

reveal their origins in Photoshop. Printed out on three-dimensional substrates, they are then photographed and digitally altered, their morphed documentation becoming another aspect of their evolving nature as art objects. Mixing photography with Conceptual tactics and the distributive possibilities of the Internet, Vierkant thereby evokes an ongoing cyclical practice, wherein the digital is given physical form only to be reabsorbed again into a new virtual configuration.

The exhibition also identified Sigmar Polke and Lucas Samaras as senior figures whose examples loom large over the present day. Like Richter, Polke used photography and mass-media appropriation to revitalize German painting in the 1960s while pursuing an extremely creative photographic practice that embraced chance, error, and the incorporation of media such as painting and drawing. During the early to mid-1970s, Samaras, for his part, deployed incisive strategies of staged self-portraiture to experiment with representations of his own body. The trippy results—in which the artist's etiolated flesh is blurred, distended, and otherwise warped—established a trajectory of experimentation with self-portraiture evident in the work of Cindy Sherman and Yasumasa Morimura in the 1970s and '80s and in that of younger artists such as Laurel Nakadate and Jaimie Warren today. Photography, the exhibition suggested, has never been a single medium, and the digital revolution has simply made it more multiple, heterogeneous, and interrelated, conscious of its own history as well as those of other media.

—Matthew Biro

DETROIT

“James Lee Byars: I Cancel All My Works at Death”

MUSEUM OF CONTEMPORARY ART

“Just make me up!” James Lee Byars is said to have instructed Thomas McEvilly as he prepared an essay on the artist for this publication in 1981, and that is exactly what Triple Candie (curatorial duo Shelly Bancroft and Peter Nesbett) did at the Museum of Contemporary Art Detroit. Taking their cue as well as the exhibition's title from Byars's proclamation “I Cancel All My Works at Death,” the organizers, in conversation with guest curator Jens Hoffmann, populated a gallery with editorialized adaptations of the artist's work. A brick wall at the entrance glittered with gold paint, in homage to Byars's use of gold throughout his career—from his costumery of gold lamé to his gilding of the curb in front of the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York (*The Gold Curb*, 1970) to the gold leaf-embossed tomb of *The Death of James Lee*



View of “James Lee Byars: I Cancel All My Works at Death,” 2014.

Byars, 1982/1994. But here, painted over the crumbling bricks, Byars's favorite color evoked faked wealth, or sham stardom. Indeed, like the Midwesterner who became Gatsby, the Detroit-born Byars—with only hearsay and conjecture for a background—talked his way into a society of artists and curators who would make a reality of his imaginary life.

The exhibition was structured around a series of sets and scripts for performances of a mystery play, complete with audition advertisements, props, costumes, stage directions, and even postperformance documentation. In the center of the gallery sat an empty throne on a bloodred carpet littered with burned logs and stone orbs, all sprinkled with powdered gold dust. Hovering above this scene was a hokey representation of the artist's spirit: a ghostlike drapery of white tulle, no doubt an allusion to his 1969 installation *The Ghost of James Lee Byars*. On either side of the throne—lining walls that led at a proscenium angle toward a tattered stage curtain—were posters for Byars's many performances. Their designs were amateur, the printing was Kinko's: We're in a regional-theater lobby! The aesthetic was that of fakery or DIY sloppiness. Arte Povera-like materials (warped and painted cardboard served as a projection screen, and cheeky cut-paper animations were looped on cheap monitors) and penciled corrections of (intentional?) typos in the exhibition texts played up the shoddiness of the show, nearly to the point of overacting.

Byars, who died in Cairo at the age of sixty-five, was not an artist so much as he was a pose, a Rose Sélavy. In his work, the avant-garde principle of turning life into art to destroy the distinction between them was simultaneously celebrated and made kitsch. But beneath what appeared as poseur tomfoolery was his desperate yearning for a paradoxically ephemeral perfection (from his 1975 performance *The Perfect Kiss* to the installation *The Book of 100 Perfects*, 1985), which distanced his work from the cooler, brainier strands of American Conceptual art.

Hanging on the back wall behind the curtain was an arrangement of obituaries for the artist. While the obits were real, their divergences in content pointed to the instability of what we know about Byars. A page from the *Detroit Free Press* was included: a black, blank sheet. (Byars's death went unremarked in his hometown paper.) Triple Candie does specialize, after all, in “exhibitions about art but devoid of it and realized without the involvement of artists.” Perhaps to its credit, but more likely to a fault, in this retrospective (or rewriting), Triple Candie ultimately created a show as much about itself—about its own modes of exhibition, appropriation, documentation, and fictionalization—as about Byars, who may be just (or may just be) the most convenient subject. Byars's bombastic self-mythologizing and grasping for celebrity were likely as self-consciously constructed as this show, which his work eludes, as it would any show—even one that exhibited the “real” Byars. The eccentric early-Soviet writer Daniil Kharms, whose play with pseudonyms and self-portraits in the guise of alter egos resemble Byars's performance of self, wrote of a “red-headed man who had no eyes or ears,” not even hair, and finally no physical attributes whatsoever. Like Byars in the hands of Triple Candie, Kharms's redheaded man is cast into oblivion, only to remain hauntingly present: “So we don't even know who we're talking about. We'd better not talk about him anymore.”

—Matvei Yankelevich

SAINT LOUIS

Lena Henke

WHITE FLAG PROJECTS

Each of the eight sculptures in “*Geburt und Familie*” (Birth and Family), Lena Henke's recent show at White Flag Projects, is titled *Galocher*