

Press Release

Dom Sylvester Houédard *tantric poetries*

12 March – 2 May 2020
67 Lisson Street, London
Opening: 11 March, 6 – 8pm

Interconnecting with his first exhibition at Lisson Gallery in 1967, this show reveals the linguistic mysticism and the breadth of influences synthesised by the artist, beatnik and monk Dom Sylvester Houédard. At the time known variously by his pen name Sylvestre, ‘the Dom’ or by his signature and initials: ‘dsh’, he was also conspicuous for his sartorial combination of cloak, habit, dark sunglasses and black beret. Most of the collages and typewritten arrangements in this exhibition have never been seen before, aside from a few that were first shown by Nicholas Logsdail in the inaugural year of the gallery’s existence, which included, in dsh’s own words: “extracts from the mantra *jrim, hum, ho, ho phat*, some cosmic patches (attempts at repairing the universe) and some particles of antimatter from Gloucestershire.” This new display is curated by Nicola Simpson, an expert in Houédard’s life and work, who has further drawn on his religious grounding and far-ranging intellectual interests to create an immersive environment that responds to the ideas, forms and grammar of his meticulously constructed textual compositions.

While dsh was already associated with the international Beat movement and with other British concrete poets of the 1960s such as Ian Hamilton Finlay and Bob Cobbing, his position as a practicing theologian and member of the Benedictine order, based at Prinknash Abbey in Gloucestershire, imbued his work with a communicative and transcendental power beyond mere lexical dexterity. His studies of every faith from Christianity to Sufism and Taoism, what he termed “a wider ecumenism”, has led Simpson to consider installing Houédard’s works in response to his particular engagement with Tantric Hindu and Tibetan Buddhist practices. The works selected specifically respond to dsh’s enthusiasm for the meditative spiritual geometries of the mandala (as exemplified in a talk dsh gave in 1966 at the infamous Destruction in Art Symposium).

The first gallery introduces the Tantric practice of weaving and transforming matter into spiritual, bodily experience. A floating constellation of laminated vinyl works – the ‘cosmic patches’ dsh described – greets visitors like a fluttering array of prayer flags, each one collaging the visible matter of words and detritus collected from newspapers and Houédard’s travels – feathers, leaves, sand and dust and also the invisible, his so-called ‘antimatter’ –, sandwiched between two sheets of transparent plastic. Simpson borrows the dsh neologism ‘environmentpoems’ to reference the kinetically hung experiments of early dsh exhibitions.

The second room leads visitors through a central, cross-shaped display that encourages movement from the edges of the gallery to the centre and out again, mapping the ritualistic paths of inner and outer Tantric mandalas. The works on these partitions revolve around discrete groupings – mandalas, tantric staircases, mantras, chakras, ‘womb words’ – all drawn from examples of dsh’s characteristic ‘typestracts’ (abstracted typewriter works) that vary from mathematically and geometrically rigorous compositions of lines and letters to freeform, staccato word poems. Houédard’s cryptic and alluring phraseology teases at the confluence and incongruence between the spiritual, the intellectual, the guttural and the sexual, seen in one 1967 typed sheet that announces the depicted forms as a *mandala of directional buddhas and consorts*. As the artist himself once wrote about a compilation of his writings: “the range of these poems can be fully traditional – sacred secular lyric erotic didactic (tho hardly epic) funny & metaphysical”.

About the artist

Widely recognised as one of the leading theorists and outstanding international practitioners of concrete poetry, Dom Sylvester Houédard (1924–1992) is firmly rooted in Lisson Gallery's early history, with his first solo exhibition held at the gallery during its inaugural year in 1967. A practicing Catholic priest and noted theologian, Houédard, also known by his initials 'dsh' or 'the Dom,' wrote extensively on new approaches to art, spirituality and philosophy, and collaborated with artists such as Gustav Metzger, Yoko Ono and John Cage. His works, made with the use of the blue, black and red ribbons of his Olivetti Lettera 22 typewriter, often incorporate language, and are known as 'typestracts,' (dsh's friend Edwin Morgan coined this term "a combination of "typewriter" and "abstract").

Born Pierre-Thomas-Paul Joseph in 1924 in Guernsey and educated in Rome and Jesus College Oxford, Houédard worked as a military intelligence officer during the war, before joining the community at Prinknash Abbey in Gloucestershire in 1949, becoming ordained as a Benedictine monk a decade later. Houédard OSB (Order of Saint Benedict) went on to help introduce concrete poetry to Britain in 1961, exploring its links to cybernetics and Wittgenstein's linguistic theory. He was literary editor of the Jerusalem Bible from 1961-66 and founded the Gloucestershire Ode Construction Company in 1967. As well as publishing prodigiously and lecturing at the Royal College of Art and the Destruction in Art Symposium (DIAS) among other venues, he showed his work at Lisson Gallery, London, UK (2018; 1967-70); Kurimanzutto, New York, USA (2018); Lower Green, Norwich, UK (2018); Richard Saltoun, London, UK (2017); NUCA Gallery, Norwich, UK (2010); Institute of Contemporary Arts (ICA), London, UK (2009, 1965); Victoria & Albert Museum (V&A), London, UK (1971); Museum of Modern Art, Oxford; Laing Art Gallery, Newcastle, UK (1972). He refocused on religion for the last ten years of his life, as an infirmarian, and died, aged 67, on January 15, 1992.

About the curator

Dr Nicola Simpson is a curator and researcher at Norwich University of the Arts. Recent curatorial projects on Houédard include: 'Performing No Thingness, dsh, Ken Cox and Li Yuan-chia', East Gallery, NUA (2016); 'The Cosmic Typewriter, The Life & Work of Dom Sylvester Houédard' at The South London Gallery, London, UK (2012); and 'The Yoga of Concrete', East Gallery, NUA (2010). She is editor of *Notes from the Cosmic Typewriter: The Life and Work of Dom Sylvester Houédard* (Occasional Papers, 2012), *Dom Sylvester Houédard* (Ridinghouse, 2017).

About Lisson Gallery

Lisson Gallery is one of the most influential and longest-running international contemporary art galleries in the world. Today the gallery supports and develops 60 international artists across two exhibition spaces in London and two in New York as well as its new space in Shanghai. Established in 1967 by Nicholas Logsdail, Lisson Gallery pioneered the early careers of important Minimal and Conceptual artists, such as Art & Language, Carl Andre, Daniel Buren, Donald Judd, John Latham, Sol LeWitt, Richard Long and Robert Rymann among many others. It still works with many of these artists as well as other artists of that generation from Carmen Herrera to the estates of Leon Polk Smith, Ted Stamm and Roy Colmer.

In its second decade the gallery introduced significant British sculptors to the public for the first time, including Tony Cragg, Richard Deacon, Anish Kapoor, Shirazeh Houshiary and Julian Opie. Since 2000, the gallery has gone on to represent many more leading international artists such as Marina Abramović, Ai Weiwei, John Akomfrah, Susan Hiller, Tatsuo Miyajima and Sean Scully. It is also responsible for raising the international profile of a younger generation of artists led by Cory Arcangel, Ryan Gander, Haroon Mirza, Laure Prouvost, Pedro Reyes and Wael Shawky.

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