

GAGOSIAN GALLERY

# The Daily Telegraph

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Saturday 4 June 2016 The Daily Telegraph

EXHIBITIONS



## Is this the pinnacle of American art?

Walter De Maria sculpted lightning – and played drums for Lou Reed. So why isn't he better known, asks *Alastair Sooke*

**H**igh on a remote desert plateau in western New Mexico, 400 stainless-steel poles are arranged in a grid measuring one mile by one kilometre. Polished, with solid, pointed tips, they are capable of withstanding winds of up to 110 miles per hour.

What are they for? They look like instruments for measuring extraterrestrial activity. In fact, these enigmatic rods form a permanent installation known as *The Lightning Field* (1977). It is one

of the most spectacular works of art in North America.

The chances are, though, that you won't have heard of the sculptor who created *The Lightning Field*, which remains his best-known work. Although Walter De Maria, who died in 2013 aged 77, had a long career during which he pioneered both Minimalism and a radical movement known as Land Art – and even joined a band called the Primitives that later evolved into the Velvet Underground – he has never had a solo exhibition in Britain, until now.

According to Kara Vander Weg, curator of a new show of De Maria's work at the Gagosian Gallery in

London, this fact is "puzzling". Perhaps, though, De Maria never became a household name because he was so reserved. Unlike Andy Warhol, who fluttered towards the limelight at any opportunity, De Maria was intensely private. During the course of his career, he gave only one interview, in 1972.

Elizabeth Childress, now 65 and director of the Walter De Maria Archives, first met the artist in 1978, when she accompanied her boyfriend, the photographer John Cliett, to New Mexico to document *The Lightning Field*. A year later, she was hired as De Maria's assistant by the non-profit Dia Art Foundation, which still maintains several of his

installations around the world.

As well as *The Lightning Field*, these include *The Broken Kilometre* (1979), a display of 500 solid brass rods, lying flat in five parallel rows in a building in New York. In essence a floor-hugging sculpture, *The Broken Kilometre* exemplifies De Maria's fascination with geometry, mathematics – and mystery. So does *360° I Ching* (1981), an installation of 576 white-lacquered wood rods arranged in patterns determined by the 64 hexagrams, or symbols, of the ancient Chinese divination text, the *I Ching*. This work recently went on show at the Dia:Beacon museum, in upstate New York, presented on two enormous red carpets, covering an area of almost 10,000 square feet.

In 1979, one of Childress's first jobs at Dia was to prepare for the reopening, the following year, of De Maria's *New York Earth Room* (1977): 140 tons of soil, presented in a SoHo loft in Lower Manhattan. It is still open to the public today.

"Walter and I had a good chemistry," Childress recalls. "As time passed, I took on more responsibility – particularly as he got older." By 1984, she was working full-time for De Maria, in a four-storey former substation he owned

"He engages with the infinite": Walter De Maria's *Lightning Field* installation in New Mexico, above; *Septagon*, below; and *The Broken Kilometre*, right

in Manhattan's East Village. "I always felt it was like being in a tomb with Walter," she says now. "He believed in privacy, and we were a bit isolated. But I don't mean that negatively. Inside, it was spacious and amazing."

De Maria was born in 1935 in Albany, California, not far from San Francisco. His parents were working-class Italians who ran a simple neighbourhood restaurant.

De Maria – who did not remarry after divorcing his wife, Susanne (later Susanna) Wilson, in 1974 – was close to his mother, Christina. "She was very sharp," says Childress. "Walter considered her his rock."

Christina encouraged her shy son to study piano as he was growing up. Instinctively, though, he preferred percussion: he always loved drumming and jazz.

Later, during the Fifties, De Maria studied history, then art at the University of California, Berkeley, where he trained as a painter. In 1960, he moved to New York and began making interactive Minimalist wooden sculptures that



JOHN CLIEFF, DIA ART FOUNDATION; THE ESTATE OF WALTER DE MARIA

were deliberately absurd. For instance, *Ball Drop* (1961) invited viewers to insert a small wooden ball into a slot near the top of a 6ft-tall plywood box, before retrieving it from another hole at the bottom.

Also in the Sixties, De Maria joined the Primitives, alongside Lou Reed and John Cale. But he grew tired of hauling his drum kit to rehearsals and gave it up – although he did later record two musical compositions in which he played the drums: accompanied, in one, by crickets, and, in the other, by the sound of the ocean.

De Maria will always be most famous, though, as the architect of Land Art, which emerged in the Sixties in opposition to the conventional gallery system. Along with his peers Michael Heizer and Robert Smithson, he became obsessed with creating ambitious works for sites far removed from civilisation, in the great outdoors. In 1968, for instance, he partially realised *Mile-Long Drawing*: a pair of parallel chalk lines that stretched for a mile through California's Mojave Desert.

*The Lightning Field*, though, is the most powerful expression of De Maria's art, which summons monumental effects from simple, austere forms. The gridded



precision of the poles is offset by the panoramic wilderness of the landscape, which contains no trace of human presence, aside from a tattered old wind pump in the distance.

As it happens, lightning strikes the Field relatively rarely: only around three times a month during "lightning season" (from late May to early September). This, however, hardly matters, since, whenever the sun rises or sets, the poles turn incandescent with reflected light.

"Walter engages with something that is infinite," explains Jessica Morgan, the director of Dia Art Foundation. "His works are often enigmas, but they are also ambitious, extraordinarily theatrical, and awe-inspiring."

According to Childress, De Maria always hated talking about the meaning of his work. Instead, he preferred to discuss practicalities about how his sculptures were made. That said, she continues, he did have a "spiritual" side, even if he was not religious in any conventional sense.

"Walter was a complicated, private person – he didn't suffer fools – but he was also beloved," she says. "I don't think he ever wanted it to be about him. It was always about the artwork."

Walter De Maria is at Gagosian Gallery, London WC1 (020 7841 9960), until July 30. Information: [gagosian.com](http://gagosian.com)