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## **The New as the Surround System of Interiority in Contemporary Art Exhibitions: Modernism and Contemporaneity in the Works of Elmgreen & Dragset**

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**Abstract:** By and large, contemporary art witnessed a shift towards installation art, nailing a genuine habitat stressing the possibilities of interactivity and immersivity of the works. My article aims to examine the modern legacy of this “new” of contemporaneity, by analyzing the works of the Scandinavian duo Elmgreen & Dragset: their pool-like vertical structures and silicone mannequins establish a temporal loop between traditional effigies of sculpture and a contemporary consideration of the virtual dimension inside the palpable realm of the exhibition. My intention is to prove that instead of interactivity with and immersivity in the outside world, the purpose of such works is to create for the viewer a surround system of interiority, where interiority is one ingredient that contemporaneity borrows from modernism.

**Keywords:** Remodernism; Installation Art; Contemporaneity; Postmodernism; Interiority.

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Can we still have the audacity to call something “new” or discuss the “new”? Is it outdated to discuss the new in terms of human interiority? At a theoretical level, the contemporary art of the twenty-first century would seem distant from such-naïveté of addressing the new or the torn and wounded interiority (without the claim of a social message or stand), when the posh looking exhibitions bring forth a space of relations, interactivity, community, experience, detachment in the manner of addressing problems openly. The issues of new and interiority belong to a vision of modernism where artistic value was recognized through “novelty, high information”<sup>1</sup>. And yet, in the debate of contemporary art, many studies focus on the modern gene and legacy inside the contemporary and contemporaneity. Some of these studies focus on metamodernism as a revival of modernist impulses and conjectures<sup>2</sup>; Susan Stanford Freedman introduces the notion of “planetary modernism”<sup>3</sup> in the sense of taking the whole planet into

consideration as a space where modernism – as a creative peak of the recurring modernity – emerges at local pace; while Terry Smith sees contemporaneity as a prolongation of modernity into a “productive synthesis”<sup>4</sup>.

This article will focus on the concept of “contemporaneity”, as encountered in works by Terry Smith<sup>5</sup>, Claire Bishop<sup>6</sup>, Peter Osborne<sup>7</sup> (among others), a notion which stems from a dialectical understanding. On the one hand, there is a contemporaneity of presentism<sup>8</sup>, like a black hole engulfing the “now” mindlessly and irrevocably, without casting any light on the course of things. On the other hand, there is a contemporaneity that is geopolitically assigned after the fading of the socio-political and metaphorical borders between West and the East<sup>9</sup> post-1989, which shows awareness of the multiplicity of pasts, memories and narratives with which it is endowed<sup>10</sup>, and which represents a form of reassembly of the past temporalities. In terms of periodization, with the failure of the Iron Curtain in mind (and the destitution of the former West, as implied by Osborne), the paradigm shift towards contemporaneity could be spotted in the early 1990s. The fall of the Iron Curtain rendered the notions “West” and “East” as no longer relevant, binding the two former separate worlds into the global construct of today. Apart from having geo-political implications, this event also had cultural consequences, proposing a new way of looking at the world, in spite of presupposed lags in synchronicity given economic and political factors. However, it is the aftermath of 9/11 – as suggested by both Terry Smith<sup>11</sup> and Susan Stanford Freedman<sup>12</sup> – which forcefully coagulated a new vision of our

times that is also reflected in contemporary art.

One important product of contemporary art and contemporaneity is the art exhibition understood, conceived and defined as installation, focusing on the relationships between artworks, forging these relationships as a sum of energies and tensions that directly engage the viewer, by virtue of the interactivity that is laid out for the viewer. Thus, the viewer transitions from a passive observer to an active participant. Such installation-exhibitions and installation art do not only create something one has to look at, but create a realm – “mini-art worlds”<sup>13</sup> – in which the spectators find themselves participating and even performing.

Among the most internationally renowned artists configuring such realms or habitats in their works and exhibitions, the Scandinavian duo Elmgreen & Dragset recursively employ elements of interior and exterior design and references to art history crafted along with philosophical ideas in order to stretch beyond the boundary between art and non-art and moving beyond the passive viewing of objects, into a realm of experiential engagement. Their corpus of works can easily be labeled as a top-notch expression of contemporaneity, bringing together – in airy and spacious setups with both minimal and minimalist clean props – recent artifacts which would testify for a certain superiority of current civilization and culture. Theirs is a purposefully critical approach to showoff of superiority that minimalism may provide. Nonetheless, in this article, we will examine key aspects of their work in the context of the residual modernist legacy within contemporaneity, aiming to uncover the

interest they lay on the value of interiority as a sublimated bruised component developed into a genuine surround-system. We shall refer to legacy of modernism – and not of *modernity* – in the way Susan Stanford Freedman distinguishes modernism from modernity, the former suggesting “an advocacy, a promotion, a movement presumably centered around a system of philosophy, politics, ideology, or aesthetics”<sup>14</sup>. Therefore, it is not the condition of modernity as historically recurrent period but it is the formula of conscious modernism – as a reflection upon the period of modernity from a high vantage point – that we take in this article as pervading towards contemporaneity. Modernism actually instrumentalized the breach with tradition in order to: 1. advance the self as a bruised self amidst conflicts, a manneristic society sweeping away its misery, the discarding of the human; 2. battle the *comme il faut* system with ingenious, intellectual forms shaping emotionality. In its turn, in its artistic manifestations, contemporaneity 1. documents the bruised self through the juxtaposed filters of several past temporalities and potential temporalities that failed to occur because of the crimes and violence of that manneristic society of modernism; 2. uses intellectual forms to shape its own set of theories to combat the severe inequalities of a conventional system set on disregarding the individual.

### **The Installation Exhibition as Product of Contemporaneity**

The recurrence and reoccurrence of modernism in current academic literature is divided between those who see modernism as making seasonal comebacks

and those who consider the reblooming of certain elements but with different approaches and in different contexts. Susan Stanford Freedman places modernity under the sign of contradiction and displacement, and, likewise, regards modernism – the formula of advocacy inside a period of modernity – not as a “single aesthetic period, a movement, or a style”<sup>15</sup>, but in terms of an expression that pervades the modernities that flourish throughout the planet. As mentioned before, in this article we separate the two notions: modernity from modernism, choosing modernism as a flag for the aesthetic and theoretical frameworks that make a comeback inside contemporaneity. The periods in history that can be coined as “modernity”, present this self-reflective current of modernism, which differentiates from modernity itself, as a conjecture. The pluralism Stanford Friedman spots in connection to modernism triggers this “planetary” version she formulates with regards to this matter: a planetarity of modernism which also includes the significance of the environment, the trajectory of life and the non-hierarchical place of the human among other species<sup>16</sup>.

Similarly, Douglas Mao and Rebecca L. Walkowitz see the New Modernist Studies as a lens through which to examine the transnational turn of modernism, following mainly the expansion of the modern understanding, the circulation of modernist art and the integration of post-colonial products<sup>17</sup>. Alternatively, scholars like David Ames and Seshagiri Urmila prefer to stick to the limits of periodization<sup>18</sup> when it comes to modernism: for them, modernism is the votive literary and artistic movement of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century to early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the archive operated

consciously by current literary productions of metamodernism. In this respect, metamodernism digs up the inventiveness and the aesthetic formulae of modernism in view of refreshing a regime of newness and innovation, of the new<sup>19</sup>.

If these scholars focus on how modernism influences contemporary philology and literary perspectives, we might argue that these ideas could also be applied to the field of contemporary (visual) art? Contemporary art and contemporaneity (as explained before in this article) guide us towards an understanding of the modernist and modern patterns not in the sense of travelling and resurfacing periodically throughout decades and centuries, but as instances that are engulfed as a riverbed inside current mentalities and approaches. The modern stance is just part of the ingredient list concocted in contemporaneity, bent, reassessed, and reassembled according to current media and applicability, according to current socio-political contexts and economic opportunities. In this way, contemporaneity is not a version of some type of modernism but, as Terry Smith claims, it offers that kinship to the present moment like the modern “but without its subsequent contract with the future”<sup>20</sup>. This means that the prime moment of contemporaneity does not lean towards utopia; rather, it would seem that contemporaneity’s modern legacy is rather keen to nurture an anti-utopian attitude, more concerned with the possible catastrophes that may occur given this rash of immediacy of the present. Even when, in an older article of his, Smith coins contemporary art as “the old modern in new clothes”<sup>21</sup>, he then explains it as “contemporary modernism” or “remodernism”<sup>22</sup>, in terms of

the attention bestowed upon innovation, still distancing it from what one might call “original” or “classical” modernism, which emerged at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and ended before World War II. Therefore, for contemporaneity, modernism and the modern remains a horizon that is still constantly dialed, but not as such, not as the rupture it was but as the tradition of the attitude of a rupture that can project the new as a commodity for reflection: a reflection intended with care and concern for mending the reckless types of progress accelerated in the original early twentieth-century modernity. In naming the components of the dialectic of modernism, Umberto Eco places the new (as novelty and innovation) on one side, counterbalanced on the other side by order and scheme<sup>23</sup>. However, for the re-modernism of contemporaneity, these dual components seem to undergo a humbler attitude towards understanding, accepting and integrating the differences and multiplicities that lie in all aspects of life, giving away the prerogative of human superiority.

Moreover, this dialectical stance is filtered in contemporaneity’s adaptation of modernism through the “awakenings” offered by postmodernism. Postmodernism is, for Terry Smith, the anti-theses of the theses of modernism, while the synthetic value of contemporaneity results from the summing of these two. While the repetition, typical of mass media products, felt like a threat towards innovation and high culture for moderns, as Eco describes it, the postmodern revisited and thrived on repetition and seriality<sup>24</sup> and this is something that contemporaneity inherited as such. Peter Osborne is another scholar who draws a link between dialectical

modernism and seriality: for Osborne, the ultimate issue of modernism – the generic modernism he relates to contemporary art – is one of dialectical modernism between object and subject, which has as mediator – artistic wise – through the element of the artistic series<sup>25</sup>. In art, the series enact these dialectics of object and subject, individuality and collectivity, in the contemporary capitalist society. In this way, Osborne reconciles what Eco saw in seriality as a property of postmodernism with how modernism resurfaces after postmodernism in contemporary art.

Contemporary society actually, given its click with the self-devouring presentism, is saturated with what the moderns would call repetition, only that nowadays this repetition comes forth not only as a message conveyed by one side as a token of consumption to the other, but as the web of interactions between humans, between disciplines, between frameworks of all sorts and between different environments. Thus, for contemporaneity, repetition has to be read through the lines of interactivity, of the circuit in which subjectivities are placed. For Nicolas Bourriaud, interactivity is novel to the current mindset and its novelty – as used in contemporary art – lies in the fact that interactivity is no longer a tool but precisely the matter of how art is created nowadays<sup>26</sup>, not for the sake of art itself, but to engage the viewer and prevent them from getting bored.

Contemporary art both originates from and fosters interactivity. It is generated from interactivity not in the sense that artists use different pieces like in building a (modernist) collage, but in the sense that they take into consideration the energies and shifts which they observe between

various aspects of reality, biography, memory. It is common for contemporary works to juggle with autobiographical materials and equally social and universal symbols. Contemporary art also generates interactivity since it appeals to the viewer subjective grasp onto these combinations of memory lanes, community traditions and aseptic denominations and settings bestowed by the society, covering the spectrum between what is deeply personal and concealed and what is utterly objective, imposed from above or from the outside, laid in the open as a rule serializing people's behavior.

Based on Bourriaud's observations of contemporary art and its relationship with interactivity, it can be inferred that he primarily (though not exclusively) refers to installation art as an important product and sub-category of contemporary art, since in installation art one encounters precisely this mapping of energies between several objects and their significance and presence. Boris Groys even calls installation art as "the leading form in the framework of contemporary art", explaining that this privileged form goes against reproduction<sup>27</sup>. Let us imagine an installation made of personal family photos alongside commercial posters: these elements – both the photos and the posters – are, of course, the products of the serialization discussed by Umberto Eco. However, Groys says, through the very fact that those issues/samples are taken out of their given production series and circuit and reframed into the installation, they are no longer mere copies but the whole umbrella of the installation converts them into originals because "it is necessary to go to the installation to see them"<sup>28</sup>. In other words, the

installation establishes itself as an instance, presence and place in itself, playing by its own rules that revalidate elements through an entirely new context.

One objection might be that, in 2008, when Groy's wrote these lines, the internet and social media were still tuning their engines and spectators had to actually go to a museum to see a particular installation, while nowadays, one can easily find online photos of the installation without being necessary to go and see it "in flesh". But is it the same thing to see an installation *in situ* versus watching it in a photo? While this is an ongoing and nuanced debate, it is true that the installation (a) requires presence inside its context in order to reveal itself properly, as intended by both artist and curator, and (b) the interaction implied by the installation reaches its full potential when the viewer is physically present. That is why the installation triggers presence and, likewise, co-participation.

In itself, this offers the feeling of what contemporary is, according to Terry Smith, who connects contemporary curating, individual and collective experience and the real and possible shades of contemporary<sup>29</sup>. Smith takes installation art and interactivity a step further: the highest level of installation art is that where all the separate works (made by one or several artists) from an exhibition are thought as one ensemble, as one huge installation. The author of this vast, monolithic yet plurivocal and multi-layered installation is the curator: the one who not only makes the selection of artists and works and takes care of the setup of the exhibition, but also creates pathways for interpreting the artist's mini-world presented in the exhibition space. Under the signature of the curator, the exhibition as installation

activates both the interactivity between separate works by individual artists and the interactivity of separate instances within one individual work, turning into a sort of accelerator of particles for what the individual and collective experience means.

Likewise, the binomial of reproduction versus original is engaged in the exhibition as installation: created as an almost self-governing framework, the contemporary exhibition re-presents any copy outside the context that validates it as a copy, and plays with this tension of how an object can lose and retrieve its meaning and presence as something significantly new. This "significantly new" may spring from what Terry Smith sees as the paradoxical performance of the contemporary in art: on the one hand, "the most up-to-date instance as definitive of all present (and immediate future) possibility" and, on the other hand, "a relationship of equivocal temporizing concerning everything that constitutes this up-to-datedness"<sup>30</sup>. Briefly, Smith discusses how the contemporary both plays its role and simultaneously reflects on itself, making the contemporary both a prolongation of the latest fashion and a reflection bred by the connections and interactions between the disciplines and contexts generating that latest fashion. In a similar manner, the new of contemporaneity is forficate into what is the next thing and what can provide a reflexive understanding of the series of possible next things.

For contemporary art, the new can easily seem artificial and superficial: in a contemporary art installation or exhibition, the odds are one will find objects of the contingent, extracted from their daily context and, with some, little or no other intervention upon them, labeled as art.

Nonetheless, following Groys' argumentation about the installation, those objects are not their usual copies, part of a familiar and non-artistic series for some reasons. Firstly, they may well be significantly thwarted from their connotative meaning and function; Secondly, they are given a new role inside the display that re-presents them to the world as something different from what they are. Such objects belong to a series that lacks any tradition beyond its own function, existing solely for industrial and entertainment purpose. The re-presentation of such objects inside an installation is subjected to and operated through the tensions reclaiming an object from its series without tradition and recontextualizing the series inside a tradition always in view of how a break with tradition would unpredictably occur.

In this way, the first part of the article demonstrates how traces of modernism persist within contemporaneity. However, the originality of modernism has already been *betrayed* by postmodernist seriality, which, as mentioned, has become a framework for interactivity. What highlights interactivity in contemporary art is installation art which, at its highest level, is deployed in the art exhibition as huge installation. Through the circuit of energies, tensions, keys of interpretation of the installation and through its recontextualization of daily objects, the question at hand concerns the contemporary's capacity for self-reflection, and the reflective value of the new outside a series and inside the habitat of the exhibition as a realm in itself. Therefore, the contemporary exhibition and installation tackle not obsolescence or dullness of expanding the real world inside the gallery/museum, but how the

tensions between objects and elements can – through the relations fostered in the circuit – pose uniqueness and inventiveness, two values highly deemed by both capitalist modernity at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and modernism. Installation art is not about replicating ordinary objects but about ingeniously creating an unprecedented context for them, functioning like a sort of laboratory, in the sense that Claire Bishop explained post-2000 exhibitions through their overt intention of being laboratories for work in progress<sup>31</sup>.

But is this the sole purpose of the installation: to serve as an experimental platform for defining contemporary meaning through subjectively managed impersonal interactions as an end in itself? Is contemporary art only dully self-aware? In the following part, the aim is to investigate how these trajectories of the installation are put to play in the works of Elmgreen & Dragset with a strong conversion inward, for putting the new as an engine for furnishing interiority.

### **The Twin Twisted Realm of the Installations of Elmgreen & Dragset**

Perhaps it is not far-fetched to adapt considerations on modernism from the field of philology, since the Scandinavian duo Elmgreen & Dragset has originally departed from poetry and theater before embarking on the contemporary art venture. It can be claimed that both poetry and theater found a unique visual expression and intertwining (and even upgrading maybe) in the works and exhibitions of Elmgreen & Dragset, which cast out the immediacy of an art object and leave one lingering in a lyrical staging of meditation.

Highly sensitive, yet sharp and critical, their works present spaces and characters, either separately or together, in frozen moments that seem to continuously retell a story differently. In this way, their works draw on Peter Adkins observations about the modernist novel, which explores both the depths of human consciousness and on the non-human fringes of life<sup>32</sup>.

No wonder that James Westcott draws a comparison between them and the German artist Gregor Schneider. Both Schneider and Elmgreen & Dragset, notes Westcott, create installations of spaces where you can actually enter without being able to properly inhabit them, given the uncanniness these spaces induce, in a “certainly existentially uncomfortable manner”<sup>33</sup>. But, more than Schneider, the works of Elmgreen & Dragset seem prone to design, wittily and paradoxically wrapping their ideas into neat displays of up-to-date products furnishing a serene lifestyle in a perfect society that reached its maximum and where one, as a human being, can achieve its full potential because all personal needs are met. However, this very appearance is meant to conceal an emotional and existential chaos.

One stereotype that can be linked to their work is that of Scandinavian design: that equally and proportionately functional and nice manner of shaping pieces of furniture and displaying them inside a living space to raise living conditions to a pseudo-philosophy. But Scandinavian design is a stereotype in itself – it is a construct, as Jørn Guldberg sees it: the discourse of Scandinavian design

established an identification of the structure, shape, and performativity

of artifacts by making pleas for their rootedness in tradition, their natural conditioning, and their communitarian and egalitarian affordances. Much of the myth of Scandinavian design is due to such traditional, naturalistic, and “democratistic” conceptions. They might also explain why most texts concerned with the characteristics of Scandinavian design are, in fact, narratives about people rather than things<sup>34</sup>.

What Guldberg suggests above is that this discourse is an anthropomorphizing of things to the extent of creating the best living environment for a place without people or for a place where people’s impulses and desires are improperly silenced. In their interview for installation-exhibition *Bonne chance*, at Centre Pompidou-Metz, Elmgreen & Dragset actually call onto this haunting prevalence of Scandinavian/Nordic design in their upbringing, emphasizing that they are critical towards the uniformity of such a “monocultural look onto the world”<sup>35</sup>. They instrumentalize this uniformity, this utopian regime of balanced wellbeing, both in order to playfully address a cultural cliché and in order to confront a minimalism typical for the artistic institutional establishment. However, there is more to their minimalist approach than just irony. The ironic stance is complemented by a melancholic adherence to the aspects of a slowly declining society, which is also viewed with compassion. Moreover, as stressed by Gordon Hall, their minimalism can be considered part of a “gay minimalism” that would “teach us how to see bodies without demanding explanations of them”<sup>36</sup>.



### Couple-Double

Their minimalism comes also in strong relation to the idea of the double/couple: a very typical feature of their work is the use of twin structures that show very slight differences, if any at all. These doubles are actually couples, as the title of one such work, featuring two vertical diving boards, suggests. One such work comprises twin diving boards (one of them in pink, the other in blue). In *Prada Marfa* (2005), their work installed in the middle of the desert, twin shop windows are reunited under the same brand. There are twin bath sinks and mirrors, with intertwined pipes or twin urinals (a straightforward reference to Marcel Duchamp) with intertwined pipes titled *Gay Marriage* (2010). Another work of theirs comprises of a same sex sculptural reinterpretation of the painted kissers with faces covered in veils, by René Magritte (they filter this sculptural reinterpretation also through the pandemic paradigm where people needed to wear masks<sup>37</sup>).

The line stressed by Gordon Hall, of the gay minimalism of their works, is correct but it does stretch even further: this minimalism is mirrored through the doubling recurrent in their works – in this way, it even seems they fight minimalism with its own weapons, actually rendering a baroque fractal world multiplying through doubles. The double is also always inseparable from the couple, like a germination of mind and soul always connected to the other, to a real other that presents positive confrontation. In this sense, their works cannot be enclosed only in the type of art delivering an activist message: their works convey a world enciphered in this dual

conversation based on love, relationship, likeness, common interests, existential views, similar bodies. Their works featuring doubles not only depict similar bodies – such as same-sex relationships – but also examine the world through various perspectives. They address both stereotypes and metaphors, blending them together and exploring the concept of the double in terms of homosexuality and the Narcissus myth, who kisses his own split reflection in the water.

While for Gregor Schneider's double dead rooms, "the reiteration is doing something interesting and disturbing, something ungraspable"<sup>38</sup>, for Elmgreen & Dragset the reiteration of certain elements (also design elements that one would normally find in toilets or in swimming pools, thusly: by the water) is of course also strongly related to their artistic relationship and working as an artistic duo. In another interview, commenting on the vertical pool titled *Van Gogh's Ear* (2016), they draw a correspondence between the idea of the lonely genius artist whom is supposedly rewarded with creativity from divinity and the way their working as a duo is still a hard pill to swallow for the art world which doesn't seem to understand that art can come from dialogue<sup>39</sup>. Therefore, there are many layers attached to the idea of the double in their works, each layer structuring another, in a sort of loop. This loop is much like a Mobius band producing infinity, just as the mirroring of one element or one set of elements in their works is a resort to find an infinite dialogue that also extends to the binomial objective versus subjective, functional versus powerless – referring to their series of *Powerless Structures* (1997 – present), named as a citation

to Foucault –, body versus mental, design for openness versus design for seclusion, “image-like identities and thing-like identities”<sup>40</sup>. All their works in a way bounce between the realms of image and of thing, this restlessness in itself highlighting a split – however, this split takes a softer shade than the modernist split inside the unity of the self<sup>41</sup>, where the personality finds itself under the spell of doom. Commenting on the double, Cris Hassold mentions that “in the transitional phase (between modernism and postmodernism) we encounter the absence of the self where we would expect to find it and a presence of human qualities where we would not expect them”<sup>42</sup>. In the case of the works by Elmgreen & Dragset, the above observation can be applied precisely through the key of the minimalist design: their doubles, filtered through or incarnated from a minimalist impersonal design, play with a dull neutrality that suspends the self and the galvanizing of self onto inanimate objects. This may be one important feature that their works owe to postmodernism, because the subliminal ground of their doubles resides in a very modernist manner of reading selfhood and otherness, upgraded at the context of a contemporary society where homosexuality is no longer banned, as it used to be in the modernist society of early 20<sup>th</sup> century.

### **Loneliness through Pools and Characters – Textualization of Interiority**

Although it stems from the idea of dialogue, union, and (erotic) relationship, the doublings of Elmgreen & Dragset often reveal a sense of deep loneliness inside a communion, a feeling of unsurmountable

isolation that one can break only with much difficulty, even in the presence of the other. The artists actually admit this isolation and loneliness as fluent language of their works, a language that made these works reborn through the aspect of the pandemic<sup>43</sup> where isolation and loneliness came as natural for everyone.

Like in the case of the doubles, the works showcasing individuals or individuality are also clad in this bullet-proof appearance of Scandinavian/Nordic design, pouring into the obvious minimalism a drop of Pop Art from the serialized, consumer friendly society of the rich in disgrace. Their votive pool-structures come in many shapes and instances, cast as sort of monuments of contemporary nothingness. Normally, the pool prompts leisure and entertainment, erotic games, a womb-like container, along a certain status quo of criticized richness. Elmgreen & Dragset turn the pool into an oversized stand-alone element equipped with a rectangular diving board, sometimes respecting the usual configuration and setup of a pool but mostly defying it for a bent, Mobius-like, vertical and/or ear-like shape (perhaps even lacking the suggestion of water), placed in parks or in malls or in the very middle of a crowded square from a large city. The starting point of these pools was a diving board they created in their early days and that gave the impression of having water below it, when in fact it just leaned over a rocky hill<sup>44</sup>. One hint would be towards a grim grin of a suicidal attempt inserted as a comment on decisions, coming of age, facing competition in a society that applauds one as a gladiator. One such diving board, with a boy on its top, is even titled *Dilemma* (2017), as a reference to the existential

dilemma that people face individually regarding possibilities and roads they should or could take in their lives.

Imitating a fun playground where your body can be admired and, in turn, you can admire beautiful bodies in a mutually negotiated exposure, the pools and diving boards of Elmgreen & Dragset weaponize this blinding beauty and carefree spirit into mechanisms of inner torment – it is hard to see the torment from the perfect exterior, but this as well is a suggestion of how society operates. The diving board becomes the stage for the solo show of one's life's decisions, that are primarily made during youth.

It is very common for the works of Elmgreen & Dragset comprising mannequins/characters to feature young boys. These boys are part of the artists' need of overcoming the cleavage of the double by inventing a third persona with individual voice<sup>45</sup>, as a synthetic creation of a new identity. There is always a state of uncertainty regarding various aspects of the lives of these boy-mannequins: status, talent, expectations of others, sexuality and gender, desired persona, competitions and battles they are forced into winning, outside world and its pressures directly proportioned to the pressures of the family authority. One boy plays alone wearing VR goggles in *This Is How We Play Together* (2021), the boy from *The Painter* (2022) paints on a mirror, the reinterpreted Little Mermaid is another boy reenacting the famous pose of the girl-mermaid from Copenhagen, another boy tries on his mother's high heel shoes and watches himself in a mirror, in the work *Future* (2014) a sad boy stands on the top of a staircase without prospect, the end of a tennis match leaves one boy fainted on the field while his opponent celebrates his triumph in a very bitter

loneliness. None of these instances looks cheerful or optimistic – once the tribulations have started, the age of innocence is gone, devoured by anxiety, worries, self-pity, feelings of futility or power-hungry cruel attitudes. In a way, there's a lot of autistic-like behavior in the boyish mannequins of Elmgreen & Dragset – even if the viewer is not presented with the adult whose authority feats resulted in the young boy's seclusion and sadness, the viewer can still guess that there is such an entity providing a mature figure preaching the expectations of a tough, inhuman, depersonalizing system.

More seldom, other characters join the boy squad: the character of Bogdan, the elder gentlemen asleep in his wheelchair, the man looking through his binoculars from a lifeguard chair, the silent maid partially watching over a baby bed where an eagle sits. It is a world of estranged bourgeoisie and several temporal frames stereotypical of the Scandinavian history that clash in these works and characters.

Performing their sorrows and alienation, these characters – even if immobile sculptural modules – are meant to encapsulate an entire story about themselves and, according to the artists themselves, “creating a situation where the audience becomes sort of a performer and co-acts with the sculpture”<sup>46</sup>, since the sculpture is also of the size of a human. The emotional charge of these works is far more tempered than the “masochistic aesthetics”<sup>47</sup> of modernism – even so, whenever these works refer to any impulse of creation (be it artistic or not), there is a bubble of pain hinting at self-inflicted pain that is activated.

All these instances, all these mannequins, typically arranged within exhibitions, appear to serve as stations for revisiting

past traumas and, consequently, re-enacting a new wave of pain. However, at the same time, there is a sense of detachment that still intervenes in their installations and exhibitions as installations: although the pain, the suffering, the crises depicted in these works are nailed accurately, they are not turned into totems of self-pity or into doctrinal slogans. The recurring detachment in these works is intended to diminish the notion that the viewer is engaging with an open platform for interaction, instead enhancing the sense that these works and installations are solely reflective of the viewer's own world. On the other hand, it cannot be claimed that the detachment incorporated in the works of Elmgreen & Dragset and their penchant for citing art in their works is a mere intellectualist branding which feasts on the critique of contemporary art and its establishment. Elmgreen & Dragset do have a clearly intellectual touch in their art, but this intellectual touch is not limited to merely mocking mannerisms of contemporary art or depleting energy of interactivity and installation by virtue of routine. The realms they create inside an exhibiting space persuade the viewer not towards an activist/social/external/gregarious position, but towards interiorization, towards confronting the lonely characters alone, towards walking alone along the diving boards that actually allow only one person at a time. It is an intelligent staging of loneliness that rises against entertainment or activism – it is a call for the viewer to enter the virtual world that already exists within themselves. This virtual world does not refer to the world of the digital or to VR or AR, but to the land of fantasies and desires half unfinished.

From this point of view, their works and exhibitions are not meditations on the

contemporary but meditations on human nature that are gilded the way they are in the contemporary society. But precisely this thing makes them atemporal, stretching beyond a specific timeframe, reactivating memories. In their case, the topological implication of the installation, coined by Groys, suggests that one has to physically be in the exhibition space in order to feel this inward experience that functions like a trip, turning the surround system of interactivity into a matter of interiority and – likewise – upgrading interiority into a surround-system that presses the button of alienation.

This possibility given by contemporary installation: the possibility of cherishing the much-valued experience of one's inner world into the open, re-presenting demons and doubts, makes the topic of contemporary novelty feeding on modernism's need for introspection. While modernist introspection was mostly confined to an investigation of the self in the narrow space of an individual discourse that invites an individual and lonely reading of it – this example of contemporary installation creates a communal space where interaction is still individual, like in a park for introspection that permanently recycles and reassesses objects and items extracted from their given series and placed as artifacts of a world coming from moving pictures. In this way, the viewer can make their own moving picture, their world assemblage of stations of pain, travelling through an inherent pain fueling human consciousness with regards to itself and to whatever exists outside the human realm. Strictly speaking, the mannequins or the diving boards employed by Elmgreen & Dragset are not new as objects, but their contextualizing and twisting in storytelling situations makes them reflective instances channeling the new.

In her 2012 article, Claire Bishop discusses examples of delegated performance where she also includes a work by Elmgreen & Dragset: „delegated performance – outsourced to non-professionals who are asked to perform an aspect of their identities: (...) Elmgreen & Dragset’s hiring, variously, gay men to lounge around in the gallery listening to headphones”<sup>48</sup>. For Elmgreen & Dragset it is rather exceptional to have such performance works, because – as presented in this article – their focus lies on installations of objects and mannequins. What is noticeable in Bishop’s comment is that she connects this outsourcing of performance to normal individuals to the opportunity of showcasing an element of their identity, of their interiority. There is no need for professional actors because the interest is in creating characters in a text. We daresay that it is precisely the recurrent mannequins of Elmgreen & Dragset – as a simultaneity of objecthood and image – that render the tension of the text through the characters created. Their installations comprising of mannequins make use of a logic of the author/writer as puppeteer and objective, omniscient narrator, while at the same time criticizing this logic in the sense that when the public encounters a humanlike mannequin displaying a state of mind then the public is confronted with an intended detachment twisted with an inherent empathy towards the story encompassed in that mannequin.

Therefore, the mannequins as well as their present absence on the pool structures are a resort to the way a literary text works – and also to how it can be deconstructed. These installations summon the conventions of the traditional text where the narrator knows it all without interfering but also break the conventions by inoculating the

question the public should ask themselves: who is actually the narrator and who makes this text – the artists or the public? By creating such installations, Elmgreen & Dragset basically let the responsibility of the narrator pass from them onto the public. Through this, they turn the act of experience – of preconceived interactivity that is, as a matter of fact, missing – into an experience of the player as narrator, where the public is both a player questing through the installation and the narrator and re-writer of that experience. On top of it, the public is induced with the dilemma of now being outsourced as performer of their own interiority inside the installation, acknowledging the limits of the text thusly created. The text is not something that is “given”, but a mobile instance that coagulates precisely when one thinks they broke the veil of textuality. In these installations we commented on here, the text is not confined to a restricted convention and space. Rather, the text regroups according to how the public is inclined to place their own individual interiority and individuality along the interiority and individuality enacted by the mannequins. In this sense, the installations of Elmgreen & Dragset resolve the conflict of objecthood and image through this super-text which the installation frames beyond the limits of framing.

### **Conclusion**

**I**n the economy of contemporary art installations, there can be noticed how contemporaneity – as a philosophical current gaining more power after 9/11 and pervading the intersections between art and society – revitalizes aspects of modernism, in the sense of enhancing modernist drives for a sustainable world. One important aspect inherited from

modernism is that of interiority and introspection redefined in the knot of all possible networks and frameworks clashing around the individual consciousness.

In contemporaneity, through the filter of postmodernism, tradition is re-established not as crucial landmark but more as unmountable parameter of an archive shuffling different historical frames and narratives and – like the installation-exhibition – extracting objects from their habitual ordinary series in order to reassemble and cast them in the light of a irreproducible context. What is enacted in contemporaneity from modernism is its capacity to rebel against the parameter of anything that would become tradition – and, eventually, contemporaneity seems to say, everything becomes tradition. Does this mean that inside every process the self will become stiff and manneristic too? In their works, Elmgreen & Dragset resume precisely such processes that would make the self-stiff, engaging the means of this unfortunate transformation not only in terms of topic but also in terms of materials, forms and media. Their installations and installation-exhibitions perform the conformism of Scandinavian/Nordic design yet not as a victory of human supremacy but as a dystopia of uniformity where the self is crushed by all sorts of formal predictions, expectations and projections. It looks like they constantly need to reinvent the human from this laboratory of human-less design,

casting existential questions into sculptural mannequins and on the diving boards as existential catwalks for lonesome crises. They seem to play the game of contemporary art by its rules, although their body of works just seems to cleverly respect the rules of a global-archivistic-aseptic contemporaneity while it actually treats contemporaneity as a riverbed without content where the content they add proves to be a modernist monologue of individual pain.

As the contemporary installation-exhibition stirs the tensions between objects and shifts their serial profile into an original profile, the new, the novelty is proposed as a value stemming from intersections and interactions between and with these objects. In the installation art and installation-exhibitions by the Scandinavian duo Elmgreen & Dragset, these interactions between doubles, mannequins and pool-like structures are meant to create a platform of interiority, a place for reflection and channeling of suffering into meditation upon existential conditions. Although modernism cannot be considered as re-emergent in these works, there are undoubtable traces of a salient modernism that pop up into the grid of contemporaneity, in the high tension of the questions on what is human and where the human limits itself into nothingness, in the discourse by Elmgreen & Dragset based on ingeniousness, innovation and introspection, rendering a specific and aware new of contemporaneity.

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## NOTES

1. Umberto Eco, "Innovation & Repetition: Between Modern & Postmodern Aesthetics", in *Daedalus*, no. 4, vol. 134, 2005, p. 191.
2. David Ames and Seshagiri Urmila, "Metamodernism: Narratives of Continuity and Revolution", in *PMLA*, no. 1, vol. 129, 2014, p. 88.
3. Susan Stanford Friedman, *Planetary Modernisms: Provocations on Modernity Across Time*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2015, p. 3.

4. Terry Smith, "Introduction: The Contemporaneity Question", in Terry Smith, Okwui Enwezor, Nancy Condee (ed.), *Antinomies of Art and Culture: Modernity, Postmodernity, Contemporaneity*, Durham&London, Duke University Press, 2008, p. 4.
5. "Today, contemporaneity (in the complex sense defined earlier that includes the saturation of the present with many different kinds of pasts, both as memories and expectations) is significantly more powerful than historical determination as the definer of contemporary life".
- Terry Smith, *Thinking Contemporary Curating*, New York, Independent Curators International, 2012, p. 93.
6. "Time and value turn out to be crucial categories at stake in formulating a notion of what I call a 'dialectical contemporaneity', because it does not designate a style or period of the works themselves so much as an *approach* to them". Claire Bishop, *Radical Museology: Or What's Contemporary in Museums of Contemporary Art?*, Köln, Walther König, 2014, p. 6.
7. "As a historical concept, the contemporary thus involves a *projection of unity* onto the differential totality of the times of lives that are in principle, or potentially, present to each other in some way, at some particular time – and in particular, 'now', since it is the living present that provides the model of contemporaneity". Peter Osborne, *Contemporary Art Is Post-Conceptual Art*, public lecture, Fondazione Antonio Ratti, Villa Sucota, Como, 9<sup>th</sup> July 2010, p. 3.
8. Claire Bishop, *op. cit.*, p. 6.
9. Peter Osborne, "A Formalism as Wishful as It Was Dialectical", in Maria Hlavajova and Simon Sheikh (ed.), *Former West: Art and the Contemporary After 1989*, London, The MIT Press, 2016, p. 34.
10. Terry Smith, *op. cit.*, p. 93.
11. *Idem*, "Introduction: The Contemporaneity Question", in Terry Smith, Okwui Enwezor, Nancy Condee (ed.), *Modernity, Postmodernity, Contemporaneity*, Durham&London, Duke University Press, 2008, p. 2.
12. Susan Stanford Friedman, *op. cit.*, p. 1.
13. James Westcott, "Gregor Schneider and the Flattering Performance Installation", in *TDR (1988-)*, no. 4, vol. 49, 2005, p. 187.
14. Susan Stanford Friedman, *op. cit.*, p. 26.
15. *Ibidem*, p. 4.
16. *Ibidem*, p. 8.
17. Douglas Mao and Rebecca L. Walkowitz, "The New Modernist Studies", in *PMLA*, no. 3, vol. 123, 2008, p. 738-739.
18. David Ames and Seshagiri Urmila, *op. cit.*, p. 88.
19. *Ibidem*, p. 94.
20. Terry Smith, *op. cit.*, p. 8.
21. *Idem*, "Contemporary Art and Contemporaneity", in *Critical Inquiry*, no. 4, vol. 32, 2006, p. 688.
22. *Ibidem*, p. 689.
23. Umberto Eco, *op. cit.*, p. 200.
24. *Ibidem*, p. 194.
25. Peter Osborne, "Modernisms and mediations", in *Anywhere or Not at All. Philosophy of Contemporary Art*, London, Verso, 2013.
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28. *Ibidem*, p. 74.
29. Terry Smith, *Thinking Contemporary Curating*, p. 30.
30. *Ibidem*, p. 92.
31. Claire Bishop, "Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics", in *October*, no.110, vol. 110, 2004, p. 52.



32. Peter Adkins, "Introduction: Modernism and the Anthropocene", in *The Modernist Anthropocene: Nonhuman Life and Planetary Change in James Joyce, Virginia Woolf and Djuna Barnes*, Edinburgh University Press, 2022, p. 18.
33. James Westcott, "Gregor Schneider and the Flattering Performance Installation", in *TDR (1988-)*, no. 4, vol. 49, 2005, p. 186.
34. Jørn Guldberg, "'Scandinavian Design' as Discourse: The Exhibition 'Design in Scandinavia', 1954–57", in *Design Issues*, no. 2, vol. 27, 2011, p. 48.
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42. *Ibidem*, p. 253.
43. Nehemias Colindres, *op. cit.*
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