

# Rob Allen

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# Do we need buildings for digital art?

With the rise of online curation, is digital practice becoming less dependent on the bricks and mortar of an exhibition space?

Rob Allen

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Beyond bricks: one compelling defence of buildings is the basic human urge to congregate. Photograph: Graham Turner for the Guardian

Entering an art gallery is an act of escapism - whether visitors become absorbed in a landscape painting or engrossed in video work, they arrive willing to be transported. But what does it say of the purpose of the gallery if artists ask viewers to turn around and walk back out onto the street?

The Liverpool arts centre FACT has brought this scenario to life, as it celebrates the building's 10th birthday with the exhibition, *Inside Out*. International artist collective, *Manifest.AR* (the AR standing for augmented reality) are presenting new work within the exhibition, which encourages people to leave the building to pace the city on a hunt for virtual objects, experienced via smartphone applications and GPS positioning technology.

As we head for the exit door to consume art beyond the white cube, is digital practice becoming less dependent on the physical exhibition space?

"The freedom of creating works wherever you want and developing spatial and social relationships without the 'consent' of target locations or buildings is exciting," says John Cleater, a New York based artist and *Manifest.AR* member. "Augmented reality provides a medium that allows one to melt that threshold between physical and virtual space but relies on both, unlike virtual reality."

The difference between augmented reality and virtual reality, mind-scrambling for many, highlights the first issue to overcome with digital arts practice - answering the question: What is digital art? Christianne Paul, author of *New Media in the White Cube and Beyond - Curatorial Models for Digital Art*, is helpfully succinct when she describes it as: "Art that is created, stored, and presented by means of digital technologies and uses them as a medium."

Paul is critical of the role of the traditional gallery space and arts centres when it comes to displaying work and engaging audiences appropriately. "Digital art seems to call for a distributed, networked information space that is open to interferences," she says. "A space for exchange, collaborative creation, and presentation that is transparent and flexible. The average museum architecture and infrastructure today does not provide that type of space and needs to adapt."

Adaptation, claims Paul, comes with a commitment to preserving digital work in an age when technology is continually threatened by

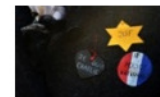
### Most popular



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obsolescence. Where so many are apparently failing on this front, the likes of [Ars Electronica](#) in Austria and [ZKM](#) in Germany, alongside festivals (proof themselves that transient events are equal to exhibitions in buildings) such as Berlin's [Transmediale](#) have cemented reputations for taking digital art seriously.



One compelling defence of buildings is the basic human urge to congregate. As Mike Stubbs, [director at FACT](#), says: "Throughout the histories of radio, TV, cinema and art, people have always wanted social spaces to congregate and come together. We undoubtedly need buildings to act as social spaces and draw people closer."

Perhaps so, but in our social media age isn't the online realm as suitable for discourse, documentation and debate? For two decades the mailing list [Nettime](#) has facilitated cultural discussion without geographical boundaries. Likewise, online exhibition has developed to become a specific curatorial specialism.

Marialaura Ghidini is founder of [Or-Bits](#), a site that has developed a reputation for innovative and engaging online curation alongside similarly successful online spaces such as [Bubblebyte](#). Although she concedes that online art has no debt to buildings, Ghidini feels the freedom of the web should not come at the expense of more traditional spaces.

"Works that are site-specific to the web, which are produced for online browsing, open up different opportunities for experiencing art," she says. "I don't think they require the fabric of an arts centre to exist and operate, but at the same time I don't think they should try to replace the model of an arts centre."

Arts centres are not just buildings, but hives of knowledgeable individuals ready to provide interpretation and improve access to the arts for all, including disabled people, children and young people, and the elderly. Can digital artists meet these same standards and responsibilities if the arts centre building, and its committed personnel, are taken out of the equation?

"Digital technology opens up a new world of cultural and artistic possibilities for disabled people," says Alison Smith, founder of the [Pesky People blog](#) on digital access for the disabled. "However, if 3.7 million disabled people have never been online, and disabled people are three times less likely to use the internet, that has serious implications."

Topics

- Audiences
- Digital
- Diversity
- Logistics
- Art



Do we need buildings for digital art? Perhaps it can thrive without them, but like the popularity of live music in the age of the download, the value of shared experience means galleries remain vital to many of us. Whether they are up to the job of doing digital art justice is a question they must ask themselves.

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## RATED > LIVE

QUIET START FOR  
MERCURY MUSIC  
WINNER DEBELLE

MERCURY  
RISING: Star  
Debelle's ace



# Speechless

**LOCAL** Manchester heroes and Mercury Prize winners of '08, Elbow, entertained 20,000 people at the MEN Arena last month.

A fortnight later, and this year's victor plays to a crowd of barely 100 at a club up the road.

Mercury triumphs like Dizzee and the Arctics have gone on to riches and red carpets – but some winners, including Ms Dynamite and Gomez, have vanished.

So will it be feast or famine for sparky Londoner Debelle? Just

**CAUGHT LIVE**

**SPEECH DEBELLE**

Night & Day, Manchester

★★★

weeks after the industry's pat on the back, such lack of regional interest means the best Debelle can hope for is a slow-burning success, but glimmers of hope do run through her show.

*She's cut from a very different cloth to other urban performers who also deal in the reality of life at the sharp end.*

The three-man band backing pocket-sized leader Debelle use a laidback vibe to deliver their message.

Coloured by flicks of acoustic guitar, the jazzy, bass-heavy

sound is at odds with much of the gritty inspiration for her Speech Therapy album.

Songs like Spinnin' and Wheels In Motion deliver neat, poppy hooks on which Debelle comfortably bounces her tales.

### Sprinkle

There's been no time for her brush with showbiz to sprinkle any fairy-dust on her craft, with her wardrobe limited to a simple black T-shirt.

Her tiny speaking voice and apologetic stage presence mean

she's even ignored by her own crew when she asks for the house lights to go up.

*The Mercury judges must have sensed some genius, and Working Weak is probably the tune that swayed their decision.*

Dedicating it to "all those people facing a nine-to-five shift on Monday", Debelle pours decision on to a former boss damned as "an a-hole" in a tale of workplace tedium.

With the help of critical acclaim, the future looks bright in the long run.

But, with enough room to swing every other Mercury nominee around her head here, momentum certainly seems in short supply.

**ROB ALLEN**



📅 20 March 13

## New collaboration takes sound for a spin

Commissioned by the Crafts Council, Weave Waves brings together sound artist Scanner and textile designer Ismini Samanidou, combining digital technologies and weaving skills. We talk to the pair as the work gets its first public airing at the FutureEverything summit in Manchester.

• Applied Art

• Digital

Structure, scale, geography, systems, code – all play their part in Weave Waves, an ambitious partnership between sound artist [Scanner](#) and textile designer/maker [Ismini Samanidou](#). Commissioned by the Crafts Council, the fruits of the project so far get their first public airing in an 'immersive slideshow' at Manchester's [FutureEverything](#) summit, before the completed work goes on tour later in the year.

The project flickered into life when the Crafts Council approached Scanner – real name Robin Rimbaud – with a proposal that would involve him working with a maker of any description. Having taken on projects as diverse as ballet scores and soundtracking musical comedies, alongside a personal practice that has seen him previously commissioned by [Artangel](#) and Tate, the prospect left him typically unfazed. The only question was: what kind of maker would he choose to work with?

"It could have been any kind of maker," he explains. "They could have worked in ceramics, glass or even jewellery. Then I had a kind of epiphany. We don't just listen to sound, we see sound too. Like a rock being thrown into a pool, you see ripples appear. I thought it would be fantastic to be able to see those sound waves appear in textile form."

### Plucking material from the air

Numerous artists have worked with found sounds, but Scanner's career has been built on literally plucking material out of the air, from mobile phone signals to radio transmissions. Finding a maker who could match his aptitude for innovation might have been a challenge, but with Samanidou there was a ready and willing foil for his intervention into contemporary craft.

Often utilising technology to transpose photographic imagery onto fabric, the Athens-born, Cornwall-based artist works with digitised looms, occasionally adjusting the weave while it is in progress. The adoption of digital tools gave both artists common ground to work from.

"We talked about computerised production very early on," explains Samanidou. "We realised we shared an interest in the way sound and textiles have hidden



codes. For me, code is very much the construction method for the textiles, and I see it as something tangible, something I can easily visualise and control."

### **Similarities and differences**

Where the two found similarities they also found differences – Scanner highlights a "very helpful tension" between the artists backgrounds. "You can see a pattern in textiles," he says. "Like with knitting, you understand that there is a structure. Music has a similarity to textiles in that a pop record also has structure, but you lose focus on the structure and begin to enjoy it as a whole.

"The same can be said for a beautiful piece of textile work. Although the outcomes are very different, the code used for making textiles is still binary, it remains ones and zeros and it's the same for making music."

Weave Waves is being allowed to develop in front of its audiences eyes, with Scanner and Samanidou documenting each stage of their collaboration online. Captured sounds, photography depicting accidental patterns and examples of woven work all provide traces of Scanner and Samanidou's journey, which included a visit to Manchester earlier in the year. Large conurbations and their sounds and structures offer a central point of inspiration.

"One of the planned outcomes is lots of small textiles where the detail will be overhead views of cities," explains Scanner. "They'll be displayed in their own vitrine, with the viewer invited to observe each with a magnifying glass. As they lean over the piece, the sound from the city will play."

The presentation of this idea is still to be realised, and the issue of making sound work in an exhibition space without it disturbing people viewing other pieces is yet to be resolved. Headphones, believes Scanner, aren't the solution. "I don't think they ever work in an exhibition environment," he says.

### **Breathing new life**

Further exploring ideas of contrasting scale, the pair have also worked on a large textile piece that, by using [spectrograph](#) software, will represent the sound of their own breathing. The intimacy of this most basic act contrasted with the impersonal rush of city life underpins the work.

"Looking at scale between cities and individuals, we wanted to juxtapose the hum of the city with the sound of an individual person," explains Samanidou. "It made sense to use our own breath as the origins of the work."

Weave Waves will be complete in time for the forthcoming Crafts Council touring exhibition [Sound Matters: Exploring sound through forms](#). Scanner, who describes his leap into the crafts world as an informed risk, remains curious about how people will respond to the work.

"I want to seduce people into recognising the relationship between mine and Ismini's practices and lead them into a sense of being surprised by it," he says. "But, at the same time, I'm thinking: How will the crafts world read this?"

**For details of Weave Waves at FutureEverything from 20-24 March 2013, click [here](#). Follow the progress of the Weave Waves project [here](#).**

*This article was co-commissioned with [SyncTank](#), the online magazine of Sync – a set of activities designed to support cultural organisations in Scotland develop a more progressive relationship with technology and technologists.*



## The Doppelganger Effect: Mark Boulos at Abandon Normal Devices

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Heading up a programme concerned with technology's effect on our enactment of identity, Mark Boulos' new work for Abandon Normal Devices festival presents viewers with a distorted version of themselves

FEATURE BY ROB ALLEN.  
 PUBLISHED 03 OCTOBER 2013

If anyone were able to enter an art gallery and have an out-of-body experience inspired by the work, then surely the art world would be brought to a shuddering conclusion, or at least a re-reckoning: we'd quickly become concerned solely with the possibility of drifting from our earthly husks to the precipice of afterlife. But Swiss-American artist Mark Boulos' aim to invoke such a reaction in his latest immersive film, *Echo* – a co-commission between Forma Arts and Media and Liverpool's FACT, and showing as part of the city's Abandon Normal Devices festival this month – is, of course, open to interpretation.

Working with Swiss neuroscientist Prof Olaf Blanke, a pioneer in the exploration of out-of-body experiences, Boulos has drawn on his collaborator's laboratory studies to stretch the boundaries of filmmaking and the gallery experience. Coupling analysis of the human brain with Hitchcock's perception-altering camera techniques and principles of Victorian theatrical illusion, *Echo* creates an intentionally unsettling experience as perspectives are distorted and reality becomes less certain. But Boulos tempers expectations of an out-of-body experience, saying it doesn't necessarily mean people will be forced to decide whether or not to walk into the light.

"I can't replicate the kind of hallucinatory, out-of-body experience that people suffering a stroke and those who have had a near-death experience have described," he explains. "But the kind of apparatus that Blanke is using with video disturbs the orientation of perception to create a feeling of disembodiment and dislocation. Olaf is trying to do a similar thing to me, to create a disturbance in the unity of our sense of perception and understanding of body, but he is trying to do it in a neurological lab and I am trying to do it in a gallery."

Since his 2008 film *All that Is Solid Melts into Air*, a two-screen installation tying together two sides of the global battle for oil, its title drawn from *The Communist Manifesto*, Boulos has been building a



NO PERMANENT ADDRESS (2010), MARK BOULOS – AND FESTIVAL 2013  
 IMAGE: IMAGE COURTESY OF MARK BOULOS AND LISSON GALLERY

### MORE INFO

Mark Boulos, Gallery 1 & 2, FACT, Liverpool, 3 Oct-21 Nov, daily 12-6pm except Sat 11am-6pm, free Abandon Normal Devices, various venues, Liverpool, 3-5 Oct  
[www.andfestival.org.uk](http://www.andfestival.org.uk)

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reputation for uncompromising film work that surrounds the viewer. (That film is one of three previous works also showing at FACT, including *No Permanent Address*, Boulos' 2010 three-screen feature that saw him capture the movements of a communist Philippine guerrilla group decried internationally as terrorists, and *The Origin of the World* (2009), which has Boulos' image reflected in his own iris in a moment of self-analysis.) *Echo*, though, is being billed as a significant turning point in Boulos's practice. Filmed in the financial district of London, it makes the viewer the character of the piece, relaying their own image and voice back in real-time as the backdrop drifts away and morphs around them. The person facing the screen is transposed and their image adjusted in the projection using 'Pepper's ghost', a 19th-century illusion technique that creates ghostly apparitions. By having no words and no documentary footage, it's a piece that Boulos, evidently a keen self-critic, feels resolves some of his misgivings concerning his previous output.

"One problem with my previous work is that it is not obviously expressive," he says. "How is it an expression of my ideas or imagination or of myself in any way? This new work is addressing that issue as it's something of a self-portrait, although the self is subtracted as it's only a self-portrait if I am standing there. The previous works were so discursive, so about the narrative; I wanted to create something that was wordless and much more formal.

"I feel one of the great pleasures of the work, without sounding arrogant, is to face you with your own image," he continues. "I think video and cinema often begs identification from the viewer; they ask them to identify with the hero of the movie, to suggest that they in some way represent something of you. But I actually wanted to do that, to place the viewer in the movie as they are actually watching it."

That *Echo* is a wordless departure doesn't mean that Boulos's worldview, so strongly evident in previous works, is completely lost. In *All that Is Solid Melts into Air*, the suited traders of the colossal futures trading centre, the Chicago Mercantile Exchange, are contrasted against the guerrillas of the Niger Delta who are locked in a battle for the rights to the oil that is sold from under them. They invoke their native spirits to make them bulletproof in their battles, perhaps a ludicrous notion to Western ears, but Boulos laughs when he recalls that "the beliefs of the traders in the film actually seemed more metaphysical, more abstract and less understandable or material than those of the guerrilla fighters." In *Echo*, the choice of the City of London as the street scene retains and promotes the idea that financial systems operate far away from the understanding of those they affect – a continuation of a personal agenda that permeates Boulos's practice. "The architecture seems to shrink away from you in the film," he explains. "It's an almost physical alienation of how we are socially or economically alienated by the financial system and its machinery and architectures."

Though the films draw on current affairs, the artist is at pains to point out that they seek no journalistic credit or appraisal. Rather, they are artworks that explore significantly more than the narrative that we are presented with, and at their heart is an interest in phenomenology: notions of subjectivity and consciousness that raise more questions about the validity of the recorded image and what we perceive to be real than about the subject itself.

"In both *All that Is Solid Melts into Air* and *No Permanent Address*, there is a sense of questioning what is seen and what is believed and an equation of documentary with fact," Boulos says. "I think that just because we see something or because the camera records something, it doesn't mean that it exists irrefutably and outside of our own subjective experience. *Echo* is trying to undermine the assumption of objectivity of a photographic or a documentary image by breaking it apart and putting you at the centre of it."

That Boulos' moment of change comes as part of Abandon Normal Devices (AND) is appropriate given the event's focus on experimentation with the inauguration of the new AND Fair, which takes vintage World's Fairs as its inspiration, and four 'ateliers', which offer artists the space and time to explore new elements of



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their practice. The ateliers include Marshmallow Laser Feast, a collaborative blend of artists Memo Akten, Robin McNicholas and Barney Steel who will work to connect cinemas across the country in a networked transmission of animation and special effects (the residency itself is closed, but concludes with a public showcase). Other highlights include SEFT-1, a road- and rail-ready vehicle devised by Mexican artists Iván Puig and Andrés Padilla Domene to explore their home country's forgotten outposts, overlooked as political and commercial interests passed them by. It will appear in Ropewalks Square after a month-long experiment in Blackburn to make the craft amphibious – proving that if progressive artists have a wild idea, AND is the place to try to float it.

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*From Muhammad Ali's gloves to a signed Lionel Messi shirt, the sports memorabilia market is filled to overflowing with pieces of sporting history. Rob Allen sorts the winners from the losers*

**V**ISIT ANY MAJOR sporting ground around the world and you will inevitably find a 'Megastore' of some kind selling all sorts of team merchandise. The amount of pure tat can be staggering - Man United garden gnome anyone? You could put all of this rubbish under the stairs for 100 years, but it wouldn't be worth any more than it was when you put it there. This is not to say, however, that there isn't money to be made from sporting memorabilia.

A new world record was set in May this year for the most expensive football programme ever sold, costing its new owner £23,500 a century after it was first bought for an old penny. Admittedly, high-value items like a rare 1909 FA Cup Final programme won't be lurking in most sports fans sock drawers - or under the stairs with the gnome - so where do aspiring collectors start when considering sporting memorabilia?

"There are two types of memorabilia," says Rob Dunlop, a collector of Formula One memorabilia for more than 40 years and owner of [www.finallap.net](http://www.finallap.net), an F1 collectibles site. "There's the stuff that all drivers produce, like the many helmets worn for one practice lap just to sell on to people on a waiting list, who then think they've bought a race-worn helmet. Then there are items like Ferrari driver Jacky Ickx's helmet, which he wore continuously for two seasons and has a handwritten note with his age and blood type on the back in case he needed medical care. That's the kind of personal memorabilia that gets collectors going."

Rob's passion for motorsports started during the late 1950s, a more innocent age, when he could stroll into the pits and grab autographs directly from drivers. While the

glut of instant memorabilia, such as Michael Schumacher replica helmets or Wayne Rooney signed photos may rankle with purists, the sale of items approved by elusive stars from across the sporting spectrum continues unhindered.

Mass-produced items made under licence provide a major source of revenue as both the stars and their teams trade keenly on their 'image rights'. The very highest earners more often sign their names onto shirts, balls and bats in aid of their chosen charities.

But will any of it enter the realm of the sporting 'super memorabilia' and net record-breaking returns? With sport breathing hard down the neck of rock 'n' roll and Hollywood memorabilia for top spot in auction houses worldwide, it's worth a closer look.

### Signed and sealed

Exclusive Memorabilia, a leader in the UK sports autograph industry, is one such example of a supplier producing wholesale quantities of items signed by the biggest names, such as superstar footballer, Lionel Messi. Tom Rollett, Co-Owner and Director of the company, is confident that buying into names with safe reputations can provide shrewd investments.

"Your money is pretty secure if it's invested in sportsmen whose reputations are safe," he explains. "So that might be Muhammad Ali, Henry Cooper or Pele. Boxing, football and Formula One have an established, passionate audience so are good areas to invest in."

Certainly, 'off the shelf' memorabilia from trusted sources appears to carry less risk, but if your signed football shirt is potentially one of hundreds it might not be the centre of future auction room scrambles.

One person who has seen interest in sports memorabilia escalate in recent years is



Dave Davies, Chair of the Autograph Fair Trade Association (AFTAI), a body of self-regulating dealers striving for better trading standards in famous signatures. As a sports agent and specialist autograph dealer, Davies has been affected by the glut of fakes that many collectors blame on faceless eBay sellers, and is actively policing the market, liaising with both eBay and Trading Standards to clean things up.

He suggests that everyone has a sporting hero and we often end up with their autograph whether we collect it ourselves or buy it, but the items that are likely to heat up an auction room will need added stardust. "People will only pay serious money for things that have been part of a star's career," he explains. "A signed shirt that was actually worn by England's World Cup winning captain Bobby Moore might cost something like £30,000, or Frank Bruno's robes from his fight with Mike Tyson would be around the £15,000 mark. They're the most valuable."

Davies' tip is to remember successful stars and teams often bring success for investors, so buying into high achievers is a good idea. If controversy or failure comes into play,



Lionel Messi. **Below:**  
Babe Ruth's New York  
Yankees baseball shirt



*There are plenty  
of fakes out there,  
and avoiding  
those means  
knowing what  
you're looking for  
before setting out*

think twice. "If someone has a good year, there will be a spike in interest," he says. "Liverpool's last season will be considered bad for them, so items from this period don't look great for the future. Items signed by Tiger Woods are only just seeing a little more interest after his recent problems. Manchester City, however, who had their first great season for years, will see big demand for memorabilia connected with that winning team."

### He shoots, he scores

Estimates suggest that the sporting memorabilia market in the US alone is worth between \$1bn and \$5bn each year. Though while football - or soccer - holds little interest for buyers across the pond, it's the sport that keeps the British and European markets alive, with international TV coverage reportedly setting a light under a collecting boom in the Far East, particularly China.

Internationally renowned auction rooms are good places for brave new collectors to make that first purchase, benefitting from stringent checks for authenticity. Bonham's Specialist in Sports and Golf Memorabilia, Dan Davies, who arranges three auctions of up to 1,000 items each year, says that football has little competition in the auction room, with the Premier League attracting collectors from around the world. However, certain criteria apply to the big ticket items that continue to escalate in value.

"Age plays a big part," he says. "Pre-war memorabilia in general is sought after, such as programmes, medals and international caps, and they're going for very high prices as a

result. People also like items that have come to us from the players' families, perhaps sold by their children or grandchildren. There is no better provenance than a family tie. The better the item, the better the authenticity, the better the price."

Davies advises potential collectors do their research before dipping their toe in the water, finding out what's likely to be genuine and what sells. There are plenty of fakes out there, and avoiding those means knowing what you're looking for before setting out, checking out a seller's credentials and asking plenty of questions.

One person who agrees that homework is the key to successful collecting is the owner of the world's biggest private haul of match-worn Manchester United shirts, Alex Sandro.

"A person's experience is vital," he explains. "The more experience you have in a field, the better placed you are to judge. Even auction houses are only as reliable as their research. Wherever you look to buy from, if for any reason you are not sure, if the seller is being evasive or it sounds too good to be true, it's a case of 'buyer beware'."

Whether buying online, at auction or from a private seller, sensible caution plus passion and knowledge for your chosen sport goes a long way. However you choose to start collecting, perhaps with a signed Pele replica shirt for a modest £300 or Ayrton Senna's own racing helmet for a more substantial £71,000, some wise moves could store up a healthy, perhaps football-shaped, nest egg. ■

ROB ALLEN is a freelance writer

### Winner takes it all

Check out some of the most valuable items of sports memorabilia ever sold at auction.

#### **BASEBALL:** Babe Ruth's shirt (£2.79 million)

Whether it be player cards, balls, bats or shirts, baseball continually breaks global auction records. This shirt (right), worn by the legendary New York Yankees player in his first season in 1920, exceeded pre-auction estimates four times over to become the most expensive item of sporting memorabilia in history in May 2012.

#### **BASKETBALL:** Dr James Naismith's Founding Rules of Basketball (£2.72 million)

Where would sport be without rules? The importance of basketball's original rule book, written by the Canadian creator of the game in

1891 and sold in December 2010, was so great that a Texan billionaire broke records to obtain the two page document that started it all.

#### **BOXING:** Muhammad Ali's gloves (£700,000)

Sold at a fundraiser earlier this year in Las Vegas, the same city the legendary boxer wore these gloves to defeat Floyd Patterson in 1965, this big purchase shows the enduring value of items that have been used by 'the greatest'.

#### **FOOTBALL:** The FA Cup (£478,000)

Winners of the world's oldest domestic football competition received this silver cup between 1896 and 1910. The most recent winner is the Chairman of West Ham United, David Gold, who stopped it leaving the UK with an overseas bidder.





REVIEWS

# Paul right now as Queen reign again

## Queen & Paul Rodgers

MEN Arena

NEWS that scientists could resurrect the woolly mammoth with test tube trickery is timely, with Queen bringing their gargantuan show to Manchester. As one legendary, giant, prehistoric creature with masses of hair returns, so too could an extinct elephant.

What two hours in the company of one of rock's greatest pantomime acts proves, however, is that Brian May is far from a museum piece yet and Roger Taylor on drums can just about keep pace, too. Hammer To Fall and Tie Your Mother Down warms up the trademark sixpence May uses to pluck at the strings as Paul Rodgers, formerly front man of bluesy rockers Free, begins to buzz around him, strutting across a stage extended through the middle of the crowd.

Fat Bottomed Girls features perfect harmonies between the five old rockers and the effort is recognised with a fevered response from a crowd stacked to the rafters.

Another One Bites The Dust brings it home that Freddie Mercury is no longer at the helm. Where his voice should have hit like a ton of bricks, Rodgers' tone is smooth and clear, suggesting he certainly doesn't smoke cigars.

I Want To Break Free is the pop whirlwind it always was, marking a highlight in the show before the band disperse for the show's protracted middle section, rudely halting the adrenalin rush. Comprising a touching audience-led Love Of My Life, a strange sequence of drum solos and Roger Taylor finally taking lead for A Kind Of



**ON SONG** Paul Rodgers and Brian May at the M.E.N Arena. There was, 'a fevered response from a crowd stacked to the rafters'

Magic, it slowed the pace to a snail's stroll rather than stop it dead.

With an electric virtuoso display by May to follow, the purists and axe worshippers will have gone away satisfied but the hit chasers were also rewarded for their patience with Radio Ga Ga, the cue for every Queen fan to get off their denim-clad behind, on to their

feet and raise their arms into the air. Crazy Little Thing Called Love and The Show Must Go On reflect the band's opposing shades, always some parts school disco and other parts dramatic opera.

No more was the opera more evident than in Bohemian Rhapsody, for which Mercury - via video screen - and Rodgers share vocal duties. The encore

really allows the singer to flex his muscles with a blistering run-through of Free's All Right Now. We Will Rock You and We Are The Champions bring down the curtain on a two hour show which bubbled with nostalgia and, above all, offered a chance to witness one of Britain's near-extinct rock beasts in all their glory.

Rob Allen



## Art review: Tatton Park Biennial 2012



**The third edition of the Tatton Park Biennial takes as its theme 'Flights of Fancy'. Rob Allen assesses the artists' attempts to achieve the impossible.**

The Tatton Biennial is not known for understatement and this year's is no different. Fifteen artists seek to challenge the serenity and scale of the Tatton Park estate, with its 50 acres of landscaped gardens, Neo-Classical mansion and vast deer park. What better way, then, for an artist to interrupt the fusty, conservative environment of a stately home, than by putting the fuselage of an airliner on the driveway?

Juneau Projects' 'Gleaners of the Infocalypse' imagines a post-apocalyptic world inhabited by two unseen artists who have set up studio in the disembowelled aircraft. The tail is painted with the image of a deer, whilst inside strange artefacts denote the odd, cult-like existence of the squatters. Although impressive in its ambition, much like Dinu Li's crashed UFO a few yards away, such works exist as capsules of thought. They self-consciously contain their ideas in a shell and keep their relationship to the park and the Biennial a less accessible secret.

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The contributions of Simon Faithfull and David Cotterrell are also presented in enclosed spaces, the former a shipping container, the latter an uncomfortable plastic arena that feels like being in an upturned wheelie bin. Cotterrell presents a broadcast of radio waves sent to the nearby Jodrell Bank radio telescope, while Faithfull shows a mesmeric film of a commuter going through the routine, unchallenged by raging flames aboard a plane. Both are awkwardly out of place, the visual stimuli inside less stimulating than the beauty of the gardens outside. On the other hand, Charbel Ackermann's audio-visual piece, 'Dead Cat', is startlingly effective whether you see the work or not – a quiet stroll is interrupted by unexpected ambient sounds.

The brasher forms of art don't make the Biennial breath taking, but gentler ideas on a large scale achieve greater feats. The giant, floating orbs of 'Pont de Singe' by Olivier Grossetête responds to the environment quite literally, as the three helium-filled spheres clatter around in the breeze – or hover calmly in lesser gusts – to suspend an endless bridge that droops lifelessly below. It is a Lewis Carroll vision in Tatton's Alice in Wonderland setting, appearing as both folly and mesmerising focal point.

The Biennial's theme this year is 'Flights of Fancy', and reflects on nature, the park's proximity to Manchester Airport and military history, and like Grossetête, Hilary Jack has grasped the brief with both hands. She has created 'Empty Nest', a giant rook's nest that allows visitors to stand amongst twigs and twine, surveying the gardens from a superior height. There is deeper inspiration at play, of childless mansion tenants and superstition, but the warmth and peace to be found in a human-sized bird's nest is oddly affecting without needing further reading.



A black mini-van, dumped unceremoniously on the lawn with a glider strapped to the roof, comes courtesy of Manchester design and art cooperative, Ultimate Holding Company, winners of the Cheshire Recent Open Graduate Competition. 'The Cartland Institute for Romantic Research' is a wonderful challenge to the conservatism and pomposity that might otherwise pervade seats of entitlement such as Tatton. Reminiscent of a mobile bordello parked in a layby, Cartland's books are read aloud in the van's gaudy interior, recalling her role in late-nineties politics as the architect of 'Back to Basics' and poking fun both at her flimsy, romantic literature and paper-thin moral crusading.

Much of the indoor work seems to struggle with its surroundings this time around, after the successes of previous Biennials, although there are moments to savour. Aura Satz has worked with Tatton's musical past to produce a new, ethereal soundtrack and almost forensic inspection of Tatton's artefacts, while Tessa Farmer's gruesome 'Cosmic Cloud' presents rats, mice and human detritus in orbit. The best of the work, however, is to be found outdoors, where art works best as it fumbles with nature.

*Tatton Park Biennial 2012 continues until 30th September. [tatonparkbiennial.org](http://tatonparkbiennial.org)*

**Images:** Juneau Projects; Olivier Grossetête; Ultimate Holding Company; Hilary Jack; Tessa Farmer; Dinu Li; David Cotterrell