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Runner's High: Guido van der Werve's Remarkable PS1 Performance

BY ANDREW M. GOLDSTEIN | JANUARY 02, 2011



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The week between Christmas and New Year's is traditionally marked by digestion, meandering gift returns, and other forms of barely constructive sloth as weary people charge up for January. At times like these, it can be inspiring to reflect on the accomplishments of the previous year, and on the work of ambitiously vigorous artists like **Guido van der Werve**. A Dutch artist who is based in Finland, van der Werve was the farthest-flung participant of **MoMA PS1's** "Greater New York" survey this year, and he contributed the show's most impressive, and probably least seen, piece, a performance titled "Effugio no 1 Chamomile; Russia's National Flower or Running to Rachmaninov." It was one of the most memorable works of the year.

The piece began in one of PS1's ground-floor galleries, with the artist, dressed in runner's gear and sneakers, seated behind a desk on which there were a few bananas, a bottle of water, and a vase filled with a bouquet of white chamomile flowers. An accomplished pianist and composer, van der Werve is known for elegiac videos that combine a preoccupation with classical music and natural beauty with feats of improbable endurance or audacity, daring to pursue the sublime in a way that draws a line between the vigorous European Romanticism of **Beethoven** and **Goethe**, for instance, and contemporary performance art. As a preamble to "Effugio no 1," the artist screened and discussed several of these works, including "Nummer Zes: Steinway Grand Piano," a 2006 video in which he used a crane to hoist a Steinway grand piano into his tiny apartment, where he led an entire chamber orchestra in playing Chopin's first piano concerto; the famous "Nummer Acht: Everything Is Going to Be Alright" from 2007, in which he walks just a few feet in front of a giant icebreaker as it plows through the North Pole; and "Nummer Negen: The Day I Didn't Turn With the World," from the same year, which shows van der Werve standing more or less still at the exact North Pole for 24 hours, with the tremendous act of stamina condensed to 9 minutes of time-lapse footage, showing the enormous sky sweep overhead from day to night to day again as one of the artist's own piano compositions plays.

After he finished the screening, van der Werve stood up, put on a CamelBak water pack, grabbed the chamomile bouquet, and abruptly ran out the door — jogging 28 miles to **Kensico Cemetery** in Westchester County, where he laid the flowers on the grave of **Sergei Rachmaninov**, the Romantic composer whose extraordinarily taxing piano concertos have been known to drive musicians to distraction. (Chamomile, meanwhile, is used in central Europe as a treatment for hysteria and nervous conditions.) The run took 4 hours and 15 minutes, and was documented exclusively by photographs taken by the artist's girlfriend, **Johanna Ketola**. *For a selection of these images, see the slide show at left.*

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