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## Melbourne in for some light relief

*Martin Creed's conceptual  
works inevitably provoke  
arguments about what  
constitutes art, writes*

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**I**S he having people on? British conceptual artist Martin Creed looks wounded at the suggestion. "The idea that I would somehow be having people on by using Blu-Tak, which is simply a coloured material, as opposed to paint, which is a coloured material ..." The sentence trails away in gentle indignation. "For me there's no difference between them," he says. "What's important, I suppose, is what you do with it."

We're discussing Creed's *Work No. 79*: "some Blu-Tak kneaded, rolled into a ball and depressed against a wall", which is, exactly as the title suggests, a blob of Blu-Tak on a gallery wall.

"Basically, the piece was a little study," he says. "If you look at photos of the Blu-Tak, the modulation of the textures on the wall become very visible. But for me a little bit of Blu-Tak is just as important as anything else."

Creed began making waves in 1993 with *Work No. 81*, "a one inch cube of masking tape in the middle of every wall in a building" installed in the offices of a London publishing company. He is now one of Britain's hottest conceptual artists, renowned for works consisting of material such as balloons, scrunched up balls of A4 paper, strategically placed furniture, lighting, and neon signs and billboards that make pithy statements such as "don't worry" and "everything is going to be alright".

For the 1998 Biennale of Sydney, he filled an entire house on Goat Island with balloons. In 2001, he won the Turner Prize with *Work No. 227* "the lights going on and off": an empty gallery space in which the lights went on and off every five seconds.

His Turner win generated controversy — protesters outside Tate Britain flashed torches on and off — but the judges, who included Tate director Nicholas Serota, a long-time supporter of Creed's, stood by their decision, praising the work for its "strength, rigour, wit and sensitivity to the site. Coming out of the tradition of minimal and conceptual art, his work is engaging, wide-ranging and fresh."

Juliana Engberg, curator of the visual arts program at the Melbourne International Arts Festival, also admires Creed's work and has invited him to create a new work for this year's Festival. Creed responded with *The Lights Off*, for which he basically turns all the lights off in the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art.

He acknowledges that it is "quite an extreme piece" and chuckles at the thought of what the tabloids might make of it. But he denies that he is courting controversy.

Engberg says that *The Lights Off*, as with all of Creed's work, will challenge people to put aside their assumptions about what art might deliver to them and also considers it a profound work.

"I don't think it's jokey," she says. "I don't think it's one-linerish. I think it's hugely dimensional and has a tremendous amount of philosophical depth to it. He is extremely serious about what he is doing and I am very serious on his behalf."

Now 37, Creed is tall and slight with tightly cropped hair, lively dark blue eyes, a bent nose, and a small mouth crammed full of large, crooked teeth. He has a soft Scottish accent (saying "aye" instead of "yes") and chats about his work with none of that impenetrable art-speak that afflicts some practitioners. He has a wry sense of humour.

Born in the north of England to an English father and German mother, who were Quakers, he moved with them to Scotland when he was three and spent most of his formative years in Glasgow. His father was a silversmith, his mother was keen on literature and, as children, he and his brother, who is now a designer, were introduced to art galleries, books and music.

Creed is still interested in music and has his own band, Owada, with whom he records. The Martin Creed Band will perform in Melbourne and Sydney while he is here.

He will also deliver a public lecture in Melbourne. In his lectures Creed likes to combine singing with discussion of his art work. He describes them as a mini-performance. "I think of all my works as theatrical events, really," he says.

It was while studying at London's Slade School of Fine Art in the late 1980s that his focus shifted from painting to conceptual art and he began using commonplace materials to create work that is anti-materialistic in the avant-garde tradition.

"I make my works for other people to look at, so I want to communicate or I just want to say 'hello' or something like that," he says. "But the material is always super-important. First of all, I think that all materials are equal — it doesn't matter whether it's gold or lettuce, for me it's all potentially beautiful."

His work for the Melbourne festival "involves simply switching the lights off so the whole space will be dark," he says, with a little laugh.

He has presented the piece before, in Cologne in 2001. Engberg stands by the Melbourne festival's claim that it is presenting a world premiere, however: "It's a new work because the context is different. If you like, it's part of a series of works."

For Creed, what makes the piece come together is that "when you switch the lights off you see everything else. You see outside the doorway into the distance, you see the little red flashing light of the burglar alarm, the dust on the floor. It kind of activates all the little details."

He recognises that *The Lights Off* is quite a difficult work and to put it in context compares it with American composer John Cage's 1952 composition *4'33"*, which contains four minutes and 33 seconds of silence. "Silence lets you hear the music of the world," he says.

*The Lights Off* will inevitably provoke debate about what constitutes art. "But that's not why I do it," Creed says. "I do it because I want to make big and beautiful artworks and, to me, this is beautiful."

*The Lights Off* is at the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art in Melbourne, October 8 to December 24. Creed will give a public lecture at the Victorian College of the Arts on October 7.