



## They keep stiff for hours

CHRIS HECTOR

TALKING TO a living sculpture is an unnerving business. Mid sentence you realise that for the past minute Gilbert — or is it George — has been totally immobile. Arm raised, eyebrow arched, drink tilted, gaze fixed — like a statue in fact.

Not that they're unfrigidly statues, far from it. Excessively polite, elegantly witty and most concerned that you should get your share of the gin and tonic that they seem to sip most of their waking life.

George recounts an unfortunate experience. Only yesterday he came down with a cold. So bad in fact that he could not touch a drop of liquor all day. "We went to bed rather early and I woke up in the morning and for the first time in my life I had this terrific hangover. Gilbert got it even worse. Once he actually fell from the dais during a performance. I think it was an overlap from a drinking sculpture to a singing sculpture actually..."

After another statuesque silence I ask: "Is there ever any point at which you are not living sculpture?" George: "Not that we've noticed. There are points at which one is a different sort of living sculpture, but not greater or lesser sculpture..."

"More framed — more framed pieces," chimes in Gilbert. "The sculpture is our work, with or without people, even in an empty gallery. When we present a sculpture as we do in this museum it is only a very small part of our year, of our life — our sculpture exists in the studio or in the office..."

"It is very, very difficult to be a sculpture. It's not difficult for us but it would be

very difficult for someone else. I think you almost have to be born to it... but there are things that you can learn. We studied sculpture for a long time, studied art history."

The rest of the press is getting the same unnerving effect ("We can frighten people — when we want to"). Half way through a question the questioner realises that George or Gilbert or both have resumed their statue form. Quite happy to stand absolutely still, absolutely silent — maybe for the next few hours.

I mention that Melbourne conceptual artist Mike Brown has expressed a desire to paint them with whitewash. George is not amused. "All sorts of artists who are not very good want to do things with us, or to us — because their own work is not enough. We like artists to do their own work, we like to do our own work."

You're never quite sure when Gilbert and George are having you on — which may be all the time or never, or both, perhaps.

"There's going to be this exhibition of the history of living sculpture. There's a long history of living sculpture, from the seventeenth century onwards. Nearly always two men. ("They only specialise in two men", interposes Gilbert.) They've found some people who call themselves J. and J. who photographed themselves outside famous buildings for years and years. Always beautifully posed.

"Then they found some people who call themselves L. and L. who travelled Egypt and all sorts of strange places. [By the time of their Melbourne press conference L&L's itinerary includes Australia.] Again you find some people who were called The

Gentlemen. Who were two gentlemen with bowler hats, who used to appear in restaurants, who were just known as The Gentlemen..."

"They've been doing lots of research for the exhibition — I think the catalogue's up to five volumes already."

Silence, stillness, more gin.

I offer a quote from the Bhagavadgita: "The man who is united with the Divine and knows the truth thinks 'I do nothing at all', for in seeing, hearing, touching, smelling, tasting, walking, sleeping, breathing; in speaking, emitting, grasping, opening and closing the eyes, he holds that only the senses are occupied with the objects of senses."

G&G are delighted. "Yes that's right, we've never heard that before; that's very nice. It seems very similar."

They apologise, they're not being very good at jokes, the jokes are better when they've had more to drink.

"Drinking sculpture can become very drunk. We are going to do a book on drunken sculpture. We have done one book called *Side by side* which is very much to do with being sober. We're trying to think of a title — this is a joke — we thought the second title should be *Shield by shield*."

Has anyone ever doubted that their work is, in fact, ART? "We are completely accepted in every single gallery. When you are in a gallery you must be art, otherwise you wouldn't be there, because that's where the art is. The sculpture would be immediately less art if it was done in the street because people wouldn't know it was art. We wouldn't feel very artistic doing it in the street. We do works in public, outside of gallery situations, but only in relation to art."

We adjourn to the sculpture court to take the photos.

G&G are very definite, they do not want anything else in the background which might distract from their piece. Gilbert is disturbed by Melbourne's cultural centre. "It's an amazing building you have here. It's absolutely fascist, it's completely like Hitler's idea, so cold, horrible."

George spies a tree in the corner. "There's a tree Gilbert, we love trees, don't we. We'll go over there..."

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BREAK for drinks and G&G reassemble for their press conference piece. Standing ("We don't like sitting on soft chairs very much"), the Gordon's and tonic set up on a low table. The silences come fast and furious as the rest of the press attempt to mould them into usable copy.

Where did you meet? "We met at St Martin's which was the last art school we went to."

Studying painting? "No, actually we were in the lavatory at the time."

Did you make your arrangement there in the lavatory before you left? "Oh no it's still going on."

There's nothing to stop anyone becoming a living sculpture is there? "If you are able to do it, yes."

What makes you specially able to do it? "We are able to do it."

By this stage the idea of two living statues seems perfectly proper and natural. It's the press questioners who are becoming increasingly unreal.

George tells a joke. He tells of the man crimping pies with his false teeth. Asked if he has nothing better to use, replies: "Of course, but I save that for the ring doughnuts."

Gilbert steadfastly denies he is a man. "Do I look mannish, do I look masculine?" More feminine then? "Not really." Neuter? George: "Precisely".