

GAGOSIAN



Walter De Maria and The Lightning Field at Forty:

Art as Symbiosis

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Jean-Léon Gérôme, The First Kiss of the Sun, c. 1886. Oil on canvas laid down on board, 21 ¼ by 39 ½ inches. Courtesy Gallery 19C, Beverly Hills.

1886: *The First Kiss of the Sun*

In 1886, the French Orientalist and academic artist Jean-Léon Gérôme (1824-1904) painted *The First Kiss of the Sun*, a serene early morning view of Giza from the east. In it, Ra's rays have set aglow only the peaks of the pyramids of Khufu and Khafre, and the sun is not yet high enough to illuminate the shorter pyramid of Menkaure nor the squat sphinx of Khafre, whose head emerges from the mist in the center of the picture. Three camels mellow in the foreground, their positions mimicking the triad of skyward thrusting tombs beyond. It had been six years since Gérôme's final trip to the Nile River Valley, but in working in the comfort of his Paris studio from a sketch made on site, he conveyed in startling coloristic chiaroscuro the way the rising sun's rays reveal the ancient structures from the top down against the brightening sky. Gérôme gave a whitish cast to the apexes of the larger pyramids, although then as now only Khafre's, the central and tallest one, still retains traces of the gleaming buffed limestone veneer that in the Old Kingdom would have covered all four sides of these ancient monuments.

Gérôme's travels in Egypt were critical to his understanding of these wonders of the ancient world. He had to witness them in the light of dawn to better understand their power. It is the intersection between nature's cycles and human presence that such monuments catalyze: they

better connect us to our environment. They heighten our awareness, drawing us out of a focus on ourselves, and help us to define our lives and lifespans against infinite time. The Land Art of Walter De Maria (1935-2013) can be regarded as a contemporary crystallization of these ideas, inspiring equal parts unease and elation. But unlike *The First Kiss of the Sun*, they are not inert: they demand and repay the viewer's personal presence and concerted focus. The intimate experience of his projects and the way that De Maria insisted that you must take only the visual and visceral experiences away with you is consistent in all his work. It may seem strangely controlling, but it is the only way to connect with artworks more often encountered via reproduction.

October 8, 2017: *The Lightning Field*, New Mexico



The Lightning Field, 1977. Long-term installation, western New Mexico. © The Estate of Walter De Maria. Photo: John Cliett, July 1979. Courtesy Dia Art Foundation, New York

It was at quarter to seven in the morning at around 7,150 feet above sea level in the desert somewhere near Pie Town that we first saw the top edge of the sun above the eastern ridge behind De Maria's monumental outdoor sculpture. Seconds before, as in the effect in Gérôme's 131-year-old painting, the stainless steel tips of the easternmost of the four hundred rods installed in a one mile by one kilometer grid in the summer and autumn of 1977 had begun to glow. At between fifteen and twenty-five feet high, they were earlier witnesses to the light of our nearest star. We swiveled around to see all the pole points beginning to shine. In the three minutes it took for the sun to fully reveal itself, each shaft stirred to gilded life, and the poles, the majority of which had been invisible in the crisp and eerily silent early dawn, now spread across the plane before us like golden light-saber beams emitting from the scruffy earth. The poles, like the Great Pyramids, are the conduits for an experience that links sky and land, light and form, human endeavor and endless time. The pyramid of Khafre is some 4,549 years old. *The Lightning Field* just turned forty.

November 5, 2017: Dia Gala, Chelsea, New York



Dia Fall Night 2017. Photo: Julie Skarratt.

To celebrate the fortieth anniversary of *The Lightning Field* (and De Maria's *Vertical Kilometer* in Kassel and *New York Earth Room* in SoHo), Dia held a gala featuring presentations by the painter Terry Winters and the Land Artist Michael Heizer. Winters, who assisted De Maria along with Robert Fosdick, Helen Winkler, Robert Weathers, and others in constructing *The Lightning Field*, spoke movingly about the impact of the artist on his work, and then mirthfully about a road trip they took to Vegas to blow off steam and see some Earthworks.¹ Heizer, who had arrived at the event with his dog, Tomato Rose, donated a color photograph from his *Actual Size* series from 1970 of De Maria in a pink oxford and blue jeans standing in the Nevada desert against a grand rock formation, arms in the air, his back to the camera. Printed on a monumental scale, it hung on the wall to the left of the speaker's podium, presiding over the proceedings. In composing it Heizer followed the Rückenfigur convention from German Romanticism, but with a twist—he set De Maria hard against the rock not looking at a deep vista.² As Heizer walked to the podium to speak, Tomato Rose barked, and John Lee Hooker's "This is Hip" (1991) suddenly blared from the sound system. The artist surveyed the crowd, his head bobbing, his hands tapping the beat. When after three minutes and twenty-three seconds a gravelly Hooker said, "Alright. Thank you fellas," and the song ended, Heizer threw his arms in the air in emulation of De Maria's pose to his right. He returned to his seat, accompanied by thunderous applause.

October 7, 2017: *The Lightning Field*



Portrait of Walter De Maria at meteor impact crater with ejecta, northern Arizona, MM Heizer, 1968. ©Michael Heizer 2017

At around 6:00 p.m. we sat with cold beverages in hand on the porch of the Depression-era cabin that Dia has had restored to accommodate the up to six overnight visitors to *The Lightning Field*. De Maria had written in his notations on *The Lightning Field* in 1980 that “During the mid-portion of the day, seventy to ninety percent of the poles become virtually invisible due to the high angle of the sun.”³ And so we waited on the porch for sunset. As the low early autumn light intensified, something unexpected occurred: every single stainless steel pole revealed itself, their right (west) sides now shimmering with streaks of gold light. For the first time since we had arrived three hours earlier, we could actually see the entire work. Before visiting the sculpture, I thought the poles were brass or bronze—an impression gleaned from the handful of approved photographs that John Cliett took that have served, since 1979, as the official reproductions of the work.⁴ But here, in the presence of the day’s lifecycle, their silvery tips first turned golden at dusk when the posts most come into existence, and their enlivened apexes appear as flaming heads of four hundred tall matchsticks, illuminated to a fiery yellow. As the tips snuff out, from west to east the bottoms of the poles slowly darken as the sun sets, and they disappear into the night, confirming De Maria’s statement that “The light is as important as the lightning.” This is spectacular art, not spectacle art.

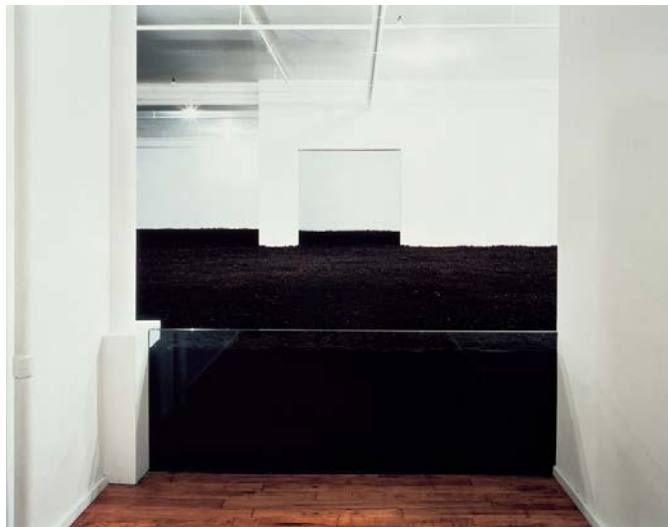
November 12, 2017: *Truck Trilogy, Dia:Beacon*



Walter De Maria, Truck Trilogy, 2011–17. Installation view, Dia:Beacon, Beacon, New York. © Estate of Walter De Maria. Photo: Bill Jacobson Studio, New York. Courtesy Dia Art Foundation, New York.

At Dia:Beacon there are three Chevrolet pickup trucks from 1950-55 arranged as *figure comme fratelli* in a “U” shape. Their bodies and hubcaps shine like the top of the Chrysler Building, in a gallery lit only by natural light. One is black, one red, one green. Three polished stainless steel rods rise eight feet high from oak platforms on each of their flatbeds. The rods’ cross sections form a circle, square, and triangle, and the linear sequence changes from truck to truck. The visual and virtual language of De Maria’s career is encapsulated in this project: trucks from his California adolescence, associated with wide-open spaces and working class America; gleaming industrially rendered materials; mathematical formulae; and a preoccupation with symmetry. Conceived in 2011 in the wake of his *Bel Air Trilogy* (2000-11, The Menil Collection), and executed this year with the support of the Gagosian Gallery, the trucks feel deeply at home in the generous spaces at the industrial warehouses of Beacon.⁵ But even here photography is not permitted—a dedicated guard is on hand to enforce the rule.⁶ De Maria was adamant about this regarding all his works—that a reproduction can never be accurate enough with respect to an immaculately crafted work. While one could question the necessity of banning the taking of photos with respect to a piece such as *Truck Trilogy*, completed four years after the artist’s death, the edict suits *The Lightning Field* and also *The New York Earth Room*.

November 17, 2017: *The New York Earth Room*, SoHo, New York



Walter De Maria, *The New York Earth Room*, 1977. © The Estate of Walter De Maria. Photo: John Cliett.

It is probably the twentieth time I have brought a class of undergraduates to the *New York Earth Room*. As ever, the artist Bill Dilworth, its caretaker since 1989 when the sculpture was but twelve years old, generously spoke to them about the work. I never tell them in advance about what we are going to see. For the first time all term, none of them take out their camera phones.

2017: De Maria Now

How do we assess *The Lightning Field* and *The New York Earth Room* at forty, projects that must be experienced to be truly understood? De Maria wished they would live on only in one’s memory. What power do they have now? The purpose of the art is not the question. The purpose of the art is not didactic. The work reorients the viewer. The art is not complete without the viewer. As Martin Creed stated in neon in a piece from 2000, “the whole world + the work = the whole world.” Creed’s puckish tautology questions the way that art impacts experience.⁷

Creation may be a zero factor, but steadfastly remains part of the equation. De Maria's impactful art is ultimately an amplification of human consciousness, loose in the wider world. And yet, "Isolation is the essence of land art," concluded De Maria in his notes on *The Lightning Field*. And in a rare interview, included in Robert Hughes's BBC series *The Shock of the New*, he said that "part of the content of the work is the ratio of people to space. So if we think of four to six people in one day walking through the field they have a very private experience. Unfortunately, one can't often get a private enough experience in the museum, though the museum has its function. The museum has its own architecture, its own traditions, which don't fit here."⁸ But the marvel is that the "private" experience of *The Lightning Field* encourages a meditation on society and community.

Land art treats the earth as an object, as a surface to be changed and manipulated. In this sense, it mirrors human endeavor over time. But while humans have abused the planet and brought it to a state of environmental crisis, Land Art now helps us see the very best of the planet more resolutely: its innate drama and its benign disregard. The earth does not need such artworks to be sublime. But how poetic to find *The Lightning Field*, as others have noted, only two hundred miles from Los Alamos, and also to see the poles in the form of ancient spears or modern tapering missiles pointed into an unsuspecting sky, constructed just over two years after the fall of Saigon, in the feverish midst of the Cold War. If the poles stand for a kind of anxiety, they also reassure with a sense of community—all 400 poles need each other to complete the geometry and provide a big enough span for the panorama. Yet De Maria's work is not about permanence but about being "forever present," in the words of Dia co-founder Heiner Friedrich.⁹

De Maria has emerged as the most humanist of his generation of artists. His aesthetic pursuits communicate both a sense of our loss of a symbiotic relationship with nature and the possibility of its revival. To experience *The Lightning Field* over the course of a day is akin to standing in the Pantheon in Rome, watching that circle of sunlight that pours through the vast oculus as it moves across the coffered dome and marble walls. At both locations one can experience the transit of the earth. I think of other works of Western art I have seen that live up to their billing, that have this potential to amplify our understanding of ourselves across time, that remain "forever present" for viewers. Most are not easy to get to. Leonardo's *Last Supper*. Carracci's ceiling of the Palazzo Farnese. The Riace Bronzes. *The Pergamon Altar* in Berlin. The Thorvaldsen Museum in Copenhagen. Fra Angelico at San Marco. Tadao Ando's Museum of Modern Art in Fort Worth and Pulitzer Foundation in St. Louis. The Alhambra. Stanley Spencer's *Sandham Memorial Chapel*. Bernini's *Sant'Andrea al Quirinale*. Andy Goldsworthy's *Touchstone North* in Thornhill, Scotland. The head of Ulysses at Sperlonga. Louis Kahn's *Trenton Bath Houses*. Piero's *Bacci Chapel* in Arezzo. *The New York Earth Room*. *The Lightning Field*. I have not yet seen the Great Pyramids. But G r me was onto something. De Maria too.

Notes

1. See also Winters's contribution to Katherine Atkins and Kelly Kivland, eds., *Artists on Walter De Maria* (New York: Dia Art Foundation, 2017).
2. The photograph is about scale, not distance. Heizer showed fifteen individual black and white prints from the series at the LA County Museum in 2012-13, including a similar one of De Maria against the same rock but unposed.
<http://www.lacma.org/art/exhibition/michael-heizer-actual-size>
3. Walter De Maria, "The Lightning Field," *Artforum* 18, no. 8 (April 1980), pp. 52-59.

4. This has been expanded with Dia's recent publication of forty-four of Cliett's images in *Walter De Maria: The Lightning Field* (New York: DIA Art Foundation, 2017).
5. <https://www.artsy.net/article/artsy-editorial-four-years-walter-de-marias-death-final-work-complete>
6. In the first years after Dia: Beacon first opened in 2003, no photography was allowed. This has since been relaxed to include only De Maria's works.
7. Similarly, De Maria wrote often of the concept of "meaningless work"—used as the subtitle of a compelling new study of the artist by Jane McFadden, Reaktion Books, 2016.
8. Robert Hughes, *The Shock of the New*, Episode 8: "The Future that Was." BBC TV, 1979.
9. Conversation with Bill Dilworth, November 17, 2017.