



# New Exactitudes

Three masculine EXACTITUDES from today, exclusively caught for Fantastic Man by notorious SUBCULTURE observers Ari Versluis & Ellie Uyttenbroek. With words by Lou Stoppard.

“WIT IS A WORD that you can’t really translate into Dutch,” says Ellie Uyttenbroek, one half of the Rotterdam-based photography duo behind ‘Exactitudes’. “We just don’t have this word. People often describe our work as CYNICAL, but it’s not. It’s WITTY. It’s the grandmother in ‘Downtown Abbey’. But people see it like typecasting in a comedy show.” Ellie is referring to the grid pictures she creates with Ari Versluis, her collaborator of 24 years. The images are made up of 12 portraits, arranged in a 3×4 format. They feature uncannily similar human subjects, each in nearly identical clothes, each striking a uniform pose, each a slightly mutated variant of the next. A title and short line of text summarise each tribe. One, ‘Casual Queers’, shot in 1995, showcases neatly turned out men with clipped hair, jeans and checked shirts. “Ideal son-in-law look-a-likes. Respectable, professional, ‘don’t pigeonhole me!’ homosexuals. No screaming fairies,” reads the description. ‘Teenagers’, from 1996, features casually dressed girls looking into the camera with moody, coquettish eyes. “Don’t label me! Nag nag nag,” the notice reads, ironically.

There is a HUGE amount of interest in ‘Exactitudes’ right now. Ellie and Ari have just shot a series for HELMUT LANG,

which features, among others, the musicians SOLANGE KNOWLES and KANYE WEST. The sizeable uptick in their profile can be credited to DEMNA GVASALIA, the man behind Vetements and Balenciaga, who based his entire Autumn and Winter 2017 collection on some 30 past photo series by the duo. The runway show was less of a fashion showcase and more of a performance – a parade of familiar social groups and a nod to critics who say Vetements offers nothing more than OVERPRICED everyday clothes. There was the punk, an ode to ‘Mohawks’ (1998); the suited secretary, inspired by ‘City Girls’ (2008); and the well-heeled older lady in her fur coat, a tribute to ‘Donna Decaffeinata’, shot in Milan in 2011. Controversially, Gvasalia also dressed a model as a homeless man (‘Vagabonds’, 1998).

There was no formal collaboration between Ellie and Ari and Vetements, and the duo received NO PAYMENT and NO INVITATION to the show. “I’m interested in this Oxford professor who is talking about big data,” Ari says. “Data is the new currency. On a worldwide scale, that show created a global interest in our work and we needed that exposure. Demna knew that that would be the result of it. They could

#### COMMON COMPLEX

A precise expression of anti-authenticity, anti-hipsteriness, and as such a contemporary division of normcore. This is a poetic and prudish look that can be achieved for not a lot of money, with trousers that are pleated or baggy enough to be gathered by a belt. No brands, no logos. Hints of the 1990s and the yesteryear colour palette of Eastern Europe. A subtle necklace goes over a roll-neck. No facial hair. A haircut is obtained by placing a bowl over the head, then cutting along the edge.

→





156. Good Morning,  
Berlin 2018



(189)

have paid us, but maybe they gave us something that is more valuable.

“With Vetements, it’s a game,” he adds, “and you can either be part of that or you can be pointlessly bitter about it. It’s better to embrace it.”

**\*\* INTRIGUED \*\***

‘Exactitudes’ began in 1994 in response to Rotterdam’s burgeoning GABBER scene. Sticking two fingers up at the perceived pretensions of the Amsterdam house-music scene, Rotterdam’s DJs would increase the BPMs (beats per minute, for the uninitiated) to somewhere between 150 and 220, creating an intense, screaming sound. Ellie and Ari were intrigued by the look of the revellers and began to shoot portraits of shaven-headed young males. “Technomates in Italian candy-coloured shell suits. Old, clean terror. Addicts to hardcore; 180 BPM in ecstasy,” reads the description with the ‘Gabbers’ series. The name EXACTITUDES emerged, a contraction of “exact” and “attitude,” and a reference to the highly specific, often fanatical style and personality quirks developed by those who attach themselves to a particular social set. After ‘Gabbers’, they shot ‘Gaberbitches’ (1996), ‘Bimbos’ (1996) and ‘Combat Girls’ (1996). They’ve now shot more than 150 series.

Ari takes the photos. Ellie and Ari both write the texts. Both search for the subjects. They scout CONSTANTLY, with the help of assistants. They have been working on some series for years without managing to get quite enough shots to complete the grid. In those cases, they might abandon the puzzle, realising that that particular societal niche isn’t robust enough. Individual portraits are discarded along the way as they search for what they call “the balanced sweet spot” of a particular style movement. Sometimes they’ll have enough to make double or triple the number of grids. Often those being captured will give tips – “That’s not a real look. You should cut him. We wear this like this. You need to look for this.”

Ari sees this process as a show of respect to those they photograph. “They are participants. You dive into something and you begin on a quite SUPERFICIAL level, and then you listen to what they say. You suddenly notice that there are so many subseries – but you never saw that richness in the beginning. You could make three or five.” They always tell their subjects in advance how they’ll be labelled. “We are never aiming to be critical,” Ellie says, adding that she gets frustrated when, based on

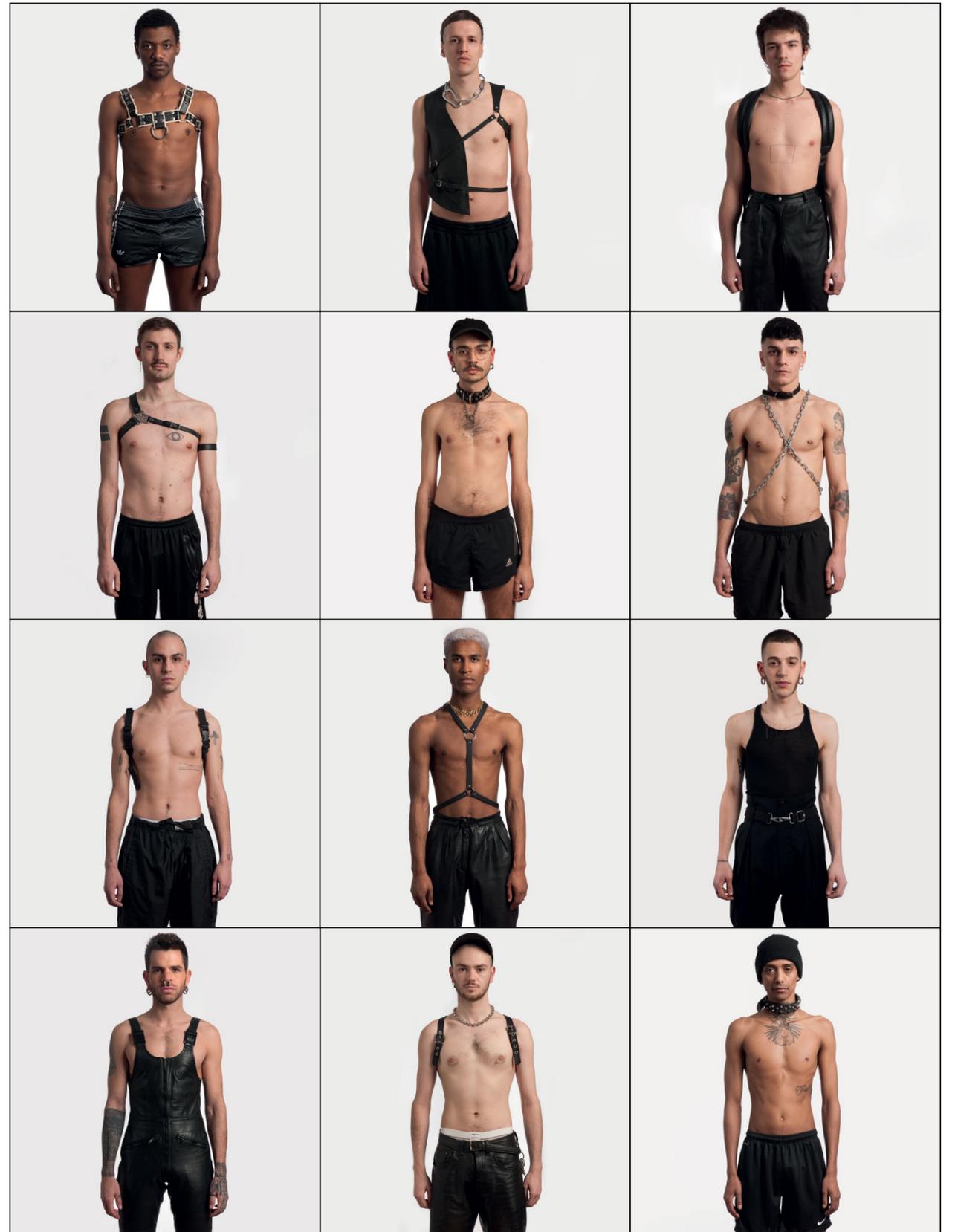
the often suggestive or terse commentary, people feel that Ari and Ellie are mocking those they shoot.

Long before VETEMENTS propelled ‘Exactitudes’ across Instagram accounts far and wide, the project had achieved a cult following. Their book, titled simply ‘Exactitudes’, is now in its sixth edition. Bombastic bookseller David Owen, who runs IDEA in London, says that the first edition can sell for upwards of £300 (the latest edition costs £45). “‘Exactitudes’, published in 2002, is an IDEA ‘superbook,’” he says. An enormous feat of time, energy and commitment – which is, in its very nature, as obsessive as the subjects it documents – ‘Exactitudes’ has influenced numerous image-makers and designers. They turn to the book for styling tips or shoot ideas. “A book that can change the way someone thinks and works and influences what they make – that is a superbook,” Owen continues. “You can find street-style pictures now across the internet and stitch together your own ‘exactitudes’, but that is not the point. The point is that they did what they did. The book is an idea and an action undertaken. It is also brilliantly written – and we are great appreciators of short-form copywriting.”

I meet Ellie and Ari at their studio in Rotterdam. Ellie, who was born in the city in 1965, lives with her boyfriend, an interior designer, and their 11-year-old daughter, Billie. Ellie is louder and more animated than Ari, who is equally warm but more reflective. Ari was born in Werkendam, not far from Rotterdam, in 1961, and often vacates for Berlin where he has had a studio since the early 1980s. Like Ellie, he has also been in a relationship for 12 years, having met his boyfriend – one of her students at Design Academy Eindhoven – at the exact time Ellie settled down with hers. Ellie had set her class a project to shoot older people’s houses; there is a 20-year AGE GAP between the two men. Ari also works as a freelance photographer for brands such as PALACE and GMBH; and Ellie as a curator – she has worked at the Nederlands Fotomuseum and the Stedelijk Museum.

We share beers before moving to the bustling, low-key restaurant Z&M. When I ask Ari what Exactitudes strapline he would give himself, both he and Ellie SIGH – it’s what everyone wants to know. “Ideal Gay Dad,” he jokes, parroting a comment I’d made earlier about him having the air of a good father. But Ellie has a series in mind. “Now he is getting a bit older, he’s wearing jeans and the kind of sporty, neat-man shoes and the Saint James sweater,” she

**GOOD MORNING** →  
Men who dress in the colour of the night and frequent Berlin institutions that generally endorse fun and interaction, such as Herrensauna and Berghain. Shorts and trousers come in nylon and leather; harnesses strap in arms and shoulders and sometimes hint at rucksack wearing. There’s a generous peppering of piercings (ears, nose, nipples) and facial hair, plus a sense of being entitled to a long, fun night out.





158. Slik,  
Rotterdam/Amsterdam 2018

(192)



(193)

says. “I was in Antwerp sitting in a falafel bar last week and there were three guys in the exact same outfit. It’s a gay look. RAF SIMONS dresses that way.”

Surely it must be strange to find that he is, like his subjects, part of a tribe?

“I totally believe deep down that there is no authenticity. And that authenticity, or style, is just a social construct,” he says. “When you show the social construct, you show style. People can say, ‘No, it’s about the individual,’ but I don’t believe it. And in this age of big data, it’s stupid to think that it’s your very own personal style. Of course, EVERYBODY has a personal narrative or storyline through their life, and that can be VALUABLE. And as a photographer you can zoom in to that beautifully, but we choose not to do that.”

\*\* COMPLEX \*\*

On first encountering ‘Exactitudes’, it’s easy to view the images as having certain inclusive values, or to see it as some of kind of liberal, celebratory project about difference and the outsiders of society – those who choose to live on the EDGE through subculture, club culture and counterculture. But look closer and it’s actually a more complex study of expectations, segregation, gender, race and class. It’s not just about who the subjects are and how they look, but about how we judge them. The cultural baggage that we bring. The motifs that we pick up on and find instantly readable or somehow loaded. The details we project additional stereotypes onto.

‘Exactitudes’ is not didactic, but it is suggestive and intended to incite. The pair put a firm emphasis on what divides us, rather than just what unites us – a focus which has become more fevered as current commentary increasingly puts forward the view that, thanks to technology and globalisation, we are becoming more similar. “There’s this idea that we’re all the SAME, buying the same big, global brands like Primark and Zara and all watching Netflix, but really there are so many small national differences. You see them as soon as you cross a border,” Ellie says. “When I’m in France, queuing in the supermarket, I look at people and I think, ‘They are so French.’ But what is it that makes them French? It’s not their visage. It’s maybe something in their clothing, but not completely. I can’t put my finger on it. And maybe THAT’S what this is all about – we really want to define this.”

Given how suited the format seems for social media, it’s hard to remember that

Ellie and Ari began creating their grids 16 years before Instagram launched. “In this world of the internet, everyone is style grouping,” Ari says. “It becomes so GENERIC to do it, because of the zeitgeist. But you notice, when you’ve been doing it for this long, that actually things haven’t changed that much. The main intellectual thinking is always saying that subculture is OVER. They argue we’re adaptable to our situations – a bit of this and a bit of that. But what we notice, certainly now by doing this most recent series for Fantastic Man, is it’s NOT true. The Berghain boys are really dedicated to their scene. The trap boys are really committed to that movement.”

One of the Berghain boys, here grouped in the series titled ‘Good Morning’, is 25-year-old student Jim van Geel. “I know I’m not the first to put my keys on a belt loop,” he tells me. “Playing with hyper-masculine gay iconography is a form of drag – there’s some irony to it.”

Ari sees the arguments about the death of subculture as SNOBBISM. “As soon as you are more intellectual and more upper class, you think that to really commit yourself to subculture is something from the lower classes – ‘Oh, you’re that rock ‘n’ roll guy. Well, we don’t do that. We can mix and mingle and move wherever.’ But, when you are young and you have no money, you don’t want to mix and mingle. You want to go extreme. You want to belong.”

To Ari and Ellie, groups will last forever. It’s HUMAN instinct, Ari says. “You need people around you to actually communicate who you are – to give you a stage, to give you resonance. To feel that you are embedded somewhere. There’s an old saying: show me the ones you walk with, and I’ll tell you who you are.”

SLLIK

→ A style succeeding the monochrome purity of ghetto goth. Think trap, but without the drug-dealing connotation. Both the 20th-century painter Jean-Michel Basquiat and the 21st-century phenomenon of SoundCloud rap are clear influences for a global niche of colourful exuberance. Brands seen throughout include Patta, Supreme, Daily Paper and a fair few Gucci accessories and gold necklaces. Eagle-eyed readers will recognise the popular Dutch artists Jacin Trill, Bokoesam and Ronnie Flex.

