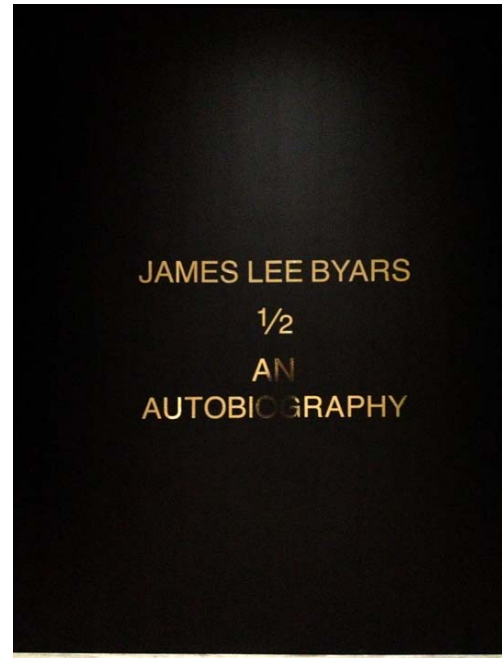


Q1 \ MAGAZINE

Melinda Santillan
30 November 2013

JAMES LEE BYARS 1/2 AN AUTOBIOGRAPHY

Artist James Lee Byars (1932-1997) seemed to live life both as a performance and an ongoing philosophical investigation. Living in the United States, Japan and Europe throughout his life, he studied philosophies and techniques wherever he went and participated in minimalist, conceptual and performance art practices. Writing was an important part of his life and he corresponded with people in the art world daily, his letters themselves becoming a work of art. His flamboyant expressions such as his habit of wearing a gold lame suit and his handwriting; large letters peppered with stars, contrasted with the austere minimalist work he produced. Through a mix of ritualistic performances and exercises in formality he brought things down to their essence, using only a few colors such as black, white, red and of course gold.



As one of their opening exhibitions Museo Jumex presented "James Lee Byars: 1/2 an autobiography" a retrospective of Byars work co-curated by Magalí Arriola of Fundación Jumex Arte Contemporáneo and Peter Eleey of MoMA PS1.



From the Fundación Jumex Arte Contemporáneo *press kit*: "James Lee Byars: 1/2 an Autobiography" is the most comprehensive museum survey of the work of James Lee Byars organized in North America since his death. The exhibition focuses on revealing the ephemeral and intangible nature of much of his art, while also highlighting the inherently incomplete summary that an exhibition offers of an artist's life and work.

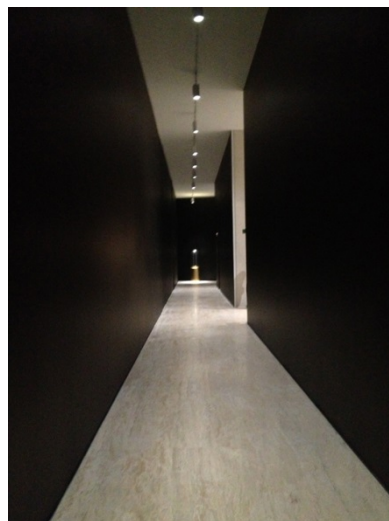
Obsessed by the idea of perfection, James Lee Byars created a remarkable body of work that strove to give form to his search for beauty and truth. Pursuing what he called "the first totally interrogative philosophy," he made and proposed art at scales ranging from the vastness of outer

Michael Werner 4 East 77 New York New York 10075

space to the microscopic level of subatomic particles, attempting to delineate the limits of our knowledge while enacting a desire for something more

Through a selection of more than 125 sculptures, costumes, performable paper works, films, ink paintings, correspondence, ephemera, live performance, and documentation, the exhibition represents the full scope of the artist's work.

The exhibition includes works and documents on loan from collections from all over the world such as moma, moma archives, the Getty research institute, the Berkeley Art and Pacific Film Archive, Kunstmuseum bern, De Appel arts center, as well as two works acquired by Colección Jumex for this exhibition.



This exhibition was co-produced by Fundación Jumex Arte Contemporáneo and MoMA PS1. in June 2014, the show will travel to MoMA PS1."



The Conscience, 1985. Michael Werner Gallery, The Estate of James Lee Byars.

Telephone 212 988 1623 Facsimile 212 988 1774

Flash Art

Eduardo Egea
March/April 2014

James Lee Byars – Museo Jumex / Mexico City



James Lee Byars, *Installation view – “½ An Autobiography,”* Museo Jumex, Mexico City, 2013. Courtesy of the artist and Fundación Jumex

Curated by Magalí Arriola of Fundación Jumex Arte Contemporáneo and Peter Eleey from MoMA PS1, “½ An Autobiography” is the most important retrospective on North American artist James Lee Byars since his death in 1997.

Byars’ oeuvre suggests a unique convergence of the peaceful and tolerant philosophy of the Quaker religious movement, the ritual of Japanese Shinto practice and the drama of Noh theater. The artist expands upon these influences using platonic geometric shapes and the innovations of minimalism and conceptual art. Like artists such as Mark Rothko, Ad Reinhardt, Monir Shahroudy Farmanfarmaian and Mathias Goeritz, Byars explored the interaction between aesthetics and spirituality by way of abstract art and geometry.

Obsessed with the idea of the absolute through perfection, beauty and timeless values, Byars, in his concern with communication in its purest forms, shares an important affinity with Joseph Beuys, who was an influence, friend and occasional collaborator with whom Byars had copious correspondence –shown here through an illustrative selection. Byars’ delicate use of objects, paper, fabric and words are in stark contrast with comparable works made by the German artist –empathies and differences that highlight their independent but complementary personalities.

One of Byars’ seminal performances, *The World Question Center* (1969), was a program for Belgian television in which diverse personalities were summoned by telephone and asked to formulate a fundamental and universal question. Like earlier exhibitions on Guy de Cointet and On Kawara, the Byars retrospective, which will travel to PS1 New York, continues Fundación Jumex’s reconsideration of globally relevant artists from the ‘60s and ‘70s, key decades for later generations of artist.



Anish Kapoor
4 June 2014

In His Words | The Art of Inscrutability

On the cusp of a big James Lee Byars show, the artist Anish Kapoor remembers the lamentably unsung American sculptor.



Courtesy of Michael Werner Gallery, New York and London. Portrait by Lina Bertucci/Courtesy of Michael Werner Gallery, New York and London.

A TRUE VISIONARY Left: James Lee Byars's gold lamé sculpture, "The World Flag," 1991. Right: a portrait of the artist.

"James Lee Byars has been sadly ignored, especially in America. He's an artist who came out of the '70s post-minimal tradition, and yet the exhibition at MoMA PS1 is the first major retrospective of his work in the United States, which I think is appalling. It's partly because the work is confounding. What you think you're looking at is not what you're looking at.

"I became aware of his work fairly early on. We both had an interest in similar questions to do with the mysterious object, the sense that in perfection there is an eternal moment that is ever-invisible and fleeting. He was incredibly obtuse — very much an artist. Always on show. Often, artists are artists when they're in their studio and then, later, they're like anyone else. James Lee was different. I never saw him casually having a drink. He dressed in a particular way. The whole of his life was a performance. There's a myth about how he died in a room in Cairo, overlooking the pyramids. It's hard to tell how true it is. I don't think there is a room in Cairo overlooking the pyramids. But that's a James Lee story. He was just a strangely present being who was always about to do something that was an act, a work. What energy! How exhausting."



Araz Hachadourian
15 June 2014

A Lifetime of Questions at MoMA PS1

A conscience in a jar, cryptic letters and a room with a ghost.

These are just some of the pieces at *James Lee Byars: 1/2 an Autobiography*, a new exhibit at MoMa PS1 co-organized by MoMA PS1 and the Fundación Jumex Arte Contemporáneo.

The exhibit surveys the life and work of artist James Lee Byars with over 300 pieces spanning almost 40 years of work.

Byars (1932-1997) is known for having lived life both as performance and ongoing philosophical investigation; through his work he engaged in what he called the “the first totally interrogative philosophy” playing with scales and mediums to draw the viewer in, but leave them asking questions.



Left: James Lee Byars. *The World Flag*. 1991. (Courtesy Michael Werner Gallery, New York and London); Right: James Lee Byars. *The Figure of Interrogative Philosophy*. (Araz Hachadourian)

Many of the letters on display are written in a “pseudo-cryptography”; sprawling letters marked with stars and arranged with alternating lines. Associate director of exhibitions at MoMA PS1 and co-curator of the exhibit, Peter Eleey talks about Byars’s love of mailing stacks of post cards from everywhere he traveled to in the world. “When you add up all of his correspondence and think about it sculpturally, as something traveling from one place to another. His correspondence forms a sort of sculpture of the planet,” he said.



Left: James Lee Byars. *Rose Table of Perfect*. (Araz Hachadourian); Right: A self-portrait by James Lee Byars. Courtesy Michael Werner Gallery, New York and London

One installation piece is simply a pitch black room with no light let in. Wandering around, you feel as if you have fallen into a void, until, of course, you walk into a wall. The piece is titled *The Ghost of James Lee Byars Calling* and is just one of the works where Byars has inserted himself into the viewing experience.

Eleey explains, “Byars himself had this very conflicted paradoxical relationship to his own visibility. From the very beginning death features in his work as metaphor but also as a kind of structure and conceit”.

The New York Times

Ken Johnson
20 June 2014

The Man in the Gold Lamé Suit

A James Lee Byars Retrospective Shows an Artist-Philosopher

James Lee Byars (1932-97) was one of the more intriguing characters to stir international art waters during the 20th century's second half. An American playing the role of artist-as-shaman, he was lionized in Europe but not so well known in the United States. "James Lee Byars: ½ an Autobiography," a retrospective at MoMA PS1, offers a valuable opportunity to assess his career. Was he the real deal, a true mystic sage? Or was he a canny, charismatic showman who knew how to exploit a modern hunger for timeless wisdom? The question hangs in the air throughout the exhibition, which was organized by Peter Eleey, the museum's curator and associate director of exhibitions and programs, and Magalí Arriola, curator at Fundación Jumex Arte Contemporáneo in Mexico City, where it had its debut last November.



James Lee Byars's "Is" (1987), a gilded wood sphere. Credit Chester Higgins Jr./The New York Times

Byars was a Conceptualist, a performance artist and a sculptor, and these three dimensions are seamlessly combined in the exhibition's most compelling gallery. With a shiny, gilded sphere about 13 inches in diameter titled "Is" (1987) spotlighted in the middle of the mostly darkened cafeteria-size room, it has a hushed, ecclesiastical atmosphere.



"The Chair for the Philosophy of Question" (1990), with an antique Tibetan chair, in "James Lee Byars: ½ an Autobiography," at MoMA PS1. Credit Chester Higgins Jr./The New York Times

In two of the room's corners are smaller rooms, with walls painted intense pink, that you can look into but not enter. In one is displayed a 39-inch, gold-leafed cube with rounded corners and edges called "The Table of Perfect" (1989). In the other is an elaborately carved antique Tibetan chair, also gold-leafed. It's titled "The Chair for the Philosophy of Question" (1990). These objects seem to glow ethereally.

On a far wall there's a set of three flat, gold-leafed rectangles with rounded corners called "Portrait of the Artist" (1993). And at the other end of that wall hangs a gleaming gold

lamé suit, an outfit that Mr. Byars often wore, along with a black top hat, in public appearances. It was his practice sometimes to sit silently thus costumed, as well as blindfolded, along with his sculptures in gallery exhibitions, as if he were himself a work of living sculpture. Since he is no longer present on the material plane of our world, the suit here serves as a placeholder for his disembodied spirit.

Considering all this, I'm torn. Byars had a finely tuned way with three-dimensional objects. There are other arresting sculptures elsewhere in the show. Installed alone in one small room is a gilded marble pillar just over five feet tall with the letters I and P engraved near its top; it's called "The Figure of the Interrogative Philosophy" (1987/1995). An especially lovely piece called "The Diamond Floor" (1995) consists of five large crystal glass diamond shapes arranged in a dark room like the points of a star.

But there's an overdetermined, gently overbearing quality to Byars's art. The portentous titles, the theatrical installations and the flashy gold costume would be O.K. if they were offered in a more humorous mood. But whatever comedy there was in Byars's enterprise — certainly there was some — is overridden by the sense of grandiose self-importance, a quality he shared with his idol, the artist-demagogue Joseph Beuys.

Still, it's a pretty interesting career. Byars was born in Detroit in 1932, studied art and philosophy at Wayne State University and lived in Japan from 1958 to 1968, teaching English and executing his first performance works under the influence of Noh theater and Shinto rituals.

The earliest works in the exhibition, from that time, include a football-size natural stone lacquered in black ("Black Stone," 1958-59), and "Self-Portrait" (circa 1959), a supine, blocky abstraction of a human figure made of rough pieces of wood with a tiny ball for a head: It is presented here on the floor by itself in a large room with walls painted gold.

Also from 1959 are some of his most elegant works, large pictures of simple, rounded forms brushed in black ink on Japanese paper. Two of these are pasted onto orange, traditional Japanese scrolls, measuring about 10 by 10 feet. Exuding an effortless serenity, they anticipate the craze for Eastern spirituality that would deeply influence high and popular culture in the United States in the 1960s.

In the early '60s, Byars produced works in paper with Conceptual and performative implications, like "A 1,000 Foot White Chinese Paper" (1963-64), a stack of folded paper that, if unfolded, would extend the titular 1,000 feet. Later in the decade, he created improbable clothes out of pink or red fabric designed to be worn by multitudes of people simultaneously, like "Hat for Three Persons"



The gold lamé suit that James Lee Byars often wore with a black top hat, hanging in his retrospective. Credit Chester Higgins Jr./The New York Times

(1969) and "Dress for Five Persons" (1969). These look forward to the trend in participatory art that is popular today.



James Lee Byars's "Table of Perfect" (1989). Credit Chester Higgins Jr./The New York Times

By the end of the 1960s, Byars had developed his persona as a dandified hierophant. In a black-and-white video that was broadcast on Belgian television in 1969, we see him in a gallery in Antwerp, organizing people into billowing fabric with many head and neck holes. Sitting in the gallery, surrounded by participants, he also enacts a project called "The World Question Center" in which he telephoned eminent scientists and thinkers to ask them to contribute a significant question. A theme running throughout Byars's oeuvre is the idea that questions were more important than answers.

In the video, he appears in a star-spangled shirt and high-domed, broad-brimmed hat, eagerly answering an interviewer's questions. He's a charmer. Boyishly handsome — almost pretty, with his shoulder-length hair — he seems a paragon of hippie chic, a glamorous rock star. The hat made me think of Richard Brautigan, the immensely popular writer who wore a similar one on the cover of "Trout Fishing in America." In his trippy get-up and demeanor, Byars gives the impression of a Magical Mystery Tour guide. That raises questions about the influence of the psychedelic counterculture of the 1960s on his enterprise. Regrettably, the exhibition doesn't explore that potentially illuminating context.

There's not a lot of filmed documentation of Byars's performances in the show, but there is one particularly memorable seven-minute movie of an action he did in 1975 called "The Perfect Epitaph." The grainy color film shows him from a distance in his gold suit and black top hat, slowly rolling a heavy, beach ball-size sphere made from red lava along vacant streets and over a bridge in Amsterdam. It's dreamy and curiously poignant, this vision of the lonely seeker in his endless, Sisyphean pursuit of beauty and truth.



James Lee Byars's "Rose Table of Perfect" (1989), made of 3,333 roses and a polystyrene ball. Credit Chester Higgins Jr./The New York Times

"James Lee Byars: ½ an Autobiography" runs through Sept. 7 at MoMA PS1, 22-25 Jackson Avenue, Long Island City, Queens; 718-784-2084, momaps1.org.

Gallerist

Andrew Russeth
25 June 2014

'James Lee Byars: 1/2 an Autobiography' at MoMA PS1

In an art world painfully short on eccentricity, James Lee Byars (1932–1997) stands out as an exemplar of outré thinking—an unrelenting performer, sculptor, writer, flâneur, operator, mystic ... the list could go on. A master of fly-by-night beauty—ephemeral performances and is-that-art? activities—he ensured that no show will ever entirely encapsulate his protean career, but this elegant and spacious retrospective, organized by Peter Eleey of MoMA PS1 and Magalí Arriola of Mexico City's Museo Jumex (where the show originated), offers a piquant look at his thrilling achievements.

Through invitation cards, letters (in a script ornamented with drawings of stars), photos and other documents (a catalogue teems with more treasures), we catch sight of the

Detroit-born Byars in Japan in the late 1950s, where he immersed himself in Zen, Noh and traditional crafts, and at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, where curator Dorothy Miller famously let him show his spare paper works, for a few hours, in an emergency stairwell. He performed on city streets—500 people wearing a long pink garment—and in the mountains of Switzerland, dropping black perfume on a rock. He sported a tall hat and suits of black, red or gold (occasionally inhabiting his shows in costume), corresponded passionately with patrons and artists (particularly Joseph Beuys, always with a dose of satire: "Great Joseph"), dispatched telegrams to world leaders (unanswered) and collaborated with scientists and philosophers, asking them to share the most important questions they were pondering. He was always searching after the unknowable: his terrifying 1969 installation *The Ghost of James Lee Byars* is a pitch-black room through which he invites you to grope.

A mixture of a Romantic, 19th-century adventurer and our era's globetrotting post-studio artist, Byars was clearly a charismatic, captivating figure—and also, at times, an exasperating one. His sculptures, mostly produced later in life, lean toward gee-whiz kitsch (a cube covered in gold, a sphere of 3,333 roses), but even they evince the same touching drive for perfection as his quixotic (sometimes comical) rituals. He constructed bulwarks against the ever-encroaching deficiencies of the world. Hinting at the quiet sadness that undergirds so much great art, and certainly his own, Byars wrote to one of his dealers in the mid-1960s, in a letter preserved here in a vitrine: "I am overcome by ordinary daily acts and their mystery."

(Through Sept. 7, 2014)



'The World Flag' (1991) by James Lee Byars. (Courtesy Michael Werner Gallery)

FINANCIAL TIMES

Ariella Budick
26 June 2014

James Lee Byars: 1/2 an Autobiography, MoMA PS1, New York – review

A gorgeous show that celebrates an artist's incongruities and cultivated contradictions



From left, James Lee Byars' 'The Conscience' (1985); Byars pictured in 1968 in his installation piece '100 In an Airplane'; 'The Sphere Book' (1980)

Buried deep within the labyrinthine halls of PS1 is a dark, silent void. Walk in, and the blackness hovers menacingly, amplifying every rustle of fabric into a supernatural roar. No matter how big the room may be (you don't really know) or how many people are in it (no way to tell that either), or how close you could be to some invisible precipice, the space feels queasily claustrophobic. This assertive emptiness is "The Ghost of James Lee Byars", made in 1969, a living artist's impalpable monument to himself. He died in 1997, but his buoyant spirit haunts PS1's enthralling retrospective.

Byars took perverse pride in being what he called "the world's most famous unknown artist", bopping between Japan, Berlin, Venice, Brussels, Santa Fe, Amsterdam and New York, and finally choosing to die in Cairo, where he wanted to rest beside the pyramids. He was cheerfully obsessed with mortality – just one of his cultivated contradictions. He abhorred materialism in its cruder forms, but savoured silk, gold and fine tailoring. He elevated simple classic forms such as cubes and spheres, yet his art erupts into baroque flamboyance. He was a perfectionist of the fleeting moment and the elusive star of the perpetual performance that was his life. He rarely showed his face, but sauntered through the world's capitals like a dandy in his gold suit and top hat. He was all costume, pose and razzle-dazzle, yet his work was also profound. This gorgeous show, curated by Peter Eleey and Magalí Arriola, salutes those incongruities without attempting to beat them into rational sense.

Byars was born in Detroit in 1932, but he beat it out of Michigan right after college and made for Kyoto, Japan. Even then, he was a quirky outsider with a hankering for international celebrity. He immersed himself in Shinto rituals and Noh theatre, but didn't neglect the centre of all art-world reputations: New York. In 1958 he met Dorothy Miller, the hugely influential curator of painting and sculpture at the Museum of Modern Art, and won her over immediately. Miller arranged a one-night-only display of paper works on MoMA's fire escape and became his great champion, organising his first commercial gallery show with the dealer Marion Willard in 1961.

Back in Japan, where he spent the better part of a decade, Byars kept in constant touch with Miller and many others, and his missives are crucial to the retrospective. He would have loathed email, that vaporous conduit of skeletal prose. His eccentric correspondence consisted of elaborately folded slips of paper inscribed with ideas for projects or performances. One suggested that Miller "put a minute of attention on this page" and forward it to a fictional Museum of Attention, which he intended to establish. He inscribed scrolls and cut out shapes; he folded paper hats and collars, and sent them with firm instructions to wear them. His compulsive need to communicate was undercut by an equally powerful wish to conceal. Byars' handwriting wasn't just hard to read; he repudiated legibility outright, deliberately distorting his script and embellishing it with stars, curlicues and exploding inkblots. He issued books in print so small it insulted the eye.

This epistolary flood was both baffling and marvellous. Byars sent more than 100 letters to Joseph Beuys, an artist he admired with ardour bordering on fanaticism. "Genius Beuys" or "Great Beuys" – Byars addressed him by both honorifics – never answered these tributes, but he kept them all, and they fill a huge glass case at PS1.

Byars' contradictory desires to mystify and to be understood flow like cross-currents through his work. He often hid his face with big hats, veils and masks, using kooky outfits to deflect the eye from his features. In 1975, his rapacious need for attention led him to don a gold suit and black top hat and roll a red lava sphere through the streets of Amsterdam. That performance, "Perfect Epitaph", exists only on film, but the ball remains as an artefact, and Byars' career pivoted around it. From that point on, the momentary flash of a body through space was no longer enough to hold his interest. He wanted each fleeting event to leave behind a splendid object.

The museum contains a number of these quasi-memorials, executed in deluxe materials or made to look precious and rare. There's "The Figure of Interrogative Philosophy", a human-sized gilded marble obelisk, spotlighted in a dim room; "Is", a small wooden sphere painted gold; and "The Table of Perfect", a marble cube with rounded edges, coated in gold leaf, holding court in a red chamber. Each is like a tombstone designed by some 18th-century visionary of the sublime. They recall Claude Ledoux's globular "House of the Gardener in an Ideal Town" or Etienne-Louis Boullée's grandiose Cenotaph for Isaac Newton, a giant, spherical funerary monument celebrating the great physicist.

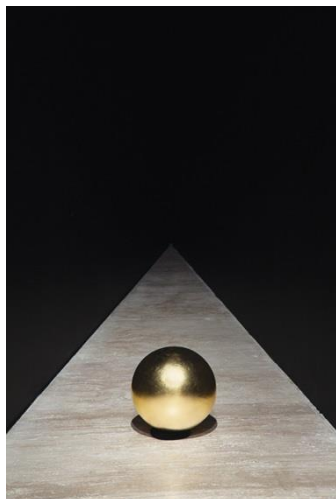
Byars was comfortable mixing science and mysticism. In 1969, he collaborated with the cold war theorist Herman Kahn, one of the masterminds of nuclear deterrence. Byars seems to have felt that if art and science joined forces, they could solve all the universe's spiritual and material mysteries. Even posthumously, Byars remains a puckish spirit, gently blowing minds. The show culminates in a dark gallery speckled with glowing remnants. The artist's lamé suit hangs limply against a black wall, looking deflated and spectral. But when I took a (flashless) snapshot with my phone, the suit in the image had acquired not only a brilliant glow, but also a head-shaped halo of light above the collar, as if Byars' ghost had slipped into the exhibition for one last magnificent stunt.

frieze
11 June 2014

James Lee Byars

Museo Jumex, Mexico City

By Gabriela Jauregui



James Lee Byars, *Is*, 1987, gilded wood,
33 cm diameter

The exhibition 'James Lee Byars; ½ an Autobiography' – curated by Magalí Arriola and Peter Eleey and which tours to MoMA PS1, New York, in June – was criticized in Mexico City for being nearsighted: its perceived lack of local relevance weighed against the institutional politics that made it happen. Showing a US artist who died in 1997 might have seemed a surprising choice to inaugurate the new building of the Fundación Jumex Arte Contemporáneo. Yet the implication that the show had little relevance to its context here was unfounded.

One can easily imagine Byars in dialogue with local (albeit adopted) icons such as the Chilean filmmaker Alejandro Jodorowsky, whose 1973 film *The Holy Mountain* was shot mostly in Mexico City and shares certain philosophical concerns with Byars's work – mystical themes, highly aestheticized and absurd. Such similarities are apparent in a video interview between the artist and Jef Cornelis from 1969, included in this exhibition, in which Byars's ideas combine with a surreal sense of humour. (He is shown literally as a talking head, with the rest of his body buried in a mound of earth). Visually, too, the

artist's characteristic pointy black hat recalls those worn by the *Holy Mountain's* sages. Even more intriguing was Byars's video documentation of *The Perfect Epitaph* (1975), a piece for which he rolled a volcanic rock around Amsterdam. In the context of Mexico City, this work is in close dialogue with many of Francis Alÿs's pieces in which he promenades various objects (a toy, an ice block) around town, or with Gabriel Orozco's *Yielding Stone* (1992), for which the Mexican artist rolled a plasticine ball around New York, collecting debris.

Much of Byars's work was concerned with anticipating his own death – notably the performance *This is the Ghost of James Lee Byars Calling* (1969) – and the way in which several of his little-known or marginalized works have prefigured pieces by artists including Richard Serra, as well as Alÿs and Orozco, seems almost clairvoyant.

The exhibition was beautifully orchestrated by Arriola and Eleey. Starting with Byars's early Zen- and Noh-inspired works, it moved through performances and sculptures, before concluding with his baroque *mises-en-scène*. The curators focused on the event-like quality of Byars's work; his gift of turning accidents into art, like the wind suddenly making his wearable sculptures/clothes billow into beautiful shapes. The exhibition opened with the early *Self-Portrait* (1959), a flat object that lies on the floor like an elongated cartoon shadow and could be read as a kind of chair or palanquin, which Byars frequently cast as a stand-in for the human figure (in this case, perhaps, a cadaver). The last piece in the show, *The Chair for the Philosophy of Question* (1996), a golden Tibetan throne sitting inside one of Byars's red silk tents, suggests themes of power, absence and death.

Ideas of being and non-being are also exemplified in the artist's film *Autobiography* (1970), in which a blank screen gives way, for a split second, to a white-clad Byars before blackness resumes. You could easily miss this blink-of-an-eye moment, but it demonstrates how accident – seeing or not seeing – can become the work. Byars's clothing pieces, when worn or performed in – as happened periodically over the course of the show – made male and female forms indistinguishable. His works on paper, again created to be performed – like the *Performable Square* (1963) or the *Mile-Long Paper*

Walk (1964-65) – question ritual and repetition, rendering the performer a cross between an automaton and a priest-like figure. They raise the question: ‘What does it mean to be human?’ The publication which gave its title to the exhibition was written in 1969, when Byars was 37 years old. Sitting in a gallery, he jotted down questions and thoughts that came to him in conversation with visitors.

Perfection is a well-represented theme in Byars’s work. If we look to Ludwig Wittgenstein (famously, one of the artist’s three – *stein* heroes, the other two being Gertrude Stein and Albert Einstein), perfection presents itself through the example of the other, which can be interpreted as both God and other people. Byars’s interrogative philosophy – the hundreds of questions in *World Question Center* (1969), a collaboration with Herman Daled, or in *The Black Book* (1971) – is intended as a dialogue with another, the *someone* that he asks his questions to.

Byars was a philosopher and cosmic clown. His personal letters, documentation and ephemera, also on display, raise questions of transcendence and materiality, of the miniature and the cosmic, taking us from the USA to Mexico, Japan, Egypt, Belgium and the Netherlands. Like the films of Jodorowsky before him, Byars’s work was clearly visionary.