

# The Erotic Frigidaire

by Massimiliano Gioni

Love is a matter of spaces—a distance we constantly try to bridge even as we fear it might grow too wide. It is in this negotiation of proximities, in this crossing of territories, that we define ourselves as individuals and as members of a group, a couple, a family. Love dwells in the space between myself trying to become yours and you and I becoming us.

Elmgreen & Dragset—but I would like to call them Michael and Ingar if you don't mind: again it's a matter of closeness, and I cannot really be objective about them—Michael and Ingar have worked on spaces and structures, on architectures and buildings, often subverting and transforming their functions and compromising their distances. They have used space as others have used marble: the perimeters of a room, the walls of a building take on a malleable substance in Michael and Ingar's work. They can be shrunk, polished, stretched and bent to illusionistic effects, but they can also float in mid air, or sink underground. With their whitewashed surfaces, Michael and Ingar's constructions seem to mimic the repul-

sive, dull architecture of institutions—the endless corridors of hospitals, the waiting rooms of unemployment offices or the anaesthetized confines of some high-tech prison cell. There is something sanitized in their installations, a coldness that one is tempted to read as clinical, repressive, or simply impersonal.

And yet all of Michael and Ingar's efforts concentrate precisely on forcing this distance, on warming things up, and one shouldn't forget that white is not only the color of cold institutional anonymity; it's also the color of bed sheets, possibly the tone of intimacy and sex. Split as it is between a playful, almost polymorphic sensuousness and an impersonal rigidity, Michael and Ingar's work speaks of a continuous struggle between proximity—or shall we say promiscuity?—and detachment. Could it be, then, that Michael and Ingar's fascination with space and the dialectics of public and private began precisely in that narrow passage we might call love?

Corridors, tunnels and conduits abound in the work of Elmgreen & Dragset. Even when directly mimicking the architecture of galleries and museums Michael and Ingar tend to change the proportions of buildings and bring things closer, even a little too close. In their *Cruising Pavilion*, the geometry of traditional modernist architecture is fractured and partitioned to allow for unorthodox uses. The interior space of the pavilion is a maze-like structure divided, segmented and then interconnected by so-called "glory holes," circular openings and fissures cut into the walls for anonymous sexual encounters: the perimeters of the white cube suddenly activated by a new geometry of desire.

Michael and Ingar often depict a subterranean world that is directly connected to the realm of fantasy. Libidinal needs or romantic cravings are both evoked and denied in the melancholic *Wishing Well*—a square pool in the ground that is sealed with a glass safety lid, allowing no more wishes to be expressed or realized. But secret passages are reopened in *End Station*, a perfectly reconstructed imaginary subway stop, in which time appears stuck in the early 1980s, when sexual voracity began to give way to the fear of HIV. In *Short Cut*, the artists imagine a mysterious journey through the center of the earth by an eternally lost global tourist, while for *Dug Down Gallery* they buried a gallery in the ground, rendering it useless. This is not so much a negation of functionality as an act of showing new possibilities, new escape routes, new knacks of continuing our old relationship with these familiar settings and designs—an art of both illusions and delusions.

Far from celebrating a conciliatory view of public space as a site for collective participation and reciprocal understanding, Michael and Ingar set up situations that are much more complex and conflictual. Their installations encapsulate diverse functions that are intended to generate intense frictions, such as in the *Cruising Pavilion*, or in *Use House*, a temporary structure realized in a park and left to be appropri-