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Dom Sylvester Houédard: tantric poeties

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1. SUPPORTING STATEMENT

Output title	Dom Sylvester Houédard: tantric poetries
Output type	M - Exhibition
Output date	2020

Dom Sylvester Houédard: tantric poetries was the first Lisson Gallery show of the artist and Benedictine monk Dom Sylvester Houédard (1924-1992) in London for fifty years. In 2019 Nicola Simpson was invited by Nicholas Logsdail to curate the show from works held in the Lisson Gallery archives. She was the first scholar to research the Houédard papers held in the gallery archives. Houédard (dsh) was one of the first artists that the Lisson Gallery represented; he had two solo shows there in 1967 and participated in three group shows between 1967 -70.

The exhibition was a development of Simpson's research on Houédard's work, his role in the transplantation of Buddhism in transnational post-war avant-garde art and her curatorial practice which engages with an interpretative conceptual framework based on Mahayana Buddhist epistemology, specifically Tibetan Vajrayana Tantric Buddhism and its associated performance rituals. As such, it was the first exhibition to present the Houédard's work as engaging directly with Tantric Buddhism.

Over a series of visits to the archives, Simpson selected 100 typestracts and 50 laminatepoems from the extensive collection of Houédard's poemobjects, typestracts, notebooks and miscellany. Some works selected had remained unexhibited for fifty years, since Houédard's 1970 exhibition at the Victoria and Albert Museum, *dsh: visual poetries*. However, many of the typestracts and laminates that Simpson chose had never been seen by the public before.

The exhibition opened on 11th March 2020 but closed due to the imposed Covid-19 restrictions. It then moved online as a virtual exhibition and Simpson filmed a curator's tour to accompany this.

Simpson was scheduled to deliver a conference paper, focused on the curation of the laminate poems in the exhibition, at 'Cutting Edge: Collage in Britain, 1945 to Now', Tate Britain, on 28 March 2020. The conference was postponed due to Covid-19 restrictions.

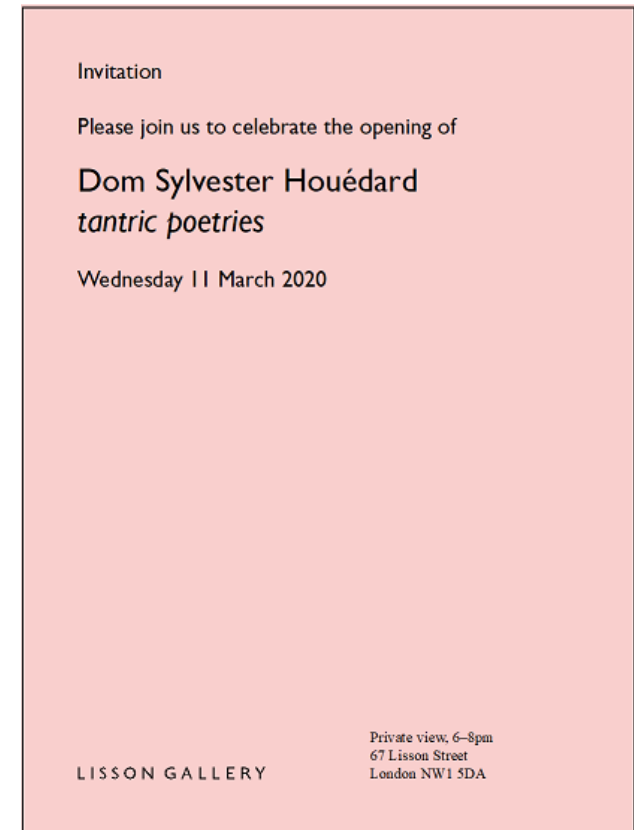


Fig.1 Private View invitation

2. RESEARCH PROCESS

The exhibition was informed by Simpson's doctoral research which established the centrality of Zen and Tantric Buddhist method practices in the production and transmission of the 'poemobjects' made by Houédard in the 1960s and 1970s. Simpson demonstrated Houédard's assimilation of the Tantric ritual practices of yantra, mantra, mudra and mandala in the production of his 'poemobjects' and investigated these rituals as territories of interdependence that perform his understanding and vision for a 'wider ecumenism' and 'wider concrete'. Widely recognised as one of the leading theorists and outstanding international practitioners of concrete poetry, Houédard was a practicing Catholic priest and noted theologian. Also known by his initials 'dsh' or 'the Dom,' he wrote extensively on new approaches to art, spirituality and philosophy, and collaborated with many other significant avant-garde artists.

Simpson has previously edited two monographs on Houédard: *Notes from the Cosmic Typewriter: The Life and Work of Dom Sylvester Houédard* (Occasional Papers, 2012), which is regarded internationally as the primary text on his work and *Dom Sylvester Houédard* (Riding House | Richard Saltoun, 2017).

After submission of Simpson's doctoral thesis in 2018, Nicolas Logsdail gave her permission to be the first scholar to see and research the Houédard papers held in the Lisson Gallery archives, and from this rare access she was invited to curate the exhibition *Dom Sylvester Houédard: tantric poetries* at the Lisson Gallery, London, 2020, showing over 150 works that had either never been seen before or not since the early Lisson gallery shows in 1967.

Simpson's conversations with Logsdail about Houédard began with an invitation to participate in a podcast for the 2018 *Dom Sylvester Houédard* exhibition, at the Lisson Gallery, New York: Episode 4: 'ON AIR' – the life and work of Dom Sylvester Houédard', a conversation between Nicholas Logsdail, Nicola Simpson, Charles Verey and Matt O'Dell, 31st July 2018, <https://www.lissongallery.com/news/episode-4-on-air-with-dom-sylvester-houedard>. (accessed 20 March 2021)



Fig.2 dsh archive, Lisson Gallery
Typestract 'yantra de la tara verte & de la tara blanche'.



Fig.3 dsh archive, Lisson Gallery
 Typestract 'the 2 nadis ida & pingala'.

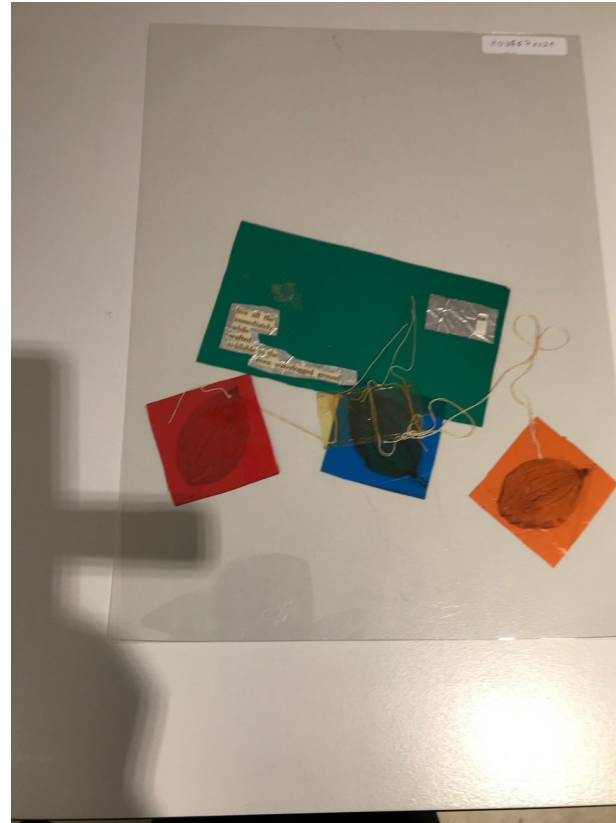


Fig.4 dsh archive, Lisson Gallery
 Laminate poem 'live all the immediately'.

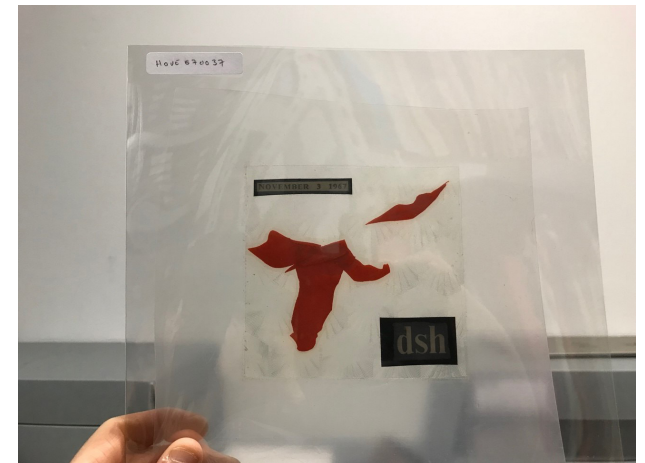


Fig.5 dsh archive, Lisson Gallery

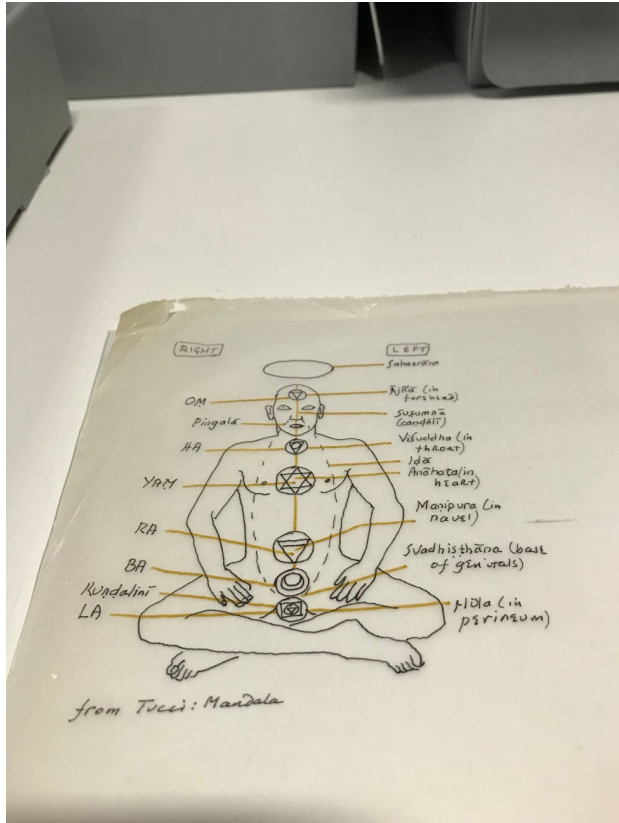


Fig.6 dsh archive, Lisson Gallery
Undated drawing of body mandala.

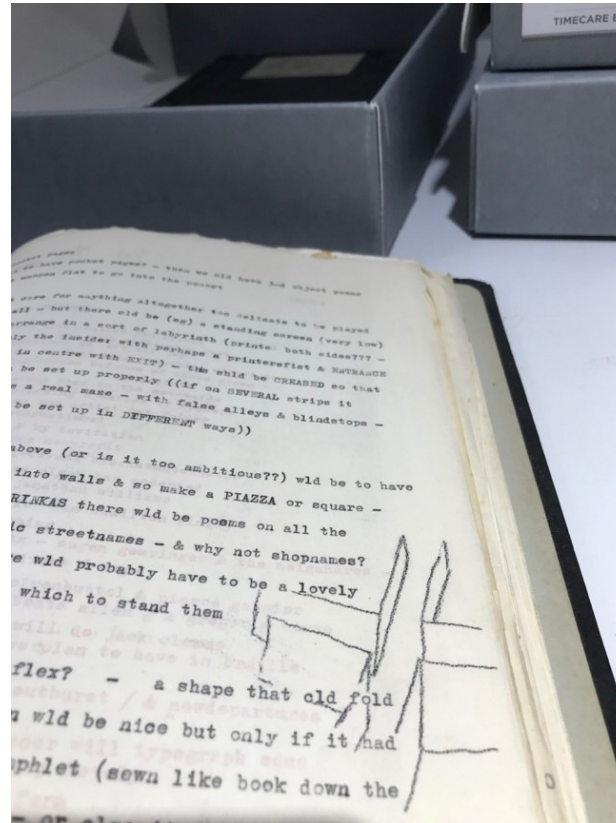
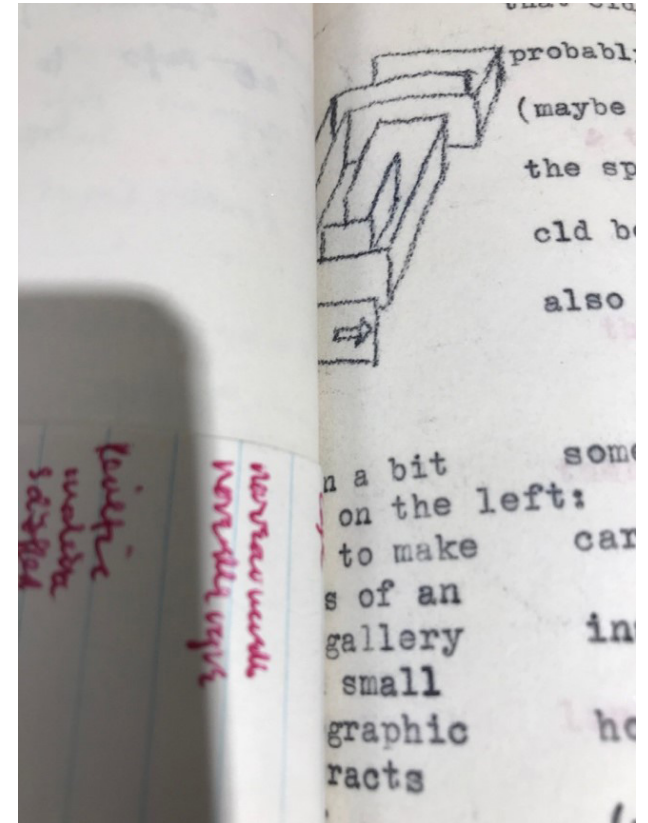


Fig.7 dsh archive, Lisson Gallery
Sketches for folding/ unfolding poems in the marginalia of a notebook.



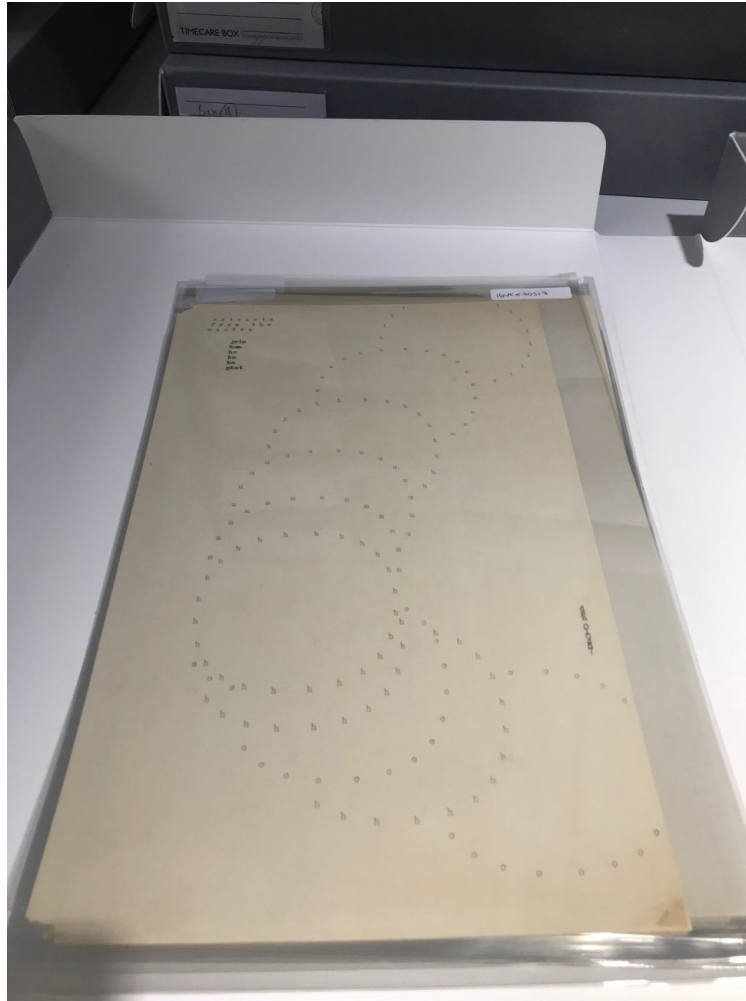


Fig.8 dsh archive, Lisson Gallery
Typestract 'extracts from the mantra jrim hum ho ho ho phat'.

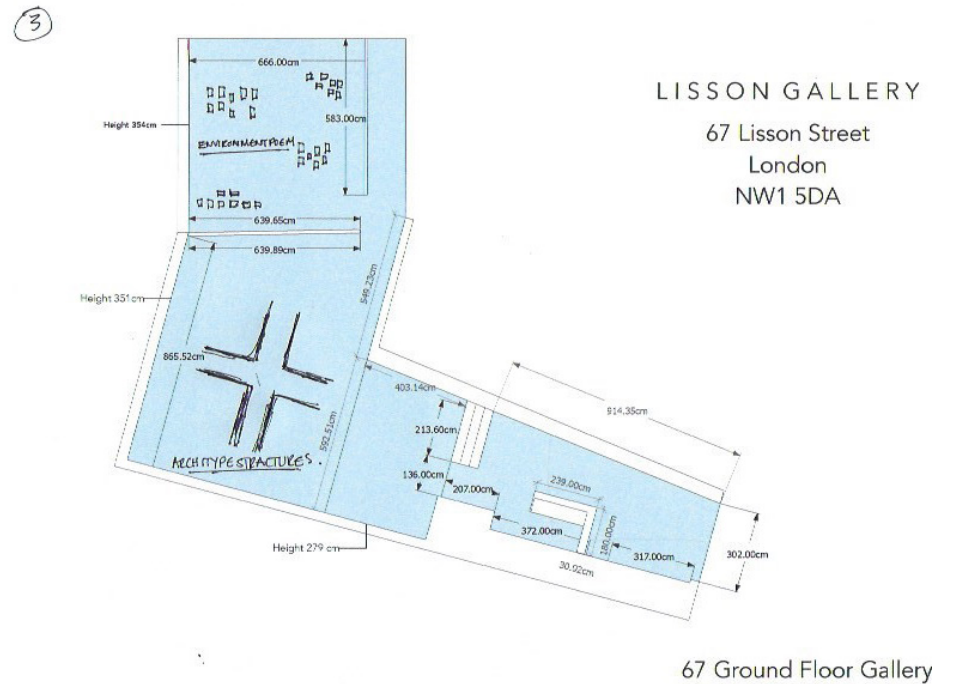
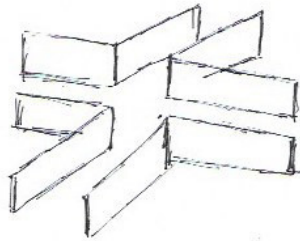
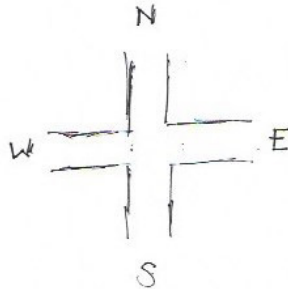


Fig.9 Simpson's preliminary sketch for exhibition plan.

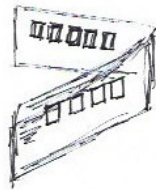
① GALLERY SPACE "SPIRITUAL ARCHITYPESTRUCTURES"
[INNER MANDALA]



8 PARTITION WALLS.
16 WALL SPACES.



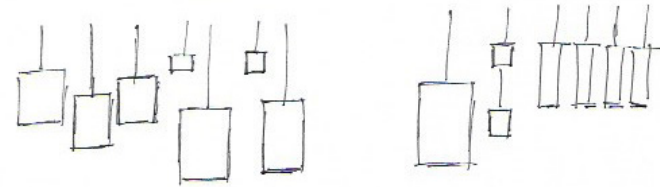
MOVING IN BOUT OF WALLS ENABLES A.
YOGA = EXPERIENCE OF
CONCEPTS IN PHILOSOPHY.
OF TYPESTRUCTS



TYPESTRUCT
HUNG IN
PERMUTATIONAL/
COMBINATIONAL
GROUPINGS.

Fig.10 Simpson's sketches for the exhibition design Room 1, 'spiritual architypestructures'.

② GALLERY SPACE "ENVIRONMENT POEM"
[OUTER MANDALA]



WALK AMONG HANGING LAMINATE POEMS.

SOUND PIECE = PERFORMANCE OF MANTRA

"JRIH HUH HO HO HO PHAT"

TRANSFORMATION OF EVERYDAY INTO THE SPIRITUAL PATH

ALL FORMS ARE THE DAKINI (BUDDHA)

ALL SOUNDS ARE THE DAKINI (BUDDHA)

ALL ACTIONS ARE THE DAKINI (BUDDHA).

Fig.11 Simpson's sketches for exhibition design Room 2, 'environment poem'.

3. RESEARCH INSIGHTS

Drawing upon the extensive collection of works held by the Lisson Gallery, the exhibition foregrounded Houédard's knowledge and practice of tantric spiritual methods and how he utilised these to produce a body of work that can be seen as pivotal in the emerging narrative of a transhistorical avant-garde and its engagement with Tantric Hindu and Buddhist practice.

The exhibition showed 100 typestracts and 50 laminatepoems from the extensive archive collection of Houédard's poemobjects owned by the Lisson Gallery. Some of the works selected had remained unexhibited for fifty years since Houédard's 1970 exhibition at the Victoria and Albert Museum, *dsh: visual poeties*. However, most of the typestracts and laminates that Simpson selected had never been seen by the public before. As such, the exhibition was a rare opportunity to see work from Houédard's most prolific period, 1964-1972.

The exhibition was divided into two spaces:

Room 1 spiritual architypestractures. The focus of this gallery space was on the movement of the viewer through the space: how the path of each 'co-creator' brings into being the spiritual patterns of energy and flow that underpin Houédard's typestracts. The four sections were designed for the viewer to walk from the edges to the centre and out again, mapping the choreography of a mandala. The four sections and sixteen walls also enabled the typestracts to be carefully curated into groups that reflect the spiritual geometrical ideas that structure most of Houédard's permutational and combinational poetry.

Room 2 environmentpoem. The focus of this area of the exhibition was on the interpenetration of all forms. The interdependence of and dance between all objects inside the gallery space and all objects outside the gallery; initially those changing forms seen through the gallery window and then those beyond. The laminatepoems were grouped together in small collections, hung from the ceiling like collaged prayer flags. As the viewer negotiated these artworks they had the option to recite the Tantric Buddhist mantra 'jrim, hum, ho, ho, ho phat'. The intention was for the visual, the aural and the kinetic to come together in one environmentpoem that again puts the viewer consciously at the centre of the experience, the centre of the mandala, the centre of Houédard's spiritual transmission.

The experiential curation and the intimacy of these small works was difficult to communicate on the virtual exhibition tour.



Fig.12 Installing the inner mandala, walls 10,11, 13 and 14.



Fig.13 Installation shot of Room 1, 'spiritual architypestructures'.



Fig.14 Installation shot of Room 1, wall 1 'moire'.



Fig.15 Installation shot of Room 1: wall 1 'moire' and wall 2 'spiritual geometries'.



Fig.16 Installation shot of Room 1: wall 3 'architypestructures' and wall 4 'yantra'.



Fig.17 Installation shot of Room 1: wall 5 'thunderbolt vajra' and wall 6 'paradeigma'



Fig.18 Installing Room 2 environmentpoem



Fig.19 Installation shot of Room 2: laminate poem groupings 17 'The Exploding Galaxy' and 18 'prayer flags'



Fig.20 Installation shot of Room 2: laminate grouping 21 'not that'

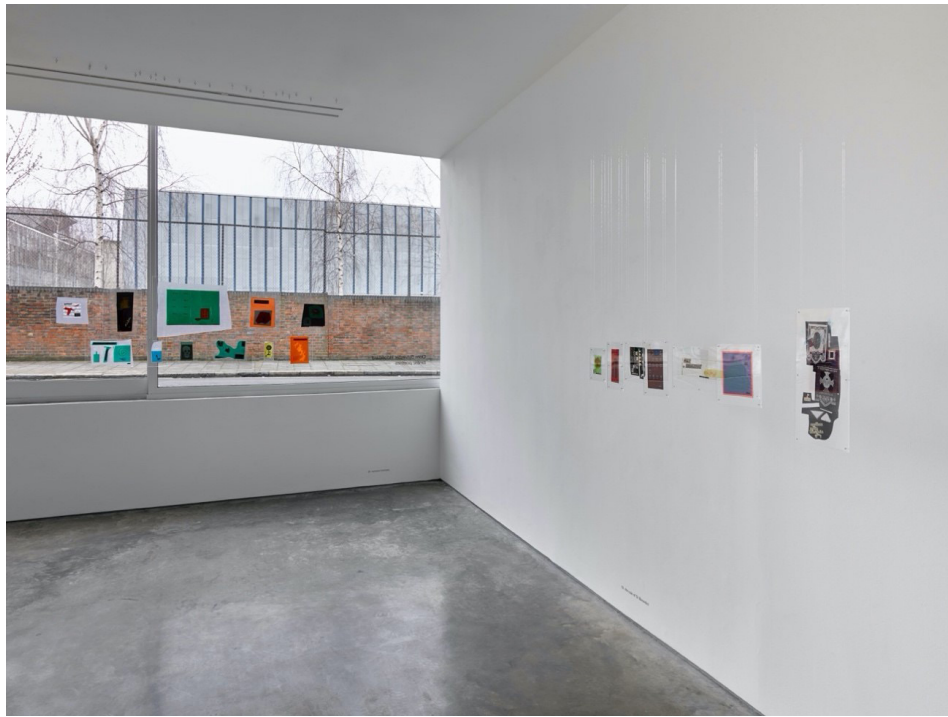


Fig.21 Installation shot of Room 2: laminate poem groupings 19 'The rule of St Benedict' and 20 'vajrayana'



Fig.22 Installation shot of Room 2: laminate groupings 18 'prayer flags', 22 'not that' and 20 'vajrayana'

4. DISSEMINATION

The exhibition opened on Wednesday 11th March 2020, was open a day, then closed on Friday 13th March due to the imposed Covid-19 restrictions. The exhibition moved online, where it is still available as a virtual show: 'Dom Sylvester Houédard: tantric poetries' Virtual Tour, Lisson Gallery, <https://www.lissongallery.com/news/dom-sylvester-houedard-tantric-poetries-virtual-reality-preview> (accessed 20 March 2021)

Simpson filmed a curator's tour to accompany the exhibition: <https://www.lissongallery.com/news/watch-now-curator-tour-of-dom-sylvester-houedard-exhibition> (accessed 20 March 2021)

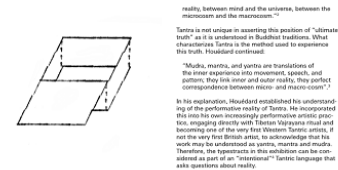
An exhibition publication, designed to be a folded textual object, is available from the Lisson Gallery and a pdf is included below.

A review of the show by Charles Verey, who attended the private view, was published online for Beshara Magazine: <https://besharamagazine.org/newsandviews/dom-sylvester-houedard-tantric-poetries> (accessed 20 March 2021)

An event and performance evening at the exhibition on dsh and Derek Jarman on behalf of the Jarman 'Prospect Cottage' Fundraiser campaign, scheduled for 12 March 2020, organised by Lisson in association with The Art Fund, featuring Richard Wentworth, Jeremy Deller, Brian Eno and Simpson was cancelled due to the Covid-19 restrictions.

Simpson was scheduled to deliver a conference paper, focused on the curation of the laminate poems in the exhibition: 'Not this and not that: Cutting a(way) to a Tantric Buddhist Collage in the work of Dom Sylvester Houédard', at Cutting Edge: Collage in Britain, 1945 to Now, Tate Britain on 28 March 2020. The conference was postponed due to Covid-19 restrictions.

Nicholas Logsdail and The Lisson Gallery have extended the collaborative invitation to Simpson and she is developing the concept further for an international touring show in 2022.



Dom Sylvester Houédard: tantric poetries
This exhibition, curated by Nicola Simpson, introduces a new reading of the works of Dom Sylvester Houédard (1926-1982), an artist, hermit and monk who was one of the leading theorists and practitioners of esoteric poetry. Most often known for his signature and creative 'dsh', he was also a practicing Buddhist priest and theologian of multiple religions. Before an introduction to his ideas, see the video, giving context to his readings of art and esoteric through his poetic work and specific interests in the use of Buddhist and tantric practices. On the reverse is an exhibition guide that links visitors through the show, exploring individual works and themes that are central to the meditative practices of the monks and the spiritual geometries of the mandala.

spiritual anthropology
Dom Sylvester Houédard spent extensively on the practices of Vajrayana Buddhism and was further initiated into the paths and rituals of the Dzogchen by Dorje Lema and other Tibetan Lamas, Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche and Hong Kong Rinpoche. As such, he was an instrumental catalyst for the translation and dissemination of this doctrine to the West and especially to avant-garde artists and poets of the 1960s.

In fact, he was an extraordinary meeting with Houédard at Princeton Avenue N. 1953 that encouraged a young Chogyam Trungpa to establish the First British Tibetan Buddhist monastery, Samye Ling, in Scotland, long before he became the Guru of the American experimentalists with his controversial methods for expanding the "Great Vehicle Lineage". (As Trungpa continued:

"My ambition was to teach and spread the Dzogchen. I was strongly encouraged by visits to Princeton Monastery and Stanforth Abbey, which demonstrated that the contemplative life could be carried out in the West."

Houédard first engaged with Eastern traditions and Tibetan music in a child, when his studies of Zen and Tibetan Buddhists are parallel with his Catholic training. The ease Christianity and Tantric Buddhism as dovetailing with the mystic journey of knowing his own heart. In his autobiography, he writes of his childhood and his relationship with the Tibetan Lamas. Buddhist practice:

"I became religious. [...] I came to understand that what I was seeking [...] is best affirmed of a blissful knowledge of the Ultimate Reality. [...] The use used in that use based on the tantra (not, with, however) involves inner and outer worlds. Form and their events, consciousness and its objects, all come along together and are linked in the discovery and establishment of new relationships between the matter and spirit worlds, between mind and"

This visual, "attentional" concrete language knowingly engages with a Tantric discourse of coded language.

"[...] In tantra, we can read with a number of levels: liturgical, vjogic and tantric. [...] To read a text with the 'dsh' is to discover the various stages of meditation to which it refers."

Houédard provided 'keys' to his texts in his prose. This exhibition presents a collection of these keys in relation to groupings of his work which can be explored on the reverse of this exhibit module, through such as: yama, chakras, shakti, wheel, mantras, bija, tantra, mantras etc. It is also worth noting that Houédard's engagement of the historical and esoteric esoteric languages, which the critic Guy Brett identified as, "esoteric letters", "pantheistic and divine", "sterilization figures" and "signs of energy" "have place prior to any concept of 'tantric art' in the West"

The Tantric practitioners, through his ritual use of yama or power diagrams can create and control mental and physical forces. Therefore, if these works are to be understood in a larger, "interior" relation to meditation and esoteric languages, "then an understanding of how these functions operate is paramount. Aki Mokubeau provides a succinct definition of the:

"Such basic geometrical figures as the square, circle, triangle, and square, have a symbolic value in representing the basic energies of the universe. They can be combined in increasingly complex figures to represent particular forces or qualities embodied in some aspect of creation, evolution, dissolution."

Houédard's experiments became diagrams of dynamic graphic of the process of concentration, fruit, understanding of the mind, creation and destruction, movement by means. Writing about the hypnotic, Houédard writes, "in the movement of making [...] they step by step control the pose ultimate questions of their own identity: dependence creates 'interdependence'." As he writes, "they should gradually be viewed like chakras [...] to understand [...] the movement of self-light or any other function of spirit force." "It is to be within the framework of Tantric practice that informed them, their interests are sought on, instead, to find the "telepresence" and "light flight" cannot be separated from use of the Buddhist in his related field: the Tantric practitioner can impact his "I" in any form. However, his "I" is as inseparable from the emergence of what is called as the typical spiritual geometrical forms that can continually unfold by a conceptual grammar that engages the space on the page to refer to its own origins."

environment
In 1966, Houédard began making a series of postcards or cards called "tantric poems" and "tantric dsh poems". A collection of works that incorporated small found objects alongside color prints and colored, technical or bright transparent prints.

They are usually very different from the previous and paratextual versions of the hypertexts, but they too engage with Tantric practices, such as the visualization of the mind and the objects that appear to the mind, through a seemingly mechanical and laborious: postcard-by-postcard

8. Nicolas Hald discusses how the art historian and collector Aki Mokubeau may have drawn the term "tantric art" as a way of redefining esoteric practices by a collective market. At the 1960s, Hong Kong Research Agency, published on the occasion of Phoblog Tantric, Drawing Room, 10th November 2016/10th February 2017 (London: Drawing Room, 2016), p.4

9. Aki Mokubeau, *Sixty Six Art Photography & Prints* (New York: East River Press, 1971), p.20

10. Brett, *Visual Poetics*, p.43

11. Mookerjee, *YOGA ART*, p.17

12. Houédard, "Architectures" in *Notes from the Cosmic Operative: The 26 and 26 of Dom Sylvester Houédard*, ed. Nicola Simpson, London: Occasional Papers, 2012, p.172

captions clockwise from top left
modules of decorative double d's corners, 1987 (detail)
 Typed page, carbon copy, 21 x 204 cm

EM6, 1987 (detail)
 Vajra-laminate (interdimensional material), 20x x 16.7 cm
 clearly blue annotations of the original, 1988 (detail)
 Vajra-laminate (interdimensional material), 14.8 x 8.3 cm
 annotations, 1987 (detail)
 Typed page, 23 x 26 cm

These laminae poems also function as observations of the microscopic, in that they intricately weave together fine particles of additional text as various operators and that but also an invisible world beneath. Form and emergence are explored in relation to the emergence of spirit, as in the last-dimension world of matter and quantum physics, alongside visible matter. Variables, however said, locally stable and finite, cannot at a global meaning within Houédard's "system counterparts". They are the spiritual language of "his text" – not this, not that. This really is not what you experience through the poems. Just because one thing after another has an emphasis, not this, not that, not this, not that. Let everything go. You cannot conceptualize from reality.

Hang together, the heliographic assemblage appear. In the experiment movement of the exhibition, the space is a tangent manifold, where the viewer temporarily encounters an installation that activates the microscopic and the microscopic, beyond the world of ordinary experience which includes what she reads: "some particles of information from disintegration". To activate this manifold, it is important to recognize that these laminae poems are exhibited alongside "tantric mantras" from the poems, "im, tan, hu, hu, hu, hu, hu", as well as Houédard's mandala. The viewer is encouraged to read his mantras as their part in this environment poem, and may use it to generate the mind of bliss and emptiness.

Dr Nicola Simpson



dsh: tantric poetries



Houédard provided 'keys' to his texts in his prose. This exhibition presents a collection of these keys in relation to groupings of his work which can be explored on the reverse of this exhibit module, through such as: yama, chakras, shakti, wheel, mantras, bija, tantra, mantras etc. It is also worth noting that Houédard's engagement of the historical and esoteric esoteric languages, which the critic Guy Brett identified as, "esoteric letters", "pantheistic and divine", "sterilization figures" and "signs of energy" "have place prior to any concept of 'tantric art' in the West"

Fig.23 Exhibition publication, written and co-designed by Simpson





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