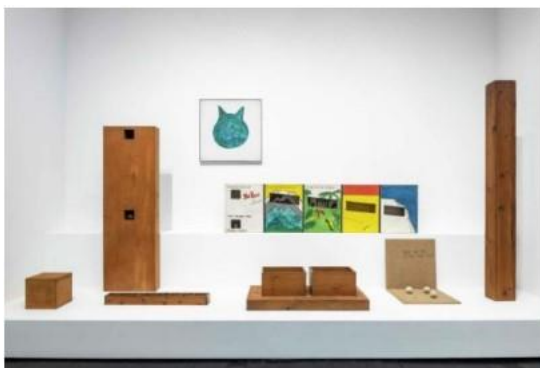


GAGOSIAN

# HOUSTON CHRONICLE

## Menil exhibit tells a history of Walter De Maria that few people know

Molly Glentzer



Few of the artists the Menil Collection has patronized for decades have been as playfully forward-thinking, innovative and underknown as the late Walter De Maria.

Among the most rascally thinkers of a radical time, De Maria started his career with the premise that “an object to look at is not enough.” He cared more about the experience of aesthetic encounters, aiming to nudge viewers to question their place within space, time, reality, consciousness, nature, history, philosophy, morality, violence.

De Maria's most famous project — the iconic 1977 earthwork “The Lightning Field” — consists of 400 polished steel poles arranged in a mile-by-kilometer-size grid upon the remote western edge of New Mexico. It's mysterious, evocative and almost impossible to see completely, even when atmospheric conditions don't conjure a mirage. All of his works involve aspects of invisibility and mathematical precision.

He made other monumental, site-specific installations around the world after “The Lightning Field,” but only now, nine years after his death, is he finally getting a museum survey. “Boxes for Meaningless Work,” on view at the Menil, tells a De Maria history few people know.

Most of the exhibition's 55 major works, which date from 1960 to 2011, are from the Menil's permanent collection and were acquired after De Maria died, along with 600 works on paper. “It constitutes an incredible corpus that hasn't been seen,” Michelle White, the Menil's senior curator, said.

‘Walter De Maria: Boxes for Meaningless Work’

When: 11 a.m.-7 p.m. Wednesdays-Sundays, through April 23

Where: Menil Collection, 1533 Sul Ross

Details: Free; 713-525-9400, menil.org

Appropriately, the show initially looks more spare than it feels once you dive in — with sculptures, drawings, a film, sound works and archival materials spread across six galleries. The many diagrams and lists from De Maria's notebooks make me think if he hadn't gravitated to art, he might have made a go of it as a philosopher or a theoretical physicist.

De Maria grew up in the San Francisco Bay Area and was a serious aesthete, even as a teenager: He visited city's museums, went to the symphony and hung out at jazz clubs in the era of Art Blakey, John Coltrane and Miles Davis. He finished his education at the University of California at Berkeley in 1959, moved to New York in 1960 and plunged headlong into a freewheeling downtown scene. He crossed paths with everyone who was anyone at the forefront of reshaping culture — participating in happenings and performance art; playing drums with the Primitives, the Lou Reed band that evolved into the Velvet Underground.

The stimulation fed his art, but De Maria wasn't a fame seeker. He shunned commercial art galleries. His works often took years to realize, and he was maddeningly choosy about where and how they were shown. As a result, he didn't participate in many exhibitions. He didn't even give interviews for the last 40 years of his life. De Maria became such a discreet public figure that the art dealer Larry Gagosian — a friend who eventually represented him — thought of him as “the Greta Garbo of the art world.”

The exhibition reveals that De Maria was not a fickle experimenter who flitted from one idea to the next. His life's work unfolded more like a sustained note on a few boundless themes, expanding along a consistent conceptual track. White and co-curator Brad Epley map the progression efficiently while exploring his connections to multiple art movements. “His work touches on facets of all these emerging, bubbling movements that totally radicalized art history — Fluxus, Minimalism, Conceptualism and Land Art,” White said.

The first gallery holds some of the artist's earliest sculptures — modest, toylike wood objects that have instructions. The piece from which the show's title is borrowed has an inscription that

reads, “Transfer things from one box to the next box back and forth, back and forth etc. Be aware that what you are doing is meaningless.” Alas, viewers can’t touch De Maria’s boxes anymore, but he also saw value in merely thinking about interactions with objects.

“He’s breaking the rules of art history in 1961,” White said, explaining how it upended the Abstract Expressionism of Jackson Pollock’s rarefied canvases. “Pollock was thinking about his own inner emotions. Walter de Maria is doing the audience: He’s sort of removing himself and pushing the creation of the meaning to you. And not only that. He’s asking you to do that by touching the art. This was absolutely radical, that you could move things and interact. In fact, the action and experience is more important than the object itself.”

The second gallery’s works are designed to heighten your awareness of the architectural space you share with the objects. An even bigger shift appears in the third gallery, where some of De Maria’s first stainless steel sculptures are displayed near the bright yellow, wall-eating canvas, “The Color Men Choose When They Attack the Earth,” which refers to earth-moving machinery as a tool for Land Art.

Time is a more obvious element in works such as “Calendar,” which has a wood bar on a chain that gets lowered by one link a day for 365 days. The meditative yet menacing 28-minute film “HARD CORE” blends a soundtrack of ocean waves with a laconic, 360-degree pan of a Nevada desert. A cowboy shootout punctuates the scene, making one of De Maria’s more obvious political statements. Audio of crashing waves also is the primary element of the one work in the show you are allowed to touch: To experience “Ocean Bed,” you don headphones, lie on a tufted pink mattress, and imagine your brain as the link between two distant bodies of water. Two important suites of works on paper end the show on a super-subtle note. They’re made with graphite marks so faint you might not be sure they exist. “Pure Polygons” explores geometric figures. “Small Landscape” features handwritten words describing elements of a landscape you can only imagine.

Much of the effort to bring De Maria’s story forward has been led by the Gagosian Gallery, which is behind the hefty new book, “Walter De Maria: The Object, The Action, The Aesthetic Feeling.” It offers the most comprehensive look yet at the artist’s career.

Kara Vander Weg, a Gagosian senior director, was among the De Maria brain trust at the show’s opening. I asked her why it’s taken so long for the scope of De Maria’s work to be recognized. “I think everything in good time with Walter,” she said. “Now... there are more pieces of the puzzle. But it’s a big puzzle. And it’s not complete. The hope is, there will be more scholarship, more interest in the work.”

For casual museum goers, the biggest revelation may be how of-the-moment De Maria’s work feels. I left the show thinking of him as a still-chill granddaddy to all the makers of big-ticket digital installations who feed 21st-century appetites for experiential art.

Out in the hallway, De Maria’s composition “Cricket Music” plays from a speaker near the ceiling. A layered recording of chirping insects with a syncopated drum track of cymbal brushing, it’s of course barely discernable. But have a seat on the big ottoman below it, open your ears, and feel the vibe.