

RICE/TREE/BURIAL
(Sullivan County, New York, 1968; Artpark,
Village of Lewiston, NY in Niagara County, New York, 1977-79)

Rice/Tree/Burial was first realized in 1968 in Sullivan County, New York, as a private ritual. It was a symbolic "event" and announced my commitment to environmental issues and human concerns. It was also the first exercise in Eco-Logic.

I planted rice to represent life (initiation and growth), chained trees to indicate interference with life and natural processes (evolutionary mutation, variation, decay, death), and buried my Haiku poetry to symbolize the idea or concept (the abstract, the absolute, human intellectual powers, and creation itself). These three acts constituted the first transitional triangulation* (thesis, antithesis, synthesis) and formed the Event. According to evolutionary theories, Event is the only reality, while the reality we perceive is forever changing and transforming in an expanding evolutionary universe in which time, space, mass, and energy are all interconnected and interdependent.

Rice represented a universal substance referring to sustenance and the life-giving element, while the seed itself denoted the nucleus, first principle or cause—the beginning. The act of sowing implied the source of growth, the introduction of a thing into another environment in order to initiate a process, the setting of something into motion (fertilization, conceiving, induction).

The chaining of trees signified linkage, connective units and associations, flexibility and restraint. It implied bondage, defeat, interference with growth—decay. The act of chaining brought attention to the mysterious life-force of an organism and its partial triumph over boundaries and restraints—its uneven limited transcendence. Chaining trees also expressed choice, the selection and defining necessary in the creative process.

The texture of the forest, having been interrupted by the reordering of its elements, yielded unique structures of isolated or combined sculptural forms. The chains became additional limbs and blended into their surroundings to become visible only in certain lights, angles, and perspectives, conveying the conflicting and interdependent aspects of art and existence, illusion and reality, imagination and fact. The chained trees stood as monuments to human thought versus nature.

The burial of my haiku formed the essence of thinking processes (consciousness, deductive reasoning, and the logic of emotions). It represented the concept as essence of invention, which connects and defines life and death and acts as modifier and rationale for both.

I kept no copies of my poetry, thereby relinquishing, "giving up to the soil," something personal and precious—an act that also symbolized the self-denial and discipline required by this new analytical art form.

The act of burial, or placing into the ground and receiving from it, a cause-and-effect process, marks our intimate relationship with the earth. On the one hand, it indicates passing, returning to the soil, disintegration, and transformation; on the other, generation and life-giving, placing in the ground for the purpose of planting. It is also a metaphor for human intelligence and transcendence through the communication of ideas—in this case, to future descendants.

All three imply change from one form to another, cyclic phenomena, transformation—as from chaos to order and back. Consequently, all three idea representatives or metaphors—the rice, the tree, the burial—become analogous, interactive and interdependent, creating the tension of opposing forces acting on each other and the momentum necessary to pass from one state to another and into further propositions.

Their interaction creates a counterbalance as they pass into each other's realm or meaning to become successively interchangeable through their inherent polarity.

The ritual marked the beginning of my involvement with the creation of a "visual philosophy," a complex process that explores essences as forms of communication. It finds methods to put analytical propositions into visual form, defines elusive processes and creates analogies among divergent fields and thought processes. It challenges the status quo and tests its own validity.

In the summer of 1977, the ritual was re-enacted and realized on a full scale at Artpark (Lewiston, NY), completing the first cycle in the evolutionary process of my work and marking an important phase in its development. This periodical summation is a natural evolutionary phenomenon. Organisms probe their environment to find best possible ways to survive by developing memory and the ability to compare. In our limited existence, this long view of reaching back and re-examining provides answers as to where we have been and where we are going.

I planted a half-acre rice field 150 feet above the Niagara gorge. The site marked the birthplace of Niagara Falls between Canada and the U.S., 12,000 years ago. The rice grew up mutant, an unforeseen consequence of Artpark having been a dumpsite near Love Canal.

I chained the trees in a sacred forest that was once an Indian burial ground, long since looted and desecrated, working under the watchful eyes of the Indians who seemed to hover over us in the trees and cover our bodies in the form of eerie spiders.

I then climbed out to the edge of Niagara Falls and filmed it for seven days, adding the forces of nature, as a fourth element, to this cycle of dialectics. With this act I also affirmed that my art functioned on the edge of the unknown in a delicate balance of the universals and the self, of the moment and of eternity—and was not afraid to assume the risks such art must take.

The shaky ledge from which I filmed had been dynamited to control the retreat of the falls. Soon after my filming, it fell into the white foam below.

The time capsule was buried at Artpark at 47° 10' longitude and 79° 2' 32" latitude. It contained no objects other than the microfilmed responses to a questionnaire that had traveled around the world, and a long letter I wrote addressed "Dear Homo Futurus."

The questionnaire was composed of existential questions concerning human values, the quality of life, and the future of humanity. The responses were primarily from university students in various countries where I spoke or had exhibitions of my work. Within the context of the time capsule, the questionnaire functioned as an open system of communication, allowing our descendants to evaluate us not so much by the objects we created—as is customary in time capsules—but by the questions we asked and how we responded to them.

The desiccated microfilm was placed in a steel capsule inside a heavy lead box in nine feet of concrete. A plaque marks the spot: at the edge of the Indian forest, surrounded by blackberry bushes. The time capsule is to be opened in 2979, in the thirtieth century, a thousand years from the time of the burial.

There are, still within the framework of this project, several time capsules planned on earth and in space, aimed at various time frames in the future.

Agnes Denes, 1979

QUESTIONNAIRE

Do you believe humanity will become extinct one day?

If so, should this influence our attitude or change our thinking and actions?

What governs your actions? Do you think there is a force influencing what happens?

What do you want out of life?

Why not more?

Are you religious? If so, do you think it could be habit or conditioning?

What do you care about most?

How do you feel about death?

What would mean the greatest happiness to you?

Do you hate anything?

What do you think hate is?

What is love?

Which do you think will prove ultimately more important to humanity—science or love?

If there are different kinds of love, what connects them?

What would you say the human purpose is?

What would you rather be, if you had a choice?

If we are results of a development, in what direction is that development moving?

What do you consider humanity's most important achievement?

If human curiosity is the result of a mind half used, do you think the mysteries will be solved when the mind is filled?

In what way do you feel that you are defeated?

In what way do you feel that you are triumphant?

What do you consider to be the major differences between humanity and "lesser" animals?

Do you think we are slaves to our customs?

How could we overcome this?

What would perfect existence consist of?

What is ultimate reality?

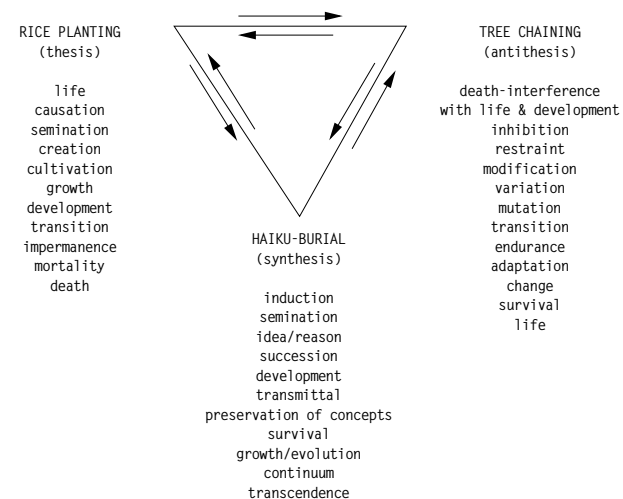
Do you think humanity should be more practical or more visionary (ethical, magnanimous, creative, humanistic, etc.)?

EXERCISES IN ECO-LOGIC

The first visual transitional triangulation was realized in the summer of 1968, in Sullivan County, New York.

RICE was planted to represent life/growth; TREES were chained* to represent interference with life/growth; and HAIKU** was buried to represent the idea, the abstract, the absolute.

We begin with something vital or controversial—LIFE; find its opposite—DEATH; then proceed to establish a connective link, intermediate rationale, which modifies the first two (deductive, assertive, or expository) and transitions them to a higher trichotomy—IDEA.



* TREE CHAINING: testing the strength of an idea to determine which is stronger: thought or nature.

** HAIKU BURIAL: Haiku poetry written before 1968 buried in an airtight container, twelve feet deep.

Agnes Denes, 1969