

WHEATFIELD—A CONFRONTATION: THE WORK OF AGNES DENES

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1 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.

1.1 Keywords

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

2 INTRODUCTION

Over thirty years ago, while I was a sophomore at Kalamazoo College, a small liberal arts college in Western Michigan, I had the opportunity to participate in the New York Arts Program through the Great Lakes Colleges Association. As such, a group of students from small mid-western colleges were housed in a brownstone in Hell's Kitchen, and for the semester we all worked in the arts. When we first arrived in New York, we were all sent out on interviews to various working artists to determine with whom we would work for the semester. My very first interview was in SoHo in the loft occupied by Agnes Denes, a space that served as her residence and her art studio. I was a young Midwesterner who had been raised in a farming community with 500 people, so the city itself was overwhelming. Meeting with Ms. Denes proved to be terrifying.

As I entered the studio, I was confronted with her conceptual piece, *Human Dust*, 1969. On a small pedestal sat a large glass bowl that held the calcareous human remains of a fellow artist who had passed. Above this vitrine was text that described in excruciating detail data regarding his food consumption, bowel movements, sex life, health, dreams and disappointments. Agnes hovered behind me noting how uncomfortable I was and in a seemingly disembodied voice exclaimed, "Most people think the text is a real person, but the real person is in the vitrine." For me, this was an unnerving start to a profoundly difficult interview.

During the interview, Agnes had the opportunity to describe her recently completed work, *Wheatfield-A Confrontation*. She was clearly excited about the work and it was also evident that it had provided a new trajectory for her life's journey. While I ultimately did not accept an internship with Agnes, the interview, while only an hour in the span of my life, left an indelible mark in my memory.

This past summer, I was sitting at my kitchen table on a Sunday morning pouring over the New York Times. As I was casually flipping through the *T Magazine*, I happened across an article on older female artists whose careers were being rediscovered and reexamined. An accompanying photograph sent a chill down my spine. I recognized the loft in which my memorable interview with Agnes Denes had taken place over thirty years ago. It was startlingly unchanged, as if the studio itself had been encased in a time capsule.

When I read the article, I was excited to learn that she had recently been awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship and I was also encouraged to learn that she had installed *Wheatfield -A Confrontation* as a new installation at the outskirts of Milan, Italy this past summer. It felt both odd and comforting that event, over thirty years ago, would again circle back to have an impact on my life. As a result, I have reconnected with Agnes after a span of thirty years and have had the opportunity to interview her regarding her work. This reconnection with Agnes has reinvigorated my own personal practice and reaffirmed my belief in interdisciplinary work that bridges among science, art, architecture and landscape architecture. This paper, about Denes, her work, and specifically *Wheatfield* is a result of that coincidence.

3 MODERNISM/LAND ART/ENVIRONMENTAL ART

Land Art and Environmental Art, I would argue, have their genesis in modernism, with its reaction against representation and its tenet of questioning the boundaries of art and site. Perhaps the best examples of this trajectory are the sculptural works of Brancusi. In her seminal essay *Sculpture in the Expanded Field*, Rosalind Krauss writes, "The modernist period of sculptural production...operates in relation to this loss of site, producing the monument as abstraction, the monument as pure marker or base, functionally placeless and largely self-referential"(Krauss, 1979). In regards to Brancusi's work, she continues, "Through its fetishization of the base, the sculpture reaches downward to absorb the pedestal into itself and away from the actual place; and through the representation of its own materials or process of its construction, the sculpture depicts its own autonomy. Brancusi's art is an extraordinary instance of the way this happens."(Krauss, 1979)

While modernism began to question representation, site, plinth and the autonomy of art, the Conceptual Art Movement of the 1960's further expanded the breadth of art and sculpture to include the temporal: it set the stage for the legitimacy of Land and Environmental Art. Lucy Lippard in her essay, *the dematerialization of art*, remarked on the evolution of art from an object-based proposition to one of obsolescence. She was championing conceptual art during a time when critics denounced the movement for not giving the viewer 'enough to look at' or for not giving the viewer what they were accustomed to looking for. In the essay Lippard cited two reasons for its value. First, she states that works of conceptual art

“demand more participation from the viewer, despite their apparent hostility. More time must be spent in experience of a detail-less work, for the viewer is used to focusing on details and absorbing an impression of the piece with the help of these details” (Lippard, 1968). In addition, she qualifies conceptual work as a temporal operation and states “the time spent looking at an ‘empty’ work, or one with a minimum of action, seems infinitely longer than action-and-detail-filled time” (Lippard, 1968).

It is this transition in paradigm from a static object to a temporal condition that allowed for the birth of Land and Environmental Art as well as a host of other conceptual artwork in the 60’s and 70’s.

4 AGNES DENES

Agnes Denes is one of the first females to be recognized within the canon of Land Art that includes such luminaries as Robert Smithson, Michael Heizer, Alan Sonfist, and Mel Chin. While these men were making heroic works of art that were static, immutable and made mostly of inorganic materials, Denes was making equally heroic work out of living material that grows, changes form, is affected by geology and hydrology, is ephemeral, and eventually reproduces and dies.

Smithson and Heizer boldly moved earth and rock to create works that defied containment within a gallery system they despised and were further free from mainstream museums and commerce. The powerful works they created were static pieces made of inorganic material that were site specific, carved from the local earth and resistant to the ravages of time. While the works themselves succumb to erosion, rising water levels, and other forces, they are imagined as static boundless pieces in remote locations that exist mainly as photographic artifacts. Again, Denes’ work differentiates itself though it’s short duration, seasonal ties, living material, planting, and harvest.

While Mel Chin does indeed use living material in his works, those installations are not necessarily concerned with an idea of planting, sowing, and harvest, but are rather a comment on our vanishing forests and the damaged environments we have inherited from our industrial past. Chin’s seminal work, *Revival Field*, exists in an isolated site at Pig’s Eye Landfill, a superfund site in St. Paul Minnesota. The installation is a hybrid between science and art and exists more as a testing field for hyper-accumulating plants than a commentary on dwindling resources or a dissertation on the urban-rural condition.

Perhaps out of all the land and environmental artists who evolved out of the 60’s and 70’s, the work of Alan Sonfist most closely parallels that of Agnes Denes. His most important work, *Time Landscape (1965-1978-Present)*, consists of a dense planting of native species on a 25-foot by 40-foot rectangular plot of land in lower Manhattan. The plant material chosen was native to the island prior to colonization by Europeans and is meant as a time capsule. While this work is sympathetic to Denes’ and is located within the urban core, Denes gains greater potency by placing *Wheatfield* at the threshold of the urban-rural condition and by virtue of soil preparation, planting and harvesting.

Like most Land and Environmental Art, Agnes’ work has a political and philosophical edge, yet is easily accessible to the general public. In most places, particularly in the ubiquitous fields of the High Plains and Midwest, crops in and of themselves carry no political polarization. It is Denes’ insistence on installing her work at the interstitial space of the urban-rural divide that gives a potency to the art- an act of planting that would otherwise be absent in a traditional agrarian setting.

5 THE GENESIS OF WHEATFIELD

Denes’ *Wheatfield* has its genesis in a much earlier work, *Rice-Tree-Burial* that was first realized in 1968 in Sullivan County, New York. Denes stated, “It was a symbolic *event* and announced my commitment to environmental issues and human concerns. It was also the first exercise in eco-logic” (Hartz and Denes, 1992).

This particular work signaled a new beginning for Denes in that it was tied to the nascent conceptual art movement, yet still manifested itself in the visual realm. As such it was composed of three very distinct components: a buried piece of poetry, a group of chained trees, and a field of planted rice. The buried haiku poetry was “an act of renunciation...a pledge of rebirth and a new lifetime commitment as an artist dedicated to the future wellbeing of the ecological, social, and cultural life on the Planet” (Mills and Heartney, 2003). The chained group of trees embodied the idea of human interference, control of nature and the creative spirit of the human mind.

The third component, the rice field, had perhaps the most potency in its simplicity and acted as a precursor to her seminal work, *Wheatfield - A Confrontation*. In *Rice-Tree-Burial*, the planting of the rice in fallow land symbolized a universal substance of sustenance that had to be planted and nurtured. The ritual

of preparing and sowing becomes an important component of the work. In *Rice-Tree-Burial*, the seed itself symbolizes the genesis of the idea. It holds the initial life-giving element that through the act of germination and growth sets a process into motion.

It is this act of preparing the ground, sowing the seed, watching the grain grow, and ultimately its harvest that differentiates Denes' work from much of the other land art of the last century. Of those land artists who do use organic material, they often are either not planting the material as a component of their process, are only using a portion of the living material, or are working in remote locations.

This reassessment of her life's work by virtue of preparing the land, sowing the seed, and nurturing the grain in *Rice-Tree-Burial*, became the qualifying factor in determining the trajectory of her life in art. Her decision to plant a wheat field in Manhattan instead of designing normative sculpture was a call to expose our misplaced priorities and deteriorating human values.

6 WHEATFIELD IN MANHATTAN

The thirty-three square miles of land that compose Manhattan are some of the richest, most culturally powerful and most valuable parcels of land in the world. The conscious effort to plant, sustain and harvest wheat at the edge of this most urban condition was a powerful paradox that questioned existing expectations of a use for that valuable real estate.

For Denes, "*Wheatfield*, was a symbol, a universal concept. It represented food, energy, commerce, world trade, and economics. It referred to mismanagement, waste, world hunger, and ecological concerns. It was an intrusion into the Citadel, a confrontation of high civilization. Then again, it was also a Shangri-La, a small paradise, one's childhood, a hot summer afternoon in the country, peace, forgotten values, simple pleasures" (Denes, 2015)

The two acres of wheat were planted in the Summer of 1982 at the foot of the World Trade Center only a block from Wall Street- the economic center of the world- facing the Statue of Liberty- a symbol of the country's commitment to life, liberty and the justice for all.

Wheatfield – A Confrontation, situates itself in a much broader context that adds additional efficacy to its meaning. *Wheatfield* was unusual in that it wasn't located in the rich fertile farmland of the Midwest or the Plains, but rather in a post-industrial landfill bursting with trash.

Implicit in this installation is the act preparing the land and sowing the seed as a precursor to growth. In March 1982 over two hundred truckloads of landfill were dumped onto the site and then flattened with cultivating equipment. Following that initial preparation, an additional eighty truckloads of soil were dumped and flattened to provide the necessary topsoil for the germination and growth of the wheat. Denes stated, "We maintained the field for four months, set up an irrigation system, weeded, cleared out wheat smut (a disease that had affected the entire field and wheat everywhere in the country). We put down fertilizers, cleared off rocks, boulders, and wires by hand, and sprayed against mildew fungus" (Denes, 2015)

Once the field was prepared, Denes and her two assistants began the work of planting the two acres of wheat in the shadow of the World Trade Center and Wall Street. This exercise in planting consisted of digging the furrows by hand, clearing any remaining rocks and garbage, and then sowing the seed by hand and covering the furrows with soil.

After the original incarnation of *Wheatfield: A Confrontation* in Battery Park, the project was repeatedly installed at other sites. Agnes readily admits, "there were small copies that had nothing to do with the original *Wheatfield*, with its size and placement that created a powerful paradox and the calling to account, but they honored the intent" (Denes, 2015)

7 WHEATFIELD IN MILAN

While Agnes is appropriately critical of the copies created over the years, her installation in Milan, Italy in the summer of 2015 regains the potency of her original installation in Battery Park over thirty years ago and solidifies the importance of context in the manifestation and significance of the work. From March to October 2015, The Fondazione Riccardo Catella, in partnership with the Fondazione Nicola Trussardi and Confagricoltura, presented the installation of *Wheatfield- A Confrontation*. In March the field was prepared and the seed sown in downtown Milan: more specifically in the Porta Nuova district. This area of Milan is an architecturally significant area of urban renewal that has reshaped the city skyline. This installation of *Wheatfield* is significantly similar to the original installation in Battery Park and was planted at a heroic scale. Over 12 acres of land were planted as an agrarian installation in an area that will

subsequently house a public park. In my interview with Denes she stated, “The Wheatfield of 12 acres this summer in Milan, Italy was calling attention to the misuse of land endangering animal habitats, world hunger, etc. etc. These fields call attention to so many issues that I am grateful when they let me create them” (Denes, 2015)

8 REFELECTIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

Since its creation for the first time in 1982, *Wheatfield* has endured in public memory as one of the most famous earthworks of all time, a masterpiece imbued with symbolism and confrontational power. In it, nature reclaims the city through a simple, yet compellingly ecological image: a wheat field grows in the heart of New York City and again in the heart of Milan, Italy. Both installations existed in the shadow of the city skyscrapers and both were powerful images in the daily lives of New Yorkers and the Milanese.

In my interview with Denes, she repeatedly commented on how thankful she is for the many people that have been supportive of her installations, have helped in their construction, preparation, and manifestation. Her work brings together a collective that binds people to a commitment that is much larger than the work itself. At the end of the interview, she alluded to additional work she intends to initiate as she nears the zenith of her career. She commented, “I have designed a forest for New York City on the last open space and hope they won’t stand in the way of it becoming a reality. It would be a magnificent addition to the city” (Denes, 2015)

As landscape architecture makes a pendulum swing towards landscape urbanism, Denes’ work situates itself at the urban-rural edge and reminds us that landscape is neither rural nor urban, but rather a continuum based on context. The land art and environmental art movement at the latter half of the twentieth century has had a profound impact on landscape architecture and the way in which we think about site, the manipulation of earth and the environment as well as the haptic and temporal qualities of inhabitation. Several landscape architects including George Hargreaves, Michael Van Valkenburgh, and Julie Bargmann all owe a debt of gratitude to this movement for expanding our consciousness regarding the fluidity of site, the connectivity of urban and rural conditions, the appreciation and understanding of natural processes and the value of the temporal.

It is for this reason that the work of Agnes Denes deserves to be reexamined in the contemporary context of landscape architecture and landscape urbanism.

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