

PLAYING PERFORMANCE

Grunts for the Arts kicked and screamed its way into the world on the 13th April 2007.

Before that, the moment of actual conception can be traced back to the start of the year when it was announced that the main source of project funding for the arts in England, the Arts Council's Grants for the Arts scheme, was going to suffer cuts to a magnitude of 35% (from £83 million to £54 million).

Amidst the plan making and strategising that ensued I, with many others, decided to put on a sports day. After all we argued, if money was to be taken from the arts to fund the London Olympics then it was inevitable that artists would need to retrain as sports people to access the shifting pots of money.

Thus Grunts for the Arts was born.

These words are being penned a few weeks after the second of the GFA sports days, and a matter of days after the announcement of the British government's comprehensive spending review. Despite an (unexpected) inflation level increase in cultural funding which at first seemed highly unlikely, it is still too early to say what the levels of art funding will be when budgets have been allocated. Superficially this is good news but, as the adage reminds us, the devil will lie in the detail.

Nevertheless, this essay won't explore the success or failure of Grunts for the Arts, nor will it look at the wider campaign raised to save arts funding. Instead, it will explore a number of thoughts on sport, art and the areas in which they interrelate. After all, there is a great deal both activities share.

Both are used as cathartic release, either by active involvement on an amateur level (the landscape watercolourist who finds an escape from their day to day life and, perhaps, idol emulation, comparable to that found by the Sunday League footballer) or by passive spectatorship of the professional few.

To take an evening at the theatre and an afternoon watching your favourite football team as a comparative example, it can be seen that though



High Heel 100m, Artists' Sports Day
Photo: Dan Machen

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rooted in different class behaviours, there is still much that is similar. Both have an expectation that those performing will try their hardest (they are there for us), both provide a source of post-event discussion with peers, both have developed an almost mythological history, and both have a highly evolved star system for virtuosic performers.

Another commonality is the demand for physical prowess from their adherents. The agility of a dancer or gymnast, the speed of a professional sprinter and the dexterity of a painter or darts player are all, alongside mental rigour, the qualities that most define ability for success. A friend of mine, a pianist, was recently telling me of the importance of diet, exercise and attention to muscles in her line of work.

Of course, there are huge differences though.

Sport is nearly entirely time-based, something which it only shares with the performative arts, and whilst hearing a cricket result can bring great joy or pleasure without a single ball being watched, such is not the intention of a cricket game. In this, sport is of a different ilk to art objects, conceptual art and that performance which is of such length as to render the witnessing of it in its entirety an impossibility (though perhaps echoes of the latter are seen in marathon running and cycling tours?).



Oddegg and Spoon race, Artists' Sports Day
Photo: Emma Cameron

Sport is also nearly always competitive in nature, whereas art, in spite of its infighting, ego conflicts and limited funding resources is, in principle at least, not so aggressive.

Grunts for the Arts is a long way from being the first to make a foray into the crossover between the two.

Sport as subject for art has probably been in existence for as long as the two activities have been demarcated. The Ancient Greeks would decorate their vases with scenes of athleticism, and even paintings on cave walls showing bison and other prey can be interpreted as tributes to the sport of hunting.

In the twentieth century, both Brecht and Artaud, two of the most influential figures on contemporary theatre, made comparisons between theatre and a

boxing ring. In part perhaps because of these writings, a model of a certain kind of contemporary performance has developed which shares certain principles of sport.

To find such performance we need to look for that which is non-linear and deliberately uncertain in its content if not its framework (the work of Julia Barclay and Apocryphal Theatre); that which emphasises the role of 'audience' within the experience (Rirkrit Tiravanija's meals of soup, French Mottershead's experiments into microperformance and those other artworks which are bracketed under relational aesthetics) and that where there is limited artifice, where it is the skill or audacity of the artist that is presented, not the persona of a fictional character (from Marina Abramovic to Kira O'Reilly, this last has dominated much performance of the last forty years).



20x2m Relay, Artists' Sports Day 2: The Re-run
Photo: Dominic Howe

Both sport and art have lessons to teach the other when they are brought together.

Art becomes more accessible; it is understood as that which it is. Even the simplest works of brilliant art can encourage the average punter to step back and wonder if they are 'getting it'. Judging from the experiences of the GFA sports days, art and sport combinations lose the competitive or elitist edge that can develop when the forms are separate. The novelty of the

action means that ego is diminished in favour of simple enjoyment. The playing field is levelled. The specialist knowledge of both art and sport is no longer so applicable, and is not so exclusive. It is that much easier to see it as it is, without 'the experts' inhibiting enjoyment and participation.

This is perhaps easiest explained amongst those events that were in the majority at the GFA Sports Days, those that have been labelled 'Silly Sports'. In this category come events such as Handbag Hurling and Celebrity Sack Racing, but it also has many precedents – giant Twister games and cheese-rolling being prime examples.

Such sports are art and sport at their most accessible; their main appeal lies in surrealist juxtaposition and exaggeration. It is obvious to all that the novelty they present is what holds the attention, what gives them their fun. They are simple and this is their strength. A professional who specialises in

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these events, and these events alone, is hard to imagine.

Alongside the 'silly' sports, there are those that retain more of the specialism of professional sports people and artists; artistic sports where dedication to the field can often render them more about spectatorship than participation.



Durational Knitting Sprint, Artists' Sports Day
Photo: Roland Buckingham

Within this category I would include work such as the Bicycle Ballet performed at the National Theatre this summer, figure skating, the juggling races held at juggling conventions (an event that combines juggling with running), Thomas Bacon's 400m Butoh at the first GFA sports day and performance company Search Party's ongoing investigation into sport and art hybrids.

Of course, Grunts for the Arts wasn't alone in seeing the potential for crossover when art funding was cut for the Olympics. Cabaret night Vauxhallville is holding the second of its Art Olympics this month whilst Simon Day in Birmingham has been organising bike rides as a form of protest.

Nevertheless, art lags slightly behind sport perhaps in bringing in elements of that which has traditionally been its alternative. For a long time sport has appreciated the importance of spectacle in its pre-event and interval entertainment - music, performers (team mascots, opera singers, cheerleaders, light shows) - all are regularly witnessed at large sports events and all represent a thought for pre-event experience that is often forgotten in much contemporary performance.

And it is in this ability to learn from the other that the benefits of combining sport and art will best be seen. They are never going to combine into something that is the sum of their parts. They are different manifestations of the same need, and can be good, bad or make an indelible mark on someone's life depending on how that need is handled.

But by combining them into experiments where we allow the lessons of the evolution of one to inform the development of the other we may discover an increased understanding of one or both, and maybe even the sociological need for recreation that lies behind each.