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“Snap Reviews: The Harrisons at Various Small Fires”
by Jennifer Peterson

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Newton and Helen Mayer Harrison have been making ecologically-committed art since the late 1960s, but remarkably, *The Harrisons*, on view at Various Small Fires, marks their first solo gallery show on the West coast. The exhibition’s focus on pieces about California nicely distills the broad range, ambition, and history of the couple’s work in various media (including maps, architectural drawings, installation, and video). A standout piece, *Book of Lagoons* (1974-84), is a handmade large-format book documenting seven different projects about ecology with a particular focus on water (including a crab farm). The book includes laborious handwritten text, detailed maps, and hand-tinted photographs.

The work is activist in nature, but targeted precisely to its audience: the political lifting it does is conceptual, even if it has practical applications. A series of speculations and hypotheses, these works don’t exactly offer plans for immediate action but rather operate on the level of poesis: bringing forth new visions of human dwelling and ecological survival.

Although the Harrisons are often placed in a context with land artists such as Robert Smithson and Michael Heizer, their approach to the environment is different, approaching art as a kind of scientific practice. Rather than the large-scale bombast of a famous work such as *Spiral Jetty*, with the Harrisons we encounter subtle pools of water and a pile of dirt. Indeed, dirt has been one of the emblematic materials of ecologically-minded art since the 1960s (think of Walter De Maria’s *New York Earth Room*, 1977). A centerpiece of this show, *Composting in the Pentagon with Worm Tailings* (2017), displays dirt (or rather compost made from coffee grounds from a nearby café) as process and solution; we are invited to turn the dirt with a shovel. This modest action feels like a metaphor, but it opens up a space for utopian realization (which may or may not follow). These resolutely analog speculations on geo-engineering feel more timely than ever as we face the imminent catastrophe of global warming.