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Star Signs and Sex Positions: Guido van der Werve’s “Present Moment”

BY SCOTT INDRISEK | FEBRUARY 08, 2016



Guido van der Werve's "Nummer zestien: the present moment," 2016.

(© Guido van der Werve; Courtesy of the artist and Luhring Augustine, New York)

In my favorite video piece by Guido van der Werve, the artist arranges to have a Steinway piano hauled up into the air and through the window of a rather small apartment. There's another piano in his current installation at Luhring Augustine in New York — music is a constant for this Dutch artist — but it's a self-playing one, generating a 12-part composition penned by van der Werve to accompany a three-channel video piece, “Number zestien, the present moment.” Like another immersive, musically driven installation at the gallery — Ragnar Kjartansson’s “The Visitors” — this one needs to be experienced in person (you’ve got until February 17). “Number zestien” features large groups of actors eating, meditating, and having sex, among other activities; the work is informed by the 12 signs of the zodiac, which dictate its structure, as well as the cinematography. I asked the artist to explain a bit more about what he calls “a mechanical quest for happiness.”

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Your latest work has a framework built on both Freudian concepts (the id, ego, and superego), as well as zodiac charts. Do you have equal faith in these things — the movement or arrangement of the stars, the tricky science of psychology?

Well, I used the star signs to structure the camera movement and as a framework for the music. So in that sense it provided the structure of the film and the music, while the psychological aspects provided the content. This work is about the hyper-individualistic society that we all live in, and I really don't exclude myself from that. We are all looking for happiness and meaning and are more than ever very much interested in ourselves. There seems to be an increased need for psychological understanding. I find it striking that we even use the vastness and randomness of the stars in the universe to somehow figure out something personal and meaningful — about ourselves.

Can you tell me a bit about the people we see in this three-channel work — how you found them, and what sort of characteristics or traits you were looking for in your actors? How did you determine which types of people would perform in which aspects of the film?

While casting the first group, I really followed my gut. Just people that I thought would be good and real. We advertised on naturist pages and pages that advertise nude modeling for art classes. The second group consisted of people who all had had some sort of burn-out. Again, they would send me their pictures and a story about their life and I chose on that basis. The third group was produced by a Dutch porn producer; we picked the actors together. I didn't want extroverted porn actors. Overall, I wanted the three sets to be an average of group that people could relate to.

What sort of direction or guidance did you provide to each set of actors? Did any difficulties or unexpected obstacles arise during production?

I just wanted them to be themselves. We took a lot of time to make them comfortable and even a little bored. I wanted everybody to just follow his or her own instinct. Every act had some guidelines, but within that structure they were free to do whatever they wanted. It was very important for me that they were experiencing and not acting. With the first group I explained that they should act out a day without friction, in the second scene we had a mindfulness coach giving instruction... and in the third scene I really wanted them to have sex the way they wanted and enjoyed it.

Would you say the third segment of the film is pornographic, or is that a completely reductive way of thinking of it?

I don't think it's pornographic, I think it's just people having pretty standard sex. There are no close ups. This work took me three years to make. Initially I wanted to make a film about the mind and started to research my own mind. The process wasn't going anywhere and I soon found myself doing nothing. I naturally started to arrange my days around the small pleasures that we have as humans and the happy hormones that these moments create. I was having breakfast, lunch, and dinner for serotonin, I was doing sport for endorphins, and having sex for dopamine. The film is, in a way, a mechanical quest for happiness, through human needs and emotions.

For the past years you've organized an epic group run — 32 miles — from Manhattan to Valhalla, New York, where Sergey Rachmaninoff is buried. How did it go this last time?

This year's run was special, because I postponed it the whole year and all of a sudden the year was almost finished. To keep it annual I decided to run there on the 31st of December, 2015, and back on the 1st of January, 2016. So it was both the sixth run in 2015 and the seventh run in 2016. Nobody seemed up for the double and the bad timing with the holidays so I ran it alone. Also because the gallery was closed, unlike previous years the crew of Luhring Augustine couldn't help me out this time, so I had to bring along my own nutrition. This was of course slightly boring, but also a very beautiful meditative experience. I ran there pretty quickly, placed flowers on the grave, and then ended up in a hotel in White Plains. I was tired and jet legged, so I fell asleep at around 8 p.m. The next day I woke up early and ran back to Manhattan. It was a surreal experience. Nobody was on the street until I got back to Manhattan. The total run was about 65 miles, but since I was alone I could really easily pace it. Maybe I will do it back and forth all the time from now on.