

James Lee Byars: An archive

An extraordinary early archive of correspondence, also including rare books, original paper art works, photographs, documentation, and ephemera, more than 200 items. Sent from various places including Kyoto (the majority), Detroit, New York, Los Angeles, Philadelphia, London, Berlin, Belgium 1961-1990.

The recipient of this correspondence was Janet Ferrell (1931-2016), a graduate of the University of Pittsburgh, who had studied French at the Sorbonne and music (she played seven instruments) under Natalie Boulanger. In the 1950s she worked as a radio/tv producer, and in the early 1960 she became assistant to Gustave von Groschwitz, the director of the Carnegie Institute in Pittsburgh, where one of her jobs was as the publicity director of the Carnegie International. James Lee Byars staged his first three museum performances at the 1964 and 1965 Internationals. Although Ferrell had been on Byars's contact list since at least 1961 it was while and after working together, as their correspondence reveals, that the two developed a mutually enriching friendship. Ferrell was a friend of La Monte Young, and other avant-garde musicians, and this may have been the source of their acquaintance. She also played an active role in some of Byars's subsequent actions; she played the flute at the Architectural League performances in 1968.

Including a number of his early paper sculptures, this extensive correspondence provides a detailed look at some of Byars's earliest artistic actions, and his network of relationships in the U.S. and Japan. In fact, he had few connections before 1972 and his participation in *documenta 5*.

The large number of letters testifies to the importance Byars found in the relationship; there are, for example, many more letters than those to Dorothy Miller in the MOMA archive; the other early surviving correspondence.

The materials and forms of the correspondence are characteristically very diverse: picture post cards, colored, flax and mulberry papers of various sorts, letters written on cellophane (edible cellophane seasonally), folded into pentagons; on 3, 4, even 11 meter lengths folded perfectly to envelope size; in sky-blue or white crayon on white paper, an

envelope filled with transparent pages, each carrying one word ; 25 postcards written sequentially the same day, and so forth.

Most of the handwriting is in Byars's early, more legible hand; by the mid-1970s his handwriting becomes more decorated and eccentric (e.g. items 116-121).

While the earliest piece in this group is an unrecorded invitation to Byars's first solo show, at Nancy Willard's gallery in 1961, the correspondence really begins in 1964. While Byars was making (performing) a thousand-foot-long tissue paper tribute to Shakespeare in Central Park, he met Gordon Bailey Washburn, then director of Carnegie Museum of Art in Pittsburgh who invited him to present his works at the Carnegie International, later that year. The first piece (Byars called them "actions") was performed November 8, 1964, and the second two in January 1965. It is in the planning for the January 13 performance where Byars and Ferrell began what became an intimately documented collaboration.

In the earliest letter Byars writes that he feels Sister Germaine (who had performed the "1 x 50 Foot Drawing" in November, and would take on the "A 1000-Foot Chinese Paper") would be "exquisite again". The piece, he writes 'will however have a more demanding air...requiring greater stillness and concentration". The first few letters deal with the nuts-and-bolts of the action as well as publicity, and Byars's other plans and needs. He mixes poetic observations about Japan, with accounts of his jobs and people he meets.

Later in 1965 Byars writes about his other planned actions and idea, enlists Ferrell's help and advice. In 1966 he is already collecting questions (See "I'm Collecting Questions", Hudson Institute 1969) writing "I tell me your most interesting questions to yourself tell me all you know of interest of the eye of the ear of the nose of taste and touch" (letter 77).

In January 1966 on a beautiful postally decorated card he is planning to "move a 100' piece horizontally through an existant (sic) exhibition moving constantly daily for a week — don't fret send your music to the set" (letter 87)

In January 1970 he announces on a picture postcard: "Byars is the artist in the Pentagon" - around this time he gave a performance in which he passed out cards carrying that line, causing a rumor that he was working for the CIA.

In the later 1970s, the correspondence (and Byars's dating of letters) became more sporadic. The last dated letter present is 1976, but there are a few announcements of later date.

References:

Guy Schraenen, "James Lee Byars. Books, Catalogue Books, Multiples, Editions, Ephemera-- Editionen -- Ephemera. In "Perfect is my Death Word," Bremen: Neues Museum (1995).

"Im Full of Byars: James Lee Byars Eine Homage / A Homage". Kunstmuseum Bern, 2009

Kati Rubinyi. "Feature 01: James Lee Byars's Performable Objects" located at http://x-traonline.org/build/wp-content/uploads/2012/08/X-TRAv5_n2_Rubinyi.pdf

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"What would have happened if Byars had continued to produce his traditional art-genre-busting paper sculptures for years — hundreds, perhaps even thousands of them? I am certain he would have gone down in American art history as the paper artist who revolutionised the art world," Viola Maria Michely, "Why James Lee Byars became an artist, or The Eternal search for perfection," (Im Full of Byars, p. 208