

# UNDER/CURRENT

## John Bock's Unorthodox Machines

Text by Yannis Tsitsovits



*This, opposite and following pages: Stills from Im Schatten der Made (In the Shadow of the Maggot) (2010), DVD Edition of 3. © the artist. Courtesy Anton Kern Gallery, New*

There's madness to the artist John Bock's method. A recent interview with him on German channel ZDF carries his signature haphazard style, quite literally writ large: he is responding to the questions with the aid of drawings. "No, no," he says. "It's not about being a good or bad artist. It's just a matter of terminology. Lady Gaga for example uses terms that speak to a large audience: sex, pseudo-avantgardism, fierceness, and fashion. But of course all these are based on other people's input. Now, where am I going with this? I'm not so sure myself." He rips the page off the large drawing pad and starts anew. "Oh yes: terms. Terms!" Bock scrawls two squares on the paper and colours in the right one, adding to it the initials UUUS. "And this is like a constant that's perpetually filled by society, the *Ur-Ultra-Use-Society*. It's like a big fat cow, with her terminology, that keeps giving milk. And from these interest-rate udders of hers there flows the milk." He points to the square on the left. "But if you try to answer without using these terms, you're in the realm of art or music. Although obviously there's a link between them."

The clip is just a grab sample of Bock's outlook and output, a seemingly anarchic melting pot encompassing performance, installation, film, music, economics, text, and a heavy dose of absurdism. At his 2010 commission for the Barbican, his largest to date in the UK, he toyed with architecture as well, creating a makeshift futuristic colony of shops and living spaces that hung from the walls like parasitic pods. (In true Bockian fashion, the show became the backdrop for a lecture, in which four actors staged a series of bizarre transactions in the structures' ovoid chambers). The year before, the artist had exhibited a group of smaller-scale but equally odd 'apparatuses' at Sadie Coles HQ, London. Largely made out of everyday materials – old tools, furniture, a bottle, wire, cushions, socks – they seemed to hint at mechanistic notions of cause-and-effect, only to undermine them with their glaring lack of function and ludicrous, longwinded titles.

The term 'sculptures' doesn't fully do justice to the trail of objects Bock leaves in his wake. They're closer to the Dadaist Kurt Schwitters' 'Merz constructions': collages and assemblages from the world's detritus, odds and ends merged into a comical pseudo-machinery of non-functioning pulleys, joints and levers. What Bock adds to the equation, however, is language. He has likened it to grease, implicitly suggesting that his works are vehicles of sorts for his clunky conceptualism, and he their revving motor.









*Strampellummel* (2009), mixed media, table: 46 x 43 x 115 cm, object: 55 x 60 x 135 cm. © the artist. Courtesy Sadie Coles HQ, London

Pinning such metaphors on Bock, however, is tricky, given his eagerness to parody the role of artist as First Mover and miraculous alchemist. A case in point: his latest film *Im Schatten der Made* (In the Shadow of the Maggot), a (mainly) black-and-white, mock-Expressionist romp reminiscent of the 1920 classic *The Cabinet of Dr Caligari*. The cast includes an artist-cum-mad-scientist, a girl called Merle, an automaton, and Bock himself as fiendish priest. One sequence has the scientist hamming it up in his laboratory, as he's about to turn a bottleful of murky goo into his doppelganger: close-ups of spiral tubes show the liquid spinning to a manic piano score. Both silly and hysterical, the scene pushes the commonly held links between artistic genius, madness and narcissism to their farcical conclusion. Yet in another sense it brings Bock's films full circle: his first video, in 1998, was a two-minute loop in which he plays a chef who is attacked by his ingredients. Amid all the apparent nonsense, Bock raises questions that lie at the heart of art-making. In what ways can an artist animate the inanimate? And, vice versa, how does matter steer and mould artistic practice? To what extent do we shape objects as they, in turn, shape us?

Significantly, *Im Schatten der Made* was commissioned by the Tinguely Museum in Basel. Tinguely was an artist famous for kinetic sculptures that grappled with ideas of surplus and overproduction. He was a member of the Nouveaux Réalistes, whose manifesto saw the world of objects as "impenetrable, growing alarmingly, alienated, a world of waste and chance, deprived of form, grotesque." Hence, they claimed, producing objects was "a saturation of the existing world with garbage." Worthy of Heath Robinson, Tinguely's works were often intricate but ultimately functionless. Eventually his strategy evolved into full-blown erasure, with self-destructing sculptures that challenged not only art's lack of use-value but its very reason for being.

In Bock's case, the challenge hinges less on self-destruction than a kind of sabotage, an ad-hoc aesthetics of improvisation, error and unusefulness. When he explains his theory on this point to me, I think of Walter Benjamin being ventriloquized by Delia Smith. "The unfinished element triggers a stimulus in the eye which leads to sabotage," he tells me. "When such a mistake creeps into the object and settles in enduringly, the object loses its original function and over time develops an existential function which grows beyond the craft. The existential function stays calmly in the object and can be awakened through the penetrative time-flat-cake. It is time to harvest the time-flat-cake so that the aura-aroma can flow out of the penetrated object. Such a scratched object with broken, dangling crank really screams for its harvest application – to free the aura-aroma onto the Ur-Ultra-Use-Society. Utopian is when one eats the Ur-Ultra-Use-Society."

As ever, nonetheless, the path towards this goal is strewn with obstacles. ("I do a lot of mistakes," Bock has said, "so it never happens.") This apparent malfunction took an interesting turn in his Barbican installation. Among the colony units Bock created was a vehicle designed to link up with the others, allowing for a variety of inter-structural combinations. The principle recalls the visionary blueprints of the British architectural group Archigram, especially Ron Herron's concept of a Walking City, which he envisioned as a giant pluggable and replenishable town-on-legs. But it's also a playful allusion to the exhibition site itself, the Barbican, a work of utopian design in its own right, whose Frobisher Crescent one level up was to originally include a shopping centre. Taking a cue, perhaps, from these unrealised plans, Bock undermined the futuristic claims laid out by his insect-like colony, filling it up with piles of vintage curios and bric-a-brac. "The human being forms a new way of living, like latching on to the ceiling," Bock tells me. "But he has to drag the old stuff along to fill the space. The innards are the second-hand and the outards are the future." If nothing else, it's an arresting image: the future as prosthetic growth, an exoskeleton projecting out from the nostalgic clutter of our past into what's yet to come.

*John Bock will be on show at 'I love ALDI', Wilhelm-Hack Museum, Ludwigshafen, from 26 November 2011 until 4 March 2012. 'Metamatics', a music performance with farming machine, is scheduled for January 2012 with All Art Initiatives, Amsterdam.*

*Opposite: Knicklenkung* (2009), mixed media, 142 x 107 x 46 cm © the artist. Courtesy Sadie Coles HQ, London

