

# Alexandra Bircken

## — STRETCH

From 8 September to 17 December 2017

### Foreword

In 2010 the Kunstverein of Nuremberg and Crédac, working with the curator Kathleen Rahn, jointly mounted the show *Mental Archaeology* (Matti Braun, Thea Djordjadge and Jean-Luc Moulène). Along the same lines, we are now featuring the work of Alexandra Bircken, the inspiration behind our latest joint exhibition. Crédac is the most recent address for a show that has traveled to Hanover's Kunstverein and the Abteiberg Museum of Mönchengladbach in Germany. And importantly, it is the first solo show devoted to Alexandra Bircken in France. Crédac has also contributed to the accompanying catalogue.

What grabs and holds viewers' attention in Bircken's sculptural work is its plastic force, topicality, and clear desire to adopt a gender neutrality that one might characterize as "androgynous." All of which has surfaced again and again in Crédac's program of exhibitions and events over the last few years.

There is a great deal to say about the artist's career up to this point. She was interested in artmaking via fashion, studying in the 1990s at the prestigious Central St Martins College of Art and Design in London, and later created her own label with Alexander Faridi. Heavily influenced by these experiences, the work Bircken is now pursuing is very much bound up with current political affairs. "How can you be indifferent to the news coming at us every day," she observes in her interview with Kathleen Rahn, Susanne Titz and me for the catalogue. Her art also conjures up the things that have long haunted her, throwing light on the workings of an object, its private reality, the way it is constructed or assembled, be it a piece of clothing, a motorcycle, or a firearm. Each of them

has its particular instructions for use and characteristics, its own identity, just as the body has its own workings.

So when the artist makes an almost surgical cut in the process of creating some of her sculptures from existing objects, not only does Bircken deactivate them, she enhances them. While she views her treatment of the body or clothing as a leitmotif, her experiments with materials suggest an interest in the study of the body and skin as an organ, outfit, cellular structure, and an extremely vulnerable border between inside and outside. Dummies, clothing, damaged motorcycle suits are exhibited, with cuts and incisions like cutaway models. All of the spatial situations mounted by Bircken point up the interactions between humans and machines, a central, omnipresent subject that has been constantly evolving since the Industrial Revolution and which has come to include at least a century later the cyborg (from cybernetic organism), that human being who has been fitted out with mechanical grafts, and the replicant (first heard in the film *Blade Runner*), which is more akin to the human clone than the robot, unsettling the notion of the human condition and the question of gender.

The overall title of the three *STRETCH* exhibitions speaks for itself. *We wear clothes and we build houses for our skin is too fragile to protect us completely.* What touches us, what gets under our skin in Alexandra Bircken's work is that it is our permeability and penetrability that make us humans.

Claire Le Restif

*STRETCH* is Alexandra Bircken's first solo show in France, it has been jointly conceived by Kunstverein Hannover (dir. Kathleen Rahn / 1.10-27.11.2016), Museum Abteiberg, Mönchengladbach (dir. Susanne Titz / 26.03-25.06.2017)

and Crédac (dir. Claire Le Restif). The exhibition is supported by IFA.

### The works on display

#### — Room 1

#### 1. *Eva*, 2013 Bronze Collection Sprengel Museum, Hannover

The bronze sculpture *Eva* was cast over a sex doll that only reproduces the trunk of the female body. The fabric and seams of the original, like those of a stuffed animal or raggedy doll, lend the bronze a peculiar aspect while emphasizing the fetishist side of the doll, which lies somewhere between a sexual object and a cuddly bedmate. The archetypal position of the body and the cavity there, which is designed for inserting an artificial vagina, make utterly plain, however, the doll's unequivocal function.

#### 2. *Kirishima*, 2016 Motorcycle suit

This banged-up motorcycle suit straddles a wood post forming the central element of *Trolley II*. In her attraction to damaged suits the artist is especially interested in the worn areas that show the contact between human and animal skin and the asphalt. The leather form has been cut open like an animal skin transformed into a rug or a sewing pattern.

#### 3. *Trolley II*, 2016 Steel, wood, buffalo fur Collection Sprengel Museum, Hanovre

*Eva* and *Kirishima* are resting on a work with which they form an overall composition, *Trolley II*, a cluster of various shapes and materials. Looking like scaffolding of some kind, the structure is mounted on rollers that were originally designed for the rails in a Glasgow art center that is installed in a former tram factory. Mobility is an intrinsic part of

the work and, like *Walking House, Trolley II* can be seen as a shelter, a mobile house that can be set in motion by the swing of a pendulum. The buffalo tail stuck in one of the metal tubes acts like a protective talisman.

**4. AK47, 2016  
Arm**

This machine gun designed by Mikhail Kalashnikov in 1947, copies and knockoffs of which have since overrun the world, has met with the same fate as the shopping cart, the mobile office, and other Frigidaire refrigerators (i.e., the “fridge”). This particular arm has been absorbed into the popular vocabulary and now indistinctly covers a number of machine gun models. In her urge to see the insides and workings of things, Bircken has performed an autopsy of the gun, revealing its archaic simplicity. Hanging on a mirror like a pop figure, the dissected arm is forever removed from its earlier warrior status and has tipped over into the domain of the icon.

**5. Ducati Diana, 2014  
Motorcycle  
Collection particulière**

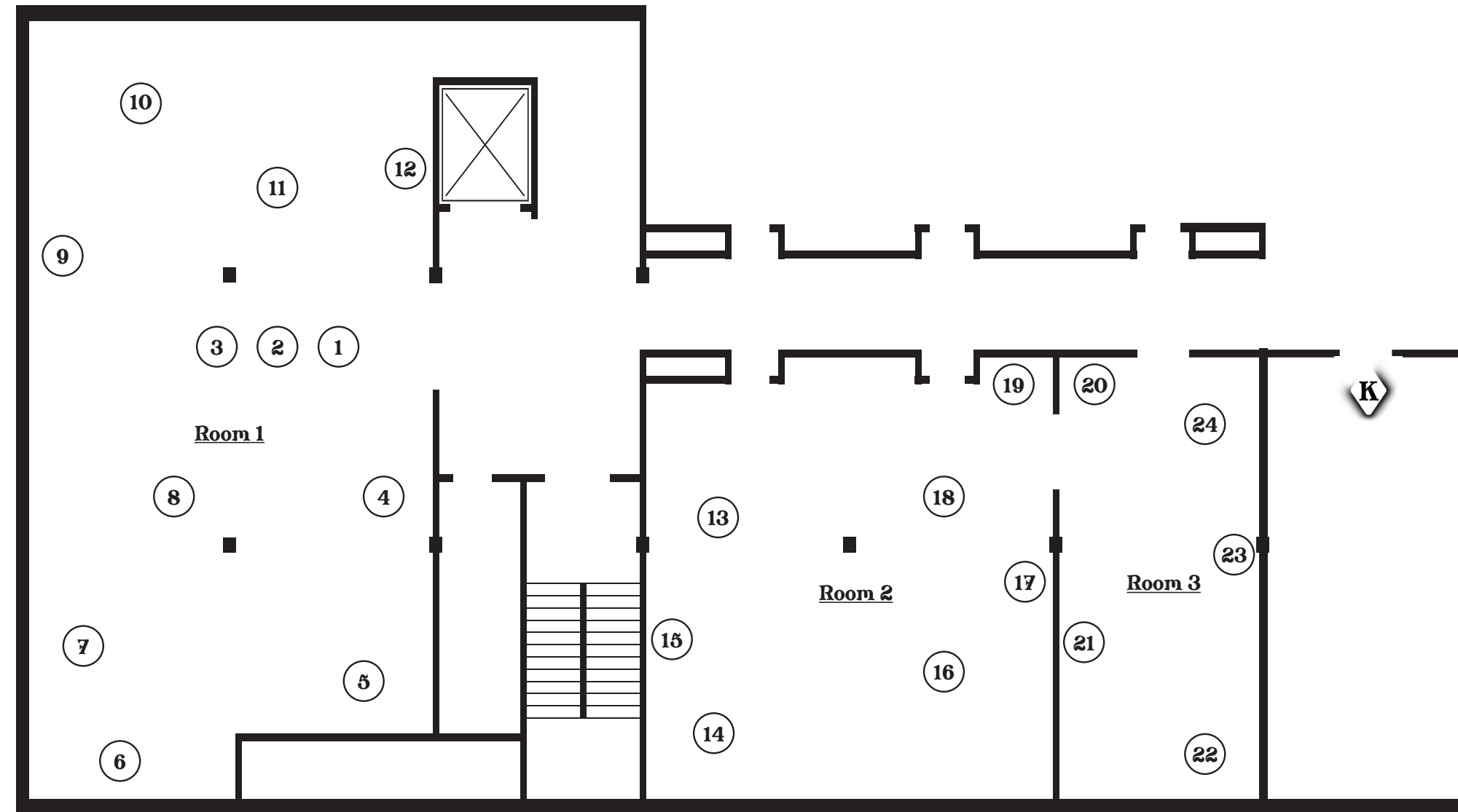
An emblematic model of the Ducati brand, the Diana 250 was developed in the early 1960s. The artist tackles this legendary bike, here in a modified version for racing, by slicing it lengthwise in two and spreading it out on the floor like a butterfly. Diana, the name of the Roman goddess of the hunt and nature, echoes *Janus*, another mechanical engine on display in the exhibition that has been reworked by the artist under the aegis of mythology.

**6. Timo, 2017  
Motorcyclist suit  
Collection Joelle et Eric Romba,  
Berlin**

The striking blocks of color and multiple logos and emblems adorning leather motorcyclist suits create an exceptional contrast with the worn spots, cuts, and shorn pieces of the leather itself. These uniforms are imprinted with the shape of the body, its posture, and the accidents it experienced, along with all the traces that evince the interaction of the human being and the machine. Like a second skin (kangaroo in this case), the animal skin protecting Timo the motorcyclist is displayed like a molted skin.

**7. Crown, 2014  
Maillechort (nickel silver)**

“The casts made from vaginas show not



only the visible outside of the female body but also its extension inside. The interior becomes visible and physical. I also wanted to show what can't be seen from the outside. Female sexuality is more invisible and hidden than the sexuality of men. I make art as a woman with what I know and show how it is.”

The sculpture exists at the interface, the melting point, between the undergarment and the body, the usually invisible point of friction which the artist has transcribed in one of the hardest materials possible, the very opposite of the elasticity of the skin and clothing enveloping it.

**8. New Model Army I - 5, 2016  
Dummies on a metal plate,  
nylon, leather, cotton wool**

This installation takes the name of both a British punk rock band that formed in 1980 and the marginal army of the Parliamentarians during the English Civil War (1645), known for its Puritanism and opposition to the Crown. Between

a fashion show and a military parade, these headless dummies set up in a row are of an indeterminate sex. Their hand-sewn clothing rests on various layers of cotton, cotton wool and pieces of leather from damaged motorcycle suits. The latter, slipped beneath the first layer of “skin,” form defensive outgrowths for these mutant bodies. They present a forceful contrast with the transparency and fluidity of the nylon stockings, which imitate the elasticity and color of human skin. Battered here and there and patched up, the dummies bear the still-fresh scars of their suture-seams.

**9. Wollkörper, 2016  
Wool, cotton wool**

*Wollkörper*, literally “wool body” in English, refers to this indistinct black shape resting in the exhibition space. This neutral body on which any imagination can project itself is named simply for the material making it up. Its form and materiality refer to a transitional object that has neither beginning nor end and acts

like a bond between the works surrounding it. It is also worth recalling that the term “body” can refer to an astronomical object or an imaginary being.

**10. Aprilia, 2016  
Motorcycle, metal stand  
Collection Philipp et Christina  
Schmitz-Morkramer, Hamburg**

Split along its length, this high-powered motorcycle demonstrates the tension between the brute force its gleaming body exudes and its surprising entrails, cleaned up and stripped of their cables. The surgical sectioning of this motorbike, which worked prior to the artist's intervention, destroys its usefulness and deactivates its dominating and dangerous potential. *Aprilia* refers to all things having to do with the month of April, from the Italian word *aprile*. Throughout Christianity, before the Julian calendar was reformed in 1582, the new year could begin on different dates in various parts of Europe, notably on 1 April; “opening” the year, the name is traditio-

nally said to be forged on the Latin root *aperire*, to open.

**11. Melanie Vitiligo, 2010  
Ski, human hair**

Like a surrealist piece of sculpture, *Melanie Vitiligo* associates a ski with two rows of human hair, brown and blonde, alluding to the depigmentation that is due to vitiligo (a skin disease). The first name Melanie, which is very popular in Germany, derives from the Greek *melanos*, meaning “black, dark, or murky.” It is likewise the root of melanin, the pigment produced by skin cells that gives the skin its color and protects it from ultraviolet rays of the sun.

**12. Tour de France, 2013  
Bicycle frame  
Collection Philipp et Christina  
Schmitz-Morkramer, Hamburg**

Unlike the other dismantled machines, this one is pared down to its frame only, asserting its presence with a light touch.

This Peugeot racing bike from the 1970s is made of lightened steel tubes. Chiseled and displayed on the wall in two parts that mirror one another, Tour de France seems like an abstract graphic sign.

— **Room 2**

**13. B.U.F.F., 2014  
Wood, foam, synthetic material,  
fabric, latex, metal**

These *Big Ugly Fat Fellows*, as the initials making up the title suggest, are also the nickname bestowed on the B-52 Stratofortress bomber used by the United States Air Force. Well padded out here, however, and made from latex-covered fabric, they show a different, pleasant side which lends them the look of clumsy oafish toys, suggesting either erotic monsters in a world of giants or cloddish bumbling characters.

**14. Storm, 2013  
Motorcycle suit, cotton felt  
Private collection**

A fall brings out the feeling of vulnerability that one can feel on a motorbike. Like a martyr, this traumatized body deprived of its limbs evinces the intensity and violence of that act and the undaunted courage of its behavior. The extravagant palette of vivid colors and the geometrical motifs recalling the 1990s lend a heroic dimension to this “character,” which may have been swept away by the storm of the piece's title.

**15. Trophy, 2016  
Maillechort (nickel silver)**

*Trophy* is cast in a one of the hardest, most rigid alloys. The hollow cast of a woman's vagina produces an erect shape here, proposing a negative physiognomy. The material used in this case differs radically from the properties of skin while recalling the iconography of the male member, magnified in classic sculpture. Its display at eye level and title reinforce the victorious dimension and pride that one might feel in showing off a trophy, for instance.

**16. Meiki, 2017  
Brushed bronze  
Collection particulière**

This bronze sculpture creates a transference similar to what occurs with *Eva*, i.e., a sexual accessory devoted to private use is transformed into a piece of sculpture that has become untouchable. The piece is cast from a silicon model and the artist tests the limits of its elasticity with nylon threads. The rawness of the dis-



play combined with the tortured aspect of this fragment of a body, reduced now to one function only, imbues the object with a violence that offers a striking contrast with the expensive character of the material.

### **17. *Uzi*, 2016** **Arm**

Developed by the Israeli Uziel Gal, this submachine gun, made from stamped metal leaf, has spread to over 50 countries since it first began to be manufactured in 1948. Cutting it in two not only reveals the inner life of this demilitarized object and its invaluable entrails, it transforms the arm's iconography into something that can now be read from other perspectives, including a Christ-like one.

### **18. *Janus*, 2016** **Motorcycle, metal stand**

The third two-wheeled machine in the show, this piece displays a bestiality and monstrosity that are well suited to the transformation carried out by the artist. The simple structural reversal here renders the traditional use of the motorcycle obsolete while paradoxically lending it an apparent form of life. It is an appearance that is emphasized by the title, which is borrowed from the Roman deity of beginnings and endings whose two-headed face is represented with one face turned to the past and the other to the future. The pleasure of being able to study the insides of this motorbike is coupled with the shape of a human figure stretched over the machine which renders the viewer's perception of a man-machine hybridization tangible.

### **19. *Techno Strick*, 2016** **Video HD, 31 min, loop**

The video shows from behind the scenes the device for producing mesh clothing. Repetitive and deafening, the mechanical movement contrasts with the organic texture of the woven fabric issuing from the process. The sound of the machinery echoes the noise that once filled the Metal Eyelet Factory, now home to Crédac.

— **Room 3**

### **20. *Rosa Parks*, 2013** **Wax, fabrics**

Pieces of woven cloth pressed into red wax make up this slice of a bust, which is akin to an artificial cross-section of the human body. This sketch of the female body recalls a number of images, above

all that fragment of a statue of Nefertiti (conserved in the Louvre) carved from red quartzite in the round, whose naked form seems swathed in a light pleated wrap. Showing through here are snap fasteners, braces, all those technical and occasionally restrictive elements that make a piece of clothing a practical object. On 1 December 1955 in Montgomery (Alabama, USA), the African-American activist Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat to a white passenger on a city bus; arrested by the police, she was issued a fine. She joined Martin Luther King and became a symbol of the struggle against racial segregation in the United States.

### **21. *Bruststück*, 2013** **Latex, wax, wool, fabric, shirt** **made from cellular fabric**

*Bruststück* is a casting of a woman's chest done in brown wax covered with a white fishnet fabric. Divided into four parts, the bosom is shown in a display case. This particular display, the material, the anatomical details reproduced by the separate slices—everything in the piece takes on a medical dimension that is sure to recall, for example, the wax body parts of the Museum of Castings of the Saint-Louis Hospital in Paris. The particular color and cut-up display of the parts lend the work the look of dried meat. And with its title, *Bruststück* phonetically conjures up *Brustbild*, which translates as "bust portrait." In this piece tinged with surrealism, the artist blends the classical heritage of the head-and-shoulders portrait and the still life, genres that punctuate the history of art.

### **22. *Walking House*, 2016** **Leather boot, plaster, wood,** **metal, wool**

This anthropomorphic house rests on one leg that is held steady by a work boot splattered with paint. Its roof is covered with a wool patchwork whose pieces form precarious walls that look like an incomplete coat. Two small pieces of plaster hanging inside serve as a needed counterweight and suggest two organs, a pair of kidneys, for instance. Its protective yet penetrable look also speaks of our human condition, vulnerabilities and the means we deploy to protect ourselves.

### **23. *Cocoon Club*, 2016** **Polyethylene, wood, wool, latex**

Hanging on the wall, this network of wool strands and knots and wood covered in latex and plastic sheaths recalls Wollkörper in the wealth of interpre-

tations the piece makes possible. The structure, whose use has to be worked out, condenses vegetal and animal shapes. The title of this burnt-looking composition imbues it with a comforting connotation nonetheless.

### **24. *Held*, 2016** **Bronze**

As in many of the works included in the exhibition, the title given to these bronze gloves springs from manufacturer's name figuring on the original object. Grammatically, *Held* in English conjures up both a past tense, i.e., of the verb to hold, and a past, that of the gloves' use in holding the handlebars of a bicycle. Reinterpreted in one of sculpture's classic materials and with the palms facing down, these gloves lose their everyday use and enter the field of art.

*All the works: Courtesy galleries BQ, Berlin and Herald St., London.*

## **Biography**

Alexandra Bircken was born in 1967 in Koln, Germany, where she lives and works. She is represented by galleries BQ, Berlin and Herald St., London.

## **Catalogue**

\* Alexandra Bircken, *STRETCH*  
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