

PROFILE

UNTITLED

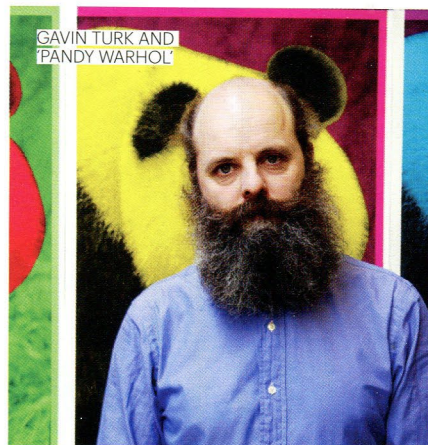
[Turk is Delight]

Celebrated Young British Artist
Gavin Turk on Andy Warhol, failing his
degree and art without a name

Words **EDWINA LANGLEY**

Scepticism is a common response to conceptual art, usually born from this critique: 'I don't get it and therefore I don't like it'. In his *Art Review* essay 'Art Bollocks' (1999), Brian Ashbee argues it is a valid criticism; that the 'experience' of works such as installation art and conceptual art are often meaningless 'without... critical text to support it'. I, for one, have spent many an afternoon staring dumfounded at inexplicable creations entitled 'Untitled', so it's hard for me not to find affiliation with this.

I realise this is rather a negative introduction to give the conceptual artist, Gavin Turk. But I feel it's important to acknowledge this reservation in order to properly emphasise how extensively Turk bucks the trend. Yes, he was part of the notorious Young British Artists movement, and creates conceptual artworks that benefit from verbal explanations. But Turk's work is supposed to be understood – he doesn't pander to experts or critics, Gavin Turk panders to you, the audience. 'A huge percentage of art is the audience,' he explains at the very start of our



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conversation. 'Obviously you need something there... but ultimately the thing comes to life through the audience.'

Is it sheepish to admit the sceptic in me is instantly won over? Though on some level I already knew he valued his 'everyman' audience. And that is because his work appeals to me – and I know nothing about art. Take, for instance, his piece currently on display as part of the 'Here Today...' exhibition in Holborn. Marking the 50th Anniversary of The International Union for Conservation of Nature's (IUCN's) Red List of Threatened

and Endangered Species, the exhibition highlights the importance of wildlife conservation and the IUCN. Like much of his work, Turk's offering nods to Warhol, and here, to Warhol's Endangered series (also exhibited) through Turk's depiction of a panda. Instead of black and white colouring however, Turk's print is red – to highlight the panda's presence on the Red List. You don't have to know that to get something from it though. You only have to read the title: 'Pandy Warhol'. When I read it, I laughed out loud. Was that the right response?

'I tried to make it as humorous as I could,' Gavin explains. 'I thought that we could [make] wallpaper, [and make] an environment. And then I thought, Maybe I can make one with the panda, which is still on the [IUCN] list. Pandas are showstoppers. If you have a panda in a zoo, for instance, that's sort of national news – if it gets pregnant. So I ended up with the panda, and then because I really wanted to make sure everybody was aware of the Warhol connection, I just thought we should call it: 'Pandy Warhol!'

Gavin Turk was born in Guilford in 1967, the son of a successful jeweller. Whilst he admits he loved art as a child

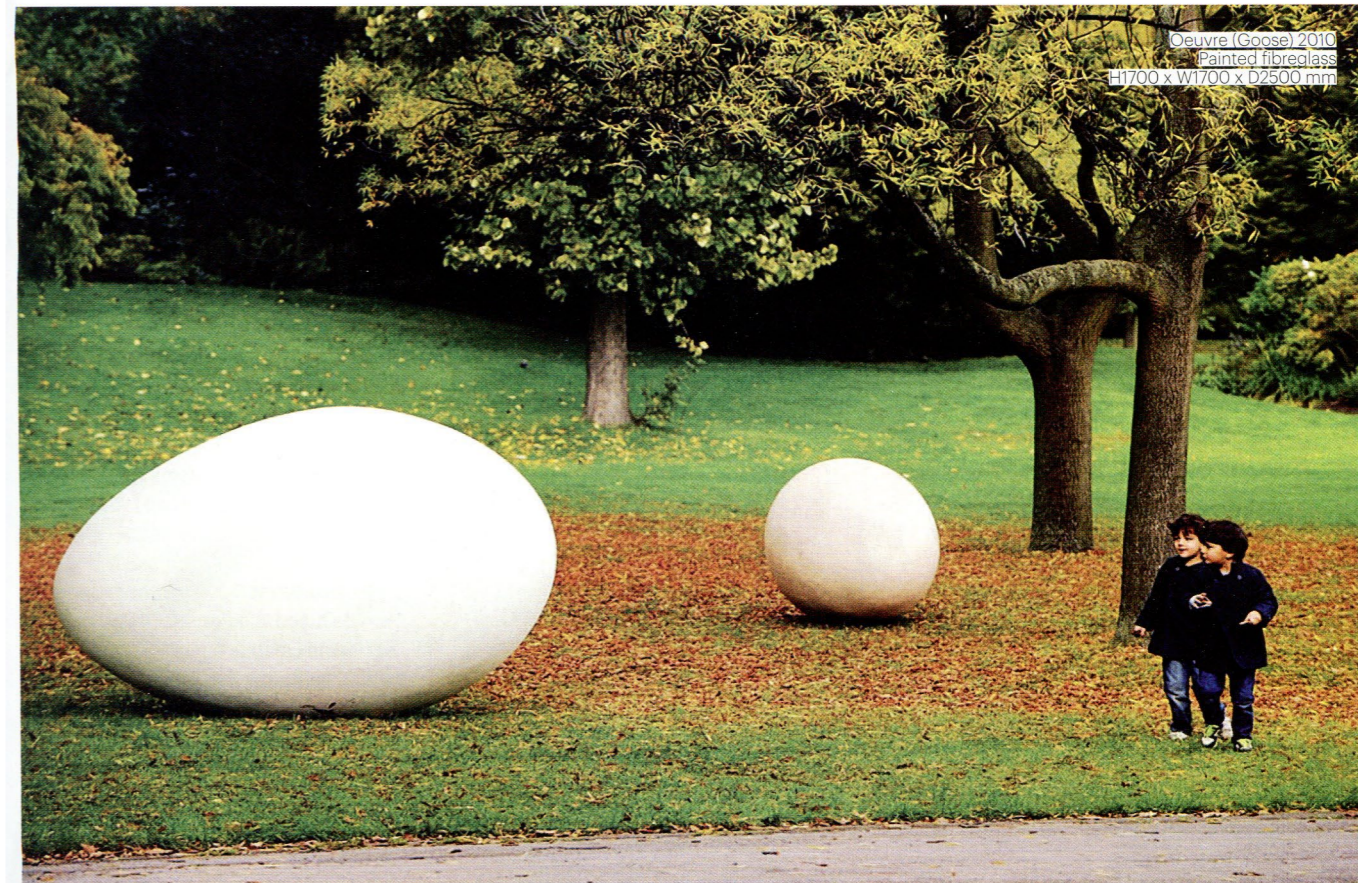
Untitled (Rubbing) 2013
 Rubbing on paper
 H910 x W750 mm



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Oeuvre (Goose) 2010
 Painted fibreglass
 H1700 x W1700 x D2500 mm



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– ‘if I had friends over, I’d say: “Let’s go upstairs and do some drawings!” – he was more focused on science. ‘My daughter asked me when she was little: “At what point did you realise that you wanted to be an artist?” And my response was: “I drifted into it.” I didn’t actively pursue it.

‘I never really thought of it as a career as something you would do... Sometimes I felt like I was a commentator. I was not ‘an artist’. I was standing on the edge and looking into [it]. I was always quite uncomfortable calling myself an artist. I didn’t think it was an appropriate title.’

These observational skills arguably explain why conceptual art is his forte. His work is clever because *he* is clever. Indeed, Turk’s intellectual credentials are often lauded: ‘Part-wit, part-philosopher’, quoted the *Financial Times*. But when I echo such praise back at him, he brushes it off. ‘Don’t worry about that. Don’t worry about what other people say. I’m just a nice guy – although, no one wants to be ‘nice’...’

When Turk left school he enrolled in the Chelsea School of Art, which in the 80s, was just off the King’s Road. ‘It was very fashion-based and it was great to be studying there, because you could enjoy the King’s Road and not really be part of it.’ He graduated on to the Royal College of Art to get an MA, but as has been

well documented, he never succeeded. Why? Because, instead of displaying a final show of work (like everyone else), he whitewashed his allocated space and displayed at the end of it a Heritage-style blue plaque with the words: ‘Gavin Turk/ Sculptor/ worked here/ 1989-1991’. Uproar arose from the ‘stunt’ and he subsequently failed his degree; it even made the newspapers.

●● YOU MIGHT *have*
found an error IN MY
 WORK! ●●

Talking to Turk now, however, I just can’t understand where this ‘arrogance’ came from. Was he surprised that he failed? ‘Yeah, I thought it was really unfair,’ he says earnestly. ‘I wanted to get my degree, I wasn’t trying to do anything really different. I think the main complication was that Jocelyn Stevens had been offered the job as the head of English Heritage, but he hadn’t told people at the Royal College he was going to leave. At the English Heritage, his job was to award these blue plaques. I think

he thought I was making a comment about him.’ So actually, it was Stevens being arrogant? ‘He thought it was arrogant of me!’ Turk counters. ‘In terms of art and in terms of the Royal College, which is based in Kensington and Chelsea, it was about souvenirs, memorabilia, memory, nostalgia, the English culture. It was about Ruskin, William Morris, the ceramic plaque... It was about being and not being.’

Now that he’s explained it, of course it makes sense. And what a clever idea it is too. But its title, ‘Cave’, illustrates none of the above. Perhaps the scepticism of the ‘I don’t get it!’ crowd was justified.

That said, at least he gave it a name. In fact, Turk gives all his works names, something I discovered when examining his artwork in preparation for our conversation. I found particular pleasure in ‘Chewing Gum Earrings’ and his various (and numerous) egg-focused creations (the symbolic properties of the egg appear in much of his work). This was, however, until I came across a piece which really put my back up. It was a rubbing on some paper, and it was called, infuriatingly, ‘Untitled [Rubbing]’. Oh, how the mighty fall! How typically ‘YBA’ not to bother even giving it a name...

‘I don’t know what that is!’ he replies in surprise, when I demand an explanation.



'It's really rare that I have pieces called 'Untitled'.' He laughs awkwardly and I tell him it surprised me too. I know he likes his audience to think about his work, and I *did* think about it, but it totally duped me nonetheless. Turk finds all this very amusing. 'I don't know what this work is, I might have to look it up. It might be a terrible mistake – you might have found an error in my work!' He goes quiet down the telephone and I assume he is looking it up.

'You may have found something here...

What it was... I made a white Transit van into a cube. That square is literally a rubbing off the top, like taking a print off the cube of a compacted van. If it was [meant to be] called 'Untitled [Rubbing]', obviously I quite liked the idea that 'Untitled' was a rhetorical title. From the Fifties onwards, through museums and galleries, a title had to be attributed to an artwork. And some artists refused to deal with it, so the work would get called 'Untitled'. Then artists themselves just started calling their work 'Untitled'. And some artists have whole [series] just called 'Untitled'. A total cop out, I interrupt. 'I agree,' he replies. '... and I like the idea that *you* [noticed]. I like to think that I worked with titles to the point where when you learnt something was called 'Untitled' you thought about it.' He cracks up and I try not to find it funny but am secretly thrilled to play guinea pig to his particular brand of conceptualism. I tell him I now think it should stay as 'Untitled'. 'Oh, alright,' he concedes, 'you're just causing trouble.'

●● IN ART *there is a* *history which IS [ITS]* CONTEXT ●●

Ironically, it was the furore around Turk's MA which arguably launched his career: His work caught the attention of art collector Charles Saatchi, who bought the first piece Turk ever sold. This led to Turk's absorption into the Young British Artists movement (alongside Damien Hirst and Sarah Lucas) and his 'Pop' waxwork (of himself as Sid Vicious in the pose of Andy Warhol's 'Elvis Presley') featured in Saatchi's 'Sensation' exhibition at the Royal Academy in 1997. But for someone with such strong ideas of his own, I wonder why Turk continues to find inspiration in Warhol. 'Andy Warhol is a really difficult act to follow,' he replies. 'His work changed the



Pop 1993
Waxwork in vitrine
H2790 x W1150 x D1150 mm

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way that art works... It almost became the cliché of modern art... Like the fabric which artists today have to move through. And I think I got caught in the net.' He ponders this for a second. 'It's something to do with standing on the back of giants.'

I'd argue that Turk is fast becoming a 'giant' himself, having enjoyed monumental successes, with solo exhibitions all over the world. He says he can only accept he's an artist now because: 'I haven't really done anything else with my life'. And whilst the married father of three refers to himself as 'middle aged' (he's 47), obviously he'll forever be a 'Young' British Artist. 'I know!' he exclaims. 'I can't tell, is that a good thing?' Would he rather be 'Old' British Artist? 'I've got a huge great big beard at the moment so I not only feel middle aged, but I also look like I'm from another age – sort of Victorian.'

I think Turk probably *is* from the Victorian age – I can imagine him as an Arnold, Ruskin or Morris. This leads

neatly to the topic of history, which is most important to Turk. 'In art, there is a history, which is [its] context,' he says. '[It's] part of the process of coming into an understanding of art. When the audience is looking at something that is 'new', they use the tools and the experience and the knowledge that they already have of art to look at it... [So] when we look at a new piece of art, it's always going to be understood through a reading and understanding of art.'

Through the work of Gavin Turk, I have come a small way towards reading and understanding conceptual art. I am now no longer a sceptic. That said, I'll never accept the 'Untitled' – unless it's that Transit van rubbing, of course. It takes Turk's type of thought for a title, to entitle the use of 'Untitled'. ♦

'Here Today...' is curated by Susie Allen, Laura Culpan and Dea Vanagan of Artwise. The Old Sorting Office, 21-33 New Oxford Street, WCI; heretoday.org