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

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Courtesy of Andy Miah via Flickr

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"

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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.

[Interventions](#), [Olympische Spiele](#), [Martin Creed](#), [All The Bells](#), [Spiele Peking](#), [Cai Guo-Qiang](#),
[Footprints of History](#)

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