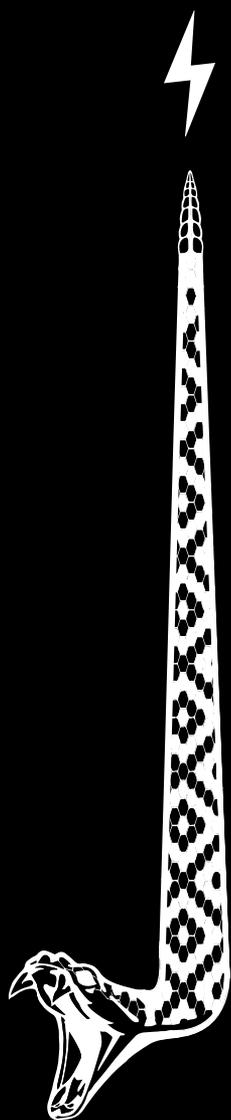


PREVIEW



THUNDERSTRUCK



||| THUNDERSTRUCK |||

*Thunderstruck is a collaboration
between one writer and five artists*

Jessi DiTillio

Rosana Aviña-Beam

Robert Collier Beam

Katherine Spinella

Michael E Stephen

John Whitten

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PREFACE

This project began with a road trip to New Mexico from three different parts of the country, Oregon, Texas, and Pennsylvania. Meeting in the desert outside Albuquerque, we made our way to the Very Large Array, an astronomical marvel and epic material expression of the human desire to know the universe. Primed by this encounter to experience the earth as a small orb in a vast space, we picked up a pie from a small bakery and headed to the Dia Foundation office to embark on our journey to Walter de Maria's 1977 work The Lightning Field.





Some Facts, Notes and Statements

by Jessi DiTillio

“When we see a landscape, we situate ourselves in it. If we ‘saw’ the art of the past, we would situate ourselves in history.”

—John Berger, 1972¹

As I tried to write this essay, I kept getting stuck in biographical origin story muck and confusing my pronominal forms, slipping between *we* and *I*, unsure who the referent was in each instance. We are three couples in our early thirties, and last year we went to the lightning field.² The trouble with *The Lightning Field* and the way I've been thinking about it is that it's gotten so entangled with the circumstances of our lives... with our marriage and my father's death, with the birth of Noma and Katherine's brain surgery, with Robert and Rosana's departure from Texas and the changing of our relationships to each other, even in the short long year since we went to the field.

But the details really aren't important.

¹ John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (Magnolia, MA: Peter Smith Pub Inc, 1972), 11.

² The correct way to refer to Walter De Maria's artwork is *The Lightning Field*, according to the Dia Foundation, but when I call it “the lightning field” or just “the field” in this essay, I mean the mushier, more expansive version of it that exists in my head.

In other people's writing about *The Lightning Field*, I've found a similar confusion of boundaries in which a sense of the collective experience of being *together* at the field overpowers an individual engagement with the artwork. As Lucy Lippard put it,

"My own experience was somewhat tempered by the fine old time we had in the cabin after dark, which blotted out the feeling of full immersion I anticipated when wandering through a landscape, taking my time, picking my focuses. We expected no lightning in May, and got none, but as the light shifted and the sun set, turning the silver poles gold and then black, I was struck by how lonely earthworks are."³

There is a bit of paradox in Lippard's words. Like me, she switches fluidly between *we* and *I*. Her memory of *The Lightning Field* was a social one, yet she sees the work as lonely. The pleasant social space of the cabin and the loneliness of the field can't quite cohere, maybe because of the way the artist framed his work.

In 1980, Walter De Maria published a statement about *The Lightning Field* for *Artforum*, declaring "isolation is the essence of land art."⁴ Ok, but if this is true, why would he develop the field as a setting for six people instead of one at a time? The six people may or may not know each other. Walter called this significant ratio—a small amount of people to a large amount of land—"essential" to the work.⁵

Essential how? He does not say. Six people is a family sized group and it produces an intimate social interaction. While the expectation of *The Lightning Field* is perhaps that it should be immersive, solitary, infinite; other people are stubbornly in the way of your solitude.



³ Lucy R. Lippard, *Undermining: A Wild Ride Through Land Use, Politics, and Art in the Changing West* (New York: The New Press, 2014), 93.

⁴ Hereafter, I'll call him Walter, for intimacy. Walter De Maria, "Some Facts, Notes, Data, Information, Statistics, and Statements," *Artforum* 18, no. 8 (April 1980).

⁵ Walter De Maria, "Some Facts, Notes, Data, Information, Statistics, and Statements," *Artforum* 18, no. 8 (April 1980).

“There is a point at which artists too must take some responsibility for the things and places they love, a point at which the colonization of the magnificent scenery gives way to a more painfully focused vision of a fragile landscape and its bewildered inhabitants.”
—Lucy Lippard, 2014

In February of 2018, after several years of failed attempts, my husband-to-be secured our reservations to visit *The Lightning Field*, Walter De Maria's 1977 site-specific, permanent installation, a grid of four hundred stainless steel poles in rural Western New Mexico. My contradictory desires for the trip began to feel like a trap. I wanted to experience the lightning field purely, as if in the past. I wanted the immersive transcendental experience I imagined *Walter wanted for me*. But this want was dampened by my sense of the present, and my academic training to be the sort of art historian who is skeptical of the politics of such transcendence. I didn't want to be fooled, lulled, or shushed by Walter.



In the early 1970s, feminist art historian Linda Nochlin speculated that the collaborative nature of “earthworks” might foreshadow a change in the emphasis on heroic, male “geniuses” that had dominated art history up to that point.⁶ Despite the many un-famous people who labored on earthworks, who dedicated decades of their lives to them, they

⁶ Linda Nochlin, “Why have there been no great women artists?” *ArtNews*, January 1971, republished in *Women, Art and Power, and Other Essays*, (New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1988), note 9, pg 177. The distinction between “land art” and “earthworks” shifts amongst historians, critics and artists. Robert Smithson introduced “earthworks” as the title for a show (that included De Maria) in 1968 at the Virginia Dwan Gallery, drawing the term from a science fiction novel, *Earthworks* by Brian Aldriss, which presented a dystopian world of environmental catastrophe and social control. Gilles A. Tiberghien, *Land Art* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1995), 13.

are still attached to a few heroic guys—*Bob, Walter, Mike, Jim*.⁷ Lippard, an art historian whose approach I trust, put it somewhat like this: Walter was part of a cabal of white men to strike out from New York, don ten-gallon hats and cowboy boots, and colonize the unspoiled West with their esoteric phallic structures.⁸ *The Lightning Field* was the first major outdoor artwork commissioned and funded by the Dia Foundation, meaning it was mostly funded by oil profits.⁹ The space between Walter's intention and the artwork's effect today is troubling.¹⁰ To be honest, I have a fantasy that I can fix that problem, by making the lightning field more capacious than it was when Walter left us.

Walter was infamously controlling about the way *The Lightning Field* should be represented.¹¹ His intentions and prescriptions have been upheld for the last forty-two years by the Dia Foundation, who commissioned the piece. This framework of control determines how *The Lightning Field* is represented in publications, but also how visitors may perceive it. Every visitor is allotted precisely twenty-two hours with the piece. A small group of stewards, most notably Robert Weathers, who worked with Walter to construct the piece, ferry a maximum of six visitors at a time from a bleak store front that serves as the Dia Foundation office in Quemado to the site of the field. Quemado is basically a one-road town with its shops mostly out of business. Directly across the street from the Dia office, a boarded up antique store called *Back in Time By Elaine!* seemed strangely apropos. The site is about a forty-five-minute drive on dirt roads, winding between dry, windswept ranch lands. When you arrive at the cabin adjacent to the field, a laminated sheet of rules and a binder of information awaits you. The binder contains, in Walter's words, “Some Facts, Notes, Data, Information, Statistics, and Statements.”¹²

⁷ Robert Smithson, Walter De Maria, Michael Heizer, and James Turrell. Lippard points out, Nancy Holt is the one female artist who has, to some extent, been able to access the ranks of canonization these men received. Lippard, *Undermining*, 81.

⁸ Lippard, *Undermining*, 81.

⁹ The Dia Foundation was founded by Philippa de Menil, heiress to the Schlumberger Oil Fortune. Jessica Morgan et al., *Walter De Maria: The Lightning Field* (New York: Dia Art Foundation, 2018).

¹⁰ This is not to say that the lightning field *itself* is responsible for anything specific that is truly disturbing—potentially its existence benefits the region of its site through tourist income. This income is surely an unintended benefit on Walter's part, but the Dia Foundation seems to have been gracious about their continued imposition on the town of Quemado. More so, I mean that *The Lightning Field* merely brings an elite art world audience to the West on vacation, only to enjoy the piece for a day and leave, without thinking deeply about where they've been and what they've seen on the way there or the way back.

¹¹ This annoyed many critics. See, for example, John Beardsley, who says “The directive posture assumed toward the viewer by De Maria and Dia suggests that both artist and patron lack confidence in either the quality of the work or the discernment of the viewer. They are therefore being defensive or condescending, neither posture positively predisposing the viewer to work.” John Beardsley, “Art and Authoritarianism: Walter De Maria's ‘Lightning Field,’” ed. Walter De Maria, *October* 16 (1981): 35.

¹² De Maria, “Some Facts...”



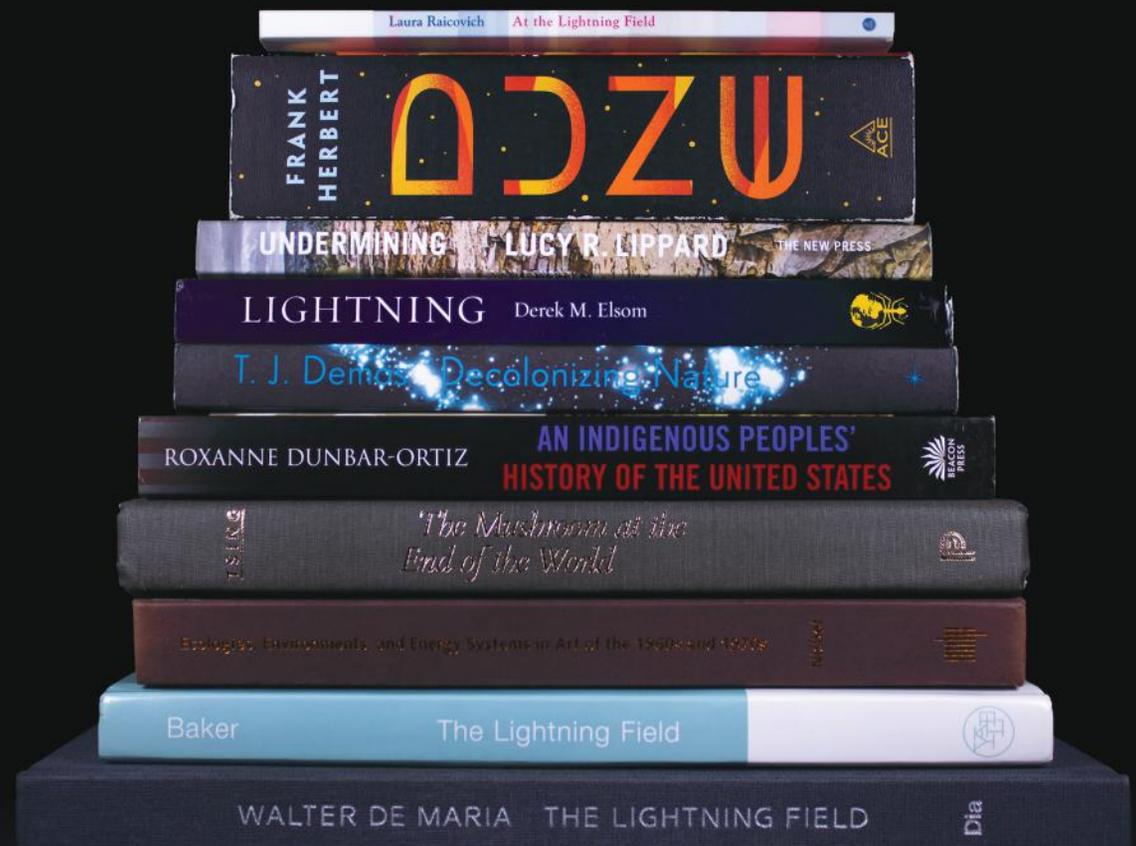
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We'd like to recognize Walter De Maria for his work, and the Dia Foundation for their stewardship and care for *The Lightning Field*. Our gratitude also goes to Carnation Contemporary and the NARS Foundation for providing us a platform to develop and exhibit this body of work.

In addition, we'd like to acknowledge the 23 federally recognized indigenous tribes, pueblos, and nations of New Mexico. We recognize the enduring relationship that exists between Indigenous Peoples and their traditional territories, and this acknowledgement is a small, though insufficient step in contributing to more awareness of Native Peoples and their resilience. The tribes, pueblos, and nations of New Mexico are Taos Pueblo, Ohkay Owingeh, Santa Clara Pueblo, Jicarilla Apache Nation, San Ildefonso Pueblo, Nambe Pueblo, Pojoaque Pueblo, Tesuque Pueblo, Cochiti Pueblo, Santo Domingo Pueblo, San Felipe Pueblo, Santa Ana Pueblo, Sandia Pueblo, Zia Pueblo, Jemez Pueblo, Isleta Pueblo, Acoma Pueblo, Laguna Pueblo, Zuni Pueblo, Mescalero Apache Tribe, Ft. Sill Apache Tribe, Navajo Nation.

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