

Injected with new blood, Düsseldorf has looked beyond its revered Kunstakademie to encompass new possibilities

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In Germany, a quickened creative pulse

Artists have always loved Düsseldorf. Their romance has its roots in the fertile soil of the prestigious Kunstakademie, an art academy housed in a Neo-Renaissance building that attracted artists from all over the world to seek excellence at its halls. Today the school has its own gallery, Akademie Galerie – Die Neue Sammlung – which archives the art of its esteemed alumni, including Gerhard Richter and Joseph Beuys, and still produces world-class artists year after year.

“In Düsseldorf, you have people who were taught at the art school and later became teachers there – this went on for years and built up a long tradition of art,” says Andreas Schmitten, a Düsseldorf-based artist who studied under German artist Georg Herold at the school, graduating in 2012.

This tradition has been kept burning brightly throughout the centuries. In the 1830s and 1840s Düsseldorf School – a group of painters who taught or studied at the Academy – broke new ground,

The K20 building, which comprises one half of the Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen Museum





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(2)

1. The exterior of K21. In May, Ai Weiwei's largest exhibition in Europe to date will be shown in K21 and K20 simultaneously
2. The Malerschule Düsseldorf collection at Kunstpalast – a school known for fanciful, allegorical landscapes

producing landscape paintings that gained a worldwide reputation. In the 1970s and 1980s, German luminaries of contemporary art like Andreas Gursky and Katharina Fritsch became the new generation of artist-professors, with expertise in forms ranging from sculpture to photography passed down like a blazing Olympic torch.

Now, the Düsseldorf scene is global.

“There are a lot of international teachers at the Kunstakademie now,” adds Schmitt. “Düsseldorf is changing, and I think that’s a good thing.”

At Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen – a museum which comprises of

K20 Grabbeplatz, K21 Ständehaus and F3 Schmela Haus – a brand-new exhibition platform was introduced in February this year for Kunstakademie’s fresh graduates to showcase their work, giving visitors insight to the most current artistic developments in Düsseldorf.

“The Düsseldorf art scene is very varied and international,” says Linda Walther, one of the two curators of the recent Planet 58 exhibition at K21 – the first edition of an annual exhibition series. The works of 60 graduates, who studied with well-known international artists like Rita McBride and Christopher Williams at Kunstakademie were

presented at the exhibition, and “showed a whole range of artistic production,” says Walther.

There are about a hundred galleries in Düsseldorf now, she says – many of which focus on young artists, who are also finding support from companies and private sponsors offering grants, awards and studio spaces.

“There are a lot of art collectors in Düsseldorf and in the whole Rhineland. The interest in contemporary art, particularly, is very common,” adds Agnieszka Skolimonwska, the other curator of Planet 58.

Founded in 1961, the Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen is itself a



3. Installations at Philara by Anna K.E.; the artist lives and works between New York and Düsseldorf

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collector of impressive 20th-century art. K21 – a former parliamentary building in the Historicist style – became part of Kunstsammlung since 2002, renovated by the Munich architecture office Kiessler+Partner into a majestic structure crowned by a striking glass cupola. It picks up where K20 – an '80s building that resembles an undulating granite wave – leaves off. Offering a comprehensive assemblage of contemporary art from the 1980s to today, it stands in contrast to K20's focus on modern European and North American art.

As well as the Kunstsammlung, the Kunstpalast – located within the Expressionist Ehrenhof building complex that dates back to the 1920s – also has strong ties to the Kunstakademie.

Since 1932, the Academy's collection of prints and drawings has been housed at the Ehrenhof, together with a fragment of Elector Palatine Jan Wellem's vast treasure trove of paintings from the 18th Century. Reopened in 2001 after extensive reconstruction work, Kunstpalast now prides itself on a diverse collection that includes nearly all artistic genres from a variety of eras – taking visitors on a journey through time and space, traversing across old and new landscapes of art.

It is a testament to just how far Düsseldorf has come.

After devastating destruction inflicted by the Second World War, the city by the Rhine was reconstructed at breakneck speed and transformed into

a metropolis of trade, administration and service industries. New buildings sprung up everywhere, and international companies flock to the city's shores to set up their businesses.

Most recently, postmodern architectural imprints were left at its bright and shiny MedienHafen. A harbour once filled with crumbling warehouses is now home to an assortment of eye-catching architectural ingenuity, the most prominent being the Neuer Zollhof completed in 1998 – a trio of buildings designed by American architect Frank Gehry that symbolises the city's rebirth. Filled with fancy restaurants and avant-garde office buildings, the transformed space also hosts Kai 10, a non-profit institution showcasing thematic group shows of largely young artists.

Wealth that poured into the city also gave birth to a respectable number of private art collectors. German heiress Julia Stoschek collects time-based art exhibited in a former industrial building. In an erstwhile glass factory in Flingern, Gil Bronner founded Sammlung Philara – a private collection of contemporary art – continuing an ever-evolving love story with Düsseldorf's art scene.

"I honestly believe that as far as museums go, the area as a whole can hold its own, to any in the world," says Bronner. "And Philara fills a kind of gap, as there are few museums with works of younger artists on permanent display."

Schmittgen, for instance, is one artist who will have a solo show that lasts till mid-June at Philara, showing some large scale drawings based on his earlier Chimera Electrified series and new sculptures. The artist – who lives in nearby Neuss but works out of his Düsseldorf studio – is still captivated by how dense the city is in terms of art – with 26 museums and over 100 galleries for a population of just over 600,000 people.

"I love that Düsseldorf is more like a village," says Schmittgen. "For an artist, I think it's important to be in or near a city where people know art, and talk about art. You don't feel so isolated."



Emirates operates flights to Düsseldorf with the Airbus A380.