



Sublime Beauty

**A PILGRIMAGE TO WALTER DE MARIA'S
"THE LIGHTNING FIELD." BY DANA MICUCCI**

SOME WORKS OF ART require more from us than a momentary connection. They demand effort, commitment and focused attention, a total immersion of the senses. They ask not that we admire them from afar but experience them intimately over time, challenging our perceptions of self and of our place in the world. One such example is "The Lightning Field," a 1977 work of Land Art by Walter De Maria that was commissioned by the New York-based Dia Art Foundation, which maintains it today. Situated in the remote high desert of southwestern New Mexico, near the small town of Quemado, and acclaimed as one of the most significant artworks of the late 20th century, this magical site lures the world-weary art lover on an unforgettable pilgrimage.

My solitary three-hour drive southwest from Albuquerque through the rugged New Mexico landscape was the perfect preamble to my experience of "The Lightning Field." For it was then that my attention began to shift from the fragmented frenzy of life in New York to the vast low hanging sky, the piercing morning light and the stark pinon- and yucca-studded earth. My mind expanded to accommodate the quiet emptiness of the desert, which at once seemed to be pulsating with expectation and possibilities. Would I be treated to the impressive lightning display captured in so many printed images of "The Lightning Field," I wondered. If not, would I be disappointed?

Once in Quemado, I checked in at the white two-story building that serves as Dia's office and then, along with four other visitors, was transported by van for another 45 minutes further into the desert. Because "The Lightning Field" must be experienced over an extended period of time to appreciate its full impact, an overnight stay is a must.

Our driver deposited us at a rustic log cabin, promising to return the following morning. There were no signs of human life, as far as the eye could see; the immense solitude both excited and haunted me. "Isolation is the essence of land art," De Maria wrote in his notes for the project.

Extending toward the horizon behind the cabin was the object of our quest—400 slender, polished stainless steel poles installed in a grid configuration measuring one mile by .62 miles (one kilometer). Two inches in diameter and averaging 20 feet, 7 1/2 inches in height, the poles are spaced 220 feet apart and have pointed tips that define a horizontal plane, which would evenly support an imaginary sheet of glass, according to De Maria's notes. The visual spectacle was breathtaking. "The Lightning Field" commands the earth with a mystical grandeur that embodies the philosopher Immanuel Kant's dialectic of the sublime and the beautiful, integrating the awesome, sometimes terrifying force of nature with the pleasurable stillness of form and contemplation inherent in any experience of beauty.

De Maria was a pioneer, along with Robert Smithson, of the Land Art movement of the 1960s and '70s, which gave rise to large-scale sculptural works that emphasize the viewer's relationship to the environment and natural phenomena. "The Lightning Field" is his best-known work. His other projects have included "Mile Long Drawing" (1968), two parallel



chalk lines that temporarily extended for two miles across the Mojave Desert in California, and “The New York Earth Room” (1977), a permanently installed dirt-filled loft in New York City that is owned by Dia. “De Maria is one of a small group of contemporary artists who have changed our way of thinking about the world,” says Dia’s

curator, Lynne Cooke. He is also one of this country’s great Minimal artists, whose preoccupation with rational order; simple geometric shapes; industrially manufactured materials, such as stainless steel and aluminum; and the serial repetition of objects endow his work with a transcendent purity, a quality that is especially palpable at

“The Lightning Field.”

From a distance, the tall steel poles alternately disappeared and came into focus like a mirage in the afternoon light. We quickly dispersed in different directions throughout the Field, which seemed to extend to infinity across a vast arid plain fringed by mountain ridges. De Maria had intended the work to be viewed alone or in the company of a very small number of people, conditions that would inspire one’s active awareness moment by moment. Walking among clumps of desert shrubs and grasses and the occasional anthill and rabbit hole, I watched the sunlight play upon the shiny smooth surface of the poles and reflect off their tips. The poles mirrored the colors of the landscape, vibrating slightly to my touch as a gust of wind swept down. I felt bounded by the steel grid yet oddly liberated by it, because my senses had been activated and serenely focused.

As I continued my exploration through, between and around the poles, I became as much aware of the surrounding landscape as of De Maria’s creation, and how it, too, shifted

constantly in my perception with the changing light of day. The land itself had been transformed but not obliterated by the artist’s need to order his environment, to civilize the chaos of nature. This ordering impulse recalls other timeless, monumental land works, such as Stonehenge, the Pyramids and the Nazca Lines in Peru, that chart an intersection between the human and the divine, sanctifying our universal yearning for transcendence. Dwarfed by “The Lightning Field” and its infinite earth canvas, I was humbled by my own insignificant place in the universe yet, at the same time, more conscious of my connection to it.

When dusk approached, the formerly ethereal steel poles began to take on a more substantial presence, glowing beautifully in the golden light. I stood beside one of them, noticing that my shadow had lengthened. I detected my vague reflection on its surface. Gazing upward, I felt that I, too, had begun to merge with the landscape. And I saw myself, like the poles, as a conduit between the earth and the heavens. I expect-

tantly watched the sky for signs of an approaching thunderstorm arid, of course, lightning, which by striking the poles would signal the ultimate connection between man/woman and nature, the ephemeral and eternal. But it was not to be. There are only about 60 days per year when lightning storms pass over the Field. As De Maria wrote, “the light is as important as the lightning.” I was content to have witnessed the subtle transformation of the Field throughout the day.

Just before sunrise the next day, I excitedly headed back into the Field, invigorated by the metallic chill. The poles appeared first as phantom-like silvery needles, some more discernible than others. As the sun slowly ascended over the distant eastern ridges, washing the sky with a soft pink light, the poles began to shimmer intensely as though they were on fire. The startling howl of a coyote broke the silence, as if to challenge the calm, orderly precision of De Maria’s creation. Then, my perception shifted again. The poles suddenly appeared as ominous spears puncturing the sky, suggesting the destructive potential

of technology in contrast to the creative, life-giving power of nature. I thought of the nuclear weapons built decades ago at Los Alamos, a less sanguine New Mexico landmark, and “The Lightning Field” became, for an instant, the ruins of a disintegrating civilization, recalling T.S. Eliot’s “The Waste Land.” But even “The Waste Land,” where thunder eventually brings cleansing rains, ends with a prayer of peace.

Throughout my encounter with “The Lightning Field,” I was reminded of such dualities and of our imperative to seek resolution within their fragile balance. I left New Mexico with a light heart and the words of Fyodor Dostoevsky resounding in my memory: “If we are going to be saved by anything, we are going to be saved by beauty.” 

Dana Micucci is the author of several books on art, antiques and collecting.