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## **Olympic Arts Festivals and the visual arts**

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In many countries the reaction of the visual arts sector to the arrival of the Olympic Games has traditionally been a most reserved one. Arts communities in general have often seen the Games as a threat for funding and public attendance. Learning that the Olympic host city contract includes a clause for the production of an Olympic Cultural Program has not always brought complete reassurance. The following article has been written with reference to the work I am doing as a doctoral student at the Centre for Olympic Studies, Autonomous University of Barcelona. My topic is the analysis of the opportunities and constraints to adequately promote and integrate a cultural and arts program alongside the celebration of the Olympic Games sports competitions.

For many, a question to start with could be, why arts in the Olympics? The question leads back to the foundation of the modern Olympic Games by French Baron Pierre de Coubertin in 1894. De Coubertin was inspired by the Greek ideal of Olympism, which sought a forum for the demonstration of the excellence of both mind and body. He brought the Olympic Games back to life hoping to create an internationally recognised marriage of arts and sport and persistently promoted the necessary integration of the arts within all Olympic sport practices "in order to benefit from them and ennoble them". The current Olympic Charter acknowledges this aspiration by establishing that the host city must develop a cultural program alongside the sporting events.

The visual arts have played a significant role in the presentation of Olympic cultural programs since 1912, when the first Olympic Arts competition was organised. They were part of the so-called "Pentathlon of Muses", composed of contests in music, literature, architecture, painting and sculpture. Despite the devotion of de Coubertin to encourage and protect them, since the very beginning the preparation of these arts contests have proved very difficult for the Games organisers. In the case of the visual arts, a critical limitation lay in the obligation to restrict all entries to sport related themes. As commented by Robyn Burnosky and Debra Good in their respective thesis (1994 and 1998, see references below) the sports topic was often irrelevant to the avantgarde artists dominating the arts scene at the time. Especially in areas such as minimalism or abstraction where movements and subjective forms would not in essence use sport or the body as a point of reference. As a result, a majority of these artists would tend not to participate. Other controversies such as the lack of "universality" of the judging processes, which were biased towards western European standards, or the very debated quality of the works presented, led to the suppression of Olympic arts contests in 1952. They were then replaced by arts exhibitions and festivals.

The first official Olympic Arts Festival was held in Melbourne in 1956 and the tradition has been followed ever since. However, as Debra Good points out, while the Olympic Games have expanded to become the greatest peace-time event in the world, its cultural component has remained in the shadow of the sports competitions, without achieving much recognition either by the media, the artists or the general public. In some cases, such as Mexico in 1968 or Munich in 1972, the celebration of the Olympics Games was accompanied by arts programs that were integrated within the general Olympic events. In others, such as LA in 1984, the festival achieved international resonance and survived in the form of an annual arts event long after the Games had faded away. But these achievements seem to have been the result of specific conditions in the host city or country, where governments or cultural institutions made special contributions which guaranteed the presence of arts activities during the Olympics.

The Barcelona '92 Games introduced the tradition of four-year long cultural programs or "Cultural Olympiads", aimed at tying the end of the previous Games with the beginning of the new ones. In Barcelona, architectural

exhibits, music, dance and theatre predominated over the visual arts component. But the promotion of cultural venues such as the Picasso Museum, Miro Museum and Modernist Museum was assisted by the Olympics which gave them extra promotion at an international level. In Atlanta '96, the most renowned component of the four-year Olympic Arts Festival was an international painting and sculpture exhibition especially commissioned for the Games called "Rings: five passions in the World Art".

Sydney has joined the Cultural Olympiad tradition and presented its first Olympic arts festival in 1997 under the title "Festival of the Dreaming". The festival achieved great success in its celebration of Indigenous cultures, with special attention to Australian Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders. The festival presented thirty visual arts exhibitions, including both traditional and contemporary Aboriginal art, and was held throughout a number of Sydney public and private galleries and museums. Arts critics and journalists acknowledged the quality of the work presented and hoped for a follow-up of such a festival initiative. Contrasting with the previous one, both 1998 and 1999 arts festivals were lacking in thematic consistency and visibility. The enormous contrast between the festivals' rationale (a year-long national festival in 1998 -"A Sea Change"- and a year long international festival in 1999 -"Reaching the World") and the extremely limited budget (no more than A\$1,5m each) led to a program almost exclusively composed of works and events that were going to happen anyway either in Australia or overseas. The placement of a sometimes difficult to identify Olympic Arts logo did not assist in the task to create a sense of consistency and even less to promote the idea that they were part of an Olympic cultural program. This last point has in fact been a constant since 1997, as not even the highly successful "Festival of the Dreaming" succeeded at promoting its association with the Games. As a whole, both the time distance and the reluctance by both media and cultural venues to emphasise the "Olympic factor" has prevented the development of a real Cultural Olympiad identity in the lead up to the sporting competitions.

As a whole, the Olympic Games seem to be both a great opportunity and a great threat for the development and exposure of visual arts exhibits and cultural performances in general. The obligation to produce a cultural program at the same time as the sporting events could be seen as an opportunity for the arts. But it requires organising committees, sponsors and governments to be committed to secure funds, quality standards and promotion of the festivals, to ensure that world wide audiences will travel to the host city and plan to attend arts events and exhibits.

*The final results of my research on the Sydney 1997-2000 Olympic Arts Festivals are due by December 2000. If interested in a follow-up of the project you can contact Beatriz García at: [bealunar@hotmail.com](mailto:bealunar@hotmail.com)*

## **References**

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