

# Walter De Maria

This selection of works by Walter De Maria—drawn primarily from Dia Art Foundation’s collection—celebrates the fortieth anniversary of three major projects commissioned by Dia and completed by the artist in 1977: *The New York Earth Room* in New York City; *The Lightning Field* in western New Mexico; and *The Vertical Earth Kilometer* in Kassel, Germany. Mostly completed between 1961 and 1966, the objects in this gallery introduce viewers to the distinctive forms, techniques, and idiosyncratic imagery developed by De Maria in the early years of his career, as his practice evolved in parallel with his Minimalist and Fluxus peers.

De Maria presented *4' x 8' Box* for the first time at Fluxus founder George Maciunas’s short-lived AG Gallery in New York City in July 1961. The work is the largest example in a series of wood boxes that the artist began producing in 1959. Its drastically simple geometric shape and bodily scale invite comparison with the Minimalist sculptures of Robert Morris exhibited in a nearby gallery. Yet *4' x 8' Box* is arguably more extreme than Morris’s austere works, eschewing their gray-painted surfaces for the raw materiality of cheap plywood. Presented as art, De Maria’s bulky box is so freed of aesthetic incident and meaning that it barely reads as art. Reducing the artwork to a bare minimum, it is an early and iconic example of Minimal art.

Throughout his career, De Maria examined systems of measurement, often deploying numerical sequences as compositional principles. *Calendar* (1961)—a small object first exhibited at Orchardland, the artist’s studio space at 9 Great Jones Street in New York City—is one of the earliest demonstrations of De Maria’s interest in how time and space are rationalized. Two sticks are joined together by a hinge at one end and a chain at the other. Following the Gregorian calendar, the chain is released by one notch each day. The work surveys the limits of perception: on a daily basis the incremental increases are not noticeable, but over the year the distance between the sticks changes

significantly. To this end, *Calendar* anticipates the concerns of De Maria’s more monumental and dramatic site-specific installations, such as *The Lightning Field* and *The Broken Kilometer* (1979).

Another work exhibited at Orchardland, titled *Column with Ball on Top* (1961), was an eight-foot-tall column with a small gold ball placed on top, too high for a viewer to see. Where the original, which was constructed of wood and scaled to a standing body, explored the principle of invisibility, the work exhibited in this gallery, *Column with Ball on Top* (1965), is an aluminum sculpture less than a foot and a half tall. The circumference of the ball in this 1965 work is greater than the width of the column on which it is placed. Like the nearby *Palladio* (1966), a work executed in buffed stainless steel, *Column with Ball on Top* reveals De Maria’s early interest in the diminution of scale. Under the patronage of collector Robert Scull in the mid-1960s, De Maria produced pedestal works of exacting, Brancusi-like perfection—a modality revived in later works such as *Gold and Silver Lightning Field* (1993), a miniature version of his large-scale 1977 earthwork, reduced to a tabletop sculpture composed of two precious metals.

In the three drawings also on display, De Maria’s abiding fascination with invisibility and material fetishism conjoin into what the artist described as “meaningless” objects that “avoid medium” by means of a reiterative format, presenting the same motif repeatedly in identical frames (the works are both drawings and reliefs, or neither). Faintly outlined in gray, green, and red pencil, yet boldly mimicked by the buffed metal frames of the same shape, the Gothic pointed arch—an iconic form of art history familiar to the Catholic artist since childhood—has almost disappeared.

# Walter De Maria

Walter De Maria was born in 1935 in Albany, California, and studied history and art at the University of California, Berkeley. In 1960 he moved to New York City, where he lived and worked until the end of his life. With Robert Whitman in 1963, De Maria founded a gallery at 9 Great Jones Street in New York City and exhibited his sculptures there later that year. He also performed as a jazz percussionist with Don Cherry and other figures, and joined the band the Primitives, which later evolved into the Velvet Underground. After his first solo exhibition at a commercial gallery in 1965, De Maria's work was included in the *Primary Structures* exhibition at the Jewish Museum, New York City, in 1966. He subsequently had numerous international shows at venues including the Kunsthaus Zürich (1999), the Museum für Moderne Kunst in Frankfurt (1991), the Staatsgalerie Stuttgart (1987), and the Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen in Rotterdam (1984). Dia maintains De Maria's *The Lightning Field* (1977) in western New Mexico, *The Vertical Earth Kilometer* (1977) in Kassel, Germany, and *The New York Earth Room* (1977) and *The Broken Kilometer* (1979) in New York City. De Maria died in July 2013.

1. *4' x 8' Box*, 1961  
Plywood  
Dia Art Foundation

2. *Calendar*, 1961  
Wood and brass  
Private collection

3. *Palladio*, 1966  
Stainless steel  
Dia Art Foundation

4. *Column with Ball on Top*, 1965  
Aluminum  
Dia Art Foundation

5. *Gold and Silver Lightning Field*, 1993  
Sterling silver, stainless steel, and brass  
Private collection

6. *Gothic Shaped Drawing (Red)*, 1965  
Colored pencil on paper in custom-shaped frame  
Dia Art Foundation

7. *Gothic Shaped Drawing (Pencil)*, 1965  
Graphite on paper in custom-shaped frame  
Courtesy Gagosian Gallery

8. *Gothic Shaped Drawing (Green)*, 1965  
Colored pencil on paper in custom-shaped frame  
Courtesy Gagosian Gallery

