

## Cross Platform

"*Betcha by golly wow*", sings Glasgow based artist Sue Tompkins, referencing a 1972 hit for the Philadelphia soul group The Stylistics. Clutching a microphone, she is performing her spoken word piece, *Orange Brainwash Tribute*. Allusions to pop music pepper her typewritten text, its loose leaf pages gathered in a folder on a lectern. Other tunes surface from the opening years of the 70s: Giorgio Moroder's "Tears", "Get It On", a UK number one single for T Rex in 1971, the year of Stanley Kubrick's *A Clockwork Orange*, with its famous brainwashing scene; and the year in which Tompkins was born. Meanings coalesce unpredictably out of her fragmentary and discontinuous word stream, strung along a wave of nerve energy, buoyed up by the rhythms of her physical movement.

Moving towards the lectern, Tompkins licks her forefinger and prepares to turn a page. Moving away, she brings a snippet of text to life. Her right arm undulates as she repeats the phrase "*the hanging washing line*". It continues to undulate as she savours the mouth feel of repeating the word prospects. Banal everyday observations are juxtaposed with verbal enigmas. She mentions a grocery delivery; asks, with skewed grammar, "*Why so much time have I?*"; murmurs, "*Mmmm*" in a way

that seems laden with significant concern. She enjoys her own coinages: "*Mckultuir mcnaomi mk decta*". Verbalisation of her text, twanging with traces of her upbringing in Leighton Buzzard, Bedfordshire, is accompanied by a personal vocabulary of gestures, not choreographed yet recognisable from one performance to the next - a skip, a jump, a smile, a touch of the nose, a flick of the hair.

"I never forget that I'm in front of people," she tells me. "And I prefer having the lights on, so we are on the same level. If there's going to be any mystery I want it to be in the work, not in me being cleverly backlit. I'm trying to communicate." Gertrude Stein once observed "I did express what something was, a little by talking and listening to that thing, but a great deal by looking at that thing." Tompkins works towards something comparable in her desire to communicate. Like Stein, she is fascinated by the texture of everyday life, its mixed menu of routine and excitement, and through unconventional assemblages in language she aims to share a sense of her engagement with the world around and within her. Like Stein, too, she is interested in gradual and oblique pattern making, and in repetition not only as a reflection of the flatness of ordinary living, but as a technique of variation and incremental gain.

In performance a word or phrase she repeats may start to vibrate against itself, creating a strange music.

Tompkins has recently been working with Andy Miller at Gargleblast Studio in Hamilton. "I wanted to make a black vinyl object," she explains. "I don't know yet whether it will be 7", 12", even whether it will have two sides. All of my performances get filmed now. That's a gallery thing, and it makes sense, but I don't want this vinyl record to sound just like one of my spoken word performances. I've recorded some sounds for it at home. Simple things like a light switch going on and off. A ball, bouncing randomly but then trying to make it more controlled, almost like a drumstick against the side of a drum. My voice will be added, over that." Tompkins recorded at Gargleblast more than a decade ago as the singer of Life Without Buildings, a post-punk outfit formed with three fellow students at Glasgow School of Art. Their album *Any Other City*, made in 2001 and recently reissued, shows Tompkins already relishing the shape and plasticity of words, the electric dance of language on her tongue.

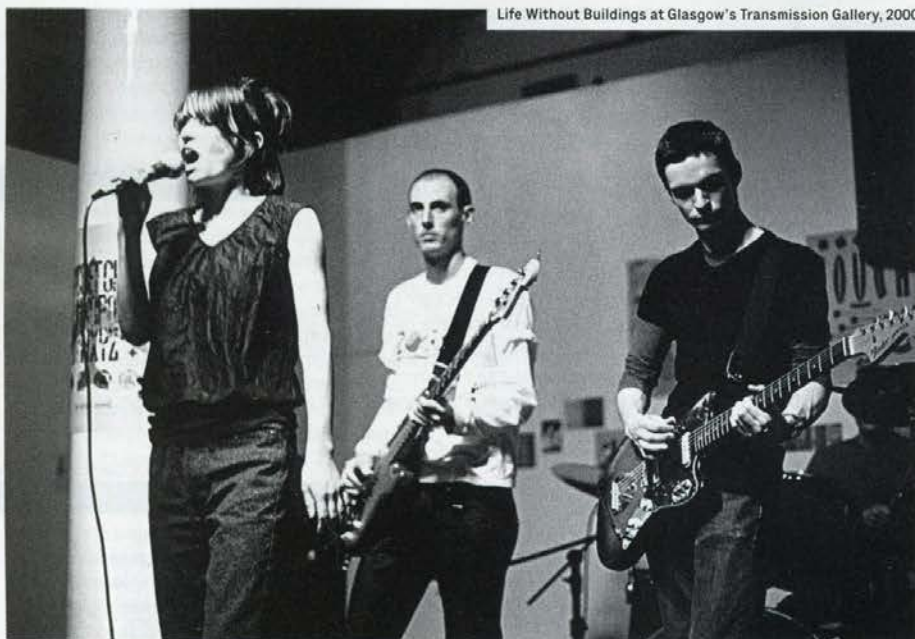
Her fascination with the spoken word, she suggests, can be traced back further. In gallery shows today she exhibits typewritten visual pieces,

The fragmentary word patterns of

### Sue Tompkins

emerge from collisions of pop music, repetition and everyday language.

By Julian Cowley



Life Without Buildings at Glasgow's Transmission Gallery, 2000



along with painted canvases that combine her love of words with a taste for bold forms and bright colours. But in her final year as a student, her attention was otherwise engaged. "There was a sense, when I graduated in the early 90s, that if you were in the painting department then you probably did paint. But I stumbled on the fact that I liked sitting in the library, reading and trying to document what I was looking at, recording my observations on a Dictaphone. It was a private, secretive, fun thing to do, gleaning from a stack of books anything that appealed to me, on first look. I'd turn a page and might record the words "pink face", and I'd be looking at an Andy Warhol silkscreen. Eventually the recording was about five hours long. Now, when I write, I'm much more aware of patterns.

"I've written one spoken word piece a year for the past ten years," she continues. "Each around 20 minutes, but this year I've written four, some shorter. In a sense they are all the same – it's just me standing there with a microphone and a plinth to rest the text on, and I read what I've written. The challenge is to get words off the page. That started when Toby Webster, who runs the Modern Institute in Glasgow, invited me to do a performance. I said yes, with no idea what I would do. But I was already used to writing things down and reading them aloud.

"I was thinking recently about The Ronettes and The Chiffons and Motown stuff, which I love. I wrote down the words '*doo lang, doo lang*', then made a recording at home of myself singing it, and for the vinyl recording we have sampled that. I like to build an awareness of a song or an era. I was watching *The Deer Hunter* and there's a scene where Christopher Walken is playing pool in a bar, and he sings along with Frankie Valli's version of "Can't Take My Eyes Off Of You". In one of my performances I build up to that song. Not a full blown cover, but I gesture towards it. I'm not an improviser. I don't work like that. Everything is accumulated and thought about, without squeezing the life out of it. There's thinking in it.

"It may be thoughts about the word Hoover, or clearing up or doing the washing up, which I like because it's down to earth. I like that flatness of normal stuff, and I like to mix it with something abstract. I edit and edit until it feels right. Sometimes, in performance, I look at whatever is on a page and think, that's not right, so I skip it. I continue to edit in the moment."

Tompkins steps back for a moment from discussion of her performance practice, before touching on the inclusive essence of her allusive and musically communicative art. "Lose analysis, and allow yourself to be excited, even by something that everyone else has seen or knows about. I extend that to everything. I've just discovered *Pléiades* by Xenakis, and I'm excited by that. It's the process of finding out that carries me along. But I still really like Vangelis and Moroder. Even when that music gets safe and developed I like to hear it and don't want to lose it as a source of inspiration." □ Sue Tompkins performs *Orange Brainwash Tribute* at Wysing's Space-Time: The Future festival on 30 August: see Out There