



Karlheinz Weinberger,  
Rebel Youth, Rizzoli New York 2011  
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WEINBERGER – By now, the indelible photographs Karlheinz Weinberger took of blue-collar, juvenile renegades in Switzerland during the late 50s and early 60s have been ripped off too many times by designers, photographers, and stylists to qualify as a discovery. Yet the images and their subjects remain as fresh as they were a decade ago, when it all started – of course – with the publication of a book, *Karlheinz Weinberger, Photos 1954–1995*. That tome, which became a fetish object itself, has long been out of print and now sells for large sums on eBay. It holds a special place in the 032c library – not to mention that of every other serious fashion-related person or enterprise. To the wider world however, Weinberger remains largely, and unjustly, unknown. This makes the publication of a new monograph with previously unpublished work (*Rebel Youth*, Rizzoli, 2011) a welcome occasion to celebrate and reconsider the pioneering photographer’s extraordinary contribution.

With their outrageous fashion and provocative attitude, the girls and boys in Weinberger’s photographs were an irritant to proper Swiss society; some citizens were terrified by them. That didn’t keep the amateur lensman, an outsider himself, from developing a caring obsession with the young rebels, a personal identification that gives the pictures emotional heft besides fashion-source value. Nonetheless it’s the kids’ incredible get-ups and hairdos that knock the viewer out, and make these black-and-white images important

documents of how intricately coded personal style functions as counterculture. These adolescents appropriated American rock-influenced styles in such exaggerated ways that it became wholly autochthonous to the streets of Zurich. In the case of Weinberger’s female subjects, this meant extra-heavy eyeliner and mad bouffants. Not surprisingly, however, the photographer’s special attention went to the boys. Sulky Swiss types with similarly over-the-top coiffures, they made an art out of the customization of denim, substituting corseted laces, chains, and nuts and bolts for zippers ripped out of the crotch. Their saucer-sized belt buckles deserve their own gallery in a *kunsthistorische* museum: completely DIY (like the rest of these looks), they are stamped with an iconography that is as bizarrely incongruous as it is fascinating – from swastikas and skulls, to photographs of Elvis Presley. James Dean’s likeness doubles as a pendant worn around the neck, as do horseshoes and giant artillery shells. As a writer for *The New York Times* once remarked, it’s as if “members of a remote cult heard about American youth culture via short-wave radio.” That all of this happened without the interference of brands or other commercial forces, and long before the Internet enabled trends to spread between distant cultural spheres, makes the self-conscious sincerity of the youths’ efforts all the more disarming.

