

# Profile

## ■ Tabula Rasa

Gilda Williams on Martin Creed

'What does it mean to place a jar upon a hill?'. This question, loosely paraphrasing a poem by Wallace Stevens, is relentlessly asked of budding American architecture students almost as soon as they walk in the door, as if to impress upon them immediately the gravity and responsibility of their chosen profession. As if this infinitesimal gesture of laying a jar in the grass – long before indulging in walls and windows and pediments – carries with it untold consequences in the cosmic order, and that these must be accounted for and addressed by the almighty architect. It is a relief, in my estimation, that art is generally spared the civic angst attached to architecture; art can carelessly combine mass culture, sex, philosophy, politics, humour, confessional autobiography and perversions of any denomination with a promiscuity, unheard of in its alleged sister discipline, architecture.

As part of this very freedom, artist and musician Martin Creed approaches his art with the rationale and purpose associated with architects without, however, any of their maniacal or uncompromising fanaticism. He questions every motivation behind every decision, every assumption in art: what is an object? How can an object attach itself to the world? The text he wrote for Work No. 74 *An unlimited edition*, 1992, adopts a plain and plodding style in listing his seemingly infinite investigations '... the problem was to establish, among other things, what material something could be, what shape something could be, what size something could be, how something could be constructed, how something could be situated, how something could be attached [ ... ] how many of something there could be, or should be, if any, if at all'. Art then is laid bare as a string of decisions each worthy of contemplation, each demanding resolution, and the artist is that person capable of making enough decisions to produce a work.

Take the wall, for example. A wall can lay flat, it can protrude or recede, it can bulge; it can vary in height,

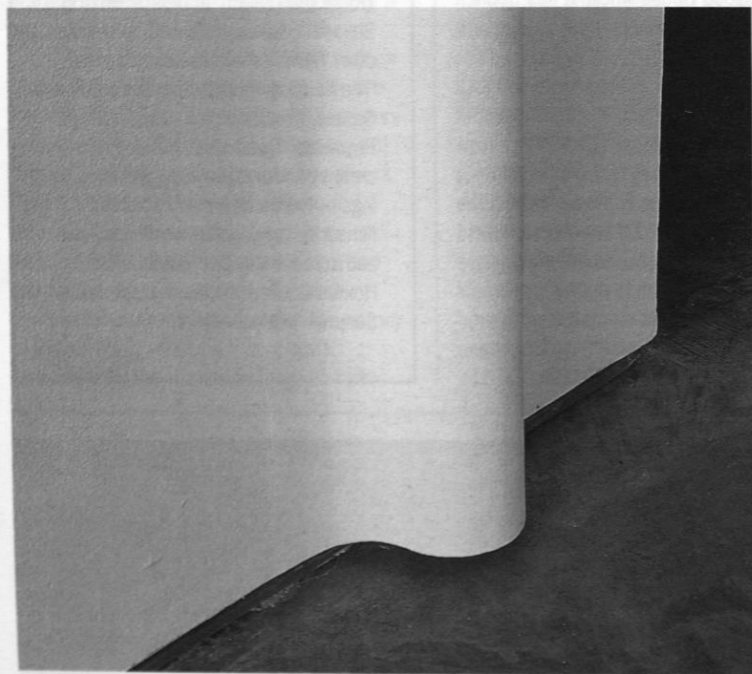
and any protrusion, intrusion or bulge can vary in placement, size and shape. This systematic thought process, then, generates works like Work No. 83 *A protrusion from a wall*, 1993, a vertical wall sculpture whose height is that of the existing wall; or Work No. 102 *A protrusion from a wall*, 1994, a tumour-like outgrowth of plaster whose dimensions are determined by the contours of the standard-sized paint roller which will eventually be used to paint it and allow it to attach seamlessly to the surrounding stucco. This is very different from, say, formally similar works by Robert Irwin, who made paintings with tapering edges which met flush with the wall in order to do away with the stigma of the frame. Creed is somehow closer to Leon Battista Alberti, who endlessly obsessed about the true nature of a wall, about what it means to add to the wall and create a pilaster, or to cut into it to form an arch and what the implications would be if a column were inserted into that, and on and on.

But, to be sure, Martin Creed is by no means a Renaissance architect, and his work is not meant to have the monumental or scientific implications of Alberti's massive architectural treatises. This is guaranteed by the immaculate modesty of scale of every one of his works and by the deliberate introduction of quirks and idiosyncrasies which prevent it, to quote the artist, 'from going up its own arse'.

The indispensably humble scale of his work was actually calculated in Work No. 143, a written piece from 1995: 'the whole world + the work = the whole world'. A kind of self-defeating little formula, it admits the works' own inconsequentiality and indeed some of his pieces go to great lengths in order to add up to zero. One of his most discrete sculptures was presented at 'Wonderful Life' in 1993 at the Lisson Gallery in London. Work No. 86, 1993, consisted of about 50 very small, 2.5 x 2.5 x 2.5 cm cubes made up of layer upon layer of squares made from elastoplast – a material whose adhesive surface provided a built-in solution as to how it might attach itself to the world. These cubes were scattered throughout the gallery, positioned in the geometric centre of any wall, no matter how small, which was not otherwise occupied by art. This piece, Creed explains, 'filled the gaps' in this not-quite-crammed-with-enough-art space, and though it wilfully took a back seat to the other works on view, like a colony of parasites it fed off them as well, relying on the context to survive as a work of art. Likewise, perhaps Creed's tiniest work, Work No. 115 *A doorstep fixed to the floor to let a door open only 45 degrees*, 1995, presented at London's Javier Lopez Gallery (another version, also 1995, allowed for a 30-degree aperture) prompted the most violent response in visitors who were genuinely angered at the disturbing knob of plastic pointlessly blocking the door. The word 'object', Creed might be surprised to learn, comes from the Latin *obicere*, 'to throw in the way of', and thus, with this work, the artist inadvertently fulfilled one of his own most essential dilemmas by creating what indeed can be defined fully as an object.

In Creed's calculation the world is a given and decisions can be deciphered, rather than made, by examining what is already there. For example, on occasion the banal architectural elements of gallery rooms where he exhibits provide his subject matter. These fixtures are asked only to do what they do ordinarily: doors open and shut; lights switch on and off (Work No. 132 *A door opening and closing and a light going on and off*, 1995), buzzers buzz (the artist's first sound piece, Work No. 92 *A doorbell amplified*, 1994). One giggles, in light

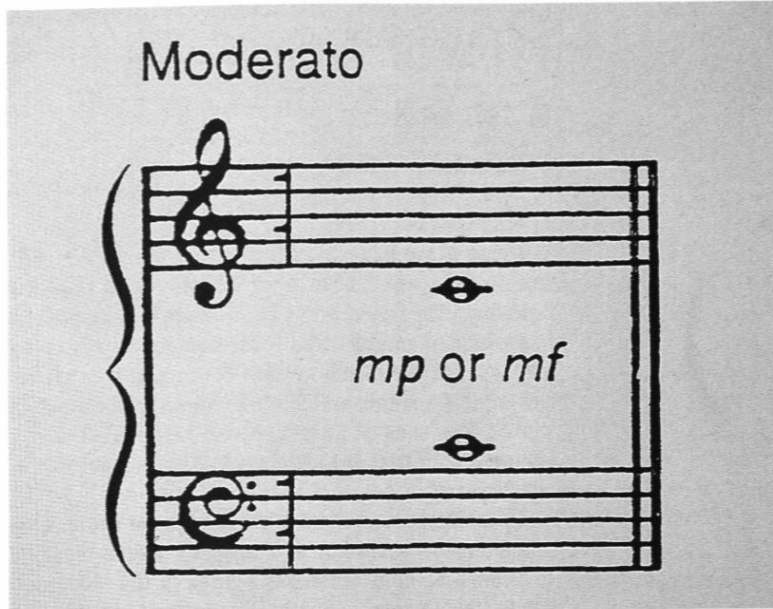
**Martin Creed**  
Work No. 83  
*A protrusion from a wall*  
1993



of this, at the thought of the architect Louis Kahn, who pompously claimed (with an emphasis and authority so distant from Creed) that 'he asked the brick what it wanted to be, the brick replied "an arch"'. Martin Creed seems to ask his materials what they want to be, and they politely respond, 'we'll just be ourselves, thank you'.

Martin Creed is equally known as a musician, and like all his work, his project in music is to expedite and deflect decision-making by using the most essential attributes of the materials at hand. His simil-minimalist compositions (which have recently enjoyed the introduction of easy-to-remember lyrics: one, two, three, four) could recall John Cage's devices to buffer his own decision-making through 'randomly' composed music. But Cage's seemingly composer-less pieces based on the *I Ching* or configurations of sticks tossed haphazardly on the floor are determined by processes which, as Creed points out, already imply an armful of arbitrary decisions inexplicably made beforehand. As the lead guitarist and composer for the band Owada, Martin Creed approaches his music with the same directness and deliberation as his art, such as Work No. 130 *All the sounds on a synthesiser*, which follows the very same reasoning as, for example, his installations which explore all the positions of a hinged door. Or my own favourite, composed for Imprint 93, Work No. 101 *For Pianoforte*, which consists of the middle note on the piano, middle C, played once. A flawless musical composition, this is perhaps the artist's most idealistic, economical and romantic work: 'Oh Martin! They're playing our note!'

There are occasions when Martin Creed reaches decisions based on a peculiar, unscientific logic, and in those instances his work unmasks its own vulnerability. In one of his wall works, Work No. 99 *An intrusion and a protrusion from the surface of a wall*, the artist also decided that these two kinds of irregularities could be marked by a pair of contrasting materials: silver and gold. This is a matched pair which we learn as kids, with crayons and glitter and Christmas tree ornaments. Silver is the opposite of gold the same way cats are the opposite of dogs: it's an uncomplicated system with which children order the universe. This kind of simplicity and lightness is crucial in Martin Creed's work and somehow ironizes the

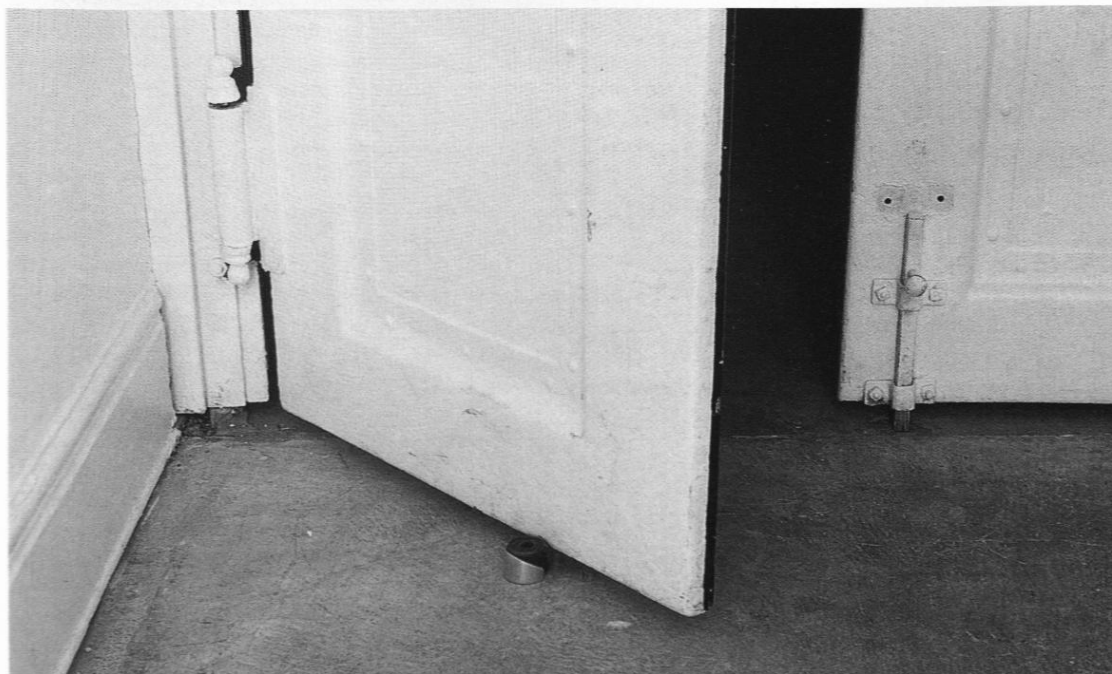


whole Western insistence on symmetrically dividing all things into either this, or that.

I think it was the architect Gerrit Rietveld who, when asked whether figurative paintings could be hung in his buildings, replied that he had no objection, provided that the painted side of the canvas lay smack against the wall. It's a startling response, not least because it suggests that neo-plasticists had a sense of humour, but also because it undermines painting's most undisputed historical decision: it is an art only of verso and no recto. Creed, however, would have taken Rietveld's snappy answer even further, questioning the stretcher as well, and the nail holding it up, and the height of the picture's backward placement. But Martin Creed isn't a modernist architect by a long shot either; functionality does not serve to answer any of Creed's queries, nor do we find any of the modernists' sweeping aesthetic masterplans or 'final solution' approach to problem-solving. The point, as always, is the question, not the answer. ■

**Gilda Williams** is an art critic and editor at Phaidon Press.

**Martin Creed**  
Work No. 101  
*For Pianoforte* 1994



**Martin Creed**  
Work No. 115  
*A doorstop fixed to a floor to let a door open only 45 degrees* 1994