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New York, OCTOBER 31, 1977

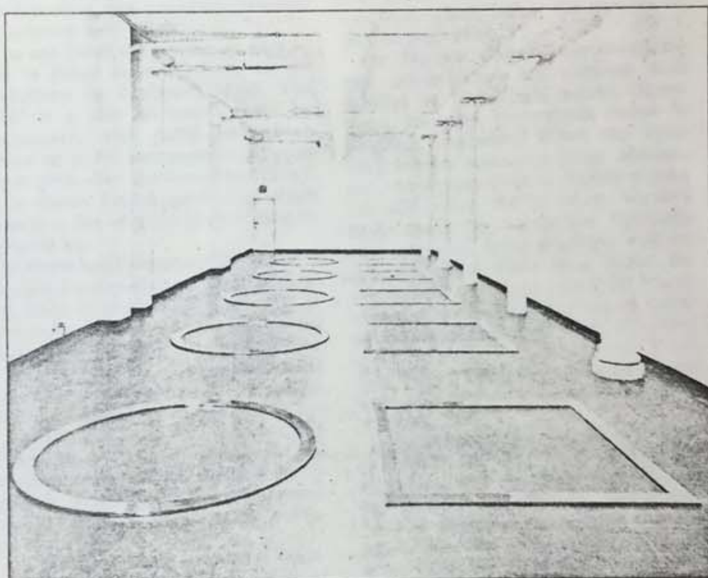
Art / Thomas B. Hess

WALTER DE MARIA, OR THE EMPEROR'S NEW CAT BOX

"...There's heraldic loveliness to steel skins spotted leopardlike in gold and silver. You think of some banker's blazon..."

For the last time—for a final flea-bitten farewell appearance—please welcome back the story of "The Emperor's New Clothes." No artist is a readier butt of its fairy-tale poppycock than **Walter de Maria**, who, usually, is one of the more elusive, slightly mysterious absences from the New York scene, and who, this month, has become vividly present. His *New York Earth Room*, 1977, fills the Heiner Friedrich gallery with wall-to-wall earth (141 Wooster Street, through 11/5). His *Equal Area Series*, 1976–77, gleams on the polished floor of a street-level loft at 19 Waverly Place (through 1/31). In West Germany, his *Vertical Earth Kilometer* has just been drilled, sunk, leveled, inscribed, and offered to the bemused citizenry of Kassel. Meanwhile, in New Mexico, the artist and his assistants are setting up the last poles of his *Mile-Long Lightning Field*, scheduled to be finished in a few weeks and to open in June when the lightning season returns to the desert. Most of his recent efforts have been financed by the Dia Foundation, which is headed by Philippa Pellizzi of the de Menil family—for almost a generation the most enlightened if idiosyncratic patronate of international avant-garde art. Dia has spun off the Lone Star Foundation in whose quarters, off Varick Street, is a recent major acquisition—de Maria's sixteen-part *Gold and Silver Meters*, 1976. Finally, if you're interested in some slightly earlier pieces, his *Three Squares*, 1974, is in the New York School exhibition in Albany (through 11/27).

Consider the *Earth Room* at Heiner Friedrich. It's the third version of a piece for which the artist orders enough tons of raw material (in this case peat and bark) to fill a gallery from floor to bottom windowsill, then spreads it around, rakes it evenly as if for seeding, and leaves a Plexiglas panel across the door to testify that it's solid knee-high earth and not a thin layer on top of a false bottom. What confronts you in Heiner Friedrich's elegantly *dégagé* whitewashed shop is a manure-brown mass that prohibits you from entering the premises; it keeps art from being shown or bought there and in general claims all the attention, like a spoiled child in a roomful of adults. It's infantile behavior, and of course the earth suggests anal eroticism, while in the background lurks the manly little chap who, to universal acclaim, pipes up, "Look, look, the emperor has no clothes."



Square circles: *Walter de Maria's* Equal Area Series, *at 19 Waverly Place.*

I've always thought that the kid in Hans Christian Andersen's story was a pervert. Some unfortunate "Oedipal" fantasy made him see a naked male in every father figure. Obviously, the crowd was embarrassed when he blurted the unblurtable, and in the nervous giggling that followed, a rationale of swindling tailors was spun, so to speak, out of cloth holes. At any event, the art writers who are attracted so persistently to the sheepish parable always have undeclared vested interests in discrediting modernist art. They're the wits who laughed at Matisse's drawing and van Gogh's color. Usually they represent entrenched styles and feel imperiled by any fresh vision. Sometimes they are happy in the grip of prejudice. "I've got a little girl eight years old at home who could do as good," they say in front of Paul Klee or Joan Miro or Jackson Pollock. "The artist is laughing at us," they insist. "It's all a hoax; we have been had."

It's sad but true that eight-year-old daughters of art haters don't cuddle next to their parents on Christmas Eve and proceed to draw like Matisse or invent shapes like Miro. The sense of will, of liberated imagination, of originality and tradition are missing. Nor can it be emphasized too often that artists don't sacrifice the best years of their lives—often working under painful hardship—to make a joke or to fool anybody, much less an art critic. A good tease might last for a few months, a year maybe. Walter de Maria has been concentrating on sculptures and Earthworks (he prefers to call them "Land Art") for about twenty years. He has taken endless pains with each piece. He is serious—you could say

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"... De Maria is concerned with inventing new elements, personal absolutes ..."

humorless—about each project, down to the smallest, highly organized detail.

Consider the *Equal Area Series*. It catches your eye as you stroll down Waverly Place—an oasis of cool light punctuated by streaks of brightness that bounce off the stainless-steel shapes aligned on the floor. The *Series* consists of thirteen units; each includes a circle and a square. They are arranged, in two ranks of four, to fill a square room, and in one rank of five to fill a rectangular room. In each unit, the square demarcates an area equivalent to the area circumscribed by the circle. In other words, a square 7 feet wide is related to a circle 7 feet 9½ inches in diameter, and both inscribe 5,476 square inches. Each of the thirteen squares is one inch smaller than the other, ranging from 7 feet wide down to 6 feet wide. The areas covered aren't always exactly equivalent because de Maria stayed with the inch as his fixed unit; there are minor discrepancies (the largest is about .001 percent).

The figures are arranged on the floor so that the smaller ones are farther away from you as you enter the square room, emphasizing a diminishing perspective (that is, the smallest piece seems noticeably smaller), while in the narrow gallery the largest pieces are placed in the back, flattening the perspective and increasing the illusion that all the parts are the same size.

The closeness of the dimensions sharpens your eye for distinctions, just as a long rest in music alerts you to the faintest sounds. Once you grasp de Maria's serial scheme, you can try to visualize the 6-foot square nesting with machined precision inside the 6-foot 10-inch one. When this most obvious of interrelationships is clarified, your eye scans the floor for more subtle ones. You begin to watch circles being squared—the dream of Pythagoras. You approach the mystery of pi, eternally uneven standard that somehow finds resolution among de Maria's steel propositions.

Everything develops like clockwork—or, better, like a sonata—from stated theme, through an allegro of increments, to a finale of equilibriums (the equivalent areas). There's a hint of fatality—of inevitabilities. The sheen of the metal, its 1-inch battleship-plate thickness, its 5-inch width, seem precisely correct—although de Maria admits that such decisions were arrived at intuitively, from wood mock-ups, in about nine months of trial-and-error tinkering. There's a longing for Platonic ultimates in these proportions that fit one another to a "tee." In the fit, some simple, classic truths are suggested—the relationship of numbers, the density of matter, the reflection of light. In short, de Maria is concerned with inventing new elements, personal absolutes—a new magic.

You can judge the amount of care he gives to detail from accounts of the installations in *Lightning Field*. The "field" is a plot of land 1 mile by 1 kilometer; 400 poles have been planted on it 210 feet apart in an equidistant grid—like the five-of-hearts layout in classic French gardening which opens to a fan of eight perspectives as you walk by.

De Maria had the station for each pole surveyed for elevation as well as location. Prior to implanting, each pole is taken to its site and given a final hand polishing (each point has been honed so sharp that it will disappear into the brightness of the sky). After the elevation has been rechecked, the pole is cut to a precise height so that its point will be part of a flat plane connecting all the other points. Below, the land gently dips and rises. Above is a taut, metaphysical ceiling, parallel to the curvature of the Earth.

On the floor of the Lone Star Foundation offices, sixteen square meters of stainless steel are aligned in two neat rows. Eight of them contain one pound of gold apiece; the other eight, one pound of silver. The precious metals are inserted with conic plugs about ¾ inch wide. There are four of them in the first square, nine in the second, sixteen in the third, and so forth (i.e., the squares of two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, and nine). Each plug in the first square meter weighs three troy ounces (¼ pound); the plugs are made increasingly shallow until in the last square they weigh 1/81 of a pound. They are set in a grid about 2¾ inches from the edge and fill the central space equidistantly in a format like the lightning poles.

There's a heraldic loveliness to these steel skins spotted leopardlike in gold and silver. You think of some banker's blazon, a latter-day Medici perhaps (the Medicis had balls). Too, there's a certain financial drama involved—pounds of precious metal, a part of the world economy no matter how minuscule, have assumed the mask of art. A force is being kept secret—secreted. Just as, in Kassel, a 2-inch brass rod a kilometer long, weighing twenty tons, has been secreted into the earth. The only evidence of its presence is its tip—or "eye"—a sunny brass circle flush on a meter-wide sandstone square plate. The art is literally underground. It's also buried in the memories of the citizens of Kassel, who were pretty upset by so conspicuous a display of wasted energy and wealth.

The single brass circle in Kassel was the cue to the gold plugs in the *Gold and Silver Meters*. It's the number one from which follow the squares of two through nine.

De Maria's dramas are involuted and self-referring; his stainless steel doubles as Narcissus's mirror. Sometimes, however, the subject matter is outgoing, explosive. When the lightning season comes to New Mexico, you can expect quite a display among the 400 poles. As in Mark Twain's story about an irresistible lightning-rod salesman, bolts probably will be conjured from clear blue skies; the whole field will jump like Bald Mountain at night. Will spectators be incinerated? De Maria's not sure. He plans some warning or PROCEED AT YOUR OWN RISK signs, like those he posted in his show of wickedly pointed spike-beds in 1969.

Often there's an aspect of aggression or hostility in de Maria's precise formulations and exquisite details. It's not anti-art or neo-Dada. His shapes have a deadpan seriousness that reminds you the artist comes from the West Coast (he was born in Albany, California, in 1935 and has a B.A. and an M.A. from Berkeley). There's nothing devil-may-care or insolent to his stance (as there is with Rauschenberg, for example, or Warhol). De Maria is intently intense; if anything, his squares tend to the square. Which brings you back to Heiner Friedrich's gallery, packed with earth, carefully raked, evened, like, in the dainty language of the New York *Times*, "the world's largest cat box."

Earth, says de Maria, is as precious as gold; it catches the sun's energies, transforms them into growing life. Earth is a prime value. Brought into the contexts and under the controls of art, it becomes a symbolizing icon as well as a vital force. It regains dignity, presence, magic. An extensive system of interpretations and insights replaces the first impression of banality or assault. The emperor reappears, so to speak, clothed as befits a noble ruler in procession before his admiring people; his cloak is of spun gold and silver with rare gems, as any normal person, with goodwill and imagination and a capacity for poetry, can plainly see. ■