**Art & Ecology:**

**Perspectives and Issues**



**Ecological Restoration**

**Helen and Newton Harrison, *The Lagoon Cycle***

**by Don Krug**

Newton and Helen Mayer Harrison currently do consulting work with regard to ecological projects. The two co-taught from 1969-1993 at the University of California at San Diego. Their initial collaborations began partially in response to Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring,* which pointed out that environmental destruction was integrally connected to post-war industrial agricultural practices and consumerism. Many of the Harrisons' ecological projects involve interpreting large scale ecosystems. Therefore, their work is often highly conceptual and ideally presents ways to challenge human intervention in the control of existing land and water usage. Their remediation work typically encompasses bodies of bioregions that cross national boundaries. They have focused their attention on solutions for restoring fragile watersheds and water basins and for sustaining and reclaiming biodiversity in light of the displacement of indigenous flora and fauna from specific ecological habitats.

Their working process is articulated by art historian Barbara Matilsky (1992):

Helen Mayer Harrison and Newton Harrison conduct ecological projects that often begin with an invitation from either an art institution or a community organization to investigate a regional environmental problem. After firsthand study, research and interviews with ecologists, biologists and planners the artists create a photographic narrative that identifies the problem, questions the system of beliefs that allow the condition to develop and proposes initiatives to counter environmental damage. They exhibit their documentation in a public forum -- a museum, library, city hall -- to stimulate discussion, debate, and media attention. By communication to the public the problems that confront a fragile ecosystem and the ways in which the balance can be restored, they exert pressure on the political system and rally public opinion in an attempt to avert ecological disaster. (p.66-67)

In *The Lagoon Cycle* (1972-1982) the Harrisons created a portable 350-foot-long mural in fifty sections that examines the processes and linkages between food production and watersheds. The work investigates land use along the perimeter of the Pacific Rim. The work includes photographs, collages, performances, and poetry. Matilsky (1992) writes, "*Lagoon Cycle* is a personal and philosophical journey, beginning with observations on the life of a small crustacean and ending with prophesies of global warming." (p.61)

The epic installation captures the storytelling qualities of the Harrisons in rich verse and images. They combine poetic caveats with powerful visual images to create memorable symbolic metaphors. Their narrative works are "stories of place" that use maps, photographs, and words to illustrate the significance of solving community ecological issues. The Harrisons believe they "are storytellers. Our art is about direct engagement." (Matilsky, 1992, p. 67) Their art uses metaphor to examine the fragility of the earth's web of life.

Many of the ecological projects the Harrisons have worked on are long-term community projects. For example, they are currently working on *Serpentine Lattice,* located on the northern Oregon coastal range (Fillin-Yeh, 1993). The project was begun over seven years ago and was designed to restore a network of watersheds to aid salmon migration. The Harrisons worked with biologists, ecologists, and community planners to design sustainable ways to rebuild damaged regional ecological systems. Lectures, demonstrations, and public forums were part of the Harrisons' community work and artistic endeavors. "The Harrisons are concerned with opening lines of communication between the community, civic organizations, and government. The power of their art resides as much in the artists' thoughts and impressions as in the visual documentation of place. With their work, the Harrisons revive and reconnect to an important tradition of communication, which is all but lost in industrial society today." (Matilsky, 1992, p.66)

Their ecological projects are based on building community partnerships that will sustain the healing of the bioregion even after they are no longer able to participate in the efforts of restoration. The Harrisons were among the first artists to proclaim the necessity of healing fragile places through collaborative efforts among disciplines. Their cross-disciplinary work serves as an example for new generations of young artists.

**Questions**

* What is biodiversity and what are bioregions?
* What contextual conditions, i.e., historical, social, cultural, should be considered when investigating how people understand their sense of place within specific time periods?
* Some cultures use systems of time based on seasonal changes. What other kinds of time systems exist? How are they implemented?
* How can oral narratives be used in contemporary ecological art to preserve and understand stories of place?

**Resources**

Matilsky, B. C. (1992). *Fragile ecologies: Contemporary artist's interpretations and solutions.* New York: Rizzoli International.

Oakes, Baile. (1995). *Sculpting with the environment--a natural dialogue.* New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold.