Eden 3 dialogue: Helen Mayer Harrison and Newton Harrison (2008)

Eden 3 dialogue. Transcript from the Collins & Goto Studio files, archived 2026.

HELEN MAYER HARRISON AND NEWTON HARRISON

INTERVIEWED BY REIKO GOTO

8 MARCH 2008

NOVOTEL HOTEL, BRISTOL, ROOM 228, 4:00 PM TO 6: PM

PPART 1 & PART 2

[text] Text in square brackets should be checked for accuracy or spelling (for example, names) or for choice of words.

[text] Text in italics enclosed in square brackets has been added or paraphrased to make grammatical sense – please check for accuracy.

[...] Three dots in square brackets indicate text that has been omitted for reasons of clarity – please check.

[?____] Inaudible.

Part 1

Present: Helen Mayer Harrison

Newton Harrison

Reiko Goto

When we think about the public realm, often we think about ourselves. We are forgetting that every public place consists of silent beings such as plants, insects, wildlife, soil, and air. When we think about aesthetics in the public realm, we must think about them and their intrinsic values.

My partner and I went to see The Serpentine Lattice at Reed College in 1993. The inside of the gallery was kept dark for the slide projections. After a while, when we were looking at the maps and the slide show, a young college student came in and sat on a bench in the middle of the gallery. Then, all of a sudden, she started crying loudly. It was very odd – but we felt it was related to your art work, even though we did not fully understand what was going on in the gallery. We did not know what to do about the situation. We then drove back to San Francisco, driving through the Serpentine (forests). We read your poem manifesto. It was a wonderful experience driving back and thinking about the images we saw.

My PhD is practice-led. I have to study theory as well as working on my practice. I need to think about your work in relation to the theories that I have been studying. I chose two theorists: Grant Kester, art historian, and Emily Brady, an American environmental philosopher. Grant talks about dialogical aesthetics; empathy, inter-subjective exchange, communicability, ethics and aesthetics.

Brady talks about natural aesthetics in contemporary environmental philosophy. For example, is it a pure perceptual experience; or is it made of scientific knowledge? How people experience it – is it simply, this is beautiful, or it smells good; or is some kind of knowledge affecting your experience.

When my partner and I were in Pittsburgh working on the 'Nine Mile Run' and 'Three Rivers Second Nature Projects', people often questioned us, "Is this art?" I told them why it was important to save an open stream from development. We researched with scientists how people could notice that beautiful nature existed in a post-industrial landscape – but I could not convince people why 'Nine Mile Run' and 'Three Rivers Second Nature' were art.

Reiko Goto: Helen and Newton, thank you very much for being with me today.

I have been thinking about your work in relation to my research question.

Is it possible to create change if people understand life as interdependent and interrelated with nature in our environments?

My first question is:

What is most important in your work and art practice?

Newton Harrison: There is nothing that is important in my work. Everything is equally important. I do not do 'most important'; rather, the work is designed in such a way that, first, one thing will assert itself, and then another, and then another, and then another – and that way layers come forth and therefore, at any given moment, something *else* may be important.

The problem with asking that question at all is that it is a bottom-line question. It is, "What is the bottom line?" and I tell you, we have none.

Helen Harrison: I am going [to answer] somewhat differently. What I think is important about our work ...

Newton Harrison: Wait – she did not say "important". She said, "What is the most important?".

Helen Harrison: All right. The most important thing about our work is that it should resonate in the mind which is the thing that any good work of art does; and the importance of it is, you ask, "What makes a difference; can you change earlier?"

You cannot change people when you give them information. Information goes in the head and it stays there. Freud said you can only change behaviour when you have the 'a-hah!' sensation of something that has really struck you emotionally. The basic thing about our art is that it reaches people at a level deeper than just words passing through or images passing through. They are images and words that will resonate in the mind.

[11:24]

Newton Harrison: Moreover, we never try to convince anybody of anything. Why would we do that? Either the work has a [way of] us being part of the work, or it does not. I do not want to talk anybody into anything. If you look at our work carefully, you would find that mostly it is a

rumination – either Helen and I talk to each other or it is 'he said', 'she said'; or it is, as a group, we went to the Pennines and discussed, 'we saw this' and 'we saw that'.

We are not trying to change anybody from that – why would one want to do that? I think changing minds is a bad idea.

All through our experience with DEFRA (putting on this Greenhouse Britain exhibition), they wanted to know how many people's minds we changed; they wanted to know who our target audience was; they wanted to know what the key issue was. I find that an awful lot of thought in this country plays with that stuff. Our work is not about that at all.

You know that – what our work is about is like the Serpentine Lattice. It is, "Can it be we let the forest die like this? Who is looking after the rest?" "Ok, we will look after the rest."

Do you follow what I mean? It is nothing about changing minds; that is about statistics. That is the economists' way of justifying what they do. I am not into the justification business. The only time our work actually works on the ground is when it touches a moment of urgency in the culture itself and then we join that urgency, and we cannot tell what is going to happen in advance.

Helen Harrison: Something else happened in our work, and that is that a great deal of it did not happen immediately; it happens within ten years, or fifteen years – and that has to do with the work resonating in the mind. People hear it; it stays with them and, gradually, it begins to assume its own forms. In other words, they did not do *precisely* what we said, but they got the results we have asked for.

[14:13]

Newton Harrison: Let me tell you an outcome from this work. If you look at the major ecology magazines that come out, you will see a variation of this Serpentine Lattice. This is the icon of the Pacific Northwest. We invented this icon; nobody ever saw it before and now this has embedded in it the meaning of the Pacific Northwest and it is used all over. And they vary – for instance, up here they make it a little bigger because it is in Canada. They changed the icon to suit themselves. We were way ahead of ourselves for the Serpentine Lattice, but this became the warning signal for all. When was the last time you saw an icon work? We had not either. And it is from this icon that we began to invent the Dutch icon and this Peninsular Europe icon.

Reiko Goto:

How did you find the giant snake; and what did the snake tell you? [How did you find the Serpentine?]

Newton Harrison: *[surprised]* The giant snake?

Reiko Goto: Serpentine.

Newton Harrison: Oh, this guy – how we found it?

Reiko Goto: *[laughing]* Yes, how did you find the giant serpentine; what does the serpentine tell you – something you had never experienced before?

[15:50]

Newton Harrison: But that is all in the work. It is all in the description, here. It is all in the Baile Oakes' book. It is about seeing and scanning. Visual artists see and scan. When we look at the map, we said, "What is it we are seeing?" We are seeing a serpentine form. "What else are we seeing?" We are seeing the Serpentine re-mirror itself in the mountain ranges and in the ocean edge. "What connects the Serpentine?" The rivers.

Helen Harrison: They are the cross branches; they are like the steps in a ladder.

Newton Harrison: So the Serpentine Lattice comes from that observation. It is about ...

Helen Harrison: ...the mountains, the coast and then the rivers.

Newton Harrison: This is about seeing.

Helen Harrison: And the river valley.

Newton Harrison: And then this gives a voice to a form. There is a certain poetic redundancy that we work with; *all* artists work with – go and look at Michaelangelo; look at the grouping and clustering and the minute you have run out of one group, another group asserts itself. We learn from those people; that is why we work with this level of complexity; and that is why we say there is no 'bottom line'. What is the bottom line to Donatello's 'Magdalen'? There is no 'bottom line'! What is the most important thing about the 'Magdalen'? There is no most important thing! There is only about forty or fifty important things embedded in the layering and they jump out at you one after another as you see and experience it.

Reiko Goto: Ok.

How do you explain your work as art?

Newton Harrison: I don't! And I won't!

Helen Harrison: How what?

Newton Harrison: She wants to know how we explain our work as art. We don't. we take for granted that the work is art and that it speaks itself. No-one will ever get me to get up and say, 'My work is art because ...".

I am willing to discuss with somebody the nature of art, but I am not willing to justify my own work. I mean, "Why are you a person, or why am I a person ..." "Because ..."

[18:27]

Reiko Goto:

What do you think about a recent socialist activity; Professor Wangari Maathai planted three million trees in Kenya? She received the Nobel Prize.

Newton Harrison: Yes, wasn't that marvellous?

Reiko Goto:

What I am asking is why your work is art and her work is something else?

Helen Harrison: What she did, was make an image of all those trees that really resonated in the mind. That is why I would say that.

Newton Harrison: But she does not claim it is art; neither do we.

Helen Harrison: No. We do not claim it is art.

Newton Harrison: Now, why don't we make that claim? Why isn't it art?

[Silence.]

Reiko Goto: Because ... she wanted to plant trees and then that changed the economy, people's lives in Africa. That was her intention. She never intended to make art. But you are making art.

Newton Harrison: That is correct. We are story-tellers, and she is not. If you look at our work, we are part of a ten-thousand-year tradition of narration; of story-telling; and of metaphor-creation. Out of that comes art. In that case, we call for fifty thousand miles of trees to be replanted – if you look at the Serpentine Lattice.

She does not make that claim. Why should she? That is not what she was doing. I mean, look: two or three different wood companies cut down fifty thousand miles of trees – that is a heroic act. Why isn't that art? It is a real big act! You know, a lot of the development world thinks it is a marvellous thing they did. It is a great story!

Helen Harrison: No, they don't.

Newton Harrison: Yes, they do. But you see what I am saying?

Helen Harrison: It is good business – not a great story.

Newton Harrison: Yes, it is good business, it is marvellous, it is terrific, it is good for the economy – never mind that eighty thousand miles of streams are screwed up – but, what the hell. Do you see what I am saying?

Reiko Goto: I think I understand.

Newton Harrison: Somebody has got you worried about how you define art. I want to tell you one story about how you define art. It is 1978; I take a class at UCST of very bright students – they are in their third year. We are going to spend ten weeks trying to define art. We spend the ten weeks and we cannot define it. End of story. I stopped. I can do what I cannot define.

Helen Harrison: For a long time people said, "Why is this art?" and we could never explain it satisfactorily earlier on, "why was this art; why was this art?"

Newton Harrison: "Why was the Fish Farm art? Why was all those works we did – why was the Lagoon Cycle ..." Nobody had trouble with the Lagoon Cycle. Maybe they could figure out that was art.

Helen Harrison: Yes. By the time of the Lagoon Cycle people began to stop questioning. Now, they still do sometimes. We do not bother. We are not justifying what we do. What we do justifies itself, and if it does not – then it does not. It is a question of a real indifference there. Either they can get it or they cannot.

Newton Harrison: We are not obliged to be self-explainers. There is something about what goes on in the culture that, as an artist, you somehow got to be a self-explainer. I assure you, you do not.

Reiko Goto: In this poem,

"Surely you will consider all points of view" and then somebody said, "In one way or another, you can't do this because of that; or that because of this." How do you divert an endless and pointless question like this?

Newton Harrison: We ignore it, and we do an act of creativity that annihilates the questions.

Helen Harrison: You see – by saying it ourselves, right there, somebody said, "How can you do this?" People look at it and it looks awfully silly.

Newton Harrison: It is ironic

Helen Harrison: It is silly and it looks ironic, and people [touch] it!

[25:15]

Newton Harrison: Because you do not want to take it out of context. Look at the next few sentences. Go ahead, read the next few sentences.

Reiko Goto: WE BEING GREATFUL, FOR THE INVITATION TO JOIN THIS PERILOUS CONVERSATION BEGAN TO IMAGINE AND ACT OF RESTITUTION…

Newton Harrison: "So, you see, we answered it afterwards. We ignore it and do an act of creativity. Art is about acts of creativity. It is not about justifications. We take all that stuff; take a look at it; and dump it! And we dump it by a creative act – the poems.

[26:06]

Reiko Goto:

How does the metaphor of the Serpentine Lattice work?

Helen Harrison: We believe that our art works a great deal through *[metaphor]* – that all work is based in metaphor.

Newton Harrison: All design is based on metaphor. What you do is, you take a look at the belief that drives a metaphor, and then you can take a look at the metaphor that designs cultural artefacts.

Helen Harrison: Our cultural behaviour, and then you see if there is some way that you can reverse it. When people see the flip, and the reverse, they understand.

Newton Harrison: Let me give you an example. Flood control is the destruction of rivers. That is a metaphor. Now, what is flood control? Generally speaking, flood control is dykes that hold the

river from wrecking a town. Supposing you flip the metaphor – now watch: [flood control is the structure of rivers [telling] you how to design] *[flood control [...] tells you how to design].* You have to have dykes; the dykes are twice as wide as they are high; they are compacted earth; they need clay in them; and all kinds of stuff. You cannot have big trees on them because the roots will make [leaves] – and so on.

Helen Harrison: Flood control is also the destruction of flood plains. The doing away of flood plains because the flood plains are meant to be flooding.

Newton Harrison: And the destruction of riverine life – a lot of destruction in that metaphor. If you flip the metaphor, flood control is the spreading of waters – then you give me the twenty million dollars that you were going to put in the dykes; I will go and buy land above; and a whole load of design will happen which we call ecological design.

Helen Harrison: We will return the flood plain to the river. We will have removed ...

Newton Harrison: She is not understanding how one got to begin at the beginning again.

Reiko Goto: Dykes are no metaphor – they are real structures!

Newton Harrison: Yes, they are a metaphor. I will tell you why. Metaphors become physical. It is *physical*. A car has a metaphor of transportation built in it. The metaphors force the design. The design of the dyke begins with a metaphor. The metaphor says, "The river is destroying the town. I will make the dyke."

Helen Harrison: "I will control the river." "I will make the dyke to control the river."

Newton Harrison: All those metaphors go into under 'live design'. If we say, "We take that metaphor and yank it apart and put it together differently", the metaphor is formed; it is a mental form. Therefore we say, "Give us the money you would spend on dykes, and we will spend the money spreading the water." If we spread the water, we make a new flood plain; if we spread the water, we make a new eco-system; if we spread the water we benefit the town, the flood plain, and the river.

Helen Harrison: In other words, we have prevented a flood simply by replacing the reason for a flood. The reason for a flood is that water is going in its natural path.

Newton Harrison: The metaphor is not a literary device.

Helen Harrison: A metaphor *is* a literary device; a metaphor, *also*, is a very real thing.

Newton Harrison: By that I mean, if you read George Lakoff's work (he is a dear friend of ours) – he proves that you cannot think in the absence of metaphor; you cannot form a complex thought. Metaphorical thinking, although denied (especially *[by]* the Post-Modernists – they hated metaphor; they do not like allegory either; at least some of the ones I knew), they saw things as literary; we see them as material and mentally physical. They are *real*, and they shape the reality. They shape the cultural landscape; they are part of the story of the shaping of the cultural landscape. You can take the story of the forming of the cultural landscape and veer it another direction. That is what the Serpentine Lattice tries to do. It does not succeed.

Helen Harrison: Yes. That is one of the works that became very well-known and continues, still, to be in demand.

Newton Harrison: We may have succeeded because, in the beginning, people were not working with watersheds. After the Serpentine Lattice, they started to work in the Pacific Northwest with watersheds. Then, about five years after that, they started to group watersheds. I think that we influenced the discourse. It is not possible to tell how much. And what do we care?

The issue is engagement with the formation of the cultural landscape; being self-empowered, sufficiently, to act; then taking action; and then expecting consequences.

Helen Harrison: Bust.

Reiko Goto: Small question ...

Newton Harrison: Good.

[32:37]

Reiko Goto:

I have noticed that you worked with over fifty people in this project – the Serpentine Lattice – maybe more, probably. Who are the most influential person or people; and why? If I need to ask about the experience of the project, who would be the best person to talk to?

Newton Harrison: Susan Fillin-Yeh, the author. You will find her on the web.

Helen Harrison: She is the woman who was the director of the museum, and she was the woman who asked us to come, and she is the woman who wrote up a whole essay on our work in general in the article there. Also, she was the one who really encouraged the work.

Newton Harrison: When we said, "Look, we are going to take on all these thousands of square miles", we expected to have to talk her into something. She said, "Go for it."

Helen Harrison: Yes. She was very helpful and a pleasure to work with.

Newton Harrison: Every time we needed a forester; or we needed a this; or we needed a that – she would go and hunt them down.

Helen Harrison: Yes, or she would find someone who would do it. She had an assistant.

[33:59]

Reiko Goto: How did you feel about these fifty people? Yesterday during the opening [at the Knowle West Media Centre in Bristol], I felt it was very welcoming and they are looking forward to seeing something very new. How did you feel about people? Do you remember?

Newton Harrison: How did I feel about that? Look. What happens is that, when you have a big vision like that ... Lots of folk are really distressed by the terrible stuff that went on up there. So, to see a couple of folk like us come in and engage, is encouraging. We were helped as much as they could help us, as people, and we all had a good time together.

Helen Harrison: We shared common concerns. We would not have shared their concerns had we not been in the neighbourhood and spent time there and understood them – even though it was a short time.

Newton Harrison: You mean 'here'.

Helen Harrison: Yes, here. It was enough. How come? We were told by Tom Trevor of the Arnolfini that we should go to this place, and meet these people, and we should do our work with them.

Newton Harrison: And see what we could do with them. Tom happened to be right. Not everybody is right, you know.

Helen Harrison: We started talking. We told them something about what we did, and they told us something about what they were doing. Interestingly enough, there were only two men there. One was an elderly man who financed a great deal of things (including the Arnolfini), and the other was a young artist who was working with him. The rest were women. The whole thing about this place is, it is primarily women.

Newton Harrison: Yes, there were about thirty or forty powerful women (or twenty – whatever) and the whole community sit on their shoulders. It was very touching. It is very engaging.

Helen Harrison: We got along very well.

Newton Harrison: We really liked them. You cannot work unless you really like folk.

Helen Harrison: We cannot work with a place unless we can identify with it; unless we can feel for it; unless it affects us, emotionally. If it does not, then we do not do a work.

Newton Harrison: Maybe we should let you go back to your questions.

[36:53]

Reiko Goto:

What do you think about Joseph Beuys's '7000 Oaks'?

Helen Harrison: We were in Documenta when he did it.

Newton Harrison: When he initiated it.

Helen Harrison: Or just after – when they were putting it up.

Newton Harrison: I have to tell you one Documenta story. Our assistant went out and found one of the oaks that died, and we put it in our exhibition – in our Documenta piece. Reverence is not the name of this game.

Reiko Goto: Beside the theories, I am working on four case studies: your work – Serpentine Lattice; the other one is Alan Sonfist's 'Time Landscape'; and then Joseph Beuys, '7000 Oaks'; and then the fourth one is my own project, called 'Biogenic Interface for Cities'. I am focusing on trees and woodlands in Aberdeen.

Helen Harrison: I would say – about Beuys – at first we used to say, "What is all the fuss about planting oak trees in beech forest? When we found out that he was dealing with a lot of old folk-tales, customs, and beliefs in what he was doing and these were the implications that we, as strangers and as non-German and alien to the neighbourhood, did not understand. His work had a great deal of meaning to people because they knew the references that the trees made which, as I say, does not carry over, necessarily, if you do not know that. It is attractive to make seven thousand oaks, and it is interesting to make such a large thing – but it was the connotations that the work brought with it that made it so interesting.

Newton Harrison: We called that 'the text in the culture'.

Helen Harrison: Yes – and that is the importance of language too. It is that words denote something very specific; but words also have connotations which are not specific but, like atmospheric things, drag along with them. It is the connotations in poetry that make it so rich; and it is the connotations in certain kinds of work when you touch on a cultural icon or a cultural history or something, that people react to – and that is what he did with '7000 Oaks'.

Newton Harrison: See, I thought that work was ridiculous because, there were the seven thousand oaks running through a beech forest! That whole area was a beech forest! I thought, "This guy does not know anything about forest architecture – so why is he using oaks? There are lots of other things that you could use." Then, after I understood the connotations (actually Helen brought them up) – I was still intolerant, but less intolerant. See, I thought he was making an ecological grab inappropriately. However, Beuys was mystic – pretty much; and he was ...

Helen Harrison: ... a shaman.

Newton Harrison: He did the shaman thing – so, within the context of his work, this was a fine work – independent of my, "What are you doing with oaks in a beech forest?"

[42:24]

Again, it is about having eyes. We [scanned], "Beech forest! Oaks!"

Helen Harrison: We did [scan] the legend or the story.

Newton Harrison: Yes, so once you scanned the text and the culture, that again changes your opinion of the work.

Helen Harrison: Yes.

Reiko Goto: But your work also works that way?

Newton Harrison: Absolutely. In fact, many of our works do not have a text and a culture and our poetry set out to generate the text and the culture. Since there are so many problems in the culture, when we tell a new story, we have to do that. That is why, lots of times, our work take ten, fifteen, years to resonate.

[43:17]

Newton Harrison: Joseph Beuys wanted to create magic.

Helen Harrison: He wanted to make new things and he made myths. His effect, also, was on his students who came and carried the ideas of …

Newton Harrison: Look at Shelley Sacks. There are tons of students who owe Beuys; who came up together.

Helen Harrison: It was very interesting because when, in 1974 when we had our first show at Feldmans, he also took on Joseph Beuys.

Newton Harrison: And he took on Bucky Fuller. Feldman really had an eye. We saw Beuys's Coyote piece which I thought was (aside from his entry in an ambulance) ironic.

Helen Harrison: No – that was a different one: "I love America and America loves me" and his coming in the covered ambulance was ridiculous.

Newton Harrison: It was silly, but once he got in with the Coyote – holy mackerel!

Helen Harrison: I thought, "How can this be so important?", and then you looked at this little coyote that did not look very happy and was kind of rat-eaten etcetera – and you looked at him – but what he did to make himself a symbol, was the stick and the cloak … He did it.

Newton Harrison: Well, there is a reason why he … He related to the coyote. He mirror-imaged the coyote's movements. At a certain moment, they were in one space psychologically, together. This was a masterwork. This was a masterpiece of seeing; of knowing; of being in touch.

Helen Harrison: [But he shepherds custom; he shepherds things.] The image that he made of himself, was part of the shaman thing that he did. It was very effective.

Newton Harrison: It was interesting, because Helen and I chose to do the opposite. We chose to behave and look as normal every day as we possibly could, while taking on impossible tasks – as normal. We chose the norm, whereas Joseph chose the extreme. We both did separate things, of course, but Joseph, for instance (Beuys, I should say) really worked with the text that existed in the culture; helping them along. We chose to generate text that did not pre-exist [in our culture].

Helen Harrison: He also worked with the culture; he worked with the educational systems in the culture; he founded the Green Party – or one section of the Green Party.

Newton Harrison: There are a lot of founders of that who do not think he founded it.

Helen Harrison: Yes – but he was one of them. He did a lot of things that had not to do …

Newton Harrison: I mean, social sculpture is fair enough for him. I do not like the term much, but it is fair enough. I see it as fair. So.

Helen Harrison: Yes, and the other thing he did – he was memorable – that was his [?_____]. He took a taxi all across Germany [?_____].

[49:22]

Newton Harrison: Helen, may I tell that story? At Documenta, they take us into a room; they show us where they are going to take the desks out and disempower a bunch of students. The kid

calls up Beuys who one of his teachers and Beuys takes a taxi from Cologne to Kassel (that is a four-hour taxi, or something) and he goes and he sits on the table; if they were going to take out the table, they are going to take out Joseph Beuys. This is a deeply inventive human being.

[50:30]

Reiko Goto: Listening to your memories of Beuys – especially the Coyote piece – it is really vivid and it gives us almost the real experience. I was thinking about, John Dewy's Art as Experience. This is going back to your work – the experience *[of your work]* – because I was very lucky to experience *[it]* [(often, and over a long period of time),] listening to your discourse and being on [the real site]. Your work does not only exist in galleries – your work exists in talking to people and going to places. It is much wider.

Newton Harrison: Well, every artist – like Beuys – had a strategy. It came actually a bit out of Rudolf Steiner. You know, [it is like the difference in our perspectives], we run into a great artist as opposed to one we considered to be a self-promoting mediocrity.

[51:48]

Helen Harrison: Well, I would give him a little more credit than that.

Newton Harrison: Helen is more generous (and he is better than that). What we have done, again and again, is – the gallery for us, and the museum for us, is a meeting hall. It is a meeting hall for text, for ideas and for images. The strategy we use – have you seen our Santa Fe work? 'Lessons from the Genius of Place.' That has been done. It is in the City plan. The river has been restored; 87 gardens were planted; it is to leap off the walls of the gallery and land in the real world. We see the gallery as staging ground; as a metaphor for a much larger field of play.

Helen Harrison: The gallery is a meeting place. I think this is very important. It is a place where people come in and because it is a gallery, and it is an art gallery, the political aspects of things disappear and people look at them differently. It is very useful to do that. We have also exhibited in libraries, city halls …

Newton Harrison: … a barn where they just drove the cows out – the flies were still there.

Helen Harrison: The places have been public, [which] will attract the public – and that is the important thing, that people meet in them.

Newton Harrison: So what you want to do … Let me suggest that you, after reading something else of ours, ask us three other questions:

What is a metaphorical flip?

What is an ecological narrative?

What is a field of play?

But later. Another time. We will give you something else to read.

Reiko Goto: Ok – thank you very much!

Part 2

Present: Helen Mayer Harrison

Newton Harrison

Reiko Goto

Anne Douglas

Tim Collins

Tim Collins: Our art reaches deeper than words and images.

Newton Harrison: Right. I have no objection to Helen's thing. I am just different. See – Helen's thing for me is *a* important thing. Not *the* important thing.

Helen Harrison: I would say that the work has an effect on people – the 'ah-hah' effect, which means suddenly they see the world somewhat differently as a result. It resonates in the mind and it takes a while for that to make a difference to somebody and they realise they are seeing the world differently.

Newton Harrison: It might be that we are having a trivial difference of opinion. It is a difference of opinion that does not affect our process, our meaning, or our outcomes.

Helen Harrison: Yes.

Anne Douglas: It is interesting, because it depends also on being able to get very close to your work, either to be (I suppose) in there, as one of the fifty people working with you, or to be able to revisit it through the books; through the project; the way the story is told.

Newton Harrison: Well, truth to say, this is really neat because we have not given the Serpentine Lattice a *think* – in ten years. It is really useful.

Helen Harrison: And suddenly I am realising that you did a very good essay. I remember thinking it at the time – but I just looked at it again, and I suddenly thought, "Yes!".

Newton Harrison: And like when you read, "Well, you can't do this because of that" – it was useful for you to lift it out, but it was useful for not the reasons you thought because, what we did was, we did a creative act that we thought pre-cancelled that. Otherwise we would have to answer those questions, and if you answered those questions, we would have stopped, then and there. So why should we let somebody else determine our agenda by their questions.

Helen Harrison: Him and I have a slightly different approach.

Newton Harrison: I know we do – and that is what makes the work.

Helen Harrison: It comes from the fact that you have been an artist first and foremost your whole life; I have been other things.

Newton Harrison: That's right. Since I have been eleven.

Helen Harrison: I have been other things, first and foremost, until I became an artist and discovered … No, I became an artist when I realised that, as an artist, I could express many things that I could not express in other ways. It is much more effective.

Newton Harrison: Helen is much more compassionate, and I am much more aggressive.

Helen Harrison: You are. I have been a literary scholar, a teacher, a psychologist. I spent some time with education and philosophy and psychology; I trained teachers – I did a number of things – and all of that feeds into the art and into the way I look at the world and things that I care about and consider. I discovered that, as an artist, I can really deal with these issues in ways that make a difference to people.

Newton Harrison: Without being edited by others.

Helen Harrison: Yes.

Newton Harrison: You see, if you take a look at collectivity – the downside of collectivity is that everybody is editing each other all the time, so certain kinds of creativity cannot bubble up in the collective format.

Anne Douglas: And where do you see collectivity manifesting itself? I mean, how do you calculate it?

Newton Harrison: [In the Old West] It is a wonderful their collectives. They all talk to each other; they edit each other; they help each other. The outcome of their collectivity is transformative. But, collectivity also has this other side. We, as artists, move in and out of it.

[5:07]

Reiko Goto: Is art related to knowledge? If it was related, which knowledge and how much knowledge would be necessary to understand your work? For example, without knowing about a watershed how does audience understand Serpentine Lattice?

Newton Harrison: Any moment, in some of our work, that so-called 'knowledge', becomes poetic and it becomes a poem; and therefore it becomes an aesthetic experience. At any given moment there is, for us, an oscillation between knowledge and aesthetics. They go back and forth. They feed each other; they are not 'either or'. I do not know how you can do this 'either/or' thing.

It is like when you said to me, "What is more important, ethics or aesthetics" and I began to laugh. Ethics is my left eye; aesthetics is my right eye. Which would you have me prefer?

Helen Harrison: Well said.

Anne Douglas: That is very well said, actually.

Newton Harrison: I think this leads to something intellectually very important. Suppose I were to tell you that I think the worst thing that has been invented intellectually in the last century or so is dialectical thinking where you do 'either/or'; where you pose opposites; where you [hope] for synthesis.

Supposing I were to argue that synthesis is a natural condition of the mind and dialectics is generally an unnecessary complication.

But anyway – that is why I tease you with my left eye and my right eye, but I mean it. Every time you ask me an 'either/or' question, I sneak around and hit it one. Do you see where I am coming from? It is pretty interesting to think about this.

Sometimes, in my own behaviour, I do not know what I am doing until after I did it. Every artist is like that. Amen. I find that when I pose these 'either/or' things which I regard mostly as straw men (you know, things you knock down), I just duck it, and then I look for the synthesis before I am willing to make the argument.

I think we create syntheses in our minds automatically and often to our benefit. Sometimes we rush to synthesis too quickly and we should examine how the synthesis is formed, but the dialectical properties of formation, for me, get in the way because sometimes they are quadratic, sometimes they are seven-pointed; sometimes they are two-pointed.

[12:04]

To go back to your question, let us see if we can dump the question, but find the meaning. You keep going back to your question – it is going really back to Kantian. There is the pure experience, and there is knowledge. I do not believe that is true. I do not believe that knowledge is separate from experience of that kind; I do not think that pure experience is separated from knowledge. Why? Because I see the psyche as unity, and the separation as an artificial construct that helps critical theory, but I do not think it helps existence.

Helen Harrison: Bucky Fuller had a very important statement to make. He said, "I don't start out to make a beautiful thing, but if what I make is not beautiful, I know I have been unsuccessful in my work."

Newton Harrison: Yes, that is a good one, yes. Helen, you are really right on.

Do you see why I am not going to do that? Do you see why, whenever you give me one of those things, I'm just not going to do it. Let me put it this way: it is not *in* me to do it; I cannot do it; my whole psyche does not want to do that. Now, I do not ask you to do things you do not want to do.

Anne Douglas: Can I turn it slightly on its head? Given where Reiko is, in trying to deal with both the development of the practice and ...

Newton Harrison: I know we're a hard nut.

Anne Douglas: No, no. This is a serious question, it is not a criticism of what you are saying. Given that a lot of the theoretical work that she is encountering, particularly in relationship to aesthetics is based on dialectics. Where would you advise her to go?

Newton Harrison: Now *that* is the right question! Thank you. First, I think dialectical thinking needs to be examined critically to see what the outcomes from it are. For instance, let us take your polarity: knowledge and pure aesthetics. What is the outcome from believing such a thing? The outcome is schizophrenia. You have separated two parts of the mind that are really unified. Then the next question is, if that is schizophrenia, what is not schizophrenia? I do not mean schizophrenia like

really sick – I just use it as a metaphor. (I am not talking about deep disturbance and you are crazy and stuff like that. If I had a better word, I would use it.)

[15:17]

Then, what is not it? Let us look at those feelings, those things. The core issue is, when I am thinking, I am feeling; when I am feeling, I am thinking. The kind of thinking I am doing when I am feeling is different from the kind of feeling I am doing when I am thinking.

I would start to find that out and find out how you can see into such a construct at which point you will have a really interesting document and, in my opinion, it would be post-critical. It would be really about how the mind works; really about how scanning works. I would go and begin to investigate the work of the cognitive scientists; I would read [Lakewell's] sub-consciousness thing that he did with [Johnson] a couple of years ago.

Look at Guattari again, for a minute. I do not agree with him for many reasons. This does not mean there is not interesting stuff in what he writes because he is an ethical being trying to do good – so it is never going to be uninteresting because he is a first-rate mind. But look at the problem he faces when he comes out of Freudianism. Freud held that there were three parts – the Id which carries this, the Ego and the Super Ego. Guess what? It is Jesus, Mary and Joseph. There are threes all over the place.

Helen Harrison: The Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost.

Newton Harrison: All over the Western culture we have got these threes. Supposing that is not true. If you look at the cognitive scientists from another perspective – and that is why I believe you really have to get out of the world of criticism into the world of thinking (I do not mean that critics do not think, but I do think they do not think a whole lot), you will find that you ask what their description of the unconscious is. The cognitive scientists hold that the unconscious is *vast* – way bigger than Freud thought – and we have less access to it than Freud thought.

Go and find out about that. Let that infuse how you see present critics making these polarities because, you know, when you present this polarity to me – you do not behave that way. When you and I are talking like human beings, you are doing both at once. The aesthetic is running in your mind; the story is running in your mind; you are worried about the beauty of something; and you are oscillating back and forth – your mind does not yank it apart – no wonder you have trouble with it. Don't do what your mind does not want to do. Does that make sense?

[18:43]

Reiko Goto: Yes.

Anne Douglas: Yes, absolutely. Thanks.

Reiko Goto: Knowledge and experience…

Newton Harrison: Knowledge is the experience that people have.

Reiko Goto: It helped me to think about our projects in Pittsburgh. We spent eight years to work with scientists. We got a little bit lost in our minds in what we tried to prove. Were we creating

information/knowledge?

Newton Harrison: In Pittsburgh?

Reiko Goto: Yes.

Newton Harrison: I thought so too. But you know, I thought it was a really noble effort. The reason why I was on your side so much was that, you do not have to succeed. Especially when you are not exactly sure what success is!

[19:36]

Reiko Goto: I agree with you. It did not matter whether it was art or not. I could not convince people especially from art communities why our projects (Nine Mile Run Greenway and 3 Rivers 2nd Nature) were art. I want to discuss with people more intelligently though.

Newton Harrison: I know what you want. Sometimes, what you want, you don't get. So many things we have wanted, we did not get. If you take a more Buddhist attitude towards it, you are non-[possessive]; you open your hand, and you just did not get that.

I have a feeling that, where your and Tim's work are concerned – just keep doing the next work, and in a little while, nobody will bring up the issue of, 'is it art' at all. So I would dump the argument because it takes up your mind space, and it takes *[you]* away from the act of creativity. It does not help you to find a way to explain it. What helps you is the act of creativity that makes the work – and you do it again, and again, and at a certain moment it is self-evident. In that you have to trust not your mind – which is the smallest part of your meditation – but your whole psyche.

[21:13]

Helen Harrison: I think it is important to have knowledge about the right plants, say, for a particular thing; or the right subject. You get it, and then you start ruminating on it and pretty soon it will be an aesthetic experience rather than an intellectual one.

Newton Harrison: Well, you see, for me it is a false dichotomy again. If you are finding out something that you know will help you – does it make you happy?

Reiko Goto: Yes.

Newton Harrison: What do you think that happiness is? When I am finding out stuff that I know is going to go into a piece, I am just so happy I can practically jump up and down.

Reiko Goto: Yes, because I am thinking about it and I see the evidence that something existed.

[22:38]

Newton Harrison: Yes, yes. I consider that part of me the so-called aesthetic experience.

Reiko Goto: It is a body of experience – not just thinking.

Newton Harrison: Yes. Then it crystallises into a work of art in due course – so why should you *[not]* have the pleasure along a whole spectrum instead of just this little piece of art you make?

Anne Douglas: I think it is probably pretty challenging at the moment. It was so interesting of what you were saying about Joseph Beuys and the mythology that underpinned the meaning of Beuys and enriched it. I think moving from the States to Europe is a big challenge because there is so much to contend with in those terms.

Newton Harrison: Yes, there is.

Anne Douglas: So the crystallisation is slower and, I think, sometimes it feels ...

[23:51]

Newton Harrison: Also the stuff you are dumb to! I was totally dumb to Beuys's mysticism. He looked fraudulent to me for a while until I picked up on the text. The Oaks looked insane! I thought it was partly a Dada act – he is running these oak ribbons through a beech forest. At the beginning I thought I am looking at eco-Dada here – until I realised this other stuff. Information is really important. Context is important.

I discovered this in the oddest way. I was giving a talk in 1968 or something to a whole bunch of kids on a foundation course and I am holding up this little Greek female figure with a jar and I am saying how beautiful it is; and how wonderful it is; and the rhyming inside; and the way this is invented; and it is all done five inches four – that is some piece of craftsmanship. Well, what do I find out later? It is a slave – then what do I think about it? This is a slave who has been forced to carry water and she cannot be happy about it. On top of that, this is an artist who is making an aesthetic statement about somebody else's pain. So all that is there too. But until I knew it is a slave, I did not know that.

Anne Douglas: Research is a little bit like putting yourself in this amazing studio of other artists and other experiences to learn from. That is, in a sense, the point of the case studies – although we might revisit those in the light of this conversation. I think it is extremely challenging currently to actually know very clearly where you are because there are, in a sense, so many options and there are also so many fragmented ideas of what perhaps another artist is doing.

Newton Harrison: There is a marked difference between, say, us and Beuys and that is, what do we do? We take on a whole system. What do we do? We are not afraid to take it on. We don't take it on – we do it, and we get questions just like the ones you saw. What we do is dump the question and stay with the system. We ask ourselves again and again, "what is the best thing for this whole place", and the most important thing for us, at first, is to define the field of play. How big is the whole place. It turned out to be 55,000 square miles. Who could believe it? In '92 we were worrying about 55,000 square miles of which 50,000 is wrecked – *and* on top of that, there are 100,000 miles of river there of which 70,000 running miles are kind of affected, 20,000 badly. Holy shit. There we are looking at this, but to be undaunted is important – to say, "Well, ok – we took it on, so we are going to take it on. What is the best thing that can happen here?"

If you look at Beuys you see him as 'seeing' mystical systems. Working out of Steiner and stuff. We know Steiner somewhat and we have read the whole bunch and put them aside.

[27:35]

Helen Harrison: I have read most of them – not all.

Newton Harrison: If you look at Beuys, he follow through one way. The Honey Pump – the flow of work from him. If you look at us, you would see this flow of work from us and it continues. Helen is eighty and I am seventy five and it is like we are just bopping along here.

The other thing to understand, Reiko, is you have got another forty, fifty years to get this worked out.

Tim Collins: So the name of this interview could be called, "She is eighty, I am seventy five and we are bopping along here".

Helen Harrison: I just wanted to say one thing that may be of help. One of the things we do that I think is fairly important, is in our talks. We are as human as we can be so that we do not become special people in that way. We are just like everyone else.

Newton Harrison: You could see it in our performance last night.

Helen Harrison: Yes. We go back and forth and do all kinds of things and we find that the human voice is effective – the speaking. We try sometimes – as we did with the Serpentine Lattice – to, at least, do a voice-over if we cannot be there when the work is presented. So, at least there is some touch of the ...

Newton Harrison: Yes. If you want to know a real problem with our work, or *the* problem with our work, is, you can accept that there is a reasonably powerful visual statement in that gallery and that the text are lucid – but, if you add us, the whole work gets better, or stronger, or more understandable; and if you subtract us, the whole work gets less accessible. We do not seem to be able to get around it. We had forty years trying to get around this damn thing

Helen Harrison: Whenever we try with the voice-overs ...

Newton Harrison: We have tried every which way and about ten years ago we decided to say, "Well, [there is] nothing to do – we will just accept it as normal for our genre."

Anne Douglas: That is interesting.

Helen Harrison: Beuys also ...

Newton Harrison: Yes, he really had to be around. His work does not do a whole lot without him there. Both of us suffer from this a bit.

Reiko Goto: I did not know about metaphor, the way you use it.

[31:24]

Newton Harrison: We are interested in thinking the 'thinkingness' of work and cannot do work in the absence of metaphorical stuff unless you make assertions of certain kinds.

Helen Harrison: If you are really working with metaphor, you have great empathy for the other – whatever it may be. You have an empathic relationship to it.

Newton Harrison: Like love. When you love you are the other, but not completely the other. This is a metaphorical relationship. A metaphor is one thing understood in terms of another. The real

stuff of metaphor is out of the ground and human, and then it is abstracted and invented in various different ways and finds itself ...

Helen Harrison: In literature they ...

Newton Harrison: ... they separate it out.

Helen Harrison: Yes, and make it less than it really is.

Newton Harrison: But the pre-literates – they were in metaphorical relationship with the fish they caught. They did not want to eat its brains, so they got a little smarter – that is a real metaphorical relationship as far as I can see.

Helen Harrison: I always said that the world suffered when we lost the river gods because we behave to the river when the river gods were part of our thinking in a way that respected the river. Once we lost that kind of respect, it made a big difference in the way we treated the world.

Anne Douglas: Are you using metaphor as belief?

[33:25]

Newton Harrison: Generally speaking, metaphors generate beliefs. Sometimes you make a metaphor and you do not know the belief embedded in it until you have listened to yourself say it. For instance, somebody says, "I love you". Well, think of the entailments of that metaphor. For instance, somebody will say (Lakoff writes about this), "Marriage is a collaborative adventure". The entailments with that are common work; all kinds of stuff. Shift the metaphor: "Marriage is a stormy adventure". The entailments of that are pain, upset, highs, lows, abandonment – whatever.

The way a metaphor is shaped has beliefs embedded in it, but to understand how a metaphor works, you need to unpack it. You unpack it by looking at the consequences. The entailments are the parts of the metaphor that flow from *[it]* as you build it.

Reiko Goto: You have to live, and you have to find the metaphor in the life.

Newton Harrison: Yes. But I think you are in good shape. You do not think you are in good shape, but I think you are in good shape. The reason I think you are in good shape is that when you make a work of art, you are in a very strong, intimate, metaphorical relationship with it. You are seeing it; you are loving it; you are feeling it; you are enacting it.

[35:03]

Reiko Goto: It is interesting. Brady's natural aesthetics and Grant's dialogical aesthetics do not touch the metaphor. Emily [talks] about the imagination, and Grant [talks] about empathy.

Newton Harrison: Yes, we know that. The thing is – if you read our Sixth Lagoon – it is called, "On Metaphor and Discourse" (we wrote in '78 or '79) – that is when we started to understand this. Then Lakoff in '81 or so wrote "Metaphors we live by".

Anne Douglas: I've got that if you want to borrow it.

Newton Harrison: Now, he is the one who laid out the issue of entailments. He cites us actually when he talks of marriages as a collaborative adventure – he is talking about us – he thanks us in this thing. You read him. I almost never teach from a book, but I taught a senior seminar from his "Metaphors we live by", chapter by chapter – it was so useful. You should read it.

Helen Harrison: The best way to learn something is to teach it.

[36:38]

Newton Harrison: She should read it. See how he unpacks things. Lakoff is the most ambitious of the linguists I ever saw. Even more than Chomsky who was his teacher and they had each other. Lakoff is convinced that every single discipline is metaphorically driven. One of his more recent books is about maths and metaphor. Mathematicians think of their work as very pure and not burdened. Lakoff proves otherwise about which he will pat himself on the back and explain to you. We like him a lot – by the way.

Anne Douglas: Is systems-thinking metaphorical?

Newton Harrison: Yes. That is how working with whole systems and seeing a field of play in which systems are embedded, and then systems become patterns that emerge out of field of play, tell us how to create.

Helen Harrison: We have to find the boundaries of the field of play that we are dealing with.

[38:12]

Newton Harrison: I have a copy of that. Why don't I send it? You know the Peninsula Europe work? Doug White who works out of the Santa Fe Institute and [UC Irvine] is one of the leading complexity theorists. He is an anthropologist.

Helen Harrison: He dealt with statistical anthropology – among other things.

Newton Harrison: He asked us to rewrite Peninsula Europe in a partially other form as a critique of complexity theorists, arguing that the Peninsula Europe work was in fact a grounded complex system event and that the complexity theorists needed to get grounded – they were not. They abstracted so far, they could not get out of their own heads. He has just published it.

Helen Harrison: It is published on the internet in *'Journal of Structural Dynamics'*.

Newton Harrison: Edited by Douglas White. If you go there, you can pull it down. It is Peninsula Europe Part 1, Part 2 and Part 3. We added two parts to it. In the first five pages we lay out what we mean by metaphor, field of play, and stuff like that – because he said we were not clear to his theorists, and asked us to do that.

Helen Harrison: It is on the internet and theoretically we are supposed to respond to people's questions about it, but we can't. I can't, anyway. Doug tried to show me how to get it, but he showed it to me quickly. *[Explaining that the two of them do not know how to use the computer.]*

Anne Douglas: Statistical anthropology – is that …

Helen Harrison: Structural dynamics.

Anne Douglas: Yes, but he is a statistical anthropologist – so he is looking at the statistics of habitation?

Helen Harrison: Well, when I said he did statistical – for example, one of the things he was looking at was the physical systems of the world. He went way back to the beginning of the Christian era. There were certain predictable things that he could find, and he could predict what would happen the next time from this. When he got towards the twentieth century, it broke down. It work for the nineteenth, but when he got to the twentieth something changed drastically in the whole process.

Newton Harrison: *[returning to previous topic:]* It is a Wiki site. *[HYPERLINK "http://repositories.cdlib.org/imbs/socdyn/sdeas/vol2/iss3/art3/" http://repositories.cdlib.org/imbs/socdyn/sdeas/vol2/iss3/art3/]*

Helen Harrison: I do not know what that means.

Anne Douglas: It means you can upload your own view and respond *[to the article]*.

Newton Harrison: We have copyrighted it, so they cannot mess with the original, but they can add their views to it. Anyway – any more questions?

Reiko Goto: Really a lot. Thank you very much.

Oaks, B. (ed.) (1995) Sculpting with the Environment. Van Nostrand Reinhold, New York.

Lakoff, G., sociolinguist, a professor of cognitive linguistics at the University of California Berkeley.

The reasoning behind the Oak: Beuys said, "I think the tree is an element of regeneration which in itself is a concept of time. The oak is especially so because it is a slow growing tree with a kind of really solid hardwood. It has always been a form of sculpture, a symbol for this planet ever since the Druids*, who are called after the Oak. Druid means oak. They used their oaks to define their holy places." Demarco, R., (1982) 7000 Oaks: Joseph Beuys interviewed by Richard Demarco. *Cencrastus Magazine,* 80, p.19.

* In HYPERLINK "http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Celtic_polytheism" \o "Celtic polytheism" Celtic polytheism, a druid was a member of the priestly and learned class in the pre-Christian, ancient HYPERLINK "http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Celts" \o "Celts" Celtic societies. Available from World Wide Web Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Druid>.

Richard Buckminster “Bucky” Fuller, HYPERLINK "http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1895" \o "1895" 1895 - HYPERLINK "http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1983" \o "1983" 1983, HYPERLINK "http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/United_States" \o "United States" American HYPERLINK "http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Architect" \o "Architect" architect, HYPERLINK "http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Author" \o "Author" author, HYPERLINK "http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Designer" \o "Designer" designer, HYPERLINK "http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Futurist" \o "Futurist" futurist, HYPERLINK "http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Inventor" \o "Inventor" inventor, HYPERLINK

"http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Poet" \o "Poet" poet and HYPERLINK "http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Visionary" \o "Visionary" visionary.

Structural Dynamics: eJournal of Anhropological and Related Sciences (2008) *Public Culture and Sustainable Practices: Peninsula Europe from and ecodiversity perspective, posing questions to Complexity Scientists* [online], the eScolarship Repository and bepress. <http://repositories.cdlib.org/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1067&context=imbs/socdyn/sdeas>