

THIS PAPER HAS UNDONE ME.

—James Lee Byars¹

I am forever unfolding between two folds,
and if to perceive means to unfold, then I am
forever perceiving within the folds.

—Gilles Deleuze²

Objects of Seduction: James Lee Byars's Scrolls and Accordion-Folded Performative Paper Sculptures

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The habitually nomadic American artist James Lee Byars left his hometown, Detroit, in the late 1950s to live in Kyoto, Japan, for the next ten years, only returning to the US for short visits. There he found validation for his appreciation of the ephemeral as a valued quality in art and embraced the ceremonial as a continuing mode in his life and work, which became inseparable. During these formative years Byars adapted the highly sensual, abstract, and symbolic practices found in Japanese performative rituals to Western science, art, and philosophy. His pursuit of the ‚perfect‘ originated from a unique synthesis of non-Western practices, Conceptual art, Minimalism, and Fluxus, infused with aspects of the Happening, Body and Installation art.

In Japan, Byars supported himself by teaching English at Doshisha University in Kyoto, an activity which he occasionally turned into a performance. Robert Landsman recalls one lesson on a late-spring evening. That day Byars instructed his class not to speak and to follow him out of the

¹ James Lee Byars. Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris, 1983 (exh. cat., n. pag.).

² Gilles Deleuze: *The Fold. Leibniz and the Baroque*. Translated by Tom Conley. Minneapolis, London 1992, p. 93.

school to his apartment, where he had laid a ten-by-ten-foot piece of white paper on the floor. He then asked his students to lie face down on the paper forming a circle with their heads meeting at its center, while in the backroom Landsman played the shakuhachi, a Japanese bamboo flute, traditionally performed in Shintō ceremonies by monks. Later, as Landsman joined the students on the floor, a large insect suddenly flew through the open window into the room and began to dance inside the circle on the paper, before dropping dead. Byars put his finger on his lips, then gestured his class to get up and leave. His ‚English‘ lesson had ended.

Byars was a master of summoning up the „unattended moment“ (T. S. Eliot) that is also at the core of the Japanese art of haiku, the minimalist poetry that aims to capture pure presence.³ Gilles Deleuze has remarked in his book on Francis Bacon, „Modern painting begins when man no longer experiences himself as an essence, but rather as an accident.“⁴ Byars had already mastered the art of happenstance, what Bataille called „the giddy seductiveness of chance“,⁵ which became a major *modus operandi* for his artistic practice where nothing and everything happens by chance.

What made Byars most remarkable was the almost hypnotic effect he had on others. A tall, handsome man with long dark-brown hair usually wearing a wide-rim hat and dressed in dignified white or black linen suits, Byars used his considerable charm to conjure up seemingly random events supervised by carefully orchestrated rituals throughout his creative life. He was alternately a seductive sleight-of-hand artist and a truth-seeking philosopher – two roles that for him were not contradictory. In his performative works, the extraordinary and the miraculous often became one.

The Format of the Scroll

In Japan, Byars first created large black-ink paintings on Japanese flax paper mounted on wood or on traditional Japanese orange hanging scrolls. In 1958, having been impressed by a Rothko painting that he saw exhibited at the

³ One of Byars’s last projects was a book of Haikus, which he put together with his friend, the philosopher Heinrich Heil: *Im Nu des Perfekten. Werke von James Lee Byars und 100 Haiku für jetzt*. Bern 2010.

⁴ Gilles Deleuze: *Francis Bacon. The Logic of Sensation*. London 2003, p. 125.

⁵ Fred Botting, Scott Wilson (ed.): *The Bataille Reader*. Malden, MASS 1997, p. 40.

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Cranbrook Academy outside of Detroit after his first visit to Japan, Byars hitchhiked to New York with some of the paintings he had made in Japan, walked to The Museum of Modern Art and asked the receptionist for Mark Rothko's address, so he could show him his work. After explaining that the museum's policy does not allow giving out the addresses of artists, the receptionist noticed the suspicious-looking roles of paper under Byars's arm and called the museum's curator, Dorothy Miller, to come down and have a look at them. Miller ended up buying two works for herself and offering Byars a show. He chose the emergency stairwell and one evening installed several works there. Most were sold, including one to Philip Johnson. The exhibition apparently lasted only a few hours, and Byars delivered the sold pieces personally that night to the collectors' homes. Miller later recalled:

When James Byars appeared in 1959 [sic] at the museum [...] several members of the staff talked to him and became interested in his unusual personality. He seemed quite unworldly and though he was living with his family in Detroit he appeared to be isolated from any appreciation or understanding of what he was trying to do in his art. [...] Both his sculptures and his 'paintings' have an immediate appeal to a number of people (I observed this myself).⁶

Byars's Japan paintings were subsequently shown in 1961 at the Willard Gallery in New York. In a statement published in the journal *Art in America* about his works at Willard, Byars wrote the following:

In Japan – my dreamland of the beautiful, which I first visited in 1958 – I discovered the materials for my paintings, handmade linen papers and Chinese black ink. My technique is pure: I simply paint ink onto a sized or unsized Japanese paper, which is placed on the floor. Then it is stretched. I use the simple forms because they offer the most comprehensive interpretation; it may be an egg [...] it may be the abstracted perspective of time and space. The only prescribed idea is that one confront art for itself, as an experience.⁷

The first major museum exhibition of Byars's scroll paintings took place at the National Museum of Modern Art in Kyoto in 1962. Subsequently, Byars created a series of performative sculptures made of hundreds of sheets of

⁶ See: MoMA Archives, N.Y., DCM, JLB I.1a (In her letter Dorothy Miller seems to have confused the date she first met Byars, which was 1958).

⁷ William S. Lieberman: *New Talent USA. Prints and Drawings*, in: *Art in America* 1 (1961), p. 50.

glued or riveted traditional Japanese flax or Kozo (Mulberry) paper folded and boxed into solid geometric shapes. He was one of several artists (among them, Richard Tuttle and Walter de Maria) who in the 1960s expanded the medium of drawing into sculpture.

In Kyoto, many of Byars's paper works were performed by his Japanese girlfriend, Taki Sachiko, dressed in black ceremonial garb. She is seen in several photographs taken at the Sokokuji temple, which Byars rented for two hours on June 21, 1964, performing a ‚processional‘ or ‚single object presentation‘.

Performative Paper Sculptures

One of Byars's best-known performative sculptures from that period is *Untitled Object (Runcible)* (1962–64), now more commonly referred to as *Performable Square*, a 18 x 18 x 18 inch (c. 46 cm) cube consisting of 1.000 sheets of hinged white flax paper that unfolds into a 50 x 50 foot (c. 15 meter) white plane (fig. 1). It was first exhibited at the National Museum of Modern Art, Kyoto, in 1964, in the center of the museum floor, placed on a sheet of glass but not performed until fourteen years later, in March 1978, during Byars's exhibition at the University Art Museum in Berkeley, California. There it was unfolded by the exhibition's curator, James Elliott, with the assistance of David Ross, Mark Rosenthal, and Earl Michaelson. It was given to The Museum of Modern Art, New York by Byars in 1966. It has not been performed since. In his instructions to Dorothy Miller, Byars wrote:

Any portion of plane may be reduced by simply closing it up. The entire object is performable or may be used as a put out. [...] All pieces kept in visual sequence both within the paper making process and in the construction of the object (All left to right beginnings).⁸

The title, *Runcible*, was given to the work later by Byars after Edward Lear, the British nineteenth-century nonsense poet, who, in his satirical poem *How Pleasant to Know Mr. Lear* had written about himself: „His body is perfectly spherical / He weareth a runcible hat.“ Frederick R. Worth pointed out an interesting parallel between the ‚progressive *unfolding* of almost any poem

⁸ See: MoMA Archives, N.Y., DCM, JLB I.2b.

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in the most traditional sense“ and Byars’s minimalist, folded paper constructions.⁹

Also in 1964, in a letter to Wernher von Braun at NASA, Byars inquired whether it would be possible „to employ a government rocket or satellite“ to send a folded piece of white paper into space, 8 miles x 4 inches (c. 13 km x 10 cm) „to be dropped to fall on our beautiful prairie at its flattest point using international instantaneous Tel-Star announcements.“¹⁰

At the opening of the 1967 Kyoto Independents exhibition held by the National Museum of Modern Art in Kyoto, Byars and a friend, Rem Stone, performed a paper scroll, two feet wide and one hundred feet long (c. 50 cm x 30 m), which was attached to a pole, 40 feet (12 m) high. The audience was held in suspense as tens of feet of blank paper had to be unrolled until finally a drawn shape was revealed, followed by an equal amount of blank paper. Both then stood there for three hours without moving and according to Lindley Hubbell, they were almost paralyzed afterwards. During an opening at Richard Bellamy’s Green Gallery in 1963, two scrolls of white paper were unrolled onto a platform made of white cubes by two people, one wearing a ‚bird’s-egg head‘, the other, a costume designed by the designer Cristóbal Balenciaga. The gallery was painted black, the floor covered with black paper and illuminated with only one single light bulb. Wearing a black dress, Yvonne Rainer, a member of New York’s Judson Dance Theater, improvised a dance by responding to the audience’s movements and reactions. Among the audience was the pop artist and filmmaker Andy Warhol, who unbeknownst to Byars and Rainer, briefly filmed Rainer’s performance the footage of which was recently found in the Andy Warhol Film Project at the Whitney Museum of American Art. Rainer later wrote an essay about her improvised dance, entitled *Some Thoughts on Improvisation*, which was published in her first book, *Work 1961–73*. Her essay was also recorded on tape and played back during an improvised solo Rainer performed with a spool of white thread at Once Festival in Ann Arbor, Michigan, in 1964. Rainer’s essay not only contains the first formal theoretical ideas on impro-

⁹ Frederick R. Worth: Poems that Open and Shut. The Accordion-Fold Creations of Blaise Cendrars and Octavio Paz, in: *Consciousness. Literature & the Arts* 14,3 (Dezember 2013), pp. 1–49. Online: <<http://www.dmd27.org/worth.pdf>> (last accessed on Dec., 1st 2017).

¹⁰ Archive of American Art, Samuel Wagstaff Papers, 1.1: Correspondence with Artists and Others, 1932–1975.

vised dance but also describes thoroughly the complex effect Byars's actions and works had at the time on his audience and peers:

The scrolls are made of white paper mostly. The boxes are a snowy field. The walls rise white and flat. [...] I share a common impulse with many people in the room: We want to defile, to desecrate, to shit on the whiteness, to crush this fragility, to smash the silence. [...] Anyway, the thing is that I DON'T HAVE TO DO IT. Any of it: all that smash and smudge, I choose not to do it. I choose to play the game his way and in so choosing I am freed from wanting to destroy his image. I become powerful and happy. I become knowledgeable. I know what is appropriate to do. I find his image beautiful.¹¹

Byars's most spectacular performative paper sculpture was *The Giant Soluble Man*, which was performed on 53rd Street between Fifth and Sixth Avenues, New York on November 16, 1967, during the opening of the exhibition *Made with Paper* held simultaneously at the Museum of Contemporary Crafts and at the Time-Life Exhibition Center and sponsored by the Container Corporation of America. A large silhouette of a man glued together from 400 feet (c. 122 meter) of white Dissolvo paper, a water-soluble paper donated by the Gilbreth Paper Company in Philadelphia, covered 53rd Street between Fifth and Sixth Avenues from curb to curb, with the help of the New York City Police Department, which stopped the traffic and removed all cars from the block. On Byars's signal, two street-cleaning trucks from the Department of Sanitation drove over the paper, spraying it with water, which caused the paper to dissolve.

While many of Byars's early performative paper objects have a formal kinship with the works of the American Minimalists, Byars himself rejected a connection between his works and Minimalism. In a conversation with Wolf-Günther Thiel, he said:

It is ridiculous. [...] First of all, nothing is simple and, too, concentration does not mean that one is minimal. [...] People have often made an effort to associate me with that kind of work, but I think I probably never felt their inclination. Like the early things of mine such as the *Mile Long White Paper Walk* or others like this. I always saw that as very powerful and very spiritual. I never thought of it as Minimal. I showed that first in the Carnegie Museum

¹¹ Yvonne Rainer: Some Thoughts on Improvisation, in: *Work 1961–73. The Nova Scotia Series: Source Materials of Contemporary Arts*, ed. Kasper König. Halifax 1974, p. 299.

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with Lucinda Childs moving along with it. So, there was another association with a figure, with a human figure.¹²

Byars's interest in the human figure most likely originated in his acquaintance with Japanese Noh theater and Shintō rituals – with its demand for elegance and grace, the use of ceremonial dress and symbolic practices, and the custom of articulating answers as questions Noh goes back to ancient times. Whereas Kabuki was for the common people, Noh was a performance for the Samurai or Warrior class. The actors wear masks and dramatic elements are minimal, movements are performed very slowly to the accompaniment of music. Dances are an intrinsic part of many Noh plays. The movements (Kata) are structured by the rhythm (Ma) as they meld into each other. The transitions should be subtle and alive, pulsed by the dancer's rhythm. As Byars explained in a letter to Dorothy Miller:

The „MA“ in Noh Drama is the interval between words, a scared absence, giving the sound its chance to become. Beautiful quiet, full of everything, isolated pure sounds, high clear, full of sorrow and joy.¹³

The Accordion-Folded Format

Between 1962 and 1964 Byars also created several paper constructions that unfold accordion-style (they may relate to the artist's later habit of calling many of his sculptures „books“): *Untitled (The Accordion Scroll / The Perfect Painting)* (1961), which consists of a 360 cm long and 30 cm wide band of Japanese paper (fig. 2).¹⁴ Each fold precedes one drawing of a slightly elongated black-ink filled circle, lightly cut off at the bottom edge of the page. Other folded works are *Untitled (1 x 200 Foot Paper)* (1962–64), also

¹² Wolf-Günther Thiel: Gespräch mit James Lee Byars / Interview with James Lee Byars, in: Im Full of Byars. James Lee Byars – Eine Hommage / An Hommage. Bielefeld 2008, pp. 79–80.

¹³ See: MoMA Archives, N.Y., DCM, JLB I.1b.

¹⁴ For a discussion of Byars' accordion-folded sculptures see also: Klaus Ottmann: The Art of Happenstance. The Performative Sculptures of James Lee Byars, in: Sculpture. A Publication of the International Sculpture Center, Vol. 21, No. 9 (November 2002); Kati Rubinyi: James Lee Byars' Performable Objects, in: X-TRA Contemporary Art Quarterly, Vol. 5, No. 2 (Winter 2002). For reproductions of works see: James Elliot: The Perfect Thought. Works by James Lee Byars. University Art Museum, Berkeley 1990.

in the collection of The Museum of Modern Art (fig. 3). It is stored in a white paper box, and was first publically unfolded in the Shokokuji Temple in Kyoto in 1962. Standing on the floor in its folded style, it features one continuous black line drawn horizontally down the middle of the entire accordion-book. A similar drawing *1 x 50 Foot Drawing* was performed at the 1964 Carnegie International exhibition by a woman wearing a nun outfit in the interior court of the Carnegie Museum of Art. These works led to the more ambitious large-scale performative paper sculptures in the style of accordion-books: the *1,000 Foot Chinese Paper* which was also performed by a person wearing nun clothing (fig. 4). This extremely long, folded paper work (it was actually only 800 feet long, c. 244 meter) was laid out during the performance in the Shokokuji Temple in Kyoto in a serpentine formation in 1963.

The British journalist and photographer Simon Blackall who lived in Japan for several years before settling in Australia knew Byars when they both lived in Kyoto. He recently described this performance on his daughter's blog:

When I reached Shokokuji there were already a number of people waiting – mainly Japanese but a few foreigners. It was pitch dark and we wandered about for half an hour bumping into one another. Eventually an enormous black 1920s Buick drew up and out stepped James Lee Byars and his Japanese girlfriend Miss Taki, both dressed in black. James was wearing a black suit plus black top hat and she was wearing a beautiful ruched black silk dress that belled out from the waist. I think it was by Givenchy but second hand.

By this time the audience had become restless and there were some boos and other jibes.

Inside the Hondo [the main hall] a small naked light bulb was switched on and the performance art began. Slowly and carefully Miss Taki unfolded attached meter square sheets of handmade paper into a long serpentine strip to make a low wall. Once the whole pile was exhausted, and after a short pause for effect, she laboriously folded them back into a cube. Throughout this procedure James and Miss Taki remained silent and then walked slowly back to the limousine. Just before they were driven off, Byars stood on the running board and shouted over the abuse:

„This is to teach you patience, perseverance and an appreciation of art.“

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The car door was closed and James and Miss Taki disappeared into the night.¹⁵

On October 25, 1965, during the Pittsburgh International Exhibition of Contemporary Painting and Sculpture at the Carnegie Museum of Art, Lucinda Childs, a member of New York's Judson Dance Theater, dressed in a full-length white ostrich-feather gown and headdress, performed *Untitled (Rivet-Continuity)* (1962–64), a 500-foot-long (c. 152 m) strip of unpainted white, handmade Japanese flax paper in seventy-five sections, joined with rivets. Grouching at the beginning of the mile-long paper object, Childs executed a small circle with her body like the hands of a clock, in a clockwise direction, rose and tiptoed gracefully along the length of the unfolded paper object, and ended by performing another circle motion, this time counter-clockwise. Byars explained this movement as signifying a plus on one and a minus at the other end. The event was announced by the artist as:

75 PAPER LONG CIRCLES SHOWN ANONYMOUSLY AT THE MUSEUM OF ART CARNEGIE INSTITUTE UNDER THE FAVOUR OF THE WOMEN'S COMMITTEE AT 10 O CLOCK ON OCTOBER 25.

Byars gave this work to The Museum of Modern Art in 1966, also referred to as *A Mile-Long Paper Walk*. An exhibition copy of the work was performed several times at the museum in 2014 by Katie Dorn, a member of the current Lucinda Childs Dance Company, as well as by the Berlin-based dancer and artist Jimmy Robert.

Occasionally, Byars exhibited or presented these paper works in their unfolded state, usually with the paper boxes he designed for each of them. On August 8, 1964, a black paper work was presented by Byars folded and in its black box, outside the Imperial Palace in Kyoto early in the morning.

In his study on the Baroque, Gilles Deleuze stresses the importance of recognizing that unfolded is not the opposite of folded but rather its continuation into infinity:

¹⁵ Sophie Blackall: Drawn from My Father's Adventures. See: <<http://drawnfrommyfathersadventures.blogspot.com/2012/04/james-lee-byars-at-shokokuji.html>> (last accessed on Dec., 1st 2017).

The unfolded surface is never the opposite of the fold, but rather the movement that goes from some to the other. Unfolding sometimes means that I am developing. [...] I project the world „on the surface of a folding“.¹⁶

Byars was essentially a sculptor – who either „performed“ his objects or allowed the materials and objects to perform like actors in a play – a notion he shared with the painter he admired most, Mark Rothko. Rothko perceived his painted floating rectangles as „objects“ and as „actors“ in an emotional drama playing out universal human tensions on his canvases. In Byars’s sculptures, what was played out were not emotions but ritual acts of body, speech, and mind. Theater by virtue of its representational function is at once about presence as it is about absence. The actors, costumes and stage props are as much themselves as they are standing in for someone or something not present; they are present by representing.

Byars’s seemingly minimalist reduction is too baroque to be considered Minimal art; his conceptualism too concerned with the production of objects to be Conceptual art. Dave Hickey writes, „There is nothing minimalist in James Lee Byars’s agenda: abbreviation is his métier, and opera, his idiom“.¹⁷

In Byars’s early works on paper, the non-Western line meets the Baroque fold. The inherent eroticism of Byars’s folded serial paper objects is captured in the dialectic of erotic love described in Søren Kierkegaard’s *The Seducer’s Diary* (1843):

Erotic love does have its distinctive dialectic. There was a young girl with whom I was once in love. At the theater in Dresden last summer, I saw an actress who bore a remarkable resemblance to her. Because of that, I wanted to make her acquaintance, and did succeed, and then realized that the dissimilarity was rather great. Today on the street I meet a lady who reminds me of that actress. This story can be continued as long as you wish.¹⁸

The presentations and performances of the folded and unfolded (and later, often crumbled) paper objects attest to the paradox of an ephemeral art that

¹⁶ Gilles Deleuze: *The Fold. Leibniz and the Baroque*, p. 106.

¹⁷ Dave Hickey: *Detroit Dharma Diva*, in: James Lee Byars. *Works from the Sixties*. New York 1993.

¹⁸ Søren Kierkegaard: *The Seducer’s Diary*. Translated by Howard V. and Edna H. Hong. Princeton, Oxford 2013, p. 152.

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mirrors the transience of the Human Condition: „In its explicit aim for the transitory, it wishes to last always.“¹⁹

¹⁹ Christine Buci-Glucksmann: *Esthétique de l'éphémère*. Paris 2003, p. 12.

Klaus Ottmann

Illustrations

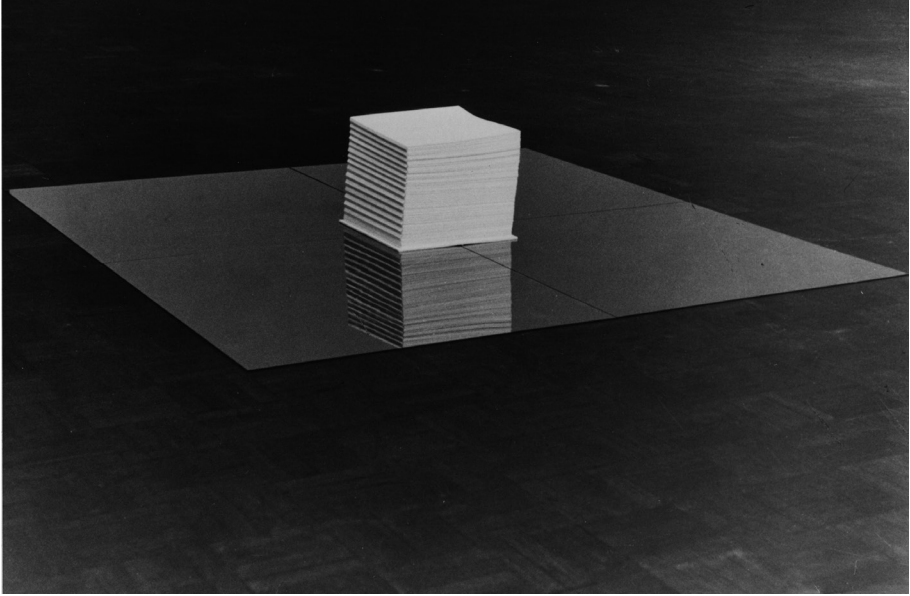


Fig. 1: James Lee Byars: *Untitled Object (Runcible)*,
also known as *The Performable Square* (1963).

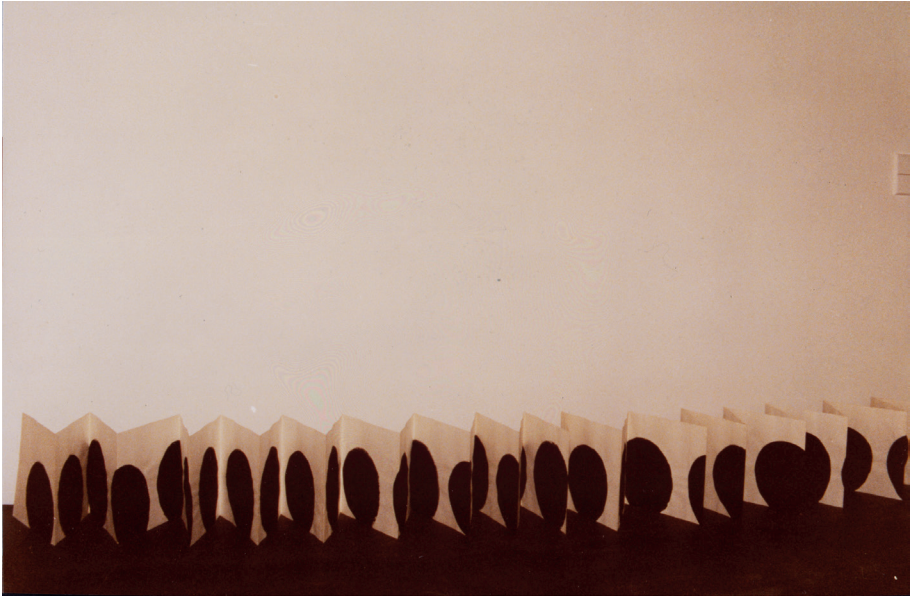


Fig. 2: James Lee Byars:
Untitled (The Accordion Scroll / The Perfect Painting) (1961).



Fig. 3: James Lee Byars: *(Untitled) 1 x 200 Foot Paper*, installation view: Shokokuji Temple, Kyoto (1962).

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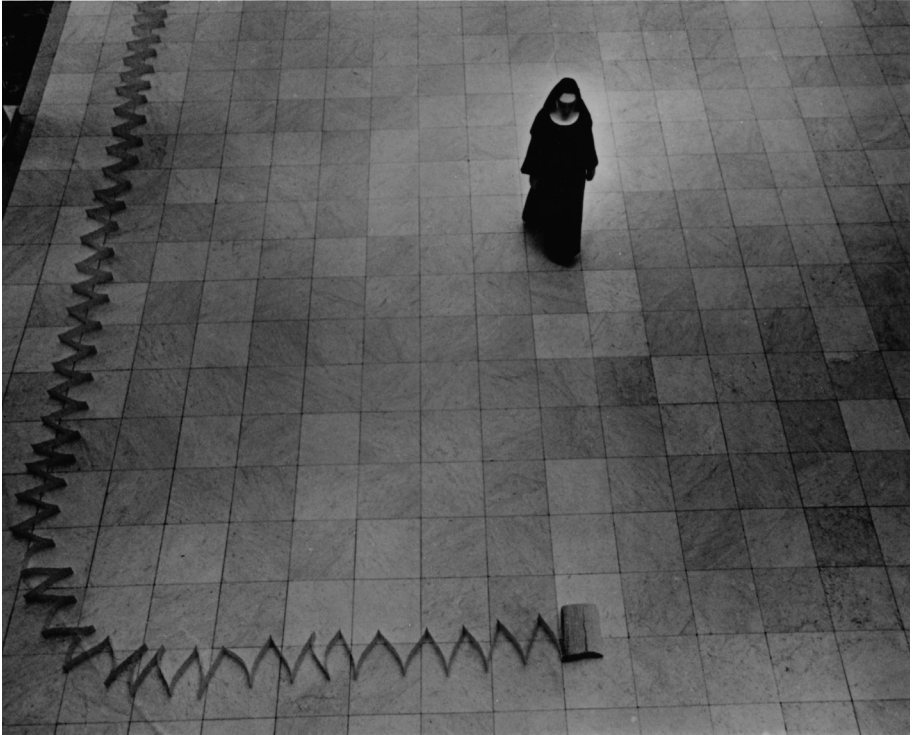


Fig. 4: James Lee Byars: *1,000 Foot Chinese Paper* (1963).