

# JOHN BOCK

## schizo-grunge



John Bock's sculptural installation at the ICA, 2004, possessed a peculiarly attractive infantile and demented quality. One could enter through plywood tunnels but there are two large doors. The tunnels are more of a challenge and an adventure. Fun and adventure are significant because this is where Bock's work wins over a broader spectrum of viewers than other, more obviously, high cultural manifestations. The photographs reproduced here show the tunnels and the strange things one sees when crawling through them: Annette Messager-like or Mike Kelley-like stuffed things hanging from the roof and apparently meaningless videos. It is all very confusing because it is such a different way of seeing art from the usual 'you can look but you can't touch' modus operandi.

Bock transforms the 'serious art' gallery into a playground/fun-fair populated with the cultural artifacts he has spawned. By constructing a gallery within the gallery we are presented with an alternative art space. This is the precise point where Bock's art becomes an important, transgressive contribution to High Culture.

The intellectual significance of Bock's work lies in the way



the expressionistic schizo identity is now programmatic

in which he frames art. The art gallery is the ultimate frame and by constructing a frame within a frame Bock both underscores and undermines this institutional framework. The various photographs videos, paintings, drawings and sculptures that inhabit the weird and wonderful art space within an art space that Bock constructs are attempts to deconstruct the institutional framing process.

These individual pieces on display complete with unobtrusive, no-frills, typed labels are simulations of art like the examples of 'modern art' or 'contemporary art' that might inhabit the set of a television drama. Bock's works of art are a subterfuge because the real work of art lies in his aggressive interrogation of the institutional spaces in which art is shown.

What was especially liberating about this installation was that it was difficult for the gallery 'police' to be sitting in each and every one of these cramped tunnels and dark rooms. They certainly tried their best but for the most part this labyrinth was unpolicable. One had the very rare opportunity to experience art without constant surveillance. One could even touch things, unheard of in the usual maximum security art gallery situation.

The viewer was most definitely immersed. When one crawled in these tunnels and climbed the ladders one noted not only their Arte Povera credentials but also the fact that they were sturdily constructed. However mad the architecture might seem it is actually structurally sound (the Health and Safety framework), which flags the fact that all the Bockian demented infantilism was actually a carefully constructed artifact.



The jumble of materials were the by now obligatory neo-Art Povera: chip board, polythene, scaffolding, plywood, cling wrap. And within this labyrinthine childrens' fun house are peppered Bock's videos and photography and sculptural constructions. Outstanding works were a giant stuffed toy-like insect, a dancing potato (remiscent of Fischli & Weiss) and a povera-esque mobile framed by a cling wrap anti-geo dome. There were also some apparently angstful works but they seemed somehow sweet in this environment.

There is a mix of the exalted and the profane in Bock's work. Indeed, there is a mix of whatever comes into this seemingly fevered mind (which of course is Bock's chosen *persona*). The conceptual painter Imants Tillers subjects appropriated fine art imagery to a meta-creative process. Bock certainly makes allusion to various artists. He also brings to bear all the additional media he can muster: video, sculpture, installation, photography: potentially, everything.

Bock attains the longstanding goal of creating a multimedia environment which stretches back at least to the 1960s. One can imagine the experience of this installation bringing back happy hippy memories of happenings back in the tripped out 1960s, but it also recalls that era's confusion and lack of direction.

If Bock is saying anything then it appears to be that it is OK to be confused. One might suggest that Bock takes us too far down the road to anything goes. But his installation is a tour de force and it *is* liberating in its own curious fashion. It is true that the emancipation ends when one steps outside Bock's theatre of art, but it was fun.

One could also call it a celebration of madness, but not



madness so much as a return to the mentality of childhood which most of us can still tune into (parenthood demands it). And when one considers this one discovers echoes of early twentieth century German Expressionism and the reverence for child art and the art of the insane evident in Der Blaue Reiter and Die Brücke.

This connection seems relevant as Bock is a German artist and expressionism was one of the major contributions made to modernity by early twentieth century German art. One can also cite the German neo-Expressionism of the 1980s: Anselm Kiefer, Jörg Immendorf, A. R. Penk, Georg Baselitz. But Bock's work cannot be reduced to expressionism. His is expressionism in the age of mass media, popular culture and consumerism. When one thinks of German Expressionism one immediately thinks of *angst* but although there are representational references to *angst* in Bock's work they are framed by the child-centred ambience of his fun house. If there is a central feature of Bock's work then it is child-likeness interwoven with madness. And if one wants to trace the lineage of that particular fabric then one can begin by consulting the pages of the *Blue Rider Almanac* (Kandinsky 1980??!!). But it is different now, more appropriational, less fraught with attempts at finding authentic human nature. Today we seem reconciled to the fact that there is no authentic human nature that we are instead, each one of us, capable of almost anything—the sum of a vast array of imported parts inscribed into us by a complex web of circumstances (genetic and environmental) subject to the order of chance. If there is any essence in Bock's work then it is to be found in this last point. tures of Bock wrapped up like a mummy in some

arte povera material peppered with razor blades we do not respond to it as we might in a different context. We look at it with the curiosity of a child rather than adopting the 'thinker pose' which seems to be the stereotypical response to 'Fine Art'. Or perhaps one might even take out a note book.