

WHEATFIELD—A CONFRONTATION: THE WORK OF AGNES DENES

BENHAM, KEVIN

South Dakota State University, kevin.benham@sdstate.edu

ABSTRACT

*This paper explores the work of conceptual and land artist Agnes Denes with particular emphasis regarding her seminal work *Wheatfield - A Confrontation*. The narrative situates the work of Denes in the larger canon of *Environmental Land Art*, specifically the work of Alan Sonfist, Mel Chin, and the art critic Lucy Lippard. Although Denes is little known outside the art world, her body of work has recently gained greater attention, thanks in part to a Guggenheim Fellowship she received in 2015 (Hoban, 2015).*

This paper argues that Denes' work differentiates itself from other Land Art in some very important and innovative ways. First and foremost, the installation uses living material that is dependent on the geology, hydrology, biota and climatological conditions inherent on the given site. As a result, the soil conditions, existing pollutants, weather, and other factors affect the growth of the wheat and the resulting harvest. Denes' work is imbued with special significance by the act of preparing soil, sowing seed, and harvesting the crop. The deployment of the work at the urban edge is a strategic decision that allows Denes to mine the political, geographic, and cultural history inherent on the site.

Denes' work deserves reexamination by landscape architects for its continued potency and its impact on the way we think about site, the manipulation of earth and the environment, the haptic qualities of inhabitation, the fluidity of site, the connectivity of urban and rural conditions, the appreciation and understanding of natural processes, and the value of the temporal.

Keywords

Land Art, Environmental Art, Conceptual Art, Narration, Culture