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JAMES LEE BYARS

The Philosophical Nail

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James Lee Byars can be considered as one of the artists of the twentieth century who refuses to be pigeonholed, like Joseph Beuys. An enigmatic figure, forever travelling (born in the United States in 1932, spending long periods in Japan and Europe before dying in Egypt in 1997), Byars marked the art of the 'seventies to the 'nineties with spectacular, not to say eccentric performances, sophisticated installations and enigmatic self-portraits.

Driven by a quest for the absolute, he developed a consistent body of work seeking to unite Eastern and Western cultures. One can consider him as the archetype of the artist/shaman, situated at the convergence of reality and an unconscious, vast and magical world. He has this profile of the artist/people smuggler; where a people smuggler is interpreted as someone who guides a person from a place of danger to a place of safety where they can be protected.

Having a keen sense of aesthetics and staging, Byars also put a great deal of effort into the presentation of his work, as is the case with *The Philosophical Nail* where he uses a mahogany display case. Presented in this way, the nail placed in this display case assumes the status of relic. The preciousness of the object is highlighted by the setting in which it is shown. This nail is philosophical in the sense that it opens a discussion on theological issues: Man's belief in God, the foundations of the Christian religion but more pragmatically on the relationship to objects, on fetishism.

The understanding of the work becomes clearer, of course, if one puts it in a Christian perspective and if one perceives the nail as a symbol of the suffering and agony of Christ. Protected in this display case, the object seems to be the "final nail", the nail rescued from the destructive madness of the ungodly and the iconoclasts. It is made all the more "respectable" since Byars gilded it, giving it a sacred aura.

All Byars' work finds its source in a mystical symbolism, and many references to Japanese civilization echo allusions to Western civilization. He is seeking something higher than reason and where the West grinds to a halt due to an excess of rationalism, he invokes Eastern philosophies.

Rather than reinforcing certainties, it is preferable to resort to chance and coincidence. Rather than searching for answers, it is necessary to ask questions, as the artist did in a series of notes dated March 1978: *which questions have disappeared?*