

$$\frac{((\text{HAIR STYLE} + \text{PIERCINGS}) \times \text{LANGUAGE} - \text{CLOTHING})^2}{\text{TATTOOS} + \text{HAIR COLOUR} \times (\text{MUSIC} + \text{NEIGHBOURHOOD})^3 - X} = \text{INDIVIDUALITY}$$

010:07

Caught in the act

We may not be at all as one-of-a-kind as we believe ourselves to be. What seems, at first glance, to be one of those somewhat dreary bits of traditional wisdom, is, in essence, simply an assumption: For at some point it becomes clear that whenever you show your true colours, you've already taken your place in the queue – among a few people, or in front of them, or behind them. Someone is always already there. You actually can't do it any other way than always belonging somewhere or to something. In the end, it's only the tales that you live that linger; postures, an ensemble of poses and gestures that define your individuality. And since these tales are part of a general globalisation, they increasingly take on specific attributes of their protagonists – in Beijing, Rotterdam or Cape Town. There are more and more major global stories, and fewer and fewer smaller, more local ones. Ari Versluis and Ellie Uyttenbroek from the Netherlands have been taking a very close look at these gestures and codes – with the accent on dress codes: those from both the big stories, and from the smaller ones. They seek them out, uncover and categorise them. And are thereby revealing that this elusive thing called individuality isn't all that straightforward. And by so doing, they are rescuing it. Because in the end, we actually all resemble each other in our quest to be different.

pending: Are the people you photograph really that way, or do they do something different for your photos?

Ari Versluis: We don't intervene with the person being photographed. The only thing we do is make an appointment with them to take their portrait in the same clothes that we saw him or her wearing on the street. We strive for that intimate moment with the person being portrayed, which also means that the person is fully aware that his or her picture is being taken.

You expose resemblances and hidden codes. How do you select the individuals?

The past few years we actually worked a lot in different locations and studios. A studio is set up at a particular location, such as recently in the department store Selfridges in London or the Gare du Nord in Paris. We stay at that location for a few weeks and initially only analyse what we see. Then we invite people to come into the studio to have their picture taken. Looking, analysing, taking Polaroids: that's the way the series grows. Some aren't finished, others turn into very striking photos. When we work in Rotterdam, our hometown, we always spot people and take down their phone numbers for a future appointment.

And your own position? Do you take a political stance on anything?
We never judge people.

The images come alive through their uniformity. Is individuality actually only a myth?

No. But it is very hard to be an individual, especially when it comes to clothing. However, when you see clothes as language some have very little to say, while others tell a very interesting story. Individuality comes with a good sense of your identity. Nowadays, people have to more and more construct their identity. It's not something that you get from your parents, for instance. And globalisation doesn't make it any easier.



Photographer **ARI VERSLIUS** and stylist **ELLIE UYTENBROEK** have been working together since October 1994. They call their series *Exactitudes*: from “exact” and “attitudes”. More at www.exactitudes.com

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