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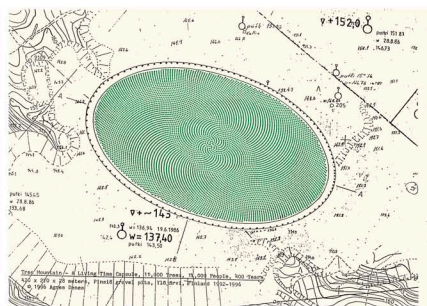
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**Sculptural Conceptualism:** A New Reading of the Work of Agnes Denes  
 by Ricardo D. Barreto



Aerial view of Tree Mountain—a Living Time Capsule—10,000 Trees, 10,000 People, 400 Years, 1996.

The traditional description of Agnes Denes as a conceptual/environmental artist reflects only a portion of the broad range of interests from which she draws to create her art. Her contribution of an innovative and expanded aesthetic vocabulary has been written about yet remains substantially undocumented. Eluding easy categorization, her work springs from a complex foundation of disciplines, which encompasses not only art and the history of art, but also the humanities and sciences. Denes's oeuvre includes everything from conceptual works with text, drawings, graphs, photographs, x-rays, prints, major public and environmental art, as well as works that come close in appearance and concept to traditional sculpture. The only means of expression the artist deliberately abandoned was painting. This she did in 1968, soon after she had begun, as it simply did not allow her to explore efficiently the issues and questions that were already at the core of her concerns.

Denes remains even today an artist for the cognoscenti, a figure whose art is difficult to convey in the simple terms that seem to be a prerequisite for fame in our society. For those who have taken the time to examine her work, however, the experience is both exhilarating and enlightening. For this circle, which includes some of the most important scholars, curators, artists, scientists and philosophers of our age, her influence and importance are clear, her eloquent articulation of the crisis in the interaction of humanity and nature touchingly apparent. The unique position occupied by Denes is described by Robert Hobbs as follows: "In the history of art there have been a few artists' artists—individuals who have emphasized in their work the raising of provocative questions and who have also tested the limits of art by taking it into new, unforeseen areas and by using it for distinctly new functions. Agnes Denes is one of these special artists."<sup>1</sup>

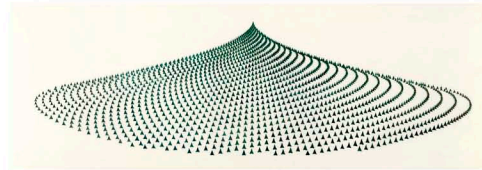
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View of newly planted Tree Mountain—a Living Time Capsule, 1992–96. Project realized in Pinsiö gravel pits, Ylöjärvi, Finland, 420 x 270 x 28 meters.

There are many ways of approaching the art of Agnes Denes. Links have been made (but not fully explored) to past masters such as Van Gogh, Piero della Francesca, Giorgio de Chirico, William Blake, Mondrian, Kandinsky, Malevich, and Moholy Nagy. Persistent comparisons to Leonardo da Vinci also occur because of her fascination with questions raised through the intersection of art, philosophy, and science. Specifically, “both artists enlarge on the traditional boundaries of art, and both are concerned with art as a way of thinking about the world.”<sup>2</sup>

Curiously unexplored is her own considerable influence on living artists and a thorough study of her early conceptual works and innovative techniques in drawing and printmaking, and the visualization of invisible processes and systems such as mathematics, logic, or human evolution. As important as these issues are, they are not the topics of this essay. What I propose instead is a deeper understanding of this artist in a new light.



Tree Mountain—Proposal for a Forest—1.5 x .15 miles—11,000 Trees, 11,000 People, 400 Years, 1983. Metallic ink and gouache on mylar, 34.25 x 96 in.

My observation of Denes’s work through the years leads me to suggest that the very essence of her unique contribution is sculptural. This can be seen in a majority of her works, not just those realized in three dimensions. Over this period, I have come to understand that every major insight, concept, or far-ranging vision Denes has evolved during her career has volumetric consequences. Even more interesting, her concern with the multi-dimensional possibilities of her art often moves beyond the three-dimensional to include the shaping of time. Indeed, Denes has found a vocabulary of tools to sculpt time and history in order to integrate their philosophical implications into her three-dimensional and environmental works.

Her identification with the early development of conceptual art seems incomplete because she has created a much richer vocabulary than is normally associated with this movement, and because her work has remained persistently visual. Nevertheless, it is conceptual art in its truest and most original form and it can be accurately described as a new language of conceptual sculpture. Denes’s work takes the idea and imbues it with life through the identification of a roster of possible incarnations, all with the potential to materialize as physical realities. Indeed, her pieces incorporate the potential for material realization, drawing as they do on anything available in the known universe, space, mind, and imagination.



**Human Dust, 1969.** Calcareous human remains, from *Study of Dust (An Investigation Involving the Philosophy of Change)*, 17 x 17 x 14 in.

In the summer of 1982 following the opening of Denes's "Meister der Zeichnung (Master of Drawing)" exhibition at the Kunsthalle, Nuremberg, the artist and I traveled by train to Paris. There, I participated in a small but telling event which clearly demonstrated Denes's keen interest in monumental space as the repository of intellectual content and her desire to understand as completely as possible how the public environment is affected by the placement of a vast three-dimensional object, in this case the Centre George Pompidou itself.

Not content to experience the Pompidou Center from the normal vantage points offered to the public—that is from the street or from the interior spaces such as galleries, escalators, and passageways—Denes pressed forward through emergency exits, clearly off limits to the general public, in order to hang precariously from the exterior structure of the top floors. This enabled her to move beyond the transparent skin of the building at a dangerously high altitude, and brought the old Parisian neighborhood before her more directly than otherwise possible.



**On the Edge, 1995.** Symbols of dead civilizations and poetry carved into the Mahtesh Ramon crater in Mitzpe Ramon, Israel, 650 square ft.

Denes was able to experience her environment in an unexpected way, consider the paradox involved—a key interest of hers—and become a more direct accomplice in the appreciation of the aesthetic, political, and social underpinnings of the plaza spread at her feet. It was perhaps the best way for this artist to understand the philosophical shape of the urban issues attached to this space at that moment in time. At the very heart of her actions were the sculptor's natural impulse to see and understand an object from every possible physical perspective. It also allowed her to imagine in a very direct way the effects of time and history on this space.

I have come to understand that all of these issues were clear in Denes's mind throughout this experience. Literally and metaphorically, being on the edge is not an unusual or unexpected place for this artist. Throughout her career this is a recurring motif and covers all aspects of her work: from the eight days she lived on the edge of Niagara Falls in 1977 filming its force from a shaky ledge a foot away from the thundering water, to a work actually entitled *On the Edge*, (1995) in Mitzpe Ramon, Israel, in which she carved the symbols of dead civilizations into a four-million-year-old desert rock on a precipice inches away from a 400-foot drop; or in her *Book of Dust*, where her purpose is to reach the edge of knowledge and human understanding.<sup>3</sup> Denes has never hesitated to take both physical and intellectual risks in the pursuit of her art. It is this very impulse that has propelled her toward an expansion of the definition of sculpture and the tools used to create it, a place where her works often involve

the cutting edge of technology as she operates happily on the edge of the art world.



**On the Edge, 1995. Symbols of dead civilizations and poetry carved into the Mahtesh Ramon crater in Mitzpe Ramon, Israel, 650 square ft.**

Denes's art is created by shaping knowledge and concepts into form and making connections where none existed before. Through her studies in the sciences, technology, philosophy, linguistics, theology, art history, music, and ecology, Denes has constructed a hybrid methodology, which allows her to give form to philosophical concepts rooted in the human condition itself and in the environmental conditions of the planet on which we live. Just as the masters of Gothic art gave physical form to mysticism, so Denes makes tangible the implications and paradoxes inherent in humanity's accumulated knowledge. Throughout her career, Denes has endeavored to bring intellectual content into the landscape in order to elucidate the complexities of human society, the natural world we live in, and the effects of the one on the other.

While it is easy to see works such as her pyramidal studies based on Pascal's Probability Theorem having lives as three-dimensional objects in space and in the landscape, it may initially be harder, yet just as enticing, to see the sculptural characteristics of some of Denes's other philosophical works. Her ability to use words to imply volume, for example, has been amply recognized by major art historians and scholars.<sup>4</sup>

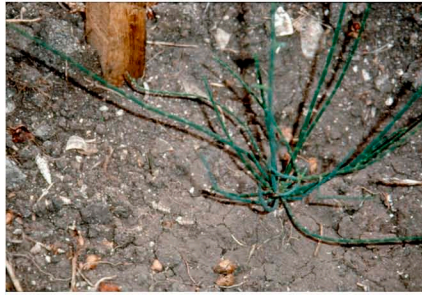


**A Forest for Australia, 1998. Six thousand trees planted in five spirals to form step pyramids, 400 x 80 meters. Project realized in Melbourne, Australia.**

In the mid-1960s Denes began to read *Webster's Unabridged American Dictionary* in its entirety to identify words denoting "strength." The seven-year undertaking resulted in the publication of *Strength Analysis—A Dictionary of Strength*,<sup>5</sup> where the juxtaposition of the extracted words had a curious effect: "They were coming to life to form a structure made of words, translucent and buzzing like a beehive. Held together by their own strength, the words created an undulating form like a swarm of bees moving about. Alive and constantly changing, nevertheless it was a sculptural, three-dimensional form, a semantic substance possessing object boundaries."<sup>6</sup>

This is also a perfect early example of a philosophical matrix offering multiple physical possibilities. These are described in part by Denes as follows: "I tried to imagine the *Dictionary* as a huge quiltlike painting in which the words kept changing color, affecting one another." But the artist goes on to explain, "this was not a painting but a living sculpture consisting of words floating in space, forever interacting like cells or atoms. Even its shape kept changing from a ball to an undulating and elliptical or conical form, while the words

stayed together with just enough space between them to make the ‘sculpture’ seem translucent.”<sup>7</sup>



A Forest for Australia, 1998. Six thousand trees planted in five spirals to form step pyramids, 400 x 80 meters. Project realized in Melbourne, Austrasia.

While many of Denes’s works are actually realizable, there are those which are not. This seems to be true especially of her works in the late ’60s and early to mid-’70s. Paradoxically, this does not diminish the importance of the three-dimensional implications of this body of work from a conceptual vantage point. In this category is a little known proposal entitled *Chaining Giant Sequoias in the California Redwoods*, from 1972. By suggesting that the giant tree’s growth be curtailed or halted by chaining its branches to its roots, the artist asks us to consider which is stronger, nature or human thought. Also examined are the “thoughts” and experiences of a 1000-year-old tree grown to 300 feet with a trunk diameter of 30 some feet. In *Underwater Project*, again from 1972, “the Earth’s surface terrain, our present landscape, is replaced with the jagged spikes of mountain tops and hollowed valleys of the ocean floor, lending our world the eerie look of science fiction.”<sup>8</sup> In both examples, space and volume are key elements of the works and central to a complete understanding. The artist’s intent was never to chain giant sequoias or pull up the ocean floor and sink the mountains, but to contemplate the magnitude of these propositions.

Other works in Denes’s oeuvre were conceived from the outset as elegant juxtapositions of physical matter and abstract thought. One of her most poignant sculptures, *Human Dust*, does just that. Dating from 1969, this piece combines a pyramidal mound of calcareous human remains with text that describes the everyman, in this case an artist, created from statistics. Part of the text, which might lead one to believe that this person was real, reads as follows: “He was not a popular man—he had honest but uneven beliefs. His work was good but not great, and the last 10 years of his life he resigned himself to this fact. He had 4 friends at various times in his life and was loved by 17 people, including his parents. He was liked by 312. His brain contained 10<sup>10</sup> neurons and it received 10<sup>15</sup> electrical impulses from his own sense organs, to each of which he responded.”<sup>9</sup>



Hot/Cold Earth Ship with Heartbeat, 1992. Wooden barge, earth, sound, and mixed media. View of installation.

Throughout her career, Denes has spent a great deal of her time drawing.<sup>10</sup> While this is an efficient way to explore her ideas, it is also a consequence of the difficulty of bringing to fruition the monumental public and environmental works that are the logical final results of her creative process. One very clear example of this is a series of studies which continues to this day to have luscious manifestations as two-dimensional works but which is all about the

transformation of volume and space. Denes's series *Isometric Systems in Isotropic Space—Map Projections*, first conceived in 1973, takes our planet and distorts it systematically into a variety of forms: *The Snail*, *The Cube*, *The Doughnut*, *The Hot Dog*, *The Lemon*, *The Pyramid*. All the while the integrity of the continents' outlines are scrupulously made to correspond to the exact longitudinal and latitudinal location each would occupy if the metamorphosis were actually to occur.

The mathematical precision is astonishing, the drawings themselves beautiful renderings by hand of images that exhibit the kind of exactitude we have lately come to expect from computer-generated images. That these images could be transformed in a compelling way into monumental structures is clear if a drawing of the *Map Projections: The Snail* is seen in the context of the master plan designs for *Peace Park U.S.A.* This proposal for a monumental nautilus-shaped amphitheater has not yet been built. One can only imagine what it might feel like to be one of the small figures looking up in awe at the continents wrapped around the transparent form of the world in the shape of a nautilus shell.

The *Map Projections* are also a good example of the highly evolved use of mathematics as a building element in the service of art. Without exception, works based on mathematics result in creations which are also superb examples of the multiple visual possibilities inherent in Denes's work. In these pieces three-dimensional renderings are always within the spectrum of possibilities.



**Hypersphere—The Earth in the Shape of the Universe, 1987. 144 panels of etched glass, bronze-tinted mirrors, plantings, and reception desk. Ceiling and lobby commission for The First National Bank of Chicago, New York.**

Perhaps the best example of this is her *Pyramid Series*, which “begins with an abstract mathematical theory of probability from which a number system is derived and rendered into visual form for the purpose of exploring its underlying structure, the inner workings of its otherwise invisible transformations.”<sup>11</sup>

Donald Kuspit has written that “Agnes Denes's *Pyramids* crystallize her conceptual art into a single structure, visually succinct and intellectually complex: they are the ultimate distillation of her scientific interests and philosophy of life.”<sup>12</sup> Thus we have the magnificent drawings, ranging from early works such as *Paradox and Essence* (1970) or *4000 BC* (1973), which actually incorporate images of the Egyptian pyramids for comparison, to the monumental nine-by-sixteen-foot drawings of the visualization of mathematics such as *Citadel for the Inner City—The Glass Wall*, from 1976, to the people pyramids such as *Pascal's Perfect Probability Pyramid & The People Paradox—The Predicament* (1980), which incorporates as basic building blocks over 16,000 individually rendered people, and to the highly abstract series of *The Restless Pyramids* begun in 1983.

*The Restless Pyramids* are designs for sculpture in motion and include some of Denes's most compelling images. “Realizing they are organic forms, the pyramids lose their rigidity and

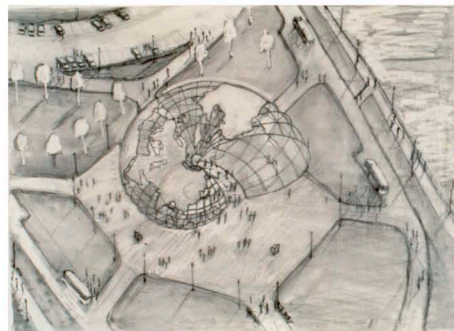
stillness, begin to stretch and sway, as they break loose from the tyranny of being built, knitted into form... Thus freed, they become flexible and take on dynamic forms of their own choosing, begin to fend for themselves and create their own destiny.”<sup>13</sup>



**Isometric Systems in Isotropic Space—Map Projections: The Cube, 1986. Lithograph with metallic colors, 36 x 25 in.**

Denes envisions these works as models for future self-contained and self-supporting habitats on earth and in space. *The Pyramids* “have a natural strength, the power of innocence and of true beginnings. They have a look of freshness and vulnerability. They are the future, and the future is always unused and vulnerable... They are grand mandalas that define our destinies.”<sup>14</sup> Knowing what they represent, and because they seem to possess the additional uncanny ability to move and to rise in flight from the paper on which they are drawn, I have always thought of these works as statements of the most complete optimism.

Even in small ways the artist makes every effort to ensure that her images are understood as three-dimensional concepts. When Denes reintroduced color into her work in the mid-'70s after a long hiatus, she selected metallic colors and inks because they fulfill two basic requirements: they have the potential to bring a lush, sensuous, and seductive quality to the mathematical rigor of precise architectural forms, thus satisfying her love of luxurious materials, and they impart unexpected vitality to the image. In her two-dimensional works these substances help emphasize the three-dimensional possibilities of her designs. Indeed, the underlying reason for their use was their ability to imbue two-dimensional images with a shimmering quality which changes the appearance of the print or drawing depending on the viewer's vantage point. This concern is not usually an issue for draftsman or printmaker; it is of central importance to a sculptor. Therefore, this significant detail shows again how important it is for the artist that all who view her work understand the potential life of the image as an object in space.

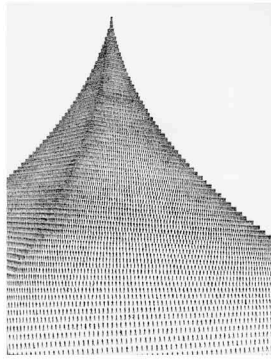


**Peace Park U.S.A.—Proposal for twelve-acre park, Hains Point, Washington, DC, 1989 (detail). Pencil and ink.**

Then there are the important works that have become environmental realities. These include her signature piece *Wheatfield—A Confrontation* (1982), two acres of wheat planted on landfill in downtown Manhattan in what is now Battery Park City, the ceiling and lobby commission for The First National Bank of Chicago's New York headquarters at Equitable Center (1987), depicting *The Earth in the Shape of the Universe* in 144 panels of carved, frosted, Pink Rosa glass, and *Hot/Cold Earth Ship with Heartbeat* (1992), a structure

combining ancient boat building techniques and 20th-century electrical devices such as a refrigeration unit, heater, and sound system to produce on one side frozen earth and on the other a warm heartbeat. But there is perhaps no better example of a monumental environmental work that incorporates both time and history as basic building blocks than Denes's *Tree Mountain—A Living Time Capsule*.

Originally conceived in 1983, *Tree Mountain*, funded by the U.N. and commissioned by the Finnish government, is the most ambitious of Denes's projects to be commissioned and built to date. Perhaps a better way of describing this project is to say that its birth has been commissioned and realized, since one of the work's distinguishing features is its evolution through natural growth and the passage of time, in this case a gradual rebuilding of the environment and the eventual creation of a "virgin" forest. Like so many of Denes's works, this grand environmental project's first incarnation was a drawing, *Proposal for a Forest*. The concept itself was already fully articulated as a richly colored image of metallic ink and gouache on mylar only 34.25 by 96 inches in size.



Pascal's Perfect Probability Pyramid & The People Paradox—The Predicament, 1980 (detail). India ink, 32 x 43 in.

What is taking place now in Ylöjärvi, Finland, where it was planted in June 1996, is the physical manifestation of a vast environmental construct whose meaning deliberately stretches from the deep past to 400 years into the future, the expected life span of the 11,000 trees planted in an intricate mathematical pattern of interlocking spirals by people from all over the world on a manmade elliptical mountain measuring 420 meters in length, 270 meters in width, and 28 meters in height. Visible from space, *Tree Mountain* has been called the first monument on Earth that is not at the service of the human ego. As Robert Hobbs points out, "this piece serves as a monument to endurance, to transcendence and survival, to collaboration, and to differentiating nature from human beings."<sup>15</sup>

Now that the mountain is there and the trees are planted, its ultimate meaning will be enhanced by its survival into the future. The drawing of *Tree Mountain* is a complete statement on its own just as a blueprint contains the entire meaning of a building which may or may not be built. Not so the actual monument, a considerably more fragile proposition now that it is at the mercy of the environment, history, and 20 generations of people.<sup>16</sup> In a related 1998 work in Melbourne, Australia, the artist planted 6,000 trees in five spirals to form step pyramids depending on the height of the trees.



Wheatfield—A Confrontation, Battery Park Landfill, 1982. View of the harvest of 2 acres of planted wheat.



Links to a sculptural sensitivity can be found repeatedly in Denes's oeuvre. Elusive and transparent, her work is as solid as sculpture. Her objects of transcendent beauty are realized through her integration of poetry, mathematics, and philosophy. If we recognize Agnes Denes as a conceptual artist, as we should, then we must also recognize her as a consummate exponent of sculptural conceptualism, a paradox very much of the artist's own making.

Ricardo Barreto has been a curator of contemporary art and is currently with the Massachusetts Cultural Council.

### Notes

- 1** Robert Hobbs in his essay "Agnes Denes's Environmental Projects and Installations: Sowing New Concepts" in Agnes Denes, exhibition catalogue. Ithaca: Herbert F. Johnson Museum of Arts, Cornell University, 1992, p. 169.
- 2** Ibid.
- 3** Agnes Denes, *Book of Dust—The Beginning and the End of Time and Thereafter*, Visual Studies Workshop, Rochester, N.Y., 1979. This book is the result of 16 years of research into the human condition and our place in the universe.
- 4** See Agnes Denes, op. cit., which includes important essays by Robert Hobbs, Donald Kuspit, Peter Selz, Lowery Stokes Sims, and Thomas Leavitt, in addition to a selection of the artist's own writings.
- 5** Agnes Denes, *Strength Analysis—A Dictionary of Strength, 1965–1971*.
- 6** From Agnes Denes, *The Organic Notebooks, on Strength Analysis—A Dictionary of Strength, 1971*.
- 7** Ibid.
- 8** Agnes Denes, description of proposal for Underwater Project: Ocean Floor vs. Continent—A Conceptual Work, 1972.
- 9** Agnes Denes, from text for *Human Dust*, 1969.
- 10** In 1982 the artist was selected "Master of Drawing" for an exhibition at the Kunsthalle, Nuremberg. She was one of four artists chosen from around the world and represented the United States.
- 11** Agnes Denes, description of *The Pyramids*, ongoing since 1970.
- 12** Donald Kuspit, "Paradox Perfected: Agnes Denes's Pyramids" in Agnes Denes, op. cit., p. 171.
- 13** Agnes Denes, description of *The Restless Pyramids*, 1984.
- 14** Ibid.
- 15** Op. cit., Robert Hobbs, p. 166.
- 16** All 11,000 people who planted trees received certificates of custodianship that reach 400 years into the future with each generation inheriting the tree as one might a precious commodity.

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