

Table of Contents

[Art v. Olympics](#) 1

Art v. Olympics

By Dave Beech

The diversion of funds from Arts Council England to the Olympics has provoked an elitist championing of art over sport when, argues Dave Beech, the point is to refuse such a choice

The idea of diverting state funds away from art to a spectacle of sport sounds like a fantastic futurist demand. Demolish museums! Worship the beauty of speed! It still reads as a refreshing inversion of what Bourdieu called 'pleasure devoid of pleasure' – the aesthetic love of art.

Art professionals have not managed to generate popular support for their protest against the projected losses to arts funding caused by the epic scale of public funding required for the London 2012 Olympics. Perhaps this is because it stinks of financial self-interest?

The perception of injustice in the devaluation of art and the over-inflation of a sporting spectacle is an echo of a pompous set of cultivated prejudices. As an artist there is at least some art – and not just my own – that I would defend, but the thought of defending art in principle gives me the creeps. In fact, I'm offended by it.

To present the complaint as a choice between art and sport, in whatever form, is simplistic, offensive and self-defeating. Art needs to be seen in a cultural continuum with all forms of popular spectacle, not cut off from it in some autonomous sphere of rare virtue and high values: art cannot be immunised from the world. And anyway, if art wins against sport, it will only lose against education, housing and health.

Thus, the argument that begins by insisting that art is more valuable than sport ends with the question 'how can you justify state spending on art when the money could be spent on eradicating poverty and homelessness?'

[Rodchenko Parade on Red Square](#)

Image: Alexander Rodchenko, "Fitzkultura" Parade on Red Square, 1935

Pitching art against the Olympics opens up some classic old wounds: mind v. body, high v. low, educated v. trained, contemplation v. exertion, individual v. the mass. These are the kind of polar opposites that underwrite the response to the funding of London 2012. Insofar as these dualities have been shredded by the critique of elitism, then, the complaint seems anachronistic – nostalgic even.

To prefer art over the Olympics – on principle – is to resuscitate an objectionable version of cultural division. The point, I would say, is not to prefer the Olympics over art, but to oppose the opposition. Or, rather, to resist the cultural prejudices that shape such an opposition.

The Olympics is a monstrous globalist jamboree. But art in the age of big business does not automatically recommend itself as the antidote, even if its middle class advocates regard themselves as worthy and scrupulous.

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