

LILIANE LIJN

Interview by Maddalena Iodice
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The life and work of artist Liliane Lijn (b. 1939 in New York) are informed by movement, a rhythmic and constant one. A motion that propagates in circular spheres, just like the swirl of her artworks, just like the spheric plenitude that characterises the feminine as described by philosopher Lou von Salomé. Working at the intersection of visual art, poetry and science for over six decades, Liliane Lijn’s category-defying work reveals a connection with Surrealist ideas, kinetic art, ancient mythologies, feminist, scientific, and linguistic frameworks.

Born in 1939, Liliane grew up in New York before relocating to Switzerland with her parents as a teenager. At the age of eighteen, she firmly declared she was going to become an artist and move to Paris. It was 1958. Her artistic research was nurtured by a vibrant cultural moment and the cosmopolitanism of the Parisian avant-garde, yet Liliane soon realised the struggle of carving out a space for herself as an artist in an environment heavily ruled by men, where only a few women were visibly operating, often embodying masculine roles. The process of finding her own voice as an artist and as a woman, took Liliane on a journey animated by the energy of creative revolution, during which she never receded from pushing her practice in an increasingly experimental direction. The quest for the self and the power of the unconscious articulated through the early drawing, became a fascination for the invisible and primordial forces of the cosmos. Where the pioneering approach to materialities, like Perspex, plexiglass and copper wire, allowed her to delve into the poetic qualities of science; the encounter of art, technological assemblage and performative intervention privileged her discourse around the female body. Her later works express the urge to read ancient archetypes anew, offering a counterpoint for patriarchal narratives.

Liliane’s work challenges categorisation, and the urge to align to any art movement, instead what moves her is the impulse to make, to follow her own motion and dive deep into the substance of existence. Her work is currently seeing a long overdue resurgence with a survey show travelling from Haus der Kunst München, to mumok, and Tate St Ives in May 2025.

I met Liliane at her North London studio shortly after the opening of her exhibition at mumok in Vienna. Our conversation provides a glimpse into her dense life and groundbreaking artistic career, offering anecdotes and insights that Liliane further elaborates upon in her forthcoming memoir *Liquid Reflections*.

SYLVIA KOUVALI

Liliane Lijn. Arise Alive at mumok in Vienna has just opened. How was the process of working on such a comprehensive survey of your work?

LL The process was very interesting, although I've had other large exhibitions, I've never had an exhibition quite like this. There are two important museums behind, Haus der Kunst and mumok, whose respective curators, Emma Enderby and Manuela Ammer came to visit me a few times. They looked at the work I had out in the studio but also through my archive, at drawers of drawings, at paintings... And then they started making choices. It was very funny because at first, I thought, *well, this isn't really a retrospective because they didn't select work from the 90s, for example*. However, their intention was to do a survey, not a retrospective. In other words, looking at my work through their eyes over a long period of time. At first, I was a little bit disappointed about that, I have to admit, but then when we actually put up the show, I realised how much work was there!

Do you think the show puts the accent on some specific aspects of your work more than others or tries to offer a new framework to read it?

LL Well, every curator will have their own reading of an artist's work. Every person has their own, right? I think the show is driven by *Woman of War* and the *Lady of the Wild Things*, which is the first piece of work Manuela came across back in 2019 at Basel Art Fair Unlimited. It is where it all started. She was very curious to understand that work, we met over dinner and talked the whole evening. In a sense the show looks at the path that led towards those sculptures.

Let's go back to the very beginning of this path then. Why art? What is it that called you about the artistic environment and made you leave Switzerland for Paris back in 1958?

LL What made me become an artist? Well basically, I met an old school friend, Nina Thoeren. We had known each other since we were about 11 years old, and she was living in Venice with her mother who was a Surrealist painter. We were both interested in making art. I had started making art in a small way, you know, in Lugano with other students. Her mother Manina was going to Paris because she'd married Alain Jouffroy, who was quite a well-known French poet, about 20 years younger than she was. Nina and I decided that we were going to meet in Paris. So, of course, it was rather difficult to do that, because my parents were not happy. I was only 18. We agreed I would have studied Archeology at the Sorbonne because my father was very adamant that I had to go to university. I couldn't just become an artist.

Your artistic research developed in a vibrant cultural moment. You were exposed to Surrealism, the Beat Generation poets... I am particularly interested in the influence of Surrealist practices in your work and your experimentation with automatic drawing. I am thinking about artworks like *Two Worlds*, 1959 and *The Beginning*, 1959.

LL Automatic drawing was very liberating. I remember going to a couple of artists' workshops where we were encouraged to draw with music and sort of feel rhythm connecting it to the gesture of drawing. Practicing yoga, delving into Buddhism and philosophy was also something that very much nurtured that phase. I read very widely and then I started becoming interested in science. But that took a while. It wasn't right away. At the beginning, I spent time drawing, because I thought I wanted to be a painter, and I realised that you can't paint if you can't draw. *Two Worlds* I must have drawn the winter of 1959. When I look at it now, I think of the triangle as clear, empty mind, and the circle full of the chaotic emotions that I felt at the time. So it was, in a sense, an idea that I had of a path, which was to be... It was very important for me, because it also articulated what I felt as a woman. For women to take the power of their mind, to connect to their own spiritual power, was crucial, especially at the time. Women couldn't become priests, very rarely would a woman become enlightened. You hardly ever heard of a Zen monk that was female...

Would you say that finding your artistic voice came with this moment of self-affirmation as a woman?

LL Yes, I think it did. *The Beginning* which I painted the same year, was also a very important work for me. I felt that I was drawing my own cosmos, if you like, and it gave me a sense of my own structure. It

marks the beginning of my own work.

What was the process cultivating your work in an environment heavily populated by men where only a few women were visibly operating?

LL It was very difficult. For example, the well-known women working with sculpture were considered to have very male energy as if they were incorporating some other role. Like Louise Nevelson. That first year in Paris for me was extremely intense. It was towards summer that I started painting. One of the paintings I did was inspired by a vision I had when out one evening at sunset. I saw this extraordinary cloud formation that looked to me as if it was a gigantic goddess in the sky... Behind all the clouds there was a chaotic presence of creatures or monsters. I drew it up, and then I painted it. Unfortunately, I only have a very bad slide now. The painting was lost when I lived in Greece.

I'd like to jump to 1962 and further talk about *Poem Machines* and the role of post-structuralist poetry.

LL I was influenced by a lot of poetry. I mean, there was poetry all around me and I wrote extensively. I wrote a lot... To begin with, I was interested in light and at some point, I started doing these long drawings I called, *Skyscrolls*, which were partially influenced by a visit to the Cernuschi Museum where I saw a show of horizontal Chinese paintings. So, I was painting these scrolls, when around 1960 I decided to go to New York. I had been living with Takis, a Greek sculptor who had developed work with magnetism. I was very fascinated by what he was doing, which led me towards an interest in science. Anyway, I needed to be on my own, so I went to New York where I developed works informed by research on light and space and experimentation with liquid polymers, molten plastic and Perspex sheets. Once back in Paris I became interested in the science of optics and light, and the work of Augustin-Jean Fresnel, a great French scientist who worked on light interference. Inspired by one of his experiments I made something I called *Le Vibrographe*. It consisted of two revolving cylinders on which I had made lines. Both cylinders had exactly the same pattern but when they revolved, they started creating interference. At that point, I realised that I might as well use words, which are lines themselves. First, I tried using the alphabet until a friend of mine, Nazli Nour who was an English poet, saw what I was doing and asked me to use her poems instead. That is how I began to make the *Poem Machines*. They were rotating metal drums; they rotated quite fast so the words were dissolved into energetic patterns that I felt related to sound.

You were basically deconstructing words' meanings, into sign, into sound, into vibration... What was the reception of these works when you first showed them?

LL My first show was in this small gallery opened by an American painter in the basement of The English Bookshop. It was very much the place where poets, especially Beat poets, artists and painters, used to hang out. The show contained *Vibrographe*, *Poem Machines*, and *Echo-Lights*. Lots of people came including Man Ray, whose artist edition was launched at the bookshop by Arturo Schwartz during the time my exhibition was on in the basement.

Did you get any critiques that made you rethink or adjust your way of doing?

LL I suppose I had some criticism about the roughness of the way I made the work. You know, it was handmade, but I was more interested in developing what I was doing. That first show paved the way for many more, until I left for Greece.

What brought you to Greece?

LL I had a child and Takis and I had this idea of building a place in Greece and living there. Which is what we did, it was kind of a crazy house. The architecture was almost circular. There were windows, but they were in the back and very small. We took the idea from Pompeii, which we had just visited, of having slits, very narrow windows inside that open up on the outside to catch all the breeze, but not the heat, and keep warm in the winter.

An artistic process in itself!

LL Yeah, it began very much as an artistic process with a poetic vision. We had lots of ideas, and making it was very exciting. It was over that period that I started developing more works with poetry and making small cones out of wood. There was very little technology in Athens at the time, practically nothing, you couldn't get plastic, it was really difficult to source the same materials as in Paris.

So that was the beginning of *Koans*. The cone seems to merge shapes and modules that had already been present in your work just like in *Two Worlds*...

LL Yes, the interesting thing is the triangle and circle can become one thing, and the cone actually merges the two.

Do *Koans* speak about the body in some way?

LL I think about the *Koans* as feminine. The cone is a sacred symbol; it used to be the mound of ash which allowed the fire to continue. When making fire was first discovered, they had to keep it going as it was hard to actually ignite one, so they covered the embers with a mound of white ash, which Robert Graves writes, was called the White Goddess.

With *Koans* we jumped to 1968, a moment when the encounter between art and science was consolidated within your work. Were you aware of how your work was positioned within the constitution of the kinetic art movement?

LL I think my work was very much on the outside. I mean partly because I was a woman, but also because I didn't take the path. Kinetic movement real-ly started in South America, apart from Op art, with French artists like Vasarely... Op art was strong in England, but not so much kinetic art. It was very much looked down by the art world.

If compared to the action of looking at a painting, ki-netic art engages your body in a very different way...

LL It is a very ancient engagement. Because, you know, all animals, all mammals, all reptiles, anything that's alive is always thinking, pray, predator, pray, predator. So you're always on the lookout for movement, because movement can either be something you're going to eat or something will eat you. It's pri-mal. I think people are fascinated by anything that moves and that is the great fascination of kinetic art. Even though I think today, because of where we are at with technology, we're a bit overwhelmed by this type of language to the point where we're always hy-per stimulated.

I'd like to talk about *Crossing Map*, 1983, and its role in bringing back drawing, writing, and defin-ing the next stage of your work with performance.

LL Well, the drawings for *Crossing Map* were do-ne well after I completed the book. I completed the writing in 1974 but I couldn't find a publisher at all. Prose publishers thought it was poetry and poetry publishers thought it was too long. However, it's not really poetry, I think of it as experimental prose.

What was the impulse behind the book?

LL Basically I wrote two books. The first one was called *Time Zone* and it was an unusual science fic-tion story based on an idea in physics that when a particle travels backward in time, when it comes back into the present it has more energy. At some point I thought, well, perhaps human beings could do that too. My protagonist, who's a woman and who's an artist, slightly based on myself, takes on so much energy that it catapults her through time and she finds herself in a future where there's no sign of human beings, no sign of buildings, noth-ing, just nature. When she comes across the hu-man, they're completely disembodied. The original story of *Time Zone* changed and became *Crossing Map*. If you think about its premise seriously, scien-tifically, if you become energy, that's what happens. There's always energy released when, let's say, an electron changes its position. And if the position of the electron changes, so does the atomic structure. If you apply this process to a human being, a very complicated biological structure, what

occurs is a change of state, a kind of dying, if you like. However, I didn't think of it as dying. I thought of it literally as becoming energy.

***Crossing Map's* closing lines are so poignant: Man / The energy addict / Wanted to eat the uni-verse / Knowing there was More / And hoping / To outdo Time.**

Thinking about today's state of things, what do you think is the role of art?

LL Art is something that could help people. It can point out what's happening in the world or can point out a path to a better way. The most important thing for me is to give people a sense of hope, energy, warmth, and inspiration. I'm not really in-to activist art because every time I have been, and I have been a few times in my life, it has always kind of come out really weird. Not being understood at all or creating the opposite reaction!

What are the parts of *Crossing Map* that you were doing performative readings of?

LL Well, I did read extracts from different parts of the book, but I used to sing the last part.

Is it the same song that you incorporated in *Con-junction of the Opposites: The Woman of War and Lady of the Wild Things*, 1983-1986?

LL No, it's different. That song came to me when I was performing from the book in Paris, at the Pompidou in 1985. I was walking in the street, when this melody and words came into my mind. I had to rush back to write them down. I remember thinking, *oh, I must not lose this*. Somehow, I felt it was very important!

What happened next and how the following part of your work delves into archetypes and a new reading of myths?

LL *The Woman of War* and the *Lady of the Wild Things* constitute the choreographic installation that is called *Conjunction of the Opposites* where the two sculptures perform, *Lady of the Wild Things* reacting to the sound of my singing voice and *Woman of War* acting out the words of the song she sings. It is a work that references female archetypes and mythological beings, embodied in elements of violence, seduction, power and spirituality. Archetypes constitute a big part of our collective imagination... I was very involved in reading different mythologies and the first figure that I made in 1983 was the *Lady of the Wild Things*, which is a nymph goddess. An early nymph goddess, she existed in Greece as well as in India where she is still worshipped. It's a female figure that protects all creatures and plants, all nature.

What about ending this interview with a closing reading? Shall it be the end of *Crossing Map*?

LL Sure:

I Looked and I Saw

And I looked to where that time had led / That time from which I had come, / The Image Era / The time of Neutral Man / The cold time of change control I looked and I saw the swan dance / Curving its sinuous muscular neck / Upwards in a straight surge / Defying gravity / The matter force

I saw the mouth of the machine / The inexorable maw / The sucking orifice / The masticating jaw / The grinding pressing draining splitting maw of matter I looked and I saw the machine in its act / In its act of drain and digest / In its act of disgorging the leavings / Spitting out the empty refuse / That which it refused to use / Being unable to transform / The lifeless [...]

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