The Perfect Kiss, 1975
James Lee Byars' art defies a strict categorization or description. It resembles conceptual and performance art, but is neither of these exclusively. His works find their source in simple, yet extreme and imaginative ideas, which he manifests into an unusually diverse range of forms. At times the work takes on extravagant, pageant-like character as in 1,000 in a Hat (1963) in which Byars created a one-mile-long pink silk hat which 1,000 participants wore through Central Park. At other times, the artist has communicated through highly reductive statements as in his film 100 Minds (1969) which lasted 1/24th of a second and consisted of a single-frame group portrait of 100 people. Byars also performs works alone which have strong surrealistic overtones. For example, in 1972 he stood on the roof of the Friebergen Museum in Germany with a golden megaphone calling out a succession of German first names.

Byars' works find their source in philosophy and theology rather than visual perception. The artist and poet William Blake once stated, "The eye envies the mind," Byars identifies with such sentiments. His calculated actions and images serve primarily as extensions of his writing, the focus for which is the refining of his thoughts into concise written declarations and questions. As philosophical inquiry, his writings are Zen in character, defining themselves somewhere between a Haiku poem and a Zen riddle or Koan. A phrase such as "How Do You Do Shakespeare?" has taken the form of a book in which this simple question—or "pure thought," as Byars refers to it—comprises the entire text.

Byars has also translated some of these single sentence thoughts into brief one act plays. The Perfect Kiss, which Byars will perform for MATRIX, is one such translation. He refers to the piece as being simultaneously "a prayer, a poem and a play." Byars has chosen the lobby of the Museum as the stage for the work's enactment. The piece consists of Byars, dressed in black, entering the Museum lobby and standing himself in a spot-it corner of the room. He faces the lobby entrance and forms a kiss with a subtle gesture of his lips, after which he quietly leaves the room.

The performance is surprisingly brief, and appropriately so. The Perfect Kiss is a single poetic idea translated into a brief poetic act. Speaking of the work, Byars remarks, "It is a mystical expression of my appreciation of the world." For Byars, to labor this idea with extended narrative action would be to detract from the purity of the message. He is intent to leave us with a quiet philosophical moment naked of special physical skills and modern technology. He is not an entertainer.

Byars has proposed that the Museum store The Perfect Kiss in the Museum as a form of knowledge, and that the piece be repeated at some appropriate time in the future by a member of the Museum staff.

Byars establishes his presence in the space in spite of the reductive character of his actions. In effect, his attire becomes a formal element of the work that helps to establish a specific mood for the play's enactment. Characteristically, he dresses in a single color wearing a suit, Pilgrim hat and gloves. He has dressed similarly in solid gold and red for previous works. The Perfect Kiss is done in black. Byars' wardrobe and color choices are more an expression of personal liturgy than stylistic trademark. Black being a color of high ceremony, The Perfect Kiss functions as quiet, elegant ritual.

Byars states, "I'm a mystic." More accurately, perhaps, he is a romantic visionary attempting to implant a sense of philosophical and religious fantasy into our tense emotionally repressed and matter-of-fact environment. If his works appear surrealistic, it may be because his simple spiritual message is in bold contrast to a culture which appears to thrive on complex structures and solutions.

James Lee Byars was born in Detroit in 1932. He attended Wayne State University and Merrill Palmer School of Psychology, where he studied art, psychology and philosophy. Since 1972 he has lived and worked in Europe. Byars currently lives in Bern, Switzerland.

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1. I'm a mystic
2. Ask my best
3. I write the world's simplest poems
4. I think so
5. Philosophy is news
6. Thinking is my first quality
7. Glimpse is enough
8. The only prerequisite is that you should be excited about something
9. You can say anything about anything
10. Hypothesis doesn't exist

1. Which questions have disappeared?
2. I can repeat the question but am I bright enough to ask it?
3. If you ask for something that doesn't exist you deserve it on the intelligence of the request?

James Lee Byars
March 1978
Works in MATRIX:

The Perfect Kiss, first performance at the Louvre, 1975.

Selected bibliography by Byars:

- 100,000 Minutes or î an Autobiography or the First Paper of Philosophy (Antwerp: Wide White Space Gallery '63).
- 100?'s (Croton-on-the-Hudson: The Hudson Institute '69).
- How Do You Do Shakespeare? (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota '69).
- 100?'s (Brussels: Herman Daled '70).
- The Philosophy of the One Question (Koln: Michael Werner Gallery '77).
- The 100 One Page Books (Koln: Michael Werner Gallery '77).

Selected bibliography about Byars:


Selected group exhibitions and performances:

- Kassel, Documenta V, '72;
- Venice, Biennale, '75.

MATRIX is supported in part by a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts, a Federal Agency.