

M A R G A R E T
T H A T C H E R
P R O J E C T S

Maria Park

Catalog essay from *Counter Nature*, 2011

By Patricia C. Phillips

In her book, *River of Shadows: Edward Muybridge and the Technological Wild West*, Rebecca Solnit explores the temporal and spatial characteristics of sublimity as an intermediary - or sensation -- between nature, culture, and technology. Like an intrepid explorer who traverses codified and enigmatic spaces, familiar and unknown phenomena, Solnit navigates emergent infatuations with technology and the captivating spectacle of nature in the 19th century American west. Muybridge, perhaps best known by our contemporaries as an eccentric inventor and industrious photographer of time and high-speed motion studies, was also a restless explorer of the wilderness who frequently retreated to the dramatic, restive landscapes of Yosemite and other remote sites to make exquisite photographs of a primordial timelessness.



CN3, 2009, Acrylic and letaset on polycarbonate, 36 x 48 inches

In these extreme and contrasting circumstances, he embraced and enacted the "wild" as a multiply-located concept, encountered in the ruggedly foreboding conditions and breathtaking views of vast geological formations, as well as through ad hoc apparatus he developed to systematically photograph Leland Stanford's beloved horses as they galloped around the race tracks of the Central Pacific Railroad magnate and philanthropist. If forays into an uncolonized wilderness were embodied, often exhilaratingly unpredictable encounters with timeless spaces, Muybridge's experiments in methodical,

sequential photography were optically immersive experiences in the temporal. In one site, visibility was a confirmation of the incommensurable; in the other, it transformed the hypothetical into irrefutable fact. If the sublime is often manifest as an experience of the body in the present and the mind drawn to an unimaginable future, Muybridge's groundbreaking work stood at the cusp of the real and the virtual, the natural and artificial, embodied experience and abstracted representation. If not the singular objective of the book, Solnit traces the roots of contemporary California's Silicon Valley and Hollywood. It is a striking trajectory that resonates within **Maria Park's** distinctive paintings of contemporary landscapes and spaces.

In *Counter Nature*, **Park's** paintings deploy precision and exactitude to raise unsettling questions that Muybridge's work presaged more than a century ago. In this recent series of paintings executed on both the front and back of sheets and cubes of Plexiglas or polycarbonate, surface and depth are ambiguously rendered through crisp, crystalline patterns and interlocking passages of color where space is effaced and time is suspended. In the entire *Counter Nature* series and, in particular, *Counter Nature* and *Counter Nature 2*, **Park** represents a legacy of culturally-endorsed landscape tropes. Niagara National Park, like other national parks, is an iconic site and legendary destination. Sited on the border between the Canadian province of Ontario and New York State, Niagara Falls is the most powerful waterfall in North America. Moving through a deep gorge created by receding glaciers during the Wisconsin glaciation and connected to the newly formed Great Lakes, the deafening torrent of water persists as sublime evidence of geological upheaval. **Park** paints this inexhaustible spectacle in a frozen choreography of colorful stenciled and layered elements. In contrast, **Park's** paintings of Hawaii's Hanauma Bay and California's Half Moon Bay depict other attractive tourist sites that feature more picturesque renditions of landscape perception and response. With keen skepticism, she creates a visually vibrant homogeneity to these compelling landscapes -- and legendary sites.

Inspired by spontaneous photographs that **Park** took of people watching an event in a park-like setting, the paintings titled *CN3-1 - CN3-4* in *Counter Nature 3* meticulously register the foreground yet edits background space and features. Individuals or small groups of people, in an apparently quiet, bucolic setting, are arrested in an unidentifiable activity and confined in an inexplicable space. The informal, casually distracted confederation of people in these paintings is ambiguous -- neither



Installation View, *Counter Nature*, 2010

planned nor pointless, neither organized nor random. If not uniformly merged, nature, culture, and humanity are depicted in an undistinguishable condition of mutuality. The paintings are aggressively flattened through a puzzling depth of field that hovers between shallow space and deep focus. A lushly manicured environment of low-lying bushes, trees, benches, trash receptacles, and other commonplace characteristics of contemporary public space register a particularity and singularity of a moment to uncannily engender a ubiquitous some place or anywhere.

The "natural" features, props, and halted activities of the *Counter Nature* series are represented through a brittle, supple, evenly applied camouflage pattern -- a representation of assimilation and distraction achieved through a graphic conformity. Like the "dazzle painting" that Norman Wilkinson invented to "hide" battleships at sea in World War I, **Park** constructs a calculated optical confusion, through intricately

interrupted yet connected geometrical shapes or painted surfaces wrapped around the surfaces of Plexiglas boxes, to produce a synaptic hesitation -- and puzzlement. Unlike conventional forms of crypsis that create concealment to help an animal or object go unnoticed, dazzle painting made it difficult to determine the size, shape, direction, or position of some thing -- for instance, a distant vessel at sea. Clashing and distracting patterns cause perceptual ambiguity and visual misalignments, creating disorientation rather than obfuscation or "disappearance".



CN shelf object (1, 2), 2009, Acrylic on acrylite 7x 7 inches each cube

Avoiding pessimism or optimism, the work has a confounding disposition. Its deadpan concision and matter-of-fact character neither laments what we have become nor aspires to something else. The paintings clinically record a moment, yet there is a particular shift of sensibility in the *Counter Nature 3* series. Park has placed figures in earlier work but generally with a discernible reason or rationale, often based on art historical references or common behaviors. In this series, people inhabit a particular, but unknown moment in a blandly pleasant, generic space. They seem neither consequentially connected to each other nor to the environment they occupy. They seem as "placed" as the other features and amenities of the setting.

In 1967, Michel Foucault introduced the idea of heterotopia in a then unpublished paper entitled, "Of Other Spaces". Citing epistemological shifts in perception in the Middle Ages prompted by Galileo's theories of an expanded and infinitely open idea of space, Foucault traced a development of modern space that was neither singular nor local, but part of expansively continuous spectrum connected through time and movement. For Foucault, this represented -- and collapsed -- the inevitable, coincidental passage of the temporal and spatial in the 20th century. The heterotopic is where contradictory concepts and experiences of time converge to create spaces of imminence and potential - where reality is challenged and ideas and images of the future are forged and fused. Foucault introduced a new conception of the topological that acknowledged an increasing conundrum of the real and unreal, the material and the immaterial.

He wrote:

"The location of a thing, in fact, was no longer . . . anything more than a point in its movement, its rest nothing but its movement slowed down infinitely. In other words, from Galileo onward . . . localization was replaced by extension. Nowadays, arrangement has taken over from extension . . . It is defined by relationships of neighborhood between points and elements, which can be described formally as series, trees, and networks."

Another example of fractured forms and startling collisions of scopic expectations is graphically experienced in Park's ensemble of 12 two-and-one-half inch cubes that discretely and serially challenge a capacity to develop a coherent, cohesive view of the world. The seductive promise of the complete panorama is constitutively unformed and chronically disturbed. Some sides of the cubes inevitably are withheld; only partial knowledge is possible. No reconfiguration of the cubes satisfies a nostalgic desire for a less artificially articulated or "complete" natural world.

In her earlier work, Park has exploited the cultural and optical conventions of landscape painting, film, and photography to create concisely rendered and leveled depictions of natural settings through elegantly equalizing, yet sensual, applications of paint on Plexiglas and other unyielding, transparent surfaces. Hudson River School painters and 19th/20th century nature photographers, such as Muybridge, made pilgrimages to actual sites to capture landscape images. In the late 20th/ early 21st century, nature increasingly -- and often dizzyingly -- is observed through the disembodied perspective of optically optimized view of photographs, car windows, other frames, and instruments, and deftly manipulated digital images. Nature is remote, separated from actual lived experience in a world of accelerating change and represented by objective scientific analysis, nostalgic visual conventions, and as a potential resource.

Through an orchestration of a shallow, spaceless depth of field with an intensification of brilliant colors in brittle fragments, Park engenders heterotopic landscapes and public spaces that are vividly imaginative and undeniably real. Deploying both the expectations of painting with a perceived objectivity of contemporary visual tools, Park creates succinct, compelling images of constitutive dislocation -- representations of a sublimity dynamically reconfigured in the increasingly contested spaces of nature, culture, and technology.

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Works cited:

Rebecca Solnit. *River of Shadows: Eadweard Muybridge and the Technological Wild West* (New York: Viking Penguin) 2003.

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