

# Hold That Gaze

Davi Pontes and Wallace Ferreira's *Repertório*

*Susana Costa Amaral*



In Ballroom culture, a *death drop* happens when a vogue dancer executes a sudden, controlled fall to the ground. The move, also known as a *dip*, is characterized by this dramatic dropping of a performer, who arches their back and extends their legs before landing on the floor. The Black radical tradition embodied in this dance step is mobilized by Davi Pontes (b. 1990) and Wallace Ferreira (b. 1993), two young choreographers from Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. Having worked independently as artists, researchers, and dancers, the duo's collaboration started in 2018 with a question originally posed by Pontes: How do you create a dance of self-defense?

The year before Pontes and Ferreira met, 2017, had been especially daunting. Artists were publicly persecuted, censored, and harassed to a degree not seen since the end of Brazil's military dictatorship in 1985. Queer artists, most of all, were targets of religious fanatics, conservative groups, and aspiring political candidates, including Jair Bolsonaro, a former military officer who planned on running for president the following year, largely supported by his internet fandom of trolls. In the months leading up to Bolsonaro's election, the large national art show *QueerMuseu: Cartografias da diferença na arte brasileira* (QueerMuseum: Cartographies of Difference in

Brazilian Art) was censored and shut down after conservative groups accused it of promoting child prostitution, zoophilia, and so-called gender ideology.<sup>1</sup> Shortly after, a rally was held in protest of a play starring transgender actress Renata Carvalho, which was then canceled on opening night,<sup>2</sup> and the visual artist Wagner Schwartz had to flee the country after viral videos of his performance *La Bête* began to circulate online, with accusations of promoting pedophilia.<sup>3</sup> It is perhaps telling, then, that a few months after these daunting events, Pontes and Ferreira began to imagine their dance of self-defense.

Amidst this violent conservative wave against queer artists in Brazil, Pontes and Ferreira presented their initial answer to this question, titled *Repertório N.1*, in November 2018—exactly two weeks after Bolsonaro’s election. Notorious for his overtly racist, misogynist, and homophobic remarks, Bolsonaro’s political rise embodied what Brazilian philosopher Vladimir Safatle defined as the “suicidal state” (2020): the exhaustion of the necropolitical paradigm in authoritarian neoliberalism. Bolsonaro ran on a “law and order” platform and the promise of easing gun control legislation in a country already reeling from a record-level epidemic of violence (BPSF 2023), particularly against Black, Brown, Indigenous, LGBTQI+ people, and all women. In fact, Bolsonaro’s signature mark, mimicked by his supporters on the streets, was a finger gun, a hand gesture in which a person uses their hand to mimic a pistol.

Against the backdrop of Bolsonaro’s election, *Repertório N.1* (2018) interpellates and ultimately disturbs the positionality of the audience. Drawing on dance theorist and critic André Lepecki’s (2006) concept of the choreopolitical and his reading of Frantz Fanon’s stumble in “The Fact of

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1. The exhibition brought together renowned names in Brazilian art such as Candido Portinari, Alfredo Volpi, and Adriana Varejão, alongside names outside the canon like the young artist Bia Leite. Born in Fortaleza, in the northeast of Brazil, Leite created the series of paintings most viciously targeted by the conservatives, titled *Criança Viada* (Faggot Child), a humorous reappropriation of how this pejorative term is used against young kids who fail to perform gender dictates properly.
  2. The play, *The Gospel According to Jesus, Queen of Heaven* (2014) by British playwright Jo Clifford, featured Carvalho in the role of Jesus Christ as a *travesti* woman. Her role was seen as an affront to the Christian community, leading to a series of attacks on the actor. The tension grew and, on the day of the performance in September 2017, religious groups attempted to prevent the public from entering the venue. They went so far as to remove the seats and the play’s scenery, forcing Carvalho off the stage. Even the eight security guards who were hired to protect Carvalho during the performance ended up joining the angry mob.
  3. Translated to Portuguese as “O bicho,” the performance was created in 2005 in France and had already been presented several times inside and outside Brazil as an homage to Brazilian artist Lygia Clark and her “bichos”—the manipulable metal sculptures produced by Clark as a series in the early 1960s. In *La Bête*, Schwartz reactivates Clark’s proposition by lying naked inside a square marked with tape. The audience could interact with his body as they might with one of Clark’s sculptures, crossing the taped line and moving the artist’s arms and legs as they pleased. The controversy started when a four-year-old child, accompanied by his mother, touched Schwartz’s foot during a performance at the São Paulo Museum of Modern Art. Soon after, the decontextualized image of a young child touching a naked man’s body inside a museum circulated, causing public outrage. The Movimento Brasil Livre (MBL), which had headed the campaign for President Dilma Rousseff’s impeachment a few months prior, joined with other religious and conservative groups, classifying the work as pedophilic art, going so far as to initiate a court dispute over the child’s custody.

*Figure 1. (facing page) Wallace Ferreira and Davi Pontes pose in Repertório N.1. Mostra Verbo at Galeria Vermelho in November 2018. (Photo by Edouard Fraipont)*

*Susana Costa Amaral (Princeton University) is a Presidential Postdoctoral Research Fellow in the Department of Art and Archaeology. She works at the intersection of performance and politics, critical race theory, visual arts, and queer studies. Originally from Brazil, she completed her PhD at New York University in the Department of Spanish and Portuguese with the dissertation “Despite Brazil: Contemporary Art in the Age of the Far Right.” sca366@nyu.edu*

Blackness” ([1952] 1967), the choreography of the work functions not as a fall but as a dislocation—a “poetics of the stumble” (Feliciano 2020). This approach serves as both a performative and theoretical intervention that solicits but also mediates how we look, listen, and relate to Black queer performing artists at this particular moment in Brazilian history.

On the always unstable terrain of raciality, Pontes and Ferreira’s self-defense program is not built on the mimesis of a fight but rather on the creation—and disruption—of a citational structure, a true “repertoire” (Taylor 2003) of movements and gestures inscribed within Black queer practices found both in traditional performances and in everyday life. As three parts of a larger choreographical research, *Repertório N.1* unfolds with two sequels, *Repertório N.2* (2021) and *Repertório N.3* (2023). In this trilogy, created amid the Covid-19 pandemic, the global uprising of Black Lives Matter protests, and the beginning and end of Bolsonaro’s administration, Pontes and Ferreira confront the audience by resisting the kind of gaze that expects mastery and predictability. The artists’ original question of how to create a dance of self-defense becomes a question of how to escape being reduced to a racial signifier, moving from a scene of interpellation in *Repertório N.1* to a “scene of objection” (Moten 2003:1) in *Repertório N.2*, and a scene of refusal and fugitivity in *Repertório N.3*.

## ***Repertório N.1***

### ***A Scene of Interpellation***

I first watched *Repertório N.1* on a YouTube video recorded to promote a fundraising campaign. In the video, Pontes and Ferreira furiously moved around a small room poorly lit by a yellow lamp. On the floor, forming a circle around them, a group of people sat quietly watching. As Pontes and Ferreira moved loudly, stomping their feet on the floor, the yellow lamp projected large shadows of their naked figures on the wall. Dressed only in a pair of black sneakers and white socks, they repeatedly shifted from this restless movement to almost complete stillness. During these pauses and in the style of voguing, the performers languorously transitioned from pose to pose, showcasing an extensive repertoire of body images and queer gestures. Amidst open angles and fierce facial expressions, one pose in particular caught my attention. Ferreira, who also goes by Pat Fudyda in Rio’s legendary House of Mamba Negra,<sup>4</sup> stood upright in a partially open stance. His hair was bleached blond, a style popularized by young Black males from Rio de Janeiro’s favelas. On the floor next to him, Pontes, his left leg bent under him, was sitting on top of his heel. His extended arm created a horizontal line to his hand, which was shaped into the form of a pistol.

I immediately recognized Pontes’s gesture—a finger gun—as I had seen it many times during Bolsonaro’s presidential campaign in 2018. At that time, the finger gun became a trademark for Bolsonaro and was repeatedly mimicked by people on the streets—usually white males—as a sign of support for Bolsonaro’s “guns for self-defense” rhetoric.<sup>5</sup> The mimicking of this gesture in public spaces acted not only as a sign of support for Bolsonaro but also of deliberate intimidation against everyone who didn’t fit into the *cidadão de bem* (upstanding citizen)<sup>6</sup> image promoted in his

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4. During the early 2010s, a vibrant vogue scene emerged in Rio de Janeiro, particularly in the city’s peripheries and favelas. This movement was heavily influenced by the widespread circulation of YouTube videos featuring North American dancers performing the iconic steps of the ballrooms, as well as by the growing trend of queer parties that were beginning to establish themselves in the city’s social calendar despite the growing conservative wave taking shape politically during those same years. As a result, young Black queer performers began to blend vogue poses with “passinho” and even samba steps in a pantomime of gestures taken from fashion shows, magazine photoshoots, gymnastic movements, and even ancient Egyptian hieroglyphics.

5. Even Wikipedia’s entry for “finger gun” has a section dedicated to Bolsonaro’s use of this gesture as an ideological marker; see [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Finger\\_gun](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Finger_gun).

6. The direct translation of this term to English would be “citizen of good.” In this article, however, I am using Rodrigo Nunes’s definition and use of the term, which he translates as “upstanding citizen” in the essay “Of What Is Bolsonaro the Name?” (2020).



Figure 2. Davi Pontes and Wallace Ferreira's finger guns in Repertório N.1. *Mostra Verbo* at Galeria Vermelho in November 2018. (Photo by Edouard Fraipont)

political discourse—a discourse built around “law and order,” hypermasculinity, and homophobia. As Brazilian philosopher Rodrigo Nunes perceptively points out,

Whereas some (mostly poor) supporters tend to see [Bolsonaro] as the sheriff who will restore respect [...]he elite, finally, identifies him above all with that figure from the plantation whose function was historically superseded by the army and the police. Unable to find a viable candidate in their own ranks, they chose to elect the *overseer*. (2020:11; emphasis added)

Bolsonaro’s signature gesture, like that of the overseer who watches over the plantation with a gun in his hand, is above all a symbol of control—the embodiment of what Michel Foucault named the “biopolitics of power” ([1979] 2008:317), the power to “make live” and “let die” that Achille Mbembe has also described under the term “necropolitics” (2019:66). Yet, Ferreira’s bleached blonde hair and the fierceness with which he and Pontes strike each pose in *Repertório N.1* seem to point in a different direction from Mbembe. The appropriation of the finger gun gesture operates not as the mimicry of a threat—mimicry as theorized by Homi Bhabha<sup>7</sup>—but as a redaction, a practice Christina Sharpe defines as “seeing and reading otherwise; toward reading and seeing something in excess of what is caught in the frame” (2016:117). If necropolitics is *not* the exception but the “weather” (104), I am interested, then, in how the finger gun gesture reappears in *Repertório N.1*, that is, how it is cited by Pontes and Ferreira’s choreography in order to be redacted. More specifically, I am interested in how the overseer’s gesture escapes the symbolic dominion of the plantation, the moment when the threat becomes the riot, and the pistol points back at the shooter not to return the bullet, but to dispute its powers of interpellation.

7. Mimicry, as Homi Bhabha theorizes in *The Location of Culture* (1994), is an ambivalent strategy whereby subaltern peoples simultaneously express their subservience to the more powerful and subvert that power by making mimicry seem like mockery.

Bolsonaro's finger gun functions as a symbolic representation that personalizes a message (see Kiffer and Giorgi 2019), as the extended index finger fulfills the choreographic role of addressing, the hailing that gives rise to the subject in the process that Louis Althusser ([1970] 2001) came to define as interpellation, in which the hailed individual responds and becomes the subject of the hail—"Hey, you there!" Almost 20 years prior, Frantz Fanon described a similar scene to Althusser's "little theoretical theatre," one in which the hailing of a French boy in the streets of Paris—"Look, a Negro!"—and Fanon's subsequent fall reveals to him the experience of "being through others" ([1952] 1986:109). Although equally performative, Fanon's scene was not a metaphor in the sense proposed by Althusser but rather a lived experience with a drastically different outcome. Instead of turning around—the "one-hundred-and-eighty-degree physical conversion" ([1970] 2001:118) that Althusser theorized as the becoming subject of the hailing—the Martinican author narrates his fall not as a subject but as a body "sprawled out, distorted, recolored" (Fanon [1952] 1986:113).

In his reading of Fanon, Lepecki observes that it is precisely the racialization of Fanon's body that calls his attention to the "racial quivering as it impacts on the stumble which marks the becoming presence in the racist terrain" (Lepecki 2004:60). For Lepecki, Fanon's fact of Blackness is a porous, quivering one. Even though Fanon rejects it, it is precisely this capacity for openness, this vulnerability, that keeps the body moving in ways that disorient hegemonic, normative, and dominant choreographies of power, showing that nothing is nor can really be fixed in and within representation: "I am fixed," Fanon writes, and yet "I progress by crawling," he continues. Lepecki reads Fanon against the work of North American artist William Pope.L, best known for his series of crawls through the streets of New York. After Fanon, Lepecki asks, "How can one dance on such a treacherously racialized ground, where progress happens only by crawling, and where presence is put under arrest?" (2006:97). By analyzing Pope.L's crawls, Lepecki discusses how the artist creates "discomfort zones" for his audience. "In order to achieve this," Lepecki writes, "[Pope.L] relies on dramaturgies that allow him to create, at least temporarily, a very real possibility of full-blown confrontation only to immediately dispel this threat through a disarming, often humorous, call for dialogue" (90). *Repertório's* choreography, like Pope.L's crawls as theorized by Lepecki in *Exhausting Dance* (2006), is deliberately provocative as a relational experience between the public and the artists.<sup>8</sup>

Pontes and Ferreira are not Martinican immigrants walking the streets of Paris nor a straight Black man crawling on the streets of New York, but two young Black queer men in Rio de Janeiro, one of the deadliest places for young Black men in Brazil.<sup>9</sup> In a place where Black life is repeatedly rendered defenseless, theirs is an encounter of chance, an accident that perforates, fractures, cracks, and ultimately escapes what Denise Ferreira da Silva calls the "horizon of death" (2007:25). In the preface of *Toward a Global Idea of Race*, Silva opens her book with an all too familiar scene for Rio's residents, one that takes place "between the release of a trigger and the fall of another black body, of another brown body, and another" (2007:xi). Pontes and Ferreira's self-defense trilogy dwells in the in-betweenness of this scene, at the exact moment when the fall is the expected outcome, but the body has not yet fallen. *Repertório N.1*, thus, performs not a fall, but the poetics of a fall—what Brazilian dramaturg Anderson Feliciano calls "poética do tropeço" (poetics of the stumble), "the poetic resignification of a fragility that is not only weakness" for "the stumble is not yet a fall, but a dislocation" (2020:122).

8. As Lepecki explained to me in conversation (2024), the original French expression in Fanon's work, "je bute," translated as "I stumble" in the English version of the text, was omitted in the Brazilian edition of *Black Skin, White Masks* (*Pele Negra, Máscaras Brancas*, in Portuguese). This difference in translation is noteworthy because after Lepecki's book publication in Brazil in 2017, the term "tropeço" began to circulate among scholars and dancers in Brazil as a concept and a method. Notably, Davi Pontes and Wallace Ferreira extensively draw inspiration from *Exaurir a Dança* (2017), the Brazilian translation of Lepecki's book, *Exhausting Dance* (2006).

9. See *Atlas da Violência* (2023:21), available here: <https://forumseguranca.org.br/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/atlas-da-violencia-2023.pdf>.

Feliciano’s “poética do tropeço,” Silva’s “racial event” (2017:277), and Lepecki’s choreopolitical reading of Fanon’s stumble in relation to critical theory of Black movement, of Black mobility, and more specifically to dance studies and contemporary Black performance inspired Pontes and Ferreira to create *Repertório*’s choreographies of self-defense. In a letter to Ferreira, exchanged during their collaborative process, Pontes lays out what he calls the “self-defense program,” a performative program built on the creation of

an attentive, vigilant body of possibility, of a promise that something might happen, but without necessarily knowing what will happen. This has a lot to do with our survival and existence. We want to play with uncertainty, disorder, and the provisional. The work of not planning the next situation but believing that it would somehow reveal itself. This is too hard. For us, these principles were fundamental. They serve almost as a stumble [*um tropeço*] that causes one thing to turn into another. Not because it was programmed, but because it’s already there.<sup>10</sup>

Pontes and Ferreira’s tropeço in *Repertório N.1* and Frantz Fanon’s stumble in “The Fact of Blackness” share the same genealogy, the same critical question: how does something turn into something else? “Not because it was programmed, but because it’s already there” as Pontes puts it. However, and perhaps more importantly, they are also radically different insofar as *Repertório N.1*’s tropeço means not a stumble but a “death drop,” a dramatic drop to the floor with one leg pointing in the air. As such, Pontes and Ferreira’s tropeço is not *not* a stumble either. Instead of the simulation of a fall, the tropeço in *Repertório N.1* is a dislocation.

In the wake of Bolsonaro’s election, considered to be a substantial marker in the global rise of neofascism (Safatle 2020), Pontes and Ferreira’s redacted citation of the finger gun interpellated the people in the audience with the troubling revelation that they too were “an object in the midst of other objects” (Fanon [1952] 1986:109). With this gesture, the artists pointed not to a simple inversion of actors in Fanon’s formulation, but to the unavoidable dislocation at the scene of interpellation, the moment when one realizes—suddenly, like a stumble—to be on the other side of the pointed trigger, inhabiting “an impossible time between life and death” (Sexton and Copeland 2003:53). Pontes and Ferreira’s interpellation confronted the audience with the physical conversion of a body that dislocates itself and, in this movement, suddenly becomes “the thing against which all other subjects take their bearing” (53).

It should not be taken lightly, thus, that *Repertório N.1* was presented for the first time in November 2018, only two weeks after Bolsonaro’s election; and its sequel, *Repertório N.2*, was performed live in January 2022 at a moment when Brazil moved toward the daunting mark of 688,000 deaths amidst the Covid-19 pandemic, which disproportionately hit Brazil’s Black and Indigenous population. Like the stage lighting change throughout the trilogy, from a crepuscular light in *Repertório N.1* to bright overexposure in *Repertório N.2* and *Repertório N.3*, the stakes for Black queer performers have been clearly raised in Brazil during the four years that separate one presentation from the next. By saying this, I aim to expand a thought already anticipated by José Esteban Muñoz (1999) in his definition of “the burden of liveness,” specifically on how it relates to a post-Black Lives Matter world when “the demand for Black representation has become so utterly pervasive in political and artistic debates, which, more often than not, fail to engage Blackness as a serious theoretical problematic” (Bradley 2023:105). I say this in order to interrogate how young Black queer Brazilian artists such as Pontes and Ferreira have lived through this political moment by creating artworks that

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10. The letters exchanged between Pontes and Ferreira during their collaboration to create *Repertório N.1* and *Repertório N.2* from 2018 to 2022 were shared with me as part of Pontes’s master thesis (defended in January 2023 at the Fluminense Federal University), where they appear only partially dated. These letters guide us through Pontes and Ferreira’s theoretical thinking as a dialog. More important, perhaps, is how these letters give access to one of the most powerful aspects of these two artworks, which exists within the event of the encounter between two talented Black queer choreographers at the very start of their careers.

challenge established modes of understanding and relating, which are necessarily situated outside the barricades of white supremacy, racial capitalism, homophobia, and ceaseless exploitation. And yet, what forms of fugitivity are being brought forth by these artists that are already embedded in the past and present Black queer traditions of self-defense, worldmaking, and refusal?

By tracing back to the colonial origins of how the juridical self-defense claim came to exist within controlling governments of the body, Elsa Dorlin distinguishes the dominant juridical-political tradition of “legitimate defense” from a different genealogy of “self-defense” going back to techniques developed by minoritarian groups such as the Black Panthers in the US and the history of feminist ju-jitsu during the women’s suffragist struggle in England. In *Self-Defense: A Philosophy of Violence*, Dorlin asks “What does violence do to our lives, to our bodies, to our muscles? And what can our bodies both do and not do, in and through this violence [...] whatever determines it to strike or not strike” (2020:9).

The shift from “muscle rather than law” initiates Dorlin’s analysis of the politics and ethics of self-defense as a “martial ethics of the self,” in which to question the terms that provide freedom and protection is to question the very processes of subjectification that have historically sustained these same terms under racist, patriarchal, and capitalist systems. There is, however, a fundamental problem with Dorlin’s project, for it disregards other less organized, more vernacular practices of self-defense that do not subscribe to the threshold of formal equality and constitutional rights. The pedestrian, “utopian expressions of freedom” that, as Saidiya Hartman argues in *Scenes of Subjection* (1997), stand for “the desires and longings that exceed the frame of civil rights and political emancipation [...], the] quotidian acts labeled ‘fanciful,’ ‘exorbitant,’ and ‘excessive’ because they express an understanding or imagination of freedom quite at odds with bourgeois expectations” (Hartman 1997:13). It is within these “fanciful,” “exorbitant,” and “excessive” gestures that I seek to locate Pontes and Ferreira’s choreographical project to create a dance of self-defense in which every pose is a different strike.

“Learning to defend oneself,” Brazilian artist Jota Mombaça writes,

requires developing other ways of perceiving one’s own fragility. There are strategies, techniques, and tools that only a corporality and a subjectivity capable of inhabiting fragility can develop. Self-defense is not just about hitting back, [...] it is also about learning to read the choreographies of violence and studying ways to intervene in them. (2021:79–80)

In *Não vão nos matar agora* (They Won’t Kill Us Now; 2021), Mombaça calls for a “gender disobedient and anti-colonial redistribution of violence” in which to *redistribute violence* stands for “a gesture of confrontation, but also of self-care” (74). It is in this sense that the tropeço in *Repertório N.1* performs the radical opening of a critical space within Fanon’s epidermal schema.<sup>11</sup> As Françoise Vergès contends, Fanon’s fantasy of an impervious masculinist ideal is one in which all “ambivalence, weakness, and ambiguity” (1996:61) are banished in favor of an “autonomous self, uninhibited by ties of desire and love” (65). Contrarily, in *Repertório N.1*, to vogue is to reclaim the power of the erotic. It is to confront, as Audre Lorde teaches us in “Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power,” “a world of flattened affect, a world of the ascetic who aspires to feel nothing [...] For the ascetic position is one of the highest fear, the gravest immobility” (1984:56). It is by means of the erotic that Pontes and Ferreira’s tropeço tenders Fanon’s *tensed* muscles,<sup>12</sup> releasing Fanon’s masculinist rigidity.

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11. As Lepecki argues in “Stumble Dance” (2004): “[I]f the quivering of presence performs the radical opening of a critical spacing (the spacing of what Derrida later will call *différance*), stumbling, the pushing of quivering presence into an accidental falling, totally short-circuits ontology, causality, politics, and choreography” (Lepecki 2004:51).

12. Throughout *The Wretched of the Earth* ([1963] 2004), Fanon repeatedly mentions that “the muscles of the colonized are always tensed” (16). For Fanon, these tense muscles correspond to the overwhelming frustration and rage experienced by the colonized, as well as his constant state of readiness. In a different parsing of Fanon, Dariack Scott argues that muscular tension is a form of embodied knowledge expressed as both refusal and possibility of resistance in subjection rather than simply defeat, “because even in meagerness and failure [the strategies that flow from it] are rich, and not without effective capability” (2010:58).

As Pontes and Ferreira explained to me when we first met in Rio de Janeiro in January 2022, there are only two tacit agreements between them while performing together. The first one is that the piece can only begin with their body temperatures raised after intense physical expenditure. The second is that, while performing, they both need to negotiate the direction, repetition, and velocity of their movements, including the time to stop and pose, without having previously choreographed when these moments are set to occur. This happens through a coded system of subtle gestures signaled between them while performing—a secretive, coded communication known only by the performers and almost imperceptible to the audience. This coded system presents an invitation, a warning, and a challenge from the perspective of critique: How can the analysis of this artwork hold space for the artists without reproducing the exhaustive racial frameworks that their work attempts to escape? Can critique operate within Pontes and Ferreira’s encoded system of communication without violating their opacity or attempting to analytically trespass the ethical *barricadas* they build?<sup>13</sup> And, more importantly, how can writing about such artwork be radically tender in relation to the aesthetic, poetic, and worldmaking strategies Pontes and Ferreira propose? These questions have now become part of a shared chorus of scholars and artists working in and about Brazil today.<sup>14</sup> They also stand as a critical necessity for moving together with this young generation of Brazilian artists to which Pontes and Ferreira belong.

Moving within and outside of academic contexts,<sup>15</sup> on fugitive paths from a historical scene of anti-Blackness, this generation most notably engages with what Stefano Harney and Fred Moten define as “black study” (2013:105). Their artworks, perhaps more so than any other political analysis of this time, offer a way of unveiling Brazil’s far-right present as another pressure point in the country’s racial history, but they do so without reproducing predictable dictates of racial violence or discrimination. Rather, these artworks interrogate the present by establishing Blackness and Black performance as that which resists objectification, mastery, and predictability—all attributes of what Cida Bento has called “o pacto narcísico da branquitude” (a whiteness narcissistic pact) (2022). As Bento argues:

This pact of whiteness has a narcissistic component, of self-preservation, as if the “different” threatened the “normal,” the “universal.” This feeling of threat and fear is at the heart of prejudice, the representation made of the other, and the way we react to it. (2022:18)

If the redacted citation of the finger gun gesture was what first drew me to *Repertório N.1*, its sequels, *Repertório N.2* (2021) and *Repertório N.3* (2023), struck me with the “choreopolitical” (Lepecki 2013) function of the Fanonian stumble, where Pontes and Ferreira take on the role not only of the gazed upon but also that of the gazer—the spectator—returning the latter’s hail in order to escape from it. Pontes and Ferreira readdress the audience’s gaze in *Repertório N.2* and *Repertório N.3*

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13. In *Não vão nos matar agora* (They Won’t Kill Us Now; 2021), Brazilian artist Jota Mombaça argues that “To stop the deadly machine that are the police, toxic masculinities, and all the fictions of power” (83), it is necessary to create a “barricade.” Their book, thus, is described as a “barricade to steal time.” My use of this term follows the artist’s.

14. In addition to the noteworthy contributions of Denise Ferreira da Silva and Jota Mombaça, I’m also thinking about the artists, critics, and scholars Hélio Menezes, Cinthia Guedes, Diane Lima, Thiago de Paula Souza, and Castiel Vitorino Brasileiro, among many others.

15. Pontes and Ferreira belong to a generation of artists whose lives and creative and scholarly paths were heavily influenced by affirmative action initiatives. These policies, which started in 2003, aimed to integrate historically under-represented communities into Brazil’s universities and public institutions. By the time Pontes and Ferreira met in 2018, the year they finished their bachelor’s degrees, these initiatives had already transformed the dynamics of cultural production in Brazil and the future of an entire generation of young Black artists. Despite notable progress made from persistent social activism and affirmative action programs since 2003, Bolsonaro’s election represented the ongoing hurdles in securing these programs’ sustained existence. Outside of academic environments, moreover, education has held significant importance within Brazil’s Black movements. Pioneering activists such as Abdias do Nascimento identified a disparity in education accessibility among different societal sectors, recognizing a discrepancy between the idealized concept of “racial democracy” in Brazil and the actual experiences of Black individuals in the nation.





Figure 3. Repertório N.2. Wallace Ferreira and Davi Pontes march in synchrony. *ImPulsTanz Dance Festival, Vienna, July 2022.* (Photo © Karolina Miernik)

as a performance inside the performance, where the decentering of the audience's hailing becomes a fugitive choreography that halts representational fixation. This happens particularly during moments of apparent inertia, when the artists suddenly stop moving, holding a pose.

## ***Repertório N.2***

### ***A Scene of Objection***

When I watched *Repertório N.2* live for the first time in January 2022 in Rio, it was my first time back in my hometown since the start of the Covid-19 pandemic. Instead of a small room poorly lit by a yellow lamp, I encountered Pontes and Ferreira at the center of a large, windowed space, their bodies covered in sweat. Even though I was the first audience member to arrive, the performance had already started. It had already been put into motion. As more people entered the space and took their places six feet apart on the floor, a circle around the performers started to take shape, enclosing their movements within the bounds of the circle. Just like in that *Repertório N.1* video I had watched a few years before, Pontes and Ferreira entered the room wearing just socks and sneakers—only this time, both items were black. Unlike the video, however, the artists now marched in synchronicity, their bodies only inches apart and shimmering with the sunlight coming through the open windows. They moved around the space with their backs slightly curved, their heads tilting from side to side, while their feet repeatedly and loudly hit the floor in a disorientating march. The large wooden boards beneath me quivered as the rhythm of their footsteps animated the floor. Step by step, they pounded the floor, and the floor pounded me back, overcoming my body's natural inertia. Step by step, the space slowly became an echoing box, reverberating within the acoustic dust summoned by their marching footsteps.

Suddenly, the beat of Pontes and Ferreira's footsteps ceased, and as I had seen them do before, the artists threw themselves onto the floor holding a pose. At the corner of the room, Pontes was now facing down, one hand resting under his chin while he stared intently at a spectator. Next to him, Ferreira had his legs stretched, his hip lasciviously elevated to the audience's eye level. They both look unbothered, almost defiant, as they lingered in stillness, breathing heavily while holding the poses. Their bodies were no longer rigid but contracted, resting on the floor. Instead of an oblique angle, the audience on the floor now stared directly at the performers' curved, twisted, and overtly queer poses. The performers, in return, stared directly back at the audience, holding their gazes for a prolonged period before quickly and suddenly standing up again and resuming their



Figure 4. Repertório N.2. Wallace Ferreira and Davi Pontes pose on the floor in front of spectators. *ImPulsTanz Dance Festival, Vienna, July 2022.* (Photo © Karolina Miernik)

march. Throughout the performance, Pontes and Ferreira repeated this gesture several times, each posing in front of a different audience member, who would then flinch with discomfort or choose to engage in this exchange as part of a flirtatious interaction.

What first struck me about the *Repertório N.2* live performance in relation to *Repertório N.1*, which I had previously watched on YouTube, was how the two curved yet angular bodies created hard-to-hold forms that seemed to both elude and ironize the virtuosity of vogue performances. In the ballroom, the phrase “Hold that pose for me” is a cue to performers signaling that the presentation is over. It instructs them to freeze in their current position while the judges grade their performances.

Suppose a pose is always already a picture, as Craig Owens (1992) points out and as madison moore reminds us in “What’s queer about the catwalk?” (2018). In that case, the poses in voguing are always already a commentary on a picture—that of the white heterosexual world that creates the fashion magazine in its image. Voguing, thus, is, most of all, a cultural and aesthetic critique of the representation captured by the photographed image. As such, voguing is the display, that is, the dissimulation of the image inside the image, the distorted crisscrossing of an appearance held still by a gaze that seeks to fix the appearance into an image. This is a tactic Tavia Nyong’o also identifies in ballroom culture as “angular sociality” (2019:40).

In *Repertório N.2*, each time Pontes and Ferreira pose, they pull the audience’s gaze closer. By slowing the tempo and delaying the audience’s desire for movement—*Repertório N.2* is, after all, a dance performance—they disturb the positionality of the spectators.<sup>16</sup> In Rio, where I saw the piece twice, their poses provoked distinct reactions.<sup>17</sup> Whereas some people flinched uncomfortably, trying to escape the hold of the artists’ gazes, others remained captured by their stares. In Lausanne,

16. For a discussion about performance and the audience’s demand for movement in Western dance, see Lepecki’s *Exhausting Dance* (2006).

17. I saw it once at Desterro, a collaboratively maintained art space in the city center, and again at the auditorium of the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro, where Wallace Ferreira graduated in dance studies.

Switzerland, in 2021, when the artists presented the piece for the first time outside Brazil, the audience at the Les Urbaines art festival responded to Pontes and Ferreira's poses in an unexpected way: they laughed.<sup>18</sup> This had never happened before. The performers' proximity in both cities directly implicated the audience in a subtle yet constant negotiation.

Although Pontes and Ferreira mostly stay within the bounds of the audience's circle during the performance, at times, they shift the pace of the march and advance towards the audience, who then retract, leaning back onto the walls. Every start and stop, every shift from the march to a pose and then back to the march, renders the audience hyperaware of every movement and sound as they reverberate in the space. With every pose, Pontes and Ferreira compel the audience to stand close, to look and listen closely, holding the space *in* and *to* the presence of two young Black queer artists, covered in sweat, wearing only socks and sneakers, and standing just a few inches away, holding a pose. As LaShandra Sullivan argues about the Black LGBTQI+ movement in Rio de Janeiro, "holding on" is also "an embodied social practice [that] implies its counterpoint—that is, the concept of falling" (2021:183). While waiting for the next move,<sup>19</sup> the next strike of a pose, the audience is forced to look straight at the performers who are looking straight back at the audience, like an "imperfect mirror" (Silva 2020).

In drawing from voguing poses and the military beat of the march as performative resources, without fully subscribing to them choreographically, Pontes and Ferreira compose what Tina Campt (2019) calls "still-moving-images," that is, images that hover between stillness and movement. Campt identifies in these images a modality for representing Black visibility through the slowing and stilling of images into paradoxical forms of motion. For Campt, the stilling of such images requires us to engage the overlapping sensory realms of the visual, the sonic, and the haptic that constellates in, around, and in response to such images. Applying Campt's concept to a live performance highlights how repetition and duration, the start-and-stop of *Repertório N.2's* choreography, operate as augmenting strategies for a Black gaze, challenging the spectators' "ability to sit passively in its presence" (Campt 2023:93).

In her thinking with and through the Black gaze in relation to contemporary artists, Campt identifies a kind of gaze that "does not allow its viewers to be either passive to its labor or impassive to its affects" (2023:102). In such artworks, "the Black body," Campt writes, "is both subject and subjected, destroyed and resurgent, abject and resplendent," and engages its viewers in "a spectatorial mediation that demands particularly active modes of watching, listening, and witnessing" (21). The gaze *as* a concept and object has been extensively discussed in cultural and media studies. However, its relation to others, not lens-based artistic expressions, is usually shadowed by a more rigorous focus on the sensory and the question of presence. A Black gaze, as theorized by Campt, expands the psychoanalytical mastery/castration dichotomy usually referenced to the gaze to frame it, instead, as "the work of enduring discomfort and facing it head on" (154).

Indeed, it is the head, or rather, *one* head that figures most predominantly in analyses that take the gaze as its object. In psychoanalytical terms, from Sigmund Freud to Jacques Lacan, it is the head of Medusa, the true muse of the analytical eye. The story of Medusa is a familiar one. Unlike her immortal sisters, Medusa is a mortal Gorgon—a winged monster, offspring of the night, living near the underworld. Tasked by Zeus and his mother, Danaë, Perseus sets out to behead Medusa,

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18. Pontes and Ferreira shared this information with me when we met in Rio de Janeiro in January 2022. We couldn't determine what the laughs signified, but they made Pontes and Ferreira feel relatively uncomfortable during the performance.

19. Emily R. Bock, in a study of what "waiting" means in the ballroom context, argues: "Waiting is gendered and racialized and has the ability to interrupt progress and upset continuity [...] when the flow of the ordinary is halted, and we are prevented from business as usual" (2021:46–47). For Bock, our conceptions of Blackness and queerness are always already shaped through such "starts and stops" (47) as being Black or queer is to be, ordinarily, interrupted. To put it differently, we could say that being Black and queer is to be always already falling (Lepecki 2006; Silva 2007) or failing (Halberstam 2011) to move in accordance with dominant dictates.

a feat celebrated as heroic. Medusa's gaze, as we know, can turn onlookers into stone, making Perseus's mission a mortal challenge. Perseus, waiting for Medusa to sleep, uses a bronze shield from Athena to avoid her deadly stare and successfully beheads her. Even in death, Medusa's petrifying gaze remains captured on the shield, her final image eternally etched onto its surface. As Hal Foster argues,

This apotropaic transformation from gaze-weapon to reflection-shield is the crux of the myth [...] There are two moments in this transformation [...] In the first instance representation arrests the gaze; in the second instance representation also requires its force to arrest the viewer in turn. (2003:182)

If the myth of Medusa "centers on the power of the gaze and the capacity of representation to control it" (Foster 2003:181), what happens when Athena's shield-as-mirror cannot retain/fix Medusa's gaze as image, as representation? Without Medusa *as image*, Athena cannot complete her "civilizational function" (181) as a figure of unity and protection to the mortals. Medusa's gaze-as-weapon thus needs to be fixed in the reflecting shield so that her threat is neutralized as a kind of protection, and her image, in turn, a means of defense for the gods. The mirror, thus, needs to foreclose Medusa's gaze in order to kill that which threatens the survival of the gods *as* gods. The fixed image is then both the reminder of mortals' and gods' vulnerability and their power to ensure their conditions of possibility. But if the shield-as-mirror is fractured and therefore cannot contain Medusa's gaze-as-weapon, then Medusa herself cannot be fixed as a flat image. Perseus is forced to look at Medusa, to face Medusa's gaze, and in this exchange, there's "Black depth" (Silva 2020). To think with Denise Ferreira da Silva here is to think of Blackness as that which fractures the mirror of transparency by exposing what the mirror reflects back, which is to say, what the mirror reflects *as Black*, as not an immortal god, as Medusa's gaze-as-weapon now neutralized as a fixed image of representation.

The image imprinted on Athena's shield, we must remember, fixes Medusa, the threat that must be killed, in her "death's position" (Rankine 2004:7). The subject as seer and seen, as Foster notes, is the double bind of the Lacanian viewer, the "apparent master of vision but potential victim of the gaze" (2003:187), and where the "subject of representation" is caught between a position of both mastery and threat. This double bind is how *Repertório N.2* creates a dance of self-defense. This is how Pontes and Ferreira's choreography operates by addressing the spectators' gaze as a performance inside the performance, which is to say, by meeting the spectators' gaze, Pontes and Ferreira dislocate their audience to labor in the work that is the performance.

While moving with their bodies curved, their penises soft, and their queerness obvious, the artists render the Black queer male body at once hypervisible and radically tender, unsettling fixation from a white normative gaze.<sup>20</sup> In an age of state-sponsored homophobia in Brazil, the poses in *Repertório N.2* register as excessive against the backdrop of Bolsonaro's hypermasculine and military figure and the heteronormative image of the "upstanding citizen" promoted by his administration. As Brazilian anthropologist Isabela Kalil notes, the overarching figure of the "upstanding citizen" is a powerful and attractive model in far-right political terms because it projects the idea of "a moral political barrier" embodied in those who resist progressive policies and vigilantly react to threats against the heteronormative patriarchal family, the rule of law, and religious conservatism.<sup>21</sup>

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20. As bell hooks contends: "Within neo-colonial white supremacist capitalist patriarchy, the black male body continues to be perceived as an embodiment of bestial, violent, penis-as-weapon hypermasculine assertion. Psychohistories of white racism have always called attention to the tension between the construction of black male body as danger and the underlying eroticization that always then imagines that body as a location for transgressive pleasure" (2004:74-75).

21. The political figure of the "upstanding citizen" is not new in Brazilian society, but it has been deliberately mobilized by Bolsonaro as a term "to denote an appropriate mode of conduct both in private and public life, for it implies a very specific meaning of personhood and a mode of behaving in society and belonging to the nation" (Kalil 2018:13).

In this context, “To strike a pose,” which in *Repertório N.2* renders not an upstanding citizen but a curving, twisting, and angular one, “is to pose a threat,” as Dick Hebdige proposes: a defensive maneuver “at the interface between surveillance and the evasion of surveillance” (1983:86).

Writing about the work of contemporary Brazilian artists, the generation of Black artists to which Davi Pontes and Wallace Ferreira belong, Silva reflects on the ways in which these artists refuse to become “evidence” of racial violence. She argues that

In these works, the body, biology, history, and their significations combine in a form of presentation that refigures Blackness to return political/symbolic violence (that of representation) in a movement that conceals and confronts [...] This is possible because Blackness is the tool of raciality that most effectively renders the horizon of death. (2020)

Pontes and Ferreira’s returning gaze leaves open what looking seeks to enclose, returning the “political/symbolic violence (that of representation)” (Silva 2020) as a way to escape the “burden of liveness” (Muñoz 1999) that haunts minoritarian performance, that is, the reduction of Black queer artworks to the racial signifier that has become a sort of fetishistic cry in the art world post–Black Lives Matter: “Black bodies” always already seen/fixed in their death’s position (see Bradley 2023). In *Repertório N.2*, the audience’s gaze is directly confronted by the performers who, by returning the stare while holding a pose, add depth to this visualization, a negative space that refuses and escapes the audience’s representational demand, inaugurating a zone of immanent singularities beyond representation as copy and capture. In this entanglement lies what Camppt calls “a tense grammar of colonization and black self-fashioning,” the tense relations between subjects’ gazes “engendered by the history of colonial dispossession” (2017:50), as the history of Black subjects posing bears both the ethnographic past of colonial inquiry and the assertive strategies of Black fugitivity that continually escape and reframe the inherent conditions of subjection for visualizing Black life. “What appears to be motionlessness,” Camppt writes, “is in fact an effortful placement that never arrives at a true state of stillness” (51).

From *Repertório N.1*’s scene of interpellation, *Repertório N.2*’s audience is displaced to labor in “the scene of objection” (Moten 2003:1), unable to hold or fix *Repertório N.2*’s fugitive choreography. By following Pontes and Ferreira’s returning gaze, I take on Fred Moten’s invitation to think of the gaze “within another formulation of the sensual” (2003:183). By analyzing the photograph of Emmett Till’s open casket—a casket left open by a mother’s demand that her son’s broken face be looked at—Moten draws attention to the “interior exteriority of the photograph,” the “phonic substance” it bears in excess of meaning. Moten highlights a “responsibility to look” and “look again” as an embodied viewing that goes beyond a purely visual and aesthetic experience of seeing, an embodied viewing that challenges “ontological questioning” (196). “That leaving open,” Moten writes, “is a performance” (200). Emmett Till’s mother allows for her son’s face to be seen in his death’s position, but this “leaving open” of the casket, as Moten suggests, is the *returning* of the gaze in *Repertório N.2*—that is, the *turning* of the gaze into a weapon. This is the performance that frees Emmett Till from fixation as a flat image and that opens space for the “phonic materiality” of his image to fracture the mirror of transparency like a sharp sound shatters glass. For even Lacan would not disavow the power of the returning gaze that reflects the image of the Cartesian subject-as-viewer’s position of apparent mastery. “No doubt,” Lacan writes, “in the depths of my eye, the picture is painted. The picture, certainly, is in my eye. But I, I am in the picture” ([1973] 1998:96).

By staring back at the audience, by lingering in each pose, Pontes and Ferreira reflect the Black queer gaze as a “disruptive force,” what Silva describes as Blackness’s “capacity to tear the veil of transparency (even if briefly)” (Silva 2017:1). *Repertório N.2*’s returning gaze, its “fiery fierceness” as Silva might call it, characterizes “a form of presentation that releases Blackness from the obligation to respond for what demands its obliteration” (Silva 2020). Pontes and Ferreira’s returning gaze does not correspond to the Lacanian phallic fear of castration. Instead, it embodies the escape from occlusion. That is, the refusal to be seen only through the frames of a target, to be locked in the gun’s sight. After all, isn’t it precisely against the disruptive force of the wayward,

the rioter, the runaway that Bolsonaro's overseer gesture has been historically set out to coerce? Isn't it shelter from this disobedient force, this counter-hegemonic resistance, that Bolsonaro's "guns for self-defense" rhetoric offers to the "upstanding citizens"? *Repertório N.2*'s poses defy the desire to control disobedient and fugitive bodies expressed by Bolsonaro's vehemently homophobic rhetoric. This, however, is merely the latest iteration of a longstanding colonial trend—Bolsonaro serving as its newest middleman.



Figure 5. Davi Pontes makes eye contact with a spectator in *Repertório N.2*. *ImPulsTanz Dance Festival, Vienna, July 2022*. (Photo © Karolina Miernik)

### ***Repertório N.3***

#### ***A Scene of Deboche***

In October 2022, Bolsonaro lost his reelection bid to Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, the center-left politician who had already served as president twice before in Brazil. The following year, Davi Pontes and Wallace Ferreira presented the last installment of their trilogy, *Repertório N.3* (2023), at the 35th São Paulo Biennial. In this final act, the artists appeared in their usual attire, only this time, they were wearing pristinely white socks and sneakers, both from the famous brand of streetwear, Nike.

In the video of their performance at the biennial, Pontes and Ferreira walk past the artworks hanging on the white curved walls of the Pavilion—designed by the renowned architect Oscar Niemeyer, one of the symbols of the Modernist movement in Brazil (see Lemos 2023)—until finally arriving at the circle of people sitting on the floor. Their arrival renders the room dead silent. The performance starts with a certain aura of solemnity, the seriousness expected from museum halls. Stopped in place, Pontes and Ferreira first look around at the audience, then at each other. They remain in this exchange for a few seconds before starting their synchronized march, stomping loudly on the floor. This time, however, they move with their spines erect and their legs wide apart, swigging their hips sideways. Halfway through their presentation, Pontes and Ferreira's syncopated march gives way to a teasing, swinging alternation between the two performers.

Then that moment happens. The moment when the performers get closer to the audience, holding a pose. This time, instead of stopping in front of a person, Pontes and Ferreira break the audience circle, opening space between the spectators on the floor, positioning themselves in the middle of the audience, at their same level. While posing, rather than staring at the audience, Pontes and Ferreira now cover their faces with their hands. Not knowing whether to move, to turn around to look at the artists, or to remain still, the audience is left *dumb as a statue*. On the floor, the audience awaits, aware that the gaze has now been turned in their direction, their places trespassed by the performers standing by their sides, their positions no longer secured by the invisible line that defines what is the performance, who is allowed to look, and who is expected to move accordingly.

By concealing their faces, Pontes and Ferreira confront the audience's desire to stare. The performers destabilize the place occupied by the spectators but also that of the exhibition hall, which was built on racial logics that have historically dictated the acquisition, display, and interpretation of "objects" within spaces of power and (white) privilege such as museums. More importantly, however, is how the white, expensive Nike sneakers worn by the artists conflate their naked bodies



Figure 6. Davi Pontes and Wallace Ferreira walk past the artworks hanging on the walls of the Ciccillo Matarazzo modernist pavilion in Repertório N.3. 35th São Paulo Biennial, December 2023. (Photo © Leo Monteiro / Fundação Bienal de São Paulo)

to the condition of “interchangeable support [in] a continuous process of fetishistic circulation of equivalence” (Safatle 2015:191). The specific model they use, the Nike Shox, is considered luxury footwear in Brazil. The marketing and commodification of these Nike sneakers both reflect and perpetuate existing racial dynamics, often exploiting the image of (Black) athletes and (Black) hip hop singers in order to sell Nike attire. When mobilized by Pontes and Ferreira, the Nike Shox underscores the complex interplay of race in shaping the patterns of consumption, identity formation, and narratives of social mobility that are operative in the production of value and cultural capital.

When I watched *Repertório N.3* live in Salvador, Bahia, in May 2024, the artists provoked laughs from the audience by repeatedly posing with their fingers contorted into heart-shaped signs, exactly like the ones used on social media platforms like Instagram and TikTok. In Salvador, the audience laughed at the explicit irony of this pose disguised in a subtle, almost minimalistic gesture. From the finger gun to a heart sign: what could this shift possibly represent in *Repertório*’s larger choreographic project of self-defense? The heart-shaped hand sign is immensely popular on social media, particularly in videos conveying positivity. The gesture belongs to a broader digital culture that embraces symbolic communication, conveying emotions in a simple yet universally understood way. The other side of this coin, however, is how the heart-shaped hand gesture also intersects with commercial interests, as it is commonly incorporated into marketing campaigns or branded content to appeal to audiences. Companies and influencers adopt this sign to convey relatability and emotional resonance in the good old strategy of attaching feelings to products. This indirect advertising approach allows brands to subtly associate their products with the positive sentiments conveyed by this gesture, piggybacking on viral trends.

If art spaces such as museums—represented here by the prestigious São Paulo Biennial Pavilion and the Museum of Modern Art in Salvador—have historically defined how to look and how to value Black queer artists, *Repertório N.3* seems to expose this process of commodification by turning it into a scene marked by irony. Instead of the simulation of a fall on the unstable terrain of racial-ity, *tropeço* in *Repertório N.3* turns into a dissimulation, *um deboche*. While the term “throwing shade”



Figure 7. Wallace Ferreira and Davi Pontes pose, faces covered, on a table above and behind spectators seated on the floor. Repertório N.3, 35th São Paulo Biennial, December 2023. (Photo © Leo Monteiro / Fundação Bienal de São Paulo)

is particularly mobilized in US queer sociality to express a practice of critique, in Brazil this term is often referred to as *deboche*, an ironic attitude and a form of mockery of social conventions—especially conservative ones. As Ferreira explains in a letter addressed to Pontes and exchanged during their rehearsals:

I believe in *deboche* as a very powerful tactic of transformation, because when well targeted, it disturbs, exposes [*expõe*], it causes discomfort, and it is there, in that discomfort, that I feel that relationships can be negotiated, that the game can change even if provisionally. Communication is made between those who understand *deboche* and a line of flight is drawn through this energy [...] I want to project other fictions that do not negotiate my existence and, in this way, I become closer to allies who help me conjure these strikes [*conjuram esses botes*]. To make art in Brazil is no longer a matter of will but of strategy.

If thought of as a form of “choreopolitics” (Lepecki 2013), *deboche* in *Repertório N.3* moves politically—it invents, activates, and precipitates a movement of disobedience, a small riot that provisionally reorients conflicting choreographies of power. It is, after all, a counter-choreography: it exposes the equation of value—difference as value (Mombaça 2020)—by amplifying its racial and sexual markers, by staying at the scene of subjugation “not to reveal its truth, but to nullify skin-deep determinations and interpretations” (Silva 2020). As a tactic of “talking back”—what Nyong’o also refers to as “critical shade” (2019:34)—*deboche* operates as an unexpected interpellation at the scene of subjection, a disarming strategy that momentarily destabilizes both the power dynamics at play and the positionality of its actors. *Deboche* in *Repertório N.3* challenges and manipulates visuality, altering the established norms and offering a complex resistance to straightforward interpretation. This practice of refusal is a practice Black queer communities have been engaging in for quite some time, albeit under various names, in their ability to establish “oppositional ideologies that function as critiques of oppressive regimes of ‘truth’ that subjugate minoritarian people” (Muñoz 1999:195).



Titled *Choreographies of the Impossible*, the 35th São Paulo Biennial released a manifesto that listed some of the questions raised by the artworks assembled by its curators.<sup>22</sup> They asked: “Where are these choreographies [of the impossible]? How can we look at them?” (Lima et al. [2022] 2023). Indeed, how can we look at the artworks of this young generation of Black queer artists without falling into the common traps of the narcissistic pact of whiteness, as Cida Bento (2022) alerted us? Pontes and Ferreira’s trilogy refuses to be reflected by the narcissistic mirror, and in doing so, the artists expose the distorted images this mirror encloses, particularly within art spaces invested in the commodification of sexual dissidents and racialized artists. In order to sell the new trend—the shiny new authentic art for consumption—such logic conditions Black queer artists and their work to stay perpetually linked to the representation and reification of the racial and sexual markers that first rendered their presence attractive to such spaces. Against representational captures that have become a pervasive presence in the art circuit under the signs of “diversity,” “representation,” and “inclusion,” *Repertório N.3*’s *deboche* is Pontes and Ferreira’s closing act of Black queer fugitivity. “If I use art to re-enact the global design of violence, when do I rest?” Ferreira asks in his final letter to Pontes, “If what we are waging here is a dispute over memories, invention, and narratives of power, *deboche* is an attack,” a strategy “*pra dar o bote e escapar viva*”: a strategy to strike when not expected so as to escape alive. Strategically, *Repertório N.3*’s *deboche* presents what Campt might call a “vulnerability twinned with proud defiance” (2017:50), the artists’ concealed gaze *talking back* at the audience.

Following Bolsonaro’s election defeat, it would be all too easy for progressive audiences to celebrate his loss with uncritical positivity. During the 2022 election campaign, heart-shaped or “L” (for President Lula) signs became popular among Bolsonaro’s opposition as a way to counter the finger gun gesture of the far-right. When they turn viral, however, these hand gestures risk oversimplifying and dismissing what was truly at stake during the presidential campaign. Mobilized by both sides of the political spectrum, these viral trends illustrate how social media platforms have become significant political actors in contemporary politics, strategically targeting audiences with carefully crafted messages.

*Repertório N.3*, as a strategy of refusal, challenges the superficial positivity that followed Bolsonaro’s defeat and Lula’s election. Its choreography of *deboche* works as a self-defense tactic against the anti-queer and anti-Black persisting realities of the present. Performing together, Pontes and Ferreira’s alliance is anchored in a commitment to protect their own fragility, “an ethical-political program,” as Pontes describes it. What this program does, what it puts forward, is a choreography of self-defense that redistributes violence, creates a riot, and strikes unexpectedly, *pra dar o bote e escapar viva*.

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