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Mr On And Off

His most famous work is a room in which the lights go on and off, but don't call him a minimalist. By **Stephanie Bunbury**.

Martin Creed doesn't drink any more. He doesn't smoke either, which represents quite a triumph for a former 60-a-day man. Now he just does a truckload of espresso and works absolutely all the time. "Life," says Creed in his slow, emphatic Glaswegian voice, "is like a big three-dimensional space and I am just trying to catch on to something that will be momentarily safe." Something, he says, to paper over his despair. "I think, basically, I am trying to fill my empty life." He smiles encouragingly. He doesn't necessarily mean that in a bad way.

Emptiness is, in fact, something of a theme in Martin Creed's art. In 2001, he won the Turner Prize, Britain's most important art award, with an unnamed exhibit consisting of an empty room in which the light kept flicking on and off. This work, which will be echoed in a new piece he is bringing to the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art as part of the Melbourne International Arts Festival, made Creed briefly scandalous.

Damien Hirst had shocked Britain with his exhibits of dead animals; Tracey Emin was simply shocking. Martin Creed, however, managed to shock simply through his choice of materials. For certain bullish columnists, pieces such as the empty room, a crumpled ball of paper, a piece of Blu-tack stuck on a wall and a room half-filled with balloons were nothing more than provocation. And they duly provoked.

In person, however, 36-year-old Creed is anything but a provocateur. Deeply serious and endlessly amiable, he says all his work springs from a need to reach out to other people. "I don't know if the right word is communication. I think I just want to be loved. I get disappointed if someone doesn't

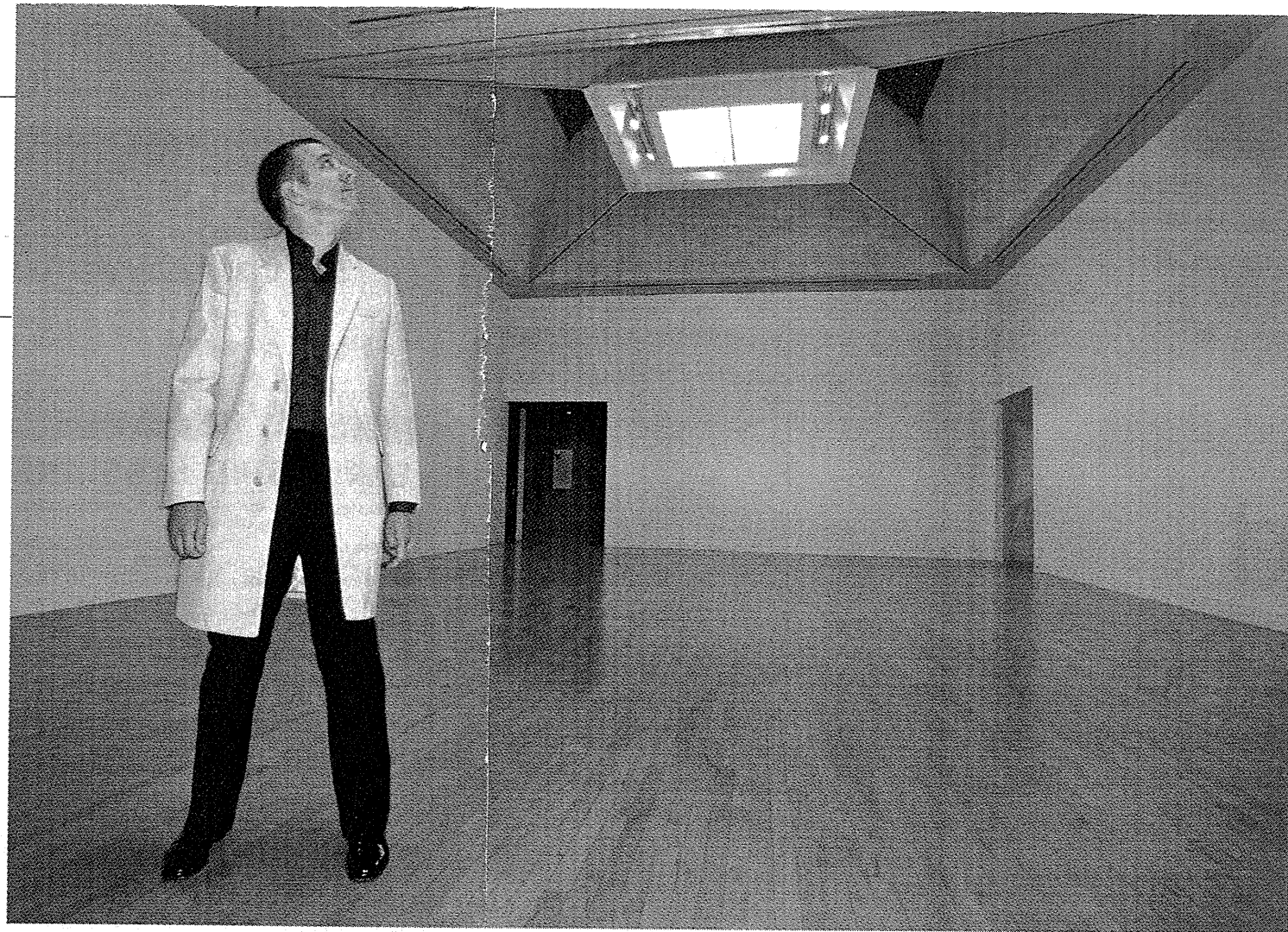
like my work, even if I think they're an arsehole."

But perhaps he is no more comfortable with the labels applied to his work — minimalist, conceptualist, anti-materialist — by those who do like it. Just because materials are cheap, he says, does not mean the work is minimalist. His empty room, for example, is made up of everything that goes into making the building and the people within it. "It is much less minimal than a painting on the wall made just from various colours."

The conceptual label troubles him even more. For a start, he doesn't believe conceptual art exists. What art, he asks, is not "conceptual"? And where is the so-called conceptual art that is not also about feelings, materials and physical sensations?

But even if you do accept that there is art that attempts to communicate ideas directly to the audience, he cannot see that his own work does anything of the kind. The work, he says, is stupid. "Of course, there are plenty of ideas involved," he says. "But the thing itself is a stupid thing and does not contain ideas. The lights going on and off is not an idea; it's an event, something that happens. If I wanted to communicate an idea, I would probably use words to do it."

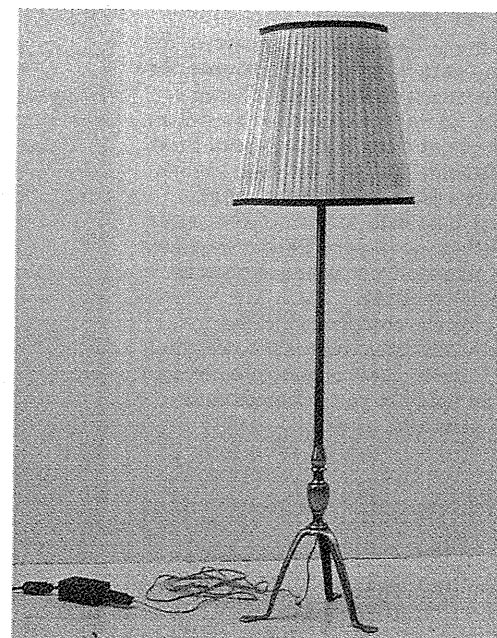
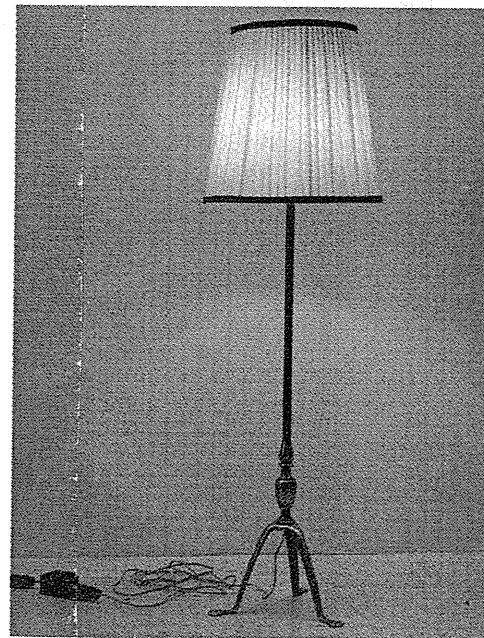
He does, in fact, like to write. "I've been spending a lot of time doing little pieces of writing, which to me are little works — not art, that's different, but works related in some way to song lyrics." He began writing lyrics 10 years ago, when he started a band because he wanted to work with a form that would occupy time as well as space. The band, Owada, has been described as sounding like a cross between Steve Reich and the Ramones; a couple of gigs are scheduled for Melbourne. He also occasionally gives lectures and will be



talking to the public in Melbourne, though he is not sure about what. "Probably about trying to talk. And about working, as well . . . whether I am talking about work or not, the words are a thing in themselves."

Recently, some of his artwork — a neon sign reading "don't worry", a banner across the front of the Tate Britain reading "the whole world + the work = the whole world" — has also included words. It is hard to see these works as stupid: clearly, they convey ideas, even if they are multiple and contradictory ideas. The instruction not to worry suggests its opposite; the simple sum might mean that work, adding nothing to the world, is meaningless, or that work and the world are synonymous.

Creed says that he wants his work to have the whole world in it, "to mean the same as love means in my heart". Of course, he adds, it is impossible for any work to include the whole world, so everything fails, including the banner he wrote about it. "But failure in the way I am talking about it is no bad thing," he says. "All of my best work contains failure;



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Martin Creed (left) with his on again-off again exhibit at the Tate Britain, and a new version of the work (below). PICTURE: AP

in fact, that is why they are my best works, in my opinion. Because when something fails to happen, something else does. For example, a failure to decide between 'yes' and 'no' might end up with you saying yes AND no. I think a lot of the time when I get stuck is when I am trying too hard to make something that doesn't fail."

We have one more tagline to dismiss, however, before we can really revel in the extent to which he fails. Screeds have been written about Creed's anti-materialist use of cheap stationery to make his art; he is the current poster boy for "the honourable tradition within the avant-garde of making work which has no material value, which resists or defies commodification", to quote a *Tate Magazine* essay. But Creed is not so much resisting anything as embracing everything. He has used silver and gold in the past, he says; he is not averse to using precious materials. He is "a huge fan" of painting. "I studied painting at the Slade (art school), so I feel like my work comes from trying to paint every day."

He stopped painting, he says, because he wanted to start with a fresh slate. "I want to try to find a style or shape every time. I want to try to make everything as if I had never made anything before. I am trying to resist all temptations to make things easy and nice."

He numbers his works now, rather than naming them, because names create a kind of narrative and add baggage that the works do not need. They go into the world dumb and free. It is only in the act of viewing that they acquire (or might acquire) meaning or resonance. How people view the works is up to them. If they become angry, he presumes they are using his work as a sounding board for the anger and frustration they already harbour. "Because my work is innocent, you know," he says. "There is nothing more innocent than an empty room."

The Lights Off is at the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art from October 8 to December 4. His band, Owada, play the Ding Dong Lounge, city, at 9pm on Friday.