

# Forbes

## A Spectacular Agnes Denes Retrospective Asks Whether Alternative World Maps Can Reshape Geopolitics

By Jonathon Keats, January 7, 2020



Isometric Systems in Isotropic Space — Map Projections: The Egg, 1979.  
Ink and metallic ink on rag paper with printed Mylar overlay, 30 × 24".  
Courtesy the artist and Leslie Tonkonow Artworks + Projects

If the world were flat, we might have a perfect world map. The shape of our spinning planet has twisted cartography for centuries. Geographers and mathematicians have invented myriad systems for projecting a sphere onto a sheet of paper. Every one of them has entailed compromise. All involve distortion.

The struggle went public in 1973, when a German historian named Arno Peters held a press conference to denounce the Flemish geographer Gerardus Mercator, whose 16th century navigational charts made Africa look small in comparison to Europe. Presenting an alternative projection, Peters said that Mercator's still-popular map presented "a fully false picture, particularly regarding the non-white-peopled lands". Peters successfully lobbied the United Nations to supplant Mercator and adopt his own preferred design, which accurately represented the area of continents by severely distorting their coastlines.

In the same year, Agnes Denes also began making world maps. Hers were even more disorienting than Peters'. She projected the continents onto two-dimensional representations of a pyramid, a cube, and a dodecahedron. She also experimented with forms including an egg, a donut and a hot dog.

Although Denes didn't ask the UN to publish her absurdist worlds, she was no less serious than Arno Peters in her underlying purpose. "One becomes aware of the relativity of reality," she wrote in a 1976 manifesto that addressed the Peters Projection in all but name. The certainty that Peters projected was more fully false than any mere picture.

Several of Denes's extraordinary maps are now on view at the Shed, which has organized the 89-year-old artist's first full-scale retrospective in New York City. They are as beguilingly otherworldly today as when they were made, and arguably more relevant, anticipating a planet wrapped up in bombastic platitudes representing incompatible worldviews.

Denes is most famous for another work that appears wholly different on the surface. In 1982, she planted two acres of Battery Park landfill with wheat, which she harvested and distributed for people to eat. The iconic imagery from that project, showing a farm against the Manhattan skyline, was given further poignancy by her title: *Wheatfield: A Confrontation*.



Agnes Denes, *Wheatfield — A Confrontation*. Two acres of wheat planted and harvested by the artist on the Battery Park landfill, Manhattan, Summer 1982. Commissioned by Public Art Fund. Courtesy the artist and Leslie Tonkonow Artworks + Projects. Photo: John McGrall

With the World Trade Center recently completed, the city was at a crossroads, and real estate was at the crux of it. Temporarily occupying an estimated \$4.5 billion worth of property, *Wheatfield* questioned the value of land in relation to livelihoods and life itself. Whether farmland was encroaching on commercial territory or vice versa was a matter of perspective, one that changed based on where people stood both literally and figuratively. The confrontation in Denes's work was between two conflicting maps of reality.

With her global hot dogs and donuts, Denes was both more universal and more specific. Like many of the other drawings on view at the Shed, her *Map Projections* series is really a philosophical proposition. "We must create a new language, consider a transitory state of new illusions and layers of validity, and accept the possibility that there may be no language to describe ultimate reality, beyond the language of visions," Denes wrote in her 1976 manifesto.

Her projections mapped the contours of this new language of visions through their intentional contradictions. The ultimate reality may be confronted by simultaneously living in all of them.