

These Deformed Clay Busts By Rachel Newsome

At six o'clock on a cool evening at the 53rd Venice Biennale in the Gervasuti Foundation, sixty neo-classical clay busts stood upon plinths in regimented rows. The effect, through uniform repetition, was that of an army of heads, eyes unblinking, expression fixed. The busts and their number were facts. In the solid realm of physical reality, they could be seen and counted. This much was certain.

And then since it's understood that only those whose achievements are considered to be valiant, worthy, exceptional and brave - and since it is also known that from Julius Caesar to Mussolini, only the greatest and most notorious of men have been immortalised in bronze and stone - it might be presumed that these busts also celebrated a person of note. A dictator perhaps, or the founder of a prestigious institution.

An understandable question at this point - and it would be a good question - is, why *this* head? What is so special and important about them that they deserve a bust? Who *is* this person? Are they a dictator, a general, an emperor?

On the face of it, the answer to this question is straightforward. These busts are the uncanny likeness of the person of Gavin Turk. But already there is a dissonance between the fact of a room full of busts and the fact of them belonging to a man called Gavin Turk, of whom little is known (What kind of person is he and from what sort of family? What does he think about the world and what keeps him awake at night?). They do not add up.

At least not on the *face* of it they don't.

For if faces reveal truths about that to which they are attached, they are also surfaces behind which truths can be altered,

marked and masked. They are and topological screens or mirrors upon which any number of things might be projected or reflected. In which light, it seems no coincidence that so many busts from ancient sculptures to the early wax works of Madame Tussaud were made from masks, specifically death masks.

Which brings us to the next verifiable – *on the face of it* – fact. The person whom these busts have been made to represent is also the person of Gavin Turk the artist and as such, this Gavin Turk can claim achievement. He can claim, for example the achievement for example of famously (or perhaps infamously) failing his MA at London's Royal College of Art for showing a heritage plaque with the words "Gavin Turk worked here" (named Cave after Plato's) as his final work. Or for once appearing at Charles Saatchi's influential Sensation show at the Royal Academy dressed as tramp.

Since if Turk's achievement is anything, it is the examination of art itself, its nature, meaning and value and the role of the artist as a seer and a joker, a vagabond and a sage, neither operating inside or outside the establishment but occupying a space somewhere tenuous and uncertain on the edges.

Indeed the cast for the busts displayed that evening in Gervasuti Foundation were made from a mould of Turk's head which had originally been created for the purposes of a wax sculpture of a member of the Queen's Guard. (In a guerrilla act of art terrorism, Turk had placed The Queen's Guard outside The Royal Institute of British Architects and later outside The White Cube).

Meanwhile, neither the facts of the existence of Gavin Turk the person, or Gavin Turk the artist, or of their identities being attached to the same person, are strictly false. But neither do they tell the whole story or even the same story. It is here that Gavin Turk the person is disappeared from the frame in favour

of Gavin Turk the artist, as the binary world of fact is abandoned for the mutable and ambiguous realm of myth.

In this shadowy sphere, Gavin Turk *the artist* exists predominantly as an absence (not just as a heritage plaque but as tea stains, signatures and copies of other artists and their signatures) or in disguise (as a tramp and a Queen's Guard but also as Che "Gavara", David's Marat, a British soldier, Sid Vicious, Warhol, Samuel Beckett, as a mechanical chess player), both of which anyhow amount to more or less the same thing, which is a vehicle to explore the twin notions of originality and authorship.

Elaborating upon and extending the myths of others, it is through appropriation that Turk creates mythological meta-narratives from pictures of pictures of pictures. As Douglas Crimp writes; "underneath each picture there is always another picture."

In doing so, Turk has created a bust of himself before - as Magritte's Dadaist self-portrait from his unpopular Vache period, L'Ellipse. In a move calculated to deliberately scandalize the Parisian audience at the Galerie du Faubourg where the artwork was to be displayed, Magritte painted himself with of a green coloured oval for a head, eggs for eyes, a rifle barrel for a nose and an ominous third eye superimposed upon his bowler hat. In Oscar, Turk does the same, only it is his head which wears Magritte's L'Ellipse - a mask superimposed on a mask.

Neither "inside" nor "outside" the realm of the institution but appropriating and subverting its visual language, do the facts (artist + academy = bust) now add up? Or do they serve to further magnify the relationship between artist (if all artists are to be considered to be of necessity, outsiders) and establishment as a parasitical one? Certainly, Magritte was so successful in his desire to scandalize that none of his art works for the Galerie Du

Fauborg actually sold. While if Turk's busts are representatives of a fiction, what or where is their original?

To be asking these questions at all is to suppose that because the these regimented rows of busts were shown in a gallery that, firstly, they must be works of art and, secondly, they must be *finished* works of art. It would be fair to imagine that as the Gervasuti Foundation filled and cocktails were served, anyone entering that evening might have presumed both the former and the latter to be true.

It would be fair to imagine but as it turned out, that was not the case. Instead, guests had been invited to treat the busts as a work in progress to which they might add their own marks (and for which purpose the clay had been kept moist using a vaporiser). The event's title, *Distortion*, said it all.

Still, that did not stop the woman in the twin set from The Contemporary Arts Society re-coiling in shock at the very thought of profaning a sacred work of art. Such was the power of the gallery's aura, it was only after some struggle that she brought herself to throw a single right hook at one of the busts, making a giant indent in Turk's face with her diamond ring and unlearning in a single definitive act everything she had been taught about how art is meant to be looked at but not touched.

Creating a situation where this taboo could be broken, the event which took place that evening follows in the foot steps of *Flesh* by Turk's contemporary Georgina Starr. For this installation at London's Royal Academy, Starr created a series of porcelain sculptures based on classical figures of the female body. As part of a performance piece, Starr one by one removed the sculptures from their plinths before raising them above her head and dropping them so that they smashed into hundreds of porcelain pieces onto the floor.

But where it was Starr who performed this creative act of destruction for an audience, Distortion invited the audience to be the performers. Here, present only in clay replicas, Turk had magically disappeared, leaving the viewer to make the art in his absence.

Subverting art's traditional status as something belonging to a hierarchy of fixed pre-ordained orders created by a single author, Turk has been here before not only with works such as Cave but also The Golden Thread. A large-scale maze constructed from mirrored glass of varying degrees of transparency, the art work was not the physical construction but the *search for art* embarked upon by viewers as they moved between the walls into which they became briefly incorporated through their reflections.

But Distortion went one further than either The Golden Thread or Starr's Flesh, since it was the audience and not Turk that was being invited to physically alter the work and make it into something else.

Presenting his bust not as a finished art work but a blank canvas yet to become art, the Distortion event proposed art as something de-authored, a collaboration produced not by the individual but the collective, in which the picture beneath the picture was further extended as Turk the arch appropriator offered his work up for appropriation by others. And not even by other artists but by anyone and everyone – children included – bringing to life Beuys' radical and utopian belief that “every human being is an artist.”

And so it was that, that evening at the Gervasuti Foundation, some took to smoothing Turk's bust to resemble a featureless oval, while others added dollar signs, fangs, ass' ears and pearl necklaces. Others still gouged, tilted, trepanned, contorted, squashed and even stamped on Turk's uniform prototype as the guests were transformed from audience to artist.

This evolution was made to feel even more authentic during a repeat event at Turk's East London studio in Hackney Wick. This time titled Bust Party, here the audience were invited not only to step into the artist's shoes but also into the private, often mythical place of the artist's studio - the place where the magical act of making of art is traditionally understood to occur.

But if at both events the audience had become the artist, does it necessarily follow that the end product – these misshapen, grotesque and deformed heads, some serious attempts at transforming Turk into James Joyce, complete with eye patch and moustache, others graffiti-ing his face with peas and sinking a martini glass into his crown, making of him something rather more absurd, further subverting any reverence either to art or artist – does it follow that these individual busts and aberrations of busts are the art?

Are they the full story, complete with beginning, middle, end? Or is it more truthful to claim, as Umberto Eco does in his essay, "The Poetics Of The Open Work", that it is the multitude of perspectives provoked by the art which also makes it.

"The form of the work of art," he writes, "Gains its aesthetic validity precisely in proportion to the number of different perspectives from which it can be viewed and understood."

He adds; "every reception of a work of art is both an *interpretation* and a *performance* of it, because in every reception the work takes on a fresh perspective for itself."

So no, these deformed busts with snouts for noses and hollows for eyes, pressed in, pushed out, slanted side ways with their features reversed, they are not the full story since in this story there is no beginning because there is no origin, and no end because there is no point at which the art is finished. In this story, there is only middle; there is only interpretation and

performance - the “creative act” as Duchamp described it - in which the “middle” of the story *is* the story, since it contains starting point and arrival, beginning and end both at once.

What those events in Venice and Hackney Wick achieved was to make the middle visible through inviting the audience not only to interpret the work by looking at it but by touching it, also. Indeed there was no art until the very first punch which not only ruptured Turk’s bust but the invisible frame around it also.

And so, stepping inside the frame, the audience became the art. With touch at the heart of the aesthetic experience, stretching, smoothing and shearing, the artist-audience were releasing something hidden not only from within the clay, but also something hidden within themselves, as the experience became something psychological as well as physical, engaging mind, body and spirit.

This participatory interaction produces what Nicholas Bourriaud describes as “a collective elaboration of meaning” which offers up new possibilities for dialogue and exchange.

“Art works are “interstices”,” he writes, “where “an interstice is a space in social relations which, although it fits more or less harmoniously and openly into the system, suggests possibilities for exchanges other than those that prevail within the system.”

“Art can function as a relational device in which there is a degree of randomness. It can be a machine for provoking or managing individual or collective encounters...

We no longer try to make progress thanks to conflict and clashes, but by discovering new assemblages, possible relations between distinct units, and by building alliances between different partners.”

But while this might tell something of the nature of art in relation to audience participation, far from solving the question,

to whom does the work belong, it only serves to further complicate it. By opening up the work to a collective, the Distortion and Bust Party events were no longer about Gavin Turk. The bust was not the art work, nor was he the subject of it. In which case, what is Turk's role in En Face, the exhibition of the outcomes from these events? Does he have any role at all, or could the work be said to bear only the metaphysical signature only of the collective?

Working on a similar project, Anthony Gormley approached an extended family of sixty bricklayers from Cholula, Mexico to sculpt tens of thousands of terracotta figures of between eight and twenty six centimetres for a piece called "Field Of Amazonians". In a continuation of the same piece, Gormley recruited a hundred volunteers from St Helens in North West England to each make a figure from thirty tonnes of clay following loose instructions regarding shape and size. The piece provoked controversy when it was claimed by some that the credit for the work should go to the family of bricklayers.

Both Gormley's and Turk's pieces, meanwhile, are evocative of a Warholian production line of Factory style multiples produced by an army of helpers and assistants. But as Turk points out; "whether you are working with a foundry or studio assistants or the people who make the tools, art has always been a collaboration." In which case, could any art work from Michelangelo to Magritte be truly said to "belong" to anyone? Perhaps Situationist Guy Debord was right when he asserted that "creation is never pure."

Describing the "impurity" of the work, Turk likens it to a "surreal exquisite trove", the diabolical game where players take it in turns to add a body part to a figure whose shape is kept hidden as the paper it is drawn upon is folded and passed on to the next player. It is only when all body parts have been added and the paper is unfolded that the multi-interpretations of a

single (usually grotesque) figure is revealed as the product of collective agency.

Woven into the meta narrative of pictures beneath pictures, the work became of meta portrait of faces beneath faces with the bust of Turk himself, barely recognisable, if at all, buried somewhere deep in its layers.

In this meta-portrait, many faces seem to appear – of the living and the dead and of the somewhere between the two. Some seem to be mythical creatures, perhaps from the sea, groaning with scales and a single enlarged ear, with the bow lips of a woman and the devil's goatee for a beard. Others, still with some resemblance to Turk, appear to be jokes; Turk (who has a shaved head) with hair, Turk with eyes in the back of his head, with holes drilled into his face to comic effect, with vanilla ice-cream splattered over his head (a metaphorical pun perhaps on the vanilla bird droppings splattered on classical busts left to the elements). Elsewhere, a bust with a dollar sign for a medallion and its head opened out to reveal the sides of an empty box appears to be some kind of comment on the “joke” that is US consumer capitalism.

In some busts Turk has been given a character to inhabit. In one, he has been given wrinkles, lines, blood shot eyes and an archaic handle-bar moustache, as if a survivor from some endless war. In another, Turk is aged with a wizened, geriatric face featuring an expression that is part puzzlement, part alarm. He is Don Quixote, perhaps. Or maybe he is Samuel Beckett, who of course knew a thing or two about the absurdity suspected to be at the bottom of man.

In others, Turk's modern Western face is marked with Maori tribal tattoos, while another sees Turk afro-cised into a spliff-smoking doctor dub with high cheek bones, flattened nose and big grinning lips. In a more sinister bust, Turk appears like the bald-headed General Kurtz, as played by Marlon Brando in

“Apocalypse Now”, his face melting in horror, perhaps at the apocalyptic melt of his own identity, perhaps at the apocalyptic melt of the very notion of identity as something certain and fixed - since if these faces are to tell us anything, it is that all identity is a fiction inseparable from how we are seen by others.

And there are those which have been so brutalised as to be more akin to the collapsed skull of Lindow Man, the late iron-age man found in peat marsh in the North of England and now on display in the British Museum, who is believed to have met his fate through a brutal and violent ritualistic murder. And then there are those whose human resemblance operates at the level of the grotesque semi-figurative abstractions of Francis Bacon. Just as Bacon described his work as made “to look as if a human presence had passed between them, like a snail, leaving a trail of the human presence and memory traces of past events, as the snail leaves its slime,” so some of the busts displayed in *En Face* appear to be sub-human also.

Like a psychiatric experiment intended to study not so much physiognomy or pathognomy but the private demons of man, *En Face* is reminiscent of the sixty four “canonical grimaces” or character heads of the eighteenth century Austrian artist Franz Xaver Messerschmidt which show him in various states of suffering and insanity. A late baroque and early neo-classical sculptor, Messerschmidt began producing the heads after observing his own facial expressions from the pain induced by what is believed to be Crohn’s disease.

But unlike Bacon, it was not Messerschmidt’s intention to produce abstractions. In direct opposition to Messerschmidt’s aesthetic interest in the pursuit of a “universal balance” (a forerunner to the principles of the Golden Ratio), the heads’ pained expressions, with titles such as *The Incapable Bassoonist* and *The Beaked Man*, were acts of masochism as much as they were acts of catharsis. Messerschmidt claimed his heads had aroused the ire of the “Spirit of Proportion” and that as

punishment the spirit visited at night, forcing him to endure humiliating tortures which inspired further heads.

In its slow melt from formations to deformations, and from representations of Turk to representations of mythical fictions, *En Face* also echoes the work of the late nineteenth century post impressionist sculptor Medardo Rosso. Where Messerschmidt had fought against abstraction, Rosso embraced it. Deliberately setting out to show the fleeting, temporal and indeterminate as pointing to a greater truth, Rosso created poetic abstractions of classical busts which appeared to melt as if into wax or flicker as if a flame flicked from the immanence. To further illustrate his point, Rosso also created a series of copies of ancient and renaissance masterpieces in order to demonstrate just how closer to real life his own impressionistic work in comparison to their fixed representations.

Whether intentionally or not, taken together the end products of *En Face*, with their misshapen distortions and altered physiognomies, also bear more than a passing resemblance to the work of Picasso who wrote to his lover Françoise Gibot, “reality must be torn apart!” in order to reveal what might be hidden behind or beneath.

But what truths, exactly, do the products of Turk’s inter-subjective collaboration work, which now make up *En Face*, tell? Formerly casts, these busts have become cast outs. No longer celebratory commemorations of achievement and skill, they tell of something far more subterranean, these clay deformities, which perhaps say something of the outcast beneath the mask in all of us.

So is this, then, the art - the product of a multi-layered, multi-level act of hyper-appropriation, with the work belonging to no one and everyone? Is it the dark secrets of the collective subconscious made partially visible like half-buried bones in the desert? In which case, does it follow that art is only art, *if* it has

been made by the collective? Or somewhere in the shadows, does the artist always lurk, manipulating the strings like a divine puppet master both granting autonomy and taking it away?

Certainly, by allowing the audience to step into the frame, the piece involved an element of risk. But it was Turk who had encoded it to be this way. Encouraging not one but two and three people to work on each bust, part of this encoding was to ensure that his “signature” would not simply be replaced by the recognisable signature of another.

Expressing the idea that we frame things but also that we are framed *by* things, the authorial control ultimately remained his. Re-appropriating that which had been appropriated, it was Turk who chose which of the busts produced at Distortion and Bust Party were to be exhibited, and Turk who decided how they would be finished, glazed and presented. Showing neither one signature nor another, it is the frame which tells the story and trumping the audience-artist with a final hidden Ace, Turk who framed it.

As Bourriaud points out; “As in the Einsteinian universe, in the “work in movement” we may well deny that there is a prescribed single point of view... We can say that the “work in movement” is the possibility of numerous different interventions but it is not an amorphous invitation to indiscriminate participation. The invitation offers the performer the opportunity for an oriented insertion into something which always remains the world intended by the author.”

In these terms, it is the invisible frame around the art set up to explore the idea of originality as something which may or may not truly exist, which is the art.

Says Turk; “I think the whole kind of notion of originality, in a way, it’s about substance or timeliness or timelessness. Maybe it’s not so important, it just has to appear or feel timeless, but as

long as it feels like that in the moment, then we can feel a sense of satisfaction of some sort. I think that's probably the best we can do, just "in the moment" feel that there's a sense of timelessness."

In which light, En Face is not the art work but the artefacts of the art work. These busts, they are remnants and ruins which suggest something timeless that has perhaps gone before. Fragments from a portrait of a portrait, a puzzle of a puzzle, even the titles of the works - anagrams of GAVIN TURK - point to the further scrambling of the artist's identity. All the right letters are there, but re-ordered they bear little relation, if any to the original.

At the heart of the art work "in the moment", meanwhile, is movement. Far from being laboured over for many days, the busts produced by the artist-audience at Distortion and Bust Party were the products of speed. And it is speed, not stasis which in turn produces what Eco describes as a "halo of indefiniteness". Even the glaze on the end products adds to this halo. Giving the busts the look of sculptures made from bronze and not clay, the glaze is a further playful exploration of the tension between the plastic and the fixed and how appearances can deceive.

Echoing Rosso, these busts which make up En Face, Turk is saying, are not the fixed busts of classical art, they are immediate and atemporal with no real end or fixed shape except, like Turk's sculptures of chewing gum and rubbish bags, the point at which they are abandoned. With stasis, there is solidity, frozenness, fixity. With speed there is layering, motion, blur. Like a shooting star which lights up the night sky for a single moment and then is gone, there is dazzle and a flash of lucidity. But blink and you miss it.

"Time appears to be found in the "between", writes Heinz-Norbert Jocks, "it is most often noticeable after the fact, in the

traces it leaves – the seasoned walls, the ruins uncovered at archaeological excavations.”

...to which could be added, in the traces of deformed clay busts.