

John Bock

Rope Tricks

 DANIEL BIRNBAUM

But it is above all the function of the rope-trick—or, to be more exact, of the archaic scenarios which made it possible—that seem to us important.

– Mircea Eliade¹⁾

Let's make one thing clear: it's not the rope itself that is of interest, it's the trick it makes possible—the act of disappearance, the act of transcendence.

What is John Bock doing when he binds things together with a thread, as in the performance ALICE COOPER (2001)? Strange objects fall out of Alice's long baggy sleeves, a complicated knot-like structure ends up on his head like an occult helmet, and a red thread is attached to a tree, connecting the branches. Finally, he constructs a small pyramid out of sticks and string. Listen to Mircea Eliade, investigator of ecstatic techniques: "When, at the end of the world, the ropes and the winds are cut, the Universe will fall apart. And since it is by the air, as by a thread, that this world and the other world and all beings are strung together, they say of a dead man that his limbs have become unstrung—, for it is the Air (the breath) that binds them like a thread."²⁾ Bock is not the first to reference cosmic schemes like this, and the predicament of not being the first is certainly something the artist is aware of and something he affirms and explores: fragments from Vienna Aktionism, Joseph Beuys, and various forms of street theater are not only present, they are actively highlighted.

Bock's art is a kind of speculative pedagogy, he delivers lectures. He constructs a discourse in front of his audience, but also his own somewhat bizarre

identity. The theatrical staging of self has a long tradition, and many of the earliest versions involve cords and ropes. Indeed, strings, knots, and the ego as construction—what John Bock calls the "Quasime"—are no new themes in pedagogical discourse, even if his way of delivering his doctrine of ropes is unique. Take Jacques Lacan, who was just as excessive in his "pedagogy": during his lecture tours in America he would spend hours, before every address, drawing complicated knots on the blackboard. And Eliade, the obsessive explorer of shamanistic practices, recounts the two recurring features of the rope trick, "(1) that magicians cut up either their own limbs or someone else's, and afterwards put them together again; and (2) that conjurers, male or female, climb ropes and disappear into the air."³⁾

Beuys, the inexhaustible lecturer, proclaimed: "To be a teacher is my greatest piece of art. The rest is the waste product, a demonstration. If you want to explain yourself you must present something tangible. But after a while this has only the function of a historical document. I want to get to the origin of matter, to the thought behind it. Thought, speech, communication."⁴⁾ Bock, no doubt, would agree. As mentioned: it's not the rope itself that is of interest, it's the trick it makes possible—the act of disappearance, the act of transcendence.

And yet, there is all this solid stuff. I look through a recent selection of Bock performances documented on DVD—ERDMANN; LEHM, LEHM, LEHM; FASHION BACKSTAGE ZERO; and ALICE COOPER, that weird piece of shamanism—and must again conclude: there really is a lot of stuff. Materials handled in unusual ways and combined in a singular fashion—more-or-less fluid household products, such as toothpaste, shaving foam, detergents of different

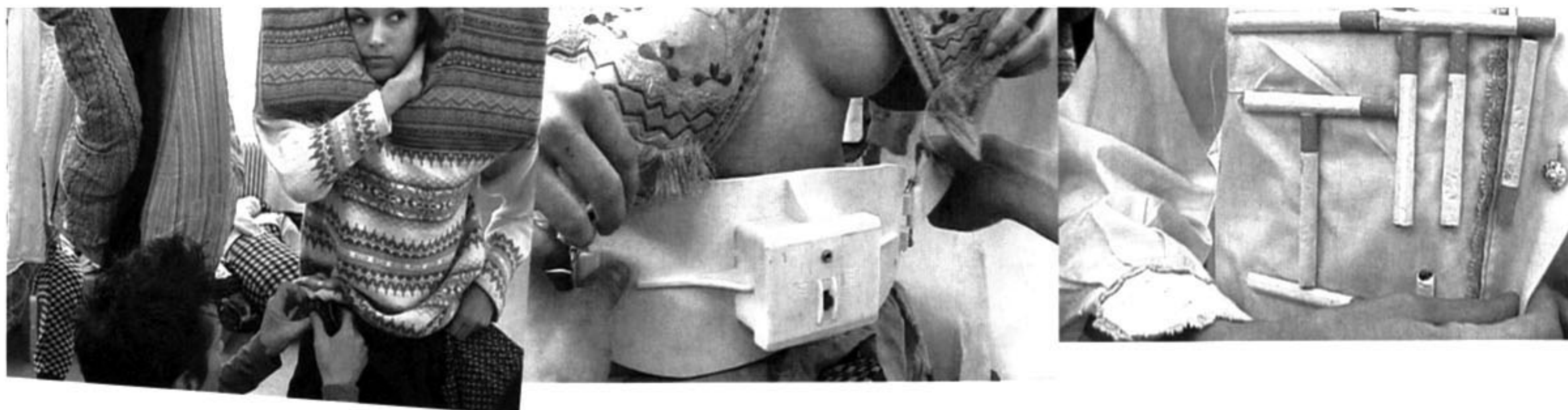
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JOHN BOCK, *FASHION BACKSTAGE ZERO*, 2000 (Jacob Fabricius, Copenhagen), Bilder aus dem 38-Min.-30-Sek.-Video / stills from 38 min. 30 sec. video. (CAMERA, EDITING: KNUT KLASSE; EDITING: MARC ASCHENBRENNER)

kinds, and objects made of aluminum foil, cotton wool, and Q-tips. And then there is food, always lots of food. All of this stuff is mixed, linked, sprayed, and poured so that various combinations give rise to previously unknown things—props, prosthetic extensions, tools, ritualistic instruments. Beuys again: "In putting honey on my head I am clearly doing something that has to do with thinking."⁵) Does Bock believe in these kinds of transubstantiation? Are his flow charts, diagrams, ritualistic performances, and systems of spiritual metabolism serious instances of shamanism, or are they built entirely on the principle of ironic citation?

So what is shamanism all about? An example: "From this point of view, the rope-trick—like all other displays of magic—has a positive cultural value, for it stimulates the imagination and reflection... It is highly significant that the image of the cord or thread plays a principal role in the imaginary universe of primitive medicine-men and in extra-sensory perceptions of modern men, as well as in mystical experiences of archaic societies, in Indo-European myths and rituals, in Indian cosmology and philosophy."⁶) Beuys, it seems, believed in the energies released through the re-staging of these rituals. And Bock? His performances and installations are anything but imitations of the art of previous generations. In fact, his work is an important contemporary example of the productivity of repetitions and returns. Artworks are not givens, they are not fixed packages of meaning, but rather carriers of infinite readings and re-readings. Thus the temporality of an



artwork—as Duchamp already noted—can only be characterized as a delay, comparable to the traumas understood by psychoanalysis as a “deferred action.” Relocated to the stage of cultural history, this logic of psychic temporality could be taken to imply the following: the traumas of the original avant-garde, such as the monochrome or the ready made, are acted out only in works of art by later generations. Hal Foster, whose book *The Return of the Real* explores some of these historical repetitions—their hysterical acting out as well as laborious working through—contends that “One event is only registered through another that recodes; we come to be who we are only in deferred action (*nachträglich*). It is this analogy that I want to enlist for modernist studies at the end of the century: historical and neo-avant-gardes are constituted in a similar way, as a continual process of pro-tension and retention, a complex relay of anticipated futures and reconstructed pasts—in short, in a deferred action that throws over any simple scheme of before and after, cause and effect, origin and repetition.”⁷⁾

A work of art would thus exist as a series of deferments, and the concept of an original presence would need to be replaced by something more primary: an originary delay, an echo. These returns and repetitions continue into our days, and John Bock is no exception. On the contrary, he is a prime example of creative misreadings, of Beuys and of others. Sometimes I also think of Franz West: When carrying around a *Passstück*, the body is forced into all kinds of odd (and often humorous) positions,

thus making tensions and neuroses visible. “I say that that’s what neuroses would look like if you could see them,” says West in a statement about his *Passstücke*.⁸⁾ Part slapstick, part psychopathology, the combination of *Passstück* and human body clearly has facetious aspects, but primarily this is an art about human shortcomings, distress, and patterns of neurotic behavior. John Bock is an artist who produces preposterous joy. His work takes place in an atmosphere of absurdity. History repeats itself, as we know. The first time things occur as part of a tragedy, the second time as comedy. Bock’s shamanistic practices are certainly seriously meant. When he’s left the stage and the installation sits there alone, it sometimes projects a slightly pensive mood that someone characterized as Elvis-has-left-the-building melancholy. But in principle, his exits and entrances are pure joy. The rope trick is part of an all-encompassing, dark comedy.

1) Mircea Eliade, *Mephistopheles and the Androgyne* (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1965), p. 186.

2) Ibid., p. 170.

3) Ibid., p. 163.

4) Joseph Beuys, interviewed by Willoughby Sharp, *Artforum*, December 1969, p. 44.

5) Caroline Tisdall, *Joseph Beuys* (New York: Thames & Hudson, 1979), p. 105.

6) Eliade, op. cit., p. 188.

7) Hal Foster, “What’s Neo with the Neo-Avant-Garde?” in *The Duchamp Effect*, edited by Martha Buskirk and Mignon Nixon (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1996).

8) Quoted from Daniel Birnbaum, “Flowers and Excrement: Franz West in the Baroque Garden” in *Franz West*, exh. cat. (London: Gagosian Gallery, 2001).