

LILIANE LIJN: MY INFLUENCES

Text by Liliane Lijn
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From conversations with friends including André Breton, William Burroughs and Caresse Crosby, to studying astronomy, physics and the Greek myths, Liliane Lijn discusses the evolution of her pictorial language.

‘A return to the source of consciousness is identical with the creation of the world.’
Marie-Louise Von Franz, *Creation Myths* (1972)

I am alive because my grandfather bought a Cuban passport in 1923. Although he was born in the border area that wavered between being Poland or Russia, Joseph Segall lived in Berlin, where he was a shipping agent for the Hamburg–American Line. His son, Herman, met my mother by chance on a Sopot beach, having just returned to Danzig, because the bar he had started with a cousin in Rio de Janeiro had failed. By marrying my father, my mother also received a Cuban passport and urged my father to leave Europe and get American papers. Despite being Jews, they managed to travel back and forth as Cubans. Back and forth, because they couldn’t decide where to make their permanent home and my father became involved in helping friends and relatives to leave Nazi Germany. Restlessness, homelessness, not quite belonging anywhere. The importance of chance, what my parents called luck. These feelings were passed from them to me and, even before my birth, formed my identity.

I was born in New York in 1939, just three months after my family had finally decided to leave the menace of Adolf Hitler in Europe and permanently settle in the United States. My mother told me that, for a few months, I had a Cuban nanny and that, because of her,

RODEO

my first words were Spanish. I grew up hearing six languages. My father and mother spoke German, especially when they quarrelled. My mother and my grandmother (her mother), spoke Polish with each other. My father spoke Yiddish to his father, who also lived with us, and Russian to my mother's mother. My uncles and aunts spoke French and everyone tried to speak English to my brother and me. From the beginning, language was important to me.

My grandmother had a beautiful voice and would sing the pop songs of her time, the sad songs of the Russian pop idol, Alexander Vertinsky. My father also sang, making up his own lyrics and poems, and my brother and I looked forward to the stories he would tell us, when he returned in the evening. He had an extraordinarily expressive face. He was large and powerful and full of surprises. You could never take him for granted. Uncles and aunts, from both my mother's and father's side, were painters or musicians, writers or simply interesting people, whose lives were the topics of much talk in our family.

And then there were also shadows. As a small child, I remember people who came to our house and my grandmother would usher me away, in case I said something about the way they looked. Relatives or friends of friends who had been in the camps and somehow escaped or survived. The camps were always spoken of in hushed tones. My mother's favourite cousin, her best friend, in whose family she had lived, sent her a postcard from Auschwitz, writing as if from a holiday camp. I wasn't told this until much later, but the emotions that were prevalent from day to day seeped into me and, with the light of my parents' energy and optimism, I also received their feelings of anxiety and helpless guilt. When my parents divorced, I was sent to boarding school. I was nine and my father gave me a little diary with a lock and key. I began writing. He also took me shopping for clothes, beautiful dresses that made the pill of leaving home less bitter. But then, only one month after arriving at Hickory Ridge – a progressive boarding school in the wilds of Vermont to which the surrealist writer and artist André Breton had sent his daughter, Aube, some years earlier – a seven-year-old child set fire to the main school building and we lost everything. The huge, all-consuming fire that we watched from a safe distance was some kind of awakening. The rest of the school year was spent living in a farmhouse close to the barn with its horses and their smell, close to the feel of the cold snow and ice, the forested hills, where we rode bareback. It was a new kind of freedom and connection to the earth that stayed with me.

RODEO

From my early teenage years, the reading at school of Nathaniel Hawthorne's novel *The Scarlet Letter* (1850) awoke in me the painful awareness of the vulnerability of being a woman. I remember the pleasure and excitement of holiday outings to the Museum of Modern Art in New York and the magic of theatre. *Porgy and Bess*, seen as a child, remains unforgettable, as do Sundays at Radio City Music Hall, with its huge organ and shimmering floor show, and the psychological dramas my father took me to. The memory of one of these, seen when I was seven years old, remained indelibly imprinted on my imagination and was a source of strange nostalgic fantasies. I was surprised quite recently to discover that it was the 1946 film *Stairway to Heaven* and that it was, indeed, great.

When I was 14, and had begun to feel at ease in my surroundings, my father, who had by now remarried, decided to move to Geneva in Switzerland. My mother hurried to join us and I chose to live with her, across the Alps, in the small town of Lugano. There, I attended the only grammar school, a Swiss-Italian state school, where no one spoke English. I was unable to communicate, and – after having previously always been at the top of my class – suddenly felt stupid, although I soon realized there were advantages, too, in not belonging. At the *liceo*, I learned to study, as I had never done before, and became familiar with great art, discovering that I lived a few minutes' walk from the amazing Thyssen-Bornemisza Collection. After nearly three years spent speaking and studying in Italian, with hardly anyone except my mother with whom to speak English, my grasp of English became somewhat unsure and my interests turned towards expressing myself in a more direct visual form. I started to paint and, having met once again a childhood friend whose mother was a surrealist painter, I suddenly decided to leave school, as soon as possible, to meet her in Paris, where we would both study art.

Nina, whom I first met at Hickory Ridge, lived with her mother, Manina, in a Palazzo near the Accademia in Venice. She had decided that Venice was too claustrophobic and, when I spent a weekend with her in the autumn of 1957, she persuaded me that Lugano was too provincial and that, to become an artist, I had to take my life in my own hands. In Paris, Nina introduced me to Breton, to Manina's new husband, Alain Jouffroy, and to her revolutionary friend, Jean-Jacques Lebel. Thus began my first year in Paris, where, in a sustained burst of unfocussed energy, I studied archaeology and art history at the Sorbonne and the École du Louvre, attended gatherings at the Surrealist Café with Nina, meeting the poets Joyce Mansour and Benjamin Péret, visited museums, explored the city, fell in love and began to experiment with ink and collage. That first year was an

RODEO

inner explosion. Most of the significant influences for my work occurred in that one year. Everyone I met taught me something, suggesting reading material, showing me their own work, telling me what to look at, giving me tips on technique and looking critically at my first attempts to draw and paint. Jean-Jacques, who became my boyfriend, introduced me to Indian and Japanese Zen Buddhism, Friedrich Engels, Karl Marx and his great hero, Leon Trotsky. Nina gave me Breton's *Entretiens* (Discussions, 1952), *The Surrealist Manifesto* (1924) and *L'Amour Fou* (Mad Love, 1937), and my notebooks of the year are crowded with lists of authors to read: William Blake, Charles Baudelaire, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Robert Desnos, Heraclite and the Gnostics, Friedrich Hölderlin, Alfred Jarry, Comte de Lautréamont, Gérard de Nerval, Novalis, Arthur Rimbaud, the Marquis de Sade and Paul Eluard. Antonin Artaud's writings impressed me deeply. In the introduction to my book, *Crossing Map* (1983), I quote from his writings during his voyage to the land of the Tarahumaras: 'Prends conscience des forces de la vie contraires, parce que sans cette conscience, tu es mort.' (Become conscious of opposite forces in life because if you are not aware of this, you are dead.) Evil, he writes, is loss of consciousness. Artaud's words, and what I read and was told of his desperate life, awoke in me a belief in the urgent necessity for awareness that has remained a central aspect of both my art and my life.

In Paris, I often frequented the Musée Guimet, spending time in the library to study. At this time, my particular interest was in South East Asian art. My mother had given me a book on the temples of Angkor Wat for my 16th birthday. I was fascinated by the juxtaposition of the clarity of the large-scale geometrical symmetries of the temple layout with the intricacy and complexity of the stone carvings. The tiered conical towers, endless arches and repeating openings created a majestic sense of space and volume, while the teeming excess of the surface carvings indicated a prescience that natural abundance will overcome human control and the irrational swallow the rational. A drawing I made in 1959 depicts that juxtaposition. In the drawing there are two geometrical forms: an outer circle, crammed full of embryonic life forms, containing at its centre a large empty triangle. Curiously, I recently came upon a similar drawing by Louise Bourgeois in the catalogue for an exhibition, in which we both took part, although both her circle and her triangle are empty. I had an almost innate interest in geometry and structure. In the summer of the same year, I visited Madrid and spent a week in the Prado. My favourite work there was Hieronymus Bosch's *The Garden of Earthly Delights* (1500–05). I loved his wild and prophetic imagination; his translucent globes and strange fruit fountains. I spent days analyzing its composition. I thought Bosch had arranged all the elements in

the triptych into triangulated segments, each segment related to the others, in a magical connective web.

I remember the amazement and sense of discovery that I felt on a visit to an exhibition of Chinese horizontal scroll paintings at the Musée Cernuschi in 1959. The paintings were of landscapes, within which were almost concealed cities or palaces with formal gardens, people and animals, all on a scale that portrayed humans and their creations, despite their obvious splendour, as a small part of the natural world. I realized that these were cosmic paintings. My series of 'Sky Scrolls', begun in the autumn of the same year, were, no doubt, influenced by these wonderful paintings that I have never seen again. They must also have shown me the importance of scale, both in painting and sculpture.

In Paris in 1959, it was easy to see the work of dada and surrealist artists. The first vernissage that Manina took Nina and I to was for a Max Ernst exhibition. I loved his inventive collages and the paintings he made while living in Arizona; it was through his work that I first discovered the *frottage* technique. I also saw, very soon after my arrival in Paris, Marcel Duchamp's *Nude Descending a Staircase, No.2* (1912). Considered his last cubist work, it didn't entirely fit into that genre. It made me think more of movement and machines, especially in the blade-like propeller form that Duchamp used to draw the body in motion. I didn't see *The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even* (1915–23) or his work with words or his readymades until much later, when I visited Philadelphia. The exquisitely delicate watercolours of Wols also delighted me. I was lucky enough to see a large exhibition of his work, which since has had very little exposure. Breton wrote about automatic writing, which Salvador Dalí used in painting, and I immediately experimented with it both in images and words. The surrealists were also interested in science, as is evident in their wonderful magazine *Minotaure* (1933–39), which gave poetry, science, archaeology and the visual arts equal importance. In it, I first saw many of Henri Michaux's mescaline drawings and read his visionary writings. It seemed perfectly natural to me that an artist should both write and draw or paint. At the time, I had not really begun to work in three dimensions nor had I realized that the visual arts and literature were held to be separate territories. In the circles I moved in, art and poetry were, if not interchangeable, at least in communication.

Jean-Jacques introduced me to the Greek sculptor Takis, who offered to teach me the lost wax technique. Through Takis and the South African poet, Sinclair Beiles, who was editing

RODEO

William Burroughs's 1959 novel *Naked Lunch* for Maurice Girodias's Olympia Press, I met Burroughs, Gregory Corso and Brion Gysin, with whom I immediately became friends. Sinclair gave me an autographed copy of the first book of cut-ups, *Minutes to Go* (1960), which was written by Beiles, Burroughs, Corso and Gysin. It took a painter, Gysin, to invent the cut-up technique, which moved surrealist automatic writing one step further, creating pure text collages and treating words like ready-made images. Unconsciously understanding this inspired my original juxtaposition of text with machine. I had also discovered the magazine *Scientific American*, which prompted much of my early passion for, and understanding of, science. My feeling about science – in particular the science of light and matter – was that it was pure poetry. A subsequent visit to the Palais de la Découverte, where I saw an early experiment with 'interference', prompted me to make the precursor to *Poem Machines* (1962–63), *Le Vibrograph* (1962): two horizontal cylinders inscribed with parallel black lines, that, when spinning, created coloured interference patterns. Next, I made a revolving drum, encrusted with Letrafilm letters of the alphabet that dissolved into vibrations. On seeing this early work in my room at the Hotel La Louisiane in Paris in 1962, my friend, the British filmmaker and poet Nazli Nour, asked me to collaborate, even if it meant I had to cut up her lengthy prose poems. 'Make my poems move,' she said. Her request was well timed, coming just when I wanted to use words, instead of lines. I reasoned that words were made of letters and letters of lines. Meaningful lines. This began a lengthy collaboration between Nazli and me.

Science, technology and industry have played a significant role in the development of my work. My first real contact with industry was on Canal Street in New York when, in 1961, Max Landau, the owner of Industrial Plastics Supply, offered to let me use a space in his warehouse as my studio. He also allowed me to freely use both the materials and machinery there, accelerating the progress of my experiments with new materials and permanently changing the direction of my work from expression to research and invention. This contact also led me to work within an industrial context, using whatever local industries I could find. I felt a great sense of space and freedom in New York in the early 1960s. Apart from the ease with which one could obtain materials of all sorts, the art scene was ebullient and open. As a young woman, I was invited to openings, happenings and parties and I frequently met interesting people.

Caresse Crosby was the most inspiring woman I have known. I first met her in 1960, when she was 70 and I was 20. She had invited Takis and I to stay the summer in her

RODEO

castle north of Rome, the huge Castello di Rocca Sinibalda, where she held court over an ever-changing group of artists, poets and guests from the world of fashion. She had met Takis in Greece, some years earlier, and helped him to leave Athens and live in Paris. Hers was a long history of patronage to the arts. She was a free spirit born into an aristocratic American family. She invented the brassiere in 1914, when she was in her early 20s, and sold the patent, so she told me, to Warner Brothers. In the 1920s, she and her husband, Harry Crosby, founded the Black Sun Press, publishing the early work of authors including T.S. Elliot, James Joyce, Henry Miller and Anaïs Nin. With a fellow American, Caresse started the organization Citizens of the World; both burned their passports and travelled without them, often ending up in prison. She also founded Women for Peace and, when I met her, she was trying to establish a Centre for World Peace in Delphi. She explained to me that she had chosen Delphi because the ancient Greeks believed that it was the *omphalos*, or navel, of the world. Caresse considered me a spiritual daughter and encouraged me to write and to make art. Three years later, Takis and I took a boat from Venice to meet her in Cyprus, where we were to meet with President Archbishop Makarios to discuss the building of a Centre for World Peace with Buckminster Fuller as architect. The boat stopped in Athens, so Takis and I went to visit his family for the afternoon. There we heard that the meeting was postponed, due to urgent political problems on the island. Caresse was an inspiration and a powerful influence on me; she was an example of a brilliantly inventive woman, an older woman who treated me as her equal.

I had been to Greece in the autumn of 1959, and fell in love with the spare, luminous land and the hospitable people there. Takis and I decided to build a house on a hill above the Attic plain, where his father had once owned and farmed the land. We imagined a pure place, a centre for artists and poets, a cosmic observatory. Takis started to build it but soon returned to Paris, leaving me to complete the work. The process of learning how to build a house, communicating in Greek with the mason and carpenter, the blacksmith, electrician and plumber, was an important education in the basics of observation, design and functionality. And then there was ancient Greece, or what remained of it. I imagined Greece as it had been at the time of Pericles and was shocked to drive through the simple crumbling villages and small towns with so little remaining of their glorious past. I spent time visiting the great classical sites. I was fortunate that, in the late 1950s and early '60s, there were very few tourists off season and I could walk freely around the Parthenon, sit against a marble pillar of the great temple and listen to the hum of the wind in the

RODEO

tubes of scaffolding that surrounded it. I felt I heard ancient murmurings. Takis told me about his experiences during the war in Greece and I read Herodotus, Homer, Plutarch, Thucydides and Xenophon. I read Aeschylus and Sophocles. I enjoyed Aristophanes and the great lesbian poet Sappho. However, the books that were most important for me then were not Greek. The 11th century Tibetan Buddhist texts, *The Life of Jetsun Milarepa* and *The Hundred Thousand Songs of Milarepa* were books given to me by Nazli, who left for India, determined to make a film on the life of Milarepa. I read the *The Hundred Thousand Songs* five times and knew most of it by heart. During my first year in Athens, I lived almost as a hermit, building the house in Gero Vouno and looking after my small son, Thanos. I lived in Greece for over three years and the time I spent there marked me profoundly. When I left, due to the break-up of my relationship with Takis and the Greek military junta of 1967, I felt deeply sad but also sensed that my body and mind were imbued with a luminosity that would remain with me. I had spent three years thinking and meditating on what was most important to me.

Astronomy and physics influenced the development of my work, in particular the physics of light. The American-British physicist, David Bohm, clarified Albert Einstein's revelation of the correspondence between energy and matter further. Quite by chance, I was invited by an American physicist, Fred Wolf, who had seen my work, to attend seminars at Birkbeck College in London. He was doing research with Bohm and I sat in for a number of their talks. Bohm, unusually for a physicist, was interested in Buddhism and in language. He described matter as 'frozen light', stating: 'Light is not merely electromagnetic waves but, in a sense, other kinds of waves that go at that speed. Therefore, all matter, as it were, is a condensation of light into patterns moving back and forth at average speeds, which are less than the speed of light. You could say that when we come to light, we come to the fundamental activity in which existence has its ground, or at least coming close to it.' In ancient Greek, *Endios* is one of the earliest epithets for god and it means simply 'in the light'. Light is a symbol for a higher state of consciousness in most spiritual quests. Light is also the most common appearance of energy, the light of the sun, lightning, fire.

I read Robert Graves's *Greek Myths* (1955) in the early 1960s. In it, Graves proposes that the Greek myths are a cryptic record of the slow erosion of matriarchal power. I wanted to obtain an understanding of the feminine that could heal the wounds of prejudice and energize my vision of self. In this aim, I turned to both psychoanalysis and the long history of human thought. Mythology became more and more important for me. The

RODEO

mythologists who have contributed most to my understanding are Joseph Campbell and his pivotal four-volume study, *The Masks of God* (1962–68); Samuel Noah Kramer, the great archaeologist who translated the Sumerian myth of Inanna; Graves's *Greek Myths* and *White Goddess* (1948); and the brilliant books of Roberto Calasso on Greek and Indian mythology and the Vedas.

There is a crossover between image and sign that comes together in pictograms, probably the most ancient form of writing. Visual expression is a language, as distinct from writing as writing is from mathematics. All three are tools that human beings use to explore outer and inner worlds, the cosmos and their relation to it. Language cannot be divorced from thought. One can feel and dream, but can one think without language? Images are a consequence of vision, whereas sound, signs and symbols are all an attempt to communicate, moving the perceived image out of oneself to another. The input for both forms of expression can be chaotic and diffuse but generating the output requires distillation and concentration. Visual expression is more holistic in that it can communicate complex feelings and ideas that can be widely interpreted, whereas writing, a much later form of expression, remains more specific, although this depends to a great extent on which language is used. Poetry is more akin to visual expression – in particular concrete poetry, in which written and visual expression converge. Cut-ups were used to open up written prose and when I made *Poem Machines* my intention was to explode both prose and poetry, remembering their origin in vibration.

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RODEO