

# THE DANCING FIGURES OF ERNST KOLB

Introducing a German baker who became an artist

By PETER BOLLIGER and ROLF BERGMANN



For two years now, drawings by Ernst Kolb (1927–1993) have been appearing on Ebay. They are carefully drawn or scribbled, with ballpoint pen, felt-tip pen or pencil, and mostly fill the whole surface of the paper, dividing the subjects into different parts, and filling them with delicate hatching suggesting woven, knitted, textured, grooved or braided material.

Kolb's drawings are dominated by figures of great variety, that look as if they had been flying weightless or had been vigorously shaken and then thrown into turmoil before being instantly frozen. Humans, animals and objects are combined in strange

manners. A glimpse at the details makes the artist's urge to avoid repetition obvious. Just as children feel a compulsion to hop playfully from one stone to another, avoiding the joints in the pavement, Kolb deliberately varies and assembles the faces of his people in ever new ways.

The drawings are staged like masquerades, the

Titles are for descriptive purposes as all works untitled.

*There is something going on over the roofs of Mannheim*, c. 1985  
ballpoint pen on white paper  
8.3 x 11.7 ins., 21 x 29.7 cm

*Comic*, c. 1987  
ballpoint pen on folded white paper  
8.3 x 11.7 ins., 21 x 29.7 cm





Ernst Kolb at his exhibition at Galerie der Tausend Möglichkeiten (Gallery of a Thousand Possibilities), Mannheim, 7. June 1988

laws of nature are outwitted and one imagines an amused artist, acting as the sorcerer of his own world: everything seems ambiguous. Large or small figures, which are arbitrarily curved, bent, or distorted in bizarre ways, join together and spatial and anatomical conditions are subordinated to the overall composition without scruple: one feels one's self in an intermediate

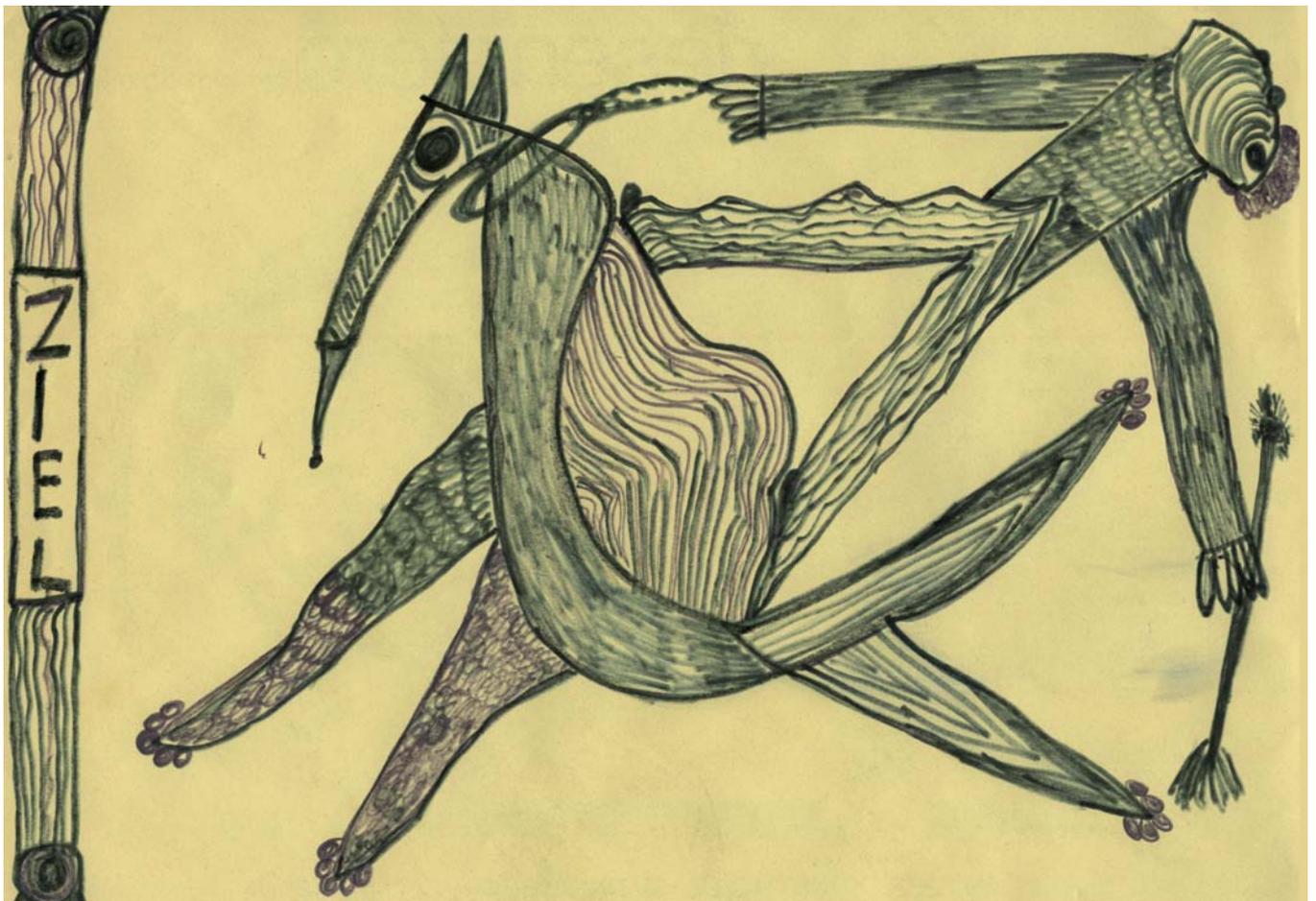
world where anything is possible

A person's arms can become zigzag elements, either attached anatomically correctly to shoulders or directly to her head. Kolb's imagination knows no bounds: corpulent figures float around, having lost their weight, or small dancing figures circle round two dominant, agitated figures forged together in dialogue. Some drawings are simple, while others are more detailed.

Everything is reduced to the minimum. Kolb catches the universe of his creatures in his characteristic way, using his specific ballpoint pen hatching technique, leaving colour, light and shadow or perspective out, creating an oscillating irritating state of perception: Dream? Game or joke? Faces or masks? The work is reminiscent of that of the silent film comedian Buster Keaton, who brought his audience to laugh with a deadly serious face. Everything seems in limbo, uncertain – each picture creates a mysterious and fascinating world of its own.

Ernst Kolb neither signed nor dated his drawings and he left no titles; only because many of them are drawn on the back sides of flyers or invitations, can we follow the events he attended and determine when the pictures may have come into being. Much of Ernst Kolb's work is still to be discovered and to be brought to light.

*The finishing post*, 1984. Felt tip pen drawing on toned paper, 11.7 x 8.3 ins., 29.7 x 21 cm





above  
*Many things fly around  
 his ears*, 1990  
 ballpoint pen on white paper,  
 11.7 x 8.3 ins., 29.7 x 21 cm



left above  
*Finds*, 1983  
 ballpoint pen on folded  
 white paper  
 11.7 x 8.3 ins., 29.7 x 21 cm



left bottom  
*Three men, strangely  
 intertwined*, 1990  
 ballpoint pen on white paper  
 11.7 x 8.3 ins., 29.7 x 21 cm



left  
*Red figure*, n.d.  
 ballpoint pen on grey paper  
 11.7 x 8.3 ins., 29.7 x 21 cm  
 Collection de l'Art Brut,  
 Lausanne, photo: Atelier de  
 numerisation.

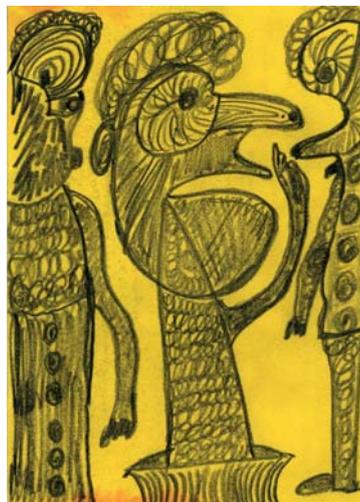


*Two clawed disputants, an innocent man in between, n.d., ballpoint pen on beige paper, undated, 11.7 x 8.3 ins., 29.7 x 21 cm*

left  
*Dialogue, 1983, pen on yellow cardboard*  
4.1 x 5.8 ins., 10.5 x 14.8 cm



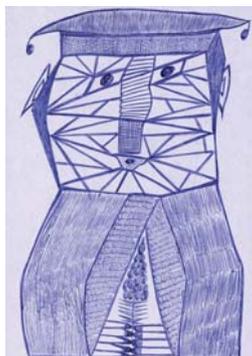
middle  
*Three figures, n.d.*  
pencil on cardboard  
4.1 x 5.8 ins., 10.5 x 14.8 cm



right  
*Figure, n.d., pen on paper*  
11.7 x 8.3 ins., 29.7 x 21 cm  
Collection de l'Art Brut



below and opposite  
Untitled ballpoint pen drawings on white and yellow paper, n.d., 8.3 x 11.4 ins. 21 x 29.7 cm, courtesy Collection de l'Art Brut, Rolf Bergmann



## **A short biography of Ernst Kolb, by Rolf Bergmann:**

Ernst Michael Kolb was born on 22nd October, 1927, in Mannheim, Germany, the son of a railwayman, and grew up in a children's home for railroad employees on the Danube. He had a sister who was four years older and schizophrenic who died in 1974. After eight years he left school, trained as a baker and got a professional certificate in 1944. In 1945 Kolb had to join the army, and four months later he was released from American war captivity.

His mother, who was mentally ill, was gassed in 1940 by the Nazis at the age of 41, which was hidden from the family with a forged death certificate. It is not known whether Kolb learned the truth about his mother, but it is likely that he later guessed what had happened.

Kolb worked in Mannheim as a baker until 1977, while also visiting numerous lectures, concerts, political meetings, theatre performances and all kinds of events in the city and its surroundings. In 1969 he had to be hospitalised with diabetes and it was there, at the hospital, that he started drawing in his notebook.

His father died in 1964 and Kolb inherited his grandfather Michael Kolb's property. He managed his assets cleverly, and continued to work as a baker but travelled often between 1952 and 1969. He went to Italy, Switzerland, France, Egypt, Morocco, Hungary, Bulgaria, Yugoslavia, Netherlands, Belgium, Britain, Scandinavia and Greece, visited cities such as London, Paris and Vienna, and museums including the Prado, Louvre and Uffizi, as well as archeological sites such as Pompeii, and in Greece and Anatolia.

Due to a typical occupational allergy, he became unemployed, and in 1984 he retired early and used his time to attend meeting and other events. From morning to night he was on the road, satisfying his hunger for information. As Ernst Kolb went

everywhere, he became part of the cultural life of his town and a locally well-known 'Original', particularly as his appearance and the chock-full plastic bag he always carried rarely fitted in with the more upmarket ambience of the receptions, lectures and art openings he attended. He talked a local dialect and was very fond of the food and drinks that were offered. Besides, he was constantly on the lookout for menus, leaflets, invitations or stationery, the backs of which he could use for his drawings.

In 1985, by chance, some artists saw his drawings, which he considered 'doodles', and became his tutors. They organised his first public exhibition, which was a quite an extraordinary success. Kolb was no longer the 'Original' everybody knew; he was seen as a serious and obsessed artist, whose works were exhibited several times. The attention of other artists focused on him; pictures were made of him and poems were written about him.

The success of his first exhibition, where he sold a few works, motivated him and he continued to draw. It is estimated that he has made at least 1000 drawings. In 1986, 1987, 1988 and 1991, his works were presented in local exhibitions.

In 1991 he suffered a stroke from which he never fully recovered. He was no longer seen in public, now living in a nursing home where his last exhibition took place in June 1993, two weeks before he died on July 1st in hospital from stomach cancer. Kolb was buried in the main cemetery of Mannheim, where many people paid their last respects. Meanwhile, his grave has been dissolved and no longer exists.

In December 2012, the Collection de l'Art Brut in Lausanne, Switzerland, acquired twenty five of his drawings. Twenty years after his death, Ernst Kolb, the German baker who became an artist, has found his place in the famous Swiss collection.

*Der Mann mit der Plastiktasche – Erinnerungen an den Bürger Kolb*  
by Rolf Bergmann (Mustermann: Marsilius Verlag Speyer, 2000).

Rolf Bergmann knew Ernst Kolb personally

Peter Bolliger is a lover and collector of outsider art

Kolb online: [www.artbrut.li](http://www.artbrut.li), [www.aussenseiterkunst.ch](http://www.aussenseiterkunst.ch). Information: [www.rolfbergmann.de](http://www.rolfbergmann.de)

Unless otherwise stated, drawings are from the authors' private collection

