

## EDUCATION NOTES

INVESTIGATING ARTWORKS IN THE GALLERY  
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ART  
GALLERY  
NSW

## 40 YEARS KALDOR PUBLIC ART PROJECTS

# 1973 GILBERT & GEORGE



# 1973 GILBERT & GEORGE

## PROJECT

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The Singing Sculpture  
The Shrubberies Number 1  
The Shrubberies Number 2

16–21 August 1973  
Art Gallery of NSW, Sydney

29 August – 2 September 1973  
National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne

We want our art to speak across the barriers of knowledge directly to People about their Life and not about their knowledge of art. The 20th century has been cursed with an art that cannot be understood. The decadent artists stand for themselves and their chosen few, laughing at and dismissing the normal outsider. We say that puzzling, obscure and form-obsessed art is decadent and a cruel denial of the Life of People.

Gilbert & George, 'What our art means', *The charcoal and paper sculptures, 1970–1974*, Musée d'Art Contemporain de Bordeaux, Bordeaux 1986, p 76

GILBERT & GEORGE

Gilbert & George present  
**The Singing Sculpture** at the  
Art Gallery of NSW in 1973

Photo: Douglas Thompson  
Courtesy Art Gallery of New South Wales



# 1973 GILBERT & GEORGE

We could easily imagine – I think it would be reasonable, anyway – that the pair's robo-movements, their posing, their never-changing suits, and Georg's unlikely made-up Prince Charles accent, are all part of the same package of insulating themselves against a world that is hostile to their particular sexuality – their badge of defiant otherness.

Matthew Collings, *Independent*, Weekend Review, 6 November 1999, p 5

## INTRODUCTION

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Gilbert & George are now among the most famous living British artists. Four decades ago, they adopted the identity of 'living sculptures', becoming not only creators, but also the art itself. Their unflagging impersonality and assiduous staging of everyday events and social rituals – as art – was remarkable and uncanny in 1973 when they visited Australia for their Kaldor project, and remains so today. Although they no longer present works in the same form, and are now perhaps better known for their pictures and films, *The Singing Sculpture* is recognised as the art piece that launched their artistic career. It embodies the 'living sculpture' concept that has informed both their art and their lives. The suits they wore for this sculpture became a sort of prim, conservative uniform for them, and they rarely appear in public unless wearing them. They dress alike, and when their faces are covered in metallic paint, they look alike. Rarely is one of the pair to be seen without the other, and they refuse to disassociate their art from their everyday lives. As Gilbert phrased it: 'Our existence became the artwork'.

## ARTIST

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### Gilbert

born 1943 in the Dolomites, Italy  
lives and works in London, England

### George

born 1942 in Devon, England  
lives and works in London, England

George Passmore and Gilbert Proesch met when they were students at St Martins School of Art, London. Their first major artwork, *The Singing Sculpture*, 'happened by mistake', according to Gilbert. 'At the end of the year, we posed with our sculptures, but we realised we didn't need them. That was when we realised we didn't believe in objects' (*Tate Etc*, issue 9, spring 2007). The piece was initially shown at art schools and wherever they could present it. It gained momentum and was shown 26 times between 1969 and 1972, in Germany, Italy, Belgium, Norway and Switzerland, and at the newly opened Sonnabend Gallery in New York, before they brought it to in Australia in 1973 for their Kaldor project. In 1991, the sculpture was 'dusted off' for the anniversary exhibition of Sonnabend Gallery.

'Art for all' is the belief that underpins Gilbert & George's art. They began to create films and pictures when they realised that presentations like *The Singing Sculpture* were extremely limited in the amount of people they could reach. These works extended the idea of living sculpture in a different form.

Almost all of the images, which include images of themselves, are gathered within walking distance of their home in London's East End. By 1975, they were producing large-format pictures, overlaid with black grids, which capture a broad range of human experience, encompassing an unexpected gamut of emotions and themes – from romantic pastoral images to urban settings of

a deteriorating London, from commercial pornographic material to images of religious fanaticism. By the late 1980s, they were creating stained-glass coloured photo-pieces incorporating faeces and bodily fluids in reaction to the HIV/AIDS epidemic.

In 2008, Gilbert & George were the subject of the largest retrospective exhibition ever staged by London's Tate Modern.

## PROJECT

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John Kaldor invited Gilbert & George to present *The Singing Sculpture* in Australia in 1973, after Christo and Jeanne-Claude suggested this other collaborative team to him. In the book *40 years: Kaldor Public Art Projects*, he recalled their first meeting in London: 'They walked in, like they do today, matching suits, ties, matching everything. They were very formal, friendly.'

For *The Singing Sculpture*, Gilbert & George – dressed in suits, with their faces, necks and hands painted in metallic paint – stood on a table and sang along to an uplifting recording of the Depression-era music-hall song 'Underneath the arches' while turning slowly in a circle and repeating a series of choreographed gestures. George recalled: 'The important feeling we had was that we wanted to do something attractive and emotional. We didn't want to do this grubby, fake-serious stuff' (*Tate Etc*, issue 9, spring 2007, p 58).

In early presentations, the song was played twice for a total of six minutes but some versions lasted up to eight hours. In Australia for the Kaldor project, the song was repeated 112 times each day, totalling five hours. It was presented for six days in Sydney at the Art Gallery of NSW, and then for five days at the National Gallery of Victoria in Melbourne. In both venues, Gilbert & George also displayed *The Shrubberies Number 1* and *Number 2*, a large 'charcoal on paper sculpture'.

A documentary of Gilbert & George's visit was filmed for ABC TV's *Survey* program by Brian Adams, capturing their presentation of the sculpture and their strolls across Sydney and its parks.

## WORLD EVENTS: 1973

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- \_ US troops pull out of Vietnam
- \_ Patrick White wins Nobel Prize for Literature
- \_ Sydney Opera House opens
- \_ Mobile phone invented
- \_ Lucy Lippard publishes the book *Six years: the dematerialization of the art object 1966 to 1972*
- \_ Walter Benjamin's influential 1936 essay 'The work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction' published in English
- \_ National Gallery of Australia controversially buys Jackson Pollock's *Blue poles*
- \_ First Biennale of Sydney held at the Sydney Opera House Gallery
- \_ **3rd Kaldor project:** Gilbert & George present *The Singing Sculpture* and exhibit *The Shrubberies* at the Art Gallery of NSW and Melbourne's National Gallery of Victoria
- \_ **4th Kaldor project:** Miralda creates *Coloured feast* at the John Kaldor Fabricmaker showrooms in Sydney and *Coloured bread* at the Art Gallery of NSW

## THEME

### Performance art

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In performance art, works in a variety of media are premeditated and then executed before a live audience. Although this might appear to be 'theatre', theatrical performances present *representations* of events, while performance art presents *actual* events as art.

An open-ended artform, performance art can have many different variables, often with a renovating experience of time and space (long or short in duration, intimate or spectacular in scale). It can work outside the context of museums and gallery spaces and draws freely on many disciplines and media (narrative, poetry, music, dance, architecture, video, slides), often putting the body squarely at the centre of art-making. Enter Gilbert & George.

Performance does us not only break down the categories between artforms (between art and architecture, in the works of Frank Stella or Vladimir Tatlin, for example), but indeed between art and life. It directly raises the question of art's role in life, and life's role in art.

**See:** Hugo Ball's Cabaret Voltaire

Founded by Ball in 1916, this now-famous Zurich nightclub featured spoken word, dance and music as artists experimented with new forms of performance, such as sound poetry and simultaneous poetry.

**See:** Alfred Jarry's *Ubu Roi (King Ubu)*

Premiering in 1896, this play from French writer Jarry was one of the precursors to the Theatre of the Absurd and the surrealist art movement of the early 20th century.

**See:** Hans Namuth *Jackson Pollock painting* 1950

Performance art explored the relation of subjectivity to art production along a slipstream created by abstract expressionist artists such as Pollock and Willem de Kooning. Before it was museumised and corporatised, abstract expressionism provided, in its free-flowing lines, an alternative model of how to be a person, of how to desire, of how to re-experience time.

**See:** Yoko Ono *Cut piece* 1964

In this work, first performed in 1964 in Japan and later in other venues and by other performers, Ono invited the audience to come up and cut away her clothing as she sat motionless on the stage.

**See:** Joseph Beuys *Explaining pictures to a dead hare* 1965

Some performance works plug in to indigenous energies through tribal ritual, positioning the artist as teacher, activist, shaman, healer. Unlike literal communication or pure entertainment, ritual is about transformation of consciousness by intensity of concentration and the transformation of meaning and symbols. In Beuys' conversation with a dead hare (a traditional symbol of fecundity), the artist – wearing a magnetic sole on one foot and felt on the other – is connecting to the ancient cycles of death and rejuvenation.

**See:** Chris Burden *Shoot piece* 1971

For this performance piece (also known simply as *Shoot*), Burden was shot in his left arm by an assistant from a distance of about five metres. Many saw it as a statement about both the war in Vietnam and the right to bear arms that is enshrined in the US constitution.

**See:** Mike Parr *Integration 3 (leg spiral)* 1975

Australian artist Parr lit a fuse that spiralled around his leg to demonstrate his increasing concern with the relationship between action and catharsis.

**See:** Sam Hsieh *Cage piece* 1978–79

What is the difference between an artist performing for one year in a cell, and a real prisoner spending one year in a cell? From 29 September 1978 to 30 September 1979, Hsieh locked himself in a 3.5 x 2.7 x 2.4 metre wooden cage, furnished only with a wash basin, lights, a pail and a single bed. He was not allowed to talk, read, write, listen to the radio or watch TV. A friend came daily to deliver food, remove the artist's waste, and take a single photograph to document the project. The performance was open to viewers once or twice a month from 11am to 5pm.

**See:** Sophie Calle

In 1980, Calle met a man at a party and followed him to Venice, tailing him from a distance through its streets. A year later she returned to Venice where she got a temporary job as a chambermaid and then made a piece about her imagined ideas of who the hotel guests were, based on their personal belongings.

**See:** Eva and Franco Mattes aka 0100101110101101.ORG  
*Reenactment of Gilbert & George's The Singing Sculpture, Synthetic Performance in Second Life* 2007

In a series of reenactments of historical performances inside virtual worlds such as *Second Life*, Eva and Franco Mattes perform all the actions through their avatars, who were constructed from their bodies and faces. People from all over the world can attend and interact with the live performances by connecting to the video-game.

## COLLECTION CONNECTIONS

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**Relevant works in the Art Gallery of NSW collection**  
[www.artgallery.nsw.gov.au/collection](http://www.artgallery.nsw.gov.au/collection)

The Art Gallery of NSW has a significant collection of performance documentation including photographs and DVDs. It includes notable holdings of the work of Rudolf Schwarzkogler, Carolee Schneemann, Vito Acconci and Joseph Beuys.

• **Gilbert & George** (Italy/England b1943, England b1942)  
*Reaming* 1982

photo-piece: ink transfer on paper (30 panels); 303.6 x 303 cm overall  
Purchased with funds provided by the Art Gallery Society of New South Wales  
2000 196.2000.a-dd

*Reaming* is typical of the way Gilbert & George make a kind of contemporary history painting. Their subject matter is drawn from the streets of London but the youths they feature take on the mantle of the heroic male model of European traditions. Gilbert & George confronted gay sexual issues in public when these subjects were usually private acts and seldom spoken of, except as scandal. They aimed to 'unshock' the public by confronting people with these images while making them as seductive as possible.

• **Marina Abramovic** (Yugoslavia, b1946)  
• **Ulay** (Germany, b1943)

*Gold found by the artists* 1981

from the series *Nightsea crossing* 1981–86

16 Cibachrome photographs; each 23.5 x 34.5 cm image; 27.7 x 35.6 cm sheet  
Purchased 1981 211.1981.5.a-p

Many of Abramovic's and Ulay's joint performances entailed endurance and pain with the added dimension of exploring the empathy and tension between male and female. For the first performance of *Gold found by the artists*, held at the Art Gallery of NSW, the artists sat opposite each other at a table in silence for the seven hours that the Gallery was open to the public, every day for 16 days. Abramovic was dressed entirely in black and Ulay in red. Between them on the black painted table were 250 grams of gold nuggets, which they had found in the desert, an Aboriginal boomerang covered in 24-carat gold leaf and a live diamond-back python. After each day they returned directly to their lodgings and consumed nothing but water: endurance performances often involve fasting as a way of purifying the body and in some cases where a performance goes for days at a time,

it is necessary for purely practical metabolic purposes. (A DVD of a major part of Abramovic's 1970s performances is also in the Gallery collection.)

• **Shaun Gladwell** (Australia, b1972)

*Woolloomooloo (night)* 2005

digital video

Contemporary Collection Benefactors 2005 129.2005

*Woolloomooloo (night)* was filmed in a service station near the Art Gallery of NSW. Gladwell is himself a skateboarder and he creates a mesmerising dialogue between performance and street culture.

• **Stelarc** (Cyprus; Australia, b1946)

*Street suspension* 1984

gelatin silver photograph; 60.5 x 40.5 cm image; 71.3 x 51.4 cm sheet

Purchased with funds provided by the Visual Arts Board, Australia Council 1986  
35.1986.3

• **Ken Unsworth** (Australia, b1931)

*Five secular settings for sculpture as ritual and burial piece* from the series *Five secular settings for sculpture as ritual and burial piece* 1975

gelatin silver photograph; 19.1 x 28.2 cm image; 25.4 x 30.4 cm sheet

Purchased 1976 85.1976.10

## SELECTED REFERENCES

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- \_ Robin Dutt, *Gilbert and George: obsessions and compulsions*, Philip Wilson Publishers, UK 2004
- \_ Sophie Forbat (ed), *40 years: Kaldor Public Art Projects*, Kaldor Public Art Projects, Sydney 2009
- \_ Francois Jonquet, *Gilbert & George*, Phaidon Press, Paris 2005
- \_ Robert Rosenblum, *Introducing Gilbert & George*, Thames & Hudson, UK 2004

### Websites

- \_ Gilbert & George, Tate Modern  
[www.tate.org.uk/modern/exhibitions/gilbertandgeorge](http://www.tate.org.uk/modern/exhibitions/gilbertandgeorge)
- \_ Gilbert & George, White Cube  
[www.whitecube.com/artists/gilbertandgeorge/](http://www.whitecube.com/artists/gilbertandgeorge/)
- \_ Kaldor Public Art Projects  
[www.kaldorartprojects.org.au](http://www.kaldorartprojects.org.au)
- \_ Kaldor Public Art Projects Explorer, Art Gallery of NSW  
[www.artgallery.nsw.gov.au/kaldor\\_projects](http://www.artgallery.nsw.gov.au/kaldor_projects)

# ISSUES FOR DISCUSSION

Gilbert & George have said 'The 20th century has been cursed with an art that cannot be understood' (see page 2). Make an argument against this statement, referencing two performance artists. In your response, consider the role of the visual artist in our society as a communicator to an audience. Debate whether you think it is part of this role to always be understood.

What is meant by the term 'ephemeral art'? How do Gilbert & George ensure their art is not ephemeral? Is permanence relevant to them?

Develop a list of the various forms of sculpture that exist, eg low relief, high relief. Propose where Gilbert & George fit in this list and outline why.

What factors bring artists together to work collaboratively? Recall a time you worked collaboratively on a project. What were the difficulties? What were the advantages? Identify some of the qualities that collaborative artists must bring to their practice. Would Gilbert & George's work succeed if there were only one of them? Why or why not?

Analyse the key factors that inspire the art-making practice of Gilbert & George. Discuss the relevance of their community, both local and global, in their subject matter. Investigate if one takes priority over the other.

Investigate the relationships between patron and artist. How essential is this relationship for both parties? What were the benefits for John Kaldor and for Gilbert & George as a result of their project together? In the contemporary art world, discuss if it is need or desire that motivates artists to take on roles other than making artworks. Research artists who have taken on a range of differing roles in the art world and outline why this was the case.

Consider the events occurring in Australia in 1973 at the time Gilbert & George presented *The Singing Sculpture*. Profile the kinds of audiences who might have seen this artwork. Investigate their reactions. Locate an example of a critic's response. Compare these with your own opinion of this work.

Street performers are common in big cities today. Find a street performer and write a critical account of their presentation. Analyse how these performers differ from artists such as Gilbert & George. Are there elements in common? Consider issues such as the artist's intention, the role of the audience and the selection and context of the site in which the performance/artwork occurs.

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*The Singing Sculpture* at the Art  
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Photo: Douglas Thompson  
Courtesy Art Gallery of New South Wales

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