

**Outsider of Outsiders: On Lily Greenham's *Tune In To Reality!* (Writers Forum, 1974; new rendition by Distance No Object, 2022.)**

Lily Greenham (1924-2001), whose 1974 book *Tune In To Reality!* has been republished by Distance No Object, was a writer, performer, artist, and musician, whose rigorous refusal to adhere to the presentational norms of any one of those media was central to her persona. She explained as such, striking a characteristic note of triumph, in her 1995 statement “Un Arte de Vivir (An Art of Living),” partially reproduced in the sleeve notes for a posthumous double-CD of her performed and recorded poetry, *Lingual Music* (Paradigm Discs, 2007):

I was never exclusively dedicated to any single discipline. Others also seemed to recognise this, because in the field of music I was often described as a painter, in the visual arts I was seen as a poet, in literary circles I was a performer, and so forth. And this was, and still is, the true situation. Some people perceived me as a ‘guest figure’ in their own domain. They were right! Hahaha! Neither nationality, nor religion, nor profession, nor *any sort of classification* covers my own concept of myself. Categories don't fit my character, nor my soul. (n.p.)

The credo of transnationalism seems particularly relevant here, given the playful quality of alienation from language that characterises *Tune In To Reality!*, published by Bob Cobbing's press Writers Forum. As Michael Parsons notes in a biographical statement included with *Lingual Music*, Greenham was born in Vienna but lived during the course of her life between the Austrian capital, Copenhagen, Paris, and London, where she finally settled; she was also “fluent in at least six different European languages.” (n.p.)

The sense of cleavage between vocal sign and its object in *Tune In To Reality!* is surely rooted in a polyglot's awareness of the swathe of functional uses to which a particular phoneme, syllable, or even word-length sound might be put, especially when working across a whole family of scripts and tongues (it's notable that many of the poems appear in two versions, one in English and the second in a different European language.) Greenham's publisher Bob Cobbing had taught French at a secondary school before committing full-time to sound poetry, and the same sense of running by rote through a foreign lexicon or grammar chart, unearthing strange affinities and connections, that typifies Cobbing's *ABC in Sound* (1965) can be sensed throughout this book. Take opening poem “ability:”

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optout (1)<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> My spacing and lineation here is a sketchy recreation of the visual effects achieved in Distance No Object's rendition of the text, itself an avowedly imperfect facsimile of the original. Like all Writers Forum publications during the early 1970s, *Tune In To Reality!* would have been printed using mimeograph stencils, in this case via a manual typewriter. One aspect of appearance impossible to recreate here is what the new publishers call “Greenham's singular attention to vertical spacing” so that in some poems, ‘lines’ of text appear staggered between two horizontal planes, creating an energetic, irregular zig-zag effect (“a note on the text,” 34). Luke

We can sense here the compositional approach that Greenham outlines in “Un Arte de Vivir:” “[a]s a starting point...I used *keywords*, as I like to call them, which I developed through an etymologic associative working process.” (n.p.) The closing gag, meanwhile is presumably a call to ‘opt out,’ in the manner of the era, from “the competitive society” referred to in “the outsider,” (30).

This kind of linguistic play becomes more expansive and adventurous through the gradual accretion of a personified, even strident, narrative voice across the course of the text—it’s hard not to read this as the author’s voice, the ‘impersonal’ aspects of concrete poetics aside. Greenham poses insistent, sing-song questions to the reader, as if pressing us on the absurdity of what all these homonyms, homophones, and threads of association somehow suggest about the world we inhabit. “With the choice of subject matter I wanted to stress the absurdity of daily/weekly/monthly/yearly social ‘trends’ and point out the conformity with which they are met[,]” Greenham notes in “Un Arte de Vivir.” (n.p.) The impulse is clear – because dramatically personified – in the dialogue-style poem “strike:”

- (a): what does the word strike suggest to you?
- (b): hit
- (c): you mean to be a hit?
- (b): what a striking remark!
- (a) that was a stroke of luck! (25)

This poem’s closing pun, “why don’t you go on strike too?” evokes a 1970s social malaise that audiences in 2022 Britain might relate to afresh (25). More significantly, it reflects the ways in which Greenham’s language games tune into the material realities of contemporary politics.

At its best, the combination of rhythmically insistent authorial persona and whip-smart lexical punning is exhilarating, and feeds the political animus. Here’s “capital:”

- starting with a c’p’t’l capital letter
- the capital point to make is that
- lack of capital
- in a c’p’t’l’s’t’c in a capitalistic society
- is a capital offence (26)

“the outsider,” planted towards the end of the text, gathers together the accumulated energy of the sequence into something of a poetic manifesto:

- i am an outsider of outsiders
- because my inside doesn’t fit
- any concepts
- any parties
- any professions (30)

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Roberts of Distance No Object suggests this is the result of switching between two different line spacing registrations on a manual typewriter (email to the author, November 24, 2022.) Thanks to Luke for this information.

At other times, the intrusion of polemic into language game can seem a little glib, as in the well-meaning but misguided punning on “race” – of rats, people – in the above poem: an endearing flaw, perhaps, and certainly one shared with Greenham’s publisher Bob Cobbing.

It’s worth noting, finally, that these poems, with their linear-narrative flourishes and one-liners, their quick rhythmic energy and jumpy visuals (see footnote), really demand to be *heard*: either in performance or realised alongside electronic soundscapes, like those provided by Paddy Kingsland for versions of several *Tune In To Reality!* pieces on the *Lingual Music* CD. This suggests the significance not only of Greenham’s connection to Cobbing’s Writer’s Forum, the hub of sound poetry activities within Britain during the 1970s, but also, at an earlier stage, to the revered “Vienna Group,” consisting of early pioneers in the European neo-dada revival including Gerhard Rühm, Konrad Bayer, and H.C Artmann. As Parsons records in his liner notes, Greenham met these poets on her return to Vienna from a painting course in Paris in 1953, and “soon acquired an international reputation as a performer of their work.” (n.p.) We might hazard a guess that Artmann’s “dialect poems,” with their interrogation of the semantic possibilities of particular geographical lexes, were a particular reference point.

Above all else, this collection generates a sense of irrepressible and propulsive energy. It sings out to us hard and sharp across the years, and matches the author’s self-projected persona as an inveterate smasher of norms and definitions. Greenham was an outsider of outsiders, “whose outside is/ outsided/ even amongst outsiders” (“the outsider,” 30).