

ARTFORUM

John Bock

ANTON KERN GALLERY

Gradually, the simplest things become exponentially more difficult for the protagonist of John Bock's film installation *Zezzimnengesang* (Sissy Songs of Courtly Love) (all works 2006). After opening, with a chisel and mallet, a tin of ravioli, he must then contend with his eating implement: a spoon attached to the leg of an armchair. Eating requires that he turn the chair over, struggle to lower its bulk to the dish, then heft the spoon to his mouth. Small wonder that he takes only two bites before giving up.

Much has been written about the echoes, in Bock's laborious procedures, of Joseph Beuys's opaque rituals. Also invoked have been Paul McCarthy's spirited excess and the Viennese Aktionists' intense and antagonistic focus on the body. Less often mentioned is the Chaplinesque quality of the characters Bock creates—hapless but more or less oblivious to their haplessness, overwhelmed and confused by the world, often in distress but nonetheless given to sentiment. In Bock's world, confusion is of the artist's own making. The situations he devises are thus more psychological than mechanical, if absurd.



John Bock,
Zezzimnengesang
(Sissy Songs of
Courtly Love), 2006,
video installation,
dimensions variable,
27 minutes 30 seconds.

Zezzimnengesang's protagonist lives in a small apartment, nearly crowded out by collections of things: glass-fronted cabinets stuffed full of fabric, towering stacks of newspapers and clothing, jars, boxes, egg cartons, and blankets. He also shares the space with a skeleton and a curious spirit, black-faced and dressed in sequins, whose actions roughly parallel his own. This compulsive collecting is echoed in his bizarre activities—peeling off layers of socks and stretching them over jars of pickles, crawling over and through the cabinets, performing a puppet show featuring pictures, torn from a magazine, of Kim Basinger, Günter Grass, and a geisha. All of these rituals are charged with hidden meaning, as well as with humor. But their necessity is clear enough, so much so that the work's finale—in which the protagonist leaves his apart-

ment, the skeleton lovingly cradled in his arms, and disappears into a glen bathed in soft afternoon light—is oddly affecting.

Nevertheless, Bock's work generally defies both classification and interpretation, and he seems to revel in this inscrutability. His early works, Beuysian lectures on the structure of the universe, used a form identified with imparting knowledge, but his soliloquies' intricacy and absurdity thwarted elucidation even as they purported to provide it. The form of those lectures as well as of his films accommodates a lively tension between what might be scripted and what might be improvised—a mix of the purposeful and the ridiculous.

In the preparation of a separate sculptural installation, *8 1/2 x 11 Mit Schisslaveng* (8 1/2 x 11 Off the Cuff), activities characterized by the same sort of deliberate randomness—or random deliberateness—had been staged for a film camera on the gallery roof. A rough cut of the resultant footage was projected onto a handkerchief at the foot of a spiral staircase in the middle of the gallery. This staircase led viewers up through a hole in the gallery's ceiling to the top of the building, where they found a sort of obstacle course: Wending their way through a maze of homely sculptural elements—bricks and a mover's blanket, a bone tied to a piece of red string, desiccated potatoes—they arrived at a rickety ladder that provided access to another level of the roof, where more objects and arrangements, including a kitchen complete with dirty, weathered pots and pans, overlooked a construction site next door. Here the dimly menacing quality of Bock's work became life-size: The faint anxiety of such innocent domestic items and tools as filled the *Zezzimnengesang* apartment—their unhealthy possibilities, their slight cruelties—was magnified by the more violent activities of the cranes and dredges next door.

—Emily Hall