



NORMAL, LIKE SOURCE CODE CHIC.

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BY N O R M A L S
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QUOTE << THE SPECTACLE IS NOT A COLLECTION OF IMAGES,
 BUT A SOCIAL RELATION AMONG PEOPLE,
 MEDIATED BY IMAGES. >>

GUY DEBORD

I

A word of advice about Trudent (811;327;142).

Don't listen to the ones who claim it is the most enjoyable locale to visit. "If anything's happening in the Culture, it's happening right HERE," they say. Stupid frenztalk, as misinformed as it gets. I swear, the place is just a trap for the weak-minded with its game of style scaling driving everyone insane – Top Twenty-Four and all that nonsense. A temple to the glory of style, AR cosmetics, one-task-wonders, and the fashion intelligentsia.

Picture a cubical cave for giants, with buildings on the left, buildings on the right, buildings on top of you, buildings under you, so dense no sunlight ever shines through. The place you'd never build a home in unless it got you a gajillion free likes. Now make it all grey. Neutral grey. Here, you got it. Well, almost... You'd have to add a stifling smokey atmosphere, and fluorescent light beams sprouting upwards, reverberating on unhealthy-looking microscopic particles of plastic dust.

First thing that strikes you when you go there – and you won't – is the place could really use a more natural temperature of color. And more actual air to breathe.

The only glitch, or so to speak, in this boring cityscape is the Strip: towards the center of the locale, the floor curves up to form an ovaloid and bright white runway where the Top Twenty-Four come to showcase their latest fashion templates to admiring plebeians recklessly seeking an answer to the eternal question: "how does one become cool?"

In Trudent, the answer lies within the unquestionably reasonable aSHaNbαβUsU8RA|-|man – μ5tafalli@a scale, originally coded by... well... aSHaNbαβUsU8RA|-|man and μ5tafalli@a. Behind this unpronounceable name, commonly shortened as "A.M. scale," lies just another ranking of the city's most stylish gentlemen and gentlewomen, based on a daily vote.

Updated constantly!

New combinations every day!

While in the morning, the place is a motionless desert – only the most zealous come here early – the actual show starts around noon, as frenz begin flowing in the streets of Trudent, hastily running towards the runway as soon as they get off the perpetually jammed mag.

And each day the fashion gods elected by the A.M. scale march on the sacrosanct Strip, from number twenty-four to number one. Artificial lights adapt, following complex scripts and music ranging from deep bass and loud muffled pulses to ear-piercing, high-pitched, senseless sequences of notes. Some frenz push towards the Strip, others beg the pushers to stop pushing, and dedicated reviewers broadcast their ever-changing opinions all over the Stream, adding more noise to the noise. All in celebration of some guilty pleasure game between willing spectators stuck in envy, and democratically elected celestial entities parading on the Strip as if chosen by a divine algorithm.

People love this. They seem to parade, too, wearing unrestrained augmented outfits of all sorts seemingly mixing up into one big puddle of tessellated mud, while the air around them, rife with adaptive perfumes clumsily covering body odors, gradually turns into a thick miasma as unbreathable as it is indescribable... Waiting for Number Three, Number Two and – oh my! – Number One to show up amidst cosmetics workshops and on-the-spot orgies, people stay in Trudent until complete exhaustion, sedated by excitement. Typical. Drunk frenz, mass hysteria, sweat and spectacle, shows and decadence. The party must go on.

Hum-tiss, hum-tiss...

II

"Isn't that 3plus3make5 over there?" Abdlcroco asks his friend Duall, who is currently busy fixing a lack of response in his newly coded template, set to print ready-to-eat scoops of hedgehog-shaped, hue-shifting bubbly sweets.

"Huh? Yeah... Could be..."

Abdlcroco adjusts his jacket, roughly pulling the lapel down to straighten it. With his outrageously long v-neck and spherical augmentations all around his arms, legs, torso, and head, Abdlcroco looks all modern Apollo compared to Duall, stuffed in his habitual penitent gowns lavished by digital embroideries looping alongside his body, like sweat or tears, struggling with simulated gravity. Sixty-five percent transparent.

Duall still believes in see-through.

"Pretty sure it's her. She's number what... six, now?"

The typical Trudent addict, Abdlcroco's main occupation – besides hatching schemes to get back in the Top Twenty-Four – consists in following every passing fad while still standing out of the mass. Meaning, he spends all of his time and materia polishing his self-proclaimed "Avant-garde Looks," in some quest for the right parameters to twitch. And this is no easy task; being such a trendsetter requires some good taste, of course, but, more than anything, proclivities to be wearing the right thing at the right time, in front of the right people.

"I think she's down to number seven..."

Dual belongs to the other kind of frenz haunting Trudent. He is not here because he cares – Duall doesn't care about anything – but because he's got nothing better to do. He likes to think of himself as a free spirit, but doesn't really appear to have a will of his own. He sticks to Abdlcroco like a parasite, and goes

unnoticed enough for his only-therefore-best friend to overlook his presence. He even proved himself helpful, once or twice.

Point is, Duall is one of those frenz who are "just there."

"And what's that stuff on her head?" Abdlcroco fishes for info on the Stream. The stuff on her head is called a Tangential Tiara, fine digital lacework, but still fractal jewelry.

"Man, that's so passé... It's a no-no... So no-no... Total fail..." Abdlcroco enjoys repeating things, a constant paraphrase of himself he thinks makes him sound like a lyrical connoisseur.

"I like it," Duall absently comments, viciously ogling at 3plus3make5 on stage, following every torsion of her body with demented eyes and orgasmically shrieking as her outfit turns into curlicues of blinking hearts, lips, silly cat faces, and other literal symbols for cuteness, .

"That was so unnecessary," Abdlcroco comments, insisting on the "so," mostly trying to get his friend out of his trip, but no, Duall's eyes keep moving like motion sensors, watching her dance, slender and graceful on top of her irrationally high heels. Occasionally, she pauses on the edge of the Strip to blow kisses at the audience, doing cute-kitty moves, surrounded by confetti screaming "I LIKE TO SPARKLE." Abdlcroco's eyes roll back. He pulls Duall by his arm and into the crowd.

"Dude, stop that, I want to see her," Duall protests.

"I shouldn't have brought you here."

"I'll totally vote for her."

Abdlcroco slaps his friend's head with the back of his hand.

"Right, right, I'm just kidding," Duall trying to apologize.

"Here, I'll vote for you right now. See?"

He doesn't. Abdlcroco shakes his head and looks towards the Strip again. 3plus3make5 is gone, so he re-focuses his attention on a girl from the audience augmented with broken black and white lines, twisted like gaunt trees. He saves her profile to his favorites. Her name is LunaSelenium and she likes air-dolphins, generative music, and mag-racing. He sends her a PIM, reading nothing but "we should hang out some time."

"Check that old timer over there..." Duall says, pointing at the Strip.

It takes Abdlcroco a while to recognize B00GGI0I000I. Cartoony characters surround her small and round body, grimacing faces and cute monsters following unpredictable trajectories, resizing at each step. Words like "Taco," "Awesome sauce," "Swaggg," in gooey typefaces pump to the rhythm of her personal musical score – graphic whimsies of long-forgotten creators, making no contemporary sense at all.

"Seriously? I thought she was dead..." Abdlcroco complains.

He stops paying attention to the Strip. Seeing her there while he remains out of the Top Twenty-Four feels like a disgrace.

"She's an anomaly," Abdlcroco summoning a printer to make himself a drink.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean she wouldn't be here if she hadn't been at the center of everyone's PIMs with that bullshit scandal." Duall doesn't look like he knows of the event. "Oh, come on!" Abdlcroco selects a drink from the most-recent list without paying much attention.

For a moment, he loses track of Duall, only to find him a few minutes later, proudly wearing a replica of 3plus3make5's Tangential Tiara.

"You think this looks good on me?"

"Looks like shit," Abdlcroco says, more serious than intended, gulping on his entire beverage. LunaSelenium finally replies with a short PIM. "Sure, why not? Like your outfit, btw." Abdlcroco smiles absently, engages a remote conversation with her. Duall is busy customizing his tiara while nibbling on his hedgehog sweets. Number four leaves the Strip, makes way for Number Three, Talentisto, wearing her classic high-waisted pants up to her breasts with a giant belt to support them, and covered in all kinds of digital cosmetics and jewelry loosely tracked to her body, blinking every second in tacky pixelated lens flares. The soundtrack is an orchestra of chimes ringing jerkily.

"Talentisto? Number three, seriously? Number the-reeeee?"

The crowd is going crazy, which feels quite unfair to Abdlcroco, so he spends Talentisto's whole segment PIMming all kinds of stuff about the vote being rigged.

Talentisto's intense display of kinetic wearability now slowly drifts to porno-chic, zapping through sequences of singing coral pink and orange tones to thick textures threading bands of rainbow-hued ribbons to complete bonded fabrics with blistered and furry textures.

"Next one's my favorite," LunaSelenium writes. "He's hilarious."

Abdlcroco feels somewhat offended. He hates funny contestants – joking feels like cheating. Those guys are being loved for their wits, so much so people forget to judge their actual looks: they're not stylish, they're just entertaining. Worst part is they sometimes stay on the Strip for days before the crowd gets tired of them.

"Mangel! Mangel! Mangel!"

Number two. More than a thousand points on the A-M Scale. The audience is hysterical. Mangel, illustrious icon-manipulator, is on display, wearing all solid red, green, and blue, fading to white around his chest. Former number one, his leader spot has been stolen by an outsider, a tat covered built-like-a-machine vanilla guy called MrSafireBoy, circa twelve hundred points. Every member of the Top Twenty-Four has to have some kind of idiosyncratic trick. A gimmick, like 3plus3make5's kiss-blowing pose. Mangel's is impersonation: he picks someone from the audience, displays a copy of his or her style around him, and just improvises series of mean jokes. He begins his little show with an impression of some random girl's pyramidal dress.

"Honestly, honey, it's a miracle the Machine even remembers this template..." Mangel yells with a sarcastic smile, before making a heart shape between his thumbs and index fingers.

The girl blushes, embarrassed. Mangel switches to the next victim. His augmentations shift to huge bubbles, and he starts walking like a crippled fat animal, making pom-podom-podom sounds. Everyone laughs, and Abdlcroco laughs too, until he realizes it's his own outfit Mangel is now parodying. Duall giggles too, and

Abdlcroco gives him a kick in the leg that bounces off his combo.

"Dude... I'm sorry... But... it's really funny..." Duall wiping tears from his eyes.

"Hey, screw you! That's... that's not fair! Y'hear me MANGEL? That's NOT FAIR!" Abdlcroco shouts, aggressively pushing frenz who are immortalizing the moment on their 'i' to make his way through the thick mob.

"Oooooohhhh... That's not faaaaaaaaiirrrrr..." Mangel insists.

"FUCK YOU ALL!" squawks Abdlcroco, getting further and further away from the Strip.

Unconcerned, Mangel concludes his act with an impersonation of MrSafireBoy: he turns off all of his augmentations and moves on to drawing childish doodles all over his body.

The audience's constant cackling echoes in Abdlcroco's ears. On the way he accidentally walks by LunaSelenium and smiles to her, seeking some comfort, but in return she simply laughs at him, mimicking Mangel's impersonation like a fresh-born meme.

Pom-podom-podom...

Enough. Time for Abdlcroco to leave Trudent.

The ride on the mag calms him down a little, but back at his place the scene starts playing again, in a loop, in front of his eyes. His head between his hands, he looks at his vote counter, going down, and down, and down.

He filters out the A-M Scale circle.

Lying on his bed, flustered by the embarrassment and anger he felt earlier, he dreamily begins conceiving plans for his revenge. Mulling over today's humiliation, he feels he has to challenge Mangel. A look-off. A direct contest, a style duello, a fashion battle in the most respectable tradition. No scale, nothing. Just a spontaneous battle. He is already picturing himself stepping proudly onto the Strip...

Unable to sleep, anxious and sweaty, he spends the entire night elaborating a complex choreography, mixing that thing he had done back when he was number thirteen, and some new moves he makes up offhandedly.

He feels creative.

III

Eight or ten hours of crafting – and a life well spent in aggro mod – later, he feels satisfied with his construction of hatred, his war dance, his provocation, one single, long, relentless hate string starting with threat messages floating around his chest and head, accompanied by a frenzied arm dance, and then... then a syncopated leg-plus-arm-plus-head outburst augmented by a slo-mo version of itself, with polygonal hemlines sharp as razorblades revealing all hidden threat signs in his dance... with lots of middle finger gestures...

He leaves for Trudent, and spends the rest of the morning standing still, staring at Mangel's digital effigy crowned with a rotating Number One award, mostly daydreaming about his ineluctable victory. Duall meets up with him in the afternoon.

"Ssup?" he asks.

"He's number one now..."

Trudent is already packed with frenz. Number 11 is on the Strip, wrapped in outdated pyrotechnic effects and stomping angrily on the ground in rhythm with a monotonous bass line, strumming on intangible keys to unleash AR 'splosions, supposed to make him appear all dreary and threatening. Too old-school to be exhilarating.

"We gotta get close to the Strip..." Adalcroco whispers to himself.

"Dude, look at this crowd... we'll never get through," says Duall, a printer in hand, still fabbing his hedgehog candies.

"Come here..."

Adalcroco doesn't care. Looking for the optimal trajectory, assisted by his sophisticated and nearly custom-made navigation interface, he spots a slit through the solid-looking layers of frenz separating him from the Strip.

"Wow, chill out, dude... You look really pissed. That's bad for your heart..." Duall says, in an odd motherly tone.

"Not as bad as that shit you keep eating..."

"They taste a-amazing, you should try. And they're not that unhealthy... Secret is: always split the remaining sugar by two. That way you never reach your daily quota, and you can eat those all day long."

"Listen, I don't have time for that," Abdlcroco ignoring Duall's mathematical know-how. "I need to confront that Mangel..."

"What?"

"He's gonna feel sorry for mocking me..."

"I'll just wait for you here," Duall says, exhausted by this wild rush.

"Yeah, just eat your... whatever it's called."

"FunBallz. They're called FunBallz. With a "z." Cause they're shaped like a ball and..."

But Abdlcroco is already turning his back to him and disappearing into the crowd.

"... they're fun?"

Abdlcroco now marches slowly against the thwarting horde of people separating him from his nemesis.

"Sorry... sorry... 'scuse me... I'm just...No... Get out the way... Yeah, you..."

Piercing through people, driven by the bittersweet taste of vengeance, his anger builds up all through number six's show, number five's...

Number four's...

Apoplectic, Abdlcroco PIMs away his rage, flooding the AM scale circle with shouts and rants and crazy-sounding announcements. It eases his impatience for a while.

Number three...

Hands tightly grasping the edge of the Strip, Abdlcroco's face is red now, his hair stuck to his forehead. He feels damp in his combo, despite the nosweat-mod. Every single face in sight seems to morph into Mangel's grinning smile. The whole world quivering in solid R, G, and B.

Number two... MrSafireBoy...

Number one...

The surrounding audience is cheering for Mangel. Abdlcroco gazes at the runway, his eyes blurred by sweat and anguish, his hair messily stuck to his forehead. In his mind, he is rehearsing all the moves he choreographed in the morning. It was all so clear back in his little room, but now he feels like he's losing it. Does he have to raise his arm before kneeling down to trigger the blast of star particles? And what is he supposed to do after that, again?

People are still shouting Mangel's name, waiting for him. Their precious number one. Abdlcroco knows it's high time he got onto the runway. He almost trips climbing the edge.

"Come on, Mangel... I'm waiting for you... I CHALLENGE YOU!" he yells, moving clumsily in front of the audience, back and forth.

No answer. Good. If Mangel doesn't show up, it means easy victory for him.

Paying no attention to the hollering crowd, Abdlcroco begins his dance, tongue out and eyes round, wide-open. Which could have been threatening, had Mangel been here.

"Come on, Mangel! Are you scared?"

The crowd goes suddenly silent, and his words resonate against the plastic walls of the locale, his voice breaking.

"YOU'RE SO NOT NUMBER ONE ANYMORE... NOT EVEN NUMBER TWO... NOT EVEN NUMBER THREE... I'M NUMBER ONE, HEAR ME? HAHA, I'M THE KING OF THE FUCKING STRIP! SEE? SEE?"

People are booing him now. He's shaking. He keeps dancing in silence for a while, before a few frenz climb onto the Strip begging him to stop.

"NO... NO! WAIT! COME ON, LOOK AT ME!"

Actives are pulling him off the Strip. He tries to protest, to resist, but he's quickly outnumbered. Even his combo isn't protecting him.

The Machine itself must be wanting him off the stage.

"REMEMBER ME, FRENZ! I'M Abdlcroco!"

They take him away. His yells fade out in the distance.

"Abdlcroco! HAHA! I'm..."

IV

Standing backstage with Mangel: today's Top twenty-four – twenty-four divas swarming around, making last-minute fixes to their styles, contemptuously ordering around a horde of actives acting as assistants for them out of pure love and/or fascination and/or lack of a better thing to do. The performance will begin soon.

Mangel works alone. Facing a real-time holographic version of himself, focused and confident, he is taking notes for his act.

"I'm gonna take a walk," he says to some guy he barely knows, standing next to him.

"Can I come along?"

"No."

He gets out through the back exit, climbs up a few stairs to end up on the balcony. Great panorama of Trudent: folks are already gathered around the Strip, and new frenz keep flowing into the locale. Mangel takes a deep breath. Focused. Confident. Someone is walking towards him: 6in6erN1nj4h, current number seventeen, a tall brunette looking all gothy enclosed in her inextricable digital superstructures of sinuous lines unintentionally forming some kind of encrypted insignia. She's surrounded by groupies, six or seven homunculi looking like cheap downsized copies of her. She leans against the rail, close enough to Mangel to make him feel uncomfortable.

"Congrats for yesterday," she purrs, gently putting her hand on his arm.

"Thanks."

"There's a lot of people here today," 6in6erN1nj4h having trouble initiating a conversation with Mangel, as usual, "coming to see you, I mean."

Mangel sniggers. Messages of love wrap Mangel and

6in6erN1nj4h, an overload of affection marks only interrupted by the occasional trolls. Ignore.

"Right, good luck," 6in6erN1nj4h tired of waiting for a reaction.

"Yeah."

"Kiss-kiss"

She's leaving the balcony, now, and Mangel is insistently staring at her backside.

Sends a like.

The show has begun. Still around number 20 something. Mangel smiles at the idea that being number one has only one disadvantage: your turn comes last. He's seriously considering taking a walk in the crowd. They're all so focused on the contestants they might not notice him. And even if they do? Who cares?

Walking back downstairs, he strides through over-excited contestants yelling at each other. He sees a new guy with capillary augmentations, and takes another mental note: easy target for his impersonation act. He likes to harass newcomers. Icons should be put down as soon as they're born.

Yes, Mangel thinks of himself as an iconoclast.

He's outside, his AR layer turned off, and the crowd doesn't seem to pay much attention to him. Without his act, without the stage itself, without the competition, without his costume, he's just a face amidst other faces. It's been a long time since he has enjoyed the district as a spectator. But now everything seems so artificial to him. A clownish act he would be happy to get out of, but disappearance is not what you would call an easy achievement.

For hours Mangel wanders around the district, his back turned to the Strip, looking at common folks. Their tranquilly pleased faces turned to their idols. He hates them just as much as the Top Twenty-Four.

"Mangel?" some guy interrupting his misanthropic endeavors.

"Mind your own business."

3plus3make5 is marching on the Strip. Same act as yesterday, it's already getting old. Mangel sits close to a printer, fabs himself a soft drink. He would get completely drunk if he didn't

have to go onto that ground-damned runway. Next to him, a weird character in a see-through robe gluttonously devours scoops of gooey hedgehog-shaped stuff.

It amuses him. Come to think about it, it's the funnest thing he's seen all day. He grabs a capture and saves it to his favorites.

"What's that you're eating?" Mangel asks the guy.

"Funballz. They're called Funballz. With a "z." Cause they're shaped like a ball and they're fun.

"What's the "z" for, then?"

"Dunno. Makes it sound nice?"

Mangel chuckles.

"What's so funny?"

"Nothing. Just that you're the only guy who doesn't seem to be interested in what's going on on stage."

"You don't seem to care much either," handing a scoop to Mangel. "Want some?"

Mangel declines.

"I'm Duall."

"Nice to meet you, Duall."

Warnings are bleeping on Mangel's interface. He ignores them. He turns around and glances quickly at the Strip. MrSafireBoy is on. Which means he's next.

"I'm just here for my friend, Abdlcroco," Duall still chewing, "he's gonna go up there. He says he wants to challenge number one."

"Oh yeah?"

"Dunno what got into him. Guess it's 'cause the guy made fun of him yesterday."

"And he didn't think it was funny?"

"Dude, he took it so personally! I – thought it was pretty funny."

Mangel smiles.

"Well, thank you Duall. I have to leave now... so... see you around, eh?"

Duall waves at him, and goes back to his hedgehogs.

Mangel now hastily walks back towards the Strip, determined. MrSafireBoy has left, and he has to see that guy make a fool of

himself. All around, blinking texts announce the next contestant in capital letters.

"MANGEL -NUMBER 1 - 24,543 POINTS"

He gets to the second row just in time to see the end of Abdlcroco's ridiculous dance, his face all sweat and rage, yelling around. Mangel can't hold his hilarity.

"What a moron," someone close to him says.

"Are you kidding?" Mangel smiles. "He's a fucking genius."

A bunch of frenz pull Abdlcroco off the Strip. They drag him back into the crowd, his mad cries fading in the distance. The booing stops.

"REMEMBER ME, FRENZ! I'M Abdlcroco!"

Trudent is silent again. People stand still, looking at each other, wondering what to do. And then Mangel steps onto the Strip.

Standing in front of the surprised audience, he bows to them.

A wave of cheers and applauses fades in, as Mangel's outfit turns into Abdlcroco's once again.

"Missed me, Trudent?"

END



A B O U T N O R M A L S

N O R M A L S is a collection of works lying right at the intersection of design and fiction. Sometimes visual, sometimes literary, video-based, musical, prototypical and functional, each element here is a gateway to a single universe – an anticipated future. Desirable to some, distressing to others, the society at its core runs on dreams of ubiquitous 3D printing and some algorithmic superstitions. Take some time to visit. Come back once in a while. You'll see imaginary artifacts and their imaginary users become hyperlinked by a story.

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