



### MY EXPERIENCE WITH ENVIRONMENTAL ARTIST AND PHILOSOPHER AGNES DENES



In 2012, the nonprofit organization I headed, New York Loves Mountains, received a generous, anonymous donation. We decided to channel a portion of that donation toward an environmental arts award in the name of a remarkable artist named Agnes Denes. While highly accomplished, Denes was not a household name. We hoped the award would help

bring much-deserved attention to her work. The biography on her website states, “Investigating science, philosophy, linguistics, psychology, poetry, history, and music, Denes's artistic practice is distinctive in terms of its aesthetics and engagement with socio-political ideas.” She was indeed a pioneer in the realm of environmental art, but also a brilliant philosopher whose work encourages a radical shift in our approach to living, one that centers the health of the planet.

Her most famous piece, *Wheatfield—A Confrontation*, was an actual two-acre wheatfield that Denes planted on top of a landfill near Wall Street and the World Trade Center in lower Manhattan (now Battery Park City) in 1982. The contrasting sight of “golden waves of grain” shining in front of America’s tallest skyscrapers raised questions about the relationship of the modern city to the natural world that sustains it. Usually that world is kept far from the man-made terrain of Manhattan, but Denes brilliantly found a way to put them side by side. In a program for the project, Denes wrote, “My decision to plant a wheat field in Manhattan instead of designing just another public sculpture, grew out of the longstanding concern and need to call attention to our misplaced priorities and deteriorating human values. Placing it at the foot of the World Trade Center, a block from Wall Street, facing the Statue of Liberty, also had symbolic import.... It represented food, energy, commerce, world trade, economics. It referred to mismanagement, waste, world hunger and ecological concerns.” The grain that was

harvested from her wheat field went to twenty-eight different cities around the world as part of Denes' exhibition, *The International Art Show for the End of World Hunger*.

Another important and more enduring environmental project of Denes's *Tree Mountain—A Living*



*Time Capsule*, completed in 1996, is described on Denes's website as "a monumental earthwork, reclamation project and the first man-made virgin forest, situated in Ylöjärvi, in Western Finland." Under Finnish law, *Tree Mountain*, one of the largest reclamation sites in the world, is legally protected for the next four hundred years. Back in New York, Denes completed a smaller-scale project in New York called The Living Pyramid at the Socrates Sculpture Garden in Long Island City in 2015. Denes's most recent proposed land art project is *A Forest for New York – A Peace Park for Mind and Soul*, a forest planted on top of the Edgemere Landfill in Queens. Still only a model, Denes hopes for it to be planted in the future.

When I first reached out to Agnes Denes in 2014 in a "cold" email about the award in her name to be given by New York Loves Mountains, she was cautiously receptive. Through further discussion, she agreed to have her name attached to the award. I put together a panel of five judges who would screen the submissions and narrow it down to three finalists. We agreed Denes would have the choice of the winner from these three finalists.

For the final selection, I visited Denes's home and studio in SoHo in the late summer of 2015. I was a new mother who toted my breast pump on the MTA north railroad with me from New Haven to New York. I was so excited to actually have audience with this great woman, I didn't mind the nuisance of having to pump while perched in a restroom stall at Grand Central! When I got to Denes's apartment, I was overwhelmed by the density of materials packed inside the dark, cavernous space. She brought me and the judges to a sitting area carved out of the piles and piles of papers, artwork, and books that filled the studio. It was fascinating to see Denes's live/work space. It felt like a reflection of her mind, packed full of information and ideas. She was lively and welcoming as we got settled to review the three finalists.

The panelists and I were excited about the three artists that we had culled from some 80 submissions. We'd spent hours debating which of them were most deserving. Denes was not – or, not excited *enough*. She ultimately felt that there was no applicant who reached a level of work deserving to be recognized in her name. I remember trying different lines of reasoning to make her feel more comfortable with granting the award to a piece that she would not have graded an A+. But Denes was firm. Despite months of work and what we felt were strong applicants, no award would be granted.

I left that fascinating SoHo flat feeling defeated. I'd had such good intentions. We had found work we really hoped to honor. And I didn't want to have to dispense with all the time and effort

that I and the judges had invested. But it would have been ethically wrong to give the award against Denes's will. So we communicated the outcome to the artists, thanked them for their submissions and closed up shop.

Though it was disappointing at the time, I greatly value the experience of becoming more familiar with Denes's work and with her as a person. I don't think it's an exaggeration to say she is a genius. *Architectural Digest* called her work "prophetic" in a recent article. She sees keenly the future challenges humanity faces as a result of our environmental ignorance (and defiance) and has accomplished massive land art projects around the world to inspire the evolution of our awareness. I hope that one day in the future there will be a new award in her name to keep her legacy alive for future generations.

**More about Agnes Denes:**

Works by Agnes Denes are in the collections of The Museum of Modern Art; the Metropolitan Museum of Art; the Whitney Museum of American Art; the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden; the Art Institute of Chicago; San Francisco Museum of Modern Art; the Moderna Museet, Stockholm; the Centre Pompidou in Paris and many other major institutions worldwide.

She has received numerous honors and awards including four fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts and four grants from the New York State Council on the Arts; the DAAD Fellowship, Berlin, Germany (1978); the American Academy of Arts and Letters Purchase Award (1985); M.I.T.'s highly prestigious Eugene McDermott Achievement Award "In Recognition of Major Contribution to the Arts" (1990); the Rome Prize from the American Academy in Rome (1998); and the Ambassador's Award for Cultural Diplomacy for Strengthening the Friendship between the US and the Republic of Hungary through Excellence in Contemporary Art (2008).

Denes is the author of six books and is featured in numerous other publications on a wide range of subjects in art and the environment, including *Eco- Amazons: 20 Women Who are Transforming the World*.

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