

James Lee Byars
MATRIX/BERKELEY 105

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The Ghost of Joseph Beuys by James Lee Byars, 1986



"BEAUTY GOES AVANTGARDE"(1)

figure 1:
"OUT DAMNED SPOT"(2)

Behind the scenes of beauty the drama of borrowed perfection is taking place.

Circle, sphere, column, marble, gold, red, and black as symptoms of perfection are selected with wise moderation. Perfection is an idea that no existing thing can come close to. Reason teaches to choose the most simple means for attaining perfection in order to master the continuous rush of disturbances.

Thus, the works are traps: they creep into the process of natural things and cunningly wring out that which does not really belong to them. As such, the works are not beautiful. They rather seem to be fragile receptacles for a distillate which is extracted from the cunningness of thought about everyday imperfection and then commonly designated as 'beauty'.

Beauty originates where the possibilities of reality meet with the necessities of the ideal.(3) Finding this meeting place time and again is the art of James Lee Byars, who has tamed beauty.(4)

figure 2:
"PHILOSOPHICAL CONCEIT"

Beauty, when it emerges, is a tautology. The perfect object refers only to itself.(5) It becomes impenetrable. What it shows is what it means, and it only means what it shows.(6) Within the short-circuit of sense the idea of perfection is mediated. The

tautological self-reference makes the search for meaning endless and awakens, through futility, the feeling of meaning as process whose end demands arbitrariness. The tautology of beauty thwarts answers. In this way, the work is drafted: it is a question.(7)

figure 3:
"THE PHILOSOPHY OF QUESTION"

The absence of answers discloses the present to the observer, so long as he is able to manage at the height of momentary glance. The one who reflects knows presence only in the form of past. His moment has always past. The beautiful, impenetrable work demands an awareness, the intelligence of a looking whose view is unquestionably that of thinking.(8)

The meaningless work meets the observer at only one moment, the present. Presence is the only possibility of access to the work.

The quality of the work consists in precisely determining the conditions of its perception. Understanding is precisely described, not what is supposed to be understood. Whoever does not become engaged with the present is shunned by the work. The meaningless work has the deepest meaning.

figure 4:
"PERFECT IS QUESTION"

Presence, created in viewing the work, is the medium of truth. This is not the abstract truth of correctness of a sentence (adequatio rei et intellectus), "but rather the hiding singleness of the unique history of revealing

the 'sense' of what we call being."(9) With the present object its truth appears. This is the substantial truth of a bare revealing of Seiende, or being, something which Aristotle called Aletheia. In the presence of the beautiful work the 'truth of Dasein', or being in itself, becomes evident as the observer endures the moment, for "Revealing is the most concealing for thought."(10) The work, and this is its meaning, propagates an attitude of mind. It is the poetical.(11) About its condition one cannot talk, it can only be made experienceable. One thing, however, is clear: poetical reason is only available on credit.

figure 5:
"WHAT IS QUESTION"

In viewing the work becomes an idea. (Work = Idea.) The idea is a work, James Lee Byars infers. Thoughts, gestures, and actions gain the value of objects.(12)

(Everyone knows that this inference is not correct. Yet we do not value thoughts because of their correctness alone. And we perceive the ironical polemics, with which this is expounded, by all means as an artistic quality.)

figure 6:
"QUESTION IS IN THE ROOM"

Are thoughts the meaning of the work? (In other words, does the text provide an interpretation?) Or are they a mere consequence? - The meaninglessness of this distinction in light of the work seems to speak for the correctness of the proceedings. But, it is objected, how can that not be fulfilled which is already

established as a consequence in the postulates (the question-structure of the work, etc.)? - On the other hand, isn't the fact that the work provokes such circularity an indication of its peculiarity? And just here an inkling arises of what is really occurring...

Stephan Schmidt-Wulffen.
Translated from the German by Clara Seneca.

Notes:

(1) The sentences cited and numbered here, including the title, are statements by James Lee Byars from talks held in November 1986. He has made these works of his available for the text.

(2) With this remark, James Lee Byars proceeds similarly to the author with his own remarks. Byars's sentence refers to a sentence by Shakespeare, which is closely related to "The Door for Innocence."

(3) This is why Beethoven says, "Perfection must be the goal of every true artist," meaning more the intention than the result.

(4) Whereas we are normally "overwhelmed" by beauty.

(5) One is all but inclined to take Byars's preference of the circle, disk, and sphere as an allusion to consistency, which also suggests the concept of tautology.

(6) To emphasize this point once more: for Byars, beauty is not an end in itself but rather a means to create the impenetrability of the object.

(7) As an allusion to this

work, one can trace the ambiguity which, beyond apparent simplicity, imbues the work with a complexity: it reveals by concealing; it speaks by being silent; and it even succeeds by failing. The history of imperfect perfection is merely one way of relating the question-structure of the work.

(8) For the sake of clarity I'd like to recall Magritte, who complained that people had forgotten how to think with their eyes. And, as a correction to Sartre's Theory of Imagination one has to say: also the perceived object is consciousness (and not in consciousness). That there exists a certain congeniality between Magritte and Byars is substantiated by the following quote: "Art, as I see it, consists in uniting things (thanks to inspiration) in such a manner that they are able to evoke de jure the mystery" (Magritte, translated from Samtliche Schriften, p. 456).

(9) From Martin Heidegger's On the Essence of Truth (Vom Wesen der Wahrheit)

(10) Translated from Martin Heidegger's The Origin of Art Work (Der Ursprung des Kunstwerks). There, art is described, moreover, as the place where "the truth of the Seiende settles into the work." In addition: "Art, by allowing the emergence of the truth of Seiende, is as such, in essence, poetry."

(11) Note: "Work" is used ambivalently throughout the text. Thus, it is important here to read "every work...", so that through repetition the demand becomes clear.

(12) Which shows itself most clearly in that Byars wants

to find an institution which will be the first to purchase an action. Precisely due to this ontological approach, the sentences of this text become exhibited art objects.

Soliloquy on Perfect

1. TSOP The Soliloquy on Perfect?
2. PIQ Philosophy Is Question?
3. PIPD Philosophy Is Practicing Death?
4. TEOH The End of Hypotheses?
5. FII Faith Is Involuntary?
6. TFTIP The First Totally Interrogative Philosophy?
7. TNT Things Are Neither This Nor That?
8. TAAEAO The Arguments Are Equal and Opposite?
9. WIQ What Is Question?
10. ISP I Show Perfect?

The Philosophy of Question was an action to explore question for yourself. It was performed with The Perfect Death at midnight February 1 and 22. In Philosophy of Questions, James Lee Byars was assisted by Beau Takahara. The University Art Museum presented these works in cooperation with the Capp Street Project in San Francisco.

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