it is the way we began working together, Newt was doing a project, and I said "you can't do that without saying something, because the image doesn't make clear what your intentions are." So let's try saying something. Let's try putting the idea into words as well as into a visual image.

N HARRISON

So then the question was...well say you did. And it took 10 pages to put something into words, and you have this one visual image. At this point, your words and your image, may fight each other. So that's when we chose the poetic form of expression.

HM HARRISON

We chose it because the poet has the advantage over the discursive writer. For discursive writers, words mean exactly what they say. But with the poet, you have the connotations of the words as well as their denotation to express your meaning. The connotation has all the possibilities and images that emerge from the use of that word.

N HARRISON

Poetry avoids planning language, science language, all those kinds of languages, so that if somebody reads our work carefully they can understand.

HM HARRISON

It's written to be understood, and it's written to be read out loud, so that it's not just the written word but also the spoken word that is very important.

N HARRISON

You know it's quite an exercise writing this material – because no one will stand in front of an image for much longer than two minutes, so most of our texts are only two or three minutes long. The global warming concepts we've been working with, I guess since 1974, can be experienced in a 2 ½ minute read.



Helen Meyer Harrison and Newton Harrison, *Green Heart of Holland*, 1984.
Image courtesy of the artists.

STEPHENS

And also, the videos that you make, that's a really brilliant way to incorporate the text, and time as well. I know my students really loved seeing your video work.

N HARRISON

Let's talk about our process. People want to know who does what. What happens is I do the first draft, Helen does the second, I go back in for the third, and then Helen has the final one.

HM HARRISON

So he has the first word, and I mostly have the last word. It works out.

SPRINKLE

So you've got it all worked out. Did it take a long time to come to what works best?

N HARRISON

No, it happened really quickly. We each do what we're best at.

HM HARRISON

And sometimes we have to do it over a number of times. Rarely do we rework the whole thing, it's mostly a part here, a part there....We follow a very natural thought. I am much more concerned with accuracy in language. Newt is much more concerned with saying what comes into his head.

N HARRISON

So Helen is always correcting me. (*Helen: laughter*) She'll correct me, and I'll say things like "Why don't I complain? Because she's right 90 percent of the time and I can't tell which is the other ten percent."

HM HARRISON

One of the things we say is that the work exists. Charles Green, the critic and writer from Australia, wrote a book called *The Third Hand*, and what he's talking about is the fact that most artists who work together over a long period of time say "the work is not mine, the work is not his, the work exists in the discourse between us." It is the third hand, and it would not exist without both of us – talking things out, expressing our own beliefs and ideas, then finding out where they meet and enacting them, visually.

SPRINKLE

Do you think a lot of artists would benefit from collaborating, or do you think some of them are just meant to work alone?

N HARRISON

I think one of the neat things about human diversity is that it is like biodiversity. You really need all kinds of different things for creativity and survival to move outwards. And I think art does just as well with someone like Joseph Cornell, who lived in a tiny little room, as, say, Warhol's Factory, where a lot of people were working in the same time and place.

STEPHENS

I want to go back, just for a second. When did you start collaborating, and could you just talk a little bit about how that happened?

HM HARRISON

Let's put it this way. The thing that brought us together was art, and talk about collaborating. Our first date was to the Museum of Modern Art (*giggles*) and it went on like that. And that was 60 years ago or something. So I learned a great deal. I had taken art history – but working with an artist is very different from art history!

SPRINKLE

So would you say you collaborated on your first date, then?

N HARRISON

No, actually, I would say something like this: Collaboration is funny stuff. Both of us have the same belief, which is that you only collaborate when you need to. Why would you collaborate if you don't need to? So, say, when we were working in the peace movement, back in 1961, we formed this Peace Center called the Tompkins Square Peace Center which ran in parallel to the Greenwich Village Peace Center, and then Helen became the first NY coordinator for the Women's Strike for Peace.

HM HARRISON

Later Bella Abzug took the Strike for Peace over – she was about the 4th coordinator, I was the first coordinator in NY, it had many coordinators all over the country – because it was a national movement. It began in Washington, we all got interested and we had a group of women, and they unanimously chose me as the person to be the coordinator and organizer.

N HARRISON

So we collaborated with the peace movement...Yes, I was pretty impressed by the Women's Strike. That's when I became aware that maybe there was something really wrong with the way the male race was treating the female race.

STEPHENS

Newton, weren't you also an honorary member of Womanhouse?

N HARRISON

Yes, 10 years later. They wouldn't show Helen's work cause she was doing it with a man. But then Arlene Raven decided to stop the baloney and then they showed the work. Back to collaboration. Helen could do a whole bunch of stuff that I couldn't do. I could do a whole bunch of stuff she couldn't do. When we decided to take on ecosystems as our core subject matter, without actually being able to define what one was, there were two things that came up. One: neither of us thought that a work like that would work over time unless there was a male-female energy driving it. Because almost all things have children. Almost all life bifurcates. Two: the other thing we did over 5-10 years is teach each other to *be* each other.

SPRINKLE

Empathy.

N HARRISON

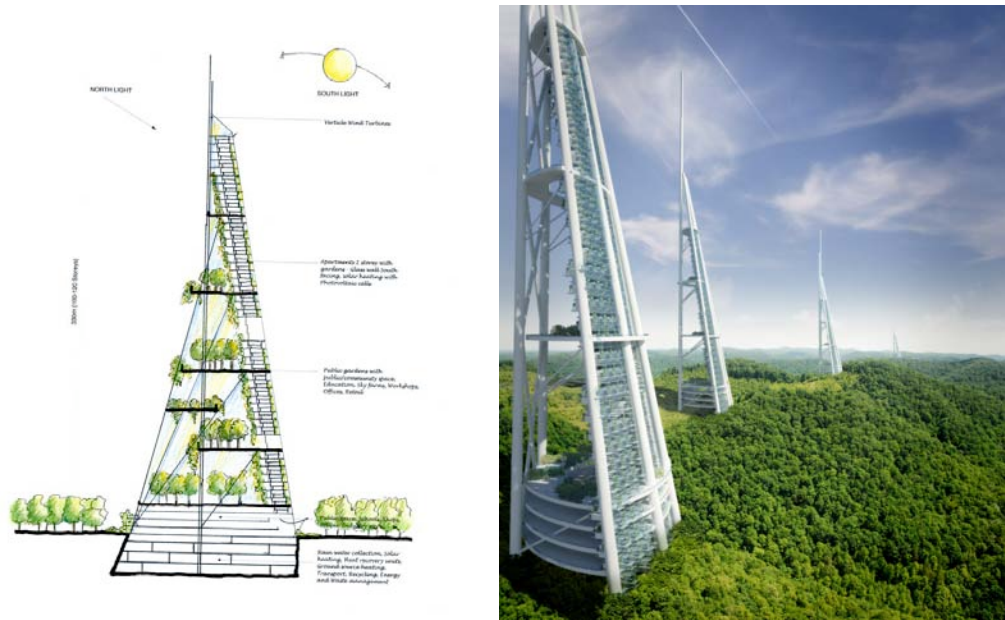
Yeah, which I didn't have so much of, but she expressed pretty well.

SPRINKLE

I would love to know what – how you decided to become environmental artists, which didn't even really exist at the time, but – was there a moment?

N HARRISON

There were two moments. Helen had a long moment and I had a short one.



Helen Meyer Harrison and Newton Harrison in collaboration with ATOPIA Research.
Tower Village Sketch (Left), *EcoTower* (Right), 2009.
 Images courtesy of the artists.

HM HARRISON

When Rachel Carson wrote *Silent Spring*, in 62, I read it. And I was old enough by then to remember when the sky was black – when I was a little girl, and the sky would be black with Canada geese migrating north for the summer or south for the winter. And I remembered when the shores at the beach were so full of shells, and the shells would break, and it was hard to walk on the sand because of all the sharp edges of the shells. I remembered when it was different and more birds were singing.

N HARRISON

And then the shells went away and the birds went away.

HM HARRISON

Everything Rachel talked about was very clear to me. It was obvious that something was very wrong and I wanted to do something about it, but I didn't know what to do.

N HARRISON

So Helen was chewing on this for 7 or 8 years. Whereas I, I'm teaching at the University, a second year course, I'm showing them Sol LeWitt, I'm talking about the module. And I'm telling them how clever it is, and all of a sudden I'm looking at it and thinking, well is it really that clever? No, it's not so clever after all. What does it mean? He's taken the first three problems of descriptive geometry, as laid out in Paul Klee's sketchbook. And they are: begin with a point, a line becomes a moving point, a moving line becomes a plane, a moving plane becomes a volume. And so, that's how he gets to repeat all the lines. And the point I got to, when that was explained, was that that was not the issue. The issue was *the claim*. The claim he made for the modules was that they referred to the smallest modules that we have, which are our cell structures and which emerges from the genetic code. So I'm in the middle of this class, and I'm thinking, I should really only do work that benefits the genetic code. And so I told the class "You're free for the next week while I think about this. I may have been teaching you wrong." And I walked out.

SPRINKLE

Wow.

N HARRISON

I'm prone to dramatic gestures. Helen is prone to express caring.

SPRINKLE

Gestation.

N HARRISON

Yeah. Then we decided to put the two together and do no work that didn't include the environment.

STEPHENS

So when was that?

N HARRISON

1970. Basically between 70 and 73 we learned how to do it.

SPRINKLE

And did you realize at that moment – hey, this is my life's work?

N HARRISON

Oh, sure. No doubt about it. There are real reasons for this.

STEPHENS

Which are?

N HARRISON

They're different for me and Helen. You know, I was a really good figure modeler, and I thought, what if I was the best? The Sputnik went up, I thought, I have a feeling for science, and then I'm thinking, that's not science, that's clever engineering. And that's a big performance – a command performance! And I, I am recapitulating the Renaissance in sculpture? Worrying about the limp wrist Michelangelo? I mean, are you kidding? And so, I buried my sculpture, turned down my commissions, then I became a field painter. Then I say, what if I'm the best field painter in the world? So what? Then I became a tech artist, with artificial auroras and that sort of thing. So what if I'm the best tech artist in the world? So what? So the question was, what could I not say "So what?" to? And you can't say "so what" to the ecosystem. You can't say "so what" to the dying of the world's oceans. You can't say "so what" to these things! And that's why I'm so critical of so much art.

SPRINKLE

So sad. That's right on. That makes so much sense.

N HARRISON

But Helen's came a different way.

STEPHENS

So where did this come from, Helen?

HM HARRISON

It was absolutely the way to deal, to bespeak the problem. I hadn't known what to do. But Newton did. He would make a project. And I knew immediately to join in. I introduced photography – I wasn't a great photographer, but I did some pretty good images. You can see this in the *Lagoon Cycle*. And the other early work I did which nobody really sees, one that we did for a museum in Florida, which was on the barrier islands, *The Mangrove and the Pine* we called it. So I brought photography in, as well as text to explicate the work, whereas Newt was a sculptor and a painter, et cetera.

N HARRISON

So we combined abilities.

SPRINKLE

I wanted to ask you about the elements, about the earth itself. Oh, I really want to ask two questions. One about what are your favorite earth elements, and also what you think about anthropomorphizing the earth.

N HARRISON

Um. I think personally that anthropomorphizing the earth is probably a mistake. What happens is that it's an intense form of empathy, and it's best to stay with empathy itself, where you are in a metaphorical relationship to the Other. Like: I am the earth but not completely the earth. You are valuing the Other – whatever it is you've been anthropomorphizing – by virtue of that double understanding. The way I feel about the earth is that life springs from it. And so I focus on the *life* of it. And I have feelings of gratitude toward it. And I have feelings of being protective. And we have made earth many times as a result of this – but I don't particularly anthropomorphize it so much as feel that we owe our being to it, our life to it. And so we protect and act.

SPRINKLE

So you see it as the wellspring of life, as opposed to saying, "Oh look at the vulva shape on that tree, or the hills, don't the hills look like breasts".

N HARRISON

Well, I've done all that, but it doesn't help me near so much as thinking, what happened to the green carpet that was on that, what can I do about it? See, I always want to act. And I never found that anthropomorphizing helped me act. But I found that empathy did, and valuing something did, and tossing my creativity in it did. I'm not against it, because I have a feeling that it helps many people – but I'm not one of them. Make sense? It's, again, part of what I consider the diversity of things.

SPRINKLE

Helen how do you view the earth?

HM HARRISON

It is itself, it is its own entity. It has its own entityhood. And the earth is actually home to mega-billions of living creatures, including ourselves but we don't respect it and we don't care about its wellbeing, and living earth is necessary for our own survival. But we don't pay attention to that. Everything we're doing is leading to our own destruction. And we are self-destructing at an incredible rate. As we destroy the earth, the ocean, the air, we are inevitably destroying all that makes life possible for ourselves.

STEPHENS

But how do you use metaphor? I mean, certainly metaphor comes into things.

N HARRISON

Yes, metaphor is core to it.

STEPHENS

Could you talk about that a little bit?

N HARRISON

Okay. There's a difference between metaphor and analogy. An analogy is where A is like B. A metaphor comes out where A is B, but not completely B. That's when your identification is as full as you can get. So for a moment I might feel that I *am* the forest. Then I'm in metaphorical relationship to the forest. But in no sense am I dumb enough to think that I'm physically the forest. I'm something else.

STEPHENS

Would you agree with that, Helen?

HM HARRISON

I would express it differently. I feel connection, empathy, understanding, with another entity. And I think that rather than saying "Earth," it's the entity that the earth represents that I feel in touch with.

SPRINKLE

So you see it as a being?

HM HARRISON

An entity is an entity, it's not a being.

N HARRISON

Because then you assume that it has a consciousness like us.

SPRINKLE

Don't you think it does?

N HARRISON

No, I think it has consciousness entirely different from us. I think that sentience is part of life...

HM HARRISON

It has sentience. Self-knowing, knowingness.

N HARRISON

Intelligence – every cell is intelligent. It knows what to do for itself in order to continue, what not to do for itself. So a cell exercises intelligence without a central nervous system.

HM HARRISON

But I think there's something else I'm trying to say, Newt. And that is, that my connection is one of feeling, one of understanding. In a sense, it's on a different plane, a different level than my connection to other living creatures. But it is to understand the living-ness of the earth. It's to understand the living-ness of the ocean.

N HARRISON

So you are the Other, but not completely the Other.

HM HARRISON

But you feel it. It's like going into the redwoods and hugging a tree, just putting your arms around it. And you feel a connection, you feel something happening – you don't have the words for it. It's an emotional response and it's an understanding that is not in words but in being.

N HARRISON

So you can see it's not anthropomorphizing at all, it's more direct. And let's go back to metaphor again. I consider love a metaphorical state. If you're in love with somebody, you are the Other but not completely the Other. That's why you don't hurt them, if you can help it. Or if you do, you apologize. That's how you know that stuff, you feel it on your skin. That's why being in love is not an analogy, there's no way to make an analogy for it. That's why I use the term empathy. And where is love in all this? And where is the empathy for place? I mean, when you marry a mountain, you're expressing empathy for place. *[Editor's note: see Lindsay Kelley's interview with Elizabeth Stephens and Annie Sprinkle in this volume.]* And that's the real issue there, and that's why you have our support. Not because it's smart to marry a mountain.

STEPHENS

Empathy of place. Well. We sure do love you guys.