

Student: Luke Smith

Nature and Culture: Deferred Meaning in Three Drinking Works by Gilbert and George

In the early 1970's the artists Gilbert and George created a series of works representing drinking and drunkenness. This paper examines the tensions in three of those works in particular. Meanings are sought in their representation of opposing innate and socially constructed states –the nature/culture dichotomy. The artists' identification with chaotic abandon or ordered control is questioned. Their drinking activity is examined through the cultural construct, or *frame*, of addiction. Conclusions are drawn on the relationship of these transformations through alcoholic intoxication to their still continuing artistic project – to be *living sculptures*.

Gilbert and George spent, in their own words “an amazingly drunken period between 1971 and 1980”. In conversation with David Sylvester, the renowned art critic, Gilbert said “[But] at that time, 1972, '73, I think that drunkenness took over and that's why we did the drinking pieces. We had money for the first time and we did a lot of drinking, a lot of partying.” George agrees; “We used drinking as the subject and the content”. Both of them were arrested and locked up on separate occasions in the 1970s. Drinking became their lives and art, a total art work.

Gilbert and George had met as sculpture students in London at St. Martin's School of Art in 1967. Unhappy with the elitist tendencies they detected in the conceptualism of the contemporary art scene they created their own art movement, *Art for All*. Calling themselves *living sculptures*, they set out to absolutely merge their art and their lives, though their project had none of the social radicalism usually associated with this avante garde aim. Instead they created a conservative image for themselves as restrained English gentlemen, always dressed in identical dull tailoring, always appearing together and insisting that they are, together, one artist. In their earliest and defining works they presented themselves, sometimes in galleries at which they were not exhibiting, as *Living Sculptures*.¹ They would stand motionless with metallic silver and gold painted faces simply exhibiting themselves. They developed this reflexive art of the artist is the work is the artist in further 'sculptures' (rather than performances) such as *The Singing Sculpture*, where they stood

¹ Daniel Farson, *Gilbert and George : A Portrait* (London : HarperCollins, 1999), p.52.

motionless as the music hall song *Underneath The Arches* was played repeatedly. This seemingly meaningless self-display has been seen as a logical end point of conceptual art, and the starting point for their wholly new Art for All.² Even at this early point a writer linked them to alcohol and alcoholism, noting that some of their earliest critics were a pair of meths drinker sharing the railway arch on Cable Street where the Singing Sculpture was first performed.³

Wilfully suppressing any technical artistic skills, they had decided to exhibit themselves. They constructed themselves as artworks and so they transformed themselves utterly. The formally dressed image, their refusal to appear separately and their insistence on being living sculptures have been sustained rigorously since their earliest performances – they have remained transformed to this day. We will focus on their representations of the transformative affects of alcohol during the early to mid 1970s. Here we will look at some of their early work that explores the implications of this transformation and the tensions it exposes.

Having established themselves as Living Sculptures, they then explored a rural idyll, the artists – and therefore the artworks – are placed in country scenes. Gilbert & George exhibited 18 ‘painting sculptures’ as *Us In Nature* at Whitechapel Art Gallery in July 1971. These nature paintings are a set of very large ‘canvases’ (sketch pad pages stuck together) that contain rather rudimentary charcoal drawings of Gilbert & George wandering through country scenes. Although several metres high and wide, they only took a couple of hours to paint. There is a clear tension between their highly constructed image as English gentlemen and the ‘natural’ surroundings. Writing at the time, the critic Richard Cork noted a “clash between the Puritanism of human thought and the hedonism of natural growth”⁴. This tension can be seen more broadly as that between constructed ‘culture’ and innate ‘nature’, between order and chaos or control and abandon. This tension informs their work right through the 1970s and beyond.

² Sharon Lancer, ‘Gilbert and George’, in *Contemporary Artists 4th Edition*, ed. Joann Cerrito, (New York: St. James Press New York , 1993), p. 426

³ Lynda Morris, ‘Gilbert and George’, *The Listener*, 27 May 1976

⁴ Richard Cork, *Evening Standard*, Thursday, July 22, 1971.

Some critics have seen this as a calm, serene phase in their work⁵, however they themselves have wished viewers would look at the nature paintings and say “How sad and lonely!”⁶ We must be cautious when dealing with the testimony of the artist/artworks. Their words are frequently and provocatively inconsistent. They claim to speak and act as one, even to be one⁷, yet they can contradict within a phrase length of each other, all the while insisting they are ‘one artist’. The best way to approach their pronouncements is, arguably, as a set of overlapping possibilities, whose complexity adds to the richness of the works. The distinction of the artist pronouncements from the works is itself problematic when the artists are the works are the artists, this serves to further enrich their life and works.

The bucolic environments of the nature paintings are also a constructed notion of Englishness and are only ‘natural’ in the rather muddled contemporary understanding of naturalness as that which is not touched by man. The cultural studies pioneer Raymond Williams notes the many complexities in the meaning of ‘nature’, including this usage.⁸ Amongst the wide uses of this difficult *keyword* is the contrasting of a ‘state of nature’ with a ‘state of society’ – or culture. This contrast rests on the assumption that there are innate natural states for man and the world, whilst states of society are unnatural and very often corrupt. This dichotomy is an enlightenment notion arising when ‘Nature’ began to supplant ‘God’ as the realm in which to seek truth. These natural states are frequently contrasted with the false, corrupt or obscuring states of culture. Shakespeare’s play *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* explores the theme of nature and culture with the fairy realm representing free and chaotic nature and the city realm representing controlled culture. As the intertwined and confused affections of the lovers resolve and the chaos of the night ends Oberon, King of the fairies, states of the lovers;

And the blots of Nature's hand

Shall not in their issue stand;⁹

⁵ Wolf Jahn, *The Art of Gilbert & George, or, An Aesthetic of Existence*, trans. David Britt (London: Thames and Hudson, 1989), ch. 2.

⁶ Sylvester, David. *London Recording*, (London: Chatto & Windus, 2003), p150.

⁷ Sylvester, *London Recording* pp. 148-149.

⁸ Raymond Williams. *Keywords* (London: Fontana, 1988), p. 223.

⁹ William Shakespeare, ‘A Midsummer Night’s Dream’ in *The Oxford Shakespeare: The Complete Works*(Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), p. 332. (Act 5.2) line 39-40.

This Nature is capricious and flawed, rather than a place to seek truth. The culture and rules of the city overcome these 'blots' and order is restored. However, earlier in that same play Lysander, one of the young lovers, awakes and calls to his new love Helena;

Transparent Helena! Nature shows art,
That through thy bosom makes me see thy heart.

This is nature as the pure beauty he beholds in Helena and is closer to a contemporary ideal of nature. Lysander is, however, speaking under the influence of Puck's magic potion that has transferred his affections 'unnaturally' to Helena. A drugged transformation to a natural state is the means Gilbert and George will use in an attempt to throw off the bonds of control. We shall examine how they attempt to move between these two worlds, the constructed and the natural through their explorations of drunkenness in the early 1970s.

Having represented themselves 'in nature' and expressed a clear tension regarding their awkward cultured presence, Gilbert and George's subject matter moves to "constructed environments".¹⁰ This is a somewhat trite observation, as the creation of a nature/culture distinction requires them to reside in one environment or the other. It is more useful to note that their work includes *them* present *somewhere*. They are the subjects and the works. The works examine them who in turn examine the works. This circular and reflexive quality runs through the 'drinking sculptures'. Their 'drinking sculpture book', *Dark Shadow*¹¹ examines their circular relationship with drink, their life at that time a series of excessive drinking bouts and recoveries. "The End (Until the next time)" states the end page, making it clear that they'll be back drinking soon. The chaos and disorder of their drinking behaviour was sharply at odds with their restrained image. *Dark Shadow* is an elegantly cloth bound limited edition book or 'living sculpture book' that uses words and pictures to describe a drinking session whose real or fictional nature is unclear. Each left hand page is text and each right hand page is a picture. The prose is disjointed and freely associative,

"[a]ll is sweet and stale in that perfect balance we search for most of living days of guilt."¹²

¹⁰ Ibid p.319. Act 2 Scene 2, line 110-111

¹¹ Gilbert and George. *Dark Shadow*, London: Nigel Greenwood, 1976.

¹² Ibid, p.21

This line with its 'sweet' and 'stale', its 'perfect balance' and 'days of guilt' shows the ambiguity of feeling to their drinking lifestyle, a tension that runs through the work. The picture accompanying this page 'Travelling Progress', is a photograph of George's face moving in or out of shadow. The book title would imply the shadow is the shadow of alcoholic debasement. Possibly addiction, a question we'll return to. However, there is also a sense of them being revealed by alcoholic intoxication,

"Drained of feeling and topped up with merry spirits they become the chaps they always knew they were."¹³

They are indeed being transformed, but transformed into themselves. The question of who 'the chaps' are – the living sculptures or the unconstructed young men, is not clearly answered. The 'merry spirits' could be changing them back into their true selves or changing their constructed living sculpture selves onwards into some new and unrestricted drunken form.

Three shows by Gilbert and George opened simultaneously in November 1972 (Anthony D'Offay Gallery, Situation and Nigel Greenwood), all shows related to drinking at Ball's Brothers Wine Bar. Caroline Tisdall relates how they failed to attend a dinner in their honour. "[And] the absence was due to the intoxicating nature of their new art means: alcohol."¹⁴ Their life and art had merged. Tisdall rattles through the contemporary thematic reading of the earlier living sculpture works, "Time, endurance, metamorphosis, art, historical inevitability, etc." Another journalist assessed these themes by comparing their performance of *Underneath the Arches* to Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*. "There is something hypnotic in the soothingly repetitive rotations of these remote yet familiar figures".¹⁵ This theme of ceaseless heraclitean change, all moving inevitably and meaninglessly to its natural end is certainly present in much of Gilbert and George's work. Responding to a question linking their work to human movement in space, George replies "It is more the person being dragged at ever-increasing speed towards the grave, rather than a technical

¹³ Ibid, p71

¹⁴ Caroline Tisdall, 'Caroline Tisdall reports on the greatest two man vaudeville act in the art galleries' *The Guardian*, 30 November 1972.

¹⁵ 'Gilbert & George', *The Sunday Times Magazine*, 10 January 1971, p. 20.

thing to do with space.”¹⁶ A sense of time slowly wearing on recurs in *Dark Shadow* where they write “[t]he work is done, the die is cast and another sodding day is past.”¹⁷

Two of the works from the drinking period are held in the Tate Collection and were displayed together at Tate Britain during 2001/2002. ‘Balls: The Evening Before the Morning After - Drinking Sculpture’ (1972), is a group of separately framed photographs loosely arranged in an oval depicting a day of heavy drinking at Balls Brothers Wine Bar on Bethnal Green Road (see Figure 1).¹⁸ The circular process of drunkenness and recovery and starting again is immediately present in the title. The photographs themselves become increasingly skewed and blurred, expressing the effects of intoxication. Gilbert & George are present in some of the images, going from stiff sobriety to drunken disarray.



Figure 1: ‘Balls: The Evening Before the Morning After - Drinking Sculpture’ (1972)

The other work of interest here is ‘Gordon's Gin Makes Us Drunk’ (1972), a 12 minute black and white video depicting Gilbert & George impeccably tailored as usual, seated in a light filled Georgian room, mechanically raising glass after glass of gin to the sounds of Elgar’s ‘Land of Hope

¹⁶ Sylvester, *London Recordings*, p.153.

¹⁷ Gilbert and George. *Dark Shadow*, P.41.

¹⁸ *Tate Collection*, <<http://www.tate.org.uk/servlet/ViewWork?workid=5180>> (reviewed 20 November 2004)

and Glory'.¹⁹ A voiceover repeats the refrain "Gordon's gin makes us drunk", changing after a time to "very drunk" and finally "very, very drunk". The title tells us they are changing to an intoxicated state, but their form gives us no clue – they remain seated, composed, upright. The drunkenness is contrasted with their formal presence and the mannered 'English' music. The use of Gordon's Gin itself is widespread in their work of this period. Marina Vaizey describes how they reformed 200 gin bottles to sell with this work (at Nigel Greenwood), she sees these bottles "recalling with fetching absurdity the famous poses of nearly nude ladies on sofas".²⁰ An examination of their representations of views on male and female nudes is beyond the scope of this investigation, but that reading provides an interesting alternative insight into the gin bottles and the artists' wider concerns. Aside from being a drink of choice, Gordon's represents a restrained kind of Englishness, a kind of Englishness they appropriate for their cultured, created *living sculpture* selves. It is a component of their self-transformation and also a vector for abandoning the very control of that construction.



Figure 2: 'Gordon's Gin Makes Us Drunk' (1972)

¹⁹ Tate Collection <<http://www.tate.org.uk/servlet/ViewWork?workid=5182>> (reviewed 20 November 2004)

²⁰ Marina Vaizey, 'Art For All', *Financial Times*, 25 July 1973.

Side by side, the two works described above show loss of control, abandonment of their cultured selves to a 'natural' state. The loose oval cloud of pictures in *Balls* expresses the formlessness of the drinking process and the mutability of their increasingly intoxicated consciousness. The circularity of *Evening After The Night Before* makes clear that this is a temporary transformation, part of a drinking continuum they occupied during that period of their lives. They never fully abandon their constructed selves, as sobriety is just a night's sleep away. The title *Gordon's Gin Makes Us Drunk* tells us clearly that they are undergoing the change to drunkenness, as does the film showing their ceaseless downing of neat gin, but in composure they remain their constructed selves. They have undergone the change to 'living sculptures' and will stay that way, whatever state of consciousness they move through, they bring these manufactured selves with them. They will return to subject matter of nature in later work but they will never again represent themselves as subjects *in nature* in those works.

The works of the drinking period are seen here as an attempt to test the resilience of their constructed selves. Gilbert and George, the living sculptures, were alienated in 'nature', as they were not 'natural' but can they become natural through the process of intoxication? The tensions in their attitude towards drunkenness are explored in a sustained manner in the 'living sculpture book' *Dark Shadow*;

"Here in the shadowed valley of endless pleasure tunnel of the corner of despair we can join together in a celebration of the life qualities sunk in that sickly comfort of dark cheerfulness necessary for jolly endurance in a day of three whole possibilities."²¹

Looking beyond the slightly nonsensical quality of this quote, there are three explicit expressions of tension – pleasure/despair, dark/cheerfulness and jolly/endurance. Drinking is both chore and joy, dull ceaseless task and endless pleasure. Drunkenness frees them and enslaves them at the same time. The abandonment of their constrained, cultured personas frees them, but in turn they are imprisoned by the drunken state. The other drinkers they encounter share this ambiguous quality,

²¹ Gilbert and George, *Dark Shadow*, p.24

with one described as “a foul smelling perfume of decaying brilliance like a diamond thinly coated with excrement”.²²

In later works they have continued to explore the tension between chaotic abandon and ordered control. The *Dirty Words* pictures (1977) are a series of formal, grid like compositions, prefiguring a later development of stained glass like imagery. The ordered compositions contrast sharply with the contained photographs of vile graffiti, randomly strewn on the walls of London’s East end (see figure 3, below).²³ These works contain the living sculptures as a composed presence contrasting with the messy streetscapes of London at that time.



Figure 3: Cunt Scum (1977)

²² Ibid, p. 25.

²³ *Tate Collection* <<http://www.tate.org.uk/servlet/ViewWork?workid=26221>> (reviewed 20 November 2004)

Wolf Jahn, one of several semi-official Gilbert and George biographers, places the drinking works within a mythic structuring of the artist's lives.²⁴ He sees this early period as a destructive descent to be followed later by an ascent and eventual redemption. His rather fanciful account likens Gilbert and George's becoming living sculptures to a great religious sacrifice, perhaps even the sacrifice of Christ. However, whilst their imagery of drinking sessions is frequently destructive with bottles and glasses strewn around their collapsed bodies, there is always a sense of going "round and round". The session will end and they will begin again where they started. This is not a destructive clearing out that makes way for their new 'Aesthetic of Existence'²⁵. Jahn's view is tempting as it charts this period as part of a metamorphosis that allows the artists to destroy meaning and then rebuild it with *Art for All* at its centre. However, after casting themselves as living sculptures there is no longer any further possible change. Even change back is not possible, as their living sculpture selves always emerge out of the drinking works. They have tested the strength of their newly created selves and found them resilient.

The meaning in Gilbert and George's drinking works can be seen as an exploration of tensions between their constructed selves and 'natural' human states. It can also be seen as a testing of the resilience of their constructed selves through the destructive transformative properties of intoxication. A further analytical viewpoint is that of addiction. Petti Alasuutari conducts a careful analysis of intoxication in Finnish society using the concept of *frames*.²⁶ Frames are clusters of rules that help to define and constitute specific activities. The two frames he brings to bear on the use of alcohol are the 'everyday life' frame and the 'addiction' frame. In the everyday life frame, drinking can be seen in light of its place within social norms. Alternatively, "we could also talk about the craving for alcohol as part of the addiction frame which itself is a cluster of frames that construct the modern individual as a desiring subject."²⁷ Addiction is a modern concept and (therefore) experience, produced from late 18th century and 19th century American middle class obsessions with self-control. Gilbert and George's behaviour is rarely, if ever, explained as that of the addict,

²⁴ Jahn, *The Art of Gilbert & George*, P. 12 (for example).

²⁵ Wolf's phrase.

²⁶ Petti Alasuutari, *Desire and Craving: A Cultural Theory of Alcoholism*, (Albany : State University of New York Press, 1992) p. 5-6 and throughout.

²⁷ Ibid. p. 2.

but it can be read as an exploration of that cultural construct. As their constructed *living sculpture* selves refused to be dissolved by or become part of nature, they then tested their resilience within a cultural frame – that of addiction. In their living sculpture book, *Dark Shadow* there are a number of photographs of the artists disarrayed on the ground surrounded by bottles, spilled glasses and other detritus. In the text accompanying one an image titled ‘Drunken Mess’, they state, “[b]ut soon morning will break and another day begins, the focus will change but never mind.”²⁸ They acknowledge the circular behaviour of drunken night to sober day to drunken night again which appears like the cyclical behavioural traps of the addict. The phrase “never mind” contrasted with the representation of their transformation from stiff gents to floor strewn wrecks expresses an ambiguity to the intoxication process that again makes sense in the addiction and alcoholism frame. This is the denial and self-loathing of the addict. In the same section of *Dark Shadow* they seem to recognise social values being applied to their behaviour. “Shame draws a picture of our action that we care so little.”²⁹ Shame arises when an external societal addiction frame is applied on their drunken transformations. Elsewhere, in *Gordons Gin Makes Us Drunk* they sit seemingly unchanged as they consume drink after drink, the controlled poise clearly makes this an art experiment. There is no desire or craving.

How might the drunken abandon be figured in relation to Nietzsche’s Dionysian ideal? Named after the Greek God Dionysus whose worshipers brought themselves into ecstatic states through drama and music. Nietzsche’s Dionysian Art is that which brings on an ecstatic state, the Dionysian ideal celebrates destructive qualities in life as they affirm its greatest pleasures. For Nietzsche music was the ideal Dionysian art form and its fundamental dissonance its primordial phenomenon. The resolution of dissonance into consonance provided the ecstatic reveries of the fluid Dionysian state.³⁰ Gilbert and George do celebrate the destructiveness of alcohol but they also lament it. They are not overcome by any ecstatic reverie. Nietzsche’s Dionysian state causes an ego loss or

²⁸ Gilbert and George, *Dark Shadow*, p. 124.

²⁹ Gilbert and George, *Dark Shadow*, p. 126.

³⁰ David B. Allison, ‘Nietzsche’s Dionysian High’, chap 2 in *High Culture* eds Anna Alexander and Mark S. Roberts, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2003) p. 51

disindividuation.³¹ The tragic hero in the dithyramb (classical tragic drama) causes his audience to be dispossessed of their selves as they go into a visionary trance.

“Now the dithyrambic chorus was assigned the task of exciting the mood of the listeners to such a Dionysian degree that, when the tragic hero appeared on the stage, they did not see the awkwardly masked human figure but rather a visionary figure, born as it were from their own rapture”.³²

The possibility exists to align Gilbert and George’s drinking works with the Dionysian ideal with natural abandon. However, they never truly shed their Apollonian, ordered selves and so remain between these two ideals. It should also be noted that for Nietzsche no true Dionysian state could be reached through alcohol.

In *Civilisation and its Discontents*, Sigmund Freud establishes that modern man is torn between the innate desires and the constraining affects of civilisation. He becomes a desiring subject ruled by the tension between the *libido* and the *super-ego*. The super-ego has personal and cultural correlates; “it can be asserted that the community, too, evolves a super-ego under whose influence cultural development proceeds.”³³ The super-ego is controlling culture and the libido is unfettered nature – the human psyche is defined by the tension between the two. By removing desire, however, Gilbert and George the living sculptures cease to be desiring subjects. Whether the ‘real’ Gilbert and George can cease to be desiring subjects depends primarily on whether the ‘real’ Gilbert and George still exist. For the purposes of this discussion, they do not. The civilising force has nothing to act against in the living sculptures, so their subsumption by Freud’s totalising identity is no longer possible. Their addiction has been self created, but their desiring selves have been removed. There is no Dionysian dissonance as the subsumption of ego is no longer possible. They are transformed only back to themselves, returning to the starting point. They have already handed over their individuality so can no longer be disindividuated or achieve abandonment to any reverie.

³¹ Ibid, p.54.

³² Friedrich Nietzsche *The Birth of Tragedy*, Eng. Tr W. Kaufmann. (New York: Vintage, 1967), section 9, p.66.

³³ Sigmund Freud *Civilisation and Its Discontents* in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud* (London: The Hogarth Press, 1995) Volume XXI, p. 141.

The artist is not required to unambiguously encapsulate ideas. He can legitimately set up tensions or polarities but refuse to resolve them. Gilbert and George's exploration of drunkenness/restraint, nature/culture, ego-free creation/ enslaved desiring subject refuses to identify fully with either of these opposites. Trying to analyse these works as a discourse that must align with one or other ideal is self-defeating and against the nature of these artists – as it is against the nature of much in art. It is fruitful to see the artist occupying the space between the opposites. Using the lexicon of postmodern thought, the art works are akin to Rorty's *unconstrained conversation*.³⁴ The *conversation* is a utopian discourse that allows particulars to be related to each other without J F Lyotard insisted on the "incommensurability of heterogeneous language games"³⁵ and Rorty's conversation is a strategy to overcome this incommensurability. The conversation is, however, always deferred due to the limits of language itself. The drinking works of Gilbert and George embody a conversation of sorts in both their refusal to align with nature or culture. The discourse uses drunken abandon and sober control as its language games but does not allow either to dominate. The underlying relationship of nature and culture is muddied and confused, so meaning is differed due to the limits of language, as it always must be. This deferment finds expression in their repeated theme of endless circularity.

Gilbert and George have made a rich study of intoxication, exemplified by the three fascinating *drinking sculptures* focussed on here. This change of states, its meaning and its expression are the subject of this essay. The tension between nature and culture and the endless circularity of that relationship forms a foundation of their work before, after and during the drinking period. The social constructs of man as desiring subject and of addiction provide further tensions between nature and culture, but the living sculptures are seen to be acting outside these frameworks. Drunkenness is seen as a means to test the resilience of their newly cast *living sculpture* identities, a test survived providing strength to that idea for the remainder of their careers to date.

³⁴ Monika Kilian, *Modern and Postmodern Strategies* (New York: Peter Lang), p. 80.

³⁵ *Ibid.* p. 8.

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