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John Bock, "Im Schatten der Made (In the Shadow of the Maggot)," installation view, 2011, Anton Kern Gallery, New York



John Bock, *Im Schatten der Made (In the Shadow of the Maggot)* (video still), 2010, Anton Kern Gallery, New York



John Bock, *Im Schatten der Made (In the Shadow of the Maggot)* (video still), 2010, Anton Kern Gallery, New York



John Bock, *Untitled*, 2011, "Im Schatten der Made (In the Shadow of the Maggot)," 2011, Anton Kern Gallery, New York

John Bock MODERN AUTOMATON by Elizabeth Kley

Can a human create another human out of inanimate materials? German artist John Bock puts his mind to the problem in his latest film, *Im Schatten der Made* (In the Shadow of the Maggot), a riotous, brutal feature commissioned by the Museum Tinguely -- a Swiss institution devoted to Jean Tinguely, the inventor of crazy mechanical sculpture -- and now on view at Anton Kern Gallery in Chelsea.

Bock has been known since the '90s for ranting in scholarly gibberish while climbing over environments cobbled together from debris, and sometimes even hanging from the ceiling. But as he gets older, he doesn't have the energy for these manic live performances. Instead, he's making movies. 2001's *Porzellan*, his first, was a two-minute loop featuring himself as a chef who's attacked by the food he is trying to cook.

Absurd scientific subject matter and arcane machinery might bring Matthew Barney to mind, but Bock is actually just the opposite. Far from being an alchemist of grandiose personal myths, he's a scavenger-connoisseur of nonsense who never tries to be profound. That makes him the esthetic kin of such Dadaist performers as Kurt Schwitters and Hugo Ball, who wanted to violently extinguish artistic convention.

Im Schatten der Made was produced by Bock, the Anton Kern Gallery, Museum Tinguely and the Universal Museum Graz, and took around a year to complete. Inspired by German Expressionism -- think Robert Wiene's 1920 film *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* -- the picture is a mostly black-and-white homage to silent film, complete with a specially composed piano score.

The cramped homemade sets -- studio, laboratory, forest, prison and church -- are reminiscent of a cross between Salvador Dalí's environments for *Spellbound* (1945) and Pee-wee's infamous *Playhouse*. Amateur actors play an artist/mad scientist, a woman named Merle and an automaton, while Bock himself takes the role of a sadistic priest. All gesticulate melodramatically, rolling their eyes and wallowing in artificial blood.

Inside a laboratory overflowing with wonderful Rube Goldberg contraptions, the scientist constructs a doppelganger out of unidentifiable goop. Bicycle wheels turn, liquid runs through tubing and potatoes dance on pacifiers, but only Merle's kisses (and more) can bring the artificial man to life.

Shown in a room constructed within the gallery with floor-to-ceiling curtains, the movie is flanked on either side by glass vitrines. Costumes and props are displayed, including a vial that purportedly holds Christ's sweat and fingernails, models of the android's erect phallus (complete with a deflated balloon), and a cross topped with a retractable fork that was put to unmentionable uses in the film.

Most beautiful, however, are four automaton heads, one of them made entirely from slices of bread. Chewed up and spit out, the masticated dough forms a Giuseppe Arcimboldo face with features made of crust and a spiraling third eye in the forehead -- a sterling example of Bock's ability to make art from repulsive garbage.

Using old-fashioned low-tech cinematic trickery, Bock has created a tongue-in-cheek study of artificial humanity as the ultimate creation -- the artist can't wake him, religion destroys him and only sex can induce true vitality in him. The entire installation -- video, objects, vitrines and curtain room -- is priced at a healthy \$250,000.

John Bock, "Im Schatten der Made (In the Shadow of the Maggot)," June 30-Aug. 12, 2011, Anton Kern Gallery, 532 West 20th Street, New York, N.Y., 10011.

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