

[RE]READINGS OF THE PERFECT

MYSTICISM OF JAMES LEE BYARS

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ABSTRACT

The complex contextualization of the work of James Lee Byars (1932–1997) in contemporary artistic practices was determined by its timelessness in both form and concept. Considered by Kevin Power as one of the key artists of the second half of the twentieth century alongside figures such as Joseph Beuys and Andy Warhol, his legacy seems to have declined probably because of the discomfort caused by the approach to his work, since any previous consideration and attempt at cataloging, escapes through the loopholes on which they are based.

Byars' performances and pieces were mostly structured around the cryptic concept of perfection. The artist's mission, in this case, takes on the roles of a shaman and a magician who questions the illegibility of a world whose materialism seems to have expelled any consideration of the sacred, thus articulating a work that, far from providing answers, raises questions about the ultimate meaning of life. Gold, geometry, time (and its transience), space (re-signified by his cultural heritage), language and the body expressed a proposal in which installations and actions are the instruments he uses primarily to question us about the big questions. Byars in this sense has been considered a mystic, since he places us at the doors of a new perception to make us uncomfortable and provoke us, to transmit us the questions about being in the world.

This article is modulated on the poetics of the work, thought and actions of James Lee Byars, one of the few contemporary artists who can be defined as mystic in the broad sense of the word and for whom the sacred, contrary to the current of unidirectional thought, is inherent to the contemporary subject.

KEYWORDS

Mysticism. Perfection. Culture. Sacred. Image.

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It seems that everything that could be said on the world of images has already been written. The surprising *years of vertigo* that made up the last quarter of the 19th century and the first third of the 20th century, or what amounts to the same thing, the narrative that descends from utopia to disenchantment, built a dialectic in which discourses ended up folding in on themselves. Once that chronology was overcome, the evolution of the different stages of the image has remained anchored in a sort of *perpetuum mobile* from which there is no escape in sight.

As Peter Bürger (1936–2017) pointed out, the assumption of the hegemonic proposal of the avant-garde has caused an exhaustion in visual practices that survive in self-absorption as mere metalinguistic and self-referential exercises. Although it is true that recent technological micro-revolutions have fostered other investigations and other formats on visuality, beyond the digital *trompe l'oeil* we coexist with the survival of the *avant-garde* imposture transubstantiated to our days.

In a period in which artistic narratives are running out of steam, it is necessary to vindicate the proposals based on otherness that have been developed since the 1960s and whose originality subverts the hegemonic procedures. Probably, one of the artists who has distinguished himself by stressing the absolute individuality of the historical movements and groups of the second avant-garde was the American James Lee Byars (Detroit 1932 – Cairo 1997). Far from any methodological reading, his work is uncomfortable in the context of the history of contemporary art. If our system is determined by that kind of archival evil that permanently leads us to establish catalogs of all kinds and to classify any document, Byars' contextualization is nullified, or at least, it is not possible to place it clearly in any space due to the elusive purity of his discourse: "He has never, so to speak, belonged to anything" (Power 2002, 104).

The enigmatic, subtle and elegant praxis of the American creator was tangentially situated on the border of the elementary lines of action of post-World War II art. His eccentric baroque style was out of tune with a modern approach that tends to distrust the immediate experience of beauty (Fuchs 1994, 37). Furthermore, his conceptual specificity made him a disturbing element for all those tendencies in which, rather forcibly, he could be pigeonholed: pop art, minimalism, body art and conceptual art, although it is true that in any of them his discourse would implode, highlighting his *outsider* condition. In the representational context, he borrowed from the aforementioned trends and integrated them into his work without paying obeisance to them. But his contrariness does not only come from the historiographic character itself, as it is necessary to refer to him as a creator whose essays transgress the specific field of art to enter the sacred and the transcendent. In this sense, silence and isolation are the *sine qua non* condition of the mystic who distances himself from the world to surrender to thought.



Fig. 1. James Lee Byars: *The Giant* (1975).
Collection M HKA, Antwerp.

This narrative of difference has led Kevin Power (1944–2013) to consider Byars together with Joseph Beuys (1921–1986) and Andy Warhol (1928–1987) as the three essential figures of the art of the second half of the 20th century. It is at least symptomatic that the art critic places him next to two artists who have represented the tension between the material and the spiritual, between old Europe and the emerging America, exemplifying the two antithetical conceptions that dominated the art scene of their time and whose legacy and influence is still far from being extinguished. If posterity has amplified the legacy of Beuys and Warhol, it has not been so in the case of Byars, whose legacy has had a fate inversely proportional to that of the former, his work being circumscribed not so much to the variants of mass consumption art but to specialists and scholars of the subject.

Aesthetics of disappearance

We do not know for sure if the American's ultimate intention was to become part of the silence and oblivion beyond the *noisy* condition imposed by modernity. While Warhol and Beuys opted for their omnipotent presence, Byars, who defined himself as *The World's Most Famous Unknown Artist*, did precisely the opposite, disappearing – or at least masking himself –, hiding in the cloak of pseudo-anonymity and keeping silent with an implacable honesty with his artistic project. In this case, the perspective and recognition of Byars' figure closes again, as in the conditioning factor of his identification in the historical discourse, since he had no antecedents, did his work independently and was not succeeded by disciples or collaborators. Joachim Sartorius placed him in a sort of third generation of twentieth-century art to project himself into the present after Marcel Duchamp, Joseph Beuys and Marcel Broodthaers: “here Duchamp was the father, Beuys and Broodthaers represent the second generation, and Byars the third with an open perspective towards the twenty-first century” (1999, 219). Beyond plastic influences – which he had – the American creator only recognized the authority of Gertrude Stein (1874–1946), Albert Einstein (1879–1955) and Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889–1951).



Fig. 2. James Lee Byars: *The Spherical Book* (1986).
MACBA Collection, Barcelona.

It is true that epistemologically James Lee Byars was close to Beuys' proposal. In fact, as has been mentioned, both will seek the transformation and transcendence of the human being through action, word and image as attested, among other actions, by the renowned performance they staged in Krefeld in 1978. Some of the most conservative critics have even considered their strategy closer to shamanism than to the artistic condition itself, such was the energetic tension that articulated their split between the material and the spiritual. In this context, the reference to Warhol's figure in this triad might seem a posturing. But if we were to pay attention, as Estrella de Diego (1958) has suggested, to the tragic determination of the last Warhol, when he became aware of his *finitude* and began to glimpse the catastrophe, to see beyond the glitter box and to readapt the discourse of contemporary helplessness as the essential line of his ultimate proposal, we might wonder, moving away from the hegemonic lines of thought, if we are not dealing with three artists who finally wonder about the existential condition of man.

Because, beyond proposing answers, any cultural document establishes the need to question itself and to establish a process that through the sensitive reaches and conditions the intellectual. It is true that the sign that has characterized the last century, beyond any preconceived discourse, is that of artistic proposals that, far from being located in a closed context, questioned us about the very nature of the represented structure. The *opera aperta* in which, as Umberto Eco (1932–2016) pointed out, the role of the spectator is as relevant as that of the artist in order to establish a link between the two. The image is no longer a closed code as it was in classicism, but is configured as a hermeneutic process that demands the participation of the spectator and that pronounces itself on different levels of reading, bifurcating into as many interpretations as there are receivers of the work.

The hybridization of East and West

Despite his “exuberant American energy” (Power 2002, 104) James Lee Byars was influenced by the nomadic nature of his travels and his philosophy. The artist traveled to almost every continent and, after studying philosophy, psychology and art at Wayne State University, he moved to Kyoto in 1957, where he would travel back and forth to the United States for the next decade. In Japan he came into contact with Shinto rituals and the No Theater whose characteristics would be transferred to his work: slowness, delicacy, spirituality and the value of small gestures that would permeate a proposal determined by the search for the limits of perception.

His stays in Japan took place between 1957 and 1968, where he stayed near the Temple of the Golden Pavilion and which would initiate another of the guidelines of his life journey: living in spaces determined by a particular historical, artistic and



Fig. 3. James Lee Byars: *The Perfect Axis* (2010).
Park Benrath, Düsseldorf.

philosophical legacy. In Japan, Byars imbibed Eastern philosophies while teaching English to Buddhist religious people in that curious bridge between Kyoto and New York. In Kyoto he learned to work with paper and the sounds of paper, developing the notion of the ethereal and where he “became convinced that isolated concepts could be aesthetic objects” (Sartorius 1999, 2018).

The American’s praxis established a symbiotic relationship capable of nodal articulation of two contrary spheres. In this sense, dependencies and quotations between the different cultures and philosophies in which he participated and whose contact and hybridization would constitute other argumentative profiles of his proposal were constant. “Byars,” writes Heinrich Heil, “was in love with the East and the West. He enthusiastically pursued the various paths to perfection of both cultures and brought them together in his art in his own way” (1999, 206). Eastern essentialism will lead him to the determination for pure figures and colors, to a visual language based on simple forms that carried symbolic connotations such as the geometries of the circle, the cylinder and the pyramid among others.

He was concerned with the choice of materials obeying antagonistic criteria: on the one hand, the durable and sumptuous and, on the other, fragility and delicacy, emphasizing their symbolic aspect. As Haenlein recognizes, he structured his work with a reduced number of *leitmotifs*: “there are performances, there are spheres, there are hemispheres, columns and colors: gold, black and white, and finally red. There is a certain sense of musical key in the artist” (1999, 202).

In the permanent search for the ultimate meaning, James Lee Byars researched primitive myths and ancient religions from which he extracted mythological references that he adapted to his discourse. The reinterpretation of other religions led him to a new assessment of the sacred and the transcendent. As Angélica Oliveira has pointed out in this regard, “from the Orphic and Egyptian traditions he extracted the understanding of a total cosmogony using the circle to represent the concept of transcendence in an earthly world for the metaphysical plane of existence” (2018, 105).

With his installations, his object work and above all with his performances, Byars succeeded in carrying out the utopian avant-garde program of the elimination of the barrier between art and life, or at least, that in his artistic practice there would be no distinction between one and the other: who else was James Lee Byars but the body that triggered the epistemological springs of artistic practices in which a perpetual interrogation is transposed? Moreover, that motif claimed the dynamism of the very action of thinking, constituted from a serene and lucid reflection on Eastern movements and philosophies in a discourse that intertwined with Western culture in a proposal slightly situated in the conceptual and the experiments of the ephemeral and the vindication of the instant. And, in this sense, the great topics of James Lee Byars’ work were three: the question, perfection and death.

The question is the question

The fascination with the question coincided with his Carnegie-sponsored doctoral studies at the University of California: “There began my deep interest in the idea of the question. I wondered if there really would be such a thing as a chronology of a person’s feelings” (Power 1994, 174). That dialectic sought the total synthesis of information in which he posed questions to interrogate us about being and the very experience of existing, leading the viewer to reflect on his vital condition, his temporality and finitude, as well as on the contextual relationship with cosmic time – in a sense close to the Italian *povera* artists – and on the sacredness of existence, since for the American, death – or the cancellation of consciousness – is as sacred as life itself. In that sense, the question claims temporality in the instant in which it is posed. In fact, this transitory relationship has to do with the very idea of his



Fig. 4. James Lee Byars: *Golden Tower* (2017).
Campo San Vito, Venice.

artistic development, since Byars restricted it to his own vital circumstance, claiming that his death would cancel his work. The question, therefore, is something alive, a dynamic entity that refers to Cartesian interrogation: one of the extensions of consciousness and an illuminated capsule of infinite questions in which the human being interrogates ontology.

The question operates as an instrument for the search for truth. In fact, Byars was not only concerned with the philosophical background but also with the great scientific preoccupations of the contemporary subject. Just as he dialogued with religious people, he also dialogued with scientists. The question itself was the objective in which each and every one of the questions is transferred and in which, of course, there was a sacred background that at the same time had to do with the scientific.

The question also had to do with the witnessed event. Byars always appeared dressed in a peculiar way, halfway between baroque and dandy, between artist and magician, as a way of calling attention to his figure in order, again, to search for meanings in a world full of questions. The costume was in turn an extension that served to connect people's thoughts, in order to link them together through questions: "The world is determined by questions, not by their answers, because if they do not

raise new questions, they are useless, because they mean stagnation. I can repeat the question, but do I have the courage to ask it? This is the answer given by Byars” (Deecke 1999, 212).

Allegory of the perfect

It could be said that the idea of perfection obsessed Byars throughout his career. Perfection, in that sense, or at least as the American artist understood and conveyed it, could only be instantaneous. Therefore, Byars’ language paid attention to ideas that allegorically symbolized it, exemplified in the ephemeral and the solemn. His production, described as baroque eccentricism, sought beauty and how it could establish through it a link with the sacred. The idea of perfection, therefore, was transferred to the quality of the image itself. In spite of its actuality, Byars’ plastic art was linked to artistic processes derived from tradition, whose expressions used materials that divinized the *spiritual* character of the image. In this sense, it is necessary to point out the implications that permeate between the Western and Eastern philosophical tradition, the former represented by the sumptuousness of the materials and the latter by the delicacy (fragility), in which, once again, his formation between two worlds was evident: that of a Westerner enthused by Eastern culture.

Therefore, his is a *mestiere* linked to the processes of the past – and that dimension of the production of the image makes him once again an atypical creator – but whose enunciative power would be in accordance with the contemporary world, configuring what could be called a new actuality of the past or a mention to past practices to articulate and define the present. This oratory, which played with and altered artistic codes, conveys the sensation that his pieces and performances were situated – they situate us – outside of time as if it were an archeology of the present based on the reconstruction of past procedures.

The powerful staging, the scenographic drift and the quasi-religious symbology claimed the innocence of the observer as an act of faith. In their perpetual dialogue with the above, Byars’ installations and performances reproduce a kind of false estrangement, a sensation of recognition and absence, which would link his praxis with the metaphysical tendencies and the return to order of the twenties and thirties of the last century.

This sensation, characteristic of Byars’ staging, is amplified in the symbolic spaces in which it is represented. Byars, apart from the specific rhetoric of the gallery and the art museum – and in this sense it must be specified that he knew and interacted with the springs of the museum and the art market – looks for specific elements in places that reflect the aesthetic and conceptual perfection that are mostly related to the sacred. It is not strange that a large part of his work is installed in temples – with



Fig. 5. James Lee Byars: *The Death of James Lee Byars* (2019).
Santa Maria de la Visitazione Church, Venice.

his special predilection for monasteries, churches and all kinds of religious buildings – which re-signify and increase the enunciative power of the pieces. The perfect as a link with the totality refers not only to the work, but also to the environmental space that contains it.

The idea of the perfect becomes, on the other hand, a perpetual questioning of the world. Hence it is transcribed in the instant, an approach that has to do with prespecialty and in which the difference between the work and the artist is indistinguishable. The perfect is, in turn, the vindication of the actuality of the moment, of the breath in which the body and work are transubstantiated into the artistic fact in relation to the very nature of life and that challenges the mere fact of existing in the face of the absolute cancellation of death.

Therefore, one of his archetypal images would be the sphere, as a perfect geometric element and, in turn, as an allegory of natural cycles and the passage of time understood by Byars as the process of transformation of the body. The artist, on the other hand, transferred the religious elements to his own presence in a particular liturgy in which he tried to create perfect works – or that referred to the idea itself – in an imperfect world and that could only exist as an allegory of perfection without ever embodying the total concept.

Death and epiphany

The impostured strategy of disappearance presages the ultimate conditioner of the idea of death. Byars began working on it in 1975 with *The Perfect Epitaph*, a piece performed in Bern in which he rolled a red lava rock through the city (Ottmann 2004, 17). In another work, the performance *The Perfect Death of James Lee Byars*, the artist lay down on the gold-painted floor in one of his golden suits, creating a visual trompe l'oeil effect in which his body, confused with the golden scenery, became invisible (17). And in this area, we penetrate into the third of the lines of argument in which all his work takes shape. In this sense, it is worth mentioning that contemporary art has banished the idea of the sacred, as if the discourse of modernity had been built from an essentially materialistic point of view. Despite its exclusion in art and in life, the idea of death is present in his discourse since it is an inherent part of the vital process. For this reason, in 1975 the artist wrote: “I am a momentary man”, underlining the instantaneousness of consciousness and the ephemeral nature of existence in order to emphasize the sacredness of his praxis. Death, like sex, is taboo and modernized Western societies increasingly conceal its presence, displace it and hide it.

On the contrary, James Lee Byars perpetually interrogates it. The artist envisioned it as the definitive event in his piece *The Death of James Lee Byars*, developed between 1980 and 1990, a reflection on the subject's feeling of his finitude in which he

establishes a stripping in favor of an epiphany. As Angélica Oliveira has pointed out, “for Byars, the antinomy between the visible body and the disappearing body would reveal the true problematic of the sacralization of the artist’s image. In short, it would be a ritual act by means of which the boundary between the human body (mortal) and the divine body (immortal) would be marked” (2018, 104).

His demise is articulated as the end of the transit, of the nomad arriving at his destination. After having lived in New York, Kyoto, Bern, the Swiss Alps, Los Angeles and the southeastern United States, James Lee Byars died in a hotel in Cairo in the spring of 1987 in a space that looked at the pyramids, architectural elements created with the idea of defying time in their implicit idea of eternity.

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