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John Bock 'Action'

Anton Kern Gallery
532 West 20th Street
Chelsea
Through Aug. 25

Anton Kern recently opened his new Chelsea gallery with Neo-Dadaist fireworks in the person of the Berlin-based artist John Bock. Mr. Bock eludes easy description. Trained as a sculptor, he hammers, stitches and glues together intricate installation-size assemblages stages for his intensely physical performances or "lectures," which involve rapid-fire talking, manipulation of hand-held objects and audience interaction. The performances are given once and videotaped. The installation, along with peripheral sculptures, remains on view in the gallery.

The main piece at Kern is a big, bulky plywood platform trailing thick ropes of sewn cloth and carrying various props: a bureau with the drawers pulled out; an abstract, gangly, Giacometti-esque form; a bar with holes cut to hold cups and bottles. In addition to being a sculpture and a stage, it functions as a kind of parade float, with a car concealed underneath. At the end of his performance at the show's opening, Mr. Bock drove the whole business out of the gallery and up the street.

The performance can be seen on video in the gallery and is worth spending some time with. In it Mr. Bock, assisted by two other performers, just *does* things for nearly an hour at a manic clip: dashing here and there, drawing words and pictures, pulling viewers into the action. And all the while he is delivering a stream-of-conscience-style patter that blends philosophy, personal history, absurdist humor and hints of violence.

The results aren't quite as improvisatory as they may appear. The words are scripted. Props seem to appear on cue. Historical references are in place. The title he has given the show points to the example of Viennese Actionism; his nutty-professor-wild-child persona is clearly a nose-thumbing homage to that most theatrical of European art world figures, Joseph Beuys.

What's most interesting about Mr. Bock's work is its connection to theater: to the circus, magic acts, music videos, secular and sacred ritual, with all the quick-change, fast-edit stuff brought out front. And this connection puts him on a parallel track with other art — Fluxus, Happenings, the installation work of Martin Kippenberger and Paul Thek and young German artists like Jonathan Meese and Christian Jankowski — in which politics and vaudeville, the adult and the infantile, the gross and the ephemeral play a role.

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