

The Flying Bird Pyramid, 1992, 25"x36", lithograph with metallics

The Lyricism of Pure Thought

The Unity of Intelligence in the Art of Agnes Denes

by: Mark Daniel Cohen

*To see a world in a grain of sand
And a heaven in a wild flower,
Hold infinity in the palm of your hand
And eternity in an hour.*

- William Blake, "Auguries of Innocence"

*My work is a composition, a process, a place, a field of grain, a mathematical forest, benign
problem solving, philosophy in the land, nature articulated through human intelligence.*

- Agnes Denes

Art is the stage upon which the drama of intelligence is enacted. A work of art is a thought — for all the reliance on and enhancements due to skill and dexterity, for all the diffidence typical of artists' statements of intention, for all their general uncertainty of their own motives, their faith in practicing art as an adventure of discovery into realms even they did not suspect when they began, art is a matter of imagination, and imagination is a mental event, an event of the mind, and the caliber of mind matters. Yet, all these distinctions and the considerations they raise concerning the different contributions of our differing parts are beside the point, for intelligence is not merely a function of mere thought, not in the usual sense of the word. Intelligence, in its true sense, is a function of all that our minds, our very natures, can do. Intelligence is an integration of all we are — it engages thinking, emotions, physical sensations, intuition, dreaming. To be smart is to be fully human, to be human in the most developed sense, for intelligence is not, in the end, purely of the mind — it is of the soul.

The prismatic aspects of intelligence are as well the aspects of art, for art is one of the premiere practices of intelligence — something of which we are all aware. There is no credible controversy in this claim, for it is the essence of everyone's common-sense idea of art. Intelligence, in the fullest sense, is what we come to art to find. We all grant art a special consideration, we give it a special attention, for we take it, always, to be something uncommon. Regardless of what we think the art of our time should be, regardless of the theories and interpretive principles by which we estimate the art of the past, we all agree that it is of interest because it communicates a meaning and because it does what nothing else does, because it possesses a high intrinsic value.

In short, art is expected to be a repository of distinctive meaning — a harbor of wisdom. Despite the dispute that split the history of art in the twentieth century, the disagreement over the role of intelligence in art that caused Duchamp to initiate his attempt to change the direction of contemporary aesthetic practice, it is clearly the case that no one really disagrees. That argument was ultimately over the quality of intelligence appropriate to art, not over the need of it. For us all, it is the intelligence of it that makes art art.

And it is the artists of the greatest intelligence, artists with the capabilities for the most penetrating insights, that we should value most, and that we inevitably do. Such artists are never the majority. They are few but they are always to be found, in any era, and one of the principals among them now is Agnes Denes. For those of us who have known her work for some time — her art, her public projects, her plans and models, and her remarkable writings — it is clear that she is one of the chief presences of our time, not only in her identity as an artist, but as a contemporary, public thinker. As much as by anything else, a period in history is characterized by its thinkers, by those who embody its instances of highest intelligence. Denes is among the few who set the tone of our time.

The exhibition at the Samek Art Gallery at Bucknell University is a dazzling display of what Denes is capable of. Comprising 110 works that include drawings, prints, photographs, digital images, models, notations, statements of intention, and much more, the exhibition is a retrospective of Denes's public projects — both executed, in process, and planned — from over the last 25 years. Curated by Dan Mills of the Samek, the exhibition makes precisely the right curatorial choice for a retrospective of one of our public thinkers. Devoted to her often monumental public works, it is also concentrated on the thoughts behind them, for what we see here are

the ideas. The majority of the works in the exhibition are not photographs of accomplished projects but “working papers” — drawings and prints and models — that preceded the actualizing of the projects. From this point of view, those projects that have been executed and those not yet built are equivalent — it is the thought behind them that is being delivered here, the ideas of someone dedicated to ideas.

Upon entering the gallery, what one finds is a full and brilliant display of the vast variety of Denes’s efforts. The exhibition is organized roughly into two segments, two drifts in the artist’s work. Along one wall are the public projects of the most direct social concern and import; along the other are the works that are more philosophical in nature, and very frequently, mathematical in nature. Yet, the separation is tentative at most, for all the works here, even the drawings that explore mathematical conceptions, participate in lines of thought that lead to plans for public works, and many of the public works are distinctly mathematical in their organization. It is all of a piece, for it all bears the mark of the artist’s personality.

What one sees most distinctly in the exhibition, however, are the attributes of intellect. There is, for instance, a tremendous range of curiosity in evidence. In her notes on the works, arranged in wall plaques, Denes raises questions and approaches areas of inquiry that would occur to few others. In her notes for *Bird Project — A Visual Investigation of Systems in Motion*, 1979, Denes wonders if birds can break their own behavioral rules when placed under stress, “or do millions of years of instinctive behavior win over circumstances and pressures? How do they deal with such problems compared to us?” In a note for an unrealized 1972 project, she thinks to ask: “Does an Ant Get Angry, Does a Bee Feel Remorse?” Few of us would wonder; few of us would have an equal capacity for wonder.

The range and variety of Denes's capabilities of comprehension match those of her curiosity. She shows a distinctive reach of intellectual ability, equal to that of a philosopher, or a scholar, or a scientist, or a mathematician — precisely what many of us expect of an artist. Her drawings for *The Human Argument in Steel & Crystal with Sundial*, 1988, illustrate graphs rooted in the propositional calculus of Alfred North Whitehead and Bertrand Russell. The plan for her *Systems of Logic/Logic of Systems*, 1988, is based on the mathematics of Pascal's triangle. For her project *Art on the Edge*, 1995, Denes carved symbols and poetry from past civilizations — representing the entire range of human existence, from the Sumerians and the Mayans to contemporary texts — on a precipice over a crater in Israel. Her *Tree Mountain — A Living Time Capsule*, executed in Finland, 1992-96, involved the planting of 11,000 trees in a mathematical pattern based on both the golden section and the system of seeds in a sunflower. On her two *Stelae — Messages from Another Time — Discoveries of Minds and People*, 1986, Denes has carved the mathematical formulae for many of the most significant scientific breakthroughs, and in her project *Poetry Walk — Pools of Thought*, 2001, at the University of Virginia in Charlottesville, she has installed 20 granite stones carved with poetry from throughout the ages.

The range of knowledge is stunning, as is the beauty of all these works. The most visually striking and beautiful of all the works here are Denes's pyramid drawings and her visualization of the *Crystal Fort*. The several drawings from her *Pyramid Series* are delicate and detailed mathematical conceptions — they are conceived out of “an abstract mathematical theory of probability,” as Denes describes the idea in a wall plaque, that they follow like the lines of a graph, which is what they essentially are. Under the influence of the algorithm, the pyramids gently twist and contort, as if flowing with the turns of a current, executing near pirouettes of mental conception and

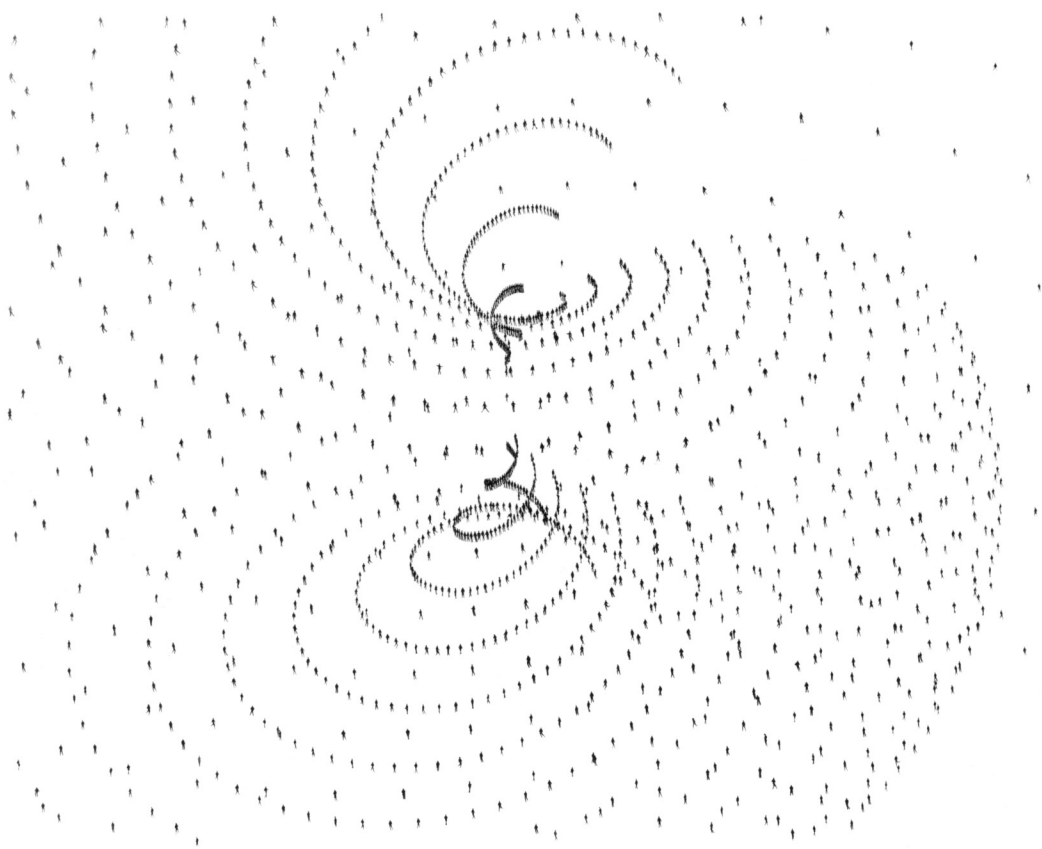
suggesting a complete erasure of the line between science and art, between mechanical construction and organic form.

The plan for *Nieuwe Hollandse Waterlinie*, 2000, proposes to transform an old string of forts and fortifications in the Netherlands into an ecologically sustainable public project involving bike paths, tree plantings, new water and flood management systems, a wildlife preserve, and windmills. The heart of the presentation is Denes's illustration of the *Crystal Fort*, which will be a non-military replacement for the old fortresses. The digital print shown here is visually striking — the intended glass fort is a circular conception of perfect, intricate symmetry that seems to sparkle and glow on the gallery wall, almost radiating a vitric green aura, and that recalls moments in art history of idealized architectural thought, such as the central building in Piero della Francesca's *Ideal City*, c. 1470, and its near repetition in Raphael's *Sposalizio della Vergine*, 1504.

The sheer beauty of so much of what is here gives the evidence of the integration of the intellect. Denes's math is sound, and it is lovely, creating forms of lyrical movement and drift. Her science is correct — it is also the stuff of art. And it is not the diversity of study but the integration of knowledge, and of the organs of knowing, that is at the heart of Denes's purpose. As is obvious from the exhibition, and as stated in the essay by Eleanor Heartney in the exhibition catalogue: "her work stresses interconnections between specialized bodies of knowledge. . . Reconciling opposites has remained her approach to art and life." As Denes puts it on one of the wall plaques, "I believe in uniting disciplines alienated by specialization, thus creating a powerful overview or summing up. My work is based on a philosophical view of the world to be shared with people of all ages and backgrounds." The ultimate purpose for Denes is one she makes clear — "The issues touched on in my work range between individual creation and social consciousness." For Denes, there appears to be no

separation. The highest, most demanding, most erudite exercises of the mind, of the spirit, serve a general good. The most exclusive is also the most generally valuable.

But there is another fusion, another identity of apparent opposites, that is the very soul of Denes's art, and evidently of her spirit, the spirit of authentic intelligence. As she is quoted in the catalogue essay: "We can move inward into inner space and out into the universe. . . The world seems to begin at the surface of our skin; there is a world beyond it and a world within, and the distance is about the same." There is the most distinctive mark of strength of intelligence — the outer world and the inner world appear to be the same. Or rather, they appear to stand for each other. Each suggests the other, suggests it undeniably — you cannot imagine one without thereby imagining the other.



Snail People— The Vortex, (detail) 1984, India ink on silk vellum 51"x62"

There is the true lyricism of intelligence, the lyricism that comes purely of thought. Everything represents everything else. Everything is a metaphor — not an invented symbol, but a vision that finds unity in diversity, and diversity in unity. To witness with the intelligence of the full spirit, the intelligence of the soul, is to witness mathematics in a forest, philosophy in the land, “nature articulated through human intelligence.” It is, as the visionary poet tells us, to see the world in a grain of sand; it is to experience eternity in an hour. It is to see as Agnes Denes sees — powerfully, with the eyes of authentic lyricism, with the true eyes of intelligence.

Agnes Denes: Projects for Public Spaces: A Retrospective
Samek Art Gallery, Bucknell University
Lewisburg, Pennsylvania
(Published in *NY Arts*, May 2003)