

# RIOTOUS REPETITION: MUTANT FLOWERS, BAROQUE ARCHITECTURE AND SLAPSTICK COMEDY

Daphne de Sonneville

Double flowers produce petals instead of sexual organs. These mutants, called 'double' or 'extra-petalled' flowers, are an example of homeosis, a biological process in which one organ develops instead of (or transforms into) another.<sup>1</sup> It is a mutation that occurs spontaneously in the wild (first spotted some 2,000 years ago) and is now ubiquitously cloned for the commercial market.<sup>2</sup> In fact, most flowers seen in gardens today — including roses, tulips, dahlias, camellias, petunias, and carnations — are doubles, grown for their full opulence. It is truly theatrical. Like a jammed machine, the extra-petalled flower is stuck producing a single element that so happens to be its most showy part! What these flowers are less able to do is propagate, as this would require a reproductive system.

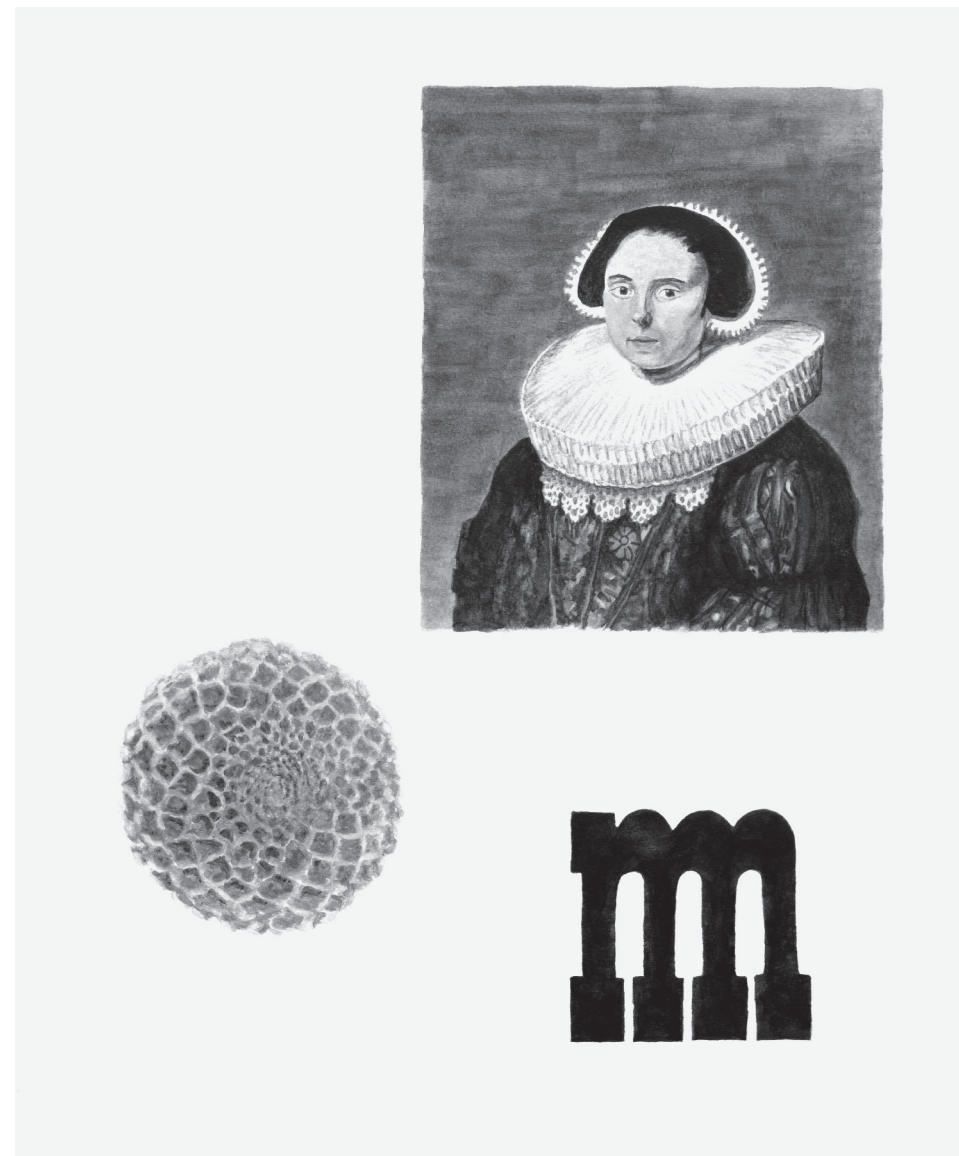
Without human involvement, the extra-petalled flower does spontaneously occur in nature as a genetic mutation, but it is rare.<sup>3</sup> The mutation is, therefore, deemed 'unsuccessful' with biologists not speaking of a transformation but a 'malformation.' It is a classification that attests to failure: "[C]ertainly it is arguable that the natural form of an organism is that which allows it to thrive under natural conditions. Any form that would not would be a malformation [...]."<sup>4</sup> But where do such judgements come from? And are they justified?

Plant mutations are caused by small accidents during the formation of the plant body. Poor timing of cell division, for example, can lead to disturbed floral patterns.<sup>5</sup> Split at a different moment, the cell contains information that prompts the plant to repeat the same process over and over again. Hence, the flower is stuck in a loop, as it were, becoming more and more beautiful. So beautiful, in fact, that it has enticed humans to lend it a hand in its distribution. So how unsuccessful is this way of growing, really? Do such flowers fail, or do they break free? Comparing the extra-petalled to other examples of mutation across disciplines, this article explores riotous repetition or looping as an emancipatory movement.

I

Full and sumptuous, the double flower looks attractive. Unfortunately for the bees, however, its stamens are non-existent or hard to find.<sup>6</sup> It is a sweet-scented metaphor for a course of action in which function is

1 Detlef Weigel and Elliot Meyerowitz, "The ABCs of Floral Homeotic Genes," *Cell* 78 (July 1994): 203–204.  
 2 The double rose made it into Theophrastus's *Inquiry into plants* (286 BC) as the earliest description. See Elliot Meyerowitz, David Smyth, and John Bowman, "Abnormal Flowers and Pattern Formation in Floral Development," *Development* 106 (June 1989): 209.  
 3 Meyerowitz, Smyth, and Bowman, "Abnormal Flowers and Pattern Formation in Floral Development," 211.  
 4 Arthur Harris, "Plants/Monstrosity," *Desert Diary* (El Paso: University of Texas, s.a.), accessed November 28, 2022, <http://museum2.utep.edu/archive/plants/DDmonstrosity.htm>.  
 5 Meyerowitz, Smyth, and Bowman, "Abnormal Flowers and Pattern Formation in Floral Development," 213.  
 6 Botanists speak of fully or semi-double flowers, the former being completely sterile, the latter having compromised fertility. Some have modified stamens that confusingly look like petals next to regular stamens, and others have so many extra petals that it is hard for bees to find access to their nectar. See Michael Pollock and Mark Griffiths, *The Royal Horticultural Society Shorter Dictionary of Gardening* (London: Macmillan, 1998), 245.



← fig. 1 Daphne de Sonneville, *Portrait of a Woman* (c. 1650) by Frans Hals (top right), *A poster-poem* (1965–66) by Aram Saroyan (bottom right), Pompom Dahlia 'Franz Kafka' (left), 2023, water-colour rendering, 210 × 297 mm.

overlooked and form prevails. Take the extra-petalled Pompom Dahlia 'Franz Kafka,' which consists of countless tiny petals shaped like tubes and organised in neat rows to form a perfect spherical shape. For insects, the flower may be an enticing place to explore, its intoxicating purple yielding seductive tunnels to get lost in. But herein lies danger: the complex network of many small units, all appearing exactly the same, looks dizzying, reminiscent of how the protagonist in the novels of the author (after which the flower is named) gets hopelessly lost in an overcomplicated bureaucratic system. Is there a way out?

There is something hypnotic about seeing the same thing over and over again, like being caught in an ever-expanding moment. Repetition leads to growth, even if it is aimless. This can be frustrating, as it is for Kafka's protagonists who find themselves trapped in a claustrophobic replay of unending procedures. There is no conclusion, no sequel, no solution, and, in the case of

the mutant double flower: no offspring. There can be, however, a certain joy, or at least satisfaction for the office personnel in just doing the same again. Repetition offers regularity, and there is beauty in that too. Is it not that very precision, that perfect repetition of forms, which makes the ‘Franz Kafka’ flower so attractive?

With its intricately pleated structure, the Pompom Dahlia is reminiscent of a somewhat forgotten item of clothing: the 17th-century millstone collar. In *Portrait of a Woman* (c. 1650) by Dutch painter Frans Hals, such a garment forms the centre of the painting and takes up so much space that it creates depth in the image, even though the scene takes place in front of a flat beige background. The collar consists of two layers of tubes that splay from the woman’s neck and run all the way around her head, delicately painted with lots of transparency, and is finished with fine bias binding. There is no space visible behind the woman: we see no room, but the collar extends ‘into’ the painting behind her and almost seems to protrude from the front. The collar thus becomes her space (it is all she has around her) but does not seem to allow for much movement. Caught in it, the woman looks stiff.

Van Hals’s painting shows how something can be simultaneously grand and limiting. The millstone collar worn by the woman is sculptural, not conforming to the body beneath, because it consists of layer upon layer of densely packed folds. This is typical of the Baroque style to which both the collar and Van Hals’s painting belong, characterised by a dizzying myriad of interlacing elements that often appear in repetition. Within the constraints of that repetition, however, lies freedom: a sense of infinity. Philosopher Gilles Deleuze describes the Baroque as “an operative function, a trait” that pushes “to infinity, fold over fold, one upon the other.”<sup>7</sup> Ever-expanding through the multiplication of ornamentation, Baroque art and architecture seem to represent growth and emergence, a formation of nature.

The Baroque evolved from the Renaissance, whose artists and architects pursued ‘ideal’ proportions inspired by their notion of ‘divine nature.’ But what the Renaissance did in a restrained manner, employing classical forms according to a stipulated rhythm, grew a lot wilder in the Baroque. Indeed, one could see it as a proliferation, a mutation of the classical ideal. When the Baroque emerged, it was viewed with disdain by contemporaries who considered the “excess” of elements “empty” and “decadent.”<sup>8</sup> Even worse, from the late 16th to the early 18th century, the word *baroque* implied connotations such as “unreasoned,” “licentious,” and “bizarre.” It was considered an implication of “immodesty.”<sup>9</sup>

Interestingly, it was the same period in which plant mutations (such as the extra-petalled Dahlia ‘Franz Kafka,’ although possibly not yet discovered) were called ‘monstrosities.’<sup>10</sup> This word, from the Latin *monstr-**itas*, dates back to the mid-16th century when the early

<sup>7</sup> Gilles Deleuze, *The Fold: Leibniz and the Baroque* (London/New York: Continuum, 2006), 3.

<sup>8</sup> Helen Hills, “The Baroque: Beads in a Rosary or Folds in Time,” *Fabrications: The Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians, Australia and New Zealand* 17 (no. 2, 2007): 54.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 49.

<sup>10</sup> The English Renaissance herbalist John Gerard describes several double-flowered varieties growing in his garden in 1597. See John Gerard, *The herball, or, generall historie of plantes* (London: John Norton, 1597), 111, 115, 296, 472, 510, 609, 636, 671, 783, 812.

modern Christian belief began to see non-reproducibility as a deviation from God’s plan.<sup>11</sup> The aversion continued well into the 19th century wherein “Monstrosities represent a chaos without law and order.”<sup>12</sup> The real scare came mainly from the realisation that people and monstrosities are part of the same life.<sup>13</sup> Seeing life fail is a reminder that humans can fail too; they are made of the same substance.

Both humans and plants have a physical presence. Bodies are subject to accidents; they may fail. This relates plant and human to the late ancient and medieval idea that “every accident denominates its subject.”<sup>14</sup> *Accident*, here, should be understood in the philosophical meaning of the word as a non-defining property that determines not *what* something is but *how* it is what it is. Mutant doubles are flowers, their mutation does not determine what they are; rather, it determines how they differ, and how they ‘fail.’ Comparing this to human conduct, one might think of the cultural expression of failure: slapstick comedy. Of course, slapstick behaviour stops one from moving on in life, similar to how the ‘unsuccessful’ extra-petalled flower will not reproduce. More importantly, however, the slapstick protagonist acts rather similarly to the double flower that loops its petal growth by distractedly rearranging the order of a behavioural sequence or isolating and repeating a single gesture. One could argue, therefore, that slapstick represents mutation not just because it shows failure, but because it demonstrates exactly how human behaviour becomes distorted.

#### IIII

Where a mutated plant body may look strange, the slapstick body looks normal at first. The classic black-and-white slapstick film usually features a respectable, well-groomed man in a suit with a snazzy moustache and bowler hat. Soon, however, it becomes clear how oddly the slapstick body moves: walking with large, bouncy steps or, on the contrary, short and waggly, skilfully resisting the outside forces that are out to get it. See, for example, Buster Keaton walking against the wind in *Steamboat Bill, Jr.* (1928), his body almost horizontally leaning in, or mistakenly sitting down on the coupling bar between two train wheels in *The General* (1926), moving up and down in perfect rotational circles.

Given such strange situations, which, moreover, result in pain and discomfort, it may be no surprise that slapstick characters are perceived as the ultimate misfits. Although some compassion might be in order, the audience laughs. In his essay, *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic* (1911), philosopher Henri Bergson describes how after “an individual or collective imperfection” follows “corrective laughter,” functioning as “a social gesture that singles out and represses a

<sup>11</sup> *Lexico Dictionaries*, s.v. “monstrosity,” accessed November 28, 2022, <https://www.lexico.com/en/definition/monstrosity>.

<sup>12</sup> Ida Keller, “Notes on Plant Monstrosities,” *Proceedings of the Academy of Natural Sciences of Philadelphia* 49 (1897): 284.

<sup>13</sup> Georges Ganguilhem, “Monstrosity and the Monstrous,” trans. Teresa Jaeger, *Diogenes*. Vol. 10 (1962): 27.

<sup>14</sup> The Latin word *subiectum* derives from the Greek *hypokeimenon*, translating as ‘that-which-lies-before, which, as ground, gathers everything onto itself.’ It is the pre-Cartesian idea that all things are subjects. Martin Heidegger refers to *hypokeimenon* to describe a subject that has being-in-the-world as its essential state. As such, Heidegger argues that even a stone is a subject because it lies before itself no less than a person does. See Alain de Libera, “When Did the Modern Subject Emerge?” *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 82 (no. 2, 2008): 200, and Martin Heidegger, *Off the beaten track*, trans. Julian Young and Kenneth Haynes (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002): 66.

special kind of absentmindedness in men and in events.”<sup>15</sup> It seems that this ‘corrective laughter’ reflects a desire to separate propriety from impropriety in a way that could be considered analogous to the early modern Christian who labelled anomalous plants as monstrosities. This holds for flowers too. In the 18th century, philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau warned young ladies against ‘disfigured’ double flowers:

Whenever you find them double, do not meddle with them, they are disfigured; or, if you please, dressed after our fashion: nature will no longer be found among them; she refuses to reproduce any thing from monsters thus mutilated: for if the more brilliant parts of the flower, namely the corolla [petals], be multiplied, it is at the expense of the more essential parts [sex organs], which disappear under this addition of brilliancy.<sup>16</sup>

Both Bergson’s ‘corrective laughter’ and Rousseau’s warning about double flowers stem from a harsh judgement of imperfection. In biology, a mutant is considered a ‘failed’ member of its species until it mutates to the point where it becomes a new species (which, logically, can only happen if it is ‘successful’). One might wonder, therefore, what science would have to say about *A poster-poem* by Aram Saroyan (1965-66). This one-letter poem has something odd about it: it looks like an ‘m’ but has an extra leg. This is particularly strange because it appears to be a typed letter. If Saroyan had written the letter by hand, he could have accidentally drawn an extra leg, but a typed letter is normally a standardised form.

The question is whether *A poster-poem* really is a letter. Although reminiscent of one, maybe it is just a graphic shape. Yet, as philosopher Georges Canguilhem puts it, “To say that he no longer is a man, [...] is to say that he still is one.”<sup>17</sup> Clearly, the letter ‘m’ in *A poster-poem* can still be recognised. Saroyan mutated the letter by simply repeating a leg, turning a triple into a quadruple. Hence, with the fourth leg of the ‘m’ continuing on the same line, Saroyan’s *A poster-poem* sticks to a pattern of expectation. One could say, therefore, that *A poster-poem* does not conform less to the basic principles of m-ness but rather exceeds them. The letter seems a nervous form that, in its awkward attempt to do it right, has just gone slightly overboard.

There is something comical about such mindless action. However, like Saroyan’s nervous m, slapstick heroes usually mean well. They do not end up on the floor because they are stupid, but because they are too invested in their actions. They show “extreme care.”<sup>18</sup> Writer Brian Dillon describes it as an exaggeration of the “mechanics of thought as such — the (perfectly rational, therefore idiotic) decisions” directing the behaviour.<sup>19</sup> This, too, corresponds to the way in which flowers mutate. Already in the 17th century, English churchman and botanist Robert Sharrock (1630–1684) wrote, contrary to the views of his contemporaries, that

<sup>15</sup> Henri Bergson, *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic*, trans. Cloudesley Brereton and Fred Rothwell (New York: Macmillan, 1911), 87.

<sup>16</sup> Enrico Coen, “Goethe and the ABC Model of Flower Development,” *Sciences de la vie / Life Sciences* 324 (2001): 525.

<sup>17</sup> Ganguilhem, “Monstrosity and the Monstrous,” 28.

<sup>18</sup> Brian Dillon, “Another Fine Mess: Nine Theses on Slapstick,” *Frieze* 110 (October 2007): 214.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 213.



← fig. 2 Daphne de Sonnevill, Jacques Tati in *Mon Oncle* (1958) sitting awkwardly in a designer chair (top right), *Hydrangea macrophylla* ‘Romance’ (bottom right), *Table (Wannabe)* (2009) by Richard Artschwager (left), 2023, water-colour rendering, 210 × 297 mm.

“even in these irregularities themselves, there often seems to be a greater curiousness, and most proper order.”<sup>20</sup>

As mentioned previously, early modern Christian society feared that mutations represented chaos.<sup>21</sup> Yet, on the contrary, it seems that mutants follow — to the extreme — the prescribed rules. In fact, the Dahlia ‘Franz Kafka’ looks so even that gardener Nicola Ferguson categorises it as ‘formal.’ In *Double Flowers: The Remarkable Story of Extra-Petalled Blooms* (2018), Ferguson describes formal flowers as perfectly symmetrical, “with petals so regularly arranged that they might have been designed by a geometrician.”<sup>22</sup> The word ‘formal’ implies a controlled or ‘unemotional’ appearance.<sup>23</sup> Formal flowers are, therefore, considered ideally suited for funerals and parades where propriety and moderation are in order.<sup>24</sup> In these doubles, wild means restrained. Their mutant ‘growth’ is not a strange pimple but excessive regularity.

<sup>20</sup> Agnes Arber, *The Natural Philosophy of Plant Form*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 6.

<sup>21</sup> Keller, “Notes on Plant Monstrosities,” 284.

<sup>22</sup> Nicola Ferguson, *Double Flowers: The Remarkable Story of Extra-Petalled Blooms* (London: Pimpernel Press Limited, 2018), 141.

<sup>23</sup> The English word ‘formal’ comes from the Latin *forma*, meaning shape or mould. See Angus Stevenson, *Oxford Dictionary of English*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 687.

<sup>24</sup> Ferguson, *Double Flowers: The Remarkable Story of Extra-Petalled Blooms*, 146.

The *Hydrangea macrophylla*, deceptively called ‘Romance,’ has deep pink, diamond-shaped petals arranged in a star shape around a centre that, small and round as a pinhead, is devoid of any stamens: there is no sweet nectar to be found. It pairs well with the sculpture *Follow Table (Wannabe)* by artist Richard Artschwager (2009), made of wood and laminate. With its symmetrical composition of clean lines and evenly inlaid areas of colour, the cube-shaped sculpture resembles minimal art, but, amusingly, also forms a schematic representation of a table with a pink tablecloth. Art theorist Jörg Heiser mentions that in this way, Artschwager has sneakily brought figuration back into an art form that originally wanted to banish all resemblance to objects in the world.<sup>25</sup> It is a reference that toys with the idea of art being useless.

Because of his humorous, visual playfulness, Heiser calls Artschwager “the Jacques Tati of Geometric Abstraction.”<sup>26</sup> Tati’s films, such as *Mon Oncle* (1958) and *Playtime* (1967), are a visual exploration of the modern individual in their living environment, where design does not always serve them. In a world of strangely laid out garden paths and kitchen cupboards that open automatically at the wrong time, Tati’s character Monsieur Hulot struggles to sit on designer furniture. Perhaps this object-induced choreography is an example of what Bergson describes as “something mechanical encrusted upon the living” in his analysis of the comedian’s behaviour.<sup>27</sup> The objects Monsieur Hulot comes across look so good they cannot be used. Failing to ‘understand’ them, one may get stuck in a loop, as does Monsieur Hulot in the modern department store building, where he is never helped and unable to leave.

Bergson suggests the problem is that rigidity is unnatural.<sup>28</sup> But, as shown by the double flower, rigidification is also part of nature. And although extra-petalled varieties are labelled failures, they are the trendiest flowers in gardens today. Popular roses put up a real show. They are silky soft and deeply coloured, full and round like pompoms. They look sensuous; even without stamens, they express fertility.<sup>29</sup> One might call it an empty reference — the bee is lost and not provided with the nectar it came looking for. However, by tempting humans to develop cloning techniques to preserve and multiply a range of doubles, these flowers may actually be propagating rather well.<sup>30</sup> This idea is also highlighted by Ferguson, paraphrasing science journalist Michael Pollan who suggests that, rather than simply multiplying, extra-petalled flowers have cultivated an organisation of human breeders, traders, and speculators to help them spread worldwide.<sup>31</sup>

Both the *Hydrangea macrophylla* ‘Romance’ and *Follow Table (Wannabe)* bypass expectations. The flower

<sup>25</sup> Jörg Heiser, *All of a Sudden: Things That Matter in Contemporary Art*, trans. Nicholas Grindell (New York: Sternberg Press, 2008), 37–38.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 39.

<sup>27</sup> Bergson, *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic*, 49.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>29</sup> Around 1840, the double rose was so popular that the entire market was geared towards novel, even fuller and more resilient varieties, with breeders introducing hundreds of new strains each year. This means that all modern roses seen in gardens today are the result of crossbreeding and the ‘world’s most romantic flower’ is, in fact, the most manipulated. See Ferguson, *Double Flowers: The Remarkable Story of Extra-Petalled Blooms*, 107.

<sup>30</sup> Over the last three centuries, increased knowledge of plant development has led to asexual propagation methods assisting the spread of the species without the need for pollen or bees. These include various cutting techniques that generate new plants from the vegetative parts — stems, roots, or leaves — of a parent plant and genetic cloning. See Meyerowitz, Smyth, and Bowman, “Abnormal Flowers and Pattern Formation in Floral Development,” 211.

<sup>31</sup> Ferguson, *Double Flowers: The Remarkable Story of Extra-Petalled Blooms*, 14.

has no reproductive organs, and the table is a minimal art cube. Interestingly, however, the hydrangea plant does produce small clusters of fertile flowers in addition to its sterile blooms, which, although they look modest, receive a horde of visitors. Research shows that the flamboyant double flowers of the hydrangea may have an auxiliary function as an eye-catching billboard for the plant.<sup>32</sup> Hence, featuring sculptural doubles to attract attention, the hydrangea has evolved to thrive in the wild and proves yet again that success is not always what it seems.



A double flower mutation may stem from a cell dividing at the wrong time. As a result, certain information is skipped, and the flower gets stuck in repetition. The norm dictates that the flower should stop producing petals at a specific time because other parts are also needed, yet the flower continues. Something similar happens with Saroyam’s m in *A poster-poem* featuring an additional leg: the letter expands the rules. And even Baroque architecture was, with disdain, considered something like a mutation: a riotous growth of the classical ideal.

Interestingly, about two centuries later, the Baroque was called ‘emancipated decoration’ instead of ‘empty’ and ‘bizarre.’<sup>33</sup> This shift in perception understands that the decorations are not there for the building; the building is there *for* the decorations. In other words, a Baroque cathedral is not merely ornamented but in the service of ornamentation. The roles have been reversed: decorations are freed from imposed values to tell their own story. Perhaps, one could say the same about Artschwager’s cube and the objects in Tati’s films — they are not there to serve.

If such a refusal to remain small and obedient is a form of emancipation, it also emanates from classic slapstick films whose protagonists resist being in the service of the industrial machine. With their acrobatic tricks and rhythmically timed actions, they are like mutant flowers, elegant but not prolific, their gestures becoming abstracted in an ever-growing choreography of repetitive, useless movements.

Thankfully, slapstick characters do tend to enjoy themselves. Take Charlie Chaplin playing a barber in *The Great Dictator* (1940), shaving his customer’s beard with a razor, shaving soap, brush, and water, accompanied by Johannes Brahms’s *Hungarian Dance No. 5*. With the music occasionally accelerating or intensifying, Chaplin is prompted to passionately brush the soap on faster or dramatically elongate the movements of his razor, rhythmically rather than operationally. As a mutant double flower, he has detached himself from earthly function to make a statement, give a show and be spectacular. This emancipated course of action need not lead to progress, but may forever expand in width.

Dr Daphne de Sonnevile is an artist, writer and researcher inspired by the potential of clumsiness. Her main activities currently consist of making text-based sculptures and writing a novel. The article she wrote for *Kunstlicht* is part of a larger research project on mutational emancipation.

<sup>32</sup> Carolina Morales, Anna Traveset, and Lawrence Harder, “Sterile Flowers Increase Pollinator Attraction and Promote Female Success in the Mediterranean Herb *Leopoldia comosa*,” *Annals of Botany* 111, (January 2013): 104.

<sup>33</sup> Hills, “The Baroque: Beads in a Rosary or Folds in Time,” 55.