

PRESS RELEASE

Prague, 24 October 2023

The artist duo Elmgreen & Dragset will transform Kunsthalle Praha into a curious public library. Titled *READ*, their exhibition celebrates Prague's literary heritage, and brings together works by sixty international artists.

Elmgreen & Dragset: READ

16 November 2023—22 April 2024

Gallery 1 & Gallery 2 at Kunsthalle Praha, 900 m²

Concept & curation: Elmgreen & Dragset

In collaboration with: Christelle Havranek (Chief Curator at Kunsthalle Praha) & Barbora Ropková (Collection Curator at Kunsthalle Praha)

For their first major exhibition in Czechia, Elmgreen & Dragset present their own work alongside artworks by sixty artists. Encompassing various decades, geographic regions, and artistic movements, many of these works have been selected from Kunsthalle Praha's Collection, while other artists have been personally invited by the duo to participate. The sprawling exhibition *READ* focuses on the historic and enduring relevance of books. Designed as a minimalist version of a contemporary public library, it also questions our relationship with books as physical objects and knowledge in the age of digital media. The title not only encourages reading, but also learning and understanding, as in to “read the signs,” “read a situation,” and “read the room.”

Prague's Library Culture

Inspired by Prague's literary heritage and culture of libraries, Elmgreen & Dragset will completely transform two large gallery areas in Kunsthalle Praha, the city's newest contemporary art space. The initial concept for *READ* emerged from an early encounter between the artists and **a key work in Kunsthalle Praha's Collection, Giorgio de Chirico's *Les jouets défendus (1916) (Forbidden Toys)***. This enigmatic small format painting is a study of unnamed books depicted as geometrical shapes in an obscure setting. It prompted Elmgreen & Dragset to delve into Kunsthalle Praha's Collection and seek out works that thematically resonated with de Chirico's metaphysical portrayal of books.

Following their recent spatial transformations for the exhibitions *Bonne Chance* (Centre Pompidou-Metz, Metz, 2023) and *Useless Bodies* (Fondazione Prada, Milan, 2022), *READ* embraces a certain nostalgia for the 20th century while also addressing current issues and planting seeds for future discussions. In *READ*, Elmgreen & Dragset take on the library as a

crucial space not just for the sharing of knowledge but for providing basic services with recent cuts on social safety nets. As digital spaces gradually replace physical ones, the artists are subtly probing the future of public libraries.

“Prague is a city where the written word has a rich, complex history. Upon the invitation to study Kunsthalle Praha’s collection, we approached this exhibition by asking ourselves: ‘What happens to libraries and the printed matter within them if digital technologies were to make them obsolete?’ In the process, we have investigated how artists historically have reimagined and reworked the idea of what a book can be. In a time where books get banned in places where we would not have imagined it in our lifetime, we found it urgent to also include recent history and current practices where books and writing play an important role,” say Michael Elmgreen & Ingar Dragset jointly.

The duo put the project together with **the institution’s Chief Curator, Christelle Havranek,** and **Barbora Ropková, Collection Curator** at Kunsthalle Praha. *“READ is an extensive group exhibition that has been developed over two years in close collaboration between the teams of Elmgreen & Dragset’s studio and Kunsthalle Praha. Questioning with humour and poetry, the future of shared spaces for accessing knowledge, the exhibition is, above all, a vibrant tribute to the physical book—an object that, despite being endangered, continues to captivate and inspire artists,”* adds Havranek.

The Kunsthalle Praha Collection as a Source

In 2021, Kunsthalle Praha expanded its collection with an important set assembled by Marie and Milan Knížák which focuses on the art of the **Fluxus Movement**. A range of these artworks will be exhibited in *READ* for the first time since the acquisition. Beyond Fluxus, a selection of pieces from the Kunsthalle Praha Collection by artists such as **Kurt Schwitters, Běla Kolářová** or **Chiharu Shiota**, tracing different artistic approaches to the book as an object and artistic medium. The earliest works shown are documents of pre- and post-World War II anxieties, whereas more recent works display concerns about an era dominated by the immaterial and the digital.

Numerous artists whose works are included in *READ* share a connection to Berlin, the city where Elmgreen & Dragset have lived and worked since 1997. Notably, parallels can be drawn between Prague and Berlin as historically significant literary centres and hubs of resistance. Both cities have evolved from their turbulent pasts to become symbols of individual freedom and fertile ground for innovative forms of expression. Furthermore, the term and institutional model of a "kunsthalle" serves as a reminder of Prague's multicultural history as a city where three nations and two languages co-existed.

Invited Artists

The invited artists in *READ* all have continuously revised the book as a focal matter in their multi-faceted art practices. **Dora García** will present a new work, for which she has read Václav Havel's plays *Audience*, *Vernissage* and *Petition* with her fingers coated in gold dust.

Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster presents, in collaboration with queer theorist **Paul B. Preciado**, a collection of texts that have opened academic and civic debates to feminist and transfeminist perspectives. In partnership with Prague Municipal Library, **Meriç Algün** will present a new iteration of her *Library of Unborrowed Books* project. **Jaro Varga** will show his ongoing project *Library* in the Kunsthalle foyer, where the audience will have the chance to write their own imaginary titles on the spines of books, while **Saädane Afif** will exhibit a work with Czech books on mountain climbing, placed at a high and inaccessible point.

In addition, *READ* will feature a selection of special book presentations. This includes a project from the **Chicago Center for Caspar David Friedrich Studies**, devoted exclusively to books with Caspar David Friedrich's *Wanderer Above the Sea of Mists* (1818) on the cover, as well as a selection of six hundred Czech translations of French literature on loan from the French Institute in Prague.

Library Structures

In Gallery 1, visitors will encounter familiar library structures, such as rows of bookshelves, an information desk, tables with reading lamps, and a public restroom. Artworks will appear throughout the space, sometimes tucked into bookshelves. Beyond the shelves, visitors will find the fifth iteration of the duo's **durational performance, *Diaries***. Originally presented as *Paris Diaries* at Perrotin in 2003, the artists have subsequently presented the performance as *Istanbul* (2013), *Hong Kong* (2015), and *Dallas Diaries* (2019). *Prague Diaries* will feature five young men seated at a long table during Wednesdays and weekends throughout the run of the exhibition. The audience will encounter the performers keeping their diaries; visitors are free to walk around, read over the diarists' shoulders, and flip through the notebooks when the performers are on a break.

In the upper Gallery 2, Elmgreen & Dragset render some of the library structures inaccessible; bookshelves hanging upside down from the ceiling, and crumbling, unclimbable stairs leading to a door marked "Filozofie" (Philosophy). Paper works will be shown in large glass vitrines under the watch of ***The Guardian***, a sculpture by Elmgreen & Dragset created especially for *READ*. Another installation will feature recently banned books, pointing out the enduring importance of libraries as repositories of knowledge, and linking present-day political turmoil with that experienced by totalitarian regimes in the past.

***READ* is on display from 16 November 2023 until 22 April 2024 and is accompanied by a rich programme of talks, performances, screenings, and workshops.**

ENDS

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NOTES TO EDITORS

Exhibition Catalogue

Along with *READ*, Kunsthalle Praha is set to release an illustrated **exhibition catalogue** with international distribution by DCV. With essays from the exhibition's collaborator Barbora Ropková (Collection Curator, Kunsthalle Praha), Paul Bazon (Assistant Professor of English, Skidmore College), and Michal Přibáň (Institute of Czech Literature of the CAS), the book will offer in-depth perspectives on the themes touched upon in the exhibition, such as the library as a space of history; the phenomena of a text in Czech art and samizdat literature (literature secretly written, copied, and circulated in the former Soviet Union).

List of Exhibited Artists

Georges Adéagbo, Saâdane Afif, Meriç Algün, Dotty Attie, Cay Bahnmiller, Olga Balema, Vlastimil Beneš, Barbara Bloom, George Brecht, Marcel Broodthaers, Pavel Büchler, Sophie Calle, Thomas Cap de Ville, Alejandro Cesarco, The Chicago Center for Caspar David Friedrich Studies, Giorgio de Chirico, Jean-Philippe Delhomme, Braco Dimitrijević, Aleksandra Domanović, Emory Douglas, Elmgreen & Dragset, Robert Filliou, Ken Friedman, Kasia Fudakowski, Simon Fujiwara, Dora García, Isa Genzken, Dominique Gonzales-Foerster & Paul B. Preciado, Tomislav Gotovac, Dick Higgins, Vladimír Houdek, IRWIN, František Janoušek, Allan Kaprow, Kirsten Pieroth, Tarik Kiswanson, Milan Knížák, Běla Kolářová, Jiří Kolář, Tony Lewis, Tom Lubbock, Vlado Martek, Endre Nemes, Nam June Paik, Géza Pernecky, Zhang Peili, Katarína Poliačiková, Florian Pumhösl, Chiharu Shiota, Marek Schovánek, Kurt Schwitters, Slavs and Tatars, Nedko Solakov, Jindřich Štyrský, Gert & Uwe Tobias, Endre Tót, Jaro Varga, Wolf Vostell, Peter Weibel, Ruth Wolf-Rehfeldt



About Elmgreen & Dragset

Elmgreen & Dragset have collaborated as an artist duo since 1995 and have lived and worked in Berlin since 1997. In their artistic practice they pursue questions of identity and belonging, and through working methods that often challenge conventional modes of exhibition making, the artist duo aims to re-contextualize or alter the conditions for how we, as an audience, perceive sculptural objects. The artists have held numerous solo exhibitions in art institutions worldwide.

Their work has been included in biennials such as the Bangkok (2018), Istanbul (2013, 2011, 2001), Gwangju (2006, 2002) and the Venice Biennale (2009, 2003). In 2017 the artists curated the Istanbul Biennial. Works by the artists are included in numerous collections, including the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago; Louisiana Museum of Modern Art, Humlebæk; Astrup Fearnley Museum, Oslo; Städel Museum, Frankfurt am Main; Pinakothek der Moderne, Munich; Hamburger Bahnhof—Museum für Gegenwart, Berlin; Museum für Moderne Kunst, Frankfurt am Main; Tel Aviv Museum of Art, Tel Aviv; and the Benesse Art Site, Naoshima, among many others. In 2002, Elmgreen & Dragset were awarded the Preis der Nationalgalerie für Junge Kunst and the artist duo received the B.Z.-Kulturpreis in January 2020.

elmgreen-dragset.com

[instagram.com/elmgreenanddragsetstudio](https://www.instagram.com/elmgreenanddragsetstudio)

About Kunsthalle Praha

Kunsthalle Praha is the newest addition to Prague's vibrant cultural scene, as the institution officially opened to the public on 22 February 2022. The non-governmental and non-profit platform was founded by **The Pudil Family Foundation** of Pavlína and Petr Pudil. Kunsthalle Praha was created through the architectural conversion of the Zenger Transformer Station from the 1930s and was awarded with **The National Architecture Award** in 2022. It now offers a modern gallery environment for short-term art exhibitions, innovative educational programmes, and cultural events.

Kunsthalle's mission is to connect the Czech and international art scenes, to present innovative perspectives on the art and culture of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, and to engage the widest possible audience in the experience and understanding of art through a dynamic programme. It has its own art collection focusing on modern, post-war, and contemporary art.

Recent exhibitions include the large-scale multimedia exhibition ***Kinetismus: 100 Years of Electricity in Art*** (22/2–29/8 2022) guest curated by Peter Weibel with Christelle Havranek, Gregor Hildebrandt's largest exhibition and retrospective to date: ***A Blink of an Eye and the Years are Behind Us*** (29/9 2022–13/2 2023), curated by the institution's chief curator Christelle Havranek; and ***Bohemia: History of an Idea, 1950–2000*** (23/3 2023–16/10 2023), guest curated by Russell Ferguson. Over an area of **5,687 m²** the premises feature three large gallery



spaces, an industrial-style bistro, a design shop, and a café with a historical terrace overlooking Petřín and Prague Castle.

kunsthallepraha.org

[instagram.com/kunsthallepraha](https://www.instagram.com/kunsthallepraha)