

GILBERT & GEORGE

THE PAINTINGS
(with *Us in the Nature*) 1971

This exhibition focuses on an installation by Gilbert & George from 1971 entitled: *The Paintings (with Us in the Nature)*. The series comprises six triptychs, oil on canvas, each measuring 230 x 680 cm. The work has been lent by the artists. The Kröller-Müller Museum hopes eventually to acquire the series for its collection.

Gilbert & George (Gilbert, Dolomites, 1943 and George, Devon, 1942) began their career in the 1960s, a period of great artistic experimentation and questioning of the definition of art. Artists expanded the possibilities of art with enormous inventiveness, which still inspires today. The term Conceptual Art originated in this period. It is the name for a form of visual art in which materials were subordinated to the communication of ideas and meanings.

Conceptual art works consist of spoken, written or printed words, sketches and annotations, photographs, films and videos, actions and performances, communication via the media or various sorts of processes and their documentation. Traditional techniques and materials were not precluded per se, but were subjected to a thoroughgoing critique because of their historical baggage. Conceptual artists often had a traditional art training but were rarely preoccupied with aesthetics or the traditional craft of making art. They preferred to establish relationships between artistic, social and natural phenomena and adopt a philosophical approach.

They posed questions about the function of art, about the social role of the artist, the role of the public, the collector and client, and the meaning of the place in which the art work manifests itself.

To communicate the essence of the idea, conceptual artists nonetheless relied upon various forms of visualisation or materialisation, documenting their actions and processes in various forms, usually in multiples: books, catalogues, magazines, postcards, etc. Although it was initially considered beneficial for the freedom of this art form that the works were difficult or impossible to sell, the principles of the art market soon triumphed and conceptual artists began to produce a broad range of more tangible and signed unique art works and editions.

The approach of individual artists within the movement differed radically. For many years Gilbert & George were considered the *enfants terribles* of conceptual art. Humorous and contrary on the one hand and melancholy and understated on the other, they ex-

pressed the age-old theme of the unity of art and life in a 'conceptual' manner. Wittily, but confusingly, they positioned themselves as 'the sculptors' or 'human sculptors', but did not produce works that would normally be considered sculpture. In these years Gilbert & George used various new and classical techniques to communicate their personal experience of space and time to the public. They are famous for their performance as 'living sculptures' and 'the singing sculpture' in museums with pigments on their faces and hands, but they also sent out postal sculptures, produced 'charcoal on paper sculptures' and books as sculpture and, as with the paintings shown here, used oil paint on canvas to make sculpture. Eventually photography became their preferred medium and they began to focus on urban life and its social problems. An essential characteristic of their work is their conscious decision to speak to a broad public, not only through subjects and art forms that appeal to a wide audience, but by remaining true to the motto they adopted in the 1960s, 'Art for All', by sending complimentary postal sculptures by mail, low-priced editioned graphic works and by refusing to exploit their author's rights.

In *The Paintings (with Us in the Nature)* they establish their relationship to nature. This extraordinary work from 1971 consists of six enormous painted triptychs. The artists called the work a 'new romantic sad beautiful sculpture'. They were painted in the winter of 1970-71 in oil on canvas as recreations of their experiences the previous summer in the English countryside. The paintings are the only 'sculpture' by the artists in this medium. They depicted themselves sitting, standing and strolling in a pastoral landscape. In each triptych there is a single cultural element to provide a counterpoint. *The Paintings* caused a degree of consternation in progressive art circles not least of all because of their choice of materials and technique for evoking their emotions in a summer landscape. A return to painting was the last thing one expected a progressive artist to do in this period. They opted for a semi-naïve approach, which was unheard of among the avant-garde at the time. Rather than

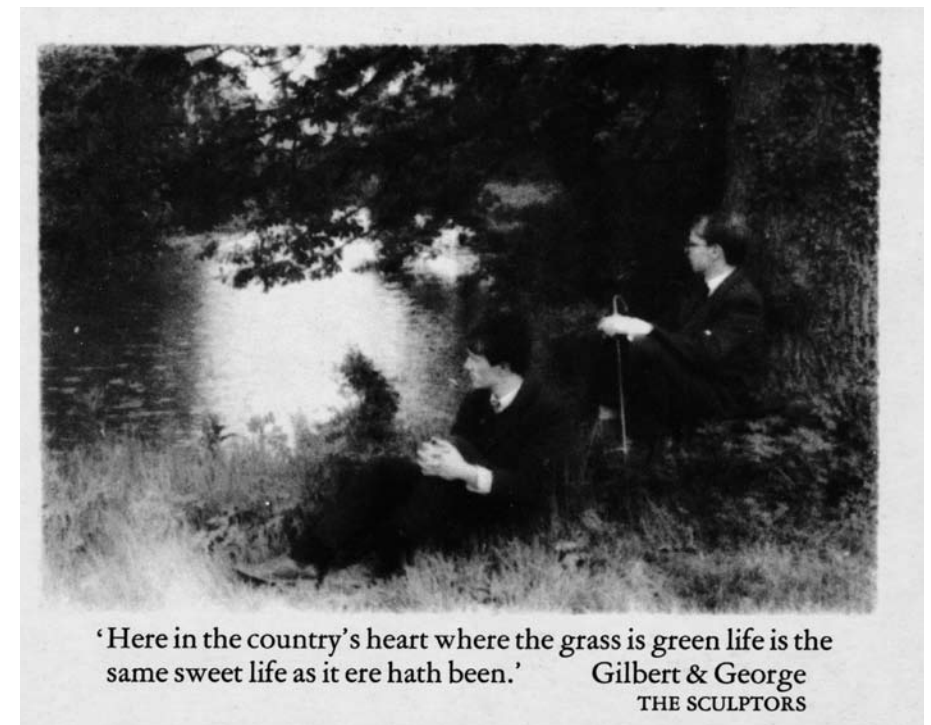
engaging in a fundamental exploration of materials, as we see in Robert Ryman's abstract works of this period, they presented an aesthetic based upon representation, emotions and intuition that seemed to have more in common with the works of the early twentieth-century painter Henri Rousseau le Douanier. In retrospect, now that we have witnessed the second or third rebirth of painting, the work may be seen as prophetic.

The form of the paintings was also highly unusual for the period: triptychs are usually associated with the tradition of religious art. Gilbert & George, who appear in each of the central panels, appear to have transformed themselves into saints. The repetition – in six groups of panels – and the large format create the illusion of scenes from the life of a saint, albeit not a particularly exciting life.

The Paintings are accompanied by an explanation by the artists: 'George and Gilbert are delighted to have you here with them in their new romantic sad beautiful sculpture'. In 1971 they introduced the paintings as follows: 'This sculpture we have lived. It was the Summer of 1970. Then came the Winter and we recreated these senses. We put them down with oil paints on canvases composed of six main frames and 12 supporting panels. During the process we discovered that like a living day is a living day so an inch of canvas is an inch of canvas. Whilst we enjoyed painting, our greatest pleasure was in seeing the sculpture coming back.'

The artists set themselves the task of communicating to us the total complex of experiences of nature. They have achieved this in a penetrating fashion, albeit with a touch of irony. *The Paintings* are at once a megalomaniac attempt to regain a lost sensation and a demonstration of the emptiness that lurks behind the notion of nature as paradise. The ambiguity of *The Paintings* is part of their strength: nature is overwhelming yet also boring; the artists are reflective but also empty; the landscape is presented as unspoiled, but has also been shaped by man: witness the fences, gates and church. How hollow or replete are the illusions presented here?

All of the works that Gilbert & George made in the summer of 1970 are related to nature: they produced a steady stream of work of themselves photographed and filmed within landscapes. In addition to *The Paintings* – the most monumental work dealing with this theme – they also produced postal sculptures such as *The Sadness in Our Art*, video sculptures and a sculpture novel entitled *Side by Side*. The photographs on which they based the images in the central panels of *The Paintings* can be found in the chapter entitled *with Us in the Nature* in this book, in which they describe in prose their experiences as the 'living sculptures' within the landscape. You will find reproductions of several pages from the book in the gallery in which *The Paintings* are displayed. The composition of the central panel of the first triptych, with George gazing at the water and Gilbert



Invitation card Video Gallery Gerry Schum, 1970

looking dreamily towards the viewer, is borrowed from the video sculpture *The Nature of Our Looking*, for which in 1970 the artists made a short 'sketch' of one and half minutes duration. This 'sketch' is included in the exhibition: both artists sit apparently motionless by a tree, but to our amazement George suddenly takes a puff of his cigarette, showing the idyll in a completely different light.

Over the past few years the Kröller-Müller Museum has filled certain gaps in its collection of works from the 1960s and 1970s – the final period of modernism – in particular with the acquisition of the Van Eelen-Weeber collection. The museum is also focusing on two other important aspects of its collecting policy: utopian elements in the work of modern and contemporary artists and a critical response to the notion of nature as paradise in contemporary work. *The Paintings* by Gilbert & George are an important addition to the collection of works in the collection dating from around 1970 in which the relationship of art to nature is central. The museum has a high-quality collection of five unique works by Gilbert & George from the 1970s. *Gilbert by George and George by Gilbert* is an installation from 1970 comprising two drawings and a soundtrack, in which we hear the artists talking while making each other's portraits. *Drifters* is a large seven-part drawing from 1972 showing the effects of alcohol on the artists and the elision of the worlds of the bar and the landscape. Finally there are three composite photoworks from 1974, 1976 and 1977, respectively *Human Bondage No. 6*, *Mental No. 2* and *Angry*, the latter two of which are not displayed here. It is in these photoworks that Gilbert & George alighted upon the form and themes that would make them world-famous. Postal sculptures, books and other documentation from the earliest years of Gilbert & George's career from the museum's collection are displayed in the vitrines and in the print room.

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