

# Martin Creed on the art of puking and shitting

MS talks turds with Martin Creed, winner of the 2001 Turner Prize and Britain's most famous and controversial modern artist



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MARTIN Creed is one of Britain's most famous artists. His work often generates a great deal of controversy, most of it questioning whether his minimalist pieces can be considered art at all. For example, his work *Some Blu-tack kneaded, rolled into a ball and depressed against a wall* is just what it sounds like, as is *A sheet of A4 paper crumpled into a ball*. Some have hailed these pieces as brilliant attempts to "short-circuit our visually overloaded culture"; others dismiss them as pointless. In the art world, Creed is a big cheese, revered for his brave installations which explore the nature of art itself, the relationship between art and reality and art and life. He is famous for his spectacular neon signs which carry comforting messages such as 'Everything is going to be alright' and 'Don't worry', many of which have been emblazoned on the walls of galleries and churches across Europe.

Creed has been big on the art scene for well over a decade but it wasn't until he was nominated for, and eventually won, the 2001 Turner Prize that his name really entered the public consciousness. Creed's fearless installation consisted of an empty gallery room in which the lights periodically switched on and off. Like most of his self-effacing work, Creed called the piece *Lights going on and off* and unsurprisingly, it sparked frenzied press coverage. It was as if his work had trip-switched the public into debating the case for conceptual art! Even now, five years later, when I ask my friends what they think of the lights going on and off, they fall into two distinct camps. There is no grey area. Camp A are utterly riled by the idea that lights switching on and off could possibly be deemed as art. One person described Creed's success as a distinct case of the 'Emperor's new clothes'. Camp B, on the other hand, are totally enthralled by the piece, viewing it as an exceptionally clever take on the world, an imaginative way turning classic visual art on its head.

Whatever your opinion on Creed's work, this thoughtful Glaswegian man is a huge success. Since he was presented with the Turner Prize in 2001 by none other than pop icon

Madonna herself, Creed has hit the big time. He exhibits all over the world, regularly gives talks to rammed audiences and he plays in a cutting edge band. He considers his music and visual artwork to be inextricably linked, primarily because they both come from the same desire to create things. Creed is obsessed with the idea of making things, whether it's neon signs, singing elevators or bodily fluids - he views them all as works of art and he is fascinated by the process of creation. His recent venture is into film and he has just come back from LA where he made *Shit Film* in which he filmed people, you guessed it, shitting. He has also made *Sick Film* in London, where you guessed it, he films people puking. Sound strange? Come and meet Mr Creed and decide for yourself...

## Why did you make Sick Film?

I'm interested in making things. My job is to make things and everything I make, I make with my body, including my mind. *Sick Film* is about getting back to basics. I think that vomiting is a very simple way that the human body makes something. I'm also interested in trying not to think too much, to be free, to make something without being self-conscious or narcissistic. I want to be free of fear, free of thinking. Vomiting is a good example of making something without thought process. It's a convulsion. It's about pure expression that by-passes the thinking process.

## Who did the puking and how did you get them to do it?

Most of the players in *Sick Film* were my friends. I set up a dining area with lots of food and drinks and people were able to consume whatever they wanted. This was important because I wanted some variety in the vomit they produced. I rang a couple of doctors beforehand to ask them how to induce vomit and how to look after people. They suggested drinking lots of liquids because these are much easier to vomit up without damaging yourself. They also told me to get everyone to fill their stomachs to the limit. A distended stomach makes the body want to vomit.

## Did you watch people as they vomited?

In *Sick Film*, I was there next to the camera watching the play-



Martin Creed: the ultimate modern artist

ers vomit with my own eyes. It felt slightly voyeuristic and I realized there wasn't any need for me to be there since I'd given my instructions to everyone. I became self-conscious because I noticed that people played to me, they looked to me for reassurance. I didn't want that, I wanted them to be in control. When I later filmed *Shit Film*, I didn't watch.

## How did you make people feel comfortable enough to shit on camera?

I tried to think about what I would want. I figured I'd want total privacy so I made a completely closed set and we had automatic cameras that could be controlled from another room. We also used a fixed

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camera, to give the player the control. That way they could choose to go in front of the camera and they could leave the frame when they wished. Also, there were no close-ups. The full figure is in shot and everyone was fully dressed. It's the whole figure, the shape that I was interested in.

## Who did you get to do it?

*Shit Film* was made in LA and we advertised for the players in the art schools, acting magazines and with porn actors. Actually, there were a few soldiers that did it. They were used to shitting in the battlefield so they were pretty blasé when it came to this.

## Is American shit is differ-

## ent from English shit?

American shit is very homogenized. It looks like toothpaste coming out. All the food out there is junk food, paste that's been reconstituted into shapes. Their shit was like that - long, stringy, toothpaste shit. Most of the film crew came from England and they were terrified of all this poisonous weird stringy shit, they could only go near the organic, solid stuff that reminded them of home.

## You are best known for the lights going on and off. What did the work mean to you?

Like a lot of my work, *Lights going on and off* was a little experiment. I was trying to make something that used the

whole of the space in which it was exhibited. I wanted to make everywhere equal, so that you can look at the floor, walls, ceiling or even yourself - your foot or whatever - and they are all part of the work. In other words, the lights are going on and off for everything in the room. In that sense, the work was more like music than visual art. Visual works of art require you to look at them but if you're in a room with music playing you can walk around and the music is always there. I wanted to get away from the art being pin pointed in a certain space. I wanted to give the viewer freedom.

## Your work generates strong reactions in people,

## perhaps because people don't know what to make of it. What do you think?

The meaning of something can only really be made by the viewer themselves. I can't make meaning, I make things. If my works have a further life as art they do so because they live in people's hearts and minds for whatever reason - but I'm not in control of that. I often think about why people love things and why they hate them. I've come to the conclusion that people make meaning for themselves. Art can be a mirror and people see themselves in everything.

## Neon signs carrying comforting messages seem to be a recurring theme. Would you say that there is an air of neurosis to your work?

When I first made the 'Everything is going to be alright' sign, I was feeling low and I guess I was hoping that everything was going to be alright. I wanted to make a positive piece and one that could be made public. In some ways it's rather an empty phrase but it's still quite comforting. 'Don't worry' works in the same way - it's soothing even though the person saying it usually doesn't know what's going to happen.

## Did winning the Turner prize ease the neurosis?

Having that institutional recognition behind me gave me more confidence. The Turner prize gave me the feeling of being back at school and trying to get good exam results. The funny thing was no matter how much I told myself that it was just a stupid prize, I still really wanted to win.

## Sculptured protrusions also seem to pop up a lot in your work. They remind me of hernias. Have you ever had a hernia?

I've never had a hernia but I sometimes think that those protrusions remind me of the cyst I have on the back of my neck. I should have had it scooped but I never have. It comes back sometimes then it bursts and all this cheese comes out. The protrusions remind me of breasts as well.

## Would you like to make work for hospitals in London?

I have one of my 'Don't worry'

neon signs in Chelsea & Westminster Hospital but I would like to do more. I've recently made work to go in elevators. My singing lifts go 'Ooh' when you go up and 'Ahh' when you go down. The musical scales are spread over the given number of floors so the journey you make in the lift determines which particular part of the musical scale you hear. I've also made work where I played canned laughter over the loud speakers in a Catholic church in Cologne. These might be fun things to do in hospitals.

## Tell us about your music and your talks.

I believe that everything I do - my sculptures, talks, music - is all part of my art. If there is anything that my work is about, it's about trying to make things and do things. For me it's the whole process. I started trying to write songs because I felt some of my sculptures were failing. Often the sculpture, the end product, feels like a dead thing and the exciting and dynamic bit is the process that got me there. I thought that a song would allow me to go through the process right there in front of people and try and make that the work.

So what do you think about Creed's work? I like it. Most of all I like the simple facts. I love the fact that some Catholic church in Cologne has canned laughter played during sermons and a huge neon 'Don't worry' sign emblazoned across its front. I love the idea that one day the hospital I work in may have a singing lift that sings 'Ooh' when I go up and 'Ahh' when I go down.

I could intellectualise these thoughts until I'm blue in the face but maybe it's OK to just say I like them. They make me chuckle and think. Perhaps they even make me happy. Ultimately, I think that Martin Creed, like us all, is governed by his emotions. He wants to do what art has always been supposed to do: "I want to make things. I'm not sure why, but I think it's got something to do with other people. I think I want to try to communicate with other people, because I want to say "hello", because I want to express myself, and because I want to be loved".

To find out more about Martin Creed check out [www.martin-creed.com](http://www.martin-creed.com).