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### Transcript: Gilbert & George



Artists Gilbert & George. Photo credit: Sandy Smallens

By  Charlotte Burns

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Published 19 October 2017 in [Podcast Transcripts](#)

**Charlotte Burns:** Hello and welcome to In Other Words. I'm your host, Charlotte Burns, and joining us today, I'm very excited to say, are the artists Gilbert & George.

**George:** Hello, Charlotte.

**Gilbert:** Hello, Charlotte.

**Charlotte Burns:** Thank you for joining us. When did you arrive in New York?

**George:** Sunday night.

**Gilbert:** Two days ago.

**Charlotte Burns:** Do you take any break when you're visiting? I know that pleasure isn't something you say you seek.

**George:** We say that life is a holiday compared to what is to follow.

**Gilbert:** Every time we have a show, we come here. We never go on holidays. We only go for shows.

**George:** At the moment, we just finished designing the whole of the *Fuckosophy*. And now we're working on *The Godology*. We will show the *Fuckosophy* in its entirety in London when we open our show at [White Cube](#). And we're showing the *The Beard Pictures* now in New York [at [Lehmann Maupin](#)].

**Gilbert:** And then we go to [Paris](#) to show *The Beard Pictures* [at Thaddaeus Ropac], then we go back to London, then Brussels, Naples, Athens. All *The Beard Pictures*.

**Charlotte Burns:** How many *Beard Pictures* are there?

**Gilbert:** 172.

**Charlotte Burns:** Wow.

**Gilbert:** And some are 30 meters long. And we've been working on it for two and a half years.

**Charlotte Burns:** And tell me a little bit more about the philosophy behind *The Beard Pictures*.

**George:** The biggest of *The Beard Pictures* is quadripartite picture, and it's called *Sex, Money, Race, and Religion*. Because we used to walk to dinner every evening, we passed a small shop, and there was a very nice young man who was always serving us there and he was absolutely charming. He was a Kurdish Alevi Muslim, and he was very, very friendly. And one day we went in, and he wasn't there. The father was there, and we said: "Where is the young man that we always see? We saw him every night for maybe five years." And he said: "He hanged himself last night." We were so shocked, and we said: "Why?" And then the amazing answer was: "We don't know."

And we were so shocked that he didn't know that we walked to dinner trying to think why. And then we thought: "Was it to do with money, or was it to do with race? Was it to do with sex? Was it to do with religion? Or a combination of those?" There's not much else apart from those four.

**Gilbert:** Yes, because *The Beard Pictures*, we started to see—like on television—walls; fencing; barbed wire; people looking through the fence; holes in the fence; keys to open up; alarms, no? Everybody is trying to protect themselves. They are all nervous about what's going on, so we realized that there were all these beards sticking out through the barbed wire and that we were very excited by that. So, we started to see the world through a beard.

**George:** To let's see where the beard can take us in the pictures. Of course, there's significance for religion. We live in the Muslim district, where most of the young people have a beard. In the evenings, we go up to Stoke Newington where there are Orthodox Jewish people with beards. Sometimes we go down south of the river where Sikh people have a beard.

And where we live, at the weekend, thousands and thousands of young people—like yourself—descend on our neighborhood for romantic purposes. Some of the girls look a bit disconsolate cause their boyfriend doesn't have a beard. It's extraordinary.

**Gilbert:** Where we have dinner every night—it's one-hour walk from us—all the hipsters are there with beards.

**Charlotte Burns:** So, the beard is a signifier of your tribe, in a way?

**George:** It's all of our life, in a way. When we were teenagers, we wouldn't have got a job if we had a beard. It's extraordinary how things change. Queen Victoria made her son, Edward, have a beard to make him more up to date. The beard was very important in the middle of the 19th century.

**Charlotte Burns:** And then out of vogue again.

**Gilbert:** Make them more manly, instead of sissies.

**George:** More forward looking.

**Charlotte Burns:** That's really interesting. Although it excludes women, obviously.

**Gilbert:** Oh, they do have beards sometimes, these days.

**Charlotte Burns:** Not desirable, usually, I'm told. The question I want to ask you here is how do you stay relevant in your work? You've been producing work together since you met as students at [Central Saint Martin's](#) when you were in your mid-20s, and that was in-

**George:** Late '60s, yes.

**Charlotte Burns:** If you'll excuse me for saying so, in many ways your personal habits can appear anachronistic, but your work is always very tied to the times in which we are living. How do you maintain that purview from East London?

**Gilbert:** It's very simple: because we never looked at art.

**George:** We're anti the elitism of the art world. We came out of St. Martin's College knowing that most of our contemporaries wanted to do a good shape, or interesting shape, or a color. We wanted the meaning, not the form. We wanted an art that had to do with crying, to do with happy, and to be romantic, and to be sad, and to be in love, and disaster and feelings.

**Gilbert:** We made a big decision to make ourself the center of our art, and the human person is the most important. The free soul, not free shapes, but human person: the drunken person; the happy person; the crying person; and then what is called nostalgic person. All that is part of our art. That is what we see every day in front of us when we walk the streets of London.

**George:** And we wanted always an art that can address anyone wherever they are in the world, whatever their educational background, whatever their religion. It is not an art that's limited to London, Paris, and New York, and some certain galleries. Anti-elitist.

**Gilbert:** We wanted to be with them. With everybody.

**Charlotte Burns:** Do you feel that you are?

**Gilbert:** Yes.

**Charlotte Burns:** Do you talk to the people on the street?

**Gilbert:** Yes. We are.

**George:** We have an enormous response from huge sections of society.

**Gilbert:** They are all approaching us, all the time. Every time we go to dinner, wherever we go, they all approach us, and they always say how much they enjoy our art because our art is speaking to them, and that's the most important. Free thought.

**George:** They explained to us that they didn't feel our art is looking down its noses at them, which they often feel in fine art.

**Charlotte Burns:** It's not patronizing.

**George:** Yes. They feel there's a friendship that's formed between us and the viewer.

**Gilbert:** And we are outsiders. We are not insiders.

**Charlotte Burns:** Yet your work is adored within the art world. You have—as you just listed—gallery shows all over the world in the coming months.

**Gilbert:** Yes, we did maybe 100 museum shows.

**George:** We have an enormous following in the general public. We are, yes, very well-respected in the profession, but we still feel we haven't won. We still want to—we always dream that we'll wake up tomorrow morning and all the newspapers will say that we're marvelous artists.

**Charlotte Burns:** All of the newspapers? That's very ambitious.

**Gilbert:** We feel we are not loved yet, and we want to be loved.

**Charlotte Burns:** Who do you want to be loved by?

**Gilbert:** By everybody.

**George:** We want to win and be loved, like everyone else. Yes.

**Charlotte Burns:** Do you think it's possible to achieve that?

**Gilbert:** We're trying our best.

**George:** You know, I think that the power of the artist in culture in general—you can walk anywhere in the world and say William Shakespeare or Oscar Wilde, and everyone knows roughly what that means. The power of culture is extraordinary.

**Charlotte Burns:** Do you think the role of the artist has changed since you met in the 1960s?

**George:** I think it is much a bigger force in the world of culture. Nobody goes to the policeman to ask advice. They go to a concert, or theater, or an exhibition, or read a book.

**Gilbert:** But we have a public. That's very important for us. We have a public that would go searching for us all the time. I really believe the art world has changed completely because there used to be these three or four galleries in 1968, '69. Now the whole world is a gallery. That's what we said in 1969: we wanted to create the whole world a gallery. In some way, it is like that now.

**George:** It is very simple because we have two main privileges. One is that we can go down to our studio in the morning and create whatever pictures we want. Nobody can check on us. We're completely free to do whatever we want in those pictures. And the second privilege is to be able to take them out into the world—again unchecked, nobody can dictate anything to us—and put them on the walls in New York or Spain or Budapest, recently, in a church in Berlin last month. That is a big freedom.

**Gilbert:** Freedom of speech. That's what it is.

**George:** And the bonus is, after those two main privileges, is the private view: the lights are right; everyone's arrived; we have a glass of wine in one hand; and we're surrounded by teenagers licking us all over. Why wouldn't we do it?

**Charlotte Burns:** Why not indeed.

**Gilbert:** What else is there in life?

**Charlotte Burns:** Another question I have for you is about 1971. The *General Jungle* works are on show in London at [Lévy Gorvy](#) right now—

**George:** Fantastic.

**Charlotte Burns:** —and they look fantastic.

**George:** I'm glad you saw them.

**Charlotte Burns:** I was very glad, too. It was really nice to be able to see them in their totality combined again.

**George:** What were you doing in 1971? You weren't alive then.

**Charlotte Burns:** Wasn't a twink in my parents eyes, no.

**Gilbert:** We are happy that we stopped that. Can you imagine 50 years of making drawings?

**George:** The charcoal paper, sculpting—they lead to what we're doing now, but we're glad that wasn't the end of the story.

**Gilbert:** It's the beginning of trying to find—

**George:** Experimenting.

**Gilbert:** —a form that fits our speaking.

**Charlotte Burns:** How did you find your voice?

**Gilbert:** We realized that we didn't like the artistic hand. We never wanted that. We wanted more aggressive way of speaking. We thought what called a frozen image, no? Like when you press the button on camera, there's a frozen image. That's much more powerful. It's much more real.

**Charlotte Burns:** And it's less personal.

**Gilbert:** Yes. And we were able to develop it into—we were able to make compositions that are more aggressive the way. More in front of you.

**George:** It's our own personal language. We felt we had something new to say, so we wanted a new way to say it. So, even if you see one of our pictures from a great distance and you can't see what's in it, but you know that it's one of our pictures.

**Gilbert:** Most important is that we became the center of the art. That we are the journey of the two artists towards the end.

**Charlotte Burns:** Right.

**Gilbert:** Yes, that's the most important. We, Gilbert & George, are walking the streets of London, walking in the world, and speaking to the viewers as well.

**Charlotte Burns:** It's interesting because your art, as it appears on walls, takes out the personal. It removes the traces of the human hand, and yet when people think of Gilbert & George, we think of you two and your personas.

I read a really fantastic [article in the New Yorker](#) from 1971. For two artists so associated with the English art scene, you also were at the birth of the SoHo scene in New York: you inaugurated the [Sonnabend Gallery](#) space in SoHo in 1971 on the same day that [Castelli](#), [John Weber](#) and [André Emmerich](#) opened in the building. Which is quite a moment.

**George:** Extraordinary.

**Charlotte Burns:** Here's how it begins in the New Yorker:

“Don't miss Gilbert and George,' was the phrase most bruited at the opening last week of 420 West Broadway...We heard it on the stairs, where hundreds of art lovers in festive denim waited as long as an hour to squeeze into the packed galleries. We heard it from Leo Castelli...John Weber...André Emmerich...from John Coplans, the editor of Artforum, and from Ivan Karp, the ever-ebullient director of O.K. Harris Gallery... 'I'm not quite sure what a 'singing sculpture' is meant to be,' Mrs. Leo Castelli confided to us, 'but don't miss it.'”

**George:** Extraordinary.

**Charlotte Burns:** I thought that was so interesting.

**George:** Very good. Very positive.

**Charlotte Burns:** Very positive, and the article ends with you two saying: “Sometimes we think of ourselves as sculptors and sometimes as living sculptures. We tend to slip from one to the other, so to speak. We feel very devoted to art, you see.' 'That's true,' Gilbert said. 'Totally devoted.'”

**George:** That's very good. We didn't change in that way. Extraordinary.

**Gilbert:** We never changed. We wrote down the laws of the sculptures in 1969. We kept to them.

**George:** Sure, we remember that day when 420 West Broadway opened, that there was a police helicopter over, because nobody knew why there were so many people in that neighborhood, on the streets. It was extraordinary.

**Gilbert:** The first time downtown.

**George:** That was an old run-down neighborhood where you never had anything.

**Gilbert:** And it was quite exciting because all the New York art is very extraordinary and friendly to us.

**Charlotte Burns:** Yes?

**Gilbert:** We used to go out every single night. It was extraordinary. Like Rauschenberg, we met Warhol and all the people. They were all friendly to us. And it was amazing. We were so young, so innocent. Totally innocent. And they loved us, in some way.

**George:** We went to Max's Kansas City every night.

**Gilbert:** Every single night.

**George:** We were very bad behaved, I can tell you that.

**Charlotte Burns:** I can imagine. Tell me a little more about [The Singing Sculpture](#), this idea of everything being a sculpture

and everything in life being art.

**George:** I think because we left St. Martin's School of Art, and we weren't middle class students, so we didn't have a safety net—

**Charlotte Burns:** Right.

**George:** —middle class kids can always get some cash from dad or go back and work on the farm or something. We were lower class students, and we had to succeed. There was nothing. Two people couldn't apply for a grant. Two people can't get a teaching job. So, we had to find our own way. It was only one or two years out of decriminalization then. We were in a fantastic position where we were uniquely able to find our own way. We didn't leave the college and run and buy some canvases or get some clay. We wanted our own way.

**Gilbert:** Everything started once you leave art school. Once you leave art school, you are alone outside that.

**Charlotte Burns:** Right.

**Gilbert:** We didn't have except one little room in Spitalfields, and we walked the streets of London day and night. We trying to, what you call, persuade us, what could be art for us, without a studio, without a gallery. We managed this idea that we could send small letters to individual people describing a kind of living sculpture, a feeling of the world, a feeling of what we felt inside ourselves, like when the snow and we're drinking coffee, we describe that to them and that became like a living sculpture.

**Charlotte Burns:** The *Postal* works.

**Gilbert:** Yes.

**George:** Exactly, the *Postal Sculptures*. And we know that what people take out of art is extraordinary. We know somewhere in the world, and maybe in a different time zone, somebody's looking at a van Gogh painting and wondering why the trees are gnarled and so distorted, and they don't even necessarily need to know who it's by, they're just fascinated by that expression.

**Gilbert:** It has to be very, very personal when it speaks. If you're able to be personal with the viewer, then it speaks.

**Charlotte Burns:** In a way, it's sort of a romantic idea, isn't it? This centrality of the emotions?

**George:** We're very keen on that idea. Romance is an enormous power.

**Gilbert:** Not that feeling is romantic, just talk to any young person.

**Charlotte Burns:** Yeah.

**Gilbert:** They're all lost. They're all in a big jungle out there. They don't know what to do. They're all unhappy. They all follow something else. So—

**Charlotte Burns:** Do you feel the same way? You talked about the jungle in 1971 with those drawings and wandering through, articulating your emotions in the world. Do you feel more clear of your emotions, or is life still confusing?

**George:** I think we like to accept all of the possibilities that are inside any person. We don't believe in just being happy and going for it.

**Charlotte Burns:** Right.

**George:** Because everything is possible. It's very, very much part of our message.

**Gilbert:** We are confronting life every single day with a new vision because we want to see what is out there. Like we always say, we don't want to see art. We want to see life in front of us that inspired us when we walk to dinner, or when we see desperate, when we see the drunk in the street, when we see the young skinheads in the street. That inspired us, no?

And we want to think how do they feel being alive today, no? That's changed, they're all unhappy, they feel they should be doing something. When we see all these secretary girls walking the street alone, incomplete in some way, boring. Their life is so empty. We are filling it with something. We're filling with thought, and that's important.

**Charlotte Burns:** Yes.

**George:** We really always feel that we're all very, very privileged. It's extraordinary to live in this privileged world that we're

living in now. We can all travel to any country in the world, eat cuisine from anywhere in the world, museums are full of sculptures of great value and interest, and it's all been achieved by people suffering to reach this great triumph. We say that, whether we like it or not, we are Greco-Romano-Judeo-Christian secular society. We've just been built up by this great line of effort and work by people.

**Charlotte Burns:** Do you feel that's permanent? Do you feel that's easily undone?

**George:** No, I think we would like to add to that. The old-fashioned Christian idea of giving in exchange for the gift of life: to add to that. We think the world is a slightly different place from when we left college in '67. We've been a little bit responsible for how things change. It's an enormously different world—

**Charlotte Burns:** In which ways?

**George:** It's much more gentle, much more sophisticated, much more kind. People are much more sophisticated. It's not often realized, that. We're war babies, so we were brought up to believe everything was a disaster, which it was. I was brought up in Plymouth, which was totally damaged and people were damaged and people had one leg and eyes. It was a disaster, the last world war. We were told one thing: that everything would get better. And it did. Food got better, transport, foreign holidays, books, travel, cinemas. Now things have changed a bit, but in general, the whole thing is quite very optimistic.

**Gilbert:** It's an extraordinarily global world. You can speak to anybody from here to Japan or China in one second. You can take an airplane to go to South Africa. Whatever you want. It's a small world and now we are more sophisticated. We all understand each other much better because we eat all the cuisines in the world. Especially London where we live, that you can eat whatever you want from the whole world.

That for us is extraordinary. We can dress up how we want, we can talk what we want. Even the religion, we are quite interested in that part, where because one end of the street we have the church and the other end we have the synagogue. No, used to be the synagogue, but now we have the mosque. Even to be in the middle of that is very good for us because we have to think how that could change. It has to change in some way, no?

**Charlotte Burns:** Well, East London has changed drastically since you first lived there.

**George:** Continues to, yes.

**Gilbert:** Yes, and we are still there. We never changed. That's quite interesting because when we started out as artists, we wanted to be famous, so we put the telephone number on every artwork that we ever did. And we still have the same telephone number.

**George:** Nobody ever calls.

**Charlotte Burns:** Did you ever, in quiet moments, consider amongst yourselves the possibility of leaving Fournier Street?

**Gilbert:** Not once.

**George:** We never thought of that, no.

**Charlotte Burns:** You've been working to restore the house, in fact.

**George:** We restored—

**Gilbert:** We restored two houses.

**George:** We restored the house that we used to have as a studio, just the one floor recently. Then we got another house, and we're making a foundation around the corner from us on a neighboring street, which will continue beyond our years.

**Charlotte Burns:** What will the foundation do? What are your goals for that?

**George:** It will be able to exhibit a range of pictures, can change every year once or twice, and it can be there forever, so it will have an endowment possibility to carry on. We all want to live forever. We tell our younger friends we do it because we want to be immortal. They say: "Don't you mean immortal?" I say: "That, too."

**Charlotte Burns:** I wanted to ask you both—you were talking a little bit about entrepreneurialism and this idea of leaving school without a safety net. You've spoken of your admiration for Margaret Thatcher.

**George:** Of course.

**Charlotte Burns:** This idea that she allowed you to move up in the world and make money. That's never been a popular opinion in the art world. I wanted to ask you what your thoughts were on Brexit and Trump.

**Gilbert:** Free market economy is very simple. Art, only the rich people buy art. There has to be a free market economy. All the generation after us—they were all these lefties, support of labor—they all became millionaires. Only because of what Margaret Thatcher started.

**George:** We say they're all Thatcher's babies, but they wouldn't like to think they are. The Trump thing is very simple because almost everyone we know are worrying and campaigning every day anti-Trump, and we wouldn't like to join a society like that. We're snobs.

**Charlotte Burns:** What do you mean?

**George:** We think it's quite a coarse group of people who are fighting day and night like that. We're trying to be more sophisticated than that.

**Gilbert:** He's being attacked day and night. And we are amazed that he is able to survive that attack. We wouldn't be.

**George:** Who wouldn't have a nervous breakdown after that? Extraordinary.

**Gilbert:** For us, he just looks like Liberace.

**George:** He has a wonderfully camp manner, which you can't help but feel is amusing.

**Charlotte Burns:** And Brexit.

**Gilbert:** We are very pro-Brexit in a big way because we believe the United States of Europe it's becoming more and more.

**George:** What's wrong with Brexit? America Brexit-ed out of Britain, right? A long time ago?

**Charlotte Burns:** That's true. Slightly different, but they did well. But, larger land mass though.

**Gilbert:** After all, many countries—there are small countries. Like Japan can survive. Korea can survive. Australia can survive. Hong Kong can survive.

**George:** Singapore is great success. There are more countries now than when the common market was formed. Many more countries.

**Charlotte Burns:** Right.

**Gilbert:** We don't believe in a big United States of Europe.

**George:** I don't like to join a club where the members had dictators within living memory. If there was a private club in London like that, I wouldn't like to join that club.

The most European place in Europe is London. Nowhere is more European. If you go to France, it's French. It's not European. If you go to Germany, it's German. It's not European. London and the southeast of England is very, very European. Global *and* European.

**Gilbert:** Global. That's what we like more: global. They always say freedom of movement, but it is not freedom of movement.

**George:** Selective.

**Gilbert:** Selective freedom of movement for Europeans only. If you are outside the system, if you are American or from Australia, you're not allowed in.

**George:** It's very discriminatory.

**Gilbert:** Or if you are Indian, you're not allowed in. Or Japanese or Chinese, very difficult to come into Europe because of this.

**Charlotte Burns:** Tell me a little bit about your personal habits.

**George:** Oh dear me. We didn't come here for that.



**Charlotte Burns:** How has life evolved? You long said that you wake up at dawn. You go out for breakfast at the same place. You come back and you work 12 hour days.

**George:** Roughly.

**Charlotte Burns:** And then you go out to dinner. I remember reading a few years ago that Obama liked to wear the same suits every day because he wanted to minimize the number of small decisions he had to make in order to be able to better focus—

**George:** Very good idea.

**Charlotte Burns:** —on the bigger issues. And I thought, well, you really pioneered that way of thinking. You've been doing that since the late 1960s. Is that why you do the same things day in and day out? In order to be able to think—

**Gilbert:** To be free.

**George:** We found a way of having empty heads that we can do something *in* that head. That we can think and feel and design and create something there. So, we don't want to have the head filled with shopping and preparing meals and cleaning up. Anything we don't need to think about, leave it out.

**Gilbert:** Very simple, George gets up at five o'clock in the morning to read 19th century books.

**George:** Reading—the best time of day is in the morning when the brain is fresh.

**Gilbert:** Then at 6:30 we are leaving the house to buy a newspaper and then have breakfast. Warm marmalade toast and a cup of tea. That's it.

**George:** Jeff's Café, the husband and wife from Turkey, charming, charming people. Extraordinary.

**Gilbert:** Then we come back, read the newspaper. Then like half past seven we start to work. And it depends what we work, because we are sectioned. It depends if you are taking new images for a new group of work, then if we're designing and then if we're making it.

**Charlotte Burns:** Right.

**Gilbert:** So, it's three parts.

**Charlotte Burns:** How do you come up with your new work?

**George:** That's the great mystery because we try as much as possible to let the pictures make themselves. It's a difficult thing, but it mustn't have too much interference from us. When we get up in the morning, we try to be zonked and deadheaded, deaf and blind. Just go to the studio without ideas and try to make the pictures that come out of how we are as human beings around that time: this day, that month, that year. It shouldn't be contrived. It shouldn't be invented too much.

**Gilbert:** Feels like the world in front of us, but not only the world that you see with your eyes. It has to be the world that is inside your head. We don't want pure vision. In some way we prefer to do art with eyes closed.

**Charlotte Burns:** Can I ask you a kind of prosaic question about that? Where do you stand? Do you sit? Do you listen to music? How do you clear yourself for—

**Gilbert:** No. We never listen to music. Ever.

**George:** It's against our religion. It's too soothing.

**Gilbert:** We don't answer the—not even the telephone anymore. We only watch the news in the evening. No music. No films. No nothing.

**Charlotte Burns:** So, you wait until an idea comes or—

**Gilbert:** No, no. Because when we have the idea, then we have to do a new picture, then we are going out with our cameras and take all the material.

**Charlotte Burns:** Right.

**Gilbert:** What interests us that day.

**Charlotte Burns:** Right.

**Gilbert:** Or that week. Or that month. All the subjects that speak to us we are taking. So, we are creating like a library of images. We put them together in group, like the heads, the leaves—

**George:** Like the dictionary.

**Gilbert:** Every time we do a new group of art, we take new images.

**George:** Don't know why we do it. Like for six months, we took images of the burglar alarms on buildings in London. We just went around deadheaded and blind, and we'd just take them. So, we took probably 1,000 different ones. We used them in the new pictures. It was only when we finished taking them, we realized why we'd taken them. And that is because they're the great silent witnesses: it's on the first floor; it's been out of action for 50 years; the man upstairs murdered his wife; it's still there. They're all in our pictures. It's extraordinary. They're amazing subjects.

**Gilbert:** Yes, and sometimes we take images and then we don't use them because they don't speak enough to us. So, we take those images again and again and again until they tell us what they are.

**George:** They reveal their moral dimension.

**Gilbert:** Before doing a group of artwork, maybe we take like 10,000 images.

**Charlotte Burns:** Wow. What happens to those images? Do you keep them all? Do you discard them?

**Gilbert:** All. All of them.

**George:** All. Yes. That's our archive.

**Gilbert:** And then we print them in contact sheets, no?

**Charlotte Burns:** Yes.

**Gilbert:** We make the artwork from contact sheets. We lay them down on big tables. They are all open. You can go from one table to the next to find what speaks to me that day.

**Charlotte Burns:** How do you decide on the colors?

**George:** Again, we try not to have a direct responsibility for that. We try to let the images speak to us.

**Gilbert:** We created a palette of colors for this group of pictures. Every time we create a palette of four or five colors. We don't use more than that.

**Charlotte Burns:** No.

**George:** I think there are two greens, there's one pink. There's red for us.

**Gilbert:** Red for us. We are always in red, the whole way through.

**Charlotte Burns:** Always, yes.

**George:** In these pictures.

**Charlotte Burns:** Since the *Red Morning*.

**Gilbert:** We have a more magenta, we have a light green and we have a—

**George:** Winter green and a spring green.

**Gilbert:** And we have a kind of orange.

**George:** A ginger, which is very important.

**Gilbert:** A ginger. Ginger beards.

**George:** Because of ginger beards. You know what ginger beer is for cockney rhyming slang?

**Charlotte Burns:** No.

**George:** Queer. Gotcha.

**Charlotte Burns:** Should have known that one. I'm disappointed in myself. I wanted to ask you a question. The [Chapman brothers](#) worked for you as assistants, and I read a [quote](#) where they said—

**Gilbert:** Very little.

**George:** What's the quote?

**Charlotte Burns:** The quote is: "We colored in Gilbert & George's penises for eight hours a day as our daily penance." I was wondering about the connection—

**Gilbert:** It's not true. Very simple because only one worked for us. Before the computer we had to mask off some parts to cover them with a kind of plastic that the color wouldn't go through. We would make a line and they would fill in the thing, and we would color it. They never colored one single object.

**George:** But they arranged the shape for the coloring, yes. He was very good, the assistant. Dinos was.

**Charlotte Burns:** Do you have assistants working with you now?

**George:** We just have one. Not a studio assistant, but a general assistant who is Yu Yang from Shanghai.

**Gilbert:** And he's a magic person for us.

**George:** You hear of people being shanghaied. He did the opposite. We were in Shanghai, and he followed us back to London. And he's the love of our life. He's the most perfect, most loyal, adorable person we ever met.

**Gilbert:** It's very important for us that we make our artwork, from the beginning to the end.

**Charlotte Burns:** Your total devotion.

**George:** Yes.

**Gilbert:** No, but to make it. Physically.

**George:** To see it through from the beginning to the end.

**Charlotte Burns:** Right. Has that process been facilitated by technology? I was reading an [article](#) which was a sort of walk through your home—

**George:** Yes.

**Charlotte Burns:** —and the ghosts of equipment past were still in the studio.

**Gilbert:** Yes.

**George:** We leave all of that technology.

**Gilbert:** Yes, we started off with—

**George:** Dark room technology.

**Gilbert:** Yes. We making composition, covering some parts. Like a Renaissance artist, no?

**Charlotte Burns:** Yes.

**Gilbert:** Like the landscape, the person, the thing to corner: they are all separate parts. We make a composition after that. And we used to do that. We had to mask off the pieces, then another picture would move in. It feels like the computer, that we designed it for our artwork.

**Charlotte Burns:** That's interesting.

**George:** It was a seamless transition from the dark room technology to this. People say: "Oh, you do it with computers?" We say: "No, we don't. We do it with the head, the soul and the sex." There are millions of computers in the world that don't make *Beard Pictures*.

**Charlotte Burns:** Well, no. They still at this stage need people to program them.

**George:** Yes. It's still our thoughts and feelings and everything in them, not the actual machine.

**Gilbert:** It's like a musician. They have the piano, but they have to be able to play it, no?

**Charlotte Burns:** Right. It's your instrument.

**George:** It's a composition.

**Charlotte Burns:** You activate it.

**George:** Yes.

**Charlotte Burns:** One of your dealers I was talking to last week, and they said to me: "The thing about Gilbert & George is that they work in series. There's always an end to particular bodies and a beginning of another."

**George:** That's true.

**Charlotte Burns:** Which is quite an interesting way of working. Your work has been characterized by so many different—

**George:** Subjects.

**Charlotte Burns:** Subjects like that. I was thinking of: the *Postal works*; *Singing Sculpture*; the *Red Morning*; the *London works*; now *The Beard Paintings*. Would you say usually somewhere between two and five years for a body of work?

**George:** Roughly, yes. Roughly.

**Gilbert:** When we start and we do it until we are—until it's finished, exhausted.

**George:** Until we've said everything on that subject that we want to say.

**Gilbert:** But it's very interesting, they are right about us because you just have to go through the titles of our artworks and the whole story is there.

**Charlotte Burns:** Right.

**George:** If you say *The Singing Sculpture*, *Red Morning*, *Dusty Corners*, *Dead Boards*—

**Gilbert:** *Naked Shit Pictures*.

**George:** *Drinking Sculpture*. It's already everything one knows in the world is there.

**Gilbert:** And the *Jack Freak* ones and *Scapegoating Pictures*. They tell a story immediately, and that's what we like.

**Charlotte Burns:** Do you have favorites? Are they like children?

**Gilbert:** We only like next.

**George:** The next pictures.

**Gilbert:** The next picture, that's it. It's very interesting because we do a big group of pictures, and then you show them and then you have to start all over again.

**Charlotte Burns:** Right.

**George:** We are very, very driven.

**Charlotte Burns:** You're relentless.

**George:** We are filled with more pictures than we will ever have time to create.

**Gilbert:** And we are very organized.

**George:** So many artists—we don't speak to artists anymore. In the old days, when we were socially involved with artists, they always would tell you they're always nervous and what to do next. We never had that problem. We were always really ready for whatever.

**Gilbert:** Not only that. What we do with it is a total artwork, from: the invitation card; to the design of our installation; to the

catalogue; to the artwork; to designing the frame; designing the boxes.

**Charlotte Burns:** Do you think you could have achieved as much without each other?

**George:** No.

**Gilbert:** Not me.

**George:** No. Absolutely not. The strength of two people together is enormous. That's why all over the world people and creatures are divided into twos.

**Gilbert:** Can you imagine, be alone in the studio?

**Charlotte Burns:** But how did you do that? Most people want to kill each other after a few minutes together, let alone decades.

**Gilbert:** I think we have a blunt knife.

**George:** No, I think it's extraordinary, that idea. The idea of two people alone has always been a rather unequal relationship. There's a bank manager and a little wife organizing the dinner parties with him. It's very difficult for mixed couples to have an equal force and idea. I mean you know the bank manager, you know his wife, but you also know what they are as a couple. That's the interesting thing always: what they represent as a family. That's always been our secret—that we know what we want together in the world.

**Gilbert:** We had to succeed because when we started off, at the beginning, they always said to us: "Oh, very interesting, but you will never last." They say that all the time in the beginning.

**George:** Because no twos ever lasted. It was a permissive society, in swinging London and anything goes.

**Charlotte Burns:** Right.

**George:** And we stuck it out. Extraordinary.

**Gilbert:** We stuck it out more than any artists, nearly.

**Charlotte Burns:** Do you have any advice? How do you get through life's ups and downs together?

**Gilbert:** No. We don't have any advice—don't have friends.

**George:** We have two pieces of advice for young artists who are always asking us how you can succeed. And you can't tell them how to succeed. It's not a question of giving them the right telephone numbers to galleries. Doesn't work that way.

**Charlotte Burns:** No.

**George:** But I say that the first piece of advice we give is that tomorrow morning when you wake up, sit on the edge of the bed, don't stand. Keep your eyes closed and think: what do I want to say to the world today? And only when you've decided that, then you move. Because it doesn't matter whether it's a brush or a typewriter, once you know that.

The second piece of advice is—

**Gilbert:** Fuck the teachers.

**George:** That should do them all right, I think.

**Charlotte Burns:** And "don't have any friends," you said as well?

**George:** We do have a very select special group of friends.

**Gilbert:** Four or five, that's it.

**George:** We are very privileged in that way. We have a wonderful one in Scotland. We have a wonderful one in Iran. We see them quite rarely, which is very nice.

**Charlotte Burns:** You were just saying: "Oh, fuck the teachers," which made me want to ask you your favorite curse words. Do you have words that you come back to?

**Gilbert:** We never swear.

**Charlotte Burns:** No, but in the work you use—

**Gilbert:** Fuck is the one.

**George:** *The Dirty Words Pictures* were everything.

**Gilbert:** Now, it's God because we are doing *The Godology*.

**Charlotte Burns:** Right. Tell me about that.

**George:** *The Godology* is a work of literature, and we can give you a very, very brief excerpt, perhaps. Brief excerpt?

**Charlotte Burns:** Please.

**George:** We only came across this form because we finished the *Fuckosophy*, and we thought terrible, there's nothing else in the world. Then we realized: the Godology is required. We'll just give you the first 20. Imagine it goes on to 4,000, more than.

God's worse than anything.

**Gilbert:** Why not god.

**George:** Life under god.

**Gilbert:** God got trashed.

**George:** God does live.

**Gilbert:** Some God now.

**George:** Together with God.

**Gilbert:** God on their side.

**George:** Sod God.

**Gilbert:** God called me.

**George:** Try God please.

**Gilbert:** Work with God.

**George:** The God channel.

**Gilbert:** God's a tricky one.

**George:** God of the Internet.

**Gilbert:** Yes please, God.

**George:** God's not worth it.

**Gilbert:** The god of spunk.

**George:** God created turmoil.

**Gilbert:** Put God away.

**George:** The God bus.

**Gilbert:** God can speak.

**George:** God's the worry.

**Gilbert:** God's a copper.

**George:** And so on.

**Charlotte Burns:** Wow.

**George:** Imagine it when it's 5,000. It's quite an extraordinary thing.

**Charlotte Burns:** What is going to—how is this going to manifest?

**George:** It can be a sound tape. It can be a book. It can be exhibited.

**Gilbert:** A whole exhibition. It could be a whole gallery. Every wall, only God.

**George:** Covered with those texts and seating, so you can walk in. It's like walking into an extraordinary mausoleum of thought and feeling.

**Charlotte Burns:** That's the next project?

**Gilbert:** No.

**George:** No. We have many other projects. That's a literary work, which is on the side in a way.

**Gilbert:** Yes.

**George:** We have many other plans. Secret plans.

**Charlotte Burns:** Could you share any of those secrets?

**Gilbert:** They are secrets.

**Charlotte Burns:** Do you still see yourselves as outsiders?

**Gilbert:** Oh yes. We never want to be part of it.

**George:** In a very good way I think. In a quiet—

**Gilbert:** Because you are free person outside.

**Charlotte Burns:** Freedom is paramount to you and your thinking.

**Gilbert:** Oh yes. You are free person.

**George:** Freedom is a privilege that everyone has. Yes, in some degree.

**Charlotte Burns:** Right, and has to keep trying to maintain.

**George:** I think we're able to do that. We know how to clean our brains out. It's like cleaning your fingernails out with a brush.

**Gilbert:** We don't want to be contaminated.

**George:** It's not interesting to be normal because everyone is. And it's not interesting to be weird because all the artists are. We like to be weird and normal—

**Charlotte Burns:** I like that.

**George:** —at the same time.

**Charlotte Burns:** I think you've achieved it.

**Gilbert:** Thank you.

**George:** Thank you very much. You're very charming.

**Charlotte Burns:** My final question for you is you're so associated with the East End of London and your debut in New York was downtown. Do you still prefer downtown New York? Do you stay downtown when you're here?

**Gilbert:** Yes. Yes. We always stay downtown.

**George:** Yes we do. We love New York in general.

**Gilbert:** Oh yes.

**George:** Every five years we come, and every time we love it.

**Gilbert:** I love the buildings.

**George:** We're crazy about the buildings.

**Gilbert:** I love the building, I love the street. It's all slow motion. I love how they dress because they're not hyper-dressed, they are completely—how would you call it, George?

**George:** It's a very strange phenomenon here. We like it. It's very casual and relaxed.

**Gilbert:** Casual and relaxed it is.

**George:** It's because we don't live here, I'm sure.

**Gilbert:** It's an extraordinary city. Brilliant. All the buildings are fantastic.

**George:** A city of privilege.

**Charlotte Burns:** Do you have habits in places you visit as well? Or are your trips a break from routine?

**Gilbert:** We're always trying to go back to the same restaurant. The same walks, every time we go somewhere.

**George:** We're trying to find ten minutes whilst we're here to go to the Brother's Café, which I think is on Second Avenue? We're working boys.

**Gilbert:** Yes.

**Charlotte Burns:** Well thank you so much for making the time to come here and speak to me. It's been an absolute pleasure.

**Gilbert:** Thank you very much. Thank you.

**George:** You've been very sweet. Very sweet. Thank you. Charming.