

this week's essential reading

'After the fall' by Sasha Frere-Jones, The New Yorker

'My city, mostly limited to Brooklyn then, was roughed up and broken and I needed a sound that matched that environment. Whatever I was looking for wasn't in what Bob Dylan was selling'



Arca is one of the new wave of electronic music producers, whose work encompasses left-field dance-floor fillers as well as ambient and strange soundscapes. Ivo Noppen

▶ the playlist

Four other pioneers at the outer edge of electronic music



Hudson Mohawke
Chimes

One of Arca's production peers on Kanye West's *Yeezus* was this Scottish upstart who plays similarly with space and bass. The four songs on this 2014 EP evoke hip-hop but from a skewed angle, with nothing in the way of rapping and lots of abstract electronic sound.



Dux Content
Lifestyle

The closest thing to an actual album on the PC Music label is this eight-song fantasia that races through all sorts of referents with little mind for musical logic or sense. It's either thrilling, too much to bear or maybe a bit of both – and certainly never boring.



Evian Christ
Waterfall

This English artist is another underground figure cast surprisingly into the spotlight by his inclusion on *Yeezus*. Sound-wise, he has more in common with Arca than any of the others here, with a similar sense of grit and darkness that makes for alluring mystery.



Fatima Al Qadiri
Asiatisch

This New York-based artist, musician and composer, who was raised in Kuwait, shares with Arca an ear for sneaky, insinuating melodies that creep out of the corners of beats and bass. Her full-length debut on the Hyperdub label seizes and seethes.

Does not compute

Arca makes slow, intense, wordless music – not the sort of thing you might expect from someone who has worked with Kanye West, writes **Andy Battaglia**

There's a song on an early version of Arca's new album *Xen* that sounds like a glorious malfunction. The track is titled *Sisters*, welcomingly enough, but as it moves with spirit to an approachable mid-tempo beat, the beginning is greeted with a forbidding wave of woozy static noise. When it falls away, the sound carries on in only the right side of the stereo field, and in the left is a piercing electronic sine wave, like a lab tone used in a hearing test or a scientific experiment. On headphones, it's radical and makes for a startling and exhilarating visceral thrill.

Affecting as it is, however, it turns out it was all a grave mistake: a glitch in the digital file sent out to writers and industry ears in advance. It wasn't supposed to sound like that; it was a gremlin, the result of a wrench in the technological engine. But here's the thing: it went unnoticed, among discerning listeners, for two months before being detected and fixed. The assumption was that it had been made intentionally disorienting and outlandishly abstract.

Welcome to the music of the future.

It's easy to imagine Kanye West appreciating such a scrambling of the signals. For his famously abrasive 2013 album *Yeezus*, the rapper enlisted Arca as a producer, and they worked together on four songs in a studio haunted by major hip-hop stars. At that point Arca was, for all intents and purposes, totally unknown, but his cracked and cryptic sound was enough to get him in with a crew that did not stint with progressive vision or ideas.

After that, Arca joined with FKA twigs, a wraithlike apparition of R&B from deep in distant time. First they teamed for twigs's *EP2* and then again for *LP1*, a striking album from earlier this year that continues to reveal strange layers of ingenuity and surprise. The sound is all sinewy synapses of digital rhythm and vast expanses of expectant space. *Xen* casts the same kind of inverted shadow.

Arca had been making solo music all the while – notably a series of EPs and &&&&&, an online mixtape whose title is not a typo – but *Xen* represents his first real coming-out as an artist on his own. It's a significant but also curious first step. *Now You Know* launches the album

more than a little mysteriously, with a slow, foreboding series of big and booming sounds that take their place in a sort of melancholy parade. All of the elements figure in the rest of the songs, in some fashion or other: streaks of shimmering electronic sound, programmed drums that seem as if extracted from a vacuum, lots of tilting and tittering arpeggios and vaguely 80s-inflected synthesiser stabs. Above and below all of that is bass, which Arca likes and uses to often extremely devastating effect.

Now based in London, Arca, also known as Alejandro Gheresi, arrived where he is by way of Venezuela and New York. He was born in Caracas and while a child moved with his parents to the United States, only to go back again and then return for college at New York University. "I loved the idea I could let myself operate in openness to both science and superstition,"

Pitching myself in between worlds allows for some kind of magic

Arca

he recently said of his upbringing, with Latin American lore and hardened city wisdom, in an interview with *The Fader* magazine. Pitching himself in between worlds became his preferred stance, he said, "allowing for some form of magic". He continued, in a way that re-sounds: "We don't completely understand everything in nature."

We don't completely understand everything on *Xen*, either. The album is decidedly, defiantly abstract. For one thing, it plays from start to finish entirely without words, an unorthodox choice for a producer who has worked so well with rappers and singers in the past. More than that, though, it is intensely quiet, considered and slow – everything that music situated even remotely in the contemporary pop realm is supposed not to be.

Xen, the title track, is a creeping, crinkling riddle of sound, with elements big enough for a warehouse rave surveyed from such a distance as to scale them instead as miniature adornments. The bass is booming enough to rattle a room (indeed, a vase of flowers fell from atop a certain writer's stereo while playing *Xen* at normal volume), but in its bigness the bass also sounds somehow solitary, alone.

Moody in a different way, *Family Violence* moves through quasi-classical string sounds given a sort of digital sheen. They're swift and swooping, fit for a number for a jaunty waltz, but also dark and ominous in a way that is difficult to fully identify.

Arca has said that *Xen* is the name of an alter-ego living in a genderless state of being. According to that same *Fader* article, "Gheresi refers to *Xen* as 'her,' but says that she's neither male nor female". It's tempting, then, to hear music so receptive to flights of fancy as autobiographical. The fantasy is bigger than that, though – open to imaginings of quite literally any and all conceivable worlds, especially worlds different from the one we all collectively inhabit.

As a young artist now 25 years old, Arca represents a new wave of music-makers suited for a future of profound and fundamental change. His vision is radical enough to attract the attention of Björk, who enlisted him



FKA twigs
LP1
Young Turks

as a co-producer for her next album, currently in the works, and it puts him in the company of others operating on an extreme outer edge of pop experimentalism.

Felicita is one of those splendid many, with a total and abiding sense of mystery surrounding everything that he or she does. It's not certain who Felicita is, exactly (or even if it's one person), but there does seem to be a link to the English label known as PC Music, which has garnered lots of attention of late for pop that sounds exploded and exhumed from the grave after being born again. *Frenemies*, a new Felicita EP released online and on bright yellow vinyl, sounds more like five or six different EPs playing all at once, each at its own wrong speed. The reference points seem to be TV commercials, vintage arcade sounds, electronic music by Raymond Scott from the 50s and 60s, old pirate-radio tapes of jungle, and countless other fleeting and weighty byproducts of growing up with limitless audio in an omni-genre age.

The artist known as Sophie haunts a similar sphere, with work as a producer for PC Music and as the creator of *Lemonade*, a hit single that is infectious and irritating at once. The sounds in it are out-there in a cosmos-shaking way, with swathes of empty space between elec-

tronic drippings and stirrings from what might as well be a kettle hissing on screen in a video game. The chorus – "lemonade, la-la lemonade" – is ridiculous but also sinuous in a manner that is hard to shake. It gets lodged in the ear and then stays there, rattling around like a parasite.

Arca is darker and more brooding than any of that, but he shares a similar sense of working with a new template only just barely connected to sounds and aspirations of the past. It exists on its own terms and demands to be heard on those terms instead of borrowed historical allegiances, with seemingly little care for how much abstraction is too much in the province of pop. Once past the point where weirdness is considered a hindrance, it's striking how much opens up as an opportunity to be seized. It's a thrill, and here's hoping it never gets detected and fixed in the end.

Andy Battaglia is a New York-based writer whose work appears in *The Wall Street Journal*, *The Wire*, *Spin* and more.

Kanye West performing in New York.
Evan Agostini / AP

