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Running man, Guido van der Werve.

Run, place, show: finding the art of endurance with Guido van der Werve

BY CLAUDIA CARRERA

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On Saturday morning, an unlikely scene was developing outside the **Luhring Augustine** gallery in Chelsea. Several spandex- and T-shirt-clad art-lovers, each clutching a long-stemmed bouquet of small white flowers, were milling around in the bright sunlight, slurping up energy gels and tucking personal belongings and extra layers into a van. Not a week after the N.Y.C. Marathon, they were about to set off on a long-distance run of their own: Dutch artist **Guido van der Werve**'s Second Annual Run to Rachmaninov (officially titled "Effugio no 2 Running to

Rachmaninov”), part of [Performa’s Fluxus Weekend](#).

A few minutes after ten, gallery co-owner Roland Augustine lifted his arm up in the air, signaling for the excited runners to assemble. “On your mark, get set, go!” Augustine’s arm dropped, and the group eagerly set off on a thirty-mile route that would take them to composer Sergei Rachmaninov’s gravesite in Valhalla, NY. There they would lay their bouquets of chamomile—the national flower of Rachmaninov’s native Russia—by the expatriate composer’s grave.

“I always thought it was kind of lonely just lying there in upstate New York,” Van der Werve said as he sipped a lemon-ginger infusion in a Williamsburg café two days before the run. He was wearing black jeans and a burnt-orange V-neck sweater over a black collared shirt, and there was a soft look to his face, which was dusted with pale freckles and framed by loose curls and ginger stubble.

Chatty and jovial, the 34-year-old artist spoke about how he has long been drawn to the Romantic composers, perhaps because of the sense of longing in their music. A classically trained pianist, he steeped himself in their piano music growing up and has used their works as soundtracks for the atmospheric, performance-based films for which he is best known. “[Rachmaninov] was always one of my heroes,” he said.

It would be a mistake, though, to think of Saturday’s run—a reprise of last year’s inaugural, solo version, “Effugio no 1 Chamomile; Russia’s National Flower or Running to Rachmaninov,” performed as part of MoMA P.S.1’s [“Greater New York 2010”](#) exhibit—as nothing

more than a light tribute to one of the artist's heroes. Rather, as is often the case in his works, here Van der Werve has distilled a whole web of themes into a single action.

"I kind of [was using] running as a way to stay fit and clear," Van der Werve said, "and also mentally healthy in relation to my work; and then I was reading Rachmaninov's bio again, and, I don't know if you know the story, but he was like 19 when he wrote his [first piano concert](#), and he had really bad critiques, basically, which completely destroyed his ego." Rachmaninov suffered a nervous breakdown and didn't write another piece for several years, regaining his confidence only after intensive work with a hypnotherapist.

"Somehow I felt that I kind of understood him a little bit?" said Van der Werve, who himself started composing about 5 years ago. "You know, if you write something, you put your heart and soul in it."

Reflecting on Rachmaninov's struggle served as a trigger. For the "Greater New York" exhibit last year, Van der Werve had originally been planning only to give a talk about his work. "And then," he said, "I got the idea to involve [Rachmaninov], and then I realized that you could actually basically run to his grave, and then,"—he kept picking up steam—"the national flower of Russia is the chamomile which, you know, also works well for the mind in a sense—you know, it's kind of soothing. So then I thought I'd just do the talk in my running clothes, with the bouquet of chamomile—the flower—on my desk, and then at the end just take off and run there."

Most people wouldn't consider a site thirty miles away to be within running distance, but Van der Werve is a devoted long-distance runner: since completing his first marathon four or five years ago, he has run so many of them that he seems to have lost track of the number. ("Maybe ten or something, I guess?" he said.) It was after graduating from art school in 2003 that he began to run seriously. "I found it's a very nice way to keep your head clear, you know, 'cause you're working in your studio the whole day, so it's great to just go out," Van der Werve said. "A lot of people ask me, how do I have the time for running? But I think it gives me a lot of time. [Otherwise] you can spend the whole day doing nothing."

A note titled "The Meaning of It All," which can be found on the [Luhring Augustine website](#) and on the run's [Facebook event page](#), details the effects of such long distance running on the brain: cell regeneration, the "runner's high" sense of elation, mental alertness, the release of neurotransmitters associated with antidepressants. It also describes the restorative properties of chamomile (used as treatment for hysteria and nervous diseases, among other ailments) and mentions Rachmaninov's depression, helping reveal some of the themes suggested by this simple performance, such as the role of mental health in creative production and the value of altered states. It's also easy to see in the endurance test of a thirty-mile run a reflection of the commitment required to master Rachmaninov's compositions, many of which are renowned for their fiendish difficulty.

In some ways these themes are at the heart of Van der Werve's approach to his artistic work. "I think I'm kind of a workaholic?" Van der Werve said or asked. His voice frequently rises at the end

of a sentence, making statements sound like questions. “And I think I don’t like to relax, because my basic state of mind is kind of, uh... miserable, I’d say?” He laughed.

“That’s almost why I like to do stuff, you know? Because I don’t want to be confronted with that kind of basic state of mind. So I guess, anything I do, it’s just an excuse to keep me busy.”

Van der Werve is really good at finding such excuses. His latest projects reflect the wide expansion of his interests and ambitions in recent years.

For 2009’s 40-minute film “Nummer twaalf, Variations on a theme: The King's Gambit accepted, the number of stars in the sky and why a piano cannot be tuned or waiting for an earthquake,” each one of the diverse themes in the title is tackled, all soundtracked by a “[chessboard piano](#)” that Van der Werve invented, designed, and built, where the squares on the chess grid function as piano keys. After private studies in music composition and chess, he then composed a concerto for the new instrument built around a stalemate chess game “composed” specifically for the board by the great chess master Leonid Yudasin.

And this spring Van der Werve plans to complete a 1,000-mile triathlon from Warsaw to Paris. (For comparison’s sake, a regular long-distance triathlon like the Ironman—which includes a full marathon—is about 140 miles long.) This massive undertaking will honor Chopin, another of Van der Werve’s favorite composers, who was born in Poland but forced by war to move to France at age 16.

The composer’s body is buried in the Père-Lachaise Cemetery in

Paris, but Chopin “requested in his will to have his heart buried in Poland,” Van der Werve explained. Chopin’s sister smuggled his heart out of the country—allegedly in a bottle of brandy—and transported it back to Warsaw, where it ended up sealed within one of the pillars of the Church of the Holy Cross.

“So I want to do a triathlon from his heart to his body,” Van der Werve said, smiling. “Not in one day, of course,” he was quick to add.

The journey will be recorded by a film crew, and Van der Werve is composing a requiem for full orchestra and chorus—itsself a gargantuan undertaking—to score the resultant film, which will premiere at Luhring Augustine next fall.

Though some critics have begun referring to him as an endurance artist, Van der Werve doesn’t see himself that way—though after describing his triathlon plans, he conceded with a smile, “maybe right now I am.” As explanation, he cited his film “Nimmer negen, The day I didn’t turn with the world,” for which he stood at the North Pole for twenty-four hours, turning slowly to counteract the earth’s rotation beneath him. Though it certainly required incredible stamina, “It wasn’t really my idea to make, like, an endurance piece,” he said. “I just thought, you know, it’s a beautiful thing that you can literally not turn with the world for one day. And it’s, like, one day, because you don’t do it for one hour or something, it *has* to be a day.”

Intentions aside, Van der Werve has come to appreciate the effects of such activities. “Actually, I just did like a twelve-hour run around

my house,” Van der Werve said, as if it were the most natural thing to do (it’s for a new film), “and, I think, for a few hours—the same thing happened when I was up on the North Pole—you get so tired that your brain starts to sleep somehow? But you just keep moving? So that was very weird. Everything became a little bit, psychotic—in a good way, not bad. I was in a trance almost. So that’s kind of nice.”

Through his daily runs, super-sized projects, trance states—his excuses—Van der Werve seems to keep himself in good spirits and extraordinarily productive; unlike the composers he reveres, he does not live the life of a tortured artist.

He has figured out how to stay one step ahead of his “miserable” state of mind, much like the character he depicted in his 2007 film “[Nummer acht, Everything is going to be alright](#)”: a man ambling along on an icy expanse, seemingly unperturbed that a gigantic ice-breaking ship is dogging him ten feet behind, pulverizing the ground on which he has just walked.

Presented with this comparison, Van der Werve said, “Yeah, exactly! That work is really about that. You know, just keep going. Everything’s going to be alright—just keep going.”

Van der Werve hopes works like “Nummer acht” can provide a sort of comfort to viewers, and said he tries to create works that are very open—by keeping a sort of blankness to his characters and focusing on mood rather than narrative—so that viewers can “feel like they own it, almost like you can own a pop song,” he said. He wants viewers to be able to take his works into their own lives,

making their own associations.

Judging by this standard, Saturday's Run to Rachmaninov was a success. Eva Ostrowska, a tall, half-Russian performance studies grad student with blond hair and wide-set eyes who recently immigrated from France, connected to the event very personally.

"My grandmother Anna was Russian and reared in the lowest depths of poverty," Ostrowska explained in an email. Fleeing Stalin's U.S.S.R., Ostrowska's grandmother "walked from Odessa to Paris with wooden shoes," never to return to her homeland. "Each time I came to her apartment," wrote Ostrowska, "we had a cup of Chai listening to Rachmaninov—*The Isle of the Dead*. Since this time, I love his music. I feel as if Rachmaninov was a part of my origins."

On Saturday, she was able to pay tribute to the composer (as a fellow immigrant, she pointed out) at his final resting place—but only thanks to the van that trailed the group, picking participants up as they reached their running limits. As it happens, not many people are ready to take on a thirty-mile run with just a couple weeks' notice; of the 9 participants, most had retired by the ten-mile point.

A few of the runners seemed to be built in Van der Werve's mold, though. Andrew Russeth, editor of the *Observer's Gallerist*, stuck it out for twenty miles; and Reid Singer, an art writer, made it the whole way—which actually ended up being 33 miles—despite having just run the N.Y.C. Marathon the previous Sunday.

Not surprisingly, Van der Werve had no trouble with the run. Luhring Augustine associate director Geneva Jann-Lewis said the

artist was pleased afterwards with how everything had gone. “He seemed super-happy and relaxed,” she said. “Not at all as if he had just run 33 miles.”

Or perhaps, Van der Werve might say—post-runner’s-high—exactly as if he had just run 33 miles.

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