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CREATION WITHOUT A CREATOR : THE CASE OF THE MAISON MARTIN MARGIELA

by

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Overview

'They're going to do the same thing all over again !' was the strident cry which heralded the first Maison Martin Margiela fashion show after the company's founder and creator left the company. In a sector where personality cults are the norm, the decision not to appoint a new creative director prompted a great deal of scepticism. How could a fashion house keep going without its emblematic creator who had personified the brand ? This original, daring and difficult choice, made in the middle of the subprime crisis, is nevertheless one which seemed to be the most in keeping with the personality and the history of the brand. In the subsequent reorganisation of the company, this change was apparent by the introduction of a sort of oligarchy. Two years later, the choices made seem to have borne fruit. The financial results have never slumped and the brand is still known for its creativity. A new phase in the history of the company can now take place, and the only way of measuring its success will be by the results.

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TALK : Stefano Caputo and Giovanni Pungetti

Stefano Caputo : The Maison Martin Margiela is perhaps not as well known to the general public as other fashion houses – and, in fact, this is partly deliberate –, but it has an identity and values which are so strong that it has been able to continue to grow by itself, without a creator, after its founder left.

The Belgian Martin Margiela created his fashion house in 1988 with an associate, Jenny Meirens, after he had completed his studies at the famous *Académie des beaux-arts* in Anvers, and after working as an assistant to the designer Jean-Paul Gaultier. He presented his first fashion show for women in the same year and his first fashion show for men followed ten years later. Today, the Maison Martin Margiela has about forty boutiques throughout the world (the largest of which is in Tokyo, and which opened in 2000), and four showrooms in Paris (the company's headquarters), New York, Tokyo and Milan. Its thirteen lines (collections) consist of men's and women's fashion (including its 'Artisanal' collection produced in Paris), accessories, shoes, jewellery, leather goods, perfumes, and interior design.

The company has been based in Paris from the start. It is currently housed in a former convent where its creative heart is embodied in our fashion trend agency dedicated to the creation of ready-to-wear collections and accessories. It is a workshop where handmade, artistic pieces are made (and exhibited during the *haute couture* fashion shows which take place twice a year). There are offices for our communications, marketing and licensing teams, as well as our interior design agency which designs shops and showrooms. There are also rooms for administrative work which serve as offices for our sales team during the three sales sessions every six months. The company employs one hundred and fifty people throughout the world, including fifty in Paris.

The history of the company has been marked by three important phases : the creation of a style by the founder ; the creation of a brand due to the arrival of a shareholder ; and, finally, the creation of a fashion house without an official creator.

Creation of a style

Giovanni Pungetti : From the very outset, Martin Margiela made no secret of his view of fashion which was diametrically opposite to that of the mainstream fashion world. In a world which worships creative personalities, he never showed his face either to the press or to clients, never gave a personal interview, and never appeared on the catwalk at the end of a fashion show on. In the early years, he only replied to journalists' questions by fax. Later on, the communications department agreed to give interviews on the company's behalf (using 'we....' and not 'he...') never mentioning the designer's point of view. The decision to remain anonymous had nothing to do with diffidence, but was more a desire to focus the spotlight on the products, doing the opposite of what the fashion industry does, and perhaps also to make people talk about the fashion house in an original way. At the end of the 1980s, when marketing was booming and black had become 'the' colour associated with a luxury lifestyle, Martin Margiela designed his shops in white with salvaged furniture also painted white, and there was no sign of any logo or label. His first shops were impossible to find : they were not on the ground floor, no name was visible, and one had to ring a bell for someone to open the door. At a time when belonging to a group was seen as positive, the Maison Martin Margiela did the exact opposite and presented an individual profile.

Stefano Caputo : It is always difficult to describe the style of a brand in just a few words. The Maison Martin Margiela is often described by journalists and clients as *avant-garde* and iconoclastic, or even intellectual. It is a fact that fashion houses like changing the rules and the codes of fashion, transforming, reinterpreting and deconstructing traditional articles of clothing often in a blatantly humorous and ironic way. The Maison Martin Margiela pays

particular attention to the designing of clothes, their manufacture, the materials used and the cut. We are always working on the quality of the finished product and the processes of designing the clothes. Some garments, for example, show the underside, the stitching or the lining. In order to do the opposite of the fashion conventions, one must first know them perfectly. Not surprisingly, the company has also built its image on a deep respect for dress-making and the skills of the workshop. It has always been based on two precepts : a modern and 'out-of-touch' one, and another which is much more traditional.

Its place in the market comes from a desire to sell luxury goods which are not ostentatious, and which manage to combine sophistication and simplicity. A client chooses a Margiela product for its intrinsic qualities, not for what it represents. The product has always been the most important thing in the fashion house. This is why our labels do not have a logo. Originally, they were blank ; now they have a series of numbers, one for each line, and the number which corresponds to the piece of clothing is simply circled in black. Even though the name 'Maison Martin Margiela' does not appear anywhere on the clothes, they are still recognisable as on each piece of clothing, there are four stitches in white thread in the shape of a rectangle. Those 'in the know' notice this. A client who wants to make a garment her own can easily unpick the threads.

Our communications and advertising are directly related to the choices we have made. The brand has never advertised. The fashion house organises its events and fashion collections in its own way. Its 'look book' is one example of its uniqueness. It is not a traditional catalogue but a piece of white cotton material onto which real photographs have been glued, and is then folded like an accordion. In twenty-three years, apart from the period which followed the creator's departure, the press has always shown respect for the choices the company has made and to which it has remained loyal.

Creation of a brand

Giovanni Pungetti : For ten years, Martin Margiela worked and developed his style and brand and at the same time carried out consultancy projects for other fashion houses like Hermès. Gradually he acquired a reputation among the *cognescenti* of the fashion world. However, in the end, he had to make a choice : should his brand grow or should it remain small and known only to a chosen few ? He decided to develop the brand and started looking for a shareholder. He chose Renzo Rosso, the founder and president of the Diesel Group to whom he sold the majority of the company's shares in 2002. The relationship between the two men was largely sentimental as there was a great deal of mutual admiration. Renzo Rosso, for whom I worked at the time, was fascinated by Margiela's visionary character and style as well as his extremely powerful marketing approach.

When the Maison Martin Margiela offered me the job of managing director ten years ago, I was working in the *casualwear* sector and I knew nothing about this brand. Before I made my final decision, I went to the Parisian department store, Printemps, to see what their clothes were like. I looked in vain for the Margiela sales point on the luxury fashion floor. In the end, I found a corner of the shop, painted in white, where the clothes were almost hidden in a hotchpotch of cupboards with no apparent logo or brand name. It was the absolute opposite of the world to which I had become accustomed, and in which I had made my career. I was intrigued, and I accepted the job.

At the instigation of the shareholder, this little-known avant-garde niche brand began to grow and change. The fashion house which had previously been reclusive, started opening up. New lines were created and shops were opened maintaining the spirit of the original philosophy of the founder. The company's turnover tripled in five years during which time the creator's image was not compromised. From this point, the Maison Martin Margiela started to exist as a brand.

Creation of a fashion house

At the end of 2008, the economic crisis worsened and hit the luxury sector. One day, Martin Margiela came into my office and said 'I am tired, I need a break.' We hoped that this exhaustion would be short-lived, but after six months' absence from the company, he came back to tell us that he had no intention of returning to work. This decision came at a time when things were already difficult for the company. We took a year to think about our strategy, and eventually decided to continue without him. It was a case of making Margiela a fashion house in its own right, and autonomous.

Stefano Caputo : After Martin Margiela left in December 2009, Suzy Menkes, the famous fashion critic, wrote an article in the International Herald Tribune which concluded 'can the fashion house continue to flourish without a creator ? If so, this will be a first.' Until now, we have managed.

A premeditated departure

Giovanni Pungetti : To tell the truth, we had a hunch that Martin Margiela might stop prematurely, and that he would not continue working until the age of 70 or 80 like Karl Lagerfeld or Valentino. He sometimes said that fashion was ephemeral, and a time would come when he would have nothing left to contribute. Without really knowing that he was going to leave, and after the arrival of the new shareholder, we nevertheless tried to protect and to boost the fashion house, a task which was made easier by the fact that Martin Margiela was not in public eye, and, as a result, his departure would be less noticeable. We emphasised the brand by distancing it from its creator. With hindsight, I can now see that by staying in the background Martin Margiela was deliberately building up and preparing the future of his company without stamping his personality on it. His decision to find a shareholder was probably also part of his strategy to ensure the fashion house's longevity.

After Martin Margiela's departure, we had several options. We could either entrust the reins of the company to another creator as happens quite often in the fashion industry, or we could continue without a figurehead, or we could discontinue the business altogether. We chose the first option and started looking for a designer whose ideas were in keeping with the values of our brand both from a creative and a marketing point of view. We also weighed up the financial advantages of each option because hiring a new creator is expensive. Time passed. In order to compensate for the void left by Martin Margiela, we handed the management over to his former right-hand man. We presented our first collection, and then the second. This proved that we were competent.

In the end, we decided not to hire a creator. In fact, Martin Margiela had not only made provisions for the future of the brand and his fashion house, but he had also passed on a way of working, a method, a philosophy and processes which embodied his vision. He had taught us to work without him, to pass on the company's style and method of communication, and how to create a collection and work as a team.

Another factor which comforted us in our decision was that he deliberately waited for the arrival of new stylists to the group (after the new shareholder arrived) before starting to delegate more. He took a back seat, and limited himself to giving a few guidelines at the beginning of each season and handling some projects in the early stages. Gradually he put in place an organisation which was able to work by itself.

In fact, the brand has such a unique form of marketing that it would have been difficult to make it compatible with the arrival of a creator or designer from outside the company. This person would have had to agree to stay in the background and blend into the company. He would have stayed two or three years before accepting a more attractive offer from another luxury brand. Therefore, we would have ended up being like all the other fashion houses rather than choosing to be unique.

When Martin Margiela left, we made the wise decision to publicise a great deal more about the brand in order to divert attention away from the fact that we no longer had a creator. We concentrated on the non-clothing activities of the company in particular (such as furniture, carpets, wallpaper, and interior design for hotels) to get people to talk about the fashion house in sectors where we were not well known. For the past few years, the company has started to focus more and more on interior design. Our clients were delighted by our in-house design and sometimes asked if the objects which we used to decorate the shops, such as lamps, were for sale. This encouraged us to explore this avenue, not only to manufacture objects, but also to create a genuine interior design department for public and private areas.

Creative management without a director

In our new organisation, without a designer, we had to make a few adjustments. We created three divisions – fashion, interior design and communications. The director of each one was a former colleague of Martin Margiela. We set up a creative board of directors so that these three directors could discuss and make decisions. The danger was that without a creative director at the head of the company, these three divisions might go in different ways and the structure would lose any coherency. The creative board of directors was put in place to avoid this taking place. Even so, the codes, values and philosophy of the brand are already so clear that they serve as natural guides for creative staff once they have been understood and integrated into company strategy and thinking. The board merely makes sure that they are implemented.

The press panned the first two fashion shows we presented after Martin Margiela left. They said the clothes were unsatisfactory and lacked creativity. However, at the same time, orders were pouring in. Was this an indication that some clients were still attached to Martin's reputation, or that we were capable of continuing without him? We analysed the situation in order to understand why our work had caused so many negative reactions. Gradually things started falling into place. After the shock and tears associated with Martin's departure, the teams started to bounce back and realised that he would have wanted us to continue creating without him, but to do this, we had to forget him, start afresh, and avoid reproducing the designs he had made over the past twenty years. Of course we made mistakes, but it was better to be panned for innovations rather than for imitations. It took us two seasons to turn this around. We no longer refer to Martin Margiela either inside or outside the company. Today our only contacts with him are purely for administrative matters. There is no trace at all of Martin in our collections, but the Margiela touch is still there. Journalists talk less about him and more about the Maison Martin Margiela. They are beginning to judge the work of a group of people, a brand and a fashion house.

I do not know what the future has in store, but it looks that so far we have made good decisions. The company's turnover is progressing in double figures. During the economic crisis and after Martin left, the turnover fell by only 8 % whereas other brands went bankrupt or only survived because of accessories bearing the fashion's houses symbolic logo.

I do not think our experience is an exemplary one. Having worked in sectors which are extremely varied such as heavy industry and *prêt-à-porter*, I know that every case is different and is the result of its history. The success of the Maison Martin Margiela is due to the fact that it has created its own story, and has not been depended on reproducing working methods which did well for others.

DISCUSSION

Keeping the tradition alive

Question : *When fashion houses suddenly lose their creators often so-called 'keepers of the flame' tend to step in. Was this what happened at the Maison Martin Margiela ?*

Giovanni Pungetti : In our case, the keeper of the flame is the entire company, and to be more precise, the creative board and myself. Collective pressure is put on anyone who strays from the philosophy of the brand. For example, there is an unspoken rule of anonymity. If a new employee dares to give an interview, he would immediately be called to order by the group. The company forbids this behaviour. Similarly, in professional social networks, we only mention that we work for the Maison Martin Margiela ; we never disclose our job title. The group keeps a close eye on this and rectifies any deviations. When we were looking for someone to replace Martin Margiela, anonymity was absolutely essential and could have been the subject of a legally binding clause.

The embodiment of the brand by the group where anonymity is important is demonstrated by the fact that all our employees wear the traditional sewing shop white gowns during public events, fashion shows and sales launches. It is a sign of group cohesion and signifies membership. Paradoxically, white – which is almost impersonal – has become our signature colour.

Management as distinct from the creative side

Q. : *Apart from the brand's work methods and codes, has Martin Margiela left you with any sort of creative process ?*

G. P. : Our creative process is the result of our history. Each employee is part of it and becomes immersed in it almost instinctively. It is passed on in team meetings where the creative team make suggestions, phases where inspirations and ideas are chosen, specific stages, and so on. To tell the truth, I am not sure that I really understand what exactly is included in this creative process. A new stylist for men's fashions joined the company two weeks ago. Four days later, the company's fashion director was already getting impatient with him, saying 'he has still not understood how we work !' How we work is second nature to us and so is difficult to explain.

Q. : *What is the relationship between the management side of the company and the creative team ?*

G. P. : People often say that in high fashion, the houses which are successful are those which are based on a pairing of the manager and the creative director. The Maison Martin Margiela has a manager, but no creative director. It is difficult when one manages a fashion house to have no-one with whom one can talk about strategic decisions which concern both creation and the development of the business. Originally, I wanted to be present at the creative board's meetings, but I realised quite quickly that my presence there was not necessary. In fact, I do not even know when or where this board meets. I am only informed that they have met because they tell us about certain creative strategies or decisions that they have taken.

I am the go-between between various employees ranging from the fashion director to the receptionist. Each person has his own idea of the company and thinks that he has understood what is necessary to make the company grow. This is the opposite of democracy, and demonstrates both the strength and the limitations of the company. There is a strong possibility that I would be tempted to take on the role of assistant artistic director, but it is not my place. My role is to be interested in creation and to assess the work of the creative team without intervening too much or interfering. If there were a creative director, the decision-making process would be smoother and easier. I know this from my experience in other companies.

Q. : *Does Martin Margiela's former number two, the fashion director, play an important role ?*

G. P. : She is irreplaceable. If she left, we would have a big problem, even bigger than that associated with Martin's departure ! She worked with him for twenty years and he taught her a system, a process and a vision. She also has technical, managerial and team qualities which are more outstanding than Martin Margiela's. She is a perfectionist. We managed to survive the departure of our creator, and we would certainly be able to survive if his number two left, but we would have to pay a very high price.

The paradox of a big niche brand

Q. : *Why do so few people know the Maison Martin Margiela brand ?*

G. P. : That is one of our problems partly due to the company not wanting to be in the limelight and, as a result, to be unique and exclusive. We will always be a sophisticated brand the clientele of which is not the general public. However, we are striving to make ourselves known, and to increase our turnover. The shareholder has invested a great deal in the company, and has been waiting ten years for a return on his investment. Therefore, it is now our duty to develop. Of course, the shareholder gives us more freedom than any other company in his group, but, apart from his admiration for the brand, his partnership with Margiela is strictly a business operation.

Q. : *Surprisingly, the Maison Martin Margiela brand corresponds to certain luxury criteria but contrasts with others. It represents quality and know-how, but does not play on the imagination or the emotions. It maintains a private image but has launched a perfume with L'Oréal. Your company goes against the trend, but you still seize opportunities.*

G. P. : The brand is a paradox. To achieve the turnover we have today, we have had to make compromises without being opportunistic. Today, 90 % of our turnover comes from traditional products. Previously, when Margiela was a real niche brand, it sold more very creative products.

Of course we carry out marketing, but it is intelligent marketing which we do in the spirit of the brand. Everything which Martin Margiela did had an ulterior motive in terms of marketing. Even his vision of style was tinged with it. The emotion we convey tends to be intellectual. In spite of that, the mystery which has surrounded the fashion house and its creator from the beginning also contributes to the mystique. The press has emphasised this aspect.

Our aim is to keep growing by means of innovation and creativity. I am certain that a large number of intelligent consumers are ready to follow us. With successive crises, it is increasingly difficult to mislead clients, especially in the luxury fashion market. In fact, if there is a luxury value we favour above all others, it is quality. It is not a choice but a prerequisite. 95 % of our clothes are made in Italy by a company within the group which has the Margiela manufacturing licence. It is responsible for making prototypes, for manufacturing and for distribution. The rest of our clothes are made in small workshops within 100 kilometres of the factory. We carry out daily quality checks in these workshops. Our products are quite unusual, and can be real headaches for the people who manufacture them. We have a limited number of suppliers because they have to prove their know-how which can only be learned with time. We only use the services of a small number of subcontractors for our accessories.

As far as our perfume is concerned, it is a project we had for a long time, but it was hard to find a partner who understood our character and was able to create a fragrance by which we could be identified. Finally, we found the partner we wanted in L'Oréal. This does not necessarily mean that it is a perfume which is suitable for everyone.

Stefano Caputo : Unlike other brands, our perfume ‘Untitled’ is not intended to sell a particular vision or pipe-dreams. It is L’Oréal’s most expensively manufactured product. It requires nineteen manual stages. We are very proud of the fact that it is the first and only product for which L’Oréal has not made consumer tests. We refused tests on principle.

Q. : *Which brands are similar to yours ?*

G. P. : Our brand is multi-faceted. One of its facets appeals to the Japanese market because of its taste for change, recycling and deconstruction. Creators such as Yohji Yamamoto, Rei Kawakubo (Comme des Garçons) and Issey Miyake have always liked our products. Japan is our most important market, and the first country in which our brand was successful and where we have the largest number of shops. Another facet of our brand appeals to minimalist Belgian creators like Dries Van Noten. Today we tend to be part of the traditional niche of French creators like Lanvin, Givenchy and Balenciaga. Nevertheless, we are still quite unique.

Q. : *Is your brand inspired by foreign cultures ?*

G. P. : The Maison Martin Margiela is an international brand both in terms of its sales and its reputation and recruitment. Our Paris office employs no fewer than thirty-one nationalities. Before designing a new collection, our creative teams go abroad to gain inspiration from places as varied as Brazil, Lebanon, Finland and Los Angeles. Diversity is a fundamental dimension in the work of Style office, but the heart of our company remains in Paris.

Q. : *Can one be avant-garde forever ? Do you not risk being copied by other brands ?*

G. P. : I do not know what it means to be avant-garde today. The creative team could tell you, but I am not one of them. I always advise my team to advance, go further and push back the frontiers.

S. C. : Other people in the fashion and design industry show that they are very innovative. However, some of our current creations are still seen as completely new. It is a fact that the tendency is for luxury goods which are less ostentatious. The Maison Martin Margiela has always done this. Should we distance ourselves from this on principle in order not to appear like everyone else ? I do not think that we can revolutionise our sector. We intend to change, but not to change fashion codes radically.

Presentation of the speakers :

Stefano Caputo : after completing his studies in political science and later marketing, started working in advertising in Milan. He became advertising director for Diesel at their international headquarters before joining the Maison Martin Margiela in Paris as their marketing director.

Giovanni Pungetti : CEO of the Maison Martin Margiela. He loves photography and Africa. In his spare time, he manages avant-garde fashion houses. He has worked for General Motors, Fiat, Unilever and Diesel.

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