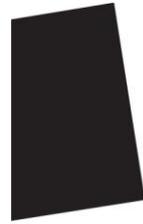


# Peter Liversidge: COMMA 07

## Essay by Helen Sumpter



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**Bloomberg SPACE**

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### **Peter Liversidge: COMMA 07**

To knock a hole in the front of the building, to run the gallery as a car showroom, to install a life-size replica of Darwin's ship *HMS Beagle*, are a few of Peter Liversidge's proposals for his new commission at Bloomberg SPACE. The fact that these ideas will not actually be realised isn't of prime concern to Liversidge. What is important is that they exist on paper and, once read, exist also in the imaginations of his audience.

Liversidge makes work in a range of media, from painting, sculpture and works on paper to public art and performance. Since 1997 he has also been creating exhibitions based on collections of proposals. In the lead-up time to an exhibition, within specific dates, Liversidge types proposals, each on a single sheet of paper, using an old manual typewriter. Some may be abstract – to propose to rely on memory; some are poetic – to propose to miss you when you are gone. Some may be performative and pleurably interactive – to set up a gin stand from which to make and hand out free gin and tonics. Some are unfeasibly fantastic – to dam the Thames and flood the City of London. But all are proposed to take place within the duration dates of the exhibition.

Once he has typed a proposal Liversidge posts it individually to the curators or gallery directors with whom he will be working. When all are typed and sent, there then begins a series of negotiations to decide which proposals will be realised for the exhibition and the logistics of how they might be achieved.

While these processes might appear random or even whimsical, what underlies them is a serious investigation into the nature of art and its relationship to life – how thoughts become ideas, how those ideas are translated into objects or events and how, in turn, those objects and events are experienced by an audience.

Liversidge's art and ideas come out of his ordinary daily life and perhaps it is significant that he is not someone who lives and breathes only in the art world. He works in paid employment alongside his art practice and also has a young family. His proposal to give every visitor to the exhibition an orange, for example, may have come from the simple recollection of how pleasurable eating an orange can be. When realised for an exhibition, that thought becomes an interactive experience for both the gallery visitors and those employed to hand out the free fruit. It wouldn't be unreasonable to ask the question - but how is that art? One answer may be to say that art lies in creating an experience that the participants may not know is art.



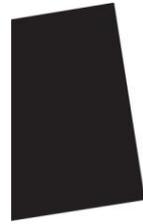
Many of Liversidge's proposals are site specific, either to the venue or city in which he is exhibiting, but any associations that may have existed in the mind of the artist when the proposal was conceived are never stated and are rarely obvious. And when a work is realised it may trigger completely different connections in the mind of the viewer.

Among Liversidge's proposals for Bloomberg SPACE is a photograph of a bear, which the artist took when walking around Barcelona Zoo, enlarged to a scale that is life-size. One might look at the huge, framed image and think of endangered species or perhaps be reminded of the symbol for a brand of lager or for the city of Berlin. But equally it reminds us that Bloomberg is a company that provides financial information and that the markets are experiencing a period of decline – a 'bear market' – as we know it. A similar train of thought might arise from viewing the realisation of the proposed text piece that reads 'The Darkest Hour is Just Before Dawn', in the form of a floral tribute. One might look at that work, hung on the wall, and think of a song sung by Country singer Emmylou Harris. One might also think of a funeral wreath and of death. Then again, in terms of the message in the words, one might also think of hope – a situation always seems at its most bleak before it starts to improve. Another pathway of thought might consider that the flowers will degrade over the duration of the exhibition and in so doing, the optimistic message will begin to undermine itself. Whether any or all of these thoughts occurred to Liversidge as he sat at his typewriter is known only to him, but the viewer is free to find their own narratives.

Some proposals will take place offsite and are often unannounced. While some of these performances or events are in one sense invisible, there may also be some aspect of the work that becomes permanent. A proposal which Liversidge has put into effect for several previous exhibitions is to drop endangered British wildflower seeds in the streets around a gallery space or in locations in the surrounding area. The event may not be witnessed and the artist may not know how many, if any, of the seeds will actually grow and flower. Again one could ask how this could be art, as this isn't even taking place within a gallery. In a subtle way, Liversidge is transforming the environment and therefore transforming the experience of that environment, for all those who encounter it.

While the works that are realised, whether inside or outside a gallery space, create one kind of exhibition, the type-written proposals themselves create another. Each completed set of proposals is also produced in the form of a book. And just as each gallery visitor will bring their own individual associations to the objects and experiences Liversidge creates, so the reading of the book will similarly become a particularly personal experience. Each proposal is descriptive enough for the idea to be understood, but at the same time sufficiently non-prescriptive to be imagined in any number of ways, so that each reader visualises their own unique version of the exhibition as they read.

Liversidge often proposes to individually frame the total number of proposals (86 in the case of Bloomberg SPACE) and display them in the gallery. This is an example of the way in which



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Liversidge's work often reflects and folds in on itself; an exhibition within an exhibition or a constituent part of another form of itself.

As this text is itself beginning to demonstrate, an artist's practice can very rarely be summarized in simple terms. The journey from the creation of an idea to an exhibition is a multi-layered process of personal thoughts and connections, negotiations, re-evaluations and collaborations. Part of Liversidge's practice is to expose some of those processes, often with a gentle wit and humour, to reveal how ideas might be created, adapted, recreated or discarded. And there's a connection here to Liversidge's decision to type his proposals on a manual typewriter, where the print quality is uneven and mistakes and misspellings are either visibly typed over or deliberately left uncorrected. It's not just the complex and messy process of making art that he's unafraid to show and share, but also the complex and messy process of life.

*Helen Sumpter*

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