



Double Extension Beauty Tubes
Rico Scagliola & Michael Meier

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foam



Rico Scagliola (1985, Switzerland) and Michael Meier (1982, Switzerland) have taken pictures and have filmed teenagers for more than two years, creating an (extensive) archive of photographs and videos of today's Facebook generation.

Images from this archive have been combined into an installation called *Double Extension Beauty Tubes*. More than a thousand pictures are being presented in a dark space on ten iPads. The order of the images is intuitive and in a stream of consciousness mode. Using soft-focus and theatrical lighting, the photographs are balanced between eighties aesthetics and glam kitsch. Metal heads, vampires, platinum blonds in high fashion outfits pose self-consciously in front of Rico & Michael's camera.

Rico & Michael live and work in Zürich. They studied photography at the Zürcher Hochschule der Künste from 2006 to 2010 and began collaborating as a duo in 2008. Since then Rico & Michael have worked on their archive, commercial commissions and projects for magazines. In 2011 Patrick Frey Editions published their 480 pages book *Neue Menschen*. This summer *Double Extension Beauty Tube* will also be on show in Museum Winterthur in Switzerland.

How dare we be so beautiful?!

An androgynous character dressed in white shoes, jeans, and a nearly half-open black shirt sits relaxed and slightly leaning forward by a tiny pond in a garden, posing for a photograph. (S)he is looking downwards at his/her mirror image, reflected from the surface of the water. This image, in its general composition not quite unlike Caravaggio's painting depicting an actively forward-leaning Narcissus, offers some clues about a giant photographic enterprise which resulted in a multimedia installation named *Double Extension Beauty Tubes*, combining still and moving images with a soundtrack, and a hefty paper volume called *Neue Menschen* (New People). Collaborating with teenagers over the course of almost three years from 2008 until early 2011, Swiss photographer duo Rico Scagliola (1985) and Michael Meier (1982) had accumulated a vast archive of about 8000 photographs, showing a cross-section of some of the more extravagant stylish expressions of teens' subcultures of the day. According to Rico & Michael (henceforth colloquially calling them, like they do themselves via their website) in an introductory video they produced



for the book, it shall be a testimony to the love affair of today's teenagers' real and virtual lives. Their cultural lives are very much coloured by pop and underground music, film, fashion and the internet. Glimpses of the backgrounds and stages of their daily lives can be seen in some of the photographs; their suburban middle-class homes, IKEA-style rooms, (poster-ridden) bedrooms.

Feeling that somehow they had missed out on their own youth, Rico & Michael started making friends with teenagers and photographed them the way they would like to see themselves and want to be seen. Through film and photography, clearly. Starting to photograph 'Emos' who were hanging out at and around the main railway station of Zurich every night, other youngsters belonging to neighbouring subcultures (Goths, Punks, Indies, Metalheads etc.) were soon to follow. The different groups were blending easily together, and some people would change styles as if changing clothes. Youth subcultures are not as clearly distinct anymore like they were in pre-internet times.

Rico & Michael sensed that the newest generation of teenagers was being dismissed as not having a proper voice of their own. But do people in the midst of the transformation from children into adults ever have a voice of their own? Adolescence is one of the most formative stages in the lives of human beings for the discovery and development of a voice of one's own. However, in the technologically advanced world, today's young generations (often called 'digital natives') are being born into fast paced digital times, in which developing a vision on the creation, dissemination and control of images of one's own is equally important to – if not more important than – the formation of a unique and opinionated voice on real life and public events. Many of the adolescents



who were portrayed by Rico & Michael are astoundingly mature in their skills of posing for cameras. In their virtual universes they are masters of masquerade and disguise. They have an almost inborn talent for staging and for compository framing. The boundaries demarcating what is real and what is fictitious are more fluid than ever before. This perhaps being one of the reasons for misunderstandings about and disavowal of the *new people* by older generations (the 'analog natives'). Today's children and teenagers demand to be seen rather than to be heard. Visual style is everything.

Whereas the mythological Narcissus was not aware that he was gazing at his own mirrored portrait, unknowingly that the face he was falling in love with wasn't real, today's image-saturated youth is very well aware about the carefully constructed artificiality of their reflected myriad selves. The iGeneration falls in love (or tries to do so) with their transformed selves inspired by the appearances of fashionable pop stars (Lady Gaga to whom *Neue Menschen* is dedicated as the most important), or with their new selves collaged together from bits and pieces found within the gargantuan digital image junk heap. Unlike Narcissus, they fall in love with faces that they recognize as theirs although they have been consciously transformed into other temporary identities. For many of the teenagers who are maturing during the times of Facebook and Flickr playful metamorphosis and sharing photographs thereof becomes a proof of their existence. This encompasses a self-consciousness that is literally a form of existence – a being out of oneself.

Modern life is one of the best subjects for photography, according to photo-critic Gerry Badger, albeit a subject that quickly fades into history. Rather than playing the snake biting its tail (photography reacting on other art or photography), photographers make more interesting work when they turn their lenses outward. And what subject could be more intriguing and ambiguous than the teenagers of the image-saturated online age. Photographing teenagers of such a high visual aptitude means both an inward and an outward turning of the lens. A volatile though ever recurring subject, one lifetime isn't enough to keep up with the ever changing fashions of teenage subcultures. As quickly as they may fade into history, it fades into nothing if there's no history to be made through imaginative documentation and multiple-platform presentation. A sensitive, imaginative, and collaborative documentary approach is one of the strengths of Rico & Michael's portrayal of the visually keen teenagers. The photographers wanted to blur any clear distinction between their roles as authors and their subject's roles as models. The teenagers were as much involved in the image-making process as the photographers, and when they had not yet conceived of how exactly they wanted to be photographed, Rico & Michael would stage and picture them in a way they deemed fitting to their respective self-perceptions. The series is not a documentary about teenage subcultures per se. Most importantly it is about today's teenagers' visual awareness, style as essence of their self-consciousness, and their aptitude for cultivating self-images. In Rico & Michael's words their project is a documentation of "the construction of (the teenagers') pictured identity." *Neue Menschen* is a photographic document of the iGeneration's inborn talent for *mise-en-scène*, for their talents for the staging of oneself as another.

The subversive, somewhat provocative undertone of the otherwise tautological title *Neue Menschen* (the youngest generation is new per definition, physically at least) suggests that teenagers nowadays are somehow radically different in

comparison to earlier generations. Is it the hypermedial online world informing them basically from birth on that accounts for this difference? Every change in technology changes the way people behave and interact with each other, and faster changes in technology tend to provoke quicker generation shifts. But in digital wonderland we are still too young to already come to serious conclusions on this matter. Another reference resonating through the title is the habit of some Anglophone New Wave bands using German band names (or even singing in German). Rico & Michael want to have their book title sound like a big and bold statement and at the same time clarifying that it deals with a contemporary subject. Its actuality may be part of history soon, the fantasized photo-selves in *Neue Menschen* will be forever young. Photographs don't age anymore and fashion styles are part of an eternal cycle of renewal.

When asked about the importance of documenting the cultures of today's teenagers, Lauren A. Wright, who in 2011 curated a large exhibition on twentieth-century youth cultures, had an admirable answer: "I think it's always important to recognise the huge influence of teenagers on our culture past and present, particularly in light of the ambivalent place they occupy. We really do both love and loathe them." Young people can teach us as much as older generations can teach them. As long as we stay open and never forget about our younger selves within our older selves. In the end, all that Rico & Michael ask from us is to love the kids they portrayed with careful attention and love themselves. If we can't embrace every teenager around for real, the least we can do is to immerse ourselves for a moment in the fantastic though often dark imagery in which teens show off their roles and their uncertain identities. A praise stronger and more concise than the following comment on a picture on one of the photographer's facebook-pages is hardly possible: *Luv it pic!*



Text: Taco Hidde Bakker, New York City

- Gerry Badger, *The Pleasures of Good Photographs*, New York 2010, p. 11.
- See: <http://www.ricoandmichael.com/work/kidz-3000> (page visited May 30, 2012).
- See: <http://teenagefilm.com/archives/youth-happenings/nothing-in-the-world-but-youth> (page visited 4 June 2012). The exhibition *Nothing in*

the World But Youth ran from 17 September until 8 January, 2012 at Turner Contemporary in Margate, United Kingdom.

All statements ascribed to Rico & Michael, and some general background info, are obtained through a personal correspondence with the artists per e-mail, June 2012.

Taco Hidde Bakker (1978) is a nomadic photo anthropologist searching for ways to coming to terms with realities in the Cyber Age. He published in *Camera Austria*, *Fw: Magazine*, *Mister Motley* and on *PhotoQ*, was a researcher for Paradox, and showed work at the Noorderlicht Photofestival in 2009.