



Gilbert & George Gilbert Proesch (b. 1943) and George Passmore (b. 1942)

by Ray Anne Lockard

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Gilbert & George are two of the most important avant-garde artists on the international art scene of the late twentieth- and early twenty-first centuries. Their work explores themes ranging from city life, with all its frailties, to religion, scatology, and homosexuality. As a result, their work is controversial and challenging.

In writing their early art manifesto entitled *What Our Art Means*, the duo stated that their intent is to break social taboos and express contempt for established norms in an effort to open debate, alter people's opinions, and effect change in society. The frequently negative reaction to their work--especially to its scatological and sexual imagery--may be an indication that they have succeeded.

Early Years and Education

Gilbert Proesch was born in San Marino, Italy, in a village located in the Dolomite Mountains, in 1943. His father was a shoemaker and he trained as a woodcarver in his father's workshop. Gilbert later went on to study at the Wolkenstein School of Art, the Hallein School of Art in Austria, and the Akademie der Kunst in Munich.

George Passmore also comes from a working class family. Born in Plymouth, Devon in 1942, he was raised in Tiverton. He left school to work in a shop when he was fifteen years old and eventually studied at the Darlington Adult Education Center in Devon and the Darlington Hall College of Art.

An adventuresome youth, George hitchhiked to London, found a day job in the China section of Selfridge's department store and worked an evening job as a barman at the Player's Club in the city's Strand district. He eventually studied for a year at the Oxford School of Art.

Collaborators in Life and Art

The two artists met in 1967 when they both earned a place in the Advanced Sculpture course at St. Martin's School of Art in London. They have worked together since that time, sharing a home, called "Art for All" in the working-class neighborhood of Spitalfields on Fournier Street in London's east end.

Proesch and Passmore have always worked as an artistic collaborative and dropped their family names to become known as "Gilbert & George." In adopting a collective name, the artists refused individualization and reinforced the point that their art is their life together.

The artists purposefully created an image of themselves as elegantly clothed, well-groomed, and conservative men in order to revolt against the elitism of the art world from a position of normalcy.

First Works

The first works created by Gilbert & George centered on performance.

In 1968, after small shows in Frank's Sandwich Bar and other locales, they felt slighted when they were not invited to participate in London's exhibition of new minimalist and conceptual art entitled *When Attitude Becomes Form*.

They responded to this snub by painting their heads and standing motionless in the center of the gallery on opening night. German dealer Konrad Fischer saw the audacious performance and immediately offered the duo a show at the Düsseldorf Kunsthalle. The artists became an overnight success and soon had exhibitions in the Netherlands, Belgium, Italy, New York, and London.

The following year, Gilbert & George gained fame with the now famous performance piece they eventually entitled *The Singing Sculpture*.

In this work, the duo stood on a table wearing identical gray worsted, three-button suits, faces decorated in bronze make-up, one holding a cane, the other artist holding a glove. The performance was accompanied by the English music-hall song, "Underneath the Arches," played on a tape recorder located underneath the pedestal on which they stood. When the pre-World War II popular song ended, the artists exchanged cane and glove; then one of them stepped down from the table, reset the equipment, and stepped back up to the table.

The piece was performed in different locations over several years, sometimes in eight-hour marathons. In this performance, Proesch and Passmore themselves literally became their art. The work, which appealed to viewers of all ages and classes, was also notable for its accessibility.

In 1989, *The Singing Sculpture* was exhibited again in honor of its twentieth anniversary at the Sonnabend Gallery in New York.

Other early series of works created by Gilbert & George included postcard sculptures addressed to collectors and gallery owners in which they detailed their daily lives and magazine sculptures published in selected periodicals. *The Meal*, a performance piece in a hall in Ripley, was an event during which Gilbert & George served dinner to David Hockney in front of an invited audience.

Other early series that were not performance pieces included *Drinking Sculptures* (1974), a series exploring drunkenness, and *Bloody Life* (1975). The latter series included a work entitled *Coming* (1975).

Consisting of a series of nine black-and-white photographic images arranged in a segmented grid, *Coming* included separate images of Gilbert & George with a splash of semen depicted in the center grid. By virtue of the fact that the two men lived and worked exclusively together, homosexuality was always an underlying concern in their work. *Coming*, however, made the unstated subject visible early in their career, even as their depiction of semen inaugurated a practice of depicting bodily fluids that would continue throughout their career.

The duo also exhibited enormous paintings and charcoal drawings in galleries throughout London at this early point in their career. Their penchant for huge canvases would also continue throughout their career.

At the end of the 1970s, the artists seemed to be searching for an art form with which they were comfortable that also allowed them to express messages that were important to them.

One series entitled *Dirty Word Pictures* (1977-1978) quotes graffiti found in urban spaces throughout the world, but also specifically in their neighborhood. It caused a storm of criticism for the artists' use of expletives.

A work from the series entitled *The Penis* (1978) featured photographs of Gilbert & George awash in the color red. A black-and-white photograph of a graffiti sketch depicting an erect penis ejaculating onto a person's tongue is included, the word "suck" scrawled on a wall next to the drawing.

The series allowed the artists to put graffiti in an exhibition space and forced viewers to acknowledge and think about urban space as a sexual space. The photographic grid form and hand-colored black-and-white photographs used in *Dirty Word Pictures* continue to have meaning for Gilbert & George.

The 1980s

The artists came into their own during the 1980s. At the beginning of the decade they had a traveling mid-career retrospective exhibition at the Stedelijk van Abbemuseum in Eindhoven.

At this time, the artists began to use an increasing number of colors in their photographic works. The presence of color emphasized the slick, stylized and cartoon-like appearance of their work. The content of these works continued to reflect urban space and morality, as well as the hope and fear associated with modern man and society. Their familiar themes--including religion, sex, and violence--were presented in a more distanced and ironic manner.

Series executed during this period include such titles as *Shit Faith* (1982), in which a Latin cross is formed in the center of the work, which consists of a representation of four brown turds issuing forth from four rosy, pink, bottoms. The cross functions as an ironic comment on the manner in which the church labels certain things (for example, gay men and excrement) as "dirty."

This work can also be viewed as a denunciation of the Christian faith and its central symbol of hope. Gilbert & George also, however, seem to show faith in a human product that society disposes of immediately and uses as a vulgar profanity.

Also in the 1980s, the artists began to create an increasing number of works with gay themes.

The anatomically explicit work entitled *Hunger* (1982) is illustrative of lust's urgency. This work presents two faces--one red with yellow highlights, the other, yellow with red highlights, painted in the same reversed patterning--engaged in fellatio. The red and yellow colors seem to speak of reciprocal, hot-blooded desire soon to be followed by the electric impulse of sexual climax.

Good (1983) makes a statement about the ambiguity of gay desire. This photographic work is overlaid against a gray-toned brick wall. A Latin cross, the central symbol of the Christian faith, is formed of overlapping red roses, a Catholic symbol for the Virgin Mary. The rose is also a visual representation of the anus, locus of male-male sexual desire. *Rose Hole* (1980) uses the same sexual coding.

A number of the artists' works created during the 1980s center on the penis, male sexuality, and sex between men. *Holy Cock* (1982), for example, depicts a red, erect penis flanked by two testicles superimposed on a white background of flowing semen droplets.

In the mid-1980s, Gilbert & George's works displayed a compositional and chromatic exuberance. This exuberance was obvious in a major exhibition of their work entitled "New Moral Works" at the Sonnabend Gallery in New York in 1985.

As the decade ended, however, it was apparent that the tenor of their work had changed in response to the AIDS crisis. An exhibition of works about illness and destruction, *Art for AIDS* at the Anthony d'Offay Gallery in London, ran from April 20 through May 20, 1989 and all proceeds were donated to CRUSAIDS, a British AIDS charity organization.

The 1990s

The artists' increasing success and fame were heralded in a major exhibition in Moscow in 1990.

In the final decade of the twentieth century, Gilbert & George continued to create and exhibit gay-themed work. In the triptych entitled *Urinal* (1991), the duo once again combined Christian references with bodily functions and this time took the subject literally into the church by using the form of an altarpiece.

In this work, a photograph of a urinal is superimposed over an image of the interior of a church, placed where an altar would normally be located and positioned in the central panel of a triptych. Representations of the artists are superimposed in two forms; once in yellow-colored full-figures, secondly in white half-portraits shown from the waist down.

The tripartite work, created in one of the traditional forms of an altarpiece, places the locus of gay male public sex into the most important part of any church--its altar. It both makes the site sacred for gay men and confronts the viewer with gay sex.

The 1990s were also a time in which Gilbert & George focused the subject of their work on all forms of bodily excreta, ranging from tears, spit, and blood to urine, semen, and feces. As if that were not enough, the subjects were often photographed under a microscope and then magnified to either life-size or larger than life.

As they stated in their manifesto at the beginning of their career together, Gilbert & George create deliberately provocative work that is harshly critical of society and its taboos. Seen in this light, the artists' scatological works can be read in three ways: as a "dirty joke," as a source of irreverent humor, or as a means of protest.

Gilbert & George use feces to make the private public, break social taboos, show contempt for established norms, and make a statement about social ills. For them, feces also function as a metaphor for artistic struggle in general and the dangerous life of gay men in particular.

The artists first used excrement as a theme in their 1983 work entitled *Shitted*, in which the artists superimposed photographs of themselves facing each other in front of a wall of vastly magnified, orange-brown turds. Gilbert & George are shown wearing blue and green with the same brown substance in their mouths. In this work, they seem to refer to themselves as the creators of the "shit" that critics claimed they brought into the art world.

A decade later, in 1993, they exhibited a collection of all of their works on the subject, at the Wolfsburg Kunstmuseum. Two years later, *The New Shit Pictures* was shown in Cologne and *Naked Shit*, the complete series, was exhibited at the South London Art Gallery where the deliberately provocative works were large enough to cover completely the gallery's walls. *In the Shit* (1996) measures 338 x 426 cm (approximately 11 x 14 feet). Hardly a work to be ignored or discreetly removed!

Gilbert & George have also frequently depicted blood, another social taboo. *Bloody Faith* (1996, 1190 x 528 cm), for example, simultaneously reflects something covered with blood, the Eucharist, and the AIDS pandemic. The title also comments on the church's attitude toward gay men and puns on the word "bloody," a foul epithet used by the British to express anger.

Maintaining a fear of blood, bodily fluids, and nudity is impossible when viewing Gilbert & George's oeuvre. *The Fundamental Pictures* created in 1997 was a two-part exhibition shown at both London's Lehmann Maupin Gallery and the Sonnabend Gallery. The gargantuan works depicted macro-images of feces and

other bodily secretions labeled with "fundamental" words like piss, shit, and spunk.

One work entitled *In the Piss* (1997) consists of a larger than life frontal nude portrait of the artists, arms over each other's shoulders, against a background of yellow urine crystals. The enormous work is an attempt to confront society's prejudice against male nudity.

Bloody People (1997, 377 x 1143 cm) illustrates the nude pair in "hear, see, and speak no evil" poses.

Gilbert & George are also represented in flesh tone wearing jockey shorts in the work entitled *Spit Law* (1997, 254 x 528 cm). The printed passage of Leviticus that condemns men who have sex with each other runs down the center of the work. Images of magnified spit are shown against a red ground. This work makes a clear comment on the Biblical text quoted by some Christians to justify homophobia.

During 1997, Gilbert & George also created *Spit Naked* (226 x 317 cm). In this work, they are depicted in the same pose as Michelangelo's *Pietà* (1498-1499), superimposed against a ground of red. The point seems to be that the artists support each other because no one else will do it, including representatives of the contemporary Christian church. The red background symbolizes the violence shown against gay men and the very real threat of blood infected by the HIV virus.

The New Millennium

The artists continue to create gay-themed works in the new millennium. *New Horny Pictures* debuted at London's White Cube Gallery in 2001. This series of sixteen works addresses the controversial subject of the gay male escort business. The series consists of sixteen enlarged photographs of individual advertisements of men offering themselves for gay sex. Their gargantuan size not only makes visible the invisible, it forces viewers to recognize the nocturnal, urban environment they normally ignore.

Gilbert & George have often received very negative receptions from critics and the public alike. Nevertheless, they have been included in the most important biennial exhibitions, including Documenta (1972 and 1978), the Venice Biennale (1982), the Sydney Biennial (1984), and the Carnegie International (1985). Moreover, they were awarded London's Turner Prize in 1986 and they continue to exhibit their work around the globe.

Despite its widespread uneasiness about their subject matter, the art establishment has accepted Gilbert & George as artists crucial to contemporary times.

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