Game on!

Sport and contemporary art
Jon Campbell
Yeah flag
(Footscray, Victoria) 2005
bunting, polycotton
100 x 200 cm
Courtesy the artist;
Darren Knight Gallery, Sydney;
and Uplands Gallery, Melbourne

Game on!
Sport and contemporary art
Welcome to Festival Melbourne 2006, the cultural celebration of the Melbourne 2006 Commonwealth Games.

Festival Melbourne 2006 will bring together over 2,000 artists and performers from across the Commonwealth, in Australia’s largest free festival of arts and culture.

The Festival will be an integral part of the 2006 Games, placing the world’s best artists and performers alongside the world’s best athletes in a celebration of the many cultures of the Commonwealth.

During March Melbourne's streets and cultural institutions will present an array of exhibitions, performances and cutting-edge youth programmes for everyone to enjoy. Melbourne will be showcased as one of the world’s truly cosmopolitan cities, building on Australia’s reputation as a leading arts and sporting nation.

The Festival is the culmination of years of planning and we warmly invite you to enjoy Festival Melbourne 2006.

John Howard
Prime Minister of Australia

Steve Bracks
Premier of Victoria

Ronald J. Walker
AC CBE, Chairman, Melbourne 2006
Commonwealth Games Corporation
The University of Melbourne has an extensive tradition of both athletic competition and cultural achievement. At the beginning of the last century, the University fielded an Australian Rules football team in the then-Victorian Football League. For more than one hundred years, the University’s conservatorium has shaped Melbourne’s musical culture. And both popular and avant-garde theatre have always found a fertile ground on the campus.

The participation of the Ian Potter Museum of Art in the cultural festival of the Commonwealth Games echoes the University’s earlier contributions to the Olympic Arts Festival in 1956; another reminder of the close connections between guernsey and gown.

In *Game on!: sport and contemporary art*, visiting artists from Scotland and New Zealand join Australian artists in an exhibition driven by curiosity, passion and a fascination with the games that people play. I am pleased to welcome Roderick Buchanan, Jon Campbell, Mathew Greentree and Richard Lewer to the Potter. Their art is reflective and inquisitive, qualities one associates with University culture. And like the contemporary university, they seek an engagement with the real world.

I sometimes think artists are a little envious of sport; it has a popularity and a human appeal that eludes most art. *Game on!* shows that art is not in competition with sport. Brought together with wit and sensitivity, art and sport share a common ground of pleasure, challenge and achievement.

Sincere thanks go to the artists and their representatives in Australia and abroad, and to those who have loaned artworks for the exhibition, including private lenders and the City of Boroondara. *Game on!* would not have been possible without the support of the Office of Commonwealth Games Coordination and Global Art Projects. We are grateful to the Norman Macgeorge Bequest, managed by the University of Melbourne, for its support of Roderick Buchanan’s residency in Melbourne during the exhibition. Once again, the Potter’s staff across all divisions have dedicated their expertise to ensuring the successful realisation of this exciting project.

Robert McKay
Chairman
The Ian Potter Museum of Art Board

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### Foreword

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### Foreword

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Art and sport are often said to be wholly separate areas of endeavour, as if the world divided easily into Jocks and aesthetes. This point of view is supported equally by popular cliché—sport is masculine, art is feminine—and academic allusion—sport is Dionysian, art Apollonian.

Look a little more closely and, like all clichés, such distinctions tend to blur and break down. But as long as the distinction allows either party to define its turf, it will maintain its appeal. American novelist Gore Vidal quoted tennis champion Bill Tilden's aphorism—‘Never change a winning game, and always change a losing one’—in order to declare that it was ‘a maxim that must be reversed when applied to art’.1 Artists, Vidal suggested, should shun success and always seek to fail; the idea being that the job of the artist is to reverse norms and reject accepted standards. A romantic and enticing vision of the artist-as-rebel but one that hardly stands up in the light of today’s culture industry.

Art is what we do, sport is what we do with each other.

There are, I think, many similarities between sport and art. Some can be stated quite cynically; what is a museum but an Art Hall of Fame, after all? Other parallels are more positive, even uplifting. Both art and sport, for example, achieve moments of magnificence when the balance between structure (the game plan) and instinct (a surrender to intuition) is just right. Both athletes and artists have, in common, a commitment to daily practice, endurance, self-sacrifice, and discipline which can be more inspiring than a deft shot at goal or a finely-turned drawing.

The relationship is a complex one, not a simple matter of difference or equivalence. Artists stalk the boundary line, making sport and art meaningful for both sides. That is, an involvement with sport allows artists to reflect on art’s condition (especially its ability to connect with everyday, social experience) and for their audience to consider what an involvement with sport means for their identity.

There are enough contemporary artists showing an interest in sport for us to reflect on what the attraction is, beyond an enthusiasm for games themselves (which is a good enough reason to make art, after all!). Sport often acts as a microcosm of larger social structures; it constructs smaller realms in which behaviour, organisation, rules and values are brought into focus. Sport also maps the social existence of players and spectators alike. Teams, clubs, administrative systems, sponsors and fans seem equivalent to nation, government, capital and citizenry. In exploring sport, artists can reflect on what society and social being might mean. At the same time, they can ask where artists stand in relation to society. Are artists players, spectators or commentators; are they on the pitch, in the stands, or about from it all? Positioning positioned artists outside of society, postmodernism argues that artists cannot escape social formations. Connecting with sport allows artists to oscillate between the two; to be in, but not always a part of society. Sport also gives artists a space within which they can grapple with issues bound to be of particular interest to those involved in visual media. Now that sport is a global, televisual spectacle, artists use it to reflect on the act of looking. What kind of psychic space does the spectator occupy; is it one of pleasure, analysis, identification, fantasy? What kind of social space do spectators occupy; is their relationship to sport one of affiliation, endorsement, surrender or resistance? Put simply, what does participation—whether committed mass spectacle or a game of beach cricket—do to people? Is sport about community formation or the dissolution of local activity into mass spectacle?

Dr Chris McAuliffe
Director, the Ian Potter Museum of Art
Member of the Board of the St Kilda Sports Club

Game on! Focuses on two elements of sporting competition: allegiance and territory. Both these words now have a ready association with sport. Allegiance encompasses visual effects (club colours, banners), word and voice (slogans, chants, songs, anthems), ritual behaviour (ceremonies, superstition) and heritage (local traditions, family legend, national traditions). Allegiance can be declared by the individual fan or a nation as a whole. Today, however, it is not always clear whether one’s allegiance is to a team or a brand, a club or a franchise.

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The fact that both words have their origins in feudal society—the territory ruled by a lord and the allegiance his subjects owed to him—points to what artists are really interested in: the ways in which sport can open onto power and politics. Richard Lewer sees sport in terms of people rather than systems. What his drawings and animation show, however, is that you don’t sidestep such structures by reducing sport to the people who play it. An individual’s engagement with sport is still meshed with systems. Not only must athletes—professional or amateur—manage time (training, competition), they must also subject themselves to management (goals, coaching, competitions).

Mathew Greentree considers several of sport’s spaces. He begins with the literal territory of the playing field and the architectural space of the stadium. But almost immediately other forms of demarcation are introduced. The titles of his relief constructions refer to boundary lines, timekeeping and the enforcement of regulations by referees. In Decision boundary (2004), tightly wadded slips of paper mimic the spectators crowding the stadium but also suggest that sport can be enveloped in the bureaucracy of statistics and by-laws. What we see here is the familiar contrast of management and free play in contemporary sport. With high-level sport now a big business, and major clubs such as Manchester United being akin to global businesses, we encounter the paradoxical union of moments of chance and improvisation on the pitch with hyper-management of image, brand and business plan.

Historically, sport has often reflected the broad social principles of its society: the time-and-motion management of American football, the laissez-faire approach of Australian Rules football. Greentree’s model stadiums are a reminder of the extent to which social formations underpin our experience of sport. The contemporary stadium can be thought of as the postmodern space par excellence: public space and private enterprise are blurred, the stadium is a multi-function platform for promotion and commercial spectacle, traditional locality gives way to global spectacle. Behaviour is monitored by closed circuit television and channelled towards consumption.

Against this rather dire vision of contemporary stadiums, Greentree poses a more personal, domestic space. Scaled to the size of a table-top, his relief constructions and faux pin-ball machine are a reminder of the fantasy world of domestic play, where small realms are constructed in ad hoc cubby-houses. But the innocence of playful competition is never too far away from the geo-politics of global conflict; the playful boy might grow into a warrior, and the national team bears a family resemblance to a nation’s army.
Jon Campbell has explored vernacular and amateur sport rather than professional or national competitions. His paintings have depicted backyard cricket, junior sporting carnivals and recreational surfing. In *Game on!*, Campbell reflects on allegiance through one of its most prominent vehicles: the flag. One literally swears allegiance to, or salutes, a flag. And in international competition, flags are used to badge teams and announce victors on the podium. In the stands, fans produce their own, idiosyncratic banners. Flag waving is a term synonymous with patriotism, but if you make your own banner you can declare a different kind of allegiance. Campbell’s *Yeah flag* (2005) is a banner for the ideal supporter: a barracker who sets aside parochial allegiance to celebrate any and all competitors. Using Campbell’s flag, Melburnians, the world’s greatest barrackers, can greet all athletes with a welcoming and resounding, ‘Yeah!’. Some are so taken with the *Yeah flag* that they have proposed it as a new national banner for Australia.

Lewer translates these qualities to the realm of art itself. The common term for art-making—artistic practice—is paralleled with the idea of practice, or training, in sport. As any coach will tell you, natural talent is not enough. The disciplines of goal-setting, daily training, strategically managed competition and visualisation all apply to art as well. Lewer’s art has quite literally involved athletic training, calisthenics in performance incorporating boxing and wood-chopping, but he also sees the value in sport as a social structure. Training, playing in a team, entering a tournament, even the simple act of finding the time and the people to play with, amount to the construction of a social space, a community of competitors. Lewer’s work has the quality of an anthropologist’s field-notes. What he finds, as he joins friends in sporting events or observes training sessions at sporting complexes, is that sport has a strong thread of behavioural management. The athlete must shape his actions according to the rules of the game, the demands of the apparatus or the shifting conditions of the elements. But behaviour must also be shaped against strategy in order to achieve the deferred goal of victory. The time-honoured metaphor—the bodily discipline of sport makes for a larger social discipline—reappears. Sport is about desire and fantasy: the athlete must hunger for victory but only by managing desire can he win.

Like the other artists in the exhibition, Campbell is interested in the languages of sport. ‘Yeah’ is a simple, colloquial, vaguely macho cry. It has the unsophisticated, visceral quality that worries people about the mass psychology of sport; all that enthusiasm and energy seems not too far short of mob frenzy. On a flag, language becomes a logo, just as advertising promotions at major sporting events can turn logos and slogans into everyday language. For all their sanctity, flags undergo a curious transformation in the world of sport. They are converted into logos and badges. And their colours and emblems mutate, not always convincingly, into jazzy graphic designs on team clothing and merchandise. Mimicking this process, Campbell has produced lapel badges and souvenir-sized paper *Yeah* flags. In another instance of boundary crossing, his aim is to take his art out of the gallery and into the stadium.

Richard Lewer

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Roderick Buchanan’s engagement with sport has been conducted since the early 1990s and is so extensive that the artist describes himself as the sporting equivalent of an entomologist. Putting contemporary sport under the microscope, Buchanan considers the impact of its dissemination through media and merchandising. With team clothing now a global leisurewear market, American baseball caps migrate from their home territory and turn up on street corners in the artist’s home city in Scotland. This distribution both amplifies the profile of a team and reduces its meaning. The baseball cap is more a component of the lingua franca of leisurewear than an explicit declaration of allegiance. The formal declaration of national allegiance also suffers through becoming a televisual ritual. In Endless Column (1999), the camera pans across teams at the commencement of a game: national colours are boiled down to rather lurid logos, as if national identity were becoming an exercise in branding. The words of a national anthem are humbled to the real task, the looking game. And at the other end of the telecast, in Tombez la chemise (2002), the players become oddly distracted, wandering around on the pitch as if their presence had lost all meaning when the final whistle was blown. Removing their team colours, the players become more physically real; not just because we can see their bodies but because the abstract character of national costume is stripped away.

In the new territory of televised sport, reality—the blood, sweat and tears of physical contest—is subsumed within the rhetoric of editing, commentary, back stories and side-bars. When the frenzy of physical activity, patriotic barracking and mythologising commentary dies down, and the playing field begins to look like an empty stage, Buchanan finds a strangely quiet moment during which we can contrast the ceremonial baggage of sport with the essence of the game itself.

Like the other artists in Game on!, Buchanan does not deny allegiance a place in sport. It must be there. As his Scottish schoolchildren demonstrate, one’s social identity is built by declaring which team one loves and which one hates. When traditional local rivalries intrude, this declaration attaches you to history, geography, politics and tradition, not simply to a team.

Which returns us to the thread uniting all the artists in this exhibition. There is an analytical aspect to their work but it doesn’t have the social scientific character of formal studies of sport. The artists see the patterned and structured aspects of language, symbol, space and behaviour in sport. And in these, they see equivalents to their own presence in the art world. This is enough for them to question the popular separation of the two spheres. More than that, however, they see the structuring of human experience, for better and worse, in sport. Far from being a form of escapism, sport is something that entrenches us in the world, whether that world is a community club or a global franchise, a pick-up game or an international tournament.

PLAY HARD OR go HOME
Roderick Buchanan

List of works in the exhibition

Roderick Buchanan was born in 1965 in Glasgow, where he currently lives and works. Since completing a Master of Arts at the University of Ulster, Belfast, in 1990, Buchanan has exhibited across Europe, Asia, the United States, Canada and Australia. He was the recipient of the first Becks Futures Award in 2000 from the Institute of Contemporary Art, London, for his video installation Gobstopper (1999), and participated in both the 48th and 49th Venice Biennales. Most recently, he represented Great Britain at the 11th Indian Triennale in New Delhi (2005). Buchanan’s photographs, films, videos and installations have been exhibited in major solo exhibitions at the Camden Arts Centre, London (Film, video and 18th-century politics, 2005); Galerie Praz-Delavallade, Paris (2003, 2000 and 1998); and Lisson Gallery, London (2001). Since the late 1980s Buchanan has taken part in numerous group exhibitions including Love over gold, Gallery of Modern Art, Glasgow (2003); Black box recorder: young video art from Great Britain, Bunkier Sztuki, Crakow, Poland (2001); Spectator sport, Cornerhouse, Manchester (2002); Sporting Life, Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney (2000); and Au-delà du spectacle, Pompidou Centre, Paris (2000). His video works have been screened at Palais de Tokyo, Paris (No foot last night, 2002); Museum of Modern Art, New York (New video from Great Britain, 1997); and the Institute of Contemporary Art, London (Take 2, 1997). Roderick Buchanan is represented by Lisson Gallery, London, and Galerie Praz-Delavallade, Paris.

• Work in progress, Tramway, Glasgow, 1995.
Jon Campbell was born in Northern Ireland in 1961 and arrived in Australia in 1964. He lives in Melbourne and has been a lecturer in painting at the Victorian College of the Arts (VCA) since 1999. Campbell studied painting at the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology before completing a Bachelor of Fine Arts (Honours). He has a Graduate Diploma in Painting at the VCA in 1985. He was a studio assistant at 200 Gertrude Street in Melbourne from 1986 to 1987. From 1987 to 1989 and 1992 to 1994 he exhibited at Robert Lindsay Gallery, Melbourne, and from 1995 to 2000, he exhibited at Robert Lindsay Gallery, Melbourne. Recent solo exhibitions include Classic & Modern, Ian Potter Centre: NGV Australia, Melbourne (2004); It’s a world, Rm 103, Auckland (2003); and the survey Jon Campbell’s greatest hits vol. 3, Glen Els City Gallery, Melbourne (1999). Selected group exhibitions include The Archibald Prize, Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney (2005); ART&Machine, Turin, Italy (2005); Fieldwork: Australian art 1968–2002, the Ian Potter Centre: NGV Australia, Melbourne (2002); and So you wanna be a rock star: portraits and rock music in Australia, the Ian Potter Centre: NGV Australia, Melbourne (2002); and as a solo performer supporting Martin Creed at the Excelsior Hotel, Sydney (2005). He has also been a member of the art collective ADAWO since 2003. Jon Campbell is represented by Uplands Gallery, Melbourne, and Darren Knight Gallery, Sydney.

Mathew Greentree was born in Melbourne in 1974, where he currently lives and works. Greentree studied printmaking at the Victorian College of the Arts before completing a Postgraduate Diploma in Public Art at the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology in 2000. In his most recent solo exhibition, Stadium united, at Watson Place Gallery, Melbourne (2005), Greentree presented sport-related sculptures and photographs. Other selected solo exhibitions include Grandstand, Hagan Gallery, Melbourne (2002); in the red corner, Dante’s Upstairs Gallery, Melbourne; and International air space, 69 Smith Street, Melbourne (2000). Greentree has also participated in group exhibitions since the mid-1990s including 808, Dante’s Upstairs Gallery, Melbourne (1999); and an exhibition of new drawings and prints and Radio, both at 69 Smith Street, Melbourne (1999). Small things, Victorian College of the Arts Gallery, Melbourne (1999); and Discourse, YunYa Gallery, Melbourne. He is represented by Watson Place Gallery, Melbourne.


Headhouse, Christopher, Stadium united, Watson Place Gallery, Melbourne, 2005.


Richard Lewer was born in 1970 in Hamilton, New Zealand, and arrived in Australia in 1997. He currently lives and works in Melbourne. In 2000 Lewer completed a Master of Visual Arts at the Victorian College of the Arts and in 2004 he returned to New Zealand as artist-in-residence at Unicollege, Wanganui. Since that time he has exhibited widely in Australia and New Zealand, with annual solo exhibitions held at legge Gallery, Sydney (since 2001); and Odepa Rex Gallery, Auckland (since 1999). Lewer has also had solo exhibitions at Millwood House, Dunedin, and Panthouse and Pavement, Melbourne (both 2000); and Ian Land Gallery, Wellington (1999). Selected group exhibitions include A rear window, the Physics Room, Christchurch (2004); Practice, Adam Art Gallery, Wellington (2003); Croyssley & Scott, Melbourne (2002); and Adrift: nomadic New Zealand art, Conical Inc., Melbourne (2001). Lewer’s performances have included a wood-chopping display, presented as part of the final work for his masters degree (2000); a boxing match between himself and Australian artist Luke Sinclair at Conical Inc. (2001); and a table-tennis match at Adam Art Gallery, Wellington (2003). Richard Lewer is represented in Australia by Legge Gallery, Sydney; and in New Zealand by Odepa Rex Gallery, Auckland, and Mark Hutchins Gallery, Wellington.


Headhouse, Christopher, Stadium united, Watson Place Gallery, Melbourne, 2005.
Game on! sport and contemporary art

Published by the Ian Potter Museum of Art, the University of Melbourne, on the occasion of the exhibition Game on! sport and contemporary art, 28 January to 23 April 2006

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ISBN 0 7340 3605 1

Photography Jon Campbell: inside front cover, p. 13; Andrew Curtis poster insert; Richard Lioncer: cover image, pp. 10, 11, 18, 19; Scott Miles: pp. 8, 9, 16; Tania Virgona: p. 17
Catalogue design Kim Scott Design

Printed in Australia by BPA Print Group
Print quantity 500

Cover image
Roderick Buchanan
Tombez la chemise
2002
videotape transferred to DVD
colour, silent
3:15 minutes
Courtesy the artist; Lisson Gallery, London; and Galerie Praz-Delavallade, Paris

Cover image
Richard Lewer
I was either going to be an artist or own my own sports shop
2005
photocopies from hand-drawn artwork
180 parts: dimensions variable
Courtesy the artist and Legge Gallery, Sydney

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Game on!: sport and contemporary art