

On *Nummer Twaalf*.

Angela Serino and Guido van der Werve in conversation, Amsterdam 18.09.2009

***Nummer Twaalf* is your most ambitious project so far. It's a new film, a unique hand-made chess piano and a composition.**

Could you tell me something about when the idea of this work first came to you and how the initial concept developed over time?

Growing up playing the music of great composers I had always been afraid to compose anything myself. When I made *Nummer Negen* in 2007 I couldn't find any suitable music for it, so two weeks before the premiere I decided to take the chance and compose a piece for piano for it myself. I managed to write the music but it was clear that I still had a lot to learn about composition and music theory, so I bought a lot of books and started to educate myself.

I was in Finland at the time and a bit bored so I decided to take up chess, an old hobby of mine, and bought a chess book to get back into that.

After a while these two little studies started to blend into each other.

First of all, the black-and-whiteness of the piano keyboard and the chessboard have very similar formal qualities.

Second and more importantly, the way chess moves are notated is very similar to music. A chessboard has eight black-and-white squares in a row. Eight is the number of an octave. Below a chessboard is written A, B, C, D, E, F, G, H. If you turn the last H into an A you have the scale of A-minor.

That gave me the idea for the chess piano, which I started building at the end of 2007, and that was the start of this project.

In 2008 I moved to New York and there the frame of *Nummer Twaalf* became clearer. To learn more about chess and composition I started working with Grandmaster Leonid Yudasin as my chess mentor and Dr. Benjamin Boyle as my composition mentor. The first year in New York was mainly studying and sketching the triptych structure of the work, as a chess game with three parts: opening, middle game and end game.

At that time, Grandmaster Yudasin started working on the chess game for the film. I asked him to compose a chess game opening with the King's gambit accepted and ending with a stalemate.

Getting more into chess myself, I became mesmerized by the endless possibilities of chess and calculated that the number of possible chess games is exactly the square of the estimated number of stars in the sky. I combined these two with an old obsession of mine, the impossibility of perfectly tuning a piano.

In New York I played chess in the Marshall Chess Club where the membership was mostly old guys. I thought it very beautiful that these elderly men, almost at the end of their lives, were trying to improve their game, even though it would take almost the age of the universe to play all the possible games. This paradox between the transitory and the definitive gave me the content of the three scenes. In the second scene, I'm trying to count the stars (an action that would last forever) from the top of an active volcano, which most likely will explode again in our lifetime. In the final scene I built a house on the St. Andreas Fault, which is the place where two continents collide and where a massive earthquake will destroy everything sometime in the next one hundred years. I started composing the music for strings based on the chess game. The chess piano would be a very slow solo instrument. Each move would make a note but would also provide me with a scale context to write in. The key of the piece changes with every chess move, which made writing the music a big challenge.

Playing a chess opening - tuning a piano - counting the number of the stars in the

night sky: how do these three actions relate to each other in your mind?

They are all cultural problems that would take a limitless time to work out. And all these problems are depicted in black and white fields: the stars in the sky, the clavier of a piano and the squares and pieces of a chessboard.

In the film you introduce the subject of each of the three chapters with figures and numbers – calculations made by scientists and mathematicians to measure the facts and phenomena you depict in the work. Listening to them I was caught between wonder and confusion. What was your reason to use them?

I wanted to show how long it would take to fulfil these tasks perfectly. The numbers are estimates of course, but they are all plausible and accurate calculations.

As in other works of yours music also here holds the whole narrative of the film together. It is ingeniously woven with the chess play and it accompanies your wanderings among breathtaking, uncontaminated landscapes.

How do you see your relation to music, since your first composition of music?

My background is in music and I have always been very impressed with the direct and abstract way that music manages to communicate with the audience. When I got more interested in visual art, this directness was always something that I really missed in the way that visual art communicates. It's great now to be able to speak the language of music and work artistically on this abstract and more universal level. I really enjoy it. Composing for me was a great experience. But I see it as a piece of a larger work. I think what Wagner described as a 'Gesamtkunstwerk'- mainly his operas - is an idea that I would like to apply to my films. This would allow me to create my own personal universe, where audio and images are equal elements. I believe that I have made an important step in that direction by starting to compose.

In the last few years I have made several films but I lacked a certain craftsmanship. I became a production slave of my own ideas and spent many months calling and e-mailing. In this situation composing gave me a way to continue my artistic development on a daily basis which I was missing in making the film.

Can you tell me something about how you see the parallel between the worlds and play strategies of sound and chess?

I think I can best explain this question by quoting Grandmaster Yudasin: "To manage the infinite amount of moves and variations during a chess game, grandmasters have developed a certain intuition which is based on experience in compositional aesthetics. Rather than trying to calculate the infinite amount of moves and consequences each move has, they look at the chess board and make a move that simply feels right." The only way to deal with the insane mathematics of chess and music is intuition and aesthetics.

It's not the first time that you built or altered an object by yourself for a film. Besides the chess piano, without a doubt your most complex work, I mean the home-made rocket in *Nummer Zeven*, or the structure holding the piano on the lake in *Nummer Vier*. Your romantic spirit does not prevent you from being curious about the concrete mechanisms of the functioning of reality. Could you tell me something more about this obsession of playing with objects?

When I was a kid I was always busy building and inventing things. My first ambition in life was to be an inventor. Then I got more and more interested in music. I lost this interest when I was 17, but I decided to go to the preparatory year of the conservatory

anyway. It quickly became apparent that it wasn't for me, so I started studying industrial design at the Technical University in Delft in the Netherlands. When I realized that wasn't artistic enough for me I applied to study industrial design at the art school in Amsterdam.

In the first year we had many different assignments and I had to try different media. I quickly became interested in video and performance art but I never forgot about my first ambition to be an inventor.

Just as with the music, I really enjoy and need to be working with my hands every day. These things are good to keep you busy and forget about everything else.

In 1968 John Cage and Marcel Duchamp played a chess game on an altered board (*Reunion*). The chessboard was wired and each move activated or cut off the sound coming live from several musicians. If you were aware of this work did it provide you with any references?

Early on in this project a friend of mine told me about this performance. The funny thing is that Marcel Duchamp used to be a member and played a lot of chess at the Marshall Chess Club in New York, where I also play chess and where I made my film. I think their idea was to create a link between chess and experimental music. The fact that both played live music and chess and were intertwined at that specific place and time was the most important thing. They wanted to create chess music.

In *Nummer Twaalf* the emphasis was not so much on creating a link between chess and live music but more on making a new instrument built on the parallels between a chessboard and a piano. I used this instrument and the unique music notation to compose the music.