

■ Proposals and Scripts

Stephen Bury

Robin Arseneault, *Monsterdom: A Tragicomedy in Four Scenes*, Edinburgh College of Art, 2005, 37pp, illus, pb, edition of 250, £5.00, 1 904443 07 9. Thomas Lehmen, *Funktionen – tool box*, Thomas Lehmen, Berlin, 2004, 1 box, illus, €10.00, 3 00 014990 2. Peter Liversidge, *Proposals 1997-2005*, Ormeau Baths Gallery, Belfast, 2005, 222pp, illus, pb, edition of 500, £12.00. Elizabeth Price, *LIVE*, Elizabeth Price, London, 2003, 60pp, edition of 20 signed copies, £6.50.

When Gulliver visits the Academy of Lagado in the Laputa section of Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*, he is confronted by a procession of schemes: a project for 'extracting Sun-Beams out of Cucumbers, which were to be put into Vials hermetically sealed, and let out to warm the Air in raw inclement Summers', or one 'to shorten Discourse by cutting Polysyllables into one.' Peter Liversidge's *Proposals* has a similar comic, satirical impact – they could all happen, but for reasons of health and safety, sanity, public order and survival of the gallery, many probably would not (like training as a midwife and delivering babies during the opening hours of the Beak Gallery in Dublin).

Liversidge's first series of proposals (from 1999) manifested itself as a spiral bound A5 booklet intended as a proposal to be placed in the back of Jason Brown's Cab Gallery. This new publication has 191 proposals, many just a paragraph in length on one side of the leaf, followed by a section containing floor plans of the galleries for which the proposals were made since 1997: Beak Gallery (Dublin), Lisson Gallery (London), Ormeau Baths Gallery (Belfast), Ikon Gallery (Birmingham), Northern Gallery of Contemporary Art (Sunderland), GEM Museum (The Hague), Herbert Read Gallery (Canterbury), Lucy Mackintosh (Lausanne), Grundy Art Gallery (Blackpool), Grizedale Arts, Townner Art Gallery (Eastbourne) – but not for the Cab Gallery. The book has a black card cover and is a chunky 4 cm thick, and complete with all the mishaps of Liversidge's usage of the keyboard of an ancient 'Continental' portable typewriter, the book as a whole is reminiscent of

one of those university microfilms printouts of theses in the 70s – and after all what is a thesis but a series of propositions to be nailed Martin Luther-style to the church door of Wittenberg.

Some proposals are common to more than one location – those decking the streets with bunting in the vicinity of the gallery or the sound clashes (where a group of non-professional DJs come together with 20 records each to construct in turn a sound narrative). I like the site-specific ones – re-introducing wolves into the forests of Grizedale or packing the back of the Cab Gallery with cardboard boxes, leaving room for only one passenger. Other proposals relate to Liversidge's interest in multiples: at the Beak Gallery he proposes to crumple A4 sheets into balls and throw them into a waste-paper bin – those that 'make it into the bin will be collected up and numbered and form ... the success edition.' Whereas a proposal for Ormeau Baths would involve a bowling machine firing balls at Liversidge in a cricket net – the balls getting him out forming a 'failure edition'. There is an infectious over-determination about Liversidge's works, and he manages to make our familiar world unfamiliar.

Liversidge's proposals, albeit in whimsical pedigree, can be seen in the tradition of Conceptual Art, of Sol LeWitt's view that an idea can be 'a machine that makes art'. They also relate to the scores for Fluxus performances, events and happenings. In the last five years several British artists have also looked at the script as a vehicle for the fine artist. The Canadian-born Robin Arseneault's *Monsterdom* is a Beckettian tragicomedy involving a Ship of Fools sailing towards Paradise but, after the inevitable becalming, arriving in Monsterdom. The cast includes a pair of lovers, Fool 1 and Fool 2 (who disappears after Scene 1), Michel Foucault (Voice of Reason), Desiderius Erasmus, Roland Barthes (Voice of the Weather), Hieronymus Bosch (Voice of the Sea), Stendhal (The DJ), Hélène Cixous (The Psychic), and Sebastian Brant, plus the inevitable audience. Around the playscript, front and rear, are black and white photographs of nooses, which at the end suspend a puppet's corpse. Using dialogue to convey ideas or art (rather than entertainment) is fraught with problems – witness HG Wells' *A Modern Utopia* which had to have a chapter on 'The Owner of the Voice': but Arseneault takes

his play beyond a slick, bravura art school piece.

A more humdrum but equally effective script is Elizabeth Price's *LIVE*, made for her Jerwood Space exhibition in 2003. It is A5 in size, and like the Liversidge book, has a plain black card cover. It is intended for 10 performers covering 26 characters, so that some need to remove sports bibs which bare characters' names as they assume new roles. It has the format of a Radio 5 live broadcast involving Nicky Campbell and guests Dom Joly and Sheila Gunn, with appearances by the sports correspondent Kevin Moseley, the travel news presenter Caroline Feraday, etc. Other cast members include the radio phone-in participants, the modern day equivalents of everyman in the medieval mystery-play cycles – Simon in Coventry, Rita in Boothstown, Debbie in Canterbury, Mushtak in Aldgate, Michelle in Upper Norwood, etc. The subject of the phone-in is Jeffrey Archer's four-year imprisonment for perjury, and Price's success is to make the play into an apparently perfect transcript of what a Radio 5 Live broadcast on the subject might have been like at the time. It has also lasted well.

Thomas Lehmen is a German choreographer. His *Funktionen*, initially produced for a series of dance performances in Zagreb, Kuusiku (Estonia), Sofia and Berlin in 2004, is a plain cardboard file box, 9 x 13 x 13 cm, with two green rubber bands to help keep the box and its contents together, stapled at its joints, containing a series of green, blue, orange, grey, pale purple, yellow, light green and white file cards. These are subdivided into 'categories', 'it's better to ...' and 'functions', with additional cards for aspects, themes, terms, persons and blank cards. Individually or as a group it is possible to use a selection from these parameters to develop a system that can be used for acting, performance, live art, music and art. This obviously has potential as a text-engine to develop texts from a set of variable rules, in the spirit of Dan Graham's *Schema* or of OULIPO, the Workshop for Potential Literature. Before I get carried away with its possibilities, I again recall Swift's account of the Lagado Academy and the project to permit even the most ignorant person to write books of philosophy by turning 40 handles to manipulate a 24 foot frame with pasted words on its wooden squares. ■

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