

JAMES LEE BYARS

«Perhaps one of the greatest philosophical moments is a realization that almost everything—as far as I’m concerned—is total question. Or at least there is some question in anything.»

James Lee Byars

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Curated by
Vicente Todolí

Pirelli HangarBicocca
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Exhibition organized by
Pirelli HangarBicocca, Milan
and Museo Nacional Centro de Arte
Reina Sofía, Madrid

Public Program

26 October: Lecture by Stephan Köhler, curator
and long-time collaborator of James Lee Byars

11 January: Conversation in the exhibition
with curator Els Hoek

8, 9, and 10 February: Program of performances
by James Lee Byars in the exhibition space

Cultural Mediation

Cultural mediators are present in the exhibition spaces
to answer questions from the public, give information
and context elements that can deepen the fruition
of the artworks.

Catalog

A volume dedicated to the exhibition is being
published in December 2023 and available at the
Pirelli HangarBicocca's bookshop and online.

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James Lee Byars in the exhibition
space of "The Perfect Thought,"
University Art Museum, University
of California, Berkeley, 1990

The Artist

James Lee Byars (Detroit, 1932 – Cairo, 1997) was one of the most important figures of the twentieth-century art scene, whose daring and experimental works have had a fundamental influence on generations of artists. Byars's actions—situations in which he engaged a diverse audience in urban, institutional or sacred settings—are regarded as legendary episodes in post-war art history. Due to his ability to range across different fields—from art to science, fashion to television—Byars has often been associated with iconic artists such as Yves Klein (1928–1962) and Joseph Beuys (1921–1986), for having investigated the immaterial and the intangible, resulting in ephemeral works that remain as traces and stories with theatrical and mythical overtones. Often described as a shaman, a dandy or a magician in his performances, Byars dressed according to a refined and entirely personal aesthetic code: a suit (gold, white, black or pink, depending on the occasion), a hat, gloves, and sometimes a blindfold.

From the outset, he oriented his life and career towards a nomadic existence, living for various periods in Detroit, Kyoto, New York, Los Angeles, Berlin, Bern, Venice, and Cairo and forging relationships and partnerships with an international network of artists and curators. He maintained a close correspondence with them in the form of sophisticated letters written on precious materials that form an important part of his production and testify to his desire to be present everywhere in the world. For its interdisciplinary and multimedia approach, his work has never been associated with a single movement, but is instead interpreted as a synthesis of Eastern practices and Western artistic currents such as conceptual art, Minimalism, Fluxus, performance art, and happenings.

While studying psychology, philosophy, and applied arts at Wayne State University, in his hometown of Detroit in the mid-1950s, Byars also approached art through informal actions and exhibitions—for example one presentation took place in his own home, where he removed all the furniture for a day to emphasize the sole presence of a space. Visitors would see him seated on a chair in the otherwise empty house. After his studies, in 1958 he made his first trip to Japan, which he would visit for long periods over the following ten years. During these stays, he came into contact with the major figures of

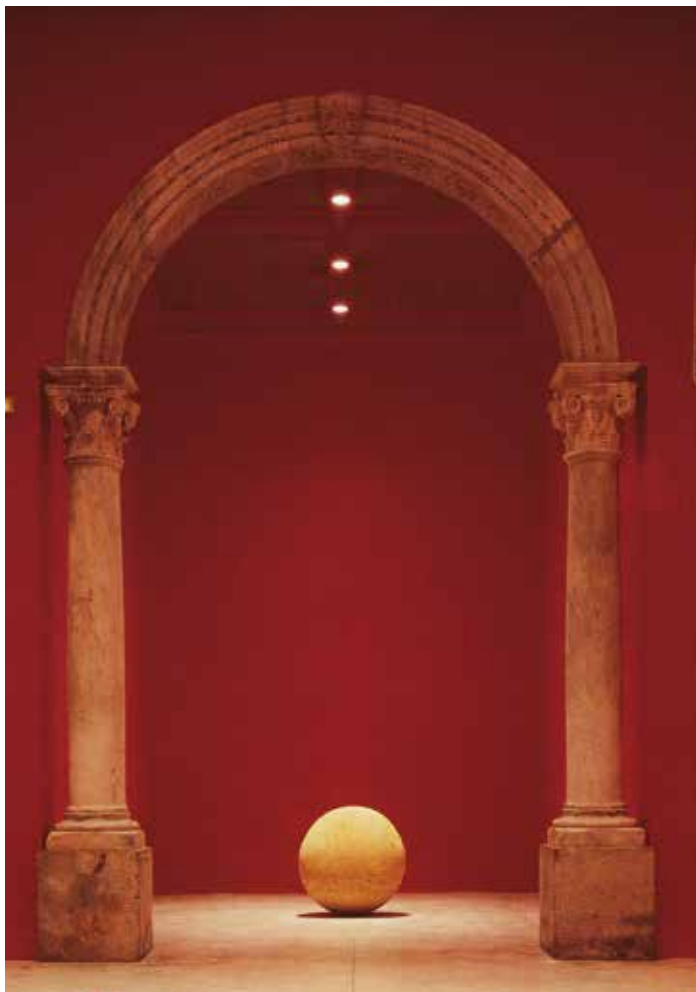
the culture of the time, engaging with numerous traditional forms of expression, from ceramics to painting on paper, that allowed him to expand his artistic vocabulary. Byars was also fascinated by the ceremonial aspects of ancient Japanese religions such as Shintoism, characterized by minimalist rituals full of meaning and the use of votive objects often made of folded paper or stones. Another important influence was Noh theater, whose formal and aesthetic characteristics he admired, like the abstract stage composition based on simplicity, the creation of vivid and sensual atmospheres, and the use of masks as an enigmatic communication device.

In the decade between the late 1950s and 1960s, Byars made his first large-scale ink paintings on traditional Japanese paper and conceived his first “performative” sculptures, such as *The Performable Square* (1963)—a cube of stacked folded paper. Sometimes they were activated by performers such as Lucinda Childs and Yvonne Rainer, both part of American experimental dance movements, who unfolded them to create a square.

Since the beginning, Byars had always been concerned with the human condition, its limits, and the notion of the end of existence. Returning from his first trip in Japan he met Dorothy Miller, then curator at MoMA, who agreed to show his work in the staircase of the museum; the exhibition lasted a single day marking his debut into the world of American contemporary Art.

During the same period, he created his iconic silk “plural garments,” which could be worn by several people at the same time during public performances that he orchestrated. On these occasions, the artist also involved well-known personalities in order to attract media attention. For example, in 1967 *The New York Times* devoted an article to an unusual event in which 100 people walked through New York wearing a single giant red silk scarf. The procession, almost 1.5 kilometers long, was led by feminist scholar Shere Hite (1942–2020), and was accompanied by the Salvation Army Tuba band, which played music by Bach.

The probing of the ephemeral and the transient relationship with the viewer, which occupy a prominent place in Byars's practice,



The Tomb of James Lee Byars, 1986
Installation view, IVAM,
Institut Valencià d'Art Modern,
Valencia, 1994

were inspired by ancient Buddhist sacred texts, according to which all visible things are illusions, temporary manifestations of an undefined and empty reality, as stated by the artist, «The Human identity (me, you) and thus also the identity of an artist, is not a fixed value: it is like a dream, like a vision, like a bubble, like a shadow, like see, like lightning.» An emblematic example of this exploration is *The Giant Soluble Man* (1967), one of the most spectacular performative sculptures ever created by Byars. It consisted of 150 meters of white Dissolvo paper—a water-soluble material—laid out to form a human figure along 53rd Street between Fifth and Sixth Avenue in New York. Participants were invited to engage with the figure and many were seen walking or rolling on it. With the aid of the police, on a signal from the artist two street-cleaning trucks washed away the long silhouette with water, causing it to dissolve into nothing.

From the 1970s onwards, Byars achieved popularity and was invited to exhibit at major European institutions, including the De Appel contemporary arts center in Amsterdam and the Kunsthalle in Bern. On these occasions, he painted monochrome backgrounds in highly symbolic colors such as red or gold, on the wall or floor of the venue to serve as backdrops for his sculptural works and performances, demonstrating his interest in the formal composition of the volumes in the exhibition space. During the same period, he turned his attention to the cosmos and undertook numerous collaborations with scientific institutes, pursuing his research through inquiries based on philosophical doubt, according to which the question is more important than the answer. In 1970, he obtained a residency at the Hudson Institute, a nuclear research center, where he focused on finding, as he stated, «the one hundred most interesting questions in America at this time.» Two years later he was invited to CERN, the European Organization for Nuclear Research in Geneva, as the first artist-in-residence. His path was greatly influenced by his study of the pre-Socratic philosophers (considered the pioneers of modern physics), magic, and alchemy, leading him to develop a way of thinking aimed at the pursuit of perfection. During this time, he started making sculptures with eternal materials such as sandstone, marble, and glass as symbols of the absolute. This exploration was also expressed in his prominent use of gold and the form of the sphere.

During the 1980s and 1990s, Byars increasingly devoted himself to the production of sculptural works, echoing a shift in the art world that saw a return to more traditional media, also in Europe, where the artistic style evolved toward a more figurative and expressionist language. Within the framework of the artistic debate, Byars conceived works in which the objects themselves were able to take on the role of performers without him being present, as, for example, in his series of “chairs” that metaphorically act as extensions of the artist’s body. Byars progressively incorporated into his visual lexicon larger works made of precious materials, such as silk and diamonds, or with archaic forms like circles and columns. As the critic Klaus Ottmann points out, «While Byars’s earlier, dominantly performative works were guided by the model of Japanese Noh theater and sought to dematerialize the art object through actions and performances, his later works re-objectify his actions by transforming the material of the objects into performers who raise philosophical questions.» The 1990s saw his international consecration with a series of retrospectives at leading European museums, including the Castello di Rivoli in Turin, the IVAM in Valencia, and the Serralves Museum in Porto.

The Exhibition

James Lee Byars’s retrospective, the first in Italy since his passing away, delves into the deeper aspects of the human experience investigated by the artist, blending mysticism, spirituality, and corporeality. Realized in collaboration with the Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofia and with the support of The Estate of James Lee Byars, the show brings together a vast array of emblematic sculptural works and monumental installations realized between 1974 and 1997. Rarely exhibited, they are here presented for the first time all together in one undivided space.

The exhibition narrative unfolds in a non-chronological order, starting and ending with two iconic works, *The Golden Tower* (1990) and *Red Angel of Marseille* (1993), that reveal Byars’s singular approach to scale and volume. Outlined by the industrial structure of the Navate space of Pirelli HangarBicocca, the show is perceived by the viewer as an overall installation



The Spinning Oracle of Delft, 1986
Installation view,
Kunsthalle Düsseldorf, 1986
© Kunsthalle Düsseldorf
Photo J. Romero

in itself, pervaded by a palette of colors—gold, red, and black—which is distinctive of the artist’s poetics.

For the show, several of Byars’s displays are represented for the first time as they were conceived originally by the artist for previous exhibitions, such as the gilded glass cases containing his series of marble “books” and *The Giant Angel with The Human Head* (1983) and *The Devil and His Gifts* (1983). The works on view, gathered from important collections and international institutions, interweave refined materials such as marble, gold leaf, crystal, glass, and silk with archetypal geometries and Baroque-like objects creating symbolic and aesthetic cross-references between form and content. The exhibition also includes historical materials and documents exchanged between James Lee Byars and Italian artist Maurizio Nannucci.



James Lee Byars in front of *The Golden Tower* (1990), at Martin-Gropius-Bau, Berlin, 1990
 Photo Heinz-Günter Mebusch, The Flying Studios International | Artforum Culture Foundation – The Mebusch Estate

1. *The Golden Tower*, 1990
2. *The Capital of the Golden Tower*, 1991

The Golden Tower, a column of approximately 21 meters high covered in gold leaf, is the most imposing work ever created by James Lee Byars. The initial idea for a monument to humanity dates back to 1974, but it was realized with its colossal dimensions only in 1990 for the exhibition at the Martin-Gropius-Bau in Berlin. In 2017, almost 20 years after Byars's death, his wish to display *The Golden Tower* in a public space was granted: the giant golden beacon was installed in Campo San Vio in Venice near the Grand Canal, visible throughout many parts of the city. The artist was particularly fond of Venice, where he had lived and worked for several periods from 1982 onwards. Recalling the archetypal forms used in religious architecture, such as the Tower of Babel and minarets built to reach towards the heavens, the sculpture symbolizes the striving for the divine, while the gold leaf covering it evokes the constant spiritual and philosophical quest for inner enlightenment essential to Byars's art.

The Capital of the Golden Tower, made a year later, recalls the hemispherical top of the golden tower. Here, the artist reverses the observer's view of the element that is generally visible from below, looking upwards, by presenting the top of the tower in understated manner, set directly on a square black plinth.

3. *The Door of Innocence*, 1986–89
4. *The Figure of Question is in the Room*, 1986

Byars synthesizes the human figure into an icon in the golden pillar entitled *The Figure of Question is in the Room*. The marble sculpture, made in 1986, reflects the artist's long and complex study of the relationship between the concept of beauty and spoken language, hidden behind the apparently simple geometric form of a rectangular column. The work was subsequently covered in gold leaf on the occasion of the exhibition at the Castello di Rivoli in Turin in 1989. The two dotted letters Q and R engraved on the top—a partial acronym of the work's title—emerge through the color. The gleaming material that covers the sculpture alludes to a spiritual dimension, while the verticality of the static marble block physically evokes the presence of bodies in space, whether human or celestial.



The Door of Innocence,
1986–89 (foreground)
The Figure of Question is in the Room,
1986 (background)
Installation view, Castello di Rivoli Museo
d'Arte Contemporanea, Turin, 1989
Courtesy Castello di Rivoli Museo
d'Arte Contemporanea, Rivoli-Torino
Photo Lothar Schnepf © The Estate
of Lothar Schnepf

Byars adopts “question” and doubt as an instrument of knowledge in his practice, believing that the question mark can breathe new life into any statement, transferring it from the realm of the assertion of reality to that of art and poetry.

The Door of Innocence is also emblematic of the use of simple geometric figures such as cubes, spheres, circles, and rectangles that Byars charges with symbolic meanings. The large marble ring, covered with gold leaf, appears as a statically balanced halo, and in the exhibition is placed in dialogue with *The Figure of Question is in the Room*. The relationship between the two sculptures creates a shared space of questioning contemplation, where the stylized human figure is framed by the golden opening.

5. *What?*, 1979

6. *Pronounce Perfect Until It Appears*, 1979

These two sound pieces, a unicum in the artist’s oeuvre, reproduce Byars’s voice for a few seconds inside a room. Recorded by Byars for the artist Maurizio Nannucci, with whom he had a close friendship for over 20 years, the works are exhibited in a loop within the enclosed space. Each encompasses a fundamental aspect of Byars’s practice, a sort of intangible counterbalance to the large-scale installations. The forceful utterance “What?” encapsulates his inquiring attitude, exposing the relevance that questions and questioning had in the artist’s poetics. The phrase “Pronounce Perfect Until It Appears” recalls his never-ending search for perfection, pursued through the precious materials used in his works.

The works are presented in the room together with archival documents described in entry 24 of this exhibition guide.

7. *The Giant Angel with the Human Head*, 1983

The Book of the Hundred Questions, 1969
The Name of the Artist, 1974
The Golden Box for Speaking, 1978
The High Romance of the Lilac Arrow, 1978
The Perfect Question, 1978
The Stone for Speech, 1979–80
The Book for Death, 1980
The Lucky Stone, 1980

The Moonbook, 1980
The Ringbook, 1980
The Sphere Book, 1980
The Stones for the Senses, 1980
The Play of Death, 1981
The Wing of Departure, 1981
The Reading Stand, 1985
The Touched Sphere, 1988

8. *The Devil and His Gifts*, 1983

Letter, 1975
James Lee Byars, 1977
The Red Devil, 1977
The Book of Clairvoyance, 1979
The Moonbook, 1980
The Sphere Book, 1980
The Phallic Book, 1980

The White Book, 1980
See It Is The Gift, 1981
The Perfect Cheek, 1981
James Lee Byars, 1982
Is Is, 1988
The Triangle Book, 1988
The Spherical Book, 1989

The two installations were originally realized for the retrospective at the Van Abbemuseum in Eindhoven, in the Netherlands, in 1983. The exhibition narrative commenced with *The Devil and His Gifts* and ended with *The Giant Angel with the Human Head*. Both were conceived as assemblages of previous works with the intention of creating a total artwork devoted to the figures of the angel and the devil. *The Devil and His Gifts* was presented on a black silk cloth laid on the floor, upon which the installation's pivotal element is placed: *The Red Devil* (1977), a large stylized figure made of red rope. As the title suggests, this form may represent the devil, his "gifts" scattered around him. These include some of the artist's letters, exhibition catalogues, and works, the most recognizable of which belong to the "books" series—small marble sculptures of varying shapes.

The Giant Angel with the Human Head, on the other hand, is arranged on a pink silk cloth, upon which artworks and objects create a more abstract composition, dominated by touches of gold, white, and black.

At Pirelli HangarBicocca, the two works are reassembled for the first time since 1983 and are displayed side by side to emphasize their complementary nature and provide an example of the complexity of Byars's allegorical language.

9. *The Unicorn Horn*, 1984

The work consists of a narwhal tusk arranged on a white silk cloth that in turn lies on a wooden table. Before the narwhal was discovered in Europe in the mid-seventeenth century, it was widely believed that the cetacean's canine tooth was actually a horn—proof of the existence of the mythological figure of the unicorn. These legends made narwhal tusks rare and sought-after objects. They were also desired for their purported healing properties, and often collected by aristocratic families, such as the famous specimen in the Gonzaga collection in the Ducal Palace in Mantua.

Byars uses the title *The Unicorn Horn* to reconnect the narwhal tusk with its ancient history, enhancing its mysticism and reverently displaying it like a religious relic. He favors precious materials, believing the difficulty of sourcing them to reflect their exceptional nature, which makes them an integral part of his relentless pursuit of perfection.

10. *The Hole for Speech*, 1974–81

The Hole for Speech consists of a large circular sheet of glass, set in a wooden frame, at the center of which is a hole rimmed with gold leaf. First displayed at the Galerie René Block in Berlin in 1974 on occasion of Byars's solo exhibition, the sculptural installation was initially called *The Big Glass or the Refinement of Perfection*. The original title was an explicit reference to the artist's performance in which he placed himself behind the transparent panel, mysteriously swathed in black fabrics, and invited viewers to approach the golden hole to verbally express their concept of perfection.

The work highlights Byars's keen interest in speech, filtered in this case by the central opening which, according to the artist, becomes a «needle eye for thoughts,» a means of communication that visitors could use to isolate themselves from the space «for some seconds of self-knowledge,» while remaining clearly visible behind what Byars called the "mask of glass." At the exhibition held at the Westfälischen Kunstverein in Münster in the early 1980s, the sculpture was renamed *The Hole for Speech*, and the performance was also modified. The viewers were asked to cover their



The Hole for Speech, 1974–81
 Courtesy University of California,
 Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film
 Archive; Bequest of James Elliot

eyes in order to be able to better concentrate and respond through the opening to certain thoughts suggested by Byars, such as «give me your five-minute reality soliloquy» or «imagine you can say 'I change my mind' through the golden hole» or «imagine living all your life without paying attention to it».

11. *The Rose Table of Perfect*, 1989

The Rose Table of Perfect is a one-meter-diameter sphere made up of 3333 red roses. As the artist explained, «I try to make something that I think is beautiful and offer it to other people. You know, I work very much with spheres and rings and these types of, for me, great beautiful forms.»

The use of this organic medium is unique in his oeuvre—he usually chose durable materials such as metals or precious stones—making the work one of the most singular examples of his pursuit of perfection. Indeed, the appearance of the sphere is destined to change over the course of the exhibition: initially a vivid red color with an intense scent, the flowers will gradually wither, losing their bright tint and scent, until they dry out. Byars contrasts this transience of beauty with the permanence of the work's symbolic meaning. In *The Rose Table of Perfect*, for example, the artist creates the sphere with a precise number of flowers, a reference to Kabbalistic numerology, and using red roses only, a flower with powerful allegorical meanings, often blatantly contradictory, as it can be both an emblem of love and passion, but also of death and pain.

12. *The Tomb of James Lee Byars*, 1986

The Tomb of James Lee Byars is a polished sandstone sphere that evokes a crucial concept in the artist's oeuvre: the quest for perfection and the absolute.

Deeply influenced by classical culture, Byars analyzes the symbolic meanings of the circular figures long explored in ancient philosophies, as he states, «if you look into Plato you will see this magnificent definition of the beauty of the sphere where all points are equidistant in the mathematics of the sphere. The surface is smooth and the surface is polished. He holds this up as one of the great examples of beauty and then goes through the cosmological idea of the earth and the religious interpretation. I am very susceptible to such ideas of beauty.»

Byars metaphorically conceives his own “tomb” as a pure and complete element, whose form recalls that of celestial bodies. The

sphere, capable of evoking a sacred aura, is a recurring element in other works in the exhibition such as in *The Rose Table of Perfect* (1989) and in the golden sphere inside the glass case of *The Conscience* (1985). In contrast to these, the orb in *The Tomb of James Lee Byars* is not covered with any material and its stratified, porous surface bears the traces of the passage of time.

13. *The Conscience*, 1985

A small golden sphere is enclosed in a blown-glass cloche resting on a gilded wooden base. The size and vertical arrangement of the volumes make the composition reminiscent of a living human figure. Clearly alluding to the Renaissance cabinets of curiosities—places that housed eclectic collections of unusual objects, the forerunners of modern museums—the work expands the concept of exploration and knowledge that is inherent in Byars’s art. Triggering a play of cross-references between inside and outside, content and container—also present in the twelve gold vitrines in the exhibition—*The Conscience* (sometimes referred to as *The Conscience of the Artist*) has a sphere at its center, an image of the reduction of an element to its minimum terms and at the same time a form with strong spiritual overtones. As Kevin Power explains, Byars «turned *The Conscience of the Artist* into a small golden sphere the size of a human eyeball as if to insist that all we can do is look at the world and question it, that our eyes are the only hierarchies.»

14. *Byars is Elephant*, 1997

Byars is Elephant was Byars’s last work before his untimely death in Cairo. The installation is composed of two contrasting parts: an iridescent large gold cloth, hanging from the ceiling and extending to cover part of the floor, and a rope ball made from camel hair, set on a pedestal. Both materials are linked to Egyptian history, but have diametrically opposite meanings: rope is a lowly product, used in ancient times to haul the stone blocks with which the pyramids were built, while gold is associated with the figure of the pharaoh and is a symbol of immortality. Byars, who spent his last days in Giza contem-



The Moon Books, 1988-89
Installation view,
University Art Museum, University
of California, Berkeley, 1990
Courtesy University of California,
Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film
Archive; Bequest of James Elliot

plating the perfect geometric forms of pyramids from a hotel room, claimed that the Egyptians were the people who had most explored and understood the concept of death.

15. *The Moon Books*, 1988–89

The installation consists of a large table covered in gold leaf, upon which are scattered 16 white marble sculptures representing the Moon in its main phases: new, waxing, full, and waning. In Western culture, the lunar cycle is usually divided into eight phases, but Byars decided to multiply this number as some Asian traditions do. The influence of Eastern cosmology and culture is evident in many of the artist’s works, which combine his knowledge and interpretation of



James Lee Byars behind
The Figure of Death (1986),
 Kunsthalle Düsseldorf, 1986
 Courtesy University of California,
 Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film
 Archive; Bequest of James Elliot
 Photo Elio Montanari

Eastern philosophies with that of ancient Mediterranean cultures, particularly Hellenic and Egyptian. In *The Moon Books* this process is reflected in the choice of materials: the moons are made of Thassos marble—an extremely fine-grained Greek marble used for the most celebrated classical sculptures—while the gilding of the table recalls the alchemical practices that aimed to transmute metals into gold.

16. *The Figure of Death*, 1986

The work is composed of ten basalt cubes placed on top of each other on a gilded base to create a tall pillar. Byars often used archetypal forms resembling obelisks or totem poles to evoke the upright nature of the body and its precarious balance. The installation stands as a celebratory icon and, like *The Figure of Question is in the Room* (1986), also in the exhibition, it becomes an eternal representation of the artist's absent body, taking on the function of a memorial. The sculpture introduces the concept of the end of human life, probed by Byars throughout his career, often via performances in which he dramatized his own end. *The Figure of Death* strikes visitors with its emblematic presence in the exhibition space: like a totem it evokes the religious sphere and underscores the artist's interest in the temporal dimension and the relationship between body and spirit.

17. *Hear TH FI TO IN PH Around This Chair And It Knocks You Down*, 1977

18. *The Chair of Transformation*, 1989

A nineteenth-century wooden chair with golden upholstery (one of the earliest swivel chairs ever made) is set on an embroidered gold silk rug and enclosed in a black silk tent. The installation was first presented at the inaugural exhibition of the Marian Goodman Gallery in New York in 1977, probably as a tribute to the Belgian artist Marcel Broodthaers (1924–1976), one of the most significant figures of conceptual art with whom Byars collaborated for many years. At the opening performance, the artist appeared with his face



*Hear TH FI TO IN PH
Around This Chair And It Knocks
You Down, 1977 (detail)
Photo Peter Cox*

covered by a black veil, illuminating the chair with a torch and reciting “Hear The First Totally Interrogative Philosophy Around This Chair And It Knocks You Down.” The phrase, from which the work’s title is derived in abbreviated form, expresses Byars’s interest in doubt as an approach to existence and as a form of awareness: «After years of thinking about all the questions, and about the nature of questions, and the nature of what I consider PHI [Greek letter that symbolizes the perfect and natural beauty], it became imminent that one question alone is quite sufficient. And a question does many things. It creates interest. I think it automatically has benevolence and humility in it. It suggests that one is pursuing perfection, in itself not being well defined.»

This space for questioning can also be seen in *The Chair of Transformation*, featured in the show, which consists of a seventeenth-century solid wood chair adorned with inlays depicting birds in a bucolic landscape with classical motifs. The work is framed by a red tent and its composition has a strong pictorial component.

Both installations evoke imagery from different Eastern traditions, as attested by the artist, «the empty throne signifying the Buddha in the realization of not-self, the empty chair of the ghost in Shinto rituals.»

19. *The Spinning Oracle of Delfi*, 1986

The large nineteenth-century gilded terracotta amphora entitled *The Spinning Oracle of Delfi* was first exhibited in 1986 on occasion of James Lee Byars’s solo exhibition at the Kunsthalle Düsseldorf.

During his lifetime the artist made numerous trips to Greece, tapping into the sources of its ancient civilization and philosophy to explore the cyclical nature of life and the primordial concept of beauty. In Ancient Greece, amphorae had two functions: in addition to containing liquids, they were used for educational and narrative purposes, and thus decorated with scenes from Greek mythology and history. The title of the work is inspired by the story of the sanctuary of Delphi, one of the most important centers of worship and pilgrimage in antiquity dedicated to the god Apollo, where the faithful went to interrogate Pythia, the prophetess appointed for life, about the future.

The Spinning Oracle of Delfi appears in the space of Pirelli HangarBicocca like an archaeological find, suspended in time to guard in the darkness of its interior the questions posed over the millennia. The lustrous patina that defines its form is a reference to the divine world, associated since ancient times with gold, a rare, ductile, incorruptible element.

20. *The Circle Book*, 1986, *The Head of Plato*, 1986, *The Triangle Book*, 1988, *The Spherical Book*, 1989, *The Cube Book*, 1989, *The Figure of Question*, 1989, *The Soft Sphere (The Head of Plato)*, 1989, *The Star Book*, 1990, *The Triangle Book*, 1990, *The Diamond Book*, 1990, *The Moon Book*, 1990, *Slit Moon*, 1994

12 gilded glass cases, each containing a white marble sculpture, are presented for the first time at Pirelli HangarBicocca following the display originally conceived by the artist for the exhibition at Castello di Rivoli in 1989 in Turin.

The artist sees these elements like books whose titles evoke certain universal concepts that have influenced his work, such as philosophy and geometry. In the closed stone books, where form and content become one, the absence of words opens up endless possibilities for the viewer to imagine or project their own meanings.

In this work too, the use of gold lends an aura to each individual element presented in the glass cases. As Byars stated, «Gold is so mysterious. [...] The reactions of the people are either like that, very mysterious, or they think it is very decadent or very meaningless. But for me, not, because gold takes me more into the infinitely mystical. I rarely think of gold as being decorative. I see it more as spiritual.»

21. *The Diamond Floor*, 1995

Inspired by Leonardo da Vinci's *Vitruvian Man* (circa 1490), Byars reduces the human figure to a collection of five points. As the artist himself said, «Most recently I discovered that five points make

a figure. They can be waterdrops, for example. If you put down one waterdrop for the head and you make a pentagon or a star figure, you have actually made a man.»

These words foreshadow the compositional synthesis of the body underlying *The Diamond Floor* installation, composed of five crystals arranged to form a pentagon on a black floor. Byars explored the concept of the five points in various works, often referring to them with the expression "Five Points Make a Man." At the same time, for many years he used star-shaped glyphs in his letters similar to those adorning illuminated medieval manuscripts and, over time, the five-pointed glyphs became the compositional elements of several drawings.

22. *The Thinking Field*, 1989

Exhibited in dialogue with *The Diamond Floor* (1995), this work consists of 100 white marble spheres, also laid out horizontally along the floor of Pirelli HangarBicocca's Navate. The work was originally presented in 1989 with the title *The Thinking Field of 100 Spheres*, with the marble globes presented in a grid across the entire floor of a room. In 1992 the work was arranged in the shape of an elongated oval and entitled *The Human Figure*, revealing Byars's interest in the exploration of the human form and its ultimate simplification.

While in *The Diamond Floor* the light and reflections on the surfaces of the crystal diamonds refer to concepts of incorporeality and immateriality, here the material prevails, with a tactile quality typical of the language of sculpture. The white marble spheres generate forces of dispersion and regularity through their mere presence, making the repetition and control from which the ovoid shape originates perceptible in the installation.

As author Heinrich Heil commented, «In each individual sphere of the field, the greatness of human thinking repeats itself and transcends a homage to Plato, to the diversity of questioning philosophy and its countless attempts to gain access to the world. One hundred expanding points represent a section from the infinite sphere occupied by the field of human consciousness.»



Red Angel of Marseille, 1993 (foreground)
The Capital of the Golden Tower,
 1991 (background)
 Installation view, IVAM,
 Institut Valencià d'Art Modern,
 Valencia, 1994

23. *Red Angel of Marseille*, 1993

James Lee Byars made the sculpture *Red Angel of Marseille* after receiving an award from the International Glass and Visual Arts Research Centre (CIRVA) in Marseille. Working with master glassworkers, the artist assembled a thousand small red glass spheres next to each other to recreate the anthropomorphic figure of a ruby-colored angel, which also evokes the shape of a flowering tree. The simplicity of the orbs is transformed into a rich opulence of colors and textures in the glistening red swirls composing the sculptural design assembled on the floor.

By contrast, the artist associates the simple symbolic form of the sphere—complete, eternal, and perfect in itself—with red, one of his favorite colors along with white, gold, and black, due to its strong expressive power. A fragile, translucent material, glass is seen by Byars as an ideal medium with which to convey the transcendence of beauty. He started experimenting with the qualities of this material in the 1980s, when he came into contact with the artisans of Murano, who helped him create

the celestial figure of *The Angel* (1989) with over a hundred transparent spheres arranged on the floor.

24. Selection of correspondence and artist's books by James Lee Byars from Zona Archives and Maurizio Nannucci

The display cases present works, letters, postcards, artist's books and objects donated by James Lee Byars to artist Maurizio Nannucci. The items selected by Nannucci and Gabriele Detterer testify to the long friendship and personal affinity between the two artists, which began after their first encounter in 1972 and continued over the years with collaborations on various projects. Examples of this are the two editions shown here, *TH / One Page Book* (1978) e *P.I.I.T.L. (Perfect Is In The Louvre)* (1990), edited by Maurizio Nannucci, co-founder of the non-profit space Zona in Florence, a collective place run by artists, where also James Lee Byars exhibited in multiple occasions presenting as well two performances at the National Library.

The items featured at Pirelli HangarBicocca are drawn from this archive and include many gifts or exchanges between the two artists, including small artifacts employed during Byars's performances, multiples, and papers, tracing a map of his imagination. Amongst these, a selection of letters sent to Nannucci over the years revealing their close dialogue as well as the experimental and diverse languages employed by the artist in his correspondence, a constant feature of his work.

These letters highlight in particular Byars's long-researched concept of beauty which lies in their physicality, as the choice of paper, color, and ink, and the nearly indecipherable decorative handwriting used for transcribing practical information, poetic epigrams, and personal messages. This collection of items also comprises rare artist books, like the "pink book" *100,000 Minutes* (1969), also known as *½ an Autobiography*, which includes a series of cryptic statements, biographical information, and anecdotes written by the artist.

Selected Exhibitions

Several international institutions have organized solo exhibitions by James Lee Byars, including Red Brick Art Museum, Beijing (2021); M HKA, Museum of Contemporary Art Antwerp (2018); MoMA PS1, New York (2014); Museo Jumex, Mexico City (2013); Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh (2011 and 1964); Kunstmuseum Bern (2008); MoMA Museum of Modern Art, New York (2007 and 1958); Barbican Centre, London (2005); Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, Schirn Kunsthalle, Frankfurt, Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art, North Adams (2004); Museu Serralves, Porto (1997); Fondation Cartier pour l'art Contemporain, Paris (1995); IVAM, Institut Valencià d'Art Modern, Valencia, Museum Ludwig, Cologne (1994); Stockholm Konsthall (1992); Castello di Rivoli Museo d'Arte Contemporanea, Turin (1989); Kunsthalle Düsseldorf (1986); Philadelphia Museum of Art, Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston (1984); Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris, Stedelijk Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven (1983); De Appel Foundation, Amsterdam (1978); Kunsthalle Bern, Busch-Reisinger Museum at Harvard, Cambridge (1978); Louisiana Museum of Modern Art, Humlebaek (1977); Palais des Beaux-Arts, Brussels (1974); Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York (1971). The artist has taken part in numerous group shows, including Venice Biennale (2013, 1999, 1986, 1980); Yokohama Triennale (2011); documenta, Kassel (1987, 1982, 1977, 1972).

This publication accompanies the exhibition "James Lee Byars"

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Maurizio Nannucci & Zona Archives, Firenze;
Michael Werner Gallery, New York, London, and Berlin;
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Pirelli HangarBicocca is a non-profit foundation, established in 2004, which has converted a former industrial plant in Milan into an institution for producing and promoting contemporary art.

This dynamic center for experimentation and research covers 15,000 square meters, making it one of the largest contiguous exhibition spaces in Europe. It presents major solo shows every year by Italian and international artists, with each project conceived to work in close relation to the architecture of the complex, and explored in depth through a calendar of parallel events. Admission to the space and the shows is completely free of charge, and cultural mediators are on hand to help the public connect with the art. Since 2012, Vicente Todolí has been the foundation's Artistic Director.

The complex, which once housed a locomotive factory, includes an area for public services and educational activities, and three exhibition spaces whose original twentieth-century architectural features have been left clearly visible: Shed, Navate, and Cubo.

As well as its exhibitions program and cultural events, Pirelli HangarBicocca also permanently houses one of Anselm Kiefer's most important site-specific works, *The Seven Heavenly Palaces 2004–2015*, commissioned for the opening of Pirelli HangarBicocca, while the exterior area hosts *La Sequenza* (1971–81) by Fausto Melotti.

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