

# The original Young Turk

In praise of a genuine YBA outsider

By Sophie Hastings

**GAVIN** Turk's spectacularly understated degree show at the Royal College of Art has gone down in contemporary art history. *Cave* consisted of a blue plaque bearing the words "Borough of Kensington/Gavin Turk/Sculptor/Worked Here/1989-1991", hung in a bare, white studio. The title referred to Plato's "Allegory Of The Cave", taken from the *The Republic*; the empty room referenced Yves Klein's 1958 Paris exhibition, *The Void*, which comprised a deserted gallery space. The work itself, says Turk, "was about not existing, the death of the author, and having to work within a pre-existing context – what is creativity within this context; at what point does an artist attain autonomy?"

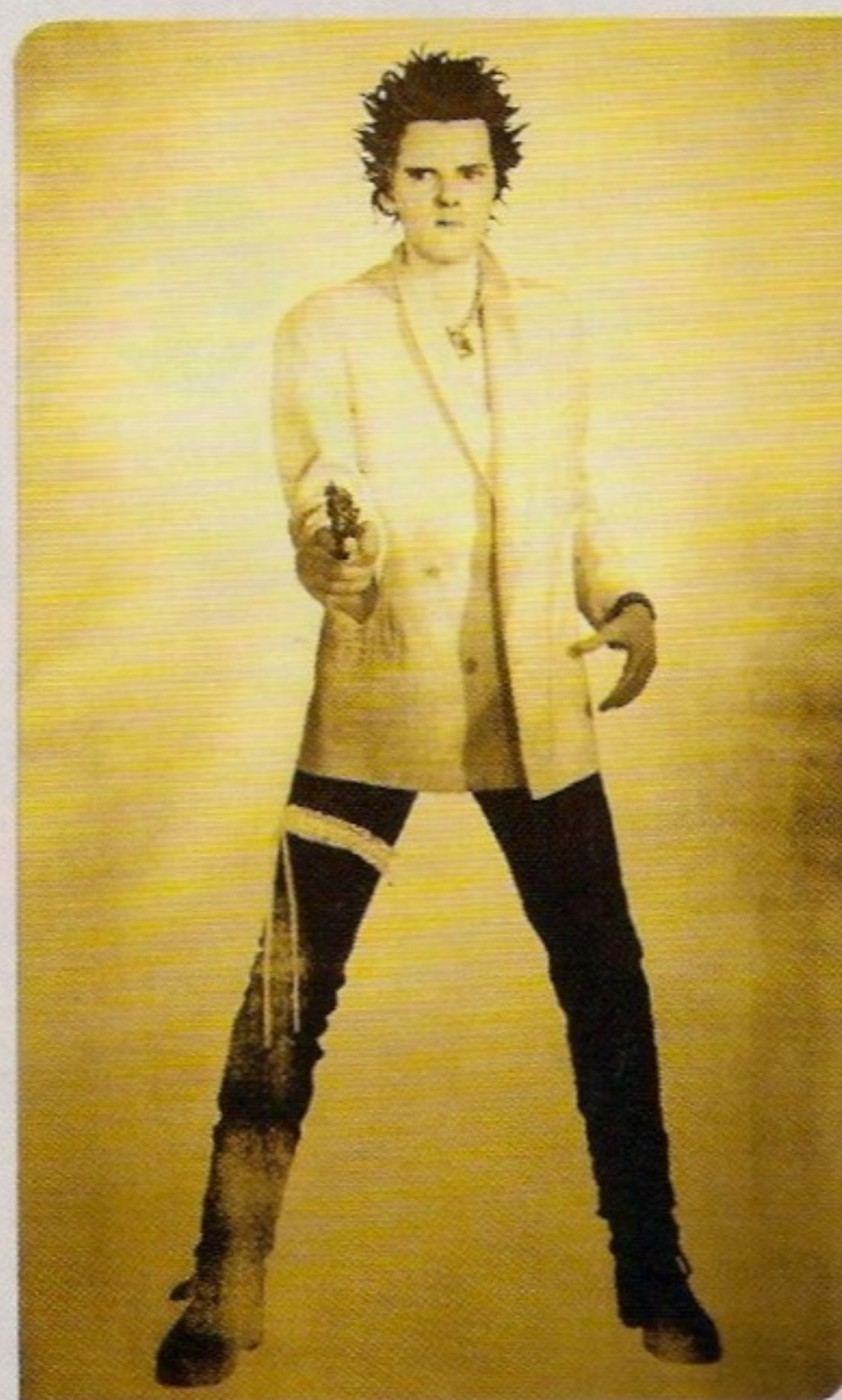
Famously, the Royal College failed Turk. Perhaps the tutors felt his blatantly self-referential show was symptomatic of the attention-grabbing shock tactics of his about-to-be-famous generation of Young British Artists, later dubbed the YBAs. Certainly, Turk was part of this movement. Tracey Emin's choice of title for her first solo show, at London's White Cube, *My Major Retrospective*, in 1993, was a nod to Turk's plaque, conscious or not. These days, an edition of the plaque hangs in London's Groucho Club, keeping company with the works of every high-profile British artist to have propped up the bar, from Peter Blake to Damien Hirst. Yet Turk has yet to experience his own retrospective. So he's publishing a monograph instead – a nudge, perhaps, to the Serpentine, the Hayward, or whichever institution is first to see the light.

Turk's output is prolific, funny and subversive, underpinned by a rigorous intellect. In his sprawling studio in east London's Hackney Wick, the kitchen cabinet is filled with sculptures of heads and penises; walls and doors are studded with drawings, photographs of Turk with half his facial hair shaved off – "me as Man Ray" – and screen prints of "White Van Man" from his series *Transit Disaster* (2012), and the floors are

scattered with waxworks, an animatronic sea captain and bronze castings of machinery. An assistant paints a cast of an outsized exhaust pipe silver; other staff organise shipping to exhibitions, participation in the Venice Biennale, proofs of the book and Turk's schedule, which includes teaching at Bath Spa University, DJ-ing and public talks.

Turk is collected by museums and individuals, shown by galleries all over the world and has made several public works, including the 12-metre-high "Nail" (2011), which pierces the pavement behind St Paul's Cathedral. The reason curators may be unwilling to take him on, he says, is that "my work is multifarious; you can't pin me down to a single theme or style and curators don't like that, it's scary. I do everything an artist can do – performance, video, painting, sculpture, printmaking, found objects, construction, models. I'm a human foundation course, a walking art school. My love of making is an extension of thinking about things."

This is especially clear in his iconic bronze casts of black bin bags. Beautifully wrought objects that are at once the epitome of what we do not



**My way:** Gavin Turk's self-portrait as Sid Vicious (doing Elvis Presley)

## ALSO SHOWING



**Eberhard Havekost:**  
**Cosmos Now**  
White Cube,  
London SW1  
Until 11 May.  
[whitecube.com](http://whitecube.com)

**Barnaby Furnas**  
Victoria Miro  
Gallery, London N1  
Until 25 May.  
[victoria-miro.com](http://victoria-miro.com)

**Man Ray Portraits**  
National Portrait  
Gallery,  
London WC2  
Until 27 May.  
[npg.org.uk](http://npg.org.uk)

**Richard Patterson**  
(above)  
Timothy Taylor  
Gallery, London W1  
Until 1 June.  
[timothytaylorgallery.com](http://timothytaylorgallery.com)

**George Bellows:**  
**Modern American  
Life**  
Burlington House,  
London W1  
Until 9 June.  
[burlingtonhouse.org](http://burlingtonhouse.org)

**Bernadette  
Corporation: 2000  
Wasted Years**  
ICA, London SW1  
Until 9 June.  
[ica.org.uk](http://ica.org.uk)

**Souzou: Outsider  
Art From Japan**  
The Wellcome  
Collection,  
London NW1  
Until 30 June.  
[wellcomecollection.org](http://wellcomecollection.org)


**Chris Levine: Light**  
The Fine Art  
Society, London W1  
17 May – 15 June.  
[faslondon.com](http://faslondon.com)

value and precious objects we want to own, the bags are layered with meaning. "They're about waste, what we throw away, which is a negative of what we keep."

Turk has proved to be such a thinker it's hard to imagine now that the Royal College mistook his conceptualism for arrogance; but perhaps they didn't. "They probably realised it would be good for me to be failed," he says. "It allowed my work to define what's acceptable. I stepped over the imaginary line, and the fact the college put a boundary in place is amazing in art terms."

*Cave* was a precursor to Turk's continuing preoccupation with signature, explored in the ubiquitous featuring of his own autograph as subject. Scrawled in black pigment on white canvas, picked out in neon or glass, written at the bottom of a mirror, emerging in bas-relief from a canvas of polystyrene balls... Turk's name is ever-present, even when it's not. His waxwork sculptures of himself as Sid Vicious and Elvis Presley and his Warhol-style screen prints of himself as Warhol are eerie examinations of signature, celebrity and identity, the familiarity of these icons rendered strange and unnerving by the realisation that it is Turk's face looking back at you. There is the added visual joke that when Turk made these pieces his face was unknown but now he is a recognisable artist, thus the celebrity face once replaced by bald anonymity is now filled with the features of a key YBA.

"There's a conversation to be had about celebrity, because it has an effect on the way people see your work," says Turk. "If you don't recognise a signature it has no value; as you become well known, people attribute value to it and they no longer stand outside the work – they lose their ability to be critical."

Let's hope at least one of our art institutions has retained enough critical sense to give Turk the retrospective he deserves.  The monograph *Gavin Turk* (Prestel, £45) is published this month. Turk and Jarvis Cocker will be debating *Art & Fame: What Celebrity Does To Identity* at the Queen Elizabeth Hall, London SE1 ([southbankcentre.co.uk](http://southbankcentre.co.uk)) on 24 May. The artist also features in *Glasstress: White Light/White Heat* at the Venice Biennale (31 May – 24 November. [labiennale.org](http://labiennale.org)).