

Restricting Artists is Not an Olympic Ideal: An Open Letter to VANOC

Raymond T Grant

This article is a letter from Salt Lake City 2002 Olympic Winter Game Arts Festival director to the CEO of the Vancouver Organizaing Committee for the Olympic Games (VANOC), sent on February 10, 2010.

Dear Mr. Furlong:

As the world gathers in Vancouver to welcome athletes and artists of the world, I write requesting that you withdraw the clause in VANOC's agreements with artists participating in its Cultural Olympiad which prohibits negative comments about the Games and its corporate sponsors. The clause is both dangerous and unnecessary. It does nothing to sustain the artist's talents, advance the Olympic Movement, and celebrate a pluralistic democracy. Unless removed, the clause, and VANOC's participation in it, will depress the cultural value of the Olympics.

In my role as artistic director of the Salt Lake City 2002 Olympic Winter Games Arts Festival, I can attest that the significant world

gathering called the Olympics can flourish, legacies can be created, new audiences can be developed, and gifted works of art can be commissioned and performed without the restrictions you thought fitting to have put into place. Let the art VANOC commissions be controversial, not your contractual and administrative acts.

The clause, brought to my attention by the Canadian press, reads "The artist shall at all times refrain from making any negative or derogatory remarks respecting VANOC, the 2010 Olympic and Paralympic Games, the Olympic movement generally, Bell and/or other sponsors associated with VANOC."

It is right and proper that the Vancouver Cultural Olympiad is a celebration of Canada. But, for those of us who admire and respect Canadian freedoms, the inclusion of this clause taints the daring celebration called Canada.

Artists live and work in community and they give communities a sense of place. Artists find the uncommon in the commonplace. Canada is,

thankfully, uncommon and goes beyond Olympic gold. Please play your continuing part in keeping it that way by removing this clause.

The Olympics has been called a magnificent moveable feast. Each series of winter and summer Games is reinvented every four years. Artists play a role in that reinvention as they have in the Olympic movement from its founding. The very earliest text in the entire Greek world is scratched into the shoulder of a terracotta vase found buried in an Athenian grave. It is a hexameter poem that describes the winner of a dancing contest from c.a. 740 B.C. It reads "he who dances most nimbly of all take this (the vase) as your prize." For me, this suggests not only a substantive chronicling of the Olympics, but the influential role artists have had over the centuries on the Olympic Movement. In the modern context of the Olympics, Baron Pierre de Coubertin's vision of Olympism - what the Olympic Movement aspires to be - is inextricably linked to the arts and humanities "harmoniously joined with sports." The Olympic motto "Citius - Altius - Fortius" invites artists to excel. It does not give carte blanche to corporate sponsors or organizing committee executives to silence gifted voices. Telling artists they can't say anything negative about the Olympic movement or its sponsors is a form of censorship.

In 2007, I had the privilege of bringing together five previous Olympic cultural directors in a symposium on Olympism at the University of Mainz (Germany.) I am confident I would be joined in my view by both these colleagues as well as artists world-wide who have been moved by the power of the Olympic experience without their voices being stifled.

I write this letter without a hint of naivety. I recognize that corporate sponsors are the Olympic Movement's form of patronage. And, history is replete with artists who have bitten the hand that feeds them. Michelangelo and Pope Julius II comes to mind. With this said, by removing your restrictive clause and letting artists continue to ask the tough questions by what they say and through their work, you will ensure that the triumphs sure to be experienced in Vancouver extend beyond the stadiums to the artistic world.

Sincerely,

RAYMOND T. GRANT

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