

# THE COMMON GUILD

Visual arts: Projects / Events / Exhibitions



Photo by Ruth Clark

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### COMMENTARIES

## Martin Creed

20 February – 3 April 2010



## Martin Creed 'Things'

Much of Martin Creed's art involves the material interrogation of its immediate surroundings. This conditions how it is made (he most often works with materials close at hand and close to home) and how it is viewed (he tends to place these materials where and sometimes even how we might expect to see them). In doing this, his art dramatically affects how we see and understand our world.

This was much in evidence in Creed's exhibition at The Common Guild. Called *Things*, the exhibition comprised existing work, selected with the domestic spaces of the gallery's Victorian house specifically in mind. A list of the materials from which the works in *Things* were made reads like an inventory of a house move—masking tape, plaster, paint, nails, tables, door, a doorstop, curtains, a lamp, empty boxes, paper, pen, house plants. In making artworks from these materials, Creed did very little to them. Rather than make meaning through denaturing objects, or placing them out of context, Creed rather insists on their nature, and works with them very much in context. As we walk through the spaces of The Common Guild, therefore, we encounter plants on a mantelpiece, nails in the wall, boxes and tables on the floor, a standard lamp in the corner, curtains at the window. There is an insistence to this that borders on the obsessive—the nails and plants are lined up in height order, the boxes and tables are stacked smallest to largest or largest to smallest, the lamp flicks on and off and the curtains open and close, both doing what they do to almost absurd effect.

There are oddities, as well, and for me these cohere around *Work No. 380*, (*an intrusion and a protrusion from a wall, silver in/gold-plated silver out*). Not only is this work made from something rather than being simply that thing itself, it is profoundly unfamiliar. In the corner of one of the walls on the stairs, Creed has introduced a small, concave 'protuberance' which projects out towards a similarly small, convex 'intrusion'. If you were to fold the corner of the stairs in on itself, the protuberance would fit into the intrusion.

Once you realise that, you can't not imagine doing it. And once you imagine it, the whole exhibition—and house—starts to move. Creed has told me that his ideal in making art is for it to function like music: a set of score-like propositions that a viewer (in the position of a musician or a conductor) can interpret for themselves. In his

words, he likes the sense that the work might "make and remake itself in front of you". *Work No. 380* does that, I think. And in doing so it re-orders how we see. Much as the stacks and rows of things from smallest to tallest do. Those works have to do with adding and subtracting by degrees, with going up and down a scale—music again.

*Work No. 990* (*curtains opening and closing*) makes and re-makes itself in front of us in reality, actively disrupting how we see. In a pleasingly self-referential gesture<sup>1</sup>, the curtains sweep regularly open—letting light into the room and opening it up to the spectacular view that is one of The Common Guild's defining features—and closed, plunging the room into darkness.

Another thing Creed says is that he makes art in order to make life (his life, but ours too) better. This is why he reaches for things close at hand—as he says in the interview Katrina Brown filmed with him on the occasion of this exhibition, "going to a special shop to buy special materials" wouldn't do that. In working with familiar objects, and in making them do familiar things, he changes for the better how he and we feel and think. Subtly, with tact and with humour, he helps us reassess not only the world around us but our agency within it.

Dr Fiona Bradley is director of The Fruitmarket Gallery and between 2007–2016 she was a member of the board of The Common Guild.

1. *Work No. 312* (*a lamp going on and off*) makes a similarly wry and domestic nod to *Work No. 227* (*the lights going on and off*), with which Creed won the Turner Prize in 2000.