

GLADSTONE GALLERY

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Know Your Place

BY DAN FOX

In the third of three articles exploring art, class and precarity, Dan Fox explores the complication of class in the art world

Hyde Park, London. It's 5 July 1969 and the artists Gilbert & George are walking through the crowd at the Rolling Stones' concert in tribute to band member Brian Jones, found dead in his swimming pool two days earlier. In a photograph taken for the *Daily Mirror* newspaper, the artists are captured wearing light-toned suits, shirts and patterned ties, with carnation buttonholes, as if they are attending a society wedding. Yet, they look uncharacteristically dishevelled: ties askew, hair blowing in the breeze. Leslie Woodhead and Jo Durden-Smith's documentary of the day's concert, *The Stones in the Park* (1969), shows hundreds of flower children basking in the sunshine under the fractious eyes of the Hell's Angels security detail. Amongst them, Gilbert & George look like bankers from an alien planet, there to out-freak the underground freak scene. One detail makes them fit in: metallic body paint on their faces and hands, which looks like badly applied fake tan. Yet, their mimicry of conservative British masculinity still manages to wrong-foot expectations of how artists or other creative types associated with old-fashioned avant-gardism should present themselves.

Gilbert & George costumed themselves as urbane gentlemen of the upper classes, but lived in a then-run-down area of east London. Their suits afforded them invisibility: a cloak of conformity that allowed them to forge ahead with their extraordinary project to make their lives into a total artwork. It was a look that, paradoxically, made them stand out amongst their peers in Swinging London because it suggested that nothing could be more conformist than growing your hair and slipping on a kaftan. But, more to the point, in class-neurotic Britain, their appearance gave the lie to assumptions as to which social bracket artists should dress for. Gilbert & George punctured a self-flattering affectation of blue-collar solidarity that persists amongst certain artists: the fantasy that artists are workers in the same way builders, firemen or mechanics are. (In her 1977 essay 'The Pink Glass Swan', Lucy Lippard describes artists who are 'persistently working "up" to be accepted, not only by other artists, but also by the hierarchy that exhibits, writes about and buys her/his work. At the same time, s/he is often ideologically working "down" in an attempt to identify with the workers outside of the art context.') Were Gilbert & George rich or poor? Upper-class toffs on the skids or lower-middle-class clerks on the rise? It was hard to tell.

That was, I suspect, the point. George was brought up by a single mother and worked a number of jobs in London – in Selfridges department store, as a barman at the Players' Theatre Club – before meeting Gilbert at Central St Martin's School of Art in 1967. Gilbert came from a family of shoemakers in a village in the Italian Dolomites. Did that matter?

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Certainly, gaming the visual codes of the British class system was folded deep into their artistic strategies. It was a way of making us laugh when they called themselves *George the Cunt and Gilbert the Shit* for their 1970 'magazine sculpture', or when we watched them get tight on gin to the music of Edvard Grieg in their 1972 video *Gordon's Makes Us Drunk*. For many artists from the UK, class is inescapable – a facet of work and identity. In 1990s Britain, artists such as Tracey Emin and Sarah Lucas actively played up their backgrounds. Tabloid headlines were appropriated to redefine conversations around female sexuality. The British working-class seaside holiday or the souvenir shop were used as tropes to talk about ownership and independence: in 1992, Emin and Lucas bought a beach hut in Whitstable and, the following year, they ran a shop together.

Class lurks in the shadows of Janice Kerbel's research project *Bank Job* (1999), an imaginary robbery inspired by being stony broke. It also scents the atmosphere in some of Lucy McKenzie's paintings, which imagine groups of self-empowered artists and craftspeople labouring within elegant environments of their own making. Working-class youth subcultures play a role in a number of key pieces by Mark Leckey, who most recently incorporated his own upbringing in the video *Dream English Kid 1964–1999 AD* (2015). Class is also foregrounded in the surreal satire of Nathaniel Mellors's 'Ourhouse' series (2010–16), which depicts the cruel games of a privileged but isolated bohemian family. In the US, there are artists who confront class head-on: think of Cindy Sherman's untitled 2008 series of grotesque society portraits, for instance; Josh Kline's sculptures based around the bodies of cash-strapped, freelance creative workers in New York; or LaToya Ruby Frazier's photographic records of social inequality in her home town of Braddock. Yet there is – to play loose with social terms – a certain kind of aristocratic privilege to the ways in which artists treat status. The artist is traditionally given licence to be as frivolous, cavalier, frugal or ethical in their behaviour as they choose. Performing a disregard of class status is a trick that some artists have learned gives them even more social leverage – or, at least, art history has provided us with images to believe so.

Think of the photograph of Jean-Michel Basquiat that ran on the cover of the 10 February 1985 edition of *The New York Times Magazine*. Basquiat – brought up in a black, middle class family, and who later slept rough for a time in New York's Tompkins Square Park before achieving fast-burning fame as a painter – is sat barefoot in a modern chair. He's dressed in an Armani suit, the cuff of his trousers stained with white paint. Here, the racial dynamics of US society are intertwined with class consciousness. His expression projects an icy confidence in his command of the signals broadcast by wearing an expensive, ruined suit and holding an insouciant pose in a racially monochrome cultural field. Think, too, of Basquiat's mentor, Andy Warhol, who came from a blue-collar family in Pittsburgh, and who worked as a commercial illustrator and window-display designer before being able to afford to become a full-time artist. We tend to picture 1960s Warhol in The Factory, its walls papered silver and the Velvet Underground rehearsing in a corner. But rarely do we think of the photograph of 1960s Warhol with his mother, Julia, eating cereal at the kitchen table of her Pittsburgh home. The Factory has become emblematic in the popular imagination of the artistic life at its most exciting, glamorous and innovative. Celebrities sat on its couch alongside homeless speed freaks, poor little rich girls, Ivy League intellectuals and assorted lost souls – all of them 'stars' in Warhol's eyes. Perhaps it's because of the deep-seated myth of meritocracy that the US has used to define itself against the rancid classism of Old Europe, but what is seldom admitted is that The Factory represented a class microcosm. However fucked-up the scene and its players were, its open-door policy (abandoned after Warhol was shot by Valerie Solanas) mixed social classes in ways that today seem unusual. Of course, New York was a different city then, but class diversity has an effect on the type of art that gets made in a place and the kinds of conversations that can be found there.

I think about these photographs – of Gilbert & George amongst the hippies, of Basquiat in Armani, of Warhol with his mum – when I walk around New York through the parts of town where the real-estate agents tell us creatives play, or when I see people in coffee shops absorbed in silent concentration on their laptops or relaxing outside restaurants furnished as a Victorian industrial fantasia and lit with Edison bulbs. The current look is effortlessly casual and contradictory: a plain white T-shirt that costs less than lunch paired with plain white trainers that cost a week's worth of dinners at a fancy restaurant. Where do these people buy their clothes and where do they get the cash to pay for them? Are they saddled with crippling debt? How much is a main course dish at that restaurant? Certainly more than the hourly minimum wage in New York City, which becomes US\$12 at the end of this year and US\$10.75 in the rest of the state. What form of creativity allows them to sit in the sunshine on a Thursday afternoon in New York? Are they living the dream of cafe society or eking out a US\$5 cappuccino in order to make use of the free wi-fi, combing the jobs listings and hustling for freelance gigs? One customer, perhaps trying to calculate if she can expense her bill to work, looks up at me: is she wondering what kind of job allows a person to take a stroll in the sunshine idly staring at members of the public, long after most people have returned to the office from their lunch break? If these people are creatives, of what stripe are they? Appearances tell us everything and nothing about the class status of the artist.

In this divisive era of politics, there are fierce debates about how appearances shape our inner lives and our communities. But discussions of identity politics in the art world – which rightly tackle race, gender, sexuality and geography – appear to find class a harder issue to confront, even despite its crucial intersection with issues such as

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education, immigration, voting rights or police discrimination. The conditions that price the producers of culture out of producing culture have been widely noted: the rent's too high, the internships are unpaid and a two-year MFA means 30 years of debt. It's all the fault of 'the market'. The internet's wrecked the old business models but everything was better in 1966/76/86/96 anyway. Et-depressing-cetera. Yet, too often, the topic of who can participate in the art world emphasizes cost over value, like the cynic whom Oscar Wilde described as knowing 'the price of everything and the value of nothing'. Or, put another way: they separate economics from identity, as if affordability has no connection to the more meteorological aspects of society.

Class in the arts is not simply an issue of invoices paid for creative services rendered, but a question of upbringing, confidence, inclusion and exclusion. Not everybody is brought up feeling that museums are places in which they belong. Entry doorbells, the aura of social exclusivity and opaque codes: these are the conditions that make walking into a commercial gallery an intimidating prospect if you don't feel entitled to be there. The language that accompanies exhibitions in the form of press releases or wall texts can often be more exclusionary than the inclusive claims they might make. Even the question of the clothes you wear – how they mark you out or help you fit in – can be a source of insecurity if you've not been raised in the social landscape of the arts. (Artist and critic Roger White, writing in the 2009 anthology *I Like Your Work: Art & Etiquette*, observes: 'An artist may dress like a member of the proletariat, but shouldn't imagine he's fooling anyone.') If you come from a modest background and become successful as an artist, it can take a long time to adjust to the change of class status this brings. As Lynsey Hanley writes in her book *Respectable* (2016): 'Changing class is like emigrating from one side of the world to the other, where you have to rescind your old passport, learn a new language and make gargantuan efforts if you are not to lose touch completely with the people and habits of your old life.'

The socially progressive rhetoric around contemporary art makes class a hard conversation to have in an industry that also has a tangled relationship with money and power. Art is for everyone, but participation in its professional systems is not. It is common, for instance, to talk about respectably art-adjacent means of making a living, such as teaching at an art school or working as a technician in a gallery. Few confess to paying their rent by juggling secretarial temping work with part-time bartending, working for the sanitation department or labouring on a building site. Professionals complain about how crowded, say, The Museum of Modern Art in New York is on Friday afternoons, when the museum drops its US\$25 admission charge and is free to the public: the implication is that we can all afford the cost of a couple of meals to enter the museum on a quieter day, or are connected enough to phone a friend to get us in.

Lately, I've heard a few conversations about next year's convergence of the Venice Biennale, Skulptur Projekte Münster, Art Basel and Documenta 14 – one of the most important exhibitions in the art-world calendar, which opens next April in Athens followed by a second iteration in June in Kassel. Always comes the question: who plans on going? An employee in the curatorial department of a mid-size museum says she's keeping her fingers crossed that she can go on the institution's dime, but she's unsure if she can afford childcare. Her intern casually mentions he'll be going. An artist says she'll first head to Europe for Venice in May, perhaps stay with a pal in Berlin for a couple of weeks and then go on to Kassel and Athens. But, if she doesn't go to Münster she may spend the rest of the summer at a friend's place in Greece. Another artist is asked if he'll also be doing the same Grand Tour, but he's skint and works a full-time job. So, he excuses himself to get a beer, too shy to say he can't afford admission to the same conversations as his peers, isn't connected to a network of internationally mobile artists.

Questioning class diversity in the art world does not mean assuming the easy, dumb position of projecting virtue onto the working-class hero artist over the artist of means. Inverted snobbery leads to facile criticism and it's usually those who don't have to worry about money who make the loudest accusations about its corrupting effects on others. There are manifold micro-class stratifications that exist within the domain of the supposedly 'democratic' art world, many of which are contradictory. I just have to listen to the clang of cognitive dissonances made by my own class experiences to know that: working-class mum, middle-class dad, not much money but early exposure to the arts through books, records, BBC, enlightened teachers. I attended state school then Oxford – before the introduction of university fees. I have always had to have a full-time job to get by: I slept on a friend's kitchen floor to afford to be an intern at *frieze*. Now, I work as a magazine editor with sophisticated, well-travelled colleagues. I am employed by a company that also runs three successful art fairs but never once have I seriously entertained owning any art. I frequently travel but it's always on the magazine's tab and I flat-share in order to afford New York. I find art profoundly interesting but, despite 18 years in the business, I feel alienated by the games of hierarchy that play out around me, because they involve forms of classism that few will admit to.

Class is a particularly British anxiety – it shaped my upbringing and has left me with a residual shyness I experience in certain art-related social situations. It is why I find it instructive to observe which artists are casually comfortable with international travel, note who is sufficiently budget-jet-set-connected to have friends in locations across the world. This can be the result of class mobility – of 'making it', as they say – or the inheritance of family experience: people's situations are complex and you cannot leap to conclusions. But it's useful to examine how many museum interns are recruited into art's managerial class as curators because they can afford to do an unpaid internship. It's fair to ask who can afford to live as a critic without independent means. These are, as first-world citizens often like to admonish, 'first-world problems'. But that dismissal leaves intact the class problems that persist in powerful first-world cultural spheres. If they are not examined, then there is little possibility that the art world can change any of its more dubious structural issues. The space of art could be a truly inclusive one, if only we'd stop spending so much time keeping up appearances.

Lead image: **LaToya Ruby Frazier, *Mom and Me in the Phase*, 2007, (from the series 'The Notion of Family', 2014), gelatin silver print, 46 x 59 cm. Made over the course of 12 years, 'The Notion of Family' is a powerful body of work detailing the economic devastation wrought upon the photographer's hometown of Braddock, a suburb of Pittsburgh. In her own words, it attempts to 'suspend the passive aestheticism that turns abject poverty into an object of enjoyment'. Courtesy: © the artist**