Emma Stone
by DIANE KEATON

LILY TOMLIN by Hilton Als
WILLIE NELSON by Woody Harrelson
RENZO PIANO by Mark Di Suvero

PLUS: Matthias SCHOENAERTS, Action BRONSON, and Abbey LEE

MAY | 10.00
Agnes DENES

By MAIKA POLLACK
Portrait: GRANT DELIN

FOR MORE THAN FOUR DECADES, EARTHWORK ARTIST
AGNES DENES HAS USED THE RAW MATERIALS OF NATURE TO
MAKE SOME OF THE MOST STUNNING, TRANSPORTING, AND
ENVIRONMENTALLY CONFRONTATIONAL PUBLIC WORKS

Since the late 1960s, Hungarian-born artist Agnes Denes has created large-scale, public environmental installations including, perhaps most famously, 1982’s Wheatfield—A Confrontation, in which she planted, tended, and harvested a two-acre field of wheat on a landfill in lower Manhattan not far from the World Trade Center. In a widely reprinted image of the work, Denes, in blue jeans and a striped shirt, stands alone in a field of golden wheat framed by the buildings of the financial district. The provoking work contrasted urban and rural, finance and agriculture, manual labor and artistic value, and also revolutionized the possibilities of public art. Still prolific at age 83, Denes is planning two major projects for 2015. This month, she’ll present The Living Pyramid, her first large-scale public work in New York since Wheatfield, a 40-foot-tall living sculpture constructed from tons of topsoil planted with grasses and wildflowers, the installation will be presented at Socrates Sculpture Park in Long Island City, Queens. Also this summer, a new version of the iconic wheat field will be grown and harvested on five hectares of land in the center of Milan at the invitation of Fondazione Riccardo Catella, Fondazione Nicola Trussardi, and Confagricoltura.

A pioneer of earth art, Denes was born just before earthworks artists like Walter De Maria, Robert Smithson, and Richard Serra. While her work also utilizes the landscape as a site, unlike those artists, Denes’s mathematical forests, rice fields, wheat fields, and pyramids developed alongside the growing environmental movement of the 1970s and an interest in minimizing man’s ecological impact on the natural world. Today Denes still lives and works in a loft in the center of SoHo. Tables are covered with intricate plans for projects both realized and as-yet unconstructed; the walls are lined with philosophy books. She invited me there this past February to talk about her new pyramid in Long Island City, mathematics, inventing a new kind of airplane, and being a woman artist in New York in the male-dominated art world of the 1960s and 70s.

MAIKA POLLACK: How did the project at Socrates come about?

AGNES DENES: How do all projects come about? They say, “There is Agnes Denes—let’s do something with her.” To me the most important thing about a work is the machinations of how it comes about, working it out, working with these guys [Socrates directors Elissa Goldstone and Katja Denny Harowitz], learning about the difficulties of the project, and rising to the occasion. Because I’m alone so much—research, libraries, writing—collaboration is wonderful.

POLLACK: You created your first ecological site work in the late 1960s. How did you get involved in making public art?

DENES: Public art existed all along, but ecological art just naturally grew out of my thinking and writings in that area for years. I didn’t get involved in it; I started what then became a movement.

POLLACK: Critic Klaus Ottmann links the work that you’re doing to Joseph Beuys and Allan Kaprow as part of a critique that harnesses creative practices to challenge social norms and the status quo. So it seems like there’s this moment in your practice when you stop making paintings, let’s say, and you start making work that has a public impact ...

DENES: I became involved in this, more or less, at the tail end of abstract expressionism. And I’m mostly self-taught. I didn’t learn much in school. But I was always interested in these issues. And I had to see if it’s not painting that I wanted. So I went through about six or seven painting methods just to see what I didn’t want to do. And then I got off the wall, and went into the environment.

POLLACK: Were you aware of Allan Kaprow at that time?

DENES: No, I was not in touch with many of the artists who were functioning at that time. And then...
when I became interested in them, they would not allow me to be in their group, because it was a close-knit boys group. So I was on my own—totally. And there's something good about that. Because not only did you dig deeper into yourself, but adversity—in other words, not getting acknowledgements from outside—brings out the best in you. To react to it and to become better.

Pollack: Would you say there's a relationship for you between painting and earth art or land art in terms of coming off the wall?

Denes: I was finished with painting. I was totally finished with it. What I did for my last act as a painter, if you call me a painter, was to photograph the weave of the canvas, and enlarge it and enlarge it until it became like a landscape. It wasn't a conscious thing. It just became a landscape. And then I went into the landscape. Most wonderful things are unconscious. The most important works were done early on, like the private ritual for the Red/Tree/Burial—an "event" in which Denes planted rice, chained trees, and buried a time capsule of her haka poetry, in Sullivan County, New York, in '68.

Pollack: Tell me more about Red/Tree/Burial.

Denes: The work was created for philosophical purposes to begin with. To evaluate, for instance, a relationship to the earth. The way we put our seed in it, for it to grow. The way we put our dead in it. The way we put time capsules in it to communicate with the future. All of humanity is this tiny, little surface around the globe. It's what? Fifty feet high, where humanity exists? That's it, all of humanity. We go beyond it a little bit, sometimes. Go up to a hundred feet, or a thousand feet, with a building. But mostly life is 50 feet above the surface. So I found that fascinating, and that's why Rice/Tree/Burial was born. I did that as a private ritual. I planted the rice field, which was planting seed in the ground; chained trees to indicate interference with life; life and death, communication, and thesis/antithesis/synthesis was the basic concept for that. And that's how it started. So it wasn't for expansion or for using anything large out there, but it had to be created in the environment.

Pollack: When you say it was a private ritual, what role does photography play in these performances or events? Because I've seen photographs of this and other works of yours—the photographs of Whatfield are iconic.

Denes: I did most of the photography myself, by the way, for Whatfield.

Pollack: Well, you're in one of them.

Denes: I'm in one of them; that was a Life photographer who came. He said, "Hold the staff in your hand." I said, "That's ridiculous." He said, "Just hold it." Pollack: And that's the one that gets printed everywhere.

Denes: Yeah, that's the only one.

Pollack: So you were in charge of most of your own photography for the other works?

Denes: There's nobody else to do it, so I had to do it.

Pollack: I was just at a panel at MoMA where the discussion was about photography's relationship to performance.

Denes: I never thought of myself as a performance artist until they said, "Well, you're performing out there." I am? You know, you look into the project and you don't see yourself the way other people see you.

So I never considered myself a performance artist. But that's unimportant, that's neither here nor there. We were talking about the earth art or land art, which started for different reasons than mine. My reasons were philosophical and about changing the ecology. It was, like, 45 years ago. Nobody thought about that. Nobody even believed that it was important. And even today you have to really convince people. Even today there are people saying there is no global warming. I mean, people are always fighting reality until it's pushed down their throats. It's amazing. For some land artists, to extend their studio space was more ego; it was not for ecological purposes. I'm not accusing only men of having egos because everybody has an ego, but their art was not for the purpose of ecological reasons; it was to expand their art, to have more space. And Smithson, whose work I like very much, he died flying over a field that he was surveying for a drawing in space. My work is about helping humanity. Looking back on my work, I now see that each one of them is trying to help a major problem for humanity and trying to give it a benign solution. Every one of my works, when I'm looking back, becomes... (Continued on page 116)
more ACTION BRONSON

(CONTINUED FROM PAGE 41) starting to get into the groove of things. I haven't totally hit my stride yet, so there's a lot more to come. I can sit in the big living room right here on a nice fucking leather couch from Jennifer Convertibles, and just get to do what I want to do. [laughs]

HILL: I hit you up after I heard “Easy Rider.” I was like, “This is a new leaf turned.” You're not holding anything back. And sometimes people not holding anything back isn't good. [laughs] But I hear this and go, “Okay. F**k yes. This is Action.”

BRONSON: That's a big decision to make back. I had to be my own man. I worked with my father [as a cook at his restaurant] for a long time. I acted real immature. And when I broke my leg, I just felt like, after that, I was just going to go fucking balls to the wall with everything that I did. I was going to make decisions and stick with them, and they just turned out to be right. When you take responsibility for your life, good things start happening.

HILL: Well, when you're just yourself and you're eccentric ... I told your manager, “You walk Action into a room, people don't see some TV actor or some shit—it's like he's already a star. There's something magnetic about him that's magnetic from him.”

BRONSON: I'm like a diamond in the rough, man. I just see the value, the rarities of people.

BRONSON: It's some rare shit, man, because I'm not your typical looking person.

HILL: [laughs] It's not that.

BRONSON: I appreciate it. Some people don't get it.

HILL: Obviously, we can't really talk about your career without the Blue Chips mixtapes, which are required listening. And then I heard Sadat X>No Strain<br/>'[2013], and I love “Alligator,” but I wasn't sure if it was actually capturing as a whole what I loved about you.

BRONSON: Well, that's exactly why that same year I put out Blue Chips 2 because I felt like I did not display my rhyming to the best of my ability on that. Even though the songs were connecting more, I wasn't satisfied. And with Blue Chips, I'm totally satisfied. I got to shine and do exactly as I feel, and I can't stop, won't stop.

HILL: Right, it wasn't just respect to the music because there's some song on the album that ...

BRONSON: Oh, never. We're on the same fucking page. I totally knoaw why you said that. I've been saying this since it came out. That project is good, but I wasn't in the right headspace. I was a little bit combustible to tell you the truth. I was a little bit hardheaded, so I might have not let that go to the best of its potential, and it was the decision that I had to live with.

HILL: The movies I've done that have felt big to me, the ones where people have a lot of pressure behind them or are telling me, “This is how it has to be done ...” while I'm doing it, I have that in my stomach knowing that it's not going to be my most elevated stuff.

BRONSON: It's the same shit for me. Exactly.

HILL: And so the lesson you take away is that when you're feeling forced and you're feeling this is for other people, then it's not going to end up like those other projects.

BRONSON: One hundred percent. I live by that. If you release something else, you're going to like it. If you're really into it, and you're feeling good about things, you have space to create, let your mind flow, let things happen naturally, then they want to happen—not with someone telling you to do it, and then you try too hard, and then you fuck up. Nothing good ever comes from that type of pressure.

HILL: I think that's a great lesson to go to this record, because I had to work at my own pace and do what I wanted to do. I'll never get out of my zone again with music, I was in a bad fucking mind frame, snapped out of it—boom, boom, boom, we're here now. I learned my lesson.

HILL: I know I've had to go through experiences where I felt less in control or more pushed around by people, and then, as painful as any of those moments might have been, the shit that gets after—out of the anger and lessons learned from those—ends up being the shit that you're most proud of.

BRONSON: Absolutely. I ended up putting out fucking incredible work after that. With this new shit, man, it's a fucking musical. I'm going to make a fucking Broadway play out of it; on Broadway, where Cats was, the Winter Garden Theatre; I'm taking over.

HILL: You should do your album release party at Katz's.

BRONSON: [laughs] That would be fucking ridiculous.

HILL: Dude, I'm not going to bring up the body-shaming shit. I'm sure you have to talk about it in every interview, but to me, just as a fan, I love it. I just think it's amazing. It just adds to the mystique of Bronsonmania. When fools would come up on the stage, you body slam them.

BRONSON: Man, listen. This is what happens. I have to protect myself. A lot of these little fucking towns, the security guards are, like, half my fucking size. I'm like 5'8, 5'9 on my best day. New York. And these dudes are six feet tall, they're not doing shit, and kids get wild. They see one motherfucker do it, they get slammed violently, and it keeps on happening. They just want to be on World Star, or they just want to say, “Oh, Bronson slammed me!”

BRONSON: There's some '80s wrestling element to it.

BRONSON: It's a live show. My live show is based upon EGO [Extreme Championship Wrestling]. I always say that because the wrestlers used to go in the crowd and wrestle in the crowd, and it would get crazy. You might get hit with a chair, you might get a little blood on you. It was just fucking fun. I want people to have a good time. I want people to be able to touch me. I'm understanding now that I'm not going to be able to do that at every venue, but I've done it in Africa, with 35,000 people. I've done it in Australia, New Zealand—every country I've been in, I've been in the crowd. I don't give a damn. But you know how it goes these days, man. What if I don't do it in this city? Whose fault is it at that point? I'm not really sure, because I'm not going at them—they're coming on to my stage. I'm paid to perform there, so I'm working there. There's got to be some kind of workaround's compensation when I do something to somebody that's trying to invade the work area. It almost went wrong really badly in Europe. Some kid jumped on stage, we threw him, and he flipped over. Who knows what the fuck happened? It's not a good idea to do that. It puts me in crazy fucking jeopardy. You know about Dinébag Darrell [a founding member of Panthera who was killed on stage by a gunman]. Come on, man, you can't get fucking Dinébag Darrell-ed. Let's just knock on fucking wood, man, because I'm about to go on this goddamn world tour. Let's hope that things go well.

HILL: Wonder how many people get your humor. You walk this really brilliant and delicate balance of being of kind of like a street scambag while being brilliantly funny. I mean, that's what you do. You're just more skilled at it.

BRONSON: [laughs] I think that's what I'm going for. HILL: A lot of your shit has to do with luxury, like somersaults out of a helicopter.

BRONSON: [laughs] Crazy gymnastics. Unheard of gymnastics moves.

HILL: Just the idea of being dropped from a helicopter doing somersaults and landing on a boat with skis going down a mountain; it's so ferocious.

BRONSON: The thought of it is ridiculous. HILL: It's absurd, absurd luxury. For you, a larger man in a velour ski suit doing a somersault out of a helicopter dropping you off down a ski mountain into a split ... BRONSON: Doesn't that sound incredible? I always watched, like, Rambo and crazy action movies, and I always wanted to be that. I wanted to be Steven Seagal and Jean-Claude Van Damme. Just recently I was watching Van Damme, trying to practice doing splits. How did he do that?

BRONSON: Like, owning an alligator for a pet. BRONSON: That's luxurious right there. I made a little bit of money, but not that much. I'm still in Queens. If I got an alligator, that shit is staying in the tub. [laughs] That's where it lives.

BRONSON: Van Damme of Queens.

BRONSON: Yeah, the Van Damme, Van Gogh of Queens. I'm a mix of Van Damme and van Gogh; that's going in the next rhyme. Oh, man. There's something wrong with me.

HILL: No! My point, my whole message that I wanted to express to you is that it's so easy to be influenced by the people you adore and who made you do what you want to do, and then there's that moment when you get to have the confidence to be your own artist. And I really see you heading there and it's so inspiring to watch.

BRONSON: Thank you, my brother. I really appreciate those words, man. That hit me right in the heart, right there. Ain't no stopping over here.

HILL: Yeah, dude. I told you, I went on a magical quest in the desert, and all I brought with me was “Easy Rider.” [laughs]

BRONSON: Man, that right there is a spiritual moment, I'm not going to lie. When I would drive around and have moments ... You know a song is good when you drive over the bridge, and you're looking at the city, and the shit sounds ill, like, “Oh, hell yeah, it's like a video.” That's how you know a song is good. And I had several moments with “Easy Rider.” The craziest part about “Easy Rider” is that we took a fucking song off YouTube, made a new song out of it, put it back on YouTube, then got millions of views. That's a crazy thing.

HILL: Wow. It was a beta test.

BRONSON: The beat, the rhythm. We sampled it into a new song, put it right back on motherfucking YouTube, got millions of views, and generated money out of it, which is a crazy thing.

HILL: I want another trip to Florida.

BRONSON: We over here! Let's do it.

MORE AGNES DENES

(CONTINUED FROM PAGE 4) some kind of solution, or something to concentrate on. Something to pay attention to and maybe change direction.

POLLACK: Do you ever walk by that area [formerly Park Landfill, now Battery Park City in Lower Manhattan] where Where's the Beef? was planted?

DENES: I had to be there for another reason. And it was a parag, a real rug. There are condominiums and office space, a new city, Battery Park City. It just pulled at my heartstrings. I think I almost died doing it. I worked so hard. I put in 16-hour days, and I had volunteers because I had no money. And I felt I had to feed the volunteers, to reciprocate for their help. So when I finished with the field, with directing it, running it, photographing it, I had to go home and make sandwiches for the volunteers the next morning. So it was like seven days a week, total commitment.
DENES: I study what I work with. I studied all these different fields of science that I needed for my work. I studied how to mine a landfill and what to plant in it. It's fascinating because you learn a new field each time.

POLLACK: Have your concerns about the environment changed since the '60s and '70s? You wrote a lot about being against expansion.

DENES: No, it's just that some of the things I talked about 40 years ago have become reality. When we attended global conferences and talked about all the earth warming and the problems about climate change, nobody listened to us. It was mostly scientists. I was just one artist there. And nobody gave a damn about it. People always disregard an artist. You know the saying: "You live for hours and understand it backwards."

POLLACK: Is there a piece you wanted to see realized and haven’t had the opportunity yet?

DENES: There are many. A different kind of Stonehenge, more mathematical forests around the world, the future city, and the restless pyramids. Brain-Maze, Starfold-Staftield, World in Air.

POLLACK: I was just reading about Brain-Maze; it's an outdoor labyrinth mapped out on the ground in the shape of the two hemispheres.

DENES: I proposed that for Socrates. Next time. In my next life.

POLLACK: Your work often looks to the future. Like your Future Cities [in the 1980s and '90s, Denes designed imaginary cities that cope with ecological change—these plans take the form of drawings and prints]. Are there any projects that you've planned that could be realized in a hundred years' time?

DENES: There was one I was looking at, Bird Project, where you proposed tagging migratory birds.

DENES: Oh, that's such a sore point. I wanted to do that work so badly. I grew up in part, in Sweden, and there was this island, Oland Island. The birds would come there when they migrated south to rest. On this little island, they were forced into each other's flying space. Bird books don't like to fly with each other because they get disoriented, and they started committing suicide. It's such a big thing in Sweden, the suicide, a lot of attention and study is given to it. So as a kid I became interested in why the birds commit suicide, why they would stop flapping and fall to earth. I heard the German bird监视, and coming to New York and being a foreigner, so to speak, I connected that to the birds flying into each other's airspace—they become foreigners. They get disoriented. I connected the birds and the people. Not that they commit suicide, but they become different people. Later on, I got a small grant from the American-Scandinavian Foundation to do the project and I went back to Sweden and visited the bird stations. I designed a plane that was between a plane and a helicopter that would fly with the birds—very small propeller with a film camera attached to it, to pinpoint the moment the bird decides to commit suicide, the moment they stop flapping and become disoriented. But I never got to build it. So that was my first great disappointment.

POLLACK: When I looked at the proposal to track bird flight patterns, I thought that if the technology had been a little more advanced back then, you really could have done it.

DENES: But nobody has already done it. There was somebody who got some money not so long ago and they were flying with the birds. Not with my concepts, but they were flying alongside the birds. So now I'd be a second person doing it. It's like if I built the crystal pyramid now in Paris, I'd be after LM. P. E. and people would think I took his ideas. Once you have people doing it, you go to the next idea and the next and the next. So the projects that I don't get to do are for the future. When I'm bye-bye. [Laugh]

POLLACK: Dear Home Fantasies, as you addressed one of your letters.

DENES: When I'm gone, you'll be sitting in a cafe and say, "Do you remember Agnes?" [Laugh]

POLLACK: You talk about making the invisible visible in your Manifesto from 1970. How do you give mathematics, or these other invisible structures in the world, a visible, almost physical presence in your work?

DENES: When you attempt to make time visible, loge visible, mathematics visible, how do you do it? I created this new art form of making it visible. That was the whole basis to it. So I had drawings that were the first time that mathematics was put into visual form. I had a understanding of mathematics. It took me one and a half years to do. So that's how I made the invisible visible. And then I have a drawing of the thinking process. Theoretical crystallography. Visualizing invisible structures. There is a drawing where I wanted to see what kind of a form mathematics would give me if I didn't think of any form. I just allowed the numbers to dictate the form. I got this strange little monster. It's amazing that I could do that, looking back. Now my fingers are not moving anymore, I was diagnosed with this disease that attacked my fingers. Aside from that, I would do something like that again to see mathematics would lead me. If you're interfering at all, just allowing mathematics to move right there. For instance, when I planned mathematical forests I ran on-going series of works in which thousands of trees are planned in a pattern based on mathematical formulas, such as intersecting spirals or the golden section; one was realized in Ylijärvi, Finland (1992–96), and another in Melbourne, Australia (1998); they're different from other forests. The tree is made by nature, mathematics by people. And combining the two is creating this beautiful alliance between humanity and nature. That's why my forests are mathematical expansion systems, all of them. In Finland, in Australia. And now I'm planning a forest for New York—50,000 trees.

POLLACK: Where will you plant the forest?

DENES: That is the first time I'm talking about it, officially. It's going to be at Edgemere. [Part of the Rockaways Peninsula in Queens, where the Edgemere Landfill was once the oldest continually operating garbage dump in the United States and is now a remedialed former landfill, where the structures can be erected until 2021; there are plans to turn it into a park; I have not been commissioned yet. But I hope they will help me do it, because we do need a forest for New York. I don't know if it's going to be a mathematical forest; I just know that I want to do it. And it is very important to do; the air. We need fresh, clean water and fresh air. And I'm also planning another wheat field, in Milan, Italy.

DENES: Oh, that's fabulous.

DENES: It's not going to be a re-creation of Wheatfield, but its going to be 12 or so acres of wheat in the center of Milan.

POLLACK: That will be stunning. An interesting place to do it, too.

DENES: In the center of the city is so important.

POLLACK: Art today exists primarily within a system of galleries and art fairs, but rarely seems to leave the art world.

DENES: I want to leave. Period.

POLLACK: Who taught you how to be an artist?

DENES: I don't think you can learn much except for the basics. One of my teachers said to me, "Here is a good example of the student surpassing the master." He was a very sweet Italian man. He painted white on white. And I drew him crazy, because I went into the drawing and then the other one. Just doing this and that. He said, "Don't ever imitate anybody. Don't you know that you are an original?" I said, "But I have to, to know that I don't want it." So I went through all these forms, reject, reject, reject. Until I got to enlarging the canvas.

POLLACK: In the '70s and '80s, when you were showing at the New Museum, Franklin Furnace, and Ronald Feldman Fine Arts downtown, who was coming to the openings? What was your social life like?

DENES: They put me into different exhibitions because they didn't know what to do with me. I had dots connecting mathematics so they put me in a show with the pointillists. It's crazy. Society likes to file away, put you in the right car category. And I never fit any category. Maybe that's one reason why I moved to a cabin in the theory. My work was not really understood, because there was no precedent for it. There's no precedent for women philosophers and there's no precedent for most of the things I did. And I did it before the boys, and at the same time not knowing any of them. I did heavy philosophical thinking at the same time. And then they called me a conceptual artist. You see? So everything happened to me in a roundabout way. And it wasn't their fault; it was probably my fault that I didn't befriended these people or push myself there. I was always alone. And I am alone today. It's fine. I have a lot of friends. But right now my work is not being connected to people. I like a person, I like them. I may like the art and not like the person. But one thing that's paramount in my life is that I am alone. I am a loner. And yet I have many friends and I don't feel lonely. And I even like my own company. But when I'm alone, it's fine to read or write. I am in my thoughts. Mostly I am learning.

POLLACK: If the male land artists were not your community, who was your community?

DENES: The garbage collector, the people around the corner, the library people. Scientists. Philosophers. I worked with AiR at Bell Laboratories. I was a fellow at Carnegie Mellon.

POLLACK: Is that when you did the computer piece? [For Hamilton Fragmented—Wittgenstein's "Pain," 1974, Wittgenstein's Philosophical Investigations was programmed into a computer and subjected to alterations, among which the word "pain" was changed to "stop". Hamer's films from Hamilton were also altered by computer to remove articles and propositions. These experiments were then printed.]

DENES: No, I did research there. I went to Carnegie Mellon, I went to MIT. That was interesting. I was teaching a course at MIT, teaching egheads. And then Bell Laboratories. I was a fellow at all these places.

POLLACK: But you were there as the artist.

DENES: Yes. And it was interesting that they loved talking to me, because I was on a level with their intellect. Well, one tried to chase me around the table. But mostly they respected me. After a while they stopped thinking of me as a woman, which was the greatest compliment that I could get. One person once said to me, "You're not going to be acknowledged as anybody important until you stop being so beautiful." I was so insulted, but he was actually right. I was good looking, and I stood in the way. Then I overcame that. And the scientists loved to talk to me because I talked their language. When I was at MIT, I talked with artificial intelligence—that was wonderful. I worked with Otto Piene ... Where was that? I have a very bad memory for names.

POLLACK: Otto Piene, the Zero group artist who did the fire paintings. Do you want to talk about the work you're showing at Socrates? Because it's different from the pyramids you've presented before.

DENES: The pyramids all relate to each other, and pyramids are so important because they're social structures. I hate to put tags on things, because tags change, and they change with the requirements
made on them. And we're changing modes and putting our minds together. I find that old expesssions are outdated, so when I write something, I try to find a new expression that hasn't been born yet. It's difficult. We use up words as we use up images. We use up everything, and that's good, because it makes us grow. But the pyramids are very important in that they're representatives of concepts. That's why the superstition is so important—that it should not be the most visible thing in it, but the least visible. Because concepts have to be standing on a very sturdy understructure, the underpinnings.

POLLACK: What's the understructure?

DENES: The understructure of thinking of everything. This is an understructure and underpinnings.

POLLACK: So how are you dealing with the superstructure of the pyramid?

DENES: I want the superstition to be beautiful. That's like when you deal with difficult philosophical concepts, you have to make your images visible to get the viewer. And once you get through admiring the beauty, you've got them. You start thinking. Otherwise they would walk away from thinking. People have too many problems during the day; they don't want to think. So I want to make this pyramid as beautiful as possible.

POLLACK: So there will be flowers on top?

DENES: The flowering of the grasses and the fact that it's alive. But it should be alive with mystic inner forces.

POLLACK: What are you putting in this pyramid?

DENES: There's something secret inside. [Denes laughs] Yes, there is! And you can't tell me what it is.

DENES: I wish I could. I want it to be as small and as powerful as possible. Anything important has to be almost invisible. And understood. So the understructure should be undetected, but strong enough to hold the earth.

POLLACK: And then people will come and they can enter the pyramid during the day?

DENES: Oh, they can't climb it. Unfortunately, they can't. You don't want to step on grass and flowers! And the planting is going to be all outside of the pyramid. So what I'm trying to design are these little structures that hold the planting they way you have in windows of buildings, where they have a little tree outside that holds the earth and the flowers. So that's what I want all around the pyramid, interlocking planter boxes.

And let's hope we can do it as unobtrusively as possible. The philosophy meets the wildflower. You see, philosophy gets its ugly head into everything, but I don't think we live philosophy anymore. It's done.

POLLACK: Do you feel like you could have picked a different field and gone just as far into it—like artificial intelligence?

DENES: Well, if I could relive my life, what would I do? I would go on with science. But not one scientist, because they're locked into their little specializations. I'd go from scientist to scientist to scientist, like a bee goes from flower to flower. They say it's a very male thing. [laughs] I have this irresistible curiosity about everything. I wish I didn't have daily problems to deal with, so that I could just concentrate on learning more, every single day.

WILLIE NELSON

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 54 put them on the road. It doesn't have to be the same group of people. You have to judge other people against yourself. They say you're not supposed to do that, but that's the only way I can judge other people. I kind of compare them to myself. And I know there's a lot of hustlers out there, in every walk of life. Whether they're preachers or insurance salesmen, it's the same thing.

HARRELL: So I've stopped hoping for much from the politicians.

Nelson: Yeah, they're all bought and paid for.

HARRELL: But this is boring...

Nelson: Let's talk about sex.

Nelson: Yeah. How old were you when you first started masturbating?

Nelson: Um, let me see. [laughs] I remember the first time I had sex. I'll never forget what she said.

HARRELL: "Mooosoo..."

Nelson: That is honorable. And very funny.

Nelson: Do you want to hear a good joke?

Nelson: Yes, I do.

Nelson: These people were in a courtroom, and they were accusing this guy of having sex with an animal. And so this lady said, "I only know what I saw. I was driving down the road, and I saw this guy out there with this sheep, and they were making love. And you're not going to believe this, your Honor, but when they got through, the little sheep laid its head over on the guy's shoulder and went to sleep." And one of the guys on the jury punched another one in his elbow and said, "Yeah, it's true." [laughs]

Nelson: If you're going to lie, you ought to do it better...

HARRELL: You probably have 50,000 jokes in your memory bank.

Nelson: You're probably close.

Nelson: I've never seen you run out.

Nelson: I must enjoy telling them. I know I enjoy hearing 'em. And whenever I hear a good one, I kind of try to hang on to it and spread it around—

HARRELL: Who's influenced you the most?

Nelson: Well, we have to go all the way back to guys like Bob Wills and His Texas Playboys, Floyd Tillman, Leon Payne, Ted Daffan, Spade Cooley, Hank Williams, Django Reinhardt. Me and Merle [Haggard] have a new album coming out called Django and Jimmie, about Django Reinhardt and Jimmie Rodgers. There's a song that says, "There might not have been a Merle or a Willie without a Django and Jimmie."

HARRELL: Ah! And did you write that?

HARRELL: Nelson wrote a whole bunch in there. Merle wrote one album, and I guess he wrote one about "Europe," and I think he wrote about "The Only One Wilder Than Me." [laughs]

HARRELL: And that's saying something.

Nelson: And we did a song on there, coming out 4/20, called "It's All Going to Pot." Whether we like it or not. As far as I can tell, the world's going to hell. And we're gonna have a lot of it. And all of the whiskey in Lynchburg, Tennessee, just couldn't hit the spot. So here's a $100 bill, you can keep your pills, fiend. It's all going to pot. [laughs]

HARRELL: That is great, man! Willie, I got to say, it really blows my mind you tour over 100 days a year, you record about one or two albums a year, and then you're also writing books—

Nelson: You have a book coming out, right?

HARRELL: Right. It's called It's a Long Story, Harrel

HARRELL: I reviewed my own book, and I cut a song called "It's a Long Story" [sings] "It's a long story, you'll probably never make it to the end / There's way too many pages, too much time to stop and start again / But if you love a good mystery, you'll never find a better one, my friend / It's a real whodunit, who lost it, and who won it / And who still aound to lose it all again."

HARRELL: That is nice, man. You know, I never told you what a big influence you've been on me, because I was liv

HARRELL: I was living in Costa Rica, and I was in love withthese four daughters, Deni and Zac, and I came back to L.A., and my buddy Jim

BROOKS asked me if I wanted to go to a concert you were doing. I went, it was a great show and afterwards, this beautiful woman, Annie, comes up and says, "Hey, I'm Willie's wife. Why don't you come back and hang out on the bus?" I'm like, "Whoa, sure." So we go back there, the bus doors open, all the smoke billows out like, you know, Cheech and Chong, and I look through the door, and I see you in there, with a big old fatty like, "Come on in. Let's burn one!" [Nelson laughs] The first of, like, 97,000 joints we would smoke together. And we had the most amazing conversation. I really felt like I met a real soul mate—someone I would always know. Of course, that proved to be true, but one of the great things that happened on that occasion, when we first met, which is an example of your generosity, was you told me to, "I live in Maui. If you ever want to come over there and stay—even if I'm not there—you can do that." So, of course, we took you up on it, and ended up in Maui. And now, almost 20 years later, I've been living in Maui, and it's thanks to you. So thanks for being such a good influence on my life, bro.

Nelson: Well, you're welcome. I was lucky. I got booked over there, and once I got there, I realized, "Hey, this would be a good place to stay!"

HARRELL: Yeah, you got a great spot there on the water.

Nelson: One thing I want to run by you, you know, if you're ever out there on the ocean, what do you think about us putting in a little fishin' gambling casino out there, maybe a little houseboat, you know, and calling it Woody and Willie's.

HARRELL: I love that idea. Bring 'em up in a boat, get a little gambling done, and send 'em back home.

Nelson: Yeah, they can ski over or whatever.

HARRELL: You'll have Owen there every night, trying to win back what he lost the previous night. I love that idea. I'm in.

Nelson: I'll see you in Maui!

CHRISTOPHER BOLLEN

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 54: BOLLEN: The death drive is parasitic. It runs off of other drives, leeching off of them.

WALLACE: That makes sense—the erotic charge serial killers, in movies anyway, get from their victims. And serial killers, of course, are also usually virginal, like the dark mirror of the detective. You were raised Catholic. Do you have any holier rituals or rites in your daily life?

BOLLEN: Well, I smoke cigarettes when I write, which is disgusting, but it really helps me.

WALLACE: That is the greatest tactic I've ever heard of—only smoking at your writing desk.

BOLLEN: It's charming myself to the work and chain-smoking my way through a book. I just think, as writers, especially with a book that takes years to write, you sort of wake up every morning hoping and praying that you can make your work for the day. It can make you superstitious. When I was writing Oviri, I went to that Wiccan store on Ninth Street, and they had these success candles. I thought, "Oh, why not?" So I had one made and started lighting it, but I didn't really want to fall into some sort of psychological dependency on it. But I then I was too scared to stop because I was starting to write well and more about this. Now I wonder if I should get another one. In fact, we should leave here and go buy candles. I'm serious.

WALLACE: We've talked a bit about the ghettoization of murder mysteries in terms of genre, which is lessening. I think, People are starting to embrance this as a vital part of literature. And I think there's nothing better than a murder mystery. A murder mystery is like a Trojan horse. You can smuggle anything in on that.