

Introduction

Niet Normaal * Difference on Display is an art exhibition, but not in the traditional sense. It is more of an exploration, an investigation into the concept of normality within our contemporary society.

What is normal and who decides? The question weaves itself through the exhibition's different sections. Is it normal for banks to collapse because of the greed of a few? Do we think it reasonable that pharmaceutical companies keep prices artificially high so that many cannot afford to take medication? Or that teenage boys and girls develop distorted views of each other when they take photoshopped images as their point of reference?

Difference on Display invites artists to seek out paradoxes, to cast a keen eye on the world around them, and share their findings with visitors. The result is by turns shocking, humorous and touching. New spaces open up between temptation and confrontation: room for being different.

There are three parts to the exhibition. Each throws a different light on the question what is normal, and who decides. The three themes are: Perfectibility and perfection, Norm and difference as commodities, Humans and technology

Perfectibility & Perfection

Happiness! Who wouldn't want to be happy? In Western society, it seems, happiness is linked to an obligation to live a life that ensures success. Scoring at the office, a wide circle of friends, a loving family, physical fitness, rewarding holidays. No one is immune to the ideal of perfectibility. We could all do with rejuvenation, or at the very least an eyelid correction. Skin colour and ethnic markers can be made to order, crafted into fashionable accessories. Plans for the future, your dream job, a second home: if you want it badly enough, it lies within your grasp. But what if we cannot, or will not, comply with this norm?

The notion of the self-made, perfect individual has a downside. Whether it's designer vaginas or immaculately styled pets, a drive for perfection dictates our lives. Inappropriate behaviour or mood swings, too, can be done away with once and for all with the right medication. The consequences of our complicity in this normalisation process have inspired many an artist and author.

The chapter *Perfectibility and perfection* collects responses to all these developments. Artists and authors offer a view from the cutting edge, showing where a push for normalcy might ultimately lead.

Norm & Difference

People have a tendency to conform to what the majority would consider normal behaviour. Norms come into being on a daily basis, through practice, and are hardly ever explicitly addressed. Artists reflect our conformity and offer a critical view of what we, in contemporary Western society, take to be normal. The results are often hilarious.

An acute sense of normativity leads to an ever greater emphasis on difference. 'Being different' comes to be regarded as entirely a matter of individual responsibility. Sooner or later, you *will* have to account for your failure to adjust.

Equating people with their 'differences' may have grave consequences, by rendering us blind to one another in more than one sense. Assigning people rigid roles on the basis of their deviations from the norm is likely to stifle them. Meanwhile, as recent history teaches us, the erasure of difference has its own dark side.

Normalisation can be cruel and undemocratic, as the artists show us. Still, a curious gaze works wonders. "Norm and difference as commodities" offers a humorous, subversive take on labels that are overly predictable.

Humans & technology

No such thing as humanity without technology. Its current level of intelligence - life science, robotics, cyberspace - requires informed choices. Should technology serve primarily as an instrument of control, or should we embrace the opportunities it offers?

Artists, documentary filmmakers and designers unfold a broad spectrum before us: from the latest in cognitive, physical and emotional improvement, through utopian worlds without illness or aging, to nightmare visions of technology overwhelming humanity. But would it not make more sense to regard, not technology itself, but the people seeking to manipulate it as the true culprits? What can we learn from such new relations?

Asking ourselves what is normal, and who decides, inevitably leads us to question our views of humanity. At what cost do we perfect and control ourselves? Would we actually want to spend our lives hooked up to a monitor? Were we ever truly autonomous or independent? *Difference on Display* concludes with a tribute to diversity, vulnerability and interdependence, an ode to life that offers poetry, beauty and a playful, debunking nod to perfection.