

**Walter
De Maria**

**Boxes for
Meaningless
Work**





The American artist Walter De Maria (1935–2013) explored how experience shapes the way we see. He believed in powerful aesthetic encounters, the beauty of the unknown, and the central role of the viewer. This career-spanning survey explores these themes and celebrates the Menil Collection’s long-standing relationship with De Maria by featuring work from the museum’s holdings.

Gallery 1

In the early 1960s, De Maria, along with his peers, questioned the very definition of art and asked how the audience could more actively engage with a work of art by making interactive, box-like wood sculptures. “An object to look at,” De Maria wrote, “is not enough.” At the time, what has become known as “participatory art” was a novel concept, and De Maria’s works, with inscriptions that invite play, reflect such an audience-centered approach. Many of these objects, which remained in the artist’s collection throughout his life, have rarely been shown to the public; and, given their age, they are fragile and cannot be touched. However, the humorous or arbitrary written directions found on the works help us understand how he might have wanted these actions to feel, look, or even sound.

In 1960 the artist wrote that engaging in these actions was not intended to yield anything productive. Rather, the simple forms and materials created spaces to imagine limitless artistic possibilities that extended beyond traditions of the past. “Meaningless work,” De Maria explained, “can make you feel and think about yourself, the outside world, morality, reality, unconsciousness, nature, history, time, philosophy, nothing at all, politics, etc. without the limitations of the old art forms.”

Gallery 2

In the following years, De Maria continued to create experiential encounters. Most of the works in this gallery were first exhibited together in a show in New York City in 1965, and are activated by the “meaningless” movement of the beholder. The two small paintings installed on either side of the room ask you to walk back and forth across the space. The monumental plywood sculpture *The Arch*, conceived as a compressed entryway, prompts the viewer to imagine what it might feel like to pass between the columns.

Gallery 3

In 1965 De Maria began to translate his wood boxes and ball-based work into steel sculptures. His shift to working with metal provided a way for the artist to convey his belief in the invisible power contained in a work of art. He also explored even more expansive ways for his work to heighten the viewer’s awareness of time and space. *Calendar*, for example, takes a year to fully experience. Each day one link in a brass chain that holds together two hinged wooden elements is released, gradually opening the sculpture.

As the decade progressed, De Maria was part of the Land Art movement, a group of artists radically treating the earth as a medium, one that they believed could break down artistic confines. The large yellow painting in this room was made for an exhibition called *Earthworks* in October 1968 at Dwan Gallery in New York City. The diminutive steel plaque in the middle of the canvas reads: “the color men choose when they attack the earth.” The phrase is a reference to the painting’s color, approximately the hue of Caterpillar-brand earth-moving equipment, and it evokes an image of the excavation of dirt as an artistic gesture. The same month, De Maria created the *Munich Earth Room*. He filled a gallery two feet deep with eight tons of topsoil. *The New York Earth Room* is now in the collection of the Dia Art Foundation and on view on Wooster Street in New York City.

Gallery 4

This gallery begins with sketches of unrealized projects and others related to De Maria's first completed earthworks. *Mile Long Drawing* was finished in 1969 and is shown in the photograph of the artist lying between two parallel lines of chalk that he drew in a dry lake bed twelve feet apart and each a mile long. The drawing extended so far into the distance that the viewer perceived it as infinite. De Maria was fascinated by invisibility and notions of infinity, and he often drew attention to the horizon line in real space, or employed it as a way of pointing to the limits of perception. In *Hard Core*, a film he conceived and directed during the Vietnam War, this line is prominent. The cowboy shoot-out staged between the artist Michael Heizer and an actor in the Nevada desert features a slow, 360-degree pan of the barren horizon.

Ocean Bed was made for the 1969 exhibition *Square Pegs in Round Holes, Situations and Cryptostructures* (Dutch, *Op Losse Schroeven...*) in Amsterdam. The show's curator, Wim Beeren, argued that the art of the era involved an exchange between the viewer, an artist's process, and the architectural space of the museum. Remade for this presentation at the Menil, the work features a mattress that the audience is invited to lie down on while listening to recordings of waves from the Pacific and Atlantic oceans. The clashing sound of the two seas creates an acoustic focal point between unperceivably distant points on the globe.

For De Maria, ideas themselves are the basis of artistic creation and can stand alone as realized works of art, even in the absence of a physical object. The diagrams and drawings exhibited in this gallery reveal De Maria's approach to what is now referred to as Conceptual Art. In a set of drawings from the late 1960s De Maria proposed a list of instructions to be carried out by the viewer. Humorous, strange, and obtuse, the requests position the reader as the artist.

Gallery 5

De Maria continued to break rules about traditional spatial relationships between the viewer and the work of art throughout his career. The blue and red paintings are from the artist's Statement Series and were created for the Menil Collection's 2012 De Maria exhibition. Revisiting the composition of his 1968 yellow painting, exhibited in gallery 3, the artist turned to the theme of global violence.

Gallery 6

De Maria maintained a prolific drawing practice. The *Pure Polygons Series* is a suite of drawings that explore mathematical figures that are characterized by a faint line, one like those in other works that have come to be known as "the invisible drawings," which include the *Small Landscape*. These feature handwritten words that are commonly used to describe elements in a landscape, each made with the slightest bit of pressure on the pencil. The artist compared his nearly illegible marks to the illusion of a mirage, a rippling line created by rising heat in the desert. He wanted viewers to question their senses. In a 1972 interview De Maria explained:

The drawings in which what was put on the page was so light, it was just on the threshold of visibility and the interest there was in the way the idea of the drawing was as important as the drawing and the notion that you doubled your senses, you didn't know if it was there or wasn't there. In a way it was something like the land work in that it is there but no one can see it.

Also on view are a sculpture and drawing for *The Lightning Field*, an earthwork he completed in 1977 that is located in western New Mexico. It consists of four hundred polished and highly reflective stainless steel poles, averaging about twenty feet tall that, according to the position of the viewer and of the sun, appear to change colors dramatically and even disappear. Configured in a grid measuring one mile by one kilometer, the poles' height was calibrated so that their tips create a horizontal plane, one that requires a sustained interaction to comprehend and is ultimately impossible for the spectator to fully perceive at once.

Hallway

Walter De Maria wanted his art to be an encompassing and sensorial experience, and his practice as an artist was complemented by his work as a musician. He was active in the San Francisco Bay Area jazz scene as a percussionist in the late 1950s and early 1960s, and was a member of the rock band The Primitives (which later evolved into The Velvet Underground). His composition *Cricket Music* contains recordings of chirping insects layered over a syncopated drum track.

Biography

Walter De Maria was involved with many influential avant-garde movements of the 1960s and 1970s that changed art history in the 20th century, including Conceptualism, Land Art, Minimalism, Fluxus, and performance art. Born in Albany, California, he studied at the University of California, Berkeley, and in the spring of 1960 moved to New York City, where he lived and worked until his death in 2013.

Michelle White, Senior Curator

This exhibition is curated by Brad Epley, former Chief Conservator, and Michelle White, Senior Curator.

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Public Programs

All programs will be held at the Menil Collection main building.

Michael Harrison, *Revelation: Music for Just Intonation*
Copresented with DACAMERA
Saturday, November 5, 3–4:30 p.m.

All public programs are free and open to everyone.
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Exhibition Dates

October 29, 2022–April 23, 2023