HELEN HARRISON: 1927–2018

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Helen Mayer Harrison was born 1 July 1927 in Queens, NY. Helen as a child was so empathic that her friends called her “St Helen.” As a late adolescent, she ranked so high on the New York honors list that she graduated Forest Hills High School at 15 and was immediately given a full scholarship to Cornell University. At Cornell she was urged to become a mathematician because of her grasp of mathematical theory, which she had partially invented on her own. She studied psychology for two years before deciding to attend Queens College, where she completed a Bachelor of Arts degree in English. She then earned a Masters degree in Philosophy of Education from New York University and began her teaching career during the 1940s in the New York public school system. By the time she was 22, she had attained a level equivalent to full professor in the New York school education system.

She came from that kind of family. Her uncle Dave discovered ACTH cortisol. Abraham and Hannah Stone, another aunt and uncle, joined Margaret Sanger in demonstrating for birth control. Her uncle Leo Perla wrote in depth about peace on Earth and later submitted his writing to the United Nations in book form, entitled Can We End the Cold War?

This is the milieu from which Helen emerged. Her long and productive career followed an unlikely path that reflected and eventually integrated her many interests. She was a kind of polymath, who easily entered disciplines as diverse as mathematics, sociology, anthropology, philosophy, ecology and, of course, art.

In the early 1950s, she met, fell in love with and married a young artist, Newton Harrison. Later in that decade they moved, with their two young children, to Florence, where they lived for three years. There she cofounded a Montessori school, working closely with Maria Montessori’s nephew Mario.

Moving back to the Lower East Side of New York in the early 1960s with a family that now included four young children and a well-traveled German shepherd, Helen threw herself into a cultural scene that merged the art world, the folk music world and the peace movement. She hosted concerts and hootenannies to raise funds for the civil rights movement and other causes, befriending musicians ranging from the Clancy Brothers to Archie Shepp. She founded the Tompkins Square Peace Center. The group she helped put together included Dorothy Day of the Catholic Worker, Dave McReynolds of the War Resisters League, Judith Malina and Julian Beck of the Living Theater, David Dellinger of the Pacifist Anarchist Group and Robert Gilmore from the American Friends Service Committee. She was the first New York coordinator for the Women’s Strike for Peace, a major force in the antiblack movement and a critical organization behind the 1964 Nuclear Test Ban treaty.

In 1965, the Harrisons were both offered teaching positions at the University of California in San Diego; Newton in the Visual Arts Department at UC San Diego and Helen directing the UC Extension Division’s education programs. She was in line to become the first woman vice chancellor in the history of the university. In about 1970, she began the collaboration that would last the remainder of her life, working with Newton to make art that would benefit the ecosystem. Their collective work began with Making Earth, in which Newton made topsoil and Helen grew food in it, and continued with the Survival Pieces (1970–1972).

Helen introduced elaborated narrative and photography to the works, and by the Lagoon Cycle (1974–1984) (Fig. 1), she and Newton were equal collaborators on the works. She resigned from her role at UC Extension in 1972, stating in her letter of resignation, “I am becoming an artist in my old age and I am doing what we have offered a number of Extension courses about—‘switching careers midstream.’” Both Helen and Newton held secured faculty positions in the Visual Arts Department at UC San Diego, where they were active participants in a seminal creative community that included David and Eleanor Antin, Jerome Rothenberg, Pauline Oliveros, Manny Farber, Italo Scanga and many others.

Helen and Newton became the pioneers of the ecological art movement. In turn, Helen also became a noted feminist, lecturer, teacher and mentor to many emerging artists from her base at UCSD and later at UC Santa Cruz, where both she and Newton held emeriti faculty positions in the Art Division. The nearly 50-year creative collaboration (as the Harrisons or Helen Mayer and Newton Harrison) focused on explorations of life and living systems, opening up a new movement in the arts: ecological or “eco-art.” Their insights related to their understanding that the importance of the interconnectedness of life was at once a great mystery, an intriguing puzzle and the path toward solving difficult problems.

“What we have to be concerned about is what is happening to the entire planet,” said Helen of their work. “What we are concerned about is the survival of the people and all living things.”

As their work developed, so did the strength of their collaboration; they developed a style that reflected their complementary voices. They boldly and consciously experimented with how the act of collaboration was generative of new forms in the art, adding dimension to their powers of diverse discipline.

Fig. 1. Helen Mayer Harrison with Newton Harrison, working on the First Lagoon, map of Sri Lanka on the table, 1976. (Image courtesy Newton Harrison; photographer anonymous.)
engagement and improvisation. Throughout it all, Helen’s commitment to an ethics of listening, of focusing on the power of the powerless, of engagement with local communities and native peoples remained dominant themes throughout their long body of work. Helen’s unbridled curiosity and ability to synthesize ideas across a broad range of disciplines was a critical aspect of their ability to engage ideas and systems at the highest level. In their master work, The Lagoon Cycle, which examines the power and function of estuarian lagoons from the laboratory to the great Pacific Gyre, the narrative thread is an encounter between two characters, a “Lagoon Maker” and a “Witness,” whose dialogue establishes the philosophical basis for the ecological argument in many later works.

The Harrisons’ work addresses the issue of climate change. Newton says, “Helen brought to our collective work deep expertise in literature, educational philosophy and transdisciplinary research. One startling example of this was in 1973 when she introduced global warming research, which then became the lifelong theme in our work.”

Whether working with Gregory Bateson, Fritz Perls, Jacob Bronowski, John Isaacs or the many world-class scientists and academics with whom they engaged over decades of work in dozens of countries, Helen was able to address their insights and integrate them into the Harrisons’ uncommon perspective, yielding often powerful results. As one of many examples:

In the mid-1990s, a branch of the Dutch government challenged the artists to solve an enormous urban planning problem: how to build hundreds of thousands of new houses while protecting the country’s lush green lowlands, known locally as the “Green Heart” of the country. The Harrisons created beautiful aerial landscape videos to bewitch the initially skeptical officials. They also audaciously exhibited a big map of Holland—printed backwards. “The planners got mad at us and they said, ‘Why have you done this?’ And we said, ‘you’re planning your country backwards, so we printed your map backwards.’” With that map, along with over a hundred public meetings, they eventually won over the officials, who adopted their vision to preserve the “Green Heart” of Holland. Newton describes the personal “bold experiment” that they developed during this time, in which they began to teach each other how to be each other, so that if one of them were to go before the other, the important work could continue.

In her final years, Helen worked with Newton on Sagehen in the High Sierra: A Future Garden for The Center for the Study of the Force Majeure, a research center established at UC Santa Cruz to continue this important work, bringing together artists, scientists, engineers, planners and visionaries to design ecosystem adaptation works in regions around the world that are nearing critical tipping points due to planetary warming. As with many previous works, Helen respected and understood the deep connection of indigenous peoples to the land and environment, and in Sagehen she collaborated with the Washoe tribe. Tribal elder Benny Fillmore notes that it was the first time he’d been asked by anyone outside the tribe to collaborate on an art project. Laura Fillmore wrote, “She taught us about ‘caring’ because, she would say, it makes people shy when you talk about love. It will always be all about that love and her grace, elegance and eloquence as well.”

In an interview with Beth Stephens in 2010, the Harrisons talked about their long partnership. “People want to know who does what,” Newton said. “What happens is, I do the first draft, Helen does the second, I go back in for the third, and then Helen has the final one.” Helen added: “So he has the first word, and I mostly have the last word. It works out.”

The Harrisons have been represented for the past 45 years by the Ronald Feldman Gallery in New York, and since 2017 by Various Small Fires in Los Angeles. Helen’s work lives on through Newton, who is actively continuing their work, now in collaboration with an ever-growing team of “inspired generalists” at the Center for the Study of the Force Majeure at UC Santa Cruz.

Perhaps the best way to see Helen in her world is through the ending lines of the Lagoon Cycle, which she often recited as part of her many public performances:

And the waters will rise slowly at the boundary redrawing that boundary continually moment by moment all over altogether all at once

It is a graceful drawing and redrawing this response to the millennia of the making of fire And in this new beginning this continuously rebeginning will you feed me when my lands can no longer produce and will I house you when your lands are covered with water so that together we can draw as the waters rise

(Lagoon Cycle, 1979)

Helen died aged 90, 24 March 2018, in Santa Cruz, California. In addition to her husband, Helen is survived by their four children and nine grandchildren, along with three great-grandchildren and many nieces and nephews.