

BROOKLYN RAIL

Agnes Denes: *Absolutes & Intermediates*

By Marcia E. Vetrocq, December 2019/January 2020



Installation view: *Agnes Denes: Absolutes and Intermediates*, The Shed, New York, 2019.
Photo: Dan Bradica. Courtesy the Shed.

Agnes Denes’s “MANIFESTO” of 1970 is printed prominently on walls not far from the entrances to the two galleries that house *Absolutes and Intermediates*, her career-spanning retrospective at The Shed. At once direct and extravagant, adamant and ardent, her list of 20 vow-like conditions, each launched by a gerund, commences with “working with a paradox.” Denes affirms “being creatively obsessive,” “visualizing the invisible,” “seeing in new ways,” and, lastly, “persisting in the eternal search.” Unlike most manifestos of vanguard art, which give voice to collective solidarity, Denes’s is a resolutely individual pledge, which may account for its sustained force throughout the last half-century. From the start, Denes has wielded mathematics, philosophy, and unflinching logic as the instruments of an intellectually formidable practice that is driven by a passion—almost a hunger—for discovery. The fiercely inventive track of her art amounts to a comprehensive engagement with Western rationalism, from Antiquity to the present. Neither a disciple nor an heir, Denes is an adept and a skeptic. Her art is a singular reckoning with centuries of Western thought, as if she’s urging that tradition to just get over itself and start yielding fearless new outcomes. To use the word much favored by Denes, today no less than in 1970, her means and ends embrace paradox.

Most of the more than 150 works on view are housed in The Shed’s fourth-floor gallery, where a loosely chronological ordering and a compact yet uncongested layout create a welcoming environment for the 88-year-old Denes’s first full-dress exhibition in New York. Upon entering, we encounter an array of intricate and often recondite graphic works. Documentation for Denes’s well known and justly celebrated *Wheatfield – A Confrontation* (1982) is visible midway across the space. Natural light beckons from windows at the gallery’s far end.



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The show’s titular drawing, *Absolutes & Intermediates* (1970), rendered in colored ink on paper conscripted from AT&T Bell Laboratories (where Denes had been a fellow), sets the tone for the early works. Printed with a circular graph intended to trace the flow of current through a circuit, the sheet has been turned on its side by Denes and inscribed with minute notations that indicate stages in human and cosmic development. Surrounding bands of inscriptions complicate the information. The rendering accommodates the curved universe of theoretical physics in a suggestively cylindrical field of successive stages that seems to gather momentum and plunge downward to nothingness at the bottom. Fairly pulsing with compression, the small drawing is a knowingly quixotic effort to synthesize multiple theories of space and time from every pertinent discipline. *Absolutes & Intermediates* looks as sober as a navigation chart, as mystically intricate as a Buddhist thangka, and as securely beyond refutation or confirmation as you would expect a diagram of all existence to be.

In a more elastic and occasionally absurdist demonstration of erudition, Denes’s *Isometric Systems in Isotropic Space – Map Projections* (1973–79) marry the axonometric method of technical drawing to the nonhierarchical cosmic space of the Big Bang theory. She projects the familiar grid of latitude and longitude onto a variety of unlikely shapes (dodecahedron, pyramid as seen from below, snail, doughnut, hot dog) to which the mercilessly distorted continents adhere. Denes’s mordant sense of humor is in full gear in a pair of dadaesque machine drawings (1969 and 1970) that visualize “human hang-ups” and “liberated sex.” Bawdier still are the *Body Prints* subtitled “Napoleons overlooking the Elba” (1971). Here Denes used fingerprinting ink to stamp a police line-up of vertical penises, this time on IBM graph paper helpfully lettered with the cautionary (and oddly Haacke-like) notification “Dimensions on this sheet vary with humidity.”



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At the heart of the exhibition is *Wheatfield – A Confrontation* (1982), Denes’s ephemeral yet enduring environmental project whose cogent politics and visual poetry remain unsurpassed. Cultivating two fertile acres of soil spread atop the temporarily undeveloped Battery Park landfill, Denes established a startling spatial proximity between the pastoral and the urban, food and finance, the human endeavor of small-scale agriculture and the inhumanity of corporate greed. Documentary videos and TV clips about the project join the well-known photographic views of the field, the high towers of the World Trade Center, a souvenir-size Statue of Liberty, and Denes herself, staff in hand, surveying the thriving grain like a modern-day Demeter.

Denes’s other land projects, realized and not, are documented nearby. Among the former is the magnificent, flourishing *Tree Mountain – A Living Time Capsule* (1992–96), a forest of 11,000 trees planted in Finland by 11,000 volunteers according to a pinwheeling pattern that Denes based on the proportions of the golden section and the growth patterns of sunflowers and pineapples. As yet unrealized is *A Forest for New York* (2014–), her proposal for a 100,000-tree planting on the former Edgemere landfill, which extends into Jamaica Bay. The petal-like configuration of forested lobes can be studied in a table-top model that is one of three projects commissioned this year by The Shed for the exhibition. The other commissioned models are presented in the second-floor gallery, where the exhibition concludes with a marked change of tone.

The dramatic centerpieces of the final gallery are the spotlighted Model for *Teardrop – Monument to Being Earthbound* and the internally illuminated, 270-inch-tall Model for *Probability Pyramid – Study for Crystal Pyramid*. Fine, delicate drawings on vellum for each (1984 and 1976, respectively) plus additional drawings from the “Pyramid Series” (1970–) and its subgroup, “Future City,” are displayed on walls and vitrines surrounded by pools of shadow in the windowless hall. Aimed at enhancing the visionary power of Denes’s art, the presentation struck me as needlessly portentous. It also points to features of the works that feel less relevant and less optimistic now than when they were initially put forward. The anticipation of construction technologies that will be developed in some distant century and the seductive glow of the transparent superstructure both bring to mind the siteless dreamings of architecture’s past, from the gargantuan geometries of Boullée to the crystalline fantasies of German Expressionism. Scaled up as sleek models that foretell a monumentality whose true necessity is never established, the projects feel drained of the ineffable conceptual warmth that underlies even Denes’s most relentlessly math-driven efforts.



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In the exhibition and throughout its catalogue, Denes is praised as a prophet, a visionary, a universalist, even a wizard. Lucy Lippard dubs her “Promethea” in an affectionate essay. References to Leonardo da Vinci abound. But I think Denes’s greatest gift lies in her being uniquely and responsibly in tune with conditions and crises beyond the bubble of the art world. *Wheatfield – a Confrontation* was not “prophetic.” It was a brilliantly conceived summa of and response to the leading ecological concerns of its time. The first Earth Day had been declared in 1970. By the early ’80s the ecological red alert centered on pollution, population growth, and the world’s food supply. More than three decades later, Denes’s response to the catastrophic connection between heedless development and climate change is just as sharp. She begins her 2014 artist’s statement for *A Forest for New York* by writing:

Last year I embarked on a project to create a forest in New York on the last open space before it is swallowed up by condos and shopping malls. The area where I planted and harvested *Wheatfield – A Confrontation* of two acres of wheat in 1982 became Battery Park City, a complex of office spaces and condos and the city reversed to its old congestion. The pressure to develop is ever present, more so in a city like New York. In dealing with climate change and environmental necessities, this project magnifies the need for the right kind of development: cultural and environmental.

As you approach the fourth-floor window just a few steps away from the *Forest* model, you’ll see the shoulder of the Vessel hulking into view as if menacing the nearby patch of planting and benches, benevolently called Hudson Yards Public Square. Tall, blank glass façades enclose the prospect. The birth of Denes’s healing plan for the “last open space” in New York just about coincided with the groundbreaking for Hudson Yards, the nation’s largest private real estate development. The overarching paradox of *Absolutes and Intermediates* is, of course, its presentation by The Shed, an appendage to that development. I can’t say for sure if this particular paradox contributed to my unease amid the hushed theatricality of the exhibition’s finale. But before exiting The Shed, I returned upstairs to the beginning, to the math, to the measure, to the earth, to the light, to the hand, to the mind, to the imagination, as honored in the endlessly challenging art of Agnes Denes.