

## Interview: Behind The Scene

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### Interview



# BEHIND THE SCENES

During the preparation of their latest exhibition, Elmgreen & Dragset interviewed each other.

Above: Elmgreen & Dragset, *Plastered Structures*, Fig. 29, 1998. Courtesy: the artists, photograph: Studio Elmgreen & Dragset

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#### MICHAEL ELMGREEN

Though we were initially invited to do a survey, we're once again doing a transformation, this time of the spatial features of the whole ground level gallery, which is the biggest part of our exhibition. Why do you think we still do it - create these vast spatial environments that will just be dismantled and disappear when the show ends?

#### INGAR DRAGSET

We started back in the 1990s to challenge the so-called "white cube", and transforming this strict architectural format might just be a continuation of that questioning. With the input from both of us, it's always a question of keeping on reducing or adding, like a constant editing process. Our larger narrative exhibitions are almost almost cinematic: the gallery space becomes a stage for complicated human relations.

Speaking of the stage: many people know that you wrote poetry before we met, but you've never spoken publicly about your time as an interloper both for children's puppet theatre and for the "Danish answer to Robert Wilson", *Hotel Pro Forma*. Do you think it had an influence on our collaborations?

**ME** In my case it was a rather short flirtation with the theatre world. I am not always the best team player and I am helplessly impatient. To me, the art world was much more dynamic. Art does however have quite a lot in common with poetry. It can be simple and direct, but also allows going beyond the normal logic of language. The installation at Whitechapel is on the one hand very accessible, but on the other it consists of a whole bunch of nonsense that only makes sense the way its parts are choreographed. Don't you think that the verbal mediation of a work - in terms of press texts and spoken explanations - can sometimes be like writing a dating profile: part lying and part not being able to capture the real-life experience?

**ID** Maybe people read press releases like they do Grindr or Tinder profiles: with a mixture of curiosity and scepticism, rather than looking for truth. But sometimes you do feel you're killing your artwork by trying to accurately describe it, especially within the parameters set by press officers and media. On the other hand, being forced to write about your work can help you unearth hidden layers in it and unravel threads of thought you might not have been aware of when making it. The actual production of a work is sometimes so challenging and all-absorbing that there's hardly any time left to think.

**ID** I'd like to ask you about production value. Whereas I myself have been, let's say, eclectic, in my tastes over the years, you seem to have possessed exquisite taste. You always know exactly how you want things to look. Where does this come from? Is it all Scandinavian heritage and neuroses?

**ME** The materiality of the work is what can trigger understandings beyond normal logic: that's what fascinates me. A surface, a texture,

a volume, a curve, a nuance in the colour tone can all direct the very perception of the work - create some sort of irritation or pleasure, which breaks with the linear reading of the object. Aesthetic choices can stir uncertainty in good sense. Remember how inspired we were by Douglas Crimp's "On the Museum's Ruins" when we first started? He talks about how some critics had a misconception of Richard Serra's use of big rusty steel plates as a macho gesture. But macho isn't embedded in any material. The material in itself is without guilt. I am obsessed with the potential of design: how altering them makes it possible to twist meanings, and unveil control mechanisms. Does that sound too idealistic to you? I mean, I don't buy this idea of the artist as a particular good or well-meaning individual...

**ID** Personally, I love the way certain objects communicate. When an artwork starts speaking back to you, it's a bit like being a child again, where everything around you potentially has life within it. When you mention "well-meaning", I always think of that time we were on a residency program in New York in 1999 and watched *Autumn Sonata* together? Only then did we understand how European we were, how conflicted and guilt-ridden and inhibited we were. And we loved it. The artist in *Autumn Sonata* is an acclaimed pianist who has no idea about the pain she has caused her daughters in her pursuit of her own artistic excellence. It's often like that with Bergman: the people that one expects to provide guidance - parents, partners, priests - can be the worst, especially when trying to do good. Conversely, the two characters in Russell Hoban's *Turtle Diary* are these slightly lost, average individuals who have the idea to free the sea turtles from the London Zoo. They manage to release them into the sea, but they both realize they don't know if the turtles will survive, and will soon be replaced with new at the zoo anyway. Still, they believed in something, they did something, and they opened up other faculties within themselves and the world around them.

Do you have a favourite animal? I got quite an overdose of nature growing up in Norway. To my knowledge, you have always been a city dweller. So, how and why have animals crept into our shared artistic world?

**ME** Like in fables, some animals can be humorous mirror images of certain human behaviours. The slowness of the snail, the stubbornness of the donkey or the vulture sitting there, patiently awaiting your death, so it can finally get its meal.

**ID** Fables are often funny. Is humour important to you? Some people have called some of our works ironic or sarcastic, but that sounds a bit cold to me, distanced. Don't we use humour in a different way?

**ME** To me, humour is really a kind of anger management.

Michael Elmgreen and Ingar Dragset are an artist duo based in Berlin, Germany. *Elmgreen & Dragset: This Is How We Rise Our Tongue*, supported by Phillips, is on view at Whitechapel Gallery, London until 10th January 2019