

*Darren Rhymes puts words together with new 'Write Ups' made for these pages by Sue Tompkins, an artist known for her performance and works on paper*

I can start with the scene. What is it that appears when I consider the moment of a thought? Alternatively, where am I within the appearance of that moment? It is here that Sue Tompkins' practice has evolved, hovering in the scene of it and reproducing it in a chain of reflecting scenes. I can see it that way.

If you got a system?  
If you got  
If you got a system?  
If you got  
If you got a system?  
If you got a system?

Who'll carry the leak?  
I said the leak

# BACK I

Since leaving art school Tompkins has used the same core process. Letting herself be drawn to simple moments of stimulus, 'the air in here', she circles them, cradling a memory rather than penetrating it. In affection for it, the moment or what occurs there, is refined in thought and written down. Her practice so far has drawn the resulting fragments into 'spoken word' performances, written and edited slowly at the rate of perhaps one a year. Or, when invited to stay for longer, as installations of typed text on paper occasionally accompanied by elements of collage and chosen objects. These scenes of fragments, despite their formlessness and partial character, have the tone, rhythm and texture of the place where you find yourself when you draw back from the moment of thought, a lucidity and acuity that links back to it. However, if I try to go back to the moments when they are spoken of, or linger in front of their typed lines, then I bounce around in them, back and forth with irresolution. Sometimes this scene is deferral, what we would familiarly call a hesitancy before the act or statement, a reluctance to say one thing or another.

Tompkins also delivers this as the saying of every version, every one of something. Mr A, Mr B, Mr C, Mr D and on for the whole alphabet. If I can see a flow between each one of these it is in the flips and turns between meaning, sound and look of the word and the action of typing that Tompkins inhabits when she performs and writes. A sort of transcribed and multiplied slippage of onomatopoeia. The sound of a syllable becomes the trigger for the next and yet both are delivered as irreconcilably separate. In the following alternating couplet, the word for bodily experience is delivered in tandem with the word for the product that we draw from it, emerging from each other both in sound and meaning.

I'm a  
I'm a  
I'm a  
non directional

corporeal  
oil  
corporeal  
oil  
corporeal

**N T O I T**

As she speaks the words, she inhabits different parts of them, emphasising one way and then another with joy in each part, in the flow between parts. The resoluteness of each sound pulls us back from colloquial meaning, yet delivered as right in its place next to its other.

In 'Grease', performed at Tate Britain, 2007, this movement between one and another in the same place occurs in a passage reflecting what was happening in the moment of its writing. It is a variating, starting, stopping and partially repeating section that finally manages a re-stated finality after fitting together all its parts in a long difficult clause.

There's nothing I wouldn't take  
 Its not a version  
 Music that passes by my window  
 It's not a version  
 Music that comes out of cars on  
 the streety-----  
 On the street Im on  
 Music that comes out of cars  
 passes by my window.  
 And it's not a version

There are several points here. There is Tompkins giving herself permission to do the act; there's the stating that something is not another of something different from itself, a version; there's the music on the street, here, but not quite right here. They circle around one another. The persistent word 'version' is particularly ambiguous, seeming to repeat, embody and undo the opposites, even destabilising the declaration it is part of. The statement 'it's not a' becomes also *it is a*.

On a compilation CD put out by Junior Aspirin Records in 2006 Tompkins has recorded the final track, '2 Part'. In the first part she sings the words 'listen to the music' and occasionally 'my keyboard', over and over again. Her voice insists on us hearing the 'it' that she is giving, just this, with the statement that her keyboard is there too (she uses it to record her voice). The second part is made of the sounds a person might make if left alone for longer than you can imagine, but also like a child, at once raw and tender, and the same time just sounds. At the end she speaks the words 'love theme' three times, each time louder and harder. The psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan conceived of love as 'giving something one doesn't have'. There is perhaps something of this non-possession in the track, in its freedom and bareness but also in its firm, near aggression at its end. Allowing oneself to understand.

try  
 try  
 try  
  
 the end.

All images: Sue Tompkins, 'Write Ups', 2009

Tompkins always tells you when the end of her performance has come. In doing so, she re-iterates its form, speaking not in normal speech, both to us and not to us, as if directed to another. Our normal place for this is in song, an inhabiting of words with or without music. Sometimes the most awkward moment is when we see the singer reach out to a member of the audience. It makes us cringe. A gap is closed prematurely. Seemingly aware of this, Tompkins performs the gap as well as what is to either side of it. She treads her feet in a rhythm, stops and smiles or looks at the audience after the delivery of words as if at an end, raises her arms in crescendo, looks behind her. Each beginning again, sometimes literally the turning of a page in her folder of typed sheets, is the possibility of belief in renewal.

Are these two previous paragraphs not a reflection of each other? If Lacan conceives of love as a partial and latent understanding of the misdirection that we undertake in our colloquial speech, this is also revealed in the transposing of the form of song into the place of normal speech, or the traversing of that gap that is made in so doing. Do we not also see this in the movement that takes place in the grammar of the work and in the way Tompkins inhabits it? Perhaps it is similarly possible to speculate on the changing arrangement of this movement in an interpretation of the performances' titles?

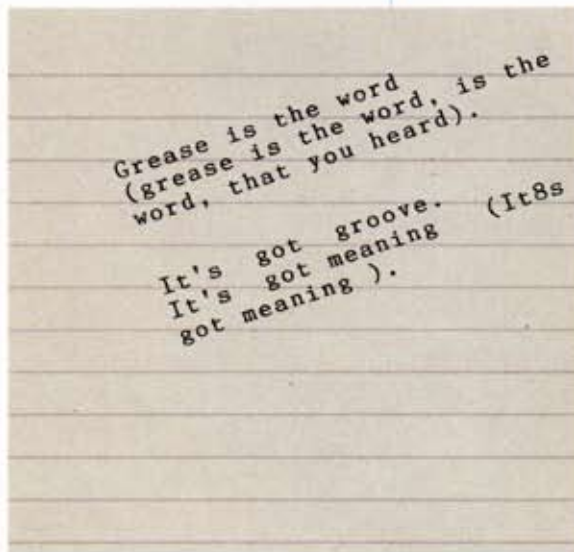
'Country Grammar' 2003: the grammar of a place, the pace and rhythm and organising elements of how it

happens there, and that place might be somewhere else. Like the *Darling Buds of May*.

'More Cola Wars' 2004: more fights over a liquid that has two separate versions (Coke and Pepsi?) which are very slightly different and yet of the same generic thing. The friction of difference happening in more places but also that the opposition that makes up that miniscule difference happens in relation to a third, which the opposition is part of.

'Elephants Galore' 2005: the exuberance of so many massive obvious ridiculously different to ourselves objects being here. And the elephant in the room is the thing you don't speak of until someone names it.

'Grease' 2007: the substance that enables movement and slippage. It is not the fabric that holds things in place but the addition that enables things to move in and out of their place.



The changing scenes of the work begin to reflect into each other and their grammar changes its arrangement. We might see it again in the comparison of two recent moments. Here is the first. 'Grease' was written and performed for *Art Now*. The fact that it is performed in early December, near Christmas, keeps coming up. Christmas is the elephant in the room, the big thing obvious to everyone but not really talked about in the Tate. So, there is a section where Tompkins sings the chorus to Mariah Carey's yuletide hit 'All I Want for Christmas is You'. She tests it out in public. She gives herself permission to include Christmas as the incongruous non-sequitor of Tate. Not that this is a transgression, but that she may be in both, at the same time. As the last lines of the performance say, 'all these presents to wrap and unwrap'. Gifts are here and can be given and received, covered and uncovered.

The other moment is in 2006 when she delivers a short performance, accompanied by Glasgow-based artist Alan Michael on guitar, at the opening to her solo show at the Modern Institute. She sings three songs of longing: Bruce Springsteen's 'Dancing in the Dark', Linda and Richard Thompson's 'I Wanna See the Bright Lights Tonight' and

David Bowie's 'Be My Wife'. It is surprising and wrong-footed in its simplicity. Multiplicity and oscillation, the continual re-approach and bid for renewal is replaced by songs just sung. The performance of non-directed speech returns to its familiar place. In one way there seems to be less. But that apparent lack is also just a changing of shape. In the holding of something from outside, famous songs sung mostly by men, and inhabiting them in the gallery Tompkins re-arranges a number of contingencies. The obvious gender displacement of her singing, as a woman, 'be my wife'. Neither Tompkins, nor the fact of gender has changed, but symbolically, perhaps both become freed from their places and returned to them.

And it happens with feeling also. In that the emotion in the performance is already present in the songs as they existed previously in popular culture; it was nonetheless surprising to find it here, and in the simplicity of how it can be given and recognised. Acceptance, sadness, joy, love and liberty as well as permission and pleasure are all here, as they were before.

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