

Don't Label Me

LOU STOPPARD

Ari and Ellie, your long-term collaborative photography project, *Exactitudes*, is an evolving archive of “social uniforms.” The project includes more than 150 sets of gridded images of people, categorized according to type. You identify these types by observing people on the street and finding patterns in their styles, their dress codes. I’m wondering whether clothing is still the biggest signifier of one’s social group. These days, Instagram seems more important. People no longer define themselves through possessions, but instead through the photos they share, the people they know, or what they “like.” Everyone has a fake, curated persona.

LS

You started the project in 1994—a totally different time. Does it feel that way?

LS

That’s a really old-school model: you’d get an e-mail alert, and then queue up outside the store. It’s ironic that these big fashion brands with all this money and digital technology are trying to replicate that early model based on the power of the physical space. People line up on the street for hours. It is a kind of pilgrimage.

LS

Through *Exactitudes*, you must have seen the commodification and mainstream adoption of certain things that were once confined to subcultures.

Lou Stoppard talks to Ellie Uyttenbroek and Ari Versluis about fashion, fitting in, and fake identities.

ELLIE UYTENBROEK

An avatar.

ARI VERSLUIS

You no longer have to go shopping to create a certain identity—but the question of what to wear and when still remains.

EU

Absolutely.

AV

At a certain moment, globalization became formed. It was suddenly real, especially for kids. They’ve developed a new kind of intelligence that allows them to define themselves within this reality. They’re no longer limited by physical geography.

EU

Early on, in 1997, we did the “Skaters” series. We found the kids just sitting in front of a skate store, waiting to buy T-shirts.

AV

The funny thing is that global brands are now cultivating the marketing behaviors of that past. Brands like Supreme or Rocawear used to create this sense of anticipation; you had to wait for a certain item to come in, and then suddenly there was a drop-off of clothes and everybody started getting that buzz . . .

AV

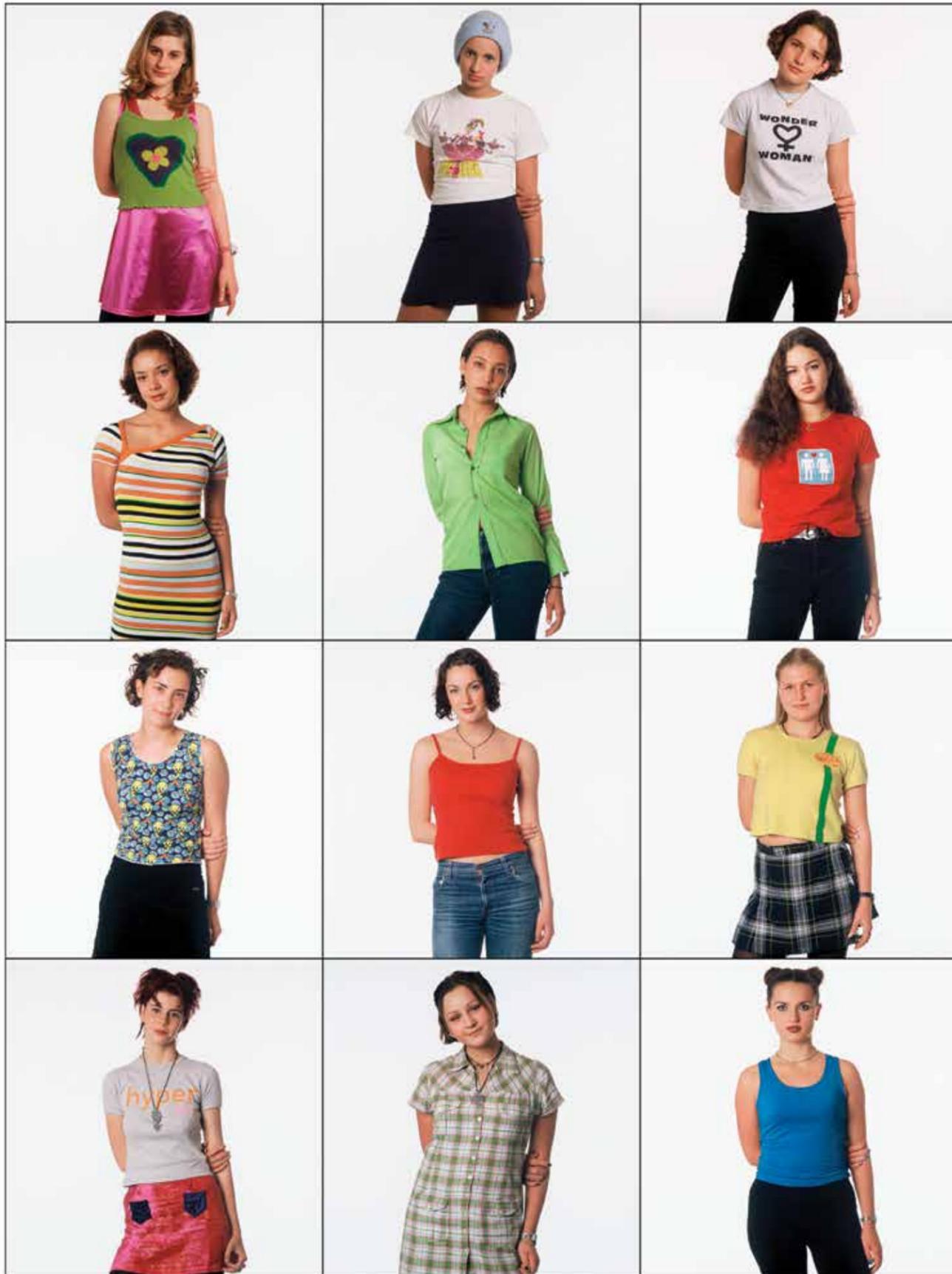
A few weeks ago, in London, I saw the store where we used to get our Dr. Martens in the 1980s. We used to go to London, queue up on Brick Lane, and then went home with the shoes. But today you can buy everything everywhere, with the exception of the artificial shortages that brands continue to create.

AV

Yeah, now everyone’s talking about cultural appropriation—taking ideas or things from other times or places and cultures, and putting them into a new, surreal context. But people don’t care where it comes from.



Clockwise from top left: Skaters, Rotterdam, the Netherlands, 1997. Gabberbitches, Rotterdam, the Netherlands, 1996. Scream, Beijing, China, 1999. Fly Girls, Rotterdam, the Netherlands, 2002.



Teenagers, Rotterdam, the Netherlands, 1996.

LS
It's as if everyone's trying to be more of an individual than ever, but everyone looks the same.

LS
I was listening to audio that goes alongside your "Teenager" series, which you made in 1996. There's a line that says, "don't label me." That is a feeling you have as a teenager. You want to fit in, but at the same time you don't want to be "normal."

LS
It's about popularity—and to be popular you have to appeal to more people.

LS
Yeah, exactly. Now you want 150,000 people to like your outfit.

LS
Different.

LS
It's the illusion of choice, isn't it? You go into Zara and can choose from a million different outfits, but you're still just going to Zara in every city.

EU
They don't even know it comes from somewhere.

AV
Young people say we just like the style and we do it. If Gucci can do it, we can do it. They erase the social and historical background.

AV
That's a big dilemma. Fashion is pop now; it seems that it doesn't belong to the avant-garde anymore. Fashion always played with the glorification of individuality. By buying some garment, you could alter your identity and create an individual. We now know that the concept of individualism doesn't work anymore.

EU
Identity has nothing to do with individuality anymore—teenagers just want to be known within this Insta-loop.

EU
Popular instead of punk.

AV
An outfit means nothing. You go to the store, you put an outfit on, you make a photo of yourself, and you put it back. Young people naively believe that they have a lot of choice. Choice is the mantra of our time. You see it with Starbucks—so many different types of overpriced coffee.

EU
Well, for them, choice represents riches.

AV
Yes, the riches. That's the neoliberal dream—but it's not true.

EU
I recently went to Basel with two little girls—my daughter and her friend. Where did they want to go? Starbucks, Dunkin Donuts, and Forever 21. They're not interested in anything that is—

EU
Everything is the same. In each and every city.

EU
Feels like home.

LS

It can sound a bit like you're millennial bashing—something people love to do about my generation (I'm 27)—“they're all so vain and shallow,” etc., but I do think there is a sense of “I can do anything. The world is my oyster.”

LS

Working on a project like Exactitudes for over 20 years must change the way you think about yourself. I guess you realize that you're just like everyone else, which is a comforting thought, but also quite scary. There's nothing worse than realizing you're ordinary.

LS

There's always this idea that young people are more liberal, more open-minded about things like sexuality and gender. Do you think this is true today?

LS

Do you think you could redo your 1996 series “Teenager” with teenagers today? Would it have the same impact?

LS

People are fearful. They are so aware of the power of an image.

EU

“Millennial bashing.” I want to write that down.

AV

I don't want to bash a whole generation, because the younger generations are always right. I'm just an outsider looking in; I see what I think is interesting and use it to get a grip on my own world and what my life is. That was also the case when we started—and now I'm over 50.

EU

When we're on the street now and we talk to young people it is totally different than it used to be. Now I really feel old. “Who's this old woman talking to me?” We started the series in 1994, two years after I had graduated from art school.

EU

No, I think kids are more conservative at the moment.

AV

Nakedness is still a problem.

EU

These kids are raised on consumerism. It's got nothing to do with revolt and nakedness and body painting. It's the glamour world of Ariana Grande and Kim Kardashian.

AV

The naivety is gone. We used to cast in the street; we'd walk up to people and ask if we could take their pictures—and they felt privileged to be asked. Now we really have to explain the reason, because kids know what the impact of an image is. They are producers themselves. They think, “Why should I let you take my picture when I can make a selfie on my own?”

EU

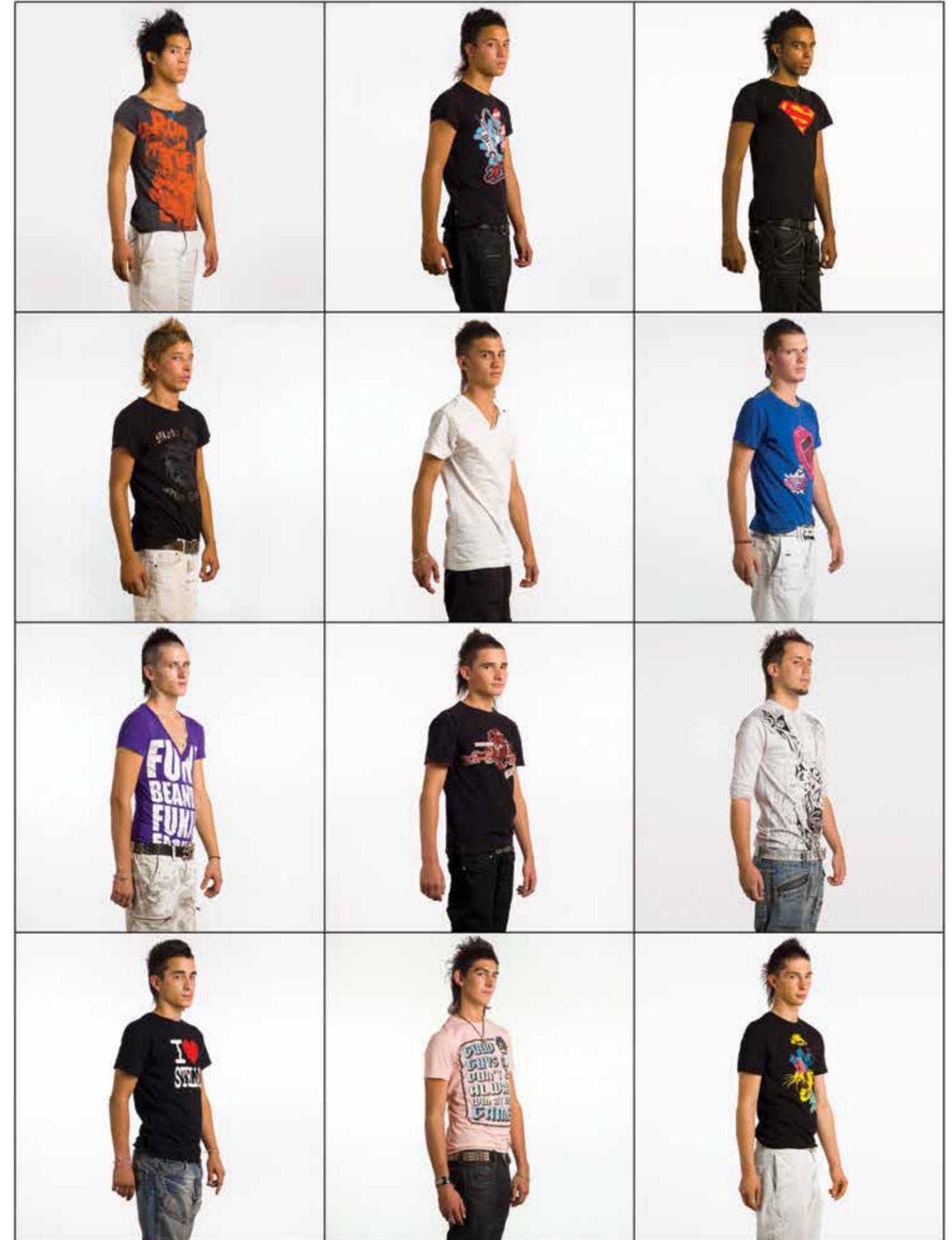
When we recently photographed some kids in the street, a guy said, “Don't tag me. Please, you can do whatever you want, but don't tag me. Don't label me.” He didn't want the photo to appear within social media.

EU

Everybody has a mirror all the time. It's called an iPhone.

AV

The mirror is one of the oldest metaphors for photography. Teenagers are constantly using their phones as mirrors—constantly readjusting themselves. But they also know that it's bullshit. Tomorrow you're old news, but the performative element is exciting.



Tektonik, Paris, France, 2008.

LS

Yes, it's performing. It's related to drag; you make versions of yourself.

LS

It's hard to imagine being 13 or 14 and creating a version of yourself online. You don't even know who you are yet. Now you have to figure out who you are twice—physically and digitally.

LS

There are all these studies that show that young people are lonelier than ever, but they're also connecting all the time.

LS

Everyone looks the same.

LS

But there are other groups of young people who are into nostalgia; they use it to feel "alternative." The kids who are seen as edgy want to have old things, or wear old clothes. Sometimes they even stay off the internet.

AV

Everybody is Ziggy Stardust now.

EU

I was recently doing a workshop in a high school in a working-class neighborhood. The class had a lot of boys, really macho boys. This one boy started dancing around. He was very popular—and gay as hell. Totally feminine. This would not have been possible in my secondary school.

AV

For me, growing up gay and from the provinces was a real struggle. I had to go to Amsterdam or Rotterdam to meet people. Now you go on Grindr and you have 75 friends in an hour.

AV

The real trouble is a lack of physical contact—everyone's communicating with screens.

EU

Which is very hygienic. Just like the obsession with shaving and bleaching—body culture. Everything has to be—

AV

Flawless. Yesterday I saw video tutorials of boys applying makeup—12-, 13-year-olds. Why, dear sweet boy, do you need foundation? Why? You're just a victim of a commercialized world, but the makeup is presented as the new thing and is thus desirable.

EU

Everybody is a pop star.

AV

In Rotterdam there's a huge store just for makeup. It's almost a supermarket for cosmetics. You see the girls coming out. It doesn't matter anymore what their heritage is, they're all beige.

AV

The same eyebrows, the same everything—it's the Kim Kardashian look.

EU

Is it nostalgia or is it the reinterpretation of an epoch? It's similar to what happens with music. If they listen to a Carole King song it's definitely not that same Carole King song—for them it is new. I think the authenticity hype has become commercialized—you can buy nostalgia but there's actually not much nostalgia to be found.

LS

I was thinking about the Russian fashion designer Gosha Rubchinskiy, and the sheer popularity of his clothes among young people. He talks a lot about Soviet Russia in his work, but there are these kids in Paris and London who don't know anything about the Soviet Union. What is it that appeals to them?

LS

It's about this veneer of authenticity. Do people just want something that feels truthful? I think that is the appeal of brands like Supreme or Palace—they feel real because they are born out of a specific scene and culture—skate, in this case. But so much other stuff doesn't.

LS

Well, it's all about the veneer of the real, isn't it? There was so much language used by Donald Trump's campaign to suggest authenticity. It didn't really matter what he was saying, but that what he was saying was "real." When Jeremy Corbyn won the Labour leadership election there was a similar sentiment—this idea of someone real.

LS

Demna Gvasalia's designs for the Vetements fall/winter 2017 collection, which was inspired by Exactitudes, redefine that element of realness and individualism, uniformed identity.

LS

What do you mean by "totally now"?

LS

When you're walking through your city now, do you find it harder to identify subject groups than it was in the 1990s?

LS

Do you think the Exactitudes project would work if you'd have started it now?

EU

It's exoticism.

AV

Right, like politics. Personality cult-driven politics is not about who the politicians are, but about how they act on television or what kind of car they drive. People are voting based on a feeling of identity, not on content.

EU

It's individualized politics. Frédéric Macron became president of France when he didn't even belong to an established party. It's amazing.

AV

It's anti-political.

AV

That is a totally now thing to do.

AV

Redefining realness in terms of individualism, social uniform, and uniformed identities is the most relevant thing to do in fashion now. This is exactly what Vetements did with their fall/winter 2017 collection. It's been our working method for 23 years, but now in 2017, identity, and identity construction, seems to be the big issue on the social and political agenda of the world, from Brexit to anti-Trump demonstrations to queerness and back. Exciting fashion always mirrors and reflects on what is happening in the now.

EU

It's harder to label.

AV

No.

EU

It'd be too late.



Demna Gvasalia, from the Vetements fall/winter 2017 collection, Paris, France.



LS

Instagram totally changed the format of a photograph. I think people like us will always imagine a photograph and a video as rectangles, but now there's a generation that will probably always think of a photograph as a square.

LS

How do you decide on the categories and the titles?

LS

Do you ask the people to take a certain pose?

AV

But what's funny is that young people see our format—the grid—in a totally new way. They look at you and they say, "Yeah—Instagram."

AV

A photograph as an object.

EU

Yes, and as a moving image. It's not a photograph anymore.

EU

I think what's most important is that Ari and I see fashion in normal, everyday things.

AV

We try to read cultural objects of everyday life in order to understand the way dress codes and behaviors are encoded.

AV

It's just body language, and body language is part of urban behavior, part of the uniform, just like everything else. You want to let the people feel at ease in the picture, so they fall into a certain natural position and they say, "Take the bloody picture." And that's always the moment.

Ari Versluis, photographer, and *Ellie Uytenbroek*, profiler, teamed up in 1994 to initiate *Exactitudes*, the highly acclaimed long-term art project that investigates the way cultures, subcultures, and social types produce, stabilize, and disseminate meaning in the social arena. Inspired by a shared interest in dress codes and "social uniforms," Versluis and Uytenbroek systematically curate permutations of conceived identity.

Lou Stoppard, editor-at-large of *SHOWstudio*, London, manages its editorial direction alongside fashion photographer *Nick Knight*.