What to do for the Sake of Love?

Michal B. Ron follows an archival treasure of Hannah Bruckmüller's. She starts with Marcel Broodthaers' contribution to James Lee Byars's *World Question Center*, where a question about love is calling from a distance of time, and creates a new questionnaire that asks for responses: what do you do for the sake of love?

Essay / Michal B. Ron December 31, 2022

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... in this condition of this strange world: what to do to make love?
Marcel Broodthaers in James Lee Byars's *World Question Center*, 1969

1969

Belgian television viewers see a group, sitting in a circle on the floor, united under a silk garment, but strangely distanced from one another. An English speaking foreigner, wearing an oversized hat, an alien from the United States, sits in the center of the circle, flanked by two beautiful women on each side. He calls people across the globe and asks: "What is the most important question for you, personally?" The respondents' answers (or rather, their questions), are to be heard in the room and on TV. This is the setting of James Lee Byars's (1932-1997) *World Question Center*, in which he collects "the most important questions" from artists, intellectuals and scientists, who were considered among the "100 most brilliant minds" of their time, including John Cage and Joseph Beuys. Byars's project was designed as a performance, which took place at Wide White Space Gallery in Antwerp and was broadcasted live on Belgian television. "If the critical questions around the world were gathered, would you then have a picture of the contemporary problems of earth people?" Byars wonders in a letter to his Belgian supporter and art collector Isi Fiszman.2

The Belgian artist Marcel Broodthaers (1924-1976), who sits in the room, contributes a question from the ring: "I have a problem: it's really, we live in a world of mechanisms, a world of wars, a world of technology – that special condition for to live, and my particular question in this condition of this strange world: what to do to make love?" [sic]

2020

Fifty-one years later, we watch the archived video online and listen attentively. Byars's performance is strangely familiar and scarily contemporary. It echoes the media-technological conditions of our time, and particularly the pandemic age: the participants keep their distance, with electrical compensation for physical absence, the phone-calls are full of feedbacks and technical failures. What can we learn from questions asked in 1969 about "the contemporary problems of Earth people"?

Broodthaers's question is uncannily timely, almost too close to come from the past. It poses an urgent problem: "What to do to make love"? In 1969, in 2020?

2022: Today, I send you, dear reader, my question: What do you do for the sake of love?

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A question about love, proposed in 1969, returns as a surprise, haunting. In 2015, a question posed

about maternity, to which we will also return, echoed its oddness. By now those questions have long departed with the men who had asked them. Today, they are whispered by friendly ghosts.

A question about love surfaces in minute 30:37 of an hour long TV-broadcasted performance from 1969. No longer live, it is now archived in a recording that became a “television relic”, found by good fortune, then digitized.3 Until the copyrights owners decide otherwise, we can watch the black and white video document that Michael Werner Gallery has uploaded on vimeo, online.4 The question it includes is an archival treasure, reserved for curious viewers. Hannah Bruckmüller’s curiosity leads her to such treasures. May I harvest your finding, dear little sister in spirit – for the sake of LOVE? Bruckmüller is attentive to details. She follows clues, to questions others don’t even think of posing, and asks further.5 She noticed that Broodthaeres participated in Byars’ *World Question Center*. Broodthaers proposed a question about love.

Fiszman, the younger ghost, was an elderly man, when he inappropriately, outrageously, urgently asked Carolyn Christof-Bakargiev and Griselda Pollock, two women who are high-ranked feminist professionals, about their position concerning maternity. This question, closing the Q&A part of their presentation in Kassel, in an event dedicated to the (at the time of 2015) five most recent documentas, was unwelcome. Fizsman asked me that same question when we first met in Brussels. I was not a mother then. I was working on my PhD dissertation on Broodthaers. At that later occasion in Kassel, he also asked me, for the second time, again: “Why won’t you study James Lee Byars?” Beuys, Broodthaers and Byars were his three (big) Bs. Other Bs buzz in my mind. Your B vibrates on my cell phone when we chat, dear Hannah.

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I have a problem:

it’s really we live in a world of mechanisms, a world of wars, a world of technology

that special condition for to live

and my particular question in this condition of this strange world:

what to do to make love?” [sic]

This is the question Broodthaers contributed in broken English and heavy French accent to Byars’ *World Question Center*. Who? What? My trail begins with Broodthaers: associated by his interpreters with Belgian pop art, conceptual art, and most prominently with institutional critique, here he surprises his followers with a directly affectionate question. At the time he participated in Byars' performance, he was running his fictitious museum, the Musée d’Art Moderne, *Département des Aigles* (1968-1972), for over a year. Broodthaers himself was the institution’s appointed director. He inaugurated the museum in his domestic space in Brussels, where he lived with his partner Maria Gilissen and his youngest daughter Marie-Puck, on September 27, 1968. And yet, on November 28, 1969, for the performance of the *World Question Center*, he was not wittily asking about art, or critically teasing the museum. He was intimately urging: “what to do to make love?”

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We move up in Fiszman’s alphabet from Broodthaers to Byars: an enigmatic artist who is associated by his admirers with magic and stars. Byars founded The *World Question Cente*r as artist in residence at the Hudson Institute in New York in 1969. In his endeavor to get a “PhD-fic” – a fictitious PhD – Byars was collecting questions. It turned out to be quite a difficult task. In a presentation of The *World Question Center* at Nova Scotia College of Art and Design on 21 April, 1970, Byars reveals

how he “asked for a world telephone and for Who’s Who and for a little room” and “called up more than 2500 people around the world”6 with “a credential as brief as possible”: “I’m James Byars, Hudson Institute, running the *World Question Center*, and I wonder if you’d be interested in trying to offer the hypotheses in regards to your discipline for the evolution of your own knowledge of that in general intellectual language?”7 He tried both approaching leading scientists and pedestrians on the streets. He tried an advertisement in a magazine (“the response was incredible. I received more than 10,000 questions in the matter of a few months”)8 and handing out questionnaires in schools (“It is interesting that I got only one return from Columbia. One questionnaire”)9. He wanted to make a poll but that would have been too expensive (“you can find the world question in a week no matter how topical this is for $25,000”).10

Many times the response was unsatisfying. Some replied: “‘I have questions but I don’t farm them out’ [...] ‘I have questions but they’re not intended for uninitiated ears.’ ‘Who are you as an artist or whatever you are to ask me what questions I’m asking myself?’” Yet next to arrogance there was also embarrassment: “The general blush was that ‘I don’t have any questions and that’s embarrassing.’ or ‘What do you mean question’?”11 The questions Byars was thankful for getting were for example: “Can you on a priori terms assess all technology?” (from Eugene Wigner in theoretical physics),12 “Arrogance is repeatable information?” (came out in conversation with Herman Kahn, director of the Hudson Institute),13 and “What do you want, a non-linguistic question?” (from Padua, “a ‘Quiz Kid’, who invented one of the basic systems of Xerox.”)14

At Nova Scotia School of Art and Design Byars played a recording of some selected questions, whispered by Viva, one of Warhol’s stars, at Byars’ request:

“I AM THE SELF-APPOINTED QUESTION CENTER?”

“E=MC2, NEXT?”

“I HAVE PERFECT QUESTION?” [sic]

“SAY IT, IT’S YOURS?”

“WHICH QUESTIONS HAVE DISAPPEARED?”15

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The questionnaire Byars mentions in his talk at Nova Scotia opens straightforwardly:

“I’m collecting questions. Please list yours and send to Byars (Temp. Art. in Res.) Hud. Inst. Croton, N.Y.. 10520”16

It then lists the numbers 1 to 100 for filling in questions. Let’s list ours:

1. “Which questions have disappeared?”

2. “What to do to make love?”

And while we’re at it, let’s list Fizsman’s question too:

3. What about maternity?

[...]

100.

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And now, let’s watch “The *World Question Center*”: the broadcast performance. In the introduction of the performance a tender woman’s voice with a French accent is heard pronouncing a list of

questions. Very likely we hear Monique Francois, whom Byars thanks “for her very lovely voice” at the end of the performance:

CLONE ME, CLONE ME, C-L-O-N-E M-E?17

DO YOU HAVE AN AFFECTION FOR QUESTIONS?

DID PLATO FORGET QUESTION?

WHEN IS DEAD?

IMAGINE PROBABILITY OF QUESTION?

WHAT’S THE SPEED OF AN IDEA?

WHICH QUESTIONS HAVE DISAPPEARED?

IS ALL SPEECH INTERROGATIVE?

MAKE A 1969 QUESTION?

DO QUESTIONS REQUIRE MORE ENERGY THAN OTHER SENTENCES?

I ASK TO EXPLAIN EVERYTHING?

IS A SINGLE QUESTION THE SYNTHESIS OF YOU?

THIS QUESTION IS CAPABLE OF QUESTIONING ITSELF?

WHAT QUESTIONS ARE YOU ASKING YOURSELF?

IMAGINE BEING POSSESSIVE OF A QUESTION?

QUESTION IS BIG ART?

I’LL GET HER QUESTION GRAMMAR?

ALL QUESTIONS RISE IN INTONATION?

LOOK AT PUBLIC QUESTION ON THE STREET?

EXALTING QUESTION SURPRISING?

THINK YOURSELF AWAY – MAYBE QUESTIONS DON’T EXIST?

DROP HELLO. HOW TO FALL IN LOVE WITH A PHONE CALL?

TO PRESENT THE OPPORTUNITY OF POSSIBLE RESPONSE IS THE EXHIBITION.

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Watching the video online during Corona lockdown in 2020 made the content of the performance uncannily contemporary.

MAKE A 1969 QUESTION?

Was it about time to make a 2020 question? We had to urgently ask back. Broodthaers: “[...] in a

world of mechanisms, a world of wars, a world of technology," and we could add: a world of pandemic, "in that special condition for to live" – "what to do to make love?"

CLONE ME, CLONE ME, C-L-O-N-E M-E?

– was a question raised by Dr. Rosencratz, "whose daily problem is to try to figure out how to clone people," Byars explained at Nova Scotia College of Art and Design.18 "Clone for people, I don't know how familiar you are with that, but clone means to for example in sexual reproduction as a problem of the National Institute of Health, it means relatively speaking, pinch your palm and get all you like of yourself."

With the lockdown came a moment when people were not allowed to meet, when bodies were kept in a distance. Those who were lucky and already, or still, in love, stuck together. Others were miserably locked in together. Others were longing in long distance relationships behind locked borders. And yet others were terribly lonely, deprived of physical touch. Was "CLONE ME" a solution for the problem of future reproduction? Another solution, next to assisted procreation, that went on halt, and "politically assisted procreation" within a heterosexual relationship, as Paul B. Preciado declares, "all human procreation is politically assisted"19 – that resulted in the following COVID baby-boom? Cloning came up as an unacceptable possible solution for Donna Harraway and her purebred, beloved, neutered dog.20

HOW TO FALL IN LOVE WITH A PHONE CALL?

It has become crucial during the world pandemic. In the performance Byars stressed the use of "the telephone company, the radio and TV," for "the process of [collective] consciousness by way of electric simulation" to "bypass speech." We had the internet, our social networks and online video conferences to bypass bodies, kept in walls, against the wet extensions of their contagious, high risked respirations.

Long minutes in the performance are haunted by feedback, latency, speakers overtaking, overtalking their microphone-time, and other technical problems caused with "electric simulation," which were haunting our virtual international meetings as well. One call follows another, and Byars struggles stoically, patiently, with problems of reception, and with the difficulties of some people, challenged to ask questions rather than making statements or proclamations. When Broodthaers's question comes up, it is articulated like verses of a poem:

> I have a problem.
> It's really we live in a world of mechanisms, a world of wars, a world of technology
> that special condition for to live
> and my particular question in this condition of this strange world
> what to do to make love?

The next question on the phone concerns the impact of the communication revolution on mankind (Arthur C. Clarke) – to which Byars responds: "indeed, we are having quite an experience tonight, aren't we." And so are we, over fifty years after, too. Thanks to the communication revolution, and to electric extensions of long gone moments and bodies, we excavate Broodthaers's question, "what to do to make love?" that captures "a picture of the contemporary problems of earth people" not only in 1969, but in 2020, 2022, and the count continues. It is here catalytic in regards to some discovery: of the urgent question of love.

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I, too, have been asking myself a question, in terms of the evolution of my field of knowledge. I would like to invite professionals in the field of art around the world to ask themselves:

What to do for the sake of love? Please send your responses to Ron michalbron.art@gmail.com

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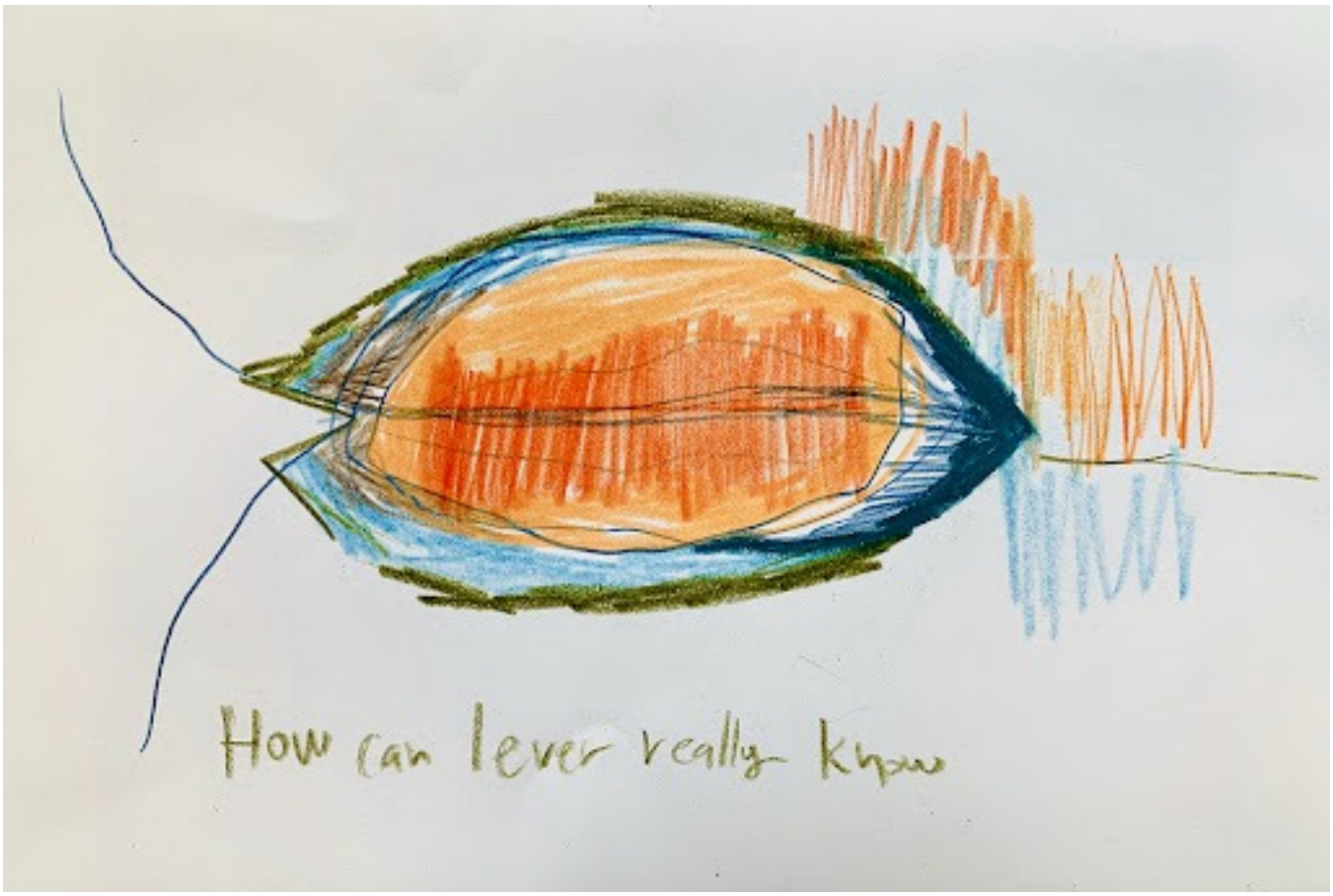
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Noa Ginzburg, How can I ever really know, from The Envelope Series, Color pencil on a 10x15 cm envelope, 2020
For more check out: https://www.instagram.com/explore/tags/theenvelopesseries/ [2]

- 1. Dedicated to an alphabet of lovers: Angel, Bruckmüller, Cassin, Daniel (all of you), Eva, Fizsman, Gregor und Gertrud, Hannah, Irene, Jacques, Katharina, Liv, Mayumi, Nevo, Ofri, Paenhuysen,?, Ron, Serge, Tanya, U, V, W, X, Y, Zakharov.
- 2. James Lee Byars, letter to Isi Fiszman, 1969. http://ensembles.org/items/letter-to-isi-fiszman-5978e63d-13a8-47e6-aa76-81efd6a1b56c?locale=en [3]
- 3. Emanuel Lorrain, "A television relic: on the digitalisation of 'James Lee Byars: The World Question Center," *ARGOSMAGAZINE* 5 (April-June 2012): 32-34. Online [4].
- 4. "James Lee Byars – World Question Center," Michael Werner Gallery Vimeo Channel, https://vimeo.com/415343441?login=true [5]
- 5. See, for example, Hannah Bruckmüller, "Marcel Broodthaers, Poet in the Pop Trap. Archival Notes on an Artist's Narrative," *Oxford Art Journal* 44.2 (August 2021): 291-306. https://doi.org/10.1093/oxartj/kcab012 [6]
- 6. Now would be a good time to pick up Avital Ronell, *The Telephone Book: Technology, Schizophrenia, Electric Speech* (University of Nebraska, 1989). Would you agree, Hannah?
- 7. "The World Question Center," transcribed tape of presentation by James Lee Byars, Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, April 21, 1970, p. 3. Reproduced in Lotte Beckwé, ed. *James Lee Byars: The Perfect Kiss* (Antwerp: M HKA, 2019).
- 8. Ibid. p. 4.
- 9. Ibid., p. 9.
- 10. Ibid., p. 9.
- 11. Ibid. p. 7.
- 12. Ibid. p. 7.
- 13. Ibid. p. 5.
- 14. Ibid. p. 11.
- 15. Ibid., p. 13.
- 16. Ibid. First page, unnumbered.
- 17. Sounds like: "TI-EL-OU-EN-AI, EM-AI".
- 18. "The World Question Center," transcribed tape of presentation by James Lee Byars, Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, p. 20.
- 19. See for example Paul B. Preciado, "Politically Assisted Procreation and State Heterosexualism," *South Atlantic Quaterly* 115.2 (2016): 405-410, 406. "All we could say from a biological perspective is that no 'human' body can reproduce itself outside collective social and political assemblages. Reproduction is an act of somatic communism. All human procreation is politically assisted [...]"
- 20. Donna J. Haraway, *When Species Meet* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008).

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[4] https://scart.be/?q=en/content/television-relic-digitisation-james-lee-byars-world-question-centre
[5] https://vimeo.com/415343441?login=true
[6] https://doi.org/10.1093/oxartj/kcab012