

# GLADSTONE GALLERY

Martin Bailey, "Art will cross the line last during the Olympics," *The Art Newspaper*, No. 231, January 2012, pg. 37, 38.

## Art will cross the line last during the Olympics

*Fears that cultural tourism will suffer this summer; museums and galleries will not reap the rewards until the years to come*

By Martin Bailey



Anish Kapoor surveys a model of his ArcelorMittal Orbit tower

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**E**xcitement over the Olympics is hotting up, with more than six million visitors expected to pour into London for the Games. But if sport is set to have a fantastic year this summer, will the arts lose out? Nearly all of London's arts venues expect fewer visitors during the Games because of the inevitable disruption. But more worryingly, there is increasing concern that cultural tourists will stay away for the rest of the year.

The Victoria and Albert Museum (V&A) trustees were warned by consultants Morris Hargreaves McIntyre last July that "benefits for cultural organisations may be before and after the Olympic year, rather than during it". The National Maritime Museum's director, Kevin Fewster, said it would be "sensible to be conservative" in forecasting attendance for 2012. Privately, UK government officials are resigned to the fact that cultural tourism will be down this year.

Following the 2005 announcement that London had won the Olympic title, there was considerable dismay in the art world, with fears that government funding and corporate sponsorship would be diverted to sport. These concerns were mostly expressed privately, since arts organisations that depend on government funding wanted to avoid alienating the Department for Culture, Media and Sport.

Government grants for sports organisations are increasing, by 28% from 2005/06 to 2012/13, although in real terms, more than half of this will be lost to inflation. Grants for museums and galleries are due to rise by 30%, but those for the arts will fall by 11%.

As predicted, the major blow was the diversion of National Lottery proceeds to help fund the Olympics. The Heritage Lottery Fund and the UK's four Arts Councils will have had their allocations cut by a total of £322m in the period leading up to the Games. From April, heritage and the arts will each get 20% of Lottery proceeds, in line with pre-Olympic figures.

It was hoped that the Cultural Olympiad would offer the capital richer cultural pickings than in a typical year. From the outset, however, the Cultural Olympiad—a four-year, nationwide programme of exhibitions, special projects and events—was underfunded, poorly managed and without a strong artistic focus. Over the past four years, it has received £45m. The largest sources were Arts Council England and the Legacy Trust UK, an independent charity that aims to create a cultural and sporting legacy from London's Olympics and Paralympics. Of the £45m, around a quarter went to the visual arts, less than £3m a year.

Keith Khan stepped down as the head of culture of the London Organising Committee of the Olympic Games in May 2008 and his successor, Ruth Mackenzie, did not take over until February 2010, leaving a leadership void at a critical time. Many of the projects that were initiated under the Labour government appeared to be politically correct schemes, with more emphasis on social inclusion than artistic quality.

But with the appointment of the Royal Opera House's chief executive Tony Hall as the chairman of the Cultural Olympiad in July 2009 and Mackenzie (a former adviser to the culture

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department) as its director, the situation has been transformed quickly. They have focused on creating a climax to the Cultural Olympiad—the London 2012 Festival, running from midsummer day (21 June) to the final day of the Paralympics (9 September). This is being funded with a further £52m, part of it from the National Lottery.

This adds up to £97m for the Cultural Olympiad and its associated festival, of which around 10% will be spent on administration, with the remainder co-funding selective projects. The total is only slightly more than the £81m allocated for the opening and closing ceremonies.

What, then, is likely to be the impact on tourism and on museum attendance figures? During the Games, normal leisure tourists may be deterred by

expensive flights, higher hotel prices, travel chaos and extra security in London. To a considerable extent, they will be replaced by visitors attending the Games, but many are likely to come for just a night or two, leaving little time for cultural sights.

General tourists may also be deterred from visiting in the weeks immediately before and after the Games, but the more difficult question is what the effect will be for the rest of the year.

London & Partners, which promotes tourism in the capital, is inevitably optimistic. It cites a 2007 survey by Oxford Economics that argues that the Olympics will generate £1.47bn of extra tourism income in the period 2007-17, 35% of which will accrue in 2012 and most of the remainder in subsequent years.

The European Tour Operators Association, however, warns of a "major slump" in London. It says that the capital is due to lose 95% of its European leisure tourists during the Games and 60% during the rest of July and August, the two busiest months. Even more worryingly, bookings for the rest of the year are currently 20% below 2011. If London suffers, so will the country. "We always see a decline in demand for a destination during an Olympic year. Clients tend to think that a city has priorities other than being a place to visit for a normal holiday," says the association's executive director Tom Jenkins.

Mackenzie is cautiously optimistic: "I would hope that tourism holds up during the Games, and over the year we might do better than hold up. But the general economic indicators for next year are not great, because of the world recession. It isn't just about 2012, and the main benefits will come in the ten years afterwards."

The proportion of foreign visitors to London's museums and galleries varies, but might average around a third. People living elsewhere in the UK may also be deterred from visiting London during the Games. So the numbers of visitors to museums will probably be reduced.

The theatre business has come to the same conclusion, with bookings considerably down for the summer. Andrew Lloyd-Webber's Really Useful Group is even considering closing its West End theatres in July and August.

Fewster, who has been involved in or attended cultural events at the last four Olympics (Atlanta, Sydney, Athens and Beijing), says the most likely positive impact on London museums will be the "afterglow" in the years to come. ■

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■ The object likely to attract most attention is the **ArcelorMittal Orbit**, designed by **Anish Kapoor** and **Cecil Balmond**. Costing £22m, the twisting 115m-tall observation tower is now being completed next to the Olympic Stadium. ■ **M.B.**