



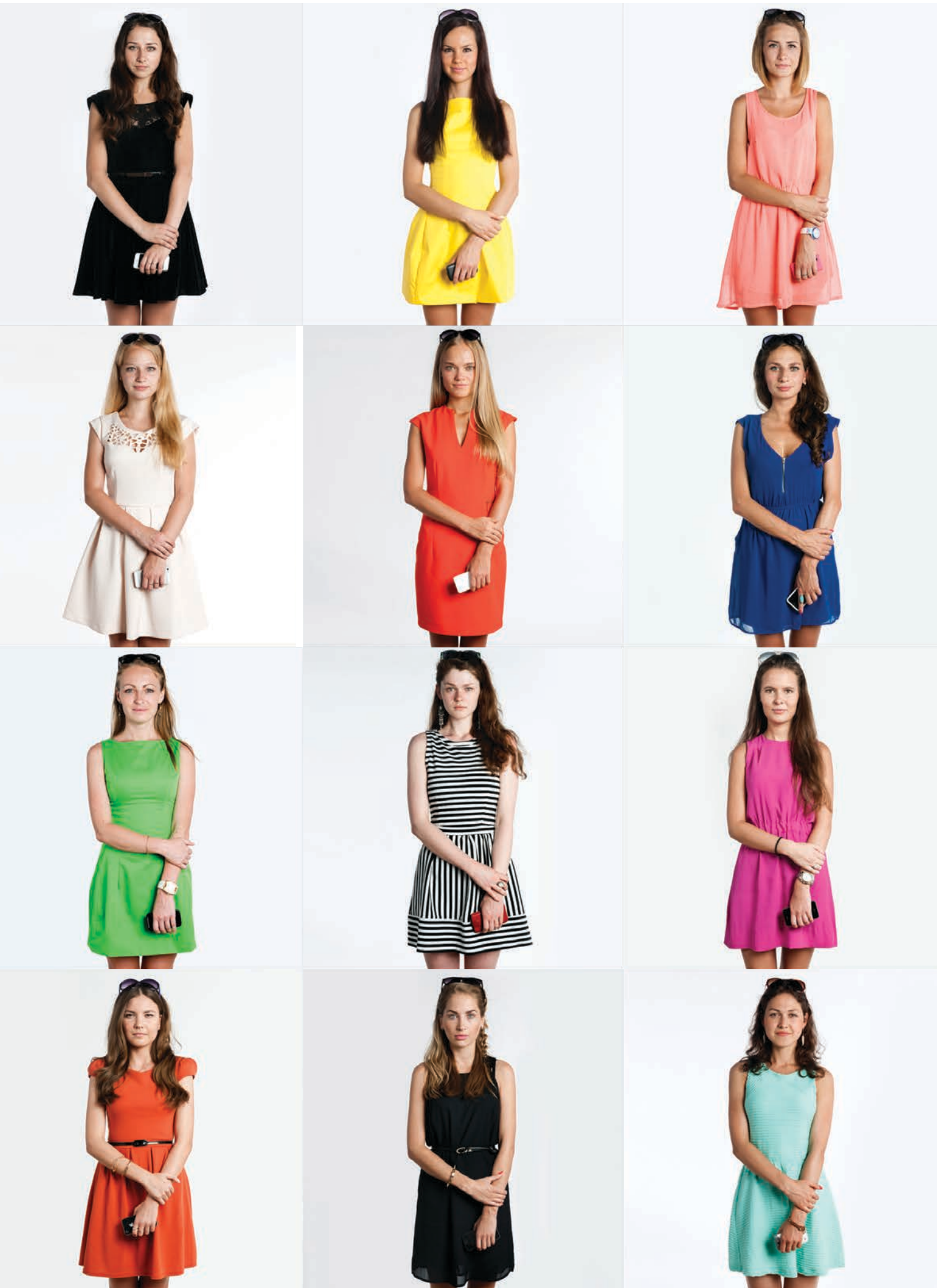
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THE SCIENCE OF EXACTITUDES

ARI VERSLUIS TALKS METHOD, PROCESS AND CONCLUSIONS

FOR TWENTY YEARS NOW, PHOTOGRAPHER ARI VERSLUIS AND PROFILER ELLIE UYTENBROEK HAVE TAKEN STREET STYLE OFF THE STREETS AND INTO STUDIOS AROUND THE WORLD. THEY'VE PHOTOGRAPHED THOUSANDS OF PEOPLE, GROUPING THEM TOGETHER BASED ON THEIR APPEARANCE – CLOTHING, HAIRSTYLE, COMPOSURE, ALL THE TELL-TALE SIGNS OF SOCIAL STRATIFICATION AND ASPIRATION. THE RESULT IS THEIR EVER-EVOLVING VISUAL DOCUMENT EXACTITUDES. WHAT STARTED AS A SHARED INTEREST IN THE DRESS CODES OF VARIOUS SOCIAL GROUPS, BECAME AN EXTENDED PROJECT THAT HAS TAKEN THEM FROM THEIR CURRENT HOMETOWN OF ROTTERDAM, TO FAR FLUNG PLACES LIKE ST. PETERSBURG, BUT ALSO TO (SUB) URBAN COMMUNITIES CLOSER TO HOME LIKE THE VILLE NOUVELLE OF ÉVRY, JUST SOUTH OF PARIS.



“AFTER A CERTAIN AGE, PEOPLE TEND TO STOP EXPERIMENTING. THEY’VE BECOME WHO THEY ARE. THIS IDENTITY CAN HAVE ALL KINDS OF CULTURAL MEANINGS TO THEM, FOR EXAMPLE, WHO THEY ARE WHEN THEY’RE AT WORK, OR WHETHER OR NOT THEY LIVE IN CENTRAL MILAN OR IN THE SUBURBS. BUT THE SAME SYSTEM APPLIES TO THEM AS TO THE YOUNGSTERS. IT REVOLVES AROUND ASSIMILATING TO THE GROUP TO WHICH THEY WANT TO BELONG.”

To look at the 3X4 blocks of photographs, one series after the other, conjures up an uncanny sensation. They are recognizable yet alienating photographs populated with individuals whose individuality seems but a sheer illusion.

We’ve all been there, especially as adolescents – you want to be part of a group by adopting a certain style, but you also eagerly try to show just how unique you are. Some conform more than others, and some only conform in parts, but it’s the most pure representations of a certain urban group or tribe which Exactitudes aims to highlight. As Ari and Ellie register their subjects plainly against a white backdrop and direct them to hold similar poses, the desired effect is achieved: a striking resemblance between strangers who are more akin than they could have hoped. It’s a perfect form of type casting in which the photographs objectively expose the need we feel as human beings to identify ourselves through dress, forming tribes at the extreme ends of sartorial expression.

Taking some time out of his busy schedule – Ellie and he are in the middle of moving offices in Rotterdam –, Ari gladly sits down for a chat about the possible meanings of the apparent contradiction between individuality and uniformity, and how social media has given cause to new developments in how identities are formed.

The very first Exactitudes series was shot in 1995, so you’re nearing the project’s 20th anniversary. Congratulations! After this time, what do you think has made Exactitudes so successful?

It must be the psychological aspect of it, the fact that people want to see part of themselves reflected in another person. They may have an existential question or just a fashion-related one: “Who am I?”, “What do I want?” I think that because there is so much imagery around us now, it’s a lot more relevant today than when we started.

Is your goal to simply document, or is it about the stylized element too?

The styled nature of it is just as important, because in the end it is an artistic production. This means that we look closely at styling, at the choices the people we’ve invited to the studio have made. In post-production we dedicate a lot of effort to creating a pleasant, unambiguous work of art.

Just how styled is it, how does that process work?

The styling begins from the moment you’re looking. So, we spot someone with a certain look, which prompts us to invite them to the studio. In the studio we look at what they’re wearing, which is usually different from what they were wearing in the street but, by and large, matches the image they want to project. And then we go from there.

How do you decide which group to single out, is it based on what you see first, or a premeditated idea of what you want to show?

In the beginning, it all happened quite organically, but quickly we received commissions from brands. For these, the time and place is fixed, and within those rules of play, within those parameters of time and place, you set out to look for what’s happening. You can’t contain everything but you try to take a snapshot view and portray it as purely as possible.

What do you enjoy the most about the process? Or, on the other hand, is there anything that frustrates you?

It’s very frustrating of course if you can’t finish something. When, while working on a series, it proves to be more difficult than expected. Or when you have trouble finding the right specimens straight away. Or when it’s not such a uniform identity as you’d hoped for. In such cases, it’s sometimes necessary to say farewell to a beautiful idea.

Looking back, the world has changed a lot in terms of globalization. Twenty years ago there was no Instagram or Facebook. Images of other people’s styles are much more accessible now. How do you think this has impacted individual style?

I find it interesting that Instagram chose to use squares. The photographic medium is rectangular for most people – so is the iPhone.

Isn’t that because they’ve modeled it on the Polaroid?

Certainly, but the Polaroid itself is an archaic medium too, if you look at how many people actually use it. So it has a nostalgic and post-modern charge to it to make use of squares. In the case of Exactitudes, the square format actually comes from photographing with a medium-format Hasselblad camera. But I digress.

“I THINK THE CONCLUSION IS – AND THIS IS A RESULT OF THE TIME WE LIVE IN – THAT PEOPLE DON’T ONLY HAVE AN IDENTITY IN THE REAL WORLD, ON THE STREET, BUT ALSO ONLINE. AND THE PRINCIPLES WITH WHICH THEY CONSTRUCT THIS IDENTITY ARE THE SAME.”

Of course our access to trends and looks has increased hugely, and hence so has globalization. It becomes apparent then that globalization leads to new mutations of a global look. That’s definitely an effect of it.

Do you think people’s styles on the street have diversified, or have they become more similar since you started the project?

That’s hard to say, because subcultures are usually youth cultures, and we don’t pick up on it so quickly. In fact, what you notice is that a whole lot of transitions are happening. Young people get older and behave in a more mature way, they become adults more quickly. Older people live longer and start to behave more youthfully. This transgenerational movement is interesting. And then, there are all the cultural influences in a city like London or Rotterdam, which are multi-cultural and where a lot of cross-pollination occurs. You used to only see it in a cool wigger girl, but now you see it much more often. In addition, nowadays, it’s much more the case that men can do feminine things and women can do masculine things – also in terms of clothing. I’m not sure if we can call all of that subcultural, but these are ways in which to look at sartorial behaviors.

Everybody belongs to some sort of cultural or social group. But do you think absolutely everyone is categorizable?

No, and that’s something we always say, only 10%-15% of people fit into a clear-cut category. The others only possess some characteristics. In the end, we want to create a pure piece of art. That means that we are looking for a defined statement, which might be quite unspectacular. A house-wife in Bordeaux is not exactly a mind-blowing type but can tick all of our boxes.

While researching, I came across the Matisse quote: “L’exactitude n’est pas la vérité”. Do you think this is true for Exactitudes?

It’s a way of looking at the truth. We don’t pretend that our portrayal is the truth. That’s also what Matisse means. We organize the truth in a certain way, it’s a kind of staged documentary. We try to take the viewer by the hand and make him look in a certain direction.

Is your work, aside of being a social and cultural study, also a commentary meant to convey a message?

No, not really. But of course, that happens by default. To be sure, it’s about anthropology, it’s about social issues, it’s about lifestyle and it’s about fashion. These are all part of it. But it’s not the case that we want to make a political statement. The fashion aspect is interesting because it’s a trigger for a lot of people in terms of a new way of appearing, by which they can distinguish themselves, without this necessarily being a short-lived trend.

Do you think it’s possible to be truly individual?

Yes, I’m absolutely sure of that. People just don’t take the time to develop it. I think that’s the problem. After going offline (off Facebook, etcetera) for a couple of months, something different surely will surface. The fact that millions of people are doing the same things, does of course mean there is less individuality. Everyone is simply looking at the same images.

Do a lot of the subjects who come into your studio show a level of self-consciousness about which tribe they belong to?

Well, they are having their photograph taken as a conscious choice, so they had time to think it over. It’s in a studio, not in the moment on the street. So that level of awareness is important, the knowledge of what they are participating in. But often they’re not aware of the outcome, of how similar they look to others, especially not the elderly people. “You’ve already photographed me”, they’ll say, and when I say “No, that was someone else”, they can be quite taken aback.

Has anyone ever felt insulted when confronted with the tribe you’ve categorized her or him in?

No, not really, because you explain to them what you are doing, and people tend to gain a lot of strength from their identity, realizing, “yes that’s me, that makes sense.” Perhaps some people have this feeling a bit less, but in general, people are pretty aware of who they are.

Are they mostly flattered?

Yes, and this is of course also due to the way in which you approach them in the street. Because even if that person’s style is not to my personal taste, I still compliment them on their appearance. And the appearance is the first thing that appeals to you, not their personality, which only strikes you later.

So, your definition of identity in Exactitudes is purely based on appearance?

Yes, and you can’t deny that behind those appearances there are ditto lives. But it would be presumptuous to make any judgments, because it’s only a photography project. I leave that up to others.

From looking at Exactitudes you’d assume that a certain dress code is a form of expression. But can it also hide something, operate as a veil? What does it say about a person if they’re not part of a tribe, or if they dress in a nondescript way?

Of course, not everyone wishes to stand out.

The ones that grab the attention are very recognizable but, because of that, often very dull too. The ones that are inconspicuous often make more interesting choices, which aren’t apparent to everyone. That’s what makes working on these series so compelling. Look, lining up twelve Mohawk haircuts is not that hard. More subtle characteristics of style are fabrics, and the places where people shop. Much of fashion has to do with accessibility. We made a series in a shopping mall in a suburb, where a lot of people wore clothing which they had bought in the same supermarket where they shopped for groceries. It had all to do with what was on offer, and this affected how they dressed. What’s interesting now is that you can buy everything online. It’s fascinating that you can go to a far-off province and spot a girl wearing Isabel Marant, something she could have only bought online. That’s the democratic side of today’s fashion.

In fashion it’s typical for the in-crowd to wear non-descript black outfits. What would your explanation for that be?

Black focuses the attention on the silhouette, and if there’s one thing that’s fashion-dependent, it’s the silhouette. The same is true for crucial lengths.

How did your most recent series in the Tate London go, when you looked for people with tattoo sleeves?

Well, surprisingly, London didn’t turn out to be the best place for this, so we completed that series in Rotterdam. Our point with the series was that we had already shot tattoos multiple times, and we noticed that tattoos are being used in more and more ground-breaking ways. The fact that you can now ink your face, your neck and your hands – former no-go areas – is striking. And, specially, the fact that the larger public now accepts it. It’s no longer the case that you can’t hold a certain job, for example, if you have a tattoo on your hand. The series also tied in with the exhibition “Fetishism in Fashion” of which we were part of in Arnhem. It has a fetishistic quality to it, to scrawl your neck with ink, and your head, and your hands.

I think it’s interesting that you don’t only document youth culture. In what way are the more mature subjects different from the teenagers? Do they have different motives?

After a certain age, people tend to stop experimenting. They’ve become who they are. This identity can have all kinds of cultural meanings to them, for example, who they are when they’re at work, or whether or not they live in central Milan, or in the suburbs. But the same system applies to them as to the youngsters. It revolves around assimilating – whether consciously or not – to the group to which they want to belong. In conversations with them this becomes clear, as they’ll tell you “I’m this type of lady and this is how I want people to think of me”.

What have you been working on recently? We’ve recently made a series about the Dutch-Indonesian population, who have a specific heritage. They were on our to-do list for a while. Sometimes, with slightly older groups, we can simply be too late, because that type of person



05 Combat Girls, Rotterdam 1996