

SECOND CHANCE

My Life in Things



RUTH ROSENGARTEN



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Lost

The evocative objects I've been writing about are tangible things that also inhabit the unreasoned (and unreasonable) space and time of the unconscious. They attract the operations of free association; meanings adhere to them, and so they become connective nodes within networks of recollection, projection and erasure. They might have once participated in the humdrum: a cigarette lighter, a hairbrush, a table napkin. Now they have become instrumental in thought, certainly, but also in feeling. In my relationship with these objects, thought and affect are intertwined and inseparable.

This beautiful artefact, incorporating several painted images illustrating the Kama Sutra, is a keepsake of a different order. In a sense, it does not enlist the multiple associations, the reverie, the thoughtful or affective (re)engagements of an evocative object. It is more an object with a single mnemonic origin. In other words, though I engage with it aesthetically, as an object of connotation it is static. It was a gift from A and it remains associatively caught in the net of circumstances of that initial exchange. It is, nevertheless, extremely precious to me.

In 1997, a few months after returning to Lisbon from my first trip to Macau, agitated and intoxicated with the beginnings of our affair—an affair I sensed from the start would unravel me—I embarked on a three-month residency in Perth, Western Australia. The two people who ran the painting programme at Claremont School of Art had seen my work the Basel Art Fair and got in touch with me via my Lisbon gallerist. I embraced this invitation, caressed it, loved it as one loves a buoy.

A would continue living in Macau for at least another nine months. Although I would be geographically closer to him, I felt that travelling to Australia would distance me from him, and in doing so, would remove me from everything that was holding me back; everything that prevented me from living my best life. By an act that externalised my

magical thinking, I would untangle myself from the bonds A and I had quickly established earlier that year and that, already then, were tethering me and tying me up in knots.

It is hard for me now to inhabit the mind of the person I was: a woman who had embarked on a long-distance relationship with a man both circumstantially and constitutionally unavailable. Here was that inescapable vocation for just one being that Marguerite Duras insists is a feminine trait; I always wanted to disagree with such a generalisation, but I secretly think she might have a point.

However, it was also this: I was in love with the idea of an obstacle, a challenge.

Writing about the obstacles we make for ourselves or even just the ones we put up with—and I think of this a great deal as I find excuses for not writing, even when all I want to do is write—Adam Phillips notes that an obstacle can only be construed when it can be tolerated. An obstacle, in other words is ‘a way of not letting something else happen, a necessary blind spot.’ It took me three years to disentangle myself from A, from my obsessive attachment to him, to the idea of him. To take myself, in other words, out of that blind spot into a place of light and visibility. To see, and to become visible again. In that new place of visibility, in the year 2001, Ian found me.

Now, for the first time, I am reading through diary entries from those years when I was all ravelled in A’s skeins. I dip into our exchanges too: there are thousands of emails. An archive of my mistakes, my gullibility when it comes to *mots doux*, my inability to tolerate uncertainty. There’s a long email in which A explains his relationship with his wife and children, as though this needed exegesis, saying, too, that their eventual return to Lisbon was inevitable but as yet unplanned, telling me how *extraordinarily captivating* he finds my *sensibility and direct manner*. Aha, my bluntness. Everyone sooner or later has something to say about that. His words read as an excuse, yet I recognise, in their prosody, the pitch of their rhetoric, the allure they had for me then. I translate from the Portuguese:

No, Ruth, I do not want to lose you. I don’t, however, know how we are going to have each other. This process of getting to know each other has been difficult, but unstoppable. You’re going to be in Australia for months. Then you’ll return to Lisbon. I don’t know where I’ll be by then.

Are we ever going to meet again? I feel certain that we shall. For sure in Lisbon, in '98. As I told you when you were in Macau, I feel homeless. Exiled. Please, please don't feel excluded when in reality, you're right here, inside of me. Let's speak tomorrow. I'll call. Sending you a huge kiss.

On a printout of this email that I have stuck into my diary, I have written, in blue ink: *This is like trying to catch a fish with your bare hands*. Though I do not remember receiving that specific email, I know it would have thrown me into a turmoil of uncertainty, a panic of disarray, describing, as it does, both a want and a rebuff. In the face of all of A's existential posturing, I would have pushed for some kind of plan. All I remember is that we did, then, make a plan. The plan was to meet in Singapore on my stopover on the way to Perth.

Predictably enough, this did not happen. He cancelled a few days before my departure from Lisbon. I no longer recollect what this cancellation cost me in rescheduled flights. I do know that in exchange for an illicitly sensual and possibly nerve-wracking rendezvous, he sent me a parcel. In it, a small notebook with pages made of washi paper that caused my pen to snag and bleed. With it, this beautiful object, a painted Kama Sutra, folding into a small *leporello*. That word for an accordion-pleated book borrows its name from Don Giovanni's servant and brings with it the echo of *mille e tre*, a catalogue of conquests and lovers. How perfect a gift from a man onto whom I projected the capability of ceaseless erotic captivation, a thousand and three other loves in Spain alone, and that's before we count the ones in my head! But more aptly, more startlingly, the opening and closing of these concertina pages serve as a deft metaphor for my own psychic exposure and eclipse. At either end of the long foldout, two pieces of wood with chamfered edges, each depicting, in exquisite miniaturist detail, a couple fucking: she with her knees bent and feet lifted, he kneeling and penetrating her.

With her, I can feel thrust and depth, the thrill of being appetitive; I can feel the dissolution of boundaries that happens in sex, but also its opposite: each body in its distinct integument.

I google Kama Sutra positions to find the name for this one. I'm directed to endless porn sites and blog posts with schematically rendered images of heterosexual couplings, two of which I bookmark because I'm amused by the drawing. *Indrani*, this position is called. I like that. Indrani. Hindu goddess of jealousy and beauty.

The Kama Sutra was published in English in 1883 in a (mis) translation by explorer, translator and orientalist Richard Burton, in effect a rendition fudged and flawed in accordance with Victorian tastes, which veered in equal measure towards prudery and titillation. The mistranslation, which has been the primary—and much pirated—source of the Kama Sutra in the West, also skews and erodes women's agency, as Wendy Doniger argues in her book *Redeeming the Kamasutra* (2016).

I cannot read the Sanskrit letters, shaped in gold on the black verso side of the painted images, but those images are gorgeous. Two young people, a man and a woman, meet on a mat. The artist grants their sexy capers a form of attention that is at once explicit and courteous. The colours are kept within a close range of black and terracotta, with touches of green and blue, and the two bodies are neatly contained in their fleshy contours. I love the way the woman knowingly, seductively, keeps her earrings and necklace on, and I love the sensuous regard in which the man and the woman hold each other. It seems to me that these two people, who are contained and quiet in their appreciation of each other, are equal in desire and its expression. That this is love without obstacles. I remember finding myself jealous of these painted figures, their availability one to the other. I know that, opening the parcel and finding this exquisite object, I will have felt a pang of longing partnering the voluptuous pleasure of being wanted or admired sufficiently to be the recipient of such a gift. It also made palpable my sense of the impossibility of the bind in which I found myself, and I understood, I think, that though desire was on offer, only its tokens could be exchanged.

In early 2020, I WhatsApp A to tell him I'm writing about objects. That's all I say at first, *writing about objects*, and I ask him where he bought this Kama Sutra. He replies: *in Kathmandu in 1995. I was there with my children. I remember watching the sun rise over the massive Annapurna*. Then he tells me he is now immersed in a project, attempting to retrieve some of his earliest writings and to rewrite them. *Palimpsests pursue me*, he says, referring, I think, to my invocation of this Kama Sutra too. He can be portentous, occasionally even lacking in self irony.

Some weeks later, he writes again, this time mischief in his tone: *Have you written about the Ray-Ban sunglasses?* he asks. I say *yes, I have*. Then, despite the vividness of his memory of Kathmandu, Annapurna, his

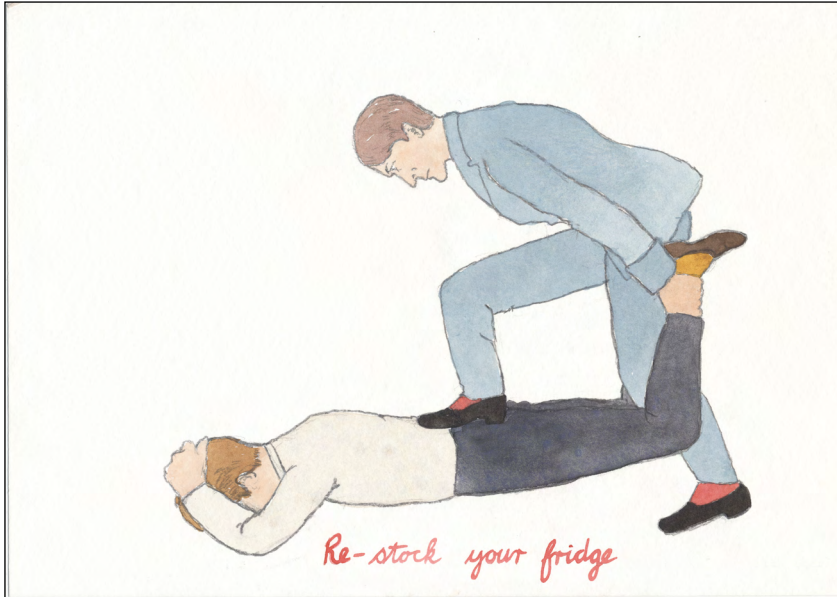
children, the sun rising, all that, he says: *if you write about the Kama Sutra, I told you that I'd bought it in Kathmandu. That's not true. It's from India, and I got it in 1980. Sorry about that.*

I'm not sure what to make of this. I think he means 1990, not 1980—I don't think he visited India when he was in his early twenties. But I don't ask. And does *not true* refer to a wilful lie, or to a misplaced memory? I, too, have those: there's no way of knowing without pursuing the issue messily. I decide to drop it.

I look through a diary from two years after we met, two years after Macau and Australia—this was a time when I was compulsively documenting my life—and now, we're both in Lisbon, and the disappointment of the meeting that did not happen (for which I use the word 'Singapore' as shorthand) continues, in a local key. There are several outings to the Alentejo that he aborts, and alongside the meals out and afternoons at my flat (some languorous, some discombobulated), there are many more that he postpones or cancels. When he does turn up, it's often a lot later than planned. Sometimes he phones at two or three in the morning. Or he rocks up, maudlin, at ridiculous hours. Well past midnight that very last time, when I didn't let him in and ran downstairs, a black coat thrown over my pyjamas, to sit crying furiously and burning with humiliation in his car under the spread of one of the tisane-smelling linden trees that line so many streets in Lisbon. I sit there crying and railing and thinking that if transience is the condition for pleasure, then A takes the art of pleasure to its rarefied extreme. But his administration of the smallest doses of gratification is also a form of sadism into which I have kept myself locked by a reciprocal compliance.

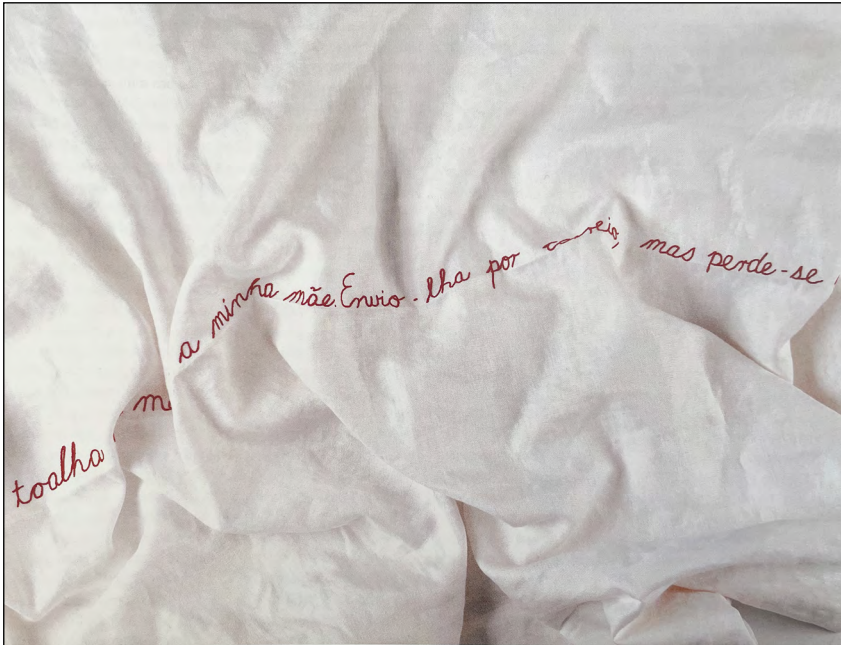
And all the while, in the wake of changes that happened while I was in Australia, this longing and frustration nourishes my work. While the topics of my work now break into my affective life, I experiment formally and materially with the rapid and apparently improvised. I stop painting in oils. I begin making photographs and shyly probing the potential of photographic and drawn self-portraits; the word *selfie* has not yet come into existence. I begin using inks and watercolours, making small, washy drawings annotated with a punch line, garnished with a smattering of caustic or melancholy phrases or lines from songs. I no longer want my love of images and my love of words to do battle with each other.

Then, in 1999, I start elaborating a body of work in which scant, stylised drawings—awkward illustrations of massage positions—are surrounded by pages and pages of text. I do not know how the idea of the massage came to me, or where I found the source material, it looks like a catalogue of sorts, but it hit me as just what I was looking for, something about the convincing, or indeed coercive, power of touch.



There are, by the time the series ends a year later, about 150 sheets of matt A4 watercolour paper, their surfaces filled with writing. Writing as drawing, drawing as listing: a series of exhortations, both fresh and clichéd (letting meaning in, keeping meaning out), written in regular schoolgirl script in leaky watercolour, each incarnadine stroke as controlled and determined as I wished I could be. The letters seem threaded together, red on white. A year later, I have a string of phrases—this time in Portuguese—in this same script stitched red on a milky linen tablecloth.

It is only now, so many years later, that it occurs to me that the form of this script has a specific link to the Kama Sutra that A gave me. In the Kama Sutra, the lure merely begins with *kama*, the sensual, the carnal, the realm of erotic desire. The *sutra* is the telling of this in aphorisms.



The word *sutra*, which is etymologically linked to the English *suture*, means string or thread, and came to be used metaphorically to describe the stringing together of aphorisms into manuals. My collection of text drawings, then, was nothing more nor less than a manual on the contradictions of erotic desire and its mental and spiritual reverberations. A Kama Sutra.

The instructions are randomly arranged, ordered only in accordance with the available space and a jagged, spoken lyricism. The adjacency of contradictory instructions provokes in me a shiver of tautological recognition. For this, *this*, is my condition:

Allow desire to agitate your imagination. Mend a fuse. Embody your ideas. Adjust quietly to altered circumstances. Shop at Shanghai Tang. Be the person your dog thinks you are. Muster up a new level of intensity. Re-invent your platitudes. Keep your charity anonymous. Count the minutes. Go slower. Watch the feathers flying. Pick up some moral fibre. Step up to a new terrace of consciousness. Slouch towards Bethlehem. Follow your needer. Notch up to a new level of intensity. Make the stopgap into a genre. Fully embrace your horror vacui. Leave a trail as you go. Put your hackles up. Supply the required quotient of pain. File your photographs thematically. Press, don't pressurise.

Adjust quietly to altered circumstances. Address my body. Abandon your quest for the eternal. Chart your disaffection. Forget your tragedy. Interpret ritualised receptions. Show your hand. Don't feel obliged to choose between Elvis Costello and Tom Waits. Familiarise yourself with my handwriting. If you can't change the work, change the title. Be master of your own plans. Disrupt a narrative arc. Forge my signature. Go easy on the testosterone. Take refuge in familiar verbal enclaves. Agonise over details. Travel light. Force my hand. Don't count the small change. Find an opening. Pave a road. Cultivate total somatic awareness. Bite your own toenails. Embrace the fate of the loser. Perfect your alibi. Boldly reveal your unfortunate defects. Lose your mother's apron strings. Take asylum in my home. Get used to prosthetic devices. Draw crazy patterns with your feet. Carefully follow the protocols of lovemaking. Jettison your inherited anguish. Don't turn transgression into a style. Make monogamy your source of true inspiration. Imagine another scenario. Tie me down. Guide me through the undergrowth. Bypass the merely capricious. Watch as I rewrite the history of feminine compliance. Enhance your own prestige. Fill me with your longing. Fill me with your semen. Look out of a different window. Explore hidden topographies. Be someone else. Stew in your own juices. Take in the scenery. Shield me with your name. Beware booby traps. Perform an autopsy on my past. Ransom your last hope. Submit to the seriousness of pleasure. Establish a noble ancestry. Rock the boat. Waltz with Matilda. Query the reassurance of familiar misery. Unfold me in slow motion. Breathe. Familiarise yourself with the stages of feminism. Try both switches. Take available routes. Mend broken vessels. Read between the lines. Stretch torment to extremes. Watch the stars falling. Gauge the distance. Be my human shield. Expose raw ends. Blend into the domestic decor. Don't blame your children. Uncover every inch of me. Underline in pencil. Work overtime. Sacrifice your incomparable logic. Allow me to feed you. Do not utter the true meaning of the ruined deal. Suspect my every move. Be my homeward dove. Undertake a programme of comprehensive damage control. Adhere to the sonnet form. Trust me. Read manuals. Take courage in defeat. Eat emptiness with a teaspoon. Move out of the married man slot. Insist on new explanations. Make alien matter pliant. Allow the sigh to subside. Fast. Rephrase the question. Don't count crows' feet. Shit or get off the pot. Learn the language of the battlefield. Cling to my threadbare optimism. Reorganise your solitude. Refine your sense of scale. Cauterise existing wounds. Call me when you're single. Edit your dictionary of complaints. Fuel yourself with important social concerns. Assume impossible positions. Test the limits of the bearable. Hijack an untenable idea. Travel further than planned. Bandage your narcissistic wound. Narrow your spectrum of options. Learn Hebrew. Blindfold me. Yield to others. Render used meanings obsolete. Look beyond probability. Live up to half my expectations. Avoid anticipating nostalgia. Foster continuity. Mistrust my sincerity. Abandon the comfort zone. Invent

a new iconographic repertoire. Don't whinge. Subscribe to a generous thought. Don't mistake me for someone who cares. Acquire fluency in the language of dogs. Watch me from a great distance. Don't wait for luck. Reinstate lost causes. Inject my veins with ludicrous hope. Hesitate. For me, undergo an ordeal by love. Unpack your metaphors. Listen to the history of feminine resistance. Elicit fierce loyalty. Applaud discordant prose. Play second fiddle. Be yourself, but on purpose. Employ stinging accuracy. Beg me to stay. Find the vanishing point. Prepare a wide background of contrast. Caress the meaty part of the curve. Live forever. Make do. Don't be a jerk. Tell me your real name. Unpack your suitcase of regrets. Enjoy the shabby delirium of absence. Study the Kamasutra. Offer me a little of what you've already lost.

Follow intuitive preferences. Underline in pencil. Examine material evidence. Staunch the flow. Invent your own aesthetics. Violate the decorum of sight. Leave me your phone number. Revise your itinerary. Stretch torment to extremes. Be my homeward dove. Refuse to believe. Mourn irretrievable objects. Turn off the gas. Divulge the unspeakable. Undertake a programme of comprehensive damage control. Change the record. Work overtime. Suspect my every move.