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# Contortions to Match Your Confusion: Digital Disfigurement and the Music of Arca

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“Día de los Muertos,” a mix released in late October 2014 by Houston’s Svntv Mverte (aka Santa Muerte), a DJ duo with a name invoking “Mexico’s cult of Holy Death, a reference to the worship of an underground goddess of death and the dead,”<sup>1</sup> opens with an ominous, arresting take on reggaeton. A moody, flickering bed of synths struggles to spring into action before the snap of slow, syncopated snares whips up a perreo-worthy dembow<sup>2</sup> over a bassline so deep that its pitch seems negligible, indeterminate, a force more palpable than audible. As the low-end nearly collapses under its own weight, an upper register synth slices through the atmosphere, soaring and faltering, more Icarus than Superman. The haunting but hopeful lead flutters across a foreboding sonic landscape, ghostly trails of reverb in its wake. A bittersweet tune, it could be cloying but for its warbling, almost pathetic qualities. Instead, a poignant frailty undercuts the digital promise of perfection. The baleful melody traverses a shifting ground of textural breaks and freaky filters, shimmering as it shape-shifts. Remarkably through-composed for loop-centered music, Arca’s “Thievery” seems as committed to repetition and

<sup>1</sup> Marty Preciado, “Meet Svntv Mverte, The Houston Duo Serving Up A Collision Of #CulturaDura, Gutteral Dancefloor Rhythms,” *Remezcla*, 18 September 2014, <http://remezcla.com/features/meet-svnte-mverte-the-houston-duo-serving-up-a-collision-of-infectious-gutteral-dancefloor-rhythms>.

<sup>2</sup> Wayne Marshall, “Digital Rhythm: The loopy origins of dembow and the knotty dancehall roots of reggaeton,” *Wax Poetics*,

28 January 2014, <http://www.waxpoetics.com/features/articles/digital-rhythm>.

rhythm as variation and development. As such, it is an excellent opening for a set, and a fine introduction to the distinctive sound of Arca, aka Alejandro Gherzi.

Caracas-born, New York-steeped, and now London-based, Gherzi has been making waves in underground art worlds and industrial music scenes for the last couple years. Finding his way into a scene of NYC-based tastemakers with lines to the likes of Kanye West, Gherzi's big break arrived when he was asked to contribute music to several songs on Kanye West's critically-acclaimed, genre-bending opus *Yeezus* (2013). Since then, he has earned further renown by collaborating with such emerging artists as Kelela and FKA Twigs. The latest, greatest feather in his cap is Björk's *Vulnicura* (January 2015), an album of lush, dark, pulsing songs that Arca co-produced with the vanguard artist herself, putting him in the fine company of Timbaland, Mathew Herbert, Matmos, and Tricky. Later this year, Arca will join Björk and a fifteen-piece string orchestra to take the album on tour—an enviable position for any musician, never mind one who allegedly knows Björk's oeuvre by heart.

An audibly simpatico collaboration, Arca's skittering, swelling, deeply percussive accompaniment to Björk's voice and string arrangements imbues the songs on *Vulnicura* with drive and dynamism, helping them to build and break like the best of Björk's work, especially for a song cycle about heartbreak. Arca's beats ebb and flow according to each song's specific demands, and they manage at once to suggest and resist genre in a manner utterly Björkian. Halfway into the ten-minute "Black Lake," an insistent, tonally restive bass drum meets with an upbeat squeak to raise the fleeting specter of New Jersey club music before melting back into crescendoing strings; later in the track, synth-toms channel the speech contours of a talking drum. Whether it's a staticky snare, the textured patina of white noise, laser-like synth stabs, or a snarl of bass, Gherzi's versatility and studious musical curiosity pair well with Björk's *sui generis* songwriting. According to the artist herself, who describes the album as "the most painful one I've done, but also the most magic one," the creative partnership with Arca was uniquely charmed, earning him special distinction among her many celebrated collaborators: "I would describe all the beats, and then he would do them and add stuff. We did it together. I've never done that before."<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Jessica Hopper, "The Invisible Woman: A Conversation with Björk," *Pitchfork*, 21 January 2015, <http://pitchfork.com/features/interviews/9582-the-invisible-woman-a-conversation-with-bjork>.

As artists inspired by the bleeding edge of underground electronic music, Björk's and Kanye's interest in Arca makes sense: his music combines experimentalism and sensuous accessibility in bold ways, and his atmospheric, affecting, radically open beats offer themselves as dramatic scaffolding for vocals. Likewise, it's unsurprising that Santa Muerte drop "Thievery" like it's hot, framing their mix by letting Arca's striking track set the tone—but it's far from unremarkable. The selection speaks volumes about a cultural wave rolling across underground and industrial scenes alike. For two DJs representing Tejano Houston via the "guttural darkness"

cutting across a swath of contemporary electronic dance music, Santa Muerte's Panchitron and Sines take up Arca's track as yet another charged resource with which to triangulate their own style, locally resonant with Houston's and Mexico's love for dark bass as it partakes in global currents. Mixing Arca's weird, wobbling dembow into Dutch-Antillean producer Anti-G's fruityloopy take on the genre into the arena-rock reggaeton of Wisin y Yandel, Santa Muerte connect a select set of dots.

As likely to perform at London's ICA as at such temples to club culture as Berlin's Berghain, Ghersi has quickly found a lofty lane for his sound. Arca's appeal across underground scenes, high art worlds, and diverse cosmopolitan networks is, in its way, an iterative expression of the artist's capacious interest in the vast world of music available to anyone with an internet connection. While Arca's unique signature makes him the producer of the moment, he draws on a sonic palette co-produced by millions, the diasporic hodgepodge that gives Arca's music its familiar pulse: dub and dubstep, reggaeton, hip-hop, kuduro, perhaps a touch of Venezuela's own take on global bass culture, *changa tuki*.

The internet was and remains crucial to Arca's sound and trajectory, but IRL connections and contexts have also been key to pushing the young artist's career forward and guiding his producerly hand. New York's GHE20G0TH1K, a social scene and aesthetic organized by Venus X, an "underground goddess" if there ever was one, served as a crucible for Arca at a formative moment. Black and Latin, queer and inclusive, avant and populist, since Venus X started throwing parties in 2009, GHE20G0TH1K has gathered and encouraged a network of sympathetic souls from NYC, LA, London, Berlin, Mexico City, and other global nodes of urban culture and fashion. Surprising syntheses and DIY edits of world club music provide a gritty, grind-worthy soundtrack to stark fashion statements and bold politics. For Venus X, "It's about having the access and power to be exactly what you want to be instead of having to fit a prescription or stereotype."<sup>4</sup>

Networked and inspired by GHE20G0TH1K, Ghersi joins the likes of such critical darlings as Shayne Oliver, designer of Hood By Air and someone with Kanye's ear, and fellow musicians Nguzunguzu, Total Freedom, and Rizzla of the LA-based Fade to Mind label, to name a few. (Arca toured with Total Freedom last year.) Svntv Mverte opening their mix with "Thievery"—or Total Freedom dropping Arca tracks into his mixes a year before they're available to the public<sup>5</sup>—affirm an undergirding aesthetic kinship. Arca's music, inspired by the approaches amplified by GHE20G0TH1K, now serves as pitch-perfect material for DJs working to tweak the mix yet again.

It is an influence Arca wears on his sleeve with Soundcloud specials like his left-field remix of Shakira's mega-hit "Hips Don't Lie,"<sup>6</sup> a radical reduction and reconstruction that recalls Total Freedom's terrifying and beautiful R&B remixes. A lurching, denatured vocal loop—likely a snip of Shakira but not recognizably—opens things up. It's rhythmic, but only

<sup>4</sup> Misty Sidell, "GHE20G0TH1K Party Initiates New Fashion Trend," *The Daily Beast*, 11 April 2013, <http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2013/04/11/ghe20-g0th1k-party-initiates-new-fashion-trend.html>.

<sup>5</sup> <https://soundcloud.com/dummymag/dummy-mix-181-total-freedom>.

<sup>6</sup> <https://soundcloud.com/arca100000/arca-hips-dont-lie>.

because it repeats. Before long, a snare drum skips across the timeline doing the azonto, then comes Shakira's voice, only marginally familiar, harmonically decontextualized and warped into an uncanny valley of half-recognition. After a textural shift introduces a shrill, buzzy drone, Shakira's well-worn melody begins to resemble itself, but only for a moment. To put such a dizzying spin on the most spun track of the twenty-first century<sup>7</sup>, Arca did a lot of twisting and tweaking.

<sup>7</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hips\\_Don%27t\\_Lie](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hips_Don%27t_Lie).

<sup>8</sup> <https://twitter.com/shakira/status/540608069076787200>.

What does it say about the zeitgeist that such a strange creation was listened to no fewer than half a million times in the month after Arca posted it? Or that Shakira considered it worthy of a superlative tweet to her 28 million followers?<sup>8</sup> (That may have nudged the numbers a little, yes, but "Thievery," to Arca's credit, has 465,000 plays on Soundcloud without such endorsements.) While many of the comments on the remix's Soundcloud page are receptive and supportive, not all listeners share Shakira's Twitter account's enthusiasm (one retorted that "Shak deberia de cambiar su administrador"). Responses run from lukewarm ("I'm sure that someone somewhere likes this") to less than lukewarm ("u did put shakiras voice in the shitter"). Apparently, one person's "Nada interesante. -L-" is another's "sexy af and great song."

Arca's tracks are nothing if not tweaked, perturbed and perturbing, and his work has deepened in this regard through an ongoing collaboration with Japan-born, Canada-raised, and London-based visual artist Jesse Kanda. (After a decade-plus internet correspondence beginning at DeviantArt.com, they're now flatmates.) Kanda's talents are formidable and prove the perfect complement to Arca's music, deftly syncing provocative, surreal visual signposts to musical events, turning images on a dime and freaking them to the beat. Kanda's flair for taking figures, especially the humanesque, and twisting them into unsettling shapes serves to darkly mirror Arca's broken-winged melodies and throbbing basslines. Together, their videos and performances probe an utterly contemporary, technological imagination of the grotesque.

In Kanda's own words, "Part of my goal is to present 'disgusting' things as something beautiful, to question what is okay to call disgusting or ugly."<sup>9</sup> In *TRAUMA (Scene 1)*, the first video in a 7-part series the two are presenting at MOMA PS1, a group of naked, translucent, androgynous baby-like creatures wind themselves woozily to some half-time dubstep while arpeggios recalling Nas's "If I Ruled the World" ping-pong over the timeline. *Scene 2* features extreme close-ups of Kanda's mouth and throat. His video for Arca's "Xen" centers on a dancing body at once voluptuous and androgynous, bizarrely proportioned and constantly morphing, evading any attempts to fix it. The gyrating figure glimmers and trails, flickers and flails. It unsettles as it refuses to settle into anything concrete, and it is a thing of beauty.

Apparently, it is the body of Xen, Arca's alter ego (and the name of his debut album), "a grotesquerie whose body blends gendered anatomies," as

<sup>9</sup> Thomas Gorton, "jesse kanda: child's play," *Dazed*, 22 June 2014, <http://www.dazeddigital.com/artsandculture/article/20250/1/jesse-kanda-childs-play>.

<sup>10</sup> Sasha Geffen, “Chris Cunningham, Jesse Kanda and The Grotesque Femininities of Arca’s ‘Xen’ Video,” *Pitchfork*, 19 November 2014, <http://pitchfork.com/thepitch/558-new-flesh-jesse-kandas-music-videos-subvert-the-myth-of-the-feminine-pristine>.

<sup>11</sup> Kate Hutchinson, “Arca: ‘Nothing is off limits emotionally,’” *The Guardian*, 31 October 2014, <http://www.theguardian.com/music/2014/oct/31/arca-bjork-kanye-west>.

one critic describes her.<sup>10</sup> It is also the body of Arca himself, digitally enhanced and reshaped: a character realized by projecting a female body onto Arca’s own dancing form. The video draws its power and imagery from Arca’s personal mythology, a regard for the subconscious animated by what Gherzi describes as a nearly lifelong inner dialogue about gender and sexual identity. Or, as Gherzi frames it in an interview with *The Guardian*, appearing to describe his music, Kanda’s general approach to imagery, and the video for “Xen” all at once: “I think there’s a certain poetry to having your body reflect what you feel inside of you. Perhaps you have a feeling that’s so pure or overwhelming inside of you that your body disfigures to it—contortions match your confusion.”<sup>11</sup>

The resonance of videos like “Xen,” or tracks like “Thievery,” seems linked to a certain insight about archetype and ambiguity that Gherzi and Kanda bring to their work: the subconscious can be hard to read. For all their vividness and focus, the suggestive images and techniques Kanda employs and the emotional range of Arca’s music leave a great deal to the imagination, technological and otherwise.