



**NORWICH**  
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Dom Sylvester Houédard: tantric poeties

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**DR NICOLA SIMPSON**

# Dom Sylvester Houédard: tantric poetries

## **CONTEXTUAL INFORMATION**

- 1 Supporting Statement 1
- 2 Research Process 2-6
- 3 Research Insights 7-12
- 4 Dissemination 13

# 1. SUPPORTING STATEMENT

<b>Output title</b>	Dom Sylvester Houédard: tantric poetries
<b>Output type</b>	M - Exhibition
<b>Output date</b>	2020

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

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

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

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

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

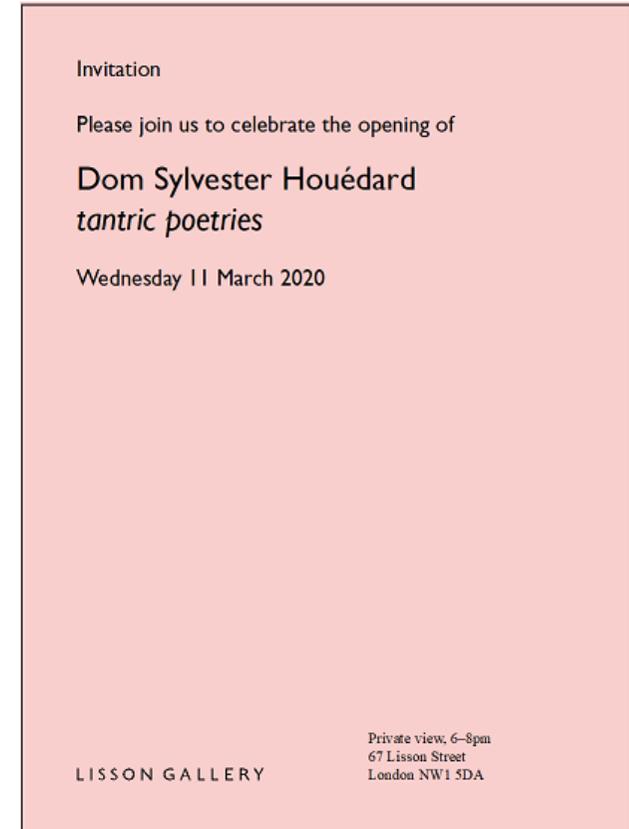


Fig.1 Private View invitation

## 2. RESEARCH PROCESS

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

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

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

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



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



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

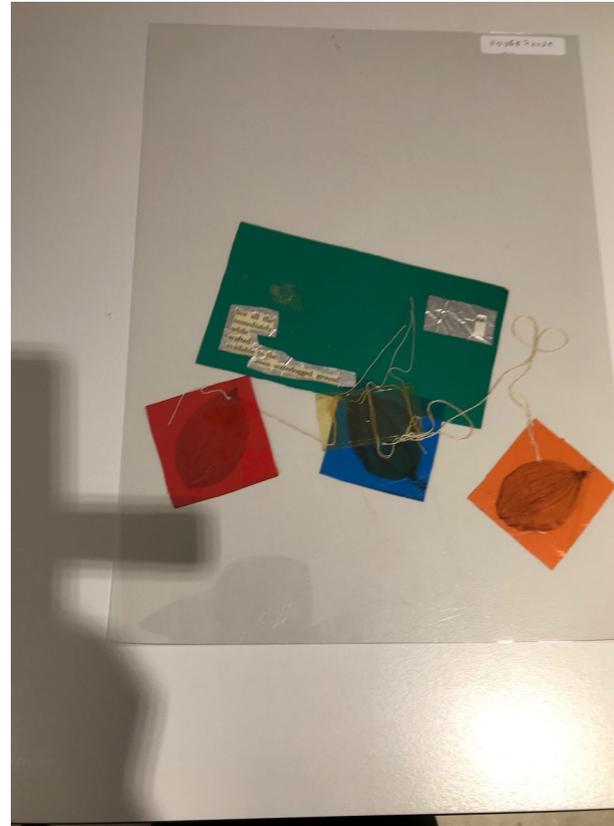


Fig.4 dsh archive, Lisson Gallery  
Laminate poem 'live all the immediately'.

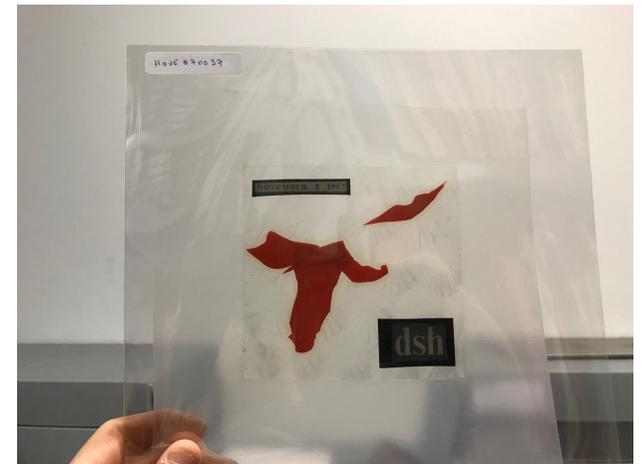


Fig.5 dsh archive, Lisson Gallery

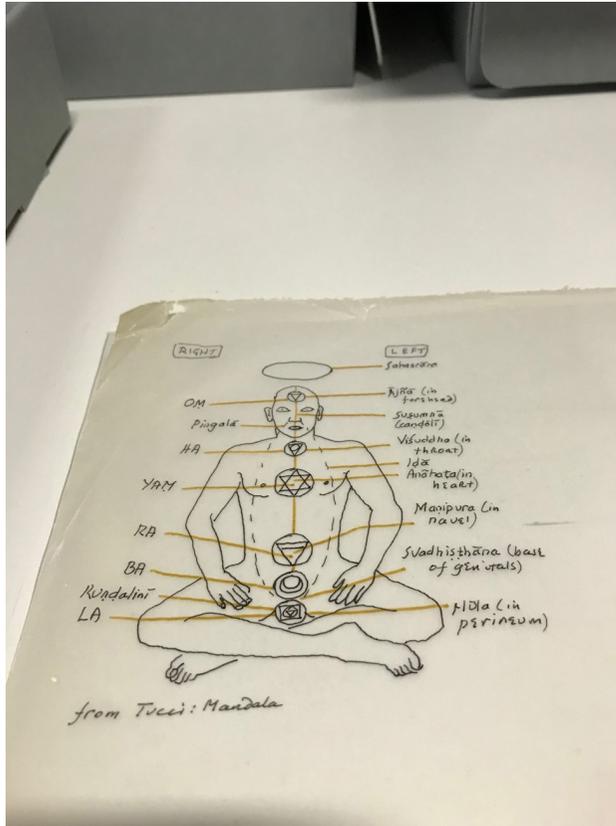


Fig.6 dsh archive, Lisson Gallery  
Undated drawing of body mandala.

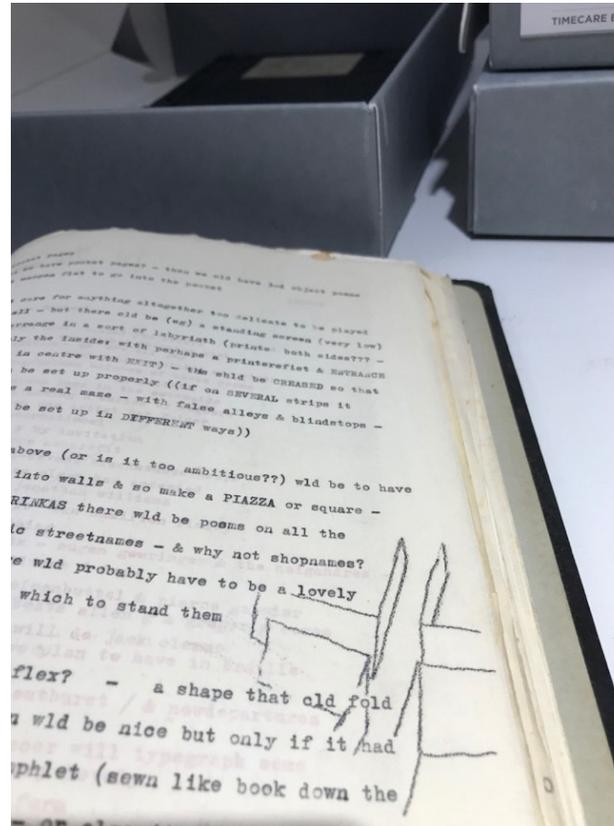


Fig.7 dsh archive, Lisson Gallery  
Sketches for folding/ unfolding poems in the marginalia of a notebook.

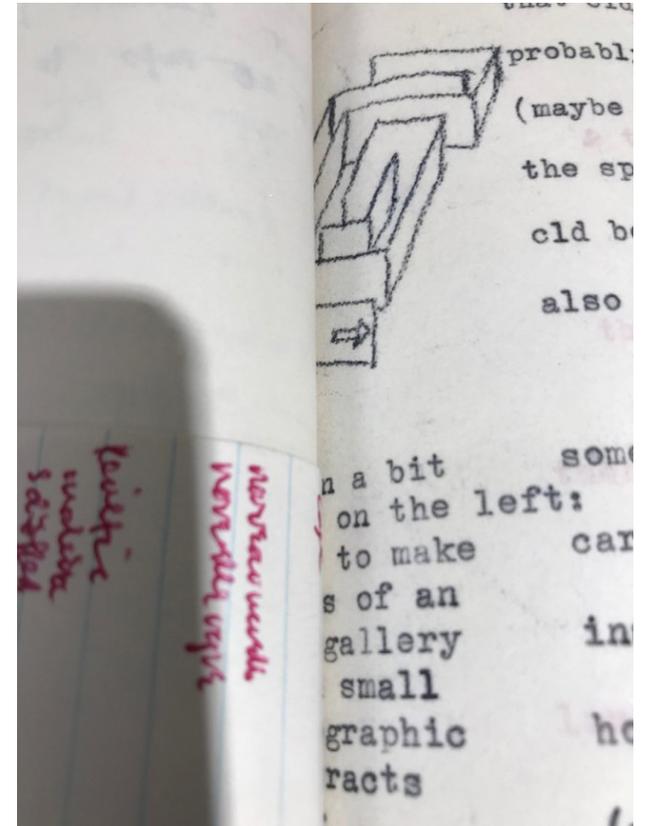
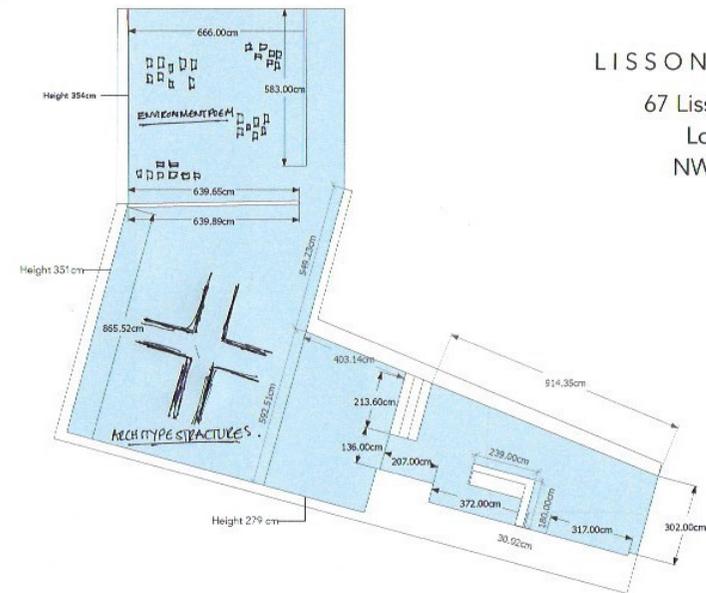




Fig.8 dsh archive, Lisson Gallery  
Typestract 'extracts from the mantra jrim hum ho ho ho phat'.

3

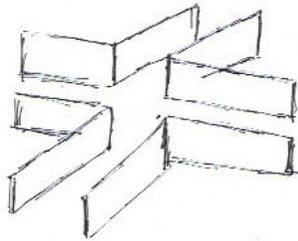


LISSON GALLERY  
67 Lisson Street  
London  
NW1 5DA

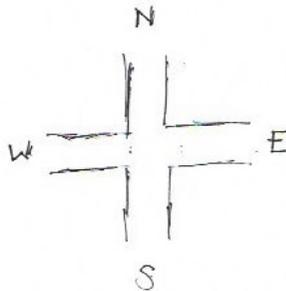
67 Ground Floor Gallery

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

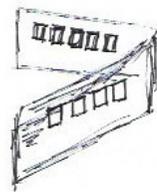
① GALLERY SPACE "SPIRITUAL ARCHITYPESTRUCTURES"  
[INNER MANDALA]



8 PARTITION WALLS.  
16 WALL SPACES.



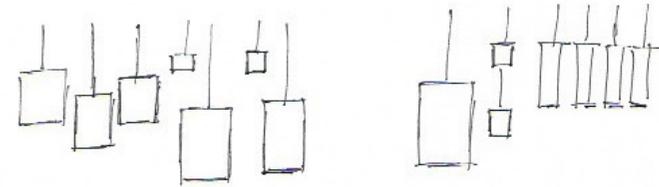
MOVING IN & OUT OF WALLS ENABLES A.  
YOGA = EXPERIENCE OF  
CONCEPTS IN PHILOSOPHY  
OF TYPESTRUCTS



TYPESTRUCT  
HUNG IN  
PERMUTATIONAL/  
COMBINATIONAL  
GROUPINGS.

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

② GALLERY SPACE "ENVIRONMENT POEM"  
[OUTER MANDALA]



WALK AMONG HANGING LAMINATE FORMS.

SOUND PIECE = PERFORMANCE OF MANTRA

"JRIH HUH HO HO HO PHAT"

TRANSFORMATION OF EVERYDAY INTO THE SPIRITUAL PATH

ALL FORMS ARE THE DAKINI (BUDDHA)

ALL SOUNDS ARE THE DAKINI (BUDDHA)

ALL ACTIONS ARE THE DAKINI (BUDDHA).

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

### 3. RESEARCH INSIGHTS

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

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

The exhibition was divided into two spaces:

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

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

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



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



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



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



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



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



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



Fig.18 Installing Room 2 environmentpoem



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

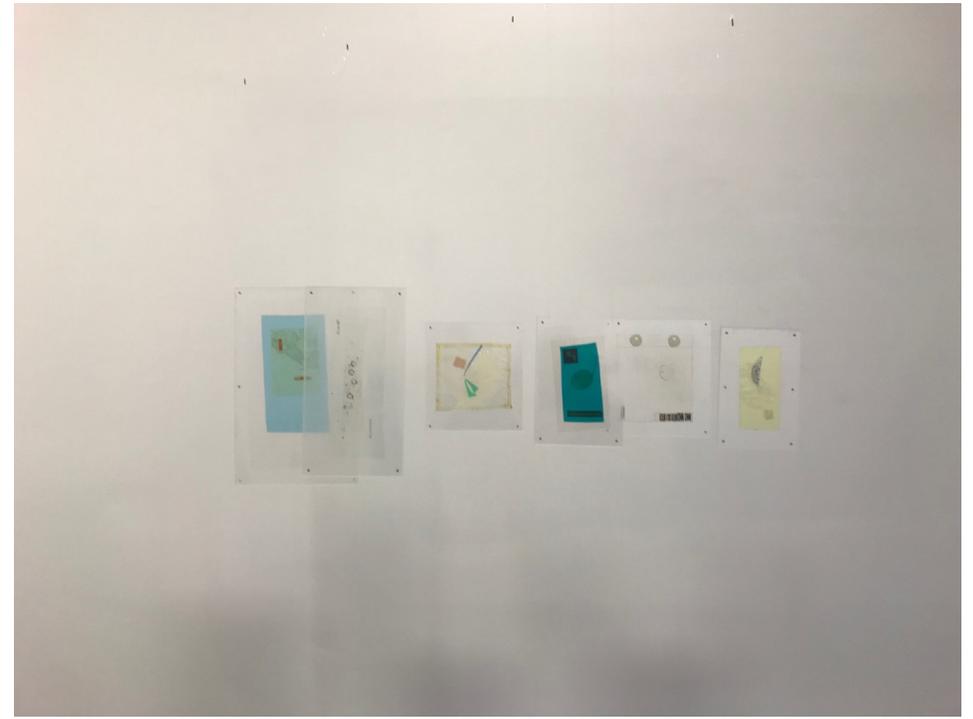


Fig.20 Installation shot of Room 2: laminate grouping 21 'not that'



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



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





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