

**James Lee Byars – A Homage**

**IM  
FULL  
OF  
BYARS**

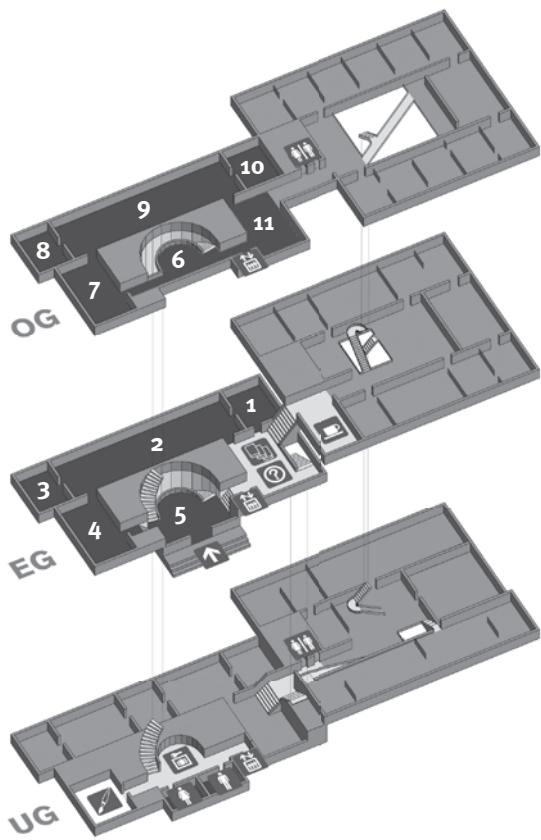
**12.9.2008 – 1.2.2009**

**Kunstmuseum Bern**

---

# Floorplan

---



---

## Introduction

---

James Lee Byars (1932–1997) was among the most striking twentieth-century artists. The Kunstmuseum Bern is devoting a large retrospective to this American artist.

Travelling back and forth between the U.S., Japan and Europe, James Lee Byars felt a particular affinity to Bern, Switzerland. Through his acquaintance with Harald Szeemann, who had invited him to documenta 5 in Kassel in 1972, Byars was able to spend long periods in Bern from that year onwards. From 1975, the artist was a fixture at Galerie Toni Gerber; in 1978 a large exhibition followed at the Kunsthalle Bern. The 1970s and 1980s also saw several performances by Byars at the Kunstmuseum Bern.

Byars loved all that was imaginary and fleeting; he equated the ephemeral and the immaterial with the material and the everlasting. His work – a symbiosis between Fluxus, Minimal and Concept art – has lost none of its mystery and poetry.

The exhibition «Im full of Byars» comprises works on paper, sculptures, indoor installations and film documentaries of his performances. Works from the museum's own collection (Toni Gerber Collection, Hermann and Margrit Rupp Foundation) as well as numerous loans from private and public collections round off the presentation.

Few if any works from Byars' time as an art student are known. Graduating in art at the University, his thesis exhibition was a one-day installation on a grand scale: having completely removed the contents of his family's home, he seated himself on the sole remaining chair in a room on the top floor, and waited for whatever was going to happen.

A few drawings from around 1960 are the only pieces that could be called his "early work". From 1957 Byars spent various extended periods in Japan, and became intimately acquainted with Japanese art. A large ink drawing and a folded-paper piece (**The Perfect Painting**) from ca. 1960 bear witness to his interest in Zen painting. At that time he also created a few formally reduced stone objects (such as **Tantric Figure**). While their formal relationship to Constantin Brancusi's sculptures is evident, the title – similar to the titles of this paper objects – refers to rituals, to a search for perfection and spirituality.

His installation **The Letter Reading Society of James Lee Byars** (1987) also symbolises culture, the spirit and spirituality. Two Lombard armchairs evoke the numerous philosophical societies or metaphysical clubs of 19th century America. As in many of his other installations, Byars used furniture – most frequently chairs – which he left empty and turned into pedestals for something that was not present.

For his first show in Bern at Galerie Toni Gerber in 1975 Byars presented letters. Director Johannes Gachnang, however, demanded other, more physical exhibits for Byars' 1978 Kunsthalle Bern exhibition. With Toni Gerber's support, Byars arranged for various objects and sculptures to be made. He had a particular liking for Bernese sandstone, which he used in various pieces, e.g. **Pedestal for Perfect** (1978) and **100 One Page Stone Book** (1977/78). His use of classical forms – the circle, the sphere, the pillar – automatically endowed them with the characteristics of a monument. He also had sculptures made from granite, lava rock, marble and glass, using gold for special places such as the edge of the large glass pane of **The Looking Glass** (1978), or for the characters in the engraved text of **The Perfect Sigh** (1978). He had special display cases made for smaller objects, placing larger objects on soft pedestals, e.g. cushions in shiny white satin.

He affixed inflatable wings to the Museum of Modern Art; he created a 30-meter pink silk aeroplane for one hundred people; he sewed a dress for five hundred people: Byars invented countless megalomaniacal projects. Can **World Tongue** (1975) – a 38-meter piece of red fabric – speak and express itself on culture?

The spherical object called **The Rose Table of Perfect** (1989) is covered in 3,333 roses. The rose is an ancient symbol of love and pain, transitoriness and death.

The group of works by James Lee Byars at the Kunstmuseum Bern (Toni Gerber Collection) largely consists of letters. Byars used the most diverse formats and papers, such as tissue paper, hand-made Asian papers, as well as toilet paper, and mourning paper with a black border. His handwriting was idiosyncratic, his style avoided punctuation and mixed capital and lower-case letters; he often used abbreviations that reveal their sense only to the experienced reader. He also adorned his script with stars, and adorned his letters with gold dust and pigments. By producing letters exceeding 30 meters in length, Byars also pushed the physical boundaries of letter-writing to an extreme.

He was a frequent, obsessive correspondent, often writing several times daily to the same person. When selecting postcards during his visits to Venice, Greece or Cairo, he would buy several identical ones which he would send to friends and acquaintances all over the world. The form and contents of Byars' letters and postcards were intimately related.

Selected and transcribed passages from Byars' letters (projected in Gallery 4) allow the visitor a glimpse of his texts that are anything but ordinary greetings but convey a poetry that creates a particular magic.

For the opening of the 1987 exhibition “Die Gleichzeitigkeit des Anderen” (The Synchronicity of the Other) at the Kunstmuseum Bern, curated by Juergen Glaesemer, Byars was invited to do a performance. It was headlined as **Come Stand on This Stone and Blow Your Soul**. In front of the museum Byars had a white marble sphere installed which weighed 1.5 tons and was anchored to the ground. Wearing a golden suit and blindfolded, the artist climbed a gangplank onto the top of the sphere, whence he inspired the museum with the spirit of the “Other”. As usual, he gave a very short performance, leaving the sphere outside the museum as a relict. Byars’ original idea had been to bury the sphere in the museum foyer, only allowing the cap to emerge, so that subsequent generations might have stepped onto it to reproduce Byars’ performance by “blowing their souls”.

Byars designed various flags. **The Poetic Flag of Switzerland** (1978) was created in the context of his exhibition at the Kunsthalle Bern. The white-satin overlay heightens the Swiss flag: white stands for purity, immortality and peace. One of his earliest flags, **Two Presidents** 1974 (Gallery 9), can be interpreted as an ironic commentary on power, or on the U.S. claim to power. It extends to a length of nine meters and has only four stripes and sixteen stars. In the 1974 show, two actors in red top hats and impersonating presidents were hired by Byars to stand behind the flag.

The spirit of the times pushed artists to create increasingly ambitious projects to reach out into ever greater dimensions with the purpose to expand art's space.

Byars' visions were often inspired by large events. One of them was the documenta in Kassel, where he was first invited in 1972. In 1979, prior to documenta 7 of 1982, Byars proclaimed "The Five Continent Documenta", he expressed his wish to integrate artists from Africa and Asia by affixing a black number 7 made of tissue paper to walls in various European cities, Bern among them. He proposed Joseph Beuys as artistic director of documenta 8 by proclaiming that "Mr. Joseph Beuys makes the documenta 8"; and, as we can see, for documenta 9 he extended **The Invitation to One Million Artists to Open Documenta 9**.

For many years Byars harbored the notion of building a tall tower. In 1974 he made plans for the erection of a 333 meter golden needle in the center of Berlin. However, he had to scale down his project, and eventually realized a gilded bronze pillar over three meters tall, **The Golden Tower**, in the lobby of the Fridericianum for documenta 7 in 1982. Shortly thereafter he created a finial in the form of a hemisphere, **Changing Top**: although the title implies change, it remains imaginary. In 1990 Byars came a little closer to realizing his original idea when he erected the 25-meter-tall **Golden Tower** in the Martin Gropius Building in Berlin.



Performance was the essence of Byars' art. His audience also played an important role – at times fascinated, then again waiting to see what might come next – but one could say that Byars was his own most important work of art: his flamboyant style and impeccable white, black or golden suits created an inimitable aura.

Most documentaries presented at the Kunstmuseum Bern are being shown in public for the very first time.

The twenty typewritten sheets each containing fifty items resemble an inventory of works: **1000 PLAYS or HOW DO YOU DO SHAKESPEARE** (1975) was Byars' title for his instructions for plays and performances; they also appear at this exhibition in digital form (Gallery 9).

Curious textile objects such as **Two in a Hat** (1968); the 34-meter piece of satin of **The Perfect Love Letter is to Write I Love You Backwards in the Air** (1974); a sphere of red lava for **The Perfect Epitaph** (1975); countless paper balls: Byars’ objects are usually the relicts he had specially made for his performances. Although the “props” placed on two pedestals clamour for a stage and actors, these objects require no director to inspire the viewers’ thoughts and reflections.

As regards their form, there is a close kinship between Byars’ self portraits and his other works. He always associated circles and spheres with life and death. In the 1970s he took the soft dough of bread rolls to make little balls he called self portraits. His **Autobiography alla Veneziana** (1986) is heightened by the fact that such a ball is presented on a velvet cushion placed inside a gilded Venetian street lantern that Byars had found. Like his works using antique furniture – see **The Letter Reading Society of James Lee Byars** – this piece evokes costliness, immortality and perfection.

When **The Golden Box for Speaking** (1978) was first installed in the Kunsthalle Bern, its title was “I hum when I think (Golden Voice Box)”. The golden box contained a loudspeaker connected to a microphone located in the office of director Johannes Gachnang. He was in the habit of humming when he had to take an important decision. So, each time he made a decision, Gachnang switched on his microphone and hummed into it. It was then switched off again so that no further sound reached the public. (Byars’ original project was to close the Kunsthalle for the duration of the entire exhibition, only allowing Gachnang’s humming to be heard from two speakers outside the building; for various reasons, he had to abandon this idea.) Gachnang’s humming was recorded by Joseph Grigely on March 17, 2002, in the context of his intervention for “Zeitmaschine” (Time Machine) at the Kunstmuseum Bern.

**The Planet Flag** was first unfurled at the Explorers Club in New York in 1982, in the presence of twenty club members, among them art critic Thomas McEvelley, who blew a Tibetan horn. “A Glimpse is enough” was Byars’ statement accompanying his request to NASA to take the golden flag into orbit around Earth like a satellite. However, the space agency refused to embark on the venture.

**Open on a Dry Day in June in the Forest, 1977**

Film by Herman de Vries; camera: Ulli Handl

8-mm film on DVD, 7 mins. 29 secs.; property of the artist

**Ohne Titel (Performances in Bern), 1972**

Film by Michel de Rivaz, 8-mm film on DVD; 7 mins. 40 secs.

Michel de Rivaz and THE UC Berkeley Art Museum

**The Perfect Epitaph, 1975**

U-Matic, PAL, on DVD; 7 mins.

Kunstmuseum Bern, Toni Gerber Collection (gift)

**Come Stand on This Stone and Blow Your Soul, 1987**

(Excerpts from “Die Gleichzeitigkeit des Anderen”)

Film by Urs Egger, 30 secs.; Kunstmuseum Bern

**A Drop of Black Perfume, 1983**

Performance on the Furka Pass, Switzerland (June 24, 1983, 12

noon); 8-mm on DVD, 11 mins. 55 secs.; film by Franziska Megert,

Collection Urs und Rös Graf

**A Brief of James Lee Byars, ca. 1979**

U-Matic, PAL, on DVD, with sound; 15 mins. 40 secs.

Kunstmuseum Bern, Toni Gerber Collection (gift)

**Two Presidents, 1974**

Super-8-film on DVD; 21 secs.; courtesy Galerie Michael Werner,

Cologne, Berlin, New York

**Show of Reality Soliloquies at Guggenheim, 1974**

U-Matic, PAL, on DVD; 3 mins.

Kunstmuseum Bern, Toni Gerber Collection (gift)

**The Death of James Lee Byars, 1994**

Film by Marie-Puck Broodthaers, 2008

DVD; 13 mins.

Copyright by Marie-Puck Broodthaers

---

Gold, the noble metal, stands for costliness and perfection. It is a symbol of immortality, but always remains abstract – as does, ultimately, death.

Byars' concern with death manifests itself in various works, the most striking of which must be **The Death of James Lee Byars**. In a performance at the Galerie des Beaux-Arts in Brussels in 1994, he lay in the centre of a large cube entirely lined in gold, dressed in a golden suit and wearing a black top hat. He almost seemed to drown, becoming one with the surrounding space. Here, five crystals placed in the center of the space represent the artist's head, arms and legs (“Five Points Make a Man”).

In a remarkable statement of 1977, Byars expressed his belief that death would not only destroy his physical body but also his works: “Death cancels all my W[or]k's never show them ag[ain]”.

In the 1970s and 1980s, James Lee Byars and Bernese artist Heinz Brand (b. 1944) engaged in an intense artistic friendship that proved to be mutually inspiring and productive. Several joint works were the outcome of this relationship.

In the 1960s Brand, like Byars, spent some time in Japan. One of the cornerstones of Brand's primarily conceptual work is the culture and philosophy of Zen Buddhism.

From the mid-1970s, Brand created translucent large-scale photo images called **Whites**. The only reliable point of reference being a piece of sharp-edged black lava, their visual reduction, empty spaces and diffuse light inspire the viewer to reflect on perception.

For his 1978 solo show at Kunsthalle Bern Byars had the cross-shaped peak tile gilded. He called the installation **Whisper Perfect to the Golden Peak of the Kunsthalle** (1978). The tile went on shining after the exhibition but its presence was soon overlooked.

In 1990 the Kunsthalle, including its roof, underwent major refurbishment. The gilded tile, rather the worse for weathering and the pecking of crows and magpies, was thrown on the skip where an attentive staff member of the Kunsthalle noticed it, and saved it from certain destruction. Part of the Toni Gerber Collection, which was gifted to the Kunstmuseum Bern, and freshly gilded, the tile was presented in the context of the 1996 show of the Collection. When an inattentive visitor to the event caused the tile to fall, it shattered into several pieces and had to be restored once more.

During the exhibition «Im Full of Byars» the **Golden Peak** will be back in its rightful place on the rooftop of the Kunsthalle.

Kunsthalle Bern, Helvetiaplatz 1, Bern  
[www.kunsthalle-bern.ch](http://www.kunsthalle-bern.ch)

---

## Biography

---

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



Photo: Heinz-Günter Mebusch, © Estate of James Lee Byars



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.**

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.

---

## Events

---

### **Public Guided Tour in English**

Tuesday, November 4, 2008, 19h30

### **Public Guided Tours in German**

Tuesday, September 16, September 30, October 14, October 28,  
November 11, November 25, December 9, December 23, 2008,  
January 6, January 20, January 27, 2009, 19h

### **«IM FULL OF BYARS»**

Loeb, Spitalgasse 47–51, Bern | Wednesday, October 22, 2008

### **The perfect performance is... A reply to James Lee Byars, 1978 by Florian Dombois** | Tuesday, November 11, 2008, 20h

With the support of Bellevue Palace Bern and Berner Fachhochschule | Department Architektur-Holz-Bau

### **An American in Berne: A Conversation about James Lee Byars | Picking Holy Words From the Perfect Ghost:**

Performance by Ana Roldan | Tuesday, January 6, 2009, 20h

### **Catalogue «Im full of Byars»**

Essays by Thomas McEvilley, Viola M. Michely, Peter J. Schneemann & Nicola Müllerschön, Susanne Friedli, Matthias Frehner.  
Kerber Verlag Leipzig, ca. 250 S., German / English. ISBN-Nr.:  
978-3-86678-155-9. CHF 58.– / Euro 35.–

---

---

# Exhibition

12.9.2008 – 1.2.2009

---

<b>Opening</b>	Thursday, September 11, 18h30
<b>Entrance Fee</b>	CHF 14.–   red. CHF 10.– red. entrance fee with Loebcard
<b>Opening Hours</b>	Tuesday 10h – 21h Wednesday to Sunday 10h – 17h Monday closed
<b>Holidays</b>	24.12.08: 10h – 17h   25.12.08: closed 31.12.08: 10h – 17h   01.01.09: 10h – 17h
<b>Guided Tours</b>	T + 41 31 328 09 11   F + 41 31 328 09 10 vermittlung@kunstmuseumbern.ch

## Curator

Susanne Friedli

## Further Showings

Milton Keynes Gallery, London (4.4.–21.6.2009)

Museum of Contemporary Art Detroit (Sept.–Dec. 2009)

## Parallel to the Exhibition at the Kunstmuseum Bern

James Lee Byars, Whisper Perfect to the Golden Peak of the  
Kunsthalle, 1978 | Kunsthalle Bern, Helvetiaplatz 1

## With the support of

Annemarie Burckhardt, Basel | Stanley Thomas Johnson Stiftung |  
Alfred Richterich Stiftung | Loeb AG | Prolith AG | Embassy of the  
United States, Berne

---

## Kunstmuseum Bern

Hodlerstr. 8–12, 3000 Bern 7

T +41 31 328 09 44 | F +41 31 328 09 55

[www.kunstmuseumbern.ch](http://www.kunstmuseumbern.ch)

CREDIT SUISSE 

Partner of the Museum of Fine Arts Berne