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Walter De Maria's 'I Ching' Sculpture Comes to Upstate New York

Measuring nearly 10,000 square feet, the piece will be on view at Dia:Beacon through summer 2017



Walter De Maria's '360° I Ching' sculpture will be on display in galleries at the Dia:Beacon museum in upstate New York.
PHOTO: BILL JACOBSON STUDIO, NEW YORK/DIA ART FOUNDATION, NEW YORK

By **ANDY BATTAGLIA**

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The late artist Walter De Maria was known for making sculptures with enormous mounds of dirt and even bolts of lightning. A new exhibition adds to that list hundreds of wooden rods and an ancient text said to hold all the wisdom of the universe.

Those are the main materials in a monumental work making its first appearance in the U.S. more than three decades after its conception. Presented as a sort of enigmatic puzzle, "360° I Ching" measures nearly 10,000 square feet in its newest incarnation, sprawling over two large galleries at Dia:Beacon, the museum for minimalist and

monumental art in upstate Beacon, N.Y.

The work, surrounded by an aura of mystery and quiet contemplation, opens Sunday and will remain on view through summer 2017.

De Maria's "I Ching" sculpture dates back to 1981, when it was first exhibited at the Pompidou Center in Paris. The source material, however, is much older: a mystical text from China with roots tracing back more than 3,000 years. In its enduring form, the "I Ching" centers on a series of symbols, called hexagrams, which for centuries have been consulted by philosophers, rulers and others as poetic pictograms accounting for all the forces of change in the cosmos—and an oracle for the future.

Each hexagram is made up of simple sets of six broken or unbroken lines. There are 64 possible permutations, each with its own cosmological significance.

For De Maria, who died in 2013 at the age of 77 with a vast and often perplexing body of work, the arrangements of the ancient hexagrams provided artistic inspiration.

"The 'I Ching' was brain food for artists," said Lars Nittve, who exhibited the sculpture in 1989 as director of the Museum of Modern Art in Stockholm and remained close to De Maria after.

Noting the text's significance for composer John Cage and mystically minded cohorts in the '60s and '70s—who consulted readings of it divined by chance operations via coin flips and other rituals—Mr. Nittve suggested De Maria's attraction was more particular to the hexagrams' striking use of simple, abstract patterns and subtle variations in design.

"I think he was more attracted to it as a minimalist exercise that, if you put it into another culture, would mean something totally different," Mr. Nittve said of the pre-linguistic symbols that have been variously translated and interpreted for ages. "He had a fascination with the oscillation between meaning and what was supposed to be no-meaning: just structure."

Other works by De Maria in New York also suggest a sense of the profound with the seemingly simplest of means. They include "The Broken Kilometer," a series of 500 brass rods laid out on the floor of a loft in SoHo, and "The New York Earth Room," an installation comprising nothing but a white-walled space and 140 tons of dark brown dirt.



'The New York Earth Room,' an installation of white-walled space plus dirt, by Walter De Maria. *PHOTO: JOHN CLIETT/DIA ART FOUNDATION, NEW YORK*

Both have been maintained in unchanging fashion, without explanatory interpretation, since the '70s by the Dia Art Foundation, which commissioned them as well as De Maria's best-known work: "The Lightning Field," an array of 400 stainless-steel rods arranged in the desert in New Mexico.



'The Broken Kilometer,' by Walter De Maria. *PHOTO: JON ABBOTT/DIA ART FOUNDATION, NEW YORK*

The "I Ching" sculpture was a Dia commission too but, due to space requirements for an artwork of such size, it has only been shown a few times in other contexts, in Paris, Sweden

and Japan. For its homecoming, the piece has been laid out with all 64 hexagrams rendered in sculptural form via white-painted wood rods made of Japanese maple and set atop a vivid red carpet.

Visitors are encouraged to walk around the sculpture's edges and take notice of changes in the patterns and hues subtly shifting in Dia:Beacon's natural light.

“It vibrates,” said Jim Schaeufele, Dia’s director of operations, of glimmers spied while installing the piece.

“It looks digital, but it’s so analog,” said Heidie Giannotti, Dia’s exhibition designer and manager.

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For the foundation, De Maria was a principal artist whose contemplative and oblique creations remain important for an enterprise founded on such ideals, according to Dia director Jessica Morgan.

De Maria, known for avoiding proclamations about his art, never said much publicly about the piece.

“His work is more inscrutable and at the same time more open-ended than many of the artists in the collection,” Ms. Morgan said of an original Dia stable that also included Dan Flavin, Donald Judd, La Monte Young, Robert Whitman and more. In “360° I Ching,” the viewer can begin to approach the artist’s “idea of a bounded limitlessness or infinity,” Ms. Morgan said, “and the vast knowledge within that.”