

A Work of Art Outside the Age of Instagram: Visiting Walter De Maria's 'The Lightning Field'

Ben Roth

Harvard College Writing Program

A doctor, lawyer, art advisor, three philosophers, and a toddler are dropped off at a remote cabin in the New Mexico desert. This is neither the setup for a joke, nor the opening scene of a horror movie (only the toddler makes it out alive), but rather the start of my visit to Walter De Maria's 1977 land art installation *The Lightning Field*.

We have been driven here from Quemado (population 228), itself plenty isolated already, along a series of increasingly dubious dirt roads, our eyes peeled, and constantly mistaking mere fenceposts, for the twenty-foot stainless steel poles—lightning rods—that will signal our arrival. It's for practical reasons that visitors meet and leave their vehicles at the DIA Art Foundation's office, but it makes for an excellent bit of stagecraft as well, heightening our expectations. Our driver is Robert Weathers, every inch the reticent cowboy one would hope for in the circumstances. We'll learn later—not from him—that he's maintained the premises for decades and grazes his cattle in *The Lightning Field* to keep the grass down during the offseason (DIA took some convincing, we're told).¹ He points out the old jail as we pull out of Quemado, then falls silent for the rest of the trip, giving us no warning of when we're close. We quickly leave blacktop, cross a low range of hills that you'd never know form part of the continental divide, go through an open but suspiciously fancy gate that we guess marks the start of DIA's territory, and eventually there the posts are, a whole field of them, gleaming in the afternoon sun. Robert quickly, and with few words, helps us unload our overnight bags, shows us around the cabin, then departs, to return at 11 the next morning. We are left without a vehicle, and without internet or cell service, only food for dinner and breakfast and an archaic landline should an emergency arise.

The Lightning Field consists of 400 sharply-tipped stainless steel poles, two inches in diameter, set 220 feet apart from one another. All together, they encompass a grid one mile by one kilometre. De Maria is said to have spent over five years searching the West for the right site, finding it in this flat and featureless New Mexican plain, 7,200 feet above sea level, hemmed in at the distant horizon by mountains on all sides. Actually, the site isn't perfectly flat, though: on average, the poles are just over twenty feet tall, but they vary with the local topography so that the tips form a level plane—making the shortest fifteen feet, the tallest almost twenty-seven. This math is integral to the work. Every measurement was triple-checked, De Maria reports in his original write-up for *Artforum*, and is exact to within 1/25 of an inch.² (To make the math work, the grid is actually a mile by a kilometre plus just less than six metres, and I suspect that I am not alone in finding this untidy remainder slightly grating.) The pleasure is in checking it with your own eyes. After gathering on the cabin's porch, which looks south over *The Lightning Field* toward the most impressive range of mountains ("What a porch!" one of us says), we wander to the nearest pole and, setting our eyes along each line and diagonal of the grid, confirm that the more distant poles disappear perfectly behind it.

These pleasures soon give way to less exact but greater ones. *The Lightning Field* defines a space, but one that cannot be taken in synoptically. Standing at one edge of it as we are in the mid-afternoon sun, the nearby poles are well-defined, but the others become indeterminate as they recede from us in three directions, such that we can't tell how far they extend, nor which way the farthest. Later, when we each wander off on our own inside the grid, we will discover that it is large enough, and the local topography sufficiently variant, for us to lose sight of one another. But first, hatted and long-sleeved against the New Mexican sun, we decide to circumnavigate the field together. We quickly discover that this must be what most all visitors do, as a clear path has been worn along the outermost line of poles, shifting its course only to skirt a particularly bristly bush or large anthill. We also discover that our estimate of how long such a walk would take (Two miles plus two kilometres? Just over an hour, right?) is way off. We stop every pole or two to take in the view, to debate the geometry (Is each section square, or merely rectangular? Is the grid set in perfect alignment with the cardinal directions?), to try to begin to articulate our impressions. By the time we reach the first corner, the toddler is not the only one struggling in the sun, and we postpone a full trip around until dusk – by which time we'll have agreed, without ever verbalizing it, that trying to conquer *The Lightning Field* in such an obvious way is beside the point, that it is better taken in – one is better taken in by it – by wandering at whim, and each on our own, not together.

At sunset, having now read up on the math of the work, I find its center, counting poles from the most visible, northeast corner. Again, previous visitors have had the same thought: I find that a small cairn marks the center – the exact center, I confirm by straddling the stones to look perfectly down each diagonal of poles. To my surprise, I discover that one, two nodes due north, is bent out of alignment, its top peeking out to the side as I look down the line. This happens occasionally with some of the taller poles due to high winds, I read later. I watch the sun descend, alternately looking across the western half of the work at it, then turning to look at the eastern half in the sun's changing light. So obviously a work about space, *The Lightning Field* is just as much, if more subtly, about time: the time of moving through it, the time of day and the way the sun's position alters the work's appearance. At dusk, the highly polished tips of the poles glow, even those that have slightly blackened, supposedly due to lightning strikes.

Along with Robert Smithson's *Spiral Jetty* (1970), *The Lightning Field* is one of the iconic land art installations of the American West, soon to be joined by Michael Heizer's *City* and, eventually, James Turrell's *Roden Crater*. Coming in, one of us worried about the sheer hubris of such works – and the expansive male egos they seem to reveal. Heizer has been at work on *City* for half a century (and has supposedly greeted the curious with a shotgun). Turrell is trying to raise 200 million dollars to complete his project. As a group, we struggle to name any similar works by woman artists (it turns out we are not alone) – that is, any woman artists who have been granted the kind of funds it would take to make such works.³ Ana Mendieta? Perhaps more performance than land art. Maya Lin's *Wavefield*? Wonderful, but it doesn't approach the same scale. Jeanne-Claude? I abashedly admit that I wouldn't recognize her name apart from Christo's. While some of De Maria's rhetoric surrounding *The Lightning Field* – “the invisible is real” – is indeed overblown, these worries quickly give way to wonder in the presence of the work itself.

I've joked that, were I a billionaire, or better yet a billionaire in a Don DeLillo novel, I would definitely have a James Turrell room in my house, that is, a room with a bench in front of one of his hypnotic, calming, meditative light installations, and nothing else (this is a joke not because I wouldn't do it, but because I will never be able to afford to). As we occupy De Maria's work, the effect is related. One isn't pulled into complete stillness in the same way, but instead slow, pondering motion. A few steps, then a pause to observe, then a few steps, then a slight change of direction to alter the angles. De Maria writes that “the land is not the setting of the work but a part of the work.” I am tempted to go even further. Striking as the grid of poles is as a regiment of silent sentinels, I find my attention drawn more and more to the landscape itself, and to its foliage and fauna.

Apparently so flat and featureless, it reveals itself as housing dry washes and slight ridges, empty pools that must fill quickly with any rain, grasses, bushes, and cacti, beetles, ants and their hills, multiple varieties of jack rabbit, and birds,

a pair of which find a way to perch upon the poles' tips. A lone antelope will keep us company for much of our visit, if at a distance. On my last walk out near the very eastern edge, I'll encounter a rattlesnake, thankfully at a distance. The poles, it increasingly seems to me, are but the means of the work. The work is the land itself, brought into focus. Put into Heideggerian terms (as you will have guessed, I am one of the philosophers), the grid of poles *enframes* the landscape, presenting it as a resource amidst technological lines, allowing us moderns to really see it for the first time – and thereby critiques our inability to see and think apart from such mediation. Gathered on the porch, we note that even if there were no work of art here, just spending a night in this cabin in this landscape, pleasantly offline and together as friends, would be worth our time and money. But the big difference would be this: absent De Maria's intervention, we would continue to enjoy the porch and its view, yes, but we would merely look over, not at, the landscape. We wouldn't wander more than a dozen yards from the cabin, unless it were to set out on a purposive hike to one of those hills on the horizon. The greatest effect of *The Lightning Field*, it seems to me, is the way that it pulls the viewer out into it, into what would otherwise seem an unremarkable landscape, to notice how remarkable it actually is.

This is not easy stuff to put into words, nor to describe the appeal of. It isn't much easier to do so with pictures. And, in fact, one isn't allowed to. DIA's minimalist office in Quemado holds but a few things: six chairs, black and white brochures for some of their other projects, a guestbook, and a clipboard of waivers – each of us has to sign away any claims of liability, and also promise not to photograph *The Lightning Field* or even the cabin. A quick image search on Google reveals that not every visitor respects this request (nor, as evidenced by at least one picture, the request to not touch the poles). But these amateur photographs are banal, utterly beside the point, capturing nothing of the effect of the artwork. Even DIA's professional, promotional shots, focused as they are on dramatic lightning strikes, don't. One reviewer, bestowing one star on TripAdvisor and revealing the closely held coordinates of the work, declares it a "waste of money when its [sic] all visible for free [...] if you do not go in there [sic] driveway according to the USGS the area all around is public access." De Maria writes that "Because the sky-ground relationship is central to the work, viewing *The Lightning Field* from the air is of no value"; perhaps he should have added that viewing it as you cruise by in a cloud of dust isn't either. This, in the end, is what I find most iconic about *The Lightning Field*, at least in the context of our times: brutally hard to get to – one has to email DIA the second reservations open for the season (midnight, Mountain Time, on the first of February); has to win the lottery to actually get a slot; has to pay a substantial fee; has to travel to Quemado in the middle of nowhere; and then has to be ferried yet farther into isolation – one could have imagined it becoming something of an Instagram trophy: look where I am, followers! #TheLightningField #ArtRetreat. But one can't take a particularly interesting or meaningful picture of the work, there's no internet or cellular access to upload one, and everything about the experience pushes against the trends of looking at art in the age of Instagram.

I will admit to moving too quickly through museums and galleries, looking at most works for but a few seconds, not even breaking stride in my worst moments. But at least I still look. Increasingly, one encounters museum goers who look only at their phones, as they take (sloppy, probably never to be looked at) pictures of pictures, and perhaps wall tags. More and more institutions, curators, and even artists actively cater to such habits. An exhibit like Yayoi Kusama's *Infinity Mirrors* was hugely successful in large part because of the selfies that could be taken amidst it. In our group, the toddler and her parents are fresh from London, where she did Baby Shark dances in front of the changing colors of Olafur Eliasson's installations at the Tate Modern – she knows her contemporary art, this little one. Her father has aptly described the exterior balconies that dominate the new Whitney's architecture as "selfie porches." Thomas Heatherwick's *Vessel* at Hudson Yards is nothing but selfie porches. To be present in *The Lightning Field* is to be – hopefully not merely temporarily – rehabilitated away from these trends. It is a work that slows you down, quiets your mind and voice, and invites you to occupy a pre-digital space and time. It is a work that, decades before the rise of Instagram, serves as one of the best critiques of it I know.

We knew from Geoff Dyer's *New Yorker* essay that it is "naïve, even a little vulgar" to hope for lightning at *The Lightning Field*: only about ten percent of days, even during storm season, bring it.⁴ Here at the peak, we saw few clouds, only the slightest hint of rain, and the vastness of the Southwestern landscape made it impossible to judge how near or far it might have been. No rain, nor any lightning, arrived. One suspects that the work's name is as much a bit of savvy marketing on De Maria's part as descriptive. Promise them the easy appeal of lightning, deliver instead subtler manipulations of light and land. Probably, all of us are gauche enough to have hoped for lightning. Definitely, none of us are bothered in the slightest by the bait and switch, and we leave wholly won over, eager to return, before we've even left, to this work of art that is best described not as prescient, not before its time, but apart from time as we currently experience it.

1.<<https://www.theatlantic.com/business/archive/2016/09/art-inn-keeper/501002/>>.

2.<<https://www.artforum.com/print/198004/the-lightning-field-35819>>.

3.<<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/11/21/t-magazine/female-land-artists.html>>.

4. <<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2011/04/18/poles-apart>>.