

ArTonic

Socrates Sculpture Park

By [Beryl Gilothwest](#)

North gate, Socrates Sculpture Park, Long Island City, New York, 1989. Photo: Steven L. Cohen.

“What we do is we bring art to the people. And bringing art to the people has a kind of a joy and liberation that nothing else can equal ... it’s a gift. What happens is that in this society that is so consumer-oriented people don’t realize that the gift-giver gets, that the person who gives the gift ends up having something that is beyond the gift.”

–Mark di Suvero¹

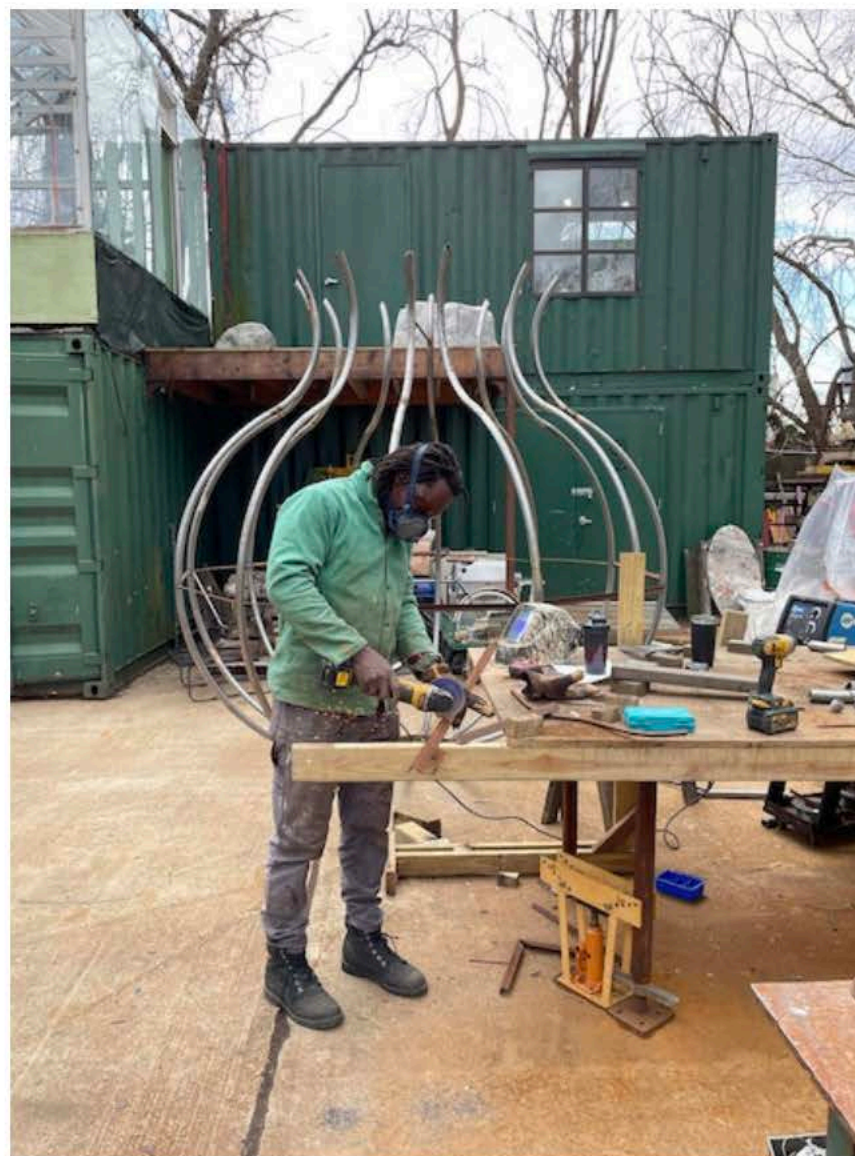
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When I visited Socrates Sculpture Park on a Friday morning in August, the large grassy space on the Astoria waterfront was bustling with activity. Locals walked their dogs, a man sat tapping on his laptop at one of the picnic benches, a woman moved through her exercise routine, and, of course, people perused the artist Mary Mattingly's large-scale installation *Water Clock* (2023), the centerpiece of the park's summer exhibition. Socrates staff, sprinkled among the visitors, soon became obvious. A few of them watered Mattingly's artwork, which is made up of edible vegetation set within a metal armature that echoes the skyscrapers visible across the East River. Another cut the grass while a group of dancers worked on a piece developed in response to the sculpture, which they would perform the following day.

Socrates isn't like any other arts institution in New York City. It has an ad-hoc, relaxed humanism that contrasts sharply with the crisp white galleries and grand museums across the river. It feels like a laboratory for art—a place where creation is as important, if not more important, than presentation. A jumble of repurposed shipping containers greets you upon arrival, mixed and matched with buildings designed by young architects as part of the Folly/Function competition, the park's collaboration with the Architectural League of New York. All of these structures function as workspaces for Socrates artists and grounds staff or are used for educational programming. It feels chaotic at first, but then you realize that Socrates reveals a whole process of making and exhibiting outdoor sculpture, which most other institutions keep hidden. "There is always a delightful period when a new exhibition is emerging and one can see the beginnings of activity," wrote artist Kenny Greenberg, "which proceeds to get downright hectic until it finally crescendos on the opening day."²

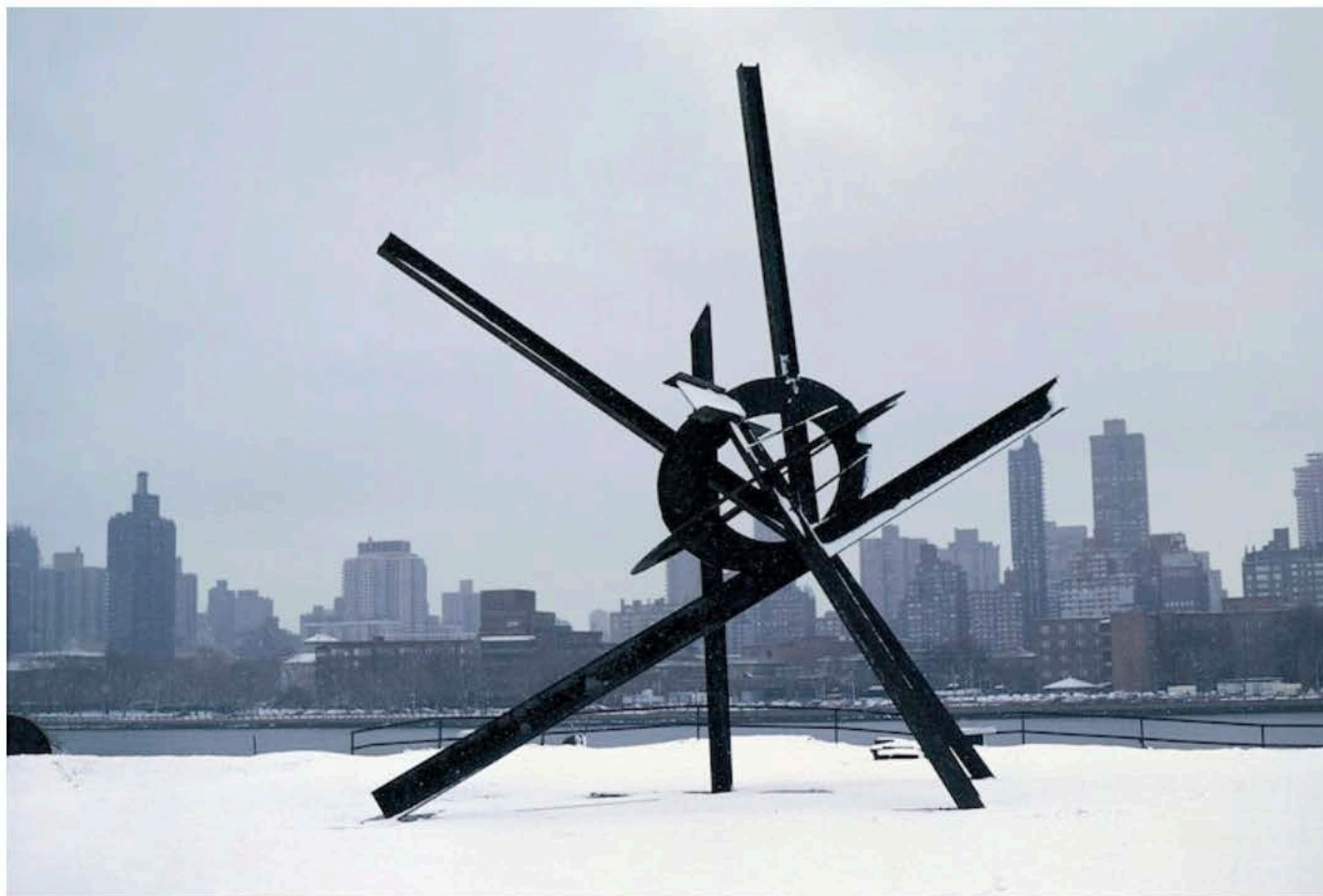
A locked chain-link fence in the back of the park holds a variety of large-scale construction equipment belonging



Stephen Callender fabricating Maren Hassinger's *Vessel One* (2022), Socrates Sculpture Park, Long Island City, New York, 2022. © Maren Hassinger. Photo: Joyce S. Chan.



A locked chain-link fence in the back of the park holds a variety of large-scale construction equipment belonging to Mark di Suvero—the *éminence grise* and founder of Socrates—who happily lends artists whatever they might need. His studio, known as Spacetime C.C., is a short walk north along Vernon Boulevard. Di Suvero was in his late forties and a successful artist known for his monumental abstract sculptures when he came to Queens in 1980. He had been living and working for a few years in Petaluma, California, when both his dealer Richard Bellamy and the curator Henry Geldzahler told him about two colossal, abandoned warehouses with spectacular views of Manhattan that were for sale on the Astoria waterfront. He jumped at the chance to purchase them and began converting the buildings into studio and living space. “I also wanted to make large pieces in New York and show them here right away, without having to send them cross-country,” he said in a 1983 interview with *Architectural Digest*. “That’s the reason for this place.”



Mark di Suvero, *Galileo* (1996), Socrates Sculpture Park, Long Island City, New York. © Mark di Suvero. Photo: Steven L. Cohen.



From the beginning, di Suvero was dedicated to sharing the fruits of his success with other artists and with his new community in Queens. A few years earlier, he had started the Athena Foundation with Anita Contini, who had co-founded Creative Time in 1974. Di Suvero wrote in the [founder's statement](#) that Athena “is dedicated to the arts for the people.” A section of one warehouse was designated for the foundation, which was soon hosting artists and giving them time, space, and resources to make new work.

The founder's statement also specified a long-term goal to “construct a public sculpture space.” Di Suvero soon noticed a 4 1/2-acre abandoned lot a couple blocks south of the studio, directly across a small inlet in Hallet's Cove. This parcel of riverside landfill was owned by the city and had been many things, including most recently a marine terminal, but was being used at that time as an illegal dumping ground. “It was completely filled with all kinds of debris, including many abandoned vehicles,” remembered Contini. “Mark only saw opportunity, and before long, listening to him talk about a dream, I began to see it too, and so did many of his friends.”³ Di Suvero and his nephew Enrico Martignoni, who was running the studio at the time, began creating a proposal to lease the land from the city to create a sculpture park that they dubbed Socrates, a nod to the historically Greek population in Astoria. An [early brochure](#) specified that the park is “dedicated to Socrates in his search for the truth.”





Site preparation, Socrates Sculpture Park, Long Island City, New York, 1986. Courtesy Socrates Sculpture Park.

With the help of the artist Isamu Noguchi, whose studio bookended the lot, di Suvero and his team were able to secure a five-year lease for next to nothing in return for assuming all the costs related to clearing the site, landscaping the park, producing and commissioning artwork, and making it all freely accessible to the public. The Athena Foundation fundraised three hundred thousand dollars to dedicate to the project and di Suvero himself gave one hundred thousand dollars with the promise of more than forty thousand dollars per year for operating costs. The ambitious initial plans included an overall design by di Suvero and Noguchi in collaboration with the architects Edward Larrabee Barnes and Shoji Sadao, permanent installations by di Suvero and Noguchi, a playground designed by di Suvero, and an outdoor sculpture studio and exhibition space for artists.

The Socrates Sculpture Park that opened on September 28, 1987, focused on the last of those plans, the one that hews most closely to di Suvero's original goal. "We've gone into this vacant lot and we have turned it into a vision of what the productive energy of people could do if they were allowed to work in a way that was creative, that was open, and that was supported in some way," he said at the time.⁴ His team, with the help of more than a hundred hired hands, had spent a year clearing the space and turning it into a suitable environment to create and install works by the sixteen artists in Socrates's inaugural exhibition, including established figures such as di Suvero and Vito Acconci.

Many of the people who helped build the site lived in Astoria Houses, a low-income development not far from Socrates. The local community has remained an integral part of the park, both formally, through well-attended free educational programs, and informally. Astoria native Logan Mattocks has worked there since 2020, when he was part of a summer program called AH-YES that employs local teens at Socrates. Incidentally, his father and uncle, Nelson and Lenny, worked on clearing and building the site back in 1986 when they were kids. When I interviewed her in July at Spacetime, Ivana Mestrovic, di Suvero's longtime studio manager and a Socrates board member, argued that the park is an early example of "creative placemaking."

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Crew working on Socrates Sculpture Park, Long Island City, New York, late 1980s. Courtesy Socrates Sculpture Park.

Di Suvero’s role in the development of Socrates is of particular note. While he was the driving force behind its concept, development, and founding, he also intentionally shied away from any sort of management or curatorial role. By



taking a backseat in the administration of the park, di Suvero was able to function as a mentor and support system for artists working there. “To me the real legacy is Mark’s ability to initiate support and start this without being the eight-hundred-pound gorilla,” former Executive Director John Hatfield told me over Zoom. “And to let that entity grow up like a child: a lot of attention as a toddler, a lot of caretaking as a teen. And then it becomes a full-fledged person. That’s where this place is at this moment.”

The early days at Socrates were fairly unstructured. “They were all artists running it,” Mestrovic told me. “It was much more informal and organic.” The art historian and former Athena Foundation board member Irving Sandler remembered an early fundraising meeting. “The ‘suits’ and I began to talk with long faces about approaching private patrons, not-for-profit organizations, and corporate sponsors who might contribute to the heavy costs of running the Park,” he wrote. “Then a young person who could not have been much older than sixteen proposed baking cookies, and an earnest discussion ensued as to what kind of cookies, how much to charge, and where to sell them. It was utterly delightful.”⁵



Opening of *Sculptors Working*, Socrates Sculpture Park, Long Island City, New York, 1988. Visible works: Tony Smith, *Duck* (1963); Lisa Hein, *The Big Shot Rocker* (1988); Michael Hall, *Waltz Stele* (1987); and Alison Saar, *Fanning the Fire* (1988). Courtesy Socrates Sculpture Park.



The early exhibitions were similarly casual, largely structured as a way to showcase the work being done at the park rather than through the lens of a specific curatorial concept. The sculptor and performance artist Maren Hassinger participated in *Sculptors Working*, which opened in the spring of 1988. Last summer, she was invited back for a solo exhibition. “Socrates Park was so different then, kind of the Wild West as opposed to the manicured parkland that it is now,” she told me in a phone interview.

When making a site-specific work, Hassinger asks herself: “What can I contribute to make this space more like itself rather than to dominate it in some kind of way by putting something foreign in it?” In *Sculptors Working*, the trio of discrete sculptures that make up her work *Three Bushes* (1988) were placed around the park, one by the chain-link fence along the border of the property and two others among the tall grass by the river. Each one was made from an amalgamation of steel cable—a signature material that she uses for its strength and endurance—bound together to create a trunk, from which wavy tendrils shoot off in all directions. In photographs, likely taken during the late fall, the burnt orange of the rusting rope blends seamlessly into the spindly dead grass. “The pieces look kind of wild and crazy because the space wasn’t so organized and prettified,” she explained. “And then in the current state, which is a beautiful park, that requires doing something else.” Hassinger’s 2022 exhibition at Socrates, *Steel Bodies*, featured a series of sleek, large-scale, hollow objects outlined with steel rods that the artist placed throughout the park. In contrast to the energetic *Three Bushes*, which echoed into the chaos of early Socrates, her see-through “vessels” framed new perspectives of the park’s mature environment for the viewer.



Maren Hassinger, *Three Bushes* (1988), in *Sculptors Working*, Socrates Sculpture Park, Long Island City, New York, 1988. Courtesy Socrates Sculpture Park. © Maren Hassinger.

The threat of losing the park was a constant fear throughout the 1990s due to the temporary nature of the original agreement between the Athena Foundation and the city. The fact that the property kept being conveyed to



different city agencies didn't help. In 1993, the site was finally placed under the jurisdiction of the New York City Parks Department, but remained unsafe from developers because the lot wasn't officially parkland. In 1997, a local investor put together a one hundred million dollar proposal to turn the site into a massive apartment complex. Former New York governor [Hugh L. Carey](#) supported the plan, touting the development as "the Queens equivalent of Sag Harbor." Reaction was swift, with angry articles popping up in local publications and support from powerful figures such as Mayor Rudolph Giuliani and Queens Borough President Claire Shulman. An article in the [Queens Chronicle](#) exclaimed, "Make Socrates a real park and put a muzzle on those Pavlovian dogs once and for all." Socrates was officially—and finally—declared parkland on December 14, 1998. "This is a major acquisition, a major new parkland commitment," said [Henry J. Stern](#), the New York City Parks Commissioner at the time. "It is a spectacular setting for major works of sculpture."



Henry Stern and Mark di Suvero, Socrates Sculpture Park, Long Island City, New York, 1994. Courtesy Socrates Sculpture Park.

In the wake of this important milestone, di Suvero decided that it was time to formalize the structure of the Socrates organization. In order to do so, he



sought the counsel of Martin Friedman, who had transformed the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis into a world class institution during his thirty years as director. “[Friedman] basically invited in consultants, formed a new board, and redid our bylaws,” remembered Mestrovic. “And we did a job search and hired the first full time staff member who was the director and curator, and her name is Alyson Baker.” The park had a series of part-time directors since its founding, including Martignoni, Eve Sussman, and Kathleen Gilrain, but Baker’s hiring marked the beginning of a new era for Socrates.

An alum of Gagosian Gallery and fresh off a stint as Curatorial Assistant at the Carnegie Museum of Art in Pittsburgh, Baker jumped right in. “The park was being run out of a storage container that was on site and that was the office,” she told me in a phone interview. “And you shared it with mice and all of these other little creatures that come through. It was the very definition of grassroots.” Her first task was cleaning out the park, which was filled with the remnants of previous exhibitions that had been left there in whole or in parts. She also began hiring full-time staff members to formalize programming and better define the organization for fundraising purposes.

One of Baker’s largest contributions to Socrates was her dedication to what is now known as the Socrates Annual fellowship and is arguably the park’s signature program. The fellowship was founded by Baker’s predecessor Gilrain, but it was an informal program during her tenure that functioned more as a means to give out grants to artists. Baker loved that the program afforded younger artists the resources to make outdoor sculpture but realized that they needed more support to do so effectively. “And so I shifted that and made it its own annual exhibition, because I felt like these artists who were working outdoors for the very first time needed more time in the studio,” Baker said. “They needed more assistance from Mark and from the staff in how to realize their projects and how to address really practical issues like structural issues and things like that.”

Each year, young artists are encouraged to apply via an open call. A jury made up of Socrates staff and outside curatorial advisors then select a group of fellows. “If you were cycling out of a graduate program looking for opportunities, trying to translate your work into different places, the Socrates fellowship was a great opportunity to do that,” Baker said. In 2023, six artists were offered an eight thousand dollar production grant to support



their project, a two thousand dollar honorarium, and three months of seven-days-a-week access to the resources and fabrication facilities of the park's outdoor artist studio. The fellowship culminates in an exhibition each fall of the outdoor works made by the fellows. "Their show would go through the fall all the way through winter and into the next spring," Baker said.

"Another really exciting thing about presenting work outdoors is that the environment in which you've placed the work changes over time and therefore the framework or context for your work changes."

Baker shifted the annual exhibitions to the summer months and focused on thematic group concepts. In 2003, she curated *Yard*, which interrogated the vernacular of suburbia set within the urban environment of Socrates. "*Yard* was totally inspired by applications we were getting with people looking at the suburban yard and the things that occupy it and the way people interact with a very domesticated landscape, and so we built an exhibition around that," Baker told me. Alyson Shotz was one of the artists she approached. "I had been working with mirrors and lenses for several years, so when I was invited to make a sculpture for this show, the idea of a mirrored picket fence came to mind," Shotz explained to me over email. "I knew from the outset that the fence would not enclose anything or behave like a barrier. It was more of a commentary on the concept of fences and boundaries, and it was at the same time meant to be a line in the landscape."

Mirror Fence (2003) was the largest work Shotz had made to date, and the unique nature of Socrates allowed her to work through the challenges of making outdoor sculpture on that scale. "Working onsite at Socrates helped me determine the form and scale of the piece," she told me. "Alyson Baker and I went out and took measurements and I realized that the sculpture needed to have a large presence to match the expansive nature of the site. It ended up being 130 feet long." When the exhibition opened, Roberta Smith cited the work in a review in [the New York Times](#): "Alyson Shotz's 'Mirror Fence' ... has a dazzling, prismatic transparency; it disappears and reappears in the surrounding green as effectively as any Magritte painting, and it's a sculpture."



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Alyson Shotz, *Mirror Fence* (2003) in Yard, Socrates Sculpture Park, Long Island City, New York, 2003. Courtesy Socrates Sculpture Park. © Alyson Shotz.



After Baker left in 2011 to run the Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum, John Hatfield was hired from the New Museum, where he had been Deputy Director. A seventeen-year veteran of the institution, Hatfield had worked under founder Marcia Tucker and then on through the development and construction of the museum's current SANAA-designed home at 235 Bowery. With this kind of experience, Hatfield brought a level of institutional expertise that was unprecedented in the Socrates staff. However, Hatfield claims that his pedigree wasn't necessarily a selling point for the board of directors that hired him: "That's the beauty of the whole thing, right?"

Coming in on the heels of Baker's professionalization of the organization, Hatfield's primary goal was to raise the profile of Socrates's programming with the idea that it could make the park more sustainable. "In my mind, it lacked ambition," he told me. "Why isn't the most sophisticated, interesting, compelling contemporary art being shown at a place that is underserved and can connect to communities that this art is supposed to be talking with or talking to?" He sought to do so by reimagining the summer exhibition, bringing in fewer and higher profile artists to do their own projects, rather than the sprawling, thematic shows of Baker's era that primarily featured early career artists.

Nari Ward, Virginia Overton, and Žilvinas Kempinas are among the artists who were given solo exhibitions during Hatfield's tenure, but perhaps no project is more emblematic of his approach than Agnes Denes's *The Living Pyramid* (2015). Denes is best-known for her seminal earthwork *Wheatfield – A Confrontation* (1982), in which she planted a field of wheat on a landfill that is now Battery Park City in downtown Manhattan. Denes tended to the field over the course of four months, eventually harvesting the fruits of her labor and distributing the wheat to cities around the world. The work is famous for its powerful political message about the misaligned priorities of humankind, exemplified by iconic photographs of a sprawling, golden field of wheat rippling against the towering gray skyscrapers of Lower Manhattan. "I threw all my chips in with Agnes Denes," Hatfield said, "a spectacular, important artist who had not done a significant public project in New York City for decades, since the *Wheatfield*."

For her part, Denes was happy to participate. I visited her recently at the home and studio in SoHo that she has occupied for decades. "So, they invited



For her part, Denes was happy to participate. I visited her recently at the home and studio in SoHo that she has occupied for decades. “So, they invited me to do a piece,” she told me. “I went there, looked at the space. Give me any space and a project comes in five minutes. So, it came, very simple. Let’s do a living pyramid. And I immediately drew it, made a drawing, and they tried to reproduce the drawing. That’s all, very simple.” Of course, the project was far more complicated than that, but Denes’s unpretentious approach and community-minded sensibility made her work well-suited to the spirit of Socrates.

The Living Pyramid comprises 340 planter boxes of varying sizes, calculated to fit together in fifty layers to create a massive, sloping pyramid that is 30 feet long and just as high. The boxes on each tier are filled with around twenty-five thousand pounds of soil, planted with grasses and flowers. The work was fabricated by the team at Socrates, with the help of the community, who were invited to plant potted flowers within the structure during its opening party in May 2015. Hatfield argued that Socrates’s ability to fabricate such a complex work onsite makes the park unique, especially in an urban environment. “We could be very ambitious on a very limited amount of money because we were producing it,” he said. “It would cost you three times as much to produce a certain kind of work. And it’s a genuine dialogue with the artist.” In full bloom, the work is strikingly beautiful and, like *Wheatfield*, its placement on the waterfront, set against the urban jungle of Manhattan, makes a political statement. “It is not just planting, but sowing the paradox,” Denes wrote in the catalogue, “a structured edifice of soul and grain, not on a farm or field, but in the heart of a busy mega-city of millions. It is sowing the seed into soil and minds.”





Agnes Denes, *The Living Pyramid* (2015), Socrates Sculpture Park, Long Island City, New York, 2015. © Agnes Denes. Photo: Chasity Nunez.

The “herculean” effort, in Hatfield’s words, that went into *The Living Pyramid* didn’t translate into a higher profile for Socrates when it debuted that spring. However, the curatorial team of the contemporary art quinquennial *documenta* contacted him asking for advice on remaking the work for their 2017 edition. When Denes was featured in *Artforum* on the occasion of her major retrospective at The Shed in 2019, an image of *The Living Pyramid* at *documenta 14* appeared on [the magazine’s cover](#). “This is rough and tumble,” Hatfield told me. “We’re not paying sixty to eighty thousand dollars a year for a PR firm that’s spoon feeding the machinery to do this elevation. The elevation can’t be just simply on the merits and quality of the work.” Either way, *The Living Pyramid*, originally commissioned by Socrates, is Denes’s defining late-career work and has gone on to be shown at institutions such as the Sakıp Sabancı Museum in Istanbul and the Hayward Gallery in London.



Today, Socrates Sculpture Park is on the precipice of its next era. Mark di Suvero now spends the bulk of his time in California; a new LOT-EK-designed building, the first permanent structure in the park, is nearing completion (fittingly, it is being constructed out of upcycled shipping containers); and a search is underway for a new Executive Director (Hatfield departed in 2021). Despite all these changes on the horizon and the wide range of perspectives that have guided the park for almost forty years, Socrates maintains the scrappy, artist and community-driven energy that fostered its unlikely genesis in the 1980s. “It’s a space that allows specialties to take place—a lot of bad things, a lot of good things, a lot of blocks, which are all a part of life,” Denes said. “What’s good about it is that somebody offered it. Somebody made it happen and gave it a space: ‘Here. Do what you want.’ That is what is special about it.”

1. Dirk Van Dall, *Socrates Sculpture Park: Ø to ∞* (1986). Athena Foundation, New York. Video, color, sound (English); 23 mins.
2. Alyson Baker and Ivana Mestrovic, eds. *Socrates Sculpture Park*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2006. p. 55.
3. *Socrates Sculpture Park*, p. 42.
4. *Socrates Sculpture Park: Ø to ∞*
5. Irving Sandler, “Art for the People: The First Decade of Socrates Sculpture Park.” In *Socrates Sculpture Park*, p. 87.

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