

The Lightning Field: Experiences in a Ritualized Landscape - Investigating a Contemporary Landscape of Contemplation

Rebecca Krinke

University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, MN, USA

rjkrinke@umn.edu

Walter De Maria's creation, *The Lightning Field*, differs from other works of land art in a profound way: *The Lightning Field* has been designed as an experience with ritual-like qualities. De Maria has made a space and an order of visitation to it. He creates the opportunity for a contemplative response that is individual and shared, though not directly related to organized religious practices. Completed in 1977, the project is composed of 400 stainless steel poles arranged in a grid measuring one mile by one kilometer, carefully sited in the New Mexico desert. In contrast to the projects with which it has been associated (such as Robert Smithson's *Spiral Jetty* and Michael Heizer's *Double Negative*), De Maria thought intensely about the way his project creates a dialogue with visitors. *The Lightning Field* was received by art critics of the time in the context of land art or minimalism. The art historical reading of *The Lightning Field*, while valid, does not tell the whole story. The location of *The Lightning Field* is secret (one is taken there only after permissions have been secured) and De Maria "ordains" an experience that includes a required overnight stay at a rustic cabin with other guests. *The Lightning Field* creates a powerful experience of being removed from the day-to-day world, which focuses one's awareness in a heightened way on the elemental, facilitating reflection, personal insight or even transformation.

In this paper I am using the *Way of Tea* (or *chado* in Japanese) as a comparative device to understand ritual-like aspects *The Lightning Field*. It is important to note that this paper does not seek to establish that the two can be compared in a "one-to-way"; in fact, there are ways in which they are quite different, and these will also be discussed. The central point is that the *Way of Tea*, as a comprehensive ritual (situated within Zen Buddhism) provides an enlarged way of understanding *The Lightning Field*, and highlights the way that this project functions as a ritual-like setting and experience. This paper will use *The Way of Tea's* ritual devices: 1: invitation and authority, 2: secrecy and taboos, 3: prescribed movements, 4: symbolic objects, and 5: spatial and temporal control, to unlock new insights into *The Lightning Field*. I draw upon the ritual theory scholarship of both Catherine Bell and Ronald Grimes, and the work of anthropologist (and tea practitioner) Jennifer Anderson.

Several published accounts of visitors to *The Lightning Field* will be discussed, with the effect that it and De Maria's designed encounter had on their (changing) perceptions of self and cosmos. Published accounts of visitors to *The Lightning Field* illuminate the ritual-like aspects of the project. For example, John Beardsley and Melinda Wortz, both art critics, published widely different accounts of their experiences of the project after it first became available to visitors. Beardsley railed against the format (the "ritual") for visiting *The Lightning Field*, writing how he felt it to be precluding him from an experience of the project, rather than seeing the artist's format as an integral part of the project. Melinda Wortz, on the other hand, wrote eloquently about the project's power to shift perception. Her writing is a meditation on the project in its totality, discussing the beauty she found in the wilderness landscape on the long drive to the project and describing the conversations she had with other guests. In later writings, Beardsley focuses on *The Lightning Field* as a project that engages the sublime, revealing his revised reception of the project. A third visitor, Robert Eaton, described his experience of *The Lightning Field* in his book that chronicled his travels in New Mexico. With no background in the visual arts, but with a desire to explore every inch of his adopted state, Eaton visits the project with his wife. His reception of

the project changed dramatically over the course of twenty-four hours, and demonstrates *The Lightning Field's* ability to shift consciousness due to its ritual format.

I visited *The Lightning Field* in 2000; and began research and writing on project soon after. But my interest in *The Lightning Field* is seemingly life-long. I am fascinated with this project's extremely beautiful engagement with time (including the required 24 hour stay - with strangers - in the refurbished 100 year old homesteader Log Cabin) and space (the vast desert and the intimate Log Cabin). Most published accounts spend their time analyzing the field of poles, while what mesmerizes me is the process of visitation and the Log Cabin as a space and as place of encounter. This was where I saw a relationship with the *Way of Tea* - which is not just a "tea ceremony" but a comprehensive setting/experience including garden, tea house or room, implements, prescribed and movements, among other devices - that for me resonated with *The Lightning Field* and De Maria's prescriptions for its engagements. The *Way of Tea* reveals ritual-like aspects of *The Lightning Field* and enlarges our understanding of this pioneering work of land art.

References

- Anderson, Jennifer L. 1991. *An Introduction to the Japanese Tea Ritual*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Baker, Kenneth. 1988. *Minimalism*. New York: Abbeville Press.
- Bell, Catherine. 1997. *Ritual: Perspectives and Dimensions*. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- de Coppet, Daniel, Editor. 1992. *Understanding Rituals*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Eaton, Robert. 1995. *The Lightning Field: Travels In and Around New Mexico*. Boulder: Johnson Printing.
- Jauss, Hans Robert. 1982. *Toward an Aesthetic of Reception*. Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press.
- Suzuki, Daisetz T. 1959. *Zen and Japanese Culture*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Treib, Marc and Herman, Ron. 1980. *A Guide to the Gardens of Kyoto*. Toyko: Shufunotomo Company, Ltd.
- Wortz, Melinda. 1980. "Walter De Maria's Lightning Field." *Arts Magazine* 54 (May): 170-173.

Additional Sources

- Beardsley, John. "Art and Authoritarianism: Walter De Maria's Lightning Field". *October* no. 16 (Spring 1981): 35-38.
- Beardsley, John. Revised 1989. *Earthworks and Beyond. Contemporary Art in the Landscape*. New York: Abbeville Press.
- De Maria, Walter. "The Lightning Field". *Artforum*, vol. XVIII, no 8 (April 1980), 52-59.
- Gelburd, Gail and Geri De Paoli. 1990. *The Transparent Thread: Asian Philosophy in Recent American Art*. Hempstead, NY: Hofstra University and Bard College. Distributed by University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Lippard, Lucy R. 1983. *Overlay: Contemporary Art and the Art of Prehistory*. New York: Pantheon Books.
- Nitschke, Gunter. 1991. *The Architecture of the Japanese Garden. Right Angle and Natural Form*. Cologne: Tashcen.
- Okakura, Kakuzo. 1956. *The Book of Tea*. Rutland, Vermont and Tokyo: Charles E. Tuttle Company. Sen, Soshitsu, Grand Master XV, 1979. *Tea Life, Tea Mind*. New York and Tokyo: Weatherhill.
- Stiles, Kristine and Selz, Peter, Editors. 1996. *Theories and Documents of Contemporary Art: A Sourcebook of Artists Writings*. Berkeley: University of California Press, Ltd.
- Tiberghien, Gilles A. 1995. *Land Art*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.