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**Autor:** Fonteyne, An

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# An Fonteyne

*Love is a Madness Most Discreet\**

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\* *Vertigo* (published in English in 1999), W.G. (Max) Sebald  
The opening chapter of the novel is called 'Beyle, or Love is a Madness Most Discreet'.

Brussels, December 31st, 2017

Lieber Max,

It may be a surprise to you that the love letter I was asked to write, celebrating an aspect of architecture, is dedicated to you. Meeting you was as important for my comprehension of working in architecture as visiting Lewerentz' church in Klippan, seeing Fra Angelico's frescos in Florence, sitting in Plecnik's Chapel in Begunje or smelling Walter de Maria's NY Earth Room. Not to mention being introduced to the music of John Zorn or the writings of John Cage. Now that I have decided to confess this to you and as I am searching for the words to explain, I feel shy and slightly embarrassed.

We spent many hours together, in the car, on the train, just at the table or on the sofa – even long, long hours in bed. One could say that our relation was and still is one of the most intimate I have known. And yet, trying to summarise what makes you such essential company for me, why it would be hard not to have you around, I find extremely difficult. My education, both as a person and an architect, focussed very much on truth: telling the truth, being honest, being authentic, not fooling anyone and especially not yourself. That may sound evident, valuable and straightforward, but it does put you under pressure. And more importantly, the truth, as valuable as it is, is not always very exciting. Our training as architects focussed a lot on being consequent, coherent, honest about structure and true to the use of materials. I totally agreed with what I was taught, and worked hard to understand the meaning of the different elements, from the structure, its appearance and harmony in relation to space, to the choice of materials and the detailing of how the different parts would relate to each other. This approach is solid and allows to develop many languages in a very consequent way. Somehow it is possible to avoid ambiguities and develop and tell a coherent story.

Until one meets history. It was in the same month of your car crash that our young office was asked to participate in a competition for the restauration of a listed town hall. It was a dark and rainy day, but we decided to visit the village on the border between France and Belgium to look at the building for the first time. Decay is the first word that comes to my mind when recalling what we saw from behind the large window on the first floor of a bakery on the main square. Sadness as well, and melancholy. Working on the project during the subsequent months, we wanted to fully understand the history of the building, in order to retrace its glory and bring it back. Coherently. Consequently. Harmoniously. Integer. All of these words slowly lost their meaning and it proved to be much more exciting to start to imagine the past and make an architecture that would suggest certain spaces belonging to a certain past. It was a confusing experience, as we knew that not each story we were telling, not each space we were tracing, was true. We started telling a subjective story of how the building may once have looked like and were subsequently proving this through the reconstruction of certain elements. Were we allowed to do so?

While trying to figure out these questions for the first time, you suddenly showed up. You told me a story about how you met a man, quite youthful, at the train station of Antwerp observing the large hall, the Salle des Pas Perdus, and how you walked up to him, interested to find out more about his sketches and the photographs he was taking. It was not the last time you met him, you said, although it was always by coincidence. You illustrated the long story with images, not seldom photographs of buildings, floor plans as well, but also images of people or historical situations. They provided the account with documentary

evidence, but somehow I was not quite sure whether I should believe you or not. When I asked, you first remained unclear. Later on, you explained that telling a story is a con trick. You spoke about the paradox, about having this string of lies, which allows you, by a detour, to arrive at a form of truth that is more precise, you hoped, than something which is strictly provable.

I mentioned the similarities with designing a building, a place, a sequence of rooms, this preoccupation with making something out of nothing. You have a few elements and you have to make something of it – and it only works through imaginative elaboration. Of course, you get the feeling, as you do this, that you are directing some form of sham reality. Making spaces, telling stories – we were both interested in making tangible a contemporary blurring of borders between fiction and nonfiction.

The difference between reality, truth and imagination – the elements you choose to remove or to add – becomes vague, unimportant to recognise. In the end, it is the story that counts, not its sources nor the personal interventions by the author.

Our encounters started off in a very innocent way, but the more you told me, the more I wanted to know, to understand, to experience myself. Our conversations opened up new ways of thinking, of looking at history, of making associations, of finding elements that I was not looking for and discovering ways to value them. You compared your method of unsystematic searching with a dog running through a field, following the advice of its nose, traversing a plot of land in an unplottable manner. And invariably, finding what it is looking for.

Lieber Max,

You have taught me so much. About reading a place. About listening to its history. About being precise in order to forget, erase, replace. About truthfulness and its limitations. About opening up. Finding beauty. And consolation. About giving attention.

We never met, Max. You died before I was even aware of your existence. Last year, I decided to visit the cemetery where you are buried. Near Norwich, a small chapel, tall old trees, and you. Opening the small iron gate to enter, I felt nervous, somehow. So much to say, so little words.

I wish I could wish you a happy new year.

An