

# frieze

## John Bock

SCHIRN KUNSTHALLE, FRANKFURT, GERMANY

A dim, strip-lit corridor, painted institutional green, lined with plastic waiting-room chairs and a hanging fly-catcher covered in dead insects: the place evokes an ill-kempt hospital or lunatic asylum, yet behind the doors lurk no white padded cells housing madmen but black cubes with the crazy antics of John Bock projected onto them. While film has, for some time, been a part of the artist's process – in which performances were recorded and then screened within their own detritus – in recent years Bock has veered away from his appearances to focus on film as his primary medium. In 2001 his first fully conceived short film, *Porzellan*, whose full title translates as 'Porcelain Isoschizo Kitchen Act of the Neurodermatitic Scrap Falling in the Coffee Maelstrom', saw Bock continuing the free-form wordplay of his 'lectures', whereby he strove to separate the pre-conscious associations inherent in words.

Set in a tiny kitchen, the film is, however, entirely wordless; the action is accompanied solely by the artist's exclamations, as the food he attempts to prepare flies up to attack him, staining his shirt and even setting him on fire. This ironic take on Viennese Actionism, with its stirring and pathological Lady-Macbeth-like scrubbing, is enacted in a 1 minute 40 second loop and edited into such a frenzy that the viewer's perception is overstrained to the point of discomfort. The malevolence of the food and the headache-inducing rapid-fire images make the film utterly riotous – both violent and comic. *Boxer* (2002) is shot and edited in a similar style. Here Bock and an opponent fight in fabulous costumes that fall apart as the sparring becomes more violent: ruffled arms ending in block hands split stuffed heads, cauliflower brains spill out and red cabbage blood spatters the walls. *Gast* (Guest, 2004) is no less entertaining but much gentler, as its protagonist, a hare that lollops around Bock's apartment, tries to familiarize itself with the artist's strange sculptural contraptions.

These earlier short films are humorous and incisive, commenting on the absurdities of life and our efforts to cope with mechanized modern existence, not unlike Chaplin's *Modern Times* (1936), and Bock's slapstick humour and childlike wonder at even the most ordinary objects is entirely engaging. They are also refreshingly devoid of Bock's ranting discourses, which have appeared in quite a number of works – as well as in *Meechfeber* (Meech Fever, 2004) and *Salon de béton* (Concrete Salon, 2005), though here voiced by serious film and theatre actors who speak with a less didactic and hysterical tone and who, by reading the gibberish in a modulated and thoughtful way, make it a more convincing form of communication. At almost 40 and 22 minutes long respectively, these earnest endeavours move out of the very contained spaces of the earlier films into more complex settings; the narratives – if one can call them that – develop from one-liner jokes ('It's not Beuys teaching a dead hare, but a live hare teaching Bock!') to more layered situations.



*Meechfeber* is set in the open spaces of a farm, where the agricultural machinery – a milking machine's cables and suckers, enormous calf-birthing forceps – is no less strange and grotesque than Bock's home-made barnyard contraptions, some of which pay homage to Fischli & Weiss' self-propelling objects. *Salon de béton*, meanwhile, takes place in a claustrophobic yet rambling concrete structure, where (among other things) French actress Anne Brochet tortures the artist while dressed in a kind of knitted octopus suit and is later chased by a huge aspirin, while a Dean Martin impersonator sits so high up on a cobbled-together chair that he is mashed up against the ceiling. Most intriguing in both these films are the fascinating sculptural objects and costumes that create haunting after-images: a hanging lamp made of neon tubes glowing in the dusty air, a tractor bedecked with wonderful knitted limbs and coils, a silver-suited monster strolling through a field causing a sensation amongst the otherwise docile cows.

The 58-minute *Dandy* (2006) doesn't fulfil the promise of these previous works, however. In it Bock turns to costume drama and falls back on conventional filmic formulae – the mad professor, the sexy assistant, the love interest, even an actual plot of sorts – and his sculptures are lost in the unnecessary attention given to period costumes, the set (Toulouse-Lautrec's château) and the overbearing force of his own presence in a lead role.

Bock's latest film *Palms* (2007) – made specifically for the Schirn – is in total contrast to this. The 58-minute murder/road movie, shot on America's West Coast and starring theatre and film actors Thomas Loibl and Rudolf Waldemar Brem, throws into startling relief how the disengagement from the cult of his own personality turns out to be Bock's cleverest move. The combination of serious actors utilizing his contraptions in a completely deadpan manner and uttering his trademark nonsensical language with forethought and aptitude reveals that, as a director more than as a performer, as a sculptor more than as a demagogue, he can be truly brilliant.

Amanda Coulson