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

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“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 a description of his methodology had been any more sensible I would be familiar with the raucous aspects of Bock’s work, but once you think about the implications of such irreverence and realise that a certain 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
WANDERING AROUND THE CRUMBLING DOWNTOWN GARMENT DISTRICT, THE ARTIST WOULD OFTEN SCAVENGE THE BASIC...

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planning tactics for getting from one narrative point to another, all with sculptures, developing personal tics and word combinations and scratch, but devising routes through spaces and ways of interacting. Improvisation, the skill lies not in perpetually inventing everything from scratch, but devising routes through spaces and ways of interacting. 

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 Gast 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 abject 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 biennales, 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 where 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 Rower (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.