HYPERALLERGIC

Agnes Denes's Future Imperfect

Spanning half a century, this retrospective reveals Denes's art to be so forward-looking that some of it remains ahead of its time even today.

Louis Bury January 4, 2020

Installation view, *Agnes Denes: Absolutes and Intermediates* at the Shed (all photos by Dan Bradica, courtesy the Shed)

The most iconic image of Agnes Denes's most iconic artwork, *Wheatfield—A Confrontation* (1982), depicts the artist standing in a field of golden, waist-high wheat that she has grown, incongruously, next to the lower Manhattan skyline. The contrast between the bright crop field and the drab skyscrapers succinctly captures the confrontation that the work stages between rural and urban space. Most other images of *Wheatfield* also capture this contrast. What makes John McGrail's 1982 *Life* magazine photograph emblematic is its inclusion of Denes, who holds a tall wooden staff (a prop from McGrail) and gazes into the distance with a prophetic squint.

The Shed's soft-spoken retrospective, ***Agnes Denes: Absolutes and Intermediates***, makes plain that the artist's oeuvre, spanning a half century, is so forward-looking parts of it remain ahead of their time even today. To be sure, Denes's work has always been a product of its day, particularly her late 1960s and early '70s experiments in Conceptualism, Land Art, and Computer Art. But even as she swam with that era's art-historical currents, Denes looked well past the horizon of what was then visible.

Her numerous "Philosophical Drawings," each an attempt to visualize some branch of human knowledge, encapsulate her work's vast, often cosmic scope, as well as its impish undertones. "The Human Argument II" (1969-2009), for example, consists of a large ink triangle drawn on graph paper, whose hundreds of interior triangles each contains a proposition in sentential logic, such as "P⊃Q," the totality of which are supposed to represent, in a satire of Enlightenment reason, "all possible human arguments." The drawing "Absolutes & Intermediates" (1970) takes a similar, mock-synoptic tack. Upon a circular nest of grids used by AT&T Bell Laboratories to chart "Impedance or Admittance Coordinates," Denes has added tiny ink marks and labels — "Age of Atoms"; "Age of Dead Stars"; "Homo Machinus"; "Homo Futurus" — to create a fanciful cosmogony that has the visual and rhetorical trappings of schematic rigor.

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Occasionally, the veneer of Conceptual austerity gives way to sight gag silliness, as when her 1971 "Napoleonic Series" depicts the behatted French Emperor as smudgy, penile-shaped bars in

a bar graph. More often, the satire is subdued to the point that it's hard to perceive. For example, Denes's mid-'70s "Maps Projections" — in which she used isometric projection to render gridded maps of the earth in shapes other than a globe — read as sincere thought experiments in alternative mapping (such as pyramid-, egg-, and dodecahedron-shaped earths) despite the sporadic gag (for example, a hot dog-shaped earth). Likewise, the rigid latticework of her numerous "Human Argument" triangles evince a fondness for visual order that belies their satirical intent.

Denes's reluctant humor makes most sense when understood as the flip side of her visionary idealism. Her work aspires toward the absolute — toward utopic, formalist transcendence — even while acknowledging its absurd impossibility. The drawings, the core of her artistic output, are thus not only quasi-systematic knowledge schemas but also droll compromises with an imperfect world — aesthetic intermediates between ideation and actuality. Their schematic quality allows Denes to realize on paper ideas that might not otherwise be plausible for pragmatic or technological reasons. In particular, her *Pyramid Series* (1970-present), which includes undulating geometric studies for self-sustained outer space eco-housing, evidences the loftiness of her speculations.

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To provide Denes's ideas greater material substance, the Shed commissioned three new sculptural models that previously had been realized only as drawings. Yet the models reinforce the almost

Platonic gulf between aesthetic ideal and physical object, especially the two centerpieces of an exhibition floor dedicated to the *Pyramid Series*. “Model for Teardrop—Monument to Being Earthbound” (2019), an incandescent, soccer-ball-sized teardrop that levitates several inches above its base by means of electromagnets, cannot exist on its envisioned monumental scale because magnet technology isn’t currently strong enough. “Model for Probability Pyramid—Study for Crystal Pyramid” — a 17-foot-tall pyramid of translucent, internally illuminated 3-D-printed blocks — has greater stature, but its resemblance to a shimmering house of cards gives it an ethereal quality.

Even Denes’s more fully realized, firmly terrestrial works, the ones for which she’s justly renowned, can have an aura of unreality about them. *Wheatfield*’s surreal juxtaposition between farmland and cityscape created a hallucinatory vista. When seen from an aerial vantage or represented in a scale model, *Tree Mountain – A Living Time Capsule—11,000 Trees, 11,000 People, 400 Years* (conceived 1982; realized 1992–96) — a landmark Finnish government commission in which volunteers planted pine trees in the pattern of the golden ratio around a 125-foot-high conical mound in the country’s Ylöjärvi gravel pits — resembles an alien crop formation.

As *Tree Mountain*’s title indicates, Denes played with the idea that artworks can be time capsules. The metaphor makes intuitive sense, in that older artworks often provide an unwitting record of seismic cultural shifts. Photographs of *Wheatfield*, for example, today appear more mirage-like than ever: the wheatfield has given way to Battery Park City’s manicured high rises; the Twin Towers have disappeared from the skyline like missing teeth. “Human Dust” (1969), which occupies a fittingly central position on the main exhibition floor, offers similar big picture perspective on time’s passage. In it, a glass bowl of actual human remains sits alongside a fictitious memorial text that purports, with dry humor, to quantify the deceased’s imaginary existence (“He ate 56,000 meals, slept 146,850 hours, and moved his bowels 18,548 times”).

But the time capsule conceit should also be understood in a literal sense, as a way, writes Denes in *Tree Mountain*’s supplemental text, to “carry our concepts into an unknown time in the future.” Like an actual time capsule, her artistic time capsules are endeavors to preserve aspects of the present so as to communicate with the future. In other words, Denes sometimes made work for an audience that didn’t yet exist, and one that (if and when it exists) may not recognize the art as such. It’s an approach that, along with her oeuvre’s protean, cross-disciplinary character and her status as an ambitious female artist working in historically male-dominated genres, helps account for why she has been under-appreciated in her lifetime.

One of her most prescient time capsule works, *Rice/Tree/Burial* (1968; 1977–79), while known, remains a hidden gem. The ritualistic performance, which first took place in private and then was reprised at Lewiston, New York’s Artpark, consisted of three symbolic parts: the planting of rice;

the chaining of trees; and the burying of the artist's haiku poetry. The black and white photographic documentation, which shows Denes digging holes in the ground and pulling heavy-duty chains around trees, appears grittier, more earthbound, than her typical imagery. For the Artpark version, Denes also buried a time capsule in the ground, her first incorporation of one into an artwork. The capsule contains college students' responses to an existential questionnaire; above ground, a placard stipulates that the capsule is not to be opened until the year 2979.

The performance's environmentalist ethos was well ahead of its time — particularly its anticipation of the need, today greater than ever, for rituals that address the psychic costs of ecological loss. But what elevates *Rice/Tree/Burial* beyond just a forward-looking idea is what also keeps it grounded: Denes's performative incorporation of her own body. The prosaic images of her squatting, digging, measuring, pulling, and planting stand out in an oeuvre brimming with quixotic architectural schemes. The photos are unintentional reminders of the great distance, as well as the modest yet essential human labor, that separates present from future, planting from harvest, vision from its realization. With Cassandra-esque patience, Denes has been performing some of that labor, through art, since before most of us even knew it was needed.

Agnes Denes: Absolutes and Intermediates *continues at the Shed (545 West 30th Street, NYC) through March 22.*
