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## Gilbert and George's Artistic Mischief

By [CAROL VOGEL](#)

LONDON - When Gilbert and George returned from the Venice Biennale in June, they found something mysterious in their mailbox: a brown cloth hood, the sort that a monk would wear. It was not the first time the artist duo returned home to a bizarre surprise. Four years ago they discovered a handwritten fax from the North Yorkshire police that began: "Dear Gilbert and George, we would like to question you about a killing."

The body of a student had been found stuffed in a suitcase and dumped in a ditch near the village of Askham Richard in North Yorkshire. She had been bound and gagged with two-inch-wide tape decorated with a pattern of men's faces on a blue background. The tape, purchased at the Tate gift shop, had been designed by Gilbert and George.

Soon after questioning, the police realized the artists had nothing to do with the murder. As for the hood, Gilbert and George have carefully hung it on a coat rack in the entrance of their home.

No. 12 Fournier Street in Spitalfields, a neighborhood in London's East End filled with George I houses built by French Huguenot immigrants, is an 18th-century paneled structure the artists bought and restored themselves 30 years ago. Their studio is reached through a small courtyard out back that features a 19th-century fountain with the inscription "If a man thirsts, let him come unto me and drink."

For more than three decades Gilbert and George have made a profession out of being naughty. Their art has dealt with politics of all types: economic, social, sexual. Combining photography with performance, they have embraced pornography, pandemic diseases like AIDS, vaudeville and scatology.

On a recent summer day, dressed in nearly identical suits and ties (in contrast to their early days, they are now careful never to dress totally alike), the artists managed to serve tea brewed in their kitchen: a space with no stove or refrigerator or sink, but enough antique china to serve 150 at a sit-down dinner.

Like Cher or Halston or Madonna, Gilbert and George dispensed with their surnames. This happened after they met at St. Martin's School of Art in London in 1967. (According to the Dictionary of Art, they are Gilbert Proesch, born in 1943 in the Dolomites in Italy, and George Passmore, born in 1942 in Devon, England.) Gilbert is the shorter and more loquacious of the two; George is taller, chain-smokes and tends to finish Gilbert's sentences.

Their studio is an immaculate space whose central room is filled with a large model: a maquette of the Tate Modern's galleries, where the artists are preparing for a retrospective scheduled to open in 2007.

In early June they were the toast of Venice, where the entire British pavilion was filled with a new series called "Ginkgo Pictures." Using sophisticated digital editing techniques, Gilbert and George produced 25 pictures, each incorporating images of the leaves of a ginkgo tree, a symbol of life. Into the posterlike works, the artists incorporated themselves, as they have in the past, in a variety of poses making faces.

The exhibition was sold out. Institutions like the Tate snapped up the largest picture; François Pinault, the owner of Christie's, who is putting together a museum and foundation in the Palazzo Grassi in Venice, was also a buyer.

Throughout Gilbert and George's career, their work has gone in and out of fashion. Now, it seems, they are having a moment, selling works that nobody touched for years.

They began their career as performance artists in London haunts like Frank's Sandwich Bar. When they were excluded from "When Attitude Becomes Form," a show of new Conceptual art at the Institute of Contemporary Art in London, they retaliated by painting their heads, donning their suits and standing motionless in the center of the gallery on opening night. They made such a spectacle that they were instantly offered a show at the Düsseldorf Kunsthalle by Konrad Fischer, a German dealer.

The following year they gained notoriety with their "Singing Sculpture," a performance in which they danced mechanically on a table wearing identical gray three-button suits, their faces decorated with bronze makeup, one holding a cane and the other a glove, as they mouthed the words to "Underneath the Arches," a Depression-era song played on a tape recorder. They performed the piece elsewhere, sometimes in eight-hour marathons.

When "Singing Sculpture" was in Brussels, the legendary dealer Ileana Sonnabend went to see them and was captivated. Antonio Homem, director of the Sonnabend Gallery in Manhattan, was with her. "We stood there for an hour totally mesmerized," he recalled. "A year later they began making photographic pieces."

So enamored were Ms. Sonnabend and Mr. Homem that they asked Gilbert and George to perform "Singing Sculpture" for the opening of their New York gallery in 1971. They have continued to work with the artists ever since.

Right now the two are focused on the Tate retrospective. Unlike most living British artists, whose London showcase is Tate Britain, Gilbert and George will be exhibiting at the five-year-old Tate Modern.

"Art is art," Gilbert said. "You can't have the English on one side and the others on the rest."

The show is a result of three years of negotiations, he said. At first the curators wanted the show at Tate Britain. But the artists refused, so Sir Nicholas Serota, the Tate's director, reluctantly gave in.

"There are a number of very fine institutions that deal with national artists," Sir Nicholas said. "Look at the Whitney." He also pointed out that Gilbert and George will not be the first British artists whose work has been shown at Tate Modern, Anish Kapoor and Rachel Whiteread being two others.

Right now Gilbert and George are having editing problems. They have produced 993 miniature versions of their work dating from 1971, from which they have to choose 120. Now they are trying out different images on the walls of the model they made of the Tate's galleries. "I get a headache thinking about it," said George, asked how they planned to make the final selection.

Their organizational skills are nothing short of spectacular. Marching down one wall that extends the entire length of their studio are careful lists, organized chronologically and taped on the wall. Beneath them are indexed boxes of all their work. They also have every party invitation they have ever received, every article written about them and a photograph of every visitor who has come to the house. "We can incriminate everyone," Gilbert said.

The spare environment of the studio stands in contrast to their living quarters, filled by decades of serious collecting. On every floor are prime examples of works from two 19th-century British movements: the Aesthetic movement and the Arts and Crafts movement. There are rooms full of Christopher Dresser vases. There are Eastlake furniture, Edmund Elton dishes, Branham art pottery, Pugin bookcases and chairs. There are rooms of Indian sculptures and a basement full of 19th-century illustrated children's books. (They also have a comprehensive, cataloged library of sex books, with titles like "Male Order," "Odd John" and "Despised and Rejected.")

When Gilbert and George first moved to Spitalfields, a traditionally immigrant neighborhood, they heard only Yiddish accents, they said. Now the neighborhood is gentrifying and riddled with artists, including the Chapman brothers, Chris Ofili, Rachel Whiteread and Tracey Emin. Yet the duo say they don't socialize with this younger generation of artists, nor do they pay attention to their work or that of any other artists, because, they say, they want to stay focused. "We choose our route to dinner very carefully," George said.

The two live in their own self-contained world, going out for every meal. When they are on deadline, as in the four months it took to get ready for the Venice Biennale, they don't answer the telephone, nor do they open any mail. They confine themselves to the task at hand.

Do they get sick of each other?

"Not yet," said Gilbert, adding, "Now, don't ask the great heterosexual question: What if one of us gets hit by a bus?"

Well?

"Fear not," he proclaimed. "We always cross the road together."