

Photosculpture

Gilbert and George —“Dead Boards”

At Sonnabend Gallery, New York
March 20—April 10

Gilbert and George are best known for their performances as “living sculpture”—or, to be more exact, for the photographs they have had made to document such performances, for most people have not had the opportunity to actually see the artists standing, sitting, or mechanically mouthing the words of a tape-recorded song. In fact, it's always seemed as though such works were more interesting as photography than as sculpture, the photographic documents setting up, as they do, such intriguing tensions between picture and pictured, reality and illusion, art and life. (Even at first glance one always knows that, somehow, these pictures are not what they pretend to be. Though the sculpture performance might be a simple representation of a common and mundane event, something in the formality and stylization of gestures—or perhaps in the strictly formal composition of the picture itself—tips off the viewer to the fact that the photograph does not record a common event, but a symbol for one.)

Yet despite the interest of the photographs for themselves, and though it could be argued that the living sculptures have been created specifically to be documented, the legend which has Gilbert and George acting slowly and deliberately (mechanically, that is) even outside of the gallery suggests that the pair **do** simply live this aspect of their art, as opposed to making it. (That they refer to themselves only by their first names in an attempt at anonymity—or universality—also supports the suggestion.) Their recent exhibition at Sonnabend Gallery, **Dead Boards**, presented a series of “photosculptures” which differ greatly from their better-known work, the most important difference being an apparent acceptance of the work of art as an object.

Dead Boards consists of a dozen or so panels of four, nine, or sixteen prints each. Every panel is a self-contained picture (“sculpture,” the sculptors would insist), yet the series must be considered together, for all the works are products of the same concerns and are, in fact, variations on a single theme (or set of themes). Each panel is a simple, symmetrical composition of photographs of an individual figure (either Gilbert or George) standing in a room of a dilapidated house, interspersed with pictures made with the camera angled downward, point-blank (or almost so) at the floorboards.

All photographs imply a conscious or unconscious choice (or compromise) between the approaches represented by these two basic components of the **Dead Boards** photosculptures. That is, every photograph falls at some point along the continuum from an abstract, impenetrable flatness to the illusion of deep space as symbolized by receding parallel lines which meet and vanish at the horizon. (All pictures, of course, fall along this continuum, but the unmanipulated

photograph is most often thought of as occupying a single point, whereas 70 years of modern art have convinced us that a painting can more easily mix both the flattening of space and illusionistic perspective.)

The panels in the **Dead Boards** series, then, each consist of an equal number of photographs representing the extremes of photographic transparency and non-transparency. Not that they are so much **about** such transparency, but they do call our attention to that picture-factor and, more important, make use of it in anticipating the question, “What is sculptural about the photosculptures?”

For Gilbert and George (whose full, self-chosen title is “Gilbert and George, the sculptors”) have elected to join the legion of workers who have rejected the two-dimensionality of the photograph for the pursuit of something more substantial. Early in the history of the medium an invention was patented which would project photographs upon the carver's block, thus making sculpture more “photographic.” Doug Prince, Robert Heineken, and numerous others have, since the early '60s, attempted to make photography more sculptural by separating parts of an image spatially or by affixing photographs to a block of wood or some other non-photographic volumetric form. The **illusion** of sculptural form has been sought in stereography (which Oliver Wendell Holmes called “sun-sculpture”) and, today, in holography.

The sculptural volume of the Gilbert and George pieces is, however, neither actual (physical) nor wholly illusory, but intellectual. These are monuments—the largest is perhaps eight feet high—which have been built block by block (and the seams are still showing). The views of standing figures are as windows in a wall, or, more accurately, holes in a floor, or better still, intaglio recesses in a block or box.

As with all work which is subtle and requires contributions on the part of the viewer, an important question arises: how much of what one sees is shared with (was also seen by) the artists? For instance, tonal differences between pictures in the panels often seem to flow from one picture to another in a carefully plotted simulation of movement, creating of the whole sculpture a monochromatic abstraction. Yet, of course, it is quite possible that the prints were not made by the artists and that such tonal variation is pure coincidence. And are we reading something into the sculptures when we note that a tilt of the head is sometimes echoed by the orientation of the cracks between boards in an adjoining floorboards picture, or that the lines of the boards frequently seem to **almost** correspond to the line of vision of one of the figures, or that the figures occasionally seem to be craning their necks to look over the boards and at their fellows or out of the sculpture and into the world?

What do the photosculptures **mean**? Their title is certainly enigmatic, though it could, one supposes, refer to the lack of the theatrical quality present in the performance work. (A friend suggests an alternative interpretation: Gilbert and George, he says, are about as close to dead boards as any human beings **he's**

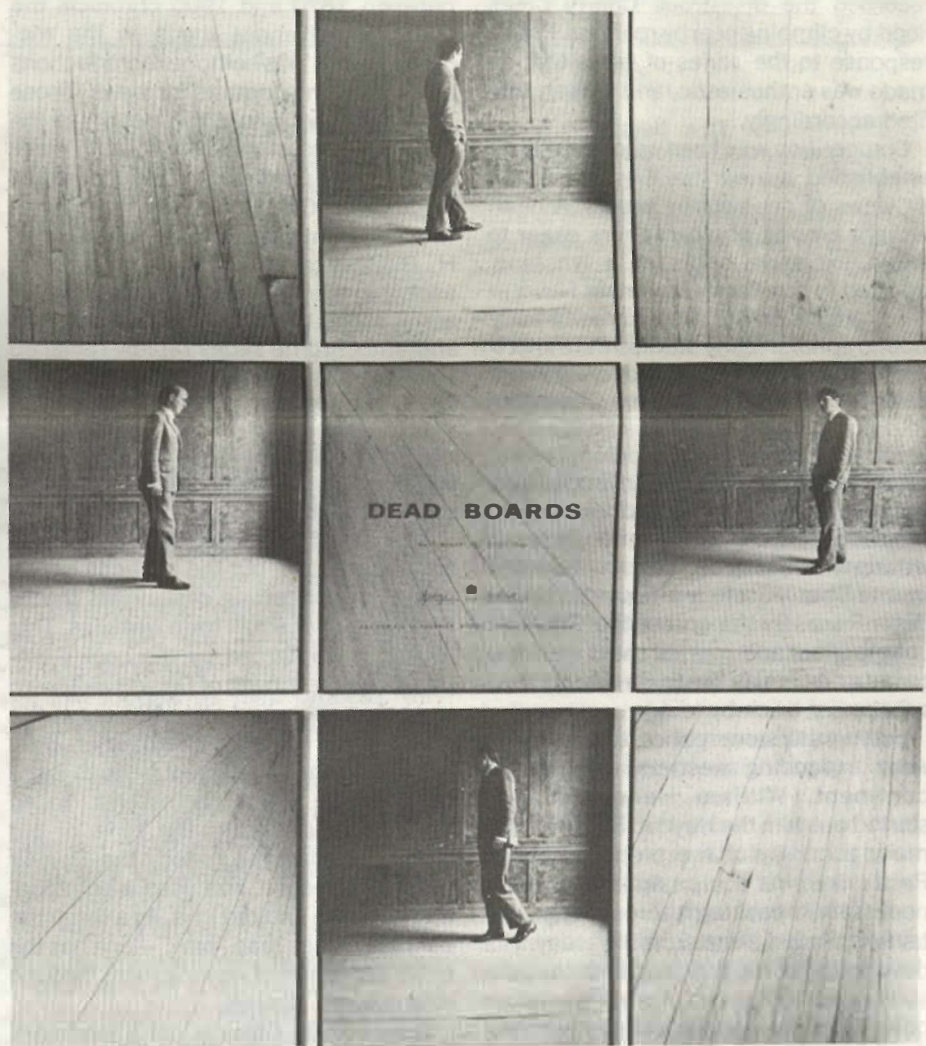
ever seen.) But the sculptures don't really seem to refer to anything outside themselves. They are, instead, formal exercises in a medium of their own, according to a set of rules written specifically for them.

The pictures in the **Dead Boards** series are photographic in that they deal with such questions as transparency and linear perspective as served or subverted by photography, and that they are attempts to contend with such inherently

photographic limitations as the medium's normally small scale and lack of actual volume. However, while they employ photographs, they are not **solely** photographic. The effect of these pieces is to force the viewer to accept a third dimension, not within a picture but as a part of the created object, which only one sensory organ will verify—we are being asked, in other words, to intellectually override our other senses.

—Charles Desmarais

Gilbert and George, from **Dead Boards**



Colorado on glass

Colorado On Glass: Colorado's First Half Century As Seen by the Camera.

by Terry Wm. Mangan.

Sundance Limited/ 406 pp./ \$28.95 (hb).

Coloradan interest in its regional history is particularly marked in this, its centennial year. A rich visual record of that history is presented in a recently published book, **Colorado On Glass**, by Terry Wm. Mangan. Through his work at the State Historical Society, Mangan had access to an enormous resource of photographic material to illustrate the first 50 years of Colorado. The men that made those early, ephemeral images were pioneers not only in a new land but in a recently-discovered art/science. Developments in photography kept pace with the advance of civilization in the Territory; by the time of its admission to the Union, Colorado's

glass plate chronicles covered more than 20 years. The era of continental expansion that they recorded ended with the century, but is preserved on their fragile surfaces.

It was with the Fremont Expedition of 1853 that photography arrived in Colorado. Among the members of the party exploring the “Great American Desert” was Solomon N. Carvalho, a former portrait painter turned daguerreotypist. His **Incidents of Travel in the Far West**, published four years later, recounts the difficulties he encountered in the mid-winter crossing to the Western Slope. His equipment was sabotaged by packers wishing to avoid hauling the heavy materials. As the weather became more severe, the group became stranded and was reduced to slaughtering their pack animals for food. Abandoning all excess baggage, including the camera, they eventually struggled to a remote settlement. Carvalho's visual records were destroyed in an 1881 fire, but a few engravings made after the daguerreotypes illustrate his words and this first chapter of **Colorado On Glass**.