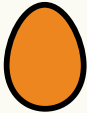


# History of Art

## Gavin Turk



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**Mimmo Scognamiglio Artecontemporanea**

**November 24<sup>th</sup> 2017**

—

**February 15<sup>th</sup> 2018**

'History of Art' is a body of work that illustrates Gavin Turk's ongoing exploration of authenticity, originality and how we value artworks and build artistic reputations. The very first history of art was Giorgio Vasari's 'Lives of the Artists' published in 1550. Vasari, an accomplished artist and architect himself, created the genre of artist biographies which became central to the subsequent study of art history. His stories about the most prominent Italian Renaissance artists are full of amusing anecdotes – albeit often fictional or exaggerated – that have served to mythologise them for posterity.

Turk shows how the myth-making process with modern artists relates to the perception of their works as a series of stylistic clichés or stereotypes that in turn become their 'trade-marks'. His practice has been to re-examine and sometimes subvert the foundations of art history, by playing around with the imagery, and questioning how the appraisal, authenticity and commodity value of works of art affect their meaning. He considers that it is important for contemporary artists to question the inherent values of art since the history of art is not necessarily final but has been formed by influential tastemakers, museums and collectors according to their different criteria or agendas.

Turk's work draws inspiration from specific modern masters – Josef Albers, Joseph Beuys, Alighiero Boetti, César Baldaccini, Salvador Dalí, Marcel Duchamp, Lucio Fontana, Donald Judd, Yves Klein, René Magritte and Jackson Pollock. He has also created a work in response to Damien Hirst's more contemporary medicine cabinets. Turk has played with the recycling of art history throughout his oeuvre. His responses to other artist's innovative works play with the way they can be reduced to stereotypes that become their recognisable distinctive 'brands'. He works with imagery and motifs, often combining two or three artist references in a single painting or sculpture. He then reshapes these art historical 'clichés' together with his own ideas to create something new and different.

Turk's inspiration for making these tribute works hovers between their aesthetic inspiration and their art-historical acclaim, which are in a sense interconnected. Some of his works are made in homage to the modern masters while others he regards as

more malleable imagery to bend to his own aesthetic. Regardless of his intuitive interpretation of the works, different aspects evolve unwittingly that Turk relates to what he calls the 'accidental' nature of art.

His appropriations or borrowing of other artists' stylistic motifs and imagery raises issues of authenticity and originality. In common with terms such as 'authentic' and 'genuine', the meaning of 'original' remains ambiguous according to its context. It is usually applied to a work to distinguish it from a copy or imitation. But even a forgery of a historic painting is not completely inauthentic since it is simultaneously both a fake and an authentic work of the forger who made it. A museum may display an Old Master painting that is authentic but exhibit it inauthentically, for example, presenting it in a spacious, white, brightly-lit gallery when it would, at the time of making, have been shown in an ornate candle-lit church.

Authenticity shouldn't be simply limited to the correct identification of the origins, authorship, or provenance of a work of art since it has more to do with its intrinsic character as a true expression of an artist's values and beliefs. This may lead us on to consider whether any work of art is completely original and if this really matters beyond legal copyright implications. Like the popular saying 'there is nothing new under the sun', our present is always linked to the past in some way. Pre-existing influence, both conscious and unconscious, is always present in a work of art since humans are natural borrowers and copying is part of the learning process from childhood.

Cultural appropriation has occurred ever since people were first impressed by other cultures, whether these were Greek, Persian, Egyptian, Chinese or Meso-American. As Picasso's is reputed to have said 'Good artists copy, great artists steal.' In the 19th century Vincent Van Gogh was among many artists who were influenced by Japanese prints and woodcuts. Picasso, Matisse and the Cubists were famously inspired by African sculptures that were exhibited in Paris in the early years of the 20th century. On the other hand it could be argued that every work an artist does by hand is 'unique' and therefore original.

In his 1935 essay 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction'<sup>2</sup> Walter Benjamin states that original works of art have an 'aura', a unique aesthetic authority, that is absent in printed reproductions. John Berger expressed similar views on authenticity in this groundbreaking book and TV series 'Ways of Seeing' (1972).<sup>3</sup> Berger maintained that our perception is governed by what we know and what we believe, rather than what is 'real'.

Turk has created a response to Berger's original Penguin book jacket for his exhibition invitation and the cover of this catalogue. But he replaces Magritte's 'The Key to Dreams' (1930), which appears as the central image on the cover of 'Ways of Seeing', with his own six-paneled work entitled 'Widower'. This is directly inspired by Duchamp's 'Fresh Widow' (1920), as if to prompt questions about art and its relationship to thought, reality and language.

Berger's Marxist view of art history was considered radical in its day since it challenged the existing elitist notion of connoisseurship and the importance studying the iconography. The History of Art has also perpetuated the existence of a canon or timeline of artists that are considered 'Old Masters' or 'Great Artists' which was Eurocentric and male dominated.

Since the late 1970s the American artist Sherrie Levine has also used appropriation in her practice. By using photography to modify and re-contextualise other artists' iconic images she critiques the notion of the male 'Artist Genius' which is so prevalent in traditional art history. Artists have also successfully challenged the misguided narrative that art history has been an evolutionary progression from lesser to greater artistic maturity, which had clearly been based on the assumption that non-Western art is culturally inferior.

In this exhibition Gavin Turk has responded to some of the many artists who have inspired and influenced him, particularly in terms of re-assigning or dismantling modernist ideas. Like Duchamp Turk uses puns and wordplays as a central element within his work. His carefully-considered borrowings critique the notion of originality, authorship and our perception of the historic avant-garde. Using the principal of the readymade, Turk uses discarded found objects, transforming the valueless into the 'precious'. Through the validating function of the artist's signature as characterised by Duchamp, Turk is also able to turn what would seem like a copy or replica into a bona fide work of art.

This confirms and celebrates Duchamp's notion that a work of art does not really reveal itself by its physical image but only by its signature. Turk uses his own signature as a recurrent motif through which to explore the way an artist's mark can embody aesthetic and commercial value. It is also sometimes integral to his artwork, functioning in a similar way to a cool brand logo. In this way the signature not only guarantees the authenticity of the artwork but also designates its cultural and market value.

Turk's borrowings could seem to indirectly question the artist's role. A parallel could be made with Roland Barthes' proposal that a work exists as an entity independent of its creator's motives or biographical context and that the creator exists to produce but not to explain the work.<sup>5</sup> It is the impression that the work has on the viewer that is most important and it may continue to gather deeper resonances throughout art history. Turk's project doesn't view the history of art as something that happened, rather as something that continues to happen. He is very skilled at adopting the guise of other artists' work and even creates photographic portraits where he convincingly mimics their characteristic poses, facial expressions and hairstyles.

2. Benjamin, W. *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* (1935)

3. Berger, J. *Ways of Seeing* (1972)

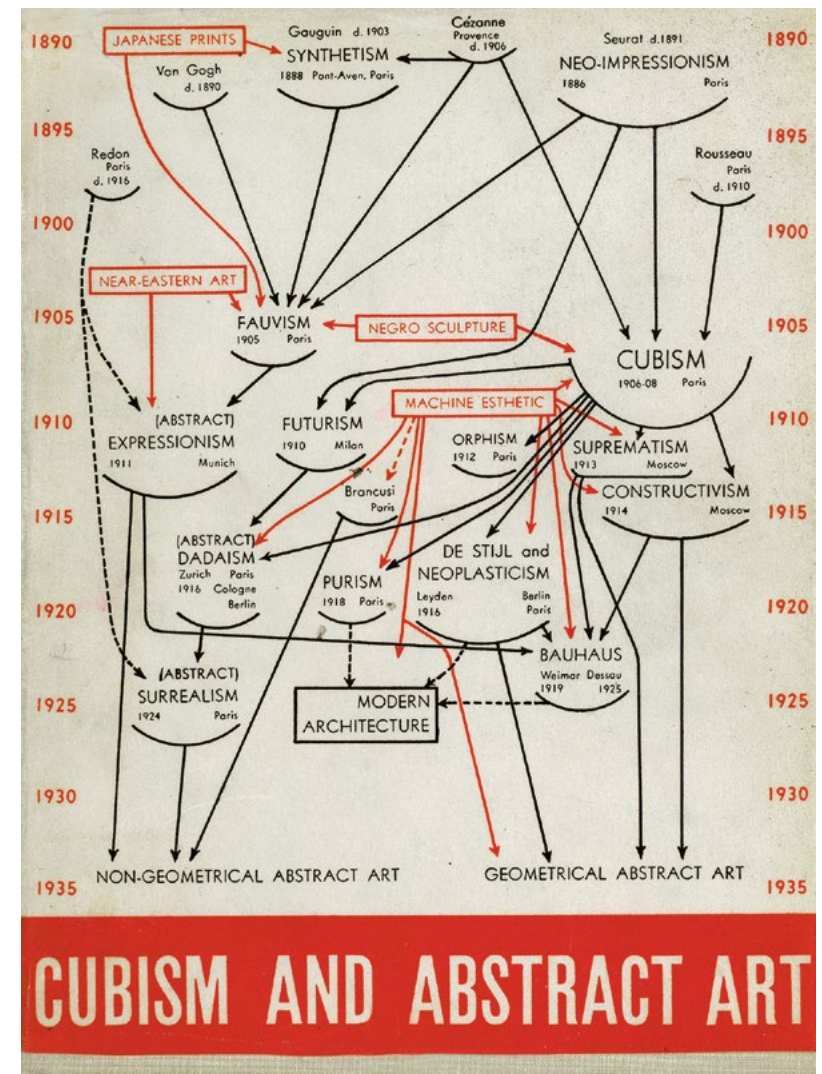
4. Nochlin, L. 'Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?' *ARTnews*, January 1971: 22-39.

5. Barthes, R. *The Death of the Author* (1967)

His imaginative imitations and appropriations are part homage, part deconstruction, where he uses his characteristic ironic sense of humour to engage the viewer. Rather than intended as being merely a critique they are more a celebration of works he has spent time considering. They provoke serious thought into deeper questions about identity, authorship and authenticity and both resurrect and undermine the myths of the old avant-garde.

James Putnam

The Museum of Modern Art, New York wanted to promote the view that art is a chronological progression from realist to abstract art. It's first director, Alfred Barr constructed a history of modern art by devising a chart showing how it had evolved from earlier movements such as Impressionism and made the famous quote – "This museum is a torpedo moving through time, its head the ever-advancing present, its tail the ever-receding past of 50 to 100 years ago."



# ‘Broken Arm’

Gavin Turk, 2017

The title (as Duchamp demonstrated) is vital. It gives an extra life to a work, suggesting different ways that it can be viewed.

Gavin Turk: ‘Historically, Duchamp made a snow-shovel artwork that was called *‘En prévision du bras cassé’* (‘In Anticipation of the Broken Arm’). Obviously it was a strange work. It was a ready-made, so people were looking at a snow shovel wondering why they were having to look at it. But this was also a strange title to give to a work: ‘In Anticipation of the Broken Arm’. Surely you use the snow shovel so that you *don’t* have a broken arm? Or perhaps you get a broken arm when you use a snow shovel?’

‘And it’s almost like this whole puzzle – the puzzle of the ready-made and the puzzle of the title – is re-iterated in **‘Broken Arm’** because it’s a kind of old, well-used and faded plastic snow shovel, a terrible iteration that’s now called **‘Broken Arm’**, which suggests that Duchamp created his work in advance of my one.’

**‘Broken Arm’** forces the viewer back into that historical art space because if I just hung up a snow shovel the audience may not think it had anything to do with Marcel Duchamp, so I’m trying to link up with that original piece.’<sup>1</sup>

**‘Art is about challenging the idea of what an idea is, or what reality is. Truth itself is an idea, and the more you think about it, the more you have to be reflexive: how can you have a conversation about truth because even if you say “there is no truth”, what is the truth in that?’**

– Gavin Turk, 2017



Wood and Plastic  
1390 x 415 mm

<sup>1</sup> From an interview with Gavin Turk in November 2017.

# 'L.H.O.O.Q.'

Marcel Duchamp, 1919

**'Since the tubes of paint used by the artist are manufactured and ready made products we must conclude that all the paintings in the world are 'ready-made's aided' and also works of assemblage.'** – Marcel Duchamp, 1961<sup>2</sup>

How do artists respond to a society and a civilisation that has forced millions of people to fight and die in the industrialised carnage of World War I? Certainly not by continuing to venerate the most cherished creations of that society, including its most iconic artworks.

Duchamp, a pioneer of the Dada movement, had grown tired of representational art before the war started, explaining, 'I was interested in ideas – not merely in visual products.' His response was to present mass-produced ready-made objects as art, firstly with the famous Bicycle Wheel and later with a snow shovel (**'In Advance of the Broken Arm'**) and the notorious **'Fountain'** urinal of 1917.

He also responded with humour, debunking the status of Da Vinci's masterpiece by drawing a moustache and goatee beard on to a cheap reproduction postcard, and retitling it to suggest that this 'Mona Lisa' is horny. When pronounced in French the letters 'l-h-o-o-q' sound like the colloquial phrase 'Elle a chaud au cul'. This is often mis-translated as 'she has a hot arse' but Duchamp himself gave a looser translation: 'there is fire down below.'

## AMAZING FACT

The 'Mona Lisa' is unsigned and undated while there are no records of a commission or payment and no references to it in the abundant contemporary correspondence. Leonardo doesn't mention it in his extensive notebooks and no preliminary drawings of it exist.



1919, Rectified Readymade  
(reproduction of Leonardo da Vinci's  
'Mona Lisa' altered with pencil)

197 x 105 mm

# 'Widower'

Gavin Turk, 2017



Oil on Canvas, 1200 x 800

Gavin Turk: 'Magritte made a series of works where he produced an object that was partly a window frame and partly a piece of marquetry paneling. For me this becomes a window, but in his painting **'The Key of Dreams'** Magritte was filling these black spaces with objects and titles, so it had a jug here and below it is written 'the bird'; or a clock was painted in another panel and below it is written 'the wind. The object is a bit like a demarcated blackboard that contains a semiotics lesson, and it was so significant that John Berger used it on the cover of his book, 'Ways of Seeing.'

Marcel Duchamp famously made a piece which is a small model of a window with black panels in it and it's called **'Fresh Widow'**. I suddenly thought that the male equivalent of a widow is a widower so it seems to mourn the loss of a wife. It's about something missing but there's also a connection, it's about missing information (which was there) with a title that plays on the name of an existing title. I think that you would ask me whether it's important to know the story, and my response would be that it's fun and I like telling you the story but there are elements of recognition: it's likely that the viewer will semi-recognise the artwork and perhaps semi-recognise the title, which is all a play on similitudes.<sup>13</sup>



**'Magritte's *Ceci n'est pas une pipe*' ('This is not a pipe') is a major influence for me, just in terms of the way that it turns painting inside out. It's a painting about painting, but ultimately it's about how painting isn't what it appears to be and can't do what it claims it can. For me it's a sort of wonderful contradiction.'**

– Gavin Turk, 2017



# 'Return to Forever'

Gavin Turk, 2009



Acrylic on Canvas  
1300 x 2300 mm

**'Return to Forever'** is from a series of large-scale canvases that Turk painted, in the manner of Jackson Pollock's abstract expressionist works. On closer inspection it is possible to trace Turk's signature concealed amidst the flicks and drips of paint. He has also made a group of black and white photographs of the artist in his studio making the paintings that are directly inspired by the famous series of photographs of Pollock painting by Hans Namuth and Rudy Burckhardt. These reveal that his characteristic drip painting technique was a deliberate process rather than a random splashing of paint. According to Pollock: 'It doesn't make much difference how paint is put on as long as something has been said. Technique is just a means of arriving at a statement.'



The painting's title is also the name of a 1970s jazz-fusion group founded and led by pianist Chick Corea. Turk alludes to the frequent comparison made between Pollock's spontaneous free flowing action painting technique and the improvisations of the bebop musicians. However it is a popular misconception that Pollock created his most celebrated paintings while listening to Jazz music. It is not proven that he even had a record player in his studio, which didn't have electricity until 1953, by which time he'd already painted his most iconic works that are likened to improvisational jazz. Yet this idea that he painted while listening to jazz music all adds to the Pollock myth like the equally misguided notion that he painted while drunk.

**'When I am in my painting, I am not aware of what I'm doing. It is only after a sort of 'get acquainted' period that I see what I have been about. I have no fears about making changes, destroying the image, etc., because the painting has a life of its own. I try to let it come through. It is only when I lose contact with the painting that the result is a mess. Otherwise there is pure harmony, an easy give and take, and the painting comes out well.'**

– Jackson Pollock, 1947<sup>4</sup>

**'Turk Leaning and Painting'**

2009, silver gelatin print, 230 x 230mm

# ‘Salvador Dalí’

Gavin Turk, 2015

Salvador Dalí was a brilliant self-promoter who enjoyed cultivating the image of an eccentric artist because he was well aware that it would help his hugely popular surrealist artworks sell more widely. In contemporary terms he understood that he was an art brand and that one way to promote the brand was by collaborating with Philippe Halsman, a photographer whose inventive skills in the studio and darkroom produced dramatic and, yes, surreally bizarre portraits.

Photoshop software makes it far easier to achieve these effects now, but the image still excites; it's a Hall-of-Mirrors visual trick that is recognisably Dalí ... and yet still a Gavin Turk.

This appropriation of an existing artwork featuring the artist known as Gavin Turk is a recurring trope in Turk's work, which has been most vividly presented in his Andy Warhol-inspired artworks where Turk takes on the appearance of Sid Vicious (posing as Elvis Presley) in paintings and life-size waxwork sculptures such as 'Pop' (1993).

This work was produced as part of a series entitled 'Project Beard' for which Gavin Turk groomed and cropped his luxuriant beard to correspond with the appearance of six patricians of 19th- and 20th-century art, namely Rodin, William Morris, Cézanne, Matisse, Man Ray and Dalí.

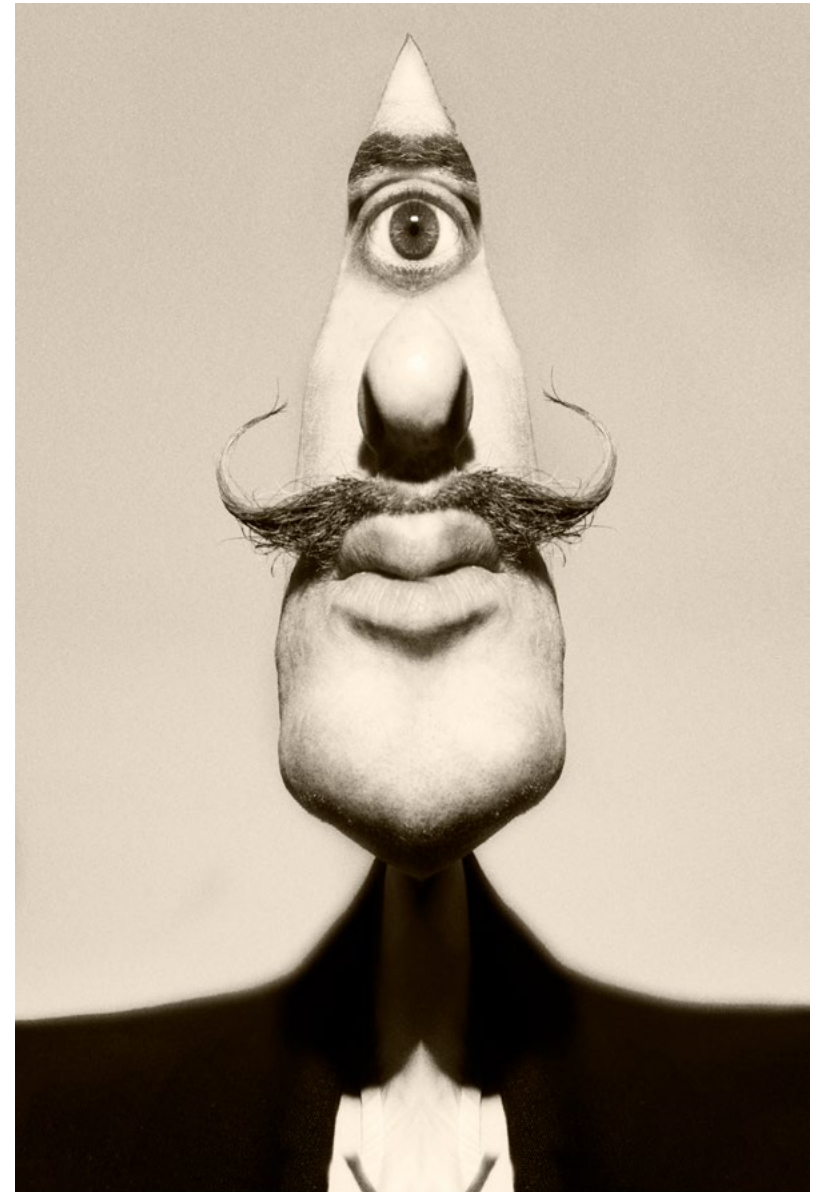
**‘It is not necessary for the public to know whether I am joking or I am serious, just as it is not necessary for me to know it myself.’**

– Salvador Dalí, 1964

## AMAZING FACT

Salvador Dalí breakfasted regularly on crayfish in chocolate sauce. In 1936 he delivered a lecture wearing a diving suit, snorkel and flippers, claiming he would be diving into the subconscious.

Lith Print  
505 x 264 mm



# 'Holy Egg (Tarnished Aluminium Medium)'

Gavin Turk, 2017

**'I've made over 600 pieces with eggs and in a way the egg is like a motif of surrealism while also being a 'house' and a symbolic object that signifies life and signifies death, a kind of Brancusian object where the form revolves on itself.'** – Gavin Turk, 2017

While Lucio Fontana's cosmic eggs are entitled '*La Fine di Dio*' ('The End of God') Gavin Turk responds with '**Holy Egg**', which in English is a pun on the 'holes' in their surface as well as on holiness, suggesting the idea of a pilgrimage to bear witness to Fontana's beautiful creations. Those holes dramatically perforate the aluminium surface, punching it into three dimensions to reveal the empty space behind the egg, and simultaneously spelling out Gavin Turk's initials: GT.

The egg is a heavily charged archetypal symbol which Gavin Turk has long cherished in his artworks, brings up notions of beginning and end, life and death combined in a closed loop. 'It's almost a perfect form, Gavin Turk said recently, 'and yet it comes back to this modernist, minimalist finite image.'

This series of works plays with notions of the aura of the artwork, alluding to the religious symbolism associated with the egg as well as to a long-standing historical relationship between art and religion, iconography and iconoclasm.

Aluminium on Birch Ply Stretcher  
1150 x 810 mm



## ‘Concetto Spaziale “Attesa”’

Lucio Fontana, 1960

**‘Obviously I do not want to make a painting; I want to open up space, create a new dimension, tie in the cosmos as it endlessly expands beyond the confining plane of the picture.’** – Lucio Fontana, 1958<sup>6</sup>

The title is linked to Fontana’s initial involvement in an art movement called Spatialism from 1947. Two years later he started the so-called **‘Concetto Spaziale’** (‘Spatial Concept’) or slash series, in which he cut holes or slits into the surface of monochrome paintings. These works effectively blur the distinction between two and three dimensions.

He went on to use the generic title **‘Concetto spaziale’** as a title for his later works. He covered his canvases with layers of thick oil paint applied by hand and brush and used a scalpel or Stanley knife to create slits in their surface. These works have either one or multiple cuts, known collectively as the *Tagli* (‘cuts’).

He continued these works throughout the 1950s and 1960s to seek different ways of developing the hole as his characteristic gesture. The canvases were later backed with strong black gauze, giving the appearance of a void behind. The darkness would shimmer behind the open cuts and create a mysterious sense of illusion and depth.

Many of Fontana’s slashes and slits evoke pain, and in particular suggest wounds to the skin, while also clearly referencing female genitalia. As the egg is an archetypal symbol of birth and death they also evoke the mystery of the cosmos, expressing the beginning and ending of all existence.



Canvas  
930 x 730 mm

# ‘White Transit Van Compression’

Gavin Turk, 2012



Crushed Transit Van  
1170 x 650 x 650 mm

Gavin Turk chose to crush an iconic White Ford Transit Van, which has symbolised a particular white working class Britishness for decades. Long before the Brexit referendum the white working class has been undergoing a slow decline as the UK becomes a post-industrial, service sector-focused economy existing within a multi-cultural society.

This 725kg compacted vehicle directly references the pioneering car compressions of the French sculptor César, which were first exhibited in 1960. César was a member of the *Nouveau Réalisme* or New Realism movement in France which had been started by Yves Klein and the art critic Pierre Restany. Their intention was to destroy the preciousness of art and its requirement to idealise its subject matter and materials and possess meaning. The *Nouveau Réalistes*' aim was to transform their material while retaining its identity; Restany described it as a 'poetic recycling of urban, industrial and advertising reality.'

**‘Previously I was making art which had this English or British culturally-touristic consciousness about it. These days I seem to be going into art itself as a sort of sub-culture.’** – Gavin Turk, 2017

## 'Yves Klein Blue Box'

Gavin Turk, 2017



Pigment on Cardboard  
270 x 270 x 50 mm

## 'Enrico Castellani Box'

Gavin Turk, 2017



Pigment on Cardboard  
270 x 270 x 50 mm

The repurposing of readymades and objet trouvés as art is, arguably, the most distinctive repeated motif in 'modern' art. Artists continually challenge the limits of what art can be made out of, whether it's sharks or shit, diamonds or dandruff, and whether it is presented in sculptures or collages, assemblages, installations, videos or performance works.

Gavin Turk has made at least 600 artworks in the three-dimensional form or two-dimensional shape of eggs, so it should come as no surprise that he has previously used egg boxes in works such as **'GT Eggshells'** (1997). Cheap, sustainable, fit-for-purpose and oddly beautiful, there's a lot to love in this everyday object, which even in minimal light will reveal shadows and highlights and varying depths of colour.



Yves Klein made no secret of his passion for the intensity and deeply saturated ultramarine that he helped to produce as IKB, and fellow Zero group artist Enrico Castellani was equally passionately wedded to white. Neither artist worked exclusively in only one colour and both produced painted works which pushed and pulled painting beyond two dimensions and expanded into artworks that aimed to create their own environment, notably with Castellani's **'Spazi Ambiente'** ('Environment Spaces'). Castellani, along with Yves Klein, was identified by the American sculptor

Donald Judd – in his role as an art critic – as one of the most important European precursors of minimalism and conceptualism.

While his mentor, Lucio Fontana, broke new ground by slicing into his canvases, Castellani has used nails to bend and stretch canvas into dynamic new dimensions beyond the purely abstract, and in works like the **'Superficie'** ('Surface') series, begun in 1959, has produced many works that are reminiscent of egg boxes in their rhythmic sequences of peaks and valleys, particularly as these have often been soaked in kaolin (china clay) solution to stiffen the material.

**Superfici** paintings have been produced in shiny black acrylic and shimmering silver, amongst other colours, but mostly these surfaces have been white, suggesting themes of purity, life and death, freedom and control, with the interplay of light and darkness creating the spatial ambiguity that run throughout his work.

**'For me, the question is that of creating a totally white surface outside any pictorial phenomenon, any intervention extraneous to the value of the surface: this is a white surface that is a white surface and nothing else... There is nothing to say: one can only be.'** – Enrico Castellani, 2001<sup>7</sup>

### AMAZING FACT

In 1961 Yves Klein risked his life by leaping out of a high window for the sensation of experiencing a higher consciousness. This was actually completely staged for the photographic artwork because he had an audience of several dozen holding a safety net below to catch him.



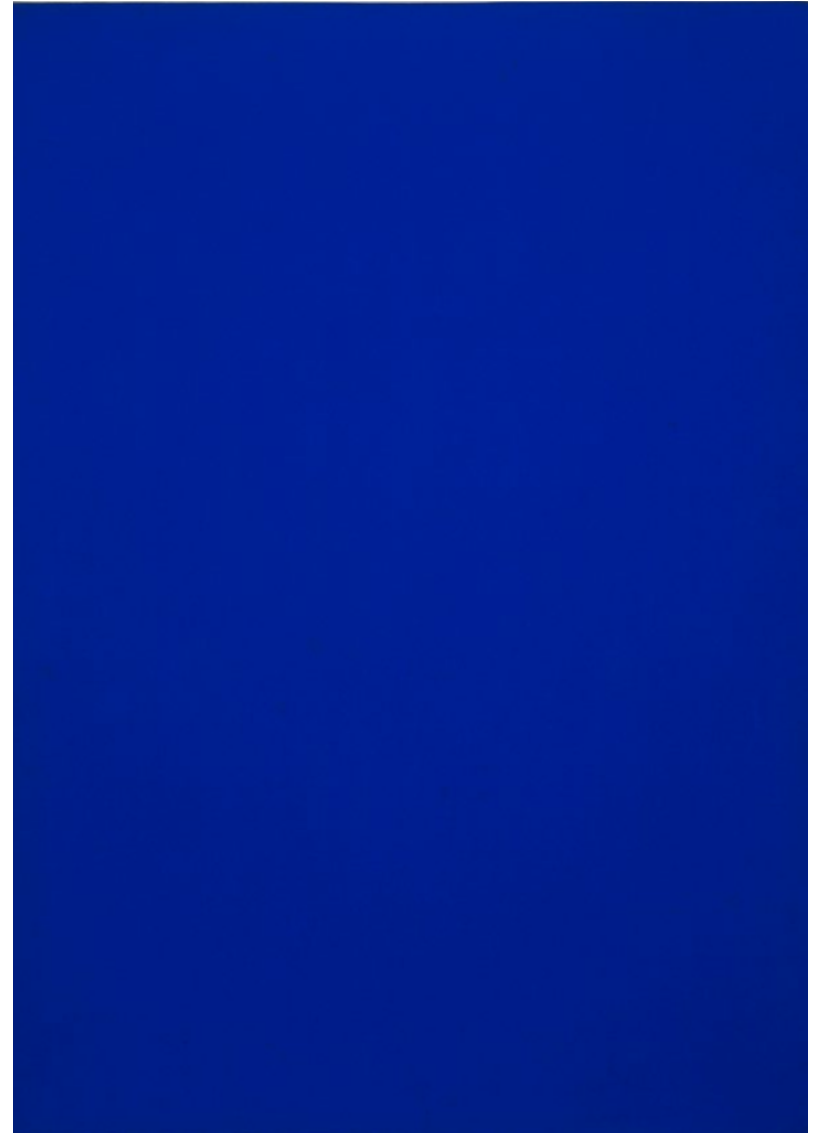
# ‘Blue Monochrome Painting’

Yves Klein, 1961

‘The glaring obviousness of my paternity of monochromy in the twentieth century is such that even if I myself were to fight hard against that fact I should probably never manage to rid myself of it,’ wrote Yves Klein in 1957.

At first reading this can seem like hyperbole or self-aggrandisement, but essentially it's true, although Klein was by no means the first artist to paint in solid colour. Apart from Malevich's famous **‘Black Square’** (1915) the Russian constructivist Aleksandr Rodchenko had exhibited three monochrome paintings and boldly proclaimed ‘the end of painting’ in 1921. There were other artists, such as Robert Rauschenburg, who painted monochromes in white, black or red in the early 1950s. Yves Klein's first monochromes were painted in 1949 and exhibited in 1950, but it was when he concentrated on one primary colour, blue, that he subsequently took monochrome art to a new level in his **‘Epoque bleue’**. He helped to create and patent International Klein Blue (IKB), which retained the ‘incandescent’ luminosity of the ultramarine pigment by being suspended in a synthetic resin. His IKB monochrome paintings became essentially conceptual pieces exploring the spatial ambiguities of the colour. To this end, he often applied the paint with rollers (rather than brushes) in order to achieve the purest, velvet-smooth finish, unmarred by individual brushstrokes.

**‘It was then that I remembered the colour blue, the blue of the sky in Nice that was at the origin of my career as monochromist. I started work towards the end of 1956 and in 1957 I had an exhibition in Milan which consisted entirely of what I dared to call my *‘Epoque bleue’*. – Yves Klein, 1957<sup>8</sup>**



Dry Pigment in Synthetic Polymer Medium on Cotton Over Plywood

1951 X 1400 mm



Silkscreen on Canvas  
1200 x 1200 mm

## 'Love Turk (Red, Green and Blue)'

Gavin Turk, 2009

**'There's a big rule: if something's a cliché don't go there otherwise you'll never make great art. But there's another rule: try and deal with the difficult things.'** – Gavin Turk, 2017

This is inspired by Robert Indiana's famous work **'Love'** which was first conceived as a personal Christmas card in 1964 (which MOMA commissioned for themselves in 1965) and was subsequently reproduced extensively in numerous unauthorised consumer products. **'Love'** was significant in that it blurred the boundaries between graphic design and pop art. The critics slated Indiana for **'Love's'** commercial success, and this one work has overshadowed decades of his other artworks.

For Gavin Turk it represents the quintessential artist's brand statement or cliché. 'Sometimes we as artists are encouraged to avoid clichés,' says Turk. 'But maybe we can look again even at highly-clichéd things, things that are so ingrained in the culture and the consciousness that they're not even thought about anymore. The idea was almost to liquefy the piece and make it come alive again so that you, the viewer might find another way to think about what you already know.'

It was a fusion of graphic design and signature which Turk could repurpose with his own four-letter word.



Robert Indiana's **'Love'**  
Greeting Card, 1968

# ‘Homage II’

Gavin Turk, 2017

Josef Albers was fascinated, perhaps fanatical about colour theory and the counter-intuitive ways that painted surfaces of solid luminous colour would interact with each other.

Gavin Turk has employed a different technique in ‘**Homage II**’, but was also initially inspired by wanting to use a particular colour:

‘Close to my studio is a building site wall that is regularly used by fly-posters. One morning I came in and it had been raining hard so that the water had loosened the posters and a thick layer of dozens of posters had fallen to the floor. The back of the posters is blue (so that the poster it is pasted over cannot be seen through it), and that’s what I first saw, and I wanted to use this particular mottled blue colour.

The posters may have been non-art, advertising a pop concert or a radio station or a new song, but to me these posters were advertising this blue colour (laughs). I literally made a collage of the backs of these posters, taking the form and the size and general composition from Albers’ ‘**Homage to the Square**’ series. Apart from the painted background it’s a collage, and of course I was also thinking of the détourned poster artworks made by Mimmo Rotella and Jacques Villeglé, one of the *Nouveau Réalistes*.’<sup>9</sup>

**‘The process through which you’d come to an understanding or an engagement with art is through being part of a conversation or a discourse. That inherently means that you have to have some syntax, language and information which you will use to communicate in that visual language.’**

– Gavin Turk, 2017



608 x 608 x 38 mm

Hardboard Medite, Posters & Acrylic

# ‘Homage to the Square’

Josef Albers, 1966

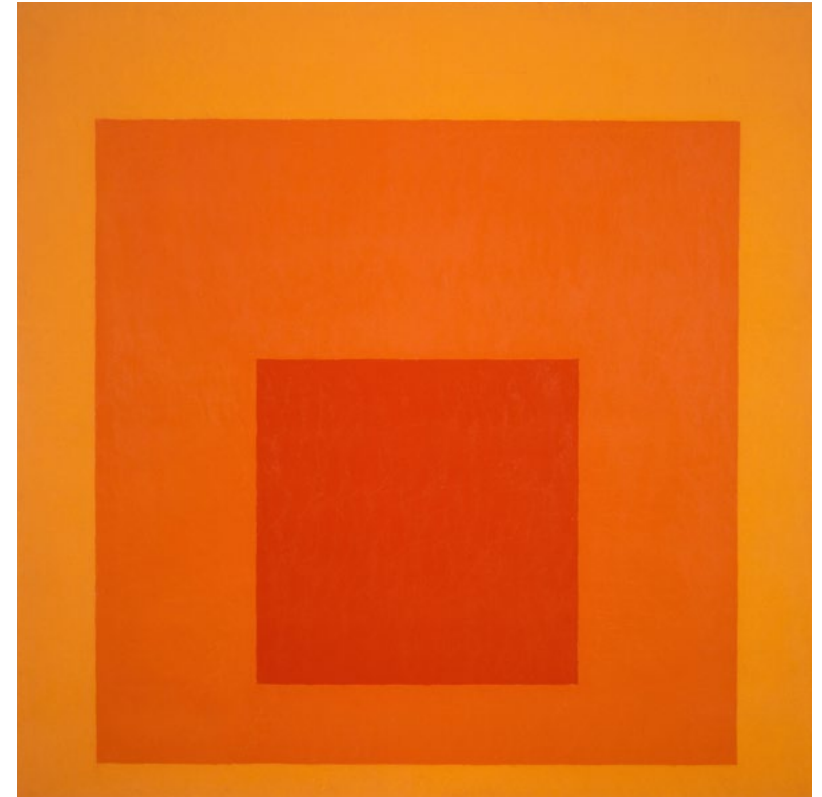
The German-born American artist Josef Albers produced more than 2,000 paintings of squares in his **‘Homage to the Square’** series. This obsession seems far less remarkable when many of these **‘Homages’** paintings are seen close up, as the more you look into the larger paintings the more their colours appear to dissolve into each other or play visual tricks, sucking the viewer in to the image.

Albers had graduated from being a student at the Bauhaus in Weimar to being appointed its Professor of Basic Design when it moved to Dessau in 1925, but he did not begin painting the **‘Homages’** series until 1949 when he was already aged 62 and living in the United States. He worked on the series until his death 26 years later, but in spite of their titles he was principally concerned with the interplay of colours and ideas about colour theory he had taught. ‘We make all the students aware through experience,’ he said, ‘that colour is the most relative medium in art, and that we never really see what we see.’

In his book **‘Interaction of Color’** (1963) he wrote about the subjective experience of exploring and engaging with colour: ‘as we begin principally with the material, colour itself, and its action and interaction as registered in our minds, we practice first and mainly a study of ourselves.’

**‘In order to use colour effectively it is necessary to recognise that colour deceives continually.’**

– Josef Albers, 1974<sup>10</sup>



Oil on Masonite  
1220 × 1220 mm

# 'Reclining Paint Tube (Albers Table)'

Gavin Turk, 2016

**'Science is dealing with physical facts,  
in art we are dealing with psychic effects.  
With this I come to my first statement:  
'The source of art – that is, where it  
comes from – is the discrepancy between  
physical fact and psychic effect.'**

– Josef Albers, 1968<sup>11</sup>

Gavin Turk: 'It looks a little like a little sculpture, like a reclining figure (and of course it recalls a reclining nude). I had made these small bronze sculptures where I literally got a paint tube that was almost empty and so dirty, with so much paint on it that it had gone dark grey, like fool's black. I cast these in a foundry and painted the bronze to look like paint. Here is this object which you use before a painting gets made and obviously pure colour comes out of even the dirtiest tube of paint.'

I wanted to show this **'Reclining Paint Tube'** without just placing it on top of a plinth, and then I recalled the nest of tables that Albers had designed in the 1920s and I recreated one of these tables to use as a showing space as they are linked by themes of colour and form and appropriation and not-painting (as the tube comes before the painting).<sup>12</sup>



Painted Bronze, Wood and Glass  
782 x 600 x 400 mm

# 'White Bicycle'

Gavin Turk, 2017

The initial response to this artwork is that the title is misleading, perhaps in the same way that Magritte set out to show that titles and messages in paintings cannot be taken on trust. Here, though, the canvas is horizontal, so it's possible that the painting of a bicycle may be hidden beneath the flowers, although the canvas is actually white and blank. The roses reference the rose in Joseph Beuys' *'Rose für Direkte Demokratie,'* and Beuys was a consummate cyclist and heavily involved in installations and performance art, so we may imagine that the vitrine, with its resemblance to a see-through coffin, is suggesting mourning for someone or something.

Ghost bicycles, the roadside memorials to cyclists who have been killed in traffic, are painted white, so that's likely to solve the title mystery – unless it's also a reference to a community bicycle scheme in Amsterdam when hundreds of white bicycles were installed for social use (and rapidly disappeared, having been stolen and shipped abroad).

Alternatively, when dead flowers are placed on a white canvas and displayed on a plinth or in a cabinet, it's almost like being at the funeral for art that has significance and meaning, rather than art which needs to be conjectured over, patiently considered or explained in lengthy descriptions.



Roses, Paper and Canvas in Glass Vitrine

## AMAZING FACT

In 1965 Joseph Beuys gave a 3 hour performance entitled 'How to explain pictures to a dead hare', in which he carried the dead animal around an exhibition talking to it silently. Beuys was once a Luftwaffe pilot whose plane had crashed in Russia in the winter and had been saved by a wandering Tartar who wrapped his body in felt and fat. This story has since been established as a myth told by the artist either as part of an artistic imagination or as an early example of fake news. He later frequently used these two materials as part of his work: referencing this myth.

**'I'm a bit obsessed by dead flower bouquets at the moment. They're still life works, but the transient blooms are all dead, like dried-out husks or a skeleton, only living on in the artwork.'**

– Gavin Turk, 2017

# ‘Rose für Direkte Demokratie’

Joseph Beuys, 1972

[Rose For Direct Democracy]

Artist. Activist. Soldier. Pacifist. Politician. Teacher. Shaman. Charlatan... Joseph Beuys was called a great many things, including one of the most influential and socially-engaged artist of the 20th century.

In addition to his artwork as a sculptor, performance and installation artist Beuys was an art theorist and professor whose work is as renowned for the myths about his life-story and the symbolic materials he used (particularly felt and fat) as it is bound up in bold ideas and pioneering artistic approaches.

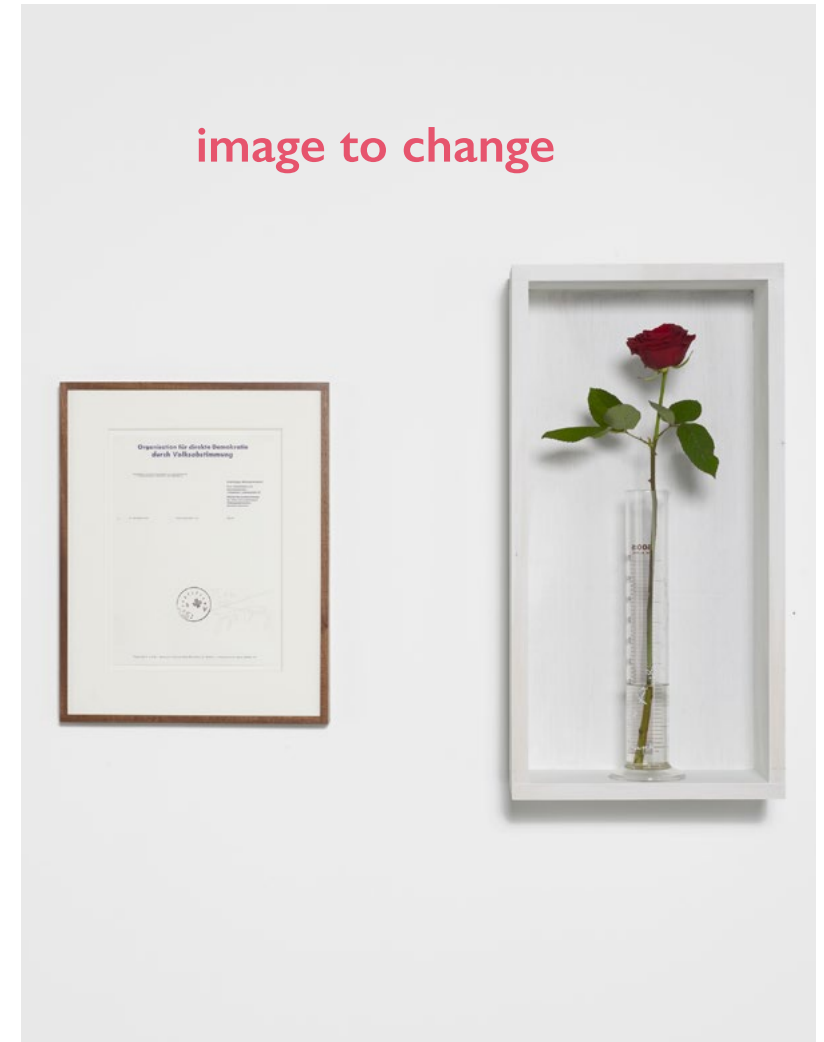
If you are looking at a Joseph Beuys work you realise that you have to get involved in a certain amount of the narrative that exists around it. Long before Beuys co-founded the Green Party in Germany in 1980 he was heavily involved in the Organisation for Direct Democracy Through Referendum (ODDTR). At the *Documenta 5* art exhibition in Kassel in 1972 he established an ODDTR office and there he proposed and debated his ideas for reshaping society through creative activity throughout the 100 days of the exhibition, culminating in a boxing match!

A fresh cut-red rose was placed in a vase on his desk each day, and the artwork commemorates this, with the vase replaced by a graduated cylinder on which the title is inscribed. The ‘Rose...’ was produced as a ‘multiple’ edition, a way to facilitate art ownership and communication of ideas beyond galleries, museums and elite private collections.



**‘My art cannot be understood primarily by thinking. My art touches people who are in tune with my mode of thinking. But it is clear that people cannot understand my art by intellectual processes alone, because no art can be experienced in that way.’**

– Joseph Beuys, 1969<sup>13</sup>



Framed Certificate of Authenticity, Painted White  
Box-Shelf, Glass Beaker, Fresh Red Rose  
94Mm X 357 Mm

# 'Crumpled Space'

Gavin Turk, 2017

Gavin Turk: 'The wooden box has the same proportions and is made with the Douglas fir plywood as those produced by Donald Judd in the 1970s. These were otherwise empty cubic forms that were fixed in a row on a wall. They are a reduction of the art object into a Zen-like, emptied-out basic form...

I chose this Donald Judd habitat as a frame and a vehicle. So in a way I've totally ruined the minimalist sculpture by putting something inside it, but at the same time I've tried to extend the essential frame-making of the piece.

I'm interested in what things guide the audience and how they come to an understanding of the art objects that they are looking at... Some viewers will attribute the 'frame' to Donald Judd (and go on to look at what's inside the box), while others obviously won't recognise that, but may imagine that this is a carefully-constructed frame with an elaborate object inside it...

This tangled length of plastic webbing is a found object, one that has been used and then thrown into a skip on a building site. It's called '**Crumpled Space**' partly because it resembles a scientific model of twisted and warped space that's been in contact with a black hole. In a way the crumpled space also suggests the process of looking, thinking and arriving at a finite form, like a universe that's been put into a box.'<sup>14</sup>

**That's possibly how art functions, as a process where when you go into a gallery you grasp for signatures, authorship, for bits of content which you recognize, that can help to draw parallels to understand a certain way of thinking about an object.'**

– Gavin Turk, 2017



black plastic mesh in douglas fir plywood box  
400 x 800 x 400 mm



# 'Box Drawing'

Donald Judd

Donald Judd is the artist most associated with the Minimalist movement in New York in the 1960s, although it was a term he didn't like. As a reaction against the complexity of the previous generation of Abstract Expressionist painters' work, Judd created works of single or repeated geometric forms produced from mass-produced materials such as plywood, sheet metal, plexiglass and concrete.

He regarded them as objects of contemplation, for their geometric explorations of volume, space, and colour and classic simplicity. He produced standardised artworks and **'Specific Objects'** (the title of his 1964 book) which aimed to be free from emotion and the self-aware artist's touch, such as the modular open-sided boxes which this drawing is a sketch for.

His drawings represent his thought process, a way of working out possibilities and solving questions. Rarely created as works of art in their own right, they were often sketches he made to communicate his forms to fabricators' workshops and are often annotated with dimensions..

**'The main virtue of geometric shapes is that they aren't organic, as all art otherwise is. A form that's neither geometric or organic would be a great discovery.'**

– Donald Judd, 1967

**'Everything sculpture has, my work doesn't.'**

– Donald Judd, 1967

Are we using these quotes?  
If so need references

## AMAZING FACT

Robert Indiana, whose real name was Robert Clark was the creator of the famous work LOVE that became equated with the hippie culture of the 1960s. It was popularized through countless unauthorized consumer products such as posters, junk jewellery, beer mugs, doormats, t-shirts and hippie patches. His interest in the word "love" came from the Christian Science church he attended as a child, which had a banner reading "God Is Love". He made his first version of LOVE as a personal Christmas card in 1964 and a year later for the New York Museum of Modern Art. The US Mail also used it on a stamp for Valentine's Day in 1973 and sold 300 million LOVE stamps. From the 1970s he made colossal 12ft high public LOVE sculptures in Corten steel that have been installed in various international cities. Indiana has also translated his LOVE motif into Hebrew, French and Chinese. The tilted O of Love was actually not Indiana's invention at all having been used traditionally in typography. Although slated by the critics for its popularity Indiana made very little money from LOVE's massive commercial usage because he never copyrighted his image.

# 'Turk & Love'

## (Arazzo Pink, Blue & Brown)

Gavin Turk, 2017

This is a joint homage to Robert Indiana's celebrated work '**Love**' (1965) and Alighiero e Boetti's *Arazzi* series of embroideries from the 1970s. These two works are significant to Turk in that they both share the square format and use letters in various colour configurations. They combine his fascination for the artist's logo or brand and his love of Boetti's use of the embroidery technique as well as a shared interest in craft, collaboration and language.

While Boetti's used Afghan embroiderers, Turk outsourced his work to be hand-stitched by prisoners across the UK using an original stitch used by Afghani stitchers. According to Turk 'The meditative act of embroidery could also be a positive experience for prisoners.'

The title is a further tribute to Alighiero e Boetti (Alighiero and Boetti) and acknowledges the Italian origin of these beautifully-produced Arazzo artworks.

**"I think one of the interesting things about tapestry is how slowly the picture comes out of the picture frame. It's so intense. You have to go close and further away; it's like the image slowly unweaving itself."**

– Gavin Turk, 2012<sup>15</sup>

### AMAZING FACT

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Embroidery on Linen  
300 x 304 x 26 mm

## **‘Udire Tra Le Parole’**

Alighiero e Boetti, 1977

Initially associated with the *Arte Povera* movement, Boetti took his own direction by the 1970s with projects using embroiderers from Afghanistan, a country he visited regularly until the 1979 Soviet invasion. **‘Udire Tra Le Pirole’**, (‘Hearing between the words’), is from his series of embroideries or *Arazzi* that comprise letters or numbers in the square format using a very wide range of colours.

Traditionally associated with the natural elements, the square had special significance to him for both its philosophical and mathematical properties. His preliminary studies were made out of cardboard with drawn-in letters then passed on to the Afghan embroiderers to complete.

Systems of knowledge, sequences and classifications are subject to a process of ordering and disordering that relates to the artist’s fundamentally dualistic practice as typified by his 1977 self-portrait. This notion of twinning led him to add ‘e’ (and) between his names, suggesting a dialogue between his two selves.

**‘For me the work of the embroidered  
‘Mappa’ is the maximum of beauty. For  
that work I did nothing, chose nothing, in  
the sense that: the world is made as it  
is, not as I designed it, the flags are those  
that exist, and I did not design them;  
in short I did absolutely nothing; when  
the basic idea, the concept, emerges  
everything else requires no choosing.’**

– Alighiero e Boetti, 1974<sup>16</sup>



Embroidery on Fabric, mounted on Chipboard  
293 x 300 mm

# 'Rotrophydhan'

Gavin Turk, 2017

paper boxes in cabinet  
2000 x 4030 x 315 mm



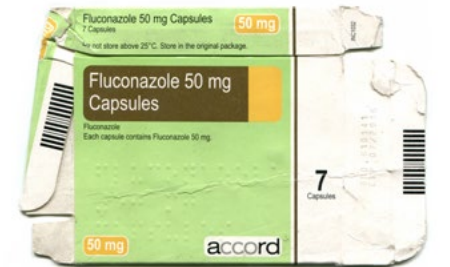
What does this title mean? *Rotro* suggests a moving object, something that rotates. While *phydian* calls to mind the French suffix *-phile*, which indicates a place, object or pastime that is beloved, so perhaps this is about loving something that turns or rotates? Well, possibly, but this may be a red herring. It's not hard to guess that the 'dh' may well refer to Damien Hirst, as this sculpture is clearly a response to Hirst's signature '**Medicine Cabinets**'. Here, though, the medicine boxes have been crushed and flattened. Is this intentional, perhaps an indication of the effects of these drugs on the person who consumes them?

As it happens, no. Gavin Turk chanced upon a pile of discarded medicine packets which had literally fallen off the back of a lorry en route to a rubbish dump. "I started picking these up," he explains, "and found that I had over a hundred of these squashed pharmaceutical packages, and I discovered that these drugs were prescribed for just about every part of the body, from the hair and the eyes right down to the feet."

'What interested me about the empty packets is that this is almost a post-drug experience – the drugs have been taken, the side effects have happened, but this is the residue, what is left. And people take all of it on trust.'

**'I quite like the idea of making something which forces people to be on their guard, or at least not take for granted what they're looking at.'**

– Gavin Turk, 2017



Selection of boxes from *Rotrophydian*

# 'AHHHHHHH'

Damien Hirst, 1997

Damien Hirst was initially attracted to *Wunderkammer* (Cabinets of Curiosity) and natural history by a visit to the City Museum in Leeds when he was five years old. He made his first Medicine Cabinet while he was a student at Goldsmiths in 1988, going on to create a group of twelve works which were given titles that mirrored, or directly referenced, the song titles of the Sex Pistols' 'Never Mind The Bollocks' album (1977). In the 1990s he created extensive series of both **'Medicine Cabinets'** and **'Instrument Cabinets'**, displaying medical and surgical instruments arranged with clinical and antiseptic orderliness.

**'AHHHHHHH!'** explores philosophical themes which have been fundamental to Hirst's work, in particular the relationships between science and nature, myth and reality, life and death and the healing effects of medicine and of art.

In 1998 Hirst also displayed medicine cabinets in the restaurant called Pharmacy that he co-owned, which had bar stools shaped like pills. This visual theme has been repeated and expanded in Pharmacy 2, the restaurant which opened in 2016 that is located in Damien Hirst's Newport Street Gallery in London.

**“People have been making curiosity cabinets for almost 500 years, and it's something that's always fascinated me: they inhabit a space between life and death that says so much about who we are as humans, and who we might want to be.”** – Damian Hirst, 2014<sup>17</sup>

**'I cannot understand, why some people believe completely in medicine and not in art, without questioning either.'**  
– Damian Hirst, 1991<sup>18</sup>



glass, MDF and drug packaging  
381 x 762 x 152 mm

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> From an interview with Gavin Turk in November 2017.
- <sup>2</sup> *Apropos of Ready Mades, 1961* (Duchamp's lecture at the MOMA museum), New York, 19 October 1961; in *Art and Artists 1*, July 1966: 47
- <sup>3</sup> From an interview with Gavin Turk in November 2017.
- <sup>4</sup> from *Possibilities*, Vol. 1, no 1, winter 1947-48, p. 79; as quoted in *Jackson Pollock (1983)* by Elizabeth Frank, p. 68
- <sup>5</sup> *Diary of a Genius* (1964), p12
- <sup>6</sup> need source for quote
- <sup>7</sup> Enrico Castellani quoted in: *Exhibition Catalogue, Milan, Fondazione Prada, Enrico Castellani, 2001*, p. 45
- <sup>8</sup> *Yves Klein, 1928 – 1962, Selected Writings*, ed. J & J, the Tate Gallery, London 1974, p31
- <sup>9</sup> From an interview with Gavin Turk in November 2017.
- <sup>10</sup> Faber Birren (1976) *Color Perception in Art*. p. 20
- <sup>11</sup> Oral history interview with Josef Albers, conducted by Sevim Fesci, 22 June – 5 July 1968, for the *Archives of American Art*, Smithsonian Institution
- <sup>12</sup> From an interview with Gavin Turk in November 2017.
- <sup>13</sup> In interview with Willoughby Sharp, 1969; as quoted in *Joseph Beuys and the Celtic Wor(l)d: A Language of Healing*, Victoria Walters, LIT Verlag Münster, 2012, p. 212, note vii
- <sup>14</sup> From an interview with Gavin Turk, November 2017.
- <sup>15</sup> From the press release for the Gavin & Turk exhibition at Ben Brown Fine Arts, London, February, 2012
- <sup>16</sup> Quoted in Mappa, Luca Cerizza, *Afterall Books*, 2008

All written content by David Swindells except introductory essay by James Putnam.

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- p30: "xxx need image title / photographer etc"
- p33: Blue Monochrome Painting (By Yves Klein): "need DACS info etc
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- p39: Josef Albers. Homage to the Square: R-NW IV. 1966. National Galleries of Scotland. © The Josef and Anni Albers Foundation/VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn and DACS, London 2017
- p44: 1972, photograph, ?
- p45: We Won't Do It without the Rose, Because We Can No Longer Think 1972; Joseph Beuys 1921-1986; Tate, Purchased 1982; © DACS, 2017; Photo: © Tate, London 2017:
- p53 Udire tra...
- p56-7 Do we need to credit the box scans?

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