

LAURIE ANDERSON - A THESIS



'ART AND ILLUSION, ILLUSION AND ART
THIS IS THE SONG THAT I'M SINGING IN MY HEART...
ART AND ILLUSION, ILLUSION AND ART
ARE YOU REALLY HERE OR IS IT ONLY ART?
AM I REALLY HERE OR IS IT ONLY ART?'

National College of Art and Design

Laurie Anderson - a thesis

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INTRODUCTION

The framework of Laurie Anderson art is set within the confines of American culture by adapting the images of that culture and using the languages of that same culture. This creates a convergence of imagery from consumer culture and real life. Anderson uses both in performance pieces which suggest a new order of cultural unity by merging media and art in a most unique manner.

When deciding on a topic for this thesis the main consideration was that the piece of writing should be on an artist that I have admired and respected and that has influenced me in some way in my own work. Laurie Anderson, performance artist, writer, composer, inventor, draftswoman, photographer, film-maker and musician is such a woman. Her haunting record "O' Superman" shot to the top twenty in the english charts and just be accident brought to the public notice the term - performance.

As Laurie Anderson's work is primarily based on narrative and music I have thought it vital to any understanding of her work to include a number of quotes and excerpts from her texts.

I refer to art history as a background in "The Female Performer" and "Record as Artwork", as I think it will bring greater depth to Laurie Anderson's position as a performing artist of today.

CHAPTER 1

Naming Yourself - Performance versus acting

NAMING YOURSELF - PERFORMING VERSUS ACTING

In the nineteenth century during the consolidation of class difference to serve the new industrial capitalism, the word artist was distinct from both artisan (craft-worker) and artiste (performer) - the difference implying not only one of form but also one of class position. Artisan implied a skilled manual worker without intellectual imaginative or creative purposes (qualities that the bourgeoisie were busy naming as their own) and artiste implied entertainer; for women this usually meant a connection with prostitution for the display of the female body in performance was considered a form of sale. The word artist was reserved for painters, sculptors and eventually also for writers and composers - part of a culture defined, funded by and mostly serving the middle and ruling classes. So to name yourself artist embodies a history of class meanings. How do people choosing this kind of work tackle this history and what does it mean to them?

For some the answer becomes criticising art itself and the prescribed role of the artist: a continuous form of self-referential protest (followed by criticism of how the protest is transformed into saleable artifact). For others the priority is to destroy the definition as it is understood to show that the manual worker also thinks, that the housewife creates, that art practice is a life practice and not the property of an elite. But for some people, using the name artist implies seizing the right to something which has been systematically denied them: the right to work with ideas on a large scale within a form of production over which they have complete control.

And what does it mean to call yourself a performance artist? At its most simple level it means to be an artist who performs. How is this different from other kinds of performance and entertainment? Does it imply that it has somehow been 'elevated' to the status of an art form? For the Dadaists, Futurists and

Surrealists to perform was in itself to dissolve and revolutionise the function of art - to disinvest it of the deadening aura of 'high culture'. The actions of and events often borrowed from other forms of performance (eg. cabaret) and from the polemics of political practice (manifestos etc.) but the contempt for bourgeois values was often more redolent of the aristocratic prankster exercising a privileged form of protest than of the struggles of the revolutionary; and, most importantly, their work was always designed to be seen in the context of the history of art. What reasons lie behind contemporary performance artists choice of self definition and anxiety to distinguish and separate their work from anything to do with theatrecality? Any implication that the entertainer deals with less important issues and in compromised ways would seem to arise from the class stereotyping founded in the artist/artiste split described above. But not all performance artists think along these lines. The emphasis placed on difference arises out of a criticism of the functions of pleasure in the theatre (plays, opera, dance, music, etc.). Performance art becomes a framework for this criticism through a combination of formal and structural strategies.

Some performance artists might describe their work as a kind of anti-skill, to differentiate their way of performing from the acting skills of characterisation. "I think performance art is open-ended, redefined everytime someone does it, it has no boundaries, and is unlike theatre in that it has no characters, no plots, it has another set of rules" - Laurie Anderson (1). Performance is seen as 'doing' an activity which is being watched rather than a part being played. Characterisation is seen as a technique founded on a literary tradition heavily reliant on the written and spoken work and intimately connected with the aesthetics of illusionism which transport the spectator by a series of identificatory processes to another place and time. Theatre is caricatured as a place of catharsis where you emote and rarely think. You may 'lose yourself' in the displays of virtuosity of another, or via the structuring mode of the story, of realism of narrative continuity. Some

see this process of engagement as itself the site of reactionary formation. Theatrical timing, developed to its ultimate finesse by comedians with a split-second appropriateness of word and gesture that delicately juggles the desires of an audience and orchestrates their response (often on the borderlines of repression and expectation) is rejected in favour of 'real time'. The time it takes to execute a certain task, read a certain text, and so on. The audience may be free to come and go during a piece; its duration is not necessarily determined by the conventions of the 'show'. The performance artist is often concerned to alert the audience to the shifting constructions of the performance, to be both inside and outside it, commenting on it. Similar reasons motivate the painter who moves out of framing; the film-maker who works with the surface and plastic qualities of film and draws attention to the structuring device of the splice. The intention is to destroy the 'innocence' of representation, to expose its mechanics. However this strategy can be counterproductive when the enemy is wrongly named as the story, identification and pleasure. Many comedians and others working in theatre tread an extraordinary line that engages an audience on many levels at once; not in a soporific way that prevents thinking but in a way that allows precisely the opposite to happen. The audience can laugh or cry and think. The function of the joke (when it's not at the expense of an oppressed group) can be to open out and stir up those places in people where thinking has stopped. "I cracked up" described the experience of a good laugh.

"A few years ago I was in a night club in New York and saw Andy Kaufman, the comedian, actually shrink a room. He seemed to understand space in a way I had never considered. He was an expert at letting the energy level in the room drop off disastrously - to the point where people suddenly become aware that they are part of a half-drunk clientele crowded in a room waiting to laugh. The walls start to close in. I learned a lot about space from Andy. For a while I was straight woman/audience plant for him. I was

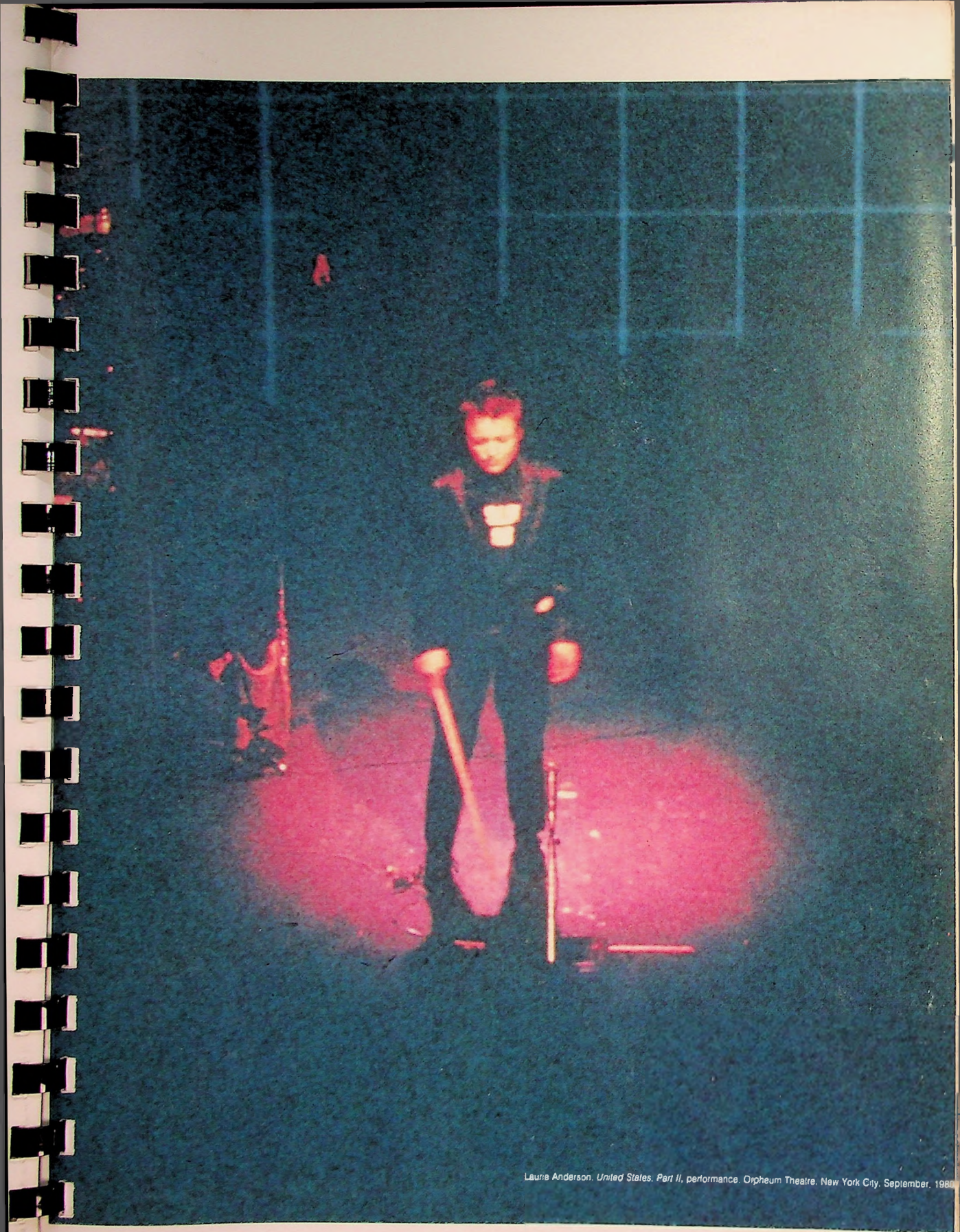
an angry women's libber and my job was to heckle him until he said, "Yeah, well, i'll only respect you when you come up here and wrestle me down." Andy never just pretended to wrestle. We used to go out to Coney Island and ride the Roto-Whirl - the cylinder that plasters you against the wass, stretching mouths into grotesque smiles, and then the bottom drops out. As soon as everybody is inside the door is locked and about three minutes pass while the cylinder is checked. It was this time frame that Andy understood. The moment the door was locked he began to look panicked. "I don't think I want to be here. I don't think this ride is safe. Let me out. Get me out of here". Suddenly the other riders mood changed, and they began to act like hijack victims. The bottom dropped out.

In any case live action, be it in a theatre, gallery or wherever, inevitably also produces its own kind of distanced effect. It can never achieve the perfection that explains the power of cinema for there is never a perfect blackout (indeed some shows happen in daylight) and there is never truly an empty space. The performer is at the mercy of possible mechanical failure if using light or tapes and is constantly exposed to the hazards of accidental sound. This erosion of the perfect statement and of precise artistic control is often used as the basis for questioning both the myth of the absolute correlation between intention and realisation as an acknowledgement of present time.

- (1) Quote from interview with Laurie Anderson on the South Bank Show
B.B.C. 2, March 1982.

CHAPTER 2

Laurie Anderson
United States



Laurie Anderson. *United States, Part II*, performance. Orpheum Theatre, New York City, September, 1980.

Laurie Anderson's talent is for collating and distilling situations through the synchronisation of various mediums, voice, instruments, slides and tapes, film, and a sharp and very perceptive wit. At thirty-five, she is a writer, composer, inventor, draftswoman, photographer, film-maker and musician. (The only activities conspicuously missing from this list are of course painting and sculpture). Sometimes she mounts sound installations in galleries or museums, for the past two years she has been producing a record album; her texts have been published in a number of periodicals. But her activity as an artist is focused primarily in the performances she stages, approximately one new work each year. For Anderson, performance is the mode which best allows the co-ordination of the multiple mediums in which she works. Thus, she has developed a format of thematically interrelated "songs" linked by verbal and musical accompaniment (slides, film). Anderson compromises her audience, and challenges and occasionally chastises her compatriots. She maintains that as an artist she is free to present situations without offering solutions and although she does this through stage performance, her music alone is strength enough to merit the same attention, catchy but obscure, sometimes very moving. While in her early works, this format took the form of a recital - a musical program dominated by a single voice - her recent productions have become concerts - musical performances by several voices or instruments or both. While she often employs additional musicians, Anderson achieves the pluralization implicit in the concert form, not by granting them equal status with her, but by submitting herself to an array of electronic devices which effectively multiplies her presence. The distinction between "recital" and "concert" is equivalent to that which recent criticism draws between considering literature as either "work" or "text". Singular and univocal, the work is an object produced by an author, whereas the text is a permutational field of citations and correspondences in which multiple voices blend and clash. (The

text can span several works as in Proust's seven-part novel).

What is highlighted in contemporary New York culture is the institutional thinness and arbitrariness of the divide between activities which 'belong' to the street or club. Two convergent tendencies in the media and art suggest a new order of cultural unity. On the one hand there is the tendency in the media to aspire to a new level of (aesthetic) consumerism. On the other there is the tendency to adopt the images of consumer culture and to see itself as set within the confines of that culture rather than within the more restricted lineage of art history. Contemporary New York culture shows us the reality of their meeting point. Perhaps this is the death knell of a dying consumer culture or perhaps it heralds the beginnings of an age of art. The ideal within the media for multimedia forms of entertainment, is familiar terrain for performance and other kinds of post-conceptual art. The reduced circumstances of the late 70's seemed to force much of the more elliptical and elongated media explorations of early performance art to become more direct, faster and to bring it closer to mass entertainments both in form and content. It is equally reflective of an attitude amongst artists rejecting the arbitrary restriction of the 'aesthetic' and trying to touch on realities previously tabooed as tainted by the media. The aesthetics of exclusion became replaced by a new non-aesthetic approach of all-inclusiveness. Suddenly art is all spectacle and as fast-moving as the entertainments industry.

"Gradually the audiences have been changing in lots of different kind of ways, and they've been real motely crews. It's been fun, because it was the art people and then the Rock 'n Rollers started coming and other kinds of people and culturally the U.S.A. is AM pop culture, period, and the artists are over here, museums, art galleries, art publications and that whole sort of little elite, and we're not talked to, its sort of real fragmented. And wouldn't it be incredible if American artists in particular decided to somehow enter their own culture". (1)

Laurie Anderson is not writing pop music, but songs about pop music. Rock 'n Roll is among the subjects of her music, just as pictorial traditions and literary or musical styles have been among the subjects of her performances. Ultimately her work refers to popular culture as does a Rauschenburg painting - only descriptively not structurally.

UNITED STATES - A PERFORMANCE

Anderson's recent work is to be a four part panorama of contemporary American life, it jumps back and forth but the areas are politics, transport, money, and love. "Part on Americans of the Move" (discussed later) was presented in the spring of '79 at the Kitchen (centre for video and music, New York) and it dealt with transportation as a metaphor for communication - the transfer meaning from one place to another.

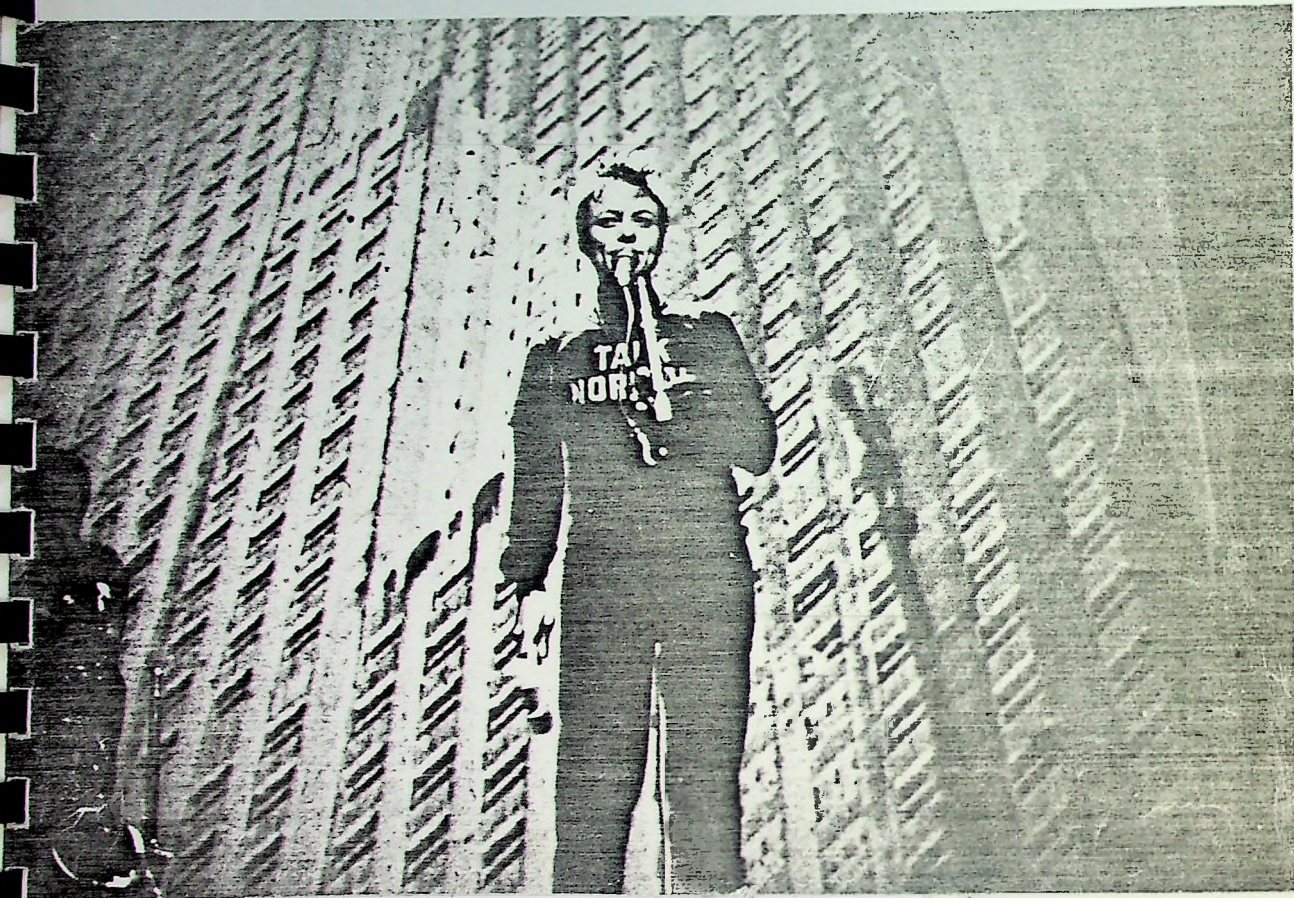
"United States Part II" was presented at the Orpheum Theatre, a converted vaudeville house on Manhattan's Lower East side. It marked Anderson's recent transformation from a radiant midwestern Madonna into an expressionless neuter "punk" - a transformation that corresponds to the shift in musical styles. Anderson's early, innocent musical vignettes have been replaced by the high theatricality and style-consciousness of "new wave". Musical styles imply specific personal styles; yet Anderson does not identify herself with either. Rather she quotes them and in doing, maintains a distance between herself and her material. The Laurie Anderson we experience is clearly an assumed persona. "U.S. II" includes 13 musical numbers performed by Anderson and a five person back-up group, imitating the format of the rock concert and the elaborate visual presentation associated with it. In previous works, Anderson's texts frequently proceeded as commentary on her images and on their opacity, their

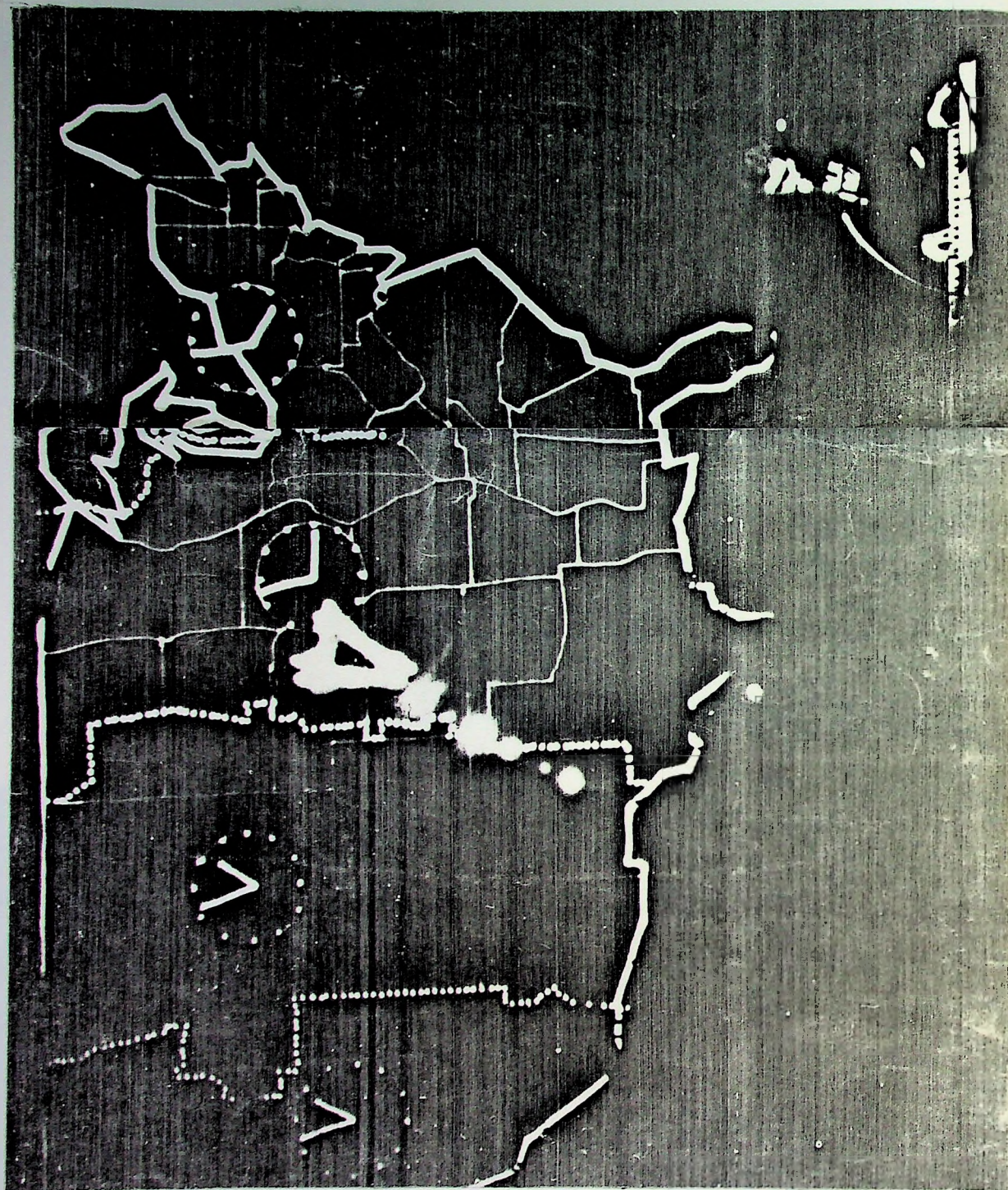
resistance to explanation. But here the visuals - her most sophisticated to date seemed designed to amplify her verbal and musical material. Using both film and slide projections, some times simultaneously she presented a kaleidoscopic montage of metropolitan life, aerial photographs of N.Y. city, sometimes in negative, sometimes enlarged so that the half-tone screen was visible, skyscrapers, the statue of liberty, subway cars arriving and departing with monotonous regularity.

In terms of content "U.S. II" was overtly political, an image of America on the brink of disaster. A swarm of insectile helicopters hovered over a map of the Middle East. A film of the electronic video game space invaders was projected over a map of the United States. The evening concluded with a portentous vision of nuclear meltdown, as a film of the American flag spinning in a washing machine - literally being laundered - was superimposed over a negative image of the Statue of Liberty, its whites intensified as if subjected to intense heat. The political message was clear, of all Anderson's works, this seemed to be the one in which her voice - in the sense of an opinion or position was unmistakable. Yet, we also identify an artist's voice as his or her presence in the work, and in this sense it was extremely difficult, if not impossible to locate Anderson's "voice". This is because the only access to herself that she allows is through all kinds of technological filters which amplify, distort and multiply her actual voice in such a way that it can no longer be identified as hers. She uses a few electronic filters to change her voice, not to create characters but to refer to types of speech, people - a low filter for a corporate or voice of authority. Collaboration with the technology of sound reproduction characterizes Anderson's recent work marking a radical shift in the direction of what has come to be known as performance art, a shift away from the esthetics of presence which has dominated that mode since its inception.

"U.S. II" opened with a hallucinatory narrative about the French using babies in carriages as "Traffic-testers". Anderson, standing center stage, isolated in the glare of a white spotlight directly addressed the audience, using the first person. "I've been travelling a lot lately..." Yet the voice we heard was clearly not her own, but that of the drawling endearing simpleton now familiar to Anderson's followers and unavoidably reminiscent of Jack Benny. Anderson creates this character through the use of a harmonizer, an electronic device (vocoder) used primarily by musicians and which in this instance dropped her voice an octave. If to act is to assume a character, then Anderson does not act; she creates her characters electronically. The text Anderson recited (and several others in U.S. II) was recycled from her exhibition last year at the Holly Solomon, Dark Dogs, American dreams which I will later discuss. The "re-run", the incorporation of previous material into new work illuminates the central role of technology in all her work, after all technology has been defined as a way of doing things in a reproducible manner

Criticism of dramatic texts conventionally interpret an author's characters. That is the author is supposed to speak through his/her characters, but Anderson's characters appear to speak through her. She is the medium which so many incorporeal voices require in order to communicate with us, the body they temporarily assume. (she also frequently treats herself as the physical medium of her work, in one of the most astonishing sequences in "U.S. II" she used her own cranium as a percussion instrument, striking it with her fingers and electronically amplifying the sound). But if Anderson treats herself as medium, then it is the technology facilitating this effect that becomes the subject of her work. Thus in the first song in "U.S. II", "O' Superman", Anderson faced the audience from behind the keyboards, she was actually playing her own voice multiplying it, and electronically modulating its pitch. Today the singer need only speak, her equipment sings for her. She presents a technologically cluttered landscape.





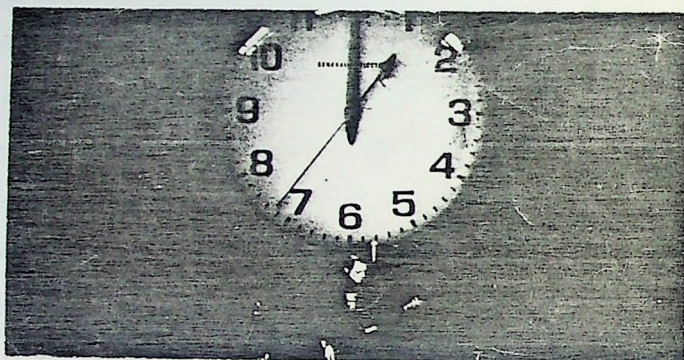
"THE SATELLITES ARE OUT TONIGHT"

FROM 'LAURIE ANDERSON'S' - UNITED STATES, PART II



"Solo with Small Speaker in Mouth "

1979, performance



Magnified images dwarf the performer, distancing her further from us.



Not only is her stage littered with mikes, amps, speakers, and other paraphernalia; she also represents America as thoroughly saturated by technology. In "U.S. II" s contemporary love song "Let X=X", it is no longer the stars, but satellites that come out at night: technology has eclipsed nature as the artist's subject. Today our experience of the world is comprised largely of the representations we make of it in photographs, films, on television. Yet the media present an "equipment-free" view of reality; except through elaborate acrobatics, the camera cannot account for its own presence in the scene it records. Like the eye of the perceiving subject for which it is a surrogate, the camera is that blind spot or "stain" in every image which permits the fantasy of presence - of reality directly perceived - to flourish. Anderson, by exposing rather than concealing the equipment through which she represents herself, destroys that fantasy. In its place, she shows us a world denatured by technology, and a self fragmented, pluralized, and thus dispossessed by its own representations.

Laurie Anderson describes rather than confronts politics, "My ideas on politics, to compress them for a second, is ... the most important thing to me, in terms of doing my own work, is not to be didactic. To create a situation ... if political ideas are used I -

a) am not running for political office, b) I don't have the answers even if I were going to run for political office, and c) as an artist I consider my job if I am interested in politics is a descriptive one, and not prescriptive, you know. I don't have any answers for anybody. I'm of course, as an artist free to work with any materials that I choose, and the danger of anything that's defined as propaganda, and the best example of this I know is ... let's say you hear a song. It's an incredibly beautiful song and you just immediately love it, but you can't understand the words; the lyrics... they're buried in it. You listen to this song fifty times, and finally understand the lyrics, and they're against... they're stupid, or they're just against anything that you ever believed, but it is too late. Because you already accepted them. And it's inside you, there's nothing you can do. This is to me the principal difference between ideas and art. Art enters you first of all sensually, through your ears and eyes, and... and it's tricky... it becomes a

kind of propaganda if you push it inside someone before they have a chance to say 'No that's not a good idea! That's a stupid idea. Politically I'm against it.' So the situation that I'm interested in creating is yes, a sensual one, but one that's airy enough, so that people can say well, well I'll think about that but I don't have to think about it right now. I'll think about it later, maybe totally disagree with it maybe I don't but I'll just sit back and watch. There's something that isn't like... I'm not up on a soapbox, doing anything. Well, I am talking about the soapbox. I think that art is very inefficient in terms of politics. The last time I tried to work directly in politics was within feminism. In '72 I was a marshal at Playboy demonstration. At a Playboy club in NY and we're all marching up and down in front of it and the Video was there, all the TV people. And someone who worked at the club came to work and she was going... Oh all these people, what are they doing here? And she asked me, because I was in charge of the communication aspect of this thing - she said 'How come you're all here?' and I said 'Well, we're protesting the fact that women are treated in a certain way', and she said 'Ah look, I make 800 dollars a week at this job, I have three kids. I have no husband, this is the best job I've ever had. If you want to talk about women not making money, why don't you go down to the garment district where women make 75 cents an hour? Why don't you demonstrate down there?' And I said 'Well, good idea'. Thing is TV cameras don't want to go down to the garment district because their equipment bumps along the cobblestones, and it's too dark, and the women just don't want to go down there because they figure ... we want news, we want a beat... we want to show our position in the spotlight. This was the last demonstration I was involved in because it was palpably about a certain kind of PR stunt that didn't work. It was ineffectual politically. Stupid. It was co-opted by the news stations to say 'Here are the girls at the Playboy club...' this is a sweet novelty story. 'You know. And it's the same thing for a lot of things that are connected to...' (2)

(1) Performance magazine, No. 14, Interview by Rob la Frenais with Laurie Anderson

(2) as above

RECORD AS ARTWORK - A BACKGROUND

C. HUTCHMAN

CHAPTER 3

Record as artwork - a background
"O' Superman"

RECORD AS ARTWORK - A BACKGROUND

O SUPERMAN

In the art of 1960's the record took its place alongside communications media such as video, the telegram, the photograph, the book and the film, as a tool in achieving the objectivity which artists, leaving behind the expressionistic climate of the 1950's seemed to be seeking. In line with the reductive theories of the period, the record contributes to the isolation of one component of art work, sound, while on the other hand it enriches the array of linguistic tools available for the task of exploding the specifically visual and pushing back the limits of the art process. The record thus extends and enhances the precepts of art. It can serve to expand work acoustically and at the same time contribute to the quantitative diffusion of art.

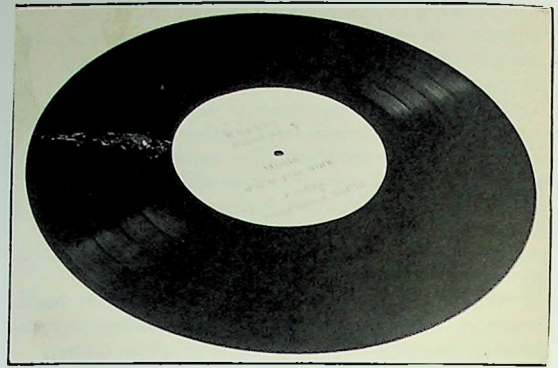
By focusing on linguistic uses, the record helps to 'document' the sound aspect of art work. Its significance is therefore as part of artistic research: it can amplify the written analytico-conceptual investigation and the actions of body research or it can be used as an acoustic element to integrate with visual content. Lastly, it can be seen in its banal function of recording musical sounds or as a self signifying object. As a form of aurally-written research from the immobility and passivity of the printed page and restore to communication those qualities of spoken language which printing removes.

In 1962 the founder and editor of the mag, Henre Chopin, produced a 'Vibrespace' record in which he collected the sound of his breathing distorted and transformed by acoustic superimposition. The idea of mechanisation of speech met with an immediate response from De Vree, Kriwet and Garnier, who began in 1962 to produce records and tapes in which sounds and words converge in audio poetry.

Kopcke MUSIC WHILE YOU WORK

1958-1964

Edition Rene Block, Berlin, 33RMP



The same magazine which later took the name OU, also published the phonetic poems of Mimmo Rotella who wrote in the 'epistaltist manifesto' that the inclusion in epistaltist composition of 'sound effects' taken from life corresponds to what polymaterial art is to sculpture and to what collage is to painting - epistaltic language means freeing all the words from their utilitarian values and turning them into tracer rockets aimed at the decrept edifices of syntax and vocabulary... the human voice must not be limited to the monotony of articulate language - it is an inexhaustible source of natural musical instruments.

Simultaneously, in the climate of nouveau realisme, Yves Dlein published in 1959, his lecture at the Sorbonne Concert of Vacuum, a soundless record in which the sensation of the void is reinforced my musical silence.

The conceptions emerging from mass culture and in particular from the analysis of the consumer society have implications for art by reducing it to the level of consumer goods, which is why, in the 1960's, with Pop Art and Fluxus, records developed into a common means of artistic communication. Artists like Warhol took up and produced commercial music, and in Warhol's case with economic and musical aspirations. Warhol also started a group, the Velvet Underground, and with it ventured into the field of sound rock. In Pop art the record was even used as a document while in Fluxus it assumed the function of disturbance : Kopcke made Music while you work, in which the grooved surface of the record

is crossed by plastic drips which produce continual interruptions aimed at annoying the listener. The material damage accentuates one of the banal meanings of the record variation in use. By damaging and cracking the record, K attempted to stress imperfection and disturbance as a sound. This means that it is possible to see it as a functional and material modification and play it at different speeds. The equation of the record as a physical product with weight, substance, diameter, shape and thickness brings the linguistic medium back to the level of its function as an object. The recording 'describes' it as an object made by an author with a title and place in history. The way it is used is also determined by the simple recording in which the record becomes a historic document of working statements and speeches. In this sense the record can provide either an account of the theories of artists, or of works resulting from their theories.

By faithfully reproducing actual sounds or noises, the record extends the dimensions of aural writing and offers something closer to the physical and tactile experience which is lost when actions, performances or environmental productions are reported only in documents or visual recordings. The sensation that performers and events are sharing the same space as the listener is a step towards audio-tactile integration in art work. The record directly 'touches' almost everyone in that it presents a collection of noises and acoustic communications between the performer and the hearer which can recreate part of the psychophysical experience of the event itself. Thus immediately the art product is refined by the addition of the record, a sensorial, acoustic/aural component is re-achieved. In 1972 Marina Abramovic reproduced on record the sounds and noises of her physical environment, while De Maria combined the music made by the waves of the Pacific and Atlantic Oceans, using drums, turned it into a crescendo.

The "Top Song" by Murray is more musical. Here the Canadian artist collects 100 hit pop songs of ten years, playing ten seconds of each. On its two sides the record covers the most famous snatches of tunes from the Beatles "Hey Jude" to "Windy Hill" by the Association, from "I Wanna Hold your Hand" by the Beatles to "Cherry Hill Park" by Billy Joe Royal. The record plays on the sound memories of its listeners, conditioned by the international hit parade, and on the way disc-jockeys work. As one of them says: 'When you have over 300 singles coming in a week you don't have time to listen to them all or even half of them. Generally a disc-jockey will play about ten seconds and he usually can tell if it is a good song or not'. Those artists seem intent on integrating iconographic documentation with the sound of the image, but they fail to realize that the record itself has a presence as an image which is all its own. The image is one of the various tools which can be used in the codification of records. Theoretically the record can follow on from its image or vice-versa.

But let us return to the present time and to the success of Laurie Andersons 'O' Superman'. The fickle nerve in the British commercial pop scene that takes 'novelty' records unerringly to the top of the charts managed to throw up something of real worth recently. Caught up by the English national mania for spoon-fed eccentricity (there was even a spoof record made of it) was Laurie Anderson's complex and haunting vocoder paean, O Superman. You can't dance to it, can't work to it, can't do anything to it, except listen to it, until all eight minutes of it is over. Yet somehow it managed to slot into the jolly japes of Radio One DJ's, and somehow, just by accident bring to the public notice the term Performance Art.

It couldn't have happened in the strictly conventional US pop scene, where, ironically the term is in fact quite accepted and not necessarily a passport to

obscurity or elevation to the rarefied heights of fine art history. In England, it produced a sort of backlash, with the New Musical Express referring to Performance having a 'lousy reputation' for being either pointlessly provocative or unnecessarily austere before going on to praise Anderson The Leveller, again in favour, 'wished she'd take her work out of the precious art-school circle it inhabits', while the Sunday Telegraph stood on its head trying to prove her connection with 'serious' art and classical music. "O Superman" certainly teased the prejudices out of the woodwork. Mick Jagger, David Bowie, and even John Lennon have all been classical examples of British pop stars who attempted to crossover between their world and the radical avant garde. But Laurie Anderson, significantly a woman, was already considered something of a performance 'star' probably before she even thought of making a record.

"My idea with making things like records too, which first of all satisfied me, because as a performance artist I have zero left of a real physical object. It's just wonderful to have, it's skinny, it's small, and it's cheap, and it's exactly the piece, and everybody gets exactly the same thing and it's affordable and I like that. And I like the idea also of using a system like a large record company to do it."

"O Superman is a kinda of a love song, with an idea of places,
cliches about places are looked at, places where Mom is"
(South Bank Show)

"O Superman" is the first song in "U.S. II", and it is a viciously ironic paean to a 'superpower'. Anderson faced the audience from behind a keyboard, intoning the lyric into a microphone. Yet the sound that emerged was that of a chorus. Anderson was not accompanying herself on the keyboard; she was actually playing her own voice, multiplying it, and electronically modulating its pitch. Today, the singer need only speak, her equipment sings for her. "O Superman" begins as a domestic mantra sweetly invoking 'Mom and Dad'. Then, answering machine voices are introduced 'Hello, this is your Mother, are you there?' 'Are you coming home?'. They grow increasingly ominous. "This is the hand the hand that takes" A collage of work images intercuts passive/aggressive messages, "Mom" moves from nurturer to devoure. Ultimately Anderson's "Mother" is a country - one that effects a

chilling, lulling reconciliation, with its disoriented child. "O Superman" concludes with a patriarchal embrace as crushing as the one Athena inflicted on Laocoon.

Walk the Dog the B side of "O Superman", has a more anecdotal overtly pop edge. Moving from a domestic quarrel which is temporarily stalled by the narrator's decision 'to go out and walk the dog' the piece spins into a lacerating exploration of social attitudes. A driving carnival beat, calypso riffs and a sarcastically sanitized country and western rhythms are interlaced and layered to climax in a hasty hallucinatory party scene. The conclusion smacks of a cruel practical joke but - and here is one of Anderson's major strengths, the force of that interpretation has much to do with the contrast between the lyrics and intonation of the performer.

Anderson's voice remains a remarkable instrument; there may be only one singer but that does not limit the number of characters the singer evokes. The glibly manipulative persona who emerges at the end of "Walk the Dog" turns a simple direction into a devastating threat.

Like much of Anderson's work the selections on the record have a hypnotic repetitiveness reminiscent at their best of Karlheinz Stockhausen's elegant merger of electronic concrete and choral music. There are also lush, lyrical passages not unlike Isao Tomita's synthesizer experiments, particularly his electronic reworking of Debussy's "Preludes". She also draws from mainstream American music (both pop and rock 'n roll) to achieve a satiric and seductively populist edge. It is Anderson's knowledge of a wealth of new music sources that gives her work such structural authority. And most significantly as the libretto for U.S. continues to emerge, there are Anderson's works. Her fractured impressionistic narrative is a totally original, insightful reflection of American creativity and chaos.



"I met a guy and he looked like he might have been a hat check clerk at an ice rink -which, in fact, he turned out to be- and I said: Oh boy. Right again.

Let X=X. You know, it could be you. It's a skys-blue sky. Satelites are out tonight. Let X=X.

You know, I could write a book, and this book would be thick enough to stun an ox. Cause I can see the future. And it's a place. About 70 miles east of here- were it's darker. Linger on over here. Got the time? Let X=X.

I got this postcard and it read: Dear Amigo. Dear Partner. Listen, I just want to say thanks. So thanks! Thanks for all the presents. Thanks for introducing me to the Chief. THanks for putting on the feedbag. Thanks for going all out. Thanks for showing me your Swiss Army knife. Thanks for letting me autograph your cast. Hug and kisses.

XXXODO. Oh! and PS. I... I feel... feel like... I am... like I'm in a burning building- and I gotta go.

It's a sky-blue sky. Satelites are out tonight. The balance of terror. Let X=X.

You know, I could write a book. And this book would be thick enough to stun an ox. Cause I can see the future- and it's a place. About 70 miles west of here where it's darker. Linger on over here. Got the time? Let X=X.

Your eyes. It's a day's work to look into them.

Your eyes. It's a day's work just looking into them."

From 'Let X=X'.

Allegory and language in Andersons work

"Americans on the Move"

ALLEGORY AND LANGUAGE - AMERICANS ON THE MOVE

" We write in order to forget our foreknowledge of the total opacity of words and things or, perhaps worse, because we do not know whether things have to be understood" - Paul De Man, *Allegories of Reading*.

Here is the beginning of an allegory, a brief parable of reading from the opening of *Americans on the Move* -

You know when you're driving at night like this, it can suddenly occur to you that maybe you're going in completely the wrong direction. That turn you took back there... You were really tired and it was dark and raining and you took the turn and you just started going that way and then the rain stops and it starts to get light and you look around and absolutely everything is completely unfamiliar. You know you've never been here before and you pull into the next station and you feel so awkward saying "Excuse me, can you tell me where I am?"... (1)

This passage, with its images of driving (Anderson's metaphor for consciousness: "I am in my body the way most people drive in their cars") and obscurity, is reminiscent of the opening of the *Divine Comedy* or rather of that state of perplexity which initiates so many allegories. And Anderson's night driver soon encounters her Virgil in the guise of a grease monkey, who reveals that her befuddlement is the result of her failure to "Read the signs" - a failure which is not, however, attributed to a subject who has either neglected or misread directional signals, but to the fundamental unreadability of the signs themselves. Commenting on a projection of the image that was emblazoned on the Apollo 10 spacecraft - a nude man and woman, the former's right arm raised at the elbow palm proffered - her Virgil in overalls inquires: "In our country, we send pictures of our sign language into outer space. They are speaking our sign language in these pictures. Do you think they will think his hand is permanently attached that way/ Or do you think they will think they will read our signs? In our country, good-bye looks just like hello".

Two alternatives: either the extraterrestrial recipient of this message will assume that it is simply a picture, that is an analogical likeness of the human figure,

which case he might logically conclude that male inhabitants of earth walk around with their right arms permanently raised. Or he will somehow divine that this gesture is addressed to him and attempt to read it, in which case he will be stymied, since a single gesture signifies both greeting and farewell, and any reading of it must oscillate between these two extremes. The same gesture could also mean "Halt"! or represent the taking of an oath, but if Anderson's text does not consider these alternatives that is because it is not concerned with ambiguity with multiple meanings engendered by a single sign; rather two clearly defined but mutually incompatible readings are engaged in blind confrontation in such a way that it is impossible to choose between them. It is, of course, in allegory that "one and the same object can just as easily signify a virtue as a "vice" and this works to problematize the activity of reading, which must remain forever suspended in its own uncertainty.

" ... in the illusory babels of language", Robert Smithson wrote, " an artist might advance specifically to get lost". Anderson is such an artist, and her performances are narratives of losing one's way in labyrinths of signs. Although she employs, in addition to lyrics and spoken texts, photographs, drawings, films and music, all of these are implicated in a general thematics of reading that extends far beyond the limits of the written text. For Anderson, the work is a vast network of signs and as such continually elicits reading, interpretation. " I use words, and slogans, I love them, they are the first things people are suspicious of, - as if it can't be as simple as that" (2)

Consciousness, being in the world, is in fact identified with reading - an identification which is not, however, unproblematic, for the legibility of signs is always uncertain. And it is to the problem of illegibility that Anderson's work is addressed. *Americans on the Move, Part I of United States*, was presented at the Kitchen and it dealt with transportation or a metaphor for communication - the transfer

meaning from one place to another. It continually returns to the fundamental ambivalence of signs and to the barrier they thereby erect in the path of understanding. A photograph of a woman shrugging her shoulders, palms turned upwards, elicits the conundrum: "Does this woman think its raining? or, do you think it's all the same to her?" An earlier version of the work included the following story about consulting a palmist (a Reader and Advisor) in Albuquerque:

The odd thing about the reading was that everything she told me was totally wrong. She took my hand and said, "I see here by these lines that you are an only child..." (I have seven brothers and sisters) "I read here that you love to fly..." (I'm totally terrified of planes) and so on. But she seemed so sure of this information that eventually I began to feel like I'd been walking around for years with these false documents permanently tattooed to my hands. It was very noisy in the house, family members kept walking around in and out, speaking a high clicking kind of language that sounded like Arabic. Books and magazines in Arabic were strewn all over the carpet. Suddenly I realized that maybe it was a translation problem - maybe she had been reading from right to left instead of left to right - and thinking of mirrors, I gave her my other hand. She didn't take it, but instead, held out her own hand. We sat there for a minute or two in what I assumed was some sort of strange participatory, invocatory ritual. Finally I realized that her hand was out because she was waiting ...waiting for money.

In this passage, which treats the metaphor of communication as economic exchange - the exchange of meaning balance by an exchange of currency - Anderson proposes that the same "text" read backwards and forwards might engender antithetical meanings. It thus recalls her palindromes (word, verse, that reads the same backwards as forwards) which rarely read the same in both directions: in her Song for Juanita (3) the first syllable "Juan-" is reversed into "no" producing a rhythmic oscillation "no-one-no-one"; morphemes are thus revealed to contain the seed of their own contradiction. Palindromes, puns, and "translation problems" recur throughout Anderson's works, allowing us to identify them as what Paul De Man, in his recent *Allegories of Reading* calls, "allegories of unreadability".

De Man recognizes allegory as the structural interference of two distance levels or usages of language, literal and rhetorical (metaphoric), one of which denies precisely what the other affirms. In most allegories a literal reading medieval schemas of textual exegesis, de Man identifies such readings as tropological. Yet because literal language is itself rhetorical, the product of metaphoric substitutions and reversals such readings are inevitably implicated in what they set out to expose and the result in allegory:

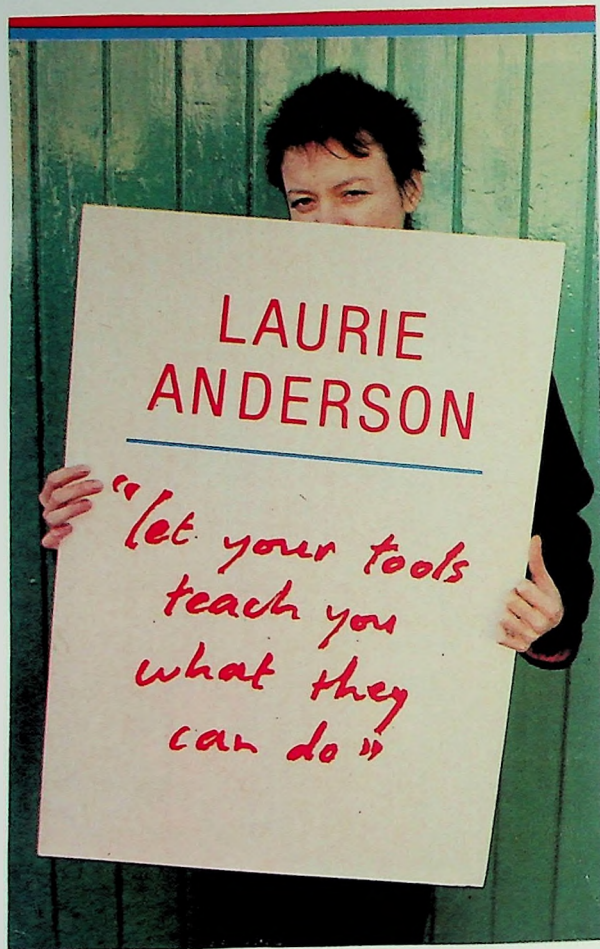
It is equally possible, however, to read the last line literally rather than figuratively, as asking with some urgency the question we asked earlier in the context of contemporary criticism: not that the sign and referent are so exquisitely fitted to each other that all difference between them is at times blotted out but, rather, since the two essentially different elements, sign and meaning, are so intricately intertwined in the imagined "presence" that the poem addresses, how can we possibly make the distinctions that would shelter us from the error or identifying what cannot be identified? The clumsiness of the paraphrase reveals that it is not necessarily the literal reading which is simpler than the figurative one...; here the figural reading, which assumes the question to be rhetorical, is perhaps naive, whereas the literal reading leads to entire schema set up by the first reading can be undermined, or deconstructed in terms of the second, in which the final line is read literally as meaning that, since the dancer and the dance are not the same, it might be useful, perhaps even desperately necessary - for the question can be given a ring of urgency, "Please tell me, how can I know the dancer from the dance?" - to tell them apart. But this will replace the reading of each symbolic detail by a divergent interpretation ... This hint should suffice to suggest that two entirely coherent but entirely incompatible readings can be made to hinge on one line, whose rhetorical mode turns the mode as well as the mode of the poem upside down. Neither can we say... that the poem simply has two meanings that exist side by side. The two readings have to engage each other in direct confrontation for the one reading is precisely the error denounced by the other and hasj to be undone by it. Nor can we in any way make a valid decision as to which of the readings can be given priority over the other; none can exist in the other's absence. There can be no dance without a dancer, no sign without a referent. On the other hand, the authority of the meaning engendered by the grammatical structure is fully obscured by the duplicity of a figure that cries out for the differentiation that it conceals.

Paul de Man, *Allegories of Reading*, New Haven, Yale University Press
pg 205 1979

I have quoted this lengthy passage in full not only because it illuminates the structure of Laurie Anderson's art and allows us to identify it as allegorical, but also because it demonstrates that modernist texts such as Yeats contain within themselves the seed of their own allegorization. Allegory can no longer be condemned as something merely appended to a work of art, for it is revealed as a structural possibility inherent in every work. In modernism, however, the allegory remains in potentia and is actualized only in the activity of reading, which suggests that the allegorical impulse that characterizes post-modernism is a direct consequence of its preoccupation with reading.

A text is made of multiple writings, drawn from many cultures and entering into mutual relations of dialogue, parody, contestation, but there is one place where this multiplicity is focused and that place is the reader, not, as was hitherto said, the author. The reader is the space on which all the quotations that make up a writing are inscribed without any of them being lost; a text's unity lies not in its origin but in its destination. Yet this destination can no longer be personal: the reader is without history, biography, psychology; he is simply that someone who holds together in a single field all the traces by which the written text is constituted.

Roland Barthes "Death of the Author", *Image Music Text*,
trans STEPHAN HEATH, NY Hill and Wang, 1977, pg. 148.



I came home today and I opened
the door with my bare hands.
And I said "Who tore up all my
wallpaper samples? Who's eating
all the grapes — the ones I was
saving . . . Moly Smokey looks
like some kind of a great host
today."

CHAPTER 5

Autobiography in Laurie Anderson's work

In her autobiography, Laurie Anderson writes about her childhood in New York City, her move to Los Angeles, and her career as a musician and filmmaker. She describes her early experiences with music and how they shaped her artistic vision. Anderson also discusses her relationship with her family and how it influenced her work. The book is a candid and honest look at the life of a creative person, and it provides a valuable insight into the mind of one of the most innovative artists of our time.

AUTOBIOGRAPHY IN LAURIE ANDERSONS WORK

Laurie Anderson has been termed 'autobiographical artist' a categorisation of which she is wary. Although private memories, snatches from the past, recur in much of their work, she feels that the autobiographical material is transcended and re-used in a special way. It could be said that all manifestations of art are in some way 'autobiographical' since they reveal as much about the personality of the artist as they do about the 'art' content: what makes this work more intimate, and more riveting, is that the distinction between the personality of the artists and the work presented is blurred in the performance. The art-life equation is a difficult one; Anderson summed it up in a song at another performance.

'Art and illusion, illusion and art
This is the song that i'm singing in my heart...
Art and illusion, illusion and art
Are you really here or is it only art?
Am I really here or is it only art?'

I don't understand film time, she confided, as low sounds resembling boat sirens filled the space. I live by the Hudson River, she continued in a gentle voice, and a lot of boats go by and I spend a lot of time trying to film them. I set up a camera by the window and every time I hear a horn, I run to the camera by it's almost alwaystoo late: and they have gone by, and this is the kind of footage I have. It's a kind of timing, a kind of syncing that's been getting into all the songs I have been writint at this time. Its like walking up the stairs in the dark and you think there is one more step than there actually is, and your foot comes pounding down on the top step - its that gap between the last real step and the one that you think is there that is in all the songs. All the songs sound sike they have their centres missing... I was trying to writh a song for a performance that I had to do and all the sounds around were so distracting that it was difficult to concentrate. Then my mother called and said "Well why not come out here and writh your song, its real quiet and i've just put new carpets down" and when I got there the carpets were so thick that none of the doors closed and the only room that didn't have a carpet was the parrot's room, and everytime someone opened the door into that room it would whack against the parrots cage and the parrot would sgriek and this is the sound that filled the whole house - this is the song that I wrote. I have used aspects of my own life and other peoples as well. But the story, really is in the telling. My work is about time, timing and memory, - about what happens when you forget part of the story, what happens in the pauses, memory lapses, rumour. The first 'autobiographical' work I did was in art issues. I began making one-sentence books, kind of diaries, as a means to get away from sculpture. One of the series was a dream series which came out of falling asleep in art history classes and mixing

those dreams with what was on the screen. I would wake suddenly from a daze and all sorts of personal material that I had in mind became completely mixed up with the art history, which I think is the case in most artists lives. From that I did a few pieces related to sleeping in public places (which I discovered to be strictly taboo), to insomnia pieces and a speakerized pillow with tapes of songs and stories inside, mostly because I was an insomniac at the time. I am not sure about how I manipulate that past material, or how much is added from imagination. One of the things about being an autobiographical artist is that the stories get more and more recent, and I have finally caught up with myself. The worst part about it is that now I find I don't have one past but two - there's what happened and there's what I said and wrote about what happened. This can get confusing. Everyone has versions. During the Whitney piece my father was at the performance and a friend of mine overheard him adding his own version of the story in a kind of stage whisper. It is difficult to separate my family background from my tendency to include narrative in my work. All my family are great story tellers - a large part of my childhood was spent listening to other members of the family recite at the end of each day. We even liked playing with words. Most of us - I have seven brothers and sisters played musical instruments, and we were all expected to perform for the family audience. So the mixture of myth, song, music, narrative, was a big thing in my childhood'.

Scrutiny of appearances and gestures, as well as the analytical investigation of the fine edge between an artist's art and his or her life, became the content of a large body of work loosely referred to as 'autobiographical'. Thus several artists recreated episodes from their own life, manipulating and transforming the material into a series of performances through film, video, sound, and soliloquy. Laurie Anderson used 'autobiography' to mean the time right up to the actual presentation of the performance. so that a work often included a description of its own making. In a forty-five minute piece entitled "For Instants" presented at a Whitney Museum performance festival in 1976, she explained the original intentions of the work while at the same time presenting the final results. She told the audience how she had hoped to present a film of boats sailing on the Hudson River, and went on to describe the difficulties she had encountered in the process of filming. The recording of the soundtrack was similarly dealt with as Anderson pointed out the inevitable shortcomings of using autobiographical material. There was no longer one past but two: 'There's what happened and there's what I said and wrote about what happened' - making blurred the distinction between performance and reality.

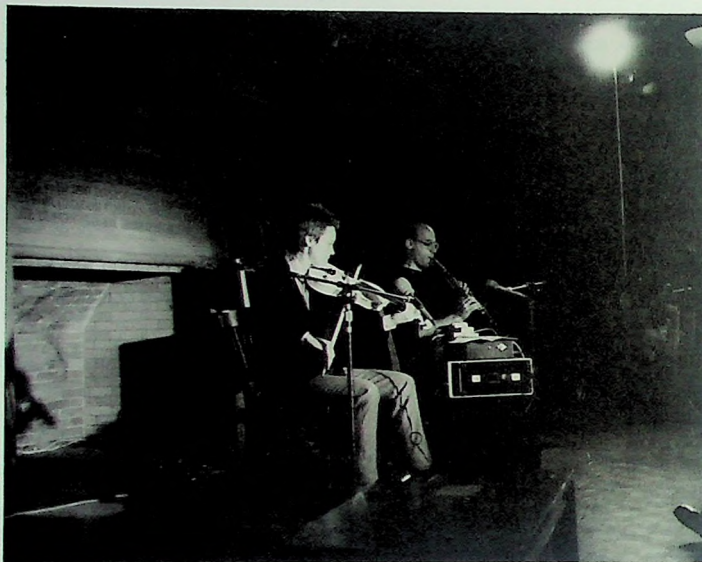
Following "For Instants", Anderson's work became more musically orientated and with Bob Bialecki, she constructed an assortment of musical instruments for subsequent performances. On one occasion, she replaced the horsehair of her violin. Each pass of the bow corresponded to one word of the sentence on the tape. Sometime, however, the sentence remained intentionally incomplete so that for example, Lenin's famous quote 'Ethics is the aesthetics of the future' became, 'Ethics is the aesthetics of the Few' - (as Anderson entitled her 1976 work). Then she experimented with the ways in which recorded words sounded in reverse, so that 'Lao-Tzu', aurally reversed became 'Who are You'? These aural palindromes were presented at the Kitchen Centre for Video and Music as part of her Songs for Lines/Songs for Waves (1977).

While Anderson's recent work has become less emblematically autobiographical, it is still self-referential. Her songs describe art, the making of art and the lives of artists. "Say what you mean and mean what you say" sounds like self-admonition for the confessional performer. "It's not the bullet that kills you, it's the hole" is a bit of folklore wisdom in reggae rhythm dedicated to Chris Burden. It is also of course, a sensible piece of semiotic advice.

- (1) High Performance Vol. 3 No. 2 Summer 1980
Per/for/mance
- (2) South Bank Show interview
- (3) Laurie Anderson's "Song for Juanita",
New York, One Ten Records, 1977
- (4) Paul de Man, Allegories of Reading, New Haven,
Yale University, Press pg 205, 1979

CHAPTER 6

Past Work



Laurie Anderson and Peter Gordon, *COMMERCE*, performance
at the U.S. Customs House, 1979.

In this chapter I should like to describe two performances of Laurie Anderson as a reflection of her expansiveness - 'Commerce', a performance in collaboration with Peter Gordon 19, and a very interesting installation, Dark Dogs, American Dreams 19.

'Commerce' is part of a Creative Time's 'Customs and Culture' exhibition at the U.S. Customs House, is truly an intermedia event; Sociology, schtick and song numbering among the media cheerfully mixed by Anderson and Gordon. Commerce begins in the foyer of the Customs House, where each spectator is given a pencil and a questionnaire. Questions range from your basic, "Where do you live?" and "What is your annual income?" to esoterica like "Have you ever dreamed about Skylab," and "Do you tip," Other data - such as how many television sets (and kinds) and how many telephones are in your house - is compulsory to give. Once completed, the questionnaire is perused by an usher who gives the participant/spectator either a red or a white ticket. Color coding is important. The red side was divided from the white side by a stanchion. On the red side, a francophile's banquet was arranged on a table set with linen tablecloths and sterling silver, brie, Perrier with lemon, tortes, pineapple and baguettes. There was also a 21-inch color closed-circuit monitor for those reds wanting a video eye view of the proceedings. The whites were treated to a fast food special: card tables were piled up high with American cheese, cola pop rocks, pork rinds, and Wonder Bread. They had a 12-inch black-and-white monitor for playback. The concert began when Anderson and Gordon shyly seated themselves before the audience. Anderson had her trusty tape-bow violin; Gordon his unreliable clarinet and electric guitar. Alternating between performing on their instruments, delivering monologues and sparring verbally. They interrupt their act to heckle the audience: "Why aren't you at

work?" They play a few bars. "We're at work", Anderson gloats. She goes on to describe her brand of movie, she has found, is directly proportional to how sticky the theatre floor is with cola syrup and popcorn; hence, the higher the concession sales and spillage, the higher the enjoyment. She also notices that women leaving a Jane Fonda movie always assume the sincere neck posture of the movie's heroine.

Gordon asks, "Do you own you own home?" More reds than whites raise their hands. Gordon, slightly competitive with his partner, asks, "Do you like me better than her?" Only one hand is counted; a second wavers. Anderson (or is it Gordon?) confides, "Last night I took a test at a Dairy Queen on another planet ..."

Gordon, with work-ethic severity, declaims, "There's no free lunch," The pair queries the audience, "Are you enjoying your lunch?". Their disarming mix of class consciousness self-consciousness, entertainment makes this 25-minute performance a particularly winning one. What's the rate of exchange here? It's not a trade between observer and observed, since Anderson and Gordon do most of the giving. They set up a series of oppositions: music versus prattle, banquet versus grub, their work versus the audience's play, and, by a process of fine tuning, provoke the audience to think about the equivalences between these pairings how one person's Perrier is another's club soda. They achieve a delicate balance, the fulcrum being irony.

DARK DOGS, AMERICAN DREAMS

Envision a large exhibition space, darkened for an installation, containing twelve huge black-and-white portraits, each at least three by four feet. In the middle of a gallery sits a squat, waist-high pillar; on its top panel are twelve clear-plastic cassette-tape boxes, each containing a small version of one of the portraits.

Next to each a pushbutton activates one of the twelve cassette decks inside the pillar filling the gallery with the voice of one of Anderson's characters. As attention shifts from face to voice, there is a sense of the visual image dematerializing into the spoken word.

Anderson's installation questions the integrity of each of its components. When you approach a portrait with the appropriate tape playing, you also read a text on a small card in another cassette box mounted on the print itself - insubstantial voice materializing into printed word. But this materialization is also a transformation: each printed text is noticeably different in length, syntax, and sometimes rhythm from the spoken one. Even the viewer's function is unstable. Pressing button after button, summoning out of the silence the voices of the characters whose faces shine softly in the darkness, the viewer becomes the performer - Anderson's stand-in, the maestro - orchestrating a series of voices and manipulating the attention of other viewers in the gallery. On the other hand, by leaving the console to someone else, the viewer becomes the audience.

The theme is dreams. "I had this dream ...," "I dreamed I was ..." "I have this recurring nightmare ..." begin the voices on the tapes, and whimsical, charming dreams they are. "In this dream I'm coming out of a Jane Fonda movie," says Cheerleader (Anderson has identified the dreamers by chalking their occupations or roles on the prints), "and all the other people look a lot like Jane Fonda." Artist dreams that Manhattan has come loose from its moorings and floats past the sinking wrecks of other cities; Student dreams his mother clips and frames magazine and newspaper pictures of hamsters to persuade him to become a structuralist film-maker; Girl on the beach dreams she's a house; Cashier dreams she's at the White House and is Jimmy Carter's lover: "And it wasn't really very romantic, but it wasn't a job".

As Cashier's dream trails off you hear the sound of a female black preacher ex-

horting her congregation to holiness. The sounds of machines, surf, traffic, trombones, tribal music, organs, and a bittersweet alto saxophone intrude on the other brief narratives and threaten to obscure the tales in the way Anderson's soft-focus photographs obscure their own details. Then the printed texts, turning voice into word, rescue the dreams from inaudibility. As every component of the installation seems about to drift into insubstantiality, something about it makes it solid, physical and clear.



Dark Dogs, American Dreams, HOLLY SOLAMON GALLERY, N.Y. 1980



I dreamed I was a kind of . . . you know—bellhop . . . in a big hotel. And I'm supposed to be delivering food or something to guests in the hotel. And Jerry Lewis is there, in the lobby, and he keeps saying, "You know, I'm really sorry now for making fun of bellhops . . . I regret it now—making them seem so ridiculous and uncoordinated . . .

So I'm going to have a phone drive and ask people to send in their money for bellhops." And he was already starting his campaign in these phone booths in the lobby—trying to get people interested in his project. And he seemed really sincere about getting the money. . .



I dreamed I was a dog in a dog show and my father came to the dog show and he said, "Look! That's a really good dog! I like that dog." And then my mother came to the dog show and she saw me and she said, "I wanted you. And I was looking for you . . . but I couldn't find you. I wanted you . . . and I was looking for you all day, but I couldn't find you. I couldn't find you." And then all my friends came and I was thinking: No one has ever looked at me like this before. No one has ever stared at me like this for so long, for such a long time . . . for so long. This is the first time anyone has ever looked at me like this, stared at me like this for so long . . . for such a long time . . .

I dreamed I was in this big dark forest, you know, big old pine trees. And I just can't get over the fact that all the trees are made of wood. They're wooden trees and they're made entirely of wood. And I'm trying to write this song . . . kind of a pop song about these trees but I just keep dropping the pencil. Every time I try to write, I drop the pencil. And it sounds real loud. It makes a real loud sound every time it drops. And I never do get that song down—I just keep dropping the pencil . . . over and over. . . .



In this dream, I'm coming out of a Jane Fonda movie and all the other people coming out of the theater look a lot like Jane Fonda. They're walking like Jane Fonda too . . . Even the ones with short legs are walking like they have these real long legs. . . . And they're repeating lines from the movie ("I'm really convinced of . . .") even though the words have nothing to do with the circumstances . . . And the main difference is that the real Jane Fonda's head is really big and in full color and very . . . well lit; and all the other Jane Fondas are really small. Their heads are really small like shrunken heads almost . . . and real long legs—And they keep coming out of the theater.



This is especially true of the photographs. Despite their fuzziness, they describe the world. Anderson understands photography's specificity and uses it to portray her subjects. In some of her portraits, a thin vague, light-grey line stands for a smile but each is different: Mailman smiles self-consciously (he tucks in his lower lip - you can see it); Butcher grins broadly, foolishly; Be-bop lyricist smiles ingratiatingly; Artist's smile slips into a sneer; Student's is bemused. Through these concise photographic descriptions Anderson's subjects become characters, each as distinct as his or her own highly personal voice.

The dreams, however, are all Anderson's (in her earlier performances she recounted them in her own voice); Dentist, Waitress, Mechanic, and Cashier merely read Anderson's texts. The combination of these specific voices, faces, and dreams achieves a fiction that is more in the domain of photography than performance art, where performer and persona are identical. The physical richness the combination yields is that of theatre. Sometimes it is the dissonance between image and voice that's engaging: Be-bop Lyricist talks cool but smiles warm. Sometimes it is the harmony: when Boy says he dreamed he was a dog in a dog show and everyone looked at him, his spooky eyes are insistent, revealing as much about his sudden awareness of solitude and selfhood as his faltering high voice. "And I was thinking: no one has ever stared at me like this for so long... for such a long time."

After looking at the pictures for a long time, you see that Anderson understands a great deal about how photographs work. She instinctively tilts her frames, for example when too much information (even in such simplified images) threatens to overwhelm the photograph's form. She also knows how subtle figure-ground relationships create a fragment and suggest continuing space to the left or right.

Anderson treats her soft focus as a version of one of 35-mm photography's most basic means of expression, drawing. Her sense of drawing is more painterly than photographic, more concerned with surface and contours than matter. The smiles that define some of her characters are drawn for emotional effect, not as interesting mouths. In contrast to Robert Frank's out-of-focus starlet at at Hollywood premiere or what appears to be the seemingly too-long arm of Frank's female gambler at an Elko, Nevada, dice table, Anderson's idea of photographic drawing is reductive. It is reductive, in fact, as the notion that the portraits are out of focus because the theme of the work is dreams. Dreams can be excruciatingly sharp as of ten as they are indistinct. Nor should we take too seriously the irony implicit in the fact that for all their quasidreaminess the photographs do not describe the actual dreams but leave that to the less substantial voices. Henri Cartier-Bresson's worker sleeping beneath a chalk drawing that looks like the sleeper himself reminds us that still photographs can create a vision of the dreamer and his dreams and stay in focus at the same time.

Anderson's photographs are out of focus, I think because they are only one aspect of a complicated work; she seems to know that with such large prints a more specific photography would overwhelm the timbers, inflections, rhythms, and hesitations of the voices, and the density of the written words. At the end of some of the dreams, voice is reduced to sound the way parts of the photographs are reduced to mere light and dark. But Anderson does not reduce photography to a conceit. She does not, for example, share the conceptualists' disdain for photography's means of expression, does not annihilate those means to create the conceptualist's blank, laconic, affectless image. For all its intellectual ambition her work would fail if it were not so gorgeously physical and executed with such

virtuosity. In her reductivism there is still respect and perhaps love for her medium. But that is not surprising, given the love and tact that characterize her approach to life.

HANDPHONE TABLE sustains weight of mystery infused with concerns of perception, space and social communication. Simplicity here belies originality and complexity of implication. Basically the work is a "Prepared" table, constructed of plain pine, with an enclosed drawer, concealing an audio playback system. At each end of a pair of nodes (internally wired to the system) are almost invisibly plugged into rounded indentations in the table top. One engages the work by sitting at a stool at either end of the table, resting elbows in the indentations and pressing the palms against the ears. Through what is described in notes as "bone conduction," one is able to hear a different "song" by Anderson at each end - "Now you in Me Without a Body Move", or "And I Remember You in My Bones". Repeating, low-frequency, stereophonic phrases played on what sounded like an organ in one song, and a slowly bowed or plucked stringed instrument in the other, induced auditory sensations of vast, vibrating spaces. At times the textures of sound suggested works in the songs, but the only intelligible language was the handwriting beneath a blurred photograph of a Handphone listener mounted on a far wall: "the way you moved through me". Telephone listening, in its static intimacy, is the obvious comparable analogy for Handphone Table, the sound is "invisible", audible only as vibrations are conducted internally to the ears through contact with the table. In Handphone Table hearing is private with the hands placed as they would normally be to block out sound; the cavity of the head is the acoustical environment with sound moving through the bones.

The interiorized solitariness of the moment is publicly shared with a stranger,
but one similarly engaged, hearing a different song at the other end of the table -
an ironic use of the table as a symbol of social interaction.

SOME FURTHER INFORMATION ON LAURIE ANDERSON FROM AN INTERVIEW
IN "PERFORMANCE MAGAZINE" (ISSUE 14) BY ROB LA FRENAIS

What other living working artists do you identify with?

In terms of technique, not many, but in terms of intent, people like Vito Aconci.

In terms of politics and style, my hero is William Burroughs. I think his style is absolute precision. It is also incredibly dense and I love that.

What of your favourite contemporaries?

In terms of music, my favourite musician right now is Glen Branca who is a guitarist of Noise music, he is really 15 people in this guy - very precise music, the loudest thing you've ever heard and incredibly powerful stuff.

I also like Marina Abramovic in terms of european performance artists, I think she is very clear, using every little pocket of space.

Why dogs in your performances?

Dogs, I guess because there's something really very nice about a voice that isn't articulating into words.

Do you have a dog or any other animals?

No, never had a dog, no animals....no....because they leave tracks on my machines.

What do you consider the principal limitations to any ambitions you might have?

Not being able to wake up in the morning and spend just a couple of hours staring out the window which is what... unless I can do that I feel totally... automatic. So this couple of hours to me is, is... and then the rest of the day I'm my own slave - getting things physically done, which is of course fun, and which of course can be the work, but the work is done in those couple of hours.

A time in which I try to become totally at ease and try to think of what's really important for the moment, but what I alone in a room want to do, without considering any other issues at all, what I would like to see. So that if I weren't able to, to be peaceful in that way, that would be my most severe limitation.

Why is there such a great U.S. appetite for U.F.O. contactee experience and the like?

We just hope someone comes down and talks to us, you know, we just like to talk.

CHAPTER 7

Summary

The ideal within the media for multi-media forms of entertainment, is familiar terrain for performance and other kinds of post-conceptual art. Laurie Anderson has tried to touch as realities tabooed as tainted by the media. The aesthetics of exclusion has been replaced by a new non-aesthetic approach of all-inclusiveness. Suddenly art is all spectacle and as fast moving as the entertainment industry.

Laurie Anderson has transformed from her old radiant madonna to a neuter 'punk'. Anderson does not identify herself with either, rather she quotes them and in so doing maintains a distance between herself and her material. The Laurie Anderson we the public experience is clearly an assumed persona.

Her work refers to popular culture and shows us a world denatured by technology and a self fragmented, pluralized and thus dispossessed by its own representations. But it is Anderson's knowledge of a wealth of new music sources that gives her work such structural authority. And most significantly as a libretto for 'United States' continues to emerge, there are her words. Her fractured impressionistic narrative is a totally original insightful reflection of American creativity and chaos.

And with United States I, II, III and IIII nearing it's completed eight hour showing, I feel sure that this work will be known as one of the great masterpieces of the '80's.

CHAPTER 8

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Art Performance I
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Flash Art, March/April no. 88-89

LAURIE ANDERSON 530 CANAL STREET NEW YORK, NY 10013

EDUCATION: 1969- BA Barnard College, NYC; Magna cum laude with honors in Art History, Phi Beta Kappa
1972- MFA Columbia University, NYC- Sculpture

PERFORMANCES

1972

"Automotive": Town Green, Rochester, Vermont

1973

"O-Range": Lewisohn Stadium, City College, NYC

Artists Space, NYC

The Clocktower, NYC

Projects Gallery, Boston, Massachusetts

"Duets On Ice": 5 NYC outdoor locations; 5 outdoor locations in Genoa, Italy (with Samangallery)

"How To Yodel" in "Soup and Tart", The Kitchen, NYC

1975

Music, Downtown Branch of Whitney Museum, NYC

"Songs and Stories for the Insomniac": Artists Space, NYC

"Songs and Stories for the Insomniac-Continued": Oberlin College, Oberlin, Ohio

"Out of the Blue": University of Massachusetts, Amherst, Massachusetts

"Dearreader": Holly Solomon Gallery, NYC

"Dearreader II": Sarah Lawrence College, Bronxville, NY

"Dearreader III": Rhode Island School of Design, Providence, Rhode Island

1976

from "For Instants": Museum of Modern Art, NYC

from "For Instants": Whitney Museum, NYC

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"Fast Food" (with "Fast Food Band"): Artists Space, NYC

from "For Instants": Skidmore College, Saratoga, New York

from "For Instants": Philadelphia College of Art, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

from "For Instants": California Institute of the Arts, Valencia, California

from "For Instants": University of California, San Diego, California

from "For Instants": Museum of Contemporary Art, La Jolla, California

"Stereo Stories": M.L. D'Arc Gallery, NYC

"Engli-SH": Akademie der Kunst, Berlin, Germany

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"Road Songs": St. Mark's Poetry Project, NYC

"Songs" (with Meet The Composer): The New School, NYC

1977

"For Instants-5" (Songs for Lines/Songs for Waves), Kitchen, NYC

"Audio Talk": School of Visual Arts, NYC

De Appel, Amsterdam, Holland

from "For Instants": Arte Fiera, Bologna, Italy

"Some Songs": ICC, Antwerp, Belgium

"That's Not The Way I Heard It": Documenta, Kassel, Germany

"On Dit": Biennale, Paris France

"That's Not The Way I Heard It": Galleria Salvatore Ala, Milan, Italy

Art Park, Lewiston, New York

"Speak Softly, But Carry A Big Stick": Museum of Contemporary Art,

Chicago, Illinois

1978

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"Some Songs": And/Or Gallery, Seattle, Washington

"Like A Stream": Benefit performance, The Kitchen, NYC

Reading: The Ear Inn, NYC

"Like A Stream-3": with the St. Paul Chamber Orchestra,

Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, Minnesota

"Down Here": Texas Opry House, Houston, Texas (with

Contemporary Art Museum, Houston)

"Some Songs": Mills College, Oakland, California

Wright State University Residency Program: Wright State,

Dayton, Ohio

Moore College of Art, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

University of New Mexico, Albuquerque, New Mexico

University of California, Long Beach, California

"Some Songs": Portland Center for the Visual Arts, Portland Oregon

"For Instants-6": DC Space, Washington, DC

"A Few Are...": Benefit for Hallwalls, Buffalo, New York

"Song for Self-Playing Violin": Contemporary Art Center,

Cincinnati, Ohio

"Song for Self-Playing Violin": Real Art Ways, Hartford, Connecticut

"Some Are...": Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto, Canada

One World Poetry, Het Tweed International Dichters Festival Rotterdam, Holland

1979

"Americans On The Move-Preview": Carnegie Recital Hall, NYC

"Americans On The Move": The Kitchen, NYC

Theater of Nations Festival, Hamburg, Germany

Groningen Museum, Groningen, Holland

International Cultural Center, Antwerp, Belgium

Dany Keller Gallery, Munich, Germany

Cultural Center, Bonn, Germany

Customs House, NYC

Autumn Festival, Paris France

CAPC, Bordeaux, France

OGGImusica Festival, Lugano, Switzerland

Real Art Ways, Hartford, Connecticut

San Francisco Art Institute, San Francisco, California

Mills College, Oakland, California

Thorne Hall, Northwestern University, Chicago, Illinois

University of Virginia, Richmond, Virginia

Glenbow Museum, Calgary, Alberta Canada

Modern Art Gallery, Vienna, Austria

Stadparkforum, Graz, Austria

Aspen Center for the Visual Arts, Aspen Colorado

"Blue Horn File" (with Peter Gordon): Tia Mudd Club, NYC

"Commerce" (with Peter Gordon): Customs House, NYC

Kunsthalle Basel, Basel, Switzerland

1980

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Santa Barbara Museum of Art, Santa Barbara, California

Perfor/mance Festival: Florence, Italy

Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts

Rome Performance Festival, Rome, Italy

New Music America, Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, Minnesota

Parachute Magazine Performance Series, Montreal, Canada

University of Northern Iowa, Cedar Falls, Iowa

Levande, Göteborg, Sweden

Paul Klee Kunstmuseum, Bern, Switzerland

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Mixage International: Rotterdam, Holland

Rust/Root: Middleburg, Holland

ROSC: Dublin, Ireland

Benefit for Volume Magazine, Irving Plaza, NYC

Lenbachhaus, Munich, Germany

Paramount Theater (with Oakland Youth Symphony), Oakland, California

Orpheum Theater (sponsored by The Kitchen): NYC

1981

Glenbow Museum, Calgary, Alberta, Canada

Art Institute, Kansas City, Missouri

University of Virginia, Blacksburg, Virginia

Western Front, Vancouver, B.C., Canada

York University, Toronto, Canada

Kunstmuseum, Basel, Switzerland

Cirque Divers, Liege, Belgium

Pension Building (sponsored by DC Space and WPA): Washington, DC

Institute of Art, Detroit, Michigan

Institute of Contemporary Art, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

University of California, Davis, California

University of California, San Diego, California

Palais de Beaux Arts, Brussels, Belgium

One World Poetry Festival, Amsterdam, Holland

Kunsthau, Zurich, Switzerland

Riverside Studios, London, England

Centre d'Arts Plastiques, Bordeaux, France

New Music America, Kabuki Theater, San Francisco, California

Rimini Festival, Sant Arcangelo, Italy

Theater der Welt, Köln, Germany

Franklin Furnace Benefit, NYC

Seattle Art Museum: Volunteer Park, Seattle, Washington

Cinema Theater, San Francisco, California

Roxy Theater, Los Angeles, California

University of Connecticut, Storrs, Connecticut

The Ritz, NYC

Vancouver New Music Society, Vancouver, Canada

"It's Cold Outside": American Composers Orchestra, Alice Tully

Hall; Lincoln Center, NYC

PUBLICATIONS

1971 The Package; Bobbs-Merrill, NYC

1972 October; privately printed, NYC

1973 Transportation/Transportation; Pace University Print Shop, NYC

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FILMS

1979 Fourteen Americans; Michael Blackwood Productions, NYC

1981 Film du Silence, Catherine Lahourcade, Channel 3 Paris, France

ONE PERSON EXHIBITIONS

1970 Barnard College, NYC

1973 Harold Rivikin Gallery, Washington, DC

1974 Artists Space, NYC (sponsored by Vito Acconci)

1977 Holly Solomon Gallery, NYC

Hopkins Center, Dartmouth College, Hanover, New Hampshire

1978 And/Or, Seattle, Washington

Museum of Modern Art (Projects Gallery), NYC

Matrix Gallery, Hartford Athenaeum, Hartford, Connecticut

1980 Holly Solomon Gallery

1981 Holly Solomon Gallery

GROUP EXHIBITIONS

1972 "Story Show", John Gibson Gallery, NYC

1973 "Thought Structures", Pace University, NYC

1974 "About 405 East 13th Street", NYC

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1975 "Narrative in Contemporary Art", Guelph, Ontario, Canada

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 "Not Photography", Artists Space, Edit deAk, Curator
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 "A Collection of New Art for Jimmy Carter", Georgia Museum of Art, Atlanta, Georgia
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 "Messages: Words And Images", Freedman Gallery, Albright College, Reading, Pennsylvania
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