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Juan José Santos
Mirror of Power
<https://www.artforum.com/events/barbara-wagner-benjamin-de-burca-sesc-avenida-paulista-1234731529/>

Publication Artforum

Bárbara Wagner and Benjamin de Burca

SESC Avenida Paulista

By Juan José Santos ☒



Bárbara Wagner and Benjamin de Burca, *One Hundred Steps*, 2020, 2K video, color and black-and-white, sound, 30 minutes.

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We approach a dark passageway, lit only by the red of a scrolling LED sign advertising a musical spectacle: “*Espelho do poder*” (Mirror of Power). But this is not a nightclub or a ballroom. Once we pass through the hallway, a dance show awaits us with sound, disco smoke, and pulsating lights on a large screen at the end of the room. In it, a sign-language interpreter welcomes us and acts as master of ceremonies, translating what is heard and also speaking as she signs, and introduces the works we are about to see: two videos, *Swinguerra*, 2019, and *One Hundred Steps*, 2020, both directed by the duo Bárbara Wagner and Benjamin de Burca, who have been working for several years with choreography and music to address social and political issues. The space itself has been transformed into a large event hall, with an empty central area surrounded by resting benches.

“Brazil, such a wonderful country. Indeed, we must honor what is written on our flag. Order and progress.” We hear these words in Portuguese in voice-over while, in close-up, a group of dancers greets the lens with a military salute. *Swinguerra*, which was shown in the Brazil Pavilion at the Fifty-Eighth Venice Biennale in 2019, takes its title from a combination of *swingueira* (a popular dance style) and *guerra* (war). Its twenty-one minutes bring to life a set of competitions between three rival dance groups, many of whose members are Black and transgender. The contests were held in Recife, Brazil, in spaces ranging from a soccer field to a spiral staircase. The choreography is based on three contemporary dance styles—not only *swingueira* but also *brega* (bad taste) funk and *passinho dos maloka* (thug’s little step)—with sensuality and identity as unifying elements. These mixed dance styles recall Brazil’s colonial and slave-trade history, where music and dance functioned as clandestine methods of political organization; this tradition continues among the queer community of contemporary Brazil, which often has found itself locked in a fight against state-sanctioned homophobia, especially under Jair Bolsonaro’s presidency, when *Swinguerra* was made.

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In *One Hundred Steps* we follow a guided tour of two mansions: a sumptuous seventeenth-century Anglo-Irish colonial manor in Ireland and a nineteenth-century estate built by a French bourgeois family in Marseille. Echoes of the people who were exploited during the construction of the buildings are heard when the tour is interrupted by musicians playing Tunisian music in Marseille and Irish music in County Cork, disturbing the privileged spaces converted into house museums. The fourth wall collapses when the tour guide focuses her flashlight on the camera—on us—or when disco smoke rises from behind the screen for the laconic ending of *One Hundred Steps*, in which a musician plays the mandole, an Algerian instrument, in a public square in Marseille.

As the title indicates, this exhibition inducts the gallerygoer-*cum*-nightclub patron into a hall of mirrors, asking them to confront a pair of works whose adversative worlds—past and present, the hegemonic and the peripheral, the playful and the political—converse in an unexpectedly coherent way.