

# ELMGREEN & DRAGSET

## deconstructive games



Michael Elmgreen and Ingar Dragset take minimalism to its illogical conclusion. Their primary focus is on what they understand as the quintessential modernist concept of the art gallery as minimalist ‘white cube’. Commenting on their first ‘painting performance’ (*12 Hours of White Paint*, Ex-Teresa, Mexico City and Galleri Tommy Lund, Odense, 1997) the artists note that:

For twelve hours we continuously painted and washed down the walls of a smooth white cube space, until the physical features of the gallery blurred and became an accidental landscape. By adding more of the gallery’s main signifier, white paint, the gallery became relieved of its so-called sublime qualities and could no longer function as just a neutral backdrop for the presentation of art. {Winkelmann, 2000 n.p.}

In this work Elmgreen and Dragset appear to set out not to erase the white cube but to amplify it out of its quiescent purity via an artistic intensification of its iconic whiteness. In



Elmgreen and Dragset, Secession, Vienna, 1998



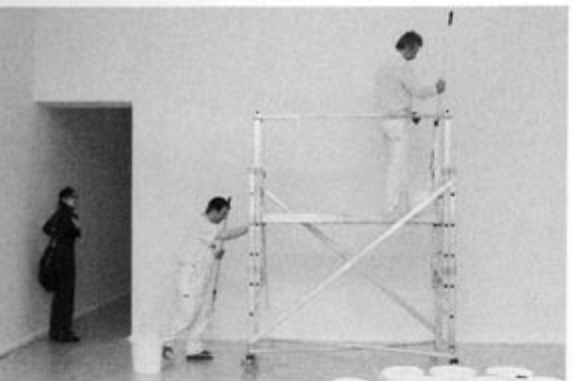
another version at the Vienna Secession they increased the self-reflexive nature of their endeavour by creating a 'white cube' within the white cube in the manner of the Russian doll-like logic of the *mise en abyme*:

At the Secession in Vienna (1998), we constructed a 6 x 6 metre glass cube in the middle of the exhibition hall. From the inside of this box we painted and scraped down the transparent walls over and over again. We wanted to create a constantly changing space within this old, venerable institution. This performance defined its own space through the painting activity, and through the shifting transparency and enclosure it entered into this peek-a-boo-like dialogue with the audience. {Winkelmann, 2000 n.p.}

These early works were performances but in the case of *Zwischen anderen Ereignissen (Between Other Events)* they decided to hire two professional painter and decorators. They note that 'it was important for us to avoid any of the romanticized ideas that cling to the artist's body or the artist-subject performing. By employing professional house painters to do the job, we took one step away from issues related to the artistic self' {Winkelmann, 2000}. Yet when Elmgreen and Dragset continue to discuss *Between Other Events* it becomes evident that there is a significant degree of respect for the aesthetic traditions they are allegedly confronting and confounding. This is evident when they discuss their relationship with the people they hired: a 'Mr Richter' and a 'Mr Rothe'. Elmgreen and Dragset talk of their 'collaboration'

with Rothe and Richter, yet one can note that this did not extend to Rothe and Richter's names being added to those of the privileged *artistic selves*: Elmgreen and Dragset. The two artists continue:

The more we spoke about the project, the more the painters could also relate to it with a deeper personal engagement. Somehow it must have appeared quite weird to them in the very beginning to be asked to paint the same venue white over and over again for seven weeks. But while we were working in the space together ... the painters gradually hooked on to the idea. They figured out that this was not just a joke or a provocative gesture on our part but that we were serious about the whole thing that we cared for the details and that we had a great respect for their professional skills. {Winkelmann, 2000}



What is interesting here is that an apparently pointless activity is taken so seriously by Elmgreen and Dragset. Their reference to the 'deeper personal engagement' of the painters they employed seems distant from Dada and Duchampian anti-aesthetics. Elmgreen and Dragset's absurdist gravitas leads one to the conclusion that post-Duchampian transgression has become aestheticized. Which is to say the antiaesthetic has acquired what Walter Benjamin referred to as 'cult value'. Elmgreen and Dragset continue their report on the indoctrination of Rothe and Richter into the dogma of High (Anti)Art:

Later on, when they [Rothe and Richter] were interviewed by a local newspaper, the journalist tried hard to get them to complain about their participation in this project. Instead

of doing so, they replied in a very insightful and loyal way. And, don't you remember when you once got corrected by one of them. You said something about just painting white over and over again, and I think it was Mr. Rothe who told you that white was not just white, but that each room of the space would always have a slightly different tone. {Winkelmann, 2000}

Rothe's response reminds one of the white on white minimalist paintings of Robert Ryman, and Rauschenberg's Zen-inspired *White Painting*, 1955. From such reports one could be forgiven for assuming that what appears to be the deconstruction of the 'white cube' is actually a *reconstruction*, or recapitulation of High Modernist aesthetics. But that is not accurate because this is not an action that leads to a heroic object such as Donald Judd's minimalist boxes. Instead it is intertwined with the everyday via the employment of people previously untutored in avant-gardist art. This leads one to read this action as a situational extension of the minimalist aesthetic into a poetics of the everyday.