



[Gina Czarnecki](#)

at the [Bluecoat](#) , Liverpool until 19 February 2012

Reviewed by [Denis Joe](#) December 2011

Curator: Sara-Jayne Parsons; Free Entry

Britain's most famous art collector, Charles Saatchi, [recently rounded on the contemporary art clique](#) , condemning buyers as 'vulgar' and criticised curators as showing "videos, and those incomprehensible post-conceptual installations and photo-text panels, for the approval of their equally insecure and myopic peers". And he may have a point, it does seem that many feted artists today produce art whose only value seems to lie in the shock effect.

Gina Czarnecki's retrospective exhibition at the Bluecoat is as far from the voyeuristic, lifestyle

lecturing of Gunther Von Hagens or the ghoulish narcissism of Marc Quinn, as you can get. In the series of sculptures, **Wasted**, which explores the use of human tissue, and includes the centrepiece of the exhibition, **Palaces**, we are not confronted by circus sideshows, for entertainment, but with works that raise the questions of what it means to be human. In that sense it can be seen as the ideal follow on from the previous exhibition, [Democratic Promenade](#)

, which focused on the radical interaction between the public and political world. Czarnecki's opus draws inspiration from the human being: the actual individual body; and how that impacts on the social and political world. The work can also be seen as following in the footsteps of the Renaissance artists, in particular Leonardo da Vinci and Michelangelo, whose partnership of art and the natural sciences gave the world some of the most beautiful images that still resonate whilst, at the same time, questioning the ideas of aesthetics.



Quarantine is a work that captures that very humanistic ideal. Using stethoscope recordings from inside the performer's body mixed with guttural sounds through physical exertion and body impact, breaths, heartbeats and tendons (sound scored by Chris Watson, a founder member of the music group Cabaret Voltaire) we are presented with a 40 minute video of the human form put through extreme self-punishment as the body exerts and contorts itself. But there is no sadistic satisfaction to be gained. One can be amazed at, what appears to me, the superhuman stamina of the runner, Rachel Tracey, but one will also be captivated by the beauty of the physical movements. By capturing human movement under extreme circumstance, the piece works as great choreography: pointing to the wonder of human motion.

That same feeling can be gained from another video installation, ***Infected***. Instead of facing the screen, we look down upon the image (as if looking into a pond) that appears to be the evolution from the stem cell into the fully formed human body. We are confronted with the feeling that the body is trying to escape its narrow environment. Whilst

Infected

poses questions about the physical body, it can also be seen as an existential statement of our need to break with the social world, that many of us feel at times.

Versifier: Stages Elements Humans is the earliest of Czarnecki's works in this exhibit, and the most unsettling. A 'wall' of figures, staring straight at the audience span the width of the gallery windows. It give the gallery a reverential, or religious, feel as the display has the same effect as stain glass art in churches. At first the images seem to be standing still, but slowly they begin to move. The movement was achieved by manipulating digital technology, and we see each figure 'awaken' and we watch as they try to break out of the narrow confines of the frames each are in. The work has connections with the Human Genome Project (which was staring up at the time that Czarnecki was working on the piece). The manipulation of pixels raises the question about the manipulation of genes, highlighting the differences that are in each of us and questioning what is 'normal' or 'real'. I found it an interesting work from the aspect of today's obsession with lifestyles that dominate the social-engineering agenda of governments. The never-ending diktats (dressed up as 'advice') that seem to be moving us into a world of uniformity, in particular over what we put inside our bodies, is at odds with the celebration of differences that underpins the thinking of 'multiculturalism'. There is also a disturbing element of biological determinism that underpins many of the assumptions of multiculturalism, one only need recall issues around the 'gay gene'. Revisionists often cited three scientific studies published in the early 1990s to 'prove' that homosexuality is a genetically inherited condition, and the 'news' of the 'discovery' was, initially celebrated by some gay rights organisations (see [The Myth Of The Gay Gene](#)).

I think that ***Versifier: Stages Elements Humans*** may have a greater impact than it would have done back in 1998. Its relevance to the world of today is greater than it was back then and I feel it will remain so for a long time, as it raises that first philosophical concern of what it is to be human. The disturbing feeling that impresses itself on the viewer may well derive from the world we live in rather than the work itself, which is a truly beautiful piece. Beneath

Versifier: Stages Elements Humans

, laid out on the floor

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is the display of dental casts; part of the

Wasted

series of installations.

Diagram For A Summerhouse

speaks of identification. DNA has replaced dentures as the means of identifying unknown or unrecognised human bodies. There is a rather humorous twist to the work in that recent legislation has said that dental casts are unsuitable for land-fill.



Spintex is a collaboration film with [Ulf Langheinrich](#) . Based on a real-time transition from day to night. The work was filmed at an open-air night club and other locations in the Ashanti region of Ghana, where Langheinrich lives, on the Equator, where the transformation from bright sunlight into the black night lasts only fifteen minutes all year round.

Many effects were used on this film, some of which throw the viewer into confusion. In one section we see a beautiful face of a woman. She is part of a crowd, watching a dance. The facial expressions are presented to us by the focus on her mouth and we are never quite sure if the movement of her lips is a result of her feelings or a result of manipulation of the image. What struck me about this section of the film was how like ultrasound scan imagery it looked. The slight facial movements are contrasted with the vigorous dancing that the film dissolves into. Throughout, the human focus has a beat to it which diverges with the sedateness of the natural move of day into night, at the beginning of the film. The overall approach to **Spintex**, brought to my mind , a fugue – where we are slightly aware of the repetition, only in this case it is not the repetition of sound but of movement.

In the upstairs gallery is the interactive video installation, **Contagion**, whose seductive, playful interface gradually suggests a powerful work focused on images, perception, surveillance, bio–security and human interaction. This is the UK premiere of the work, which is a triumph of technology as much as it is for art. In this work, the tiniest movements of visitors in the installation space are tracked and made visible as colours projected on screen; new colours and sounds are created as visitors' paths coincide. We are led to contemplate our own roles of cause and effect within the installation. The work draws parallels between the biological spread of diseases and the dissemination of information, ideas and beliefs and uses a quote from Stephen Corbett, Head of Public Health, Sydney, Australia: “The fear of the pandemic is more lethal than the pandemic itself”.

I am not normally impressed by interactive works, I feel that it is, generally, a lazy means of drawing the crowds, and most seem to serve no other purpose than to entertain. But **Contagion** is an important piece. It seems to move away from the idea of the individual/social relationship and raise reflections on the wider, public, domain. I didn't interact with the piece myself but watched a couple of children interacting. A woman, who I assume was their mother, stood outside of the arena, then a man, obviously the father, entered it and started moving around, showing the children what was happening on screen. The debate that this piece raises is certainly important, but will it ever answer the question why fathers feel so insecure that they have to assert their authority even when it is inappropriate (rather like your Dad dancing with your friends at your birthday party)?

Downstairs, in the main gallery, we find more from the **Wasted** collection. The obvious issues here are those of recycling. But not simply the petty concerns about shopping bags and waste paper, Czarnecki confronts us with the recycling of human waste products. This is something that many people might not care to address, especially when we are confronted with an art deco armchair that has a very comfortable looking cushion made from human fats, or a crepe made from human fats. It is to Czarnecki's credit that she chooses to make her point by using a material that most people would feel squeamish about. Perhaps no other substance will raise a 'yuck!' these days than fats and human fats in particular.

Trophies of Empire comprises two objects resembling a stalagmite and a stalactite, contained within a large clear Perspex cylinder. One is made of growing salt crystals, the other of sugar, solidified like amber. Contained within both are clusters of engraved femoral heads. Sugar and salt are both used as preservatives and corrosives. The work has deep local significance in Liverpool, not only in the use of body parts and issues relating to permissions but also links with the history of the local international trade route to the Caribbean and Africa with sugar (Tate) and the Cheshire salt mines. **Trophies** has also been developed specifically in relation to the history of the Bluecoat and is co-commissioned by them.



Czarnecki's **Palaces** sculpture has been commissioned by The Bluecoat. It represents a unique collaboration between Czarnecki and the biologist Professor Sara Rankin from Imperial College London. One is immediately taken in by how beautiful the work is. It has a look of spontaneity about it, as if the shape's details came about by accident through the process. But the drawings for the preparation of the work, that are displayed in the gallery, suggest otherwise.

[Czarnecki has said of this work](#)

: "For me, the Palaces project is like the 'tip of the iceberg'. Its aesthetic – playful impact of the object – is critical, yet the actual artwork is not the object, but the process, a signifier of mass participation.

Under the surface there are multiple levels on which this can be read

[my emphasis]".

Children from all over the UK have been donating their milk teeth to a resin sculpture, to stimulate a debate on the regenerative potential of stem cells. It is on this point that I have my concerns about this exhibition. Whilst art will raise issues of a political/social/public nature, I am not comfortable with the idea that this is the primary aim of art. Art should allow us to reflect on ourselves: how we view ourselves as individuals and how we see the world. Our reflections on life are the very thing that contribute to debate. If art feels that it is setting an agenda for debate then it simply becomes an extension of what should be the role of politics, and in doing so, it gets our elected officials off the hook.

Over the past twenty years or so governments and the media have demanded that footballers become role models, soap operas parrot the latest thinking on lifestyles and that painting or writing contribute to our wellbeing. Funding for the arts requires artists and organisations to meet a requirement that their work serves some public or social good. It diminishes the role of the artist as a visionary and so, denigrates art in general to a simple function of a sticking plaster. If art is to mean anything it cannot anchor itself to contemporary concerns; its relevance should outlive the inspiration.

In the **Wasted** group of installations, Czarnecki not only draws on biology for inspiration but also points to the bureaucracy that poisons much of modern life. Permission slips are displayed that speak of the lack of trust that has entered into public life, particular since the Alder Hey organs scandal, and the public enquiry that led to the Human Tissue Act 2004. The major change in the art world, over the past quarter of a century has taken place in the role that it serves. No longer are we trusted to appreciate it as something that enriches us as individual human beings, we are expected take away a lesson from it.

My experience at the packed premiere of this exhibition leads me to believe that people attend events such as this, not to learn, but to marvel. Gina Czarnecki shows herself, first and foremost, to be an important artist. That she can fill the galleries of The Bluecoat with thought-provoking and beautiful works, is a great achievement. Perhaps the only 'awareness' that we need is just that. Thanks to Bryan Biggs and Ria, a volunteer worker, who helped put some things into perspective for me.

Further events around this exhibition:

Chris Watson - *Quarantine*: Fri 27 January 7.30 – 9.30pm

Founder member of influential Sheffield based music group Cabaret Voltaire, Chris Watson is one of the world's leading recorders of wildlife and natural phenomena. Here Chris Watson presents the UK premiere of new album *El Tren Fantasma* and a live performance of his sound score for *Quarantine*, (Free but booking required)

Iona Kewney with Joseph Quimby: Sat 28 January 7.30 – 9.30pm

A collaboration in movement and sound, pushing physical boundaries and exploring the

limitations of the senses. Performing solo for 15 years, Iona Kewney has developed an idiosyncratic style that mixes dance, live music, texts, drawings and physical movement. She features in *Quarantine* and *Infected*. (Free but booking required)

Meet the artist: Sat 4 February 2-3.30pm

Gina Czarnecki will be working on the *Palaces* sculpture and is free to answer your questions. A great opportunity to find out more about this unique artwork. (Free, just turn up)

Pernille Spence NaCl: Sat 4 February 4.30 – 5.30pm

Standing in a glass tank, an almost motionless body will gradually be buried under one ton of salt, chosen for its loaded political and economic history and the striking contradictions such a basic but beautiful substance holds. Performed by Pernille Spence, a visual, new media and performance artist, whose practice explores a visual dialogue between the human body, movement and space, and the body's physical/psychological limits and constraints within specific parameters. (Free but booking required)

Gallery talk by Sara Rankin: Everything you need to know about stem cells - a beginner's guide for the non-scientist: Weds 8 February, 4.30-5.30pm

Sara Rankin, Professor in Leukocyte and Stem Cell Biology at Imperial College London, is currently researching how stem cells could be the key to tissue regeneration. For several years now she has collaborated with artist Gina Czarnecki on the research and creation of *Wasted*, a series of sculptures that explore the use of human tissue in art, the life-giving potential of „discarded“ body parts and their relationship to myths and history. (Free but booking required)

Should living people be able to donate their own human tissue to art?: Weds 8 February 6.00-7.30pm

Join artist Gina Czarnecki, Roger Phillips (BBC Merseyside) and guest speakers, including Sara Rankin for this timely debate. The audience will be able to comment and ask questions. (Free but booking required)

Palaces will tour to the Science Museum, Imperial College London and the Centre of the Cell, London in 2012, and the Herbert Art Gallery & Museum, Coventry in 2013.