

**Conversation between Thomas Liu Le Lann, artist & Hans Ulrich Obrist,  
Serpentine Galleries.**

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H.U.O. How did you get into art?

T.L.L.L. I think it's better if I begin talking about my first soft-sculptures. I started to create objects inspired by the character named Astro Boy. At that time, it was a way for me to portray men about whom I wrote my stories. I made several soft sculptures that I presented with photographs, video, and vernacular documents of my travels. It was created within the context of sex tourism to tell stories about these boys (men). However, what I consider to be the entry into my artistic practice was the moment when I performed in Nantes in 2015. My friends and I formed a collective to choreograph theatre performances. That's when I felt like I was really getting into art. Later on, I left Nantes, met my fiancé, and moved to Taipei to work. There, I started to create my sculptures and paint.

H.U.O. Does dance/performance continue to be present, or has it disappeared from your work?

T.L.L.L. I think it is still very present. My sculptures are bodies or objects of penetration, and these objects remind us of the human body. The attitude of the sculptures is almost always the same—depraved. The movement is also the same. It's, therefore, one and the same dance.

H.U.O. Do your sculptures portray existing people?

T.L.L.L. Yes, I write biographical essays about the boys (men) I meet, linking them to my sculptural work. I title each piece with their first names.

H.U.O. Who is the main character?

T.L.L.L. He was my lover. The exhibition *Best Western* will attempt to tell a story about him. Specifically about the night that we shared together in a room at the Best Western Hotel in Hong Kong. I want to recreate this hotel room on a different scale by putting the outside neon lights and some other elements inside the exhibition space. My poem about my lover will also be placed within the exhibition.

H.U.O. Who are the artists that inspire you?

T.L.L.L. I don't see artists as heroes. However, some inspire me or have inspired me in some way. One of my greatest inspirations is Cosima von Bonin. When I started my studies at HEAD in Geneva, where Verena Dengler and Lili Reynaud Dewar were teaching, I got a chance to work with them. It allowed me to start writing under Lili Reynaud Dewar tutorship. Perhaps, in some of my recent paintings, I think of the show *FRA ÅRE TIL OVN* by Ida Eklblad at the Zürich Kunsthalle. Her exhibition was a highlight for me and greatly influenced my work.

H.U.O. And in terms of memory and reconstructing a room, is Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster an influence?

T.L.L.L. Yes, I am particularly thinking about my use of light and ambiance. I did a workshop with her at E.C.A.L., Lausanne in 2017. The idea of redoing my hotel room is mostly inspired by her work. Here in New York, the hotel room is reconstructed in a very fictional way --characters and the story become alive.

H.U.O. How is this going to work? Will there be an exact reconstruction of this hotel room? With the minibar, the T.V., the table?

T.L.L.L. Not really, it will be far from being a millimetric reconstruction of the room. The exhibition space already looks like a bedroom. Therefore, I'm going to place the hotel's neon lights and my luggage inside it. It will be a small scene that occurs within the room rather than reconstructing the hotel room itself.

H.U.O. So this scene is linked to the text?

T.L.L.L. Yes and the text will be physically present in the exhibition.

H.U.O. The exhibition in Arles had a text written by you. Can you tell me more about your works shown in Arles?

T.L.L.L. There were three padded vinyl and polyester knives in the shape of "Zombie Defense Knives" banned this year in Britain. I also made a series of children's backpacks out of transparent P.V.C. in which I placed copies of *péril jaune* -- an autofiction story that I wrote. Everyone could take this printed grey-paper edition and read.

H.U.O. What's the importance of writing for you?

T.L.L.L. I don't draw. I write a lot. I only draw sewing patterns, and sometimes I make scribbles in my sketchbook. My research and ideas pass through the writing of my stories and poems.

H.U.O. What influences your writing?

T.L.L.L. In my younger years I took inspiration from Marguerite Duras, specifically *Un barrage contre le Pacifique*, *Le Ravissement de Lol V. Stein* and obviously *l'Amant*. Later I read Paul B. Preciado, Guillaume Dustan and then Hervé Guibert, *Voyage avec deux enfants* and *Le Mausolée des amants*, these authors and their writings are fundamental to me.

H.U.O. Dennis Cooper also seems very important to you?

T.L.L.L. He is an essential writer for me. Also, more recently Paul Clinton linked my work to boys described by Dennis Cooper.

H.U.O. I am not familiar with Guillaume Dustan. Can you tell me about him?

T.L.L.L. He is undoubtedly the only author to have addressed certain subjects in his own way and who reflected an intense period in Paris. His success in France, if we can call it a success, is also strongly linked to his media appearances and the Prix de Flore he received for *Nicolas Pages*. One of his books, *In My Room*, has been translated into English and published by Ramaya Tegegne. In his writings, he discusses his relationship to the H.I.V. epidemic, contamination, bareback sex, and relapse. He also documented club life, backrooms and gay bars in Paris, many of which have disappeared today. He expressed a strong position against a certain moralism, which caused a scandal and turned him into a pariah in opposition to the morality of that time.

H.U.O. All these are references from previous generations, who are the writers or artists of your age that inspire you? Which ones are you closest to?

T.L.L.L. I believe the artists with whom I work, without knowing precisely, inspire me. Soon I'll be opening an artist-run space in Geneva with Mohamed Almusibli, James Bantone, and Ser Serpas. I think these are the people who surround and inspire me. They are artists as well as writers. I also think of my friends such as Camille Juthier in Paris and Alfredo Aceto in Lausanne.

H.U.O. What will be the name of this space?

T.L.L.L. CHERISH! It's based in Geneva, and the first exhibition will open in November.

H.U.O. Where does the name come from?

T.L.L.L. It comes from the R'n'B group composed of four sisters.

H.U.O. What is the common ground? What brings you together?

T.L.L.L. Age, place, and friendships. At first sight, there is no link in our work. However, our artistic practices and built-in conversations allow us to grow together in these crossovers. I imagine allowing various intellectual and personal exchanges to happen and take place. As we are in the familiar territory, as I like to call it, new and different artworks will be born from such discourse.

H.U.O. In your work, some objects and figures keep reappearing. You told me earlier that they were portraits? What is the role of these figures?

T.L.L.L. Paul Clinton called them "Soft Heroes," since then I have called them that way. They are passive figures. They are objects, and they are objectified, fetishized, and very tired of being visually treated like that. They are in their almost depressive attitude.

H.U.O. Earlier you told me that artists are not really heroes and heroines.

T.L.L.L. I don't know. I believe the figure of the Hero is meant to be deconstructed.

H.U.O. Yes, that's what I think as well, and the "Soft Hero" is a deconstruction of the Hero, isn't it?

T.L.L.L. Yes, that's right. When we hear 'Hero,' we imagine things, people, but we must no longer think about that. We have to think of our Soft Heroes. This reminds me of Guy Hocquenghem and what he describes as the "power of passivity." He argues that to weaken patriarchy, anal penetration is a subversive act. So, passivity is the power of men. Therefore, these men who engage in anal penetration may be or would become soft heroes. It's a beautiful vision. However, to go further, we can imagine communities of completely passive men, who do not practice penetration. I'm talking about an image; not a solution.

H.U.O. Concerning your exhibition *ShowDown* at M.B.A.L. Le Locle, you made Kalashnikovs. Where do these Kalashnikov sculptures come from?

T.L.L.L. The rifles were made of padded vinyl. The material is fetishistic and soft, including fake fur that falls off. These weapons are powerless like the phallic representations of Tetsumi Kudo. They are also harmless weapons—toys, penetrable, and with the possibility of sexual insertion.

H.U.O. It seems to me that you are interested in Japanese anime, can you tell me which ones?

T.L.L.L. When I was a child, Akira and Evangelion were my inspiration. Astro, the little robot always remained an essential anime character for me. I also read a lot of B.L. and Yaoi.

H.U.O. And in New York, will there be a text again?

T.L.L.L. There will be a short text that starts with a letter written in the morning to wish me a good day; and, which then unfolds like a poem. Some of it was already written in 2016 in *péril jaune*, and some of it is new. I was first thinking of writing it with light coming through the ceiling lamps within the gallery space.

H.U.O. So you write texts of autofiction and also poems?

T.L.L.L. When I write, I drift towards poetry to express things that storytelling does not allow. I also use it to lighten the hard and toxic elements of the story. It makes me feel better, and I think it is the case for everyone, including potential readers. Poetry does not have a light nature, but in my case, it is the lightest -- the toxicity disappears in my poems.

H.U.O. Your main writing format is autofiction?

T.L.L.L. L'écriture du moi, but with long drifts in fiction.

H.U.O. Is all your work autobiographical?

T.L.L.L. In short, yes; it's mainly about me, who travels and sleeps with men. These stories are also punctuated by science fiction.

H.U.O. For "*Best Western*" in New York, what led you to revisit this character?

T.L.L.L. As I will undoubtedly reissue my essay in Geneva in book format. I would like to resume this writing, to reconstruct the story and also translate the text into English. I found it interesting by rewriting the text and starting a cycle of exhibition projects that draw inspiration from the scenes in the book. *Best Western* is the first revised chapter within my novel. Only then will I know if I can, and wish to continue this until the end of the story. It can be stunning unless I get tired of it.

H.U.O. Is *Best Western* only about that specific night at the hotel? Or as in *Nouveau Roman*, does it also concern the objects in the room?

T.L.L.L. Yes, it was a room with a view of the bay. My lover and I drank beer and smoked sitting on the bed; there were smells, a tapestry...

H.U.O. And what happened to this character? Have you kept in touch? Does he know about it?

T.L.L.L. He works in finance in Hong Kong. We don't talk to each other anymore. Yes, he knows about it. All of the people I had the opportunity to write about have read the texts for validation. The names, places, and details were changed during the writing.

H.U.O. Do these exhibitions represent new chapters in your novel? Alain Robbe-Grillet has always told me that he uses invitations as a pretext to write sections of his book. For instance, he has to write about a painter; but in his head, it is the first chapter of a novel. Could you imagine that every exhibition you do is a new chapter in your book?

T.L.L.L. Yes, I think there are always elements that play again and again in different situations. It can also be read as a novel with various scenes. The idea for *Best Western* is to go from chapter to chapter by rebuilding, rewriting, and further developing the text and simultaneously creating new exhibition projects.