Martin Bailey, “Art will cross the line last during the Olympics,” *The Art Newspaper*, No. 231, January 2012, pg. 37, 38.
Excitement over the Olympics is hotting up, with more than six million visitors expected to pour into London for the Games. But if sport is set to have a fantastic year this summer, will the arts lose out? Nearly all of London’s arts venues expect fewer visitors during the Games because of the inevitable disruption. But more worryingly, there is increasing concern that cultural tourists will stay away for the rest of the year.

The Victoria and Albert Museum (V&A) trustees were warned by consultants Morris Hargreaves McIntyre last July that “benefits for cultural organisations may be before and after the Olympic year, rather than during it”. The National Maritime Museum’s director, Kevin Fewster, said it would be “sensible to be conservative” in forecasting attendance for 2012. Privately, UK government officials are resigned to the fact that cultural tourism will be down this year.

Following the 2005 announcement that London had won the Olympic title, there was considerable dismay in the art world, with fears that government funding and corporate sponsorship would be diverted to sport. These concerns were mostly expressed privately, since arts organisations that depend on government funding wanted to avoid alienating the Department for Culture, Media and Sport.

Government grants for sports organisations are increasing, by 28% from 2005/06 to 2012/13, although in real terms, more than half of this will be lost to inflation. Grants for museums and galleries are due to rise by 30%, but those for the arts will fall by 11%.

As predicted, the major blow was the diversion of National Lottery proceeds to help fund the Olympics. The Heritage Lottery Fund and the UK’s four Arts Councils will have had their allocations cut by a total of £322m in the period leading up to the Games. From April, heritage and the arts will each get 20% of Lottery proceeds, in line with pre-Olympic figures.

It was hoped that the Cultural Olympiad would offer the capital richer cultural pickings than in a typical year. From the outset, however, the Cultural Olympiad—a four-year, nationwide programme of exhibitions, special projects and events—was underfunded, poorly managed and without a strong artistic focus. Over the past four years, it has received £45m. The largest sources were Arts Council England and the Legacy Trust UK, an independent charity that aims to create a cultural and sporting legacy from London’s Olympics and Paralympics. Of the £45m, around a quarter went to the visual arts, less than £3m a year.

Keith Khan stepped down as the head of culture of the London Organising Committee of the Olympic Games in May 2008 and his successor, Ruth Mackenzie, did not take over until February 2010, leaving a leadership void at a critical time. Many of the projects that were initiated under the Labour government appeared to be politically correct schemes, with more emphasis on social inclusion than artistic quality.

But with the appointment of the Royal Opera House’s chief executive Tony Hall as the chairman of the Cultural Olympiad in July 2009 and Mackenzie (a former adviser to the culture
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The object likely to attract most attention is the ArcelorMittal Orbit, designed by Anish Kapoor and Cecil Balmond. Costing £22m, the twisting 115m-tall observation tower is now being completed next to the Olympic Stadium. ■ M.B.