Gavin Turk
In loving memory of Geoffrey Turk
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Doors of Perception
Gavin Turk is an elusive member of the so-called Young British Artist (YBA) generation that raised the profile of British Art in the 1990s. Despite his being a ubiquitous player in the stories and happenings of his contemporaries, his work – like the chameleon – is often camouflaged. As an artist he has utilised a wide range of themes, references and layers in a variety of formats from sculpture, printmaking, painting and filmmaking to express universal ideas. From the words on a blue plaque in an otherwise empty studio, *Cave* (1991) [80], echoing Plato’s shadow theatre, to *L’Âge d’Or* (2011) [384], a portal through to your imagination, his works encapsulate a philosophical musing about art and life.

Over the last 25 years, Gavin Turk has played with the building bricks of art history, imagery, meaning and value. Like an archaeologist turning over the rocks at the margins of our social terrain, he has explored the trade routes to the current contemporary art world. His sculptor’s curiosity has created a collection of seminal works traversing the British cultural landscape at the beginning of the twenty-first century.

He is not the first to investigate the nature of a work of art, and what it means to be called an artist. His art references give thoughtful recognition to artists before him who trod the same path – Marcel Duchamp, Giorgio de Chirico, Yves Klein, Piero Manzoni, Alighiero Boetti, André Cadere, Joseph Beuys, and their new world cousins Jackson Pollock and Andy Warhol. With a lightness of touch, the young Turk addresses the art world’s relationship to capitalism with its ambivalent consumption of value and meaning. His deliberate eroding of the reflection from Robert Morris’s Modernist cubes while still a student announced his fearless exploration and recycling of other artists’ works. This path lead to many other détournements, from the stripping of the branding from Warhol’s Brillo to the employment of prison embroiderers to produce the work for his show in homage to Boetti, *Gavin & Turk*, of 2012.

Turk consistently plays on this dialogue with his fellow artists and, at home in his milieu, often includes more than one reference in a single work, adding complexity, which takes thought to decipher. According to the artist, ‘successful art is that which is most misunderstood by the greatest number of people.’

He has enjoyed playing the game of identity, presence and absence since his first solo exhibition *Signature* in 1991, which was a drawing show consisting of riffs on the philosophical nature of the author and his symbolic defacement of the picture plane. This played with notions of value and the art market, as one of the works he sold from the show, *Stain* (1992) [38], was a paper tablecloth with food debris, wine stains and a signature. This preoccupation with the The-Artist-Was-Here tag (first glimpsed in Jan Van Eyck’s *Arnolfini Portrait* of 1434) shows a fascination with the framing of art, its self-referential self-consciousness, so prevalent in contemporary work.

The most definitive of this series of works, *Title* (1990) [35], consisted of a large signature painted across a recycled canvas with a small, hand-stitched information sign. This predated the popular notion of a carbon footprint with a promise of an energy-neutral, entirely biodegradable artwork.
(the canvas even stretched by string, not nails). Jacques Derrida made a famous statement about this branding of a work of art: ‘A written signature implies the actual or empirical non-presence of the signer. But ... it also marks his having-been present in a past now.’

At the beginning of the twentieth century, Bernard Berenson and Roger Fry, art historians working in the field of Italian Renaissance art, established the market for ‘Old Masters’. Artists up to that date had mostly worked anonymously. With the rise in humanism, Renaissance artists began to autograph their work, showcasing their talent. Berenson and Fry set about authenticating major works by these artists, and their authentications increased the value of the artwork. Here began the significant equation between money and autograph, and the concept of the signature as brand, which Turk (first amongst his peers) regularly explores in his work.

In his MA exhibition in 1991 at the relatively conservative Royal College of Art, Turk installed a singular work within his exhibition space, a circular blue ceramic plaque called Cave, based on the familiar ceramic punctuations on London buildings showing the habitats of the established and esteemed. This parvenu’s emblem made claims for his industriousness in the halls of the college and his intentions for the invisible œuvre. This was a signature work indeed. The title is a reference to Greek philosopher Plato’s Allegory of the Cave, found in his seminal political text The Republic, which sought to answer questions about the nature of truth, reality and perception. The rest of his Royal College studio was cleaned, painted white and left hauntingly empty. Turk knew his art history: in 1958 Klein presented an exhibition Le Vide at the Iris Gallery in Paris, consisting of an empty gallery space.

Cave raised ideas about absence and presence, inside and outside, and life and death. It was the final work coming at the beginning, as Turk offered up a conceptual identification of himself, using his signature/name as a kind of relic, as well as a kind of readymade. In Turk’s exhibition Collected Works 1989–1993 (1993), a dozen rooms within an eighteenth-century house in central London hosted a series of disparate works, with (unusual for its time) no unifying mode of expression, no consistent autograph style; a visitor could well have thought (s)he was looking at a group show. This show, however, consisted of a group of what, with hindsight, were iconic works, each of which led to several decades of pursuant themes – signature pieces, waxwork figures, painted bronze, ephemera and appropriation works.

In the screenprint Gavin Turk Right Hand and Forearm (1992) his arm hangs in a large glass medical jar filled with clear liquid, looking like a preserved specimen pickled in formalin, or a holy relic. This is the suggested signature-making hand, that which confers authenticity but without hiding the artifice (the rest of his arm appears at the top of the jar). Again using a kind of self-portraiture to present his philosophy as an artist, Tattoo (1992), is a photographic image of his hands with a recycled symbol inscribed on the palms. Camouflage (Self Portrait) (1994) is a twist on
this idea – using disguise (this time a beauty treatment, ‘Mudd’) to bring a camp aggression to the concept of recycled ideas and the renegade artist. Godot (1996) also extends this exploration of portraiture with a head replaced by the egg in a reference to Magritte’s apple-face portrait Son of Man.

In the C-type photograph Portrait of Something I’ll Never Really See (1997), the artist photographs himself with his eyes closed; this reflexive self portrait captures a visual paradox.

In the late 1980s/early 1990s figurative sculpture was considered quite unfashionable. Only a very few contemporary artists such as the American Duane Hanson had persisted in realist figurative work. For Hanson it was an experiment in super-realism, with his fibreglass figures clothed and painted to look as real as possible. Turk’s contemporaries Antony Gormley and Marc Quinn were using their own bodies as a more visceral raw material. But Turk was the first of his generation to use his own image conceptually and in particular to use waxwork figures within museum cabinets, referencing the tourist phenomenon of Madame Tussauds.

Reinventing the British Pop Art brand of realism popularised by Peter Blake in the 1960s, Turk created a series of symbolic tropes in over a dozen waxworks through a technique now embraced by many of his contemporaries. He began his ongoing series of these with Pop (1993), a life-size waxwork of the artist, impersonating the tragic Sex Pistols front man Sid Vicious, performing My Way in a Frank Sinatra tuxedo. The pose also referenced the iconic Warhol screen-print of Elvis as a glamorised cowboy with a prop-store gun. Bringing together Sid Vicious and an echo of Warhol was a perceptive move, since Punk was an English version of the happenings in Warhol’s notorious Factory.

Punkish Pop was followed by Bum (1998), a waxwork figure of Turk as a wretched tramp – the fallen hero still pointing the gun-like finger at the audience. This classic outsider character was followed by a series of anti-hero types such as Che (1999) after the icon of rebellion. The expression of the face echoes the Alberto Korda image that is now hung in teenage bedrooms throughout the world.

Then, as if to shock the audience out of their complacency, comes the undignified demise of this freedom fighter/terrorist portrayed in Death of Che (2000). Allegedly the executioners arranged the original corpse to resemble the infamous Korda image to prove that Guevara was now dead, so here the artist/symbol is subjected to its own iconography in death, laid on the slab, the finger still pointing. This more harrowing image was reminiscent of Turk’s earlier Death of Marat (1998) referencing Jacques-Louis David’s elegiac painting of this brutal revolutionary assassinated in the bath. This artwork, whilst following its own internal logic, linked the neo-classic David painting with the populist waxwork image of Marat made by Tussaud herself. The current commercial tourist success of Tussauds, supported by the public’s appetite for celebrity culture, has long been in competition with the free attraction of the British Royal Family and the decorative, highly-trained guards that protect them.
Referencing the mawkish nationalism of the tabloids, the emasculated tourist geegaw *Somebody’s Son* (2007) stands to attention with the patriarchy of the British Empire behind him. More a representative of cultural warfare than civil defence, he takes up his pose in his sentry box vitrine, with a gun in his hand.

Britain’s seaside towns have become living museums. The animatronic laughing sailor *Gentleman Jim* (2005) shows the pier attraction having the last laugh – the maverick Victorian sea dog condemned to entertaining his audience. These figurative works (including *Mechanical Turk* (2006)), made over a span of 20 years, have a consistency of pose and narrative. If American artist Cindy Sherman is addressing existing stereotypes and gender relationships when she creates her photographic self-portraiture, Gavin Turk inhabits his characters as archetypes of cultural identity as defined by its edge. The edge, in this case, is defined by the rebel, the revolutionary, the queen, the tramp, the sailor, the gypsy or the Turk.

‘ Appropriation art’ turns the concept of originality on its head: from Duchamp’s readymades to the copies of Sherrie Levine, Elaine Sturtevant and Mike Bidlo, it contests the mythologised aura of the original by challenging and redefining authorship. As a conceptual tool, this was popular in America through the late 1980s, but Turk gave a uniquely British evolution to this form and helped to pave the way for other artists, as he began directly referencing other artists’ work while still an art student. Perhaps it is more true to say Turk recycles imagery rather than appropriates artwork.

The formative experience of seeing a Robert Morris sculpture in the Tate as a child led to Turk’s seminal *Robert Morris Untitled 1965–72* (1990), made when he was still a student at college. The facsimile mirror cubes were corroded by the artist as if they had been exposed to the inclement English weather: American minimalism found in a Brontë museum. Since then he has produced works referencing the style or the imagery of Van Gogh, Magritte and de Chirico paintings, Warhol silkscreens, Duchamp readymades, and Boetti embroideries. With every referenced style or work, Turk gives it a new cast: the Brillo boxes stripped of their logos or the Pollock drip as an endless signature.

For example, his series of *Transit Disaster* screenprints (2011/12) addresses the demise of the British working-class spirit in manufacturing and commerce – symbolised by the white Transit van (white van man) – as much as it plays on Warhol’s use of shocking imagery alongside celebrities and iconic design motifs as he depicted twentieth-century consumer desire.

Turk inhabited a female avatar in a series of works in the early 2000s in the mythical figure of Ariadne. These responded to a series of de Chirico paintings of this much-recycled image: the Greek character adopting an uneasy pose, seemingly trapped in repose. This melancholic maiden – abandoned by her hero on the island of Naxos just before being whisked off to a life of partying by Bacchus – represents the male gaze removed of all focus, washed up in a metaphysical dream piazza.

As well as reinventing the figurative sculpture or
waxwork, Turk pioneered a new British trompe l’œil through the use of bronze painted with lacquer or oil paint to look real, the first example of which was pipe (1991) [89]. The Betrayal of Images is the title of a Magritte painting of a traditional wooden pipe, complete with the caption ‘Ceci n’est pas une pipe’ (This is not a pipe). An oil painting of a pipe is not the pipe itself, so the message is correct, but the painting raises awkward questions. In Turk’s case, he cast an old-fashioned children’s sweet into bronze, then painted it to give the illusion that it is made from liquorice and sugar. This choice of material referenced American artist Jasper Johns and his Painted Bronze (1960), which depicts two beer cans, cast in bronze and painted in parts to look like the original objects. Turk’s piece layered the associations by depicting a painted bronze in the form of a children’s sweet that looks like a pipe that references Magritte.

Bronze is amongst the most traditional of casting materials, creating a stable, permanent edition from an unstable original (often clay). As a sculptural material it had fallen from favour among a younger generation, since it was expensive to produce and carried strong associations of the lumpen heavy metal of Henry Moore et al. At the beginning of the 1990s Turk claimed it as a versatile casting material, ironically obscuring its natural patina, disguising it with a coating of paint. His purpose in using this technique was not to add a commercial value to the work, but to question value itself and to create a visual illusion, which resonates philosophically after the viewer has passed by. It feels intrusive to gaze at the lifelike Nomad (2003) [156], even when the audience knows it to be a lump of metal and paint rather than the abstract form of a homeless being, encased in a soiled sleeping bag.

This major work led to others such as the chrome-plated bronze of Somewhere Between Sleeping on the Streets and the Silver Clouds (2005) [146], a pillow still bearing the imprint of a sleeper’s head. In inimitable style, this modest artwork references other works – Warhol’s room of floating, helium-filled silver balloons, perhaps Felix Gonzalez-Torres’s photograph of two indented pillows, and Nomad itself.

The path to these works was forged by a simple series of sculptures that encapsulated the idea of ‘we are what we throw away’. Bag (12) (2001) [162] is a bronze cast of a black rubbish sack painted to look real. This transgressive artwork has all the formal beauty of the modernist project but with the base associations of our wasteful contemporary culture, devaluing what we desire as soon as we consume it. With skilful craftsmanship, Turk reflects back at us this ultimate paradox of our time by elevating icons of waste to poetic status.

His representations are not degenerate or abject – reflecting failures and perversions – but uplifting and transcendent. His cardboard boxes, staples of the logistics industry, are elevated to characters with personality. Turk’s boxes, unlike Warhol’s, bear no branding, and in their plainness they exemplify anonymity. However each has its own character – one partly open and another firmly shut, sealed up with parcel tape. Since boxes usually contain something, the viewers are curious, and Turk confounds their perceptual
and emotional expectations. His rubbish bags are modernist abstractions (once you realise the cleaner has not forgotten to take them out to the bin). He has also played with bricks (the building block of colonial Victorian Britain), and the leftovers of the fish and chip shop (that peculiarly clichéd British institution) via used polystyrene cups, trays and chip forks.

His most ambitious bronze is the twelve-metre-high Nail (2011) [377], set into the pavement behind St Paul’s cathedral, in front of the glazed steel, architect-designed shopping centre. The surface is not actually painted but has a ferrous oxide patina to give it the impression of ageing, like some religious relic or exalted symbol of traditional twentieth-century building techniques.

Confounding expectations is a recurrent game in Turk’s work. He carried this out at a public event, for the opening of his exhibition The Stuff Show (1998) at the South London Gallery. When the invited public arrived, they were confronted by eighteen works of art, all wrapped for the duration of the entire opening – like Christo works – in beige dust sheets and rope. This experience was encapsulated in a small artwork Dröste Effect (1998) [208], which is an infinitely recurring frame – the little frame itself wrapped and appearing as one of the works in the wrapped works photograph. This elliptical game is key to Turk’s work and reinforced in the representation of the dust sheets themselves, titled Zeuxis and Parrhasius.

The frustration of the south London crowd’s expectations has echoes in other witty performance artworks produced since the beginning of his career – perhaps Cave itself can be thought of as his first performance as an absent showman. In 1993 he created a glamorised event at a London pub, A Night Out with Gavin Turk, foreshadowing the burgeoning mass-media interest in the art world. The sponsorship of the event enabled nothing more than the sponsor appearing with the artist himself – another solipsism. Not a performance but a presentation is Turk’s perceptive and prophetic work of 1994, Identity Crisis [77], which showed a fabricated copy of Hello magazine, with the young artist gracing its front cover along with his partner and small child. The headline promises that his views on culture and fatherhood are revealed inside. This work preceded the growing appetite for artist features in the British media, where the content of their work was ignored in favour of details about their personalities and social activities. In 1993 he produced a short video work and a series of stills A Marvellous Force of Nature [32]. In this, he appears as the prop for a magician who uses him to perform the illusion of a person levitating in mid-air. Turk here presents his transfigured body as an artwork, and in this he is perhaps channeling Klein and his leap into the void as well as the relationship between artifice and magic.

As a sometime deliberate hoaxter himself, in Mechanical Turk (2006) [294], Turk borrows the identity of the once notorious chess-playing machine for this looped film. In the disguise of the automaton he follows the Knight’s Tour, moving the piece through every square on the chessboard just once. This apparent automaton, dressed in the costume
of an oriental sorcerer, hid a series of chess masters who played and defeated most eminent challengers (including Napoleon and Benjamin Franklin) for several decades without the ruse being discovered. This legendary phenomenon was a precursor of the mysteries of technology, which now threaten to eclipse the magic of art.

Surrealists such as René Magritte frequently used ordinary objects, such as loaves, eggs, pipes and fruit, to create psychoanalytic, paradoxical and incongruous associations, and Turk turns to these same objects to transform the ordinary into the extraordinary. Turk has also worked with other ephemeral and conceptual materials, such as chewing gum, rabbit fur, breath and excrement, consciously incorporating other artistic signatures. For example, he references Marcel Broodthaers’s frequent use of eggshells stuffed into old cabinets, set on tables, or glued in accumulated groups to white canvases. The Belgian artist has spoken of this as ‘painting with eggs’ — a simultaneous reference to egg tempera (a favoured technique of the early Renaissance artists before the discovery of oil painting).

One Thousand, Two Hundred and Thirty-Four Eggs (1997) uses that number of white eggshells stuck to a canvas to provide Turk’s signature. Turk uses eggs repeatedly as philosophical puzzles: which came first, the chicken or the egg? In 2001 Turk made a giant painted fibreglass egg, Œuvre, making a play on the French word, which describes an artist’s total body of work, but sounds to English ears a little like œuf (egg). Like conceptual maestro Joseph Kosuth, Turk enjoys playing with words and their semantics.

Appearances might be deceptive, but much of Turk’s work is very funny. Not laugh-out-loud funny but — like the story of the Emperor’s New Clothes — daring you to smile in the face of the serious and earnest. Gentleman Jim (2005) even guffaws back at you when you enter the room. The latest in his series of standing self-portraits is Self Portrait (Fountain) (2012), after the Boetti self-portrait in bronze within which the ‘gun’ or ‘pointing finger’ has turned into a hose comically spraying water upon its own steaming hot head.

Inspired by subversion, juxtapositions, the commonplace and the weird, Gavin Turk is a leading protagonist of a long line of home-grown English Surrealists, who were thinking and working in poetic metaphors long before the twentieth century. Artists and writers such as William Blake, Jonathan Swift and Lewis Carroll produced imaginative work featuring elements of surprise, humour, and the non sequitur. Blake wanted to open the Doors of Perception, which he believed man was in danger of closing shut. Swift, with his tales of Gulliver’s Travels, and Carroll, with his Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland, conjured up beings in fantastic worlds, with comic overtones and sudden changes of scale.

Turk’s most recent works are a group of over life-size bronze doors set in frames, painted to look as though they have been left out in the rain. He sites them in the open air, in the middle of fields, and titles them with puns such as L’Âge d’Or (2011). The doors are not closed — Turk leaves them half open to allow the imagination the freedom to roam, as Blake so fittingly prescribed.
Mirror
1988, wood, perspex and concrete
244 × 365 × 244 cm
Stool
1990, wooden stool and glass, 90 × 38.5 × 51.5 cm

Iris Clert
1995, wood, glass spy hole and fishing wire, 11 × 10 × 10 cm
fig 2

fig 4

Reference Garden
1996, painted wall, dimensions variable
Eclipse
1995, tinted glass in wood frame, 160 × 250 cm
Robert Morris Untitled 1965–72
1990, distressed mirror plate glass and wood, each 91.4 × 91.4 × 91.4 cm, installation dimensions variable
Slide Glasses

1992, glass slide mounts and spectacle frames, 5.1 × 13.1 × 13.4 cm
A Marvellous Force of Nature (Stills)
1993, c-type prints, each 20.3 × 25.5 cm
Trebuchet MS (Tattoo Design)
2001, inkjet print on paper, 29.7 × 21 cm

Saxon (Tattoo Design)
2001, inkjet print on paper, 29.7 × 21 cm
Tattoo
1992, c-type print, 12.5 × 18.5 cm
Stain
1992, wine, cheese, bread and biro on paper tablecloth, 142 × 139 cm
Gavin Turk Right Hand and Forearm
1992, silkscreen ink on paper, 86 x 68 cm
Gavin Turk
1997, polystyrene beads and acrylic on canvas, 153 × 213 cm