

HUBE

*Elmgreen & Dragset: After Dark*

Winter 2023

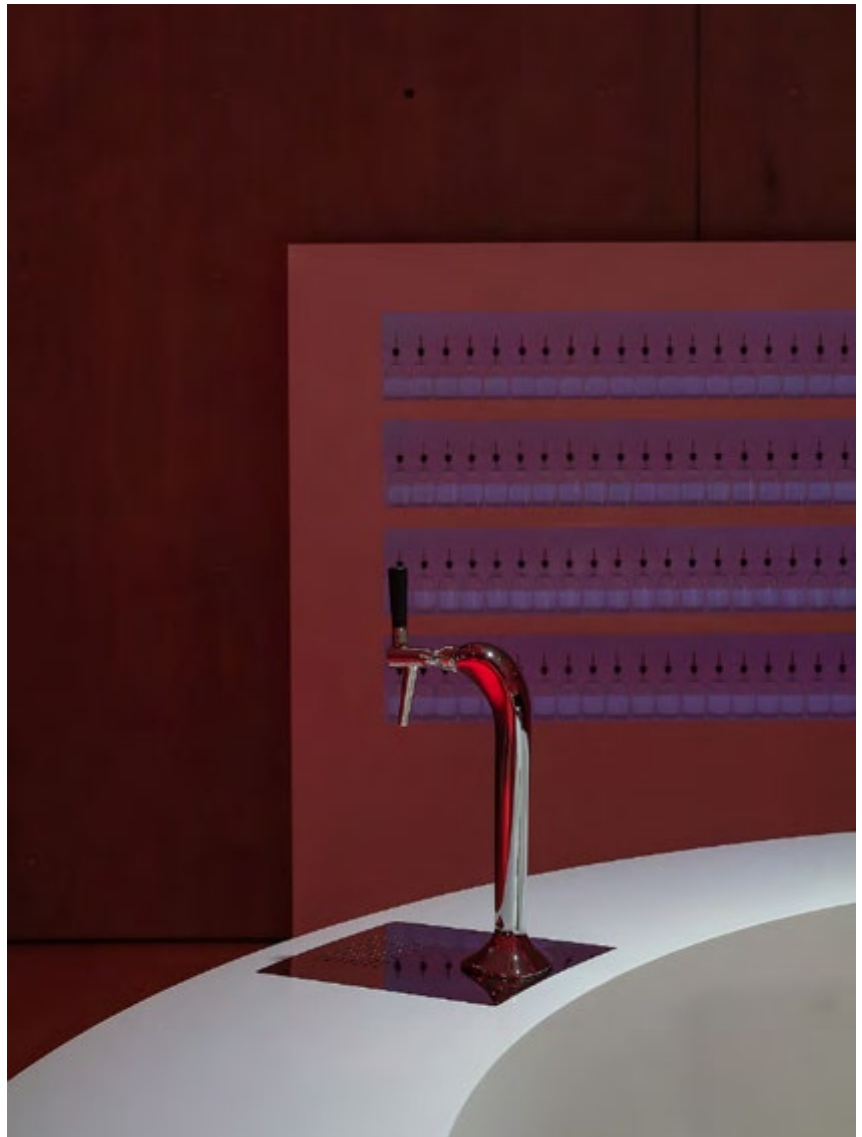
# ELMGREEN & DRAGSET

**After Dark**



**hube:** The verbal and the visual are two of the many languages used in art. Some might argue that spoken language is a limiting medium for communication; inaccuracies in translation, definitions, and terminology can obfuscate meaning and impede dialogue between the artist and the viewer. Others prefer visual language, arguing that it has more dimensions. How do you perceive the conflict between the verbal and the visual in your work?

**ELMGREEN & DRAGSET:** There doesn't necessarily need to be a conflict. For us, it's more about using the two separately. Our practice is based on dialogue, so without the verbal, we wouldn't get through the idea phase. We also need verbal communication in the making phase of the work, since we often collaborate with craftspeople and other specialists to realise our ideas. When it finally comes to the presentation phase, we agree that verbal communication should be turned down, or even off. The viewer should be given time and space to develop their own relationship with the artwork. But following this, the verbal might come in handy again, since many audience members like to learn more about artists' backgrounds, their thinking, the context of their work, and so on, in order to gain a deeper understanding of the artwork(s) they have encountered. Many artists hate to talk about their work, but for us, verbal communication is such a natural part of the process that a verbal follow-up comes quite easily. In general, we believe that information should be equally accessible to all members of the audience.



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Exhibition view, AFTER DARK  
By Art Matters, Hangzhou, China, 2022

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ELMGREEN & DRAGSET  
*The Touch*, 2011

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*All Dressed Up*, 2022





**h:** The human body has remained a site of artistic interest throughout history. It has also played an important role in your work. One of your recent figurative pieces, *What's Left?* (2021) was exhibited as part of *Useless Bodies?* at the Fondazione Prada in 2022. A statement about this hyperreal sculpture of a young man, who dangles from a wire with a balancing pole in his hand, says it can be interpreted as “a representation of a body struggling to find its role as a political actor or instrument of social change.” How do you think the concept of physicality might change in the next 100 years?

**E&D:** A hundred years is a long time. It is absolutely impossible to look that far into the future. What we do know is that biotech and infotech will merge to a much higher degree than we have seen so far. How long this process takes depends on a number of factors. Much of the technology is already there, but ethics and regulations, for example, can slow the process down. There's even commercial interest in stalling in order to mine the financial potential of what already exists. But with the recent COVID-19 pandemic, we have seen that things can change suddenly.

**h:** In the exhibition catalogue, Lisa Blackman speculates that the body will be reduced to a mere “data-bank available to be mined and exploited to realise potential.” Do you agree?

**E&D:** Yes, this is a possibility. We all know this. The current trend in going ‘off the grid’, moving to the countryside (at least partly), or not wanting to work (at least not full-time) is related to this.

**h:** Your work references the ideas of philosophers, architects, writers, sculptors, and artists such as Lina Bo Bardi, Thomas Vinterberg, Donald Judd, Kae Tempest, and others. You clearly dedicate a lot of your time to analysing the works of prominent thinkers. Do you seek to give visual form to philosophical ideas? Or can your art be seen as an intrusion of the visual into the field of philosophy?

**E&D:** Sometimes, we are directly inspired by philosophy or by academic research. Foucault's theories on power being a fluid notion inspired our series *Powerless Structures* in the '90s. Deleuze and Guattari made us look





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Exhibition view, AFTER DARK  
By Art Matters, Hangzhou, China, 2022



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ELMGREEN & DRAGSET, *Short Story*, 2020



at public space in a rhizomatic manner, as can be seen in our project *Aéroport Mille Plateaux* (2015) in Seoul. In that project and many others, sociologist Marc Augé's thinking around transitory 'non-places' has also been helpful. But it is not like we sit down and make illustrations of other people's ideas. It is more like these thoughts linger at the back of our minds, and combined with the mess that is our own brainwaves, the occasional composite idea comes out and materialises into its own thing. It does happen that such an idea brings about its own philosophical conundrum.

**h:** Hans Ulrich Obrist noted that over the past 20 years your work "has gone beyond the exhibition space". Do you see the metaverse as another possible exhibitional space for your art?

**E&D:** There is still so much unexplored territory in the physical world that we haven't found a deep fascination with the metaverse yet. So far, much of the metaverse seems to replicate a lot of real-world idiocy. But ideas can go anywhere, so we are not excluding operating within the metaverse over time.

**h:** The graphics and the technical tools available in existing metaverse prototypes can be likened to children's cartoons, in the sense that users rely purely on imagination and intuition to make sense of a new reality. What are your thoughts on this?

**E&D:** It might show that humans are still quite helpless and even sweet, and that the speedy shift towards a cyborg reality might still be a way off.

**h:** Let's suppose that humanity can create and implement the utopic virtual world described by tech giants, philosophers, and humanists. Do you think that artists will have more creative freedom there than they do in the physical world?

**E&D:** The metaverse is still created by humans so it will always be full of flaws and conflict. So no, we cannot imagine it as a much freer place than the physical world.

**h:** A transition to the metaverse is, to some extent, the acquisition of noncorporeal existence. How do you think the absence of a physical body in the virtual world might

**change the way we interact in the real world? Could it change our moral principles, aesthetic preferences, social needs, and relationships?**

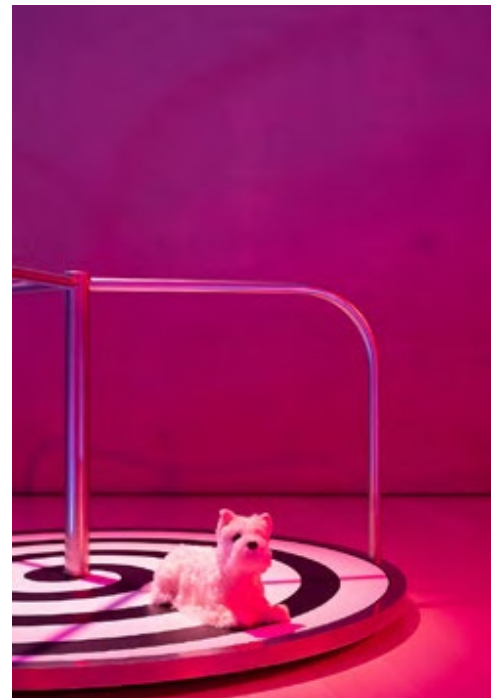
E&D: Since it is not actually possible to fully disembodiment oneself, reality will always catch up with you in the end.

**h: In every era, culture, and society, the body has been subjected to different aesthetic standards and norms. How do you perceive the range of ethical and aesthetic norms that exist today? Are there any boundaries that you won't cross?**

E&D: Luckily, aesthetic norms have expanded to include a much wider scope than ever before. And in the so-called Global West we are slowly starting to understand that our ethical ideals are deeply flawed from centuries of self-aggrandizing behaviour, believing we were the centre of the world. In our own artworks, we try to be careful not to tell other people's stories. We aim to keep both the subject matter and the visual aspects close to a lived reality, within a personal experiential field, through referencing artistic historical contexts that have directly influenced us. Take minimalism and realistic figuration, two recognisable forms in our practice: we use both in order to tell stories that are different from those normally associated with the classicism that pervades them. Our form of minimalism can be dirty, subversive, and non-functional, whereas our figurative works draw on the challenges of everyday life. There can be many queer and contradictory stories told also from a cis gay male perspective. But, of course, we like to be in dialogue with a much wider reality, to learn from other people's experiences, to see the world through different lenses. In that sense, both curating and editing thematic publications are essential as part of our overall practice. The publication for the *Useless Bodies?* exhibition had 37 text contributions by thinkers across a number of fields, from geographical locations around the world. To us, it is important that art is seen as a field of research in dialogue with other sciences.

**h: Would you agree to live in a world where aesthetics rule over ethics?**

E&D: Of course not.

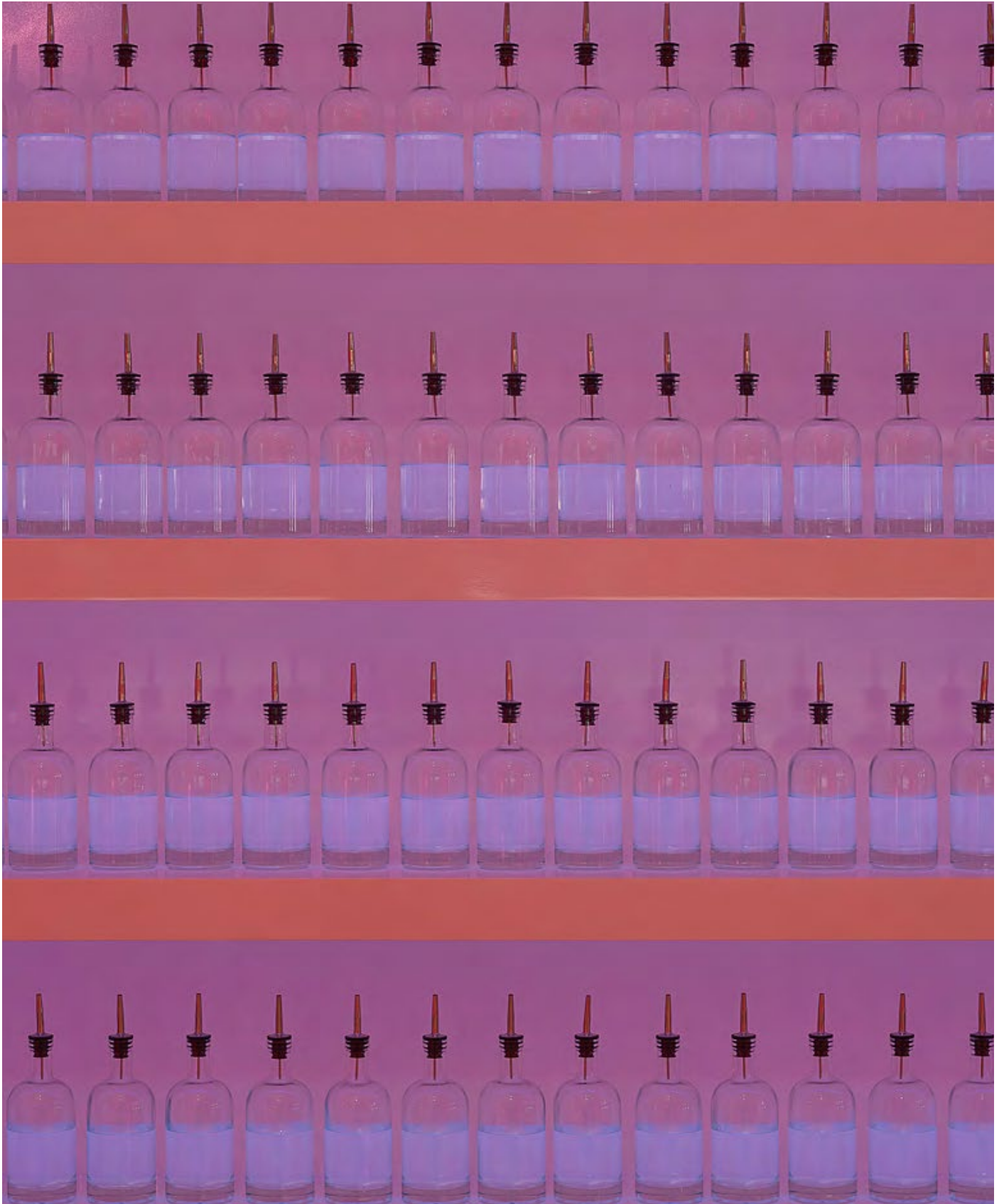


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ELMGREEN & DRAGSET  
*Social Media (Terrier)*, 2022

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*Monochrome Bottle Shelf*, 2022

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ELMGREEN & DRAGSET  
*On Target*, 2022





**h:** The obvious problem of our physical existence is the fragility of our bodies and the processes of ageing and death. It has been a key area of interest and debate amongst philosophers, scientists, and artists across time. Religions have offered us the concept of an immortal soul, but no one has come up with a concept to ensure an immortal body. Do you think that digital immortality can solve this problem or can it help us address it?

**E&D:** We don't believe in immortality. It might be that machines will feed—and feed off—machines at some point, but will they understand the concept of immortality? Doubtful.

**h:** In your work, you frequently recreate quotidian spaces—offices, homes, carparks, nightclubs—in gallery environments. Your 2022 exhibition at Fondazione Prada included a number of immersive environments: an abandoned office, a kitchen, a dining area, a spa, a science laboratory, a locker room, and even a morgue.

Architects use standard human proportions and needs as reference points for their designs. With the development of new technologies and virtual worlds, these parameters are changing (for example, sound-proofing and air conditioning may be obsolete in the metaverse), so architects now have the opportunity to ignore or rethink them. Do you think metaverse architecture of the future will change our perception of the physical world? How likely is it that the human body will cease to be the standard reference for the development of new architectural practices (in the context of the metaverse)?

**E&D:** Sometimes one has the feeling that there are already architectural practices that disregard the needs of the body! But that aside, in order to speak about an architecture completely disentangled from the body, we have to consider architecture in relation to the various institutions we have built up around the human life cycle. Let's take kindergartens, for instance. Can we imagine our kids spending their childhoods in meta childcare spaces? Or envision meta funerals for our dead? Since kids as well as adults are partly living out their fantasies through avatars of themselves online, such meta institutions are maybe not completely unimaginable. But we believe they would, at

most, continue to represent parallel universes—one influencing the other.

**h:** The processes of developing a creative concept and creating a work of art are often influenced by the external environment. When selling your artworks through commercial galleries, do you think about where they will end up being displayed?

**E&D:** It would be an almost impossible task to track what happens to one's works once they are sold. They can change hands, be resold, be destroyed, damaged, forgotten, altered... And there's the question: is an artwork more 'valuable' than, say, a song? A singer would never be able to control who listens to their music. Look at what happens at Trump rallies! We believe that our work stands for the opposite of conservative values, and hope that conservatives understand that we'd disapprove of their ideals. It should be easy to find out what we stand for: we frequently do talks and interviews. In order to be completely safe one would have to not participate in the market at all, simply not sell. But that would also mean not spending public money. Most governments receive money from dubious sources, so they would have to be excluded as commissioners, as well as private ones. When it comes down to it, one has to believe in the power of the artwork itself. And nothing is static. We certainly don't believe that identity is. A 'bad' person can change, as can—sadly—a 'good' person.

**h:** At the moment, virtual reality seems to be less dogmatic when it comes to gender issues. Some might argue that by providing greater freedom around gender identity, the metaverse might also allow for greater creativity. What can artists gain from these opportunities?

**E&D:** Let's hope you are right, that gender really is more fluid and free in the metaverse. Unfortunately, it seems to us that there are a lot of 'dudes' out there making their NFT worlds disguised as communities, but replicating a lot of real-world ills. But sure, if the trend is towards liberating us from the hegemony of gender binaries, that's great. Societies have learned a lot from queer thinking, and we are learning about ourselves from trans activists, thinkers, and communities. As this continues to happen, we are seeing ↳

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ELMGREEN & DRAGSET  
*White Maid*, 2014



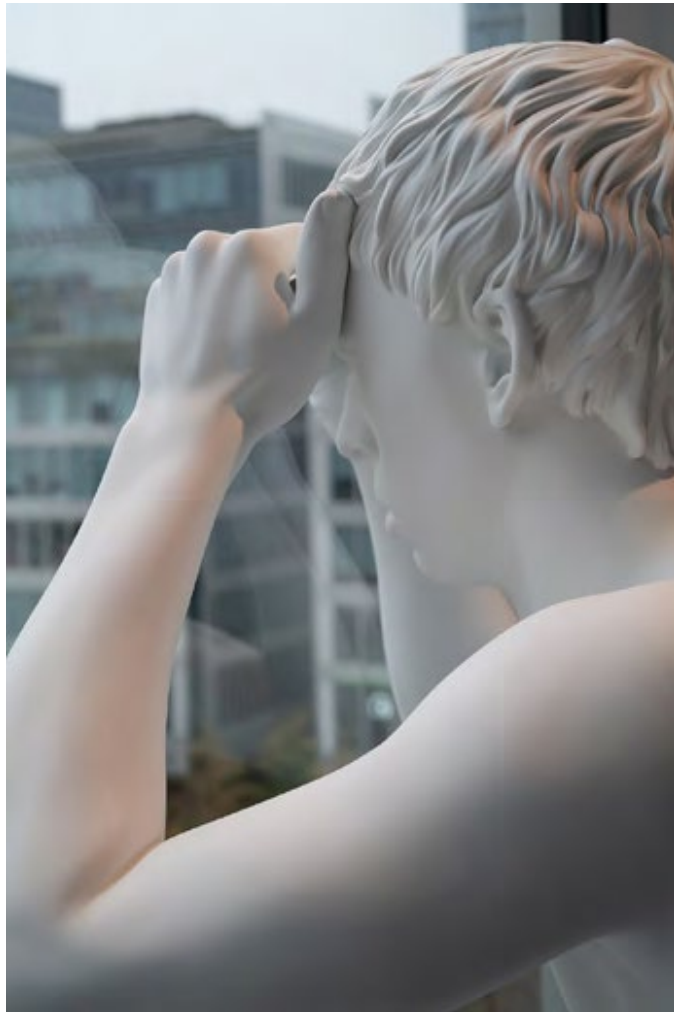
**"IT MIGHT SHOW  
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Elmgreen & Dragset

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ELMGREEN & DRAGSET, *This Is How We Play Together*, 2014







**"THE METAVERSE  
ALONE WILL  
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ELMGREEN & DRAGSET  
*Point of View - Part 1*  
2019-2021

some amazing art being created. Any new understanding of who we are as humans and how we relate to the world around us, natural as well as constructed, carries with it great artistic and creative potential.

**h: If you believe that in a digital reality we will have more freedom of self-expression and be relieved from the pressure of certain stereotypes imposed on us by society, do you think that our attitudes to gender, masculinity, femininity, and sexual orientation in the physical world will change as well? Do you believe that the metaverse could bring social justice to human society?**

E&D: The metaverse alone will not be enough.

**h: Can you explain the idea behind *After Dark*, your solo exhibition opening in November 2022 in Hangzhou, China?**

E&D: For *After Dark*, there will be two different parts to the exhibition. One will be a selection of figurative sculptural works displayed in a series of vignette-like groupings. These will touch on themes such as growing up, ageing, and various emotional states like longing or defeat. Among these works, for example, is *This is How We Play Together* (2021), a sculptural pairing of two bronze children wearing VR headsets, seemingly detached and absorbed in their own worlds. As bronze cast figures lacquered in white, these sculptures may recall classical statues, but the subject matter in this instance is clearly contemporary with technology being so present.

Contrastingly, in the other part, we will be reconfiguring the museum's main exhibition space: transforming it into a nightclub environment complete with a stage, a bar and seating areas. Nightclubs are meeting places, sites of real physical interaction, unlike anything you can find on a screen. Historically and culturally, they are also places for transgression, for identity development (both for individuals and for people's bodies), places that can strengthen a community and provide a refuge for minorities—not to mention escapism. As important social sites, we were drawn to the dynamics that enable such behaviours to develop in clubs. It seems today that clubs are increasingly in danger of disappearing, with large numbers of places that had been seen as institutions closing their doors.

We will be holding a party in our nightclub space at *After Dark*, before the exhibition opens, inviting a club crowd to see and interact with our installation before the typically hierarchical art world set does. So in that sense, this exhibition will step beyond the visual and verbal, and instead delve right into the sensory and audible. ●

**Words**  
Pavel Prigara  
Sasha Kovaleva