

Fondazione Prada

# USELESS BODIES?

ELMGREEN & DRAGSET

Milano

# THE EXHIBITION

The exhibition “Useless Bodies?” by the artist duo Elmgreen & Dragset explores the contemporary status of the body in our post-industrial age, in which it seems that our physical presence is losing its centrality and becoming increasingly superfluous. This shift now impacts every aspect of our lives: from our working conditions to our health, our interpersonal relationships and the way we retain information. The project explores how we adapt to a world increasingly based on two-dimensional imagery, and a labor market which has less use of our physical presence—not least in the light of the current pandemic.

“Useless Bodies?” occupies three of the buildings and part of the courtyard at Fondazione Prada. From the two floors of the Podium to the Nord gallery and through the Cisterna, Elmgreen & Dragset have created a sequence of site-specific, immersive installations, each with its own atmosphere, aesthetic and focus. Perception of the body is an underlying theme connecting many aspects of the artists’ work since they started their collaboration in 1995. In “Useless Bodies?” they investigate current transformations that are affecting our physicality across various parts of daily life—in relation to work, wellness, our domestic settings and within our shared public space.

On the ground floor of the Podium, figurative classical and neoclassical sculptures meet figurative works by Elmgreen & Dragset in a synchronic constellation. Inspired by Fondazione Prada’s inaugural exhibition “Serial Classic,” curated by Salvatore Settis and designed by Rem Koolhaas in 2015, which explored seriality in classical art, Elmgreen & Dragset here juxtapose the contemporary with the historic. The artworks on the ground floor reveal both similarities and differences in how artists have mediated the male physique and masculine identities in sculptural practices spanning centuries. Through a complex system of cross-references and gazes, the artists establish a dialogue between “now” and “then,” arguing for a rethinking of the historically defined role of being a “man.”

The second floor of the Podium is transformed into a vast, abandoned office landscape that focuses on the changing role of the body in relation to work. Rows of identical, cubical desks fill the entire space,

paying witness to how spaces were optimized for maximum productivity, before being left empty with no human presence. The installation, entitled *Garden of Eden* (2022), was conceived well before the recent Covid-related lockdowns, but can also be read as a monument to a time of workplace community, before “home office” became the norm. With its modular repetition of workstations, *Garden of Eden* recalls the geometric structures typical of 20th century Minimal sculpture. The environment, in which visitors can encounter tiny signs of the desk-owners’ private lives—like personal notes or coffee cups—also evokes dystopian movie sets.

In the Nord gallery, Elmgreen & Dragset continue their ongoing interest in exploring the meaning of “home,” as first shown in their exhibition “The Collectors” at the Nordic and Danish pavilions at the 53rd Venice Biennale in 2009, typically combining interior architecture, design objects and artworks in order to establish a narrative. Here, the audience enters a futuristic vision of a domestic setting—an eerie fusion of a bunker, a spaceship and a science lab, portraying an unlivable home of extreme vanity. No area seems designed to fully accommodate the needs of the body, provide comfort, or encourage any sort of daily activity. The clinical, dehumanized appearance of this space raises questions on how we exist in our homes today, especially now that we share them with technology to such a high degree. As an “uninvited guest,” the visitor is free to explore the space, gather clues and make up their own stories in an alienating environment reminiscent of a sci-fi movie, where the only occasional moving presence is that of a robotic dog. With the world’s richest entrepreneurs investing in space travel and cryonics, a home with a morgue in the living room might not be far off reality.

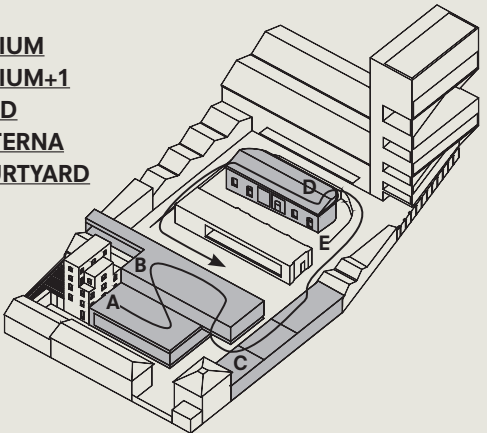
In the Cisterna, the artists have taken their starting point in the wellness, leisure, and health industries and how these impose pressure on us to conform to new body ideals. The three rooms of this building are turned into a forsaken spa-like environment, including an abandoned swimming pool and a locker room. As our bodies are being rendered useless by technological innovations, the ever-expanding wellness, leisure and health sectors are offering countless new ways to “solve the problem of the imperfect body.” The central room of the Cisterna features a work titled *What’s Left?* (2021), which can be interpreted as a representation of the body that struggles to find its role today as a political actor or instrument of social change.

The way our bodies are physically regulated in the public sphere is explored by a number of sculptures by Elmgreen & Dragset presented in the outdoor spaces connecting the various buildings at Fondazione Prada. These works are subtle alterations of everyday objects, such as street signs or public benches or a cash machine, all of which cannot be used as we would expect them to be. They encourage a re-evaluation of what we perceive as ordinary and highlight how we negotiate the control mechanisms embedded in public spaces. Centrally located is a section of the Berlin Wall, a relic from recent history and the era of the Cold war. Close to the entrance to the Torre visitors will find a car parked with two male figures seemingly sleeping inside. The car is filled with wrapped and crated artworks and on a closer look it becomes clear that the two young men might be art handlers. The car has Russian number plates and with the intimacy of the two male figures in their spooning position, this sculptural installation also speaks about the difficulties that the LGBTQIA+ population experiences in the current political climate in Russia.

From start to finish "Useless Bodies?" raises discourse on the shifting status of the human body in today's world. With each space addressing an independent everyday scenario, whether it be the gym, the home, the office or the museum itself, this exhibition draws attention to dilemmas that occur when we are made to believe that our bodies no longer function as the main agents of our very existence. However, it is the hope of the artists that this exhibition, along with its accompanying publication, can contribute to new debates about how to reclaim the body in future societies.

#### SPACES

- A PODIUM
- B PODIUM+1
- C NORD
- D CISTERNA
- E COURTYARD



# ELMGREEN & DRAGSET IN CONVERSATION WITH MARIO MAINETTI AND NICCOLÒ GRAVINA

**MARIO MAINETTI:** Why an exhibition about the body?

**ELMGREEN & DRAGSET:** We seem to use our bodies less and less in this post-industrial reality. Nearly everything has become digitized, taking place on screens, and our physical existence feels increasingly dispensable in the Western world. To look at this phenomenon and create an exhibition that could open discussions on the consequences of this repositioning, which impacts every aspect of our lives—from the way people work, to our health, our interpersonal relationships and how we communicate and retain information—it was not just something that we had hoped to delve into fully for a while, but actually ties together many different elements and themes that we have touched on in our sculptural and installation works over the years. Subjects such as loneliness, growing up, romantic liaisons and different living modes are all present across our oeuvre in different ways and all relate to our perception of the body. In fact, once the concept for this exhibition had taken hold, it seemed to make more and more sense in the context of our work as a whole and at this point in time.

**NICCOLÒ GRAVINA:** How is this theme articulated in relation to different shades of gender identity, and in particular to the investigation into the many expressions of the male universe that is part of your practice?

**E&D:** We have been exploring the body as a theme since the beginning of our collaboration, since our first performances together, where we did things like unraveling knitted garments off each other. As our own experiences and realities are often starting points for specific projects or sculptures, our bodies and male bodies more generally have felt like a natural subject to pursue. Moreover, being two gay men, who have not always or easily resonated with the more macho articulations of the masculine, we have intuitively been looking at a broader spectrum of identities and gender-related concerns and it is often manifested in our work—you could take *He* from 2013 as an example of this fluidity. With this male version of the Danish *Little Mermaid* sculpture, which was originally a public work titled *Han* (2012), we upset quite a lot of people, basically because the male figure is sitting with his legs to the side—a position traditionally seen as feminine. As the site for the public sculpture was a former shipyard jetty, some found that the figure did not represent the (masculine) image of a metal worker. This was not even ten years ago, and Denmark claims itself as one of the most socially liberal countries in the world. We often debate masculine fragility in our works. The image of a “strong man” is hard to keep up and can easily be challenged and shattered. This is why in parts of “Useless Bodies?”—especially on

the Podium—we continue to expand on the theme of the male identity, and it is compelling to negotiate the various mediations of the masculine, which are not always at the fore—those that are side-lined in the media or by history and seldom presented as societal ideals, like fearfulness, feelings of isolation or social pressure.

**NG:** In your exhibitions, the viewer is often invited to take a critical outlook that enables an unveiling of associations or analogies that are embedded in your works. Even since your first projects, the visitor is almost invited to take their own position on the themes dealt with in your work. What role does the viewer play in “Useless Bodies?”, is it different from past exhibitions?

**E&D:** With “Useless Bodies?” there is as much an absence of figures as there is a presence. The exhibition theme centers on the body, but in different spaces the sculptural body is more in focus, and in others, the visitor’s own body might feel more important. This exhibition actually consists of several shows, exhibitions within an exhibition. Each venue is created as a different universe, with its own atmosphere, its own themes and aesthetics. There is an openness in the variety of approaches to each space, which not only, hopefully, means that the audience will experience contrasting environments—ranging from a dystopian home to an abandoned swimming pool—but also that this shifting in focus stimulates new or divergent reactions and thought patterns. In the Podium, for example, which is filled with figurative works, it is the relationship between the bodies in the room that seems important—between the visitor’s real body and the marble, bronze, and sculpted works, as well as between the classical, neoclassical, and contemporary sculptures themselves. We try not to be prescriptive with our work or exhibitions, however, allowing for everyone to find their own understandings. We all have such different backgrounds that when we come to a museum, we all have independent experiences, and there is real value in that.

**MM:** Your sculptures, like those of classical art, have their own histories that develop through contextualization in new exhibitions and the production of editions. Your Podium presentation draws inspiration from our exhibition “Serial Classic” (2015) curated by Salvatore Settis, which explored relationships between originality and imitation in Roman culture and its circulation of multiples in homage to Greek art. How would you define the relationship between this part of your exhibition and “Serial Classic”?

**E&D:** Yes, the overall display on the Podium has very much taken its inspiration from the inaugural exhibition “Serial Classic” in this space. We loved that show, not least for the way it utilized the big open space with its transparency like a public square but also, its beautiful juxtapositions of the human form and the rectilinear, hard-edged architecture. Then of course the core thesis of the project proved that our modern ideas of the “original,” the “unique” do not actually correlate well with the classical Roman period. As the title of that show hinted at, sculptures were serialized, forms used over and over again, over long periods of time.

# PODIUM



If not otherwise specified, contemporary artworks in the following checklist are by Elmgreen & Dragset.

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|---|----|--|
|   | 7  | <i>Flo</i> , 2020<br>Bronze, lacquer<br>Courtesy the artists and Pace Gallery  |
| 1 | 8  | Bertel Thorvaldsen<br><i>Hyrdedreng</i> , 1822–1825<br>[Shepherd boy]<br>Marble<br>Thorvaldsens Museum, Copenhagen   |
| 2 | 9  | <i>Pregnant White Maid</i> , 2017<br>Aluminum, stainless steel, lacquer, clothing<br>Courtesy the artists and Perrotin / Collection of Bancrédito, Puerto Rico |
| 3 | 10 | <i>Invisible</i> , 2017<br>Bronze, marble, wood, lacquer, clothing<br>Courtesy the artists and Perrotin / The Nicola Erni Collection, CH                       |
| 4 | 11 | <i>The Painter, Fig. 2</i> , 2021<br>Bronze, stainless steel, aluminum, lacquer<br>Courtesy the artists and Pace Gallery                                       |
| 5 | 12 | <i>Runner</i> , 1st century BCE<br>Bronze<br>Museo Archeologico Nazionale, Naples  |
| 6 | 13 | <i>He (Silver)</i> , 2013<br>Epoxy resin, silver lacquer<br>Courtesy the artists and Perrotin / Private collection, Paris                                      |

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|---|---|
| <p>14 Luigi Secchi<br/><i>Al lido</i>, post 1893<br/>[At the beach]<br/>Plaster cast<br/>Accademia di Belle Arti di Brera, in storage at Galleria d'Arte Moderna, Milan</p> | <p>21 <i>For today I am a child</i>, 2016<br/>Gilded bronze, textile, metal, fabric, glass, wood, paint<br/>Courtesy the artists and Massimo De Carlo, Milan, London, Hong Kong / Collection of Keith Fox and Tom Keyes</p> |
| <p>15 <i>Farnese Antinous</i>, 2nd century<br/>Marble<br/>Museo Archeologico Nazionale, Naples</p>  | <p>22 <i>Elevator</i>, 2022<br/>Steel, lacquer, stainless steel<br/>Courtesy the artists</p>  |
| <p>16 <i>Multiple Me, Fig. 2</i>, 2022<br/>Steel, lacquer, mirrors<br/>Courtesy the artists</p>   | <p>23 Bertel Thorvaldsen<br/><i>Ganymedes rækker skålen</i>, 1804<br/>[Ganymede offering the cup]<br/>Marble<br/>Thorvaldsens Museum, Copenhagen</p>  |
| <p>17 John Börjeson<br/><i>Kägelspelaren</i>, 1871<br/>[Skittle player]<br/>Marble<br/>Gothenburg Museum of Art, Götaplatsen, Göteborg, Sweden</p>                          | <p>24 Pietro Tenerani<br/><i>Fauno in atto di suonare la tibia</i>, 1859<br/>[Faunus playing an aulos]<br/>Marble<br/>Villa Tasca, Famiglia d'Almerita, Palermo</p>   |
| <p>18 <i>This is How We Play Together</i>, 2021<br/>Bronze, lacquer<br/>Courtesy the artists and Perrotin / Christen Sveaas Art Collection</p>                              | <p>25 <i>Watching</i>, 2021<br/>Gilded bronze<br/>Courtesy the artists and Perrotin / Yaacov Gorsd Collection, Art consultancy Idit Orni</p>  |
| <p>19 Filippo Albacini<br/><i>Achille morente</i>, 1854<br/>[Dying Achilles]<br/>Marble<br/>Accademia Nazionale di San Luca, Rome</p>                                       |   |
| <p>20 <i>The Observer (Umbro)</i>, 2021<br/>Epoxy, aluminum, steel,</p>   |   |

The sculptural works included in our display on the Podium explore the relationship between classical, neo-classical, and contemporary figurative sculptures. Classical sculptures are displayed side-by-side with neo-classical artworks and interspersed around and set in dialogue with a selection of our own pieces. As the Roman sculptures in their day repurposed those of the Greek period, we could perhaps say that we repurpose and transform some of the classical sculptural language in our own figurative work, playing with the perceptions and values often adhered to in that language.

**MM:** What is your experience of Classical, Neoclassical and Modernist sculpture? What relationship is established between your works and those from the past?

**E&D:** As much as we believe in the importance of historic knowledge and academic discourse, we feel it is our job to read any art historical artifact from a personal and contemporary perspective. "What story is this sculpture or painting telling us now?" This does not mean that we are not interested in historical facts and contexts, but that we believe that a re-appraisal can teach us something new about our current society, who we are now. And it is worth mentioning that history has always been rewritten according to the ethical parameters of different time periods. When we use our own pre-existing pieces in new exhibitions, we can place sculptures in completely



new contexts, and they start to tell different stories. If someone else were to do it, we would perhaps be worried, but we do it ourselves and in that way we are not loyal to sculptures having static meanings.

As human beings, we change all the time, the world is changing all the time. So, we look at the Classical and Neoclassical, or pieces from the Renaissance in a completely different way today. The same can now be said for Modernist works too. The idea of the avant-garde has changed, and the Modernist language is known to a mass audience today. This means it gives artists the freedom to play with this language in a broader sense with no need for translation. We have no qualms about using any formal language, technique or ism, as long as it serves in communicating the concept of the work.

**MM:** In the Podium there are no hyper-realistic figures, although they feature elsewhere in the exhibition. The sculptures here are still realistic—dressed, assuming poses from everyday life and occasionally including humorous or alienating elements. What is the relationship in your work between statue and body? How do you decide what should be realistic and what should be ideal?

**E&D:** By casting a bodily pose in bronze, you memorialize it in a different way than you would if the body was presented in a hyper-realist way. One could even speak of a form of perceived elevation. Not a real one of course, but one that plays with perceptions of history, of value, of permanence. In a hyper-realistic representation, you play more with the momentary situation, elements of surprise, of immediate emotion, of make-believe. This immediate emotion is not there in the same way in a bronze cast; the emotion is not at the core, it is transformed into a conflict, in the way that it is removed from of the sphere of “reality” and presented back to you as a story about a story or as representation. When confronted with a bronze sculpture that is painted white, you might empathize with the story of the figure (in the situation), rather than the figure itself. It is a story you need to recognize within yourself.

Bronze sculptures also function in relation to a sculptural tradition and the materiality of it becomes part of the reading of it. The hyper-realist figure, on the other hand, has a much more direct effect—you tend to read the sculpture as a person, as an actual character. We choose one of these approaches according to the relationship we want to build between sculpture, audience, and space.

**NG:** As in previous exhibitions, the only female figure included is the sculpture *Pregnant White Maid* (2017) [9], located next to and in relation to *Invisible* (2017) [10], a crouching child who takes on a protective pose. How can we explain this presence, which embodies numerous socio-economic issues, and partly evokes 19th-century depictions of servitude?

**E&D:** Sadly, this expectation of servitude is not a thing of the past for many, especially women. The uniform might have disappeared from many workplaces, also for domestic staff, but that does not mean that the hierarchies and power imbalances are not still there. If anything, they might even have become stronger and

simultaneously harder to discern and deal with directly than before.

The *Pregnant White Maid* figure is included in order to sow confusion, to evoke shame, and maybe even some hope in that it points to a new future. Yes, it is a female figure, but it is very much speaking about masculinity and the Freudian concept of the Madonna-Whore Complex. Men still often struggle with finding a balance between sexual desire and love, a fact that shows itself in everything from dating app wording to current feminist debate.

Many men seem unable to reconcile different simultaneous roles held in their opposites. The scared son huddled up inside the fireplace in *Invisible* might be the child of the master of the household—a sexual predator who might be the one to have got the maid pregnant—and the maid might even be his mother. There are plenty possibilities for different disturbing narratives linked to this scenario.

## PODIUM+1



26 *It's The Small Things in Life That Really Matter, Blah, Blah, Blah*, 2006  
Wood, door handles, hinges, paint, electronic number display, number dispenser, plant, pot, seating arrangement with 4 seats  
Courtesy the artists / ZKM | Center for Art and Media Karlsruhe

27 *Flint Water*, 2022  
Watercooler, Flint water  
Courtesy the artists

28 *Garden of Eden*, 2022  
MDF, aluminum, fabric, monitors, keyboards, computer mice, office chairs  
Courtesy the artists

**MM:** On the upper floor of the Podium, you reflect on the questioning of the role of the body in the context of labor and on the crisis of the work-places, exacerbated also by the growing practice of remote working. How do you interpret recent developments in the world of labor in relation to the body?

**E&D:** Our bodies are no longer the main agents of our existence. They don't generate value in our societies' advanced production methods as they did in the industrial era, and our physical selves have even become more of an obstacle than an advantage. Especially within the workplace, in this time of threatening pandemics and in a world increasingly based on two-dimensional imagery, which the body cannot partake in. It is changing the definition of the self as well as our value systems and we are physically being excluded from a large part of the reality that surrounds us. In the 19th century, the body was the

producer of daily goods, whereas, in the 20th century, the body's role became more that of the consumer. Twenty years into the 21st century one could claim that the status of the body is now that of the product—with our individual data gathered and sold by companies like Google and Facebook. With the publicly available knowledge surrounding the harvesting of data from tech companies being so inane, and the rapidly accelerating rate at which such companies are expanding into every aspect of our lives, it does sometimes feel a little scary to think about our bodies' future role.

**NG:** The idea of transforming the upper floor of the Podium into an office space was born in relation to the architecture of the exhibition space. This creative process resembles your artistic approach to the Danish and Nordic pavilions at the Venice Biennale in 2009, where you transformed two pavilions into abandoned villas of make-believe collectors. This arose when you noticed similarities between the architecture of the national pavilions and that of an upmarket suburb. Through repeated use of this approach, there seems to be the consolidation of a method. How has this creative process evolved in our exhibition?

**E&D:** The architecture and locations in which we do projects are integral to how we make our artistic decisions when we exhibit in a spatial setting—they contribute largely to how we approach artworks and installations as different situational contexts bring forth different significances, whether they are on a community level, or pertaining to how people use or do not use a particular environment physically. Transforming art spaces into various settings, often departing from the expected institutional appearance, especially the stiff white cube, is a device that we have developed since the early 2000s. We have created a subway station, a full-scale art fair, an airport, a hospital ward, an abandoned public pool as well as various domestic settings and, most recently, a car park setting—all inside museums. By creating these unexpected environments in which artworks can be encountered, we find that by altering the exhibition display, our artworks can be experienced differently, free of this admiration for the institutional prominence. Admiration also has to do with power, so by interrupting that dynamic, there is a leveling of sorts. The architecture of the upper Podium seemed so clinical with its sparse spatial features when we first visited, that the idea of transforming it into a wasteland-like, hostile office landscape clicked quite quickly. The large room felt like it could have been a laboratory or area for storage, so we have transformed it into a space for human storage. The repetitive design of the seemingly endless rows of workstations that make up our installation there pulls on this reductive minimalism of the building, but it also relates to Carl Andre and Donald Judd's Minimal, geometric formats too. Films with utopian or dystopian office landscapes in them, like *Brazil* (1985) or Jacques Tati's *Playtime* (1967), also came to mind as we developed this idea.

**MM:** The deserted office is also animated by the presence of the Fondazione Prada invigilators, emphasized by the label

on their shirts. How do the room attendants' bodies play a crucial role?

**E&D:** Sometimes, in museums or in exhibitions, we involve the guards because their role is a bit strange: on the one hand, they are supposed to be present to watch out so that nothing happens, but on the other hand they are supposed to be so inconspicuous that they are not seen. In this exhibition the room attendants will wear shirts with labels saying, "Useless Bodies?", which includes them, as people, more directly in the project and hopefully dissolves a bit of that reticence between visitor and guardian, which is sometimes present in museums. By including the attendants integrally in the show like this, we are able to carry the conversation on the status of our bodies in today's world, which is raised throughout the exhibition, beyond the artworks and spaces, into a more personal and sociable dimension. The staff wearing the tags "Useless Bodies?" seems, on first impression, to question the bodies and the status of the work of the staff members themselves, which is of course outrageous. At the same time, however, it reveals a kind of thinking that we all subconsciously become victims of in our everyday encounters: is this or that person's job, their physical presence, of any importance, efficiency, value? And if so, how important, efficient, or valuable in relation to myself? We have become used to thinking in terms of speed and optimization, rather than the value of the individual as part of a larger community. Such questions of course also apply to the role of the artist or the artworks on display.

**NG:** In the course of our conversations, the topic of the anonymity of employees has been raised, the conditions of which have changed very little in the last fifty years. How do you respond through your artworks to how the labor situation of so many people has remained unchanged?

**E&D:** In many exhibitions over the past twenty-five years, we have accentuated or celebrated the work that is normally hidden from public view in any art institution. In "Zwischen anderen Ereignissen" (Between other events, 2000) at Galerie für Zeitgenössische Kunst in Leipzig, we prolonged the process of the re-painting of the galleries that normally goes on between exhibitions to last for the whole exhibition period. The two painters that were temporarily hired came in every day for several weeks to continue painting the walls white. About a year later, we appropriated the whole re-design and renovation of Kunsthalle Zürich, letting the audience experience both the demolition process of the old building and the construction of the new. Making something visible can be the beginning of change. Seeing or acknowledging the work that goes into making something, into creating and sustaining something is fundamental to respect for a social balance and equality.

In another work in "Useless Bodies?" we discuss labor conditions further. In *The Outsiders* (2020) [56], which is installed outside in the courtyard, two realistic, silicone figures depicting two young art handlers lie spooning in the back of an old Mercedes estate car surrounded

by packed artworks. It seems like they have no other possible accommodation and therefore have to sleep in their car. Low paid art handlers and technicians are most often not seen when the opening of an exhibition or an art fair takes place. They undertake the important labor that goes into setting up the show but are then not part of the spectacle.

## NORD



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|---|---|
| <p>29 Lucio Fontana<br/><i>Concetto spaziale. La fine di Dio</i>, 1963<br/>[Spatial concept. The end of God]<br/>Oil, gashes, holes and graffiti on canvas<br/>Private collection</p>   | <p>Courtesy the artists and Georg Jensen</p> <p><i>Looking Back</i>, 2022<br/>Stainless steel, aluminum, paint, easel<br/>Courtesy the artists</p>          |
| <p>30 <i>Doubt</i>, 2019<br/>Stainless steel, Oriol, aluminum, bronze, lacquer<br/>Courtesy the artists and Pace Gallery / Sunpride Foundation</p>  | <p><i>Untitled (After The Lovers)</i>, 2015<br/>Zellan, stainless steel, MDF, lacquer<br/>Courtesy the artists and Perrotin</p>                             |
| <p>31 <i>Humanized Architecture</i>, 2019<br/>Stainless steel<br/>Courtesy the artists</p>  | <p>34 <i>Powerless Structures, Fig. 282</i>, 2022<br/>Transparency, lightbox, plastic tube, rubber, hole drilled into the wall<br/>Courtesy the artists</p> |
| <p>32 <i>Tailbone</i>, 2019<br/>Aluminum, lacquer, Oriol, stainless steel, steel<br/>Courtesy Kukje Gallery / Kyung-Tak Kim Collection, Seoul</p>   | <p>35 <i>Circulation</i>, 2019<br/>Stainless steel<br/>Courtesy the artists and Pace Gallery</p>  |
| <p>33 From top to bottom, from left to right</p> <p>Nancy Grossmann<br/><i>Black</i>, 1973–1974<br/>Leather, wood, paint, epoxy, cast aluminum and metal hardware<br/>Courtesy Michael Rosenfeld Gallery LLC, New York, USA</p> | <p>36 <i>Pollarded Tree</i>, 2022<br/>C-print on aluminum<br/>Courtesy the artists</p>  |
| <p><i>The Bed</i>, 2019<br/>Sterling silver, fabric, cellphones</p>   | <p>37 <i>Untitled</i>, 2011<br/>Steel, wood, silicone male figure, fabric<br/>Courtesy the artists and Perrotin</p>   |

**MM:** In the Nord gallery, some domestic-looking features and objects, which seem to have been chosen more for show than to meet the needs of the body, are thrown into question. Similarly, the impossibility of satisfying needs and desires is a theme that also emerges in relation to your work in the Cisterna and the Courtyards, and creates paradoxical contexts. Is there something that unites all these elements running through the entire exhibition? Do you think that design, which was born in relation to the needs of a body or community, has lost its relationship with the physicality of people?

**E&D:** With its windowless wall structures, the environment of the Nord gallery might remind its viewers of spaces of transition or commerce, for confinement, or even a panic room, a laboratory, a space ship or a bunker. It is, however, thought of as a futuristic home— an unlivable, but maybe still not completely unrealistic domestic setting of extreme vanity. The design is based on various tendencies in current architecture and interior design, but has been further developed to create an environment which might serve partly as a prediction, partly as a warning of what our homes might turn into—somewhere between what might be possible and the alarmingly unthinkable. It's meant to have the feel of a show-home, intended for public display rather than for comfort. Furniture today can seem so uncomfortable, too, it does lead you to wonder if it's been designed for the body or if the body is meant to fit to the design. The concept underlying our Nord gallery presentation perpetuates the notion of life as an exhibit and looks at how our private lives are increasingly becoming more public the more we share online. There's a duality in this trend, which is leading to this public, virtual presentation influencing our private choices, particularly in terms of taste.

Throughout the whole exhibition a current runs, which looks at our bodily relationship with different objects, from sculptures to street signs. Here, in the Nord gallery, there are design objects that most of us encounter every day in our homes. The dystopian atmosphere in this space, which is emphasized by these clinically designed objects, is meant to raise questions about how we exist in our own homes today, especially now that we share them with technology to such a high degree.

**NG:** Compared to the existing industrial structure, the architecture of the Nord gallery has been radically reconfigured, drastically altering the perception of the original space and consequently raising a series of social and cultural questions. What does this drastic intervention—initiated by creating a temporary architectural scenario—suggest?

**E&D:** In a way, this installation is a new direction for us, because it does not take its inspiration from the features or role of the "mother space" (as with the office landscape at Podium +1), but rather works try to remodel the original space and, for the most part, even hides it. It is a complete stage, where the stage set is all-enveloping. We intentionally aimed for a degree of artifice, in order to underline the aspect of alienation. On the other hand, this "building within the building" is not so unusual in Milan, famous for its large, often immersive design installations during Salone del Mobile. Still, like with our former "domestic settings as installations," the audience enters into a sort of role, as an uninvited guest, as a "detective," free to roam the space and make up their own stories from what they see and discover, from the cues given in the artifacts, in the design, in the atmospheres created. And it has an atmosphere a little like doomsday or a sci-fi film-set to it. The only "living" being in the space besides the visitors themselves is a robotic dog...

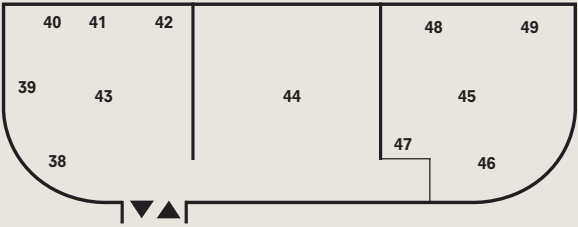
**NG:** The Nord gallery is a futuristic, almost sci-fi domestic environment presenting elements easily associated with a home, including a kitchen, a dining table, a bed, a fireplace, and a sofa, which are related to the movements, sensations, and needs of the body in everyday life. However, the overall design of the space appears idealized, not functional: an attempt to arouse associations beyond the usual domestic sphere. The space has no bathroom and closes with a morgue containing a hyper-realistic figure of a dead body, *Untitled* (2011). Why is the only place where death is physically present in this home environment, built as if intended for public display?

**E&D:** *Untitled* (2011) is installed at the end of the Nord gallery. It's a morgue with one compartment open and the lower body of a deceased person visible from under a white sheet. Death is sometimes delineated as the only true democratic denominator between humans: we will all pass away, no matter our different backgrounds, how rich or poor, how lucky or unlucky we have been throughout our lives. However true this is, we still die under seriously different circumstances. For the very few, very rich, cryonics is now an option for dying a little differently, with the hope that science will reach a point where you can be resurrected in the future. Many dream of passing away quietly in their own bed, of a family grave that is tended to and cared for by a loving family, never to be forgotten. Here, these aspirations are taken to their extreme, the ultimate resting place is situated directly within the living-room area of the domestic setting and visible from the bed, where both sleep, dreams and orgasms ("*la petite mort*" in French) have been described as experiences close to death. As the only human figure in the Nord gallery installation, the corpse serves as a *memento mori*, highlighting the absence of human contact and developed personalities in this quasi-dystopian, dehumanized domestic environment.

**NG:** The design of the interior space appears dehumanized—the robot dog is the only moving presence in the exhibition. Is this a parodic prediction of our future relationship with pets, or a reflection on the consequences of contemporary technological evolution? How do you see our future in relation to technology?

**E&D:** People already develop strong relationships to avatars online, so we wouldn't say that the robot dog is a parody of the human need for company and comfort, but a pretty direct image of where we're at or where we're headed in that respect. Our generation might still be terrified of a robot nurse bringing us our medicine and orange juice in a retirement home, but for future generations this will be normal. One hope we have is that people will generally have much more time on their hands, so that it is possible to balance out the machine/human ratio in everyday life by being together in a social way that has nothing to do with work or productivity. But of course, the dog is also a symbol of how our needs and desires now and in the near future will be taken care of artificially, and how parts of our social lives will be based on substitutes.

# CISTERNA



- |   |   |
|---|---|
| <p>38 <i>Marriage</i>, 2004<br/>Mirrors, porcelain sinks, taps, stainless steel tubing, soap<br/>Courtesy the artists and König Galerie, Berlin, London, Seoul</p>                        | <p>44 <i>What's Left?</i>, 2021<br/>Silicone, clothing, wire rope, balancing pole<br/>Courtesy the artists</p>                                    |
| <p>39 <i>The Touch</i>, 2011<br/>Massage bench, silicone, fabric<br/>Courtesy the artists and Perrotin</p>  | <p>45 <i>Piscina di Largo Isarco</i>, 2022 [Largo Isarco pool]<br/>Mixed media<br/>Courtesy the artists</p>                                       |
| <p>40 <i>Powerless Structures, Fig. 19</i>, 1998<br/>Underwear, blue jeans<br/>Courtesy the artists</p>   | <p>46 <i>Too Heavy</i>, 2017<br/>Aluminum, lacquer, stainless steel, fabric<br/>Courtesy the artists and König Galerie, Berlin, London, Seoul</p> |
| <p>41 <i>Spogliatoio 2 / Powerless Structures, Fig. 128</i>, 2022 [Changing room 2 / Powerless Structures, Fig. 128]<br/>Teak door, metal handles and hinges<br/>Courtesy the artists</p> | <p>47 <i>I must make amends, Fig. 2</i>, 2019<br/>Bronze, patina<br/>Courtesy the artists and König Galerie, Berlin, London, Seoul</p>            |
| <p>42 <i>Powerless Structures, Fig. 137</i>, 2015<br/>Wood, door handles, hinges, safety locks, chain<br/>Courtesy the artists</p>  | <p>48 <i>A Hard Rain's A-Gonna Fall</i>, 2021<br/>Bronze, patina<br/>Courtesy the artists</p>   |
| <p>43 <i>Superstars (Gold)</i>, 2019<br/>Bronze, goldleaf<br/>Courtesy the artists and</p>  | <p>49 <i>Free Play</i>, 2018<br/>Wood, stain, paint<br/>Courtesy the artists and König Galerie, Berlin, London, Seoul</p>                         |

**NG:** In the Cisterna, the pressures to conform to a body ideal dictated by the media in relation to the wellness, leisure and health industries are investigated. Why did you decide to place the tightrope walker, *What's Left?* (2021) [44], in this space, the only human figure that explicitly addresses the crisis of leftist antagonistic forces in the contemporary world?

**E&D:** In "Useless Bodies?" the Cisterna spaces are transformed into a series of spa-like scenarios, taking a look into how the wellness industry is changing the way we exercise, spend money, and interact with our own health, not to mention how it contributes to how we perceive ourselves, develop our identities and relate to others. As our bodies are being rendered useless by technological innovations, the ever-expanding wellness, leisure, sex, and health industries are offering countless new ways to "solve" the "problem" of the "imperfect" body. For some, approaches from fitness to yoga to



plastic surgery are seen as solutions to improving the appearance of the physical self: adjusting it in pursuit of optimal health, endless youth, or perfecting it according to dominant aesthetic norms. For others, recreational activities serve as a reminder of our physical existence when we gather together with other human beings in contexts ranging from sports facilities, shopping malls, museums, art fairs, rave parties, or street demonstrations. Between the locker room and the abandoned swimming pool in the Cisterna is a room dedicated to a new work, *What's Left?*, which consists of the figure of a tightrope walker who is seemingly slipped from his position on the wire and is hanging on to it, suspended from one hand. The figure is hyper-realistic and made of silicone, so the scene really seems frozen in time, in a precarious way. It is not clear what caused the man to slip, but suddenly this strong and agile body is faced with making a momentous decision: to fall or attempt to haul himself back up. He wears a t-shirt with the slogan "What's Left?", which is deliberately multi-layered: is it a political question, an existential one or is it just nihilistic? The individualized society, as outlined above, is a challenge for the political left, which literally struggles to find a balance between an acknowledgement of the general population's obsession with well-being as individuals and the proclaimed political aim to make life better for the masses.

**MM:** How has your relationship with your body changed over the years, and what relationship do you have with exercise and the wellness industry? In the exhibition you also included *Bogdan (2020)* [1], a figure of an elderly man in a wheelchair. Do you think that in the future aging and loss of body power may become an important issue in your work?

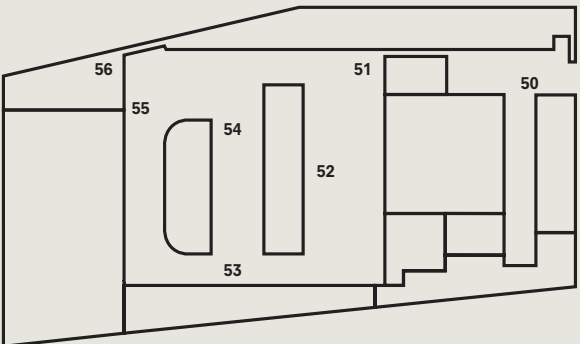
**E&D:** It would be absurd if our relationships to our own bodies had not changed over the years. Together, we are 113 years old! That is a lot of life lived. We met when we were young, so we have also witnessed each other's bodies age and change, and been there when the other was sick, in hospital and so on. Having this collaborative mirror keeps things real, to say it that way. No illusions or delusions of eternal youth at least. The first thing that happened as we got a bit older, was that we both felt the need to look back at childhood. Before middle age, we were too preoccupied with the moment, with the next step, with the near future to think much about the past. But then you reach a certain point, and you realize that you keep on repeating a lot of the same behavioral patterns that you have always done, and you start to ask "Why?", "How did I become this person?" Now that we have dealt with a lot of that childhood trauma, we might be more ready to look forward. And part of our not-so-distant future is of course getting old. We will see what experiences that brings with it. We often use personal experience only as a starting point though, a trigger to study the circumstance of the experience. This circumstance is often more interesting to explore, since it is not only relevant to ourselves, but often to a larger part of society.

**NG:** In your work the concepts of pleasure and desire play a fundamental role, also in relation to the possible illusions or

frustrations that may arise from them. Since antiquity, from Plato to Medieval Mysticism, the relationship between desire and pleasure has often been observed with suspicion, but it is from Romanticism onwards that desire tends to approach explicitly the idea of a yearning, a painful longing. From this point of view, the association of desire, pleasure and even emotional pain in your works may recall the thoughts of authors who, from Arthur Schopenhauer to Sigmund Freud, have revealed how to some extent we all also pursue our own evil. Why is pleasure in your works often hindered or delayed, and the desired object is often unreachable?

E&D: We have found that denial is a great device for kickstarting analytical or critical thought—it can initiate curiosity or frustration even on a small scale, which leads to an immediate mental process of assessing why one is being confronted with a denied situation, possibly also attempting to overcome it. This thought process is quite a subconscious human reaction and it is something we have really looked into and played with since our early works. Our *Powerless Structures* series, which we started in the 1990s, is based on manipulating objects or structures or denying their functionality. Examples of these works in the locker-room environment in the Cisterna include the double doors that are latched to each other and *Marriage* (2004) [38], two sinks connected with conjoined piping, so they had never drained. The approach to this body of works draws on Michel Foucault's theories that power is in fact assigned to objects or concepts by people, rather than being inherent. When we manipulate an object or deny its functionality, any associated power or meaning conceptually tied to it can be reassessed and we find that this can be accentuated by changing the contexts in which objects are encountered. For us, by playing with expectations and desires, which are so psychologically complex, we find that new possibilities of interpretation are opened up between object, individual, and society at large. And isn't so much of desire dependent on denial? We seem to yearn for what we cannot get, for that which is unreachable.

## COURTYARD



- |    |   |    |   |
|----|---|----|---|
| 50 | <i>Adaptation, Fig. 2, 2020</i><br>Stainless steel<br>Collection Würth  | 54 | <i>Marbella Beach, June 21st, 1989, 2015</i><br>Bronze, paint<br>Courtesy the artists and Nicolai Wallner / Private collection                          |
| 51 | <i>Statue of Liberty, Fig. 2, 2018–2021</i><br>Original section of the Berlin wall, cash machine, stainless steel<br>Courtesy the artists                   | 55 | <i>Adaptation, Fig. 9, 2020</i><br>Stainless steel<br>Courtesy the artists and Nicolai Wallner  |
| 52 | <i>Adaptation, Fig. 16, 2020</i><br>Stainless steel<br>Courtesy the artists   | 56 | <i>The Outsiders, 2020</i><br>Mercedes W123, silicone, clothing, packed artworks<br>Courtesy the artists and Pace Gallery / David H' Collection, Geneva |
| 53 | <i>Powerless Structures, Fig. 117, 2001</i><br>MDF, iron, paint, silk-screened letters<br>Courtesy König Galerie, Berlin, London, Seoul / Sammlung Wemhöner |    |   |

NG: Many times in the past you have been confronted with the monumental and the public. The work *Statue of Liberty, Fig. 2* (2018–2021) [51], composed of an original part of the Berlin Wall incorporating an ATM, could be considered a monument of criticism of capitalist and neoliberal ideological appropriation. The work is of course also a relic of the Cold War era that has suddenly taken on a different meaning given the current situation in Ukraine. Yet, as emerges from your public *Memorial to the Homosexuals Persecuted under the National Socialist Regime* (2008), permanently installed in Berlin, even in your monumental production the dialectic between public and private is far from univocal. How does your work change when a project becomes public and escapes the control of your narrative?

E&D: When we create artworks, we follow them from the seed of an idea through every step of the production process, through edits and refinements, until we get to the final piece, and it is exhibited. We are close to them throughout that journey, but once an artwork is launched into the world, it sort of takes on its own identity. It is interesting when works take on their own lives and develop beyond our control. New works and particularly our public or outdoor sculptures become integrated into their environments over time, becoming embedded in the fabric of a particular community or space, surrounded by public. This physical integration is important, especially given the crises museums and institutions are currently facing and the fact that so much of art is now experienced digitally, accelerated by the pandemic.

In terms of subjects, however, we also find the boundaries between public and private an intersection that is both meaty and delicate and is a psychological space we have explored in many of our works. Here in the courtyard of the Fondazione, we have included works from our *Adaptation* series, the street signs with mirrored surfaces that show no instructions. Instead, they reflect your surroundings back at you, uniquely returning cropped views of the public space around you, only to you. You may see other people, or yourself, but no one else will share that specific view and in that way, your interactions with public through the sculpture

remain private. There is a voyeurism that can come with playing with these two divergent worlds, that subtly asks you to assess your place within them.

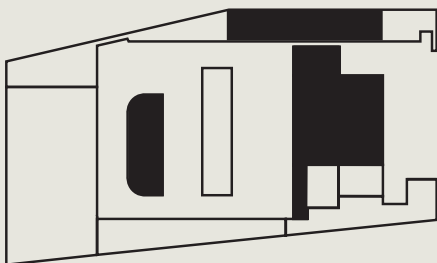
**NG:** In "Useless Bodies?" the visitor goes through abandoned public spaces, private domestic environments intended for public display rather than comfort, and workplaces where a personal dimension timidly tries to emerge. The dialectic between public and private spaces has been one of the main themes of your work. What are the developments of this dialogue in this exhibition? The use of different spaces in this way creates variety, and the juxtaposition of these contrasting installations takes us to a new level. How does the multiplicity of approaches to exhibition spaces affect the theme of the show?

**E&D:** By walking through the different spaces, you go through many experiences and emotions, each of them relating to the body in different ways. It should also be mentioned that all of these spaces are recognizable in their core concepts from most people's everyday lives: the workplace, the home, the gym, the street, the park bench, each with their twists. We wanted to work with this familiarity as a starting point, so that the visitors feel that this is about us all, about all our bodies, individually as well as collectively; meaning in relation to each other and to the environments that surround us. The contrasting aesthetic appearances of one venue to the next are like the contrasts we might experience in our own lives or like the visual jumps we experience when we dream.

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