

SCAR-TISSUE MUSIC

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36 **M**usic is the musician's body: its actions, expressions, affects, its insides and its outsides, its pasts and futures. In live performance, the musician's body is augmented acoustically and technologically, it occupies a state of becoming; on record, the musician's body is suggested in the traces it has left behind, and can even be reconstructed from them. The listener's body may resonate in sympathy, in recognition of common experiences and desires. Ultimately, music is no more the consequence of the musician's body than anything they do, whether talking, writing, or filling in tax returns. Culturally, however, the belief holds that music has a special closeness to and immediacy with the body. This is related to dance, but also to the ancient view that music has a particular power over emotion – the heart over the head – together with the Romantic embellishment that music communicates that emotion far better than any equivalent words might. From this belief springs a conception of authenticity that has long run through popular music, namely that the mediation of music's emotional communication by the world of the mind (be it discourse as traditionally drawn, intellectualised poetics and aesthetics, or even particular sorts of technologies) threatens its authenticity.

Certain recent electronic music albums have reframed this authenticity by embracing the idea that bodies and minds are in fact intimately related and impossible to disentangle. What's more, they hold that the body can and will change, in fact has already done so, in ways described within the broad and multifarious wave of left social justice politics, whose effects have been deeply










arca1000000  • Folgen

arca1000000 APRIL 7 / 'ARCA' ALBUM /
ART BY JESSE KANDA / XL RECORDINGS

Weitere Kommentare laden


greg.bach Yesssssssssss 

edgrndrs Fuck im hyped 

roiadrien Choo choo hype train  

danielmour.a <3 

aaron__philip SHOOK 

applezacks_ So good 

frankieeder    

azizalbraik Omg 

typaraiso Oh yes father 

blaq_everything  

cireez tightttt 



Gefällt 5.851 Mal

22. FEBRUAR 2017

Kommentar hinzufügen ...



felt in underground music and its discourse. Taking some of its cues from the critical and political theory of earlier generations, much of today's electronic music underground understands the musician's body as having been subject to the violence of socio-political oppression and bio-material finitude. Because of this, it must change, must be exercised, in the present and in the future, to ensure survival and a better tomorrow. Notably, this change occurs with the help of what were hitherto among the de-authenticators of popular music: theoretical discourse, and the use of advanced technology, whether musical or medical.

One of the more obvious manifestations of this imperative has come from queer and transgender people, and in fact four prominent underground artists – Elysia Crampton, SOPHIE, Lotic, and Angel-Ho – have changed their pronouns from those associated with the genders they were assigned at birth, and after they had accrued considerable audiences, too. They have done so against the backdrop of an increased visibility of trans people around the world and vigorous, often dehumanising debate over their rights. Yet similar understandings of the body-subject-to-violence, and the need to raise awareness of this and transcend it, have underpinned Black Lives Matter (with police subjecting black bodies to lethal violence), Me Too (sexual harassment and violence towards women, together with the President's campaign scandals and the instatement of Judge Brett Kavanaugh), continuing shifts and pressures on abortion rights (in the USA or Ireland), and the outcry over the treatment of migrants (whether over crossings on the Mediterranean, Yarl's Wood and the Windrush scandal in the UK, family separation and detention in America, or tear gas at the US-Mexico border). Conversations about mental health, too, have transcended the solipsistic >cogito< and pointed to the social, political and bio-material causes and effects of conditions like depression and anxiety, whether in conventional political arenas or in the vernacular of Tumblr, the introduction and debate over trigger warnings, growing awareness of the opioid crisis, or in the writings of Mark Fisher, before and after his death.

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Against this political backdrop, electronic music has taken to embodying these struggles for self- and social justice. The musician's body, especially the politically >othered< and marginalized body, bears the effects of all these oppressions (and they transform it), but it can also transcend them. The music that results from the body can reveal and portray these wounds, but it can also reconstruct the body and heal them. Like scar tissue, the music is both witness to violence and the healing response: arousing pathos, even challenging to look at, perhaps, but a hope-inspiring testament to survival in the face of threatening experiences. It is a music of self-care and self-awareness, of painful emotional and biographical honesty, simultaneously mourning and celebrating, yet without contradiction.

This new honesty surrounding personal struggles within politicised identity categories has been expressed in a wave of albums we might think of as

>coming-out albums<, a description meant not at all flippantly but to draw attention between the continuities in presentations of authenticity, biography and the album-as-statement, and they have appeared at the top of the charts as well as underground. Sam Smith said of the tracks on his 2017 album »The Thrill of it All«: »I feel like they show me. They show the gay guy I've become.« Janelle's Monáe's 2018 album »Dirty Computer« was presented as the artist's most honest statement yet, one in which her voice is no longer mediated by the robotic alter-ego Cindi Mayweather. As well as portraying and responding to the negative, the album also celebrates the positive with its erotic charge and lyrics on »Americans« such as »love me for who I am«, and »cross my heart and hope to die, I'm a big old piece of American pie.« As »Dirty Computer« was released, Monáe was newly open about her queerness. Though not >coming-out albums< in the sense of sexuality, Ariana Grande's »Sweetener« (2018) and Florence and the Machine's »High as Hope« (2018) opened up about anxiety and eating disorder respectively; as Florence Welch said, »There is loneliness in this record, and there's issues, and pain, and things that I struggled with, but the overriding feeling is that I have hope about them.«

In underground electronic music, laden as it is with cultural baggage over the expressive limitations and inauthenticities of its medium, this personal authenticity sees no contradiction between honesty, emotion, and biography on the one hand and surreally fantastic artificial soundscapes on the other. This is not a new development of course – this irony was a foundational principle of queer theory and the queer arts communities that preceded it. If albums such as Arca's »Xen« (2014), »Mutant« (2015) and »Arca« (2017), Lotic's »Power« (2018) or Angel-Ho's »Death Becomes Her« (2019) recover any traditional authenticity at all, it is on the basis that queer transition is not a loss of authenticity but its quintessential enshrinement – not losing >who you are< but finding it. Angel-Ho's debut album is described in the press release as »one of >emancipation and trans identity«; the intent of the title and the drive of the lyrics are a way of »killing the old self, and expressing a poetic way of assuming a new identity.« >This is who I am<, the albums may appear to say, perhaps understanding gender romantically to be an inner, essential truth to be externalised and laid bare, or perhaps seeing it as (re)constructed and performed, as some queer theorists have. If any vestige of Romantic personal authenticity remains for artists or listeners, it may have been in reaction to the earlier vogue for quasi-ironic techno-capitalist music represented most vividly by James Ferraro, PC Music and vaporwave, mediated as it often was by pastiche and persona (Lotic, in fact, famously railed against PC Music's inauthenticity in a Facebook post after their act Girlfriend of the Year made an ironically racist joke).

One of the earliest albums to do this was Arca's »Xen«, which marked the point at which the Venezuelan musician not only openly discussed his queerness, but presented his music as a vehicle for its actualization. He did this by



constructing a digital avatar with artist Jesse Kenda, named Xen after a childhood alter ego, that appeared on the album's art and associated videos. As such, Xen and »Xen« construct a new body for the musician in several senses and without compromising the artist's authenticity (quite the contrary). The album's music follows suit in using electronics to augment acoustic timbres to suggest a choreography of transcendent bodies and gestures, though hardly one of conventional beauty and elegance. Arca released something of a second >coming-out album< with »Arca« in 2018, this time taking the extra steps of leading with his relatively unprocessed voice and appearing in person in three music videos and on the (notably self-titled) album's cover. The debut albums of Lotic (»Power«), Angel-Ho (»Death Becomes Her«) and SOPHIE (»Oil of Every Pearl's Un-Insides«, 2018), are similar as much as they also saw the artists using their own voices where they generally hadn't before and each of them, again, photographically depicting the artist on the cover. The newfound use of the voice and the photograph of the artist have obvious connotations of less mediated use and presence of the musician's body, though they are not necessary components. Elysia Crampton has not, I believe, used her voice or likeness on albums since her transition; she nevertheless sees her music as intimately related to her body and its experiences as an Aymara-American trans woman of colour. As she told the website Ploughshares, »maybe I am trying to map out some sense of self and body that is ultra-body.«

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Often, this music abandons any conventional aesthetics of beauty (one might consider it the most avant-garde music that has been this prominent in popular music in a generation). If these albums sound challenging, it is from a fierceness directed at norms, or else from adopting a kind of beauty or other appeal that the listener must ask themselves if they are, out of ignorance, resistant to. As a queer black person, Lotic has been particularly strident in their music and in commentary on it, saying of the title of their EP »Heterocetera« (2015) that »Any time an oppressed person is being addressed by their oppressor and don't want to hear it, that's the word that comes to mind. As nice as I think I am, I'm always going to say fuck you. I have to say it once a week. The whole EP, especially the title track, is the biggest middle finger I can do right now.« The subsequent album »Power« »originally started as an empowerment album... I felt that I needed to offer something outside of myself, as sort of a healing moment... The question of what would be empowering – the answer to that changed so often over a two-year period. I had to figure out who I was all over again. With this record, I went back and incorporated all of my musical selves.« The album is indeed as rich as Lotic is suggesting here, and its most compelling undercurrent is the balancing act – and sometime simultaneity – of broken, delicate, even vulnerable textures with bold and insistent force, both becoming one under the gestural and undeniably physical exercise of »Power«.

SOPHIE's album »Oil of Every Pearl's Un-Insides« is also strident, but she is an artist with a close affiliation to the PC Music aesthetic Lotic had criticized, and has a different, provocatively pliable and even ironic sense of authenticity. SOPHIE's »coming-out song« was »It's OK to Cry« at the end of 2017, a pop statement not far from the sentimental style of a charity single, yet demanded to be taken seriously amid the atmosphere of trans visibility. The album that followed months later is explicit that bodies are at least partly, if not wholly, flexible, even artificial: the sonic consequences of this are obvious in the album's bendy, liquid gestures, and the emotional consequences veer from angelic sweetness to decadent indulgence. This is clearest on the song »Faceshopping«: »My face is the front of shop/My face is the real shop front/My shop is the face I front/I'm real when I shop my face//Artificial bloom/Hydroponic skin/Chemical release/Synthesize the real/Plastic surgery/Social dialect/Positive results/Documents of life...//Scalpel, lipstick, gel/Action, camera, lights/Violence in your heart/Memories of love (What?)/Professor?«

44 Ironically or otherwise, multifarious physical transformations are explored with apparent enthusiasm amid the presentation of oneself as a commercial venture »fronted« by the plastic face (what about the back?). Is SOPHIE satirising the culture industry (or even sex work), or is she telling it like it is? In the context of the discourse surrounding trans women, it's bold however you read it: the notion that transitioning is indulgent, inauthentic and libidinally charged is a common line among transmisogynists. In a similar way that PC Music and friends toyed with sensitivities around the inauthenticity of digital technology and the commercial pop industry, SOPHIE is baiting transphobes. In any case, SOPHIE's rejection of traditional authenticity and decadent aesthetics amounts to a radical position on queer emancipation.

Another version again of the queer-emancipation-themed debut album came in the form of Colin Self's album »Siblings« at the end of 2018. Self, queer and a drag performer, talks eloquently about his album being an act of expression of elation, of self-care and community care, amid the struggle against oppression within the queer community and beyond it. It also centres the body in the form of the human voice, both sonically and philosophically, and binding the album together is the conception of the »research sister« (as one track is named), a personal or historical inspiration who will help her sisters survive. »Siblings«'s liner notes quote Emily Roysdon and Donna Haraway and feature a cloud of names that includes Ursula Le Guin, Karlheinz Stockhausen, and Celine Dion. Musically, the album's relatively stable and conventional structures of diatonic melody and groove give it a relatable mood of euphoria; though it has its vulnerability and moments of fracture and searching, it is an album free from ironies of emotional expression or cultural output.

Quasi-therapeutic electronic albums as statements of self-revelation have not been limited to queer experience – health has been another focus. One of

the earlier records to occupy this vein was Visionist's »Safe« (2015), which brought his already modernist grime into a bracingly expressionist space. The press release described the producer as »play[ing] off ever-present anxiety and his own battle not to let it overwhelm him. »Comfort, protection, salvation – this is what we search for,« he says. »We are taught that a life of no worries is better for us, and therefore we try to create one that is 'Safe'« ... The album traces the arc of an anxiety attack, from its onset through to recovery.« Mental health has been a key component of social justice discourse lately, and at its forefront has been an awareness of and admission to experience of anxiety and depression. Conditions such as psychosis, however, are less easy to talk of in terms of oppressed identities, emancipation, raising consciousness, self-care: too frightening, too isolating, too inevitably medical, the moral narratives surrounding it less clear. If schizophrenia is to have its mainstream civil-right moment (beyond, that is, Deleuze and Guattari's semi-rescinded enthusiasm in the 1960s), it may not belong to the currently emerging generation. Nevertheless, Berlin-based artist Réelle's astonishing 2018 album »Ghamccccxc vRR« was accompanied by this quote from the artist: »schizophrenia is said to limit a person's abilities overall. My discovery was that it opened a gate to limbic realms not accessible under normal circumstances – at least not to me.« »Ghamccccxc vRR« is probably the most vivid, striking and affecting example of the more gothic strain of these visceral self-portrait albums as initiated by Arca. But Réelle took their own life in November 2018.

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If this wave of scar-tissue music has its ideological and aesthetic limits, it is, for obvious reasons, not for this relatively privileged, straight white male critic to delineate them. A new generation of the structurally oppressed will claim their own narratives and evaluate the strategies of their predecessors. For now, this music seeks to heal the wounds of the present, to feel good in its own skin, and hopefully it is succeeding. If nothing else, it has decisively served to re-frame independent music's outmoded narratives of authenticity and its relationship to bodies and technologies. ◆