Gavin Turk’s – ‘History of Art’

‘History of Art’ is body of work that illustrates Gavin Turk’s on-going 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’ [[1]](#endnote-1)published in 1550.1 Vasari who was 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 mythologize 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 ‘trademarks’. His on-going 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 previous art since the history of art is not necessarily final but has been formed by influential tastemakers, museums and collectors according to different criteria or agendas.

Turk’s work draws inspiration from specific modern masters: -Albers, Beuys. Boetti, Cesar, Dali, Duchamp, Fontana, Judd, Klein, Magritte and 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 waythey 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 authentic and genuine, the meaning of the term ‘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 in a spacious, white, brightly lit gallery when it would have originally 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 it 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.AsPicasso’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 essay ‘The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction (1935) 2 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). 3 He 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 publication. But he replaces Magritte’s ‘The Key to Dreams’ (1930) as the central image 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 is Eurocentric and male dominated. In 1971 Linda Nochlin wrote her influential essay’about the omission of female artists from the canon of art history entitled ‘[Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Why_Have_There_Been_No_Great_Women_Artists%3F)’ 4. Since the late 1970s the American artist Sherrie Levine, has also used appropriation in her practice. By modifying and re-contextualizing other artists’ iconic images that she has used photography to critique the notion of the male 'Artist Genius' so prevalent in traditional art history. Artist’s have also successfully challenged the misguided narrative that art history has been an evolutionary progression from lesser to greater artistic maturity to suggest that non-Western art is culturally inferior.

Like Duchamp Turk uses puns and wordplays as a central element within his work. His carefully considered borrowings critique the notion of originality 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 characterized by Duchamp, Turk is also able to turn what would seem like a copy or replica into an original work of art. This 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 recurrent motif through which to explore the way an artist's mark can embody aesthetic and commercial value and is sometimes integral to his artwork as if a reference to a brand or 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 and 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 5. 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. His imaginative imitations and appropriations are part homage, part parody where he uses his characteristic ironic sense of humour to engage the viewer. Rather than being intended as being just a critique they are more a celebration of works he has spent a long time considering. They provoke serious thought into deeper questions about identity, authorship and authenticity and both resurrect and undermine the old avant-garde myths. Although exhibited out of their historical and intellectual context they may well ‘accidentally’ gather additional art historical readings beyond their creator’s ’s original intentions.

James Putnam

1. Vasari, G., (1550)- *The Lives of the Most Excellent Painters, Sculptors, and Architects*

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

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

4 Nochlin, L. "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?" [ARTnews](https://www.revolvy.com/main/index.php?s=ARTnews&item_type=topic" \o "ARTnews" \t "_blank) January 1971:22-39.

5 Barthes, R. (1967) – The Death of the Author [↑](#endnote-ref-1)