

# frieze

## Alexandra Bircken

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*BQ, Berlin, Germany*



Alexandra Bircken, 'Alles muss raus!' (Everything must be let out!, 2009). Installation view

Since the gallery's move from Cologne to Berlin earlier this year, BQ's exhibitions have taken place at a series of temporary spaces. Given that these have been relatively unexceptional apartments, this has come to suggest an avoidance of the all-purpose gallery more than an explicitly site-specific programme. In this case, however, they have taken on a shop premises in one of the colonnaded arcades of a square designed, in 2001, in an extreme neo-classical idiom by the reactionary German architect, Hans Kollhoff. Alexandra Bircken brings a subversive strain of hippyish chaos to the stiff upper lip of the surroundings. Walking past the shopfront window you sense that some profound breach of decorum has been committed. Bircken's background is in fashion design, and fabric remains one of her staple materials; in an area of high-end boutiques, her display of threadbare hand-me-downs makes its own iconoclastic statement. The exhibition's title – which translates as 'Everything must be let out!' – suggests constraint giving way to liberation.

Bircken's work has always threatened to spill messily from its frames. It capitalizes on the tension between formal containers – the plinth, the picture frame – and the uncontrollable proliferation of her object making. Fabrics, organic matter (such as branches and food) and synthetic detritus combine to create composite, obliquely anthropomorphic forms. The accumulation of material here may sometimes recall a Jason Rhodes or Sarah Sze installation but such comparisons emphasize how Bircken is less concerned with the unfolding narrative sprawl of the objects than their potential to gel into startling juxtapositions. Old ingredients combine into new wholes with a theatrical flourish that is distantly related to the investing of dumb matter with life that occurs in figurative sculpture.



In this show, the habitual framing mechanisms have been subsumed, or become part of the activity. *AL LEGO RIE* (2009) has a roughly hewn wooden trunk support a block of primary-coloured Lego bricks. *Viss* (2009) stacks two office stools as a pedestal for Lego, pigment and an unprepossessing lump of grey concrete. A plastic water bottle protrudes somewhat phallically, its yellow neck like an embedded eye forced open.

The space is dominated by *Source* (2009), an installation arranged around a wooden structure – like the skeleton of an oversized child's playhouse – containing plants, food leftovers, wicker baskets, cardboard boxes overflowing with rags and a delicate mobile made out of used tea bags and light bulbs. It might be a refuge for the relics hoarded in your attic if you were born somewhere between the late 1960s and the early '70s. Nostalgia is the melancholic corollary of the found material, but it is always counterbalanced by the present-tense inventiveness of Bircken's process.

A series of large photographs leans against the back walls (*Knot Picture I, IV and V*, 2009). Mounted on chipboard in rough crate frames, they are multi-coloured close-ups of knitting, which a cursory glance might take for action painting, the skeins and stabs of wool imitating Abstract Expressionist brushstrokes. This illusion takes up a thread of ambiguity between what is real and what is fabricated: amidst *Source*, an old pancake, turning brown, is real, but a hunk of cheese is plastic; real grass grows out of the cross section of a mannequin, stood on the front window ledge (*Püppi gone astray*, 2009). Nothing is what it seems. We are brought to see afresh objects which have been rendered invisible by familiarity, to bypass the cultural associations with which they have automatically come to be linked and discover new ones.



*Püppi auf Abwegen* (Püppi gone astray, 2009)