

Notes on a Visual Philosophy

by Agnes Denes

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**HYPERION:
ON THE FUTURE OF AESTHETICS**

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INTRODUCTION

There is little doubt that most of the readers of *Hyperion* will need no introduction to Agnes Denes or her art. There is no doubt whatever that those familiar with contemporary art are thoroughly acquainted with Denes and with her inestimable accomplishments. One cannot be intimate with the art of the second half of the twentieth century and not know, and not frequently over the years have stood in awe of, the range, innovation, and intellectual breadth of Denes's work.

Yet, there is no reason to be remiss in observing here the achievements of one of the leading artists of the present moment. Agnes Denes has been one of the noted innovators in contemporary art over the past several decades, and she has been and is one of the most prominent philosophical forces in the field. Her work assembles a stunning array of intellectual disciplines and puts them in service of an aesthetic ambition that challenges the viewer's ability to comprehend the depth of her learning and the power of her imaginative transformation of her materials.

Throughout her career, Denes has reset the boundaries of artistic practice. Consistently, she has been ahead of her time, and, in many areas, remains to this day unrivalled among contemporary artists in her use of sophisticated materials of imaginative thought. She is one of the earliest of the Conceptual Artists, initiating many of the strategies that have become standard artistic practice, and a pioneer of ecological art. She has been an innovator in the use in art of serial imagery, linguistic analysis, and Deconstructive tactics, and, perhaps above all, in the artistic approach to philosophical issues, mathematics, and advanced theories of physical science.

Underlying this extraordinary range of intellectual endeavor is not only an extraordinary mind but a coherent and unified intellectual objective. Denes's aim is to employ her art as an integrative methodology, to draw together, or rather to demonstrate the inherent relationships among, the variety of areas of advanced inquiry that she investigates and that otherwise remain isolated in their self-defined fields of specialization. She takes art to be a language of visual perception, a form of *lingua franca* capable of opening a flow of information among what she terms "alien systems and disciplines." What makes such integration possible, and what innately subtends these self-distinguishing areas of investigation, is a system of universal forms and concepts. It is, for Denes, the business of art *per se*, and in particular of the art she has striven throughout her career to create, to visualize such forms, to dramatize them, and thereby to render a language for seeing the universal concepts—a language of "pure form," and thus a language of "pure meaning."

Art is capable of creating a new philosophy and a “new type of logic,” a logic of hidden patterns. It is a logic that makes art the central repository and integration platform for science, philosophy, and mathematics, as well as instinct, intellect, and the intuition—it is a logic that makes art the essential form of inquiry into the nature of the world. Her work can be seen as a project of aesthetic theorization, for as she has written, “Art is a reflection on life and an analysis of its structure.”

Agnes Denes is as capable and compelling a writer as she is an artist, and these propositions can be read in their full intricacy in the essay immediately below. “Notes on a Visual Philosophy” serves as something of a statement of purpose for Denes. It has long been out of print, and it serves here as the first in a series of writings by Denes, either out of print or never previously published, that *Hyperion* has the privilege of placing where they belong: into the ongoing public discourse. We humbly thank Agnes Denes for permitting us the distinction of publishing these materials.

—Mark Daniel Cohen

NOTES ON A VISUAL PHILOSOPHY

The symmetries operating in my work are subtle and complex. Some are more easily discernible than other, some operate on the surface of perceptions on the visual level, others are deeply hidden in the ideas and philosophies underlying my work. Whether obvious or subtle, visible or elusive, these symmetries are inherent and real. The fact that they were never consciously sought, since the work was not created with this goal in mind, makes their presence even more exciting.

In mathematics symmetries are precise, well-defined operations such as rotation, translation and inversion. In the sciences these operations are applied to an idealized physical world where they abound, ranging from bilateralism in people to celestial motion to time-reversible laws. Even broken symmetry, so popular among physicists today, has precise meaning. Logic, which manipulates concepts mathematically, has exact symmetries. In art and music they appear on many levels serving esthetic functions.

In my work everything, including symmetry, is created through a conscious use of instinct, intellect and intuitions. When I visualize (give form to) processes such as math and logic, or when I apply X-ray technology and electron microscopy to organic and crystal structures, one might say I reveal well-defined symmetries and antisymmetries. When I deal with abstract concepts definitions blur and the symmetries go beyond ordinary mathematical confines. Some examples follow:

—Mapping the loss that occurs in communication, i.e. between viewer and artist, between giver and receiver, between specific meaning and symbol, between nations, epochs, systems and universes.

—Mapping human parameters within the changing aspects of reality, within the transformations and interactions of phenomena.

—Working with the paradox, the contradictions of human existence such as our illusions of freedom and the inescapability of the system; our alienation in togetherness; the individual human dilemma, struggle and pride versus the whole human predicament; our importance or insignificance in the universe.

—Trying to give form to invisible processes such as evolution, changing human values, thought processes and time aspects (pinpointing the moment growth becomes decay in an organism: penetrating the “folds of time” to record its “instants”).

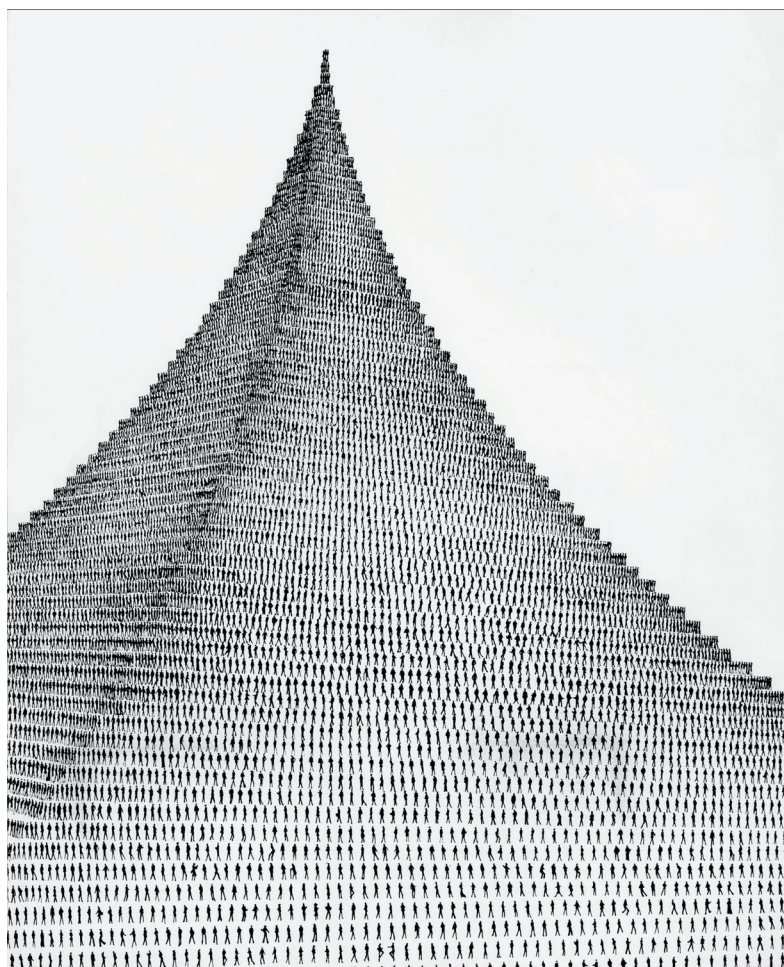
—Finding contradictions and balances, pitting art against existence, illusions versus reality, imagination versus fact, chaos versus order, the moment versus eternity, universals versus the self.

These symmetries are less available and definable but they are there nevertheless, working on mysterious levels in the interactions of phenomena and ideas. I may even venture to say that these unnamed, unmeasured symmetries operating in the network of concepts are the anatomy or substructure of invisible underlying patterns of existence that make new association and analogies possible.

The world is becoming more complex. Information and ideas are coming in faster than they can be assimilated, while disciplines become progressively alienated from each other through specialization. Even words lose their precision as they take on multi-meanings, while communication, based on superficial understanding of things, eventually breaks down. A new type of analytical attitude is called for, a clear overview or a summing up. Not losing sight of abstract reasoning, but using induction and deduction in the discovery of the real and concrete structures, the substances of things and ideas emerge. In this sense they represent the primary being of things to act as universal forms or ideas when brought to the surface to interact with each other. When “things” are pared down to their core or essence, superfluous data fall away and new associations and insights become possible.

**Agnes Denes, *Pascal's Perfect Probability Pyramid*
& *The People Paradox—The Predicament*, 1980 (detail)
Lithograph on paper, © 1980 Agnes Denes**

A society of isolated individuals who are imprisoned in a system of mathematical precision, inevitable and inescapable, and to them, invisible—they are each alone but fused into a single structure, free but determined by the form they make. They are a living paradox.



My concern is with the creation of a language of perceptions that allows the flow of information among alien systems and disciplines in which essences carry pure meaning into pure form and all things can be considered once more simultaneously. From specializations to essences, from patterns to symmetries, to form, seeking ultimates in the elemental nature of things and vice versa. Thus analytical propositions are presented in visual form where both the proposition and its deductive reasoning achieve their own essence and communicate visually. The resulting art is a dramatization or “visualization” of these forms, entities or summations. They are words, sentences or paragraphs in a language of seeing. They are the universal concepts or substances I often refer to in my writings.

To clarify this further, I consider a universal concept one that possesses universal validity and is

the perfect representative of a system or function. It can be a well-conceived, well-balanced idea with immediate universal connotations, that communicates directly and will yield further inquiries while it can withstand the stress of experimentation.

Universal concepts seeking analogies and new associations are not easily subjected to the analysis of symbolic logic. It takes a new type of logic and perhaps a new philosophy to categorize their symmetries and consequences.

When these hidden patterns and processes are realized in visual form ambiguities can be clarified, misconceptions reexamined and the subjective self-state of a system can be studied to seek the imperfection or restate the perfection in its design. Processes can be held still for analysis, their intricacies brought into perspective and all that is unseen, undiscovered or guessed at but feasible can gain recognition until it can establish its own validity.

Pattern finding is a symmetry operation. It is the purpose of the mind and the construct of the universe. There are an infinite number of patterns and only

some are known. Those that are still unknown hold the key to unresolved enigmas and paradoxes. Thus formal and exclusively visual information can be refined to such an extent as to impart the most precise and significant information in addition to visual gratification.

These thoughts are further clarified by quoting from my lecture entitled "Evolution and the Creative Mind". This lecture was first delivered at the Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C., 1976.

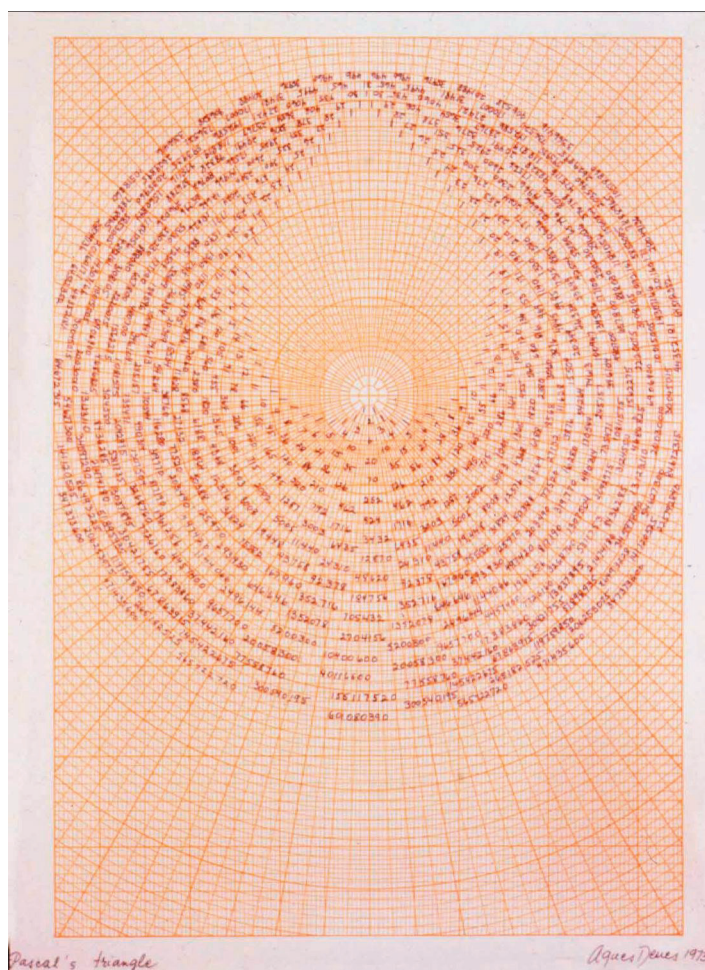
My art exists in a dynamic, evolutionary world of rapidly changing concepts and measures, where the appearances of things, facts and events are assumed manifestations of reality and distortions are the norm....

Although I deal with difficult concepts, my work remains visual. The process of "visualization" is doubly important since aspects of the work explore invisible systems, underlying structures and patterns inherent in our existence....

I incorporate science, philosophy and many other disciplines that enrich my work and are so necessary to any worthwhile human activity in the world today.

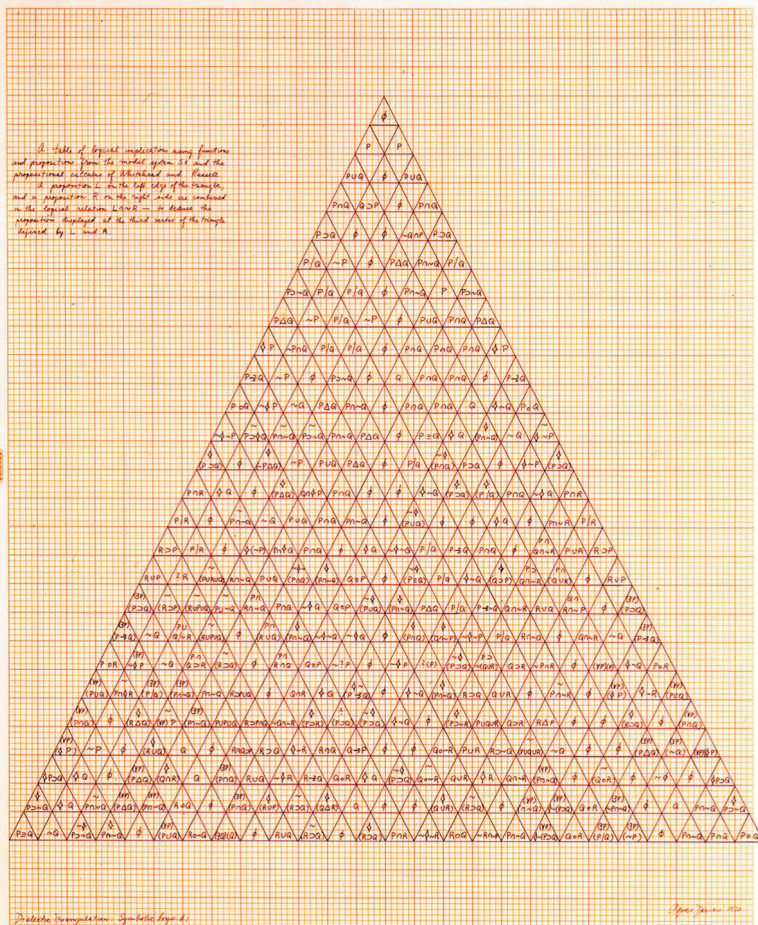
I communicate my ideas in whatever form is most true to the concept. It is the concept that dictates the mode of presentation. My projects take several years to complete and they are in a constant state of flux. The work follows an evolutionary attitude and process. It questions, dissects, reevaluates and reconstructs through the conscious use of instinct, intellect and intuition.

...By questioning our existence as well as existence itself, we create an art universal in terms of all humanity.



Agnes Denes, *The Human Argument*, 1969-70
India ink on orange graph paper, © 1970 Agnes Denes

A satire on human self-importance—based on the modal system S8 and the propositional calculus of Russell and Whitehead, the triangular table lists logical implications, functions, and hypotheses, the profundity of human thought reduced to its mathematical simplicity, procedural repetition, and ineluctability.



Personally, I am fascinated by our human position of being somewhere in the middle of this “existence.” We live on an average galaxy; we don’t live too long, and yet, we can look out to the edge of the universe into light years and penetrate the atom chasing quarks and another world within. The world seems to begin at the surface of our skin; there is a world beyond it and a world within, and the distance is about the same. I like that.

Once we abandon Newtonian static physics and accept Einstein’s four-dimensional principles of relativity, we question reality and know that even the laws of nature may undergo evolutionary changes. We even invented the uncertainty principle, although we use it for other reasons.

We haven’t begun to understand the implications of

this new, relativistic existence, where everything we had known and had believed now seems to be wrong. In this new dynamic world, objects become processes and forms are patterns in motion. Matter is a form of energy and our own human substance is but spinning velocity. There is no solid matter and no empty space: time becomes an earthbound reality but remains an enigma in the fourth dimension. We must create a new language, consider a transitory state of new illusion and layers of validity and accept the possibility that there may be no language to describe ultimate reality, beyond the language of visions.

In our limited existence, evolution provides answers as to where we’ve been and where we are going: a future prediction based on previous phenomena. The universe contains systems, systems contain patterns. The purpose of the mind is to locate these patterns and to seek the inherent potential for new systems of thought and behavior.

My work touches on the various stages of the development of my species, reevaluates and makes new comparisons in order to enhance perception and awareness, to form new insights and new methods of reasoning....

This analytical attitude probes the structural and philosophical significance of an invisible world where elusive processes, transformations and interactions of phenomena go unseen, buried in the substance of time and space. I am referring to known or unknown events hidden from recognition either by their nature of spatio-temporal limitations or by our being unaware of their existence and functions.

I believe that art is the essence of life, as much as anything can be a true essence. It is extracted from existence by a process. Art is a reflection on life and an analysis of its structure. As such, art should be a great moving force shaping the future.

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