

Exhibition Guide

Martin Creed

24 September – 16 November 2008

First and Second Floor Galleries

Born in Wakefield in 1968, Martin Creed now lives and works in London. Since graduating from the Slade School of Art (University College, London) in 1990, he has developed an international reputation for an artistic practice that is often minimalist and systematic. In 2001 he was awarded the prestigious Turner Prize.

Ikon's exhibition is a survey of Creed's work, involving a wide range of media – film, sculpture, sound installation, paintings and drawings – characterised at once by conceptual stringency and a touching, deceptive, simplicity. There is a logic taken to often humorous extremes that can result in something next to nothing, or a work that is completely arresting in its effect on the viewer. A recent exhibition in Melbourne, for example, consisted just of an art gallery with all its lights turned off. On the other hand, the *Sick and Sex* films (Works No. 583 and 730 respectively) could not be more arresting in their depiction of very basic human behaviour. Often working with music, Creed similarly moves from one extreme to another. Work No. 180 is very dry, consisting of eight metronomes, each playing at a different musical speed – largo, larghetto, adagio, andante, allegro etc – whilst Martin Creed and Band is like a pop group, with drum, bass, guitar and vocals, playing songs that are often tuneful. Asserting continuity between his artistic gestures and (non-art) everyday life, exemplifying a fundamental proposition through variety, Creed's oft-quoted aesthetic equation is "the whole world + the work = the whole world".

The idea of balance, struck between complementary kinds of objects or states, is like a thread drawn through Creed's work overall. This is subtly demonstrated by Work No. 935 *A sheet of paper crumpled up and flattened out* (2008) and Work No. 934 *A sheet of paper folded up and unfolded* (2008). The artist reveals a compulsion to unmake a gesture as soon as it is made. One action counteracts what has gone before to convey a kind of anxiety he describes, born out of an uncertainty as to whether or not he is doing the right thing, or making the right work. Work No. 381 *An intrusion and a protrusion from a wall* (2004) likewise suggests ambivalence through its small bell

shapes – one gold, one silver – one popping out from the gallery wall whilst the other is set within, sinking back away from the space we occupy as we confront it.

Such oscillation is evident in the metronomes, constantly tick-tocking, and emphatically reiterated in the combination of two pieces in Ikon's Tower Room. A version of Work No. 160 *The lights going on and off* (1996) – in turn similar to the work Creed showed at Tate Britain when he won the Turner Prize – is operating at the same frequency as Work No. 129 *A door opening and closing* (1995). There is a restlessness which will not abide some easy-going default position, or slackness, and this, to some extent, informs our reading of the artist's video works. Every one here, usually derived from film, is looped. Every action we see is repeated ad infinitum, so that Work No. 494 *Ships coming in* (2005) depicts not only two boats arriving in a harbour, but two boats always in the process of arriving. The two dogs in Work No. 670 *Orson and Sparky* (2007), due to an auto-repeat function being switched on, ceaselessly pad backwards and forwards across a studio floor.

The sick films in Work No. 583 (2007) have a similar rhythm. Various individuals appear in a studio, with white floor and white walls, to vomit, but any sense of relief is short-lived due to their reappearance seconds later. The looping of the sex film in Work No. 730 (2007) has a different correspondence with its subject, this time playing off the rhythm of a couple having sex. Rather than maintaining tension through an endless recycling of a whole process, including its resolution, the sex film has no climax, dramatically or physiologically. It is continuous sex without an orgasm, interrupted only by a few blank frames in between loops.

The sick and the sex films are a significant development in Creed's artistic practice, to some extent because they provide a key to our understanding of his motivation. The films assert an essential concern with human experience and what we think we know. Creed's frequent use of readymades and regularity conveys fascination with our ways of navigating through life rather than generalised observations on ways in which the world works. The impulse to organise things – such as cacti in order of height (Work No. 587), cardboard boxes in order of their volume (Work No. 870), or paint brushstrokes in order of their width (Work No. 585 and Work No. 885) – is at once idiosyncratic and intuitive, as much about needs (to know etc.) as it is about desire. It is about resisting chaos and making sense of what happens to us personally. It is difficult for us not to be captivated by such a project – especially one undertaken with such refreshing unpretentiousness – and then transfixed when the artist focuses his attention on the human body.

The kind of balance in Creed's work is like that achieved by a gyroscope. Movement (real or implied) is necessary for it to be maintained, and thus it suggests something

vital, something life-affirming and generous. In this vein, the artist has proposed extra events to accompany his exhibition at Ikon. A screening of an extended version of Sick film, Work No. 610 (2007), accompanied by Martin Creed and Band will take place at The Electric Cinema, Birmingham and, at the end of an evening concert, the City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra will perform Work No. 955 (2008), a new composition by Creed at Birmingham's Symphony Hall.