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Holly Black, "This 1970s Artist Turned Her Body into Domestic Appliances," *AnOther*, April 19, 2018

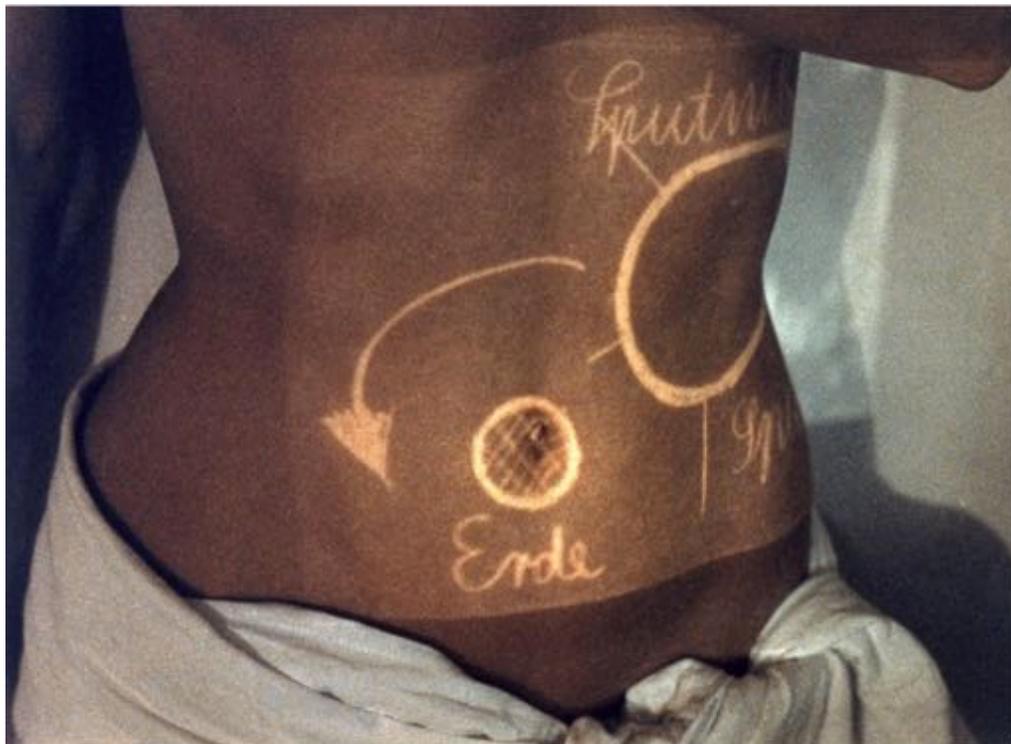
AnOther

Art & Photography / Who, What, Why

This 1970s Artist Turned Her Body into Domestic Appliances

— April 19, 2018 —

The female body and domestic labour collide in Austrian artist Birgit Jürgenssen's eerie, provocative performative photography



Untitled (Body projection), 1988 © Estate Birgit Jürgenssen, Courtesy Alison Jacques Gallery

Who? Though she died in 2003 at the early age of 54, Birgit Jürgenssen had a powerful impact on the feminism avant-garde of the 1970s. The Austrian artist broke open the male-dominated Viennese art world with her uncanny sculpture, drawings, performance and photography, which drew on the female experience within a domestic setting and the general clichés surrounding womanhood. Despite receiving only modest acclaim for most of her career, the enduring power of her imagery has come to represent the significant

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authority of self-portraiture within feminist art practices, much like the fellow Austrian artist VALIE EXPORT, whose brutal bodily performances act as something of a counterbalance to Jürgenssen's surreal and often playful subversions of traditional gender roles.

What? Throughout her career Jürgenssen continually investigated issues of labour, or what might commonly be referred to as 'women's work'. For example, her highly stylised portrait *In Küchenschürze (Housewife's Kitchen Apron)* depicts her dressed in an absurd apron that has actually morphed into a stove, complete with a resting loaf of bread. It is as if a woman should be indistinguishable from the kitchen she inhabits and, for an English-speaking audience at least, there is an easy parallel to be drawn with the saying 'a bun in the oven', which compounds the idea of a woman as domestic servant and child-bearer. Similarly, in the film *Fensterputzen (window-cleaning)*, Jürgenssen charts the disappointing realities of marital life. She literally becomes part of the furniture and fittings and begins to iron herself, as if she is truly at one with the domestic interior.



BIRGIT JÜRGENSSEN

Untitled (Body projection), 1988

© Estate Birgit Jürgenssen, Courtesy Alison Jacques Gallery

In both these instances there is an interesting Surrealist undercurrent, as familiar objects become something strangely linked with the body. She went even further in her later experimental photography, which moves beyond the utilitarian process of documentation and enters a celestial and mystic sphere. For example, her series from 1988 sees starry night skies and handwritten texts projected onto her nude body. The effect of the unusual light source emotes a sense of magical twilight, as if the artist is inhabiting her own parallel universe. By the 1990s she was constructing her own custom frames and transparencies to create even more compelling semi-installation photographs that investigate the opposing forces of light and dark; day and night. In *Narcissus and Echo [Diptych]*, for instance, a haunting image of a daffodil (usually so strongly associated

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with bright spring days) becomes shadowy and slightly unnerving. During this period the artist also experimented with more archaic forms of image-making including cyanotypes and photograms, both of which have a visceral quality that are closely associated with the earliest forms of nature photography.



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Untitled (Body projection), 1988

© Estate Birgit Jürgenssen, Courtesy Alison Jacques Gallery

Why? Jürgenssen's multidisciplinary practice has served as a powerful force for countering assumptions around 'natural femininity' and gender categorisation. Her absurdist imagery actively ridicules the ideal of the 1950s housewife and the fetishisation of the female form (especially traditional beauty standards) and she was never afraid to invoke humour in her efforts to subvert cultural norms. Her images still seem exceptionally relevant today, which is in part due to the truly compelling aesthetics of her practice, whether that be a hyper-Modernist sculpture-cum-outfit or alluring nocturnal images of nature. And now London-based readers can witness them in the flesh, too – Alison Jacques Gallery's new solo exhibition *Nocturnal Light* presents a broad selection of her later work across performative photography, painting, drawing and sculpture, deftly demonstrating that her critique of modern attitudes to gender is as relevant now as it was 50 years ago.

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Untitled, 1995

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