

## The Polyglot Parrot: Gavin Turk at ScheiblerMitte, Berlin

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It doesn't always take much to justify a work or an artistic career. A single gesture can be enough. Take, for example, Georg Baselitz. He turned his paintings on their heads, an irreverent yet refined gesture aimed at the essence of a work that changed painting forever. The same could be said for Daniel Buren's translation of painting into a critical operation, his multifunctional weapon of a universally applicable design of stripes. Certainly the latter example is evidence that, when dealing with gesture-based art, the concept of measure cannot be underestimated. The situation gets tricky when the gesture is neither particularly original nor well metered. Forgive my audacity, but what if we were to get a walloping of minimal? Gavin Turk (born 1967) has chosen this very path and indeed has done so quite deliberately. The work of this English artist thrives in principle on a single, somewhat unoriginal idea that he has varied endlessly and reproduced on a grand scale: Turk inscribes himself into existent works of art history. The most original aspect of this idea is perhaps that it is not even his. Turk's art is derivative to the core, but there's a method to its derivation. Because the core of his work from the last two and a half decades—more to the point, *the manifestation* of this plot in the most diverse media, styles, formats, appropriated and altered looks—has been tackled by dozens of other artists before him. This is the foundation of the artist's false bottom from which he magically produces his rabbits—and it makes the show at ScheiblerMitte quite entertaining.

When Turk examines the role of the artist, and thereby forces the question of how one can make art at all and what art actually is, he is acting as an exceptionally polyglot parrot. He imitates and parodies others. He substitutes his own likeness for the faces of popular heroes such as Elvis Presley or Che Guevara and produces these iconic images, which have long since ceased to be portraits, in the typical Warhol silkscreen look as an edition on glass or as a unique work on canvas. With or without the camouflage pattern appropriated by Warhol (*Camouflage Elvis Cream*, 2006, and *Four Che, Seven Hues*, 2005). He produces an oversized version of his signature as a decorative mirrored object (*Erutangis*, 2009). Reproduces his name in the manner of Robert Indiana's Pop-Art emblem *LOVE* (1966), which has been appropriated beyond ad nauseam. Or in "Olde England" style as an elegantly carved, artificially weathered shop sign in gold letters (*Shop Sign*, 2008), which would be a credit to any proper British cobbler with a reasonable sense of tradition. The art historical and pop culture references that Turk transposes in this entirely pleasurable tour are myriad. It is to his credit, however, that he incorporates them structurally, never remaining on the topical surface. Instead, he refers to object and title, to aspects of the technique, the material, the internal handling, to issues surrounding editions and the original. And here and there he scores minute, precise hits. Wonderful, for instance, how his 14-minute film *The Mechanical Turk* (2008) debunks Wolfgang von Kempelen's legendary Turk (1769)—allegedly a faultless, mechanical chess robot with which the inventor fooled his contemporaries—as an entirely human hoax. It is Turk, of course, who slips into the role of the "Turk" (not necessarily the best part of the joke) and perform the "Knight's tour" sporting a robotic gaze and moving with the rhythm of clockwork. Then the loop begins again.

The limits to Gavin Turk's artistically derivative project inevitably become apparent. At some point we have understood how the moves are made and that, as with chess, not every move is crowned

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with glory. The reason we grin as we move on is because Turk is fully aware of his works' aspects of profound unoriginality, forced humorousness, and utter dependency on time. It would seem that he does not care whether we believe his gestures or not. This makes for a pleasant difference to those shows in which the second or third casting of artistic action is sold as an authentic original creation. Perhaps this is the reason why Gavin Turk, who had vanished from the scene following his initial peak during the YBA era, can be brought into position once again. Because it is worthwhile to mark the difference between artists that are dead serious about fooling us with their gadgetry and those who reveal to us the false bottom of such magic tricks.