

# BOOKFORUM

December/January 2020

## ART BOOKS

# AGNES DENES: ABSOLUTES AND INTERMEDIATES

EDITED BY EMMA ENDERBY. FOREWORD BY ALEX POOTS. TEXT BY GIAMPAOLO BIANCONI, AGNES DENES, EMMA ENDERBY, ET AL. NEW YORK: THE SHED. 384 PAGES. \$65.

## CHLOE WYMA



**A “VISIONARY,” A “PROPHET,” A “MODERN-DAY LEONARDO”:** Writers often resort to panegyrics when confronted with the eccentric, daunting intellect of Agnes Denes. Given the ambition of the octogenarian artist’s career, which spans fifty years and emerges from deep research into philosophy, mathematics, symbolic logic, and environmental science, it’s hard to fault them.

And yet, as important as she has been to Conceptual and Land art, Denes, by her own reckoning, has been “marginalized” within these movements. That’s finally beginning to change, with a major retrospective this fall at The Shed in New York. As curator Emma Enderby notes in the exhibition’s catalogue, Denes’s neglect was due, in no small part, to gender bias at a time when “working with land, with science, [and] with technology was perceived as quintessentially male.” Equally important is how she undermined the assumptions of these late-modern genres, spurning Conceptualism’s positivistic, anti-aesthetic tendencies and Land art’s interventionist approach to nature. In 1976, for example, Denes translated her statement “If the mind possesses

universal validity, art reveals a universal truth. I want that truth” into Classical Middle Egyptian. She delighted in the awkwardness produced by the gaps between the two languages, arranging the hieroglyphs in an elegantly gridded pyramid—a ubiquitous form in her oeuvre, symbolic of human striving and dialectical movement. At the dawn of the Reagan era, she planted and harvested two acres of grain in the shadow of the World Trade Center to create her best-known piece, *Wheatfield: A Confrontation*, 1982. Anticipating the intensifying conflict between capitalist accumulation and planetary survival, the ephemeral public artwork deliberately wasted “valuable real estate,” posing a landscape of pastoral abundance against an abstract economy of speculation and profit. Today, it makes for a jarring contrast with the show’s host venue, widely condemned as a gleaming monument to taxpayer-subsidized gentrification. Interpolated with the artist’s lucid writings, this generous publication surveys Denes’s consistently rich production, from the exquisite hand-drawn diagrams to the large-scale ecological works to many more that have yet to be realized (such as a proposal to bury several time capsules in Antarctic glaciers, to be opened thousands of years later by our descendants—should any survive). Scholarly contributions—among them a characteristically clear-eyed précis from Lucy Lippard and Caroline Jones’s compelling discussion of anthropocentric landscape conventions in *Wheatfield*’s photo-documentation—round out but never pin down Denes’s rigorous, imaginative work, which remains directed against the “increasing specialization and information overload” she diagnosed decades ago. After nearly four hundred pages, one feels they’ve barely scratched the surface.