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ARTFORUM

OCTOBER 2019

I N T E R N A T I O N A L

LEIDY CHURCHMAN
DOUGLAS CRIMP
THE MODERN WOMAN
AGNES DENES

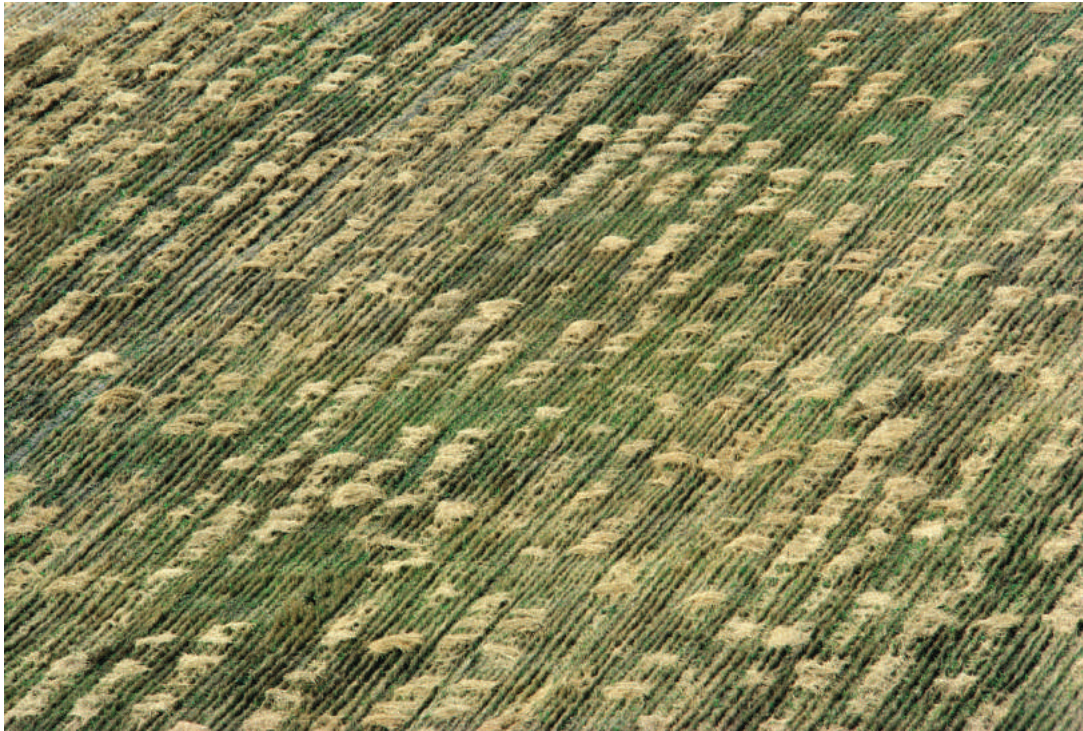


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LAND OF THE LIVING

LAUREN O'NEILL BUTLER ON THE ART OF AGNES DENES



ASHES TO ASHES . . . Before the recent wave of disquisitions on our planet's impending demise, there was Agnes Denes's *Book of Dust: The Beginning and the End of Time and Thereafter* (1989). A heavily researched investigation of the death of all matter, written between 1972 and 1987, the book is full of passages that ring clear as a bell today, none more so than this:

The paradoxes of our existence: alienation in togetherness, uniformity in specialization, illusions of freedom in group mentality, ignorance in the midst of information overload, greed in the face of neglect, self-aggrandizement in response to ineffectuality. It is comparable to going into the ice age and the heat wave of the greenhouse effect simultaneously.

Denes's ecological artworks, which she commenced in the late 1960s, are just as prescient as this early diagnosis of climate catastrophe. Over the ensuing decades, she has been called a visionary. But such encomiums risk eliding the depth and complexity they celebrate. Denes has never been just one thing.

Typically, each of her projects begins with a basic equation or question, which blossoms into a diagram, drawing, or installation that suggests an obscure code for some mysterious process of transformation. One of the first artists to work with computers, Denes began building digital models from a basic geometric unit—the triangle—in the late 1960s. Her interest in origins seems driven by an understanding that technological advances, no matter how utopian the rhetoric surrounding them, are always in danger of becoming tools of the state, of elites, of oppression. It's as if she wanted to grasp the roots of intricate and possibly abused systems so that she could understand how to break them apart. Her forensic inquiry has encompassed

Opposite page: Agnes Denes, *Wheatfield: A Confrontation*, 1982, New York.

Right: Agnes Denes, *Tree Mountain—A Living Time Capsule*, 1992–96, Ylöjärvi, Finland.

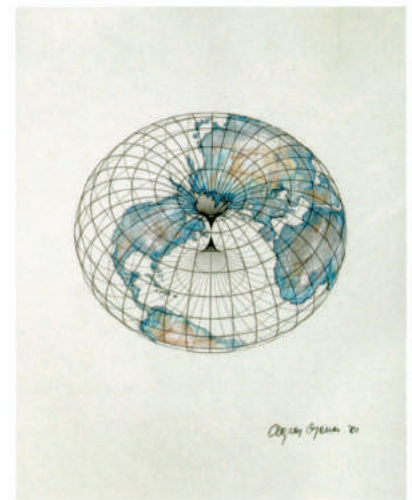
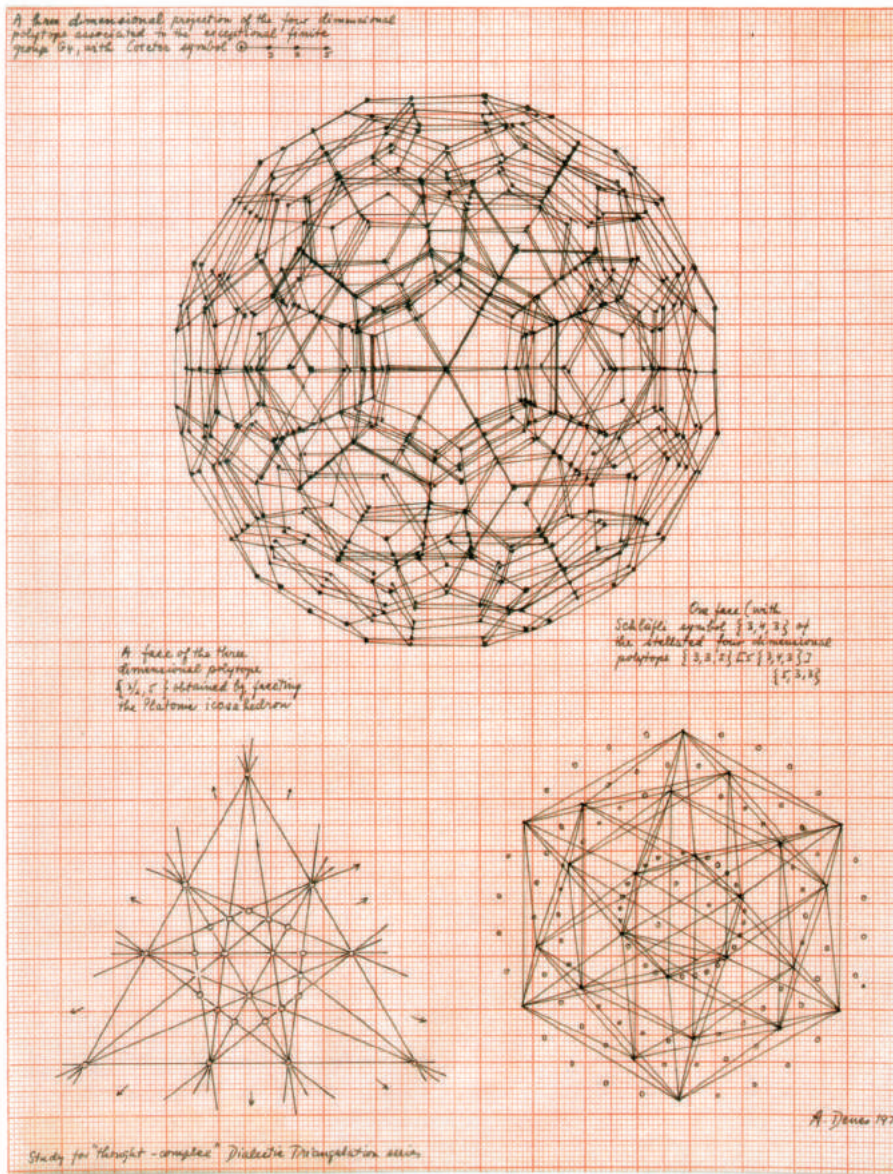


Below: Agnes Denes, *Study for Thought Complex*, 1970, ink on graph paper, 11 1/4 x 8 1/2".

Right, top: Agnes Denes, *Isometric Systems in Isotropic Space—Map Projections: The Doughnut (tangent torus)*, 1980, ink, gouache, and paint on paper, Mylar, 17 x 14". From the series "Isometric Systems in Isotropic Space—Map Projections," 1973–80.

Right, center: Agnes Denes, *Isometric Systems in Isotropic Space—Map Projections: The Hot Dog*, 1976, ink and charcoal on graph paper, Mylar, 24 x 30". From the series "Isometric Systems in Isotropic Space—Map Projections," 1973–80.

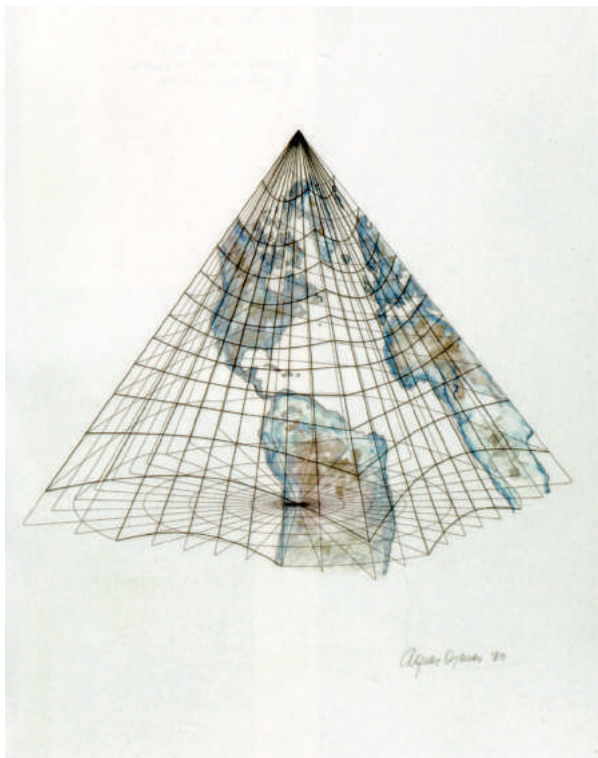
Right, bottom: Agnes Denes, *Isometric Systems in Isotropic Space—Map Projections: The Egg*, 1979, ink on rag paper, Mylar, 30 x 24". From the series "Isometric Systems in Isotropic Space—Map Projections," 1973–80.



Below, left: Agnes Denes, *Isometric Systems in Isotropic Space—Map Projections: The Pyramid*, 1980, ink, gouache, and paint on paper, Mylar, 17 x 14½". From the series "Isometric Systems in Isotropic Space—Map Projections," 1973–80.

Below, right: Agnes Denes, *Isometric Systems in Isotropic Space—Map Projections: The Snail*, 1979, watercolor, pen, ink, and silk screen on paper, Mylar, 24 x 30". From the series "Isometric Systems in Isotropic Space—Map Projections," 1973–80.

Denes's forensic inquiry has encompassed not only informational systems but also societal ones. She knows how deeply the two are intertwined.

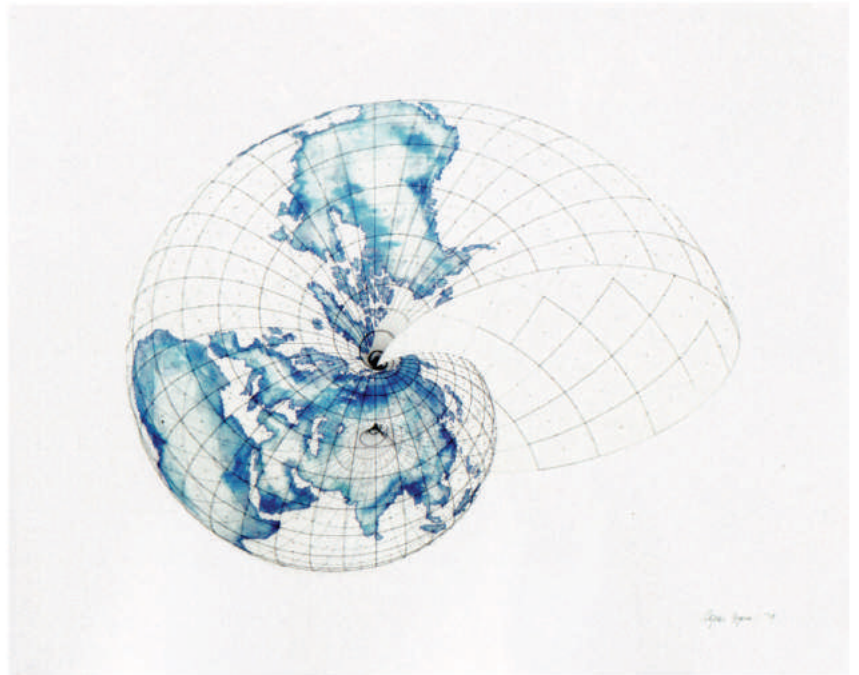


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Denes was one of three women included in "Software—Information Technology: Its New Meaning for Art," the groundbreaking 1970 group show at New York's Jewish Museum, where she exhibited *Trigonal Ballet*, 1970, a foray into the nascent field of digital animation. She had planned to also show several programs she'd written. In a letter published in the December 1970 issue of *Artforum*, she claimed the museum had not delivered on its promises, making it impossible for her to present her works as she'd intended. Even the computer displaying the animation eventually broke down, and it was not replaced. In her letter, Denes wrote: "My work and I were treated as a joke. . . . I blame no one person. I was caught in the gears of a system within which shows of this type are financed and publicized with complete cynicism, and the end always justifies the means. The waves close over it and nobody gives a damn."

Denes didn't mention sexism, but its role in the shabby treatment she reported receiving is implicit in her statement. Two years after the "Software" debacle, Denes became a cofounder of New York's A.I.R. Gallery, a space dedicated to supporting women rather than needlessly challenging their artistic or intellectual credibility. However, though she identified as

feminist, Denes didn't set out to make overtly feminist art. From the late 1960s into the '70s, she was focused on brokering the critical shift from Land to ecological art and on contributing to the latter's development. That didn't entail abandoning her studio. It was essential to Denes to keep producing her drawings and prints, such as the series "Isometric Systems in Isotropic Space—Map Projections," 1973–80, wherein the earth is warped and twisted into trigonometric shapes: a snail shell, an egg, a hot dog. She has long been interested in disordering what appears organically ordered and in emphasizing that change is the essential nature of all systems. These images work to those ends, thoroughly confounding "old oppositions between drawing and diagram—the embodied versus the projected, the direct trace versus the mediated matrix," as Michelle Kuo put it in 2009. The blurring of categorical boundaries is often accomplished with a great deal of wit. In Denes's print *Human Hang-Up Machine*, 1969, she conflates mechanical processes with Freudian discourse, while in *Liberated Sex Machine*, 1970, the apparatus is captioned with bawdy phrases like CAPTIVE SCREW, HOT DIPPING, and ECCENTRIC HOLE. Both works come across as biting commentary on our desire to increase or decrease our psychological and/or libidinal capacities. If we could do that, as these contrivances satirically suggest (through the EMPATHY AMPLIFIER, for instance), perhaps we could find some kind of equilibrium.



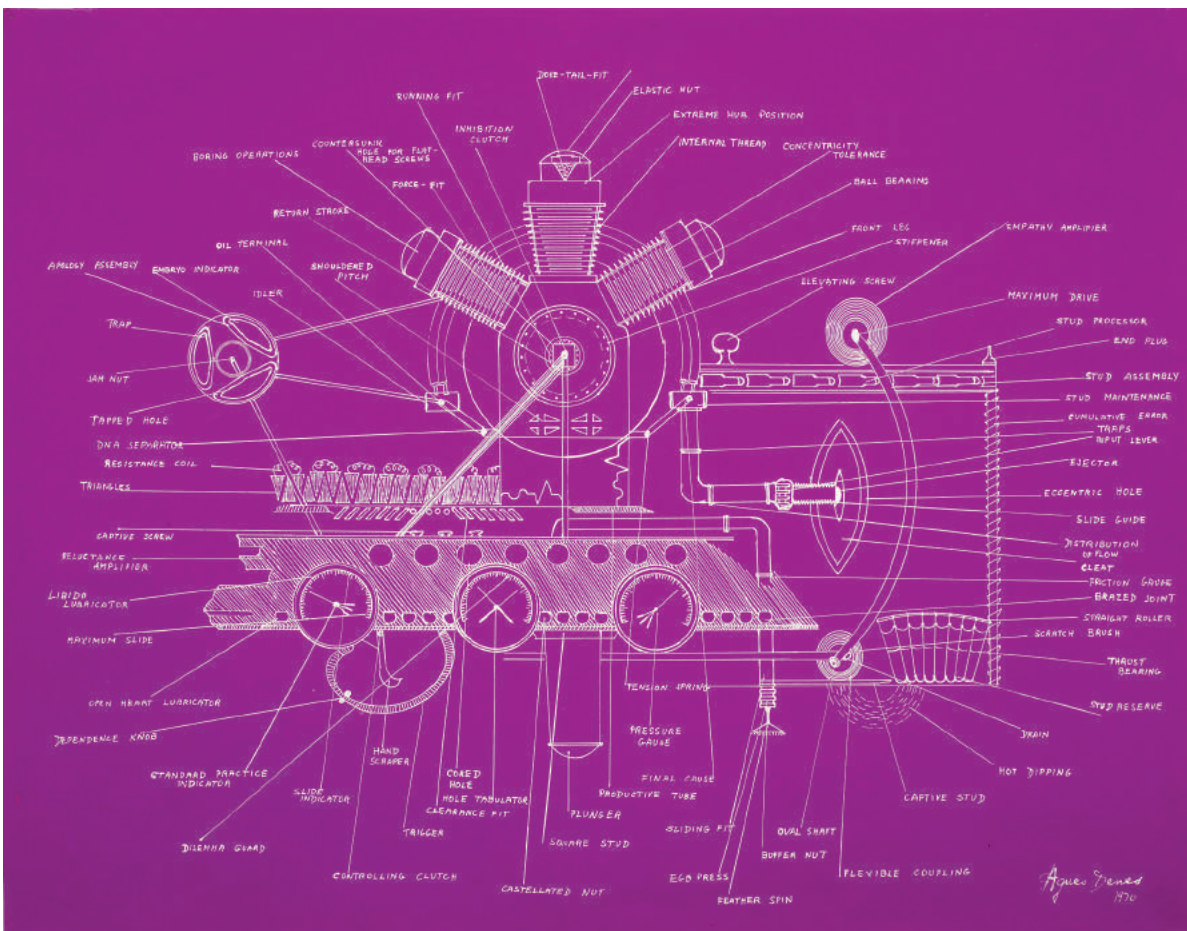
From the start, Denes's large-scale initiatives have required a living, generative format, which she often found in agriculture, as in her 1982 *Wheatfield: A Confrontation*. With a team of volunteers, Denes planted a shimmering field of red spring wheat over two acres of rubble in Lower Manhattan's Battery Park landfill: \$158 worth of grain on a piece of land then valued at \$4.5 billion. (The history of this ersatz beach and the other art projects sited there is a fascinating topic in its own right.) In light of the truly haunting photographs of those amber waves of grain rippling in the shadow of the twin towers—images that now register as elegies—it's tempting to read something clairvoyant into this project, some supernatural attunement to violence yet to come. In truth, of course, Denes didn't need to actually see into the future to imbue her work with such foreboding. She needed only to comprehend, as so few people did, the trajectory of Anthropocene devastation. Denes had

witnessed mass destruction as a child during the 1944–45 bombing of Budapest, her birthplace, at the end of World War II. Her family fled the city for Stockholm and then, in 1954, for the United States, where they encountered the toxic admixture of Cold War paranoia, the arms race, and a rapacious consumerism that could destroy the planet even without help from nuclear bombs.

"Did it hurt a little bit to cut it down?" asked Jane Pauley, during a televised interview with Denes about *Wheatfield* on NBC's *Today* in August 1982. Denes confirmed it: "Oh, yes. I lived out there for about four months." That she then turned to more durable land reclamations comes as no surprise. Denes's 1983 drawing of a hill made of tiny conifers eventually led to *Tree Mountain—A Living Time Capsule*, 1992–96, the first man-made virgin forest in the world. To produce the work, Denes invited eleven thousand volunteers to plant the equivalent number

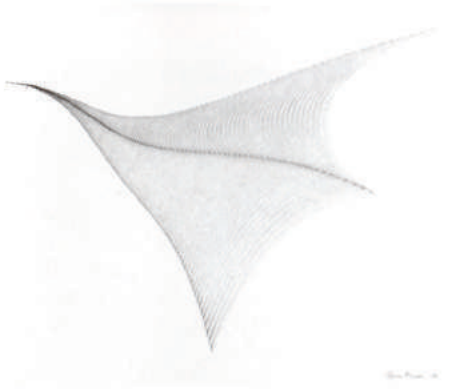
of trees in Ylöjärvi, Finland, forming an upward spiral that tapers toward its peak. The site will be protected by law against deforestation for the next four hundred years.

Denes's interest in triangles has often projected itself into three dimensions; pyramids have been a recurring motif in her art since her 1967–69 *Dialectic Triangulation: A Visual Philosophy*. The drawings in her series "Restless Pyramids," 1983–, slough off any rigidity associated with the form, taking the shapes of a flying fish, a bird, an egg, and a teardrop. "They begin to stretch and sway, as they break loose from the tyranny of being built," Denes has noted. "Once their elements are free, the 'Restless Pyramids' become flexible to take on dynamic forms of their own choosing." While they are an allegory for environmental collapse, Denes in her most portentous mode has imagined them as blueprints for post-earth dwellings: easy to repair, self-contained, and self-supporting. The



Left: Agnes Denes, *Liberated Sex Machine*, 1970, pen and ink on coated paper, 13 1/2 x 18".

Below: Agnes Denes, *Tree Mountain—A Living Time Capsule*, 1992–96, Ylöjärvi, Finland.



Left: Agnes Denes, *Flying Bird Pyramid*, 1984, graphite on vellum, 34 × 41". From the series "Restless Pyramids," 1983–.

Right: Two photos of Agnes Denes's *Wheatfield: A Confrontation*, 1982, New York. Agnes Denes.



mound on which Denes's forest grows is her largest pyramid to date—but her works are never overweening, never monumental in the traditional sense. Her second New York public commission, *The Living Pyramid*, 2015, at Socrates Sculpture Park, was a thirty-foot-tall pyramid holding several tons of grasses and wildflowers that were recycled back into the site's grounds. This regenerative work struck me at the time as antagonizing the adjacent East River panorama of phallic luxury high-rises, erections that would eventually fall.

Denes has long been compared to Robert Smithson. Some have even said she is the "true heir" to his legacy. But that's not quite right—let's not forget that Smithson believed in entropic inevitability, not environmentalism. He saw "the idealistic ecologist" as "hopelessly going over the same waterfall" as the "profit-desiring miner." I've wondered if Smithson

meant something more terrifying when speaking about the cataclysm of capitalism, something closer to Leonardo da Vinci's late-career black-chalk drawings of torrential flooding. Leonardo had a long-standing fascination with destruction and wrote at length about watching meteorological or geological phenomena overpowering a landscape. For him, as for Smithson, there was no stopping the chaotic processes of either nature or its ostensible other—civilization. But Denes holds out hope that entropy can be slowed. When she accepts a commission, she often uses legal contracts to make individuals and governments abide by her conditions (such as the proviso that *Tree Mountain* be protected for four centuries), implicitly endorsing the idea that our species does have the agency to save itself and the planet.

In Denes's retrospective this fall at the Shed, organized by Emma Enderby with Adeze Wilford, she

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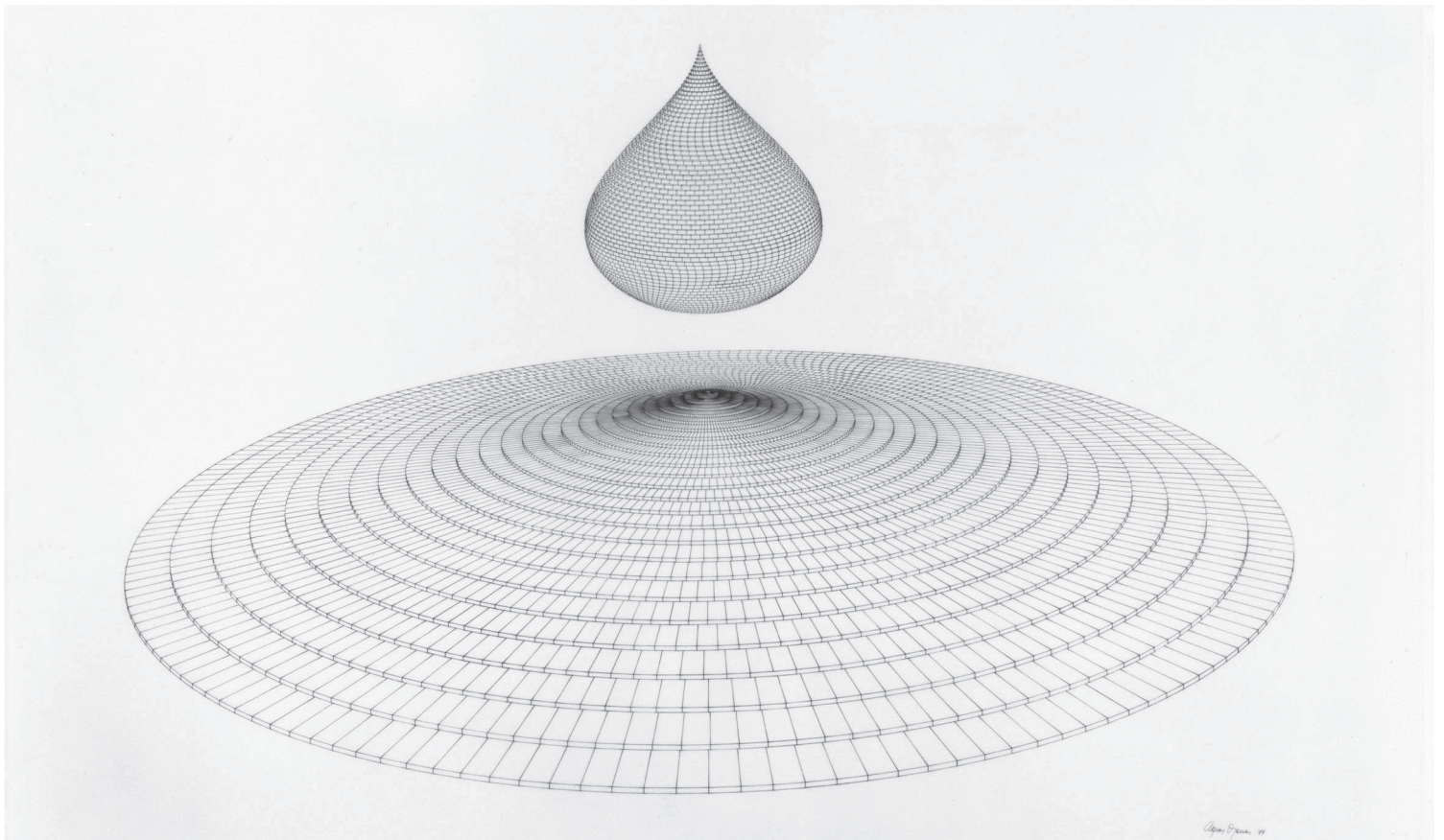


Above: Agnes Denes, *A Forest for New York*, 2014, New York. Rendering.

Right: Agnes Denes, *The Living Pyramid*, 2015, grasses, flowers, vegetables, earth, wood. Installation view, Kassel, 2017. From Documenta 14. Photo: Mathias Voelzke.

Opposite page: Agnes Denes, *Teardrop—Monument to Being Earthbound*, 1984, ink on vellum, 46 x 80".





will seize the opportunity to channel and exert that agency again. The institution has commissioned three works from Denes's repository of unrealized pieces. The first is an architectural model based on *A Forest for New York*, 2014, Denes's plan to turn the nearly 255-acre Edgemere Landfill on the Rockaway Peninsula in Queens into a forest of a hundred thousand trees suited to the brackish environment. Denes writes that this endeavor, once realized, will address Far Rockaway's "public health problems"—such as the asthma epidemic—"through the positive effects of a forest to remove carbon dioxide from the air, purifying it, to clean groundwater, and to create a healthy ecosystem." The Rockaway Waterfront Alliance has sponsored the project, though progress toward its realization has been slow. The scale of care that Denes is pursuing here is also ambitious, to say the least. The model will be a call to action.

Sloping up to seventeen feet in height, and comprising six thousand 3-D-printed bricks of compostable, corn-based plastic, the second model is premised

on a proposal Denes made in 1976. The original, transparent design was to be made with more than a hundred thousand glass blocks, as can be seen in a preliminary drawing for it, *Probability Pyramid—Study for Crystal Pyramid*, 1976. At the Shed, the model will be illuminated from the inside, its iridescence suggesting buoyancy or outright weightlessness, similar to *The Living Pyramid* and the untamed "Restless Pyramids."

In 1984, Denes drew the *Teardrop—Monument to Being Earthbound* in silver ink on vellum. It was a proposal for a floating, large-scale sculpture. Denes wrote at the time that the work "consists of a circular base and a teardrop-shaped top, which levitates above the center of the base afloat on an elastic cushion of magnetic flux. The top is gently and mysteriously moved about by air currents but held in place by superconductive elements. When lit, the teardrop resembles the flame of a candle." Since technology still has not caught up to Denes's vision, the exhibition will feature an updated proposal. The 3-D-printed nylon teardrop will float above its base, kept in place

by a magnetic field between the two parts of the piece and lit from the inside.

An object of beauty, *Teardrop* is symbolic of our times: Water now drops from the atmosphere in such quantities that insurance companies have begun to proclaim basements "uninsurable." What to do? Our current climate-change warriors—from marching scientists to school strikers to divestment campaigners to water protectors to Extinction Rebellion activists—are making dents in an obdurate political system. Now even the most environmentally wanton president in modern American history is turning to ecological bromides to garner votes. It doesn't mean he cares, but, increasingly, everyone else does. Will political action, if it ever happens, be swift or thorough enough to make a decisive difference? Understood with hindsight, Denes's potent body of work appears as a warning of the impending deluge. □

"Agnes Denes: Absolutes and Intermediates" will be on view October 9, 2019, through January 19, 2020, at the Shed, New York.

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