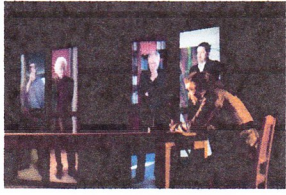


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Searching for the bigger picture



Searching for the bigger picture - Noorderzon in discussions with Berlin

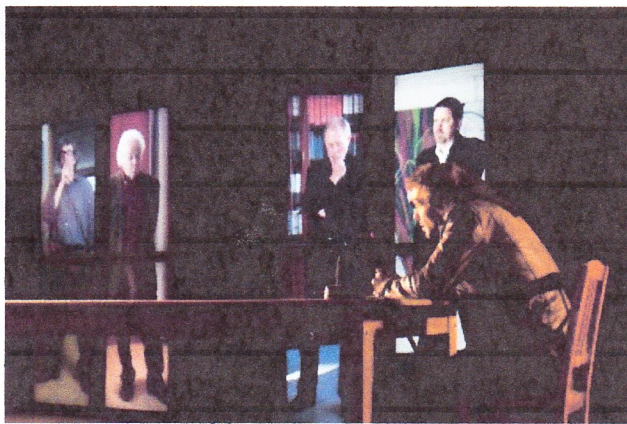
Land's End, the latest performance by the Belgian theatre group Berlin, has been enthusiastically acclaimed by the press and public in Paris, with rave reviews as a consequence. And because the performance will have its Dutch première at

Noorderzon – at a special location – this has generated great expectations here as well.

On the basis of their own organization, Berlin's core members Bart Baele and Yves Degryse have been working since 2003 with several consistently returning staff and co-producers in the artistic and academic sectors. As a result, a cycle of intriguing city portraits has been generated under the name 'Holocene' – the current geological era – with which they are still on a worldwide tour. With their new series 'Horror Vacui (Fear of Emptiness), of which Land's End is the second show, Baele and Degryse continue this trend. Noorderzon spoke with Bart Baele about Berlin's working methods and, of course, about Land's End, which we are extremely curious about too!

What's in a name?

'Berlin' is pronounced as it is in German. Bart grins: 'A company from Antwerp with the name Berlin, which also produces performances about cities and regions throughout the world – that is indeed somewhat confusing.' Berlin has travelled all over the world in the past few years, with a cycle of intriguing city portraits under the name Holocene, a cycle with which the company is still touring the world. The new series Horror Vacui, of which Land's End is the second performance, continues this course from a somewhat 'biased starting point', as Bart refers to it.



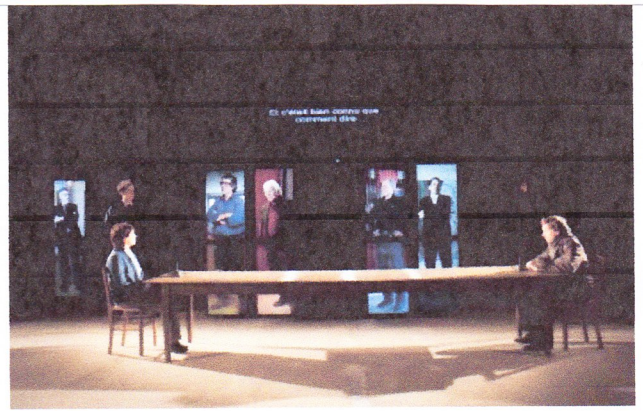
(c) BERLIN

National border through the living room

'The murder case that is the topic of Land's End was not the direct impulse for the performance', Bart explains. 'We had heard of a farmstead on the border between Belgium and France. That farmstead literally, very literally, straddles

the national border – it runs through the middle of the living room! The old story was that the court of law once appropriated this farmstead for a few days for a confrontation between a Belgian woman and a French man.'

'So we already knew that story. Then we were approached by the NEXT Festival, a cross-border festival in Kortrijk, Flanders, which also extends into northern France. We were asked if we could create something about that region, something analogous to our city portraits from the Holocene cycle. That was how we arrived at the idea of processing the story of the farmstead in a performance. We investigated whether or not the story of the farmstead was true and then you ultimately end up with the murder case: the 'pancake murder'. This is a case in which a Belgian woman commissions a French man to murder her husband. After a month, both perpetrators are arrested and are held in custody – one in a Belgian prison, the other in a French one. The Belgian prosecutor presses for a confrontation. And then the legal squabble begins.'



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Kafkaesque circus

'France does not extradite its citizens, so an alternative solution to this confrontation has to be found. Nowadays this would be solved by means of a video conference, but that did not exist at that time. Due to the imaginary

national boundary, no "normal" sitting can take place. The legal authorities appropriate the farmstead and a table is placed in the middle of the living room. Imagine it: two legs on the Belgian side, two on the French side. The woman is only allowed to move around on the Belgian side, so she is ultimately brought into the room via a window. The man is led in via the backdoor, and an extra toilet has been placed on the French side, as the house toilet was on Belgian ground. A whole Kafkaesque circus was set in motion to avoid a different kind of bureaucracy. To us, that was what made the story interesting.'

'The first phase of the research was very time consuming. We visited and interviewed all people concerned: the people from the farmstead, the previous and present owners, all the lawyers and public prosecutors that had anything to do with the murder case, etc. It was never our intention to enter into the private lives of the families involved in the murder case, that is of no real interest to us.'

At the same time, the performance deals with questions such as: What happens during this type of confrontation? What is life on the border like for the present-day residents of the farmstead? 'All those kinds of aspects are covered: the absurdity of such a situation, the recognizability of the bureaucratic fuss and communication problems in general. In short, the big story behind a – in a certain sense – minor event.'



The imaginary line

The big story behind a minor event is exactly what this second cycle, Horror Vacui, is all about, and the differences between it and the first Holocene cycle.

'In Holocene, we invade a city and attempt to depict it in its most expansive form. The research cannot be broad enough; everything is interesting. The Horror Vacui series has a completely different starting point: a very small story, a very specific thing. From that point of departure we enlarge our vision. If we begin with a story we are always aware of the fact that it should communicate even more, something universal. More than a murder and the border between Belgium and France. It is about the recognizability of a confrontation – regardless of which kind of confrontation it may be –, about the recognizability of trying to solve a problem and actually creating an even greater problem as a result. And, of course, of the difficulties that issue from an imaginary line.'

Land's End consists of two parts. The first part is made up of seven installations, while the second is the farmstead and ultimately the confrontation. The intention is that the public should revisit the installations after the performance. So much more becomes evident in retrospect. 'Yes, sure,' Bart grins again, 'then you certainly adopt a different view of things.'

By: Mirre Dieleman