

AGNES DENES

—

Absolutes
and
Intermediates

AGNES DENES:
PROMETHEA OF PARADOX

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Lucy R. Lippard

I must have first met Agnes Denes around 1970 in meetings of the Ad Hoc Women Artists' Committee. Her work impressed and befuddled me, as mathematics and philosophy are not my strong points. However, her vast and original embrace of human thought and endeavor, the beauty of her fusions of nature and intellect, and her unapologetic confidence were compelling, and have become more so over the decades.

Denes's brilliance was recognized early on, but she has been endlessly frustrated by the broader success of male colleagues, many of whom are neither as smart nor as innovative as she is. Though her vita attests to a sterling exhibition and lecturing record beyond conventional art/science boundaries, the complex density of her work

means she doesn't fit easily into the shallower drawers of the commercial art world—which is, of course, a good thing. (*Complexity* is a word consistently used to describe her work.) The beauty of her isometric drawings, map projections, charts, and triangular graphs can stop a viewer in her tracks, leaving full comprehension of the underlying philosophy elusive. Denes has often been called a conceptualist, but that label does not do her justice. She is a driven visionary, concerned less with current fads than with future possibilities. Her art has been called timeless, but time—more than space—seems its primary medium; her projects include a number of time capsules. "Change," she says, "is the fourth dimension, time is but a measuring device."¹ Lawrence

Alloway once said that "Denes's art is like a textual criticism of the universe,"² and she has been compared to Leonardo da Vinci.

Because of my own preoccupations, I have been most attracted to Denes's work in and about the natural world (and what part of the world is not natural?). There is a reason that her most popular work, *Wheatfield—A Confrontation* (1982; pp. 258–63), is also her simplest—not in concept or execution, but in its clarity of purpose. With the late World Trade Center looming behind the pastoral pre-harvest scene, the micro-politics of the working landscape informs the macro-politics of nearby Wall Street at the same time that it silently protests the impending upscale development that would soon replace fecundity with finance.

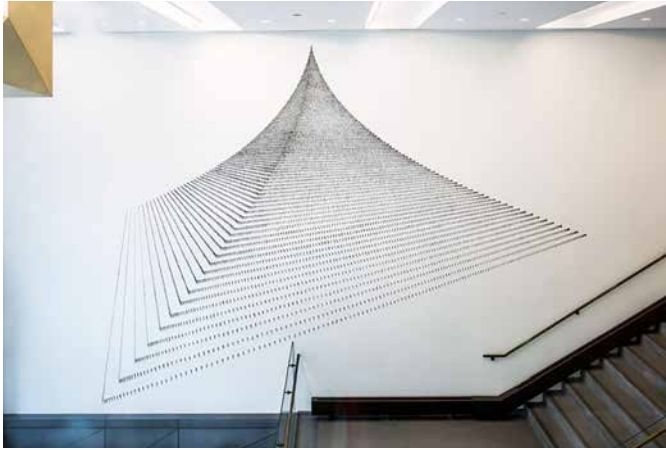
1. Agnes Denes, "Studies of Time: Exploration of Time Aspects 1970–," in *Agnes Denes: Perspectives*, exh. cat. (Washington, D.C.: Corcoran Gallery of Art, 1974), 5.

2. Lawrence Alloway, "A Note on Macro-Esthetics," *Agnes Denes: Perspectives*, 2.



[Fig. 49]

The Living Pyramid, 2015
Socrates Sculpture Park, Long Island City, NY
Photo: Socrates Sculpture Park



[Fig. 50]

Mural commission completed in 2017, based on Denes's 1980 drawing. *Pascal's Perfect Probability Pyramid & The People Paradox—The Predicament (PPPPPP)*
cut vinyl on latex paint, 208 × 280.2"
Site-Specific Commission, The New School Art Collection.
Photo: Fernanda Kock, Galo Studios, courtesy The New School Art Collection

The 30-foot-high *Living Pyramid*, created for the Socrates Sculpture Park, Long Island City, New York, in 2015 (fig. 49), is the outdoor, three-dimensional sister of the graceful, soaring interior mural at the New School, New York (2017; fig. 50). Its concave sides and sharp apex recall Denes's other best-known living Land art, *Tree Mountain – A Living Time Capsule* (1992–96; pp. 266–73), in which 11,000 trees were planted by volunteers in Finland, spiraling up a curved pyramidal mountain and slated to survive for 300 or 400 years as a symbolic antidote to global ecological stress. In her earliest Land art proposal—*Rice/Tree/Burial* (1968; fig. 51; pp. 250–51)—burial and rebirth coexisted. Like *Wheatfield*, these projects can be seen as what she has called "planting the

paradox."³ The astounding breadth of her work includes natural forces and isolated sites—endangered species, boundaries, portals, glaciers, undersea fields, outer space, Antarctica....

The pyramid that has been the vehicle for some of Denes's most ambitious ideas can be (mis)-perceived as a hierarchical form—its pinnacle occupied by an elite, informed by historical associations with Egyptian pharaohs and Mesoamerican sacrifices. But her rhythmic, weightless, and iridescent *Probability Pyramid—Study for Crystal Pyramid* (1976; p. 134), for instance, is the antithesis of the heavy, grounded monuments to which her sculptures are inevitably compared. On perusal of Denes's proposals from the 1960s onward, it becomes

clear that the pyramid stands for aspiration. Her definition of "dialectic" (in her analytically fertile *Dialectic Triangulation: A Visual Philosophy* [1970; p. 63]) as "a forever rising knowledge, a deepening awareness or consciousness through which the trinities are argued and regrouped," is a pyramidal concept.⁴

In Denes's hands, the pyramid becomes a shape-shifter, a knowledge carrier, as well as a monument to an unresolved future. The "Restless Pyramids," conceived in the 1980s as forms (one is in the shape of a flying bird [p. 144]), are no longer rigid or static: "They begin to stretch and sway, as they break loose from the tyranny of being built,"⁵ she says, offering models and metaphors for a drastically "new urbanism." Some of their incarnations are "Self-Supporting City

3. "Planting the paradox" is a phrase Denes often uses, especially concerning *Wheatfield—A Confrontation*.

4. Agnes Denes, "Dialectic Triangulation: A Visual Philosophy," in *Agnes Denes: Perspectives*, 12–13.

5. Agnes Denes, "Pyramid Series," in *The Human Argument: The Writings of Agnes Denes*, ed. Klaus Ottmann (Putnam, CT: Spring Publications, 2008), 119.



[Fig. 51]

Denes burying her haiku poetry in *Rice/Tree/Burial*, 1968
Sullivan County, New York
Archival digital print
4 1/2 × 4 1/2"

Dwellings" (pp. 130, 142)—a prescient suggestion, given today's attempts to create sustainable urban environments. Noting that our civilization "attempts to interfere with its own evolution," she has conceived a New City (that is also a City of Fools). It is divided by a river called You Can't Step Into Me Twice (because unstoppable time interferes, as Herodotus pointed out, sweeping both life and death before it), and eventually, inevitably, it becomes

a "flawless ruin."⁶ The New City's place names are both prescriptive and predictive: "Moral High Ground . . . Pillars of Assumptions . . . Square of New Roots . . . Temple of Narcissism . . . Power Drive and Error Lane."⁷

Denes embraces extremes and scorns mediocrity. (Her University of Mediocrity "teaches tolerance toward a lack of extremes"⁸—an engrossing statement in itself.) Her "Perfect Pyramids" display

"freshness and vulnerability," like the new era they herald.⁹ Underlying everything Denes creates and writes is a passionate desire for humanity to succeed, despite its constant failures.

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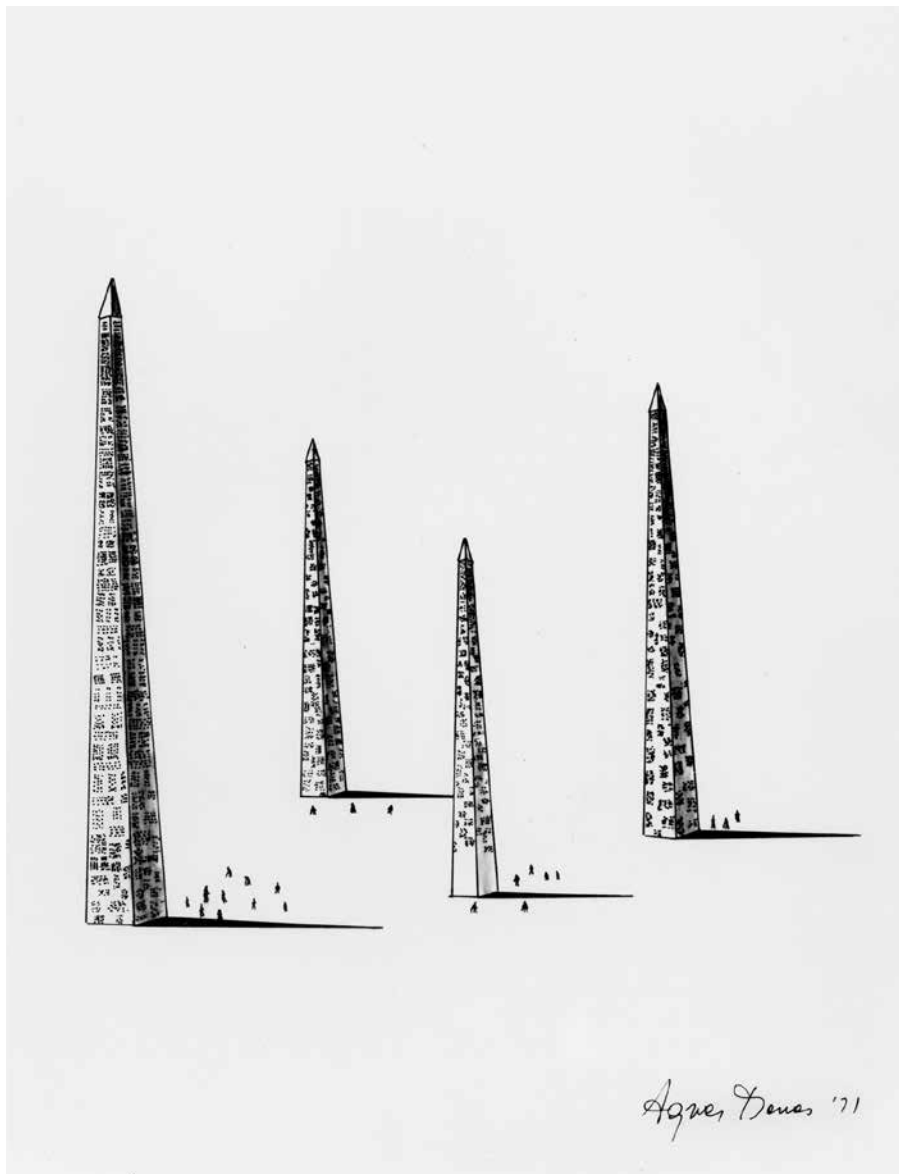
6. Ibid., 117.

7. Agnes Denes, "The Perfect Pyramids and the City of

Fools—(Model for a Flawless Ruin) (1980–2015)," unpublished manuscript.

8. Ibid.

9. Denes, "Pyramid Series," 119–20.



[Fig. 52]

Pillars of Assumptions, 1971
India ink and charcoal on vellum
12 x 9"

THERE ARE OVER
SIXTEEN THOUSAND PEOPLE
IN THE DRAWING¹:

A Poetic Response
to the Work of Agnes Denes

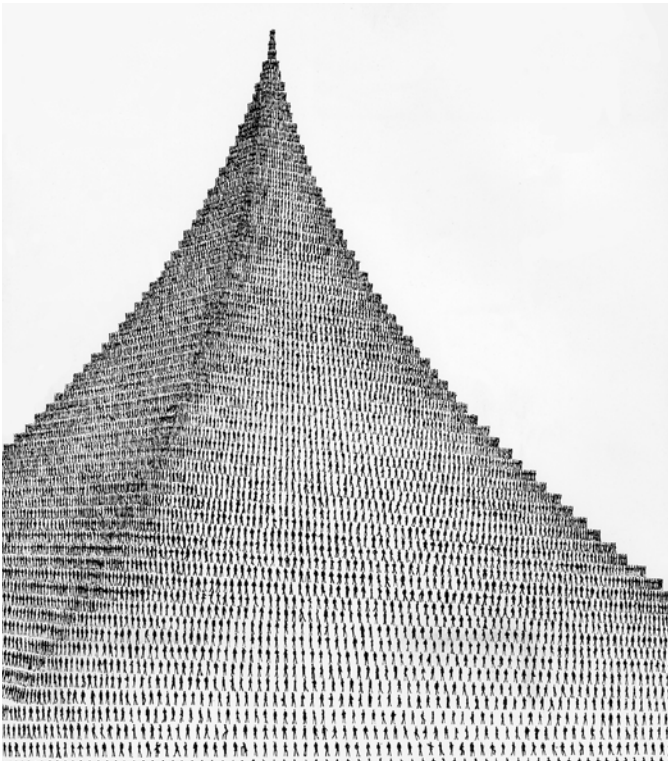
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Renee Gladman

PART I

Harriette Vanessa Renee Gwen Danielle Eva Tony Fairy-Belle Martha Antoinette May Matt-Lou Mary Chubby Rachel Aja Jessica Hoa Jen Anna Kristy Anders Joanna Christina Amy Jennifer Mary Fred Stella Thalia John Mary Amra Percene Kenny Tisa Betsy Anna-Joy Therese Michael Meredith Anselm Coach Eva Beth Tim Ann-Veronica Eileen Lisa Vanessa Robin Elise Jen Charlotte Anna Gail Carrie Patti Lisa Lyn Gloria Mei-mei Rosmarie Patricia Ann Lynne Lydia Martha Natalie Mary Joshua Mauricio Corrine Caitlin Johanna Angela Joeonna Amina Erica Nat Matvei Amaranth Jena Amze Laynie Mathias David Caitlin Tim Danielle Alisha Mirene Alev Layli Charity Matthew Carrie Laura Solange Stefani Jasper EE Tom Stephanie Velice Krista Erin Shell Mary Dario Lauren Sarah Joe David Laylah Josh Chris John Ash Roberto Jenna Catherine Nicholas Roger Michael Bob Sheila Jenene Mali Evie Zoe Donna Matt Luswage Earl Ana Záoter Logan Etta Ella Hannah Isabel Lauren Rosali Jessica Julie Toba Martha Cy Leon Mira Patrick Alma Joan Vincent Tracie Tiffanie April LaShonda Anana Kera Drea Carla MK Olivia Vivian Max Shep Lulu Zizi ZZ Daniel Kathleen Susan Maria Charlize Idris Emily Liv Jessica Santiago Noam Krist Silke Frederike Aykan Heidi Dawn Stephanie Sommer Karla Khadijah Alex Carolyn Richard Caitlin Emma Nina Ani Juliana Joanna Saretta Dorothea Yanara Kate Francesca Olu Ballaké Sarah Andrea Caryl Marguerite Julio Virginia Esther WG Claudia Claudia Nasreen Robert Hilma Emma Rudolf MC Kim Eden Kevin Steph Andre Klay Draymond David Jordan Sue Brianna Ami Arnold Tanya Taylor Laura Brent Dale Dusty Wura Vero Segena Allegra Lewis Karen Tony Jeanne James Rena Cy Judy Milre Dianne Michelle Marianne Stina Emma Louise James Martellus Calvin Malcolm Dion Tom Chris Julian Josh Antonio David Venus Cate Gertrude Alice Simone Marguerite Toni Audre Dionne Fran Harryette John John David Brandon Chuck Doreen Lorenzo Julian Laura Mary Jacqueline Simona Claudio Leonardo Leslie Eddie Brenda Anne Lisa Nicole Etel Simone Richard Natalie Carla Carla Barrett Barrett Beyoncé Paul Aldo Samuel Brodsky Utkin Escher Anna Toumani Kassé Miriam Jonsi Alex Mikael Kabir Sharmistha Rebecca Sonny John Eric Charles Otis Bud Thelonious Rokia Smokey Oscar Ben Lonnie Tracy Regine Valerie Carole Meredith CD Forrest Briony Catherine Tacita Roni Jean-Michel Simryn Lee Rachel Sarah Hedda Maria Leonora Monica Kevin Fia Jennie Amy Amy Sadie Eric Colin Snehal Deb Aziz Samita Meredith Nora Claire Azie Anu Akilah Fred Lillian Roger Christine Miranda Stephanie Sabrina Brian Tracy Pavla Cathy Marty Crow Tyler Amanda Jason Shawn Ms. Kilgore Ms. Williams Ms. Cathcart Mr. Berry Rachel Rachel Sarah Madonna Stevie Alice Alice Osman Shirley Brenda Linda Laurie Phoebe Sarah Shelia Colleen Jessica Christine Cori Robin Julia Dara Ilona Allie Lucy Diana JP Helen Maja Laura Karen Yedda Lisette Camille Ricky Ed Josephine Marianne Mel Dominique Elizabeth Roanna Christian Larry T-Bout Whitney Becky Yasmin Yasamin Erin Devin Niels Yaw Rachel Caroline Saskia Donika Melissa Abby Connie Kara Julianna Gisele Jada Nusrat László Daniel Anne Dorka Daniel Anne Christine Katie J'Lyn Sara Sara Melissa Jessamine Melany Ragga Daisy John Lizzie Thea Lisa Virginia Martha Andy Ali Baha'ud-din Rahul Monir Meg Tanya Frankie Aisha Aisha Maggie Harry Cathy Kelli Kelly Ghada Shayla Rachel Nick Wu Ellen Kamau Cecil Juliana Bela Ben Tara Cecilia Andy Ali Darrell Angie Shanté Minka Sara Summi Ashley Mimi Casey Casey Allison Astrid Jennifer Jennifer Bobby Catherine Julie Anne Julie Roland Hervé Martin Roland Jorge Judith Nate Nate Stephen Adam Langston Gwendolyn Zora James Kristin Kristin Kristin Ellen Tatiana Èvelyne Jordan Jordan Doug Rachel Kirby Meredith Charlotte Benjamin Hank Tanya Kristin Calvin Heather Bret Damon Naomi Ian Ally Parker Maggie Robin Richard Dave Khaela Hildegard Johann-Sebastian Domenico George-Frideric Wolfgang Arvo Philip Ali Philip Nadaka Ganesh Nick Rihanna Missy Meredith Mal Courtney Archie Gillian Clara Michael Jade Richard Erik Eric Jesse Jen Kevin Ruth Poppy Kamili Deborah Keith Keisha-Khan Susan Julian Malcom Danny Chris Chuma Eric Dustin Fred Grant Ludwig Ludwig Kim Melissa Laird Eleni Magdalena Christa Yves Cristina Joanna Barbara Frida Ana Ana-Maria Maggie Berta Gena Wynona Loretta Wynona Ashley Reba Chloe Randy Zoe Anna Paul Jane Mark Andreas Riccardo Eliades Celia Ray Renée Renee Ben Matt Abigail Mati Henri VV Pupa Tyrell Heather Amala Susan Mercedes Carol Meghan Kristala Enrico Jennifer Ben Casey Leona Juliet Julia Itai Nicolette Jennifer Jennifer Moyra Morris Tasha LaTasha Michelle Michelle Barak Sojourner Harriet Billie Ella Sara Bessie Aretha Betty Arthur Brenda Bruce Curtis Debra Tara Swati Cyndi Deniece Ernst Baaba Cheick-Tidiane Mansour Laetitia Astrid Jacqueline Angelina Karen Aida Jennifer Wilma Laurie David Mitch Nadia Nadia Peter Liz Rhonda Oscar Champ Gladys Teddi Lady Phugh Kamala Sarah-Fran Jolene Ginger Peta Nora Pat Joan Cynthia Max Abbey Reggie Sonny Duke Miles Hayley Charlotte Taylor Mike Adam Lance Jocelyn Kevin Camille Rae Pam Lauren Susan Jay Rosaire Mary-Therese Peter Martine Sophie Jon Marisol Lisa Amar Chester Tala Jan Selah Lila Frank Denise Bobby Bobby Eric Eric Carl Ms. Turner Matt Miles Cole Myung Cole Jon Dan Tommy Stephen Molly Max

1.	This title is taken from Agnes Denes's statement on her drawing <i>Pascal's Perfect Probability Pyramid & The People Paradox—The</i>	<i>Predicament (PPPPPP)</i> (1980; p. 136). Denes based her drawing on people she knew at the time. Materials for Part I of this essay are the names	of all the people I have loved, am currently loving, as well as those who have moved me in some way this far in my life.
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[Fig. 60]

Pascal's Perfect Probability Pyramid & The People Paradox – The Predicament (PPPPPP), 1980 (detail)
Indian ink on silk vellum
32 × 43"

Venus Michelle Jalen Mike Duncan Brian Tony Adam Lisa Crystal Dan Russell John Genna Torin Andrea Oumou Dale Ryan Booger Darren Damien Jon Sarah Gilbert Mr. Kelley Mona Desmond Bob Jimi Jim Al Willie Gus Gust Ariel Tina Sofia Arielle Marvin Dana Edith Grant Sebastian John Rachel Jamie Benjamin Tonya Yona Paul Lawrence Joan Kenny Dolly Tanya Kenny Amy Kathy Willie Kate Jeri Nina Thomas Francis Hans Jill Joanna Joanna Ms. Sullivan Doug Jennifer Anfernee Dwight James Matthew Philip Dak Murphy Ariel Cat Maura William Kate Brian Samina Shelby Lewis John Ben Peter Rusty Stacey Jacqueline Jonna Rocket Meghan Nicole Genji Daisy Jennifer Steve Eli Maralie Erica Greg Heather Josh Nicole Denise Maria Leah Ben Owen Nicole Janey Taylor Emma Ira Georgia Ian Brooke Nat Hilary Christine Penelope Bob Jeff Kahlil Noah Brent Amy Emily Cynthia Cynthia Sena Amy Sarah Enrico Kristin Molly Sigrid Lena Monica Michelangelo Sayjit Carlos Adolfo Esther Lisa Sheetal Tracie Nekar Travis Charles David John Carrie Brady Corbin Beth Amanda Alex Stacey Judith Nancy Dana Beth David Maria-Helena Dan Brice Donald Doug Kristin Malik Josey Cybele Marilynne Delia Matthew Hilary Chris Henrique Cecilia Geraldine Calvina Jerome Pascale Rachael Zoë X Mia Nathalie Rosa Rose Aaron Micala Mark Ambrose Neil Kibra Tim Alex Charlotte Paul John Jonathan Victor Sharon Patrick Stacey Stacie Laura Randy Cecilia Anna Ms. King Prince Michael Janet Sarah Chipper Scott Michael Janet Johnny Will Irina Christine Jeff Quincy Alejandro Bill Tony Esther Francesca Adrienne Adrian Enigma Sweet-Pea Buddha Mari Stephen Bernard Godfrey Robert Dwayne GG Magazine Early Helsinki Oboe Gerainy Lucious Pumpkin Office Fraggles Fern the Hildegards Ms. Bowden Angel Henri Gego Karsten Erica Ulrike Youmna Sina Ken Katherine Leslie Austin Anjali Lola Breeda Piper Lena Piper Emma Katherine Sara Chandra Kim Chyler Jessica Katie Floriana Chloe Evangeline Sonya Steve Rob Michelle Dawn Max Hilary Sabrina Carrie Hal Ian Kim Thurston Shirley Thurgood Frederick WEB Sayward Karen Bernice Ysaye Whoopie Elvis Austin DeShaun Mimi Beth Elena Elena Eleanor Hick Nandita Shabana Dena Frederick Winston Michelle Gina Denzel Keanu Scarlett Oprah Anna Kenya Toni NourbeSe Patrice Kristin Bernadette Bruna Maria Julie Simone Emma James Lily Anaar Ethan Shambhavi Anushka Andy Ed Lorenzo Henry Anne John Nalini Caryn Corina Suzi Caroline Ben Sandra Marcella Raver Emily Mo Terrance Janet Lucy Brenda Catherine Janice Ayano Pudding VS Cynthia Wols David Unica Marie Monika Eva Djuna Emily Prunella Svetlana Gordon Ana Jorinde Constant Joan Shirley Nicholas Samiya Marie Clarice Sylvia Valentine Tove Walter Robert Denise Ludwig Marcel Jacqueline Rainer Anne Georgia Carson Flannery William Max Collette Mina Richard Patrick Tarjei Jamaica Caroline Stacey Bob Barbara Peter Max Milan Imre Ann BS Ismail Anna Naomi Sebastian Uta Anni Nathalie Dorothea Alex Karen Megan Chris Mary-Lou Lou Ruth Alex Richard Chris Alex Alex Eden Jacob Martha Dustin Kevin Shaun Javale Elisabeth Natalie Alan George Andrew Cush Clémence Laura Hannah Mayko Erika Natalie Kate Edie Katie Nicole Aaron Mariana Karen Ren Shawnie Tatum Drew Ben Sarah Laurel Kaia Jeffrey Alexis Jozefien Oliver Pasquelina Harper Stephanie Max Pat Hannah Ruth Paula Teddy Mary-Beth Rebecca Malic Lisa Jennifer Merce Agota Thomas Fanny Peter Sarah Nina Julie Emma Morgan Samuel Rachel Kate Rooney Kate Maggie Lyndsy Melinda Satyajit Anton Samantha Martha Ana-Maria Olga Carolina Faye Marta Anita Barbara Andrina Gal Merrit Elizabete Francisca

Elaine Sonia Elaine Dani Lorna Cindra Laurie Fatimah Josh Doreen Nell Octavia Ondine Ellie Maxine Christine LeeAnn Susan Amanda Mary Kit Syd Andrea Renato Chris Renee Molly Patrick Travis Mara Tom Yoruba Lili Hannah Henry Franz Michelangelo Nathan Harris William Nawa Edythe Inger Ibrahim Omara Compay Rubén Hector Yo-Yo Herbie Stan Ingeborg Krishna Krishna Susan Gregory Martin Robert Michael Jong Peter Peter Stephen Clive Robert Samuel Keira Winnie Moomin Snork-Maiden Eeyore AA Meryl Sigourney Helen Judi Steve Luke Michael Tony Chelsea Becky Doris Naomi Adolph Michelle Carrie Brigid Julie Florence Rajery Rebecca Bella Wiley Peter Hildur Edda Sólrún Maria Ana Art Susanna Debbi Vicki Cat Hildur Hope Edie Hamza Joan Zakir Prince-Markie-Dee Kool-Rock-Ski Buff-love Aisling Candace Bruce Zoe Caitlin Natalie Osip Nadezhda Anne Marguerite Grace Marguerite Daniel Lenny Yvette Michael Anna Abdullah Vusi Sibongile Rosa Nelson Winnie Alfre Pharoah Lonnie Gary Woody Cecil Clifford Nathaniel Anthony Clifford Lee Franz Ralph John Fred Geeshie Andrew Shelly Oana Janna Kiko Jenni Marina Heather-Anne Pradeep Nicholas Claude Aurora Johanna Romare Helene Zaha Eileen Kelli Sunny Margaret Maggie Kristina Amy Andrew Rosamond Lily Lisa Ellen Hope Cesásaria Lucy Bilal Sassafras Ugmo University Lisa Annabelle Barbara Eugene Dan Marie Suzanne Goutam Marie Steve Julia Eili Kaya Sybile Mavis Sylvia Norah Richard Ralph Barbara Paul Octavio George Michael Tilda Kristin Alison Tyrone Allison Lucy Nicole Nicole Gabe Zarina Rebecca Summer Kim Trish Allison Candace Jahan Lucy Steve Johanna Carolina Julie Sara Sebastian Poupeh Theresa Laura Ronaldo Arlene Paget Robert Marina Kameron Janalyn J'Lyn Bailey Lisa Max Mary Mark Adeze Hans Emma Agnes Agnes Agnes Agnes had all at some point or precisely at the same time made a gesture that perforated the wall of the PPPPPP.

PART II

However, you'd have to multiply these people by 10 to extend the architecture toward the Waving Migration Point (WMP), that threshold moment where a place lifts and contorts and bends at harm and away from harm, and all these people standing on top of each other, trying to get to space, to bring feeling and space into a configuration that folds time—all these people, in their waving, folding time. But how does Harriette get to Agnes, which you'd have to do to move the structure; you'd have to put Harriette in motion, and this takes adding a MTOS,S to the project: a Massive Threading of Souls, Sentences, which would take the energies of Harriette walking toward Agnes while Vanessa moved toward another Agnes and someone solidly in the middle—Wilma—walking toward Fred. These bodies need a calmativ and a song. They need loose shirts and flat shoes and they need access to the grasses. For the bodies to multiply they have to meet other bodies in a Rigorous Intervening (RI) of the PPPPPPP; they need to lie in the grass and meet and be old people meeting and thinking explicitly about waving and snapping and putting a dip to the dance. The WMP is a dance and the MTOS,S is a song and we're putting them together, doing our acts,

because we're also in the poem. But it's about the architecture and how if it waves and opens the air around it changes; the changes are pockets forming in the atmosphere and each pocket is a novel. If we can get the bodies into the novels, they'll multiply and this is according to the SPI, the Space Paradox of the Imagination, that says thinking makes space, which makes people. The novels are written of air in the air of waving thinking structures—not just this one we are loving—and these novels open with lines like, "Where the island of Isling exists is under the water but over the mountain is the other Isling and," or they begin, "They cleave; they hover; they shoal the city streets," and it's all these novels that the hands are reaching for as the structure waves and strains against the multiplying: I'm standing on my mother's head. Yet, the structure doesn't wave until the numbers get up toward the Maximum Lift Component of Our Breathing (MLCOB), because when it's just the 1,600 of us, the walls are tighter even though you'd expect the opposite; you'd think there aren't enough of us to hold the walls so the walls should buckle or begin a soft fold inward or outward, but no, it's the strain that makes the wave and it's the dance that awakens the novels,

so you've got to fill the breathing to its capacity. Joanna, you've got to run. Go get Èvelyne. And everyone becomes a writer in their bodies as they dance and talk in a manner that doubles or triples what they're saying: it's an architecture of novels and breathing and people moving their feet. To multiply this novel by 10 everybody's got to open a window—unlatch and push the panel outward: 1,600 windows open all at once—and with this the structure takes on air and the space around the structure expands (we are thinking how to get out of space, outer) and the pyramid lifts just slightly off the ground. With 14,400 more people opening windows, we will fly. So Nawa you've got to play your cello, to wake the other cellists from their sleep, and multiply the sound we hear by 10. If we are all doing what we love and waking the others who love what we do and do it themselves in their own configurations, we will all be multiplying and lifting the structure toward the WMP and getting there, to a space on the other side of space, where bodies bend and stop and bend and dip and snap then rise and juke and smile and dip and hands go up, butts get bigger, hips brush and all this is the engineering of building: you've got to dance to build. To lift, there's got to be migration.

“... SEEING REALITY
AND STILL BEING ABLE
TO DREAM
PERSISTING IN THE
ETERNAL SEARCH”

—Agnes Denes, “Manifesto,” 1969

Silvia Rocciolo and Eric Stark

As an incandescent spark in a community of seekers, educators, and innovators pushing against the status quo, Agnes Denes was an inspired choice for a site-specific commission in the dining hall of our recently built New School University Center at 63 Fifth Avenue in New York City. Given the New School’s history of championing artists whose work both speaks to and transcends the moment of its making—a variation on New School president Alvin Johnson’s 1931 provocation to the first two commissioned muralists, Thomas Hart Benton and José Clemente Orozco, to create a work of art that would still be relevant in 100 years—Agnes Denes, the universalist, Agnes Denes, the visionary, made perfect sense.

We worked with Agnes and her gallerist Leslie Tonkonow to explore new ideas and revisit older ones. After several months, we mutually agreed on a mural version of her 1980 drawing *Pascal’s Perfect Probability Pyramid & The People Paradox—The Predicament (PPPPPP)*,

owned by collector and philanthropist Agnes Gund. This work, originally an ink on vellum measuring 30 by 40 inches and referred to by the artist as a philosophical drawing, is from her iconic “Pyramid Series.” The image, comprised of thousands of small individuated human figures spiraling upward to a single figure at the top, addresses hierarchical human systems, population growth, and our innate existential crisis as a species. What themes could be better suited for the New School—an institution predicated on the idea that education and activism are two sides of the same coin?

The task of changing scale and medium while holding on to the delicacy of a drawing that took years to complete was difficult. Early analog approaches (painting a mural) failed because of the absence of the artist’s hand and digital reproductions pixilated into unrecognizable images when enlarged. The solution was to fine-tune the scanned image with a digital paintbrush and then plotter cut the figures from a 2-D block of color (scan, Photoshop, vector, vinyl). Each one of the thousands of figures was almost perfectly rendered; the final digital file ensured the work would be consistently reproducible and allow for it to be transferred to other locations or exhibition venues, an important consideration for art in public spaces. With startling acuity, Agnes painstakingly reviewed the translation at every step, noting every leg out of place, every tiny aberration in every figure. Some of the figures she had drawn were her friends, so who knew better than she what they were meant to look like!

Soon after the mural’s completion in January 2017, graduate students occupied the dining hall in solidarity with cafeteria workers negotiating to protect their jobs. Agnes’s *People Paradox* mural sat quietly behind the

striking students amid this charged moment. Recently, a young woman read Agnes’s manifesto from 1969 in an elevator in the Albert and Vera List Academic Center on 16th Street. It was one of several feminist manifestos presented on December 8, 2018, by the Vera List Center for Art and Politics in a university-wide series of investigations into freedom of speech and subtitled “Curriculum for Studies into Darkness.” We wondered: Have the students read the mural’s wall text? Do they know that Agnes dedicated the work to them? Had she prefigured the movement? Are they aware of Agnes’s many agitations, her activism, her *Wheatfield—A Confrontation* (1982)? “Read the figures, they are you,” Agnes urges in the wall text. Students and workers were asserting their right to stand in their place, to voice, to persist—another normal day at the New School—

another day experiencing the fully lived reality of institutions challenged by the complexity of an unsettled world.

Working with Agnes Denes, who is vibrant, formidable, and ambitious, was a singular pleasure for us both. She is a force of nature, her clarity and determination honed by fierce intelligence and deep feminist roots. No project of this kind is ever straightforward or easily accomplished—from contract to scaffold. The process was investigative and illuminating. And what couldn’t be resolved through lively—at times heated—discussion or brainstorming was easily brokered over a Danish and a cup of tea.

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Silvia Rocciolo and Eric Stark cocurated the New School Art Collection until Stark’s retirement in 2018; Rocciolo is currently the collection’s director/chief curator.

[Fig. 65]

Mural commission completed in 2017, based on Denes’s 1980 drawing *Pascal’s Perfect Probability Pyramid & The People Paradox—The Predicament (PPPPPP)* (detail), cut vinyl on latex paint, 208 × 280.2”
Site-Specific Commission, The New School Art Collection.
Photo: Fernanda Kock, Galo Studios, courtesy The New School Art Collection

