

Newton & Helen Mayer Harrison: How Big is Here?

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NEWTON & Helen MAYER HARRISON: HOW BIG IS HERE?

John K. GRANDE

Leading pioneers of the Eco-Art movement, the collaborative team of Newton and Helen Mayer Harrison (often referred to simply as “the Harrisons”) have worked for over forty years with biologists, ecologists, architects, urban planners and other artists to initiate collaborative dialogues to uncover ideas and solutions, which support biodiversity and community wellbeing.

The Harrison’s concept of art embraces a breathtaking range of disciplines. They are historians, diplomats, ecologists, investigators, emissaries and art activists. Their work involves not only public discussion and proposing solutions, but also extensive mapping and documentation of these proposals in an art context.

Past projects have focused on watershed restoration, urban renewal, agricultural and forestry issues among others. The Harrisons’ visionary projects have led to changes in governmental policy and have expanded dialogue around previously unexplored issues, leading to practical implementations both in the United States and Europe.

Their work process is singular. It begins with the question, “How Big is Here?” Here may be a street corner, as in *California Wash* or it may be a sub-continent, such as *Peninsula Europe*. The artists create the agenda in discourse with the larger community. They stay only as long as the invitation continues, or until they deem that they have done all that is possible for them to do.

JKG: How did the two of you begin working together? Was the collaboration a way of enlarging the scope, the scale of engagement with the environment as artists?

Our collaboration in the domain of art making began somewhere around 1970. We had worked together in the anti-war movement of the early 60s and collaborated in other things aside from raising our four children. The collaboration began very simply with a decision that each of us made separately for somewhat different reasons to do

no work that did not benefit the ecosystem or the life-web. It took several years for us to grasp how such systems worked particularly how systems were nested within each other. We simply chose the ecosystem as our subject matter and one thing led to another and continues to this day.

Is sharing always a part of the matrix of your art? If so, is it sharing as a reflection of material culture, or spiritual culture, or a sharing of consciousness?

Sharing is always part of the matrix of our work. How can it not be, since we share what we have learned and how we have learned it and we share how we say it? Also, like a river or watershed, it’s pretty difficult to sign a meadow; so many of our works develop a life of their own, which is a separate story.

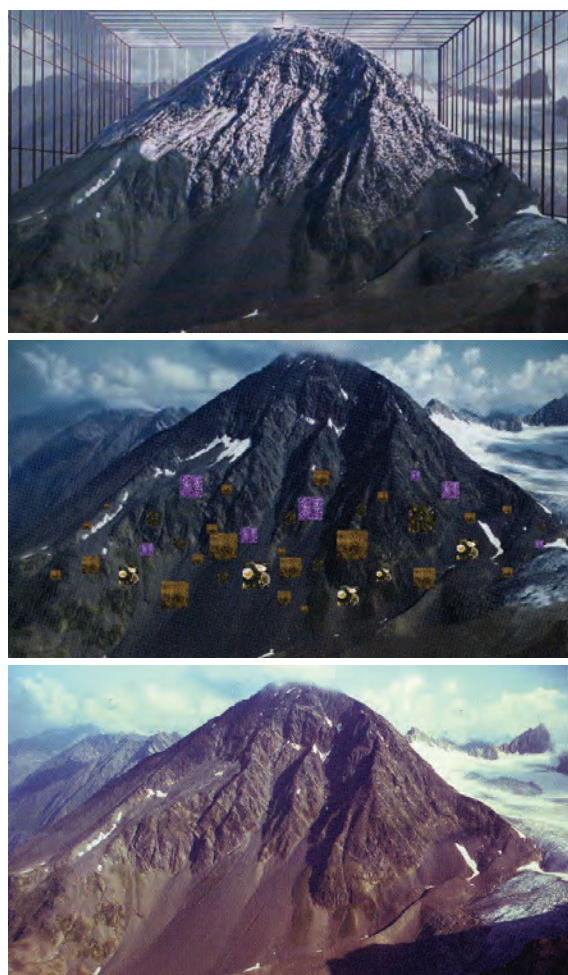
As early as 1974 in San Diego is the centre of the world, you addressed global warming, and in 1978, The Lagoon Cycle project in Sri Lanka drew attention to the future global warming scenario we are all now dealing with... Was working in an altogether different so-called “3rd World” context challenging, or was the context of nature, its universal commonalities, the real background for The Lagoon Cycle?

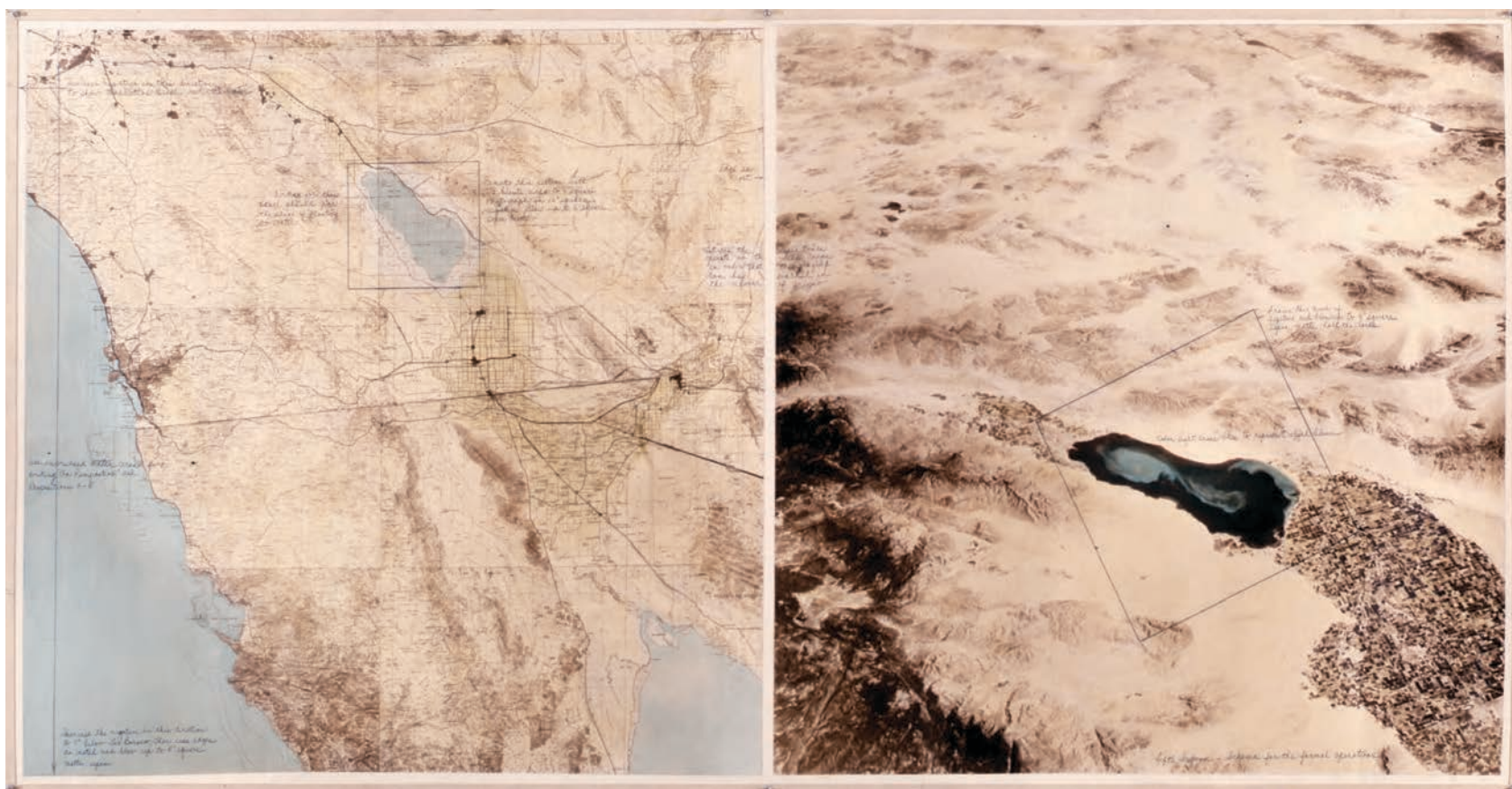
Working in the third world context, various countries in Europe and various parts of the US sort of infiltrated our thinking processes and are the real background for *The Lagoon Cycle*. Topsoil and grasslands are a theme in our work that started early and continue to this day. So is Global Warming. *The Lagoon Cycle* was invented with many levels in mind. The first was that in the process of making it, it began to have the properties of a Picaresque novel in 7 parts. We had in mind that it would be the storyboards for a rather odd movie. When it was up, we often performed it. Also, *The Lagoon Cycle* became a

story about our own development as artists and human beings.

Can you tell me about your recent Greenhouse Britain project (2007-2009)?

Basically, we were interested in democratizing Global Warming information in a very material way. That is to say, anyone who looked at the model and saw the ocean rise and heard the text, could get an idea of what would happen to their house or town if it was located close to sea level. Therefore, everyday people would be able to plan accordingly. However, *Greenhouse Britain* had a number of parts. One, an amusing





NEWTON and Helen
MAYER HARRISON,
The Fifth Lagoon Cycle,
1975. Photo: Courtesy
the artists.

←
NEWTON and Helen
MAYER HARRISON,
*The Mountain in the
Greenhouse*, 2001.
Photo: Courtesy the
artists.

film, posed the question; What would happen to Bristol if the ocean rose 5 meters? The concept proposed creating a barrier in the channel and diverting the Avon River. Another proposal examined the upward movement of people and where and how London might respond to ocean rise.

Sierra Nevada: An Adaptation (2011), part of the Force Majeure effort to encourage public and communal adaptation to ecosystems, is ingenious. The intention is to increase awareness of the way things can go—positive or negative—according to the way land, resources and the environment are used. You do this through map projections of land use scenarios largely missing from the media and public consciousness...

While it is true that the *Sierra Nevada* work and the *Force Majeure* works in general encourage public awareness and communal adaptation to ecosystemic change, we don't see ourselves as equipped to increase awareness sufficiently to counter the Global Warming phenomenon. We suspect that our work and perhaps that of several hundred others will collectively change consciousness, but in our opinion, not in time. Rather, from our *Force Majeure* works, we have concluded that tipping points have passed, or are passing and we need to begin

an investigation of and action toward adaptation at a very great scale. By this we mean, something like the several million square kilometers of the Tibetan Plateau not too mountainous to grow things on. This is a very long story. The proposal we have made begins with *Manifesto for the 21st Century*, then lays out the Tibet work, the *Peninsula Europe* work, which may clear the requirement for adaptation, then includes the *Sierra Nevada* work and the experimentation that it will do, in which we set out to prove concepts on the ground in what we call a "hybrid work."

In Force Majeure you intimate that we are not conscious of the physical, even invisible changes in the world, opting instead to read and inform according to traditional informational systems rather than watching the real world, the physical world, the physics of the world in effect... And so is physics a far more radical teacher than method or ideology?

You quote from our *Manifesto for the 21st Century*, in which we define how and why we use the term *Force Majeure*. In it, we express our doubts about the value and power of diverse ideologies to resolve the stress coming about as a result of accelerated Global Warming in transaction with the culture of resource extraction. Instead we

refer to the laws of physics as something we must tune to. We do this because any serious review of critical theory demonstrates the absence of serious attention to the physical laws, which underpin life. As suggested in our manifesto, too much of human activity pays attention to other human activity. This is true whether we are looking at social justice issues, economics, entertainment, critical theory or everyday conversation. All together, our attention is upon each other and not upon that from which we all have been born and that which underlies the wellbeing and survival of us all and all life that we perceive is not ourselves. From the perspective of the laws of physics and our own self-interest, we have institutionalized insanity. www.theharrisonstudio.net ←

John K. GRANDE is a leading writer and curator in the Art & Ecology field worldwide. He is the author of *Balance: Art and Nature* (Black Rose Books, 1994), *Art Nature Dialogues: Interviews with Environmental Artists* (State University of New York Press, 2004, (www.sunypress.edu), and *Dialogues in Diversity: Art from Marginal to Mainstream*, Paris, Italy, 2007 (www.paripublishing.com). John K. Grande co-curated *Eco-Art* with Pia Hovi-Assad and Peter Selz at the Pori Art Museum (2011) in Finland and is curator of eARTH ART 2012 at Van Dusen Gardens, Vancouver, B.C. His recently published books include *Black Peat* (Print Factory, Ireland, 2012) and *Art in Nature* (Borim Press, Seoul, Korea, 2012). www.grandescritique.com