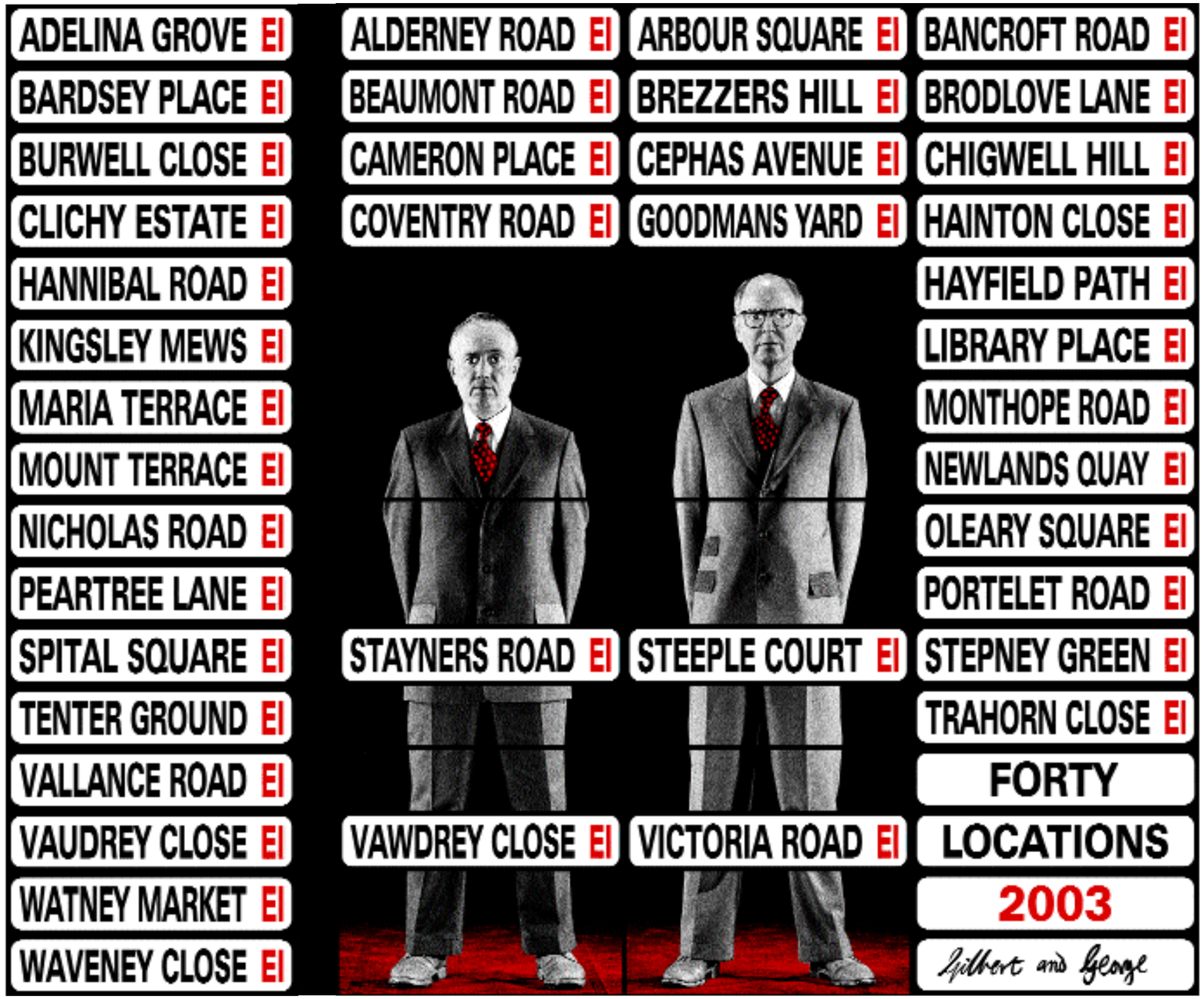
Eastern bloc

Since the late 1980s, Hoxton and Shoreditch have led the way in making and consuming art in the context of a new contemporary culture – and the original East End pioneers have watched it all happen on their doorstep. By **Michael Bracewell**



On the eastern fringes of the City of London,the streets and squares of Hoxton and Shoreditch spread out like a grey delta – a last dense matting of the urban fabric, cut through with choked arterial roads.

For James Mason, our glamorous guide to *The London Nobody Knows* in Norman Cohen's 1966 cinema adaptation of Geoffrey Fletcher's book of the same name, the streets and markets of the old East End were a thriving, exuberant place. Mason, dressed in tweed sports jacket and matching cap, threads his way through the busy crowds with the air of a gentleman tourist.'Sorry to have bumped you sir!' he announces to a man he has just inadvertently jostled, and gives a courteous little tap to the peak of his cap.

But there is a darker side.The imagery of the film intercuts between shots of basins of live eels, vagrant alcoholics and the tombstones in a local churchyard. Mason pays a visit to a house in Fournier Street, too, where he is shown – by a respectful housewife – the spot where one of Jack the Ripper's victims supposedly bled to death.Ruins and dereliction sit side by side with daily struggle.

Cohen's feature-length documentary – the tone and sensibility of which were recently reclaimed by the pop group Saint Etienne,whose richly atmospheric new film *Finisterre* is a similarly strange and poetic homage to London at a time of major transition – can be seen now as a last meditation on a dying world.The film shows streets and people little changed since Nigel Henderson photographed them back in the late 1940s. There is the same sense of being fingertip-to-fingertip with the London of Charles Dickens, and with a brooding and mysterious place that still has an air of being its own republic.

This would be a London that few people knew, until the beginning of the last decade. For even in the 1980s the streets and squares of Hoxton and Shoreditch felt like London's Wild Wood: labyrinthine and slightly threatening, not welcoming of strangers and bound by an etiquette and rules known only to its inhabitants.

At once poetic and somewhat forlorn,the proximity of a historically poor, densely multicultural, working-class district to London's financial centre has bred an atmosphere of particular intensity.There is the sense, to reprise Virginia Woolf's gloriously melodramatic phrase,that one is 'arriving at the very jaws of Whitechapel' – that one has crossed the width of a street and exchanged the soft-lapelled opulence of banking for a breeding ground of bohemianism.

In its relation to contemporary art and visual culture, the recent history of the East End is complex and intriguing. More than any other cultural manifestation of the last decade, the district came to represent youth, newness and regeneration. For just as contemporary architecture throughout the 1980s became the signifier of fashionable modernity, so contemporary art throughout the 1990s would be seen as the ultimate refinement of the Zeitgeist. The dereliction of inner cities – post-industrial areas, now deprived of their industry – was colonised across the country by enterprises of new visual culture. Art came to be seen as a catalyst of regeneration. And the model was always Hoxton.

In fact, to the social anthropologists at work in advertising agencies and market research offices, the word 'Hoxton' became both noun and adjective.This old London district was the latest semiotic shorthand to denote what trend analysts have officially described as 'urban edgy' – meaning the new, monied, inner-city consumers for whom a knowledge of contemporary art would be right up there with their aspirations for a Thameside loft apartment and a holiday in a hip hotel or their fondness for Prêt à Manger sandwiches. A new breed of citizen homeowner who would want the cosmetic glamour of living in an 'edgy' urban district, but who also required the newly arrived services of insulation and lifestyle support, a good Merlot by the glass and a showroom of mid-century furniture. And who could blame them?

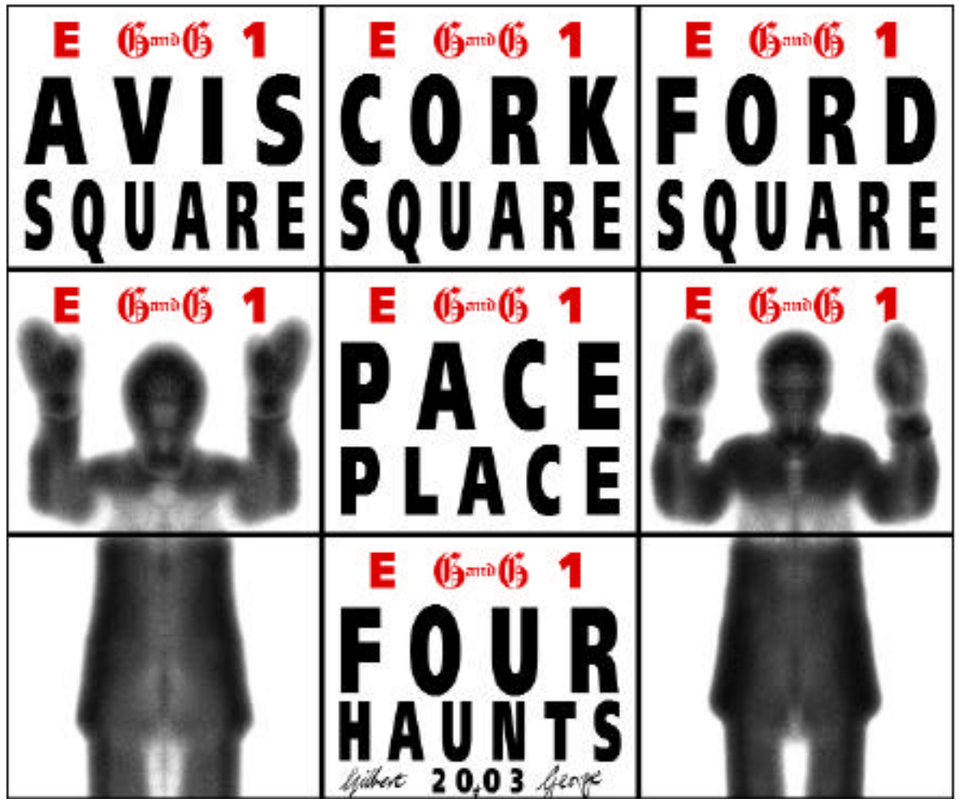
Artists had been setting up studios and finding flats in the cheaper East End throughout the 1980s, although even then property developers had an eye on the district.There had been the artists'scene around Beck Road and a few warehouse parties. But it was subsequent to the pan-media resonance of Damien Hirst's 'Freeze'exhibition,held at the Port of London Authority building in 1988, that the adopted home of contemporary art within Britain – the very HQ of what was called 'Young British Art' – would spread to the once mean streets of Hoxton and Shoreditch.Where formerly were tool-cutters,joiners and print works, the white-hot furnace of funky, neo-grunge attitude began its imperial phase as the principal energy source within the cultural landscape. Before you could say 'Boho Dance', the notion of a new bohemianism – young artists attracting *haut bourgeois* patronage, as classically defined by Tom Wolfe in his extended essay of 1975 'The Painted Word' – was in place around Hoxton Square, Rivington Street, Charlotte Road and Commercial Street; and could be found in its wildest contortions, in fact, pretty much anywhere between Liverpool Street, Old Street, Brick Lane and Whitechapel High Street.

The principal event to mark this shift was 'A Fête Worse Than Death', organised in Hoxton Square in 1994 by the late Joshua Compton, under the auspices of his one-man organisation, Factual Nonsense, based in Charlotte Road. The 'Fête Worse Than Death' was important because it not only brought together many of the new names in contemporary art – Tracey Emin and the Chapman brothers took part – but it did so in a way which came to the attention of the broader cultural media. Suddenly there was a scene. And the appearance of the late Leigh Bowery's eccentric 'pop group', Minty – a performance in which Bowery mimed giving birth to his wife through the ripped gusset of his tights – assured the necessary little sprinkle of 'shock factor'.

By the end of the 1990s the very power bases of the British contemporary art scene – the wealthy private galleries representing the big new art stars – were taking up residence within this new bohemia. Stuart Shave and Detmar Blow set up Modern Art Inc in Redchurch Street; Jay Jopling's White Cube, entering a spectacularly successful phase in its existence, occupied the old Duckworth publishing building on Hoxton Square; even one of the principal dealers on Cork Street, Victoria Miro, established a new East End headquarters. These old streets had become, to borrow further from Wolfe, the latest outpost of 'Cultureberg', with the food chains of wealth reaching out and down, as it were, to where the art was 'warm and wet from the loft'.

This represented an enormous geographical shift in the art world's perception of itself. By 1990 there were plenty of people who could remember a time not so long ago, say in the mid-1980s, when you couldn't have held a major private view for an artist anywhere further east than Bond Street.But more importantly, the move east marked a sudden gear change in the attitudes to making art of the new generation of artists – many of whom were graduates from either Goldsmiths College or the Royal College of Art.

There is the story of a critic who was writing reviews for a leading art magazine towards the end of the 1980s and who had first-hand experience of the reality of this gear change. A group show of young ▸



COURTESY THE ARTISTS

Above: Gilbert &George, *Eight Hang-Outs*, 2003, 282 x 252 cm
Preceding page: *Forty Locations*, 2003, 282 x 336 cm

artists was due to open in a temporarily rented space near Shoreditch. In those days this was newly fashionable and seemed to represent an exuberant independence from the elitism of grand private galleries in the West End. Even so, to a critic it could seem like a bit of a trek – way out there beyond the Barbican Centre. And so he rang one of the artists to see if he could come down to the show in the afternoon before the evening private view. 'Er… no,' came the abrupt reply. 'Why? Are you still hanging the show?' 'No. We're still making the work.'

The very idea of such high-speed, DIY, hit-and-run art-making was a total reversal of what had been the prevailing fashion in contemporary art: the intensely romantic, densely literary and neo-expressionist paintings of the 'New Image Glasgow' school of painters. To many pundits the new East End version of contemporary art was seen as a miniaturised version of punk rock's cultural revolution: an overturning of the old established order by young, fast, sharp and shocking artists. But what would be more impressive still was the sheer speed with which this snappy young scene entered into a business relationship with galleries that were every bit as expensive and elite as their older colleagues over in the West End.

In fact,the cultural uptake of the Hoxton scene – as a highly potent image of newness,hipness and fashionability – by the mainstream of not only the art establishment but also the worlds of media, advertising, fashion,design and property development was one of the fastest on record. Ultimately, the significance of the East End art scene would lie in its role as a cultural catalyst, as an indicator of necessary change, reflecting the much deeper and more important issues of how you might make and consume art in the new context of contemporary culture. What was the art for the fast, cynical new world? This was the business of the new East End art scene.

The idea that the East End could provide a kind of ideological backdrop of tough, streetwise, neo-punk attitudes for this latest 'cenacle' of young artists was as crucial to their public image as it was to their actual practice. By 1997, when the 'Livestock Market' artists' street fair was held in Rivington Street, EC2, Tim Noble and Sue Webster's 'tattoo parlour' stall cheekily sold the art world its image of itself as 'urban edgy'. As David Barrett wrote of the event in his essay 'How to be a Young British Artist for fun and profit': 'Well-bred gallery girls had "BITCH" scrawled on their bodies. Young artists finally had the hard-core tattoo they'd always wanted, and they strutted up and down Charlotte Road like a bad actor doing the LA Bloods. But it was a hot day and the inks ran in the heat. Then everyone started to worry that the colours would stain their agnès b cardie or Carhartt jeans…'

So who were the real pioneers of this landscape? Who had braved ridicule, flying fists and outside lavatories long before Hoxton had a boutique bistro on every street corner? In the 1960s and 1970s there had been a few significant settlers in both the East End and the eastern and southern Thameside districts. The Whitechapel had been hosting vital exhibitions of modern art since the 1950s, with such landmark shows as 'This Is Tomorrow' defining contemporary art's relation to the new pop world of mass media. Likewise, in 1968 the 'Anti University' was founded in Shoreditch in an attempt to maintain the spirit of the student riots in Paris. A new revolutionary curriculum was established with pivotal figures such as R D Laing and Yoko Ono as teachers.

It is difficult to imagine now just how remote the East End of London must have seemed in the late 1960s. The streets were dangerous – the National Front committed arson attacks on the local buildings from time to time – and with the exception of the changing ethnic communities this was still very much 'the London nobody knows'. Gilbert & George have been resident in E1 since 1965, when George moved to their old studio in Wilkes Street, and their ceremonial house in Fournier Street has now become an international icon of contemporary culture.

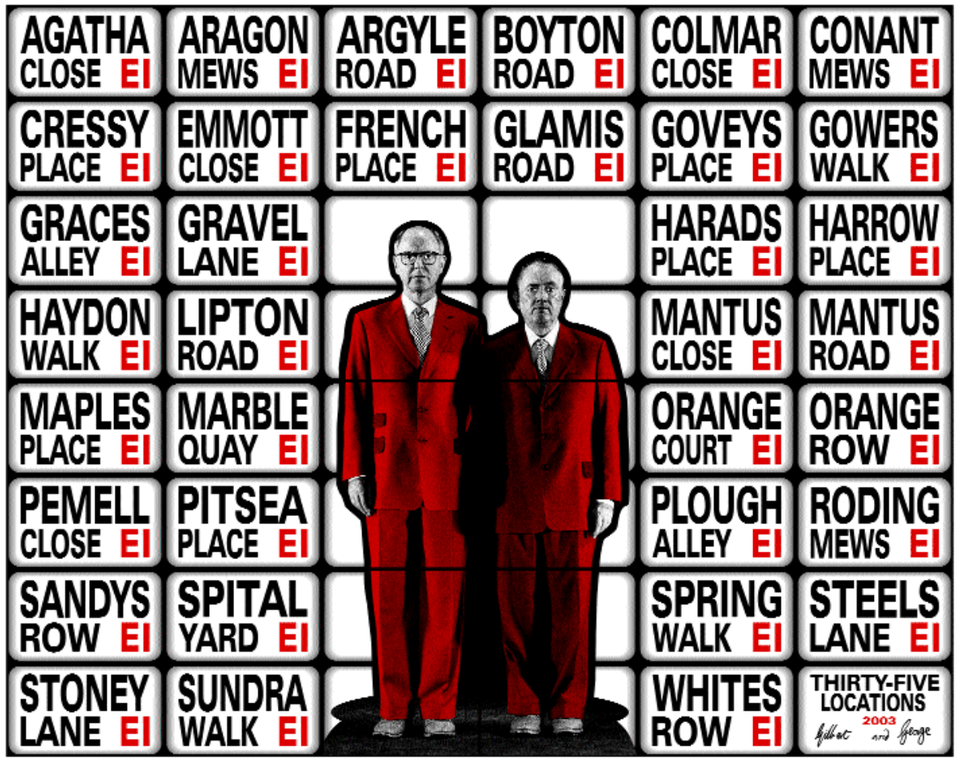
Gilbert & George had been attracted to the East End not simply by the affordability of property – much of it formerly industrial, or almost wholly derelict – but also by the need to declare a barrier of sensibility between themselves and the prevailing cultural climate. As students at Saint Martins School of Art in the mid-1960s, they had developed a way of considering and making art that was utterly at odds with the ideologies and ambitions – and even the appearance – of their tutors and peers. They wanted to make an art that spoke directly to the broadest possible number of people. As such, they have created a body of work in which their locality – London, E1 – becomes universal and articulates the feelings of being in any city on the planet, from Chicago to Beijing.

Vitally, Gilbert & George have endlessly refined their art, in such a way that it describes the most intense relationship between the city and mortality. Their new work, 'The London E1 Pictures', sets the identification of specific 'Streets', 'Locations', 'Haunts' and 'Hang-Outs' within that particular postcode against images of Gilbert & George representing ages of man: normal, disturbed and dead. These pictures extend and update the political journalism of Charles Dickens, in which Boz described the ages of man within the London parish system. We see, too, Gilbert & George beginning to haunt their streets in ghost-like form, articulating the shared experience of many city-dwellers as they get older, for whom the streets they are walking begin to seem like the chapters of their autobiography – they are revisiting scenes of their own past.

Gilbert & George, like T S Eliot's Tiresian seer in *The Waste Land*, have watched the flux and change of the city's life beyond their front door. As the properties around their home have become hugely expensive and the chic restaurants and bars have begun to attract a mixture of Hoxtonite bohemians and young City workers, they have observed the parallel rise of religious and political fundamentalism, from Islam to anarchy, in the same streets. Hence their justifiable claim that all human life – from advanced capitalism to preparations for holy war – can be observed on the streets of E1.

One imagines that the East End, as observed by Gilbert & George, will maintain its ancient, historical progress as a place in the shadow of the City's tremendous wealth, but where the shifts of fashion will be of less importance than an old, underlying sense of tension. Despite the flashy restaurants and the young galleries, Shoreditch and Hoxton to this day maintain their somewhat derelict, elegiac air. Two minutes from White Cube you can be walking streets which have a sadness and obscurity that will survive even the rise in property prices. At the same time, the art world is rumoured to be planning its next move: to either the coastal towns of Essex, where the Hoxton formula of art's regeneration of depressed areas can be repeated; or back to the West End and the old haunts of old money.

Gilbert & George, 5 June-31 July, Galerie Thaddaeus Ropac, 75003 Paris (+33 1 42 72 99 00, www.ropac.net); 'East End Academy', 11 June-29 Aug, Whitechapel Art Gallery, London E1 (+44 (0)20 7522 7880, www.whitechapel.org)



COURTESY THE ARTISTS

Above: *Thirty-Five Locations*, 2003, 336 x 423 cm
Preceding page: *Twenty-Three Hang-Outs*, 2003, 221.5 x 336 cm