

Gordon Hall

*philosophy is news.*¹

– James Lee Byars

3. First, a triad. Through the ruched violet-grey translucent curtains and to the right of the sphere of red roses, there is a photograph mounted on a diagonally protruding section of wall. The unattributed photograph, taken in Venice around 1980, depicts James Lee Byars dressed in a pale pink cotton pajama-like costume with a matching mask and holding up a curtain of the same hue, obscuring most of what appears to be a domestic interior. The photograph has been attached to the wall with a small piece of tape with a kissy lips print on it. This composite object—the photograph, the piece of wall, the tape—is not attributed to an artist on its corresponding wall label, which simply lists its components as I have done here. So who made it? I'm going to attribute it to a three-way collaboration between Matt Morris, James Lee Byars, and the Contemporary Arts Center (CAC): Morris conceiving it and overseeing its production, Byars staging and appearing in the photograph, and the preparators at the CAC crafting this diagonal “wing” of wall, as Morris refers to it. (But who operated the camera, printed the photo, mixed the paint, designed and manufactured the kissy tape and, and... quickly this triad is becoming a crowd.) Morris tells me that the photograph is printed at the precise dimensions of this catalog, which you are now reading, a charming premonition of the exhibition's eventual life in documentation. In an exhibition that is, at its core, a participatory, collaborative, and sincerely sentimental archive, it seems fitting that this piece welcomes you upon arrival.

1. Excerpted from James Lee Byars' “statements” published in the exhibition pamphlet for “The Perfect Kiss” at the University of California, Berkeley Art Museum, March 1 – March 31, 1978.

2. Also published as: Hall, Gordon. “Object Lessons—Thinking Gender Variance Through Minimalist Sculpture” *Art Journal*. Volume 72, Issue #4, Winter 2013.

3. The second three has to be the other photograph in the exhibition, this one mounted on the wall and attributed to Morris, who titled it “I'll be wearing ribbons down my back this summer.” In the photograph, one of the CAC's preparators disappears behind a cement column in the gallery. He is naked except for Byars's pink silk tail. While looking at the photograph I am aware that this tail is right behind me, on a plinth next to a pink silk Balenciaga coat. Also pictured in the image: a cordless drill, a level, part of an open cardboard box, a moving blanket, and a piece of PVC pipe. The wall label informs me that the preparator is named Reid Radcliffe, and Morris tells me a photographer named Taylor Dorrell shot the image, developed the negative, then scanned and printed it.

When I came to Cincinnati to see The Perfect Kiss (QQ) *questioning, queer I also gave a lecture called “Object Lessons: Thinking Gender Variance Through Minimalist Sculpture”² in which I try to*

think through some possible ways that we can learn modes of embodiment from sculptures, in a way that might make gender-variant bodies more possible. After the talk, Steven Matijcio, curator at the CAC, excitedly asked me if I was planning on developing more “object lessons” in the future. I said surely, of course, at some point, and made some excuses about writing being so haaaaard. Maybe this list is an effort in this direction. I am trying to learn from this show.

3. Another three would be that it seems worth pointing out that the entire exhibition is pink, white, and grey, or mixtures of the three (is not the redness of roses just a darker and more saturated pink?)
3. I’m going to say that perfume is a three-way: between the wearer, the maker of the scent, and those who smell it. In this case *Amour Nocturne Eau de Parfum* by the perfumer Bertrand Duchaufour, worn by the CAC staff during the run of the exhibition. Smell is the hardest sense to describe, remember, or articulate. This one is said to smell of cedar, hot milk, caramel, gun powder, and orchid. And as “an explosion of love.”³

In the middle of the week in which I labored over this text, the U.S. Supreme Court legalized same-sex marriage in all 50 states. The cyclone of opinions and emotions this historic event produced in me and around me has lent an added layer of urgency to this writing, as a taxonomy of possible relationship formations that are NOT the stable romantic couple. As relational structures embodied in the exhibition and its artworks, let this serve as an effort to cultivate and honor a rich constellation of relational life—thrupples, quick fucks, communities of affiliation, intimacy with strangers, extramarital affairs, siblings, best friends, temporary soul-mates, platonic life partners, writing buddies, roommates... May they (we) not be “condemned to live in loneliness,” to use Justice Anthony Kennedy’s deeply conservative (and discriminatory?) phrasing. It is so ordered.

2. Elevated just above the floor, a horizontal photographic image of two rose quartz spheres, just touching, given to Matt Morris by his twin. Morris photographed the crystals, just inches across, and blew up the image to the exact dimensions of James Lee Byars’s *This This*, a pair of basalt spheres currently being weatherized in the yard of Mr. and Mrs. Leonard Korman in Fort Washington, PA (and thus unable to travel to the show as originally intended). Morris titled his photograph *This This Him Them*, a reference to his twin’s use of the non-gendered pronoun “they” (which I also use). The two (or other plural number) of siblings—that relation of laterality that forms between beings that emerge so different even while originating from the same genetic material—is of critical importance to Morris as an overlooked register of intimacy and intercorporeal being. With so much pink fabric in this exhibition, the phrase “cut from the same cloth” seems an appropriate articulation of the horizontal companionship of sibling relations (a coincidental parallel for me in experiencing this show, as my siblings are my life partners).

3. “Explosions D’Emotions — Amour Nocturne” on luckyscent.com, accessed July 1, 2015.

These exhibition labels are so complex—detailed information in some cases and mysterious lack of information in others, quotes by Virginia Woolf, Clarice Lispector, and D.W. Winnicott, a full list of the

origin of every vase in Morris' vase collection, every occasion The Rose Table of Perfect has ever been exhibited... I'm relishing the confusion this exhibition produces about what is the work and what is the surrounding contextual material—the wall text, catalog, the work of the installation... Is Matt Morris the artist or the curator? I'm losing track of what these terms even mean. Where does "the work" begin and end? Accumulation in the form of many lists—this essay among them.

2. The two of parting. The opening of the ruched grey voile curtains of Matt Morris' *Festoon*, through which I enter the exhibition. Echoing the parting of various forms of lips and cheeks, the two of anonymous, rushed, or sudden sexual acts. Getting to the thing you want.

A news item just surfaced in one of my feeds: a story about a gay couple in the 1970s in which the (significantly) older partner legally adopted the younger partner as a way of ensuring that his boyfriend inherited his money when he died. The story gets framed as a "look at the ridiculous things that gay people used to have to do before we had gay marriage" type of nostalgia. I feel excited about the idea that adults could adopt each other.⁴ Michel Foucault was as well.

2. This two will be for things that are not as they appear: in this case two lines that appear to cross to make an X when in fact they never meet. Matt Morris's *Cerebra (Yvonne)* and *Cerebra (Lucinda)* are punctuation at the end of the show—two ruched satin pipes that diagonally bisect the back of the gallery without meeting. We often don't know what we are looking at. I regularly think I know more about what is going on between people than I actually do. Looking at things only from the front will do that. The two of the X that isn't actually an X—just a visual overlap caused by unclear depth of field. Relationships are not what they seem; what we believe is going on between people shapes what we see them to be doing.

- 1.5 An unanswered letter. What else could that be but a 1.5? James Lee Byars wrote countless letters to curators and other artists, daily and throughout his life, many of which did not get replies from their recipients. Perhaps this whole show is a 1.5—an unanswered, *unanswerable* letter to James Lee Byars from Matt Morris. A collaboration with someone who is not alive to give consent to it. Archival spelunking without permission.

4. "Long Before Same-Sex Marriage, 'Adopted Son' Could Mean 'Life Partner'" Part of *StoryCorps* on National Public Radio, aired June 28, 2015.

5. Adorno, Theodor W. *Aesthetic Theory*. London: The Athlone Press Ltd., 1997. p. 232.

Last summer I attended one meeting of a summer theory reading group hosted by a friend who is working on a dissertation in New York University's Department of Performance Studies. The assigned reading was Theodor Adorno's Aesthetic Theory and it was requested in advance of the meeting that we each pick a sentence or passage and memorize it. The phrase I chose is "Brutality toward things is potentially brutality against people."⁵ The phrase resurfaced in me as I viewed The Perfect Kiss (QQ) *questioning, queer, I think because the opposite of brutality is care, and care is the approach that dominates this project. Not just as an emotion felt toward others (caring about people) but also as an orientation towards objects, regardless of their value defined according to conventional standards. Matt Morris cares deeply about Byars' work, but also about*

the objects of his own life, and the exhibition is marked by an attention to nuance and detail that is utterly excessive. No one will appreciate the thoroughness of Morris' care as much as he does, because it is, frankly, overwhelming. But the feeling of "everything being attended to" is pervasive, and in it I see not only a way of making an exhibition, but the basis of a politics of living and encountering one another. To shamelessly treat one's objects with excessive care is to treat the world un-brutally, cultivating what might be described as a materialist ethics of care, which I am grateful to have witnessed.

1. This is the one of the dot, of which there are many in Morris' series of five watercolor drawings on tissue paper, *The Good Enough Kiss*. More than the dot as a singular entity, I am interested here in the process of drawing not as an act of *expressing* the inner self of the artist, but one of *consolidation through time* in the process of repeating a single act (the making of the dot). I'm curious about the things that occur when one makes one's work in a monotonous and quiet way for hours and hours on end. It's less like painting and more like embroidery, knitting, or sewing—traditional craft activities that keep one's hands busy while one's mind (and heart) wanders. Does this inner life make it into the stitches? The dots? Non-representational handmade objects that are products of a body at work over time. Art making as waiting, as passing time. Dot after dot after dot.
1. There are two versions of James Lee Byars's performance *The Perfect Kiss*. In one, two women kiss each other in a gallery in Brussels in 1974. In the other—originating around the same time and of which Morris organized re-performances throughout the run of this exhibition—a single person delicately parts their lips. That's all. And that's the one with which I want to finish this list, this tiny performance, a mere glimpse, this solitary auto-erotic open gesture. The perfect kiss.