

Embarrassing Positions: Being Inside–Outside the Olympic Park

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On 1 October 2011, at the View Tube in London, Hilary Powell and Anna Hart (chair of the session) invited Adriana Marques from the Arts and Culture team at the Olympic Delivery Authority (ODA); Tim Abrahams, associate editor of *Blueprint Magazine*; Neville Gabie, Thomas Klasnik and Nina Pope, artists commissioned by the ODA; and me, an independent researcher and practitioner, to discuss the “tensions between inside and outside both in terms of officially commissioned projects in the Olympic Park and those operating outside of this framework and between the Park site and its hinterlands”. Drawing from that debate, as well my participation in a peer consultation event organised by Art in the Open to look at the art commissioning programme for the Olympic Park,¹ I will explore the positions art programmes, curatorial teams and artists have in relation to large-scale urban developments such as the Olympics.

The Salon was a chance to unpick what we understood about notions of “inside/out” in the context of the Olympics. This of course raised the question of one’s position in relation to the physicality and ideology of the Olympics. While the majority of the guests (as commissioned artists or curators) at the table had their feet, if not their minds, firmly “inside” the boundaries of the park, it became apparent throughout the evening that this “inside/out” dichotomy was more fluid, temporary and contested than we perhaps initially thought.

In the context of the Olympics, “inside” implies a position gained through an official commission, paid work and an approved contract with the arts and culture team working for the ODA – a ticket to the inner sanctum of the bureaucratic process of urban development. This might practically entail having a place at the table during meetings or being introduced to other staff and contractors on site. This “insider status”, however, does not necessarily mean that your voice is heard or taken seriously. Operating “outside” on the other hand implies carrying out unofficial, uninvited, unpaid acts that trespass on the grounds of official commissions, perhaps taking inspiration from the schemes dreamt up by developers and subverting them in some way. While this “outsider” status remains firmly on the margins, easily ignored or tolerated, I suggest that the position of “insider” commissioned artists often remains equally impotent when it comes to influencing or challenging processes of urban development.

The position of the commissioned artist, I argue, is formally “inside” and yet a performance of acting as if “outside” often takes place. “Unexpected” acts are encouraged by commissioners and embraced by artists as acknowledgement of their “special status” and presumed autonomy. For example, in the report *Square Pegs and Round Holes* on the ODA commissions by Open City and Art in the Open,² the authors state how the artists’ contract is different from that of other contractors who are paid to carry out a specific agreed job, since artists are rather “appointed to do the unexpected” and will often expand on an initial idea after a contract has been signed. Usually, if the contractor does not deliver what is in the contract, the client can find someone else to carry out the work to the specifications. This is not so easy with artists, who are expected (to varying degrees), to make something unexpected by developing their work once they have been appointed.

The ODA’s contract for artists’ services legally requires artists to not “do anything which would have an adverse effect on or embarrass us, any Games Body or any official supporter or sponsor of the Games”.³ In this essay I explore the extent to which artists are gagged by the contracts they sign, preventing them from engaging critically in the politics and economics of urban development, and the resulting “performative critique” that remains in the margins, incapable of generating in-roads to challenge and inform the often inequitable processes of regeneration. Some public art curators and supporters recognise it is an achievement to have persuaded developers to include art as part of a development. The kind of art being commissioned, however, is often contracted and “allowed” on the basis that it will not cause the clients or their sponsors any “embarrassment”. Indeed, such commissions often exist in order to shine a positive light on the development.

There is a pretence of autonomy that art exists unsullied and independent of the mechanisms and agendas of developers and sponsors. This illusion of freedom, often presented in the form of an “open brief”, is reflected, for example, in the artists’ web pages for their Olympic Park art projects, which are not branded with Olympics logos or fonts. Instead, they are presented as independently funded initiatives. Perhaps connected to this, there is a clause in the ODA contract which asks contracted artists not to “represent, directly or indirectly, that you or your services or goods” are in any way associated with the ODA.⁴ This clause in the contract goes on to ask artists not to publish or issue “any statement (factual or otherwise) about the Games or the provision of goods or services to a Games Body”. Furthermore, contractors have to refrain from undertaking any form of “Ambush Marketing”. While it is

perhaps understandable that a contract of employment would include a clause about the employee not doing anything to damage the property or image of their employer, to what extent is an independent, unexpected and uncensored approach possible in this context? The control over the critical content of such practices is, I argue, strengthened by the invisibility of “the brand”.

About the ODA Arts and Culture Programme

In just two years (2009 to 2011), the ODA Arts and Cultural Programme commissioned over 30 projects, including public realm commissions, the View Tube and Greenway entrances. While there was no budget allocated for arts and culture at the outset when London won the bid in 2005, by the end of the programme in 2011, the amount spent on arts and culture across the Olympic Park was £11.7 million.⁵ The programme was an add-on after the masterplanning of the Park had taken place. Indeed, the ODA commissions were to some extent marginalised from the development of the Olympic Park. Anna Vickery, principal advisor on the Arts and Cultural Strategy, likened the development to a fast moving train: “We knew we had to jump on and that we would end up in the wrong carriage, but there was no alternative.”⁶ Adriana Marques, principal arts Advisor in the same team, described how she often felt as if she operated outside the mechanisms of the Olympics, despite having more access to the ODA than most of the “people of east London” surrounding the site.

“Inside/Out” was one of the ODA’s programme strands. It encompassed a series of art commissions focused on the edges of the Olympic site with the aim of “encouraging local engagement with the regeneration process, focusing on local communities/users near to the Olympic Park site”.⁷ The artists commissioned were tasked with making the inside of the Park visible to those living on its edges and beyond – a bit like a museum curator inviting artists to institutionally critique their place of work to help them appear more open and accessible to their public or customers.

Three of the artists around the table had participated in the programme. Thomas Klasnik worked on “Fantasticology”,⁸ planting wildflowers across the park in the shape of the footprints of industrial buildings which previously occupied the site. Nina Pope (part of the artist duo Somewhere) developed the Floating Cinema, a narrowboat that travelled the waterways of the host boroughs, holding free screenings, events and tours during the 2011 summer.⁹ Also part of this programme was Neville Gabie’s artist-in-residence in the Olympic Park. Gabie developed numerous projects in response to the site and the people working there, such as “Unearthed”, an exhibition that brought together art-

ists who had studios between 1985 and 2001 on Carpenters Road (where the London 2012 Aquatics Centre is now located).

The ODA's commissions for "Inside Out" actively strove to involve residents in the projects. Such commissions could be understood as public relations exercises for an already agreed and masterplanned urban development by improving links with local residents and journalists. While it was important for Sarah Weir at the ODA that "the culture of the Park comes from its surrounding context" and for Nicholas Serota (speaking about the choice not to have a single curator) that "we needed to leave space for the people of east London to make their mark" it is not clear to what extent people living in the surrounding context could inform the development and how this has happened, if at all.¹⁰ Despite this unclear objective of people making their marks, artists were charged with symbolically dissolving the "blue barrier" to creatively get rid of the negative connotations of the physical fence surrounding the site.

With this in mind, to what extent does commissioned Olympic Park art become a marketing and communications exercise, used to deliver the "You're Part of It" branding of the Olympics? And how have these artists navigated, ignored or subverted this job they agreed to carry out? What if the "people of east London" managed to make marks the ODA did not like? This is one of the "lessons learned" noted in *Square Pegs and Round Holes*: "Ensure artists aren't expected to be flag-wavers for clients. They need the freedom to create a work of art that is free from propaganda or a sense of allegiance to an organisation or ideology."¹¹ But how does this relate to the terms of the ODA contract discussed above?

Gabie's residency, for example, was funded by Arts Council England (ACE); this contractually meant he was not answerable to the ODA and that they were therefore unable to direct or censor him or his work. Does this mean he had a free reign to "embarrass" the ODA and related sponsors, if he wanted to? He talked about being present at ODA meetings, but not feeling responsible, which allowed him a critical distance from the development. He had a relatively "open brief" and did not "feel compromised at all" or that his role was to put a positive spin on the Olympics. Rather, his job was to develop an honest approach and response, one that can only be subjective, spoken from the position he was in as someone contracted to work there as an artist.

Securing some critical distance (because of ACE funding) might mean you can get away with more subjective and risk taking acts, but the pay-off might be that no one at the ODA is really listening to your critique. The artist continues under the radar, operating in the hyphenated space of inside–outside.

Does the artist and their work remain constantly on the margins, never to be taken “seriously”? The artist may have achieved enough insider status to have a place at the table, but it might not be an “important” or equitable one, in ODA terms. Like the joker or court artist they are allowed to sit there quietly documenting and interpreting what they see, but without the remit to have any real influence on the running of things. Their “outsider” status represents both their freedom and futility in this context.

Inside–outside

What is lost and what is gained by accepting a place at the developer’s table? Such a position might be tokenistic and marginalised. By performing a recalcitrant role, the ODA Arts and Culture Programme (and the artists it commissioned) were being counter-productive by staying on the periphery, but perhaps this is the only place art can occupy. These often celebratory, cathartic art spaces for refuge and reflection are “the perfect showroom for the ODA”.¹² As soon as a critical eye turns to the process itself, however, and gets close to the bureaucratic mechanisms of a development in a way that is not “productive”, criticality is undermined, instrumentalised, censored or, perhaps more likely if it can be named as “art”, easily ignored.

It is perhaps naïve to assume that art can influence decisions on planning as bigger forces are at play in the deregulation of design, planning and construction. Art will perhaps always remain at the edge of this, becoming a card that is played in a larger marketing campaign for a new development. No matter how invisible the brand or unexpected the outcomes, publicly funded art projects working on the “inside” are serving the corporate brand. The question remains, then, from which position is one best placed to draw attention to aspects of urban development that urgently need critiquing, embarrassing and changing?

Endnotes

1 This meeting was held on 7 June 2011 for invited curators and artists to look at the art commissioning programme for the Olympic Park and involved a tour of the Park and talks by Neville Gabie and Simon Pope, two of the commissioned artists. Outcomes of the discussion fed into *Open City/Art, Open, Square Pegs and Round Holes: A Report on the ODA Arts and Culture Programme* (London: Open City and Art in the Open, 2011).

2 Open City/Art, *Open, Square Pegs and Round Holes*, 27.

3 ODA, Draft Contract (London: Olympic Delivery Authority, n.d.), <http://www.london2012.com/documents/oda-publications/oda-draft-artist-contract.pdf> (accessed 26 March 2012).

4 Ibid.

5 This funding came from internal and external sources, such as London Development Agency, Arts Council England, ODA project budgets fulfilling planning conditions and Section 106 funding. This amount excludes the £22 million from ArcelorMittal for Kapoor's Orbit. See Open City/Art, *Open, Square Pegs and Round Holes*, 52–4.

6 Open City/Art, *Open, Square Pegs and Round Holes*, 16

7 ODA, *Call for Expressions of Interest – Inside Out* (London: Olympic Delivery Authority, 2009).

8 See The Klassnik Corporation, <http://www.klassnik.com/pages/Fantasticology.html> (accessed 25 March 2012).

9 See Floating Cinema Films, <http://floatingcinema.info/> (accessed 25 March 2012).

10 Open City/Art, *Open, Square Pegs and Round Holes*, 16, 25.

11 Open City/Art, *Open, Square Pegs and Round Holes*, 29.

12 Isaac Marrero-Guillamon, "The Convenience of Public Art", *The Hackney Wick* 1 (Summer 2011): 6–7.