



BOYFRIEND MATERIAL

LiangWest is a "new prototype of gallery for a new generation of artists whose artistic agendas are relevant to contemporary ideals". For this month's Collaborative relationships a-n Magazine Coordinator Chris Brown talks to proprietors Theresa Liang and William West and artist Prem Sahib. They discuss the importance of peer support, and describe how they negotiate their ongoing relationship and their forthcoming exhibition project 'Boyfriend Material'



"Models don't exist just to be copied – we should ultimately challenge and reinvent them."

When we were still at college, in a conversation with Richard Wentworth, he pointed out something that retrospectively speaking, paved the way to our way of working with others now. He encouraged us to work within our peer groups. Instead of trying to break out of their level and connect with people above them in the art world hierarchy, we believe that the best things come out of the community of people one studies with or works alongside, because you tend to have the same understanding and sensitivities, and can relate to them more directly.

When we were at the Slade we were curating a lot and found ourselves defending this as our practice. Now that our curatorial practice has completely overtaken, we feel that the most important thing in this industry (probably in all fields as well) is to just be clear, consistent and focused. Now LiangWest has a group of artists that we regularly work with and whom we have a lot of faith in. We have a very close collaborative relationship with them and try to keep as close contact with them as possible. We identify with this group of artists particularly because they are our peers. Not all artists look to work with people at their own level: many have the notion that to work with people at a higher level will benefit them more, either by furthering their career or opening up doors. We don't disagree with this notion because we sometimes work in this way as well, but in terms of finding artists whom we want to work with, we look for an inclination to work in a reciprocal way. We look to establish long-term relationships with those who we work with, rather than act as some form of publicity tool, as

long-term working relationships allow for so many more opportunities of creative exchange. The relationship really depends on the person, their personality, their work ethic and our understanding of their work.

The artists we regularly work with are those in whom we have confidence when considering the longevity of their practice and aspirations. Community sounds like a 70s ideal, but LiangWest has become a community of artists – we want them to identify with one another as well as with us, not necessarily in terms of their interests but in terms of the situation and shared ideals.

We initially showed a piece of Prem's work in 'Overzealous', one of our first group shows out of the Slade. We'd never worked with him and were really amazed at his dedication to the hanging of this one piece, and we really appreciated this. We regularly saw Prem in social circles and started a conversation with him, proposing to work towards an issue of *Introducing* (the online curatorial publication edited by LiangWest). We were considering a 'design' theme because of the influences and artefacts which feature in his work. After a time he said he was interested in proposing a show called 'Boyfriend Material'. This instantly excited us and from there the discussions and suggestions started to happen.

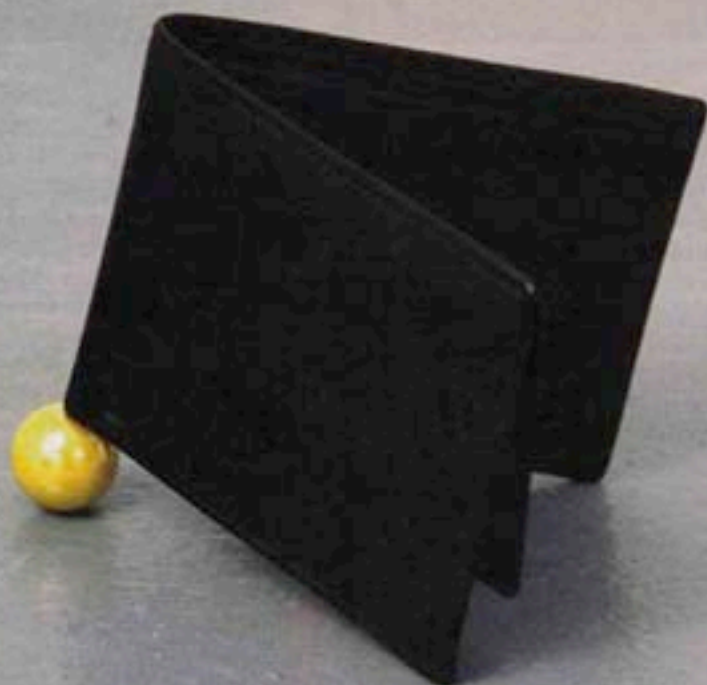
The way we work with people has developed into a mutual understanding that we all come with our own knowledge and experiences, even if we were educated at similar times and come from similar backgrounds, and that if we are open to bringing those together the project ultimately becomes stronger. This makes it diverse yet coherent at the same time.

placed and the broader dialogue around their work or its cultural ramifications, rather than what it's about in itself. It's very important that we work with people who appreciate that their practice doesn't exist in a vacuum. If we can identify that quality in an artist, we are very excited about working with them. We're also very interested in dialogues around other creative industries – for example, we're both interested in design, fashion, film and architecture – and the more we open the conversation up and take contemporary art off this hierarchical platform and bring it back into a broader discussion, the more people will begin to appreciate it and find it approachable. The idea that art just exists for the art world is not something we're interested in. The show with Prem will make a lot of outside references, and the art will become just one of the signifiers among numerous other references and sensibilities in the work, which makes it really exciting for us.

A huge part of supporting young artists is trying to get their work sold, and while this will never be at the forefront of our ethos, we are actively trying to cultivate relationships with collectors. Although the models of not-for-profit galleries, curator platforms and commercial galleries are well established, we're not interested in adopting just one of these models exclusively. We invented the LiangWest model for ourselves because we see this as the only way of pushing it as a full-time endeavour and still sustain ourselves. There is always the chance that it may not work, and we acknowledge that it's a huge risk to develop untested ways of working, but models don't exist just to be copied – we should ultimately challenge and reinvent them. None of the existing models and positions in the art world really interest us unless we can intermingle all of our interests and personalise our roles. Without sounding like we want to have our cake and eat it, there are a lot of interesting things you can do while maintaining a commercial interest.

From a conversation with Theresa Liang and William West.

1. Prem Sahib, *The Future of City Living*, tube lights, household paint, 2006, 'Overzealous' group exhibition curated by LiangWest, Guest, London, 2009.





3 ***"One of the key things I look for in collaborators is their recognition of my long-term goals."***

these especially well given their particular interest in the broader conversations that develop around contemporary art, and also through the online publication *Introducing* itself.

I see the show as a big collaborative endeavour, and one that's not purely curatorial, but artist led. I'd enjoyed a similar type of interaction when I worked for *Truck Art* – a mobile gallery space founded by Joseph Frazier. The nomadic character of the gallery meant the context of our exhibitions was constantly changing. In many ways I feel this has become synonymous with the flexibility offered by *LiangWest* – right from the logistics of finding an appropriate venue, there are no specific boundaries just possibilities. I'm excited by the prospect of creating something that is not so one-dimensional, and by virtue of its partnership allows me to concentrate more on my art making than curating.

One of the key things I would look for in collaborators is their recognition of my long-term goals. It's been good to have William and Theresa's opinion through particular developments because I knew they were interested for the right reasons. What's more, I fully appreciate their value and expertise in areas that affect my practice but don't necessarily motivate me greatly – like the commercial side of things. I think the longevity of this relationship comes down to its organic nature and not necessarily adhering to any particular model, but developing a model that suits us. At the moment I don't feel that I have had to negotiate or justify anything because they implicitly understand the objectives of my work. With *'Boyfriend Material'* in particular, I'm pleased by the level of control I have, and the possibilities that exist for us to develop this into something more than just an exhibition.

From a conversation with Prem Sahib.

Although I was familiar with William and Theresa's work from being at the Slade during the same period, I didn't know them personally. I only became aware of their curatorial partnership through the online publication *Introducing*. I was particularly intrigued by the fact that many of the artists they worked with were from my own generation – several of whom I had exhibited with, or whose work I was interested in.

When I was first approached about being in their group show *'Overzealous'* it was a particularly busy time for me. I was working for Tariq Alvi on his Chisenhale exhibition as well as completing my Master's thesis. That year I'd decided to pursue a course in Material and Visual Culture (a vanguard field of anthropology) as I was hoping to reconcile certain questions which were arising through my practice but were nonetheless capable of being resolved through the work itself. I was struck by how accommodating William and Theresa were towards such endeavours, and their interest in how these pursuits were shaping my work. I could of course identify with this as the sort of questions I constantly ask myself. Because of their own artistic background, I felt that William and Theresa were better equipped to empathise with the wider processes of making and the difficulties involved in sustaining a practice. I felt that they were taking an active interest in my practice as opposed to simply privileging what I was making then and there at that time (this hadn't always been the case with previous collaborators). For this reason I saw them as more than just facilitators, but people I could potentially bounce ideas off.

It was fairly recently that I approached them with my idea for *'Boyfriend Material'*. I already had a vague direction of some of the people I wanted to work with. The list existed mostly of my contemporaries – artists whose practices appealed to me because of a particular personal investment I saw in their work, and a certain disposition towards material – one that perhaps considers potentialities. I was excited by how this could develop as something that retained a kind of autobiographical relevance to my own life and work. Although we still at the stage of developing the exact premise for the show, I'm really happy about some of the conversations that have emerged. We are planning a number of peripheral events that will reflect some of these directions to go alongside the exhibition that will take place in September/October. I'm confident that *LiangWest* will help interpret

PROFILES

When they started working together as fine art students at the Slade School of Fine Art, Theresa Liang and William West established a collaborative working relationship resulting in the establishment of LiangWest in 2010. Reinforcing the relationships between contemporary art and contemporary life, they propose a new prototype of gallery for a new generation of artists whose artistic agendas are relevant to contemporary ideals. *LiangWest* work with emerging contemporary artists on a project-by-project basis. Employing a collaborative approach to art and the presentation of art encouraging discussion between different creative industries, they produce exhibitions regularly within a diverse range of locations providing varying contexts for varying concerns. *LiangWest* is currently working alongside artist Prem Sahib for their upcoming show *'Boyfriend Material'* scheduled to open in September/October 2010.

Prem Sahib was born in London in 1982. He predominately makes sculpture and since graduating from the Slade School of Fine Art in 2006 has exhibited in London and Europe. His interest in notions of encounter and presence are made manifest through works that precariously flirt with the viewer, and seemingly aspire towards an autonomous existence both through their materiality and form. His recent work reflects an interest in artifacts as a unique category of object that herald the capacity to present misleading historiographies and defy the immaterial in a tangible physical form. His most recent work has developed a more personal trope, utilising themes such as gay cruising, disco and the paranormal as narrative devices to engage with broader issues of loss and resonance and how these are made meaningful.

Later this year Prem Sahib will begin a three-year postgraduate programme at the Royal Academy of Art.

www.liangwest.com

RESISTANCE TO DOGMA