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TEAIRRA MARI AND JAY-Z
PHOTOGRAPHED BY TERRY RICHARDSON

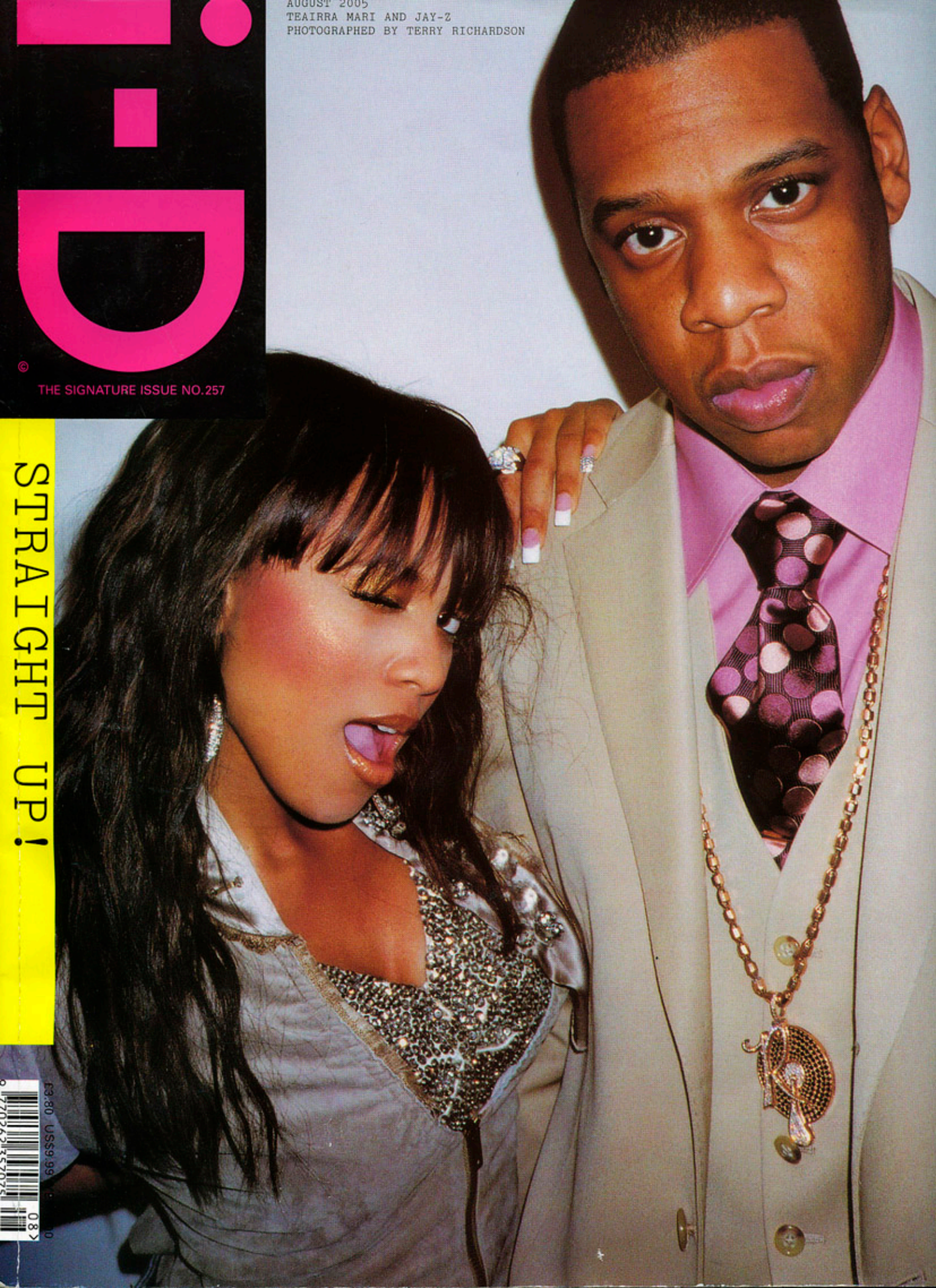


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STRAIGHT UP!



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I WANT TO BE ME

Exactitudes is an ongoing art project created by photographic duo Ari Versluis and Ellie Uyttenbroek. Named as an amalgamation of 'exact' and 'attitude', their work explores questions of identity and group instinct, challenging what makes each of us unique.

Since Ari Versluis enrolled on a photography course in Rotterdam, portraits have always grabbed him by the throat and shaken him to his very foundations. As he explains, "I've always taken portraits. I can't take pictures of a building." Ellie first entered Ari's world via her student fashion show, which Ari admits he was totally bowled over by. "I thought she was great", he says. Ellie's impressive catwalk presentation led the duo to hook up and work on various commercial photographic jobs together when Ari needed a stylist with an exact and precise eye, and Ellie needed the right photographer for an identity concept she was working on. "From that moment on most of our work was done together," says Ari. Inspired by the dress codes of different social groups, the pair have documented countless scenes and explored multiple subcultures and group identities. Although based in Rotterdam, they travel the world scouring and sourcing tribes united by a particular style nuance, tattoo, inflection or haircut. By portraying their subjects in an identical grid-like framework, all with similar stances and dress codes, their art project provides a near-scientific examination of style and self-expression. Many questions are raised; is the chosen subject matter trying to distinguish themselves from others by assuming a group identity, or by striving for individuality are they automatically grouping themselves into a sect? Is it possible in this time of glossy magazines, advertising campaigns and infinite labels to retain a personal sense of style? i-D went direct to the source and asked the talented twosome for the lowdown on their impressive body of work.

When did you start Exactitudes?

Ari: Around 1994. When the whole gabba thing was at its highest point here in Rotterdam, it was truly amazing. You saw so many of the same clones that it was like the whole city was invaded. We did some pictures and I never knew the names of the people because they all looked so alike! Then one day we thought, let's make a whole load of photographs of those guys. Then we had the pictures published and from that moment on it was like, BOOF! We also wanted to investigate other ideas so we went to a gay bar around the corner from here. We saw all the gays with their checkered shirts and from that one

evening we had the second series. It just grew and has never stopped!

Why did you decide, as a rule, to shoot in the studio rather than on location?

We like taking pictures in the studio because we really like to meet the people, you know? I'm curious about how they are; I want to get some intimacy. I like to have a quiet environment so that you can really make the best out of it. That never happens in the street. Then, it's just a split-second of imaginations. You say hi and bye and that's about it. I really look at the clothes, you know, what are you wearing, and also try to figure out whether each person is right or not. So how many people do you shoot for each series? Mostly twenty to twenty-five, to get it right. The funny thing is that you start off and then the series evolves into something slightly different than where you started. You get people in who know the style much better than you do, so they give comments on the Polaroids. They say 'Oh, he's a fake' or 'they are a true original' or whatever. With that opinion in mind, you research further and that makes the actual process more interesting.

How much styling is involved?

Well the styling aspect is actually restricted to observing the dress code when you go into the cities or into the clubs. We really want to check out what the people are wearing and what kind of brands they wear, or whatever. Then we ask them to come into the studio with the same outfit and also bring some more. So when they bring some more I choose the best and also try to make the series interesting. So when it's all about, let's say, colourful jackets, then I really want to strive for the yellow one. It's also about making the whole series interesting so that it becomes one picture in a way.

Do you stage the pose?

We start off with one icon; we always have one person for us who is the icon of a certain style. We have a 'holy cross' in the studio and about ten thousand people have stood there and I just ask them to stand there on the cross and I take a few rolls. Then in the meantime while I am taking the shots I get the feeling that this is a very pleasant pose, very suitable for a certain group. It shouldn't be too specific because otherwise you can't repeat it, but mostly it comes from the people themselves - it's quite natural. With the









bouncers, for instance, of course they stand with their hands in front of their crotch because that's always the way they stand at the club. Then there are specific things, like the 'bimbos' - they have this '50s style pose with their hands on their leg, because their hips are mostly too broad. Things like that come from the people themselves. You can't say to a hip hop guy to stand in a certain position because he has a repertoire of certain moves. Even the movements are quite coded in a way.

When did you realize that Exactitudes was something bigger, that it had the potential to grow as a lifestyle project?

After two or three series we started to think about all the possibilities there were and all the different groups out there and how constantly changing they are. To not focus on the fashion side but on the layer below that, which is hardly ever covered. It becomes so interesting when you think about all the possibilities on offer and it starts to sparkle in your head. Sometimes we do it in concentrated periods working for a few months on a certain group of Exactitudes but then we have to do other work. Otherwise we get totally obsessed!

So do you snap them when you travel?

Yeah, when we travel we always take out a month or so. We try to get involved with the locals as much as we can because they are the major source of inspiration. Then we just sit in McDonald's at Ipanema in Rio, for instance, because we know that's the centre point for all people. It takes a week to analyse what's really happening. Then we make a portable studio in the street because it's difficult to get people into a real studio in somewhere like Ipanema.

What is your favorite series so far?

That's such a difficult question! [Laughs]. I like the 'fly girls' and I like the 'gabbas'. For me it's so good to see how everything is evolving. You know like the fly girls are actually the gabba bitches from ten years ago, but now they are totally into American hip hop and using American slang and things like that. When you meet the girls they're from the same background and have the same feeling but it's completely changed. People don't change but the clothes do. You see the girls and it's all about roughness. Everything is so rough. Like, where is the love?

Are there any series you've worked on that haven't come to fruition?

We start a lot of series that actually don't work out probably because they are connected with a quick style or quick trend. There are some series that we just keep in our archive. But when it doesn't work out it's more because the trendiness is too heavy in a way.

Do you think it's still possible to be an individual?

[Laughs]. Of course. I think the beauty of the portraits is that people are super-self aware when their picture is being taken. Even when they have a uniformed identity, they are real people. That combination of uniformed identity in combination with having an individual portrait taken makes for a very nice contradiction. Within the images, however, there are individuals and those individuals form their own sort of style family. I do believe in individuality!

By grouping people together in series of twelves, do you feel that that this gesture is stripping away their individual personalities?

No, it's just stressing their need to belong to a certain group, because it's all about communication - communication within the group and communication to other groups. When we exhibit the work the prints are really large. They are two and a half meters high and one and a quarter broad and from a distance all you see is the group. But when you zoom in and you enter the photo more, you see the individual and then you see that everyone is slightly different and does it their own way. It's really nice to see that from a distance they all belong to a sort of uniformed identity group but when you zoom in, you see that there are persons involved. Somebody is more self-aware and somebody is a little bit shy. It brings in their individual aspects - from a fashion point of view and how they create their thoughts on food or politics to how they want to see their house or whatever.

Would you like to go into fashion shoots, styling people and making new scenes and looks?

We did a shoot for 'Vogue Homme' all about the new collections. We thought ok; this is sort of eco-punk styling so we went to Paris to find those kinds of guys. At that time it was all about the new hip hop so we only wanted to see the Arabic or black guys wearing it. I think it's always interesting to have the right people in the right clothes - sometimes I think that that's quite lacking in fashion. You see nice models, but it's so indifferent in a way because they are so nice. Does it really reflect anybody? That's what I like about the Dior campaigns. It's just about thin guys, you know? For me, it makes sense in a way.

What are you referencing at the moment? Do you look towards the catwalks for inspiration?

We want to keep informed, that's for sure. We are glossy addicts and we want to follow what is going on but we also want to see the interpretations of the street. It's about the translations which make it interesting. For example, when Helmut Lang makes tight jeans it takes a year or two before you see it in the street. You see what fashion can dictate sometimes - some styles are adopted in the street sometimes and others not, and the other way around, of course. So what was first? Some of the things that happen in the streets never reach the fashion magazines and that's quite a pity I think. What are you working on at the moment?

We are working on two new series, one about the new consumer. Very young girls with a lot of silicon and young guys with babies, who really take the role of the mother. We call them 'carry-daddies'. Also old ladies who are completely into the Japanese or Belgium fashion styles. You know, the ones into Comme des Garçons styling and so on, who truly believe in the design idea of form following function. And then there's a series about God. What we are trying to do is see the Jesus-freaks and the really hip hop guys from Amsterdam and from the big cities but also go into the villages where all those styles have not changed for one hundred years. When you go to those villages and see those women who never cut their hair and always wear black, completely pale who have no television or whatever, it's very difficult to get those people into the pictures. It will take a few months of infiltration in that scene to get all those people in the pictures, but I think the end result will be fantastic.

Project Rotterdam: Works By Ari Versluis & Ellie Uyttenbroek will be showing at the Museum Boymans Van Beuningen from July 2 until September 9. For more information check out www.exactitudes.com