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DANCE CLASS

BÁRBARA WAGNER and
BENJAMIN DE BURCA's films
probe economics, race and
gender in Brazilian popular
music by *Evan Moffitt*

RECIFE: capital of the Brazilian state of Pernambuco, historic slave port, pearl of the South Atlantic. Built on the continent's easternmost point, the colonial city's many rivers, islands and bridges make it a kind of tropical Venice, its warm, pale-blue waters infested with killer sharks.

Bárbara Wagner's favourite place in Recife is a narrow spit of land that sticks out into the Atlantic like a rhinoceros horn, on the south side of the city's shallow bay. Brasília Teimosa is a *favela* or slum – a warren of wood, plaster and corrugated-metal shanty houses squeezed into long blocks on pothole-ridden streets that terminate at a sandy beach. Teimosa is the end of Brazil: nothing lies east but a vast ocean and, somewhere beyond that, Angola. The beach is the *favela*'s only public space and, on its hot banks, the city's poor – many of them descended from Angolan slaves – come to gather and play. For years, Wagner visited the beach with her camera and photographed the crowds. In the series 'Brasília Teimosa', boys splash in the sea, men ride horses through the low tide, women stretch out on rocks eating coconut flesh. The photographs form a rich colour study in warm umber and sapphire: tan, tattooed skin and cool ocean water. Due south, Recife's crop of high-rise residential towers cluster along another beach, Boa Viagem, where low rocks shield swimmers from shark attacks; the skyline's sudden spike reflects a grim class disparity.

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Brazil was the last nation in the Americas to abolish slavery – in 1888. Today, that history pokes through the seams of Brazilian society, in economic divisions that run mostly along racial lines. In Pernambuco and Bahia, northeastern states once ruled by sugar-cane plantations, more than half of the population is black or mixed-race – an economic underclass of African descent whose music and dance styles, from samba to *maracatu*, have had an outsized influence on the country's national identity. For decades, mostly white state officials and moneyed interests have sought to commodify forms of cultural expression first developed in resistance to colonialism. For instance, Angolan slaves created the aggressive, acrobatic dance known as *capoeira* ('the dance of war') to disguise combat training as jubilee and prepare for a rebellion against their Dutch and Portuguese masters. Today, it is taught in schools around the world and celebrated during carnival; bodily contact is strictly forbidden.

Several years after the publication of *Brasilia Teimosa* (2005–07), Wagner moved to the colder climes of the Netherlands, where she enrolled at the Dutch Art Institute. It was there she met Benjamin de Burca, a German artist who had recently abandoned painting for photography. The two married in Berlin in 2010 and resettled in Recife, where they began to document the culture of the city's poorer communities. Their 12-minute video, *Faz que vai* (Set to Go, 2015), records four Pernambucan dancers performing *frevo*, an exuberant offshoot of *capoeira*. In Recife, shortly after slavery was abolished, carnival troupes would hire bands of fearsome *capoeira* dancers to lead their processions and ward off the city's violent street gangs; the men spun open umbrellas in their hands as a makeshift crowd-control device. The umbrellas shrank, the movements grew more stylized and *frevo* was born: a flashy, fast-paced dance full of dips and twirls recognized as 'intangible heritage' by UNESCO in 2012. The *frevo* dancers in *Faz que vai* are not masculine bodyguards but mostly effeminate men – and one transgender woman – whose coquettish gestures flatter rather than threaten. Transgender people face significant violence and discrimination in Brazil, but are celebrated during the week of carnival as foremost practitioners of masquerade; for Wagner and De Burca, their use of *frevo* demonstrates how the dance has become safe and sanguine. Performing mostly in profile, their movements also reflect the way an unconstrained street dance has flattened to appeal to the camera.

Like the majority of Brazilian culture, *frevo* is a syncretic art form, mixing influences from West Africa, the Amazon and Portugal; US viewers may recognize elements of voguing. Cultural hybridity propels Wagner and De Burca's work and underscores the ways that, throughout history, people from various backgrounds have found means of collective expression in opposition to colonialism. The artists' two-channel video installation *Cinéma Casino* (2013) captures the extent of



OPPOSITE PAGE AND RIGHT
Bárbara Wagner &
Benjamin de Burca,
Faz que vai (Set to Go),
2015, film stills.
Courtesy: the artists and
Fortes D'Aloia & Gabriel,
São Paulo



this hybridity in the traditional and popular dances of La Réunion, a small French concession in the Indian Ocean, where former slaves from Madagascar and indentured servants from India formed a thriving creole culture. As the film opens, the voice of a young creole woman describes the differences between Réunion's traditional dance – *maloya* – and newer forms like dancehall, which she and two friends demonstrate in the spotlight glare of an otherwise darkened stage. They are replaced by two young men in street clothes rehearsing the frenzied side-to-side movements of *coupé-decalé*, a dance native to the island; in voice-over, one explains that internet videos have influenced the traditional form to involve a dancer's entire body. In another scene, a traditional dancer explains how, in the 1960s, creole communists used *maloya*, after it was outlawed by the French government, as a means of organizing for independence. The camera continues to cut between new and old, dancehall and *maloya*, hip-hop and *coupé-decalé*. As one dancer puts it: 'Dancing allows me to think of nothing, to move only in ways that liberate me.' By filming the performers on a dark stage and adding sound without music, Wagner and De Burca isolate their gestures as the colonized body's language of resistance.

In Recife, the cultural equivalent of dancehall might be *brega*, once a regional musical genre and now a popular global industry. *Brega* is Brazilian country music, with

LEFT
Bárbara Wagner,
Untitled, from the series
'Brasilia Teimosa'
(Stubborn Brasilia),
2005–07, inkjet on
cotton paper, 50 × 75 cm.
Courtesy: the artist and
Fortes D'Aloia &
Gabriel, São Paulo

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sappy lyrics crooned over plodding, tropicalia-infused beats; its name – ‘brothel’ in Portuguese – hints at its low-class origin and widespread critical disdain. Since the 1960s, though, *brega* has birthed a litter of subgenres, from the sentimental love songs of *brega romântica* to the deep bass and rap lyrics of *brega funk*. Wagner and De Burca’s film *Estás vendo coisas* (You Are Seeing Things, 2016) – the standout work of last year’s São Paulo Biennial – profiles a firefighter-by-day, *brega-romântica*-singer-by-night named Dayana Paixão and a hairdresser-cum-*brega-funk* rapper named MC Porck, as they seek success in the nightclubs of Recife. The camera takes us to the set of *brega* music videos, packed with hip-shaking women in tight denim ‘booty shorts’ and swaggering rappers in football jerseys. Over and over, the music cuts out too early and we watch as dancers jiggle awkwardly in silence; Wagner and De Burca set up shots so we see things meant to remain hidden, like rubbish piled beneath palm trees, to the right of a glossy sports car. Often, the filmmakers capture the impromptu public audience: residents of nearby *favelas*, some bare-foot, their skin far darker than the rappers and dancers they ogle.

Dayana and Porck are melancholic characters: dreamers who escape their blue-collar jobs for a nighttime fantasy they hope will bring them fame. Their sombre expressions seem to capture some of the uncertainty that many young Brazilians faced when economic recession hit in 2013, after years of left-wing government policies lifted them from poverty. A generation of *brega* fans, weaned on new technology, had to suddenly grapple with the loss of cultural funding and social welfare programmes, as well as rising youth unemployment. At one point in the film, Porck appears on a radio show hosted by an MC named Júlio Propaganda to discuss his goals as a musician and his daily life as a hairdresser. Closing the segment, Propaganda proclaims: ‘*Brega* is power for us all.’

Estás vendo coisas also teases out divisions between the genders in a musical genre that too often celebrates misogyny. Porck – a self-styled ‘masquerader’ – has the tattooed face of a gangster rapper from the American South, but with bleached tips and plucked brows, and awash in the pink and green of nightclub strobes, he appears almost angelic. In *Estás vendo coisas*, *machismo* – toughness – is a carefully calculated posture; men primp and preen as much as women. Dayana and Porck’s jobs – firefighter and hairdresser – serve as another kind of gender-role reversal. At the film’s 10-minute mark, a group of male *brega* MCs spin a tower of cheap plastic sunglasses, refracting the light like a cylindrical disco ball. They try on pairs, don fake gold and diamond chains and stiff baseball caps adorned with bling. (One reads: ‘MONEY.’) Wagner describes this posturing as a kind of ‘drag’ that defines the *brega funk* scene: an obsession for flashy commodities meant to display wealth but which, instead, showcases a desire for it.

The taste for *brega* might be maligned as low-class, but Wagner and De Burca treat it with respect, as a lens onto a culturally-rich segment of society. Dayana and Porck’s dreams are framed no differently than those of any artist. The filmmakers take a less sympathetic stance towards the music industry, which profits from the labour of performers while keeping them reliant on a circuit of stage venues and club promoters. Standing silently under klieg lights, staring blankly at a battery of cameras, Dayana and Porck look like pawns in a game of profit. As with *Faz que vai*, *Estás vendo coisas* tracks the production of a musical genre whose radical potential has been largely scrubbed clean by corporations or the state, in the pursuit of financial security.

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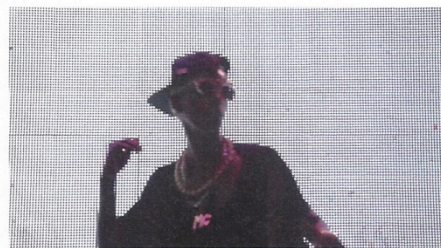


Most recently, the artists' obsession with 'low culture' took them to rural Pernambuco, where they shot *Terremoto santo* (Holy Tremor), a profile of local evangelical gospel singers, which was still being edited at the time of writing. They also completed a multi-channel video installation that will screen in Münster's Elephant Lounge as part of Skulptur Projekte 2017. The video follows the lives of two club singers and performers of *schlager*, the upbeat, pop genre beloved by working-class Germans but panned by intellectuals for its sentimental lyrics and nationalistic schlock, set to accordion riffs or electronic synths. Wagner and De Burca examine the way *schlager* provides its performers and fans with a fantasy escape from everyday life, and situate it within a broader discourse about German national identity – from the genre's appropriation by the Nazis to its 1960s suppression and, finally, its resurgence after the 2006 World Cup.

Wagner and De Burca's films are a self-aware mixture of fiction and fact, straight documentation and staged, cinematic encounters. The mass-cultural narrative form of cinema allows them to address subjects outside of the world of fine art – who may differ in taste and politics, financial background and cultural repertoire – while undermining their own authority as ethnographers. The artists practise a form of Brechtian cinema, in which film acts as a mirror, reflecting both our desires and our fears. *Brega* is a mirror for Brazilian society, its many subgenres reflective of regional divisions, economic disparities and the country's relationship to the outside world. The contradictions of *schlager*, too, embody a century of conflict and change. Wagner and De Burca believe that popular music and dance are a powerful gauge of social temperature. Few artists so actively bridge the widening cultural gulf of class divisions, but it's hard to imagine what else could assuage such differences, in Brazil or elsewhere, when an ascendant right wing seeks to push us ever further apart. After all, where can we dance, if not on common ground? ●

THIS PAGE
Bárbara Wagner & Benjamin de Burca,
Estás vendo coisas
(You Are Seeing Things),
2016, film stills.
Courtesy: the artists
and Fortes D'Aloia &
Gabriel, São Paulo

OPPOSITE PAGE
Bárbara Wagner & Benjamin de Burca,
*Bye Bye Deutschland! Eine
Lebensmelodie* (Bye Bye
Germany! A Melody
of Life), 2017, film stills.
Courtesy: the artists
and Fortes D'Aloia &
Gabriel, São Paulo



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BÁRBARA WAGNER and BENJAMIN DE BURCA are artists based in Recife, Brazil. They have worked collaboratively since 2012. Their work has been included in group exhibitions at: Museu de Arte de São Paulo, Brazil; Fortes D'Aloia & Gabriel, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil; the 32nd São Paulo Biennial (all 2016); the Museum of Contemporary Art, Detroit, USA; and Vila do Conde, Porto, Portugal (both 2017). It will also be shown at the 35th Panorama da Arte Brasileira at the Museu de Arte Moderna, São Paulo, in September, and Skulptur Projekte Münster, Germany, from 10 June to 1 October.