A Big Apple Museum Displays Soil as a Work of Art

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"The ultimate filth, a room full of dirt" is how Wall Street Journal writer, Meg Cox, in her May 18, 1990 front-page article described a 3,600 sq. ft (some 280,000 lb) soil display in a lower Manhattan art gallery.

The work of Artist Walter De Maria consists of a 2-ft deep, long, narrow, lumpy carpet of rich black pungent soil that a caretaker rakes weekly and keeps moist and free of mushrooms and weeds.

Nearly 200 people—the biggest turnout ever—showed up on the eve of 1990s Earth Day since the museum is closed on Sundays. They came to view the "Earth Room" that has drawn more than 70,000 visitors in the past 10 yr. Like "The Fantastics" the exhibit is supposed to go on and on.

Owned and operated by the Dia Art Foundation, the display originally was backed entirely by the oil-rich de Menil family, but now also is supported by private and public contributions. The article did not describe Senator Jesse Helms's reaction to the use of public funds for this kind of dirt.

Questions most asked by museum visitors are: "Why?," "What does it mean?," and "Is it really art?"

Critics' opinions differ widely. Hilton Kramer, editor of the New Criterion journal says, "It has "absolutely no artistic merit and is a waste of time."

Lawyer John Cartafalsa's reaction is that "Art is supposed to be uplifting, and this does nothing for me."

In contrast, Kenneth Baker, author of "Minimalism: Art of Circumstance," says, "It's a major piece. When you spend some time there, your whole idea of what's inside and outside and up and down are completely shaken." Hans Jenny, Univ. of California soil scientist who is internationally known for professing that a natural soil body is one of nature's supreme works of art doubtless would look kindly on this distinctive display.

Located in New York City, the display receives international contingents, many of whom stand in rapt attention. One Japanese businessman was observed clutching a scrap of paper that listed the museum's address, 141 Wooster Street 2B, as one of the "best things to do in New York City."

Visiting German art students are cautioned by their instructor not to miss it. And the Japanese once featured the exhibit in a movie.

This on-going soil display in the heart of New York City is but another example of how an object's dearth generates curiosity, awe, respect, and even reverence and possibly explains the reason that Kansans, in general, take for granted their remarkable prairie soils, of which they have the most acres of any state.