
Biography James Lee Byars

James Lee Byars was born in Detroit on April 10, 1932. He studied art, philosophy and psychology at the Merrill-Palmer School in Detroit.

Byars' first visit to Japan occurred in 1957/58; he was to return various times until 1967. In the early 1960s he had several public appearances (performances) in Kyoto. A few, highly abstract paper works (ink drawings) remain from that period.

In 1958 his folded-paper pieces are briefly displayed in an emergency stairwell of the Museum of Modern Art in New York – thanks to his contact with curator Dorothy Miller.

Byars' performances in 1964 in New York's Central Park and in 1967 outside the Museum of Contemporary Crafts reach a wider audience. That is also the time when he creates the first costumes for "collective" performances, e.g. **Four in a Dress** (1967).

Byars' first European exhibition was held in 1969 at the Wide White Space Gallery in Antwerp (The Netherlands). It was the year of his first appearance in Bern, where he met then-Kunsthalle director, Harald Szeemann, who invited him to documenta 5 in Kassel in 1972. Byars gave two performances (**The Introduction to the documenta 5** and **Calling German Names**). That summer Byars spent some time in Bern, doing several public performances: **The First International Perfume Exhibition** outside Loeb's supermarket, Spitalgasse 47; **Calling German Names** from Bern's famous Zytglogge tower; and **Hommage to Einstein**, outside Einstein House, Kramgasse 49.

Byars continued to focus his interest less on his artistic production than on formulating and collecting "questions": **I'm collecting questions** (performance at the Hudson Institute, 1969) and **The World Question Center** (performance at the University of Minnesota, 1970). In this context, Byars visited the CERN Nuclear Research Center near Geneva in 1972. Having received a DAAD scholarship, he spent most of 1997 in Berlin, Germany.

In 1975 Byars had his first solo exhibition at Galerie Toni Gerber in Bern ("The First Letter Show"), where he presented a large number of different letters. In June 1975 he pushed a large lava-stone sphere through the narrow streets of medieval Bern (**The Perfect Epitaph**).

Until well into the 1980s, Galerie Toni Gerber dedicated numerous shows to Byars. Bern became an important location for Byars, and the starting point for trips to Venice (e.g. the Piazza San Marco during the 1975 Biennale, with **James Lee Byars Does the Holy Ghost**); Cologne (e.g. **The Play of Death**, 1976, outside the Dom Hotel) and Düsseldorf, Germany; Antwerp and Amsterdam, The Netherlands; and Brussels – usually for performances, often assisted by Birgit Grögel (BB).

Byars participated in documenta 6 (1977), 8 (1987) and 9 (1992), and was invited back to the Biennale of Venice in 1980. "The Exhibition of Perfect" at the Kunsthalle Bern (Director: Johannes Gachnang) in 1978 was Byars' first major solo exhibition with numerous sculptures and objects. Byars made the shortest of appearances at the opening, merely whispering "gr" (for "great") to the audience. In 1978 Byars also performed at the Kunstmuseum Bern, where he whispered inside the galleries reserved for the Old Masters: **The Perfect Whisper Is To Nothing**.

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Byars participated in art projects on the Furka Pass (Switzerland; FURK'ART), and did performances: **A Drop of Black Perfume** (1983) and **Introduction of the Sages to the Alps** (1984).

Byars' reputation in the U.S. was not as great as in Europe where he had various important shows at renowned institutions: the Stedelijk Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven (The Netherlands) and the Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris (France) in **1983**; the Kunsthalle Düsseldorf in **1986**; the Castello di Rivoli, Turin (Italy) in **1989**; the Museum Weserburg Bremen (Germany) in **1995**, and the Fundação Serralves, Porto (Portugal) in **1997**.

In **1994** Toni Gerber closed his art gallery after thirty years of activity. A large number of Byars' works from the Toni Gerber Collection were gifted to the Kunstmuseum Bern; some of them were acquired by the Hermann and Margrit Rupf Foundation.

James Lee Byars died in Cairo on May 23, **1997**, following a protracted, serious illness; he was interred in the American cemetery in Old Cairo.

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