

## Peter Liversidge: ‘My work is solely about engagement’

The artist talks about the significance of his “proposals”, and discusses his recent project at Tate Modern involving a 500-strong choral performance, and his two new shows in the US

by NATASHA KURCHANOVA | 11/10/2016



Peter Liversidge is a British artist who became known for his use of “proposals” tailored to a specific project. The proposals vary greatly in their degree of feasibility, but always begin in the same way, typed on a standard European-sized A4 piece of paper. Liversidge’s recent projects include *The Bridge*, a choral performance of 500 singers at Tate Modern; *Notes on Protesting*, a performance with 60 children at Whitechapel Gallery, London, which was centred around the ways of expressing their discontent with various rules they were expected to follow; and *Surface Mail*, an exhibition of his postal objects from a private collection at Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven. This interview was taken on the occasion of Liversidge’s first one-person museum exhibition in the United States, at the Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum in Ridgefield, Connecticut, and his exhibition *Twofold* at the Sean Kelly Gallery in New York.

**Natasha Kurchanova:** On your website, you divide your work into several categories, including sculptures, interventions, performances, videos, etc. “Proposals” is not among them, although, as an artist, you are known through your proposals for projects, which, if realised, may include all the other categories of works. I suppose the reason for it is that it is very difficult to represent a proposal. Your idea of a proposal is very complex and does not conform to a simple representational model: some of them are realisable, some are not; some require a tremendous amount of work and organisation, some are relatively simple tasks; some impose strict guidelines on you, some are open-ended; some sound like jokes, and some concern very serious social issues; sometimes they combine several of these features in one proposal.

The only consistent characteristic seems to be that they are all site-specific, are inspired by a particular location for which they are being proposed. Could you describe a typical process – if there is one – for writing proposals? Has it evolved over time? Apart from the format in which they are written – the heading in the upper left corner with the name of the site; the text in the middle centre, and the signature in the lower right part of the page – is there anything else that is consistent about the process of their writing?

Peter Liversidge: My proposals are all typed using a portable typewriter, an Olivetti Lettera 35. The proposals are descriptions of work and, although I consider them to be “the work”, they are often just the beginning. It is important that they are descriptive and not prescriptive, in that they are a starting point to the work. The other important part is that the proposals are written during a pre-assigned writing/working period, usually four weeks, within which I spend time researching how to make the individual proposals actually work, should they be chosen for the show. The typewriter was chosen when I started writing proposals in 1997. It became almost immediately apparent that I was making not just text-based works, but a sculptural intervention with the paper, or as much as a drawing, rather than just typed text ... If I type a letter “p,” I get a letter “p”. When you hit that letter, you make a mark. There is no erasing, no evolving from that letter, because any erasing or correction I make would be readily recognisable from a distance as a mistake. As an object, the typewriter is very stable. It’s mechanised, but, it is basic mechanisation. When you hit the letter key, the mechanism reacts; it traps the carbon ribbon between the hammer and the paper, and the letter head transfers the carbon on to the paper, which makes the mark. The description of the work was equally interesting to me – the fact that the work did not have to exist as a physical thing but in description; it could be anything at any time, and also shift into being something else on further readings.

**NK:** Could you elaborate about the significance of using a typewriter for your practice? Why a typewriter and not a computer, or just simple handwriting?

PL: It was as much about economics as anything else at that point; many of my friends were beginning to use computers – it was the time when Apple home computers were just becoming popular and were still quite expensive. But I really liked the typewriter, mainly because it is a mechanism, although not a complex one. It is more than the sum of its parts. It also offers a direct relationship with the paper; the immediate translation it offers, of thought to paper. A similar type of basic mechanisation is also used in producing the pairs of Polaroids/Fuji FP100C images now on view at the Sean Kelly Gallery. They are instant photographs. To me, the process is a very similar level of photography, as to the typewriter; in terms of the mechanism of the camera, a Fuji Fotorama. Not so much the earlier Polaroid cameras and film, but the film with which they have been made since 2011; Fuji FP100C. The Fuji FP100C film is so beautiful in its recording of light, the finished “prints,” are reminiscent of miniature C-types. It is basic photography. The camera fixes the light reflecting off an object or a scene, which is then focused through the lens on to the instant film, it is exposed and then once I pull it out of the camera, after four to seven minutes, it reveals what I saw. The second of the two images is taken once the first has fully developed, using the first as a guide to composition. These two images are shown side by side, in separate frames with just enough space between the two frames so that they cannot be seen together. They address the transient part of the scene – material that was not there during the intermission between the two. It is the missing information, the time in between that is as much the work as the two images bookending what is missing, only the subtle changes in the two images are markers to the time passing between the two. In the same way that the two images represent what is missing, the proposals point to something that may exist at the point they are written. They exist only as text, a description, an idea, which has potential to be materialised. Equally, who is to say that my realised proposal – whatever it may be – is the right version of that work? In the end, it is all about interpretation of an idea and then, potentially, materials. If it’s just a description of the work, where does authorship of the actual work lie? Who “owns” our individual interpretations of a piece of text; a newspaper, a book, Moby Dick for example?

At what point do you come in contact with the work? And how? Is it the text on the paper that is the work, or is it the work as you imagine it in your mind while reading the text?

**NK:** I find your proposals fascinating precisely because of their open-ended nature. They have a very rigid structure in the beginning: but then some of them grow, some do not, and of all have an infinite range of possibilities for realisation.

**PL:** When I am invited to do a show, all proposals are specific to that show, all the projects are new. At the Sean Kelly Gallery, there are 12 proposals. Ten of them are realised and two unrealised, but they are only unrealised in terms of a physical aspect. The two unrealised are immediately realised as you read them in the process of internalising the work. It is a direct collaboration with the viewer, inviting them in to imagine the work as they wish to see it. I have an exhibition on view now at the Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum in Ridgefield, Connecticut, in which there are 60 proposals, of which 26 are realised. The 60 proposals for the Aldrich were all very specific to Ridgefield, Connecticut; they relate to the history of the museum, its architecture, its location, the history of Ridgefield and the surrounding area, and draw on the relationships I made while in that town – people I met definitely informed the work. Some of the proposals that were realised are very small interventions and others are large sculptural works. Some of the works are ongoing and will be performed until the end of the show.

**NK:** If we go back to the Sean Kelly Gallery, your exhibition there is called Twofold. Did the idea of a twofold come from exhibiting the pairs of Polaroid photographs made with Fuji FP100C film?

**PL:** Yes, very much so. All the work in the show has a twin. Not necessarily an identical twin, but a version of it exists at the same time elsewhere. Some of them exist in a/ the space together, and the Polaroid/Fuji FP100C pairs are an example of that. But the wall drawing and the cannon ball lodged in the wall relate to the exhibition in the Aldrich Museum. What I found interesting is that because the two shows are running simultaneously, I consider them to be a pairing, not only a physical pairing of works, but a geographical pairing as well. I asked myself the question: “Do you need to be in the same space to see a companion work?” It took me a long time to figure out how to describe the pairs of works, separated by several hundred miles, because they are not twins, nor are they a diptych. They are rather companions to works that already exist. Both of them are describing space. For example, the wall drawing at the Sean Kelly Gallery and the companion work at the Aldrich are made with three different-length wall-drawing instruments. We used them to determine the length of the line. The line is drawn using a pack of children’s colouring pencils. In that artwork, we described the architecture of the space, the wall, in lines that do not intersect. There are 4,500-plus individual lines that describe a wall. All they are doing is projecting a surface on a surface. So, you are potentially dealing with the invisible depth or a possibility of depth. The wall drawings are in two different places at the same time, each work dealing with the architecture in slightly different ways.

**NK:** Apart from being concerned with space, I think your work very much deals with the issues of time and how things change over time, because you said yourself how important to you that the companion-works are not identical and they mark two points of an arrested flux of matter.

**PL:** Yes, you hit on a key point of show/shows, which is that, no matter how much you try to replicate something, no matter how hard you try, in some ways it is an impossible task. The Polaroid/Fuji FP100C pairs are a perfect illustration of that idea. They are trying to replicate something that is in a constant state of flux; everything changes all the time. Equally, if you think of something, as you begin describing it, it loses its initial clarity and potentially the purity of the idea disappears from your head and is made physical through an object, or real through description. It is almost like watching light across the room slowly disappear into darkness. As you say, all my

proposals begin in the same way. But they are trying to use language to describe something that essentially may never exist, but is potentially possible. I am really interested in that sense of unmaking of work. There is a certain freedom that comes from inviting people to imagine the possibilities of something similar but not the same. In some ways there are parallels with the David Bowie lyric: “Is there life on Mars?” Well, is there? Why not, it is there, or could be there. How? Because we imagine it. It’s almost like being in a small room and projecting yourself into a landscape – whether it be a mountain range or a seascape, or whatever it is. It’s much easier than actually being in that landscape or seascape and attempting to project yourself into a smaller space. The invitation to take the work home is there, either as remembered text or as a collated bookwork of proposals. One of the reasons that my work is made using inconspicuous and readily available materials is that they could be reimagined as anything, or in any way.

**NK: I have two questions in relation to your work’s concern with time. The first is about Gordon Matta-Clark, because you refer specifically to his work Day’s End (1975) in your exhibition at the Sean Kelly Gallery. Did he have any particular influence on you?**

**PL:** He was someone I was aware of from a very young age. It does not mean that I knew much about him, or art, at the time: I was much more music-literate than art-literate, and the art I liked was mostly of the outsider kind. I discovered artists such as Raymond Pettibon, Mike Kelley or Reverent Howard Finster through album covers. I do not know how I came across Matta-Clark’s work, but it was one of his projects, splitting a house in New Jersey, that struck a chord. The impossibility of this project made real changed my views and understanding on what was potentially possible. I found the idea itself fundamentally interesting; the fact that Matta-Clark worked on such a scale, but was removing things instead of building them. It was not actually about what was there, but what was taken away. The sense of: “What can you remove in order to make something visible?” Later, I remember finding out about his Pier 52 project. He would go into the pier and work there without permission. When he was finally happy with the results of his work, and he invited visitors to see it, police arrested him and charged him for trespassing (he was later released without charge). I found that aspect really interesting – the fact that what he was doing was not acceptable to a section of society that had a mandate of authority, plus the added narrative recontextualised the work. I always found the challenge of authority in a non-aggressive way very interesting. For example, I admire [San Francisco 49ers quarterback] Colin Kaepernick’s stance during the singing of the American national anthem [he refused to sing it, in protest at what he saw as wrongdoings against African Americans and minorities in the US]. I found it astonishing as a gesture and the response that gesture received. As I understand it, the national anthem is very important at that point of the game. This football player was exercising his right as an individual to protest, which was potentially a difficult thing to do because of who he is, a professional sportsman. This was a desperately important act, especially at this point in American history, because of where the next step could take the country after the elections. I admired Kaepernick, because he was doing what he felt he could to highlight something that was known, but address it in an unaggressive way.

**NK: I am glad that earlier you mentioned music, because my next question was about the relationship of your art to it. I find that it is very much related to music structurally, precisely because of your concern with time. Also, on your website, I noticed that you have mostly photographs, even for your performances and other works that take place in time. The video section reflects mostly concerts that you recorded. Also, I am curious about one of your most ambitious pieces, the performance of 500 choir singers at Tate Gallery’s Turbine Hall on 18 and 19 June this year. Could you say a few words about this particular performance, and also expand on the role of music in your work in general?**

**PL:** I’d like to make it clear that I do not have any musical training. Music was very important for me when I was growing up, and still is now. In my studio, I have a record player and a very good set of speakers. I listen to records all the time – anything from drone and noise to contemporary classical. I’m drawn to melody and lyrics, too. When

I was an adolescent, I was involved in several bands, but I never thought I'd be in a band for the long-term.

The music element became more prominent in my work recently. There are three pieces I made in the past four years that could be called or described as involving music. In the past, I collaborated with various musicians on backdrops and designs for their performances, partly because I am fascinated with the process of making anything, but especially in the making of music, which is so often a collaboration between a group of people. It is the document of a performance that I also find fascinating. I am thinking about the astonishing footage of blues singer RLBurnside from 1978. Alan Lomax filmed Burnside performing in a field in rural Mississippi. He sat next to his amplifier on an upturned bucket and among the songs he performs, he plays Jumper on The Line. His performance is just incredible. I mainly watch it on a laptop screen, but something between me and that screen happens when I watch it. It is this very exchange of energy that I am interested in, this relationship between the audience and performer and the fulcrum at which they meet. Is it to be found when you are preparing for the performance? Or is it in the actual time at which the performance is taking place? Or is it watching a YouTube video 30-plus years later? I am interested in capturing something transient and without a firmly established form, something like what that is present in a live event or live music. It's like smoke, the most beautiful smoke, it curls and disappears above the audience. A couple of years ago, a friend of mine, pianist and composer Rachel Grimes, commented that, to her, my work was akin to composing or composition. It struck me as being an insightful observation of the nature of my creative process. I would never say that my work was like composing, because I do not feel that I have the ability to use musical language in a way a composer would. But, in arrangement, the proposals do have a language of their own while using a recognised structure.

Going back to the choral pieces. There was a choral piece that I wrote when I was in Iceland. Before that, the only piece that used music was Notes on Protesting, which was made for the Whitechapel Gallery in collaboration with the Emdash Foundation. It was a performance put together with the help of local schools, when I worked with 60 six- and seven-year-old schoolchildren. I met with them at least once a week over six-and-a-half months. We talked about the idea of rules, a possibility of wanting to break the rules, or who you might go to if you disagreed with the rules and who might help you in that task, beginning with sisters, brothers, parents and teachers and going up the ladder to the headmistress, a policeman, and maybe even all the way to the prime minister. Finally, we reached the level of the United Nations. We did an entire lesson on the United Nations and the Treaty of Rome, which led to a full-blown discussion about what rules are, and what it means to break them. We developed a language describing various possibilities and scenarios for breaking rules. Then very slowly – and it was vitally important that it was not led by me, but by the children – we started gathering materials for protest songs. All the material came from them, not from me and what I imagined they may want to protest against. We wrote 11 pieces, which were performed by all 60 children, symbolically, on 1 May – May Day – 2014. Notes on Protesting was the first piece written and performed with a music-related aim in mind.

Two months later, I was in Iceland, and wrote another choral piece. It was based on Icelandic fishing sagas, usually written for those who are at sea. I have no real experience of being at sea, so I wrote the songs from the point of view of those left on land waiting for those at sea to return. Fourteen pieces were then sung by an Icelandic choir that I put together with the help of an Icelandic musician Benni Hemm Hemm. On 12 June, it was performed in a harbour at sunset, which was at about a minute to midnight followed by sunrise at midnight. The sun literally kissed the water and bounced back. It was very beautiful. It does not get dark there at that time of year – June and July. On the night we performed, we experienced the most astonishing sunset.

These were the two pieces that gave me confidence to consider my most recent performance at the Tate Modern. It was an 11-month project, and I worked every single day of these 11 months. I had 43 hours of recorded interviews and 17 notebooks. I interviewed everyone from the director of Tate Modern to curators, technicians, porters and other members of

the gallery's staff, friends and visitors. I also spoke to volunteers and to different groups from around London who had links to the museum. I spent three weeks with each group, gathering material about the Tate; I also worked in the archives. I recall an incredible meeting with a group of ladies who came to the museum through an outreach programme for the elderly. None of them had been to the Tate before, although they lived within a mile. One of the ladies' husbands used to work as an engineer in the building when it was a power station. This lady had a link to the building before it was transformed into the Tate. What was astonishing was that her husband worked for the power station for almost 20 years until he retired. At no point during that period did she visit him at work, even though they lived a 15-minute walk away.

Material for the songs was collected from many different groups, some directly involved and others indirectly with the Tate's building, also local businesses: hairdressers, waiters, salespeople in various shops ... I distilled the collected material down to find common themes and things that worked within the context I wanted to present. I did not want the work to be a historical marker. I wanted it to go from the point of Tate Modern existing in 2000 through to this year. Also, I wanted to look two or three years ahead to what Tate might become. I recorded the sounds of the building, using a very sensitive contact microphone that could pick up almost imperceptible noises coming from the building. The performance started with a hum, which is the actual sound of the Turbine Hall. It is almost as if the songs and sound of the building made by the voices of 500 singers was the building giving up the music and songs for, and to, the audience. The hum was an incredibly moving part of the performance, 500 singers were humming at the same time as the building, and in time with the building. I should add that there were no professional singers involved in the choir of 500. For me, it was very important that all choirs that took part were amateur choirs: I wanted a similar demographic to perform the choral piece as the people who provided the material for the choral piece.

**NK: How long did the performance last?**

**PL:** Forty minutes. I think it was the right length of time. We had a huge crowd of people, between 6,000 to 7,500. We printed the songbooks for the performers, adding the sheet music and the lyrics. We also printed 4,000 books for the audience, so they could follow and be involved in the piece and had something from Tate Modern to take away with them. As you know, I am interested in the printed word, but it's not just that, it's the physicality of that thing. It is important to me that the audience has something physical to take away with them, alongside the intangible feeling of experiencing a performance en masse.

**NK: I saw one of the books you did for Printed Matter. They have a copy in the Special Collections at New York Public Library. I have just one more question for you, about your exhibition at the Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum. You said a few words about it, but perhaps you can say a few more, because it is very close, slightly over an hour away from the Sean Kelly Gallery, and you obviously refer to it in your gallery installation.**

**PL:** At the Aldrich, a lot of the work is sculptural and in some way representational of my experience of the museum and of Ridgefield. One of the realised proposals in the show relates directly to being there. It is a proposal to investigate the non-existence of matter, and yet linking me inextricably with being there, in Ridgefield. The proposal references an Anglo-Irish philosopher, Bishop Berkeley, who himself proposed that objects do not themselves exist; it is the idea of the object in the mind of those who think it exists that makes it exist, and that in that existence they are without matter. When Samuel Johnson heard this, he kicked a stone and, as he did so, proclaimed: "I refute it thus!" So, with this in mind, and the idea to me that it is the physical interaction with material that can root you to a place, I kicked stones from wherever I found them into the museum.

What I also found interesting is that Johnson's thinking absolutely grounds you to a specific place. Sometimes, I would get stopped when people saw me kicking rocks and asked what I was doing. Depending on how they asked the question, I would tell them what

was happening, or sometimes I would tell them something else. There are more than 100 rocks of all sizes in the museum now. They all became part of the artwork. That piece is related specifically to the Aldrich because of the idea of being in a place and imposing your will on that place and an object at that place. Some other works exist there because of conversations I had about the Aldrich and Ridgefield. Keith Richards of the Rolling Stones has a brother-in-law who lives in Ridgefield and runs a very good restaurant. I thought it would be interesting to propose that Keith Richards would come to the museum and perform. Then I thought it would be even more interesting to get his amplifier and install it in the museum as a sculpture. It would be switched on every morning like a neon or video work. The proposal suggests that, at any point during the show, he can just come into the museum and perform, rehearse, or practice - whatever he wants to do using the amplifier. These two pieces are similar, because by kicking a rock, someone is imposing his will on it. In the same way, by using the amplifier, Keith Richards is imposing his will on it. What's important in a large group of works, such as these at the Aldrich, is not just the realised work, but also the unrealised work: to me, there is no hierarchy. It invites people to address the possibility to think differently about the work than what may have been their initial reaction, whatever that may be. My art is not like Alex Katz's, who at one point said that he wanted to dominate people. However, I completely understand that sentiment and, in his art, you can see that urge as well. There is no negotiating with a beautiful red coat. It's so confidently definite - it is what it is. The same is true about Jeff Koons's sculpture; there is a definite unambiguity to it. Whereas I wish my proposal to say: "This is what I think the work should be, and my version of it may not be the correct one." This is ambiguity. It may be that the work could be mine, but it is willing to give up something, which is thinking space. My work is not about looking at it and not engaging. It is solely about engagement.