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Where Inspiration Struck

Located near a remote New Mexico town, Walter De Maria's 'The Lightning Field' harnesses solitude and the power of nature.



A different kind of art experience, one that is sweeping and holistic. *PHOTO: COLLECTION DIA ART FOUNDATION, NEW YORK. PHOTO: JOHN CLIETT.*

By **ANDY BATTAGLIA**

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The way to Walter De Maria's "The Lightning Field," one of the most enigmatic works of modern American art, involves a mind-clearing drive through the wilds of New Mexico. The nearest navigable landmark, two hours southwest of Albuquerque and an hour farther still from Santa Fe, is the tiny town of Quemado, home to a sleepy gas station, a lonely municipal plaque and a doleful road choked with dust.

Since 1977, this minor desert outpost—population: 228—has served as the launchpad for a visit to "The Lightning Field," a mysterious and enduring work of Land Art. As sculpture, it consists of 400 stainless-steel lightning rods, each standing about 20 feet tall, arranged in a rectangular grid measuring one mile by one kilometer. Material

terms, however, are hardly the best to assess a work of art about such metaphysical matters as time, space and, as the cryptic De Maria himself communicated, “isolation.”

The array of themes shares much in common with other works of Land Art, or Earth Art, which prospered in the 1960s and '70s as a way for artists to expand beyond the physical constraints of the gallery and the museum. Works in far-flung locations offered an escape from the commercialization of the art market and allowed artists to commune with large-scale art from ancient times. The remoteness of the site—and all the sojourning required to get there—was crucial for the ways it turns even casual viewer interaction into a sort of pilgrimage.

Visits to “The Lightning Field” are limited to guests who register in advance for overnight stays in a cabin that accommodates six. Reservations open Feb. 1 for a season that runs May through October. Provisions are supplied, but otherwise an operative from the Dia Art Foundation, which commissioned the project and administers it still, drops guests off in the afternoon with little more than a promise to return the following day.

Outside the cabin, the vastness of the land, with nothing in view for miles save for a ring of mountains on the horizon, is majestic. The sky opens wide; everything beneath it seems to gleam and shine in the Southwestern sun.

The grandeur plays out on a smaller scale, too. What at first appears as a stretch of barren desert turns out to teem with lively brush and wildflowers, plus all manner of critters—beetles, birds, bunnies—who seem preoccupied in worlds of their own. Anthills built up all over the grounds, spied from the right perspective, share aspects with the geological masses rising up in the distance, all of them mountains in their own right.

Then there are the alien rods that signal “The Lightning Field” itself. Silver and slim, the poles glimmer during certain parts of the day and seem to vanish in others, depending on the dynamic desert light. As the sun sets across the plain and the luster hits them just right, the rods ignite and turn fiery orange for an instant, before receding from view for the night. At sunrise, they creep back out of the darkness as the sun illuminates them through soft shades of pink and blue.

They invite close scrutiny too, with their exactitude of surface and spacing. The striking polish of the poles was worked out after much back-and-forth between De Maria and the manufacturer, and their precise arrangement at intervals on the sprawling grid is promised to be accurate within 1/25th of an inch.

Less apparent is perhaps the most mind-boggling aspect of all: Each pole, after the artist spent months surveying subtle gradients of elevation in the land, was made to its own measurements so as to rise to exactly the same height across the field as the others. Materials in the cabin declare, “The plane of the tips would evenly support an imaginary sheet of glass.”

What does it mean? De Maria, who died in 2013 at age 77, never exactly said. He wasn’t big on interviews. But in a 1980 issue of Artforum magazine that introduced “The Lightning Field” to much of the world with an eight-page spread of photographs and text, the artist explained, “The land is not the setting for the work but a part of the work.” He continued: “Isolation is the essence of Land Art.” Also: “The invisible is real.”

De Maria’s gnomic utterances do hint that “The Lightning Field” proffers a different kind of art experience, one that is sweeping and holistic, where the work of the artist’s hand is no more important than sublime sensations that stand to exhilarate and swallow the viewer whole. Walking around the field and contemplating what can and cannot be seen is a natural reaction. So is arriving at the realization that lightning is in certain ways beside the point.

Expectations of a flashy lightning strike are unavoidable—and essential to an artwork that addresses the volatile mix of serenity and menace in nature. But when no bolts reach down from the sky, as is often the case on any given night, “The Lightning Field” remains in touch with invisible forces no less wondrous.

—*Mr. Battaglia is an arts writer in New York.*

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