

ARTnews

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Spray The Ketchup, Fling the Lettuce

Groucho Marx meets Dr. Frankenstein in the hilarious multimedia extravaganzas of John Bock, whose improbable props include mayonnaise, cigarette butts, and artificial blood

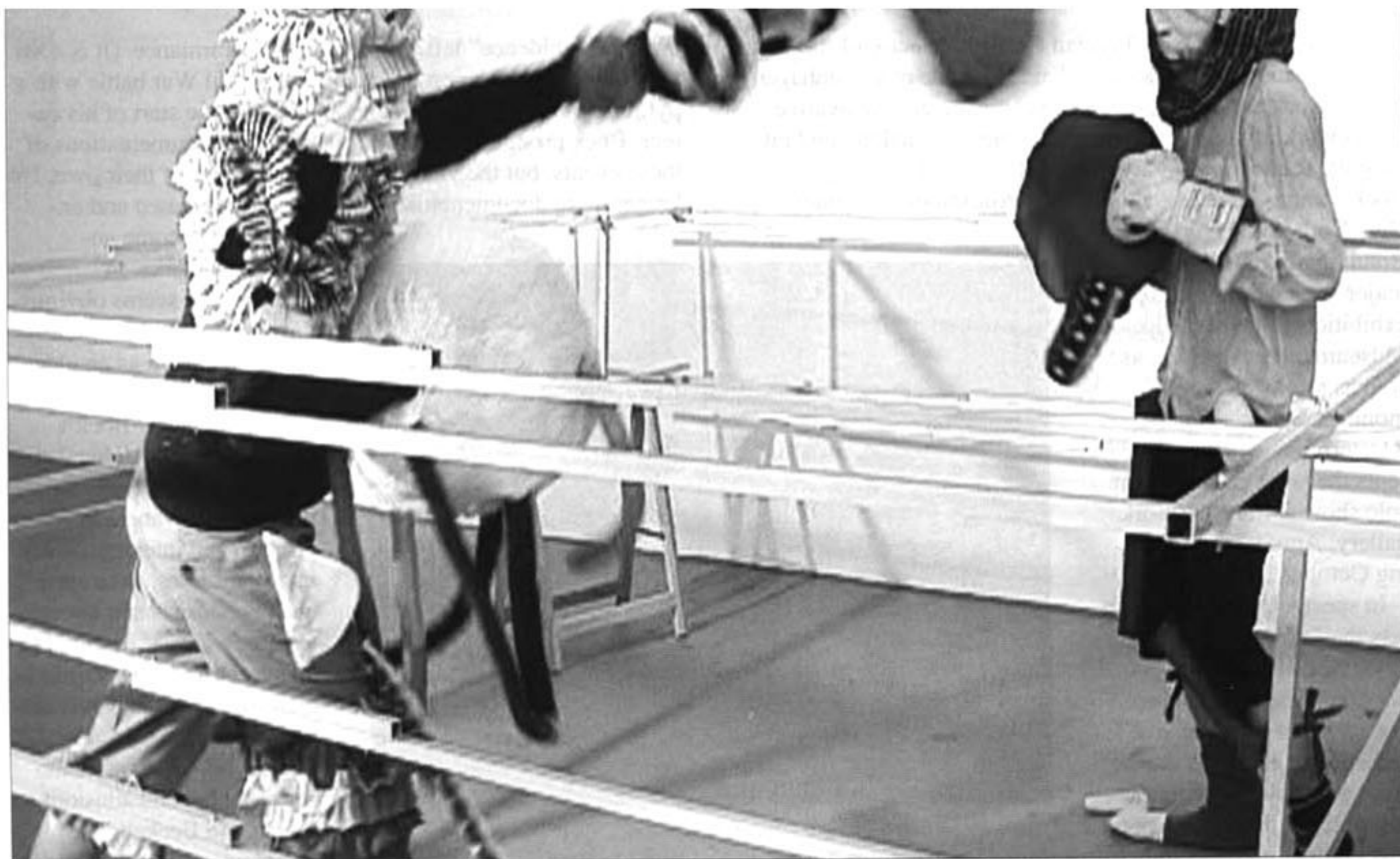
BY DAVID GALLOWAY

TOP Bock as shock-rocker Alice Cooper in 2001.
BOTTOM *ApproximationRezipientenbedürfniscomaUr-UltraUseMaterialMiniMaxi*, Bock's performance at the 1999 Venice Biennale.

OPPOSITE, TOP Heads and vegetables fly as two costumed figures duke it out in his film *Boxer*, 2002.

CENTER AND BOTTOM A masked actor and an Elvis impersonator in *World in Stage in Wood*, 2001.





With some 150 lectures and performances to his credit, most of them documented on video, and a growing number of films in which he takes the starring role, 40-year-old John Bock would hardly seem camera-shy. Yet he still feels awkward about the camera team that has trailed him in recent months, preparing a television documentary for ARTE, the French-German cultural channel, to be broadcast later this year. They have filmed the artist cobbling together the bizarre artifacts employed (and sometimes destroyed) during his performances, consulting with his Turkish tailor about the outfits he is designing for the hard-rock group Blackmail, and gleefully pushing the stroller of his 15-month-old daughter, Josephine, through the streets of Berlin. The German capital has been Bock's base for more than a decade. He moved here, "where the rents were cheaper and the streets wider," eight days after receiving his diploma from the School of Fine Arts in Hamburg.

When Bock made apple pancakes for the ARTE team, they filmed that event as well—after all, mayonnaise, oatmeal, ketchup, and whipped cream are among Bock's favorite mediums. It was also emblematic of the lack of separation between his private and professional lives. Bock's latest film, for instance, is being shot in his apartment, the contents of which may at some point find their way into an installation piece.

Bock's activities perfectly exemplify the blurring of distinctions between life and art propagated by the pioneering American performance artist Allan Kaprow. Indeed, Bock cites Kaprow's "Happenings" as a precedent—one that he has taken to calculatedly grotesque extremes. Bock's oeuvre has been



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derided as infantile, but Christian Gerther, director of the ARKEN Museum for Moderne Kunst outside of Copenhagen, praises Bock as "among the most promising and innovative artists working today" and describes him as "shaking and rattling the foundations of art with an unaffected intensity."

Bock's antics have landed him solo exhibitions in London, New York, São Paulo, and Bonn; this year brings a major installation in a group exhibition at the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam, as well as a solo show this month at Berlin's Galerie Klosterfelde, which represents the artist, and another solo show at his New York gallery, Anton Kern, opening October 20.

In spectacles that last from less than an hour to several days, Bock creates imaginary universes of epic proportions that build on and incorporate elements drawn from psychology, economics, politics, art history, popular culture, and everyday life. Improbable structures, props, and costumes are made specially for each event, and Bock's more elaborate constructions, with their rickety scaffolding, tunnels, towers, chutes, and claustrophobic dead ends, regularly challenge safety codes for public buildings. "I look for spaces in a museum not intended for exhibiting art, like storage rooms," Bock explains, "and work with whatever materials I find at a particular location—usually things that provoke domestic memories."

Within these multilayered environments, Bock delivers "lectures"—frenzied monologues in which language flows in a rushing stream, devoid of syntax and studded with compound or invented words. Throughout these extravaganzas runs the artist's contagious sense of humor: Groucho Marx meets Dr. Frankenstein. Bock's cherubic good looks heighten the absurdity of dramas in which he plays multiple, metamorphosing roles: hero and victim, dancer and disc jockey, acrobat and ringmaster.

Last year, at the opening of the Nationalgalerie Prize for Young Art exhibition at Berlin's Hamburger Bahnhof, for instance, Bock began a rambling, virtually unintelligible lecture that provoked a (rehearsed) physical attack by angry listeners. The lecturer flung himself through a (sugar-paned) window and, streaming with (artificial) blood, ran to a nearby bridge, followed by concerned audience members. There he read a manifesto and sprang from the bridge into a passing boat, where nine muses offered comfort. He had worked with a stuntman to perfect the sequence.

Bock's interdisciplinary fusion of language, fashion, film, video, performance, and installation makes his work virtually impossible to categorize. Audience participation is a frequent, unpredictable element, and Bock often asks fellow artists to join him in realizing a piece, as he did for his last show at Anton Kern, for which Bendix Harms was his collaborator. What results is difficult to capture in a filmed documentation

or in the "evidence" left behind after a performance. (It is a little like trying to suggest the reality of a Civil War battle with a pyramid of neatly stacked cannonballs.) At the start of his career, Bock produced straightforward video documentations of these events, but the videos soon took on lives of their own. No longer mere documentation, they were manipulated and ex-

panded to become autonomous works. In retrospect, it seems obvious that Bock would eventually move on to film as an independent medium.

At first glance, Bock's oeuvre seems anarchic, yet each piece is carefully scripted in advance. Improvisation and interaction play important roles, to be sure, but Bock insists that his written scenarios are essential to his pieces and productions in their own right, however difficult they may be to read. "Critics who look at them never get beyond allusions to Brecht and Beckett," he complains. "They don't look at the words themselves, and what I really do is to paint the objects with language, then cut them up. Language

Bock, in Beuysian mode, delivering a lecture *World in Stage in Wood*, 2001.

can be used like a jigsaw." Yet he admits that even patient listeners may be baffled by lines like those that open *Lombardi Bängli*, written for the Kunsthalle Basel in 1999:

Vietkong, King Kong, Vita / Eckberg, la dolce Vita /
Dolce & Gabbana / kick in the eye / Bela Lugosi, undead,
undead, undead / I'm dead, dead / I feel like
MegaMeMind, / I am
united aggressiveactiveactionamorph, / I live out my
RandyDandy / 100 percent. / The self lies out of the
triangle bush....

Let it be noted that *Lombardi Bängli* is one of Bock's more conventional texts, whose recognizable allusions to war and aggression, horror films, the beleaguered self, and the world of fashion are recurrent motifs. To date, Bock has produced some 4,000 pages of text, which he dreams of publishing in a facsimile edition, complete with the pasted-in photographs, drawings, diagrams, and scribbled notations that make the manuscripts every bit as complex as the live events for which they form the basis.

In the early years, Bock specialized in "suitcase performances," for which he arrived at a venue with a suitcase full of props, performed one of his pieces, then packed up and moved on. At first, these lectures often had an emphasis on economics (which he studied, along with fine arts, in Hamburg). The scripts soon widened to include jargon from other academic disciplines. Then came the first invitations to leave the "set" behind, along with a video, for those who had missed the performance itself. It was during this phase that Bock was asked to create a piece for the first Berlin Biennial in 1998,



with (artificial) blood, ran to a bridge, where he read a manifesto

where his work came to the attention of the legendary curator Harald Szeemann. In many ways, the young German seemed an incarnation of that spirit Szeemann had showcased at Documenta 5 in 1972 in a section titled "Individual Mythologies." The curator used the term to describe artists who saw art as a ritual in which the individual "attempts to confront the big disorder with an individual order all his own." Szeemann promptly invited the newcomer to participate in the 48th Venice Biennale the following year.

There Bock made his international breakthrough with a five-day performance titled *ApproximationRezipientenbedürfniscomaUrUltraUseMaterialMiniMax*. Critics and curators began to grope for ways to describe his revolutionary idiom. They were still doing so when Bock made his ebullient, circuslike appearance at Documenta 11 in Kassel in 2002. Some tried to align him with earlier avant-garde movements like Futurism, Constructivism, Surrealism, Dadaism, and Fluxus, while others pointed to existentialism, absurdist drama, and Happenings. A star-studded cast of alleged precursors, mentors, and comrades-in-arms has grown to include Antonin Artaud, Matthew Barney, Walter Benjamin, Joseph Beuys, Charlie Chaplin, Alice Cooper, Marcel Duchamp, Michel Foucault, Eugène Ionesco, Kaprow, Buster Keaton, Mike Kelley, John Maynard Keynes, Martin Kippenberger, Jean-François Lyotard, Otto Mühl, Pipilotti Rist, Dieter Roth, and Kurt Schwitters.

The artist also claims as an influence Wes Craven, whose splatter films Bock particularly admires, as evidenced in the heads of lettuce that fly through the air in *Boxer* (2002). The horror genre has proved a frequent source of inspiration. In his exhibition at London's Institute of Contemporary Arts in 2004, Bock even devoted an entire gallery to a screening of Douglas Hickox's 1973 film *Theater of Blood*, in which Vincent Price plays an actor who mounts an elaborate series of Shakespearean charades through which he takes murderous revenge on his critics.

There is validity to virtually the entire litany of sources typically cited in reviews of Bock's work, for the simple reason that he consciously acts as filter and transmitter of information. But few figures can rival the stature of Beuys in Bock's pantheon of influences. Direct references to the German guru's work can be seen, for example, in the blackboards that accompanied Bock's early lectures, and in *Gast* (2004), he realized an ironic restaging of Beuys's infamous attempt to teach art to a dead hare, with an assist from the family rabbit. (Bock reports, "He definitely likes being a film star.")

As did Beuys, Bock threads autobiographical allusions throughout his work. The London ICA show, for example, was entitled "Klütterkammer," a northern German word used to

describe a room in a farmhouse where odds and ends that might someday be of use for repairs are stored: clutter, in short. Bock, who was born in the northern German village of Gribbohm (current population: 500) and spent much of his childhood on a farm in Schleswig-Holstein, describes his Berlin studio in similar terms. "There's so much stuff around that most people don't even recognize it as a studio," he says.

For Bock, objects have a life of their own. "Don't forget the little things, like cigarette butts!" he warns. "The whole world is there." In his newest film, a bean plays a major role among a cast of small objects that move through a miniature dollhouse. "Then I suddenly cut from toy trees to real ones," he explains. "There's a high that comes from this interplay of large and small things. I feel like I'm wandering through the universe."

In the film *Meechfieber* (2004), a kind of sequel to an earlier video entitled *Astronaut* (2003), he becomes a spaceman. In *Skipolt* (2005) he is an intrepid explorer in old-fashioned aviator clothing who steadily makes his way across lava beds and glaciers, only to die a melodramatic death in the end. The quest motif is hard to miss, and one is tempted to force Bock's work into just such imported structures. But while recurrent phrases like "the recipient human" and "the Quasi-me" suggest a philosophical dimension, they may be no more than a parody of academic discourse.

Bock has been compared to the medieval fool, whose function was to amuse the court but who often had a private agenda of social and political criticism. His works, whose dramatis

personae include Rasputin and Mother Courage, brim with references to blood, aggression, torture, and apocalypse, yet they somehow maintain a mood of innocent amusement. The slides and towers, tree houses and tunnels, ladders and mazes in his sets echo a world of childhood adventure and imagination.

Last year Bock took a break from exhibitions and live performances to concentrate on filmmaking, which offers greater artistic control. "The problem with performing live and recording it on video," he says, "is that something is sure to go wrong. The microphone acts up, the camera angles are wrong,

the public fails to give the right response. Or people fall asleep." As he reflects on those possibilities, his eyes take on an intense, piercing gaze, as though he is attempting to translate some transcendent vision into mortal terms. Finally, he offers, by way of explanation: "If I'm working with a pepperoni, for example, you can actually see it in close-up, so that it acquires a character of its own." ■



The artist covered with unidentified liquid substances in *Astronaut*, 2003.