



STILLEVEN

On generativity, and impossibility made true through art

I. THE BOUQUET THAT NEVER EXISTED

One is obliged to begin with a confession that is also, conveniently, the argument: nothing in this book is real, and this places it squarely within the most rigorous tradition of realism the West has produced. When Ambrosius Bosschaert the Elder set a striped tulip beside a cabbage rose beside a crown imperial in a single glass, sometime in the first years of the seventeenth century, he was not recording an arrangement. He was committing

sermon on transience, and one does not wish to be unkind to the iconographers, who were doing their best (Plate 2). But the pictures themselves argue the opposite. Every one of them is a machine for refusing transience. The tulip of April and the rose of June stand together in a perpetual season that exists nowhere on the calendar and everywhere on the canvas, and the water in the glass never clouds. To have seen such a picture in 1620 was to have seen an impossibility rendered



Plate 1 — The arrangement that was committed, not recorded.

one. Those flowers do not bloom in the same month. No table in Middelburg ever carried that vase (Plate 1). The bouquet was assembled in the studio, petal by petal, from studies made across the seasons and kept against future need, and the men and women who paid for such pictures understood the transaction perfectly: they were not buying a flower. They were buying the defeat of the calendar.

It has become customary to call these works still lifes, from the Dutch *stilleven*, and the term is better than its users generally know. Not stilled life; still life. Life that persists. The genre's first scholars catalogued its symbols, its skulls and its snuffed candles, and read every bouquet as a

with more conviction than most painters could bring to the possible (Plate 3).

The method deserves closer attention than it usually receives, because the method is the point. The painter kept a library. Studies of single blossoms, drawn or painted from life in the weeks they could be had, were held in books and portfolios for years and consulted like scripture; a tulip observed in one decade reappears, petal for petal, in bouquets painted in the next (Plate 4). The composition was a selection from this stock, governed by rules that were nowhere written down and everywhere obeyed: the light patient and from the left, every head at the exact crisis of its bloom, the tall imperials crowning, the roses



Plate 4 — A study is a flower held against future need.

ballasting the base, the whole pyramid consenting to an order that no gardener has ever been able to impose on actual stems. A library of parts. A system of rules. An act of selection. The reader is



Plate 2 — Stilleven: not stilled life. Life that persists.

invited to notice that this is a complete description of a generative system, and that it was in productive operation on the Zeeland coast four hundred years before anyone thought to call it one (Plate 5).

The economics of the arrangement confirm what the method implies. A flower painting was, by the standards of the objects it depicted, cheap; in the feverish years a good picture of tulips could cost less than one of the tulips, a fact that has amused every commentator who has ever repeated it and instructed almost none of them. Consider what was actually for sale. The bulb offered one season's performance, weather permitting, followed by the usual descent into foliage. The

painting offered the performance in perpetuity, weather irrelevant, at the exact peak, in the best light the Netherlands had ever manufactured. The market, given a choice between the flower and the render, priced the render lower and should not have. Time has since executed the correction, and we will come to it.



Plate 3 — An impossibility, rendered with conviction.

II. FLOWERS HELD OUTSIDE TIME

The ground behind these flowers deserves its own chapter in the history of ideas, and has generally received a paragraph. Bosschaert's generation set its bouquets against daylight: pale niches, arched windows opening onto polite Flemish distances. It was the following century that discovered the dark (Plate 6). In the mature manner of Rachel Ruysch the ground goes to a blackness that is not the absence of setting but the removal of the world, and each petal carries its own light into it, the way a thing remembered carries its own light into the middle of the night. The flowers in this book are painted on that blackness, and belong therefore to her strain of the tradition, the severe



Plate 8 — Ruysch signed her age, 83, beneath the flowers.

strain, the one that understood that if you wish to hold something outside of time you must first take the time out of the picture (Plate 7).



Plate 5 — A library, a system of rules, an act of selection.

Ruysch knew more than most about holding things outside of time; she had grown up inside the problem. Her father, Frederik Ruysch, was the most celebrated anatomist in Europe, famous for preparations that kept the perishable in a state of permanent presentability, and his daughter arranged flowers in his cabinets of preserved wonders before she ever signed a canvas. One does not wish to overwork the inheritance, but one notices it. She painted for more than six decades and signed her age, eighty-three, under the flowers she finished in 1747, an inscription that reads less like a date than like a boast, and was entitled to be one (Plate 8). Her contemporary Jan van Huysum, the other summit of the late manner, guarded his procedures like a



Plate 6 — The eighteenth century discovers the dark.

man who believed method itself was property: he painted alone, locked the studio against his own brothers, accepted in his whole life a single pupil, and drove her out when her work grew good



Plate 9 — Van Huysum locked the studio against his brothers.

enough to frighten him. Art historians report this with disapproval. Every generative artist who has ever declined to publish a seed will read it with a flicker of fellow feeling (Plate 9).

What the secrecy protected was not a trick but a discipline: the patience to build a flower out of glazes the way the flower had built itself out of days. And here the tradition's deepest habit comes into view. The study held the bloom outside its season. The dark ground held it outside its room. The glaze held it outside its hour. At every scale the practice is the same practice, the preservation of the perishable by translation into a system that does not perish (Plate 10). The anatomist did it with spirits and

Bosschaert dynasty ran on exactly this inheritance, three sons and a brother-in-law compositing from the family stock like a studio sharing an asset library, because that is what they were. When the same anemone appears in two bouquets twenty years apart, art history calls it workshop practice. An engineer would call it a dependency, and both would be right.

One should also say a word for the vase, the least regarded and most instructive object in the genre.



Plate 7 — *To remove time, first remove the world.*

wax, the daughter with oil, and the difference between them is smaller than the difference between either and doing nothing, which is what time proposes.

It is worth pausing on what the studies were not. They were not sketches, in the modern, forgiving sense; they were specifications. A tulip study recorded the number of petals, the exact syntax of the break, the particular candor of that bloom on that morning, at a resolution sufficient for the flower to be reconstructed decades later by a hand that had never seen it. The portfolio was, to say it plainly, a format. It could be inherited; sons and workshop assistants painted their fathers' tulips long after the originals had composted, and the

It is the constraint. Everything else in the picture is free, impossibly free, seasonally free, and the vase is the one thing that must be obeyed: the stems must enter it, the pyramid must rise from it, the weight must balance over it. The masters understood that an impossibility becomes convincing precisely in proportion to the rigor of the frame it is placed in, that the eye forgives the defeated calendar because the composition defeats nothing, and this, too, the reader is asked to file away, because the second half of this book is a demonstration of the same law conducted with a grid instead of a vase.

III. THE BEAUTIFUL ERROR

In the winter of 1637 a single bulb of the tulip called *Semper Augustus*, white, with flames of carmine broken across every petal as if the flower



Plate 10 — Preservation by translation into a system.

had been scribbled on by an inspired hand, was priced at ten thousand guilders, a figure contemporaries compared to the cost of a fine house on an Amsterdam canal (Plate 11). The



Plate 11 — Priced against a house on the Herengracht.

economic historians, killjoys by profession, have since audited the mania and found the ledgers thinner than the legend; fewer such sales were consummated than the moralists claimed. The correction is noted and does not touch the essential fact, which is stranger than the legend and much more useful. The flames on those petals were symptoms. A virus, moving from bulb to bulb on the mouthparts of aphids, was interrupting the flower's production of pigment,



Plate 13 — A market in unrepeatable outputs, 1637.

and the interruption is what the connoisseurs prized. No grower could command the break. It arrived, or it did not, in patterns that could not be repeated, and the rarest patterns commanded the greatest prices. Nobody would isolate the cause for nearly three centuries; the mechanism was finally identified in the 1920s. The collectors of the Golden Age were bidding, without knowing it, on the outputs of a random process running inside their merchandise (Plate 12).



Plate 14 — Extinct in the ground; permanent in paint.

One tries to say this carefully, because it sounds like wit and is in fact history: tulipomania was a market in generative art. The bulb was the algorithm. The virus was the seed. The bloom was

the output, unrepeatably, authenticated by its own strangeness, and priced according to the improbability of its pattern. The Dutch, who are supposed to have invented modern finance in the same half century, had also invented the economics of the rare output, and they did it while believing they were buying flowers (Plate 13). And the parable has a second act, which is the one this book exists to tell. The virus that painted the Semper Augustus also weakened it. Each daughter bulb carried the infection deeper; the line sickened generation by generation, in inverse proportion to its beauty, and at some point in the eighteenth century it failed to come up at all. The most valuable flower in recorded history is extinct. It survives in exactly one form: in the paintings (Plate 14). The impossible bouquet

The mechanism deserves its dates, because the dates are the joke. The break was prized by 1620, priced by 1637, and explained in 1928, when Dorothy Cayley at the John Innes Institution demonstrated that the patterning traveled with transferred tissue and named the culprit a virus; three centuries of connoisseurship had been, unknowingly, virology conducted at auction. And the aesthetics survived the diagnosis intact, which is the part the moralists never predict. Knowing the flame is a symptom subtracts nothing from the flame. The Rembrandt tulips sold today are stable imitations, bred to counterfeit the disease without carrying it, the way a print reproduces a brushstroke: the market for the beautiful error outlived the error, outlived the mania, outlived the moral. Beauty is indifferent to the



Plate 12 — The pattern was a symptom; the symptom was the value.

turned out to be the durable one. The image did not merely outlast the flower; the image is now the flower, the sole remaining instance, the type specimen of its own kind. Whoever wishes to see a Semper Augustus must go and look at art. This is what is meant, in this book, by impossibility made true: the picture began as the one thing that could not exist and ended as the only thing that does (Plate 15).

respectability of its causes, and the seventeenth century, to its credit, never pretended otherwise. `); M.push(` There is a temptation, having said all this, to declare the Dutch prophets and stop, and the temptation should be resisted, because the resemblance runs the other way. They were not anticipating generative art. They were doing it, fully, with the only processor then available, which was a trained hand executing a system held in a portfolio and a skull. What has



Plate 16 — Commissioned in words, delivered in convention.

changed since is not the method but the substrate: the library has moved from paper to weights, the selection from the wrist to the seed, the rules from the guild to the constraint file. The



Plate 18 — The study in its pure state.

did not foresee, though it would have recognized the commission instantly. Each was asked for in words, a single head in the Dutch floral style, isolated against black, and each arrived carrying



Plate 15 — The type specimen of its own kind.

act, assembly of the impossible from a stock of the held, is identical, and it is identical because it is the only act that has ever produced a still life. To paint a flower that outlasts the flower is already to have conceded that the image is the durable form and the organism the fugitive one. Everything after that concession is engineering. `); M.push(` IV. THE LIBRARY. The eighty flower heads gathered in these pages were painted in the tradition's manner by an instrument the tradition

the conventions like a passport: the leftward light, the crisis of bloom, the dark that removes the world (Plate 16). It is no longer interesting to be scandalized by this, and it was never interesting to be triumphant about it. What is interesting is the shape of the practice, which the reader of the first chapter has already seen. The prompt is the commission. The model is the portfolio, trained on the tradition's whole surviving stock the way an apprentice was trained, by copying. The output



Plate 19 — Bloom, held at its best hour, indefinitely.

is a study: one head, one light, held against future need. Eighty of them together are not eighty pictures. They are a library, and a library is a claim about the future. It says: arrangements will be required (Plate 17).

The library has since been taken further than the seventeenth century could take its portfolios, and in precisely the direction the seventeenth century was straining toward. Every head has been



Plate 17 — A library is a claim about the future.

separated from its stem and its ground, so that it floats, placeable against anything, a study in the pure state (Plate 18). For every open bloom a closed bud has been made in the same palette and

the same light, which is to say: the flower has been given a past it never had, a beginning invented to suit an ending that already existed, and if that operation strikes the reader as illegitimate, the reader is reminded that Bosschaert gave his tulips whole seasons they never had, and is honored for it. Between the invented bud and the actual bloom, the opening itself has been interpolated, so that each flower in the library performs its own becoming, on a transparent ground, in a loop. Van Huysum spent summers in Haarlem waiting for particular flowers to open. The library does not wait. It holds bloom the way Frederik Ruysch held tissue: indefinitely, and at its best hour (Plate 19).

V. COMPOSITION

It remains to say what the flowers are for, and the tradition has already answered: they are stock. The studies existed for the bouquets. The library exists for the arrangements, the grids and waves and mandalas and kaleidoscopes into which these heads will be composed, each arrangement a bouquet in the strict Bosschaert sense, an assembly of parts that never shared a season, made true by composition. The impossible bouquet was never a genre. It was a procedure, and the procedure is portable (Plate 20).

This book is the procedure's most recent output, and the reader is entitled to know that it practiced what it printed. No hand drew these pages. A grid was chosen, in the Swiss manner, two columns and twelve fields with the margins mirrored page against page; a system of type was locked to a module so that every size keeps the same register; the plates were graded to a few permitted sizes, because the fewer the differences in the size of the illustrations, the quieter the impression created by the design; and the essay was written with its plates anchored in the text, each one instructed to stand as near its mention as the fields would permit. Then a programme composed every page, flowing the words around the flowers by whole lines, mirroring, counting. Instead of solutions for problems, said Karl Gerstner, in 1964, in the

sentence this book's typesetter regards as scripture: programmes for solutions. Change one word of the seed and every page rearranges, correct again, different again, another bouquet from the same stock. The edition in your hands is one selection from a space of valid books, and it does not mind telling you so; the Semper Augustus never minded being a symptom.

So the argument closes where the tradition opened, on a single head against the dark, one



Plate 20 — Stock, awaiting arrangement.

light, one long attention. Painting held the flower outside its season. The library holds it outside its death. Composition, now as in Middelburg, makes the impossible arrangement and then makes it again, and what survives of any of it, bulb, bouquet, book, is the generated thing: the image that could not exist, and therefore had to be made, and therefore remains. The rest is composition.

Set in Georgia, 10 on 13, on a two-column grid of twelve fields with mirrored margins and folios on the fore edge, composed entirely by programme from a space of valid books; this is seed “stilleven-essay-1”. Twenty plates from a library of eighty flower heads in the Dutch manner, studio of Melissa Wiederrecht, 2026. Typeset by GEVIERT, das Geviert, the em quad. The bouquet that never existed is the only one that still does.