

Lament for a lost pool

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EXHIBITION

Michael Elmgreen and Ingar Dragset's new installation is an elegy for a civic space that never really was, they tell **Ben Luke**

THE Whitechapel Gallery has undergone many changes in its long history but none as surprising as this. The Evening Standard can now reveal that artists Michael Elmgreen and Ingar Dragset's much-anticipated autumn installation has transformed the gallery into a disused swimming pool on the brink of reinvention as a luxury spa.

When I meet the Scandinavian duo (Elmgreen, 57, was born in Copenhagen, Denmark; Dragset, 49, in Trondheim, Norway), the installation is in its early stages. But already the Whitechapel's lower gallery is shape-shifting into a light-filled yet forlorn early Edwardian public pool. The pair's sculptures will be dotted here and throughout the galleries in a show titled *This Is How We Bite Our Tongue*. Upstairs is what they call *The Chapel*, a brooding, gloomy negative to the daylight pool below, sardonically reflecting on contemporary masculinity. Even incomplete, it's a spectacular show.

The pair are "encouraging the space to perform new roles," Elmgreen says. "I feel the ground floor [the pool] is playing along," responds Dragset, with a laugh. "Yes, it really wanted to become a public pool," Elmgreen adds. Dragset explains the way they work: "You come in, you analyse the space, you get inspired by the architecture and interior, the surroundings, what this space means in the local environment, and then ideas come up."

The Whitechapel and its environs proved to be fertile ground for the artists to further develop long-explored political themes. "Even since 2007 when I moved to London, Aldgate has been so changed, all these hideous glass towers have come up in that period," Elmgreen says. Dragset points out that the Whitechapel is "from a time when it was a civic ideal to bring art and culture to poorer areas, in 1901 — so it

springs out of the same period when public pools also became popular".

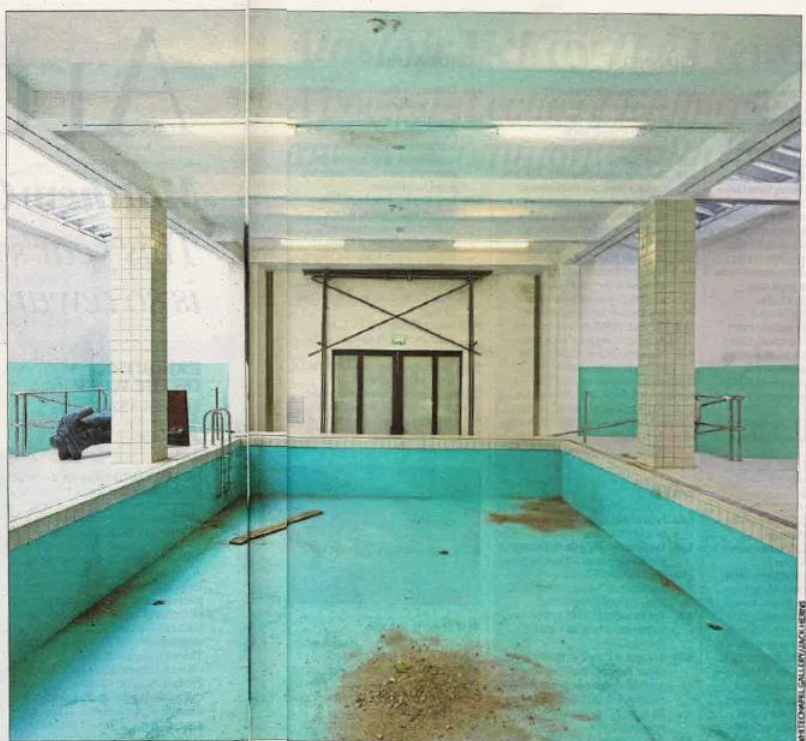
The pool is a contemporary fabric, its fictional history told on a wall plaque philanthropic funding. Fifties refurbishment, inspiration for David Hockney's swimming pool paintings, peak years in the Seventies. And then losing its funding "in the last year that Margaret Thatcher was Prime Minister," Elmgreen says, before being squatted, raided, abandoned and, finally, it was sold to be an "art hotel and resort" in 2016, during Boris Johnson's last year as Mayor.

It's a long history but Elmgreen and Dragset are addressing acute issues: the closure of civic spaces due to government cuts; not just public pools but most notably libraries — the Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy said last year that 449 UK libraries had closed since 2012.

The duo see the exhibition as a follow-up to their 2006 *Welfare Show* at the Serpentine, partly a critique of the welfare state but also reflecting "how important it was, in order to take care of people who were not that fortunate, or make a society that would be for everyone," Elmgreen says. "Since then, it's over."

Johnson's fictional sell-off of the Whitechapel Pool is particularly pointed. "A lot of what we see around us, all the sell-offs to Qataris, were happening when he was Mayor," Elmgreen says. "That was easy money in the pocket, for a very short time. It's like cocaine in your pants when it's cold; it warms nicely in the beginning and then it becomes really bad."

The duo clearly despise the former Foreign Secretary, who drew their ire when, in 2011, they won the commission for the Fourth Plinth for their work featuring a golden boy on a wooden rocking horse. Turning up late, Johnson



made a characteristically glib speech about the work symbolising Britain's quest for Olympic gold; Elmgreen publicly corrected him. "It was so arrogant and so disrespectful," he says. Joanna Lumley unveiled the work in 2012, avoiding more of Johnson's inane bumbings.

The pair are now based in Berlin. Inevitably, they're appalled by the Brexit vote and the rise of populist politics. "We're really sad to lose you, obviously," Dragset says. "And we don't understand what's going on — in

Europe, as well. Why did this happen?" Both note a difference in London since he vote. "There's not the same optimism," says Elmgreen.

Swimming pools have long reflected sense of hope in the duo's work. Pools are "a place where people dared to bow their bodies in front of each other... where people actually could socialise, different classes, to a certain degree at least, and interact in a freer way." So the empty Whitechapel pool summons an elegiac mood. The work of Elmgreen and Dragset is often charac-

Empty dream: Elmgreen and Dragset's fictional swimming pool at the Whitechapel Gallery tells the sad story of civic demise in London

terised as ironic and satirical but Elmgreen says that's not intended. From our conversation it's clear that their work reflects sincere concerns and an underlying anger. "Humour is a way of dealing with it, to make it bearable, not to cry or scream," Elmgreen says. He pauses for a moment. "But f**k, we mean it!"

© Elmgreen & Dragset: This Is How We Bite Our Tongue is at the Whitechapel Gallery, E1 (whitechapelgallery.org), from Thursday to Jan 13