

Ine Gevers

## Normality on Prescription

### Introduction

‘Get over yourself’ – that was the *cri de coeur* of the American artist Paul Thek in the mid-Sixties. Give up the notion of the artist creating a new masterpiece in the isolation of the studio.<sup>1</sup> This declaration of dissatisfaction, much applauded by fellow artists, dealt a deathblow to the ideology of the artist as solitary genius. However, it did the same to the notion of the autonomous individual who needs to be in full control, independent and in possession of all her faculties in order to speak. Give up the obsessive, one-dimensional ‘I’, Thek seems to be telling us; focus instead on the interdependence of species, things and people. Give up the ‘I first’ mentality that has permeated all areas of our society – our family life, our careers and on the street. Meet those who are of a different kind, explore where it hurts, and accept asymmetry and reciprocity as the hallmarks of our relations. Be part of this world!

In the name of productivity we put up with instruction manuals, checklists, test points, electronic dossiers, coaches, web systems and lifestyle programmes. Customer profiles, digital facial recognition, chip cards, camera surveillance, reports of biometric findings, monitors, surveillance systems govern our lives. We are prepared to take spreadsheets, scoreboards, ability reports, personal performance plans and flow charts on board as well. Without computers, mobile phones and personal digital assistants we don’t exist. In the personal sphere we make great efforts to achieve our goals. Diets, supplements, fitness, self-assessment, genetic check-ups, personal goals, cosmetic corrections, medicines – all to enable us to comply with the norm. Is there anyone who doesn’t want a healthy, stable and successful life, with guaranteed protection from all unwelcome risks? The fact that life is thus reduced to a four-stage plan would seem to be of subordinate importance. Better to be monitored fulltime than to have to cope with existential questions.<sup>2</sup>

The fact that voluntary participation in this normalization process gets in the way of actually living is an interesting paradox for many artists. It is fascinating to see how eager we are to impose restraints on ourselves. Dystopias discussing the price we pay for organized happiness are not only bestsellers; they are frighteningly real.<sup>3</sup> Aldous Huxley, author of *Brave New World*, concluded his speech to a conference of pharmacologists in 1959 with the words, ‘There will be, in the next generation or so, a pharmacological method of making people love their servitude (...) people will in fact have their liberty taken away from them, but will rather enjoy it, because they will be distracted from any desire to rebel against propaganda or brainwashing (,).’<sup>4</sup> Huxley depicted a ‘dictatorship without tears’, a ‘painless concentration camp for entire societies’ under the influence of chemical substances that provide happiness for all. Today everyone knows what medicine he was referring to. Our subjection to invisible ‘obedience machines’ is terrifying, exactly because it leaves the illusion of control and self-determination intact. One of the better science fiction films, *The Matrix*, part I, shows how human beings have become the slaves of their own technology. And it is true that to an increasing extent technology determines the space in which we live. In itself that is no problem, except that this technology is often designed in such a way that it prescribes, demands and excludes rather than extends. For years now technology has contributed to what has been called ‘distributed intelligence’ (intelligence networks), that makes the long cherished distinction between human and non-human no longer

tenable. The question thus arises of whether our thinking in terms of power and control is not totally out-of-date. A relational perspective would be more to the point. Redefining human being and its environment creates possibilities for co-intelligence, respectfully shared information and multiple complexities.<sup>5</sup> An approach of curiosity, of wanting to understand this habitat, even when it doesn't feel 'natural,' may help us to escape rigid forms of dichotomy – labels, boxes and categories such as sick and well, able and disabled, normal and abnormal.

## Niet Normaal

Niet Normaal · Difference on Display touches on the above-mentioned subjects. It poses the question of what is normal and who decides it from a variety of angles. What patterns of normalization play a role in a society that has made 'life' itself its most important capital? The French philosopher Michel Foucault, who is often referred to in this book, devised the concept of biopolitics. He used it to refer to the whole complex of agreements, narratives and modes of conduct by which we 'govern' ourselves, with life itself as the central object of concern. Developments in biotechnology have meant that this life has become commodified down to its tiniest molecule, with implications that Foucault couldn't have foreseen. Although recent research in the field of genetics has shown that variety is the norm as far as our genes are concerned, it would seem that the collective pursuit of 'normality' has become more stubborn than ever. Is it possible for people who cannot or will not conform to the requirements of the current cult of perfectibility to escape this trend? Suppose we are no longer willing to sacrifice our lives to targets and utility. How do norm and difference operate in everyday life, at work and in the relationships market? Are we still capable of thinking outside the box, beyond the labels that reduce others to brand names, complete with price label and shelf-life date? What effect does all this have on us?

In theory technology can contribute to participation and interaction between people on an equal footing. Robotics, cybernetics and biotechnology offer us chances of equal participation in a society in which the able-bodied and the less abled and their various companion species can complement each other.<sup>6</sup> People with disabilities or chronic illness welcome these developments. In order to ensure their existence, many opt for a cyborg status rather than being dependent on other people. Any yet we are still a long way removed from an inclusive society. Simplistic images of perfection push the same technological developments in opposite directions; technology being consistently and one-sidedly applied in favour of normalization and homogeneity. The current post-political climate, in which populism is in the driving seat, is not readily conducive to any change. Perfectible people must be improved, whether they want it or not. In these interesting times, in which cyberspace makes it possible to have more than one identity and where the border between own and foreign is becoming increasingly diffuse, we are nonetheless forfeiting our freedom. Choices that don't fit in with the logic of the collective goal of self-improvement are penalized. With our health status being seen as our greatest capital, bio-citizenship is no longer an incomprehensible philosophical concept but an everyday reality. Addictions to tobacco or to food have become the first and second most common diseases in western societies; donor selection, embryo screening and genetic intervention are procedures that are increasingly in demand. The double morality that was so fascinating in the fabulous science fiction film *Gattaca*, in which genetically manipulated 'valids' are in power and naturally born

‘invalids’ have to do all the dirty work, is not unfamiliar to us. How is it that nowadays a nose correction or complete makeover can make someone ‘more of a person’, while someone with an artificial limb is always viewed as ‘less’ of one?

## Different Platforms

The exhibition *Niet Normaal · Difference on Display* is composed of existing and new work by international, contemporary artists, designers and documentary and feature film directors. The exhibition invites one to reflect on the theme of norm and difference. How is normality constructed? And what effects does striving for perfection as a norm have? Are there alternatives to the way we look at ourselves and others? What can we learn from people who are marginalized by standardization and levelling? Can one actually speak of a division between abled and disabled bodies, normal and abnormal, as our western tradition would have it? Questions such as these are the guidelines. The exhibition deploys three perspectives – perfectibility and perfection, norm and difference as commodity and the relation between people and technology.<sup>8</sup> A fourth perspective, practices of democracy, has been added specially to the publication.

The works selected or commissioned for the exhibition touch on the most important reason for organizing *Niet Normaal* – the broadening of horizons and especially those of our own perceptions. It is an aim that also explains why we have chosen to organize an art event in the first place. If there is anything that is specific to art, it is the unique perspectives it has to offer. Artists are often capable of viewing the world in ways that differ from the standard one and to communicate them convincingly in unique forms. Curiosity and a longing for the unknown have precedence over certainty and security. Artists such as Pawel Althamer, Nathalie Djurberg, Christiaan Bastiaans, Inez Doujak, Thomas Hirschhorn, Joseph Grigely, William Kentridge, Jon Kessler, Aernout Mik, Donald Rodney, Imogen Stidworthy and Javier Téllez stimulate the viewer to perceive and accept as true that which could not previously be seen. Furthermore they take responsibility for what is revealed. In this sense the work is more than merely a self-enclosed object. The works of art talk back; they are informed and have a will of their own. The artists lend their products ‘subject status’. They retreat a step in order to give the work the chance to engage in dialogue with the viewer, facilitating the formation of meaning beyond their own control. An artwork such as this is therefore never really completed. It comes to life in relationship with the other. It is precisely these heterologous and asymmetrical relations that *Niet Normaal* is aiming for. Artworks such as these are vulnerable: they speak another language and require that the viewer accompany them in renouncing familiar images in exchange for an as yet uncertain destination.<sup>9</sup>

It is not just artists who show their vulnerability by means of visual and non-discursive discourses so as to find out more about the world, embark on new relationships and make a strength out of what may appear to be a weakness. There are also linguistic variations – texts, dialogues and discussions that destabilize existing power relations and offer an opportunity for alternative positions. Theorists, scholars and scientists also opt for the precarious. Motivated either by engagement or by a sense of justice, they recognize themselves in others. All the authors who were asked to contribute to the publication, *Niet Normaal · Difference on Display*, have been affected as it were by their subject. With their own discipline in mind, they are looking for new ways to remain faithful to a personal truth, often against all odds. According to a

definition by the French thinker Alain Badiou, this is what makes them artists. In their writings they develop an ethical relation with what is outside them and it is precisely this that makes them part of the world. It is how they become subjects.<sup>10</sup> Language, style, rhythm, sound and choice of words resonate and inspire them to new observations and other organizing principles.

Gender studies, ethnic studies and the recent trend of disability studies<sup>11</sup> concern themselves with the question of how the lives of people are influenced by complex and interacting representations of norm and difference. Disability Studies argues for another way of 'being in the world'. Partially on the basis of the work of Foucault, this school of thought links scientific analyses with activism and politics.<sup>12</sup> While for Disability Studies a disability may well have a physical component, this is at the same time formed in a cultural and social sense. Circumstances determine how disability or illness is perceived, and how one responds and acts. What a person is able or not able to do in a society is dependent on these conditions. Abnormality, disability or illness are therefore relative and differ according to the situation. 'Disability' is therefore defined in analogy to race, gender and class. Disability Studies opens up areas of meaning that are still unknown territory for many people, but which destabilize fixed beliefs and accepted truths. Fascination with the other and the consequent casting of doubt upon the assumption that we are all the same is an important ingredient. This body of thought is suspicious of what we automatically think of as 'normal' and is critical of the normalizing strategies that we generally submit to unthinkingly.

The publication, *Niet Normaal · Difference on Display*, builds bridges between the exhibition and the parallel programme, between artworks and schools of thought. The textual contributions are autonomous and stand just as little at the service of or are subordinate to the artworks as the other way round. Similar subjects do however crop up; one can speak here of a mutual sympathy and in-depth dialogues do arise between text and image, artist and academic.

The editors have deliberately chosen not to deal in any depth with concepts such as identity politics. The authors chosen are not interested in emphasizing 'difference'. The essays clarify how abandoning familiar patterns can liberate people from the yoke of 'difference' and lead to an outlook on the world that everyone can profit from.

### Perfectibility and perfection

Perfectibility may well appear to be a uniquely contemporary topic, but perfecting the body and mind has been the domain of artists and scientists for many centuries. It is only since the nineteenth century, however, that doctors, psychiatrists, and more recently geneticists and prenatal diagnostics have set the norm. In this context Tom Shakespeare claims a frontrunner position. Apart from his considerable analytical and intellectual ability, he has also inherited from his grandparents the dominant genetic condition of achondroplasia (dwarfism). Based on his wide knowledge of biotechnology and genetics, and inspired by disability activism Shakespeare doesn't beat about the bush in describing what it is like to come into the world as an 'abnormal' person, to go through life as 'abnormal' and, on top of that, to produce 'abnormal' offspring.

Perfectibility is not just confined to our outward physical appearance. Neurobiology, increasingly used to cosmetically improve our brains, has become an everyday phenomenon that, according to Trudy

Dehue, we will have to learn to deal with seriously. In the present-day climate perfectibility has become entirely the task of the individual. It is no longer an excuse to say that this is who you are, or that you have simply been dealt a poor hand in the game of life. It has become our 'duty' to improve ourselves in a neurological sense, so that our functioning as part of society is optimal. How far are we prepared to go in pursuing this goal of neurobiological perfection? Commonly occurring behaviour is increasingly defined as pathological. Quite soon we will have to accept en masse being labelled as sick in order to pass as 'normal' after treatment.

An analysis of science fiction films also shows the degree to which perfectibility and perfection now prescribe what is normal and what is not. Sci-fi films project accepted notions of behaviour onto a fictitious time and place. The time projected in the film *Gattaca* is 'the not so distant future'. For Johnson Cheu this is a reason for a detailed explanation of how, despite the technological possibilities of completely eliminating physical shortcomings in favour of a homogenized and normalized humanity, the role of the underdog continues to be assigned to people with a disability or serious illness. Cheu asks why the need for the representation of human shortcomings is so dominant and what this means in the context of our present-day culture of perfectibility.

#### Norm and Difference as Commodity

People are quite happy to stand out as exceptional, provided they have complete control of their 'difference'. Such a difference becomes a brand that with a bit of luck can even prove profitable. Variations that occur in a natural way increasingly have an economic value as well. It is not just in the media or in art that 'being different' is emphasized or even exploited; in everyday life too the slightest variation can have a great influence on the course of your life. No matter how revolutionary this development may at first sight seem, when contrasted with discrimination or marginalization on the basis of race, gender, wellness, validity, or genetic make-up, it also has its down side. Being labelled as different may feel like imprisonment in the role that you have been allocated.

This is the context that the performance scholar Petra Kuppers refers to in order to explain the unique position that the performance artist and actor Mat Fraser occupies with his burlesque theatrical shows. Enacted as a restaging of the famous freak shows on Coney Island, Fraser's work is a commentary on the self-evident division of positions on a scale leading from normal to abnormal. Precisely through refusing to speak from the position of a single person, or if one likes 'identity', Fraser can clear the path towards yet undefined niches. By staging his own being-as-freak and literally 'playing' it, he provokes ferocious and contradictory responses in his public. Kuppers tells in colourful language how Fraser alternately undermines and affirms stereotypes, thus casting doubt on the equation, 'perfection = norm'.

The rapidity with which a society changes as a result of globalization and consumerism is made clear by the story of Renu Addlahka. She describes in a subtle fashion the pros and cons felt by a couple that decides to publicly oppose the prohibition of the abortion of a foetus with a presumed cardiac abnormality. Not only is there an ethical dilemma about whether or not to make use of prenatal technology; social, economic, cultural, moral and of course legal issues play a role here too. Addlahka describes the neo-liberal, globalized Indian economy where medical tourism is a growth industry and a rising middle class is replacing

its socially-based ethics with an individualized self-image. All this is occurring in the context of a tradition where selective gender-based abortion is officially forbidden, but always tacitly tolerated.

Racial and genetic differences between people are increasingly often resorted to in order to investigate or prevent crime. Exploring Michel Foucault's notion of biopower, Amade M'charek states that a number of power structures are operative in the domain of criminality that focus on disciplining individuals and regulating the population. Two concrete instances show clearly how the biologizing of criminal behaviour can lead to serious simplifications and exaggerated precautions. Criminality is rapidly becoming defined in racial and genetic terms as a health problem for which the whole of society is responsible. What significance do such developments have for society and are we prepared to accept such a far-reaching form of compliance? Is genetic citizenship our collective future?

## Humans and Technology

Human beings have always been inseparable from their technology, but with intelligent technology the roles appear to be reversed and we are affected to the core. Do we still have control over technology or must we look for a different balance? Would a re-evaluation of our relation with technology offer an escape route, so that technology becomes an opportunity instead of it mainly being designed and used at the service of regulation and control? Various authors are contesting the diffuse frontiers between human beings and technology. It is precisely in this border area that new identities can come into existence.

In her *Cyborg Manifesto* (1991), now a classic, Donna Haraway made short shrift of the idea that humans are essentially natural beings. If she could have her way, we shouldn't even aspire to that. 'Able Bodies and Companion Species' can be read as a celebration of the human as a hybrid species. Haraway emphatically refuses to distinguish between the human and the non-human, the personal and the public or the everyday and the scientific. A personal narrative about her father is alternated with meta-analyses about 'humans' and their numerous companion species, about the space that is thus created and how this can stimulate our curiosity.

A unique and world-renowned case is that of the South African athlete Oscar Pistorius. In the summer of 2008 he attracted a great deal of media attention because of his public struggle to overturn the Olympic Committee's decision to exclude him from the regular Olympic Games. Because he used 'flex-foot' artificial limbs, he was 'condemned' to their Paralympic equivalent. Ivo van Hilvoorde and Laurens Landeweerd analyze the arguments and come to some remarkable conclusions. The narrow distinction between 'talent' and 'handicap' would seem based on a long series of arbitrarily selected instances. Which mutation gives you either an advantage or a disadvantage is dependent on the context and above all on socially agreed terms.

Ingunn Moser goes even a step further. The relation between humans and technology does not just admit of countless shades of meaning; it can, if we see ourselves as relational beings, lead to interesting processes by which identities and positions are interactive and influence each other. In the same way as race, gender or ethnic background, a disability can be 'made' or 'unmade', depending on context, relations, or technology. This can set us thinking about how assumptions and labels contribute to the preservation of the distinction between normal and not normal.

## Practices of Democracy

Traditionally the ‘darkrooms’ or margins of a society have proven to be the best laboratories for democratic renewal. Democracy develops from the margins and its current decline can perhaps partially be attributed to the ever decreasing visibility of ‘others’ in our society. It is for this reason that Giorgio Agamben speaks of a post-democratic spectacle society.<sup>12</sup> Which democratic practices are still valid in today’s post-political climate? To whom and to what should we listen if we are to refashion our society in such a way that increasing numbers of new minorities, vulnerable groups and as yet unfamiliar voices get heard? How do these ideas relate to a society that with its aim of achieving order and perfection seems increasingly to distinguish between citizens and ‘other’ citizens, with the latter apparently not automatically able to claim the rights that the status of citizenship should lend them?

People with the label ‘intellectually disabled’ are objectified and repressed by prevailing notions about abnormality, tragedy and disability. Griet Roets and Daniel Goodley give the floor to the people themselves. This is a unique occasion because in real life these persons exist unnoticed at the bottom of the ladder and have virtually no rights. In the United Kingdom and Belgium self-advocacy groups of people with an intellectual disability are claiming a place for themselves. The authors work with them, highlight their resistance and show how they have survived as politicized citizens in the midst of repressive discourses. Knowledge has to be deployed to offer people the space for development instead of depriving them of it. This is especially so when this knowledge is supplied by the people concerned.

Patrick Devlieger invites the reader to share his observations of the poor, war-torn border area between the two capital cities of Kinshasa and Brazzaville, both of them on the Congo River. The vital commerce between these cities is largely run by people with a disability: tricycle riders, people who are blind or visually challenged, or deaf people. Devlieger’s essay begins with his own observations as an anthropologist who is astonished about the unique position of this group of people in a part of the world that has the reputation for failed governance and poverty. His reflection takes him deeper into the question of how this unique niche could have been created, the way that the local population supports this situation as a fait accompli and the distrust on the side of the NGOs, which therefore remain at a distance.

In his contribution Michel Callon says that we will all end up belonging to ‘groups of concern’ in present-day technological and marketed society. What can we learn from people who have long been manoeuvred into such a situation? In that respect people with a disability or a chronic illness possess a wealth of experience and knowledge. By addressing us all as handicapped in one way or another, Callon does not just show us how our consumer culture deliberately creates new species and excludes others, but also how we can resist this development. People with disabilities possess skills that are useful for democracy – the collective naming of shortcomings in a nascent democratic society.

The essays and works of art that have been brought together for *Niet Normaal · Difference on Display* show how practices of democracy can be extended to areas of society that not everyone is familiar with. It is a society that appears to be turning its back on the most fundamental qualities that characterize it – diversity, interdependence and asymmetry. I am much indebted to the editorial board, the artists and authors for the

courageous way they have committed their curiosity and open-mindedness to exploring this terrain. I hope that their example may inspire others.

1 Paul Thek, Paul Thek. *Tales the Tortoise Taught Us*, Karlsruhe (ZKM, Museum für neue Kunst)/Hamburg (Sammlung Falckenberg)/Cologne, 2008.

2 I am grateful to Joep Schrijvers for his summary in *Het Wilde Vlees. De tomtomiserig van de passionele mens*, Schiedam, 2006.

3 Cf. also Yevgeny Zamyatin, *We* (1924), London, 1993; Aldous Huxley, *Brave New World*, London 1932. Even after Michel Houellebecq resurrected Huxley's *Brave New World* in *The Possibility of an Island* and famous scientists have publicly begun to make predictions, we dismiss it as science fiction. See an interview with brain specialist Susan Greenfield in *Vrij Nederland*, 12 July 2008.

4 Aldous Huxley, *The Final Revolution*, In: R.M. Featherstone & A.Simon (eds), *A pharmacologic approach to the study of mind*. Springfield,IL:Charles C.Thomas, 1959 pp 226-227

5 Peter Sloterdijk, 'The Operable Man' (2000), in *Der (im-)perfekte Mensch*, Dresden (Deutsches Hygiene-Museum), 2001.

6 Donna Haraway, 'Able Bodies and Companion Species', in *When Species Meet*, Minneapolis, 2008, p. 161-180, included in this book on pp. 00.

7 Thanks to support from the Foundation for Art and Public Space (SKOR), a large number of works have been specially commissioned for *Niet Normaal*.

8 The separation into these three categories is to a degree artificial. In reality, both in art and the articles in this book, the different domains are not separate at all.

9 Ine Gevers, 'Images that demand consummation. Postdocumentary photography, Art and Ethics' in *Documentary Now!* ed. Frits Giertsberg, Maartje van den Heuvel, Hans Scholten, NAI publishers, Rotterdam, 2005.

10 Alain Badiou, *Ethics. An Essay on the Understanding of Evil*, London, 2002. Badiou positions himself as a follower of Jacques Lacan and Michel Foucault and as an opponent of the 'différance' theorists, who in imitation of Jacques Derrida and Emmanuel Levinas have come to view the other as 'Other'. Badiou deals summarily with the deconstructivist foundations on which multicultural and post-colonial ethics are based. In his view, philosophically speaking they are of little relevance. For Badiou 'the Other' cannot be any ethical category for the simple reason that 'being in itself' presents itself in an infinite variety of ways. People are different in every respect. In Badiou's view, thinking in terms of radical difference is actually the consequence of a lack of interest in ethics than the other way round. Ethics only genuinely deserve to be called ethics when they can survive intact despite differences. Ethics have to do with what unites people beyond any difference.

11 Since Disability Studies has been developed in the United Kingdom and the United States and the term 'disability' has a specific meaning that does not have a Dutch equivalent, the English term has been used both in this introduction and in the other essays. As is explained elsewhere in the text, 'disability' stands for a contextual rather than a medical or individual approach and cannot therefore be translated by 'handicap' or any other synonym. Currently the possibility is being seriously reviewed as to whether Disability Studies can also be included in the Dutch university system. It is important that Disability Studies should be viewed as

part of a broader cultural field and not as islands regulated under the umbrella of medical science.

12 Shelley Tremain (ed.), *Foucault and the Government of Disability*, Ann Arbor, 2005.

13 Giorgio Agamben, *The State of Exception*, Chicago. 2005.