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### Taking the Piss Out of Art: A Q&A Gilbert & George on Their Urethra Pictures

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LONDON—At Paris's Thaddaeus Ropac Gallery, Gilbert & George are showing "Urethra Postcard Pictures," their long-running series revealing myriad aspects of London, from its military parades to its lewd come-ons, through the use of tourist postcards. Before the show, the two artists — whose work is also currently on view at Lehmann Maupin's Armory Show booth — were more than pliant for a video camera-wielding journalist, calmly letting her manipulate them like dolls into all sorts of poses. (After all, they did start off in 1967 as "Singing Sculptures.") ARTINFO France then sat down with the impeccably-dressed pair to talk about urethras, the Union Jack, and why showing sex-shop images is "the decent thing" to do. Why did you choose the urethra, and what does this canal represent for you?

George: I think for two reasons. One is that we never like to use a form just for form's sake. We want a form that has a meaning. That's why in the 80s we made postcard pictures with the cross. It was not just a form, it has a moral dimension. And we discovered the Theosophical Society, which still has a branch in Paris. Two leading members are Annie Besant — who was a pioneer of family planning, she went to prison for promoting it — and the other author is Charles Ledbetter, who taught male masturbation by post at a time when it was almost illegal, it was shameful, it was unhealthy, it was sinful, it was un-Christian. And so he tried to remove the shame and horror from it. Because in the 19th century there were actually suicides among young people connected to masturbation. So he was a great, great forward-looking person.

Gilbert: You see in these landscapes a circle with a dot, a stylized image of a urethra. And when you see through that eye, the urethra eye, everything is tinted, everything comes out in a different way. You start to think completely different. That postcard is different when you have the urethra on top of it.

George: It's not an abstract shape, it's a meaningful shape. Also we found out that the Boy Scout movement, they used that sign on the hand like that to say "going home." Is there a connection there? I'm not sure.

Patriotic images are very prominent here. Is this a meaningful idea today?

Gilbert: Patriotism is quite interesting because in Europe now we have the common market but all the countries are becoming more nationalistic than ever before in some crazy way. You have the English cheeses, German cheeses, French cheeses, you don't have European cheeses. So we are still very nationalistic in some way. And the Union Jack for us is the best design of any flag, we think. Because it's based on two crosses as a design.

George: The simple truth is that it is not just a design — it is made up of straight crosses and diagonal crosses, most of which were used for crucifixion. So they're not abstract shapes.

Gilbert: And the Union Jack is such a problematic symbol in England, it's been right-wing, it's been left-wing, and it's been not allowed, so for us it is very interesting as a meeting power. We used it already in 1989 — in fact we used it in 1974 for the first time when it was nearly forbidden. Now it is not, because now they're all using it on both sides of the political spectrum for the first time. And now, every foreign person who comes to London they always immediately buy a hat with the Union Jack — it's the first thing they buy.

Do you think the Union Jack has lost its political or patriotic dimension?

George: No, because it's still used over the coffins of dead troops every week. So you can never remove this political dimension.

Can you tell us a bit about your choice of postcards featuring transsexuality, sado-masochism, and Viagra?

George: We had to have a criterion, because we didn't want to be "artistes." We didn't want it to be because we liked it, or because we liked the color. So with the postcards, it was any card which had the Union flag in it. We didn't reject one, we used every one. And with the London telephone postcards, we had a very simple criterion: any card that wasn't boring. Because most of them are boring. And with the flyers, which is a smaller group, also the same criterion: any flyer which wasn't boring.

Gilbert: The flyers are very interesting, because they have to do with health as well, with sexual health.

George: With sexual appetite as well.

Are the postcards real, or are they copies?

Gilbert: They're all real.

George: We have to run all the way up the road, and we find maybe seven. Then we cross over and find another one, and no more. So we come back the next day and there are another two.

Gilbert: So it can take weeks to get 13. Or sometimes even half a year because they disappear and we don't have enough.

So it's like being on a detective mission on the streets of London.

George: We think we are doing the decent thing, because the local government and the central government are against these cards. They try to make them illegal, and

they try to make the people who put the cards up illegal, and we're collecting them for the common good. We're enabling people to explore that world.

Gilbert: It's very interesting, because in London you have to look at them with one eye, but in the gallery everybody can look completely freely. Because it is art, so you are allowed to look.

George: We do believe that we should always celebrate the whole in life. Not to be selective. To accept that inside you is everything — you have the potential murderer, the lover, the beast, everything. And to celebrate modern life you have to include the government, the church, the telephone book, the sex cards, and the flyers. We don't want to eliminate or discriminate.

Gilbert: But we are not showing everything. We are only showing some aspect that we like, that speaks to us. And that is a little bit on the edge.

What are you planning to do next?

George: Oh, we have a fantastic project. We have a huge series of pictures which we're about to create where the titles precede the images.

Gilbert: They're called the "London Pictures." They are going to be enormous, many will be as big as one wall. And we have the titles here, the beginning of the works.

George: Arrested, Attack, Baby, Blaze, Bomb, Boy, Caged, Child, Cute Kids, Cyclist, Dead, Death Plunge, Die, Dies, Drug, Drugs, Gang, Gay, Girl, Gun, Hanged, Jail, Jailed, Kids, Killed, Killer, Killing, Knife, Knifed, Knife Man, Lover, Man, Man Dies, Missing, Money, Murder, Old Age Pensioner, Pensioner, Pervert, Police, Porn, Rape, Rapist, School, Sex, Teen, Teenage, Teenager, Terror, Toddler, Woman, Youth, Yobs.