

# FASHION FORWARD

ROSE DYKINS REPORTS ON DUSSELDORF'S THRIVING FASHION INDUSTRY, WHICH HAS BLOSSOMED THANKS TO THE CITY'S AVANT GARDE ART ROOTS

**SUN STREAMS THROUGH THE FRENCH DOORS** of fashion designer Marion Strehlow's airy studio. A wooden bowl of fresh, sweet-smelling strawberries sits on her work bench-slash-dining table, and a series of thin pipes – suspended from the ceiling by string – run the length of the room with her latest creations hanging from them. The collection is like a pastel rainbow, broken up by pops of khaki, navy and white. There are asymmetric-collared tops, palazzo pants and floaty blouses.

Strehlow chats excitedly about her upcoming show,

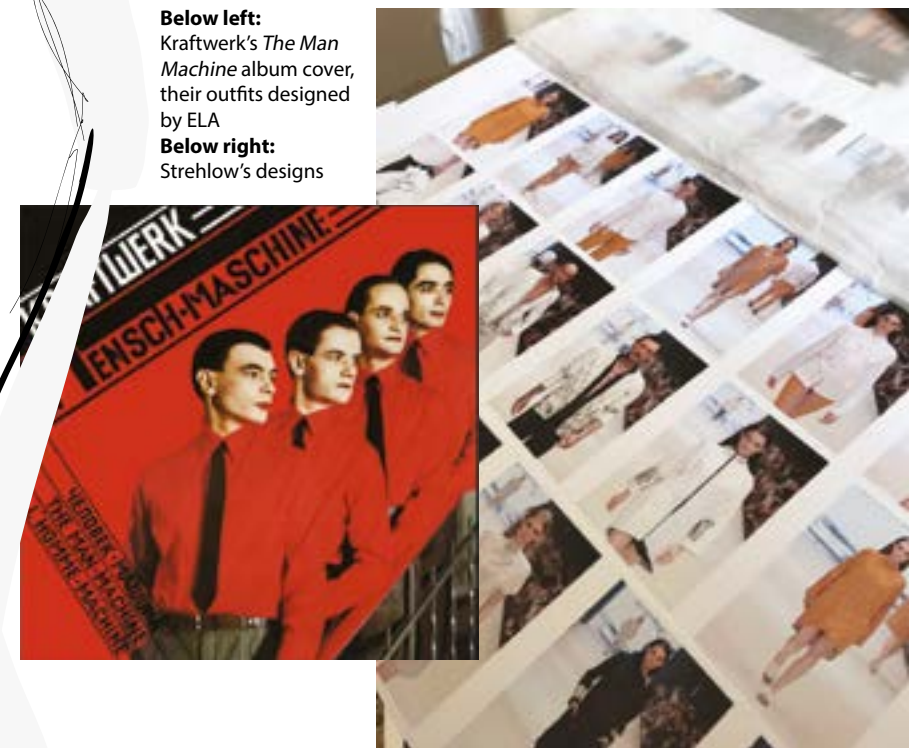
which turns its back on your typical catwalk parade. Instead, her clothes will share the stage with a dancer, who will try on whichever items she is drawn to, while a piece of bespoke music will play – incorporating the sounds of sewing machines. "For me, it's important to see what the dancer does with my clothes, and how the composer interprets my clothes through his music," says Strehlow. "It's not only fashion, it's art."

So far, so Dusseldorf. For the past 50 years, these closely knit relationships between different art forms

**Left:**  
Strehlow's  
showcase at  
Platform Fashion  
in Dusseldorf



**Below left:**  
Kraftwerk's *The Man Machine* album cover,  
their outfits designed  
by ELA  
**Below right:**  
Strehlow's designs



DESIGNER IN DUSSELDORF:  
**MARION STREHLOW**



**Describe your aesthetic**

I always design things I like to wear myself. I like to connect colours with shapes, and then develop the pattern for a piece, which leads to several different ideas. It's a constant process of development when I'm working on a collection. This jumpsuit I'm wearing, for example, was an evolution of another piece. I love it so much, I wear it every day!

**Does Dusseldorf inspire creativity?**

We have a very good creative scene – there's a really collaborative atmosphere in Dusseldorf. Because we're a small city, everybody knows everybody, and there's a lot of mutual respect



between musicians and artists here.

**What are you working on next?**

I'll be at the Open Source music festival in Dusseldorf in July ([open-source-festival.de](http://open-source-festival.de)). I create the clothes for some of the musicians performing there – including BAR ([bar-music.com](http://bar-music.com)). During the event,

I will develop a new bag in collaboration with graffiti artist MAGIC – we do it every year. And we'll also be co-designing some festival clothing. We always bounce off each other while we create, and then present what we've made at the end of the festival – and a lot of people collect our creations each year. **Visit [stre-low.com](http://stre-low.com)**

have existed in the city, with the fashion and art worlds in particular influencing one other. A famous example is local fashion label Ela ([ela-selected.com](http://ela-selected.com)) founded by designer Gabriela Holscher Di-Marco in 1977. Ela's clothing is often worn by German pop stars – including the bold red shirts sported by Kraftwerk on the album cover of *The Man Machine*.

But Holscher Di-Marco's own inspiration comes from exchanging ideas with artists – including Imi Knobel. Also Dusseldorf-based, Knobel's experimental body of work was influenced by his time spent studying at the Dusseldorf Art

Academy ([kunstakademie-duesseldorf.de](http://kunstakademie-duesseldorf.de)) under Joseph Beuys – one of the founding fathers of Dusseldorf's globally acclaimed avant garde art scene.

In the 1960s, Beuys used his position as a professor at the Dusseldorf Art Academy – still considered one of Europe's leading art schools to this day – to turn the traditional notion of art on its head. This in turn led to the realisation that fashion could also be considered art. "Joseph Beuys formulated the new idea and concept of art," says local art historian Natalia Gershevskaya. "He influenced this integration of art into everyday life, and championed the conscious perception of one's own artistic potential. This came to be expressed in the form of one's clothing."

Today, the ties between high art and high



**Below:** Dusseldorf's Medienhafen district



PLATFORM FASHION / CHRIS NAIIR / ISTOCK / ALAMY / BABETTE BANGEMANN / AF ARCHIVE





fashion in Dusseldorf remain strong. Some 800 fashion showrooms are stationed around the city – from the white-brick studios and pop-ups in Hammer Hallen in Medienhafen district, to the 17,000 sqm Dusseldorf Fashion House (fashionhouse.de) to the north of the city centre – offering exclusive access to pieces from the city’s top designers, their ideas shaped by the arty ecosystem around them.

However, while established fashion designers enjoy success in Dusseldorf, it’s fair to say that emerging talent could be better cultivated. “We have a fantastic scene here for musicians and artists, but the fashion scene is fairly underground,” says Strehlow. “We have seven fashion schools here, but virtually no designers stay here after they graduate. There is a lot of funding for artists, but nobody takes responsibility for young fashion designers – we don’t fit into the art and culture box. And when you can’t show the return on investment for a project, it’s difficult.

“I’m here in Dusseldorf because I won a prize at fashion school where I received a year’s financial support. At the moment, there’s not much competition for me and not a lot of other designers for me to work with, which is a

**Below:** Königsallee is Dusseldorf’s luxury shopping destination



### BAG SOME CUTTING-EDGE CREATIONS

Dusseldorf is full of quirky shopping pockets, where you’re bound to find some interesting additions to your wardrobe. Head south of the centre to Unterbilk and Bilk for trendy boutiques and tree-lined avenues. **Ela** (ela-selected.com) on Volmerswerther Strasse features collections from established and up-and-coming designers. **Null Zwo Elf** (nullzwoelfshop.de) on Loretto Strasse offers street-wear, T-shirt printing and home furnishings made in the city.



Former blue-collar area, Flingern is now a hub of street art, independent galleries, designer studios and boutiques. **Bittersuess** (bittersuess.net) on Birkenstrasse produces beautiful hand-sewn items for adults and children; **Tina Miyake** (tinamiyake.de) produces woven and knitted garments on Ackerstrasse and, a little further along, find sustainable “metropolitan

casual “fashions at **Wunderwerk** (wunderwerk.com).

The leafy streets of Pempelfort harbour their own creatives, including jewellery designers **Huck von Scheven** (traeume-und-taten.com) on Tussmannstrasse, and Nordstrasse’s independent **Feen und Kobolde** (feenundkbolde.com) offers unique pieces for women and children.



“It’s not only fashion, it’s art”

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the **high-comfort mattresses** automatically adjust to the body weight and thus maximize muscular relaxation during the night. The hotel is conveniently located in the triangle between the airport, city centre and trade fair. The bustling centre of Düsseldorf is only 10 minutes away. Thanks to **excellent connections** to the public transport network, any key destination is within easy reach, which makes NH Düsseldorf City Nord the ideal hotel for any visitor to the city. **nh-hotels.com.**





shame. It's something that is very important for the city."

Strehlow's passion for establishing a more nurturing environment for fashion's next big thing is clear. "It's very important that the city creates a space for designers to work, with machines for them to use," she says. "We also need a platform for presenting creations in the very centre of the city – this would be a statement from Dusseldorf to include us. And the clients who would commission these designers would find them right in the heart of the city, as they do with artists at the moment."

Fashion pulses through Dusseldorf's veins. From the enormous trade shows that draw in retailers from across the continent, to the swanky luxury mile along leafy Königsallee – twinned with Paris's Avenue Montaigne shopping street – the city has plenty to satisfy fashionistas with money to burn. The origin of this thriving industry is the creativity Dusseldorf inspires, thanks to its history of artistic breakthroughs. The ideas will continue to flow and, provided the city gives new talent a chance to grow, who knows what will come after avant garde... ■



Joseph Beuys and Andy Warhol

SPOTLIGHT ON: **JOSEPH BEUYS**

In 1961, Beuys was appointed professor of monumental sculpture at the Dusseldorf Art Academy. An avant garde performance artist, he advocated "extending the definition of art", encouraging a broader, less exclusive approach to what constituted art, with the aim of empowering others to express themselves creatively. This had huge implications for fashion, and its inclusion as an artform today. Here is a rundown of some of Beuys's fascinating contributions to the global avant garde scene.

***How to Explain Pictures to a Dead Hare (1965)***

Beuys roamed around a locked art gallery, his face covered in honey and gold leaf, and a slab of iron attached to his shoe, while cradling a dead hare and mumbling the meanings of the paintings into its ear. The idea was to convey the complexity of the creative realm, and some critics coined it the Mona Lisa of the 20th century.

***Infiltration Homogen for Piano (1966)***

Beuys covered a grand piano in felt, so it became impossible to play or hear, and added a red cross to its side. This was a statement about the danger of remaining silent when we should speak out.

***I Like America and America Likes Me (1974)***

Having flown to New York JFK airport, Beuys was covered in felt and loaded into an ambulance, which transported him to an art gallery, without him having touched American soil. He then spent three days in a room with a coyote – a symbol of Native America. Beuys was challenging the dominance of American art, by conveying the damage done by white settlers to the continent – while simultaneously protesting against military action in Vietnam.



Right and below:  
Dusseldorf Art Academy

