

Guido van der Werve: King's Gambits and Artist's Games

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by BRYNE MCLAUGHLIN



Guido van der Werve *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* 2009 Film still Courtesy of Galerie Julienne Jongma

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On the evening of March 5, 1968, [Marcel Duchamp and John Cage sat down in the theatre of Toronto's Ryerson Polytechnic Institute](#) (now Ryerson University) for a game of chess. It was a one-off event, performed on a customized chessboard conceived by Cage to produce [an ambient audioscape](#) modulated by the game's progressive moves. The performance, which lasted for more than four hours, was very much a personal exercise for the players—Duchamp had long been a reclusive chess master, and Cage was his student in the game. But the work was also a display of fundamental intellect, transforming the precise stratagems of music and chess into a spontaneous experiment in aural aesthetics.

It's difficult not to think of Duchamp and Cage's game and the intertwining complexities of life, art, chess and music when viewing Dutch artist [Guido van der Werve's](#) latest film work, *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*, currently on view at [Prefix ICA](#).



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The 40-minute film projection is divided into three "movements," each

opening with van der Werve sitting alone in a small room contemplating statistics, first of the perfect game of chess, then of the number of stars in the visible universe and finally of the vexing impossibility of exactly tuning a piano. The quantities are awesome—for instance, van der Werve reports that it would take 10×10^{50} possible chess matches to finally reach the perfect game, i.e. a draw with both players' kings still on the board—a beginning that reminds viewers of the limitless boundaries of existential contemplation.

With that mind-numbing appreciation set, each segment then moves into a corresponding film sequence. The artist studied music before turning to art and his composition for a small string orchestra drives the sequences throughout. The first movement picks up on van der Werve's perfect game theory, showing the artist and his chess mentor sitting in New York's [Marshall Chess Club](#) where, in a nice coincidence, Duchamp was a member. They're playing a scripted "perfect" match called "The King's Gambit" on a piano chessboard (on view at Prefix until this Saturday, February 13, only) built by van der Werve to sound a different note on each move in subtle, if slightly discordant, harmony with his composed string music. As the game begins and the camera slowly pans out, an interesting contrast is established in the meditative silence—the immediate present of the game is played against an infinite future of unsolvable propositions.



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The film's second movement, prefaced by visible star stats, finds van der Werve trekking through the still devastated landscape of Washington's volcanic Mount St. Helens. The string music adds a mournful aspect to panoramic views of the barren mountainside, a moving testament to the cataclysmic power of the 1980 eruption, while the random strike of chessboard-piano notes draws the viewer back to the chess game in progress. Van der Werve reaches the peak at dusk and as clouds pass by he sits down to count the stars. It's a closing shot straight out of a Caspar David Friedrich painting.

In the final movement, van der Werve emerges from his small room, which as the camera slowly zooms out to an aerial view, turns out to be a cabin built in the California desert on top of the San Andreas Fault. It's another study in contrasts, the paradox of one man's universal contemplation in the face of pending natural disaster. The work of another Dutch artist, [Bas Jan Ader](#), resonates in the ether. As the film ends, so does the chess game: in a levelling of sorts, a draw. (124–401 Richmond St W, Toronto ON)

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