

A FOREWORD BY OLIVIER VARENNE

Mad Hatter: Am I going mad?

*Alice: Yes, you're mad, bonkers, off your head ...
but ... I'll tell you a secret...all the best people are.*

Lewis Carroll, *Alice in Wonderland*, 1865

Over a decade ago I bought Gilbert & George's picture MAD from 1980, one of a series of black-and-white pictures of homeless Londoners. In this picture, the close-up portrait of a man with wild hair and a worn face is framed as if it were a mirror. We cannot help but feel uncomfortable at the suggestion of our own reflection. Here, Gilbert & George emphasise our tendency to make superficial judgements of others. They present the boundaries found in our society, those that cause the divide between the rich and the poor, the educated and uneducated. By simultaneously blurring these boundaries, Gilbert & George suggest that this form of judgement has become obsolete. The line between madness and sanity, we are told, is thin, and who are we to determine on which side this man may find himself?

For now I believe I walk comfortably on the sane side, but living with MAD helps to remind me that this line would be easy to cross. I could lose everything, and much like the subject of MAD, be found roaming the edges of society, subject to judgements far beyond my control and with a past that no longer mattered. Even I, aware of this hypocrisy and standing on the safer side of the line, can be guilty of these unfair judgements.

It is typical that the art of Gilbert & George should test our resolve, whilst asking questions we are uncomfortable answering. Their art manifests in endless forms, large in scale and overwhelming in colour, attacking our senses and ultimately leaving us with no safe place to turn.

With an already profound interest in Gilbert & George's art, it was by chance I found myself in a sculpture park in Jerez, in the south of Spain, talking with a man named Christiano Raimondo. He introduced me to a collector who owned more than eighty wonderful Gilbert & George pictures from the 1970s onwards. This private collection was to become the central core of our exhibition and, working together with the artists, we are here today with the very first Gilbert & George retrospective in Australia.

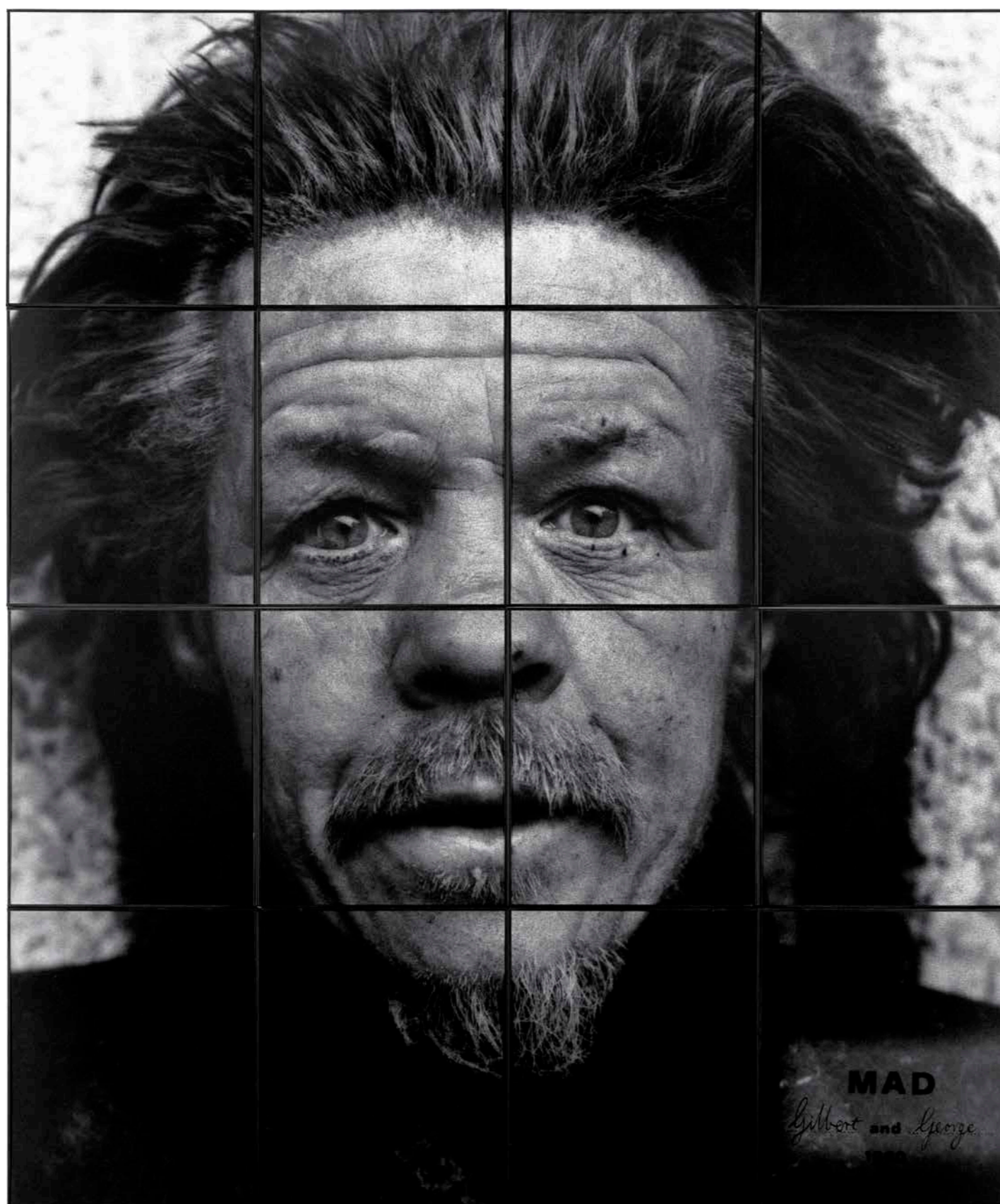
When I started to curate this exhibition, I sent an email to Gilbert & George. I had assumed, naturally, that I was going to assist the artists with the selection of the pictures for our exhibition at Mona. So, on the 8 October 2014, I fired off my email, expecting to have my assumption confirmed. It would be a pleasure to see them again and I was looking forward to working together, and I wondered when we might be able to sit down to start our selection. To both my delight and horror I received perhaps the only fitting reply possible. It simply read:

CERTAINLY NOT!

ARE YOU MAD?!

Lots of love,
Gilbert & George

Olivier Varenne
Tasmania, 2015



Over a decade ago Olivier Varenne bought this Gilbert & George picture entitled MAD from 1980 ...