

ARTFORUM

JOHN BOCK

ANTON KERN GALLERY

"I'm in New York, and in New York the tradition is that the artist makes a Happening," John Bock announced while standing on a curious plywood platform that formed the stage for his most recent performance. Cheerfully, earnestly, the German artist urged his Chelsea audience to "Go do it, it's a Happening!" The viewers, most of whom were probably in diapers during the Happenings era (as Bock himself was), responded with sluggish amusement, as if they had been asked to dance the frug. Some accepted the beer and cigarettes Bock proffered. Others allowed him to douse twists of their hair with hairspray. One woman giggled with embarrassment as he tried to cajole her neighbors into nuzzling her. The hour-long event, complete with knitted sculptures, a costumed goat, and a surprise ending, felt sloppy, fresh, and yet strangely quaint, a throwback to a time when live performance promised to renew art with an infusion of raw, unframeable creativity.

"He just seems sort of . . . green," one charmed pundit offered afterward. But if Bock's persona has a winning innocence, the performance itself couldn't have been more knowing. With their mock-Beuysian philosophical patter ("In the hyperbole disco is the way of truth"), Paul McCarthyish foodplay, Matthew Barneyish prosthetic costumes, and a host of other recognizable echoes, Bock's "lectures" can seem like anthologies of avant-garde performance. Understandably, critical writing about them tends to bog down in riff-spotting: Brecht, Fluxus, Viennese Actionism, Kippenberger, Rhoades, take your pick. The result is that the artist's own identity seems a little elusive. With his James Spader-esque good looks, it's easy to think of Bock categorically, as a sort of *echt* "New German": unruly,

gregarious, more-pluralist-than-thou.

Of course, self-mockery comes with this territory. But when Bock smiled and drawled, "Behave, baby," in his odd white shirt with green ruffles, the allusion wasn't just a rimshot. At times his recycling comes perilously close to Austin Powers-style camp—a goofy, manic retro-avant-gardism. More often, Bock calls to mind a rock 'n' roll analogy: his quasi namesake Beck. The two share a chameleonlike virtuosity, weaving eclectic borrowings into layered textures that are both rehashed and distinctive. What's not clear so far, however, is whether Bock will remain a riffmeister or gradually shape this welter of influences into something more emphatically his own.

Until the finale, the performance seemed shapeless. Then Bock climbed inside the stage and drove the whole apparatus, which was built over a hidden car, slowly out of the gallery. Exit Bock—and with him the audience, which followed parade-style out into the street. Bock's 1999 show at Kern had ended with an equally striking surprise: A video performance suddenly went "live" when the artist broke through the screen wall, plunging into the audience. Both exit and entrance were dramatic gestures, "theatrical" in Michael Fried's sense (or Brecht's): They welcomed us back to the "real" world.

I'm tempted to bet that this kind of realist impulse is Bock's core motivation, and that the Barney and McCarthy borrowings, with their transformative, fictional implications, are window dressing. But essentializing Bock is a dicey proposition. These abrupt endings might simply be declarations of volatility—Bock's way of suggesting that he reserves the right to switch gears on us. For the moment, though, the most interesting development in his art might be a new attentiveness to its physical materials. After the performance, a puzzling, vast chassis sat in the gallery, projecting an Elvis-has-left-the-building melancholy.

—Alexi Worth