



## Cultivating Hinterland: What Lies Behind Agnes Denes' *Wheatfield?*

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### PLANTING IDEAS

In 1982, the artist Agnes Denes and a team of agriculturalists and volunteers planted and harvested two acres of wheat in a landfill site in lower Manhattan, a short distance from Wall Street and facing the Statue of Liberty. Volunteers cleared the ground of rocks and waste, 200 truckloads of earth were brought on site, and 285 furrows were dug for planting the wheat kernels. Volunteers maintained the wheatfield for four months, cleaning it of wheat smut, weeding, fertilizing, and spraying it against mildew fungus, and installing an irrigation system. On 16 August, they harvested the crop and gained 1000 pounds of wheat. The kernels were sent to art galleries in 28 cities around the world (Denes 2019, 41).

Denes titled the project *Wheatfield: A Confrontation*. She described it as representing “food, energy, commerce, world trade, and economics. It referred to mismanagement, waste, world hunger and ecological

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concerns” (“Agnes Denes”). Denes was photographed standing in the field of swaying, golden grains, holding a staff in her hand.<sup>1</sup> The World Trade Centers towered in the background. Some likened her image to that of a goddess (“Agnes Denes” 1982). Others compared her work with art historical traditions that celebrate American agrarianism and extol its wheatfields as the nation’s breadbasket (Jones 2019, 225). Others still celebrated her environmentalist politics (“Agnes Denes”). Denes encouraged these different interpretations, describing *Wheatfield* as both “an intrusion into the Citadel, a confrontation of High Civilization,” and “Shangri-La, a small paradise, one’s childhood, a hot summer afternoon in the country, peace, forgotten values, simple pleasures” (Hartz 1992, 118).

*Wheatfield* has consistently been celebrated as “environmentalist” by Denes and by critics then and today. But how does Denes’ idea of nature as a set of “forgotten values” conceal asymmetries of power? What industrial, classed, racialized, and gendered conditions are obscured by *Wheatfield*’s spectacular impact? Denes was driven by undeniably eco-ethical intentions, hoping to confront North America’s economic locus of power with a reminder of the agricultural hinterlands upon which its wealth is founded. A city’s history is also the history of the hinterlands upon which it depends for extracting natural resources and labor (Cronon 1992, 19). *Wheatfield* represents hinterland as it confronts the metropolis and exposes how class conflict lies behind the artificial separation of urban and rural space—that is, how capital extracts from the hinterland and focuses on the metropole, thus alienating a huge number of people and depleting landscapes of their biodiversity (Neel 2018, 13, 17).

But *Wheatfield*’s position as an artwork is ambivalent. Its lovely presence on a then-underdeveloped piece of land risked bolstering the very “Citadel” it purported to criticize. Denes’ choice of the word “citadel” indicates her association of New York City with imperial power. The word renders the metropolis a privatized space for affluent people, which *Wheatfield* apparently confronted. But *Wheatfield* also risked contributing to the public imagination a marketable image that perpetuated an oppositional narrative of nature-hinterland/culture-metropolis (Curtis and Rajaram 2002). With this came a related, essentialist association of nature and femininity. *Wheatfield*’s pastoral beauty is an aesthetic so aligned with

<sup>1</sup>For the photograph, see Agnes Denes’ website: <http://www.agnesdenesstudio.com/works7.html>.

classist and gendered norms that it risks being reincorporated by, rather than confronting, patriarchal and capitalist power structures. Given these complications, how should we understand *Wheatfield* today?

By studying *Wheatfield* as a diagram of entanglements between various stakeholders involved in its production, this chapter nuances understandings of Denes' aims and achievements. To do this, the notion of hinterland—literally, what is “behind” a city, providing it with natural resources and labor power—guides this chapter as I ask who and what lay behind *Wheatfield's* cultivation. Hinterland helps me envision a diagram of power and influence into which *Wheatfield* inserted itself as both a “confrontation” and a “simple pleasure.” Diagramming *Wheatfield* in this way sheds light on art's potential for disrupting ecologically and socially unjust systems and cultivating alternatives—as well as its potential of falling into positions of compromise or complicity. Though planted 40 years ago, *Wheatfield* yields important questions for art and spatial practice today, as polarizations between urban and rural contexts are exacerbated by the climate emergency.

Denes was keenly aware of the crisis facing the climate. She described *Wheatfield* in heroic terms as a political effrontery to the environmentally and socially damaging capitalist “system” and its “machinery.” It called “people's attention to having to rethink their priorities,” she said (Denes 2019, 283). Yet her use of wheat as “a universal concept” to criticize intensive agriculture and food shortages is perhaps short-sighted (Denes 2019, 283). The Hard Red Spring variety of wheat she used is specifically suited to America's cooler northern states and is prized for bread baking (Curtis and Rajaram 2002). A “universal” concept might equally or more accurately deal with soy or rice. But Denes knew her audiences. Wheat's centrality to a species of American pastoralism rooted in founding myths of economic and territorial expansion underpins the project and accentuates its provocation. “Look,” *Wheatfield* seemed to say, “if this is what Wall Street's wealth is built upon, why are agriculture and its hinterland locations exploited and ignored?” But *Wheatfield* itself ignored an exploited people, being planted on the land of the Lenape people, which Dutch colonists claimed in the seventeenth century. Wall Street is named after a wall the Dutch built that came to exclude the Lenape. The Lenape grew mixed crops and kept animals on this land—they did not cultivate large areas of wheat there. Denes' choice of crop refers to white settler colonists' industrialized monoculture techniques, and its aesthetic—whether seen as beautiful or confrontational, or both—should therefore

be understood as an aesthetic grown directly from colonial and industrial-agrarian roots.

Denes' harnessing of agrarianism to progress her politics points to her larger strategy of working with contradictions and her ability to maneuver between different audiences and cultural markets. In a statement about her use of Venn diagrams in 1971, Denes discusses her interest in cultivating seemingly contradictory interpretations. "While a work of art may be subject to misunderstandings," she reasoned, "it does exist independently of them" (Denes 2019, 76). *Wheatfield*, then, constituted a kind of Venn diagram of interpretations. It existed "independently" as two acres of wheat and accrued different and sometimes contradictory readings. In so doing, it offered less the "confrontation" its title and artist promised, and more a materialization of the tangle of agriculture and business interests, of nature and capital, that characterizes the planet's increasingly globalized and urbanized environments (Rawes 2013, 40; Jones 2019, 225). This was a tangle of agrilogistics (Morton 2013, 42). It was also a tangle of idealized nature and its (disavowed) exploitation. Denes' installation of a flock of sheep in the gardens of the American Academy in Rome (1998–2002) attempted a similar diagramming of complex interests. Again, the piece combined agrarian nostalgia with agribusiness, this time cultivating associations with cloning—Dolly the sheep had been born two years earlier (Denes 2019, 275).

### UNEARTHING EXTRACTIVISM

*Wheatfield*, then, like the sheep in Rome, diagrams a socio-economic power structure of hinterland and metropolis. The wheat and sheep "intrude" upon the "Citadel" as reminders of their vital yet disavowed roles in infrastructures of food transportation, preparation, storage, consumption, and disposal (Jones 2019, 225). Extractivism comes in different guises, and *Wheatfield* encourages consideration of several. First, it critiques extractivist approaches to land and labor, whereby the soil becomes depleted, and people exhausted, by intensive production (Marx 1992, 283). Its material components—soil and wheat—become means of recognizing the tangle of socio-political and material constituents that determine planetary boundary conditions and, when pushed out of balance, indicate the need for ethical renegotiation in a kind of eco-politics (Salazar et al. 2020, 5).

Second, *Wheatfield's* adjacency to Wall Street urges consideration of other, more abstract but equally extractivist economic techniques well underway by 1982, such as real-estate and market speculation (Brenner and Katsikis 2020, 30). Just a decade earlier, the US stopped converting dollars to gold at a fixed rate. This increased possibilities for financial speculation, including the trading of future stock values of grain. Planting a real wheatfield outside banks' headquarters, Denes inserted a reminder of the material basis upon which their profits once relied. Location was crucial for this—it is harder to ignore something when it is on your doorstep. Indeed, *Wheatfield's* location beside the Financial District underlines the fact that extractivist capitalism depends upon a spatial arrangement whereby an operational center controls the flow of extracted products transported from (rarely seen) places of poverty to places of wealth where high prices are obtained for them (Ye et al. 2020).

Wheat and other cereals are foundational commodities in the New York Stock Exchange's history. The marble pediment on its façade at 18 Broad Street depicts commerce and industry. Beside a strong woman representing Integrity stand figures of Science, Industry, and Invention on one side, and Agriculture and Mining on the other. This latter sector is symbolized by a man carrying a sack of grain and a woman in a scarf leading a sheep. She holds a staff remarkably like the one Denes holds in her photograph in *Wheatfield*. In the background of this section is a relief of wheat sheaths. Beyond the farmer couple, two men inspect a piece of mined rock. These figures are industriously extracting resources from the earth. A marble sea laps on either end of the pediment, symbolizing global trade. This is a celebration of nineteenth-century capitalism. Resources are depicted in abundance, and workers in good health.

Denes' *Wheatfield* is harder to interpret. She wanted it to confront capitalism. But her golden crop is beautiful. Like the carving, it shows nothing of the reality of hinterland extractivism—none of its destruction of biodiversity, its widespread pollution, its depletion of human and animal energies, and its displacement of indigenous peoples. Without priming on Denes' political intentions, audiences of *Wheatfield* might be forgiven for viewing it as a real-life extension of the celebratory Stock Exchange carving, with Denes herself representing Integrity. Like her field of sheep, *Wheatfield* therefore constitutes a double bind in its uneasy combination of spectacle and politics (Jones 2019). These artworks make powerful critiques and picturesque postcards.

Denes selected *Wheatfield's* location in Battery Park, a former landfill site squeezed between the Financial District and the Hudson River, to achieve this tension between the political and the picturesque. She negotiated this location with the New York Public Art Fund, a non-profit organization that part-financed *Wheatfield*. The arts activist Doris C. Freedman, whose own father was a New York architect and property developer, founded the fund in 1977. Freedman was keen to support art that reached audiences who would not normally be exposed to it in their everyday life and that could thus improve civic cohesion (Cascone 2017). On the one hand, *Wheatfield* did just this, blowing in the summer breeze, far from the confines of museums and galleries. On the other, it was mainly visited by bankers during their lunchbreaks, art enthusiasts, and tourists. If a family from Queens or from wheat farming country in North Dakota had wanted to visit *Wheatfield*, they would have faced significant travel times and expenses.

For precisely this reason, the Public Art Fund recommended other sites, including Wards Island, a piece of land sandwiched between the lower-income and more racially diverse boroughs of Harlem, the Bronx, and Queens. This location would have been more geographically and economically accessible for many New Yorkers (few people lived near Battery Park at the time). It would also have chimed with Wards Island's long-standing use for social facilities including hospitals and recreation grounds. But Denes wanted confrontation and spectacle. She envisioned an audience of bankers, financial lawyers, and bureaucrats as targets. Whether they felt confronted, or soothed, by the swaying field remains unclear. Denes boasted that some were moved to tears when the field was harvested (Denes 1993, 390). Again, it is unclear whether this had anything to do with *Wheatfield's* political implications. Just as likely, *Wheatfield's* banker neighbors were moved at witnessing something so aesthetically pleasing in a space that was previously a no-man's-land where waste was dumped, people occasionally walked dogs, and sporadic art projects took place.<sup>2</sup> It was surely inspiring to see a poor patch of land turn golden and upsetting to see it turned back into a wasteland with the harvesting.

If man has dominion "over all the earth" as the Bible promises, and as nineteenth-century industrialists zealously enacted, then crops and

<sup>2</sup> Agricultural advisor to the project, John Ameroso, in email correspondence with author, 28 August 2021. Former curator at New York Public Art Fund, Emma Enderby, in email correspondence with author, 23 August 2021.

quarries like those depicted on the Stock Exchange pediment must have owners.<sup>3</sup> Land ownership is a foundational principle for capitalism. “Private” originates in the Latin *privatus*, which means “restricted,” and relates to “deprive.” A designation of privacy regulates who has access to something or somewhere and who does not (Nitzan and Bichler 2009, 228). Battery Park was already being assessed for Battery Park City development by 1982, but it captured Denes’ imagination by its appearance as a no-man’s-land. The space comprised material excavated in 1973 to make space for the World Trade Centers. It was as if Denes was coaxing fresh life from the waste of global trade, caring for the land through a collective and voluntary cultural-agricultural form of labor very different to that upon which the nearby financial markets depended. Although *Wheatfield* was enclosed by a fence (conveniently, this was not visible in most of the photographs made of it), it was intended to enact not ownership, but a form of custodianship and care.

Care is a gendered concept closely tied to extractivism. Patriarchal power structures have exploited women’s reproductive capacities by identifying them with a proximity to “nature” and an aptitude for caregiving. Denes demonstrates a playful awareness of this as she has herself photographed nurturing *Wheatfield*. This occurred precisely when ecofeminism emerged as a subfield within feminist and environmental theory, rising to prominence with the publication of Carolyn Merchant’s 1980 *The Death of Nature* and Vandana Shiva’s 1988 *Staying Alive* (Nirmal 2021; Jarosz 2001). *Wheatfield* invites us to consider the same intersection of topics as these books did, as well as several conferences held in the following decade that cemented the correlation between patriarchal oppression and ecological violence (Buckingham 2015).

Rather than conform to an essentialist association of women and nature prevalent in some cultural feminisms at the time, for example in the Goddess Movement (Warren 2001), Denes’ cultivation of *Wheatfield*, and her careful documentation of the insects and animals that temporarily made it their habitat, demonstrates a more socialist ecofeminist approach. It emphasizes women and nature (including animal and vegetable species) as oppressed groups who live on the margins of global capitalism and whose appropriated resources make that system possible (Clark 2012). This differentiates her practice from what she recognized as Land Art’s masculine constructions of (usually permanently installed, often

<sup>3</sup> Genesis 1:26.

manmade) material (Denes 2019, 282). Denes' ecologically prefaced projects involve plants and animals to emphasize inter-species collaborations that change over time (through growth, decay, or harvesting). As a prime example of this approach, *Wheatfield* demonstrates how social and ecological justice must be prefaced on ethical collaborations across groups of people, with other species and with land itself. It exposes an anthropocentric idea of independence as fantastical and damaging.

### GROWING COMPLICATIONS

This ecofeminist reading of *Wheatfield* is incomplete, however, if it does not also question certain material aspects of the project. Why, for example, did Denes rely on unpaid volunteers? Sourcing a grant to pay them would surely have furthered the project's championing of agricultural and caregiving work so often placed out of sight (in physical or symbolic hinterlands), and under- or unpaid. Denes was a founding member of A.I.R. Gallery, which opened in 1972 as an artist-run non-profit space supporting women and non-binary artists. *Wheatfield* could surely have emanated A.I.R.'s ethos by remunerating the workers responsible for its creation and care. Materialist feminism developed throughout the 1970s with campaigns such as Wages for Housework that reclaimed care from idealized associations with labors of love (Puig de la Bellacasa 2017; Federici 2012). Denes sits somewhat uncomfortably between this form of feminism and a cultural variety that sees women as essentially "closer" to nature. Materialist feminism sees the latter's "affinity" position as reductionist (Mellor 1997). When Denes is shown standing alone in *Wheatfield*, her team of volunteers out of sight, she evokes agrarian goddess imagery in line with cultural feminism and misses an opportunity to highlight materialist feminism's calls for systemic change.

In a similar soloist tendency to undervalue volunteers, Denes downplayed earlier art projects that put Battery Park on the cultural map before *Wheatfield*, preferring to frame her contribution as unique within a physical and cultural wasteland. These projects included an installation by the sculptor Mary Miss in 1973 and *Art on the Beach*, a project by the group Creative Time that ran each summer between 1978 and 1988. Project by project, Battery Park became physically cleaner, culturally more desirable, and financially lucrative. Today, it is called Battery Park City and comprises high-cost housing, retail, and entertainment spaces. Denes anticipated



this, foreseeing that Manhattan would close itself again like a “fortress” after her project (1993, 390).

But it would be naïve to suggest that the projects of Mary Miss, Creative Time, and Denes operated independently from a neoliberal project to financialize land. Taking root at this time, neoliberalism describes a theory of political economy based on the belief that human well-being is best advanced by the maximization of private property, entrepreneurial freedom, and global free trade (Harvey 2007). Art often provides areas with cultural assets useful for increasing land value; artist communities are often harbingers of an area’s gentrification (Malik and Phillips 2012). Crucial to a neoliberal construction of space is the separation of people by class so that more wealthy people rarely encounter their poorer neighbors and their needs (Fitz 2019, 30). Racial dynamics caused by structural inequality play a part in this. *Wheatfield’s* target audience was the banks. Put another way, white, male bankers were the ones who primarily enjoyed the privilege of seeing it.

Iterations of *Wheatfield* reproduced in a disused railway curve in London (2009) and an empty lot in central Milan (2015) have also contributed to urban regeneration, coinciding with funding opportunities in the prelude to the 2012 London Olympics and Milan’s 2015 Expo. While the London project grew into a decade-long community garden that continues to thrive and welcome diverse local publics—albeit in an increasingly unaffordable area—its Milanese counterpart lasted only months during a period of redevelopment in which a vast business district was constructed, backed by Qatari and American funders.<sup>4</sup> Denes’ original New York *Wheatfield* could also be criticized for the short-term nature of its spatial presence.

A closer look at *Wheatfield’s* funding also raises questions. Alongside the Public Art Fund, *Wheatfield* was supported by American Cyanamid, a pharmaceuticals company involved at the time in numerous legal issues related to its environmental pollution of a river in New Jersey and price-fixing exposed in several litigations.<sup>5</sup> It was American Cyanamid that supplied Denes with a combine harvester (Enderby 2021). The corporation’s PR was overseen by the notorious lobbyist E. Bruce Harrison, whose

<sup>4</sup>Thanks to Peg Rawes and Nicolas Henninger for this information.

<sup>5</sup>*Wheatfield’s* sponsors were New York City Public Art Fund, The New York State Council on the Arts, The New York State Urban Development Corporation, The Battery Park City Authority, and American Cyanamid.

fundes included the National Agricultural Chemical Association (comprising pesticide producers). Harrison is known as the father of “green-washing,” and his books include *Corporate Greening 2.0* (Stauber and Rampton 1995). Harrison and American Cyanamid tried to hush revelations of the harms chemical pesticides and fertilizers wrought on natural habitats, including Rachel Carson’s ground-breaking 1962 book *Silent Spring* (Aronczyk 2021). Supporting Denes’ *Wheatfield* offered them a way to appear “green” while maintaining the capitalist, white, and patriarchal power structures upon which they depended. Was Denes making strategic and subversive use of available resources by accepting American Cyanamid’s support or risking her eco-ethical principles through a form of collaboration?

A similar ambiguity characterizes what Denes did with *Wheatfield*’s harvested straw. According to Denes, she donated it to New York City’s Mounted Police (Jones 2019, 226). Mounted constabularies are often deployed to suppress civil protest; New York City Police Department has a troubled record for class, race, and sex-based brutality (Erzen 2001; Nelson 2001). Was Denes’ gift naïve or ironic and subversive?

Beyond real estate, combine harvesters, and straw lies the larger question of art’s political agency and confinement in relation to the Anthropocene-Capitalocene. The history of art has long since been exposed as sharing a history with capital and its structures of power and domination (Berger 2008). How can ecological and socially minded artwork like *Wheatfield* ever subvert this?

## HARVESTING COMPLEXITY

*Wheatfield* invites us to consider the idea of hinterlands. But as we have seen, a closer look at what lies behind *Wheatfield* as an artwork reveals its own tangle of dominant and oppressed interests. If we use the idea of hinterland to envision a diagram of power and influence, in which Manhattan is the locus of economic control and Middle America its source of wealth, then where does *Wheatfield* insert itself? Does it disrupt a crucial part of the diagram, or conform to it? The answer is both. *Wheatfield*’s stated ambition to critique economic globalization and its role in damaging the climate is undoubtable. But its placement, funding, and cultivation insufficiently extricate it from the networks of capital it purports to confront. Studying *Wheatfield* today helps shed light on art’s potential for

disrupting ecologically and socially unjust systems—and the danger of ending up bolstering them.

*Wheatfield* critiques the capitalist proposition that nature is an endless bounty for profiteering. But, as Raymond Williams points out, propositions of the form “Nature is,” “Nature shows,” or “Nature teaches” are selective (1980, 70–71). Ideas of nature are human ideas, historically and politically determined. The same goes for *Wheatfield*. Denes’ ideas of nature are selective, tending toward both wilderness romanticism and a critical form of eco-socialism that visualizes, and thereby politicizes, the often-invisible links between urban life and the violence of hinterland extractivism (Brenner 2016, 126). Denes purposefully retains both romance and critique, and this retention is both *Wheatfield*’s legacy and its problem. *Wheatfield* uproots fixed definitions and cultivates complexity, yet never quite unsettles the idea of the hinterland, especially now that it has become such an iconic and reproduced image. What has grown after *Wheatfield* was harvested is a set of unresolved questions pertaining to global social and environmental justice. These questions reach far and wide, spreading like Denes’ wheat’s kernels, hopefully sprouting as future conversations and art practices.

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