

CHAPTER TWO
EXACTITUDES
BY ARI VERSLUIS AND
ELLIE UYTENBROEK

EDITED BY
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CAN YOU SEE THE REAL ME, CAN YOU?

A conversation about the making of that
wonderful project about people called
Exactitudes

“Subculture” and “family” are words we often use to describe groups of people who share traditions and stories, thus forming and defining the identities of their members. The difference between the two being that family usually means blood bonds, which means you have to spend at least one of the designated family holidays together, unless one wishes to be considered an asshole. Subcultures, on the other hand, don’t necessarily require either one of the aforementioned things (blood bonds or ancestral guilt pangs). But let’s focus on what family and subculture have in common: the definition of identity. Philosophy tells us that identity is what unites two things into one. Or we could say it is the binary relationship between a thing and itself. So, as long as you’re not bipolar, you generally identify with yourself because you are the same person as yourself. But what happens if, on an aesthetic level, you and yourself boast a mohawk and a studded

jacket? Or if you wear a brown mink fur coat, have short blondish hair and are a middle-aged woman? Or if you wear a plaid shirt and, by sheer coincidence, also have a beard?

What happens is this: a messy debate full of ideals, stereotypes, standards, fashion, profiling, posers, haters, marketing and mass media but, above all, sociology. And it is in the land of these dangerous concepts (which make many people very angry) that Dutch photographer Ari Versluis and profiler Ellie Uyttenbroek ventured to create a brick of a book called *Exactitudes*. *Exactitudes* is a project started in 1994 which, at the moment, includes one hundred and thirty nine photo series depicting what Ari and Ellie call “social teams”: people with dreadlocks, punks, gabbers, flygirls, but also gentlemen wearing blue double-breasted coats and mustard-colored trousers, Chinese children in cute handmade sweaters, and MILFs wearing layers of gray jersey coupled with oversized suede bags. In short, people who share a certain dress code and an exact attitude (ta da, an “exactitude”). Stylistic designations that, quoting Ari and Ellie, represent “an attempt to distinguish oneself from others by assuming a group identity”.

There's a hint of contradiction between distinguishing oneself and conforming, but Ari and Ellie assure us that it's pretty apparent. Apparent because, from a logical point of view, you are always yourself, but from a stylistic point of view, well, it becomes more complicated, because fashion is a language and, just like in literature, it's not like everybody is destined to win a Pulitzer prize. The virtue of this photographic endeavor is that it pushes the envelope of the concept of style, going beyond well-known dress codes and in our face – and throwing in our face more, subtle realities, juxtapositions in which one perhaps risks recognizing oneself (true story, I'm a total “Veggie”). What could happen is that you find out you belong to a “team” whose existence was previously unknown to you. Anyway, in order to clarify my ideas, I called Ari and asked him a bunch of questions and he replied patiently and thoughtfully.

What are the criteria you use when deciding whether to shoot or not to shoot a certain group?

Above all, we try to find group identities through their repetitions in society. The first thing we take into consideration is, without a doubt, the style and the look of the people we're selecting. Next, we ask ourselves if that look is simply trendy or if it has a meaning that transcends its form, thus making it a real identity, a tradition, a manifestation of change in society. We always keep in mind the concept of "teams", seeing society as a cross-section that can be divided into "social teams". The last series we shot was commissioned by Lavazza and we spent a few weeks in Milan working on the concept of "the art of drinking coffee". Therefore, we drank a bunch of coffee everywhere, from the stadium to luxurious locations, and we tried to find a common denominator for Milan's coffee drinkers.

The "Decaffeinated Woman" series is genius.

Oh yes, *las sciuaras!*

Exactly, my mother is kind of a *sciura!*

Awesome! You know, it wasn't easy to convince them to participate. They're always super busy. It took us four weeks to bring those characters into the studio and do the photo shoot. And sometimes it's not even an issue of how high a group is on the social ladder. The difficulty in involving people is an across-the-board issue, we always have to invent something to approach and attract our subjects.

Aside from "the *sciure*", in the last

twenty years, have there been other groups that were difficult to shoot?

Yes, usually the Muslim groups are pretty difficult to get involved. Since Rotterdam is our base, this is a situation that we deal with fairly often because in the past thirty years the city has become particularly multi-cultural. Ellie and I are extremely interested in the Muslim groups and, in particular, in the new generations, because we think they represent an important index of change in society, that they are religious and modern at the same time, but, above all, they have an incredible influence on the fashion world, especially in terms of streetwear.

Do you think we all belong to an "exactitude", or are there people who don't belong to any category?

Ellie and I retain that about twenty percent of society identifies itself with a specific look or culture. These people are fairly straightforward in how they dress and they are the ones we're interested in for our project. This "bluntness" of dress shouldn't be confused with "eccentricity" or "awareness". Many people who are part of an "exactitude" aren't aware of the fact and/or dress in a very simple way. Sometimes not being special makes you special! Coming back to your question, apart from that twenty percent, the rest of society is a mix of styles and different elements. So don't worry, we're not looking to give everybody a label!

Do you think that working on this project has influenced Ellie's as well as your own style?

Certainly, we're extremely conscious

of how we present ourselves. For example, if we're going to shoot the hip hop scene of the banlieu in Paris, we dress hip hop. And if we go to the antique fair to take pictures of rich women, we dress accordingly. From that point of view we're chameleons. Obviously we're faithful to our style and the things we believe in, but we also have to know how to adapt ourselves to various situations, because you only have one chance to make a good first impression. And this counts especially when you work on the street and have very little time to interact with someone.

Today, for example, I put on a button up shirt to interview you, in the hopes of seeming more serious than I actually am.

Yes! [laughs] You're very preppy.

Thanks. Personally, I don't think I understand everything about fashion. I like your project for that reason: it's a way to make sense of what seems to be chaos, but that's only a surface impression.

Yes, that's true. Many people feel the same thing as you. I think that's the reason why the fifth edition of the book is already sold out and we're already working on the sixth. This time in history is extremely interesting because there's a sort of globalization of identity. It's mind-boggling. Of course there's also the "local" counter-current, but I think that, for the most part, society is pretty globalized.

And how do you feel about that?

Well, you can't avoid globalization, but it will always have a local flavor to

it. At the moment, it seems to me that it's much more difficult to construct your own individual identity, especially in the case of younger generations. And that's because you can buy anything online and hipster culture transforms everything into irony.

It's interesting that you mention this because a couple of months ago came out a *New York Times* article about how hipsters are the most superficial subculture in recent history. The debate fascinates me because, on the one hand, I can't deny being part of the group, but, on the other hand, I find that this irony has reached a level where you can virtually avoid taking a stand on any issue.

I understand. I think hipsters were the perfect response to their historic moment. With the advent of the Internet, young people have been constantly bombarded with information and the only way not to succumb was to take it all with a grain of salt, with irony. Now, however, this approach has reached its limit because the historic moment is different. There's a terrible economic crisis and an environmental crisis that's even worse and the new generations have to deal with all of this. Irony was the perfect response twenty years ago, but it doesn't work anymore. The post-hipsters will have a very hard task ahead of them, I'm afraid.

I agree. I read in various interviews that *Exactitudes* doesn't have a specific goal or message. Nevertheless, I imagine that in the past twenty years you and Ellie have reached some conclusions or – better

yet – observations on society.

Undoubtedly. The conclusion after twenty years of research, and not only for *Exactitudes*, but for other photo projects as well, is that people don't change much. Punk twenty years ago is, in its own way, still punk, just twenty years older. And, in light of our experience, this is the most evident conclusion. If you think about it, it also makes sense from a socio-political point of view. Change, the passage from one social group to another, is just an illusion, I think. Or at the very least, it's a rare occurrence. From this point of view, I think I'm becoming more and more of a socialist! *[laughs]* Another personal observation is that Ellie and I have become quite humble in reflecting on society: there's so many of us on this planet that we start asking ourselves "What does 'me' mean?", "What does 'you' mean?". All in all, very fundamental questions.

It's the conceptual tension that exists in thinking about individuality within a group context.

Yes, the point is that throughout the history of photography, the portrait implies a very strong sense of individuality and unity. What we confirmed through our series is that we don't necessarily believe in absolute individuality in photographic terms. And I think that this is one of the reasons why in the beginning the world of photography didn't take us very seriously. Typical comments, for a long time, were, "Oh, but this is a fashion project," or, "This is a project that always uses the same conceptual trick," or, "These aren't real portraits". Stuff

like that. Now things have changed and *Exactitudes* found its own dimension in the world of photography. Coming back to the discourse on individuality – you can see it in our portraits as well, but the point is that the claim of absolute individuality is an illusion, it's bullshit. We're more and more like each other and we're all pretty conscious of the fact that we're part of something bigger than ourselves, even if that something doesn't always have a clear definition.

What you're saying is that human beings, even if they don't like to admit it or don't understand it, have a social instinct that makes them conform, at least aesthetically, to certain canons. Social animals?

Yes, absolutely. We're social animals. C'est ça. And, being a social animal, you have to adapt yourself to situations in order to survive. Obviously, the democratization of the fashion world has allowed us to play around a lot more with our aesthetic identity. It has allowed us to create interesting variations, but we always remain social animals and, at the end of the day, always conform to certain canons. Even if it's an unconscious process.

Coming back to the world of photography, looking at your work brings back images of *Twentieth Century Portraits* by August Sander.

Of course. His work influenced me a lot – ever since I was in school, studying. The crucial difference being that Sander portrayed a single representative of a certain social category, while our photos are series

of people who belong to a sort of “team”. What we have in common is the research in every single subject of all the characteristics and details that define a certain category.

And what can you tell me about the poses of the subjects? I find they are incredibly representative of their “exactitude”.

When Ellie and I had just started shooting we didn’t really ask people anything in particular: we would tape a cross on the floor of the studio and would tell people to stand there. More often than not our subjects would naturally assume a pose that perfectly represents who they are. The bouncers would cross their arms, the grandmothers took on that fearful expression, the stylish girls would keep their bag at their wrist, the hip hop guys held their chin up. From a certain point of view it’s totally logical. When Ellie and I identify the most expressive pose pertaining to each category, we try to repeat it for the entire series. Sometimes we have to show a polaroid to some of the subjects, but even then, as soon as they see it, they know how to copy it – perfectly and immediately. I find this extremely interesting. The pose, aside from expressing the essence of the category, is also a formal aesthetic aspect that’s very important in our line of work. Sometimes we need a while to understand this essence, you have to take lots of photos until the subjects, on their own, come to terms with themselves and then it’s like voila, “It’s me, here I am. No smiles, no jokes, this is what I am.” From a certain point of view, the subjects become their own photographers.

Nobody ever complained about being part of the series.

Do you think the main reason is that people are happy to belong to a group?

Well, not everyone knows they’re part of a group. When I show them a complete series of photos, sometimes people are totally surprised.

In a positive way?

I wouldn’t say it’s that simple. Honestly, some people are completely ignorant of the fact that their identity pertains to a group. I’m not talking about subcultures like punk or hip hop, but rather “non-intellectual” groups. They don’t have the slightest idea that there are many people like them in the world. When I show them the photos, they’re like, “Wow, you found a bunch of people who look like me!”. And we could have found many more, thousands of others. People who are part of a subculture, on the other hand, are usually more conscious of what they do, they know the vocabulary of their language. The point is that fashion is a language: poetic, full of protest or whatever else.

Would you say that young people are more inclined to admit they’re part of something, thus sacrificing a little bit of their individuality in favor of a sense of belonging?

It’s more complicated than that. It depends. Even subcultures with a very strong, prescribed aesthetic, people have the desire to celebrate individuality. When you talk to these people, they think they’re unique. It’s kind of a problematic concept, because sometimes being anti-conventional

makes you very conventional. It's a dilemma.

Exactly, I think you used the perfect term. There isn't really a resolution to the conflict between the natural desire to be unique and the instinctive pull of wanting to be part of something, of not feeling alone in your uniqueness.

Yes, it's astounding. That's what to this day surprises me. Sometimes, the moment when we show people the series is a moment of revelation. You see them thinking things like "Maybe I should change..." or "Should I change?". For example, four guys from the series "Dreads" shaved their heads right after posing for *Exactitudes*.

Wow. It's like they just saw themselves in the mirror for the first time. A pretty ruthless mirror.

Exactly. And often people are not very happy to see the reflection in that mirror. It makes them uneasy.

That's very interesting. I would like to ask you a question about the geography of the project. I see that you still shoot a lot in Rotterdam, your home base. What kind of relationship do you have with your city?

It's a pretty particular city, both by Dutch as well as North European standards. As you probably know, it was one of the biggest ports in the world and, as a consequence, had an extremely multi-cultural history, especially in the last thirty years. This is probably the reason why it became the "place to be" in terms of street fashion. Amsterdam was hippie, while Rotterdam was punk, new wave, electro, hardcore, techno, gabber and

to this day we find that it's one of the most stimulating cities in Northern Europe. It's important to travel and visit different countries, but it's also fundamental to come back to the same places in order to see what changed in your absence. For example, in Rotterdam the "Gabberbitches" of the early Nineties became the "Flygirls" of the early two thousands and these two looks are complete opposites. The gabbers were racist and xenophobic, but ten years later these same girls were totally obsessed with hip hop culture, the US and everything that comes with that.

So having a sense of geographic continuity has allowed you to document the evolution or the stagnation of a certain culture. That's a totally scientific approach.

It is. Visiting the same cities and maintaining contacts with our subjects allows us to have some authority in the matter, a sort of scientific validity. We've reached a level where we can literally scan the street in a minute. We have trained eyes.

I believe you! If you were to shoot a series about your personal style, how would you entitle it?

I have no idea. As I told you before, I adapt myself to the situations I find myself in.

So your category would be an "un-exactitude"?

Yes, even if, clearly, I have certain preferences which haven't changed much since I was a teenager in London. I still have my Doc Martens, black jeans and leather jacket. Of

course, I can also get dressed up, but my style is very influenced by the working class dress, simple things that stand the test of time.

I don't think I've changed much either, but I doubt that I dress the same way as when I was a teenager, with the difference being that at the time I believed in the messages my style carried whereas now it has more to do with nostalgia.

Nostalgia is a very important element in fashion, especially in this moment in history. Sometimes it seems to like people are looking more to the past than the future. Think about all the retro stuff you see around or a tv series like *Mad Men* and the impact it has had on our culture. There isn't much futurism around these days. I think Asia is much more into it, almost radically so, as evidenced by cities like Hong Kong and Shanghai. From a certain point of view, retro is a lie. And it's totally fine to live a lie, it's comfortable, but it remains a lie.

And what do you think about the impact the Internet had had on fashion?

People have started to see themselves as silhouettes. We've gone from giving value to what's being worn to giving value to how you wear it, to the point of arriving at the shape, the form of it, the silhouette a person creates using clothing. A silhouette is a 2D image by definition.

So you're suggesting that today people dress up to end up on some blog on the Internet, which is 2D?

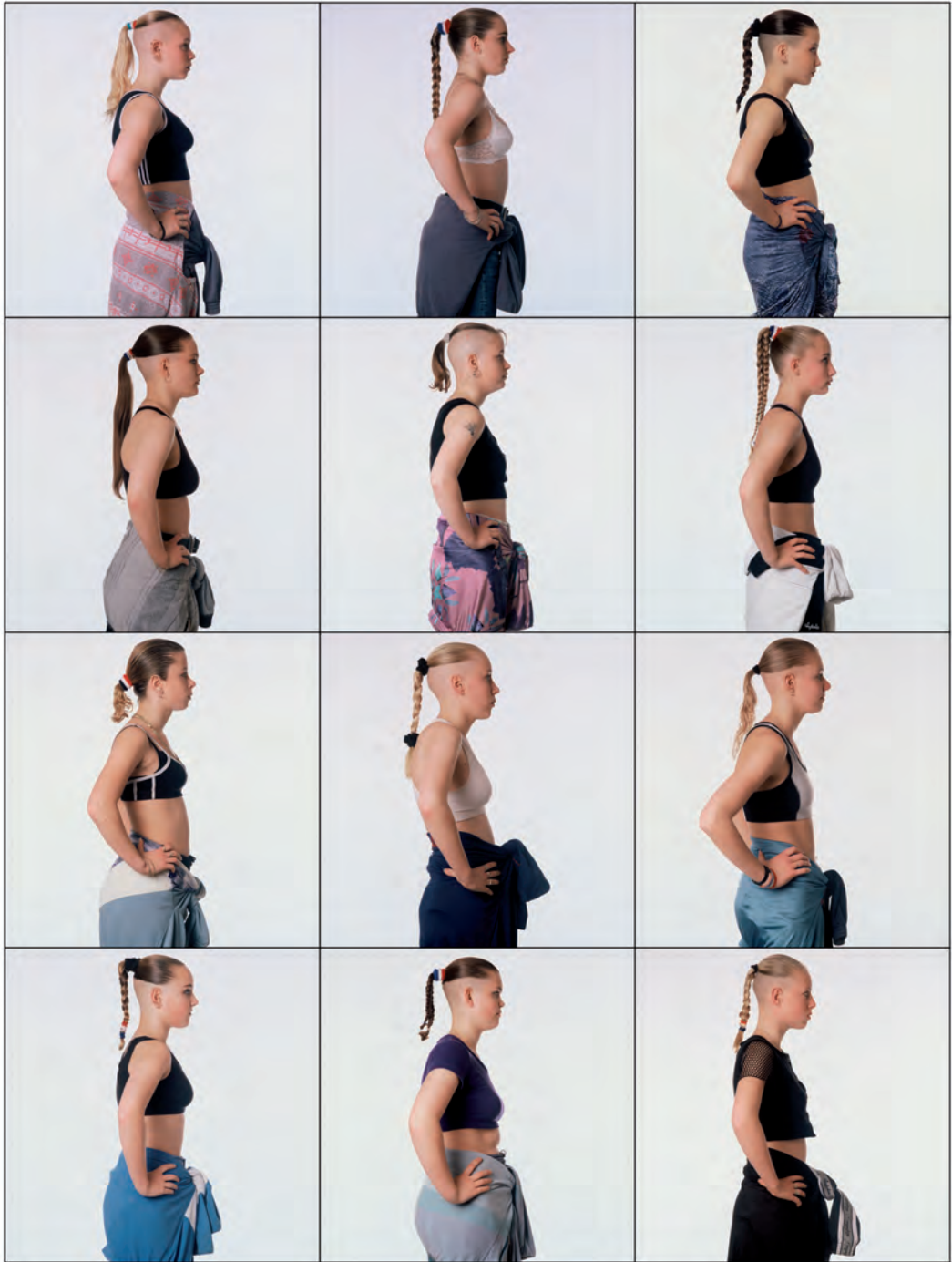
Exactly. I think this is

extraordinary. I was just reading about Fashion Week in New York and how it's becoming more and more obvious that people dress up to have their picture taken.

Of course. What strikes me is how everyone has become extremely aware of photographic techniques: at this point everyone knows how to pose to come out well in a photo.

Yes, and failing is not an option. Nobody wants to look bad.

The fifth (and expanded) edition of *Exactitudes* is out now. Ari Verslius & Ellie Uyttenbroek are represented by Flatland Gallery (Amsterdam/Paris), and you can check tons of their photo series at www.exactitudes.com



Gabberbitches - Rotterdam 1996



Ari Versluis & Ellie Uyttenbroek / *Exacititudes*

Ari Versluis & Ellie Uyttenbroek / *Exacititudes*

Moroccies - Rotterdam 1997



Speedfreaks - Rotterdam 2002



Flowerpower - Rotterdam 2007



Bonkerboys - London 2008



Ari Versluis & Ellie Uyttenbroek / *Exacititudes*

Ari Versluis & Ellie Uyttenbroek / *Exacititudes*

Cocktails & Dreams - Rotterdam 2008



Gitanes - Paris 2008



The Old Boys Network - Limburg 2009



Donna Decaffeinata - Milan 2011



Veggies - Zürich 2012

APPENDIX: PHOTO BOOKS

“REBEL YOUTH”

Photographs by Karlheinz Weinberger,
Rizzoli USA, 2011, Foreword
by John Waters

This the book that surprisingly and very recently put Switzerland on the cool map. Self-taught photographer Karlheinz Weinberger spent almost ten years of his life, between the late 50s and the 60s, documenting Swiss working class teenagers and their look,

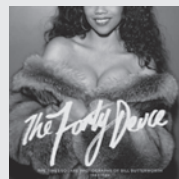


fusing American pop-cultural imagery – biker jackets, denim jeans, bouffant hairdos, James Dean insouciance – with their own idiosyncratic sensibilities and provocative handmade designs. Cherry on top: the foreword by the genius, hilarious John Waters.

“THE FORTY DEUCE
THE TIMES SQUARE”
PHOTOGRAPHS OF BILL
BUTTERWORTH, 1983-1984
Photographs by Bill Butterworth
Powerhouse Books, 2012

A collection of images from a lost time when Times Square wasn’t ruled by Mickey Mouse but by the seedy, the perverse and the thrill-seekers. Bill Butterworth spent his entire life

wandering through peep shows, sex shops, arcades and low-budget theatres



where he could snap photos of his favorite subjects: the first b-boys, the dressed to impress, the pimps, the spandex prostitutes and many others. Fun fact: if you have a quick eye and you are a history nerd of the NY underground scene, you might be able to spot a legendary face.

“SKINHEADS”

Photographs by Nick Knight
Omnibus Press, 1982

The very first book by world class photographer Nick Knight. Knight shot these delicate black & white portraits of East End skinheads



while still in school during the early 80s. *Skinheads* does not only feature photographs, but also a piece by Dick

Hedbigge on the sociology of youth cults, a fashion notebook by Jim Ferguson, a discography of classic skinhead tunes (strictly from '68 to '71), and much more, including some precious pictures of Last Resort – basically, the very first skinhead (but also punk & rockabilly) shopping heaven.

**“AMSTERDAM!
OUDE FOTO'S 1947-1970”**

Photographs by Ed van der Elsen
Van Holkema & Warendorf, 1988

Unfortunately not as recognized internationally as in his homeland, Dutch photographer and filmmaker Ed van der Elsen is one of the pioneers of modern vernacular photography, presaging the work of people like Larry Clark, Nan Goldin and Wolfgang Tillmans. Ed started photographing at a very early age and was particularly influenced by the American



sensationalist photographer Weegee, of whom he kept the gritty black and white aesthetic, while applying it to more personal and eccentric subjects. *Amsterdam!* is a photographic diary of a city and its inhabitants which spans from the naive and atmospheric Fifties to the riotous Sixties.

“EAST 100TH STREET”

Photographs by Bruce Davidson
St. Ann's Press, 2003 (originally published in 1970)

East 100th Street is a classic and controversial document of the New York inner-city ghetto life: Davidson, the renowned Magnum photographer, documented one single block in East Harlem, day after day, from 1966 to 1968. With this book he created an incredibly powerful statement of the



dignity and the humanity that is in all people, and at the same time contributed in a fundamental way to the wake of consciousness on the extreme conditions of the New York City ghettos.

**“RADIO SILENCE /
A SELECTED VISUAL HISTORY OF
AMERICAN HARDCORE MUSIC”**

by Nathan Nedorostek and Anthony Pappalardo, MTV Press, 2008

Hardcore music emerged just after the first wave of punk rock in the late 1970s. The dividing line between punk and hardcore music was in the delivery: less guise, less melody, and more aggression. *Radio Silence* documents the ignored space between the Ramones and Nirvana through the words and images of the pre-Internet era where this community built on do-it-yourself ethics

thrived. The book authors catalogued private collections of unseen images,



personal letters, original artwork, and various ephemera from the hardcore scene circa 1978-1993.

“SAN FRANCISCO BERLIN”
Photographs by Stefan Ruiz
Chris Boot, 2011

Stefan Ruiz started his career at the San Quentin prison as an art teacher, moved to photography, was a Creative Director at *Colors* and eventually one of the most respected image-makers of the past twenty years. This book depicts large format portraits of fetishist gay men dressed for events in Frisco and



Berlin, two communities that played a fundamental role in shaping a more accepting society in terms of sexual expression.

San Francisco Berlin shows Stefan's ability in combing classical art with photography, as well as it represents

a documentation of the wonderful mutations that sometimes happen in fashion, when people takes a certain dress code (like the biker) and reinvent it into something else (like the leather daddy).

“PEOPLE OF THE 20TH CENTURY”
Photographs by August Sander
Harry N. Adams, 2002 (originally published in 1929 as a smaller book titled *Face of Our Time*)

Sander was a German photographer who lived between 1876 and 1964. Beside running a profitable activity as a studio photographer, around 1911, he embarked on a project to document “the German people of the time” and started building one of the biggest archives in the history of photography devoted to a single subject: 40,000 images – that survived the Nazi censorship in the nick of time. Sander's



goal was to cross-sect German society by categorizing it in certain social types, but the most fascinating thing about this anthropological investigation is that – as the writer Alfred Doblin pointed out – those who know how to look will not only learn about others, but also about themselves.