

# State of the Day

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*Het Imaginaire Eiland/*

*Imagine your Island*

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## I wish a had a garden

Last week I met Insayno, a word artist from Rotterdam. He was the closing act in a talk show on circular economy that I hosted. Strange how I never heard of this Insayno before, I thought while watching his videos in preparation. The videos were on social inequality, power differences, police brutality... The texts could have been written yesterday. While watching the videos he moved me. Not the issues he addressed specifically, because: what's new? It touched me to see how he had the talent and found the words to translate an inner struggle in an art project. It fascinates me endlessly how other artists of colour can transform societal issues to an artistic product. How they (or we, because I am also a part of it) can write off rooted pain to process trauma collectively. Whether this is music group Zwart Licht, or actress Joy Delima at ITA, or the recently graduated director Gavin Viano or artist Felix de Rooy, we are all parts of the same chain in which we address inequality and fight for (our) freedom through the arts.

Stories on black identity have appeared as beauty marks on skin in recent years. I read them, watch them, hear them; looking for recognition or a new insight. It has a healing effect. I've often sat in an audience watching in awe and jealousy, but also with (great) annoyance at the performers who obviously didn't feel responsibility for a society. 'I just want to entertain people, offer them relaxation,' a white actress and friend once told me. She never thought of making a change. From a tear to a smile perhaps? What freedom one must have not knowing its own privileged part in a collective, I thought back then. And how annoying that I feel the call to react. If an artist of colour doesn't feel the need to address society, the expectation still exists. Last year I spoke with students of a Flemish theater school who received criticism for 'not doing anything with their blackness'.



Is it something you need to address? Is there a responsibility to take? Not having to ask yourself these questions shows that as an artist you enjoy freedom.

In 2017, before Oerol, I had an interview on the telephone with theatermaker. Saman Amini after his show *A seat at the table*. I asked him which projects were in his future, and whether he could make something other than societal engaging shows. No, he couldn't, not yet. He might want to make a piece on love, for example, but inequality was still a big issue, and people are still too ignorant. With this, a lot of coloured artists take great responsibility. We can express ourselves artistically, but there is also a persuasive power for a (mainly) white audience. Hear! See! Do! Theater maker Ira Kip recently wrote *De Theatermaker* (in an email correspondence) that she was fed up with educational shows. 'Is there no space for us to speak of topics other than the blind spots of white people?' Dispirited she writes that the lack of knowledge in the Netherlands, after living in New York for years, makes its way in her head like a cloud that can't distinguish between depression or burn-out. How many moons does she have to wait to see this change in the Netherlands?

Her loss of spirit I recognized. For years I've felt the responsibility of working through traumas and sharing personal stories for a broad audience to get them to understand our story. And honestly, I'm a little tired. Tired of being a representative of a fictitious collective 'artists of colour', or 'inclusive artists', or 'diverse artists'. In the debate on racism (it still surprises me that it is a debate to begin with) the focus stays on 'us'. Why do I have to relate to this all the time and not the white-skinned among us? Whose story is it in the end? That of victim George Floyd or aggressor Derek Chauvin? Black people are supposed to identify with George Floyd collectively, but do white people do the same with Chauvin? Ira ended the letter with 'we need a revolution'. Not long after the hashtag *educate yourself* was trending, no one seems to stumble over the words 'institutional racism' anymore and lists of books about black consciousness and white privilege are shared as if they were sweets. Suddenly there is a shift and a visible collective awareness: *we're all in this together*.

I went to three protests, because I know that all bodies matter, but it was at the expense of my own. The stories, the emotions, the memories; it was too much. 'Don't become a junkie for the good cause,' my mother texted me. During the talk show I wanted to ask Insayno if he had a garden in which he could work to let his thoughts blend in the earth. As a form of therapy. Because fighting constantly, or taking responsibility to try to make a change, will take a toll. But I realized it was a question or desire for myself. The

pressure, or will, is too big sometimes, the walls too high. I wish I had a garden. The period of lockdown did me well because it forced me to hit the brakes. For once I didn't have to dig up the past, find the right words, and it gave me freedom to focus on a circular life. The muscles in my shoulders relaxed, there was space. Until me social media coloured black and with it my mind.

I wish we'd all be on an island, to talk about it, to massage out all the black blocks that make up trauma. To discuss what we have all consumed recently and speak on how it tasted. 'We can finally talk about something else,' I joked to an 'activist' friend. We laughed in emojis and cried on the inside. Actually, not just the inside. Because despite the change in listening to the message that people of colour have cried for decades, I still notice a level of cynicism that has taken over me these past years. All those paths to diversity, debates, here we go again. Again, I am somewhat tired. And we probably all are, but now is the time to suck it up, like my mother also texted me. Fortunately, we have Insayno. The word artist that wore a coat of plastic bottles and has a communal garden. His artist name is an abbreviation of 'In Nasty Situations All You Need: Optimism'. In that moment he was the right medicine.

