For Whom Did Martin Creed's Bell Toll? The Politics of Art at the Olympic Games

by Ben Davis
02/08/12 12:28 PM EDT

Culture secretary Jeremy Hunt with schoolchildren, as part of artist Martin Creed's "Work No. 1197: All the Bells in a Country Rung as Quickly and as Loudly as Possible for Three Minutes"
(Courtesy of Andy Miah via Flickr)

Cai Guo-Qiang's "Five Olympic Rings: Fireworks Project" for the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games

I am not much of a sports fan, so saying that I'm not too into the Olympics is probably not saying much. Still, in a time of grinding austerity and global economic instability, there's something about London 2012's stew of bloated excess, shameless corporate celebration, and jingoistic body culture that I find particularly distasteful. As for the cultural component, the six-ring circus that is the Olympic Games tends to instrumentalize all that falls into its orbit, turning art into bombastic nationalist kitsch — which, whatever good you found in it, was precisely what Danny Boyle's freaky Friday night phantasmagoria was.

I do find at least one interesting Olympic side narrative, though, in the way that contemporary art has been increasingly woven into the festivities' identity. Four years ago, Chinese art star Cai Guo-Qiang, master of arty conceptual fireworks, conceived a ferocious aerial display as part of Zhang Yimou's Games opener. For London 2012, lovably loopy Scottish neo-conceptualist Martin Creed staged his communal bell-ringing happening ("Work No. 1197: All the Bells in a Country Rung as Quickly and as Loudly as Possible for Three Minutes") last Friday morning, summoning Britons everywhere to join in a good group clanging. The esoteric realm of art reaches such vertiginous mass-cultural heights only once in a blue moon, and the two aesthetic interventions actually lend themselves to a rather nice compare-and-contrast on the subject of how the cultural ideologies behind these nation-branding spectacles function — or try to function.

Cai's contribution to the 2008 opening ceremonies — most notably "Footprints of History," a series of massive fiery footprints in the sky, leading to Beijing's Olympics stadium — was welded seamlessly into the overall bombast of Zhang's famously awe-inspiring opening ceremony. This integration made good sense in a country where every bit of official culture must be directed in the same direction, ideologically. It was a display of literal aesthetic firepower, perfectly advancing the overall objective of the Beijing opener, which was to reflect, as Ai Weiwei remembered recently, "the party's nationalism," standing as artistic embodiment of the coordinated might that only the discipline of China's authoritarian state could marshal.

Creed's contribution operated a bit differently. Rather than being folded into Danny Boyle's opener — which was really more of a frantic highlight reel of UK's greatest pop culture hits (James Bond! Mr. Bean! Mary Poppins! Paul McCartney!) than a space for fresh creative exploration — the funky national bell-ringing break served as cultural amuse-bouche to the Games. Which is fitting for a country that, with the tabloid-baiting art of the YBAs, pioneered a mode of inserting contemporary art into the public mind by treating it as a kind of sideshow attraction.

Reprising a piece previously staged in Puerto Rico, "All The Bells" mined not art's recent blockbuster turn but its recent obsession with pseudo-democratic theater. Instead of being a spectacle directed from above, it was an exercise in playfully low-stakes aesthetic participation. The two works are thus perfect symbols of the ideal roles for art in a one-party state versus in a capitalist democracy like the UK, the one

serving as imaginary representation of official power, the other serving as idealized representation of popular concord.

There's more, though: What I particularly like about placing Cai's and Creed's works side by side is the comparison between the reactions they provoked. Both Olympic artworks provoked a bit of a public backlash, which is perhaps only natural for any cultural work that achieves such a level of popular penetration — but which also ends up saying something about the respective political agendas behind them.

In the case of Cai Guo-Qiang's pyrotechnics, you may recall that the whole affair became tangled in a mini-narrative about the Beijing Games's opening ceremony, about how the Chinese were aesthetically cheating: ethnic minorities were played by actors during the ceremony, a little girl deemed too homely to represent China was swapped out for a more photogenic lass, and some digital footage of animated fireworks was implanted into the broadcast feed of Cai's work instead of the real thing. Apparently, authorities were afraid that pesky atmospheric conditions would mean that the spectacle wouldn't come off perfectly. Determined that nothing mar the picture of flawless national power they were hoping to project, the organizers opted for simulation.

Why did this snafu, which, as the artist pointed out in defending himself, was by any serious standard fairly trivial, become such a big deal at the time? Precisely because the spectacle of the Beijing ceremonies had such a glaring political subtext. The fireworks slight-of-hand took on symbolic significance because it suggested how the Chinese government may not be as all-powerful as it wanted to project, on the one hand, and how the spectacle of the Games was repressing a darker reality, on the other.

Which brings us to Creed's participatory proposal for London 2012. Friday morning's event produced one of the most memorable moments of viral comedy of recent memory, with foppish cultural minister Jeremy Hunt — known for presiding over widespread arts cuts, and more recently for his uncomfortable cosiness with Rupert Murdoch — grinning before the camera to participate in Creed's collective action, only to have the end of his hand bell whip off into the crowd as soon as he gave it a shake, nearly striking a bystander.

No less than in Beijing, it seems to me that the Jeremy Hunt #bellend affair (as Twitter wags dubbed it) took flight as a meme because of the underlying political context. The whole conceit of Creed's happening, why it became a part of the official programming in the first place, is that it is about rallying Britons of all kinds to come together, forgetting their differences for a moment to support the nation: "Martin Creed's wonderful idea gets everyone involved in the opening day of the Games not just as an audience but as an integral part of the work," explained Cultural Olympiad director Ruth Mackenzie. Which sounds very wholesome — but at a time when hyper-class-conscious England is being asked to pull together to "share sacrifice" by the same government presiding over the lavish spectacle, it also has a queasy subtext.

I mean, why on earth would the average person want to pull together with Jeremy Hunt? This is the guy who once expressed solidarity with workers in his own government department, after informing them that as many as half of them might lose their jobs due to cuts, by assuring them that he also was sacrificing by cutting back on the use of a personal chauffeur ("an absolute pain," remarked Hunt, "but we're all getting used to it.")

There's nothing shameful about enjoying a three-minute distraction in grim times — and some of the footage of "All The Bells" is even quite touching in the way it brought out a gallery of eccentrics, tweaking Creed's conceit in their own weird ways (the guy who lugged out his old-school synthesizer, the joker in the tiger costume) — just as there's nothing inherently bad about enjoying the competition itself, for what it is. But I think that, not so far beneath the surface, the laughter at Hunt's misfire — like the outrage at Cai's firework missteps — is so satisfying because the message of national solidarity Creed's bell-ringing purports to promote, in the end, rings hollow.

Interventions is a column by ARTINFO executive editor Ben Davis. He can be reached at bdavis[at]artinfo.com.