

# Edinburgh Art Festival 2018: Elmgreen & Dragset

An upturned swimming pool outside the Rockefeller Center; a diving board in (and partially out of) Denmark's Louisiana Museum of Modern Art; a Prada store in the middle of the Texan desert. **Michael Elmgreen** and **Ingar Dragset** clearly want to subvert our preconceptions, to make us think – but also to make us laugh. At the Scottish National Gallery's Hawthornden Theatre last week they delivered this year's Edinburgh Art Festival Keynote Lecture. It was engaging; it was funny; it was brilliant.



Elmgreen & Dragset, 2016  
Photographer Elmar Vestner

**Elmgreen & Dragset** have worked together as an artistic duo since 1995. Neither has formal training in art (one started as a poet, the other studied theatre);

‘As outsiders, we questioned some of the conventions.’

And one of the first conventions they questioned was why every modern art gallery was white.

‘We thought making exhibitions would be a celebration.’

But when they first visited New York City, they found galleries unwelcoming, minimalist and exclusive;

'You would go in and be faced by a girl or a guy typing at a desk, all you could see was their eyes above the parapet.'

One of the key themes in their work is the institutional space; how does it work, and perhaps more importantly, how does it influence the way people think, and behave? In 1997, for *12 Hours of White Paint/Powerless Structures, Fig 15*, they spent twelve hours using water hoses to apply 300 gallons of white paint to the walls of an already 'white cube' gallery. Every time they had coated the walls, they washed the paint off and started again 'until the whole gallery was a blurred and messy glacial landscape.'

Why did they do this? They are reluctant to give definite explanations because they don't want to influence people's own interpretations, ('We get big surprises when people interpret our sculptures; sometimes they are far cleverer than we are.') but one view is that, by removing and reapplying the paint, they hoped to show that the white cube is not the neutral background that some galleries would claim it to be. White walls are a choice, the white cube is a vulnerable institution; minimalism is used as a signifier of 'good taste', of a certain aesthetic that limits social interaction and tells people to behave in a certain, reverential, way. You're not meant to laugh.

In Humlebaek, the diving board sticking out of the Louisiana Museum (*Powerless Structures, Fig. 11*) seems to invite one to leap into the Øresund Sound below – except that it doesn't, the window glass is still there, and it's a very long way down to the water. The board looks familiar, but it is out of context, it can't operate as we expect it to, and as such has lost its accepted meaning. We are (deliberately) confused.

Outside Valentine, Texas, *Prada Marfa* looks like a fashion

store beside Highway 90; but it's a store that never opens, a *trompe l'oeil*. It originally contained real Prada goods, chosen by Miuccia Prada herself. When *Prada Marfa* appeared in 2005, it got a lukewarm reception. Then Instagram arrived, and now it's one of Elmgreen & Dragset's most famous works. The people of Valentine have warmed to it (especially as it attracts tourists to local businesses) – volunteers even look after it – and when the local authority thought about knocking it down, there was so much support for it that they had to leave it be.

As their fame grew, Elmgreen & Dragset were invited to seminars, many of which considered how more people could be persuaded to engage with art. These seminars were, ironically, always held behind closed doors.

'We wanted', says Dragset, 'to break through, to engage with real people and find out what they really thought.'

So they developed more projects; a sunken gallery (which became a late night party venue) in a museum park in Reykjavik (*Dug Down Gallery, Powerless Structures #45*), a ladder from a ground floor gallery into an upstairs neighbour's kitchen in Milan (the neighbour, having been unhappy about their activity in setting up the gallery below, loved the idea and collaborated with them in their installation), a clinical waiting room in which the number on the ticket machine never changes (*It's the Small Things in Life That Really Matter, Blah, Blah, Blah*). Themes of isolation, exclusion and alienation are explored. They have said (in an interview with Ellen Himelfarb, *Wallpaper*, September 2014) that 'the exclusion of sadness from artwork functions like denial.'

They enjoy transforming museum spaces, showing their work in quite different settings so that the viewer is freed from the social constraints of the standard gallery. In Korea they turned Plateau, Samsung Museum of Art, into an airport

(*Aéroport Mille Plateaux*) but one in which signs lead nowhere and nothing is as it seems, so that every attempt to 'get somewhere' is thwarted. Their study of the work of the philosopher Gilles Deleuze ('he's impenetrable but very interesting') led them to see airports as huge social spaces, but also non-spaces, places of waiting and transition. And airports do, of course, make us feel disconnected; stuck in them for any length of time, we start to lose our bearings, we feel detached.

In New York's meat packing district ('before it became gentrified') the artists found that the basement of the Bohemian Foundation looked like an underground station, so they created an 'abandoned', fictive one, (*End Station*) adding narrative layers with the help of graffiti artists and taggers. Visitors were disoriented – should their behaviour fit a gallery or a station? How does a station affect behaviour differently from a gallery, and why?

In the UK, Elmgreen & Dragset are perhaps best known for their sculpture for the Fourth Plinth in Trafalgar Square, London. In 2012 they installed *Powerless Structures #101*, a boy on a rocking horse, a direct challenge to the war-honouring narratives of the incumbent statues of Nelson and George IV. They wanted, they say, to create a more positive image of masculinity, to honour the everyday battles of growing up. Boris Johnson, then mayor of London, told them they could not refer to the piece as an anti-war monument. 'We told Boris "it doesn't work like that in the art world".' Then they asked Joanna Lumley (not Boris) to declare the piece open – 'she was great fun.'

Later this year Elmgreen & Dragset will open a new exhibition *This Is How We Bite Our Tongue* at London's Whitechapel Gallery. Among other things, it promises 'an extraordinary new large-scale installation that meditates on the fate of civic space.'

The fate of civic space, and the social controls that come into play in increasingly private, exclusive spaces, are just some of the issues addressed in the work of these dynamic, challenging artists. As the keynote lecturers for the 2018 Edinburgh Art Festival, Elmgreen & Dragset encapsulate all that is valuable – and vital – about art in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Their work draws our attention to what is happening in the world, and in our lives as social beings; it heightens our awareness and stops us becoming numb. And it does all of this with extraordinary empathy and wit.

As Simon Groom (Director, Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art) remarked at the end of this inspiring afternoon,

‘It’s been a revelation.’

**Edinburgh Art Festival** is on now until 26 August 2018. Full details of all exhibitions and events can be found here: <https://edinburghartfestival.com/> or in brochures available at galleries and other venues throughout the city.

*This Is How We Bite Our Tongue* is at the [Whitechapel Gallery](#) (77-82 Whitechapel High St London E1 7QX) 27 September 2018 – 13 January 2019.