



Is this feature a piece of art? Is it my creation or a joint collaboration with the interviewee, the artist Martin Creed? For him there is no cut off point between the work he makes, the words he uses to talk about it and the conversation I'm having with him here. It's part of his world and according to him everything in it - his thoughts, words, breath, shit (more on that later) - can be considered art. Whether you agree or not doesn't really matter. It only matters to Martin Creed, says Lawrence Chiles.

But if everything in his world is an artistic creation, no separation from the gallery to the toilet, doesn't that send you a bit mad? "In my mind it helps me to feel well. Instead of thinking that at a certain point when I enter a room I am then an artist. It kind of taking the pressure off," he says. "You can't be on guard at all times. If putting on a show is like being on guard then you're very conscious of presenting something to people at a concentrated point in time, but in realty you're doing it all the time."

Creed became infamous in 2001 for furthering the public denouncement of the Turner Prize by winning it with a work that seemed to enrage the tabloids with its simplicity. Creed was called 'barmy' by *The Sun*. *The lights going on and off* consisted of two works, one with an interval of five seconds, the other for 30, and was just as the title suggests: a room with the lights going on and off.

The press had a field day. After years of drubbing the young British artists of the mid to late 1990s, from the moment a shark in a tank was wheeled into a white cube, a conceptual artwork that seemed not to contain any art at all was given the winning prize of £20,000. The award undoubtedly has allowed the affable Scot to become an international artist of fame and standing, but you get the feeling that he would have got there anyway. Despite the jibes he is unfazed, because for him it isn't just about one moment frozen in time.

Martin Creed's world is more easily explained through his performance. It comes as a surprise to find that as well as his blue-tack stuck to the wall (*Work No. 79*) and ball of scrunched up paper (*Work No. 88*) he also >



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> does a one hour performance that is a convergence of stand-up comedy, music gig and mime. Not that it's really those things in the way you would expect them.

The stand up is Creed on stage ad-libbing, talking about his thought process at that very moment, explaining exactly how he is feeling and thinking about being on stage at that very moment. The music is him with his band, Owada, the three-piece he has been performing with since 1994, singing songs such as 1-100 and 1234. Being stripped-down short punk tunes, you can guess the lyrics from the titles too - they have the same simplistic, minimal approach that Creed brings to his gallery work. The mime is him followed around stage by a dancer, or perhaps two, mimicking his every improvised movement. His own-brand version of a variety performance leaves the audience laughing but a little perplexed.

"Watching someone think live on stage is a bit difficult. To do things and keep it fresh that's what I'm trying to do, but it's difficult. That's what it's all about," Creed explains. "As soon as you have something that is exciting you try and grasp on to it and stay there, but even that after a while can become dead. There are a number of things that are improvised in the performance. The dancer that follows me around near the end is just a way of trying to amplify movement in the same way that the microphone amplifies the voice. Although it's improvised I do make a lot of notes."

It all seems primed to risk ridicule but the fear of failure is intrinsic to Creed's work. You get the impression that he is throwing himself at the mercy of the audience to see what will happen, loved or loathed. Most people go on stage with a script, hoping their mind doesn't go blank. Martin goes on blank, hoping a script will come.

"It's a kind of reverse performance and it probably stems from a fear of performing, a fear of not being loved or a desire to be loved," he says. "When you go in front of an audience, you've got an immediate gauge of being liked or not." This is something he perhaps doesn't get with his

balloons half-filling a gallery (first one being *Work No. 202*) or neon "Everything is going to be alright" signs (*Work No. 205*).

His aim is not to have a goal and the result is something absurd and funny, even if being funny is not the intention and more a happy result. In fact, any goal or aim really does seem to get in the way.

"I'm totally aware that I'm asking the audience to sit through something. And although they could leave it is a trapped situation. Comedy allows me to get out of that, but I don't think I'm funny when I try to be funny. Comedy is such a specific goal it almost asks that you fail. But if you're funny by accident then it's kind of ok," Creed analyses. "I think I'm so scared of failure that if I don't try and be funny and then I am by accident, it's kind of ok. But I do think it's important to me and, to put it another way, the things I usually like are the things that make me laugh."

The common notion about Creed's work is that there must be something to get, some great philosophy behind the simplicity, that it is all deeply conceptual. But this is something he denies. "I love expressionist paintings. If there's any type my work falls into more than anything it's expressionism. I'm just trying to express myself," he says. The conceptual tag often alienates audiences, creating a barrier not just between the audience and art in general, but between the audience and the object in front of them - not that Creed is shy of having the debate about it.

"I've always liked the degree of argument. Art objects are just things in the world. They're not different from other objects. Maybe the fact that art objects are given this more rarefied treatment is what people object to," he says. "I think that there are many great artworks and some of them are TV shows, or films, or designs, but they're not all put in art galleries. That's probably a flaw in my view. I think that *Fawlty Towers* is one of the greatest artworks of all time. It's not just a great show. Or a Bob Dylan song. These are all great works of art. If it means something to you, in your mind and soul, then

it's art."

What might be difficult for some to find meaning in are Creed's latest works. The object this time is the human body and the "tiny creations" made during bodily functions, specifically vomiting and defecation. The *Sick* films, shown in cinemas towards the end of 2006, involved volunteers walking into a white room to spew in any way they saw fit. The *Shit* films - well, say it like it is - are yet to be edited into an artwork but will probably appear in some format later this year. They involved another group of volunteers, this time from LA, home of the porn industry and a place more open to people doing anything for money, to enter a white sealed room and let nature take its course. The 'what's the point?' question seems to loom larger still.

"It's the first time I've used a body in the work. I'm always aware that in my installations it's the audience, their bodies that bring it alive and complete it," explains Creed. "When I design works I design spaces for the people to complete it - like in the lights going on and off piece. But the films are adding a layer of complexity."

If the *Sick* films are an attempt to capture a moment without thought where "you're out of control" perhaps the *Shit* films aim to capture a point when we're at our most contemplative? "Yeah, they're like opposites, the mouth and arse - the front and the back," says Creed. "But I also thought of the *Sick* films being like painting and the *Shit* films being like sculpture."

Created and described by anyone else, you might feel like discarding this as pretentious rubbish. But Martin is the polar opposite of pretentiousness, with his easy manner and willingness to talk about what he does. You end up just going along with the wry smile and believing that, as he did as a student, he "often made work that was hard to explain using words - it's such a pressure put on to produce something that needed to be explained."

It's not that he's trying to shock. "I find the films difficult to watch. It's like the ultimate taboo. It's not that I find it easy at all. You know, I'm totally scared of shit. I've already gone through a lot of thoughts thinking 'why, god, am I doing this?' And then thinking 'well, fuck, it's just a bodily function. In many cultures >

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First spread: *Work No.79*. Previous spread: stills from the *Sick* films. This page, top to bottom: *Work No.88*, Owada on stage, *Work No.370*, *Work No.200*



> it isn't taboo. And we are animals as well as humans."

Using other people in the performance could be seen as him wanting to be in control, directing from afar. "Rationally I wanted to do it myself, and maybe I should do it," he concedes. "With the set-up I was thinking if I wanted to do it would I want anyone watching? So the set was built so that no one was there and there was only a video feed to another room. If I'd done it myself then it might be like a composer playing their own music - they might play it in a better way - or the audience might take a special interest because it's the artist doing it."

And that, excuse or not, is something Creed doesn't want. As with his other work, the simplicity and directness of the object and act is what he's after. If he was doing it himself the audience may feel that the artist is suggesting there's a right, or artistic, way to defecate perhaps. Once again, taken on their own the films can feel isolated, but placed in the increasingly (if not chronological) numbered world of art that he creates they form a more complete narrative.

"Each piece is like a little punctuation mark in a longer sentence," believes Creed. "One of the reasons I like doing the performance works and talking about them is because it's a chance to combine the work together and to make a work that includes them in a bigger composition that has more of a narrative. I think of all of my work as a story of trying to make something, or the story of looking for something more than just the ordinary reality of everyday stuff."

So is Martin Creed's work a provocation designed to agitate people, mock the art establishment and strip the critics of their words? Or a space in which to ponder?

"If something gets under your skin then that's quite powerful. The worst thing is if something gets ignored, because then it's like saying it has no meaning," Creed muses. "I want people to like my work and if it's a breathing space I'd be happy about that. If people walk into a gallery and see something that is simple and deadpan then that surely offers some kind of relief."



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