

John Bock

ARS COMBINATORIA

JENS HOFFMANN

The first challenge we are confronted with when approaching the work of German artist John Bock is that it is simply unclassifiable. It is neither performance nor clearly installation, neither sculpture nor solely slapstick happening, neither film nor any known form of theater. Bock's work is most likely a turbulent mixture of all of these—he creates exuberant, extroverted, passionate, and often forceful but always humorous and highly absurd pieces of art. The range of Bock's artistic means is remarkably diverse; in fact, it is impossible to pin him down at all, since so much is ambiguous, cryptic, obscure, enigmatic, and mysterious. What is already known, spoken about, seen, or heard of is of little importance to Bock. No matter how exhausted, how worn out our world may appear, the artist confronts us with an unstoppable avalanche of visual impressions and artistic stunts, as if everything still remains to be said, seen, or heard.

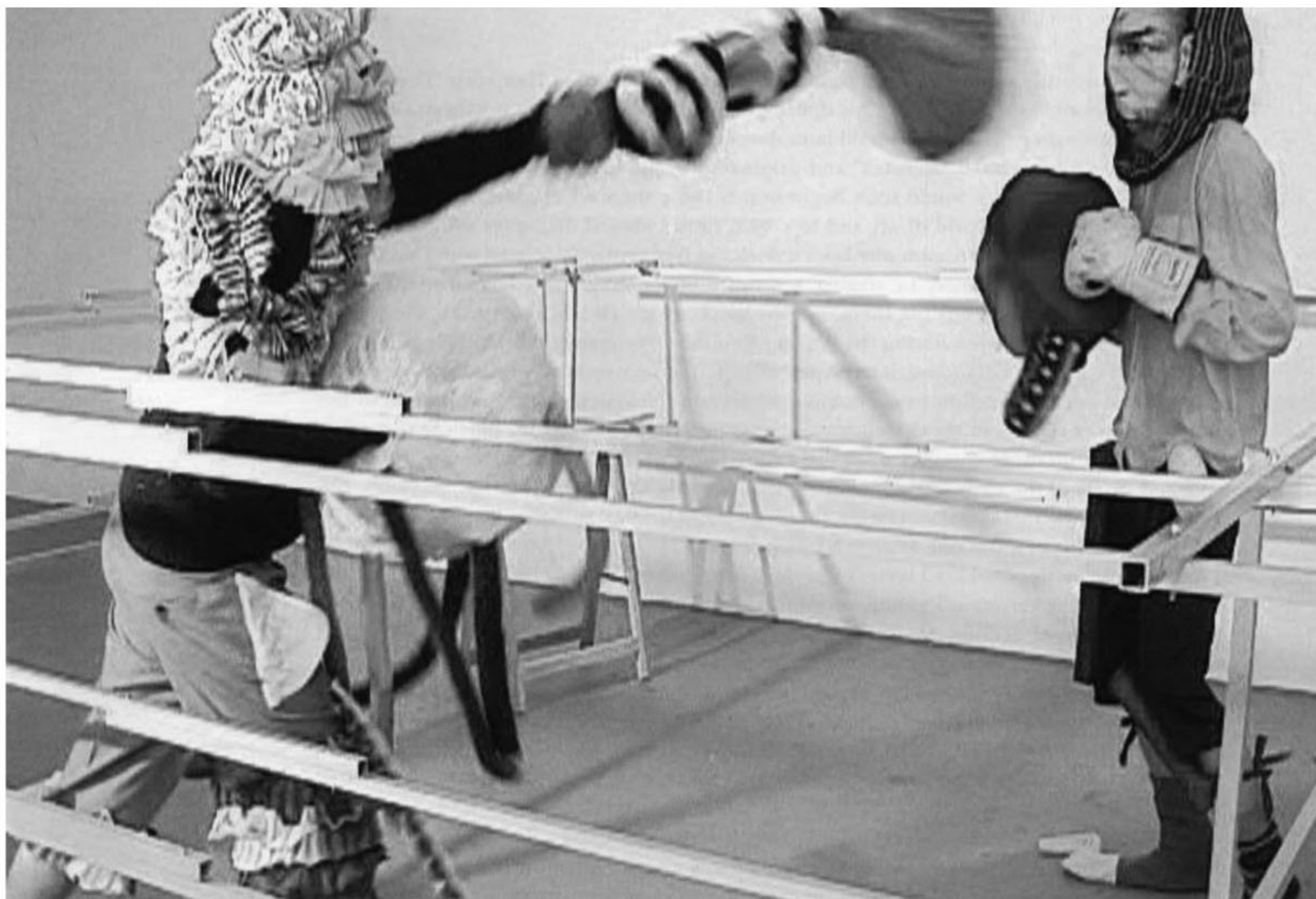
In the seventies, a term was coined to describe the interaction between various visual concepts within a single work of art, thereby suggesting that the era of dogmatic theories and classifications in art had come to a point of conclusion: *ars combinatoria*.¹⁾ The term is clearly linked to what was considered trans- or interdisciplinary work in the nineties, but in contrast to the limitless pluralism of the postmodern "anything goes," it suggested an interplay and exchange between the disciplines rather than an unaffected fusion of styles and concepts.

Bock takes the idea of *ars combinatoria* literally, when constantly delivering an endless array of visual conceptions as results of a seemingly boundless imagination that is at home in many different fields of art and far beyond that. He has created a universe of Homeric dimensions that appears to be completely unrestricted. Yet we cannot simply enter it, but must slowly digest every detail in order to comprehend his unique artistic vocabulary. The artist gives us few clues to what his intentions really are. Consequently, his performances and installations are often seen simply as nonsense, pure spectacle with a large dose of abstruseness. In our frantic desire to contextualize every piece and fragment of art that we see, Bock's work has repeatedly been linked to Dada, Surrealism, the Viennese Action Group, popular culture and even the rather mystical world of German artist Joseph Beuys. It is true that those affinities exist, yet these readings also obstruct a better understanding of Bock's intentions that extend further in a different direction.

The artist often appears like a sad clown, a postmodern Buster Keaton, a cross between the anarchic but constantly melancholic Harpo Marx and the forceful Kurt Schwitters. He em-

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JOHN BOCK, *BOXER*, 2002, *Bilder aus dem 2-Min.-30-Sek.-Video / stills from 2 min. 30 sec. video.*

(CAMERA: KNUT KLASSEN; EDITING: MARC ASCHENBRENNER)


bodies a creation not unlike the classic fool, whose function was to amuse the court, but at the same time to observe subtly what was rotten in the state. Bock deliberately applies all means to give birth to his extravagant creations, mixing and sampling various styles and artistic methods and in fact creating a particular form of what French philosopher Jean-François Lyotard described as *meta-narrative*, abstraction as a principle of artistic depurification.²⁾ The artist seems to have an existential need to get everything he absorbs out of his system, to multiply all the impressions he takes in with thousands of others before throwing them back into the world. Yet Bock is not an artist who represents a postmodern aesthetic of triviality or indifference. His work is very rigorous and is driven by strong autobiographical allusions and completely personal matters. Many works have a lot to do with an exploration of the artist's own identity or, better, other identities as, repeatedly, he takes on different characters and personalities for his countless performances.

John Bock


Bock simultaneously studied art and economics at the university in Hamburg. This among other episodes of his youth, such as his upbringing on a remote farm in northern Germany, had a large influence on what he would later develop as an artist. Most of his early actions or performances were termed "lectures" and originated in the idea of an academic lesson on economic concerns. Bock would soon begin to mix those theoretical speeches with subjects better known from the world of art and to create rather absurd dialogues with the public. Those early pieces are the reason why Bock's work was frequently associated with Dada. Here he evidently parodied society by staging a travesty of seemingly intellectual matters and society's irrational affections for them, yet the work stands clearly apart from the radical political statements of Dada during the Weimar Republic. For many of those early pieces, the artist used a classical chalkboard, a large pad of paper, or an overhead projector to draw diagrams about art's connection to economic systems and dynamics. Bock slowly began to use more and more objects in these lectures and to create entire sets for his performances that became more and more complex until the original idea of the academic lecture completely vanished. Some of the early works include PAUL-ELUARD-GEDICHTSKORREKTUR (1992), DIE KUNSTWOHLFAHRTSMASCHINE (1993); DAS GÄNGELBAND DER KUNSTWOHLFAHRT (1997), DER KLEINE UND DER GROSSE REZIPIENT (1998), KUNSTKARTON (1994), and others. What is left of those earlier works is a series of performances called *Suitcase Performances*, which the artist still does. He arrives at a gallery carrying a suitcase full of props that he uses to develop entirely improvised actions. More elaborate, but still totally improvised are the so-called KOPPELFELD LECTURES. Those lectures could be compared to the idea of a traveling circus. Bock loads an immense number of objects into his car and drives to a destination, unpacks the car, gives a lecture, and that same evening, he packs everything back into the car, as in DER ONKEL IM KOFFER (1996), DIE DRECKSCHLEUDER (1996), RASPUTIN IST MÜTTERCHEN (1997), BOMMELBABYFACE NELSON (1998), and REGARDER LE DISCJOCKEY LONG JOHN SILVER (1999).

Around 1998, Bock began to create large-scale installations that could be put to use by the audience in various ways. Most often his complex sets would remain after his presentations as traces in the exhibition spaces. Realizing the discrepancy between the empty set and the performed installation, Bock began to film most of his actions and show the documentation on screens inside the sets. The aim was to give the audience the chance to see the performance again and again, or, if they missed the inauguration of the piece, even experience it for the first time. After the initial movement from spoken performance to installation and then to documenting his life appearances on film, Bock began to study the medium of film more and more carefully. One of the turning points in this latest development is a film he made for the exhibition "A Little Bit of History Repeated" in Berlin. For this exhibition, younger contemporary artists were asked to recreate classic performances and find new readings for them.³⁾ Instead of simply repeating a well-known performance from the sixties or seventies, Bock began to closely investigate the relationship between performance and film during this period and he came across the collaboration of Austrian artist Otto Mühl and experimental filmmaker Kurt Kren. Mühl developed a particular form of performance, presenting his actions to a film camera as the only witness. Using this method, Mühl could take advantage of film's possibilities and began to heavily manipulate and edit the films. For his contribution to "A Little Bit of History Repeated," Bock focused on the idea of translating performance/action into the medium of film as he had seen it in the work of Mühl and Kren. Bock also teamed up with a group of collaborators—Knut Klauen and Mark Aschenbren-


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ner—who are accountable for the filming and editing of most of Bock's recent films. What is essential here is that Bock takes on Kren's typical style of film editing in which the cuts actually created the movement and performative development and not necessarily the performance/action itself. Some of the collaborations of Mühl and Kren include *Mama und Papa* (1964), *O Tannenbaum* (1964), and *Sinus Beta* (1967). It is quite striking to see how Bock has broken free of the original model to create something unique, but he has still managed to keep affinities to the style alive. The first film in this series was *PORZELLAN ISOSCHIZO KÜCHENTAT DES NEURODERMITISCHEN BROCKENFALLS IM KAFFEESTRUDEL UND DAS ALLES GANZ TEUER* (2002); several others, such as *BOXER* (2002) followed, always in collaboration with Kläßen and Aschenbrenner. *BOXER* is a 2.30-minute film that shows the artist boxing with his opponent in such a violent, but still charming manner that even Wes Craven could discover new special effects for his splatter movies. Heads in the form of vegetables fly through the air and green sauce spreads over the protagonists in measureless amounts right out of the boxers' bodies. *PORZELLAN ISOSCHIZO KÜCHENTAT DES NEURODERMITISCHEN BROCKENFALLS IM KAFFEESTRUDEL UND DAS ALLES GANZ TEUER* is only 1.30 minutes long and depicts the artist in his kitchen while messing around with all types of kitchen utensils and food. Like *BOXER*, this film is almost a sequence of hundreds of still photographs appearing in six-frame, rapid succession one after another, creating, together with the forceful soundtrack, a high-speed journey through a delirious universe consisting of flying herring, ravioli, eggs, liverwurst, toast, milk and carrot juice.



Considering the details of his wide-ranging body of work, one realizes that Bock has obviously looked at a lot of historical live art and performance work, as clearly demonstrated by his arsenal of props including hay, spaghetti, canned fish, Q-tips, tooth picks, second-hand furniture and clothes, various wild and domestic animals, toothpaste, nude models, and, again and again, mountains of shaving cream. The energy and strength of his pieces, especially the visual and physical aspects, unquestionably remind the viewer of artists such as veteran American performer Paul McCarthy or the Viennese Action Group in all their overflowing excessiveness. Bock often mentions both as sources of inspiration, along with energetic performers such as Alice Cooper. In contrast to those figures, Bock also maneuvers in the tradition of modern theater, looking for the beginning and the end of the stage in the "theater of life." His references include ideas on the theory of alienation taken from the principles of Bertolt Brecht's epic theater, Samuel Beckett's melancholy, the doomed transdisciplinary visions of Antonin Artaud, or the absurdity of Eugene Ionesco's dialogues. For "Documenta 11" in Kassel, Bock began to combine his interests in theater and film more and more, documenting almost all of the performances that he staged on a field outside the exhibition venues together with a group of actors and the director Jochen Dehn. He is fascinated by the idea of the stage as the representation of a meta-level of human articulation and existence.



It appears that Bock, as much as he is interested in expanding the limits of art, simply enjoys creating his own individual cosmos constructed within epic categories of thought. His work is a self-contained system, an unusual and careful blend of fantasy and rationality, subjective reflection and objective visual process, emotional challenge and sensual proposition: *ars combinatoria*.

1) Werner Hofmann, "Ars Combinatoria" in *Jahrbuch der Hamburger Kunstsammlungen*, vol. 21, Hamburg, 1976.

2) Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985).

3) "A Little Bit of History Repeated," Kunst-Werke Berlin, 2001. Curated by the author.