

MoMA PS1 presents the most comprehensive museum survey of James Lee Byars (Detroit, 1932–Cairo, 1997) organized in North America since his death. The exhibition, which includes documentation and works across a range of mediums and occupies the entire second floor of MoMA PS1, confronts the absence of Byars himself, and more generally highlights the inherently incomplete summary that a retrospective offers of an artist's life. The exhibition *James Lee Byars: 1/2 An Autobiography* will be on view from June 15–September 7, 2014.

When Byars was 37 years old—then half an average lifespan—he wrote his “1/2 autobiography.” Sitting in a gallery, he jotted down thoughts and questions every time a visitor approached him, and published them afterwards in a book he also titled *The Big Sample of Byars*. Obsessed by the idea of perfection, Byars produced 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 space to the microscopic level of subatomic particles, in an attempt to delineate the limits of our knowledge while enacting a desire for something more.

After studying art and philosophy, Byars moved to Kyoto in 1958, where he spent much of the next decade. Influenced by aspects of Japanese Noh theater and Shinto rituals, Byars created and performed folded paper works at sites including Japanese temples and New York galleries, and made fabric pieces that served as costumes to join together two or more people in public performances. Throughout his career, he also produced a large quantity of printed books, ephemera and correspondence that he distributed among friends and acquaintances. Dispersed across a wide geography, they attest to Byars's desire to be present—however fleetingly—in different places and times.

Byars lived and worked itinerantly, moving between New York, Venice, San Francisco, Kyoto, Bern, the Swiss Alps, Los Angeles and the American southwest, eventually choosing to die in Cairo. Posing his art confoundingly between apparent contradictions—the monumental and the miniscule, the universal and the personal, the luxurious and the minimal, the relic and the event, the spectacular and the invisible—Byars heightens the viewing experience. In the aesthetic interrogations he provokes, he suggests that perfection may occur not simply at the most evanescent edges of form, but also in the attenuated moments of attention spent trying to discern it.

The Museum of Modern Art played an important role in Byars's early career. In 1958, after having been inspired by a Mark Rothko painting he encountered in his native Detroit, Byars came to New York and arrived unannounced at MoMA's reception desk intent on getting an introduction to

Rothko. Instead, he met Dorothy C. Miller, the museum's first Curator of Painting and Sculpture, who took an interest in the paper works Byars had been producing in Japan. Byars convinced her to allow him to mount a brief exhibition in one of the museum's stairwells. This event would be remembered as the artist's first museum exhibition, and the relationship between Byars and Miller flourished into an extensive correspondence and gifts to the museum of a number of key performable paper works, which are included in the exhibition. In 2011, MoMA added important fabric pieces, ephemera and correspondence with the acquisition of the Daled Collection of American and European Conceptual Art. In addition to the museum's holdings, *James Lee Byars: 1/2 An Autobiography* features work from private and public collections, and from the artist's estate and archives.

The exhibition is co-organized by MoMA PS1 and Fundación Jumex Arte Contemporáneo, and curated by Peter Eleey, Curator and Associate Director of Exhibitions and Programs, MoMA PS1; and Magalí Arriola, Curator, Fundación Jumex Arte Contemporáneo; with Jocelyn Miller, Curatorial Assistant, MoMA PS1; and Javier Rivero, Curatorial Assistant, Fundación Jumex Arte Contemporáneo.

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