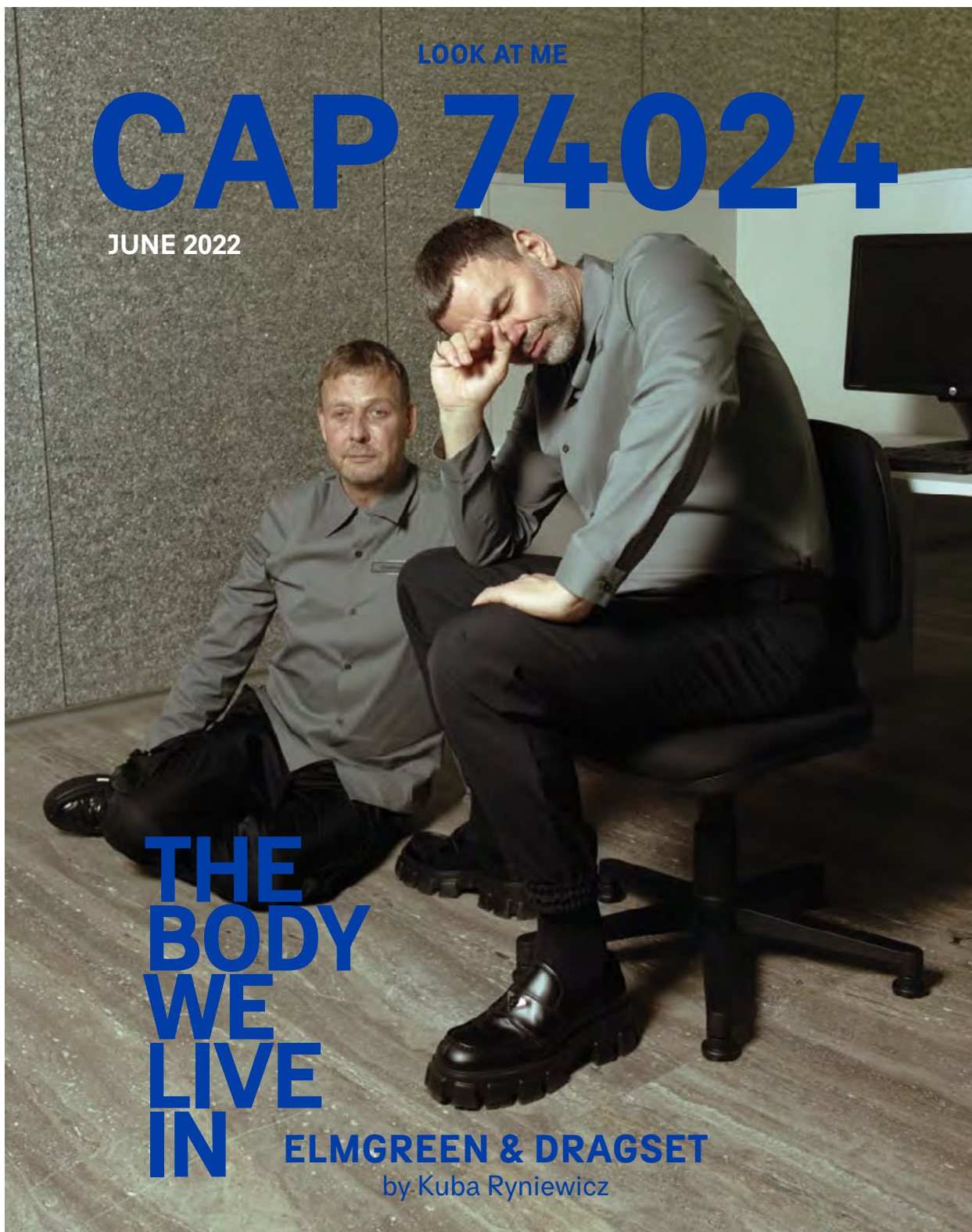


CAP 74024

Ryniewicz, Kuba: *Elmgreen & Dragset*

June 2022







ELMGREEN & DRAGSET

chatting with
Alexander Fury



Of course I spoke to Michael Elmgreen and Ingar Dragset via zoom, because you speak to everyone via zoom these days. But we had been in the same spaces, just not for interview purposes. First for the opening of their major exhibition “Useless Bodies?” at the Fondazione Prada in Milan, their first physical opening in three years - with attendant press, collectors, fans, Miuccia Prada and Raf Simons, and a dinner in a tower overlooking Milan, the place where Covid-19 first struck in Europe, which I can never get out of my head. After that, we were all in Venice, because everyone went to Venice for the much-delayed 59th International Art Exhibition. But by the time we spoke, I was back in London, they in their studio in Berlin. We started off by talking about Venice - actually, moaning about Venice. Because that’s what people do.

«It’s quite amazing that the world has almost been divided into two parts: those who realise that we are actually living, right now, in a disaster movie. And deal with it. And those who haven’t, and act like wild zombies, being completely out of control.»

Michael Elmgreen



[ME] You can’t get a Vaporetto. If you take a water taxi, they say, then you pay double. It’s insane.

I walked around a lot, which was very shocking to people, apparently. I was at the Baglioni - I think to walk from the Baglioni to the Arsenale took thirty minutes. Everyone was appalled. Did you enjoy it?

[ID] I mean, the main exhibition, maybe most. Cecilia’s (Alemani, ed.) exhibition. Especially the Italian pavillion.

I was quite blown away. It was also a bit strange - going in, seeing the sewing room. It was a context I could understand. I’ve been to places like this. To me, it was far more romantic than Gian Maria Tosatti’s intention. I thought it was about the kind of beauty of industry.

[ME] If you go to some of the Chinese textile factories. It’s not so romantic. It’s real.

But thank you both for making time today. I was able to come to the opening of “Useless Bodies?” at the Fondazione Prada - fortunately, because I was really randomly in Milan for three days. And so obviously I wanted to start off by talking about the show. You said that you started to work on it in 2017.

[ME] It was pre-pandemic. It was a different world. But we were already interested in this new marginalised position our poor bodies had at that time, with the increase of digital reality - where we can’t physically take part - and in a lot of production, where our bodies are not meant to be part of it anymore. But also with how we socialise: I mean, we are from the gay community...

Me too!

[ME] There are a lot of gay bars closing down around the world, because people will chat through apps instead of meeting in real life. A lot of normal social interaction has already been replaced by virtual interaction. At the same time, well, the body seems to be reduced to a decorative element in our sense of reality - selfies, or commercials. Where the body is used as an advertising tool, or an advertisement for yourself, through social media. We were interested in that even before the pandemic, and then bam! The pandemic arrived, in the process of preparing the show, and things went even more in that direction. Now our bodies were even posing a threat to others - we were afraid of being close to each other, we were asked to have a social distance. Clubs were completely closed down. And workplaces were also changing, from being very squeezed office environments where you try to optimise the human resources in as few square metres as possible, to suddenly totally eliminating the workforce in an office environment, asking people to work at home.

It’s almost like the last few years have just accelerated things that were already present. I remember reading about this gym fetishization amongst young, straight guys - the whole idea that their bodies are useless, because they don’t have employment, people aren’t having families. So the only purpose for the body is to be decorative. The only kind of value young men can find in themselves is to pump themselves up and look really great, because they can’t fulfil traditional male roles.

[ME] That fetishizing of manual labour has actually been going on since the ’50s. Blue jeans are a typical example, fetishizing workwear. And the gallery White Cube started in abandoned factory lofts in Manhattan. This idea of having a rough environment, with white walls and concrete floors - and not a salon - was also a fetishizing of what was formerly a space for hard manual labour. It’s a process that goes way back. And now it really has been speeding up tremendously. You will have no such thing as manual labour for most of us. But you go to the gym, to look like a healthy workman.

Talking of work - and talking of the length of time this show ended up taking to be staged, because of the pandemic - what was that process like?

Was it luxurious, to be able to kind of reconsider pieces over time? Or was it frustrating and just wanted to get it out there?

[ID] A little bit of both - boring

answer! Of course, it was luxurious, because it gave us time to work on this quite extensive publication at the same time. Thirty-seven contributors - you can really do a lot of research... [Michael holds up the book. It’s thick] We worked very closely with our favourite designer here in Berlin,

Andreas Koch, to make this sort of visual essays that kept you know changing and morphing and growing. And we made new work that we realised fit well to the to the context of “Useless Bodies?”. For instance, the guys lying in the car (The Outsiders, 2020, ed.), this was a work that we created in the time that the exhibition was

delayed. It wasn't meant for the Fondazione Prada exhibition, to start with, but it fit well into it. But on the other hand, of course, it is hard to think about other things, when you are so in the middle of a process. That's the frustrating part - we did other projects, mostly two big projects in public space - one in Stockholm and one in New York - in this time. But it was hard to start thinking about new exhibitions and dive into other things that we are interested in, and that we should have been working on! So we are super happy and super excited that it's now open, that the audience is there. And also glad this process of us is now over, and we are free to think of other things.

[ME] It was a little bit relaxed during the process, and at the end you kind of explode. We were so touched at the opening because we hadn't had an opening for three years, on that scale. It was amazing to see so many people and be able to celebrate that project. And fortunately also Fondazione Prada was very generous. We were so bored in the process of postponing the show, that we kept making additions to it [laughs], and they actually accepted them all. So it became quite substantial.

I was going to ask - did it end up how it was originally conceived? But you're kind of already saying no, it became... quite sprawling! It's across all of these different spaces, with quite different identities to those different spaces, and the works.

[ME] It grew!

[ID] Yeah. Basically they gave us 'carte blanche' to start with, and said okay, look at the buildings you're interested in. We could play basically where we wanted - we started, it may have been in two spaces, and then in the end it was four and outside.

[ME] It's a warning to other institutions - don't give us too much time!

[ID] You will end up with this enormous show!

The physicality of it changed, but do you feel the meaning of it changed? Given everything that was going on and happening, our audience perceptions of it have changed. But for you, did the actual meaning of it shift, as you were adding pieces, making those new works? Did the pandemic, that period, alter the whole meaning of the show for you?

[ME] I think certain work suddenly had a different meaning. I mean, in the North Gallery, we have the little peep-hole where you see the planet Earth from far away ("Powerless Structures", Fig. 282, 2022, ed.). And as billionaires in the world started to go into space on day trips, of course that added an extra layer. We had maybe thought of it as some sort of bunker environment, but it could also be a spaceship - because they don't believe in the future of the world anymore. And the office ("Garden of Eden", 2022, ed.), of course, looks more realistic than it would have done if it would have been launched in 2019. Now offices, for a big part, are looking like that.

In the middle of the pandemic, I had to go into my office - and it was like the Mary Celeste, with half drunk cups of coffee that had been left. First of all, I went in and thought: «God this is a total shithole!». But it was a mess because everyone had been whisked away. It was very strange.

[ID] I think in terms of this office space, from our point of view, it was maybe more clearly a critical stance towards that kind of office space, at the time we conceived it. But after Covid-19, as big corporations have closed down their office spaces, and then losing the whole social aspects around those spaces, we are not so sure anymore. There's something to be said for people meeting, to have this room for incidental encounters, accidents that happen for improvisation. General care for each other that you can't really have when you sit in your little bubble, at home.

It also became really about kind of humanity. As someone observing it, you started looking in each cubicle, trying to find these kinds of traces of people. It's a bit like a sculpture in that, it's a representation of a person, in each little cubicle. An identity is carved out in each one. And now, there's also this slight sense of nostalgia. That maybe is something from the past - like the historical interiors in the Met.

[ID] Or a memorial.

[ME] It's maybe bleak and dystopian, but it's also hopeful in a way. It shows that, no matter how much you try to uniform people and uniform their conditions, they remain individual weirdos. With all their different small passions and identities. Even in such an environment, you will have your personal traces.

Can we talk about the title, because you ended it with a question mark. And I wanted to ask: what is your answer to that question? Do you feel that bodies are useless? Or do you see the show as a contradiction, a testament to the importance of the physical self? It's not a show of NFT's - which I obviously

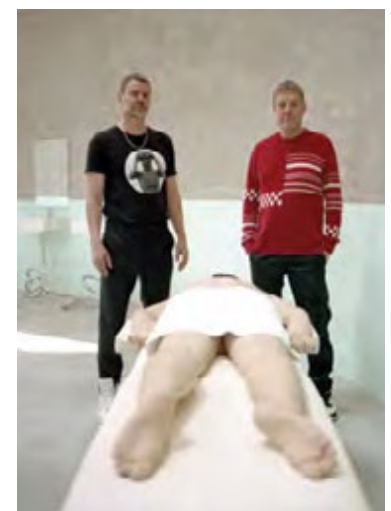
have to mention, because everybody has to mention an NFT, in any discussion of anything these days. But it's very much a physical show. And about being a physical body, in those spaces.

[ID] It's pretty clear we still believe in the body, in the meeting of bodies, the meeting of people.

«When people interact with our work, they make it more real. They take on the role, which is something that we often want to do with our shows. You give the audience a different kind of agency, they have power to create, fulfilling narratives that we only start.»

Ingar Dragset

T-shirt Ingar's own



[ME] I think the next revolution will be younger people demanding the body to regain its status - being taken seriously, having respect for both our health and our living conditions. And it has to do with everything, from how we deal with our public space, to real estate, to health industries. We need to not be people who are just delivering data that can be sold by the big tech industry when we are on social media. We are worth more than that. I think that young people want to gather together again, they want to have bodily experiences, they want to break out of the solitude of just being wired from home.

People talk a lot about metaverses - and I've been interested in that idea for a while - but I think it will always be niche. There are digital worlds already, people could occupy them. But they don't.

[ME] It could have been wonderful. But the God and the Universe is named Zuckerberg, there's not going to be a beautiful world. You can already see the tendencies where, in real life, there has been a progression in gender issues - we treat and respect each other's choice of gender preferences in a different way today, it's one of the positive development in recent years - but in the fucking metaverse, it's so macho-dominated already. It's repeating all the worst from the old world. It's not a paradise, it's not a new start, or anything. It's a 2-D replica of the worst.

It's also that horrible thing where people grasp after cliches. Here's a sphere where you can be absolutely anything you want to be - and people want to be a six foot eight guy built like a brick shithouse, or a Playboy bunny. That's anybody wants to be! You can have wings, you have a horse's head - but people want to be this. It reinforced these cliches, these stereotypes. This is what you should look like, this is how you should be.

[ME] And it doesn't smell.

We ended up talking about ideas of reality there - and one of my favourite scenes or vignettes from that exhibition was someone sat down on the chairs, which was actually a piece of work ("It's The Small Things in Life That 27 Really Matter, Blah, Blah, Blah", 2006, ed.). Someone sat down, put her coat down, started to type on her phone and then someone told her it was an artwork. Do you like reactions like that - where you've kind of broken down the hierarchies between art and reality, art in the everyday. This idea of recreating things that are familiar, but then putting them in a different context.

[ID] Yeah, of course. Normally it would be possible to sit on those benches, but it got too complicated. There were certain things you cannot touch, you cannot sit on... so it became too difficult to mediate, for us, and for the guards. But it's great - when people interact with the work, they make it more real, as you say. They take on the role, which is something that we often want to do with our shows. You give the audience a different kind of agency, they have power to create, fulfilling narratives that we only start.

[ME] They become performers for other viewers. The whole idea is that people start to look at each other in a different way, and be aware of each other's presence. And that's a very special social movement. When you're in an exhibition, you can freely be a voyeur. If you're on the underground, or on the bus, and just start to stare at people, you easily get into trouble. But when you go into a show, you're allowed to look at each other in a different way. That's very much the whole idea. We will never do shows without an audience. There's some artists who believe in their artworks without an audience. Our shows would cry without an audience. It's quite interesting, once we were invited on a very special tour, of only us going through the Louvre. We went and we saw the "Mona Lisa" without anyone else. And she looked so lost. She looked completely different. She was like: «What's going on here? When are they coming?».



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Michael Elmgreen

I like the Louvre because it forces me not to see the “Mona Lisa”. It makes you go and look at other things. I love “The Raft of the Medusa” by Gericault - next to the “Mona Lisa”. And that was empty. I also remember watching somebody who went around, he was taking a picture of every artwork. His whole experience was looking at his phone and taking a picture of every artwork. So I was watching him - I was fascinated with this, like, performance piece. And thinking: «Why the fuck you doing that? You're not even looking at anything». But that is very now: the idea that I need to record the fact I was here, a testament to my presence, somehow proof. And if I don't take a picture, I somehow didn't experience it.
[ID] We all get influenced, I think, it's a common impulse. For myself, even though it would be the first to admit it's ridiculous.

This is awful. When I was in Venice, I had to look at something on my passport. And I opened my passport and tapped it. As if I was tapping a phone. [Laughs] And then I was like: «Oh, what the fuck? What is wrong with me?». Those weird haptic impulses. Or you zoom - the thing with two fingers - on a book or something. It goes back to what you were saying about kind of bodies. I remember it kind of in the middle of the pandemic going out and walking down the street and someone's walking in the opposite direction to me, and I crossed over the road to avoid them. And they nodded, in thanks. And I thought - if I had done that six months ago, crossed the road to avoid someone, it would have been a massive insult, but now it's been transformed into a courteous act. Moving away from someone is an act of respect as opposed to insult. It's going to take a while for our minds reset.
[ME] Also our digital Covid-19 passes. I have a few very dear friends who have been resisting having i-Phone, tablet phones, who wanted the old school Ericsson phones. But they were fucked. Now it is like 100% who have it, because otherwise you would not be able to go to any café or restaurant.

A phone had already become almost an extension of our selves - and now they have become indispensable. Whether you like it or not.
[ME] And it's also where you'll have had all the biggest technological inventions in the past decade. I think that Concorde was the last kind of physical tool. And that failed. It's a symbol. And then we went introvert. Now it's all in the technology of cell phones and the internet.

I think they're trying to revive Concorde. Now they think there might be a market for it.
[ID] There's more billionaires. Buy your own Concorde.

We talked about kind of people interacting with your art, and you've always had an interest in public art. Is that kind of the ultimate manifestation of public performance, of interacting with work? And does it trace back to when you became interested in art?
[ID] When we started working together, we weren't particularly into public art: it doesn't have a great reputation, it's often just somewhere without much consideration, either for audience or context or architecture. It's just there, somehow. But I think what made us maybe more interested was a couple of things. We took part in this competition in Berlin, to create the Gay Memorial - the “Memorial to Homosexuals Persecuted Under Nazism” (2008, ed.). I think that is very, very few signs of homosexuality - public signs of homosexual life - in any public context. You have the signs maybe of some gay stores or clubs, or bars, or something, but nothing official. So we thought, from perspective, it might be worth trying to place something in public space. And we ended up winning that competition.



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Michael Elmgreen



Shoes Michael's own





Our work was released in 2008. We also got “The Fourth Plinth” commission in London (“Powerless Structures”, Fig. 101, 2012, ed.), a couple of years later, it was also very interesting. I think through these projects, you become aware of the diversity of audiences. Audiences have always interested us, their different reactions, how they think differently. When there’s an audience out there that hasn’t asked necessarily for this experience. You have to communicate in a different way than when you do something in a museum or a gallery, where people are prepared and they have all the tools and the language, the lingo to understand it and talk about it. In public space you enter a different dialogue. And we’re used to dialogue - we talk together all the time! We talk to our studio assistants, our team, our galleries, curators. We like this dialogue.

[ME] You say in spite of its bad reputation, I would say because of its bad reputation. We had already done something that had a really bad reputation, we had made narrative exhibitions, exhibitions like our project in the 2009 Venice Biennale, “The Collectors”, where we turned the two pavilions into houses, or like the Victoria and Albert Museum. We have made exhibitions that had a narrative, and that also had quite a bad reputation.

[ID] The theatrical, even more so.

[ME] But then it becomes more interesting, yeah. And then we discovered that public art had such a bad reputation. It’s amazing to go in and actually see if you can contribute in a way to change that reputation.

[ID] The metaverse may be the next...

I was going to ask about the idea of elitism, but it’s interesting, you bringing that up. There’s a certain snobbery about public art and a snobbery about narrative art. And I think a lot of your work is actually very much about egalitarianism. It’s quite open and quite generous.

[ME] It’s quite sad. If you’re seeing that every time you’re welcoming people in one way or another, it’s populist. It’s so arrogant, it’s so ignorant and hostile. I think people are actually not that stupid, and you can do something that is quite complex, but you maybe don’t use codes that only you and your neighbour know about. So it’s accessible for other people as well.

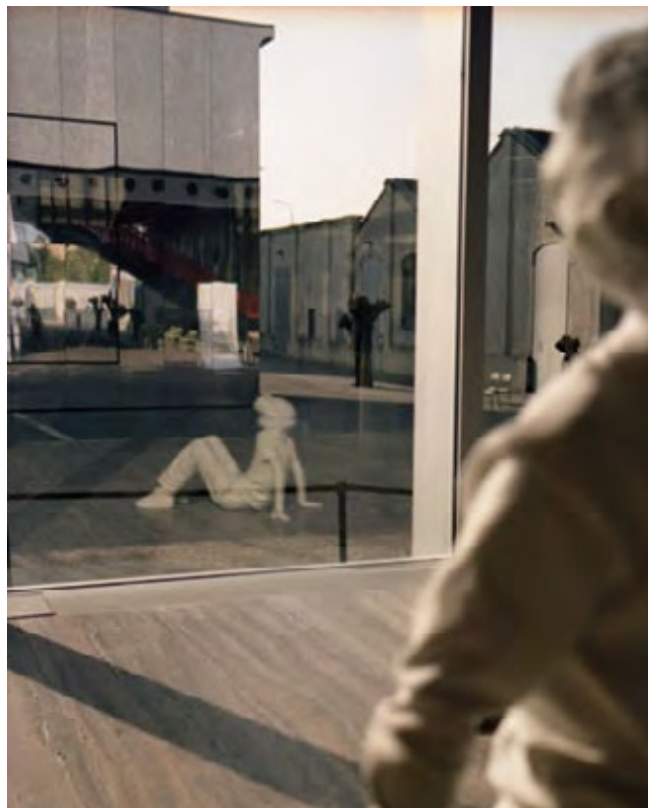
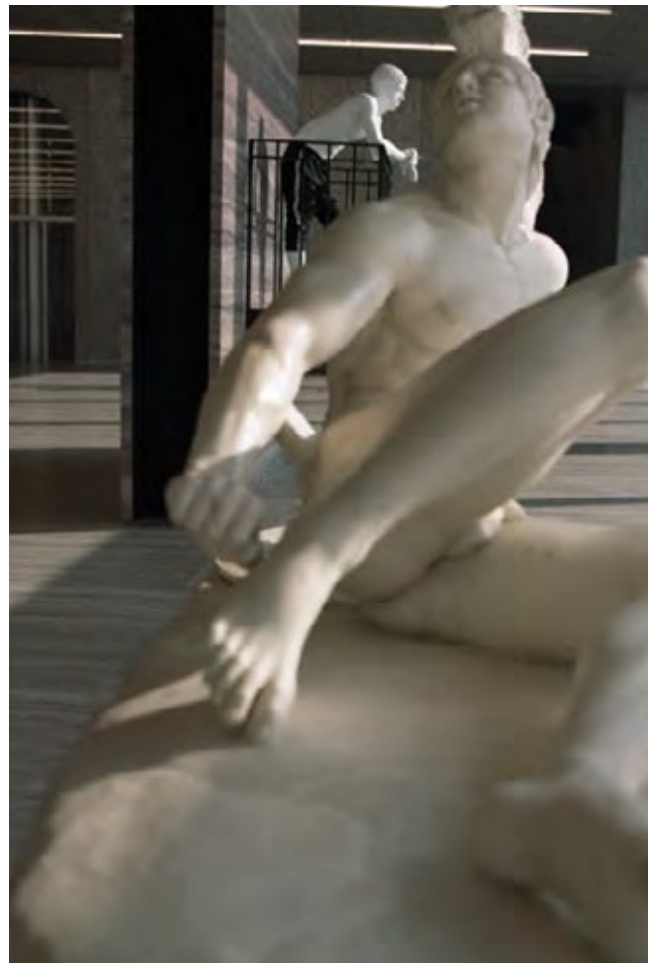
[ID] About 10 years ago for the Liverpool biennial, we made a VIP door (“But I’m on the Guest List Too!”, 2012, ed.) - that is a freestanding VIP door, open a crack. That you can also walk around it. It’s quite possible, I think, that it’s about this relationship to elitism and snobbery.

We touched on it a little bit earlier, but I’m really interested in generally how world events have recontextualized the artworks of useless bodies - especially the one that you mentioned, “The Outsiders”, the Mercedes with the guys in it, with Russian license-plates. It has a very different resonance now than it even had in January, a very different meaning.

[ME] As gay men, we have been warning people sucking up to the oligarchs in Russia for a long time. Now, they all stumble over each other to criticise the regime there. But, you know, in Russia, it’s the same.

It’s been a totalitarian regime without any democratic structure, it has been impossible to have freedom of speech or to choose your own lifestyle for so long. The war has just put an extra focus on that. The work has the same meaning as it had before. Maybe more people are listening now.

[ID] It’s not just us saying this is like the tell tale signs in the country and the culture already, that we need to be more aware of. Not only in Russia, but in many places in the world.



«The whole awareness of, basically, our voices not being even relevant or important in certain discussions, or certain ways of seeing the world - that is a hard learning point. We need to shut up and listen, and that's an incredible thing to have been made aware of.»

Ingar Dragset

Context feels like it's something you're interested in.

The idea of placing things in unusual or contradictory environments.

Do the works feel recontextualised generally, in the landscape of today?

[ID] I think they are. You can also see why people sort of using our work as an illustration of a feeling they have or a situation they're in.

During Covid-19, for instance, we saw people posting older works.

Which was really touching, in many ways - as a useful kind of tool, or almost a treatment of a help in a situation. The guy isolated on a balcony, for instance, or the kids stuck on the fire stairs. Works that are, maybe, about isolation and loneliness. Frustration.

[ME] All artworks change over time. The classical sculptures and neoclassical sculptures that we used, in combination with our sculptures on the Podium, mean something different today than when they were made. They're read in a different way. Abstract works from Modernism don't have the same shocking effect as they had at that time. Things change - as we change in society - and artworks also change. If they have a static meaning, it's because there are some powers in art history who want them to have a static meaning.

As we said before, the last two years have been a really kind of remarkable period. Do you think it affected your creativity?

Has it shifted how you make art or why you make art?

[ME] Little, but not so much. A lot of artists claim that they have changed so much, but if you actually know them, you see that they haven't. I'm not that good at lying, so I want to say I haven't changed. I try to do things in a more environmentally friendly way when we can do it. So we try to ship artworks from closer destinations instead of criss-crossing the Atlantic. We have been lucky during lockdown that we have a big studio, so people could come in, others could work from home. We didn't have to lay off anyone.

We're not suffering. We were some of the lucky ones.

[ID] I think maybe we became a little bit more patient. We're normally quite restless. You especially, Michael. But understanding, when things are not so smooth, so easy.

[ME] Normally in our working process, we are super planned, and then we kind of change everything last minute anyway.

This is a bit of a pretentious question... But do you think that, because of the pandemic, because of the Black Lives Matter movement, because of the experiences of the past two years - have they altered your viewpoint on the world?

[ID] It would be strange if it didn't influence us at all? But I don't think we could change completely as people. I feel we were staunchly anti-racist before Black Lives Matter, for sure, but of course, it makes you much more aware of other perspectives, and maybe where that perspective should be from on different things. The whole awareness of, basically, our voices not being even relevant or important in certain discussions, or certain ways of seeing the world - that is a hard learning point. We need to shut up and listen, and that's an incredible thing to have been made aware of.

We should, of course, have been more aware of it a long time ago, but it's better to change than to never change.

[ME] It's quite amazing that the world has almost been divided into two parts: those who realise that we are actually living, right now, in a disaster movie. And deal with it. And those who haven't, and act like wild zombies, being completely out of control. Because they're frustrated about the fact that they are in a disaster movie, and everything is falling apart, and they have no mental tools to cope with it.