DRAFT presented at AESS conference 2015

Performing Agriculture: The Survival Pieces *of Artists Helen and Newton Harrison*

I will talk today about two artists, Helen Mayer Harrison and Newton Harrison, and an ensemble of their artworks from the early 1970s entitled *Survival Pieces*. The Harrisons have created a four decade-long art practice that is motivated by a sense of advocacy for and accountability to the natural world. Although today I am going to tell you about a particular moment in time and series of artworks, this presentation is part of a larger research project of mine that investigates exchanges between artists and scientists, more specifically, scientists who are ecologists, and artists who work with ecology and ecological concerns. I am also a landscape architect, and deeply invested in how we think about productive landscapes such as forests and farms.

Background

In the 1960s-70s, new genres and approaches to art were emerging in the art world, such as Earth Art, performance art, and Conceptual Art. There are two tenets of Conceptual Art that help set the stage for understanding the *Survival Pieces*. The first principle is that a value or even function of art is to make us think. The second erases traditional expectations that art is a creation of an aesthetically pleasing object; in fact, art might not be an object at all (Schellekens, 2015).

Art could be painting with light, as Newton did by introducing gases such as argon and helium into containers of plasma in a collaborative project with Donald Bartz, a mechanical engineer at Jet Propulsion Laboratories in Pasadena. Both were participants in the 1967-71 Art & Technology program organized by the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA), an ambitious program to bring artists and scientists together to exchange knowledge and work together on a potential project. The outcome of Newton's work with Bartz, *The Encapsulated Aurora* (1969), was successfully exhibited at the 1970 World Expo, several galleries, and LACMA's 1971 Art & Technology exhibit (Tuchman, 1971).

Newton was becoming increasingly concerned with the relevancy of contemporary art practices, including his own, in the face of overwhelming environmental and social problems, and what he

perceived as an urgent need for action. He soon was declaring: "My art…has moved into survival because of my obsession with the study of planetary eco-systems. As we all know, they're showing signs of breakdown. I want to know how I will survive – how we'll all survive" (Tuchman & Livingston, 1971). He believed the only art that would be nontrivial in the face of such threats would need to take up ecology as subject matter and "work actively with real systems that have scientific and social implications" (Harrison, 1974b; Adcock, 1992).

Survival Piece #2

Newton had created a second artwork for the Art & Technology exhibit entitled *Notations on the Ecosystem of the Western Salt Works with the Inclusion of Brine Shrimp* (1971), or for short, *Shrimp Farm*. Following conversations with planktologists Richard Eppley and Michael Mullin from the Food Chain Research Group at Scripps Institute of Oceanography, he designed an experimental ecosystem of green microalgae (*Dunaliella*), brine shrimp (*Artemia*), and salt water to be installed outside the main entrance to the museum in four, low, connected basins (Adcock, 1992; Harrison & Harrison, 2014).

Brine shrimp thrive in hypersaline conditions where they graze on algae in a co-produced, dynamic system. The algae produce carotene in the same hypersaline conditions, an adaptive survival strategy. It is the carotene in the algae that transforms typical blue-green water into algal blooms of olive, pink, orange and brick-red (Oren, 2009).

Each basin was filled with algae and water with a different saline content. The color of the water in the basin changed with the levels of salt, creating an artwork that used natural systems to create fields of color. The brine shrimp were introduced near the conclusion of the exhibition, eating the algae and "drain(ing) the color from the work" (Harrison & Harrison, 2001). The artwork as a whole was a demonstration of a simple feedback loop, and of what art critic Jack Burnham called a "systems esthetics" emerging from the relationships found in living and technological systems (Burnham, 1974).

Shrimp Farm would become *Survival Piece #2*. The Harrisons did not set out to create a series, although it quickly developed into one. Each project examined means of production and

consumption from a different perspective, in response to the questions that initiated the artworks: How are we – all 3.8 billion of us[1] – going to feed ourselves? What do we need to know in order to survive?

Making Earth

Shrimp Farm was predated by another art project, not officially part of the series, entitled *Making Earth* (1970), a four-month process to do exactly that – make earth. Newton shoveled varying amounts of leaves, sawdust, sewage sludge, animal manure, rock dust, and other by-products of industry into seven piles and each day turned and watered the piles (Burnham, 1974; Harrison & Harrison, 2014). It was performed as a ritual and an exercise in cooperating with and directly engaging natural processes, and would inform future *Survival* works.

Survival Piece #1 (1971): *Hog Pasture*

The first numbered *Survival Piece* was *Hog Pasture*, exhibited in February 1971 at the Boston Museum of Fine Arts (Gunter, 1971). It consisted of a wood box filled with earth, a light box above, and R. Shumway Seedsman's Annual Hog Pasture Mix.

Newton made earth, sowed seeds, turned on the lights and watched grass grow. He wanted to include a pig in the exhibit, which would have extended the cycle through harvest of the pasture and, with the inevitable manure, improve the soil. The museum, however, declined his request (Seidenbaum, 1971; Harrison & Harrison, 2014).

Survival Piece #3 (1971): *Portable Fish Farm*

The first *Survival Pieces* dealt with mineral (in *Making Earth*) and vegetable (in *Hog Pasture*) but when animal was added to the series, all hell broke loose. *Portable Fish Farm* was *Survival Piece #3*, and shown in September 1971 at the Hayward Gallery in London (Tuchman & Livingston, 1971). Newton built six rubber-lined tanks in the gallery, with the intention of establishing a demonstration fish farm replete with fish feasts. A series of five feasts were planned, at which catfish would be electrocuted per Humane Society of America standards, filleted, fried, and served with hush puppies.

[1] 1971 population figures as per U.S. Census Bureau (2013). International Database: World population. Retrieved from: http://www.census.gov/population/international/data/worldpop/table_population.php

However, the gallery and the artist greatly underestimated the British public's visceral reaction to what the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (RSPCA) announced as the "ritual execution" of catfish. It didn't help that catfish in the U.K. were aquarium pets, not food. The press didn't do well with statements from the artist about prototypes and analogs. Outraged citizens sent letters to the editor. Comedian and ardent conservationist Spike Milligan took a hammer to the gallery storefront window; the gallery curator promptly handed Milligan a bill for the damage (Seidenbaum, 1971; Walker, 1999; Wilson & Seidenbaum, 1971).

The Arts Council of Great Britain was called in, led by Lord Goodman, the government's Special Envoy in the negotiation of Rhodesian independence. Newton protested that the protest conveniently ignored "edible cows and edible chickens" (Harrison & Harrison, 2014) and, with a connection made by a sympathetic art lover, contacted geneticist Maurice Wilkins to intervene. Wilkins, who shared the 1962 Nobel Prize with Crick and Watson, promptly called C.P. Snow, author of the influential *The Two Cultures* of 1959. Wilkins told Snow that the artist was actually building a bridge between science and art, as Snow had urged was essential to our common future (Seidenbaum, 1971). Lord Snow replied that he had no objections, which may have influenced the outcomes, as after prolonged meetings, it was agreed that the catfish execution could take place in private and the actual eating could proceed as planned.

Portable Fish Farm posed questions that confronted the philosophical implications of what we should eat, who was allowed to prepare it for us, and of the distance we enforce between the living animal and the meat on our plate. Judging from the public outrage, it was clear: the proper place for food production was behind closed doors and done by people who are not "us", and the food on our plate was most acceptable when it first passed through the supermarket and a refrigerator.

Other Survival Pieces

Survival Pieces were done as quick sketches, and completed in a rapid succession of project exhibitions. *Hog Pasture* (1971), *Shrimp Farm* (1971), and *Portable Fish Farm* (1971) were followed by *La Jolla Promenade* (1971), *Survival Piece #4,* with four ducks, a pond, some plants and one thousand garden snails installed in a courtyard at the La Jolla Museum of Art. Snails were eaten and eggs were

laid (Karlstrom, 1996; Seidenbaum, 1971). At California State University Fullerton, the Harrisons exhibited twelve citrus trees in *Portable Orchard* (1972), *Survival Piece #5*, a critique of current land use practices in Southern California where suburban development was devouring the citrus groves that gave Orange County its name (Harrison & Harrison, 2014); the mounds of earth and trellises of beans in *Portable Farm* (1972), *Survival Piece #6*, were presented with instructions for creating a "whole system backyard farm" (Adler, 1972); and in August, a crab arrived from the nephew of Sri Lanka's first prime minister. The crab was intended originally as *Survival Piece #7* and the lagoon that supported it as *Survival Piece #8* (Harrison, 1974b). Instead, the crab evolved into a ten-year project for the Harrisons and shifted their experiments with survival issues from the confines of the gallery to the scale of whole landscapes. John Isaacs, then-director of the Scripps Institute of Oceanography, encouraged the Harrisons to apply for a Sea Grant to report on their revelatory research on aquaculture with crabs. The grant was received in 1974, arguably the first time an artist received a grant for work in science (Harrison, 1974a; Harrison, 1975).

Conclusion

Today, there is increasing interest in interdisciplinary research between scientists and artists. Recent examples can be seen in events such as the National Science Foundation's (NSF) 2011 sponsorship of an "Art as a Way of Knowing" workshop, and a 2010 joint project between NSF and the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) to develop a national agenda for art and science collaborations. While many scientists and science places have found art to be a useful tool for public outreach and education, others such as Bill McKibben (2005) argue that through art we can learn to feel a thing in our gut and to register what is *not* known, what is distant in space or time. This is crucial, McKibben contends, because if we cannot feel it, it is difficult to know how to act. Artists tell stories that let us know, in the sense of *feel*, the rightness or risks of a situation or idea, rather than merely hear the lecture. We need the poems, the plays, and the "goddamn operas."[2]

A number of art critics have declared that *Shrimp Farm* was the conceptual hinge between an Earth Art that used nature primarily as material and site for art-making, and an Ecological Art that not only engaged ecological systems, but also embedded ethical values, advocacy and activism into the work (Nisbet, 2014). Like the concurrent development of environmental ethics, and the later

[2] *Portable Fish Farm* was recently adapted as *The Catfish Conundrum* (2014), an operetta by British composer Edward Lambert. Retrieved from: http://www.edwardlambert.co.uk/theatrical/catfishconundrum.html

emergence of conservation biology and environmental communication, ecological art is a movement catalyzed by environmental crises. It is a "crisis discipline," to use a term from conservation biology, with little room for neutrality, as, writes biologist Michael Soulé, "dithering and endangering are often linked" (Soulé, 1986).

Explorations into food production and the sustainability of our actions are urgently needed as rapid urbanization deepens the divide between everyday life and productive landscapes that are elsewhere and distant. Bifurcating the terrain into production there and living here effectively brackets the consequences of the production and consumption of food, and puts the systems of places and creatures that feed us out of sight. Philosopher Roger King (2007) proposes that an "ethics of seeing" is critical, as seeing is knowing and ethics are enacted. We are able to keep a place or thing "in our moral sights" through everyday actions, habits, and customs: we learn to care for the larger environment, farmed or wild, by first engaging what is at hand. The *Survival Pieces* are one example of how "becoming morally accountable for our eating" (King, 2003) demands an embodied awareness and action, and suggest that it may be critical that we know what it looks like to make earth, grow a pasture, and skin a catfish.

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