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The Dia Generation

By MICHAEL KIMMELMAN

Next month, a former factory in a small town an hour north of New York will become the first museum dedicated to the greatest generation of American artists. Not Pollock, Rothko and de Kooning. The next generation, the one that came of age during the 1960's and 70's, the one that includes Donald Judd, Dan Flavin, Walter De Maria, Michael Heizer, Robert Smithson, Sol LeWitt, Andy Warhol, Robert Ryman, Agnes Martin, Bruce Nauman and Richard Serra. The history of American art is going to need a little rewriting. They are men mostly, with big egos and big ideas. They were the first Americans to influence Europeans. The work these artists made changed, or at least questioned, the nature of art: what it looked like, its size, its materials, its attitude toward the places where it was shown, its relation to architecture, light and space and to the land. The artists even questioned whether art needed to be a tangible object. Minimalism, Post-Minimalism, Earth art, video art, Conceptualism -- suddenly art could be nothing more than an idea, a thought on a piece of paper that played in your head. It could be ephemeral or atmospheric, like the experience of a room illuminated by colored fluorescent tubes. The work found itself at home, as the artists did, in the lofts of abandoned industrial buildings in Lower Manhattan, converted into studios and white-box galleries. But much of the art was too big for a gallery. Robert Smithson's "Spiral Jetty" was 6,650 tons of black basalt and earth in the shape of a gigantic coil, 1,500 feet long, projecting into the remote shallows of the Great Salt Lake in Utah.

The artists demanded space in tune with their aesthetic. Now along comes Dia: Beacon, set to open on May 18. Housed in a factory in Beacon, N.Y., which was built in 1929 to print boxes for Nabisco crackers, it will be the biggest museum of contemporary art in the world. With nearly a quarter of a million square feet of exhibition space, it dwarfs Frank Gehry's Guggenheim in Bilbao, Spain: it is reused raw space adapted by artists to suit themselves, with no star architect but huge rooms, some as long as football fields, for paintings and sculptures that have never felt truly at home.

Before he died in 1994, Donald Judd complained that his sculptures were crammed in with other art in most museums and that the objects were denied what he considered their rightful independence and integrity. "So much money spent on architecture in the name of art, much more than goes to art, is wrong," he barked about new museums. "Even if the architecture were good, but it's bad." Dia:Beacon was built to



Dia: Beacon is a museum that its artists can truly call their own. Above: "Union of the Torus and Sphere," by Richard Serra. Below: Three works by Richard Serra, front to back, "Torqued Ellipse II," "Double Torqued Ellipse" and "2000." Bottom of page: "North, East, South, West," by Michael Heizer.



let people see art the way Judd would have wanted.

Conceived by a charismatic German art dealer, Heiner Friedrich, and his wife, Philippa de Menil, in 1974, Dia was not meant to be a traditional museum. The opposite, in fact. For a while, Dia spent millions and millions of dollars financing projects like Walter De Maria's "Lightning Field," for which huge steel poles were planted in a remote stretch of New Mexico. It poured \$4 million into "Dream House," by La Monte Young and Marian Zazeela: a building on Harrison Street in Lower Manhattan that housed Zazeela's light projections and where Young's electronic music played 24 hours a day. "Dream House" had its own guru in residence, Pandit Pran Nath, the Indian singer and teacher, and a staff that recorded every note of music and word of conversation and photographed and logged every meal eaten there.

Dia bought Fort Russell, a former Army post on 340 acres of scrubland in Marfa, Tex., for Judd to create a private museum for his work and the work of the few chosen artists he admired. The project epitomized the crazy scale and wild ambition of the art of his generation. Marfa, an isolated clutch of adobe and wood-frame houses on streets that peter out into no man's land, languished several drowsy hours from civilization. Its fort was a cavalry post for patrolling the Mexican border and later a camp for German prisoners in World War II, before it was decommissioned. Judd converted abandoned barracks into exhibition spaces.

At the center of the fort was Judd's crowning achievement and Minimalism's great shrine: 100 milled-aluminum boxes installed in two converted artillery sheds, twin cathedrals with giant Quonset hut roofs. Judd replaced the sheds' garage doors with big windows, letting sun play against the boxes, deflecting any preconceptions that the sculptures might be forbidding or monotonous.

The work exemplified Minimalism's paradoxical nature: Puritanism offset by a sensual embrace of optical surprise and ravishing detail. Time, light, form: Judd forcibly focused viewers' attention on these basics of human experience via simple shapes presented exquisitely, for slow study in rarefied isolation. At a time when museums were becoming malls and art seemed cheapened by commerce and mass reproduction (so felt 60's artists like Judd, inflamed by the antibourgeois politics of the time), Marfa was conceived to restore innate dignity to art and to the experience of looking. "A shape, a volume, a color, a surface is something itself," Judd declared. "It shouldn't be concealed as part of a fairly different whole." While Judd rejected metaphors of bodies for his boxes and other abstract sculptures, the utopian -- which is to say, human -- implications of what he had in mind were obvious.

To lump Judd with Nauman and Serra and Warhol as a "generation" is obviously to put together people of different ages and styles, not to mention temperaments, who nevertheless all first made their marks during the 60's and 70's, when wild experimentation tested the definition and limits of every kind of art. Art has not been the same since.

Andy Warhola, as he was born, made Andy Warhol his masterpiece, forever blurring the line between art and life. Nauman made movies of himself neurotically pacing in circles and helped to open up a whole world of video and performance art. Dan Flavin used colored industrial fluorescent tubes to make Minimal sculptures whose ambience was as much the subject as the abstract arrangement of the lights, establishing the basics of installation art before anybody ever thought to call it that.

Partly inspired by Flavin, LeWitt decided to start "from Square 1," he said, with sculptures in the shapes of squares and cubes. Linguistic theorists at the time talked about words and mental concepts as signs and signifiers. LeWitt moved between his syntax of geometric sculptures and mental propositions for images: concepts he wrote on paper that could be realized by him or someone else or not at all. Physical things are perishable. Ideas need not be. LeWitt wasn't interested in precious one-of-a-kind baubles. "Art has been veritably invaded by life, if life means flux, change, chance, time, unpredictability," the sculptor Scott Burton observed around then. "Sometimes the difference between the two is sheer consciousness, the awareness that

what seemed to be a stain on the wall is in fact a work of art." LeWitt's conceptual work pushed the point to an extreme: his art was the equivalent of the stain painted over, leaving only consciousness.

Meanwhile, painters like Martin, Ryman and Frank Stella were pushing at their own limits, making works that were just stripes or white on white. They were partly inspired by Pollock, but they rejected the 50's cult of expressionism that he exemplified. Pollock had revolutionized abstract art by pouring and dripping, but in the 60's his impact was as much on sculptors as it was on painters. Serra, tossing hot lead, echoed Pollock's physical performance and liquid vocabulary, moving sculpture off the pedestal and onto the floor.

Out west, Heizer, De Maria and Smithson were simultaneously moving art into the great outdoors. Heizer drove his motorcycle across a dry lake bed in the Nevada desert, making immense drawings with his tire tracks; then he made "Double Negative," a 1,500-foot-long, 50-foot-deep, 30-foot-wide gash cut onto facing slopes of an obscure mesa in Nevada, a project that required blasting 240,000 tons of rock.

Visiting Chichen Itza, the Mayan city, he devised "City" next: a suite of giant, variously shaped abstract sculptures over an area that covered more than a mile end to end -- modern art turned into monumental abstract architecture, with ancient ruins as the model. Heizer imagined "complexes," immense mastabas, some a quarter of a mile long, with 70-foot slabs weighing thousands of pounds. He acquired several square miles of remote property, surrounded by public land, two hours into the Nevada desert from the nearest paved road, and he lived for years in a trailer, locked in for half the winter and once going for months seeing only a couple of sheep trailers and a passing pickup truck. Art didn't get much more extreme than that.

Heiner Friedrich, who was born in Germany in 1938, liked to describe how seeing the destruction during the Nazi years inspired him to want to create things that would last forever. One recent morning, at the Mercer Hotel in SoHo, he told me that "living in the countryside after the war in purest relation to nature, in great peace, made a huge impression on me -- seeing the manifestation of the divine." Bespectacled, dressed in a black suit and black shirt, a large, sturdy man with a lined face, Friedrich today looks more forbidding than he is. He is a dreamer, prone to verbal flights of near-spiritual reverie.

A son of the founder of Alzmetall, a manufacturer of industrial equipment, his life was changed by visiting Matisse's chapel in Vence, France, and on trips to Greece and Italy, "where I saw art and architecture, each in its own place." Giotto's Arena Chapel in Padua "became for me the true insight for the unfolding and development of Dia." The chapel was the work of a single artist: a singular site, complex, revolutionary, preserved in perpetuity, a pilgrimage destination both cultural and spiritual.

Friedrich started a gallery in Munich in 1963 and then opened a second one in Cologne, representing artists like Beuys, Sigmar Polke, Gerhard Richter, Judd, Heizer, Cy Twombly, De Maria and Warhol. But Friedrich grew depressed by the endless cycle of short exhibitions and sales. At the same time, he noted how artists like Judd, De Maria, Smithson and Heizer were gravitating toward a kind of art that museums and galleries simply couldn't accommodate.

Fed up with struggling to raise public money for big art projects in Germany, Friedrich moved to SoHo in 1971. For a while, his gallery at 141 Wooster Street became a salon where artists like De Maria and Blinky Palermo would hang out. Young and Zazeela staged performances. Judd exhibited sculpture. The gallery commissioned art on a large scale. Soon Friedrich met and fell in love with Philippa de Menil, an heiress to the Schlumberger oil fortune and the child of Dominique and John de Menil, low-profile, high-class art collectors who had commissioned the Rothko Chapel in Houston and whose Menil Collection, a cypress-clapboard-and-glass masterpiece by the architect Renzo Piano, exemplified the family's taste for fabulous, expensive simplicity.

Who knows how much of Dia can be attributed to Friedrich's vision or to the influence of the Menils or to the contribution of Dia's other founder, Helen Winkler, who worked for the Menils and became Dia's link with

many artists. Winkler and her husband oversaw the construction of De Maria's "Lightning Field" in New Mexico. "She held things together," Friedrich says. "She was indispensable." Much of Dia clearly also came from the artists themselves, like Judd, who knew how and when to capitalize on a golden opportunity.

The general idea as it gradually emerged was pure and beautiful -- that is, if you accepted the premise that it was worth spending millions of dollars on difficult, brainy abstract art few people appreciated at the time. Then again, time itself was a relative concept for Dia. This was one of its distinguishing philosophies. Projects like "Lightning Field," for instance, were expected to last for eons. If you calculated attendance in decades or centuries rather than weeks or months, then a handful of devotees trekking to the New Mexican desert year after year added up to a blockbuster crowd.

Friedrich explained that dia was a Greek word meaning "through," as in conduit. A dozen or so artists, Friedrich's chosen ones, would be freed of all constraints and allowed to pursue work as they envisioned it. Naturally, this fueled deep suspicion and jealousy in the art world, but Friedrich compared what he was doing -- now with his wife's fortune -- to the Medicis. "Dia didn't tap something new; it tapped something old," he said at the time. "Our values are as powerful as those in the Renaissance." For emphasis, he added that Dan Flavin "is as important as Michelangelo."

Dia's artists were certainly devising plans that made Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel look like a minor interior-decorating job. In 1977, Friedrich's SoHo gallery became a permanent locale for De Maria's "The New York Earth Room": 280,000 pounds of dirt trucked in and spread 22 inches deep across 3,600 square feet. The room had to be regularly hosed and raked and cleared of mushrooms. Employees were assigned to watch silently over it -- no reading was allowed on the job, lest their distraction disrupt the aura of aesthetic contemplation. De Maria's "Vertical Earth Kilometer" was completed that same year: a slender 18-ton rod sunk into a 1,000-meter hole drilled in Kassel, Germany, leaving only the tiny circle of one end visible in the ground. The cost: \$419,000, and \$2,500 a year to maintain.

The first big outdoor project completed in America was De Maria's "Lightning Field": 400 stainless-steel poles, 2 inches thick and up to 20 feet tall, installed as a grid in a one-mile-long and one-kilometer-wide stretch of extremely remote New Mexico. Visitors were required to spend 24 hours in a rustic cabin beside the poles, contemplating the way light changed as day passed to night and back again. Dia bought the land near Quemado, N.M., in 1975, and local high-school students helped install the poles. Cost for the project: \$1 million.

What was incalculable, as at Marfa, was its artistic value. The work required a journey, a pilgrimage, the sacrifice and effort being part of the philosophy of immersion in the art. There was something manipulative, even prescriptive, about that idea, but also something deeply liberating about the experience. On extremely rare occasions, a bolt of lightning actually struck one of the poles. Otherwise, the art entailed psychic intangibles: taking in the silent, peaceable, solitary passage of time in the high desert and the vastness of space -- and noticing how subtly different the poles looked as the sun moved across the sky, shifting from shiny slivers at sunrise to ghosts at noon, when they're nearly obscured by the high sun and surrounding mountains, then burning like fireworks just before sunset. The work meditated on a man-made forest of industrial materials and perfect geometry playing off against the wilderness and the stars. It celebrated America and the Western landscape, incorporating it, which was something fresh that De Maria's generation brought to art.

By 1979, Dia's staff had expanded from half a dozen to 80, and its annual payroll topped \$800,000. Heiner Friedrich and Philippa de Menil were now putting together a vast collection, but their resources were being stretched thinner. They had met Sheikh Muzaffar Ozak, a Sufi master of the Halveti-Jerrahi Order of dervishes, and Dia started pouring money into a Sufi mosque on Mercer Street as well as supporting various Islamic publishing projects. At the same time, Dia was buying real estate for one-man museums. In addition to La Monte Young and Marian Zazeela's "Dream House" and Judd's spread at Marfa, it bought a former bank in Winchendon, Mass., for Fred Sandback in 1981 and converted it into a kind of open studio/private museum. Sandback's sculptures entailed thin colored strings attached to walls outlining geometric shapes, like triangles

and rectangles. Viewed from certain angles, they created the illusion of solid glass, but from other angles, they disappeared from sight. Dia supported the museum for years until, by more or less mutual consent, the building was sold.

"People would scratch their heads and ask, 'What's going on here?'" Sandback, now white-bearded and ruddy-faced, looking like a monk with a ponytail, told me one recent afternoon. "I think the skepticism hurt Heiner very much. It implied his motives were not correct. He may have gone overboard. But he wanted nothing more than to give LaMonte what he needed and Don what he needed to proceed unencumbered. Say what you will, I think the motivation was simple."

Unfortunately, as Dia's costs skyrocketed, Schlumberger plummeted from around \$87 a share in 1980 to around \$30 in early 1982. Philippa de Menil had to sell off more and more stock for Dia. Plans were initiated to turn over some of the artists' projects, like Turrell's "Roden Crater," to independent foundations, which would now need to find their own source of support.

Artists Dia had supported were apoplectic, especially Judd, congenitally angry anyway. Dia had spent more than \$5 million and lavished a monthly stipend of \$17,500 on him. Now Judd fumed about Friedrich: "I distrusted him from the beginning. The only problem is that I didn't distrust him enough."

Sandback says: "When someone is so very protective and generous, it becomes the norm, which it isn't. This was a new paradigm for patronage, and I myself am ungodly lucky to have had such support and freedom in my life. It's too bad that some artists became so upset when it stopped. I didn't regard it as my due to have my work purchased. But other artists had reason to scream bloody murder, I suppose, because they were left high and dry in terms of what they really wanted, and had expected, to do. Remember, Don's commitment to Marfa was just as strong and intense as Heiner's was to Dia. That made the conflict inevitable. It's what made both of them exceptional."

By 1983, Schlumberger stock had fallen further, and Dia had to take out a \$3.87 million loan. Dominique de Menil, Philippa's mother and the family matriarch, now stepped in. Philippa's money was put in trust controlled by her brothers. Dozens of employees were fired. Much of the Manhattan real estate that had been acquired for one-man museums was put on the market. Young and Zazeela's "Dream House" on Harrison Street was sold.

Dia had spent \$40 million amassing 1,000 works, creating or laying the groundwork for some of the most ambitious art in modern history. But now it had no income, and many of these projects were still far from completion.

Dia auctioned off 18 works at Sotheby's: a Twombly went for a record \$418,000; a Warhol, for \$165,000. The sale raised \$1.3 million, but this was \$700,000 less than Dia had hoped to raise. A low point for Friedrich was when Dia sold two of its three Barnett Newmans. "That was crushing," he told me. "I had talked about a Newman museum with Newman." Judd, threatening a lawsuit, won custody of his art (and another \$2 million) in an out-of-court settlement.

"It was not run the way money people normally treat money" is how Friedrich responds to critics who say he was irresponsible with Dia. Dominique, his mother-in-law, was one. She forced him to resign. A blue-blood board replaced him. Ashton Hawkins, longtime counsel to the Metropolitan Museum of Art, became chairman. Lois de Menil, Philippa's sister-in-law, became vice chairman. Stephen Breyer, the future Supreme Court associate justice, joined the board.

The foundation stopped collecting art. Dia's grand experiment seemed officially over -- like the era that produced it.

Charles Wright, a lawyer from Seattle, son of an art collector, was hired as the new director. Wright admired artists like Judd and De Maria and became increasingly enamored of Friedrich's ideas, but the new board had its own plans. By the end of 1987, real estate and art sales had raised \$17 million, and Dia was pointed in a new direction. Dia donated more than 150 Warhols to help establish the Warhol Museum in Pittsburgh. It gave six Twomblys to Dominique de Menil's Cy Twombly Gallery. Friedrich had said Dia was a conduit. Now Dia's collection became the conduit for one-man museums that other people ran.

Dia did keep a warehouse on West 22nd Street in Manhattan, with 38,000 square feet that was converted into spare, white exhibition space. In October 1987, it opened with a show of Joseph Beuys, Blinky Palermo and Imi Knoebel. Dia now would present changing exhibitions -- the opposite of what Friedrich had conceived Dia to do -- but at least the exhibitions would be kept on view for up to a year or more, unlike shows at other museums, which were stuck in the entertainment cycle of rapid change that Friedrich despised.

Meanwhile, the climate of the art world was changing. First the glamour of the 80's, with its marquee stars like Schnabel and Salle, made the asceticism of artists like Judd and De Maria seem fusty. After the art-market boom went bust by the early 90's, Dia's traditional stress on solitary geniuses, great men removed from everyday circulation and freed to pursue big dreams, seemed equally out of sync in a cultural atmosphere that prized egalitarianism and social engagement. Wright, now 48, keeping up with the times then and wanting to endorse the new spirit, explained that "people of my generation are looking for ways that the artist can come back down and plug directly into the social context . . . to make art more a part of a whole way of life and less of a removed, ivory-tower activity." He bemoaned the "cult of the individualism of the artist," and with Gary Garrels, then Lynne Cooke, Dia's curators, he programmed heavyweight symposiums and exhibitions by politically conscious artists like Jenny Holzer, Tim Rollins, Robert Gober and Group Material. Dia established itself as a serious and chic gallery, although attendance was dismal.

People looking back on Friedrich's days now talked about what had gone wrong. But plenty had gone right. Dia still had "Lightning Field," "Broken Kilometer," "Earth Room" and a collection in storage deep in certain artists -- dozens of sculptures by John Chamberlain, the 102 "Shadow" paintings by Warhol and many works by Flavin, Beuys, Palermo and Twombly. "The basic intent remained intact," Friedrich says. The original Dia had simply gone into hibernation.

What revived it -- and what led to the creation of Dia:Beacon -- was another bloody board shakeup. Having saved Dia from collapse, trustees seemed to have little energy left to raise more money, and Dia was still being kept afloat by selling property and art, which was self-cannibalism. After a decade as director, Wright resigned in June 1994, but stayed on the board to help pick Michael Govan as his successor and to support a new agenda.

Govan, 39, is a dark, lanky, quietly ebullient man disposed to cowboy boots and black shirts. In keeping with Dia's artists and founder, he is a kind of megalomaniac, despite his aw-shucks manner. He came from the Guggenheim Museum, where he had been the smiling, calm, long-suffering front man who had to explain the museum's slippery finances and unconventional strategies. He first met Thomas Krens, the Guggenheim's notoriously audacious director, at Williams College, where Krens was director of the Williams College Museum of Art when Govan was an undergraduate. The two shared ambition and a passion for 60's and 70's art; after he graduated in 1985, Govan became acting head of exhibitions at Williams. Along with Krens and another Krens protege, Joseph Thompson, Govan helped to dream up the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art, Mass MoCA, a gigantic museum in a complex of abandoned factory buildings in the depressed town of North Adams.

Then Krens left to take over the Guggenheim, and Govan took off to become a conceptual artist -- studying in California with 60's and 70's art icons like Allan Kaprow, David and Eleanor Antin and Helen and Newton Harrison. The experience was "formative," he says. Even so, when Krens called, Govan moved to New York. He was 25.

He seemed like a baby technocrat, only more easygoing and personable than his boss. He would look pained while defending the museum for cutting staff or closing the library, but he also spoke Krens's business-school jargon.

Sometimes he, not Krens, seemed actually to be running the place. Besides helping to get Bilbao off the ground, Govan organized exhibitions, including a Dan Flavin show, and negotiated the purchase of Count Giuseppe Panza di Biumo's collection of Minimal and Post-Minimal art (a collection Friedrich helped to put together years before). The Panza purchase, which caused a public firestorm because the Guggenheim sold valuable paintings to make it, was the sort of risky venture and large-scale commitment to the art of the 60's and 70's that, in retrospect, made Govan a logical choice to take over Dia.

Despite the seeming symbiosis, in retrospect Govan had big differences with Krens that weren't apparent. Both were deal makers, but Govan's interests were more in art and artists than in fancy new architecture. He now speaks respectfully of his former mentor, who was hurt when he quit for Dia. "It was thrilling at the Guggenheim," Govan told me when I met with him recently at Beacon. Krens, he said, had lately arrived unannounced on his motorcycle, with the actor Jeremy Irons. Govan laughed. "On a day-to-day level," he added about his time at the Guggenheim, "nothing could possibly be as exciting as working for Tom."

When he was appointed as Dia's director, Govan made pilgrimages to Marfa and to Arizona to see Turrell's crater. Lynne Cooke, Dia's curator, introduced him to Michael Heizer, and he visited "City." He reached out to Friedrich. He became the good son to several difficult fathers, like Heizer and De Maria, patiently giving them the sort of attention no one else did for years. Dia's board, lately expanded, now included Mimi Haas, heir to the Levi's jeans fortune; Ann Tenenbaum, whose husband is the venture capitalist Thomas Lee; Fred Henry, whose money came from publishing; and Anne Lannan. Her husband, Patrick, ran a \$150 million foundation then supporting cutting-edge art.

Govan undertook a \$12 million fund-raising campaign, which included a matching grant from the Mellon Foundation, \$1 million if Dia could raise \$5 million, a feat not even Mellon seemed to think Dia could pull off at the time. A rift opened on the board. To raise money, some trustees wanted to sell more property. They proposed unloading the building housing "Broken Kilometer." Govan threatened to quit. Wright, Haas, Henry and Tenenbaum supported him. They called for restructuring the board. Hawkins resigned. Others followed.

The brouhaha dragged on for months as disgruntled former Dia trustees now lashed out in the media. They accused Govan's supporters of being social climbers, a curious accusation considering how marginal Dia remained in social spheres, notwithstanding that its annual gala had become fashionable. Meanwhile, Dominique de Menil, Friedrich's adversary in the first coup, joined the board. Wright became chairman. And, significantly, Leonard Riggio, chairman of Barnes & Noble, became a trustee.

Modern art's big patrons, if not arrivistes, are often newcomers, attracted by its argot and milieu. Dealers, artists and museum directors are happy to take advantage of their largess. Riggio, a rough-edged mass-market businessman, may seem the most unlikely devotee of cerebral and rarefied art -- until you recall that Judd, Serra, Turrell and Heizer are rough-edged in their own rights. In his office on lower Fifth Avenue, Riggio, now Dia's chairman, talked reverently one day about what he calls his "conversion": "When Jay Chiat asked me to join the board, I asked the question everybody asks: 'What is Dia?' He told me it had great parties. My epiphany came when I saw Serra's 'Torqued Ellipses.' I immediately got the idea of the single artist space, seeing art in its own environment. I just got the concept of Judd, Flavin and all the others without even seeing their work yet."

Riggio bought the Serras for Dia. "My real intellectual awakening had come in the 60's," he told me. "The big concept then was the integrity of the individual, the potential of every human being. When I built my business, I was thinking about bookstores for average citizens, for the whole of society. Then I went to Marfa and Roden Crater and visited Heizer in Nevada, and I thought these artists recognized the genius of the average American.

Judd built his museum in a little Texas town. Turrell was hiring Native Americans from the area. Heizer was working with local people."

Meanwhile, Patrick Lannan, Dia's other big patron, spent millions to revive projects like "City," which until then seemed as if it might remain the most immense private folly ever conceived. Thanks to the injection of cash, after 30 years Heizer completed the first phase: huge dirt complexes rimming a vast, empty courtyard, in turn rimmed by massive mountains, whose silhouettes alert a visitor to the silhouettes of the massive structures Heizer erected. Then Heizer launched into the rest of "City."

Heizer's project, Riggio says, "represents humankind's highest aspirations, spending a lifetime on a single project, pouring every ounce of energy, his entire soul, whatever money he makes into it. One man building his own equivalent of the pyramids. It's incredibly beautiful. After all, what is art? That's the big question.

"It exists at the intersection between the work and the viewer. Most museums are on an endless acquisitions binge. Their identity is defined by their architecture, and artists have to fit into the galleries. Dia has little institutional identity outside the projects we fund, and no objective except to sustain art on its terms."

That's the point of Beacon, he adds, which was, in fact, Govan's last alternative for a home for Dia's collection, still slumbering in storage. His first thought was to exhibit the art at Mass MoCA, the place he, Krens and Thompson concocted. Thompson ran it. But putting the collection there meant turning it over to another institution. Govan then looked into a building in Chelsea and also asked New York State about leasing a pier on the Hudson. The building fell through. Dia was told it might take a decade to get approval for the pier.

At that point, Govan recalled piloting a small rented plane up the Hudson in 1998, accompanied by Lynne Cooke and the architect Richard Gluckman. They happened over the derelict Nabisco factory. "Michael, that's the building you want," Gluckman said.

The factory sprawled beside railroad tracks that take passenger trains up from New York City. A long, low building on 31 acres with "Nabisco" in faded letters still visible from a passing train as a kind of pentimento just below the roofline, it turned out to require \$1 million in environmental cleanup but had good bones. Riggio and Govan brokered a deal with International Paper, the owner, then got the state to contribute \$2.7 million. (Beacon is Gov. George Pataki's neighborhood.) The acquisition and renovation took four years.

Now opportunistic developers, New York art dealers and a few public art projects, seeing how Dia became an anchor for cultural development in Chelsea, are already anticipating that people will make the hourlong pilgrimage upriver from the city, and they have been buying property, opening galleries and turning Beacon into an artistic boom town.

Govan gives me a tour of the factory in late winter, when the place is still mostly empty. He starts outside, pointing to where Robert Irwin, the artist, has planted rows of trees -- hawthorns, hornbeams and crab apples, still barren -- in front of the building to soften the mass of the facade. Irwin has also designed a formal garden on the side facing the river, mixing weeping hemlocks, cherry trees and Japanese barberries. Everything is simple and discreet. The focus is on the art.

An entrance to the building, also by Irwin, is a kind of Frank Lloyd Wright touch, akin to the entrance at the Guggenheim in Manhattan: a tight vestibule like a small compression chamber through which the galleries beyond look even more gigantic than they are. Inside, electricians and painters are puttering. Govan notices fluorescent lights overhead and fumbles with a light box before asking one of the workers to help turn them off. "They're just for emergencies," he says. "The natural light is plenty year round." With the overhead lights off, sun, pouring through row upon row of skylights, bathes the space and bounces off the maple floors. Most of the skylights are saw-toothed windows, some 25,000 square feet of them, facing north. Although austere, thanks to

the light the building feels serene and comfortable. Riggio had told me: "When I saw what other people would describe as a wreck of a factory, I was blown away by the ribbons of north light. It's genius. The people who designed it may have wanted to cool the place in summer or light it for the printers, but I've dabbled in industrial psychology. This is a place that makes humans feel better for being there."

Govan points to empty rooms. Here will go the Agnes Martins, he says, there the Warhols, there the Gerhard Richters, there the Darbovens and the Joseph Beuyses. (It is not just Americans at Beacon.) The choice of artists, as always at Dia, is idiosyncratic. Cooke, Govan's collaborator in installing Beacon, argued passionately for, among others, Louise Bourgeois, whose work will now occupy the attic, and for artists like Darboven, On Kawara and Robert Smithson. Several different-size galleries survey the paintings of Robert Ryman. The Warhol room alone is nearly as large as a floor of Dia's Chelsea gallery. The building is so big that its scale is deceptive. A passage between two huge galleries looks from a distance only slightly larger than a normal doorway, but up close it's clear you could drive a Hummer through it.

Next Govan shows me the room for Kawara's identical gray canvases with a different date printed in block letters on each one. Kawara, like other artists, was invited to design his own space at Beacon, so he had the doorways at either end lowered and moved slightly off center and all the floorboards taken up so that a layer of ceramicized red-oak branches could be put underneath them. Govan tells me this is to ionize and purify the air in the room, "a traditional Japanese construction technique," he says.

Serra's immense "Torqued Ellipses," cottage-size, walk-in steel sculptures weighing hundreds of tons already occupy what used to be the factory's train depot, which opens onto the formal garden. Wedged into a passageway nearby, in a space the size of a gymnasium counts as a passageway, Serra's "Union of the Torus and Sphere" resembles the warped steel hull of a beached ship, an ungainly, enigmatic container that cannot be entered, only circumnavigated. The placement in tight quarters stresses the work's mass.

And Heizer's "North, East, South, West" is embedded in a 150-foot-by-40-foot concrete floor on the opposite side of the building. The Heizer, a variation on a groundbreaking work he did in 1967 in the Sierra Nevada, consists of vertigo-inducing geometric holes cut into the concrete floor, made of Cor-Ten steel, in the shapes of a double square, a cone, a partial upside-down cone and a wedge. The holes are up to 20 feet deep. A glass rail will cordon off the work and limit visitors to a few at a time. But no barriers immediately surround the holes. To stare down into them requires walking right up to the unprotected edges and leaning over. It is thrilling and deeply alarming -- a little like standing on the edge of the Grand Canyon, I realize, which people also want to do for the view despite the danger, or maybe because of it. This kind of art, typical of Heizer's generation, aspires to a similar condition: call it extreme wonderment. To the inevitable question, How will he prevent people from falling in, Govan responds with a sheepish smile. Maybe bungee cords tethered to the walls, he says. He's not kidding.

Renovation costs for Dia ultimately exceeded \$30 million, a hefty sum for a marginal nonprofit art foundation, which next will have to figure out how to pay for renovating its aging Chelsea site. Riggio and Lannan reached deep into their pockets, also coming up with millions for more art to put in Beacon. Counting the cost of Irwin's landscaping, Beacon came to under \$100 a square foot. Bilbao topped four times that. Beacon is the anti-Bilbao: cheaper, a renovation to an old industrial building, not brand new; shaped by artists, not an architect; a harbinger, perhaps, of a straitened new century. Frank Gehry's spectacular building, the product of a booming economy, exemplified the go-go 1990's and inspired museums elsewhere desperate to mimic its novelty and civic attraction. Tom Krens's grand plan for the Guggenheim empire has been to open signature buildings around the globe, shuttling the same shows through them: Guggenheim branches functioning as spectacular shells, fancy containers sharing the same products. Another one, designed by Jean Nouvel, is slated for Brazil.

Dia:Beacon, although also grandiose, is the reverse: a permanent display of art in a space consonant with it. You could say the same thing about the affiliated projects around Dia, including "Roden Crater," Smithson's "Spiral Jetty," Heizer's "City" and De Maria's "Lightning Field."

Touring Beacon with Govan, I notice De Maria in the twin main galleries, the first, cavernous rooms past Irwin's vestibule, each 100 yards long and about 13 yards wide. A virtual recluse for so many years that many people think he is dead, De Maria keeps to himself, as usual, declining to talk, instead arranging large circles and squares of cardboard on the floor, mock-ups of flat, polished stainless-steel sculptures. For weeks, De Maria has apparently been pondering minute changes in the placement of the sculptures in these vast rooms, shifting them an inch or less this way or that, his fixation with detail being the obsessive essence of Minimalism's paradoxically immense ambition.

The only color in the building at this point comes from a couple of John Chamberlain's crushed-car sculptures. But a crew is now starting to unpack crates of Warhol's "Shadow" paintings: near-abstract variations on the same obscure image, many in Day-Glo hues. Govan, snowblind after staring at the same white walls for so many months, is elated. "I've been waiting for years for this," he says.

I nod. Even so, the large empty rooms, the light and glass and peace and quiet, make the paintings seem almost like an intrusion. To get acclimated to Beacon is to become attuned to an aesthetic of plainspoken industrial spaces, simple forms and a kind of meditative silence that is the antithesis of the usual museum experience. It is a somewhat peculiar reaction to have to a museum. But then Dia has always been a most peculiar kind of museum.

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