

# Private and confidential

CONNYIE RETHMANN'S PERSONAL APPROACH TO FASHION





**“Miss World” (don't panic, I'm organic)** – is the first in a roll call of names that guide the current collection of *Privatsachen* (private clothes or private matters), an avant-garde fashion label by Cocon.commerz based in Hamburg, Germany. Joining this mysterious woman are “Miss Leading (a textile-interpreting artist heading for the stars), Miss Fortune (a highly talented rejecter of the average) and Miss Chief (a career woman with a penchant for materials) – Connyie Rethmann, chief designer clearly loves a whimsical play on words. When she conceives a new collection she combines her passion for words and literature with her effervescent talent for designing garments in unusual shapes, patterns and colours.

For more than twenty years Connyie Rethmann and her brother Rado Rethmann have successfully run Cocon.commerz. While vivacious Connyie, who trained as a graphic designer, plows through heaps of literature and undertakes weekly excursions to art museums searching for new sources of inspiration, her brother Rado, a cool-headed Hanseatic businessman who studied economic engineering, manages the enterprise.

Their involvement with avant-garde individualistic fashion began with Connyie's hand-painted denim clothing but it was their signature crinkled hand-dyed silk scarves that led to a break-through in 1984. Today the company produces four different lines with two annual collections in each. The *Originals* collection presents classic elements, clothes rarely change dramatically but colours and materials vary. *Privatsachen* is the prêt-à-porter collection of garments designed for women “who have the confidence to wear them”. *Groesse 38, das Weite suchen*, is the latest addition introduced with the summer collection 2007, it caters up to a generous size 32, and finally *Kleiderklein* (bodywork) is a range of textile accessories that complement the current collections.

Cocon.commerz cater for a small but highly demanding niche market. The women attracted to the clothes are “versatile, multifaceted and successfully different; they wear their attitude on their sleeves.” Connyie asserts that they do not “depend on men's admiring glances,” although they may well attract them.



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Connyie designs her own fabrics using only natural fibres, woven by small, personally selected companies in Germany, Poland, China and Macedonia. The woven and knitted materials are pleated, crushed, plissé, and finished to make the fabric soft and supple. Clothes are piece-dyed after construction and Connyie personally supervises the hand-dyeing of the final product in their Hamburg studio. She uses fibre reactive dyes because of their quality and low impact on the environment. Her colours are rich and deeply glowing, yet subtle. These “in-between shades” as she calls them, look like vegetable dyes and recall the luscious colour schemes of Mariano Fortuny. The dazzling hand-dyed colours add to the flattering character of her clothes. The materials drape well and gently envelope the body. Combined with her clever pattern constructions the clothes fit equally well on women of dissimilar stature.

Each collection carries its own carefully researched theme. This summer's “Miss Worlds” alludes to traditional female needle work; the effects of Broderie Anglaise, Madeira lace, elaborate chain stitch, smocking and Occhi (tattooing) are reproduced by printed, laser-cut, hand-painted techniques as well as hand knitting and embroidery. The fabrics “are perforated in countless ways and means to reveal glimpses of the inside world to the world out there”. Such philosophical reflections are appreciated by women who are interested in the intellectual discourses surrounding fashion.

Although Connyie and Rado Rethmann present their collection on the major international fashion fairs they also pursue more unusual marketing strategies. They are not lured by the mass market and carefully vet magazine coverage. But while they prefer a low profile they cultivate close contact with their clients. They are also engaged in ethical design and ecological issues. They want to return as much production as possible to their home country. For this reason, Connyie has opened the salon “Strich und Faden” (grain and thread) and invites Hamburg designers, craftsmen, tailors and journalists to informal monthly gatherings to build up a network that could create a viable alternative to globalization - the private becomes political. ●●● **Dr. Elisabeth Hackspiel**

