



# James Lee Byars A Study of Posterity

*Though James Lee Byars has been increasingly identified, since his death, with elegant, reductive objects, his most radical-and characteristic-works were ephemeral and even immaterial.*

BY THOMAS MCEVILLEY

James Lee Byars was born somewhere in America in 1932. He often used to say he was born

in the small town of Daylight,<sup>1</sup> Tenn., from which his family moved to Detroit during the Great Migration of the 1930s, when many rural and urban southerners, both black and white, moved north for work. But at other times he asserted that he was born in Detroit, though his family previously came up from Tennessee. In later years Byars said that he had once been offered a show at the Whitney Museum of American Art and had refused on the ground that he was "not an American artist." America meant to him—as to many—a commercial vulgarity in which his work supposedly did not participate. Still, at the end, he went into the earth as an American—though more or less an expatriate. When he died of cancer on May 23, 1997, in Cairo, Egypt, at age 65, he was buried in the American cemetery in Old Cairo. Since no headstone had been ordered, a tin can was

stripped of its paper wrapping, stamped flat and stuck into the loose dirt on top of his grave with his name and date written on it in black Magic Marker.

The previous winter Byars had been in Kyoto, a city among the many where he had maintained friendly contacts for years. I can't remember when he started phoning more often than usual. He was quite ill and this probably accelerated his usually active telephone use. He was calling me, and a few other friends, several times a day with no particular message. Then things changed and he moved on to Giza, Egypt, where he settled for the last three months of his life in the Mena House hotel (the hotel where Sadat and Begin signed their 1978 agreement). One day I got a new phone machine that had a display showing how many calls had been received; I realized that Byars had called me 12 times that day. A couple of days later the manager of the Mena House phoned and said he had seen my name and number frequently in Byars's phone records and thought he should tell me that Byars had gone into the intensive care unit of the Anglo-American Hospital. I flew to Egypt at once and spent his last days with him, discussing plans. By the time I got there, he looked



*Tin can used as a headstone at James Lee Byars's grave, Cairo, 1997. Photo Thomas McEvilley.*

*Opposite, Byars performing at the 1993 Venice Biennale. Photo Filippo Tritto. Courtesy Bildarchiv Preussischer Kulturbesitz/ Art Resource, New York. All works this article © Estate of James Lee Byars, courtesy Michael Werner Gallery, New York and Cologne.*

like the famous mummy of Ramses II when it was exhumed years ago to be flown to Paris to undergo repairs.

Neither of us, for some reason, thought he would die immediately. Rather, it seemed to both of us that he would probably last till about the end of the summer. I would try to get him to Venice, where he had long planned to be buried. Since he couldn't walk, this wasn't going to be easy. Even riding in a wheelchair was hard on him. Then, two or three days after my arrival, he died in the middle of the night.

The next morning, I got to the Anglo-American Hospital just after James's body had been carried out to a little cinder block building behind the hospital that may have been used for autopsies, as there was a stone-topped table with grooves for the runoff of fluids. The hospital said they had to put him there because they had no refrigerated area for stowing corpses. The undertaker would come soon and pick him up. I said I would wait with him until then.

Hours passed. No one could explain why it was taking so long. The day was hot and the body began to smell sweet.

Finally, after seven hours, the undertaker's van showed up. They took him away, and I went back to the hotel. As I stepped through the front door into the lobby I became aware of a disturbance in the middle of the room. Men were raising their voices and the hotel manager was trying to cool them down. One, it turned out, was an agent of an overseas services company that had been hired by Byars's widow to take possession of the contents of his room and send everything to her in Santa Fe. Another, representing Byars's principal art dealer, Michael Werner, argued that Werner had the rights to the stuff in the room because he had been paying the hotel bill. Finally the hotel manager decided for the widow's cause and ordered the room sealed until her representatives could get it packed up. There was also an argument over who should pay for the burial. That's why the undertaker was seven hours late: no one had agreed to pay him.

It was well known that, in the time he had spent dying in that hotel room, Byars had made perhaps 100 artworks, most, but not all, small. He had contracted with several local workshops-specialists in glass, leather, gold and papyrus. The making of the work was usually paid for by Werner on



*Byars calling out names from the top of the Fridericianum at Documenta Vin 1972. Photos this spread courtesy Michael Werner Gallery.*

the assumption that he would sooner or later recoup his investment-and maybe more-when the time came to sell the works to a more Byars-friendly market.<sup>2</sup> But Byars told me that the gallery had not paid the \$20,000 he owed to the Egyptian workshops, and he felt he could not leave Egypt without taking care of the debt. That's why he stayed in Giza so long and why he died there. He was, in effect, a prisoner in a five-star hotel for the last few weeks of his life.

Byars's work has never been given a major exhibition at an American museum. Some of the reasons for this go back to his abrasive personal behavior. He was a manic-depressive, and as the height of a manic phase approached he would become increasingly brazen and insulting. Perhaps partly because of this, his work was not acquired much by the collectors who sit on museum boards or otherwise influence institutional decision-making. Once Michael Werner and I were collaborating in an attempt to get Byars a big show at the Guggenheim-one that would occupy all the ramps. Tom Messer, director at the time, was a friend of mine, of Werner's and, for many years, of Byars's. The early meetings, without Byars present, seemed promising. Then Byars was brought into the discussion. "My first requirement," he said, "is that the entire museum be painted black inside and out-flat matte black" "You see," Messer said sadly to Werner and me after Byars's departure, "for me to give Byars a show would be to destroy my museum." Then he said one of those simple things that contains an almost frightening amount of truth. "I will give Byars a show," he said, "when he is dead."

Prospects abroad, however, were not so bleak. The main audience for Byars's work from the mid-'70s on was in Europe, especially but not exclusively northern Europe. His home bases were Bern, Kassel and Venice. The comparative popularity of his work in Europe reflected the realignment of the 1980s that left New York the main art center but no longer the only one. Cologne and Malmo, Thrin and Eindhoven, Diisseldorf and Paris all saw brilliant Byars shows over the years.

Byars was a classic dandy in an extreme sense, a phenomenon never

trusted in the U;S. but which had counted among its number some impressive Europeans. His extravagant gestures, garb, appearance, language, his wild drinking, his manic frenzies-these traits seemed in Europe to underscore his authenticity rather than call it into question. It's true there were bad times. A Dutch curator who organized a show in Rotterdam in which Byars appeared in an old tower as the Sage of Rotterdam-an appellation for Erasmus-told me the task of working with Byars was "a nightmare"; he looked genuinely ill at the remembrance of it and swore he would never do it again. On the other hand, Jiirgen Harten, when giving Byars the full-scale retrospective at the Dusseldorf Kunsthalle that the Guggenheim had turned down, concurred in Byars's request to paint the entire inside of the museum (not the outside) Pompeian red. And so it was done. At the opening Byars, who thought Harten's expensive catalogue looked too much like a missal, burned a copy of it in front of the museum. At least one German critic who was there and with whom I spoke later interpreted Byars's act as a reference to the Nazi book burnings of 1933. "You don't joke about that," he said in dead earnest. But Byars, hard as it might be to believe, did not even know about this Nazi precedent; it was the religious look of the book that offended him and prompted the burning. He did the same thing a year or two later when James Elliot gave him a show at the Berkeley Museum-with, again, an elaborate and beautiful catalogue that Byars again thought looked too religious (both these catalogues had narrow ribbon place-markers like those in hymnals, missals and bibles). Elliot's show, "The Perfect Thought," was the closest Byars came to being taken seriously in America-but that wasn't very close. Despite some critical coverage, including a short article in this publication [see *A. i.A.*, October '90], it seemed that Byars's friends were his principal audience.

But now things are starting to change. Byars has been dead for more than a decade. People in America are beginning to forget how obnoxious he was. It is becoming possible to look at his work without thinking

about his constant expressions of contempt for it. Even now, though, no major museum show has developed in the U.S. Meanwhile, in Europe, a significant museum show occurred in 2004, organized by U.S.-based independent curator and critic Klaus Ottman, first in Frankfurt, then in Strasbourg. It was reportedly scheduled to come to the Whitney but didn't; instead, Whitney curator Chrissie lies put on a smaller Byars show, "James Lee Byars: The Perfect Silence," that seemed loosely based on Ottman's European show. Ottman also curated a Byars show in spring 2006 that took place at six commercial galleries in New York, of which more later. And this fall, a Byars retrospective opened in Switzerland at the Bern Kunsthalle, where it remains through Feb. 1.

f Byars's dandyism drew on a European tradition that goes back to Charles Baudelaire and Oscar Wilde, he also received important influences from the style and behavior of Shinto priests whom he observed during repeated visits to Japan in the 1950s and '60s. It was from there (not, I think, as Ottman has said, from Elvis<sup>3</sup>) that Byars derived his eccentric outfit: the long black silk underwear that wound around his legs and at times dragged beyond his pants cuffs reflected the Shinto influence. He also favored the black suit, shirt and hat-usually with a wide, slightly floppy brim-that were conventional gunfighter garb; a black silk hood or mask completely covered his eyes and most of his nose. He could dimly see through the black silk, but no one could see his eyes. (Seeing the eyes, he said, is too intimate.) This was the everyday uniform. Special additions included a pink silk spike-ended devil's tail, a straitjacket, a bright red velvet cowboy hat, black sleeves so long they completely concealed his hands, and a gold lame suit with similarly long sleeves. And other things. When he had his costume decided-say the

## At Documenta V, Byars shouted German names from the top of the Fridericianum and passed out tiny Eucharist-like paper discs.

pink silk tail-there was no possibility of compromise. Nothing could convince him to take it off. I once saw him get thrown out of a fancy restaurant in New York rather than remove the black silk hood. Plainly he was one of those of whom people say, "He made his life his art."

Among artists since World War II, the closest model is probably Yves Klein, who famously remarked, "The artist only has to make one work, himself, constantly." In an age when regal pretensions were part of the social landscape, Disraeli said that the dandy was a prince of an imaginary kingdom. This surely describes Byars. He was princely-often, in fact, kingly-in his day-to-day intercourse with other humans. And he was not above being the clown prince. Sometimes (not infrequently) he would get so drunk he would fall down. Scottish painter Stephen McKenna and I once marveled at the apparently studied grace with which, laughing hard, he fell straight over backward at the Taverna Pan in Delphi on New Year's Eve.

The next day at Delphi, Byars wanted to do a piece in the Temple of Apollo (it was, after all, New Year's Day). Breaching the rope boundary, he stretched himself into a star-shaped figure behind a gold lame circle while I hollered a selection of locutions ("That's a beautiful hat"). As the guards blew their whistles and rushed toward us, a schoolteacher stopped her students to say, "Look, children, an homage to Apollo."

And so it was.

*View of The Holy Ghost, an action in Piazza San Marco at the 1979 Venice Biennale.*

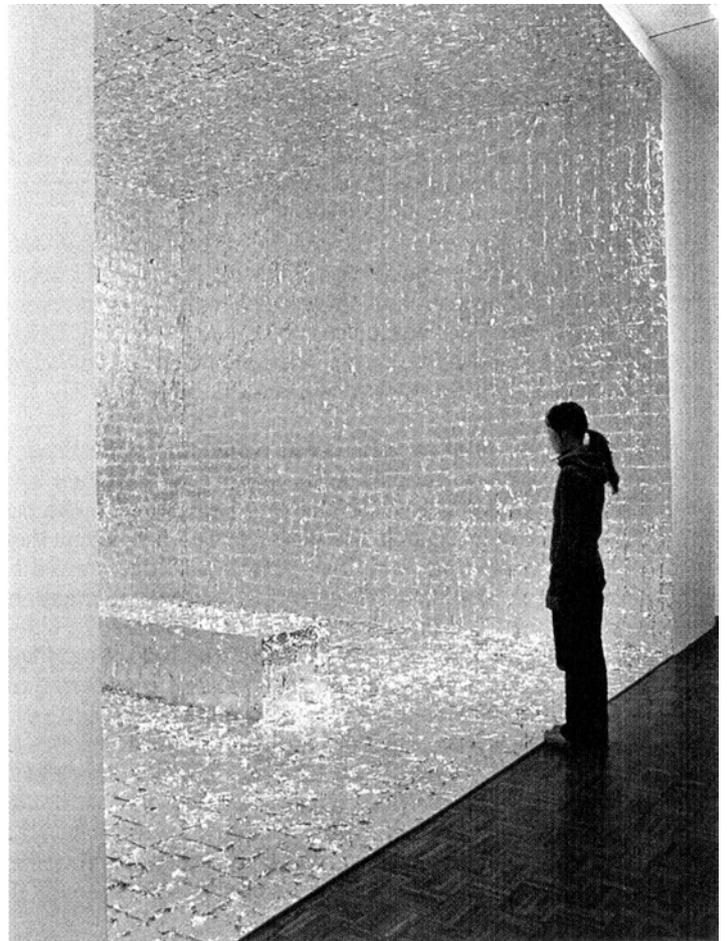


**The six linked New York gallery shows in 2006 seem to have been intended to make Byars appear a more conventional and marketable artist than he was.**

Usually there seems something ersatz about the claim that you "had to be there," that you must have personally known a certain artist in order to understand his or her work. It seems there are two reasonable positions about this. Either it's true of every artist, so unless you do know him or her, you can only really understand the work from the outside, from a culturally mandated viewpoint. Or there are two types of artists, those who attempt to render their work publicly accessible by locating it in the known trajectory of art history (rather than in the unknown trajectory of their dreams and nightmares), and others (and I am leaning toward this position in Byars's case) who either refuse to bow to the times or simply cannot because they literally have no way to—they are somehow what are called Outsiders—and are irredeemable as such.

Despite his university training and his extensive involvement with museums and galleries, Byars had some claim to Outsider status. He had an obscure axe to grind which to him didn't seem obscure at all—it seemed the most obvious thing in the world, maybe the only obvious thing in the world. Byars's self-aware and intentional eccentricity embodied a conscious and decisive mask or role, not adopted frivolously. There was a feeling, among those who cared about him, that his outrages were justified by the idea that he couldn't have survived in a plain manner of living—not because he wouldn't, but because he didn't really seem to have access to a plain manner. You could call his outfit—gold suit, black mask, straitjacket, etc.—hiding, but you could just as well call it a way to reveal himself.

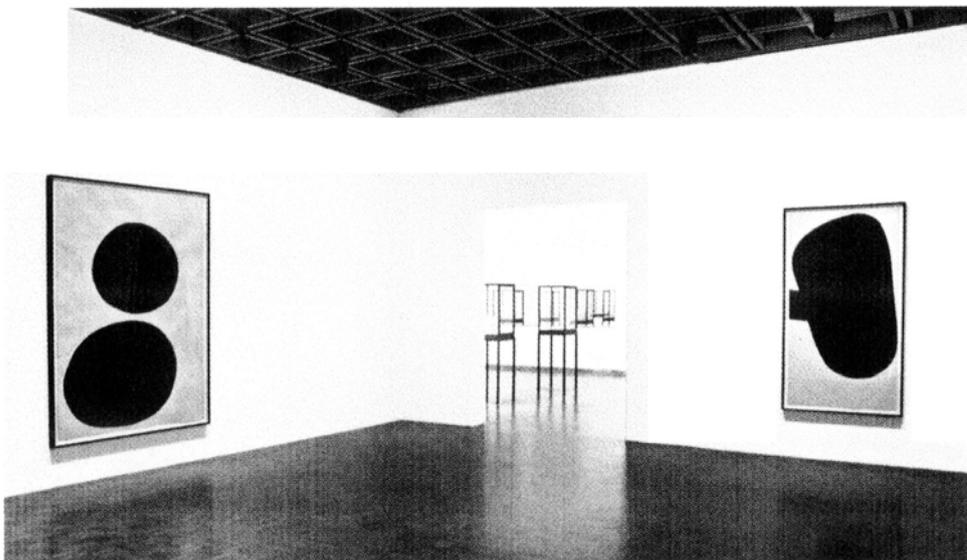
It appears that while a student at Wayne State University in Detroit Byars already had the peculiar sensibility he would later call the "atmosphere of question." His thesis piece (variously dated from 1955 to 1958)<sup>4</sup> is prominent evidence on this point. In his college days Byars lived with his parents in a working-class neighborhood of Detroit. He invited the professors who were to oversee his thesis project to his family's home at a certain time. Before their arrival he removed all the furniture from the house, storing it in the barn; he then removed all the doors and all the windows from their casements, and stowed these, too, in the barn; his parents went out to the barn where they sat watching TV until the event was over. When his professors arrived they entered the house unbidden



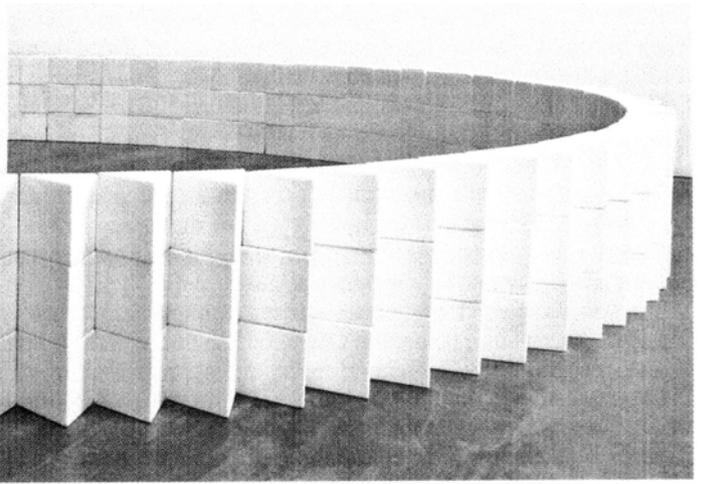
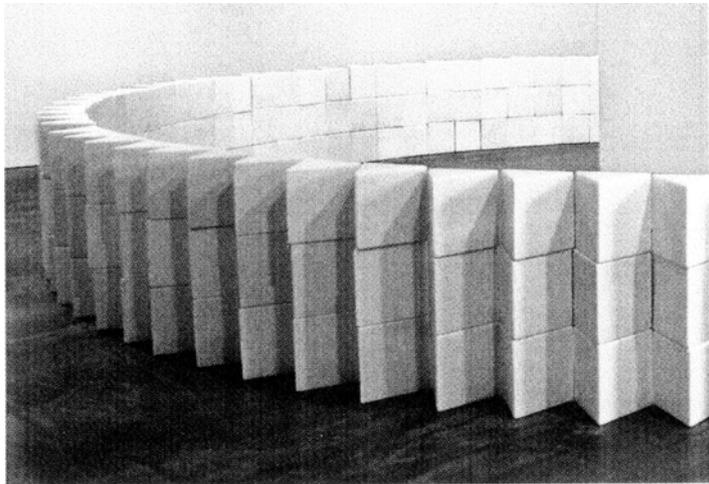
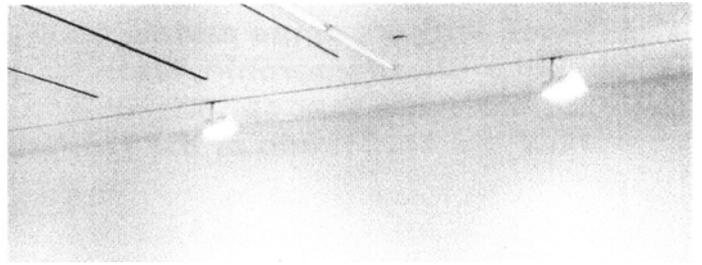
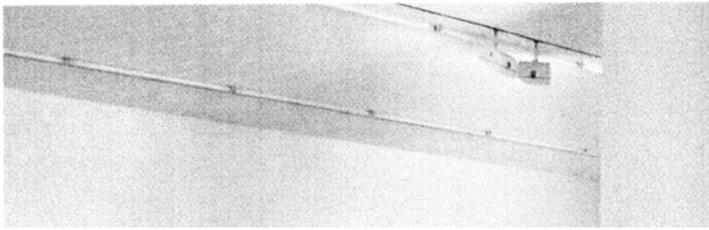
*View of The Death of James Lee Byars, 1994/2000, mixed mediums; in "The Perfect Silence" at the Whitney. Collection Walter Van Laerents.*

except by the open doorways. They walked through the empty rooms looking for the exhibition, then went upstairs where, in one second-floor room, they found Byars seated in a straight-backed chair (the only piece of furniture left in the house), blindfolded and perfectly still. The exhibition of himself (not exactly the same as "exhibitionism") was to be perhaps the central theme of Byars's oeuvre as it unfolded.<sup>5</sup>

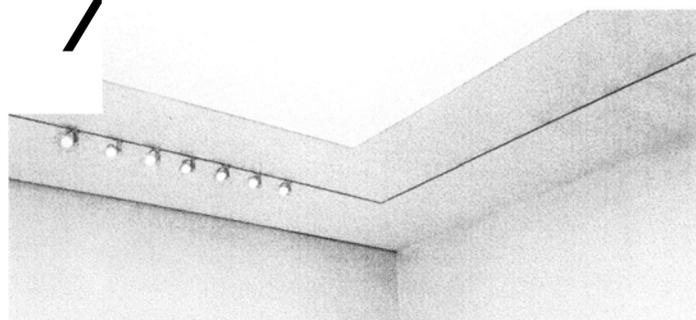
The exhibition of the artist's own personage as the artwork has relevant precedents in earlier traditions; one could find examples easily enough among the pre-Socratic philosophers, the Crazy Wisdom practitioners of Buddhism, the Sacred Clowns of the American Southwest and elsewhere—mostly in the history of religion. In the modern European tradition it has occurred more often in the field of art, where the idea goes back at least to certain remarks by Duchamp (such as that one could designate one's every breath as an artwork). The kind of self-exhibition that was performed by Byars in his thesis project was subsequently taken up by Yves Klein, Gerhard Richter, Tom Marioni, Chris Burden, Linda Montano, Gilbert & George, Marina Abramovic and Ulay, and numerous others. It became one of the central themes of performance art. The presentation of the artist as the art object is, in fact, an icon of the late modernist and postmodernist idea of closing the breach between art and life that appeared in different ways as the central theme of Allan Kaprow's as well as John Cage's work.



*Two untitled works (ca. 1960) in "James Lee Byars: The Perfect Silence" at the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, 2004-05. Photos this page Jerry L. Thompson.*

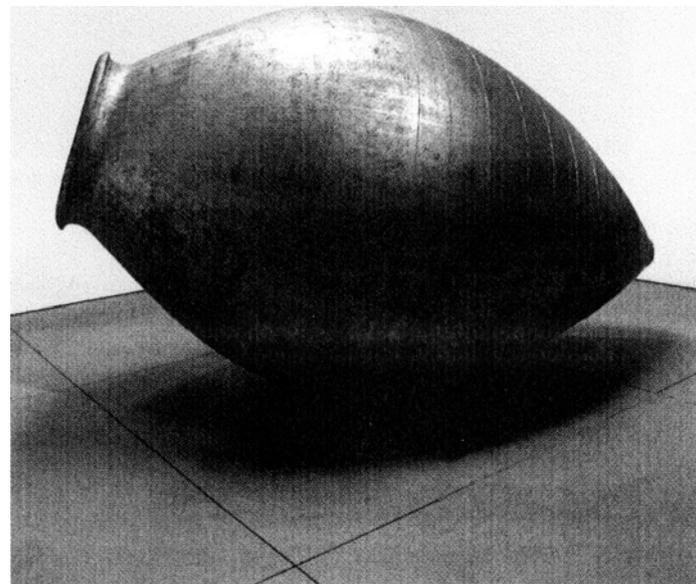


*The Sun, 1990, marble, 360 elements, each 9 by 9 by 9 inches.  
Photo courtesy Perry Rubenstein Gallery, New York.*



*Left, The Spinning Oracle of Delphi, 1986, gold leaf and terra-cotta,  
77 by 126 by 77 inches. Photo courtesy Mary Boone Gallery, New York.*

Byars himself repeated and varied it many times. An exhibition at the gallery Wide White Space in Antwerp in 1969, for example, consisted of Byars seated in suit, mask and hat, draped in red velvet, in an otherwise empty white gallery. When an arriving visitor saw that there were no paintings or sculptures, his or her attention would turn to Byars, who would ask one of his trademark questions ("What is question?" for example, or "Is is?"). He would then write down the visitor's response on a page in a blank book. On many other occasions he presented *The Death of James Lee Byars*, which, as he defined it, meant "quietly lie down and quietly stand up."



Chronology has not been much attended to in studies of Byars's oeuvre because the artist himself was uninterested in it—even attracted to the idea of confounding it in the cause of ahistoricism. He liked things to seem to appear out of nowhere rather than out of causes. He kept virtually no archive, nor did he worry about whether or not he was first with something. A basic question that the few critics who have bothered with Byars at all have left unanswered is the periodization of his oeuvre. There are, first, the works he made before leaving Detroit in 1958—what might be called the Wayne State period. While these were student works in the most literal sense, some of them, like the senior thesis, show that his essential project was already coming clear in his mind.

The second phase must be the years in which he visited Japan repeatedly—1958-67. It does not seem quite right to state, as some have, that James more or less lived in Japan for 10 years. Rather he traveled back and forth between Japan and America seven times in the space of a decade. His peripatetic streak, which lasted until the final days of his life, was already evident. One of his discoveries while in Japan was the 17th-

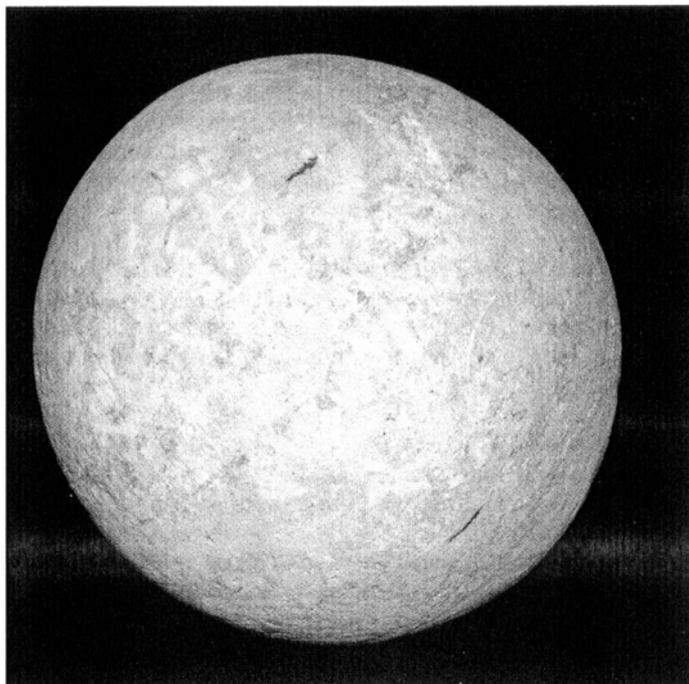
***The Angel*, with its spine and limbs, is roughly anthropomorphic, its delicate message that sphericity is somehow the soul-mode of the human.**

century poet Basho, whose writings deal with details of his wanderings. Basho was Byars's favorite poet. Similarly, the only painters he esteemed were those Zen masters who painted the circle meaning *mu*, or nothing, in a single brushstroke and then let it be. There can be different opinions about this, but in Byars's own mature view the works he produced during his visits to Japan seemed to him a continuation of the student years.

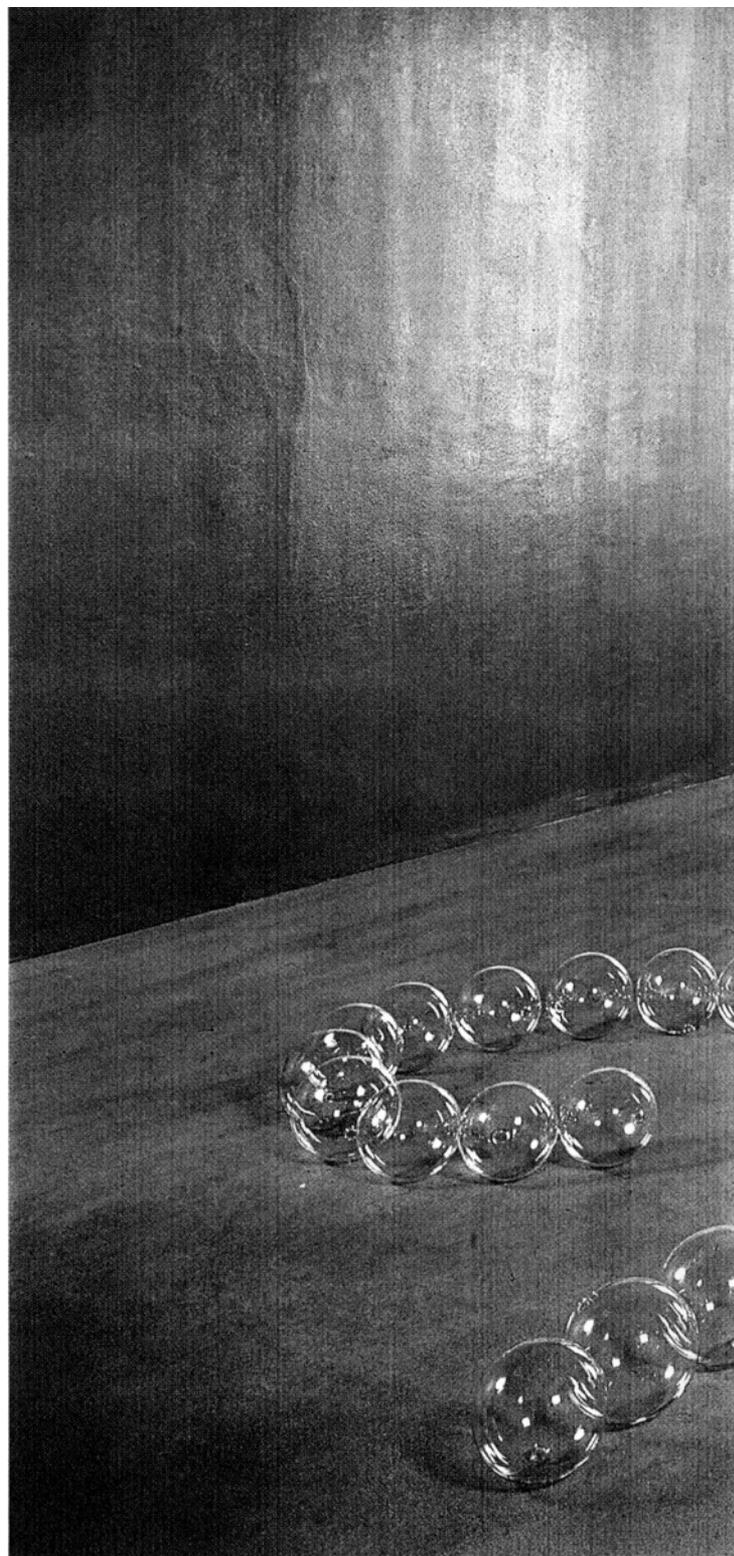
The time of visiting Japan was followed by a stretch of four years or so when Byars, back in the U.S., did his Shinto-influenced folded paper and clothes pieces such as *A 1,000 Foot White Chinese Paper* (1963), *Mile Long Paper Walk* (1965), *Dressfor 500* (1968) and *100 in a Hat: Cake* (1969). (These works all have performative aspects, such as Lucinda Childs's unfolding and refolding of the 1,000-foot length of white Chinese paper.) In certain terms, this would be period three. But in another sense it seems that all three of these periods are not yet mature, but instead three parts of a somewhat prolonged period of student work in which he was still casting around for a certainty about his metier.

It is the next period, the fourth, starting about 1969, that has to be considered his mature phase, the moment when he did, in fact, find his metier, recognize it with blinding clarity and apply himself to exploring it exhaustively. The discovery was, as Byars called it, "Question." Question was primarily an immaterial mode of art. (Materiality would be more a statement than a question.) It could be a very minimal performance or even less. Byars once described it by saying, "I create atmospheres." His pursuit of the immaterial through the ephemeral is shown by a work of the mid-'60s for which he released 100 pink helium-filled balloons to rise toward the sphere of the moon.<sup>6</sup>

When I began my first writing about him, for an *Ariforum* article of 1981 called "James Lee Byars and the Atmosphere of Question," I sat Byars down, took out a pencil and pad, and started to ask him questions.

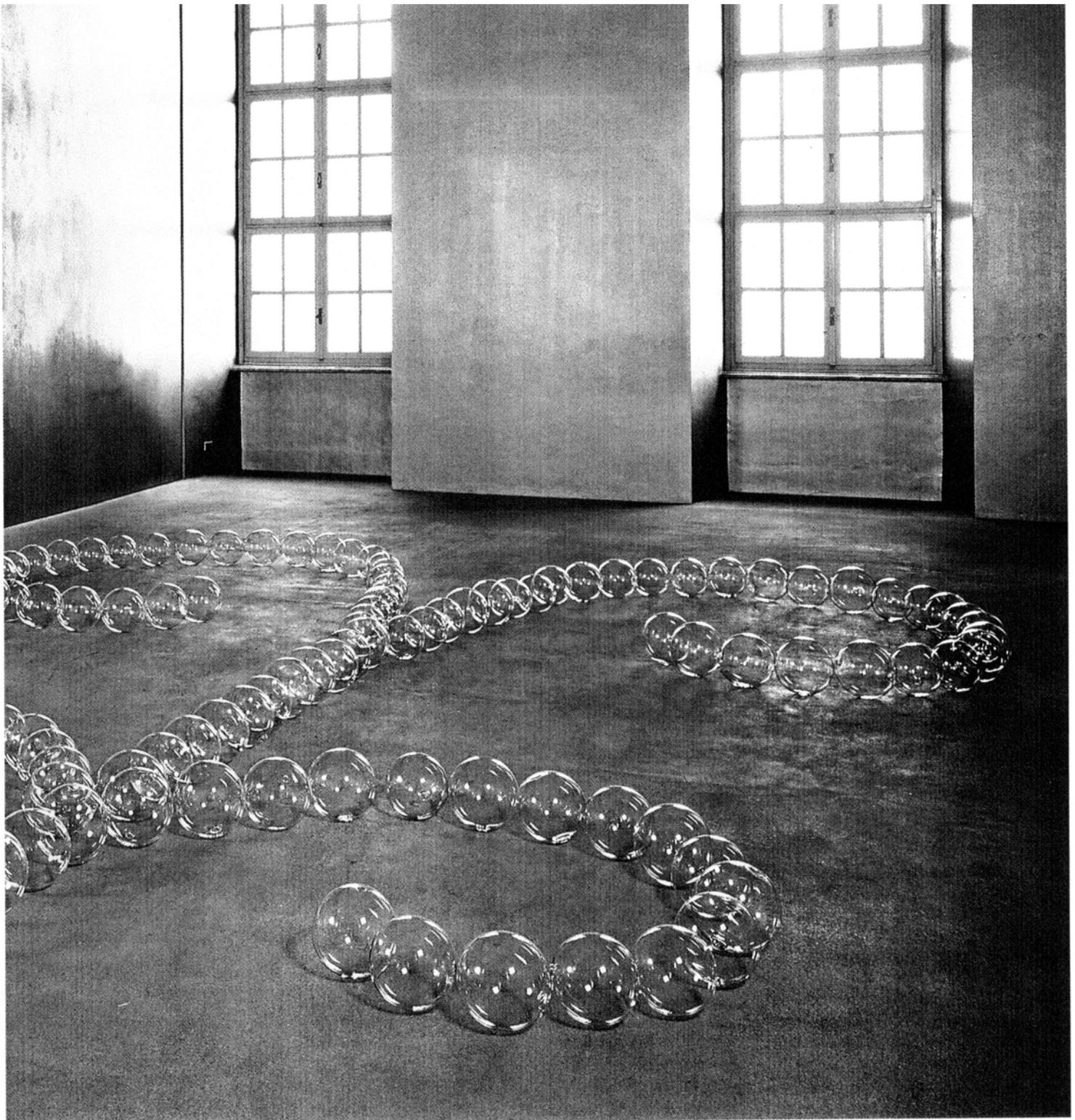


The Tomb of James Lee Byars, 1986, limestone, 39 inches in diameter.



The Angel, 1989, 125 blown Venetian glass spheres, each 7<sup>11</sup> inches in diameter.

Evincing impatience with the prosaic clerical approach, he exclaimed, "Oh, Thomas, just make me up!" Truly he would rather remain a question than allow anyone to turn him into an answer. I saw the point, and I made him up. Specifically, I made him up in the way that I made sense of his work, the way it made sense for me—in terms of philosophy. I made him up with references to Democritus, Sextus Empiricus, Edmund Husserl and other thinkers whom he had heard of barely or not at all. I did not claim that these references came from him; I simply allowed my way of understanding his work to enter into my picture of it. It seems a mistake to



*this spread courtesy Michael Werner Gallery.*

describe Byars as trained in philosophy, though certain writers have done so. Byars was, as he himself put it, "interested in philosophy" but had actually read almost nothing but some scraps of Wittgenstein (*Zettel* and bits of the *Blue Book* and *Brown Book*). He was aware that Wittgenstein had become a cult figure in the 1960s, and that he was antisocial or socially perverse, and Byars liked that; but he could not have begun to explain what Wittgenstein had meant. Question is after all not an answer; in fact, in Byars's way of seeing it, a question is smudged, polluted, cancelled out by having an answer. Answer is the betrayal of the open spirit of Question.

The answer to which we cannot aspire ("Is is?") is the true doorway to the openness or emptiness he exalted.

The many works of Question constitute the center of Byars's career, his highest insight, the principle to which he was most committed. But the immateriality presented problems. Like many other artists of his generation, Byars worked constantly but rarely, if ever, had anything to sell. In the U.S. his reputation was mostly that of a charlatan or mountebank. *Village IVice* critic Kim Levin recalls once hearing him described as "the

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Liberace of the art world," which is a way of mocking the vulgarity of his pretensions and costumes and special airs.<sup>7</sup> But in Europe he had been more or less accepted from the beginning (meaning from about 1970-71). The Europeans had no problem with his denial that he was an American. They could see perfectly well he was not an American. Perhaps not a European either-surely, a prince of an imaginary kingdom.

After 1970, a long period ensued in which Byars shuttled more or less constantly between Europe and the United States; like many artists and intellectuals of earlier centuries, he went wherever a patron offered him a place to stay for a while, usually in conjunction with some show or work in the neighborhood. These were the years of Byars's artistic maturity. They fall into two phases, but one must bear in mind that in Byars's career, stylistic or thematic phases tended to overlap; there were not clean breaks between them.

The first was the period of Question-from around 1969 until 1985 or 1990-when Byars rarely made any concrete object-works; the very idea made him literally shudder. ("The artist comes in," he said with withering contempt, "carrying his little *Kunst* ... ") The point was that any formed object would be an answer, and thus the antithesis of Question. Question was open because it had not yet received any form; it was a kind of prime matter, or a substance that existed in a realm of potentiality, an indefinite state that had not yet become anything in particular and maybe never would. But any formed object, on the other hand, would have denied all that: if it has already received form it is over, closed, ended; it has slid from the vague cloud of potentiality into a collision with the flat wall of fact that lay hidden behind it. Byars was far more amenable to the mode of becoming than to that of being: an object whose form was somehow always changing, so you could never say that at a certain moment it was exactly this or that, was acceptable to him because it avoided certainty.

During the Question phase, Byars claimed to renounce more or less all his earlier work. He seemed genuinely to have no interest in it anymore. He fell in love with the lightness of Question; he swore that thenceforth nothing material (nothing "heavy") would pollute his consciousness. Byars never employed religio-sentimental terms like "spirituality," but it would perhaps not be offensive to him to say that Question, for him, was the most precious manifestation of spirit.

At Documenta V in 1972, Byars shouted German names from the top of the Fridericianum and passed out tiny Eucharist-like paper discs with the letter Q printed in "the smallest print that twenty-twenty vision can read," Byars claimed. Sometimes the performance element got bigger, as in the *World Question Center* (1969), where elaborate efforts were made to elicit from a group of world intellectuals their most interesting questions. In one situation, a group of students sat at desks with telephones as in a telethon and attempted to reach people, mostly scientists, from a list of names that Byars had assembled. The event was broadcast live on Belgian TV. These procedures didn't always work out, as when one famous scientist said, "What do you mean, questions?" though in other instances the spirit seemed to pass over, as when physicist John Wheeler said, "Axiology?"<sup>8</sup> (Axiology is a method of studying how values are determined, and in the form of a question it seems to imply a questioning of value judgments.) Sometimes the object took on a larger role, as in *The Black Book*, 1971, "a one page book with one hundred questions printed in tiny gold letters on black tissue paper with imaginary covers."<sup>9</sup> Indeed, books became the quintessential genre of Question, most often as volumes containing brief philosophical passages or abbreviations of phrases he had made up ("QR," for example, meant "Question is in the Room"). Sometimes the books were made pure Question by being wordless.

Stage four began to give way to an unforeseen stage five as Question began to be replaced by a new primal concept-Perfect. What Perfect meant, especially for Byars at this time, was the sphere-and the circle, but perhaps somewhat less so. An early example of the genre is *The Perfect Epitaph* (1975): Byars in a gold suit rolling a red lava sphere about 2 feet in diameter through the streets of Bern, Switzerland. Another is *Halo* (1985), a gleaming brazen circle about 4 feet across exhibited leaning against a wall. There are many others-*The Tomb of James Lee Byars*, a golden sea-stone sphere (1986); *The Spherical Book* (1989); the gilded marble sphere *Is* (1989); the countless small paper discs passed out on different occasions. At the very end of his life he was working on an array of small golden spheres, commissioning them from a local gold workshop near the hotel in Giza. It was a Pythagorean idea: he would make 1,000 gold spheres each one millimeter in diameter, 100 gold spheres each one centimeter (10 times as big) in diameter, and 10 gold spheres each ten centimeters (again 10 times as big) in diameter. As the numbers decreased by powers of ten, so the sizes increased. Everything was golden and everything was round; everything was Perfect.<sup>10</sup>

So life went on. Starting about 1985 the Perfect works-mostly regular geometric forms in gold or gilded brass or white (Thasian) marble-began to take over the oeuvre. As Perfect continued to grow at the expense of Question, Byars was reluctant to admit that it was difficult to remain true to both. He wanted Perfect to be somehow another mode of Question-maybe somehow a deeper penetration into it. Perhaps these two modes were not as much in opposition as they seemed. But as the years passed it became increasingly, uncomfortably clear to those close to him that he had finally been trapped into an answer. Perfect was in fact the Answer to Question. Perfect was the end of Question. It stopped Question cold.

In Islamic countries a corpse is supposed to be buried within 24 hours of the spirit's passage out of it. After his number one choicethe cemetery island of San Michele in Venice-James had a second preference. One of the works he had commissioned from a local leatherworking shop in Giza was a rug stitched together from the skins of 100 long-haired black Egyptian goats. It was roughly circular when you opened it up all the way-maybe 40 feet in diameter. The long hair was brushed over the stitched seams to hide them. For this particular work he had two purposes. As an object to be exhibited in an art context, the rug was to be stuffed loosely into a room until it filled the space evenly from side to side and bottom to top; second, if he died in Egypt he was to be laid down in the middle of the circle, the long-haired rug to be loosely bunched up around him, then the whole object taken out to the desert and left to dry.

Arrangements for the feat could not be completed in 24 hours. Instead we buried Byars in the American cemetery in Old Cairo. Old Cairo is one of the most crumbly-with-age places around; you enter it through an ancient archway in a wall of brown, flaking clay. The little cortege motored in. When we got to the church associated with the cemetery we met the handsome young Presbyterian minister from Indiana. He read the Presbyterian service over the coffin, I read some passages from the Egyptian *Book of the Dead* (including the Get Thee Back to the Heights of Heaven and The Unbroken Egg passages). We put Byars in the ground and then erected the stamped-flat tin-can grave marker.

The time is coming now for Byars (as it does for everybody) when all those who write about him will not have known him. The critical view of Byars will change as all those who knew him die. First comes a shift of emphasis away from the stage four works that have no physical presence, already evident in the attention being given to the early work and juvenilia-in marketable genres such as black ink abstractions on white paper. It is perhaps inevitable that the market will turn things its way as

much as it can. There seems to be an effort under way to tame Byars. The 2006 cluster of simultaneous Byars shows in Manhattan embodied this attempt to corral a stubborn individual.

During the last 20 years of his life, Byars took a negative view of most of his earlier works. He spoke, for example, as if embarrassed by the black-ink-on-paper drawings. Yet these works were presented with a straight curatorial face both at the Whitney Museum of American Art (where he swore never to show) and at the six-venue extravaganza in 2006 curated by Ottman (at Michael Werner on 77th Street, Mary Boone at her Midtown and Chelsea galleries, and Perry Rubenstein at his three Chelsea spaces). When is the last time you remember a single artist having one-person shows at six high-profile galleries in New York City? Some of the works were priced as low as \$100,000, several at \$1.2 million each. (The \$20,000-worth of works left unpaid for in Egypt was not in sight.)

The show at Werner's smallish 77th Street space was Perfect. It consisted primarily of one work, *The Angel* (1989), a symmetrical floor arrangement of 125 transparent glass spheres each 7/8 inches in diameter. The configuration is roughly anthropomorphic—a spine with two upper and two lower limbs. It fit Werner's space perfectly, with its delicate message of sphericity as somehow the soul-mode of the human (as Plato thought it was). This glass work was an object that Byars did truly love. Another relatively late work was *The Spinning Oracle of Delphi* (1986), a huge gilded antique terra-cotta amphora seen at Mary Boone in Chelsea. At Perry Rubenstein's 24th Street space, a much earlier work was shown—*Untitled (American Flag)*, ca. 1974, a parody of the American flag that preceded the circular flag works starting with *The Planet Flag* exhibited in Eindhoven in the early 1980s. Other works from various dates coexisted in a fragmented attempt to yield a retrospective-like effect. A principle behind this group of gallery shows seems to have been to make Byars appear a more conventional and marketable artist than he was.

The sense that has drawn me to comment here is that the nature of Byars's contribution is being shifted by outside forces, and an effort should be made to go back and refocus on the intention behind the oeuvre. Byars was one of those artists who really believed in the dematerialization of art, a belief that leaves nothing behind, no heavy stuff for the market. Now market forces are closing in on

him, and even he, toward the end, growing exhausted by his 50-year-long rebel role, may have wanted conventional success a little bit.

Perhaps those people who now have control of Byars's oeuvre are doing the sensible thing. The Byars we get in these recent shows and their accompanying texts is a Byars reconceived by art history. The now deceased Los Angeles artist Eric Orr told this story about Byars:

One day we were driving in my car and he was in his straitjacket period which meant that he wore a Houdini escape straitjacket all the time everywhere. As we passed a police car driving in the other direction, they took one look at him, V-turned screeching on a dime and pulled us over.

The upshot is they left him at the curb in the straitjacket and took me away for old parking tickets.

Ah Jimmy- I loved him ...<sup>11</sup>

1. Not "Skylight," as James Elliot has it in his chronology in James Elliot, *The Perfect Thought*, San Francisco, Arion Press, 1988, p. 71.

2. Gordon VeneKiasen of the Michael Werner gallery tells me this practice of funding Byars's

art-making was not a hard and fast arrangement, though it usually happened that way. 3. Klaus Ottman, *James Lee Byars, The Rest Is Silence*, exh. cat., Cologne, Michael Werner, 2006, p. 12.

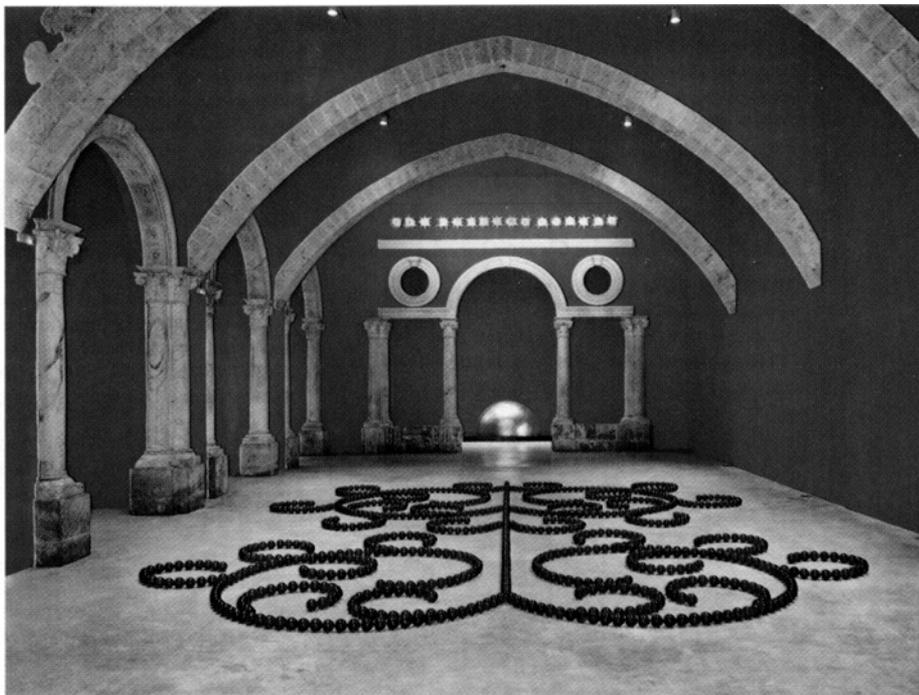
4. The 1955 date is given by Elliot, p. 72; some other sources give 1958. I spent a good deal of time on the phone with various offices of Wayne State University and could not resolve the issue.

5. Different descriptions of the work occur, Elliot feeling that the house was not completely empty but had stones arranged in it somewhat in the spirit of a Japanese garden: "Byars shows large spherical stones in his family home after removing all windows, doors, and furniture" (in *The Perfect Thought*). But in Byars's descriptions of the work to me and to Eric Orr the stones were not mentioned.

6. Many of the Question works are described in my *Ariforum* article of summer 1981, "James Lee Byars and the Atmosphere of Question," reprinted in Thomas McEvelley, *The Triumph of Anti-Art, Conceptual and Performance Art in the Formation of Post Modernism*, Kingston, N.Y., McPherson, 2005, pp. 285-300.

7. Kim Levin, "Reassessing an Artist 'Too Preposterous for New York,'" *VUlage Voice*, Jan. 10, 2005.

8. According to Elliot, it was Marshall McLuhan who asked "What do you mean, ques-



The Red Angel, 1993, 1,000 red crystal spheres, each approx. 4\* inches in diameter; at the Institut Valencia d'Art Modern.

tions?" and Alvin Weinberg was the physicist who said, "Axiology?" [in the exhibition catalogue *The Perfect Moment*, Valencia, IVAM (Institut Valencia d'Art Modern), 1995, p. 294 ]—another example of conflicting memories.

9. Elliot, *The Perfect Thought*, p. 100. The description seems to come almost verbatim from Byars.

10. For more detail on this and other Perfect works see Thomas McEvelley, "More Golden Than Gold," *Ariforum*, November 1985, revised and republished as "Perfect Things Move in Circles," in Thomas McEvelley, *Sculpture in the Age of Doubt*, New York, Allworth Press, 1999, pp. 261-74.

11. Eric Orr and Thomas McEvelley, *The Death of James Lee Byars* (book and CD), n.d., Amsterdam, realization Ulay, publisher Vincent Vlasblom.

*James Lee Byars had a two-part exhibition at Michael Werner, New York, "Five Points Make a Man" [Feb. 7-Mar. 1, 2008] and "The Diamond Floor" [Mar. 3-29, 2008]. "I'm Full of Byars: James Lee Byars, An Homage" is currently on view at the Kunstmuseum Bern [Sept 10, 2008-Feb. 1, 2009].*

Author: *Thomas McEvelley's latest book is The Triumph of Anti-Art: Conceptual and Performance Art in the Formation of Post Modernism (McPherson).*