Projects 71 : John Bock : the Museum of Modern Art, New York, May 5-June 13, 2000

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john bock

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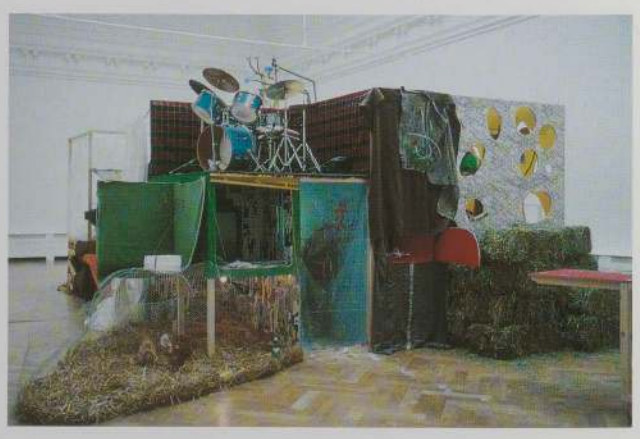
The John Bock Primer

Given: There are three elements in the work of Berlin-based artist John Bock.

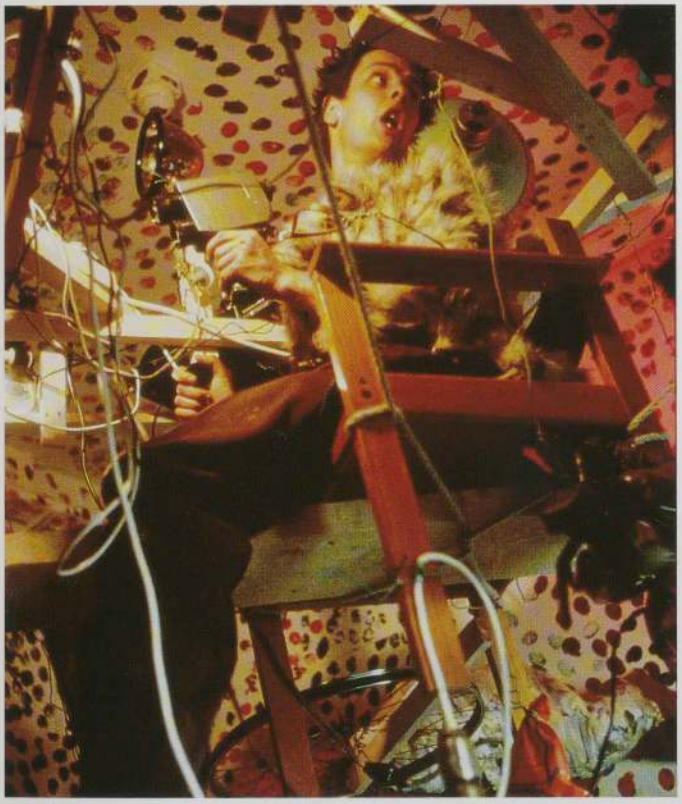
Element one consists of Bock's fantastic environments. Cobbled together of colorful junk picked up from everywhere—tin foil, appliances, plastic fruit, and cardboard—they range from multistoried labyrinthine dens to blue jays' nests secreted behind walls, on top of doors, in rafters, and under furniture. These environments can be seen as sculptures, and indeed Bock studied sculpture at the Hochschüle für Bildende Kunst in Hamburg. But they are also spaces for the artist to dwell—Bock spaces, Bock lairs, built by him and for him, all of them unmistakably imprinted with his presence. At the same time, however cleverly they are hidden from view or made difficult to access, they are not homes but rather habitats in which to observe the artist. Made to be exhibited, they are also stages on which Bock performs. As such, they are neither public nor private, but a weird conflation of the two. As Bock has declaimed from within one of these constructions, "I live in the inside world. I live in the outside world. I live outside in the inside world. I live inside in the outside world. I live in the inside-outside world!"[1]

Not to be forgotten are the Rube Goldberg–like devices that Bock arms himself with and the knitted and sewn objects that he wears when he performs. Although these objects and articles of clothing are lived-in, used, and often destroyed during his lectures, they are not props in the conventional sense because, according to the artist, it is the object that animates the action, not the other way around. When he abandons them in a gallery or museum, they serve as his mute surrogates. The clothes—lanky and off-balance—look like him, and the environments—complicated, untidy, and multileveled—are models for his lectures.



Lombardi Bängli. 1999. Installation view. Kunsthalle, Basel. Photo by Knut Klassen, courtesy Anton Kern Gallery, New York, and Klosterfelde Gallery, Berlin

Element two consists of these lectures, torrents of quasi-scientific, aesthetic, political, literary, and comic logorrhea, declaimed in German, English, French, and a mind-boggling mix of all three, often accompanied by diagrams and codes drawn on anything within reach. Lectures also often feature Bock executing elaborate pantomimes that incorporate objects, body-morphing costumes, or feats of physical daring including, but not limited to, squeezing worm-like, crawling snake-like, and falling sack-of-potatoes-like into spaces much too small for most lecturers.



The term "lecture" is one that Bock insists on, preferring it to the looser, artier "performance." It is also most surely a reference to one of the most important artists that postwar European art has produced, the late Joseph Beuys. An artist as well as a political activist and a teacher in his native Germany, Beuys's plan during his lifetime was to integrate these practices, to do no less than empower every person to make art of his or her life and create the greatest "social sculpture" of all—a democratic society. Beuys's thousands of drawings and diagrams, many produced during his lecture/performances given throughout Europe and the U.S. during the late sixties through the eighties, illustrate with Cartesian logic the process by which society could progress from chaos to a just form of government.

Bock has said that he admires aspects of Beuys's work (particularly his use of everyday materials and the way that space is formed within his arrangements of objects), but ultimately Bock's project is so different from that of the older artist that it is tempting not to see it as a correction, however gentle, of Beuys's messianism. Despite the Beuysian, pedagogic flavor of the term "lecture," Bock's purpose is not didactic. "I don't teach the audience," he has stated flatly. "The audience is intelligent. They don't need me."

Which bring us to the third crucial element constituting the work of John Bock and that is us.

left:
ApproximationRezipientenbedürfnis-comaUrUltraUseMaterialMiniMaxi. 1999. Lecture, *Venice Biennale*

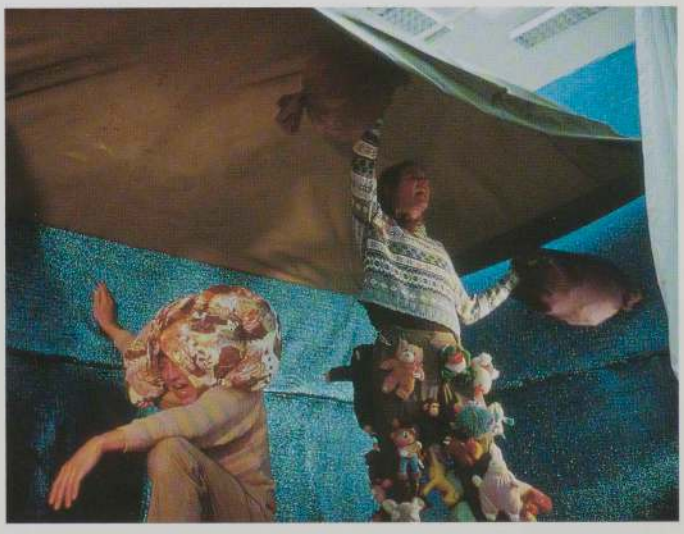
right:
NajAristotelesOchi–NICHTSABSOLUT. 1999. Lecture, part of the exhibition *The School of Athens*, Athens, Greece

below:
Lombardi Bängli. 1999. Lecture, Kunsthalle, Basel

Photos by Knut Klassen, courtesy Anton Kern Gallery, New York, and Klosterfelde Gallery, Berlin

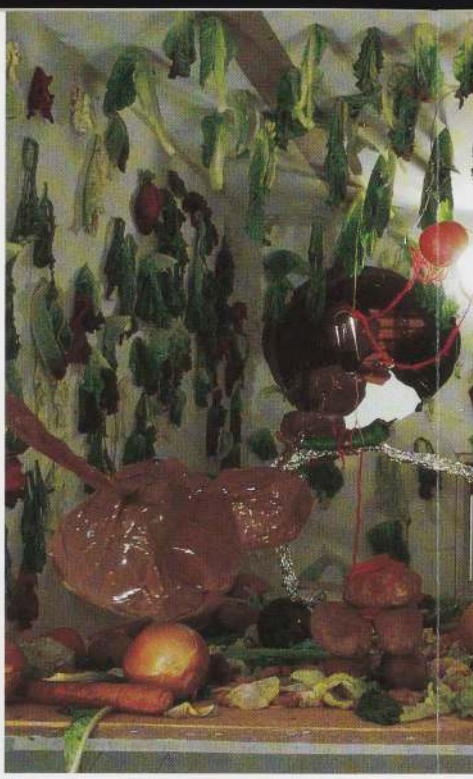
Element three is the audience. All of Bock's lectures have a common cause in their attempt to communicate in a significant manner with us through the sluggish atmosphere of what he has called the "heavy numb dumb world,"[2] and he utilizes myriad creative strategies to achieve it. Communication, like the environments he builds, has many levels, with connections often reached by circuitous, seemingly paradoxical routes. Bock has stated bluntly that his goal is to make us "see," yet his self-constructed redoubts are often impenetrable to any view but that of a video camera. Consumed with the desire to create an unmediated experience, he often mixes live and recorded action. Finally, in pursuit of profound understanding between himself and his audience, he speaks to us in a language that is purposely beyond our comprehension.

For *Projects 71* Bock presents four lectures in various areas of the Museum. Some will be performed live, others live on videotape. Still others will mix the two. How we, the audience, perceive Bock is what unites all of these works. In each of them, he has provided a different kind of screen between himself and his viewers. In the first work, a fashion show is narrated by Bock's disembodied voice; he does not even appear. The models, dressed in objects of his creation, serve as his surrogates. In the second work, Bock presents himself to us, but encased in a completely sealed box with five opaque sides and one of glass. The structure resembles a television set, and watching his performance through the glass, right there but as remote as if he were an electronic image, is a punning reference to "live" T.V. In the third lecture, Bock appears both "live" on tape and then in the flesh. In the fourth, Bock is completely hidden from view, encased in a box, performing his lecture while a photographer who is inside with him, snaps photographs. The audience will follow the action as still photographs are developed and displayed outside his confining structure.



It has been said that the illusion of reality is the strongest in the photographic mediums, particularly television and film. So convincing are the constructed realities of photos, movies, and T.V. that theater—the illusion of life play-acted—pales in comparison.[3] Writing at mid-century, the German playwright and activist Bertolt Brecht recognized this and to counter it set forth a series of strategies for the stage he called the "alienation effect." Devised to expose the simulated reality woven by the typical theatrical spectacle, and concomitantly to present the real reality of a play being acted, "alienating" techniques include the breaching of the proscenium that divides stage from audience by actors addressing the audience members directly, an actor retaining his or her own identity during the playing of a role, the exaggeration of gestures, and the unorthodox use of dialogue.

Although Bock's work is most often connected to a long line of performance artists, from the shamanic activities of Beuys and the rituals of the Viennese Aktionists[4] to the obscene clowning of the American Paul McCarthy, in the end it is theater that seems to be the most useful point of reference in understanding what Bock is doing. His insistence on the presentation of his performances on tape or through photographs is a contemporary manifestation of the Brechtian alienating tactics described above. Just as the outsized gestures of Brecht's actors gave the audience an opportunity to witness the difference between acting on stage and simply being, so Bock's live and taped antics



Maybe-Me-Be-Microworld. 1999. Lecture, installation view. Anton Kern Gallery, New York. Photo: Knut Klassen, courtesy Anton Kern Gallery, New York, and Klosterfelde Gallery, Berlin

give us the chance to examine the difference between live and recorded action. It might at first seem paradoxical, but Bock's use of photographic recording devices in his lectures is indicative of a desire to make his audience experience his events more directly.

Bock's dialogue, called by one critic "pseudo-scientific esthetic gibberish,"[5] is clearly an "alienating" technique as well. Despite his quasi-technical jargon, his on-the-spot diagrams, and his experiments with substances identifiable and not, it is impossible to follow the logic of Bock's lectures simply because there is none. Not precisely illogical, the world that Bock presents to us is a-logical, a place where points of reference such as up or down, real or artificial, chaos or form simply don't exist. This abandonment of discursive thought in favor of the freedom of absurdity not only recalls Brecht but also brings to mind the Theatre of the Absurd and the work of postwar playwrights like Eugène Ionesco and Samuel Beckett.[6] Although Ionesco defined absurdity as "that which is devoid of purpose,"[7] like Brecht's "epic" theater, the Theatre of the Absurd was an activist movement whose goal was to shock the audience into facing up to life "in its ultimate, stark reality."[8] Bock's obsession with his connection to the audience has led him to use devices that are similar to those found in Absurdist plays, including the comic proliferation of objects, repetition and doubling of dialogue and characters, and nonsensical sequences of action.

But it is in the way that Bock uses language that his deep commitment to the anti-rationalism of the absurd is most strongly expressed. According to the Absurdists, it is a rationalistic fallacy that language is the best vehicle with which to communicate human experience. Because words are understood by the ready-made, experience-based associations attached to them, the only way to break away from old associations to real experience is to communicate on a subverbal level.[9] Although all of his works are scripted, the dialogue in Bock's lectures, spoken in a mixture of at least three languages and referencing everything from physics to film stars to German Romantic poetry, is allusive but ultimately inexplicable.

Bock readily admits that his words are designed to keep the audience "between the limits of understanding and misunderstanding." We are meant to get only part of the story, enough to keep our interest, but not enough to string together a narrative. "The audience says, 'okay, okay, okay,' and then—'I don't understand'" Bock explains. Denying us the ability to understand his work through description, he opens us up to the possibility of a more direct method, that is, through experience, and also through empathy. At some basic level, neither above nor below language but perhaps beyond it, we understand Bock. We can relate to him as we have been able do to all the great clowns of the past century—Charlie Chaplin, Buster Keaton, Lucille Ball. Like them, he appears to be one of us. His lectures, however fantastic, are at their core, about the "little problems in life" that bedevil us all, and his progress through his self-created obstacle courses or his slapstick encounters with unwieldy objects remind us of our own untidy lives, with their crowded subways and kitchen mishaps. More importantly, what perhaps can only be called his heroic struggle to communicate with us, his audience, resonates deeply because it is our own struggle as well. Everyday we slog through the "heavy numb dumb world" hoping to connect and integrate, like Bock, with the profundity and absurdity of the experience of being.

Therefore:
"I think I am an object artist, then a lecture artist, then an audience artist," Bock said recently, "and in the end, I can fly."

The first three claims are self-evident; it is for the viewer to experience a lecture by Bock to test the validity of the last.

Laura Hoptman
Department of Drawings

Schedule of Lectures

Lecture 1: Multiple Quasi-Maybe-Me-Be updown
Friday, May 5, 2000
6:30–7:30 p.m., Garden Hall

Lecture 2: Intro-Inside-Cashflow-Box
Thursday, May 11, 2000
11:00 a.m.–5:00 p.m., Garden Hall

Lecture 3: MEECHfeverlump schmears the artwelfareelasticity
Friday, May 19, 2000
6:30–7:30 p.m., Café/Etc.

Lecture 4: Gribbohm meets Mini-Max-Society
Thursday, May 25, 2000
11:00 a.m.–5:00 p.m., Garden Hall

All lectures are free and open to the public with Museum admission.

Videotapes of Bock's lectures will be on view from May 6 to June 13 in the Garden Hall and Café/Etc.

biography

John Bock was born in 1965 in Gribbohm, Germany. Recent exhibitions and lectures include one-artist exhibitions at Klosterfelde Gallery, Berlin (1997, 2000), Anton Kern Gallery, New York (1999), and the Kunsthalle, Basel (1999). Bock has also participated in major international exhibitions including *Berlin/Berlin*, the First Berlin Biennale (1998), the *XLVIII Venice Biennale* (1999), and *Children of Berlin,* at P.S.1 Contemporary Art Museum in New York (1999), among others. He lives in Berlin.

notes

1 John Bock, *Maybe-Me-Be-Microworld*. Lecture at Anton Kern Gallery, New York, February, 17, 1999.

2 Ibid.

3 See Martin Esslin, *Brief Chronicles: Essays on Modern Theatre* (London: Maurice Temple Smith Ltd., 1970).

4 See Yilmaz Dziewior, "Bock: The Receiver's Due, " *Art Text*, February–April 2000, pp. 62–65.

5 Roberta Smith, "John Bock," *The New York Times*, March 19, 1999, p. 3.

6 Martin Esslin, *The Theatre of the Absurd* (London: Penguin Books, 1980), p. 24.

7 Quoted in ibid., p. 23.

8 Esslin, *The Theatre of the Absurd*, p. 401.

9 Ibid., p. 194.

acknowledgments

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The **projects** series is sponsored by Peter Norton.

cover: *Koppel op Kop*. 1999. Lecture, Kunstverein Freiburg. Photo: Knut Klassen, courtesy Anton Kern Gallery, New York, and Klosterfelde Gallery, Berlin