Agnes Denes's Sly Eco-Conceptualism Seems More Relevant Than Ever

by Ben Davis
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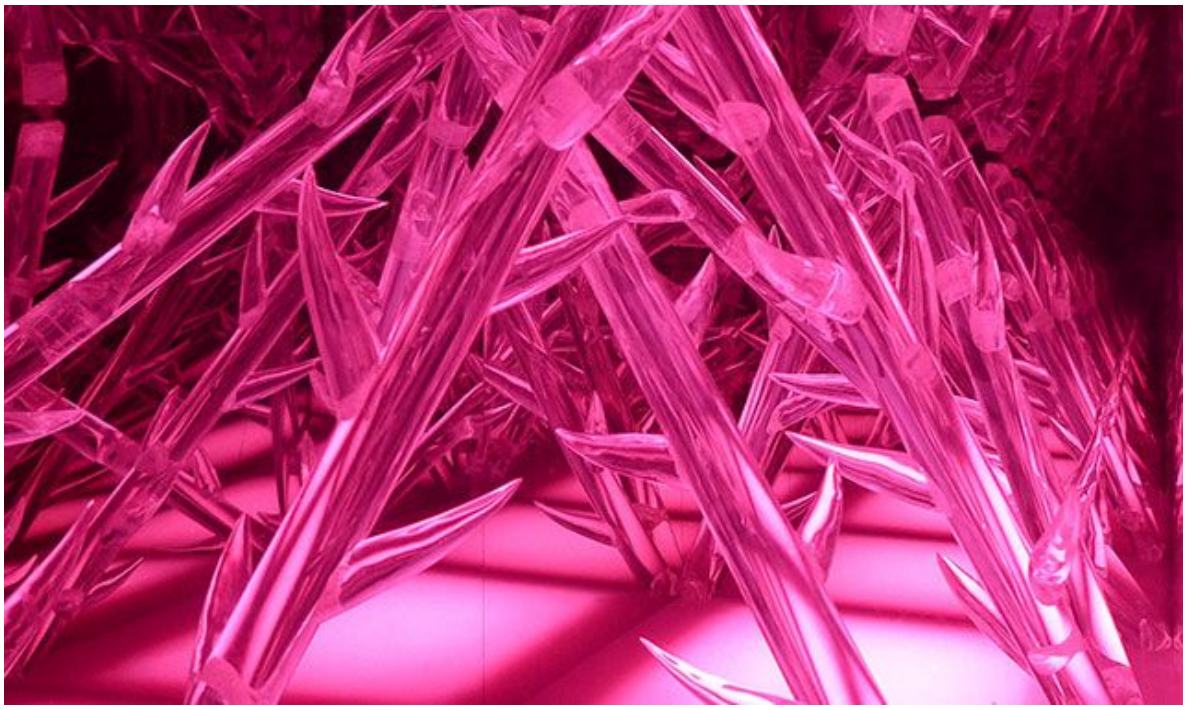

Agnes Denes, "The World of Thorns," 1968 (detail)
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Agnes Denes / Courtesy Leslie Tonkonow Artworks + Projects, New York

In the history books, Agnes Denes will rank as both a key practitioner of Conceptual Art and as a pioneer of Land Art, that is, of art at its most heady and dematerialized and of art at its most materially rooted. The entirety of the blithely polymathic practice of this Hungarian-born artist, who is now in her early 80s, can be read as an extended riff on this collision of opposites. Understanding this fact is the key to unlocking the humor and social consciousness that makes her work endearing, enduring, maybe even prophetic.

A sampler-sized retrospective of Denes's odd Plexiglas sculptures, intricate diagrams, project documentation, and protean artist books is

currently on view Leslie Tonkonow Artworks + Projects, and seems particularly worth considering given the current show at theBrooklyn Museum on the legacy of art critic Lucy Lippard and her famous history of Conceptual Art, *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object*. The Tonkonow exhibition includes a new work by Denes, a triangular wall relief formed of a dense lattice of multicolored neon sections, the latest evolution of the artist's long-running series, "The Human Argument" (begun in 1969); the first version appeared in *Six Years*. A lithograph centering on the original diagram is also on display here, each of the small triangles that link together to form the pyramidal chart filled in with an equation in the notation of symbolic logic. To the layperson, this is impenetrable gobbledygook. A caption explains that the work intends to serve as a matrix for how all human relationships can be distilled into equation form.

Such a claim would chime with the hyper-rationalistic rhetoric of classic-period Conceptualism, which made a totem of Wittgenstein and the aloof argot of academic philosophy. In Denes's case, however, the trope is infused by brainy irony. As a wall label explains, "The Human Argument" is meant as "a satire." Her graph is not actually about reducing human relationships to quasi-mathematical symbols. It is a pataphysical joke about what happens when you try to do so.

Such is also the spirit behind Denes's most affecting project, "Human Dust" (1969), which consists of a dish full of chalky white shards that purport to be human remains, set alongside a large text panel narrating the life of the anonymous artist whose remains they purport to be, reduced to a series of numerical milestones: "He ate 56,000 meals, slept 146,850 hours and moved his bowels 18,548 times," etc. — an intentionally absurd account of a life, drawing some wry comedy from rendering lived experience as a series of numerical achievements. At the same time, since the figure in question is identified as an artist, "Human Dust" also turns back on itself, becoming about how, in the cosmic scheme of things, our human creative aspirations will be footnotes, or less.

Already here you have a sense of humanity's relationship to the universe that points to the more outwardly engaged side of her work. "I feel so much love and compassion for humanity," Denes said in a recent interview, "and I feel so sorry for us, the problems the world is having." Vintage Conceptual Art can be faulted for many things, but what makes it still lovable for me is realizing just how *'60s* it was.

Lippard's *Six Years* emphasized how it chimed with the countercultural aspirations of the era, how what gave idea-based art its original allure was the implied quasi-political mission of creating an alternative culture, one that escaped conventional institutional bounds and could be shared in new ways.

Such idealism was not long for this world — as my colleague Chloe Wyma recently remembered in reviewing the Brooklyn Museum's Lippard show, by the turn of the decade, it had already become clear to all that this adventurous new art was just one more style that was being incorporated into the mainstream, rather than a robust alternative to it. Meanwhile, its forms came to seem a little too close for comfort to the bureaucratic mindset that the rest of the '60s counterculture pitted itself against, so that the trajectory of its more engaged practitioners (Michael Asher, Hans Haacke) fled from the "aesthetics of administration to the critique of institutions," as Benjamin Buchloh once put it — from the creation of arbitrary rule-based games to subverting the power structures of the art world itself. Denes's witty but skeptical version of Conceptual Art already implied this disillusionment. However, she went in a different direction to escape its limitations.

The period of classic Conceptual Art also coincided with the birth of modern environmental consciousness: Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* was published in 1962, leading in the span of a decade to a ban on DDT; the first Earth Day, conceived of as a mass environmental teach-in, was held in 1970. And it was to the environment that Denes looked to escape the deadlock of simon-pure Conceptualism. Thus, she is credited with what is widely regarded as the first eco-conscious work of art, *Rice/Tree/Burial*, of 1968 (not represented at Tonkonow). And Denes's most famous project — here glimpsed via concept drawings and photo documentation — is "Wheatfield — A Confrontation" (1982), a Public Art Fund commission for which she planted and cultivated wheat in a plot in Lower Manhattan, just below the site of the World Trade Center towers — a surrealist version of Occupy Wall Street, with wheat.

The words "A Confrontation" in the title are important, and point to how this work is, in its own way, as subtly questioning of Land Art as her more philosophical works are of Conceptual Art. For the most obvious component of this famous piece is that it brings nature to the city, rather than taking culture to the wilderness and looking to nature as a pure alternative or escape or locus of transcendental experience. Reviewing the photo documentation at Tonkonow, you note that Denes has carefully organized it to represent a dialogue between human reactions to the

incongruous wheatfield (a fireworks show to celebrate it, tugboats shooting multicolored water into the air) and natural ones (spiders making their home in the pop-up farm).

“The Human Argument” was a satire of hyperrationalism as applied to human nature; “Wheatfield — A Confrontation” was about man’s “argument” with nature itself. It is about how culture and nature interlock and interact, clash and contrast; her postiche farm celebrates the earth as a sustaining force for civilization but also expresses how we tend to turn nature into culture, making it into a parody of itself — much the way the formulae in “The Human Argument” render human relations as schematic, hollowed out versions of lived experience.

The theme that society is out of joint with the environment has only grown more relevant; the passage of time has given Denes's work more and more gravity. And that may be a final twist, since one of her themes has been, as with “Human Dust,” how the lofty perspective of time defeats human pretentions, and makes them seem trivial. But then, some sense of humor is probably exactly what you need to endure history, as best you can.

Agnes Denes, “Sculptures of the Mind: 1968 to Now,” is on view at Leslie Tonkonow Artworks + Projects, at 535 West 22nd Street, through Janurary 19, 2013