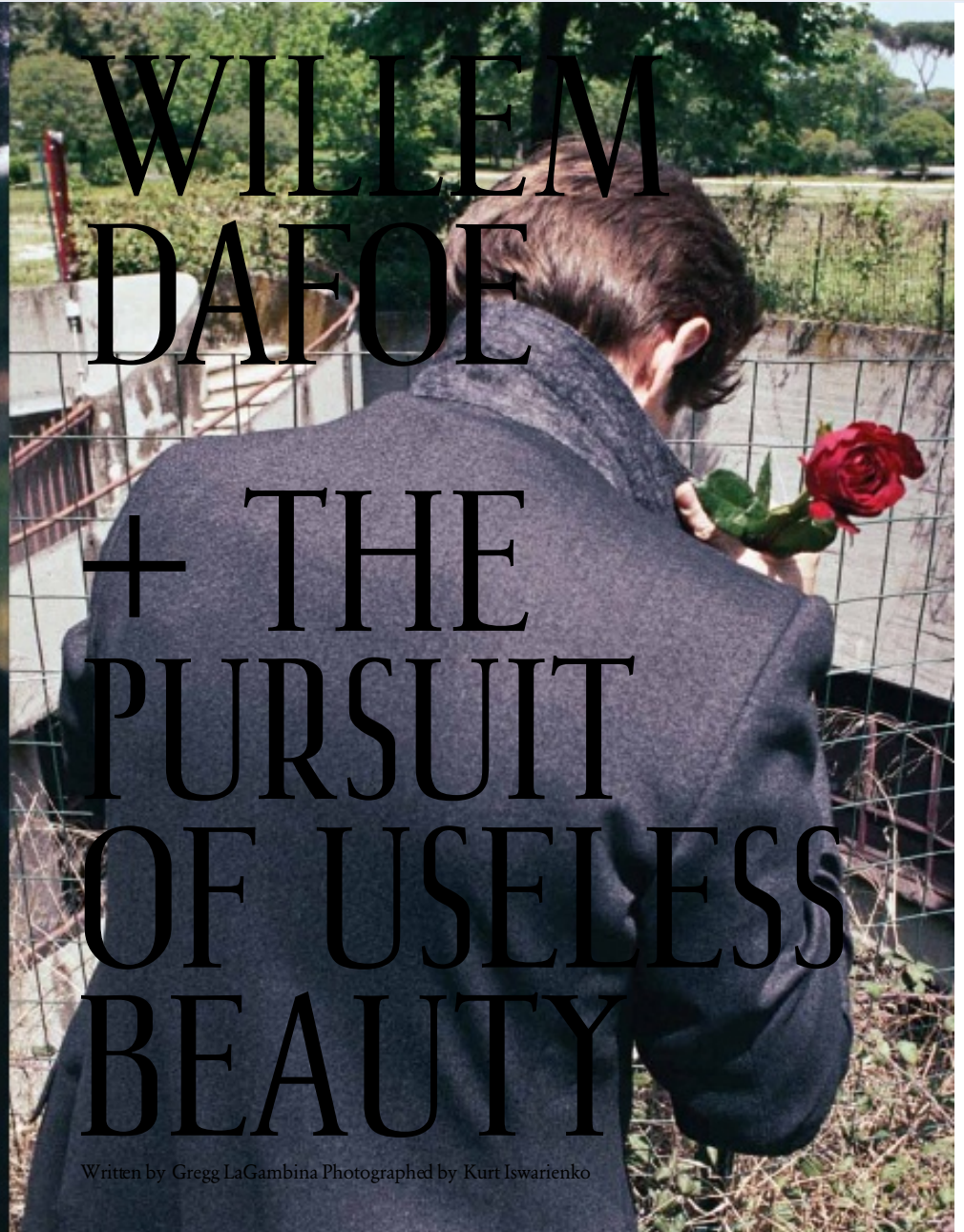


Cotton T-shirt by COSTUME NATIONAL.
OPPOSITE: Wool single-breasted jacket by FENDI.



WILLEM DAFOE + THE PURSUIT OF USELESS BEAUTY

Written by Gregg LaGambina Photographed by Kurt Iswarienko



Dogs have instincts that make them growl at invisible forces. Their claws click lightly on asphalt in curious pursuit of those of us with a different electricity, with signals transmitting at odd frequencies. It makes us remark about how they love the company of children. And the insane.

"It's usually really quiet out here on the terrace. But these dogs are particularly loud. They are trying to kill each other somewhere."

Five stones above a back street in Rome, Willem Dafoe leans over his balcony looking for the source of this alarming baying of unseen alley beasts. He makes it worse; it gets louder. These hounds might be on to something, with this changing in their midst.

"Wow. We may just have to speak up."

It is early evening, a few minutes past seven. He's smiling that smile—the sharp, wide grin, with those lips that peel back far enough for a glimpse of even the most deeply set, craggy molar. It's a device of his, a gesture that has conveyed everything from Max Schreck's secret bloodlust in *Shadow of the Vampire* to the crucified Jesus of Nazareth muttering, "It is accomplished" in the final scene of *The Last Temptation of Christ*.

At 53, Willem Dafoe splits his time between New York City and Rome, his adopted sister-city since his marriage four years ago to filmmaker Giada Colagrande, whom he met while filming Wes Anderson's *The Life Aquatic*. House guests depart, and Dafoe offers a friendly, "Ciao, ciao. Buona sera," as he settles in to patiently discuss the troubling curiosity that has recently built around his forthcoming Lars von Trier-helmed *Antichrist*, co-starring Charlotte Gainsbourg.

"It's a real strong movie," he says, matter-of-factly, only days before its unveiling at Cannes, where, fairly or unfairly, it will be roundly jeered. "It was really great to do. Lars is a great filmmaker. You feel such freedom with him. And on the other hand, he really throws you to the dogs. He forbids rehearsal, and the camera's so loose, you never know where it is. That can be real disconcerting. And particularly with intimate stuff, it can be really scary, and you feel very vulnerable. But day after day, when you feel yourself survive that, and you have a complicity with the director, and you trust him, it's a very powerful feeling."

The "intimate stuff" he speaks of, calmly, as if these were Hallmark moments of teary romance, includes scenes of genital mutilation that caused more than a few to faint in France. In one instance, Gainsbourg's character, the simply named "She," severs her clitoris with a pair of rusty scissors. This will not sit well with those who already claim von Trier is an unapologetic misogynist whose most celebrated films, namely *Breaking the Waves* and *Dancer in the Dark*, portray women as helpless victims.

"Oh, it's not for me to say," Dafoe says, addressing this common charge. "That's a whole complicated discussion. All I know is, as an actor just in this instance, he dealt with Charlotte and I the same way. And I thought he worked beautifully with her. And then, thematically, sexual politics is in the mix there, but that's a whole other discussion. My feeling is people are so frozen about that stuff, that the discussion doesn't even get accomplished, which is worse than coming down on any side of it one way or the other."

Art, in its own way, leads us to come down on certain sides, but by showing us, not telling us. This is a recurring theme with Dafoe—his reluctance to lay definitive claims on the things he makes. He is maker and observer. The act of creation has always been a way to surprise ourselves, yet for most of us, surprise is a too-close relative to fear, and by design, our best artists are the most fearless. It is about vision, an ability to peer into aspects of our lives, to live in the constant flux of perpetual discovery. The majority of us would rather seek comfort and leave these pursuits to those like Dafoe, giving up a couple hours of our weekends to see what they come up with. It's probably why most people know him as the Green Goblin in the *Spider-Man* franchise and not the lustful Bobby Peru in *Wild at Heart*. The Green Goblin is easier; we can pick a side.

"Look, I met a well-known Italian actor the other night," he says. "He was charming, he told stories, he was funny. I thought, 'Wow, that's an actor. I'm not like that. I don't feel like an actor. I feel more like—and don't think I'm being pretentious—but I feel more like an artist. I like to make things. And, okay, in the actual performing, I probably feel more like a dancer. But in the actual approach to things, I feel much more affinity with the world of visual art and dance than I do probably with theater, for example. And some of my favorite experiences happen in galleries or watching dance."

Let's be brave and just call it transcendence. Simply put, it's why we go to the movies in the first place, to transcend ourselves, if only for the duration of a well-told story. More complicated is a thing like worship, to meet together in mosques and cathedrals and stare up and up at something so distant or grand, it cannot be seen, only believed. It's these unseen things that create compulsions, needs, and a way out, the map that points to the place beyond our selves. It's why violence and art often merge, when people feel that need corrupted by something they can't believe in. It's why people shouted at the screen during *Antichrist* and loudly demanded an explanation from von Trier at the ensuing press conference. As if any of von Trier's compulsions could be any better explained than the audience's reaction. Why do any of us participate in these things? Why do we react so violently when another's vision doesn't square precisely with our own? Why even bother with any of it?

"Making stuff is satisfying, because it always involves a shift of consciousness out of your everyday, wear-you-down consciousness," Dafoe says. "The world drops away, and you get caught up in this thing I can only describe as becoming. The same thing can happen while making a beautiful meal. I think I'm always attracted to that. I DON'T THINK I'M A VERY NEUROTIC PERSON, BUT I'M

A NERVOUS ENOUGH PERSON AND A FEARFUL ENOUGH PERSON THAT WHEN I'M MAKING THINGS, ALL THAT GOES AWAY AND WHY DOES IT GO AWAY? IT'S BECAUSE I FEEL KIND OF USEFUL, I DON'T FEEL PETTY, I FEEL LIKE I'M IN THE MIX WITH NATURE, I'M IN THE MIX WITH THE DIVINE AND MAKING IT FOR WHAT? THAT'S EVEN THE BEST PART—IF YOU DON'T KNOW WHY YOU'RE MAKING IT, THAT'S WHAT'S SO GREAT ABOUT ART. SOMETIMES, IT'S JUST BEAUTIFUL IN ITS USELESSNESS."

Considering he's worked with filmmakers as storied as Scorsese, von Trier, Wes Anderson, Oliver Stone, David Lynch, and David Cronenberg, it's not surprising that his next run of films is with similarly exacting visionaries like Julian Schnabel, Werner Herzog, and Theo Angelopoulos. Dafoe even concedes, "I've always been attracted to auteur cinema." Yet, the inherent restrictions that come with working under the heavy authorship of these self-assured stylists, coupled with Dafoe's admitted yearning to "make things," you get a sense this might all be one long, secret apprenticeship.

"Do I want to direct a movie? No, not so much. I find myself always happier when my job is to take someone else's vision and make it mine. The stories that I want to tell, that I think I want to tell, when I think about telling them, I lose my impulse, because I know it already. If I can articulate it, it doesn't run very deep. It loses its mystery. I don't need to say anything. I need to do a lot of things. And I want to be clear, and I want to grow to be fearless, and I want to be openhearted and flexible. But I don't have anything to tell people."

This Rome evening rolls in a bit further to become night, ushering the yapping dogs into other streets to sniff out new dangers and howl fresh warnings. Sitting on this terrace of old Italian concrete, Willem Dafoe is a miracle of sustained enthusiasm—this, 30 years since he was fired as an extra from the set of *Heaven's Gate*, and more than 70 films hence. The lines in his face seem like they've been there waiting, just beneath the surface—ever since he first kick-started that bike at the opening of *The Losers* in 1982—emerging one by one in slow fashion, demarcating every story he's ever told.

In this endless refining of ourselves that we embark upon from day one, no matter what we do, there's a time, especially for movie stars, where you can rest. You can just be Willem Dafoe. You can stop. And the work will still come. But then the art falls away, and with it, purpose.

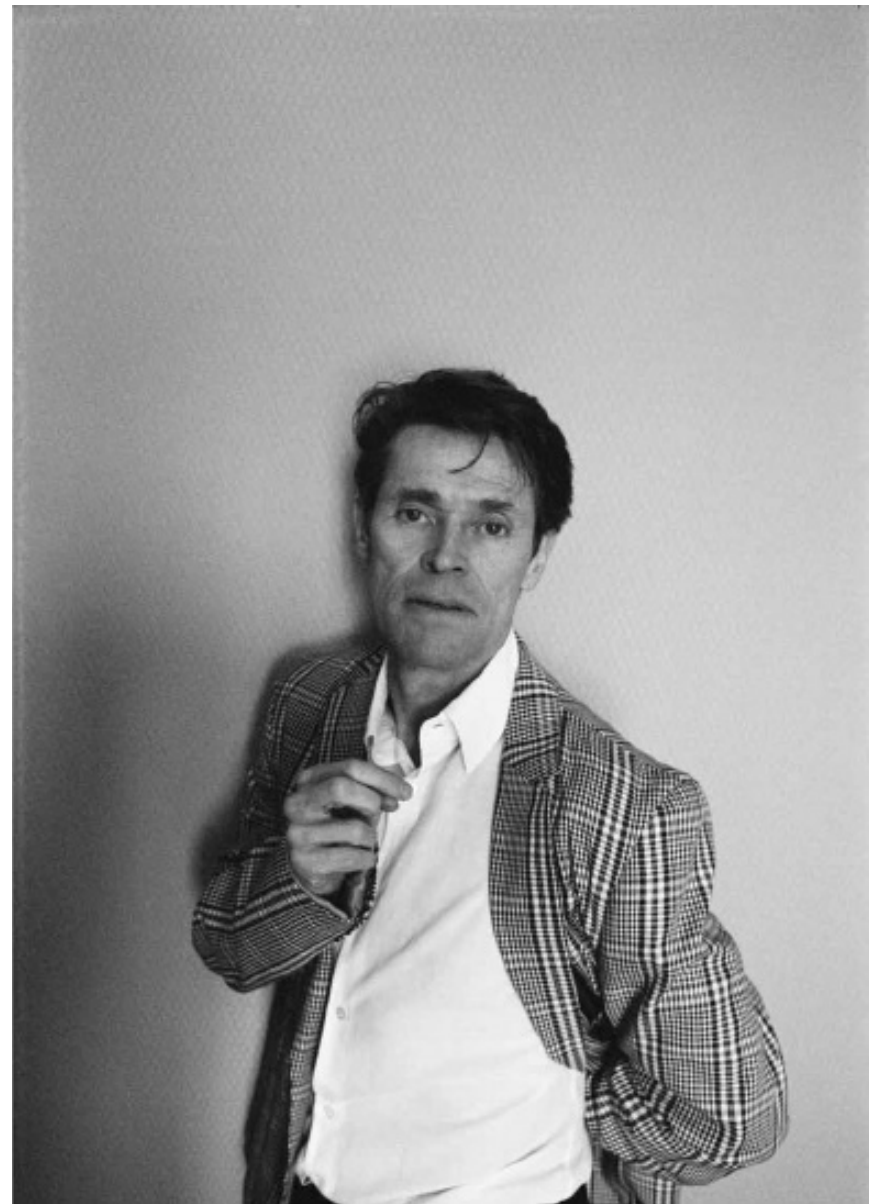
"You hate to be a crybaby and complain about that. It's the most natural thing in the world," he says about any limitations of his established persona. "You got to be pragmatic. Performing isn't just about transformation, although I'm very attracted to that. And you got to look in the mirror and say, 'What's coming off this face? What's coming off this voice? What do you want to change? What's forever?' But look, I don't feel quite trapped. I've been pretty lucky that I get to mix it up. And I think part of that is because, you know I don't stay in any place for too long. If you go in and out of worlds, you don't wear out your welcome."

"It's about being in movement," he continues, returning to an earlier theme about performance. "When I'm in movement, when you're in motion, when something's becoming, when something's happening, when you're trying to go toward something—again, the world drops away. It's that Fernando Pessoa thing, 'I am everything, I am nothing.' It's sheer selflessness and sheer ego satisfaction. I never get tired of it, because it's so elusive."

Nothing barks, nothing stirs, and Dafoe hangs on this last thought just long enough, before leaning in and flashing that famous ragged grin, of fering, almost conspiratorially, "Take care of this kind of talking, because we can really come off as pretentious pricks." ☐



OPPOSITE: Wool single-breasted jacket, cotton shirt, and wool pants by FENDI, leather shoes (actor's own). THIS PAGE, FROM TOP: Cotton T-shirt and cotton jeans by COSTUME NATIONAL, leather shoes (actor's own). Wool single-breasted jacket and cotton shirt by FENDI.





Wool, single-breasted jacket, custom shirts and wool pants by FENDI.