

Unknown  
Quantities  
The  
normal  
issue

**ual:** university  
of the arts  
london  
central  
saint martins

# **(unknown)** quantities

Unknown Quantities III is a joint project of MA Culture, Criticism & Curation  
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# Editorial

Normal  
/'nɔ:m(ə)l/

*adjective*

conforming to a standard; usual, typical, or expected.

*Related words:* routine, order, regularity, natural, regular, routine, traditional, typical, average, accustomed, conventional, customary, run-of-the-mill, unexceptional, sanity

This third issue of *Unknown Quantities* places an often-overlooked concept in the foreground. Although it remains difficult to define or quantify, it simultaneously governs the ways in which we perceive our environment, those around us and our selves.

"Normality", the state of being "normal", is largely defined as the process of "conforming to a standard; usual, typical or expected" (OxfordDictionaries.com, 2015). Yet these terms remain substantially loose, subjective and highly dependent on context. Some say that we can only define what is normal by identifying what it is not. As abnormal behaviour highlights the characteristics of normal behaviour, normal mental health is recognised by the lack of abnormal thought. However, without abnormality, what is it to be normal? Who defines it? Who regulates it?

We can divide normality into two overarching notions: a personal normality and a collective normality. While the former refers to what is customary for each particular person, such as their specific tastes or demeanour, the latter denotes the norms imposed by and on society. It is this notion that we have found specifically problematic, as it underlines normality as a social construct that excludes and stigmatises those who differ. Although perspectives on the subject have changed over time, society's need to label and categorise remains entrenched. Yet categories of normality are arbitrary and result in hierarchy, inequality and limitations.

On the other hand, categorising what is and what is not normal allows for order and understanding in a diverse world. The common use of the word "normal" to describe what is comfortable and safe speaks to the necessity of routine and stability in everyday life. As a consequence, the term carries both positive and negative connotations, as breaking the norm can simultaneously equal chaos and upset as well as the extraordinary and revolutionary.

This issue of *Unknown Quantities* presents a selection of testimonies and interviews from ten individuals across the globe, from Turkey to the United States. Their perspectives highlight the subjective nature of the term, the fluidity of its definition and the grounding it has in different fields of study, from photography to child psychology and poetry. The questions we proposed to our interviewees sought no right or wrong answer, nor did we expect them to provide a fixed conclusion. Instead we hope it will provoke a debate about a term that habitually passes us by silently.



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


















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## Decrypting key

A		R		9		a		r	
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D		U		.		d		u	
E		V		?		e		v	
F		W		[]		f		w	
G		X		{}		g		x	
H		Y		()		h		y	
I		Z		+		i		z	
J		1		=		j			
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M		4		*		m			
N		5		"		n			
O		6				o			
P		7				p			
Q		8				q			

Wingdings is a typeface made exclusively of pictograms. It was designed by Kris Holmes and Charles Bigelow for Microsoft in 1990. At that time images were often too data heavy to work with easily in software. Wingdings provided an alternative form of access to high quality scalable vector images. Contrary to some popular conspiracy theories, Holmes and Bigelow did not embed any hidden messages into the design.



## You could see me as some kind of normality guardian

Cathrine 🙋 😊 ♀ ■ ♦ ♀ ■

*Do you feel normal?*

I have a theory that everyone at some point will be in doubt as to whether they are normal. I think that's one of the fundamental paradoxes of the world we live in. You can never know what others are thinking and how their consciousness works. You can't compare yours with theirs. So you can never be 100% sure if you are normal or not.

I believe the majority decides what is normal, and its definition is based on an average of most people's opinion. Yet it depends on what approaches you choose to rely on when you need to define a complex concept like normality. If we take the tangible example of an intelligence test, which I use a lot in my work, then there is a standard distribution. This means that you have tried the test on, for example, 1000 children, and then you figure out the average and the standard deviation. This produces a spectrum where most of the children will be in the middle. It's a statistical investigation of what normal is, and is what you would probably call a "scientific" approach. Since this quantitative way of looking at a scientific approach is of great importance for our society, I also think that it has had great importance for our understanding of normality.

If we are to discuss a different approach to "science", it's hard to avoid Michel Foucault. What comes to my mind is his book *Madness and Civilisation* from 1961, in which he describes how madness as a concept arose as a product of culture; as a man-made construction. You can only have an idea of what normal is if you can define what it is not. Just as we use the night to find out how great the day is. Of course anyone who has read Foucault knows I have simplified his ideas here. Nonetheless, you could say that Foucault argues that certain people throughout history, via certain discourses and certain social developments, have helped to determine what is conceived as normal today.

The perception of normality quickly becomes complex if you want to include both cultural development and scientific progress. But yes, back to the question, the majority of the time I think I have exactly the same thoughts, feelings, values and goals in life as everyone else. Therefore I consider ☹️📧♂️🔪 🟩🟩🟩🟩.

*You say "the majority of the time". Are there times when you've considered yourself abnormal?*

Yes, I would still argue that there are certain situations where I have been in doubt. Sometimes when I have driven myself into some kind of pattern of thoughts, or when I've had some bizarre ideas. Then you start to consider if everyone has these kinds of thoughts, or if you are exceptional in some way, although you would probably always like to think of yourself as unique. Just like when my mum always said: "You're something completely special, little Cathrine."

Working as a child psychologist has led me to consider undergoing some kind of psychiatric diagnosis. I think you owe that to your patients. Sometimes I notice I have a tendency to view the world in a negative manner. Not that it needs to be a diagnosis in itself, that is not how this diagnosis system works at all, but they say that there are some personality traits that make people predisposed to suffer from various psychiatric disorders, such as depression.

*So if you were to give yourself a psychiatric diagnosis?*

If I had to? It was fortunate that I just said depression and not psychopathy. Yes, I think it probably would be a tendency to depression. Maybe just a minor depression.

I remember once during university, we engaged in a personality test called NEO PI-R, [Neuroticism, Extraversion, Openness Personality Inventory-Revised] which measures a person's basic personality traits. When we got the results back, I had a low amount of kindness, high dominance and high neuroticism. Several of us spoke with our professor and asked if she thought our results appeared 🟩🟩 🟩♂️🔪🔪🔪. My profile said that I would be a great and strong leader, but it also said that I did not have compassion and empathy for others, which of course then made me question my choice of career. I assumed a psychologist should be empathetic and understanding. However, our professor reassured us that these results were actually normal within psychology students, so I guess they revealed more about my profession than about me specifically. At that time, for a second, I felt quite abnormal, and this was the first time it was "scientifically" proven that I had a small abnormality.




If that is an advantage in your profession, can it be a disadvantage in your  
 ☐☐✠❖♣♦♠ ●✠♠♠?

According to the NEO PI-R test, that would be correct, as results should reflect all situations in life. Of course there have been some situations in my life where I've been surprised at my lack of empathy. In situations where it would have been humane and normal to show compassion, others have told me that I have been cruel. I remember an episode at a high school party, where it had never occurred to me that a girl I knew was upset and as a result, feeling vulnerable. At some point, I noticed she was behaving slightly hysterically, at least in her voice, and I yelled, "Why don't you just go outside and dig yourself a hole in the garden?" I didn't realise it, but others told me afterwards that I had said something extremely insensitive.

Nonetheless, in a more current sense, my boyfriend and I have arrived at a consensus about my somewhat cruel and direct manner. He knows it doesn't necessarily mean anything; I think he learnt to accept this a long time ago. Yet I am aware it's important to be empathetic in a relationship.

Which other aspects of your lifestyle seem normal to you, but may be abnormal to others?


This is an easy question for me, as I recall getting a strong response to my moving away from Copenhagen to the countryside, four years ago. My friends at the time reacted with disdain and disbelief as I moved in with my boyfriend who was twice my age and already had four children. They wondered why in the world I would want to move away from the city. Some people feel that it is their duty to stay in Copenhagen for the rest of their lives. Mine was not a popular decision within my circle. According to their normative spectrum of lifestyle choices when young, you must be a student, stay in Copenhagen, have a lot of fancy friends, eat at fancy places, go to clubs and travel. Those are the normative

Why did you choose to become a ?

I once said to myself that I would like to see behind people's facades, to be able to manipulate them. I often thought that the benefit of psychology was that I could get better at managing people around me, since I enjoy control enormously. I later found out that it's not that simple. People are hard to control and it's difficult to even slightly alter their personalities and actions. Ultimately, university was a five-year-long introduction to what is conceived as normative in the world of psychology. I thought this would improve my ability to navigate the social field and thus have an effect on people's mind-set. But fortunately I ended up realising this is not the case.

*Did you believe that learning to navigate the social field successfully would make you feel more normal?*

Yes, you could say that. I hadn't thought about it like that, but I guess it could be interpreted that way. To me, it's clear that if you have a greater understanding of the social field and can engage with others meaningfully and empathetically, this will be reciprocated, thus forming normal meaningful relationships. In fact, I previously researched the theory of "positive psychology" which argues that a positive approach to life ultimately results in a positive living experience. It explains a close link between empathy and "normal" interactions and essentially states that it is always possible to be more empathetic. But this poses the question, how much empathy do we need to be normal? I believe there is a close relationship between the two.

In my profession, I always work with the idea that becoming aware of one's actions and behaviour is the first step to creating a change within the self. If you were to ask me if, over the years, I have advantageously become aware of my sometimes  personality traits, I would say "Yes". It may be why it has been said that 90% of those who study psychology choose it because they have problems themselves, and the remaining 10% are gay. But I don't know whether you want to include that in the interview. It may not be completely wrong.



*Do you feel your job is to  $\mathbb{M} \times \square \square \mathbb{M}$  normality?*

You could see me as some kind of normality guardian. I feel that if I can try to keep people on the right side of the normality spectrum, then at least they do not get the stamp that says "You are abnormal". Of course I also have to accept that sometimes there is no alternative but to accept that the child's challenges can sometimes best be understood when giving them a diagnosis. Then they are abnormal in a clinical sense because the diagnosis course is built on what being normal is. This does not mean that I am opposed to making a diagnosis. Sometimes a diagnosis can ensure that the child gets the help they need.

*Has your job changed your own perception of normality and your own ideas about the term?*

I have certainly become more aware that one can think of normality from many different perspectives. Because of my job, I hold a crucial position where I must think of what normality is in accordance with various kinds of human nature. As the first person the parents and children meet, it is my idea about normality that determines the future of the child. It's an approach that quickly becomes dependent on the individual psychologist, and highlights how important one person's view of normality can be. Of course it's required of me to have a good understanding of the different forms of normality and I believe that I owe it to the children to have this knowledge. There are many reasons why people, especially children, react as they do; why many lie in the grey areas of what is "acceptable". It doesn't mean there is an error in the brain, so it's essential to be careful about how you pass judgement.

A somewhat more concrete example of my own changing perceptions is my intolerance of certain kinds of people. Me and my unfriendly character used to have little time for drunks on the street and children crying in the supermarket, including my boyfriend's children for that matter. Having a narrow-minded outlook on normal behaviour causes you immediately to judge those who differ from you. However, if you have an understanding of normality as a concept that is strongly dependent on  $\mathbb{M} \blacklozenge \bullet \blacklozenge \square \mathbb{M}$ , geography,  $\blacklozenge \square \circ \square \times \blacksquare \gamma \circ \times \blacksquare \gamma \circ$  and so on, then your tolerance shifts and your own behaviour changes. In response to your question as to whether my perception of normality has changed, yes it has.



## Just a plain flat plateau

Erbil ♀✧❖☾♦●✧□♂●◆

I think to be normal is to be the version of something when it's left to its own devices, like the default on a computer system. You are born into it. For example, the traits that you are born with, such as a talent for drawing, remain throughout life even if you don't work on them. They are innate.

For me, normal is like a flat plateau. There are no meteors that have fallen on this flatness nor can you witness any continental drift on it, it's just a plain flat plateau.

If you think of normality as a food, I think it would be flavourless. It is the state of food when it lacks flavour. When you are cooking, let's say you're ♀□□✧✧♂♂ ☾☾❖❖❖ □□♦❖❖□♂, you may choose to add a bit of flavour by putting in a little garlic, basil or bay leaf. Lots of people just put the potatoes into the oven. That is the normal part. Yet little things change the taste and make a difference. Experimenting makes something tastier. Even though it doesn't taste better for everyone, it adds flavour.

I remember feeling normal when I was in elementary school, when I was not sufficiently aware of what I was doing with my life. I used to go to swimming lessons or guitar lessons but there wasn't any true passion for me. I wasn't thinking that I would be successful at guitar playing or in sports. When you're not an A-plus student or the most talented, you feel normal. It was normal, back then. ☾●❖❖□♦□♂♂.

As you mature, you get to experience different flavours. Once you decide baked potatoes taste better with basil, you may become addicted to that taste. Experimenting and trying things out leads you to discover yourself, your preferences. Once you find what you truly like to do in life, you feel it in your bones; it becomes the essence of your life. It becomes something natural, something where you do not even question its

normality. It is like enjoying something and at the same time getting a better result.

These days I notice that it's what I strive for that separates me from normality. Investing a special kind of energy in the things that you truly care about, that's what breaks you out of the mundane. Some may call it having a passion.

On the other hand, it's the things that you rarely do or have never done before that are least normal to you. Repetition in daily life is what makes normal behaviour. For example, swiping an Oyster card every morning or climbing stairs while coming here. There are not many experimental ways of swiping your Oyster card. Repetition generates normality.

However, I would argue that normality is still dependent on location and culture. In Turkey, my home country, lots of people live their lives without questioning. When you do not try to ask better questions or continue to live without questioning life, you stay more normal, I guess. Critical thinking is not that common. There are widespread judgemental views on people that come up with new, experimental ideas, snap judgements that they are not going to "save the world". I think that expression is the obvious sign of people who are stuck in the mundane. It's not about saving the world. It should be more about individuals following their own path and chasing their dreams. It's easier to follow the norm, but the hard way is to go after your passion or freedom. I would like to believe that things might change in the future. It would be nicer if we had the popcorn effect in Turkey, where ideas of people who are chasing different things will pop out at different times and freedom of experimenting, also earning money from that, will be more possible.

Translated from Turkish by Yonca Keremoğlu



## The whole notion of being normal is highly overrated

Andres ♡♣♠♠♠♠

*Do you feel normal?*

I've never felt normal nor have I ever wanted to be. In the 1950s, normal meant being ♡♣♠♠♠♠ (I lived in an Italian neighbourhood) and having a mother and father. I was an only child and my father left when I was very young, so it was difficult for me to feel normal under those circumstances. You accept the lot you're given. I had a crazy mother so that was normal to me. By crazy I mean outrageous, outspoken and out of control; she did not have any borders when it came to controlling her anger. She also had several nervous breakdowns. Whatever values she gave me were her values, which I either accepted or did not. She taught me to read Spanish, which was good, and she taught me to stand up for myself, which was also good. But I have no sense of family or of belonging anywhere in particular.

Ultimately for me, it's ♡♣♠♠♠♠ to be normal. I've always felt uncomfortable around people who are very conservative or normal. These people are usually white (although they don't have to be), Republicans (but not always) and they have a specific view of normality.

*As you mature, has time changed what you perceive as "normal"?*

I don't think so. Normal has always been subjective for me. It's normal if it's normal for you. It's normal for me to be the way I am. During the 1970s I was a drug addict, so that was normal for me then. Nowadays, it's normal to have an iPhone, which I don't. It's normal for some people to be artists or crazy but for others it is not. To me there's no difference between the two. Being married you settle down, but I'm not sure that is normal. Because of this and my upbringing, I always had an interest and commitment to subcultures, which I always felt part of through the different stages of my life.

*You have photographed individuals in various subcultural groups that have at some point clashed with society. How do you perceive their normalities?*

I have seen and been among many subculture groups and in those circumstances it is normal for those people to live the way they do. In 1997, when I was working on my series *A History Of Sex* for the Groninger Museum in Holland, I went to a lot of fetish and BDSM parties in Amsterdam and that was normal for those people. What was interesting about those parties was that there was a strict dress code. They were wearing rubber, leather or nothing, and you were considered abnormal unless you dressed accordingly. If you are going in looking for the freaks, you soon realise that you are the freak.

*In your photography project Residents of New York, you have portrayed the homeless in New York. How was your experience with them? How would you place them in the context of normality?*

My experience with them was normal. I asked them to pose and paid them and they accepted my offer. I have seen the homeless in many cities since then and in some places there are so many people on the streets it almost looks normal.

*In many of your works you use organic materials such as meat, milk or bodily fluids. Why do you think some people find it subversive to use something that is so vital, natural and normal?*

Because they don't look at much art, otherwise they would realise that it is normal. Most people do not go to galleries or visit museums so they're not used to looking at contemporary art. What passes for normal in the art world can freak out the ♡♣♠♠♠♠. Normality in a photograph or work of art is the thing that speaks to you, the thing that makes you feel connected and good about yourself. Needless to say, it's different for everyone, although there are things that have mass appeal.

*Do you think that the majority is the significant indicator of what normality is?*

I think the consensus is that if everyone is doing it, it must be normal. But that isn't always the case. There is a difference between a human being and a tool or a sheep. The whole notion of being normal is highly overrated and in many cases a waste of time. You cannot always fit in nor should you want to. We live in a world where the definition of normal is rapidly changing. For instance, millions of refugees will soon flood Europe and eventually America. These people will come from different



worlds, politically, culturally and economically. Will they be considered normal? By whose standard?


*Can you give a reference to a text or a book that reflects your point of view on "normality"? In what ways do you think this text reflects your perspective?*

J D Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye*. Holden Caulfield was completely normal. He was a kid being himself.

## I am one of many in the audience, the grey mass


Max 

I must admit that I have no great trauma to talk about. I have not been beaten as a child, I have not been let down by my parents. A stepfather has not abused me, and I have not been harmed by alcoholic parents, or been damaged because the home was filled with drugs or poverty. I have not lost my parents in a traffic accident, and I have not lost my siblings to cancer. I've only lost lovers, when I have left them. I still have most of my grandparents. I have five siblings. I'm a middle child. My mother smokes. I'm a little upset about that.

I have no major confusions with my . I'm not in any closet. I have never been in doubt that I'm a man in a man's body; there is no shy girl hiding inside of me who dreams of dressing up and wearing a bra. My gender is not fluid, I'm sure of that, and so it's not something that confuses me in my everyday life. There once was a guy who kissed me while I was drunk. It did nothing for me and we laughed it off.

I do not have a broken heart that I can cry and write deep poems about. I can draw on old love and the break-ups I've been through in the past, but that's all. I do not want to kill myself when a woman does not feel the same for me as I feel for her. However, I may get a stomach-ache about it, but who wouldn't?

I once cried over a girl but it was probably because she chose my best friend instead of me, so I lost a little more than just a girl. I am more confident when flirting than ever. It seems that it just takes a few years before you really understand what it is all about, and then it takes a few more for you to feel comfortable with it. I think I understand it now so it's not something that bothers me.

I have also had my share of partners; not many, but enough to not shout about it. I have only had chlamydia once. So no, I don't have a . I'm fine. I have no girlfriend, though I would like one, but it should not be just anyone.

I do not really have any wild dreams in life and therefore I do not get hopeless when they seem far away. I have a part time job where I save up money in order to get a small apartment one day. I go to university. I will soon run out of student support, but it will not make me protest against the government. I guess I can't live on other people's money forever so it suits me well to begin working in order to finish my MA.

I'm having my dream education, and I hope to be able to live off my writing one day. I'm sure everything will be just fine. It would be cool to travel a bit more but the bit of Europe that I have seen has been enough to quench the thirst for now. I would like to see more of Denmark, or Asia, but if I don't get to do so before I have children, I'm fine with that. Maybe I can take them with me? I have some minor debt because I moved around a bit in my late teens. It's a bit of a burden, but it will be gone in a couple of years so it's fine.

I do not suffer from any disease, either physically or psychologically, so I do not have any negative experiences in connection with our healthcare system. I was once number six in the queue with my doctor, but I think it works okay. I do not have anxiety, do not panic when being in large groups of people, and I feel relatively fine in stressful situations. I enjoy them at times.


I am happy most of the time. I often get told that I always smile when people see me, but I think I smile when I see people I like. I like most people. I do not suffer from depression. Of course the winter can be a little long and my skin becomes a little grey, but summer will always come. It's just about waiting.

I have no obsessions. I do not need my keys to be in the same place every time, though often I actually cannot find them. I rarely catch a cold. I guess I have a good immune system, even when someone is coughing on me on the subway. I get a little back pain from sitting at the computer a lot, but my roommate is good at giving me massages.

I am well satisfied with how I look. I eat my oatmeal every day and go for a run every now and then. I do not smoke. I mostly only drink on Fridays. I do not have a crooked penis. It is not very small, a bit above average, I believe. I do not have any strange growths, no haemorrhoids for the time being and I weigh only a few kilograms more than I should.

I have no stretch marks, no moles and no birthmarks. I have healthy teeth. I have never had a cavity, despite the fact that it's a long time since I've been to the dentist. I do not have any awkward hair growth, apart from that on my back. It seems a little strange to me but that's just





something I have to get used to. I have heard it is very normal for . My hairline is receding, so it requires a little more sunscreen.

I do not feel alone. I do not feel that my generation is lost, spoiled or astray. I have hope for the future and I have plenty of optimistic people around me. I'm sure a few of them are destined for big things.

I do not feel passionate about or obligated to discuss politics, economics or other heavy topics. I do not own a TV, and when I finally open a newspaper, I do not know who most people in the headlines are. It is not really a subject for conversation when I meet friends for food and beer every now and then. I do not see my family very often but I talk to my sister every day, and I visit my mother across the country once in a while. I use public transport and I do not mind it, although I think it is a little expensive now that my travel card is blocked.

So no, I do not really have much to say and not much to complain about. I often sit with my coffee (with milk, no sugar) and think of how "normal" and "average" I really am. Although I feel tremendously blessed to be like this, I think the two terms are also very misunderstood. I do not think I'm as average as I'm grey. I do not think I'm as normal as normal is today, because now normal is not that grey mass, which is all of us who just don't really have anything to say.


I almost feel ashamed about thinking this way, because we are often served with stories about something terrible. People are starving or homeless, people die of cancer or malaria, or people are so sick-minded that they do not function in our society and live off other people's money. War and peace and hatred and death and love across genders and failure, both from the family and the public.



I know others who feel the opposite, others who have lost love, others who suffer in some way or are unhappy with who they are or what their loved ones are or do. It frustrates me that I cannot do anything about it other than to love them or to be there when they need someone to listen. It is perhaps the same role I must take in daily life: just be one who is there, one who listens to all the other people's anguish. I am one of many in the audience. I am one of the   which exists as a contrast, as a receiver. But I guess there is something tragic about that.



Those afraid of tomorrow  
should skip it

Dragan      

In this world, where  is the one and only measure, a man feeling at least a tiny need for something spiritual will become unhappy and discontented if he fails to build his own parallel universe as a shelter. As I believe nothing in life happens by chance, I began building my shelter some 15 years back when I agreed to leave quite a comfortable situation where my job was only a few floors away, and move to Boljun, 25 kilometres away, to run a small post office. Such decisions are not made level-headedly, but are prompted by an inner drive, something springing from one's being and yearning for inner balance. In a time as crazy as this one, being normal is in fact a madness in its own right. In many people's opinion, a man is normal when he fulfils the norms imposed by the society he lives in. In my view, a man is normal when he is in balance with himself and his environment.

For a long time I nourished the need to express myself in ways other than this so-called . All these poems I have been nesting inside me found a way out on a blog I launched on the web. I called the blog *Bolgyn* and it was left empty for a long time... for months. One evening I wrote a poem on this pristine virtual wall. It was about a man sitting by a black hole and waiting next to this "singularity washing machine" for time to start turning back so that he could make up for his mistakes. This man was me: the man who persistently followed imposed norms at the expense of his own being. The man who that way brought himself to the brink of depression, and was left with two choices: you will either write poetry, or you will sink down with depression. By choosing poetry, I cured myself. I am currently working on my fourth collection and I agree to be it all... a poet and a postman... a husband and a father... completely ... and completely normal.

A poem as an ending:

*Master of Time*

In this post office, on this hill, I am the master of time and although the strict rules of my service do not allow me to ante-date those who want to go back to their youth should pick a date those afraid of tomorrow should skip it

madam, you who like to remember your wedding 4 October 1969... there... it's only a matter of seconds to me you are young and beautiful again, your husband desires you, and on Saturday mornings he buys you roses

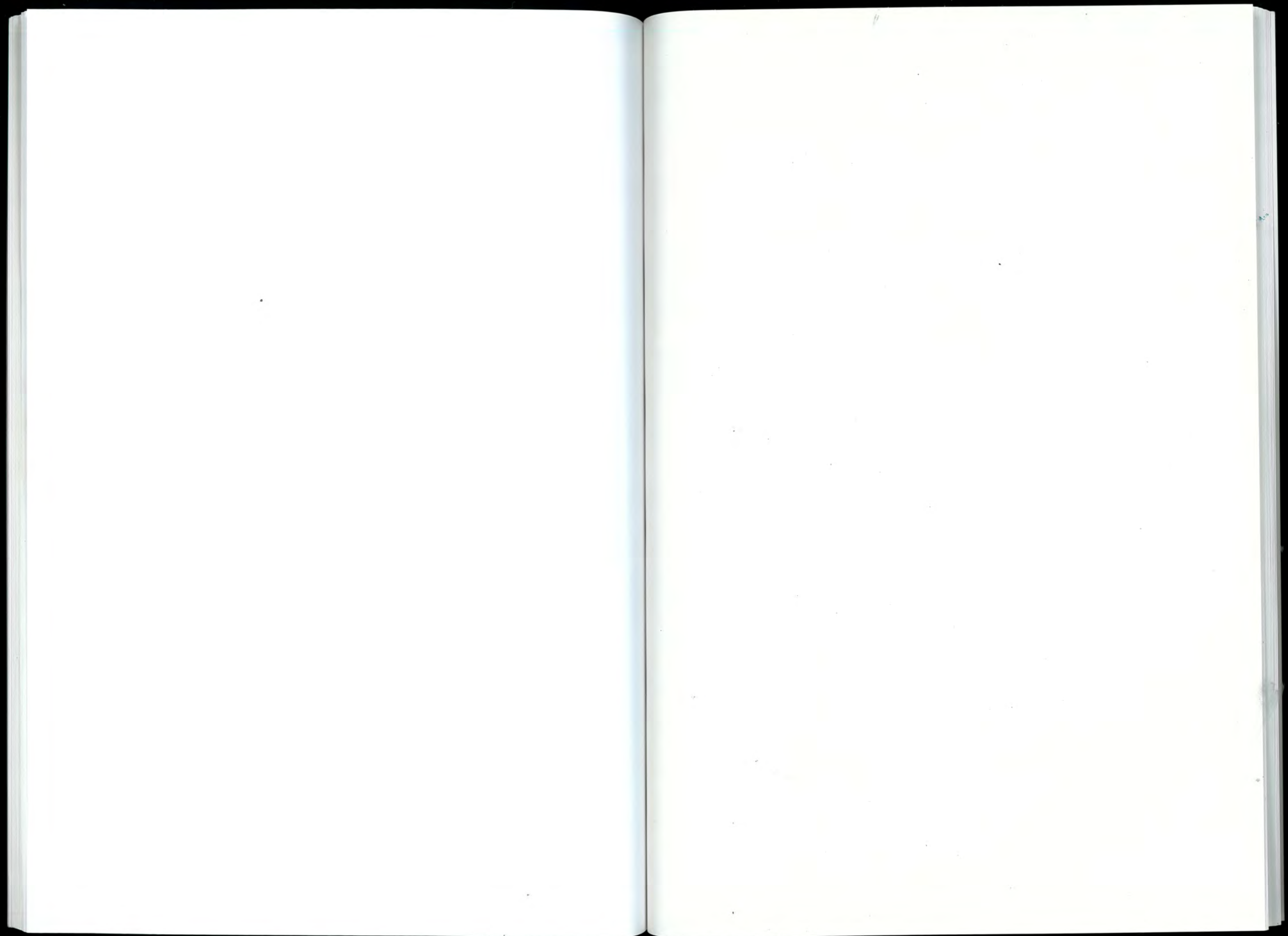
I see disbelief in your eyes and you are asking me if it works  
of course it does, madam, I am the best example you only  
need to believe, the magical stamp does not work  
without faith

what about you, dear child?... your dog died? this is but a tiny thing to us... when the stamp number turns a puppy will cry in a cardboard box

Translated from Croatian by Ivana Ostojčić



# Portfolio





# We need a paradigm shift in thinking about humanity

Simon 🖐️◻️●●✕■🌀◆◻️■

To paraphrase and distort Dave Hickey (where he uses beauty and the beautiful, I am using normality and the normal):

Normality is a ◻️🌀✕● 🌀◻️■◆◻️◆🌀 and a set of ambient community standards. "Normal" is what we do and we are, whether we like it or not, or what we are, however voluntarily or involuntarily. [The original quote appeared in *Bomb Magazine*, Spring 1995]

How do we measure normality? We can use statistics. But that, depending on what methods we want to use, means that I have more legs than the "average person". Is the average normal? If so, then normality is just a mathematically contrived statistic/status and nothing else. Not that I am having a pop at mathematicians.

Let's look at the much-peddled idea of human nature. I think it's nonsense. There is a way humans behave in certain situations that seems to display a common trait. Yet if we compare this to the way sociologists believe our hunter-gatherer forebears lived, during the greater period of modern human existence, then human nature reads very differently. Have we evolved, or have we been coerced into believing a compelling hierarchical/capitalist narrative in relation to what is normal? I believe we have been coerced, but there you go. My beliefs mean nothing other than that they are my beliefs.

In terms of my own normality... well, I don't consider myself a psychopath. But normal is obviously a disputed term. I'm normal in some senses since I am married. We have a mortgage on a house that we live in. We have to work for a living and we use public transport. We buy food in our local shops and make dinner for each other. We both have middle-class jobs.

You can decide which parts of that are normal. There is nothing inherently odd there, depending on one's ambient community standards.

Yet my own normality hasn't remained the same. I grew up in a working-class community in North East London. All the houses were pretty much the same. We were all pretty much white and from the East End of London. Very few of our parents had a great deal of "formal" education. Both my parents left school at the age of 14 but this does not mean they are uneducated. Not many of my peers went on to higher education.

We ate English food, often the same dinner on the same day of the week. We watched football: the main division was whether one was Arsenal or Tottenham Hotspur; no-one else was supported. This was before the globalisation and mass capitalisation of football; if anyone said they did not support a local London team they would have been kicked out of the playground. My parents worked in Hoxton, which was an area of grinding poverty. You can still see the shop if you want to: 90 Hoxton Street. I think it is now called Fags and Mags.


What one needs to remember is that going into higher education was a big thing. That was one leaving one's social/cultural background behind. Whereas it is normal for middle-class kids to go to higher education, it was not for the ◻️◻️✕■🌀 🌀●🌀. When I left to go to art school my mother said to me, "Don't ever forget where you come from." I have tried not to. I still consider myself working-class. It is claimed that one's class is instilled very early on in childhood. I think I agree with that.

It is a real tragedy that the present government's policies make it harder for the current generation of young people to go to art school or university. If I were to be saddled with the debts that they have, I doubt I would ever have gone. It is an attack on culture and knowledge and it's an attack on the working class. Class warfare has never stopped and it is mainly prosecuted, on many different fronts, by the affluent on the working class: housing, education, healthcare, etc. It is claimed that there are enough empty houses in Europe to house all of our homeless people twice over, which means we have about five million empty homes left over to house the people who make up the increasingly desperate refugee crisis.

In my opinion this crisis is notably impacting society's view on normality. My fear is that these scenes will become normal. Neo-conservative capitalism, failed foreign policy, environmental degradation and media manipulation will see the images that we are witnessing at the moment become all too common. Worldwide, we currently have the largest displaced population since World War II.



In the short term we have two possible responses: build fences or open doors. In the long term we need to address the massive difference between rich and poor, the secure and the threatened. We need to address the military-industrial complex that props up our national economy and then causes catastrophes.

We need a paradigm shift in thinking about , where we come from and where we need to live, both politically and environmentally. To do this effectively, humanity needs a radical stance, a structural change in how we organise our world and how we think about ourselves, our fellow humans, the other animals we share the planet with and all our human and non-human habitats.

I'm not sure that this is going to happen until it all gets a lot worse. Until then we will open a couple of doors and build a whole lot of fences. But I will say this: fences (both physically and conceptually) are just obstacles. We can jump over them, pull them down or dig underneath them. The more of us who do this, the better place we shall all end up in.

I lived in Brixton for 13 years and when I left it was a changed place. I loved it for what it was and not for what it had become, and many of my friends loved it too. To quote Oscar Wilde (who was talking about America) the area went from "barbarism to decadence without the intervention of civilisation". Obviously Brixton was not barbaric but it was very anarchic; the shift happened quickly without many of us noticing, until we saw the prices of renting accommodation go up.

It had become a "go to" area as opposed to a "no go" area. And that is when we, like many others, moved to another South London suburb, this time without squatting; and we have become part of another gentrification of another community. In the local shop I overheard a white working-class man saying to the Pakistani man behind the counter, "I used to know everyone around here but all those bastards from Brixton have moved in."


I read recently that something like one in 65 people in England is a millionaire. I know two millionaires and they do not conform to my stereotypes of millionaires but they bought fairly cheap houses in the 1970s and these houses are now worth more than a million pounds. They both agree that this is disgusting and very problematic for London and its future.

So is that normal, simply the way of things? It is at the moment but surely it cannot last. Essentially London is being "socially cleansed" and this will destroy what makes London great and re-frame what is considered normal.

My idea of normality is no different from when I hung around in squats, helping to organise art exhibitions, making food for the café and helping feed people a decent meal when they hadn't had one. I am older now and so the way I act is practically different; but if large enduring squats were still legal then I would still be involved (not that I am saying that legality should be a bar for involvement, just that it seems to be a lost cause at the moment). I'll leave that to the young people who know what is going on. As Ian Bone, the designated leader of the anarchist organisation Class War, wrote in his autobiography, "My brick-chucking arm is not as good as it used to be", although those may not be his exact words.

I have a dog and walk her every day and she is my constant and loyal companion. Except that she is an Irish Terrier, a breed that, shall we say, has its own mind. She knows right from wrong but does not worry about doing "wrong". Her behaviour is normal to me but not to other people who have a different breed of dog.

And this is the thing, she is a pedigree dog and so conforms to breed standard. She is normal but not natural, as she has been bred by humans to be what she is. The question about normal and/or natural is here, if indeed there is such a thing as natural, or indeed normal.

I have a problem with the concept of the . I am not natural as I have been inoculated against various diseases, and thus I'm a product of medical science. I have had teeth fixed in the same way, although it may not look like it. There is little in the way of landscape that has not been made or "curated" by mankind.

I find our relationship to animals odd. We are, supposedly, a nation of animal-lovers (it is claimed that one in four households has a dog, although again I do not know what form of statistical analysis was used) but we eat animals everyday and use them for "scientific" tests, whether to find a cure for cancer or to test cosmetics or tobacco.

Arguably, our relationship to the landscape is based on class and ownership. It is generally accepted that we are facing an environmental catastrophe, yet capitalism continues as if we can carry on using the earth's resources with abandon and creating a possibly uninhabitable planet. We could escape to other worlds. However, we have left so much "space junk" in near-space that launching small satellites is increasingly difficult, let alone the science fiction dream of colonising other planets.

So that is why I have a problem with the concept of nature: humankind has fucked that well and truly. But is that what humans naturally do?



I believe that humans creating large conurbations (cities) is natural in the same way that bees create hives. But as far as I can understand, a beehive does not expand due to short-term capitalist investment. I could be wrong. It has been a while since I had a conversation with a bee about politics.

Or is the question we're asking, "Am I 'abnormal'?" I must be if I am not "normal". So one has to say that we are all normal, every single one of us. It is just that some are more normal than others. Or we are all abnormal. It is just that some of us are more abnormal than others. (I'm paraphrasing George Orwell here, but I am sure you know that.)



## The media could strongly modify our brain

Valerio ✚✚■✚✚■✚✚■

The word normal comes from the Latin "norma", which was a square ruler used by carpenters. Something normal refers, then, to something that conforms to a standard, which can be measured and is expected. We tend to associate a neutral or positive connotation to the word normal. For example, the best university in Italy is in Pisa and it is called Normale because its purpose is to teach a set of norms to the best students in the country. In our society, we send the best students to places where they must conform to a standard.

On the other hand the word abnormal and the expression "not normal" have negative connotations. Doing something that is not normal, breaking the rules, is not well perceived in ■◆■ ◆■✚✚■◆■. When I was 30, I left my "normal" job and decided to become a full-time photographer. At first I just had a passion for photography. I later realised that it is a very powerful tool, important for expressing concepts even more than stories. Photography has helped me shape a critical attitude towards life and it tends to challenge, in some cases, the notion of normality.

Standards, rules, norms change over time and space; normality is an ever-changing concept. What was normal in the past might not be normal today. The project that I entitled *Smiling is not allowed* is an example of this. Today one is not allowed to smile in passport or ID pictures. In this project I put "old normal" ID pictures side by side with the "new normal" versions. I want to show the huge impact that this new rule has on the images of ourselves that we pass to the next generations. However, what is normal today may be not normal tomorrow. New normalities are in fact created by people who one day broke the rules, fought the friction of the establishment, and imposed new visions. I often wonder what the positive changes of the future will be, the normal things in today's society that will not be acceptable in the future. Will it be illegal to declare a war? Will we abolish passports?

The notions of travel and ✚✚■◆■◆■ have always been fascinating to me. In the *Borderline, The Frontiers of Peace* project, my intention was to show images that are far from the stereotypes that we tend to associate with the word "border". No walls, fences, and border patrols but instead serene landscapes. I dream of a day when we will consider a border landscape with no walls or fences normal.

I still remember when I first moved to France in 1993, just before the Schengen Agreements. Getting a residence permit was a nightmare. I wanted to talk about the Schengen Agreements which have allowed Europeans since 1995 to freely travel, live, and work in many EU countries (26 as of today). This was inconceivable during the Cold War and is probably the most important historical event in Europe since World War II. I wanted to give visibility to this radical change.

When I started this project I thought it would be interesting to show all the abandoned customs houses along the border. Later I became increasingly intrigued by the landscape visuals on the borderline. During the project, I realised that more than just documenting the positive effects of the Schengen Agreements, the work is also a reflection on the concept of borders between countries. I wanted to talk about the borders of the future more than the borders of the past.

This year I have just come back from a trip along the EU borders of Croatia and Romania. As with my 2014 trip to Bulgaria, I am anticipating that these EU countries will join the Schengen Area in the years to come. I calculated that from 2007 to 2013 I've crossed Schengen borders more than a thousand times without ever having to show my ID. On this trip, as I was travelling in countries that are not yet a part of the Schengen Area, I was controlled numerous times. I often had to explain my project to suspicious border patrols. I had the unpleasant impression of jumping back into a surreal and irrational past. On one of the days I was camping in the mountains at the border between Greece and Bulgaria, I was woken up in my tent in the middle of the night by a border patrol. It took me more than an hour to convince them that there was no need to bring me to the police station. This was an abnormal experience for me.

I am concerned about the future of borders in the rest of the world. The temporary checks at the French-Italian border and the wall between Greece and Turkey, as well as the fences in the Spanish exclave of Melilla or the fence between Hungary and Serbia, make me sad and ashamed. I think that we should learn from history, it has a lot to teach us. Barriers between countries and walls between people might give the impression they solve the situation in the short term, but they



actually have never been a long-term viable solution in Europe, as well as in the rest of the world. As Stefan Zweig recalled in his *The World of Yesterday*, before 1914 there were no passports, visas, permits, or authorisations required, and everyone could freely travel around the world. I know this sounds utopian nowadays, just as the Europe that I show in my pictures sounded utopian less than 50 years ago. I strongly believe we should work today towards a pre-1914 free liberty of movement for everyone. This should be a basic right of every individual. This, one day, should be normal.

However, it is also interesting to look at normality in an individual context. In 2001 I read an article in a newspaper about a scientific discovery. A housewife in Italy suffered from severe brain degeneration. Although capable of reading and speaking, she was unable to recognise most of her relatives. She could recognise the picture of only one person. Not her husband or children but someone she had never met in her life: Silvio Berlusconi. As a unique case in the history of neuropsychology, her pathology led to the understanding that our brain, when it is bombarded by the same images, "stores" them in a deeper region of our consciousness. The visibility of everyday images that we consider "normal" affects our conscious at a deeper level. So the repetition of the "normal" has a significant impact on the brain, which in turn may lead to an abnormality. When I read about this discovery I was shocked. For the first time there was a proof that advertising and the media could strongly modify our brain. It took me a few years before finding a way to talk about this issue. My series *Cortex*, in superimposing many photographs of world leaders gathered from the Internet, proposes an artistic vision of the subliminal image that our brain creates after being bombarded by images of the same person.



## As if someone has distorted your settings

Esme 🧨🌀🌀📺🌀

*What is your definition of normality?*

It's hard to define "normal". The definition may lead to many different things if we keep talking about it or experiencing it. The first thing that comes to my mind about normality is ✨♦️ 📺🌀♦️✨❖✨♦️📺. It changes from person to person. It's a very ambiguous term. The concept of normality floats in the air; you cannot classify or create a stereotype out of it. For me, normality is open to broader meanings and definitions. However, I consider anyone who is aware of themselves and the people around them to be normal.

Abnormal is easier to define. I relate abnormality to anything that I consider unhealthy. For example, when I realise that I am not healthy or thinking straight, that's abnormal. Or whenever I overthink something specific and still can't make sense of it, despite the time spent on thinking and thinking all over again. The moment I start to think otherwise instead of over-thinking is the moment that everything turns normal to me. It is quite complicated.

I think abnormality emerges when you stop listening to the sounds in your soul in your body and to the animals inside you. What arises when you stop listening to the voices in your mind is what is not normal. When you move away from your needs and the needs of the system of your body, that's when abnormality occurs, as if someone has distorted your settings.

Since I would like to avoid generalising or categorising almost everything, I can't make any assumption about my own normal or abnormal personality traits. I am not quite sure how to define myself in the context of normality. I do not have the kind of mentality which categorises what is normal or what is abnormal. In a nutshell, I generally try to avoid comparison of something with something else.

*How have your childhood and family impacted your later life?*

That's a complicated issue. Kafka wrote in a letter to his father, "For children, the only thing that a parent must do is to embrace the children with all their heart". While growing up, everyone searches for love. In that sense, it doesn't matter whether you grow up in an intellectual environment or not. All that matters is good communication between each other. My family has never been the kind of family to ✨📺📺♦️📺🌀✨♦️. We have always had good communication, for which I consider myself lucky, but in a broader sense, the concept of family is hard to deal with. If you go into the happiest-looking family, you will find that every family has its own issues. To sum up, my family has always set me free, which then allowed me to find my world.

*Do you think being an actress changed your views on normality?*

Becoming an actress has changed everything in my life. I wouldn't be me if I weren't an actress. Probably it's the same for anyone who does his/her job passionately. I don't know if it's because of the nature of acting but when you become an actor/actress you become a more curious person, curious about almost everything. All the characters that I have played so far occupy different places in me. For example, the last character that I played was a girl named Serap in Emine Emel Balci's 2014 film *Nefesim Kesilene Kadar*. After we finished shooting I was really sad that I wouldn't get to be her anymore. I worked on playing this character for a long time, and sometimes you develop a strange bond, even with a fictional character. Normally I wouldn't make the choices that she makes, but at the same time I was thinking that she was absolutely right in her choices. Because I was playing her, in a way I was experiencing what it's like to be her.


*Have you been in a film that makes a comment on society and its normative culture?*

I believe Seren Yüce's 2010 film *Majority* reflects the realities of Turkey. It represents the stereotypical patriarchal and nationalist family structure with an underdeveloped consciousness about who lives in this country. The boy in the movie, a young middle-class boy, falls in love with the character I play, Gül, a Kurdish girl, but she can't be with him because of his family's oppressive attitude towards Kurdish people. There are so many examples like that in Turkey, and not only in Turkey. The world is full of families who raise their children with a twisted point of view. I think in Turkey there are many examples of passive boys who are condemned to become just like their fathers. It isn't hard to guess what these children will become in the future.



*How is Turkey's political situation affecting you and your relationship with your country?*

The level of conflict in Turkey is at its peak right now, so much that it seems impossible for me to even talk about it. Days go by with constant struggle. I have no idea how we'll recover from the trauma we experience in everyday life. We are living in a constant storm and as with ever-changing weather, lightning strikes often. However, I can't imagine living somewhere else because I know that I wouldn't stop caring about the troubles in the place I grew up.

These are  issues, and I believe that I don't have the extensive knowledge to provide an answer. I also wonder to what extent a culture, a country, shapes a person. Even a lullaby that you listened to when you were a baby is somewhere in your memory. Where you are born is where your personality grows.

Translated from Turkish by Yonca Keremoğlu



# I don't see anything normal in this modern secular life

Jeremy 🖐️📦📦💎📦

*When I mention the word normality, what is your first thought?*

📦📦🔪📦📦📦🔪💎📦. It is a kind of a balance between the safety of being part of a conformist society that functions, where you can live and be safe. But also on the other side of the coin it is like a prison, someplace suffocating which you want to break out of. It is an ever-shifting balance between these two things. If you break out too much then you lose your security and that feels abnormal; conform too much and you feel trapped by the situation. That feels abnormal as well.

*Is the balance between these two positions achievable?*

I think it is. Most people are doing that most of the time. That's why, regardless of the circumstances, everybody is trying to achieve a certain stability, some status quo that will work for them and to an extent that is what is called normal.

*Would you describe your upbringing as normal?*

I would say it wasn't normal because it was different from the majority. But in other ways it was normal. I had a mother and a father, who were together, who had jobs, did gardening at the weekends. I have three younger sisters. I suppose that it was slightly abnormal. Where I grew up, in a village called Oakley in Bedfordshire, most people had two kids. My parents moved there from London because of my dad's job. He was working for Unilever as a research scientist. My mum stayed at home when we were little, but she was teaching here and there: she found a job when my youngest sister was at school. We were the abnormal ones because we didn't have a brand new TV and a brand new car. I always had that sense of non-conformity when I was growing up, of somehow being different from other people. It is hard to describe. Maybe it was that I saw that other people had a more materialistic approach. Their houses were usually set up in a different way, with no books and the TV that was

constantly on. Where I grew up it was more of a ramshackle mismatch of furniture, homemade clothes. It was slightly eccentric.

*So your parents were structuring their lives according to their values of what normality is?*

I think my mum's parents were a significant factor. They were forward thinking for their time. They had anti-establishment ideas in a gentle way. For example, they were quite disapproving of receiving interest on money from the bank. They were equals in terms of their intellectual status as husband and wife; they had a mutual respect and were very much on the same level. My grandad was a scientist and a lecturer at a polytechnic. He used to walk six miles to work rather than drive. When he did drive later, he would never take motorways, instead picking cross-country routes and small roads. They were people who allowed themselves to be individual, particularly him. He would describe himself as a very singular person. When they went on holiday, my grandmother and my mum and uncle would take a train and he would cycle separately. It was not normal; it was a bit strange. But they were completely devoted to each other. I suppose their influence indirectly affected my childhood.

*Do you think that those values have anything to do with the presence of Methodism in the lives of both sets of your grandparents?*

Possibly. Methodism promotes a simplified way of life. The churches are simply built; there's no grandeur there. Methodists don't drink during the mass, so instead of communion wine they have blackcurrant juice. My grandmother on my mother's side was the only dedicated worshipper. On the other hand, my dad's grandfather on his mother's side was the last of the Charles Simmons Methodist preachers who had been serving in Cornwall since John Wesley founded Methodism there. In the meantime modern society and the 1960s happened. But they kept their values about not being extravagant or extreme, instead simply being kind. It was a lot to do with openness, tolerating other people and being understanding.

*Isn't that 📦📦📦📦📦📦📦?*

I don't know about that. I think the world is lacking in that, to be honest. It would be a nice normality.

*So the individualistic approach to materialism made your family differ from others?*

I remember as a kid I was told, "You can have stuff, but why would you



need it? You don't need it, you just think you do." My sisters and I were kind of indoctrinated into not being materialistic and not joining the consumption frenzy. We were always eating homemade food and wearing handmade clothes. I remember when sliced bread came out. It was like a miracle and everybody was eating processed white bread. At school everybody else had white bread sandwiches with sliced ham and cheese and I had this crumbly homemade bread with leftovers from the previous day's meal and a Tupperware pot with apple crumble. I was sitting there eating my lunch and looking around and thinking, "I am not normal. There's something different about my family." It was a bit embarrassing and people picked on me.

*Does it mean that you felt uncomfortable with the fact that you didn't fit to the standard concept of what normal was?*

Well, in fact I was against it. I felt some kind of solidarity with my parents and what they instilled in me from an early age. I felt indignant towards certain things I was seeing outside so I thought, "This is wrong." I didn't know how to express it so I suppose I was dismissive of it.

Yet it did also make me feel an "abnormal" outcast. As a boy you must play football to be a part of the group. That's it. Full stop. This football thing defines everything about being a boy and I wasn't interested at all. And if you didn't play football, it was like, "What team do you support?" "I don't support anybody." "What do you mean, you don't support anybody? You must support a team!" Why would I? I couldn't get it at all. And then I crumbled at some point and said, I better do something. I think I was nine or ten. I remember I needed a new schoolbag so I got my mum to get me one with "Spurs" on it. I picked the team at random. It was a half-hearted attempt to join in, and then I went to school and the first guy I saw said, "Spurs? They are rubbish!"

*But soon enough you found your crowd among musicians?*

Yes, at an early age. My mum was teaching music on Saturday mornings at a school run by her friend. Every Saturday from the age of eight or nine I went to that school and there was a whole other crowd of people and some sort of shared thing going on, a shared experience of being into music, being a bit weird like everybody else. None of that awkwardness at school was present in this environment. It was a huge relief because being excluded or bullied makes for a lonely place to be. Suddenly finding a group where I was accepted was a good feeling. I suppose 99% of people want that too.

*As someone who is 44, are you surprised with the changes in British society that have happened since your childhood? Did you find the past*  
 ○□□■ ■□□○●●?

I don't see anything normal in this secular modern life. To me it is completely nuts in the way that people are led like sheep to everything flashy and attention-grabbing. It is almost as if the masses are so malleable because there is nothing holding them together anymore.

It's all about money and ego, about the cult of individualism. People are being told that they are individuals in the way they dress, etc. As in reality shows, for example, it is all about the personalities of these people. But who cares? It is all built on the idea of sharing these people's experiences, talking about themselves. The process of ups and downs, emotions and everything else are on public display. It is accentuating the worst parts of human beings.

*How do you feel about it as a musician?*

I feel ♫•🎵□□□✕■◆♫🎵. In this country there is never enough striving for quality. I am still kind of proud of this country because it seems a well-balanced place that functions pretty well. It's not as if we just faded into the background. We are still up there as a major player. But I am disappointed in a way, especially in the culture, that everything always seems to come down to the lowest common denominator rather than any kind of striving for quality. Anything really good can't be seen under this blanket of mediocre crap. Maybe it was always so.

*And what the media are promoting is driving public opinion on what is good or bad and then the audience is asking for more of what they have been given. It's a closed circle.*

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The media are in control and the government does nothing about it. It is the influence of America obviously, but I am not sure if it has affected other European countries like France and Germany. They don't seem to jump on the bandwagon with such commitment as we do. I am not saying that everything that comes from America is bad, but it seems that we took the worst elements. It's all so dull: on telly it's just another police drama, like the one I used to watch in the 1980s called *Juliet Bravo*.

*But people compensate for something they lack in their "normal"*  
 ○◆■♫🎵■♫ ●✕♫ with such entertainment?

It's a buzz. It's like buying something: you do your dull job every week, get the money and treat yourself by getting new clothes, a new sofa, or going



to John Lewis to get some curtains. It's as if people feel in control of their lives when they are consuming. I don't like that feeling. The sense of disappointment comes immediately. For example when you are buying clothes, you get a slight feeling of excitement but then you realise that after a few washes they look like a dishrag. At the end you have this horrible feeling that you are being manipulated and channelled into the mantra of consumerism. Even the politicians tell you, "We really hope everybody this Christmas is going to spend, to help the economy." I think, "What? We are going to spend our way out of recession? It's madness!" I see people joining in with the thrill. Eventually they don't even know what is happening anymore. First they say, "Something's happening, we must join in. And it's so exciting, isn't it?" But is it really?

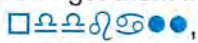
*Is it actually more of a loss of a critical point of view?*

Totally. For example when Barack Obama was elected I thought, "Great. This is a seminal moment." But I didn't want to watch the inauguration because I knew it would be a feeding frenzy. Maybe I was just a grumpy bastard but I could see how everybody wanted to feel as if they were part of it, to take ownership of it.

*And to feel "That light is shining on us too".*

It's a blinding light! It blinds them to any kind of reality that normally happens in these situations. I was thinking, "Let's just calm down a bit. Yes, it's great, but the colour of his skin doesn't tell us anything about his programme or anything that is behind the scenes and that he still has a job to do." And we were judging him as special because of the colour of his skin. It's ironic.

*Do you feel a bit alienated in situations when you stand alone against the views of the majority?*

That used to bother me with girls. You won't get them if you are not part of the group because nobody wants an , do they? They go with somebody else who was quite obviously normal in a conventional way. That used to piss me off but then I got over it. I saw that all those girls I might end up with I wouldn't be able to hold any conversation with anyway because they were all invested in the group. That was one of the big ones. But other than that I didn't care. As a musician I live on a periphery of society anyway. I see people when they are out socialising. I don't have any idea what their lives are really like. I see them all dressed up in a jazz club or theatre or pissed in a pub, which means that I get an almost abstract view on society.

*In what way is your life different from the majority of people and in what way do you find your crowd of musicians more normal to you?*

Well, what is normal for us musicians is completely abnormal for most other people. For instance, the crazy travelling: crossing timelines, jet lag, being spoken to in different languages, working out prices in different currencies. One of the main things, though, is that there is no routine at all. You always have to be on the ball, one step ahead, checking your diary frequently to plan the next few days and anticipate any problems that might arise because you have to make the gig. I've been in many situations where I and my fellow musicians have managed to get to the venue and home again despite floods, snow, air traffic control strikes, Tube strikes, even volcanoes. It is hard for us to find people from other walks of life who understand our normality.

*When you were 20 you quit the oboe course at the Guildhall School of Music & Drama and enrolled at the Royal Academy of Music on the jazz course. It seems that by that choice you removed yourself from the conventional idea of a normal life and career.*

I was surrounded by a lot of people who were pushed by parents who controlled them, and thinking that it is absolutely the most important thing ever. They were very driven young people. It was almost like sports. In the wind-playing world people were backbiting and cutthroat. There was little sense of camaraderie or solidarity. I immediately felt a lack of love for music. There wasn't any fun. Jazz seemed to me back then more laid-back, relaxed. It made sense to an Englishman to go down the route of European classical music, but I got seduced by the rhythm of jazz, this African rhythm, exotic and fascinating. Jazz's concept of a groove does not exist in classical music. Classical music can be a bit stuck up and "precious", which can be suffocating. It is high art and you are privileged to be part of it. This is an amazing thing really, however what drew me was the exploration of groove. It is related to a heartbeat, something which is constant, flowing rhythmically, that doesn't really exist in classical music. In classical music there is constant chopping and changing, moving from one thing to another and slowing down and speeding up, whereas jazz has got a beat.

*Do you think then that jazz feels more natural?*

Maybe. The sort of jazz I like has that primeval energy. You can put as much information as you like on top of that but this beat and this feeling have to be there.



*Did it feel more normal, then, to play jazz?*

I would say it was  $\circ \square \square \square \text{m}$   $\times \square \text{m} \text{m}$  although that's not even true either, to be honest. Because in the improvisational side of things you are much more in control of what the music is, but then you are trapped by your own limitations, because everything is turned on its head. What it did give me was an opportunity to get my hands dirty and to actually get involved with the elements of the music. When you play classical music it's all about interpreting what is written on the page and the page is full of information: there's the tempo, the key and everything else, but there are also tons of expression markings, so you are reading how to express the music in the way the composer intends. Also you need to master your instrument. While with jazz you might get a page with 32 bars and the chord symbols, but you need to make up all the notes, the expressions and the rhythm. It's much more hands-on, dealing with the raw elements. That is why I picked jazz.




## The era of exploring the world is over

Davor 

The past ten years of my life have been spent searching for an absolute wilderness, a forgotten Paradise, a place beyond the known. On the journey through these places, I have encountered people whose thoughts, needs and values were so different from mine, which were formed in Croatia on the streets of Zagreb. I described the normalities of these far away societies in my book, *Džungla* ("Jungle"). It's about a Banggattung clan of Korowai people. I visited their members during my expedition to West Papua, which was the final destination after a three-year-long exploration of the mostly unmapped jungle territories of Guatemala, the Amazon River, Papua New Guinea, Tahiti and the Philippines.

The clans of the Korowai people live in a hunter-gatherer society and build their houses in trees. On special occasions they practise cannibalism. While southern Korowai clans have had contact with Western civilisation, northern Korowai clans are more isolated. My goal was to come close to the clan which had remained completely isolated from any influence of the outside world: the Banggattung clan. After a long walking trek to their hidden territory, they let me live with them for a few weeks. What follows is the epilogue from *Džungla*.

The Korowai are a strictly territorial people. They link their identity to tree-houses and a small plot of land that is theirs alone. This plot provides them with everything they need for a pleasant and rich life. By endlessly repeating actions established long ago by their ancestors, at the time of mythical beginnings, the Korowai have lived in the same way throughout the entire history of their people. This is how they obliterate time and live in a constant present. When white men came and built the very first villages, for the first time the Korowai got a chance to lead their lives elsewhere. As often happens in such cases, they also encountered many problems and obstacles. My Banggattung friend Janian may remain in his tree-house until the day he dies, but his children will move

to the nearby village sooner or later. They are interested in the new, the other, in what is beyond reach. Just like the rest of this planet's population, they have every right to  this, as well as a free hand to decide for themselves and choose what to do with it.

The same issues, in one way or the other, concern all of us who travel, seek new things and wonder about them. I have seen many adventure films and read many adventure tales in which people, much braver, stronger and more skilful than I am, set out to the vast areas of terra incognita, to the highest peaks, across the greatest seas...

I was particularly shocked by a story I was following while writing this book. After many successful endeavours, Andrew McAuley, a famous Australian climber and kayaker, decided in 2007 to become the first man to row the 1600-kilometre stretch of the Tasman Sea between Australia and New Zealand, one of the most dangerous seas in the world. He attached a camera to his kayak to record everything. After just a few hours rowing, having left his wife children and friends waving goodbye, he had a complete mental breakdown. He kept rowing, crying and wondering why he was doing this. His inability to find the answer drove him to despair. Every day he broke the immense waves and kept asking himself the same question, without finding the answer. For a month, he managed to resist every danger the Tasman threw at him but eventually, just 30 kilometres off the coast of New Zealand, the sea engulfed him...

All of us from time to time break under the weight of a question we cannot answer. But the answer to this question, which many travellers and adventurers ask themselves, is in fact very simple: "Because we want to be heroes." This is no longer "trendy". Gods and heroes are dead, and we refuse to admit that. But yes, this is the answer. We want to be heroes. We want to find answers to the questions determining our destiny. We want to give a sense to the life we lead and of the world we were thrown into. Blaise Pascal said he admired people who don't go crazy and don't give in to despair once they realise they were thrown into this world without knowing who threw them in, why, and what they ought to do. Those who do not ask these questions reconcile themselves to their fate. Those who do confront their fate.

In the past four years, on seven expeditions through various jungles, I searched for perfect wilderness. Simply, the remnants



of the Garden of Eden. I could say that I finally found it with the Banggattung. I witnessed that they are still today "completely" immersed in their archaic world-view. Quite possibly there is no other tribe on the planet more deeply rooted in the mythical time of the archetypal paradise.

However, a more thorough and honest analysis leads to a conclusion that even the most authentic "primitive" native does not fully reside in this mythical "timeless time", because he cannot bear suffering. Once I asked Janian if he remembered the day of the solar eclipse. He said that he was a boy and that he remembered. "What did you do then, how did it make you feel?" I asked. He was terrified and he cried, and his father shot darts at the sun. They were convinced it was the end of the world. Out of misery and helplessness, some people tried to run away from their tree-houses so fast that they fell to the ground and died.

In a mythical time, in an archetypal paradise, in complete wilderness, there is no chain of cause and effect that could lead to suffering. A doe runs away from a jaguar, using all of its strength. But when the jaguar gets hold of it, it surrenders. It faces its fate and reconciles itself to it. By not knowing and not acknowledging the sudden illness and death of a young person but attributing the cause to *khakhua*<sup>1</sup> or other forest spirits, the Korowai do not accept suffering. The rituals that take them back to the time of their ancestors represent their longing for a paradise, their refusal to come to terms with the world surrounding them. By shooting darts at the eclipsed sun, they demonstrated their refusal to accept their destiny. In doing all this, they are, just like us, people who long ago descended from the Garden of Eden.


I had to admit that a primitive man has never lived in paradise. The myth of the noble savage is an illusion that exists only in travel guides. The paradise I sought and wrote about exists only as a category. If it ever existed on earth, there is no return. Even if there could be, this choice would not be right. We have to stop looking back and longing to return, but rather always keep moving on.

The final night in my tree-house I had a strange dream. The voice sounded divine, paternal, a deep male voice telling me, "Whenever you jump, my friend, you are bound to fall. This seems inevitable.

<sup>1</sup>*khakuha* are the evil spirits who are able to possess a man and force him to kill a specific victim by using invisible arrows of black magic.

Inescapable. Every cell in your body is moved by this universal force. You are not bound to fall. You are bound to fly. But you will fall again and again until you think that the ground dragging you down is your home, that this ground is safe and good. You will realise that you are not a bird, you are not built to fly and you will think you are made to live on the ground. But on the ground you will never be complete. That is why, without knowing why, you will nevertheless keep rising and jumping again. Because every cell in your body knows that it will not fulfil its purpose and will not be complete until you fly. That is why you are here, my friend. You have always known that. To kill this dragon that keeps you on the ground and fly."

I'm not saying this was an epiphany, it was probably just a result of my thoughts, a fruit of my unconscious mind. But still, if we stop perceiving God as something exclusively "external", the whole world and every moment in life become an epiphany.

Boundaries shift and move. People sacrifice their lives to move the boundaries a little further. Even the furthest lines of the reach of our power still limit us. Boundaries should be obliterated, not moved. The era of exploring the world is over. There is no distant terra incognita. On the other hand, within us, there are a million unanswered questions, an infinite vastness of the unknown. We don't have to embark on this journey ever. We can spend a perfectly good life with both feet firmly on the ground. There is nothing  with it. Just as the Korowai deserve a metal axe because it is more efficient than a stone axe, and a plastic necklace because it is prettier than dog's teeth, all other people in the world deserve what they believe they need in order to live in prosperity. All the people in the world deserve a beautiful and carefree life away from all suffering.

But still, it would be good if somewhere someone heard a voice and set out on a heroic quest. Of any kind. Crossed the threshold of the unknown, overcame all obstacles, enjoyed the help of magnificent assistants, deserved prosperity, brought it to the world and inspired it to revival. We are all invited. It is only a matter of *who* will answer the call. And fly...

This essay is an edited version of a chapter from Davor Rostuhar's book *Džungla* ("Jungle"), published in 2009 by Algoritam (Zagreb). We thank Davor Rostuhar for giving his permission to republish this excerpt here.



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