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THE
HIPSTER

ISSUE



Issue 90

\$4.95



EXACTITUDES

ROTTERDAM-BASED PHOTOGRAPHER ARI VERSLUIS AND STYLIST PARTNER-IN-CRIME ELLIE UYTENBROEK CAPTURES THE GLOBAL EVOLUTION OF STYLE—AS IT HAPPENS IN REAL-TIME

Text by Donari Braxton ■ Photos by Ari Versluis (exactitudes.com)

ARI VERSLUIS IS ON TOP OF THE WORLD.

In some cases figuratively, in others, quite literally. Five minutes after I spoke with the Rotterdam-based photographer, I received jubilant word from him that the entire series of his project *Exactitudes*, a now ubiquitously bricks-and-mortar global-arts avatar, had just been purchased for the permanent collection of the Toledo Museum of Art, Ohio. Now, was that the literal, or the figurative case? Either way, with upcoming shows in locales such as Paris's own Gare du Nord, and another in London's renowned Selfridges Ultralounge (February 24–April 20), the *Exactitudes* galaxy, like the parenthetical essence of its own motif, has apparently got the world on a string, sitting on a rainbow...

What is *Exactitudes*? False. And how is *Exactitudes*? Well, you've only to watch television, read your daily newspaper; you're bound to get a good idea. The serial theme of the endeavor, which belongs to Versluis and his stylist partner-in-crime Ellie Uyttenbroek, is to capture the stylization of global evolution as it happens in real-time. Punning on "exact" and "attitude" is after all not coincidental, yet if it can be so put, Versluis and Uyttenbroek approach their series as much like lepidopterists as they do like artists. Their cooperative body of work offers both artistic and anthropological documentation of modern

man and its perpetual struggle for visual communication—in some ways thus it is nearly as fit for 7th grade Social Studies textbooks as it is for the living-room walls of art inamorati.

However, to look at *Exactitudes* as pure social critique is not only reductive, it's simply inaccurate. In counterpoising the universal banality of the photo-booth aesthetic with the subtly inimitability of personalized portraits, Versluis and Uyttenbroek also manage to annex the beauty of globalized communication. Surely, more than tiny traces of individuality get lost in this taxonomy of the identities. But the artists also feel that globalization offers today's "self" the luxury of limitless and uninhibited auto-constructions. There are aspects of globalization which, though troubling, are beautiful in themselves. And the residual image of these possibilities, in the end, is the contemporary *Me*, in all its freedom and contrarily permeated splendor.

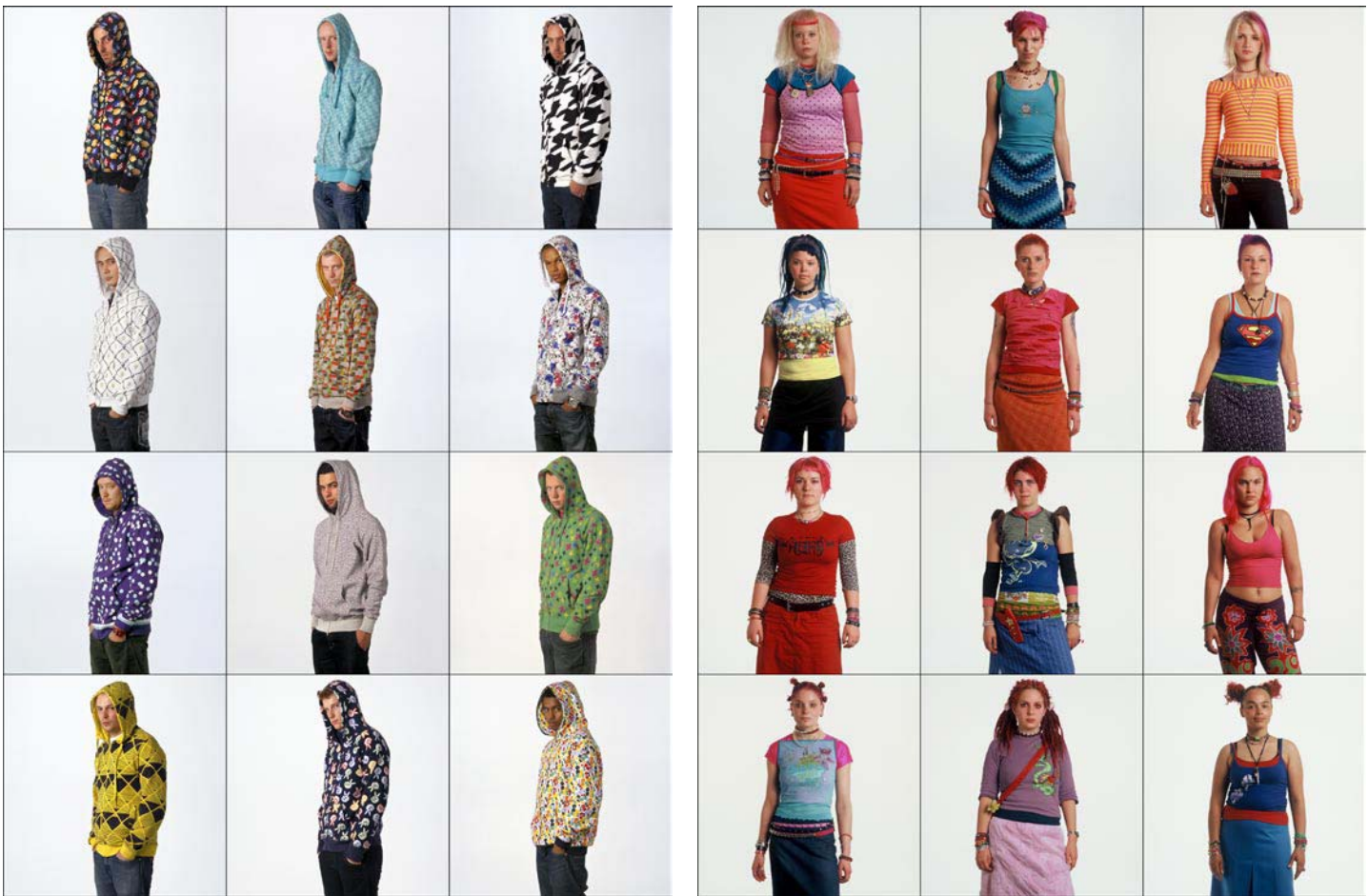
BPM: Can you tell me how you and Ellie work together to bring *Exactitudes* to life? AV: The styling aspect of the series is really analyzing what's happening in the streets. It's not a fashionable thing, like putting clothes on people. It's about really analyzing what's going on. I love fashion, but I hate fashion jobs... And for us, we'd like to continue *Exactitudes*, because we want to make the Holy Bible of fashion.

Sorry, you say you hate fashion jobs but want to make its Holy Bible? Well, it's always a love/hate kind of thing, of course. But it's always interesting how people communicate with clothes. I see clothes as a language, and that language is constantly renewed... When you want to deal with what's going on all around you, fashion is a very nice entrance.

In that case, what part of fashion repels you and what parts speak to you? It's more the *really* high fashion that I hate. We look on the streets and see fashion with a broader perspective. We look at old people and we think they're wonderful, want to portray them, and that's not considered fashionable. It's always about the young and the beautiful, and that's only just a *part* of [fashion]. It's a weird contradiction, though, that all "non-conformists" also look the same. And that's the idea behind *Exactitudes*.

Has that always been the idea, or have the focal points evolved or changed over time? That's a difficult question. When we started the project, people were scared of it, because they said, "You're boxing in people and we don't like it!" But when you continue to work, and have reached a hundred [different] series, then people can't say that anymore. It grows and it shows so many different aspects of society that it's not a question of boxing in anymore; it's a question of looking at a very big spectrum. The more series [that we produce], the more subtle it becomes.





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Is *Exactitudes* on its way to some kind of "conclusion"? Is there an end in sight? In fact, we never ask those questions; we just *do*. The world is very big. And the world is getting very global; local styles are hardly available anymore. A surfer boy from Miami looks exactly the same as in France. And that's interesting for us to experience. So the authenticity of people is changing. People get info from all over the globe, and they do something with it.

That's an interesting point. And it's very funny too. In the beginning we were very local, and we made series just in Rotterdam. Halfway through the project we started to make series which were half made in Italy, half made in Rotterdam, or in France, etcetera, and it actually just doesn't matter [where we go] anymore. 50 years ago, that was impossible.

How do you decide on your subjects, or the groupings of your subjects? We just decide on a place. Last summer we decided on Bordeaux in France. We built a studio in front of a suburban shopping mall, which we thought was very interesting, and we just do our thing there. How do the women look, and the men? How do the young boys profile themselves? You take a magnifying glass on a certain situation or a certain location, and that's it.

One notices that the models in *Exactitudes* are often posed in similar ways. Does the styling and position of the models weigh in heavily?

That's actually the artificial aspect of it, in order to communicate our message clearly. We begin with one [type of person], and that person has a natural way of standing. When the next person comes, I show them the Polaroid and ask them to imitate, and it always works.

So the aim is to kind of make the models superposable? Well, it's very interesting sometimes how it works. When you take pictures of bouncers [for example], they all stand the same...they come in, they spread their legs a little bit, they fold their hands in front of them; it's five minutes' work. You don't have to say anything.

And as for your own individuality, what do you think this project reflects of you as an artist?

I think that for me, the fun part of 2008 is you can play around with individuality. I have many identities. And I can change my identity a lot of the time; it also has to do with the work I do. Ellie and I know so exactly the codes of these situations, that if we go to a skinhead party, we shave our heads. And when we go to [hip-hop] parties, we know what to do. We talk the street language, we know the signs, and it's nice to play around with all those identities.