

ARTFORUM

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James Lee Byars

MoMA PS1

This retrospective, which takes over the second floor of PS1, reveals James Lee Byars as a peripatetic showman whose work engaged some of the most compelling artistic questions of his time. Included in his variegated oeuvre is a collection of letters—the majority addressed to Joseph Beuys, Byars’s hero and most obvious influence—that evince the artist’s desire for creative correspondence. But, these letters, written in Byars’s intricately ornamented “star script,” evince a simultaneous fascination with gnomonic indecipherability, as in all of his work. This conflicting set of impulses is equally evident in his “book” sculptures, which, in their irregular shapes and illegible typefaces, seem to flaunt their unreadability. Tropes of communication bleed into a sort of communion in Byars’s multiperson garments, such as the *Pink Silk Airplane*, 1969, which can accommodate one hundred simultaneous wearers.



View of “James Lee Byars: 1/2 an Autobiography,” 2014.

These call to mind contemporaneous works by Franz Erhard Walther, though the idea of the artwork’s activation through participation was already present in the interactive paper sculptures that Byars made after spending time in Kyoto. His *World Question Center* project, also 1969, was dedicated to compiling America’s “most interesting” questions—Byars’s response to Beuys’s contention that “everyone is an artist”—but left them conspicuously unanswered.

In Byars’s most original works, the opulent sculptures he produced from the 1980s on, his desires to show and to shroud are reconciled by embracing a Jodorowskyesque theatricality. Byars would interact with these works, which combine blood-red silk, gilded marble, and dramatic spotlighting, in temporal actions he called “plays.” The retrospective ultimately succeeds by presenting all of the artist’s work in such terms, with the galleries’ walls painted black and luminous gold, giving the impression of a black-box theater turned gnostic temple.