

## THE NEW YORK OBSERVER

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### 'James Lee Byars: 1/2 an Autobiography'

MOMAPS1

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, flaneur, 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 PSI and Magali 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 present works on paper in an emergency stairwell for a few hours. 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 regularly sported a tall hat and suits of black, red or gold (he occasionally inhabited his shows in costume), corresponded passionately with patrons and artists (particularly Joseph Beuys, always with a hint 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 frightening 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 with gold, a sphere of 3,333 roses), but even they evince the same touching drive for unspeakable perfection as his quixotic (sometimes comical) rituals. He constructed bulwarks against the ever-encroaching deficiencies of the world. Hinting at the strange, quiet sadness that motivates 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)*