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I N T E R N A T I O N A L



JOHN BOCK

INTRODUCED BY RONALD JONES

MUSEUM AS MUSE

BY THOMAS CROW

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OPENINGS

JOHN BOCK

RONALD JONES

Ensconced in the cramped, nethermost level of a makeshift three-tiered Dantesque universe, the artist busies himself with some nasty alchemy. His materia prima: some vile, puslike goo. His laboratory: a tangle of tubes, cables, and wires feeding an ad hoc array of whining machines in a space suggesting a MIR space station teetering on the edge of total dysfunction. Sporting one of those grimy Russian tank helmets that resemble vintage college-football headgear à la Red Grange, our protagonist is in full-throttle mode as he goes through a set of routines apparently designed to produce "suffering in the artist." Crying out in largely incoherent German, he subjects himself to various trials—including a lashing from green peppers attached to a spinning Mixmaster—before slithering through a narrow passage up to the next tier. Popping through to level two, he finds his head and arms sheathed in plastic—a homemade bubble bodysuit—recalling all those space-age "white rooms" where workers "safely" handle virulent materials, from Ebola to spent uranium. If this bizarre real-time adven-

ture, careening in and out of focus and wreaking havoc with everyday perception, begins to suggest some incipient allegory of the reception and creation of art—then you are closing in on John Bock.

In spirit and style, Bock's debut in New York at the Anton Kern Gallery, *Maybe-Me-Be-Microworld*, 1999, recalls the artist's earlier performances, in which the illusion of theater gave way to improvisational spontaneity and direct audience contact. The impulsive rhythms of Bock's "new theater" evoke the history of circus clowning, commedia dell'arte, and burlesque as well as his art-school education in Hamburg; that city's rich theatrical milieu has obviously left its mark. In "Young Scene 1998," held at the Wiener Secession last summer, he carried on inside another multilevel structure, this time a homemade tower comprising five distinct levels, his performance visible over a live television feed to those gathered below the makeshift turret. The New York

Bock negotiates the long-standing polemic between the Brechtian narrative and the Absurdist poetic image, between a social and psychological reali-

the frogs to be cooperative subjects and to n along his diagram "from point A to point B," he qu discovers that, well, frogs will be frogs. As they away from Bock's terrorizing grasp, he resolu announces his conclusion: "Can't reach! This variable!" Of course, this "lab/studio" is a parab creativity, the pseudoscientific scene recalling Beu

blackboard arcana, themselves an echo of lones privileging of the powers of creative instinct i rational inquiry.

Yet Bock's relationship to Beuys—the shaman precursor is directly referenced in the multilay garb and multiple duffels—seems to partake as r of parody as homage. Even in the second level, w Bock's manifesto-like call for creative action n overtly brings Beuys to mind, there is none of the relevance associated with the Düsseldorf g Instead we find a fresh-faced playfulness to Bo brisk lectures, elaborately unfolding formulas stumble along in broken English or tongue-German, something simultaneously more open-en and much more theatrical than what currently pas for performance art.

In the third and uppermost region, a kind of E where Bock plays Adam to a nurturing Eve costur in vegetables and bread, the female character spe in a nonsensical and elliptical language of the "e: nal" reception of art. In a meandering singsong v she rambles on about the development of "milk fi art welfare" and its destiny in the "heavy numb-di world." Meanwhile, Bock is fiercely at work o mnemonic three-dimensional object: an arc of tin connecting two fruits, that serves as an idealized r of the creative dementia he has enacted in traver: the three levels. With this "poetic prologue," B moves into the gallery proper for a series of sr

audience, on the other hand, was able to stand a few feet away during most of the action. One of the segments that was mediated by closed-circuit camera involved his misadventures on tier two—the attempt to slip into the plastic sleeves and gloves of the bubble suit. Uncomfortably protected by his airless attire, Bock finds himself in a sterile white space empty but for five unusually large frogs. He abruptly begins a lecture making elementary diagrams on the floor and walls of the "lab" in a vague attempt to illustrate the difference between rational behavior and instinctual action. Expecting

In this ongoing series, writers are invited to introduce the work of artists at the beginning of their careers



John Bock, *Lombardi Bangli*, 1999. Performance view, Kunsthalle Basel, 1999.



Above left, top and bottom: John Bock, *Lombardi Bangli*, 1999. Performance views, Kunsthalle Basel, 1999. Right: John Bock, *Maybe-Me-Be-Microworld*, 1999. Performance views, Anton Kern Gallery, New York, 1999.

dramas—some asinine, some incoherent, but each centered on one of the *Inferno*-like scenes/levels constructed for the performance.

In *Reflections: Essays on Modern Theater*, theorist Martin Esslin wrote: "In the cinema and on the television screen the illusion is much stronger, much more convincing, because there we watch segments of photographed reality; they really *are* magic windows into the lives of other people. Confronted with such overwhelming competition, the live theater must seek to establish areas of experience its audience cannot get in the mechanical, photographic mass media. And these areas of experience *must* lie in the region suggested by the adjective 'live.'" Bock's reinvention of theatricality has caught up with Esslin's prediction.

Bock, who was recently invited by Harald Szeemann to participate in this summer's Venice Biennale, has

provoked all manner of facile critical comparisons: Beuys, of course, but also the Viennese Aktionists, not to mention Paul McCarthy's slimy-bject playpens and Jason Rhoades's sloven-bject playpens—even Matthew Barney's sweeping epics. In a manner that the art of Beuys and Barney does not, the nucleus of Bock's efforts springs from deep roots in modern and avant-garde theater, above all in the "live." What's left over from the performances become trace elements that indeed look like the absurd constructions they are, but in no way replace or fully stand in for the artist's work.

To watch Bock move through his tower, to witness his melodramatic lectures and preposterous vignettes, is to see him propelled by a tradition unlike those of various art-world compatriots—in McCarthy's case, TV; in Barney's, film. And in this respect his work addresses

concerns that are more proper to the theater than the gallery. Indeed, he can be seen to negotiate the long-standing polemic between the Brechtian narrative and the Absurdist poetic image, between a social and a psychological reality. Should Bock continue along the trajectory predicted by his exhibitions and lectures, he will be in a position to bring together under the sign of theater what had once seemed antithetical. He might even confirm another prediction of Esslin's, this one from 1961: "It is my contention that, far from being contradictory and mutually exclusive methods, these two styles [Brechtian and Absurdist] are complementary and could well be fused in the future. And it is here that I see at least a possibility for a new and exciting step forward for the avant garde of drama." □

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