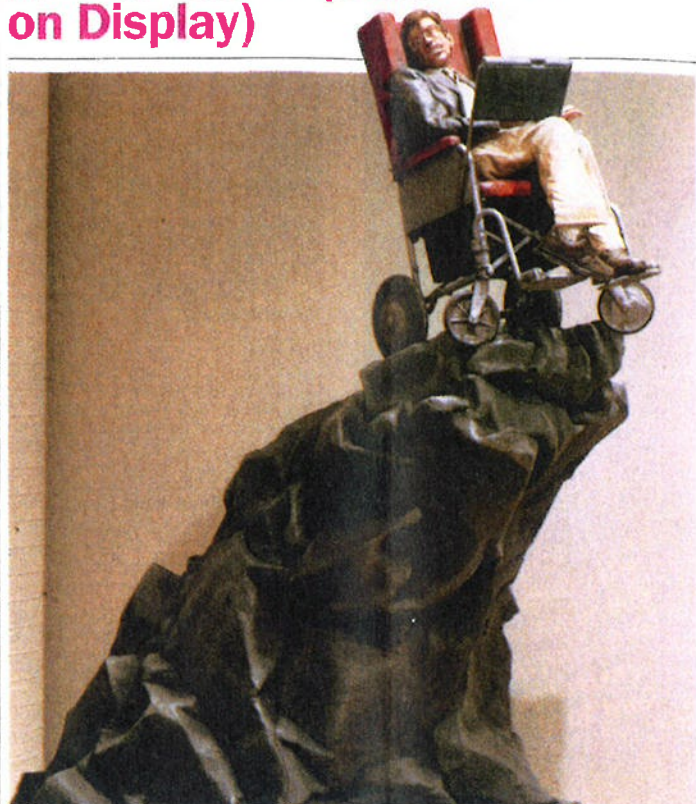


Niet Normaal (Difference on Display)



Jake and Dinos Chapman, 'Übermensch', 1995

★★★☆☆

Beurs van Berlage until 7 March

A horde of Afghan amputees runs through the desert to catch prosthetic legs falling from the sky; medical photographs reveal the naked bodies of severely deformed patients; a 3.5-metre sculpture depicts disabled theoretical physicist Stephen Hawking; these are just a few sample images from 'Niet Normaal', an exhibition that claims to explore 'the concept of normality within our contemporary society'.

Immediately, the premise seems fuzzy. Since ancient times, the process of marking differences among people has defined our notions of deviance. To put 'difference on display' is therefore a double-edged enterprise. As much as it can help in discovering normalcy it can also become just another way to reinforce it.

'Niet Normaal' is divided into three sections - 'Perfectibility & Perfection', 'Norm & Difference' and 'Humans & Technology' - and each part is equally sensationalistic. The vast majority of contemporary works here, including pieces by such established artists as Damien Hirst, Mark Quinn and Thomas Hirschhorn, could easily be labelled 'shock art', designed to titillate and frighten, rather than help people make sense of 'otherness'.

Take the central piece of the show, 'Outgrowth-Family', a multimedia installation by Swiss artist Thomas

Hirschhorn, in which mannequins are covered with bulbous growths made out of packing tape. This work draws much of its impact from the anonymous medical photographs stuck to the sculptures of people with severe natural deformities. The images are horrific and the artist doesn't explain where these photographs came from or why they were taken. Similarly, a looped fragment from the 2001 feature film 'Kandahar' by Iranian director Mohsen Makhmalbaf, which depicts men chasing prosthesis in Afghanistan, doesn't give us any sense of context, which would help us 'normalise' their struggle.

The work assembled here reduces physical disability to graphic and shocking spectacle. While ostensibly attempting to make sense of difference, 'Niet Normaal' ends up being an old-fashioned freak show and as such it simply reinforces the bounds of normalcy. The challenge for us is to reverse stigma over difference, not to put it on display. *Beursplein 1 (beursvanberlage.nl). Open daily 11.00-18.00; €11. Catherine Somzé*



Patricia Piccinini, 'Foundling', 2008

Art