

I made *in a land* in 2003 as my first professional work. Just coming out of school I was filled with ideas around Minimal Art, but also about conceptual art, and ideas that find their most strict realization in an “historical” gesture of the artist. Another important source of thoughts was landscape art, and especially the work of the 19th century romantic painter Caspar David Friedrich. With all those ideas in head I elaborated the concept of *in a land*. I cannot really recall how I got the idea to work with 40 people *from the street*. They were mainly there in order to execute a concept. They were serving the idea. The project departed from the rather naive idea of making a landscape of people in a theatre on one hand. On the other hand it came out of the urge to create a situation where the difference between people on stage and people watching them would disappear. Two groups would stand in front of each other, exchanging a gaze.

We arrived thus 5 years later in Dirceu, an outskirts of Teresina the capital of the far remote state of Piauí in the poorest region of Brazil, the North East. The theatre that invited us for this project was a place to present performances. But it was much more. It was the place where the people of Dirceu would gather at night. It was the place where young and old could get workshops and classes in theatre, hip hop, Capoeira, painting, yoga... It was the center of the community. I knew that everything would be different here. I knew that I was 5 years older of experience in working in the theatre and I knew that I was in place that had very little to do with Amsterdam. So 150 people arrived to the audition and we asked to “perform” the very simple actions of *in a land*. It became clear for me that this wouldn’t work. I could see myself five years before and I could see how dogmatic conceptual I used to be. I knew that it had to be different. I knew that I had to loosen the old concept and concentrate on those people. It had to be *about* them. It had to portray them and through them their land. *In a land* had to be a piece *for* them *by* them. And that was exactly the potential of the primary idea.

I chose 40 people out of the 150. The youngest turned out to be 7 and the oldest 70 (see group picture). And within three weeks we worked intensively on a choreography where they would enter, choose a place where to stand on stage and just look at the audience. Some people would stand alone. Some people would stand in groups. When some would enter some others would leave. Those simple compositional principles were creating small stories on stage and those stories were dissolving to let place for others. The piece never became formalistic. It always navigated between strict choreographical principles of bodies in space and the stories that those bodies put together were telling. A little girl enters on the far left of the stage. She stays alone there for a while. Then arrives a middle-aged man with a rather sinister face on the far right. They are just standing there but the link and the associations you make as an audience are clear. A few moments after an old lady enters and through her presence, adds information to the story unfolding on stage.

So what is the value of making a performance like *in a land* in Brazil? There is no topic in this performance. It is a portrait of people. One after the other, they enter on stage. They are just there, looking at us. And we are looking at them. This shared gaze is what *in a land* is about. In *in a land* the person on stage is me, the spectator and I am the person on stage. The stage gets filled with people. Those people are not different than the spectators. They wear their casual clothes. They come from the same world. It could be me. So when they fill the stage it is a true mirror of us, the spectators. To apply this in the context of a poor area of an isolated city in the North East of Brazil is a political gesture. Everybody felt this during the making of the performance and during shows. Eventually it became clear that it was somehow changing the way people would look at themselves. At least it gave potential to it. The three shows we did were a big success. The performance has now been integrated into the repertoire of the theatre.

During our stay there we (Sarah Vanhee and me) also gave a workshop to a group of 18 students. Through a slow build up of knowledge exchange, and a constant link to our work on *in a land* we tried to support them into a clearer awareness of the specificity of their work as young artists.