

NC 0020242 8



**NATIONAL COLLEGE OF ART AND DESIGN**

**FINE ART AND SCULPTURE**

**TITLE: Gilbert and George in  
the 1980's.**

**A symptom of or a critical  
reaction to the  
consumer capitalist culture  
in which they work?**

**BY**

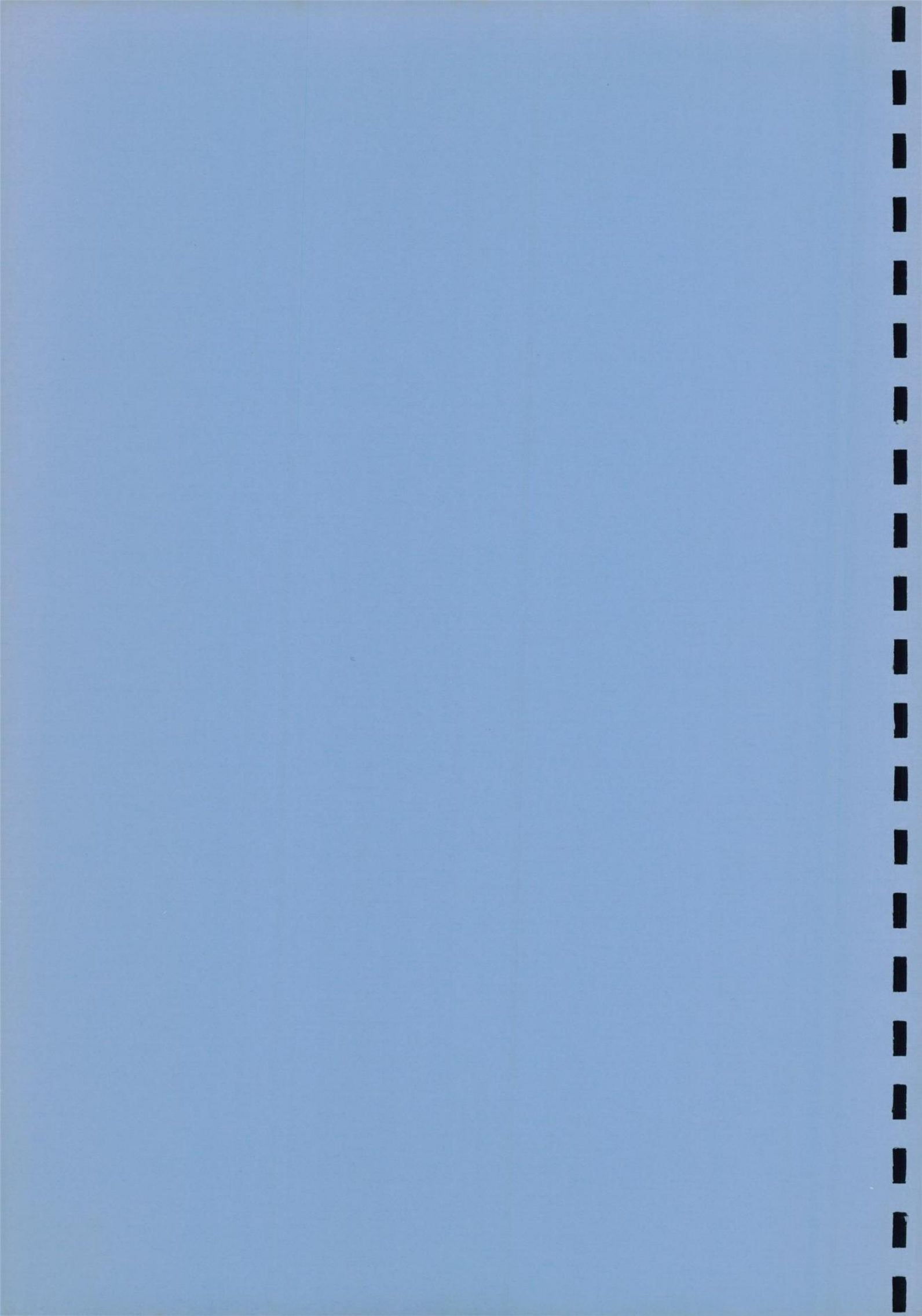
**NICOLA GOGAN**

**Submitted to the Faculty of History of Art and Design and Complimentary studies in  
Candidancy for the Degree of B.A. Fine Art Sculpture 1993.**



## TABLE OF CONTENTS

		Pages	
1.	INTRODUCTION	3 - 4	
2.	CHAPTER ONE	A brief history	5 - 13
3.	CHAPTER TWO	What they say	14 - 30
4.	CHAPTER THREE	What they do	31 - 49
5.	CHAPTER FOUR	Dealing with sexual identity	50 - 55
6.	CONCLUSION		56 - 57

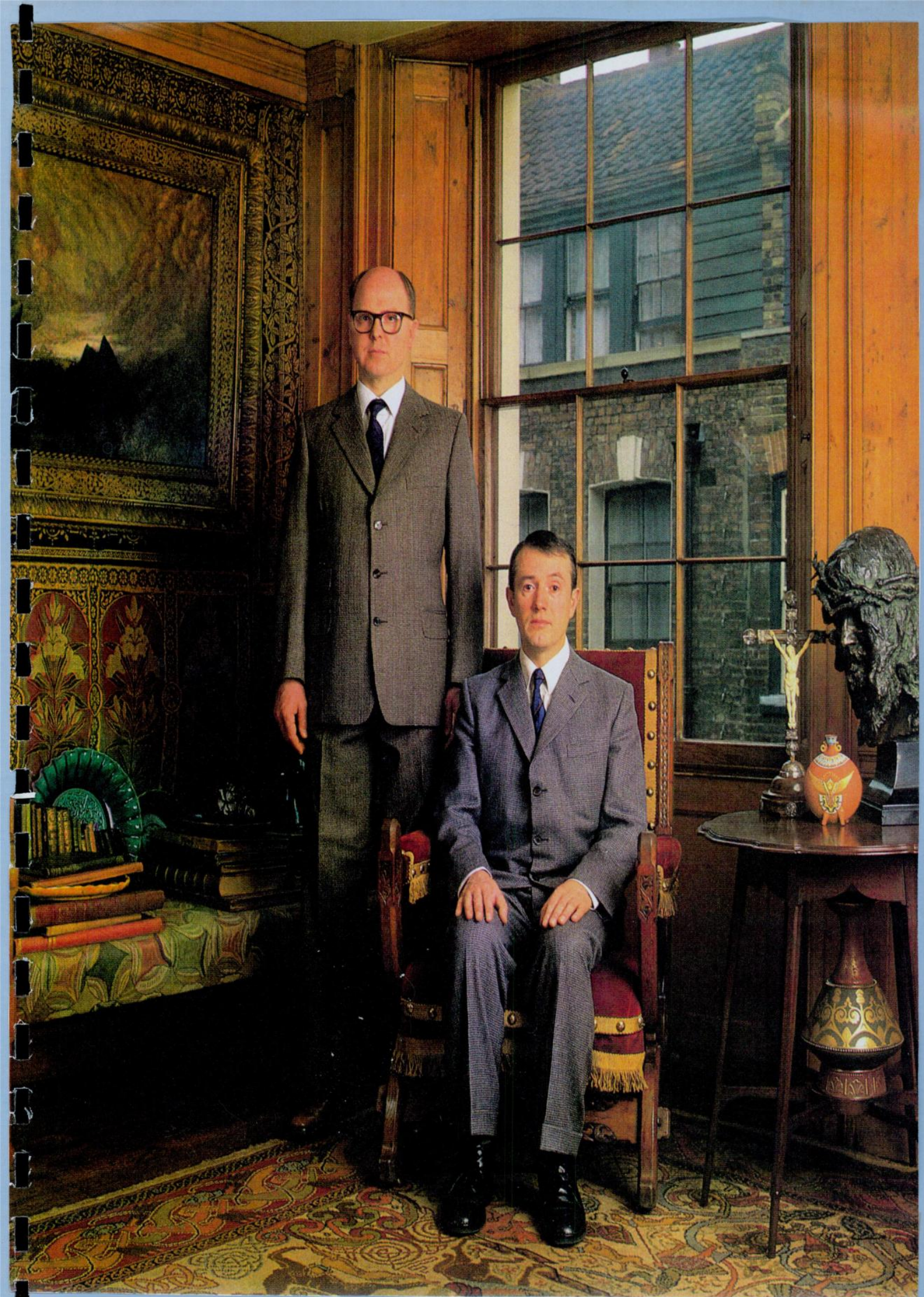


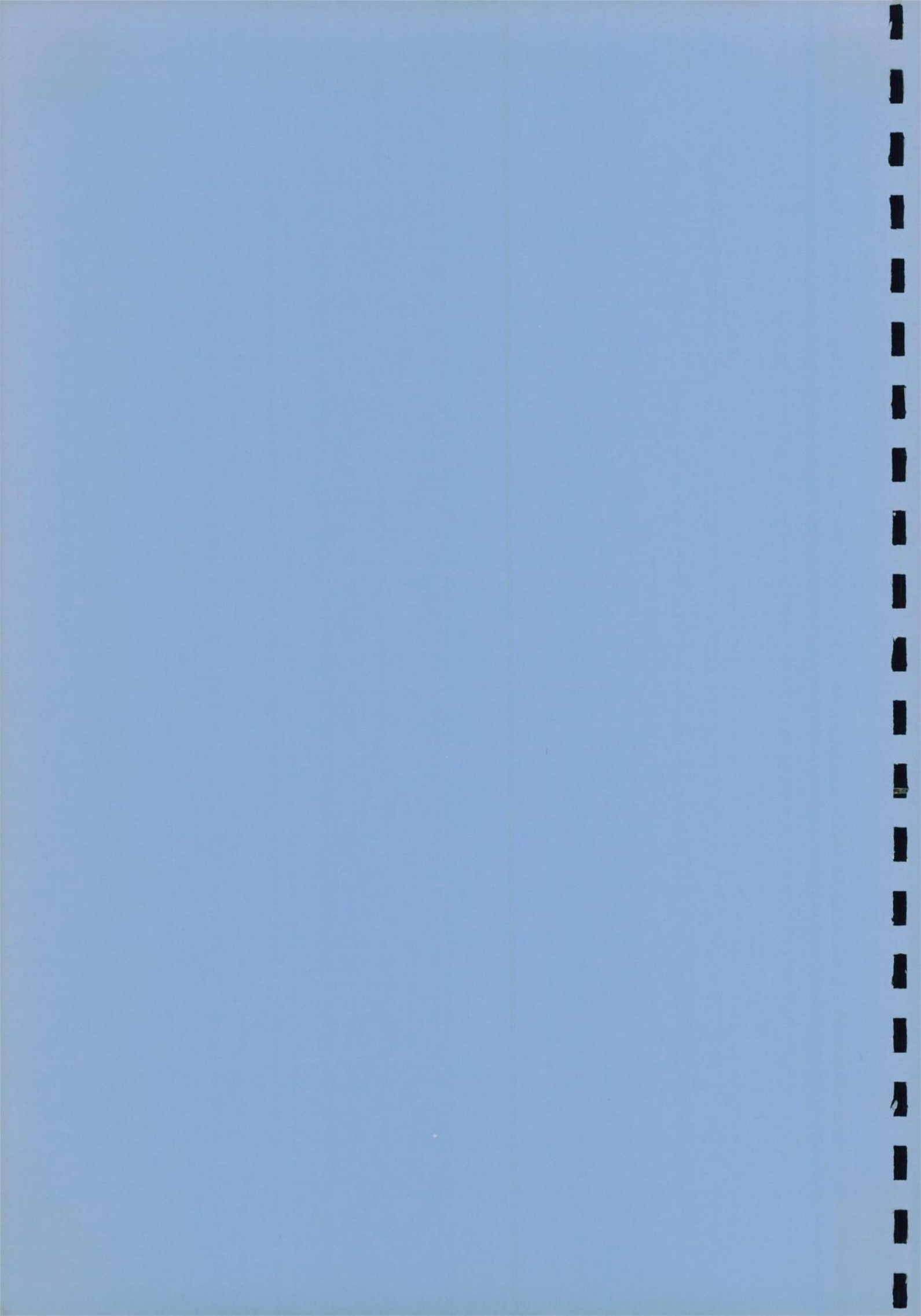
# PLATES

## Pages

1. George by Gilbert & Gilbert by George
2. Experience.
3. Nationalism. Britisher. Patriots.
4. Thatcher World.
5. Illustration from "Don't mention the eighties" .
6. Stills from "Defining the Lord's Prayer".
7. Speakers.
8. Shit Faith.
9. There.
10. Here. .
11. Paki. .
12. Mad..
13. Death and life from Death, Life, Hope, Fear.
14. Fear and Hope from Death, Life, Hope, Fear.
15. Oh, Charley, Charley, Charley.
16. Sperm Eaters, Thirst, Hunger, Various Lovers.
17. Sex.
18. May Man.









## INTRODUCTION

The work of Gilbert & George had always appealed to me. When I attended the opening of their show *The Cosmological Pictures* in IMMA, I was struck by the huge imposing photo collages, with the beautiful colours and complicated imagery. But even more so by the duo themselves, their manner, appearance (especially the ties they both wore with images of their heads in orange floating on green backgrounds). It's the Gilbert and George 'personalities' that most attracted me, and as my research went on I realised that this is a key element in their work. They constantly play the Devils Advocate in interviews (depending on who is interviewing them, they are usually most offensive when talking to established Art Critics and more receptive and philosophical when talking to more 'popular' type interviewers such as in *The Face*). I think the criticism this evokes is caused by the fact that much of what Gilbert and George parody is very close to the bone of the socialist Art establishment in England and I think for this reason many critics fail to see or even accept the critical analysis of English society that Gilbert and George are presenting.

In the following text I am discussing the question are Gilbert & George a symptom or a reaction to consumer culture focusing on the 1980's as being the



time when Britain witnessed a consumer boom time that existed purely on the liquid economy established during Margaret Thatchers reign as Prime Minister which soon fell into inevitable recession. I have paralleled this with Gilbert & George's hyped public front, suggesting that their vision for the future is perhaps an empty one. Seducing the viewer the way Thatcher seduced Britain.

In my first chapter I go into this discussion looking at their hyper english way of life (which they term 'normal'). In chapter two I take a look at society and popular culture at this time and also considering what they say their art is representing. Chapter 3 deals with much the same issues but looking closer at their imagery and work method taking on board the notion of a barrier that is set up between the viewer and the work. My final chapter looks at their concern with the breaking down of stereotyped sexual identities.



# CHAPTER ONE

## A BRIEF HISTORY

Gilbert and George live in Fournier Street in the East End of London. They have organised their lives in such a way that they have minimised interfering elements that we all have in our lives, so as they can be free. They have a cleaner to do household chores and assistants to aid them in their work. They go to the same tailor who makes them identical suits. They wear identical haircuts (styled from a coin with George V on it.). They have eaten at the same restaurant for twenty years, which is situated down the road. In these ways they have eliminated choice, which does not concern them. They don't cook. They habitually watch *Coronation Street* every evening. They don't have a car, they don't socialise, they rarely read, as George said in the an interview with *Art Monthly* "We are not of that class really." (G & G in Wilson, 1990, p.12). They like order and tidiness they want to: "achieve lots of things and everything and everything we do has to serve that" (G & G in Wilson, 1990, P.11). They are always together and leave aside all the



personal and unimportant details.

"We don't have any other private life we eat, go to sleep, think about art. When we have an exhibition we get drunk, that's it. That's very simple" (G& G in Wilson, 1990 p.13).

They engage in banal ceremonies obsessively (e.g. watching Coronation Street every evening) to highlight their futile nature. They use modern day Kitsch in their decor, their china, they take tea at 11 o'clock etc, they are met with much criticism for being stuffy conservatives, but (as I will discuss in chapter 3) this is the reaction they want to cultivate.

Coupled with this way of behaviour, they stress that they are "normal" (G & G in Wilson, 1990, p.10) boring, working-class conservatives. By calling this normal what seems to be a very odd way of conducting ones life, is shown up as an imitation of a type of very english way of life, a parody. Their whole public existence is a performance and they are only going through the motions of normal mundane life. It is this facade of normality that is the key to understanding their work.

The two met at St. Martins College of Art in London 1967. Gilbert Proesch





is Italian and comes from a region of the Dolomites. He was born there in 1943 into a working class family of seven. He attended the local art school which was more craft orientated, he says "we had to carve Madonna's and Bambi's for the tourists" (G & G in Barber, 1991, p.4). At the age of seventeen he went to Munich Academy for six years and then on to St. Martins.

George Passmore was born in 1942 in Plymouth. He left school at 15 to work and took up evening art classes at Darlington Adult Education Centre. He won a scholarship to Darlington College of Art to join a full time course, then he went to Oxford and from there on to St. Martin's.

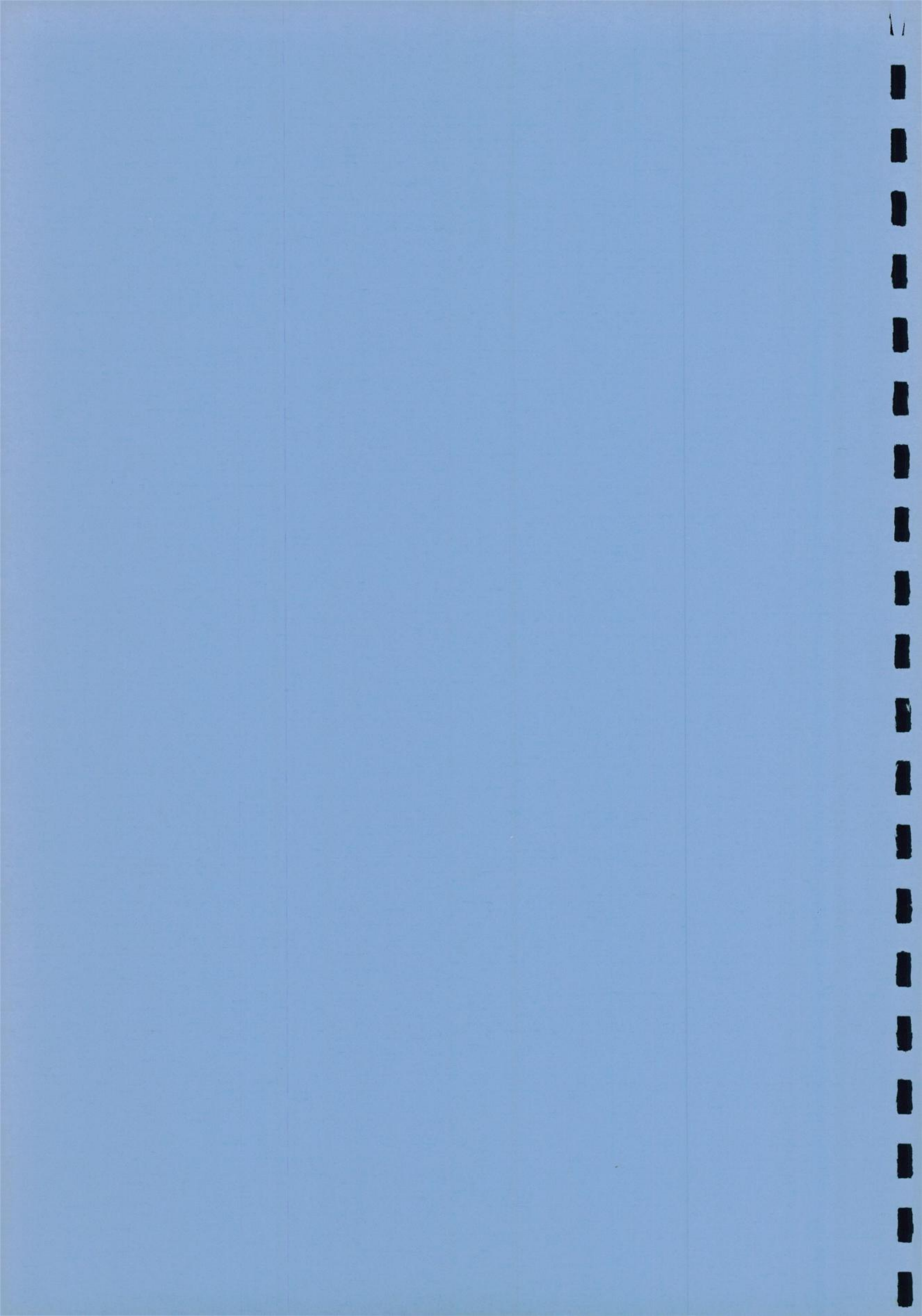
When they met, Gilbert spoke no English and claims that George was the only one interested in speaking to him in pidgin english. They were in a special sculpture course run by Frank Martin, (other students in the course included Anthony Caro). While in college they did exhibit together and work together but they say it wasn't planned to become a partnership.



After they left St. Martins in 1969 the Post Modern idea about the death of individuality was taking hold. "If the experience and the ideology of the unique self, an experience and ideology which informed the stylistic practice of classical modernism, is over and one with, then it is no longer clear what the artists and writers of the present period are supposed to be doing" (Jameson in Kaplan, 1988, P.17)

What Gilbert and George did was to declare "the loss of creative imagination to be the subject of their art" (Jahn, 1989, P.8) and they declared themselves living sculptures and began as performance artists.

They were broke, had no materials and so expressing themselves with 'nothing' only themselves was the answer. One performance from this period was *Underneath the Arches*. "The meaning of the song *Underneath the Arches* was very important, we were very close to being down and out ourselves. Suddenly we were no longer students ... we had no contacts in the art world, yet we still wanted to be artists every day".

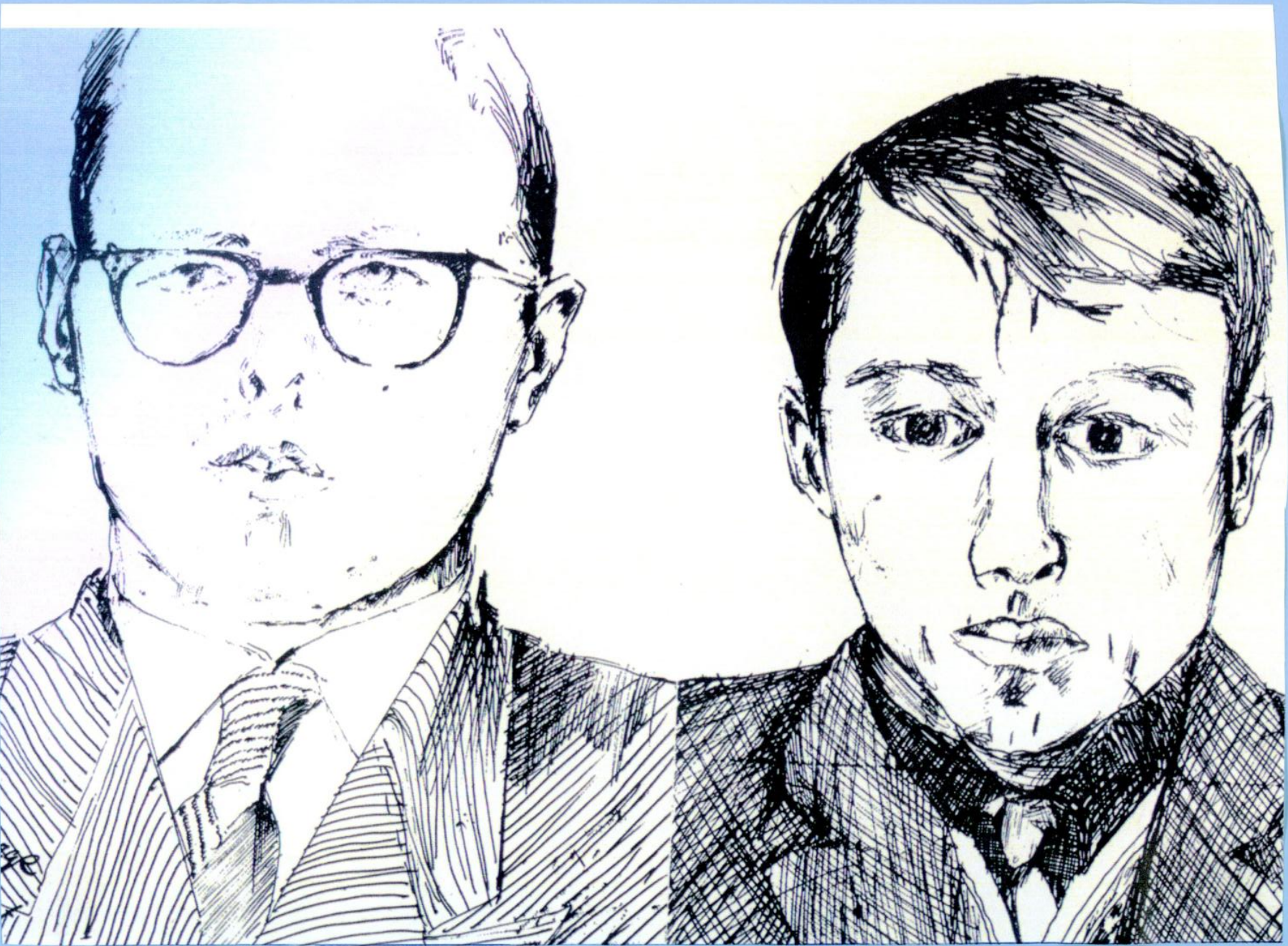


"A groupshow called When Attitudes become Form had a travelling show and local artists were invited, we weren't so we went along as *Living Sculpture* to the opening and became an extraordinary success . . . That one evening transferred our whole life, not doing art like other artists we were the form and the content rolled into". (G & G in Farson, 1991, p. 33)

What was important about this piece was the way they stressed looking as identical as possible and as normal as possible: "they dressed in ordinary suits, had identical haircuts and avoided any hint of personal individuality or originality". (Jahn 1989. p. 75) This was done to stress the loss of "unique self" (Jameson 1988 p. 17) a loss through which, as Wolf Jahn puts it, "The individuality of the artist and the originality of the artwork then coincide exactly in a state of total vacuity and absence of content" (Jahn 1989. P. 9)

Announcement of their lives as *Living Sculptures* was a transformation which rendered them the same as each other and as one unit. This idea was established by the drawing *George by Gilbert and Gilbert By George* in which each drew a stereotype image of the other. This drawing emphasised their interchangeability, neither now possessed an individuality of his own which might serve to characterise him as a person and set him apart from the other. By discarding their surnames they made it possible to be perceived in this way.





*George by Gilbert and Gilbert by George*





Their union can be described as an empty union because it denied identity. Because their ideas had two inputs but only one voice their vision dismissed notions of ego and competitiveness and of personal expression.

"We're based on common agreement. We don't think it's interesting what Gilbert thinks about this, or George thinks about that, we're interested in what we think" (G & G in Barber, 1991 p.4)

"It makes it a very democratic form" (G & G in Wilson 1990, p. 13)

(This denial of individual identity will be discussed further in chapter 4 regarding their analysis of sexual identity).

This living sculpture concept combined with the rigid way of life they adopted allowed them to exist only for their art, which was themselves. "To be with art is all we ask" (G&G in Jahn, 1989 p. 34). At this point they declared *The Laws of the Sculptors* 1969.

- "1. Always be smartly dressed, well groomed, relaxed, friendly, polite and in complete control".
- "2. Make the world believe in you and pay heavily for this privilege.



"3. Never worry, assess, discuss or criticise but remain quiet respectful and calm.

"4. The Lord chisels still, so don't leave your bench for too long".

(G & G in Farson, 1991, P.34).

Daniel Farson described the Gilbert and George union as being: "As complimentary as bacon and eggs". (Farson, 1991 P. 33). They themselves don't feel this joining of identities is a personal sacrifice " We feel it was a strength". They see a couple as being "the most common grouping" (G & G in Barber, 1991, p.4) for people.

Their union is more than an intellectual comment on Post Modern culture but also a personal relationship similar to that experienced by twins e.g. they talk in unison, or finish each others sentences. "When I'm worried" says Gilbert, " I get ill in the stomach." George: "And I get drunk." Gilbert: " But George getting drunk doesn't help me at all; it makes me much worse." George: " But Gilbert getting stomach ache worries me, so I get drunk. (G & G in Barber, 1991, P. 4) Also they are almost never apart.

They expressed their understanding of Post Modern culture by simulating the void left by the absence of spirituality and creative force that is felt to be at



There were two young men who did laugh

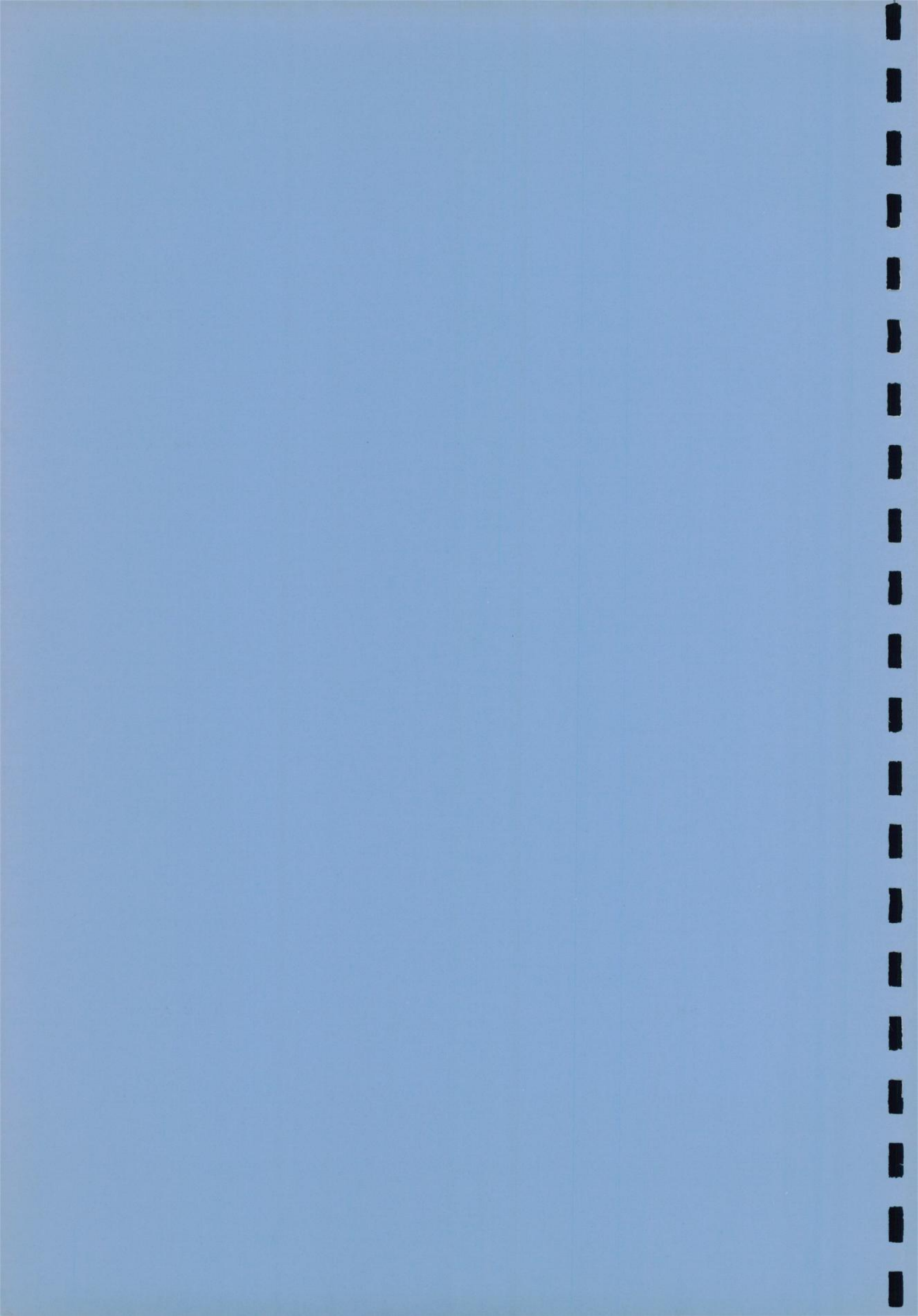
There were two young men who did laugh  
They laughed at the people's unrest  
They struck their sticks in the air  
And turned them around with the best  
Then with time they began to feel strange  
For no longer it swung in their way  
So to capture again that old thrill  
They started to take the life-pill.

who did laugh



*Experience*

5



the heart of the Post Modern condition. Suzi Gablik has written 'to the post modernist's mind, everything is empty at the centre'. This emptiness, together with post-modernism's existence only as the empty space marking the place of a collapsed Modernism." (Hewison, 1990, P. 19)

As the 70's went on their work became limited to images of themselves (as Sculptures) and of man made dwellings or interiors, often accompanied with text. One piece done during this period is titled *Experience*.

**"There were two young men who did laugh  
They laughed at the people's unrest**

**They stuck their sticks in the air  
And turned them around with the best**

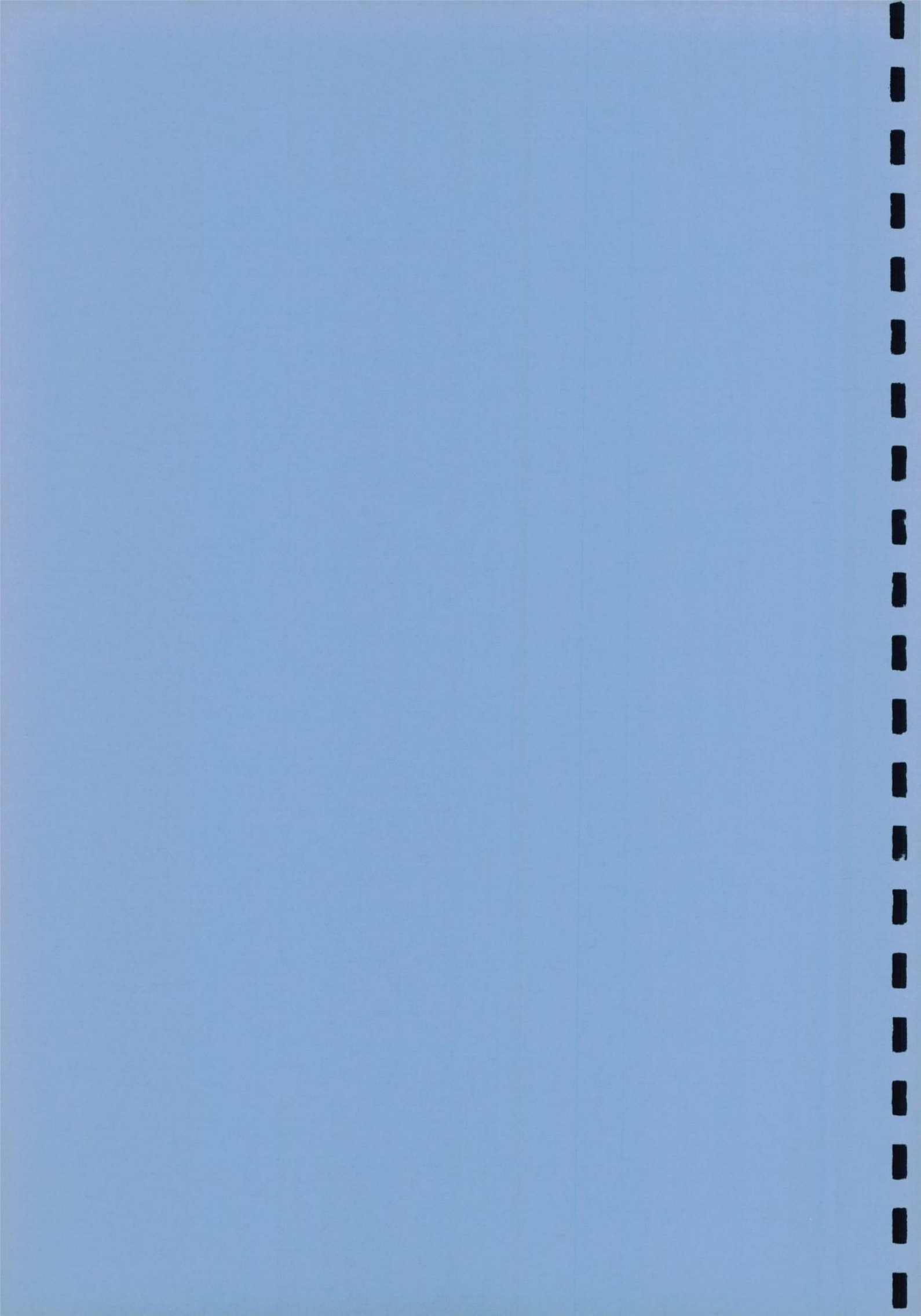
**Then with time they began to feel strange  
For no longer it swung in their way**

**So to capture again that old thrill  
They started to take the life-pill"**

(Text from *Experience*, Jahn, 1989, p. 78)

This piece I think is about the superficial nature of contemporary existence. Their experience is one of familiar nostalgia (familiar because of their surroundings, nostalgic because the text is reminiscent of better past times).

"Instead of offering an alternative, the artist mimics reality in all its profeness





in order to indicate, by default the longed for 'other' life beyond." (Jahn, 1989, p. 9)

In the late 70's Gilbert and Georges work changed very much. They began to include other people and elements in their pictures. They no longer tried to mimic the empty heart of culture - but I would <sup>argue</sup> agree, they began challenging society by reproducing and reordering society.

" George! our subject matter is the world. It is the pain. Pain. Just to hear the world turning is Pain, isn't it? Totally, every day, every second". Gilbert: "our inspiration is all those people alive today on the planet, the desert, the jungle, the cities. We are interested in the human person, the complexity of life". (G & G in Wilson, 1990, P. 11)

With this turn they claimed to have a vision for the future, they decided to offer "an alternative" (Jahn, 1989. p. 9) "for us, art is searching for life, a re-examination of life for the new generation" (G & G in Wilson, 1990, p. 11).

"The vision is important, because that is what changes the world." (G & G in Wilson, 1990, p. 10)



# CHAPTER TWO

## WHAT THEY SAY

"We always say it is what we say that is important". (G & G in Wilson, 1990, P. 10)

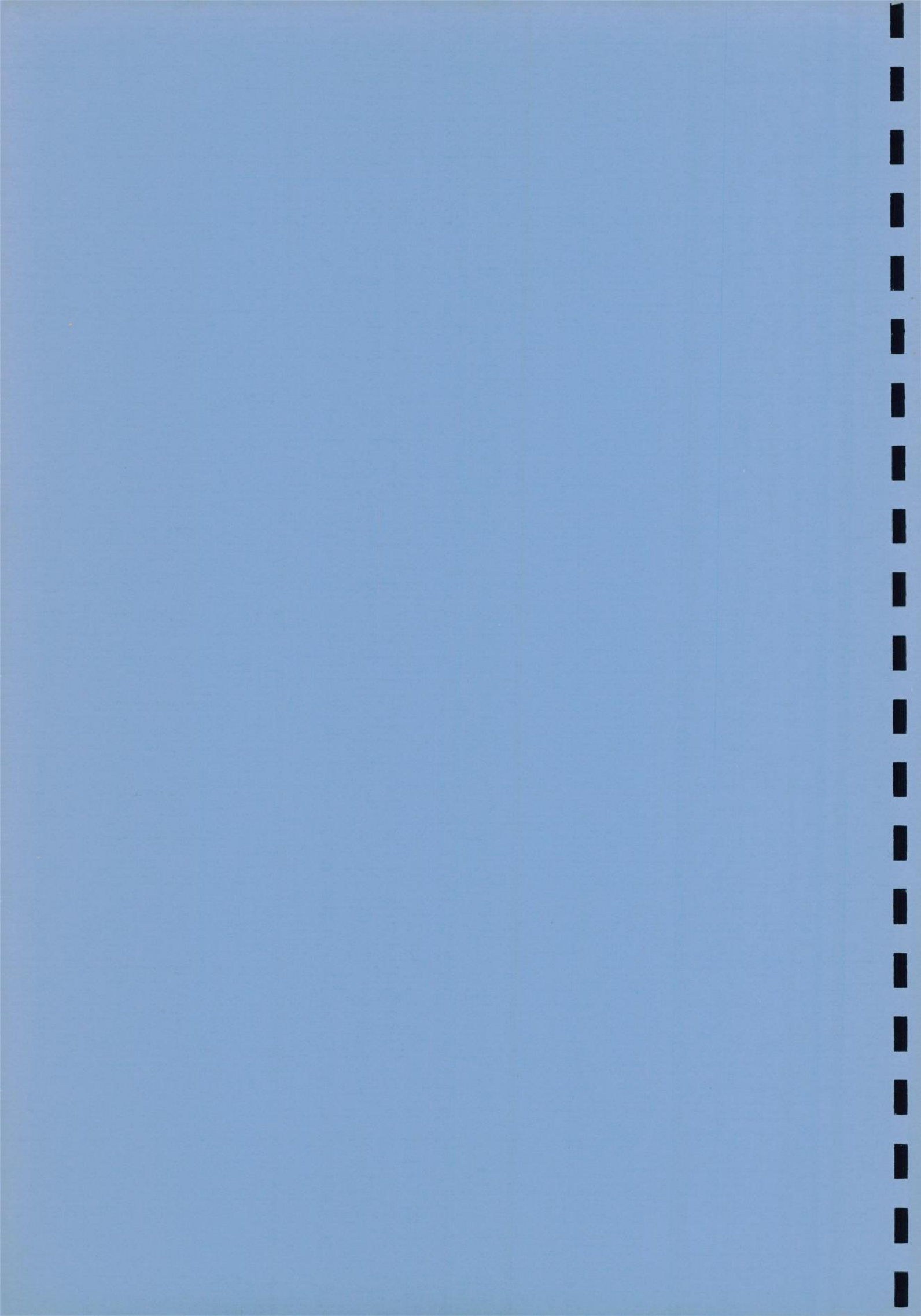
As I discussed in chapter one Gilbert & George shifted from depicting a minimal hollow view of the human and of man made space to a new "complicated Art" which accordingly to Wolf Jahn in his book *the Art of Gilbert & George* is the "dross" that they excluded from their earlier work. Which amounts to society at large, universal themes "all of life" (Jahn, 1989, p. 164).

"From the dross of the old body (old work) the corpse of a rationality afflicted with insane delusions of omnipotence, which had attempted to swallow up the world conceptually - a new life unfolds, it is a life quite oblivious of the old quest for "objective" reality " (Jahn, 1989,



P. 164).

When they decided to use imagery that surrounded them what they found was a changing Britain. Britain was changing from what was a Labour governed country with state owned industries with trade unions for security for the workers, to a liquid economy under the conservative government. The whole tone of economic, political and social life in Britain in the 1980's was set by Margaret Thatcher's landslide victory in the May 1979 election. This had been achieved through a combination of factors. Firstly widespread disenchantment with the Labour government as a result of the 'Winter of discontent' in 1978/79 when the British economy ground to a halt amid mass strikes and lockouts and the growing public impression that the country was being held to ransom by powerful union leaders. In this climate, the Tory promise of sweeping populist economic reforms based on the principles of the free market seemed like the perfect antidote. Under the new leadership the power of the unions was greatly curtailed and their influence lessened especially with the introduction of secret ballots for strikes greatly. Along with a body of anti-union legislation, Thatcher took on the whole union movement in the public arena during the miners strikes of 1984/85 and crushed it. This left the unions membership depleted by the end of the decade and this removed a large section of the traditional working class (the grass-roots of union membership) from the political process. This in turn erased



the notion of community from the structure of the working class. At the same time Thatcherite economic policy was undermining the manufacturing industries in which most union members worked. The government's monetary policy increased interest rates and greatly lowered public expenditure for the greater part of the eighties and caused hundreds of thousands of jobs to be lost in British industry. While there was mass unemployment in the industrial North of England, the City of London was where 80's Thatcherism was conjuring up the facade of economic prosperity. One of these policies was the privatisation, or selling off of state assets. This was essential to the creation of a share - owning democracy where not only the rich investor could play the stock exchange game. This widespread public subscription to shares reached fever pitch between 1984 when British Telecom was sold for £ 3.9 billion and when British Gas went for £ 5.4 billion. With the restrictive practices of the Stock Exchange ended, Thatcher, after destroying T. U. ability to interfere with 'free enterprise', did the same to the Government with privatisation and the deregularisation of financial institutions. With the 'Big Bang' of October 1986, markets in both shares and foreign currency went into overdrive. P.R. and Advertising firms thrived while fortunes were made on financial services. Suddenly credit was easily available, opportunities were rife and it appeared as though anyone could participate. The philosophy of free market

individualism was on the ascent, eclipsing issues of unequal access to new





market opportunities based on class, ethnic or educational background. The fast thinking, comprehensive educated boy from the East End could now earn more than the Public school and Oxbridge graduate and briefly the off-spring of the working class were confronted with the opportunity to liberate themselves from their class.

Johnathon Rutherford talks about this "new breed of white middle class male" (Rutherford, 1992, P.174) in his book *Mens Silences (Predicaments of Masculinity)*. (This stereotype is parodied by Gilbert and George during this period, their behaviour, as I will go on to discuss is similar to that of this 'new breed').

He sees the behaviour of the so called 'yuppies' in the 80's as being a "public assertion of masculinity" (Rutherford, 1992, P.74) and a direct result of the "Thatcherite ethos of individualism.....it was a social expression of male narcissism which inevitably influenced the fashion industry, blighting mens new interest in clothes and cosmetics with a masculine arrogance". (Rutherford, 1992, P.75).

(Of course women in this era were also known to 'power dress' and the shoulder pad became an essential item in every ambitious woman's wardrobe).

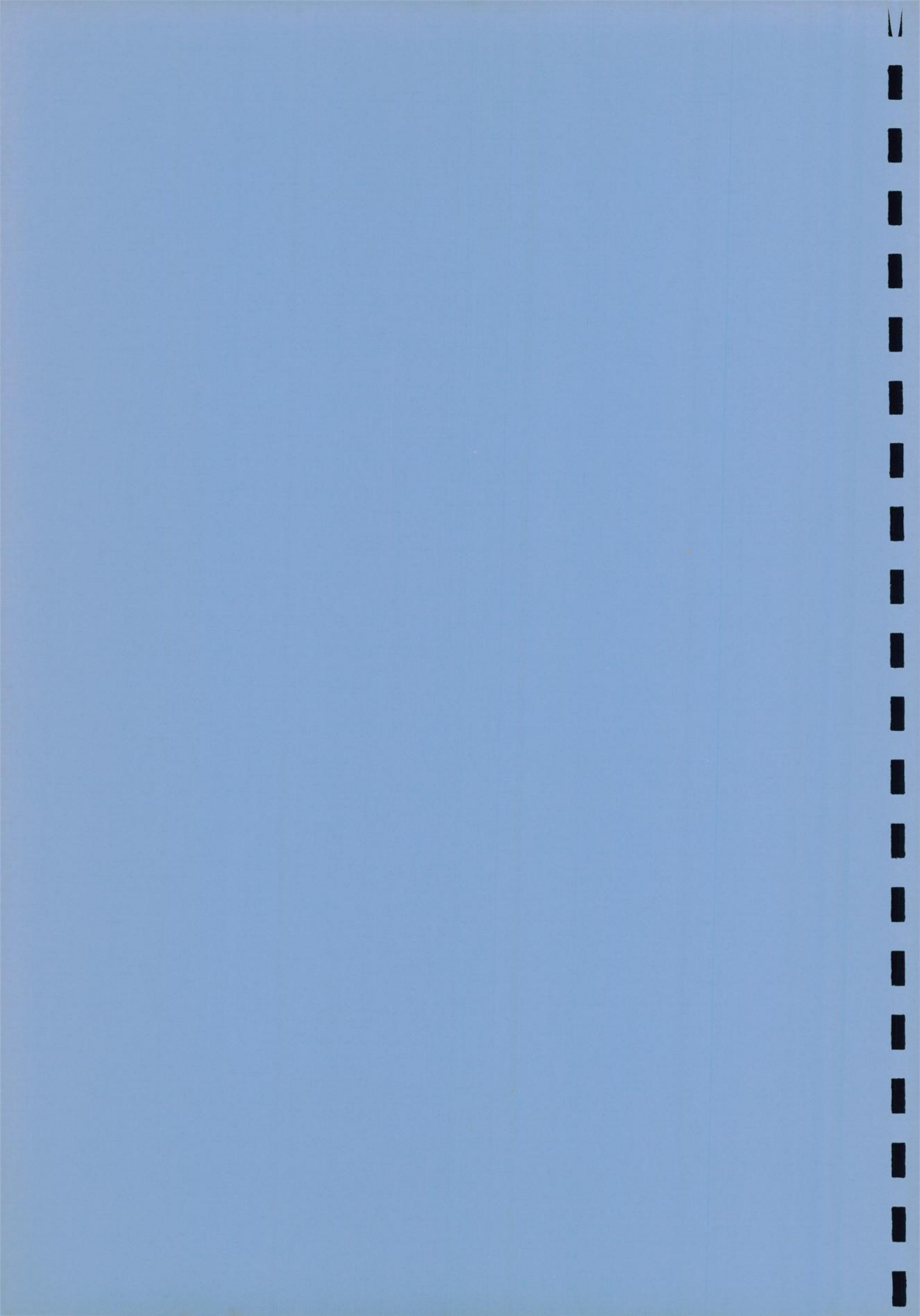


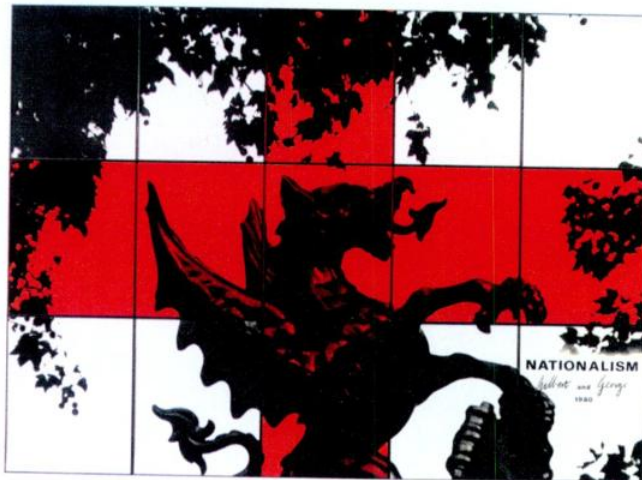
Because of personal fortunes being made and credit being available to all, elitist behaviour became popularised so to speak, champagne bars, cellphones etc, became accessible to more than the traditionally wealthy classes in Britain.

Also during this time there was a surge in nationalism, partly due to the Falklands War and partly because of the strong economy and a long term of office by the Tory Government. This aggressive nationalism was also evident in the form of football violence which following the Falklands war, reached a peak "it was a matter for their drunken blood thirsty and racist English 'honour' that the terraces be cleared of 'Spiks' and the Union Jack flown unchallenged. I saw one Liverpool fan with a tee-shirt 'Keep the Falklands British, as though he and his mates were the task force". (Rutherford, 1992, P. 176)

(This overt Nationalism is evident in the work of Gilbert & George around this time, I will elaborate on their imagery and themes in chapter 3)

This popular money culture rapidly come to define the era and be the general criteria by which things were judged , how much one earned and how it was spent. Products were sought after for their style rather than substance and





NATIONALISM. 1980. 181x250 cm.



PATRIOTS. 1980. 181x300 cm.



BRITISHER. 1980. 181x300 cm.

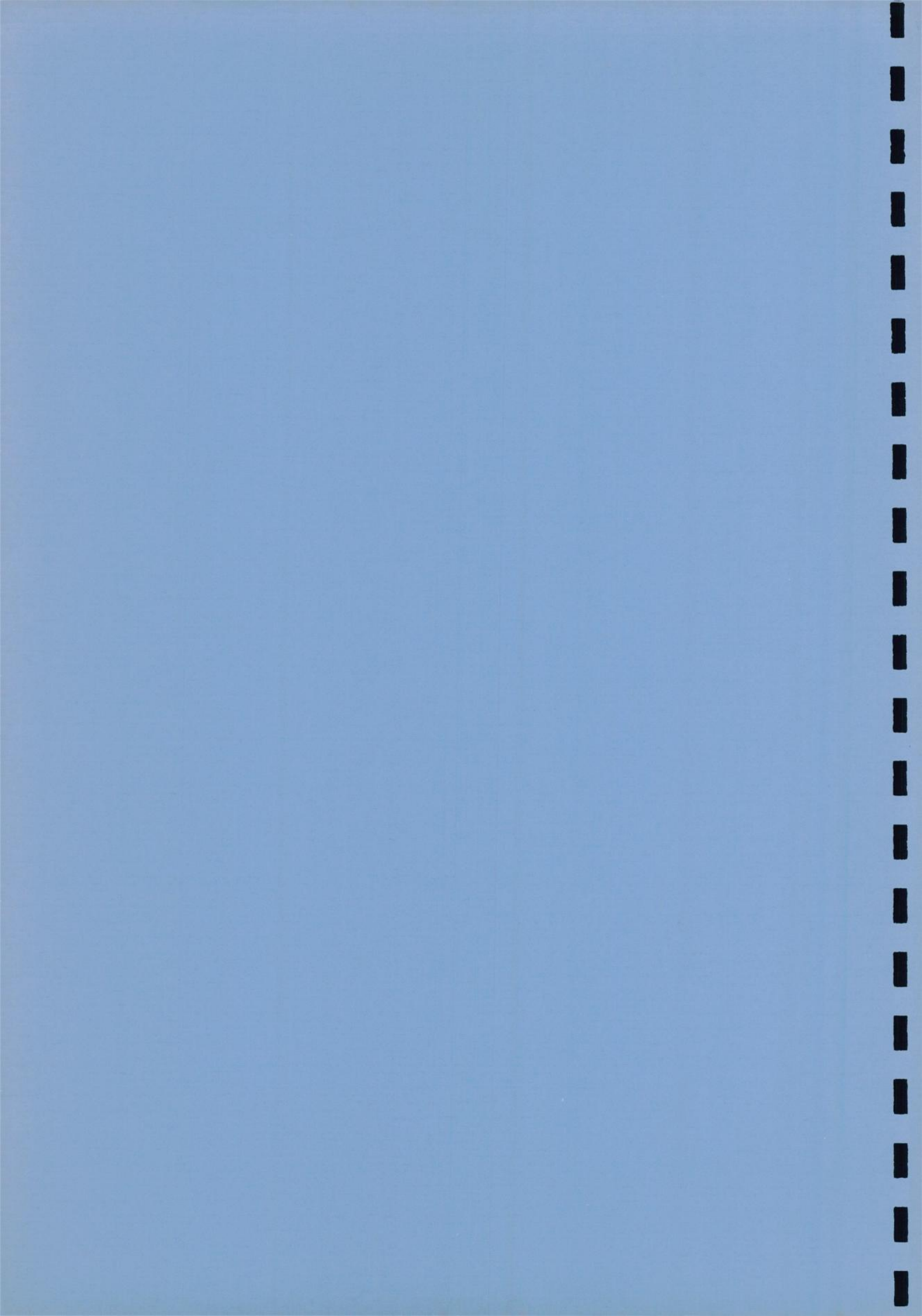
*Nationalism, Patriots. Britisher*



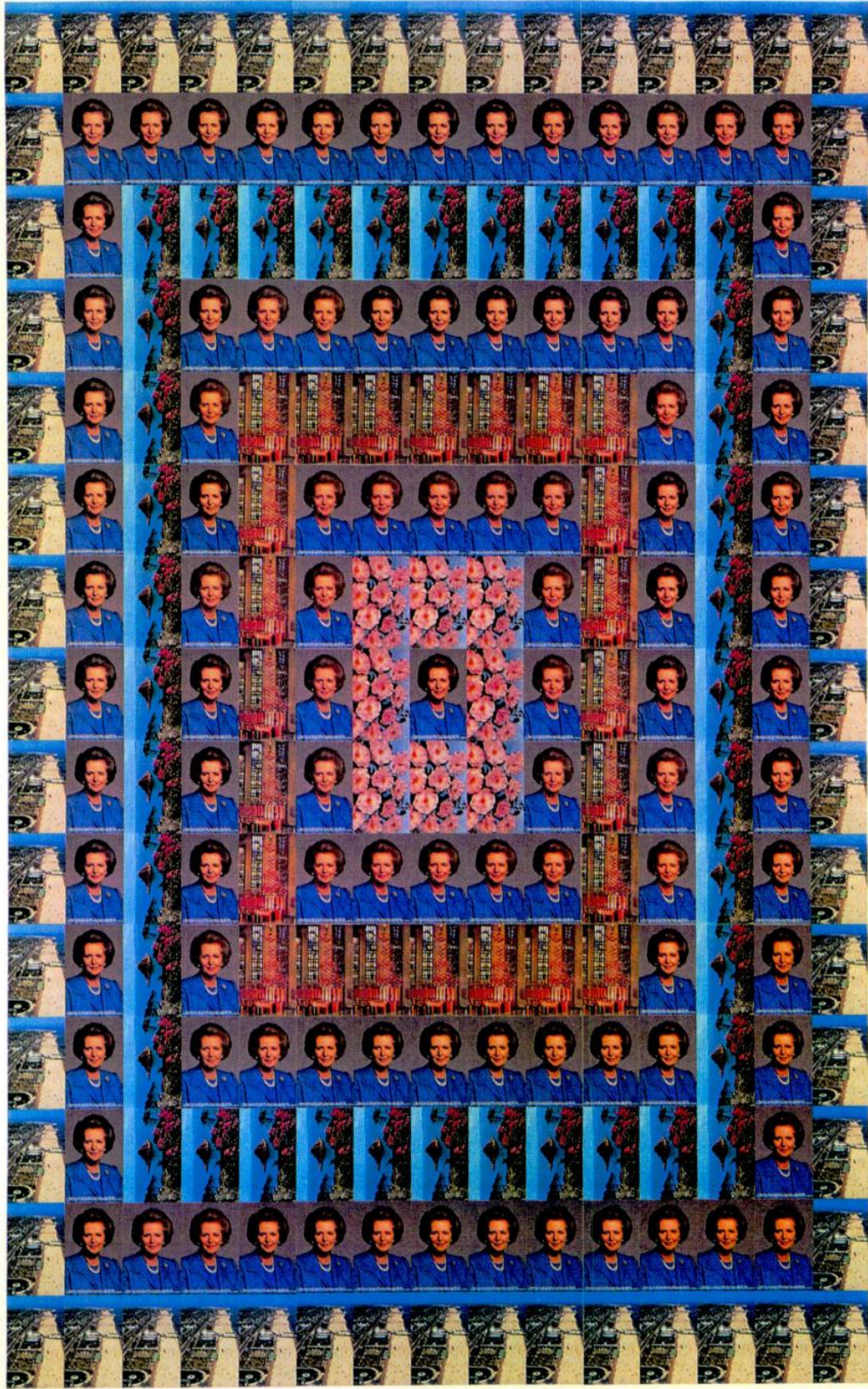
become a way of broadcasting and defining oneself. This idea of style or 'vener' was applied to products and politicians alike, the Advertising industry is a £ 47 billion business in the U.K. The company Saatchi and Saatchi took the 80's climate and ethos and put them into practice, becoming hugely successful.

According to Rutherford in *Future Tense* they were (in 1989) the biggest advertising agency in the world, with 16,000 employees and offices in 58 countries. They are prime examples of the new economic order , they are not merely a multinational company but a global one. They played an important role in the commodifying and privatisation of art. They have a huge private art collection which has a significant influence on the art market. At one point Saatchi had the power to make or break artists purely on the basis of the value of the pieces. Art buyers all over the World looked to them as mediators of the value of an artists work, if Saatchi bought the work was obviously valuable if they sold it was no longer of great value. This must have been how the word Art Broker (as opposed to Stockbroker) was coined.

They also applied the idea that veneer or style could be commodified. One of their clients was Margaret Thatcher herself, the public Thatcher, clothes, voice etc., was created by them using the cultural language her style of

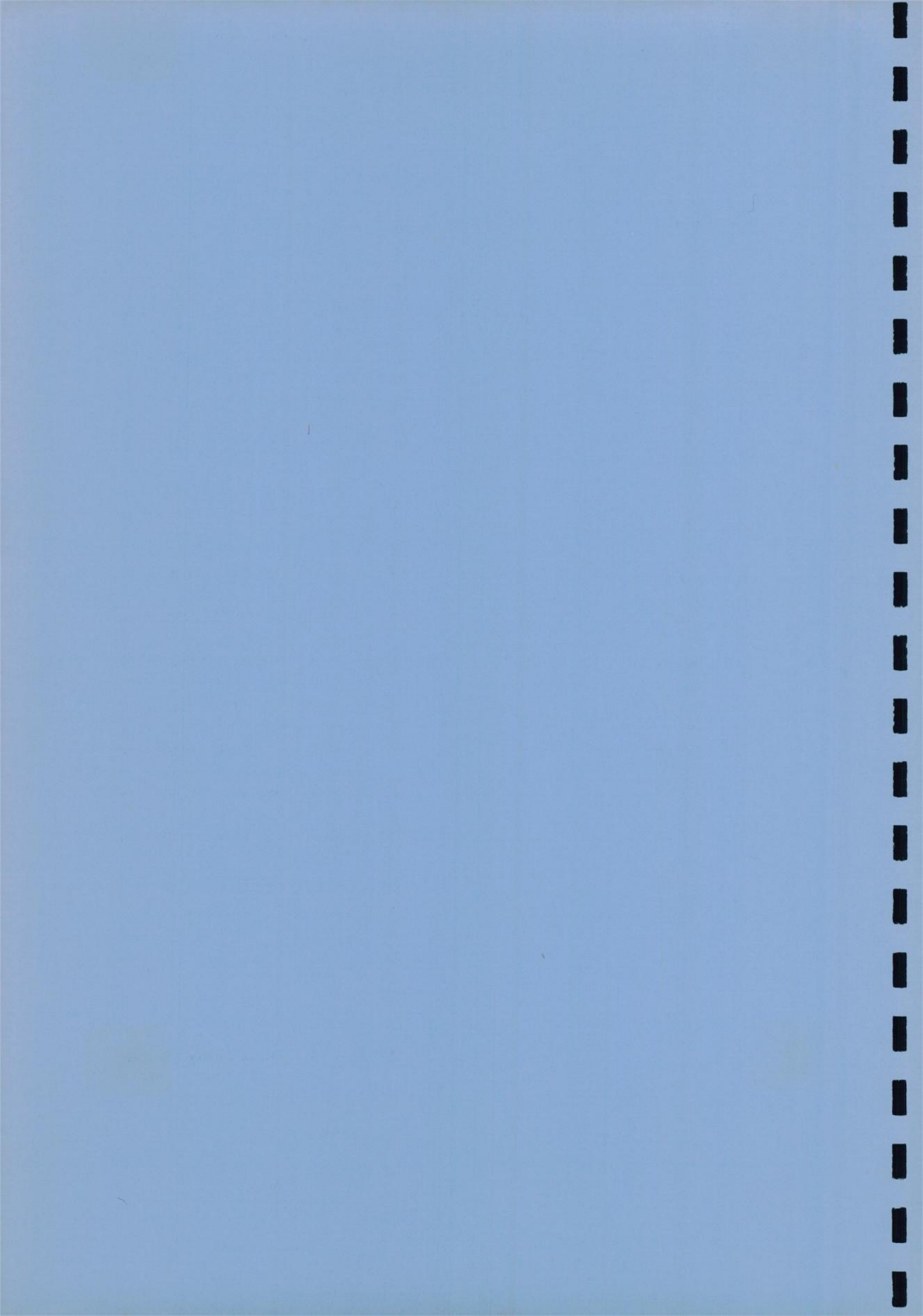






THATCHER WORLD  
*Margaret Thatcher*  
1981

*Thatcher World*



politics produced, thus setting herself up as a cultural Icon.

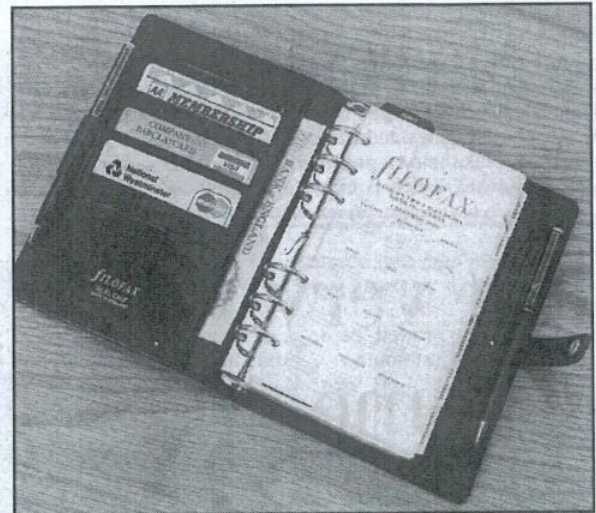
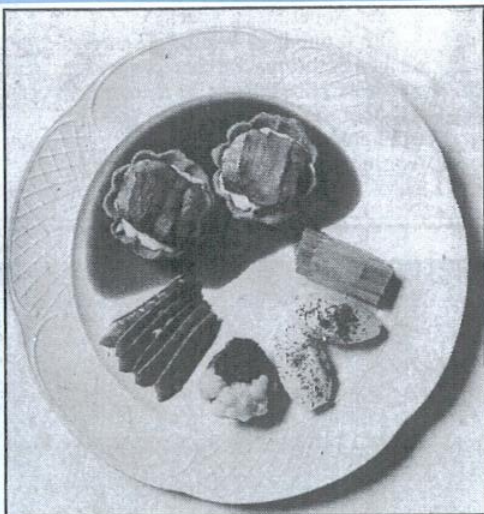
"The coming of post industrial society seems to mean not the end of capitalism, founded on the control of production and raw materials, but transcendent capitalism, which through the deployment of international finance capital not only is beyond the control of nation states, but has invaded the private sphere where consumption has become the sole purpose of life . . . The Saatchi collection , sustained by profits from this system, frames the dilemma of the avant-garde". (Hewison 1990 P. 47).

" As commerce takes over culture so, manipulation succeeds information". (Hewison 1990. P. 47)) Nevil Brody, the Art director of *the Face* magazine who pioneered the Russian constructivist style revival in design in the 1980's , who is associated with the dance subculture is said to have "Succeeded in marrying style to politics" (Rose 1991 P.15) . His opinion , quoted in *Future Tense* on the direction of design " is towards the refining and redefining of techniques of manipulation. Design is no longer a creative process it is being used to conceal a social system on the brink of collapse" (Hewison , 1990, P.58).

Conspicuous consumption became the leisure pursuit of the newly enriched twenty-somethings, the act of consumption was promoted and therefore the companies producing what was desired flourished ie. service industries,



Illustration from "Don't mention the eighties"



Passé news: food-as-art Nouvelle Cuisine; Loadsamoney and his wad, as immortalised by Harry Enfield; the Filofax, life-support system for the networking yuppie ...



... not forgetting, the Power Suit (shoulder-pads and serious expression *de rigueur*); the Ultimate Driving Machine (in black, of course); and the sign of the times: SOLD



fashion industry, property development etc.,. In this, an era described as one of selfish individualism, property owning democracy, the slogan, "I shop therefore I am" (Bedell, 1992, P. 16) epitomises the general psyche along with an image of a crowd of young upwardly mobile persons, flexing their financial muscles in their Armain Suits in a trendy Soho bar playing WAD! (a game where when a group of 'yuppies' are gathered and someone shouts WAD! all present must produce their WAD (of money of that is) and the person with biggest WAD wins all) (this stereotype is caricatured by comedian Harry Enfields character *Louise o' Money*). With lower taxes and seemingly limitless credit available from both financial institutions and high street retailers there seemed to be no end in sight. But, on the 19th of October 1987 the overheating in the global economy claimed its first victim as the Wall Street Stock Exchange in New York crashed to half its value, followed rapidly by London and Tokyo. Within a year the British economy began to feel the strain of the money culture and interest rates shot up again to counteract a weakening sterling. For a paper economy centred on credit and borrowing, this was serious trouble as opposed to 'serious money' people became

burdened by the huge and ever multiplying debts of their consumption. The property owning democracy was replaced with record level of repossession and unemployment, particularly in the former boom areas.





When asked the question: 'Are you a politician' in *Art Monthly* magazine they replied:-

Gilbert - "We always say we are boring conservatives".

George - "Normal, Normal".

Gilbert - "That is what we like to be, normal".

George - "Average. Lower class, uneducated Tories". (G & G in Wilson, 1990. p. 10)

And they behaved as a stereo typical one might, larger swilling, nationalistic, Coronation Street watching type of behaviour.

Gilbert & George look on the Thatcher years as being a positive time for art in Britain "Mrs Thatchers greatest achievement in the arts ... was ... privatisation of the Artist" (G & G in Wilson, 1990, p.8). It wasn't her own personal opinions or attitude that was important but that the government seemed to arrange a system where in the 80's the number of galleries in London quadrupled and where the number of artists living by the means of their work was multiplied 10 fold. This opinion seems to be taking on board the 80's ethos of self promotion entrepreneurship . They did undertake to promote their Art and their image with vigour in the 80's according to Lynn Barber in the *Independent on Sunday* there are more books about Gilbert &



George than on any other living artist because they pay publishers to print them. When she refers to this using the term "vanity publishing" (Barber, 1991, P. 4) George explains to her it is "Because it's democratic - by subsidising the publishers we can bring our pictures to a wider audience who otherwise wouldn't see them - because we remember as art students, being interested in contemporary art, the access to it was nearly impossible" ( G & G, Barber, 1991, P.4)

They have put on at least one and as many as three shows a year for the past decade and sell their work for tens of thousands each. They only pay themselves £ 23,000 a year each, the rest of their money is reinvested into publications and producing more work. They also give generously to charities, especially to Aids hospices and even produced a show in 1989 where all the proceeds were donated to the Aids cause. The reason they give for producing so much work and literature and going to great expense to have it shown worldwide (next year they will have a show touring China!) is, firstly to convert ordinary people worldwide to art. "We want there to be a dialogue between the ordinary person and our paintings". (G & G in Lee P. 10)

They say that "Art helps people and that money helps bring art to the people." (G & G in Farson, 1991. P.36). They see the promotion of art and literature as a means to "change the view and vision of the human person.....pushing



forward the frontiers of knowledge making it a much freer society". (G & G in Wilson, 1990, P.10). They say that "its not important what each member of the Government thinks about art, as long as they arrange a freedom that you can do whatever you want" (G & G in Wilson, 1990, P.10). In this way they say that being forced to compete and promote yourself can bring a type of liberation.

But is this a false superficial sense of liberation?

With this in mind I will continue my discussion looking at Gilbert & George's vision which incorporates their idea of "Art for All" with their work. (G & G in Wilson, 1990, P. 10)

"Vision is important because that is what changes the world". (G & G Wilson, 1990, p.10)

Looking at Western culture, since the time when Nietzsche wrote his text *Thus spoke Zarathustra* dealing with the Death of God, man's faith in the spiritual has been diminished. This is partly due to science, mans realisation of the vastness of the universe and of the potential for life on other planets. And due to scientists like Darwin and his *Theory of Evolution*, which essentially dismisses religious texts dealing with the creation of man and the





Our Father.



Which art in Heaven.



Hallowed be thy Name.



Thy kingdom come.



Thy will be done.



On Earth.



As it is in Heaven.



Give us this day.



Our daily bread.



And forgive us our trespasses.



As we forgive them  
Who trespass against us.



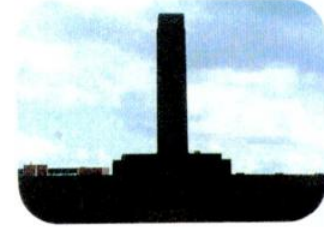
And lead us not into temptation.



But deliver us from evil.



For thine is the kingdom.



The power.

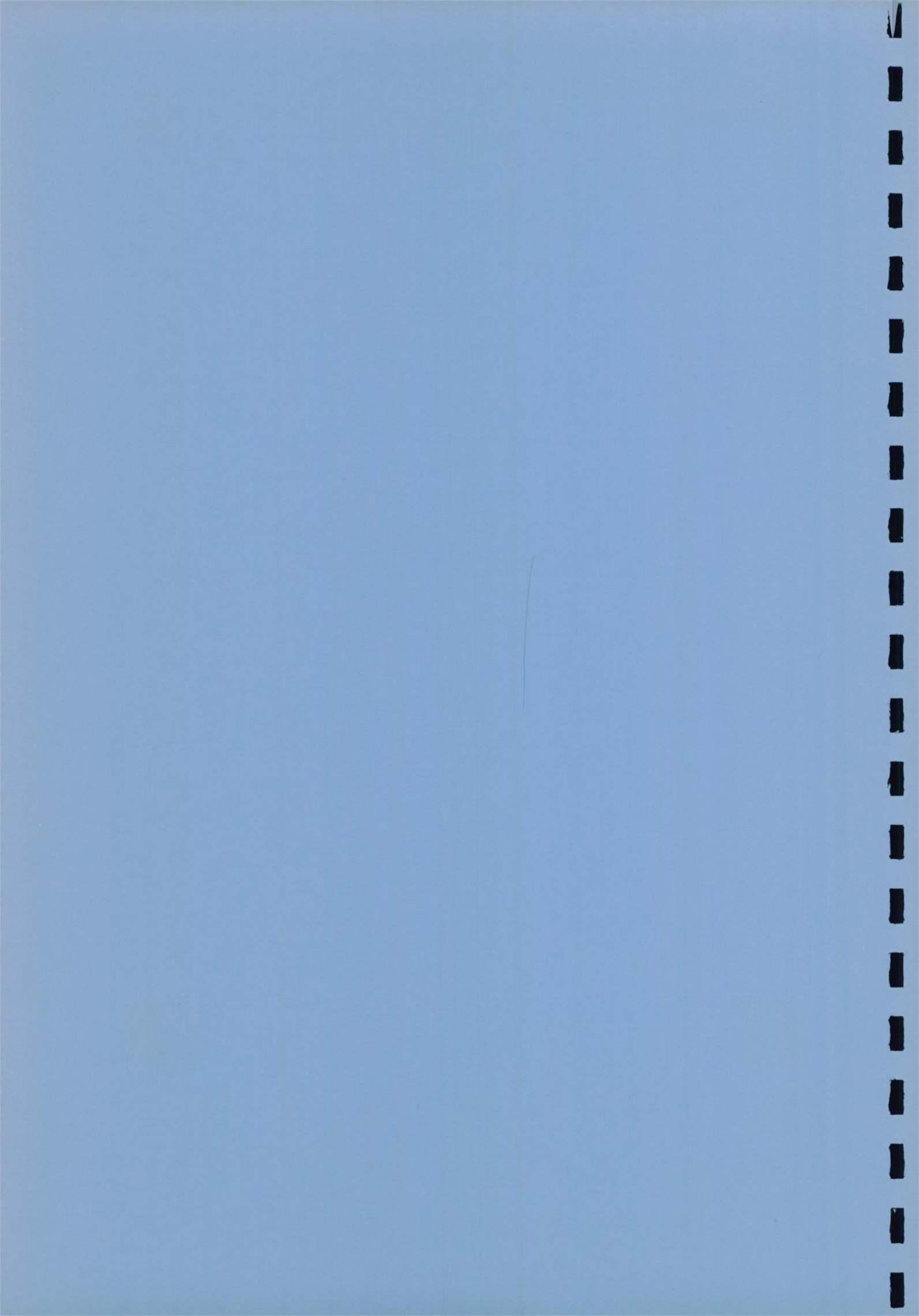
Stills defining the Lord's Prayer,  
from Gilbert & George's film *THE  
WORLD OF GILBERT & GEORGE*,  
1981.



And the glory, for ever and ever. Amen.

In Gilbert & George's version, the Lord's  
Prayer concentrates exclusively on the  
human being and his world.

*Stills from "defining the Lords Prayer"*





universe and of his 'God-given' superiority on earth. The Age of Enlightenment has left a gap in the Western psyche, which has largely been filled by a search for an earth bound reality to validate mans existence.

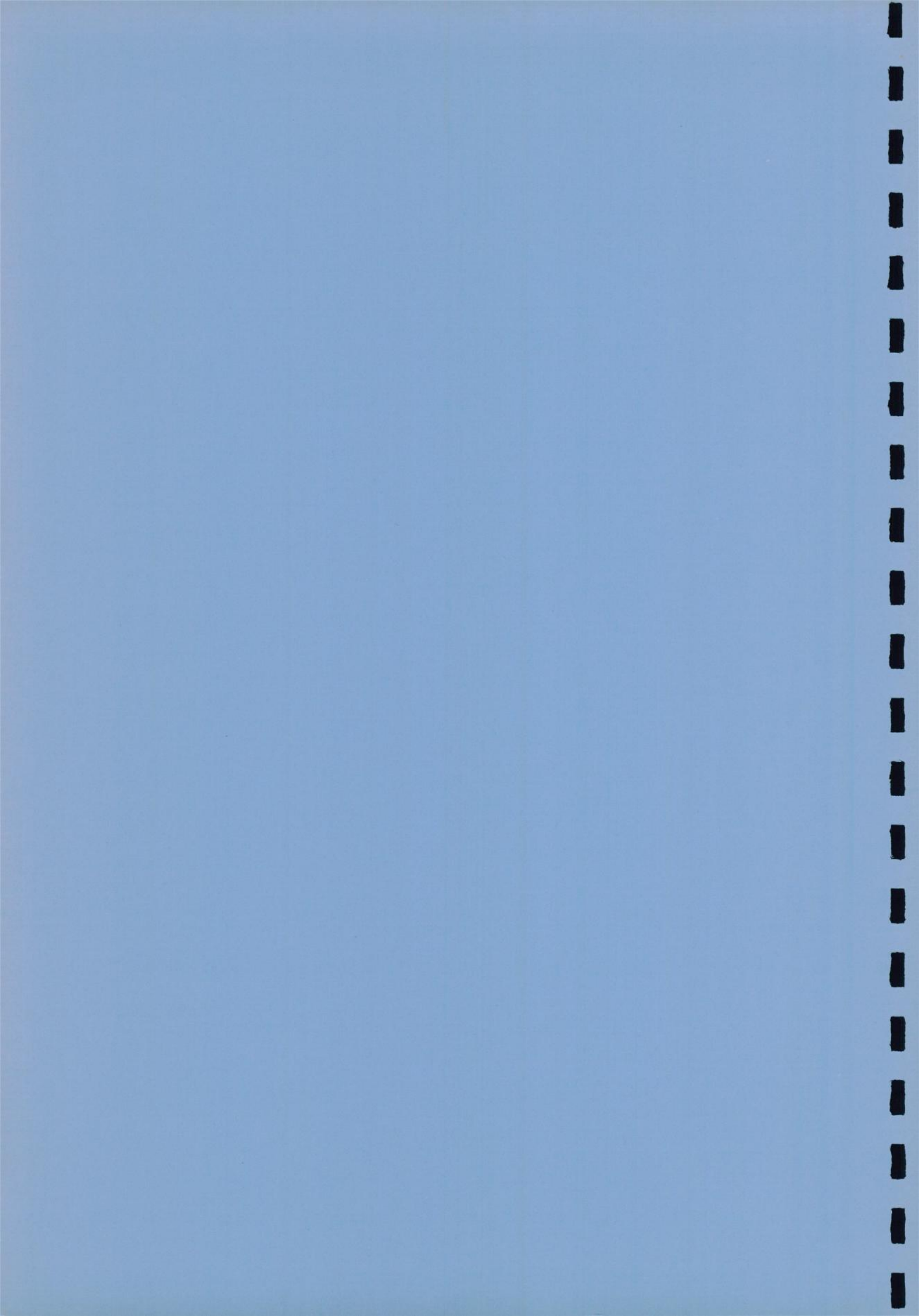
"(Technology and Science) took the place of the earlier belief in an other worldly reality, God Given reality or Nature". (Jahn , 1989, p.364)

It is this turn to Science and urban living coupled with a sense of spiritual loss that reached a peek in the 1980's, God was replaced by greed, self indulgence and consumer goods. The individual became the modern icon.

"Heaven, Earth, Power and Glory and temptation are all illustrated by urban imagery" (Jahn, 1989, p.368).

Gilbert and George don't appear to go along with this pessimistic thinking, when discussing western civilisation in *Art Monthly* they say "we don't believe it is time to stand still, there is still room for improvement" (G&G in Wilson, 1990, p.11) As Daniel Farson says in his book Gilbert and George are "going against the grain of today's cynicism". (Farson, 1991, p.39)

Gilbert and George say their vision, their Art is an: "Art for All" (G & G in

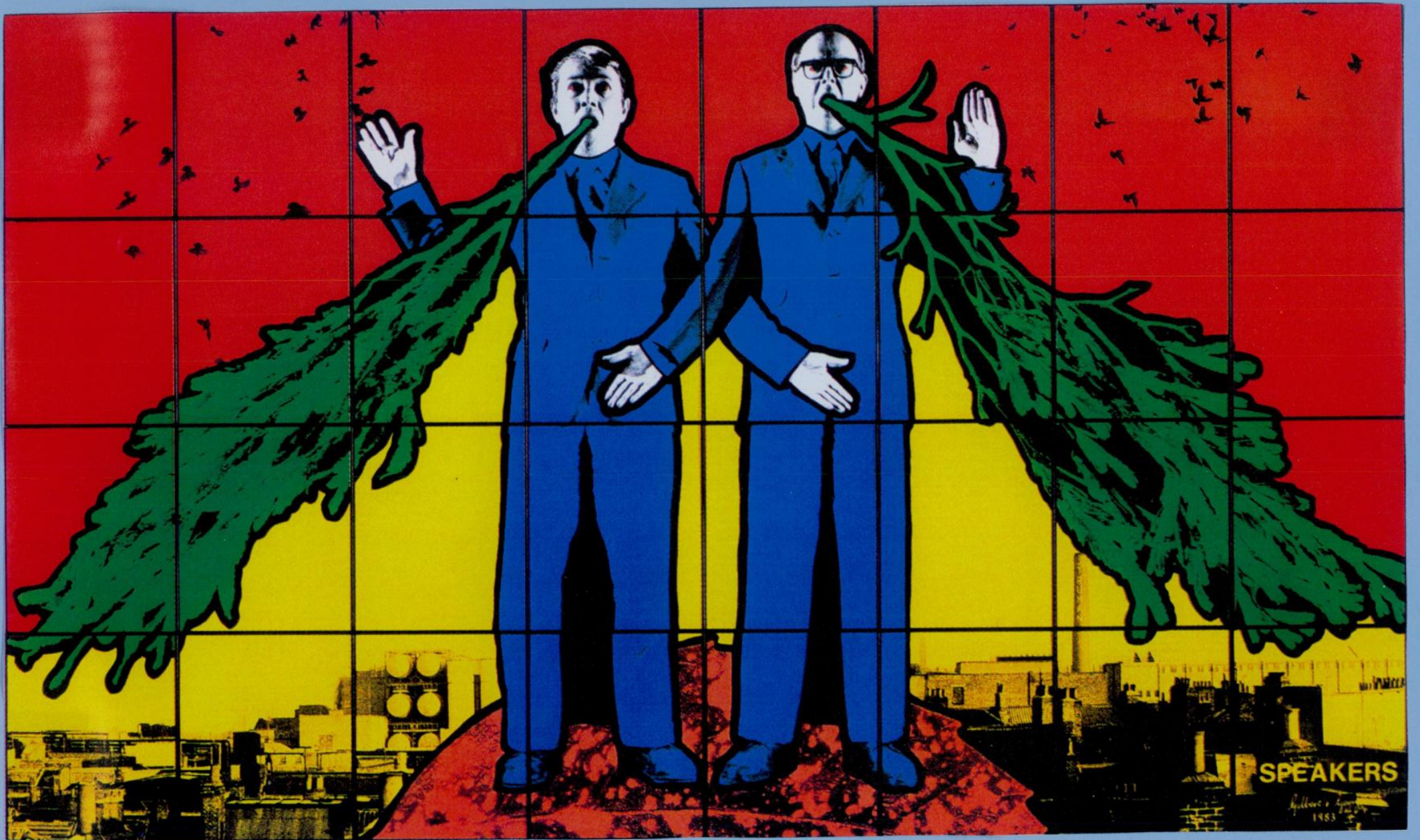


Wilson, 1990, p.10) and are not selective in their audience " we want our art to speak across the barriers of knowledge directly to people about their life and not about their knowledge of Art" (G & G in Wilson, p.11). They say their art is a: "re-examining of life", they don't seem to care whether the piece is 'liked' or not, what is important to them is the very fact that it was seen, they want it to be seen in the "light of their (the viewers) own life". (G & G in Wilson,1990, p.11) They see their work in terms of 3 life forces". "The head, the soul, the sex". "In our life these forces are shaking and moving themselves into ever changing different arrangements each one of our pictures is a frozen representation of one of these "arrangements" (Gilbert & George, 1986, p.1). The meaning of these arrangements is what is most important and that "the form should serve the meaning". (G &G in Wilson, 1990, p.10).

The subject matter of their work is the world and their inspiration is the human person and "the complexity of life" (G&G in Wilson, 1990, p.11) they say they are: "re-examining life for the new generation" (G & G in Wilson, 1990, p.11). They term the youngmen in their pictures "humanoid" (just examples of Man) and that their images are: "forming the future" (G & G in Wilson, 1990, p.12).

It is when they start to use terms like "forming the future" that the label they

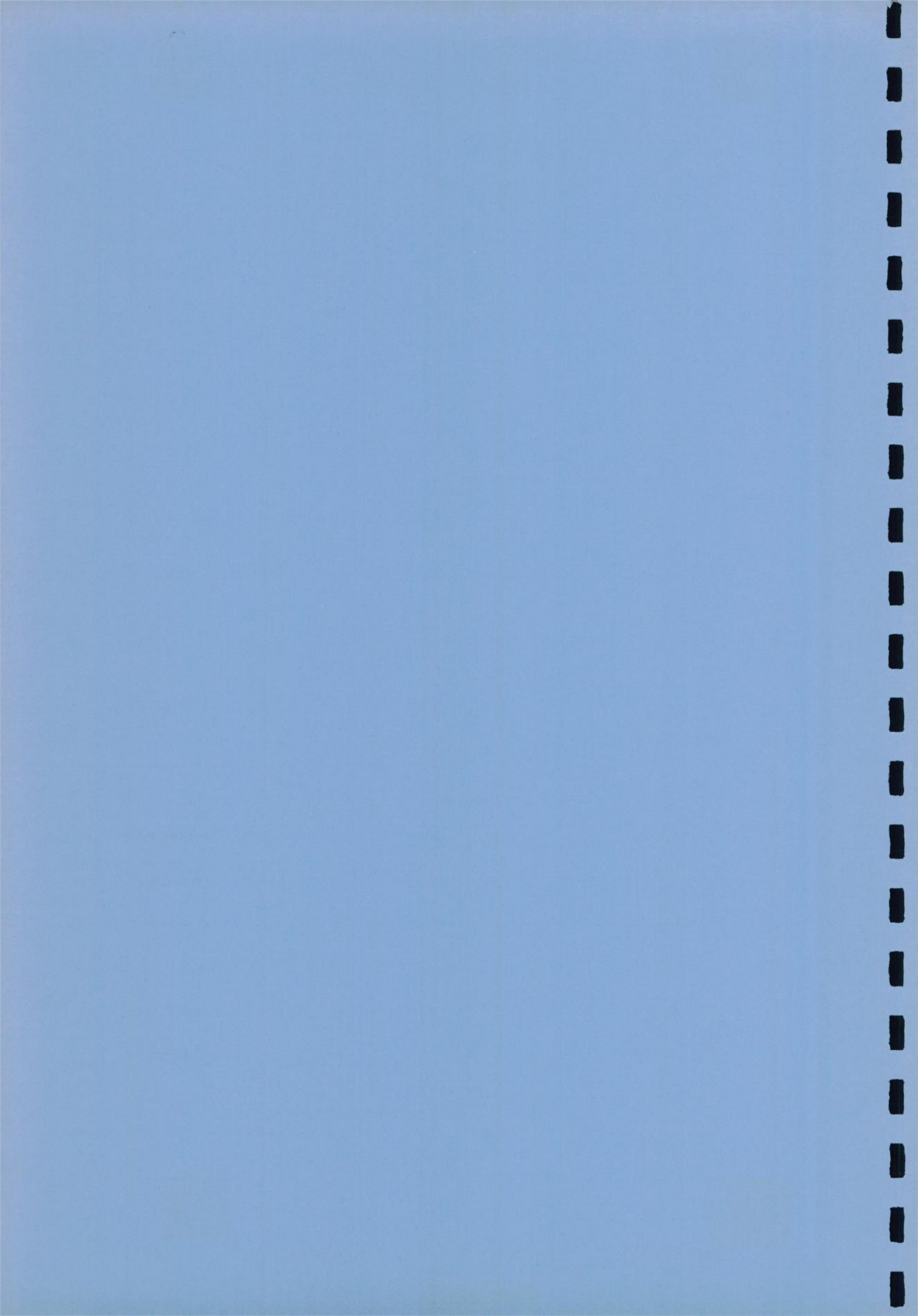




**SPEAKERS**

*Billboard & Agency*  
1983

*Speakers*



have as fascists can be seen I will elaborate on this criticism in Chapter 3 but it is necessary to mention it at this point in my argument, as I will proceed to discuss the question are Gilbert & George a symptom of this eighties era, or a reaction?

One piece of their work that epitomises how they see their role as visionaries or preachers is *Speakers*. It depicts themselves in an urban landscape with one hand each raised (as if being 'sworn in') and out of their mouths come pieces of green foliage. Here they are raised above the urban sprawl and speak of nature this is their vision.

"We always say it is what we say that is important". (G & G in Wilson, 1990, p.10)

But what they say is what they want to do, change the world, but they never specify how, they are never specific, in all the interviews I read they repeated the same answers to questions especially when questioned about their personal lives, or in any depth about their work. David Lee in *Arts Review* magazine described their interview as an "interview performance" (Lee, 1993, p.9). This system they have of avoiding in depth access to their work or 'Vision' produces a sense of discomfort, (as does the rigid facade of their day to day lives mentioned in the first chapter) This raises the question, do they want





their work to be impenetrable? They say they think there is still room for improvement in society. To do this improving they stripped their lives to the bare essential functions, to achieve a freedom to enable them to create without anything influencing them. A sort of sublime state in which vision and future can manifest.

"The apparent void, the loss of firm ground becomes the source of a plenitude of life". (Jahn, 1989,p.164).

But still we are left with a felling of emptiness and dissatisfaction. This poses the question is their vision an empty one or does it even exist? One approach to this question is to refer to the political and cultural state of Britain during the 1980's. The economic prosperity was a superficial one because the sort of fluid 'paper'economy I discussed could only sustain itself for so long and recession was inevitable. While the government was boasting good times ahead (while merrily selling what the British public owned to the British public) what was really pending was recession. There is a parallel between this and Gilbert & George's hyped public front which sings of self helped success and vision whereas the reality is a void or perhaps an empty vision.

"We're the most miserable sods we know says one, the most miserable sods in the world, agrees the other". (G&G in Farson, 1991, p.38) They claim

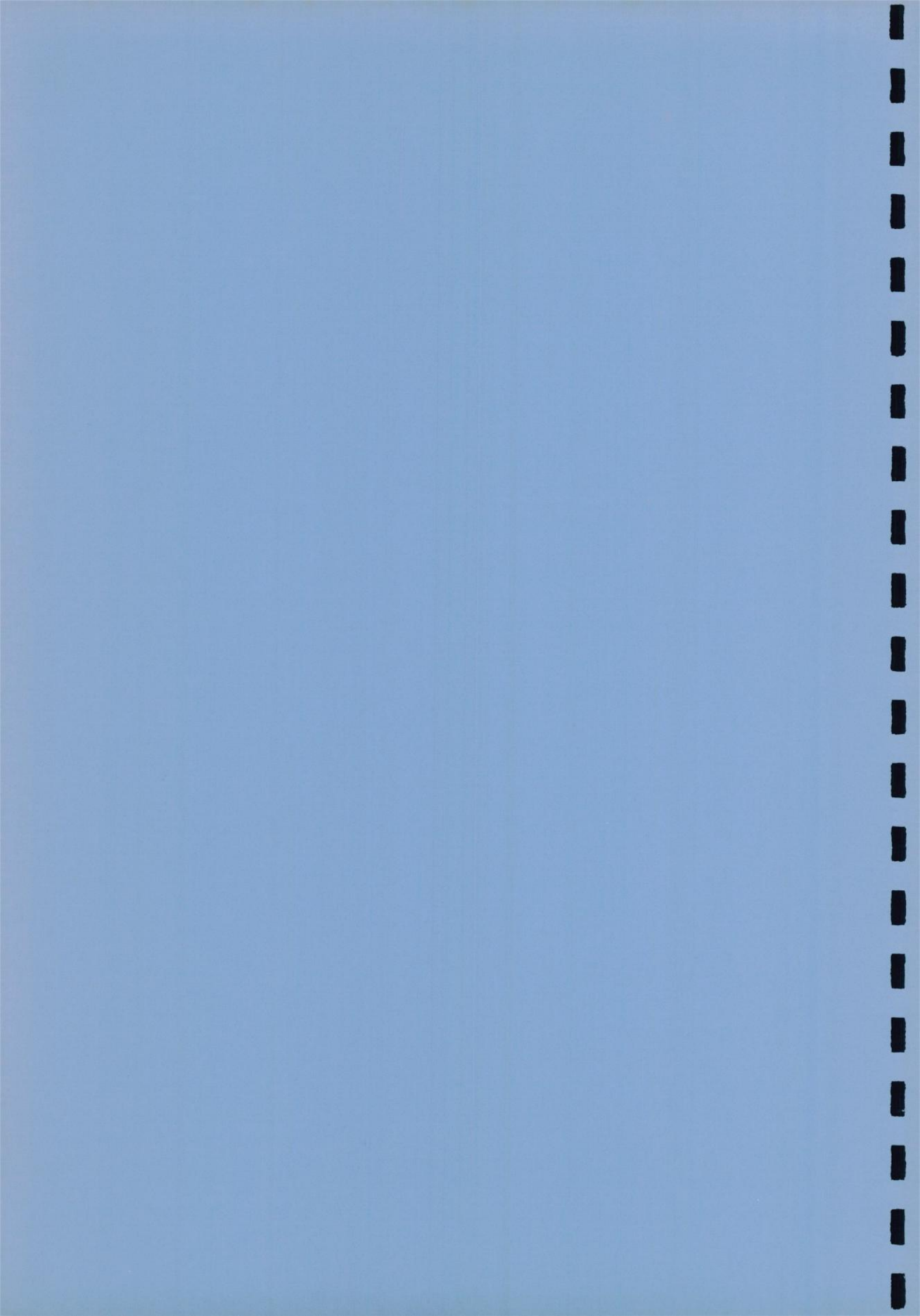


that one must be miserable to produce, "such happy work". That the art becomes the living force. Is this misery a part of their facade or a diversion or is it a clue to the true nature of their message.

Contrary to what I have implied both Wolf Jahn and Gilbert & George say that they don't reflect society, but as their use of photographs, of urban dwellings, tramps, streetscapes etc., suggest they do. On top of these images are studio shots of themselves and armies of young men. This is using images of society to create a dialogue between society and their vision. In this depiction of a 'vision for the future' the side of society they show is decaying aggressive, vulgar, racist, sexist, all glossed over with ultra vibrant colours.

While presenting us with this imagery Gilbert and George stress that they are normal "normal, normal" (G & G in Wilson, 1990, p.10). And they strive to uphold a hyper normal existence (as I described in Chapter 1). So is this view of society a normal one?. If not normal it is realistic.

In chapter three I will take an indepth look into the fact that I am not convinced that Gilbert and George are creating a 'vision for the future', "a normality of tomorrow" (Jahn, 1989, p.145) - but they say they are and cover up todays normality with bright colours and a distracting black grid (which serves, perhaps to make the viewer look harder at todays problems or seduce



the viewer to a certain point and then present him/her with a point of ambiguity or even hopelessness).

With this in mind I will discuss that what they are presenting us with is a critical analysis of contemporary society and not a vision of the future and also that they are reacting against the values which they appear to uphold.

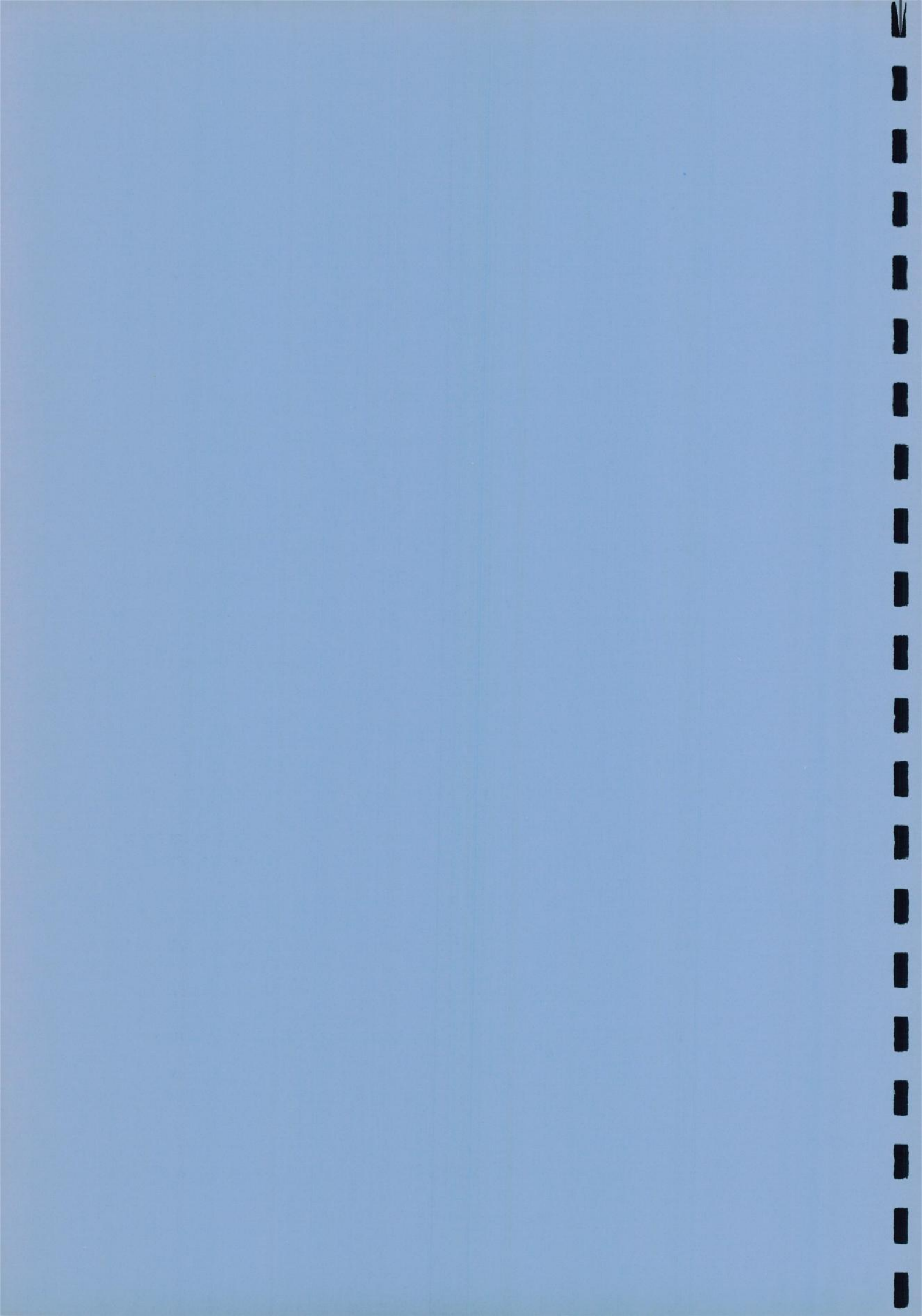


## CHAPTER 3

### WHAT THEY DO

Gilbert and George are controversial in many ways through their imagery, themes and use of language. They get up the noses of the liberal art establishment because of their tongue in cheek sense of humour and sense of camp, which is missed by many who take all they say literally. It's a sort of naughty schoolboy type of humour on some levels they frequently use rude words like 'jobbie' and on others highly satirical, playing the fool, misogynist, racist or philistine. It must be humour because it is so obviously provocative and also varies with who they are taking to.

In an article in *The Face* magazine December 1992 in a very laid back non aggressive interview with Ekow Eshun, the interviewer referred to an article by Judy Rumbold in *The Guardian* where she was projecting Freudian type reasons for their 'phallic obsession' on them: In reaction to





this Gilbert says "That was the worst article we ever had. She said that we were trying to push the penis down womens throats" George (with the punch line) "not one picture shows that" (Eshun, 1992,p.77)

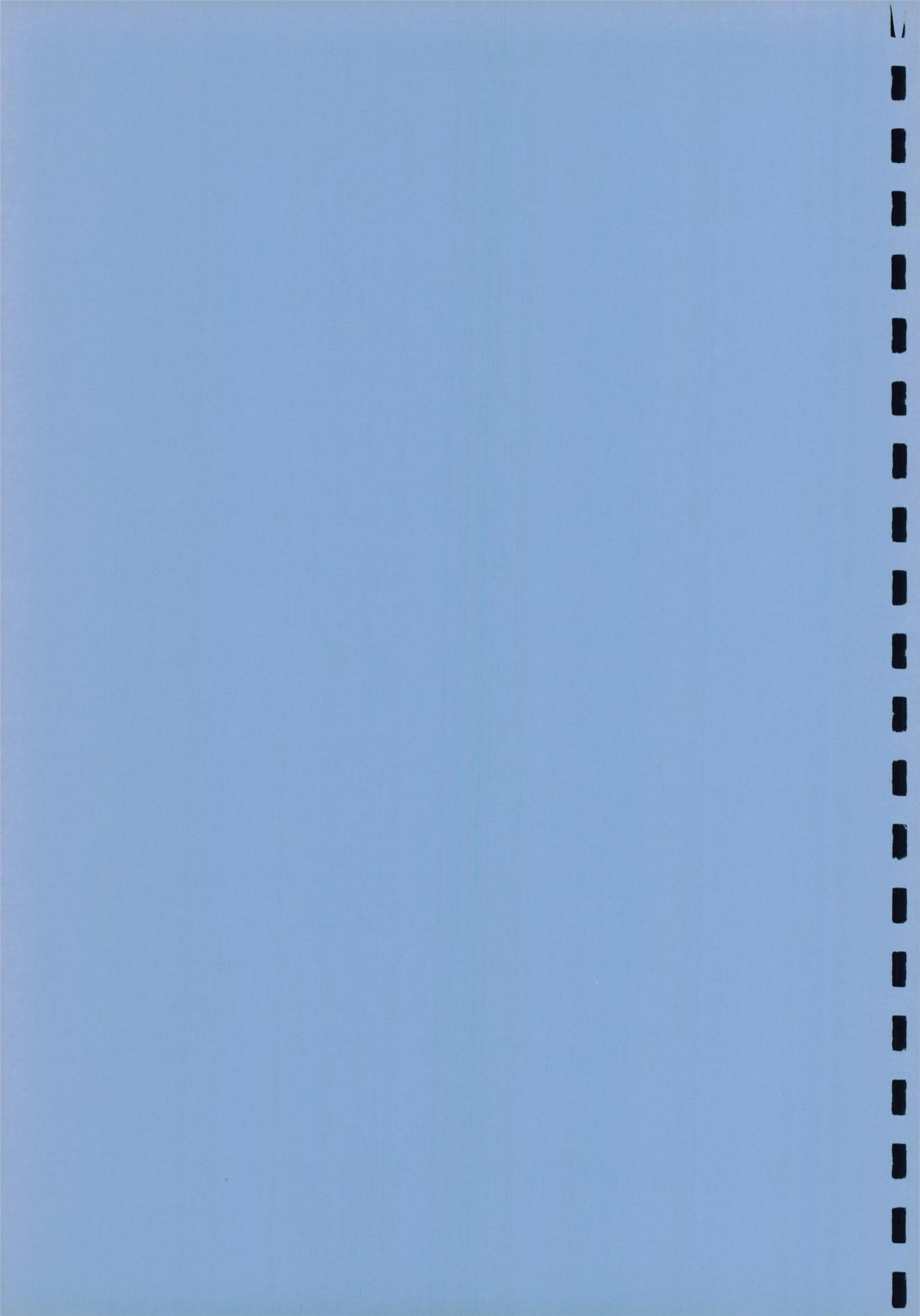
Obviously this is not what Judy Rubold meant, it was just an unfortunate choice of metaphor to use in the context of Gilbert & Georges art!

It is this sort of humour that moves into the realm of parody. They act out roles in their lives and in their work as I mentioned above, and it is this that provokes the much talked about criticism they receive. Do they encourage this reaction and controversy as a means of subverting and of challenging stereotypical values?

"They call us drunks, fascists, paedophiles all kinds of stupid names!" ( G & G in Barber, 1991, p.5)

"We have to open things to discussion. If there is distress involved in that, then that's very good. We don't want to make art that pats people on the back" (G & G, Eshun, 1992, p.80)

In this way peoples criticism of them seems to mean their art has achieved its aim. Daniel Farsons quotes Polly Devlin writing in *International Herald Tribune* about an exhibition she attended of theirs. " We find here an anti-cathedral a temple to the profound and even the damned, and the responses go on red alert." " Everything that is ordinarily human and womanly in me bewails this exhibition" (Farson, 1991, p.48)

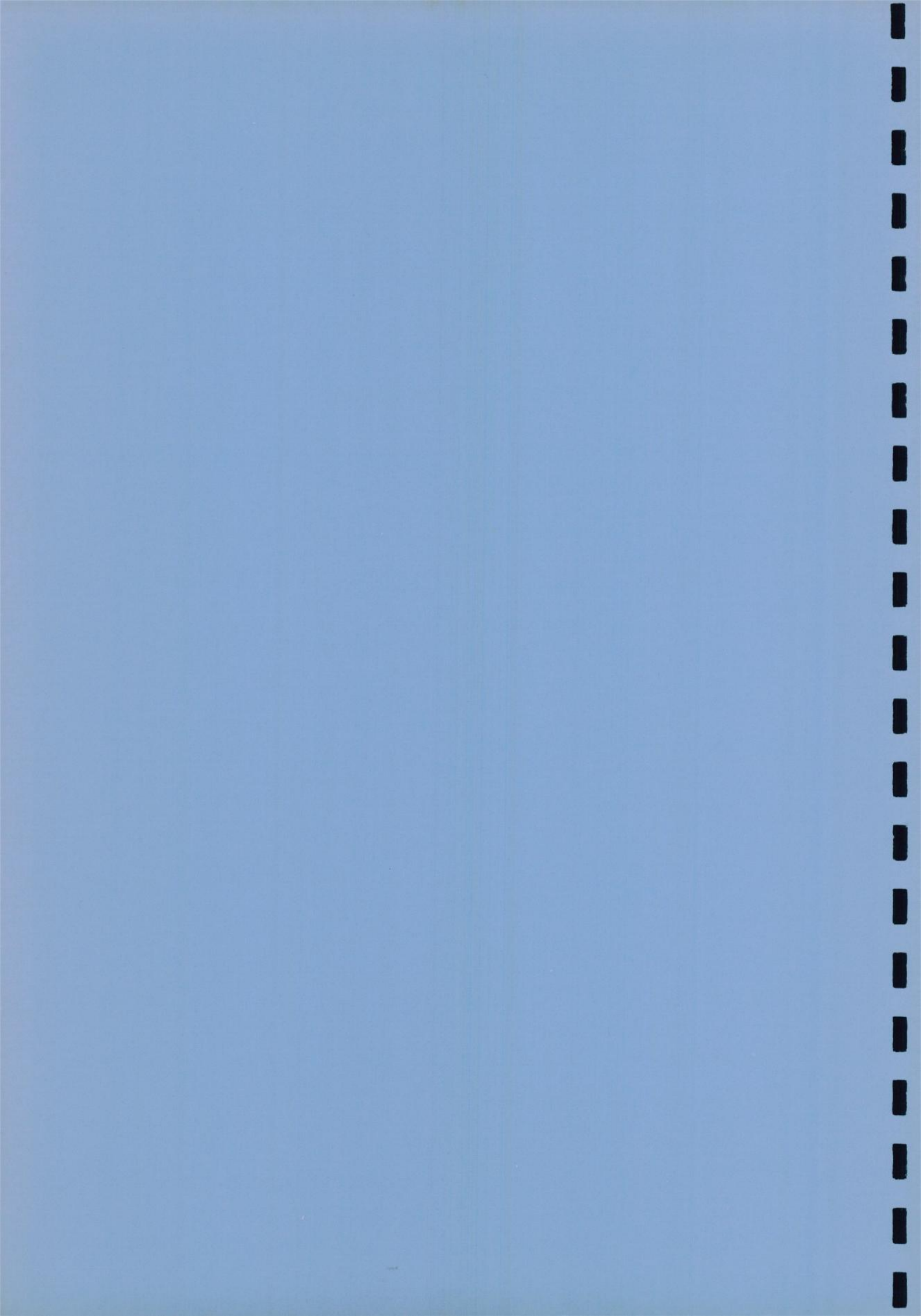


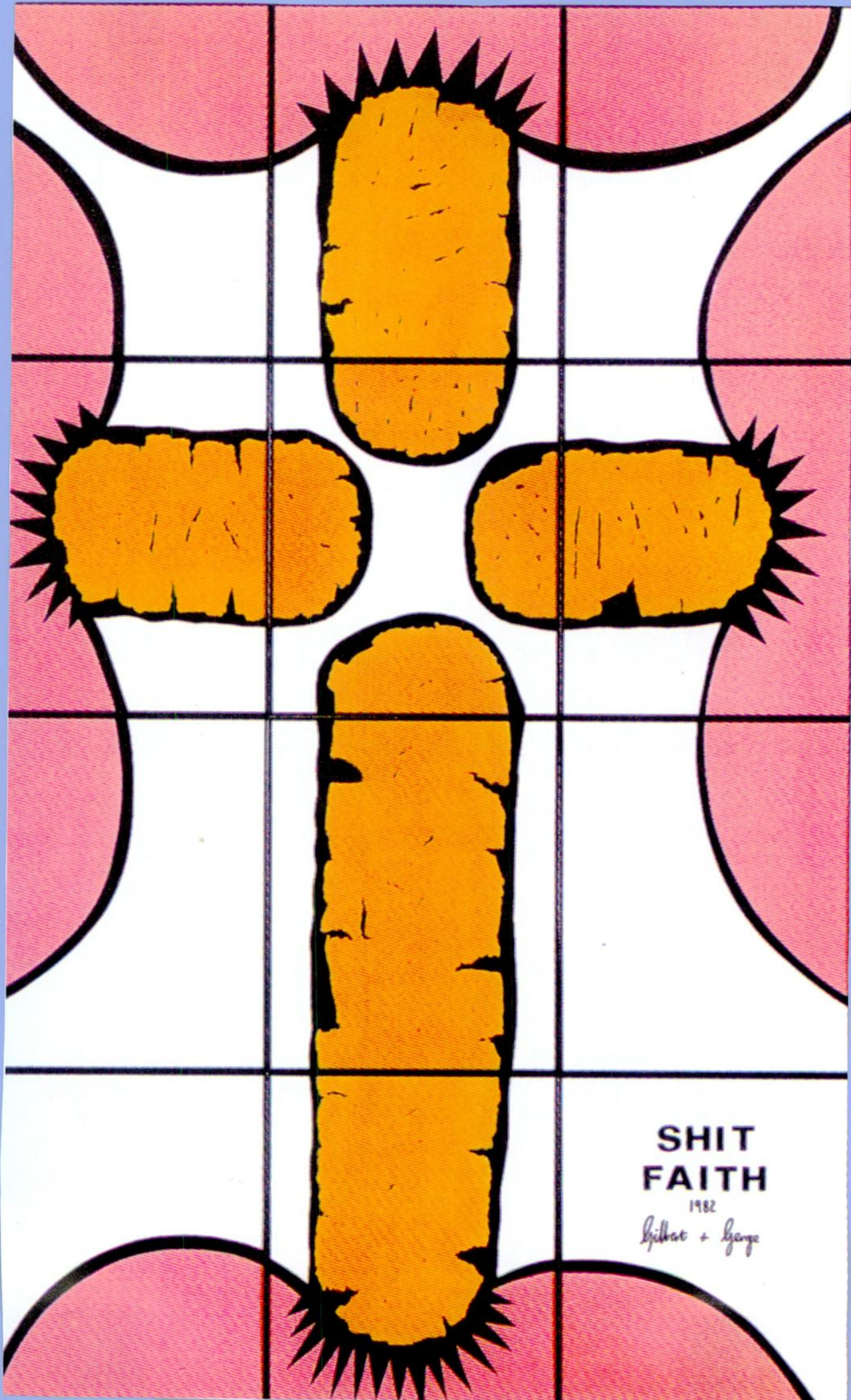
This sort of criticism or reaction is the reaction they welcome. This is what they mean by opening things to discussion.

"We want to provide the opportunity for change in the viewer, so if someone starts talking about racism when they see our work that's very good." (G & G in Eshun, 1992,p.80)

If they want to provoke criticism perhaps they even go as far as inventing it as Lynn Barber suggested in *The Review* magazine interview "by saying they are reviled and 'beaten up' is good self advertisement". (Barber, 1991,p.5) This is also hinted at by Farson in that he thinks that their critics aren't as plentiful as they imagine. If this is the case and they do exaggerate the extent of their criticism, it is an effective form of diverse self promotion and media manipulation that ensures they remain controversial and their work is discussed in terms of derogatory implications - which ultimately is, I think what the artists aim at.

The work Gilbert & George produced during the 1980's consists of photographic imagery coupled with a manipulation of language which produces work dealing with multiple themes and concerns. The imagery they use is one one level, universal; God & Nature. They also use images of Man and urban cityscapes and then they use surface, in the form of





SHIT  
FAITH

1982

*Silbat + Gorge*



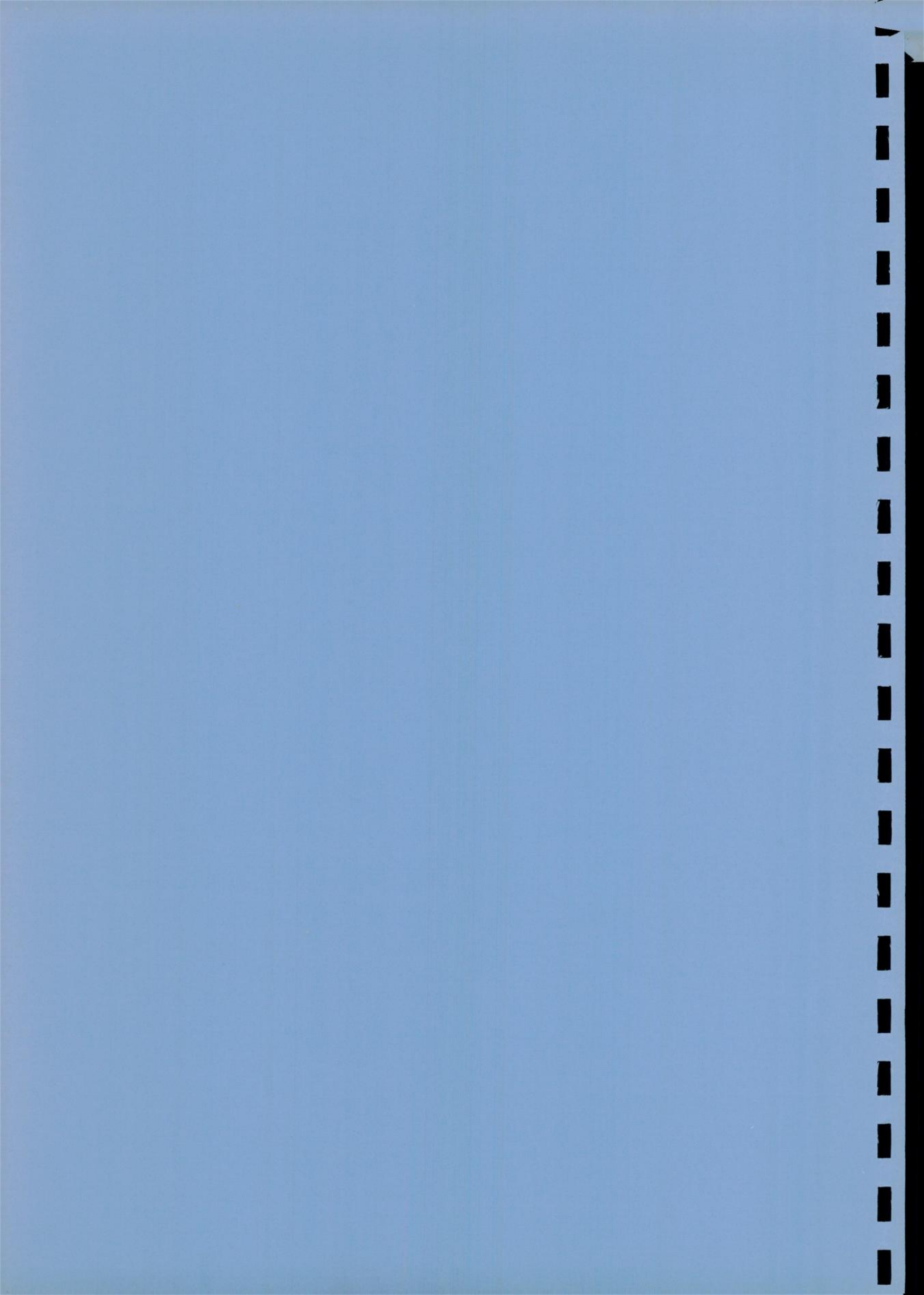
foliage textures or bodily fluids and colours.

"Our subject matter is the world.....our inspirations is all those people alive today on the planet.....we are interested in the human person, the complexity of life". (G & G in Wilson, 1990,p.11)

All these elements are arranged in collages in varying places of importance depending on the implication intended in the piece. For example, the Cross, a prominent feature in their work has been constructed out of anything from shit, to Queen Elizabeth postcards to penises.

One practically ever present image is that of young men, studio shot images collaged into various formations. They say they are "just ordinary boys we find on the street" (G & G in Barber,1991,p.4) This image seems to be the most problematic to most critics, it is one reason why G&G's work has been referred to as fascist. When they reject fascist as being a word they would use to describe their work Lynn Barber doesn't seem convinced. "Still, there is something menacing about the armies of bare chested young men who march across their canvasses" (Barber, 1991, p.4)

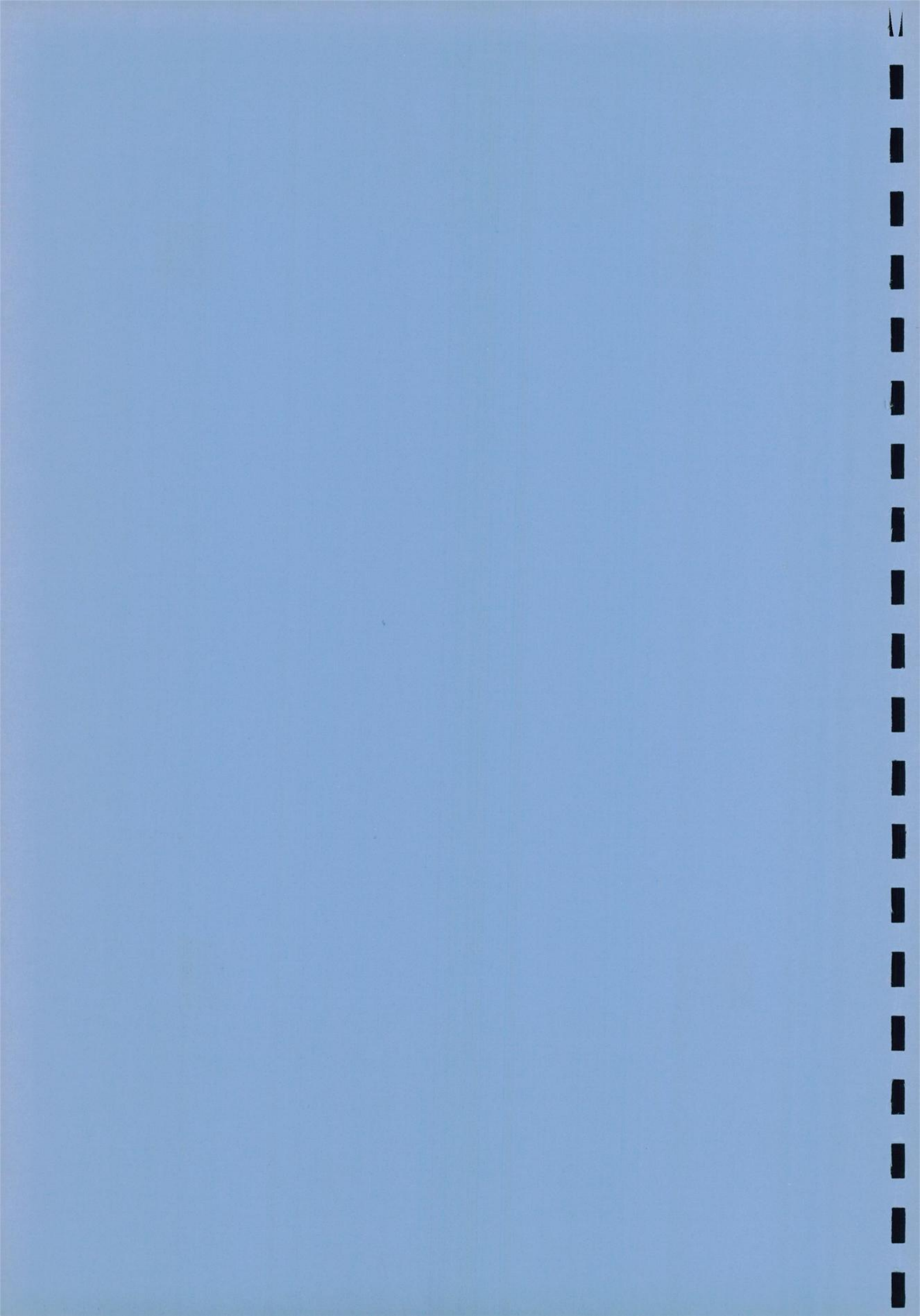
The images are also commonly called homoerotic, Gilbert and George







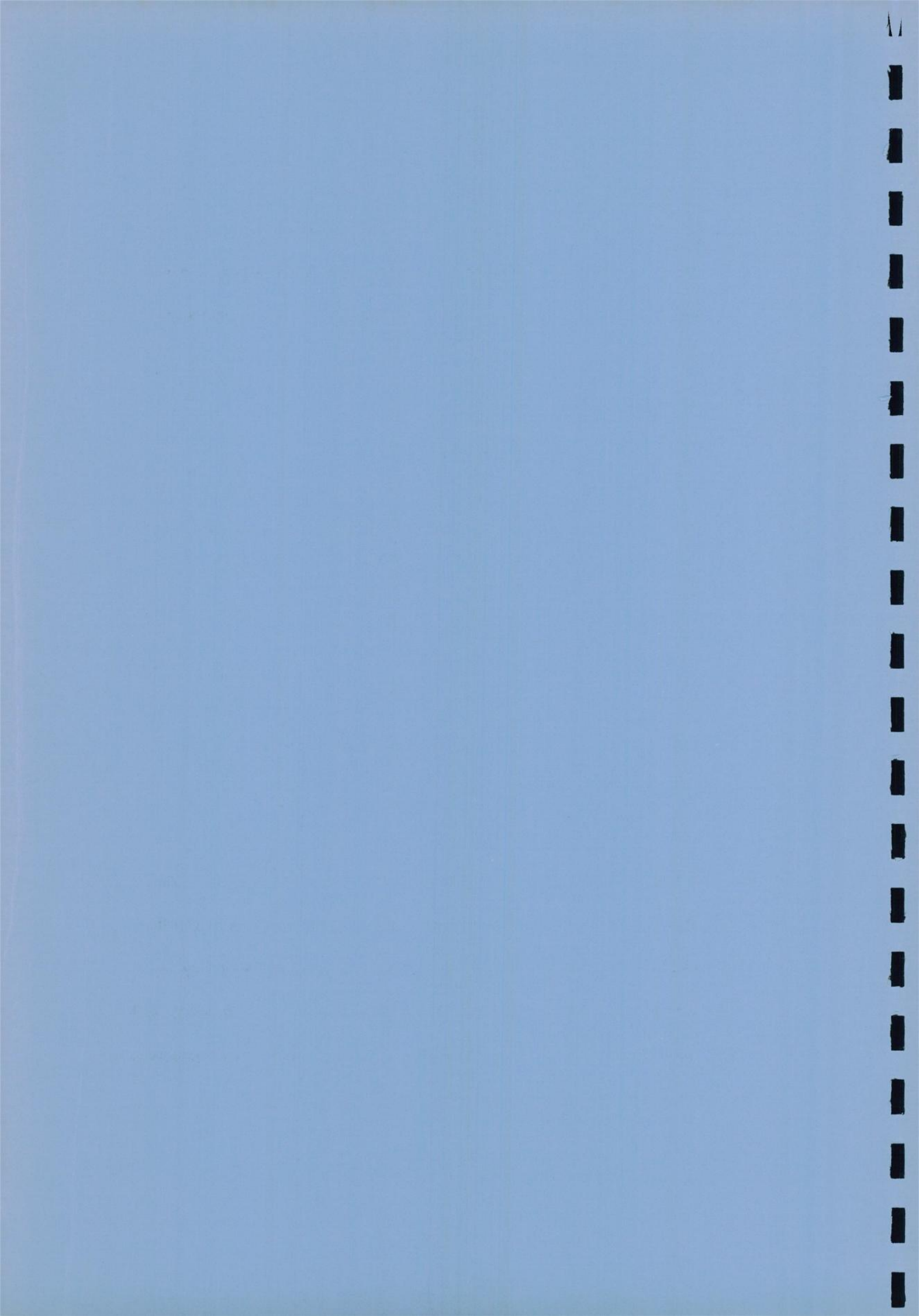
*There*



would disagree they use the argument that, just because it is an image of a man, it is called homoerotic, naked or semi dressed images of women are never termed as "lesbierotic". "They are saying one thing for one sex and one for another". (G &G in Eshun, 1992, p.77)

Critic Brian Sewell implies that Gilbert & George are paed~~i~~ophil~~l~~es producing pornography under the guise of artists. "What must he (the model) think of these two artists getting away with the very contact against which he must at one stage have been warned (beware of strange men who ask you to do funny things) simply because they proclaim it art and not pornography" (Farson, 1991,p.66)

On the contrary writer Wolf Jahn goes slightly over the other end of the scales and refers to the young men as "warrior homosexuals" (Jahn, 1989.p.327) Robert Hewison, in his book *Future Tense* describes them as "emblems of a life force which may yet resist the crushing urban environment" (Hewison, 1990, p.96) (see *There*) and for this reason sees them as the symbols of a vision which he feels is present in Gilbert & George's work as in the work of other contemporary writers and filmmakers working with "an urban realism of a specifically late twentieth century kind" (Hewison,1990, p.98) Gilbert and George simply claim that these young men are 'Normal, humanoid' (G & G in Barber, 1991, p.5)



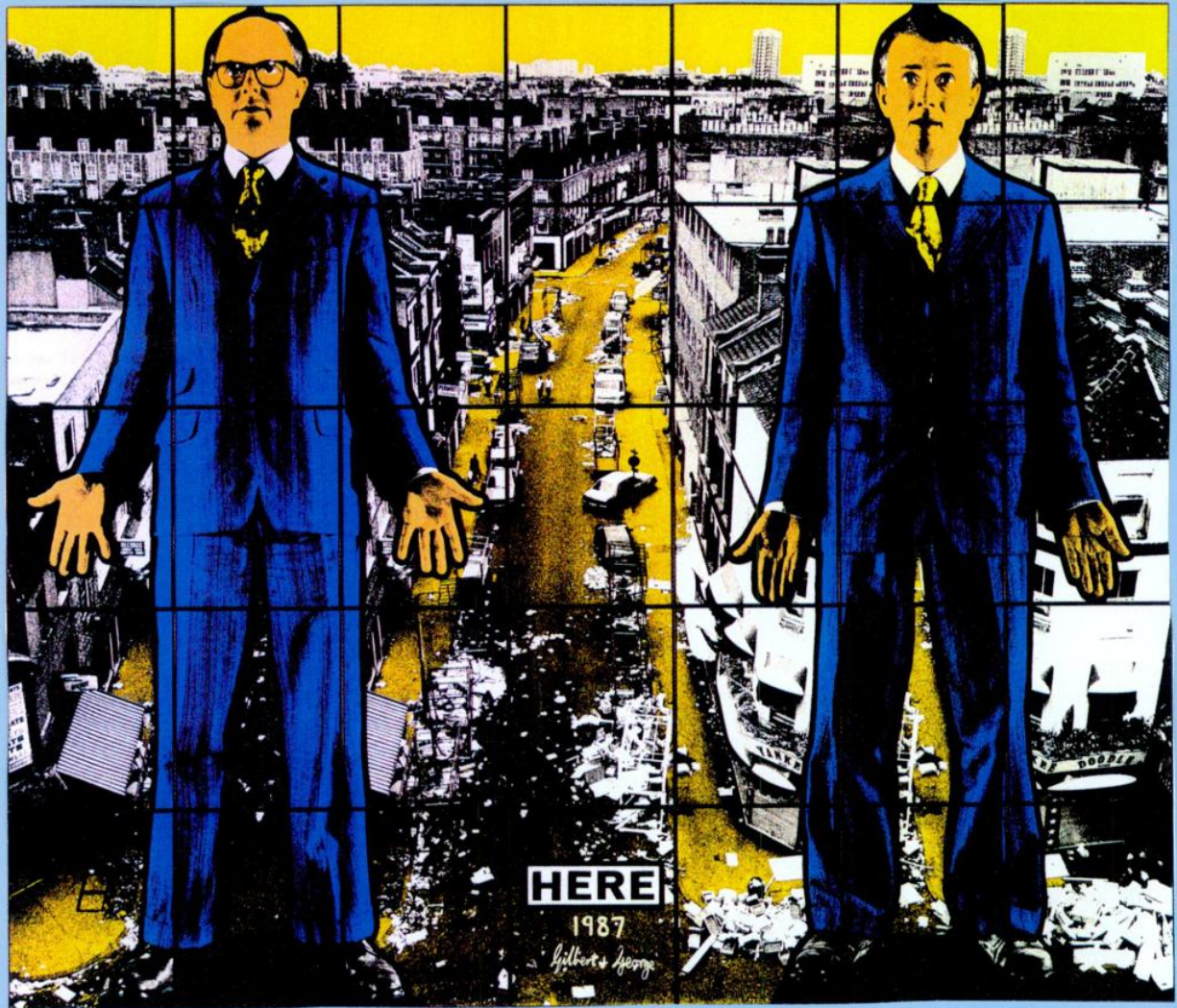
just representations of man and they use this random selection on the street to emphasise the fact. "We are interested in the human person, regardless of class or background or anything. All the people in our pictures are humanoid - they are devoid of class. They could come from any background. " (G & G in Wilson, 1990, p.12)

The most common image found is urban scenery, the architecture is mainly crude and dirty usually taken from the working class area of Spitalfield where they live.

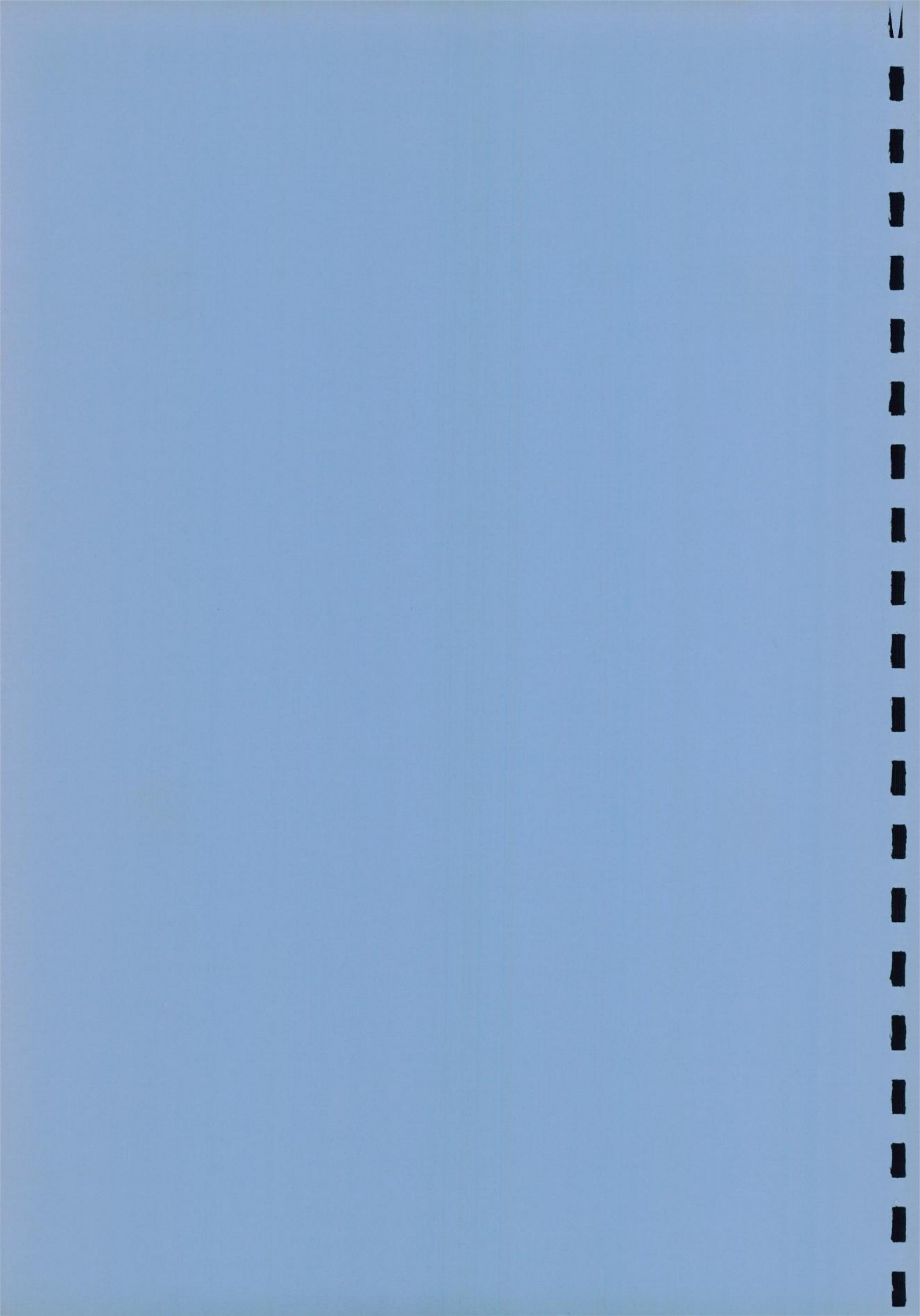
"They address themselves to the lay person, the ordinary human being, and so they incorporate in their art every day aspects of the city". (Jahn, 1989,p.163) This is in keeping with their socialist idea of "Art for all". (G & G in Wilson, 1990,p.10)

(Even though they claim to be staunch conservatives many of their ideas about art are very socialist, they don't believe in elitism, this is why they use 'popular' colours and photography in their work, and why they say they produce so much work so it is accessible and why they produce, as I have discussed in my previous chapter, numerous books about themselves. Also, as I am about to discuss their work is socially critical).





*Here*





The fact that they live in Spitalfield is of particular significance because of its position beside the Docklands which were (during the 80's) privatised and developed by commercial institutions who invested vast amounts of money and subsequently (for reasons I mentioned in my previous chapter) when recession hit, lost vast amounts of money. The "Character" of the docklands was what was being commodified here also there was a demand for luxury accommodation near the city. In *Future Tense*. Robert Hewison talks about the "draining of meaning from urban life by such environments as Tobacco Dock" (Hewison, 1990, p.15) That the very nature of what the developers were doing by: "comodifying the culture" (Hewison, 1990, p.15) was destroying what they were investing in, and therefore, like the economy, couldn't sustain itself. He maintains that "The artists Gilbert and George have an insiders view of the forces of conflict, and I argue that this has influenced the direction of their work" (Hewison 1990, p.96)

This reinforces the point I made in my previous chapter, that the change in their work during the 1980's was a result of them becoming aware of the Social and Cultural changes that were occurring in the 1980's because of the political policies of the new conservative government.

In this turn about in their work, the depiction of multiple themes and



meanings, they kept one element or image constant, the idea of them as sculptures, empty vessels, "conception of man as isolated and objectified devoid of meaningful connection with anything what so ever". (Jahn, 1989, p.164)

This post modern concept is discussed by Frederick Jameson in his essay "*Postmodernism and Consumer Society*". When discussing the idea of fragmentation in the arts he suggest that if you apply the same proportion of fragmentation that has occurred in the Arts to Society, in terms of communication, he imagines a situation with "each profession developing its private code or dialect, and finally each individual coming to be a kind of linguistic island". (Kaplan, 1988. p.16)

What Gilbert & George did in the 80's was place themselves as voyeurs in this fragmented landscape, but at the same time stand as a reminder of the void at the heart of Post Modern culture/society "It is a life quite oblivious of the old quest for "objective" reality, it is a life that is aware only of the promise of osmosis and organic growth". (Jahn, 1989. p.164)

The production of these huge photo-montages is very labour intensive, Gilbert & George spend ten - twelve hours a day in their studio six days a week.



"When and where are you happiest? Sober in our studio" (G & G in Farson, 1991, p.37)

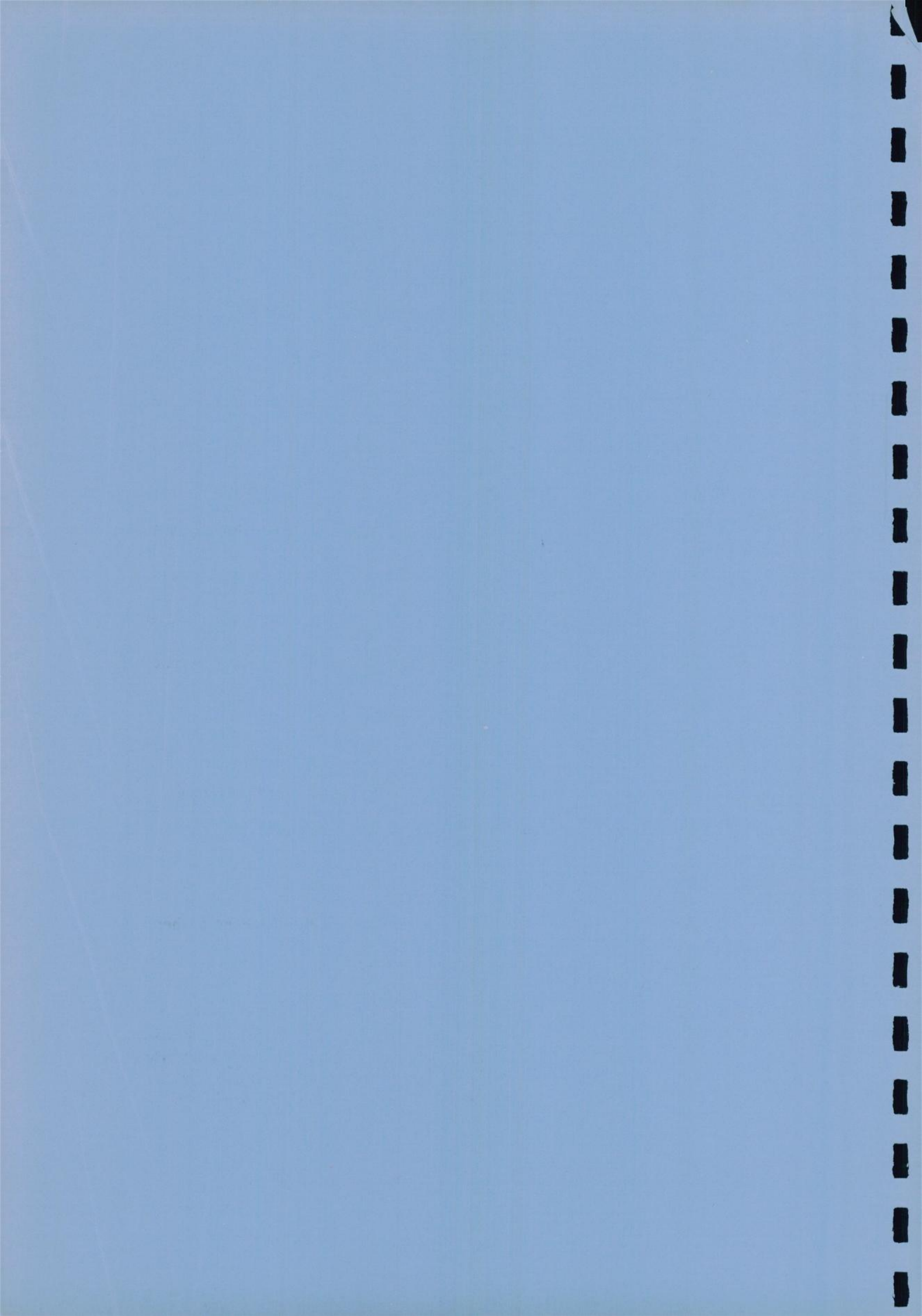
They follow the same process for every show in their well documented studio at the end of their garden in Spitalfield. The process is best described by Daniel Farson, it goes something like this,

"With no concept of the finished picture, they know exactly the human subject and area of thought and feeling which the picture will deal with . . . they start by taking a large number of photographs - as many as 30,000 over a period of three months... The films are developed and contact sheets are printed which spark off ideas for possible subjects, with similar themes marked on different sheets. Then they enlarge the relevant negatives . . . and subsequently dye the prints . . . Then the series of prints are mounted and framed into individual panels - up to 100 - and these are assembled into the finished collage of the picture." (Farson, 1991, p.37)

They see the use of photography as a means of mass communication, a medium associated with non-elitist forms of art/communications. "We believe the camera is the best modern brush to day" (G & G in Wilson, 1990, p.11)

Another distinction between their early work and that of the 1980's is their use of colour.

"They (colours) were introduced to define more closely the world of feeling and emotion which Gilbert & George went onto elaborate from



1980 onwards". (Jahn, 1989. p.278).

The colours they use are bright almost 'garish' described by critic Rodger Scruton in *Modern painters* as "those of the playground and supermarket". (Farson, 1991, p.67) These lively colours in one way are used to , for example, define or "invent a person" "even though that colour has no place in reality" (Jahn, p.989/p.287) (What Wolf Jahn means by this is they don't use colours as the particular symbols we might understand them as). In another way they serve to reinforce the notion of optimism and vision because of their liveliness. They use these 'popular' colours over their images of a decaying society as a barrier between us and the concerns of their work.

"Colour is a wall with nothing behind it and a multitude of potential meanings in front of it" (Jahn, 1989, p.287)

They set up another barrier between the viewer and the content of their work in the form of a black grid.

"Without the grid you look at the photograph and try to understand what it represents the eye looks into it like a frame or a television set. With the lines, on the other hand, it becomes flat. You see it as whole, as a work of art on the wall, instead of looking for its content". (Hewison, 1990, p.94)





And yet they use their medium like television, the same rigid format to deal with a diverse variety of subjects and themes. This quote also reinforces my discussion in the previous chapter that they have a desire to make their work impenetrable (by putting up a facade around their lives) and for this reason also they put this grid around their work.

They always say "the form should serve the meaning" (G&G in Wilson, 1990, p.9) The form being the grid and colours and the meaning being the implications of their images.

This implies (when read with the previous quote in mind) that their ultimate message is one of impersonality or struggle.

"The emptiness, or rather baffling impenetrability of their work, has a blank neutrality that is essentially post-modern". (Hewison, 1990, p.94)

I would argue that this doesn't deter people from looking for a 'meaning' it serves the opposite function and makes the viewer more inquisitive. The criticism I discussed earlier wouldn't exist if people weren't trying to decipher what Gilbert & George are trying to say. (Also intrigue about their private lives is evident in almost every article I read about them "The existence of George's wife has long been rumoured in art circles, but





*Paki*

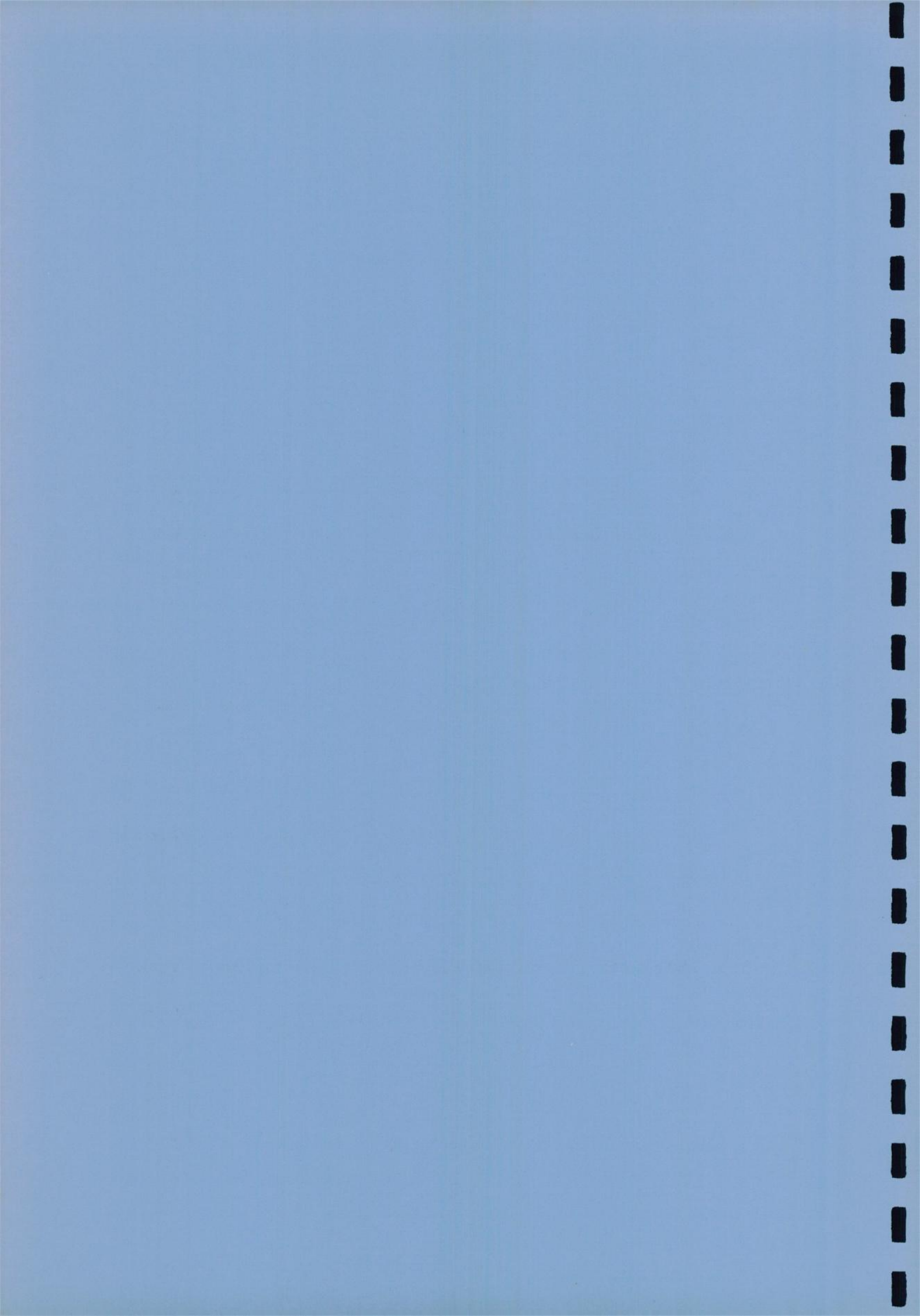


nobody seems to have met her". (Barber, 1991, p.4)

"Gilbert and George have evolved a visual style that defies the normal process of emotional identification". (Hewison, 1990, p. 94)

One criticism of Gilbert and George that often reoccurs is that they are racist. One piece that appears so is "*Paki*". This piece was done with a series that includes titles like "*the Man*" "*The Gardner*" and '*The Alcoholic*'. These pieces were done in an attempt to show the activity of name giving as "Value Free" (John 1989, p.206) . The link between the name (or title) and image is being scrutinised by them. The activity of calling a picture of a Pakistani man "*Paki*" is similar to the black voice reclaiming the word 'Nigger' eg. the political controversial rap band NWA (Niggers with Attitude). Similarly in England there is a group of women striving for a new female identity who call themselves the 'pussy possie'. Also the gay activist group 'Queer Nation' with their slogan 'we're here, we're queer: all use the same device. 'Nigger'Pussy' and 'queer' all previously interpreted as derogative terms, being reclaimed by the people they were aimed at as insults, gives a new potency to the meaning.

This work is similar I said to the above but, because this insult would



never be aimed at Gilbert and George (although they have experienced a type of racism in the form of being 'gaybashed') this piece can also be read as being overtly racist.

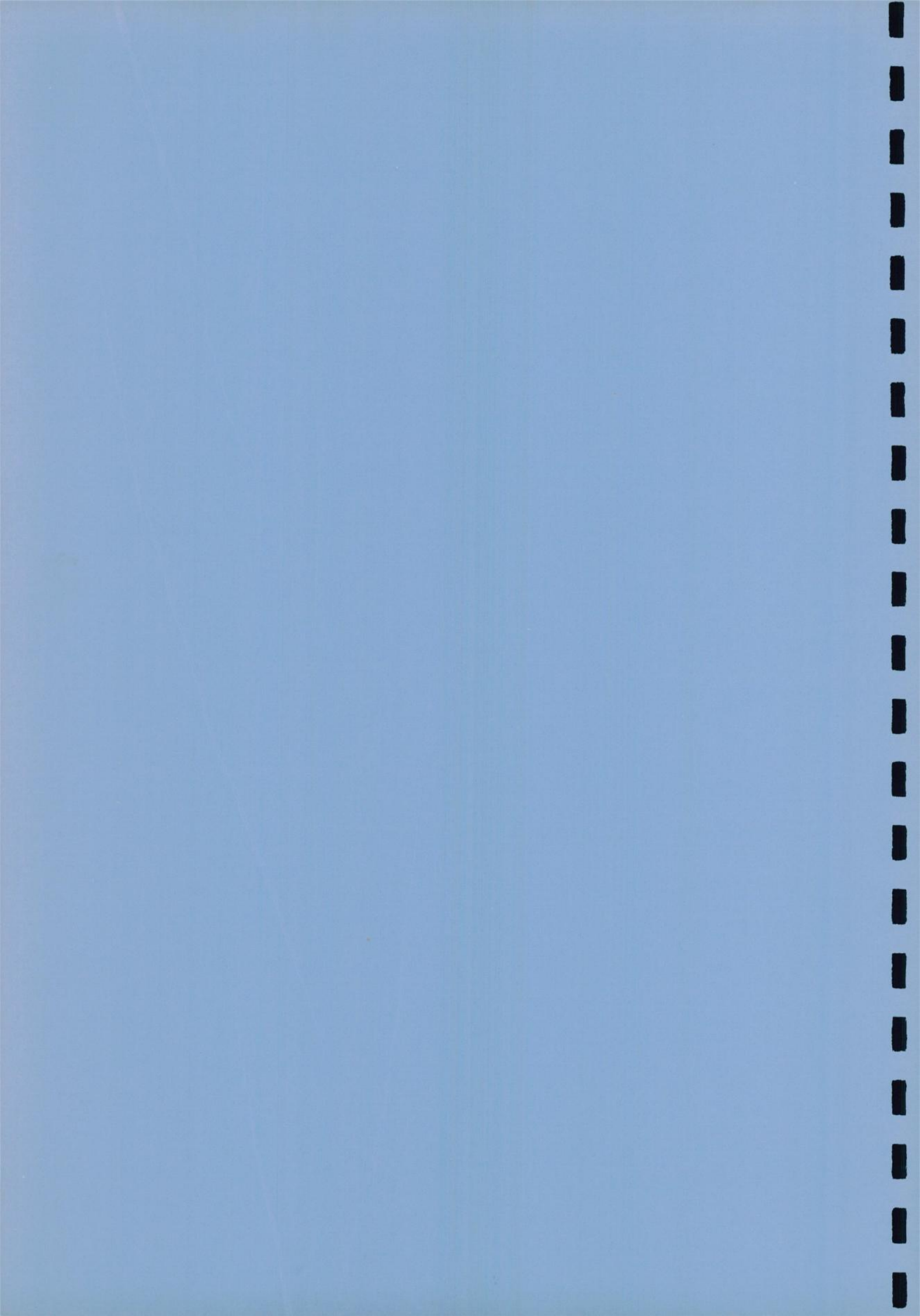
Instead of making a piece of art depicting racism they make a piece that appears to be racist (imitating or parodying the activities they are commenting on) "they lay bare the power of words, not by dispensing with their connotations, and thus being left with the mere basic sense, but and this is crucial - by giving them a new sense which is independent of the former value - judgement". (Jahn, 1989. p.206)

This process subverts the viewer in that it evokes a reaction to the piece, in the form of criticising the artist.

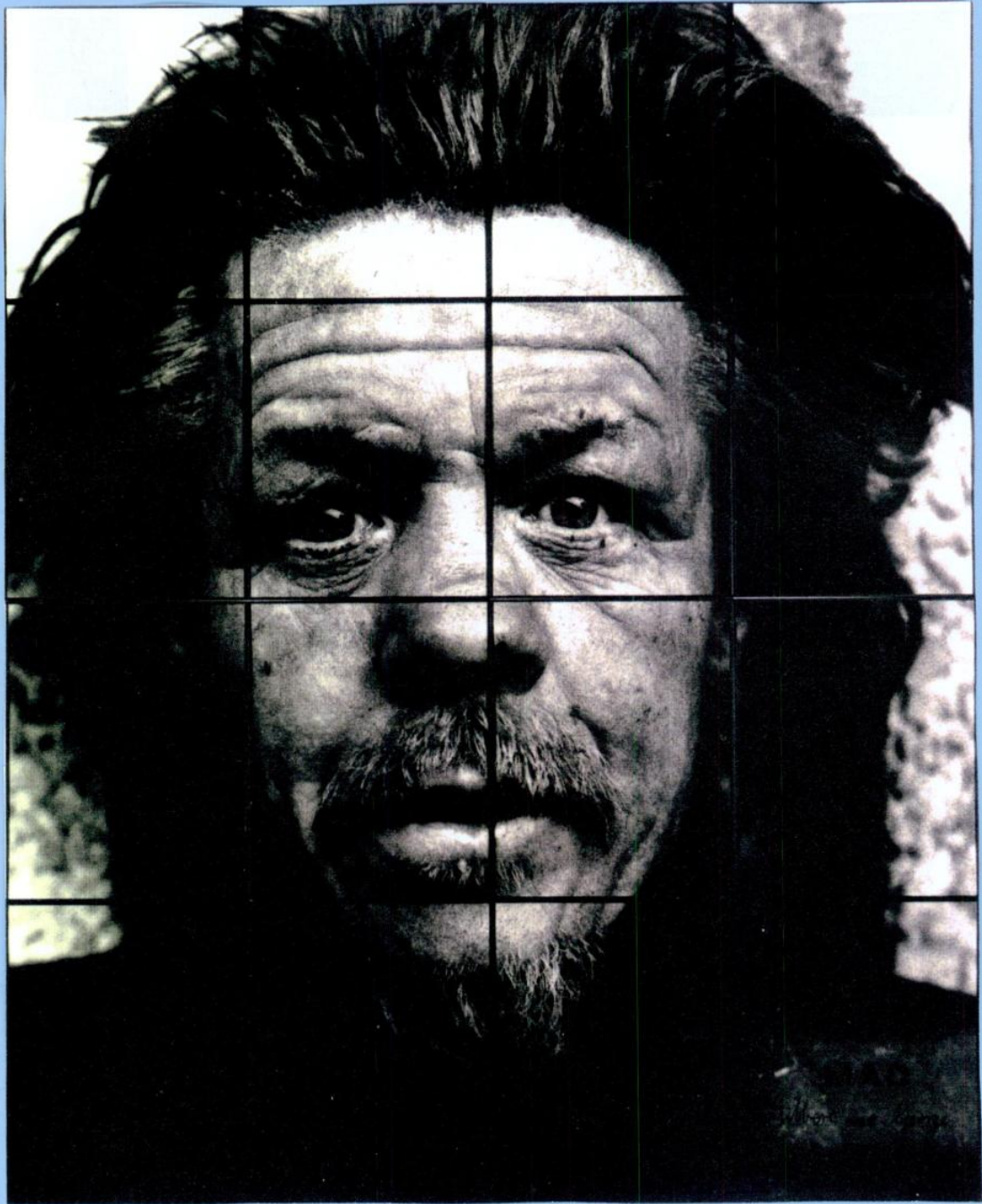
"If somebody starts talking about racism when they see our work - that's very good" (G & G in Eshun, 1992, p.80).

The way the viewer perceives a piece is being called into question, the way we pass judgement in contemporary society is therefore being questioned

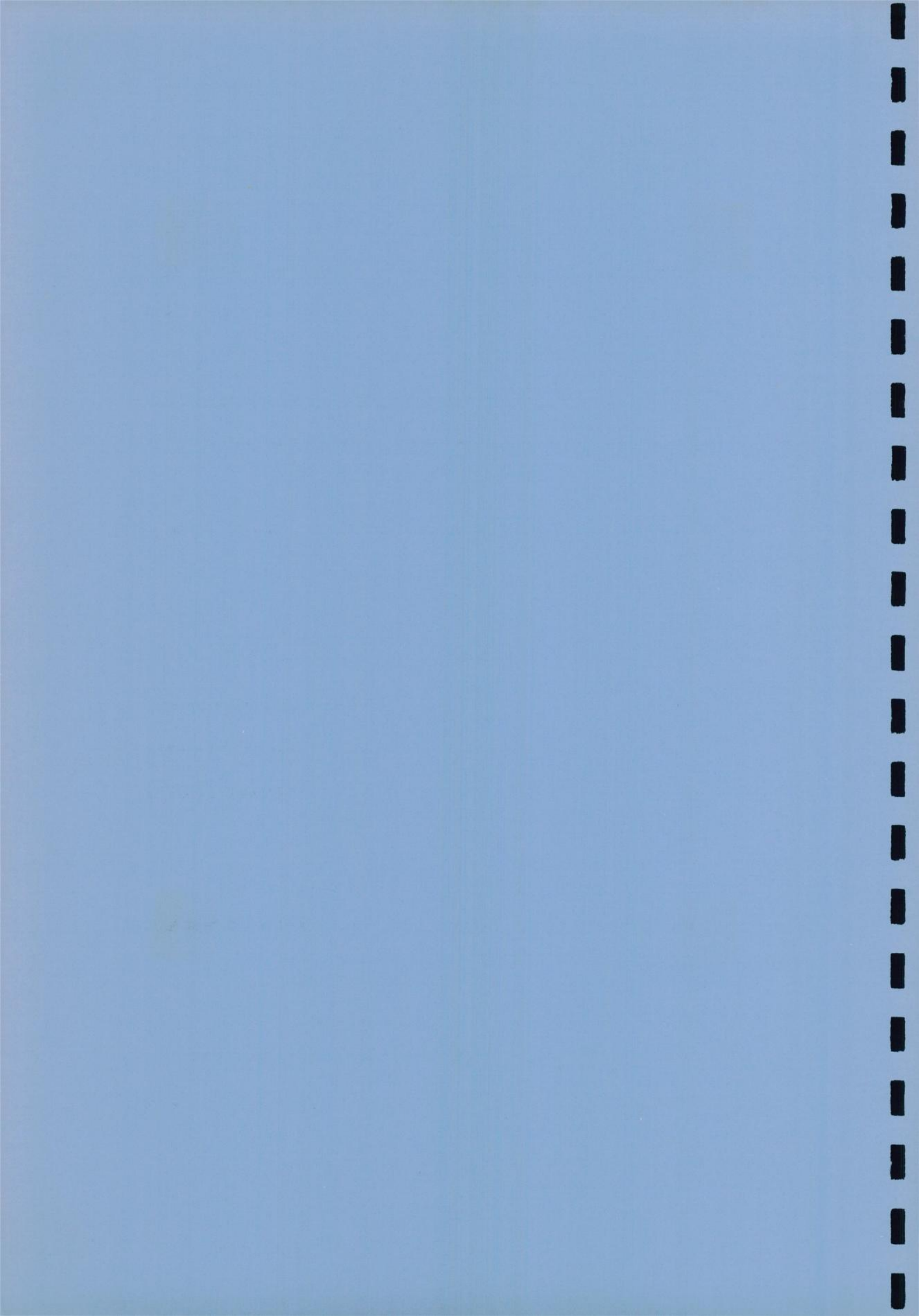
This "value - judgement" (Jahn, 1989, p.206) which is integral in racism, judging a person by their colour can also be applied to the consumer







*Mad*



culture I discussed earlier. The contemporary value system that exists in a consumer society is largely based on possessions and appearances. (This theory can be discussed in terms of the post modern idea of 'Death of the Subject' (Jameson) or death of individuality that because of a homogenised culture expressions of individuality no longer exist) Wolf John sees a criticism of this judgemental culture in their work.

"*MAD* is about the judging, assessing look that has become excessively dominant in Western Culture". (Jahn, 1989, p.345)

It is about pre-conceived ideas we have, based on the appearance of the man in the picture and the title '*MAD*' but in accompanying text of the 'mad man' speaking, says " I don't hate anyone because I don't know any one so how can I?" (Jahn, 1989, p.345) So the man looks at us with an uncritical eye.

Which tells us the piece is about rejecting the self proclaimed right to pass judgement.

Both *MAD* and *Paki* were done in the early 80's. As the decade progressed the meaning or interpretation becomes more difficult to decipher, the barrier I discussed earlier seems to become more dominant and the

pages out of order  
turn over four pages...



This fragmented meaning coupled with their many themes, all projected through an identical format, is comparable to the way most information in Western Society and (increasingly the East) is received - through television.

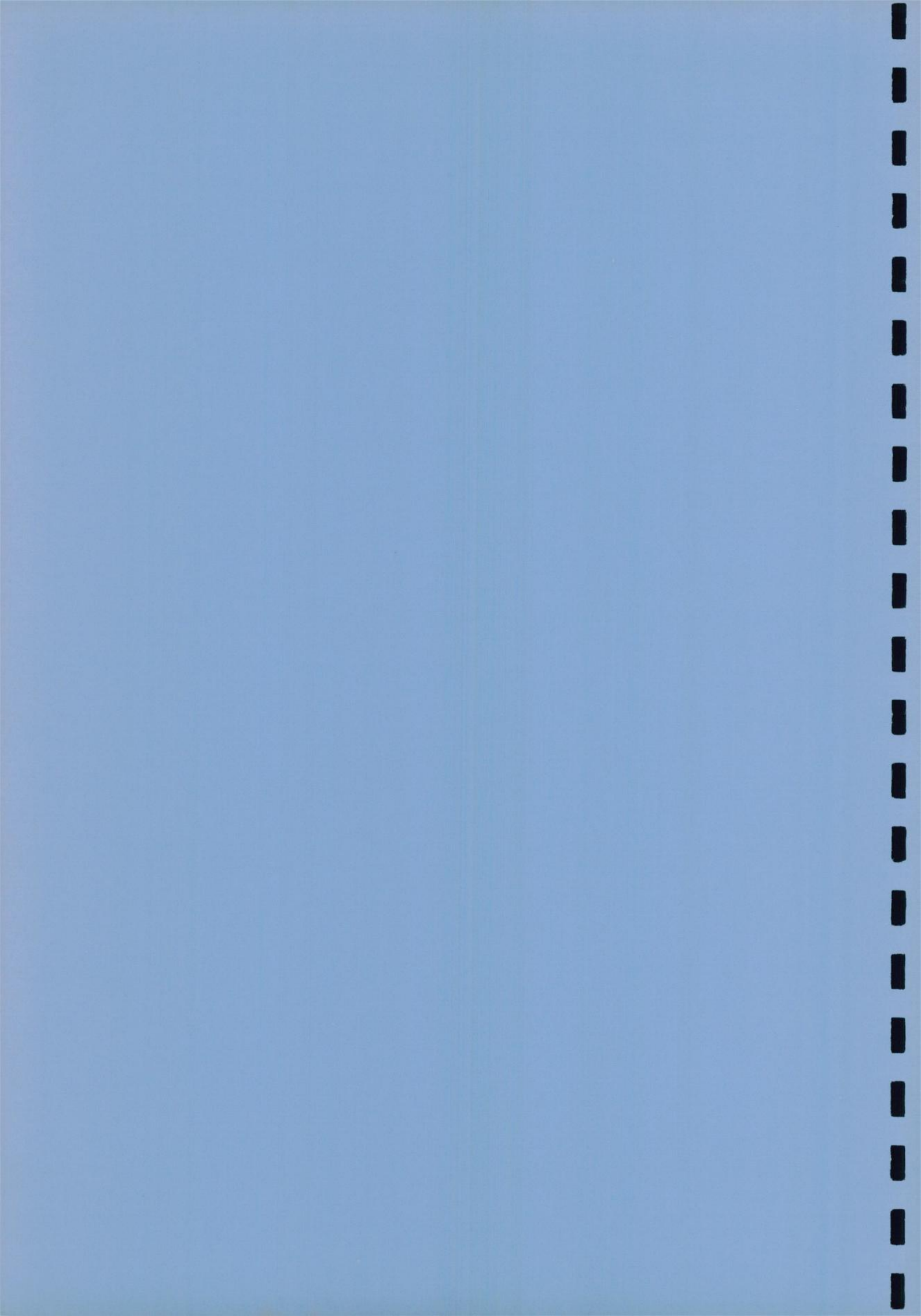
Since the 60's visual (as opposed to literary) communication has accelerated. I see three main differences in the way information is transferred due to this, the tempo of the information given is much quicker, half hour or one hour slots (as opposed to taking time to read a book) which I feel cultivates a short attention span. The quality of information which is of course affected by the restricting time factor, you are being bombarded (if you sneeze you could miss a crucial point). The variety of information received, through a constant medium and with the same 'attitude' or 'frame of mind' sitting down watching a small screen, whether it be an Australian Soap or sky news or the Late Show.

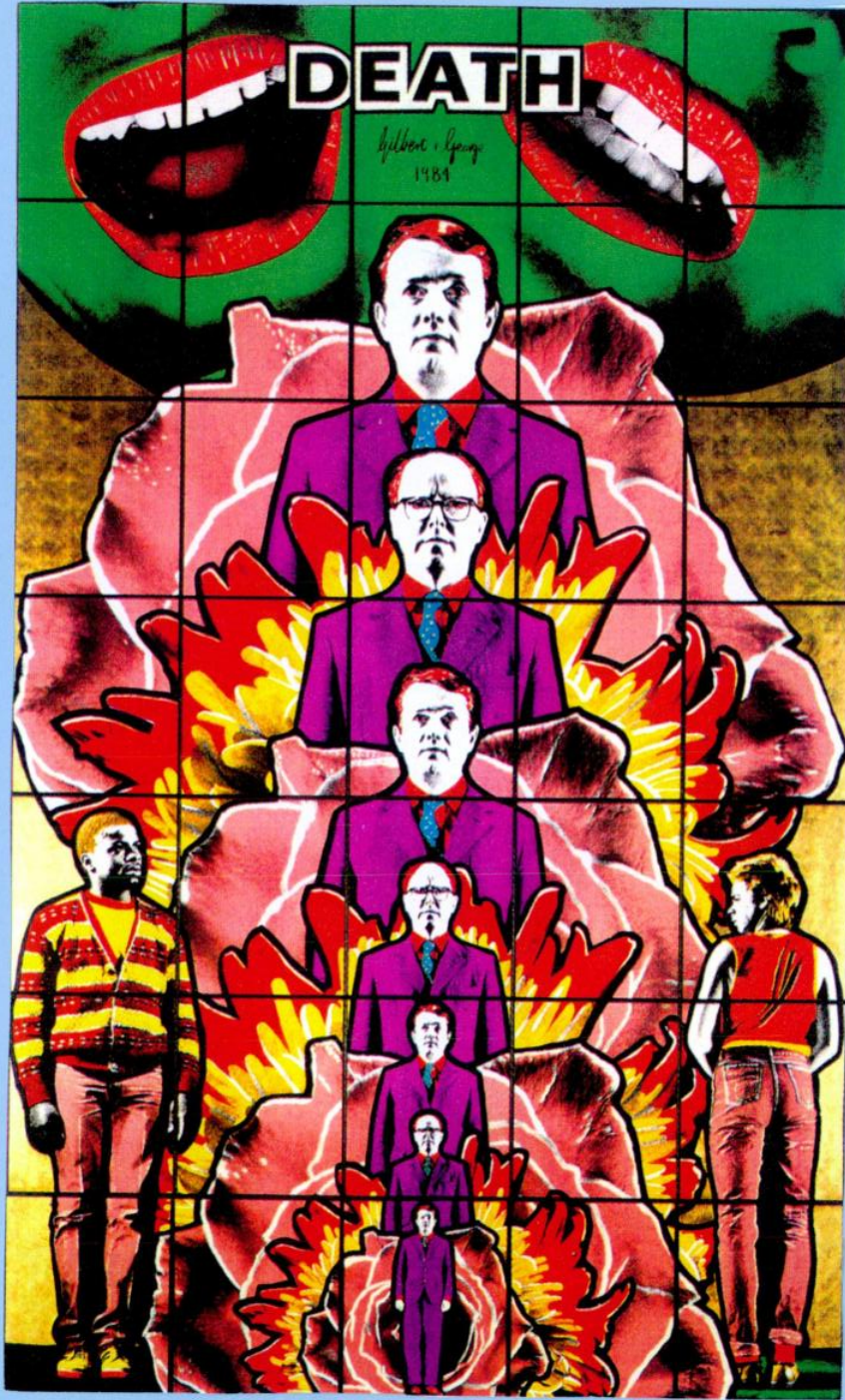
Gilbert and George's work in the 1980's does possess a quality like this, using the same format while dealing with a variety of subjects.

"The model and medium of this culture is television" (Hewison, 1990, p.14)

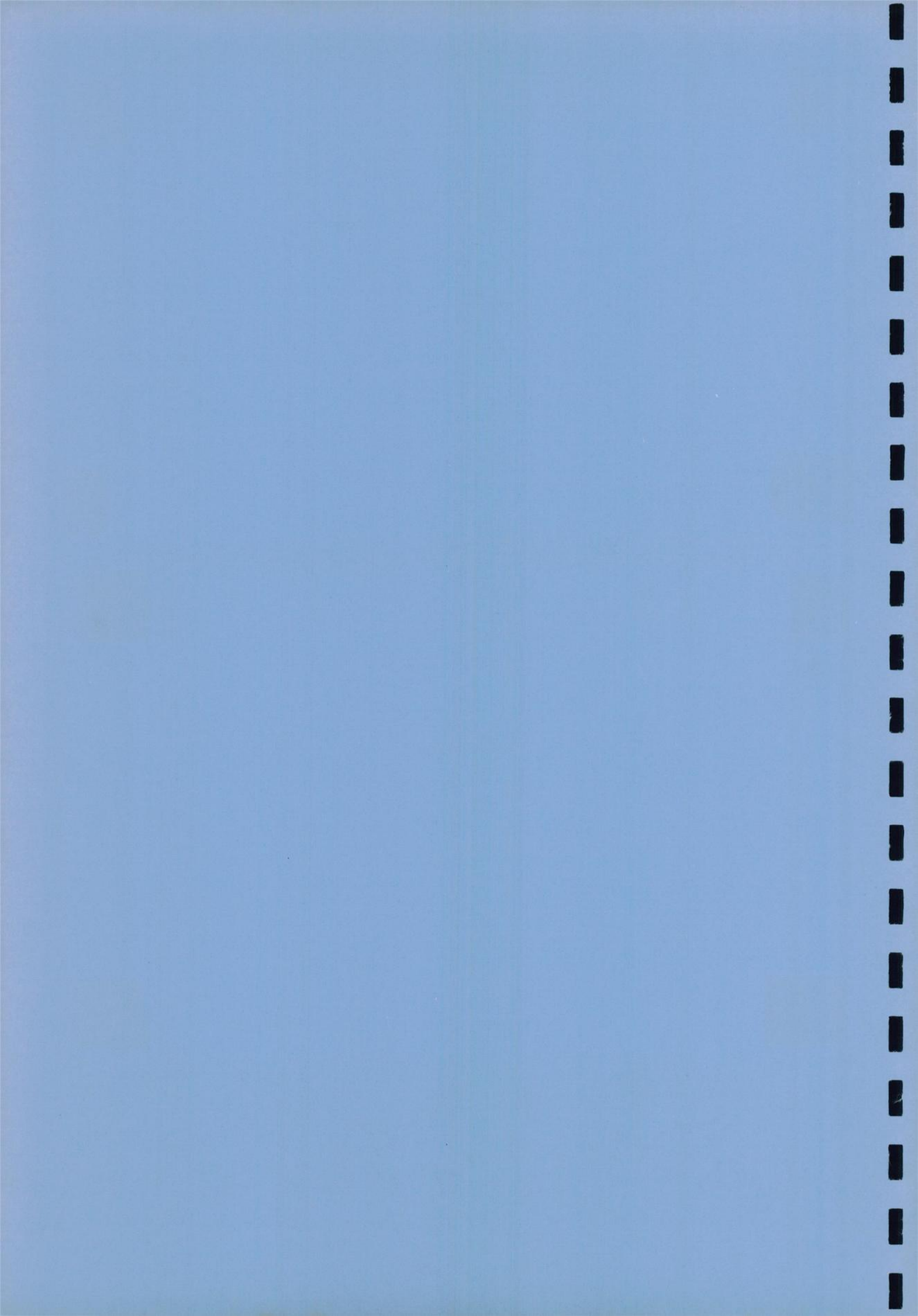
I see the fragmented quality of western society influencing them to produce

turn over 4





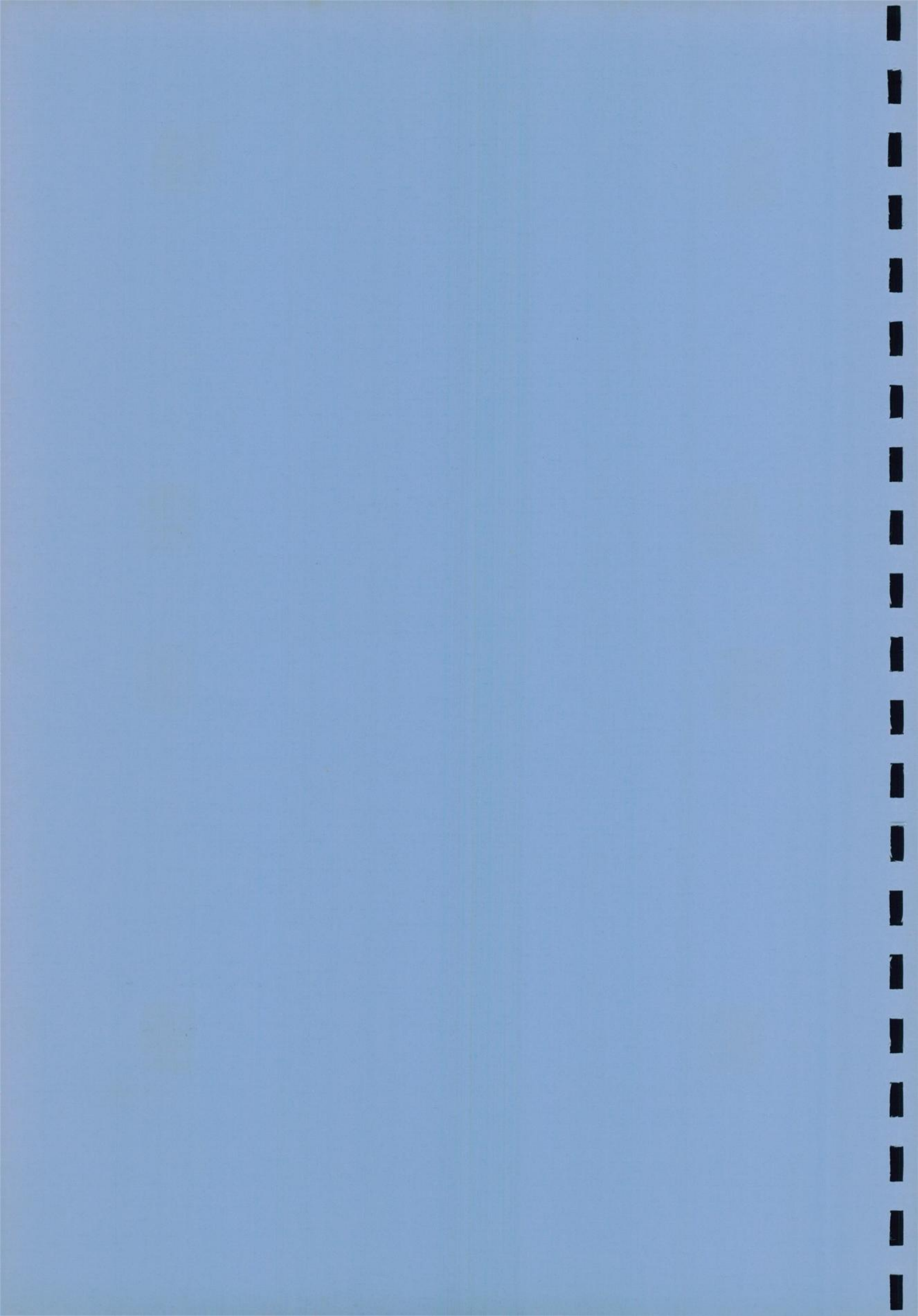
Death & Life from Death Hope Life Fear.







*Fear & Hope from Death Hope Life Fear*



work becomes more ambiguous.

"These pictures elicit a response as ambivalent in meaning as the artists' own utterances are contradictory. For example, when they show themselves in the company of black youths, such as in *Roads*, are they grimacing from fear or loathing? Or are they concerned at the fate of youth in a hostile society which considers them troublemakers and outsiders? Are they saying that they should take the road home? (Lee, 1993, p.11)

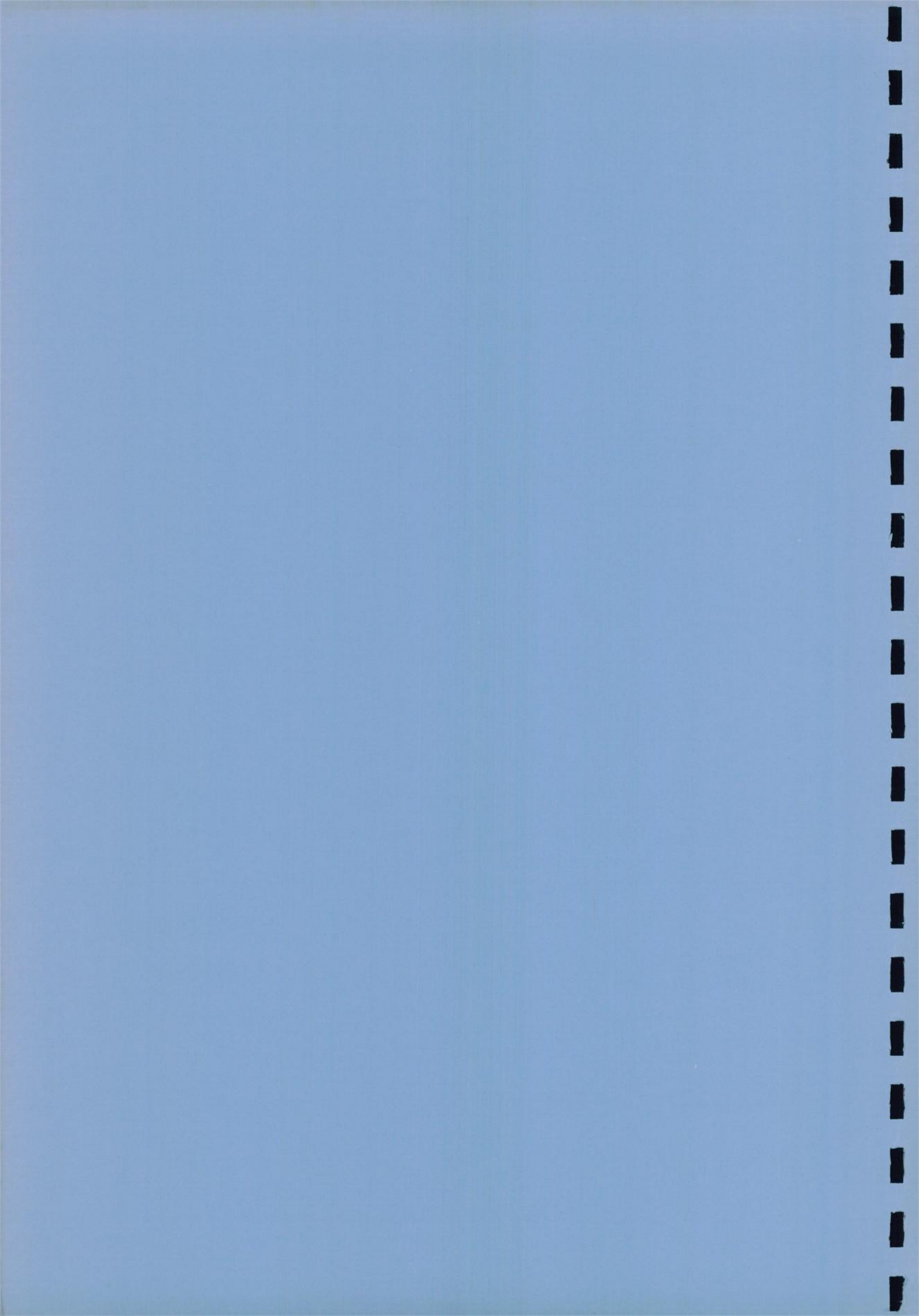
This ambiguity of meaning is as much part of their social commentary as the implication of their imagery. This element of their work gives us a panoramic view of society each viewer can interpret his/her own meaning from the work.

"We would like to give the individual greater opportunity for individualism" (G & G in Barber, 1991, p.5)

Every show they produce deals with many themes ranging from irreverence, to blasphemy, tranquility, aggression, life, death, etc.,.

" We don't believe in having only one view it is many views we believe in very much . . . We believe in the whole circle with every thing in it - the flower and the shit . . . So it fits in on every level". (G & G in Wilson 1990, p.9)

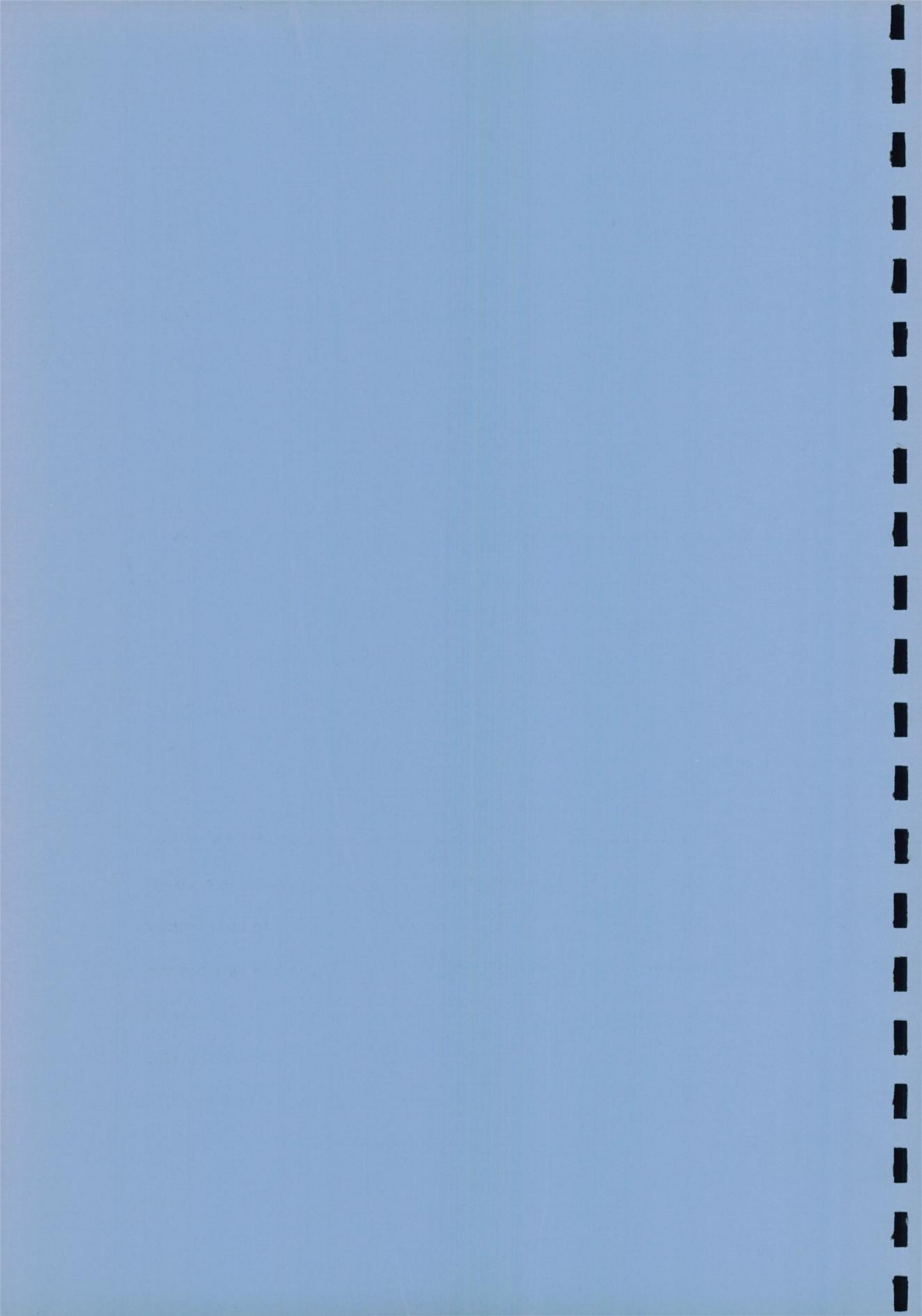
from back 3 pages



this work. In this way, are they imitating these qualities and therefore being socially, critical about the impact of mass culture? or is this art competing with the information industry? Which is becoming the most powerful economic force in the world.

90% of the world information network is owned by about ten global companies (like Sony, Warner Comms, IBM, Rupert Murdoch Corp.) Advances like Satelite T.V. mean that up to "30% of the worlds population can witness the same event at the same time via satellite" (Hewison 1990 p.46) Hewison thinks that T.V. creates an economy based on reproduction as opposed to production. What he means by this is what we see on T.V. is a reproduction or a reinterpretation of reality which consists of fragmented information which causes us to either not get the full picture or to get many different angles and opinions on a subject. These are the qualities I think Gilbert and George's work possess also.

"T.V. is fundamental to the process, not only because of what it presents in terms of imagery and values, but because of the way it alters and shapes our world view. As T.V. functions at present, that view is both distanced and fragmented, where imagery overrides ideas, and where accessible images - not only in culture but also in politics are offered as a substitute for the thought". (Hewison

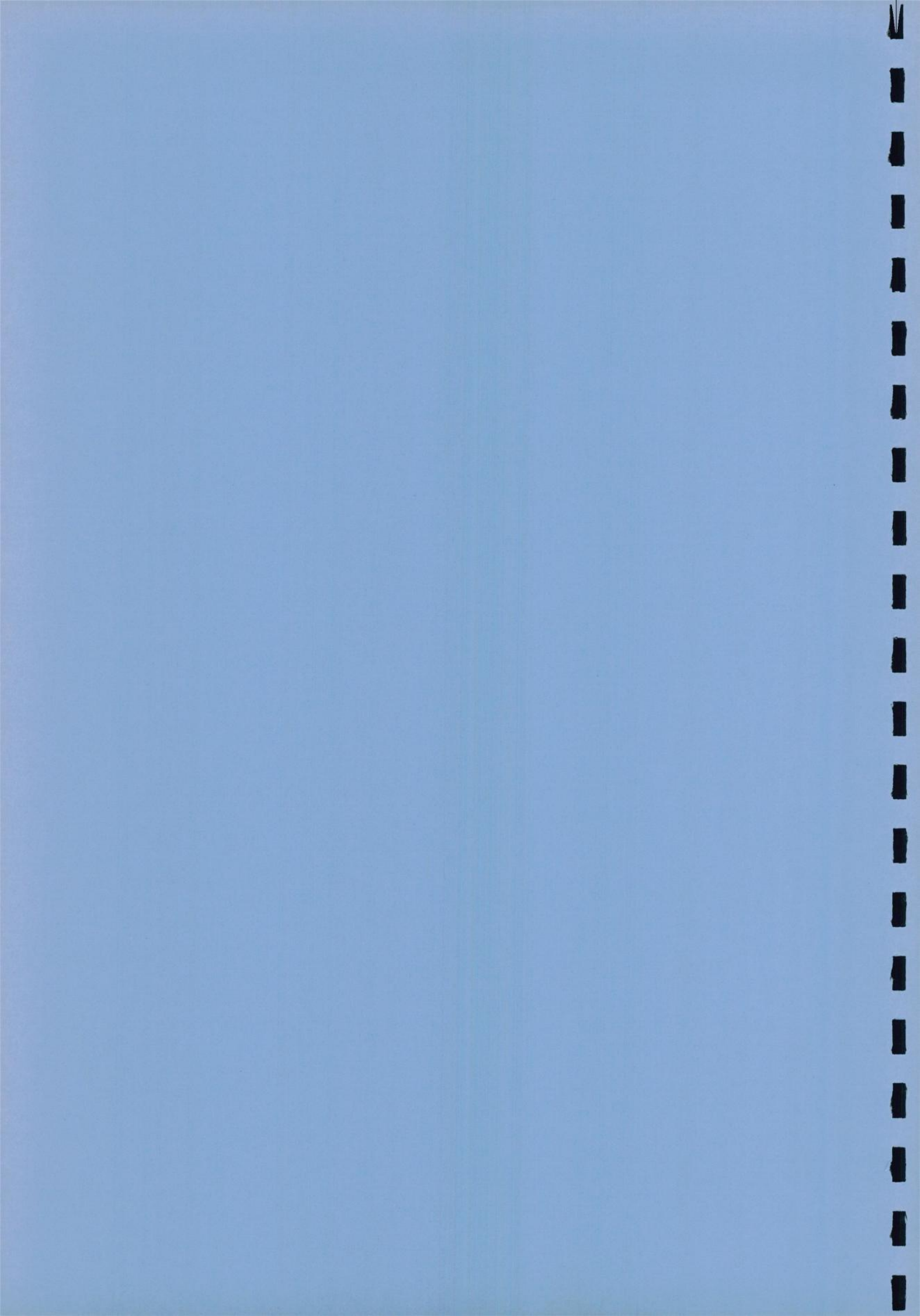


1990 p. 14)

Are they competing with the instant gratification aspect of T.V? With the type of entertainment we expect from our 16" electronic window of the world? They do mass produce (at any one time you can be almost certain there is a G & G exhibition on somewhere in the world) and their work is instantly recognisable, this produces an instant gratification that accommodate a short attention span. This is perhaps necessary to be successful in this era of comodified culture. (I've also seen ad's for their exhibitions on M.T.V).

"It is a guiding principle of this public culture that art and ideas should be immediately accessible and therefore undemanding" (Hewison 1990 p. 14)

A symptom of this "undemanding" format through which we view the world is the rendering of events as banal, sensationalism only holds our attention for a limited time. (Who didn't tune into Sky news to watch the kick off of the Gulf War and then lose interest after a few days because Sophie found out ~~w~~he was pregnant on Home & Away!) In this way I think human beings are becoming shock proof and are only affected while the media choose to expose us to whatever for however short or long a time.

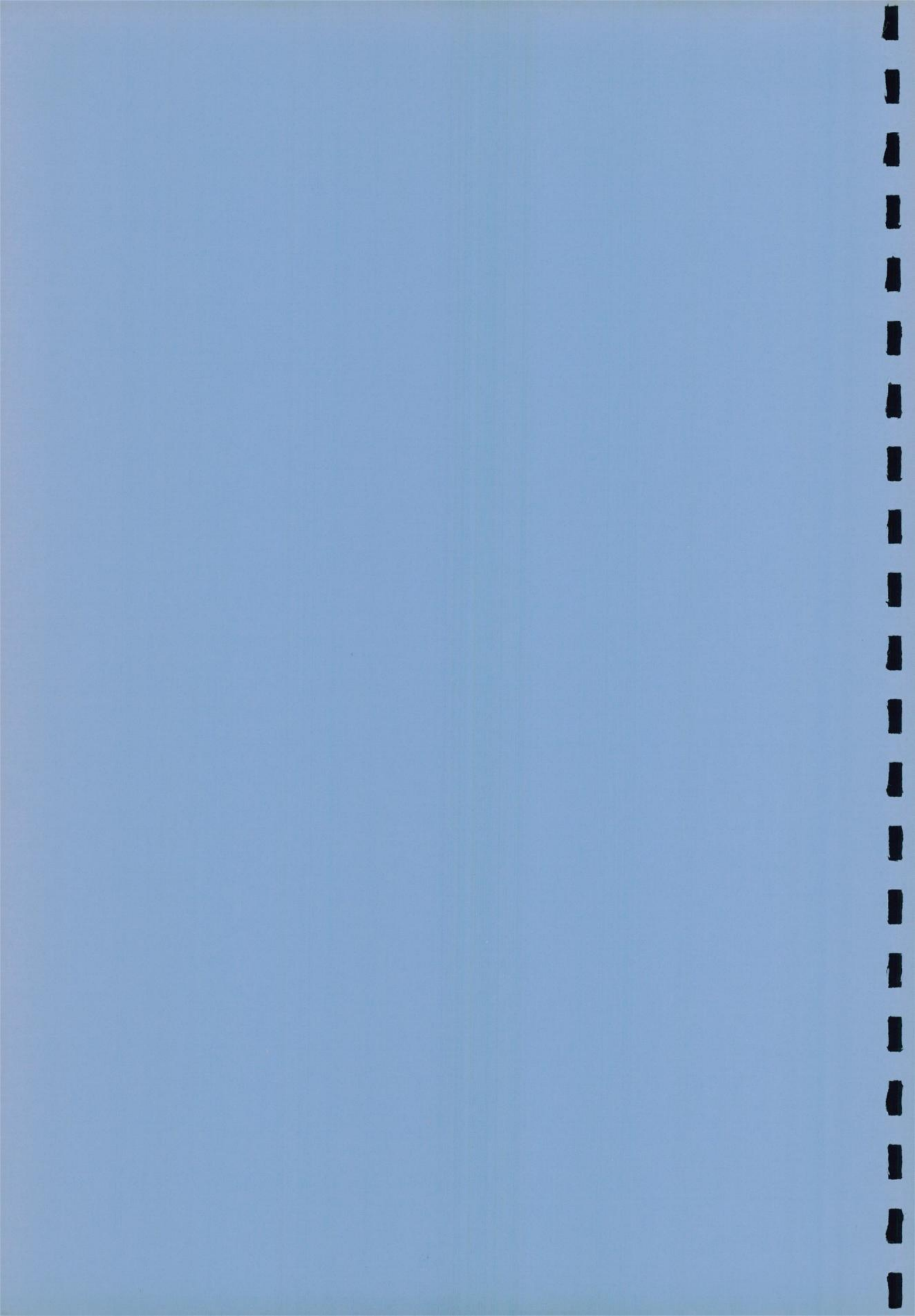




"The real world of post modern culture which has entertainment as its ideology, the spectacle as the emblematic sign of the commodity form, lifestyle advertisement as its popular psychology" (Kroker and Cooks Kaplan 1988, p.35).

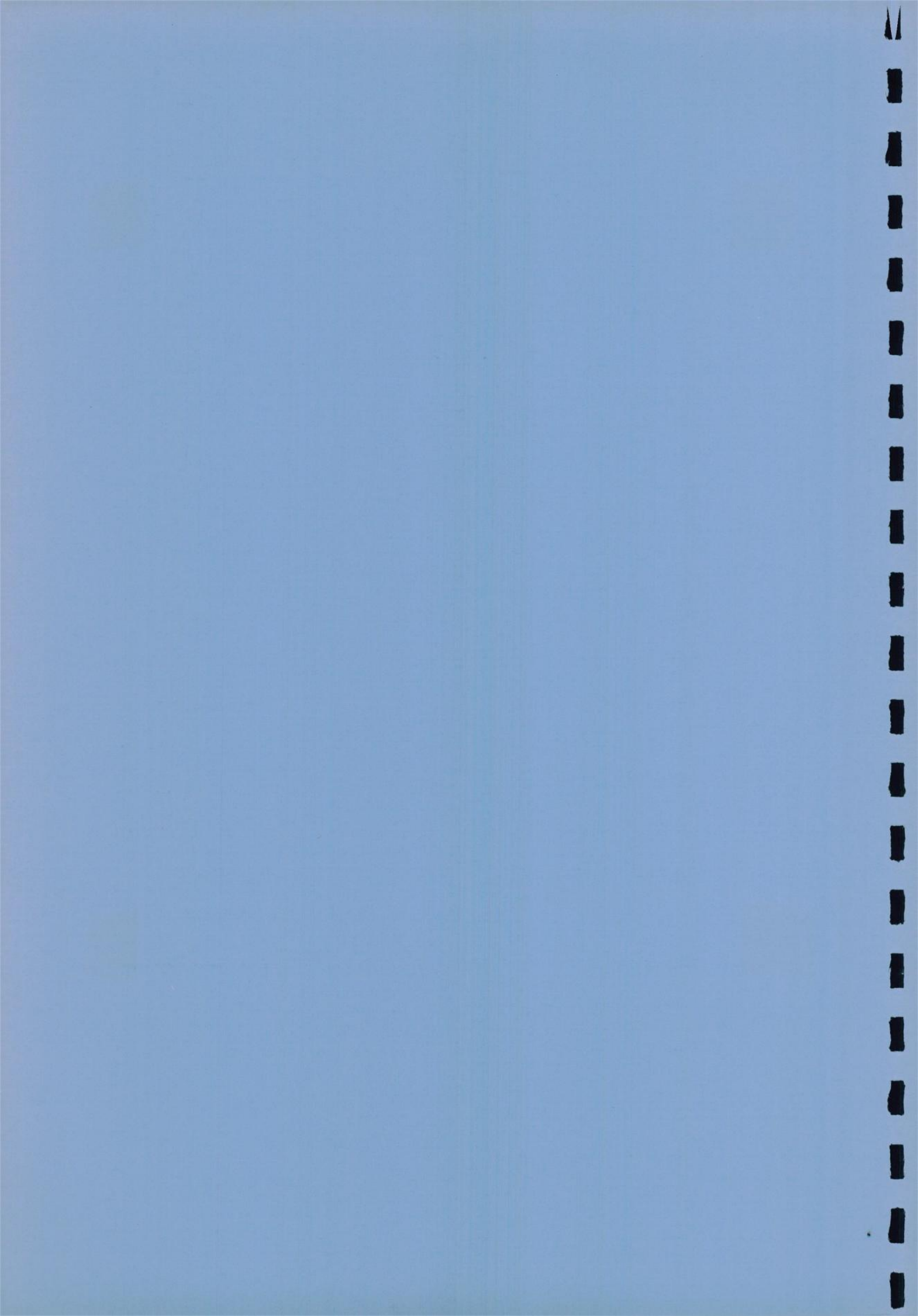
In their discussion of post modern society Gilbert & George have imitated the most powerful format for transporting information. As television can render us complacent on one level, so does their work (for the reason I discussed earlier instant gratification and barrier and ambiguity of meaning). But the difference is, the reason why their work sometimes manages to shock or get any sort of reaction, is because this rendition of a banal,decaying fragmented society is on a gallery wall, claiming to be a vision of the future.

"On the evidence of their career to date Gilbert and George are among the most disturbing artists at work anywhere since the war" (Marina Vaisey in Farson, 1991, p.48)





*Oh! Charley, Charley, Charley*



# CHAPTER FOUR

## DEALING WITH SEXUAL IDENTITY

Through technology human existence is being pushed further into the realm of fantasy. One can realise ones fantasy whether it be getting the nose, lips or hips you desire or identifying with the problems experienced by a character in a soap opera. This indulgent existence is well documented in the art show *Post Human* and epitomised by the Charles Ray piece *Oh! Charlie, Charlie, Charlie*. "The body is the missing term in the reconstruction of society under the dominance of transcendent capitalism" (Hewison, 1990, p.142)

Gilbert and George say repeatedly that human beings are the most important thing in life - that the direction society has gone in is forgetting about interaction and that we have become categorised, introverted. " We are interested in the human person, the complexity of life".(G&G in Wilson, 1990, p.11)

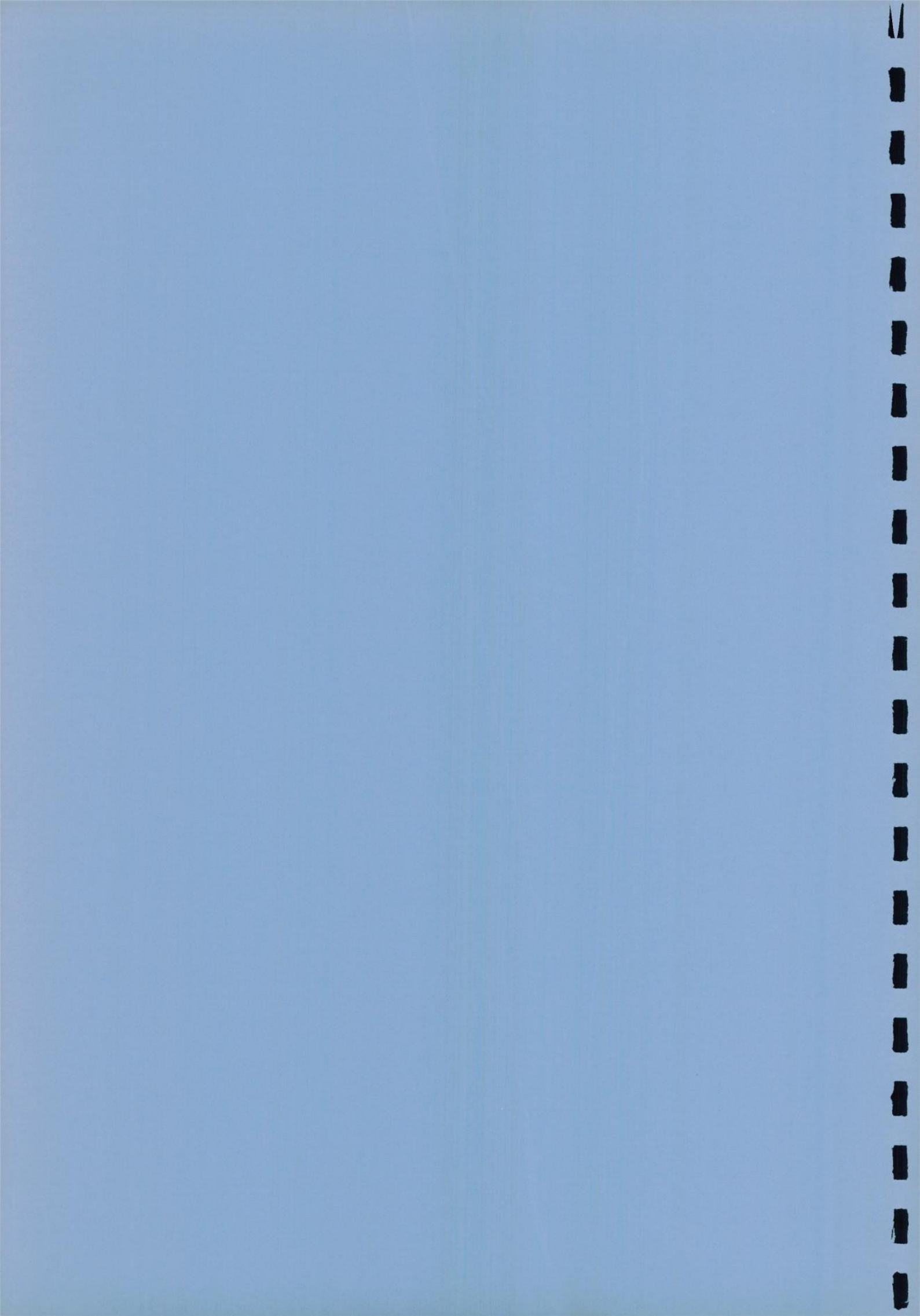


While watching the T.V. documentary *South* (made by filmmakers in developing countries exploring the societies they live in) I saw a man discussing his society during the demise of communism. He said the most instant change was the breakdown of communication between people as a direct result of competitiveness - a social element that he had never experienced before .

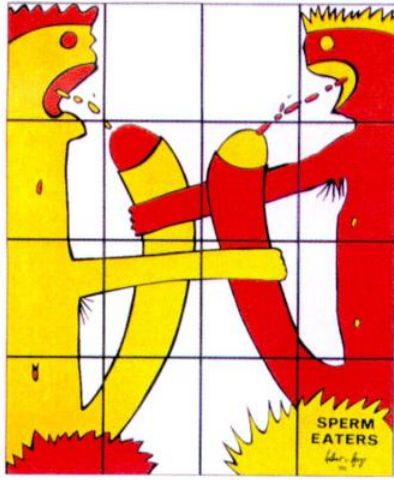
Looking at the other end of the scale, where in the West this breakdown in society has reached an extreme, Robert Hewison briefly discusses the punk ethos.

"In their self-mutilation punks have parodied an economic order which ... looks on both the world and people simply as raw materials". (Hewison, 1990, p.143) Their 'mutilation' comes in the form of inviting harassment and rejection. This is similar to Gilbert and Georges's non conforming in the early 70's when they dressed in conservative suits. They adopted this style in opposition the 'established rejection of society by their contemporaries', "the archetypal 'freaky' artist of their student days, with special whiskers and special sandals". they adopted formal suits". (G & G in Eshun, 1992, p.80)

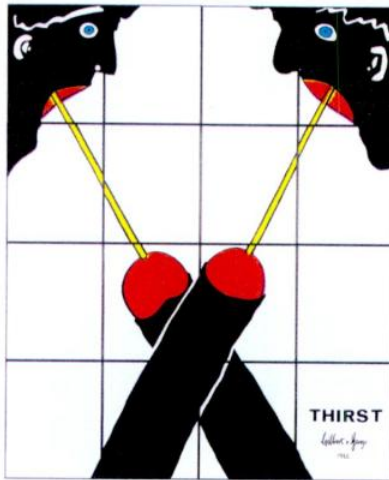
Similar to the punks they provoked rejection but by being overtly normal.



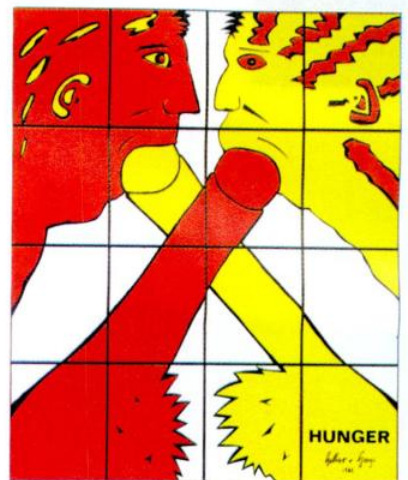




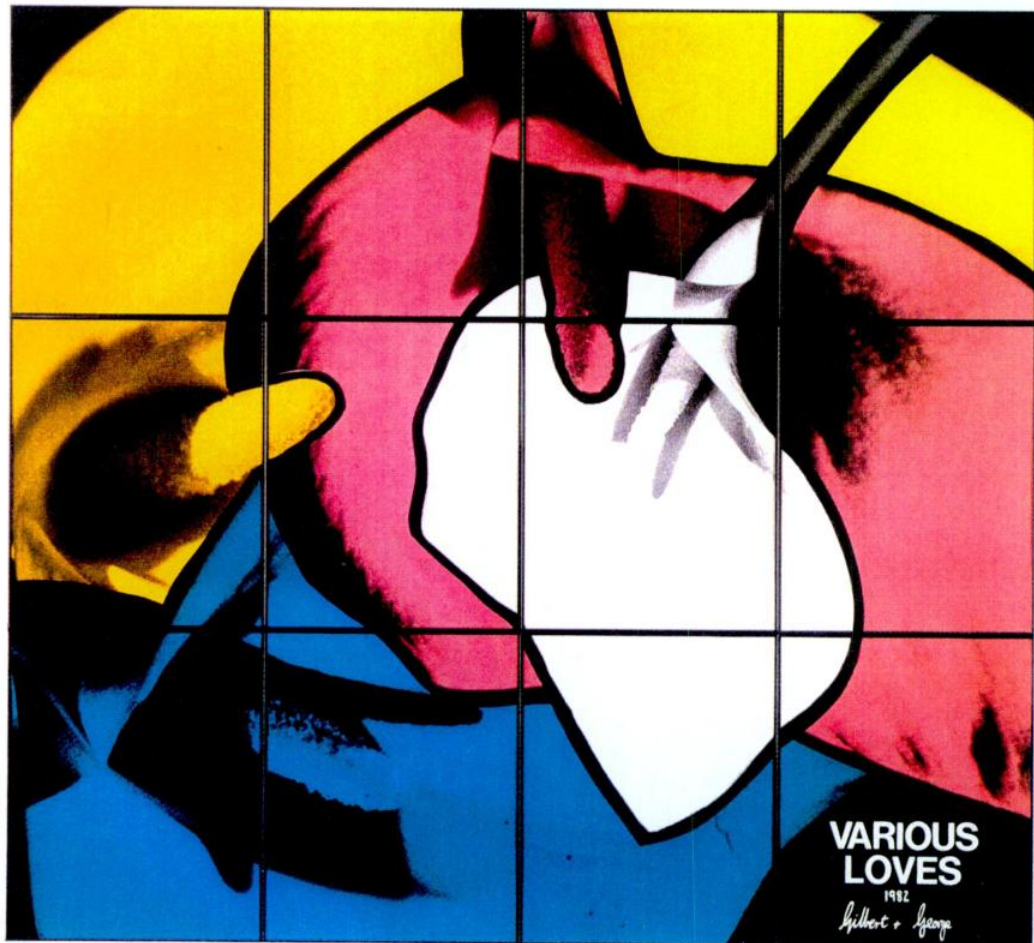
SPERM EATERS. 1982. 241x201 cm.



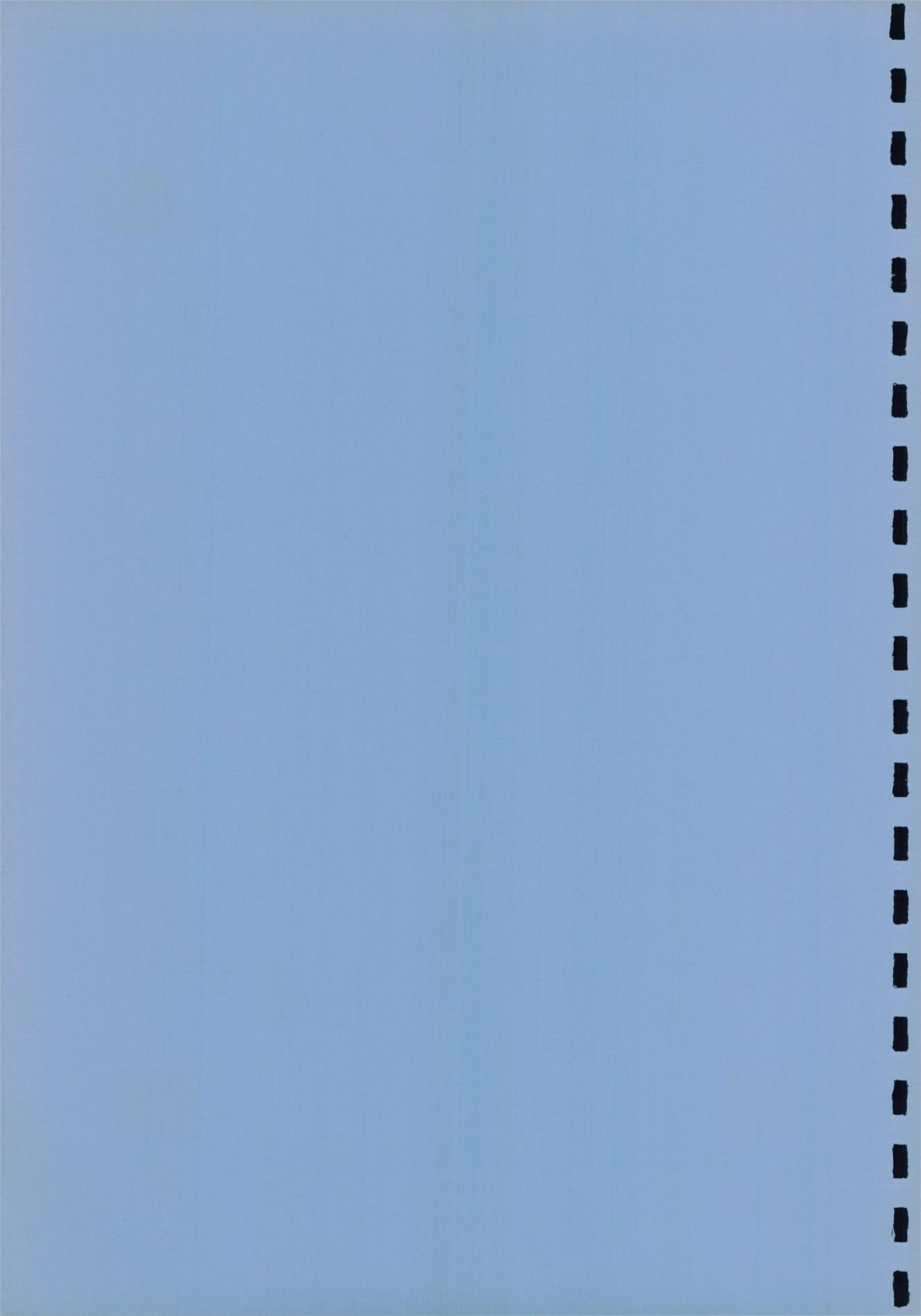
THIRST. 1982. 241x201 cm.



HUNGER. 1982. 241x201 cm.



VARIOUS LOVES. 1982. 181x201 cm.



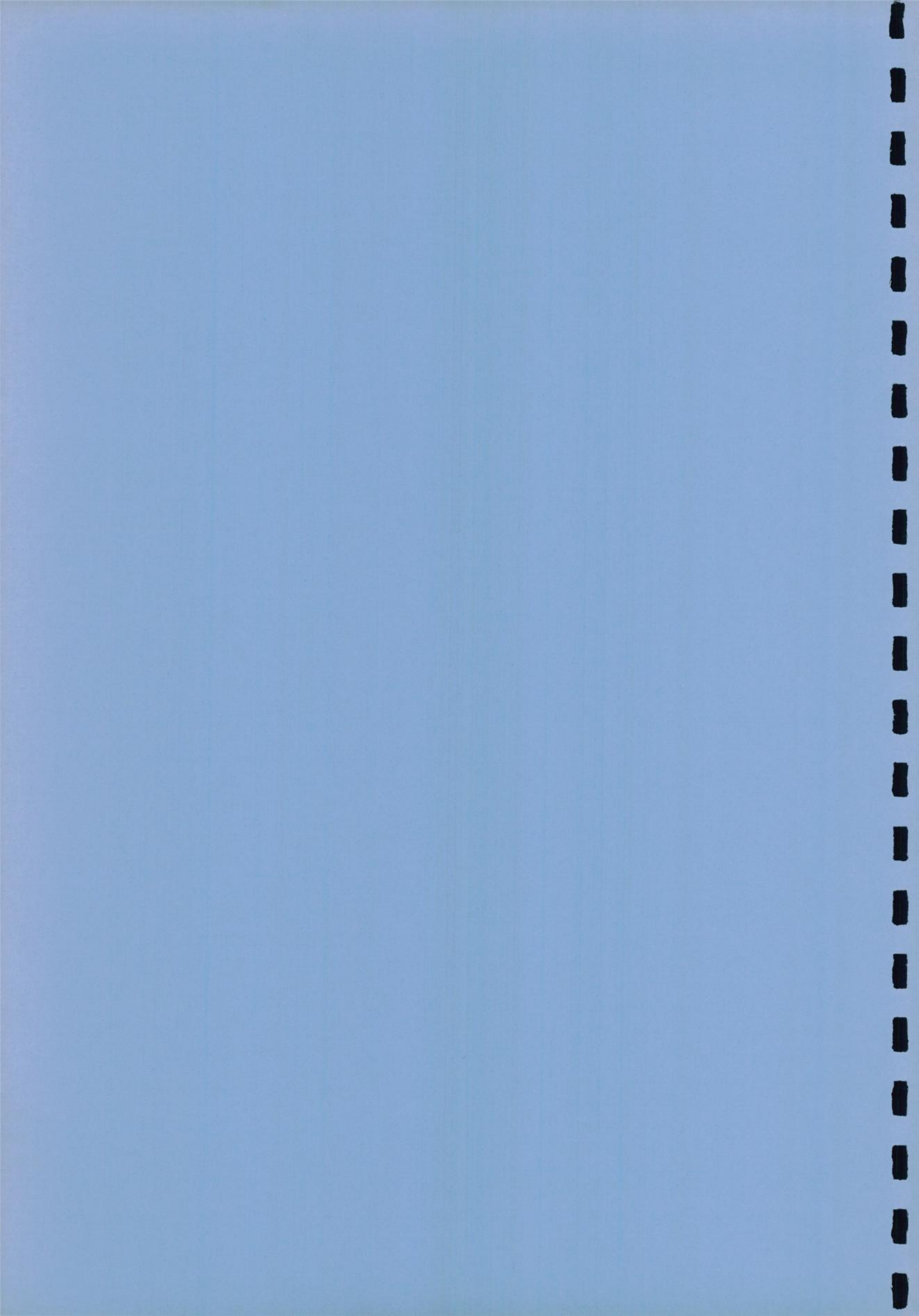
I asked the question earlier, are Gilbert and Georges a reaction or a symptom to contemporary consumer culture? I think there is some evidence that they are being socially critical. Admitted it is a fine line they tread, as they are repeatedly taken at face value. But I think their most clear criticism of society is evident when you look at their work dealing with sexuality.

They have taken a stance in public as normal, boring, average, working class Tories, then they produce pieces of art like *Sperm Eaters*, *Thirst* and *Hunger* all depicting obviously homosexual encounters. In addition many of their canvasses are full of bare chested young men. Gilbert and George are saying that your average 'Joe Soap' can be a homosexual. That homosexuals are not what they are usually depicted as by the media.

"These images which have been termed stereotypes: the occasional child mother, pathetic queen, aging pervert, or upper-class effete spy". (Marshall in Boffin/Gupta, 1990, p.20)

They admittantly deny that some of their work is homoerotic, in this way they also don't believe in any sexual category.

"We believe that every person is 'sexual' Gilbert: "The whole of life is sexual, not homosexual, not heterosexual, dividing up. We believe in different





Sex



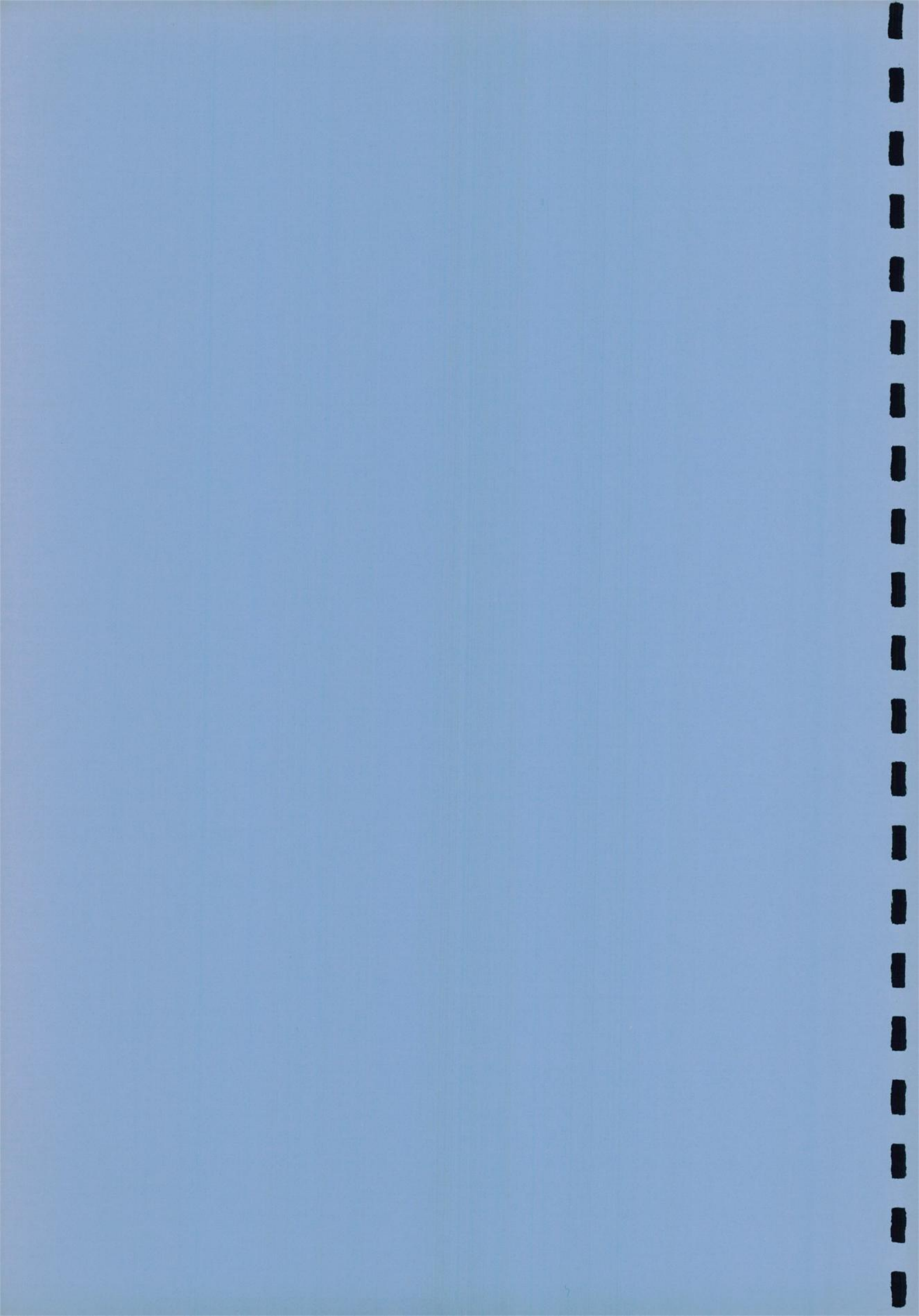
freedoms. Complicated life no? Because people are complicated. And we have to accept that, not having strict rules". (G &G in Barber, 1991, p.4)

They say they are sexual people "normal humanoids" (G&G in Barber, 1991, p.4) not gay, not straight, but simply sexual. They are arguing for a breakdown of boundaries and stereotypes, they are saying it is normal to be homosexual.

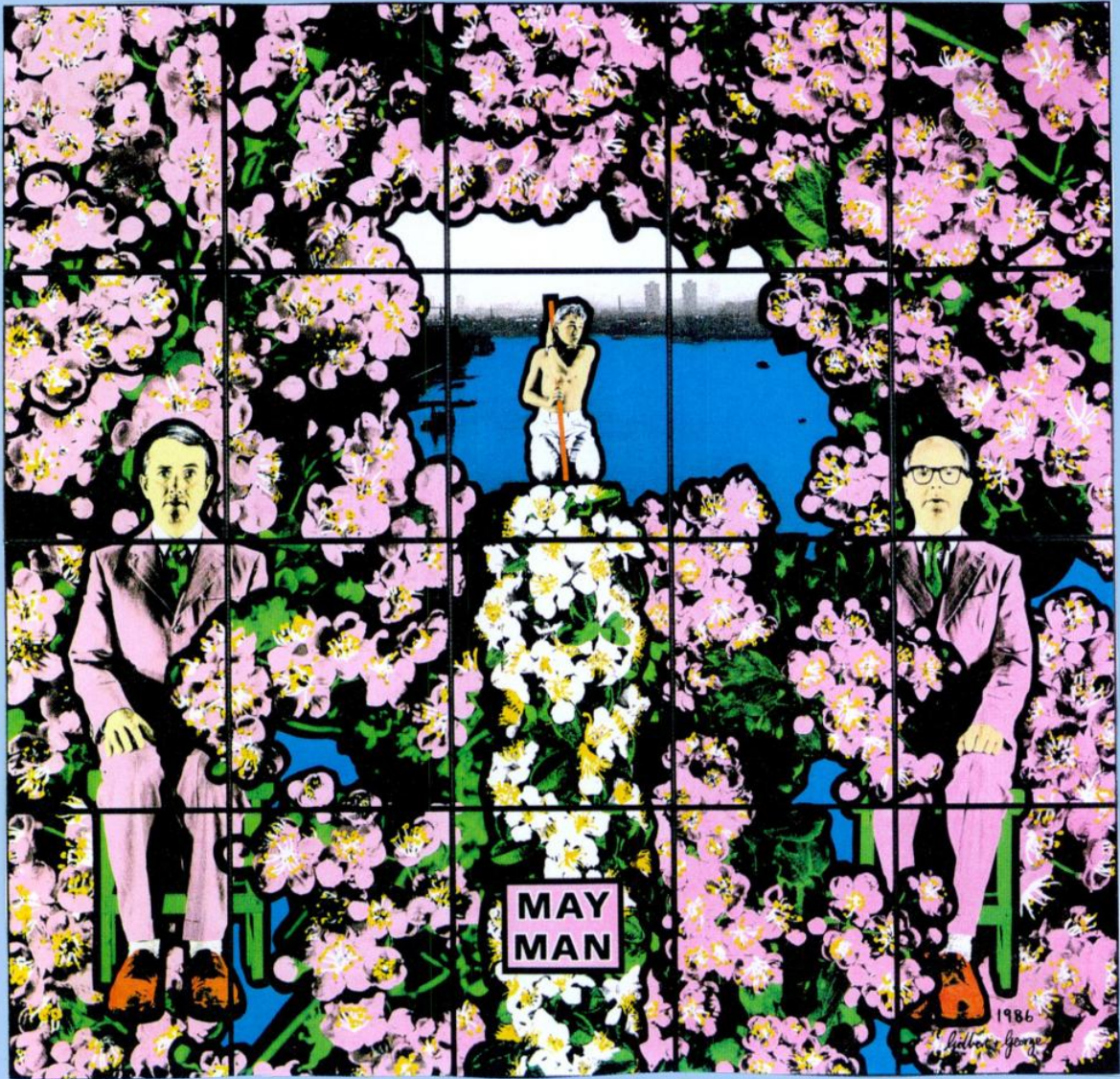
But how can they say they are dealing with homosexual boundaries etc, when they never include images of women in their work (apart from iconic images of the Queen and Margaret Thatcher)? Have they themselves put up a barrier that excludes female sexuality?

Wolf Jahn and Robert Hewison both suggest that the female is represented by their images of nature and fluids. "The formless female principle is both menacing and potentially fruitful" (Hewison, 1990, p.96)

When looking at some of their images of nature, such as, *Sex* or *Various Loves* there is an obvious reference to female genitalia. This is not a representation of woman but just a suggestion of the female in perhaps an idyllic way, as 'MotherMature' or perhaps a reference to the feminine side of male sexuality. But most of their obvious sexual imagery is homosexual,







Mayman



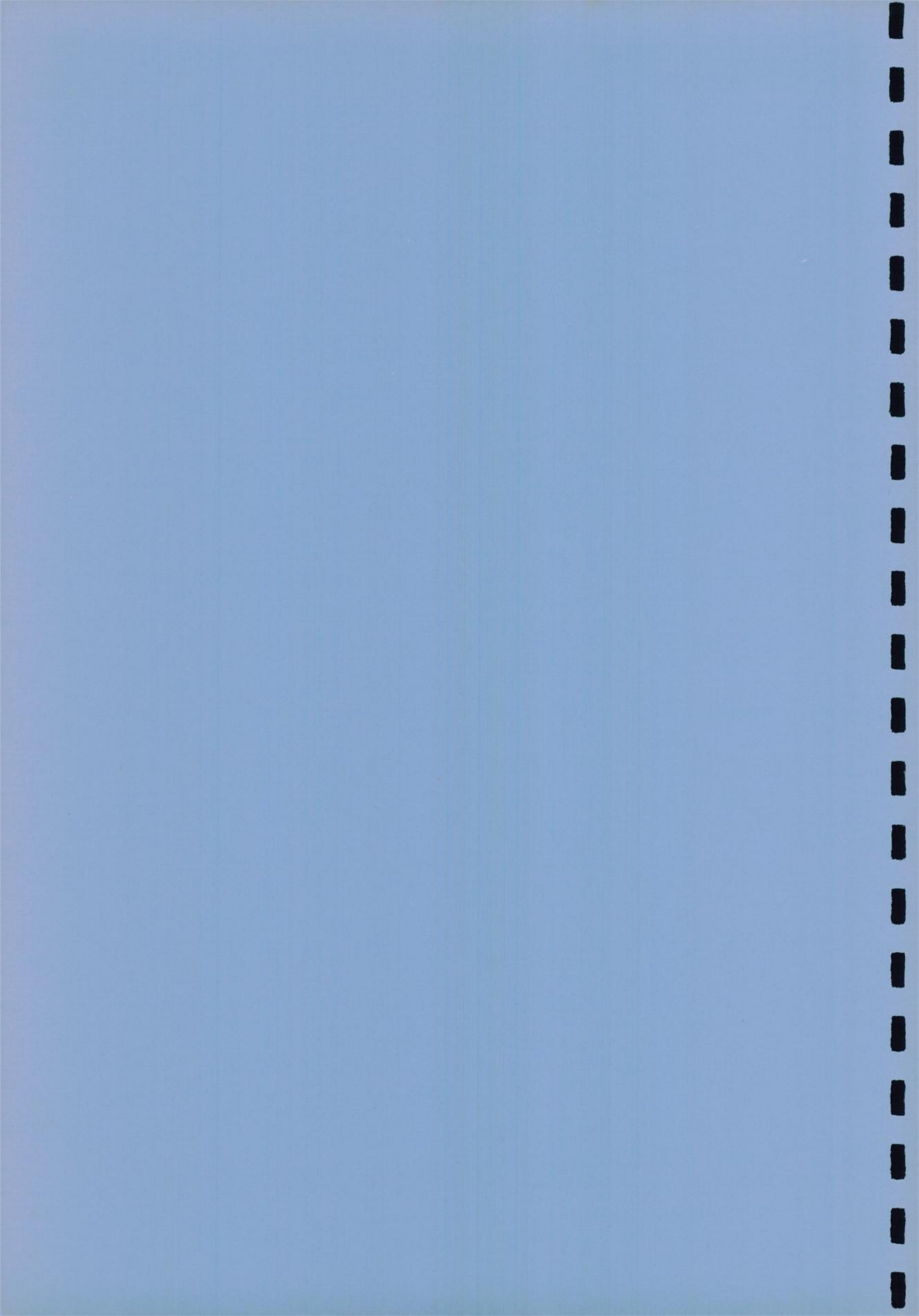
Wolf Jahn argues that they are simply dealing with the sex to which they belong. Some of their work is extremely camp which is an interpretation of femininity which frequently exposes how gender categories are social and historical constructions:

"The category 'homosexual' is as much socially constructed as 'male' and 'female'... the homosexual identity may be whatever the homosexual wants it to be ..... but only as a reconstruction of other constructions" (Hewison 1990, p.154)

Since the 70's there has been a link between the search for a homosexual identity and the feminist movement. In his essay *Picturing Deviening*, Stuart Marshall sees one fundamental difference as being that of exposure.

"Women have suffered from an excess of visibility and gay men from virtual invisibility" (Marshall, 1990, p.20)

In the 70's female artists took on performance art as a new art form that had no history, had no place in a patriarchally dominated art world concerned with materials and technique. Performance had no criteria to adhere to, the artists proceeded to deal with the breaking down of stereotyped female representation.

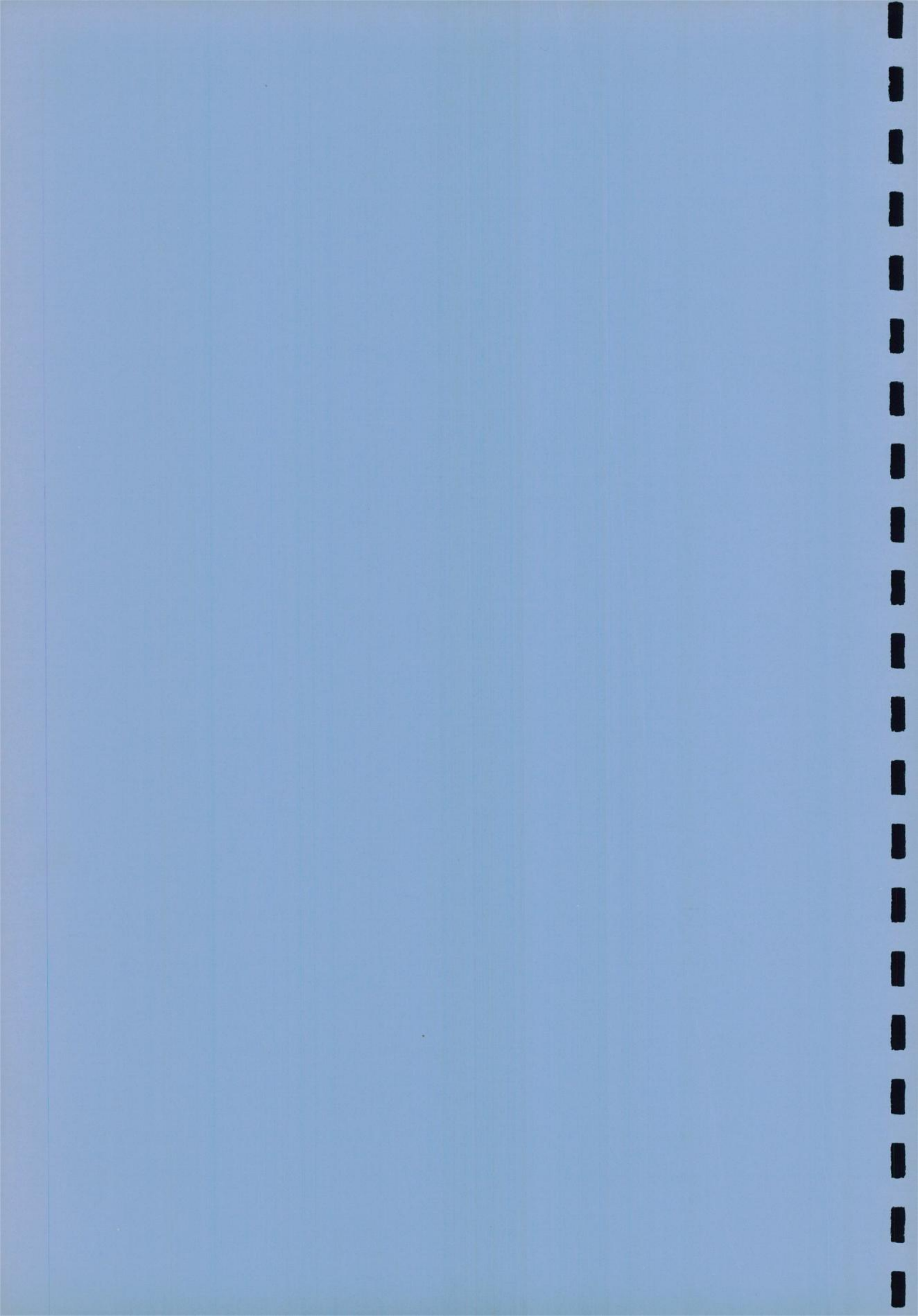


"A new wave of feminist theory that questions rigid dichotomies of gender, challenging the core assumptions of identity politics, including the very notions of sexual identity upon which gay-liberationist projects have historically been based." (Kotz, 1992, p.82).

Similarly Gilbert and George adopted performance to deal with stereo-typed male imagery.

This breakdown of stereotyped representations is a reaction against the consumer orientated society/culture in which they work.

"It's conditioning, people are just dragged along by conditioning". (G&G in Barber, p.5)

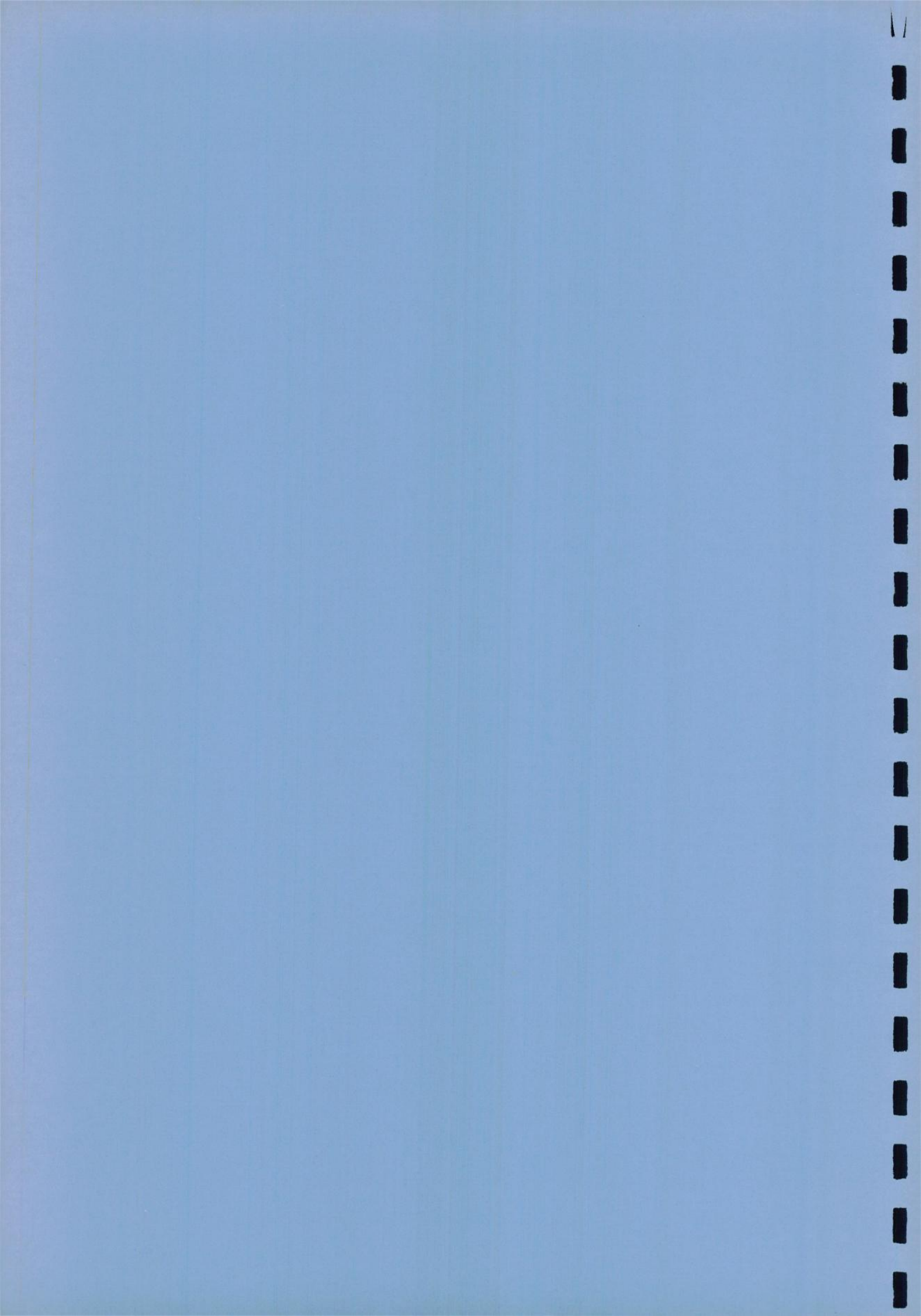


## CONCLUSION

Gilbert and George's life-performance is an exageration of normality, a parody. It is the key to understanding their work, as this facade exists not only in the way they conduct their lives but also it is a fundmental element in their work. When they began to represent the changing Britain in the 1980's it was the facade of economic strength that produced the new breed of ambituous and competitive people that they imitated. These elements in society served to isolate people, in that it broke down communication. By inventing new stereotypes "Design is no longer a creative process it is being used to conceal a social system on the brink of collapse" (Brody in Hewison, 1990, p.58).

This veneer or facade was represented by Gilbert and George in the form of an inaccessability to their work evoked by their use of a grid, colours and their constant promise of a vision of the future that is impossible to perceive.

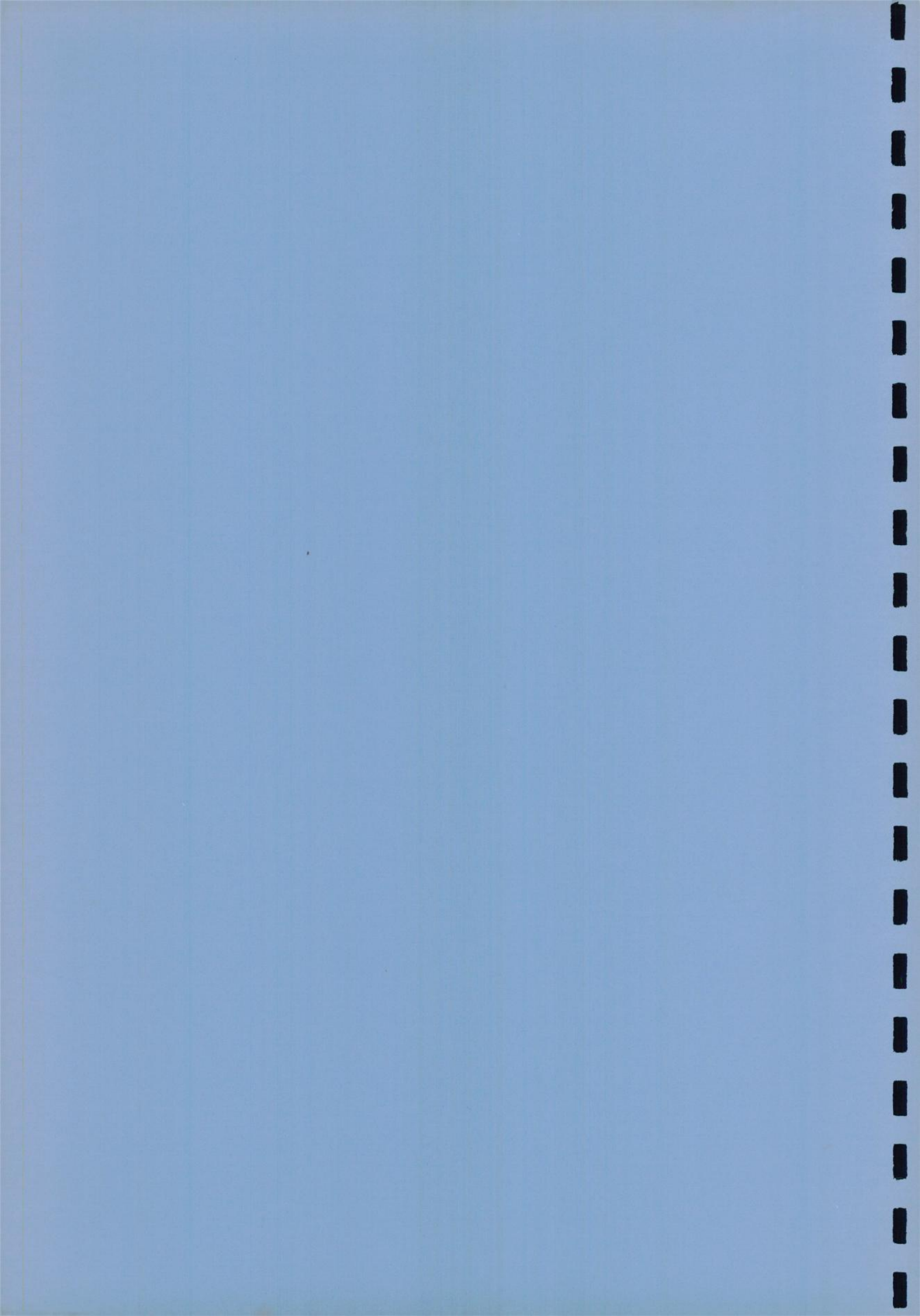
The posing question is are they a sympton or a reaction to this 'collapsing society'? Is this facade (in all forms) a deliberate 'holding up' of social order and of mans immunity to it? I think it is.





As I have quoted, they are pleased when social issues are discussed in relation to their work, even though it is normally in the form of criticism of them for upholding these values within an 'Art' context.

"If someone starts talking about racism when they see our Art, that's very good" (G & G in Eshun, 1992, p.86)



## PERIODICALS

**BEDELL**, Geraldine, "Don't mention the eighties"  
The Independent on Sunday, 27 December 1992.  
pp. 16

**BARBER**, Lynn, "Interview with Gilbert & George"  
The Sunday Review, 13 October 1991,  
pp. 3 - 5

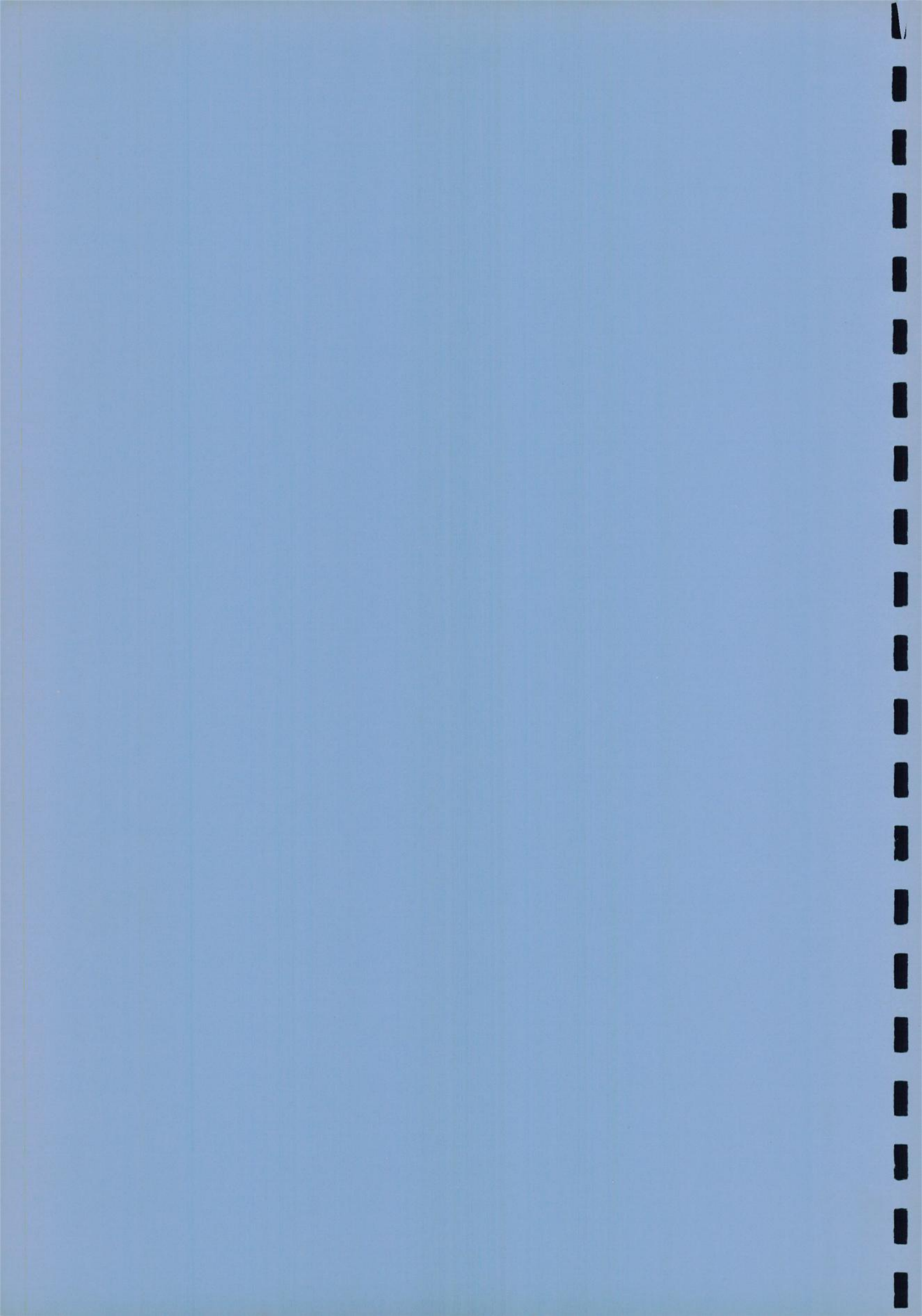
**ESHUN**, Ekow, "Interview with Gilbert & George"  
The Face, Volume 51, December 1992  
pp. 74 - 80

**GODFREY**, John, "The new camp"  
The Face, Volume 51, December 1992,  
pp. 109

**KOTZ**, Liz, "The body you want",  
Artforum, Volume 3, November 1992,  
pp. 82 - 89

**LEE**, David, "Interview with Gilbert & George",  
Arts Review, Volume XLV, January 1993  
pp. 8 - 11

**WILSON**, Andrew, "Interview with Gilbert & George",  
Art Monthly, Volume 135, April 1990  
pp. 6 - 13



## BOOKS

**GILBERT & GEORGE**, "What our Art means" in,  
Gilbert & George ("The complete pictures 1971 - 1985")  
Thames & Hudson, 1986

**HEWISON**, Robert, "Future Tense", London,  
Methuen, Michelin House, 1990

**JAMESON**, Fredric, "Post modernism and Consumer Society",  
in Kaplan, E. Ann (ed) "Postmodernism and its Discontents",  
London, Verso, 1988.

**JAHN**, Wolf, "The Art of Gilbert & George",  
New York, Thames & Hudson, 1989.

**KAPLAN**, E Ann, "Feminism/Oedipus/post modernism:  
The Case of MTV " in Kaplan E, Ann (ed), "Post Modernism and  
its discontents", London, Verso, 1988

**MARSHALL**, Stuart, " Picturing Deviancy", in Boffin/Gupta (ed),  
"Ecstatic Anitbodies (resisting the AIDS mythology) London,  
Rivers Oram Press, 1990.

**ROSE**, Cynthia, "Design after Dark"  
London, Thames & Hudson, 1991

**RUTHERFORD**, Johnathon, "Men's silences, predicaments  
in Masculinity",  
London, Routledge, 1992

