A STADIUM IN THE CITY

CMA - CREATIVE AND MANUAL ACTIVITIES
VA - VISUAL ARTS
L - LANGUAGES
MNS - MATHEMATICS AND NATURAL SCIENCES
HSS - HUMAN AND SOCIAL SCIENCES
A stadium in the city

Activity Sheet

Introduction

The Olympic stadium is a central element of the Olympic Games. Its construction marks the presence of the Olympic Games in the urban landscape, and it provides the backdrop to some of the highlights of the sixteen days that reverberate across the planet: the Opening Ceremony, Closing Ceremony, athletics events and sometimes other competitions. However, its presence lasts far longer than sixteen days, and it can change the face of the entire city.

In this activity sheet, students are invited to become project managers for the Olympic stadium.

The exercises can all be carried out separately, according to the amount of time the teacher wants to devote to the topic.

This document should be used in conjunction with the information sheet on the same topic.

→ Download from www.olympic.org/education
   > Teaching Resources
ACTIVITY 1: DOCUMENTATION
The history of Olympic stadiums and their growth

EXERCISE 1
The Olympic stadium memory game

In order for a building to become a reality, someone has to decide on its shape and outline, and produce drawings. That is the architects’ role in designing a stadium. This memory game helps to understand the conceptual shapes behind each stadium.

AIMS
• Exercise your visual memory.
• For older students, compare and analyse various different works of art through the history of stadium architecture. Focus on materials and shapes.

EQUIPMENT
• Scissors.
• Before starting, print and cut out the cards included in Annex 1. (You will need one set of cards for every four students.)

Game
In groups of 4, arrange the cards face down on the table.

The first player turns over two cards. If the same stadium is one both cards, the player wins the cards and turns over two more.

If the two cards are of different buildings, the player replaces the cards face down in their original position, and the next player turns over two cards.

Students must try to remember the location of the cards to complete a pair.

The winner is the player with the most pairs.

For older children (12-15 years):
Observation and placing architecture in its historical context

Print and cut out the stadium cards and the timeline with the dates of the Olympic Games. Invite each group of students to work together to place the stadiums in their correct position on the timeline.

An artistic analysis of how the stadiums evolved can provide an understanding of how they reflect the concerns of their time. In the early 20th century, shapes were more daring, reflecting the architectural trends of the time.

Since the beginning of the 21st century the stadiums have been more homogeneous, but where they differ is in the materials used, their technical innovations, their carbon footprint and their reuse.
ACTIVITY 1: DOCUMENTATION

The history of Olympic stadiums and their growth

EXERCISE 2

Figures for the London 2012 Olympic stadium

Introduce the London 2012 Olympic stadium and talk about the post-Olympic conversion plans (http://queenelizabetholympicpark.co.uk/the-park/venues/the-stadium)

AIMS
• To understand units of measurement and statistics through stadium construction.
• Express your opinion and identify your perceptions.
• For older children (12-15 years): explore and identify contributions from different sources.

EQUIPMENT
• Print and cut out the table in Annex 2, separating the two columns.

For older children (12-15 years):
Research and comparison

Invite the students to find similar information on other stadiums, using the internet. Compare these results with the figures for the London 2012 stadium. Are there any surprises?

Use of figures and units of measurement

Ask the students to form teams, and match the figures with the correct elements.

Group discussion

Discuss the results. Which are the most striking or unexpected?
ACTIVITY 2: THINKING ABOUT ISSUES AND TAKING DECISIONS
Olympic stadiums and urban planning

EXERCISE 1
The big issues surrounding the Olympic stadium

For this exercise, students must put themselves in the position of the planners responsible for planning the future stadium. If the stadium is to be integrated harmoniously into its environment, the plans need to take account of elements that affect the city as a whole, not just the design of the building itself.

AIMS
- To think about the various urban planning issues involved in building a stadium.
- To identify the major issues for consideration.
- To develop an argument.

Brainstorming
Ask the students to identify one urban planning issue that needs to be taken into account when building a stadium.

- Location: city centre or outskirts.
- Does the area lend itself to redevelopment or not? (if so, a redevelopment plan is needed.)
- Changes to or creation of transport networks (bus routes, rail, airport).
- Will a car park be needed?
- Construction of other buildings necessary for the Olympic Games (hotels, shopping centres).
- Distance from the stadium to the Olympic Village.
- Stadium lifespan.
- If the stadium is temporary, how are the materials to be re-used?
- Maximising the tourism potential of the stadium after the Olympic Games.

Adaptation to the students' own environment
If an Olympic stadium were to be built in your own city, what issues would need to be considered in the planning?

Students may refer to the list above, but they can also bring in other issues depending on the urban context.

- Is the city big enough to host the Games?
- How will the surrounding areas be affected? How could they be used?
- Is there enough space to build a new stadium?
- What changes would have to be made to the transport networks?
- What other buildings be needed, apart from the stadium itself? What purpose will they serve after the Olympic Games are over?
- If the stadium can be re-used after the Games, will that make other facilities in the city obsolete?
- Will the venues within the Olympic Park (e.g. Olympic Village) serve a purpose after the Olympic Games?

Conclusion
Discuss the construction site of the future stadium, and the urban provisions to be made.
ACTIVITY 2: THINKING ABOUT ISSUES AND TAKING DECISIONS

Olympic stadiums and urban planning

EXERCISE 2

The Olympic stadium debate (for ages 12-15)

Planning an Olympic stadium means reconciling a whole host of different concerns, to ensure that the new building fits harmoniously into the host city and becomes a vector of development.

AIMS
- To explore different opinions and points of view.
- To adopt the point of view of another person and defend it.
- To choose and adapt the relevant language, taking into account intention, context and target audience.

EQUIPMENT
- Character cards in Annex 3, to be cut out and given to the students.

Role play
After printing and cutting out the cards in Annex 3, students in groups of 6 are invited to take the roles of the following characters:

- Pierre de Coubertin;
- the mayor of the city;
- the sustainability officer of the city;
- the architect of the future Olympic stadium;
- an IOC representative;
- a citizen of the city.

Everyone must play the role and adopt the corresponding point of view, and ensure they get their point of view across in the discussion.

Debate
The students hold a meeting on the construction of the future stadium. They discuss the shape and location of the building, as well as transport, security, the future use of the building, etc.

Decision-making and presentation of the plans
At the end of the meeting (to which a specific period of time has been allocated), each group makes six decisions on the construction of the stadium, according to the discussions and arguments put forward by the various stakeholders. The decisions are presented to the class, and the reasons behind them are explained.

If the number of pupils is not a multiple of six, add one or two project managers to the groups. In the absence of a consensus it is the project manager who must take the decision, and they must be able to back it up.
ACTIVITY 3: IMAGINE AND CREATE
Creating the Olympic stadium project

EXERCISE 1
The Olympic stadium environment

This exercise takes the form of a site study. Students are asked to identify the best location in their city for an Olympic stadium. They must then present their conclusions by drawing up a plan of the area complete with the planned facilities.

AIMS
• Site survey.
• Work on students’ ability to look at their own environment and community.
• Expressing an opinion and looking at various ways of implementing a project.

EQUIPMENT
• Camera.
• Paper, pencils, erasers, felt pens, coloured pencils.
• City map, aerial photo of the city.

Site study
Take the class on a walk through the city or the district, with the aim of identifying a location for the future Olympic stadium. If possible, take photos of the chosen area.

» Will the stadium be in the city centre, in an urban park?
» Or will it be on the outskirts, in an area in need of redevelopment?
» Will it be necessary to demolish existing buildings?

Analysis of the data collected
Back in the classroom, invite the students in groups of 4 to recreate the area of the future stadium, on the basis of their analysis of the area, their memories and the photos they took.

Implementation and artistic practice
The student groups compile their sketches, memories and photos to create a plan of the neighbourhood with the future facilities they have planned, adding the photos taken during the site study if this will help to visualise the new layout.

They can also draw directly on the photos taken during the survey, or stick an image of the future stadium on top of a photo.

Presentation
Each group is invited to present their project to the rest of the class, and the class is invited to discuss and compare them.
ACTIVITY 3: IMAGINE AND CREATE

Creating the Olympic stadium project

EXERCISE 2

The architecture of the future Olympic stadium

The skills needed to build a stadium change constantly. Every new stadium aims to be more perfect, more suitable and more environmentally friendly than those that have gone before. In this exercise, students are invited to be the architects of the future.

From the design brief to the model, they can even create something that doesn’t (yet) exist: a carbon-neutral stadium made of reconfigurable modules, using natural plant-based materials, with water and energy collection solutions, for example.

AIMS

- Stimulate the students’ creativity.
- Express an idea by creating a three-dimensional object.
- Execute a group project.
- Take into account different interconnected elements (future of the structure, management of foot traffic inside the stadium, external buildings and facilities, etc.).

EQUIPMENT

- Paper, pencils, erasers, felt pens, coloured pencils, plasticine, cardboard or stiff paper, wire, acetate, any other crafting supplies that might help with building a model.
- A printout of the model design brief in Annex 4 for each student.

Drafting the design brief

Encourage the students to work in pairs on the design brief for the future stadium. The design brief is a vital element of the project, because it describes the precise requirements that the project must fulfil (aims, constraints and limitations, deadlines, technical specifications, etc.).

Project presentation and reasoning

Ask some students or pairs of students to present their project to the class, and group the projects according to type of stadium (e.g. green stadiums, modular stadiums, temporary or permanent stadiums).

The audience is encouraged to ask questions and challenge the students after their presentation, on the basis of the issues raised by the design brief in Annex 4.

Debate and project selection

After having introduced the students to the two or three types of stadium under consideration, with their corresponding design briefs, invite them to choose one and draw the stadium, specifying how the stadium will be used and what its features will be.

Some students may present their project to the class.

Building the model

Bring all the sketches together and pick out one or two proposals for each type of stadium, bringing in previous proposals where possible. Invite the students to choose one type of stadium and one proposal.

Work in groups on two or three models (depending on the number of stadium types), on the basis of these detailed proposals. Various materials may be used.
ACTIVITY 3: IMAGINE AND CREATE
Creating the Olympic stadium project

EXERCISE 3

Contemporary art and Olympic stadiums

Neville Gabie was the first artist-in-residence associated with an Olympic Games. Various themes suggested by his fascination with the site, changing spaces, proportions, measurements and sport inspired a series of works brought together under the title Great Lengths 2012. http://greatlengths2012.org.uk

AIMS

• To identify and appreciate the original elements of a creation.
• To develop interest and curiosity in the presence of various different works of art.
• To engage with new ideas and new ways of thinking, and explore them.
• To express ideas in a new way.

EQUIPMENT

• For the teacher: printout of Annex 5, which outlines the work of Neville Gabie.
• For the students: paper, pencils, felt tips, crayons.

Links between contemporary art and Olympic stadiums

Discuss Neville Gabie’s project and talk about the numbers that resulted from his performance. (Number of seats on which he attempted to sit in the stadium, number of people who worked on the stadium construction that it is possible to film during a 100 m sprint at 25 frames per second, number of litres of water the artist drank compared with the volume of water in the Olympic swimming pool, the time needed to run 1,500 metres in a straight line in the Olympic Park, taking into account the various security checkpoints on the site, etc.).

Creative reflection

Encourage the students, in groups of 3 or 4, to think about their own performance art work which could help the public to realise the scale of the stadium construction, or an art work that would capture it.
ANNEX 1
The Olympic stadium memory game

Print out this page twice for a complete memory game.
For a more realistic result, mount the sheet on cardboard (preferably colourful) before cutting out the memory game.

ROME, 1st century A.D.  HELSINKI, 1952  TOKYO, 1964  MUNICH, 1972
LONDON, 2012  RIO DE JANEIRO, 2016  TOKYO, 2020

Timeline (on the next page)

Print out the timeline in A3 format.
### ANNEX 2

**Figures for the London 2012 Olympic stadium**

Print and cut out the strips. Blue = stadium construction, red = stadium renovation.

| 80,000 | seats               |
| 860    | metres in circumference |
| 60     | metres high         |
| 800,000| tons of earth excavated during construction |
| More than 5,250 | people worked on the project |
| More than 240 | businesses were involved in construction |
| More than 5,000 | concrete pillars were sunk into the ground to reinforce the superstructure |
| Around 700 | rooms and areas were built into the stadium (including toilets and changing rooms) |
| 338    | kilometres of electric cabling |
| 140,000| blocks to build the walls |
| 45,000 | m² (surface area of the new roof) |
| 930    | tons of steel cabling to support the new roof |
| 21,000 | newly-installed retractable seats |
| 995    | new toilets         |
| 428    | new wheelchairs bought |
| 400    | metres (length of the new track) |
| 2,000,000 | total hours worked by the end of the stadium conversion |
ANNEX 3

Urban planning for stadiums, many different points of view

Print, fold, laminate and cut out the six cards (below and on the next page).

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For me, the construction of an Olympic stadium must reflect the values we wish to uphold: competition, excellence and respect.

Pierre de Coubertin

Hosting the Olympic Games in our city is an amazing opportunity. But how can we guarantee the safety of the athletes, organising teams and spectators?

The Mayor of the host city

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The IOC representative

I’m delighted to see that we share the same ambitions for the organisation of these Olympic Games. What can we do to welcome spectators and guide them around the site?

A citizen

It’s amazing that the Olympic Games will be coming to my city! It’s a once-in-a-lifetime experience! But how am I going to get to work and do everything I need to do while the Games are on? What with all the athletes and spectators, public transport will struggle to cope, and traffic will be gridlocked.

The architect of the future stadium

This project is the pinnacle of my career. I want to design a building that people will remember forever.

A citizen

The architect of the future stadium

This project is the pinnacle of my career. I want to design a building that people will remember forever.

The city sustainability officer

I share the enthusiasm of my colleagues at City Hall! But I hope that building the Olympic Stadium will represent a genuine development opportunity for our city. I don’t want the stadium to be abandoned after the Games – I want the new community around it to continue to grow.

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ANNEX 4

Design brief for the future stadium (next pages)

Print out the sheet in A3 format, double-sided.
1. Does the shape of the stadium symbolise something in particular? If so, what?

2. Will it have a roof? If so, what sort of roof?

3. How will the seating be arranged? Will the seating be modular?

4. What will the field of play be like?
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Answer</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>5. How will the public get to the stadium? Will a car park be necessary?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. What kind of energy and materials will the stadium use? Will it be able to produce, collect or recycle energy?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Will the stadium be temporary or permanent?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Will the stadium serve any other purposes?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. What will the stadium be used for after the Olympic Games?</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>
When the Olympic Delivery Authority commissioned Neville Gabie for the London 2012 Games, it was not only the first time there had been an artist-in-residence on an Olympic Park, it was a bold move. The commissioners had no idea what he would produce.
The London 2012 Games marked the first time in the modern era that an artist-in-residence had been commissioned to produce artworks while the site was being delivered. It is as yet the last time, too, despite what the artist Neville Gabie believes was a forward-looking, visionary decision on the part of the Olympic Delivery Authority (ODA).

From September 2010 till March 2012, when the London Organising Committee for the Olympic Games (LOCOG) took over the site, Gabie produced a series of striking works of art in a range of media that drew heavily on his fascination with place, the changing use of space, scale, measurement and sport.

These themes were explored in a range of projects under the overarching banner ‘Great Lengths 2012’ and included a homage to one of Georges Seurat’s most famous paintings (*Bathers at Asnières*), a film telling the story of a Turkish Cypriot immigrant swimming in the Olympic pool and an attempt to sit in all 62,000 seats of the Olympic Stadium.

But when he first received the commission – something he described as a once-in-a-lifetime chance – South African-born artist Gabie had little idea of what he wanted to produce and had told the ODA they needed to wait three months before he would make his final proposals. It was convincing them this was the only way to deliver something truly responsive to the site that Gabie believes
made the difference and ultimately resulted in the commission. 'I'm a huge fan of sport and that's been an influence in a lot of my work to date', said Gabie. 'And then there's my interest in place and, in particular, locations in a state of flux or change. So when the opportunity to apply for this residency came up, it seemed to hit all my interests in one go. I thought, "I have to apply; I'm going to pull out all the stops, I really want this".'

It was a real positive to work like that are rare. It relies on an open-ended way. I have to say, opportunities to work with this community of people. And then I would come up with the project proposal. It was a real gamble. Gabie had to write a three-page synopsis. From that stage, the ODA drew up a shortlist of artists who then needed to pen a 16-page document with precise details of what they were proposing and the budget.

'At the outset, I was very much a maker. And thenon the commissioner taking a gamble and trusting that something will come out of the process. And most commissioners who are spending large sums of money want to know exactly what they are going to get for it. It was a huge leap of faith on their part, but quite visionary too.'

Gabie became artist-in-residence on the site of London 2012. Although there had never been an artist-in-residence at the Olympic Games before, there is a strong tradition of arts dating back to the ancient Greeks. The original Games were seen as an opportunity to spread Greek culture throughout the Mediterranean, so, as well as athletics, sculpture, poetry and the arts featured strongly. It's a tradition that has continued; culture was an integral part of the Games imagined by Baron Pierre de Coubertin, and Cultural Olympiads have featured in each edition of the Games in the modern era.
‘As the sporting element of the Games has become so strong, those other things seem to have been marginalised and pushed to the side, at least as far as the media is concerned’, said Gabie. ‘And I think one of the reasons the IOC gave the Games to London was because they saw the value of that cultural emphasis.’

‘I can think of many reasons why there hasn’t been an artist-in-residence on the Olympic site before. You run the risk of getting in the way, the time pressure is huge, there’s very little flexibility in the programming of delivering an Olympic Games. So to have an artist faffing around is not ideal. And there were huge difficulties with my residency, which is possibly why another artist-in-residence has not been commissioned for the Rio 2016 Games. When the Games were awarded to London, it had to be a success. I think the original budget was £2bn, whereas it was nearer £10bn when it was delivered. There was a lot of anxiety and criticism in the lead-up to the Games, a lot of pressure. And, politically, it had to be a success. So anything that could in any way undermine that was seen as a huge risk.

‘But Sarah Weir, who was heading up the Arts and Culture Strategy team, felt it was really important to give some visibility to all that goes on behind the scenes in the making of the Games as well as delivering the sculptural, visual pieces on the park itself. And I think it was a visionary thing to do. I’d love to see that happening more widely.’

On the whole, the ODA’s Arts and Culture team was incredibly supportive of the residency, but issues around how it fitted alongside the larger delivery programme were a continual challenge. Each of the projects delivered had huge obstacles to overcome.

In 2010 Neville Gabie was the first artist ever to be appointed as Artist in Residence during the construction of the Olympic Park, London. Commissioned by the Olympic Delivery Authority, he was given unfettered access to the whole site over a two-year period.

‘I can look at all those projects and they all had sticking points’, said Gabie. ‘When I got on to the Olympic Park, you had to undergo a range of inductions and security checks – it was like going through airport security three times a day. The site was so big and, for safety reasons, you couldn’t just walk around it, so there was a team of around 30 bus drivers who ferried everyone to where they were going. And one of the first I met was Semra Yusuf, who had a really interesting history: Turkish Cypriot immigrant, part of the East End community, from a really conservative family and an obsessive swimmer. She swam these amazing distances every day and so I wanted her to swim the distance of her bus route – 1,270 metres – in the Olympic pool. And that was incredibly difficult to organise. A lot of the publicity around the Olympic Games was about it being “The People’s Olympics”, but when I wanted to get a person who was quite intimately involved in the building of the park and from the East End to be the first person to swim in the pool, it became a massive issue.‘

But, despite the obstacles and difficulty of working among an ever-changing cast of 46,000 people engaged in one of the largest UK public building projects in years, Gabie produced a suite of artworks that reflect the immense scale, sheer complexity and great lengths to which those involved needed to go for the Olympic Park to be delivered.
Neville Gabie talks through each of the main works he produced as part of the Olympic Park artist-in-residence programme.

EVERY SEAT IN THE STADIUM

(Video, performance, Olympic Stadium, May–September 2011)

I spent a lot of time in the different stadiums. I would have loved to have done something in the velodrome, but I didn’t get the chance. You stand in these spaces when there’s nobody there and it’s quite extraordinary. You suddenly feel really small. A project I did with Penguin publishers involved taking pictures of goalposts in South America and, as part of that, I went to the stadium where the 1978 World Cup was held in Argentina. It’s a powerful experience being in a stadium on your own. But standing in the middle of the Olympic Stadium and feeling really small, I thought: how, as one person, can you do something that measures the scale of this space? My way was an attempt to put myself in each seat and see how long that took. It was very much about giving a sense of the building’s scale in relation to a single person. In the end, I sat in about 46,000 – that took three weeks and was really hard on my knees; I just couldn’t complete it.

I had a routine. I had to look at the grass in the centre, as if I was an observer. Sit, log, move on. To keep the seats clean, they all had plastic bags on them, so I had to have one person in front of me removing the plastic bags and someone else behind me putting them back on. One of them was my son, who after three weeks of that didn’t want to speak to me again!

I had a finite amount of time and, in a way, it wasn’t about whether I did it or not. It was about the attempt. But that was a really difficult project. I asked if I could do it and everyone just said no. So I spoke to an engineer and he said if I wait for permission to do anything on this park, nothing will ever happen. Just do it and apologise afterwards. So I started filming myself doing a day of sitting on the seats. All hell broke loose. And where I’d been trying for weeks to speak to the chief executive at the ODA to get permission – and had failed – all of a sudden I was in his office being asked why I was doing this. But because I was able to show him the footage and explain what I was trying to achieve, he said ‘OK fine, carry on’. For them, with the pressure they were under to deliver, it was easier to say no. Once they could see I wasn’t going to hold up the project, they were OK with it.

When it was shown, the reaction from people was quite humorous. But I’m not afraid of using humour in my work. Sometimes art takes itself too seriously and I think you can make a serious point through humour anyway.
When I was shown the visualisations of what they were trying to build on the park, it was really interesting because the parallels to Seurat’s *Bathers at Asnières* were incredibly strong. I immediately went to the National Gallery to see it. Seurat painted it in the 1880s, and it was a radical painting at the time because it was the first by an artist to depict an urbanised, working-class community in a city centre with the drivers of that urbanisation – the factories – in the background.

And I thought, this was the first really industrialised area of London, but, in its current post-industrialised state, we’re now using sports and leisure as the driver for regeneration. And the people in Seurat’s painting, white working class, were very different from those here. And I was really struck by those parallels and contrasts. In just over 100 years, the demographic and cultural shift in terms of sports or leisure rather than industry was fascinating.

The reason I wanted to use a newspaper like the *Metro* to display the photograph was because you see it everywhere. I didn’t want to make a work that sat in a prestigious environment like a gallery where only a select audience sees it. It needed to be seen in a highly public environment. Then it was a matter of finding the people for whom this particular space was significant. So we have Steve the security guard with his dog, the engineer who designed the bridge in the background, the landscape architect who was responsible for all the landscaping, the people who planted the riverbanks, the chap in the boat who was an athlete hoping to get into one of the rowing teams. So everyone had a kind of very specific relationship to it. And then there was the onerous task of trying to get all the different companies to release their staff for the shoot.

Then there was the day itself. I’m trying to photograph, I’ve got hard hat, goggles, boots, gloves, high-vis jacket. I was photographing next to the riverbank, so one of the boats had to have a lifeguard in case I fell in. I had to wear a lifejacket and, because I was near the bank, they insisted I was harnessed, so there was an anchor into the bank with a cable attaching me to it. If I fell in, it was only knee deep. So it was bizarre. But on the plus side, this was the first Olympic Park ever to be constructed where there were no fatalities, which is pretty amazing.

In essence, I wanted to give visibility to some of the people who’d worked and been responsible for making that site. On the Great Lengths website, each of the characters has a film telling you their story and their relationship to the place. At the point at which the Games happen, it’s all about the superstars – so much so that the history of the people who enable all that is gone. So I wanted to make sure their work wasn’t forgotten.
If I’m being brutally honest, that was the most compromised bit of work I did from a personal point of view. Once I’d come up with the idea, there was a huge amount of pressure to complete the film, to deliver it and to show it before the Games happened. In the end, we filmed it in August 2011 and it was shown publicly in December. And because I was in the zone of producing lots of work, I don’t feel I brought enough objectivity to it. Sometimes when there’s so much material, you almost need to film it and step away from it for six months and then go back to it. And I think it tried to do too much as a piece of work and as a result it didn’t hit the mark.

Part of the reason I wanted to do it was Semra. Hers is a really tough story. And you wouldn’t know it from this piece of film. When she came to the UK, she had been badly abused, had attempted to commit suicide at 18, was in a forced marriage... but, through the Olympic Games, she got an apprenticeship as a bus driver, she divorced, she became an independent woman, and she now drives a red bus around London. The Games were hugely important in terms of her finding her own voice. And that, for me, was the real story. It was a story that I don’t think she was ready to tell at the time and it was a story which I think the Games would have found a bit difficult to handle. Last year, I completely re-edited the film with her. Now it’s not about the Olympic Games; it’s about her doing the swim and her personal story. I just felt it was too rushed and there was lots of material there that could have been better. Semra was absolutely delighted with the film. She took her swimming very seriously and, in different circumstances, I think she’d have been quite capable of being a professional athlete herself. It was only because her parents banned her from doing that at school that she was never able to pursue it. So for her to swim in that context and in that pool was absolutely huge. And, from that point of view, I think the film was really successful. And the people who saw it really enjoyed it. But from a personal perspective, I think it could have been better.
When I was at the Royal College of Art, one of the sites I did a huge amount of work in was a derelict paint factory, which is exactly where the Aquatics Centre is now built. So it was a curious journey of coming back to the same place after all these years and seeing it transformed. There was also a huge studio complex, which had been a Yardley’s perfume factory and was the biggest artists’ studio complex in the whole of Europe. It was massive. I think more than 1,000 artists were there in around 700 studios in that one building. My wife had a studio there; she shared it with Rachel Whiteread.

When I was commissioned, everyone referred to it as a brownfield or derelict site. Those were the terms people used. And both those terms seemed to suggest there was nothing there before the Games. But if you look back, this bit of Stratford was really the birthplace of the Industrial Revolution. I think the first discovery of petroleum or gasoline was made on the site where the Olympic Park is now. The first manufacturing of plastic was in Stratford, originally made with milk. So, historically, it’s really significant. But as an artist, I knew what fertile ground it had been for so many artists, too. Grayson Perry had a studio there, Rachel Whiteread had a studio there, so too did Fiona Rae. I mean, the list of highly established artists who started their careers in this building is a long one.

I wanted to say that, before the Olympic Games, this place had a history. So the idea was to invite artists who’d made work that was about that place or had some connection to it to exhibit work. It was a completely eclectic, weird exhibition because it was all very different work. But in a sense, it was more about the place.
If you’re thinking about sports, it’s all about notions of measuring time and what you can do with your body. So I like the idea of making work about time. And with athletics, it’s the 100m final; it’s what everyone gets excited about. It’s the event everyone wants to see. And I thought it’s amazing so much of the whole Olympic project is about that tiny moment; less than 10 seconds.

If you break up a piece of video footage that’s 9.58 seconds long – equivalent to Usain Bolt’s world 100m record – there are 25 frames a second, which makes 239. So I photographed 239 of the people who helped build this place and each occupies one frame of the film.

For me, the biggest missed opportunity was the lack of an interface with LOCOG, because it just meant there was all this work that could potentially have been seen but wasn’t. It would have been really nice to show this film to people queuing up to get into the stadium. It would have been really easy to do, but there was no interface so it never had that visibility during the Games.
Standing in the empty Olympic swimming pool and thinking about the huge volume of water that fills it and how that relates to the size of one human being. So it’s really about measuring the volume of what I’m capable of drinking in relation to what would fit in the pool.

I spent three days standing in a pool surrounded by people building and tiling while I was drinking what ended up being 18.5 litres of water. I spent a lot of time with them, filmed a lot of people in the pool and got to know them well. They joked around and laughed at me a bit, but you build up a relationship with people if you’re with them for a period of time. It became really important that I arrived on site at the same time of the morning as they did. And I left when everyone else did.

On a very basic level, if people see you clocking in and out with them, they repect that more than if you were to come swanning in at 11am. It takes time, but you can build up relationships with people so they’ll hopefully reveal more. People might have a laugh and a joke at your expense, but it’s not a huge issue. And I think they felt I was highlighting the work they were doing in my own bizarre fashion.
Changing places

THE 43.6 MINUTE MILE

(Performance, 14 December 2011)

Measuring things and distance was a regular theme throughout the residency. I wanted to see how long it would take to walk a mile in a straight line across the Olympic Park. Again, it was so difficult to organise and carry out. But I wanted to show how complicated this area was by doing something ostensibly really simple – walking.

Each little area was looked after by a different construction company, so every time you wanted to go from one zone to the next, you had to do a different health and safety induction. Sometimes lasting a whole day. I wondered whether just walking from one side to the other in a straight line was even possible.

It turned out it wasn’t. I sent hundreds of emails trying to get permission and tracked my progress with a GPS so I could show the route I had to take. It really shouldn’t take that long to walk from one side of the park to the other – say, 20 minutes? In the event, it took much longer than that. I think it took closer to three-and-a-half hours. But it was a great way of highlighting the complexity of the site.