

No Fear: Conversation with Elmgreen & Dragset

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Michael Elmgreen and Ingar Dragset employ performance, installation, design, and corrupted advertising to subvert collective sensibilities. They come at the objects and assumptions that rationalize our lives with an adolescent energy, protesting against the moroseness of maturity and refusing to surrender to the status quo. For them, commodity-driven capitalism, entirely absorbed by the newness of now, amounts to a fast-forward fossilization of material culture that destroys the environment and public space, reducing common areas to privately held fiefdoms. Artists-cum-activists, they are in no way inhibited by standard procedures or protocols. Driven by a desire to reach outsiders looking in, they positively vandalize social structures in an effort to force us to think of something better.

Rajesh Punj: You began your collaboration with performance. How did you go about incorporating other disciplines?

Michael Elmgreen: For the first year, we only performed, and then we decided to try making sculptures as well, because we wanted to give audiences a surprise. At the time, we were doing a lot of bodily performances. For instance, we painted a gallery for 12 hours with 300 liters of white paint, and then we washed down the paint, so it would fall as a thick layer from the walls to the floor, something like a weird, slightly crazy snowscape.

RP: Was that about endurance?

ME: Partly, yes. It was also about questioning the white cube and the idea of the space being neutral because it is painted white. Of course, it isn't that, so we thought, "Why don't we add some more white material to it and try to make it start moving?"

SCULPTURE COURTESY: ARTISTS' MARKET GALLERY / PORTMAN SQUARE, LONDON

Installation view of The White Chapel Pool, 2016.

■ elmgreen & dragset

RP: Did you record any of it?

ME: We didn't care much about documentation at the time. People came and looked at it, at us, and they could come for 12 hours if they wanted. Many would leave and come back to see if we had collapsed. We did it without any break, but we were fitter then. That was the start of our collaboration. Ingar came from performance and theater, and I came from a writing background and had done a bit of visual art.

RP: So, neither of you went to art school?

Ingar Dragset: No, we accidentally landed in this world.

RP: How do you feel about doing such scaled-up and talked-about works now? *The Whitechapel Pool*, which transformed London's Whitechapel Gallery into a moribund swimming pool littered with debris, generated a lot of attention.

ME: It almost makes us have a little less respect for the institution, and the making and framing of an exhibition. When we come into a room, even if it is an amazing institution, we are constantly asking ourselves how we can transform it into something that changes its identity for a time. Maybe that has to do with us not being brought up in a museum environment. We never take an art space for granted.

RP: I think of a time at art school when I stopped producing anything, because I was overwhelmed by what had gone before. It was as if I couldn't contribute anything more, which led to reading and writing as a substitute.

ME: I don't want to sound anti-intellectual or anti-educational, but if you watch children, they have an eagerness to question everything, and they are curious. They have the courage to ask, "Why is it like that?" Somehow the educational system hasn't managed to cut it off completely. It is very sad that many adults stop asking these kinds of questions, because they are very important.

We read books and theory, and, of course, we are interested in the academic context of our work, but that can also be very standardizing. An academic perception in any field can become routine. Douglas Crimp was a big inspiration for us because when he was writing *On the Museum's Ruins*, he spoke about how you get it completely wrong that Richard Serra is a macho artist because he works with big steel plates. Macho is not



Elmgreen & Dragset in
The Whitechapel Pool,
2010.

defined by material—we would be so lucky if we were seen as macho for melting down steel. It is all about your attitude and your approach to whatever material you have, which led us to do larger scale installations such as the swimming pool.

Back then, there was something of a perception that gay artists had to be more poetic, that they needed to work in very soft materials. And we thought, "Hell, no way." I was not going to be boxed in like that and buy into the stereotypes. So, we did *Dug Down Gallery* (1998) in Iceland, building a whole gallery as a hole in the ground—to show that you can have sexuality and that you can actually feel something in the landscape.

RP: I am intrigued by your adherence to an amateur or adolescent approach. Is that the essential impetus for your looking at everything anew?

ID: In spite of the accomplished finish in the diving boards and road signs, we still try to involve a level of amateurishness in our work, and we like trying new things, which keeps the freshness that I think is important. It can be moving into new areas, like opera or theater productions, but also not being afraid of architectural and public space, which requires talking to all kinds of people.

We made a list of all the jobs involved in making a public art project. You have to be everything from a landscape architect to a politician, to a fundraiser. You need to be a psychologist to deal with people's crazy reactions, and you have to be incredibly practical in terms of technical solutions and engineering, asking, "Is it possible, not possible?" What keeps it very interesting to be an artist today is that you need so many different kinds of people around you at any one time to provide information and advice.

ME: The other side of being an artist is akin to a cat-and-mouse situation. In order not to be cornered, you need to move really fast; and if you are cornered, you need a good set of tricks to escape, so the cat that is the system doesn't eat you. With *Whitechapel*, it was great to do a show that we felt had sufficient narrative the whole way through. That started with a complete environment. Then, there were smaller works on the stairwell, leading into a room that was very art historically referential, but also interactive, where you could sit and drink Scottish whisky. They didn't expect people to actually do it in the gallery, but they did, which is great.



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT:
Pregnant White Man, 2017.
Aluminum, stainless steel, lacquer, and clothes, 180 x 45 x 68 cm.

Too Heavy, 2017.
Rock, aluminum cast and lacquer paint, trampolines, aluminum cast, steel, and fabric, rock, 170 x 170 cm.

One Day, 2017.
Boy, aluminum cast, matte white paint, shorts, socks, and shoes; rifle, aluminum cast and matte white paint, and vitrine: glass, wood, and matte black lacquer, boy, 104 x 40 x 40 cm; vitrine: 65 x 145 x 20 cm.

Capitalism Will Collapse From Within, 2005.
Canvas, paint, stainless steel safe door, and combination lock; painting, 120 x 200 cm, safe: 90 x 90 cm.



LEIF HANSEN

RP: People are never certain of the level of interaction they can have with your works. Do you enjoy exploiting that conundrum?

ME: You shouldn't do too much to guide people. The action should be an open invitation, and then you get the surprise. For us, it is important not to work in only one formal language. We are pretty confident in our staging, but we want to test other kinds of exhibitions and environments, as with the swimming pool, which was a brilliant idea.

RP: Is it about confidence? You always appear to pull it off.

ME: For us, it is about no fear, not confidence. I have always liked uncertainty, because it reminds me of our beginning as artists. Too much certainty is not positive or productive. It is about not fearing to fail. The art world has become so professionalized—failure is regarded as an incredibly bad thing. The whole world shouldn't be oppressed by perfection.

RP: Do you have works that you come back to, ideas that you continue to explore?

ID: Our 2018 show at Galerie Perrotin in Paris was very much about us looking back to early works from the late '90s. The diving boards, the pools, and *Queer Bar/Powerless Structures, Fig. 221* (2018) were all versions of existing works.

ME: We made a square version of the bar in 1998, which was about changes in social encounters, exactly when chat websites and social media started and people didn't go out as much. It was also about exclusion, because you can't be a guest at that bar; the bar stools are trapped on the serving side. If there is one thing we don't appreciate about the art world, it is the VIP culture; it is entirely obnoxious, with its fear of mingling with the crowd and the filtering of people. With our Scandinavian backgrounds, we can't get used to that.

RP: But you must experience it all the time.

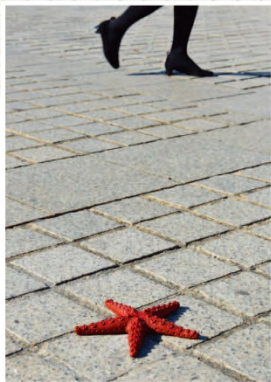
ID: The thing is, we were not always able to get into the after parties for our own openings—for instance, a very fancy party at one of the first Art Basel Miami shows. **ME:** Some posh party organizers were running the event, and they had brutal bouncers. Emmanuel Perrotin was down in the basement with no reception on his cell phone, and we were hanging out with friends in the gallery until quite late. When we arrived at our party, the bouncers said, "No, you can't come in."

elmgreen & dragset ■

12 Hours of White Paint/Powerless Structures, Fig. 15, 1997.

Performance with white paint (160 liters), aluminum paint cans, painting equipment, and water hose with high-pressure gun, dimensions variable.





To Whom It May Concern,
2015.
100 stars in bronze, steel, and patina, dimensions variable. 2 views of work as installed in Place Vendôme, Paris.

We remembered that party, and it became a work. For "Too Late," our first show with Victoria Miro in London, we re-created the interior of a club that, for the final audience, looked completely trashed, like it was after hours. We had first invited a huge group of guys to come and have fun with us and enjoy a real party before the opening. This essentially meant that the VIP guests would come too late, and they would see all the empty beer bottles and cigarette butts—all the mess in and around the sculptures. Anyone who attended the private view was in the second round of guests, and we thought it was good that they had the feeling of not being the priority for once, of missing something in spite of wanting to be there.

RP: Many of your figures appear to represent all of humankind. They appear to be someone and no one at the same time. Do they represent human problems?

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ME: The frightened boy in the fireplace is very much about masculinity. He is linked to the small boy on the gold rocking horse that we put on Trafalgar Square's Fourth Plinth (*Powerless Structures, Fig. 101, 2012*), which was in stark contrast to the grubby war heroes on their black horses. It is very much about the problems of traditional masculine roles, which may be more present now than before. Gun violence is a masculine problem. The sculptures are very much about learning to look. **ID:** There is also an element of voyeurism.

RP: The almost machine-like perfection of the diving boards invites us to think about aesthetics that we don't notice in everyday things. Good design and fabrication are clearly satisfying for you both.

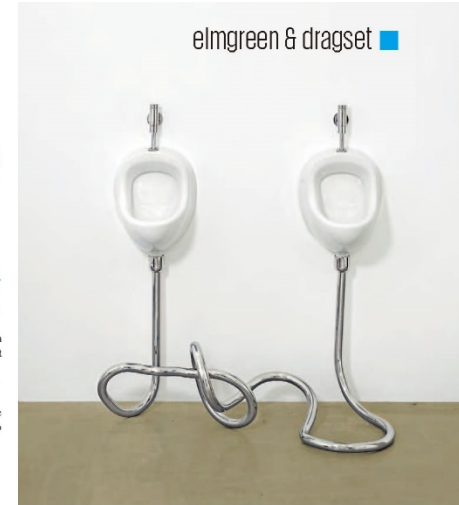
ME: Most people take materials and design for granted today because we are overloaded with objects in our everyday lives. There is too much on offer to feel that an object can be precious or beautiful anymore. People just buy, buy, buy. When they are bored of one thing, they are on to the next. Electronic gadgets are a good example. You get looked on having the latest version, but you are not amazed anymore, like when the first iPhone came out. It is very much about making people relate to objects in a different way. The street sign *Adaptation, Fig. 5 (2016)* is about how we don't think about the ways that we control our behavior according to traffic regulations. Stripes on the road and street signs have become a global language, more or less the same all over the world. It is a relatively new phenomenon that we control our behavior according to such signs.

RP: Everything that you talk about concerns civilizing the individual, controlling behavior so that we are more sane than savages.

ID: The more rules we have, the less people are allowed to think for themselves. That is also what these works are about. We need to consider ourselves, our behavior, and take more responsibility. When you have a large number of rules, you create more "rule-breakers." Conversely, that can create more criminality. Petty crime is a bigger offense than it used to be because we impose all of these regulations that generate confusion in society.

RP: It's ironic, these rules are intended to clarify how we should behave.

ID: People don't want to take care of each other, of themselves even. It stopped meaning something.



elmgreen & dragset ■

ME: If you have a cigarette outside, there is a guy in a fluorescent vest pushing you behind a yellow stripe, because you can't smoke beyond that line. We are supposed to go out and feel free and have fun. It is crazy—not even when I had a birthday party as a kid was it so controlled.

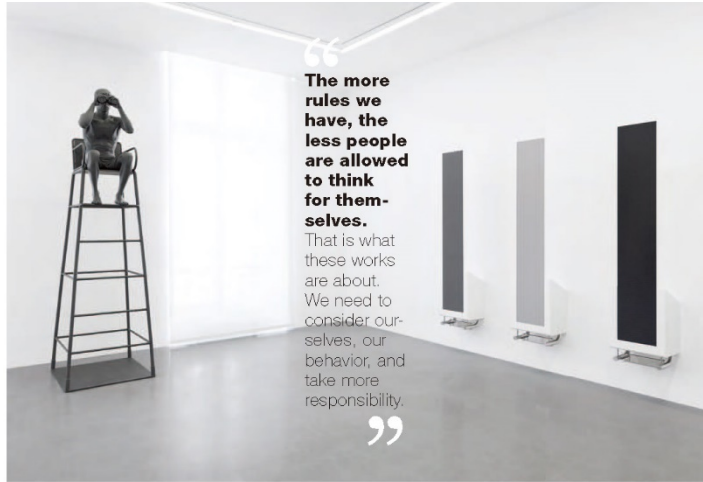
RP: And yet this is supposed to be a time of great freedom.

ID: This is why we are so interested in public space and shared space—which takes us back to *The Whitechapel Pool* and the decline of public spaces and amenities as popular environments for social exchange. The degeneration is also about how people appear to accept any takeover by private companies, by advertising and entertainment—I don't know why people don't seem to want to fight against it. Putting an artwork in a public space makes people more

Gay Marriage,
2010.
Porcelain urinal, taps, and stainless steel tubing, 110 x 43 x 123 cm.



Exhibition view of "Elmgreen & Dragset," 2016.



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aware of it being a shared space, a civic space. The shared space becomes a collective place to vent your frustrations, irritations, and likes, which also brings levels of disobedience, much more so than when you add another café or put up a billboard. In a way, this makes us optimistic that people do care.

ME: We have seen how easily it can change for the better, and for the worse. How do these structures come about? They are there because we agree on them. We vote for the politicians and political systems that create them. They function because we follow these rules. The minute we discuss them, and begin questioning them, and apply our common sense, they could work to our advantage.

South Korea is a good recent example. Tens of thousands of people went peacefully to the streets for months to protest a dictatorial president, Park Geun-hye. They were very organized, incredibly polite, and she was eventually ousted, arrested, and sentenced. They voted in a more democratic president, who immediately tried to address the country's

crippling corruption. So, there are situations where democracy does function.

RP: But are you genuinely optimistic about the future, when so many of your works critique the status quo?
ID: Making art is an optimistic act in itself. If we didn't care, we would just do nothing. We might have topped ourselves otherwise.

RP: Are you constantly critiquing the system from within?

ID: People ask if we are part of the system that we critique, and we obviously have to say yes. We are all part of a capitalist reality, and we cannot escape it. We have to react to the world around us. You shouldn't be naive, you shouldn't be accepting of everything. For us, being critical is about studying every aspect of our reality.

ME: The problem at the moment is that people can become so disillusioned that they start to become extremist, mostly toward the right of the political spectrum. But there is real progress in different parts of the world. It is important to have a more varied

picture so you can handle the problems and challenges of the political climate in a better way, because if it is all just "bad" then you instantly become depressed and dysfunctional.

RP: It can often feel that way though, when social media and television appear to indulge solely in negative news.

ME: Our generation can't handle the constant flow of information because we didn't grow up with it. Kids are much better at filtering, at being more skeptical and more relaxed, while our brains break down and become blurred.

RP: How does scale come into play now that you're established artists?

ME: If they expect us to do something small, we will definitely do something big. At Place Vendôme in Paris, a lot of artists have tried to compete with a huge phallic column celebrating the empire, but it has never really worked. So, for *To Whom It May Concern* (2015), we thought we would go really small, and we scattered

100 bronze starfish all over the plaza. People became involved. You had kids going crazy with them, tourists photographing them, and macho bankers trying to step on them to see if they could break them. Seeing something curious shows a lot about human behavior. It was much more interesting to make a series of tiny interventions and do it in a different way.

RP: I am interested in how you see space as a facilitator. Does the space determine what you do, or do you decide what goes into the space?

ID: At Whitechapel Gallery, it was very much about the space itself, and that inspired the swimming pool installation. There are certain features of the gallery that could be in a pool space, like the skylights, the swinging wooden doors, the columns, and the longish space itself. We integrated them into the pool architecture.

But it was also the function of the space at Whitechapel, the area in which it's located, and how it interacts or doesn't with its surroundings and the people around it. We wanted to comment on the gentrification of the area. The banks appear to be moving closer and closer, and the glass buildings feel like a wave that will eventually swallow Whitechapel. Then, there is the gentrification of Brick Lane, with trendy Shoreditch coming closer as well.

We felt it was important to make viewers aware of the significance of the civic in residential areas like this, and for that we needed to find another kind of space than the gallery itself, so the pool became our temporary focus. We conflated a fictional history of the swimming pool in Whitechapel with the real history of Whitechapel as a gallery, which opened in 1901, gifted by a wealthy businessman who, together with others, decided to bring art, culture, and education to the poor. There seems to be less and less of that kind of philanthropy today, and public facilities are closing down.
ME: Almost 450 public libraries have closed in the U.K. since 2012.

ID: Even football pitches are privatized now. Adults pay to play, and kids hang outside, hoping that they will finish a little early and give them that last 10 or 20 minutes to play. It is so sad—play, sports, and fun are basic. Ways of being together are no longer possible without people having to pay to go to restricted spaces, like museums for instance. People go to Tate Modern to hang out.

ME: Because they have dreadful apartments. ■

Credit: © Elmgreen & Dragset, 2016