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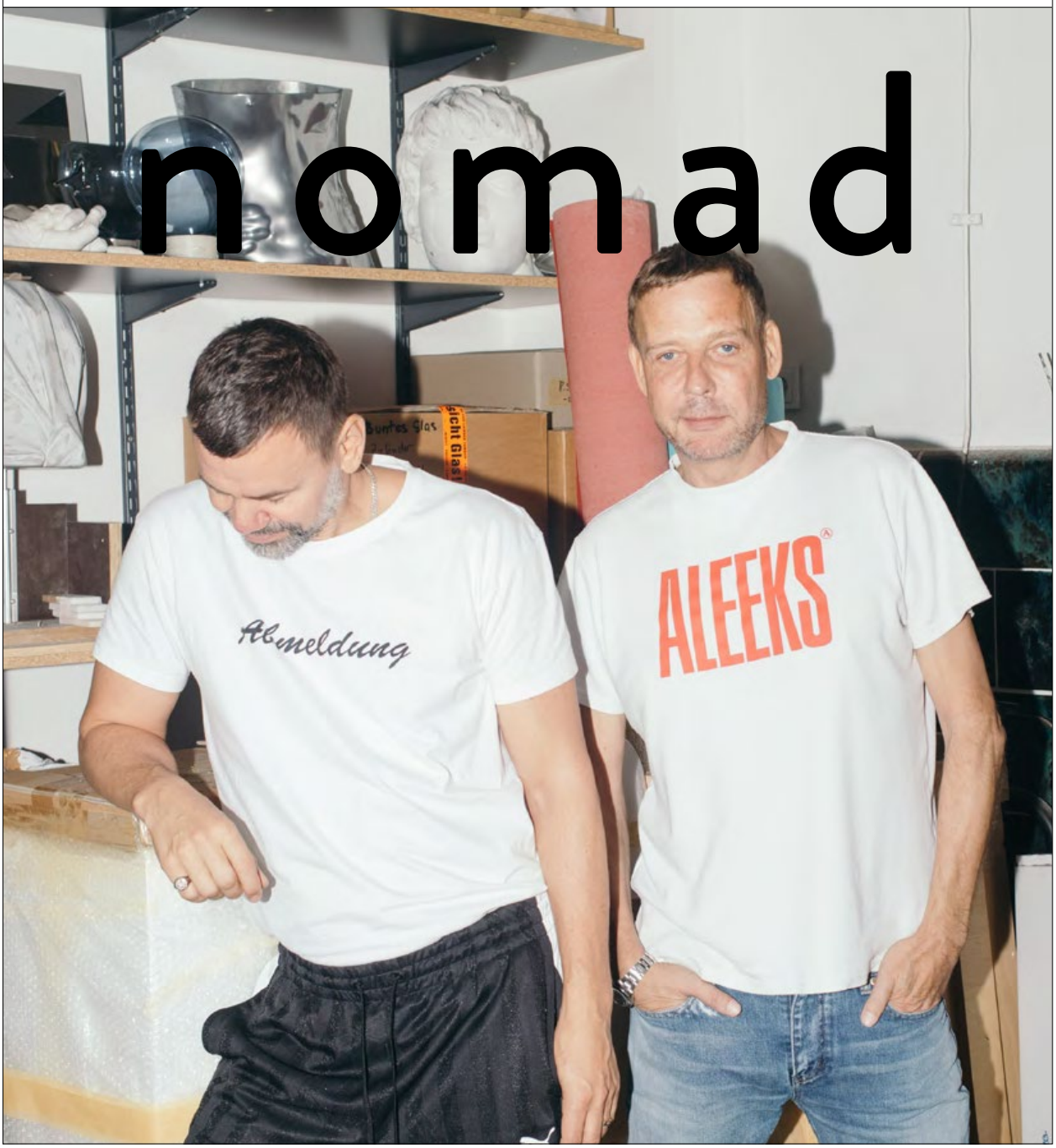

ELMGREEN & DRAGSET

Photos *by* Robert Fischer
Words *by* Kimberly Bradley

For the past quarter century, the artist duo of Elmgreen & Dragset has developed a hybrid practice melding architecture, design and art as well as wit, subversion and subtle social critique. Their *Prada Marfa* (a forever-closed but fully stocked Prada store, sitting lonely in a Texas desert) first went viral in the 2000s. By now, however, their public sculptures and structures have reached busier, better-trod places like Rockefeller Plaza in New York, the Fourth Plinth in London's Trafalgar Square and many locations throughout Scandinavia. Not to mention an array of museum and gallery spaces, and lots of new eyes and minds.

Michael Elmgreen is Danish, Ingar Dragset Norwegian. Both are youthful fiftysomethings. They arrived in Berlin in the mid-1990s, when the German capital was a derelict work in progress. It was the perfect setting for the duo ——for the first decade of their practice they were also a couple——to move beyond their early performative work to installation, sculpture and public art in all its for ms. The two have also curated large-scale events like *A Space Called Public* (a months-long exhibition of public art) in Munich in 2013 and *a good neighbour* at the 15th Istanbul Biennale in 2017. Speaking with them is like watching a mental tennis game played for fun, with ideas and words being lobbed back and forth. Some hit hard and hammer home, others drop and are left to roll for a while before being picked up again.

nomad met the two in the sprawling attic of their studio——a former pumping station with soaring ceilings——in Berlin's Neukölln district, to discuss Berlin's early days, what art can do, believing children are our future and transcending Scandinavian conformity.

Do you think your Scandinavian background shapes your work? And if so, how?

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It's informed our work on many different levels. One element that's apparent is the influence of Scandinavian functionalist design. Of course, with Minimalism there's also a certain perception of design having to be functional, and *efficient*, for large groups of society. But it wasn't necessarily thought of as exclusive. There are minimalist objects for your household which are also used in schools and institutions, and they've became part of a kind of ideology.

M
E

Even kindergartens were done in minimal design, people really got it from early on.

I
D

It has a certain smoothness about it; an elemental control. The ideology is that we are all living in a specific way that's working perfectly. We are all more or less the same. And in that sense, for us in our work it's like part fascination and part critical confrontation with these ideas. We can see there are also problematic aspects to traditional Scandinavian design.

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What are they?

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It's based on monocultural values——that we all desire the same thing and our behavioural patterns are streamlined. This goes through Scandinavian countries today as well. Even though there is low immigration, they love to make big headlines out of it and make it a problem. The Nordic countries are very open-minded, but *only* as long as you eat the meatballs they eat, and celebrate Christmas like they do, and sit in …

I
D

… the same Arne Jacobsen chair.

M
E

And adapt to all the behavioural patterns in that society. In Scandinavia you could basically have just one fashion store (all laugh). In Berlin, London, or New York people dare to stick out. In Denmark, you have 99.9 percent of people in duvet jackets during winter.

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There's Acne, but COS looks a lot like Acne.

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Exactly! Last winter, I got lost cross-country skiing in Norway. I went on the wrong side of the mountain. But then as I skied around trying to find the people I was with, I thought I saw them all the time … but I didn't. Everyone just *looked* the same. It took me ages. The paranoia wasn't so much about not being able to find them again, it was about the feeling of seeing doubles all the time.

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Does your art twist this conformity?

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We often use banal everyday objects and just slightly alter them. The viewers get to think about their function and how you interact with them on a daily basis, and what they mean. Because all the stuff that we surround ourselves with in our everyday life is based on certain values. From our light bulbs and our sneakers to the way cafes are designed or how our cities are planned. It all reflects the cultural values we live among. But often people don't think about it.

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Ikea has also played a huge role in training people's perception.

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What is the link between art architecture, design, and art? How do you navigate this?

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This question of architecture started from the beginning, when we moved from performance into the institutional art world. When we did our early performances in gallery spaces, we felt so constrained by the space itself and the behaviour in the space. So we did this performance called *12 Hours of White Paint/Powerless Structures, Fig. 15* (1997), where we added more and more white paint

to a room with a sprayer. In other projects we played with the idea of the white cube, as an example of an institutionalised, maybe Scandinavian space.

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It's a bit of Institutional Critique, maybe, to use art parlance.

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Yeah, sort of. Then we realised that this exhibition mode was never really going to change. If we wanted change, we had to change ourselves. We then moved more into narrative exhibitions, showing scenarios like *The Collectors* in the 2009 Venice Biennale (where the Nordic pavilion became the home of a mysterious art collector) or *Tomorrow* at the Victoria and Albert Museum in 2013 (which showed the life of an elderly failed architect through a series of domestic rooms using objects from the V&A's collection).

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Why did you come to Berlin?

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(whispering) Space!

M
E

When we came in 1997, Berlin didn't have an established structure for the art scene. No one knew what would be the coolest gallery or gallery district. It didn't have an established art system that you had to fit into; you could be part of shaping the scene together with your artist colleagues. Artists would open bars; you would have illegal clubs and everyone was——— in a very innocent way——— curious about what it would become. Of course it was super attractive to be part of that early in your professional career. And it was dead cheap. So if you wanted money for your beers and your studio, Berlin was a perfect place.

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Even now, Berlin is one of these rare places where it's big enough for you to disappear, but you still feel like you are valued as an individual, that society cares about the whole. There aren't that many places in the world like this. Berlin may be the only place I know.

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Do you like what's happened since the 1990s? Right now Berlin is in this crazy real estate bubble.

I
D

But many things have gotten better in Berlin. It's so much more international, in a good way. Back then, there were no black people ... if black friends from America or London visited, people would want to touch their hair! It was terrible. The art scene was super small, but it was also super misogynist, and not very open. It was run by a handful of guys with a lot of power. I mean, come on, it has gotten better!

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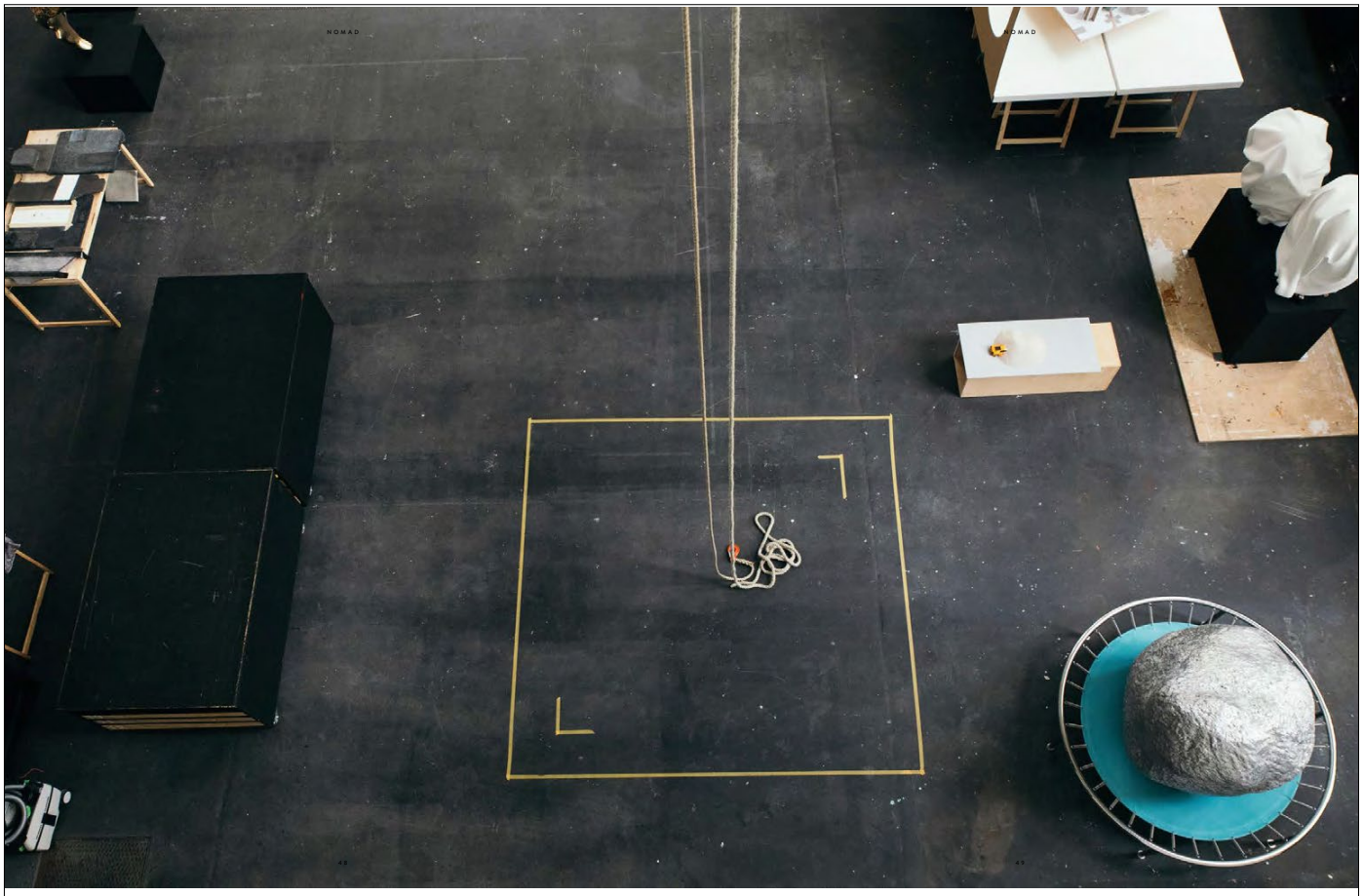


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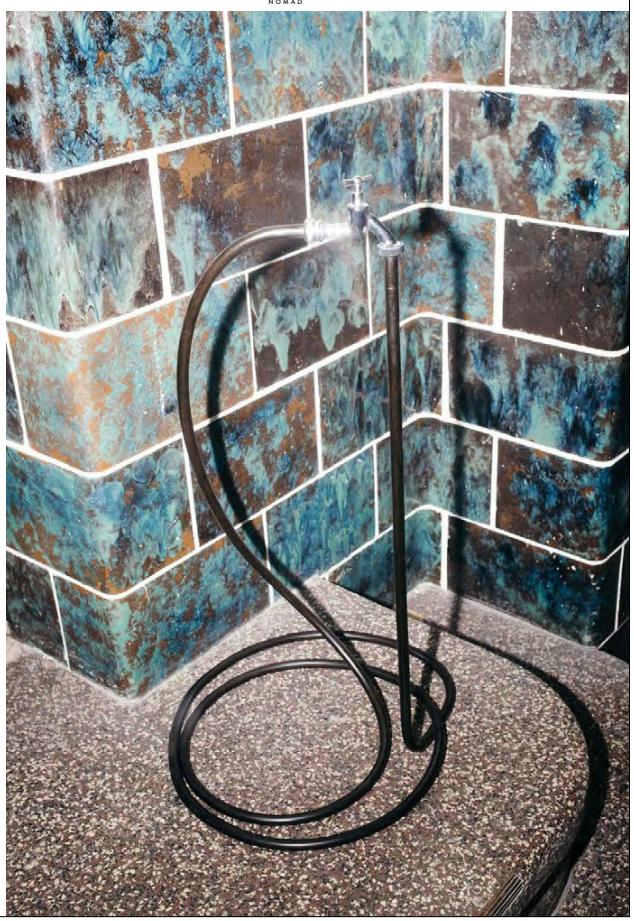

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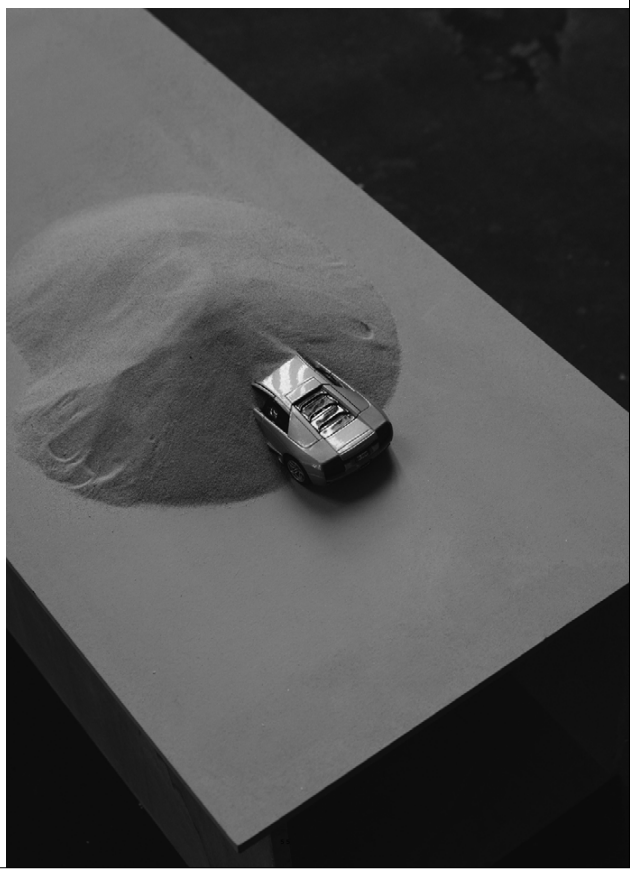

There was a lot of bad art back then, too. Nostalgia always distorts reality a bit, doesn't it?

M
E

Some is still bad (all laugh). But in general, what I do not like about the development here is that a lot of people who came quite late to Berlin are so overcritical towards its development, instead of doing something.

I
D

It's still possible to do something!

M
E

You can't use all your energy being overly worried about the development of the world. You need to contribute in some way and try to provide some alternatives, on a small scale, to the reality you live in. And Berlin is still one of the most liveable cities where you can experience this, where you don't have social class differences that are so in your face all the time.

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Much of your work seems to subtly critique social issues like gender roles, consumerism, how we perceive space.

I
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As an artist, to feel like you're going to do anything in the world, you need to feel that your view should also be presented. We grew up feeling a lack of representation. I didn't even know what it was; we just felt that there was something wrong. We grew up in heteronormative, middle-class Scandinavian household environments and realised that that we saw the world differently from people around us. As an artist, you have the ability to present a different view on things.

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Do you aim to provoke?

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Provocation is a bad strategy because you only piss people off. And provocation has a starting-point where you very arrogantly try to predict how stupid people are and play with their mindset in a certain way. If someone feels provoked by anything that we have ever done, it's come as a big surprise.

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Do you have an example?

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In Denmark, in 2012, we did a public sculpture, *Han*, depicting *The Little Mermaid* in a male version, but without a fish tail, in front of the Kronborg castle in Helsingør, north of the Louisiana museum. So, we were surprised, in liberal Denmark, that this caused an uproar and became headlines in newspapers. They said that the sculpture was too gay or was satirising the national icon.

I
D

It was also too effeminate to be situated in this former shipyard harbour area, to commemorate the workers. Its arms were too thin.

M
E

The media and the real estate developers hated it. So it became a big issue. Fortunately

Michael Elmgreen and Ingar Dragset have worked as an artist duo for nearly twenty-five years (ten of them as a couple, in fact), critiquing realities through performance, public sculpture, installation and curation. The Scandinavian natives arrived in Berlin in the mid-1990s, and shaped the German capital's art scene at the same time they established an international art-world presence. The first comprehensive monograph of their work, *Elmgreen & Dragset*, was published by Phaidon in May 2019.

the city was determined to have that sculpture, and afterwards of course, it was suddenly like the logo of the city and has adapted in a way. We never made that sculpture to provoke anyone, but it revealed that people in Denmark were more conservative than we'd thought. They were speaking about the sculpture being gay, which is ridiculous because stainless steel sculptures can't be gay. So sometimes it happens that projects we do steer a certain debate.

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What were you thinking going into that project?

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In Denmark, you have Copenhagen and you have Helsingør. In the past, Helsingør was more important——the king was based there——but over time it became a working-class city. Therefore, we wanted to present the national icon normally based in Copenhagen, in Helsingør instead. To show the power relationship between the two cities.

I
D

It also suits the area in many different ways: there's a jetty going out into the water right

in front of the castle, *Hamlet* is set there. The sculpture could also be like a young Hamlet.

M
E

It was also a continuation of how we work with new masculine roles. Masculinity today has fortunately moved in many different directions, even though in our society we operate with classic notions of it. I will say the new generation is really healthy in dissolving all these classic categories.

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Speaking of young people, what do think of Greta Thunberg?

M
E

She's a symbol of a hope that a new generation is engaged in a different way. And they've become heroes and heroines. It's the same as the youth movement in Hong Kong. And all over the world. In general, people who were small kids around the millennium are much better attuned to living in this world and dealing with this reality than we are. I think we have embedded in ourselves a huge disappointment about what didn't happen after we entered the new millennium. This has made our generation so disillusioned and misanthropic. I think if we lowered the voting age to 15, our world would look much better.

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Does this thought infiltrate your newer projects?

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Of course, some our work is often quite emotional in taking a pulse or a general feeling from a population. The pool sculptures (for example, *Van Gogh's Ear*, which was installed at the Rockefeller Plaza in 2016) do this, although they can look simple——they're pools raised up on their edge, standing there without walls. It's like dealing with the dream of a good life, the middle class, the perfect suburban idea of a pool in the garden … but it's the house that didn't happen. You have to recalibrate and reset your visions and dreams.

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Do you personally feel any of this Gen-X disappointment? Because I see a lot of playfulness and optimism in your work.

M
E

Art is hopefully a function that can make some people less fearful in life. What art has been able to do throughout centuries is liberate thinking patterns. I understand that there has been a new set of ethics within culture to enable this——and we've needed it! We still have museums in which 80 percent of what's represented is by male artists from a certain cultural background, as if nothing else in in history ever existed. Some really healthy tendencies of a new awareness from powerful cultural institutions are to have a more varied picture of the time we live in and connect to that more varied background. There are also issues of sexual harassment and inappropriate conduct that needed to come to the surface. Of course, everything becomes hysterical because these issues explode on the internet. But that doesn't mean that these issues shouldn't have been raised. We need to check in on our ethical parameters and get them in order.

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How?

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It's important to keep the complexity and not go for the easy solutions, the big headlines or the hysteria. Because otherwise we're often pulled around by certain power structures where we are reduced to only reacting. It's important to stage cultural activities that don't care about the power structures. This way we diminish their importance. We put the focus on something more dignifying.

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What's your next show?

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Next year is the 25th anniversary of our collaboration, and we're mounting a big show next year in Finland, in a museum called EMMA (Espoo Museum of Modern Art) in Espoo, which is a satellite city to Helsinki. One of our large swimming-pool sculptures is going up in Miami this November———a permanent commission by the city. And we'll do a show at König Galerie for Gallery Weekend Berlin in May 2020. And we've just opened a show in the Nasher Sculpture Center in Dallas, Texas———Texas is a love story that started 14 years ago, and we just recently went back to see *Prada Marfa* for the first time since it was made in 2005.

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Your best-known work, maybe … it's a beacon of consumerist critique in the desert. You never went back in between?

I
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No. And it was a really emotional moment. We've changed so much, and the piece is still just there. Nothing changed! A local rancher, the husband of the woman who owns the land, basically passes by and takes care of it. Like a retirement project. It's so sweet.

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Thank you Michael and Ingar.