

# ARTFORUM

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## REVIEWS

### Agnes Denes

LESLIE TONKONOW ARTWORKS + PROJECTS

What do you want out of life? Why not more? Which do you think will prove ultimately more important to humanity—science or love? What is love? These were some of the questions that Agnes Denes asked students in the late 1970s, their answers forming part of the second iteration of her 1968 piece *Rice/Tree/Burial*, 1977–79. The responses were then buried in a time capsule, as the “burial” component of the tripartite project. These kinds of questions—the “big ones”—are the ones that Denes’s art implicitly asks. Ever since she arose alongside (though distinct from) Land art in the ’60s, Denes’s environmental actions and intimidatingly precise ink drawings have attempted to reconcile the precision of science with the sloppiness of human emotion.

Denes’s art is a combination of farming, environmental ethics (“eco-logic,” in her phrase), a philosophically driven faith in triangulation, and clear, explanatory writing that contextualizes all of these things in relation to her output (*The Human Argument*, a book of her writings, was published in 2008). Denes’s rigor is clearly relevant to a younger generation of artists interested in environmental consciousness, although she has never received anywhere near the acclaim of contemporaries such as Robert Smithson or Michael Heizer. Her work has crucial philosophical differences from theirs: Smithson and Heizer as well as Dennis Oppenheim, Alice Aycock, Walter de Maria, and Nancy Holt were arguably concerned most with the monumentality of land-science hybridization. In “Entropy and the New Monuments,” Smithson celebrated how artificial materiality conveyed the new significance of modernity’s deadening visual logic. Denes, by contrast, has always retained a more positivist take in her own work with land. Her art is “slow” in the gastronomic sense: It involves digging, tilling, planting, and waiting. Moreover, the idea of *not* knowing—as with the time capsules—is

central to Denes’s practice, hence the embedding of a consciousness of time in her work.

This recent exhibition was a miniretrospective, notable not least for the debut of a series of 1977 photos of *Rice/Tree/Burial* that neatly summarize how its ideas drive her art and her philosophy. The original version was her first piece based on triangulation, represented in that instance by three actions: planting a field of rice in a rural area northwest of New York City, chaining tree limbs to constrict and redirect their growth, and burying her own poetry. In her writing, Denes is extremely forthcoming about the work’s symbolism; planting rice represents life-giving, chaining trees interference with nature, and burying poetry “the relinquishing of something personal and precious to the ground.”

Denes’s magisterial 1982 *Wheatfield—A Confrontation*, photographs of which were also included here, shows how her interaction with organic process expanded after the ’60s. For this, probably her best-known work, she secured a two-acre rectangle of land on the site of what is now Battery Park City, which had been used as a dumping ground for landfill. Once they had cleared the land, she and a team of volunteers planted a huge field of wheat—more than a thousand pounds were harvested—that was later included in the traveling International Art Show for the End of World Hunger, from which people took wheat and planted it locally. One of the images shows a massive field of gorgeous golden wheat stretching from edge to edge of the picture plane, a tiny Statue of Liberty sitting on the horizon—monumental human triumphs of the organic and inorganic variety confronting each other, with Denes’s field of grain also representing a vision of care for humankind’s precarious present: a vision that the statue once stood for and perhaps now fails to, surrounded by so many glowering glass towers.

—Nick Stillman



Agnes Denes, *Rice/Tree/Burial (Chaining the Forest)*, 1977, black-and-white photograph, 10 x 8".