

# Walter De Maria

Walter De Maria's two closely related multipartite works, *Silver Meters* (1976) and *Gold Meters* (1976–77), both comprise eight polished stainless-steel square-meter plates measuring one inch in height. Each plate contains one troy ounce\* of silver or gold in the form of solid cylindrical plugs that have been inserted flush to the plate's surface. The plugs vary in depth according to their number and weight; the number of plugs that constitutes the troy ounce progressively increases from plate to plate by squaring the integers two through nine, so that the first plate in each series contains a total of four plugs (weighing  $\frac{1}{4}$  troy ounce each) and the last plate contains eighty-one plugs (at  $\frac{1}{81}$  troy ounce each).

These works, like others made by the artist, employ measurement and number as compositional principles. The fact that each plate contains the same amount of precious metal is not discernible from empirical observation. As with *The Vertical Earth Kilometer* (1977), a kilometer-long, solid-brass rod measuring five centimeters (two inches) in diameter that has been fully inserted into the ground with its top flush to the surface of the earth, certain key relationships are hidden. By prompting speculation about such underlying or binding systems, De Maria's sculptures engage structures of meaning beyond the immediately apparent. Abstract methodologies based in ordering, sequencing, and mensuration provide fundamental and essential ways of regulating human experience, yet, like the values attributed today to rare metals, they are ultimately arbitrary; that is, they are the product of human rather than cosmic ways of engaging and apprehending the world.

Such plays between the relative and the absolute were critical to De Maria's aesthetic starting at its inception in the 1960s, when his work evolved in parallel with that of Minimalist and Fluxus peers as diverse as La Monte Young and Donald Judd. Yet, De Maria's trajectory was singular and explored the numerical in relation to the serial. It ranged from the vast scale of *The Lightning Field*—a Land art example in western New Mexico that was realized under the auspices

of Dia Art Foundation in 1977 and whose grid of four hundred stainless-steel poles spans a field a kilometer by a mile in dimension—to this more modest pair of works—both of which similarly incorporate metric and English (or Imperial) systems of linear measurement. Common to these works, too, is the use of highly polished metal components and pristine workmanship, together serving to impart a sense of absoluteness—of indubitability—as if they existed outside the vicissitudes of happenstance. The opposite seems to be invoked in *The New York Earth Room* (1977), however, it too is invested with the basics of his abiding aesthetic. Composed of thousands of cubic feet of loam covering the floor of a former factory in New York City to a depth of approximately twenty-seven inches, this extraordinary work is kept in pristine condition through constant custodial care. It invites that distinctive speculation about concepts, qualities, elements, and even values normally considered conceptual foundations on which human experience is parsed.

\* Slightly heavier than an avoirdupois (or standard) ounce, troy ounces have been employed for measuring certain precious metals, notably gold and silver, since medieval times. Even today gold and silver are often weighed and sold according to this alternative system.

# 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 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, 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, and *The New York Earth Room* (1977) and *The Broken Kilometer* (1979) in New York City. De Maria died in July 2013.

*Silver Meters*, 1976  
stainless steel, silver; 8 units  
Dia Art Foundation

*Gold Meters*, 1976–77  
stainless steel, gold; 8 units  
Dia Art Foundation

LeWitt

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