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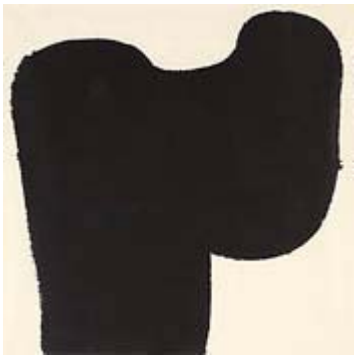
Outside "The Rest is Silence" at Perry Rubenstein's space on 534 West 24th in Chelsea

James Lee Byars
Untitled (Eight Cones)
ca. 1959
Perry Rubenstein Gallery



James Lee Byars
Untitled
ca. 1958
Michael Werner Gallery

REFLECTED GLORY
by Ben Davis

The current James Lee Byars bonanza, "The Rest is Silence," organized by the artist's curatorial champion Klaus Ottmann and occupying six far-flung galleries both in Chelsea and on the East Side through June 24, 2006, is New York's most thorough survey to date of the late American artist's minimalist, mystical work, coming fast on the heels of the rather modest exhibition at the Whitney in 2005 (itself just a sampling of the much larger retrospective mounted in Europe).

Clearly, Byars' work covers a daunting range, much of it rather baffling at first glance. There are early pieces awash with Japanophilia (Byars left his hometown of Detroit to live in Japan in 1958), like 1959's *Untitled (Eight Cones)*, featuring eight cone shapes of varying sizes sculpted out of paper covered with Japanese characters, or his Zen-like paintings featuring large black blots on white paper.

Then there are more all-American references, like the long, draping American flag with 16 stars and four stripes, a prop from Byars' ca. 1974 film *Two Presidents*. Other works from the same period riff on European issues, no doubt a product of his lengthy sojourns to the Continent. *The Black German Flag* (1974) features a hanging cloth pierced by the words "MOVE ALL THE J'S FROM I. BACK TO G.?" (translated from Byars abbreviated style, this is "Move all the Jews from Israel back to Germany?")

From towards the end of his life, still more sculptures seem to play on different sorts of New Age or cosmic-spiritual themes, like *The Moon Books* (1989), a round, gold-colored table, with a series of shapes scattered on top of it depicting various stages of the moon, or *The Spinning Oracle of Delphi*, a big, bulbous, gold-painted jug laid on its side, mouth open to display the dark void within.

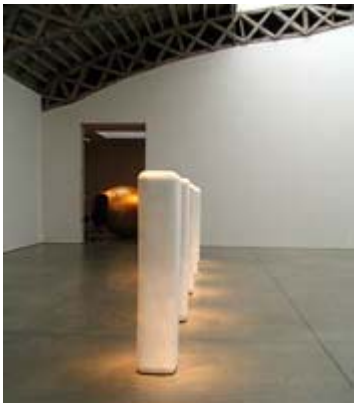
Byars, of course, came to early notice for performances for which he had groups dress up in giant articles of clothing designed for multiple people, like *Four in a Dress* and *Three in a Pants* (both from 1967). His art was firmly rooted in performance, and some have suggested that his sculptures don't translate well to the gallery because they miss the feeling of "presence" conveyed by his actions.

On the contrary, though, a quick trip through Byars' history shows that, if his works seem strangely mute, more quotations of mystical themes than mystical, this quality is deeply ingrained in his practice itself.

The most obvious Byars influence is Joseph Beuys, whom Byars met in 1969. And indeed, Byars adored Beuys. Beuys had a signature fedora and fisherman's vest; Byars affected a top hat and gold lame outfit. Byars wrote Beuys a stream of letters, addressing them to "Genius Beuys" and "Great Beuys," each an elaborately folded work of art, expressing admiration and proposing collaborations ("Let's do a little show together"). Beuys never wrote back. In 1973, Byars even conceived the artwork *Hello Beuys* for the Institute of

James Lee Byars
The Black German Flag
1974
Mary Boone Gallery

James Lee Byars
The Moon Books
1989
Mary Boone Gallery



James Lee Byars' *Concave Figure* (1994) [foreground] and *The Spinning Oracle of Delphi* (1986) at Mary Boone Gallery in Chelsea

James Lee Byars
The Spinning Oracle of Delphi
1986
Mary Boone Gallery

Contemporary Art in London, which involved bellowing Beuys' name from the rooftop and street.

It is important to put this influence in perspective, however. Like Beuys, Byars had an activist streak, staging performances in solidarity with anti-war protestors and the Berkeley Free Speech Movement. But he could also be fickle in his intellectual enthusiasms. The same year as his anti-war work, strangely, Byars also voyaged to the east coast to spend time with the archetypical Cold War intellectual, Herman Kahn, father of the concept of Mutually Assured Destruction and inspiration for Dr. Strangelove. Byars made a series of artistic tributes to Kahn, and was taken enough with the man that he would later refer to himself as "the skinny Herman Kahn." (Still later, as a conceptual project, he was to declare himself the "artist of the Pentagon.")

Byars, it turns out, was fascinated with the idea of intellectual gurus, rather than any particular guru -- which explains the inconsistency of his choices. His projects often mined the self-abasing glory gleaned by serving as conduit for the great ideas of others. Famously, in 1969, he conceived of the "World Question Center," which involved attempting to contact a heterogeneous collection of the world's "100 most brilliant minds" to ask them what questions preoccupied them (he even managed to stage this work on TV, ludicrously dressing the callers in one of his group articles of clothing). His curriculum is also full of notes like the following: "1979 -- Invites Salvador Dalí to Hollywood to have his death filmed; Dalí does not respond."

Byars proclaimed that the figures that influenced his art the most were not other visual artists, but the euphonious list of "Stein, Einstein and Wittgenstein." Thus, for one performance, he had performers stand in a circle and read passages from Gertrude Stein, while for another, he proposed investigating "The next step after $E=mc^2$" as an artwork. As for Wittgenstein, the great analytic philosopher's influence is evident in numerous projects incorporating references to "Interrogative Philosophy."

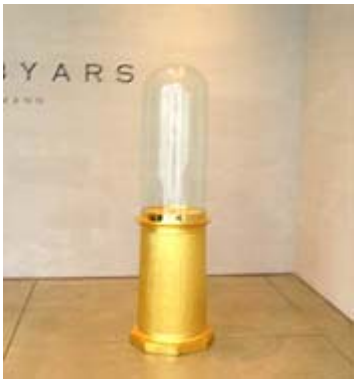
All this serves to put into context works like the four gold stellae currently occupying one of Perry Rubenstein's small West 24th street spaces. Each of these four columns has two letters carved into it at the top: "O.Q.," "I.P.," "Q.D.," and "I.Q," and is intended to correspond to a specific philosophical idea as its incarnated image: "The Figure of the One Question" (O.Q.), "The Figure of Interrogative Philosophy" (I.P), "The Figure of the Question of Death" (Q.D.) and "The Figure of the First Question" (I.Q.)

In the catalogue accompanying the show, Ottmann states in connection with this work that "Byars' Interrogative Philosophy is arguably his most important philosophical legacy." This is like saying that his gold lame suit is his most important contribution to fashion. Rather than some kind of deep exploration of Wittgensteinian philosophical investigation, the work is clearly a kind of personal fan latter and shrine to an idea, infused with the same elemental enthusiasm that Byars brought to his love letters to Beuys.

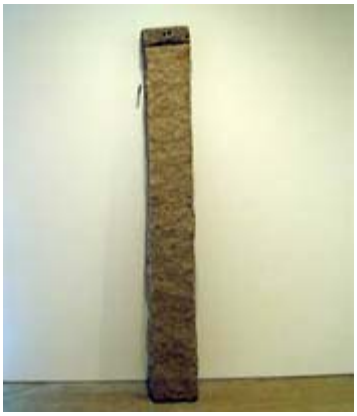
Beuys had his signature materials, felt and fat. As "The Rest is Silence" displays, Byars also had his signature materials -- the pieces abound in shiny gold surfaces, fine crystal and rare marble. But while Beuys' materials are infused with the significance of a personal mythos, the materials Byars used clearly reflect something rather less abstract: They are all popularly associated with mystical values, and therefore reflect his habit of appropriating readymade objects of prestige.

Left to right: *The Figure of the One Question* (1987/1995), *The Figure of Interrogative Philosophy* (1987/1995), *The Figure of the Question of Death* (1987/1995) and *The Figure of the First Question* (1987/1995

James Lee Byars
The Angel
1989
Michael Werner Gallery



James Lee Byars
The Conscience
1985
Mary Boone Gallery



James Lee Byars
Untitled (Tantric Figure)

Benjamin Buchloh's famously cantankerous attack on Beuys has it that his shaman-like style reflected an anti-rational quest for cultural origins that is suspicious in light of the recent German experience of the Nazis. Byars is the other side of this coin: He apes Beuys, but in contrast to the European artist, his work emerges out of a very American sense of rootlessness and lack of a meaningful past. Whereas, Buchloh argues, Beuys' art serves as a way to forget fascism but also unconsciously reenacts fascist cultural tropes, Byars' art at once searches for something meaningful beyond American everydayness -- whether in the exoticism of other cultures, in political immediacy or in alternative religion -- and yet recreates the profane attitude he is trying to escape, as is suggested by his restless shuttling from one theme to the next, as if they were just different costumes.

There's a certain kind of poignancy to this conflict. How difficult a balancing act it is gets displayed each day at noon at Perry Rubenstein's other space on West 24th, where a gallery assistant reenacts the Byars performance piece, *The Perfect Kiss*. Standing on a designated spot, he puckers his lips fleetingly to the air, then leaves. The whole thing is gone almost before you can see it.

One gets the feeling that the assistant is a little too cool for the work ("It's that brief," he declared ironically upon finishing, the day I stopped by), and consequently, it falls flat. Byars, on the other hand, always treated his sources with the utmost sincerity, so that, no matter how silly they are, they nevertheless have the very human drama of the quest for something perfect in an imperfect world.

James Lee Byars, "The Rest is Silence," Apr. 27-June 24, 2006, at Mary Boone Gallery (541 West 24th Street), Perry Rubenstein Gallery (527 West 23rd Street, 526 West 24th Street, 534 West 24th Street) and Michael Werner Gallery (4 East 77th Street); May 18-June 24, 2006, at Mary Boone Gallery (745 Fifth Avenue), New York, N.Y.

BEN DAVIS is associate editor of *Artnet Magazine*.

1960
Perry Rubenstein Gallery

A gallery assistant at Perry Rubenstein, having just finished a performance of *The Perfect Kiss*, by James Lee Byars