

ART

Mindfulness-Blowing Sex: Guido van der Werve's Latest Video Work Bares More Than Souls

by JESSICA DAWSON

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Eat, drink, and be Present: A still from Guido van der Werve's latest.

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ARTIST AND LUHRING AUGUSTINE, NEW YORK

As some artists know and others clearly don't, the precise moment you enter a video work's orbit determines how likely it is you'll stay. Show up in the middle of an orgy, say — which you will, if you arrive around the 45-minute mark of Guido van der Werve's *Nummer zestien, the present moment*, which screens on the hour at Luhring Augustine — and you're going to want to know how the fuck you got there.

Then again, as you'll discover should you turn up earlier on, it takes nearly the whole of its running time for van der Werve's languorous, three-channel video work, screening on a trio of walls in a darkened gallery, to come full circle to this orgasmic climax. In the interval, we watch footage shot on the same closed set — a black box with a softly padded floor — where actors pantomime three versions of a life cycle: awakening, some eating and drinking, some fucking, some meditating, and finally all lying prone as if sleeping or dead. To our left, about 25 nude men and women, many of them middle- to old-aged, sit and stand, drink and eat, some with their breasts at their pubes and their balls at their knees. On the wall opposite, equal numbers of young folk come together in pairs, ultimately engaging in acrobatic, sometimes mechanistic-looking hookups. At the work's center, black-clad figures perform rituals of meditative movement. Van der Werve, 38, gives us this menagerie but not much else, and it's up to us to make sense of what we're watching.

Like much of this Dutch artist's work, *Nummer zestien* is a marathon, not a sprint. Past videos involved van der Werve engaged in endurance exercises that felt like metaphors for states of mind: racing thoughts, depressive anxiety. Here van der Werve the man never shows up on screen, but his lilting, mournful score (he's a classically trained pianist) issues forth from a player piano stationed in the gallery's center.

For those willing to do the full hour, it's a twitchy expedition, alternately dull, lulling, icky, intriguing, surprising, and lugubrious. The piece's subtitle indicates that these bodies want to tune in to the Now, the meditators most obviously: Their walking meditation — *lifting, moving, placing* — stills their minds from ruminating on the past and fantasizing about the future. Watching them, you get the sense that van der Werve wants to do something Big and Philosophical, and the effort of his desire can weigh this piece down. You may harbor a wish, somewhere, for a simpler means of expression.

Even so, there are funny moments, like when two screens find participants sipping beverages and the third group performs oral sex, a wry nod to Freud. There's absurdity, too, as when the meditators break into laughter just as the orgy reaches its crescendo on an adjacent screen. Familiar images, some more disturbing than others, also come to mind: The orgyists recall, at turns, a Boschian bacchanal or Manet's *Luncheon on the Grass*; the naked bodies miming sleep can conjure concentration camp dead.

The paradox of this work is that the presentness presented here is choreographed and premeditated, pointing to the impossibility of capturing presentness (other than maybe a Bruce Nauman incorporating closed-circuit surveillance cameras). Instead, perhaps it's better to approach van der Werve's work as an hour-long opportunity to look in- as well as outward and see what you find.

On a recent Saturday, some didn't have the patience and found the going too slow. Others stayed the full cycle, curious what would happen. A critic who stumbled in at the right moment knew what to do: Just wait.

Guido van der Werve: *Nummer zestien, the present moment*

Luhring Augustine

531 West 24th Street

212-206-9100

luhringaugustine.com

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