

A Day of Meaningless Work reconstructs the durational and participatory spirit in the work of American artist Walter De Maria (1935–2013) featured in the Menil’s exhibition *Walter De Maria: Boxes for Meaningless Work*. While De Maria is known for his contributions to Minimalism and Land Art, the roots of his creative practice are in music, and he developed his early work in conversation with Happenings, Fluxus, postmodern dance, and musical Minimalism. Participatory and theatrical, many of the works featured in the exhibition intend to activate the beholder’s awareness of how experience is shaped by the textures of space and time. In today’s program, contemporary artists and musicians interpret rarely presented scores and realize actions inspired by the work of De Maria and his peers in the New York downtown scene of the 1960s. Visitors are also able to handle fabricated copies of the artist’s interactive boxes and observe and participate in many versions of what the artist called “meaningless work,” from the witty and disquieting to the meditative and profound.

De Maria began his career as a musician. He played as a professional jazz drummer alongside his graduate studies in painting at UC Berkeley, during which time he befriended avant-garde composers La Monte Young and Terry Riley. Together they organized a number of Happenings-like concerts that activated multiple senses with actions such as dragging furniture and cooking food. De Maria’s early performance works *Licorice Stick* and *Bats*, both 1960, were first performed in July 1960 at a concert organized by De Maria, Young, Riley, and Dick Higgins at the Old Spaghetti Factory in San Francisco. For *Licorice Stick*, as Young described to *Artforum* in 2013, De Maria “took a package of licorice sticks and distributed a stick to each person in the audience.” In *Bats*, “he stood over a table with a baseball bat and proceeded to break the table to pieces.” Even Young admits “it was a little bit sensationalist,” although “it made a point” with regard to more conservative art and music sensibilities of the time. A related work, De Maria’s *Piece for Terry Riley*, 1960, is also baseball-themed in its use of catcher’s equipment. It is one of very few written scores by De Maria to exist from this period. We present these three works in conversation with the artist’s larger body of work for the first time.

Upon moving to New York in 1960, De Maria continued to think about how his art engaged the dimension of time and maintained a close dialogue with Young, whose music centered on meditative, minimal drones. Like many artists of his generation, De Maria wrestled with what novel contribution he could make to art history that would acknowledge yet move beyond the precedents of Marcel Duchamp's readymades, abstract expressionist painting, and the musical experimentalism of John Cage. His answer came in the form of about two-dozen plywood box sculptures, many with instructions for interaction written directly on them. Their radical innovation was to invite the viewer's direct physical participation. Exhibition copies of two such works—*Move the Ball Slowly Down the Row* and *Toss Ball in Box*, both 1962—are available outside the main building for you to interact with.

Underpinning today's program is De Maria's philosophy of "meaningless work." In 1960, the artist wrote a text with this title that was published in *An Anthology of Chance Operations*, 1963. On view in the show, it is a diverse compendium of scores and essays edited by Young with poet Jackson Mac Low and designed by leading Fluxus organizer George Maciunas. According to De Maria, meaningless work is a form of non-instrumental action that opens up time and space for thinking philosophically about how it is to be alive. In this sense, meaningless work is not at all meaningless. Rather, it updates philosopher Immanuel Kant's definition of art as something that has "purposeless purposiveness." Intense yet open-ended experiences of this nature would come to characterize De Maria's more well-known works, such as *The Lightning Field*, 1977, a gridded array of 400 vertical steel poles installed in the New Mexican desert, which visitors behold in isolation over an extended period. What these works have in common is that any self-aware response we might have—whether fascination, amusement, irritation, boredom, or enlightenment—is granted value, as long as we have invested our earnest, sustained attention.

In the foyer of the main building, DACAMERA Young Artists with support from Ethan Adkison and Sonia Flores execute a recurring piano-centric program of scores by De Maria and Fluxus artists

George Brecht, Alison Knowles, Mieko Shiomi, and Emmett Williams. Everyday gestures are repurposed in order to upset our expectations of “performance” and help sharpen our appreciation of the mundane. This program highlights Philip Corner, another figure associated with Fluxus, whose extensive, often minimalist experimentation with the piano brings out the instrument’s percussive qualities.

Outdoors, two interactive sculptures by artist Gabriel Martinez (who is also a practicing drummer) extend the logic and legacy of De Maria’s boxes in more explicitly musical directions. *Sound Bed*, 2019, invites the activator to let a hand-carved wooden ball ping its way down a ramp studded with nails, while *The Tempest*, 2020, generates a cascade of drips when water is poured over a cymbal with tin cans hung from the rim. In both, repetitive, indeterminate, percussive sounds emerge from sculptural situations arranged by the artist with everyday materials adapted to unusual ends. Additionally, Martinez performs his own version of meaningless work, *Cleaning and Polishing a Drainage Grate*, a superfluous polishing of a storm drain grate that generates drone-like sounds and intends to reveal unexpected material beauty.

Further outdoor activities include vocalist Justin Jones responding to text-based scores by Mac Low and Fluxus affiliates Benjamin Patterson and Takehisa Kosugi. These works activate the performer’s body and resonant space while testing the boundary between meaningful communication and abstract intonation. Finally, members of the MFA in Studio Art and MA in Art History programs at the University of Houston School of Art realize sporadic actions inspired by the performative works of De Maria and his milieu. Delightful, spontaneous gestures occur around the main building alongside a durational activity inspired by the artist’s suggestion in “Meaningless Work” to dig a hole and then cover it. Grab a tool and join in! After all, as De Maria wrote, “Meaningless work is the new way to tell who is square.”

— Natilee Harren

PARTICIPANTS

A Day of Meaningless Work is co-curated by art historian Natilee Harren and artist Gabriel Martinez, with thanks to Sarah Cooper, Philip Corner, Alison Knowles, Mieko Shiomi, David Dove, Elizabeth Childress, Michael Childress, and the Walter De Maria Archive.

Participating performers include Ethan Adkison, Saran Alderson, Andrea Benabent Follana, Sonia Flores, Zoie Buske, Olivia Ek, Arthur Gilligan, Justin Jones, Randi Long, Pablo Martínez Martínez, and Zulma Vega. Please visit menil.org for biographies of the performers.

This program is presented in collaboration with the DACAMERA Young Artists Program and the University of Houston School of Art, with in-kind support from Lisle Violin Shop.

Walter De Maria: Boxes for Meaningless Work
On view through April 23, 2023

INSERT Walter De Maria, "Meaningless Work" (1960), excerpted from *An Anthology of Chance Operations* (1963). Text © Estate of Walter De Maria, Courtesy of the Walter De Maria Archive

The Menil Collection
1533 Sul Ross Street
menil.org
Admission free, always.

SCHEDULE

12–5 P.M. Interact with exhibition copies of Walter De Maria’s sculptures *Move the Ball Slowly Down the Row* and *Toss Ball in Box*, both 1962.
SOUTH SIDE OF MAIN BUILDING

Visit Gabriel Martinez’s sculptures *Sound Bed*, 2019, and *The Tempest*, 2020.
MAIN BUILDING EAST LAWN

“Digging a hole, then covering it” (visitor participation encouraged)
plus other ongoing and/or spontaneous actions with Saran Alderson,
Zoie Buske, Olivia Ek, Randi Long, and Zulma Vega.
MAIN BUILDING FRONT LAW

Mieko Shiomi, *Event for the Late Afternoon*, 1963.
SOUTHEAST CORNER OF MAIN BUILDING

1–1:30 P.M. Ethan Adkison, Sonia Flores, and DACAMERA Young Artists Andrea Benabent Follana, Arthur Gilligan, and Pablo Martínez Martínez present a program of works by George Brecht, Philip Corner, Walter De Maria, Alison Knowles, Mieko Shiomi and Emmett Williams.
MAIN BUILDING FOYER

2–2:30 P.M. Justin Jones responds to vocal scores by Takehisa Kosugi, Jackson Mac Low, and Benjamin Patterson.
EAST SIDE OF MAIN BUILDING

2:45–3:15 P.M. Gabriel Martinez performs *Cleaning and Polishing a Drainage Grate*.
MAIN BUILDING EAST LAWN

3:30–4 P.M. Ethan Adkison, Sonia Flores, and DACAMERA Young Artists Andrea Benabent Follana, Arthur Gilligan, and Pablo Martínez Martínez present a program of works by George Brecht, Philip Corner, Walter De Maria, Alison Knowles, Mieko Shiomi and Emmett Williams.
MAIN BUILDING FOYER

MEANINGLESS WORK

Meaningless work is obviously the most important and significant art form today. The aesthetic feeling given by meaningless work can not be described exactly because it varies with each individual doing the work. Meaningless work is honest. Meaningless work will be enjoyed and hated by intellectuals - though they should understand it. Meaningless work can not be sold in art galleries or win prizes in museums - though old fashion records of meaningless work (most all paintings) do partake in these indignities. Like ordinary work, meaningless work can make you sweat if you do it long enough. By meaningless work I simply mean work which does not make you money or accomplish a conventional purpose. For instance putting wooden blocks from one box to another, then putting the blocks back to the original box, back and forth, back and forth etc., is a fine example of meaningless work. Or digging a hole, then covering it is another example. Filing letters in a filing cabinet could be considered meaningless work, only if one were not a secretary, and if one scattered the file on the floor periodically so that one didn't get any feeling of accomplishment. Digging in the garden is not meaningless work. Weight lifting, though monotonous, is not meaningless work in its aesthetic sense because it will give you muscles and you know it. Caution should be taken that the work chosen should not be too pleasurable, lest pleasure becomes the purpose of the work. Hence sex, though rhythmic, can not strictly be called meaningless - though I'm sure many people consider it so.

Meaningless work is potentially the most abstract, concrete, individual, foolish, indeterminate, exactly determined, varied, important art-action-experience one can undertake today. This concept is not a joke. Try some meaningless work in the privacy of your own room. In fact, to be fully understood, meaningless work should be done alone or else it becomes entertainment for others and the reaction or lack of reaction of the art lover to the meaningless work can not honestly be felt.

Meaningless work can contain all of the best qualities of old art forms such as painting, writing etc. It 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.

Meaningless work is individual in nature and it can be done in any form and over any span of time - from one second up to the limits of exhaustion. It can be done fast or slow or both. Rhythmically or not. It can be done anywhere in any weather conditions. Clothing if any, is left to the individual. Whether the meaningless work, as an art form, is meaningless, in the ordinary sense of that term, is of course up to the individual. Meaningless work is the new way to tell who is square.

Grunt

Get to work