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The Waiting and the Night

Bárbara Wagner's *Ensaio* (Rehearsal) was born of an awareness of the commonplace ethnographic image and the desire to measure an artistic work with the tradition of photojournalism. The artist has turned to the world of rural maracatu in the squares of Nazaré da Mata and other country towns in the state of Pernambuco during the rehearsals that precede Carnival, when the revelers do not use the traditional fancy-dress. Wagner directed her lens at moments that are rarely celebrated: her vertical shots show caboclos hanging around waiting, before the music begins and everyone joins in the dance. The waiting and the night compose a timeless space; attention is concentrated on the involuntary poses of these men, their expressions, details of their clothes, small gestures. The series alternates between the static nature of August Sander and the stark harshness of Weegee, and reveals an irony missed by the stereotypes of many documentary taxonomies, which narrow photographic art to the cold application of a concept.

The horizontal series begins when the music starts up: the group gets into the spirit of things and the performers react to the frenetic rhythms of the wind instruments and drums. The singing of the master puts a stop to the commotion. Lying down, crouching or kneeling, the caboclos respect the terms of a truce conceded in the form of improvised rhymes. It is during this interval that Wagner takes her horizontal portraits. The same men are now isolated in a space that is limited to the pavement, the beaten ground. The maracatu is dismembered and its men are now individuals confined to a horizon abstracted from realism, verging on pure portraiture.

The maracatu festival becomes an allegory of life itself, in which young and old follow the inevitable rhythm of the dance and the game. Bárbara Wagner's photography forgoes merely bearing witness, building up a playful personal mythology made of pride and ingenuity, exhibitionism and ferocity, in which each image lays bare the incommunicability which takes us beyond the colors of folklore. The caboclos in *Ensaio* know that they are being photographed and accept this gesture, which is not helping to build the image of the maracatu, which asks no questions and promises nothing in return. The photographs become a nocturnal mirror, in which the eye, enticed by that ineffable suspension, amazes itself.