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
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

David Galloway is a freelance curator and critic who divides his time between Wuppertal, Germany, and Forcalquier, France.
He flung himself through a (sugar-paned) window and, streaming
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 rat-
tting 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 imagi-
nary universes of epic pro-
portions that build on and
incorporate elements drawn
from psychology, econom-
ics, politics, art history, pop-
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, regu-
larly 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 do-

corative memories.”

Within these multilayered environments, Bock delivers “lec-
tures”—frenzied monologues in which language flows in
a rushing stream, devoid of syntax and studied 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 absur-
dity 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 in-
stance, Bock began a rambling, virtually unintelligible lecture
that provoked a (rehearsed) physical attack by angry listeners.
The lecturer slung 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 lit-
tle like trying to suggest the reality of a Civil War battle with a
pyramid of neatly stacked cannonballs.) At the start of his ca-

cerrer, 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-

canded to become auto-


Bock, In Beuysian
mode, delivering a
lecture World in

This article has been adapted from an article in ARTnews, May 2006.
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 ApproximationRezipientenbedürfniscom oderUltraUseMaterialMiniMax. Critics and curators began to grope for ways to describe his revolutionary idiom. They were still doing so when Bock made his ebullient, circus-like 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 existentialist, 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-Francois Lyotard, Otto Muhl, 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 2004 exhibition at London’s Institute of Contemporary Arts, 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 Shakespearan 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 deaf 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 “Klitterkammer,” 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 Skipoli (2005) he is an intrepid explorer in old-fashioned aviation 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 dramatic 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."