

Gavin Turk

# Gavin Turk: the analyst will unmask you now

He has impersonated tramps, punks, Pollock and Che. But who is the real Gavin Turk? As a major retrospective opens, we challenged psychoanalyst Darian Leader to find the man behind his many masks



Gavin Turk (right) with psychoanalyst Darian Leader Photograph: Sarah Lee for the Guardian

## Darian Leader

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Who is [Gavin Turk](#)? The title of his major new retrospective consists of a string of questions - Who What When Where How and Why - but it is no accident that the “Who” comes first. Turk’s explorations of artistic identity and authenticity have been as witty as they have been profound, from his early invention of an artist called “Gavin Turk” to his casting of himself as Jackson Pollock to create drip paintings with his own signature.

“Do you have to be an artist to make art?” he asks. “Or are you constituted as an artist by the work?” Turk had seen [Robert Morris’s mirror cubes](#) as a child, and would later consider them not simply as reflecting surfaces but as symbols of the artistic establishment itself: if you had these, he thought, you could set up a museum anywhere in the world. They incarnated an authority that sanctioned “art” as “art”. Turk’s later fashioning of corroded mirror cubes both contested this and conceded to it, and Morris’s works have remained an important touchstone.

In [his work Cave](#), a heritage blue plaque stated that Gavin Turk sculptor had worked here, 1989-1991. With no other works in the room, the story goes that the Royal College refused Turk his degree, but at the same moment he was transformed into a recognised artist. It was a moment of authentication, as if he had emerged out of nothing from this single artwork. The artist who works on the question of how art and artists are produced is himself subject to a myth about his own creation!

Like Duchamp, Turk constantly sidesteps the labels that are assigned him, while still operating within them. “I am trying to move away from anything that would



Cave (1991)  
Photograph: Gavin Turk, Live Stock Market, Photo Prudence Cuming Assoc



be a quintessentially Gavin Turk piece,” he says. But this process is recursive, as every new work will be appropriated by the media, by art history, by culture, and a whole set of works explores this recursiveness: Turk as Pollock or Manzoni or Fontana; Turk as punk or revolutionary; Turk as Hello cover celebrity; Turk hosting A Night out with [Gavin Turk](#).

Turk’s name is ever-present in his work. He has called it “a found object”, to be treated and operated with like a material. He paints, chisels, sculpts, atomises and inverts it, contracts it to “Gav” or “GT”. He blurs it, wobbles it, writes it in eggshells. Where some artists become buried in their name, Turk constantly challenges the space between himself and his, using its apparent constraints to create an emancipation. The name is his clay or paint.

If identity is always being imposed on us, the many masks that Turk wears - from the revolutionary to the punk to the sailor - can be understood as uniforms to don within this space. Adopting a mask is perhaps the most logical way of operating with the fact that we can’t control the labels that are assigned to us. If what is imposed is by definition not us, if it brings with it an inherent artificiality, what better way to reside there than by accentuating this artificiality. If being Gavin Turk involves how Gavin Turk is constituted for the art world, the media etc, why not just go one step further and actually don a disguise, a mask that symbolises, in part, the fact that identity is given to us, whether we like it or not?



But there is also another current, dealing less with masks and disguise than with what psychoanalysis calls separation. Separation doesn’t mean separation from a person or from something dear to us, but separating from discourse. It refers to the process of extracting oneself from the many labels and identities that are imposed on us. If identity tells us what we are supposed to be, separation elects its imagery from the margins of what can be represented, in waste, in detritus, in whatever is foreign or excluded from ready and received representation.

Turk’s focus on waste products is a crucial counterpoint to his works that treat disguise and masks. He casts apple cores, cigarette butts, burnt matches and all manner of waste in bronze. The more he interrogates how we are formed by discourse, the more he deals with the artist known as “Gavin Turk”, the more that separation demands some kind of staging. The apple cores, used tyres, loo rolls and junk incarnate this aspect of existence, and they are just as much self-portraits as any of the signature works.

‘Just as much self-portraits as any of the signature works’ ... Tip (2004). Photograph: © Gavin Turk, Live Stock Market, Photo Prudence Cumming Assoc



When Turk dressed as a tramp and attended the opening of *Sensation*, his act was situated within this logic. He was there as a waste product, as what would normally be excluded from this high-end art world gathering. The

opposite, in fact, of a blue plaque. He was there as an apple core or a skip or a polystyrene cup or an oil stain or a burnt match.

**Darian Leader** When you were at the Royal College of [Art](#) in the late 1980s, you decided to invent an artist called “Gavin Turk”. Why?

**Gavin Turk** I spent a lot of time trying to think about what name I could choose to start my career as an artist. After about a year, I realised I could just use the name I actually had, that there were interesting and useful parts to it. I wanted to be able to sustain a critical distance from my art. I would look at other artists and see

that here was the work and here was the artist and there was sometimes not an obvious correlation. I realised that there was a separation between the person who's making the art and the art itself. But I was interested in putting the artist's name or signature or brand into the actual place of the artwork.

**DL** In one of your best-known works, you appear with your wife and newborn child on the cover of Hello magazine. The pose is so convincing, many people believed it to be genuine.



📷 Hoodwinking Hello!... Identity Crisis (1994).  
Photograph: Gavin Turk, Live Stock Market, Photo  
Prudence Cuming Assoc



**GT** But all the magazine copy was visibly hand-painted! This was about becoming a sort of invented celebrity while, at the same time, clearing a space for something different. There is a desire in the media to consume not only artists' works but artists themselves - to get to the details of their personal lives. But once they're in that media space, they've already become something else, and I'm interested in exploring that transition and its paradoxes. To focus on the artist's life is to stop thinking about their work and its implications.

**DL** Your work has been deeply prescient here, as social media has the potential to transform everything now into a kind of celebrity.

**GT** Yes, we are increasingly moving into a kind of a reality-show world where it's not just reality TV stars, but reality Presidents of America.

**DL** This theme of what is real and what is a copy seems central to your work.

**GT** My art always uses illusion and imitation mainly with the aim of outing various realities. I'm still interested in the question of branding and advertising here. There was a moment in early 90s fashion when there was a kind of crisis of originality. They'd started to put logos on the outside of

clothes rather than the inside. It was only a matter of time before the copies all had logos on the outside as well, and you couldn't tell the difference between a copy and the real thing.

**DL** And in art?

**GT** It's perhaps similar only more complex. Art already makes something a copy even if it's simply taking something from the real world and putting it in a gallery as an artwork. It's a basic feature of western art to emphasise the idea of originality and uniqueness here. But it's important to set that against works from Asia and non-western countries that might be more interested in iteration and derivation. Their emphasis may be on the idea of copying. You could study under a master and you would learn the master's marks and the way they presented their picture of the world. From there, you might then become a master yourself and people would be copying you.

**DL** So how does this work when you "copy", as it were, a Jackson Pollock?

**GT** I set up a framework where, at a distance from the canvas, I just repeatedly signed my name over and over again in various layers and colours, but obviously it ends up looking like someone else's signature.

**DL** A signature traditionally guarantees that a work is not a copy, yet you

relentlessly play with your own signature.

**GT** One way of thinking about art is to see it as a kind of system of social identification or social voting. So-and-so's signature is the valued signature of the moment. Anything that this signature is attached to becomes relevant, powerful, and looked at. The preconception of something that bears this signature must stop any appreciation of the work itself.

**DL** This becomes even more complex in works where you appear as another artist - as Yves Klein, as Manzoni, as Fontana, and as Jackson Pollock.

**GT** Art always uses other art for its context, so it seems that audiences will see other artists in my work anyway, so I just make more of this process and cook the books in plain sight!

**DL** What's so fascinating is that you aren't just appropriating another artist, but how culture has already appropriated them. You're working with what are already iconic images.

**GT** Yeah, in some sense I'm playing the game of being the constructed artist, part of the look and feel of me Gavin Turk as an artist. It's one of the reasons I'm interested in the processes that transform a person into an icon. People say to me, "Oh you're always doing this, you're always doing that." And I almost want to tell them, "It's not me! It's a different me!"

**DL** The masks of Gavin Turk! When the celebrated show Sensation opened at the Royal Academy, you went to the private view dressed as a tramp. Why?

**GT** It was a response to dressing up for the opening and the idea of appropriate, or rather, inappropriate behaviour. I just wondered about the rough sleeper as a social outsider living inside a town yet being outside. But really, at the time, it was more to do with fancy dress for a party than art.

**DL** A tramp is certainly not invisible at an art opening, but may be willfully ignored in a busy city street. Your bronze sculptures of sleeping bags, apple cores, refuse sacks, old cups and fag-ends make us see what we tend to ignore.

**GT** It's like life drawing: you've got to treat the negative space as just as important as the positive space. And if you look at the negative space almost like a physical thing, you find that it becomes much easier to draw what's in front of you. So sometimes through looking at what you're not supposed to look at, you're able to actually see with greater clarity. In Somebody's Son, the waxwork of a Queen's guard on duty in his sentry box represents an icon yet at the same time there is a person there who, even if he is front of us, we tend not to see. We see only the iconicity. The question of what happens when someone is transformed into an icon or symbol is important in my work.



**DL** And the fact that it's a waxwork?

**GT** Waxworks generally have a connection to popular culture rather than to fine art, so it repeats the peculiar status the sentry has, between the iconic and the individual, between popular culture and fine art.

**DL** How do people behave when they are standing next to your casts of tramps sleeping rough in a gallery?



📷 'An anti-portrait' ... Nomad. Photograph: David Levene for the Guardian



**GT** People are continually having to check the way they are behaving in galleries. Obviously the rough sleeper has been magically transposed from the street to the gallery. So now it's more of a performance of sleeping rough, but I've seen people spend a long time looking at the sleeping bag - to see if it's breathing! These pieces are in a way like props. I'm busy making things that are obviously not what they are. We are looking at a skip or a bag of rubbish while at the same time it isn't a skip or a bag of rubbish. It's a thing that's been made, then painted to look like a full bag of rubbish. But what's a bag of rubbish doing in the space? It's like the negative space again, or an anti-portrait. When the police want to find out who someone is, they go through their rubbish and look through all the things that they've at some point chosen to throw away. These leftovers and bits of waste will say a lot.

**DL** This focus on what we don't see obviously has a political dimension. How do you see the relation today of art and politics?

**GT** I think that art is political, but that its messages are much more poetic and much more ambiguous and ambivalent than straightforward political discourse. Contemporary art is made for a large audience, and so it necessarily has this potential to impact, even if a lot of the art world is controlled by an elite. When I was asked to make a work for Zaha Hadid's Mind Zone in the Millennium Dome, my first suggestion was a sculpture of Che Guevara in military fatigues. Marconi, the sponsor, weren't too happy about this! Art has a power to sanction the space it's in, and so the question of its political resonance is always present. I do obviously feel pushed by political events to make work and I would say that yes,

**DL** You've said that the most successful art is the art that has been most misunderstood by the greatest number of people. What do you think has been most misunderstood about your work?

**GT** When I say it's misunderstood by the largest number of people it means that they are able to engage with it, but from totally different perspectives. They can latch on to it and can feel a sense of belonging or of enjoyment or of connection with that object or thing.

**DL** And the process for you?

**GT** I feel like I make artworks to solve problems, but as I solve these problems I create a lot of other problems. So I then have to make another artwork to solve those problems. And then I make other problems in the process - and so on.

● [Gavin Turk: Who What When Where How and Why](#) is at Newport Street Gallery, London, 23 November to 19 March.

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