



## Agnes Denes: Projects for Public Spaces

October 16, 2003 - January 4, 2004



*Wheatfield—A Confrontation: Battery Park Landfill, Downtown Manhattan, 1982, cibachrome, 16 x 20 in., photograph by John McGrail, © 1982 Agnes Denes*

The Haggerty Museum of Art is pleased to present **Agnes Denes: Projects for Public Spaces**, a major retrospective exhibition of work by the internationally recognized conceptual and environmental artist and writer Agnes Denes. The exhibition surveys the artist's public and environmental projects from 1968 to present in a variety of media. Drawings, works on paper, three-dimensional models and text describe various projects while photographs, often taken by the artist, document actual public spaces created by Denes around the world.

*"All of my work up to now culminates in my environmental art and installations. From the early poetry to the philosophical drawings, from the abandonment of painting to working without color for eleven years – this complex body of work is the most rewarding."*

Denes began her career as a poet and a painter. After studying at the New School and at Columbia University in New York, Denes turned to conceptual art and working directly with the environment. This allowed the artist to combine her interests in mathematics, linguistics, philosophy and art. In the late 1960s, Denes started creating installations which she describes in textual form. Denes' writings are part personal philosophy and part project description. They are considered essential by the artist to both illustrate and explain the thought process behind her work.

Her first major environmental piece, *Rice/Tree/Burial*, was created in 1977-79. This piece has three components. The artist planted a rice field to symbolize life, chained a group of trees together to signify man's interference with nature and buried one of her poems. With these three acts, Denes implies a cyclical transformation from chaos to order and back.

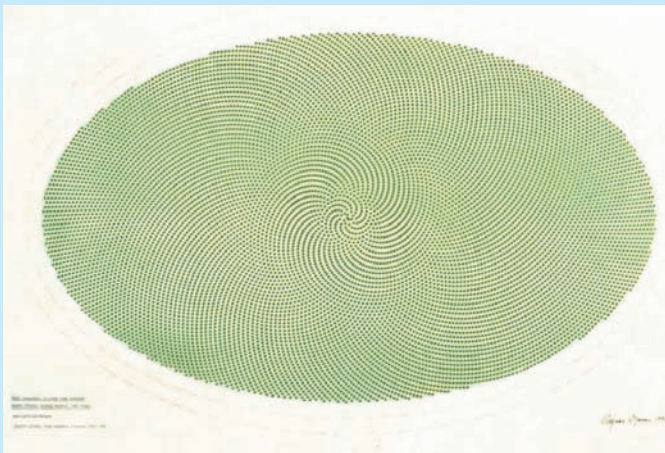
Denes is perhaps best known for *Wheatfield—A Confrontation*, 1982, a four-month project on the future home of the World Trade Center. At the time of the project, the Battery Park site was worth 4.5 billion dollars. In 1982, Denes negotiated temporary rights to the two-acre area in lower Manhattan and transformed it into productive cropland. The site was cleared, planted, tended and then harvested. The ever changing natural site was an anomaly in the context of a crowded metropolis.

The field yielded 1000 pounds of wheat valued at approximately \$200. The grain harvested from the site was featured in **The International Art Show for the End of World Hunger**, which traveled to 28 cities, before being symbolically planted around the world. The hay was fed to the horses of the New York City Police department. Denes' intention with this project was to show the potential of the site, and the economic disparity between land use and its value in Manhattan. Those who witnessed the daily changes and growth of the seedlings experienced the natural beauty of the life cycle of plants not native to a thriving metropolis. This ecological performance piece was documented in a series of photographs, some taken by Agnes Denes, others featuring the artist on the site.

Between 1992 and 1996, Denes created *Tree Mountain—A Living Time Capsule*. The project consisted of a series of architectural renderings on vellum featuring designs for a new forest to be planted in Pinziö, near Ylöjärvi, Finland. These works on paper became planning documents after the Finnish government decided to make Denes' project its official Earth Day contribution at the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro, 1992. This major earthwork and reclamation project was designed by the artist as a community building project. To accomplish the massive undertaking, Denes invited 11,000 people to plant a tree. Each person became the custodian of a tree and received a certificate recognizing their role in the project. The forest, which is to remain a living legacy for 20 generations, has spawned additional projects.

In 1998, Denes planted a forest of endangered trees in Melbourne, Australia. Her spiral design takes into account the height and forms of each type of tree once full grown and solves the land erosion and desertification problem of the site. It also clearly exemplifies Denes' philosophy. For Denes, "the new role of the artist is to create an art that is more than decoration, commodity or political tool. This art questions the status quo and the direction life has taken, the endless contradictions we accept and approve. It elicits and initiates thinking processes and suggests intelligent alternatives."

Denes is currently designing a 25-year master plan for the *Nieuwe Hollandse Waterlinie*, 2000, in the Netherlands. Her goal is to unite a 100 kilometer-long string of forts dating from the sixteenth to the nineteenth centuries. She is incorporating water and flood management, urban planning, historical preservation, landscaping, and tourism into the plan.



*Tree Mountain, Aerial View*, 1992-96, Architectural rendering on vellum, 34 x 42 in.  
© Agnes Denes



*Tree Mountain, with Small Tree Pattern*, Spring, 2002, Vibrachrome, 11" x 14"  
Photograph by Agnes Denes, © 2001 Agnes Denes

## About the Artist

Agnes Denes has been in over 300 exhibitions on four continents, including Documenta VI in Kassel (1977), two Venice Biennales (1978, 1980) and Master of Drawing Invitational at the Kunsthalle in Nürnberg (1982). She has shown at the Museum of Modern Art, the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Whitney Museum in New York. In 1992 she had a major exhibition at Cornell University. An artist of enormous vision, Denes has written four books including a catalogue of her map projections entitled *Isometric Systems in Isotropic Space*, 1979. Among her numerous awards are the Watson Transdisciplinary Art Award from Carnegie Mellon University (1999); the Rome Prize from the American Academy in Rome (1998); the Eugene McDermott Achievement Award from M.I.T. "In Recognition of Major Contribution to the Arts" (1990); the American Academy of Arts and Letters Purchase Award (1985); four National Endowment Fellowships and four NYSCA grants; and the DAAD Fellowship from Berlin. Denes is a Research Fellow at the Studio For Creative Inquiry at Carnegie Mellon University; the Center for Advanced Visual Studies at M.I.T. and the Courant Institute at N.Y.U. She lectures extensively at universities in the U.S. and abroad and participates in international conferences.

## Acknowledgments

This exhibition was made possible through collaboration with the artist and Dan Mills, director of the Samek Art Gallery, Buckell University. Support for the exhibition came from the Andrew W. Mellon Fund, Marquette University, College of Arts and Sciences, Milwaukee Arts Board, and the Wisconsin Arts Board.