



*The Lightning Field* (1977), a grid of 400 stainless-steel poles arranged in the New Mexico desert, is De Maria's most famous work, and widely credited as the origin of the Land Art movement.  
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## Walter De Maria by Katie Baron

In our digitised era of hyper-networked micro-communications it's not hard to grasp the extent to which everything's becoming connected, nor how sped-up the world has become. It is, however, becoming considerably trickier to find a space in which to escape, pull back and be moved by the bigger, more mysterious picture. The works of Walter De Maria - the reclusive giant of American art who died in 2013 leaving a career spanning 50 years and a legacy of epic, solitude-fuelled sculptures straddling Dadaism, Conceptual Art, Minimalism and Land Art - have never been more vital in filling that hole, as sanctuary-like standpoints for infinitely grander outrospective thinking.

Growing up as the shy child of gregarious restaurateur parents, he found his own voice in music - a first love with plenty of endurance; by the age of 11 he'd already joined a musician's union; at 30 he was playing the drums with The Primitives - the New York rock band that later evolved into Lou Reed's The Velvet Underground. Music became the catalyst for his early artistic odysseys, with his initial professional evolution propelled by a stream of new musical blood. On studying history and painting at the University of California in Berkeley, San Francisco during the late Fifties, he was taught by David Park - a painter who also had a jazz group, in which De Maria sometimes played. From there on in it was a swift transition into San Francisco's avant-garde art scene - an alternative world of 'happenings' and theatrical productions on the cusp of segueing into the great American counter-cultural revolution of the Sixties.

Key collaborators included the composer La Monte Young (an artist generally considered to be the world's first minimalist composer) and dancer and choreographer

Simone Forti, whose obsession with channelling everyday movements, including the improvised movements of children playing games, directly fed into De Maria's own playful, interactive sculptures. 'Boxes for Meaningless Work' (1961) bears the directive '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' - a bordering-on-the-idiotic scenario indicative of his early interest (coinciding with a move to New York in 1960) in Dadaism - an art movement anchored in the nonsensical, irrational and intuitive.

Constant questioning via the interactions of others was a prerequisite. For the group show *Live in Your Head: When Attitude Becomes Form in Switzerland* (1969) he presented a black telephone placed in the middle of a gallery beside a small sign reading: 'If this telephone rings, you may answer it. Walter De Maria is on the line and would like to talk to you'.

It's a similar sense of mystery that permeates De Maria's most famous works - vast, often isolated pieces of land-related art located either in the outdoors or unusual urban locations - that beg the viewer in the most visceral way (not unlike that of his contemporaries Donald Judd, Richard Serra and Dan Flavin), to ponder the wondrous enigmas of the natural world amid a crucible of manmade artifice.

'The New York Earth Room' (1977) consists of a 3,600sq ft loft in Soho, New York filled with 22 inches of dark earth, specially treated to remain entirely barren. Appearing as if teleported direct from a rural domain it's as surreal as it is gratifying, simultaneously alien and familiar. 'The Broken Kilometer' (1979) consists of 500 two-metre brass rods in perfect rows on the gallery floor - inferring an impossible attempt to tame even symmetry itself. 'The 2000 Sculpture' (2012) at Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA) reprises that concept with a herringbone pattern of rods totalling one kilometre. Protruding just five inches beyond the floor it's an exquisite paean to the minimalist genre, and a nod to the notion of invoking hidden distances, spaces and time.

Even De Maria's own home in New York (currently up for sale) was a colossal electrical substation that he purposefully left almost unchanged architecturally - a live/work temple to the grand power of minimalism.

To De Maria, the measurements included in the descriptions of his work are another tool for amplifying intrigue: they act as codes to heighten the viewer's awareness of the experience - new mysteries, or additional reveals that visual scrutiny alone won't unearth. At times, he used a mixture of imperial and metric gauges, highlighting the multiple human attempts to define and create order and sense from the natural world that constantly eludes our complete comprehension.

The most famous work of all remains 'The Lightning Field' (1977) - widely regarded as being the genesis of Land Art itself - involving a grid of 400 stainless steel poles pitched in the New Mexico desert. 20.5ft high and 220ft apart across, the conductors cover an area one kilometre by one mile. With or without the drama of witnessing the illuminated sky when struck by lightning, it's a breathtakingly poetic attempt to harness order from chaos. So potent is its impact it's even rumoured to have shaped the descriptions of the wild landscapes envisaged in Cormac McCarthy's 1985 novel *Blood Meridian* - landscapes used as a metaphor for a foreboding, uncharted parallel universe (fitting for an artist cited to have once proclaimed 'the invisible is real').

Described by Michael Govan, the director of LACMA who worked extensively with De Maria, as 'one of the greatest artists of our time', De Maria's work is simultaneously grand and intimate, a constant and highly pertinent spiritual reminder of a world beyond ourselves.

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