

Laster, Paul
“Monitor: Guido van der Werve”
Art in America.
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ROME Dutch artist Guido van der Werve has been slowly developing ways to combine his training in classical piano with his current interest in chessmaking. One chess (2005) depicts him playing an upright piano on a floating dock in the middle of a river in Finland. In another (2006) he acquires a grand piano and squeezes it, an orchestra and a conductor into his incredibly small Amsterdam apartment, where he stages a recital before the costly instrument is repossessed.

For his second show at Monitor, van der Werve presented his most ambitious project to date: Nummer twaalf: variations on a theme: The king's gambit accepted, the number of stars in the sky and why a piano can't be tuned or waiting for an earthquake. An elaborate, 40-minute high-definition video that was two years in the making, it was shown as a large wall projection. Nummer twaalf combines music with chess—another of the artist's pursuits—and an obsession with insoluble problems.

The video is divided into three “movements.” The first opens with van der Werve in a cabin, thinking aloud about the vast number of potential chess games and the time that would be required to play them all. The action then shifts to van der Werve and chess master Leonid Yudasin playing the “King's Gambit,” a game Yudasin invented, on a chessboard-cum-piano designed by the artist, which plays a note each time a move is made. The game is scripted as a perfect match that ends in a draw. The artist had previously translated Yudasin's chess diagram into a score for the chessboard-piano; he later added music for strings. That piece, and an actual nine-piece string orchestra, accompanies the two chess players at their game, a performance that takes place at New York's Marshall Chess Club, where Marcel Duchamp used to play.

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In the video's second movement, van der Werve is back in the cabin, propounding a theory about how many stars there are in the sky and how long it might take to count them. The video moves on to scenes of him climbing the devastated Mount St. Helens to its smoldering peak to count the stars. In the final movement, we see the artist once again in the cabin, musing about why pianos are always off-key and discussing the intricate history of piano tuning. At one point, the camera pulls back to reveal that the cabin rests on the San Andreas Fault. By going to the volcano and the fault, the artist places himself in absurdist contradictions, courting danger while pondering problems that would take more than a lifetime to solve.

For the opening of the exhibition, which consisted of the video and framed stills whose mats are embellished with chess diagrams, van der Werve and a different chess master played the King's Gambit again, accompanied by a live chamber orchestra. In his impressive video, which draws together passions for music, chess and filmmaking, van der Werve constructs a marvelous, poetic realm.

Photo: Guido van der Werve: Nummer twaalf, 2009, video, 40 minutes; at Monitor.