

## JOHN BOCK

### *Monsieur et Monsieur, 2011*

video, 36 min 49 sec

Born in 1965 in Gribbohm, Germany lives and works in Berlin, Germany  
John Bock makes lectures, films and installations that combine and crosspollinate practices of language, theatre and sculpture in an absurd and complex fashion. He is known for producing surreal, disturbing and sometimes violent universes in which he manipulates fantasmagorical machines constructed out of waste and found objects. Bock actively collapses the borders of performance, video and installation art. Raised in a rural area of Germany (a background that he has drawn upon for his films involving tractors and rabbits), Bock came to prominence in the 6th Berlin Biennale (1998), the 48th Venice Biennale (1999) and Documenta 11 in Kassel (2002). He was initially known for his unpredictable, sprawling live performances in which he brings together uncanny costumes, jury-rigged sets made from tables, cupboards and simple machinery, and his own wildly discursive lecturing style. Clad in bright and excessive cloth appendages and covered in sickly materials, Bock interacts with handmade assemblages and inanimate objects that reference a range of social, scientific and philosophical structures.

Following the less florid practice of Joseph Beuys, the settings and objects remain in the exhibition space as installations in the aftermath of his lectures. Moving from early documentation videos of performances, Bock has recently begun to work on more complex videos and films that play with the structures and genres of cinema. He uses spectacular settings and costumes, rapid-fire editing, and a mix of sound and popular music to stage narratives that reference such broad fields as 1990s Hollywood cliché, 1970s Glam Rock and nineteenthcentury dandyism. He does not appear personally in *Monsieur et Monsieur, 2011*, the film shown here, but instead plays the role of director of this bizarre, kafkaesque nightmare.

## HISTORY OF PRACTICE

John Bock initially studied Business Administration before continuing his education under Franz Erhard Walther at the University of Fine Arts Hamburg until 1997. It was already during this time that he developed the format of lecture performance, which continues to shape his work today. One of the first, in 1992, entitled “Wie werde ich berühmt?” (How do I become famous?), explores the role of the artist, one’s own and social expectations and possible requirements and excessive demands. These actions somewhat misleadingly perhaps referred to as “lectures” unite Dada and absurd theater, the grotesque with self-irony and always directly involve the audience. Sometimes it becomes part of the actions, but often it becomes a mirror of his own presence.

Whereas Bock initially appeared alone on the stage, he was later joined by amateur and professional actors. All of them wear strange costumes, body additions or become part of organic-looking apparatus from which it is not unusual for a slimy liquid to drip. With time the “lectures” morphed into room-filling, sprawling installations, in which the props and costumes become artistic sculptures and objects. Bock builds tunnels that visitors can only negotiate bent over, or they have to clamber over swinging bridges or rickety stairs. What interests him is chaos, questioning safety and the norm.

*“His lectures are the attempt to re-define the world between drollery and absurdity. And this repeatedly produces moments of truth, which are concealed in playful seriousness,”* commented Peter Packesch, Director of Kunsthalle Basel, on the occasion of Bock’s exhibition there in 1999. That same year Bock participated in the Venice Biennale, and three years later, in 2002, in documenta 11 in Kassel.

Bock lays no claims to consistency, clarity or narrative logic. Only a few pairs of terms or even sentences are to be understood in his actions. He loves playing with allusions, which might not intend to be or even be allusions at all. He leaves it to the viewers to find cross-references or links. These exist in an art-historical context with the Surrealists, in Dada and in Fluxus. However, Franz West and Ed Kienholz are also points of reference in his highly diverse work. Yet his works are also always characterized by a particularly playful kind of institutional criticism. Not without reason are his installations pretty much the antithesis of the aseptic white cubes of the art business. He establishes a counterpoint to the reduced exhibition rooms in which everything is spick and span and reduced to the bare essentials. His works sprawl, take up the entire room, they are colorful and startling – and capable of repeatedly shaking up his audience.



Since 2001 he has also produced numerous film and video works, whose visual language is strongly based on the performances. Much seems to be improvised and to have been created using the simplest of means, the individual genres are combined with one another in a bold manner, and the result is a collage of text and image, which can be regarded as being completely removed from a specific time frame.

In 2010, John Bock was invited to produce something as curator and artist for the Temporäre Kunsthalle in Berlin. Bock incorporated into a hybrid of tree house and climbing frame numerous cavities and niches, and into these he installed additional art. In doing so he employed a wide variety of works from all art-related disciplines, from fashion design to “relics” of well-known actors, and integrated works by over 30 artists. He created a multimedia artwork, which might not have afforded the countless individual works of art much space, but did offer them a visual proximity and thematic affinity, something sadly lacking in many group exhibitions. [TEXT BY DER KUNSTVEREIN, HAMBURG]