

Profile

■ A League of His Own

Gilda Williams on Roderick Buchanan

Organising the universe by opposing sets, or teams, is a recurring device in human thought and behaviour. Rather than erasing identity, the reassurance of belonging to a team seems to lie in its ability instantly to provide one. Glaswegian artist Roderick Buchanan centres his work on the concept of teams – either literally sports teams or, more laterally, those set by national identity or any other expedient for group cohesion. Buchanan examines properties which define a team, and then he either inverts them, or he discloses the arbitrariness with which we all choose sides and invent alliances in order to position ourselves geographically, socially and politically in relation to the world.

A team is determined by a few indispensable features: an overriding group identity, a uniform, a common use of language. Also necessary is some joint activity and a circumscribed territory. In Buchanan's work, belonging and non-belonging are shifting goalposts; the Home Team blurs with the Visitors, Us with Them, the Good Guys with the Bad. In *Work in Progress*, 1995, Buchanan photographed Glaswegian supporters of rival Italian teams, AC Milan and Inter Milan. These 39 smiling young men in Motta or Fiorucci shirts could easily pass for the genuine Mediterranean article, although these teams' members are essentially traitors, double agents masquerading in the enemy colours.

With Roderick Buchanan, teams play for the world at large; sometimes, just as indifferently, they root for the opposition. In *Yankees*, 1997, the artist photographed anyone whom he spotted wearing a visor cap, jacket or T-shirt bearing the famous blue-and-white insignia of the New York baseball team. Membership was stretched to non-playing supporters in Amsterdam, Paris or Berlin,

thanks to worldwide merchandising, mass tourism and a kind of generic fascination with American sportswear. The symbol is emptied of the game, the players, the stadium, and becomes, like a fake Cartier watch, the emblem of something it is not: in this case, a Yankee. 'Who's on first?' loses any meaning when all the players are randomly scattered, roaming uncoached across the globe.

Most of Buchanan's teamwork, however, is less literal, examining the leveling and grouping properties of language, for example. In *List of Blades*, 1993, he lists every cutting instrument imaginable, with culinary to street-gang to surgical applications. The menacing effect of, say, a cleaver is obviously dulled when keeping company with the smoothly pathetic butterknife, yet Buchanan joins them on the same team. Here, the glaring differences between them – one is capable of decapitation, the other can barely stand up to melted butter – are overcome in this forced kinship. In *A Short Walk through Saint-Nazaire* and other performance-walks on video, Buchanan draws together similar yet unrelated places joined through post-production in a single path based on some abstract, linguistic relation. In *Saint-Nazaire*, Buchanan walked streets bearing dates from 18 June 1940 – the German occupation – to 28 February 1943 – an Allied raid – and so forth, weaving together a kind of macroscaled, über calendar of the city's forgotten events. Buchanan seems to embody in his walks Walter Benjamin's idea that the city 'has become a cosmos of language through the names of its streets'. In other instances a walk connects Sailor's Street with Captain's Street, overcoming military hierarchies, or England's greatest playwright (Shakespeare Street) with her greatest soldier (Cromwell Road). Here Buchanan seems to be re-mapping the city landscape according to conceptually formulated teams of language, like the list of knives, in forcing a comradeship which the words suggest but which, in effect, are meaningless.

In *Notes on Pronunciation*, two speakers, one British, one Finnish, read a list of names – as if

Roderick Buchanan
Work in Progress 1995



Roderick Buchanan
Sodastream 1995



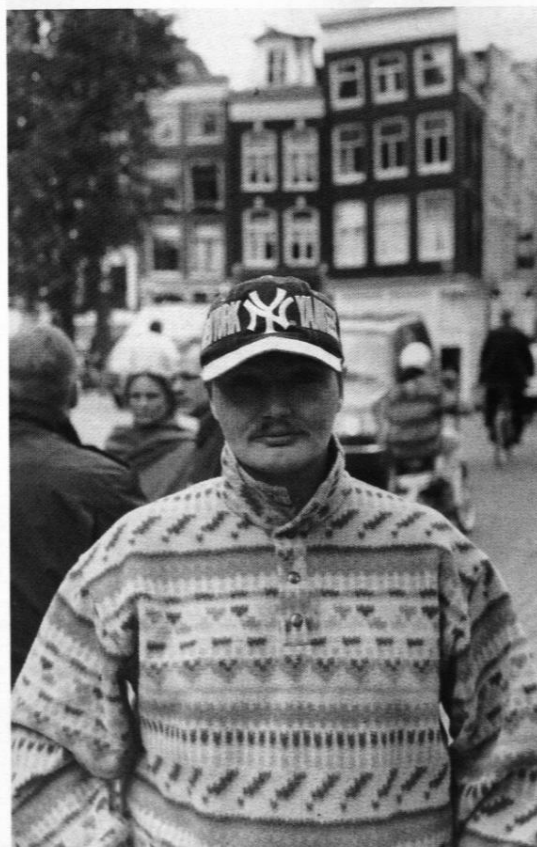
announcing the players at bat – half of which are English-sounding, half Scandinavian. Each speeds through her nation's list, and then stutters and strains over the foreign names unfamiliar to her. It is a perfect metaphor for the arbitrariness of national alliance: each young woman, similar in dress and appearance, defines the other's language as alien, weird, asserting her membership and the normalcy of her side through language. As anyone who has grown up with an odd or unpronounceable name can attest, even the language of names can be a mechanism of exclusion.

Indeed, in examining teamship, what Buchanan is really analysing is otherness: what joins one group of like things together, and how do they consolidate their sameness by positioning themselves against an opponent? What occurs when a thing and its apparent opposite are paired together, and shown as being essentially the same, albeit configured differently? In Buchanan's witty, unforgettable video *Sodastream*, 1995, a series of cheap sodapop bottles are first presented full and intact, held in hand, and then seen dropping from above, smashing loudly onto a hard concrete floor. The result is shattering, fizzy, violent. The artificially coloured froth – in some instances pink (cherry-flavoured), at times orangey (peach), and so forth – recedes as the liquid curls briefly around the shards of glass and then, almost instantly, another bottle is held, then deliberately dropped to the floor, and on and on. There is a childish delight in this pattern, in part because we are spared the chore of cleaning it up, in part because we have access to an endless supply of sickly sweet, teeth-rotting liquid. Pollock is summoned from the dead, dripping gallons of sodapop onto the canvas instead of paint, intensifying the cheap, saccharin emptiness of this nutrition-free drink. This team of like-dressed, like-minded beverages is reconfigured as a massive, cloudy spill, building up a set of chaotic yet similar patterns on the floor like a second, parallel team.

Sometimes teams become hugely numerous, comprising thousands, even millions of members, and its geographical limits are extended to lines called 'borders' and team spirit changes its name to 'patriotism'. Buchanan takes his usual set of questions in examining

national allegiances and divisions, as in his *CIRCUIT, Ceasefire '95, A Trip between Republican and Loyalist West Belfast*, 1995, in which he drove across enemy lines, filming his view through the windshield. Once again crossing enemy lines is uneventful, even undetectable; the landscape remains unvaryingly bleak, and the unseen artist, like a secret agent, becomes a camouflaged member of two indistinguishable, enemy teams. ■

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Roderick Buchanan
Yankee, Amsterdam
1996