

NATURE AND AGRICULTURE: MISPLACED ICONS OF URBAN RESISTANCE?

Artistic activity and images of agriculture, farming and nature: An analysis of Agnes Denes' WHEATFIELD –a confrontation (1982)

A lecture given as part of the conference;

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In the study of landfills, Land use (planning), Art and architecture (aesthetic), engineering (technology), Waste management, Biotic life systems and social systems of organisation all come together and reveal each other.

LANDFILLS remind us that all processes we instigate on this planet, arrive at some destination where they intend to be temporarily hidden from sight in order to allow the 'state of things' to be maintained. It is not a coincidence that often these places are set within areas of countryside, often in correspondence of old mining ground, or in wetlands and marshlands or even next to areas of special interest and outstanding beauty whilst still maintaining their invisibility.

It might even be said that the presence of a landfill can act as a temporary deterrent measure from development, as an unexpected agent of conservation.

Despite their post-closure seemingly pastoral appearances, landfills are some of the most heavily engineered places on our planet.

In their disguised state, they can be described as camouflaged pieces of hyperrealistic nature or *heterotopias*¹ in Foucauldian terms, perfectly embodying a definition of waste as 'the morning after of our romance of the new'².

Such state becomes quite clear during the transitional moment when plans for post-closure development are put in place. Their reclamation processes are often driven more by a desire of establishing an efficient and hasty return to real estate values than actually a conviction of the need to return the 'disturbed land' to a state of healthy and sustainable water, air and earth conditions.

In these instances of 'remediation', when new land values are established, or some previous ones supposedly reinstated, some shortcomings seems inbuilt in our systems of value that does not allow natural assets to be considered valuable for what they 'do'. Not for ourselves in aesthetic or financial terms or practical terms, but what they do for an ecological system. Such distinctions between 'resource' and 'commons' are often highlighted in environmental discourse.

The lack of an acknowledged *intrinsic* value of natural resources that may be validated against financial capital causes all sorts of problems of equity, scale and validity.

Whilst the concept of *Natural Capital*³ is brought forward by various environmental economists, is still far from being considered a platform for compensation for loss of natural resources within world trade for example. Mechanisms for calculating the value of a forest, a stream or a wetland have been tempted, but more to drive environmental arguments rather than proposing actual policies.

So when Agnes Denes, in relation to her work *Wheatfield*, talks about having reaped 158 dollars worth of wheat on a piece of land worth 4.5 billion dollars she is clearly cutting through and across notions of value system which may appear incompatible, and then again the physical and 'real' existence of the artwork, despite any reasonable and utilitarian opposition, speaks of a desire for a possible coherence between various system of knowledge and values.

¹ Foucault, Michel. (Spring 1986), *Of Other Spaces*, *Diacritics* 16, 22-27.

² Stam, R. and E. Shohat (2002). *Narrativizing Visual Culture (The Aesthetic of Garbage)*. *The Visual Culture Reader*. N. Mirzoeff. London, Routledge: 41-45.

³ Lansing, S. J., P. S. Lansing, et al. (1998). "The Value of a River." *Journal of Political Ecology* 5..

It is Denes herself which expresses such desires:

It is not one theory, it is many theories
It's not one model, it is many models
It is not a word, it is many words.⁴

In short we can say that landfills are unique vintage points from which cultural and natural system and their interdependent relations can be observed. They are our collective back garden and our most revealing 'social sculptures'.

In a pedagogic frame, they can help us see through an often reiterated but false opposition of natural vs cultural or urban vs rural.

Landfills are considered *disturbed*, not *contaminated* land and therefore their post-closure management fit within a specific framework of soil remediation. It is still hinging on the possibility of *returning* the land to previous uses, which on a strictly legislative level and despite the state of agriculture in UK, means *returning to arable land*. But today such premises are hardly met or even considered desirable beside being affordable.

The proportion of land use given to crop growth is constantly decreasing, with increasing preference given to returning of such areas to new development whenever possible, or leisure, forestry, wetland, golf course and public parks as alternatives.

The recent formation of two newly instituted cross-agency bodies such as NATURAL ENGLAND⁵, or the LAND RESTORATION TRUST⁶, are clear indication of these tendencies. As we speak, a tender process is deliberating the future of Lamby Way landfill in Cardiff as a site for a rapid post-closure redevelopment centred around the provision of a pay-and-play gold course, with other leisure, hotel and residential facilities.

In the case of landfills, geotextiles substitutes act as barriers in place of soil, but because of their specific purpose (stop water to come through – stop methane to come out) they can hardly be a soil replacement. In fact, more soil is often required in order to achieve the slopes grading necessary for proper drainage of the sites.

The 1m of soil described in the post-closure specifications for landfills relates to the strict minimum necessary for the possibility of a lively biological activity to take place within that soil that is 'growth'. Within the remit of the EU Common Agricultural Policy soil is considered a protected entity; our standards for a healthy soil mean a soil that can support a complex and diverse life system and harbour bioenergy for growth.

But here is where we encounter another cultural contradiction between the idea of the soil as protected entity, and the kind of treatment that intensive agriculture submit the soil to, with the consequence that level of nutrients in UK soil for example has fallen considerably in

⁴ Agnes Denes, interview with the writer, NYC 21st May 2005

⁵ <http://www.defra.gov.uk/rural/ruraldelivery/natural-england.htm>

⁶ <http://www.landrestorationtrust.org.uk/>

the last 40 years, and so is the level of proteins, anti-oxidant and vitamins in crops grown within such 'engineered soil'.

And whilst new soil can be engineered, a fully functional natural soil is ultimately a non-renewable source.

Going one step further, the full ambition of a GM integrated system, tend to surpass this natural limitation by effectively using the soil a mere 'carrier' of the *seeds-fertiliser-pesticide* fail-proof system, thereby affording complete product driven control rather than an open-ended process.

If we accept the term 'control' as a *cultural* one and the idea of 'open-endedness' as a *natural* one, we can see how easily concepts such as 'domination of nature' might set foot in debates about land use, despite the use -too frequent, too vague- of the term: 'sustainability'.

Let's also not forget in times of climate change that soils are still the largest carbon-sequestering medium in their capacity as biological engines of terrestrial ecosystems.

As an artist I am interested in systems, their interconnectedness, their flows and their effects on both land and people.

My interest springs from the fact that as an artist I have also been an audience of art, and in a sense learnt through observing and experiencing many work of art a kind of unspecified pedagogy which I believe can be useful in the understanding and when necessary, the promotion of change of the system observed.

For these reasons, I would like to pose as a possible point of convergence between our activities (art and agriculture) that a form of pedagogy exists in the experience of soil as much as in the experience of art, however different and separate they might be.

Could we then speak of a healthy soil as a system defined by its multidimensionality whose outcomes are equally repeated and still diverse every single time?

And can we equally say that a healthy cultural climate would respond to a similar definition?

Is this a simple representation of the idea of Earth > Art as terms of equivalence?
Can we still merely accept, like Hans Haacke once posited that Grass Grows?

It would be easy to fall back on known parallels between art and nature, between aesthetic theories and philosophies of nature, but a warning sign must caution us, that by seeking in history the root of our need and reason for a relationship today, we might end up missing the point. It is in a coherent and mutually informative exchange of knowledge of our present situation that something can truly develop.

What instead is potentially emerging, is a parallel between alternative positions of independence both of the artist operating a critical art practice, and the farmer as 'independent' from industrial logic of agricultural production.

Such ambitions are hard to conceive, establish and sustain but have their success rate too.

It could even be observed that the simultaneous emergence of practices such as 'organic' farming and farmers' markets in agriculture, and 'artist-run spaces' and 'socially oriented artist' in artistic practices might not be unrelated.

'The first condition of art's independence is not art's isolation but its re-occupation of the cultural field, whether in setting up alternative spaces or by doing alternative things in existing spaces.', says Dave Beech.

One could easily see how such methodologies of critical engagement, -in between resistance and compliance- could easily be transposed to farming activities in context of rural regeneration, in order to avoid the culturally bland and pompous excesses of parallel cases in large retail-based urban regeneration.



-Wheatfield: a confrontation. (1982)

New York City

commissioned by Public Art Fund.

Denes' field of wheat was developed out of an empty derelict tract of land filled with the debris of the WTC building site. Derelict but far from valueless (\$ 4.5 billions), the landfill was awaiting for its destiny, percolating its value possibly even through the attraction to the site that so much cultural activity would bring to it.

A yearly festival called Art on the Beach would take place on the site.

What was effectively a wasteland was set on a quick trajectory of growth by Denes' work, and the work instantly acquired a paradigmatic significance.

Denes' Wheatfield, pitched the **confrontation** in terms of Financial services vs. agricultural production, as if one would have been the antithesis of the other.

It seemed to remind us of days in which agricultural production, and in particular that of grains, was taken as an index of prosperity and wealth.

Even the iconic image of Agnes in the golden wheatfield with the World Centre in the background seemed nostalgically constructed –she takes all her photographs-, the worker forcefully at centre stage, idolised into a Demetrian-like figure towering over the World Trade Centre.

It could be seen as an image edging out of photographs of happy workers empowered by labour and protected by social organisation, in the semi-manufactured newsreels of socialist countries, commenting on the quinquennial plan moving ahead of its expectations. The perspectives on the photographs, as well tended to dwarf the towers in between the wheat, as to reverse the balances of power commonly held as true.

But also the terms of that confrontation were clear enough to send a powerful message of hidden dependency and misplaced priority.

And it is that idea, that of the *'the confrontation'* that I want to concentrate on today, particularly in view of the fact that the oppositional terms of the conflict envisaged by Wheatfield have been permanently altered by the 9/11 events.

And just as the spiteful visibility of power structures since 1982 has gradually disappeared from sight to turn into a far more deceptive system of shadowy and fluid identities merging and separating at will, so the crystal-clear iconic confrontation of Wheatfield has given way to much less clear iconography of resistance.

It is an easy and remorseless affair to shoot on a clear ugly target.

But it was exactly such a powerful visual metaphor –that of the direct confrontation- that would have possibly instigated the investigation of other, less visible and more surreptitious forces at play.

By setting up and fostering such dialectic Denes, pursued a multilayered agenda of meanings.

However powerful on a symbolic level, such confrontation revealed at a closer look some unexpected complexities and permeation between the adversaries.

In its comfortable terms (the good and the bad, the humble and the powerful, the cheap and the ostentatious), the confrontation was easy to popularise, but at the same time was couching far more compelling truths about food production, processing and distribution industry.

The idea of the agrarian world –the power of the soil- as an antidote to the arrogant world of financial services and large corporations held in reality a far less simplistic articulation.

Already in 1982, when Wheatfield took place, the grain production, processing and distribution industry was far from being antithetical to the world of large capital and finance.

Cargill was on its way to becoming the largest privately-owned corporation in the world.

The image of wheat, held as powerful, pure and natural, suddenly would acquire tarnish from its very nemesis, the large financial corporations, banks and investment firms housed in twin towers.

Couched by easily swallowed post-war humanistic argument of supply for the growing demand, the entry of agriculture into the ranks of 'business' meant increasing profit-based decisions at the expenses of the nutritional qualities of soil, of its product and, as a consequence of our health. Huge tracts of landscape changed their appearance to fit the new stewardship of intensive agri-business symbiotically linked to the emergence of giants of food production industry and retail business.

At present Cargill's interests range from supplying seeds to farmers, to receiving the harvests, to transport, processing, export, animal feed manufacture, rearing and processing animals for meat, and producing and marketing packaged food products, not to mention its consultancy, financial and professional services, as well as ramifications in steel, salt and petroleum industry.

So, in 1982 the field of wheat production was the theatre, as much as it is today, of expansion plans of what were then still called 'multinationals' but today we would more likely refer to as 'global businesses'. And Cargill's presence is truly global; when the US presidency changes, one of the first visits the newly elected president receives is from the Cargill's CEO.

Cargill has also been heavily involved in the rows between EU and US regarding the commerce of GM crops. Cargill's most direct involvement in GM technology is in **Renessen**, a joint venture with Monsanto, formed in May 1998, to develop crops specifically designed for 'improved' animal feeds.

A future scenario develops and one that is crucial in understanding some large players' views on the future of mainstream agricultural production.

Cargill operates at every stage of the agricultural food supply chain, from seed to packaged end product.

It is this vertical integration, together with its vision of contract farming, which explains its extreme keenness for GMOs.

Artist are famous visionaries, but when it comes to enactment, the corporate-style vision may be less poetic but it has all the structures in place to enable plans to be effectively turned into a working structures:

- 1- A grain farmer buys all his inputs as a 'package', including seeds from Renessen, herbicide from Monsanto and fertilizer from Cargill.
- 2- He signs a contract, which determines the growing and handling conditions, to deliver the produce to Cargill at a specified price and quality;
- 3- the farmer sells the harvest to a Cargill elevator (storage facility);
- 4- Cargill processes the harvest into animal feed;
- 5- Cargill ships the animal feed to Thailand;
- 6- there it is fed to poultry, by a farmer under contract to Cargill (as with the grain farmer);
- 7- Cargill buys the poultry and processes, cooks and packages it;
- 8- Cargill ships the packaged product to Europe, and sells it to McDonald's or a supermarket.

Now this might be an extreme scenario, but even in a much less synergic degree, it is easy to see that, in contrast to a farmer, who really has to accept the market as it is, Cargill

has a large amount of influence over the nature and direction of the market, or in some cases, Cargill *is* the market. The field of cultural production is also increasingly displaying similar synergies.

Just in 1998/1999 Cargill vastly expanded its empire by buying out its second largest competitor in the US market, Continental Grain.

The direct interest of Cargill in the matter, and the sheer power of their market share, meant that when the main British supermarkets decided after public pressure to exclude the use of GM crops for animal feed found very difficult, if not impossible, to locate alternative sources of product within the global marketplace.

And staying in the UK market, Cargill acquired Allied Wheat, a subsidiary of ABNA (*Associated British Nutrition & Agriproducts*), and part of ABF (*Associated British Foods*), and in the process changed its name into Frontier.

Cargill also owns Sun Valley, the largest poultry producer in the UK, with interests also in France and the Netherlands.

In a recent interview with Agnes, I got to know that the Durum wheat that was planted at Battery Park came from Minnesota.

The Minnesota Museum of Art in Saint Paul was later on in 1987 the initiator of the INTERNATIONAL ART SHOW FOR THE END OF WORLD HUNGER, in which Denes contributed the grains grown on Wheatfield in an act of restitution of the seed back to the audiences of the show which were invited to help themselves to the wheat.

Cargill's headquarters in the United States is in Minneapolis, Minnesota.

Cargill, in 1999 donated to the University of Minnesota \$10 million to expand the university's work in the emerging field of microbial and plant genomics.

The gift would be used for a facility on the St. Paul campus, and would be expected to strengthen the university's position in the genomics field.

But Wheatfield was also an exercise of redemption of a tract of derelict land caused by displacement, and even a commentary of how and why tracts of land are considered derelict and for whose interest such classification plays an important part.

What we might want to remember is that in order to create the 16-acre World Trade Center site, five streets were closed off and 164 buildings were demolished.

Construction required the excavation of more than 1.2 million cubic yards of earth, which was used to create 23.5 acres of land along the Hudson River, a part of which in 1982 (2 acres) became Wheatfield. Such acts of displacement on a massive scale provoked very mixed reaction even at the project inception.

It was mostly through the steady pressure of the then director of Chase Manhattan Bank David Rockefeller and his brother and New York Governor Nelson Rockefeller that the project was realized.

Once again, confrontational stances emerged, also in the light of the persistent unpopularity of the towers, their slick, solid, unattainable surface talking about clear priorities of social character and land use.

Again, as often noted, nature (mind you it always appears in singular, unified form, even if we speak of its diversity, assuming its total interconnectedness) could be seen as an 'icon of urban resistance'.

Images of Nature, fertility, agriculture, as an unequivocal barrage against urban development would assume the role of a 'reality' pitted against the 'naturalisation' of social constructions.

Some of these views emerged strongly in New York as the context in which Wheatfield developed in the early 80's. The various activities on the other side of downtown in the area known as Losaida or Lower East Side, would include urban agriculture, independent power generation, fish farming, and at some point even a workshop by Buckminster Fuller on how to build geodesic domes.

It was precisely the presence of large area of architectural dereliction and abandon in NYC which allowed the 'return' of some forms of unexpected vegetation within decaying urban areas. Migrant seeds, waste deposits, lack of care all allowed such developments.

And these were exactly the transitional phases in urban development between entropy and growth that fostered a temporary suspension of many typical urban paradigm and the unsteady balance that allowed experimentation. Such conditions would later reappear for example in Berlin and remained characterised by a temporary reinvention of land uses and brief moments of suspension from speculative interests.

What many of these enterprises tended to, at the risk of romanticising once again nature as a benign force (cure) against the 'malignant' forces of the city, was to directly affect planning practices colluding with large capital investments, and to open up the too clear-cut debate between nature and culture.

In the light of the developments of both the sites and the local-global context where Wheatfield took place we might make some observation on the terms in which the 'confrontation' mentioned in its title has mutated.

Wheatfield was a temporary project and by the end of the 80's the whole area was to become Battery Park City, completed with many pieces of permanent Public Art embedded within the architectural structures of the development.

If the level of experimentation afforded by temporary cycles of decay and regeneration in many western cities allowed for the existence of pouches of diversity within the bland value driven land use, today's agenda of sustainability, if taken seriously, would point towards more permanent and structured choices rather than the mere exploitation of gaps in the market place.

Urban growth continues and it is actually in a largely expanding phase, whilst agriculture is at the same time under the spell of a shrinking phase and a renowned interest.

But mostly, the terms of that confrontation changed with 9/11, and Agnes Denes, aware of both the 20th anniversary of Wheatfield and with the resilience of the challenge set towards the Twin Towers in 1982, went back to the site and documented it photographically.

Instantly, the whole iconography of Wheatfield was voided of its hanging hook, as another land displacement was taking place, that of the mixed remnants of the WTC rubble and its trapped bodies within, to the Fresh kills landfill specifically reopened for the occasion.

