

Seeking An Ecological Arts Practice



Helen Mayer Harrison and Newton Harrison giving the keynote lecture at Evolving the Future conference, Shrewsbury, 2005. Photo: D. Haley

Seeking an ecological arts practice, my Masters in Art As Environment course at Manchester Metropolitan University (MMU) concluded in 1996 with an invitation to project manage and lead the research for Helen and Newton's Artranspennine98¹ project, ***Casting A Green Net: Can It Be We Are Seeing A Dragon?*** The project gave me the opportunity to develop arts-led, practice-based processes of research that opened new ways of questioning the Countryside Information System of The Institute of Terrestrial Ecology² (ITE), and led to my PhD (Firbank et al 2009). Mapping the ecosystems of Northern England became a whole systems inquiry that included the environmental terrain, agricultural, cultural and economic contexts, as well as the map-makers intentions. Satellite and field study data was supplemented by many car journeys back and forth, between Liverpool to Hull, to see the terrain and talk with many people from different disciplines and walks of life. Thanks to Professor John Hyatt, the project itself and the production of the six 2m x 3m was based at MMU's

¹ Artranspennine98 was an initiative between Tate Liverpool and the Henry Moore Foundation, Leeds, to create a corridor of artworks between the two cities. The Harrison saw the ecological opportunity of 'rhyming the Humber and Mersey estuaries.

² The Institute of Terrestrial Ecology merged with other environmental research agencies to become the Centre for Ecology and Hydrology.

Department of Fine Arts, with regular 'Open Studio' events to generate conversations with academic, industry and civic experts, arts and design students.

The exhibition opened at Bluecoat Gallery, Liverpool and in 2000, thanks to Richard Scott of the National Wildflower Centre, was shown at the Society for Ecological Restoration's (SER) first World Conference, at the Adelphi Hotel, Liverpool. The Harrisons gave a keynote presentation with the work, in the hotel's capacious lobby. My relationship with SER, as Ecoart Symposium Coordinator/Chair culminated with their World Conference in Manchester in 2015.

In 2005, I was commissioned to curate ***Evolving the Future***, an international three-day conference as part of the Charles Darwin bicentennial celebrations in Shrewsbury. At the end of The Harrisons' closing keynote lecture, I invited them to consider a project that would focus on mainland Britain as one ecosystem under stress from climate change. We toured the length and breadth of Britain, for a year, meeting many people, to develop a project proposal for potential funders. Finally, Chris Fremantle made a successful application to Defra UK³, as The Harrisons and I flew to Budapest for a conference. We appointed Chris as Project Manager, I became Associate Artist to the Harrisons lead, Gabriel Harrison designed and produced the exhibition and the project became ***Greenhouse Britain: Losing Ground, Gaining Wisdom***. It toured six UK venues (2007-2008) and several in the USA (2009-2010), before becoming integrated into the Harrisons' ***Force Majeure*** (2010) work.

At one point, Defra nearly withdrew Greenhouse Britain's funding, as they perceived the work to have exceeded the Government's climate change remit of 'raising awareness' to include 'behaviour change'. We renegotiated the terms of the project to comply with the restrictions, letting the poetics carry the impact further. Meanwhile, a friend from Casting A Green Net, Professor Tony Bradshaw, called me one evening, concerning sea level rise mitigation: "... but the Environment Agency are developing plans for managed retreat." I explained that 'managed retreat' used engineering and military metaphors, while The Harrisons had coined the phrase, 'graceful withdrawal' – metaphors of becoming and acquiescence. And this insight chimed with the Tai Chi concept of 'yielding' that has grown through my practice – Yield: give way to gain (Haley 2018). Greenhouse Britain, also contained several sub-projects and initiatives including, ecological development of the Lea River Valley, a charrette with Professor Paul Selman's landscape research students at the University of Sheffield, flood strategies for the River Avon and the River Thames; and opportunities for contained ecological housing/food production to protect the headwaters of all the rivers rising in the Pennines. However, the final UK exhibition at London's City Hall (2008) met with resistance from the incoming new Mayor of London, Boris Johnson, who saw our work as challenging his proposed Tilbury desalination plant. After a week's stand-off, Boris Johnson backed down when he realised that the Guardian newspaper was writing an article that depicted his first act as Mayor being the banning of an ecological arts exhibition that offered opportunities to save the Capital from sea level rise.

³ Defra UK is HM Government's Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs.



Helen Mayer Harrison & Newton Harrison: Pendle Valley, researching Greenhouse Britain 2007. Photo D. Haley

Through 2007, while working on Greenhouse Britain, The Harrisons and I toured Taiwan to develop the unrealised Greenhouse Taiwan. However, as we toured, we developed the idea of 'Post-disciplinarity' – around a roundtable, all the disciplines sit with equal status, while maintaining the integrity of their discipline. Then, the most urgent problem/question of the day is placed at the centre of the table for all to address, together.

We didn't always agree. And that was one of the ways we learned from each other. They didn't always agree. And that was one of the ways they learned from each other. Through working, touring and engaging with Helen and Newton, my ecological arts practice continues to be found and like them, I hope to enable others to seek their ecological arts practices.

References

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Ecological artist, researcher and eco-pedagogue, David Haley, publishes, exhibits and works internationally with ecosystems and their inhabitants. Using images, poetic texts, walking and sculptural installations, he generates dialogues for 'capable futures' that question the nexus of climate, species and cultural crises. David is a Visiting Professor at Zhongyuan University of Technology; Guest Professor at Sichuan Fine Art Institute and Universidad Iberoamericana; Vice Chair of the CIWEM Art & Environment Network; Mentor/Advisor (founder) of Futures' Venture Foundation; a Trustee of Chrysalis Arts Development and Art Gene; Board Member of The Nature of Cities; a member of the ecoart network, UK Urban Ecology Forum and Ramsar Cultural Network.

