

RAPHA

OF

WARM ROOM DRINK

PHOTOGRAPHY: ROBBIE LAWRENCE

BODY

In attempting death-defying acts of endurance, Dutchman Guido van der Werve blurs the lines between art and sport



WORDS: KIMBERLY BRADLEY





Shipping news: Guido van der Werve now lives in Berlin. He made his name on the conceptual art scene with a film in which he walked across a frozen Baltic Sea ahead of a huge icebreaker

“As a child I wanted to do three things,” says Guido van der Werve. “I wanted to be a pianist. I wanted to be an inventor. And I wanted to be an actor. I couldn’t really do any of them. But in art you can do everything.”

“Everything” means all of the above, in a career that has seen his highly distinctive work exhibited in events as prestigious as the Venice Biennale and acquired by institutions such as New York’s Museum of Modern Art, among others. In his many works of video art, the affable 40-year-old appears on film, invents surreal situations, and performs on the piano. “Everything” also means outrageous physical acts such as standing at the north pole for 24 hours, defying the Earth’s rotation as if on a dare, or completing a 1,000-mile triathlon. Because there is another unmistakable element in Van der Werve’s art: extreme endurance sport.

In a newly bought and renovated Berlin live-work apartment in the city’s gentrified Prenzlauer Berg district, Van der Werve sits on a sofa and explains. “As a teenager I didn’t drink, because I didn’t like the effect,” he says. “But in art school I started drinking.” This ended when he decided to make a film on the north pole. “I thought I’d better be fit. I started to train, and I liked it. It suited my competitive mentality,” he says. “I chose to not become fat and alcoholic,” he adds, chuckling.

Slight, boyish and wide-eyed, Van der Werve is the picture of fitness. Choosing health over hedonism suited the Dutch native, whose artistic notions are often sporty and always quirky, perhaps even obsessive. Though he is the son of a painter, he’d never intended to pursue a career in art – as

a child he trained as a classical pianist, before later briefly studying industrial design. In the late 1990s he attended art school in Amsterdam, realising that art was the one field in which disparate passions could come together.

And how they came together. In *Nummer negen*, *The day I didn’t turn with the world*, from 2007, he stands, bundled up and alone (save for his hardy cameraman), in the snowy, windblown landscape of the geographical north pole for an entire day, slowly shuffling against the Earth’s rotation. In *Nummer dertien effugio C*, *You’re always only half a day away* (2011), he runs for 12 hours around a house he owns in the forests of Finland with his girlfriend, the photographer Johanna Ketola. The film is a one-take, domestic ultramarathon, as absurd as it is impressive.

To explain *Nummer dertien*, Van der Werve says that after living in cities such as St Petersburg and New York, he began feeling uprooted: “Sometimes you miss people. But it doesn’t matter, since you can fly anywhere in the world in 12 hours.” Running for those 12 hours represents that time frame in terms of human capacity, but also shows the transformation of a fit young man into what looks like a hobbling octogenarian; a reflection on our shrinking world but also a comment on personal mortality.

Van der Werve leads me into the large room in his apartment that serves as his art studio. It’s the lair of a somewhat mad athletic, musical genius. Files sit on wooden bookshelves he built himself in Finland of local wood (when a collector or museum buys a work, the film is delivered in a beautiful display box, also handmade by Van der Werve).

In one corner is an acoustic upright piano; along the front wall an electronic one. On the upright piano is a large flat-screen monitor showing software that helps the artist compose full orchestrations. Notes on papers attached to the wall sketch out a project in progress.

Van der Werve began composing in the late 2000s when he discovered he could not find the perfect music for his films; a music professor in New York suggested he learn to write his own. At the upright piano, he plays one of his new compositions, a slow-moving paean that evokes the French Romantic period.

Also standing in the room is a slick black bike, a Cer vélo P3 set up on a turbo trainer on which the artist trains indoors, up to 100km a day, when he's not doing shorter runs outside with his Berlin running group. Inscribed along the bike's top bar is a loose English translation of the supposed final words of the Polish composer and pianist Frédéric Chopin: "I don't feel the pain any more."

Pain, or the threat of it, characterises much of Van der Werve's work. In his early film *Nummer twee, Just because I'm standing here doesn't mean I want to* (2003) he is struck by a car in front of his childhood home and then lies in the background as a troupe of classical ballerinas emerges from a police van to perform a choreographed dance. But the film that made Van der Werve's name on the contemporary conceptual art scene is 2007's *Nummer acht, Everything is going to be alright*. "That's my hit single," he says, laughing.

Van der Werve's best-known film is a perennial presence in museum exhibitions and biennials, but its thrill never diminishes. In it, Van der Werve – shot from a distance –

walks slowly towards us on a frozen northern Baltic Sea. Behind him a huge ship creaks and moans as it crashes through the ice, apparently about to overwhelm him. It's a Romantic gesture given a 21st-century spin, as if the German landscape painter Caspar David Friedrich, who often depicted man amid raging nature, had enlisted a camera crew and a Finnish icebreaker.

Van der Werve first pulled on his running shoes in the name of art in 2010, when he began an annual run (bearing chamomile flowers: the Russian national flower and, Van der Werve says, a natural anti-depressant) from various art venues in New York City to the composer Sergei Rachmaninoff's grave in upstate New York, 33 miles away. At first it was a solo performance, but other runners have joined Van der Werve for subsequent stagings of the work. This sporting mode clearly suited the artist: in the 2012 film *Nummer veertien, Home*, music and endurance sport combine as the artist retraces the route between Chopin's heart, preserved in Warsaw, and his body, interred in Paris.

The film opens with Van der Werve, wearing a head-to-toe wetsuit and swimming goggles, playing a piano in a Warsaw church. He then plunges into the Vistula river to begin the swimming leg of a 1,000-mile triathlon between the Polish and French capitals. The film is slow and complex – narrative threads address the death of Van der Werve's father, but also cover the lives of Van der Werve's heroes Alexander the Great and Chopin (he claims his personal heroes are cultural greats, not elite athletes).

The work is emotional and moving, with a lush orchestral soundtrack. For Van der Werve, music and film are direct

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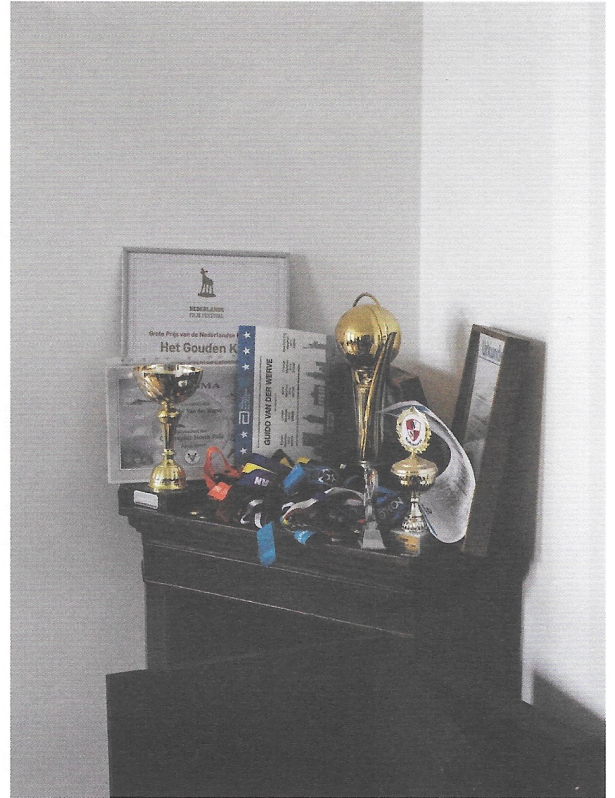
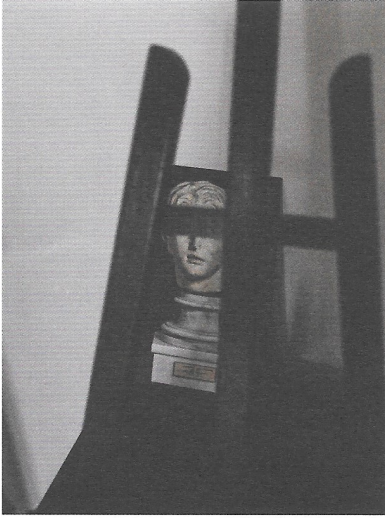
MONDIAL



**'THE PEOPLE WHO STOPPED RUNNING WERE PROBABLY EATEN BY LIONS.
THOSE WHO KEPT RUNNING EVOLVED'**



Man of many talents: Van der Werf is a trained classical pianist and has won medals for his running



lines to evoking deep feeling, which is one of his work's main aims. "Mood is the basic memory," he says. "I use my own emotions and feelings and try to abstract them and make them universal. I use my state of mind as a searchlight, to find what says everything in the shortest and simplest way."

Sport is an inextricable part not just of Van der Werve's artistic career, but his life. The artist is a self-admitted nerd but was always athletic – he cycled in his youth, and was on the Dutch national alpine ski team. After running shorter distances in the mid-2000s, he saw a poster for the Helsinki marathon and signed up without any extra training. "My first marathon was a disaster," he laughs. "I hit the wall big time. I finished at just over four hours."

Ever-faster marathon times became an immediate ambition. Van der Werve soon broke the 3.5-hour mark in the Rotterdam marathon, then three hours in the Berlin marathon in 2013. He fetches a certificate showing that he has completed all six of the World Marathon Majors, in cities from New York to Tokyo and his current home town of Berlin. So impressive were his times that he found himself starting races with the elite East African runners. Having mastered the marathon, Van der Werve began doing Ironman-length triathlons, and considered climbing Everest (instead he scaled Mount Aconcagua in Argentina, at 6,960m the highest mountain outside Asia.)

"Sport is an honest expression," he says. "It's our nature as human beings to move. It's something we've been doing for millions of years. We hunted animals and chased them for

days until they collapsed, right?" Often Van Der Werve's best ideas come to him on the road, and he admits an addiction to endorphins, nature's painkillers. "You can fool your body in a way. It's maybe the evolutionary purpose of endorphins. The people who stopped running were probably eaten by lions. Those who kept running evolved."

Van der Werve is curious in general but unusually inquisitive about where I come from and how athletic I might be; I'm happy to report that I grew up in the Minnesota forest and long ago ran a marathon, competitively cycled for a few years, and completed a triathlon. Finally, the conversation arrives at the bicycle accident that has occupied Van der Werve since it occurred in spring 2016. He'd rather not mention the details, but the accident was serious and recovery arduous ("The doctors told me it was very good that I am fit," he says). Another reason for the reticence is that a project may ultimately emerge from the experience.

For now, Van der Werve seems poised for the next chapter in a life marked by doing the things he's always loved, with a new perspective that has come from adversity... and the creaks that come with simply getting older. The artist claims he is a melancholy soul, but it's easy to see his irrepressible drive and underlying optimism. He mentions that he and Ketola might start a family soon, if all works well.

But first, there are kilometres to crank out for yet another sporting feat, this time for fun: "I'm going to do another triathlon," he announces, resolutely. "My brother is a triathlete and we're going to do the half-Ironman in 2018."