

# exactitudes

A PHOTO SERIES THAT CHALLENGES THE NOTION  
THAT WE ARE ALL INDIVIDUALS.

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IT READS LIKE IRVINE WELSH WITH TOURETTE'S: GABBERS, COMBAT GIRLS, CASUAL QUEERS, BONITAS, GAME BOYS, ALLAHS GIRLS, TATTOO BABES, BOUBOU LOGO, HOLLY HOBBIES, GHETTO FABS, FLUFFIES, TECTONIKS, SISTERS OF LOVE, BONKER BOYS, CASSETTES GANG, POCKET MONSTERS, YUPSTER GIRLS, GOOLIES, SPEED FREAKS, BUNDA BOYS, ROFFAS, CHILLERS, MASALAS...

Who knew there were so many street culture tribes these days? Ari Versluis and Ellie Uyttenbroek, that's who. For the past 18 years the Rotterdam-based duo have been creating their anthropological photo series *Exactitudes*. The name is shorthand for 'exact attitudes', or particular social types.

In 1994, Ari (photographer) and Ellie (stylist) were working on a commercial shoot about youth culture when they began noticing various recurring styles. "There were many, many groups looking the same and we shot a series of portraits. After that it just started," says Ari.

Shot against plain white backgrounds on medium-format film, the images have a consistency to them, "so you only look at apparel and remove the context". It's almost how you'd imagine an alien categorising the human race. The images are arranged in a grid of 12, four-by-three across. The format never differs. Each series of 12 photos takes about a month to shoot and is given a title, along with the year, city and a short description. All subjects are photographed exactly as they are dressed on the street.

The *Exactitudes* series has been exhibited widely throughout Europe, Japan and the Americas and has sold out four editions in book form. The website is also a strangely addictive, voyeuristic medium, where you can peer at posing strangers defined by their fashion choices, race and body types.

"Making the series is addictive too," Ari says. "When you are a collector you like to have more and more and more." But is there a message? A statement they are trying to make? "No, that would be quite dangerous," Ari insists. Still, it's hard not to wonder how their subjects feel about being categorised purely on their dress as 'bimbos' or 'gabber bitches' – the latter are defined as, "speed sluts, white trash".

"The first question we'd ask the bimbos was, 'Are you a bimbo?' Sometimes they reacted with a slap in the face and sometimes they'd say, 'Of course I'm a bimbo,'" Ari says.

When they have identified a particular group, Ari and Ellie set up in a public place and carefully select their subjects. "Ninety-nine per cent say yes, but they are often a little shocked when we find similar-looking people. Ari says, "You always have to be up front. You always have to be very honest. If you want to shoot someone naked your first question should be, 'Can I shoot you naked?' If you want a series of angry negroes you have to ask, 'Are you an angry negro?'"

Surprisingly, their subjects are almost universally pleased with the results. "Nobody complains, they're really proud," Ari says. "You show them the results. You try to involve them in the project. We keep them posted continually on everything

that's happened with the project. I think that's the responsibility as a photographer. They give something to you, you should give something back."

The heterogeneous street culture of Rotterdam remains a key inspiration, but their latest edition takes them through Milan, Beijing, Rio de Janeiro, Casablanca, Cabo Verde, New York, Bordeaux, London and Paris.

Ari describes himself as a chameleon. If he is shooting skinheads he will shave his head to blend in. His experience has also convinced him that stereotypes are created for a reason. "Some of those clichés are really true," he insists. "If you think about a group in a certain way it mostly is that way. These social groups are also becoming more global with the international flow of information and media."

Selecting each group still comes down to the time-honoured art of people watching. "You need to really watch and look at every detail of the person and every detail of the body," says Ari. "The body is also part of the confection." Mercifully, Ari concedes most of us remain unique, unclassifiable by such neat definitions. "I always say, only 20 per cent can be put into an *Exactitude*." But, that doesn't mean the rest of us are safe. Ari has plans to pursue a series on "unique people next", he says, with an evil genius chuckle. This seems like the ultimate irony – true individuals lumped together because they have "uniqueness" in common. It's hard to tell if he's joking or not.

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