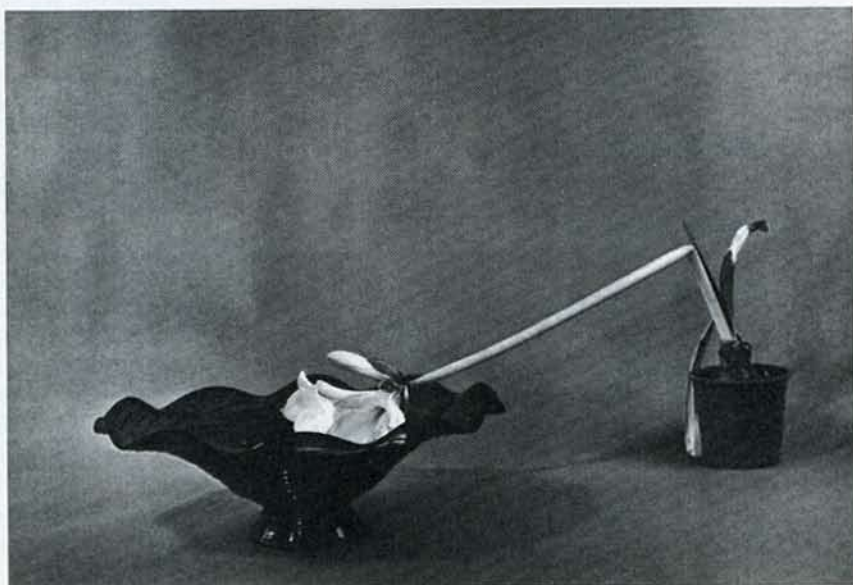


(Festoen)Festoon  
1990  
70 x 45, concrete



Vanitas Vanitatum  
et Omnia Vanitas  
1989/90  
91 x 131, photo



# The Sweet Smell of Bad Taste

An interview with  
Rotterdam flower curator,  
Geer Pouls

*By Louise Sandhaus*

**A**round the time when the blossom of the year begins to wither and fade, I was notified that come the season of upturns in the floral economy I'd find myself a guest in the land of tulips. In this place, where Spring fulfills the promise of the national signifier, the normal and everyday is planted comfortably next to the odd and extreme. But, to my American self used to daffy colorful displays of consumer culture, oddity could easily parade itself in Holland as the everyday itself without eliciting a moment's second glance. This probably accounts for why it took me so long to notice anything in particular about the shop in Rotterdam with the kitschy plaster elves in the window that I assumed to be a serious purveyor of lawn orna-

mentation. It wasn't until a friend pointed out the connection between a curious assortment of posters I'd seen and the hawked garden doodads down the street that I put it together that this was a serious establishment of bad taste. At first glance the name, *Brutto Gusto*, does nothing to reveal anything about this confusion between florist, art gallery, and curio shop. "Brutto Gusto" you say to yourself in your best Italian accent conjuring images of sumptuous, extravagant Bacchanaen feasts of overwhelming debauchery and blatant indulgences of masculine erotica. Ah, but there's the rub — a slight skew in how these masterpieces are regarded divulges these descriptions as the baroque camp, the brutto gusto which trans-

lates as bad taste, that these compositions have come to signify. It seemed suiting for the Flowers issue of *Errant Bodies* to have a chat with Geer Pouls, the instigator, proprietor and perpetuator of brutto gusto. A couple of notes to begin with: Clearly concerned about appearing in bad taste, Geer asked Piet de Jonge, advisory member of the New Rotterdam Garden Society to make a



contribution; responses in Dutch were translated by Marcel Zalme; and I've occasionally taken a further liberty with the answers to clarify the intended meaning. **First of all, who is Geer Pouls?** (*response by Piet de Jonge*) Put a

floral arrangement made by Geer Pouls between fifty others and you'll see the difference immediately: if the trend dictates that a type of flower used once should be repeated in the bouquet, he'll produce one with no two flowers the same. His choice of color is unexpected and unorthodox and exotic blooms manage to find their way between native varieties, posies of weeds appear between the roses and his bouquets stick out in all directions. The flowers can be looked at from all angles, and in fact, ask to be looked at from all angles — a bouquet by Pouls jumps out at you. As it is with his bouquets, so it is with Pouls. **How would you describe Brutto Gusto?** (*response by Piet de Jonge*) Brutto Gusto is a florist shop, a second-hand store, a gallery, and design center rolled into one. Art, flowers, artificial flowers, vases, the ugly and the beautiful, real, kitsch, and fake. There's a bit of everything in this shop, where everything operates, both literally and figuratively speaking, on three levels. An assortment of flowers and the odd pot or vase greet you upon entering. A few steps down is an inconceivable and

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incongruent collection of vases, each marked nonetheless with the indelible stamp of Geer Pouls, their collector. It's his choice, his brutto gusto (bad taste), that decides whether or not an object earns admission to the shop to be sold as a Pouls original. A few steps up and you're in a small space where artists display their experiments among a collection of cacti, stunning examples of sixties French vases, dour German ones, and a single matte red vase ribbed like a novelty condom. **How did Brutto Gusto come about?** I'm educated as a flower designer, but worked for a few years as a visual artist. During that time I missed the direct contact with the audience, and also income was sparse, so in 1988 I decided to change my studio into a shop, which it had been anyway before I started using it as a studio. From the beginning all kinds of people came — rich, poor, snobs, trendy people, students and grandmothers — but all with a love of nature and a sense of art. I don't think they came to buy art — they wanted to buy something that touched their heart. **What's your interest in flowers and where did it come from? What signifi-**

**cance do flowers have for you?** I've been interested in flowers since early childhood, and I think this is because of the energy they generate. The way nature makes something sublime from nothing and returns it to nothing again in a short span of time — it's incomprehensible. I won't deny beauty it's place, but for me it's second. Eloquence is more important to



me, and it's this that carries me into the artistic arena, where imagination plays the leading role. **Your ideas about floral arrangements are quite unique — you see the process of the flowers dying as significant as it's life.**

Could you explain this further? The decay of the bouquet isn't really decay. Decay is as much a part of life as growing and blooming are, as far as I'm concerned. All are processes and reactions that stimulate my curiosity. I want to know where it all leads, and even when you think you know, the outcome is always different and conveys a different feeling, a different emotion. The way different flowers in a bouquet develop is never the same, so that the meaning the bouquet imparts constantly changes. What do you mean by the "meaning the bouquet imparts"? Other than a bridal bouquet or a thank-you bouquet or a decorative arrangement, I never thought about a bouquet having meaning. The meaning the bouquet imparts is its expression. In the decay, the expression, which exists in the form and color of the flowers, constantly changes. The meaning is what someone feels when they encounter a rose or callalily or snapdragon — each of these are examples of very different meanings. Do you see your work as art or as something else? Whether my work is art or design isn't

important to me. When I work with my chosen material — the flower — I look for a natural balance that allows the flower to be itself as much as possible. Flower arranging is a craft, a craft that acquires meaning when you assemble the materials with love and respect. Perhaps art is the result when you pay careful attention to your material, but art isn't what I'm after. My training in Ikebana, the Japanese art of flower arranging, deeply influenced me, but after returning from Tokyo in 1980, I realized that what I really needed to rediscover was my own Dutch tradition. This led me to the 17th century masters of floral still life, whose influence on me was just as profound as the Ikebana. Equally significant for me was the way Robert Mapplethorpe arranged flowers and assimilated them into his work. Could you explain the tradition and origins of the floral still life in Holland and what was it about those floral arrangements that you wanted to rediscover? And lastly, what was significant about the work of Mapplethorpe for you? The original still lifes are paintings about several things, but the content is flowers—in

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particular blossoms that are in a process of decay. The decay is a kind of warning — a warning of vanity, of beauty as something temporary. This all has to do with the Protestant religion, which was dominant at the time. These works were reacting to the extravagantly decorated churches of the Catholics. For me the warning finger of these paintings is still relevant and interesting in a day and age when everything seems to be about expanding consumerism. As far as Mapplethorpe goes, it's the purity and innocence in the way he arranged flowers that's so significant for me. I'm amazed that he created very simple arrangements that were so erotic — as erotic as his nudes. He brought more sex into a simple tulip than 10 male nudes together could convey. Life has to do with sex and working with flowers is life. What kind of artwork is on display at **Brutto Gusto** and what's the relationship between the floral shop and the art? **Brutto Gusto** has regular shows of works that range from floral paintings to small installations and can range in subject matter from critiques of consumerism to the nature



of the transitory. The exhibitions are intended to challenge the shop. The works open up a discussion about the shop's right to exist. These works often seem to find a reason why to end the life

of flowers. Although when it comes down to it, I have to ignore these arguments because I'm not able to do something else. You have a long-standing relationship with a graphic designer who makes the diverse and captivating invitations for your art openings. What's significant about your relationship with this designer in terms of the concept of *Brutto Gusto*? Since 1988, I've been collaborating with Berry van Gerwen, a graphic designer. I was introduced to him through his work for a graphic design studio where he was doing an internship. We hit it off at once. His openness and unaffectedness reflected the type of product I was looking for. Rather than artistic or "art-y," I wanted something playful, maybe even a bit anarchistic. One of the conditions of my first assignment for him — to make the invitations for the openings — was that each one should look as though it had been made by a different designer, an absence of single style. Since then you could call his work *Brutto Gusto's* face and I'm the body. Why did you want each of the invitation to look as if it was made by a different designer? I asked Berry to make the invitations

look different from each other because I didn't want to have a house style. I wanted the invitations, like the diverse variety of vases and flowers in the shop, to always be a surprise for the receiver. I'd like to close with a quote from "Fleurs du mal," an essay by Jorinde Seydel that appeared in the catalog for a show of Geer Poul's work at Galeria Antonio de Barnola, Barcelona in 1992. "*What can be done and what Poul's is doing by way of the strategy of 'affirmation', is to make things much worse and more extreme than they actually are, so that at least they can speak again. By way of inverting the real and unreal, Poul's shows 'en situ' flowerboxes with artificial grass, or plant boxes with a flowered carpet, or wallpaper with a pattern of real flowers, or large concrete vases filled with bouquets of vases in an imitation garden. Dead flowers, clashing color combinations, photos of broken flowers in baroque frames: the 'brutto gusto' of the graceless flower arranger suppresses tasteless reality but does restore something of illusion.*"