

The Guardian
19 January 2025

Breaking Lines: Futurism and the Origins of Experimental Poetry

review - the beauty of art made by typewriter



Laura Cumming

Sun 19 Jan 2025

★★★★☆



📷 Dom Sylvester Houédard in 1964. Photograph: © Clay Perry, England & Co

Estorick Collection, London

The contemplative 'typewritings' of Benedictine monk Dom Sylvester Houédard steal the show in a fascinating two-part survey of 20th-century experimental poetry

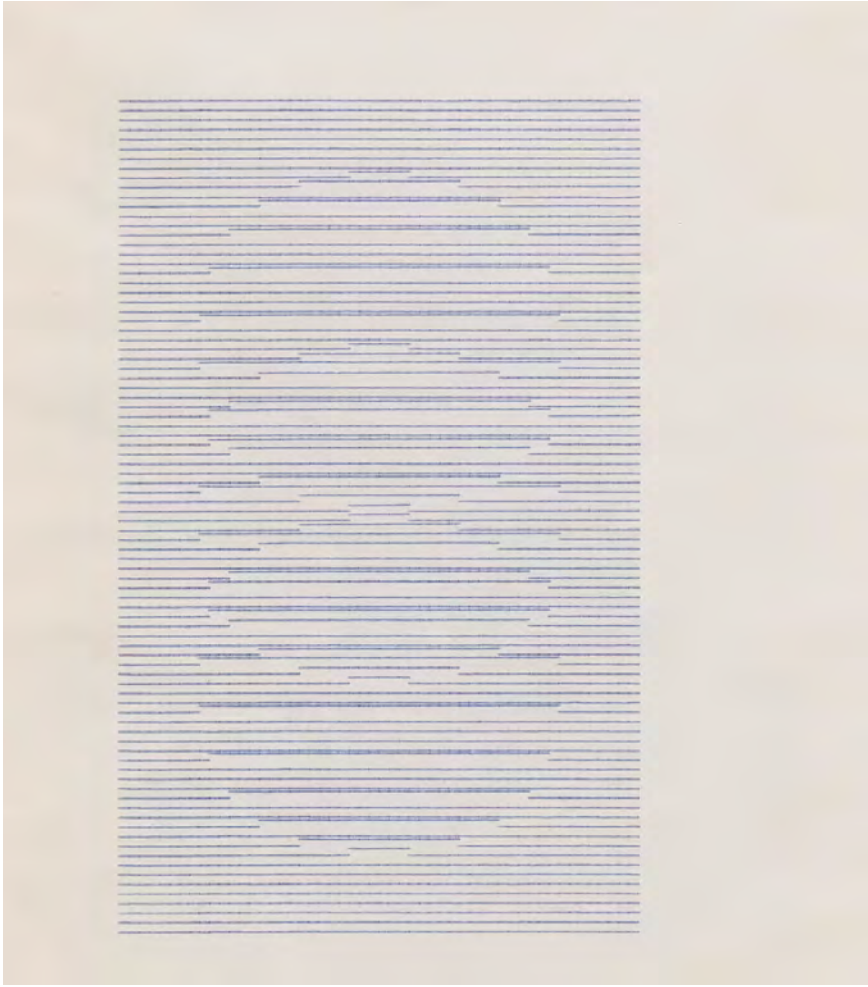
The typewriter drawings of a British Benedictine monk in the swinging 60s are so startling they deserve a sheaf of exclamation marks (although he himself barely used them). [Dom Sylvester Houédard](#) (1924-92) was always sparing with the punctuation, and so modest of spirit that on his artworks his name invariably appears in lower case. Sometimes it is typed in a vertical configuration - dsh - running down the page like a tiny Japanese inscription. Which is apt, for all of dsh's "typewritings" amount to a foreign language.

Which is to say that although his works are composed of the letters and punctuation marks of an old manual Olivetti, they are not meant to be *read* so much as viewed. And what you see, on the framed A4 pages he liked to use, can be almost entirely abstract. A shifting pattern of dots, whirling constellations of commas, a vibration of hyphens that is something like visual interference. There is a beautiful work in the [Estorick Collection](#) in which a dense field of oblique strokes is interrupted by a single line of brackets, running diagonally up the sheet, which might be read as a ripple in water or time.

▲▲ *Marks not bound by word, sentence, rhythm or line, they are simply beautiful images in their own right*

What is so surprising is the way Houédard's images hold the page so powerfully as to suppress all curiosity about which letters he is using. A figure seems to be walking upstairs, or perhaps it is downstairs. There is no figure; there are no stairs. In fact there are only innumerable hyphens. But so superb, and subtle, is the configuration of all these fractional lines that it seems as if someone is ascending, or descending, through a body of air.

Only imagine how on earth Houédard did this. He is not drawing with a pencil, painting with a brush, or etching with a needle. The interplay between his fingers - pressing down on the keys, turning the page this way and that - and the final image on the wall is frankly fantastical. It requires him to establish every mark in his mind's eye, long in advance of typing. The obvious, if remote, analogy is with weaving on the warp and weft of a loom.



📷 Untitled, c1971 by Dom Sylvester Houédard. Photograph: Courtesy Lisson Gallery

Take a beautiful work in this show (as so often, untitled). Three overlapping discs shimmer like planets seen through mist. The effect is at first purely visual: of a glimmering and filmic translucency, ultimately evocative of moonlight. And the method may appear entirely simple. Lines of intermittent length, and stepped positions, reach across the page: it might almost be a drawing. But each line is composed of complex variations of typewriter keys - hyphens, underscores, equal signs, and a most refined overlay of full stops. And Houédard uses black over blue, here and there, to deepen or darken the light.



📷 'Droll and enigmatic': elitist observation, 1971. Photograph: Courtesy Lisson Gallery

Houédard could be droll and epigrammatic. A work titled *elitist observation* (no capitals, no quote marks) presents a vertical polyhedron bearing down on a flattened blue counterpart, at a distinct angle and in abrasive scarlet. You get the point, so to speak. Indeed it is wonderful to see how brilliantly Houédard deployed the limited colours of Olivetti ink ribbons, in juxtaposition, alone or in overlay. He even used the soft and slightly blurred register of carbon copies to introduce a more ancient or spectral appearance.

Collages, cut-ups and concrete poems: dsh made them all at one time or another. But the works in this show are more original and austere. Marks not bound by word, sentence, rhythm or line, they are simply beautiful images in their own right - a constant interplay between mind, hand and eye; between man and typewriting machine.

● [Breaking Lines](#) is at the Estorick Collection, London, until 11 May

IN PICTURES

Frieze Masters

Working spaces

The curator **Sheena Wagstaff** has curated a second edition of the Studio section at Frieze Masters as part of her new role as the fair's creative adviser. This year is an expanded edition, with stands dedicated to ten mid-career and senior artists, all of whom engage with historical art and have begun to reinvent their practice. The focus is on artists' working spaces, with each immersive presentation, Wagstaff says, seeking to "evoke the spirit" of the studio. The ultimate aim, she adds, is to show that the best way "to animate history is via living artists".



Interview by Alexander Morrison. Fair photographs by David Owens

I SHIRAZEH HOUSHIARY *Rite of Passage (2024)*

Lisson Gallery

Shirazeh Houshiary combines quantum physics, spirituality and the hard-graft practice of painting. She works on her hands and knees on the canvas and makes these drawings—when you get up close to the surface you see this extraordinary lattice. It's about the interweaving of line, about chance. It's spiritually based, but it's not woo-woo, because it actually connects art with science in a very clear way, which has to do with cosmic interchange and where we sit in relation to the cosmos.



Dom Sylvester Houédard: *tantric poetries*

Charles Verey reviews an exhibition at the Lisson Gallery in London.
11 March – 6 June 2020



Installation image. Photograph © Dom Sylvester Houédard; Courtesy Lisson Gallery.

This exhibition, *tantric poetries*, consists of 'typetracts' and translucent laminates from the Lisson Gallery's collection of work by Dom Sylvester Houédard (*dsh*) (1924–92). The pieces exhibited are a part of Dom Sylvester's widespread but as yet un-catalogued *oeuvre* in the concrete idiom, made by him between 1963 and 1972. Unfortunately, the exhibition is closed to the public until further notice because of the lockdown, but a short guided video tour plus the catalogue, etc., can be seen on the [Lisson Gallery](#) website and on [artnet](#).

Dom Sylvester was a British Benedictine monk who spent most of his life at Prinknash Abbey in Gloucestershire. A man of extraordinary intellect, his interests reached far wider than is usual for a monastic priest. He was a well-known poet, remembered for his precise, abstract and graphic work on an Olivetti typewriter and as an articulate participant and communicator in the radical, creative expression of the 1960s, where he worked alongside figures such as Yoko Ono, Allen Ginsberg, and John Cage. He had a life-long interest in, and deep knowledge of, Eastern spiritual traditions, especially Buddhism.

In her notes on this exhibition, the curator, Dr Nicola Simpson, quotes him on the meaning of *tantra*, giving valuable insight into his underlying intentions in the work on display:

“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, wovenness) 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.” [1]



Typewritten: “slipping sideways into god”. One of a series of Moiré poems, where the superimposition of two grids on top of each other is used to explore the way in which two different religions may offer coinciding views of a shared event, such as the experience of emptiness in meditative prayer. Photograph © Dom Sylvester Houéard; Courtesy Lisson Gallery

Projecting Mind States

The exhibition, designed and arranged by Dr Simpson, summarises the work that she has put into a decade of studying Dom Sylvester’s typestracts and laminate collages for the PhD thesis that she completed in 2019. [2]

She has assembled two rooms: one in which six groups of translucent laminate collages hang like stalactites, bearing reflecting crystalline messages; the other is an open room in which she has built a central *mandala* – or simple maze – of walls, in the form of a hollow cross, on which typestracts are displayed on either side, drawing the visitor to its centre from each of four directions. Effectively the cross is built with four identical sets of walls, each formed to make a square corner, pointing like an arrow-head towards the central space of the *mandala*. Each structure has two inner faces and two outer faces, a total of sixteen wall-spaces, on each of which a discreet group of typestracts is displayed. In addition, Dr Simpson has produced an excellent and necessary guide to the display, printed on both sides of a square sheet of paper, ingeniously folded in the basic form of the *mandala* structure.

Overall, the exhibition affords an opportunity for Dom Sylvester's work to be seen in a format that does it justice; these *tantric poetries*, as we study them, become mind-states, projected onto the ever-fluent screens of our self-awareness. Perhaps the most essential point made by Dr Simpson's presentation lies in its emphasis on the 'keys' that Dom Sylvester often included, in pithy verbal pointers, alongside the geometric, architectural, concrete forms that are the substance of the typestracts. "This visual 'intentional' concrete language knowingly engages with a Tantric discourse of coded language," she tells us. These keys are intentionally present to unlock the pathway to the meditation that is latent in the typestract. The exhibition "presents a selection of those keys in relation to groupings of his work: *moiré*, *thunderbolt vajra*, *yantra*, *chakrometers*, *chakra wheels*, *mantra*, *bija*, *tantric staircases* etc." [3]

Dom Sylvester was recognised in his lifetime as a significant exponent of the graphic values of the modern age, and this exhibition reminds us that his work is redolent of the contemplative values that are common to poetry and to spirituality. However, although he is also recognised, both nationally and internationally, as a theorist as well as an influential practitioner of concrete poetry, a critical description of his work, in general, has eluded commentators, collectors and curators alike. *tantric poetries* casts a radically new and elucidating light on an intensely productive decade. Dr Simpson has undoubtedly succeeded where others have struggled, proposing a possible spiritual route to a systematic schema of Dom Sylvester's creative work of the decade, and to the living, poetic language with which he had engaged.



Installation view: the central mandala of the display. Photograph © Dom Sylvester Houédard; Courtesy Lisson Gallery

The Wider Ecumenism

However, some caution is needed. Dr Simpson has a perceptive grasp of the values of the *language* of concrete poetry, which emerged as a global, creative force in the post-WW2 decades. And her profound knowledge of Buddhism through years of practice and study in the *New Kadampa Mahayana* tradition has certainly enabled her to recognise and to decipher Dom Sylvester's intuitive use of his Olivetti typewriter to communicate his comprehensive grasp of *tantra*. Thus the creative substance of this exhibition may validly be seen, in itself, as she claims, as a living transmission of the Buddha's message to mankind.

But it should also be pointed out that Dom Sylvester's extended vocation was dedicated to identifying a *universal* form of spirituality that is suitable for the modern era – a fact that does not in any way imply dissimilitude from the traditions to which he adhered. He coined the phrase 'The Wider Ecumenism' as a platform from which to express his thought. It is sometimes thought that 'wider ecumenism' – reflecting the meaning of 'ecumenism' as discussion between the different branches of Christianity – implies no more than to establish a dialogue between Catholicism and members of other faiths. But for Dom Sylvester it was about the rediscovery of the full meaning of universality and the act of being. To embrace truth, one does not ask, 'is this the truth or is that the truth?', one asks, 'what is the truth *in* this?', and 'what is the truth *in* that?'.

Later in his life he found an illustration of a twelfth century biblical illumination: it illustrates Abraham, iconically sitting in the 'A' of Adam, which is the opening letter of *The First Book of Chronicles*. In Abraham's lap are members of all three religious families descended from his progeny, Jews, Christians and Muslims. This, Dom Sylvester would explain, is the *ecumenic norm* of the monotheist traditions, a reality recognised by the Benedictines who copied the text of their Bible nine hundred years ago. He went on to explain:

(the ecumenic norm of the three families) would seem to offer a firm basis from which the Benedictine tradition can explore, as an integral area of monastic theology, the domestic economy by which God regulates His household in the most extended wider sense... beginning with the entire human race... [4]



Environmentpoem: "On the enclosed leaf of our petition to time before the no act of un doing", 1967. From a series of mixed media and laminate works (this one is two-sided) using natural materials gathered from the grounds of Prinknash Abbey. Photograph © Dom Sylvester Houédard; Courtesy Lisson Gallery

Dom Sylvester's Legacy

Considering that, on one hand, the language of concrete poetry is obscure to many people, and on the other that a concern with spirituality is elusive in the modern world, one might assume that the graphic art of Dom Sylvester is not well received generally. And yet his work is proving to be of great interest to a younger generation of contemporary artists. His playful graphic work, executed with the greatest dexterity and skill, has a visionary quality that draws the eye and mind into its understated grasp of fragmented spaces. It has been suggested that he may in certain respects be comparable with William Blake.

But I would suggest, though very different in style, there may be more reason today to see his standing as comparable to that of Aubrey Beardsley. Both of them manipulated space, inventing a new vision, using a writing implement; both spoke graphically from the conscience of their time. And both were neglected for a time – one for his flight into obscenity, the other because he was religious. Towards the end of Dom Sylvester's productive years, 1971–2, The Victoria & Albert Museum graphics department arranged a retrospective exhibition of his work. But today, almost half a century later, while the 1960s has increasingly attracted attention, Dom Sylvester remains inadequately represented in national collections. Is it too much to hope that Tate Britain or one of our other great galleries might like to take note of the significance of the Lisson Gallery's current offering of Dom Sylvester's work?



Dom Sylvester Dom Sylvester Houédard at the Signals Gallery in 1964. Photograph © Clay Perry courtesy England & Co Gallery

For more on Dom Sylvester, see Nicola Simpson's article on his 1966 poem *d-r-a-w-n-i-n-w-a-r-d* in Beshara Magazine Issue 2 by clicking [here](#).

For more on this exhibition, see the [Lisson Gallery website](#).

Charles Verey is an artist and writer living in Gloucester. He is currently working with Jane Clark on a collection of Dom Sylvester's late lectures: 'The Kiss; Dom Sylvester Houédard's Beshara Talks 1986–92' (Beshara Publications, forthcoming 2020).

LISSON GALLERY

Galleries Now
March 2020

GalleriesNow



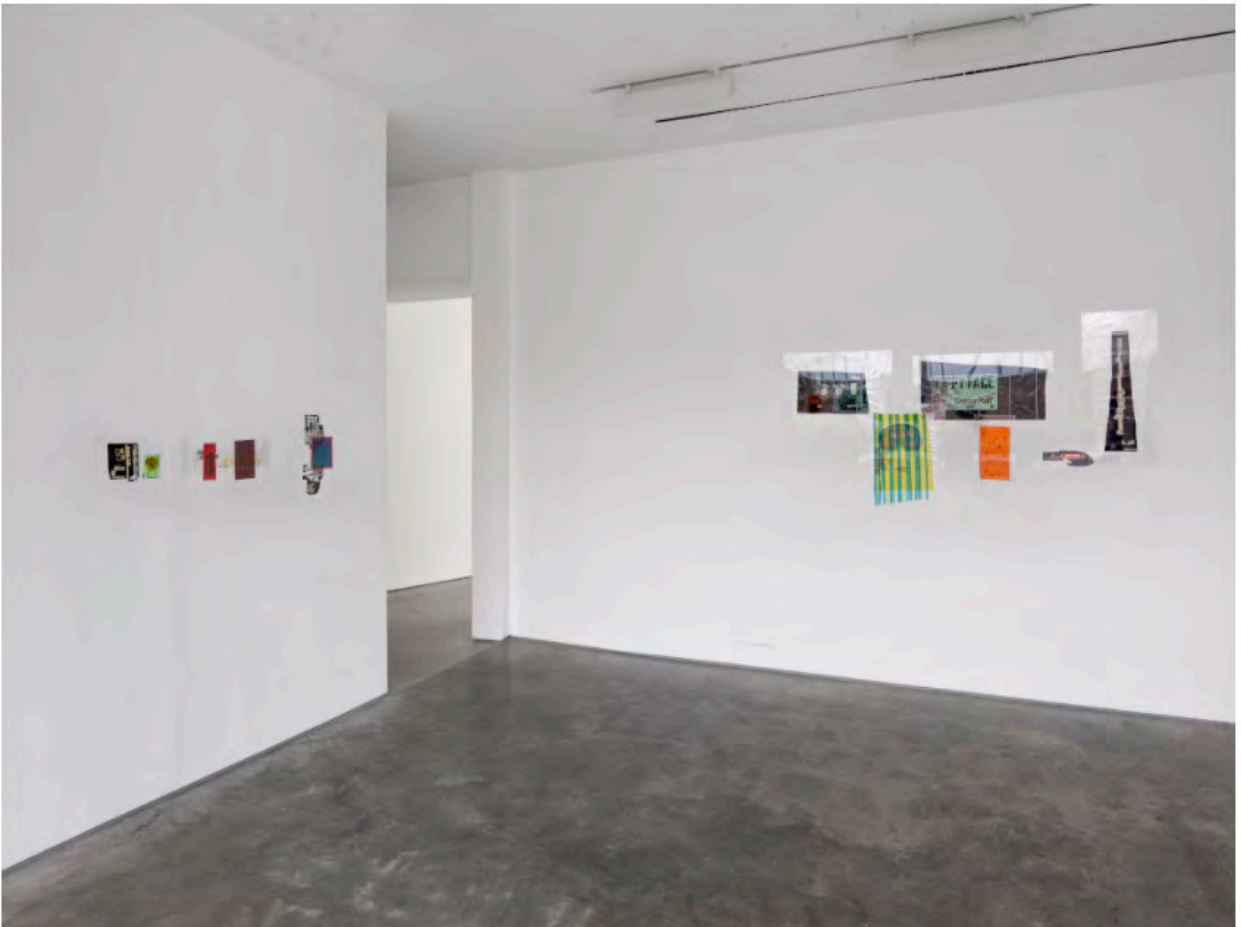
Dom Sylvester Houédard: tantric poetries

Lisson Gallery
London

Thu 12 Mar 2020 to Sat 2 May 2020
Temporary Closure

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".

LISSON GALLERY

Hyperallergic
12 June 2018

HYPERALLERGIC

ART

The Clever Concrete Poetry of a Benedictine Monk

Dom Sylvester Houédard, friends with the beatniks, littered his texts with references to god and prayer, and had a peculiar sense of humor.

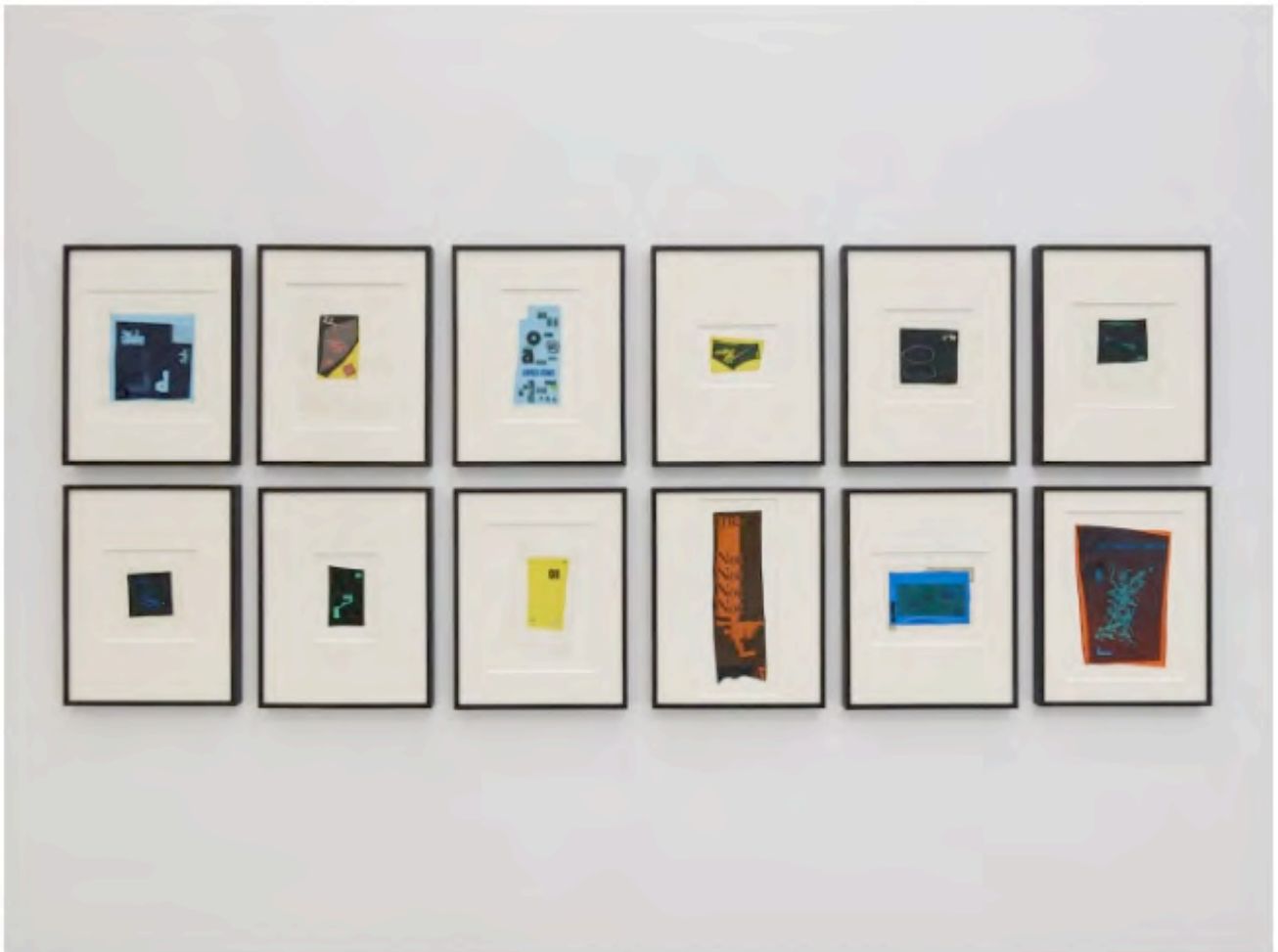
Megan N. Liberty June 12, 2018



Portrait of Dom Sylvester Houédard (1964), taken at Signals Gallery in London (© Clay Perry, England & Co. Gallery, London)

In the 1960s, Dom Sylvester Houédard, a Benedictine monk who lived most of his adult life at Prinknash Abbey in Gloucestershire, England, would sneak off on weekends to London, where he participated in the emerging concrete poetry scene. This backstory is certainly alluring and unusual, and upon learning it at [his current show at Lisson Gallery](#), one scours the works for signs of religious piousness.

Though they are littered with references to god and prayer (“prayersticks” (1969); “the jesus christ light and power company inc.” (1971); “RED God” (1967), to list a few), Houédard’s texts drip with humor more so than traditional religious devotion. (He called them “typestracts,” concrete poetry created using a typewriter, and “laminates,” collages of magazine words sandwiched between laminate paper.) And while clever, his works are also sincere. Houédard spent time in Asia while serving with the British military and was deeply influenced by Eastern philosophy. The geometric shapes, centered and minimal compositions, and simplistic color choices are balanced, beautiful, and even utopian. His color palette of mostly blues, reds, and blacks evokes Mondrian and the De Stilji artists who used abstraction to elevate their artwork towards the spiritual. “To be creative through the arts means that you are actually responding to your inner spaces,” notes Charles Verey, biographer and scholar of Houédard, in the accompanying catalogue, “so there’s a very close connection actually, between spirituality and the spirit of creativity.”



Installation view of *Dom Sylvester Houédard* at Lisson Gallery, New York (image courtesy Lisson Gallery)

Houédard's cut-and-pasted magazine collages recall Dada chance poems; his phrases are rooted in the counterculture movement of which he was a part. Friends with Allen Ginsberg and William Burroughs, "dsh," as he signed his works, spent much of his time in London, at the home of Lisson gallerist Nicholas Logsdail and his partner Fiona McLean. According to Logsdail, and many others, Houédard referred to himself as a "monknik," a title that reconciled his identity as a religious figure with his Beatnik interests and lifestyle.



Dom Sylvester Houédard, "RED God" (1967), vinyl plastic laminate, 27.7 x 17 cm (© The Artist; Courtesy Lisson Gallery)

Despite his phrases having been written long before iPhones, they remind me of text messages and experiences with autocorrect. I cannot count the number of times, while rushing down the street, I've sent a quick text to a friend to inform them of my delay only to look at it moments later and see the message looks nothing like what I wrote. "Bushmen impose their verbal clicks on zulus," could easily be a line from one of such garbled messages. But unlike these messages, Houédard's titles are deliberately chosen. This text, in a 1971 work, appears in all lowercase — as with most of his typestracts — justified slightly to the right, just above the center of a roughly letter-sized, off-white page. Above the text is a blue square filled with lines that appear to vibrate as they crisscross. This kind of movement is present throughout his images. In another 1971 work with a similar composition, "the jesus christ light and power company inc.," the vibrating square is cut across with what looks like a lightning rod, made by gaps in the dashes. Houédard's precise mark making creates a still image that moves and floats on the page. Language is never still.



Dom Sylvester Houédard, "Tulip Label" (1967), vinyl plastic laminate, 24.5 x 13.5 cm (© the Artist, courtesy Lisson Gallery)

Houédard's laminated collages, visually very different than the typed works, also display slippage and movement. The glossy contact paper that holds them together makes them glisten in the gallery lighting, fitting considering Houédard was called these "cosmic dust laminate poems." This is especially clear in "TULIP LABEL" (1967), which places his gridded geometric forms against a background of dust and various speckled materials, giving an otherworldly quality to the list of collaged words which hover over an atmospheric space: TULIP LABEL, BRONZE LABEL, OLIVE LABEL, GOLD LABEL, EMERALD LABEL, CRIMSON LABEL, WHITE LABEL, and DIAMOND LABEL. In her

essay for the catalogue, Laura McLean-Ferris describes the fluid quality of these works: “Language slithers and puddles, bubbles slide down washed dishes, words and rain commingle with drips and jewelry.” Language is certainly a slippery form. Hard to pin down, easily muddled up, and easily miswritten, especially with the aid of our correcting machines.

The essays in the catalogue speculate as to why there has been a recent resurgence in interest in Houédard. They connect it to a rising awareness of the counterculture’s relationship to Eastern religion and spirituality. While that is perhaps what’s causing curators and researchers to bring his work more to light (with the publication of a scholarly monograph in 2012, in addition to a 2017 solo show at London gallery Richard Saltoun with an accompanying publication by Ridinghouse), it is its relevance to concerns of modern communication that give it staying power. Houédard wrote of concrete poetry: “concrete fractures linguistics, atomises words into incoherence, constricting language to jewel-like semantic areas where poet & reader meet in maximum communication with minimum words.” We are in an age of maximum communication with minimum words. But unlike poetry, our quick words tend to fail as we are bombarded by fake news, Twitter bots, and fast replies. Houédard, like other concrete poets, forces us to slow down how we read and see, his vibrating visuals and witty texts opening up the space between words and meaning.



Dom Sylvester Houédard, "the jesus christ light and power company inc." (1971), typewritten material, typestract on paper, 29.8 x 21 cm, framed: 41.5 x 32.5 cm (© The Artist; Courtesy Lisson Gallery)

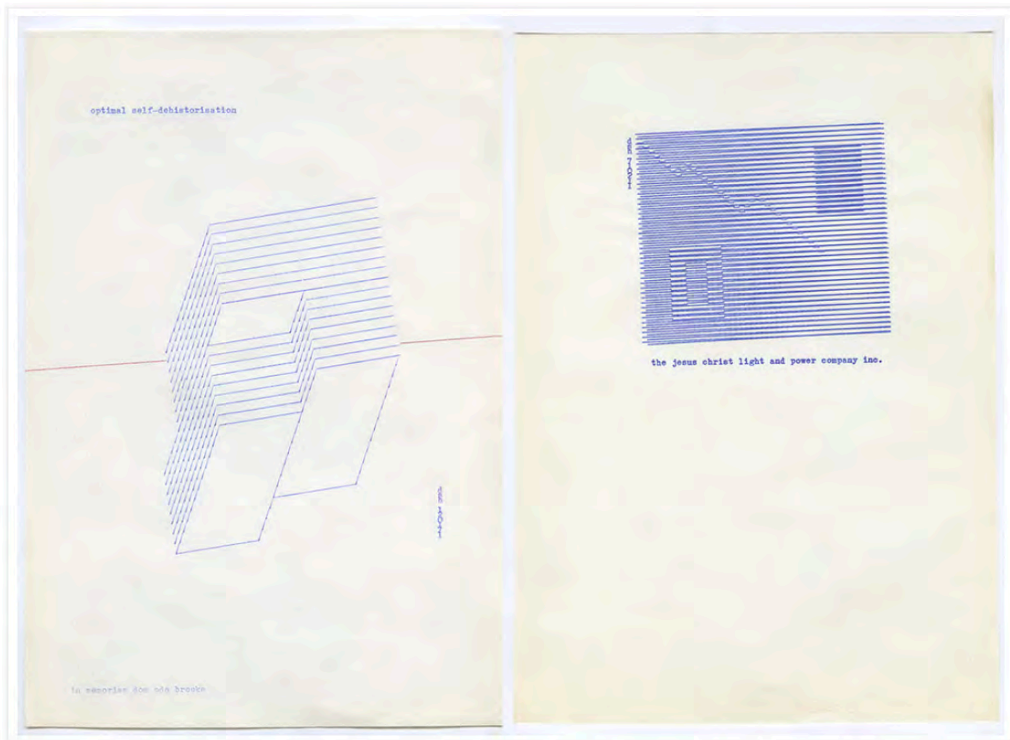
Dom Sylvester Houédard *continues at Lisson Gallery (136 10th Ave, Chelsea, Manhattan) through June 16.*

LISSON GALLERY

Dream Idea Machine
2 May 2018



ART-PRESENTATION: Dom Sylvester Houédard

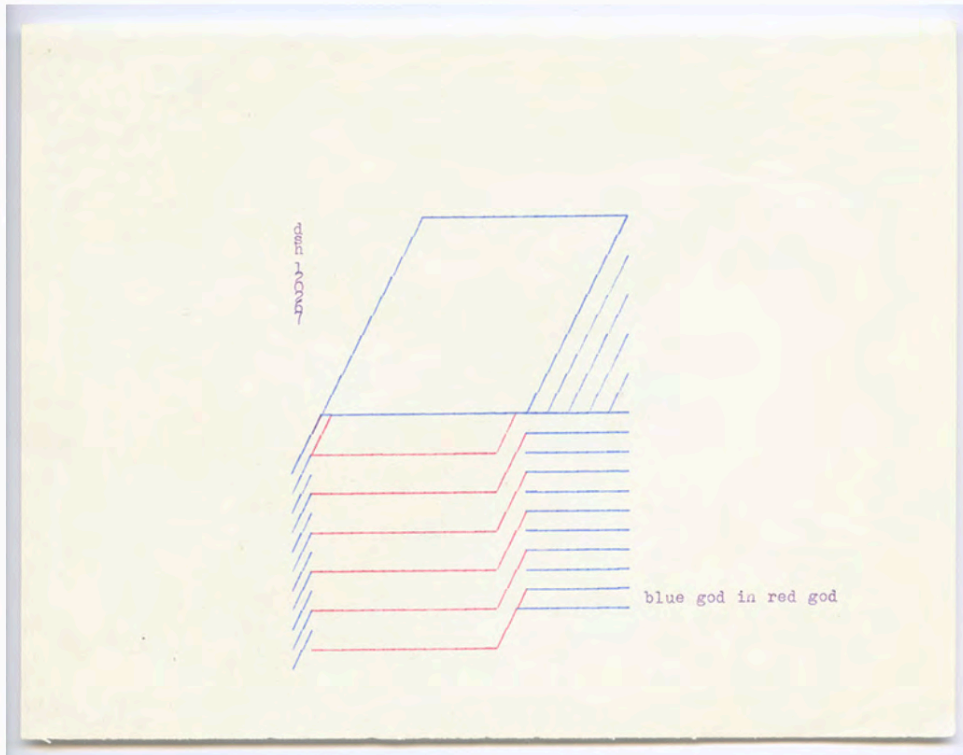


Dom Sylvester Houédard, (or dsh, as he was known), was a contradictory and elusive figure, Not only was he a pioneer of concrete poetry, in which the typographic style of the letters is as important as the meaning and rhythm of the words, Houédard also wrote extensively on new approaches to art, spirituality and philosophy as well as collaborating with artists including Gustav Metzger and Yoko Ono, and the composer John Cage.

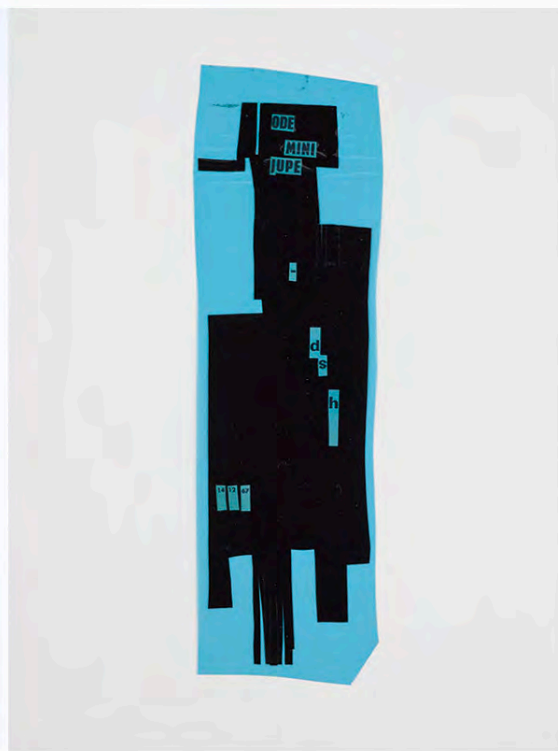
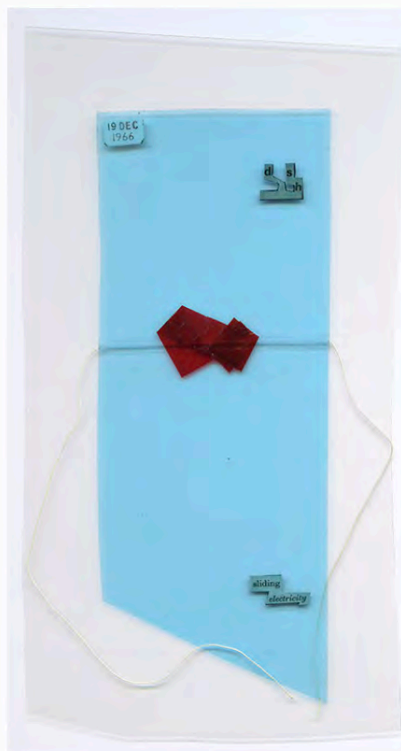
By Efi Michalarou
Photo: Lisson Gallery Archive

The first solo exhibition for over fifty years by works by Dom Sylvester Houédard is on presentation at Lisson Gallery in New York. Houédard believed in the transformative power of his word-based arrangements to elicit linguistic, visual and spiritual connections, citing previous examples as **“texts created for concrete use: amulets talismans grigris mani-walls devil traps kemioth tefillin mezuzahs medals sacred-monograms”**. Seen in this light, his use of language is specific, his lexicon a cumulative barrage of marks, matter and meanings, usually without capital letters and only scant regard for grammar. The exhibition centers on a number of these typestracts – usually using red, blue and black ink ribbon, notable for their textual content from minimal word-poems to complex, onomatopoeic scores. Another series represented here are the more spatially fluid ‘laminates’ or ‘glasspages’, made by collaging language cut out from newspapers and colored paper which are then laminated together using transparent vinyl. Born on Guernsey, Dom Sylvester Houédard was educated at Jesus College, Oxford. He served in British Army Intelligence from 1944 to 1947, and in 1949 joined the Benedictine Prinknash Abbey in Gloucestershire, being ordained as a priest in 1959. He is firmly rooted in Lisson Gallery’s early history, with his first solo exhibition held at the gallery during its inaugural year in 1967. In the early 60s, Dom Sylvester Houédard, was writing semi-confessional ‘neo-beat’ free verse. He was inspired by the Brazilian artist E.M de Melo e Castro, who described concrete poetry as “an experiment in ideogrammatic or diagrammatic writing and poetic creation”. Under this influence, Houédard started creating poems in which **“words unsay themselves in a performative strategy of dis-ontology”**. He quickly opened up the parameters of Concrete Poetry to include mail art, kinetic art, ‘part-art’ and performance art. Towards the mid ‘70s such was his fame that his presence became problematic for his monastery, not least because his connection with the prevailing revolutionary moment meant that he dealt also with politically and sexually explicit subject matter. Gradually, under pressure from the monastery, he turned to matters of theology and ceased his artistic practices.

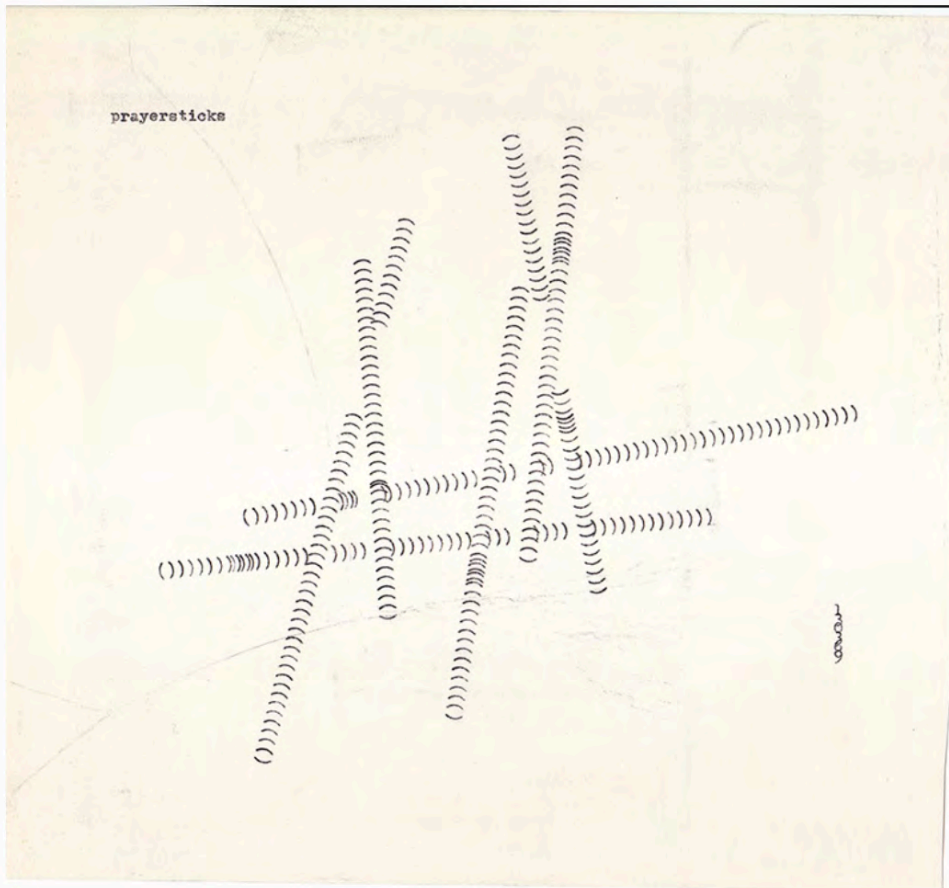
Info: Curators: Hana Noorali and Matt O’Dell, Lisson Gallery, 138 10th Avenue, New York, Duration: 2/5-16/6/18. Days & Hours: Tue-Sat 10:00-18:00, www.lissongallery.com



Dom Sylvester Houédard, blue god in red god, 1967, Typewritten material, typestract on paper, 15.5 x 20.4 cm, © The Artist; Courtesy Lisson Gallery



Left: Dom Sylvester Houédard, sliding electricity, 1966, Vinyl plastic laminate, 22.1 x 12 cm, © The Artist; Courtesy Lisson Gallery. Right: Dom Sylvester Houédard, ODE MINI JUPE, 1967, Vinyl plastic laminate, 24.3 x 7.4 cm, © The Artist; Courtesy Lisson Gallery

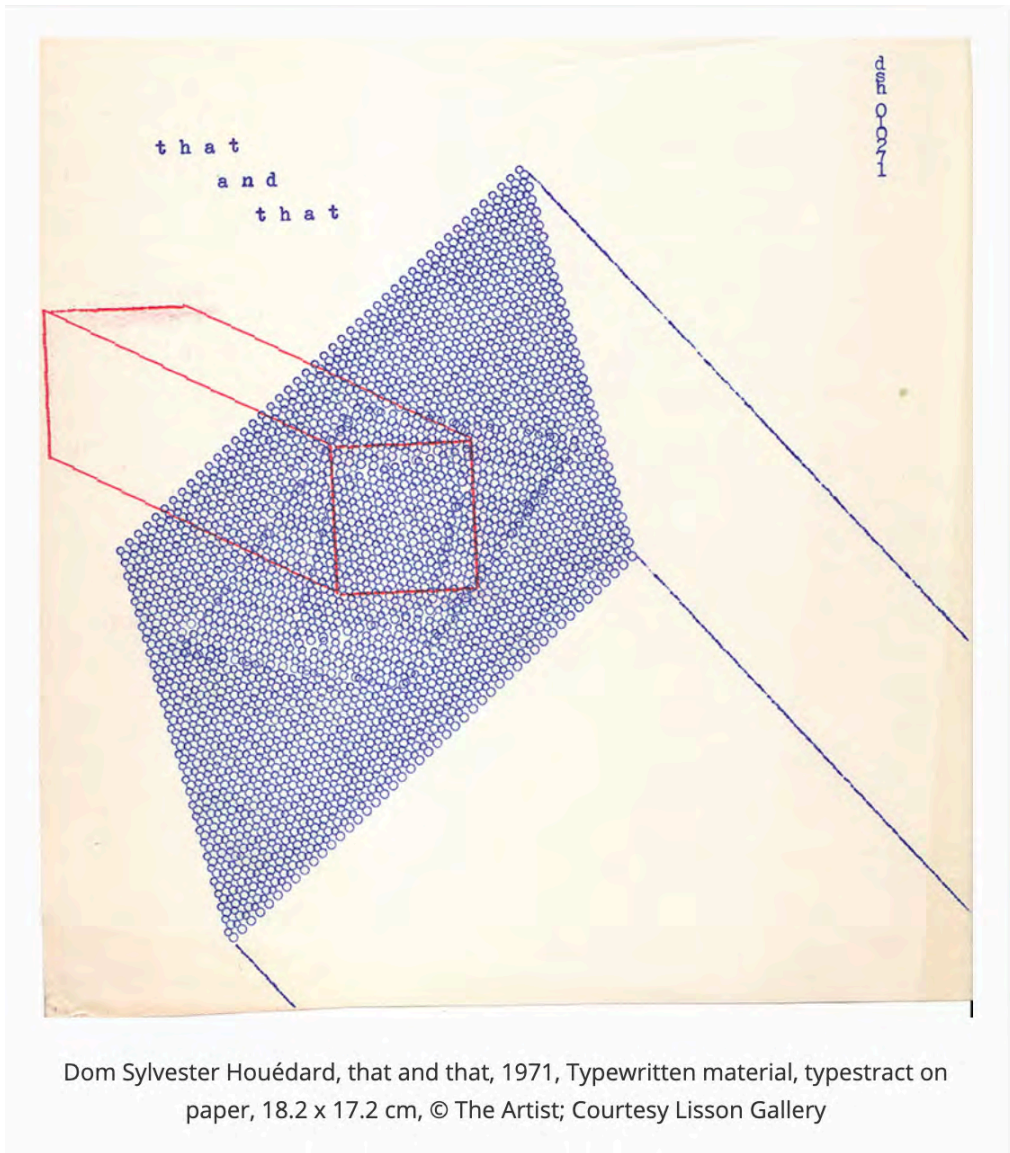


Dom Sylvester Houédard, prayersticks, 1969, Typewritten material, typestract on paper, 20.3 x 23 cm, © The Artist; Courtesy Lisson Gallery

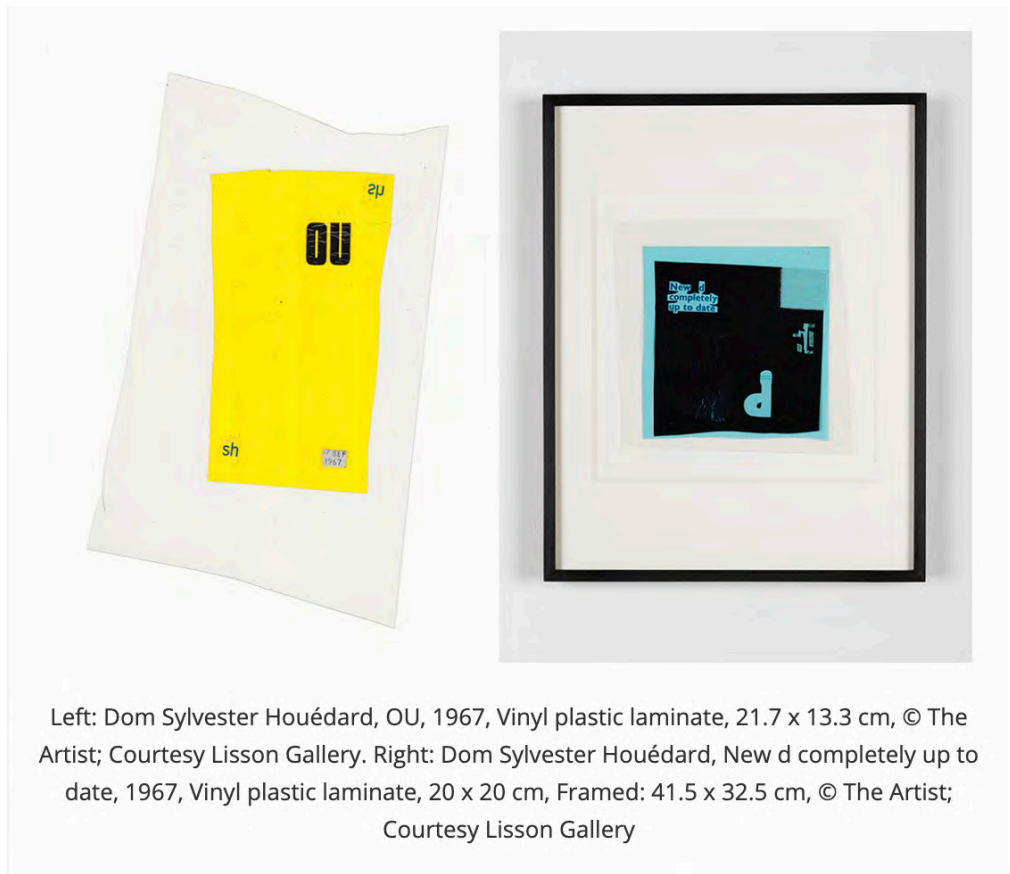


Left: Dom Sylvester Houédard, Whenever you find the distinctive red you Perhaps, 1967, Vinyl plastic laminate, 22.7 x 17.5 cm, © The Artist; Courtesy Lisson Gallery. Right: Dom Sylvester Houédard, RED God, 1967, Vinyl plastic laminate, 27.7 x 17 cm, © The Artist; Courtesy Lisson Gallery





Dom Sylvester Houédard, that and that, 1971, Typewritten material, tpestract on paper, 18.2 x 17.2 cm, © The Artist; Courtesy Lisson Gallery



Left: Dom Sylvester Houédard, OU, 1967, Vinyl plastic laminate, 21.7 x 13.3 cm, © The Artist; Courtesy Lisson Gallery. Right: Dom Sylvester Houédard, New d completely up to date, 1967, Vinyl plastic laminate, 20 x 20 cm, Framed: 41.5 x 32.5 cm, © The Artist; Courtesy Lisson Gallery

LISSON GALLERY

The Oxonian Review

3 July 2017

the Oxonian Review

“slipping sideways into god”

REY CONQUER

Dom Sylvester Houédard: Typestracts

Richard Saltoun Gallery, London

26th May – 14th July, 2017

The works currently on display at Richard Saltoun Gallery, Dom Sylvester Houédard’s “typestracts”, are small and at first glance modest. The largest – and most legible – is an obvious homage to the Scottish concrete poet Ian Hamilton Finlay; those in the artist’s own idiom require closer attention. The abstract shapes and indeed lettering that can be made out at a few paces become, as you approach, much more obviously the work of a typewriter, each shape or line or letter made up of other letters and keystrokes, painstakingly overlaid and matched. You can see smudges and bleeding; in some cases the work has been folded to create mirrored figures, as in a Rorschach test. Some have glossy surfaces, but a sticky, mucosal gloss, reminiscent of PVA glue used as varnish as we did at primary school: despite the cerebral look of typewritten letters they are compellingly, if mysteriously, corporeal. (There are also collages proper, of found text and coloured plastic, but also spit, jam, talcum powder, dust.) Of a previous exhibition of the typestracts (the term was thought up by Edwin Morgan) the late *Scotsman* critic, Edward Gage, wrote that they were “much more positive than one might have thought possible”.

Pierre Thomas Paul Jean Houédard signed his work dsh, and was known by his contemporaries in the avant garde poetry and art worlds of the 1960s as Silvester or Sylvester, the name he had taken on his profession as a Benedictine monk. (As an undergraduate at Oxford he had been Pierre; to his family on Guernsey, where he was born in 1924, Peter.) He was a distinctive figure: the black beret and Ray-Ban Wayfarers might have been on their own unexceptional, recognisably part of a beatnik uniform, but it was his black habit and characteristic cloak that marked him out – Edwin Morgan’s poem, “dsh: recollection of a vortex” begins, “a swirling cloak on great western road | a swirling monk filling the lift”. He made the typestracts in his cell at Prinknash Abbey, Gloucestershire on an Olivetti Lettera 22 (“olivetti himself/themselves show sofar a total non interest in this fact”). Cells, rather – as by his death in 1992 he had three, one that functioned as a study, and two for his large collection of papers and bits and pieces of a sort that might seem unusual for a monk (such as a **foot-high lino elephant made by Eduardo Paolozzi**). It is the sheer improbability of the

idea of a “monklike”, and the difficulty of understanding the integration of his lives as monk and concrete poet, the integration of his religious thought and his art, that the monograph accompanying the exhibition seeks to address. The editors, Andrew Hunt and Nicola Simpson, have combined essays on his work and life written especially for the volume with, among other things, pieces of Houédard’s own critical prose—“bits of autobiography”, “paradada”, “me as poet rather than critic” and others. In this last, Houédard states clearly the possible parallels between these two, seemingly incompatible, vocations, and makes of monastic vows a manifesto: “artist to soc like monk to ch: cf CHASTITY – of vision: OBEDIENCE – to material: POVERTY – of form”.

It is a good year, it seems, for Catholic artist-poets, and there are parallels to be drawn between Houédard and David Jones, whose work was described hyperbolically in Thomas Dilworth’s biography, which came out this April, as “probably the greatest existential achievement of international modernism”. While the story of David Jones’s neglect has been overstated, it’s true that he doesn’t quite have the reputation that others predicted for him. Both Jones and Houédard are overlooked in part because there simply isn’t all that much that is around to be seen. (The public unavailability of their work is also tied up with its form and what could be thought of as its genre: Jones’s inscriptions were often made as gifts for friends, as were Houédard’s typestracts, and continue to lie in private hands.) But in both cases it has also been argued that this neglect can be connected to their faith, and the demands this makes on viewers and readers.

There are important differences, however, in how these two artists approached Catholicism, particularly with regard to the liturgical reforms of the 1950s, 60s and 70s. Dilworth unhelpfully and inaccurately exaggerates the changes within the Church following the second Vatican Council when describing Jones’s reaction to them, but it is certainly clear that he regretted the move towards celebrating the Mass in English, and was one of the signatories of a petition (along with, most famously, Agatha Christie) protesting the abandoning of Latin. Houédard, on the other hand, was involved with the committee responsible for implementing this reform in the UK, and translated other liturgical texts for the publisher Darton, Longman and Todd. Notably, he collaborated with the Catholic poet and translator Alan Neame as literary editor of the newly translated Jerusalem Bible, again for DLT. In an article, “Beat and Afterbeat: A Parallel Condition of Poetry & Theology?”, the council (or “Vat II”, as he calls it) becomes the pivot for this “parallel condition”, with its emphasis on dialogue: “Poetry all art is one of universal worships à l’insu of god the unknown... what Vat II is ABOUT is universal need to re-phrase without loss of content so as to communicate with the non-us”.

His was not, then, a religion that tended to separatism or exclusion, and while there is a theological density to his writing that can be off-putting, it is rather his deep interest in and openness to the “non-us”, his “wider ecumenism”, as he termed it, that forms one of the greatest barriers to his work. His range of religious reference was impressively vast, and sometimes frustratingly so. In his funeral homily, Dom Stephen Horton spoke of this, saying, “it was very difficult to follow his mind – so often his reasoning seemed obscure and one was left feeling like an idiot or rather exasperated. I personally found it hard to admit that I had not read all the apocryphal literature of the inter-testamental period, the Kabala, or the works

of the Fifth Dalai Lama.” (Houédard gave a lecture with Neame on the literary problems of Biblical translation, of which problems an anonymous diarist for the Catholic newspaper *The Tablet* wrote, slyly, that “the audience found these more subtle than they had expected.”)

He rejected the idea of art or poetry as a form of persuasion, which “makes art like its some form of religious indoctrination – like its some aperient/carminative med’cine”, and appealed to the notion of “kerygma” (that is, the proclamation of the Christian message) over “catechism” (the teaching of Christian doctrine), the latter “ingroup reinforcement – a partyline imposition” and the former “announcement fanfare & proclamation exuberantly made to anyone in earshot”. Houédard’s critical writing is always generous in intent—he was, for instance, the first to write about concrete poetry in English, in the hope of bringing it to a new public—and the self-consciously ‘beat’ rhythms, dense quick-fire allusions and syntactic and orthographic concision certainly create a sense of exuberant proclamation, but also, to re-use Morgan’s image, of a kind of maelstrom of ideas that is hard to follow. Where a certain coterie mentality can make both physical and conceptual access to British concrete poetry difficult, Houédard seems sometimes to exist in a coterie of one.

Houédard wrote sensitively of A J A Symons’ *A Quest for Corvo*, trying to expose the extent to which this celebrated experimental biography gave more a picture of Symons than Rolfe, turning the latter into a far less reasonable person for the sake of a good story. We might similarly want to avoid exoticising Houédard’s eccentricity, for all that his presence as a central node in the art world sounds, certainly from 2017, unexpected (“It seemed almost as if ... he appeared from another planet”, Charles Verey, one of the book’s contributors, notes). In profiles, obituaries, and so on, the emphasis on certain trappings of his monkhood—the clothing, the way that letters of invitation should include a line or so persuading the abbot to let him out—make of this aspect almost a gimmick. But he was a monk long before, and long after, his involvement with the experimental poetry world, and he was as well-connected in the Catholic world as he was in that of concrete poetry (at Oxford he was president of the Newman Society, for instance). He may have been seen as a kind of dilettante by, for instance, Elizabeth Anscombe’s son John Geach, but his commitment—even if on some level a commitment to dilettantism—was profound.

The various essays and other material in the exhibition catalogue try, then, to deepen an understanding of Houédard’s context, to tell us “something about the artist” in the hope of encouraging wider recognition of the work. It is lovingly, and generously, edited: the detailed bibliography compiled by Gustavo Grandal Montero will be invaluable for future researchers, and the book also contains near-lifesize reproductions of the works from the exhibition, with the aim of allowing for a longer-standing engagement after the originals have once again been dispersed and sold off to private collections.

When printed next to, for instance, a typewritten script of a talk on apophatic art, full of visual puns, we can begin to imagine the extent to which the typestracts and concrete poems were continuous with Houédard’s prose writing and letters, and appreciate the intimacy of it all. One typestract made for Neame (who becomes in Houédard’s orthography “alaneame”), seems to encapsulate the quality of expansiveness in these works: there is something like a cloud, and dashed parallel lines in two colours falling to a ground made up of indistinct

letters, out of which emerges “E / LEI / SON” and “HO / HO HO”. (It was only on returning to it in the book that I realised that I had mentally added a “SANNA”.) Even without wider context there is something arresting about these works, an incitement to a kind of devotional looking. “i see my typestracts as icons depicting sacred questions” Houédard wrote:

they should probably be viewed like cloud-tracks & tide-ripples – bracken-patterns & gull-flights
– or simply as horizons & spirit levels

Later typestracts have the look of visionary architecture, along the lines of Vladimir Tatlin or Peter Cook, as if they might be designs for cosmic churches. Houédard wrote of one of his few published collections, “the range of these poems can be fully traditional – sacred secular lyric erotic didactic (tho hardly epic) funny & metaphysical” and this range can be seen, too, here. He continues, “the perils they face are equally traditional – the glib the clever flat & esoteric are all as ready to hand but have i hope not crept into the narrow limit of this collection”. Glibness will always be a risk in concrete poetry, and in particular the manipulation of found text can end up little more than a cheap joke, but the collages here maintain a mantic edge. Houédard wrote of Vatican II that it acknowledged the “SACREDNESS of ambiguity”, and the works here are not the sort of thing that can be paraphrased or explained. (Other, more well-known, pieces of Houédard’s, such as the **reworking** of Basho’s most famous haiku, “frog pond plop”, are.) And god is always at the edges of these works, whether implicitly, as in ‘typestract 150664’ where gs drift towards forming *os*, not yet *ds*, or explicitly: one contains the text, “slipping sideways into god”; another, “draft for etymological poem”, mischievously posits a connection between “god” and “cock”. (Mischievously – but sexuality was for Houédard certainly, and perhaps problematically, part of the sacred.) But god is also in the delicacy, the deft and concentrated craft of this “monk-making”, which, as in Houédard’s definition of kerygma, is

lyric & appeals to the fruitful dharma depths in others from which wild independent things are hoped for – to spring up & resound & ‘be the next thyng’.

The Tablet
31 May 2017

THE
TABLET

31 MAY 2017, THE TABLET

Benedictine beatnik: Dom Sylvester Houédard was both a monk and a leading avant-garde poet and artist

by Laura Gascoigne



Twenty-five years after his death, a monk who was a leading figure in the avant-garde art and poetry scene of the 1960s is being celebrated at a London gallery. By Laura Gascoigne

For those who don't remember the 1960s, the recent exhibition, "You Say You Want a Revolution?", at London's Victoria and Albert Museum contained some vivid reminders. Among them was Peter Whitehead's film of the 1965 International Poetry Incarnation at the Royal Albert Hall, showing a familiar audience of duffle-coated poets and Biba-dressed girls. But in the front row sits a more incongruous figure wearing clerical black teamed with dark glasses.

This "beatnik from the middle ages", as he has been described, was Dom Sylvester Houédard, a Benedictine monk on leave from Prinknash Abbey in Gloucestershire to attend a key event in the avant-garde poetry scene which he had done so much to promote in Britain. Whitehead's film was, appropriately, titled *Wholly Communion*. In 1971, the V&A gave dsh, as he was known, the honour of a retrospective.

It celebrated a poet and artist who, since the late 1950s, had been a pivotal figure in the British counter-culture: co-founder of concrete poetry collective Gloup and Woup, collaborator with David Medalla's experimental performance group, the Exploding Galaxy, and inventor of his own art form, the "typestract": a form of abstract work on paper ingeniously created through deft manipulation of the letter and symbol keys on a portable typewriter.

At a time when other luminaries of the 1960s are being enthusiastically "rediscovered", and a recreation of Medalla's 1961 bubble machine *Cloud Canyons No. 3* stands in Tate Britain's Manton Foyer, the work of Houédard – most of whose typestracts were sent to friends and disappeared into private collections – has been sadly neglected. Now, 25 years after his death in 1992 at the age of 67, London's Richard Saltoun Gallery is reviving interest in this intriguing figure with the exhibition "Dom Sylvester Houédard: Typestracts" (until 14 July), the first large gathering of his works for nearly 50 years.

Part of the problem with Houédard's work, suggests Nicola Simpson in the monograph accompanying the show, is its religious dimension. "Whether he was bent over his typewriter meticulously structuring a typestract, or reading out loud and performing ... he was, in all circumstances, a Benedictine monk." He himself regarded his typestracts "as icons depicting sacred questions".

Born Peter Houédard in St Peter's Port, Guernsey, in 1924, he recalled in a childhood memoir published in *The Tablet* in 1977 how "at home my father incised the Cross on each loaf before cutting it", yet "religion was non-pietistic".

At the age of eight he was impressed by a reference to the thirteenth Dalai Lama, who had just died, as a “God-King” and cut out the newspaper article with a photograph of Lhasa, the “Vatican of Buddhism”. It was the start of a lifelong fascination with Tibetan Buddhism and its relationship to Christianity. A dawning “sense of the real unreality of reality ... slipped into place with one sleepless night when my mother said: ‘Try to make your mind a blank’ – an effort that introduced me to zen paradox”. He was an abnormally thoughtful child.

The death of his paternal grandfather in the same year prompted him to wonder whether life could be “just a dream God was having? Was death him waking up?” After losing both parents and his only brother by the age of 19, such speculations would become fixed preoccupations. At Oxford, where he studied modern history, his life revolved around the Catholic Chaplaincy; in 1942 he was elected president of the Newman Society. But three years’ military service as an intelligence officer in India, Sri Lanka and Singapore reignited his interest in other religions, laying the foundations of the “wider ecumenism” that would come to characterise both his faith and his art.

Meanwhile, in a Nissen hut in a camp in Singapore, he discovered the “inner release” of noodling on a typewriter in Latin alphabet arabesques, the precursors of the typestracts he would develop at Prinknash in the 1960s on his Olivetti Lettera 22 – an achievement in which “Olivetti himself/themselves show so far a total non-interest”, as he commented drolly in the catalogue to the ICA’s 1965 exhibition, “Between Poetry and Painting”. At Oxford, Pierre, as he then called himself, was a bit of a dandy, adopting an ebony walking stick and fancy waistcoats. He flunked his finals, receiving the degree routinely awarded to returning servicemen, but impressed the chaplain, Mgr Val Elwes, who supported his application to join the Benedictine community at Prinknash. On entering the monastery in 1949, he gave up the cane and the waistcoats but not the interest in Zen Buddhism and comparative religion.

After completing his studies at St Anselm's Benedictine University in Rome, he was ordained a priest in 1959. It was at Prinknash in the 1960s that he began writing the Neo-Beat poems – “Can yr t/writer wiggle its ears?” was the title of one – that would evolve, over long nights of tapping on his trusty Olivetti, into the finely tuned geometries of the typestracts. Many were dedicated to friends and riffed on their names; others explored the theological conundrums that continued to obsess him. In later examples, the jumbled and overprinted letters become increasingly unreadable as the balance shifts from literary to visual.

His best known work remains his simplified spin on a haiku by the seventeenth-century Zen monk Matsuo Basho, which reduces 17 syllables to three – “frog pond plop” – printed on paper folded into an origami fortune-teller toy. A photo taken at Signals gallery in 1964 (opposite) shows him demonstrating the toy with childish delight: with his black cloak, beret and humorous expression he could be a conjurer at a children's party.

For him, performing poetry wasn't “abt life holiness religion it IS holy religious alive. The mad gay bliss of Benedictine gravitas – so other than puritanical seriosità.” In the early 1960s, Houédard led a double life. Alongside his avant-garde activities he put his linguistic skills to more orthodox uses, acting as literary editor of the New Testament books of the Jerusalem Bible and translating the Office of Our Lady. His “wider ecumenism” found a more practical – some might say concrete – outlet as a member of the office set up after the Second Vatican Council to foster monastic interfaith dialogue. “Vaticanum Two part One,” he reflected in 1964, “this rapprochement after so many decades/centuries of diplomatic manoeuvring between heaven & earth: co-existence between catholic & noncatholic, xn & nonxn ... That's the background to the future.”

By the mid 1970s he had renounced his artistic life to pursue his theological researches into the common ground between religions, lecturing to students at the Beshara School in the Scottish Borders – who knew him as “the Dom” – and speaking at the Oxford headquarters of the Muhyiddin Ibn ‘Arabi Society. The painter Dom Stephen Horton, who shares his initials, met him in the late 1960s on a trip to London from Birmingham School of Art and later gravitated to Prinknash, joining the community in 1974.

He now occupies Houédard’s old cell and has taken on his role as infirmarian. “He may have been eccentric,” he tells me over the phone from the cell whose walls once resounded with the tapping of typewriter keys, “but his compassion was deep. He had infinite patience with the infirm and the sick; I never knew him to lose his temper.” Houédard showed no regret about abandoning his art – “He’d said what he wanted to say, and when you’ve said what you wanted to say there’s nothing else to be said” – but he still had plenty to say in his sermons. “When he was flying, he was a genius; he’d pull out things you’d never think of. He opened up stuff.”

The Atlantic

Collecting Art, Without Knowing What Kind of Art You're Collecting

The biggest holding of concrete poetry in the world sits in a Miami duplex, gathered by a couple who initially didn't know what "concrete poetry" was.

In 1974, Marvin and Ruth Sackner began gathering works of "concrete poetry," poems whose words and typography are arranged to convey meaning graphically. But they didn't know the genre was called "concrete poetry" until 1979. Coming across Emmett Williams's *Anthology of Concrete Poetry* in a book store "was a Eureka moment," says Marvin, a neurologist by trade. "I exclaimed to Ruth, 'What we've been collecting has a name!'"

In the years since, they would help give a once-languishing art movement a home at the Sackner Archive of Concrete and Visual Poetry in Miami, an enormous and unparalleled collection of 250,000 works—housed not in a museum, but in a massive duplex overlooking the bay. Now, 300 choice pieces of theirs sit on display at the brand-new Pérez Art Museum Miami (PAMM), whose [concrete-poetry exhibit](#), "A Human Document," was set to come down in May but has been extended and remains on view until August 2014.

The Sackners have built two other major art collections in the past 30 years. The first was of contemporary constructivist works. The second was of Russian avant garde and early 20th century avant garde movements (books, drawings, and paintings informed by dada, futurism, surrealism and the like). But it was the concrete and visual poetry collection—which includes artist books, assemblings, artist magazines, experimental calligraphy, typewriter art and poetry, and word-image works—that would become the Sackners' signature achievement.

That fact is due as much to circumstance as anything. As collectors, the Sackners could never afford to establish *the* early 20th-century avant garde art and book collection. But focusing on concrete poetry and letter arts was a different matter. “The prices were within our means, and we related to the facile immediacy of the visual and linguistic communicability of concrete poetry,” Marvin says. “We gradually came to realize that it was possible to build *the* collection of concrete and visual poetry.”

They certainly accomplished their mission, with hundreds of rarities, one-of-a-kinds, and limited-edition documentation. The earliest book in the Sackner collection is Rabanus Maurus’s 1503 *Liber de Laudibus Sanctae Crucis*, produced in 1,000 copies and including 28 shaped poems. The collection continues to the present with the most recent book of experimental calligraphy by Francoise Mery dated April 2014.

The Sackners’ database encompasses more than 58,000 records with approximately 17,000 partially or not catalogued. The number of individual pieces is about 250,000. This is because artist books, print portfolios, and assemblings are recorded as one entry in the database although they may contain multiple prints and drawings.

“A Human Document” at the Perez Art Museum begins with Mallarme’s first publication of *Un Coup de Des* in *Cosmopolis* (1897) and then provides examples of Dada, Russian avant garde, De Stijl, surrealism, futurism, lettrisme until World War II. Artist books and magazines, manuscripts, concrete and visual poems, correspondence art, typewriter poems and art are displayed in vitrines. Post-WWII word-image wall works are displayed from artists and poets worldwide.

Of all the materials, typewriter art and poetry is the most fascinating. The genre “began about 20 years after the commercial introduction of the typewriter and reached its flowering with the advent of concrete poetry in the 1950s and early 1960s,” Marvin explained, adding that this method allowed an inexpensive but often very labor-intensive solution for widespread distribution of a new poetic form. “Moreover, the ease of overstriking letters and text for new visual and kinetic effects would have been costly and difficult if the poems were typeset during that time.”

Asked about the Sackners’s three most valued art and artists, Marvin said the first two choices were easy: “Tom Phillips’s original book *A Humument* and the pages of its revisions is the most important work in our collection, and we consider it the greatest and most innovative artist book of the 20th century. The most interesting person in the collection is Dom Sylvester Houédard, a

Benedictine Monk who was one of the outstanding typewriter artists and poets of all time in addition to being a foremost critic of concrete poetry, an artist, translator, social activist, and fantastic correspondent.”

He went on to say that there are a number of individuals are tied for first place: Augusto de Campos, the Brazilian who founded of concrete poetry; Henri Chopin, a French typewriter artist and sound poet; William Jay Smith, an American pre-concrete typewriter poet and conventional poet; Ian Hamilton Finlay, a Scottish concrete poet, artist, and sculptor; artists, poets, mentors and publishers, including D.A. Levy (American), J.W. Curry (Canadian), Geof Huth (American), Vittore Baroni (Italian), Bob Cobbing (British), John Furnival (British), and Wally Depew (American).

The collection is curated exclusively by the Sackners, who are also the catalogers and registrars. “I do most of the cataloging and almost all the image scanning (about 17,000 images are in our database),” Marvin says. “My ‘secret’ of getting things done since the 1980s has been to limit sleep time to about five to six hours per night.”

While representing only a small portion of the overall collection, the Perez exhibition effectively tells the story of this artform. Rene Morales, the organizer of the show, explained its organizing narrative:

I am particularly drawn to the earlier artifacts, when the form was new. “They are about as radical as it gets,” Morales says, “despite having been made as much as a hundred years ago. That first set of vitrines has been truly eye-opening for me, providing a totally different way of assessing the various strains of modernism.”

The appeal of the Sackner Archive is what Morales called “the leveling of traditional hierarchies, a suspension of biases and reflexive value judgments.” For the cognoscenti it has the iconic makers and pieces by Guillaume Apollinaire, Kazimir Malevich, Carl Andre, and other well-known, canonical artists. But there are also less-popular figures, as well as works created in “non-mainstream genres or media, from mail art to rubberstamping.” The strongest aspect of the exhibition is not any single object, says Morales, “but rather the potential for discovery that runs through the whole installation, just as it runs through the collection itself”—a potential for discovery that led the Sackners to develop a fascination with something they knew little about three decades ago.

LISSON GALLERY

It's Nice That
11 February 2013

It's Nice That

Typestracts: concrete poetry by the Benedictine monk Dom Sylvester Houédard

Words Anna Trench

Work Art

11 February 2013

1 minute read



Dom Sylvester Houédard was a Benedictine monk, scholar, concrete poet and pivot in the post war avante-garde. Since his death twenty years ago, Houédard's varied, experimental work has barely left the hands of private collectors. The publication of *Notes from a Cosmic Typewriter: The Life and Work of Dom Sylvester Houédard*, edited by Nicola Simpson, seeks to reintroduce this maverick to a wider audience.

Chiefly celebrated for introducing concrete poetry to England in 1961, in particular Houédard is remembered for his delicate *typestracts* – concrete poems created on his Olivetti typewriter. Though based at Prinknash Abbey in Gloucestershire, Houédard was an influential figure within the international artistic movements of the time, composing event scores for John Cage and Yoko Ono, founding the concrete poetry collective Gloup & Woup, participating in the mail art movement and collaborating with others. *Cosmic Typewriter* not only contextualises Houédard, but shows the extent to which he pushed the form he helped create: making poems from collaged found objects, and turning them into sound.



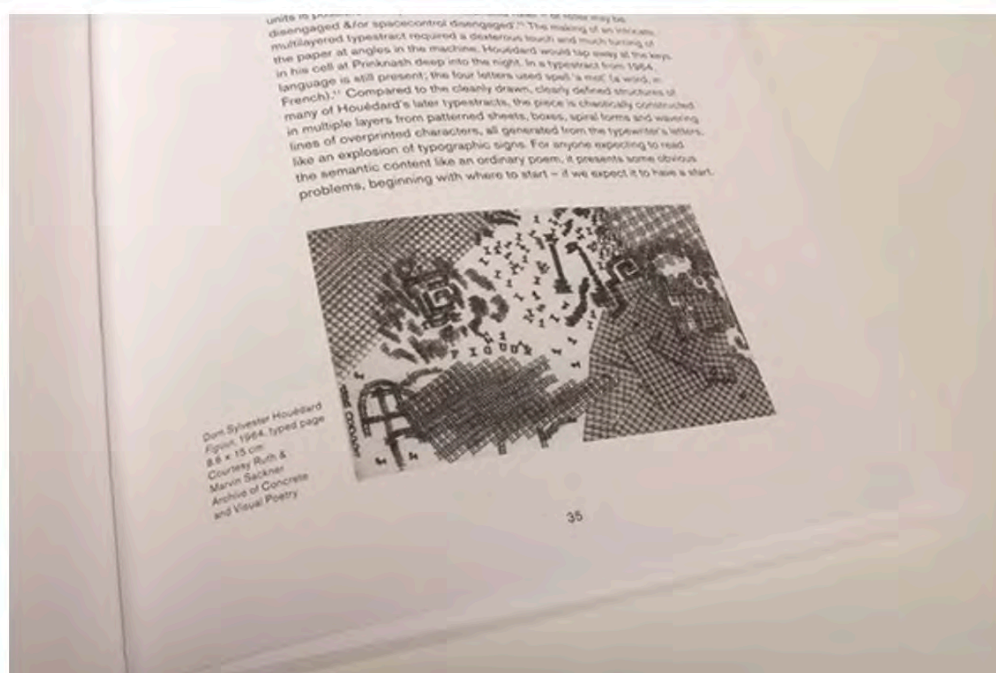
Above Nicola Simpson: Notes from a Cosmic Typewriter: The Life and Work of Dom Sylvester Houédard



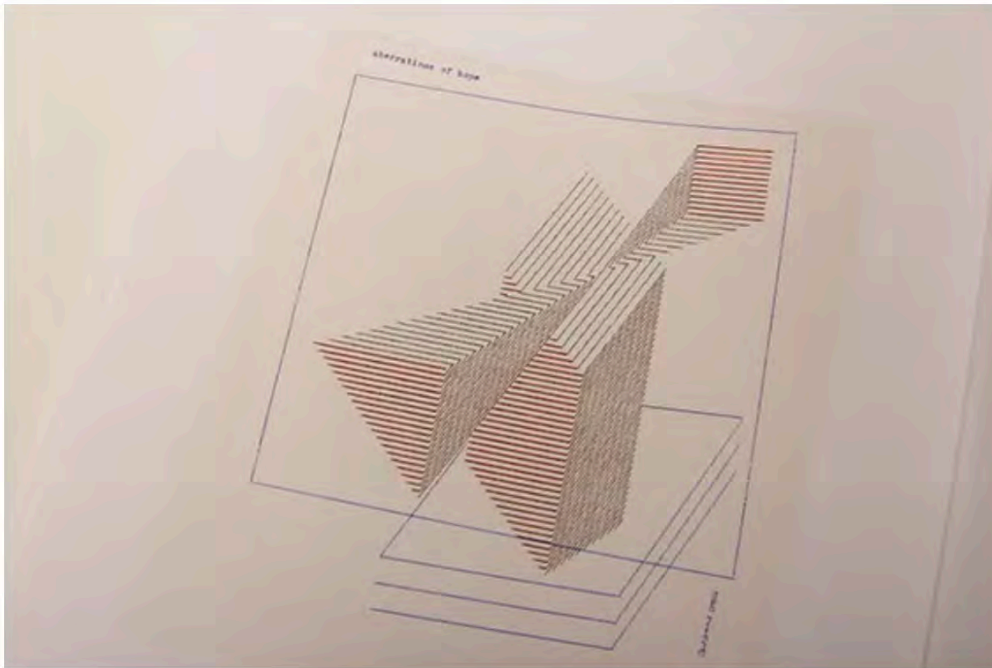
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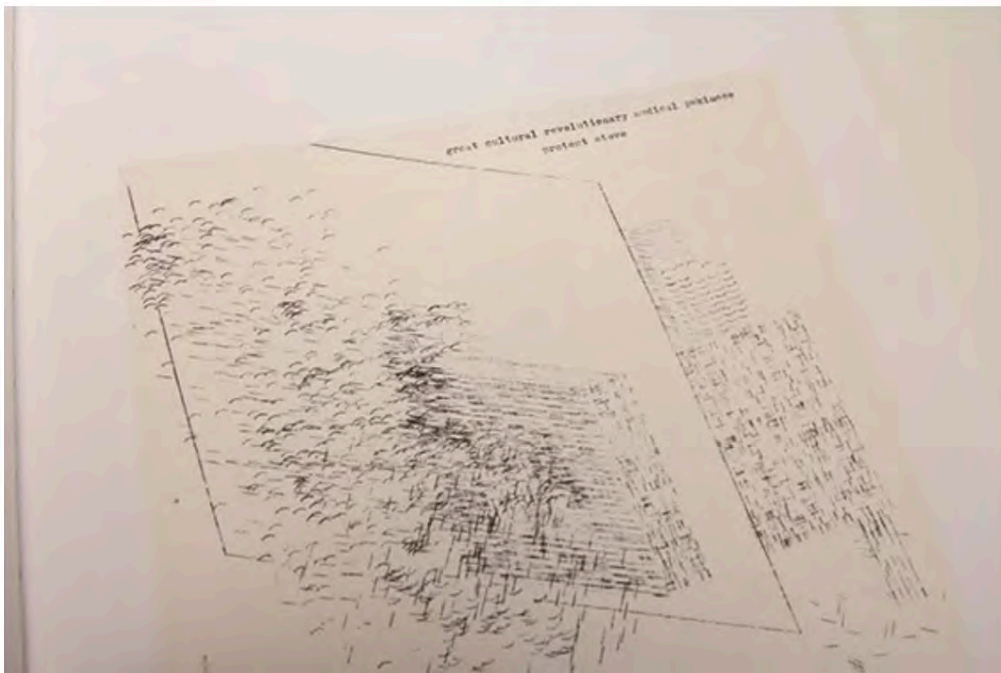
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New York Times
16 December 2012

The New York Times

The Eccentric Monk and His Typewriter



Dom Sylvester Houédard in 1964 at the Signals Gallery in London. Clay Perry/England & Co. Gallery, London

By Alice Rawsthorn

Dec. 16, 2012



LONDON — To anyone who was seriously interested in design in postwar Britain, *Typographica* magazine was essential reading. Take the issue published in December 1963, which included essays on the work of the German typography designer Joshua Reichert and the Dutch graphic designer Paul Schuitema, as well as a review of an exhibition of British typography and one of the first articles to be published on the emerging concrete poetry movement.

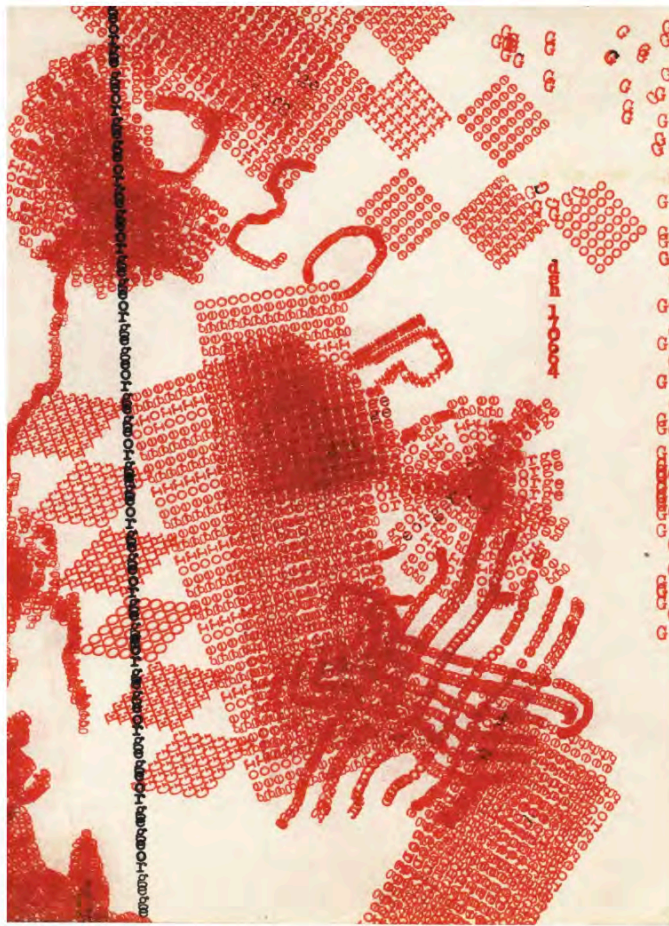
The concrete poetry piece was written by an author who was new to Typographica, Dom Sylvester Houédard, known as “dsh” or “the Dom” to his fellow artists and activists in 1960s London. His avant-garde credentials were impeccable. Not only was he a pioneer of concrete poetry, in which the typographic style of the letters is as important as the meaning and rhythm of the words, Houédard also wrote extensively on new approaches to art, spirituality and philosophy as well as collaborating with artists including Gustav Metzger and Yoko Ono, and the composer John Cage.

Prolific though he was in pursuing his cultural interests, Houédard was devoted to his vocation as a Benedictine monk based at Prinknash Abbey in rural Gloucestershire. By the mid-1970s, he had forsaken many of his outside activities to devote more time to the abbey, and to his research and writing on theology.

Since his death in 1992, Houédard has appeared as an enigmatic figure in accounts of 1960s counter culture, until the publication of a new book, “Notes from the Cosmic Typewriter: The Life and Work of Dom Sylvester Houédard,” by Occasional Papers, a nonprofit publishing house in London.

“There is such a lot of interest in Houédard’s work, which so many artists, designers and poets know so well,” said Nicola Simpson, a specialist in 20th-century poetry who edited the book. “But his work is difficult to find because it is scattered in private and institutional collections. Even to this day, we don’t know where all of it is.”

A Benedictine monk in flowing robes and dark glasses must have looked as incongruous at Signals Gallery, the Institute of Contemporary Arts and Houédard’s other avant-garde haunts, as an authority on the beat movement would have seemed in the 16th-century calm of Prinknash Abbey. But, as one of his abbots points out in the new book, Houédard was considered “rather eccentric” even before he took the Benedictine vow.



"George," a 1964 typestract by Houédard. Ruth & Marvin Sackner Archive of Concrete and Visual Poetry

Born Peter Houédard on Guernsey in the Channel Islands in 1924, he grew up there until both of his parents died during his teens, and he was sent to live in England. Houédard began a degree in modern history at Oxford University in 1942, but interrupted his studies to do military service, working as an intelligence officer in Asia. After graduating from Oxford in 1949, he joined the Benedictine community at Prinknash Abbey, and was ordained as a Catholic priest in 1959.

Each Benedictine abbey is run as an independent entity by an abbot or abbess, who has absolute authority over the monks and nuns who live there. A monk like Houédard could not have engaged in activities outside the abbey without his abbot's consent. He was fortunate in having joined Prinknash Abbey under Wilfrid Upson, an enlightened abbot, who encouraged him to pursue his passion for the arts and his research into different faiths and belief systems. After studying at Sant'Anselmo, the Benedictine University in Rome, during the early 1950s, Houédard undertook occasional jobs for religious publishers. He wrote poetry throughout this time and explored his fascination with the relationship between the physical form of words and their meaning, sharing his thinking with other members of what was becoming known as the concrete poetry movement.

By the early 1960s, Houédard was ready to publish the concrete poems that he had typed on his Olivetti Lettera 22 typewriter. As those poems evolved, they became increasingly abstract, with Houédard attaching greater importance to the visual impact of the typewritten characters. His poet friend Edwin Morgan coined the word “typestract,” a combination of “typewriter” and “abstract,” to describe them.

Typography was treated in a similar way in the experimental work of the progressive designers who featured in *Typographica*, like Robert Brownjohn and Edward Wright. “Their playful manipulation of words looked a lot like concrete poetry,” said Rick Poynor, a writer, critic and authority on graphic design, who contributed to “Notes from the Cosmic Typewriter.” “In the 1960s, both sides, the contemporary avant-garde and forward-thinking designers shared a conviction that letters and words should be free on the page, an idea that goes back to the innovative modernist typography of the 1920s.”

The parallels between Houédard’s work and that of Brownjohn, Wright and other designers prompted Herbert Spencer, who edited *Typographica* to visit Prinknash Abbey and to invite him to write about concrete poetry in the magazine. For the rest of the 1960s, Houédard flung himself into a succession of collaborative projects, often inviting designers to participate in them. Having founded the Openings Press in 1964 to publish books of concrete poetry with the graphic designer and artist John Furnival, Houédard persuaded Wright to take the role of “typographical editor” there.

By the late 1960s, Houédard was exhibiting his visual poetry internationally, and in 1971 was given a solo show at the Victoria & Albert Museum in London. Yet he continued to fulfill his commitments to the abbey and to pursue his fascination with different faiths, Tibetan Buddhism in particular. Throughout the 1960s, Houédard was active in the Vatican’s efforts to modernize Catholicism by forging links with other religions and, from the mid-1970s onward, he spent more of his time working on such issues at Prinknash Abbey.

“In his own way he lived his life very faithfully,” Dom Aldhelm Cameron-Brown, abbot of Prinknash Abbey during the 1980s, is quoted as saying in the new book. “He wasn’t a typical monk, but he was a loveable person, and he was dedicated to the community, even if he felt we didn’t always appreciate what he was doing.”

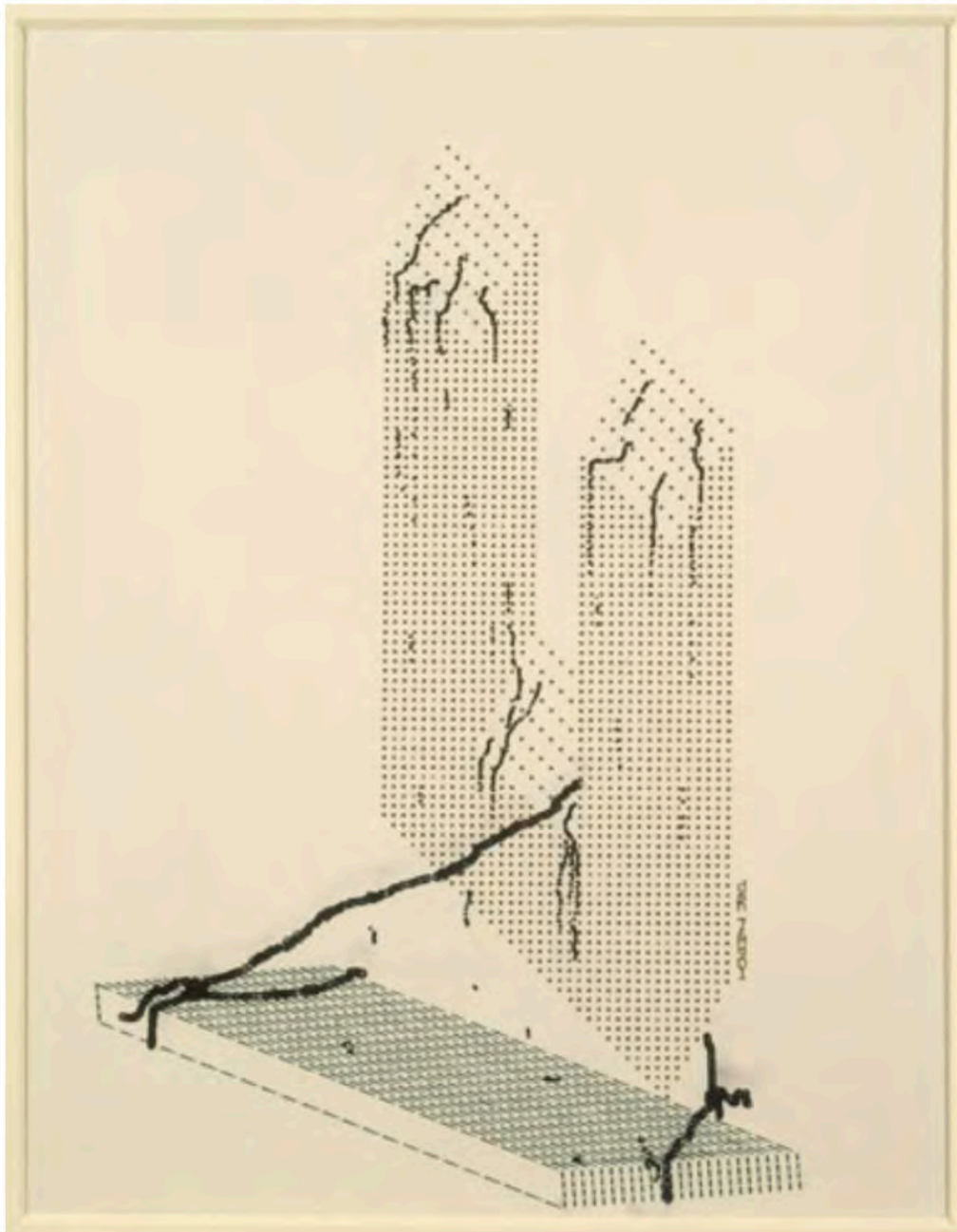
The Independent
19 June 2009



INDEPENDENT
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Great Works: For the 5 Vowels (U) (1976) Dom Sylvester Houédard

By Tom Lubbock | Friday 19 June 2009 00:00 |



Some people hold on to it, but the typewriter, the old manual, is almost gone from our hands and our lives. We went electric, then word-processor, then laptop. In the process, the gap widened from finger to mark. Tangible paper has turned into intangible screen (and ink need never emerge at all). Yet, in the meantime, we still haven't thrown away our pens. And so on our desk today there lies an open chasm: between pure handiwork and the cleanest mechanisation.

Or that's how we often see the distinction, hand against machine. But in *The Nature and Art of Craftsmanship* (1968) the craftsman and teacher David Pye defined the difference more accurately. The contrast, he said, was between "the workmanship of risk" and "the workmanship of certainty". Almost all workmanship employs tools or machinery (and hands). The question is the relationship between means and end. How far can the precise form of the work be guaranteed? How far will there be some play in it, making the result risky, unpredictable?

Pye said: "The most typical and familiar example of the workmanship of risk is writing with the pen, and of the workmanship of certainty, modern printing." The computer page – non-printed, immaterial – would only be a further advance in certainty, another move in the direction away from handwriting.

Around the time that Pye wrote his enlightening book on craftsmanship, the poet and Benedictine monk, Dom Sylvester Houédard, was turning the manual typewriter into a visually creative medium. His works offer an object lesson in art and certainty and risk. He called these typed pages "typestracts". Pye mentions the typewriter too. He considers it "an intermediate form of workmanship, that of limited risk. You can spoil the page in innumerable ways, but the n's will never look like u's, and however ugly the typing, it will almost necessarily be legible."

That's true, if you use the machine in the standard way. But if you type an n, take the page out, put it in upside down and type a u, they will look very similar. And if you fill a page with typing, then put it in again and type over it, legibility will start to go. This is the kind of way Houédard proceeded. He used the manual machine more manually than most, and beautifully. He employed standard equipment. His typestracts were all typed on a portable Olivetti Lettera 22 (a fact, he said, Olivetti showed no interest in). He limited himself to the normal ink ribbons, with their normal colours, blue, black and red, along with various coloured carbon papers too.

Houédard's workmanship combines Pye's categories. He uses the typewriter's "certainty" elements. There's the fixed hold of the page, the set spacing between characters, the straight and parallel alignment of the lines. There's the fact that all his marks are struck with his machine's available 86 key heads. He also exploits the typewriter's "risk" elements, the source of what (by strict secretarial standards) would be considered failings, slips and spoils. The keys can be struck with variable pressure. The ink ribbons fade. The roller can be disengaged, the page moved freely through it or reset at a different angle. Keys can be repeatedly overprinted.

Houédard's visual repertoire is as wide as his medium allows. Some of his typestracts are made with the letter keys, and composed from words. Some have the graphic keys – the dashes, the dots, the brackets – doing most of the work. Typestracts can be abstract indeed, flat shimmering surfaces, in which areas of colours of different intensity mesh and blend. Or they can use their strokes to construct quasi-images, often three-dimensional forms. For the 5 Vowels (U) is like that. It comes from a group of five images, each one a variation on the shape of a vowel. Here, the letter U is translated into a straight-edged solid, a two-pronged structure. It's reminiscent of a tower block or a tuning fork.

A letter is an obvious enough subject for typewriter art, but there aren't any u's or other letters used in this U-structure. Its planes are made entirely from full stops, more and less widely spaced. These dots are in regular lines and columns, and most of them are set on the page in the normal upright way, and very tightly. But the dots that form the wider-spaced, up-facing planes run at diagonals. Houédard didn't do this freehand. He turned the page in the machine, and used stencils to guide his slanted forms. In other words, he added some extra "certainties" to the typewriter's built-in regularities.

The two-pronged U-structure seems to be floating off the ground, or rather just above a separate oblong base. (It could be a 3D underlining.) The U-structure is typed in black ink, but this base is in green – carbon paper? - and it's constructed not from dots but from a stitching and criss-cross of dashes.

What makes the U-structure look weightless is the way it's joined to this base. A length of string, knotted around the ends of the base, and threaded through the U, is holding it down. Now this length of string is a piece of freehand drawing (though very laborious). It is created by gradually moving the page by hand through the roller, as numerous individual black strokes are closely overprinted and accumulated into a loose, fat, twisted line.

The strokes are so dense, so merged together, it's a little hard to identify which key has been used to make them, but probably it's the capital O. And they're struck with a degree of "risk" – an uncertainty as to where they will exactly land on the page – that's beyond even the messiest typist or the jerkiest machine. This imprecision imbues the knotted string with its fluid or organic character. There are other drawn lines, but thinner and shorter. They hang on the tops and sides of the U-structure. They're probably made from dots. They look like seaweeds trailing down it, or sea-worms slithering up it. There are further tiny drippings or droppings, descending and going off the bottom. All these marks give the U-structure a feeling of being underwater. That makes sense of its weightlessness. Perhaps that's what U stands for.

By turning the typewriter to these novel purposes, this typestract uses it both with and against its grain. It employs its existing regularities and vagaries, and then introduces new ones. Some of these are very alien to a typewriter's habits, like the exact but oblique alignments, or the free drawing. But they're combined with normal typing practices, like the lines of dot dot dots... The familiar only makes the strange seem stranger. The typestract shows a medium being put through its paces, and a body being put through a machine. It sets certainty in dialogue with risk, painting with text. It stresses typewriting as motion. As dsh wrote: "typestracts – rhythm of typing – action poetry."

For the 5 Vowels (U) can be now seen at the ICA, on the Mall, London SW1, in a show called Poor. Old. Tired. Horse., a very miscellaneous anthology of visual-verbal artworks, until 23 August. There are a dozen typestracts, including the rest of the 5 Vowels. They'll remind those who can remember of the nature and art of the manual.