I Don't Know was the title Birgit Jürgenssen gave to her last solo exhibition at Galerie Hubert Winter in Vienna in 2001. Two years later, in September 2003, the artist died at the age of only fifty-four, leaving a large and impressive estate. Based on her inexhaustible wealth of ideas, shrewd observation, and an incessant internal monologue, Jürgenssen created a multidimensional work that to this day exudes refreshing irony, provocative elegance, and a self-effacing presence.

To manage an estate, and particularly this estate, is a very sensitive challenge. It means understanding and decoding the complexity of a real person (or trying to do so), seeing her in terms of her local and aesthetic history, and gradually coming to understand the contexts in which she operated.

I Am. (ill. 48) as a confident artistic statement by Birgit Jürgenssen and the title of this retrospective, the comprehensive precision of this sentence stands symbolically for the obligations that managing this estate entails.

Who is Birgit Jürgenssen? This privileged view of an artistic oeuvre and its complex image, which Jürgenssen’s multifaceted approach certainly deconstructed, has to be reconstructed and then made visible. And she bequeathed us a remarkable image, a strong imprint. As Georges Didi-Huberman puts it:

»It is not possible to understand a technology—and thus also not an art—unless one attempts to grasp its anthropological dimension. In terms of its procedures and uses, the imprint is doubtless a product of ›that science of the concrete‹ of which Lévi-Strauss writes in the first chapter of The Savage Mind. Why? Because making an imprint always means creating a network of material relations, from which a concrete object emerges […] but which link up with a whole array of abstract relations, myths, phantasms, knowledge, etc.«
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Ohne Titel (Selbst mit Fellchen) 1974/1977

Birgit Jürgenssen: I Don't Know

Natascha Burger
As she got to know his work at an early age and began to imitate it. In her childhood she drew her first sketches in a school exercise book, the fascinating work of an eight-year-old that she light-heartedly called BICASSO Jürgenssen (see p. 117). As a child she had the nickname »Bi,« enjoying a playful symbiosis with the name Picasso, and she filled the pages of this thin school book with visual citations from the work of the Spanish painter. This was the first Jürgenssen sketchbook, later published as a facsimile.

The multilayered nature of the collage together with the absolute silence implied by the title Can You Hear the Grass Grow? is a very clear illustration of Jürgenssen's connection to and inspiration from nature. A self-portrait alongside various other cutouts, put together from her own stock of images, allows us to sense the artist's points of reference and interests at this time. It is the »the morphological features, the accidents, and the individual solutions« that Jürgenssen's artistic work brings forth, making any reading of it highly complex. The burning candle can be seen as an iconographic symbol of life, the flying crane is a holy bird in Japanese mythology and honored as a symbol of happiness and longevity. Stones are seen as symbols for endurance, strength, and power. Jürgenssen opted for a favorite stone of Georgia O'Keeffe, which the latter displays in her open palm. This American painter and her symbolic and deep relationship with nature must have greatly impressed Jürgenssen, and O'Keeffe figures a second time on the lower margin of the picture.

Human palms are unique and mysterious. Drawn by nature. In O'Keeffe's case covered over by nature. Birgit Jürgenssen was also fascinated by these so-called lifelines and brought these lines to life in her drawing Lifelines – Little Trees (ill. 21). Little blossoming trees that are planted in nature grow from a sensitive spot. The inside of the outstretched hand remains empty and open. These lines, which are supposed to reveal a person's fate, are passed on and over to nature. The drawing of the lines of the hand follows no logical pattern. In the black-and-white photograph these fateful lines seem to be covered up by nature, and in the fragmentary drawing of 1978 Palm Lines / Lifelines / Map for the Fortune Tellers the work's title gives a name to this mythical place (ill. 42).
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exhibition, Jürgenssen concentrates solely on the presentation of a section of forest, and here, with an interest in different vanishing points, confusion, and an anthology of seeing, she uses the «piece of forest» for further computer-generated collages (ill. 28, 29). With erotic and voyeuristic moments, Jürgenssen applies an ironic and critical eye as she integrates her black-and-white images into the forest scene.

«But, whether one deplores or rejoices in the fact, there are still zones in which savage thought, like savage species, is relatively protected. This is the case of art, to which our civilization accords the status of a national park, with all the advantages and inconveniences attending so artificial a formula; and it is particularly the case of so many as yet «uncleared» sectors of social life, where, through indifference or inability, and most often without our knowing why, primitive thought continues to flourish.»

Birgit Jürgenssen’s last exhibition is «sure» evidence of her irresistible quality and the multifacetedness of her use of media and means of expression. Unpredictably and knowingly, Jürgenssen operated in her own time. What remains is: «I am.» — «It is personal achievements that count. In the end, there is only the good drawing, the good photo, the good piece of work.»
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Zungenbeckschuh 1974
Lick-Tongue Shoe

Muskelschuh 1976
Muscle Shoe
I Am – Bicasso
Nicole Fritz
92
Hl. Sebastine
1983
St. Sebastine
123
Ohne Titel (The Party) 1973

Gleiche Wellenlänge?

1976

On the Same Wavelength?

157
Gleiche Wellenlänge? 1976
On the Same Wavelength?
Untitled (From the Series »Death Dance with Maiden«) 1979/1980
Über Titel (Aus der Serie »Totentanz mit Mäden«) 1979/1980
Untitled (From the Series »Death Dance with Maidens«)
Freed from Any Constraint

Ninja Walbers

10 Days – 100 Photos
1980/1981

Badeserie, Verletzung
1980

Bath Series, Wounding
Ohne Titel 1988/1989

Untitled

254
Selbstportrait mit Lampe 1979/1991
Self Portrait with Lamp
Untitled 1977
Birgit Jürgenssen is born on April 10 in Vienna.

At the age of eight, she begins to draw copies of works by Pablo Picasso in a school exercise book. Her signature »BICASSO Jürgenssen« is a combination of the name of the Spanish master and her own name. As a child she is called »Bi« by family and friends.

At fourteen she is given her first semi-automatic camera. Most of her photographs are of small objects she has made herself. As a teenager, she dances ballet and is a fan of Rudolf Nureyev.

«As far as I remember, I began to draw stories at the age of eight or nine in my brother's unused school exercise books. Some of my parents' friends were artists and people who lived unconventional lives. The stories my parents told me about them and about the large Picasso exhibition in Paris, as well as a book with pictures by Paul Klee we had at home, made me very curious, and so I tried to draw copies of everything that interested me. At the age of 14 I got my first semi-automatic camera and most of my photos were of small objects that I made myself. The aim was to do most of them in just one color.»
1949
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1957
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153 Ohne Titel / Untitled 1982/1983
Gouache, charcoal, oil on paper
100 × 65 cm
Estate Birgit Jürgenssen (z911)

154 Sklavin des Herzens / Slave of the Heart 1983
Gouache, pencil on handmade paper, heightened with white
38 × 56.4 cm
Estate Birgit Jürgenssen (z454)

155 Sklavin des Herzens / Slave of the Heart 1983
Gouache, pencil on handmade paper, heightened with white
38 × 56.4 cm
Estate Birgit Jürgenssen (z452)

156 Ohne Titel / Untitled 1979
SX-70 Polaroid
10.5 × 8.7 cm
Estate Birgit Jürgenssen (ph153)

157 Ohne Titel (Der Leichnam lebt) / Untitled (The Corpse Is Alive) 1979
SX-70 Polaroid
10.5 × 8.7 cm
Estate Birgit Jürgenssen (ph422)

158 Ohne Titel / Untitled 1979
SX-70 Polaroid
10.5 × 8.7 cm
Estate Birgit Jürgenssen (ph146)

159 Ohne Titel / Untitled 1979
SX-70 Polaroid
10.5 × 8.7 cm
Estate Birgit Jürgenssen (ph147)

160 Ohne Titel (Ranking) / Untitled (Ranking) 1999
Color photograph, laminated
69 × 50.5 cm
Estate Birgit Jürgenssen (ph1554)

161 Hausfrauen Küchenschürze / Housewife’s Kitchen Apron 1975
B/W photographs
39.3 × 27.5 cm each
Estate Birgit Jürgenssen (ph1578)

162 Ohne Titel / Untitled 1972/2001
Color photographs, triptych
11.2 × 26.1 cm
Estate Birgit Jürgenssen (ph671)

163 Ohne Titel / Untitled 1978
SX-70 Polaroid
10.5 × 8.7 cm
Estate Birgit Jürgenssen (ph134)

164 Ohne Titel (Totentanz mit Mädchen) / Untitled (Death Dance with Maidens) 1979/1980
B/W photograph, overpainted
39.5 × 29.5 cm
Estate Birgit Jürgenssen (ph2040)

B/W photograph
40 × 30 cm
Estate Birgit Jürgenssen (ed2)

166 Ohne Titel (Totentanz mit Mädchen) / Untitled (Death Dance with Maidens) 1979/1980
B/W photographs, polyptych
39 × 24.9 cm each
Estate Birgit Jürgenssen (ph1334–ph1347)

167 Ohne Titel (Aus der Serie »Totentanz mit Mädchen«) / Untitled (From the Series »Death Dance with Maidens«) 1979/1980
B/W photograph, overpainted
39.5 × 29.5 cm
Estate Birgit Jürgenssen (ph143)

168 Ohne Titel (Aus der Serie »Totentanz mit Maidens«) / Untitled (From the Series »Death Dance with Maidens«) 1979/1980
B/W photograph, overpainted
39.5 × 29.5 cm
Estate Birgit Jürgenssen (ph146)

169 Ohne Titel / Untitled 1978
SX-70 Polaroid
10.5 × 8.7 cm
Estate Birgit Jürgenssen (ph371)

170 Ohne Titel / Untitled 1979
SX-70 Polaroid
10.5 × 8.7 cm
Estate Birgit Jürgenssen (ph148)

171 Ohne Titel / Untitled 1979
SX-70 Polaroid
10.5 × 8.7 cm
Estate Birgit Jürgenssen (ph149)

172 Bodenerei, Verletzung / Bath Series, Wounding 1980
SX-70 Polaroids, artist’s frame
32.4 × 26.7 cm
Estate Birgit Jürgenssen (ph1405)
This mesmerizing collection of photography, drawing, and sculpture showcases the work of Birgit Jürgenssen, an Austrian avant-garde artist.

Birgit Jürgenssen (1949–2003), one of Austria’s leading avantgarde artists, was a strong feminist and fierce advocate for women in the arts. This volume draws on the comprehensive spectrum of Jürgenssen’s oeuvre, rooted in deconstructing stereotypical relationships. Starting in the late sixties, Jürgenssen’s early vibrant illustrations and surrealist, dreamlike photographs explored gender and societal restraints. Her hybrid human forms debunked gender codes and blurred the lines between humans, plants, and animals. This inspiring book reveals Jürgenssen's prescient and revolutionary work and reaffirms her legacy of challenging boundaries in art and in life.

This book is beautifully produced with tactile cover material and lavish paper changes.