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Joseph Beuys  
Elizabeth  
Gavin Turk  
Magritte  
Siel Vicious  
Andy Warhol





# SIGNATURES

Josie Barnard

*A dying art*

When a child reaches the age of nine or so, he or she begins to understand that in adulthood a “signature” is necessary. At this point, the idea of a signature as a means of authentication and identification is hazy. For a pre-teen, it’s a chance to take control of who they are. They often start practicing. I know I did. My signature became a project, an opportunity to start moulding my identity. The perfected signature was to be a condensed version of the future me — except I was a child of my time. The 1970s was an era of Holly Hobby cartoons and Love Is posters. Along with most of the other girls in my class, I tried a whole host of decorative possibilities. I dotted the “i” with a smiley; I turned the “o” into a heart; I experimented with a looser, freer “J”, at one stage looping it right round my whole name and concluding with a perky flower.

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¶ Kids today seem rather more sophisticated. The day my daughter and her classmates set to developing their signatures, she came home with selected examples. Not one featured childish flourishes. These 21st century nine-year-olds' signatures were all about encrypting. Manic tangles of ink, they were pretty good approximations of adult signatures. And adult signatures do tend to become illegible. After any initial excitement about a signature as a way of expressing oneself, it tends to get rushed — scrawled on cheques, invoices, letters, postcards, credit cards; scribbled on legal documents, prescriptions, report cards. Signatures are high-speed marks; it's not always possible to read them, because writing them has become a chore.

¶ Some signatures are collected and hunted. When I was in my early 20s, I got a job in a publishing house as a blurb writer and fancied becoming "a writer" myself one day. I'd just discovered the Australian novelist Patrick White and found his lyrical, tough treatment of the outsider deeply inspiring. Having had no prior interest in collecting signatures, suddenly I wanted his.

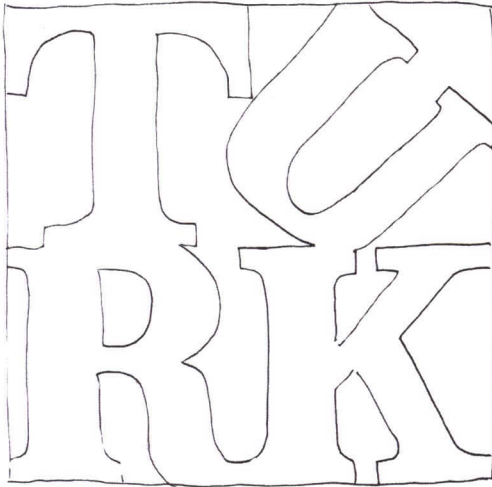
¶ White lived in Australia. It was the days of snail mail. He was notoriously reclusive and cantankerous to boot. The book I wanted him to sign was *Three Uneasy Pieces*, a collection that starts with a story called *The Screaming Potato* and goes on to explore whether we should gouge out "warts of the soul" or wait for the "evil in us" to die naturally. The photo in the front of the book showed the author standing at his kitchen table — mouth down-turned, one brow raised slightly — implacable, apparently humourless. He was a Nobel Prize winner. He received piles of fan mail. The chance that my request for a signature would even make it past his agent was, I thought, low to nil. I had nothing to lose. I popped it in the post.

¶ To my real surprise, perhaps two months later, the package came back. The note from his agent says, "Patrick was happy to sign your book". Happy. The signature is a bit shaky (he was in his late 70s) — the "P" looks like an "O", the crosses of the "t"s float a little way from the main text. But it is a clear, open, friendly signature. It still gives me goose bumps to see it. The book remains one of my most treasured objects. Why? Because Patrick White, a writer I admire enormously, had it in front of him, perhaps on the very kitchen table that is in the photo. With his hand, he signed his name, for me. He gave me something of himself.

¶ One of the precious things about a hero's signature is that it's personal. I was surprised to hear that Canadian writer Margaret Atwood had invented a machine that enables her to sign fans' books while she is in a different country altogether. In 2006, when LongPen was launched, Atwood told the *Independent* newspaper what had inspired her. "As I was whizzing around the United States on yet another demented book tour, getting up at four in the morning to catch planes... I thought, 'There must be a better way of doing this'."

¶ LongPen is an ingenious concept; I had a toy that used the same principle when I was a child. With my toy, the author's pen had a robotic arm attached so that marks made were replicated by another quite separate pen. It meant I could write simultaneously on bits of paper that were several inches apart. Technology may allow the gap between pens to be thousands of miles, but getting a signature is about touch and physical presence, surely, not gizmos and gadgets. If someone wants a signature, don't they want to feel they've gained a one-to-one exchange with the author? I gather that if you go to a LongPen signing, you'll find a pen attached to a computer as well as a monitor and speakers. You'll be able to look at the author, close up, and have a chat, too, before they sign. In a virtual way, you can feel as if you are alone with the author — even in their home. You might glimpse their personal effects, perhaps a pepper pot in the kitchen, a calendar on the wall. ....

¶ Autograph hunters may want to sell their bounty on. If Atwood, and now a whole bunch of other authors, can sign books anywhere in the world without stepping outside their front doors, that affects the market. Online sellers are very careful to make distinctions. One clarifies, "This signature was obtained in person, not through the author's 'high-tech' invention called the LongPen. Copies 'signed' in the latter manner must be identified as such because they have no collectible value. The point of a signed copy is that it unmistakably indicates that the author held the copy of the book and left his or her trace on it."



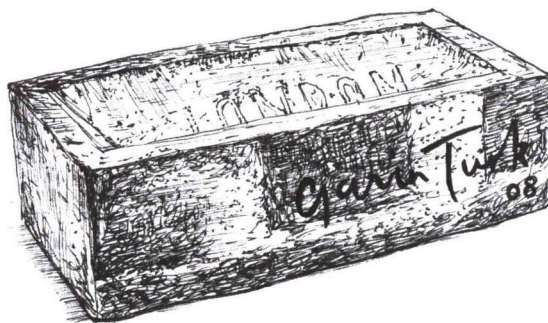
Gavin Turk *Turk Love Black on White* 2010

Silkscreen ink on canvas, 120 × 120 cm  
After Robert Indiana's iconic *LOVE* image

¶ If a signature is not unique, does it count? LongPen puts signatures centre frame and draws attention to the idea that they might become outmoded. Purchases and bank transactions are made remotely using pin numbers and codes. At more and more schools, children queuing for dinner have to present their fingerprint for verification in order to get their pasta.

¶ Signatures are often beautiful. There is something archaic about them, and they have been taken for granted. Their alluring illegibility may become a thing of the past if we don't have to sign our names on a day-to-day basis; signatures won't evolve in the same way. For anyone who worked on them as a child, as I did, or hunts signatures of others, that could feel tragic.

¶ However, as I think that, I smile. Signatures are only a convention. In the short story *Amy Foster* by Joseph Conrad, the main character, Yanko Goorall, is an exile from central Europe who has been shipwrecked on the English coast. A sign of just how excluded he is from Eastbay society comes when the rector has to write Yanko's name for him in the marriage registry. The castaway can only make a "crooked cross" himself; he is disenfranchised by his inability to effect a signature. Yet, Conrad notes, the other people in the Eastbay community look "heavy". The soles of Yanko's feet do not seem to "touch the dust of the road," he "vaults" over stiles and "pace[s] these slopes with a long elastic stride". Throughout the story, Conrad emphasises it is not the rector nor the doctor nor the landowner, but rather Yanko, the man who can't even sign his name, who is bursting with life. He is a "soft and passionate adventurer... lithe, supple and strong-limbed, straight like a pine, with something striving upwards in his appearance as though the heart within him had been buoyant."



Gavin Turk **Revolting Brick** 2008

Marker pen on brick, 6 × 7 × 22 cm

Edition of 10

A brick signed by the artist



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