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# Neglected visionary Agnes Denes altered our landscape with her art. At 88, she's finally getting her due.

By Anne Midgette, October 24, 2019



"Wheatfield — A Confrontation," by Agnes Denes. In 1982, the artist planted and harvested two acres of wheat on the Battery Park landfill in Manhattan. Now, the artist is having a career retrospective at the Shed in New York. (Agnes Denes/Photo: John McGrall/Commissioned by Public Art Fund. Courtesy the artist and Leslie Tonkonow Artworks + Projects.)

The signature image of the artist Agnes Denes shows her standing in a field of golden grain, with skyscrapers in the background. It's not just a snapshot; it's a record of a work of art.

"Wheatfield — A Confrontation" involved planting and tending two acres of wheat on the Manhattan landfill that was later to become Battery Park City. It was a work about the environment and resources and world hunger, and it offered not only protest, not only beauty, but also, in its own modest way, a solution. Her field yielded a thousand pounds of wheat, later shipped and planted at other installations around the world. Denes even donated the straw to the NYPD, for their horses.

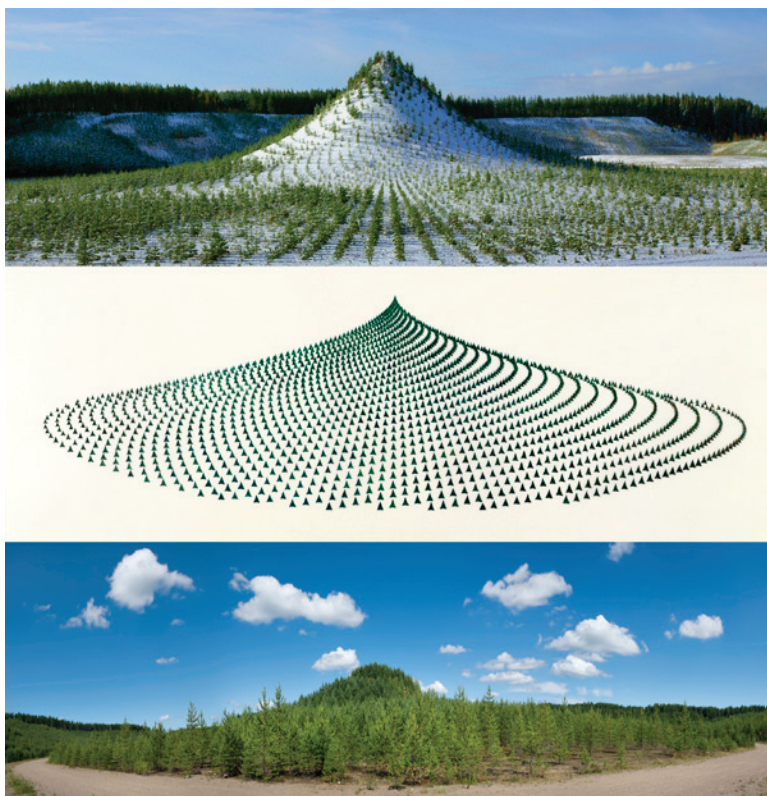
The year was 1982. Climate change was not yet the hot topic it has since become. Other artists, mostly male, had been doing so-called land art — large-scale installations, even incursions on the natural world, like Robert Smithson's "Spiral Jetty," an earthwork sculpture in a lake in Utah. But few saw their work as a way to address crisis or create solutions for a suffering planet. Denes, now 88, was miles ahead of her time.



"Model for Teardrop — Monument to Being Earthbound." One of three works commissioned by the Shed for the current show, this model features a teardrop shape suspended in the air by powerful electromagnets. (Dan Bradica/The Shed)

A neglected 20th-century visionary finally receives her due: that's the hook of the Agnes Denes retrospective at the Shed, New York's new multipurpose temple to new art. Two decades into the 21st century, we're still getting proof that the art world has given short shrift to its female luminaries, and Denes is yet another example. Once well-known in the New York art world and with a long string of shows and international commissions to her name, she's been living in a loft in this city since the 1980s, yet the Shed is the first New York institution to offer an overview of her career. And this thoughtful and well-presented show — the Shed's first attempt at a major retrospective of this kind — reveals a protean artist who is in many ways even more visionary than expected.

There's a lot more to Denes than "Wheatfield," though that work remains a seminal piece, both in her career and in the history of public art in New York (it was partly funded by the Public Art Fund). Much of her career since then has also involved large-scale, ecologically based works. In the 1990s, she planted 6,000 trees at a sewage treatment plant in Australia ("A Forest for Australia") and 11,000 on a hill in Finland ("Tree Mountain — A Living Time"), creating pieces that were at once beautiful — the trees spiral down the Finnish slope in a pattern inspired in part by the golden section — and a gift to the environment — the Finnish project is meant to be cultivated for 400 years. As-yet-unrealized projects include vehicles for space travel, self-supporting dwellings for a future when the climate may be less hospitable and a series of barrier islands to protect New York Harbor from rising sea levels.

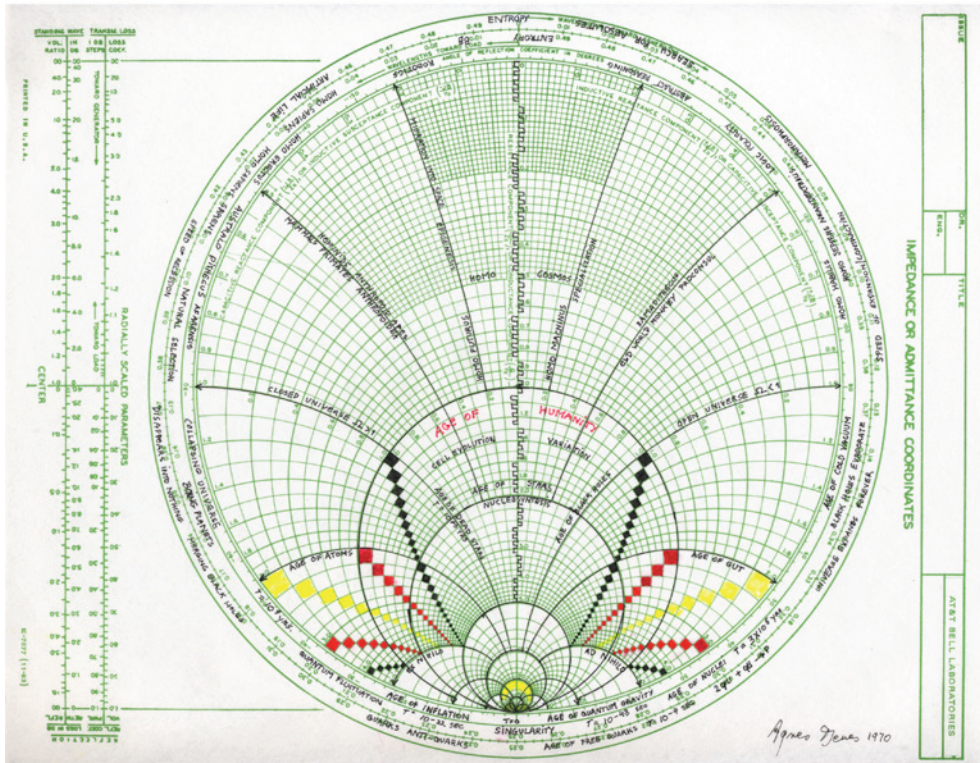


For “Tree Mountain — A Living Time Capsule” (1992-1996), Denes and volunteers planted 11,000 trees on a hill in Finland. Some have since suffered from drought — the kind of climate change the work was partly about. (Agnes Denes/Courtesy the artist and Leslie Tonkonow Artworks + Projects)

Denes’s early work, however, is quite different — and provides key context for what was to come. The show’s title, “Absolutes and Intermediates,” comes from a 1970 drawing that is characteristic of the artist’s “Philosophical Drawings” of that period. It’s a piece of custom-printed graph paper in complex whorls, precisely plotted with labels denoting phases of human evolution, scientific thought and the state of the cosmos. The result is too complex to be easily described; but it’s undeniably beautiful, and it shows something about the ways in which humans construct systems of knowledge and the way that knowledge itself can become an aesthetic creation. Art, for Denes, is a way of ordering the world, of transmitting ideas, of offering other people new ways of looking and thinking. She refers to her body of work not as an oeuvre, but as a philosophy.

In our siloed world that keeps genres of thought and discourse clinically separate, we no longer encounter the figure of the artist-scientist that was once such a key part of European culture. Goethe was a passionate geologist; Voltaire performed scientific experiments; but today, someone without specialized scientific knowledge is seen as a dabbler.

Denes, though, is no dabbler. Her work represents the fruit of considerable scientific labor, hours and hours spent in the library researching and collating, and some of it is dense as a textbook: figures representing Pascal’s triangle, a visualization of the binomial coefficients, meticulously plotted on orange graph paper (“Pascal’s Triangle,” 1973), or the body of scientific knowledge about human evolution, with texts and intricate diagrams, laid out on a length of X-ray paper some 20 feet long (“Introspection I — Evolution,” 1971). Denes had to invent a special technique to create this extra-long print.



Knowledge itself can be beautiful: The show's titular work, "Absolutes and Intermediates" (1970), illustrates the aesthetic properties of scientific structures of information. (Agnes Denes/Courtesy Leslie Tonkonow Artworks + Projects, New York)

Encountered in a gallery, such work makes us ask: Is it serious? Is it really scientific? There are no clear answers. Certainly there's humor in some of the work — like the "Napoleonic" series, prints on graph paper of what looks like a little man in a great coat and military hat but which are actually ink prints of Denes's then-husband's penis. There's also a plan for a "Liberated Sex Machine" (1970) that looks like a real technical drawing, labeled with actual technical terms dripping with innuendo ("dependence knob," "stud processor").

But the humor only serves to emphasize the fundamental seriousness of the whole. Structures of knowledge are human creations and have their own beauty and their own randomness. In her "Map Projections" series of the 1970s, Denes creates isometric projections of the world map onto the shape of a doughnut or a hot dog — a joke but also a reminder that even the forms of the map we accept as "authentic" (the globe, the rectangle) involve distortions and approximations. They're just ones that we are more ready to accept.

This point is particularly timely as the art world itself reexamines traditional structures — the "isms" and chronologies that inform how we think about where an artist fits. The new Museum of Modern Art, for instance, is dispensing with the traditional chronological order to create new ways of thinking about connections between works. It's an approach that Denes's work foresaw.

There's a further element of subversion to the show. Offering multiple alternatives to traditional ways of thinking, Denes is also providing a woman's perspective on systems that have largely been generated and perpetuated by men. For the first years of her career, she did this with intellectual rigor that flashes off the pages of her drawings like a diamond. In later works like the plans for a "Forest for New York," 100,000 trees to be planted on 120 acres of landfill in Queens, one of the new commissions, the rigor is mitigated. This is in part because the skill set required to realize a project — negotiating with bureaucracies, coordinating volunteers, engineering something that can actually stand or move or withstand the tide — is distinct from the skill required to draft it in a studio.

“I believe you have an obligation to share your vision with humanity,” she says in one of the videos in the show. “Then you have to give up a little bit of the ego that is necessary to create great art. You have to relinquish it and give it up to see that others are as important as you are.”

The entire retrospective is also a narrative of a woman’s life in art, and the process of letting go of the quest for personal glory in the possibly quixotic but never worthless attempt to try to help the world. Like all human systems, the results are uneven. Some of the works are almost gift-shop worthy: silk-screens of X-rays of plants; a rendering of the Pascal’s triangle meme in neon; a hologram of a rice seed sprouting that the artist asserts was the first 360-degree integral hologram but that looks like something from a Brookstone’s catalogue (1978-1980). And others have been sabotaged — trees in Finland and Australia killed by drought — by the very environment she seeks to heal.

But all the work, hits and misses alike, grows out of the early drawings — through to the great glowing pyramid built of 3-D-printed blocks, “Model for Probability Pyramid,” that’s one of the Shed’s commissions for this show. Like so much of this collection, the pyramid goes back to Pascal’s triangle. Denes is an artist who has tilled her field carefully and planted her intellectual seeds deep. They continue to grow into monumental forms, spreading their bounty to a new generation.

Agnes Denes: Absolutes and Intermediates Through March 22nd at The Shed, New York, N.Y. [theshed.org](http://theshed.org).