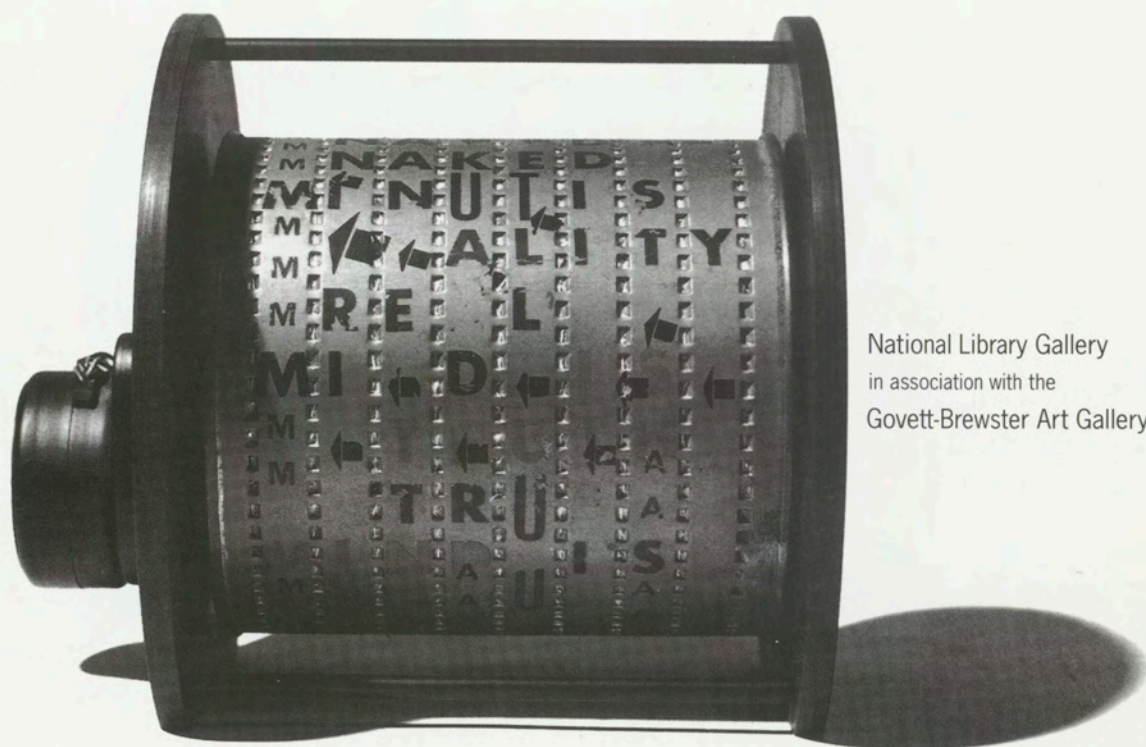


Liliane  
Lijn

Poem  
Machines  
and  
other  
book  
works



National Library Gallery  
in association with the  
Govett-Brewster Art Gallery





Liliane Lijn and her mother:  
Frantispiece for *Her Mother's Voice*

The idea for this exhibition came from Wendy Harding, who approached the National Library Gallery in 1996. We were immediately attracted by the *Poem Machines*, and the links between art and text in those works and the bookworks *Crossing Map* and *Her Mother's Voice* seemed ideally suited to us as a library gallery.

We are pleased that the Govett-Brewster Art Gallery, in New Plymouth, will also be showing this exhibition of Liliane's work, and we have enjoyed a fruitful collaboration with them on this project.

Our thanks also to The British Council, whose financial assistance has enabled Liliane to fly out to New Zealand for the opening of the exhibition, her first in this country.

**Richard King**  
Exhibitions Officer  
National Library Gallery

## Introduction

Liliane Lijn's bookworks are primarily concerned with language as energy. She is interested in connecting the different paths of perception: the visual, the tactile, and the auditory. The story of how her works came to be shown here is a story of chance.

In 1995 I met Liliane Lijn at the Artists' Book Fair in London. Her name had been mentioned to me by a Wellington artist who had once been mistaken for her, and it jumped out at me almost as soon as I reached the book stands. Their similar sounding names – Liliane Lijn/Vivian Lynn – made a tenuous connection I was curious to follow. I told my story to Liliane and she invited me to see her studio. Discussions on my return with the Govett-Brewster Art Gallery and National Library Gallery, who both expressed interest in her work, led to this exhibition taking place.

Liliane Lijn began exploring words and energy in 1963, using a rotating cylinder to dissolve words in a blur of vibration. By physically deconstructing the language she was reinventing it with a new energy.

Twenty years later, in *Crossing Map*, written words, transformed by colour and visual movement, flowed across the page in conversation with their drawings. By 'entering the machine' Lijn was able to manipulate 16 ink colours on the press while the book was actually being printed. Each page of each book has slightly different colours.

Thirteen years further on, in 1996, the fascination with words and language became a personal journey into memory – transcribing the rich flowing cadences of her mother's reminiscing into printed words and photographs, with the handmade Japanese paper giving fragility and translucence to the work. Now the language itself flows across the page while photos and video stills freeze movement, as a contrast to *Crossing Map*, where the imagery flowed from page to page. The visual, auditory and tactile all combine to evoke precious memories – the past in the present and the future in the past.

**Wendy Harding**

## The Blurring of the Word: Liliane Lijn's Poem Machines

It wasn't until the middle of the fourth century that systems for structuring written alphabetical language began to develop, and they took until the end of the seventh century to fully catch on. Up until that point, readers read aloud from a string of words because, for thousands of years previously, as with Egyptian hieroglyphs and Sumerian cuneiform, all texts were continuous. Early Christian monks knew most of their texts by heart, but in order to help those who didn't, they began to separate the material into lines of sense, and then to develop ways for showing where to raise or lower the voice. These changes brought with them the phenomenon of silent reading, possible then because auditory memory linked to a vocal response was no longer necessary for understanding written words.

Lijn's whirling texts move language back to those earlier periods of no punctuation. Her scripts revert to dissolving word spaces and making textual bands which are

texturally homogenous. Laden with texts and formulas by Lijn herself or poet friends, which allude to the laws of subatomic physics and astronomy, the revolving horizontal drums and vertical cones create continuous moving lines, hovering whirling hoops.

Lijn speaks beyond the visual, writing that they contain 'a pure vibration' that becomes an 'energy of sound' which enables the viewer 'to see sound'.<sup>1</sup> She suggests that the audience will mentally hear them when they are read, read in a way that is beyond their being mere signifiers for sound.

Her explanation of the vibrating movement refers to the physiology of hearing. It implies a transmutation, almost a sort of transubstantiation in which the whirling text is transformed into sound waves:

The words we utter travel in sound waves vibrating through the air into our inner ear. When we see the written word, we forget that these letters are symbols of vibrations... [With the] *Poem machines*, I want the word to be seen in movement, splitting itself into a pure vibration until it becomes the energy of sound.<sup>2</sup>

The 'inner' of the 'inner ear' is here a place for a mental experience, as well as part of the listening organ. For the texts to be heard in the mind, legibility is essential. They need to be seen first. The experience is not aurally hallucinatory, but symbolic in the sense that the blurs

added to the lettering allude to the movement of ear parts, which of course, on these occasions, are not vibrating at all. Only in the mind's ear.

The cones and cylinders motorised by Lijn have a fortuitous relationship to the processes and body parts of sight and sound. The cylinders coincidentally seem to refer to the ear drum, and the cone shape, since the Renaissance, has been associated with vision, especially when on a horizontal axis. That Lijn's cones face the ground is appropriate, as she wants her viewer 'to see sound', to examine them while, paradoxically, also disengaging from the visual world.

Lijn's machines can be compared to Marcel Duchamp's *Precision optics* series of experiments. In 1920, Duchamp and Man Ray made *Rotary glass plates*, a machine of five revolving glass oblongs bearing parallel stripes. Positioned on a horizontal axis in order of increasing length, the plates formed cross sections of a spinning cone. Five years later Duchamp made another similar motorised contraption, *Rotary demisphere*, which had patterns attached to a vertical rotating disc under a plexiglass dome. In his 1926 film *Anemic cinema*, this machine was used to present nine black circles containing spiralling and

punning texts. These were alternated with other discs of optical patterns. Sometimes he photographed the patterns revolving within a circle of text, showing patterns and words simultaneously.

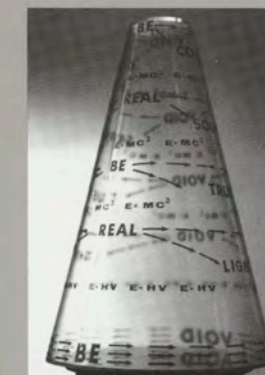
On Lijn's conical *Poem machines*, the spinning word-lines are more decipherable nearer the slower moving tops. However the way they use motion to blur letters and blend words is related to the way Duchamp used motion on his texts for the *Rotary demisphere*, texts that were rich in assonance and alliteration. His most well known example is 'estimons les ecchymoses des Esquimaux aux mots exquis,' (we esteem the bruises of the Eskimos with beautiful language). Whereas his texts form a vertiginous spiralling line that, when rotated, draws the viewer into an ambiguous space, with Lijn the centrifugal spin creates separately floating rings that hover. Some words merge with letters of other words to form blocks, and these blocks coalesce to form thick bands. The words take on a structure that is the opposite of the structure of the pronounced sounds of Duchamp's contrived, non-moving text. One blurs letters so that they are almost illegible; the other instead of slurring, actually staccatoes sound – chops it up so that the words are spoken with added rhythmical emphases.

Lijn's emphatic desire for the words to be blurred by movement privileges the moving text over the static one for, although the objects are elegant and mysterious

when still, these artworks are machines that need to demonstrate their purpose, in order to succeed as artworks. To see them only when they are still, is like looking at a painting when it is upside down. It is a distortion.

Yet there is a paradox within this movement for, at the same time as the words begin to fuse and then disappear as identifiable units, they gain a velocity that allows them to become more than single words – to be utterances, instead of rudimentary definitions. When their letters lose their clarity, the words gain an inflection which allows them to function as phrases. No longer lingering in isolation, suspended as solo units juxtaposed in small groups, they instead expand their meaning, evoking thoughts beyond themselves. They acquire a pitch, an urgency, a shrillness, so that, like Tibetan prayer wheels, their very motion anticipates and facilitates the hearing of faraway listeners. It is these poetic 'vibrations' that give Lijn's *Poem machines* such a cogent fascination.

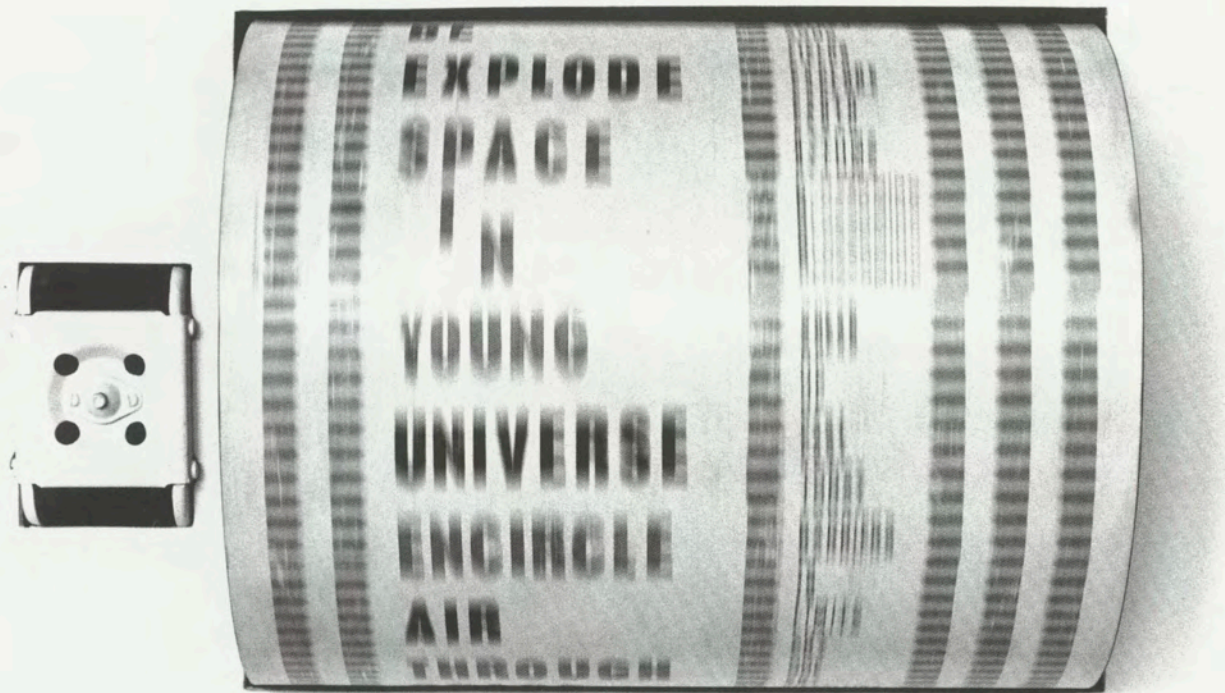
**John Hurrell**  
Curator  
Govett-Brewster Art Gallery



E=MC3 1968,  
Letraset on perspex  
cone, motorised  
turntable, poem by  
Liliane Lijn

<sup>1</sup>Liliane Lijn, 'Poem Machines = Vision of Sound' in Liliane Lijn: *Poem Machines* 1962-1968, National Art Library, Victoria & Albert Museum, 1993  
<sup>2</sup>ibid.





**National Library Gallery**

Molesworth Street  
Wellington  
Tel: 0-4-474 3000

1 March – 17 May 1998

Gallery hours:

9 – 5 Monday to Friday  
9 – 4.30 Saturday  
1 – 4.30 Sunday

**Govett-Brewster Art Gallery**

Queen Street  
New Plymouth  
Tel: 0-6-758 5149

11 July – 23 August 1998

Gallery hours:

10.30 – 5 daily

cover

*Man Is Naked* 1964/5,  
Letraset on oil filter, plastic,  
painted metal, motor, poem  
by Liliane Lijn

this page

*Young Universe* 1961/2,  
Letraset on painted steel  
drum, wood, hardboard,  
motor, words by Nazli Nour

Inside from left to right

*ABC Cone* 1965,  
Letraset on painted cork cone,  
motorised turntable

*Atom Body Was Light* 1963,  
Letraset and paint on wood  
cone, turntable, motor, poem  
by Liliane Lijn

*Atom Born Beings* 1962/3,  
Letraset on painted metal  
drum, plastic, painted metal,  
motor, words taken from  
a poem by Nazli Nour

*Beyond Images (Handheld  
Poem Machine)* 1963/4,  
Letraset on painted wood  
cylinder, rollerbearings,  
wood shaft, wood base, 9  
words selected by the artist  
from a 9 page poem by  
George Andrews