

Thoughts From Elmgreen and Dragset That Make You Think Twice About Art And Bangkok

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Michael Elmgreen and Ingar Dragset are no strangers to Bangkok. Making their artistic mark in the Kingdom as early as in 2002 with a group exhibition *Beyond Paradise: Nordic Artists Travel East* and then a solo site-specific installation, *Dislocated Oriental* in 2008 followed by a few private visits and lectures, the city is hardly a place they would feel disoriented by.

This year, the duo is back in town for the Bangkok Art Biennale 2018, and they've built what they call "swimming pool" at the pier of the East Asiatic Building to mark their return. Titled *'Zero'*, the exhibition follows their characteristic approach to art — minimal, thought-provoking, and a bit of a humorous jab at existing social and cultural issues.

We sat down with them at *It's Happened To Be A Closet* for a quick chat about their views on social concerns, living in the city, and how art can inspire change.

Where have our public spaces gone?



For their exhibit in the Bangkok Art Biennale 2018, Elmgreen & Dragset created 'Zero', a public pool-shaped structure at the East Asiatic Building.

An aspect of the duo's work is a critique of gentrification in large cities, where public institutions are increasingly closed down and turned into commercial developments. For their project in London's Whitechapel gallery — titled '[*Elmgreen & Dragset: This Is How We Bite Our Tongue*](#)' — they created an abandoned swimming pool, signifying the gradual loss of public spaces.

Their exhibit for the Bangkok Art Biennale, '*Zero*,' poses a similar question. "You see this in Bangkok as well — there are less and less public spaces. There are less spaces where you don't have to pay money to get in. Whether it used to be a library, or a football field, or a public swimming pool, more and more public spaces get privatised in our society. That's the development you have everywhere in the world at the moment, not just here.



'Zero', lit up at night.

"Our exhibition for the Bangkok Art Biennale 2018 is a public pool because it's out there where everyone can go. There are very few here, and again, this is something that was brought to Thailand by Western culture. Swimming pools weren't here originally — Thai people would swim in the river or the canals."

Why the East Asiatic Building? "When we looked around for different venues last year, we liked the East Asiatic Building a lot because it's a normal public space that's next to the Chao Phraya. As you can see, the swimming pool is just a big hole, so you have to look through it and see that it's filled with water from the river, which is where Thai people really used to swim. This is just an artificial pool, it's just the *frame* of the pool, and you see the river through it."

How much effort actually goes into a work of art?



Michael Elmgreen, Ingar Dragset and Prof Dr Apinan Poshyananda working behind the scenes on 'Zero'.

"You know with anything like this, even though it looks ready-made, it's all designed and crafted very carefully. Even the ladder on our exhibit is handmade. And because it's all new in a way, you can't calculate it — you have to just try things out.

For 'Zero', we had to find a system where you could balance the structure so it wouldn't fall even when there are strong winds. It's made of stainless steel, but we couldn't make a base deep down because it's a pier, and the pier's not that steep. So as a solution to this problem, there is a big steel plate under the base that is very heavy and keeps the entire structure in place so that it doesn't fall. We worked with very good fabricators here, so it's all done locally — both the static engineering and the fabrication. There's a lot of trial and error from the fabricators side, so it was very fantastic in a way."

Private museums, even ones owned by luxury brands, can be good given they have good programme.



Fondazione Prada. Image: Courtesy of fondazioneprada.org.

Elmgreen & Dragset believe the success of art galleries and contemporary art museums depend strongly on the programmes created for the space.

“The Fondazione Prada in Milan is really fantastic because it’s done with such care and the architecture is really wonderful. Prada as a brand is more in the background — they even use a different logo and you don’t see the original Prada logo anywhere. The program can also be very critical towards fashion or the industry. Fondation Louis Vuitton in Paris is a little different because they really have the logo and the brand image in your face. It’s more perfumed, it’s more *bling*. There are a lot more spectacular shows and not so many critical shows, so it seems to be less about art, and more about marking in a way and then you start to feel a bit icky.

It doesn't hurt to keep asking questions.



Ingar Dragset

Witty, playful and tinged with a dark humour, Elmgreen & Dragset's art often tackles issues that can otherwise be difficult to talk about. They don't see their approach so much as a critique, but more as a way of asking questions.

"When you are a kid, you ask a lot of questions. Silly questions, but many of these questions are actually very good. 'Mum, why is it like this? Why do they do it like that? Why does it look like this?' When we grow older, many of us stop asking these questions, we're just like 'oh yeah, that's how it is'. Sometimes as an artist, it's good to get back to that state of mind where you're like 'what if it was different? Why is it looking like this? Why do we organise our cities like that? Why is the design looking the way it does, and how could we change it?'

Another thing also is that, a big thing in our society today is we try to do the same thing as what has already been done. There's not so much curiosity or innovativity. We need to constantly ask questions about how we can make things better, in order to believe in the future."

The Bangkok Art Biennale is a promising step forwards for the Thai art scene.

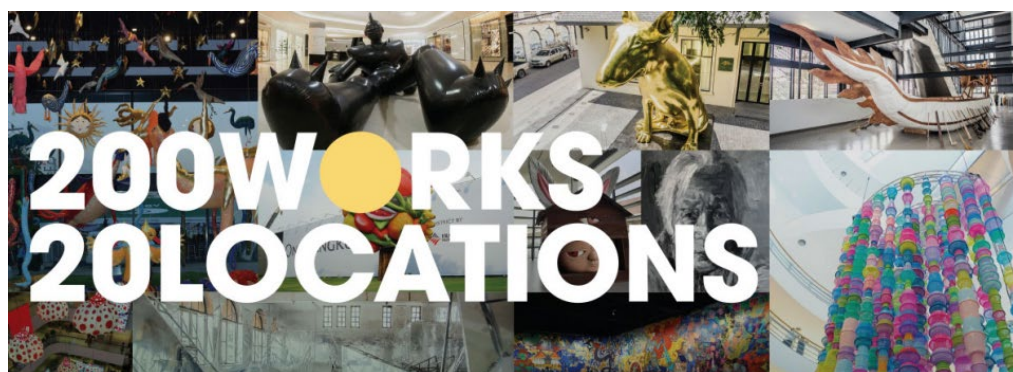


Image: Courtesy of bkkartbiennale.com.

"The Biennale is a very good place to start discovering a lot of Thai art. The great thing is that you can have this international exchange and you discover each other and meet people. When we first started over 20 years ago, there wasn't really a place you could go to discover cutting-edge art in the Scandinavian art scene. Then slowly people started showing an interest and a few institutions started holding exhibitions that were bringing in international audiences. That was when artists like us got an opportunity to show our work to those outside, and that's what a Biennale can contribute.

It brings people in from the outside to discover talents in the local scene, so the local art scene can become stronger. It also becomes more common for cities to have different types of galleries, and then artists and galleries can also become more daring in their approach."

Are cities giving people what they really need?



Michael Elmgreen, Prof Dr Apinan Poshyananda and Ingar Dragset in Bangkok.

“Hopefully we can also inspire some developers in cities and city governments to think about treating our public areas in a different way that is better for the citizens, and not just about trying to make the most profit out of the square centimetre in our cities.

Maybe we can persuade them to think about what the people actually need, because the city needs the people — without them, it’s not a city anymore. When you start making cities so not possible to live in, people will start to move away. That’s why it’s really important that local governments and developers start to think more about how we do this — make the city more human for people, and a different population will grow. We should start thinking about things like, how do we make things nicer for ethnic minorities? How do we make it nicer for children? *How do we make it safer for women who are scared of getting attacked at night?*”

Change *is* possible, and art can become a source of hope.



Michael Elmgreen

As artists, Elmgreen & Dragset hope to inspire change. "It's pressing to give people hope that there is the possibility of change. The structures we have in our society, or in our art world or in our culture only exist because we are either too lazy to change them or because we have given up hope. For us, doing our small city statements all around the world is to show that you can actually change something — at least a little bit at a time. When we change an art institution — say, the way it looks or the way it functions — for a period of time, we show the world 'hey, see, we could change this. You, in the art institution, could also change this.'

No one should have the right to dictate how Thai artists express themselves.



Michael Elmgreen and Ingar Dragset

“Some people from outside describe the Thai art scene as too ‘self-censoring’. We find it a little bit rude to describe a whole scene like that, because you have people here who are critical towards political matters, but maybe you also have a different culture. People speak different languages in different places and culturally, Thai culture is a bit more soft-spoken than some other cultures, where it’s very much about confrontation. Of course, you would speak with the language that you come from — you *are* what you come from.

Confrontational complaining has become the dominant language in contemporary art, so people kind of say, 'oh but in Thailand, they speak in a different language. They should be more critical'. Who are you to tell people from Thailand how they should speak? That's so imperialistic, in a way."

Elmgreen & Dragset will be exhibiting next in Seoul and Hong Kong. To find out more, visit their elmgreen-dragset.com. For more information on the Bangkok Art Biennale 2018 visit bkkartbiennale.com.

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