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edicated Rhinelanders

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Text Ilona Marx *Photos* Andi Zimmermann *Illustration* Roman Klonek

Art metropolis, fashion capital, the cradle of German punk? The hype surrounding Berlin over the last two decades has left its mark on Düsseldorf too. Whether as musician, artist or designer, anyone post-1989 who thought they might have talent followed the call to the newly unified city. For those bled dry of talent and left behind in the provincial cities, it felt a bit like being buried alive. Especially after an event-studded weekend visiting friends who had moved to one of the happening districts of Berlin.

But times have changed. The main characteristic of any hype is its fleeting nature, and Berlin Mitte is certainly not the centre of the universe it was ten years ago. At some point the word was out: this may be a place to hang out drinking coffee on the cheap, looking hip, but even that would get boring at some point because the great job you were yearning for wasn't out there waiting for you. As a result, the so-called 'uncool' remains of the Republic awoke to a new self-confidence, hand in hand with a new pioneering mentality – after all, the weekends in Berlin had been quite inspiring.

The charisma coming from Berlin over the last few years has caused quite a lot of flux in other cities in Germany – last but not least in Düsseldorf where many ambitious shops and gastro projects have materialised. The development is most apparent in the district of Flingern, where,

around the Acker-, Hermann-, Linden- and Hoffeldstraße one pretty little shop after another is shooting up out of the ground. But also in Bilk and in Friedrichstadt, better known until now for their charmless post-war architecture rather than for young coffee-house culture, a distinctive small community scene has been able to develop – a real “axis of good” whose perhaps favourite hangouts are the cultural centres ‘Brause’ and ‘Damen und Herren’, and the mini-café ‘Mopete’, as well as galleries like Kunstradar and Slowboy. But despite all the new influences, Düsseldorf remains true to itself and many of its clichés. The Königsallee for example: even if it has lost a few high-class shops and gained a few chain stores, there is still the aura of the exclusive shopping promenade and perfect backdrop for the show-offs who, depending on gender and season come flaunting their convertibles and mink furs. Another firm fixture is the old town, known as the longest bar in the world, where the beer is first transformed into merriment and then into urine. But that’s how it is: happiness Rhineland-style!

In their defence, it must be said that the majority of those who meet in the traditional pub district in the heart of the city, putting the city under siege every weekend, are not usually indigenous to the NRW metropolis, but have come here for a booze-cruise or a stag night. Local Düsseldorfers certainly also value their convivial nights, but every now and again there is also work to be done. After all they have to pay their rent somehow and life in the county’s capital is far from cheap – although some really rate the fact that you can go about your business in peace and quiet. That’s why, amongst others, photographer Andreas Gursky has remained true to Düsseldorf, like Thomas Ruff, another famous Becher student, who until recently also held a professorship at the prestigious Düsseldorf Art Academy.

Generally – Düsseldorf and art is like an old love that doesn’t fade, mainly because one or the other is always prepared to put their back into it. In 2002, K21 the old assembly building, reopened under a glass cupola, offering not only the most important representatives of contemporary art a platform. With its Salon 21 as well as numerous special events and parties, it is especially attractive to a young audience. The old long-established K20, Museum of Classical Modernism, is currently being renovated and expanded, to reopen in 2010. In the NRW forum at the Düsseldorf Ehrenhof, the favourite theme is the interdisciplinary overlap between art, design and fashion, whilst KIT, the youngster of the scene, mainly owes its popularity to its great flexibility – as shown recently as part of a Sonic Youth exhibition – but also to its special architecture: KIT stands for ‘Kunst im Tunnel’ and what you see is what you get.

Talking of architecture: even if a little more patina would do no harm here and there, all speak a very individual interesting language: the Arag tower by Sir Norman Foster, Frank Gehry’s Neuer Zollhof in the Düsseldorf Media Harbour, the so-called Dreischeibenhaus (‘Three Slices House’), which with its clear façade of aluminium glass and stainless steel forms an appealing contrast to the white painted curvaceousness of the Düsseldorf Schauspielhaus. At the same

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Written by Martin Steinigen

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time, it is the aspect of the city that seemed so showy, which is now gradually growing older. In a good way, the perfect façade is beginning to crumble slightly. This is by no means a drawback according to many of the inhabitants who return here after stints in the capital and sing the praises of their hometown the loudest: the mild winter and the proximity of everything – not to mention how uniquely beautiful it is when a large river flows through the city.