

**Martin Creed:**

**The Light**

*Rye Dag Holmboe*

‘I feel sick,’ he says. He walks across the stage looking perplexed, like a messenger who has forgotten his message. He stops and raises his arms above his head. His arms raised he joins his hands together and stretches. His arms return to his sides. He puts his hands inside his trouser pockets, crosses his legs, and for a while gazes at the audience, an absent expression on his face. Then, as if a kind of lethargy had descended upon him, he slouches. ‘The thing is,’ he says at last, pushing his hair back with a nervous hand. ‘Well, the thing is that...’

After a series of false starts and embarrassed silences, Martin Creed tells his bemused audience that he cannot remember why he is here. A harmonica sits in a holder that rests on his neck. Behind him stands a guitar plugged into an amplifier. But these instruments will remain untouched until the end of the performance. For now, it would seem that whatever song Creed has come to sing has been forgotten.

Instead he spends much of his time on stage trying to give voice to the monologue that unfolds inside his head, an interior monologue whose articulation is consistently interrupted by pauses, delays, and hesitations. Creed’s voice is the voice that

emerges in moments of indecision, moments when the mind has a tendency to move faster than the spoken word. On such occasions, it is the materiality of language that impedes what are sometimes imagined to be the immaterial movements of thought.

Yet there is also a sense in which speed may be a term inadequate to describe Creed's thought process. From the start, what is difficult to establish is whether or not this hesitant, forgetful figure is really on the threshold of saying what the 'thing' is, which would imply that he knows something that he will not or cannot express, or whether he is simply incapable of ordering and articulating his thoughts with any consistency whatsoever. This suggests that Creed's speech—uncertain, hesitant, faltering—is not the failed articulation of a confused inner voice but is instead the expression of a singular language where the act of thinking and the act of speaking are the same, where every word thought is at the same time a word spoken. In other words, the kind of slow-witted but immediate language associated with the figure of the idiot, who stumbles over his words and never thinks before he speaks.

It should be said at the outset that, when the proper name 'Martin Creed' is being used, it is not in order to reintroduce a biographical self as a determining source of meaning. It is true that one of the difficulties faced when writing about the artist's performances is related to the issue of intentionality. At times,

Creed speaks in a virtual monotone and seems to listen to his words fall as if from the mouth of another. It is as though he cannot quite believe his own presence on stage. At such moments, he is like a person who is searching for something that is lost, and what sickens him is that he does not know what he is searching for with such resolve. At other times, however, there is a certain jauntiness, close to conceit, to Creed's demeanour. In his slow, slinking movements and in the monotone of his speech there are sometimes hints of irreverence. The mechanism of his repetitive and at times exasperating acts, which would put an angel out of patience, is interrupted: his eyes light up; his face breaks into a smile; he laughs. At such points, the audience's confidence is in danger of being lost because what becomes unclear is whether Creed is playing the fool, which would make the performance a hoax, or whether he is in fact the faintly ludicrous, nervous, and forgetful figure he appears to be. The way in which Creed's performances seem designed to push the spectator into taking them literally will be returned to. The problem of literalism, idiocy, and their relation to trust runs like a luminous thread through all of Creed's works, whose very simplicity, together with the sense of the artist merely as a simpleton, often seems the seal of their truth. For now, the point to be made is not that one aspect of his performances is the true one, the other the performative or fictive one, but that both aspects form part of the work the artist does on stage.

In a catalogue essay called 'Ifs and Buts,' Briony Fer observes the compulsive nature of Creed's practice, as well as a tendency to debasement and chaos which Fer reads through the theories of Georges Bataille.<sup>1</sup> If the taxonomic systems in Creed's work recall the logic of the series in Minimalism, for Fer they also reveal its irrational underside, and its absurdity. The present essay offers a psychoanalytic examination of Creed's work, one that also asks what the critical stakes of these operations might be. I argue that Creed's object-world is pathological, both neurotic and hypochondriac. Sigmund Freud considered hypochondria to be the third neurosis, the other two being neurasthenia and anxiety.<sup>2</sup> In his correspondence with Sándor Ferenczi, hypochondria was related to the anal character, a figure in whom repressed anal eroticism is often expressed as orderliness, cleanliness, and trustworthiness.<sup>3</sup> This relationship will help to account for the paradox in Creed's object-world between the highly visceral, as in *Work No.660: Shit Film* (2006) (*plate 1*), a film in which a woman is seen defecating on an empty white stage (there are other versions of the film in which the person is a man), and the pure and ascetic, as in *Work No.398: ASSHOLES* (2005) (*plate 2*), where a white neon sign glows in such a way as to suppress the word's scatological and sexual connotations, lending it instead an almost antiseptic quality. These characteristics will be related to the hypochondriac's anxiety in the face of desire, sexuality, and

libidinal temptation. The argument will extend to the persona Creed adopts in his performances and will help to make sense of his claim, often repeated, that he feels sick. 'The primary feeling is like shit, my insides,' as the artist put it in one performance.<sup>4</sup>

### **I like things, a lot**

In 2004, Creed produced a work titled *Work No.338: THINGS (plate 3)*, a white neon sign about fifteen centimetres high in which the word things is delineated in block capital letters. The work sits on the wall at eye level and, in this version of the sign, turns on and off every second. When it is on, *THINGS* glows and suffuses the surrounding space in a halo of light. When it is off, the surrounding space is darkened and *THINGS* looks vacant, almost expectant.

From one perspective, *THINGS* seems to draw attention to the temporal specificity of things. Some things pass, some things last. On this view, light stands for duration, clarity, animation, life. For a second, it is as if things were promises, bearers of truth, inclining towards infinity rather than being fixed in material objects. Darkness, on the other hand, stands for impermanence, obscurity, finitude, death. *THINGS* may also suggest that some things are filled with light while others are lightless. Things are not always mere things, sub-objects or quasi-objects, but are sometimes alluring, auratic, and illustrious, as in shining with light. At the same time, the way in

which *THINGS* flicks on and off suggests the light emanated by things is not metaphysical but conventional, a point reinforced by the fact that the light in the work is artificially generated. *THINGS*, it seems, is incapable of producing an appreciable revelation for longer than a second.

*THINGS*, then, moves on two planes at once. Understood as a referential sign, the work invokes the relation between things and thingness. For theorists such as W.J.T. Mitchell and Bill Brown things elude verbal description because they are to some degree formless or amorphous.<sup>5</sup> The contours of things are diffuse and worn away, such that they are unable to attain, or be reduced to, the status of objects. This is one of the reasons why things are more assertive, more present, and more menacing than objects. It is as if they were perverse voluntary agents intent on overwhelming the subject with their insistent materiality.

Yet *THINGS* glows in such a way as to evoke pure, luminous, even immaterial things, not insistently material things. When it is illuminated, the work is evocative of higher things, divine and ascetic things perhaps. The work does not insist upon its thingness but upon what might be described as its thingitude. It is redolent of a world where things are not a cause for fear or anxiety but for happiness, for joy, a world in which things enjoy a kind of dumb beatitude. In this context, it is noteworthy that on several occasions Creed has claimed to 'like

things.’<sup>7</sup> In one of his songs, which is sung in a sharp, nasal monotone and is accompanied by a guitar upon which the artist repeatedly plays only the most basic chords, he even claims to like things a lot:

I like things, a lot,  
I like things, a lot,  
I feel very well, I feel very well,  
I feel positive, I like things a lot,  
I like things, I like things,  
I like things, I like things,  
I like things, I like things,  
I like things, I’m happy!  
Happy, happy,  
Liking, liking,  
Things, things,  
Yeah, yeah.<sup>8</sup>

That Creed claims to like things should not be confused with the notion that the artist likes the order in which things stand, just as his claim to feel positive, happy, and well is at least partly wishful thinking. ‘Working,’ the artist says, ‘is a way of trying to cope,’<sup>9</sup> and his performances are often edged by a sense of anxiety. Art appears to provide the character Creed plays on stage with one way of making sense of things. It might also

serve a pacifying function. If things are threatening for Creed, if he finds them nauseating and anxiety-provoking, his response seems to be to try to make light of things, to invest even the most mundane things with a form of levity.

Two further points should now be advanced in relation to *THINGS*. The first has to do with its semantic range. It would be impossible to account for the multiplicity of things the work could refer to. In this respect, *THINGS* is radically contingent. In its simplicity the work carries intimations of the infinite. Yet the paradox is that this same logic renders the sign superfluous. Isolated from a sentence and independent of any referential function, *THINGS* has its end in itself. It is both pure and tautological: it is a word to be read but also a thing to be looked at. *THINGS* is a sign of itself.

The second point is that, if *THINGS* designates not only things but also states of things, then the use of the plural suggests that for Creed things might be systematically inter-related in such a way as to affirm, with an optimism that some will find objectionable, that whatever form they take, things could be made clean, auratic, and illustrious; in brief, that whatever attributes belong to *THINGS* might be made common to all things.

Indeed, in an interview, the artist has claimed that all the works he has made are in some sense the same, and that is why all his works are numbered. 'I started numbering them because I



wanted to treat them all the same,' he said. 'I mean, I wanted a way of identifying them and also because I wanted them all to be somehow the same whether they were pieces of music or little things or big things.'<sup>10</sup> It would seem that, for Creed, the process of enumeration has a levelling effect. It allows music and differently sized things to become the same. It is as if everything in his object-world were derived from a single substance whose transformations varied only through number. As he puts it elsewhere, 'My world is a soup of thoughts, feelings, and things that are quite indistinguishable one from the other.'<sup>11</sup> Or, again, 'It's hard to distinguish between things, to separate things. I'm in a soup of thoughts, feelings, and things, and words.'<sup>12</sup>

For Creed, then, words, feelings, thoughts, and things are both epiphenomenal and promiscuous. Emanations of a common substance, they are pushed up, as if by chance, from a comparatively smooth and consistent surface—soup, or what he sometimes refers to as 'pâté.'<sup>13</sup> Words, feelings, thoughts, and things are temporary differentiations of an abstract field. Pushing this logic a step further, it is arguable that everything in Creed's object-world manifests the same virtues and that everything emits the same light, even if it is not always manufactured or artificially generated. To borrow Dan Flavin's terms, everything is 'infected' with the same 'blank magic.'<sup>14</sup> I want to argue that this form of enchantment is characterised by a

paradoxical combination of, on the one hand, neutrality, banality, and material facticity—thingness—and, on the other hand, purity, simplicity, and luminosity—thingitude. Which is another way of saying that everything in Creed's object-world is subject to the logic of *THINGS*.

For example, in relation to *WORK NO. 88: a sheet of A4 crumpled into a ball* (1995) (plate 4), Creed has said, in a characteristically neutral, matter-of-fact tone, that 'the crumpled ball of paper came about as an attempt to make something out of a piece of paper.'<sup>15</sup> Soon after he repeats this claim and says that the work was 'an attempt to make something using just a piece of paper.'<sup>16</sup> Creed then says that the reason he made a ball out of the paper was that it was 'the most simple shape'<sup>17</sup> he could make because, he continues, repeating himself once again, 'the sphere is equal in all directions and it's a simple shape.'<sup>18</sup> Creed then goes on to say that what he likes about this work is that 'it kind of disappears when you put it in the world and it can be something quite precious and it's also a piece of rubbish. I like that about it.'<sup>19</sup>

What Creed seems to like about the work is its out-of-jointness, the way in which two contrasting halves of reality—thingness and thingitude—are brought to bear on an A4 sheet of paper. On the one hand, the artwork, if this term is indeed applicable here, is merely a crumpled sheet of paper reduced to its simplest expression. It is a trivial-seeming thing. It is a

finished piece of work, but it is the result of minimal work, virtually no work at all. The creative gesture has been reduced to the tightening of a grip on a blank sheet of paper, which has not been tossed aside but exhibited. Something useful, a support for drawing or writing, has been rendered useless. On the other hand, this procedure, which stems from Creed's desire to be as succinct and substantial as possible, has also raised this simple shape to a new form of expression. A minimum amount of labour has produced a disproportionate amount of value, 'something quite precious,' as Creed put it. It was Karl Marx who first argued that the economic value of a commodity was proportionate to the labour time necessary to produce it. Yet in *a sheet of A4 crumpled into a ball* the labour-theory of value is inverted. What would usually end up in a dustbin is transfigured, obtaining an economic value that is quite out of keeping with both the time it took to make and its material qualities. Rubbish is sublimated and turned into something sheer and light that frustrates the viewer's desire to pin it down with words.

For the work's formal simplicity is illusory. Provided one accepts its invitation to the superfluous—as with *THINGS*, one can just as well ignore its demand for attention—it would be difficult, if not impossible, to account for the complexity of the work's topology, for the system of lines, folds, and angles that comprise this simple sphere. The task would be almost infinite. You would have to describe its creases and its crinkles, its

shadowy interior, the way space is inflected, articulated, illuminated, the way in which new combinations are formed every time you look down at it, as they are in a kaleidoscope. When photographed, or if your eyes are defocused slightly, these lines, folds, and angles look like fractures, precipices, and inlets. You can imagine a rock here, a peak rising there, such that this insignificant thing suddenly becomes a world in miniature.

Of course, even if the work sets you dreaming of paper planets and astral bodies, *a sheet of A4 crumpled into a ball* is much less than either of these things, even if the work also appears to be more than just a crumpled ball of paper. So much less, in fact, that to imagine the work as an animate thing, let alone a microcosm fulfilled within itself, like a world glimpsed through the wrong end of a telescope, is absurd. The analogies are superficial and require a distortion of perspective. The work is simply and underwhelmingly there. Tautological, it is what it is and can only be taken up in its own terms: a simple thing that points dumbly at its own thingness. 'I am a sign of myself,' it seems to say.

Nevertheless, it should be borne in mind that there is nothing tautological about a crumpled ball of paper. Instead, Creed makes a tautology of reality. He splits it. He redoubles it. The paradox is that he does so only to return things to their soup-like sameness, to what Don DeLillo calls, in his novella

*The Body Artist* (2001), the 'not-as-if of things.'<sup>20</sup> This condition the narrator describes as a time without narrative quality where things are stripped of any symbolic or metaphorical value. In this respect, the not-as-if of things might be compared to the Lacanian Real. For the not-as-if of things should not be confused with mere reality. Rather, for DeLillo, the not-as-if of things comprises 'a continuous thing, a continuous whole,'<sup>21</sup> an impersonal and neutral continuum in which everything merges with everything else, such that the lines separating dream from reality, the animate from the inanimate, and the living from the dead, become blurred. This toing and froing between states of differentiation and dedifferentiation may account for why everything in Creed's object-world is both divided from itself yet identical to itself, why everything flashes yet remains the same.

Like a light turned on and off, then, in Creed's object-world a thing takes flight and becomes a luminous image. Yet, unable to disengage fully from its material support, in a second movement the image crumbles and folds back upon itself, and it is at this point that all of Creed's works sink back into the soup or pâté, the not-as-if of things. It is also here that the 'as if' slides into the 'if only,' which, in its mixture of longing and disappointment, is perhaps the most intimate aspect of Creed's work. In an essay called 'What Art is and Where it Belongs,' the artist and critic Paul Chan suggests that this condition may be

true of contemporary art more broadly. For Chan, the artwork is 'both more and less than a thing.'<sup>22</sup> It is more than a thing because it seeks to exceed its material properties by becoming an image, and it is less than a thing because it lacks the Thing's internal consistency. 'If art is, in truth, art,' Chan writes, 'it feels as if it is too concrete to be mere appearance, but not concrete enough to exist as mere reality. And it is this simultaneous expression of *more-ness* and *less-ness* that makes what is made art.'<sup>23</sup> For Chan, art aspires to a condition of wholeness. It wants to 'exist fully in the world.'<sup>24</sup> This is its utopian aspiration. Yet, like all utopias, this dream is not so much an affirmation as a negative horizon, which is why Chan suggests that the artwork fails and is condemned to expressing 'the irreconcilability of what it is and what it wants to be.'<sup>25</sup> Later I will argue that in Creed's work this sense of disappointment is related to the maternal axis and to the experience of infantile disappointment in the face of a reality that refuses to be held together or made whole again. Here it is enough to observe that every attempt to separate and differentiate seems only to lead to a greater experience of formlessness and abstraction. This suggests that the desire for order harbours within itself a drive towards disorder.

In Creed's object-world, then, things share not only a common thingness but also a common thingitude, and a form of double vision is required in order to behold them as such. Once

this equivalence is postulated, the differences between Creed's works may be seen as purely formal or modal in character, like variations on a single theme, while in each work the same processes of abstraction are operative. Whatever its outward expression, in this insular system each thing is necessitated to be what it is by its relation to every other thing and to the whole. The rules of the game are fixed. They only admit variations in detail.

**Blind Faith, or I want what I want to say to go without saying**

'Talking about work is work. Thinking is work. Words are work.'<sup>26</sup> These words suggest that, for Creed, performances are works. They also suggest that the artist himself can be taken as work. If the logic of *THINGS* is such that everything in Creed's object-world speaks in the same voice, intimating itself and at the same time something else, then by the same token it can be argued that there is no contradiction between *THINGS* and the mechanics of Creed's speech. Nor is there a distinction between the work and the character Creed plays on stage, who forms part of the same system and obeys the same rules. Like *a sheet of A4 crumpled into a ball*, Creed is a split or divided figure that mediates between two worlds, the paradoxical place where they commune, where a movement from the profane world to the sacred world, and from the sacred world to the profane world,

becomes possible. Creed dramatises this threshold. He makes himself part of the mystery of *THINGS*.

First, though, a consideration of the singular quality of Creed's words. The artist's speech is remarkable for the neutral, matter-of-fact way in which he speaks and for what appears to be the complete lack of any inspired idea behind his words. His speech often leads nowhere. His words are spoken without aim or purpose, as though they knew a goal his mind was unaware of. They sometimes appear to have been formed by chance, as if they were not spoken so much as generated, pushed up from another, more abstract dimension of reality—the not-as-if of things. Unable to concentrate his attentions, Creed seems compelled to wander around the stage aimlessly. He speaks mechanically, reflexively, almost compulsively. What the audience experiences when listening to these digressions is, to my ear, a mixture of perplexity and frustration akin to the experience of listening to a long, badly told joke, with the added dimension that the speaker has forgotten the punch line. That these words are at once frustrating, comical, and strangely mesmerising stems from the experience of the materiality of language as much as from what it communicates.

The affectivity of this digressive mode of speech is accentuated by its tautological character. In propositional logic a tautology is a formula that is true in every possible interpretation. But its truth is of a particular variety. A tautology



is true because superfluous, superfluous because true. As Creed writes:

I don't know what I want to say, but, to try to say something, I think I want to try to think. I want to try to see what I think. I think trying is a big part of it, I think thinking is a big part of it, and I think wanting is a big part of it, but saying it is difficult, and I find saying trying and nearly always wanting. I want what I want to say to go without saying.<sup>27</sup>

When describing his works Creed states the obvious. Blank facts and flat statements are spoken with banal certainty. What he says goes without saying. The things he says are waste. They add nothing and take nothing away from the world, which may explain why the words he speaks are strangely muted. The tautological construction of Creed's speech, which might be summed up as variations of the formula 'this is this,' allows him to name and describe his subject without recourse to metaphor. His words betray nothing. Like the titles of his works, they admit no contradiction.

Consider the following written passage. Note that, as is often the case with Creed's writings and speech, the last clause does not only say something but does what it says. It has a

performative character: its meaning coincides with the act of its utterance. Tautological, it is composed of a series of words in a line which stops:

Words are things. Words are shapes, sounds,  
noises. Words are like other things. Words are  
materials. Words, like most things, are a demand  
for attention. (...) Words are never ironic. Words  
are, like money is, neutral. Meaning is made by  
people. Words are things to look at. Words are no  
more or less than other things which fill up space  
and time. I try not to worry, and put words one  
after another in a line which stops.<sup>28</sup>

For Creed, then, words are not units of signification. They are material things composed of phonetic or acoustical matter that can be moulded into different shapes, sounds, or noises. Words have no content. They are neutral and impersonal, like money, though people behave as if this were not the case. In order to preserve this neutrality, he tries not to worry and to express, as immediately and as automatically as possible, the words, feelings, thoughts, and things that take shape in the soup of his world. And when he talks you feel included among them. You feel remote, mentally and physically suspended, as if by strings, blended with all manner of things: the chairs, the instruments,

the lights, the stage. It is like being caught in someone else's dream.

In this respect, Creed's language might be compared to the words spoken by one of the figures encountered in the work of the British artist Mark Wallinger, 'Blind Faith.' In a film called *Angel* (1997) (plate 5), Wallinger memorised the opening of the gospel of Saint John backwards: 'In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God...'. The film shows Blind Faith in his trademark and comically funereal outfit—white shirt, black trousers, black tie, dark glasses, white stick in hand—walking down the escalator at Angel Tube Station in London. His stick swings from side to side as he recites the gospel's opening lines. As Blind Faith does so the escalator moves upwards so that he is forced to keep walking in order to stay in place. The film ends when he stands still and is carried up to the comically incongruous chorus of Handel's *Zadok the Priest*. It is as if, after a long journey underground, God's messenger had finally ascended to heaven.

What is disorienting about the work is that *Angel* is played backwards. This means that the commuters who appear in the film move the wrong way round, while the words pronounced by Blind Faith, originally spoken in reverse, are now articulated in the correct order. Yet these inversions do not result in a completely coherent language but a slightly garbled sound. The art critic Martin Herbert has compared it to the sound of

someone speaking in tongues.<sup>29</sup> It could also be compared to the babble of fools. What is important is that these reversals reduce language to its 'base materiality,'<sup>30</sup> to use Bataille's expression. The Word's referential function is foreclosed and Saint John's gospel is profaned and abstracted into acoustical matter. Where there was meaning there is now only an affect. These tendencies to regression and debasement are crucial because, alongside the film's comic elements, they serve to undermine its spiritual and mystical dimensions. In *Angel* the divine Word is transmogrified into nonsense. By the same logic, Wallinger's film also demystifies and discredits what an artist does or knows. If Blind Faith is as an angelic figure, then he is a messenger without a message, a prophet with nothing to say.

The same might be said for Creed. As with Wallinger's *Angel*, when the former artist speaks in his awkward, nervous, not-of-this-world-way, the words he articulates are akin to the material double of the language of angels, which is not a language of referential words but a language of immaterial, expressive sounds.<sup>31</sup> During his many long detours and oblique digressions, words become material things because their referential function is suspended. At the same time, any mystical or spiritual dimension is belied by the possibility that Creed is not an angel but an idiot or that the performance is a hoax. In Creed's performances, things are said, truths spoken, with exasperating slowness. Every word can be heard coming, even

if, paradoxically, what he actually says is hard to remember. Most of his words are forgotten as they are said, and what remains of them are memories of a mainly sonorous nature: nasal, humdrum, monotonous, deadpan, like the buzz of a neon sign perhaps. As with dreams, moreover, what is difficult to know is whether there is any hidden meaning behind that which is manifestly expressed. Yet the paradox is that the more things are simplified the more mysterious they become. Creed makes the secret that he has nothing to say evident and surrounds this secret with a halo of mystery. Which is why a whole world seems to be contracted and condensed in each of the things Creed says: a world of simplicity, a world of truth, a world of light, but also a world of superfluity, of banality, of waste.

The structure of Creed's language, then, mirrors the internal structure of his world. There is an isomorphic relation between the object-world he has created and the words he uses to describe it. This is because Creed expresses himself not by words, but by *THINGS*. In this context, the fact that he describes sentences as 'words one after another in a line which stops' is suggestive, and not only because it recalls Donald Judd's well known definition of Minimalism as 'one thing after another.' It makes Creed's speech like his works. Here are three examples: in *Work No.960: Cacti* (2009) (*plate 6*), thirteen cacti are arranged in a series from smallest to biggest; in *Work No.701: Nails* (2007) (*plate 7*), seven nails are hammered into a wall,

starting with the longest and ending with the shortest; and in *Work No.736: Piano Accompaniment* (2007) (plate 8), a person plays every note on a piano from left to right and back again. Of course, words are not cacti or nails or notes, but the logic of the series in Creed's work is such that disparate things can operate in the same way. The artist reduces speech to a mechanical and repetitive procedure that must be run through again and again each time a word reaches a full stop. In that sense, the meaning of what he says is of secondary importance, just as, for Creed, there is probably little difference between a cactus, a nail, or a word.

There is also an anxiety-provoking aspect to this procedure. This is accentuated when the artworks are exhibited together. Creed does not only place cacti, nails, notes, and words in series but also balls, boxes, bricks, chairs, girders, planks, tables, and tiles. The list could go on. There is an obsessive and compulsive dimension to this reordering of the world. Like an angelic bureaucrat out of a story by Melville or Kafka, Creed creates systems in which things enter into strict but pointless taxonomies that provide a sense of order in what, for the persona the artist adopts, seems to be an otherwise threatening and chaotic world. The paradox is that the desire for order turns itself inside out in the realisation of its own logic. The more objects are systematised the more volatile, abstract, and thing-like they seem to become. As Fer memorably put it in her

discussion of Creed's work, 'never underestimate the potential for chaos of too much order.'<sup>32</sup>

The same might be said for Creed's speech. Like Bind Faith's glossolalia, if his language is literalised and purified of ambiguity, this does not prevent him from talking shit or for his speech to be akin to a form of coprolalia, which Ferenczi describes as a '*tic convulsif*.'<sup>33</sup> Creed's words are expelled from his mouth like bodily waste. Yet the paradox is that there appears to be no contradiction between the luminosity of the things Creed says and their excremental character, no contradiction between their thingitude and their thingness, just as there is no contradiction between the manic ordering of his object-world and the sense of formlessness that ensues. It is arguable that they are two sides of the same coin, so to speak, the expressions of the anal character Creed plays on stage. This condition is not only made visible in compulsive efforts to rearrange and sublimate things, but also in his constant complaints of feelings of sickness as well as in his interest in the limits of the body.

### **Prosthetic Symbolics**

In a chapter of his book *What is Madness?* (2011) called 'Stabilization and Creation,' the psychoanalyst Darian Leader describes patients who construct 'prosthetic symbolics'<sup>34</sup> as coping mechanisms. These symbolic fictions are tantamount to

‘the creation of a new world.’<sup>35</sup> They allow people to experience a sense of order in their lives and help to make existence more tolerable and manageable. The psychoanalyst notes that these prosthetic symbolics are often ‘built up around some ideal point’ which can be ‘traced back to the mother.’<sup>36</sup>

The example Leader provides is suggestive. He recounts how a boy called Stanley, who was unable to construct a stable boundary between the world and his body, ended up treating himself by developing an addiction to television and films. Finding socialisation and emotional engagement highly invasive experiences, Stanley would mirror the behaviour and emotions of the actors he saw on screen. These identifications helped the boy to function in the world, even if his emotions ended up controlled and polarised. Stanley understood that in social situations emotional expressions were the norm and that he had to comply in order to be accepted, so he would simply turn them ‘on’ and ‘off.’<sup>37</sup> ‘He would switch himself from panic to ecstasy as if by flicking a switch,’ as Leader puts it.<sup>38</sup> If Stanley’s emotions were curiously detached, the creation of a ‘minimal binary’<sup>39</sup> nevertheless provided him with a way of coping.

The idea of a prosthetic symbolic built around a set of simple binaries offers a fitting way of describing Creed’s object-world. It has already been said that, for the character he performs on stage, work is a ‘way of trying to cope.’ He also says that it is a way ‘to separate the soup and escape; to get from



the inside out.’<sup>40</sup> To think of his object-world along these lines helps to make sense of works such as *Work No.336: FEELINGS* (2004) (*plate 9*), a blue neon sign that can be turned on and off, like *THINGS*. Feelings are conventionally held to be inside a person, where they are often a source of anxiety and confusion. By externalising feelings and turning them into things, Creed, it seems, tries to neutralise them. The volatility of feelings is reduced to a simple and mechanical binary. Like Stanley’s emotions, they can be turned on or off, and when they are on they always glow in the same impersonal way. It is as if, with this work, Creed was able, or at least hoped to be able, to decide when to feel and when not to feel, and to always know how he will feel when he so chooses: neutral and blank. The same could be said for *Work No.1090: Thinking / Not Thinking* (2011) (*plate 10*). In this film, Creed sings the words ‘thinking’ and ‘not thinking’ repeatedly while an Irish Wolfhound—the biggest dog—runs alongside a Chihuahua—the smallest dog—on a pristine white stage. Apart from this sense of scale—smallest to biggest—the relation between the two dogs and the words ‘thinking’ and ‘not thinking’ appears to be tied only by a logic of repetition. As with *FEELINGS*, here too the sense is that thought might be turned on or off at will. To structure his object-world as an ‘elementary plus and minus,’<sup>41</sup> to use Leader’s terms, seems to provide Creed with a way of differentiating and neutralising what is otherwise confusing and

anxiety-provoking. One might also say that creative process allows for the organisation and systematisation of the soup of words, feelings, thoughts, and things that constitutes Creed's inner world, even if that system seems always on the brink of turning into its contrary, reverting his prosthetic symbolic to the not-as-if of things.

Why, then, does Creed want to neutralise things and make everything the same? Why does he seem intent on getting what is inside—words, feelings, thoughts, and things, and indeed himself—out?

In 2011, Creed produced an artwork titled *Work No.1092: MOTHERS (plate 11)*, a massive neon sign in which the word 'mothers' is written in large white capital letters. The word stands on top of a horizontal steel girder that revolves at different speeds above the spectator's head. It slows down and picks up speed again, at times seeming to spin out of control, only to slow down again. To stand beneath the work is unnerving because the heavy girder, which seems to fill the whole room, spins only inches above your head, and however many times it passes there is still a sense that it might hit you.

In an interview, Creed has said that the reason why *MOTHERS* is monumental is because 'as babies we are inside the mother,' so 'by definition the mother has to be big.'<sup>42</sup> The role of the mother also accounts for the fear the artwork is designed to provoke. 'When you're small,' he says, in words

that are notably child-like, 'your mother is always really big. So it seemed like a good reason for this to be big and... scary.'<sup>43</sup> Elsewhere the artist has said that the experience of the work made him feel 'sick' and that he felt this had 'something to do with Mothers.'<sup>44</sup> Soon after he noted that separation from the mother is also a source of anxiety: 'That is the one where the baby is literally part of the mother and is not separate, and then you have to come out and be separate. It is the most difficult thing to do.'<sup>45</sup> Like everything in Creed's object-world, then, mothers are both a positive and a negative force, a plus and a minus, a source of happiness and love, and a source of fear and anxiety.

Creed's words are all the more suggestive for their child-like simplicity. There is something at once naïve and knowing about the way in which he says things, which is disarming. They also seem to suggest that at some level this separation remains traumatic, though it is noteworthy that the use of the plural 'Mothers' suggests that, for Creed, this is a generalised experience rather than a matter of autobiography. It is an effect of his work perhaps. On this view, it is arguable that the maternal axis—in Creed's object-world the paternal axis seems to be excluded or foreclosed, if only by omission—can help to account for several important aspects of the artist's work.

As has been noted, for Leader the construction of a prosthetic symbolic can often be traced back to an infant's

relationship to their mother. So when Creed says that mothers are frightening and when he writes, in words previously cited, that 'words, like most things, are a demand for attention,' it is arguable that it is not only a fear of desire that motivates his construction of a prosthetic symbolic in which everything is clean, sterile, and can be turned 'on' and 'off.' It is also motivated by the fear of an unpredictable and all-powerful mother. A demand for attention, after all, may also be a demand for love. This is suggested by *Work No.374: LOVE (2004) (plate 12)*, a white neon sign that glows unchangingly.

In the psychoanalytic story to which Creed appears to be indebted, separation and castration anxiety are the two principal forms of fear experienced by an infant when they are separated from their mother. At first, an infant has a narcissistic relationship with their mother. The child identifies with her in a register Jacques Lacan calls the Imaginary. After the mirror stage and the child's entry into the Symbolic, the socialised world of language, a division or splitting takes place. Desire for the mother is prohibited by the paternal function and the child is castrated. Separation from the mother also introduces the child to the experience of finitude. By dissolving the imaginary lost paradise of primary narcissism, a state of oneness in which the ego is felt to be whole and immortal, separation also results in death-anxiety. In this second moment an infant detaches their libido from the mother and invests it in different objects on a

path of sublimation that begins with an interest in faeces, the first possession. What is important is that the prohibition of incest makes all desire to some degree nostalgic while at the same time anxiety-provoking. This is because objects of desire are substitutes for the lost body of childhood, the lost object, which is why Freud suggests that ‘the finding of an object is in fact a refinding of it.’<sup>46</sup> This means that desire is structured according to a principle of repetition and difference; and because desire is unconsciously incestuous, it also means that it is both traumatic and transgressive.

With this in mind, Creed’s claim that his feeling of sickness is related to mothers is suggestive, as is his claim that he is trying to get what is inside—including himself—out. To recall an earlier quote, ‘the primary feeling is like, shit, my insides.’ On this view, it is arguable that what makes the artist feel sick is a displaced libidinal investment typical of hypochondria. In hypochondria, the libido is withdrawn from the external world of objects and is attached to the inside of the body, leading to the experience of painful sensations in the organs. This displacement is related to the guilt produced by desire. ‘Hypochondriasis,’ the Hungarian psychoanalyst Otto Fenichel observes, ‘may serve as a gratification of guilt feelings.’<sup>47</sup> He adds that, as a rule, the unconscious significance of ‘hypochondriacal anxiety [...] represents, in a distorted manner, castration anxiety.’<sup>48</sup> That is why Fenichel goes on to

suggest that hypochondria is often experienced by men ‘who were frightened as little boys.’<sup>49</sup> The penis is endangered by the threat of castration, which is understood as a punishment, and is introjected, such that the hypochondriacally affected organ becomes an unconscious equivalent of the penis. This displacement of castration anxiety to hypochondriasis also helps to make sense of Freud’s claim that the hypochondriac shows hostility to sexual satisfaction. For the psychoanalyst, the neurotic symptom can function in one of two ways. Either the symptom aims at ‘sexual satisfaction’ or at ‘fending it off.’ In the first instance, the wish-fulfilling character of the symptom tends to lead to hysteria. In the second instance, the ‘negative, ascetic one,’ desire finds expression in hypochondria and obsessional neurosis.<sup>50</sup>

How might this be related to Creed’s performances, to the persona he adopts and to the words he speaks? Consider this spoken passage:

I want the whole world to be in my work. You know, and I don’t want to ... I want to ... yeah, I want to choose yes and no, you know. I want to have everything in it, and that’s the problem, that’s the problem with any kind of decision. Most decisions are judgments that place one thing above or more important than another and I don’t like ...

I don't like doing that, you know, I think it is possible to choose everything.<sup>51</sup>

Creed wants to say something that goes without saying, to try to say something without trying, to choose everything by choosing nothing. It is arguable that this passive and almost mechanical procedure is related to the displacement of the penis onto an internal organ that takes place in hypochondria, a condition in which the foul substance is on the inside and seems to emerge from within. Such a line of thinking finds support in two works, which, on the face of it, could not be further removed from the cold, sterile, ascetic world one might expect from an hypochondriac: *Work No. 660: Shit Film* (2006) and *Work No.610: Sick Film* (2006) (plate 13). In the first film, a woman (but in other versions a man) walks onto a pristine white stage, pulls up her dress, defecates on the floor and then walks off, a few smears the only traces of her passage. In the second film, a suited man (but in other versions a woman) walks onto an identical stage, puts his fingers in his mouth, retches, and eventually empties the contents of his stomach onto the floor. Here too the only things left behind are stains.

Creed has described these works in relation to his own performances, where he says that he tries to turn 'feelings, thoughts, desires, hopes, and ideas into something to show other people.'<sup>52</sup> 'Vomiting', the artist claims, 'is a good example of

trying to get something from the inside out.<sup>53</sup> He compares the pain of vomiting to the pain of making work, and claims that he wants to make work that is ‘more like vomit than a rumination.’<sup>54</sup> This is because vomit is ‘uncontrollable’<sup>55</sup> and the uncontrollable moments in life are, for Creed, the ‘good things.’<sup>56</sup> ‘Thinking gets in the way so often,’ he says, ‘it checks you and stops you expressing yourself freely.’<sup>57</sup> What Creed likes about vomiting is that it is a ‘reflex that bypasses the thinking process,’ like a form of automatic speech perhaps, or a tic or stammer.<sup>58</sup> In other words, there is an immediacy to bodily functions that interests him because it does away with subjective intent. This may explain why Creed describes *Sick Film* as ‘an attempt to make a fresh thing never made before—a work without prejudice and without hope.’<sup>59</sup>

The asceticism of *Sick Film* and *Shit Film*, then, can be accounted for by the fact that vomiting and defecating are automatic processes. If, as Fer observed, the manic ordering of Creed’s object-world leads to an experience of disorder or formlessness, the inverse may also be the case: disgusting or indeed alluring as they may be for some, puking and shitting can also be seen as rites of purification. For in neither film are shit or vomit fetishised. Nor do the processes lend themselves to symbolic or metaphorical readings. That is to say, shit and vomit do not stand for anything beyond themselves. Instead, defecation and throwing up are shown to be processes as



reflexive as a woman's nipple hardening and softening (*Work No.730*) (*plate 14*), a man's penis becoming erect and then flaccid (*Work No.1177*) (*plate 15*), or a door opening and closing (*Work No.129*) (*plate 16*). Vomiting and defecating are literalised, the logic of repetition aiming to neutralise and desexualise, to make everything the same. Likewise, when Creed speaks his words are like shit or vomit. It is as if he were trying to evacuate the filth within him, to purify his body of its organs, to get the shit from the inside out.

Which brings me to the central paradox in Creed's work. I have argued that the persona the artist adopts, the anal character on stage, tries to avoid psychic conflicts and contradictory thoughts and feelings because of castration anxiety and an unconscious fear of breaking the incest taboo. That is why things in his work glow in a neutral way, free from any sex appeal. It is also for this reason that Creed constructs a prosthetic symbolic based upon an elementary binary—plus minus, on off, smallest to biggest, left to right, and so on. Yet this object-world seems always on the brink of sliding into its opposite. As Creed puts it in one song:

I got myself into a mind trap  
And now I'm looking for a mind trap map  
I got myself into a mind trap  
And now I'm looking for a mind trap map

I can't get out of this mind crap  
I'm looking for a mind crap gap  
Left and right and up  
Down and right and back  
Through across along  
Bit by bit by bit.<sup>60</sup>

Even in these lyrics, the way in which the words 'map,' 'trap,' 'gap,' and 'crap' sound almost the same makes meaning slide, such that everything gets mixed up again. The map is itself a trap and the crap emerges from all the gaps.

In Creed's object-world there seems to be always a danger of slipping back into an undifferentiated state.<sup>61</sup> And it is the conflict between life narcissism—the desire to create, to sublimate, and to differentiate, what might simply be termed the logic of the 'as if'—and what the psychoanalyst André Green calls 'death narcissism'—the unconscious drive towards a full stop, a return to what Creed calls the soup or pâté, the not-as-if of things—that is the most compelling aspect of Creed's work. For it is only in this second state, a state where desire is abolished because definitively fulfilled, that he can be neutral and impersonal, like *THINGS*. Earlier I suggested that what made Creed's work singular was the logic of the 'if only.' His object-world seems to be underpinned by an infantile desire to mend and reconstitute, to make things whole again. As Creed puts

it, 'it's like putting up a ruler, or a grid, against the world, so that the changing world, as messy as it is, can be made into a pattern—like looking at the wilderness through a fence.' Given the importance of the maternal axis in Creed's work, this might be related to infantile disappointment, which reawakens in the spectator the sense that the lost object is constitutively lost and cannot be recovered, with the caveat that the recovery of the lost object and its promise of oneness threatens the subject with the possibility of dissolution and a return to the not-as-if of things. This argument might be extended to the things Creed says and to the anal character he plays on stage. At the end of his paper on anal erotism, Freud relates neurosis to a particular use of language. 'Neurosis, here as elsewhere', writes the psychoanalyst, 'is taking words in their original, significant sense, and where it appears to be using a word figuratively it is usually simply restoring its old meaning'. Here one can perceive more clearly the relationship between the figural language of dreams, children and neurotics. Wherever archaic modes of thinking persist, what returns under the guise of the figural are the coprophilic, anal-erotic desires of early childhood. This is what makes Creed's work uncanny. It is as though, as in a game of Russian dolls, his prosthetic symbolic unconsciously reproduced the very soup-like formlessness it was designed to escape.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Briony Fer, 'Ifs and Buts', in *Martin Creed*, Rennie Collection, Vancouver, 2011, 10.

<sup>2</sup> Sigmund Freud, 'On Narcissism: An Introduction' (1914), in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. James Strachey, London, 14: 83.

<sup>3</sup> For a brief discussion of hypochondria and its relation to anal eroticism see: *The Correspondence of Sigmund Freud and Sándor Ferenczi 1908-1914*, (eds.) Eva Brabant, Ernst Falzeder and Patrizia Giamperi-Deutsch, London, 1993 1: 357-362.

<sup>4</sup> Martin Creed, 'Words and Music', performance held at the Zabludowicz Collection, 2 July 2015.

<sup>5</sup> "‘Things’ are no longer passively waiting for a concept, theory, or sovereign subject to arrange them in ordered ranks of objecthood. ‘The Thing’ rears its head—a rough beast or sci-fi monster, a repressed returnee, an obdurate materiality, a stumbling block, and an object lesson.' W. J. T. Mitchell, *What do Pictures Want? The Lives and Loves of Images*, Chicago, 2005, 112.

<sup>7</sup> An exhibition of Creed's work held at the Fondazione Nicola Trussardi in 2006 was titled 'I Like Things'.

<sup>8</sup> These are the words sung during a talk given by Creed at the conference 'Making Space' at University College, London, in 2012. The transcript can be found in: 'Martin Creed', *Free Association: Psychoanalysis and Culture, Media, Groups, Politics*, 65, February 2014, n.p.

<sup>9</sup> Martin Creed, *Martin Creed*, London, 2007, n.p.

<sup>10</sup> Martin Creed, in *Art Now: Interviews with Modern Artists*, (ed.) Sandy Nairne, London, 2002, p.96

<sup>11</sup> Martin Creed, in *Martin Creed*, 2007, n.p.

<sup>12</sup> Martin Creed, *Work No. 470: If you're lonely* (2005). Published on: [www.martincreed.com/site/words/if-youre-lonely](http://www.martincreed.com/site/words/if-youre-lonely).

<sup>13</sup> Martin Creed, in *Martin Creed*, 2007, n.p.

- <sup>14</sup> Dan Flavin, '...'in daylight or cool white.' an autobiographical sketch,' *Artforum* 4, December 1965.
- <sup>15</sup> Martin Creed, in *Art Now*, 98.
- <sup>16</sup> Martin Creed, in *Art Now*, 98.
- <sup>17</sup> Martin Creed, in *Art Now*, 98.
- <sup>18</sup> Martin Creed, in *Art Now*, 98.
- <sup>19</sup> Martin Creed, in *Art Now*, 98.
- <sup>20</sup> Don DeLillo, *The Body Artist*, London, 2011, 90.
- <sup>21</sup> DeLillo, *The Body Artist*, 91.
- <sup>22</sup> Paul Chan, 'What Art Is and Where It Belongs', *e-flux journal*, no. 10, November 2009.
- <sup>23</sup> Chan, 'What Art Is and Where It Belongs'
- <sup>24</sup> Chan, 'What Art Is and Where It Belongs'
- <sup>25</sup> Chan, 'What Art Is and Where It Belongs'
- <sup>26</sup> Martin Creed, *Work No. 470: If you're lonely* (2005).
- <sup>27</sup> Martin Creed, 'I don't know what I want to say', published on:  
[www.martincreed.com/site/words](http://www.martincreed.com/site/words).
- <sup>28</sup> Martin Creed cited on:  
[www.sorrywerecooled.com/en/expositions/presentation/17/martin-creed](http://www.sorrywerecooled.com/en/expositions/presentation/17/martin-creed).
- <sup>29</sup> Martin Herbert, *Mark Wallinger*, London, 2011, 45.
- <sup>30</sup> Georges Bataille, *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings, 1927-1939*, (tr.) Allen Stoekl, Minneapolis, 1985.
- <sup>31</sup> The study that was consulted for a wider understanding of angels was: (ed.) Peter Marshall and Alexandra Walsham, *Angels in the Early Modern World*, Cambridge, 2006.
- <sup>32</sup> Briony Fer, 'Ifs and Buts', 10.
- <sup>33</sup> Sándor Ferenczi, 'On Obscene Words', *Sex in Psychoanalysis*, New York, 1950, 132-153.
- <sup>34</sup> Darian Leader, *What is Madness?* London, 197.
- <sup>35</sup> Leader, *What is Madness?*, 206.

- <sup>36</sup> Leader, *What is Madness?*, 197.
- <sup>37</sup> Leader, *What is Madness?*, 206.
- <sup>38</sup> Leader, *What is Madness?*, 206.
- <sup>39</sup> Leader, *What is Madness?*, 206.
- <sup>40</sup> Creed, *Martin Creed*, n.p.
- <sup>41</sup> Leader, *What is Madness?*, 296.
- <sup>42</sup> Martin Creed, cited in: 'Martin Creed Makes the Mother of All Sculptures' (2011), interview with Helen Sumpter. [www.timeout.com/london/art/martin-creed-makes-the-mother-of-all-sculptures](http://www.timeout.com/london/art/martin-creed-makes-the-mother-of-all-sculptures).
- <sup>43</sup> Martin Creed, cited on: [www.southbankcentre.co.uk/whatson/festivals-series/martin-creed/martin-creed-m-r](http://www.southbankcentre.co.uk/whatson/festivals-series/martin-creed/martin-creed-m-r).
- <sup>44</sup> Martin Creed, interview with Isabella Burley: [www.dazeddigital.com/artsandculture/article/9362/1/martin-creed-mothers](http://www.dazeddigital.com/artsandculture/article/9362/1/martin-creed-mothers).
- <sup>45</sup> Creed interview with Burley
- <sup>46</sup> Sigmund Freud, 'Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality', *SE*, 7: 222.
- <sup>47</sup> Otto Fenichel, *The Psychoanalytic Theory of Neurosis* [1946], New York, 1990, 262.
- <sup>48</sup> Fenichel, *The Psychoanalytic Theory of Neurosis*, 262.
- <sup>49</sup> Fenichel, *The Psychoanalytic Theory of Neurosis*, 264.
- <sup>50</sup> Sigmund Freud, cited in *The Language of Psychoanalysis*. (eds.) Jean Laplanche, Jean-Bertrand Pontalis, London, 1988, 76.
- <sup>51</sup> Martin Creed, interview with Corinna Durland: [www.martincreed.com/site/words/questions-by-corinna-durland](http://www.martincreed.com/site/words/questions-by-corinna-durland).
- <sup>52</sup> 'Martin Creed: Private View': [www.timeout.com/london/art/martin-creed-private-view](http://www.timeout.com/london/art/martin-creed-private-view).
- <sup>53</sup> 'Martin Creed: Private View'
- <sup>54</sup> 'Martin Creed: Private View'
- <sup>55</sup> 'Martin Creed: Private View'
- <sup>56</sup> 'Martin Creed: Private View'
- <sup>57</sup> 'Martin Creed: Private View'

<sup>58</sup> ‘Martin Creed: Private View’

<sup>59</sup> ‘Martin Creed: Private View’

<sup>60</sup> The lyrics are from Martin Creed album, *Mind Trap*, London, 2014.

<sup>61</sup> André Green, *Life Narcissism Death Narcissism*, London, 1983, 28.