Going for the Gold

This summer in London, art may be the only thing more unavoidable than athletes. The London 2012 Festival, a 12-week cultural extravaganza opening June 21 and overlapping the 2012 Olympic Games to run through September 9, will fill the city and points beyond with theater, dance, music, performances, and all manner of fine-art events. Rather than promoting the safe and old-fashioned, organizers are placing the nation’s leading contemporary artists at the heart of the enterprise.

Even before the launch, posters commissioned from the likes of Martin Creed, Tracey Emin, Sarah Morris, and Chris Ofili for the Olympic and Paralympic Games set the tone. And at 8 am on July 27, for the official opening of the Games, Creed is inviting Britain to perform his Work No. 1197: All the bells in a country rung as quickly and as loudly as possible for three minutes. The Royal Navy’s ships are already signed up, and anyone can join in for what promises to be both a very communal and a rather singular celebration.

Stated for a wide-ranging line, Jeremy Deller’s Stonehenge-shaped bouncy castle. Sacrilege, a tongue-in-cheek comment on the links between heritage and mass entertainment, will spread unpretentious fun throughout the country, while in East London, Frieze Foundation—the nonprofit branch of the eponymous art fair—has plotted projects with emerging artists such as Can Aylay, Nicholas Byrne, Anthea Hamilton, and Gary Webb.

Most museums in London have saved their blockbuster shows for the Olympic period. Damien Hirst’s midcareer retrospective is at Tate Modern, which will also be hosting a large performance-art commission by Tino Sehgal, as well as a 15-week performance series in the tanks that were used to hold fuel during the building’s previous life as a power station. At the Serpentine Gallery, Yoko Ono will set up a filmic anthology of portraits, asking members of the public to record their smile in a custom-designed booth installed on the Serpentine’s lawn. Soberly billed #smilesMfm, the project coincides...
Coline Millard, “Going for the Gold,” Art + Auction, July/August 2012.

with a major show of the artist in the gallery, which will also unveil its 12th architectural commission: an excavated pavilion designed by Al Weswel and Herzog & de Meuron. Despite its moniker, the London 2012 Festival won’t be confined to the capital. In the northwest, Anthony McCall has devised Column, a spinning tower of cloud rising from the Wirral coastline, it will stretch into the sky and be visible from up to 100 kilometers away. New York collective YesYesNo is planning a light installation across the 73 miles of Hadrian’s Wall, and Antony Gormley has designed a stage element for a production of Samuel Beckett’s Waiting for Godot, to be unveiled July 2, as part of the Enniskillen Festival in Northern Ireland. Back in England, perhaps one of the most breathtaking projects for the London 2012 Festival will be Richard Wilson’s full-scale replica of the bus that dangles on the edge of a cliff in the finale of the iconic 1969 British film The Italian Job—transposed to the rooftop of the De La Warr Pavilion in Bexhill-on-Sea. This “cliffhanger of a work,” as the artist’s own description, is a sculptural interpretation of the scene in which the characters are trapped in a vehicle full of gold but are unable to reach the treasure without risking toppling the bus into the void. Drawing parallels between his piece and the Olympic Games, Wilson told Art+Auction, “That structural daring is a metaphor for the absolute limit of being poised at a moment of everything either being lost or being gained, and that’s exactly what these athletes are doing.”

—Coline Millard