



129. Donna Decaffeinata – Milano 2011



Vetements:

# REAL IS WHAT YOU FEEL

*Text* Alexander Fury

*Photographers* Ari Versluis and Ellie Uyttenbroek

It was director Jennie Livingston's 1990 documentary *Paris Is Burning* that introduced a wider public to the idea of "realness". The drag performer Dorian Corey summarises it best, about 15 minutes in.

"In a ballroom you can be anything you want," she states in a languorous tone, from beneath hooded, jaded eyes.

Instagram: [vetements\\_official](#)  
[vetementswebsite.com](#)



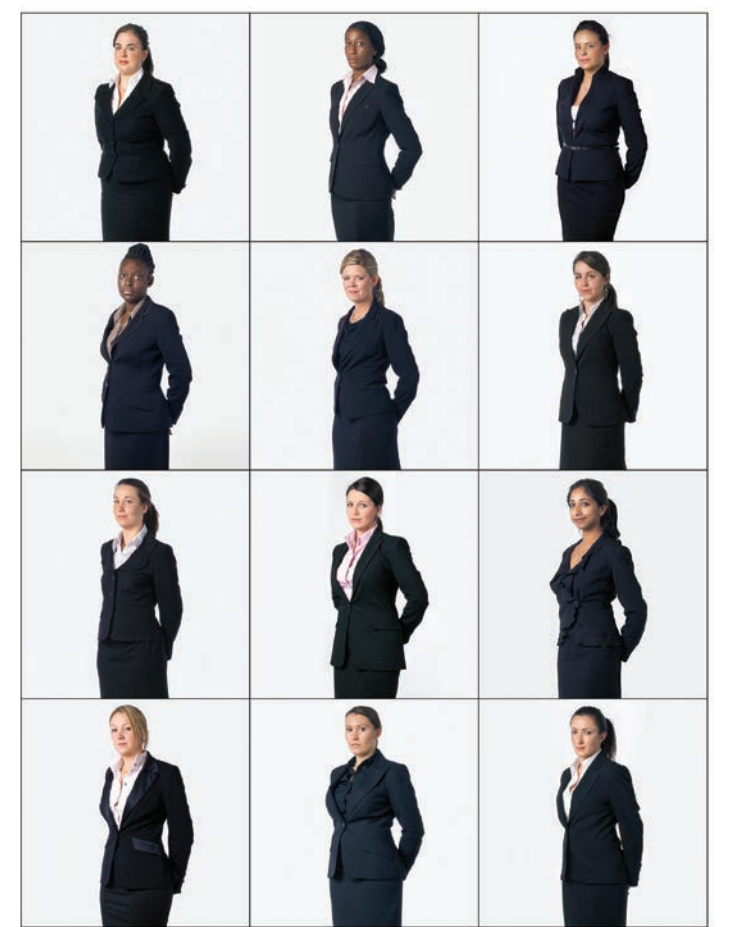
01. Gabbers – Rotterdam 1994



Exactitudes / Vetements AW17



95. City Girls – London 2008



“You’re not really an executive, but you’re looking like an executive,” Corey continues. “And therefore you’re showing the straight world that I can be an executive. If I had the opportunity, I can be one because I can *look* like one.”

Ignore what you learnt in childhood: appearances are everything. Looks will get you everywhere. The idea of being able to pass – to look real – is all-important. To blend into the crowd. To assimilate and imitate. It’s something the natural world has demonstrated for millennia – the chameleon masks itself using its surroundings as a survival instinct; *phyllidae*, more generally known as leaf insects or walking leaves, are impossible to distinguish from foliage at first glance. Even their movements mimic leaves blown in the wind. It’s a way of life, or perhaps *the* way of life.

It’s a phenomenon that photographer Ari Versluis and stylist Ellie Uyttenbroek began documenting in 1994, in their Exactitudes series, for which the duo photograph a sample from a selected subgroup – starting with the subcultural types of gabber ravers, skaters and skinheads, but widening (they recently documented Milanese baristas, American tourists and a Barbour-sporting young fogley subset dubbed Farmcore). Sometimes the group is designated by occupation – bouncers, chairmen, volunteers – or perhaps by sexual proclivity (one of the earliest, from 1995, is Casual Queers), but generally the grouping is purely aesthetic, emphasised by similarities in poses and an adherence to a display of 12 images or more. There is no backstory, no sense of the individual – although Versluis and Uyttenbroek painstakingly research that, frequently to

track down other members of the same “tribe” (as was the case with the gabber ravers they began with). The visual impact comes from each person’s place within a larger context: alone, the portraits are unremarkable; together, they’re slightly mind-boggling.

Versluis and Uyttenbroek have described Exactitudes as “a scientific anthropological record of people’s attempts to distinguish themselves from others by assuming a group identity”. Which sounds paradoxical – marking yourself out by similarity – but has a distinct connection to fashion, which champions the individual statement, but then tries to sell it in multiple sizes and colours.

The Exactitudes series was the inspiration for Demna Gvasalia’s AW17 Vetements show. The invites were fake IDs – each attendee received a genuine (fake) form of government-issued document from a variety of European countries. It was stamped with their name, but someone else’s picture and identity. Mine was a Dutch driving licence bearing the image of a dour twentysomething man, with the word “Stoner” printed on the reverse. Stoners aren’t an Exactitude, but they are a stereotype, or an archetype. That is what Gvasalia chose as the linchpin for this Vetements show – an exploration of tropes of dressing, from stoners through tourists to grannies and Milanese, a take-off of Exactitudes 129 (“Donna Decaffeinata – Milano 2011”). The latter opened the Vetements show, but rather than the flawless mink coats of the Exactitudes grid, the Vetements coat was slightly mangled, mauled, the lining looped up and intentionally exposed, bands of mink running at a 45-degree angle. It was a twisted take on those style tribes.

The intention wasn’t to be fashion at all, which is heretical when staging a show during Paris haute couture week (as Gvasalia did). As opposed to a polished salon in a grand mansion, the Vetements show took place on the ground floor of the Pompidou Centre. Granted, it’s the venue where Yves Saint Laurent showed his two-hour last hurrah to haute couture 15 years ago – an event that, for many, marked the death of a certain breed of couture altogether. But there was no bower of flowers or spotlights, as there were with YSL. Rather, a wriggle of chairs snaked its way around the building’s concrete atrium and the models descended an escalator and trudged past, as if scurrying to work rather than catwalking. The intention, Gvasalia said, was to be as “unfashion” as possible. The entire event was supposed to look more like everyday life – the street that he and his Vetements cohorts are obsessed with – rather than a fashion show. Incidentally, Gvasalia himself wasn’t sure he succeeded: “The whole experience was very ‘fashion’,” he said. “Fashion” isn’t a good thing.

Nor is a “model” for Gvasalia. It’s an unwieldy term when referring to his work, specifically in this context; the individuals were street cast, decidedly non-model in appearance, specifically chosen for their connection to the individual archetypes they were portraying. The process of fitting the garments was, as a result, far more laborious and complicated – as no two bodies were exactly alike.

And yet, each of the Vetements models represented a specific “type” – an archetype, a stereotype. Which connected, oddly, to the idea of haute couture. Couture is, after all, created for individuals,

rather than for mass consumption. Unlike prêt-à-porter, every piece of haute couture clothing is hand-sewn to dimensions determined by each specific client. Everything is custom-made and made to order. The maximum production of any dress, by law, can only be six, but frequently it does not rise above one. But there’s a twist, of course, even in this most elite of fashion echelons. Many haute couture clients would keep themselves rake-thin so they could buy the sample garment with minimal adjustments (chopping a foot off the hem, maybe tweaking the seams a little). And stories abound about a *directrice* who instructed her couture clients as to which plastic surgeons could “tailor” their bodies’ proportions in order to best suit the clothes they were ordering. It has the ring of truth about it.

Gvasalia wasn’t showing haute couture, of course – there are few designer labels that seem as antithetical to couture as Vetements. Yet, ideologically, this focus on the power of the individual – of individual looks, individual clients, individual things individually made – is intrinsically connected to haute couture. And the Vetements look has fast garnered international attention due to its individuality, its separation from the rest of the industry. Well, at the start, at least – the rest of the industry is currently following the lead of Gvasalia and Vetements, so much so that it would be easy to compose your own Exactitudes-esque grid composition of dresses with oversized sleeves, skewwhiff ruffles and odd proportions. Maybe that new style tribe could be dubbed Vetem-esque.

Gvasalia’s comment, however, wasn’t about the fashion industry. He saves his fashion excursions – focuses on cut, shape, proportion >



78. Charitas - Rotterdam 2006



18. Mohawks - Rotterdam 1998



24. Bouncers - Rotterdam 1998



Exactitudes / Vetements AW17

– for his other role, as creative director of Balenciaga. The patrician couture back catalogue of Balenciaga has profoundly influenced his outlook, separating his two day jobs (moving the Vetements business to Zurich probably helps with that distancing, too). Back to Corey and Paris Is Burning: “The ‘realer’ you look... it means you look like a real woman, or a real man,” she stated. “It’s not a take-off or a satire. It’s actually being able to *be* this.” That seemed to be what Gvasalia was interested in – and remains fixated on. The SS18 Vetements collection was presented via a “No Show” in Paris, consisting of an installation of a series of near-life-size photographs in a car park in the 8th arrondissement. The images were of real people, unremarkably dressed in Vetements clothes. Those garments weren’t styled – the sitters, all found walking the streets of Zurich, selected their own outfits and also their own poses. They were captured in nondescript city streets. There was, it seemed, nothing special about them. Which was the point.

Where does that fixation with the ordinary come from? Possibly from Gvasalia’s Eastern bloc childhood – he once told me that there was only one brand of toothpaste you could buy in Georgia, the Soviet republic where he grew up. It was called Toothpaste, which somehow syncs with that Vetements fixation with distorted, ersatz logos, and with collaboration and cross-pollination with other companies. There is a toying, constantly, with real and unreal – realness in the terms of the actual, the physical, the true; and “realness” as a construct. “Realness”, after all, is only real when it’s fake. It’s about passing for real – while knowing you’re not.

For autumn/winter, what Vetements did was scramble those two senses of realness: their chavs and punks and secretaries were both real and “real”. Lotta Volkova, the stylist who works with Gvasalia at Vetements and Balenciaga, walked as the secretary. Were the other “models” really the bouncers or policewomen or soldiers they pretended to be? Or where they just cast because they conformed to our idea of what those people should look like – were they real? Or “real”?

The bride, at the end, was the ultimate question mark, a piss-take even, a take-off of the traditional bride that ends an haute couture fashion show – was this how Gvasalia and co think a bride should dress? *Really?*

Realness – reality – is what Gvasalia is really fascinated by – the actual clothes people are actually wearing, and how you can toy with that. Hence his fascination with Exactitudes – because the images are posed, but not styled, capturing sitters in the clothes they sport every day. They’ve been plucked from one context and placed in another, like an anthropological experiment – sociology was, reputedly, Gvasalia’s favourite subject at school. Knowing that, you re-contextualise him and his work – his obsession with the mundane and the everyday, extending to calling the whole label Vetements. “It’s just clothes,” he once told me, which was about the designs, not the name.

Alexander Fury is chief fashion correspondent, *T: The New York Times Style Magazine*