

## Agnes Denes

BRAVINLEE PROGRAMS

Agnes Denes is perhaps best known for planting a two-acre wheat field at the southern tip of Manhattan in 1982, prior to the development of Battery Park City. An iconic photograph of the artist—waist-deep in golden sheaves, skyscrapers looming nearby—appears in several surveys of her career. But this work, of seemingly simple generosity (Denes harvested one thousand pounds of the crop that August and planted it around the globe), was pointedly titled *Wheatfield—A Confrontation* and can be understood as one of the first occasions on which Denes worked on a scale large enough and in a location public enough to suit her outsize ambition. The intervention represented, in the artist's words, nothing less than "food, energy, commerce, world trade, economics. It referred to mismanagement, waste, world hunger, and ecological concerns."

By the time the Public Art Fund commissioned *Wheatfield*, Denes had been creating drawings that married Conceptual art to philosophy, mathematics, and science for fifteen years. Twenty-five drawings, alongside documentation of *Wheatfield* and *Tree Mountain—A Living Time Capsule*, 1992–96, a long-term environmental intervention in

Finland, were included in this exhibition, the artist's first solo show in New York since a touring retrospective of her public projects arrived at the Chelsea Art Museum in late 2004. Dating from 1970 to 2006 but primarily created in the late '70s and 1980, the works on paper often feature abstract geometric shapes centered on white or gridded grounds. Their precision betrays a fiercely analytic mind and a steady hand; their refinement highlights a bit of conventional wisdom in the nonartistic disciplines her practice engages: The best solution to a problem is the most elegant.

Arguably the loveliest drawing in the exhibition was *Colorburst: The Egg (longitude lines)*, 1980, in which variously hued ribbons of watercolor nestle side by side, bounded by meridian lines—drawn in ink on an overlaid sheet of clear acetate—that demarcate an egg shape. The equipoise between rule-bound and seemingly free-form marks is splendid; the delicate colors worthy of Fabergé. Yet Denes would disdain a purely formal interpretation of her drawings, even when they succeed so well at pleasing the eye. For example, other similar drawings—not included here—are meant as studies for utopian, self-contained urban dwellings.

One series, "Isometric Systems in Isotropic Space: Map Projections," 1973–80, predominated. In these drawings, which project mathematical forms—the cube, the dodecahedron, the torus—onto representations of the world, Conceptual rigor rubs against the myriad imperfections of the spatial environment we inhabit, and the friction highlights the contingency of how we understand space. These playfully idiosyncratic maps, Denes's unrelenting seriousness notwithstanding, exhibit a dry humor: *Isometric Systems in Isotropic Space: Map Projections—The Hot Dog*, 1976, for example, shows an earth that has improbably morphed into the shape of a frankfurter.

Perhaps entering the territory of so many other disciplines made Denes's position somewhat marginal in the contemporary art world. Likewise, her shift into the realm of public, environmental art can be said to have uprooted her from the gallery system that feeds conventional art institutions. Yet without impinging on other artists' signature styles, the works exhibited here furthered many artistic concerns prevalent in the late '70s—Denes was entirely of her moment. Given that her concern with the environment is one we all share (or ought to), the exhibition left one hoping her art will soon reenter mainstream circulation.



Agnes Denes, *Isometric Systems in Isotropic Space: Map Projections—The Donut*, 1978, india ink on silk vellum, 14 x 15". From the series "Isometric Systems in Isotropic Space: Map Projections," 1973–80.