



WALTER DE MARIA

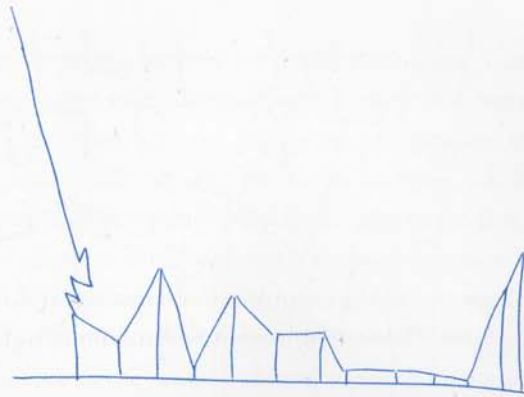
Meaningless Work

JANE MCFADDEN

[Robert] Morris, and who benefited from the same patronage (Robert Scull during the 1960s, the De Menils later on) has yet to be fully assessed in the context of minimalism.<sup>8</sup>

What might this absence tell us, as both viewers and interlocutors, about the blind spots in our methodologies? If De Maria privileges experience over discursive meaning, could there be an art history of ‘meaninglessness’ (De Maria’s chosen term) that avoids what Susan Sontag so famously called ‘the revenge of intellect upon the world’?<sup>9</sup> These questions in turn ground the following investigation, which serves as an introduction to an artist, already ubiquitously present and simultaneously invisible. Photography plays a special role here, for almost everyone knows about *The Lightning Field*, and for that matter most of De Maria’s work, through photography – almost all of which is carefully constructed and controlled rather than mere documentary snapshots – yet discussions of photography have been generally absent.

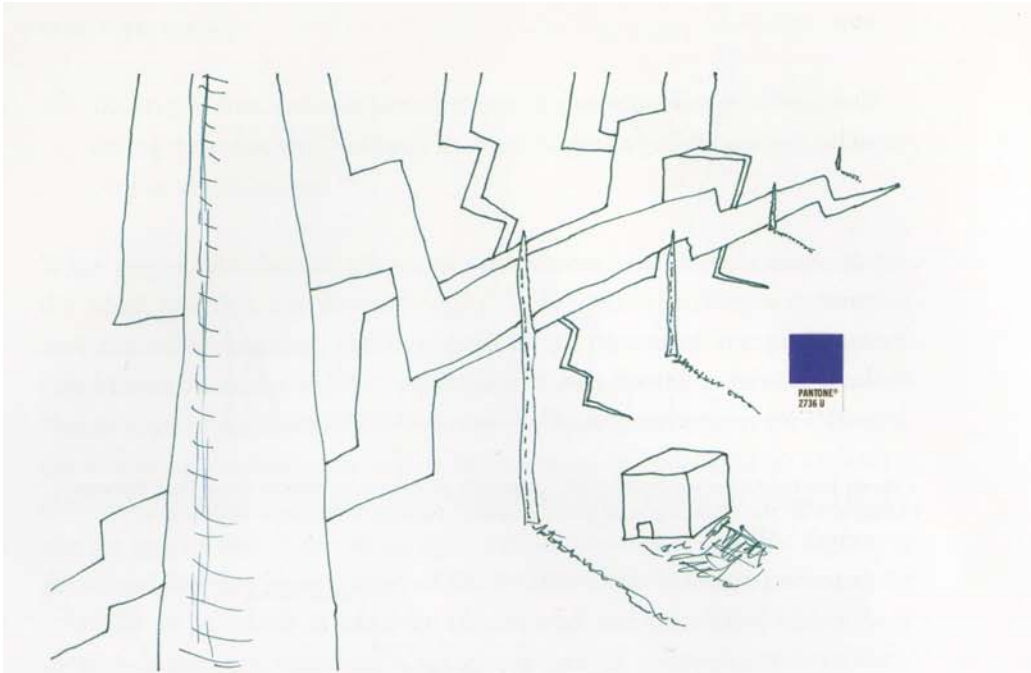
A two-part feature on *The Lightning Field* in *Cabinet* in 2001 captured the state of the field. An interview with John Cliett, the photographer of *The Lightning Field*, reveals the complex process of making these well-known images – which involved, among other things, a camera designed by a NASA engineer.<sup>10</sup> The result, of course, is that the images are far from documentary and far from the eye’s capacity, as we already know (human vision cannot really articulate lightning), but at times willingly forget. In *Cabinet*, the interview was followed by a segment in which eight artists were asked to ‘Please Draw That Famous Photograph of *The Lightning Field* from Memory’.<sup>11</sup> The request forefronts the role of photography in reception of this work, even as it distances that medium from an experience of the sculpture in the field. Contemporary artists Aziz + Cucher, Emilie Clark, Liam Gillick, Douglas Gordon, Sarah Morris, Jenny Perlin, Matthew Ritchie and Rachel Urkowitz took up the task. These drawings provide a distinct and critical alternative to sanctioned images of the work, which are often unmarked by the context of production and publication. The resultant gap is creative, humorous, prescient and perhaps melancholic, as we are reminded of the layerings of mediation in our contemporary experience.



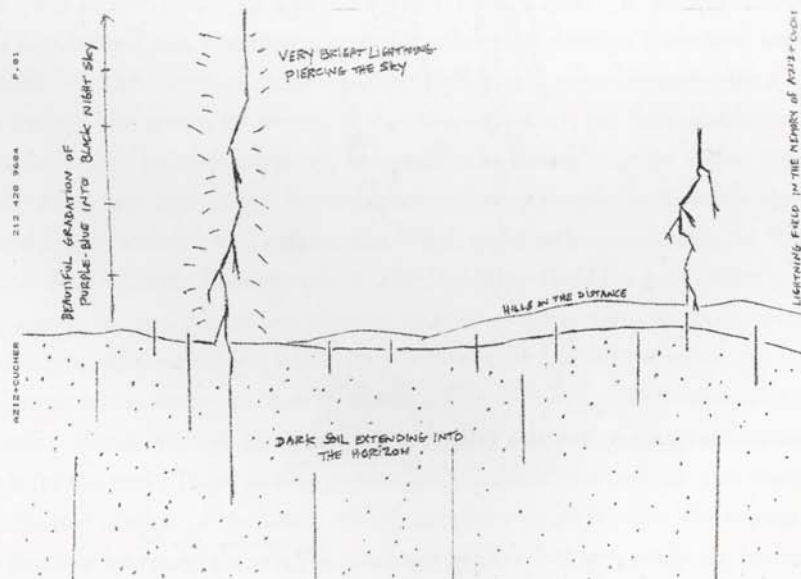
1 Sarah Morris, *Lightning Field*, 2001. Originally published in 'Please Draw That Famous Photograph of *The Lightning Field* from Memory', *Cabinet*, 3 (Summer 2001), p. 4.



2 Matthew Ritchie, *Lightning Field*, 2001. Originally published in 'Please Draw That Famous Photograph of *The Lightning Field* from Memory', *Cabinet*, 3 (Summer 2001), p. 99.



3 Douglas Gordon, *Lightning Field*, 2001. Originally published in 'Please Draw That Famous Photograph of *The Lightning Field* from Memory', *Cabinet*, 3 (Summer 2001), p. 94.



4 Aziz + Cucher, *Lightning Field*, 2001. Originally published in 'Please Draw That Famous Photograph of *The Lightning Field* from Memory', *Cabinet*, 3 (Summer 2001), p. 95.

Nonetheless, images continue to proliferate. Since I began my initial research on this project over a decade ago, images that were once hard for me to discover have often, by now, landed on the Internet through the odd passages of amateur sleuthing, digitization of archives, scholarly collection, auction advertising and general interest. Is the solution to this proliferation to still pretend as if an artist can overcome it through sanction and control? Or to believe that it is transparent by refusing to discuss the medium itself? Who will be allowed to tell the stories of these pictures? Photography is a constant in De Maria's practice of the 1960s and '70s, showing up at every turn – rarely as straightforward documentary but rather as a medium of investigation itself. He experimented widely with many media, modes of reception, forms of humour and genres of representation (from sci-fi to pornography), which enrich our understanding of his thinking. To dismiss these investigations to the margins does not clarify his legacy, but instead impoverishes it. For when De Maria grappled with the stakes of being present, he knew what he was up against. It is photography's ostensible neutrality that is dangerous, fooling us into not noticing the difference between seeing and seeing at a remove. This book provides a more nuanced and contextual way of encountering the margins of De Maria's work; for it was the richness of De Maria's diverse multimedia practice, relatively unknown, that inspired this book, and remains generative.

We might even argue that it was experimentations with media that led to *The Lightning Field*, for it is a work deeply embedded in the fray of a mediated post-war art world, however far removed from its site. By 1996, Paul Virilio dramatically positioned it as a type of last stand against total dislocation:

I'm wondering, then, if art didn't regress from the exhibition, the installation on a wall or in a gallery, to the inscriptions of land art [here he discusses *The Lightning Field*], only finally to disappear, no longer inscribed anywhere but in the instantaneous exchange of sensations offered by virtual reality . . . Can we hang on to the Raft of the Medusa represented by land art, like a kind of life-saver that would carry us toward a reinscription and reinstallation of art in the here and now,

## TO LOOK AGAIN

At the time, De Maria was often out west, hard at work on what would become his one permanently installed large-scale work in the land – *The Lightning Field* – completed in 1977. Yet as we know, the work itself is tenuously visible, even on site. Instead, the iconic nature of *The Lightning Field* is grounded in photography.<sup>72</sup> Photographs of the work, as we have noted, are limited to a carefully controlled set of images that have been ubiquitously reproduced, often as flashy full-colour bleeds in surveys of Land art.<sup>73</sup> Yet within decades of use, the photographs themselves have not been discussed as images, despite the fact that the history of De Maria's work, as well as the discipline of art history, would seemingly demand such attention. (I have again turned to the provocative visual essay originally published in *Cabinet* for assistance here.)

The photographs first appeared as a nine-page spread in the April 1980 issue of *Artforum*.<sup>74</sup> The spread begins with a monochromatic sky-blue page that distinguishes the series from the discursive contents of the rest of the issue – an anomaly within the history of the publication and a marker of the distinction of these images within. The images themselves were carefully constructed as well, and the series acts as another photoessay rather than documentation. The first double-page spread presents two photographs with different strikes of lightning taken from the same position. Through the doubling of an image of place and the freezing of time in the captured images of lightning, this introductory spread, framed in black margins, immediately invites us into the realm of technological reproduction – the manipulation of space and time by the camera that is impossible at the site. In particular, the figure of lightning, for which these images are most famous, revels in the potential of images to extend our vision in new ways. The image on the cover of *Artforum*, perhaps the most ubiquitous image of them all, similarly depicts broad strokes of lightning against a dark ground that dwarfs the sculptural configuration below. These images reflect and refract, streaks of light in a darkened box, like photography itself.

A second double-page spread of *The Lightning Field* presents a full-bleed panoramic image of the landscape, the sculpture barely visible within it, and the photograph, with a high horizon line dissecting the page, flattens into a



70 Rachel Urkowitz, *Lightning Field*, 2001. Originally published in 'Please Draw That Famous Photograph of *The Lightning Field* from Memory', *Cabinet*, 3 (Summer 2001), p. 4.

limited field of blue and green. Here, sculpture morphs into plane as the grid of *The Lightning Field* disappears and the grid of the page emerges. The image of the expansive landscape lacks specificity, and instead, in its flatness, its openness, demarcates a relationship to American space in general, not unlike that produced by the washed-out television screen. Ready, waiting for our projections – the sublime, the natural, the nuclear, the cinematic, whatever we may conjure to be grounded there (but of course not residing there at all).

This flatness is perhaps why the photographs are so often reproduced without being discussed – they reflect and refract our desire to see into them, and in doing so reveal their public nature, their transformation of the environment into representational form – a particular strategy in the face of the difficulty of American space:

The country is really too big for human beings to live in without making a conscious adjustment, and there are only two you can make: you can either



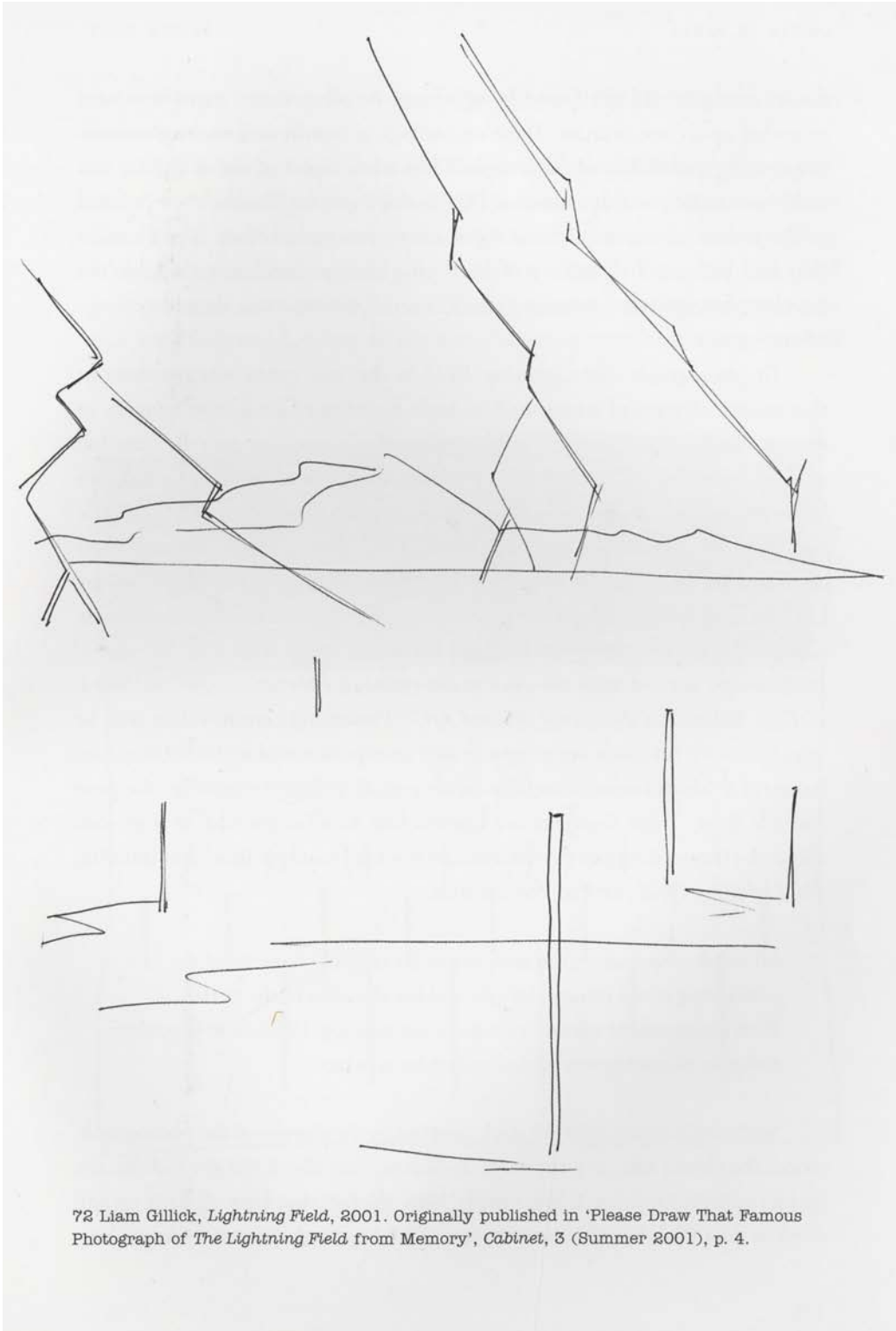
71 Emilie Clark, *Lightning Field*, 2001. Originally published in 'Please Draw That Famous Photograph of *The Lightning Field* from Memory', *Cabinet*, 3 (Summer 2001), p. 4.

increase, through mind or machine, your own reach in space and time, or you can break that space into man-sized chunks. The artist working in the environment, almost by necessity, renders his strategy public.<sup>75</sup>

Both extending our reach through space and time, and breaking each into 'man-sized' fragments of vision, page upon page, these photographs are about the representation of landscape, which we share, not an experience of it, which we don't.

John Cliett, the photographer of *The Lightning Field*, took hundreds of photographs of the work over a course of several summers, in cooperation with De Maria. Cliett relates: 'The pictures were a necessity . . . My goal was a competitive one, which was to make the pictures so astounding that nobody would ever be able to make a better one.'<sup>76</sup> The dramatic images of lightning strikes were captured using triggers made for the cameras by Richard Orville (a scientist studying lightning for NASA).<sup>77</sup> The triggers were set to





72 Liam Gillick, *Lightning Field*, 2001. Originally published in 'Please Draw That Famous Photograph of *The Lightning Field* from Memory', *Cabinet*, 3 (Summer 2001), p. 4.

the wavelengths of light found in lightning. At other times, exposures were extended up to one minute. These technological manipulations heighten the 'astounding' possibility of the images.<sup>78</sup> But what aspect of visual culture was really astounding at this moment? De Maria's work for 'Rooms' had pointed to the pedestrian nature of most sights only a few years before. The Vietnam War had become a repository of horrifying images circulating through the blandest atmospheres – numbing. Each issue of *Artforum* was already a collage of sameness.

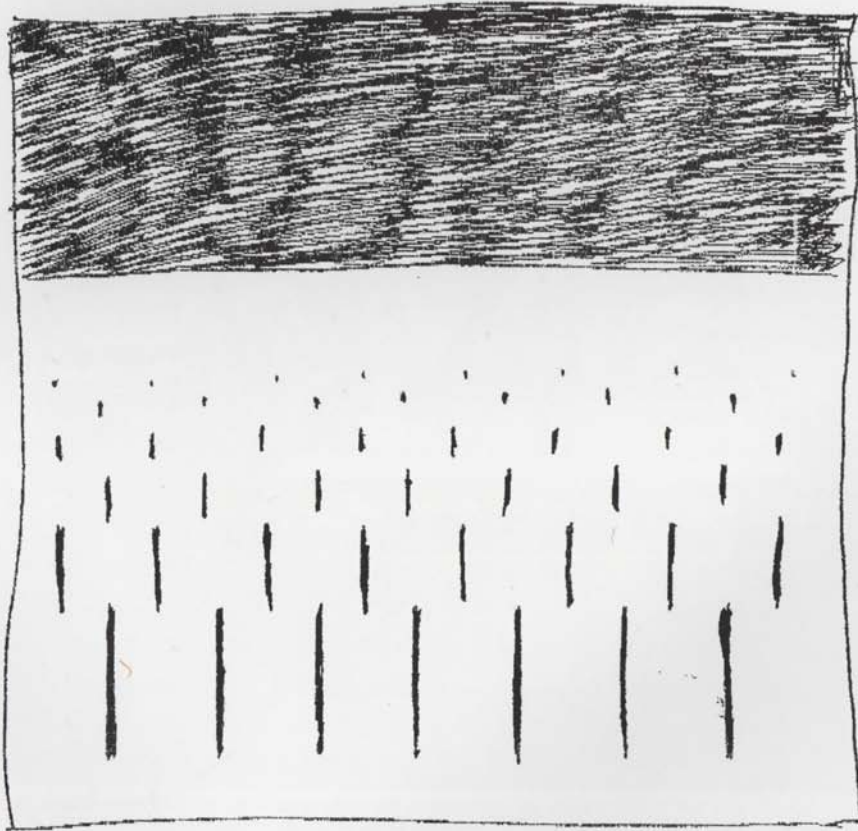
To photograph *The Lightning Field* in the late 1970s was to confront this variety of ways of seeing and its lack: histories of landscape imagery in America heavy with ideology but also 'relieved of consciousness'; the question of documentation of art and the prioritization of the visual ('you can never know for certain, can you?'); and the presence and force of American spectacle in general 'like the other side of the moon'. *The Lightning Field* photoessay was cordoned off from the fray by its introductory blue page. A one-page essay by De Maria that followed the images only further warned of their difference: '*The land is not the setting for the work but a part of the work . . . The sum of the facts does not constitute the work or determine its esthetics . . . The invisible is real . . . Isolation is the essence of Land Art.*'<sup>79</sup> Presenting certain values that he associates with his extensive sculpture and an experience of it (invisibility, isolation), De Maria's words carefully create tentative distance between the page and the field. These thoughts are interspersed in a longer text of notations about the impressive feats of material and physical manipulation that building *The Lightning Field* entailed, for example:

An aerial survey, combined with computer analysis, determined the positioning of the rectangular grid and the elevation of the terrain . . . Each measurement relevant to foundation position, installation procedure and pole alignment was triple-checked for accuracy.<sup>80</sup>

Such engineering exists in stark contrast to the physics of the photograph, where the viewer can, as perspective indicates, float above the ground. Yet the images remain iconic, as Cliett noted: 'Now the fact that I got all fired up and tried to do a Pink Floyd album cover, that's okay. And it certainly hasn't hurt

the field in my opinion. But it is unfortunate that those pictures have become such an iconic idea of it.<sup>781</sup>

Appropriately, when the dedicated crew finished the four-month construction of *The Lightning Field* in 1977, they took in a show of Dionne Warwick at the Sands, perhaps unintentionally giving us a soundtrack to take with us, as she inevitably must have reminded them that you could 'pack your car and ride away' from the seat of representation and projection that was Hollywood, where all the stars that never were 'are parking cars and pumping gas'.<sup>82</sup>



73 Jenny Perlin, *Lightning Field*, 2001. Originally published in 'Please Draw That Famous Photograph of *The Lightning Field* from Memory', *Cabinet*, 3 (Summer 2001), p. 4.

De Maria was aware of the distinction of the photographs of *The Lightning Field* and once he had them he explored various venues that would emphasize their public nature, against the private experience of the work. As Cliett later explained,

At the time this all happened, we [John Cliett and De Maria] had two goals. One was *Life* magazine, and the other was a big billboard in Grand Central Station. And we had the deal with *Life* . . . But Walter pulled the plug on the whole thing. *Life* were [sic] really pressing Walter. They wanted him to pose with the piece, they wanted to send their own photographers. And he felt like the people from *Life* were just looking at it from sort of a sensationalistic point of view. *Life* magazine had a picture in the back called the Endpaper, and there was one of a moose standing on the hood of a car. And it said at the bottom of the thing what happened to the moose – everybody was trying to get the moose off the car on the freeway, and the moose freaked out and ran in front of the car and was killed. And Walter saw the picture and said, ‘I’m not going to be a moose on the hood of a car.’ . . . He pulled the plug on seven pages of *Life* magazine.<sup>83</sup>

*Life*, like *National Geographic*, served as a site for vicarious travel – a printed realm through which one could traverse international geography and celebrity. Grand Central Station was a node for travel as well, where the train would take you out – like ‘lines traveling out to infinite points’ – literally and symbolically linking this site to multiplying geographical and historical elsewhere. Each venue, or either venue, promised a distinct life for the work – one in which it would enter the undifferentiated chaos of visual culture. These were not spaces in which only twenty or thirty people a year could see the work, but ones for a ‘mass audience’.<sup>84</sup> These were where De Maria would render his strategy public, where he would emphasize the distinctions between walking through a field and reading the plane of the page, where he could remind us of the stakes of believing in everything we see (lightning frozen in time for example) at the expense of the invisible. Yet to present the images at all was to risk the photographic equation of one experience for another; to risk being like a moose on a freeway, out of place, just another