

Gavin Turk: 'All sculpture is public sculpture'

The artist's latest project is a giant rusty nail in the centre of the City of London. What will the bankers make of it?



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Gavin Turk with his sculpture Nail. Photograph: Ian Gavan/Getty

There was a time when a 12-metre rusty nail stuck into a City of London pavement might have raised a few eyebrows. Good lord, the bowler-hatted gents would have said, what abomination is this? Modern Art, no doubt! Today, [Gavin Turk's sculpture Nail](#), to be unveiled later this month at One New Change in London's financial district, is unlikely to appal anyone, for it comes in the wake of a great wave of public art commissions that have changed the appearance of squares, hillsides and city centres across Britain. But which of these sculptures, that range from a bronze statue of the poet [John Betjeman at St Pancras](#) in London to Antony Gormley's figures on a Merseyside beach, will be preserved with pride, and which will be forgotten in silent shame?

"In a way all sculpture is public sculpture," says Turk, who became famous in the 90s for putting his own name on the blue plaques that mark renowned artists' and writers' haunts. He stresses something that is often ignored when people talk about public art; the idea of permanence. A sculpture positioned in the same place for ever, in the open air, has to endure changes in fashion and attitude. "Even on an elemental level in the wind and the rain, it's very difficult for art to survive."

A lot of recent British public art is doomed because artists and patrons seem to think of it solely as something for today, and perhaps that's why so much of it is superficial, glib and ugly. The B of the Bang in Manchester – which used a crass image of a bursting steel star to symbolise sporting excellence – was a bad work of art even before [safety fears led to its demolition](#).

Gavin Turk's Nail is more modest and humorous. "It pins the bottom of the building down to the pavement," he says, and makes a jokey contrast with the hi-tech Jean Nouvel architecture it is hammered into. "I suppose it's a nostalgic thing because I don't think there's a nail in that entire building." Humour might be more enduring than grandiosity when it comes to public art. Mark Wallinger's design for a giant horse at Ebbsfleet is witty and exact for all its immense size.

The Olympics next year will see some of the most gargantuan works ever. Let's hope these would-be icons show some of Turk's recognition of the strange and timebound nature of such art. What will he feel if his nail simply becomes a local landmark and people meet there, without knowing who made it? "I'd be quite happy with that."

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