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Walter De Maria's huge art installation has the floor at LACMA



Walter De Maria's 'The 2000 Sculpture' at LACMA's Resnick Exhibition Pavilion, where it will go on display for six months starting Oct. 1. (Collection Walter A. Bechter Foundation / LACMA)

By Mike Boehm

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Walter De Maria's "The 2000 Sculpture," an expansive array of plaster rods laid out in 20 rows 164 feet long, will have the floor, literally, for six months at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art's Resnick Exhibition Pavilion, starting Oct. 1.

The work may not be familiar to LACMA's public, but the surroundings are familiar to the work, which occupied the same spot during the summer of 2010, when curators used "The 2000 Sculpture" to help fine-tune the new venue before its opening that fall.

"The sculpture provides an ideal way to test the Resnick Pavilion's capacity to deal with large-scale work in the context of its architecture," is how museum director Michael Govan put it at the time, in a post on LACMA's "Unframed" blog. "The installation of a monumental work as we acclimate this building gives us the chance to test new strategies in anticipation of future projects where we may choose to use the entire space for major installations."

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Evidently, Govan and staff liked what they saw back then.

“The 2000 Sculpture,” which was first displayed in 1992 at the Kunsthaus [Zurich](#) in Switzerland, was mainly on view only by invitation during its first LACMA stay, although some regular museum-goers got to see it during sneak preview days before the Resnick Pavilion’s Oct. 2, 2010, opening.

Before coming to LACMA in 2006, Govan worked for 12 years as president and director of New York’s Dia Art Foundation, which meant he was in charge of De Maria’s most famous work, “The Lightning Field.”

That assemblage of 400 polished steel poles, averaging more than 20 feet high, forms a huge grid in the high desert of western New Mexico, where it often attracts lightning bolts. The 1977 work, whose dimensions are one mile by one kilometer, with 220 feet between each pole, was commissioned by the Dia Foundation and cost \$750,000 to install. It helped established De Maria as one of three leading American figures in the Land Art movement, along with Robert Smithson and Michael Heizer, whose “Levitated Mass” recently took up residence outside the Resnick Pavilion.

People who want to see “The Lightning Field” pay \$100 to \$250, which includes a mandatory overnight stay in a nearby three-bedroom cabin. The Dia Foundation website specifies that visitors should “refrain from bringing electronic devices,” and no photography is allowed.

De Maria, 76, keeps out of the spotlight – he didn’t have his first U.S. museum exhibition until last September, when “Walter De Maria: Trilogies,” made up largely of new work, opened at the Menil Collection in Houston. The artist apparently wasn’t granting interviews, so the [Houston Chronicle](#) turned to Menil Collection director Josef Helfenstein for insight into matters such as the thinking behind “Bel Air Trilogy: Circle Rod,” in which De Maria faithfully restored three red and beige 1955 Chevrolet [Bel Airs](#), except for adding 12-foot-long steel rods that traverse each automobile from front to back, piercing the windshields.

“He does not explain,” Helfenstein said. “He has never done that.”

De Maria is not amply represented in L.A. museum collections. The Museum of Contemporary Art’s online catalog lists three works – an untitled 1973 photograph of mountains rising from a desert, a 14-inch steel bar with accompanying paper certificate that’s called “High Energy Unit,” and a print of “Hardcore,” a 28-minute film that De Maria made in 1969 that’s partly a western but also dwells on scenic elements of Nevada’s Black Rock Desert. LACMA’s sole De Maria holding is a print of “Hardcore.”

The artist also was part of a little-known but pivotal moment in the birth of alternative rock music. Early in 1965, De Maria briefly played drums in the Primitives, a New York City rock band that Pickwick Records assembled to support one of its in-house songwriters, [Lou Reed](#). The Primitives soon morphed into the Velvet Underground, although by then De Maria was no longer involved.

He, musician-filmmaker Tony Conrad and avant-garde multi-instrumentalist [John Cale](#) had been plucked from a party by a producer for Pickwick, who thought they had the right long-haired look, according to Cale’s autobiography, and assigned them to accompany singer-guitarist Reed in the Primitives.

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Cale and Reed stayed together and went on to form the Velvets, who soon were part of history's most propitious union between rock 'n' roll and visual art. Andy Warhol featured the band in his Exploding Plastic Inevitable multimedia events and served as its manager and producer -- as well as creating the album cover for the 1967 LP that began one of rock's most original and influential bodies of work.

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