

# JOHN BOCK

# HIDE AND SEEK

On the eve of a major retrospective in Frankfurt, the German artist talks  
to *ArtReview* about his ongoing search for the glam

---

words SALLY O'REILLY  
portrait MIKE FIGGIS





above: *Dandy*, 2006 (installation view),  
DVD, 59 min, edition 2 of 5. © the artist.  
Courtesy Sadie Coles HQ, London

facing page: *Dandy*, 2006  
(co-produced by Foundation EDF and Printemps de Septembre)  
Photo: Jan Windszus. © the artist.  
Courtesy Klosterfelde, Berlin, and Anton Kern, New York

**“MAKING MOVIES IS LIKE... IS LIKE... AH...** like when you put a nose hair on a cuticle. This balance is like making a movie.” If John Bock’s description of his methodology had been any more sensible I would have been sorely disappointed. And yet the prevailing narrative anarchy and hare-brained aesthetic in his work has been sustained for enough years now to suggest at least an internal logic, even if coinciding only tangentially with logic at large.

Bock is perhaps best known for his actions – live performances in which he babbles patent bollocks and incorporates crude puppetry, rickety contraptions and messy squirty cheese, shaving foam, toothpaste and the like – and video installations that stand as testament to the actions, propagating their mayhem in sculptural form. Now, though, Bock is concentrating more on filmmaking. The centrepiece of his recent exhibition at Sadie Coles HQ, London, for example, was the hour-long *Dandy* (2006), a more classical approach to filmmaking that, although containing all the elements of Bock’s signature absurdity, has an evident structured sense of narrative. *Dandy* will be shown as part of an exhibition focusing on his more recent cinematic work at the Schirn Kunsthalle in Frankfurt this June, with a clutch of films that range from *Skipholt* (2005), the epic set in the Icelandic tundra, to *Gast* (2004), the hilarious sci-fi adventures of a rabbit in a living room, and a new film shot in the Californian desert.

Bock’s work can seem rather puerile at first, or perhaps a straightforward practice rooted in ironic low-fi cobbling. But in fact the inveterate nonsense that almost chokes his films and videos, the tirades of gobbledygook and mayhem, comprise strata and strands of recognisable methodologies and motifs. He adopts the language of established disciplines and genres, committing malapropism and solipsism as an everyday act. In *Dandy* Bock plays an eccentric in cravat and tailcoat who, with his girdled assistant, Louise, executes ludicrous experiments: improving on nature with artificial appendages, shamanically facilitating the perfect poetry and attempting to concoct the most exquisite perfume from unmentionable ingredients. His character, Lautréamont (the pen name of the poet and surrealist icon Isidore Lucien Ducasse), is part homage to the diminutive aristocrat

Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec (the film was shot at Lautrec’s Chateau du Bosc in France) and part literary reference to Joris-Karl Huysmans’s neurotic aesthete character Des Esseintes in *Against Nature* (1884): there is a scene featuring a bejewelled tortoise, albeit rather low-fi, which in *Against Nature* dies because it cannot breathe through its gaudily encrusted and gilded shell. Bock adds his own dash of invention, however, with Louise rolling up the blank, in-between areas of carpet pattern as the tortoise pootles about, while the pair’s ceaseless and earnest tinkering with contraptions cobbled from roughly cut wood, foil, wire, paper clips and other quotidian consumables recalls more the delusional Don Quixote or children playing doctors and nurses than the high-minded Des Esseintes.

Bock’s attitude to history is clearly not what you would call reverential, but more unreservedly curious. He talks of reality and existence as if they were simply an episode of the journey towards abstract thought, which for him is ‘the best result that humans produce, as well as the worst’. His point is that the removal from empirical experience that abstract thought heralds is both the point at which artists have made unprecedented leaps unrestrained by convention – he gives the example of Malevich’s arrival at the black square – and the remove that enables people to kill and wage war. Intellectual distance from experience, he suggests, prompts the nihilistic as well as the ingenious.

This sort of ethical discussion may come as a surprise to those familiar with the raucous aspects of Bock’s work, but once you think about the implications of such irreverence and realise that a certain understanding of the history of ideas and events is a necessary prerequisite to subverting them so absolutely, Bock’s acerbic smartness becomes evident. His obvious relish for absurdity, sculptural eccentricity and nonsensical language is rooted in his admiration for, among many other things, the Bauhaus, the Theatre of the Absurd and the phonetic poetry of Hugo Ball. The ideology of Cabaret Voltaire, and Ball’s scored pieces such as *Caravan* (1916), developed out of a political desire to reproach the rising nationalism of post-First World War Europe. Ball’s goal of creating the total artwork, based on the ideas of ▶









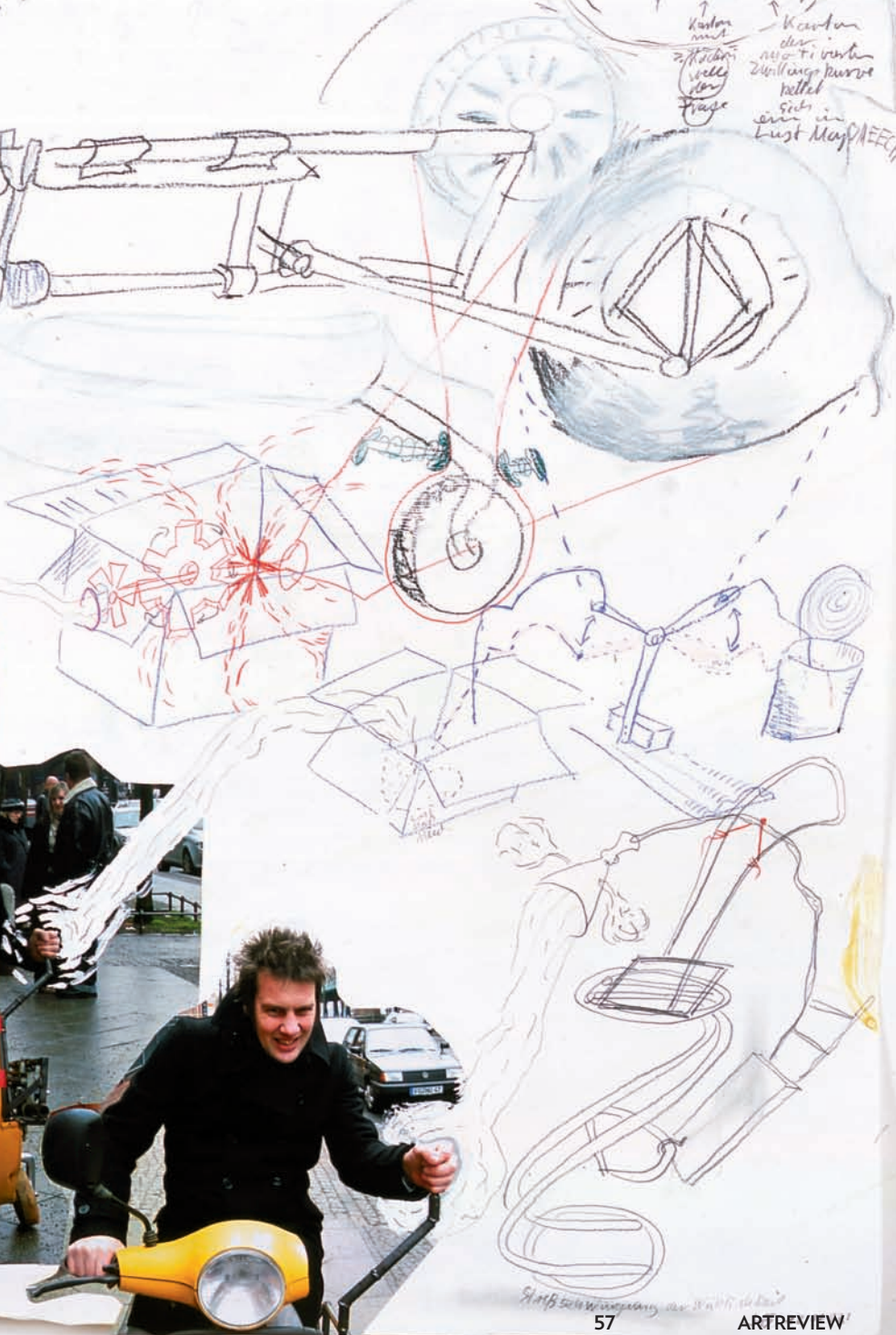
above: *Home Vespa*, 2007,  
yellow Vespa, steel, alarm, 172 x 94 x 114 cm.  
Courtesy Sadie Coles HQ, London

facing page: *Something stressful about a woman's curves*, 2007,  
graphite and collage on paper, 96 x 75 cm.  
Courtesy Sadie Coles HQ, London



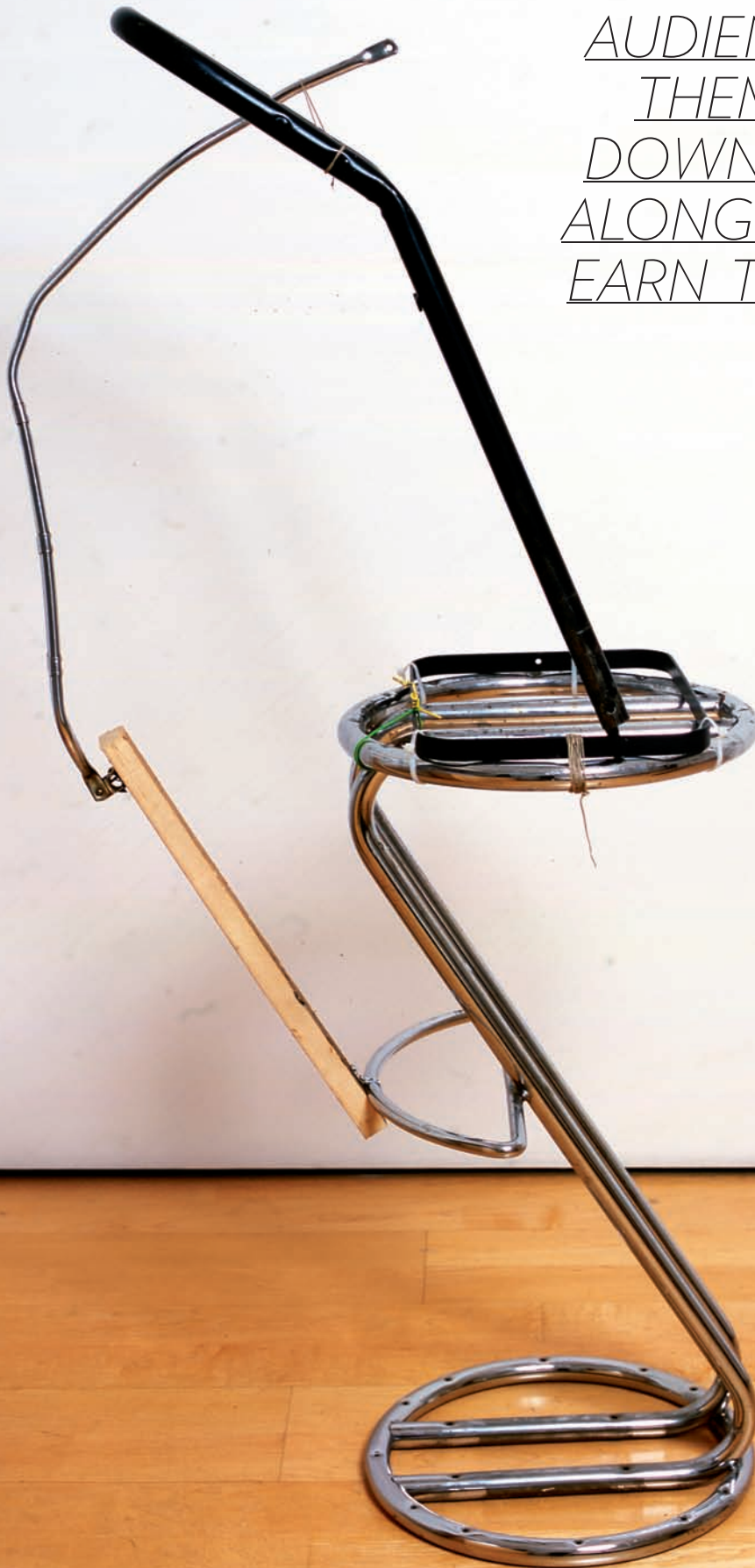
1. Kar 1. Kanten Hartstörck auf jeder Seite  
Silberhaufen neben antw. 12, Abrücken  
2. Kar 1. Kanten voll ab in Drecks Lage  
Zahnrad mit Klammern nach ein bricht  
Zacken Druck, Trummer in Jaspierstein  
Laf. rüber des Toten in eigen angelaufen  
3. Kar 1. Kanten abnehmend in Dreck hohle Tot  
ein gesagut mit Dreck 1700  
4. Dreck 1. Kanten  
Spray ansehungstun verlappt  
5. Dreck 1. Kanten  
Zwillings 1. Kanten  
Nieder, feller Klammern  
bloße die Mund Verhittel  
vermuppeltes Art gemessen  
6. Dreck 1. Kanten  
Schiff 1. Kanten  
7. Dreck 1. Kanten  
8. Dreck 1. Kanten  
9. Dreck 1. Kanten  
10. Dreck 1. Kanten  
11. Dreck 1. Kanten  
12. Dreck 1. Kanten  
13. Dreck 1. Kanten  
14. Dreck 1. Kanten  
15. Dreck 1. Kanten  
16. Dreck 1. Kanten  
17. Dreck 1. Kanten  
18. Dreck 1. Kanten  
19. Dreck 1. Kanten  
20. Dreck 1. Kanten  
21. Dreck 1. Kanten  
22. Dreck 1. Kanten  
23. Dreck 1. Kanten  
24. Dreck 1. Kanten  
25. Dreck 1. Kanten  
26. Dreck 1. Kanten  
27. Dreck 1. Kanten  
28. Dreck 1. Kanten  
29. Dreck 1. Kanten  
30. Dreck 1. Kanten  
31. Dreck 1. Kanten  
32. Dreck 1. Kanten  
33. Dreck 1. Kanten  
34. Dreck 1. Kanten  
35. Dreck 1. Kanten  
36. Dreck 1. Kanten  
37. Dreck 1. Kanten  
38. Dreck 1. Kanten  
39. Dreck 1. Kanten  
40. Dreck 1. Kanten  
41. Dreck 1. Kanten  
42. Dreck 1. Kanten  
43. Dreck 1. Kanten  
44. Dreck 1. Kanten  
45. Dreck 1. Kanten  
46. Dreck 1. Kanten  
47. Dreck 1. Kanten  
48. Dreck 1. Kanten  
49. Dreck 1. Kanten  
50. Dreck 1. Kanten  
51. Dreck 1. Kanten  
52. Dreck 1. Kanten  
53. Dreck 1. Kanten  
54. Dreck 1. Kanten  
55. Dreck 1. Kanten  
56. Dreck 1. Kanten  
57. Dreck 1. Kanten  
58. Dreck 1. Kanten  
59. Dreck 1. Kanten  
60. Dreck 1. Kanten  
61. Dreck 1. Kanten  
62. Dreck 1. Kanten  
63. Dreck 1. Kanten  
64. Dreck 1. Kanten  
65. Dreck 1. Kanten  
66. Dreck 1. Kanten  
67. Dreck 1. Kanten  
68. Dreck 1. Kanten  
69. Dreck 1. Kanten  
70. Dreck 1. Kanten  
71. Dreck 1. Kanten  
72. Dreck 1. Kanten  
73. Dreck 1. Kanten  
74. Dreck 1. Kanten  
75. Dreck 1. Kanten  
76. Dreck 1. Kanten  
77. Dreck 1. Kanten  
78. Dreck 1. Kanten  
79. Dreck 1. Kanten  
80. Dreck 1. Kanten  
81. Dreck 1. Kanten  
82. Dreck 1. Kanten  
83. Dreck 1. Kanten  
84. Dreck 1. Kanten  
85. Dreck 1. Kanten  
86. Dreck 1. Kanten  
87. Dreck 1. Kanten  
88. Dreck 1. Kanten  
89. Dreck 1. Kanten  
90. Dreck 1. Kanten  
91. Dreck 1. Kanten  
92. Dreck 1. Kanten  
93. Dreck 1. Kanten  
94. Dreck 1. Kanten  
95. Dreck 1. Kanten  
96. Dreck 1. Kanten  
97. Dreck 1. Kanten  
98. Dreck 1. Kanten  
99. Dreck 1. Kanten  
100. Dreck 1. Kanten

↑ Karbon  
mit  
↑ Karbon  
dis-  
sotiv  
Zerfalls-  
kurve  
helf  
sich  
ein in  
Lust May





BOCK LIKES TO  
MANIPULATE THE  
AUDIENCE, FORCING  
THEM TO STOOP  
DOWN OR CLAMBER  
ALONG A PASSAGE TO  
EARN THE SCREENING





above: *Klütterkammer*, 2004 (installation view, ICA, London).  
 Courtesy Klosterfelde, Berlin, Anton Kern, New York, and Giò Marconi, Milan

facing page: *Something stressful about a woman's curves*, 2007, steel chair, wire, wood, string,  
 136 x 57 x 37 cm. Courtesy Sadie Coles HQ, London

Kurt Schwitters, and his desire to unearth the essence of the utterance beyond conventions of language and meaning, were typically utopian of the era. Bock points out that he is not unconditionally appropriating an outmoded and short-lived gestalt, or even incorporating intact quotations, as he and Ball are in entirely different intellectual, economic and social circumstances, and yet there are points on which they converge. The total artwork persists to an extent in Bock's practice, as he collages images and ideas from across the board of archetypes, genres, atavisms and mythology, both ancient and modern (he refers to economics as the mythology of the twentieth century, arguing that it is as fictional, variegated and contingent as the classical myths). Such fusions of fact and fiction, invention and quotation, are intended to 'catch' the audience, to snare them on moments of recognition. Science-fiction motifs, from Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968) in particular, recur, as do ridiculous conglomerations of pseudo-scientific and economic terminology. We see the helmeted face of Kubrick's Dr Dave Bowman as he appears to encounter the rabbit in Bock's *Gast*, for example, and in *Skipholt* we might recognise an element from Tarkovsky's *Stalker* (1979) in a squid-like thing with plastic cups for a body, which Bock uses just like the bolts tied with bandages that the stalker employs to navigate the gravitational anomalies in the Zone.

Bock's interdisciplinary approach to film and performance seems a salute to Ball's unconstrained methodologies and the Bauhaus's fusion of forms, from theatre to design. *Erdmann* (2003) – an object puppet show conducted in a shed and tunnel, viewed as a live video feed by the audience outside – incorporates live and recorded modes of making, melding theatrical, filmic and painterly concerns. Its narrative construction, too, is heterogeneous, part storyboarded, part made-up on the hoof. Of a film treatment that is, say, 30 pages long, only three or so words are learned from each page, so that the main concept of the narrative is understood by Bock and the professional actors he works with, but no one ever quite achieves the state of 'acting'. As with most improvisation, the skill lies not in perpetually inventing everything from scratch, but devising routes through spaces and ways of interacting with sculptures, developing personal tics and word combinations and planning tactics for getting from one narrative point to another, all

while presenting the illusion of complete spontaneity. Particularly in the earlier videoed performances, this, along with the confined spaces in which the performances take place, creates a potent voyeuristic intensity.

Talking about his recent decision to concentrate on filmmaking rather than live performance, Bock describes the difficulty of performing at large art fairs and biennials, where the general hullabaloo detracts from any possibility of a concentrated viewing experience. He likes to manipulate the audience, forcing them to stoop down or clamber along a passage to earn the screening. In *Klütterkammer* (2004) at the ICA, London, for instance, the eccentric installation/group exhibition brought work by Sarah Lucas, Paul Thek, Sigmar Polke and other artists admired by Bock, or occupying a place in his art-historical lineage, together with such 'artefacts' as Rasputin's fingernails (a metafictional fabrication) and his own videos, which were installed so that viewers had to sit in a bathtub or crawl through splintering wood to view them. In contrast to this, the framing and installation of *Dandy* was oddly cursory. At Sadie Coles HQ, the artist's motorcycle and some improbable fabric/woollen sculptures were arranged inertly in the space next door, whereas the appearance within the film of his sculptural contraptions, made from off-cuts, vegetables, wire and unidentifiable stuff, seems much more suitable, retaining their centrality and vitality as interactive objects.

Bock says that these days he is more interested in architecture than anything else, although it is difficult to say how this manifests itself. Perhaps it foretells the further use of heritage locations, or explains why his previous choppy editing style, put to such brilliant effect in the frenetic and low-down, dirty *Boxer* (2002), has extended into longer connective narrative passages. But then again it's probably not a good idea to impose too much sense on such claims. Although Bock's flitting between forms and genre is not couched in such stringent political terms as those of the early-twentieth-century avant-garde, it is underpinned by a similar ideology. He persists in finding what he calls the 'glam', asking us to look, look again and look harder at the latent fascination of the universe. •

John Bock: Films *is on show at the Schirn Kunsthalle, Frankfurt, from 7 June to 23 September*