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Translated by Edith C. Watts

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Back when I was younger and still took a lot of things for granted, the gallery owner I worked for at the time said something to me that I often remembered later on: “Never underestimate the fact that you’re a good-looking woman. No - not necessarily beautiful, not in a way that would scare people off and nobody would dare approach you, but definitely above average. That’s capital.” I quit three weeks later. Although I was vain at nineteen, I was ambitious too, and felt insulted that he wasn’t praising me for my work, but for something I obviously had no control over; he might just as well have made me responsible for the existence of Damien Hirst, Joseph Beuys or classical modernism. I found him inane and superficial, and left, instead of being thankful to him for letting me work there without having a degree and enabling me to gain experience in the art business. One is so overweening when one is young. One takes compliments as insults; only much later does one appreciate them – when one notices one is no longer getting them. Perhaps I reacted so violently because I had a foreboding of what darkness, what grief, was to descend upon me – as if the past had disintegrated into nothing but mismatched fragments, and here and there I came upon things from another time; they are terrifying even in broad daylight: an old photo lying in a long-unopened book, a hair slide that from one day to the next looks ridiculously childish in the mirror, a letter that fell behind the wardrobe years ago, a memory distorted in sleep, things that remind one of other circumstances.

I admit I may be talking myself into this after the fact, to avoid having to acknowledge how superficial I was, how I took offense at nothing whatsoever. It was an exquisite art exhibition house that I left behind, but there were others. I forgot the gallery, just as I forgot many jobs I had as a student. I changed jobs often as I got bored quickly. Just after registering for my

doctoral thesis on Margot Winkraft, a performance artist I admired, I heard she was looking for an assistant.

I was absolutely certain I would play my cards better than everyone else. Instead of lining up behind hundreds of other international applicants, I snagged a commission from an art magazine to interview her, and prepared myself meticulously for the conversation. It worked. One has to make people believe that they are the ones with the ideas - that's the whole trick, I noted. I later realised that Margot had very definitely put two and two together about my turning up and the vacant job – I wasn't even the only one to finagle a non-binding meeting with some trick or other. It was just like Margot to mention the story by chance, years later in front of a whole group of people, and just like me that - with burning cheeks - I laughed along with everyone else.

I came to know Margot and realised instantly that she embodied everything I yearned for. She *believed* what I had always wished I could believe, were it not that I had nothing of my own that I could develop, that I could live for. Margot's project became my own. She sometimes said that of all her employees, I was the most dedicated she had had in a long time. She said it over and over again until I believed it. And it was true that I put all my energy in each of her projects – in all of them except one, the China project, but I'll come to the reasons later.

Margot's art revolves around one thing and one thing only, beauty. She is obsessed by it. I don't mean just the beauty of the female body whose vulnerability and inevitable decay she continually depicts – or rather mourns - in her installations. I think her entire life has always consisted of the search for beauty. She calls herself “an employee of light.” I remember how I heard her phoning, not long after I had started working for her. She sounded impatient. “What do I mean by a summary

of light? That's obvious, my dear. I mean tender, dangerous, dreamlike, living, dead, clear, misty, hot, cruel, naked, sudden, spring-like, falling, straight, crooked, sensuous, subdued, poisonous, calming, falling light. That's what I want from the space!" Spoken by anyone else I knew, it would have come across as extravagant, even affected. But with Margot it was as if she were simply reminding her listener of something that he had basically known for a long time and had merely forgotten. She was petite and graceful, but her voice was loud and throaty, and I quickly got used to speaking louder in her presence as well, just as I copied some of her turns of speech.

I had become Margot's confidante during the time in which the China project was in the offing. It was a friendship in which each of us kept her secrets – it was only in Shanghai that I realised just how existential they were. During this time, I myself had to conceal an incident that was more of an embarrassment than anything else, but which had far-reaching consequences, as I found out when it was too late. I had cheated on Christopher once again, and this time excuses were useless. He froze up, made good on his threat and moved out. I begged, bombarded him with phone calls, pleaded, screamed, scolded, but he remained unmoved, I was crashing up against the wall of his binding, wounded, cold "No" over and over again. I didn't understand my own unfaithfulness. Insecurity? Oh, dear! Fear he might beat me to it? It all sounded so ridiculous, and when I had talked with my girlfriends, I just sat there long after the phone calls had ended, stunned at having become the addressee of so many phrases.

Without the situation with Christopher, unusual, minor, yet jarring things about the project in China would have struck me as peculiar sooner, so that I am certain I would have asked more questions. But above all, I would not have given up my control over the course of things. From the very start, the mere fact that Margot came into my office to talk about the project

instead of calling me to her office, was a bit unusual. I remember it was a cold winter day, and the air conditioning system had run amuck in the whole building, so that we all came to work in winter clothes, but wore light things underneath to adjust to the temperatures in the loft. Margot thought this was great, because this way she could wear a designer's new summer collection six months ahead of time, for which she had done a display window installation and which she had been furnishing free of charge since then. On this day, a melon-yellow silk dress wafted about her.

"What are your thoughts about Shanghai?" she asked and let her gaze drift seemingly uninterestedly through the room. But I knew her, she was waiting to pounce. One saw it on her forehead more than in her eyes: when she tensed it, two long, vertical furrows distinctly appeared, and with the addition of two that were not as clear-cut, but still visible as a "V" shape, it looked as though she bore an "M" on her forehead as her emblem. Anna called her M, after James Bond's female superior; I felt somewhat proud of myself that I had not acquired this quirk.

"*China?*," I asked.

She had a folder in her arms that she was holding as carefully as a baby. All our projects began this way. She had a saccharine smile. She knew what I was thinking, but she wanted to hear it from me.

"Okay, China, if you want my opinion. Seven, eight years ago, for sure. Or better yet, ten years ago."

I yawned pointedly to underscore my all-too accurate remark. At the moment everybody was sick of China. Since the 'Nineties a couple of really sharp people, dealers and collectors, had made a lot of money there, a few artists could live very well there, and a whole string of imitators could at least manage better than before through small-time frauds.

My phone rang. “Recently...” I began.

“Aren’t you going to answer, my dear?”

While I was phoning, she turned away and distractedly picked up one thing or another in my cabinet, a few folders, a glass paperweight, a framed photo of Christopher on Halloween with vampire teeth. I phoned until my handy contact broke off.

Margot put the photo back.

“I expected you’d say that. We’re going to do it, anyway. I’ve never worked with Asian women.”

“Well,” I said, “it looks as though everything’s been decided.”

She raised her eyebrows, to indicate that she found me very amusing. The phone rang again.

“It’s Anna,” I said, annoyed. “She’s at some market or other in Mumbai and the woman she wanted to meet hasn’t come.”

“Anna gets bored too quickly. You take it. I’ll leave this here for you.” The folder was placed on my desk right before my nose so nothing could go wrong, in case I should suddenly become myopic. Margot danced lightly out the door.

This phone call had only three sentences – then suddenly an Indian man was on the other end of the line and I hung up for good. I took the folder, flipped through it and read whom Margot was in contact with in Shanghai. A small gallery – that wasn’t what we usually did – our last performances had been held at MoMA and Versailles Park – apart from the fact that my boss chose our venues herself and did not wait for suggestions. I studied Margot’s folder. The gallery had the silly name Garage 2, it was run by a sister and brother, a certain Lian who had also initiated the China project through a letter to Margot – hell, I’d really liked to have read that letter – and her brother Tian. I called up Lian, got her in person right away, and she told me in chirpy German that she had studied in Stuttgart for three years. She also told me that the gallery’s real owner and sponsor was a certain Wei Ze, her uncle. Uncle Ze, an extremely wealthy collector himself, had given them money to

play around with, so to speak, without otherwise meddling in the affairs of Garage 2. That was alright with me, having one less person to consult with. The siblings concentrated primarily on works that dealt with the Chinese aesthetic tradition, and less on works that were more politically and socially oriented. I noted at once that Lian was a connoisseur of Margot's work. And she seemed to be in the gallery day and night, because even when I ignored the time difference and called at unusual times for Shanghai, expecting the answering machine, she answered and effervesced into the phone.

It was due to Lian that the preparations went like lightning, as Margot demanded this time; I sat for hours in the office and stared at the wall, then I reached for the handset once again, to call Christopher and to plead for a talk, "one last talk," I said. "Please!" I convinced myself that the new intern was listening through the door, smirking, but when I went out to have a look she was working silently on a letter. We went out together for some tea, and I talked and talked – so long that she made it abundantly clear that I was keeping her from her work.

Until the day of our talk, I had lived under the assumption that there were only a very few things that one could not make good. I felt totally confident because Chris had agreed to a stroll in the Taunus. We had often gone on this little excursion half an hour from Frankfurt; it reminded me of better times. Chris didn't speak during the drive, he sat at the wheel with a grim look on his face, drove maddeningly slowly and kept a stony silence as we trudged from the car park into the empty, snow-covered winter landscape, a landscape like those on gingerbread cookie boxes, disconcertingly beautiful and fragile. It was already late March, but it had still snowed heavily one last time, one saw the black branches against the whiteness, silhouettes, tree silhouettes, as lacy and filigreed as veins, and the beauty of the forest made it seem as if one were taking a stroll in Novalis' dream.

“Look, how wonderful!” I said and pointed nervously here and there; animal tracks could be seen everywhere in the snow, everything around us pointed to life; it had merely concealed itself. I tried to interpret this as a good sign and mumbled something about the trees and snow and all the little animals and the rhythm of the seasons, or something like that.

He went into a rage. “So you think it’s beautiful here,” he screamed. “Beautiful! Beautiful! Beautiful!” It seemed to me as if I were hearing how he used this word for the first time.

Perhaps it was the acoustics; the snow and the unreal expanse that the walls made of trees suggested muffled and distorted what he was saying. It’s snowing far too **early** (< **late**). It’s catastrophic climate change!“ His face was red, a couple of strands of black hair falling onto his forehead. I thought of how we had lain on the balcony in bathing suits in late March of the previous year and, lolling about and filled with a sense of well-being, had talked about the crazy weather, and I almost laughed, but the look on his face stopped me. His eyes – that was hate, pure hate.

“I wish I’d never gone to L.A.,” I said. “It” happened after a book presentation in L.A. to which I had gone with Anna, our photographer. I had written the text for the occasion of Margot’s fiftieth birthday; the most comprehensive book on her complete works to date, a small, creative work of art; we were proud of it, and so the evening took its course, everything was nice, American, inconsequential. “Yeah, your little shagging excursion” Christopher screamed. “Tell me, how often did you shag him?” He trampled the footprints of a hare: “Tell me!” And without waiting for an answer: “Was he good-looking?” He fixated on this question, screaming it over and over again, alternating with: “Was it good?” and “Was he good-looking?” “and “Tell me! Guaranteed a blond surfer type, right?” He raised his hand as if to strike, but then let it drop and took a step back, away from me.



In spite of this, I hoped he would hit me or do something that would put him a little bit in the wrong, too. He walked faster and faster, I had to run. A fallen tree, its crown covered with snow, lay before him; he nearly slipped as he stumbled over it because he did not want to go around it. Cuckolded, he didn't want to suffer this ignominy too. "Tell me, was it good?" He shouted.

"I love you," I whispered.

He approached me, blew his breath in my face.

He imitated my whispering in a mocking, hateful manner in a voice that sounded as though he were cutting glass:

"Then – if it really were so – you'd have taken responsibility, it was yours, but that's what you simply cannot do. You never take responsibility for anything, that's why you let them all shag you, yeah, there you are, an assistant getting fucked by life, just nothing of your own, and that's why they all fuck you with the greatest of pleasure, only not me, not me, ever again. I loved you so much, but you fucked it, God knows you did it thoroughly. And if you try to sell me Anna as a bad influence again, then stay away from her. And another thing - Anna is single. Single! Like you are now, too! Now you can really get going. Have fun! My God, how I hate you!"

He turned away and ran off. "Admit it, you're happy to get rid of me!" I screamed after him. I couldn't move. When I could no longer see him, I ran straight ahead until my lungs hurt. The worst was that I couldn't cry. Actually I can never cry, except when I'm in intense physical pain. At some point I followed a trail of large footprints with dog prints alongside it, and thus made my way to the forest hotel that stood at the last stop of the subway line 3; dog and master had evidently gone inside. I remember every detail of the hotel and the subway station as if it were a piece of photo art I had studied for a long time. Our car was gone, the subway, still waiting for the conductor, was pointed in the direction of the city. An uncompromisingly black

bird crossed the white winter skies in a consummate arc; my memory froze him at the highest point. The subway schedule: a sheet of paper affixed behind a dirty pane of glass, hardly legible.

When I opened the door to our flat, chilled to the bone and with blue lips – it was late afternoon and already dark - I immediately felt the stillness that had now taken his place and would live with me, the stillness of his absence whose many nuances I would yet come to know. I presented Margot with the travel data for Shanghai a couple of days later.

I went to the airport far too early on the morning of our departure, and was amazed to find Margot already waiting for me. “I can’t do anything more than regret,” I had written on a white piece of paper, because I assumed that Christopher would come home during my absence to collect more of his things. After check-in, Margot, up ahead in First Class, built herself her typical nest of newspapers from which a piece of her head, getting better informed by the hour, appeared only occasionally, then again her slender, tanned, ring-less hand. I flew Business Class, but this time I was out of luck, because after a few minutes, my Dutch neighbour began showing me all his photos on his laptop from his past travels through northern and southern China. I pretended to sleep, but observed for a while out of the corners of my eyes the huge scarf of very stiff fabric, tied into a violet bowknot, that one of the flight attendants wore, and when she disappeared from my range of view, I wondered if it was acceptable to pep up one’s professional clothing with a propeller like that, and while I was turning this over in my mind, I peacefully fell asleep. I slept through the whole flight, ten hours long.

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The models Margot is arranging are tall, slender women with doll-like make-up. They are very attractive, but Margot is trying to eliminate any impression of perfection when positioning them; she also places value on grotesque details. These can be fetish-like accessories such as curly, waist-length wigs, fake eyelashes, gloves, high heels or cute, pink lingerie sets. Otherwise the models are naked. The reason for this varies with each model – “You wouldn’t believe it, but there are as many reasons for being naked as there are for getting dressed,” as a witty cultural journalist once texted.

“The girls are naked,” Margot said during *Halcyon Sleep*, our millennium project that would finally cement her reputation as one of the great living women artists, “they are naked because they are sleeping. What they have on are parts of their dreams.” We had had each of the girls hold a small object of her choice, to embrace it, cling to it, or whatever. They chose everything from teddy bears to death’s-head pendants; producing an eerily romantic aura that enveloped them. *Halcyon Sleep* had taken place in Berlin, and we had posted Anna’s oversized advertising photos, a series of seven works displaying a selection of various objects before a light blue background, in all major German cities and awakened curiosity about the girls. They now are among Anna’s most well-known photos because they announced a coming event and at the same time ironically and provocatively underscored their souvenir character. New women were constantly applying, even during the three days of the performance. Margot stated contentedly that we could have rocked half of Berlin to sleep. Why was everyone so exhausted? I just laughed. I was in the office eighteen hours at a stretch while the *Halcyon Sleep* project was running. Work ran my life – I stayed up all night during the peak stages of

projects, something that unquestionably damaged my health: I had headaches, and drank in the evenings to be able to sleep at least a bit. "Freedom and Compulsion" was the title of a long article in *Artforum*, and I still know how I stared at the title and asked myself what exactly drove me to be a part of the action so unconditionally and zealously - and if anyone would even notice if I simply wound down a little more. Where did the performance begin, where did it end? Was I a part of the concept? The magazine article wasn't bad. Freedom is in fact the key concept in Margot's work, but it is the freedom to expose oneself to a compulsion one has chosen. The models who subject themselves to this displaying of themselves do so of their own free will and for only a small fee. They have to arrive six hours before the event begins, as their entire bodies painted with make-up. They wear these high-heeled shoes, which is strenuous even when they sit or lie down during breaks. Usually they stand for hours at a time, get hungry and thirsty, a couple of times one fainted; a spectacle for the audience. *Halcyon Sleep* was the exception here.

The girls stay where they are: they do not heed the audience when they move within Margot's arrangement; they think about one thing or another, perhaps they have a headache or their shoes pinch, but however uncomfortable it is, they are in any case proud to be part of a work of art.

"They are all like Botticelli's *Venus*," wrote an American woman journalist about the women. And it was true - at least they felt that way. They enjoyed knowing that they were admired, photographed, filmed, simultaneously present and absent, desirable and unattainable, and not by just any public, but by aesthetes, art lovers, collectors, celebrities. "They are like Cézanne's apples," said Margot, who couldn't stand the comparison with the Botticelli *Venus*. I believed they felt like one or the other, depending on their self-esteem, and I

sometimes amused myself by dividing them into self-haters – apples- and show-offs – Botticelli ladies. We know the women a bit, after all. We send questionnaires to all casting applicants and ask them to return the forms before the interview, so we can sort them out.

The questions deal with their body image, their ideas about femininity, their development, their sex lives, nutritional and sport behaviour. They were allowed to choose which questions they would answer and which ones they would not, but most answered all of them because they think this way they will have a better shot at being accepted. Sometimes I read these reports as if they were crime novels, sometimes case studies, sometimes they are embarrassing, sometimes implausible, clearly made up. I was always pretty excited about the questionnaires: did the women – who in my opinion - as far as their looks, professions, etc were concerned - absolutely should have – see themselves as happy or not? How did they describe their body image? There were always a handful of persons who attached additional sheets because, for one reason or another, one of the questions got to the heart of an issue that the girl was dealing with at the time. But this time, the questionnaires, at least the ones we had received up until now, were one thing and one thing only: totally vapid. We had never had such reserved, polite, evasive – and ultimately interchangeable – responses.