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Fashion Fast Forward

June 21, 2017 #Fashion, #Social



A chat with sustainable fashion designer Maria Glück of HOWL

On a Friday afternoon, when the streets around Schlesisches Tor in Kreuzberg were abuzz with the fervour that only weekends can conjure, I sit myself next to fashion designer [Maria Glück of HOWL](#) in her studio at [AA-Collected](#). The fervour hasn't found its way to her work space yet. She's still hard at work bent over her desk, matching up patterns to fabric as she humours my interviewing skills. I've known her for over a month now, and I've read a fair amount about her in the trendier corners of the internet. But for someone like Maria, the stories are never ending. Her life could easily fill several volumes' worth of biographies. I barely know where to begin, so I ask her about the chronology of her fashion design career, and about the moment she realised that this is what she wanted to do.

The story goes way back, long before she joined AA-Collected. In fact, it likely started before she had any concept of what a fashion designer was. Her mother was a seamstress, so Maria grew up in the Basque Country in Spain surrounded by sewing machines and patterns. Despite her familiarity with clothes-making, her background was in fine arts, and the first sewing machine that she owned was used specifically for her art.

"I got a grant to make a video, and I was making clothes for the video. After that, I got another grant for another video, but I just got so tired of the screen, so plain and flat. I had a lot more fun playing with textures and materials. They were physical, they were dimensional, and I missed that. So I decided to play with these materials some more, and I ended up making a collection."

Without any idea as to how far she'd get or what her concrete goal was, Maria submitted the collection to Madrid Fashion Week. They invited her for a showroom, she made a logo and branding, and the rest, as they say, was history.

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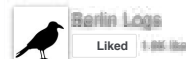
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Except it wasn't really. The ripple effect of one successful showroom event during fashion doesn't last forever. The season after, under HOWL, Maria was invited to do a runway at Madrid Fashion Week, all expenses paid. Then the invitations rolled in, from Paris to Berlin, where potential buyers would see her work. She won a Samsung Innovation Prize later, which enabled her to design, produce, and present a collection of her works. But she tells me that this becomes increasingly difficult for smaller labels that don't have the financial means to put out a new collection and partake in several fashion weeks every season.

"For us smaller designers, it doesn't make sense. There's this whole process where you make the prototype, then you go to the showroom where you have to pay a lot of money, and then they may or may not buy, and then they order, and we produce, and that's just for one season. That's a lot of money on top of the cost of a show."

I ask her if the financial aspect and the competition with bigger, established conglomerates of the fashion world was her biggest struggle. She tells me that the problem isn't so much that there's competition with the bigger labels, but rather that there's a game in the fashion industry that favours the big labels and not the small.

"It's nothing like I had expected. You know, you come from the arts, and you think, well, design is much more of a product, and a product is more sellable and more marketable than art... which of course, art also becomes a product in the end... but you know what I mean."

I did know what she meant. As someone with a fine art background myself, I know that there's a general regard of design as being the commercialized counterpart to art. But Maria explains that with fashion design, there's a huge amount of money that's needed upfront.

"In between experimenting with what you like and what you want to work on, you feel like it's more removed from the practical aspect of selling clothing, but then at some point you have to get back to that. Ideally you're doing collections all the time. You always have a collection where you're currently producing, then you have another quantity to be delivered to the shop, and you have another quantity that's already in the shop. So you have these three things constantly running, and everything is spend-spend-spend. And when you have a showroom in fashion week, in the end, it only squares it."

She explained how every step of the way, there's bills to be paid. From the initial material costs to production, then to hire photographers and models and stylists and everything in between, the amounts pile up. She tells me that at the end of it all, not even the big labels always make money from their collections. That's why they sell perfumes and lipsticks and licensing, things that have a tangible use-by or used-up date. This could be late-stage capitalism at its shiny plastic best.

It's also why I'm fascinated with Maria's label. In this world where products are so far removed from their origins, HOWL is a breath of fresh, organic air.

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GERMAN WORD OF THE DAY:

die Aufarbeitung : reprocessing, renovation (die Aufarbeitungen)

Die Aufarbeitung des Liegengebliebenen dauerte einige Zeit.

It took some time to catch up with the backlog.

9b

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 **13°**
and falling

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WEEKLY FORECAST

She designs, cuts, sews everything herself, and her ideologies on sustainability and gender norms clearly shine through in her work. The connection from designer to end product to consumer is irrefutable. Even the fabrics and raw materials used are considered in a transparent way. I have the distinct feeling that if it art wasn't her calling, Maria would've become a material scientist.



She tells me about the different myths that surround certain fabrics, and how that too might be detrimental to her artistic voice.

“People rarely understand fabrics at all. Or they understand wrongly. For example, people often think that cotton is always natural fibres and that it's the best, but there's so many conflicts with cotton. I use organic cotton, but even then, without pesticides and with better working conditions for farmers, it still takes a ton of water to produce. Then there's polyester, which for a lot of people is like the ultimate evil, but there's always polyester that's recycled or recyclable. A lot of high end labels use these polyesters that look and feel like silk, when in fact it's plastic.”

She also tells me about how mixed fabrics aren't great, as it's practically impossible to separate the fibers so to recycle them. Then there's vegan ideologies that often play a hand in ethical fashion. While silks and wools are luxurious materials sought after by consumers and designers alike, violence done to other living beings is not something that everyone can abide by. Maria tells me about a non-violent silk that she uses in some of her products where the silk thread is unraveled from the silkworm so as to leave it undisturbed. There are also wools that she sources from small productions in Portugal where old techniques of slow, hand-woven methods are used.

“It's also about reducing waste. I try to not have any leftover. If I have a tiny bit of fabric leftover, I do something with it. I also get leftovers from stores or last meters because as a smaller label, I can handle having small pieces.”

What some might spin into a negative light, HOWL by Maria Gluck is strengthened by. Small-scale production means more interesting materials, more sustainability, more avant garde designs, and more experimental outlets. It makes the process of taking on new endeavours easier. For example, HOWL mini was started recently in the same studio, taking on the mission of HOWL with all organic fabrics and unisex styles and applying it to baby clothes. Taken away from the artificial constancy of fashion seasons, designers are able to dictate for themselves what to pursue.

While she has partaken in and will continue to partake in Fashion Week shows and showrooms, Maria takes comfort in her ability to remove herself from the rat race of the fashion world. With AA-Collected, a designer-run studio and store front, Maria tells me that the processes of production, the constant rotation of products from studio to storage to store, is combined to enable a frictionless connection from designer to consumer.

“This way, we [independent designers] don't have the pressures of the big labels, which is good because we don't have the financial leeway of the big labels anyway,” she says. “This way, we're way more free.”

Our conversation winds to a close and I step out into the Berlin weekend. I admire the cool Kreuzberg kids walking by in their trendy outfits. I wonder about the origin stories of their clothes. I wonder whether they know where their clothes come from. I wonder, but I know that conscientiousness and consideration towards an ethical trade isn't going to solve anything in a heartbeat. Still, it's an important first step. For someone like Maria, and for a label like HOWL, it becomes every step.

By Sandy Yu



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