How to do things with pictures in the museum

Photography, montage and political space

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Gilbert and George, *Are You Angry or Are You Boring?*, 1977
CHAPTER SIX

The Imperative: Gilbert and George in Thatcher’s Britain

In my discussions of the modes of performative speech in the preceding chapters, it is possible to consider different groups. The first group— the integrative, the contemplative and the interpellative—may be considered as an argumentation that is decorous and “co-operative” in nature. By contrast, the combative and the declarative may be regarded as insistent and confrontational. In this chapter, I will introduce one more Austinian mode as a way to explore the political in art: the imperative. In argumentation theory, the imperative mode belongs to a class of exercitives or commanding expressions (accusatives, hortatives, admonitives) that express desire on the part of the speaker for an action to be performed by the speaker, addressee, by both, or perhaps by another party.¹

At the beginning of this study, I cited Umberto Eco’s framing of Genesis 1:3,4, observing “thus Creation itself arose through an act of speech,” and continues with a citation from Genesis 2:16-17, noting God’s first words to Adam and Eve commanding them not to eat of the Tree of Knowledge.² Austin credits a theory of the origins of the imperative to Danish linguist Otto Jespersen, who conjectured that all utterances must have first begun as imperatives or as swear words.³ When survival is at stake, speech that commands is, indeed, useful: for instance, to demand resources, to give instruction, or to warn of imminent danger. In this context, directives and exercitives move beyond the requirements for survival and are fundamental elements of promoting mutually amenable social space, such as resolving conflict. For this reason, the constitutive nature of exercitives has found a central place in political theory, in the writings of


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Friedrich Nietzsche, Paul de Man and Jacques Derrida as examples: the imperative in its positive character exerts juridical force in concepts of justice and the protection of identity.\textsuperscript{4} Conversely, Jean-François Lyotard warns that exercitives may also operate as oppressive and normativizing prescriptives (“should” or “ought”) rather than a pluralistic, descriptive (“is”) model. In Excitable Speech, Judith Butler argues that in both linguistic and political domains, the imperative model contains the power to injure through speech. In this way, utterances render violence and are, therefore, prosecutable as hate speech: Butler cites African-American author Toni Morrison’s contention that “oppressive language does more than represent violence, it is violence.”\textsuperscript{5}

This chapter considers the huge multi-panel photographic installations produced by the collaborative duo known as Gilbert and George. Their high-profile professional and personal partnership was formed in 1967, and Gilbert and George have since then explored conceptual premises that interrogate the mechanisms of art world systems and the privileging status of the artist: their works have taken the form of performances as living sculptures, mass-disseminated posters and postcards, and monumental photographic installations called Photo-pieces produced and exhibited between 1977 and 1983. I have selected a number of these for a close reading, specifically images from a series of exhibitions: Dirty Words (1977), Postcard sculptures (1980), Modern Fears (1980-1), Crusade (1982) and Modern Faith (1983). I argue that these constructions enter the grammatical, procedural and political spheres of the imperative through interventions that disrupt dominant, oppressive discourses of poverty, nationalism, homophobia and racism. As generators of critical interventions, their indecorous visual utterances mark both their presence and absence/abjection in the colonized rhetoric of the public sphere during the Thatcher years. Their word/image constructions are purposely designed to outrage and to disrupt in confrontational installations featuring graffiti-rendered titles with hortatives such as Suck or Lick or the citation of epithets (“words that wound”\textsuperscript{6}) such as Paki, Queer or The Alcoholic. Their exercitives do not solicit harmonious social relations, rather they (re)frame the toxicity of hate


speech from the street and spew it directly into the more socially and spatially exclusive social space of museums, art galleries and private collections. These works operate as aggressive confrontations in the British public sphere and invite linkages that will be explored in the discussion that follows to marginalization in the films of Stephen Frears/Hanif Kureishi (My Beautiful Laundrette, Sammy and Rosie Get Laid), to archetypes of “laddishness” and the disturbing phenomenon of mass rioting by British football fans, intermixed with rabid neo-Nazi youth (disturbingly chronicled by former GRANTA editor Bill Buford), and to the explosive eruption of punk as a form of cultural attack by the marginalized on the rhetoric of tradition.

1. Gilbert and George

The art and life partnership began in 1967 when Gilbert Proesch and George Passmore met at St. Martin’s School of Art in London. Their early collaborative works were based on post-Duchampian conceptual approaches to the mechanisms of art and language systems, such as performance events in which both artists performed in galleries as living sculptures. They eventually came to define their exploration of the role of the Artist as both a privileged social construct and as agency of socially purposeful visual by appearing consistently in the “bourgeois” uniform of slightly ill-fitting suits, which they referred to as the “responsibility suits of ART.”

Gilbert and George were initially known for their conceptual living sculpture performance singing Bud Flanagan and Chesney Allen’s classic music-hall song Underneath the Arches for hours and hours on end, while moving robotically, with their hands and faces covered in metallic paint. First performed literally underneath the arches in 1969, both in Charing Cross station and Cable Street, in London’s East End, it has been repeated many times since in venues around the world.

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7 Anders Kold, “Facts and Vision,” Gilbert and George. New Democratic Pictures (Denmark: Aarhus Kunst Museum, 1992). The artists have been referred to (and refer to themselves) variously as Gilbert and George, as well Gilbert & George, throughout the literature. For the sake of consistency in this discussion, I have chosen to Gilbert and George, the form used by the artists as their stamped “signature” on prints.


9 This work is discussed by Wolf Jahn, Gilbert and George: Monarchy as Democracy (London: Anthony d’Offay Gallery, 1989). See a video clip of Gilbert and George performing the work around 2012: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CsuHpi2geGY
In three decades of image production, they have displaced self-referential, interiorizing aesthetic concerns of modernist art in their early parodic performances as living sculptures with combined images featuring portraits, iconic monuments, urban graffiti, and documentary snapshots of street life to create a “fusion of sacred and profane pictorial elements in an interchangeable strategy of terrorism.”

Gilbert and George are life-long residents of London’s East End. This is where the Photo-pieces were produced from 1976, through Thatcher’s tenure as prime minister, as specific interventions engaging with the deteriorating living conditions for the UK’s working class and poor residents. Streets and landmarks of the East End photographed by Gilbert and George themselves, are combined with studio-made images: the resulting conflation of disjunctive elements, like Heartfield’s critical practice, is invoked as a strategy to create critical propositions. Their approach to street photography deliberately attempted to avoid the predatory tropes of journalism and documentary narrative practices, deploying the candid “street” shots (derelicts, youths, city scenes) as focalizers in a critical confrontation with regressive discourses, rather than the usual solicitation of sympathy for the “deserving poor” objects of our gaze.

2. The Imperative and Thatcher’s Britain

Aspects of the political environment in Britain during this period bear some reiteration here prior to linking the Photo-pieces to specific political propositions. In 1975–1976 under Labour Party rule, shifts in economic policy, seeking to establish monetary control, produced a dramatic restraint in public spending for social programs: in the resulting recession, the Sterling pound fell below a value of $2 USD precipitating still further cutbacks in public spending and Britain’s abrupt dependence on credit from the International Monetary Fund. In the wake of these conditions, the nation underwent a worsening recession, increasing adult unemployment, and a rising call for stringent law-and-order measures to stabilize dissent. Political and social policy was further radicalized in reform measures enacted following the election of Margaret Thatcher’s Conservative Party government in 1977: as British economist Peter Riddell observes in his study The Thatcher Era and Its Legacy, Thatcher campaigned on a populist platform promising “renewal at every level, and in every profession, of our old vigour and vitality”

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10 Mark Holborn, “Gilbert and George Storm America’s Citadels,” Aperture 97:2-5.

elected, her government placed priority on fostering private sector growth to the detriment of funding education, culture, and research initiatives. While middle- and upper-class Britons prospered in the wake of the new private sector profit ventures, the bottom tenth of the British working population suffered a drop in real income of 9.7% between 1979–1985. In sum, the nation was better off but its citizens were more unequal. The most intractable problem facing the Thatcher government was the unabated rise of the welfare state: the number of people with income below the poverty line rose 55% to 9.4 million, or 17% of the total population in the same period\textsuperscript{12}, and disturbingly, the number of homeless “households” rose from 68,000 to 163,000.\textsuperscript{13}

The inner city of London as a contested terrain for the intersecting manifold interests was addressed by numerous artists in this time period, picturing the contiguous neighbourhoods along the Thames River of the City of London, and the East End London borough of Tower Hamlets. Tower Hamlets was created in 1965 from a fusion of Stepney, Poplar and Bethnal Green and, including the Docklands and Spitalfields, it was considered to be one of the most racially and culturally diverse areas in London. Loraine Leeson and Peter Dunn, whose work I have discussed in the preceding chapter, worked with community groups in Docklands to resist the gentrification of “post-industrial wasteland” to create the new upscale inner city of Canary Wharf. In \textit{My Beautiful Laundrette} (1986) and \textit{Sammy and Rosie Get Laid} (1987), written by Hanif Kureishi and directed by Stephen Frears, the inner metropolis of London, including both declining and prosperous neighbourhoods, is the locus for a post-colonial kaleidoscope of ludic and tragic clashes between characters representing various configurations of class, race, sexual orientation and nationality. As Leslie Brill concisely summarizes in an essay about \textit{Sammy and Rosie Get Laid}:

\begin{quote}
\textsuperscript{12} Riddell, \textit{The Thatcher Era}, 155-156.

\textsuperscript{13} Riddell, \textit{The Thatcher Era}, 174. It is worth mentioning here that the cultural sector also suffered severe reductions in government support during Thatcher’s governance. Cultural critic John Roberts observes that the widespread notion of Thatcherism as “hegemonic” is unduly “ideologist” (assumes a coherence and manipulative power to ideology that just isn’t there) and excessively discontinuist; essentially Thatcherism represented an extended control of the ideological apparatuses of the state by the ruling class, making the process of capitalist cultural colonization more unpalatable and less negotiable than it might have been. In this way, Thatcherism furthered weakened the possibility of art’s place within a new counter-culture sphere. See John Roberts, \textit{Postmodernism, politics and art} (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1990), 57-59.
\end{quote}
Volatile slums sink into chaos while stable middle-class neighborhoods persist unchanged. Wealthy white businessmen bulldoze mixed-race, classless settlers off an area moneyed interests wish to develop. The grandiloquent oratory of Margaret Thatcher regarding “the big job to do in some of those inner cities” is heard as “domestic colonialism” by those who dwell there and feel they have no way in running their neighbourhoods.\(^\text{14}\)

In Derek Jarman’s film *The Last of England* (1987), the Docklands is presented as a liminal space where the past and present collide, an endpoint of modernity, as well as a place of departure for those set adrift in the film’s conclusion, as Mark Turner comments, brutal, spent and undergoing the radically damaging forces of neoliberal ideology.\(^\text{15}\)

With these elements in mind, we can turn now to the analysis of specific works of Gilbert and George produced in response to this economic and political climate. The series *Dirty Words* was first exhibited in 1977.\(^\text{16}\) This series is an early example of Gilbert and George’s characteristic Photo-piece construction which are formally consistent as black-and-white photographs combined as a grid measuring approximately 241x 201cm, with yellow and/or red tinting of specific images. In each work, photographs of the figures of Gilbert and George flank a changing selection of their own street images of London, portraits of residents, and “found object” images of graffiti with “dirty” words, such as “suck”, “cock”, “cunt”, “shit”, “piss” and “bollocks”.\(^\text{17}\) The titles are derived from the featured graffiti in each composition, and form an aggressive challenge to the beholder through a combination of the affront of the graffiti as “rude”

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\(^{16}\) *Dirty Words* was reprised at London’s Serpentine Gallery in 2002, the “silver” anniversary of the series’ debut, and coincident with the 60th anniversary of Queen Elizabeth II’s ascent to the throne. In his review of this installation, Adrian Searle noted that it was the first time the complete series was shown in one space, and that he felt it created a very melancholy gravitas pointing to the reality of social inequity in the UK then, and in the present moment. “What a State,” *The Guardian*, June 11, 2002.

\(^{17}\) I note here the comparison of Gilbert and George’s own photographs with London photographer Nigel Henderson in his own 1950s-era photographs of East End streets, including images of young boys and youths in the street with graffiti-laden walls in the background. See *Nigel Henderson’s Streets. Photographs of London’s East End 1949-53*, edited by Clive Coward (London: Tate, 2017).
street language (and gesture), and the towering presence of each grid over the height of the viewer. [fig. 6-1]

We didn’t want to be like a photographer or like a newspaper photographer with one image, because that belonged in photography history. We wanted to make an artwork in a gallery or museum representing a work of art not a photograph, and the only way we could find in the first place was to make a group of photographs which looked like an object on the wall. Then very, very slowly this came together into shapes […] we used a rectangle, like any classical picture, then we lost the gaps in between the sections; toward a single picture away from the idea of a group of separate images. In 1977 because we did *The Dirty Words* we realized we could do images which crossed sections of the picture. So, slowly, they became a single picture.18

[fig 6-1] Installation view from the exhibition Gilbert & George: The Dirty Words Pictures, Serpentine Gallery, London (6 June – 1 September 2002)

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This focus on graffiti as street statement operates on several levels. First, the frames that feature the graffiti words are in themselves evidentiary of real-world expressions of resistance to polite, decorous society. It is parole, everyday speech as an anti-authority expression, and also a criminal intervention as defacement of private or public property. The originators of the graffiti create a form of vernacular, street-level intervention to exert voice in the public sphere, and use language to fight back against cultural and economic hegemony, as Ivan Illich writes “to secure political or participatory space for forms of governance that enable exceptions to national-international forced development [...] and the totalities of the left and right ideology.”

From the perspective of Austin’s concept of a total speech environment, the variables in the performance of an utterance provide a context for its reception; in the case of spoken English in the UK, this touches on concepts of social status in socio-linguistics: Received Pronunciation (RP) is an accent associated with a higher social and educational background (posh), the class level associated with power and influence; by contrast, localized accents and dialects are associated with lower economic status speakers. This binary is most familiar in George Bernard Shaw’s My Fair Lady, where a Cockney accent is remade into Received Pronunciation.

Before continuing to discuss the specific operations of the imperative in Dirty Words, it is important to consider how the citation of the graffiti is, and is not, productive. Gilbert and George, sympathetic inhabitants of this very neighbourhood, act not as outsiders showing a parade of naughtly expletives, but position their photographic documentation from the perspective of insiders with what is generally an undervalued, inner-city mode of expression. However, their intervention as artists also includes picturing graffiti epithets, such as “paki”, “the alcoholic”, and “faggot”. Here, they quote hate speech, words that wound, as Judith Butler has argued. Like

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19 Quoted by Trent Schroyer, Beyond Western Economics: Remembering Other Economic Cultures (New York and London: Routledge, 2009). More recently, there has been academic interest in exploring related concepts such as dirt, punk and trash as manifestations of dirty art, dirty media, dirty words and trash culture and the overall rhetoric of “waste, dirt and shit”: See the announcement for a 2016 workshop hosted by the Amsterdam School for Cultural Analysis.

20 See William Labov, Sharon Ash and Charles Boberg, The Atlas of North American English (Berlin: Mouton-de Gruyte, 2006). While the origin of this idea of RP is specific to Southern England, there are variations elsewhere: the English used in theatre and radio broadcast is generally mid-Atlantic, a fusion of RP and North American English; distinctions are also made geographically, within a city such as Brahmin spoken English (educated) and “Southie” (Irish working class), or across regions, such as the consideration of English spoken in the southern United States sometimes regarded as inferior, connoting an unsophisticated person.

Gilbert and George, Jean-Luc Moulène has also photographed urban graffiti as visual utterance, and points to a different reading, from that of criminal acts against private property to the condition of incommensurability of their disenfranchised authors. Jean-Luc Moulène series of photographs, Le Tunnel, depicts graffiti messages by unknown authors along the walls of the tunnel at the Boulevard de Bercy in Paris. Moulène combines the visual documentation of “found objects texts” with their transcription as typographic text: the images of the originating graffiti expressions capture the Austinian total speech environment through gestural handwriting and syntax signifying anguish, despair, violence and philosophical reflection; in “translating” the words as machine-produced text, readers are denied a reading of the statements as poetic gestures of suffering, and are instead confronted with the impact of what is being said. I also refer back to Martha Rosler’s later Bringing the War Home series, with the appropriation of the Abu Ghraib image showing Lynndie England torturing an Iraqi prisoner. In her essay “Objectification,” Martha Nussbaum considers several modes of objectification, drawing examples from literary sources: texts from D.H. Lawrence, James Joyce, Playboy magazine, hard-core pornography, and bathhouse memoir. Her examples position objectification as the transformation of someone into something, and examines how the meaning of this transformation is dependent on context, one component of which is the location of the narratorial voice residing in a character, in an implied author, or in a real-life author. Here Nussbaum’s approach is helpful in the consideration of the role of artists in the detaching and re-presenting instances of real-world objectification from their points of originating utterance. As narrators, the implied authors of informal trophy shots of humiliated prisoners, of evidence of apartheid police brutality, of racist and homophobic street graffiti, are superceded by artists (Rosler, Haacke, Moulène, Gilbert and George) as meta-authors, who restage these iterations as citations, which require critical reading. In the case of Gilbert and George, they are the originators of their appropriated photographs, working as both intrepid documentarians as well as meta-authors. Consider these statements from a single interview with Carter Ratcliff:


The human figures [...] were taken very shyly and very frightenedly (sic) from the first-floor window at Fournier Street [...] After a time we ventured out of the house with a camera, but only with a long lens, so we could take people’s pictures at bus stops and things. One or two we asked. We thought of the figures as representative persons. Six different individuals became Patriots (1980).24

Here, the artists point to their struggle with adopting the practices of other photo genres (street photography, photojournalism, social reform documentary) by their reluctance to objectify by “taking” images of individuals, as well as their willingness to do so through the transformation of photographed individuals into representative types.

Mieke Bal, writing about the politics of citation in her review of a volume featuring historical photographic images of African subjects, draws attentions to the ethical implication of re-presenting the gesture of appropriation and exploitation: “The reproduction, even in enhanced form, of the objectionable images is a gesture of complicity, no matter how critical the text that accompanies them. The stare of the critic [author/reader] is caught, and he cannot help but be entangled in what he has set out to do.”25 Viewed from another perspective, the use of citation in above-mentioned examples makes visible invisible social space: as Henri Lefebvre notes in The Production of Space:

What is different is, to begin with, what is excluded: the edges of the city, shanty towns, the spaces of forbidden games, of guerrilla war, of war. Sooner or later, however, the existing centre and the forces of homogenization must seek to absorb all such differences, and they will succeed if these retain a defensive posture and no counterattack is mounted from their side.26

The citations of image fragments are not only of other voices (urban graffiti), but also a kind of quoting from other modalities of photography (‘trophy’ snapshots, photojournalism, commercial magazines and advertisements). The integration of these non-art source images is then recuperated as components in the art object. It is useful to divide the discussion into two major sections: 1) grammatical strategies used by Gilbert and George to create narrative voices (identifying modes of imperative speech, the speaking agents and the addressed in the


construction of the works); and 2) pictorial strategies through which the polysemic readings are produced (spatial organization of multiple images and iconic referents).

3. Speaking Through the Grid

Admonition

*The Alcoholic*, a mammoth grid photo installation is an example of the admonishing narrative voice created by Gilbert and George in 1978. [fig. 6-2] The pictorial space is divided into a grid pattern of sixteen frames; the upper twelve frames form a continuous image showing the theatrically lit profile faces of George (left) and Gilbert (right); the lower register of four frames forms a continuous horizontal image of an indigent man sleeping on the street. The lower right frame displays the authorial data typically associated with fine art production: the title of the work, the signatures of the artists and the date of production. Through monumental scale, dramatic “theatrical” lighting signifying the artists’ performance as actors, and the reduced scale and compositional containment of the object (the alcoholic), Gilbert and George invoke the constitutive power of the imperative.

Gilbert and George perform similar strategies positioning the subject/object/viewer in *Paki* (1978) in which nine frames (181 x 151 cm) are arranged into three vertical registers: red-hued full-length allegories performed by the artists in their customary “responsibility suits” flank the smaller-scaled black-and-white portrait of the central figure. [fig. 6-3] The term “paki”—derived from the nationality Pakistani—is the epithet that labels and frames the racial humiliation of its pictorial referent. In both examples, Gilbert and George activate the imperative performance through both pictorial and the textual components. They position their own portraits as massive flanking figures dressed in suits staging the images as though they observe each other gazing, but their line of vision does not really allow them to see the man placed between them. 27

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27 Museumgoers may or may not recognize the two artists as posed figures for the portraits: either way, the artists perform as massively-scaled stock “everyman” characters attired in their habitual and banal “responsibility suits” performing the work of entitled white patriarchy through surveilling and judging others.
[fig. 6-2] Gilbert and George, *The Alcoholic*, 1978
[fig. 6-3] Gilbert and George, *Paki*, 1978
There is at once a kind of detached apathy in this refusal to “see” the Other, while at the same staging of *ménage à trois* that physically pins and dominates the titular figure. Carter Ratcliff observes that this pictorial structure performs (as) a kind of architecture with the figures of Gilbert and George as classical caryatid sculptures.\(^{28}\) As allegorical figures, Gilbert and George are positioned as figures of judgement over the dispossessed or non-citizen, and this is a pictorial strategy that recurs in their grid work across many series. This startling (forced) framing of the gaze and the operations of gazing takes on narrative “voice” in the filmic version of the same body of images in their 1981 film *The World of Gilbert and George*, extensions of their earlier performance work as “living sculptures”, in personae that function at once as political artists and as generic privileged figures of “authority”.\(^{29}\) The voice-over narration given in the published script articulates first-person utterances for these disparate conditions:

**Scene 80: Mad Text (read by uneducated person)**
I am the mad man that nobody loves. My hair is filthy with grease because no one cares for me. My mother has left me behind in this wonderful state to look at you like this. My teeth are rotten and I don’t have nothing to care because I stumble to corner to corner and every place is my place of rest. The eyes are bad and I cannot see very well but it doesn’t matter because I have nothing to care. I was in the war and got hurt twice, but I had no friends. But I love my Queen and Country and I don’t hate anyone because I don’t know anyone so how can I?

**Scene 94 Text (spoken alternately by Gilbert and George)**
We are unhealthy, middle-aged, dirty-minded, depressed, cynical, empty, tired-brained, seedy, rotten, dreaming, badly-behaved, ill-mannered, arrogant, intellectual, self-pitying, honest, successful, hard-working, thoughtful, artistic, religious, fascistic, blood-thirsty, teasing, destructive, ambitious, colourful, damned, stubborn, perverted and good. We are artists.\(^{30}\)

The title of the work serves as the invocation of epithet as abusive invective as well as the visual presentation of the flanking figures of Gilbert and George in their customary suits. The

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\(^{29}\) Of particular interest in this production is the addition of Gilbert and George in performance, some of which is (un)intentionally amusing, and provides an alternative view of the static grid works by presenting a kinetic version of the artists/giants.

viewer, whether they recognize these figures as the artists, or not, are nevertheless presented with men wearing suits as allegories of the powerful who preside in judgement over the derelict and the immigrant. Their dispassionate expressions both literally and symbolically loom over the pathetic “Other” commonly associated with journalistic practices. Deploying the authority of this scrutiny and the admonitive labelling of “the alcoholic”, “the paki”, the work of Gilbert and George performs as a visual proposition addressing disparate social relations and suturing the addressed audience into its framework: we cannot ourselves narrativize the compressed images of the abject, according to our own moral apparatus and position of relative comfort, because we are confronted with the oppressing judges doing this for us. This in turn is discomfiting; there is now no “comfortable” point of identification. Rather than neutralizing or naturalizing the “documentary” image, this strategy repels our habitual reading of the social documentary discursive space. Here, we can draw again on the distinctions made by Allan Sekula in his germinal essay “The Body and the Archive”. He identifies three significant gazes that we perform on photographs of people: the ennobling gaze (the look up), the intimate gaze upon the beloved, and the pitying gaze (the look down).31 It is Gilbert and George who act out or “perform” this judging or pitying gaze and frame it, precluding the possibility of our doing so. The installation also focalizes our cultural practice of choosing these gazes, specifically, it points to the normative practices in the construction of difference. In the installation of large-scale constructions, this Other then confronts us in life or larger than life so that we deny, escape or “minimize” the incommensurability. The proposition performs as an imperative to confront us (and defamiliarize) the habits of our social relationships.

In this way, Gilbert and George insert and therefore reinscribe the exiled figures of the “the alcoholic” and “the paki”, formerly invisible and unvoiced subalterns, into the discursive space, or at least, the privileged space of the museum/gallery. The Alcoholic, then, is not merely a descriptive declaration inciting us to “Look, there is an alcoholic man” (emphasis on adjective) but an admonition “There is the alcoholic” (emphasis on article and noun) which positions our gaze down. The grammatico-pictorial strategies of Gilbert and George, in focalizing poverty, alienation, racism and homophobia, invite comparison to the collaborative films of Stephen Frears (director) and Hanif Kureishi (writer). My Beautiful Laundrette (1986) and Sammy and Rosie Get

*Laid* (1988) explore the brutalization of life in the United Kingdom under Thatcher marked by racism and social injustice: the films openly place the responsibility of a deteriorating national condition at the feet of Thatcher in an ironic pre-credit long shot of muddy waste ground accompanied by a voice-over of the plummy arrogant tone of Thatcher welcoming a Tory election victory and speaking complacently of the Conservative Party’s program for transforming inner cities. Frears’ cinematic technique also compares to the pictorial strategies of Gilbert and George: use of split screen, rapid rhythmic cross-cutting, shock cuts, vivid colour (especially use of red filters) producing films replete with privileged and abjected characters from the crossroads of modern London.

**Exhortation**

*Suck* (1977) is one image in the *Dirty Words* series that I would argue may be considered as a “hortative”, as class of verbs that urge, exhort or encourage. [fig. 6-4] The allegorical presence of Gilbert and George is inserted as small images in the lower register; surrounding them are stock traders (possibly a direct reference to the operations of the London Stock Exchange), who buy and sell corporate shares and “move” the money of the nation. In the centre of the grid is the image of a destitute man curled up, sleeping on pavement. In this large-scale multi-image grid (measuring 241 x 201 cm), the imperative command “suck”, inscribed as text in the top register, embodies several associative meanings. As (transgressive) graffiti lettering on a building surface, the “street” connotation of “suck” refers to a sexual command commonly associated with the “servicing” role of fellatio. Scrawled by the marginalized as a hortative against private property owners, or perhaps the public sphere in general, it reverses the normativizing power relations. The visual reference to the stock market opens another reading, positioning the constitutive power of disenfranchised classes. Other meanings are suggested by the title: as an infinitive, “to suck” is an

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33 Allen Kaprow reminisces taking sixth grade kids on a field trip: “On the way, they took pictures of each other making faces, of their shadows, of helicopters in the air, of army tanks and cops; but mostly, they seemed to prefer graffiti on the sidewalks and walls of buildings. Allan Kaprow, “Success and Failure when Art Changes,” *Mapping the Terrain. New Genre Public Art*, edited by Suzanne Lacy (Seattle, WA: Bay Press, 1995), 153. I draw attention also to Martha Rosler’s interest in epithets, dirty words, graffiti and street life, not only in her image/text series *The Bowery in two inadequate descriptive systems* (1974—1975), but also in her 1980 video *Secrets from the Street: No Disclosure.*

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[fig.6-4] Gilbert and George, *Suck*, 1977
the imperative more pointedly to siphoning the flow of economic profits away from idiomatic expression meaning repellent or disgusting; “to suck in”, meaning to cheat or deceive; the antonymic references; “to give suck”, “suckle” or “succor”, all associated with the relief that is clearly denied by the framed proposition; and as a reference to an economic system “sucking” away resources from the poor.34

Lick, another grid construction from the Dirty Words series, positions images of a prison exercise yard and a black man with dreadlocks, positioned in the centre of the 241 x 201 cm composition, flanked by the red-hued figures of Gilbert and George. [fig. 6-5] The graffiti exhortation of the title “lick” is augmented by additional graffiti text in the lower register “shit to every baby”. The total proposition points to a reading of the inevitability of a “dead end” social position for Great Britain’s black citizens, where they are forced to “lick” (as in the idiomatic expression “to lick someone’s boots” meaning to act in a servile manner before an oppressor) in obeyance to institutionalized sites or “be licked”, as in beaten, by systemic operations, observed by an indifferent white privileged class. Bummed presents six red-hued images of Gilbert and George positioned in the centre, surrounded by images of soldiers on manoeuvres and images of rusted corrugated metal. [fig. 6-6]

The “bummed” of the graffiti title in the upper register suggests polysemic possibilities: sodomic practices; destitution or a depressed or discouraged mental state; any disappointing or unpleasant experience; or to borrow or cajole something with little intention of returning it. The past tense conjugation of the title verb also suggests something that has already transpired rather than an action about to be performed.

An integral aspect of the total speech situation over which Gilbert and George preside is the rude shock of indecorous speech in a (sanctified) museum or art gallery environment, or church, as the composition of the grid formations—highly coloured patterns, with the images separated by a black border— is also suggestive of the stained glass windows used in ecclesiastical architecture, usually also in the form a narrative featuring figures and scenes from religious texts.35

34 My thanks to Christa-Maria Lerm Hayes for pointing out this last meaning. Correspondence with the author, July 5, 2018.

35 Ibid.
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The titles of the *Dirty Words* series (*Lick, Cunt, Shit, Scum, Prick Ass, Queer, Bollocks, Bummed*, etc.) are in themselves aggressive and transgressive, imposing sexual, rude or phobic language into the space; the physical dominance of the works in gallery spaces tower over the beholder, framing an unavoidable confrontation with “the street”.\(^{36}\) The very sign/ing of graffiti is in itself denotative of disenfranchised speech forced into the interstices of discursive space by trespass and vandalism. In reviewing the Gilbert and George works, critic Mark Holborn questioned the strategy of making art (in his words “slick and expensive art”\(^ {37}\)) by means of disenfranchised subjects: who is finally exploited, the people photographed by Gilbert and George and their camera peregrinations through the East End or the gallery-goer made uneasy by the ethical propositions?

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\(^{36}\) I have seen the series installed at Serpentine Gallery in London’s Hyde Park (2002), as well as part of a blockbuster retrospective at the Tate Modern (2007).

Interrogation

In a third focalizing move, Gilbert and George activate the imperative through the use of the interrogative sentence. The usual intent in asking a question is to solicit information. However, the operation of interrogation is laden with other characteristics wherein the real intention of the speaker in posing a question is to pressure or accuse, or to express sarcasm or anger. Let us consider a specific work that literally poses a question in its formulation *Are You Angry or Are You Boring?* [fig. 6-7]

The question can be considered rhetorical, as in the example of the Guerrilla Girls campaign *Do women have to be naked to get into the Met. Museum?* Through the inversion of the grammatical components, the question is revealed as an accusatory statement: “you are angry or you are boring” and “women have to be naked to get into the Met. Museum.” The question mark is also potent in its role in interrogation, an insistent cross-examination, in contrast to a request. Here, the graffiti exhorts us as viewers, punctuated by a question mark, in French *le point d’interrogation:* the pronoun “YOU” is an address by the artists to us as audience, forcing our own moral stance as the subjects of the question *are we angry?* (meaning the current system that produces incommensurability is unacceptable and must be challenged) or *are we boring?* (that is, passively accepting the conditions presented as apart from and beyond its negative consequences).

*Are You Angry or Are You Boring?* positions the imperative as intrinsically dialogic. The formulation of a question condition presupposes the participation of a respondent, so that a question/answer dialectic is invoked, linking the strategy to the “Hey, you!” address of Althusser’s policeman.38 It sutures our complicity as audience into the work by addressing us specifically as unavoidably present in the proposition. The interrogation invokes participation with the proposition to a higher degree than we have seen with other modes of visual speech acts, such as the contemplative, interpellative or declarative.

[fig. 6-7] Gilbert and George, *Are You Angry or Are You Boring?*, 1977
As in the previous examples, this graffiti text is sprawled across a brick wall, the “sign” of marginalized speech of the inner city. The recombinant images continue the cross examination: dramatically lit images of Gilbert and George as allegorical figures form vertical columns which restrain red-saturated images of black men, skyline views of the city and street scenes. This containment is both a framing device that serves to display and focus our attention on these scenes, as well as a negation of the imposing white faces, who refuse to “see” the inner city problems.

In the next section, the discussion turns from the deployment of the imperative through the Dirty Words image/text combinations to Gilbert and George’s use of heraldic symbols as figures of speech.

A Frame for Viewing

In the same period of time that Gilbert and George were exploring the potency of “dirty words”, they also undertook an exploration into the symbols and myths of a vaunted British patriotism. Although these Photo-pieces were not presented by the artists as a specific series, I will refer to them as “Britisher” works, linking this identity of Anglo-Saxon traditionalism to rising incidences of neo-Nazi and homophobic violence. The term “Britisher” (the actual title for one of the immensely scaled multi-image grids) seems apt to me for its polysemic connotations: 1) as a noun pointing to the terms 19th century historical origin in the context of colonialism as an appellation of implied superiority of British subjects residing in South Asian or African territory, to distinguish an upper-class from non-British “locals”; 2) as a contemporary synonym for “Britishness”, that is, referring to citizens of Anglo-Saxon ancestry in contrast to immigrant citizens from South Asia and the former West Indies; and 3) as a comparative term, being more British or extra British, again, a term to imply racial superiority, and inversely, as a demarcation from those deemed less British. 39 The grammatical possibilities of these propositions are again presented syntactically as a grid pattern, providing not only the pictorial/semantic possibilities of conflations, repetitions and continuous abutments, but also the liminal spaces of thresholds and boundaries between independently framed visual elements.

The grid structure focalizes the aggregation of images as a construction, and the clearly evident boundaries of each image against its neighbour prevent any reading of an illusionistic, naturalistic space. This produces, I would argue, another kind of montage, a kind of lenticular view, oscillating between the refusal of a graphic strategy employing receding depth toward a vanishing point, and the reference to the origins of pictorial construction as a means of doing so.

As I discussed in reference to the work of Hans Haacke and Allan Sekula in an earlier chapter, the grid format is an oft-used installation format by many post-Conceptual artist/photographers, such as Martha Rosler, Bernd and Hilla Becher, Jan Zimmer, Arnaud Maggs. I read their use of ordering images in a grid as a device to invoke the idea of the evidentiary, of rationalism, of the orderly and the objective, and to point to the fact that this spatial organization as a construction. Rosalind Krauss takes care to show how this operates as a device of modernism:

Flattened, geometricized, ordered, [the grid] is antinatural, antimimetic, antireal. It is what art looks like when it turns its back on nature. In the flatness that results from its coordinates, the grid is the means of crowding out the dimensions of the real and replacing them with the lateral spread of a single surface. In the overall regularity of its organization, it is the result not of imitation, but of aesthetic decree.40

Krauss argues that the Albertian lattice, such as that used by Dürer to create perspectival studies, is not really a grid as it supports rather than denies naturalism. The advent of Alberti’s method to map three dimensions space onto a two-dimensional surface divides a scene, such as an ideal Renaissance townscape, into a tool to map, square by square, what the eye sees. The end product does not “announce” these points of orientation but performs a “slight of eye” representing real space as if seen through a window. This grid method is also closely connected to the origins of photography through the use of en plein air devices such as the camera lucida for rendering scenic views. Given that my study implicates this history of the grid, and its application in the prehistory of photography, I am not in agreement. Either by modernists, or their predecessors, the creation of a visual image is already a kind of frame defining either the real or the theoretical. In this way, I read this kind of ordering as a device to invoke the idea of the evidentiary, of rationalism, of the orderly and the objective, while at the same time presenting an entirely

subjective perspective.

Gilbert and George subvert the naturalizing operations of camera-based documentary by creating multi-image grids that show the “hand” of the artist duo through arrangement, discontinuity and juxtaposition. Their contemporary, David Hockney, like many artists of the time, was keenly interested in the instantaneity afforded by Polaroid images. Through his experimentation, principally in the early 1980s, Hockney also employs the grid structure to refute illusionistic space and photographic verisimilitude. In his Portrait of David Graves (1982) [fig. 6-8], Hockney arranges a grid-formation composite of Polaroid SX-70 instant photographs, each image becoming a fragment combining to create a single pictorial scene. The syntactical strategy of “framing” each constituent photograph with defined borders produces a dialectic tension between the desire to perceive the multitude of fragmented parts and the desire to create a continuous and coherent pictorial illusion. The result is a large cubistic grid featuring disjointed relationships of scale, spatiality and temporality, a body at once constituted and fragmented, temporally fixed yet fluid. The instant exposure and production of the image is subverted as a collage of 120 “fragments” created in succession and built up to compose an aggregate image. Each fragment of the whole composition represents its own non-contiguous moment in time, and moreover, as a recombinant image, in fact created at a later point in time through the arrangement of the pieces. Here Hockney shares with Gilbert and George an interest in the grid as a graphic and a theoretical device of the imperative: their use of photographic montage as a minor language points to the hegemonic social construction of (sexual) identity through forced fitting, as well as to the dismantling of this normative categorization through breaking the pictorial rules of naturalism and resisting/exceeding boundaries.

Another strategy explored by Hockney was his “joiners”, images created by breaking away from the structured grid and overlapping fragments (this time, photomat-developed prints) one upon another. By continuously changing of each image frame during the original photography, Hockney sutures the beholder into the pictorial proposition through the creation of multiple and relational perspectives that appears to extend outward toward the beholder rather than away as in Alberti’s singular vanishing point. [figs. 6-9 and 6-10]

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[fig. 6-8] David Hockney, *Portrait of David Graves*, 1982
[fig. 6-9] Leon Battista Alberti, diagram showing perspective lines leading to a vanishing point, *Della Pittura*, 1435

[fig. 6-10] David Hockney, *Pearlblossom Highway*, 1986
Hockney’s construction of a vanishing point that is, in fact, us as beholders, refutes the symbolic reference of the vanishing point as the locus of the divine God’s Eye, widely held by artists of the Italian Renaissance. This transition is not only one of medium, from imaginary eye to camera eye, or from sacred to secular conceptions of the representation of space, but it is also a significant move from a theoretical absolute eternal to a perceived provisional present. Gilbert and George construct a pictorial grid that forms a template for representational space that is subjective and relational.

The grid as employed by Gilbert and George is not only a method for displaying distinct images as a physical graphic multiplicity, but is also an aggregation or accrual of individual components to produce a collective proposition, and in this way, it performs the politics of montage. Their framework of multiple “voices” and vantage points avoids the trope of figuring the object of inquiry as a “naturalized” camera subject, as in documentary photography, a move that Martha Rosler was also able to circumvent in her image/text mapping of the marginalized residents of New York’s Bowery district. Beholders must survey the possibility of propositions towering before them and create meaning from a vocabulary that is at once familiar, but also disorienting.42

The use of the grid to suggest stained-glass windows is also a deliberate strategy that is evident in images from Photo-pieces, especially in the works 1981-1983 that directly reference religious themes through iconography and titles. Hence Crusade (1982) emphasizes the cross-shaped pattern of chairs clutched by the artists (and in other works, the cross shape suggested through the pattern of coloured frames). The title itself refers to the religious expeditions to Jerusalem by Christian Europeans in the 11th through 13th centuries, and the violent mission to convert Muslims and others. In addition to the allusion to the stained glass of a medieval church,

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42 This methodology has been utilized in David Odpyle’s wall piece This Land, created from hundreds of overpainted postcards from the early 20th century, each portraying a distinct slide of idealized Americana. From close range, each coloured “pixel” is a vintage postcard; from a distance, the mammoth grid (over 243 cm high x 487 cm wide) reads as a bird’s eye view of a valley, with the sun rising in the pristine distance. The lower portion of the grid begins to break apart with postcards seeming to fall away from formation, an augur of future environmental chaos. Lawrence Weschler, “To get this artist's message, you have to look really closely,” The New York Times January 18, 2019. Accessed April 21, 2009 https://www.nytimes.com/2019/01/18/arts/design/david-opdyke-university-of-michigan-artist-activist.html
the triptych form references, like Haacke’s *Voici Alcan*, a religious altarpiece. Through the massive scale of the work, the imperative is employed to create a deictic experience which dominates the viewer. While Brenda Richardson argues that Gilbert and George’s *Crusade* “casts the artists in the role of Christian contemplatives, looking toward both world and afterlife salvation,”43 I would argue that their works in the *Modern Faith* series (1983) present a clear condemnation of the role of the church as moral and sexual repressor, and the source of forced conversion, in homoerotic content as well as blasphemous titles: *Cabbage Worship, Armed Faith, Death Faith*.

The concept of religious conversion is also an instance of the imperative and can also be linked to the forced conversion therapy used to convert the sexual orientation of homosexuals to heterosexuality. Katherine Bourguignon reads the employment of the grid as a metaphor for the closet, and the works of the 1977-1983 as the artists coming out of it.44 In this reading, the grid structure serves not as a connector of disparate propositions, but a latticework of boundaries that constrain gayness into compartmentalized lives. The sexualized graffiti drawings of *Dirty Words* reference contemporary gay slang (bugger, cock, queer, prick ass) and well as other titles in the *Modern Faith* series (*Holy Cock, Winter Tongue Fuck, Reaming, Sperm Eaters*).

I will now explore specific works produced by Gilbert and George after the *Dirty Words* series in the wake of Margaret Thatcher’s election as Prime Minister. These “Britisher” works appropriate images derived from pictorial codes representing the mythology of nation and tradition derived from heraldic symbolism, official portraiture and public commemorative sculpture. Images are used iconically to refer to British identity, such as views of famous London monuments (Trafalgar Square, Tower Bridge) or allegorical statuary (lion or dragon rampant). These traditional motifs are interwoven with a new, vernacular vocabulary of charges: candid


views of people (citizens) in crowded neighbourhoods; figures of British youths (warriors); signs of social decay such as indigents, dilapidated buildings and the unemployed standing in queue; and the allegorical figures of the artists themselves in their trademark “responsibility suit” uniforms ironically signifying their genteel social standing. The overt invocation of heraldic pictorial language is more than an appealing compositional device: the use of ordinaries and charges imported from medieval battle discourse into photographic grid fields mobilizes new ideological battlegrounds in which the artists may stake/state their claims.

4. Imperial Iconography

In addition to the references to pictorial systems through the use of the grid, Gilbert and George refer also to another, pre-technological convention of picture-making and proclamatory address, namely heraldic visual language. Heraldic symbolism, which reached its fullest range of expression in medieval England, is a complex and vivid picture language exerted in military and political operations and serves multiple signifying functions: to challenge or assert identity, fealty or territory in the field of war; and to propagate hereditary continuance through genealogical lines. An explicit functioning sign system in its historical manifestation, the contemporary popular interest in and usage of heraldic languages serves to nostalgically enshrine the myths of feudalistic England, of particular significance during Thatcher’s Tory administration. According to art theorist John Roberts, during this period, British national identity was framed in part through a central-core traditionalism manifested in public celebrations, petit-bourgeois taste, the rituals of royalty and country house life, as well as the continuing denigration of cultural peripheries.

One of the basic operations of heraldic pictorial language, used for instance in the fabrication of military shields, is the division of the pictorial surface (referred to as the “field”) into shapes. The simple, flat bands or “ordinaries” which divide and create specific patterns such as “pale” (trisection of the field vertically), “fess” (trisection of the field horizontally) and “cross”


Another heraldic practice is to “charge” the field with iconic emblems or “devices”: in traditional heraldry, common devices are lions, birds or hybrid winged creatures, cosmological, botanical and agricultural symbols, and icons referring to military engagement.

The use of heraldic language is explicitly constructed by Gilbert and George in the “Britisher” installations: the photographic fields comprise ordinaries created through bands of red-tinted photographs contrasted with regular black-and-white sections in pale, fess and cross configurations. *Elizabeth and Philip Potent* (1981), part of a series of Postcard pictures is composed as a square grid pattern known in heraldic design as “potent”, that is, having a crosspiece at the extremity of each arm. [fig. 6-11] The pattern itself is comprised of alternating colour photographs, official portraits of Queen Elizabeth II and Prince Philip produced for the celebration of the 1977 Jubilee, with the placement of the reigning Queen as the centrepiece.

The repetition of these smiling faces transforms the image of reverence and celebration of monarchy into an inane decorative pattern. This installation also operates as a ludic performance of the power and authority of monarchy itself: rather than “potent” as the name of the heraldic pattern would suggest (as well as the obvious sexual connotation of male erection and propagation), it foregrounds an insecure and waning central identity for traditional (imperial) Great Britain during the economic crisis of the 1970s. [Note also the etymological connections stemming from the Latin word *imperare* in the modern English words *imperative* (to command, order), *imperial* (pertaining to sovereign, empire) and *imperialism* (extending power and influence through diplomacy or military force).] In public life, the Queen plays a dual role as figurehead in her role as the secular head of nations as “the Crown”—a term I discussed in in the preface to this study in reference to the display of Nadia’s Myre’s work at the National Gallery of Canada — as well as her role as the head of the Church of England. Placing upbeat promotional postcard copies of her portrait, juxtaposed with that of her royal consort Phillip, in a cross formation invites a reconsideration of this double function. While their smiling portraits composed as a heraldic arrangement capture the spirit of the Silver Jubilee anniversary, they are also characters cast by
[fig. 6-12] Gilbert and George, *London*, 1980
the artists portrayed as seemingly oblivious to the trauma associated with their own inheritance through royal lineage, as perpetrators of subjugation and exploitation across Great Britain’s imperial history and to the suffering Christ on the Cross.47

The lost “potency” of the UK is asserted in London (1980) as a mammoth square grid presenting a single continuous image of a dragon statue marking the boundary of The City of London at Blackfriars Bridge. [fig. 6-12] The winged hybrid creature, a traditional “charge” device in heraldic design, connotes potency in its “rampant” or active physical stance, erect on two legs with phallic tongue and tail emphasized in the profile view. The field is bisected vertically into red and white zones as established “pale” format. The incorporation by Gilbert and George of images of lion and dragon sculptures in situ around London as part of a pictorial framework to dismantle myths of nationalism bears further examination. Within the vocabulary of heraldic design, these animal figures are avatars performing as both markers of sexual power and political power. In their dominant stance, they exert a forceful stride representing of the male erection, and this posture is described in heraldic terms words as “rampant” and “potent” as synonyms of state authority and power. Both specifically mark sites associated with the historical origins of both city and country.

In London, the dragon operates synecdochally for the manifold connotations of the word “London”: the locus of the hub of Empire, hegemonic colonialism and the historic glory of a great city. Dragons are a recurring motif in Gilbert and George’s work, including a variant of this grid entitled Nationalism, similar grid treatment of other dragon statues on view in London, and hand-drawn graphic dragon monsters. Traditionally, the dragon is associated with the legend of St. George and has served as an emblem of London since at least the early fourteenth century. The dragon sculpture featured in London (and in variant works entitled Go to Hell, and Living with Fear) is one of a pair of ornamental boundary sentinels, each clutching the heraldic shield of the City of London. The lion is a common symbol in heraldry, traditionally invoking not only its dominance as “king of the beasts”, but is also a synecdoche for the state and monarchy. The Royal Coat of Arms represents the British monarch and is arranged as a quartered shield supported by a crowned rampant lion and chained rampant unicorn, both male. The arrangement of large grids in

47 I thank Christa-Maria Lerm Hayes for making this last observation. Correspondence with the author, July 5, 2018. Elizabeth and Phillip Potent was featured in the commemorative Diamond Jubilee exhibition, The Queen: Art and Image, organized by the National Portrait Gallery (London) in 2012.
Dirty Words with the figures of Gilbert and George “rampant” flanking left and right reiterates and interrogates this performance of power, and raises the question whether they, as well as the monsters of heraldic symbolism, are protective or threatening, or perhaps both.

Citations of British heraldry also form the images of young British men, as in Cocky Patriot (1980) and Britisher (1980), both grid compositions trisected vertically. [figs. 6-13 and 6-14] In the former, the centre image of a Caucasian male youth is flanked by photographs of the Union Jack flag, thus creating a meta-flag field invoking the sexual potency (“cocky”) of Great Britain and a renascent British nationalism. The latter image consists of three views of a Caucasian male youth, whose overcoat bears a Union Jack emblem. The composition resembles the frontal and profile views associated with “mugshot” police photographs, while conversely the title “Britisher” refers not only to someone who is British, but to someone who is British-er, that is to someone who is authentically British, or hyper-British, in comparison to merely or conventionally British, such as Celtic minorities, non-Caucasian or immigrant Britons. In this way, the composition points to the dual condition of both entrapment and supremacy for young Anglo-Saxon males in the UK. Related to this image is Patriots (1980) in which the photographic grid is divided into a series of frontal full-length portraits of young males standing against various building backdrops, compressed into a shallow pictorial space. [fig. 6-15]
[fig. 6-14] Gilbert and George, Britisher, 1980

[fig. 6-15] Gilbert and George, Patriots, 1980

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The work seems nearly identical to *Britisher*, with a marked exception: the occupation of the third image by a youth of South Asian descent which disrupts the uniformity of the police “line-up” of sallow, disaffected expressions. The “otherness” of this youth, the focus of attack of racist bully groups, operates against the rhetoric of who may or may not be considered as a “patriot” or entitlement to English identity, bringing to mind Theodor Adorno’s urging that if we want to counteract anti-Semitism we must not depend on the belief that it has something to do with Jews, but instead “turn toward the subject—the anti-Semite, the other who hates the other man.” Contestations regarding the manufacture and performance of British identities during the Thatcher era point the way to intertextual readings of the Gilbert and George “Britisher” works. 

At the core of these contestations (in this discussion demonstrated in linkages to radical films and punk music) is the struggle to inscribe or extinguish a pluralist vision of contemporary society. These cultural expressions take the form of angry attacks at the social foreclosure of choice and tolerance produced by economic recession and ascendant nationalism, as well as the promulgation of *us versus them* positions: fascism, racism and homophobia.

This discussion has explored the grammatical and pictorial strategies pointing to transgressive speech (*Dirty Words*) and to physical violence (“Britisher” works). The exploration now turns to related works in other media that support the “speaking roles” introduced by Gilbert and George to represent the positions of contestation.

5. Laddishness

The “Britisher” installations by Gilbert and George discussed above (*Are You Angry or Are You Boring?*, *Bummed, Suck, Paki*, etc.) all demonstrate direct reference to the presence of young men as threatened (impotent) and threatening (potent) focalizers; the heraldic symbolism of the works points to confrontational aspects of militancy and territoriality. It is particular of significance that these productions place the fomenting and explosive rage of young men at the centre of their narratives. “Laddishness” refers to a particular form of boorish heterosexual masculinity, originating as a derogatory term with working-class associations, and later

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[fig. 6-16] Gilbert and George, *The Queue*, 1978
appropriated by the middle class as a kind of “cool”. During the time of Gilbert and George’s use of the laddish type in the late 1970s and early 1980s, the term primarily referred to disaffected, unemployed young men, to followers of white supremacist groups, and to tough hyper-masculinized subordination of gay men.

In *The Queue* (1978), Gilbert and George arrange the grid pattern into three distinct horizontal registers. [fig. 6-16] The upper register is a four-panel photograph of the unemployed standing in a long welfare queue; the middle register presents a close-up shot of two young men with tense, mistrustful facial expressions; the bottom register with the impassive and harshly lit faces of Gilbert and George, again as allegorical figures of complacent British society which refuses to “see” the dangers posed above. Like the figures of young men in the police “queues” of *Britisher* and *Cocky Patriot*, the protagonists of *The Queue* represent both thwarted potential and impending destruction through their frontal (accused and accusative) stance.

*Bollocks (We’re All Angry)* (1977) points to both the inclusion of their voices as well as to the chorus of frustrated and fractured constituencies under pressure in Thatcherite Britain. [fig. 6-17] Who is the collective “we” referred to in this title? We are reminded here by historian Peter Riddell that Thatcher announced in 1968 “there are dangers in consensus: it could be an attempt to satisfy people holding no particular views about anything.” The multiple frames that are combined to form the graffiti-titled *Bollocks* include street views of a bobby in a multiracial district, black residential and commercial areas, a homeless man sleeping on the street, as well as youthful photographs of and George flanking the graffiti text “We’re All Angry”. While the imposing declaration can be construed to emanate from the artists as social critics, or any of the citizens depicted in the street views, in comparison with the installations featuring young men, it could also stand for the voice of British male youth alienated in a fracturing culture.

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49 My thanks to Christa-Maria Lerm Hayes for pointing out this last meaning. Correspondence with the author, July 5, 2018.


51 Peter Riddell, *The Thatcher Era*, 1.
This is demonstrable in the film version of these installations, *The World of Gilbert and George*, which features on-camera revelations by anonymous British youths, National Front bully boys whose very future is foreclosed, attempting to articulate this condition with considerable disease and self-consciousness in flatly delivered phrases such as “I am angry”. Racism and homophobia are not overtly articulated by the camera subjects, but the evasive nature of their responses suggests direct linkage to other, stylized scenes in the film: soldiers marching, emphatic choreographed clenched fist gestures, audio track with military marching music, etc.  

52 (Notably and hilariously, scenes of Gilbert and George in their suits acting out the banal rituals of

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observations of weather conditions, pouring tea, shopping lists, is interspersed with the mobilizing forces of the angry young men.) The potency of this anger is documented in *Among the Thugs* by *GRANTA* literary magazine editor Bill Buford, tracking the confluence of football match riots with the recruitment of National Front white supremacists. In his harrowing, though fascinating account of mob violence by football fans, Buford describes his experiences interviewing his informants, who regard football less as a pastime than as a religion, cult or firm: the young men are candid about their investment in (“It makes us somebody”) and capacity for violence (“We’ve all got it in us”).53 Buford then documents how the nascent violence of the football grounds is tapped and manipulated by National Front organizers recruiting new members.54 The targets are located both on the field, as fans grunt like apes when a black player has the ball, and outside the stadium where “pakis, blacks, jews, wogs and fags” may encounter the roving gangs of “thugs” post-match. The “racialist” expressions, as the informants themselves refer to their actions, are supported by the production of White Power music with deracination song titles such as “Young British and White”, “England belongs to Me” and “British Justice”55, echoing the blunt force of the graffiti drawing epithets appropriated in the *Dirty Words* series, and the sarcasm of the Photo-pieces I discussed as the “Britisher” works. Buford’s closing assessment renders into words what is visually portended but not decisively concluded by Gilbert and George in the photo installations: “a bloated code of maleness, an exaggerated embarrassing patriotism, a violent nationalism, an array of bankrupt antisocial habits.”56

Despite the intolerant hatred fostered in this culture, particularly toward non-heterosexual orientation, Gilbert and George do not appear to condemn the young men they portray. The “queue” portraits demonstrate a certain tentativeness about how these youths might operate in the public sphere; the titles give “voice” to their own sense of fears; and the overall tentative approach reveals a certain insight into the unarticulated homoerotic nature of their explosive violence in an all-male “packs”. A possible reading is an acknowledgement of the intersection of homosexual

54 Buford, *Among the Thugs*, 146.
55 Buford, *Among the Thugs*, 152.
56 Buford, *Among the Thugs*, 265.
and homosocial culture, in this instance, both on the margins of the mainstream. The violence of contemporary neo-fascism meets the homoerotic culture of skinheads in disturbing large-scale paintings by Canadian-born artist Richard Attila Lukacs, working in West Berlin in the latter part of the 1980s as part of a group of artists known as the Young Romantics. In his mural-size paintings, such as *The Young Spartans Challenge the Boys to Fight (after Degas’ Young Spartans Exercising and Caravaggio’s The Calling of St. Matthew)* (1989) [fig. 6-18], Lukacs stages ambiguous or openly homoerotic scenes, featuring young leather-clad or nude skinhead models posed in fictitious subterranean netherworlds replete with motifs of sadomasochistic practices.

The “Britisher” works open the possibility of intertextual reading to another forum of young male anger during Thatcher’s tenure: the concomitant rise of punk as a narrative voice of opposition to the authority of the British traditionalism. In 1977, the same Jubilee year to which the ludic *Elizabeth and Philip Potent* refers, the Sex Pistols recorded the *cri du coeur* punk anthem *God Save the Queen*. Although lyrics in themselves cannot do justice to the wrenching nihilism of the recorded performance, they do convey a sense of a foreclosed future for Britain’s youth:

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God save the queen
The fascist regime
They made you a moron
A potential H bomb
God save the queen
She’s not a human being
and There’s no future
And England’s dreaming
Don’t be told what you want
Don’t be told what you need
There’s no future
No future
No future for you
God save the queen
We mean it man
We love our queen
God saves
God save the queen
’Cause tourists are money
And our figurehead
Is not what she seems
Oh God save history
God save your mad parade
Oh Lord God have mercy
All crimes are paid
Oh when there's no future
How can there be sin
We're the flowers
In the dustbin
We're the poison
In your human machine

The anarchic impetus of punk music, at least in its early expressions, was aggressive toward systemic apparatuses of any kind, the established commercial music recording industry as much as social norms in general. Especially, punk shared with the cultural practices of Gilbert and George the capacity to produce offensive attacks against the failure of the benign liberal conscience to produce social reform. Rather than coalescing as a collective force of victimization, as with the National Front bullies, punks manifested their rage through extreme and militant individualism, particularly performed through abdication from social mechanisms such as school and job, non-participation in the cash economy, and adoption of “extreme” approaches to personal

58 The song was released as a chart-topping single in 1977 in response to the celebration of the Queen’s silver jubilee, and later included on the Sex Pistols’ only album, Never Mind the Bollocks, Here’s the Sex Pistols.
appearance as a visual protest in the public sphere (body piercings with safety pins, torn clothing, startling and brilliant-hued hair arrangements set with shoe wax).⁵⁹ Although punks are not explicitly present among the *dramatis personae* of the “Britisher” images, their inventive strategies of non-compliance and outrage, as well as acceptance of the marginalized, bears marked comparison with the artistic practices of Gilbert and George.

Arguably, the most conducive correspondence to the fluctuating social and moral arena upon which the “Britisher” works of Gilbert and George are deployed is found in the independent films of the same period. Derek Jarman’s film, *The Last of England* (1987), is a personal meditation on Britain as a ruined and repressive society that mixes theatrical performance, home movies and footage of urban decay. The themes and cinematic techniques of the films of Stephen Frears and Hanif Kureishi mentioned earlier in this essay, such as *My Beautiful Laundrette* (1986) and *Sammy and Rosie Get Laid* (1987), compare to the pictorial strategies of Gilbert and George: use of split screen, rapid rhythmic cross-cutting, shock cuts, vivid colour (especially use of red filters) producing films replete with privileged and abjected characters from the crossroads of modern London. More significantly, the photo installations of Gilbert and George share with the Frears/Kureishi productions the impossibility of assuming a benign or “neutral” liberal conscience in a corrupt (and corrupting) world: both teams force the audience/viewer into agency in order to accept or reject a moral responsibility. The myriad cast of characters thus represents various social positions that are fixed/fluid and complicit/oppositional to the dominant discourse and therefore to each other; their interactions through moral minefields are filled with probity, wonderment and hilarity, making the films closely proximate to the compassionate and outraged spirit of Gilbert and George productions. *Sammy and Rosie Get Laid*, in particular, presents the phenomenon of wealthy *culturati* title characters cultivating their own “street cred” through associations with dissident or marginalized characters. Dread Scott notes how even the anarchistic expression of punk music becomes commodified: “In order for me to hear The Clash, some record executive from a multinational conglomerate has to make that record. And this is an executive who is

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probably controlling the same level of wealth as many of these art institutions." I see the use of laddish archetypes in Gilbert and George’s work as a kind of lament for a lost generation of boys rather than reifying a certain cool for wealthy collectors of the period.

It is possible to regard the presentation of lads in the work of Gilbert and George as a kind of speech act delivered through the middle voice. This mode of expression hovers between the active voice of (the agent of the doing) and the passive voice (the object of the doing), but not strictly either one of these, and, to be noted here, the middle voice may a reflexive character in which the subject acts on itself, both performing and receiving the action expressed by the verb. As gay men who survived the era of hyper-masculinized Mods and Rockers (as well as specific representations of tough East End laddishness in period portrayals such as the 1967 film To Sir, with Love), Gilbert and George look to a younger generation of boys/men who are at the same time perpetrators (of gay bashing, intolerance) and victims (of a class system, of social conditioning).

I see a link between the antagonisms that reside in and are foregrounded by Gilbert and George’s The Dirty Words series, as well as their imperial and laddish works I have discussed above, together with the film works cited, and Chantal Mouffe’s writing on agonism. I previously noted the importance of her work to Krzyzstof Wodiczko, and find perspective on the imperative of a radical democracy consonant with the works the struggle for heterogeneity and equity discussed in this chapter. Mouffe lived in Britain during the Thatcher era and has commented on the awkward necessity of adopting a defensive position. In 2006, she recalled that time: “When I came to this country, the basic common sense was social-democratic, there is absolutely no doubt about that. And of course, we were critical about that common sense because we thought it was not radical enough. Now, we are in fact trying to protect what we were criticizing.” Mouffe’s comment astutely points, I think, to the interlocked yet fluid positions of resistance and survival that feed the imperative as a strategy for justice and the protection of identity.


The imperative performed by Gilbert and George resides not only in the force of the cited graffiti words, and in the titles of the work themselves, but also in the pictorial proposition. Like Moulène’s *Le Tunnel*, the force is found in the *gesture* of the graffiti’s creator, the originator of a transgressive act later acquired and cited by the artists. The text is not rendered in type, but as a hand-drawn (or sprayed) trace of an author and an action/utterance. The grid strategy by the artists as they re-present these renderings both organizes a spatial field that serves as a theatre stage for performance (flanking wings with a centre protagonist) and as evidence of an artificial system of seeing, a rationalist tool for seeing that does not see, entrapping the predators as prey. Gilbert and George are also part of the *dramatic personae* of this stage: they hover between personas of themselves, or as Everyman, as viewers who, like the constructed grid, also do (*The Alcoholic*) or do not see (*Paki*). *Their* gesture of observing is also a lenticular oscillation, a doubling both mimics the *not-seeing*, a mirror reflecting back onto the eventual wealthy collectors who acquire their works, and facilitates the *seeing* as a theoretical object for presented for analysis to viewers in the public museums.

I will now close my explorations of specific works, and their relation to a proposed template for performative strategies and conclude my study with some evaluative comments and pathways for further research.