



HYPERION:  
ON THE FUTURE OF AESTHETICS

## The Self-Intricating Art of the Mind

Agnes Denes: Uprooted & Deified—The Golden Tree

BravinLee programs, New York, NY

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by Mark Daniel Cohen

The mounting of an exhibition of the art of Agnes Denes at the same time *Hyperion* has the exclusive privilege of publishing some of her literary work creates an unusual and happy opportunity. It is a circumstance that gives the chance of saying something more in the way of introducing her art to a readership than a normal introduction leaves room to do, and it gives readers in the New York area the chance to see for themselves the caliber of the author of her texts.

The exhibition at BravinLee programs is relatively small considering the scale of Denes's accomplishment over the years, but it is—as would be any properly curated exhibition by Denes of any scale—thoroughly apt for this purpose. The reason is rooted in the strength of Denes's work, and, more particularly, in the strength of the imagination that underlies and infuses, that accounts for the aesthetic virtue of, her art. There is a synecdochal quality to her individual works, a metonymic aspect, what we might now, in current terminology, call with some justification a fractal capability.

There stands a question for anyone considering art, a question that determines everything that may be done in the way of the consideration of art. It is a question much to the moment after a century that began with experimentation into the full range of what may be done with the traditional media of artistic creation and spent its second half in experimentation concerning what non-traditional media could be used and in what way they could be used for artistic creation. The question concerns the standards of judgment, the principles of legitimacy: What now constitutes authentic artistic accomplishment? What are the acceptable modalities of art? And what constitute credible criteria for excellence? Are all the areas of experimentation implicitly authorized now? In short, what must a work of art do? What makes it worthy of the special attention, and the special quality of respect, we grant a work of art merely by considering it to be art?

These questions are of significant concern and occupy a degree of special attention among those who discuss art. Debate over the issues arises still in the literature. It can be found in this publication as well as all those that are capable of managing a serious-minded approach to the art of the moment. It is our present business to determine what history has turned art into.

A credible position on the standard of final arbitration, on the ultimate requirement for art, is one that is exemplified by a small number of contemporary artists and by none more than Denes. It is the standard of sheer intelligence. It can be said that what art must be, at the least, is what anything of our manufacture must be to warrant serious examination: It must be smart—and that is all it must be. Regardless of the materials employed, of the techniques applied, of the protocols of expression and the formulae for “reading” the work, a sufficient degree of comprehension of subject matter sufficient to hold such comprehension is sufficiency enough. Put simply, if a work

of art is capable of holding power of mind, then it is worthy of holding our attention, and all other issues are available for legitimate debate. And they are available for legitimate debate specifically because they make possible sufficiency of comprehension. They are adequate to their function.

Intelligence, power of mind, then becomes the single unassailable and indispensable standard for judging works that are products of the life of the mind. And as the standard of pure intelligence alleviates the then arbitrary demands of other requirements—any medium or artistic practice is acceptable if it makes possible an expression of potent intellect, if it can be employed profitably by a potent intellect—so too it specifies qualities that mark all works of value. It gives the running thread among them, and one of the perennial designations of such potency is the fractal. Substantial acts of mind are recognizable not by their resultant observations, which might be anything, but by their workings. Mind always acts like a mind, and the intricacies of its operations cannot be diced. They are present in full complement wherever mind is in action, despite the scale of the focus. The consideration of the atom is as intricate as is the occupation with the stellar nursery. The moves of contemplation are the same.

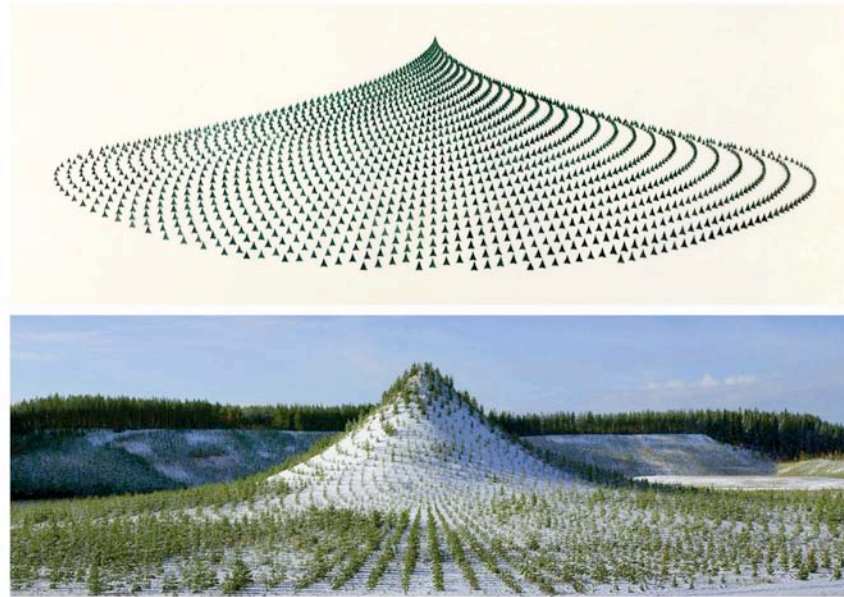
Denes's art is an art of a finely honed and widely informed intellect, and in the current exhibition one can see the regular gestures of depth of thought, as clearly and as dependably as one can find them throughout the full body of her art. These works, as much as any of her hand, of her mind, demonstrate that thought has its means. It has its strategies; it has its habits. One can see some of essentials of them aligned with and segmented into the local clusters of works in the gallery. One can see the machinery at work.

In the drawings—which are divided into two groups: Map Projections and Colorbursts—we see the analysis of protocols of the spatial distribution of information,

of the discretionary geometric modeling of data so as to disclose and examine its necessary relationships. The Map Projections particularly demonstrate through a series of topological transformations. Drawn images of the globe of the earth show it distorted into a variety of alternate shapes: a cube, an elongated hot-dog form, an ovoid, a pyramid, a spiraling snail's shell, and others. As those who know topology will recognize—and as the drawings, all of the same subject transformed, indicate—all the variants are variations of each other. They are all topologically alike—mathematically interchangeable. For as long as the formulae for the coding of information is coherent and comprehended, information remains intact. The fact that the spherical rendition of the earth is literally accurate is irrelevant from the point of view of the conceiving of information—it is all a formula, and all formulae are arbitrary. They serve only to encode, to visualize mentally, and it is the habit of the mind to explore the range of available protocols and to recognize that none is literally correct, or rather that literal accuracy is accidental and immaterial. We devise the forms of our understanding and must translate back, must decode, must reconstitute, to recover the truth.

In *Tree Mountain—A Living Time Capsule*—a 1983 environmental project that is represented in this exhibition by a detailed model and numerous drawings (see the introduction to Denes's "Manifesto, Mathematics in My Work & Other Essays" in this issue for a full description of the project and a statement of Denes's purpose)—we encounter the examination of and fascination with hidden order. The trees were planted in a complex geometric pattern, and their very regularity indicates the role of human intention, the imposition upon natural order. Yet, the regular geometric order—one of overlapping, criss-crossing spirals that are in accord with the Fibonacci series—is to be found in nature: most recognizably in the head of the sunflower. The human-imposed order here is a natural order, as natural as the spiraling of a snail's shell, transformed

into a globe of the earth, as natural as is the human being itself, and as is all it does and thinks. And the implication here should be noted: the order we see, or the one we typically notice, is not the only order present. As we code information in different ways, as demonstrated in the Map Projections, we may be unearthing order that is present of itself, not merely an epistemological artifice of ours, and Denes's drawing of the earth with depressions at its poles is an accurate representation of the magnetic field of the earth. We must ask ourselves which is more the truth on which we live: the shape of the rock of the planet or the cut of its electromagnetism.



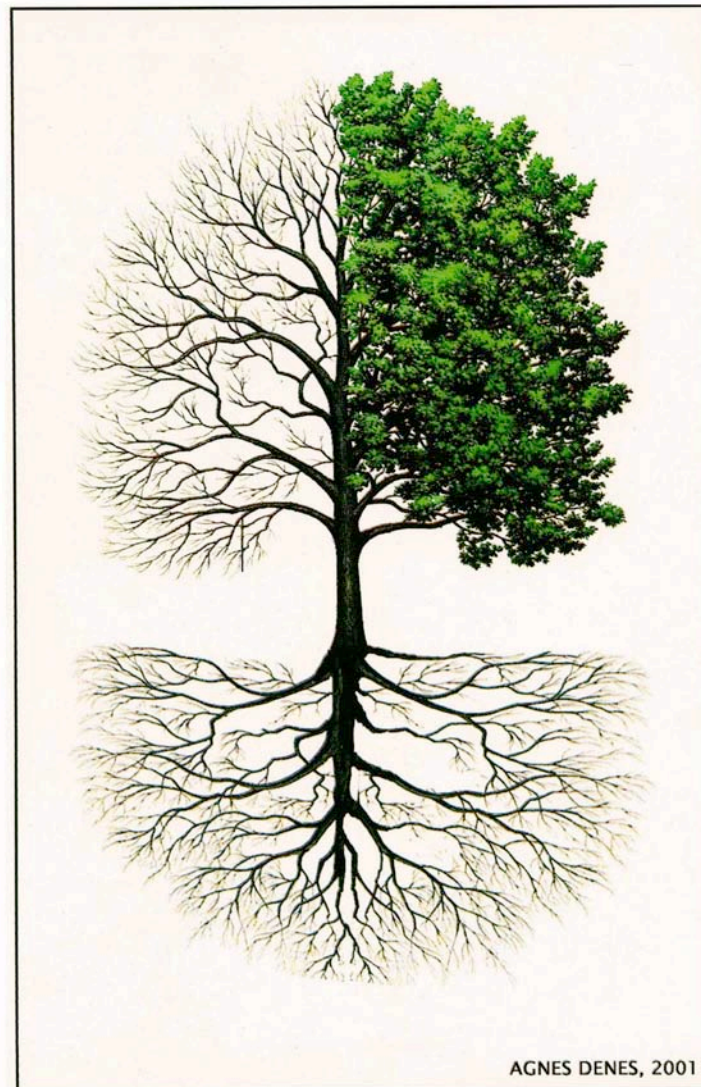
Agnes Denes, *Tree Mountain—Proposal for a Forest—1.5 x .15 miles—10,000 Trees*, 1983  
© 1983 Agnes Denes

Denes's *Wheatfield—A Confrontation* is another environmental project, from 1982, in which the artist planted and harvested a field of wheat in the landfill at the foot of the then-present twin towers. The project is represented in the exhibition by a series of documentary photographs. In them, we witness not the transformation or

transposition of intellectual formulae of ordering but the confrontation of seemingly opposing, irreconcilable visions of the world: not natural order and mathematical order becoming the same, but nature and culture, evidently not the exchangeable. Here, the issue is not the discovered identity of the apparently different but the relationship of the palpably unlike, the intricate relations between what cannot be transformed into each other. The wheatfield and the city are of different orders, there is a jolt of inappropriateness in laying one in the lap of the other, and yet they are interdependent. The city depends for survival on the field of natural growth, and what is grown is the stuff of commerce, of business, the trade that grows a city. This is not the identity but the harmony of seeming opposites, the search not for interchangeability but for balance.

The subtlest of all the mind's exercises is metaphor, subtler than intricate interplays of related intellectual models, and it is found in the project that gives the title to this exhibition, *Uprooted and Deified—The Golden Tree, 2001*, a work that was presented at the Goteborgs Internationella Konstbiennial in Sweden in 2001 and at the Venice Biennale in 2003, in which a tree was uprooted, painted gold, and installed horizontally. The work itself is too large for this exhibition space and is represented here by a print. The hovering horizontal tree, with its roots intact and mirroring its branches in innate bristling symmetry, is, according to Denes, symbolic of the sacrificial lamb and the Golden Calf. It is mark of, an example of, intersections of thoughts, contacts that are not equivalences or transformations of each other. There are thoughts that, simply, are not parallel—they are not identical, not even deceptively, and so eventually they must intersect, they must touch at some point that is their only relation, identify in strictly one aspect without being identical in any aspect. And that relation is itself not transformable into any other expression. Taken far enough, all thoughts touch at some point, all are related, and we have no *lingua franca* for what is found at the

nodes. There is a network of the substance of the mind, it is somehow all of a piece, and in principle, from each node, the entire self-intricating system could be recomposed. But there is no math for working that system of relations—not yet—no rigor for playing out the intrigue in the mystery of thought, the mystery that centers the logic of its workings.



Agnes Denes, *Uprooted and Deified—The Golden Tree*, 2001

© 2001 Agnes Denes

All standards of judgment must possess a certain quality of self-evidence if they are to withstand their own application in practice. A standard for judging other matters cannot be in need of anterior justification, else we are in the infinite regress in which everything must be supported by something else. To judge is to take something for granted, and it must be something that has the power to compel at least the speculative consent of others. Intelligence in and of itself, intelligence *per se*, is one self-evidently significant quality we can accept. It is our best bet for a definition of what is worthy, for it is inherently the case that, put simply, it is good to be smart—it is better than the alternative. Intellectual prowess provides a standard for art in a time when all other requirements and definitions are up for grabs. It is not a Nietzschean definition, not a capability for art that is transformative, that gives a vision of the reality of the world otherwise closed off for us, but it is a sense of art that Nietzsche, on most days at least, would not have disdained. It also sets a profound responsibility for art, for as with all employments of the mind, with the smallest slippage in capability, there is a sharp falling off in result. The implicit demands of incisive thought are rigorous; its inherent requirements are unforgiving. And it is a responsibility that Agnes Denes has lived up to for decades, throughout the body of her achievement.

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