

FEB/MAR 2009

The Human Argument: The Writings of Agnes Denes

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Like a chapbook or a treatise, the collected writings of Agnes Denes are sheathed between plain and precisely designed manila covers. Yet *The Human Argument* is no arch Conceptualist tract. If Denes is recognized as one of the earliest concept-based artists, since the late '60s her practice has nevertheless reveled in voluminously detailed drawings that are as lush as they are rigorous and in carefully tended yet plush, shimmering fields of wheat captured in deep-focus photographs, many of which are reproduced here. Similarly, her interest in linguistic codes began bare-bones but quickly veered into the mystical, as her writings recount: *Morse Code Message*, 1969–75, appears to be just that, dots and dashes etched into Plexiglas, but the code represents biblical passages that are to be

translated into music; the essay “The Strange Story of Ancient Egyptians Visiting Modern-Day SoHo and How They Took My Art” (1974–75) chronicles the making of a set of prints with curiously disappearing and reappearing hieroglyphs.

Denes began her career as a pragmatist who would have scoffed at such tales of the occult. She embraced entropy as the positivist, thermodynamic explanation of our world—nothing more and nothing less. The scattered nouns in her *Book of Dust* (1972–88) are organized into essayistic and pictorial descriptions of “ancient dust” (zircon, fossilized bacteria), chemical formulae of “happy dusts” (angel dust and peyote among the particulate variants), and physics flowcharts that lead, for instance, from the “Age of Free Quarks” to the moment of “Boiling Planets.” Unlike some of Denes’s more transcendently inclined peers, such as Ruth Vollmer and Robert Smithson, the artist’s obsession with systems and their dissolution has found living embodiment in workaday agriculture. *Rice/Tree/Burial*, 1968–79, is chronicled here as a “private ritual,” but one that “announced my commitment to environmental issues and human concerns.” In 1968, Denes planted rice in Sullivan County, New York, chained a group of trees together to constrain their growth, and buried a series of her haiku at the site. While the rice planting was a generative process and the tree chaining an act of inhibition and decay, the text burial was, for Denes, a synthesis of the life force and the death drive in an act of cognition and ideation. She represents these events with photographs, a triangular chart, and a free-verse rendition of the project. So, too, the work itself changed over time and triggered unforeseen events: When *Rice/Tree/Burial* was reenacted in upstate New York in 1977, because of the project’s proximity to the Love Canal the rice grew mutant, radioactive.

Rice/Tree/Burial has been called the first ecological artwork, and it differs markedly from the pictorial cast of subsequent Land art. Rather than having geometric forms that could be apprehended from above, Denes’s “Eco-Logic” projects were often inchoate, such as her famous *Wheatfield—A Confrontation*, 1982, a sprawling field planted in the Battery Park Landfill in lower Manhattan, and *Sheep*, 1998, in which the artist brought a rambling herd into the pristine gardens of the American Academy in Rome.

Denes also explored the warping of scrupulous order in her map projections of 1973–79, globes topologically twisted into doughnuts and snails, and in her “Pyramid” series, begun in 1970 as pyramidal graphs constructed from teeming elements of tiny people or numbers based on Pascal’s triangle (a numeric arrangement that, among other uses, serves to chart probabalistic outcomes). It is striking that Denes could so thoroughly confound old oppositions between drawing and diagram—the embodied versus the projected, the direct trace versus the mediated matrix—and that she actually represented many of these linear forms with fields or bodies or animals. Her quiet and intimate notes, her patient and logical deductions, found shape in the quivering and breathing beings of the real world.

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