

Elmgreen & Dragset

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ELMGREEN & DRAGSET

Photography by Robert Rieger

Michael Elmgreen and Ingar Dragset have been collaborating as an artistic duo since 1995. Their artistic output, consisting of sculptures that intermingle pristine surfaces with undercurrents of pathos, humor, and decay. From their iconic installation *Prada Marfa* (2005) to *Van Gogh's Ear* (2016), they have firmly established themselves as a team with one of the most innovative and radical artistic outputs in the 21st century.

Subversive and multivalent practices are Elmgreen and Dragset's bread and butter. Forgoing obvious optics or points of reference, they have devised objects, environments, and situations that confront the viewer's expectations of what art means. Drawing on everything from children's books, middle-brow aesthetics, and queer theory, Elmgreen and Dragset playfully mix the political with the mundane, discovering new ways to present art.

Love is a strong basis for the artists' practice. Beginning as a romantic coupling, the duo has worked throughout their career to find ways to 'transfuse love of all forms into their work. In our interview, Elmgreen and Dragset reflect on their profound personal exchange, shaped by their individual artistic sensibilities. Their love for each other allows them to be fearless, both within their own relationship and outwardly through their collaborative work.





MICHAEL ELMGREEN AND INGAR DRAGSET CONVERTED
A FORMER PUMP HOUSE INTO THEIR CAVERNOUS STUDIO
LOCATED IN THE BERLIN SUBURB OF NEUKÖLLN.



PLUS

Before we jump into the questions, how have both of you been doing?

ELMGREEN & DRAGSET

Not too bad actually. The daily life in our studio in Berlin has been relatively normal over the last year, all things considered, and despite months of lockdown in Germany. Now we are working in shifts, so everyone comes in only 3 days a week, and since our workspace is relatively spacious and spread out on different floor levels, we manage to keep things running. We are grateful for having been able to continue working on projects and keep the whole studio team. Given that so much has been turned upside down over the last year for so many and that health itself has become such a highly valued asset, we definitely appreciate whatever can still be called normal. Who would have thought just a year back that we suddenly would find even relatively boring daily routines so precious, haha. Of course, some shows have been postponed, and others have changed shape as a result of the pandemic, but so far, we've been able to roll with these changes.

P

In your early careers, Michael wrote poetry (and worked as an intern for children's puppet theatre), and Ingar did experimental theater. How did these influences affect your art practice?

E&D

Poetry and theatre led us fairly naturally into art performance as we first started to collaborate. The performance was an intuitive meeting point for us both that incorporated various elements from these other art forms: interaction with the audience, explorations of our bodies in space, and investigations into socially embedded conventions or behaviors. Having non-traditional art backgrounds made us look at the systems within the art world with somehow fresh eyes and made us question some of these seemingly set structures. As outsiders, we tried to make sense of it all through a process of questioning interactions. Being inquisitive is still fundamental to our collaboration today - although perhaps it has come as much from the meeting of our two personalities as from our backgrounds in poetry and theatre.

P

How do you work when it comes to discussing and working on new concepts/ideas? How has this process evolved over your years working together?

E&D

Our working method is based on this ongoing dialogue. Most days, we are both in the studio, and particularly at present, so our conversations about different projects are continuously developing, and sometimes they might even change direction within a single day. Each artwork of ours evolves through a kind of ping-pong process where we discuss concepts, contexts, and details together - plotting our ideas until they feel right. Sometimes our works will take on a few different forms before we both feel resolutely sure about them. These days though, after 25 years of collaborating, we're pretty familiar with each other's thought processes and can usually anticipate the other's reactions, which does make things a bit smoother. We have maybe turned into a two-headed monster.

P

To you, art has a lot to do with providing the possibility to open up someone's mind and be a meeting place for many diverse ideas. How have you defined 'art' within your practice?

E&D

Absolutely, which is why we've never tried to define it. We don't like the idea of placing any restrictions on what art should or should not be, either conceptually or aesthetically. The only thing it should be is to be free of linguistic delineations.

P

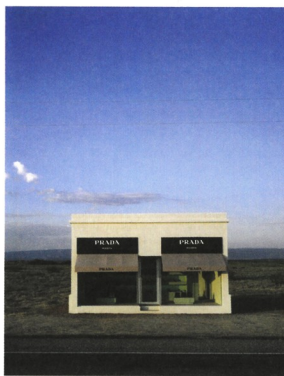
Since 1997, you have been creating a series of works called *Powerless Structures*. Why have these *Powerless Structures* been so indelible in your practice?

E&D

Our series of works titled *Powerless Structures* began with us altering objects or perceptions of objects in subtle ways so that associations linked to them would begin to unravel. Our first sculpture, *Powerless Structures, Fig. 11* (1997), was a diving board penetrating the window of the Louisiana Museum of Modern Art in Humlebæk, Denmark. The museum is by the sea and many visitors would spend time looking out at the view through the window as much as at the art, so we wanted to play with that reality. We heightened this inside-outside reality, blurring the boundaries but also presenting visitors with an object intrinsically linked to action - diving - which invites the viewer to interact. By putting the diving board through the window, though, we denied any potential for action. "Denials" like this can be found in many of our artworks, be it a closed door or a malfunction. Maybe *Prada Marfa* (2005) is one of the most well-known examples of these so-called



Powerless Structures, Fig. 11, 1997. Courtesy of Galleri Nicolai W



Prada Marfa, 2005. Courtesy of Art Production Fund, New York; Ballroom Marfa, the artists.



The Hive, 2020. Courtesy/ commissioned by Moynihan Train Hall Developer LLC, in partnership with Public Art Fund

denials – a forever closed shop in the middle of the desert. With this kind of approach, we hope to draw the audience out of the linear logic thinking that is easily triggered by straightforward interactivity.

P

From your early performance in 1997 (*12 Hours of White Paint/Powerless Structures*, Fig. 15) to the most recent installation (*The Hive*, 2020) in New York, you love to present your viewers with warring ideas, emotions, and images. Where does your drive for such dissonance come from?

E&D

Perhaps it comes from our interest in dissecting established structures and altering objects in our work, as these processes create a kind of conflict between what viewers expect to see when they look at a particular object and the reality that's actually before them – where something's changed. A cerebral push-pull can be built up when we play with a situation in this way. And where there are several possible meanings or dualities, there's space for re-thinking things or discovering new ideas or understandings. On a more subliminal level, though, perhaps such dualism in our work both comes from and reflects the fact that there are two of us...if you wanted to read deeply into it. In our new work, *The Hive* (2020), which is installed in Moynihan Train Hall, part of the renovated Penn Station in New York, we created this imaginary cityscape made of 91 individually illuminated skyscrapers of all different designs and suspended it from the ceiling upside down. By turning this whole panorama upside down, viewers can literally see this familiar sight from a different and unexpected perspective, which hopefully encourages a small shift in perception of moment, place, and context.

P

The retrospective of your works has a pristine and minimalistic style. What is it about this aesthetic that you feel lends itself to effective communication of your ideas?

E&D

We're Scandinavian so it's kind of in our DNA... Growing up in Denmark and Norway we were surrounded by utilitarian minimalist design. It's almost a lifestyle there, visible everywhere from household objects, institutional (interior) design, to architecture, so that has certainly informed both our mindset and art practice from the beginning. As young artists too, we were inspired by the Minimalist art of the 60s, and particularly the work of Donald Judd who used this really

pared down the visual language. Several of those Minimal artists used this specific aesthetic to critique the format of the art object and the exhibition itself, which we've always found particularly interesting and explored in our own work too. Felix Gonzalez-Torres, whom Michael met at the end of his life, was also an inspiration, in the way that he was one of the first to suffuse minimalism with queer content. In our sculptures, we find that using unadorned aesthetics can often make certain "truths" about particular objects or situations become more apparent, and therefore new layers can be unearthed or added more smoothly.

P

You said 'humor' is like anger management to you. Can you elaborate on what you meant by that?

E&D

Humor can express all sorts of emotions; we might use it in our work to express frustration, outrage, concern, or indignation. It also doesn't have to be separate from serious issues, so it can serve well as a form of "anger management". In fact, humor can actually be a good starting point for confronting important topics because it provides a contrasting perspective. Through humor, you can create a universe where you set new terms for how to speak about topics. And absurd qualities are often highlighted in this process. We use humor and absurdity in our work when subverting certain conventions or systems, re-contextualizing deep-rooted structures or norms. And we have been very inspired by how playwrights like Samuel Beckett and Harold Pinter have used absurdity to address the existential matter.

P

There's a repetition of cyan blue color throughout many of your works (ex. your diving boards, the window tint in *Short Cut*, 2003, *Trap*, 2020, walls in *Biography*, 2014-2015, and the trampoline in *Too Heavy*, 2017). Is this intentional?

E&D

Aha. You're not the first to ask. Yes, there's a cyan-blue that has featured several times in our swimming pool sculptures like *Van Gogh's Ear* (2016), *Zero* (2018), and our *Bent Pool* (2019), where that particular color is familiar in its physical context. It might even conjure strong associations of being by a pool, which perhaps lends a directness to these sculptures. Turquoise also featured in *The Whitechapel Pool*, where we created a to-scale abandoned civic swimming pool installation at The Whitechapel Gallery, London, in 2018. There, the blue

could be read as more institutional, reminiscent of those tired public spaces that are so well used but under-loved. Colors impact how space is interpreted, and they can subconsciously characterize an environment or delineate its function. We enjoy taking apart what makes one place specific to one function and being sensitive to different visual signifiers is key to this. We like that certain shades of turquoise blue come with divergent associations: some positive, others less so: we think of water, health, nature, and leisure on one side, and institutional, old, derelict, faded, and nostalgic on the other.

P
Creating a third persona, a fictional character, has been introduced often in your exhibition. This allows both of you to input personal stories, past experiences, and projections to be shared, as well as allowing the viewers to interact actively and creatively without boundaries (allowing viewers to engage in their storytelling, taking careful action to details, letting loose to figure out their own meaning behind the works too). * Can you talk more about the fictional characters and what role the viewer's interaction has in your work?

E&D
Yes, we've incorporated a whole range of different characters into our exhibitions and projects. We mentioned the two different collectors invented for the Venice Biennale presentation: Mr. B and a mysterious absent family. Then there's also Norman Swann, who was a fictitious retired architect for our exhibition *Tomorrow* at the V&A in London (2013). For that project, we transformed several of the museum's en suite galleries into a grandiose apartment setting and implied that this part of the museum was up for sale by putting a real estate sign outside on the museum facade. That caused a bit of controversy at the time, as some people were concerned that the government was beginning to put up public cultural institutions for sale. Others seemed genuinely curious and interested in buying the apartment and requested viewings! Anyway, that was a digression: creating characters like Mr. B, the middle-aged gay art collector, and Mr. Swann, the elderly failed architect, as part of our exhibitions enables us to take a narrative beyond the museum or gallery walls, and engage the audience in a different way, maybe more like they engage with a play, a novel or even a film. These characters also become stand-ins for us, maybe sometimes representational of less flattering aspects of who we are: our doubts, our failures, our fears. We like to build open narratives by invent-

ing characters like this – stories that have a kind of structure, but where some details are left deliberately obscured. It means the audience can really get inside the narrative and use their imaginations and it's great to see how the public reacts in these cases and often comes up with conclusions or storylines that are surprising also to us.

P
Your Memorial for homosexuals persecuted under Nazism (2008) in Berlin, seems to approach such relations and desires with an, especially tender viewpoint. Love-- which can be felt between both the couples in the video installation as well as throughout the careful craftsmanship and intention put into the memorial-- is an extremely powerful takeaway from that piece.

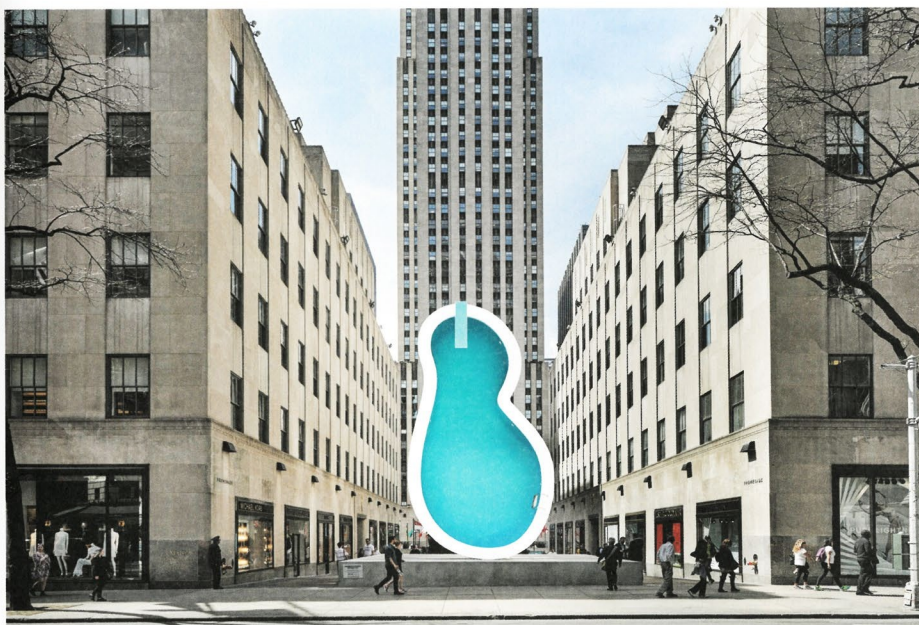
E&D
We hoped the Memorial to be as much of a celebration of LGBTQ+ lifestyles as a reminder of how gay people were persecuted under Nazism. In a way, it was love that was being persecuted as much as any behaviors, which is also what is so problematic with the fact the victimization happened in the first place, and sadly it still continues to happen in parts of the world today. Our memorial has a screen embedded in it where a film is on view and people can peer inside to watch it – the films inside change every few years, but always contains the main motif of same-sex couples kissing. It was always important to us to make a memorial that is intimate and emotional, instantly recognizable as relating to homosexual love, and that sends a positive signal to the visitors. It's important to indicate hope. That's important to us as we really must not forget that discrimination still takes place against LGBTQ+ people each day. It's imperative to keep discussions about equality alive in order to keep moving forward. The thought of these topics being drowned out in the context of recent political developments, with the populist right on the rise, is really quite frightening.

P
The art market is shifting as many artist-run galleries/ collectors have started to prioritize fast purchases and more profit-seeking. To some degree, the so-called 'community' is becoming less communal in the 21st century, and wonder how you perceive this change?

E&D
The last year has given rise to such huge transformations in the way that art is both mediated and commodified, it seems to have accelerated a path to art being experienced through technol-

Van Gogh's Eiv, 2016. Courtesy of the artists and the K11 Art Foundation. Public Art Fund, Galerie Perrotin, Galleria Massimo De Carlo, and Victoria Miro Gallery.

The Whitechapel Pool, 2018. Courtesy of Whitechapel Gallery and the artists.

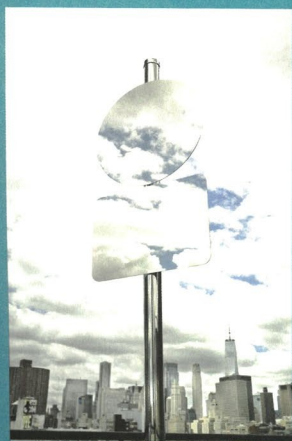






ogy. As fewer people have been able to travel, be they collectors, gallerists, or artists like us who haven't been able to oversee installations of our work across the world in the last year or even travel to see our own exhibitions, everyone has turned to technology to keep things moving. The impact of and subsequent response to the pandemic in the arts has completely reshaped the workings of the whole sector. While museums and public institutions are in crisis, digitally experienced art has opened access to new audiences: younger people, those unable to travel, and a whole public on Instagram. Galleries and commercial frameworks in the arts have been scrambling to keep up with these shifts and no one is really sure what the lasting impact of these changes will be. Of course, it's always a good thing when more people can see and experience art, but for us, it has highlighted the importance of public artworks and their roles in communities—how valuable it is to be able to go and see art freely in real life. After a time of isolation and travel restriction, we hope that people are more aware of what it means to be local, and also more interested in sustainable, quality encounters with art, artists, and other art lovers.

P
In *Adaptation Fig.1*, 2018, you have replaced street signs with mirrors to evoke how people are used to being told and directed. The way people go and how fast they go is all under control by the system. Not as an artist but as a viewer's point of view, what do you see through this sculpture? Any particular directions, signals, thoughts you had through the reflection of the sculpture?



Adaptation, Fig. 1, 2018. Courtesy of Galerie Perrotin.

E&D

We have a series of sculptures called *Adaptations* which consist of mirrored shapes that you find in familiar street signs—circles, triangles, or rectangles stacked on poles. By altering these objects and making their surfaces mirrored, we adapted their function, so they reflect the world around the sculpture back at the viewer. When we look at these works ourselves, we often see our own faces and the surroundings we are in. The actual sculpture sort of becomes invisible, which is the opposite of what a street sign should really do—instead of instructing or directing, we feel like it almost asks us a question. Like asking us to take in the space we are standing in, our position, what's around us, it's almost like a little exercise in looking, opening our gazes. It makes a change from the kind of focus that's required when we look at a phone or laptop screen.

P

Your work often contends with the distinction between public and private space both within objects, spaces, and desires. Where do you feel the line between public and private is?

E&D

It's a line that's so often blurred in both directions. The public sphere increasingly spills into our private ones as well as the other way around. We can see nearly everything happening in the world through our little phone screens any time of day, observing and participating in things from the seclusion of our own homes. Conversely, our private lives are becoming increasingly more public at the same time with selfies and auto-documentation across social media—we share so many things now that we used to think were private and it's totally normalized. On the other hand, though, our public spheres are becoming increasingly privatized, with big companies taking over public spaces and restricting access to important community spaces. We think it's worthwhile to keep awareness of this at the fore. Some of our works reflect this concern, like *The Whitechapel Pool* (2018), which in its abandoned state opened discussions on gentrification and the loss of civic facilities in the local Whitechapel area. Other examples like our unassuming early *Powerless Structures, Fig. 19* (1998), which consists of two crumpled pairs of jeans lying on the floor as if two people had just hastily taken them off, brings a private scene into the gallery or museum – a really intimate moment becomes implied in a public space where objects are deliberately on display. The work generates quite fun reactions from the visitors, like people wondering if they

might see the two trouser-less owners of the jeans having sex somewhere in the museum. When we play with expectations like this, we like to break down assumed barriers between private and public spaces to challenge the strict rules that delineate how we are told to behave in the public realm. Switching private and public expectations opens a dialogue about how we use and inhabit different spatial settings.

P

You are an artist duo but also have taken a role in many curatorial projects; both of which reflect your ideas, change, and developments. Can you take us to how these experiences as artists and curators have complemented each other and if they have opened up a different perspective for your practices?

E&D

Coming from theatre and performance, it has always felt natural to us to collaborate with others, and curating is again an extension of the ongoing dialogue between us both. We've found that curating has expanded our interactions with other artists, which has made it both stimulating and rewarding. For *The Collectors* at the Venice Biennale in 2009, we invited 23 other artists to show their work and add to the overall narrative we invented for the two pavilions. In 2017, when we curated the Istanbul Biennial, we included the work of 56 artists and centered the concept on how we as humans co-exist, in our homes, neighborhoods, and everyday lives. Working with artists from so many different countries and backgrounds was a really enriching experience. Then, in 2019, we curated *There I Belong. Hammershøj* by *Elmgreen & Dragset* at Statens Museum for Kunst in Copenhagen, where we worked with the paintings of Vilhelm Hammershøi, an artist whose eerie interiors have been inspirational to us and some great contemporary artists, like for instance Njideka Akunyili Crosby. So perhaps there's been a slight focus on the home and the roles of different spaces conceptually running through our curatorial work so far, which ties into parts of our more material artistic practice.

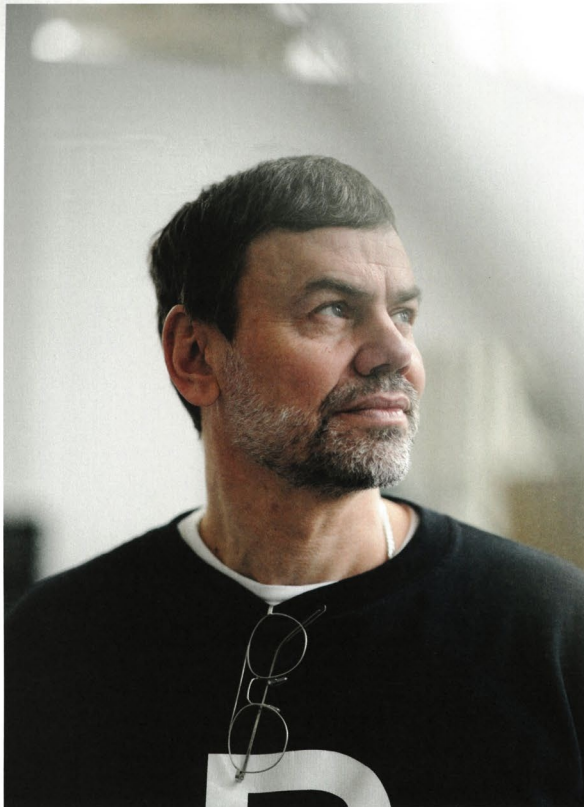
P

What emotions do you find in the collaboration that you can't access while working as an individual artist?

E&D

We've always been working together, since the very beginning of our practice so being a duo is the only thing we really know. But we like to point out to people that fear 'losing themselves' in a collaboration that there is plenty of space to





“HUMOR CAN EXPRESS ALL SORTS OF EMOTIONS; WE MIGHT USE IT IN OUR WORK TO EXPRESS FRUSTRATION, OUTRAGE, CONCERN, OR INDIGNATION.”

realize yourself, your visions, and your dreams within a collaborative process.

P

The way you unfold your story (works) is unique since there is not a single working method on repeat but instead you have kept your practice open-minded to explore through its size, material, space. How important is this for you to experiment with new approaches?

E&D

Every time we are about to become too "good at" something we tend to let it rest for a while and dive into new working methods, materials, or art forms. We continually experiment as we prefer not to be boxed into certain defined categories. When we first started collaborating and had been making performances for a little while, we felt people associating us with that type of artwork, so we opened up and explored new areas. Then, after we'd made works under the title *Powerless Structures* for a while, those works started becoming something everyone thought they understood fully, and art writers started to write in the same way about what it meant – it was almost at risk of becoming a brand, so we stopped using the title *Powerless Structures* for a good while. For us, it's important to continue generating new meaning in our existing works by placing them in new contexts, letting them become part of changing narratives by grouping them in new constellations within multiple exhibitions. In that way, multiple layers of understanding can unfold around a sculpture or installation. As long as we are alive, we want our sculptures to be alive as well.

P

How does love encounter within your life? As an individual, as a creator, innovator.

E&D

Love is at the heart of our collaboration. We started out as lovers but ended our romantic relationship after ten years. The love never left though, it just took on other forms, and sometimes it might even be invisible to others, especially when we get into heated discussions or one of us storms out of the room in frustration. But exactly because of love, these disagreements and differences are allowed to exist. Because of love, we can be fearless, both inwardly in our relationship and outwardly. There is always something to fall back onto. Love nurtures criticism. Criticism can be love. The world needs more love.

P

To close this interview, can you finish the sentence: Love is __

E&D

Love is a strong biochemical reaction in your brain that can make you completely forget about yourself—unlike an emotion like attraction that might appear almost similar in some situations but is driven by more selfish preferences. Love is dynamic.





