

PROJECT 3

Gilbert & George

1973

The Singing Sculpture

The Shrubberies Number 1

The Shrubberies Number 2

16 – 21 August 1973

Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney

29 August – 2 September 1973

National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne

BIOGRAPHY

Over four decades ago, Gilbert & George adopted the identity of ‘living sculptures’, becoming not only creators, but the art itself. The duo have worked across a variety of media throughout their career. Underpinned by their core beliefs of ‘Art for Life’s Sake’ and ‘Art for All’, they refer to all their work as sculpture. Today Gilbert & George are among the most famous living British Artists known for their signature billboard-sized photomontages, which question conventions and taboos.

FACTS

- Gilbert and George refer to themselves as ‘living sculpture’, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.
- For Kaldor Public Art Project 3, they performed for five hours each day, over six days, in the Entrance Court of the Art Gallery of NSW.
- They performed the song ‘Underneath the Arches’ 112 times each day.
- ‘Underneath the Arches’ was written in 1932, and refers to the arches of Friargate Railway Bridge in Derby, England, and the homeless men who slept there during the Great Depression.
- Gilbert & George each held a prop – one striped plastic cane with a squeaker at the base and one rubber glove, which they exchanged at intervals.

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PROJECT OVERVIEW

For Project 3 in 1973, Gilbert & George presented *The Singing Sculpture* in both Sydney and Melbourne, merging sculpture and performance and bringing art into everyday life. With their faces and hands painted with a mix of bronze-coloured metallic powder and Vaseline, and a table as their plinth, they sang along to the song of two Depression-era tramps, 'Underneath the arches', slowly repeating a series of gestures and circling mechanically like figures inside a music box. Gilbert & George are now among the most famous living British artists, known for their signature billboard-sized pictures in bright neon colours, showing them together, suited or naked, among a kaleidoscope of images and symbols. *The Singing Sculpture* is now recognised as the art piece that launched their career. It embodied and communicated their idiosyncratic personae and the concept of 'living sculpture' that has informed their lives and art over 40 years.

Gilbert & George met in the 1960s as students at St Martin's School of Art where they began to explore radical ideas such as portable sculpture, and in 1969 they removed the mediation of the art object entirely, shifting focus to the actions and rituals of their daily lives as 'living sculpture'. Wearing timeless, tailored suits and neckties, they adopted a posture of genteel decorum, enacted through a flow of polite interactions and formal modes of correspondence. They invited audiences to *Lecture Sculpture* and *Meal Sculpture*, or to view *Walking Sculpture* and *Magazine Sculpture*.

The Singing Sculpture visualised Gilbert & George in their new role as an art object. It was first exhibited in a variety of guises at London art schools, music events and festivals, wherever they could find it a home. After a number of guerrilla presentations, the sculpture began to gain momentum and they were invited to travel and present it overseas. *The Singing Sculpture* was shown 26 times between 1969 and 1972, across Germany, cities in Italy, Belgium, Norway and Switzerland, and at the newly opened Sonnabend Gallery in New York, before the final presentations of the piece in Australia in 1973.

Crowds flocked to see *The Singing Sculpture* in Australia, many staying to watch the work for hours at a time. In Sydney, 'Underneath the arches' was repeated 112 times a day, presented for five hours each day over six days in the Entrance Court of the Art Gallery of New South Wales, then for five hours a day over five days at Melbourne's National Gallery of Victoria. As part of the environment for the work, Gilbert & George also displayed large 'charcoal-on-paper sculptures', across the gallery walls.

..those who worry about whether or not it's art should quite worrying and learn to love this bombshell planted in the gallery... they have a genuine aesthetic effect for they make you look at other art quite differently. Gilbert and George are like nothing you have seen or heard.

- Patrick McCaughey, 'Singing Sculptures act of the season', *Age*, 30 Aug 1973, p2

Kaldor Public Art Project 3: Gilbert & George, *The Singing Sculpture*, Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney, 16 - 21 August 1973

Photo: Douglas Thompson



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Photo: Douglas Thompson

