

# ELMGREEN & DRAGSET

ARTWORK AS CODE

With their installations, sculptures, and performances, the Scandinavian conceptual artists Elmgreen & Dragset define in an entirely new way how to present and experiment with art.

Their critical artworks embrace themes such as gentrification, social alienation, consumer society, and architecture: As does the work *Prada Marfa* (2005). A boutique for the Italian luxury fashion brand Prada standing utterly abandoned in the midst of the Texan desert. The Prada shop architecture style is consistent in this mini sales shop, and looking from outside through the large showcase window, until today one sees the fall/winter collection 2005. No one can open or enter the shop; it is ordained to remain forever closed. Like a container for preserving things for a set amount of time, which people open, or can open, only after the passing of a certain amount of time, in order to hand on characteristic objects to the following generations.

It is a site-specific installation, but also a “pop-architectural land art project” of sorts, which oscillates between architecture, art, and design. The sculpture is conceived as a critique of consumption and property, emblematically representing the artists’ ideas. Neither fashionable Prada consumers nor art collectors can buy the object of their desire; just like the imaginary goods in the miniature Prada shop, the artwork is not for sale.

The photograph in the Nicola Erni Collection (NEC) arose in 2007 as part of the documentation of the work. The highly esteemed artist-duo achieved their artistic breakthrough with *Prada Marfa* in 2005.

Michael Elmgreen’s and Ingar Dragset’s amazingly astute, complex, creative, and critical spirit are also revealed in the works *Against Nature* (2012), *I Will Never See You Again* (2009), and *Photo Booth* (2004). They use their art to examine power structures and investigate how they form. By displacing and interchanging specific elements in these formations, they demonstrate how relative and fragile they actually are.

The artwork *Against Nature*, part of the *Harvest* project, deals with the thematic of contemporary art and the self-image of galleries in conjunction with that. The multipart work, first installed in the Victoria Miro Gallery in London in 2012, is an ironic reference to the fact that galleries and their modern exhibition spaces present themselves in an extremely matter-of-fact way as explicitly ideal sites for the presentation of artworks. But that is not always true—gallery spaces cannot entirely meet artistic demands, as they oppose art’s original nature. The sculpture *Against Nature*, which is part of the *Harvest* group, is to be understood along these lines. A young, apparently grieving boy seems to sit much too close to the edge of the balustrade. In the Nicola Erni Collection, as already in the London gallery,

the space where the blonde boy lets his feet swing down freely creates a platform for the fictive presentation of stories, memories, and references. The site is a narrative one, where beholders are motivated to move around between the artworks, submerge in them, and entirely in line with Walter Benjamin, bring them to life as completed artworks only through their individual experience of them.<sup>1</sup>

*I Will Never See You Again* is a wall installation that includes a mirror on a small table with a bouquet of flowers wrapped in cellophane lying on it. These disconcerting words of seemingly adolescent origin are written on the mirror. Elmgreen & Dragset present us with a devised reality and challenge us to weigh out how much fiction and how much cliché their carefully staged Realism contains.

This is the case with *Against Nature*, *I Will Never See You Again*, *Prada Marfa*, and also *Photo Booth*—the artwork as code for the state of society. Upon entering the NEC, like voyeurs we notice the four legs turned towards one another, peering out of the bottom of a photo booth. We realize that no one is behind the curtain preparing to be photographed, or we hope to catch a bit of movement or sound. The photo booth, with the curtain shut like a closet, visualizes the enduring moral and social barriers against homosexuality.

The art of Elmgreen & Dragset is special because we are able to recognize the story behind the artwork, we can make associations with the artwork in a real figurative way, it is performative and has the aesthetic allure of a sleek art object—all qualities that make an artwork legible, and in doing so are fascinating at an artistic level rather than concentrating solely on the representation of sociological themes.

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<sup>1</sup> “For Benjamin, perception was acutely temporal and kinetic”. Jonathan Crary, *Technique of the Observer: On Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century*, MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1992, p. 20.



*I Will Never See You Again*, 2009

OPPOSITE

*Untitled (Prada Marfa)*, 2007





*Photo Booth, 2004*

OPPOSITE  
*Against Nature, 2012*



