

Dom Sylvester Houédard: Exhibiting spiritual architypestructures and cosmic dust.



Figure 1: Dom Sylvester Houédard, *ON THE ENCLOSED LEAF OUT PETITION TO TIME BEFORE THE NO ACT OF UN DOING*, 1967. Vinyl plastic laminate (newspaper cuttings, miscellaneous material and PVC plastic) 5.6 x 15.2 cm. © Dom Sylvester Houédard; Courtesy Lisson Gallery.

Dom Sylvester Houédard (1924-1992) was a Benedictine monk, artist and poet from Prinknash Abbey, best known for the typestracts and concrete poems he made on his Olivetti Lettera 22 typewriter in the 1960s and 1970s. In March 2020 I was invited to curate an exhibition, *Dom Sylvester Houédard: tantric poetries*, from the extensive private collection of his work held by the Lisson Gallery.

Houédard's practice of making typestracts began in 1963 with grids built up from the punctuation keys on his typewriter. In his notebooks and papers from this period there are grids of colons, apostrophes and quotation marks. As his practice developed experimental circles are made from the back slash and forward

slash keys, rudimentary forms gradually develop and change initially into spatialist landscapes and constellations and gradually towards the deliberately repetitive geometry of the three-dimensional circles, ensōs, pyramids, triangles, ladders and stupas of his fully developed work. Forms are endlessly revisited yet each typestract has its own identity and its own *pattern* (Figure 4). In the words of Houédard, each typestract is a yantra, 'tantric perhaps...' and together they form an extensive, almost daily, record of a monk at prayer, typewriting his inner contemplative experiences.

In 1966, alongside this routine of composing typestracts, Houédard began making a series of poemobjects he called 'lamine poems' and 'cosmic dust poems' and that incorporated many small found objects alongside cut-up prose and cut-out pictures, pasted onto bright techni-colour sheets of transparent plastic (Figures 1 and 6). They are visually very different from the precision and permutational variations of the typestracts and seem far removed from the yantric patterns made on his typewriter however the laminate poems also engage with Tantric practices of transforming the mind and the objects which appear to mind. Through a seemingly stochastic and kaleidoscopic juxtaposition of forms, often found in his immediate environment, Houédard developed a methodology of Tantric collage, that wove together the *chaos* of forces, events, consciousness and objects that appeared in the daily and impermanent flux of life.

There is an inter-relationship between these two distinct methods of making concrete poems, understood in the context of Buddhist, and in particular Tantric Buddhist, epistemology. Houédard's intentions to exhibit both together is evidenced in an exhibition leaflet from his show with Antonio Sena and David Medalla at the then fledgling Lisson Gallery in June 1967 which states that 'dom sylvester houédard is exhibiting a selection of his typestracts, some extracts from the mantra "jrim, hum, ho, ho, ho phat", some cosmic patches (attempts at repairing the universe), and some particles of antimatter from gloucestershire' (Lisson 1967: n.pag.).

The meditative precision involved in engaging and disengaging the typewriter roller, moving paper carefully a fraction at a time before pressing a key, evaluating and leaving blank the spaces of the foolscap clean and un-inked in the composition of a yantric typestract is a methodological contrast to the making of a laminate poem: cutting out a shape of coloured cellophane; spreading the surface with glue, spit or other sticky and receptive bodily fluids; pasting layers of cut-up text, sand, petals, leaves, jam, pills, combs, Christmas cracker toys and other found and visible objects and waiting patiently to capture layers of the invisible such as spoken prayers, the trace of a bird call from the tree outside his cell window, particles of dust and anti-matter.

Taking the 1967 Lisson show as curatorial prompt, and in the words of one of the laminate poems, to 'clarify the intentions of the original' in the making of *Dom Sylvester Houédard: tantric poetries*, (Figure 6), I foregrounded the knowledge and practice of Tantric spiritual methods and the

way in which Houédard utilised these to produce a body of work that can be seen as pivotal in the emerging narrative of a twentieth-century, post-war, transhistorical avant-garde and its engagement with Tantric Hindu and Buddhist practice. Houédard, with his early contacts with the Tibetan Lamas, Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche and Akong Tulku Rinpoche, his autodidactic study of the first Western commentaries to the practices of Tantric Buddhism, and his initiation into the path by the current Dalai Lama, was instrumental in acting as a conduit for the transplantation and transmission of this doctrine to the transnational avant-garde artists and poets of the 1960s.



Figure 2. Dom Sylvester Houédard: *tantric poetries*, 12 March – 31 July 2020. Installation view.

© Dom Sylvester Houédard; Courtesy Lisson Gallery. Photography by Jack Hems.

spiritual architypestructures

The focus of this gallery space was on the movement of the viewer through the space and how the path of each 'co-creator' brought into being the spiritual patterns of energy and flow that underpin Houédard's typestracts. The four sections directed the viewer to walk from the edges to the centre and out again thereby mapping out in physical footsteps on the gallery floor the imaginative choreography within the mind of a Buddhist or Hindu Tantric practitioner as they engage with a mandala diagram (Figure 2). The four sections and sixteen walls also enabled the typestracts to be

very carefully curated into groups that reflected the mathematical and geometrical ideas that structure most of Houédard's permutational and combinational poetry.



Figure 3. Dom Sylvester Houédard, from the series *cosmic patches*. *Some attempts at repairing the universe. For david medalla*, 1967. Typed page. 41.5 x 32.5 x 2.5 cm (framed). © Dom Sylvester Houédard; Courtesy Lisson Gallery.

Houédard had been interested in the eastern contemplation traditions and Tibetan music since a small child and his studies of Zen and Tibetan Buddhism ran parallel with his Catholic theological journey. He saw his Christianity and any practice of Tantric Buddhism as dovetailing in the mystic's journey to knowing his own heart (Figure 4). In one of his first published essays, he outlined what he understood by the Tibetan Tantric Buddhist practices:

Tibetan mysticism [...] aims at liberation from all that is unreal [...] it seeks attainment of a blissful knowledge of the Ultimate Reality [...] The aids used in Tibet are based on the tantra (net, web, woveness) between the inner and outer worlds. Forces and their events, consciousness and its objects, all form a single weave; and tantrism is the discovery or establishment of inner relationships between the matter and spirit worlds, between ritual and reality, between mind and the universe, between the microcosm and the macrocosm.

(Houédard 1960: 95)

A mind that is liberated from all that is unreal, that has attained a blissful knowledge of the Ultimate Reality, has attained this realization. Tantra is not unique in asserting this position of 'ultimate truth' as it is understood in Buddhist traditions. What characterizes Tantra is the methods used to experience this truth. Houédard continues: 'Mudra, mantra, and yantra are translations of the inner experience into movement, speech, and *pattern*; they link inner and outer reality, they perfect the correspondence between micro- and macro-cosm'. (Houedard 1960: 96 emphasis added).

In this explanation Houédard establishes his understanding of the performative reality of Tantra. Buddhist contemplative method practices were incorporated into an increasingly performative artistic practice that engaged directly with Tibetan Tantric ritual and, as such, locate Houédard as one of the very first Western Tantric artists, if not the very first British artist to acknowledge that his work may be understood as yantra, mantra and mudra. Therefore, the typestracts in this exhibition can be considered an 'intentional' Tantric language that asks questions about reality (Eliade, 1969: 251).

Art historians such as Ajit Mookerjee have established that a yantra is essentially a geometrical composition. But to understand the 'true nature' of these geometrical drawings, Mookerjee clarifies that 'one has to go beyond the notions of geometry into those of dynamics'. He continues, 'a *Yantra* then represents a particular force whose power or energy increases in proportion to the abstraction and precision of the diagram' (Mookerjee 1971: 20). The Tantric practitioner, through his ritual use of yantra or power diagrams can create and control mental and physical forces.

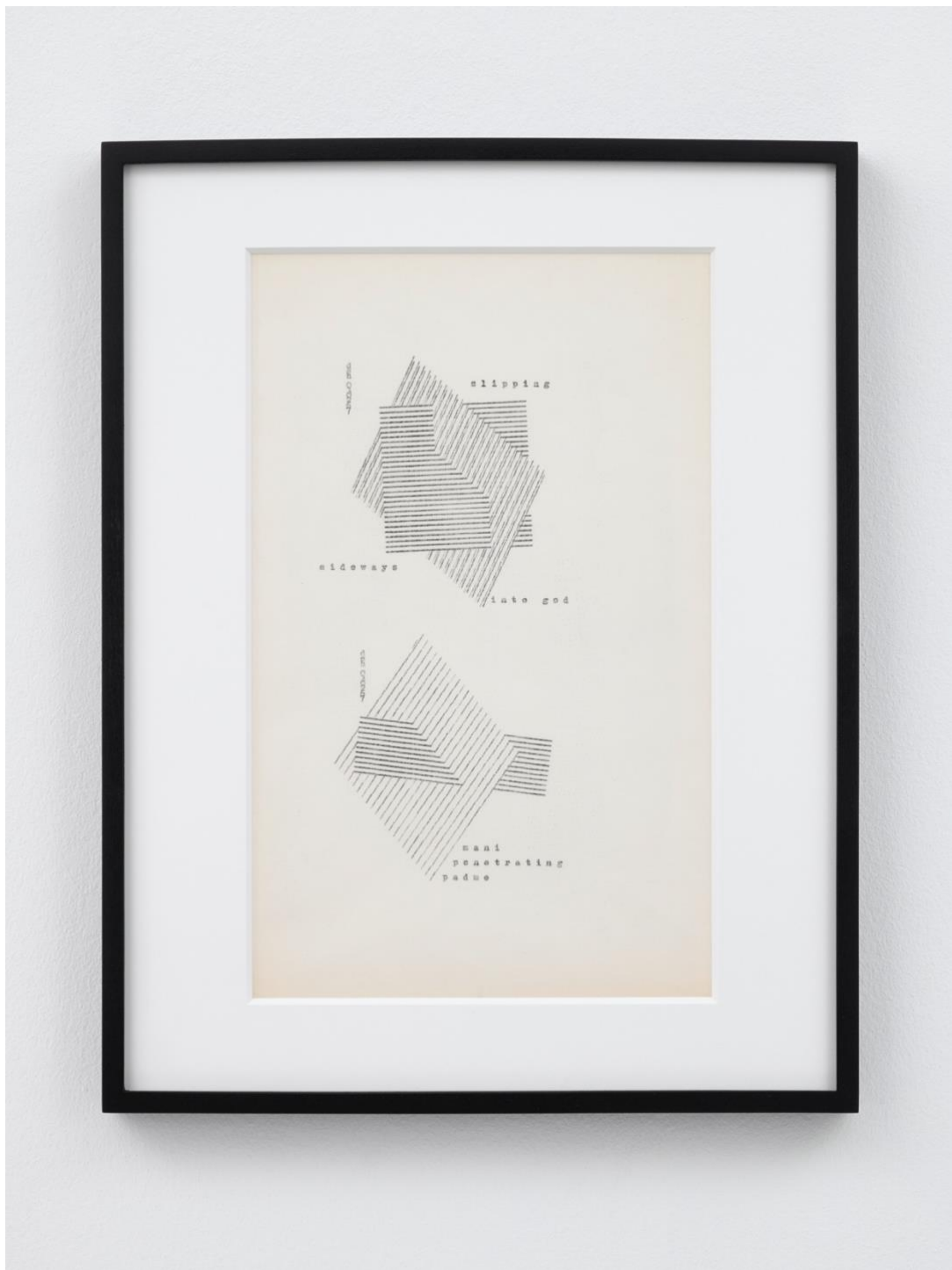


Figure 4. Dom Sylvester Houédard, *slipping sideways into god*, 1967. Typed page, carbon copy. 41.5 x 32.5 x 2.5 cm (framed). © Dom Sylvester Houédard; courtesy Lisson Gallery.

The visual 'intentional' concrete language of Houédard's typestracts knowingly engages with a transhistorical Tantric discourse of coded language, thus '[...] a tantric text can be read with a number of keys: liturgical, yogic and tantric [...] To read a text with the 'yogic key' is to decipher the various stages of meditation to which it refers' (Mookerjee, 1975: 252).

Houédard provided 'keys' to his texts in his prose. This exhibition presented a selection of those keys in relation to groupings of his work: moire, thunderbolt vajra, yantra, chakrometers, chakra wheels, mantra, bija, tantric staircases. Houédard's development of this powerful and creative contemplative language, which the critic Guy Brett identified as, 'geometric figures', 'architectural spaces', 'orientation figures' and 'signs of energy' (Hunt et al. 2017: 47), took place prior to even the concept of 'Tantric art' in the West.¹

The Tantric practitioner, through his ritual use of yantra or power diagrams can create and control mental and physical forces (Mookerjee, 1971: 20). Therefore if these works are to be understood as being 'similar in nature to mandalas and other cosmic diagrams' (Hunt et al. 2017, 47), then an understanding as to *how* they function as yantra is helpful. Again, Mookerjee provides a succinct definition of the yantra:

Such basic geometrical figures as the point, straight line, 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.

Mookerjee, 1975: 33

Houédard's typestracts become diagrams of forces, dynamic graphs of the process of conceptualization itself, understandings of how the mind creates and destroys form, moment by moment. Writing about the typestracts, Houédard states 'in the moments of making [...] they step by step control me & pose ultimate questions of their own identity dependence destiny & independence'. As forms 'they should probably be viewed like cloud-tracks & tide-ripples – bracken-patterns & gull-flights – or simply as horizons & spirit levels' (Simpson, 2012: 172).^{xi} Yet to do so within the framework of Tantric practice that informed them, these 'cloud-tracks' and 'tide-ripples' are as equally un-served as a tide ripple, which cannot be separated from the sea or a gull-flight, which cannot be separated from the sky. Realizing his un-served self the Tantric practitioner can impute his 'I' on any form. The typestracts are yantras when Houédard, or another Tantric practitioner imputes their 'I' upon their

¹ Rebecca Heald discusses how the art historian and collector Ajit Mookerjee may have devised the term 'Tantric art' 'as way of neatly packaging artefacts for a Western market' in the 1970s, 'Thinking Tantra' *Thinking Tantra Research Papers*, (2016), published on the occasion of the exhibition *Thinking Tantra*, Drawing Room, 24th November 2016- 19th February 2017.

forms. However, this 'I' is as inseparable from the emptiness out of which it arises as the typed spiritual geometrical forms that are continually undone by a compositional grammar that engages the space on the page as referent to its own emptiness.

environmentpoem



Figure 5. Dom Sylvester Houédard, *tantric poetries*. 12 March – 31 July 2020. Installation view.

© Dom Sylvester Houédard; courtesy Lisson Gallery. Photography by Jack Hems.

The focus in this gallery space 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, the calls of the primary-aged children tumbling through the local school gates, the spring trees emerging into leaf on the pavements outside, the intermittent traffic on Bell Street and the grey March London skies beyond and then beyond to all phenomena in the universe. It was intended to be a space where Houédard's playfulness would come to the fore: his profound knowledge of the Tantric practice of transforming all objects into the spiritual path and his connection to the Tibetan spiritual lineage of 'Crazy Wisdom' as embodied in the 1960s and 1970s by the Tibetan Lama Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche. The laminate poems exemplify a Tantric practice where all objects (leaves, sand, chairs, tin foil, Vaseline, jam) and all actions, however

seemingly transgressive for an ordained Catholic monk (sex, eating, dancing, taking drugs) are methods for spiritual transmission.

The laminate poems serially and collectively enact this transformation. The relationship between cut-up text and the objects and images collaged together in each separate poem at first may seem random, even chaotic, representative of the impermanent and unexpected flux of daily life. However, in this opportunity to exhibit from such an extensive collection I was able to present the viewer with some of the same relational concepts of permutation and combination in these laminate poems as in the typestracts. There are reoccurring motifs of leaves, sand, antimatter, alongside reoccurring themes of death, sex, god and the Buddha in the poems.

These laminate poems also function as observations of the microcosmic, in that they tantrically weave together tiny particles of substances such as talcum powder and dust but also an invisible world that remains very deliberately invisible. Forces and energies are collaged and sandwiched between layers of plastic, as is the invisible sub-atomic world of matter and quantum physics to become, alongside visible forms of buttons, Vaseline, leaves, sand, bodily fluids and detritus, carriers of a spiritual meaning within Houédard's eastern counterspace.

In this space there was no prescription as to how the viewer should move. The laminate poems were grouped together in small collections and hung from the ceiling like collaged prayer flags. In Houédard's 1967 Lisson Gallery exhibition, these laminate poems were described in the accompanying exhibition leaflet as 'cosmic patches (attempts at repairing the universe)' and a typestract, with the same yogic key was included too (see Figure 3). At one level they are counter-culturally 'cosmic' and many of the poems were made for prominent figures of the 1960s psychedelic scene. Works featured in the *Dom Sylvester Houédard: tantric poetries* exhibition include those made for John Hopkins ('Hoppy'), his girlfriend 'Suzy Creamcheese' or members of the hippie Galactic commune and artistic collective such as David Medalla, Edward Pope and John Dugger.

In hanging together the laminate poems, like an assemblage of hallucinogenic prayer flags, in the impermanent environment of the exhibition, this gallery space is a transient mandala, where the viewer temporarily encounters an installation that activates the macrocosmic and the microcosmic, beyond the world of ordinary appearance, such as 'some particles of antimatter from gloucestershire'. To activate this mandala, I felt it was important that these laminate poems were exhibited alongside 'some extracts from the mantra "Jrim, hum, ho, ho, ho, phat"', just as Houédard intended. In this contemporary exhibition, the mantra was printed in the exhibition guide enabling the viewer to recite it out loud, or silently in their head, as they participated in this environmentpoem, and maybe use it to generate the wish to attain the mind of bliss and emptiness, the Buddhist mind of enlightenment.

This was an instruction to bring the visual, the aural and the kinetic together in one environmentpoem that again would place the viewer consciously at the centre of the experience, the centre of the mandala, the centre of Houédard's spiritual transmission. Here, at this centre, all phenomena are born and return, the macrocosm of the seen gallery space, the attendees, invigilators, artworks, floorboards, walls, windows and the microcosm of the unseen vibrations of spoken word and breath, the impermanent thoughts and emotions of the persons present and the further hidden collisions, appearances and disappearances of the sub-atomic quantum world.



Figure 6. Dom Sylvester Houédard, *clarify the intensions of the original*, 1968. (Vinyl plastic laminate: newspaper cuttings, miscellaneous material and PVC plastic. 14.6 x 8.3 cm. © Dom Sylvester Houédard; Courtesy Lisson Gallery.

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