

## WILL THE REAL GAVIN TURK PLEASE STAND UP?

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He's 'been' celebrity icons such as Sid Vicious and Elvis, Marxist revolutionary Che Guevara and art superstars Andy Warhol and Jackson Pollock, but who is the real Gavin Turk? Patricia Ellis meets the artist, the brand, and Hackney's own thinking person's YBA, to discuss bright lights, appropriation and lobsters.

*Turk Leaning and Painting, 2009 © Gavin Turk*



**Patricia Ellis** — Your studio is one of my favourite places in London. It's nestled away on a quiet side street in Hackney Wick, surrounded by industrial sites – it's something of a hidden gem. Inside it's sort of a combination of Andy Warhol's Factory and a French chalet. There is always a load of people here, and music playing... it's really social; you've got espresso and the kitchen thing going on, and it's all focused on producing your work. It's not quite a factory, maybe more like a groovy cottage industry.

**Gavin Turk** — I think the culture of the studio is really important; to have a good creative atmosphere. The studio becomes a helpful thing, it starts to make the work itself. I come in and can see how to make the work because the studio's shaped in a certain way. Because I make work in so many different ways – if it's clay, or woodwork, painting, printmaking, spraying stuff, sanding stuff, grinding stuff... all those things are possible here. They all happen back to back in different parts of the studio. The studio is laid out like a tool, like an expanded drawing board.

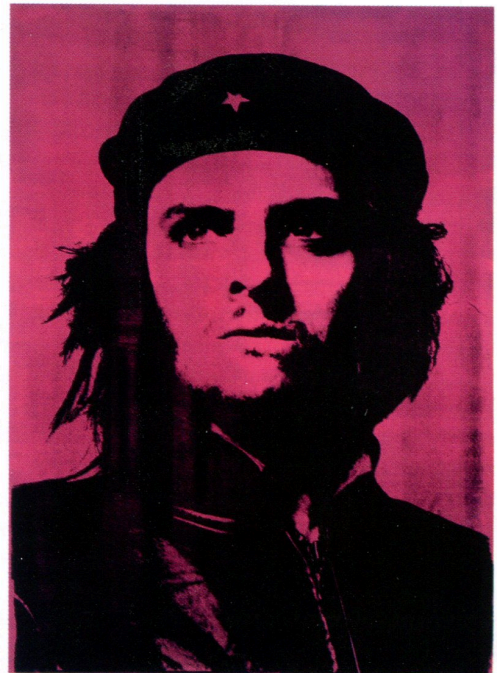
**PE** — What are you working on now?

**GT** — We just did a show in Monaco, next is a neon art show at the Bowes Museum in County Durham; curated by Greville Worthington. Neon's quite strange because neon itself is a sign. It was developed for making signs, and it seems that everything you make in neon is already a sign – a sign of something else and what it is. I made a neon sculpture in 1995 which is that one that's in the kitchen, the lobster. It looks like a sign for a restaurant or something. But then the lobster was some sort of classic symbol, like something in a Dutch still life painting... paintings of opulence.

**PE** — Neon is opulence: Las Vegas glam... Or a low-rent promise of it, anyway.

**GT** — Sort of... I suppose neon is on the way out. It's being replaced by LED. And there's the other thing about neon lights: Georges Claude, who invented them, wanted to promote the Nazi party using neon signs. There's an odd propaganda involved with them. I spoke with a child about one of the more recent neon pieces I've done, the neon door frame (Port 2012), and he said: "Wow, I love neon lights and this one's saying what it feels like. It's very attractive and makes you feel all excited to be going towards it and when you get close it makes you feel really sleepy." I thought yes, it does do that. It almost stop-checks you when you get close to it. You don't want to be there or look at it too

*Pink Che*, 2005  
© Gavin Turk



long, but at the same time you're attracted to it. And I suppose that's why neon light becomes a portal or a doorway. It advertises something to go through – a sickly threshold.

**PE** — I'm really intrigued by this show, because neon's such an off-beat thing to do at the moment.

**GT** — I was invited to do an exhibition in a space which doesn't have any windows. It's this totally artificial space, very big and beautiful. It's in an old fashioned museum of decorative arts from the 18th and 19th centuries; inside the museum is this room where they're doing contemporary exhibitions. So I thought it might be nice to take some section of my work – I did that lobster neon in 1995 – and every now and again I've made another neon sculpture, like an eye seeing something, a giant egg, a door, a match on fire... I think there's about eight. I've never seen them together as a body of work, so we thought maybe we could extract those and they would look fantastic.

**PE** — I imagine it as a collection of glowing symbols, like icons or pictographs, a bit quasi-religious.

**GT** — Maybe; I imagine it looking a bit like a light shop. They also want me to make something for the outside of the building. So that's the plan at the moment.

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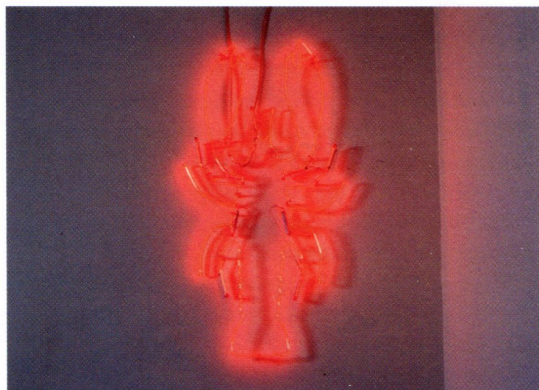
**PE** — I'm thinking about what you said about the propaganda aspect. Do you ever think the brand Gavin Turk is sometime taken too much at face value?

**GT** — As someone who spends a lot of time thinking about brands, I realise that lots of people *don't* spend so long thinking about brands. They just invest in brands as a kind of shorthand. The thinking's already been done for them – and that's part of the establishment of the brand. It's like, you can believe in this brand because all the thinking has already been done for you, so all you have to do is remember the name of the brand. But for me, it's interesting to know what that thinking is. I think brands always need deciphering, they need to be challenged. There's always a point. If we look at hierarchies, whatever those hierarchies are: art institutions or museums or various public and important galleries, in effect they're just some person's whim, or some kind of collective decision of what is or isn't 'in' or 'out'. It starts to be quite interesting when you give yourself the authority to say: "What are the terms of engagement of this museum? Why does it choose to support certain kinds of art? Why does it want to see itself in certain ways? What is its agenda? How is it pushing forward into the future, or protecting our past and now? How is it representing us? Or is it for someone else, and who are those people?"

**PE** — So how do you answer those same questions in your own practice? You choose very specific artists to appropriate: you're claiming that power of selection for yourself, you're determining cultural value. How are you using that power?

**GT** — I use different artists' work in very different ways. Sometimes I use art that I believe to be so well known that if I put my face in it, or my own input into that work, the audience will recognize, not that it's my work, but that it's not this cult artwork. They'll recognize the cult artwork and they'll recognize that the thing in front of them is a fake, that it's unreal. That it's a kind of a picture of a picture. That it's something wrong, that it's something different. But hopefully they'll also understand that it was them who recognized the difference in the first place, so that they will then be able to construct their own thought process, to slow their thought process down, and go "Oh, what was it about the original thing that I was responding to, that I was buying into? What is the thing I'm now looking at? Where does this differ?"

*Still Life with Lobster,  
Red neon, 1995  
© Gavin Turk*



What are the parts that are now missing?" Through the bit that's not the cult object or not the known highbrow art object, fine art product, they might start to see what they're looking for, or what the actual art product is about, what it stands for.

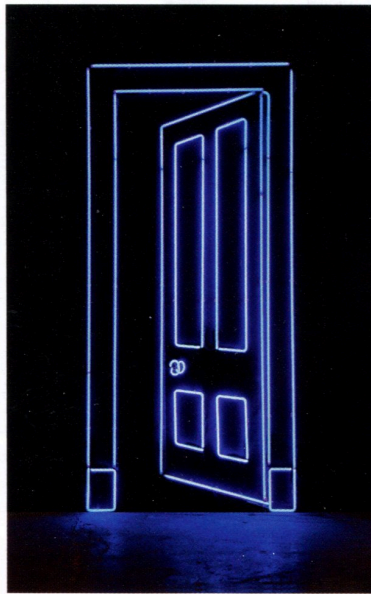
**PE** — I think this concept of originality is one of the most radical elements of your work. When you make a replica or quotation, you've got the aura of the original plus your own aura of authorship added to it. You're placing your own celebrity art brand on top of another celebrity brand. You've got seven little Manzoni replicas lined up in the kitchen. It's the worst way to see them; they're just sat on the windowsill next to the tea towels... but they're the first thing I clocked. They're like a super-power: Manzoni + Turk + lots of them. It's a bit like Las Vegas – the excess of aura provides a context for fakeness to exceed the original.

**GT** — I can't think of anything worse than going to see, say, the Pyramids in Las Vegas rather than going to see the real thing. I suppose the attraction is that they're a) not the pyramids and b) more glamorous, more packaged. So you can feel the surface of them better than the real ones which are maybe too mystical and distracting... esoteric. In Las Vegas, they have a gettable, eatable, bite-able, doable quality to them. I love this idea of a building aura or a more glowing aura. I think the things that I make puncture the aura, they involve themselves. I'm fascinated with this authenticity. To enjoy art is to enjoy the physicality of art. You are here in the world with this relationship with this sculpture/painting thing. You have to be there in order to see it. I know now with photography and digital media we're moving into a place where the authentic object, the actual object, is more like

text in a book. We can feel that the text in the book is the same in France as it is in England. We pick up the book and it's got the same words and we can attribute the same value to it. Unless you want to get into first editions or signed manuscripts, then you've got back into that real object. I suppose antiques get like that as well. When things get rare they have that sense of aura. Masterpieces almost seem to glow because they've invested with so much "I need to look at this as hard as I can because when I go away I won't be able to see it any more." The object seems to glow in the aura of all this looking that's been attributed to it. Maybe when you take one of these things, and when you incorporate it into your work... I don't think I increase the aura, I just transform it a little bit, make patterns with it. So it's like you think you can see the aura, or recognise the aura, but it's different, a bit off-kilter.

**PE —** Your work is often discussed as appropriation, but I think it's far more about re-enactment. It's not only about styling yourself as Warhol in a screen print for example, but how you go about doing it: it's a kind of performance or 'spiritual' channelling. People are really familiar with your early works like when you modelled yourself as Sid Vicious, who partly modelled himself on Elvis. But I think with your most recent works the re-enactment becomes quite complicated, through collaboration and the author/power questions this evokes. Like working with prisoners to produce your Boetti tapestries — they became a symbolic exchange for Boetti's Afghani guilds. It's an elaborate re-staging of process as much as form.

**GT —** I think that's been another running theme. I did something called *A Night Only... A Night Out With Gavin Turk* in 1993 which consisted of selling the artwork to 20 different people for £100, getting the two thousand pounds and creating a stage and making a sign — then standing on the stage being photographed with the sponsors. The photograph was the artwork that they got for being involved with the exhibition. It was in the back half of a pub, but it was set up like a design stand at Earl's Court or Olympia. There was this panelled wooden floor with a plinth that came out of it. This was relatively early. I remember seeing pictures of Andy Warhol cowering beside an empty plinth in a club, and I don't really know what it was, but apparently it was a kind of performance he did in a night club. I didn't know exactly what I was doing, but there was a kind of relationship to what Warhol did.



**PE —** Today's context of celebrity culture didn't exist when you started making your work. We had Warhol, but we didn't have reality TV, or *Heat* magazine, or YouTube. The idea that anybody can be a celebrity, anybody can be a commodity, didn't exist. In many ways your early works seemed quite prophetic, whereas the works you're making now seem to be questioning that economy. Or now we read your work in relation to hyper-capitalism, democratization, and cultural exhaustion.

**GT —** I quite often find myself trying to tap into various kinds of cultural iconography — culture is like how you get out of bed in the morning, it's just instinctive. Sometimes I think, in very sweet historical terms, that fine art itself is an historical thing. Like screen printing is an old fashioned thing to be doing, it's disappearing. It's hard to find people who still do screen printing. I think art's tied to art forms. I sometimes like traditional art forms. It's not entirely how I work, but I often find myself having quite nostalgic thoughts about art. I think somehow art is playing a kind of catch up game. I sometimes wonder how effective it is as a solution, as something that can be a progressive force, because it's often looking backwards.

— GAVIN TURK'S EPONYMOUS MONOGRAPH HAS JUST BEEN PUBLISHED BY PRESTEL WITH ESSAYS BY IAN SINCLAIR AND JUDITH COLLINS.

**above left:**  
*Port (Blue)*, 2012  
© Gavin Turk

**above right:**  
*White Pop*, 2011  
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