

## Environmental Artworkers

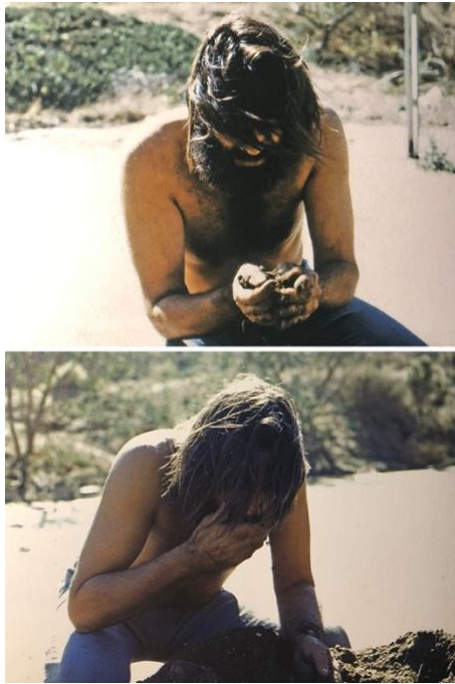
To get to the ideas of environmental artworking, I need to clarify my understanding of the term artworker I began by reflecting on my earliest ideas about the concept and considering some of the images that shaped that knowledge. I then move into specific texts that examine ideas and practices that address art, work, and labour, taking particular note of a cultural evolution shaped by the confluence of social and political changes in the 1960's and 1970's. I will then briefly consider ideas about social practices which recognize the aesthetic validity and import of arts-based human interaction. With these new readings of history, innovative theory mixes with specific artwork and work methods emerge that shed light on the environment as something that is not only contiguous with body, mind and material relationships but is comprised of a caring interrelationship with living things. I am looking for ideas that might initiate and or support a relational understanding of environmental artworking and potentially environmental arts labour. My attention is primarily on the last five decades, which span over the turn of the 21st century. The current social and political catalyst is understood as the environmental changes caused by carbon accumulated in the atmosphere over centuries. We share the impact of these changes with all living things.

Over time social and political changes have shaped what it means to work as an artist. This was particularly true in the USA in the 1960's and 1970's.[1] Work can be understood as the efforts and production by individuals that contributes to a world of both ideas and tangible things. Labour is understood as a networked social arrangement, that seeks to maintain the methods and means of production. The two terms are in tension with one another, underpinned by notions of individual freedom and social agreement. Dave Beech [2] reminds us that a focus on individual work limits our perception and understanding of both terms. Productive, material, and essential forms of labour contribute to a workers' sense of community as well as the function of commodity capitalism. However, there are forms of labour characterized as unproductive and immaterial as they result in social services rather than products. Michael Hardt describes an 'affective form' of immaterial labour, 'Practices [that] produce collective subjectivities, produce sociality and ultimately produce society itself.' [3] This describes a range of social, creative, and care-based activities that range from finance to hospitality, retail, health, and human services. It also references communication analysis and data management services while responding to previously ignored forms of home and family care. This affective immaterial form of labour will prove increasingly important as I try to reveal what a critical environmental artworking might be. The first problem is to find an historical perspective on the cultural forces that pushed artists to make the claim of being artworkers; seeking the shelter of labour networks. The subsequent question is whether any of this helps us to understand meaningful creative response to the impacts of current climate-based changes?

### Art Working 101

I was twenty-one years old when I enrolled full time at the University of Rhode Island with a Pell Grant. I wanted to be an artist and understood artworking in general terms. Like many I presumed that it meant becoming a painter, or sculptor, perhaps a photographer or filmmaker. I understood an artist as someone with skills in specific media. Confirming this I enrolled in a series of studio courses focused on a broad

induction to creative practices that moved across drawing and painting, sculpture, photography, film, and printmaking. In the second and third year of my studies I began taking courses with art historians. One challenged us to retain our social context and experience, while we read our way into the meaning of challenging work, while another had us thinking beyond objects by considering the artist's role in landscape and earth art. However, I particularly remember two images which challenged everything I understood about artworking up to that point. It was in an infrequent sculpture studio lecture where the teacher would put up various images to challenge our nascent understanding of what sculpture was or could be. It is perhaps hard to fully grasp the shock and discomfort of being presented with an image of Mierle Laderman Ukeles (1973) washing the steps of a museum followed by a final slide showing Newton Harrison (1978) tasting dirt. Arguments about these artists and their way of making 'sculpture' would percolate for a few weeks; for many in my cohort neither effort had anything to do with art making. We would subsequently read Ukele's *Maintenance Art Manifesto* (1969) in one history class. The Harrison's work was introduced to us in another history class, presented in a wider landscape context for detailed consideration. These artists continue to hold my attention to this day.



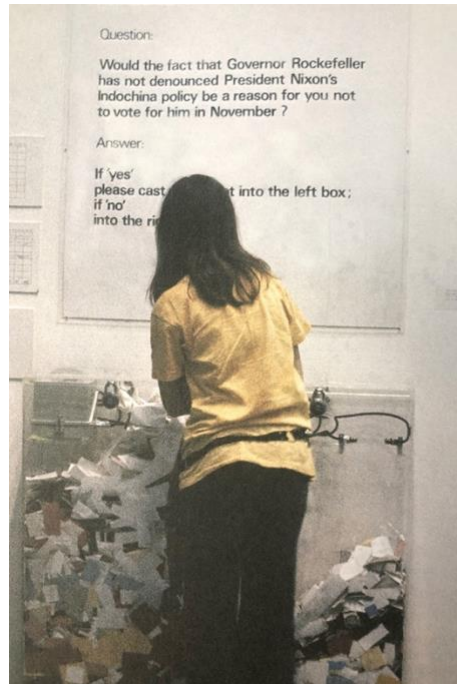
- 1 Documentation, Newton Harrison, *Making Earth*, San Diego Ca. (1969-1970). Photo Harrison Studio.
2. Documentation, Mierle Laderman Ukeles, *Hartford Wash: Washing/Tracks/Maintenance: Outside* (1973). Wadsworth Athenium Museum.

In the years that followed I would learn more about the Harrison's as artist farmers, paying attention to their thinking about food survival and their interest in Socratic dialogue. By the time I was immersed in graduate school in San Francisco, California, I was spending time in the Water Library at UC Berkeley reading about 'Meditations on the Sacramento River (1976-1977).' I would also eventually spend time reading the epic narrative of the *Lagoon Cycle* (1972-1984). This was the formative background and the basis for initial meetings with Helen and Newton Harrison. But before I waded into their ideas and methods, perhaps the place to start is simply this notion of artworking. What does it mean when art is understood as work and artists and writers

find common ground under the banner of labour?[4] I will come back to the Harrisons after considering the impact of the 1960's on ideas of work and labour in New York City.

### **Art, Work – Labour and Ethics**

Helen Molesworth developed the exhibition and catalogue, 'Work Ethic' (2003) for the Baltimore Museum of Art. Six years later, Julia Bryan-Wilson interrogated the history of a labour movement in New York City in 'Art Workers: Radical Practice in the Vietnam War Era' (2009). Bryan-Wilson states 'the notion of the art worker offered artists an up-to-date politically relevant model of identity. It enflamed artists as they organized for change in the art world and in the wider public sphere.'[5] What is described here are the social-political impacts of labour organizing, artists with common interests and a sense of their collective power. Was labour collectivity at the root of that new worker identity? Artists wanted to exert control over their own work; they wanted to effect change within cultural institutions and have a more significant voice in politics. To accomplish this, they sought to seize power by organizing as a labour force. Bryan-Wilson interrogates the people and the narratives that surround the development of the 1969 Arts Workers Coalition (AWC) in New York City. Her focus is on cooperation, on labour, politics, the social political role of museums, and questions of gender and racial equity in cultural institutions. The text reveals how an emerging interest in work and labour resulted in a collective shift in subjectivity and an understanding of the political potential of the arts at that time. She starts to work her way through all of this using case studies of four key contributors, (there were no leaders) of the AWC: Carl Andre, Robert Morris, Lucy Lippard, and Hans Haacke. One artist understood work in terms of mass-produced materials assembled in linear and geometric forms to produce minimal sculpture-practices that challenged the presence of the artist's hand. Another argued that art is a process, a way of interrogating material relationships. Experience (and meaning) are shaped by material, context, and the conditions of perception. Another challenged gender roles and the meaning of work while maintaining that curatorial work and critical writing are essential and legitimate forms of artworking. The final case study is about creative, journalistic exposition of the social relationships that define museum direction, intention, content, and public access. In this range of examples, artworking negates the hand of the artist. Artworking embraces more than material. Artworking includes critical consideration and exposition of others' work. Artworking can interrogate society. The gravitas of the artworkers chosen for the case studies adds authority to the claim that an identity shift had occurred: a new subjectivity, coupled with a sense of engagement with the social-political context within which the artists were embedded.



3. Documentation, Robert Morris, Whitney Museum (1970) © Artist's Rights Society

4. Documentation, Hans Haacke, Museum of Modern Art, NY (1970) © Artist's Rights Society

Bryan-Wilson tells us it that it was a somewhat lesser known (if no less talented) artist named Vassilakis Takis' who initiated the AWC. He had decided to remove his own work from an exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art, as he had not agreed to that exhibition. He distributed a statement expressing his desires for: 'The first in a series of acts against the stagnant policies of art museums all over the world. Let us unite, artists with scientists, students with workers, to change these anachronistic situations into information centres for all artistic activities.' [6] This statement helped establish the idea of artists as a labour force with collective interests. His colleagues working across art and technology joined in and were soon followed by a wider mix of recognized artists and critics. ' . . . Primary amongst the AWC's ambitions was the public redefinition of artists and critics as labour; the artworkers asserted that their practices were located within specific social relations, subject to economic imperatives and exacting psychic costs.' [7] It is perhaps redundant to say this, but the fundamental condition of a labour movement requires a membership of workers; it is a representative form of socio-economic and political advocacy.

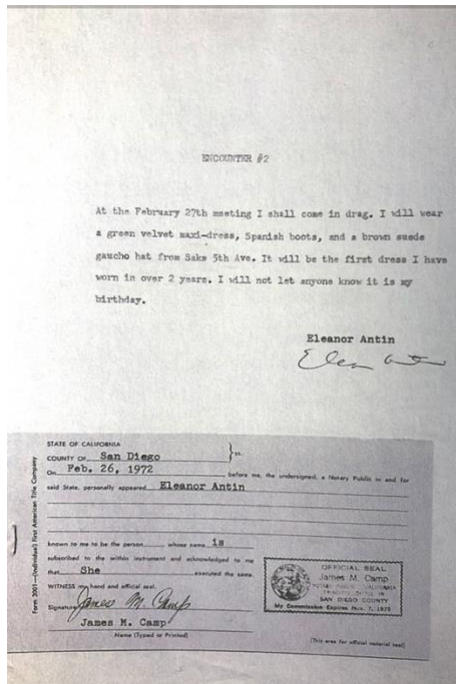
According to Bryan-Wilson, some in the group linked their labour to the exploitation of Western capital; others felt that framing art as labour and proper work [8] communicated a sense of rigour and import to the field. The AWC would establish public hearings to develop a wide ranging-agenda that sought an expansion of artist's rights and changes within museums, a reconstruction of the publishing of news and critical reviews to address a better mix of gender and racial representation in both the arts market and the institutional bodies that made up the Artworld. While there was apparent hostility to capitalism the significant conflict was focused upon the hegemonic power structures within the artworld.

Redefining art in terms of work and labour was a means to validate the concepts and process of the new art. Prominent theories by Guy Debord and the International Union

of Situationists (1957-1972) are identified in the text as an important influence particularly in reference to 'Marx's conception of how art is itself productive, for he understood aesthetics as formative to the education of the senses – art, that is, helps create social subjects.' [9] The Situationists focused on art and politics, opposition to capitalism and the society of the spectacle understood as the dominance of the commodity and exchange relationships which undermine social relationships. Significant methods included *détournement*, a means of turning the capitalist system against itself through political pranks; psychogeography the effect of environment on human behaviour and emotions; and *dérive* the method of letting a place reveal itself while attending to the potentialities that are often lost when movement is intentional, and destination predetermined. *Dérive* can be thought of as the joy of aimless wandering or more authoritatively as psychogeographical reconnaissance.

The philosopher Herbert Marcuse expressed ideas central to both this text and the thinking of the artists working at the time. In particular, the philosopher 'exerted considerable influence on art workers. In his early writings, he fostered a utopian conception of how work might function. He believed that once erotic energies were no longer sublimated work would be transformed into play and play itself would be productive.' [10] This claim is tied to the Marxist idea that a beyond labour and toil, there is potential for a more humane civilization that emerges when the tensions that separate sensuality and practical reason are resolved. At that point in time, (and perhaps even today) this idea of a purposeful play (as opposed to work and toil) was resonant to many counter-cultural practitioners and activists. The fact that Marcuse would identify art as an essential component of social change was even more resonant; particularly given the fact that ideas about a revolutionary age were embedded in all aspects of the music, theatre, and visual arts of the time. I will come back to Marcuse, but first I want to consider an exhibition and catalogue that engaged the same content only six years prior to Julia Bryan Wilson's activity.

In a late 2003 exhibition titled 'Work Ethics' the historian and curator Helen Molesworth intended to reveal 'The artist as worker, manager, and creator of experiences; [and] the visitor. . . as viewer, consumer and participant.' [11] Experience of the work at hand would be rewarded through close looking and deep consideration. This was an exhibition of institutionally authorized art that emerged from an inquiry about art, work, and materials. To introduce the curatorial intent, Molesworth described the import of work by artists such as Robert Morris, Frank Stella, and Robert Rauschenberg. She argued that by ' . . . replacing the skills of art with the activities of work, these artists began to make art that eschewed artifice and illusion and instead presented itself to the world as it was; [in Morris's case] a box with the sound of its own making. . . ' [12] Morris's particular work, for example is a simple wooden box nailed shut, with the recording of its own construction, placed inside it. Much of the work discussed and described in the text, is recognized for these kinds of material and performative challenge to artmaking, art objects and the art market. Some of the most salient and lasting examples of work-related inquiry emerge from a section of the catalogue dealing with gendered approaches to women's labour. The typically unpaid and unrecognized effort that was revealed in the work of artists like Eleanor Antin, Alison Knowles, Yoko Ono, Martha Rosler and Mierle Laderman Ukeles; each of the artists address specific aspects of an emancipative, gendered exposition of art, life, and work.



5. Documentation, Eleanor Antin, (1972)
  6. Documentation, Alison Knowles, (1962)
  7. Documentation, Martha Rosler, (1975)
- Electronic Arts Intermix.



In another chapter of the catalogue the historian and theorist of public space Miwon Kwon argues that the much of the work from the 1960's and 1970's is about '... art as idea, art as action, Conceptual art, Performance art, Happenings and so on – attempts to install alternative models of exchange that counter, complicate or parody the dominant market and profit based medium of exchange.' [13] This claim not true of all of the work in the exhibition but it was distinctly exemplified by work such as Allan Kaprow's 'Happenings' (1959-1967), Alison Knowles 'Make a Salad' (1962) Yoko Ono's 'Cut Piece' (1964), Valie Export's 'Touch Cinema' (1968), David Hammon's sale of snowballs in New York City (1983), and Sisco, Hock and Avalos's 'Arte-Reembolso (Art Rebate)' (1993), which was a redistribution of Arts funding to migrant workers. Some of this 'exchange' work is then discussed by Molesworth in a section of the exhibition / catalogue titled 'Artist as Experience Maker: The Audience Completes the Work'. She describes John Cage's 4' 33" silent composition (1953), then Allison Knowles' Make a Salad (1962) as key examples of everyday experiences of reality as art: commonplace activities and interactions where the art was only complete when the audience was engaged. The claim was that art challenges ideas of authorship by becoming increasingly interactive. Molesworth explained that some artists were developing '... participatory works. . . designed to liberate the creative impulses of

the audience. The idea that art was an activity that everyone could participate in and generate. . . found its strongest advocate in Herbert Marcuse.’[14] She specifically references Marcuse’s works ‘Eros and Civilization’ (1955) and *Essay on Liberation* (1969) for ideas about creativity as a condition of humanity and freedom as living without needs with opportunity to be creative.

When Molesworth attributed Herbert Marcuse’s theories on art and liberation to Cage and Knowles I had to stop and reflect on this. While the works have made a significant impact on the meaning of art within the avant-garde, the liberatory impact would seem to lie solely within the process of artworking itself. What is set free in the dialogue between the maker and the viewer in these works, are boundaries around the idea of how art itself was understood. It is clear that this work contributed to the collapse of boundaries that once separated art from life. But I struggle with the claim that these audience-completed works, liberate the creativity of the audience. Was there something in Marcuse’s thinking that I am missing that would make it easier to understand Molesworth’s claim?

Marcuse, Truth, and Reality.

I find it helpful to consider Marcuse’s 1967 lecture on ‘Art in a One-Dimensional Society’ at the New York School of Visual Arts where he argued that art is truth. Followed by another talk in New York in 1969 at the Guggenheim Museum where he discussed ‘Art as a Form of Reality.’ He claimed that art was an oppositional reality that revealed the limitations of the established cultural infrastructure and moral behaviours of culture and society. He argued for a cognitive, or intellectual art that was true unto itself, or at least capable of revealing hidden and repressed truths. ‘The artistic process thus is the liberation of the object from the automatism of perception which distorts and restricts what things are and what things can be.’[15] Part of this argument is about how art is understood, but it also seeks to recalibrate our subjective understanding of the world. The role of art is to present ‘true’ experiences that in-turn opened up the collective consciousness to a critical understanding of the limitations that define the normative conditions of the everyday. Marcuse’s ideas reveal theoretical potential for audience liberation by providing access to truths and realities that were bound by the artworld and therefore held separate from the utility of day-to-day experience. Douglas Kellner the editor of ‘Art and Liberation: Collected Papers of Herbert Marcuse Volume 4’ (2007) provides further insight. He argues that Marcuse was clear that art could not be instrumentalized, as its political power is understood as a critical subjectivity rested within its own aesthetic dimension. ‘Genuine art provides an experience that helps liberate the individual from thrall to the existing society to cultivate a critical subjectivity capable of motivation to transformative action to produce a better world.’[16] Marcuse believed that art could contribute to revolutionary consciousness because it was conditioned by an autonomous inward reality, and when given outward form it could antagonize and challenge the day-to-day conditions of labour. In Julia Bryan-Wilson’s and Helen Molesworth’s texts, a critical understanding of what artwork could be is expanded beyond previous boundaries, while the collective idea of artist’s labour is understood as the cultivation of a critical subjectivity focused upon the production of a better world.

Marcuse was important as a validating force for the new practices, as he argued for new truths and realities being a result of creative inquiry with materials and social context. The reading has produced several points essential to our interest in

environmental artworking. The first is that the political value of art lies within its own aesthetic framework. The second is that work which presents new truths and critical realities has an essential significance. The final point is that artworking (as it was understood at the time) was an open concept.

### Art Society and the Environment

So far, our reading suggests that some of the most thoughtful historians of art, work and labour saw the environment as extraneous to their topics. However there are challenges to some of the previous intellectual constraints that confined artwork to material and societal interrelationship. My first point of reference is Suzi Gablik [17] who thought about a productive response to the scepticism that defined the time. She focuses on a constructive postmodern practice, understanding this as a responsibility to both society and its ecological context. 'Reconstructivists are trying to make the transition from Eurocentric, patriarchal thinking and the dominator model of culture toward an aesthetics of interconnectedness, social responsibility an ecological attunement.' [18] Gablik has argued that the social value and impact of art has been constrained by an ideology of freedom, a liberatory rendition which has never been enacted. The 'critical subjectivity' which Marcuse argued was a result of art as separate truth, or even as a unique reality. This was not enough for Gablik who argued that the aesthetic boundaries that validated artistic alterity constrained the social and ecological interconnectivity she was searching for.

Turning to Grant Kester who is recognized as a primary historian and theorist of community arts and dialogical aesthetics. In a 2005 exhibition catalogue, he wrote about the history and evolution of identity, labour, and property. His purpose was to reveal the false consciousness of the bourgeois subject that the avant-garde still believes can be altered by revelation provided by the experience of art. In a closely argued historical analysis he describes the age of enlightenment, and the pathway that set people free from God and king. Following John Locke [19] he explains that labour (work) directed by body and mind, mixes personality with nature at which point nature in the form of land and resources is transformed into personal product and property. In turn the ownership of property was the condition that informed eighteenth century ideas of what it meant to be free, and conversely what it meant to be constrained and unfree. Kester then describes contemporary middle-class identity as something performed and catalyzed by engagement with the social and material conditions of the world. There is a subjectivity ruled by desire, driven by the pursuit of profit with a preference for conservative values and continuity. He argues this generalized subjectivity is a long-standing focal point a primary target of the avant-garde. Critical of this conflicted otherness, Kester argues that it is the turn toward collaboration, and an understanding that dialogue and social exchange have aesthetic qualities, that ultimately challenges this historic position. It is the experience of this dichotomy, within the unique alterity of the arts that is purported to enable anyone that engages the work to discover a new critical relationship to the world as we know it. The question that follows is: how may we engage differently? Kester argues that the 'The decisive point . . . is to develop the skills necessary to mitigate [the] violence and objectification in our ongoing encounter with difference.' [20] As a critical theorist, he pays attention to sustained discursive engagement, signs of reciprocity, and indications of empathic insight. The goal is to engage across class, race, nation, and gender barriers with an open mind. The desired outcome is an art-based evolution of what can be described as a subjectivity amongst the partners in a discourse, as a reflective social interaction



that seeks something other than practical solutions to world problems. It retains Marcuse's ideas about art-based truth and reality, although they are 'discovered' through discursive interrelationship rather than as a result of individual creative inquiry. These theories present a model of artworking that is fundamentally relational and discursive with none of the controlled parameters and limited participation found in the artist's described by Bryan-Wilson or Molesworth above.

Extending this idea further, in 'Conversation Pieces' (2004) Grant Kester reveals the unique discursive approach to the art working of Helen and Newton Harrison. Kester is primarily interested in the Harrisons' dialogic method which they call 'conversational drift,' which he understands as, '. . . unanticipated new images and forms of knowledge generated by open-ended dialogue across disciplinary boundaries, focused on a given ecosystem.' [21] Interviewing Newton, additional clarity is offered. The meaning of conversational drift is refined, and he talks about the problems inherent to dialectical thinking, Newton is speaking. 'Much argument is in dialectical terms, the idea that there are holes, and one finds a resolution between two forces of opposition. Conversational drift lets you be free of that if you choose. . . There are many forces and voices operating in the conversation you can play with them all.' [22] The Harrisons are noted for their abilities to carry on conversations with a range of disciplines. This is complemented by an impressive spatial and temporal imagination which allows them to see unexpected opportunities and challenges, as well as communicate their unique view of our changing world in a way that is more poetic than didactic. The work at its best is an exhaustive interrogation of a place and its relational conditions. Like Hans Haacke as discussed earlier, they raise deeply significant questions about the social, economic, and political forces that limit the way we know and relate to the world. Their work differs however, in its focus on issues that surround land and place while offering a framework to clarify the complexity of relations that make up an ecological system. With this example of the Harrisons' contribution the practice of discourse, the environment is becoming more visible in the relationship between the individual subject and its relevant social context. Kester continues to write with the environment in mind; although his primary focus is on artwork that attends to the social and political conditions of environmental justice.

I am not convinced this kind of work can be done with the same kind of moral and ethical codes that both Kester and Miles describe for ideal human-to-human creative, discursive exchange. There needs to be room to fail if differential ideas about sentience, consciousness and more-than-human exchanges are the focus of creative inquiry. Following a different line of inquiry, John Roberts writing about the evolution of the Avant-Garde (2015) offers important insight into art, autonomy, and other disciplines. He argues that '...one of the critical functions still left to artists. . . is their ability to borrow from and invest in various knowledge bases without placing themselves at the instrumental service of such disciplines and practices; and this – as a matter of art's self-definition – is something that should not be underestimated or undervalued.' [23] He goes on to argue that 'adisciplinarity' tests the boundaries of knowledge in art, and at the same time the limits and validity of ideas expressed in the biological, physical, and social sciences. This work seeks to contribute and enable experiential, cognitive, and intellectual inquiry that is autonomous by intent, with moral attention to ethics and freedoms, enabling or simply contributing to a space where instrumental and commodifying forces of capital are not the dominant priority. This brings us back to some of the critical points raised by Marcuse and Kester. We start to

see a structure that reveals a new form of artworking that is based on a relational dialogical approach to mind, body, society, and the myriad ways we perceive and understand the otherness found in our environment.

#### Cooperation that Maintains the World.

I want to look back at the work of Helen and Newton Harrison with a focus on ten years between 1970 and 1980. It was at this time that they developed their studio as a place of research and experimentation informed by the knowledge and expertise of other disciplines. It is also important to recognize that it was at this time that Helen's interest shifted from education to art, as she became a primary collaborator in the Harrison Studio; the monologue became a dialogue which would evolve into a multispecies relationality.

In 1970 Newton spent four months in California working on 'Making Dirt. This informed the development of 'Survival Pieces' (1970 to 1973). 'The Lagoon Cycle' began in 1972 and would not be completed until 1982. In keeping with the standards set by Bryan-Wilson and Molesworth, there is nothing unusual about Newton making earth. His artworking methods included raking, hoeing, shovelling, watering, mixing and ultimately tasting his product. Here we have the indications of an iterative practice, and an evolving experimental, material inquiry that indicates an essential interest in maintaining the world. Of course, this intention would be essential to Mierle Laderman Ukeles' work as well. The difference is that Ukeles sought to interrogate gender roles and the performance of work that maintained the fundament of society, while Harrison was experimenting with natural generative and regenerative forces. Over this decade the Harrison Studio would evolve sophisticated methods that were intended to reveal new aesthetic truths and critical realities. Once Helen joined Newton in the studio, they were increasingly effective at developing and interrogating the form, function, and ethical application of social-environmental life support systems, as the intellectual focus and material content of their environmental artworking. The next step was to create a series of 'Survival Pieces' (1971-1973). In Laura Cassidy Roger's history of this period, Newton is presented as the artist, scientist, and technologist, while Helen is described as having an interest social engagement, seeking to develop a food community comprised of recipes, cooking, and sharing of food as these 'Survival Pieces' are harvested during exhibition. Having known both of them, perhaps their boundaries were more fluid. Although they brought different backgrounds, gender roles and training to the artwork, they were equally engaged with the ideas, images and texts that were essential to their work. In these early efforts the artworking gained topical clarity as we can see the artists as social-environmental activists and researchers. The work is perhaps best understood as effective material labour; that lives at the edge of experimentality, while flirting with pragmatism and utility, engineering, and design. Rogers describes the 'Survival Pieces' as; ". . . poetic edge objects because they deepened understanding about the moral dilemma associated with life and death cycles (or growth and harvest cycles) that supply humanity with food.'[24] The works offered new socio-eco-aesthetic experiences that were designed to illicit a dialogue challenging the audience to consider interdisciplinary aesthetic truths, and what would become increasingly complex work, dealing with repressed realities.



Documentation, Helen Mayer Harrison and Newton Harrison with John Isaacks, working on *Survival Piece 7 / The Second Lagoon: Sea Grant*, The Harrison Studio

The Lagoon Cycle is the primary artwork from this period that I want to consider. It is a nascent example of a decade-long, research-based artwork that emerges from within an academic context where the Harrisons ‘. . . experiment with new forms of conceptual, physical and social intervention, and benefit from the freedoms [interdisciplinary support and funding] that academic culture affords.’[25] Working from a university building with a faculty research grant they set up an initial experiment creating a lagoon habitat to grow Sri Lankan blue swimming crabs. From this initial work they planned a series of lagoons and in 1974 they received a Sea Grant from the US National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration. In the grant application, Newton wrote, ‘We are developing a commercially viable crab with simple mating, hatching and growing processes.’[26] At the same time they were preparing artwork from initial experiments with the blue crab.[27] Although I don’t have the space here to resolve the tensions embedded in these practical or design aspects of their work. I can say that my partner [28] was always impressed with their ability to maintain an illusion of practical outcomes, while thinking well beyond the limited interests of the funding bodies and institutions that engaged them.

Evolving over twelve years the Lagoon Cycle is a set of texts and panels that have an exhibition form and a book form. The narrative begins with two characters, a lagoon maker and a witness -- a generative forceful maker and a rigorous critical thinker. These were two artists who engaged people, places, and things in an ever-expanding dialogue with more than one lagoon and a grand tale of a coevolving awareness and shifts in subjectivity. As I have said previously, I am not convinced that these roles are exclusive to either one of them. Here I examine an excerpt from the exchange that begins the work. One way to read it is as an exchange between two people, yet another way is to think about it as dialogue with a sentient, more-than-human living thing: ‘Where are you [the other answers] in a space of my own devising. Who are you A being of my own invention. Why are you my companion You have entered the space of my dreaming.’[29] The anomalous exchange continues, as there is work to be done, an experiment in knowing together and paying attention reflecting on the cause and effect of relational behaviour. ‘An experiment a bargain A transaction of sorts. To discover if we are each other’s invention But how would you know or I know By listening to a conversation of another’s devising. And comparing our own understandings and enacting our own believing While recording each other’s

behaving.’[30] This artworking challenges boundaries of perception and subjectivity in a number of ways. It is a series of seven experiments that emerge over a period of ten years, the artists received university funding, arts funding, a Sea Grant and commercial funding. It starts out with a reference lagoon in Sri Lanka, experimental habitats, and then evolves into a grand experimental concept that goes on to engage the Salton Sea and then the Ocean itself. If we take Kester’s precepts, we can see that discursive engagement is a core intent of the work. Whether we are talking about a dialogue with a human, or a sentient otherness, reciprocity and empathic insight are essential. In the text’s introduction the Harrisons establish a radical environmental artworking model that is based on interrelationship with more-than-human otherness. In the conclusion to the work, they reveal a global scope and scale of their attention and intention.

I am not the first amongst my colleagues in the field of ecological and environmental art to recognize the scope of the Harrisons’ vision. They predate most artists and authors in the cultural field by intimating the scale of environment change that we are all aware of today. Notably this is presented as a record of the ocean singing. ‘One morning we heard the ocean singing Increase in heat decrease in ice Increase in water decrease in land. . . Stated changes changes of state. . . Melt at the South Pole rise in L.A. And the waters will rise slowly. . . redrawing the boundary. . . It is a graceful drawing and redrawing this response to [what they describe as] the millennia of making of fire.’[31] Is it the water commenting on the drawing and the impact of fire and carbon, or is it the ocean? The ocean singing initiates a metaphorical relationship a relational subjectivity where the border between humanity and ocean becomes porous. The Artworking, the poetic lyricism embedded in a relational subjectivity that is part human, part ocean, and a union of sentient otherness.[32]

### Conclusion

In the beginning of the paper, the first challenge was to establish an historical perspective on the cultural forces that pushed artists to make the claim of being artworkers, seeking the shelter of labour networks. This pattern is addressed by art historians writing about the topics of art, work, labour, and ethics. The following question was whether any of this helps us to understand meaningful creative responses to the impacts of current climate-based changes? Perhaps this is an unfortunate choice of words, as the problem seems to be one of subjective transformation an opening up to ecological otherness that results in a recapitulation of normative value, rather than a finite or analytical understanding of creative response. I do not think this has been fully resolved here. Herbert Marcuse is referenced throughout the first section by the art historians dealing with arts work and work ethics. I embrace his insight that art that retains its aesthetic frame has a power that does not exist in other disciplines.

It is important to note that Grant Kester’s position is essentially a moral one. He is looking for work that seeks to mitigate the objectification of others, and to address the inequities and abuse that often occurs in our encounters with otherness. Malcolm Miles has substantial agreement. ‘Art which engages with environmental issues needs to do so in ways which do not reproduce the viewpoints of power-relations of art shaped by structures of a world in which environmental destructiveness has become a norm.’[33] To assess ethical factors in artworking Kester looks for a discursive approach to engagement, that embraces reciprocity and empathic exchange as essential elements

of collaborative work amongst artists and communities, or specific social groups. He is very sensitive to ulterior motives, manipulation, or sociopolitical dominance on the part of the artist, their collaborators commissioning bodies or institutions. Returning to Miles who describes an idea of a green aesthetic which replaces, ' . . . disinterested judgement with interested non-judgmental interventions, [34] a moral position that suggests interference while bracketing judgement and opinion. To be honest I am cautious about Kester's sensitivity and have reservations about Miles' constraint on judgement. My discomfort arises from the fact that, from a societal perspective we are talking about groups with different levels of knowledge, experience, and confidence. Working from an ecological or environmental perspective we are dealing with two overlapping problems. The first is that there are large gaps in the general understanding of what a productive and respectful relationship to nature might be. The second is that, despite a range of work on the sentience and consciousness of more-than-human others, we do not have a language in common. So, interaction is based on signs of emotional response and an evolving sense of empathic interaction. All we really have is an intent to do no harm coupled with a recognition that as we commingle with other species, we are both fallible and prone to failure. We only have our anthropocentric world view, an evolving sense of moral duty and our imagination to rely on as we attempt to do this work. With careful reflection and a written record of research, we can perhaps begin to limit mistakes and missteps, but judgement is essential to any ethical attempt to do this work.

The Harrison's 'Lagoon Cycle' provides an example worth contemplating given the previous statement. As described, they embrace a relational subjectivity of nature as other, lagoon maker and witness. One could argue that they embrace a union of sentient otherness; the nature-other is always conscious. Complicating things further, they embrace the problem of food production, dance with market forces to run one lagoon experiment and then envision a project that is so vast and speculative that one of them evidently gets lost in their own ego. 'Why did you not tell me you already know the problem with the ocean before I did all of that planning I became so intrigued by your planning that I began to desire your desires and a forgetting took place. But you also knew the value of the ocean is greater than that of a pond in the desert however large – why didn't you remember yourself?'[35] The 'Lagoon Cycle' is an arts-based research effort that evolves with the crabs, and with the artists interests. Looking at all of this in hindsight from 2022 they seem fearless and perhaps foolish at times. After all experimenting with human food production and what maybe sentient creatures raises some alarm bells. But at every step they are self-reflective and aware. Issues arise that they try to address, perhaps resolve, and at times only acknowledge. This is all part of the iterative learning model that we have to take into consideration when working beyond our own species.

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Research Interests include aesthetic and ethical ideas about our changing environment with a focus on how art shifts values in relationship to new ideas and experiences. With additional reading and writing about the evolving meaning of nature as informed by science, philosophy, experience, and imagination. The area can be understood as an ecologically and socially engaged art practice informed by consensual democratic and agonistic discourse framed by our changing environment.

## Endnotes

- [1] This is also true during the 1930's when Federal Project #1, was established to employ artists all over the country under the aspects of the Work Progress Administration as part of the 'New Deal' established by President Franklin Roosevelt to combat the effects of the Great Depression (1929-1939).
- [2] Beech, *Art and Postcapitalism: Aesthetic Labour, Automation and Value Production*.
- [3] Hardt, 'Affective Labor', 89.
- [4] For a specific view of labour and socially engaged art here in the pages of the Field Journal see the book review of Leigh Clare La Berge's *Wages against Artwork: Decommodified Labor and the Claims of Socially Engaged Art* by Noni Brynjolson. [Accessed July 12, 2022]. <https://field-journal.com/editorial/book-review-wages-against-artwork-decommodified-labor-and-the-claims-of-socially-engaged-art>
- [5] Bryan-Wilson, *Art Workers: Radical Practice in the Vietnam War Era*, 16.
- [6] Takis, 'An Art Worker' (Self published, 1969), Lucy Lippard Papers, Museum of Modern Art File AAA.
- [7] Bryan-Wilson, p. 14-15.
- [8] As opposed to ideas of free labour or unproductive play
- [9] Bryan-Wilson, *Art Workers: Radical Practice in the Vietnam War Era*, 30.
- [10] Bryan-Wilson, 31.
- [11] Molesworth, *Work Ethics*, 7.
- [12] Molesworth, 25.
- [13] Kwon, 'Exchange Rate: On Obligation and Reciprocity in Some Art of the 1960's and After.', 85.
- [14] Molesworth, *Work Ethics*, 167.
- [15] Marcuse, *Art and Liberation*, 117.
- [16] Kellner, 'Introduction: Marcuse, Art, and Liberation', 63.
- [17] Gablik also wrote *Has Modernism Failed* in 1984.
- [18] Gablik, *The Reenchantment of Art*, 22.
- [19] John Locke was a seventeenth century English philosopher recognized for his work on social contract theory with contributions to epistemology and political philosophy.
- [20] Kester, *Groundworks Environmental Collaboration in Contemporary Art*, 30.
- [21] Kester, *Conversation Pieces: Community and Communication in Modern Art.*, 64.
- [22] Kester, 64–65.
- [23] Roberts, *Revolutionary Time and the Avant-Garde*, 34.
- [24] Rogers, 'The Social and Environmental Turn in Late 20th Century Art: A Case Study of Helen and Newton Harrison after Modernism', 236.
- [25] Rogers, 270.
- [26] Harrison and Harrison, *Book of the Crab*, 20.
- [27] See Rogers, p. 274 where she describes *Hardcore Conceptual: Wherein the Transformations are Found Outside the Domain of Art* developed for the exhibition "Decentering" at the Ronald Feldman Gallery in New York. (1974). In 1979, an exhibition at the Santa Monica Museum of Art, resulted in the publication of the 'Book of the Crab'. A copy of this catalogue (also referred to in Rogers' thesis, Pp. 281 and 284) was passed to me by Chris Fremantle.
- [28] Artist and author Reiko Goto Collins.
- [29] Helen Mayer and Newton, *The Lagoon Cycle*, 26.
- [30] Helen Mayer and Newton, 26.

[31] Helen Mayer and Newton, 96.

[32] James Lovelock's, *Gaia: A New Look at Life on Earth* was first published in 1979.

[33] Miles, 'A Green Aesthetic: After Kant the Deluge', 69.

[34] Miles, 78.

[35] Helen Mayer and Newton, *The Lagoon Cycle*, 80.

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