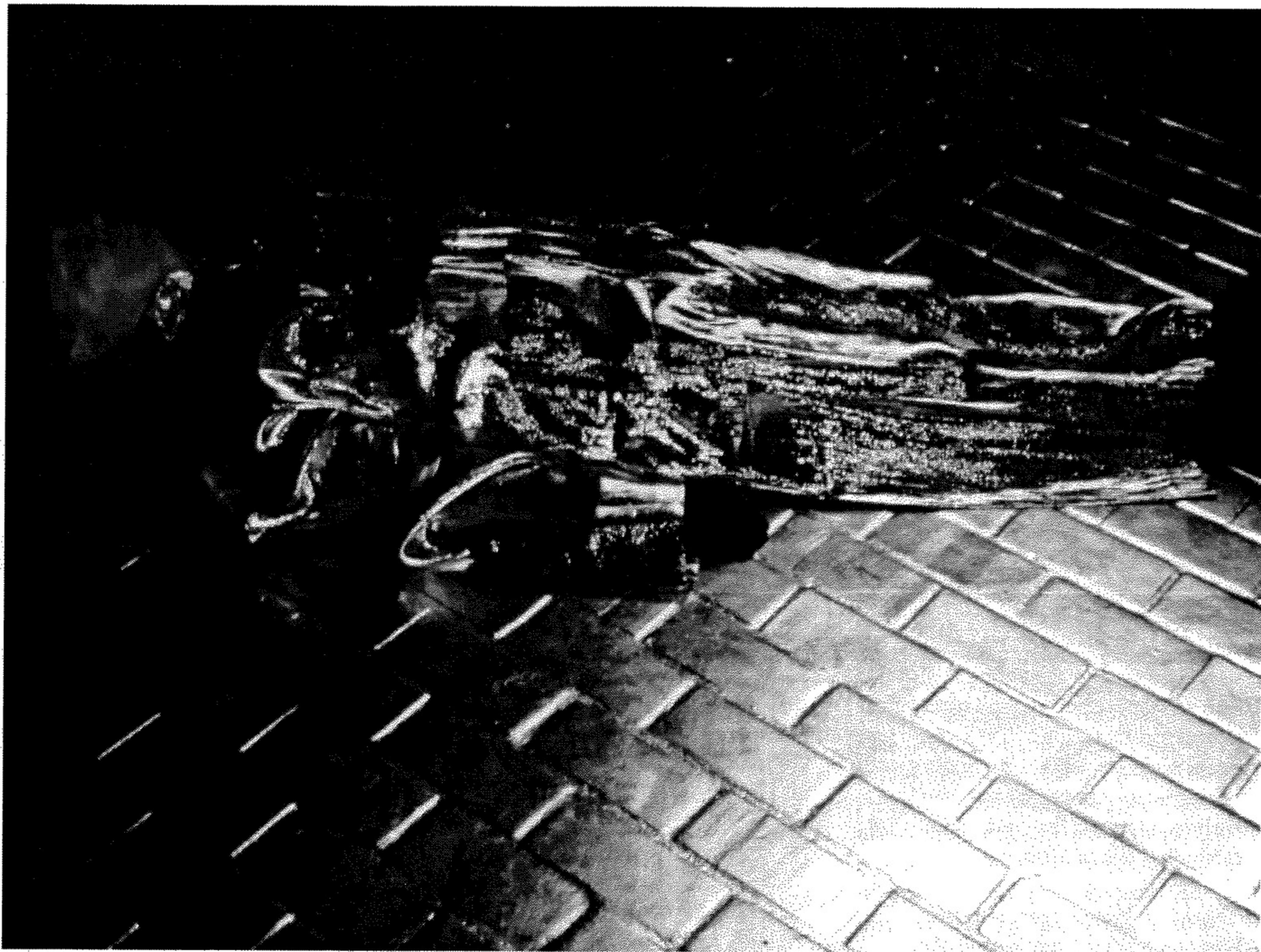


James Lee Byars
MATRIX/BERKELEY 104
February 1 and 22, 1987
The Perfect Death (performance)



"Just the sentence is enough. I mean we activated it physically, but just to say, 'The Perfect Death,' for me, already, there's a contemplative quality."

"I did *The Perfect Death in Honor of Joseph Beuys* in Munich and I tried to deal with it as real material.

Unsuccessfully, and I am surprised. I am particularly surprised in Germany where the people are extremely aggressive and extremely anxious to find every phenomenon they can of reality. I love the energy of them for that. But in this case I was unsuccessful. *The Perfect Death in Honor of Joseph Beuys* has many simple forms. One, for example, is that you simply are in an atmosphere and you hear that poem, in my terms. You hear *The Perfect Death in honor of Joseph Beuys* and you contemplate that."

This performance as at the opening of an exhibition at the Stadtische Galerie, Lenbachhaus. Originally planned as a tribute to Beuys on his birthday, the artist's death prior to the opening turned the exhibition into a memorial.

Lenbachhaus is a 19th century revival of a 17th century Baroque house with the entrance in an open courtyard. It was twilight when a crowd formed in the court to view the performance prior to the exhibition opening. Above the entrance is a narrow porch which is entered from double doors in the facade. The doors were open. After a prolonged wait Byars emerged from the darkness in a gold suit and top hat. His presence was graceful but the tenebrous atmosphere gave some sense of foreboding. Byars waited only a moment and then performed the "action." As he turned away, walking with a slightly springy step and arms held out from his sides, he almost seemed to float into the darkness.

"The other, physical action they waited and so I said, well a very simple physical action would be to quietly lie down and to quietly stand up and to do this in some beautiful place and some atmosphere where people would see this action, done in honor of Beuys, and also the suggestion that you may try it out yourself."

Byars' original proposal for the action at Berkeley was *The Perfect Death of James Elliott*. During a visit some months before the performance, Byars asked me to describe the time within the 24 hour cycle of day and night I would prefer to die, and how I would like to be lain out. We discussed elements of such choice down to the lining of the casket, and Byars made several proposals for the place and the form for the performance, which were much more complicated than the same action when performed elsewhere.

When Byars returned for the performance, however, he had decided to use the simple form of the performance in Munich. He was very discreet about the reason for the change of plans, but it was clear later that he had concluded that, due to a current matter of difference between me and the University administration, my position would be ill served in a symbolic portrayal of my death.

First performance in Paris at the Pavilion Denon of the Musee du Louvre by Christiane Germaine. Other recorded performances of this action are in 1984 at the Philadelphia Museum of Art and in 1985, "The Death of Thomas McEvelley," in New York City.

James Lee Byars was born in Detroit, Michigan, in 1932. He studied art and philosophy at Wayne State University and subsequently spent ten years living and traveling in Japan (1958-67) during which time he annually returned to the United States. New York City was the focus of his visits and it was where he lived after he moved back. He visited Los Angeles, frequently, however, usually for extended visits, and traveled often elsewhere. Beginning in 1969 he was invited to perform and exhibit in Europe and he began to visit regularly. In 1972 he moved to Bern, Switzerland and in 1982 to Venice, Italy. In the early nineties Byars began to again spend most of the year in the United States. He presently lives in Santa Fe, New Mexico.

James Elliott

Selected one-person exhibitions and actions:

Jisha University, Kyoto, '61; Marion Willard Gallery, NY, '61; National Museum of Modern Art, Kyoto, '62; Green Gallery, NY, '63; The Performable Square, National Museum of Modern Art, Kyoto, '63-64 (also performed at UAM, Berkeley, 1978); Film Strip, The Twenty-Five Foot Robe and Three in a Pants, 3 performances, Metropolitan Museum of Art, NY, '67; *Mr. Byars and Six Plays*, Architectural League of NY, series of performances, '68; Art Gallery University of California, action, '69; Art and Technology, Los Angeles Country Museum of Art, '69; Wide White Space, Amsterdam, '69; Eugenia Butler Gallery, LA, '69; Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, NY, The Exhibition of Reality Soliloquies and other actions, '70; *Documenta 5*, Kassel, W. Germany, '72; Galerie Rene Block, Berlin, '74; Galerie Rudolph Springer, Berlin, '74; Toni Gerber Gallery, Bern, Switzerland, '75; De Appel Gallery, Amsterdam, '75; *The Perfect Kiss*, MATRIX, UAM, Berkeley, '78; De Appel Foundation, Amsterdam, '81, year long exhibition of actions, '81; Michael Werner Gallery, Cologne, '81; *Documenta 7*, Kassel, W. Germany, '82; Stedelijk van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven, The Netherlands, retrospective exhibition, '83; ICA, Boston; Kunsthalle, Dusseldorf, W. Germany, '86; Sydney Biennale, Australia, '86.