



## CV

The artist duo Mathias & Mathias consists of Mathias Toubro (b. 1986) and Mathias Dyhr (b. 1991). They both graduated from the Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts in 2016 and have worked together since 2012. Mathias & Mathias have exhibited extensively at art institutions and galleries, including Tranen Contemporary Art Centre, Ringsted Galleriet, The Exhibition Space Q, Last Resort Gallery, Sculpture by the Sea, Skulptur Odense, Heart Museum of Contemporary Art, as well as Museo Nacional de Art in Mexico.

## EVENTS

Thursday 8 February 5-6.30pm

### WALK & TALK

Join us for an exhibition tour, when Mathias & Mathias will talk about the ideas and the process behind their current exhibition as well as their practice in general. The event will be in Danish.

Thursday 1 March 6-7.30pm

### LECTURE: ART, LAW AND SOCIETY

This evening, Overgaden offers an insight into what happens when art clashes with the systems of society. First Ole Thyssen, Dr. Phil. and Professor Emeritus at CBS, will discuss the relationship between art and other domains of society such as economics, politics, law, science, and religion. Afterwards lawyer Christine Ulrich Andersen will give a number of real examples of how art and law have collided – and why it sometimes can be difficult to deal with art in a legal context. The event will be in Danish.

## THANK YOU

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Image: Mathias & Mathias, *Kære*, 2018. Detail from the installation.

This exhibition folder can be downloaded from: [overgaden.org](http://overgaden.org)

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**OVERGADEN.**

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*The Aesthetic Sphere as Critical Stage  
– The Art Practice of Mathias & Mathias*

By Anna Krogh

The avant-garde of the early 20th century strove to connect with reality. Art was to merge with everyday life through a social practice linked to social values and norms. And all of this was to take place via an artistic revolution capable of breaking down boundaries and making an aesthetic mandate the basis for society's *raison d'être*.<sup>1</sup> Since then artists have approached this kind of understanding of the critical potential of art in various ways. This is often where major breakthroughs are made – where something new occurs.

Avant-garde or not, art is embedded in reality, created by real-life artists using real materials. But can art be anything other than fiction? An artistic interpretation of the world – of life? At a general level it could be claimed that art transforms reality into artworks in their own right. As a society we need this existential processing of daily existence, because what our approach to art and reality have in common is that they are basically both about life and our sense of meaning.

#### MATHIAS & MATHIAS

Both artists in the art duo Mathias & Mathias are graduates of the Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts and have worked together since 2012. Their collective art practice focuses on the aesthetic sphere – understood in the avant-garde sense of both production and perception – as the true, principal force of art. It is not about the individual subject (including the artist), but rather about community – the public. With a basis in the aesthetic, visual and artistic realm, they expose and articulate social issues. Mathias & Mathias' central hypothesis is that art is an inevitable part of reality, like an indispensable atom: that it is critically illuminating, but also has the capacity to redefine by virtue of its aesthetic value.

As their solo exhibition at Overgaden demonstrates, Mathias & Mathias work across media including sculpture, text and film. Their *œuvre* is based on actual events, but also includes a wealth of references to the aesthetic realm, including theatre and the avant-garde art of the 1920s and 1960s. Reality and fiction co-exist in a conscious mix where objects, words, and moving images seem familiar to viewers through their basis in events known to the public. The artists thus draw reality into the aesthetic realm. And make it relevant.

Mathias & Mathias base their work on the premise that whilst art might be something other than reality – a representation, an illusion – the one cannot exist without the other. Art has the capacity to generate narratives, the most important task of which is to pinpoint the conditions and circumstances of real life. Which

is what Mathias & Mathias do: tell stories about what touches us as aesthetically sensing beings, as members of society.

#### ART AS THEATRE

The duo's installations can be experienced as stylised stage sets or actual plays. In the exhibitions *Kære* (Overgaden, 2018), *Artie* (HEART, 2017) or *Dumplings* (Last Resort Gallery, 2015) they present their sculptures as props on a stage. The viewer does not necessarily 'read' the entire narrative, let alone the meaning of the individual elements in the installation. Like absurd theatre, their works operate in an open field where the props provide fragments of a narrative it is the viewer's role to complete.<sup>2</sup>

Mathias & Mathias thus work in the field of installational art, in which the physical space – and thereby the space of the viewer – is brought into play. Like the British playwright Harold Pinter (1930-2008), they are not interested in a logical, rationally defined plot as such, but rather in the *state* the work puts the viewer in. Therein lies its signifying performativity. Physical movement within the artistic universe generates a bodily perception revolving around experience and the self. As viewers we thus occupy a role in generating the meaning of the work, something Mathias & Mathias use to probe epistemological validity and concepts of truth. How does perception gain broader legitimacy, and how can it be converted into real life?

The aesthetic realm activates a world beyond that of art: at an immediate level by the concept of the work being embedded in a concrete event, and at a physical level through the viewer being present in the work. Like a contemporary, avant-garde practice in which art, the aesthetic object (and aesthetic experience), as well as the realm of reality are brought into play in one and the same space – another version of Peter Bürger's concept of the autonomy of the avant-garde being a prerequisite for the liberation of art from the art establishment. Mathias & Mathias take this intention at face value by insisting that art does not exist in an independent sphere, at a remove from actual reality. Instead they create an aesthetically based realm that is experienced and existent, thereby creating the potential for an alternative articulation of the social, cultural and political relations of reality.

#### THE AESTHETIC MANDATE

Whereas Mathias & Mathias draw on the aesthetic and philosophical ideas of the modernist avant-garde, their methods are developments of the artistic tendencies of the 1990s dubbed 'relational aesthetics' by the French

curator and theorist Nicolas Bourriaud. In relational aesthetics the work of art is based on social relations rather than aesthetic objects. Dialogue with the audience is key to the work, which thus involves the viewer not as a passive recipient, but as an active participant. In many cases the goal of the relational artwork is to establish a direct relationship between the work and the participant. Mathias & Mathias also work with the viewer as an active participant, but whereas relational aesthetics discounts the signifying potential of the art object, Mathias & Mathias insist on its communicative and critical capacity to articulate their artistic intention. The tangibility, presence and core of the object is accentuated, creating a connection between art and the viewer. It is in the material object that dialogue with the viewer begins.

The concept of the avant-garde embodies a tension between high and mass culture, between modernity and bourgeois thinking – between modern art's credo of freedom, the imagination and radical innovation and a more conservative orientation towards the establishment. This is a boundary both the avant-garde and relational aesthetics strive to eliminate. Similarly, Mathias & Mathias strive to involve the commonplace in art, converting the aesthetic realm into a discourse that extends into reality. The activist art represented by Mathias & Mathias has the aesthetics as its catalyst, has art as its primary voice. There is a clear mandate to create art that acts as a transformative force. That our aesthetic experience influences our social practice as well as the norms and values of society.

Mathias & Mathias work with the hypothesis that art operates as an integrated part of the social structure, as one language among many. They address the importance of aesthetic judgement for society at a concrete level, and of the individual at a specific level. And they reflect on the actual (critical) legitimacy of art. Using the human element, they investigate the potential influence of aesthetics on social rules and regulations, more specifically when these cross swords with art and thereby become a public matter.

Contemporary art is not revolutionary per se, but a lot of new art has an avant-garde approach. Whereas in the 1990s innovative art was driven by the idealism of relational aesthetics, and in the 2000s the focus was on formalist art, there has subsequently been a marked interest in the avant-garde or critical potential of the aesthetic object. Mathias & Mathias can be seen as representatives of a generation of artists with a conceptually based practice that rethinks the activist qualities and potential of the art object.

The avant-garde was criticised by Peter Bürger and others for failing to engage with reality, for wasting its revolutionary potential. Many of the non-representational works of relational aesthetics also left a puzzled audience in their wake. The critique was that whereas the art object of the avant-garde ended up on a pedestal, relational aesthetics converted public space into an autonomous art institution for art's own sake.

The modelling of an aesthetic object placed in an open, democratised space might just be the *raison d'être* of new contemporary art. There is an immediate accessibility to a visual, physical object with a narrative based in reality. When that object is then placed in a public space, art and reality merge like two mutually dependent universes. The legitimacy of art today lies precisely in the democratic co-ownership through which the aesthetic realm can engage the audience contemporary art seeks to activate. It is here that the potential for new knowledge, new realisations, and new insight based on collective aesthetic experience lies, and here that the object-based practice of Mathias & Mathias is located.

*Anna Krogh is curator at Brandts – Museum of Art and Visual Culture.*

Translation: Jane Rowley

1. In his seminal text *Theory of the Avant-Garde* (1974), Peter Bürger addresses the revolutionary potential of the avant-garde to transform bourgeois society. Bürger emphasises the possibility of art pushing boundaries and breaking with the bourgeois social order and the art of the establishment, but also addresses the failure of the avant-garde to be entirely successful in doing so.  
2. One of the focuses of the art duo is the absurd theatre of the 1960s, in which only the realm of aesthetics can provide meaningful and valuable answers to the meaninglessness of life. *Commedia dell'Arte* is another source of inspiration based on the allegedly ordinary individual and their everyday life.