



The Experimental Art of Noel Harding At the Intersection of Nature and Technology

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Abstract: Until his death in 2016, London-born, Canadian artist Noel Harding demonstrated continual growth from fairly traditional art objects to large-scale, public sculptures bordering on urban planning. Detailing three major works, this article reveals the artist's conscious move away from art contained within galleries to open-air installations created with environmental stewardship in mind. While earlier artworks demanded no more than thoughtful reflection from viewers, projects from Harding's final years affected real change in the community through ongoing audience participation and the actions of many. His viewers were transformed from mere observers into stakeholders, artists, and activists toward sustainability. By uniting the community together with technological and natural forces, Harding's practice ultimately demonstrated that an ecological focus is possible without shunning modernity and its proclivity toward man-made machinery.

The results prove that technology is at home with nature, machines are welcome in the garden, and the community is at ease with its creations. (Noel Harding, *Green Corridor* Project Summary).

I. INTRODUCTION

Particularly since the 1990s, Noel Harding's portfolio has reflected a growing concern for raising environmental awareness in the community through

large-scale public art projects. After the artist completed a number of works of unquestionable environmental orientation, numerous critics began to classify his artistic output with labels such as ‘ecological’ or ‘green’. Inclined to leave off these adjectives, Harding seemed reluctant to categorise his art. He was especially opposed to being grouped together with so-called ‘environmental artists’. Situated more comfortably within this category are a number of practitioners such as Andy Goldsworthy and Ana Mendieta, who have created often ephemeral art from earthly materials such as sticks, rocks, and mud. Considering the role technology has played in the massive destruction of our environment, a reactive approach—shunning modernity in favour of an untouched planet—is hardly surprising. However, Harding’s portfolio stands out from this environmental trend to demonstrate an alternative outlook—technology can be harnessed to work *for* nature rather than *against* it. Employing interdisciplinary methods, Harding actively created art that united the seemingly paradoxical. Three major artworks selected from the past several decades reveal this artist’s unique perspective, and simultaneously expose an intentional growth from theoretical experimentation in the gallery to real-world, eco-technological action through art.

II. *ENCLOSURE FOR CONVENTIONAL HABIT*—THE 1980S

Enclosure for Conventional Habit, a controversial sculpture from 1980, exemplifies Harding’s early interest in the fusion between nature and technology. In this unusual artwork animals were proven capable of coexisting with machinery in an entirely invented environment. The end result, a most unique gallery installation, necessitated the construction of an enclosure that functioned explicitly to maintain the habits conventional to the selected flora and fauna, as the title suggests. Chickens took centre stage as theatrical components but required food, sleep, and regular exercise. To meet these demands the artist created a treadmill of sorts, designed with multiple resting points and feed stations. A sizeable deciduous tree was mounted on a motorised platform to accompany the birds. Moving freely on a track throughout the gallery space, the tree was tended through the use of a misting device and grow light. Harding completed his surreal vision with a soundtrack composed specifically for the non-human participants. The recorded overture, inspired by the tree, was initially preformed by a trio of cellists and was predictably different than the percussion-heavy score written with the chickens in mind.

By including live animals, Harding had produced an artwork that presented a literal microcosm, possibly a world in which man must intervene to maintain any semblance of the natural world he has destroyed. Perhaps surprisingly, perhaps not, the public reception was not entirely positive. The variety of visitor responses ranged from the artist’s preferred outright amusement to anger intense enough to inspire corresponding illegal intervention.

Specifically, a group of animal rights activists, claiming to be official inspectors, attempted to free the chickens. This pretence was not outlandish given the intense scrutiny with which various venues approached the work. In Germany, seven different veterinary doctors examined the installation before allowing it to open to the public. While consistently passing all standards, *Enclosure for Conventional Habit* still remained polemical. Recognising that the work was accused of cruelty to animals, or similarly seen as harnessed life support, the artist wondered if ‘they weren’t looking close enough’.¹ After all, Harding had designed a setting capable of providing the animals with the same quality of life available in nature, but the public discomfort seemed to stem from an innate response to the unnaturalness of that very environment. Contrary to the introductory quote, the 1980s audience was far from at ease with Harding’s combination of nature and technology. However, this difference of opinion did not discourage the artist, and by the 1990s, with internationally recognised works like *The Potato Eaters* under his belt, he began to envision his eco-technological art on a much grander scale, moving outside the gallery to create public art for larger audiences.

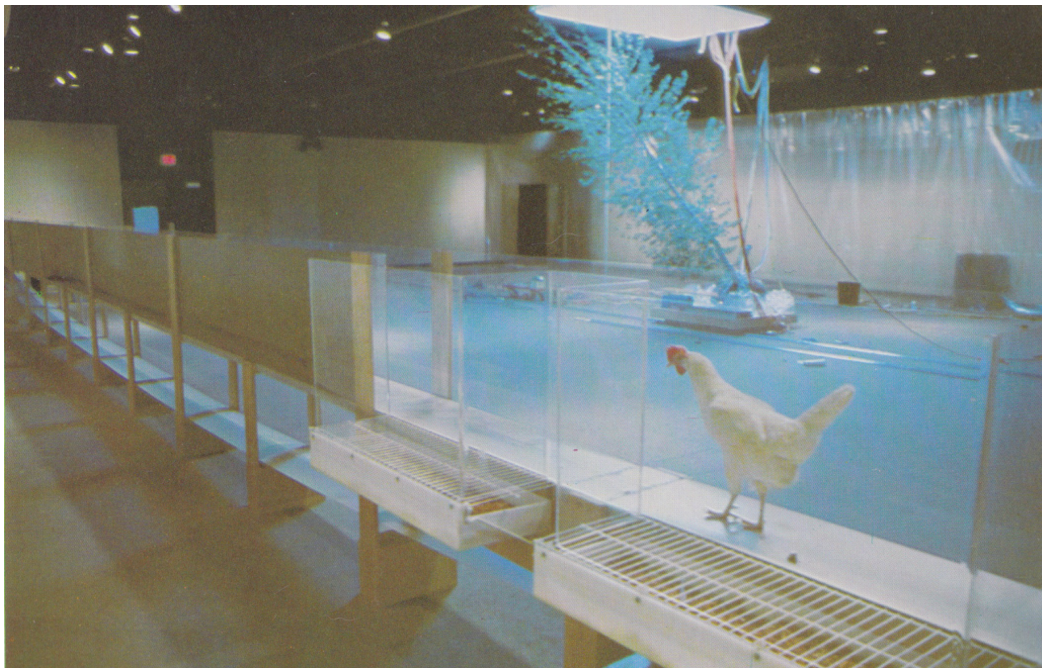


Figure 1: Noel Harding, *Enclosure for Conventional Habit*, six chickens, treadmill, feed and rest station, belt wash unit, motor, drive and gears, live tree, motorised cart, grow light, mist device, audio speakers, cassettes, water, power lines, rope, wire, and polythene. © Noel Harding.

III. *THE ELEVATED WETLANDS*—THE 1990S

If a watershed event is one marking a unique historical change of course, *The Elevated Wetlands* was both literally and figuratively a watershed artwork. The monumental sculptures were purposefully positioned to drain an urban watershed, but figuratively the installation served as a departure for Harding from art which functioned theoretically to art which literally functioned. In the early stages, the creative undertaking crossed disciplines, requiring extensive scientific planning and experimental testing. Sans any future sculptural attributes, a miniature model of the technologies used for the various filtering processes was constructed and tested extensively at the University of Lethbridge in Alberta, Canada. *The Elevated Wetlands* compounded the university's scientific research with Harding's artistic vision, and the outcome was a small-scale water treatment plant in the form of an animated sculptural grouping.

Water treatment methods were not only exposed but honoured as art, and after three years of hard work the massive construction stood as six animal-like structures gathered around a watering hole in Taylor Creek Park, Toronto, where it remains today. The location was chosen precisely, because it required a drastic intervention; the grounds are continuously contaminated due to a combination of overflow from the North Toronto Sewage Treatment Plant and runoff from the city's many streets and sidewalks. While the damage is considered normal in an urban setting, it is the artwork that is uncommon, standing as a symbol of an ongoing effort to affect change. Situated on either side of the Don Valley Parkway, Harding's masterpiece acts as a gateway to the city and has been labelled one of the seven green tourism locations in Toronto. The materials and mechanisms implemented in the construction of *The Elevated Wetlands* further its environmental message.

With the Canadian Plastics Industry Association as the main sponsor, recycled plastics were given a new life in the form of a substrate soil imbedded within the giant structures. The creature-like forms vary in size, ranging in height from twenty to forty feet. They have been arranged from tallest to smallest in two different locations so that water, which has been pulled up to the largest through a solar-powered pump, will trickle naturally through it, gravitating slowly toward the next beast. The layers of plastic soil substitute contained within each body act as a mechanical filter while the plants serve as a biological filter. Together they remove considerable toxins and other impurities from the water, returning it to the Don River in a cleaner state. The combination of natural forces and mechanical technologies is encouraging, as Harding did not envision a future world in which mankind reverts to a state of living without the luxuries of technology. His is one in which the organic and industrial coexist in an effort toward sustainability. Through the purposeful juxtaposition of plant matter and man-made materials, the artist was able to expose the real potential for man's current needs to be met more naturally. The regenerative nature of *The Elevated Wetlands* played a large part



Figure 2: Noel Harding, *The Elevated Wetlands*, 1997-1999, six sculptures of expanded polystyrene foam, acrylic stucco coating, solar powered irrigation system, recycled plastic soil, native plants and water from the Don River. Image courtesy of Institute Without Boundaries. © Noel Harding.

in Toronto winning the 1999 *Nations in Bloom* competition, and consequently gaining widespread recognition for its cutting edge environmentalism.

IV. *THE GREEN CORRIDOR—THE 2000S*

Word of *The Elevated Wetlands*' success traveled to the border where a representative from the Canadian Auto Workers Union pondered the possibility of a similar intervention for the pollution-stricken city of Windsor, Ontario. If this small section of Toronto could be reclaimed, why not Windsor? Why not the world? Contacted by the union, Harding accepted an invitation to visit the location, and while initially hesitant, upon seeing the site and specifically the Huron Church Road and Ambassador Bridge corridor, the artist was deeply motivated to bring beauty to the distressed area. Nevertheless, he flat

out refused to replicate *The Elevated Wetlands*; this project would grow in scale, reaching a larger portion of the population and covering more ground.

Windsor serves as an artery connecting the United States and Canada. The corridor leading up to the bridge is a two kilometer stretch of highway, ending at the customs processing area. According to statistics, it has become the single busiest gateway between the two North American countries—Canada and the United States. An average of 10,000 semi-trucks cross the Ambassador Bridge per day, carrying a grand total of forty per cent of all goods traded between the two nations, and traffic can be estimated at tens of millions of vehicles per year.² Harding could not tackle this problem alone and sought assistance from a friend, University of Windsor art professor Rob Strickland, who readily agreed to partner on the grand artistic endeavour. Together they allowed themselves to dream of a revitalised Windsor. In the artist's words: 'Instead of asking for permission, we made an imaginary proposal. (It was) what we'd do if everyone said yes.'³

To call the plan ambitious is an understatement, and in order to realise the various aspects of the proposal, now known as *The Green Corridor*, the art partners would first need to secure extensive monetary support. Take for example the pedestrian bridge in front of Assumption High School. Costing nearly 4.3 million dollars, the overpass was transformed into *The Green Corridor's* centrepiece, now known as the *Nature Bridge*. A garden stretching along either side of the path and an irrigation unit to care for the plants was additionally installed as phase two. This technology was designed to connect to an earth-friendly generator driven by a combination of wind turbines and solar panelling. The long-term goal is to integrate the irrigation system with water sourced from a yet-to-be-completed man-made wetland habitat. This space, referred to as the *Educational Wetland and Urban Nature Park*, will one day serve as an outdoor classroom for the students of both Assumption High School and the University of Windsor, enabling young adults to learn about the importance of urban watershed management.

As was the case with the *The Elevated Wetlands*, the scope of such an undertaking could not be accomplished without considerable manpower and backing from the community. Harding and Strickland set their sights on involving the University of Windsor. A course was soon on the docket that attracted students from an incredible array of disciplines—environmental science, engineering, visual art, economics, law, information technology, and even creative writing.⁴ The students brought with them various backgrounds and experience, and over the course of the semester, everyone contributed creatively and physically to the project.

Outside of class, the students formed *The Green Corridor Environmental Coalition* out of eight different campus organisations and met monthly to brainstorm new ideas. There have also been noteworthy, but unaffiliated, offshoots in the form of urban farming initiatives and green housing developments. The number of smaller projects included under the banner of *The*

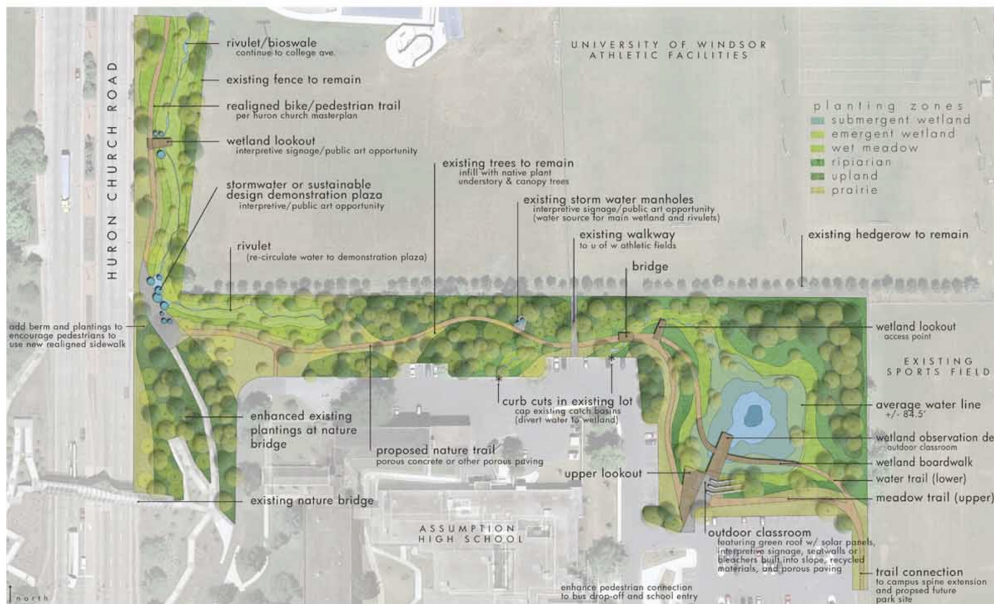


Figure 3: Noel Harding, Rod Strickland, Dawn Danby, Justin Langlois, Stantec Consulting, and LandLab Environmental Design, Urban Wetland Site Plan for *The Green Corridor* Project, c. 2006. Image courtesy of LandLab Environmental Design.

Green Corridor is truly remarkable. While the plan began with Harding's vision, his role has since been diminished, passive in comparison to the actions of many. The assortment of side initiatives keeps his spirit alive through their melding of natural and industrial components.

As a case in point, The Canadian Auto Workers who originally contacted Harding have sponsored a technological effort to create electricity through renewable means. Water turbines, acting much like underwater wind-mills, were temporarily installed in the Detroit River. It was initially questionable whether the force of the water would be enough to drive the turbines, but the machinery has now been tested and proven effective. Should the artistic team gain the necessary financial support, they now have the technological means to light the sign atop the Ambassador Bridge with the natural force of the river's current. These efforts further Harding's vision to expose the truly symbiotic relationship between the natural and scientific worlds, but unlike the tree from *Enclosure for Conventional Habit*—kept alive through the use of carefully integrated industrial devices—the roles have been reversed. Nature now demonstrates its strength, driving new technologies through the force of its current or the warmth of its sun.

A particularly memorable performance under the umbrella of *The Green Corridor*—the *Drive-thru Symphony* of 2009—exposed additional connections between this unorthodox artwork and Harding's sculpture from decades

before. With the help of a 12,000 dollar grant from the Canada Council, Harding and Strickland joined forces with composer Brent Lee and Jowi Taylor, of the Six String Nation Project, to create an environmentally motivated musical event. An orchestra led by professionals, and composed of local students, split into smaller units and lined a short stretch of Huron Church Road. Positioned on either side of a busy intersection, the groups responded to each other, and the accumulation of sounds made through traffic, even utilising bicycles to power instruments and amplifying devices.

The intention was for these street noises to meld with the more controlled audio sensations produced by the orchestra. The combined musical assemblage was broadcasted in live time over CJAM 91.5 FM, and a large banner asked passers-by to ‘Honk for a Greener Tomorrow.’ Recognising their role in the one-time performance, drivers tuned in on their car radios and blasted their horns in collaboration. The power of the piece could be heard especially in the background honks, representing a collective good will for future generations. Traffic was not demonised but used instead to spread a message of sustainability.

V. CONCLUSION

Technology, whether it takes the form of a car or a cell phone, has become an integral part of man’s everyday existence. Rather than eschewing it, Harding embraced its presence and put it to work toward a more realistic effort to enact change, reminding us all to make conscientious choices in our daily lives. With true innovation on a variety of levels, Windsor is slowly being transformed, and the city is well on its way to becoming an ideal enclosure for our conventional habits. However, unlike Harding’s earlier gallery installation, this project is not an exhibition to tour and eventually dismantle. *The Green Corridor* has become a lifestyle for the people of Windsor and a source of pride. According to Harding, it will never end. By looking beyond the traditional art object and moving into the public art sector, Harding expanded his role as artist to include dreamer, inventor, and environmental activist. Perhaps even more impressive is his ability to inspire others. His creations, once surreal, have now transformed into a realistic plan for the future, effectively combining community collaboration, science, and nature’s renewable forces. As hybrid technology becomes the most promising solution to mounting environmental issues, it is clear that Harding was always a man before his time, experimenting in the crossover between machine and mother nature.⁵

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NOTES

1. Harding, 11 November 2011, Personal Interview.
2. Fritsch 2004, 2.
3. Harding, 7 November 2011, Personal Interview.
4. Fritsch 2004, 4.
5. This article would not have been possible without the continual assistance and willingness of Noel Harding and the support of Professor Mark Cheetham, Ph.D, during his University of Toronto class *Recent Canadian Art in the International Perspective*.

REFERENCES

- Fritsch, Ryan. 2004. "The Joyous Environmentalism: Fostering Creative Democratic Discourses in Law and Community." *Hein Online* 18, no. 1.