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Artist of the week 99: John Bock

His performances – decorated with flying food as well as Punch and Judy-style puppetry – owe as much to circus clowning as to avant-garde theatre

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The next MasterChef? ... John Bock performs Zero Hero in Munich 2003. Photograph: Thomas Dashuber. Courtesy Klosterfelde, Berlin; Antony Kern, New York; Giò Marconi, Milano

John Bock is often labelled a mad inventor. His films and performances are full of crazed contraptions, hand-built from bits of old furniture and domestic junk. Sometimes Bock and his collaborators also don these creations, while performing outrageous vignettes. Their dialogue is a gobbledegook of science, philosophy, art, sex and the scatological, variously delivered in the cadence of serious drama, childish singsong or hysterical jabbering. Owing as much to anarchic circus clowning and slapstick as to avant-garde theatre, [Dada](#) and [Fluxus](#), these antics have featured flying food, Punch and Judy-style puppetry, live animals – even exploding vegetables.

Born in 1965, Bock studied art in Hamburg, one of Germany's most theatrical cities. His early work took the form of surreal lectures, the artist drawing demented diagrams while delivering a babble of cod science and social theory. Whether crawling up home-made sculptural towers, crashing through audiences with a puppet-theatre over his head or staging absurdist skits from the gallery ceiling – as with the towering installation he has created inside London's Barbican Centre – his performances are renowned for their extreme physicality. The sculptures that serve as props or sets are conceived in the same spirit of creative irrationality: Bock collages everyday household objects into dysfunctional machines or assemblages of whatchamacallits. They force us to consider the adult world anew.

While documentary footage forms part of the show when the live exploits are over, in recent years Bock has increasingly focussed on making films in their own right. His elaborately conceived productions have veered from the surreal high-jinks of 2005's *Salon de Béton* – which includes a memorable sequence of a woman being pursued by a giant rolling pill – to the costume drama *Dandy* (2006), which was set in [Toulouse-Lautrec's](#) château, and culminated in an orgy of sculptural appendages sported by Bock

himself, talking the role of a hypochondriacal aristocrat.

By turns absurd, transgressive and flagrantly silly, Bock's work variously recalls [Hugo Ball's nonsense poetry](#), [Kurt Schwitters' Merz pictures](#), [Viennese Actionism](#), [Paul McCarthy-style gross-out](#) and the [Shamanic rituals of Joseph Beuys](#), among many other influences. The irreverent spoofing, wild energy and relentless sculptural invention, however, are all his own.

Why we like him: For the brilliant black comedy of his 2007 road movie Palms. While Bock stayed behind the camera for this murderous gangster escapade through the Californian desert, professional actors brought an unusual gravitas to his chaotic dialogue, making their posturing both hilarious and unnerving.

Country boy: Bock grew up on a remote farm in northern Germany, something he referenced in the ladders, wooden shoots and hay-bales that visitors had to climb through, on and over for his [2004 ICA show, Klütterkammer](#).

Where can I see him? At [the Barbican's Curve gallery](#) until 12 September.