

# MARTIN CREED

Work No. 270, *The Lights Off*

Australian Centre for Contemporary Art,  
Melbourne

Melbourne International Arts Festival  
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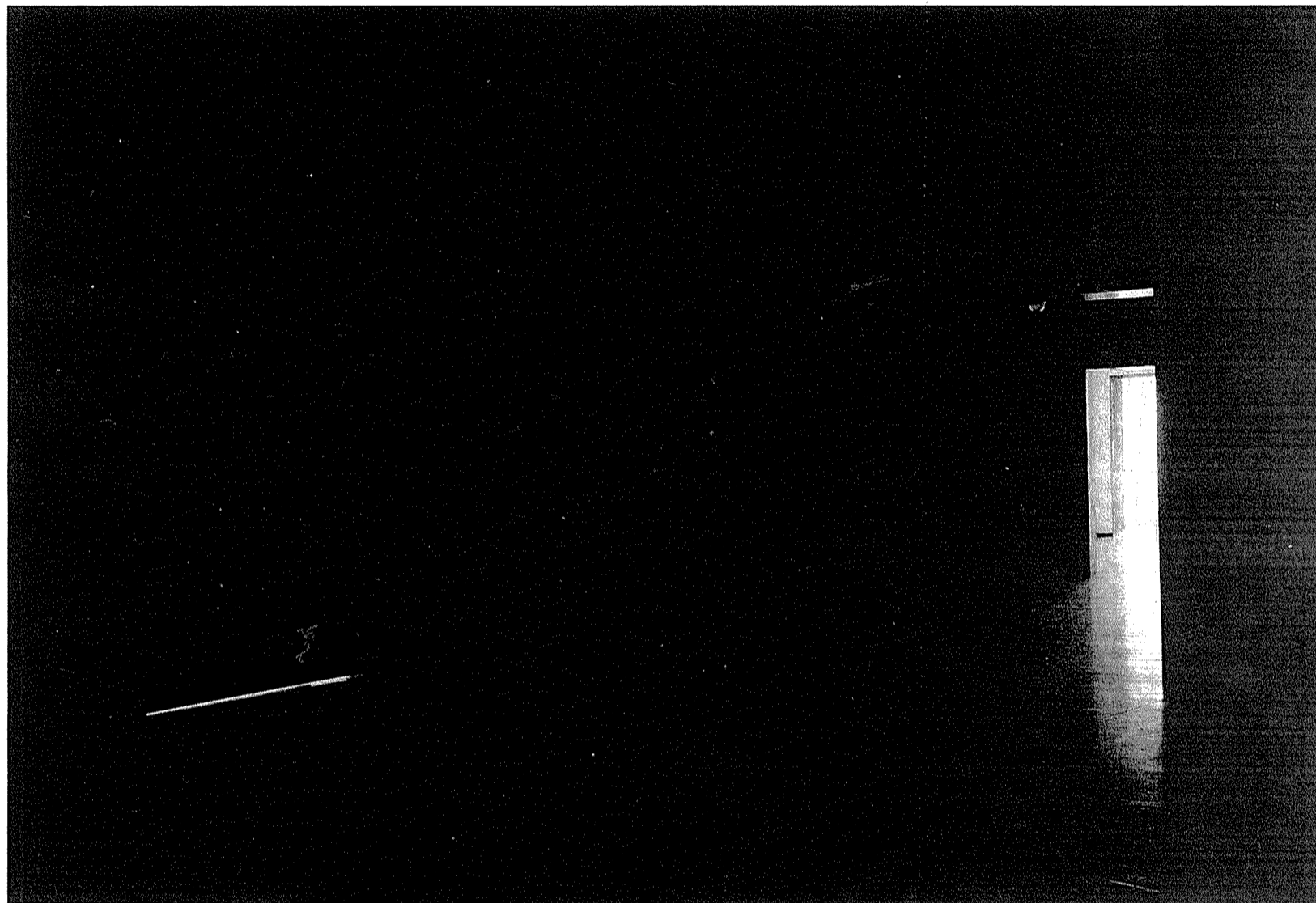
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Humans need food, clothing and shelter to survive. But they want cuisine, fashion and architecture and endless novelty as well. Martin Creed is creating a cultural pause and his work makes us stop and think about such issues. He won the 2001 Turner Prize for a work where the lights went on and off in a gallery [*Work No. 227, The Lights Going On and Off*, 2001]. He has also made a Duchampian work comprising a dollop of Blu-tack [*Work No. 79, some Blu-tack kneaded, rolled into a ball, and depressed against a wall*, 1993].

For the *Melbourne International Arts Festival*, Creed simply left the gallery empty, with the lights switched off. We can barely see in the gallery, which is illuminated only by a little light through the door, by the mandatory green exit lights and by the flickering movement sensors that detect potential thieves. [Recalling conceptual artists' propensity to use air as a medium, I stole some by inhaling deeply before exiting. Once our eyes adapt, we notice the architecture and interior detail, we hear the echoes of people outside and the mumbblings of others within. This space looks like an unused space that is now in use as an unused space, and which also represents [an] unused space, etc. A dark, empty gallery is a cold and forbidding place, or a curio or an enigma or a revelation or an indictment etc, depending on your viewpoint.

Creed is not the first to exhibit an empty gallery and thus to enjoin us to consider what it signifies. Yves Klein did it [*Le Vide*, 1958] and undoubtedly there have been others. Similarly, John Cage's *4' 33'* [1952], in which the pianist sits still at the piano for that period of time, permitted the listener to hear ambient sound and to contemplate what music is through its absence. *The Lights Off* is a tabula rasa on which the viewer is invited to write, but it also recalls some of the twentieth-century's most iconic avant-garde works. We are thus provoked to wonder what value those avant-garde works had beyond their immediate impact and what has happened [to art] since their first appearance.

Creed's talk at the Victorian College of the Arts on 7 October was a chatty conversation, in which he mainly answered audience questions and sang a couple of songs, recalling Dada and Fluxus events. He opened his talk by playing



a recording of a Ron Sexsmith song that goes, "Where's the crime in wasting time?"—as if the process of thinking is excessive and doing nothing is a valid activity. He suggested that he attempts to suppress thought before making art [a strategy shared with Zen philosophy], and that the blank, the void, is under-appreciated. He intimated that—the starting point for a work is the space itself; that the work emerges into the world from the inner void and becomes art when experienced by the viewer; that the world cannot be encompassed and the work is a counter to it; and, perhaps predictably, that anything can be art and anyone can be an artist. [By extension, nothing can be art and art can be nothing.] Following his own premise, he shaped his delivery in response to the audience, offering few obvious leads.

His songs are simple. 'I Love You' comprises that single phrase repeated continuously to a couple of chords, a recapitulation of 1960s musical serialism, but in pop guise. By paring back the text he invests what text there is with more weight [less is more?], but he adds feeling through tone of voice. Irony and wit are central to his oeuvre. He sang the phrase 'I'm feeling blue', then followed it with 'I'm feeling brown... I'm feeling pink... I'm feeling off-white' and

so on, running through much of the colour wheel to show how colour evokes mood [and perhaps depicting painting's absence, like *Art & Language*]. Even his works' titles avoid meaning beyond formal description [a sort of hybrid of Pollock's and Whistler's titling systems]. His work suggests the negation of the artist, but there he is on stage as role model, his faux naivety belying serious and thoughtful intent.

Creed's enigmatic art can appear derivative and his empty gallery seems to me no coincidence. But he is not expressly re-presenting or appropriating avant-garde strategies and indeed he gives the impression he is thinking anew. His denial of the commodity status of art objects is a timely reminder in the current era of collector frenzy and reconfirms the unimportance of the commodity to the very idea of art. He denies the need for external criteria that establish what art is and what its value is by emphasising the importance of viewers' experience of [these] events. Though his work variously suggests minimalism or end-game art, I doubt he thinks his work is either minimalist or end-game; and anyway, his work renders those terms historical and comparative. But though we can appreciate Creed's work without knowing of Duchamp, Cage, Klein,

Dada etc, our experience of his art will be determined by our awareness of those earlier artists' revolutionary strategies and the abrupt and far-reaching reconsideration of Western culture and its values that they precipitated. The revolution does not need to be repeated, nor could it be. Reprising it is a postmodern act, but one that reignites the challenge to materialist values and beliefs.

Creed seems intent on raw simplicity of the rawest and simplest kind. A wise colleague of mine once observed that there are two kinds of people in the world: complicators and simplifiers. Creed is thus the apotheosis of the simplifiers. Hence his dictum; "The whole world + the work = the whole world." His work will inevitably come to be seen as a manifestation of those generational cycles of artistic reconsideration and renewal that characterise Western culture. Noting that our visual culture and its theorisation have burgeoned in the period since the artistic upheavals of the modernist era, his work functions as an invitation to us to reconsider how we understand and theorise art.

Above: Martin Creed, *The Lights Off*, 2005