

FEATURES

Duane Linklater and the Limits of Dia Art Foundation's Reckoning

David W. Norman



Installation view of *Duane Linklater: 12 + 2*. ©
Duane Linklater. Photo: Bill Jacobson Studio,
New York. Courtesy Dia Art Foundation.

JUNE 24, 2026

Last November I spotted an unusually mundane poster at Printed Matter, the nonprofit bookseller that once served as the distribution arm of New York's Conceptual art scene. The print, designed by Garry Neill Kennedy in 1982 and titled *Verboten* or *Posted*, depending on its display conditions, appeared to be a generic "No Trespassing" sign that precisely mimicked New York state standards for posting private land. The owner of the land this artwork sought to restrict access to? The Dia Art Foundation.

The poster, Kennedy claimed, was based on a sign fellow artist Robin Peck removed from an actual Dia property. It could easily be dismissed as just another art world in-joke, but in fact this small act of appropriation pointedly upends the self-image Dia has cultivated since its inception. Dia, of course, was established in 1974 to fund, collect, and promote large-scale Minimalist and Land art projects through a decentralized network of sites and gallery spaces. Financed largely by the Schlumberger oil fortune, it once courted comparisons to the Medici family, aspiring for its commissions to “become a permanent part of the cultural tradition of the 20th Century” comparable to “chapels and sacred spaces of the past,” as an early internal document attests. *Verboten/Posted* instead portrays Dia as little more than a possessive landowner, making its practice of acquiring rural and postindustrial properties to host site-specific projects seem more like the expansion of a franchise than the actions of a pious benefactor, and its efforts to entrench a particular cadre of artists in art history like any asset holder’s ploy to protect and grow their portfolio’s value.

Beyond poking fun at Dia itself (admittedly an easy target), Kennedy’s print also casts a shadow on the land-based artworks that count among its property holdings, a gesture that now seems remarkably prescient. The foundation owns several of the most canonical works of late-twentieth-century Land art, including Robert Smithson’s *Spiral Jetty* (1970), Nancy Holt’s *Sun Tunnels* (1973–76), and Walter De Maria’s *The Lightning Field* (1977), the latter commissioned by Dia. The branch of Land art to which these projects belong is currently undergoing a significant historical revision as critics increasingly associate it with settler colonialism and Indigenous dispossession. If these artists were once praised for opposing the commodification of the art object, today scholars like Alicia Harris (Assiniboine) remind us how they drew inspiration from perceptual and material procedures that historically facilitated settler land theft, often while literally commodifying the lands they worked atop. Dia is directly in the crosshairs of this reckoning: Legal historian K-Sue Park has shown that *The Lightning Field*’s basic format—a forty-acre territory, cleared and measured into a grid, adjoined by a single log cabin—~~is~~ stills the very essence of a [land] claim” under US homesteading legislation.



Walter De Maria, *The Lightning Field*, 1977. © Estate of Walter De Maria. Photo: John Cliett. Courtesy Dia Art Foundation, New York.

But while Dia keeps alive such artworks' claims on stolen Indigenous land, over the past decade it has gradually opened the door to other perspectives on the legacy of 1970s site specificity, organizing historic surveys of artists like Senga Nengudi, Michelle Stuart, and Felix Gonzalez-Torres, whose career timelines overlap with those of Dia's original roster, but who faced systemic underrecognition as a result of their racial, ethnic, gender, or sexual identities. Still, the question remains whether Dia can successfully expand the institutional categories it once helped cement while maintaining a largely hagiographic approach to the artists on the other side of the imbalance it now seeks to correct. Is it even possible to critically reframe settler Land art, with its engrained coloniality, without materially transferring authority over such sites back to Indigenous nations?

These questions were already on my mind when I encountered Kennedy's print, as I had stopped by Printed Matter after visiting Duane Linklater's (Omaskêko Cree) exhibition *12 + 2* at Dia Chelsea. This project represents Dia's most sustained engagement to date with concepts of site grounded in Indigenous perspectives from Turtle Island (although a previous Dia Chelsea exhibition, Delcy Morelos's *El abrazo* [2023–24], explored principles of sculptural mass and dispersion through Indigenous Andean and Amazonian understandings of earth as an embodied being). Linklater developed *12 + 2* as a meditation on buffalo wallowing: behavior buffalo exhibit while in a restful state, including massaging their bodies into the land, forming earthen depressions. Over time, wallow pits deepen into watering holes that regenerate their wider territory. This is just one of many acts of earth-keeping that wallowing sets in motion. Buffalo also redistribute seeds as they make contact with the land, supporting biodiversity; their dung restores nutrients to grazing territories, keeping them fertile. As the exhibition pamphlet explains, however, buffalo wallow only when they have sufficient privacy to feel safe from predators, and when their autonomy and mobility are unrestricted. They "do not wallow in captivity, under duress, or in threatening conditions." Today, in the aftermath of the mass slaughters of herds by US and Canadian settlers that heavily reduced buffalo from their historic numbers, confining those that survived to a fraction of their territorial range, wallowing is a rare phenomenon. With clear parallels between this history and the creation of the reserve system in mind, the exhibition explicitly linked the conditions buffalo need to thrive—mobility, land access, and privacy (or perhaps opacity, in the sense of unknowability, as described by philosopher Édouard Glissant)—and those that support Indigenous communities.

With *I2 + 2*, Linklater physically and conceptually remapped Dia Chelsea to echo wallowing's status as a site-making practice. The title refers to a numeric structure within Omaskêko Cree cosmology as well as the number of poles required to build a teepee. Linklater redrew the site's floor plan to visualize this structure as a circle that bisects the wall separating the two galleries, anchoring the exhibition around this invisible ellipse, rather than Dia's architecture. A work also titled *I2 + 2* (all works 2025) further transgressed the galleries' spatial orientation on a material level. This piece consisted of twelve core samples taken from land in North Bay, which is situated in Northern Ontario on the traditional territory of the Anishinabek Nation, specifically the ancestral homeland of the Nipissing and Dokis First Nations, where Linklater lives. These were presented alongside earth extracted from two holes drilled through the floor of Dia Chelsea, connecting soil from Linklater's home region to the land Dia occupies. The core samples were arranged along the back wall of both galleries in two linear piles, while the on-site boreholes remained visible through glass plates, exposing layers of history buried below, from fertile marshland that once supported tobacco fields to landfill and debris from multiple cycles of removal and gentrification. Aruna D'Souza compared this gesture to the objects Smithson called "nonsites": installations of rock and soil deterritorialized from their places of origin and set within an exhibitionary complex that infringed on the material's site specificity. Linklater, though, undertook the reverse operation: removing a layer of nonsite to reaffirm the land's sitedness.



Installation view of *Duane Linklater: 12 + 2*. © Duane Linklater. Photo: Bill Jacobson Studio, New York. Courtesy Dia Art Foundation.

Doing so might have been a prerequisite for Dia to host the exhibition's central work, *wallowposition*, in a good way. *wallowposition* consisted of seven heavily abstracted sculptures of buffalo enlarged to twice their natural size and frozen in quiet moments of relaxation. During the exhibition's first seven weeks, they were periodically joined by dancers performing a piece choreographed by Tanya Lukin Linklater (Alutiiq/Sugpiaq), Duane Linklater's partner. The performance activated the sculptures and articulated buffalo's position for many Indigenous peoples as honored relatives, as discussed by Linklater, filmmaker Tasha Hubbard (Peepeekisis First Nation), and poet Layli Long Soldier (Oglala Lakota Nation) in the exhibition pamphlet.

Several of the other works on view, when situated within Dia's art-historically loaded context, suggested specific confrontations with the legacy of settler Land and environmental art, as D'Souza's comparison to Smithsonian evidences. It might also be tempting to read *wallwallow*, a wall-mounted earthwork, as a response to British Land artist Richard Long's *Red Earth Circle* (1989). The latter was included in the controversial 1989 exhibition *Magiciens de la terre* at the Centre Pompidou, where its juxtaposition with the ground painting *Yam Dreaming* (1989), by six Warlpiri artists from the Yuendumu community, was heavily criticized for appearing to conflate land-based art forms rooted in vastly different cultural values. That Long's work was visually elevated led critics to suggest it appeared to dominate *Yam Dreaming*—although this critique itself reflected a Eurocentric privileging of the vertical. *wallwallow*, by contrast, intimately conversed with *wallowposition*'s horizontal expanse by channeling the earthen depressions that wallowing creates. The result was a call-and-response-like dialogue between the exhibition's upper and lower worlds.

In the pamphlet, Dia curator Matilde Guidelli-Guidi dredged up another art-historical reference, characterizing *12 + 2*'s eponymous artwork as a critique of Joseph Beuys's *Strassenbahnhaltestelle/Tram Stop* (1976). That installation, created for the German Pavilion at the 37th Venice Biennale, included a borehole penetrated by an iron bar and a variety of other objects, one of which Guidelli-Guidi explains appropriated the format of Northwest Coast totem poles. From the perspective of a Dia representative, any potential reference to Beuys would certainly carry added weight: Heiner Friedrich, one of Dia's cofounders, was among Beuys's closest supporters, and thirty-eight trees belonging to Beuys's *7000 Oaks* project line the street outside Dia Chelsea. If we extend Guidelli-Guidi's comparison to Beuys's presence just beyond the gallery walls, foregrounding Beuys's extractive approach to Indigenous cultures could be interpreted as a challenge to his broader environmental politics.

Yet any temptation to read *I2 + 2* primarily as a critique of the non-Indigenous canon would be to misread Linklater's priorities, and such comparisons ultimately remind us how unresolved Dia's colonial entanglements remain. This obscure connection to Beuys in particular seems difficult to reconcile with *I2 + 2*'s careful attention to the specificity of buffalo and the cosmology that envelopes them, and it's unclear if this reference was one Linklater intended. At this point, I began to wonder how the labor of grappling with Dia's relationship to settler colonialism is distributed in projects such as this. While hosting such exhibitions enables Dia to present itself as willing to engage in institutional self-critique, that view can overshadow the artist's intended themes and potentially overrepresent Dia's actual commitment to challenging its legacy.

Aside from *I2 + 2* and its associated events, each program Dia has organized in collaboration with Indigenous artists has been part of its Artists on Artists Lecture Series, which explicitly focuses on reframing Dia's collection. The most recent of these, a lecture Kent Monkman (ocêkwi sîpiy/Fisher River Cree Nation) gave last October, centered on a series of nineteenth-century drawings by members of the Hudson River School that entered Dia's holdings via Dan Flavin. Flavin reportedly appreciated these artists' attention to light, yet, among Indigenous communities, they are better known for their legacy of visualizing manifest destiny. Monkman's lecture discussed his career-long interventions in Hudson River School imagery, and for the occasion he also developed several drawings that reimagined specific works in Dia's collection, filling their empty vistas with Thunderbeings and chalk outlines dedicated to gender-nonconforming Indigenous people who have been erased from the historical record.



Installation view of *Duane Linklater: 12 + 2*. © Duane Linklater. Photo: Bill Jacobson Studio, New York. Courtesy Dia Art Foundation.

In 2024, Alan Michelson (Mohawk member of the Six Nations of the Grand River) also gave a lecture at Dia Chelsea that explicitly addressed settler Land art, focusing on Smithson's *Spiral Jetty*. Michelson highlighted his and Smithson's mutual interest in deep material history, but stressed Smithson's indifference to the Indigenous identity of the land he worked atop, describing his approach to site as fundamentally extractive. "Like settlers," Michelson explained, "the [Land] artists were drawn to land whose physical properties suited their purposes: to farm or to mine or to site colossal sculpture." He sharply contrasted this attitude with the continent's millennia-old traditions of Indigenous earthworks: "communally constructed earthen forms grounded in place knowledge and attuned to cosmic cycles."

While Monkman's and Michelson's talks filled critical voids in Dia's institutional memory, the first Indigenous artists Dia collaborated with under this program interpreted the lecture series format rather differently. For their contribution, in 2021, Duane Linklater and his son Tobias Linklater (Alutiiq/Sugpiaq and Omaskêko Cree) developed a video and musical performance in response to Holt's 1978 film *Sun Tunnels*. Throughout the video, the artists drew a web of elliptical lines by tracing the edges of cymbals against a wall onto which Holt's film was projected. As the drawing overlaid images of Holt's crew surveying, digging, and operating heavy equipment, the Linklaters' musical composition layered atop the film's original soundscape, denaturalizing its controlled inner world and, by extension, that of *Sun Tunnels* the earthwork. Yet the Linklaters, who were present at the event only via this recorded video, refused to make their intervention legible as a neatly categorizable critique. Privileging Indigenous epistemologies that resist didactic or narrative closure, they instead enacted conditions that Jarrett Martineau (nêhiyaw and Denesûliné) and Eric Ritskes once described as "fugitive Indigeneity," performing a "reorientation toward freedom in movement, against the limits of colonial knowing and sensing." In this case, the Linklaters oriented themselves *away* from the assumed role of artist-disruptor: the external actor to whom institutions delegate the task of "decolonizing" their collections only insofar as this doesn't jeopardize the institution's ownership of certain spaces, objects, and discourses.



Duane Linklater, *kitaskînaw_kitaskînawâw (every Indian I know hates that song)* (detail), 2025. © Duane Linklater. Photo: Bill Jacobson Studio, New York. Courtesy Dia Art Foundation

There is a lesson here about the limits of recognition and critique as responses to colonial harm. In the same year as the Linklaters' performance, Dia published a guidebook to its sites, and the book's preface explains how the uprisings of 2020 prompted the foundation to "reckon with [its] role in processes of gentrification, displacement, and dispossession." Dia's collaborations with Indigenous artists have all generatively contributed to this rethinking. So far, however, any "reckoning" seems largely confined to expanding the spectrum of voices invited into Dia's temporary exhibition venues. Such efforts at increasing inclusivity, while important, can accomplish only so much; as David Garneau (Métis) notes, acts of "[m]aking, holding and sharing space" can ultimately "[reinforce] settler ownership of these display territories," as "these actions are designed to momentarily re-present, but not to engage the Indigenous beyond" the duration of an exhibition or program.

While Dia welcomes critique of its Land artworks from afar, its actual management of these sites appears to have changed little, if at all. No Indigenous nations or organizations are publicly listed among Dia's stewarding partners for them. Webpages and brochures for *Spiral Jetty* and *Sun Tunnels* continue to display prohibitions similar to those parodied in Kennedy's print and offer no information about the Indigenous and colonial history of the lands these earthworks occupy. *The Lightning Field*—with its notorious restrictions on access and its indebtedness to the Public Land Survey System (PLSS) grid—remains a monument to the authority of private property under settler colonialism.

What would it mean for Dia to more fundamentally grapple with its sites' relationships to their colonial past and present? How might its conservation of De Maria's, Holt's, and Smithson's permanent, land-based projects change if it invited Indigenous communities who are in relation to those lands to partner in stewarding them? Dia's recent commissions and programs gesture toward an ethics of relationality that has been missing from the foundation's current land stewardship model, but they have not provided a road map for how to remediate Land art extractivism. For now, at least, Dia, like homesteaders of another generation, continues to infringe on the sovereignty of the Indigenous nations whose ancestral lands it owns, "holding space" for artists who identify settler colonialism's foundational role in Land art's history—safely, at arm's length.