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Art in Review

By Roberta Smith

John Bock

Anton Kern Gallery

558 Broadway, near Prince Street

SoHo

Through March. 27

If there's something called abject-scatter-performance art, count the young German artist John Bock in. His alternately amusing and tedious solo debut introduces a sensibility that mixes the tradition of Joseph Beuys and the Viennese Actionists with a wide stripe of absurdist, rather juvenile humor.

Mr. Bock inaugurates all his exhibitions with an action lecture, spouting pseudoscientific-esthetic gibberish while interacting with, arranging and otherwise initiating sculptures and installation pieces that he has crudely fashioned out of found objects and detritus. In the video of the opening-night action at Kern, he's part part clown-magician, part mad scientist and part puppeteer. Occasionally he evokes a housewife demonstrating small appliances on early television.

The best segment seems to send up Beuys's blackboard lectures: holding forth from a white shelf in the gallery's cramped storage closet, Mr. Bock draws a diagram, connecting dots that happen to be large live frogs. Whenever a frog moves out of reach, he announces, "This is a variable." When the action shifts to the shelf above, which is lined with leaves of lettuce, a woman reads a text about "milk fever art welfare," "the aura action life style" and "the end of art as such," while Mr. Bock demonstrates these principles with an arc made of tinfoil. Parodies of the sculptural extravaganzas of Jason Rhoades and Matthew Barney also seem likely.

In the gallery's larger exhibition space (just taken over from Wooster Gardens) one can walk among the found-object play stations seen on the tape. But without Mr. Bock's animating presence they feel incoherent and abandoned, instead of, well, incoherent and inhabited. In their favor are a pleasant colorfulness, a lack of pretension and, it seems, a disdain for excessive materiality in both contemporary art and life. The most striking element in the room is an extended hanging canopy of cardboard. It can make you feel as if you are under a large table looking at a thoroughly rearranged living room where a very bright child has played make-believe on a rainy afternoon.

ROBERTA SMITH