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18. Mohawks – Rotterdam 1998

Exactitudes: Mohawks – Rotterdam 1998 Ari Versluis and Ellie Uytenbroek

Behind Exactitudes, the photo series that inspired Vetements

Dutch photographer Ari Versluis discusses his project with Ellie Uytenbroek – a study of social uniforms which influenced Demna Gvasalia's AW17 collection



Last week marked the unveiling of Vetements' AW17 collection, which saw Demna Gvasalia send a troupe of stereotypes down the runway – including the punk, the emo, the gabber and the chic Parisienne – in a brilliant study of clothes as signifiers of constructed identities. Gvasalia, a self-professed sociology fanatic, described the collection as a response to his “fascination with social uniforms and how people dress,” citing Exactitudes, the ongoing photo project by Dutch photographer Ari Versluis and profiler Ellie Uyttenbroek, as his key inspiration. The project, which has been published in various print editions and also exists as a wonderful online catalogue (be warned, it’s a rabbit hole: once you enter, you won’t resurface for at least an hour), began in 1994 and is made up of 154 series to date. Each series comprises of 12 square portraits, laid out on an A4 grid, depicting members of the same social group. They stand in identical poses, further highlighting their conformity to a specific dress code.

Participants range in age, race and sexual preference according to their group (a factor mirrored by Gvasalia in his casting for the show) and as with the Vetements stereotypes, each is given a specific name, from the fur-coat-clad Donna Decaffeinata of Milan to the long-haired Reli-Rockers (religious rockers) of Rotterdam. To find their protagonists, Versluis and Uyttenbroek scour streets, clubs, cafés, churches and malls, inviting their selected subjects back to the studio for a photoshoot and accompanying interview to discover the minutiae of their lives. The duo then use this information to compose a short, poetic description of each tribe, which is read out in a clipped, BBC world service accent as you view each series on the website. (“From city bank to Slug and Lettuce, from tailormade to T.M. Lewin, from Old Boys network to Corporate Girls – the heel is the female tie,” reads the wonderful ode to London’s City Girls.) Gvasalia echoed this for the show by providing a written description of each Vetements character, which probed deep “into the details of their lives (and) how they wear things” – as the designer relayed backstage.

Versluis, who knows Gvasalia and was aware that *Exactitudes* was the driving force behind the collection, watched the show unfold with eager anticipation, marvelling at Gvasalia’s own take on a theme so familiar to him. Keen to hear his reaction, and curious about the future of *Exactitudes* (the last series was taken in 2014), we called the photographer in Rotterdam to pick his brains.

When did you first meet Demna?

Ari Versluis: I’ve met Demna a few times. I shot some collection images for him for *Purple* magazine about two years ago and then I did a portrait of him and Lotta for *Glamcult* magazine in the Netherlands. We talked about the *Exactitudes* project, and Demna was always super in favour of it; he said that it was one of the most influential books he saw when studying in Antwerp, which was really cool. His comments about it are always spot on – he’s somebody who really understands our approach and our interest in realness and social identity, which is, of course, at the core of *Exactitudes* and our fascination with street

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When did you find out about the show?

Ari Versluis: A few months ago. They gave me a call and Demna introduced the idea, with other further details about it to be confirmed. But then actually everybody was so busy that suddenly the show was here and it was one big surprise: a fabulous surprise, of course!



56. Homeboys – Rotterdam 2002

Exactitudes: Homeboys – Rotterdam 2002 Ari Versluis and Ellie Uyttenbroek

How did it feel to see your project come full circle and itself inspire a collection?

Ari Versluis: It was weird to see, especially because it was done in such a good manner. It's that contrast of social identity and fashion. In fashion there has always been a focus on individualism – which I think is quite an overused concept, especially in the industry – and it has separated fashion from clothes. We have been documenting clothes and lifestyles for years and now suddenly the clothes have become the inspiration for the fashion. It's very interesting to see how Vetements has redefined that element of realness and individualism – social uniform, uniformed identities – which is, of course, a totally 'now' thing to do. It's fascinating to observe how people construct their ideas of themselves in this fast changing and very complex social environment we live in nowadays, as well as the influence of the internet and Instagram on fashion – and you can sense all of that in the show. It's totally fabulous.

You started the *Exactitudes* project over 20 years ago – what have been the key observations you've made about fashion and clothing over that time?

Ari Versluis: What you really see is that fashion is cyclical; it goes around and then comes back in a different form. You can almost wait for those moments to arrive – there's a certain pace that you notice when you've followed it for a very long time, and I love that rhythm.

In the 1990s, I watched Jennie Livingston's documentary *Paris is Burning*, a movie that was very influential for me. It triggered my fantasy about reality in drag. It was about that realness – that executive, street realness – and the idea that everybody could suddenly play that role. When looking at the Vetements show, it really reminded me of the film in the way that it played around with this realness and those categories, and presented this transformation on the stage – in the film it was a stage, now it is a catwalk. It's a sort of drag, the present reality in drag.

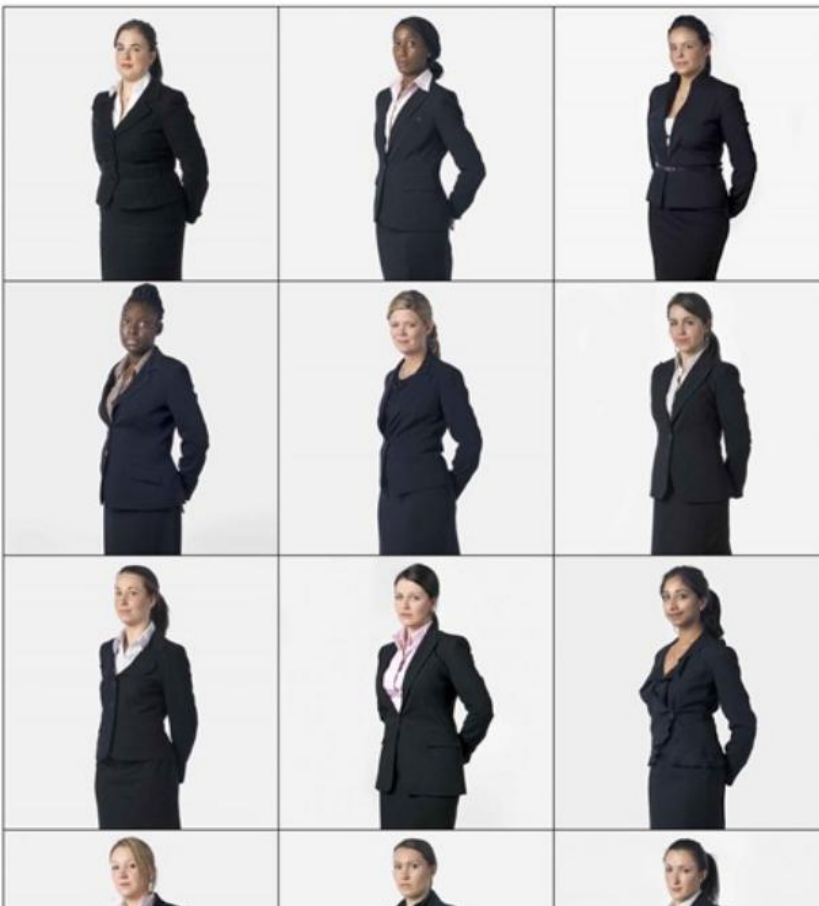
“Demna’s comments about *Exactitudes* are always spot on – he’s somebody who really understands our approach and our interest in realness and social identity”

So how did *Exactitudes* come about?

Ari Versluis: It was just an urge. I lived in London for a while in the early 80s, and then when I came back to Rotterdam, there was this immense gabber explosion. I'd never seen anything like it before and I realised that it was a Dutch phenomenon – it was the first Dutch youth culture to emerge. It was fascinating: suddenly there was an explosion of record labels, looks, parties... and it was so new and so isolated at that time. Ellie and I were actually the only ones to see that originally, coming from a photography and fashion background, and we just decided to document it.

And did it just take off from there?

Ari Versluis: Yes. We began to invite the boys into the studio because we wanted to meet them, not just see them at a party when they were on drugs, and when we finished that series, we thought, 'There's so much going on. Let's do the gabber bitches next.' Then we'd always hang out in a gay bar next to our studio and we soon noticed the cloning going on there, and suddenly we'd fallen head over heels into the project! We're both very much collectors, so we started and we never stopped.



Exactitudes: City Girls – London 2008 Ari Versluis and Ellie Uyttenbroek

You've shot quite a few series in different cities. What's your process like when shooting somewhere new?

Ari Versluis: First of all it's about going there with a very open mind. Ellie and I choose certain places just to sit for a few days and see what's buzzing. We take little snaps and talk about it – it's always a real discussion. Interestingly, when you go somewhere new, you have a certain idea in your head – 'we will find this' – but it's always different to what you expect. When you zoom in on all the details, and ask questions about where materials come from, where a certain type of person shops, you start to unravel it and come to understand how little you knew of that group.

And that's another thing, coming back to Vetements and the way they play around with stereotypes and social identities and the external perceptions we have of them: subcultural groups today can also be quite defensive. It's almost like they're saying, 'I'm not your gabber; I'm not your hip-hopper.' That conflict is very interesting and is something that Vetements touches upon. But saying that, we also live in a time where everybody borrows elements from each other's styles, and that's probably a good characteristic of our age.

Definitely. Instagram has made it much easier for people to dip into certain elements of subcultures, whereas before you had to really be a part of it to understand it...

Ari Versluis: Exactly. In the early 80s when I wanted to acquire black Levi's, for example, I had to take the boat to London to buy them! It's quite an interesting story in terms of seeing how the world has changed. Vetements, and their very well played game of shortage, was also a great response to that internet abundance.

So what does the future hold for *Exactitudes*?

Ari Versluis: We take pauses from the project because it's quite intense – you have to be quite a chameleon to encounter these people, going from the environment of a club, say, and then to a chic party to meet some fur ladies. So we're having a period of reflection at the moment to do other things, but there will be a time where we're simply going to do it again because the designs in the street are too powerful, they just seduce you. And that's very good.



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Vetements AW17 Photography Lucie Rox

Vetements AW17

36 IMAGES

