

THE MAN WHO STOOD STILL ON TOP OF THE WORLD

by Guido van der Werve

Nummer Negen, the day I didn't turn with the world

The North Pole is a strange place. It's hard to get there. It's only possible in the month of April when the sun is up but the ice is still thick enough to land on. There's a Russian organisation that organises these trips. They fly over the North Pole, find a good spot for a camp (about 100 km south). They drop a bulldozer and a few guys on parachutes. They make a runway on the ice and then the plane lands. The plane they use can land on the ice and has its engines on top of its wings. They set up the camp and fly people in from Svalbard. From the camp to the North Pole they fly with Mi-8 helicopters.

We had to fly to Svalbard first and wait for about a week. April was very warm that year and the runway at the North Pole camp kept cracking and had to be fixed. We were getting nervous because it was the last camp of the season and it might have not been possible to fly there at all. We were on the Island of Spitsbergen in the capital Longyearbyen, a tiny town that is quite boring to spend a week in. In April there was still a lot of snow and the sun never went down. You couldn't leave the town because polar bears were a serious danger—supposedly the only animal that hunts and eats humans deliberately. My only traveling companion was my cameraman.

Then we got the ok to fly to the North Pole. The plane was a bit crappy (Russian style) and we had to sit on fold-down seats in the cargo area. The landing was very, very rough and some stuff flew through the plane. The camp on the icecap was small. The people were mostly scientists, nature filmmakers, rich tourists and journalists. As it happened it was the Dutch year of the North Pole and there was a radio crew from Holland. One of the crew had studied with my cameraman. Talk about a small world...

The Russians had constructed a canteen tent that included a grumpy Russian woman behind the counter who stared angrily at you when you tried to get some porridge. I wondered why they didn't fly someone more pleasant over if they had to spend more than a month alone on the ice camp. The first thing I noticed when I entered the canteen was a woman with a totally black nose from frostbite. It made me quite nervous because I had to spend 24 hours in the cold and my nose protrudes quite a bit.

We met with our guide and the director of the camp. I hadn't told him my intentions yet—I thought they might try to cancel the operation, because of the risk involved. They were Russians, so they thought it was crazy but funny. People there never spend more than a maximum of two hours outside. They started placing bets about whether I would survive or not. The odds dropped quite a bit when they found out I am a vegetarian.

The two big technical problems on the North Pole were the cold and the lack of electricity. We did a lot of testing with my cameraman; he specialises in time-lapse photography of the Aurora Borealis (northern lights) so he had a lot of experience with working in these conditions. We decided early on to use time-lapse photography with a still camera. Shooting the whole 24 hours with a video camera wouldn't be possible logistically, and personally I wanted the idea of not turning with the world for one day to weigh more heavily than the endurance aspect of it. By time-lapsing the 24 hours into eight minutes the passing of time, and me turning in a circle, would be much clearer. We tested it in a big fridge and the Nikon D1 didn't need any protection and worked fine for the whole 24 hours. Due to the cold the display screen stops working which is rather frightening.

When we arrived at the camp there had been a whiteout for several days. This involves some type of polar fog. It's a weird experience

because everything is white, and because of the landscape you have no references to focus on, so often your eyes are not able to focus. It would also ruin the movie, as seeing the path of the sun would make it much easier to get the idea. The weather forecast predicted one good day, the last day of the camp. It was our last chance and when we got back to the camp we would have to leave straightaway. We left in the morning after a bad night's sleep—the tents were quite uncomfortable and kept warm by kerosene ovens which blew hot air into them. They were quite loud and stank.

We flew to the North Pole with our guide. When we left the camp the whiteout was still in place, but halfway through the journey the weather cleared up. When we got there, the guide put up the tent and we set up the camera. He had guns with him in case a polar bear showed up. This was unlikely though, because they usually hunt where the water turns into ice. He pitched the tent and put snow around it to keep it on the ground in case of a storm. Storms are frequent there and vicious, and they come without much warning, so he was constantly monitoring his atmospheric pressure device. If it dropped we had to leave or shelter immediately. He had a little cooker with him to keep the tent warm and to cook tea and soup. He was a bit of a grumpy boy-scout kind of guy and from the start he was annoyed with our lack of camping skills. He also didn't understand what we wanted to do or why.

We started shooting and the first hour was fine, I stood on the spot and it was beautiful and sunny. The sun helped me define my turning speed as I could simply follow my shadow. The memory card could fill up every 90 minutes. Then my cameraman had to change the card, which gave me a minute or so to run out of the frame to get hot tea and soup and relieve myself. The clicking of the camera was the only sound there and it was comforting to hear that the camera was still working. I brought an iPod with me with some Wagner operas and some audio books to pass the time. I have a background in music and I'm very impressed by the direct and intuitive way that music communicates. It's something I learned to take for granted from early on. A song or piece of music becomes part of your life as soon as you hear it. I think visual art is much more sealed off and there are many layers that hinder the experience. I don't think it has to be that way though.

It was about -25 c but with the sun out and my very thick down suit, it didn't feel that cold. I spent a lot of time staring into the distance—the landscape is so weird that you really can't make out the distance or the volume of the ice. The dry air made everything appear very sharp and some ice had a very distinct and beautiful blue colour that I had never seen before.

After about six hours I started getting quite stiff. I have always been in good shape, but standing still for a long time leads to stiffness. I was trying to flex my muscles while standing still to keep my blood flowing and avoid hypothermia (which together with frostbite was the biggest danger). This is a trick that British soldiers use, as they have to stand still in front of official buildings for a long time. I was also slightly scared of polar bears. The guide and my cameraman spent most of the time inside the tent, so I was just standing there unable to look back.

After twelve hours I started to panic a bit. I noticed that I started to touch my nose manically to test if it still had some feeling in it. And being half way, I could grasp the amount of time that I still had to stand there, which seemed very long. I needed a lot of concentration

and willpower to calm myself down. I have been doing some endurance performances and I do endurance sports. For me these things are very meditative, they help me to keep a calm head and to focus. The whole North Pole experience seemed very dreamlike and I think I still haven't dealt with it in a way.

The last four hours were very surreal. The whiteout came back and I couldn't focus on anything. I fell asleep a few times and my iPod stopped working which made the time seem even longer. After the 24 hours, we celebrated a bit and were all tired and relieved to be finished. We had to wait for the helicopter to fly us in, so we spent time shooting the guide's shotgun.

When we got back to camp we had to fly back to Spitsbergen straightaway. The next morning we flew straight to Tromsø (northern Norway), then Oslo, and then Amsterdam. It was weird to come back to Amsterdam. It was Queen's Day so about one million people were in town. After spending two weeks in isolation and one day on the North Pole, we just went home and slept.

I have been to a lot of remote places and the strange thing is that you always need assistance to get there and once there you are constantly with your film crew. So the experience of these places of solitude is always very social. I think walking around in a city one can feel lonelier.

Well, what I try to do with my performances is in a way to offer a blank figure: the audience shouldn't think that they are looking at a person doing something but rather put themselves in my place. I

try to create an experience that has been triggered by a very personal feeling of mine. I abstract this feeling and make it as open and universal as possible. In the best case the work only exists between the viewer and the art piece and I'm completely irrelevant. I think humans go through a lot of similar things and it's the artist's job to archive these feelings into something solid so we can try to eternalise them. This work is particularly timeless because I try to not turn with the world for one day. I'm politically interested and have strong opinions. So they appear in my work from a personal perspective. I think however that while art is capable of moving people, it is unable to move people in a certain direction. In this sense I think art is not able to be political or to be used as a tool to convey a political idea. I think that if you want to change the world in that sense you're much more powerful being a journalist, politician or whatever.

I didn't really think much about the South Pole while being at the North Pole. The geography is completely different. The South Pole is a vast mountainous landscape, while the North Pole is covered in ice. When I pictured not turning with the world for one day, I pictured myself standing on top of the world, which I consider to be the North Pole. Practically the South Pole is a much harsher environment and being out there for 24 hours would be nearly impossible. I like spending time in nature. Almost all of my choices of location are conceptual though. The North Pole being an obvious example. I think the world is still a beautiful place (and I have a great cameraman to prove it) and I would rather make something look beautiful than ugly.



Guido van der Werve
Numer negen, The day I didn't turn with the world, 2007
 timelapse photography to HD video, duration 8'40"
 Geographic Northpole
 Image by Ben Geraerts