

The New York Times

By Holland Cotter Nov. 7, 2019

At 88, Agnes Denes Finally Gets the Retrospective She Deserves

She set out to change humanity. Now a superbly installed survey at the Shed charts this visionary artist's 50-year journey.



A photograph of Agnes Denes, standing amid her 1982 public work, "Wheatfield — A Confrontation," in Lower Manhattan. Her career-spanning exhibition, "Agnes Denes: Absolutes and Intermediates," is on view at the Shed.Credit...Agnes Denes and Leslie Tonkonow Artworks + Projects; John McGrall

We'll be lucky this art season if we get another exhibition as tautly beautiful as "Agnes Denes: Absolutes and Intermediates" at the Shed. And we'll be right to ponder why this artist, who was born in Budapest 88 years ago and has lived in New York City for more than 60 years, is only now having a retrospective here.

Must neglect be the price paid by brilliant art that lies outside ready marketing categories, that baffles conventional critical thinking, that manages to be, paradoxically, mortality-haunted and hopeful? Too often the answer is "yes," particularly if the art is by a woman.

I learned of Ms. Denes late, in 1982, by which time she already had a significant career. I was living in Lower Manhattan, two blocks from the Hudson River and an empty grass-stubbled urban prairie that had been formed by landfill excavated from the World Trade Center building site. (Battery Park City sits there now.)

One spring day I noticed a truck dumping fresh earth at the site, then people digging long furrows and sowing seeds. In early summer green shoots came up, grew tall, turned tawny yellow. By mid-August, two-acres worth of waist-high wheat was ripe for cutting.

Kansas had landed in Manhattan! If you stood in the middle of the field — and anyone could — you had views of the twin towers rising nearby and the Statue of Liberty off to the south. The scent there that hot summer was pure country (as were the bugs). Then one day a thresher showed up and harvested the crop. I wasn't around for that, but when I dropped by the landfill later I remember feeling shocked and dismayed to find the field bare, the wheat gone.



If you stood in the middle of the wheatfield, Holland Cotter writes, you had views of the twin towers rising nearby and the Statue of Liberty off to the south. Credit...Agnes Denes and Leslie Tonkonow Artworks + Projects



Once harvested, the wheat traveled to 28 cities across the globe in an exhibition called “The International Art Show for the End of World Hunger.” Credit...Agnes Denes and Leslie Tonkonow Artworks + Projects

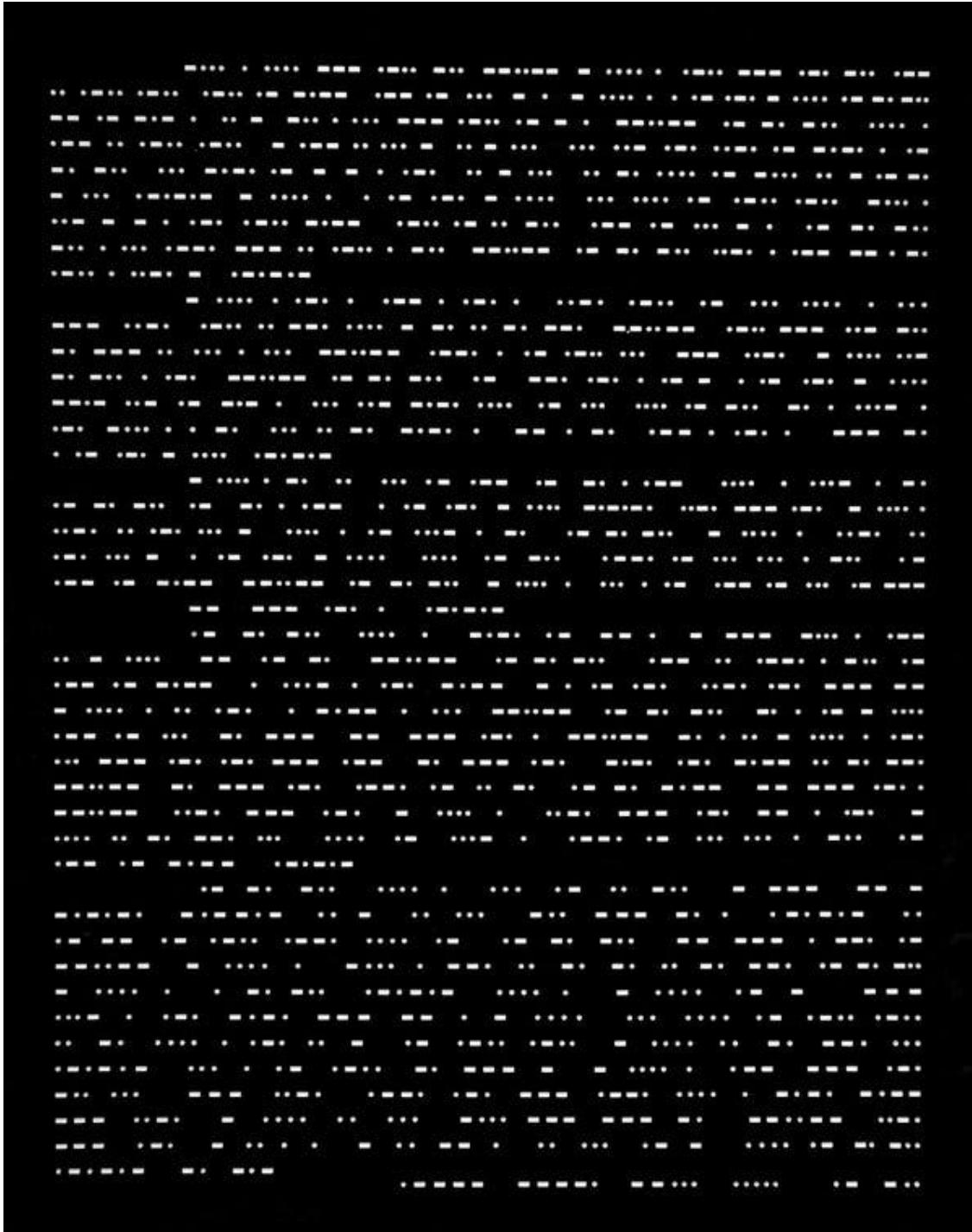
The planting was a work of environmental art conceived and produced by Ms. Denes, with the help of a small crew, on a commission from the Public Art Fund. The title she gave the project — “Wheatfield — A Confrontation” — nailed its political intent, though you understood it, without prompting, at the sight of two acres of breeze-swept natural bounty, accessible to all, sprouting beneath the silos of capitalist greed that were the twin towers. (The wheat ended up traveling to 28 cities across the globe in an exhibition called “The International Art Show for the End of World Hunger.”)

You can still sense the power of that image from documentary photographs and a 1982 video of the artist being interviewed by the NBC newscaster Jane Pauley, all on view on the Shed’s fourth floor, where the superbly installed survey of nearly 150 works, spanning Ms. Denes’s career, begins.

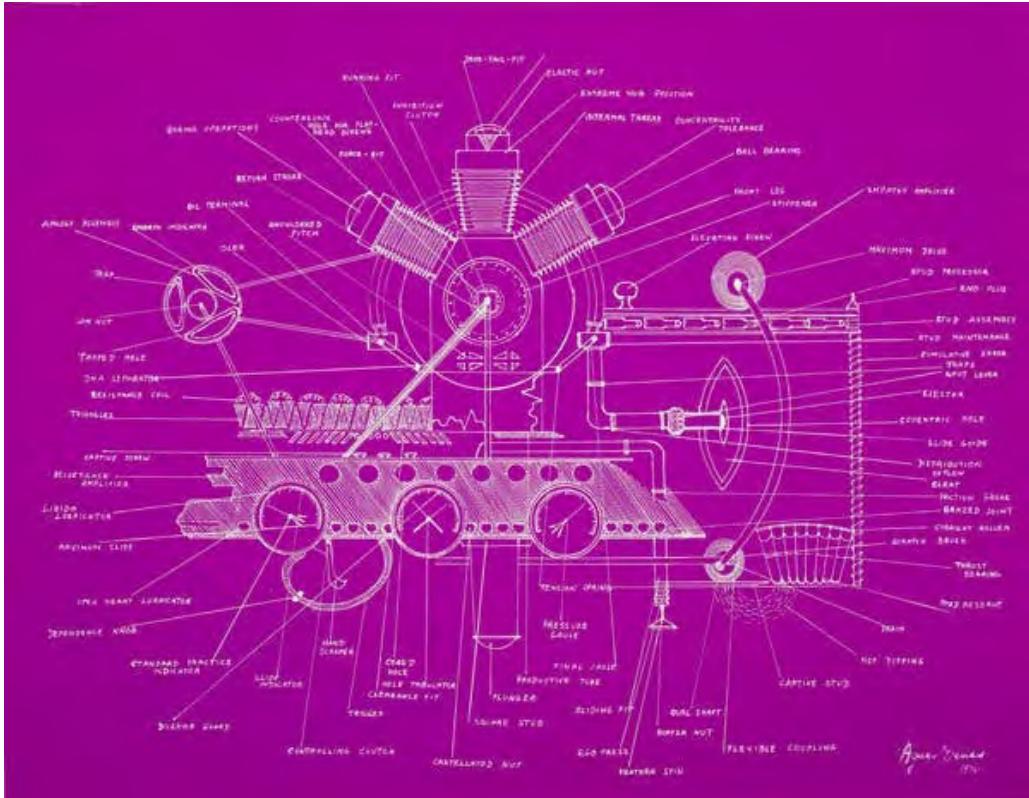
Her focus on ecology, on the fear of present decay and the hope for future survival is clear from the start in sequential shots of a 1968 solo performance, “Rice/Tree/Burial,” done in upstate New York, in which she planted grains of rice, bound trees with chains and buried time-capsule copies of her own poems. Yet most of her work, early and late, is the form of meticulously executed diagrammatic drawings based on scientific and philosophical subjects: the workings of the brain, the complexities of language, the possibilities of post-Anthropocene habitation — in short, the fundamentals of what she is not afraid to refer to as “human existence.”



Ms. Denes during a re-enactment of "Rice/Tree/Burial" (1977-79) in Lewiston, N.Y. For the work, first realized in 1968, she planted grains of rice and buried copies of her poems. Credit...Agnes Denes and Leslie Tonkonow Artworks + Projects
Image



In "Morse Code Message" (1969-1975), religion and ethics are the artist's main concerns. It translates biblical passages into a language of dashes and dots.Credit...Debbie and Glenn August; Stan Narten



Ms. Denes's elaborate 1970 drawing "Liberated Sex Machine" reduces the grand opera of sexual coupling to a user-unfriendly instructional chart. Credit...Art Institute of Chicago; Art Resource

In certain word-intensive pieces, like “Manifesto” (1969), which appears large on a wall outside the show, a tendency to abstract loftiness is tempered by plain-style language, with results that read like concrete poetry. Other, more purely graphic drawings have the flawless crispness of digital prints. (Ms. Denes was a pioneer in applying computer technology to art and in the 1970s was already forecasting the fate of knowledge-as-truth in a coming age of information overload.)

Religion and ethics enter the picture in a work in low relief called “Morse Code Message” (1969-1975). Made from bits of white plastic attached to a dark plexiglass ground, it translates biblical passages in which God lays down the law for mankind into a language — supposedly universal — of dashes and dots.

And there's humor. An avowed feminist and one of the founders, in 1972, of the all-women A.I.R. Gallery (then in SoHo, now in Dumbo, Brooklyn), Ms. Denes takes satirical jabs at the workings of gender in an elaborate 1970 drawing, "Liberated Sex Machine," that reduces the grand opera of sexual coupling to a user-unfriendly instructional chart.

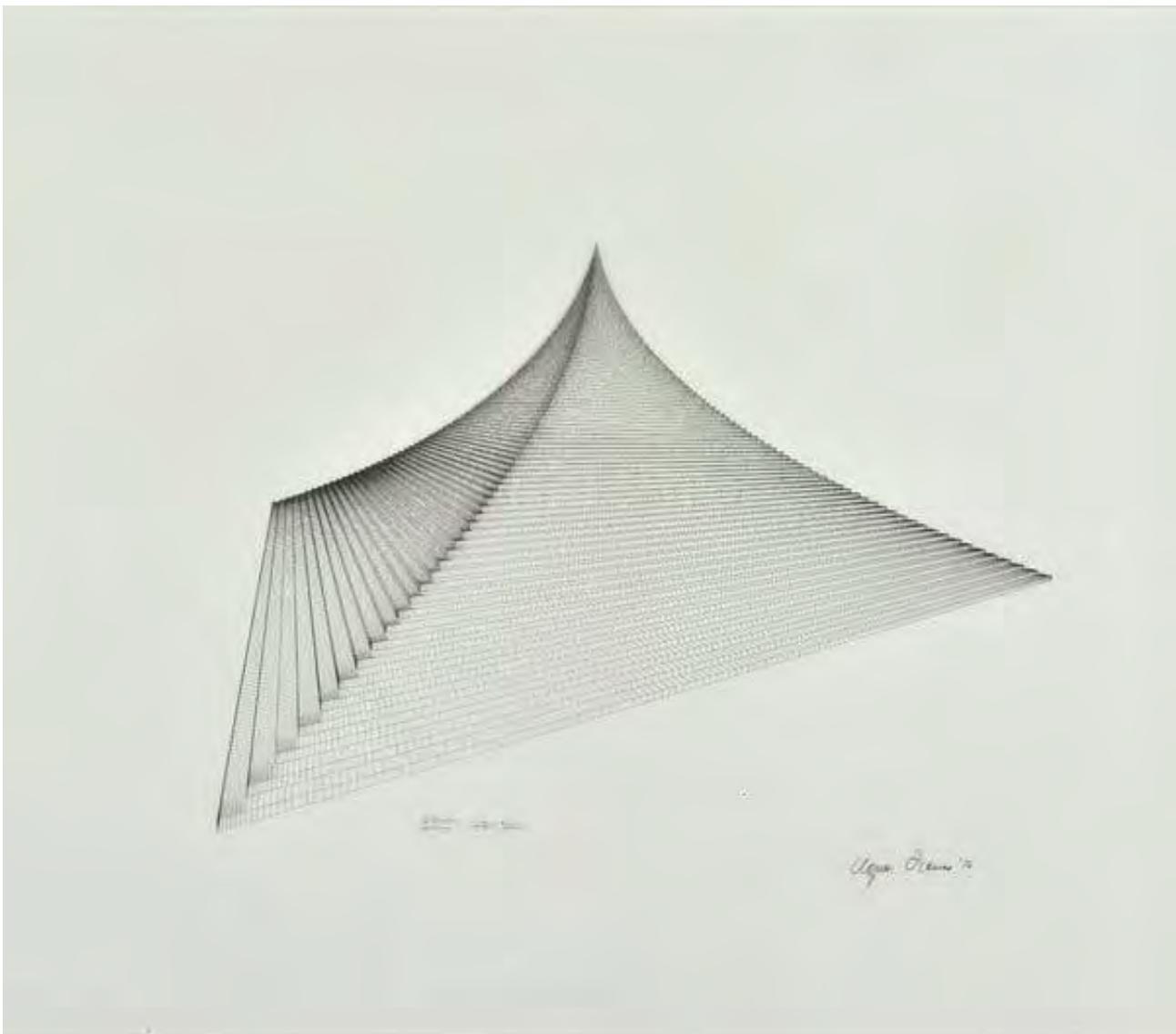
All of this probably qualifies in some sense as Conceptual Art, which would make Ms. Denes a rare participant in a mostly male category. Yet her work has a speculative breadth and, most important, an attention to visual presence that much classic Conceptual work does not. She has basically carved out an independent, label-free niche for herself and has been occupying and expanding it for over 50 years.

Visionary is one label that does apply, though the art world has never been sure what to do with it, whether to trust it. Over the years, as she has taken on increasingly elaborate ecological projects, her drawings, which she calls a form of “visual philosophy” — have grown more ambitious. They include distorted world maps, in which the geopolitical relations we’re familiar with are unfixed. There are designs for cities that are also space stations, vehicles for exploration but also for escape.

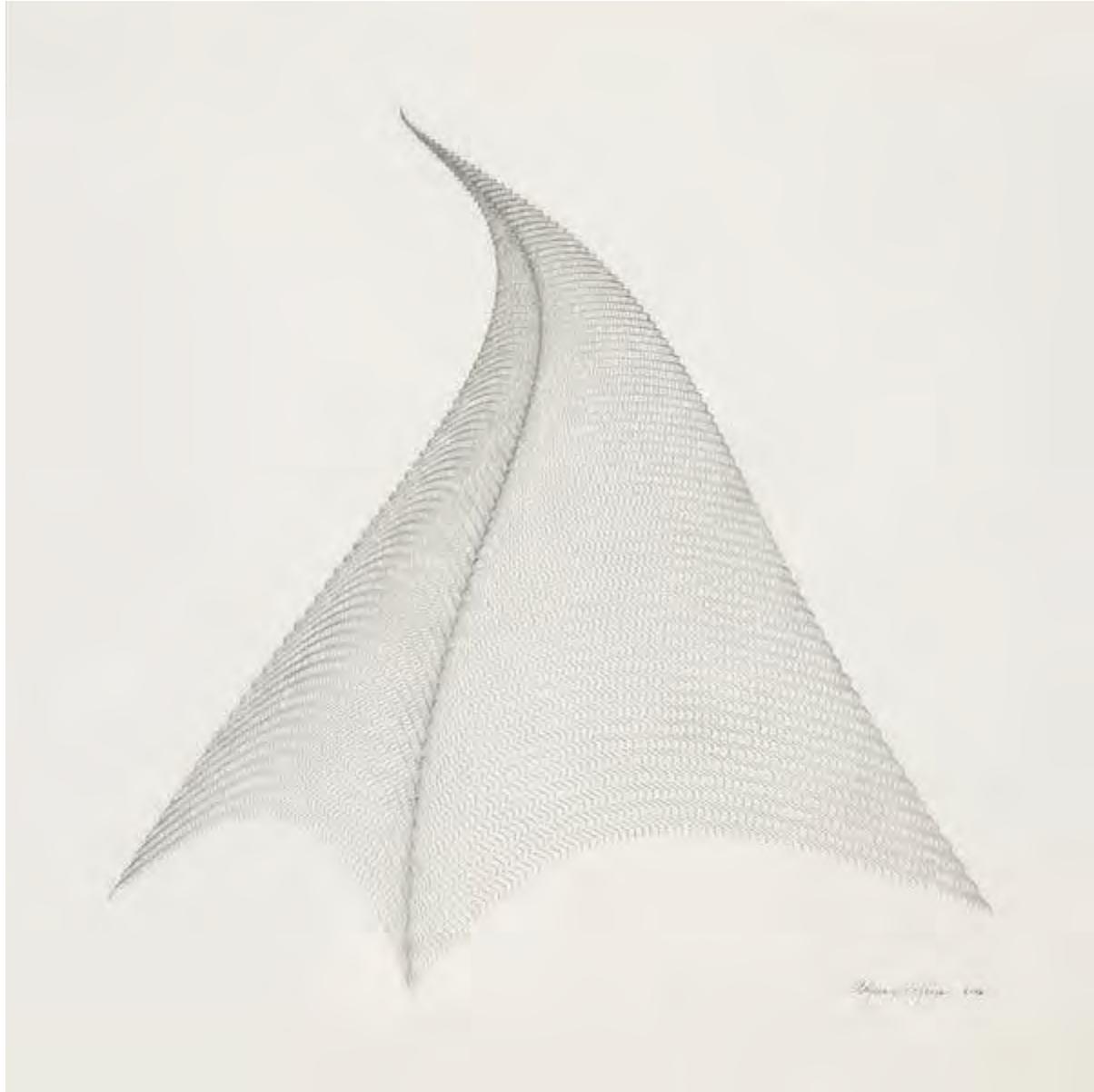
Many of the designs are based on the ancient, energy-channeling form of the pyramid, but the pyramid is now relieved of weight and monumental function. Ordinarily rigid and vertically directed, the pyramid, in Ms. Denes’s drawings, stretches and twists, swells like an egg, curls like a snail, flies like a bird. Everything in the world, as this artist sees it, is in flux, subject to growth and decay, a dynamic that is dramatically embodied in her public projects.



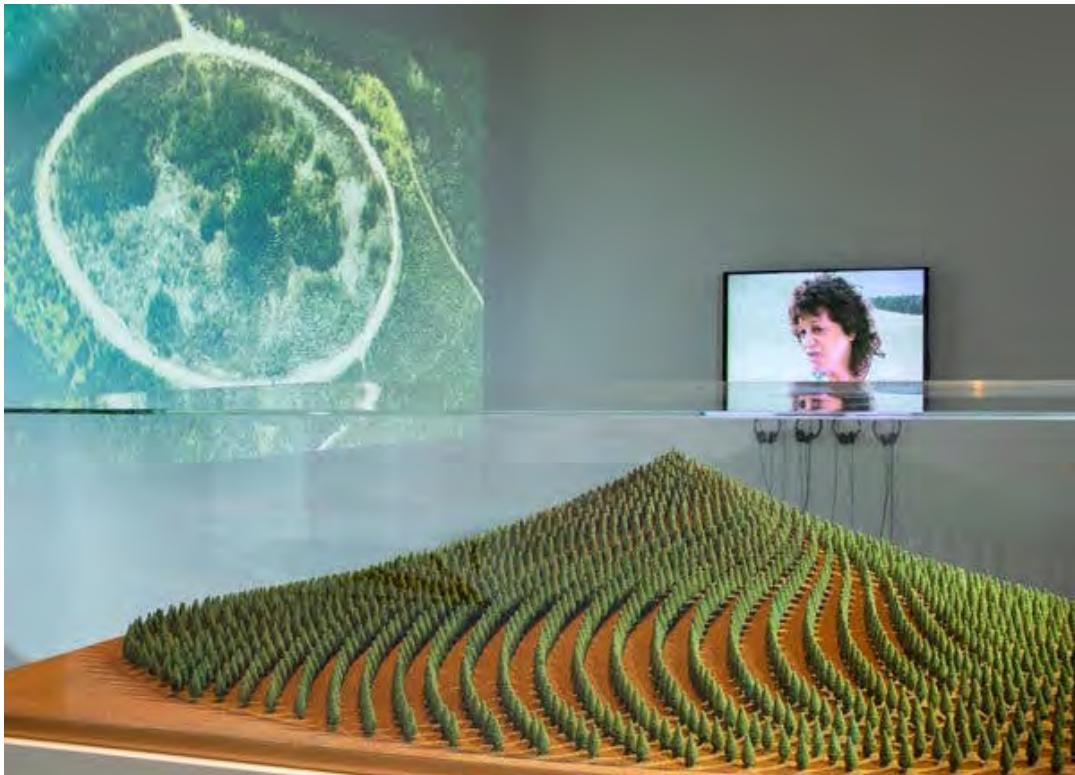
An installation view of the artist's studies for her recent pyramid and teardrop works, which are on the second floor of the Shed.Credit...Elizabeth Bick for The New York Times



"Probability Pyramid — Study for Crystal Pyramid," 1976.Credit...Honolulu Academy of Arts, American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters



“The Aging Pyramid,” 2006.Credit...Agnes Denes and Leslie Tonkonow Artworks + Projects



Videos and a model of “Tree Mountain — A Living Time Capsule— 11,000 Trees, 11,000 People, 400 Years,” 1992–96, a still-intact public work in Ylojarvi, Finland. Credit...Elizabeth Bick for The New York Times

Only a few of the many she has proposed in drawings have been realized. “Wheatfield — A Confrontation” is by far the best known, and was, of course, meant to be ephemeral. Another, still-intact public work, “Tree Mountain — A Living Time Capsule — 11,000 Trees, 11,000 People, 400 Years,” has a longer projected time span, though still a finite one.

Built in Ylojarvi, Finland, from 1992 to 1996, it consists of a handmade hill covered with trees arranged in a mathematically determined spiral pattern. Each tree has been planted by a volunteer who has been contractually granted ownership of it, valid for four centuries, and transferable generationally. The larger idea behind the arrangement is straightforward: Conservation is both an individual and collective responsibility, extending far into the future.

Photographs of “Tree Mountain” are in the show, as are plans for other projects that still exist only on paper or as models. One is for a system of artificial dunes to protect the storm-wracked Rockaways in Queens, N.Y. Another is for an air-cleansing virgin forest to be planted on landfill also in Queens. A third, and probably the least likely to be given the go-ahead any time soon, is for a Peace Park in Washington, D.C.

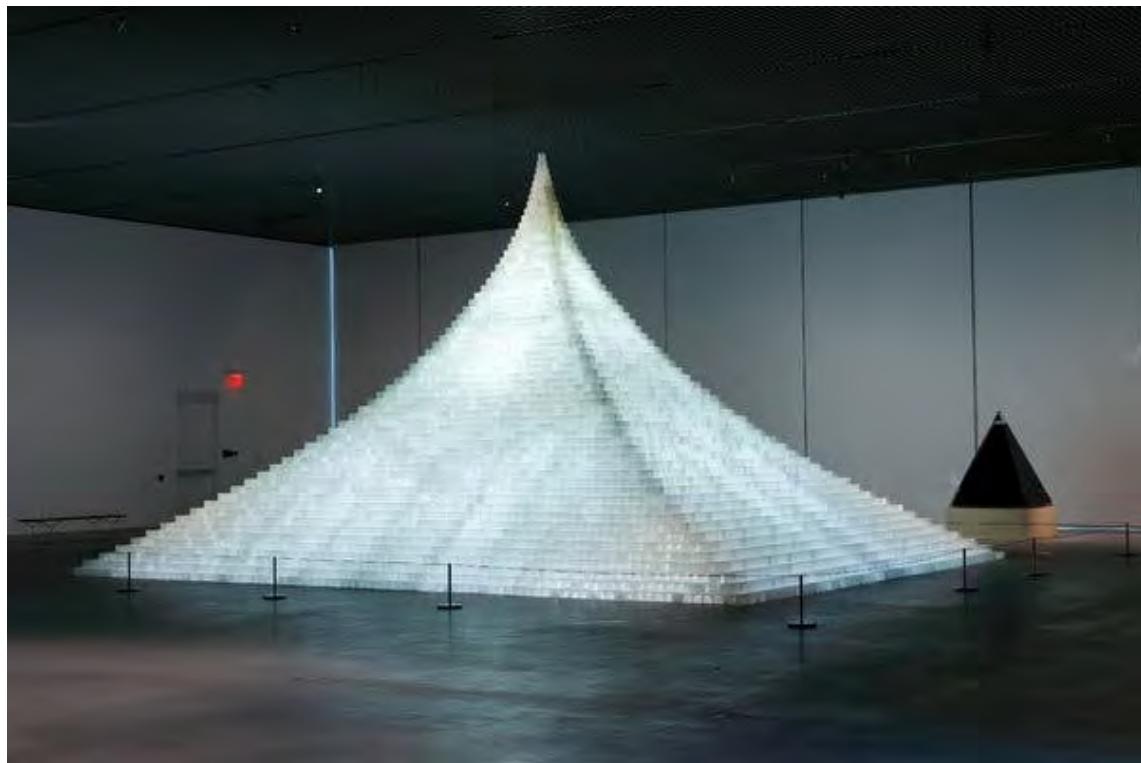
The qualities that distinguish such work from 1960s and ’70s Land Art, with which Ms. Denes has sometimes been associated, are the same qualities that mark her drawings: a combination of moral rigor and an uninvasive lightness of touch. And what separates her work from object-fixated, dollar-value art of the 21st century is an insistence on

impermanence. (That the retrospective is happening in the cash-butressed fortress of Hudson Yards is an irony surely not lost on her.)

Positioned almost in the center of the fourth-floor galleries is a 1969 installation called “Human Dust.” It has two main components. One is a poster-size wall text telling the story of an unnamed man’s life. “He was an artist,” it begins. “He was born fifty years ago, which means he lived app. 2/3 of his expected life span.” We get statistics: the number of his close relationships, the number of places he lived. We learn details of his appetite (“During his lifetime he consumed 4800 lbs. of bread, 140 gallons of wine”), and of his character (“He was unhappy and lonely more often than not”). The account, basically an obituary, concludes: “34 people remembered him or spoke of him after his death and his remains shown here represent 1/85 of his entire body.”

The remains are indeed on display: a clear glass bowl filled with fragmented bones.

As if in response to this somewhat unnerving memorial, the galleries on the second floor, where the show concludes, have a dusky chapel-like atmosphere. Many of the most extravagantly imagined late drawings are here, as is a model of the Queens forest, financed by the Shed, and two sculptures, also commissioned by the Shed for the show.



“Probability Pyramid — Study for Crystal Pyramid,” a new commission, is a 17-foot-tall pyramid with inward curving walls.Credit...Elizabeth Bick for The New York Times



"Model for Teardrop — Monument to Being Earthbound," a new work commissioned for the Shed exhibition.Credit...Elizabeth Bick for The New York Times

One, "Probability Pyramid — Study for Crystal Pyramid," is a 17-foot-tall pyramid with inward curving walls. Made from thousands of 3-D printed white blocks and lighted from within, it has the presence of a traditional monument but looks like a giant lantern. It was conceived in 1976 to be even taller: 30 feet, a height that could, with the addition of more blocks, be reached in a future setting.

The other, a smaller piece, "Model for Teardrop — Monument to Being Earthbound," comes with complications. Physically it consists of a dark round base with a glowing nylon teardrop — or a flame — floating above it, and it really is floating, held in midair by the force of electromagnets embedded in both the base and the form itself.

This piece, too, as seen in the show, is smaller than the artist originally envisioned it. Could it, too, be scaled up? Apparently there are no magnets strong enough to permit that, making this piece a monument designed to fail. But what is it a monument to? To the paradoxical dynamic that drives this artist's finest work: rising, and falling, and rising. Living, and dying, and living. Can a tear and a flame coexist? Even be the same thing? In Ms. Denes's world they can.

Agnes Denes: Absolutes and Intermediates

Through March 22 at the Shed, 545 West 30th Street, Manhattan; 646-455-3494, theshed.org.

The Woman Who Harvested a Wheat Field Off Wall Street
June 14, 2018



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Both Sides Now

The myth of media objectivity

MARISSA BROSTOFF

THE VIEW FROM SOMEWHERE: UNDOING THE MYTH OF JOURNALISTIC OBJECTIVITY BY LEWIS RAVEN WALLACE CHICAGO: UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO PRESS.

240 PAGES. \$25.

Shortly after Donald Trump's inauguration, the journalist Lewis Raven Wallace posted a short piece on Medium with the provocative title "Objectivity is dead, and I'm okay with it." In those first surreal days of the new regime, mainstream media outlets were reacting to Trump's shock-and-awe tactics by doubling down on their own self-regard. Even as they rushed to normalize the new administration, news purveyors like the *New York Times* and NPR suggested that their own unbiased, verifiable content—

in a word, their objectivity—was the best antidote to the president's unchecked mendacity. Wallace—who worked, at the time, as a reporter for the nationally syndicated public radio show *Marketplace*—disagreed. He questioned the liberal media's insistence that journalistic objectivity was a noble aspiration, let alone an achievable goal, at a moment marked by grotesque injustice and escalating terror. Wallace used himself as an example. As a transgender writer, how could he possibly serve as an unbiased observer of political

forces arrayed against his existence? Instead of striving for an impossible neutrality, he argued, journalists should be unapologetic about the political nature of their task. "As the status quo in this country shifts," he wrote, "we must decide whether we are going to shift with it." Wallace's post circulated over social media and was spotted by his bosses at *Marketplace*. A few days later, he was fired.

In *The View from Somewhere*, Wallace responds to his dismissal with a thoughtfully

researched series of essays on journalistic objectivity, placing himself squarely on the side of the concept's malcontents. While the tone of his original blog post was affirmative, emphasizing the role of the journalist as a public servant, his book paints an often damning picture of a news industry that uses the rhetoric of neutrality to serve the powerful. Historically and today, Wallace argues, media outlets have sought out the perspectives of writers unmarked by social difference or radical ideas, granting these perspectives the status of unfiltered reality and tagging writers outside this narrow frame as inherently biased. In times of crisis, he suggests, it should become only more obvious to us that this kind of sophistry amounts to moral failure.

AGNES DENES: ABSOLUTES AND INTERMEDIATES EDITED BY EMMA ENDERBY. FOREWORD BY ALEX POOTS. TEXT BY GIAMPAOLO BIANCONI, AGNES DENES, EMMA ENDERBY, ET AL. NEW YORK: THE SHED. 384 PAGES. \$65.



Agnes Denes with her *Wheatfield: A Confrontation*, 1982, New York.

A "VISIONARY," A "PROPHET," A "MODERN-DAY LEONARDO": Writers often resort to panegyrics when confronted with the eccentric, daunting intellect of Agnes Denes. Given the ambition of the octogenarian artist's career, which spans fifty years and emerges from deep research into philosophy, mathematics, symbolic logic, and environmental science, it's hard to fault them.

And yet, as important as she has been to Conceptual and Land art, Denes, by her own reckoning, has been "marginalized" within these movements. That's finally beginning to change, with a major retrospective this fall at The Shed in New York. As curator Emma Enderby notes in the exhibition's catalogue, Denes's neglect was due, in no small part, to gender bias at a time when "working with land, with science, [and] with technology was perceived as quintessentially male." Equally important is how she undermined the assumptions of these late-modern genres, spurning Conceptualism's positivistic, anti-aesthetic tendencies and Land art's interventionist approach to nature. In 1976, for example, Denes translated her statement "If the mind possesses universal validity, art reveals a universal truth. I want that truth" into Classical Middle Egyptian. She delighted in the awkwardness produced by the gaps between the two languages, arranging the hieroglyphs in an elegantly gridded pyramid—a ubiquitous form in her oeuvre, symbolic of human striving and dialectical movement. At the dawn of the Reagan era, she planted and harvested two acres of grain in the shadow of the World Trade Center to create her best-known piece, *Wheatfield: A Confrontation*, 1982. Anticipating the intensifying conflict between capitalist accumulation and planetary survival, the ephemeral public artwork deliberately wasted "valuable real estate," posing a landscape of pastoral abundance against an abstract economy of speculation and profit. Today, it makes for a jarring contrast with the show's host venue, widely condemned as a gleaming monument to taxpayer-subsidized gentrification. Interpolated with the artist's lucid writings, this generous publication surveys Denes's consistently rich production, from the exquisite hand-drawn diagrams to the large-scale ecological works to many more that have yet to be realized (such as a proposal to bury several time capsules in Antarctic glaciers, to be opened thousands of years later by our descendants—should any survive). Scholarly contributions—among them a characteristically clear-eyed précis from Lucy Lippard and Caroline Jones's compelling discussion of anthropocentric landscape conventions in *Wheatfield*'s photo-documentation—round out but never pin down Denes's rigorous, imaginative work, which remains directed against the "increasing specialization and information overload" she diagnosed decades ago. After nearly four hundred pages, one feels they've barely scratched the surface. —CHLOE WYMA

In the early years of laboratory science in Restoration England, one method of establishing an experiment's validity was to secure the presence of gentlemen witnesses. These self-appointed natural philosophers were not expected to possess special technical knowledge. In fact, as Donna Haraway writes, the ostensibly generic quality of their gaze—"modern, European, masculine, scientific"—was the whole point. For Haraway, the "modest witness," whose social stature gave him the privilege to disappear into his observations, was key to the invention of scientific objectivity. When he wrote down his laboratory notes, "his narratives ha[d] a magical power—they los[t] all trace of their history as stories." *The View from Somewhere* is in large part about the construction of the journalist as a kind of contemporary modest witness. Wallace's own experiences with the slipperiness of scientific objectivity—he notes that he was diagnosed in 2005 with gender identity disorder, which would cease to exist as a medical category by 2013—help to inform his critique of media pieties. He shows how journalistic objectivity, a seemingly self-evident ideal with its own scientific aspirations, was in fact assembled gradually out of specific technical practices marshaled toward the maintenance of the status quo.

Wallace makes his case by carefully tracing the history of so-called objectivity in journalism. His story begins in the 1830s with the birth of the penny newspaper. Where newspapers had once been the organs of political parties and business interests, this new kind of mass-circulation daily, funded by advertising and pitched to a growing urban working class, was independent. But what did journalistic independence look like? For some newspapermen, it meant the freedom to engage in active political combat along the lines of principle rather than party affiliation. Horace Greeley, the legendary founding editor of the *New-York Tribune*, placed abolitionism at the center of the *Tribune*'s mission and disdained the "gagged, mincing neutrality" of outlets that took a less determined stance. But other nineteenth-century publications touted their impartiality and established the signposts that would come to announce as much: boundaries between the publishing and editorial sides of a newspaper, and between news and opinion sections;

EXHIBITIONS

An artist who was miles ahead of her time

20th-century visionary Agnes Denes, at 88, finally gets her due

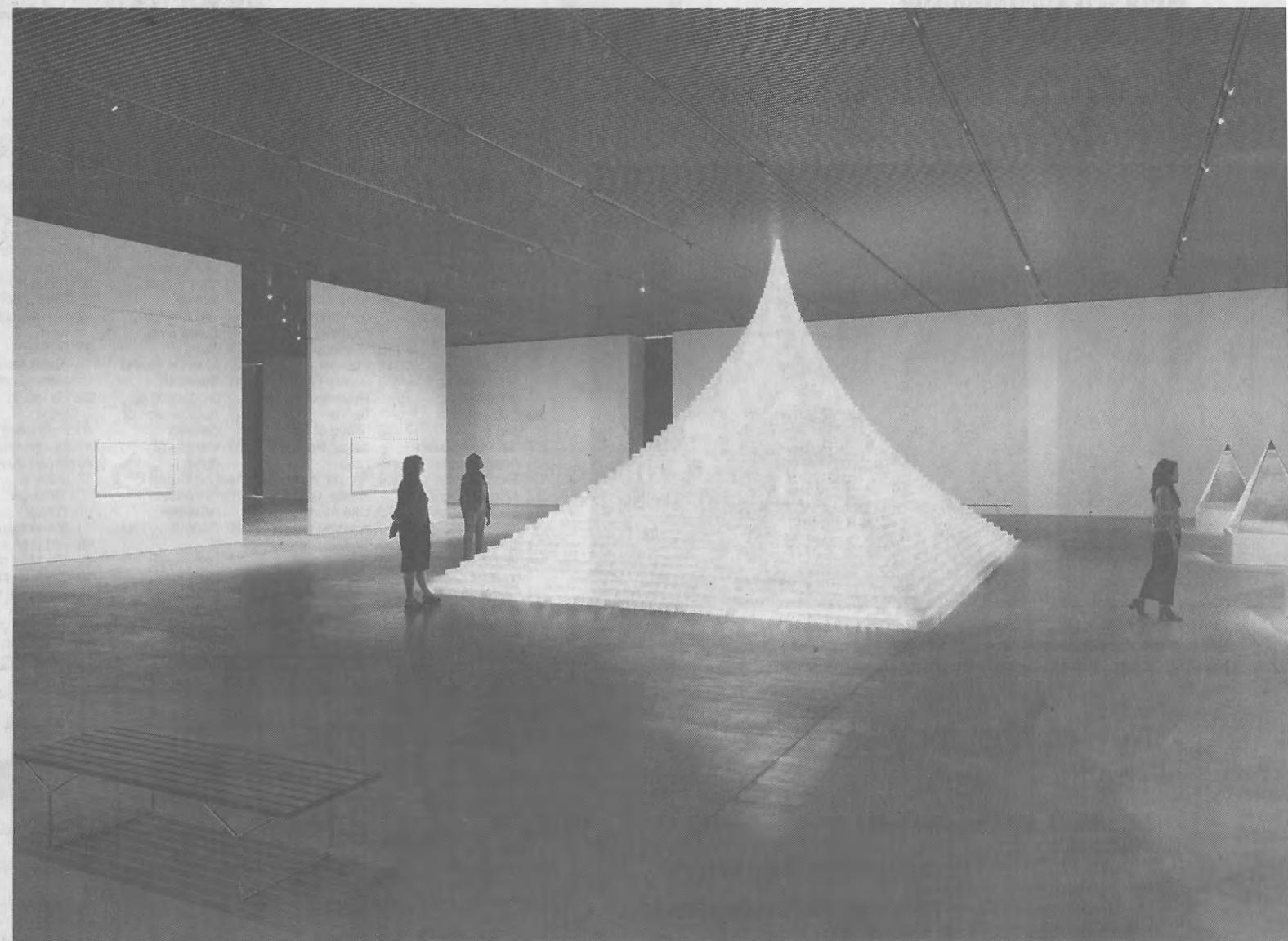
BY ANNE MIDGETTE
IN NEW YORK

The signature image of the artist Agnes Denes shows her standing in a field of golden grain, with skyscrapers in the background. It's not just a snapshot; it's a record of a work of art. "Wheatfield — A Confrontation" involved planting and tending two acres of wheat on the Manhattan landfill that was later to become Battery Park City. It was a work about the environment and resources and world hunger, and it offered not only protest, not only beauty, but also, in its own modest way, a solution. Her field yielded a thousand pounds of wheat, later shipped and planted at other installations around the world. Denes even donated the straw to the NYPD, for their horses.

The year was 1982. Climate change was not yet the hot topic it has since become. Other artists, mostly male, had been doing land art — large-scale installations, even incursions on the natural world, like Robert Smithson's "Spiral Jetty," an earthwork sculpture in a lake in Utah. But few saw their work as a way to address crisis or create solutions for a suffering planet. Denes, now 88, was miles ahead of her time.

A neglected 20th-century visionary finally receives her due: that's the hook of the Agnes Denes retrospective at the Shed, New York's new multipurpose temple to new art. Two decades into the 21st century, we're still getting proof that the art world has given short shrift to its female luminaries, and Denes is yet another example. Once well-known in the New York art world and with a long string of shows and international commissions to her name, she's been living in a loft in this city since the 1980s, yet the Shed is the first New York institution to offer an overview of her career. And this thoughtful and well-presented show — the Shed's first attempt at a major retrospective of this kind — reveals a protean artist who is in many ways even more visionary than expected.

There's a lot more to Denes than "Wheatfield," though that work remains a seminal piece, both in her career and in the history of public art in New York (it was partly funded by the Public Art Fund). Much of her career since then has also involved large-scale, ecologically based works. In the 1990s, she planted 6,000 trees at a sewage treatment plant in Australia ("A Forest for Australia") and 11,000 on a hill in Finland ("Tree Mountain — A Living Time"), creating pieces that were at once beautiful — the trees spiral down the Finnish slope in a pattern inspired in part by the golden section — and a gift to the environment — the Finnish project is meant to be cultivated for 400 years. As-yet-unrealized projects include vehicles for space travel, self-supporting dwellings for a future when the climate may



be less hospitable and a series of barrier islands to protect New York Harbor from rising sea levels.

Denes's early work, however, is quite different — and provides key context for what was to come. The show's title, "Absolutes and Intermediates," comes from a 1970 drawing that is characteristic of the artist's "Philosophical Drawings" of that period. It's a piece of custom-printed graph paper in complex whorls, precisely plotted with labels denoting phases of human evolution, scientific thought and the state of the cosmos. The result is too complex to be easily described; but it's undeniably beautiful, and it shows something about the ways in which humans construct systems of knowledge and the way that knowledge itself can become an aesthetic creation. Art, for Denes, is a way of ordering the world, of transmitting ideas, of offering other people new ways of looking and thinking. She refers to her body of work not as an oeuvre, but as a philosophy.

In our siloed world that keeps genres of thought and discourse clinically separate, we no longer encounter the figure of the artist-scientist that was once such a key part of European culture. Goethe was a passionate geologist; Voltaire performed scientific experiments; but today, someone without specialized scientific knowledge is seen as a dabbler.

Denes, though, is no dabbler. Her work represents the fruit of considerable scientific labor, hours and hours spent in the library researching and collating, and some of it is dense as a textbook: figures representing Pascal's triangle, a visualization of the binomial coefficients, meticulously plotted on orange graph paper ("Pascal's Triangle," 1973), or the body of scientific knowledge about human evolution, with texts and intricate diagrams, laid out on a length of X-ray paper some 20 feet long ("Introspection I — Evolution,"

1971). Denes had to invent a special technique to create this extra-long print.

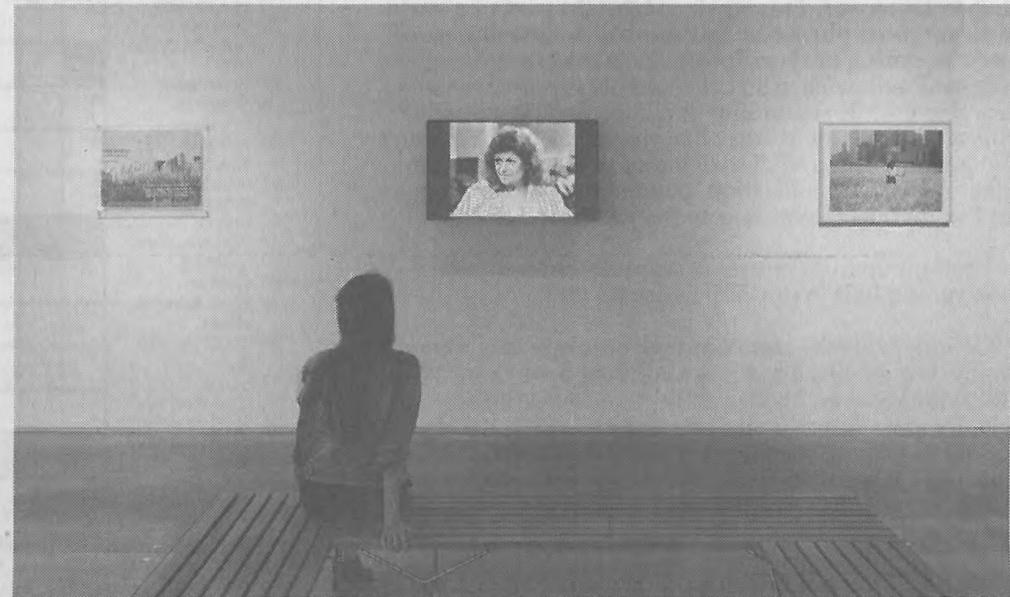
Encountered in a gallery, such work makes us ask: Is it serious? Is it really scientific? There are no clear answers. Certainly there's humor in some of the work — like the "Napoleonic" series, prints on graph paper of what looks like a little man in a great coat and military hat but which are actually ink prints of Denes's then-husband's penis. There's also a plan for a "Liberated Sex Machine" (1970) that looks like a real technical drawing, labeled with actual technical terms dripping with innuendo ("dependence knob," "stud processor").

But the humor only serves to emphasize the fundamental seriousness of the whole. Structures of knowledge are human creations and have their own beauty and their own randomness. In her "Map Projections" series of the 1970s, Denes creates isometric projections of the world map onto the shape of a doughnut or a hot dog — a joke but also a reminder that even the forms of the map we accept as "authentic" (the globe,

the rectangle) involve distortions and approximations. They're just ones that we are more ready to accept.

This point is particularly timely as the art world itself reexamines traditional structures — the "isms" and chronologies that inform how we think about where an artist fits. The new Museum of Modern Art, for instance, is dispensing with the traditional chronological order to create new ways of thinking about connections between works. It's an approach that Denes's work foresaw.

There's a further element of subversion to the show. Offering multiple alternatives to traditional ways of thinking, Denes is also providing a woman's perspective on systems that have largely been generated and perpetuated by men. For the first years of her career, she did this with intellectual rigor that flashes off the pages of her drawings like a diamond. In later works like the plans for a "Forest for New York," 100,000 trees to be planted on 120 acres of landfill in Queens, one of the new commissions, the rigor is mitigated. This is in part because the skill



TOP: Pyramids recur throughout Agnes Denes's work, most recently in "Model for Probability Pyramid," center, commissioned by the Shed for the career retrospective "Agnes Denes: Absolutes and Intermediates."

ABOVE: At the exhibit, a video image of Denes is displayed to the left of a photograph from "Wheatfield — A Confrontation," in which she planted and harvested two acres of wheat on the Battery Park landfill in Manhattan in 1982.

set requires negotiations, coordination, engineering skills, and the tide — required.

"I believe in humanity videos in have to give ego that great art, and give are as important.

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But all these alike, drawings glowing printed blue Shad's com Like so many the pyramid triangle. It has tilled planted high deep. They monumen their bound

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Agnes Denes: Intermediates at the Shed, 540 West 26th Street, New York. Through Jan. 12.

The Washington Post

Neglected visionary Agnes Denes altered our landscape with her art. At 88, she's finally getting her due.



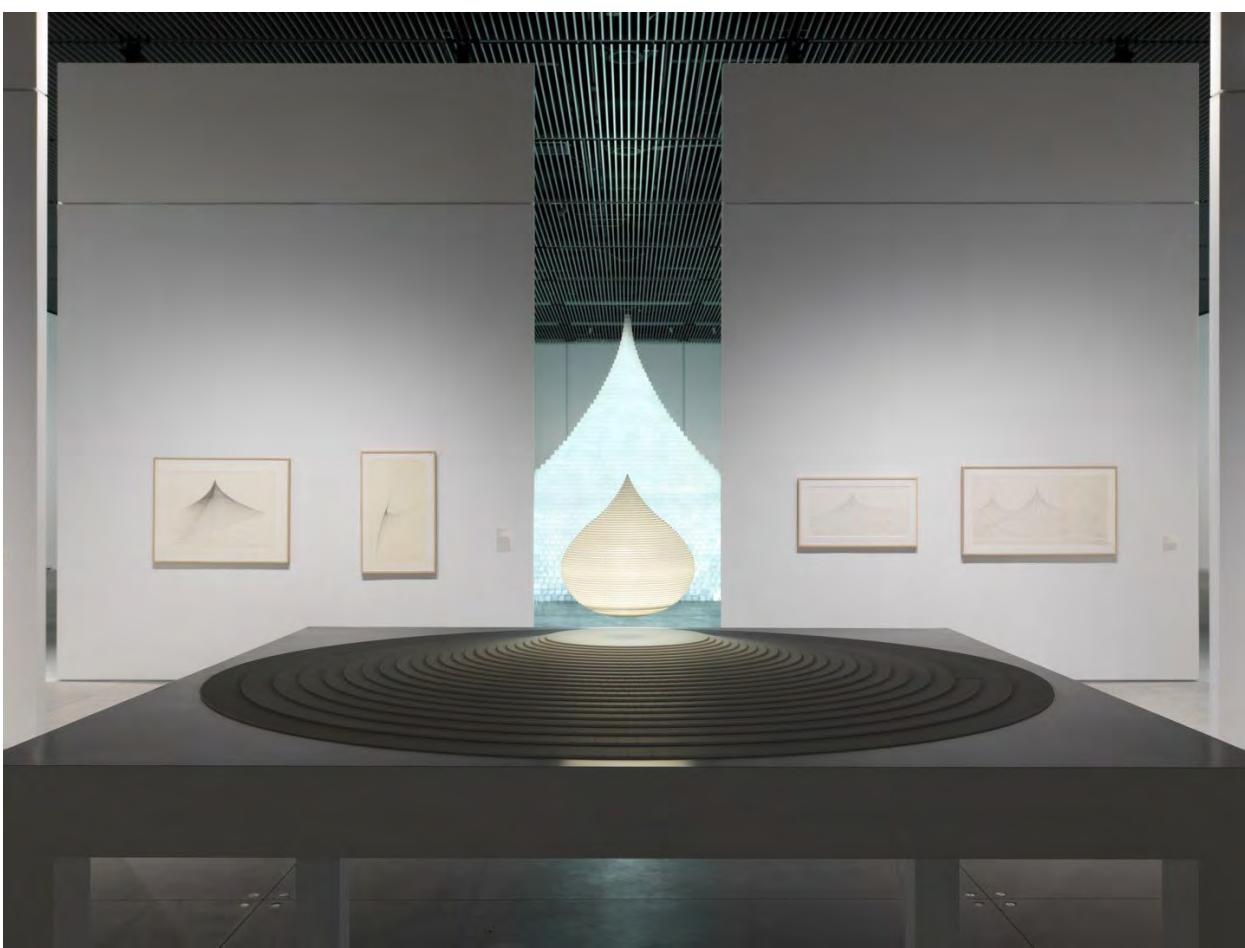
“Wheatfield — A Confrontation,” by Agnes Denes. In 1982, the artist planted and harvested two acres of wheat on the Battery Park landfill in Manhattan. Now, the artist is having a career retrospective at the Shed in New York. (Agnes Denes/Photo: John McGrall/Commissioned by Public Art Fund. Courtesy the artist and Leslie Tonkonow Artworks + Projects.)

By Anne Midgette Oct. 24, 2019

The signature image of the artist Agnes Denes shows her standing in a field of golden grain, with skyscrapers in the background. It’s not just a snapshot; it’s a record of a work of art.

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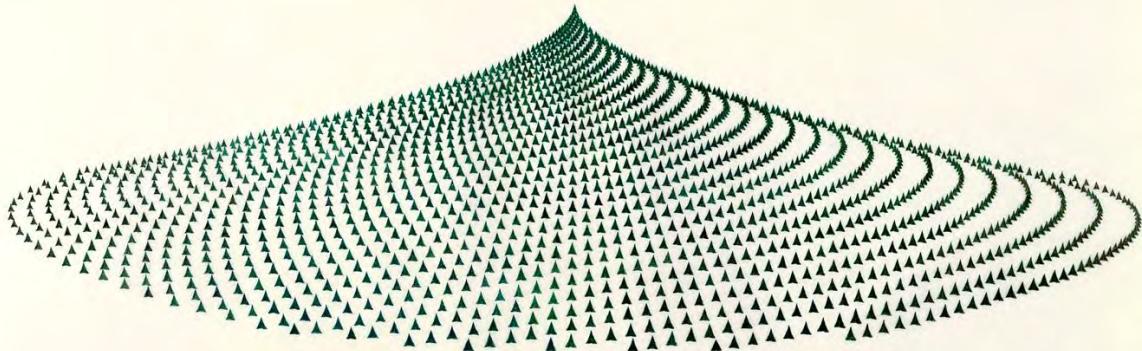
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“Model for Teardrop — Monument to Being Earthbound.” One of three works commissioned by the Shed for the current show, this model features a teardrop shape suspended in the air by powerful electromagnets. (Dan Bradica/The Shed)

A neglected 20th-century visionary finally receives her due: that’s the hook of the Agnes Denes retrospective at the Shed, New York’s new multipurpose temple to new art. Two decades into the 21st century, we’re still getting proof that the art world has given short shrift to its female luminaries, and Denes is yet another example. Once well-known in the New York art world and with a long string of shows and international commissions to her name, she’s been living in a loft in this city since the 1980s, yet the Shed is the first New York institution to offer an overview of her career. And this thoughtful and well-presented show — the Shed’s first attempt at a major retrospective of this kind — reveals a protean artist who is in many ways even more visionary than expected.

There’s a lot more to Denes than “Wheatfield,” though that work remains a seminal piece, both in her career and in the history of public art in New York (it was partly funded by the Public Art Fund). Much of her career since then has also involved large-scale, ecologically based works. In the 1990s, she planted 6,000 trees at a sewage treatment plant in Australia (“A Forest for Australia”) and 11,000 on a hill in Finland (“Tree Mountain — A Living Time”), creating pieces that were at once beautiful — the trees spiral down the Finnish slope in a pattern inspired in part by the golden section — and a gift to the environment — the Finnish project is meant to be cultivated for 400 years. As-yet-unrealized projects include vehicles for space travel, self-supporting dwellings for a future when the climate may be less hospitable and a series of barrier islands to protect New York Harbor from rising sea levels.

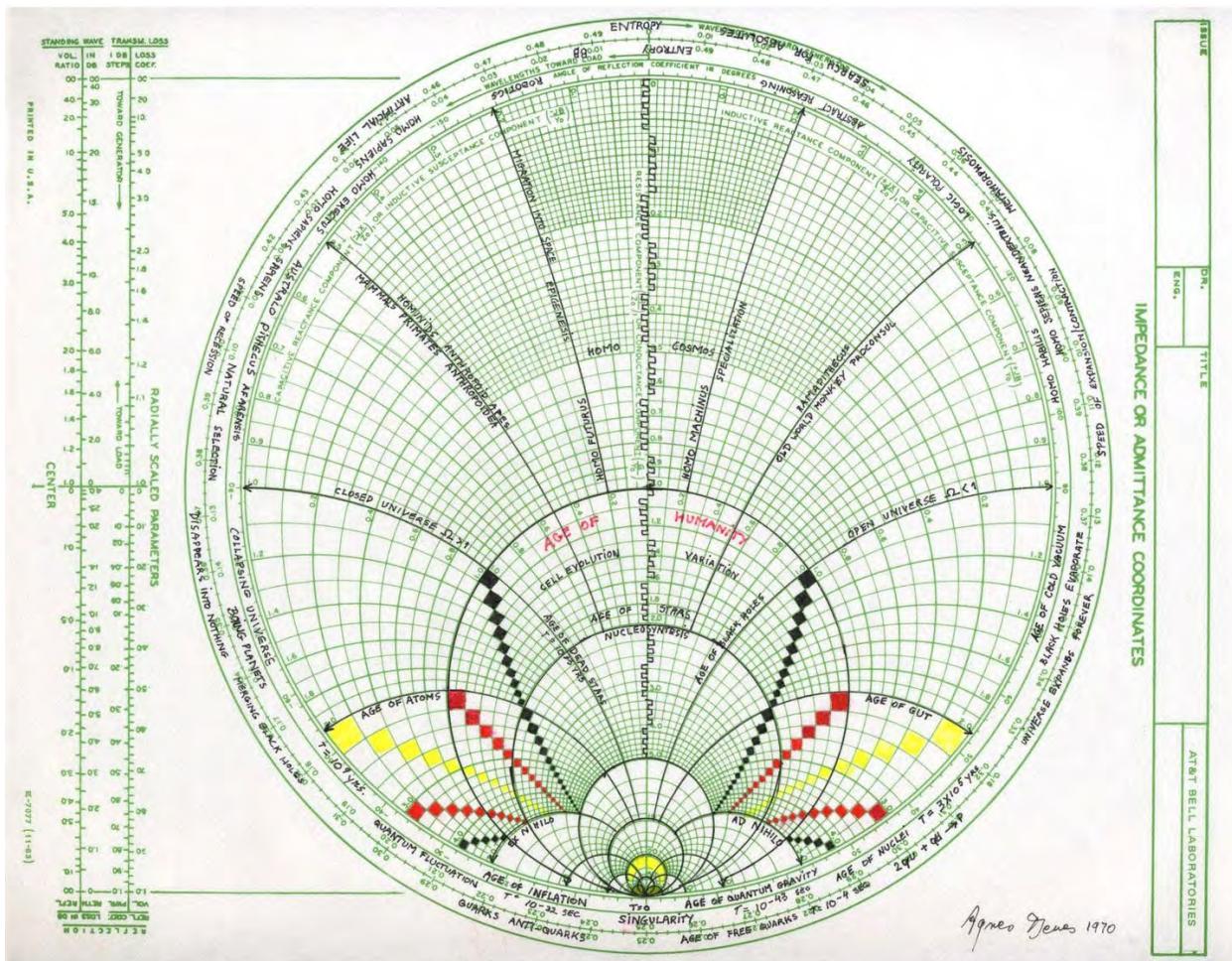


For “Tree Mountain — A Living Time Capsule” (1992-1996), Denes and volunteers planted 11,000 trees on a hill in Finland. Some have since suffered from drought — the kind of climate change the work was partly about. (Agnes Denes/Courtesy the artist and Leslie Tonkonow Artworks + Projects)

Denes’s early work, however, is quite different — and provides key context for what was to come. The show’s title, “Absolutes and Intermediates,” comes from a 1970 drawing that is characteristic of the artist’s “Philosophical Drawings” of that period. It’s a piece of custom-printed graph paper in complex whorls, precisely plotted with labels denoting phases of human evolution, scientific thought and the state of the cosmos. The result is too complex to be easily described; but it’s undeniably beautiful, and it shows something about the ways in which humans construct systems of knowledge and the way that knowledge itself can become an aesthetic creation. Art, for Denes, is a way of ordering the world, of transmitting ideas, of offering other people new ways of looking and thinking. She refers to her body of work not as an oeuvre, but as a philosophy.

In our siloed world that keeps genres of thought and discourse clinically separate, we no longer encounter the figure of the artist-scientist that was once such a key part of European culture. Goethe was a passionate geologist; Voltaire performed scientific experiments; but today, someone without specialized scientific knowledge is seen as a dabbler.

Denes, though, is no dabbler. Her work represents the fruit of considerable scientific labor, hours and hours spent in the library researching and collating, and some of it is dense as a textbook: figures representing Pascal's triangle, a visualization of the binomial coefficients, meticulously plotted on orange graph paper ("Pascal's Triangle," 1973), or the body of scientific knowledge about human evolution, with texts and intricate diagrams, laid out on a length of X-ray paper some 20 feet long ("Introspection I — Evolution," 1971). Denes had to invent a special technique to create this extra-long print.



Knowledge itself can be beautiful: The show's titular work, "Absolutes and Intermediates" (1970), illustrates the aesthetic properties of scientific structures of information. (Agnes Denes/Courtesy Leslie Tonkonow Artworks + Projects, New York)

Encountered in a gallery, such work makes us ask: Is it serious? Is it really scientific? There are no clear answers. Certainly there's humor in some of the work — like the "Napoleonic" series, prints on graph paper of what looks like a little man in a great coat and military hat but which are actually ink prints of Denes's then-husband's penis. There's also a plan for a "Liberated Sex Machine" (1970) that looks like a real technical drawing, labeled with actual technical terms dripping with innuendo ("dependence knob," "stud processor").

But the humor only serves to emphasize the fundamental seriousness of the whole. Structures of knowledge are human creations and have their own beauty and their own randomness. In her “Map Projections” series of the 1970s, Denes creates isometric projections of the world map onto the shape of a doughnut or a hot dog — a joke but also a reminder that even the forms of the map we accept as “authentic” (the globe, the rectangle) involve distortions and approximations. They’re just ones that we are more ready to accept.

This point is particularly timely as the art world itself reexamines traditional structures — the “isms” and chronologies that inform how we think about where an artist fits. The new Museum of Modern Art, for instance, is dispensing with the traditional chronological order to create new ways of thinking about connections between works. It’s an approach that Denes’s work foresaw.

The new MoMA is a lot bigger. But you may not learn as much about the art.

There’s a further element of subversion to the show. Offering multiple alternatives to traditional ways of thinking, Denes is also providing a woman’s perspective on systems that have largely been generated and perpetuated by men. For the first years of her career, she did this with intellectual rigor that flashes off the pages of her drawings like a diamond. In later works like the plans for a “Forest for New York,” 100,000 trees to be planted on 120 acres of landfill in Queens, one of the new commissions, the rigor is mitigated. This is in part because the skill set required to realize a project — negotiating with bureaucracies, coordinating volunteers, engineering something that can actually stand or move or withstand the tide — is distinct from the skill required to draft it in a studio.

“I believe you have an obligation to share your vision with humanity,” she says in one of the videos in the show. “Then you have to give up a little bit of the ego that is necessary to create great art. You have to relinquish it and give it up to see that others are as important as you are.”

The entire retrospective is also a narrative of a woman’s life in art, and the process of letting go of the quest for personal glory in the possibly quixotic but never worthless attempt to try to help the world. Like all human systems, the results are uneven. Some of the works are almost gift-shop worthy: silk-screens of X-rays of plants; a rendering of the Pascal’s triangle meme in neon; a hologram of a rice seed sprouting that the artist asserts was the first 360-degree integral hologram but that looks like something from a Brookstone’s catalogue (1978-1980). And others have been sabotaged — trees in Finland and Australia killed by drought — by the very environment she seeks to heal.

But all the work, hits and misses alike, grows out of the early drawings — through to the great glowing pyramid built of 3-D-printed blocks, “Model for Probability Pyramid,” that’s one of the Shed’s commissions for this show. Like so much of this collection, the pyramid goes back to Pascal’s triangle. Denes is an artist who has tilled her field carefully and planted her intellectual seeds deep. They continue to grow into monumental forms, spreading their bounty to a new generation.

Agnes Denes: Absolutes and Intermediates Through March 22 at the Shed, 545 West 30th St., New York. theshed.org.

This 93-year-old artist is finally getting her due.

Judy Chicago doesn’t have time for games. The planet is dying, and so are we.

Reevaluating Roy Lichtenstein at blockbuster retrospective.

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AD



Agnes Denes, *Wheatfield—A Confrontation*. Two acres of wheat planted and harvested by the artist on the Battery Park landfill, Manhattan, Summer 1982. Commissioned by Public Art Fund. Photo by John McGrall. Courtesy the artist and Leslie Tonkonow Artworks + Projects.

ART + AUCTIONS

Agnes Denes's Prophetic Wheatfield Remains As Relevant As Ever

In an act of protest against climate change and economic inequality, Denes planted a massive wheatfield in a landfill in downtown Manhattan. Nearly 40 years later her message reverberates with a poignant urgency

By

By Phoebe Hoban November 6, 2019

Agnes Denes's pioneering artwork, whether it's her cerebral conceptual pieces mining her deep understanding of mathematics and philosophy, or her literally down-to-earth land art, has always had a prophetic quality. And her prescient 1982 *Wheatfield – A Confrontation*, an environmental piece in which she planted a two-acre amber field of grain in the shadow of the Twin Towers, is now more relevant than ever, in the wake of climate change and the dramatic divide between the 1 percent and the rest of the planet's population.

Denes deliberately chose the site—a landfill created when the Twin Towers were built, just a stone's throw from Wall Street, home of the stock exchange where such commodities as wheat are traded—to simultaneously comment on the world's economy and the state of the earth itself. A fascinating documentation of this iconic work, including illuminating wall text, striking photographs, and vintage videos, is now on display at Chelsea's the Shed, as part of *Agnes Denes: Absolutes and Intermediates*, a comprehensive 50-year retrospective of the 88-year-old artist's career.



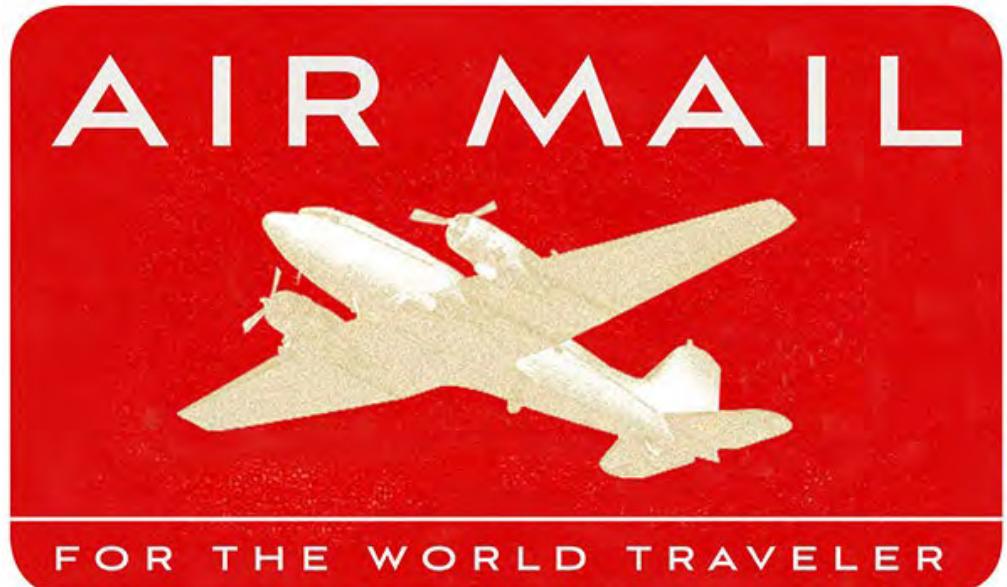
Agnes Denes, *Wheatfield – A Confrontation*. Two acres of wheat planted and harvested by the artist on the Battery Park landfill, Manhattan, summer 1982. Commissioned by Public Art Fund.
Image courtesy the artist and Leslie Tonkonow Artworks + Projects.

"Those images of the *Wheatfield* remain profound and surreal and universal," observes the Shed's senior curator, Emma Enderby, who organized the show. "It's food, it's earth, it connects all of us." Among the most memorable images are the stills and the video footage of Denes herself, alone in the field with its view of skyscrapers and the Hudson, where she actually lived for about four months.

The artist explains the point of her famous piece, commissioned by Public Art Fund, in a text in the show's catalog. "My decision to plant a wheat field in Manhattan instead of designing just another public sculpture, grew out of the longstanding concern and need to call attention to our misplaced priorities and deteriorating human values," she wrote. "Placing it at the foot of the World Trade Center, a block from Wall Street, facing the Statue of Liberty, also had symbolic import.... It represented food, energy, commerce, world trade, economics. It referred to mismanagement, waste, world hunger and ecological concerns."

Or, as Denes told Jane Pauley on the *Today* show at the time, "I wanted to make a powerful statement for a powerful city." Because the landfill was made up of infertile rubble taken from the World Trade Center as it was built, which, as Denes put it, was "full of boulders and rocks and old overcoats and ties," two inches of fresh soil were shipped in. Then the artist and a crew of volunteers dug 285 furrows in which rows of wheat from North Dakota were planted by hand.

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Agnes Denes: Absolutes and Intermediates

UNTIL MARCH 22, 2020 THE SHED NEW YORK ART



Installation view: Agnes Denes: "Absolutes and Intermediates," The Shed, (2020). Photo: Dan Bradica.

Courtesy The Shed

In 1982, Agnes Denes planted two acres of golden wheat just two blocks from Wall Street and the former World Trade Center. Why? To point out inequities in land use, to protest environmental damage, to question human values. The “installation” was called *Wheatfield—A Confrontation: Battery Park Landfill, Downtown Manhattan*. In 1996, Denes completed *Tree Mountain* in Ylöjärvi, Finland, a virgin fir forest of 11,000 trees planted in a mathematical pattern related to the Golden Ratio. Ranging back 50 years to her emergence in the 1960s and 70s, this retrospective presents 150 of Denes’ mixed-media works, her own evolution traced step by step. —E.C.

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APOLLO

THE INTERNATIONAL ART MAGAZINE

My art is about overcoming our limitations' – an interview with Agnes Denes

Gabrielle Schwarz 11 OCTOBER 2019



Agnes Denes walking through her installation *Wheatfield – A Confrontation* (1982) in the Battery Park landfill, New York. Commissioned by The Public Art Fund. Photo: John McGrail; courtesy Agnes Denes and Leslie Tonkonow Artworks + Projects

On the occasion of a major show at the Shed in New York, the conceptual artist Agnes Denes talks to Gabrielle Schwarz about what it meant to plant a wheatfield in Manhattan – and why she would need at least 500 years to complete all her unrealised projects. Your work across drawing, sculpture, and environmental installations incorporates ideas from many non-artistic fields – such as philosophy, mathematics, science. What first drove you to work in this way?

I wanted to involve all of life, to investigate its processes and put them into visual form. I wanted to evaluate all of human knowledge – which was quite a stupid, enormous task. But, of course, I went for it, as all young people do – they go for things that are impossible to achieve. I didn't realise that it would take the rest of my life but I did achieve some milestones.

Were there particular figures who inspired you to follow this path?

Everybody asks that. Leonardo is the only one I can think of. There may have been others, but they were probably not artists. Many artists today are working in many fields and I don't know where that originated from. Some people say it came from my work; I am not sure. People are beginning to realise that you cannot go in just one direction, unfortunately you have to go in many directions at the same time.

This is your largest institutional show so far in New York. Manhattan was also the site of one of your most influential works, *Wheatfield – A Confrontation* [1982], in which a wheatfield was planted on a landfill site at the foot of the World Trade Center. What was it like to create that piece?

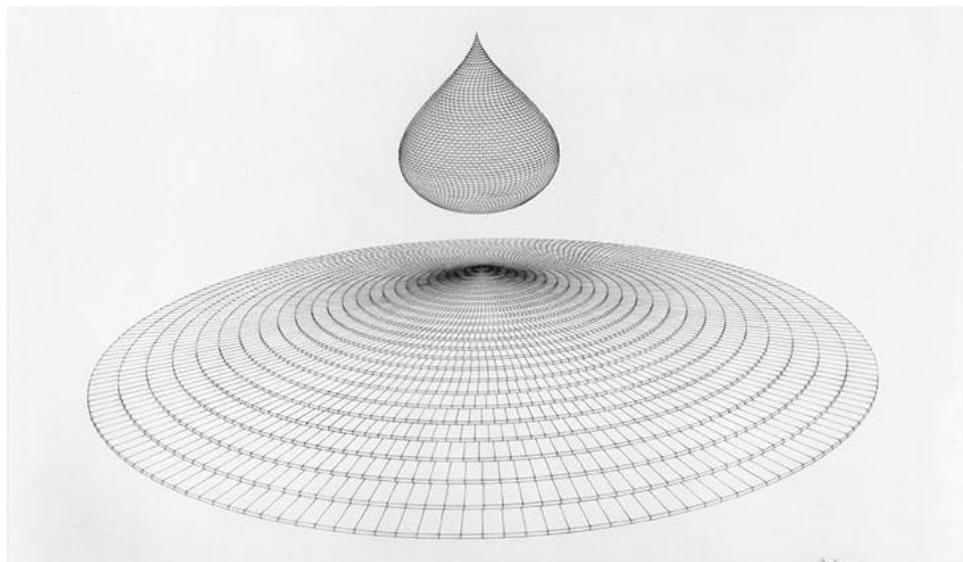
Well, the land given to me was four acres of Manhattan. We only had money for two acres of it to be used, because I had only \$10,000 to do that whole project – from the Public Art Fund – and so we only planted two acres, but four acres of Manhattan were mine for a summer. And then after I harvested the wheat, they continued building Battery Park City. So it became a city of condominiums, office space, and billions of dollars of business. And that is what *Wheatfield* was about. It's about misuse of land, or abuse of space. Thinking of money instead of all the other things we should be thinking about. Like the end of world hunger, the end of so many things that I don't need to voice because they've been voiced by many others.

At the end of the project, you created a time capsule containing surveys made up of 'existential questions', filled out mostly by university students. Why did you do this? It's communicating with the future. After each of my works, a time capsule is buried. Reactions to my questionnaire by all those involved around a project. I want the future to read us by the questions we asked and the answers we gave. I lament our short-lived existence, so I'm trying to overcome it, and communicating with the future is one way of doing that.

All my work is about doing something for humanity. It's not just philosophy and visual beauty. My work, if you examine it carefully, is about dealing with problems humanity has and trying to find benign solutions.

Are you hopeful about the future of humanity?

A lot of people ask that question. I lament a lot of things about human life, about human nature. I worry about humanity's underside, the bad thinking versus the good. I admire a lot of things about humanity, but I'm also aware of a lot of mistakes we are going to make. That might make me want to worry about the future. But I think we'll make it.



Teardrop – Monument to Being Earthbound (1984), Agnes Denes. Courtesy the artist and Leslie Tonkonow Artworks + Projects

The exhibition at the Shed includes unrealised projects, some of which have been made into three-dimensional models for the first time. Why did you want to include these?

I've had over 650 exhibitions – I don't tell people what to exhibit. What they're interested in is what is exhibited. There will be some of my forests that are not yet built – although I have one that is a 400-year project, which will create the first man-made virgin forest [Tree Mountain, 1992]. That will take 400 years to complete because the ecosystem takes about four centuries to rebuild itself and become a virgin forest.

But a lot of the projects remain unrealised, perhaps because I am a woman. And they would always realise a man's project, even if it was half-thought-out. They would always prefer a man because they trusted a man more than they would trust a woman. And that is slowly, slowly, slowly changing. I'm not belabouring the fact, I'm not thinking 'Okay, this was the only reason' – but it was one main reason.

Is there a particular project you hope still to realise?

The 'Future City' project. 'Future City' deals with, among many other things, our problem with the weather. How to create structures that will withstand further flooding and drought and other disasters. And it creates individual structures that are self-contained, that grow their own food, have their own educational systems and are totally self-reliant. It will help us in the future. People will have to read about it and look at the images. That is a complicated project that I started working on in the mid 1980s and I understand it's not easy to realise.

Once, when I was asked how much more time I would need to create my projects, without hesitating I said 500 years. And when I thought about it: what a silly answer, 500 years wouldn't be enough. And it would be very boring to live that long. So we are limited in so many ways and I think, perhaps, that my art is about overcoming our limitations. Overcoming the limitations of being a human being, a philosopher, a creator, overcoming the limitations of the years given to live.

'Agnes Denes: Absolutes and Intermediates' is at the Shed, New York, until 19 January 2020.

###

ARCHITECTURAL RECORD

Nothing Like a Dame

This fall, more women than ever are earning kudos in architecture and the arts.

By Cathleen McGuigan November 1, 2019

Lastly, an exhibition called *Agnes Denes: Absolutes and Intermediates* has opened at the Shed—and it is a revelation. The 88-year-old Denes is best known for her 1982 piece *Wheatfield—A Confrontation*, in which she planted a two-acre field of wheat near Wall Street in Lower Manhattan—a provocation that explored the urban and the rural, finance and agriculture, food-management and the environment. But the Hungarian-born artist has mostly worked under the radar, with her wide-ranging interests sparking various kinds of art, now on view in the show, including pieces that veer toward architecture, and delicate and exacting drawings on gridded paper that she made in the 1970s. When the director of the Shed, Alex Poots, asked her why she hadn't had an exhibition like this before, she replied, "I'm a visual artist, a philosopher, a draftsman, an environmentalist, and a woman. I'm hard to fit in one box."

Fortunately for Denes as well as a host of other women in art, design, and architecture, the boxes are getting big enough to hold all kinds of work and ideas.

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ARTnews

Fall Preview: 32 Essential Museum Shows and Biennials to See

BY *The Editors of ARTnews* POSTED 09/12/19

“Agnes Denes: Absolutes and Intermediates” The Shed, New York October 9–January 19

Agnes Denes created in 1982 one of the most improbable public artworks ever: two acres of wheat that she planted and then harvested in New York’s Battery Park landfill. The 88-year-old Hungarian-American artist has spent her career splicing together elements of science, mathematics, and other fields with conceptual art, and this 150-work survey promises to take her full measure.

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Arts Summary

A Visual Journal

Agnes Denes: Absolutes and Intermediates at The Shed, October 9, 2019 – March 22, 2020

OCTOBER 13, 2019



Photographs by Corrado Serra.

"The Shed presents the most comprehensive retrospective exhibition to date of the work of Agnes Denes (b. 1931), a leading figure in Conceptual and environmental art. On view across both of The Shed's expansive galleries, *Agnes Denes: Absolutes and Intermediates* brings together more than 150 works in a broad range of media spanning Denes's 50-year career, including three new works commissioned by The Shed. Denes rose to international attention in the 1960s and 1970s, creating work influenced by science, mathematics, philosophy, linguistics, ecology, and psychology to analyze, document, and ultimately aid humanity. Her theories about climate change and life in an ever-changing, technologically-driven world demonstrate a deeply prescient understanding of society today." — The Shed

"Agnes Denes was ahead of her time. She saw the coming of an ecological crisis, and in the 1960s started working with land, mathematics, philosophy, language, and technology to consider and offer solutions to the challenges facing humanity," said Emma Enderby, Senior Curator of The Shed. "She alerted us to humanitarian and environmental issues through beautiful, sensual visual forms combined with a deeply researched and scholarly philosophy. Her vision was radical, and in retrospect, terrifyingly prophetic."



Center: Studies for *Echo Chamber*



Installation view



Human Dust, 1969. Glass and calcareous human remains with text panel



Installation view



The Human Argument IV—Light Matrix, 1987/2012



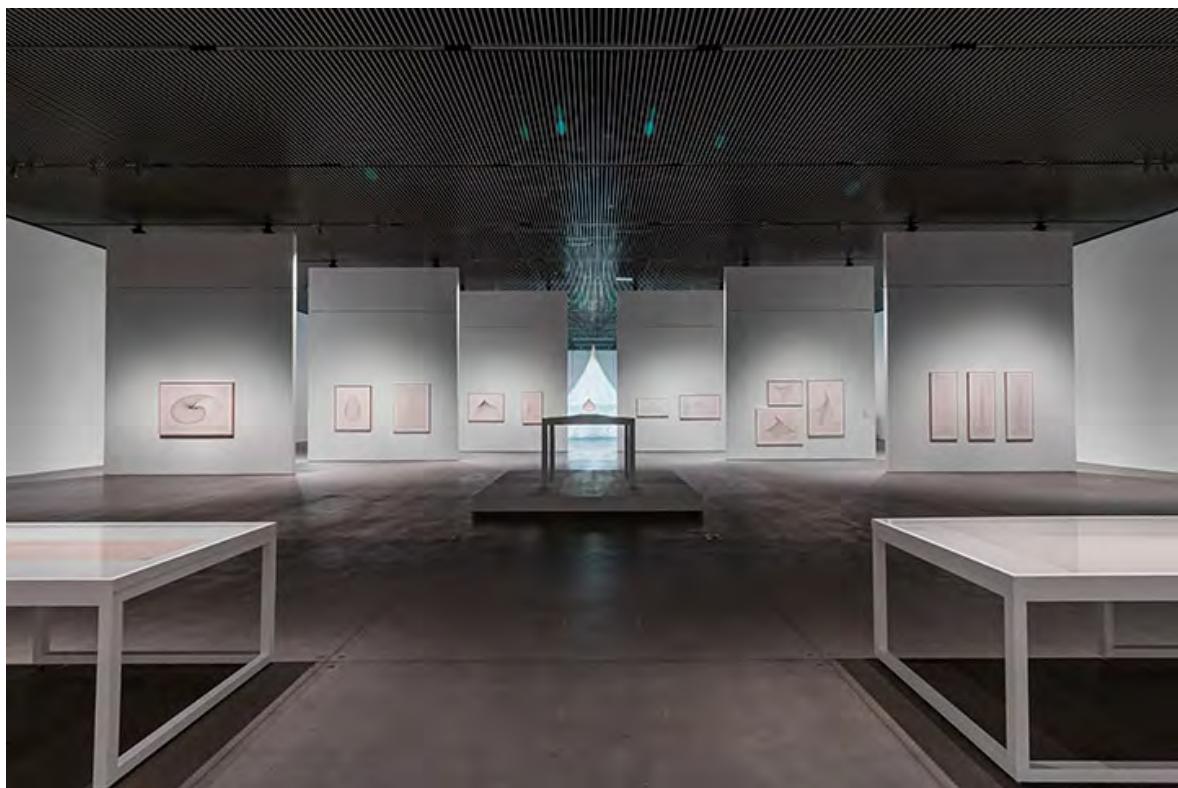
The Debate—One Million B.C.—One Million A.D., 1969



Series: Isometric Systems in Isotropic Space—Map Projections



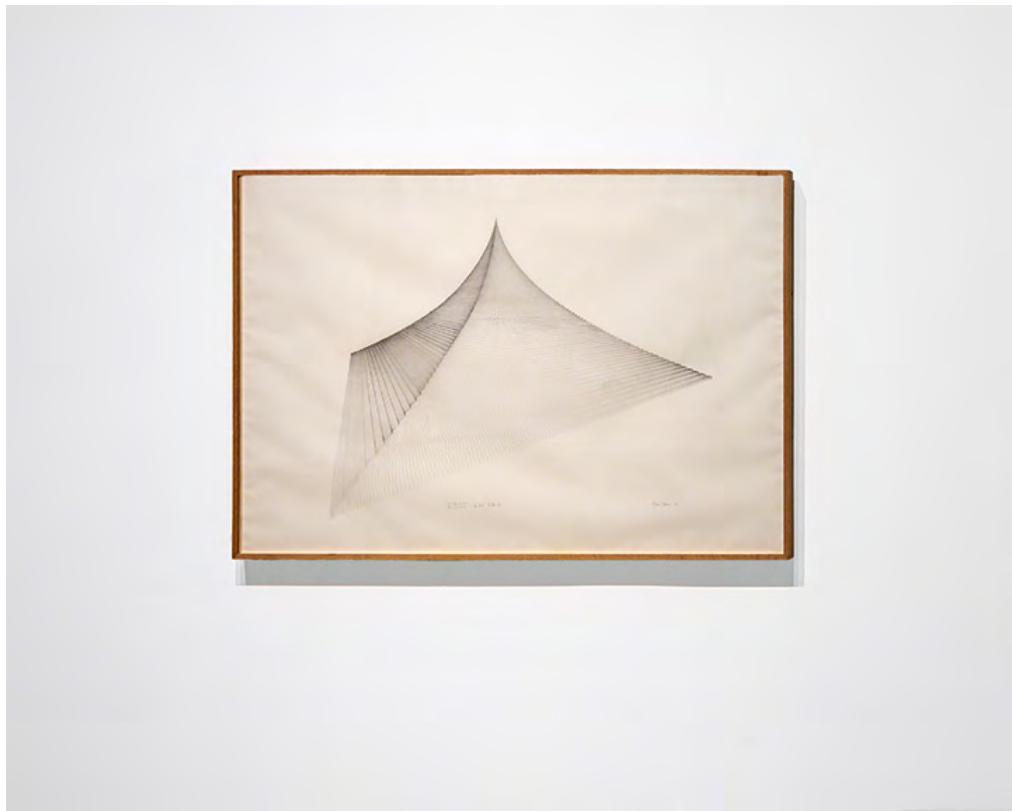
Work commissioned by The Shed. Center: *Model for A Forest for New York*, 2019



Installation view



Work commissioned by The Shed. Front: Model for *Teardrop—Monument to Being Earthbound*, 2019



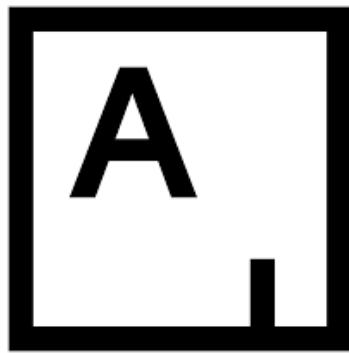
Probability Pyramid—Study for Crystal Pyramid, 1976



Work commissioned by The Shed. Model for *Probability Pyramid —Study for Crystal Pyramid*, 2019

Agnes Denes: Absolutes and Intermediates was organized by Emma Enderby, The Shed's Senior Curator, with Adeze Wilford, Curatorial Assistant.

###



Agnes Denes's Manhattan Wheatfield Has Only Grown More Poignant

Alina Cohen Oct 15, 2019 6:09pm



Agnes Denes, *Wheatfield—A Confrontation*, 1982. Photo by John McGrall. Courtesy of the artist and Leslie Tonkonow Artworks + Projects.

The past couple of months have ushered in some of the highest-profile arguments for climate intervention to date. Sixteen-year-old Greta Thunberg gained international celebrity after speaking at the United Nations about the urgency of governmental action. Jonathan Franzen wrote of our inability to prevent an impending climate apocalypse. And British activists plotted to fly drones around Heathrow in protest of the airport's attempt to build a third runway. In this context, it's easy to situate Hungarian-born artist Agnes Denes within a roster of environmentalist agitators. For over 50 years, Denes has created land art, drawings, and sculptures that advocate for greater attention to our planet. Her first-ever retrospective in New York City, "Absolutes and Intermediates," which opened at The Shed last week, positions Denes as a prophetic figure in the history of environmental activism. "One of our goals, in the face of ecological catastrophe and extinction, should be to establish new forms of ecological intelligence, rooted in imagination, empathy, and attentiveness—exactly what Agnes Denes has done," said Hans Ulrich Obrist at the show's press preview. Yet in 2019, Denes's landmark work *Wheatfield—A Confrontation* (1982) also inspires nostalgia and frustration: Back in 1982, we had a much better chance of reversing the harm we've done to the planet.



Agnes Denes, *Wheatfield – A Confrontation, Downtown Manhattan – The Harvest*, 1982. © Agnes Denes. Courtesy of the artist and Leslie Tonkonow Artworks + Projects, New York.

In May 1982, with the help of [Public Art Fund](#), Denes planted around two acres of wheat in downtown Manhattan at the old Battery Park Landfill. The process required digging 285 furrows in the ground, by hand. For four months, the artist and her assistants became agriculturalists, tending their plants: ultra-American, amber waves of grain. Two blocks from Wall Street and just across the water from the Statue of Liberty, their urban garden thrived. The project's title, *Wheatfield—A Confrontation*, nodded at the tension between the field and the city behind it.

Denes's idea, she told the [New York Times](#) back in 1982, was "an intrusion of the country into the metropolis, the world's richest real estate." At the time, the piece was as much a critique of the economy and the city's real estate system as it was a protest for environmental awareness. According to the artist's website, the land that comprised the literal trash heap under her field was valued at \$4.5 billion. The land has since been built up and developed into Battery Park City.



Agnes Denes, *Wheatfield—A Confrontation*, 1982. Photo by John McGrall. Courtesy of the artist and Leslie Tonkonow Artworks + Projects.

Now, nearly 40 years later, Denes doesn't believe the meanings embedded in her work have changed. "The issues have not been resolved," she recently said. "There is still world hunger, mismanagement of resources, mismanagement and misuse of our spaces and environments." The artwork distinguished Denes from her land art counterparts. Most were male and working out in the wide-open spaces of the American West. In 1969, [Michael Heizer](#) famously cut into Nevada stone to create *Double Negative*. [Robert Smithson](#) created *Spiral Jetty* (1970), a swirling formation of rock and water out in Utah. Viewing [Nancy Holt's](#) *Sun Tunnels* (1973–76) requires a trek into the Utah desert. And [James Turrell](#) acquired Arizona's Roden Crater in 1977 and continues to plot his still-in-construction artwork.



Aerial view of Agnes Denes, *Wheatfield – A Confrontation*, 1982. © Agnes Denes. Courtesy of the artist and Leslie Tonkonow Artworks + Projects, New York,

To be fair, Denes wasn't the first artist to intervene in New York's landscape.

Walter de Maria

had set up his *Earth Room* (1977)—a [SoHo loft](#) filled with dirt—a few years prior. Yet Denes's work was infinitely more accessible than that of her peers. When she harvested her crop in August, the yield served as horse feed for the city's mounted police, and the grains traveled to become part of an exhibition, "The International Art Show for the End of World Hunger," which traveled to 28 cities. "Individuals took away the seeds at the harvest day itself and from the exhibition," Denes recalled. "They were in thousands of little packets!"

As with all temporary land artworks, *Wheatfield—A Confrontation* lives on only within memory and photographs that documented the work. And the pictures are stunning. In one of the most frequently reproduced images, Denes stands in the middle of the golden field, staff in her hand. In a striped button-down and jeans, her legs mostly submerged in her crop, she looks like she could be out on the prairie. The high rises behind her create a simultaneously humorous and foreboding contrast: In a match between a solitary person and the hulking architecture, it's obvious who'd win. Another striking picture captures just the field itself and, beyond, the Statue of Liberty. The symbol of American freedom appears to rise from the crop.



Agnes Denes, *Wheatfield – A Confrontation: Battery Park Landfill, Downtown Manhattan – The Harvest*, 1982. © Agnes Denes. Courtesy of the artist and Leslie Tonkonow Artworks + Projects, New York.

The most poignant documentation, however, features the wheatfield against the backdrop of the World Trade Center. In 1982, the Twin Towers loomed in the background like capitalist villains. Today, it's impossible to see them without lamenting the lives lost on September 11th, and all the tragedies that have followed: two long wars, international conflict, and mounting religious intolerance. The world in the wheatfield photographs is far from perfect, but it's difficult not to look at it and wish we could reverse time.

Curators are deeming Denes prophetic for her ability to see climate issues for the quagmire they are. Yet Denes didn't foretell the future—no one can. Scientists can't even agree on exactly how our climate will change within the next 50 years. Denes merely identified basic human tendencies, such as competition, greed, and shortsightedness, that have led us into our contemporary climate crisis. Most of all, her work conjures some ever-relevant, 50-year-old Joni Mitchell lyrics: "You don't know what you've got 'til it's gone."

###

FAST COMPANY

We can save our planet and stop behaving like ‘robots,’ says environmental artist Agnes Denes

BY MARCUS BARAM 11.30.19

Agnes Denes has warned of environmental disaster and the dangers of technology since the 1960s. As a new retrospective opened in New York City, we spoke to the artist about her life's work.



Two acres of wheat planted and harvested by the artist on the Battery Park landfill, Manhattan, summer 1982. Commissioned by Public Art Fund. [Photo: John McGrall/courtesy the artist and Leslie Tonkonow Artworks + Projects]

The idea seems unreal, like some fever dream of New Yorkers who long for the pre-9/11 days, when life was simpler and there was room for hope and beauty and spontaneity. But it really did happen: Back in 1982, a two-acre wheat field improbably sprouted at the base of the World Trade Center, amber waves of grain swaying in the breeze just a few feet away from skyscrapers and the mayhem of the city.

It was the brainchild of artist Agnes Denes, who planned the monumental environmental project to urge humanity to change its ways and reassess its values. She roped off a space atop the landfill excavated from the Twin Towers site, arranged to have dump trucks deliver tons of rich

topsoil, and organized people to dig furrows and plant seeds. Within a few months, a beautiful wheat field became a fairy-tale-like destination that captivated jaded New Yorkers commuting to their office jobs. At one point, Denes even brought in threshers to harvest the crop.



That project is the highlight of *Agnes Denes: Absolutes and Intermediates*, the long-overdue Denes retrospective at the Shed, the new exhibition space at Hudson Yards in Manhattan. And *Wheatfield—A Confrontation*, which is depicted in photos and videos, is still stunning. I've lived in New York City for almost 30 years, work just a block away from Ground Zero, used to dine and drink with friends at a bar atop the old World Trade Center, was covered in dust and debris when the towers fell, and yet I'd never heard of this project.

Agnes Denes [Photo: Jeremy Liebman. Courtesy The Shed]

In addition to *Wheatfield*, the enormous new exhibition (which is open and runs through March 22, 2020) features the 88-year-old artist's other environmental works from around the world and her essays and drawings that focus on scientific and philosophical topics, some of which were uncannily prescient. Denes recently answered some of our questions via email.

Fast Company: What inspired you to plant a wheat field at the base of the World Trade Center?

Agnes Denes: When invited by the Public Art Fund to create a sculpture for a plaza, I decided to plant a wheat field instead of another man sitting on a horse. It created the paradox the work is based on if you read my writing on the work. It called attention to the misuse of land, world hunger, and misplaced priorities.

FC: At the time, you wrote that you hoped the work would get people to reconsider their priorities and said, "Unless human values were reassessed, the quality of life, even life itself, was in danger." Your words are haunting, in light of the 9/11 tragedy. Have we completely failed to reconsider our priorities?

AD: Completely or partially, it doesn't matter. We move slowly, even if danger is clear and apparent. We usually correct in hindsight.

FC: What could we do better individually and through government action?



Model for *A Forest for New York*, 2019. [Photo: Stan Narten/courtesy of the artist and Leslie Tonkonow Artworks + Projects]

AD: This isn't something that can be answered quickly. [*Denes then referred to her writings on environmental issues, which express the need to make drastic changes to avoid a climate catastrophe. She doesn't hold out much hope for government action but has taken on the challenge as an artist. In the wake of Hurricane Sandy, she created the idea for a manmade forest in Far Rockaway, in Queens, to hold back rising sea levels. It remains unrealized, but a model for this concept is featured at the Shed. For her work Tree Mountain, she got 11,000 people to plant 11,000 trees in Finland, creating the world's first manmade forest built by humans.*]

FC: Even more prescient than your essay on *Wheatfield* were your words in *Matrix of Knowledge* [a collection of Denes's essays and drawings published in 1970] about the overload of information to come in future decades. "When having to read and learn that much becomes more than the mind can handle, reduction, preselection, and elimination will be the answer," you wrote. That prediction certainly came true, considering our addiction to social media and our current era of Big Data. What can we do to pull back from drowning in information (and misinformation)—or is it too late?



Model for Probability Pyramid—Study for Crystal Pyramid, 2019. [Photo: Stan Narten/courtesy of the artist and Leslie Tonkonow Artworks + Projects]

AD: It's not too late, but maybe a huge catastrophe is needed to stop the addiction and take people's minds in a different direction. Monkey see, monkey do. People imitate each other. Tell people that only stupidity and lack of education will make them susceptible to this form of communication, and if the message is believable, they may stop. In old times people who committed a crime were tied to a post in a public square to be shamed in front of their relatives and friends. Today we have something similar on a large scale. Don't just shame people, educate them effectively.

FC: Do you believe art can influence our thinking, to help us rethink our priorities and values? Or is that becoming more difficult to do in an era where we're overloaded with information and media (video games, streaming entertainment, virtual reality, etc.)?

AD: Art could, just not the kind that's out there. People get quickly on bandwagons. Environmental art spreads like wildfire and now everybody wants to partake in its production. It's okay, but do some good, make people think and act effectively. Art can educate as well as be pleasing. Every work I made also offered solutions to the problem that it dealt with, exposed, called attention to, solved. We are becoming robots. I would like to make people think and feel good about themselves. Inside, even in a misguided fool, lurks a good person. My art touches on that secret spot.

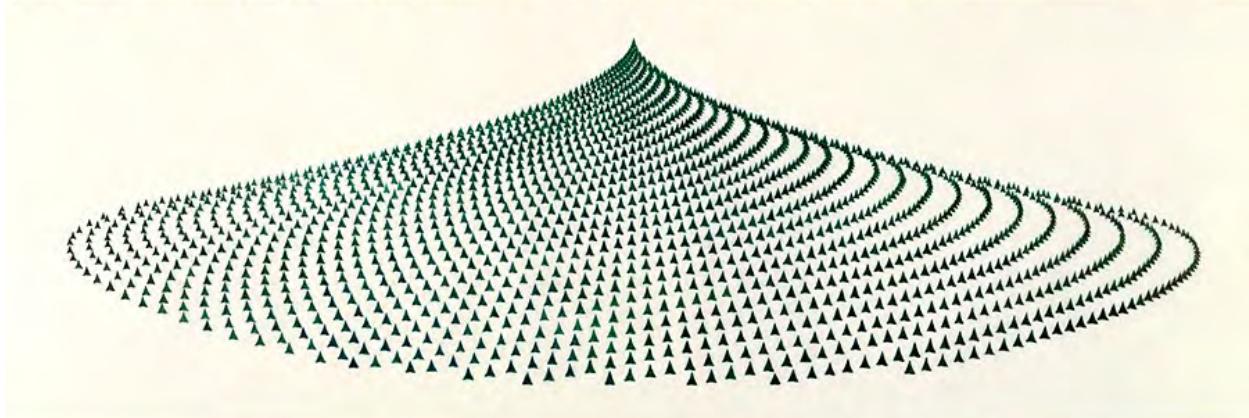
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Frieze

BY EMMA MCCORMICK-GOODHART 31 OCT 2019

If the Earth Were a Hot Dog: A Conversation with Agnes Denes

With a survey exhibition at The Shed, the visionary artist speaks to Emma McCormick-Goodhart about the importance of learning from nature



Agnes Denes, *Tree Mountain – A Living Time Capsule—11,000 Trees, 11,000 People, 400 Years (Triptych)*, 1992–96, 1992/2013, chromogenic print, overall: 91 × 91 cm. Courtesy: the artist and Leslie Tonkonow Artworks + Projects

Agnes Denes's prescient work pushes the limits of the physical world. Many of her structures remain unrealized in the built environment, existing as precise renderings on paper. Her 'eco-logical' depictions of cilia, organisms, spheres and hyperspheres stretch from subatomic to planetary scales. 'Absolutes and Intermediates', Denes's solo exhibition on view at The Shed until March 2020, surveys more than six decades of experimentation, from her 'Philosophical Drawings' (1969–80) and 'Map Projections' (1973–79), to her early experiments in holography and range of public projects. This imaginative cartography engages questions of mind, matter, machine intelligence, ecological precarity and future habitation.



Agnes Denes, 2018. Courtesy: The Shed; photograph: Jeremy Liebman

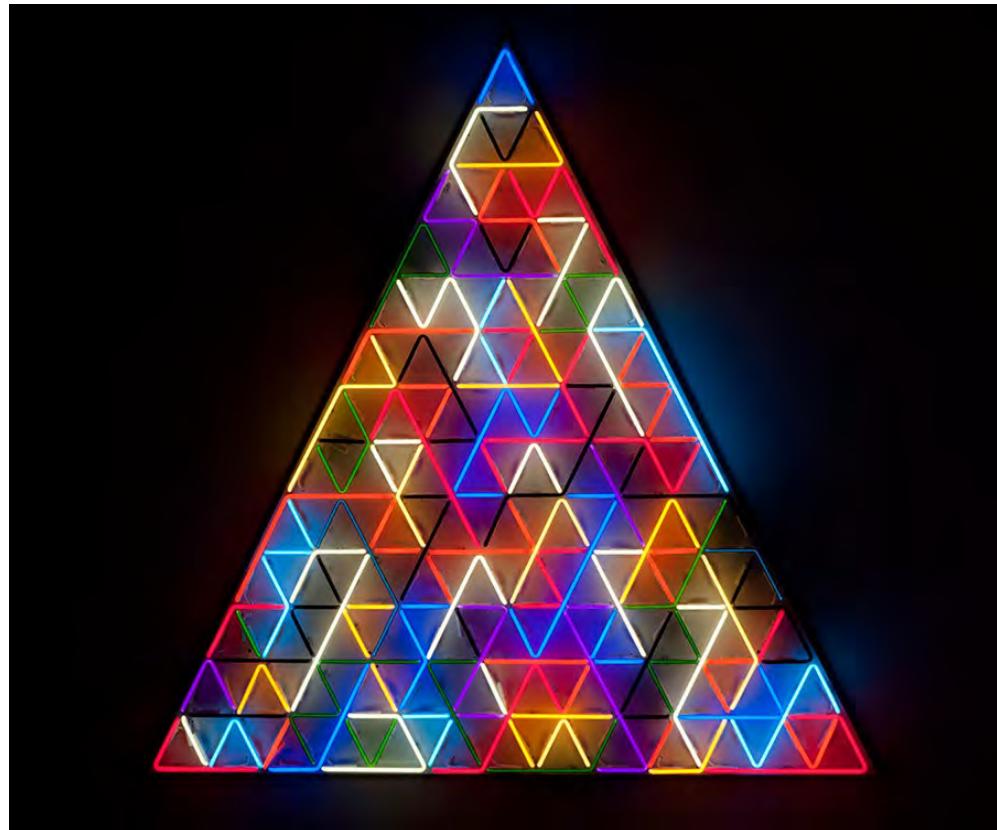
Emma McCormick-Goodhart: Do you recall how and what you played with as a child?

Agnes Denes: I remember having a *Robinson Crusoe* environment. My father had a small, little estate, and we went there in the summertime, when school was out. I remember dragging a blanket across the field and digging out a little environment under bushes, where it was my space. I remember sitting there and dabbling for the first time in poetry.

EMG: You've described how a 'loss of language' – a feeling of being 'deaf and dumb' – caused by geographic relocations as a child led you to embrace visual vocabularies.

AD: When you travel, you pick up different languages. I picked up different languages that interfered with writing poetry. Somehow my need for creative expression found a way in prose, visual expression, painting, and so on.

When I started, I wanted to evaluate human knowledge. I wanted to re-examine our thinking; and during this investigation, my art was born. At the time, embarking on a project I was attracted to, I didn't realize that it would take me years to complete. Once you are in something, you can't walk away from it. That's how I wound up doing my works that seem like such summations of knowledge in visual form. I feel that difficult concepts can only be understood if they're put into visual form, and that is the most difficult thing: visualizing invisible processes.



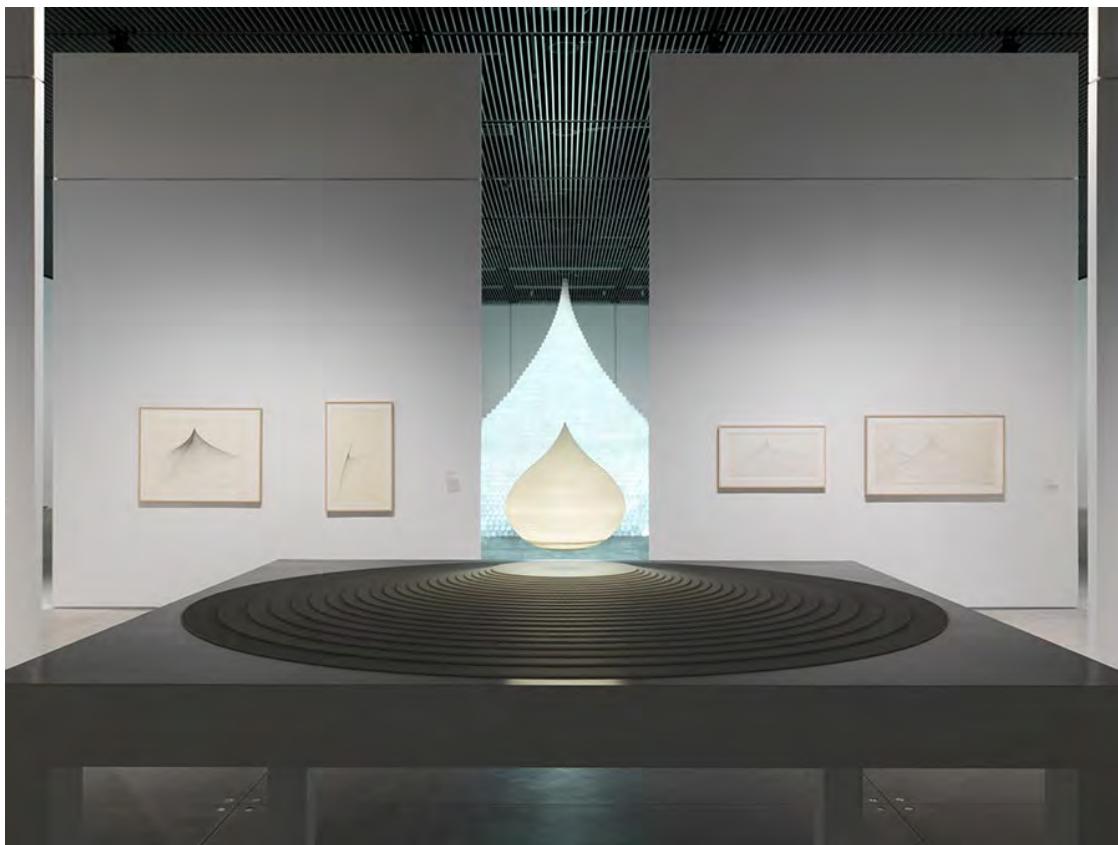
Agnes Denes, *The Human Argument IV—Light Matrix*, 1987/2012, neon on powder-coated aluminum, 183 × 183 × 13 cm. Courtesy: the artist and Leslie Tonkonow Artworks + Projects

EMG: A body of your work remains unrealized, albeit meticulously rendered. How important is it that a work be 'realized', and does it make it any less real if it isn't? What freedom does *not* realizing a work, but conceiving of it, confer to you?

AD: It is important for the world to realize these concepts as they offer benign solutions to the problems we are facing. You can take a horse to water but can't make it drink. The world has yet to wake up and act on intelligent suggestions. My roll is only to propose them.

EMG: What does working without colour, as you did for 15 years, permit in the way of experimentation?

AD: I loved colour, even taught it in school, so giving it up meant divesting myself of something I loved in order to deal with difficult concepts I needed to visualize and put into the foreground.



'Agnes Denes: Absolutes and Intermediates', 2019–20, exhibition view. Courtesy: The Shed; photograph: Dan Bradica

EMG: You've designed environments for outer space, terra firma, coastlines, and the deep sea – some of which are built, and others that exist as concepts or masterplans. Which genre of environment is most interesting and/or challenging to design for? Which feels most urgent to design for?

AD: All of them.

EMG: How has your *Mega Dunes and Barrier Islands to Hold Back the Sea: A Project for the Rockaways and the New York Harbor* (2013), a collaboration with climate scientists, oceanographers, Rockaway community organizations and others, evolved since its inception? Do you see sculptural possibilities in island creation – of land and wetland formation?

AD: I designed mega-dunes to slow down the destruction of sea surges for the shores of low-lying areas in the New York Harbor and around the world. And even though the Rockaways signed off on the project, it is still waiting for any real support, like my *Forest for New York* (2014). The world is slow if there is no motivation, expensive advertising, or wealthy, big-name support.



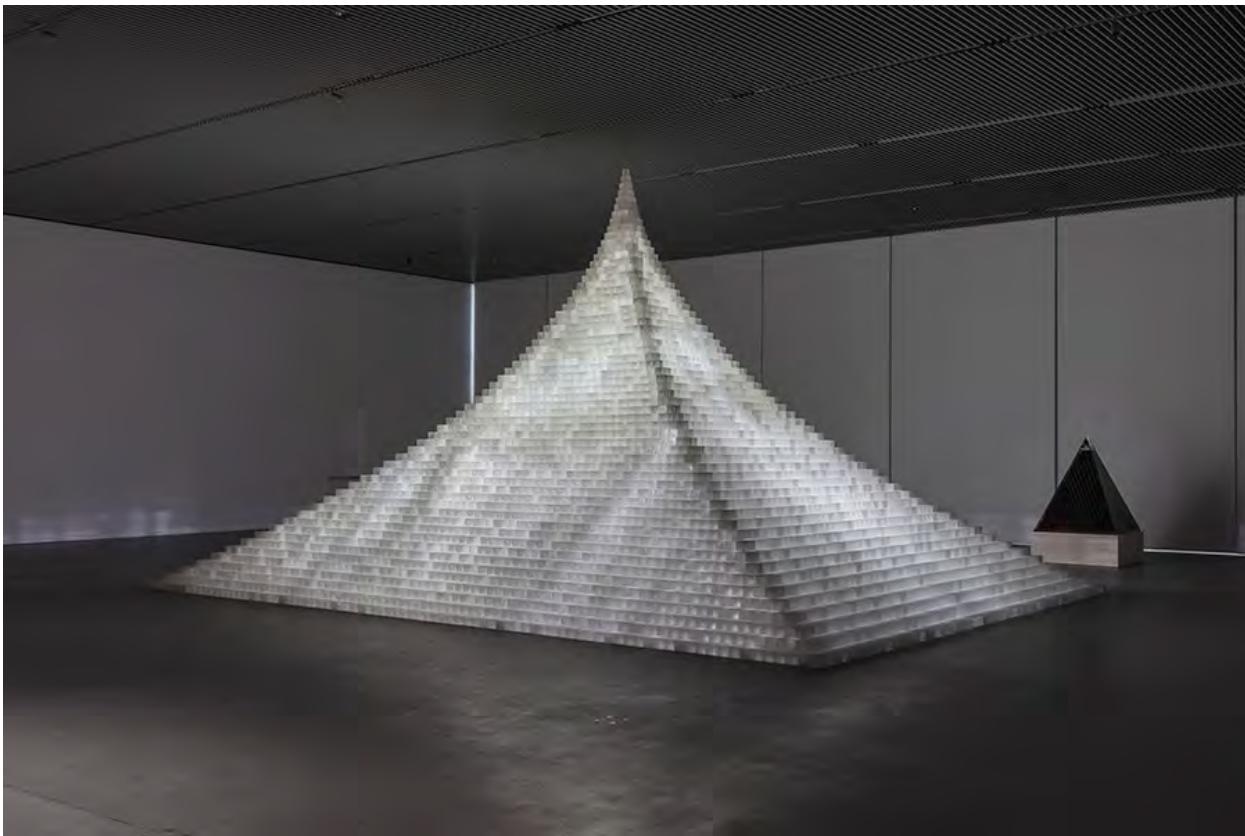
Agnes Denes, *Model for A Forest for New York*, 2019, plywood, MDF, foam, natural branches, paint, sand and plastic, 138 × 107 × 8 cm. Commissioned by The Shed. Courtesy the artist and Leslie Tonkonow Artworks + Projects; photograph: Stan Narten

EMG You were thinking about sentience and nonhuman intelligences well before the topic was embraced by the philosophical community. Your unrealized piece, *Giant Sequoia* (1972), reads as follows: A proposal for a film that examines the ‘thoughts’ and experiences of a California redwood that has lived over one thousand years and grown to 300 feet with a trunk diameter of thirty-some feet.

AD An entity that lives on earth; a tree that’s a thousand years old. What has it seen and experienced in history that lived around it: the demise of people, the growth and the rebirth of people in cities ... If that could talk, wouldn’t that be fascinating? I’m just putting myself in the mind of a thousand-year-old sequoia. It’s very simple.

EMG You also ‘worked with’ plants. Your microphotographic series, ‘Anima/Persona—The Seed’ (1978–80), is both visually opulent and hyper-kinematic, like early stop-motion photography.

AD I’m interested in growth, in pinpointing growth – not time-lapse photography, necessarily. I’m fascinated by how people change. I used microphotography to photograph a seed, because I wanted to see changes the eye can’t see.

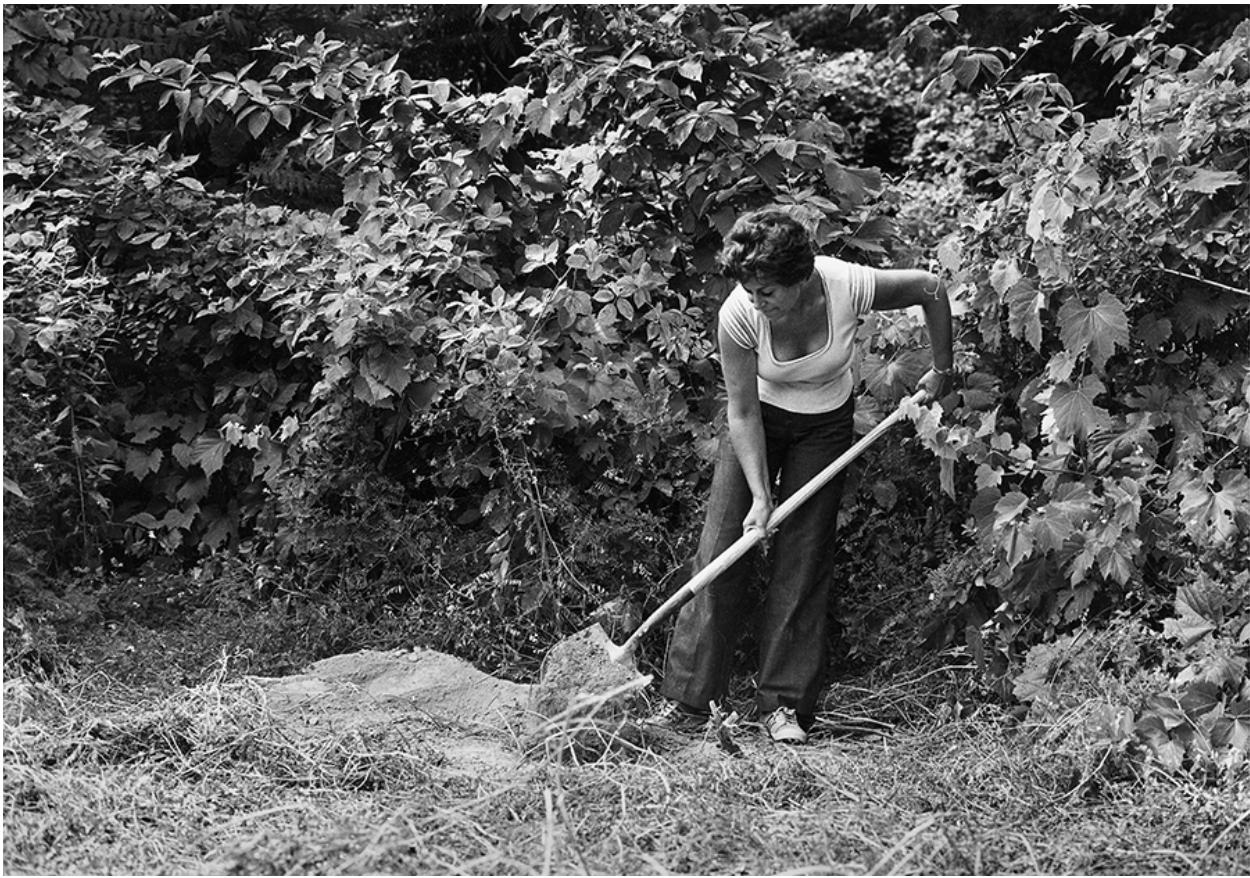


Agnes Denes, *Model for Probability Pyramid—Study for Crystal Pyramid*, 2019, corn-based PLA 3D-printed bricks, clear acrylic plexiglass, 6.7 x 9.1 x 5.2 m. Commissioned by The Shed. Courtesy: the artist and Leslie Tonkonow Artworks + Projects; photograph: Stan Narten

EMG Many of your works activate the morphology of the shell (*Snail Pyramid—Study for Self-Contained, Self-Supporting City Dwelling—A Future Habitat*, 1988; *Snail People —The Vortex*, 1989; the Nautilus Amphitheater in *Peace Park U.S.A—Proposal for Twelve-Acre Park, Hains Point, Washington DC*, 1989, etc.). What fascinates you about molluscs and their capacity for enclosure?

AD: When I was on vacation in Long Island, I started studying hermit crabs. They're fascinating creatures, because they move out of a house, and they start looking for another house immediately. They're like real-estate people, little Trumps. They go and find a house and they back into it [she motions with her shoulders] to see if it fits. I try to understand nature, independent of the words man has given it.

I don't think of this as morphology, which is a man-given thing. I look at it as a parallel to the way we play with the only home we have as humans, this silly little earth. For instance, what would people look like if they were living on an earth shaped like a hot dog? They would be tall and skinny like toothpicks. My drawing that imagines that, *Isometric Systems in Isotropic Space—Map Projections: The Hot Dog* (1976), is a comic piece, with very serious implications.



Rice/Tree/Burial, Artpark, Lewiston, New York, 1977–79, gelatin silver print. Courtesy: the artist and Leslie Tonkonow Artworks + Projects

EMG What do you envision as future spaces of practice and exhibition for artists of the future, who have yet to be born? Should we not be practicing indoors?

AD It depends on what they want to do. I see a lot of art today that, to me, is meaningless. Artists try a little bit of environmental art, a little bit of this, a little bit of that. I don't see anything beyond the struggle to be seen and heard. It's good to have so many artists; I wish we had more. But most artists don't spend enough time on their art.

If your art is well thought-out, it demands its own presentation, it demands its own space. Art has to be strong enough to make room for itself. It has to be strong enough to withstand the public's lack of understanding.

'Agnes Denes: Asolutes and Intermediates' continues at *The Shed* through 22 March 2020.

EMMA MCCORMICK-GOODHART

Emma McCormick-Goodhart is an artist, writer and researcher based in London, UK, and New York, USA

####

GIORNALE DI SICILIA

FONDATO DA GIROLAMO ARDIZZONE

The art of Agnes Denes at the Shed

10 October 2019



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Beyond Land Art: in 1982, with funding from the Public Art Fund, the artist Agnes Denes planted one hectare of land in wheat in the future Battery Park City: "Wheatfield - A Confrontation", later replicated in Milan for Expo 2015, called attention to large-scale changes to the New York waterfront, specifically the construction a few years before the Twin Towers. That iconic work and others created by the 88-year-old conceptual artist who has lived in New York for 50 years are at the center of "Absolutes and Intermediates", a retrospective at the Shed which for the first time gathers together all the Denes production under one roof with the ambition to make her a Leonardo of our century.

"Denes has not only anticipated the destruction by the a man of natural habitats at a time when few people were concerned about the environment: much of his work also offers solutions to the ecological crises we are experiencing ", said Hans Ulrich Obrist, the Swiss art historian who contributed to the exhibition. For Emma Enderby, Senior Curator at the Shed, "Agnes anticipated the times. He saw the arrival of the crisis and, starting in the 1960s, he began to work with mathematics, philosophy, language and technology to give solutions to the ills of humanity. His vision was radical and tremendously prophetic. "The exhibition combines unfinished projects - in this and in another by paying tribute to a contemporary creativity that many critics recalled the genius of Leonardo - others completed.

Agnes, whom she had seen from child the horrors of which the man with the bombing of Budapest at the end of the Second World War, finding then in his second home, the USA, the ghosts of the Cold War and of a rapacious consumerism that threatened to destroy the planet even without the nuclear bombs, a year later the "Wheatfield" designed a hill covered with small conifers that in the nineties in Finland became a real forest, the first ever planted by man. The model of another still unrealized forest (Forest for New York 2014) is one of the three new commissions of the Shed: the artist has proposed to transform into a park a landfill of about fifty hectares in Queens through the planting of one hundred thousand new trees. A cyclopean undertaking: it would take hundreds of years to achieve it.

A section of the exhibition is dedicated to the series of the Pyramids: sculptures, drawings and prints in which from the 70s to the present the artist breaks up a simple geometric shape transforming its shape with complex mathematical equations. As a corollary there is a questionnaire for visitors in which Denes invites her to express herself in a personal way to questions related to her work. Among the questions, "what do you think will be most important for humanity? Science, love (compassion empathy, etc.)". The answers will be collected and buried on the edge of the Shed in a "time capsule" to be opened in the year 3020.

###

INTERIOR DESIGN

“Agnes Denes: Absolutes and Intermediates” to Open at The Shed

September 27, 2019 By Annie Block



INTERIOR
DESIGN

An image of *Wheatfield—A Confrontation*, 1982, two acres of wheat planted and harvested by Agnes Denes on the Battery Park landfill, commissioned by Public Art Fund, is appearing in her retrospective at The Shed in Hudson Yards, October 9 to January 19. Photography courtesy of Agnes Denes and Leslie Tonkonow Artworks + Projects.

It was May 1982 when 200 truckloads of dirt were brought to a vacant lot. Volunteers dug hundreds of furrows and sowed thousands of seeds. An irrigation system was set up and the field was maintained for months. In August, a crop yielding more than 1,000 pounds of golden wheat was harvested. Kansas or Oklahoma? Far from it. This took place in what is today called Battery Park, and it was the vision of [Agnes Denes](#), the now 88-year-old conceptual artist who lives in SoHo, just a few blocks north of that landmark environmental installation nearly 40 years ago. Come October 9, she'll be at Hudson Yards, where her retrospective "Agnes Denes: Absolutes and Intermediates" appears at [The Shed](#). The exhibition, which runs through January 19, features over 150 of her works, including three new ones commissioned by [The Shed](#), among them *A Forest for New York*. Ongoing since 2014, it's Denes's proposal to turn another landfill, this time 120 acres in Far Rockaway, Queens, into a lush public park by planting 100,000 trees.

###

The New York Times

Holiday Museum Guide: Where to See Art This Season

We'll not only help you figure out what exhibitions to see, but also offer some tips before you head out.



An installation view of the Rachel Harrison exhibition at the Whitney Museum of American Art, which runs through Jan. 12. Credit...Charlie Rubin for The New York Times

This season can make even the grouchest New Yorker an urban romantic, and encourages local residents and visitors alike to rediscover the museums and monuments we sometimes take for granted. Prepare for good cheer, special programming — and big crowds.

Whether you're coming with your family, your friends, your lover or your good old self, you'll want to plan ahead when visiting New York's unsurpassed arts institutions, and exploring some exquisite smaller museums outside the tourist green zone. Check online before you go: most have shortened hours on Christmas and New Year's Eves, and are closed Christmas and New Year's Days. (An exception: The **Jewish Museum**, on Fifth Avenue, is open as usual on Dec. 25 and reliably popular that day.)

Holiday Art Guide

We also have tips for where to eat, and some alternatives to the big museums.

Your top priority should probably be the expanded, refreshed **Museum of Modern Art**, which now has 30 percent additional gallery space and a far more welcoming entrance. So far the crowds have felt palpable but manageable, although weekdays are a tick more peaceful than weekends. If all goes well you won't have to queue too long at the new digital ticket counters, but you can walk right in if you pay at moma.org and show the ticket on your phone. You can save \$25 a head by visiting on Friday after 5:30 p.m., but you'd better prepare to wait.



Eliana and Tania Thomas with Keith Haring's "Untitled," 1982, on the second floor of the Museum of Modern Art.Credit...The Keith Haring Foundation; Karsten Moran for The New York Times

Friday and Saturday evenings are an excellent time to visit the Metropolitan Museum of Art, with its Christmas tree festooned with antique Neapolitan ornaments — as well as the Met Breuer, the museum's under-trafficked satellite. Before the Met vacates the Breuer building next summer, make time now for its finespun retrospective of the Latvian-American artist Vija Celmins; then head downstairs for a drink at Flora Bar, with the smartest by-the-glass wine list on the Upper East Side.

You can explore a new neighborhood, as well as another time period, by visiting a house museum. The grande dame is the Frick Collection on Fifth Avenue, currently presenting Renaissance bronzes by Bertoldo di Giovanni and matter-of-fact painting by Manet. We're also fans of the Morris-Jumel Mansion in Harlem, which dates to 1765 and is the oldest house in Manhattan; the even older Van Cortlandt House in the Bronx, nestled in one of the city's largest parks; and the Merchant's House Museum in the East Village, with one of New York's very few landmark residential interiors.

Have a look below at a sampling of what's on view right now, or consider following this three-hour tour through some of Midtown's finer small institutions. Don't worry, kids, it's not all art: We've allotted time for a snack.

These Women Will Blow You Aw



'AGNES DENES: ABSOLUTES AND INTERMEDIATES' at the Shed (through March 22). A photograph of Agnes Denes standing amid her 1982 public work, a two-acre wheatfield that she grew and harvested in Lower Manhattan, speaks to her pioneering spirit. It's among the items in a superbly installed survey of the visionary artist's 50-year journey, exploring her focus "on ecology, on the fear of present decay and the hope for future survival," Holland Cotter wrote in his review. "We'll be lucky this art season if we get another exhibition as tautly beautiful." 646-455-3494, theshed.org.

###



THE ART NEWSPAPER

Agnes Denes: environmental art pioneer. Plus, Rembrandt-Velázquez and De Hooch

We speak to the artist behind the extraordinary Wheatfield work and visit two new shows in the Netherlands. Produced in association with Bonhams, auctioneers since 1793.

Hosted by BEN LUKE and MARGARET CARRIGAN. Produced by JULIA MICHALSKA, DAVID CLACK and AIMEE DAWSON 11th October 2019



Agnes Denes's *Wheatfield—A Confrontation* involved the artist planting and harvesting two acres of wheat on the Battery Park landfill in Manhattan during the summer of 1982. Commissioned by Public Art Fund. Courtesy the artist and Leslie Tonkonow Artworks + Projects

We talk to Agnes Denes, best known for her extraordinary *Wheatfield*, a two-acre field of wheat that she planted, tended and harvested in 1982 on landfill in Lower Manhattan, as the *Shed* in New York opens a retrospective of her work. And we visit two new shows in the Netherlands: *Rembrandt-Velázquez* at the Rijksmuseum and *Pieter De Hooch* in Delft at the Museum Prinsenhof in Delft.

- *The Art Newspaper Weekly podcast is available every Friday on our website and all the usual places where you find podcasts including iTunes, Soundcloud and TuneIn. This podcast is brought to you in association with Bonhams, auctioneers since 1793. bonhams.com/define*

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THE BROOKLYN RAIL

Agnes Denes: *Absolutes & Intermediates*

By Marcia E. Vetrocq



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

ON VIEW

The Shed

October 9 – March 22, 2020
New York

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, adamantine 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.



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

The show's titular drawing, *Absolutes & Intermediaries* (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 & Intermediaries* 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."



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

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.



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

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.

###

whitewall

Betye Saar, Hans Haacke, and More Must See New York Shows

By Pearl Fontaine OCTOBER 30, 2019

In New York this month, be sure to visit some of these top exhibitions, on view at spaces like The Shed, the new MoMA, Pace Gallery, and Brooklyn Museum.



Installation view: "Agnes Denes: Absolutes and Intermediates"

Photo by Dan Bradica

Courtesy of The Shed.

Agnes Denes: Absolutes and Intermediates On View

The Shed

Now—March 22, 2020

“Absolutes and Intermediates On View” is the most comprehensive retrospective of **Agnes Denes** to date. Filling both galleries of **The Shed**, the show presents over 150 of Denes’ works created throughout the artist’s 50-year career, including a range of media like monoprints, etchings, ink drawings, and lithographs. A leading figure in conceptual and environmental art, Denes first came up in the 1960s, creating works related to science, philosophy, linguistics, mathematics, and ecology, with a goal to aid humanity. Highlights include pieces from her “Philosophical Drawings” series, the “Pyramid” series, monumental public works like *Wheatfield—A Confrontation*, and three new commissioned pieces made especially for The Shed.

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T THE NEW YORK TIMES STYLE MAGAZINE

The Woman Who Harvested a Wheat Field Off Wall Street

Agnes Denes, the queen of Land Art, made one of New York's greatest public art projects ever in 1982. Now, the world might be catching up with her.

By Karrie Jacobs June 14, 2018



"Wheatfield – A Confrontation: Battery Park Landfill, Downtown Manhattan – With Artist in the field," 1982.Credit...John McGrail, courtesy Leslie Tonkonow Artworks + Projects

A DIVERSE ARRAY of artists, academics and curators assembled on a stage this spring at a news conference for the Shed, the mammoth Hudson Yards arts space that is scheduled to open next year. They flanked the new institution's artistic director and chief executive, Alex Poots, and, one by one, explained their contributions to an inaugural year that will include, among other events, a 100-year survey of AfricanAmerican music and an exhibition in which the paintings of Gerhard Richter are paired with compositions by Arvo Pärt and Steve Reich.

At the far end of the lineup was an older woman, dressed in black, with two-toned hair: blond in front and brown in back. She looked fragile, but her short speech was spirited. "I'm bursting with ideas because the time is short," she declared. "Creativity and innovation is the answer in a troubled world to swing the pendulum. Be creative. Never stop. Creativity is hope."

Murmurs of “Who is she?” rippled through the audience. Her name was in bold white type on a black screen behind her, but it was unfamiliar to many. A photograph projected on both sides of her showed the same woman, much younger, resembling a peasant in a 19th-century Russian painting: She is standing in the midst of a shimmering field of golden wheat, holding a staff in her hand. But behind her, incongruously, a slice of the World Trade Center skyscrapers is clearly visible.

The woman was Agnes Denes, the artist who created one of the most significant artworks in New York City history, “Wheatfield – A Confrontation,” a two-acre wheat field that was planted in May 1982 on the landfill that would eventually become Battery Park City, was harvested that August and then disappeared forever from the site. Denes, too, would largely vanish from the city’s consciousness until 2015, when her work “The Living Pyramid,” a grassy ziggurat, popped up at the Socrates Sculpture Park in Queens. She remained busy elsewhere, building a mountain from scratch in Finland and planting 11,000 trees on it, foresting an Australian waste treatment site. She has had exhibitions all over the world and shows at museums at Cornell University and in Santa Monica. Her show at the Shed in 2019 will be her first solo exhibition at a major New York institution.



“Wheatfield – A Confrontation: Battery Park Landfill, Downtown Manhattan – Volunteers Spreading the Soil,” 1982. Credit...© Agnes Denes, courtesy Leslie Tonkonow Artworks + Projects



"Wheatfield – A Confrontation: Battery Park Landfill, Downtown Manhattan – Statue of Liberty across the Hudson (14)," 1982. Credit...© Agnes Denes, courtesy Leslie Tonkonow Artworks + Projects

Why did it take so long? And how did a trailblazer like Denes, whose most flamboyant work was easily accessible to millions of New Yorkers, fade from view? Maybe "Wheatfield" was just too ephemeral; it wasn't a triumph of heavy equipment over dirt like the best-known earthworks of the day, but a meditation on the tension between the man-made and the natural. It was also an experiment in urban farming that was a solid 30 years ahead of its time. Denes had a lot working against her: She was an artist whose signature work existed for only three months; a woman — and, in her early 50s at the time of "Wheatfield," not even a young woman — whose peers in the earthworks movement were defined by their heedless machismo; and a conceptual artist with huge ideas at a time when galleries and museums were more interested in the bright canvases of the Neo-Expressionists. At long last, time has caught up with her, and the very things that cut her off from the mainstream — her boldness, her theoretical concerns — have made her, and especially her "Wheatfield" project, more necessary than ever.

DENES, 87, WAS born in Budapest and has lived in the same loft, just below Houston Street, since 1980. Her home is a throwback to an earlier SoHo, more like a warehouse than a living space, crammed with her artwork. There are pieces in almost every possible medium, tracing Denes's free-ranging exploration of math, science and the nature of the universe.

Her instinct has always been to go deep. Against one wall of the loft is a piece she began in 1969 and completed six years later in which passages from the Bible were translated into Morse code and displayed on black Plexiglas. Denes is obsessed with three-sided geometry, and a pivotal etching finished in 1975 called "4,000 Years — If the Mind..." is a triangle divided into triangles, each containing a single small Middle Egyptian hieroglyph. An accompanying text explains that it's part of her quest for "universal truth."

"That was the beginning of wanting to re-evaluate knowledge," she says. "I wanted to know the clean language of art, that I feel is the cleanest, because it's transparent and it's unselfish — well, mostly — and to get that truth that it conveys." Asked why she decided to plant a wheat field in Manhattan, she simply says, "I wanted to do something that was meaningful."



"Wheatfield – A Confrontation: Battery Park Landfill, Downtown Manhattan – Aerial View," 1982.Credit...© Agnes Denes, courtesy Leslie Tonkonow Artworks + Projects



"Wheatfield – A Confrontation: Battery Park Landfill, Downtown Manhattan – Golden Wheat (2)," 1982.Credit..© Agnes Denes, courtesy Leslie Tonkonow Artworks + Projects

Denes secured \$10,000 in backing from the Public Art Fund, a nonprofit that has been producing works since 1977. By the early '80s, the group had started to display creations by artists such as Keith Haring and Jenny Holzer on the Spectacolor sign in Times Square; "Wheatfield" wound up being one of the organization's most ambitious projects.

Initially, Denes says, the Public Art Fund encouraged her to grow wheat in the quieter borough of Queens. She refused, setting her sights instead on the 92-acre Battery Park landfill, then one of the last undeveloped sections of Manhattan, an uncommonly serene slice of waterfront and the closest thing to farmland the island had to offer (it is now the site of a planned community).

The subtitle of Denes's project — "A Confrontation" — was deliberate. The work seemed to stare down the World Trade Center, one of New York's significant symbols of power, and force the viewer to confront difficult questions. Its placement, "one block from Wall Street, with traffic going through a block away, facing the Statue of Liberty," Denes says, "was a meaningful attack" on the divide between rich and poor, between the pastoral and the technocratic, and how people embrace progress. The magic of the piece, then as now, was the setting: Significantly, it was the rare example of the Land Art genre that wasn't off in some remote place, like the Great Salt Lake or the Painted Desert — or, for that matter, Queens.



"Wheatfield – A Confrontation: Battery Park Landfill, Downtown Manhattan – Blue Sky With World Trade Center," 1982. Credit...© Agnes Denes, courtesy Leslie Tonkonow Artworks + Projects

Denes, an assistant and a small group of volunteers toiled every day for a month to plant two acres of wheat on soil that, she wrote in a project description, was "full of rusty metals, boulders, old tires and overcoats." (Much of the Battery Park landfill was created by the holes that were dug during the construction of the twin towers.) "I worked 16 hours a day," Denes says. "I had no money to hire anybody to help me. I had to go home after work finished in the 'Wheatfield' and make sandwiches for the volunteers for the next day, because I couldn't pay them."

"Wheatfield" is, in retrospect, viewed as a watershed moment in public art. Its short existence was documented in photographs, which have taken on an added resonance as New York City's empty spaces fill up and familiar landscapes are eradicated. A piece that was once about the contrast between the man-made and the natural environment is now more about the vulnerability of everything. The two behemoth skyscrapers in the background of the photos unexpectedly proved as perishable as the artwork in the foreground.

"Wheatfield" is a still reminder that the city is always changing, and nothing is permanent here. A project on the scale of "Wheatfield" would likely no longer even be possible in Manhattan. Lately, Denes has been plotting "A Forest for New York" — she wants to plant more than 100,000 trees atop another landfill. The location? Queens.

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When Battery Park City Was a Wheat Field in 1982

By Michelle Young 09/13/2019 ARTS & CULTURE, NEW YORK, NEWS



Agnes Denes, Wheatfield—A Confrontation. Two acres of wheat planted and harvested by the artist on the Battery Park landfill, Manhattan, Summer 1982. Commissioned by Public Art Fund.

*Courtesy the artist and Leslie Tonkonow Artworks + Projects. Photo:
John McGrall*

In 1982, the artist Agnes Denes planted two acres of wheat on landfill that would become Battery Park City, a new outcropping on the Manhattan waterfront created as a result of excavation for the World Trade Center in the 1970s. You might also recall the indelible images of the Battery Park landfill used as a sandy beach during this time. But Denes' *Wheatfield — A Confrontation* was particularly striking, especially looking at the photos today. The work called attention to the large-scale change to the city's waterfront over the centuries and gave a glimpse of what could be possible, heralding the more ecological approaches since promulgated by projects like the BIG U/Dryline by Bjarke Ingels Group.

Denes' work is now the subject of a retrospective, *Agnes Denes: Absolutes and Intermediates*, that will take over two of the galleries in The Shed at Hudson Yards from October 9, 2019 to January 19, 2020. It will be the first time that all her work will be shown together in New York City. "Agnes Denes not only anticipated the man-made destruction of natural habitats at a moment when few people were paying attention, but much of her work features solutions to ecological crises that we are now facing," said Hans Ulrich Obrist, The Shed's senior program advisor.



Photo courtesy the artist and Leslie Tonkonow Artworks + Projects.

Wheatfield — A Confrontation was sponsored by the Public Art Fund, the second work in its Urban Environmental Site Program, that sought to bring attention to the abandoned or empty places on New York City's waterfront. Denes and her team hand dug 285 furrows by hand, removing the rocks and garbage that had accumulated on the site, and then put the seeds into the furrows.

The Public Art Fund says that each furrow took two to three hours to do, and after Denes and her team “Denes and her assistants maintained the field for four months, set up an irrigation system, weeded, put down fertilizers, cleared off rocks, boulders and wires by hand, and sprayed against mildew.” On August 16th, in the middle of installation, she “harvested the crop, yielding almost 1000 pounds of healthy, golden wheat.”

At the time, Denes described *Wheatfield — A Confrontation* as a “symbol, a universal concept. It represents food, energy, commerce, world trade, economics. It refers to mismanagement and world hunger. It is an intrusion into the Citadel, a confrontation of High Civilization. Then again, it is also Shangri-La, a small paradise, one’s childhood, a hot summer afternoon in the country, peace. Forgotten values, simple pleasures.”

Emma Enderby, Senior Curator of The Shed, says today that “Agnes Denes was ahead of her time. She saw the coming of an ecological crisis, and in the 1960s started working with land, mathematics, philosophy, language, and technology to consider and offer solutions to the challenges facing humanity. She alerted us to humanitarian and environmental issues through beautiful, sensual visual forms combined with a deeply researched and scholarly philosophy. Her vision was radical, and in retrospect, terrifyingly prophetic.”

Indeed, with Mayor Bill de Blasio and other local politicians completely scrapping years of design work and community engagement on the Dryline, with new plans to replace it with a hard edge park, it appears that history indeed does repeat itself.

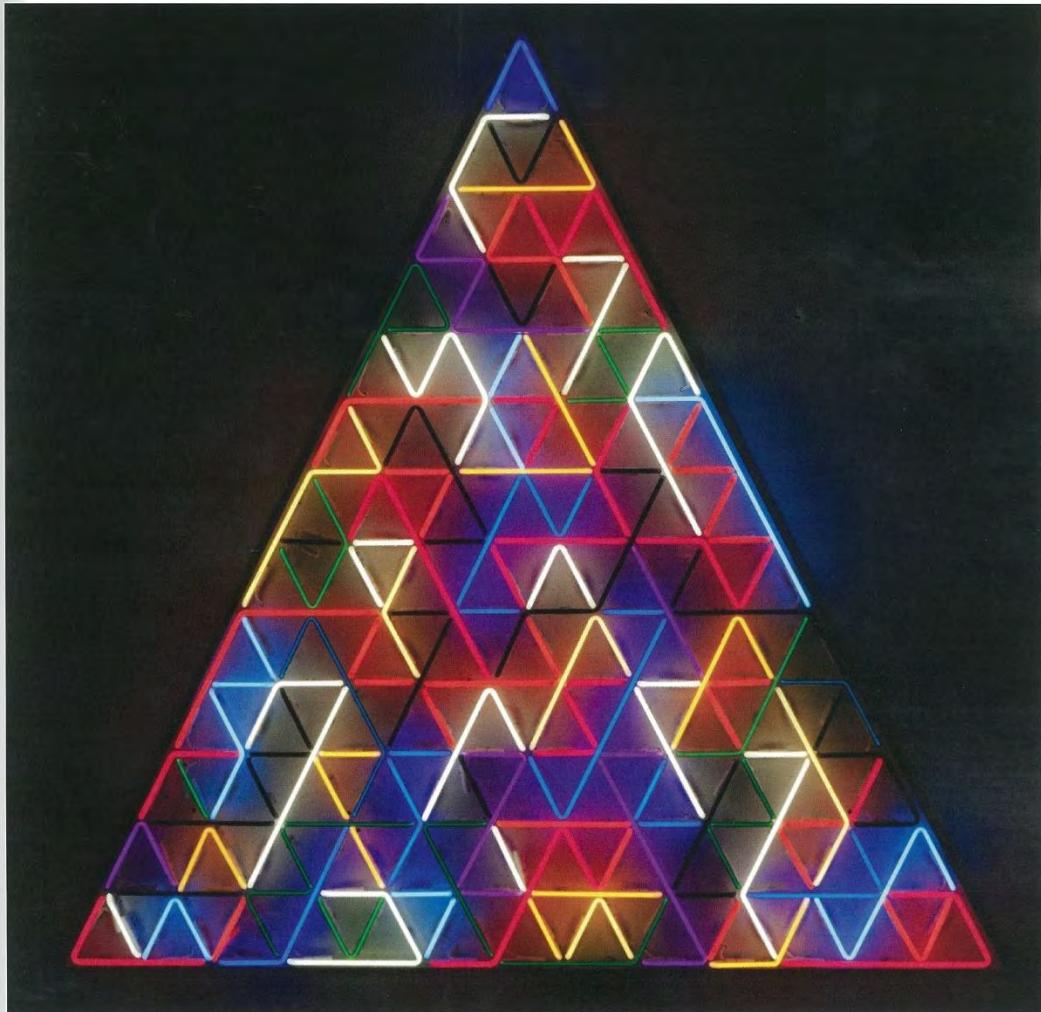
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Art in America

December 2019

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Courtesy Leslie Tonkowicz Artworks + Projects, New York.

Agnes Denes: *The Human Argument IV—Light Matrix*, 1987/2012, neon on powder-coated aluminum, 72 by 72 by 5 inches.

Future Imperfect

A pioneer of environmental art, Agnes Denes reflects on the genesis of her Pyramid drawings – one of which has been turned into a 3D-printed sculpture on view in her retrospective at the Shed.

by Agnes Denes

Agnes Denes,
ca. 1980s, in front
of her drawing
*Probability
Pyramid – Study for
Crystal Pyramid
(50 x 50 meters,
160,000 glass
blocks)*, 1976.
pencil on vellum,
34 by 53 inches.



THIS IS A SNAPSHOT ONE OF MY STUDENTS took here in New York, probably at the School of Visual Arts, or maybe Columbia. I'm in front of one of my "Pyramid Drawings."

This series has run through my work for fifty years. The pyramid is not an image; it's an emblem into which I put my philosophical concepts.

Most of my work is about helping

humanity with one problem at a time, by offering benign solutions. And I need hundreds of hours of research for each particular problem. Then I put my research into a visual form – it's much easier for humanity to understand itself through visual means than through mathematical or logical concepts. Each pyramid deals with a different situation – overpopulation, water shortage,

etc. *Wheatfield – A Confrontation* [1982] dealt with the misuse of land and world hunger. My forest [*Tree Mountain*, 1996] is planted in a mathematical formation. I want it to be maintained for four centuries, so that the ecosystem establishes itself and it becomes the first manmade – well, womanmade – virgin forest.

I just saw some pictures of my Shed commission [*Model for Probability Pyramid – Study for Crystal Pyramid*, 2019], based on this drawing, and it's interesting how the shape changed. This one is made of 3D-printed bricks, not glass. If the Shed had made it in glass, it would have cost hundreds of thousands of dollars, and probably have fallen through the floor! Anything innovative, that doesn't interfere with the meaning or the beauty, is acceptable to me. Whenever you realize a project, you have to compromise. When I made *Wheatfield*, I had to make compromises when it came to money and space. It should have been four acres at least to make an impact, but it became two. I supplemented the budget with my own money and worked all summer to make it a reality. Once you put something into the world, it always changes; my glass pyramid changed too. But I like it, I accept it. It's a beautiful compromise.

I'd never worked with 3D printing before. I realize it's one small part of the future. When I build my "Future Cities," they'll be made of real materials – whatever materials the future comes up with. ●

—As told to Leigh Anne Miller

AGNES DENES is an artist based in New York.

CURRENTLY ON VIEW

"*Agnes Denes: Absolutes and Intermediates*" at the Shed, New York, through Jan. 19, 2020.



THE NEW YORKER

[ART](#)

Agnes Denes

This sui-generis artist has long envisioned—and occasionally realized—exceptionally humane public projects. Her best-known piece is “Wheatfield—A Confrontation,” from 1982, for which the New York-based artist cultivated two acres of grain near the Twin Towers to draw attention to global hunger. In 1993, Denes transformed a gravel pit in Finland into a small mountain patterned with eleven thousand trees, each one assigned its own human custodian. New drone footage of that piece is on view in the expansive, overdue retrospective “Absolutes and Intermediates,” impeccably curated by Emma Enderby (assisted by Adeze Wilford). Two numinous sculptures, commissioned for the exhibition, bring a pair of the artist’s schematic “Pyramid” drawings—a series she began in 1971—into three dimensions. In the first new work, conceived on paper in 1976, thousands of translucent, compostable bricks form a luminous seventeen-foot-high pyramid. In the second sculpture, an electromagnetic model for the 1984 drawing “Teardrop—Monument to Being Earthbound,” a glowing nine-inch-high ellipse levitates like a candle flame above a circular base—a melancholic architectonic memorial for our threatened planet.

— [*Johanna Fateman*](#)

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WWWD

Fifty Years Ago, Agnes Denes Predicted What Climate Change Could Do

Now, the artist's life's work is being recognized in a major retrospective at The Shed at Hudson Yards.

By Maxine Wally on October 15, 2019



Agnes Denes Courtesy of Jeremy Liebman

In the Sixties, when artist Agnes Denes first started embarking on projects involving the environment — ecological endeavors which would come to define the Land Art movement — people thought she was crazy.

Back then, people considered her proposals to build farms on city rooftops and harness energy from the sun through huge panels impossible.

They were especially aghast at an idea that has become a cornerstone of her life's work, and is the subject of a major retrospective at The Shed in New York: climate change.

Denes, a native of Hungary who moved to the United States with her family when she was a teenager, saw indications of a world in trouble in 1968, when today's global concern was barely a thought in the public's mind. She visited Connecticut College to speak on climate change and other environmental issues that year, suggesting the school teach rooftop planting studies to its students. The architect involved in a related project immediately nixed the proposal.



Agnes Denes works on the environmental project "Rice/Tree/Burial," in 1968 in Sullivan County, N.Y.

"Innovative ideas need time to sink in and then [for people] to act on them even more," Denes, 88, says via e-mail. "And even then comes the arrogance of those who oppose necessary change for their own selfish reasons, political gain or money."

"I've never hated anyone nor have I ever hit a person, but just give me one of these people and watch me lose my temper."

"Agnes Denes: Absolutes and Intermediates," which opened at The Shed last week and will run there until March 22, examines Denes' breadth of work over the span of 50 years. Although she's best known for her environmental projects — including her most famous, "Wheatfield — A Confrontation," in which Denes planted a two-acre wheat field on the Battery Park landfill near Wall Street and produced over 1,000 pounds of wheat — "Absolutes and Intermediates" covers the multidisciplinary nature of her work, and her manner of thinking.



Agnes Denes stands in her Land Art piece "Wheatfield — A Confrontation" in 1982. Two acres of wheat were planted and harvested by Denes on the Battery Park landfill in Manhattan. Courtesy Photograph

The exhibit's senior curator Emma Enderby spent years researching Denes, conversing with her and leafing through the history of her career before she felt ready to create the exhibition, which stretches over two floors and includes her visual art, written work, statues and installations in addition to commissioned pieces.

"Her body of work is vast, complex and, really, just scratching the surface," Enderby says. "She cringes when I say this, but Leonardo Da Vinci is someone whose work is similar to hers. She'll say, 'That's bulls—t, honey!'"

It's not necessarily an out-of-this-world claim.

Similar to Da Vinci, Denes saw disciplines like writing, architecture, poetry and visual arts as interconnected; as a result, she absorbed them all in her practice. (Her sketches of the human body, too, echo the Vitruvian Man.) The cross-over can be seen at “Absolutes and Intermediates,” where her early drawings take on the technical look of a draftsperson’s — like the meticulous “Map Projections,” a hand-sketched rendering of the globe, in the shape of a hot dog, on graph paper.



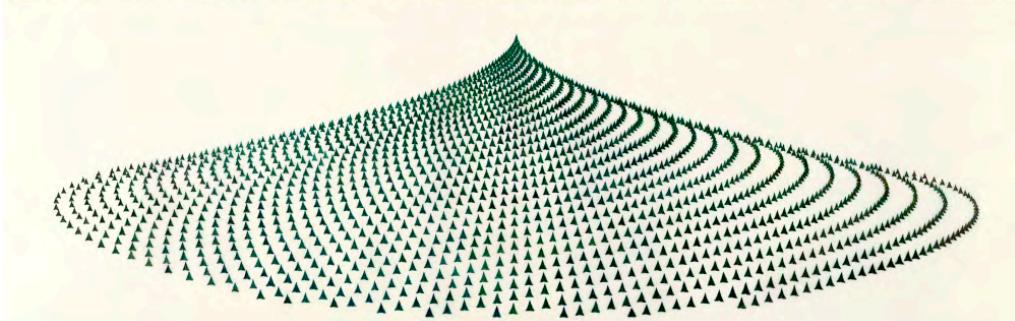
For “Rice/Tree/Burial,” Denes planted rice, chained trees and buried her haiku poetry in a three-part project. Courtesy Photograph

Denes tapped architects to teach her their ways when it came to drawing, philosophers to discuss humans’ existence as it pertains to the environment. Plus, she did a huge amount of personal studying on her own time to learn other crafts, then integrated those into her own work.

“I once wrote that ‘We live in an age of specialization, when disciplines have become progressively alienated from each other, creating communication problems,’ ” Denes says. “I still believe that.”

Denes’ prescient knowledge about climate change is most evident in the exhibition. In the beginning, her take on the world is philosophical and abstract, but deeper into the Eighties, her Land Art pieces adopt a more practical — but still fantastical — approach.

For “Tree Mountain,” Denes enlisted 11,000 people to plant 11,000 trees in Finland, an elliptical, orbiting spiral of forestry built atop a gravel pit. It’s the first man-made forest built by humans in the world.



A rendering and photographs of "Tree Mountain" in Finland.

Denes plans on doing something similar in New York. After Hurricane Sandy hit, she wanted to create an environment that could hold back rising sea levels. The artist got to work on the idea for a man-made forest at Edgemere in the Far Rockaways, and the model for this concept is mounted at The Shed — a reminder that Denes could spend another 50 years advocating for the environment and it would still be an essential effort.

"I looked around me and understood that we must adapt to our world," Denes says. "It's not hard, it just requires you to learn about impending issues and then try and find solutions to confront them. I lived with science and had a philosophical mind. I listened, studied and assessed the problems and realized that unless we were able to make drastic changes, it would continue to get worse and the world was in trouble. I lectured on this at colleges and universities. The young listened."

"When they grew up, some became the artists today working with these issues."



"Model for Teardrop — Monument to Being Earthbound," is one of three newly commissioned works on view at The Shed as part of the retrospective. According to curator Emma Enderby, the piece is kept in suspension by electromagnets. "Agnes wanted it to be flickering and moving like a candle," Enderby says. Courtesy Photograph.

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Art in America

January 2020

REVIEWS

Exhibitions in New York, Philadelphia, Los Angeles, Berlin, Istanbul, and Elsewhere

NEW YORK

Agnes Denes

The Shed On view through Mar. 22



Agnes Denes:
*Model for
Teardrop –
Monument to
Being Earthbound*,
2019, acrylic,
nylon, magnets,
electromagnetic
stabilization
circuit, lighting
circuit, and
aluminum, 9½ by
9 inches (teardrop);
at The Shed.

THE INTRODUCTORY WALL TEXT for the Shed's grand retrospective of the work of Hungarian-American artist Agnes Denes (b. 1931), "Absolutes and Intermediates," cites Leonardo da Vinci as a like artistic mind (as do numerous passages in the catalogue). The upper floor of the show presents an exhaustive survey of Denes's work from the 1960s to the present day—drawings dotted with mathematical figures; anatomical studies and finely rendered graphs; and records of her efforts toward land reclamation and environmental remediation. The picture emerges of a prolific, intellectually omnivorous figure devoted to real-world change as much as artistic innovation, and the comparison to Leonardo—that visionary student of geometry and physics, architecture and flying machines—seems less absurd than it might initially have.

The question, however, nags: why reach back to the fifteenth century? One could speculate that the Shed's figuring of Denes as an unclassifiable savant more in league with Renaissance humanists than with her direct contemporaries serves in part to bracket the question of her relative absence from canonical narratives of postwar art history. The framing unmoores her from the artistic context of New York, where she has lived since early adulthood, and what is sometimes missing from the otherwise rich exhibition is an uncovering of the ways in which her practice *does* resonate with works associated with movements like Land art and Conceptual art. It is through this sort of unearthing that one best grasps the qualities that have, perhaps, rendered Denes's work exceptional and hard to

categorize: a disarming optimism, and a direct investment in the enrichment and longevity of humanity.

"Absolutes and Intermediates" begins with Denes's "Philosophical Drawings" (1969–80), a formative body of prints and ink drawings on graph paper, vellum, and tracing paper in which she attempts to visualize diverse corners of human knowledge – ranging from the formation of the universe to religion – in order to better understand them. The works' conceptual scope might owe to Denes's desire, early on, to combat the "fragmentation" of knowledge wrought by specialization. *Thought Complex*, a white-on-black monoprint from 1972, is a particularly representative "Philosophical Drawing": dense with notated geometric projections and plotted graphs, the work, per Denes, is a "diagrammatic presentation" of thought processes. Largely obscure but abundant in visual interest, *Thought Complex* is a vibrant index of ideation, an image of neuronal fireworks. That we can't completely crack its code is just as well, for therein lies its seduction. In *Introspection I – Evolution* (1968–71) and *Introspection II – Machines, Tools & Weapons* (1972), a pair of nearly twenty-one-foot-long monoprints laid out in vitrines, Denes moves beyond the brain and approaches the history of humankind. In the first work, she attempts, through cross-sections of skulls, studies of cell division, and taxonomic tables, to wrest encyclopedic order from the evolution of our ape ancestors to humans capable of art and science.

The "Philosophical Drawings" recall the strands of '60s Conceptual art that relied on numbers and language, even if Denes has stressed her distance from that movement. The exhibition label for the drawing *The Human Argument* (1969–70) notes that the work was first published in critic and curator Lucy Lippard's landmark Conceptual art anthology *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object* (1973). Just as notable is that this and several other "Philosophical Drawings" were included in the fourth and final of Lippard's "numbers shows," as they became known (each was titled after the population of the city in which it was held). These exhibitions took place in the late '60s and early '70s and showcased an emerging generation of artists tending toward the ephemeral, "dematerialized," and conceptual.

Featured alongside Denes in Lippard's show, German artist Hanne Darboven stands as a salient point of comparison, as her early graph-paper drawings crowded with calculations seethe with mental



Denes: *Tree Mountain – A Living Time Capsule, Ylöjärvi, Finland*, 1992–96, architectural model, 18 by 99½ by 48 inches; at the Shed.

Refusing to accept an apocalypse as inevitable, Denes invests in our futurity, precarious as it may be.

energy in much the same way as Denes's "Philosophical Drawings" do. But if Darboven's dizzy mathematical exercises strongly resist comprehension, even Denes's most arcane investigations at least purport to make tangible and available that which is unapproachably abstract. Indeed, while much Conceptual art – particularly that of figures like Douglas Huebler and Dan Graham – approached questions of syntax, seriality, and authorship with an aloof intellectualism, Denes's works of "visual philosophy" have a welcoming pragmatism, demonstrating a desire to accumulate and represent knowledge of the human. In her series of "Body Prints" (1971), shown on a wall opposite the "Philosophical Drawings," Denes made ink impressions of her breasts and her then-husband's penis on her ubiquitous graph paper, underlining her desire to give knowledge a kind of flesh.

Also shown on the exhibition's upper floor is ample documentation of Denes's

"Public Works" series, the environmental interventions for which she may be best known. Center stage is a presentation of the celebrated *Wheatfield – A Confrontation* (1982), a Public Art Fund commission for which Denes planted two acres of wheat in the Manhattan landfill that would become Battery Park City. One block from Wall Street, *Wheatfield* confronted a stronghold of late-capitalist excess with a plainly material gesture toward sustenance as a basic need, highlighting disparities of wealth and well-being and the continuing fact of world hunger. *Wheatfield* appeared as a brief, shimmering mirage: after four months, Denes harvested the grains and donated them to the touring exhibition "International Art Show for the End of World Hunger" (1987–90).

The line between art and activism that *Wheatfield* straddles is made more porous by Denes's efforts toward more permanent land reclamation. For the collaborative work *Tree Mountain – A Living*



Denes: *Rice/Tree/Burial*, 1977–79, at Artpark, Lewiston, N.Y.

Time Capsule – 11,000 Trees, 11,000 People, 400 Years (1992–96), which was sponsored by the United Nations Environment Programme and the Finnish Ministry of the Environment, Denes and 11,000 volunteers planted 11,000 pine trees atop a man-made mountain at the Pinziö gravel pits near Ylöjärvi, Finland. Represented in the *Shed* exhibition by architectural models and in drone footage, and powerfully framed as an ongoing project of collective concern, the living, breathing *Tree Mountain* suggests a belated return to the canon of Land art and its frequent emphasis on inert monumentality.

It should be acknowledged that, contrary to Denes's own assertions, nuanced concerns around land use and abuse were not wholly uncommon among Land artists, particularly in the decades that followed the inaugural "earthworks" of the '60s. Especially notable in this regard is Nancy Holt's unfinished *Sky Mound* (1988–), an effort to transform a landfill in New Jersey's Meadowlands into a public park. However, Denes's *Tree Mountain* and *Wheatfield* contrast starkly with the efforts of figures like Michael Heizer, whose megalithic structures and earthen devastations, he has suggested, might just outlast a civilization extinguished by war and pollution. Refusing to accept an apocalypse as inevitable, Denes invests in our futurity, precarious as it may be.

This dedication to the future is felt acutely on the intimate lower floor of "Absolutes and Intermediates," which is devoted entirely to Denes's "Pyramid Series" (1970–). In this series, she employs the form of the pyramid variously as geometrical abstraction, diagrammatic tool, and a literal (inhabitable) structure put to a variety of speculative uses. Many of the drawings on view depict pyramidal dwellings and monuments designed for an envisioned "Future City," and the *Shed* has commissioned sculptural models of

two such renderings. *Model for Probability Pyramid – Study for Crystal Pyramid* (2019) scales down the intended 100,000-block structure to a more modest 6,000 blocks, and renders them in 3D-printed, compostable form rather than in glass. This faintly translucent model, measuring seventeen feet tall and softly illuminated from within, is imposing and properly otherworldly. Equally affecting are the drawings that tease out the utopian character of Denes's "Future City," portraying self-supporting architecture and floating water habitats meant to provide safe haven, perhaps, in the wake of ecological devastation.

Like *Tree Mountain*, whose pine trees the artist chose for their long lifespan (three hundred to four hundred years), Denes's pyramidal dwellings and monuments presuppose a future in which humans have persisted, however improbably. The prospect that such pyramids might deliver us from the threat of rising waters, battering storms, and dwindling resources is more than a bit fantastical, even if Denes has argued that these structures "have little science fiction about them" and considers the drawings to be renderings awaiting realization. However, her unalloyed hope has a restorative power in our moment of cynicism, defeatism, and uncertainty. Here, as elsewhere in "Absolutes and Intermediates," faith in the

perpetuity of human life and knowledge is posited as the artist's ultimate project: one that we are welcome – even compelled – to take part in. While the *Shed*'s retrospective sometimes lapses into detachment, dialing art historical conversations down to a whisper, it is anchored powerfully in Denes's commitment to futurity. Upon leaving the exhibition, little else feels so urgent or necessary.

— Walker Downey

Forbes

A Spectacular Agnes Denes Retrospective Asks Whether Alternative World Maps Can Reshape Geopolitics

By Jonathon Keats Jan 7, 2020

If the world were flat, we might have a perfect world map. The shape of our spinning planet has twisted cartography for centuries. Geographers and mathematicians have invented myriad systems for projecting a sphere onto a sheet of paper. Every one of them has entailed compromise. All involve distortion.

The struggle went public in 1973, when a German historian named Arno Peters held a press conference to denounce the Flemish geographer Gerardus Mercator, whose 16th century navigational charts made Africa look small in comparison to Europe. Presenting an alternative projection, Peters said that Mercator's still-popular map presented "a fully false picture, particularly regarding the non-white-peopled lands". Peters successfully lobbied the United Nations to supplant Mercator and adopt his own preferred design, which accurately represented the area of continents by severely distorting their coastlines.



Isometric Systems in Isotropic Space — Map Projections: The Egg, 1979. Ink and metallic ink on rag ... [+] AGNES DENES

In the same year, Agnes Denes also began making world maps. Hers were even more disorienting than Peters'. She projected the continents onto two-dimensional representations of a pyramid, a cube, and a dodecahedron. She also experimented with forms including an egg, a donut and a hot dog.

Although Denes didn't ask the UN to publish her absurdist worlds, she was no less serious than Arno Peters in her underlying purpose. "One becomes aware of the relativity of reality," she wrote in a 1976 manifesto that addressed the Peters Projection in all but name. The certainty that Peters projected was more fully false than any mere picture.

Several of Denes's extraordinary maps are now on view at the Shed, which has organized the 89-year-old artist's first [full-scale retrospective](#) in New York City. They are as beguilingly otherworldly today as when they were made, and arguably more relevant, anticipating a planet wrapped up in bombastic platitudes representing incompatible worldviews.

Denes is most famous for another work that appears wholly different on the surface. In 1982, she planted two acres of Battery Park landfill with wheat, which she harvested and distributed for people to eat. The iconic imagery from that project, showing a farm against the Manhattan skyline, was given further poignancy by her title: *Wheatfield: A Confrontation*.



Agnes Denes, *Wheatfield — A Confrontation*. Two acres of wheat planted and harvested by the artist on ... [+]
JOHN MCGRALL

With the World Trade Center recently completed, the city was at a crossroads, and real estate was at the crux of it. Temporarily occupying an estimated \$4.5 billion worth of property, *Wheatfield* questioned the value of land in relation to livelihoods and life itself. Whether farmland was encroaching on commercial territory or vice versa was a matter of perspective, one that changed based on where people stood both literally and figuratively. The confrontation in Denes's work was between two conflicting maps of reality.

With her global hot dogs and donuts, Denes was both more universal and more specific. Like many of the other drawings on view at the Shed, her *Map Projections* series is really a philosophical proposition. "We must create a new language, consider a transitory state of new illusions and layers of validity, and accept the possibility that there may be no language to describe ultimate reality, beyond the language of visions," Denes wrote in her 1976 manifesto.

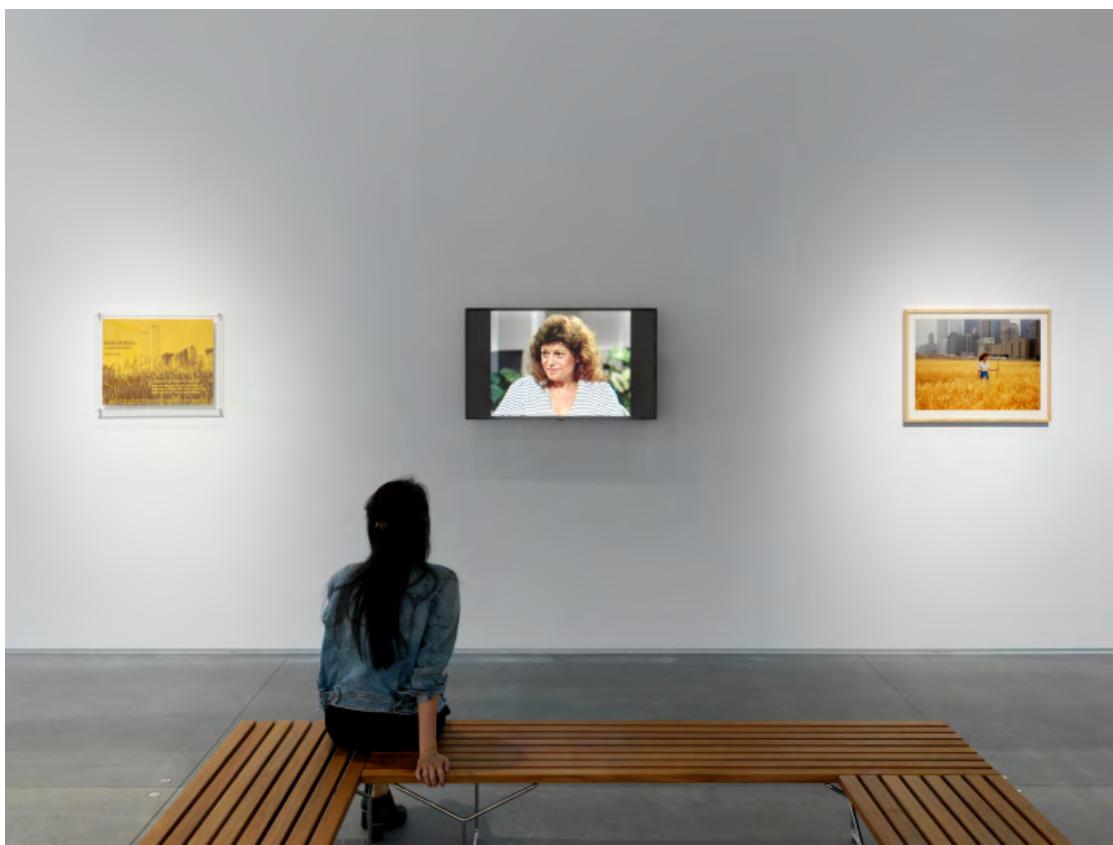
Her projections mapped the contours of this new language of visions through their intentional contradictions. The ultimate reality may be confronted by simultaneously living in all of them.

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.

By 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 " $P \supset Q$," 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.



Installation view, *Agnes Denes: Absolutes and Intermediates*

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.



Installation view, *Agnes Denes: Absolutes and Intermediates*

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").

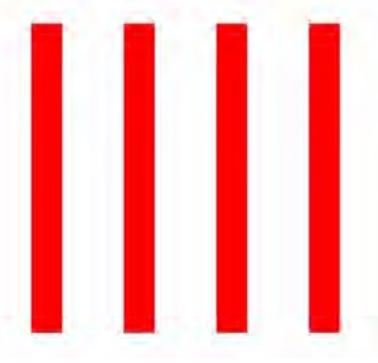
But the time capsule conceit should also be understood in a literal sense, as a way, writes Denes in *Tree Mountain*'s supplemental text, to "carry our concepts into an unknown time in the future." Like an actual time capsule, her artistic time capsules are endeavors to preserve aspects of the present 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.](#)

##



Agnes Denes.

From wheatfield to penis Napoleon: a half-century of work by the polymathic artist.

By Jeffrey Kastner 01.10.20



Agnes Denes, *Wheatfield—A Confrontation*, 1982. Two acres of wheat planted and harvested by the artist on the Battery Park landfill, Manhattan. Image courtesy the artist and Leslie Tonkonow Artworks + Projects. Photo: John McGraw.

Agnes Denes: Absolutes and Intermediates, curated by Emma Enderby with Adeze Wilford, the Shed, 545 West Thirtieth Street, New York City, through March 22, 2020

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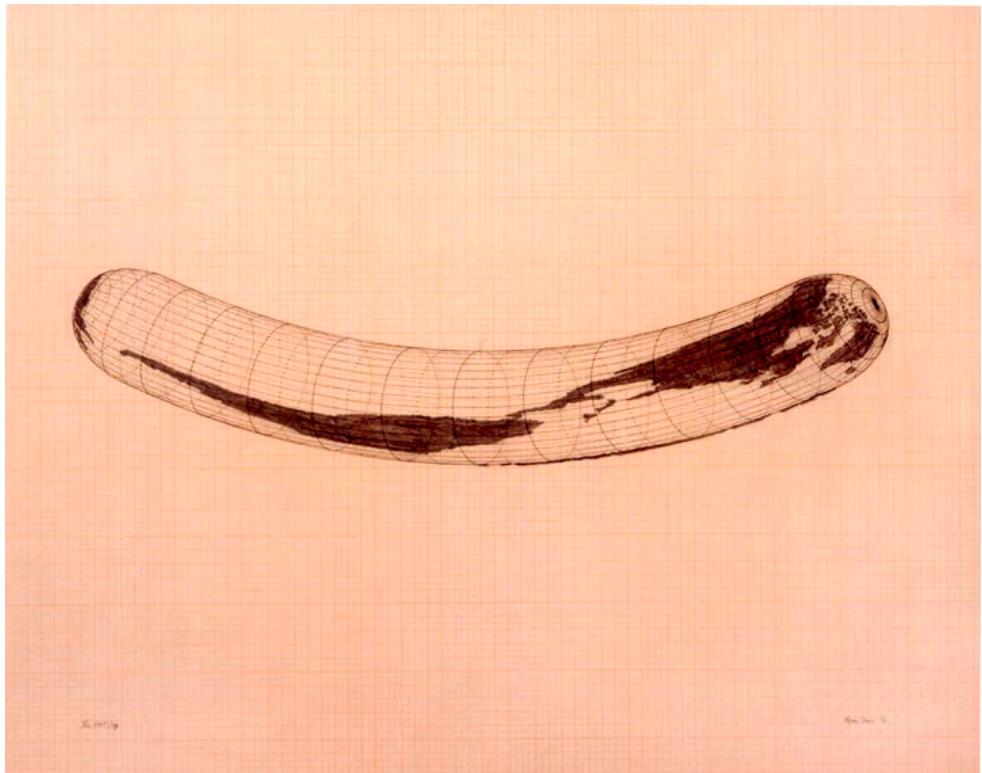
Even if you don't know much about Agnes Denes, chances are you'll know the photographs. Like the instantly recognizable images of those other site-specific landmarks from the postwar canon—think of Robert Smithson's Spiral Jetty coiled in the flats of the Great Salt Lake or Walter De Maria's Lightning Field poised beneath an electric New Mexico sky—the pictures documenting Denes's most famous project, Wheatfield—A Confrontation, are icons of contemporary art history.

Many photos were made of Wheatfield during the five months it existed in the summer of 1982, but two are especially vivid in the way they bookend its presence and concerns. In the first, the Statue of Liberty is visible in the distance, rising above an implausible frame-filling horizon of golden wheat. The other shows a reverse vantage. Standing in the same field with the towers of Wall Street vaulting into an overcast sky behind her, the artist surveys her ripening crop with a long staff in her hand—an Old Testament prophetess transported to an Earth Day era, here to coax amber waves of grain from a rubble-strewn two-acre plot in the Battery Park landfill. Together, the images provide a succinct illustration of the central conceptual fascination of Denes's long, polymathic career: those sites of inquiry and action where the nominal categories of nature and culture can be made to melt into each other in particularly evocative ways.



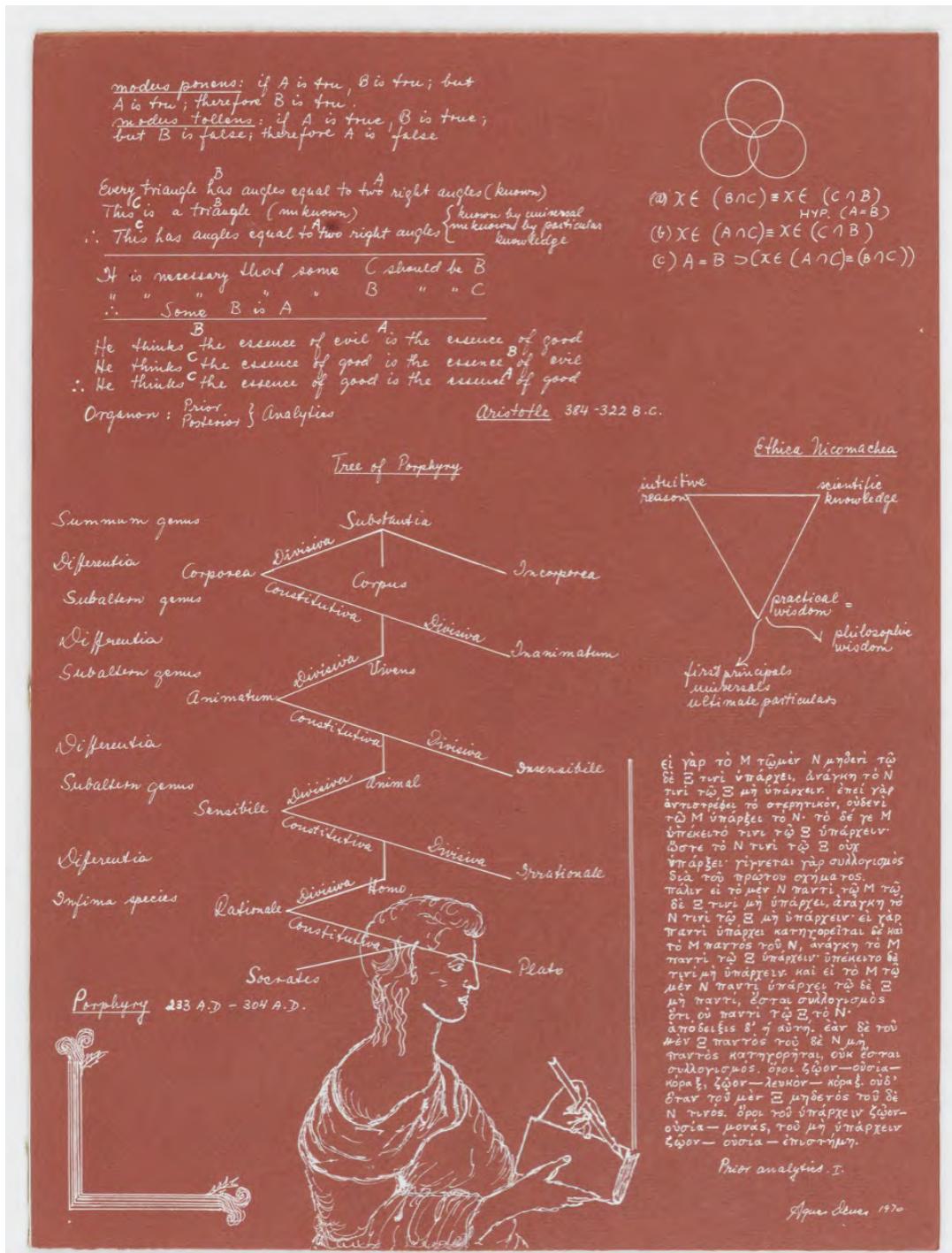
Agnes Denes, *Wheatfield—A Confrontation*, 1982. Two acres of wheat planted and harvested by the artist on the Battery Park landfill, Manhattan. Image courtesy the artist and Leslie Tonkonow Artworks + Projects.

There is a certain serendipity, and no small amount of irony, in the fact that the eighty-eight-year-old Denes is receiving her most significant retrospective to date just a few dozen blocks up the Hudson from the site of her indelible piece of urban deterritorialization. The spot where the landfill was located is of course today's Battery Park City, home to a complex of high-end condos, tony corporate headquarters, and luxury retail. Meanwhile, the institution responsible for organizing and hosting the current show is the Shed, the arts center embedded in Hudson Yards, that even more aristocratic complex of high-end condos, tony corporate headquarters, and luxury retail that's been conglomerated across the last few years atop a platform that covers several dozen active Long Island Railroad tracks in the far-west 30s. And the parallels are not simply geographic and demographic. The "confrontational" attitude of Wheatfield, which the artist recently described as a "golden field of grain on land meant for the rich," also suffuses the show. A half-century's worth of propositions arguing for the interconnectedness of the systems that underlie both the natural world and the structures of human thought designed to understand it, *Absolutes and Intermediates* feels like a sharp thorn of care and conscience planted in the paw of an immense plutocratic beast.



Agnes Denes, *Isometric Systems in Isotropic Space-Map Projections: The Hot Dog*, 1976. Ink and charcoal on graph paper and Mylar, 24 × 30 inches. Image courtesy collection of Gail and Tony Ganz.

Spread across the building's two primary exhibition galleries and featuring more than 150 works, the exhibition is demanding—so much so that at times it threatens to overwhelm viewers with its complexity and density. Thankfully, curator Emma Enderby organized the show around a series of rubrics that gather Denes's assays into more easily digestible sequences without reining in their restless diversity. The first two of these, “The Philosophical Drawings” and “The Map Projections,” are by far the most intricate, their welter of works on paper concerned with, in the words of the artist's 1969 manifesto, “defining the elusive / visualizing the invisible / communicating the incommunicable.” Animated by a kind of endlessly enthusiastic intellectual and makerly horror vacui, the first decade-and-a-half or so of Denes's career is a blizzard of diagrams, illustrations, sketches, and charts that conjure, among a great many other things, the Earth isometrically transformed into an egg, a doughnut, a snail, and a hotdog; a comparison of the evolution of the human body and of machines, tools, and weapons; thought processes visualized in terms of crystallography; a “matrix of knowledge” that “anticipates a future in which . . . information will be dehydrated and coded for storage”; the “scale of being” proposed by the Neoplatonist philosopher Porphyry; linguistic cut-up experiments made by feeding Wittgenstein and Shakespeare into computers; and her “dictionary of strength,” a schemata including every word related to that concept that the artist found during a seven-year-long cover-to-cover reading of Webster's Unabridged International Dictionary.



Agnes Denes, *Porphyry*, 1970. White ink on colored paper, 16 × 12 inches. Image courtesy the artist and Leslie Tonkonow Artworks + Projects.

Superbly organized and beautifully drafted, Denes's visualizations reward detailed examination, and even when their content is abstruse to the point of unintelligibility, the ritual devotion to inquiry they display lends them a remarkable degree of persuasiveness. This commitment to revealing the underlying causes of things has made Denes something of a pattern hunter, and Absolutes and Intermediates clearly announces that her preferred pattern, her spirit shape as it were, is the triangle. It features in one after another of the drawings and in certain small-scale sculptural pieces, and the entirety of the second-floor gallery is given over to her

explorations of the form and especially its volumetric twin, the pyramid. Along with dozens of graceful drawings depicting the figure in various states of stasis and movement, the gallery also hosts a pair of new commissions for works that had theretofore been unrealized, including Model for Probability Pyramid—Study for Crystal Pyramid, a tapering seventeen-foot-high ziggurat of milky-white, compostable 3-D-printed blocks, based on a 1976 drawing, that seems to glow from within.



Agnes Denes: Absolutes and Intermediates, installation view. Image courtesy the Shed. Photo: Dan Bradica.

Naturally, there's more: X-rays, microphotography, holography; plans for waterfront parks and barrier islands; lighthearted body prints in which the artist's breast and her then-husband's penis play the roles of a piece of fruit and a tricorn-sporting Napoleon; and Human Dust, a startling work from 1969 involving the calcareous remains of a man along with an imagined accounting of his life—the 56,000 meals he ate and the twenty-seven sexual partners he had, the 3,800 times he was misunderstood “when it mattered,” the seventeen people who loved him. But as Wheatfield so clearly demonstrates, Denes is at her very best as an artist when she's given the opportunity to bring her ideas to life on a grand scale and for the broadest sort of public. And it's in another planting project, her Tree Mountain—A Living Time Capsule—*11,000 Trees, 11,000 People, 400 Years* (1992–96), that the promise of her practice comes perhaps closest to its full realization.



Agnes Denes, *Human Dust (9)*, 1969. Vintage gelatin silver print, 8 × 10 inches. Courtesy the artist and Leslie Tonkonow Artworks + Projects.

Presented here via drawings, models, and several documentary films, the work—a mini-forest of pines in a mounded spiral pattern like the seed head of a sunflower that Denes derived from the golden ratio—was created in a gravel pit outside of the town of Ylöjärvi in southwestern Finland with the help of volunteers who received perpetual legal title to the trees they planted. Denes is obviously aware that the centuries-long lifespan of the trees makes the work a quixotically optimistic gesture toward a future that she will never see, and that may or may not ever arrive at all. But as you watch her wipe away a tear after she tucks the first of the saplings into the dirt, reaching down and mussing its needles like a doting aunt while wishing it good luck, it's clear she also knows that no matter the final outcome, the very fact of the attempt articulates an outlook as potent as it is unexpected in a work of contemporary art—hope.

Jeffrey Kastner is a New York-based writer and critic, and the senior editor of Cabinet magazine. His books include the edited volumes Land and Environmental Art (Phaidon) and Nature (MIT/Whitechapel), and he is coauthor, with Claire Lehmann, of Artists Who Make Books (Phaidon). A regular contributor to Artforum, his writing has appeared in publications including the Economist, frieze, the New Republic, and the New York Times, and in books and exhibition catalogues on artists such as David Altmejd, Ragnar Kjartansson, Tomas Saraceno, and Sarah Sze.

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contemporary / international

Péter Emőd • Today | Reading time: 8 minutes

Agnes Denes, a Hungarian-born artist living in New York for more than 60 years, is considered a pioneer artist before his age. In the meantime, the age has come to an end, and that is what helps us appreciate the importance of his work today.

Agnes Denes: Absolutes and Intermediates
The Shed, New York, March 22nd

Alongside Vera Molnar and Judit Reigl, Agnes Denes is the most important female artist of Hungarian origin living abroad, but she is not known for her two careers and contemporaries, which does not call into question the importance of her oeuvre. He is a pioneer and outstanding educator of land art, eco-art, and its importance, though it has attracted considerable attention for decades with its monumental projects, which have taken many years to design and implement, has only been recognized since the climate emergency is now a menacing reality, even if not everyone is willing to take notice of it. Maybe that's why we had to wait until now for your country and city of choice, New York, to be really big,



Agnes Denes, 2018. Photo by Jeremy Liebman. Courtesy of The Shed

Denes' family emigrated to Sweden during World War II, and soon moved to the United States, where he studied painting, including at Columbia University. His interest was not limited to the fine arts, but also studied philosophy, linguistics, psychology, art history, literature and music; his knowledge of these areas later served as inspiration, foundation or an important component of his visual artwork. He quickly found his way; from the beginning the human environment, its changes, the elements of the ancestors - earth, air, water - and man's relation to them were concerned.

He made his first "environmental art" work, Rice Field, in more than 50 years, in 1968; this is today considered the first land art by American art. The artwork was born in the form of a rice plantation, and this is what the artist testified to in an interview with Magyar Orange in 2005: "I created a small rice plantation just where Niagara Falls was born 12,000 years ago. In that place, I discovered an Indian-sanctified forest whose trees were marked with iron chains, and in the middle of the forest I buried a time capsule. Thus, I succeeded in creating the symbol of thesis-antithesis-synthesis. Rice meant life, marking trees, interfering with nature, and finally burying my one-time poem in a time capsule meant symbiosis with the earth. I interpreted our relation to the earth, the material covering the globe. ... The immense power of nature, lived in close proximity, has made me realize who I am and how small a person in nature is. ... This is how grotesque the relationship between eternal nature and mortal man became clear to me. Since then, that's all I care about. "



Courtesy of The Shed

This interest sparked 14 years later, the work that is still most closely associated with the name of Denes, and the documentation of which, of course, should not be missing from the recent premiere in New York. *The Wheat Field - Confrontation*(Wheatfield - The Confrontation), a project highlighting failed social and economic priorities, was the heart of a real, nearly one-acre wheat field - in the heart of New York, southern Manhattan, Wall Street and the World Trade Center - In the words of the New York Times, the twin towers of capitalist greed - in the immediate vicinity of a former rubbish dump. (The ruins of the towers that were destroyed in the terrorist attack fell here on September 11, 2010.) With the help of wheat aides, the artist himself sowed, nurtured, and collected a number of Mázány crops, which then became a traveling exhibition to 28 cities around the world he came from where people could take them home in small packages and replant them. The straw that was consumed by New York City police horses was not lost.

Another 14 years later, an emblematic four-year project, this time in Finland, was completed. *The Fahegy - Live Time Capsule* (Tree Mountain - A Living Time Capsule) is an environmental rehabilitation project where 11,000 people planted the same amount of pine trees in a gold mining arrangement on a former gravel mine under a special ownership scheme. The forest has been protected by the state for 400 years, which means that this project has a long time horizon, compared with the "one summer" wheat fields, leaving a valuable legacy for future generations. If one were to formulate the message of these projects in one sentence, it would sound quite commonplace, the way in which the message is presented, its astounding richness of thought and tools, but its effectiveness will indelibly remember the fundamental truths so many and so often overlooked.



Agnes Denes: Wheatfield — A Confrontation. Two acres of wheat planted and harvested by the artist on Battery Park Landfill, Manhattan, Summer 1982. Commissioned by the Public Art Fund. Courtesy of the artist and Leslie Tonkonow Artworks + Projects

It is also worthwhile getting acquainted with the institution hosting the exhibition; of The Shed One of New York's newest exhibitions, having a history of less than a year, it has already gained a significant following in this short time. More specifically, much more than that; The program, which covers the performing arts, visual arts and the full spectrum of pop culture, not only showcases the most exciting works of the various artistic fields, but also often sponsors their creation. The new cultural center in western Manhattan is a highlight of the 21st century. century art and the 21st century. In the 20th century, it operates in forms that reflect the needs of the public. Its building has been designed to showcase a wide variety of arts. Most of the spaces are customizable to the needs of each program, and state-of-the-art technology is a basic requirement. Michael Bloomberg played an important role in the birth of the institution, Former mayor of New York, whose merits have been recognized by naming the building that houses the art center as the Bloomberg Building. The program for the first year included events such as Soundtrack of America , co-ordinated by Steve McQueen for African-American music, with Quincy Jones and Maureen Mahon among others, or Reich Richter Pärt live performance exhibition based on paintings by Gerhard Richter and music by Steve Reich and Arvo Pärt. Other projects featured well-known stars such as world-renowned American soprano Renée Fleming, Icelandic singer Björk, and British actor Ben Whishaw. One of the first events of the exhibition program was the joint exhibition of Tony Cokes and Oscar Murillo. The names above indicate that The Shed is a real world star, while providing a great opportunity for emerging generations of artists; winning an invitation here and being invited to create new works is already ranked.



Agnes Denes: Model for Teardrop — Monument to Being Earthbound, 2019. Acrylic, nylon, neodymium magnets, custom electromagnetic stabilization circuit, wireless lighting circuit, aluminum. 9 1/2 x 9 inches (teardrop); 56 x 3 1/8 inches (monument base); 60 x 60 x 44 inches (table). Photo: Kelly Barrie. Commissioned by The Shed; courtesy of the artist and Leslie Tonkonow Artworks + Projects

Agnes Denes was among the first to be invited by The Shed, following the institution's short-lived practice, not only to present its most important work and documentation of the past decades, but also to present three new projects under way. Indeed, Denes's work fits in well with the institution's multidisciplinary profile and, more importantly, the house can provide the conditions required to present Denes' projects, which are usually very spatial and technical in depth.

In the introduction, we have already quoted Denes' testimony that he is always interested in the relationship between eternal nature and mortal man, and that his exhibits of about 150 works, performance and project documentation and countless drawings, most of them related to projects still to be realized. Within this subject, the spectrum is very wide; where he deals with issues of religion and ethics, as in the Morse Code Message series from 1969-75 , which presents biblical quotes in the language of dots and lines - in principle for everyone to understand - where sexual co-existence is described in a humorous way In the form of a "non-user-friendly instruction manual" (Liberated sex machine, 1970). The exhibit is not lacking in the major projects that underpin its reputation as mentioned above, nor in the themes to which it has regularly returned for decades. The Pyramids series, for example, has been in existence for more than half a century and continues to expand; this geometric shape seems to be particularly close to the artist. He prefers to deconstruct and reshape the pyramid, which at times is quite fluid, sometimes floating, so that in the future it may even be a potential living space, for example in space or in confined environments. In these works, too, art and science merge, as they are based on mathematical theories.



Agnes Denes: Model for Probability Pyramid — Study for Crystal Pyramid, 2019. Corn-based PLA 3-D-printed bricks, clear acrylic plexiglass. 264 x 360 x 204 inches. Photo: Stan Narten. Commissioned by The Shed; courtesy of the artist and Leslie Tonkonow Artworks + Projects

In addition to the early major projects, this series is a great demonstration that, despite its close relationship with the land art, it would be a simplification to push Denes into this category or, if you like, into a box. His works also usually bear the features of conceptual art; the predominance of the idea, the role of the idea, can also be observed, but in its value system, visual representation tends to get more weight than in conceptual art in general. Denes created a box for himself, which he fills and expands constantly.

The exhibit, of course, has a special interest in the new works created at the request of The Shed. One of these is an offer to his host and exhibition city, and a kind of return to his early work, as the centerpiece of the proposed project is the installation of 100,000 trees in an empty Queens area. The project is not new, Denes already started in 2014; but only now, at the request of The Shed, did he have the opportunity to present his ideas on a model, which perhaps paves the way for their realization.



Agnes Denes: Model for A Forest for New York, 2019. Plywood, MDF, foam, natural branches, paint, sand, plastic. 54 1/4 x 42 1/8 x 7 inches. Photo: Stan Narten. Commissioned by The Shed; courtesy of the artist and Leslie Tonkonow Artworks + Projects

An earlier 1984 drawing comes to life, at least with the help of a 3D printer model in the Model for Teardrop — Monument to Being Earthbound project. A tear drop - or flame - floats in the air above a solid pedestal. The secret to the "trick" is an electromagnetic field. If the project were to materialize, its dimensions would be much larger - provided the strength of the electromagnetic field would allow it. If not, the tear would fall back onto the pedestal representing the earth. But so is nature; together, there is the ascension and the fall, the life and the death ...

The exhibition received widespread media coverage in America. On November 9, [The New York Times](#) analyzed Denes' work in a larger article. 88-year-old Agnes Denes finally gets the retrospective exhibition she deserves is not littered with enthusiasm and writes that this season is unlikely to have a "similarly beautiful" "well-installed" exhibit in the American city. Longer writing commends the show in the October issue of [Artforum](#) last October. Online art portals include [Hyperallergic](#) and [Artnet News](#), which has been featured in eight of New York's eight major winter exhibitions.



Exhibition interior, photo by Dan Bradica. Courtesy of The Shed

When writing about Denes in connection with the large retrospective exhibition in New York, it is also worth noting that the artist has been present on the domestic scene for two thousand years. Negotiations on his Hungarian oeuvre exhibition began in 2005, and he was interviewed in Magyar Orange during one of his trips to Budapest for the preparation of the exhibition. The exhibition Agnes Denes: Art of the Third Millennium - Creating a new view of the world title at last the [Ludwig Museum](#) took place between September 2008 and January 2009. The introduction to the exhibition praised Denes's work: "Agnes Denes uses and interprets lively and inventively the diverse disciplines, natural and social sciences, philosophy, linguistics, psychology, conceptualize the results of sociology and translate them into unique works of art with exceptional aesthetic sensibility. Large-scale public art projects in urban and natural settings, enduring monuments to the need for ecologically responsible thinking." A decade later, the [acb Gallery](#) dedicated a solo exhibition to Denes; Agnes Denes: Visual Philosophy 1968-2018 , from November 2018 to February 2019, featured highlights from some of the artist's larger series, including the Pyramids and Map Projections at the New York Show.

Opening Image: Agnes Denes, Wheatfield - The Confrontation: Battery Park Landfill, Downtown Manhattan - The Harvest, 1982.
© Agnes Denes. Courtesy of the Artist and Leslie Tonkonow Artworks + Projects, New York. / Artsy.net

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Noah Becker's

WHITEHOT MAGAZINE

of contemporary art

"THE BEST ART IN THE WORLD"

New York: Agnes Denes at The Shed

By JONATHAN GOODMAN January, 2020



Artist Agnes Denes has a major show of her work on in New York City at The Shed

Agnes Denes, the Hungarian-born eco-artist based in New York, is likely best known for her 1982 project entitled *Wheatfield--A Confrontation*, in which she planted and grew two acres of wheat within shouting distance of the Statue of Liberty, in a then-empty part of downtown that has now become Battery Park City. Denes, whose mind lies both in the detail, in the exquisitely rendered drawings found in the show; and in the large idea, as happens in the concept of planting the wheat, also is not without a certain feistiness--witness the title of the wheatfield piece. As an ecologically oriented artist in the 1960s and '70s, Denes stood at the head of innovative land-oriented art, but, sadly, it has taken until now, when she is nearly 90 years old, for her achievement to take on the importance it deserves with a major New York show. In retrospect, her work looks both futuristic and slightly old-fashioned, being oriented toward highly detailed technical drawings (oriented toward the future) and grand scenarios, nearly church-like conceptions of installations established outdoors (oriented toward the past). In *The Shed*, whose showing space is unusually simple, consisting of open, high-ceilinged rectangular floors, the drawings were shown to good advantage, and there was even room for a tall structure, a 17-foot ziggurat created with six thousand compostable white, translucent bricks, reaching almost to the ceiling of the space.

Like *Wheatfield*, the brick pyramid orients toward a grand view of cultural and natural interactions (the downtown wheatfield being more so). But in whatever the public meaning these two grand projects move, there is also the sense of intense personal involvement and supervision; Denes is a fine artist of notable caliber, and her own hand is as important as the social outlook available in much of her art. The drawings, maquettes, and actual project for some 11,000 trees planted in rows leading up a manmade (small) mountain in Finland--the project is called *Tree Mountain* (1992-96)--is marked by the same precision and open creativity that is operative in all of Denes's work. This combination of the intuitive and the rationally specific give the artist a chance to make work as memorable in its details as in its larger outlook. One can see this in the many excellent drawings available in the show--for example, in *Liberated Sex Machine* (1970), a drawing not without humor, a complex, mechanized treatment of the sexual act is given encyclopedic treatment, so that the schematic image's many parts--often rods entering slit-like openings--are named and indicated by lines to the specific components of the design. It is funny, but not without a certain bite to its comic view. There is another drawing, a study for the crystal pyramid, that is notable for its exquisite detail; generally, the particularity of the image is central to Denes's creativity. Another drawing, in which Denes's ethical and spiritual concerns are made evident by the translation of portions of the bible into Morse code (1969-75), is an abstract-looking image of dots and dashes; sometimes, by distancing ourselves with the visual familiarity of the text, that text takes on greater authority--even if we do not understand the text in its current imagistic state, as would happen for many viewers here.



Installation view 2019, Agnes Denes at the Shed, New York, NY

A mid-size teardrop, which seems to have been composed of the same material as the bricks that make up the tall tower on view, was created especially for the show at The Shed. Its elegant, rounded shape exists in accordance with the work in the rest of the show. We must remember that Denes began as a Sixties artist, committed to feminism and political change. But her work doesn't always specify politics; often the beauty of her work comes to the viewer without the weight of a publicly proclaimed morality. The ongoing tension between the public extension of the artist's social beliefs and the private achievements of her remarkable hand--or, equally useful, not their tension but merger--has resulted in a career remarkable for its independence and integrity. The thousands of trees marching up the artificial rise in Finland began as a grand, perhaps defiant ecological gesture, but, happily, the project was realized in a permanent fashion; photos indicate it is very beautiful. And we have the marvelous pictures of the shoulder-high wheatfield with the image of the Statue of Liberty behind--in this case a literal realization of a line in one of America's favorite patriotic songs, as well as a reminder of the merger between nature and culture that we are sometimes capable of achieving. It should be remembered that while Denes lives in New York, and her show takes place in The Shed, within an urban setting, she is as truly a land artist. The mathematical precision of her imagination is to be highly praised, although usually her specifics exist in service of a larger undertaking. Personally, I liked the drawings associated with her outdoor projects; their lyricism managed to be visually captivating but also socially intended. The show indicates her skills marvelously well, and it is time for Denes to be known to a larger audience. WM

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The New York Times

18 Art Exhibitions to View in N.Y.C. This Weekend



The hand-blown bulbs of “Curiosity Cloud” (2015-19) by Katharina Mischer and Thomas Traxler each contain a replica of a different insect. They glow and flutter, the result of thermal sensors, when a visitor walks through the installation. It’s among the projects and products on display at “Nature: Cooper Hewitt Design Triennial,” which closes on Monday. Credit...Andrea Mohin/The New York Times

Published Jan. 16, 2020

Our guide to new art shows and some that will be closing soon.

‘ARTS OF CHINA’ and ‘ARTS OF JAPAN’ at the Brooklyn Museum (ongoing). Redesigning an American museum’s Asian wing is no mean feat. But these exhibitions, reopened after a six-year renovation, successfully integrate stunning pieces by contemporary Chinese and Japanese artists into the institution’s century-old collection of antiquities, drawing 5,000 years of art into a single thrilling conversation. Look out for the 14th-century wine jar decorated with whimsical paintings of a whitefish, a mackerel, a freshwater perch and a carp — four fish whose Chinese names are homophones for a phrase meaning “honest and incorruptible.” (Will Heinrich)

718-638-5000, brooklynmuseum.com

'AUSCHWITZ. NOT LONG AGO. NOT FAR AWAY' at the Museum of Jewish Heritage (through Aug. 30). Killing as a communal business, made widely lucrative by the Third Reich, permeates this traveling exhibition about the largest German death camp, Auschwitz, whose yawning gatehouse, with its converging rail tracks, has become emblematic of the Holocaust. Well timed, during a worldwide surge of anti-Semitism, the harrowing installation strives, successfully, for fresh relevance. The exhibition illuminates the topography of evil, the deliberate designing of a hell on earth by fanatical racists and compliant architects and provisioners, while also highlighting the strenuous struggle for survival in a place where, as Primo Levi learned, "there is no why." (Ralph Blumenthal)

646-437-4202, mjhny.org

'AGNES DENES: ABSOLUTES AND INTERMEDIATES' at the Shed (through March 22). We'll be lucky this art season if we get another exhibition as tautly beautiful as this long-overdue Denes retrospective. Now 88, the artist is best known for her 1982 "Wheatfield: A Confrontation," for which she sowed and harvested two acres of wheat on Hudson River landfill within sight of the World Trade Center and the Statue of Liberty. Her later ecology-minded work has included creating a hilltop forest of 11,000 trees planted by 11,000 volunteers in Finland (each tree is deeded to the planter), though many of her projects exist only in the form of the exquisite drawings that make up much of this show. (Holland Cotter)

646-455-3494, theshed.org

'THE GREAT HALL COMMISSION: KENT MONKMAN, MISTIKOSIWAK (WOODEN BOAT PEOPLE)' at the Metropolitan Museum of Art (through April 9). The second in a series of contemporary works sponsored by the Met consists of two monumental new paintings by the Canadian artist Kent Monkman, installed inside the museum's main entrance. Each measuring almost 11 by 22 feet, the pictures are narratives inspired by a Euro-American tradition of history painting but entirely present-tense and polemical in theme. Monkman, 54, a Canadian artist of mixed Cree and Irish heritage, makes the colonial violence done to North America's first peoples his central subject but, crucially, flips the cliché of Native American victimhood on its head. In these paintings, Indigenous peoples are immigrant-welcoming rescuers, led by the heroic figure of Monkman's alter ego, the gender-fluid tribal leader Miss Chief Eagle Testickle, avatar of the global future that will see humankind moving beyond the wars of identity — racial, sexual, political — in which it is now fatefully immersed. (Cotter)

212-535-7710, metmuseum.org

'EDITH HALPERT AND THE RISE OF AMERICAN ART' at the Jewish Museum (through Feb. 9). This rare show covers the life of an influential art gallery, founded in 1926 by Halpert. Skilled at both business and publicity, she represented stellar prewar American artists like Stuart Davis, Yasuo Kuniyoshi, Charles Sheeler and Jacob Lawrence, promoted folk art and selected some wonderful pieces for her own collection, which have a room of their own here. (Roberta Smith)

212-423-3200, thejewishmuseum.org

'THE JIM HENSON EXHIBITION' at the Museum of the Moving Image (ongoing). The rainbow connection has been established in Astoria, Queens, where this museum has opened a new permanent wing devoted to the career of America's great puppeteer, who was born in Mississippi in 1936 and died, too young, in 1990. Henson began presenting the short TV program "Sam and Friends" before he was out of his teens; one of its characters, the soft-faced Kermit, was fashioned from his mother's old coat and would not mature into a frog for more than a decade. The influence of early variety television, with its succession of skits and songs, runs through "Sesame Street" and "The Muppet Show," though Henson also spent the late 1960s crafting peace-and-love documentaries and prototyping a psychedelic nightclub. Young visitors will delight in seeing Big Bird, Elmo, Miss Piggy and the Swedish Chef; adults can dig deep into sketches and storyboards and rediscover some old friends. (Jason Farago)

718-784-0077, movingimage.us

'IN PURSUIT OF FASHION: THE SANDY SCHREIER COLLECTION' at the Metropolitan Museum of Art (through May 17). Featuring 80 pieces of clothing and accessories, this exhibition is, more than anything else, the reflection of one woman's love affair with fashion. Schreier's collection, and the part of it on view at the Met, contains all the major names, but what defines it more than anything else is her own appreciation for pretty things. Hidden away between the Balenciagas and the Chanelles, the Dioras and the Adrians, are treasures by little-known or even unknown designers that are a delight to discover. Three origin-unknown flapper dresses from the 1920s, beaded to within an inch of their glittering seams, matched only in their lavish surprise by three elaborately printed velvets of the same era — two capes and a column — by Maria Monaci Gallenga, so plush you can practically stroke the weft with your eyes. It is these less famous names whose impact lingers, in part because they are so unexpected. (Vanessa Friedman)

212-535-7710, metmuseum.org

'THE LIFE AND TIMES OF ALVIN BALTROP' at the Bronx Museum of the Arts (through Feb. 9). New York City is a gateway for new talent. It's also an archive of art careers past. Some come to light only after artists have departed, as is the case with Baltrop, an American photographer who was unknown to the mainstream art world when he died in 2004 at 55, and who now has a bright monument of a retrospective at this Bronx museum. That he was black, gay and working class accounts in part for his invisibility, but so does the subject matter he chose: a string of derelict Hudson River shipping piers that, in the 1970s and '80s, became a preserve for gay sex and communion. In assiduously recording both the architecture of the piers and the amorous action they housed, Baltrop created a monument to the city itself at the time when it was both falling apart and radiating liberationist energy. (Cotter)

718-681-6000, bronxmuseum.org

'MAKING MARVELS: SCIENCE & SPLENDOR AT THE COURTS OF EUROPE' at the Metropolitan Museum of Art (through March 1). This exhibition brings together nearly 170 elaborately crafted objects, many never seen in the United States: the mesmerizing 41-carat "Dresden Green," an ornate silver table decorated with sea nymphs, a clock with Copernicus depicted in gilded brass. Some, like a chariot carrying the wine god Bacchus, are spectacularly inventive — Bacchus can raise a toast, roll his eyes and even stick out his tongue. Some, like a charming rhinoceros, a collage created from tortoiseshell, pearls and shells, are merely lovely. The show could have been simply a display of ornamental wealth for the one percent of long ago, an abundance of gold and silver that was meant to be shown off in any way possible. But "Making Marvels" is

about more than that. (James Barron)

212-535-7710, metmuseum.org

'OCEAN WONDERS: SHARKS!' at the New York Aquarium (ongoing). For years, the aquarium's 14-acre campus hunkered behind a wall, turning its back to the beach. When aquarium officials finally got around to completing the long-promised building that houses this shark exhibition, maybe the biggest architectural move was breaking through that wall. The overall effect makes the aquarium more of a visible, welcoming presence along the boardwalk. Inside, "Ocean Wonders" features 115 species sharing 784,000 gallons of water. It stresses timely eco-consciousness, introducing visitors to shark habitats, explaining how critical sharks are to the ocean's food chains and ecologies, debunking myths about the danger sharks pose to people while documenting the threats people pose to sharks via overfishing and pollution. The narrow, snaking layout suggests an underwater landscape carved by water. Past the exit, an outdoor ramp inclines visitors toward the roof of the building, where the Atlantic Ocean suddenly spreads out below. You can see Luna Park in one direction, Brighton Beach in the other. The architectural point becomes clear: Sharks aren't just movie stars and aquarium attractions. They're also our neighbors — as much a part of Coney Island as the roller coasters and summer dreams. (Michael Kimmelman)

718-265-3474, nyaquarium.com

'CHARLES RAY AND THE HILL COLLECTION' at the Hill Art Foundation (through Feb. 15). This Los Angeles-based sculptor is one of the most painstaking artists working today; he's certainly among the slowest, taking years to finish a single statue of silver or aluminum, and that makes every exhibition of his an event. This knife-sharp show, which Ray has installed himself with his habitual exactitude, contrasts five bronzes of the 15th and 16th centuries (of a lion, of Bacchus, of Christ on the cross) with his own sculptures of a sleeping mime reclining on a daybed, or a mountain lion tearing into a stray dog in the Hollywood Hills. Where his Renaissance and Baroque predecessors used molds and wax to cast their sculptures, Ray relies on 3-D scanning and CNC machining: highly precise technologies that translate objects into data that can be output to a robotic mill. But his concerns are the same as artists 500 years gone — how bodies can be transubstantiated into precious metal, and take on new meaning and value. (Farago)

212-337-4455, hillartfoundation.org

'T. REX: THE ULTIMATE PREDATOR' at the American Museum of Natural History (through Aug. 9). Everyone's favorite 18,000-pound prehistoric killer gets the star treatment in this eye-opening exhibition, which presents the latest scientific research on T. rex and also introduces many other tyrannosaurs, some discovered only in this century in China and Mongolia. T. rex evolved mainly during the Cretaceous period to have keen eyes, spindly arms and massive conical teeth, which packed a punch that has never been matched by any other creature; the dinosaur could even swallow whole bones, as affirmed here by a kid-friendly display of fossilized excrement. The show mixes 66-million-year-old teeth with the latest 3-D prints of dino bones, and also presents new models of T. rex as a baby, a juvenile and a full-grown annihilator. Turns out this most savage beast was covered with — believe it! — a soft coat of beige or white feathers. (Farago)

212-769-5100, amnh.org

Last Chance

'ARTIST IN EXILE: THE VISUAL DIARY OF BARONESS HYDE DE NEUVILLE' at the New-York Historical Society (through Jan. 26). Born in Sancerre, France, and banished to America at the beginning of the 19th century, Neuville was self-taught but a quick study, and the swift arc of her proficiency is obvious in this exhibition of over 110 watercolors and drawings. Neuville used a portable watercolor paint box, a new contraption back then, to document landscapes and people, flora and fauna, factories and mansions throughout the Eastern Seaboard and New York State. Although Neuville traveled in privileged circles, she produced some of the most accurate and sympathetic portraits of marginalized Native Americans and mixed race and enslaved people from that period. (Martha Schwendener)

212-873-3400, nyhistory.org

'HANS HAACKE: ALL CONNECTED' at New Museum (through Jan. 26). For this German-born American artist, what matters most about art is what you can't see: the hidden systems of class, power and capital that assign value and importance to the pictures and objects we see. Haacke won fame and grief in the 1970s for polling museumgoers about their beliefs and their bank accounts, and for deadpan installations that disclosed one collector's links to the Nazis, another's to the coup d'état in Chile. There's no denying these midcareer works were Haacke's best: His early fan-blown tarps or water-pumping tubes look hippie-dippie today, while more recent antigovernment installations (torn flags, MAGA hats, dismembered Statue of Liberty dolls) are embarrassing. But his example pervades the work of today's young artists, who never even knew a time before we were all connected. (Farago)

212-219-1222, newmuseum.org

'MEMORY PALACES: INSIDE THE COLLECTION OF AUDREY B. HECKLER' at the American Folk Art Museum (through Jan. 26). "Outsider art" is more of a sociological phenomenon than a genre. But in this exhibition, you do find a certain consistency. Heckler, a trustee of the museum, began collecting around the time of New York's first Outsider Art Fair, in 1993, and she's assembled a comprehensive introduction to all the category's varieties, from the stark, primordial silhouettes of Bill Traylor to the exacting architectural drawings of Achilles G. Rizzoli; from Henry Darger's uniquely majestic epic of little girls battling evil to George Widener's endless numerology. With about 160 works, from all over the world, the show can be hard to take in, unless you fix your attention on a few favorites. My own would be a handful of sublime paintings and drawings by Thornton Dial Sr. and by Martín Ramírez, the Mexican rancher who spent half his life confined to midcentury American psychiatric institutions. (Heinrich)

212-595-9533, folkartmuseum.org

'NATURE: COOPER HEWITT MUSEUM DESIGN TRIENNIAL' at the Cooper Hewitt, Smithsonian Design Museum (through Jan. 20). Plastics transformed the material world after World War II. Today, they pollute our oceans. A better future will be made with ... algae. Or bacteria. That's the dominant theme of this sweeping exhibition. On display here at the Smithsonian's temple to the culture of design are objects you might once have expected only at a science museum: Proteins found in silkworms are repurposed as surgical screws and optical lenses. Electrically active bacteria power a light fixture. The triennial displays some 60 projects and products from around the world that define a reconciliation of biosphere and technosphere, as Koert van Mensvoort, a Dutch artist and philosopher, puts it in the show's excellent catalog. "Nature" provides us with a post-consumption future, in which the urgency of restoring ecological function trumps the allure of the latest gadget. (James S. Russell)
212-849-2950, cooperhewitt.org

'FÉLIX VALLOTTON: PAINTER OF DISQUIET' at the Metropolitan Museum of Art (through Jan. 26). New York's first survey in around 50 years of this Swiss-born French artist dazzles, intrigues and puzzles. It showcases his revolutionary woodblocks of the 1890s, which unblinkingly and inventively satirize the political, social and especially marital hypocrisies of the bourgeois. These themes continue in his paintings, where he sits out modernist abstraction, preferring instead to explore his brilliant rendering techniques and the different representational styles — advanced and less so — they enabled. (Smith)
212-535-7710, metmuseum.org

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On View

Environmental Art Pioneer Agnes Denes Makes Art That Defies Gravity—See Images From Her Overdue New York Survey Here

The Shed commissioned a 17-foot-tall pyramid from the 88-year-old artist.

Sarah Cascone, January 20, 2020



Agnes Denes, *Wheatfield—A Confrontation* (1982). Two acres of wheat planted and harvested by the artist on the Battery Park landfill, Manhattan, Summer 1982. Commissioned by Public Art Fund. Courtesy the artist and Leslie Tonkonow Artworks + Projects.

"Agnes Denes: Absolutes and Intermediates"

The Shed, New York City, on view through March 22, 2020

What the Museum Says: “Agnes Denes rose to international attention in the 1960s and 1970s as a leading figure in conceptual, environmental, and ecological art. A pioneer of several art movements, she creates work in a broad range of mediums, utilizing various disciplines—science, philosophy, linguistics, ecology, psychology—to analyze, document, and ultimately aid humanity. Denes turns her analysis into beautiful, sensual visual forms, poetry, and a philosophy that she has developed over the course of her career.”

Why It's Worth a Look: Regardless about how you feel about the institution itself (not everybody loves it), you have to give the Shed credit for this overdue look of the 88-year-old’s pioneering career, which is marked by large-scale ecological projects—many as-of-yet unrealized—such as Denes’s seminal *Wheatfields—A Confrontation* (1982), in which she planted two acres of wheat on the future site of Battery Park City in Lower Manhattan. “Absolutes and Intermediates” is the Shed’s first major retrospective and features new commissions from Denes, including a 17-foot-tall curving pyramid of crystalline 3-D-printed corn-based bricks.

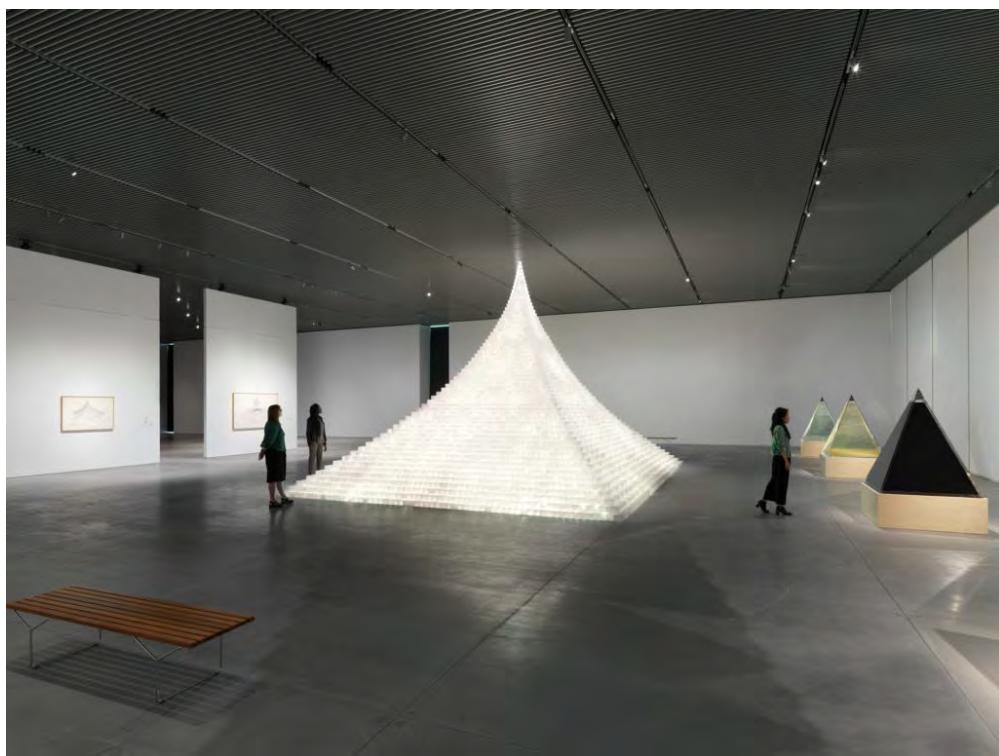
What It Looks Like:



Agnes Denes, *Model for Probability Pyramid—Study for Crystal Pyramid* (2019). Photo by Stan Narten, commissioned by the Shed; courtesy the artist and Leslie Tonkonow Artworks + Projects.



Installation view of “Agnes Denes: Absolutes and Intermediates” at the Shed, New York. Photo by Dan Bradica.



Installation view of “Agnes Denes: Absolutes and Intermediates” at the Shed, New York. Photo by Dan Bradica.



Agnes Denes, *Model for Teardrop—Monument to Being Earthbound* (2019). Photo by Kelly Barrie, commissioned by the Shed; courtesy the artist and Leslie Tonkonow Artworks + Projects.



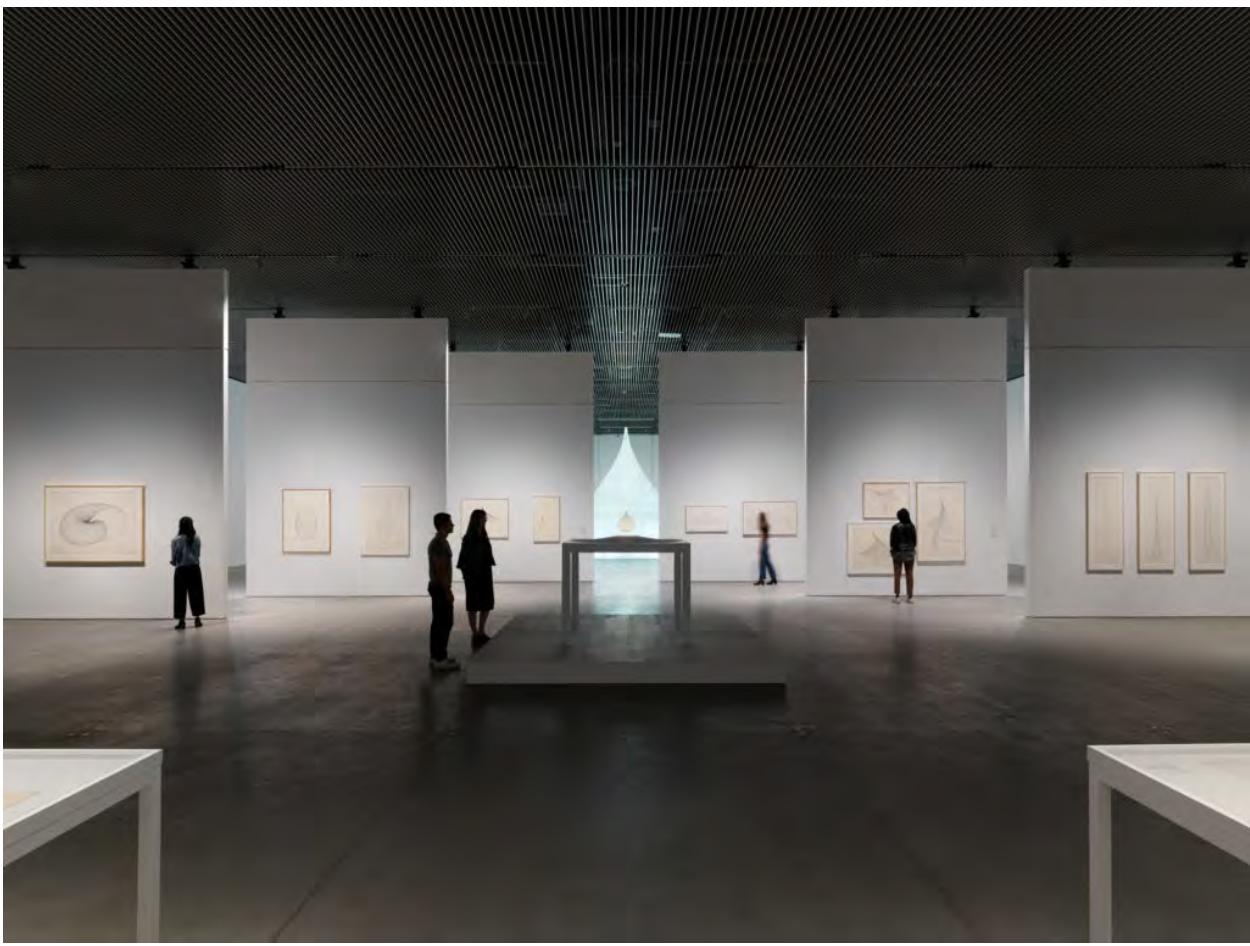
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Agnes Denes, *Model for A Forest for New York* (2019), detail. Photo by Stan Narten, commissioned by the Shed; courtesy the artist and Leslie Tonkonow Artworks + Projects.



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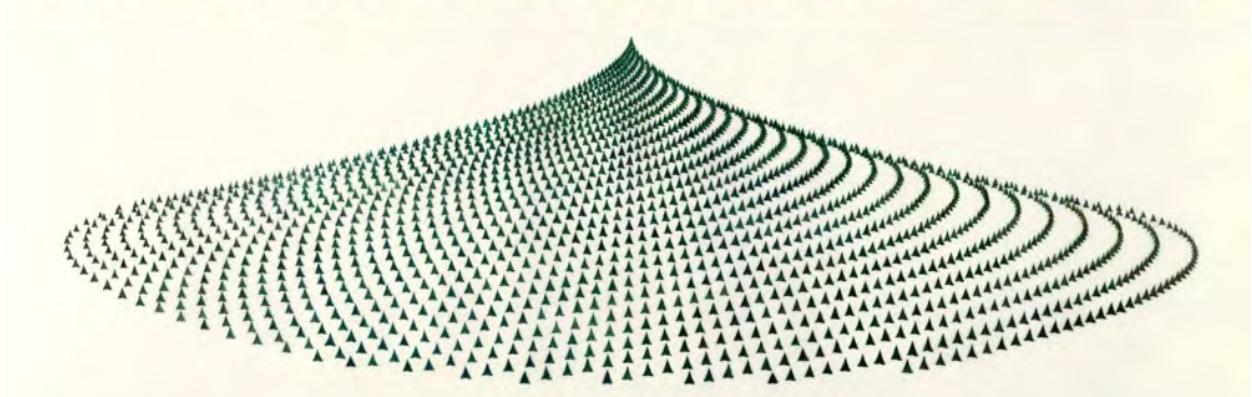
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Installation view of “Agnes Denes: Absolutes and Intermediates” at the Shed, New York. Photo by Dan Bradica.



Agnes Denes, *Tree Mountain — A Living Time Capsule*” (1992–96). The artist and volunteers planted 11,000 trees on a hill in Finland. Courtesy of Agnes Denes and Leslie Tonkonow Artworks + Projects.

The Shed is located at the Bloomberg Building, 545 West 30 Street, New York; general admission is \$10.

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The New York Times

13 Art Exhibitions to View in N.Y.C. This Weekend



"The Music Lesson" by Jacob Lawrence is among the works on display at "Edith Halpert and the Rise of American Art," which closes at the Jewish Museum on Feb. 9. Credit...The Jacob and Gwendolyn Knight Lawrence Foundation, Seattle/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

Jan. 30, 2020

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718-638-5000, brooklynmuseum.com

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212-535-7710, metmuseum.org

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212-535-7710, metmuseum.org

[Read about the events that our other critics have chosen for the week ahead.]

'MAKING MARVELS: SCIENCE & SPLENDOR AT THE COURTS OF EUROPE' at the Metropolitan Museum of Art (through March 1). [This exhibition](#) brings together nearly 170 elaborately crafted objects, many never seen in the United States: the mesmerizing 41-carat "Dresden Green," an ornate silver table decorated with sea nymphs, a clock with Copernicus depicted in gilded brass. Some, like a chariot carrying the wine god Bacchus, are spectacularly inventive — Bacchus can raise a toast, roll his eyes and even stick out his tongue. Some, like a charming rhinoceros, a collage created from tortoiseshell, pearls and shells, are merely lovely. The show could have been simply a display of ornamental wealth for the one percent of long ago, an abundance of gold and silver that was meant to be shown off in any way possible. But "Making Marvels" is about more than that. (James Barron)

212-535-7710, metmuseum.org

'CHARLES RAY AND THE HILL COLLECTION' at the Hill Art Foundation (through Feb. 15). This Los Angeles-based sculptor is one of the most painstaking artists working today; he's certainly among the slowest, taking years to finish a single statue of silver or aluminum, and that makes every exhibition of his an event. This knife-sharp show, which Ray has installed himself with his habitual exactitude, contrasts five bronzes of the 15th and 16th centuries (of a lion, of Bacchus, of Christ on the cross) with his own sculptures of a sleeping mime reclining on a daybed, or a mountain lion tearing into a stray dog in the Hollywood Hills. Where his Renaissance and Baroque predecessors used molds and wax to cast their sculptures, Ray relies on 3-D scanning and CNC machining: highly precise technologies that translate objects into data that can be output to a robotic mill. But his concerns are the same as artists 500 years gone — how bodies can be transubstantiated into precious metal, and take on new meaning and value. (Farago)

212-337-4455, hillartfoundation.org

'T. REX: THE ULTIMATE PREDATOR' at the American Museum of Natural History (through Aug. 9). Everyone's favorite 18,000-pound prehistoric killer gets the star treatment in this eye-opening exhibition, which presents the latest scientific research on T. rex and also introduces many other tyrannosaurs, some discovered only in this century in China and Mongolia. T. rex evolved mainly during the Cretaceous period to have keen eyes, spindly arms and massive conical teeth, which packed a punch that has never been matched by any other creature; the dinosaur could even swallow whole bones, as affirmed here by a kid-friendly display of fossilized excrement. The show mixes 66-million-year-old teeth with the latest 3-D prints of dino bones, and also presents new models of T. rex as a baby, a juvenile and a full-grown annihilator. Turns out this most savage beast was covered with — believe it! — a soft coat of beige or white feathers. (Farago)

212-769-5100, amnh.org

Last Chance

'FIVE HUNDRED YEARS OF WOMEN'S WORK: THE LISA UNGER BASKIN COLLECTION' at the Grolier Club (through Feb. 8). Documenting the long and sometimes hidden history of women making an independent living, this exhibition features nearly 200 items from Baskin's collection, including books, letters, photographs and printed matter of all kinds, along with surprises like a pink early-20th-century birth control sponge (or a "sanitary health sponge," as its tin puts it). Among the oldest pieces is one of the first books printed by women, a 1478 history of Rome's emperors and popes. (It's shown open to a passage about Pope Joan, a mythical female pontiff.) The most recent are letters by the anarchist Emma Goldman, displayed, in a slyly pointed nod to the present, next to Goldman's 1919 pamphlet against deportation. Other objects include a sample of framed embroidery by Charlotte Brontë, displayed with a Brontë letter describing her efforts to find work as a governess, and a copy of the first autobiography by a black woman in Britain: the rollicking 1857 account by Mary Seacole, a Jamaican-born nurse who, among many other things, served in the Crimean War. (Jennifer Schuessler)

212-838-6690, grolierclub.org

'EDITH HALPERT AND THE RISE OF AMERICAN ART' at the Jewish Museum (through Feb. 9). This rare show covers the life of an influential art gallery, founded in 1926 by Halpert. Skilled at both business and publicity, she represented stellar prewar American artists like Stuart Davis, Yasuo Kuniyoshi, Charles Sheeler and Jacob Lawrence, promoted folk art and selected some wonderful pieces for her own collection, which have a room of their own here. (Roberta Smith)

212-423-3200, thejewishmuseum.org

'THE LIFE AND TIMES OF ALVIN BALTROP' at the Bronx Museum of the Arts (through Feb. 9). New York City is a gateway for new talent. It's also an archive of art careers past. Some come to light only after artists have departed, as is the case with Baltrop, an American photographer who was unknown to the mainstream art world when he died in 2004 at 55, and who now has [a bright monument of a retrospective](#) at this Bronx museum. That he was black, gay and working class accounts in part for his invisibility, but so does the subject matter he chose: a string of derelict Hudson River shipping piers that, in the 1970s and '80s, became a preserve for gay sex and communion. In assiduously recording both the architecture of the piers and the amorous action they housed, Baltrop created a monument to the city itself at the time when it was both falling apart and radiating liberationist energy. (Cotter)

718-681-6000, bronxmuseum.org

MASTER DRAWINGS NEW YORK at various locations (Jan. 25-Feb. 1). Painting and sculpture often overshadow drawing, or what Roberta Smith, the co-chief art critic of The New York Times, has called "the most intimate of art mediums." But this annual showcase on the Upper East Side, which takes place at more than 20 locations clustered around Madison Avenue (as well as at Sotheby's and Christie's), spotlights works of paper and ink, charcoal or graphite. Among the highlights are Moeller Fine Art's "The Enchanted World of Lyonel Feininger," a collection of drawings and painted wooden pieces by that German-American artist, and the reunion of Guercino's recently rediscovered "Aurora" with its preparatory drawing at Christopher Bishop Fine Art. (Peter Libbey)

masterdrawingsnewyork.com

###

VARIETY

The Shed, New York's \$475 Million Arts Center, Opens Today

By JEM ASWAD APRIL 5, 2019

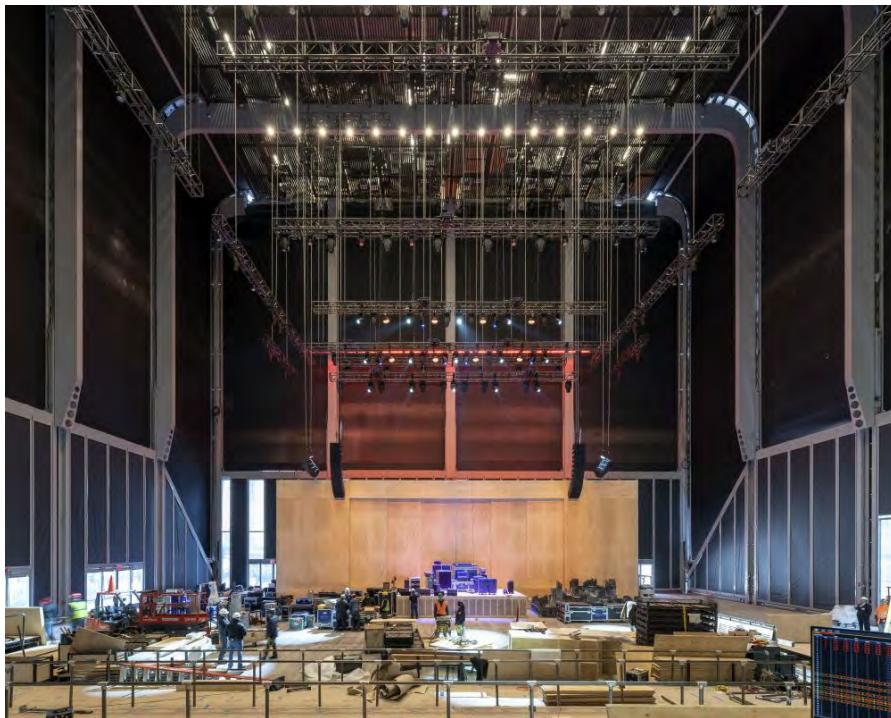


The Shed — New York City's new, \$475 million arts center “dedicated to commissioning, developing, and presenting original works of art, across all disciplines, for all audiences” — opens to the public today with the world premiere of “Soundtrack of America.” The five-night concert series, conceived and directed by Steve McQueen with a creative team led by Quincy Jones and Maureen Mahon (also including Jay-Z/Kanye West producer Dion “No I.D.” Wilson, RCA EVP Tunji Balogun and veteran keyboardist/producer Greg Phillinganes), celebrates the impact of African American music on contemporary culture with performances by a new generation of artists.

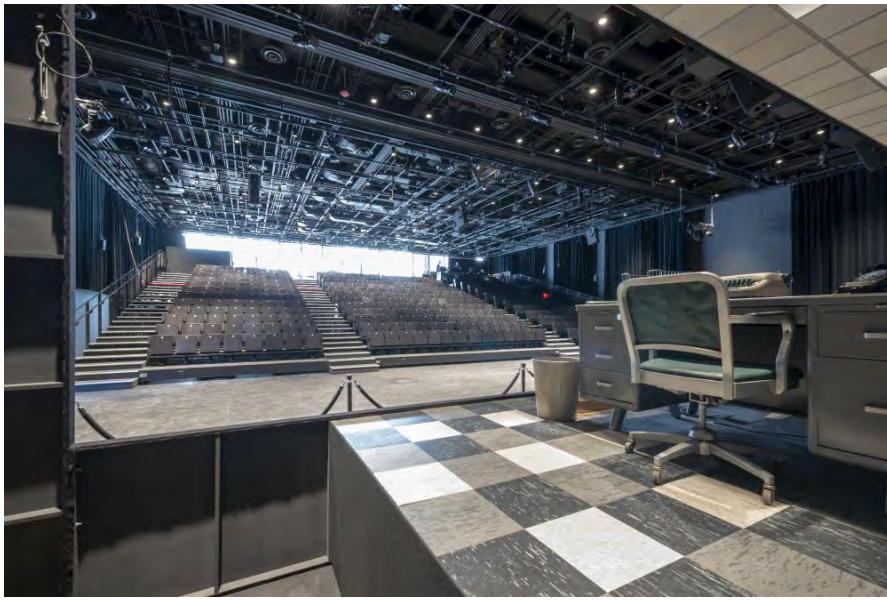


The opening commissions continue on April 6 with new work by artist Trisha Donnelly and the world premiere of “Reich Richter Pärt,” an immersive live performance installation from artists Steve Reich, Gerhard Richter, and Arvo Pärt. The world premiere of “Norma Jeane Baker of Troy,” a specially commissioned spoken and sung dramatic work by poet and scholar Anne Carson, starring Ben Whishaw and Renée Fleming and directed by Katie Mitchell, will be performed on April 9 (with previews on April 6 and 7). Scheduled for later in the Spring are elaborate projects featuring Bjork, “Sorry to Bother You” director Boots Riley and many others — head here for a complete schedule.

It's an ambitious opening slate for a monumentally ambitious project — a gigantic arts center in the city's new, skyscraper-dominated neighborhood of Hudson Yards. In development for more than a decade, The Shed is a nonprofit cultural institution located in a movable, adaptable structure that includes two floors of expansive galleries; a 500-seat theater; and The McCourt, a multiuse hall for large-scale performances, installations, and events for audiences ranging from 1,250 seated to more than 2,000 standing. A rehearsal space, lab for local artists, and event space are located in The Tisch Skylights on the top floor.



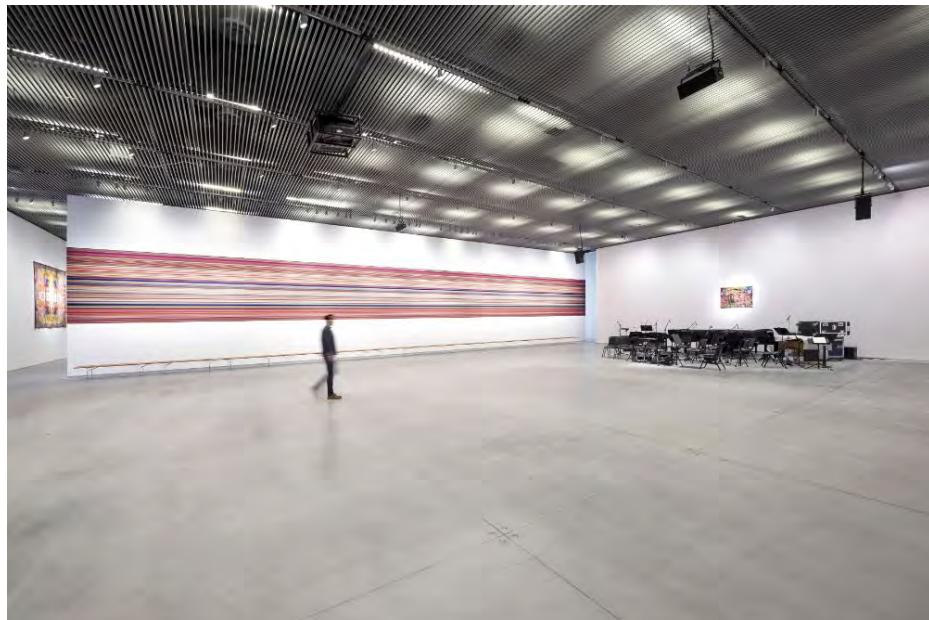
Variety attended a media preview of the space and a couple of the forthcoming projects earlier this week, and both are state-of-the-art and artistically challenging. The venue's main performance spaces are intimate and acoustically precise, but the floor-to-ceiling glass in many of the hallways and escalator banks provide stunning views of the city's west side and across the Hudson River (not to mention the much-maligned new viewing platform, the Vessel). The McCourt has not only a large stage and seating area, but also a bleacher-style viewing area containing a couple hundred seats a floor above, enclosed in the front by floor-to-ceiling glass that overlooks the McCourt. The rehearsal space on the top floor has floor-to-ceiling walls on two sides as well as its titular skylight, making for a sun-kissed performance area. Another interior theater has a large stage essentially built into the wall, making for an unusually contained performance space — a press preview of “Norma Jeane Baker of Troy” took place in this theater (pictured below).



"As a commissioning home for artists from the worlds of performance, visual arts, and pop, The Shed is a place for all artists and all audiences to meet," said Artistic Director and CEO Alex Poots.

Dan Doctoroff, chair of The Shed's Board of Directors said, "The Shed is doing something very different: a new idea of a cultural institution; an unprecedented building in a new part of the city; a new team commissioning all new work. It is uniquely of New York, dedicated to the pursuit of boundless artistic ambitions across all art forms for all audiences."

Thus far, The Shed has raised \$529 million toward its capital campaign goal of \$550 million, which includes building costs, organizational start-up expenses, and support for the creation of new work.



###

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

A Tree Falls in Hudson Yards

Trisha Donnelly's installation at the Shed highlights humanity's inhumanity to nature.



An installation view of Trisha Donnelly's exhibition at the Shed, which includes the trunks of two large redwood trees
PHOTO: TRISHA DONNELLY/THE SHED

By Peter Plagens April 10, 2019

Trisha Donnelly's conspicuously untitled (and unexplained—there is no press release) work of installation art at the Shed is a lyrical op-ed about humanity's inhumanity to nature. Into a capacious, dark gallery illuminated only by a little daylight coming in through vertical openings in one wall, Ms. Donnelly has brought the trunks of two large redwood trees and placed them atop the kind of padded, rolling platforms that furniture movers use. She's also bandaged, as it were, the ends of their amputated limbs with cloth and twine. Across the room, the artist has placed a large number of similarly wounded, albeit smaller, sections of trees. (All the examples were already diseased and dying, and taken from private land.) Off to the side, separate from the mournful arboretum sits a black speaker that emits—at considerable volume—Leontyne Price singing “Habanera” from “Carmen.”

Trisha Donnelly exhibition

The Shed

Through May 30

The effect is something like a World War I field hospital, minus the moaning and screaming. Each morning, in fact, someone from the Shed comes in and pours water on the two big trunks to keep them from drying out. On the floor, the spilled liquid looks not unlike blood in a black-and-white war movie.

One of the openings in that wall is aligned with a Hudson Yards skyscraper to the north so that it's projected onto the opposite wall of the gallery as a vague, camera obscura image. The ghost skyscraper represents—if it needs pointing out—the corporate, commercial, mechanized and essentially soulless side of society responsible for the massacre of the redwoods. The developers of Hudson Yards probably didn't see that one coming.

Ms. Donnelly, a professor of art at New York University, was born in 1974 and has a daunting track record of solo shows at such venues as the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art and the Serpentine Galleries in London. Her overall style is a fleshed-out conceptual art halfway between, say, Joseph Kosuth and Doris Salcedo. She works pretty much in black, white and gray—which fits well with the Shed, where everything, indeed everyone, is similarly decked out.

If the purpose of Ms. Donnelly's installation is—to invoke an increasingly conventional art-world rationale—to “address the issue of...,” it mostly succeeds. Rather than being aesthetically immersed in what the Germans call a *Gesamtkunstwerk* or “total work of art” involving all the senses, however, I found myself in an interior debate over the work’s methods and effectiveness as poetic propaganda.

“It’s good that the Shed let the piece speak for itself,” I thought. No, said a skeptical little voice, viewers deserve some guidance. “Well, it’s not the artist’s fault that too many of them are just strolling around smiling, a couple even doing a few dance steps to ‘Carmen,’” one side of my mind countered, “and then proceeding to the next attraction.” No, the little voice responded, the author of an editorial, visual or otherwise, should take account of its readers, so to speak, and figure out a way to make things clear to them.

“‘Carmen’ reinforces the tragic mood of the work.” *Au contraire*, it’s a gimmick. “The installation as a whole, you have to admit, is really well done; it’s actually quite moving.” Come on, bandaged trees are pretty obvious and cartoonish. Besides, the whole idea of damaged trees as bodies on gurneys is—how to put it?—simplistic. “The installation is nevertheless beautiful.” Granted, but its aesthetics are those of a piece of contemporary art in a currently popular style; installation art is as art-historically specific as interrupted pediments in Baroque architecture. It’s just that the art audience agrees not to see this, preferring to regard such works as expansively universal.

“Every work of art is historically defined, but some works transcend their moment. Goya’s ‘The Disasters of War’ etchings, created two centuries ago, for example, still pack a punch.” Yes, but they required a lot of drawing talent and craft, and prints are a format that lasts rather than ending up disassembled like a stage set as soon as the play is over.

“In the end, the work raises the viewer’s environmental consciousness, which is all to the good.” But there’s a paradox here: An arcane contemporary-art exhibition, in a venue (let’s be honest) that’s a cultural embellishment for a huge urban real-estate enterprise, nominally laments our culture’s mistreatment of nature by talking to an audience whose members may very well not get the point. If they do, will they care about it as they exit into Hudson Yards and proceed to its glistening, high-end mall?

“What do you want? A completely green work of art in a 100% carbon-neutral location seen by an audience that didn’t consume an ounce of fossil fuel in order to travel to see it?” Point taken. As the saying goes, the perfect should not be the enemy of the good. Ms. Donnelly’s work of art is startling and tinged with tragic beauty. The fact that it’s also elegant, as installations go, should not count against it. Game, set and match—narrowly—to those who are moved by the visual poetry of this nameless work of art.

###



THE NEW YORKER

ART

Trisha Donnelly

You hear this American artist's profoundly thoughtful exhibition before you see it: Leontyne Price singing the "Habanera" aria from "Carmen" on a five-minute loop. The repetition provides sonic structure for the sprawling, moving, untitled installation. The trunks of two mammoth trees—a redwood and a Scots pine, felled after dying on private land in California—rest side by side on dollies, at the north end of the seven-thousand-square-foot gallery, like a couple lying in state. A dense tangle of the trees' branches line the eastern wall, as does a row of benches. The lights are off, and the only illumination arrives, along with perplexed visitors, through a narrow aperture in the wall, sliced from ceiling to floor in front of a picture window. (Donnelly has rerouted people from the standard entrance and exit.) As Price sings, in French, "Love is a rebellious bird," thoughts turn to the speeds of life—swift for a bird, slow for a tree—and the increasing threat of human beings to the natural world.

— *Andrea K. Scott*

Through May 19.

The Shed

ART

A New Artists Space



Illustration by Leonie Bos

The nonprofit **Artists Space** was founded in SoHo, in 1972, as a refuge for experimentalists. Cindy Sherman showed her “Film Stills” there for the first time, in the late seventies, when she was also briefly the receptionist (who once came to work dressed as a nurse). In 1989, Nan Goldin organized the group exhibition “Witnesses: Against Our Vanishing,” a cri de coeur deploreding the AIDS epidemic, honing the activism she now directs at the Sackler opioid empire. For forty-seven years, Artists Space has been peripatetic, occupying five different locations. Now, as commerce dominates conversations about art—and artists need alternative strongholds more than ever—it has found a long-term home in a cast-iron building in Tribeca. Superbly designed by the architectural firm Bade Stageberg Cox, the two-level space feels at once permanent and provisional; the entrance on Cortlandt Alley, off White Street, sets the perfect liminal tone. The quartet of inaugural shows (through Feb. 9) is a hit-or-miss affair—so it goes with experiments—curated by Jamie Stevens (and Artist Space's invaluable director Jay Sanders), with sculptures by Danica Barboza, Jason Hirata, Yuki Kimura, and, most impressive by far, Duane Linklater.

—*Andrea K. Scott*

Through Feb. 9.

[Artists Space](#)

ART

Barbara Probst

In early 2000, this German artist (who is based in Munich and New York) photographed herself, using a strobe light and twelve cameras, on a midtown Manhattan rooftop at night. The resulting images—a mix of color and black-and-white—are now on view in an installation titled “Exposure #1: N.Y.C., 545 8th Avenue, 01.07.00, 10:37 p.m.” Probst captured herself at the height of a graceful jump—as well as her equipment, the roof’s parapet, and the glittering city beyond—from a variety of distances and angles. The multipart work wraps around the small gallery to dramatic effect, simultaneously bringing viewers close to the artist and stationing them, voyeuristically, in the shadows. It’s striking how differently these perspectives render one strobe-lit moment: alternately glamorous, desolate, or forensic.

—*Johanna Fateman*

Through Feb. 8.

[Higher Pictures](#)



THE NEW YORKER

Night Life

March 11, 2019 Issue

Spring Night-Life Preview

The season brings mighty women performers, like Lizzo, who is poised for stardom, and a burst of multinational acts, including Bad Bunny.

By Briana Younger March 1, 2019



Illustration by Sarah Mazzetti

Spring brings April showers, May flowers, and hip-hop abloom in its assorted iterations. A pair of queer rappers—Lor Choc, whose amorous sing-raps are a street romantic's dream, and the equally tender Kodie Shane—kick things off at S.O.B.'s (March 6). More mighty women follow, including the savvy masked rhymer Leikeli47, at Elsewhere (March 28 and April 2), and the always captivating Lizzo, who is poised to become a star. Spitting kinetic, uplifting lyrics one minute and belting out a lovesick ballad the next, Lizzo brings her iconic flute, her polished performance style, and her forthcoming major-label début to Brooklyn Steel (May 12-13) and Terminal 5 (May 23). Bbymutha, with her take-no-prisoners approach, joins Earl Sweatshirt at Irving Plaza (March 30) on his "LIGHT IT UP!" tour, for a showcase of lo-fi ingenuity and lyrical prowess.

The Puerto Rican rapper Bad Bunny ignites Madison Square Garden (April 27) with his charming album “X 100PRE,” a dynamic collage of Latin trap, reggaeton, and bachata flavors. This multinational burst extends to several other acts, including the vivacious South Korean girl group BLACKPINK, which brings its début U.S. tour to Newark’s Prudential Arena (May 1). The Comet Is Coming, a London-based trio, seeks out “universal truths” through futuristic jazz at Mercury Lounge (March 18), and Aphex Twin, an Ireland-born British electronic producer, transports listeners to distant realms on shards of gauzy synth and bass at Avant Gardner (April 11). And, finally, the Icelandic artist Björk settles in for an eight-show residency at the newly minted venue the Shed (May 6-June 1, various dates). Merging vibrant live music with theatrical and digital elements, this concert series promises to be one of her most ambitious.

The Miami-born, Italy-based musician Yves Tumor marks his Stateside return at National Sawdust (March 25-26), with an exhibition of polychromatic soundscapes. Across the river, Mariah Carey summons the birds and the bees to Radio City (March 25), but, despite her status as pop-music royalty, spring in New York will be ruled by R. & B. newcomers. VanJess, a nostalgia-inducing sister duo, embarks on its first headlining slot, at Mercury Lounge (March 20). Lucky Daye (March 14, Baby’s All Right) and Pink Sweat\$ (April 8, Bowery Ballroom) perform songs from their promising début EPs. Ella Mai (March 11-12, Brooklyn Steel), fresh off her first Grammy win, and her compatriot Jorja Smith (May 3, Hulu Theatre) offer snapshots of their acclaimed takes on U.K. soul. ♦

Published in the print edition of the [March 11, 2019](#), issue, with the headline “Spring Preview.”

#



THE ART NEWSPAPER

Shapeshifting \$475m arts space The Shed opens in New York's Hudson Yards

Gerhard Richter, Trisha Donnelly and Steve McQueen will show new commissions

HILARIE M. SHEETS 1st April 2019



The Shed under construction in February 2019 © Brett Beyer

The Shed, due to open on 5 April where the High Line and Hudson Yards development intersect on Manhattan's western edge, aims to be the world's most flexible cultural institution. "It's part museum, part performing arts centre, part pop-up venue—providing parity across all art forms, for all audiences," says the artistic director and chief executive, Alex Poots.

The non-profit, which commissions, develops and presents work across performing and visual arts and popular culture, has a gleaming new \$475m building to service its lofty ambitions. Designed by Diller Scofidio + Renfro with the Rockwell Group, and situated above the West Side rail yards, the eight-level building has a moveable shell that can roll out on wheels into The Shed's outdoor plaza, adapted from the shipyard technology of gantry cranes as a nod to the site's industrial past. "It moves quite majestically, like a ship through the sea," Poots says. It also doubles The Shed's footprint and provides another sound- and temperature-controlled space for performances and exhibitions, in addition to the building's versatile theatre, two expansive galleries, rehearsal space and creative lab.

Creating a zone of public space adjacent to the new luxury condos, shops and restaurants of the massive Hudson Yards project, The Shed was part of the original deal struck with the developers in 2005 by the former mayor Michael Bloomberg's administration. The city launched a call for proposals for a non-profit cultural facility in 2008 and gave \$75m towards the project's \$550m capital campaign for the building, start-up costs and first three years of commissions. The campaign has raised \$529m to date through additional private funds.

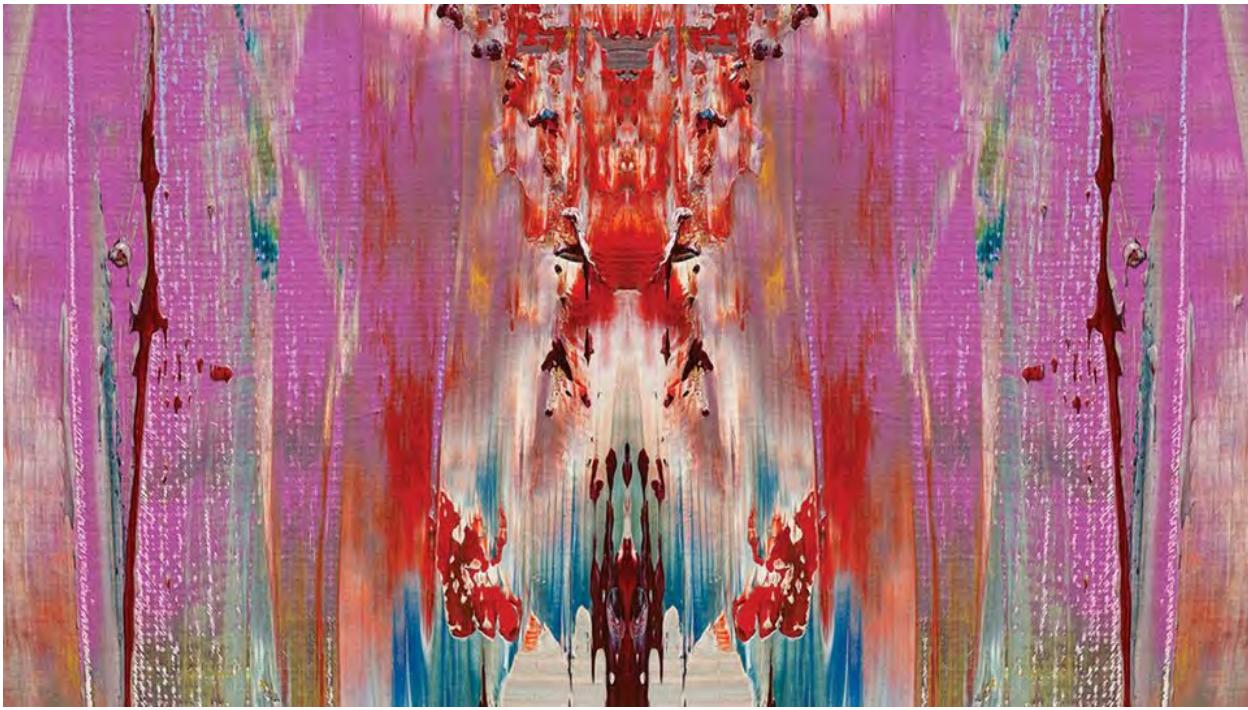
"When we first conceived the idea of The Shed, we had not yet recruited the Whitney to go down to the southern end of the High Line," says Daniel Doctoroff, The Shed's board chairman and the former deputy mayor, who spearheaded the project from the start. Now, The Shed caps the necklace of institutions along the High Line, which attracts 7.5 million visitors a year, including the Whitney Museum of American Art, the Kitchen, Dia Art Foundation (currently under renovation) and the newly opened Hill Art Foundation.

Projects that otherwise could not happen can see the light of day at The Shed

Early on, many arts leaders questioned The Shed's purpose and why the city gave so much money to an institution that did not yet exist. "The vision of the city was to carve out the space for something the city might need, that wasn't competing with anything else," Poots says. "I think a centre for commissioning all artists and for all audiences tries to give that opportunity."

Poots, the founding director of England's Manchester International Festival from 2005 to 2015, has brought on board his collaborator Hans Ulrich Obrist as the senior programme adviser; they have been inspired by the festival's nimbleness and interdisciplinary programme. Almost 20 commissions are planned for The Shed's first year. "Projects that otherwise could not happen can see the light of day here," Obrist says.

An inaugural commission to be presented from April until June synthesises work by the German painter Gerhard Richter, the Estonian composer Arvo Pärt and the US composer Steve Reich. Richter has designed immersive works for two gallery spaces; in one, an acapella choir will perform a piece by Pärt while the other presents a new live orchestral piece by Reich.



work by the German painter Gerhard Richter will be part of two immersive live performances © Gerhard Richter, 2019

The \$25 ticket price for the events includes a new film by the conceptual artist Trisha Donnelly (which can be seen separately for \$10). “Somebody might come to see Trisha Donnelly and then experience a Reich piece, which they might never otherwise have visited,” Obrist says.

The UK artist and filmmaker Steve McQueen is also venturing into the world of music with *Soundtrack of America*, a family tree of African-American music, from spirituals to trap. With a team led by the legendary US musician and producer Quincy Jones, the work will be performed in April by young musicians in the plaza space under the extended shell.

Admission prices will vary depending on the event, but 10% of tickets for all performances will be available to low-income families for \$10 as part of The Shed’s focus on “equity and democratisation”, Poots says. This endeavour extends to providing space for Open Call, a programme of new pieces by 52 emerging artists from the five boroughs, and Maze, a theatre production showcasing the street dance taught in 20 New York public schools and community centres as part of The Shed’s FlexNYC outreach programme, which will be performed by participating students and teachers.

“We’d like to have the residencies we’re doing in communities tie back to culminating events and block parties happening in The Shed,” says Tamara McCaw, the institution’s chief civic programme officer. Noting its proximity to public and subsidised housing in Chelsea and Hell’s Kitchen, she adds: “I don’t want The Shed to be one more thing that improves the neighbourhood but that a lot of the residents don’t feel is for them.”

###

RIOT MATERIAL

ART. WORD. THOUGHT.

Bereavement Of The Felled: New Works By Trisha Donnelly

MAY 22, 2019 BY JOHN HABER

At The Shed, NYC (through May 19)
Reviewed by John Haber

If a tree falls in a forest and there is no one there to hear it, does it still make a sound? At the very least, it can make art. For Trisha Donnelly, it *must* make a sound as well, for art is always listening, even as so many refuse to hear. Much of the planet may be dying, like her two fallen trees at The Shed, but art can speak to that as well. She has the very first show in the cultural center of Manhattan's Hudson Yards, and it makes quite an impact. It puts to the test a gallery with, as yet, too few visitors, next to a shopping mall serving too little of New York. It looks beyond that very concentration of wealth to a fragile state of nature. It also risks drowning global warming and goodness knows what else in sounds of its own.

One enters through a side entrance to the galleries, past a black curtain, and into a vast room empty apart from a traffic cone at the far end. Early visitors must have wondered if the galleries were really open yet—much as with *Closed for Installation*, the sparest of site-specific art by Fiona Connorat Sculpture Center in Queens. The black curtain divides the room, in preparation for a show to come. Nothing beyond dates appears on the gallery's Web site, not even a title, and no wall text hints at what is to come. Soon enough, though, Donnelly relented at least a little. Off the escalators on The Shed's top floor, a guard in casual dress now points the way.

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L'amour Est un Oiseau Rebelle, aka "Habanera."
Herbert von Karajan, The Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra, feat. Leontyne Price

The guard also offers some much-needed advice: follow the opera. One can already hear it, the "Habanera" from Georges Bizet's *Carmen*, in a fabled performance by Leontyne Price—and it grows in intensity as one crosses the dark empty space. An amp and two speakers share a second room along with two impressive tree trunks lying helpless on the floor. Donnelly has bound one trunk loosely with a pink ribbon and wrapped the broken limbs of the other with plastic gauze. They could be bandages for a wounded planet.

The artist might indeed be trying to save the earth with her bare hands. Then again, the ribbon could come as a failed gesture or sheer mockery, and the plastic could stand for all the litter that refuses to biodegrade. More plastic covers the ends of the work's messier fourth component—dozens of branches heaped in a corner and reaching to almost human height. Even so, this room, too, stands largely empty, and pools of moisture from the fallen trees are drying out. One might be grateful to slip behind the north wall for a view of the Yards and into the light.



Installation view Photo: Dan Bradica. Courtesy The Shed

Donnelly has a history of operatic conceptual and performance art, riding into one installation on a horse, and this is no exception. When she curated MoMA's permanent collection in 2012, as "Artist's Choice," she did not shy away from big postwar art at that. Just what, though, does Carmen have to do with the death of trees? Are they both beloved but tragic heroes, like a model ecosystem in art by Anicka Yi or Maya Lin, and are she and nature alike the free spirits in a song titled "L'amour est un oiseau rebelle" (or "love is a rebellious bird")? Is Carmen speaking instead for climate change deniers and an unfeeling humanity when she asks, "When will I love you?" Alas, she answers, "Maybe never, maybe tomorrow . . . / But not today, that's for sure!"

Of course, ignorance for a critic like me is no excuse, even if I also had to rely on other reviews to know that one trunk belongs to a redwood and the other to a pine. Still, Donnelly is willing to sacrifice a degree of coherence in the interest of darkness and impact. The Hudson Yards itself plopped down to the north of the Chelsea galleries and the west of Penn Station like a very rude and very expensive intruder. By the time it is done, it will hold offices, apartments, shops, restaurants, an observation deck, and a hotel along with the arts center. One can already ascend a towering sculpture in its central plaza by Thomas Heatherwick, called for now *The Vessel*. Yet it feels like something dropped into the city from above—and from Asia, the Gulf States, or suburbia.

From a distance, a great building like the Chrysler Building or the Empire State Building calls out a welcome, and tourists and New Yorkers alike respond. Hudson Yard simply ignores you. Its sheer bulk says that it is here, and you are not. The angled cuts at the very top of two of the five existing towers, as if they were leaning into one another, further suggests that they are talking not to you, but to each other. The residences set aside ten percent for affordable housing—or just over four hundred units. Set amid so much wealth, that, too, could stand for the threats to lives and the planet.

The Shed, by Diller Scofidio + Renfro with the Rockwell Group, takes the most risks, which is all to the good. Yet it looks like, well, a shed wrapped in shiny plastic. When New York's ban on plastic bags finally kicks in, it should be the first to go. Its director, Alex Poots, formerly ran the arts program at the Park Avenue Armory, with overblown and woefully overpriced events, and star performers here are already on the bill. Donnelly does, though, suggest that the galleries hold real promise, along with the challenge to fill them more than halfway—and for now, but only for now, they are even free. Whether one can still love them after she is gone remains, like Carmen's song, an open question.



Installation view

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The New York Times

The Shed Opens: What Our Critics Think

Soundtrack of America, “Reich Richter Pärt” and work by Trisha Donnelly were on offer during the arts center’s inaugural weekend.



The Howard University “Showtime” Marching Band parading through the audience on Friday during the opening night of Soundtrack of America, the first public performance at the Shed.Credit...Nina Westervelt for The New York Times

By Joshua Barone, Jon Pareles, Zachary Wolfe and Jason Farago April 7, 2019

When people use the word “fanfare” to describe celebrations, they usually mean it metaphorically. But there were literal brass instruments, bells up and held high, at the official opening of the Shed on Friday night.

The first public performance — inside the cavernous McCourt space at the new arts center, one of the most ambitious and high-profile additions to New York City’s cultural landscape in years — began with a marching band exuberantly parading through the audience.

It was the start of Soundtrack of America, a five-concert series paying homage to the history of African-American music, conceived by the filmmaker and artist Steve McQueen. He and Quincy Jones watched from the sidelines as the instrumentalists made their joyous entrance.

Nearby was Alex Poots, the Shed's artistic director and chief executive, pacing on the periphery. He was witnessing not only the inauguration of an institution more than a decade (and \$475 million) in the making, but also of the programming he has been developing since he joined in 2014.

For the Shed's first weekend, he had commissioned "Soundtrack for America," as well as the interdisciplinary "Reich Richter Pärt," new work by the artist Trisha Donnelly and the play "Norma Jeane Baker of Troy," starring Ben Whishaw and Renée Fleming.

On Wednesday evening, the Shed had opened its doors to mostly donors and industry insiders for a preview party. Mr. Poots and Elizabeth Diller — the architect whose firm, Diller Scofidio + Renfro, designed the building in collaboration with the Rockwell Group — were tapped on the shoulders by a near-constant stream of luminaries offering congratulations. It was a long day for Ms. Diller, who arrived at the building around 8 a.m. and stayed at the party until 10:30 p.m. (To unwind, she said, she and her husband, Ricardo Scofidio, went out for ramen. She was back at her office by 9 a.m.)

There was a preview of "Reich Richter Pärt"; afterward, Steve Reich said in an interview that he was happy to finally hear his score with a large crowd, and not in the acoustics of an empty room. He was there again for the piece's first public performances on Saturday.

[Our guide to navigating the Shed and Hudson Yards.]

By the weekend, the building was operational, though not fully finished. One crucial escalator wasn't completely installed; another was in and out of service. A bartender for Cedric's, the Shed's not-yet-open restaurant by Danny Meyer's Union Square Hospitality Group, apologetically handed out free bottles of water and said that it would probably be up and running by late April.

But that didn't stop thousands of visitors from passing through. "Reich Richter Pärt" drew a solemnly attentive audience. "Norma Jeane Baker of Troy" had a full house for its premiere. (A review of that is coming this week.) Part of Trisha Donnelly's show was treated as an observation gallery; one man asked a Shed employee where the exhibition was, not knowing he was standing in the middle of it.

Soundtrack of America

Through April 14 in the McCourt.

Thundering syncopation and a parade through the audience opened the first part of Soundtrack of America, a five-concert survey of African-American music. The McCourt was configured as a club, with a plywood stage, a dance floor, a D.J. and a seated aerie.

Jon Batiste was leading the Howard University "Showtime" Marching Band, the Brooklyn United drumline and his own 369th Experience brass band. Their set commemorated James Reese Europe, a pioneer in bringing African-American music to concert halls — including Carnegie Hall in 1912 — and recordings. During World War I, he served in the segregated 369th Infantry Regiment, known as the Harlem Hellfighters, and directed its regimental band, which introduced ragtime across Europe. Mr. Batiste's 369th Experience musicians wore military khakis.

The roar of massed drums turned into W.C. Handy's "Memphis Blues," a Hellfighters favorite. Mr. Batiste paired ragtime tunes with his own "Golden Crown," rooted in the Mardi Gras Indian music of his hometown, New Orleans. He declared, "We summoning the ancestors tonight!"

That's the mission of Soundtrack of America, conceived by Steve McQueen as a joyful history lesson and advised by Quincy Jones and others. Dedicated to continuity and cultural memory, each concert features five musicians performing songs that inspired them, alongside their own music.

Friday's lineup included performers and songwriters (PJ Morton, Victory, Rapsody and Sheléa) backed by the keyboardist Greg Phillinganes leading a supremely adaptable band. They chose more recent, more familiar musical ancestors — less history, more hits — and were willing to risk having their songs compared with the pantheon.

Mr. Morton, a keyboardist in Maroon 5, invoked both the two-fisted New Orleans piano tradition and Stevie Wonder, putting gospel flourishes into the Fats Domino hit "Blueberry Hill" and barreling through Mr. Wonder's "Higher Ground" on the way to his own ballad, "First Began," full of Wonder-like chord changes and vocal turns.

With her burnished, supple alto, Victory started "Feeling Good," a Nina Simone showpiece, as a bluesy reflection, then shifted it toward the Caribbean lilt of her own songs calling for self-acceptance. Rapsody, a rapper from North Carolina, emphasized women's power and self-determination. She declaimed her rhymes with decisive, leaping inflections, linking her material to Nina Simone, Queen Latifah, Lauryn Hill, Roberta Flack and (joined by Victory singing "Strange Fruit") Billie Holiday.

Sheléa juxtaposed her elegantly retro jazz ballad "Love Fell on Me" with crowd-pleasing homages to Sarah Vaughan, Whitney Houston and Aretha Franklin. Mr. Phillinganes and the band added their renditions of songs by Ray Charles, James Brown and Thelonious Monk.

On the way out, concertgoers received a poster-size family tree tracing 400 years of interconnected African-American music. For all the major figures that its opening night touched on, Soundtrack of America has plenty of pantheon left. *JON PARELES*

'Reich Richter Pärt'

Through June 2 in the Level 2 Gallery.

A few minutes after the audience has entered the first of two gallery spaces that make up "Reich Richter Pärt," chanting begins. It turns out the singers, dressed in street clothes, have been embedded among us — a tired trick of contemporary performance.

Members of the Choir of Trinity Wall Street sing, and repeat three times, "Drei Hirtenkinder aus Fátima," a spirited piece in Arvo Pärt's neo-Medieval style. When this collaboration between Pärt and the artist Gerhard Richter was new, in England in 2015, "Drei Hirtenkinder" was heard among Richter's somber "Double Gray" diptychs and "Birkenau," a series of abstractions concealing photographs of concentration-camp prisoners.

Perhaps a little heavy for the Shed's opening festivities?

Now, amid the cheerful commerce of Hudson Yards, the only history being reflected upon is that of the artists' collaboration itself. "The History of 'Reich Richter Pärt,'" the program screams in inch-high capital letters, endowing with epochal import a 50-minute interplay among three octogenarian cultural celebrities.

No more concentration camps. The art, lit with reverential spots, is tall columns of wallpaper and a few rectangles of tapestry. The space is perhaps meant to evoke a cathedral: A text claims these Richters "emulate stained glass."

The adjacent room is wrapped in more wallpaper: panoramic pieces printed with the final stage of Richter's "Patterns," a 2012 book project that halved and mirrored an earlier abstract painting, over and over, into ever-thinner strips that eventually resolve into long, horizontal bands of color.

A film, by Mr. Richter and Corinna Belz, depicts the "Patterns" process, then its reversal, to the live accompaniment of a new score by Steve Reich, played on Saturday by Ensemble Signal, that also undergoes a symmetrical process-based transformation. (The International Contemporary Ensemble will fill in for some performances in the eight-week, four-times-daily run; the Brooklyn Youth Chorus similarly shares the workload for the Pärt.) A two-note motif builds to complex, rhythmically agile brightness, then gradually recedes back into blur as we watch Richter's bands seem to rush by at light speed, fervently oscillating, at the finale.

The music has tender energy, and an undercurrent of melancholy. Its droning tones sometimes seem to be pulling apart — like taffy, or like Richter's stretching spaghetti stripes of color. The film, by contrast, feels merely self-fascinated. But two masters have been brought together, furthering the reputation of each; in the collaboration-consumed, eminence-obsessed ethos of high-end art-making these days, that's all that matters. *ZACHARY WOOLFE*

Trisha Donnelly

Through May 30 in the Level 4 Gallery.

In choosing the American artist Trisha Donnelly for the Shed's first solo exhibition, the curators here opted for a tactician and a troublemaker — one whose terse, enigmatic maneuvers stand far from the sparkle and retail of Hudson Yards.

Ms. Donnelly's page in the Shed's brochure for its first season is blank. Her show, alone among the inaugural offerings, is not signposted beside the half-finished escalators. And she has bridled against the building's architecture, forcing spectators through the side entrance of the new gallery into a half-lit space that some will confuse for the back of house.

You wanted an artist who'd push the boundaries of the new institution? Be careful what you ask for.

Inscrutability, provisionality, self-effacement: These are the contrivances of Ms. Donnelly, whose untitled exhibition is the only project here that puts the Shed itself in question. In the dim gallery you will see segments of two massive tree trunks, a redwood and a pine, lying like cadavers on simple dollies. Water puddles beneath them (these trees, though blasted, are still alive), and their amputated branches have been dressed with white plastic foam bundles that appear like tourniquets. Dozens of smaller branches, many also bandaged, balance in a corner. A sound system positioned on a dolly as its own sculpture roars a single aria on loop: the Habanera from “Carmen,” sung by Leontyne Price and rattling the speakers.

The blaring Bizet, extolling love as “the child of the bohemian,” and the bandaged trees, recalling mutilated soldiers, suggest joys and pains that have no place in Hudson Yards. Yet how these elements inform one another, as easy opposites of nature and culture or of life and death, is less important than whether they together can conjure an atmosphere of whispers, diversions, mistakes, vanishings.

When the art world was smaller, Ms. Donnelly’s evanescent, undocumented interventions — most famously, a 2002 performance in which she rode into a gallery on horseback, proclaimed a military surrender, then galloped back out — had the thrill of a runaway rumor. Today, when every exhibition is Instagrammed and hashtagged, that effect has become almost impossible to realize, which Ms. Donnelly has surely acknowledged by leaving a narrow gap in the wall built to block the windows. At the hour I visited, the light passing through it cast a faint camera-obscura gleam of the soon-to-open Equinox Hotel.

This artist’s resistance to marketing, and her scrupulous refusal to kludge up her art with paratext, come as salutary aberrations amid all the Hudson Yards hype. But Ms. Donnelly seems to have already accepted that the cultural world we have built over the train tracks may not have space for art like hers. *JASON FARAGO*

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ARTnews

The Shed's Commissions for 2019 Opening Involve Gerhard Richter, No I.D., Steve McQueen, Trisha Donnelly, Steve Reich, Arvo Pärt, Many More

BY ANDY BATTAGLIA March 6, 2018 4:50pm



The Shed under construction as seen from the High Line, February 2018. ED LEDERMAN

The Shed, the new multidisciplinary performing-arts center slated to open on Manhattan's booming West Side in the spring of 2019, announced new commissions for its inaugural season at a press event this afternoon. By way of a panel discussion convened in a room overlooking construction of the behemoth building on West 30th Street in Hudson Yards, talk turned quickly to courting diverse audiences and mixing up artistic modes. "If the range of artists you present represents the range of society, then you have a chance," said Alex Poots, the Shed's artistic director and CEO.

The first commission for next year will be *Soundtrack of America*, a work meant to address the history of African-American music from 1680 to the present as conceived by the filmmaker Steve McQueen, record producer Quincy Jones, New York University professor Maureen Mahon, and Dion “No I.D.” Wilson, whose credits as a hip-hop producer include work with Jay-Z and Kanye West. Charting such a lineage is important because “history can be lost,” No I.D. said in a video presenting the project (with Jones, ever-present in the news of late, in a wild silk smoking jacket). As described by Mahon, the work will address music ranging from spirituals and jazz to techno and house—“we may even get to trap at the end,” she added.

Other commissioned projects include a collaboration matching the painter Gerhard Richter with the musicians Steve Reich and Arvo Pärt; a show of work by the artist Trisha Donnelly; a performance conceived in part by the poet Anne Carson on the subject of Marilyn Monroe and Helen of Troy; *Dragon Spring Phoenix Rise*, a piece by Chen Shi-Zheng, Jonathan Aibel, Glenn Berger, Akram Khan, and Tim Yip; and a survey show to be the largest thus far in New York for the artist Agnes Denes, whose work will fill two large galleries in what Denes herself called “a funky building that inhales and exhales.”

Also among the announcements was “Open Call,” a large-scale commissioning program for “early-career artists from all disciplines who live or work in New York City,” and “Dis Obey,” a workshop program for teenagers from around town. In addition, Hans Ulrich Obrist was named the Shed’s senior program adviser, and naming rights were granted for the Shed’s main hall, to be ordained the McCourt after a \$45 million gift from board member Frank H. McCourt.

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Art in America

TRISHA DONNELLY

By David Everitt Howe June 1, 2019



Trisha Donnelly's inscrutability is legendary. She largely forgoes press releases and other sorts of exhibition didactics describing what the artwork is and how it is intended to be interpreted, and has limited the photo-documentation of her work. When she rode into Casey Kaplan on a horse in 2002 and announced Napoleon's surrender, the performance lived on entirely by word of mouth. Her efforts can be so subtle you'd miss them entirely. Her 2015 show at Matthew Marks in Los Angeles included a back door left ajar as part of the installation. Requiring viewers to suss out meaning entirely on their own, Donnelly's work can be too arcane for its own good. Or, it can make the everyday uncanny. Her installation at the Shed fell in the former camp.

In typical Donnelly fashion, the press release was a blank sheet of paper and the show had no wall text. To get to the work, you had to walk through a large room awkwardly occupied by massive risers that faced a floor-to-ceiling glass wall overlooking the Shed's massive theater. The impression, inevitably, was that you were in the wrong place. Press on, however, and you encountered a huge room that was mostly empty and dark save for the light emitted through a slit built into one wall. To either side of this opening were the trunks of two large trees resting on dollies. The trees were apparently a redwood and a pine sourced from California that had been dying due to effects of climate change. Such details were, of course, nowhere to be found in the show; I know them only from private correspondence I had with a Shed press representative. The trunks were kept in the gallery on a kind of cruel life support, their exposed, cut sections watered daily by Shed staff. Their branches were massed haphazardly on dollies in the opposite corner of the room, many of their cut ends wrapped in foam and tape, as if this were an arboreal triage unit. A cluster of large black speakers, also on dollies, blasted the "Habanera" from *Carmen*. The Shed press person noted that Donnelly chose the song because it was sung by Leontyne Price, who in the 1960s became the first African American prima donna at the Metropolitan Opera. Perhaps Donnelly intended the song to serve as a subtle critique of the billionaire-backed Shed itself, which joins the ever-growing list of art institutions that reinforce socioeconomic and racial inequality in their very existence while putting forth a program that speaks to liberal notions of diversity and inclusiveness.

The artist's maimed trees, meanwhile, appeared to gesture to the environmental costs of real estate initiatives like Hudson Yards. Carmen is a wild heroine—too wild and independent, perhaps, for the more conservative kind around her. The redwood and pine, in a sense, had a similar status here. Just behind the sliced wall, an area with a large picture window reinforced this point. Visitors gathered in this space, seeming less interested in figuring out the meaning of the trees and the opera soundtrack than in taking selfies and iPhone shots of the sparkling skyscrapers surrounding the manicured park outside. While Donnelly might have considered the view to be as much a part of her show as the installation in the dark gallery was, her refusal to contextualize either in even the smallest way did her work a disservice, and placed too high a burden on visitors to connect the dots.

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