

Art in Parks: Seeing with Fresh Eyes

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Introduction

As the U.S. National Park Service (NPS) celebrates its centennial in 2016, it has been challenged anew to respond to changing demographics and to stay relevant to the changing needs of 21st century park visitors. How can parks, trails and other protected public spaces continue to serve as places of sanctuary and recreation while providing opportunities for reflecting on and even encouraging dialogue on issues that hold relevance to Americans? There is a growing realization within NPS and other federal land managing agencies of the need to be more proactive and creative in their community outreach and in addressing relevant issues, especially for populations that are under-represented at parks, in order to invite their participation in the enjoyment and stewardship of parks, trails, and greenways (NPS, 2009).

Background

Creative engagement of visitors through the arts is ideally situated at the nexus of the NPS goals of connecting with new visitors, and encouraging exploration and democratic discourse. Recognizing the need to expand arts engagement at national parks as one of the best strategies to support the NPS centennial, the National Endowment for the Arts introduced the “Imagine Your Parks” in 2015, a partnership with NPS to advance art projects that celebrate the mission of the NPS and to forge new partnerships between conservation and arts organizations. In the first round of applications, more than 100 projects were proposed, and more than 300 in the second round.

Within the NPS, the primary response to this challenge is “Arts Afire”, one of ten key strategies identified in the agency’s Call to Action: “to engage young people and diverse audiences in national parks and trails through the arts” (National Park Service, 2015). For young people especially, the arts offer powerful modes for self-expression and for reflecting on and sharing the park experiences that matter to them. As President Lyndon B. Johnson in establishing the National Endowment for the Arts, “Art is a nation’s most precious heritage. It is in our works of art that we reveal to ourselves and to others the inner vision which guides us as a nation. Self-discovery and cultural reflection are essential to people’s physical, mental and spiritual well-being; both need to be nurtured as our nation continues to evolve” (Tracy & Cook, 2014).

Goals

Through a series of five recent “Arts Afire” case studies from national parks across the country, this paper will show how national parks are working with a wide range of artists and art organizations to attract new, younger and more diverse visitors and to provide a locus for exploring contemporary issues, such as immigration, climate change, and political prisoners, to increase the relevancy of parks in contemporary society. Each of these art projects have broken new ground in re-interpreting key themes at national parks, in bringing people who have never or rarely visited a national park, and in creating new partnerships with museums, galleries and other arts organizations.

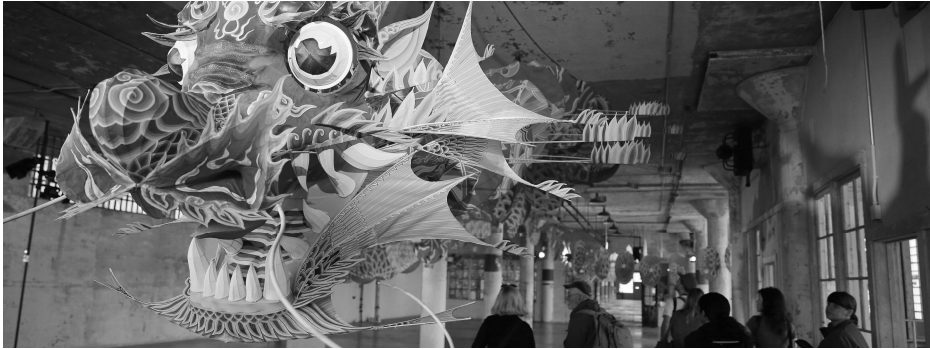


Figure 1. @Large: Ai Weiwei on Alcatraz

@Large: Ai Weiwei on Alcatraz (*Golden Gate National Park*)

This temporary public art project on Alcatraz Island, part of Golden Gate National Recreation Area, attracted new and diverse audiences (FOR-SITE Foundation, 2016). Weiwei created three site-specific works for Alcatraz in response to the island’s layered legacy as a 19th-century military fortress, a notorious federal penitentiary, a site of Native American heritage and protest, and now a national park.

Revealing new perspectives on Alcatraz, Weiwei’s sculpture, sound, and mixed-media installations transformed the iconic prison into a space for dialogue about freedom of expression, political prisoners and human rights for more than 800,000 visitors (Spalding & Ai, 2014). More than 90,000 postcards were sent to prisoners of conscience in more than 20 countries as part of the exhibition that invited visitors to reflect on their experience. Commissioned by FOR-SITE Foundation, @Large was the catalyst for a major increase in regional attendance of more than 70 percent. The project also initiated engagement with the Chinese community in San Francisco who were attracted by the participation of the internationally renowned Chinese artist.



Figure 2. Unframed—Ellis Island

Unframed—Ellis Island (*Statue of Liberty National Monument*)

The French artist JR was invited to work in the Ellis Island Immigrant Hospital, a building on the south side of the island, and part of Statue of Liberty National Monument, that has been abandoned and closed to visitors since 1954. About ten percent of the millions of migrants who passed through Ellis Island spent some time in the hospital. For *Unframed—Ellis Island*, JR chose archival photographs of the hospital's patients and staff and wheat-pasted these images around the abandoned building, creating haunting scenes that bring the history of these rooms back to life (Save Ellis Island, 2016).

Accessible by guided tour, the photographs reveal an overlooked story in immigration to the United States. JR's vision to use Ellis Island archival photos to re-enact history, and his reputation as a multidisciplinary artist who bridges pop and high culture, helped the New York Harbor's premier national park reach a younger audience. The park and its partner organization, Save Ellis Island, offered a lecture series, other exhibits and new programs to encourage people to return for multiple visits.

Isles Arts Initiative (*Boston Harbor Islands National Recreation Area*)

In Boston, NPS partnered with environmental and arts organizations, including Massachusetts Department of Conservation and Recreation, Boston Harbor Island Alliance, Greenovate Boston, and the Boston Art Commission, to increase awareness of the intrinsic beauty and long history of the Boston Harbor Islands. The goal of the Isles Arts Initiative (IAI) was to invite visitors, especially Boston's young people, to experience the islands differently and to find new meaning through new media and sculptural installations and

performance art on the islands, complemented by gallery shows in the city (Devlin, 2015). As the first large-scale art exhibition on the Boston Harbor Islands, IAI generated widespread media coverage and attracted a broad spectrum of participation from the Boston arts community, from artists to art enthusiasts to galleries to museums.



Figure 3. The Island of Monster Rangers —Isles Arts Initiative

The Confluence Project (*Lewis and Clark National Historic Trail*)

The Confluence Project began as part of the 200th anniversary commemoration of the Lewis and Clark 1804-5 “Corps of Discovery.” The project is a series of seven large scale art/landscape installations along the Columbia River in which artist Maya Lin has used the historic journey of Lewis and Clark as a lens into the physical and cultural histories of these sites. It encompasses work in over 15,000 acres of state and federal land that is now being restored as an integral part of the project (Lin, 2016).

Envisioning the river and its tributaries not only as singular points along the way but as a connected and integrated ecological system, each of the sites is linked to the passage of Lewis and Clark and with the local Native American Tribes that inhabited this region. Maya Lin has been in a close working dialogue with the many of the tribes of this region as well as with local, state and federal officials.

Lin’s subject is the dialog between the environment and humanity told through history and texts. In commemorating the Lewis and Clark mission by embedding their texts in the very land that they helped to damage and in dialog with the cultures that were almost destroyed, Maya Lin has managed to enable us to connect to a painful history in a constructive way. In her review of the

Confluence Project, art historian Susan Platt sees Lin’s work as a conversation, not a commemoration. “Maya Lin invites us to step from certainties to ‘thresholds,’ of the past and present, of natives and whites, of nature and people, of water and land” (Platt, 2006).



Figure 4. The Confluence Project

Parks to People (*New England National Scenic Trail*)

In Parks to People, Carolina Aragon, New England Trail artist-in-residence and Smith College visiting lecturer, collaborated with her Art and Ecology class and an after-school group in Holyoke to create art and inspire the public to visit the New England Trail and local parks. The Holyoke students visited the Smith College landscape studio to create T-shirt designs and hiked with Smith College students on Mount Tom, along with geology and botany experts. Later, the group worked together on collages, watercolors, postcards, and maps that were exhibited at the Holyoke Public Library.



Figure 5. Parks to People

The college students collaborated on public art works, while being mentors to the younger students. Among the works created during the project were a PVRTA bus sign featuring a collage of printed photographs forming the outline

of Mount Tom with a bilingual message inviting Holyoke residents to visit the New England Trail; a three-dimensional photo installation using student photographs and drawings relating to Mount Tom; maps showing how to get to the park and showcasing seasonal elements of interest; and student-written postcards addressed to Mount Tom.

Discussion

The Organization of American Historians' report "Imperiled Promise: The State of History in the National Park Service" urges park managers to "recognize that meanings change over time and respond to not only new information, but new audiences, new questions, new approaches ... and new perspectives" (Organization of American Historians, 2011). As this small but diverse group of examples demonstrate, working with artists and encouraging visitors to express their park or trail experience through the arts can provide unexpected and vital benefits to parks, including:

New Audiences: All of these art projects successfully engaged new visitors and encouraged current visitors to see and understand the park in a new way. In San Francisco, @Large increased local and regional visitation by 70 per cent; IAI introduced the Boston Harbor Islands to the growing demographic of young people moving into Boston; the Confluence Project invited residents and visitors along the Lewis and Clark National Historic Trail to reconsider the dominant narrative and the ecological impacts of the Corps of Discovery.

New Partnerships: national parks working with artists, especially parks in urban areas, found themselves also working with a whole new group of partners, including museums, galleries, universities, and thereby connect more directly with the life of the city. IAI helped forge several new museum and corporate partners for Boston Harbor Islands NRA; @Large opened up a dialogue between NPS and the region's Chinese community about expanding interpretive themes; Parks to People drew together Smith College, the library and other city departments in Holyoke, the regional transit authority, and the Friends of Mt. Tom State Reservation;

Untold Stories and Unused Spaces: Artists can expand the range of stories to be told in national parks, as well as address hidden or more difficult stories. In addition, temporary art projects can allow parks to activate previously unused or inaccessible spaces. Both strategies help parks to broaden their audiences and become more engaging and relevant places. An openness to artistic expression and a willingness to see the world with fresh eyes enables the parks themselves to once again be seen by the public with fresh eyes as well.

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