

Kohli, Kuhn, Knecht Welcome to the tiger cage! The artists' house on Kruggasse

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Introduction

The mid-1950s and early 1960s were crazy times in Zürich. People who were able to afford it looked for a larger, more comfortable apartment or moved to the countryside. Some of the run down houses in Zurich's old town were temporarily empty before being renovated, including the house at Kruggasse 4. The journalist Louis Jent seized the opportunity and rented six apartments at Kruggasse 4 for a total of 500 francs! Jent lived in one of those apartments himself and rented out the others as inexpensive studios to young artists, including the painters Richard Kohli, Friedrich Kuhn and Fred Engelbert Knecht, who helped shape the turbulent life on Kruggasse. The «happenings» in that artists' house were legendary. Opposite Kruggasse 4 and the notorious restaurant «Grüner Krug» was the «Café zum Schwarzen Ring», which was known as the „centre of the rebels“. Within walking distance were the „Odeon“ and the „Select“, two spots for artists and writers – all in all, a melting pot of creativity, artistic excesses and excesses of all kinds.

Welcome to the tiger cage!

That inscription marked the entrance door to Richard Kohli's apartment at Kruggasse 4. For us, it represents the breaches of social taboos and artistic outbursts that emanated from Kruggasse in the 1950s. You may have wondered about the old banister dangling from the ceiling at the entrance. At first glance, it could be read as a symbol for the bars of a tiger cage, based on the title of the exhibition. But there is another reason for this: when Louis Jent asked his tenant Friedrich Kuhn one day why the stairwell was missing more than a meter of railing, Kuhn answered without further explanation: «It was a cold night yesterday, so I had to burn it.» This is just one of many examples that show how things were going in Kruggasse. You can find out more about that life in the publication accompanying the exhibition in which intimate testimonies of contemporary witnesses shed a light on how they experienced Kohli, Kuhn and Knecht and the wild stuff going on in the «Grüner Krug» and the «Schwarzer Ring» on Kruggasse.



Richard Kohli

Entresol

The historical photo documents, the wonderful watercolors by Richard Kohli and the original edition of the Kruggasse magazine „Der Krug“ No. 3 / 1st year 1956 – we were able to find a single copy in an antique bookstore –, bring you back into the world of the «Kruggässler» (the inhabitants of Kruggasse) in the middle of the last century. „Der Krug“ was edited by Louis Jent at Kruggasse 4. No one knows how many editions were published in total.

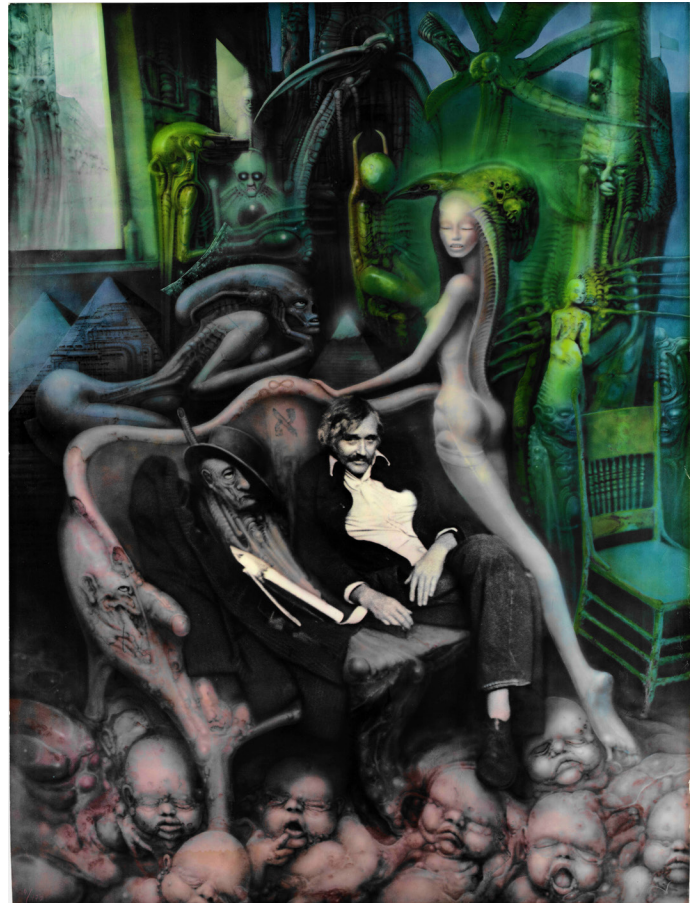
The impressive – from today's point of view perhaps also astonishing – videos from the SRF archive (archives of the national Swiss radio and TV stations) give an insight into the zeitgeist of the time and the «the scene of the rebels» around the «Schwarzer Ring». That, too, was part of the spirit of optimism on Kruggasse and recalls a chapter in Zurich's city history.

Large exhibition hall

The high-quality of the diverse loans – works by Richard Kohli, Friedrich Kuhn and Fred E. Knecht – bear the stamp of the times and at the same time point to the future. In their own way, all three – Kohli, Kuhn and Knecht – were visionaries.

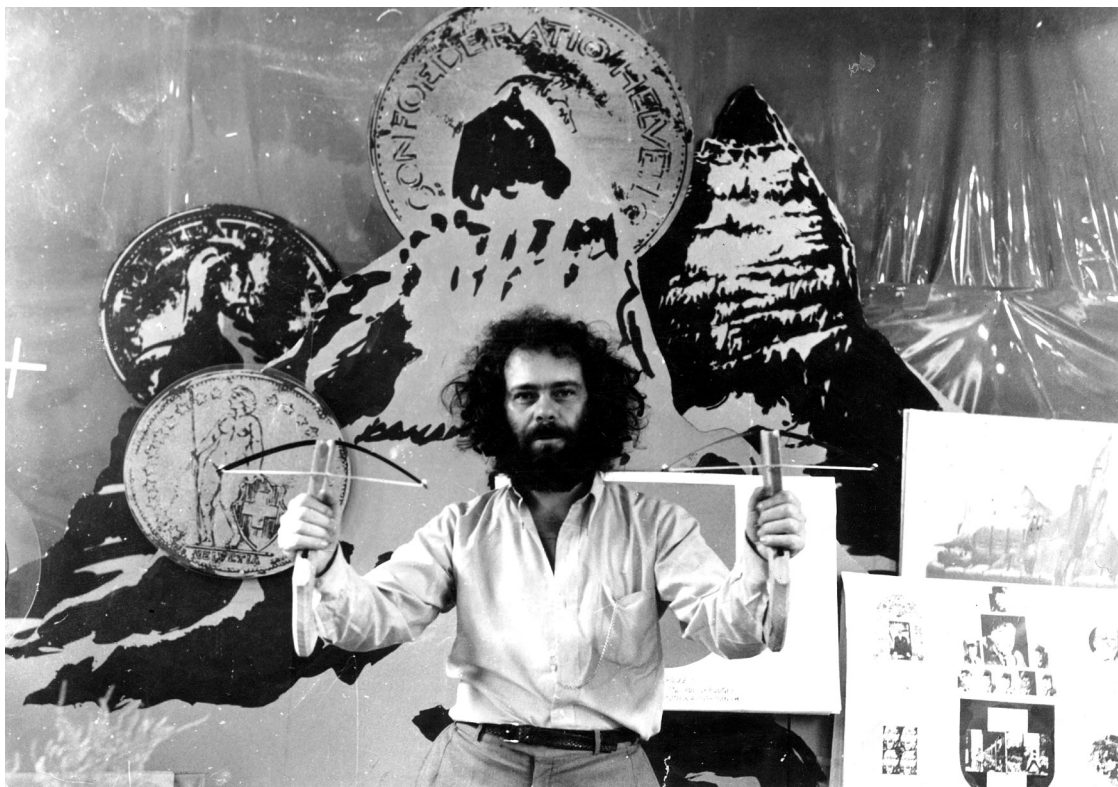
Richard Kohli (1920 – 1974), the least well-known of the three, was a mathematics and drawing teacher and led a kind of double life on Kruggasse. In addition to watercolors and woodcuts with cityscapes, he had devoted himself entirely to the tiger. Tigers are available as drawings, lithographs and woodcuts in different colors. His apartment on Kruggasse was plastered with them. Some of the pictures stood or hung upside down – as in the exhibition. In 1969, Baselitz also came up with this idea and became famous with it. At the legendary Kruggasse happenings, Kohli wore a top hat and had a whip in his hand, with which he lashed wildly between his big cats as a tamer and his offensive jokes contributed significantly to the bad reputation of the Kruggasse.

The work of Friedrich Kuhn (1926 – 1972) is less homogeneous and also less clear. He was self-taught and developed his own design language without any artistic training. His early work features pictures that can be summarized as a group of works under the term „overgrown furniture“. Fragments of bourgeois furniture are assembled with all sorts of ornaments and architectural elements to create bizarre „altars“, landscapes and atmospheric images, as can be seen in the „Oriental Garden“, for instance. They are painted collages reminiscent of cubism. And just



Friedrich Kuhn

like the images of Cubism, Kuhn's works from this series also testify to a fragmented world that has gotten out of joint and therefore – in the spirit of Kruggasse – has to be rethought and rebuilt. They are pictures of awakening and breaking out, pictures of longing for a better world. This is also the theme



Fred Engelbert Knecht

in the later works, the well-known palm tree pictures by Kuhn.

The longing for a better world is even more concretely expressed in the paintings of **Fred Engelbert Knecht** (1934 — 2010) than in the works of Kohli and Kuhn. Looking at his career, one is tempted to place Knecht among the traditionalists: he attended Johannes Itten's graphic arts class at the Zurich School of Applied Arts, took art history and photography courses and worked as a commercial artist, illustrator and photographer. But in reality he was a dropout, a seeker, someone who traveled the world to finally find his own way beyond the mainstream. Nature and the fear of its destruction are a thematic focus in his work. In the beginning, there were still pictures of an unbroken, rural idyll; in later acrylic paintings, nature pushed out by civilization, reclaimed its space, as can be seen in the pavilion.

François Viscontini (*1944) is a self-taught artist and one of the veterans of Kruggasse. Already at the age of 14 he, who was already a big music fan, was drawn to the «Schwarzer Ring», where popular rock groups made his heart beat faster. The hustle and bustle on Kruggasse not only interested him, but also had a lasting impact on him. In addition to his own work as an artist, he began collecting art early on. His collection comprises many works by the «Kruggässler». A lifelong friendship connected him with Fred E. Knecht. In 1999 he opened his mini gallery «Coin de Vue» at Kruggasse 8, not far from the former artists' house. In contrast to the artists' house, Visco's «Coin de Vue» still exists today. As a link from then to now, Visco is moving part of its mini-gallery to the Musée Visionnaire for the duration of the exhibition. In addition to his own works (some impressive ship sculptures can also be seen in the garden of the Musée), he is showing a selection from the extensive Viscollection. On January 19 at 7 p.m., he can be seen live in the Musée Visionnaire: Visco will talk about himself and his irrepressible passion for art and music.

Pavilion

Friedrich Kuhn's palm trees are legendary. The motif first appeared in his work in 1964/65. He was later called «Palm Kuhn». Last but not least, the exhibition «The Palms of Friedrich Kuhn», which was presented in Pierre Baltensberger's «Small Art Cabinet» at Zollikerstrasse 22 in Zurich in 1968, was a highlight of his artistic career. The palm tree can be read as a symbol for modern escape and dream worlds, for wanderlust, for exotic island, for freedom, as a sign of breaking out of bourgeois environments. It embodies the longing for a better world, perhaps also for paradise where there are no taboos. The advertising poster that Kuhn designed for his palm tree exhibition can also be read in this sense.



François Viscontini

It shows a pin-up girl with bare breasts and had to be over-printed, first with a black bar over the breasts, then the poster was redesigned such that the woman's head and light-colored body were painted over with a dark color up to her mid-thighs. Thus, the poster was socially acceptable in the end... Apparently the time was not yet ready for a better world. Is it today?

In the pictures by Fred E. Knecht, Zurich is sinking into the jungle, the Matterhorn is being overgrown, famous quotes from art history are becoming relics of a vanished culture, and people are rapidly disappearing from the scene or living on in the carnival of the animals only as masks. The irony and biting criticism of the times in his works are more relevant than ever. The actress Giorgina Hämmerli will read Franz Hohler's story «Die Rückerobung» on March 2 at 7:30 p.m.

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MUSÉE VISIONNAIRE

Predigerplatz 10, 8001 Zürich

+41 (0)44 251 66 57

info@museevisionnaire.ch

www.museevisionnaire.ch

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