

Martin Creed Artist's Talk - Birmingham Institute of Art and Design, Margaret Street

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Martin Creed: I like to do things like this because I like to do talks and I like to travel around. I've travelled here today from London. I like travelling because I like to get out in general, to get away from wherever I am. I feel trapped and I like to feel free. Putting an exhibition on in public, putting up works from the private into a public area where people can look at them. For me that is where I find out if things work. When I am working at home, in my private area I find it difficult to know if what I'm doing is any good or not. I see exhibitions as a kind of testing ground. I worry when I do exhibitions because I want people to like my work. I think of each work as a little experiment.

Q. If someone off the street asks what kind of work do you do? How do you see that work? How would you describe it?

MC: I would like to think that my work can't be typecast. But I do what I do to try to make my life better. The reason I work is to make things. In whatever I do I'm trying to make my life better- more excitement, more enjoyment, more fun, more comfort. That's what I think I try to do. I think life's really hard. If I had to put my work into a type of Art I would call it Expressionism. Or I would call it my medicine. I think my works helped me to live. It's a cure. My life is this weird soup of thoughts, feelings and things. The work is something to hang onto. You could say my work is almost like a handrail or a ladder. Something to hold onto in our ever changing world. I think that's why I like repetition, and repetitive rhythms and patterns. I find that a comfort. I wouldn't divide art into any types of areas. I'd just say it's all Expressionism. I think everything that everyone does is always an expression. First of all it's creative. It's everything you do, every movement you make. Everything is a form of expression whether you're answering a phone in a call centre or making a piece of sculpture which is going to be exhibited in an art gallery. I wouldn't distinguish between different types of activity. Everything's creative, a form of expression. People express themselves in everything they do.

Q. I read in the Times this weekend about films like *Sick* and *Shit were* about involuntary acts. I'm interested why you chose being sick. There are other forms of involuntary actions that can get the point across. Sometimes I think being so extreme in your choices can cloud the issues you are trying to get across.

MC: The Sick films started from some talks I was doing where I was trying to talk about my work. I was talking about thinking, and thinking that thinking is easy. Whereas, doing things without thinking is more difficult, in the sense that it is more difficult to control. Doing something without thinking is sometimes a more true expression. If you suddenly do something, find yourself doing something, it is often a more direct expression than

something that has been planned through. I was thinking that work is like trying to get into the inside out, trying to turn thoughts and feelings into something to look at. I thought of vomiting as an example of that. The moment you're vomiting you're not in control. You can try to make yourself vomit, but when you are vomiting you are not in control. I was thinking that it is a good example of the kind of work I wanted to make. In other words, I wanted my work to be more like a vomit than a rumination. That got me thinking that maybe I could make a video of people vomiting as work in order to investigate that. Also to make something from the body directly.

Q. Do you feel people have responded to it as you would like people to respond to it?

MC: I don't really know. It's hard to know. You don't really ever know what people think of things. You can feel generally that a lot of people like it, or a lot of people don't like it. A lot of people laugh when they see the sick. I found it really difficult to watch the footage after it had been shot. I've always found being sick a horrible thing. I can barely make myself sick even if I know it will make me feel better. Now that it's done I think of them as portraits of people basically expressing themselves in a very vulnerable, difficult mood. Some people might think that it's horrible or disgusting but I think that as well. It's another reason why I did it because I was scared of being sick. I think it's good to do things that scare you. I try to make a clear division between the work I do to make that thing. Once it is shown to people or exhibited, at that point I do not have anything to do with that work. If that thing works, if it's a song, or an object, it's not necessarily by me. Things only work because people make it work. They use the work for entertainment or food for thought. I used to think that I needed to control the audience. To make the audience sad or happy, or make it mean something. I don't think you can control people though. Now I try to make something I'm happy with, then if I can think it through and am happy with it then I can put it out and not mind what happens. I don't want my works to be a vomit so much, but to be like a football, a perfect work in that it can be kicked around without being damaged. It can be kicked around but it's always just a football. I want my works to be like that so that it can be used by people but also not damaged! When I first made shows I used to make objects and things and it was just soul destroying to go to a gallery and find it was all damaged, all chipped and broken. I remember consciously thinking, I'll try to make work that is unbreakable. That led to work like *Lights turning on and off* and immaterial works. You can break the light but it's an electrical problem. You can't break the work!

Work can be a comfort or something to enjoy but is also like pitching yourself or even like cutting yourself to see if you feel something. I think for me the Sick film is partly that. To see if I could still feel.

Q. When the show goes up are you there with instructions or is it all written down, or do you get hands on?

MC: It varies from work to work. Some of the works have instructions that are quite simple. I need help to install some things and there are always people in the gallery that help. In general, like a show at Ikon, there are many days of moving things around and seeing where they might work best. For me the biggest problem with a show like this is the challenge of showing more than one work but having each work live by itself. I don't like to see big exhibitions of one artist. I much prefer to see one work in a museum than 12 of them in a row in a gallery. I think that's because unless the work is designed to be together, to work in a dialogue with a viewer, it can be very confusing. Works can start to look like a variation on a theme. It can stop works working well. I used to have a rule that I would only show one work at a time for that very reason. A bit like a band who would only release singles. An album is a story. With a single you can have one bang. Three minutes.

Q. You see the exhibition as some kind of testing ground. Does this include failure? How do you recognise if something fails?

MC: Of course. When I put things up in public I see how I feel about them. If a work fails I often feel real terrible about it and see that it worked in theory but now it doesn't. I think I'm quite slow like that. With a new work, maybe it's not until the next year that I realise it wasn't that good. I can put it into perspective. I try to be tough and once the work's made try to be really hard with it. I think the best way to work is to accept that maybe it's not going to be any good than it's better not to make anything. If you're not scared of failing, it's easier to make work. It just depends if people like it to a certain extent. Usually some people like it and some people don't like it.

Q. How do you choose what you work with? The works that we've talked about deal with repetition, like with the nails and the planks of wood. How did you come up with using neon as a material?

MC: The neon works don't fit into the logical process in choosing the materials. I struggled with that when I first made neon. The first neon I made was outdoors and I used neon in a functional way, allowing it to be seen at night in a public place. It was a way of writing something that could be seen at night. For me the problem came when I was doing neon indoors. I worried why I was using neon, just because I thought it was nice. The first gallery indoor neons I made were flashing. I started to think that it was a way of using words and giving them rhythm. Almost like singing a rhythm. It goes on and off so you can say something and then not say it. Works like *Don't Worry* are more loose. It's great when they're lit up. It's more like singing words than saying them.

Q. Being established in the Art World how does that feel? How do you feel about that Art World?

MC: It makes things easier and more difficult. It is easier to make works and exhibit them. I can get funding to make things. It's easier to persuade people. But there is a lot of danger in that. It means the route from the idea to the finished work is easier. Works that aren't so good might not get stopped. I think difficulty comes from that. The Art World is a general field of activity. It's a world in which I can do what I do. But I want my work to take its chances on the street. The Art World can sometimes feel like a specialist place where things are protected. Art Galleries I just think of as theatres for the presentation of things to look at. And that's all they are. That's not to say that they are more special than the street. Just like a theatre, the white walls lend themselves to looking at things.

Q. Discussing *Sex Film*, does it matter whether it is a homosexual film or a heterosexual film?

MC: It's heterosexual. I don't think it matters. I thought it would be great to make a film of two people coming together, coming apart, coming together, coming apart. It was a very deliberate positioning of the work at the beginning [of discussions for the exhibition]. We talked to Jonathan. I don't like separated viewing rooms. I like the spaces to be open. I often find in viewing spaces you are in a dead end, stuck there. Especially with *Sex Film*. It is seen as a back room thing, hidden away. We thought it would be good to show it up front and that was the idea of putting another work in that room, the crumpled ball of paper. That was to not have a video room, this dark room where you are pretending that it's the cinema, which it isn't.

Q. Does it take you a long time to decide where to put your things? Do you think that is a process in your work? Is it important?

MC: Yes it takes a really long time. There are so many inter-relationships between works that maybe you lose the direct relationship between the work and the rest of the world. When I am making a work I am thinking about that work and all of the rest of the world. The time finishing a work takes much longer than the idea of the work. Often I think if I try to put the process into the finished work more, it might be better work because for me the story of trying to make something, the journey is the work. Sometimes with work such as *Sick Film* I try to show the process, and that was one of the very literal ideas about that. That's also the idea of trying to write pieces of music. A piece of music tells a story of its own making from start to finish. Often sculptures are the end, the bit that's left over and maybe it's not that interesting. I often try to put the process into the work.

Q. You made three films *Sick, Sex* and *Shit*. Why is *Shit* not being shown?

MC: The *Shit film* has been shot but it hasn't been edited. I've made two works from *Shit film*, but I did a *Shit film* shoot where I filmed lots of people defecating but that hasn't been made into any works yet, apart from two or three. I made the *Shit film* trailer. I wanted to show you but we've got a flickering screen problem. But I could show you one of the shit films, just one of the scenes. I've shot all this footage but I'm not sure what I'm going to do with it except for these little clips which would be displayed in a gallery in a similar way to how the *Sick films* are.

[shows clip]

MC: If it was in a gallery it would loop. I'm not just scared of sick but also really scared of shit. The question of giving them toilet paper or not was a big one. I decided against it as I thought it an extra unnecessary thing. It gets in the way between the body and the shit. All the time I'm trying to make these things, but all the time I'm always making shit. It's like the first sculpture. If you think of the *Sick film* as a painting and the *Shit film* as a sculpture.

Q. There are people who are not necessarily Artists who have used being sick as an analogy for a sculpture or painting by them. It's interesting to have presented that as a piece of work.

MC: I'm not making Art. I don't know how to make Art. Something's only Art if people use it as Art. I make these things whatever they may be but it is only Art if people use it as Art. That also helps me as because if I think I'm trying to make Art, I wouldn't know where to start. The meaning of something is not within your control so don't try to control it. Something means something to someone because each person brings something to the art object. We make of it what we will. I try to put into it as much as I can. I can't control the mood of something, but I can control to a certain extent its shape, its colour, the materials from which it's made. Thinking about that helps me to work. If I think what something's going to mean to someone, if I think about it, I find it debilitating when it comes to working.

Q . The practices are very diverse. Regarding your working process, do you think about the materials as a starting point for your work?

MC: I think one of the reasons I work in lots of materials is because I'm scared to be pinned down. I'm dodging and weaving. I'm spreading the risk. I don't feel sure. It's shit. It's better I work in different media. I believe everything can have value and therefore, that belief makes me not want to work in one medium as that would lead to putting your eggs into all one basket. But I believe the material is very important. That's all the work is. The meaning of the work, if people give a meaning to it by people who use the work enjoy it or whatever. The work itself is just material. Just stupid matter. For example the

stack of plywood , stacked up to 8 feet high, that's a question about the process. I wanted to make an object that you could see the way it's made. That's an example of a piece that comes from the material. A material might be a starting point, like the lift in Ikon. That is the starting point that led me to writing that piece of music that went in the lift. The movement of the lift gives the music meaning for me. So I think that materials are a starting point. If I think what the working process is like, first there's a desire or urge to make something, then after that comes the question of 'I want to do something' or 'I want to make my life better' or something. I'm looking around for a starting point. One starting point could be going to a bar and getting drunk, another point on a canvas. I have materials given to me. It's like a question, a starting point.

Q. Does materials being given to you make the process easier rather than having to choose the material?

MC: I think so yeah. Like the *Crumpled up piece of paper* is a standard A4 piece of paper. I didn't see why I had to make a special piece of paper. To a certain extent you can think of everything as a sort of given. I you think that you find yourself here in the world. You find yourself having certain feelings. You can think of everything as a kind of banned situation. I often think in the working process. It sometimes feels like it's not me making the work. There's a quotation from Michelangelo that said the sculpture is inside the marble and it was just a matter of finding it. I think that's beautiful and I think that's a nice idea, as it's like you're not so much in control. You need to think that you are looking for something rather than trying to make something.

Q. Do you like simplicity (of starting a new work) ?

MC: Yes. I do like the start. It's easy to start and it's difficult to go on, and it's really difficult to finish. You can start, but everything you do after is in relation to that. The more things that you do, the more things you have to contend with whether you're making a sentence or making marks on a canvas. Maybe that's why I try to make my work a single thing. It's only one thing, not two things.

Q. How much scope is there for the direction piece before you get to the point of the piece as opposed to the final angle?

MC: I think the best works aren't the best for me. Some are the works where the end seems inescapable as the only possible result. With the crumpled ball of paper, I set myself the task of making something with a piece of paper. I thought the best thing I could do was make it into a ball, which solved the problem of the paper having sides of different lengths. The ball makes everything equal, and it's equal in all directions three dimensionally. That's an example of something I think that the resulting work is in my view the best solution to the problem. Problems come in works where there may be more than two or three solutions and seem to be equally good. Another piece like that is the

lift with the singing voices. The voices simply go to the lowest of the bass to the highest of the soprano. Once the parameters of the work are set, the work makes itself. It's a matter of dividing the range of voices over the journey of the lift. That's another piece where the end result is inescapable after the work is set in motion. I'm trying to think of work where there are two paths. The neon piece *Don't Worry* - it's not clear to me why neon. That's not such a perfect work in the sense we're talking about. It's got more grey areas. It's more down to feelings.

Q. The more you define your problem, the easier it is to see the solution? The more you feed into it, the solution becomes much easier to see.

MC: Yes I think that's true.

Q. Have you thought of throwing no parameters in?

MC: Yeah. I did try to have no parameters in the sense of I wanted to try to do more better or not as much better. No, more better, but not as much worse!

Q. Can you tell us about the stripe painting on the wall, can you tell us where that came from?

MC: That was a bit like the protrusions from the wall. They came from trying to make a work that you could just paint over. The aim was just to make a piece that you could paint over and it would be just the same colour as the wall. The wall painting's also a bit like that. I want to paint the wall, but I'm not sure I want to paint all the wall, so I'll paint half of it black. The way that's made is very important. It's very important that it's done with a roller, and the edge is the edge of a roller. I wouldn't want it done with masking tape because I think that it's a more natural line made with a roller. I think that's also a work which shows the way it is made. Most of the time you see a painted wall, you can't see where it ended as you can just see a wall painted and it's flat. With the roller ones, it stops before the roller gets to the edge which is also an important part. You can see what happened. The repetition is like the on/off piece, trying to balance what has been done with what has not been done. I think of it as a background to people, people are the most important thing as they make the work work. The work's always a background in that, and in my mind they have a decorative quality in the sense of wallpaper. The surroundings around people rather than thinking of them as the direct things that people need to look at. If you're putting something in a room it's good to be aware that someone might not look at it. You can spot light it or do things to make it more visible, but I like my works being mixed in with things that aren't my works like fire extinguishers. When I go to museums, often I remember the wallpaper more than the paintings or the person I met in the cafe. That's where I find my things to look at, not necessarily in the gallery.

Q. Why go to a gallery. Why not go to a shopping centre?

MC: I don't go to galleries much except for my work. I like to go to all kinds of places including galleries, but not particularly galleries. What I really like is motorway service stations and airports. I like those places that are very transitional. No one's home. I find people in those places much nicer as no one's defending; it's no one's own turf.