

## The Rose Table of Perfect by James Lee Byars

Kati Rubinyi, February 15<sup>th</sup>, 2001



The Rose Table of Perfect, 1989  
3,333 roses. 39 3/8 inches diameter.

The Rose Table of Perfect was made in 1989 out of 3,333 roses. It is 39 3/8' in diameter. It was exhibited in The Castello di Rivoli in Turin and in the Galerie de France in Paris (I think the photos are from the Galerie de France). Each time it's shown the roses are new, as they are subject to deterioration but it's always photographed fresh and it's unclear how long it's left to decay. The roses are of slightly varying shades of red that form fields like oceans on the surface of a planet: A planet for which the earth's gravity is a featured efficient cause. It sits on the floor, inert, waiting for something to elevate it off the ground, or more likely roll it around the room. Impossible because the roses would be crushed, so it's staying in one place. To touch the surface would be pleasurable, but to move it would be complicated. The Table of Perfect is basically a planter, a flower arrangement. It's a domesticated Noguchi sculpture closer in spirit to a red velvet (velveteen, velour) Ottoman, - or a table, if we believe the title. The domestic allusions are created in equal measure by the space that it's in as by the object. The gallery is a semi-abandoned Rococo palazzo whose doorways and windows were decades ago hastily blocked up with wooden slats and more recently reconsidered with fresh pieces of plywood. The fragmentary view offered by the photo suggests that the gallery is itself only one part of an otherwise inaccessible building likely made up of long rambling corridors and series' of large unspecific rooms. After years of disuse the gallery space is re-inhabited and its abandoned program of domesticity recalled through the introduction of Byars' elaborate flower arrangement.



The Rose Table of Perfect, 1989.

The red rose globe presents us with an idealization of the natural that is both jokey and earnest. The implication is that the roses are growing infinitely outward from the central kernel of the sphere. In terms of the sequence of events, the roses come first, before the sphere is even visible, growing out of 3,333 seeds converging on an immeasurably tiny point in the center. The center chose to manifest itself  $19 \frac{13}{16}'$  above the floor of this ex-Palazzo. More likely, the roses and sphere formed in the realm of the ideal (of Perfect). In this Kantian realm, the natural world is cast as a materialization of a simultaneously infinitely receding and expanding mathematical structure.<sup>1</sup> The roses participate in the same model of growth as the sphere as a whole. In other words, the roses are symbolic elements subject to a recursive allegorical structure symbolized by the sphere. The roses are Perfect too. The special numbers that describe the piece reinforce the sphere-rose parallel. The suggestion is that 3,333 roses have a necessary relationship to  $39 \frac{3}{8}''$ , the limit of the sphere's growth. Using sixth grade geometry, starting from the portentous 3,333 it is easy to arrive at a diameter of around 40'' – a bit of tweaking and the magical  $39 \frac{3}{8}''$  emerges. The aesthetic significance is paradoxical. Along with referencing the infinite nature of the organic, the  $39 \frac{3}{8}''$  also delineates the sphere as a discreet object whose most important feature is its surface. But the surface is not just surface but a loaded Romantic icon.

All this makes the Rose Table of Perfect hard to place. There are similarities between it and Sol Lewitt's conceptualist wall drawings that use mathematics in the service of both aesthetics and decoration. The piece also engages minimalism through serial repetition of a mass-produced object, but as a gay alternative to Minimalist macho.

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<sup>1</sup> Jeremy Gilbert-Rolfe, *Beauty and the Contemporary Sublime*.

The mass-produced object in question here is a rose, provoking ironic reflection on the alleged neutrality of minimalist materials. As Krauss says “Mass production insures that each object will have an identical size and shape, allowing no hierarchical relationships among them...”<sup>2</sup> But the rose contradicts minimalist aspirations by, among other things, alluding to inner biological forces. It also conforms to what Krauss calls pop’s anecdotal use of a “thematically inflected readymade”, which she contrasts to Minimalism’s stripping away of the object’s symbolic function. But it isn’t pop either. Pop ready-mades are manufactured, not grown – although the roses are obviously designed and mass-produced products. Pop ready-mades generally contain graphical elements and are about “now”, whenever that happens to be. The high-low discourse of pop ennobles banality as it underlines the consumerist aspect of art. This is less straightforward here. The Rose Table of Perfect is lacking in pop’s sneering criticality, although it’s not lacking in irony. An examination of this requires the temporary isolation of the rose as the basic symbolic unit.

There are at least two ways to look at the function of the rose and they correspond to the finite and infinite modes of surface and sphere. First of all, it’s relevant to both modes that the commercially produced red rose is a Victorian icon for “love”. The Victorians sublimated a Romantic, recycled Medieval, symbol (consider William Blake’s erotic *The Sick Rose*) and converted into an object whose meaning became increasingly diffuse as it was applied to more and more decorative and commercial functions. (Arthur Sullivan, as in *Gilbert and Sullivan* - a pop phenomenon very apropos to Byars - called for every surface of his house to be covered in roses in honour of a visit from Queen Victoria’s daughter). The rose comes to us, and to Byars through, 60’s and 70’s pop culture and graphic design, dragging along with it a century of associations (and leaving aside its pre-Victorian ones). Returning to *The Rose Table of Perfect* and its infinite state: It’s a little monument to a utopian notion of universal, infinite love. In other words, love is the “material” cast by the sphere as model of infinite expansion and regression. Love is the Perfect: Very Christian. Even though Byars’ piece comes 20 years later, the rose sphere is in a similar spirit as Robert Indiana’s ubiquitous 1967 LOVE logo. Indiana’s piece, distributed as commercial art, posits utopia through collective love (as in goodness and tolerance). It also extends the promise of inner fulfillment through a good attitude - as in “all you need is love”.

As a neo-Victorian, Byars re-enacts the conflation of symbolism with interior decoration. He also has a compulsion for devising codes, codes that come to mean more than their referents, and for theatricality and invention of character. This brings us back to a discussion of the surface. Plumbing the Rose Table’s depths, besides finding the

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<sup>2</sup> Rosalind Krauss. *Passages in Modern Sculpture* p.250

conceptual infinite one would encounter the banal in the form of a Styrofoam core pierced by little vials of water holding the rose stems. In other words, no interior space, only a crust. So much for solid-state universal order. And not only that: The sphere is not so perfect. There is variation of color, the petals stick out a little here and there, the flowers will wilt; and beyond it, the room has seen better days. The ensemble of defects is about creating an ambiance, making décor. This underscores the piece's most significant aspiration; it's final cause: To cast the spell of glamour. Glamour creates desire through the deployment of a specific kind of beauty, a beauty that comes out of the dialogue between fashion and the media. The dialogue generates consensus about the equation between wealth and beauty through constantly recasting that relationship. The glamorous image is defined by its own illusory-ness. Byars, in this piece and in all others, is about creating that illusory quality. So although his work is not pop, there is a fundamental connection to pop via mass media and photography. Mass media is not invoked directly, but its effect is lurking in the background as an undeniable force, like the gravity that acts on the sphere on the floor. The residue of mass media is cast on the surfaces in the room (rose, sphere, columns, walls) and on surface of the photo – another instance of a recursive order.

In 1938 Heidegger spoke of the problem of a technological world perceived as a picture. "Where the world becomes a picture, the system becomes predominant, and not only in thinking."<sup>3</sup> But Heidegger's picture is more of a diagram, with totalizing and "planetary" ambitions, than a picture. But if the "World Picture" can be a photograph it is freed from the instrumentality of prediction and control and takes on a new aesthetic program. Byars' proposed "world picture" is a fashion photograph. Gestures, objects and context are arranged to convey a world that is smooth, neat, expensive-looking and entirely frivolous, exploiting a Kantian philosophical system for its aesthetics. The Rose Table of Perfect points to the order of the sphere, but with a slight of hand replaces it with the order of the surface – the order of glamour.

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<sup>3</sup> Mass Mediauras; or Art, Aura and media in the work of Walter Benjamin p.30

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