

JULY 24, 2013 | ARTISTS

Running to Rachmaninoff

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When I talk to friends about Dutch artist Guido van der Werve’s work *Nummer dertien, Effugio A: Chamomile, Russia’s National Flower or Running to Rachmaninoff* (2010), they are usually surprised to hear that the Russian composer and concert pianist is buried in upstate New York. The whereabouts of the remains of Sergei Rachmaninoff (1873–1943), who has been described as “the last romantic of the 20th century,” are still a little known fact.(1) Yet, van der Werve (b. 1977) has taken it upon himself to spread the word with his annual homage to Rachmaninoff, an endurance performance piece he premiered as part of *Greater New York* at MoMA PS1 in 2010. On the afternoon of October 9, 2010, the artist embarked on a solitary journey to Rachmaninoff’s grave, traversing a total of 29 miles from Queens, to place a chamomile flower bouquet on the tombstone at Kensico Cemetary, located in Valhalla, New York.



Guido van der Werve. *Nummer dertien, Effugio A: Chamomile, Russia’s National Flower or Running to Rachmaninoff*. 2010. 16 35mm color slides, framed text. Gift of the artist and Luhring Augustine, New York. The Museum of Modern Art, New York. © 2013 Guido van der Werve, Used by permission

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Guido van der Werve. Nummer dertien, Effugio A: *Chamomile, Russia's National Flower or Running to Rachmaninoff*. 2010. 16 35mm color slides, framed text. Gift of the artist and Luhring Augustine, New York. The Museum of Modern Art, New York. © 2013 Guido van der Werve. Used by permission

In order to experience the live performance in its entirety, one has to keep up with the artist, who is not only a marathon runner, but a musician as well. Van der Werve is known for challenging the unpredictability of nature in his chronologically numbered video and performance pieces, often exposing himself to danger or undertaking major physical exertions. In 2009, MoMA acquired his sublime, large-scale video projection *Nummer acht, everything is going to be alright* (2007), currently on view on the Museum's ground floor. Here, the artist situates himself as the protagonist of the scene and confronts himself with the elements, as he slowly walks ahead of a 3,500-ton icebreaker in the frozen Gulf of Bothnia, off the coast of Finland.

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Guido van der Werve. *Nummer acht, everything is going to be alright*. 2007. 16mm film transferred to video (color, sound), 10:10 min. Fund for the Twenty-First Century. The Museum of Modern Art, New York. © 2013 Guido van der Werve, Courtesy Galerie Juliette Jongma, Amsterdam

Nummer dertien, *Effugio A* is van der Werve's first slide show piece, documenting this first performance through which he started to incorporate sports in his art.(2) Part of the work is a framed text that provides background information about the piece. Like many works by the artist, the symbolic performance is built on a complex narrative: chamomile, the national flower of Russia, is one of the most important central European remedies, known to reduce symptoms of hysteria, from which Rachmaninoff suffered. He finished his First Piano Concerto at age 18. Its performance in 1897 was a disaster, causing him a creative crisis and a three year depression. Cured through hypnotherapy, Rachmaninoff completed his Second Piano Concerto, which was a big success, in 1901, and dedicated it to his therapist.

The accompanying text states that exercise promotes cell growth in the brain, which could alleviate depression, known to be a form of cell death. Therefore, intense running would affect the mind in a positive way. Rather than an attempt at a posthumous cure, van der Werve's annual run to Rachmaninoff's grave is more of an obscure, humorous, and, at the same time, melancholic journey. A moving tribute to a great musician he will never be able to meet in person, van der Werve's repeated run to Rachmaninoff is a continually evolving 21st-century *memento mori*.(3)

(1) The composer left his home country in light of the Russian Revolution, moved to the United States in 1917, and died in Beverly Hills, California. Due to the Second World War, his remains couldn't be returned to Russia.

(2) *Effugio A* is one of three elements that compose *Nummer dertien*, *Effugio B* is a photographic diptych shot by the artist at the summit of Mount Aconcagua in South America, and *Effugio C* is a 12-hour film of van der Werve running in circles around his home in rural Finland.

(3) Whoever feels fit for the challenge is welcome to join the artist for his upcoming run, which will start at Lühring Augustine's Chelsea location on November 24, 2013, and coincide with the launch of a publication featuring the first three runs.

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