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The

Alien

The genre and gender twisting universe of superproducer

Arca

is part of a new wave of nonconforming electronic music touching the mainstream via Björk and Kanye West. By **Steph Kretowicz**. Photography by **Nadav Kander**

Alejandra Gherzi holds up her phone screen to show me a glimpse into her past. It's a YouTube placeholder image of the producer at 16 years old wearing plastic sunglasses and a short, feathered haircut. She's in a shiny Adidas track jacket and looking over her shades – eyebrow cocked – while striking a New Kids On The Block pose. A Spanish language track called "Un Paseo" plays behind it, a kind of DIY chiptune that cruises under a plodding tresillo beat.

It's a fan upload of an early 2000s track Gherzi made under the Nuuro project name in her teens. "The first comment is, 'wow, Arca hacia reggaetón'," the bilingual producer says, code-switching from English to Spanish and grinning through a Zoom window. "It's so naive. I was so angsty and my household was so fucked up that I only made The Postal Service-type lyrics with, like, non-gendered pronouns," she adds. "I'm like, oh my gosh, what kind of a fucked-up feedback loop is happening in my existence. It's not that I'm doing anything new, it's just that the loop was so big that I didn't see that it was a loop until I turned 30 or something."

Said loop extends from a difficult childhood and adolescence in Caracas to her early to mid-twenties in New York. There were roughly five years in London, and a couple in Barcelona, where Gherzi is living right now. We're both still in the middle of what's a month-plus lockdown because of the global coronavirus crisis, and we're talking via video from our respective apartments – Gherzi in her Catalonian bedroom studio, myself in my Los Angeles home office. The person I'm looking at on screen strikes a very different figure from the static representation of an awkward adolescent who made glitch reggaetón pop and indietronica in Venezuela. My view is of Gherzi's silky shoulder-length layers and strappy black top through a mostly crystal-clear Zoom connection, as she wriggles in her chair when talking about anything that excites her. "I listened to that, and then 'Thievery' on *Xen* and then I listened to 'Mequetrefe' on this one," she says of the creative arc from Nuuro's closeted synth pop through to the

warped industrial hiphop of a song on the new Arca album. "It's like I've always kind of been into putting reggaetón into different contexts."

A casual listen to these three tracks spanning a 15 plus year career might not initially reveal the similarities Gherzi is talking about. One features the shabby 8-bit aesthetics popularised by Y2K dance-punk revival bands like Hot Chip and LCD Soundsystem. Another, from Gherzi's 2014 debut album as Arca, builds on the nauseous IDM organism of her influential &&&& mixtape, released previously on the infamous Hippos In Tanks label. The third is from her new fourth album *KiChk i*, released on XL Recordings, following the hour-long single @@@@. This is ostensibly why we're here – sharing a space in time that's vaguely located across the Atlantic Ocean via fibre optics.

The record is described by Gherzi as an explicit moment of transformation, one of "symbolically, physically, biologically, hormonally, transitioning and moving countries and ageing". It's a culmination of an eight year journey under the Arca moniker, where the producer joined a swell of underground electronic producers in the 2010s exploring a hybrid dance music that problematised genre hierarchies through a flagrant disregard of those limitations. Nothing was off-limits in terms of material, where grime, glitch, hiphop, R&B, industrial and pop were melted down into an unsettling amalgam of stylistic markers that soon became known broadly as a post-club sound. Arca is its finest example, with a mutual influence spanning a spectrum of eerie IDM, from the dystopian hi-tech global wave of Fade To Mind affiliates like Kelela and Total Freedom, to the more downbeat pop perversions of the Tri-Angle label's early roster.

"I do see my musical expression as cyclical," explains Gherzi, arguing there's an essence in all these seemingly disparate stylistic approaches to music production, running in parallel to her own biography. "When I was like 13 or 14, I started making glitch music that emulated musicians that I really loved. And then I slowly started making pop music

Inside

Arca at home in Barcelona, photographed in London, April 2020





when I was 16 or so in Venezuela. I was at the height and peak of my family and my high school friends knowing that I made music, playing shows in Caracas, and being in the newspaper and having this adoration of people being like, 'Oh my gosh, you make music, that's you, you're the 16 year old?' Then pulling the plug on that really viciously because I felt I was misrepresenting myself. I thought it was just too pop, it was too much for other people."

On closer listen, "Un Paseo", "Thievery" and "Mequetrefe" do all feature the conspicuous dembow rhythm of reggaeton in one form or another. It's a style with anti-colonial (if homophobic) roots from the Jamaican dancehalls of the 1990s which then dispersed across Spain and the Americas. Famous for its memetic adaptability, the genre had already spread and mutated like a virus across the Spanish-speaking Caribbean throughout the 90s and early 2000s, long before arriving at the Justin Bieber version of Luis Fonsi & Daddy Yankee's "Despacito" in 2017. It also happens to be a sound that's been reclaimed and reappropriated by queer and adjacent Latinx artists like Eslabrava or Neoperreo's Tomasa del Real, making it the ultimate analogy to Ghersi's own circular trajectory, both creatively and personally.

After rejecting the kind of hetero-acceptable pop she'd been making while living in her own version of social isolation in Venezuela, Ghersi abandoned the Nuuro project and moved to New York to study music, coming out as gay and marking the beginning of Arca. "I was an anonymous producer just like other producers that I really respected at the time," she says, naming Aphex Twin and Burial as inspirations who informed the anonymous and opaque persona she'd maintained across early releases. "Then slowly again, I started to attach my face and my identity to Arca, and the glitch music slowly moved again into the realm of pop with this album. It's not really a thing that hasn't happened before. It's cyclical, but each time I loop around the cycle it's not exactly the same thing because it's happening over time, and I'm changing and my environment changes."

It takes a couple of prompts to trigger Ghersi's memory, but we've actually met before in person. She and ex-collaborator Jesse Kanda DJed a mutual friend's wedding back when we both lived in London, as well as a birthday celebration in a Bermondsey art studio at a time when we were both preparing to move to other cities. "Oh my God, the bouncy castle. They know how to party," she says about the DIY cafe Chats in South London. "I remember feeling like going to Chats was like entering a temporary autonomous zone, a TAZ," she says, referencing Hakim Bey's 1991 text exploring the potential of creating provisional spaces to elude structural control. She Googles a summary of the book for my reference: "[it] seeks to preserve creativity, energy and enthusiasm of autonomous uprisings without replicating the inevitable betrayal and violence that has been the reaction to most revolutions throughout history," she recites. "That's a loaded thing but basically, it's up to each person to define what they think a TAZ is, or if a TAZ is possible, or if a TAZ exists. A TAZ is like a world within a world with different rules to the simulation, and I think about TAZs a lot."

The most pertinent way Ghersi thinks about this

notion of evasive resistance is in the making rather than the taking of space. Her time in New York was marked by an association with a freshly globalised dance music community developed around the city's rich ballroom dance and mutant disco history. She collaborated and partied with members of the famous GHE20GOTH1K club nights, whose omnivorous stylistic palette – crossing music, fashion, art and activism – reflected their explicitly queer and inclusive political imperative. Arca's music work with one of its co-founders, designer Shayne Oliver, on the Hood By Air Classics fashion collection, is notable for an eerie slow mix of Lana Del Rey's "Blue Jeans". This kind of pitched and deformed genderfucking of bass, grime and pop music elements would become a hallmark of the scene of the time. It also became the foundation of some of the most alluring tracks in Arca's early catalogue. A stunning edit of global pop star Nelly Furtado's 2006 song "Showtime" called "Love You In Chains" was a minor viral hit when it was uploaded to SoundCloud in 2011. It imbued the original's peculiar melodic synth refrain and closing lyric with a freaky melancholy. The track holds a special place in my own biography, marking a first kiss of what would become a significant, if dramatic, romantic relationship.

"That's crazy, that's a deep cut," Ghersi says in response to the revelation of this small personal detail on what happens to be Lesbian Visibility Day. "I feel that's a degree closer already because I literally was talking about that song yesterday, or two days ago. I was playing it before going on a live stream because I think it sums up getting ready for a show, like what that feels like, so it's beautiful that you bring that up. What's the story?"

While there isn't much more to elaborate on regarding the circumstances of the event itself, it's an example of just how palpable and oddly recognisable music like Arca's is to people who share her relationship to gender and sexuality. Whether it's in the elastic bass abstraction and creepy vocal pitch of "Ass Swung Low" from 2012's *Stretch 1* EP, or the mournfully raw and fragile choral of *KiCk i* closer "No Queda Nada", there's an ambiguity to the music that's perversely attractive. I've lost count of how many likeminded contemporary artists and musicians I've met and connected with based purely on their work, and if you lined up their portfolios, there'd be no clearly discernible aesthetic similarity between any of them. And yet they have an essential indefinability – textual yet ungraspable, solid yet mutable – that connects them all.

"I know what you mean, you vibe with someone's energy or something, and how they tend to categorise the world," responds Ghersi. "When do they leave things undefined, and when do they tend to collapse things into a yes or no?" The latter idea is key to her relationship to the term non-binary, as a trans woman using female pronouns. "I would say it as if I was a computer, it's more than one drop-down menu. Like, one drop-down doesn't suffice any more. It's like a degree of nuance to say: do you view gender identity as binary or non-binary? And then you can answer how you identify after that, almost as a separate question. It's like a subset, you know? Like when there's a math equation and you have to resolve the outside before you can resolve the inside."

The notion of identity as existing outside of any

gender dichotomy and simple categorisation is a given on *KiCk i*, particularly when it opens with a track quite literally titled "Nonbinary". Next to the crunchy bass distortion and shrieking vocal pitches of "Rip The Slit", it's the most combative number on the album. Ghersi's menacing, unfiltered rap warns "speak for yourself" over resonant distortions and gun cock samples. It's also the lead single for the record, launched with a dazzling cross-media exercise in worldbuilding with interdisciplinary artist and director Frederik Heyman. Along with the video's cyborgian fantasy of animated, digitally altered photography, "Nonbinary" acts as a sort of gatekeeper, stating its intention in no uncertain terms before allowing admission into its genderqueer universe. It cautions: enter at your own risk.

But Arca's approach is not exclusionary. Despite once boasting that she landed the co-production gig on Kanye West's *Yeezus* album after sending the "the craziest shit" she'd been making in 2013, her stated aim for *KiCk i* is to connect with other audiences outside of her existing experimental milieu. "I didn't want to preach to the choir. I wanted to know what it would look like if I was capable of putting forward a rallying cry without alienating people, but rather inviting people in to recognise the fact that there's an alien inside of each of us. That we all *other* other people. That we all are constantly in flux." What would it look like, she speculates, if we didn't shy away from "our pleasures, even if they're kinks, even if we don't understand why we have them."

"I want to connect with someone that doesn't care about experimental music," she continues. "But I also want to connect with someone that doesn't care about pop music. I wanted to try and make a gesture that conflated and didn't force me to pick in a binary way between packaging my project in a high-brow way or a low-brow way. I didn't want to have to make those choices."

Another artist who's taken this pop turn most recently, while remaining staunchly uncategorisable, is SOPHIE. Before her 2018 debut album *Oil Of Every Pearl's Un-Insides*, the maximalist dance producer's career had existed almost in parallel to Arca's. They both released their first records under their respective monikers within a year or so of each other, SOPHIE's effervescent "Nothing More To Say" single on Glasgow's Huntleys + Palmers, and Arca's *Baran Libre*, *Stretch 1* and *Stretch 2* EPs through UNO NYC. One played with bass frequencies and syncopated breakbeats with an eerie garishness, the other explored tactile and contorted sonic organisms with a contrastingly overcast unease. "I remember relating to SOPHIE's work, kind of like a yin to a yang... there was a point in time where we'd never met but I was like, OK... there is a void that I perceived, in terms of how to relate to branding and the accelerationism of a self-awareness about consumption, and hedonism, and challenge. It was someone that I was in indirect conversation through watching and most likely responding to because they're an artist I respect. Even sometimes there could be a sense of competition in a friendly and fertile way."

Both artists also happened to be playing with vocal manipulation in their own way. This was around the time of The Knife's long awaited comeback album *Shaking The Habitual* in 2013. The Swedish

electronic duo had explored gender ambiguity throughout their early 2000s catalogue, and now other queer-identifying artists like Mykki Blanco and Planningtorock were doing the same. "I think The Knife are very underrated in general," says Gherzi of Karin and Olof Dreijer's work. "When I made *Stretch 2*, and there was a lot of pitching and shifting of the voice; I really, really, really loved and respected, and listened to a lot of The Knife in the years leading up to making that work."

With all that in mind, it's not a huge surprise that SOPHIE should contribute to *KiCK i*. Alongside tracks featuring Spanish pop star Rosalía, and Gherzi's enduring high profile collaborator Björk, "La Chiqui" is one of the more formally unorthodox numbers on the album, an aptly berserk collision of animate sonic forms.

In theory, the partnership with SOPHIE reads like a bizarre crossover episode of two mutually exclusive fictional universes. One combines bass, UK garage and industrial with the hyper-cute consumer aesthetics of J-pop, nightclub and EDM in collaborations with Kyary Pamyu Pamyu and Lady Gaga. Arca meanwhile takes shape-shifting sonic abstractions of intricate organisms into co-productions on Björk's *Vulnicura* and *Utopia*, as well as the early molten triphop of FKA Twigs's *LP1*. In practice, it's a match made in heaven, two producers with a mutual obsession for deconstructing dance music convention, as well as a shared regard for the glitched abstractions of Autechre. "When SOPHIE was public about transitioning – this is the first time I've ever talked about this," says Gherzi, trying to find the right words, "I was like, 'this is a disaster.' Because I wasn't so far away from the idea of transitioning. I liked to be referred to by female pronouns by my roommates and my friends. And, so I was like, 'Oh no, this person who I really respect, who was a yin to a yang, and I was responding to and relating to, is taking this path.' And then it made it seem like it was further away for me."

As an artist hell bent on making something unique, the news was initially a blow to her ego. "It's fucked up, right? And this happens a lot. I think more than people acknowledge it in the queer world, is this sense that you're much more likely to feel at odds and other from someone within your own community than someone outside of your community."

This is a sentiment that I can relate to, both as a journalist and a person. I've misidentified artists from this same queer and non-binary network who consciously obscured their identities out of necessity and self-protection, demanding transparency through a limited feminist lens. As a writer, I've been guilty of misplacing provocations against my own people. "It's like this idea also, when it comes to moving to New York and there being different friends of mine that have been brought up in the ballroom community. If you see yourself being really, really, really shady to one person more than everyone else, there's probably something in them that you respect so much that you feel is so similar to you. Sometimes when you're shady about someone, you're actually giving them life."

There are other artists and collaborators with similarly genderqueer dispositions that Gherzi has worked with that you might never have connected in the first place. There's a shared friend and

collaborator in Mica Levi – who featured on Arca's 2016 *Entranas* mixtape – as well as a remix for Frank Ocean, and myriad engagements with nascent online queer parties and secure servers during lockdown. It's reflective of a global community of artists who exist within each other's orbits but don't necessarily explicitly intersect creatively or aesthetically, while still finding each other, regardless.

"It feels like there's a vocational or like a spiritual element when your ego gets so entangled with how you perceive yourself and how you perceive others that you're inadvertently connecting with strangers through music and through peers, even if you've never met them."

A dispersed and undefined queer and non-binary community both supports and is supported by artists like Arca. I'd been following her work as a writer and an admirer since her early days – an initially faceless figure with no biography whose evasive attitude to press mirrored that of a wave of queer and non-binary artists whose parallel stories gradually unfolded over time alongside her. As a wildly talented producer with an insatiable curiosity, Gherzi's highly complex, expressive and eloquent verbal skills mirror that of her intricate musical aptitude and orientation. "I remember being like, I never want to repeat myself, or, if I work with someone on a hiphop related project, the next thing I want to do is not a hiphop related project because I don't want to be seen as just *that* kind of producer."

She has a career-long obsession with "reinventing the wheel". That impulse has extended to the very structures of her productions, whether it be in not letting a beat loop for more than 30 seconds, or eschewing choruses in her songs entirely. "I was just too afraid of being put into a box, basically. Weirdly, I was as subjugated to my ego then as if I never stepped out of my comfort zone, because my comfort zone was to try and resist the categorisation."

Nearing the end of our very long conversation – touching on everything from AI as the ultimate other to how a life already lived online makes one more equipped for the collective trauma of pandemic and social distancing – I notice the subtle creases in the green screen behind Gherzi. The audio transmission between us is only occasionally scrambled; a rainbow coloured glitch across the screen surfaces just once or twice. But these interferences are still there, making visible the reality that I'll never fully understand Gherzi, as Gherzi could never fully understand me. It's her accepting and even seeking out of the unknowable that makes her constantly evolving work so exciting.

"The stories are important. I believe more and more in the power of storytelling and how it's the way we keep a connection to our past and we forge our future. I love the instances in which you feel like language can never articulate anything perfectly," she adds, describing her relationship to words and their limitations. "I also think it's why I love music so much. The abstraction of a melody. It makes space. People can project their encounters with a beauty that is particular to them. But that doesn't mean that we shouldn't be afraid of getting messy. I think sometimes things that are worth doing are dangerous. Things that have value come with sacrifice." □ Arca's *KiCK i* is released by XL Recordings

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