

The Value Industry

Reflections on Art, Money and Celebrity

Daniel Barnes

extract from **Chapter 3: The Power of Myth**

The value of an artwork, or an artist's body of work, can be created by something external to it. It is laden with a story, a narrative which forms the basis of its value: Tracey Emin has the narrative of mad Tracey from Margate, Julien Schnabel's story is one of the meteoric rise of a swashbuckling painter with a devil-may-care attitude and Van Gogh is the quintessential troubled artist struggling to paint despite his demons. These are the myths that pique interest and contextualise the art; sometimes they are created by artists and bought into by the artworld, and sometimes they are entirely fabricated by anyone other than the artist. In every case, however, myths end up as essential elements of the sales pitch, for a strong story about the genesis of art and its whole reason for being can create value – both economic and cultural – sometimes with scant regard for the qualities of the artwork itself. These highly efficacious stories are myths in the sense that they are not written, as truth or historical fact; they are passed through generations as if they are indubitable, but they are entirely constructed, fabricated to explain reality without much, if any, concern for truth. The hallmark of myth is that it is believable, but wholly unverifiable, and yet extraordinarily powerful in explaining a history and maintaining a favourable status quo.

Here we shall consider a range of cases where value is primarily a result of myth-making; sometimes the myths will supplement a fine body of work, and sometimes they will compensate for something lacking, but they will always be the locus of cultural value. Importantly, however, whilst cultural value follows from and sometimes depends upon myth, economic value only follows contingently because the power of the myth enables it to. That is, myths do not automatically or a priori generate economic value, since some myths are unbelievable, faulty, boring or idiotic, in which case they can generate nothing but nonsense, and certainly not much in the way of economic value.

They Studied Sculpture at St Martins College...

We begin with the beguiling case of Gilbert & George. The story of Gilbert & George is so often told and is so integral to their art that it has the authority of theological orthodoxy, but the glue that holds it all together is a pervasive myth. Two people, one artist, making Art for All in their tweed suits, dining every day in the same restaurant because they do not have a kitchen, with no friends and traditional values. They are incisive sculptors of modern life who live in public view, yet remain a tantalising mystery.

It is not an accident that little is known about their early lives. Gilbert Proesch was born in the Dolomites, Italy, in 1943 and George Passmore in Plymouth, Devon, in 1942. Gilbert's family were the village shoemakers and he showed an early aptitude for art with woodcarving before studying in Austria and Germany. George grew up in Totnes with a single mother and worked as a babysitter and in Selfridge's before turning to art. More detail would soil the immaculate conception of Gilbert & George the Sculptors¹.

They met on the sculpture course at St Martin's in 1967. It was love at first sight, since, they say, George was the only one who could understand Gilbert's English. St Martin's, they always say, was a grim place that rejected colour, emotions and figuration. They wanted to make art that spoke, free of jargon and fashion, to the restless heart of humanity. And so they constructed a world that has Liverpool Street station as the centre of the universe. The East End of London, they always say, is 'the most planet earth place', where an alien could land to find all human life within a hundred metre radius. Their art, against prevailing trends, paints a portrait of the turbulent ordinariness of humanity and crafts the most devotional love letter to London. Having lived for fifty years in the same Huguenot house on Fournier Street, they are practically a mobile tourist attraction, and almost all their art has been made from images of their neighbourhood².

They arrived in Spitalfields, penniless and full of passion, at a time when the East End was truly spit and grit. The idea of living sculptures emerged from the realisation that the human being is the most artful, complex and beautiful thing. They found fame with *The Singing Sculpture* (1969), which involved the pair singing along to Flanagan and Allen's music hall classic 'Underneath the Arches' for eight hours a day the Sonnabend Gallery, New York. Then there were the videos, *Gordon's Makes Us Drunk* (1972) and *Bend It* (1982), featuring these two curious men in suits drinking gin or dancing erratically. And so the

¹ More detail, although nothing earth-shattering and certainly nothing that will change the public perception, is available in Daniel Farson, *Gilbert & George: A Portrait* (London: HarperCollins, 2000).

² An exception being the 'Ginkgo Pictures' (2005), which feature leaves collected in New York.

Sculptors became the sculpture, using their bodies as their primary material. Using the body as a sculptural object in the format of video was an innovation in British art, echoing Bruce Nauman's similar efforts in America in the late 1960s, but for Gilbert & George it was the totality of their practice. In order that they could make art and always be art, every detail of their daily lives was scripted and mechanised, removing all caprice and distraction – friends and kitchens, for example, were shunned because they stood in the way of the serious business of making art.

The pictures for which Gilbert & George are best known were born in the early 1970s. They used to make enormous, elegant, evocative charcoal drawings of themselves strolling around Hampstead Heath. When their Berlin gallerist, Konrad Fischer, asked how much he should sell them for, they said £1000 as if nobody would pay that, but a few days later the pictures sold and they had enough money to misbehave for a year, as they say. And misbehave they did. They took blurry black and white photographs of themselves getting drunk, which were then framed and arranged in irregular configurations. The configurations echo the sensation of drunkenness, with their skewed compositions and blurry images, as if trying to visualise the haphazard, fragmented memories of the night before. These Drinking Sculptures were the start of the Gilbert & George picture, depicting the artists and their vision of a turbulent world that consists of nothing more than sex, money, race and religion.

Gilbert & George's stroke of genius was that, around about 1975, they stopped making all the work that had made them famous. Recent history instantly became the stuff of antiquity, discontinued relics that could only be acquired at a premium, such as those early charcoal drawings which can go for anywhere up to £1,000,000. In 2008, Christie's sold *To Her Majesty* (1973), a Drinking Sculpture for £2,2,000,000, making them one of Britain's most expensive living artists. They thus cemented their artistic reputation by creating a welter of value – for cultural value was assured by scarcity and economic value therefore followed – which would eternally justify anything else they might do. From that moment on, they set about making pictures, establishing their trademark grid and helping in no small measure to establish photography as a respectable artistic medium.

As students at St Martin's, Gilbert & George were appalled by the artworld's rejection of colour and emotion, so they decided to inject both into their art. They were also sceptical about the orthodox view of sculpture as consisting of an object of a plinth, so they made themselves living sculptures. In their pictures, they depicted the degenerate, down-trodden low-lives of Spitalfields, which in the 60s and 70s was a far cry from its contemporary affluence. They made a counterpoint to their image as gentlemen in suits by

producing those photographic sculptures of themselves having a debauched time in the pubs of Bethnal Green. And then there are the pictures of shit, piss, spit and spunk: piss flowers, piss streams, eight shits, shits and bums, naked shitty world, spunk on sweat, spunk on piss, and spunk money. But, again, the more they provoked the well-to-do establishment, the more entrenched they became – they could do no wrong. These two well-to-do gentlemen used to court considerable controversy, which is now so ubiquitous now that the very idea of controversy is laughable: once you have made former director of the Tate, Sir Nicholas Serota say ‘spunk’ in public, there is nowhere else to go.

The indivisible remainder of their rebellion is the fact that, against all politically correct strictures, there are hardly any women in a lifetime of pictures populated by archetypal East End boys, with the exception of Queen Elizabeth II, who appears in one of the ‘Scapegoating Pictures’ (2014). The early grid-style pictures of the 1970s, such as ‘Bad Thoughts’ (1975), feature Gilbert & George looking forlorn and moody, posing in the stark rooms of their Fournier Street house prior to its renovation. In 1977, the ‘Dirty Words Pictures’ take the streets of London and the varied men who roam them as their subjects. During the 1980s, the pictures unashamedly focused on boys, such as the young poet David Robilliard, affectionately photographed in their Fournier Street studio, beautiful and strong, sadly immortalised after his death from an AIDS-related illness. As well as modelling for Gilbert & George, Robilliard was charged with the task of finding models for them, to which end he would walk the streets of Soho and the East End looking out for and propositioning boys whom he regarded as especially photogenic. In those days, Gilbert & George paid models, one of whom was the at the time unknown actor Martin Clunes, the princely sum of £50. In 1980, they made one of their most famous pictures, *Patriots*, which shows a carefully selected lineup of East End boys – skinhead, Bangladeshi, smart, scruffy, smooth, rough, listless – stood against a wall as a representation of life in multicultural Britain. It is difficult to see now why it was controversial, but at the time people found this selection of models, tantalising and perfect as they were, grouped under the title “Patriots” a bit difficult to swallow. People, it seems, have always been a bit mad. Later, Gilbert & George would stop using models, not because the public questioned their judgement in selecting boys, but because the logistics of it was too tiresome and intensive and subtracted time from the business of making Art for All. Instead, they preferred to use themselves or glimpses of strangers caught on the street, but nonetheless, the pictures always and only featured boys. Indeed, from East End tearaways to Bangladeshi to fledgling models, artists and poets, Gilbert & George’s boys stand out in the history of art as singular depictions of masculinity

that are simultaneously arousing and affectionate. The Gilbert & George boys' club, whatever the 21st Century might want to say about it, remains a quaint, archaic curiosity. Gilbert & George have always challenged the orthodoxy, showing in their pictures the things that will offend polite society. 'The Banners' (2015) extended this to a series of commands that they, in good faith, think will improve society if adhered to. They are moral exhortations that go against the grain, or at least express what we are all thinking but dare not say publicly. There has always been that strong moral sense in Gilbert & George which simultaneously fights bigotry and, as Michael Bracewell as noted, offers an alternative in the form of equally dogmatic commands to challenge the established order³.

These commanding works have their origins in two sources: first, in the *Scapegoating Pictures* displayed at White Cube, London and Thaddeus Ropac, Paris, in 2014, where there was a triptych which featured slogans such as "Padre is a poof" and "Cuddle a cadet"; second, the *Dirty Words Pictures* of 1977 which showed graffiti on the streets of recession-stricken London. In all their previous work, and later in *The Banners*, Gilbert & George overstep the mark of politeness because art, if it is to speak direct to the people, cannot afford the mores of polite society or the complications of art-speak. This is the simple and sometimes brutal honesty of Gilbert & George at its most direct, the purest expression of their rejection of the established order and the affirmation of 'art for all'.

Here, though, is one of the great paradoxes of Gilbert & George: while they claim to be passionate monarchists and Tories, they also espouse an uncompromising liberalism, as if the uneasy children of John Stuart Mill and Margaret Thatcher. A picture of David Cameron hangs on the wall of their studio at Fournier Street as they tell you they refuse to sign a petition to ban drinking on the streets of Brick Lane because they'd never do anything to stop young people having fun, even if some people call it 'anti-social behaviour'. And there is no sense at all – not a smirk nor a careless whisper – that they are peddling a contradictory blend of Conservatism and Liberalism for effect. It seems, as everything in the world of Gilbert & George does, flawlessly genuine. The craftsmanship of these little inflections and nuances of character is so refined, engineered for durability and efficiency. Perhaps the politics was an affectation they concocted as part of the act in the 1960s, but now it is so well-crafted and well-honed that it seems utterly sincere, logical and necessary, as if, given time, they came to believe whatever it was they had to say to get the act going.

³ Michael Bracewell, 'Introduction', in *Gilbert & George: The Banners*, exhibition catalogue (London: White Cube, 2015)

It is not just the politics that seems acutely contrived. The remarkable thing is that Gilbert & George's entire body of work is predicated upon a myth – namely that they are living sculptures *all the time*. The idea of these impeccably dressed, friendless, kitchenless, monarchists who live and breathe their art to a clockwork schedule is essential to the creation, understanding and appreciation of their art, and yet it cannot be indubitably verified as the complete truth. The unbearable lightness of being Gilbert & George is so complete that it is impossible to know what is behind it, as if the real life of Gilbert Proesch and George Passmore is a Kantian noumena veiled by the phenomena of living sculptures. At the end of the day, when their assistant YuYi Gang has gone home and dinner is done at Mangal 2, do Gilbert and George go home, take off the suits and slump in an armchair to watch *EastEnders*? Does the act ever finish? Even their official biographer and long-time friend, Daniel Farson, concluded that what goes on behind closed doors at 12 Fournier Street is very much a mystery⁴.

The myth of the living sculptures is so complete, flawless, absolute, all-encompassing that nobody has ever seen anything other than Gilbert & George the living sculptures. There is not a crack to be found anywhere in the immaculate presence of these two men whose myth proceeds them everywhere. But it is precisely this perfection that sows the seeds of doubt – how could two people so perfectly construct and sustain such a façade? The obvious answer is that it is not a façade, even if there is an element of performance to being Gilbert & George, which must have been consciously constructed at some point in the late 1960s. There are no affectations of ordinary life that the rest of us have – birthdays, families, holidays, kitchens, shopping – so the myth seems not to be grounded in anything we understand as human. It is mechanical, and for that reason seems unreal; as such, it seems as if there must be something behind it. But there is nothing; nothing, at least, that anyone has ever found, for it, whatever it is, is hermetically sealed in a time capsule somewhere in 1967. The true Gilbert & George is just and only what we see, and that is all that matters.

For Gilbert & George, the art *is* the performance of the myth and the pictures are secondary to that. It is their crowning achievement that they got the entire artworld to play along, tight-lipped and ecstatic, always hungry for more, for it is this myth that is the conceptual ground of their work; and it is on the basis of the myth that the entire value of their work rests. A Gilbert & George picture is not just a picture to look at, it is the product of and is entirely entrenched in the myth of the living sculptures, without which the pictures

⁴ See Daniel Farson, *Gilbert & George*, p. 29-33.

simply do not make sense. The ‘Naked Shit Pictures’ (1994), for instance, would be vulgar if they were not the sublime expression of Art for All and all the mythology attached to it. The myth dresses the reality of commercial success and artistic achievement in a veil of romanticism that preserves the authenticity of Art for All. Gilbert & George closed the gap between the artist and the artwork one day in 1967 because in that gap there is only ever the inauthentic struggle of trying to make art with life constantly getting in the way.

But all of this is to miss the point – Gilbert & George are human beings; they are sensitive, infinitely generous, caring, loving beings who are nothing if not utterly, flawlessly sincere. So what does it matter if there is any more or less to them than living sculptures? The truth is that it does not matter what, if anything, is behind the myth or whether they ever take a break from being Gilbert & George because they are one of the greatest artworks to have ever been conceived. The myth gives depth and meaning to the pictures, for the ‘Naked Shit Pictures’, by two perfect gentlemen who live like monks in the shadow of a pious church, are the pinnacle of cosmopolitan social commentary. As such, all Gilbert & George’s value is cultural, since it is the myth that makes the work significant, interesting and of continued relevance to art; the economic value of a given artwork is just a necessary evil of working within the confines of the commercial artworld and of living an expensive lifestyle in a capitalist society.

It is as if Gilbert & George set out to find the truth of human life and discovered that only the objectivity of a living sculpture could grasp the ineffable spirit of human striving. None of this is to say that there is nothing interesting in the pictures, but only that the myth of Gilbert & George is precisely what makes them valuable. The value industry is delighted with Gilbert & George because it need not concern itself with scholarship or analysis of pictures to create value for this exemplary artist duo, for the myth does all the hard work. They will take their myth and ultimately their art to the grave, leaving us with only the pictures, as if to say, ‘all my life I give you nothing, and still you ask for more’⁵.

⁵ This is the title of a pair of self-portraits by Gilbert & George from 1970.