National Parks in Prospect, Art Journal

Oct 8–18, 2021
Deadline: Oct 15, 2021

Monica Bravo

National Parks are celebrated as “America’s best idea” and visited by tens of millions of people each year. Although the National Park Service (NPS) is often thought of as a straightforward preservation agency, it is also a cultural institution that has fundamentally shaped the relationship between national identity, memory, and land in the United States. The NPS interprets history through the curation of over four hundred cultural landscapes replete with architecture and vast collections of ancient artifacts, objects of fine art and material culture, and monuments. Representations of National Parks also play a critical role in shaping ideas about nature and national belonging; for, despite their apparent hyperlocality (precisely this patch of land), they are federally managed and understood to be an entire nation’s patrimony. Indeed, the past and present of National Parks have been grounded in, mediated by, and circulated through visual phenomena such as landscape paintings, nature photography, tourist brochures, and contemporary art. Despite the significance and influence of the visual culture, art, and architecture produced by and about the National Parks, there is little academic literature on the subject; key exceptions include texts by Martin Berger, Alan Braddock, Erika Doss, Richard Grusin, Thomas Patin, and Rebecca Solnit. Much of the existing art historical scholarship focuses on the late nineteenth century, when the first National Parks were created through a settler colonial process that both relied on, and reinforced, an emergent visual ideology of landscape that paved the way for the dispossession of Native Americans in the name of preserving “public lands.”

In our contemporary moment, National Parks have become flashpoints for everything from their origins to their recent, frequently politicized, actions and inactions. On January 20, 2017, the NPS retweeted photographs comparing the sparse crowd at incoming president Donald Trump’s inauguration to the robust audience that welcomed Barack Obama eight years prior, improbably becoming heroes of the #resistance. This perception of the NPS is contrasted by its portrayal in the May 2021 issue of The Atlantic, when, joining a chorus of Native voices, David Treuer’s headlining article “Return the National Parks to the Tribes” appeared, illustrated by Katy Grannan’s poignant portraits of members of the Blackfeet Nation in Glacier National Park. Meanwhile, various parks and their collections, which include numerous Confederate monuments, sites of enslavement, and “First Amendment” spaces like the National Mall, have become locations of uprisings that resist or perpetuate white supremacy, triggering debates about the rightful interpretation of histories of racial injustice. Finally, amid the COVID-19 pandemic, National Parks are places of refuge, as well as alarming overcrowding, calling into question the sustainability—and environmental impact—of the whole endeavor. Each one of these events has taken the form of and/or been documented by photographs, videos, and other visual phenomena, which have profoundly shaped

opinions on political discourse, conflicting land claims, social justice protest, climate change, and truth itself.

For a proposed peer-reviewed special issue of Art Journal, we seek submissions of original essays, interviews, artworks, and creative reflections that analyze the role of art and visual culture in relation to National Parks in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Although we are concerned with increasing Art History's engagement with the National Parks, we welcome interdisciplinary approaches as well as writings from scholars in academia, the NPS, and other affiliations. This set of essays will explore the National Parks in prospect, in all its multivalent meanings; that is, as sites of natural and cultural extraction, as landscapes that bring into view (and occlude), and in terms of their future potential. We especially welcome submissions that address the following prompts:

• How does the visual culture of the National Parks continue to intervene in the politics of land through contributions to evolving discourses of the environmental movement and imperatives of Indigenous sovereignty?
• In addition to contributions that address the NPS's foundational dispossession of Native American territories, following Martin Berger, how do they participate in the depiction of nature as spaces of whiteness?
• What role does the NPS play in urban placemaking, which has transformed entire downtowns like that of Lowell, Massachusetts, into cultural museums?
• How does the visual culture of National Parks intervene in debates about the proper preservation and care of historical sites and monuments in the NPS's purview?
• How does the NPS engage in the history of art through their stewardship of the homes and studios of artists like Emery and Ellsworth Kolb, Augustus Saint-Gaudens, and J. Alden Weir, and artist in residence programs such as Art on the Borderland at Big Bend National Park?
• Whose interests and which audiences are represented by the National Parks' visual culture?
• How does the art and visual culture of US National Parks function in transnational contexts, including cross-border parks with Canada and Mexico, or compare with other park systems globally?
• Contributions by or that consider contemporary artists who integrate the visual culture of the National Parks into their work, or site-specific installations by contemporary artists like Ai Wei Wei at Alcatraz Island.

Abstracts of 250 words accompanied by short biographies are due October 15, 2021. A total of eight to ten proposals will be accepted; completed contributions, including original essays of approximately 5,000 words inclusive of notes, will be due to the guest editors by April 1, 2022. Contributors will be invited to participate in a preliminary workshop to share and discuss research in advance of submission. Once contributions are finalized, the entire selection will be submitted to Art Journal, where it will undergo double-blind peer review. Please submit abstracts and inquiries to Monica Bravo (monicabr@usc.edu) and Emma Silverman (emma_silverman@partner.nps.gov).

Reference:

CFP: National Parks in Prospect, Art Journal. In: ArtHist.net, Oct 10, 2021 (accessed Nov 10, 2026), <https://arthist.net/archive/35035>.