

## Agnes Denes

SANTA MONICA MUSEUM OF ART

Nick Stillman

**WHEN AGNES DENES** planted and harvested almost one thousand pounds of wheat in what is now New York's Battery Park City, the action—and the astonishing photographs showing the World Trade Center and the Statue of Liberty looming over the endless golden grain—cemented her reputation as an unconventional Land artist and environmental visionary. In becoming her signature piece, however, *Wheatfield—A Confrontation*, 1982, has also somewhat obscured the complexity of her long career. From the literally germinal work of eco-art *Rice/Tree/Burial*, 1968–79, through her more recent plans for the reclamation and renewal of the Netherlands' Waterline (a fifty-mile string of fortifications dating to the seventeenth century), Denes has demonstrated a powerful commitment to the environment. But just as intrinsic to her practice is an exploration of the interplay between manifestation and concept, instance and system, including the representational and diagrammatic structures of math and science, which, as she shows, have their own lyricism. Her environmental works can't really be understood apart from the two-dimensional works, especially her drawings.

Concurrent exhibitions of Denes's work at Leslie Tonkonow Artworks + Projects in New York and the Santa Monica Museum of Art this past autumn, in addition to her inclusion in the Brooklyn Museum's recent "Materializing 'Six Years': Lucy R. Lippard and the Emergence of Conceptual Art," may help bring the full range

of her practice to light. Curated by Jeffrey Uslip, the Santa Monica Museum's "Agnes Denes: Body Prints, Philosophical Drawings, and Map Projections, 1969–1978" brought together a noteworthy variety of Denes's works on paper—a facet of her production often overlooked despite its critical role in her work, to say nothing of the sheer impressiveness of her draftsmanship. Sans *Wheatfield*, the concise exhibition worked toward a declassification of Denes as primarily a Land artist. This is an overdue correction for an artist whose approach favors the subversion of categorical thinking in all its forms.

Most of the works are on graph paper. Lee Lozano used the same support in the early 1970s for her scarily revealing lab reports of the soul, and in Denes's graph-paper works, too, the clinical, gridded backdrop is in tension with personal, funny, and often—startlingly for those familiar only with her better-known works—off-color iconography. An early-'70s group of body prints (incidentally concurrent with David Hammons's great early body prints) are especially bawdy. *Still Life #1* and *Still Life #2*, both 1970, each showcase eight individual breast imprints in black ink with five cock prints poking nosily into their force field. Two other works show veritable police lineups of erect dicks. One, *Napoleonic Series II: Investigation of World Rulers—Some More Napoleons Overlooking the Elba*, 1971, lines up phallic forms in pathetically descending order, presumably inversely proportional to the size of their owners' complexes.

One doesn't immediately think of Denes when mentally ticking off female artists whose early-'70s work actively dealt with sexual politics. But the combination of abstract science with the corporeal is quintessential for her. When, in *Design of the Universe*, 1971, she pairs a lone breast print with a rendering of a globe (with nipple and North Pole wittily occupying the same location and surface area of their respective curvatures), she intertwines the human body—that irrational, illogical thing—with the inexorable laws guiding it and the representational systems defining it.

The show demonstrates how geometry and architectural modeling have driven Denes's drawing style since the early days of her practice. In *Isometric Systems in Isotropic*

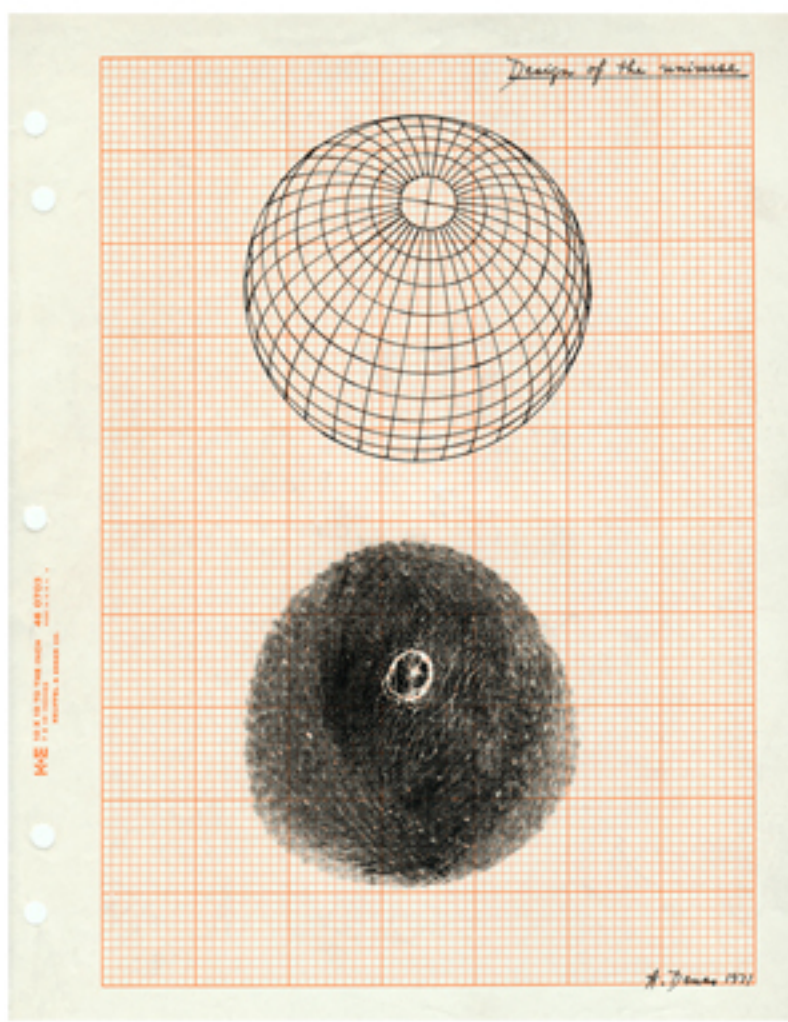
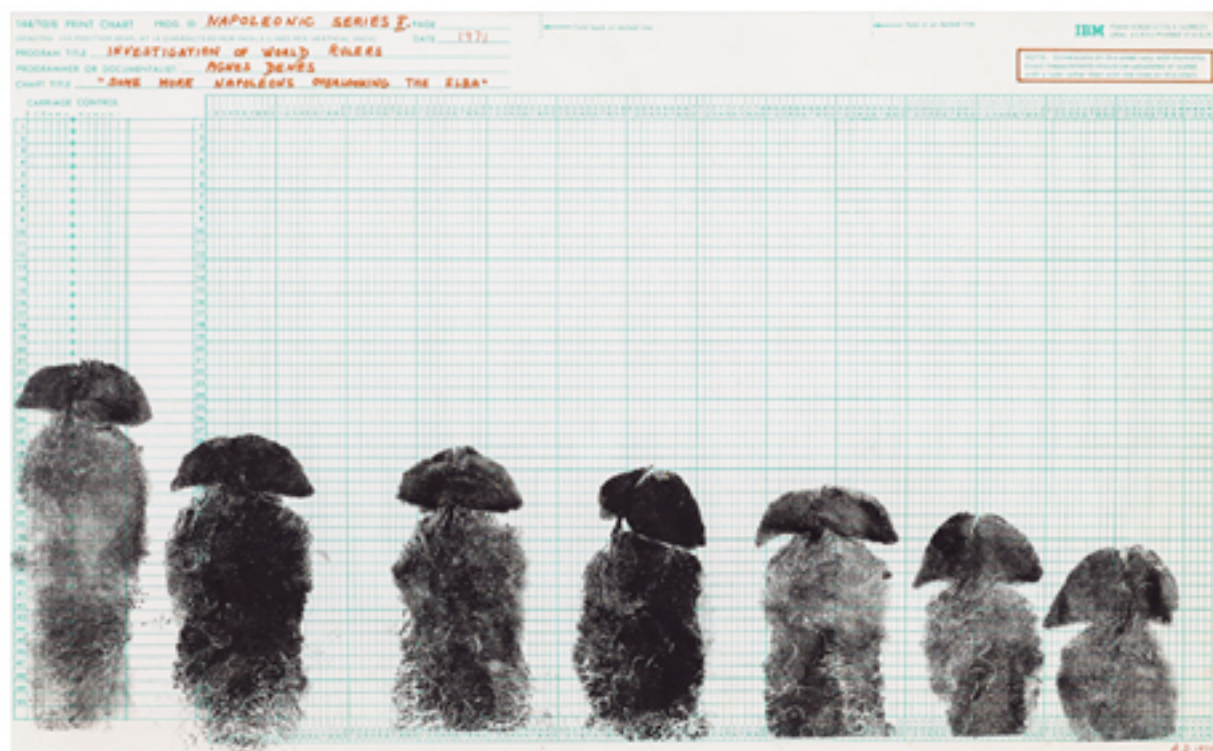
*Space: Map Projections—The Pyramid (The World from Below)*, 1978, the planet, with its identifiable land masses, is hypothesized as a pyramid instead of a globe. Such pyramidal forms pervade her imagery, linking ancient past and sci-fi future. The map drawings can have a proto-CAD stiffness about them, yet the bizarrely gorgeous rendering of continents floating within the tubular form of a hot dog (*Isometric Systems in Isotropic Space: Map Projections—The Hot Dog*, 1976) is more evidence of the artist's wit. Is the work Denes's link between American hegemony and the future advent of a thoroughly processed and culturally Americanized planet? An intuitive, astral logic is also evidenced in the "philosophical drawings," which graph such phenomena as energy, time, space, evolution, and truth, plotting them as infinitely malleable, nonlinear continuums.

It's not surprising that Denes's emergence onto a greater institutional stage has been a slow process. Her

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early work was perhaps too prescient (especially her pioneering vision of Land art not as monument but as renewal) and eccentric; in addition, scientifically inclined female Conceptualists eager to poke fun at male power weren't exactly carving out an easy path to acclaim. Regardless of whether Uslip's modest exhibition raises Denes to the stature she deserves, it showed her from a significantly different angle. In any case, what was perhaps ahead of its time in Denes's early work now feels acutely timely. In 1970, she wrote that her art is a response to an environment rife with misinformation, misconceptions, misinterpretations, and delusions: "Transmission and reception are distorted or blocked, while all exchanges are dangling . . . themselves perhaps false and illusory." The universe that Denes maps and charts is intimately personal, but it's also very much ours. □

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From left: Agnes Denes, *Napoleonic Series II: Investigation of World Rulers—Some More Napoleons Overlooking the Elba*, 1971, fingerprinting ink and colored ink on graph paper, 10 1/4 x 17 1/8". From the series "Body Prints," 1970–71. Agnes Denes, *Design of the Universe*, 1971, fingerprinting ink and india ink on graph paper, 11 x 8 1/2". From the series "Body Prints," 1970–71. Agnes Denes, *Isometric Systems in Isotropic Space: Map Projections—The Pyramid (The World from Below)*, 1978, gouache and ink on vellum and Mylar, 24 x 30". From the series "Map Projections," 1973–80.

