

WHEATFIELD-A CONFRONTATION (1982)
Commissioned by the Public Art Fund

The Philosophy

My decision to plant a wheat field in Manhattan instead of designing just another public sculpture grew out of the long-standing concern and need to call attention to our misplaced priorities and deteriorating human values.

Manhattan is the richest, most professional, most congested and, without a doubt, most fascinating island in the world. To attempt to plant, sustain, and harvest two acres of wheat here, wasting valuable real estate and obstructing the machinery by going against the system, was an effrontery that made it the powerful paradox I had sought for the calling to account.

It was insane. It was impossible. But it would draw people's attention to having to rethink their priorities and realize that unless human values were reassessed, the quality of life, even life itself, was in danger. Placing it at the foot of the World Trade Center, a block from Wall Street, facing the Statue of Liberty, also had symbolic import. My work usually reaches beyond the boundaries of art to deal with controversial global issues, questioning the status quo and the endless contradictions we seem to accept into our lives—namely, our ability to see so much and understand so little, to have achieved technological miracles while remaining emotionally unstable; our great advantages, desirable, even necessary for evolution and the world's ecosystem or for that matter the individual human dilemma, struggle, and pride versus the whole human predicament.

Wheatfield was a symbol, a universal concept. It represented food, energy, commerce, world trade, economics. It referred to mismanagement, waste, world hunger, and ecological concerns. It was an intrusion into the Citadel, a confrontation of High Civilization. Then again, it was also Shangri-La, a small paradise, one's childhood, a hot summer afternoon in the country, peace, forgotten values, simple pleasures.

What was different about this wheat field was that the soil was not rich loam but a dirty landfill full of rusty metals, boulders, old tires, and overcoats. It was not farmland but an extension of the congested downtown of a metropolis where dangerous crosswinds blew, traffic snarled, and every inch was precious real estate. The absurdity of it all, the risks we took and the hardships we endured were all part of the basic concept. Digging deep is what art is all about.

Wheatfield affected many lives, and the ripples are extending. Some suggested that I put my wheat up on the wheat exchange and sell it to the highest bidder, others that I apply to the government for a farmers' subsidy. Reactions ranged from astonishment to being moved to tears. A lot of people wrote to thank me for creating *Wheatfield* and asked that I keep it going.

After my harvest, the area facing the New York Harbor was returned to construction to make room for a billion-dollar luxury complex. Manhattan closed itself once again, to become a fortress, corrupt yet vulnerable. But I think this magnificent metropolis will remember a majestic, amber field. Vulnerability and staying power, the power of the paradox.

The Act

Early in the morning on the first of May 1982 we began to plant a two-acre wheat field in lower Manhattan. The planting consisted of digging 285 furrows by hand, clearing off rocks and garbage, then placing the seed by hand and covering the furrows with soil. Each furrow took two to three hours.

Since that March, over 285 truckloads of dirty landfill had been dumped on the site, consisting of rubble, dirt, rusty pipes, and other garbage. Tractors flattened the area and 80 more truckloads of dirt were dumped and spread to constitute the ten-inch minimum of topsoil needed for planting.

We maintained the field for four months, set up an irrigation system, seeded and cleared out wheat smut (a disease that had affected the entire country that year). We put down fertilizers, cleared off rocks, boulders, and wires by hand and sprayed against mildew fungus.

"We" refers to my two faithful assistants and a varying number of volunteers, ranging from one or two to six or seven on a good day.

We harvested the crop on 15 August 1982 on a hot, muggy Sunday. The air was stifling, and the city stood still. All those Manhattanites who had been watching the field grow from green to golden amber and gotten attached to it—the stockbrokers, economists, office workers, tourists and others attracted by the media coverage—stood around in sad silence. Many cried. TV crews were everywhere, but they too spoke little and then in a hushed voice.

We harvested more than 1,000 pounds of healthy, golden wheat. The harvested grain traveled to twenty-eight cities around the world in an exhibition called *The International Art Show for the End of World Hunger (1987-90)*. The hay was given to the city's mounted police for the horses, and the seeds were carried away by people.

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Later that same year, in 1982, during the wheat embargo with Russia, I proposed the synchronized planting of three wheat fields to the governments of the three superpowers in Moscow, Beijing, and Washington, D.C.

In this vein, I proposed the planting and harvesting of two more wheat fields on the Diomed Islands in the short summer months available for growth near the Arctic Circle. Bringing the United States and the USSR together in a symbolic act of unification, the wheat, when mixed, would produce the hardiest hybrid available to be planted in poor soil anywhere in the world, serving as universal concept and metaphor.

A harvest festival was proposed to celebrate the miracles of life, growth, endurance, global consciousness, and cooperation.

Agnes Denes, 1982