

Art in America

INTERNATIONAL REVIEW

JOHN BOCK

ANTON KERN
by anne doran



Since the early 1990s, John Bock's art has largely taken the form of absurdist lectures and live performances, as well as the documentary footage and sculptural installations left over from these events. Recent years, however, have found him producing an increasing number of stand-alone films and objects.

Bock's latest film, the black-and-white silent movie *In the Shadow of the Maggot* (2010), was the centerpiece of a recent solo exhibition at Anton Kern. A retelling of the classic Frankenstein story, it is a gothic tale of love, reanimation and revenge that serves as a vehicle for many of Bock's longstanding themes, among them the position of the artist in society, the differences between men and women and the amoral nature of creativity.

Bock's performances regularly feature characters—the inventor, the explorer, the showman, the choreographer and even the sociopath—who stand in for the creative personality. One might have expected him, therefore, to play the role of the professor, who at the beginning of the story builds an artificial human out of dough, dried peas and old auto parts. Instead, Bock shines in a star turn as the far more interesting local priest, who lusts after the professor's beautiful wife (even as she lusts after the android) and whose intellectual powers are focused on rationalizing his vile intentions.

Thoroughly entertaining, the movie is also gorgeous. Its characters navigate through fantastical, claustrophobic sets whose painted shadows, modernistic angles and distorted perspectives recall such masterpieces of 1920s German Expressionist film as *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*. Each frame is as cluttered as a Max Beckmann street scene and as carefully composed, while key elements are crudely colorized, such as the android's eyes briefly glowing Mercurochrome orange and the priest's bloodstained hands momentarily flashing red.

Accompanying the film was a group of related collages incorporating images of various spectacles, from boxing matches to church services to concerts. Recognizable figures include Russian mystic Grigori Rasputin, artist Joseph Beuys, theater director Bertolt Brecht, shock-rocker Alice Cooper and actor Klaus Kinski, all of whom Bock counts as influences. These works attest to Bock's interest in theater as a platform for conveying social and psychological truths. At the same time, like the film, they reveal him to be an adept producer of formally beautiful pictures.

Taken as a whole, Bock's output has often seemed to constitute a universe unto itself, one with its own material culture, its own language, customs and beliefs, and its own social, economic and power structures. Like all his work, *In the Shadow of the Maggot*, while primarily an allegory for the production and reception of art, also has much to say about the human condition, a frequently tragic, often ridiculous and occasionally splendid state.

Photo: John Bock: In the Shadow of the Maggot, 2010, video, approx. 74 minutes; at Anton Kern.