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Imagining the Lagoon in Helen Mayer Harrison and Newton Harrison's *The Lagoon Cycle*

Monica Manolescu♦

Helen Mayer Harrison and Newton Harrison's *The Lagoon Cycle* (1972-1985, in the collection of the Centre Pompidou) is a hybrid work that combines visual and textual material in the form of a 360-foot long and 8-foot tall mural first exhibited at the Johnson Museum at Cornell University in 1985 and made available as an exhibition catalogue (with essays by Michel de Certeau and Carter Ratcliff) and as a handmade book. It comprises a relatively long text structured into seven parts (from the First to the Seventh Lagoon), drawings, maps, photographs, site-specific artworks and performance. *The Lagoon Cycle* can be read as a version of the total work of art and as a polymorphic example of aesthetic hybridity that navigates between poetry and science, the local and the global, action and contemplation. The heterogeneity of media is common in conceptual and Land Art starting with the 1960s (both are part of the Harrisons' genealogy), but *The Lagoon Cycle* stands out through its sheer size in terms of exhibition material inside the museum, the complexity of its discourse which the artists often enacted in live performances, its vast geographical scope, its ambitious deployment of spatial representations and its ambivalent probing of the challenges of restoring degraded environments.

The prolific work of the Harrisons has been analysed by critics from the perspective of its environmental and social content and the ways in which it confronts the legacy of modernism (Rogers, 2017), its emphasis on improvisation, contradiction and inconsistency (Douglas and Fremantle, 2016a) and its conversational and collaborative practice (Kester, 2010). In this article, I will address the representations and practices of space in *The Lagoon Cycle*, in particular the lagoon as *topos* that stands in between the concreteness of site and the abstraction of metaphor. I will first

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discuss the artistic genealogies of the artists in relation to their use of site and their inscription in a critical reflection on landscape, I will then engage with their reliance on fieldwork as a cultural practice and finally I will uncover some of the performative and conceptual dimensions of the lagoon.

In *The Lagoon Cycle*, the artists explore the possibility of transferring a depleting species (the mangrove crab *Scylla serrata*) from the lagoons of Sri Lanka to a laboratory at the University of California San Diego and then to the Salton Sea in California, a transfer that would involve the reconstruction of a habitat and a sustainable harvesting in its new location. In the end, the heavily exploited mangroves of Sri Lanka are echoed across the globe by the polluted waters of the Salton Sea, in a mirroring of degradation that transcends national boundaries. *The Lagoon Cycle* speculates on the possibility and consequence of the transfer of *Scylla serrata* through a series of poetic and philosophical dialogues infused with the language of scientific experimentation. The main objective of *The Lagoon Cycle* is not to successfully restore degradation, even if a lot of speculative energy is channelled towards imagining the technological, economic and pragmatic frameworks that would make it possible.[1] Above all, *The Lagoon Cycle* rethinks spaces in terms of fragile systems (of which the lagoon becomes an emblem), reconsiders the complex interweaving of humans and the environment, and argues in favour of an ethics and aesthetics of "attention" to our surroundings (*LC*[2] 82). As a conceptual project whose utopian ambitions prevent it from fully materializing, *The Lagoon Cycle* asserts the role of art in reflecting critically on the present and in projecting the future that might result from perpetuating the current situation. Ultimately, the artists plead for "re-orienting consciousness around a different data base" (*LC* 92), namely for a reconsideration of the human interaction with the surrounding world.

Situating *The Lagoon Cycle*: artistic genealogies

American artists Helen Mayer Harrison and Newton Harrison embarked on their joint artistic career in the 1970s. Space is at the core of their aesthetics with the expressed objective "to create new spaces – first in the mind and thereafter in everyday life" (Harrison, 1993: 377). The primacy of the "mind" in the quote spells out the conceptual anchorage of their approach which is then meant to be transferred onto the concrete terrain of the everyday. The Harrisons can be inscribed in an

1 T. J. Demos uses the phrase "restorationist eco-aesthetics" (Demos, 2016: 39) to refer to the convergence between art and ecological restoration. The relationship between art and ecology is at the forefront of recent artistic and curatorial activity. See for instance the exhibition catalogue of the Milan Triennial entitled *Broken Nature. Design Takes on Human Survival* (Antonelli and Tannir, 2019).

2 All references to Helen Mayer and Newton Harrison, *The Lagoon Cycle* (1985) will be preceded by *LC*.

emphatically ideological framework of landscape understood as an art that deals closely with the critical aspects of land representation. The two artists are mentioned in the introduction to the *Critical Landscapes* collective volume (Scott and Swenson, 2015: 12) that discusses contemporary artists who confront the forces, tensions, erasures and displacements at work in shaping the land. The art of the Harrisons urges connections between space and the environmental, the social, the political, the ethical, and, it should be added, the poetic and the speculative.[3]

The Harrisons' critical thinking about landscape needs to be understood in the context of their original affinity with Land Art. Their early work shares certain procedures with a number of Land Artists, notably the transferral of samples (rocks, earth) from the site to the exhibition space to be displayed in containers, sometimes accompanied by photographs and maps of the site. However, several significant elements distinguish the Harrisons from most artists associated with Land Art at its beginnings: their ecological inspiration[4] (which became increasingly political over time) and their actual inclusion of plants and animals in their installations.[5] Their embrace of organic life is manifest in *The Lagoon Cycle*, where it appears as an original take on entropy, a major subject for certain artists of the 1960s and 1970s. In the work of the Harrisons, the cultivation of plants and animals within an ecological

3 Another major American figure comes to mind in relation to the Harrisons' blending of artistic, scientific and ecological concerns: Buckminster Fuller, especially in his *Operating Manual for Spaceship Earth* (1969) and *Utopia or Oblivion. The Prospects for Humanity* (1969). The Harrisons' *Future Garden for the Central Coast of California* (University of California at Santa Cruz, 2018) uses geodesic domes that recall Fuller's utopian designs.

4 As explained by Kaiser and Kwon in the preface to the *Ends of the Earth. Land Art to 1974* catalogue, Land Art (a more encompassing term than Earthworks) developed around 1960 in a specific constellation of artists and networks, but starting with 1974, this constellation shifted and diversified into distinct paths of artistic inquiry: "public art, landscape design, outdoor sculpture, ecological art, and so on" (31). The Earthworks artists did not have ecological leanings, as made clear by Katia Schneller in her article "Earth Art, un art écologique?". A different perspective on the relationship between Earthworks and ecology, including recent ecological reactions to the exploitation of sites close to some of the most famous Earthworks/ Land Art works such as Smithson's *The Spiral Jetty*, Walter de Maria's *Lightning Field* and Michael Heizer's *City*, can be found in Serge Paul, "Land art et écologie: vers une thérapie du paysage" in Hélène Guenin (ed.), *Sublime. Les tremblements du monde*, Centre Pompidou-Metz, 2016, 38-43. This exhibition catalogue makes repeated connections between the interest of Earthworks artists in blasted industrial landscapes and more recent artists with an ecological agenda.

5 The Harrisons would have liked to include a real hog in their installation *Hog Pasture. Survival Piece* (1971), but the Boston Museum of Fine Arts refused. Years later, at the *Ends of the Earth* exhibit organized by Kaiser and Kwon at the Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art (2012), the *Hog Pasture* performance and installation was revived, and a pig was finally authorized to be part of it. The Harrisons created several *Survival Pieces* using shrimp, which highlighted questions of sustainable aquaculture, food production and rituals of eating. Their work *Portable Fish Farm* at the Hayward Gallery in London (1971) created a turmoil and antagonized animal rights activists because the catfish grown as part of the installation were supposed to be electrocuted prior to a planned feast (Rogers, 2017: 233-234).

paradigm as part of an artistic installation is entangled with a reflection on how to actively decrease the entropy of the organic and of ecosystems in general.[6] This active and activist approach is radically different from that of other notable artists interested in entropy, for instance Robert Smithson, whose practice and philosophy sought to illustrate the inevitability of entropy, exclusively inorganic in nature. Yet another divergent example is provided by Gordon Matta-Clark's interventions in dilapidated architecture, which precipitated ruin and displayed a fascination with degraded urban and suburban environments, but without seeking to stall entropy in any way. The Harrisons' explicit goal in the works devoted to earth, plants and animals is a decreased entropy articulated with sustainable land cultivation and food production, respectful of the earth and liable to offer a practical response to starvation, food shortage and soil degradation.

Varying conceptions of the relationship between the original site and the exhibited samples existed among the artists working in the 1960s and 1970s.[7] One of the most enduring theorizations of the relationship between the site and its representations or stand-ins (rocks, maps, photographs) belongs to Robert Smithson along the lines of the site/non-site dialectic, which sought to introduce a physical dimension in the artistic interaction with nature. The Earthworks artists used earth and rocks to build entropic works or to transfer samples to the museum. They often travelled to various sites, more or less remote (from New Jersey to the American West and as far as Mexico), to take photographs and collect samples. Smithson argued that landscape painting had introduced a nefarious distance between the artist and nature through its "studio-based formalism and cubistic reductionism" (Smithson, 1996: 162). The latter is dismissed by Smithson as a "pictorial representation derived only from the mind" (161). "A concrete dialectic" is his response to "a retreat in scenic beauty" (164). The non-site is an alternative response to pictorialism through its "representation without resemblance" ("Provisional Theory of Non-Sites," Smithson, 1996: 364). The tradition of the picturesque provides Smithson with a precedent for the site/non-site dialectic, which he discusses at length in "Frederick Law Olmsted and the Dialectical Landscape" (1973). In this essay, Smithson makes a case for degraded environments or "infernal regions" ("slag heaps, strip mines, and polluted rivers," 1996: 155), which he considers particularly suitable for making art: "My own experience is that the best sites for 'earth art' are sites that have been disrupted by industry, reckless urbanization, or nature's own devastation" (165). Smithson dismissed ecology as an adulteration of the relationship between man and nature and claimed that, by "pretending to

6 The Harrisons' manifesto entitled "The Force Majeure" is permeated with reflections on entropy (2007): https://theharrisonstudio.net/the-force-majeure-works-2008-2009-2.

7 On site-specificity, see Kwon, *One Place after Another. Site-Specific Art and Locational Identity* (2004). A nuanced discussion of site in 1960s American art in relation to photography and cartography is provided by Dryansky's *Cartophotographies. De l'art conceptuel au Land Art* (2017).

be saving the landscape" (164), ecology paradoxically widened the gap between the two. It is interesting to see the occasionally divergent contemporary reassessments of the Harrisons (pioneer ecological artists) and Smithson (Earthworks artist who contested the separation between nature and culture in ecological pursuits). Recent criticism of the Harrisons' art and of early ecological art of the 1960s-1970s claims that the latter deepened the nature/culture divide resulting in an objectified nature, divorced from social, political and technological concerns (Demos, 2016: 43). It can be argued that this statement is questionable as far as *The Lagoon Cycle* is concerned. In contrast, contemporary readings of Smithson interpret his critique of ecology in a nuanced and positive way, arguing that he critically engaged environmental history and that his art and writings actually "anticipated the influential ecocritical perspective of scholars today" primarily by insisting on the need to put an end to the idealization of nature (Braddock and Kusserow, 2018: 363). T. J. Demos also considers that Smithson's critique of autonomous nature sundered from man and his dialectic of site and non-site would have been beneficial to certain pioneering ecological artists (Demos, 2016: 45). The Harrisons share Smithson's focus on devastated sites, but their approach takes a resolutely ecological turn thanks to their interest in preservation and their goal of raising awareness to climate change and environmental decline. Their inclusion of a wealth of photographs and maps in *The Lagoon Cycle* is reminiscent of Smithson's, Oppenheim's and Huebler's non-sites.

As Gilles Tiberghien argues, Land Art is not a landscape art in the traditional sense, but rather an art that takes its cue from the earth in its material form (Tiberghien, 2012: 38-39). Significantly, the name of the first exhibition associated with Land Art was *Earthworks* (Dwan Gallery, New York, 1968), although in later uses the term referred strictly to the artists having participated in the original exhibit rather than to Land Art in general. Robert Morris's *Earthwork* (Dwan Gallery, 1968) and *Dirt* (Dwan Gallery, 1968) are examples of piled earth and detritus in exhibition rooms, completely disconnected from the site of origin.[8] Similarly, Walter de Maria produced three works entitled *Earth Rooms* starting in 1968 (in Munich, Darmstadt and New York)[9], but again the connection with the original site is not at stake. The Harrisons adopted a different approach to earth, which consisted in "making earth" as a response to topsoil degradation, rather than simply exhibiting earth samples. Several of their performances and installations deal with this process and are explicitly entitled *Making Earth* (the first one dates to 1970): mixing "sand, clay,

8 As Schneller remarks, Morris's *Dirt* suggested less an emphasis on earth than urban debris. *Dirt* was made up of grease, peat moss, bricks, steel, copper, aluminum, brass, zinc and felt. Ironically, a plant sprouted on top of the pile of dirt during the exhibition.

9 *The New York Earth Room* (1977) is the third *Earth Room* sculpture executed by the artist (on exhibit at the Dia Art Foundation), the first being in Munich, Germany in 1968. The second was installed at the Hessisches Landesmuseum in Darmstadt, Germany in 1974. The first two works no longer exist. For a contemporary reaction to the Munich Earth Room, see Glozer.

sewage sludge, leaf material, and chicken, cow and horse manure. These elements were gathered, mixed, watered, mixed again and again over a 4-month period until it had a rich, forest-floor smell and could be tasted."[10] While the Earthworks artists focus primarily on reconfiguring the relationship between the site and the museum by introducing the incongruous concreteness of earth in exhibition spaces, the Harrisons are interested in the artistic process of producing earth as an endangered organic element and in the social awareness their act might induce. The earth thus produced serves a double ecological and experiential purpose, simultaneously abstract and concrete: it stands for the degradation of soil in general, but it can also be tasted ("it had a rich forest-floor smell").

The Harrisons' installation *Hog Pasture. Survival Piece* (1971) goes one step further, since its medium is constituted by plants and fertilizers.[11] Commissioned by the Boston Museum of Fine Arts for an exhibition entitled "Earth, Air, Fire and Water," *Hog Pasture. Survival Piece* featured a wooden box container of earth with light box of equal size above planted with R. H. Shumway's "Annual Hog Pasture Mix." The grass grew about half an inch a day. "We attempted to introduce a hog to our pasture. The museum refused."[12] The installation was presented in mid-winter, when the green grass contrasted with the winterly context. This was the Harrisons' first grassland work, followed over the years by many others, notably *ArtPark* (1977), *Endangered Meadows* (1996), *Greenhouse Britain* (2007). In *Hog Pasture*, the emphasis is on plant growth in a museum environment, not simply on earth as an element taken from a site. Similarly, the Harrisons' *Portable Orchard* (California State College Art Gallery, 1972-1973) was composed of boxes planted with citrus trees understood in a context of decline of farms and orchards in Orange County.[13] The installation has been criticized for its confinement of nature to the protected, isolated and monumentalized realm of the gallery (Demos, 2016: 42). Issues of plant survival constitute the political agenda of *Portable Orchard*. Carson's *Silent Spring*, published a decade before (1962), had documented the nefarious effects of pesticides on the flora and fauna of the United States. All of these installations can be understood as precursors to *The Lagoon Cycle* in terms of the transferral of depleted life forms from their given site to the museum.

10 *Making Earth* (1970): https://theharrisonstudio.net/making-earth-1970.

11 It should be noted that we find vegetation on the agenda of other artists of the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s, with or without ecological aims. The environmental and ecological dimension is present in Alan Sonfist's *Time Landscape* in Manhattan (1965-1978), Agnes Denes's *Wheatfield – a Confrontation: Battery Park Landfill, Downtown Manhattan* (1982) and Joseph Beuys's *7000 Oaks* (Manhattan, 1988). A very different example with no environmental underpinnings is provided by Ana Mendieta's *Grass Breathing* (film, 1974), combining earth and body art, and *Arbol de la vida* (1976), an earth and body sculpture that insists on the association between nature, femininity, and life.

12 *Hog Pasture. Survival Piece* (1971): http://theharrisonstudio.net/hog-pasture-survival-piece-1-1970-71.

13 *Portable Orchard* (1972-1973): http://theharrisonstudio.net/portable-orchard-1972-73.

Fieldwork: culture as conversation

The Lagoon Cycle takes up the challenge of transplanting a threatened crab from its habitat to a laboratory, where its initial environment, with its seasonal variations in temperature and salinity, is mimicked to ensure that no radical change is registered by the crustacean. The next step consists in the transferral of the crab from the laboratory to yet another location, in the Salton Sea. One finds in nature writers like Annie Dillard apparently similar, but actually very different examples of a fragment of life displaced from its original environment to somewhere else. In *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* (published in 1974, only two years after the Harrisons started working on *The Lagoon Cycle*), the chapter devoted to "Seeing" presents such a procedure for the purposes of observation:

> Often I slop some creek water in a jar and when I get home I dump it in a white china bowl. After the silt settles I return and see tracings of minute snails on the bottom, a planarian or two winding round the rim of the water, roundworms shimming frantically, and finally, when my eyes have adjusted to these dimensions, amoebae. (Dillard, 2007: 26)

The content of the china bowl becomes a microcosm of Tinker Creek extensively observed and described in the spirit of Thoreau's *Walden* and Transcendentalism at large, but in Dillard the survival of the life forms that constitute it is not at stake. Rather, Dillard plays with the interfering scales of macrocosm and microcosm to convey the intuition of embedded realities and the possibility that human beings might live in a china bowl themselves, under the scrutiny of some higher and invisible authority. The Harrisons' paradigm is quite different: they wish to create the necessary conditions for the minute creatures to thrive and multiply in their bowl, and would single them out for aquaculture only if they were suitable for consumption as part of a food and sustainability paradigm. Also, the Harrisons are intent on documenting original habitats, as evidenced by *The Lagoon Cycle*.

The lagoon finds itself on the island of Sri Lanka, in Upouveli. "The First Lagoon" explores it as the habitat of the *Scylla serrata*, but its deployment in maps, photographs and poetry expands well beyond the conventional boundaries of the term "habitat." A journey to the lagoon in Sri Lanka thus marks the first necessary step in the process of documenting the site. The Harrisons' trip to the lagoon in 1979, with its documentary and anthropological underpinnings, is reminiscent of the fieldwork performed in the 1960s and 1970s by a wide range of poets and artists in the United States. Lytle Shaw discusses fieldwork as an important practice of the 1960s: fieldwork "in the dual sense of working with spatially specific locations and with the authority of disciplinary fields that might explain or contextualize those literal spaces" (Shaw, 2013: 67). However, the Harrisons' interest in the human fabric of the history of Sri Lanka diverges from the fieldwork conducted by artists such

as Robert Smithson. The latter was fascinated with the layered history of sites, but disregarded the human agency of history. Jennifer Roberts comments on Smithson's lack of interest in "the Maya as historical actors" in his "Incidents of Mirror-Travel in the Yucatan" (1969) which presents the Maya as exclusively entangled with ancient mythology and impervious to history (Roberts, 2004: 110). Part of the construction of space in the *Lagoon Cycle* takes the form of a historical and anthropological investigation of Sri Lanka, capturing some of the conflicting voices of its inhabitants, its history and its traditional technologies of dam-building. This anthropological dimension (journey, visit, interviews, archival research) appears as a complex practice of space, combined with the more abstract drive of the maps that accompany it. The two function together in the way the site and the non-site work in dialogue. At the end of "The First Lagoon," the anthropological stance is equated with that of the witness, who is an observer and recorder by definition: "*And I thought/I will go to Sri Lanka/and behave as a witness*"[14] (*LC* 31). This process of witnessing results in an intertwined vision of man and nature, of the biome and the historical/social/technological context, which is far from operating on the basis of a division between nature and culture as some critics have argued (Demos, 2016: 41-43).

The journey to Sri Lanka is triggered by interest in the crab *Scylla serrata*:

> He said
> he knew a hardy creature a crab
> and supposed it could live under
> museum conditions
>
> He said
> to do so it would need warm waters to
> grow in and equatorial light cycles
> and some hiding places further
> it could live out of water for up
> to five days. (*LC* 31)

This section also introduces the two characters and voices of the lagoonmaker and the witness. The lagoonmaker is a demiurgic figure whose discourse has Biblical inflections:

> I said
> fetch us some crabs and some bottom mud
> and some mangrove seeds and whatever
> and

14 All the quotes from the text of *The Lagoon Cycle* given in this article reproduce italics and extra spaces within lines as accurately as possible.

I thought
I can grow a crab
I can make a lagoon to
grow it in
I can be a lagoonmaker. (*LC* 31)

The lagoonmaker is thus faced with the challenge of making a new lagoon "under museum conditions"[15] modelled after the original lagoon, which requires an effort of description, documentation and experimentation. It can be argued that the function of the original lagoon goes beyond that of "site" in site-specific art: more than simply a place of origin and a starting point for further ramifications of itself, the lagoon is a cultural and historical world whose complexity is rendered by multiple voices and discourses that enact it in a polyphonic manner. The speaker decides to undertake a journey to Sri Lanka and to the lagoon, thus revisiting a whole tradition of field trips and site-specific expeditions that artists of the 1960s and 1970s practiced as a performative part of their work. Immersion and experience are the keywords of this artistic enterprise whose goal is to produce familiarity with its spaces of experimentation. Sri Lanka is painstakingly described, page after page, throughout "The First Lagoon." In "Shifting Positions," the Harrisons compare their text to a picaresque novel (Harrison, 1993: 371), thus situating it at the intersection of the literary and the artistic. Official documents and subjective opinions, cultural artefacts and natural systems, photographs and maps, economic and cultural considerations conspire to give a multifaceted image of Sri Lanka and the lagoon in particular as complex universe. Various characters act as subjective filters whose opinions collide.

National symbols such as the flag are extensively discussed over a whole dense page through the voice of a "*speaker for the flag*" who decrypts the various visual elements and colours making up the flag (yellow is "*the colour of Buddha's robe*") and speaks in the name of the people (*LC* 32). His discourse is structured by the repetition of "*He said*" (seven times), which is the leitmotif introducing various local values and beliefs: integrity, courtesy, morality, recognition of talents, protection of life ("*we protect the right of all to exist in non-hate, in non-violence, in restraint*," *LC* 32). The coda to this long expository discourse about the flag consists in the foreign visitor's response, which introduces the American (and more generally Western) perspective on the issues discussed:

15 The phrase "under museum conditions" appears as such in the poem. It should be read in the context of the reassessment of the institutions of the museum and gallery that started at the end of the 1950s and continued in full force in the 1960s and 1970s. As a result, the boundaries of art institutions were redrawn and the relationship between artists and curatorial instances was redefined. In *The Lagoon Cycle*, "under museum conditions" means in a scientific laboratory, where the latter is understood as similar to the enclosed and supervised space of the museum.

And I said
in my world we manipulate both birth and death and
do not hold anyone's right to land and water as sacred
Instead we value life liberty and the pursuit of
happiness Nor do we value non revenge but rather
the right to exact it through the instrumentality of the
law. (*LC* 32)

This collision of "worlds" is at the origin of the deterioration of the lagoon, whose traditional system of dams, we are told later on, has been extensively affected by commercial exploitation and the demands of mass tourism. Several distinct voices and characters intervene to utter short vignettes that sum up opinions on various features of their culture: a merchant, a taxi driver, a wealthy friend, a guide, a diplomat, a historian, a young student, his mother, a traditional dancer, an actor, a shopkeeper, a priest, a farmer villager, a doctor… The overall image is contrasted and tense, with the history of colonialism and current economic predicaments surfacing repeatedly. The crab appears as an element of contention, since the lagoon is said to suffer from overexploitation, which in turn affects the local population:

A shopkeeper said
When the hotels serve fish and crab no one else can get
any. (*LC* 35)

The visitors intervene from time to time in short asides to comment on the various opinions expressed. Visually, the scroll of text is juxtaposed to a map of the island (fig. 1) and photographs of local scenes and people at work. Quotes from official documents dating back to the colonial period are introduced, and their impression of documented objectivity counterbalances the subjective opinions of the various speakers. The artists appear as observers, sociologists, anthropologists and historians engaging in an experiment of immersion, interviewing the people they meet, visiting various sites (a Buddhist shrine, government offices, the lagoon), consulting archives and aiming at a detailed and informed opinion on the "culture" under scrutiny. Terms such as "space" or "site" fail to capture the complexity of what the Harrisons are trying to encapsulate. "Culture" appears a more relevant term, with the following definition:

And I thought
A culture is a cooperative adventure a complex system
of shared interrelated beliefs about the nature of reality
and causation of values codes of conduct and ethics
by which people define themselves collectively and niche
themselves individually. (*LC* 37)

Once the coordinates of this culture have been introduced, the central figure of the experiment comes into focus once again: the crab which fully belongs to this culture and reveals its economic and environmental fragility. The character of the "old fisherman" (who seems to be inspired by a myth or epic poem of old) describes the habits of the crab and the best methods to catch it. As a result, the lagoonmaker is ready to take the fisherman's description as a template for an experiment meant to transfer the crab to a laboratory environment:

> So I thought
> I can make a tank four paces by five paces
> and waist high
> I can make a light cycle with timers
> and time it to equatorial light
> and keep it at equatorial temperature
> and make a bottom filter that changes
> the water as the tides
>
> And
> I thought
> how will a crab know it's not a lagoon. (*LC* 41)

This optimistic project is contradicted right away by an oppositional voice: "*But/the tank is not a lagoon/nor is it a tidal pond*" (*LC* 44).

Anthropological investigation is the first step in the experiment conceived by the Harrisons in order to transfer the crabs of Sri Lanka to the laboratory and then to California for purposes of aquafarming. Scientific discourse and methods take over at the end of "The Second Lagoon" and throughout "The Third Lagoon," where the space under scrutiny is narrowed down to the tank in the laboratory that simulates the natural conditions of the lagoon. Once anthropology has provided insight into the human, social and historical texture of the island and the lagoon and once their lessons of vulnerability have been laid bare, the crabs can be subtracted from them and sent on a long journey from Sri Lanka to the Pepper Canyon laboratory at the University of California in San Diego. Some of the crabs are eaten right away by the principal investigators and artist personae: "*Those we ate were delicious*" (*LC* 47). The discourse of scientific observation becomes predominant, combining precise remarks about the behaviour of the crabs with remarks on the poetic or stylistic nature of the experiment, for instance when the crabs stop moving because they were missing their monsoon time in Sri Lanka: "*The metaphor of absence was compelling*" (*LC* 47).

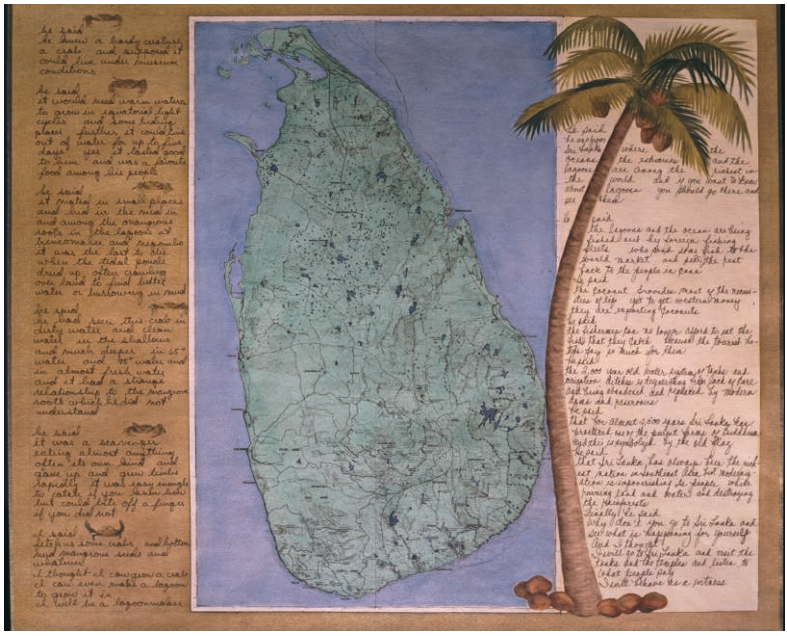


Fig. 1: Helen Mayer Harrison and Newton Harrison, *The First Lagoon* (*The Lagoon at Upouveli*), from *The Book of the Lagoons*, Courtesy of The Harrison Studio.

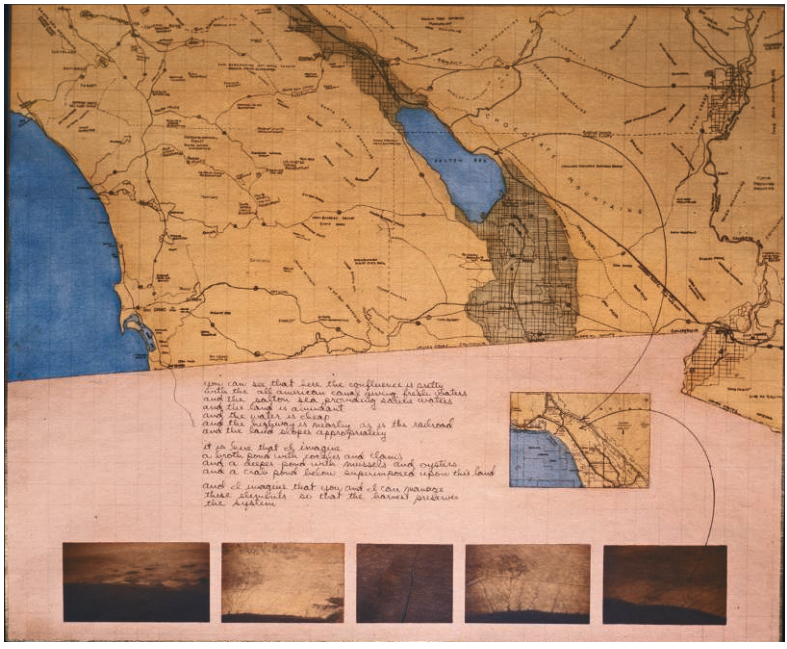


Fig. 2: Helen Mayer Harrison and Newton Harrison, *The Fourth Lagoon* (*On Mixing, Mapping and Territory*), from *The Book of the Lagoons*, Courtesy of The Harrison Studio.

The lagoon as topos: performance and conceptualism

Constant shifts in approach and method are characteristic of *The Lagoon Cycle*, which resists a coherent generic and discursive paradigm. It also resists a unique methodological framework. The conversational nature of the text causes the project to take sudden turns, whose enactment is openly dramatized in the text. The evolving nature of the work is combined with the variety of visual media, which reinforces the impression of plurality and hybridity (fig. 2). The reader of the printed version of *The Lagoon Cycle* and, even more so (one can only imagine), the visitor of the installation, can feel slightly disoriented on its shifting grounds, which is paradoxical given the wealth of maps it contains. Existing recordings of the Harrisons reading the text of *The Lagoon Cycle* evidence a going-back-and-forth dynamic between the two artists, especially in certain parts of the text where dialogue is predominant, but also within individual lines that shelter distinct voices. Certain printed lines harbour blank spaces in excess in their middle, suggesting a breakage in voice or a relay race in which another voice takes over. This vocal dynamic creates tension and prevents any retreat in stability and predictability. This is mirrored by the various shifts in location (from the lagoon at Upouveli to the laboratory in San Diego, then to the Salton Sea and from there to the whole world) and in methodology (from anthropological investigation to laboratory observation, from practical procedure to poetic musing). The complexities of the lagoon and its odyssey of failed transferals are played out in the orality of the text which invites live enactment. It can be claimed that the visual material (maps, photographs, sketches) is not simply a backdrop for a potential performance, but also an acting out of the imaginative and metamorphic possibilities of the lagoon. The lagoon mutates through the conjoined performative potential of text and image.

Stylistically, the text of *The Lagoon Cycle* combines orality with hieratic diction in a way that is reminiscent of ancient epics. It invites chanting more than recitation and its privileged medium is the voice (actually voices in dialogue). Jerome Rothenberg's ethnopoetics offers a relevant term of comparison, as already suggested by Douglas and Fremantle (2016b). Rothenberg's *Technicians of the Sacred. A Range of Poetries from Africa, America, Asia, Europe and Oceania* had been published in 1968, four years before the Harrisons had started *The Lagoon Cycle*. It offered an alternative canon of poetry characterized by orality and performativity. It also drew an alternative atlas of poetic creation where traditions from all over the world converged in their common emphasis on ritual and vision. Rothenberg was professor of visual arts and literature at the University of California at San Diego, where Newton Harrison and Helen Meyer Harrison also worked as faculty in the Visual Arts Department. Rothenberg edited the journal *New Wilderness Letter* (with twelve issues published between 1977 and 1984), whose editorial board included Helen and Newton Harrison together with David Antin, Steve McCaffery, Jackson Mac Low,

Eleanor Antin, Allan Kaprow and Pauline Oliveros. Various poets and artists had teaching positions at the University of California at San Diego. Some of them were important figures of the Happenings as well as the Fluxus movement: Allan Kaprow, David and Eleanor Antin, Helen and Newton Harrison, Pauline Oliveros, Linda Montano, Jerome Rothenberg and historian Moira Roth (Loeffler and Tong, 1989: 391). Rothenberg's article on "ethnopoetics" in *The New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* defines the latter as a poetry movement and a field of scholarly study that seeks to explore oral and nonliterate, visionary forms of expression. It recuperates the impulses towards primitivism in romanticism and modernism and avant-garde tendencies to adopt alternative forms of poetry. One of its goals is to abolish the dichotomy between Western cultures and cultures marked by orality. Its pronounced intermedial dimension allows for conventional genre boundaries to be called into question. Ethnopoetics borders on the performative arts through its mobilization of performance and ritual (Preminger and Brogan, 388). In the original preface to *Technicians of the Sacred* (dated 1967), Rothenberg explains that the poems chosen for the anthology are "carried by the voice" (Rothenberg, 1968: xxix) and, consequently, the written poem is a score leading to public readings and performance poetry. *The Lagoon Cycle* is indeed carried by two voices in dialogue. Its dialogic form has been commented on in terms of a "conversational aesthetics" (Kester, 2010) and also in terms of the features that result from it: improvisation, inconsistency and contradiction (Douglas and Fremantle, 2016a). What I would like to argue here is that the dialogic form gives rise to a certain correlated representation of self and space. The text amounts to a performance of the self defined as heterogeneous and unstable, in close relation to the mapping of a multifocalized space. Thus, text and visual material are bound together by a mirroring of self and space in dialogue. The exchanges between the witness and the lagoonmaker at work in the text of *The Lagoon Cycle* are echoed by the operations of displacement and transferral of the lagoon from Sri Lanka to California. A parallel choreography of voices and spaces is thus performed. The dialogic matrix of the text puts forth a less individualistic, less authoritative and more fluid mode of expression strongly rooted in the primacy of the speaking I in dialogue with another speaking I, resulting in a performance of the self as diverse. The multiplicity of the self in constant dialogue with otherness successfully de-centers a conventional model of individual authorship but without going so far as to embrace a radically different, collective and participatory aesthetics. *The Lagoon Cycle* rethinks subjectivity in relational terms and also imagines the relationship to the surrounding world in terms of a conversational exchange. "The Seventh Lagoon" begins with a long discussion of the nature of the self which connects subjectivity, orality and space:

Do you desire to begin another conversation
The I that at any moment may answer yes
is itself a peculiar invention
which appears at birth
and disappears at death
This I is a peculiar convention
adopted at birth
and relinquished at death
It is invisible
but not indivisible
It is a theory
a convenience
an improvisation
a metaphor
This I like a moment
[…]
may be expanded indefinitely
Like any moment
it may break into many moments
[…]
Often I have the feeling that I am
in many places at the same time
Yes my consciousness is intermittent
yet with the intermittencies so brief
that awareness seems continuous
Yes my present is intermittent
and I improvise it
by successfully reframing moments
with such speed that now seems continuous. (*LC* 90)

The malleable self is expansive and fragmentary, discontinuous yet giving the impression of continuity, made up of spatialized multifocalizations. *The Lagoon Cycle* amounts to a poetic performance of the self as site of contradiction and tension, permanently engaged in conversation with its own doubles and external interlocutors. In the post-Pollock era, as a reaction to Pollock's expression of the artist's self, a certain number of movements (minimalism, conceptualism and Earthworks) shunned precisely this expansive emphasis on the artist's self. An aesthetic position against self-expression emerged in the 1960s and continues to this day.[16] *The Lagoon*

16 This resistance to the expression of the self can be traced back to Flaubert and then to T. S. Eliot, who both put forward the notion of impersonality.

Cycle nuances this position by using the dynamic and tension between self and other in order to constantly amend and displace individual arguments and projects.

On a spatial level, the lagoon as microcosm straddling two distinct universes (fresh and salt waters) becomes an archetype of the Harrisons' philosophy of permanent dialogue and an image of the world as a whole. It is also a *topos* that stands for the self balancing between discordant options and a metaphor for discourse weaving together conflicting strands. Forceful human intervention (economic, ecological) in the lagoon destroys the latter's balance and affects its biome. Consequently, the lagoon can be read as a spatial form that is particularly affected by the Anthropocene. This aspect emerges with particular poignancy starting with "The Fourth Lagoon," which marks a growing emphasis on conceptualism and constitutes a moment in the text where practical action is relinquished in favour of speculation and imaginative projection. This conceptual drive grows out of the performative force of language combined with the suggestiveness of the maps. The project turns into a vision, suggesting a kinship between conceptualism and visionary expression. This brings to mind a relevant aspect of ethnopoetics, namely the fact that the poems anthologized by Rothenberg rely on visions, dreams and images, and turn the poet into a shaman, as explained in the original preface to *Technicians of the Sacred* (Rothenberg, 1968:

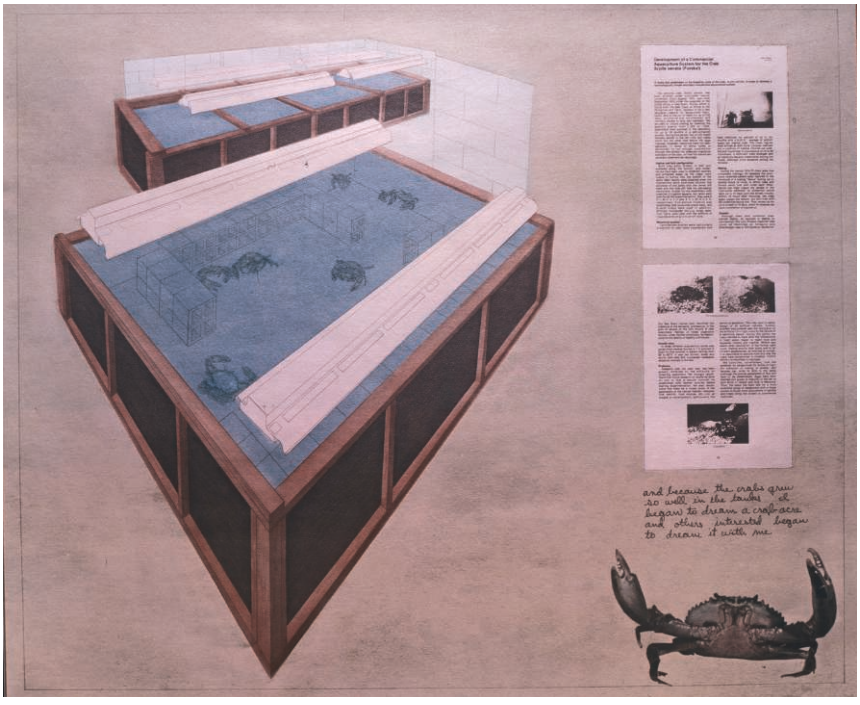


Fig. 3: Helen Mayer Harrison and Newton Harrison, *The Second Lagoon* (*Sea Grant*), from *The Book of the Lagoons*, Courtesy of The Harrison Studio.

xxx). This equation of conceptual art and visionary art starting with "The Fourth Lagoon" adds to the existing discussions of the conceptual nature of *The Lagoon Cycle* and of the Harrisons' work more generally. Michel de Certeau argues that "the lagoon reaches different levels of reality" (de Certeau, 1985: 19)[17] and Rogers highlights the "poetic edge" of the Harrisons' art (Rogers, 2017: 266).

The point of no return in *The Lagoon Cycle*, where realistic action is replaced by a brand of conceptualism with no counterpart in real life, concerns the aquaculture project on the shores of the Salton Sea "in the midst of the Colorado/Desert of California" (*LC* 65) (fig. 3). It takes the form of a sea grant, whose summary is reproduced in full (*LC* 53). On the face of it, the sea grant called "Development of a Commercial Aquaculture System for the Crab *Scylla serrata* (Forskal)" appears perfectly serious and scientifically accurate: references are given, together with details about mating, disease and tank configuration. The purpose of the application is to further develop crabs for commercial purposes in "a technologically simple and labor-inexpensive aquaculture system" (*LC* 53). But its manifest scientific character is only a preliminary stage for further expansions and relocations. The logic of the experiment is one of evolution, hybridity and interdisciplinarity in terms of ideas and methods: anthropology, marine biology and laboratory experimentation are followed by a leap into the vast, utopian project of recreating the lagoon in California, on the shores of the Salton Sea, thus moving to a different spatial frame. This unusual proposal combines the language of science, the jargon of grant application, the chronological listings of historical narratives and schematic drawings, but its overarching framework is that of the imagination:

> Here I imagine a broth pond
> with cockles and clams
> and a deeper pond with mussels and oysters
> and a crab pond below
> superimposed upon this land
> and I imagine that you and I
> can manage these elements
> so that the harvest preserves the system. (*LC* 64)

The whole experiment is understood as a metaphor for the lagoon, literally a displacement or transport:

> But
> the tank is part of an experiment

17 Michel de Certeau was on the faculty of the University of California at San Diego from 1978 to 1984 at the same time as the Harrisons and contributed an essay to the exhibition catalogue of *The Lagoon Cycle*.

> and the experiment is a metaphor for a lagoon
> if the metaphor works
> the experiment will succeed
> and the crab will flourish
> after all
> this metaphor is only a representation
> based on observing a crab in a lagoon
> and listening to stories. (*LC* 44)

The experiment is developed on two levels: a scientific one where a habitat needs to be perfectly reproduced to ensure survival and a metaphorical one where the scientific dimension is subservient to a larger aesthetic and representational project. The experiment adopts a heuristic mode of construction marked by hesitation and frequent shifts in approach which are part and parcel of its performative nature.

The deteriorating ecological conditions of the Salton Sea (high salinity that affects the survival of fish and birds, pollution due to agricultural drainage) are well documented (Reisner, 1993) and have occupied an important place in a variety of environmental actions aiming at reducing its degradation. *The Lagoon Cycle* offers its own solution, but its feasibility is doubtful, since it is based on a series of speculations emphasized by the repeated use of the conditional structure "if…then" (*LC* 76) that involve the digging of channels from the Salton Sea to the Colorado River aqueduct, or from the Salton Sea to the Colorado River delta. The financial aspect of these major interventions is not overlooked: "the cost would be roughly equivalent to that of/building a four-lane highway over the same terrain" (*LC* 76). Earthworks artists like Smithson and Heizer had produced works in remote locations in the American West that involved precisely such costly and labour-intensive operations, for instance Heizer's *Double Negative* (1969) and Smithson's *The Spiral Jetty* (1970). In *The Lagoon Cycle*, the digging of channels around the Salton Sea remains a purely speculative endeavour formulated as a result of observing and manipulating maps of the region:

> As I tipped the map in another direction looking at
> the Salton Sea […]. (*LC* 78)

These projected large-scale modifications of the land do not develop unhindered, even in the realm of the imagination. They are checked by environmental and socio-economic realities: given the pollution of the Salton Sea, a channel would allow its contaminated water to reach the Pacific or the gulf, thus aggravating and enlarging an existing ecological problem. The shape of the Salton Sea on the map calls forth the abject image of a "diseased bladder" being "flushed" elsewhere (*LC* 78-79). Transferring the lagoon from Sri Lanka to California turns out to be a bold

conceptual adventure whose limits are set by the degraded condition of the various spaces where it aims to be delocalized. A space read as a metaphor of conversation, interaction and balance of contradictory factors, the lagoon cannot be easily displaced due to unfavourable contexts and polluted environments whose degradation can only increase. The final chapter ends with a meditation on the rising level of oceans that will cause a reconfiguration of the world marked by migrating populations and mutating habitats:

> *And the waters will rise slowly*
> *at the boundary*
> *at the edge*
> *redrawing that boundary*
> *continually*
> *moment by moment*
> *all over*
> *altogether*
> *all at once.* (*LC* 96)

This pessimistic ending functions as a lament and warning in a way that is common for environmental discourse. At the same time, it is coupled with the suggestion that a change is possible through an ethics centered on "paying attention" (*LC* 82) to the delicate balances that constitute the very nature of the world (for which the lagoon stands) and the entanglements of man and the environment. While the poetic leap into utopia may look like an unrealistic withdrawal into speculative impossibility that would have no impact in terms of actual restoration, it can be claimed that the poetic is political in the sense that by imagining impossible projects, by inviting a change of attitude, the Harrisons are performing a fundamentally political gesture.

The oralized poetic form in *The Lagoon Cycle*, its use of graphic means to suggest this orality and its inclusion of a multiplicity of voices construct a layered space, geographical and vocal, poetic and political, set on maps of Sri Lanka and California, but also on the printed page. The lagoon stands out as a symbolic space emblematic of life, the self and artistic creation as dialogue. The concrete goal of developing a crab industry in order to feed multitudes remains unfulfilled, but the imaginative force of the speculative processes it unleashes is overwhelming. The activist dimension and the complex practicalities and technicalities of the project are combined with a speculative drive akin to a utopian form of imagination. While the aquaculture project materializes in its early stages, its growth on a massive scale remains exclusively conceptual, articulated in language and in the visual form of mapping. The Harrisons keep the lagoon balanced between the material and the immaterial, site and non-site, the poetic and the political, the danger of environmental disaster and the hope for an imaginative leap into restoration.

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