



## [Niet Normaal: Difference on Display](#)

at the [Bluecoat](#) , Liverpool until 2nd September 2012  
Reviewed by [Denis Joe](#) July 2012

This exhibition, comprising of the works of 24 artists, is part of the third annual DaDaFest, featuring work by international as well as regional artists, has been programmed by the Liverpool-based **DaDa** (***Disability and Deaf Arts***) organisation, formerly known as the North West Disability Arts Forum.

Bob and Roberta Smith is a pseudonym for the artist Patrick Brill. His ***Bonfires*** is visually unimpressive at first. A collection of signs and notices piled up like a bonfire, the work is a recreation of an event from a few years ago when the artist was forced to burn much of his student work that had been stored at his mother's house. Brill has described the work as [autobiographical](#)

. It is made up of individually created signs containing both personal and political statements. Some are quite serious whilst others are very funny ('Peter Hain is a shit' appealed to my infantile sense of humour).

The piece further develops Brill's interest in politics and art, and focuses on slogans in particular. Taken individually, the pieces that make up **Bonfires** say very little (the audience is invited to choose a statement and walk around the sculpture whispering it to themselves), in its totality I thought that it put across much of the vacuity apparent in today's political world. An essay by [Edward Winters](#),

about the artist, criticises Brill's work for "being unmade". Winters draws on the history of contemporary political art and states that "Politically radical artists required of their art that it presented the viewer with political content." He thus dismisses Brill's work. But I feel that Brill does capture the mood of the political world of today. The statements that make up

### **Bonfires**

may well reflect the thinking of the artists, but it does represent a form of thinking – one in which the line between

*personal*

and

*political*

is blurred.

### **Bonfires**

is not really a reaction against the blandness of modern politics, it is more of a confirmation of it. And in this sense Brill breaks with the traditional ideal of the 'political artist' who attempted to put forward an alternative vision.

Javier Téllez's ***Caligari and the Sleepwalker*** uses Robert Wiene's classic silent movie as the basis for this video installation. This offered the possibility of an interesting take on the story of *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*;

a film that has been interpreted as a commentary on the German people's somnambulist response to the rise of the Nazis. The film does reverse that overly misanthropic view but only to replace it with a variant on Nietzscheanism, whereby it is the somnambulist, Cesare, who is presented as the saviour of mankind.

Set in an observatory cum asylum, the story of ***Caligari and the Sleepwalker*** is heavily loaded with clichés about extra-terrestrials (recalling Scott Derrickson's classic film

*The Day the Earth Stood Still*,

though far less sophisticated) and crude anti-professionalism. The argument that runs throughout the film is one that has been the currency of the anti-psychiatry movement since the

1960s and can be found in the ideas of thinkers such as Michel Foucault or R.D. Laing. As a piece of cinema,

***Caligari and the Sleepwalker***

is quite interesting, but I feel it has little to offer as a work of art that has anything either original or meaningful to say.



Pharmacopoeia's ***Cradle To Grave*** is an impressive work. Commissioned by the British Museum in 2003, it is a medical-art collaboration between the artists Susie Freeman and David Critchley and the family doctor Liz Lee. This 14-metre long installation, focuses on the Western biomedical approach to ill health with its reliance on medicines. Using prescribed medicines only, the installation creates a 'pill diary', illustrating anti-depressant and antibiotic use as well as other medications. On either side of the pill diaries are objects, documents and medical artefacts that relate to daily life. The work is extremely impressive and raises a great many questions about the medicalisation of everyday life. The story behind the work can be found [here](#)

Liverpool artist Imogen Stidworthy's video installation continues her fascination with speech. In ***I Hate***

we are invited to view and hear the rehabilitation of a photographer who lost his voice in a cycling accident. Sessions with the therapist are filmed along with his own shots of the Eurostar Terminal at St Pancras prior to November 2007. Its moving qualities lie not so much in the presentation of personal and public tragedy but in the strength of people to overcome the very things that can dehumanise them. Speech is not an area that visual artists tend to work with, and Stidworthy takes the opportunity to present us with the visual aspect of speech: the shape of the mouth forming certain words. "I Hate" may well allow those, at the start of speech therapy, to rebuild their vocal communication, but the use of that statement, for this work, could well be seen as a rejection of the present debilitating situation.

Dutch artist Floris Kaayk's video ***Metalosis Maligna*** is a fictional documentary about a disease that affects patients with medical implants. The disease eats away at human tissues replacing it with pieces of metal. The video employs many of the usual approaches to spoof documentary: fake scientists and faked medical images. Graduating from the animation department of the St. Joost Academy, Kaayak employs CGT to create an effect of the disease eating away at a human body. The thinking behind it reminded me of Shinya Tsukamoto's

*Tetsuo*

films and although the piece is quite entertaining there is a rather misanthropic feeling to it, particularly as the disease is presented as a result of people living longer. The piece shares with Javier Téllez's video a pessimistic view where it seems that the 'normal' world has created problems for the disabled and seems unconcerned for them in the pursuit of progress. There are some very comic moments in Kayaak's video, which, at least, doesn't share Javier Téllez's over-indulged pretentiousness, but the humour is derived from an inability to take

***Metalosis Maligna***

seriously.

Birgit Dieker's ***Bad Mummy*** is a sculpture of a female torso clad in leather with spikes sticking out where arms, legs, neck and breasts would be. The piece is sat on a stool. It seems that the features commonly associated with female attractiveness are made to look ugly or dangerous. It is obvious that this piece does not correspond to our idea of 'normal' motherhood. I think that despite its unattractiveness, ***Bad Mummy*** comes across as recognising the differences in us all, even when we are provided with a social role such as

motherhood.

Andreas Mølgaard Vinther's ***Ambush, non traceptives with intelligent sperm selector***, plays on contemporary fears around genetic research and experimentation. Using an advertising approach Vinther's work raises questions around the issue of designer babies. This mock-up of a pharmaceutical advert, complete with graphs and illustrations on the structure and motion mechanism of the intelligent sperm, selector condom is an interesting contribution to a debate that lies at the heart of what it means to be human. Whilst the work is presented as an advertisement, intended to get you to buy into the idea, the work is oddly, and refreshingly, non-committed on the topic.



Christine Borland's ***Cast From Nature*** is truly beautiful. Borland repaired fibreglass structures made from casts found in the Royal College of Surgeons in Edinburgh, and went on to create the two statues on display here. The original casts were the work of the great Scottish anatomist [John Goodsir](#) whose wide ranging interests in human anatomy led him to write and lecture on the aesthetics of human anatomy. And with these two works Borland only reinforces many of Goodsir's views. Both statues are white, giving them an ethereal quality. One of the figures has been flayed at the chest and is posed, with his back arched, in the pose of Christ cut down from the cross in the manner of Michelangelo's *Pieta*

. The other contrasts that with a figure almost in flight to heaven.

There is a rather serene look on both faces that leads you to forget the original nature of these casts. Borlands' works stand out from the other works in this exhibition as they do not celebrate difference as much as the very physical nature of what it is to be human. In the poses we also seem to get an impression of the spiritual nature of humanity and whilst it would be easy to say that these two works can also be seen as representing the frailty of the human form, I think that would be a banal assumption as both figures seem to be striving to break out of the limitations of their respective human forms. There may well be a religious viewpoint behind these pieces but that should not be allowed to detract from their real strength in the portrayal of humanity. Watch a video of the making of [Cast From Nature](#).

In the upstairs gallery we are confronted by three works. Koert van Mensvoort **Next Nature Baby** provides us with an image of a foetus inside a womb, holding a mobile phone. Mensvoort believes that humanity has gone beyond what he calls 'old nature':

***Old nature, in the sense of trees, plants, animals, atoms, or climate, is getting increasingly controlled and governed by man. It has turned into a cultural category. At the same time, products of culture, which we used to be in control of man, tend to outgrow us and become autonomous. Our notions of nature and culture seem to be trading places. The 'natural powers' shift to another field.***

**Next Nature Baby** takes that to an absurd level where potential (of a baby to communicate) is overtaken by actuality. This seems to me to be no different from the ideas that inform entertainments such as science fiction narratives or the Matrix movies. There is nothing shocking in the image, and much of [Mensvoort's work](#) seems to aim at entertaining rather than putting forward any deeper meaning or contributing seriously to any debate around the issue.

**Screen** by Amzee Perera, displays multiple glazed ceramic pods that remind you of foeti. Each piece has been made in the same way, but due to random conditions during the firing process, each pod is different and this seems to emphasise the chance mutations that occur from conception onwards. It is strange that this piece is included as it raises the question “What is ‘normal’?”

The upstairs gallery is dominated by **135 Museum Visitors And 1 Dog**, an installation by Karin Sander. With this installation, Sander raises questions about authorship. She creates sculptures that are actually photographic copies of anonymous individuals who are rendered as plastic free-standing objects taken from a scan. It seems that each object was generated by technology rather than shaped by human hand. The statues are rendered in different colours and the way that their arrangement on the shelving makes them feel like knick-knacks. But the incredible detail that is captured by the scanning process, catching a range of emotions as well as physical traits, makes the pieces seem almost life like.

**Niet Normaal: Difference on Display** is a fascinating exhibition, although I struggle to understand what it has to do with disability. Like the best art, the exhibits tell us something (or try to) about the human condition. Yet this forms part of the

[DaDaFest](#)

. Whilst I do not personally embrace lifestyle politics, there is, at least, some understanding of the women, gay and black forums in every aspect of social, public and political life today: they are an offshoot of genuine political movements that grew, particularly in the 1960s and 1970s, to challenge political oppression as well as discriminatory practices which resulted from social isolation.

By contrast, I find that there is a streak of dishonesty and blatant opportunism at the heart of ‘disabled politics’. Whilst public life has catered for the disabled in employment access as well as public access, it is difficult to understand why there is a need for organisations such as

DaDa. Art itself doesn't require the artist to be physically-abled. The main input into art has to be imagination. Whilst disabled people have as much to tell us about the human condition as anyone else, it is a shame that they feel a need to do this from a ghettoised position.

That said, I would have no reservations about recommending *Niet Normaal: Difference on Display*. The exhibition succeeds in confronting questions around 'normality', and most of the works on display celebrate the differences that mark us all out from everyone else. Congratulations are owed to the Bluecoat and its staff and to Ine Gevers and co-curator Garry Robson for another excellent and enlightening exhibition.