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Karlheinz Weinberger's Jeans

The photographer's posthumous book looks closer at post-war Swiss rebellion, youth culture and the male obsession with the blue, all-American cult classic



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GALLERY / 11 IMAGES

In the 50s, Swiss photographer Karlheinz Weinberger began documenting a generation of Swiss rebels obsessed with American culture. Raw, intimate and sexy, his photographs capture the eternal spirit of youth in revolt. 'Jeans' is a new book published by the Swiss Institute in New York showcasing some of Weinberger's earliest photography: homoerotic images of men in blue jeans. Denim clad boys are shot candidly in the streets, as well as posed in the Siemens-Albis factory, the industrial warehouse in Zurich where Weinberger worked for over 30 years.

Printed beautifully in large format, the book is a facsimile of a self-designed portfolio created by Weinberger (1921-2006) in the mid-1950s. Though undeniably stylish, the images in *Jeans* are far more than a documentation of street style. Jeans were a badge of status and rebellion in post-war Switzerland; their scarcity, as well as the clothing's close association with American pop culture, identified a working class of Swiss boys and girls dissatisfied with the conservative climate of the day. 'Jeans' is the first publication that focuses on Weinberger's early work.



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talked to Gianni Jetzer, the director of the Swiss Institute and one of the editors of 'Jeans', about Weinberger's extraordinary photography, and the artist's lifelong study of a subculture.

Dazed Digital: What do you love about Weinberger's work?

Gianni Jetzer: I totally admire the freshness of his photographs half a century after they were taken. They are a genuine contribution to portrait photography in the 20th century.

DD: Rebel Youth was an obvious documentation of rebel culture. Do you think Jeans, although more subtle, has a similar spirit behind it?

Gianni Jetzer: The conceptual aspect is even stronger. The mixture of posed pictures of Weinberger's lovers with snapshots of strangers on the streets — all united by the vestimentary extravaganza of jeans — is quite unique. No photographer cared about this burgeoning culture in Europe at that time.

DD: In an interview with John Waters about Weinberger's images of the Halbstarke, Waters said, "There was this tiny, tiny group of people that looked like that, and thank god Weinberger noticed... exhibitionists need a voyeur, and he documented them like rare butterflies." Do you think that without Weinberger, the subculture documented in Jeans would be largely forgotten?

Gianni Jetzer: The Swiss chapter for sure. There is a film about the Halbstarke in Germany, but it is more made up--nowhere near as authentic as Weinberger's images.

DD: In your eyes, was Weinberger just documenting rebellion, or was there a rebellion in creating homoerotic images of his subject matter?

Gianni Jetzer: First of all he was an ambitious photographer. He wanted to deliver strong pictures. His interest in the first generation of youth culture is astonishing. Although he was from an older generation, he gained the respect of gangs through his sincere admiration of their lifestyle. The homoerotic element is an important aspect of his work, but not the only one by far.

DD: Why do you think it was that Weinberger's didn't find success in his lifetime?

Gianni Jetzer: Until recently there were very little opportunities to exhibit this kind of photography in a