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The Bearable Lightness of Martin Creed



Chris Kendall

Martin Creed: *Feelings* A survey showing at Bard College includes "Work No. 628: Half the Air in a Given Space."

ANNANDALE-ON-HUDSON, N.Y., July 7 — There are two ways to introduce "Feelings," the charmingly colorful, amusingly noisy, sparsely installed survey of the British artist

Martin Creed at the Center for Curatorial Studies at Bard College.

ROBERTA SMITH
ART REVIEW
One way is to remind everyone that in 2001 Mr. Creed precipitated something of an uproar in the British press when he won the Tate's Turner Prize for "Work No. 227: Lights Going On and Off."

It is exactly what it sounds like: The lights of a given space, which may or may not contain other art, are set to turn off and on at regular intervals. Depending on your mood, it creates frustration or pro-

vides breathers from looking at art.

At Bard Mr. Creed has "Work No. 227" operating in the Hessel Museum of Art, the center's big new wing, where he has mixed his own works with those he has selected from the Hessel Collection, often by the Minimalists and Conceptualists who inspire him.

Mr. Creed's penchant for provocation is even clearer in two short videos. In each a person walks in front of a camera trained on an empty, pristine white-on-white space and either vomits or defecates before walking away. This sounds more shocking than it looks, in part because the performers manage to maintain both their dignity and their privacy.

But let's move on to the second approach,

which would begin with "Work No. 628: Half the Air in a Given Space." As the title suggests, half the air in the gallery this piece occupies has been altered by the artist: It is contained within bright blue balloons, which fill the space wall to wall to a height of about eight feet. You can't miss it; first, one side of the gallery is glass, and second, you have to walk through the piece to enter one wing of the museum.

Being in this gallery is startlingly delicious. The balloons yield to every move. It's like skinny dipping, or swimming with dolphins, or deep-sea diving, except you can breathe. It must also be similar to floating in

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The Bearable Lightness Of Martin Creed's Work

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an antigravity chamber, except for all the shifting, weightless jewel-like orbs of blue.

As these works suggest, the art of Martin Creed veers between shock therapy and something quite a bit more tender. Either way it is direct, irreverent and also clownish, with, when it succeeds, an undercurrent of seriousness. Mr. Creed's purpose, is generally to take liberties, with the body, the museum, the idea of art and most of all with the viewer's imagination. He uses whatever medium seems suitable.

The more than 100 works in this show include painting, sculpture, drawing, video, wall painting, installation art, language and forms of music. One example: a grand piano turned into a percussive instrument by rigging its top, sheet-music holder and key cover to fall at regular intervals.

- ◆ There is also performance: Every 10 minutes during the show gallery assistants run through the rooms.

Born in 1968, Mr. Creed belongs to a continuum that begins with the Dada artists, yet he displays a lot of formalist savvy. He is a very late Conceptualist with no bias against objects, a devotee of the rarefied art-in-the-street tendency of Situationism whose favorite situation seems to be the white cube of the gallery. He has a Minimalist's sense of scale, color and unhampered space, but his fabrication is often very low-tech, which means that Minimalism's use of repetition, progressions and intervals can turn odd. A possible homage to Donald Judd's stack sculptures consists of five black bean-bag chairs stacked one on the other, held up by their own weight in a slouching, lumpen yet vertical form that Judd would probably have dismissed as too figurative. Similarly Mr. Creed's version of a progression can be five nails of different sizes hammered into the wall;

"Martin Creed: Feelings" continues through Sept. 16 at the Center for Curatorial Studies at Bard College, Annandale-on-Hudson, N.Y., (845) 758-7598.

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Additional images from "Feelings," the exhibition of Martin Creed's work at Bard College:

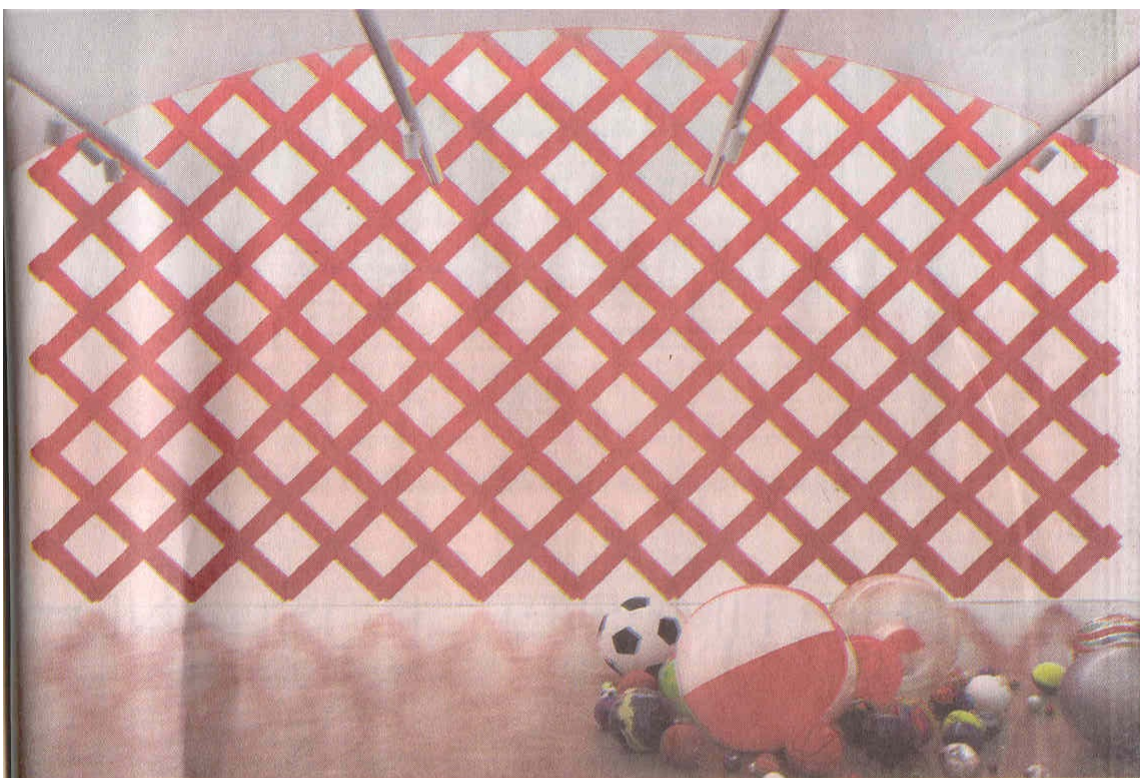
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five 16-foot boards of different widths stacked in ziggurat formation, or five trees of different heights, like those he has just planted outside the center (a permanent work).

With the banging piano parts and the running feet, this show makes quite a bit of surprisingly pleasant noise, turning Minimalist notions of repetition and progression into sound. One especially wonderful racket comes from 39 metronomes ticking away in a long line on the floor; they look like marionettes, except each set to a different beat, progressing from slow to fast. It's controlled chaos and the constant re-winding that the faster-beating metronomes in particular require will turn the work into a second performance piece.

In the same gallery is a speaker playing an audio piece that is, as its title explains, "all the sounds on a drum set played one after another in their given order, at a speed which makes the piece last for one minute." Its progression of different but regular tones complements the erratic rhythms of the metronomes' monotone clicks. Mr. Creed seems to build deliberately on avant-garde precedents both to comment on them and to flaunt the idea of originality. His contribution to the tradition of the modernist monochrome involves extensive use of the bright-to-fluorescent highlighter and marker pens. One work consists of 220 sheets of framed typing paper, each covered with a different color in a different stroke or different width of pen. They line a hallway at the museum, a perfect example of Mr. Creed's tendency to initiate simple-minded projects that become more convincing as he sticks with them.

A tiny cube made of one-inch-square pieces of masking tape might be a work by Tom Friedman, but it is more interesting



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The show at Bard includes "Work No. 406: Balls" in front of "Work No. 800," a cross-hatched wall painting.

as a thumbnail sketch (literally) of a plain yet imposing 8-foot-high stack of 4-by-8-foot sheets of plywood. Similarly a floor piece made of 110 balls — many of them colorful, from marbles to beach balls — can bring to mind Jeff Koons and Sylvie Fleury, but it has an obvious cheapness that neither of those artists would allow. The backdrop of this piece is a wall painting reminiscent of the work of Sol Lewitt, except that Mr. Creed's is made with a common paint-roller and based on one of his own doodlelike drawings. The result is a pattern of bold, criss-crossing red diagonals.

The slightness of the study for this piece — a sheet of typing paper with the same motif rendered in red marker hanging in

another gallery — is a lesson in itself.

Changing scale and materials is a constant theme. In one gallery you'll find a gold-plated knoblike protrusion and its silver-lined negative spanning a corner and reflecting each other. Elsewhere the same shape, enormous and made of white plaster, protrudes from a wall, looking something like an aura from two galleries away. In another gallery a painting of a large-breasted woman by John Currin hangs opposite a pair of protrusions. No one ever said Mr. Creed couldn't be sophomoric.

One of my favorite pieces here consists of two monitors, one set on top of the other, showing two different videos of the same ferry docking at a pier. On each screen the boat moves into view and executes the same

nautical choreography of turning, dropping anchor and backing up, but the images match only in the final seconds, when the gangways touch down at the same moment and the same point. The work magnifies the implicitly thrilling grandeur of watching a boat dock, doubles the pleasure and turns it into a duet. It seems consistent with a language piece, shown in the same gallery with a Donald Judd sequential wall sculpture and a small bright gouache by the Pattern and Decoration painter Kim MacConnel that is tellingly titled "Better Looking."

In tall black letters high in the corner of one gallery, the Creed piece says, "the whole world + the work = the whole world." Art is simply a form of light used to illuminate life.