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Douglas, Sarah, "As an Addition to His Country House, Sean Kelly Builds an Artist Residency," *Artinfo.com*, July 19, 2010.

ARTINFO

As an Addition to His Country House, Sean Kelly Builds an Artist Residency

By Sarah Douglas

CHATHAM, New York—The quaint, quiet town of Chatham in upstate New York, home to businesses like the American Pie Contemporary General Store and Ralph's Pretty Good Cafe, is not a place where you would expect to find a series of conceptual art interventions. And yet, that is precisely what has been going on there since British artist Peter Liversidge moved into town a month ago. Over the past few weeks, he's been collecting handwritten signs that read "Free" — he generally finds them protruding from bins at tag sales, or on the roadside next to a jumble of discarded objects — and replacing them with ones of his own creation. He has set up the signs he's gathered along one wall of a spacious studio he is currently occupying on the town's Main Street, upstairs from a deli and a clothing shop. Arrayed together in the space, they seem to advertise a larger, more idealistic sense of freedom.



While the setting may be unusual for the London-based Liversidge, the format is not. His artworks almost always take the form of typed-up proposals for offbeat projects. In 2007, he made a series of these that were shown in Art Basel's Art Statements section and which proposed activities that he enacted during the fair in the tiny canton of Basel, such as fishing in the Rhine River.

Chatham has posed some challenges, however. His latest hurdle is the local bookstore, which is the one business that has turned down his proposal to emboss dollar bills with a message that reads "Montana Forever." (Liversidge lived in that state for a time, and became fascinated with it.) The ice cream store said yes, as did the deli, which calls itself the Grainery. "The bookstore said no," Liversidge laments. "They were pretty grumpy."

Luckily Liversidge's Chatham host can probably lend a hand in the matter. "Oh, the bookstore," says British-born New York dealer Sean Kelly, standing in Liversidge's studio on a recent Saturday and waving a hand dismissively. "I'll talk to them." Kelly owns the vast studio space Liversidge is using in Chatham, and invited the artist to live

there for the summer, along with his wife and two young boys, an arrangement that functions as a sort of informal artist residency. "It's been relaxing," the artist's wife, Cassie, says. "Peter has stopped wearing his watch."



The building has an illustrious history. In the 1970s, Ellsworth Kelly (no relation to the dealer) used it as a studio and produced a group of paintings he called the "Chatham Series," among other works. But there have been even more colorful visitors. Cady Hall began its life in the late 19th century as Allen's Theatre, a mainly vaudeville venue that was used for both films and live performances into the 1930s. When Sean Kelly did a full-scale renovation of the space after purchasing it a few years ago — he put down a new floor, and had to replace its entire rear wall, which was falling down — he found

old programs secreted away under the floorboards, including one for "Queen of Sheba," advertised as "A Gigantic 10 Reel Production: Two Machines, Giving a Non-Stop Show. No Time Lost Changing Reels." The bottom of the program promises "Big Pictures are Worth While." He also found an old ticket-stamping machine. As sleepy as it may be now, Chatham was a lively center of industry in the first decades of the 20th century. Just behind Cady Hall are a set of train tracks now used for freight — Liversidge has been flattening pennies on them, to amuse his two boys — that used to serve major passenger lines so that celebrities including Houdini and the Three Stooges who had just performed in Manhattan would hop off the train, do a quick gig at the Hall, then catch the next train up to Montreal.

Kelly and his wife, Mary, and occasionally their son and daughter, have had plenty of time to mull over the various oddities that they found in the space — many of which Kelly plans to donate to the local historical society — as they were using Cady Hall as a country getaway of sorts until construction was completed their new permanent residence there. (That abode, a modernist house designed by architect Toshiko Mori, sits on a hilltop on the outskirts of town and has an appealingly green aspect: its shiny exterior is made entirely of recycled aluminum cans.) While Kelly has left a few attractive pieces of modern furniture at the studio space, including a rare Kjaerholm flat file, his new house is like a small museum, built around the theme of language and stocked with artworks by the likes of Joseph Beuys, Marcel Duchamp, Jenny Holzer, and Lawrence Weiner. In the glass-walled library, an edition of Marcel Duchamp's famous "Boîte-en-valise" is displayed alongside rare editions of James Joyce's "Ulysses" (Kelly is something of a Joyce fanatic; the family's two Jack Russell terriers are called Molly and Finn.) Outside, a Joseph Kosuth neon text piece spreads over a wall with the words "History Place Parts Whole Context Meaning," in front of which one of Antony

Gormley's life-size figural sculptures stands like a sentinel, gazing at a landscape of upstate New York. So wide is the vista, stretching from Red Hook to the Catskills to Albany, that this Fourth of July the Kellys were able to simultaneously watch five different sets of fireworks.

Above the bed in the room occupied by Lauren Kelly, the dealer's daughter and an associate at his gallery, is a framed set of Liversidge's proposals. It was Lauren who brought Liversidge to her father's attention after seeing his project in Basel, and, in exchange for his time at Cady Hall, he will give the elder Kelly some of the work he is producing there. And he hasn't only busied himself collecting "Free" signs and embossing money. There are also delicate drawings of trees made by cutting thin strips of black tape and placing them on paper. There are also photographs that Liversidge, a confessed Polaroid obsessive, has taken with a couple of antiquated Polaroid cameras that he was given in exchange for cataloguing an art collection. He managed to find film for them and has been making little diptychs from photographs of everyday things around town — he thinks of them as "siamese" images — by taking one photograph and then, a few minutes later, attempting to exactly recreate it. What interests him are the unavoidable subtle differences between one picture and another, such as slightly displaced shadows. Another "siamese" piece involves a Xerox copy of a sign for a lost cat, which happens to be siamese.

Liversidge is the first artist who's been invited to use Cady Hall for the summer, but Kelly, always thinking like a dealer, has big plans for the space — big plans for big pictures. Wouldn't it be great, he says, as he descends the stairs to Main Street, to invite his Edinburgh-based artist Callum Innes to spend some time here? "He could come here and make big paintings," he says. "We'd put them on view here in Chatham, and then at the gallery in New York. That's a show! The only way we have of getting his large paintings to New York now is on planes that can handle giant freight. It's a problem." And with that Kelly, throwing on a straw hat, climbed behind the wheel of a red and white 1962 Chevy Impala convertible with license plates that read "HISTORICAL." Asked about the classic car, he laughs. "Oh, this?" he says. "I suppose this is my other problem."