



LAURIE
ANDERSON

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LAURIE ANDERSON

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INTRODUCTION

In this work on Laurie Anderson, I wish to make clear the position she occupies, both in her work and in her contact with the media, for I believe, interpretation of her work cannot remain solely within that of her performances and fixed object work; although the clues for further exploration lie in these.

The fact that language, as she often stresses, is her main concern and all the problems of communicability that go with using language, we must, therefore, in any appraisal of her take into account her own approach to the media and how she deals with it as it might stand for one of the most everyday "ways of using verbal language". This I have dealt with in Chapter IV and in it I hope to convey common sensibilities that parallel in her art making and her interviews with the media.

Chapters I and II deal with work produced from 1972 to 1982 and at the same time, attempt to interpret it on an individual basis (piece by piece) as well as an overall basis, because few works by Laurie Anderson are definitive in that one sees many permutations of her work throughout these ten years, with the exception of some fixed pieces like The New York China Times piece.

Chapter III is on the subject of her music, and tries to clarify its position in terms of structure as well as meaning (both in the sounds generated and texts or lyrics) as it relates to her overall ideas

CHAPTER I - LAURIE ANDERSON'S EARLY WORK

It was in 1972 that Laurie Anderson carried out her first performance, elements of which can be detected in her later works.

Titled Automotive, it took place in Vermont, and involved the auditioning of cars privately owned in order to discover what key the car-horns were in,

"Is your Dodge a C*"(1)

... to the eventual staging of a concert of these cars where the audience sat on the stage and the cars occupied the audience section.

It was a great deal more humorous and showed its concerns to be artistic notions of her immediate environment and what it contained more than an academically qualifiable notion on art, something that could be easily viewed in the light of art history, contemporary or otherwise.

According to the workings of a drive-in movie, it was usual except that the spectacle was taking place in the "Audience", while the people on stage, observed. This is not unlike the situation set up in Pirendello's play Six Characters In Search Of An Author, where the audience (in the play) invade the stage and delineation between character and audience becomes vague. With Automotive it is possible also to see Cagean influences therein, though not, significantly, to its detriment. Anderson, herself, identifies closely with John Cage and many notions that Cage harbours about music are not unlike those of recent artistic practice, namely the multi-media environments and the idea of chance elements of visuals and sound.

Cage, himself, in 1968 set up a street concert where he sat at a piano on a busy street and at a predecided hour, set a timer going, opened the lid of the piano, and for the duration of one hour remained motionless, not striking one chord. At the end of the sixty minutes, the lid of the piano was replaced and Cage took a bow signifying the end of the concert. So, with the absence of the expected piano music, all other street noise, provided the concert - that of the traffic at rush-hour, and pedestrians etc.

In Cage's view, all possible noises are potential music. Anderson's Automotive performance exphasized this also. Another aspect of this performance that carries through in its idea right up to the 1978 piece, "United States", is her use of the stage as a formal audience/performer seperation device.

contradiction

The employment of this tradition was largely rejected by other performance artists up to then on the grounds that it seperated the audience from the performer in a manner akin to that of theatre, a union that was most important to uphold, also, it tended to give a sense of non-reality or a "staged play" reality to the situations. Since the intentions of performance artists with regard to this were to ensure a minimum amount of illusion of time and a physically closer identification with their audience, the use of the stage, because of its historical connections with events that specialize in the illusion of time - namely plays - would have hampered their intentions for getting across the idea of real-time, real space type of work. So the stage was viewed as a false means.

what union?

Contrary to this, the use of the stage as an element is a fairly constant aspect of Anderson's performance work. More, perhaps, than referring just to theatre, it also associates itself with other types of situations, anything, in fact from a rock concert to a House of Commons meeting, and in its connotations, television is also a "stage". It is more, I feel, to do with the multiple connotations of the stage that Anderson is concerned with than its more direct association to theatrical or non-real events. "I just don't believe actors. You know where these people are going to be after the play is over, - in the bar down the road. I could love what they are saying as poetry, but I am not interested in their fate as characters". (2).

In many ways her stage becomes a fact of Western life, serving as a metaphor for the distinct differences of Western attitudes and ideas as opposed to those of Oriental countries. While the attitudes and ideas of the Orient are in keeping with their religion which serves as the way of life and are closer to the needs of man's internal self. The West in contrast to that tends to externalize things and judgements are made on the external aspects.

The aspirations of many of the performance artists of the sixties were closer to Japanese theatre, particularly that of "Kabukai" (working class theatre), in that audience integration is a distinctive part of that kind of theatre. Often, characters are planted in the audience and enter the stage by passing through the audience.

Many of the activities of the Flux^us group in America, for instance, were derived from the teachings of Zen, the Japanese Buddi^hst Religion.

Within the context of the recent history of performance art, Anderson's adoption of the stage as an area to be utilized, was a breaking down of an aspect of performance art that had become a tradition to it, that of the rejection of the stage as a working space. While suggesting itself as a metaphor for a notion of the way we think in the West, it also embraced aspects of popular culture in its associations.

The 1974 performance Duets on Ice carried out in numerous predecided locations involved standing in ice skates which were buried in blocks of ice whilst playing a violin along with melodies issued from a tape recorder concealed under her dress. The "Duet" ended when the blocks of ice melted. Duets on Ice, as we might normally interpret it, would involve two persons performing choreographed figure skating on an ice rink. On being presented with Duets on Ice (Anderson) the possible multiple meaning of the title becomes manifest. Our notion of the reality of live performance and that of pre-recorded time is thrown into question when we discover that the second party to the "Duet" is a tape recorder. The reality of the two are in competition.

"This is the time and this
is the record of the time" (3)

Subtly juxtaposed, these methods of combination serve to enhance or change the meaning of each other or act as a metaphor for something else. The constant question of meaning, its sentences or statements as they are definitive or changing is inherent in her work from the earliest of pieces.

"It seems pointless to just
go Coke cola coke cola coke cola,
it might sound good but why

not use the other aspects, the
fact that words can also
mean something" (4)

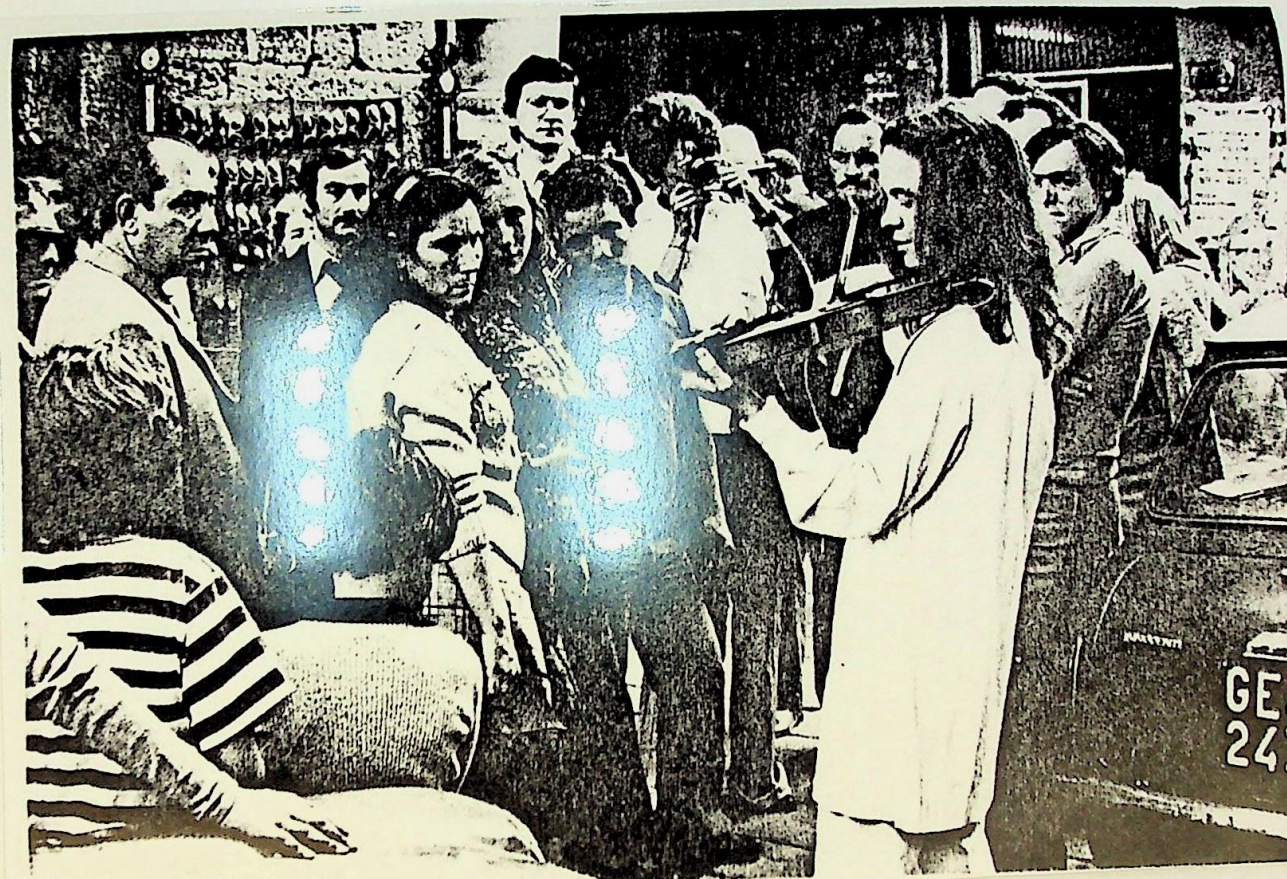
In one piece from her For Instance⁷ collection, she projected from a film projector, white light onto a screen and back-projected a slide image of words onto the same screen. As she moved in front of the screen she blocked the white light and her shadow provided the darkness necessary to read the slide image. The words were the lyrics to a song she carried out to the accompaniment of the violin:

"White on white, left to right,
could you move away
you are blocking the light" (5)

The lyrics coupled with the actual stage set-up cause a sort of paradox for if she responds to the demand and moves away, the image made visible by her shadow disappears in the intensity of the white light. The juxtapositions of the two logics, those of the words and the visuals when placed together contradict each other:

"The messages were thus conveyed
through contradiction "white on
white" was only legible when it
was false, "You're blocking the
light seemed to complain un-
reasonably about the visual
interference which made it
perceivable" (6)

In 1978, she performed Like a Stream which was carried out at the Walker Arts Centre, Minneapolis, The Portland Centre for the Visual Arts and The Kitchen, New York. Executed in a similar fashion to the For Instance piece, it was, however, different in that it was more autobiographical than the previous. It involved the slide projection of images relevant to a text, which she delivered verbally in her slow deliberate way to which the images pulsed in and out with a rhythm not unlike that she was adopting for the reading of the texts ... " a pulse that is very even ... which



frees you to use real talking styles over that rather than being locked into a verse structure. So you can work outside of metre". (7)

For this, she also employed her invention, The Tape Bow Violin, which consists of a violin with the strings removed and in replacement a tape recorder playback head mounted at the bridge. The horsehair on the bow is replaced by $\frac{1}{4}$ inch audio tape. The instrument is played in much the same manner as one might play an ordinary violin, and the recorded sounds are thus revealed. These sounds are as coherent in reverse as they are straight. They include sounds of breathing, walking, water rushing, and colloquial language utterances, like, "uh-huh?", as is used to indicate agreement and "uh-uh" used to indicate 'no'.

The following are extracts from the texts:-

6. I wanted you. And I was looking for you. I wanted you and I was looking for you all day but I couldn't find you. I couldn't find you.
39. I went to a palm reader and the odd thing about the session was that almost everything she said was totally wrong. She said, "I see here that you love to fly ..." and planes terrify me. She said, "I read here that someone named Terry is the most important person in your life" and I have never known anyone with that name, except once I had a fish named Terry. She gave me all this information, however, with such certainty, that I began to feel I was walking around with a pair of false documents permanently tattooed to my hands. Had I known a Terry? The parlor was full of books and magazines in Arabic and I could hear people in the next room, speaking rapidly in what sounded like that language. Suddenly, it occurred to me that maybe, it was a translation problem ... maybe she was reading my palm from right to left, instead of left to right. I have her my other hand, thinking it might be analogous to a mirror situation. She also put her hand out. We sat there for what seemed like several minutes, awkwardly holding out ... until I realized that this was not a participatory ritual ... that she was waiting for money. (8)



2.



3.

22 If you can't talk ... if you ... if you can't talk about ...
about ... if you ... just ... all you have to do is ... point
to it ... just point to it ...

As this piece stands, it is closer in its complexities and multiple levels of meaning attained in her later Mammoth piece United States I-IV the full eight hours of which were performed in 1981 in the U.S.

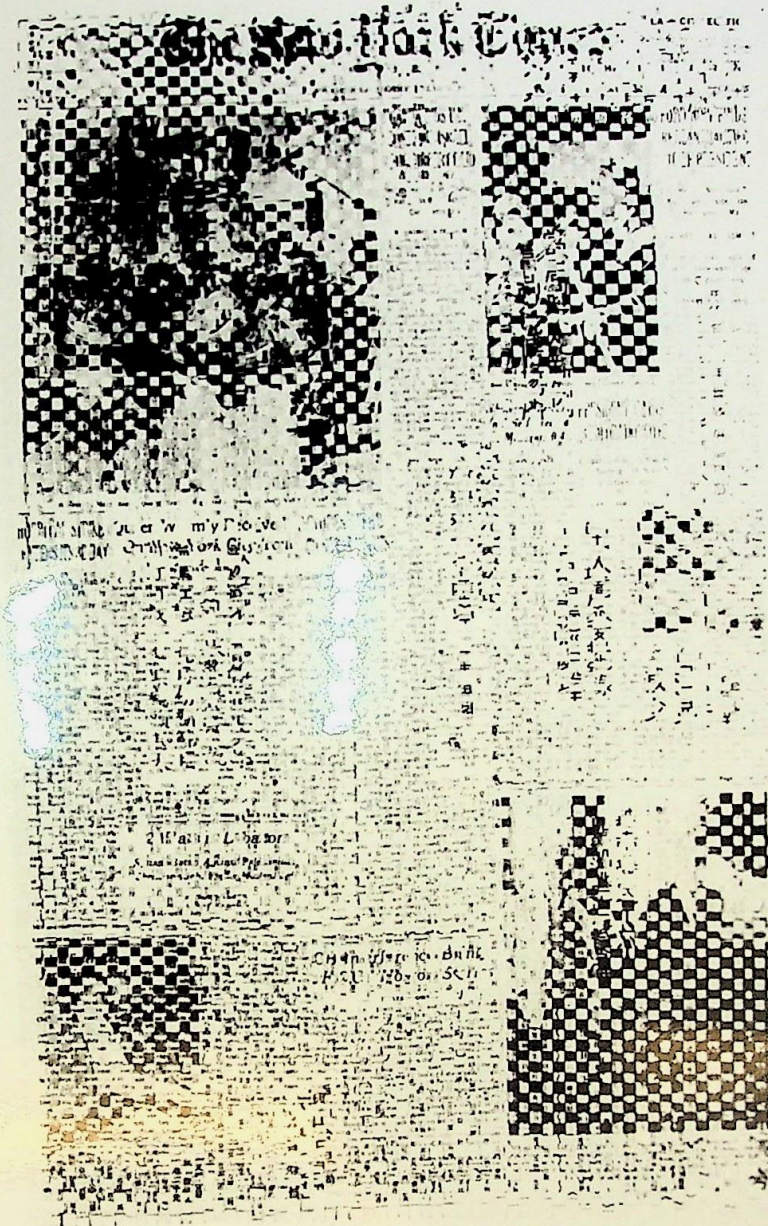
As with For Instances, there is a close interaction between the mediums used. Rather than mere juxtapositions of these mediums to cause a complex and dense environment, she places them together in an order so that they play off each other and refer to each other. The pulse changing of the slide images for example, act as the backing for the texts and violin in much the same way as a triad functions in classical music.

"..... like slow motion football as
one image evolved into the next" (9)

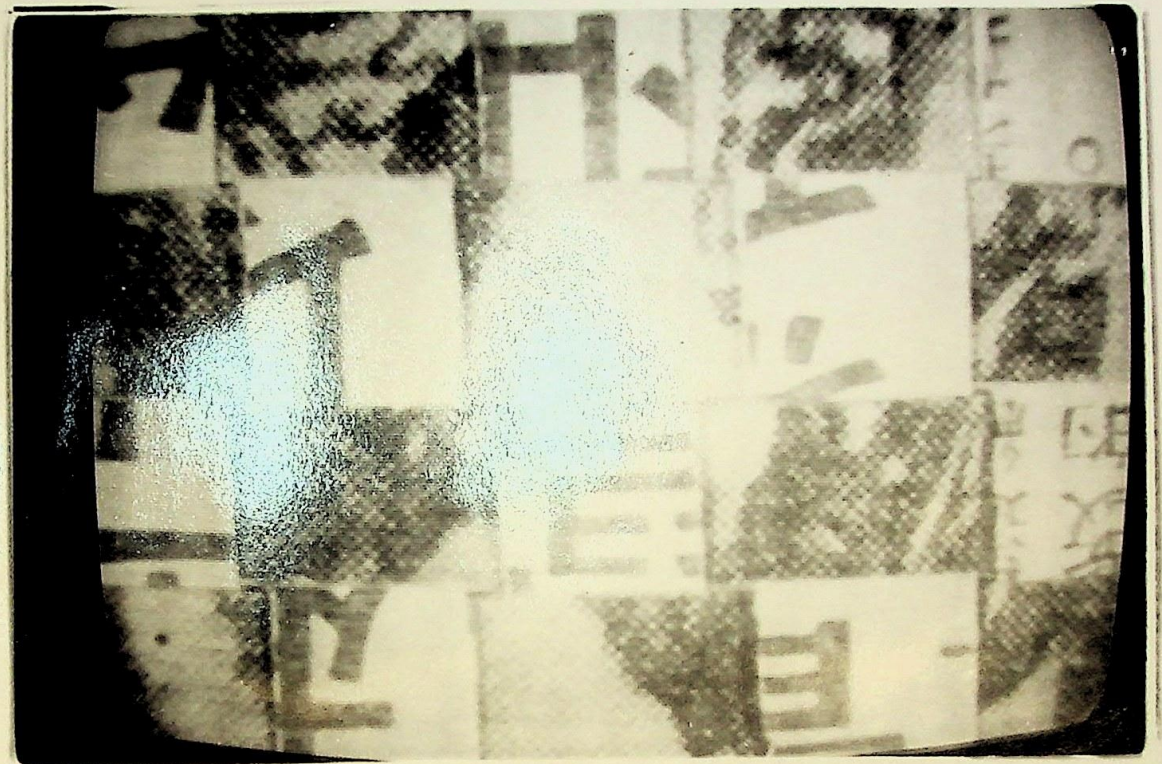
The crossover of references such as this one are a common and illuminating aspect of Anderson's work, both in the objects she makes and the performances she carries out.

Anderson's method of presentation of her work employs these means used by the music and entertainment world as well as the art world, that of the gallery space; the credibility of each in the context of her work being preserved and utilized fully. For instance, the gallery as a working space does not get rejected in favour of a vaudeville situation, but rather functions with these other means and visa versa. In terms of fixed or still works, Anderson has produced a variety of objects throughout the years she has been doing performances. One of the earliest of these is The New York/China Times Vertical and Horizontal piece for which she cut the front pages of both newspapers into a quarter inch (approximately) strips and weaved them together, thus creating a broken up, patterned image of both newspapers. The "Vertical and Horizontal" was to do with the methods employed to read the respective newspapers.

(China Times: right to left, bottom to top,
New York Times: left to right, top to bottom).



Laurie Anderson
New York Times, Horizontal/China Times Vertical, 1971
Geweber Zeitungsdruk, 76.20 x 55.88 cm
Courtesy Holly Solomon Gallery, New York
Photo: Harry Shunk



5.

Much of her other two-dimensional work involves photographs with texts, lyrics for songs and musical scores. In 1974, she was included in a feminist art show exhibiting a series of ten photographs with text. They are unconventional portraits of people in their various professions. The photographs of these people are out of focus, so little visual information that could indicate the condition of these people is available. It is written what they are at the bottom of each photograph, Butcher, Mailman, Student, etc., and each photograph is supplied with a text recording a dream (invented by Anderson herself) accorded to the respective photographs. Since their first showing at the Women Conceptual Artists show, organised by Lucy Lippard, they have travelled extensively around the US and furnished the Urban Kisses show at the ICA, London in 1982, by which time, she was about to carry out the first international performance of United States I - IV.

In ways, the repeated showing of these photographs at different centres over such a length of time, is not unlike the way in which Robert Rauschenberg availed of the same image for more than one painting. By retaining the stencil on a screen, he could, at will, silk-screen the image onto a piece of work, giving testimony to the obsolescence of the idea of uniqueness or value in rarity. For a number of works, he has utilized a photographically reproduced stencil of a depiction of Venus.

Perhaps that example is closer in its similarities to Anderson's choice of material for her performance work, in the way, for example, she will use written or scored material a number of times with long periods of time lapses between those uses. It focuses in on the issue of timeliness^{ess} and timeliness of things, in particular, works of art and the novel or the new.

"Rather than finish the whole thing
and call it the final form. I like
doing things in different situations
because each time you have a completely
different physical set up". (10)

The fact that Laurie Anderson engages in this mixing and re-ordering of

her material to the extent she does, makes it very difficult to locate the origins of certain pieces and to establish premier dates of specific pieces since often the pieces themselves are split up and reworked. For example, much of the text for the Like a Stream performance becomes part of United States I-IV her recent L.P. record premixes some material from United States I-IV, there are two, if not more versions of the New York/China Times piece and the Handphone Table. As much as this may be problematic to a reviewer without first hand access, it is as indicitive in this age of ^{re-cycle, reproduction} recuperation, and more specifically is an important aspect of Laurie Anderson's overall idea. Of the two Handphone Table that exist, one is designed to accomodate one person and the other two persons. Both are basically the same but the recordings transmitted from within are different. On the table's working surfaces, are two metal nodes onto which one places one's elbows. The recordings issued from a tape recorder concealed in the table are transmitted up to the nodes and subsequently up through the bones of the person. It is only on covering one's ears with one's hands that the recording becomes audible.

"... the seated head-propped-in
-hands posture is kinesthetically
associated with weightly [?]contem-
plative activity. Furthermore,
the interiorized solitariness of
the moment is publically 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 social
interaction" (11)

The smaller version of theis Handphone Table issues a recording of a line from a poem by George Herbert, the English metaphysical poet:-

"Now I in you without a body move" (12)
..... greatly slowed down so that the words barely seem coherent.



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 ... so long. This is the first time anyone has ever looked at me like that. I 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 ...



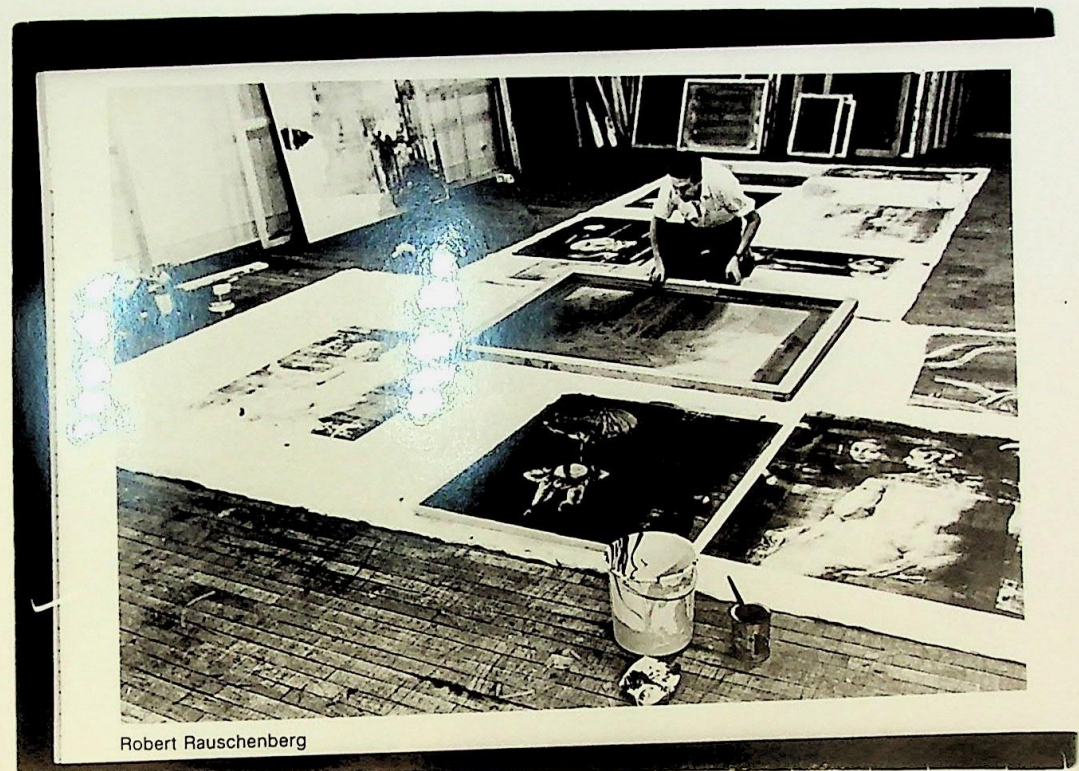
In this dream, I'm coming out of a Jane Fonda movie and all the other people coming out of the theater look a lot like Jane Fonda. They're walking like Jane Fonda too ... Even the ones with short legs are walking like they have these real long legs ... And they're repeating lines from the movie ("I'm really convinced of it") 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.

CHEER LEADER

These pieces have been widely exhibited in the U.S. and in Europe. Such is Anderson's method of dissemination of her work, that it is not simply one piece of work following another and being held, as a result, in contrast with the previous. It is a series of constants from which various pieces are isolated, and combined at different times which facilitates a clear all-over view of her intentions. This ethic or method follows through to her interviews with various media outlets which will be examined in Chapter IV.

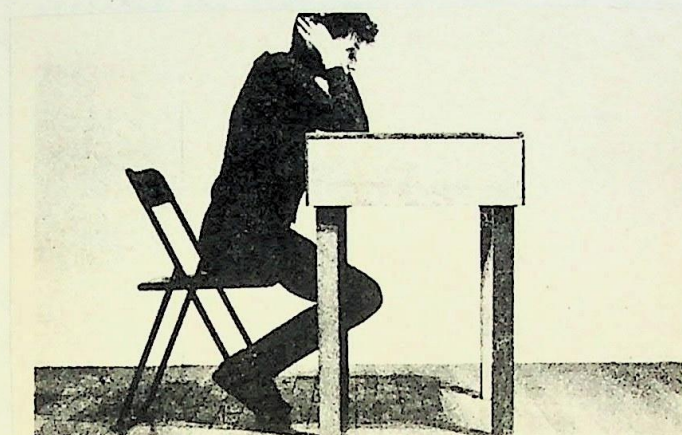
In 1978, she carried out eighteen performances at various venues in the U.S. and by 1980 she was performing internationally with her venues extending to Europe to such places as Germany, Holland, France, Belgium, Austria, Switzerland, and Ireland. In 1981, she performed at twenty-eight different U.S. and international venues. The performances were often, as has been mentioned, permutations of previous work altered or added to by means of images, music or words.

So, it is clear that much of the emphasis lay in multiple deliveries of her work rather than a short term approach, that of working out an idea and the result being a definitive public performance. In this way, it broadens out into the territory of theatre, music and dance, where multiple renderings (albeit of unaltered performances) are an important part of the organization of that area. Where a fixed work of art (i.e. painting) is in constant existence after its completion, a piece of music, to approach that level of physical manifestation, must be performed ^{number} at an unreasonable amount of times or else recorded.



Robert Rauschenberg



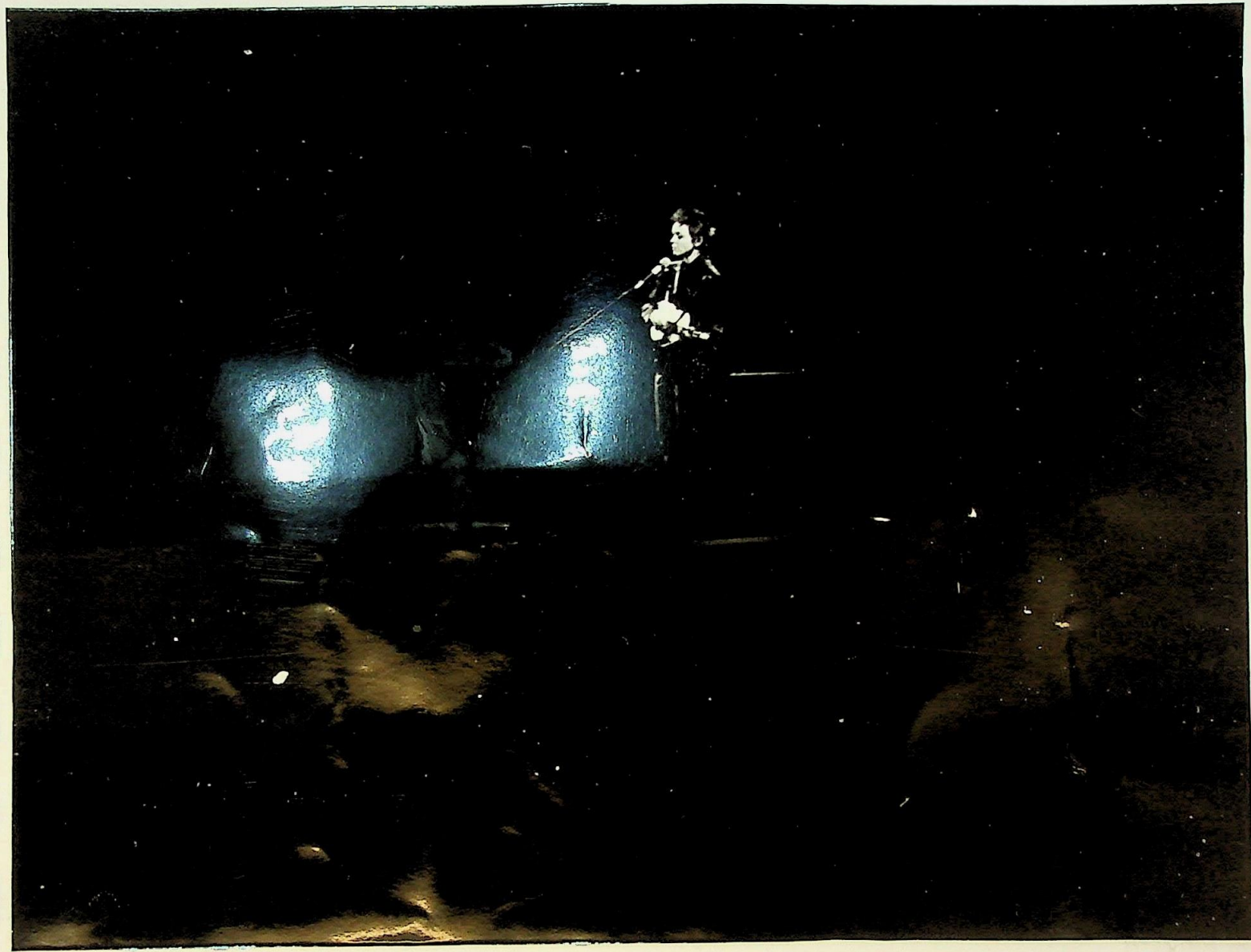


The Handphone Table ('When You We're Hear') Small version, 1978. You lean your elbows on the table and the sounds are transmitted through your arms up to your ears

9.

CHAPTER I

- (1) Robin White, "Laurie Anderson Interview"
View Vol. 11 No. 8, p. 13.
- (2) "Laurie Anderson : Language is a virus from outer-space"
New Musical Express, 26th June, p. 30
- (3) Taken from the song "From the Air" on Laurie Andersons L.P.
record Big Science, Warner Bros. Inc., 1982
- (4) ^{Op. Cit.} New Musical Express p. 30
- (5) I attended the performance of United States I-IV at the Dominion
Theatre in London on February, 15th and 16th, 1982; from which
this is taken. Any further references to this performance will
be listed simply, - United States I-IV, London, 1982
- (6) Patricia Steward, "Laurie Anderson: With a Song in my Heart,
Art in America, March/April, 1979, p. 112
- ^{1/8}
(7) Stuart Morgan, "Laurie Anderson: Big Science and Little Men"
Brand New York Literary Review, special issue, Feb. 1982, p. 78
- (8) Laurie Anderson, "Notes from Like a Stream ", A.A.Bronson and
Peggy Gale (eds.) Performance by Artists, p.p.44, 46, 48
- (9) Ibid, p. 42
- (10) Robin White, p. 7
- (11) Richard Lorber, "Laurie Anderson Review", Artforum, Dec. 1978 p.60
- (12) From the South Bank Show documentary on Laurie Anderson, presented
by Mervyn Bragg, I.T.V. 1982. Hereafter, this will be referred
to as simply - The South Bank Show.



CHAPTER II - UNITED STATES I - IV

Within the context of history, Anderson's development and use of the material means she employs, while being used as bearers of content, refer also to the recent history of multi-media.

The consistent use of slide projections, film projectors, and various machines associated with theatre by multi-media artists throughout the art works, have rendered these devices traditional to multi-media and thus there is a constant factor of the possibility of technique overriding idea or content where little would be conveyed except the fact of its own (the mediums) usage and the seduction common to the mediums of films, slides, etc.,

In much the same way as "video art", is being dealt with historically, the delineation takes place with the "medium" and not with the "message" as it were, in that strength of ideas are rated within the confines of the history of the medium. This of course, is strictly referring to the formation of general art history on the subject, and its inevitable requirement to categorise. In practice, always the most potent pieces of work in any category are those pieces in which the idea, incorporating the marriage of subject, content and method remain as functioning and is not subject to the tradition of the medium.

Laurie Anderson has shown a freshness in using these types of mechanics through her approach to them, that is, not as art historically accepted methods or as potential content in themselves (i.e. video being the subject of video, a tautological condition), but for all the aspects they suggest. The idea successfully ^{transcends} supercedes the potential inherent seduction in the mediums in that on being presented with her work, one experiences the depth of these ideas much more than effects of the medium, such as over manipulation of technique.

By 1982, and the arrival of her eight-hour performance, United States I-IV her methods such as the combination of ideas and presentation had reached a high level of sophistication. Numerous records she composed were already

manifest by the time Warner Brothers Recording Company signed her up for the production of the L.P. Big Science. Her arrival in England to perform United States I-IV at the Dominion Theatre, in London, did not suffer through lack of promotion; rather it broadened the scope for the type of audience which by that time had extended well beyond an art orientated audience.

The performance itself was formally set up with an extensive array of equipment on stage along with projection facilities. By this set-up, it was evident how much her work had departed from the insular confines of the "downtown ^{NY}manhattan" gallery-type exposure and realized much of what had been latent in her previous gallery-orientated performances. The content and method of her United States I-IV piece along with the type of venue it occurred in, seemed to emphasize her notions about culture, environment, attitudes and generally our relationships to a conditioned world. By operating in this formal, concert-like arrangement, she held any "appraisal" or "mocking" of the issues she dealt with on an ambiguous edge by virtue of the fact that, this very thing she referred to; in her texts and imagery was what she depended on for the successful rendering of the performances. Where it is seen that she is opinionating on the hazards of technology and "painstakingly mocking" it at the same time, she is in fact, doing neither.

b) "At the moment of lift-off, the first computer began to get strange read-outs. Nothing seemed to calibrate. What should have read zero, read 2,000, and visa versa. Whole systems went out. The computer began to trouble shoot " (1)

At the same time, she is punching away at a Synclavier, of late, one of the most sophisticated computer synthezizer key-boards available. It is not an opinion on the state of things, but a sensitive observation, a predicament which she herself is involved in, one who is possibly as manipulated as much as they manipulate.

In practice, United States I-IV, was intentionally and successfully a contemporary portrait of America.

Deviding the performance into four sections with supportive titles, Transport, Politics, Money and Love , she takes as her subject, everyday situations that one might be involved with or exposed to and combines them, alters them in a tight pattern with rhythmic regularity whilst exentuating or inverting the meaning in subjects so that they refer not only to themselves, but to other things also. Juxtaposing the words "Lucille, I'm home" with the projected film clip of an astronaut on the moon, disturbs the value of that film clip as a unique documentary and brings it closer to a comedy T.V. show, thus bringing about the question of the reality of experience through filtered mediums. It is these situations and those banal ones, that form this portrait of America.

The close or "shutdown" of United States I-IV, is an image of the Statue of Liberty projected so that the torch light of the statue is superimposed over the animated projection of a blazing trail of rocket, so that the light of the rocket becomes the fire of the torch of Liberty, coupled with her delivering a piece of text:-

"You're driving and it's late
at night and you took a turn
back there, and you're not
sure if it's the right one.
"Excuse me, can you tell me
where I am"? "You've been on
this road before, you can read
the signs".

(Walks onto a diving board
mounted on stage)

"Hold on, I wanted to yell ...
It may not be over ... yet". (2)

These three things, the rocket, the Statue of Liberty, and the text of driving and getting lost, are a few of the really strong images that

are associated with America. We are at once aware of the strength of these symbols and the sensationalism that centres around them, what it is hoped they represent and what they actually represent.

In the combination of these images, with this particular text there is a hilarity achieved that is not without a certain seriousness in imagining the spaceman in the rocket pulling up at a galactic intersection, hopping out, and asking an alien for directions. But, of course, this is literal and much of its strength lies in the metaphor and the seriousness that it achieves is to do with what this combination stands for. It is in this way, that Anderson manages comedy without destroying the purpose or intention or an underlying suggestion, not really a message, because there is no definitive message put into it. She focuses our attention on the logo employed to go on the side of the Space Shuttle, Apollo 10, and in this case, deals directly with the image itself and possibilities of interpretation.

^{This} The image itself is intended to serve as a communication of greetings, but there are many obvious discrepancies with it. Quite apart from the fact that it is two-dimensional and in black and white line, Anderson raises some fundamental questions about the meaning that it holds.

"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 that they will think his hand is permanently attached this way, or do you think they will read our signs. In our country 'Goodbye' looks just like 'Hello'. It is a sweep on the dial. In our country, you don't ever really know if you have arrived. You don't even know if YOU HAVE LEFT YET. In our country 'Goodbye' looks just like 'Hello'. Say, 'Hello'. (3)

Anderson intentionally withholds judgement and thus leaves the issue suspended between the two observed possibilities of interpretation that might occur if the alien encounter actually took place and that the alien might indeed understand it in our terms. If this seems unlikely, it is so at least as much as is the likelihood of an alien observing it in the first place.

On the subject of the above text and supporting image, Craig Owens, points out that Anderson's text is not so much concerned with ambiguity (that of multiple meaning) than it is with ...

"... two clearly defined but
mutually incompatable readings
(that) are in blind confrontation
in such a way that it is
impossible to choose between them". (4)

That may be true, but although the text only refers to two possible readings (that of Goodbye/Hello), it suggests alternatives precisely by leaving them out and refraining from being direct in the language as to an exact meaning or reference, that of a definitive statement. These alternatives, that of representing the order to 'Halt' or the taking of an oath as suggested by Owens himself, maintain a 'presence' similar to that outlined by Doublas Crimp, when he states:-

" ... that kind of presence
that is possible only through
the absence that we know to
be the condition of
representation". (5)

..... that in being presented with a representation of the real, one is immediately reminded of and made aware of the presence of the absence. In terms of meaning in Anderson's texts, this is a central issue, where she deliberately uses a "necessary indirectness" (6) to avoid being prescriptive. Another interesting aspect of the text that supports the

Apollo 10 image, is the notion she puts forward of the fact that ...
"In our country, you don't ever know if you've really arrived. You don't even know if you have left yet" (7). It ties in closely with Jack Kerouac's idea of America which is that the whole place is "home" one is never "away" as such and Anderson picks up this idea in the United States II section of her work with the following:-

"You know, last night I came up
out of the subway, and I said
to myself, "Hmm, do you want to
go home?". and I thought; "You
are home". (8)

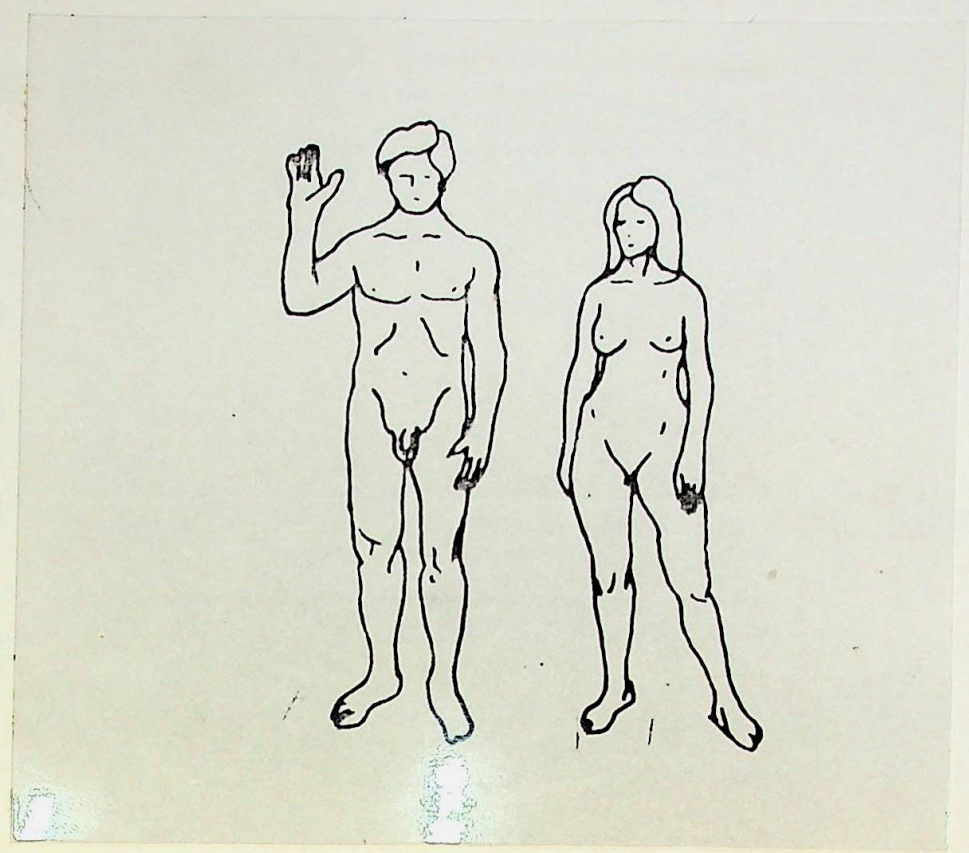
Because of the incessant mobility on the part of citizens in America, both upward and downward (social) mobility as well as geographical, the activity itself becomes the "home". That there is no specific geographical location for home because they rarely remain in one place longer than another so there is no specific home. "Home" becomes a metaphor for a sense of place politically, socially and geographically.

"... and you grow up in one city,
then go 200 miles away to
University. Then your company
sends you a 1,000 miles over
here ... Americans tend to confuse
'change' with freedom". (9)

As a portrait, this piece of work United States I-IV , " ... is not a painting of someone's face ..." (10), but a multi-faceted manifestation of the presence of America to be experienced through all the senses. This view of the self as fragmentary and made up of moments is central to the essence of the Buddhist religion of Japan. Meditation in Buddhism serves to slow down the activity of the mind so as to experience the moment of that activity. The self is seen as a series of these moments or fragments which are an integral part of everything around the self, the environment, the world, or the universe.

In United States I-IV, the characters that we are made aware of, such as the Mailman, Butcher, Student, Minute men, T.V. announcers, etc., are integral, and not separate from the environment or 'universe' as much as it is an inseparable part of them. At the same time, a notion or idea of uniqueness or individuality is present in two aspects. One being the very real or actual presence of Laurie Anderson as the composer of this portrait, and the second, being the very evident absence of "Artist as hero" where through her text she describes meeting someone on her travels and describing herself as an artist. This juxtaposed to the stories about the other professions such as, Mail man, Waitress, etc., grounds the role of artist in his or her practical environment, as a 'normal' person with normal features and at the same time, reminds of the common notion of artists as unusual, enigmatic or mystical in their role.





11.



Laurie Anderson, *Americans on the Move*, 1979

12.

CHAPTER II

- (1) Sarah Kent, "Speaking in Tongues", Time Out No. 652
(Feb. 18-24, 1982) p. 14
- (2) *Ibid.*
Sarah Kent, p. 15
- (3) Laurie Anderson, "Americans on the Move", *October*,
Oct. No. 8.
- (4) Craig Owens, "The Allegorical Impulse" Toward a Theory
of Postmodernism", Part II, Oct, No. 13, p. 38
- (5) ⁹
Douglas Crimp, "The Photographic Activity of Postmodernism"
Oct. No. 15, p. 92
- (6) *Ibid.*, p. 92.
- (7) Laurie Anderson "Americans on the Move", October, No. 8, p. 55
- (8) Laurie Anderson, "United States, Part II"
Chantal Pontbriand (ed.) , Performance Text(e)s and Documentation.
- (9) Sarah Kent, p. 15
- (10) From the South Bank Show.

CHAPTER III - LAURIE ANDERSON'S MUSIC

Laurie Anderson's work has perhaps occupied the most unusual position on the market, in terms of what we know to be ^{the} average or normal stance occupied by most artists & popgroups. I refer here specifically to her activity with music and the way in which it is communicated or distributed (that of its presence) in a market. Particularly with the song "O Superman" which when put on general release, entered the pop singles charts and escalated to No.1, early in 1982. As is common practice in the Pop industry, the L.P. containing a further eight tracks soon followed and this was then followed by a second 45 rpm release, this time the title track off the album, ^{was} Big Science. All these releases occurred on the Warner Bros. record labe^l and it is said that "Track after track was lifted off her L.P. Big Science, and released as a single, each failed to sell". (1) Because of the nature of her work, that of it being more than music-making, or record production, this does not have the serious repercussions it might have for a pop group. She is not definitively a pop singer, but holds a place between the two professions, that of performance artist and a pop artist. The reason this is unusual is because in relatively recent years, it is rare for an artist, on the one hand, to keep a professional integrity as an artist, while operating in the pop music field. Similarly, with a pop singer, it is rare that they would be considered 'serious' artists.

In all other respects, other than that of a professional category, they may be considered artists, that of those groups involved with experimental music, such as Throbbing Gristle, and Cabaret Voltaire. Both these groups have a history of an art school training.

In defying the media's efforts to have her categorized as a singer, she has succeeded in claiming an area which has enabled her to avoid the lable of mere entertainer, and at the same time, is in a position to operate in those areas of entertainment, record production, concerts etc.

Though the state I have described above is the professional state as opposed to a practical one, the site she occupies therein has much to do with her overall ideas. In describing her situation prior to the ^{condition} ~~premier~~ ^{at} her performance United States I-IV, New Musical Express, have to say:-

"Though she now has a powerful new patrol in Warner Bros., who usually guard their own interests before those of the artist, she (Anderson) has'nt been diverted from her original intentions". (2)

It is the intention of such groups as Duran Duran, to be a pop group, to operate within that tradition and to rate their successes against an external and heavily institutionalized source, with no diverse or greater aspiration in mind (at least that is apparent), to be a good, or the best pop group. Because of this, the rate of that success will be subject to the machinations of record companies similar to that of Warner Brothers.

If this brief examination of Anderson's position in relation to that particular industry seems irrelevant, I would like to stress the importance of the functioning in this area in relation to ideas and methods that are brought across or present in her other work, that of performance.

The song 'O Superman' opens with the endlessly repeated utterance, "Ah", spaced roughly a half second apart and in a constant key throughout. It serves as a backing rhythm, and a key location for what follows. The first few lines are sung while being filtered through an electronic device. Then some of the lyrics are spoken unfiltered:

"Hi, I'm not home right now, but
if you wanna leave a message
just start talking at the sound
of the tone. Hello, this is
your mother, are you there, are
you coming home?". (3)

Around the middle of the song, there is an addition of a synthesizer, which increases the richness, depth, and melody of the piece. On completion, we are left with what is started out with - the "Ah's" - which has quite a desolate feel after the multi-layers of sound just prior to that.

"Cause when love is gone, there
is always justice, and when justice
is gone, there is always force,
and when force is gone,
there is always Mom,
Hi, Mom.
So hold me Mom,
In your long arms
So hold me Mom
In your long arms.
Your automatic arms,
In your electronic arms,
In your arms
So hold me Mom,
In your long arms
Your petro-chemical arms
Your military arms,
In your electronic arms". (4)

The song is the length in time of most pop 45 rpm singles - that of five minutes approximately, and like most pop tunes approaches a climax around the middle or towards the end. Anderson's use of the pop-song structure, rather than simply working within that tradition, exposes it for its make-up ^{because} (where in her careful delivery leaves us under little illusion. Each element of the song is observable and little gets lost in a build-up of musical sounds. The recent synthesizer pop methods include such illusionary devices as "Chorus" switches built into the synthesizers, delay mechanisms (where a singers' voice is repeated electronically, a split second after the original to give the impression that more persons are singing) echo unit (to give an idea of space acoustics) and special channels that imitate violins, wind instruments, brass etc.

"Most inventors of electronic musical instruments have attempted to imitate 18th and 19th century instruments ... when Theremin provided an instrument with genuinely new possibilities, their ministers did their utmost to make the instrument sound like some old instrument, giving it a sickly sweet virbato and performing on it, with difficulty, masterpieces from the past". (5)

As the changing slides function also as a backing rhythm or pulse for the texts in the Like a Stream, performance, the repeated "Ah's" serve as the basis for timing in 'O Superman'. These "Ah's" and the way they are repeated are derived from a language teaching method that occurs at the Rudolph Steiner School in Bern. The endless repetition of these also refers to the metronom, a ticking instrument used by musicians to keep musical time. Of late, it has been adopted by such people as John Cage, as a musical instrument in itself. (He has set up a concert where the stage was occupied with a large number of metronoms all of which were set off at different speeds. The concert ended when the last metronom wound down).

Anderson's use of this repeated utterance, such as that used in 'O Superman' occurs again in the performance United States I-IV, in a section entitled ENGLISH. The last two letters, SH, are repeated via a special synthesizer connected to the microphone, and again, provides onimous background rhythm for the texts.

Unlike Cage, Anderson's music utilizes a classical harmony tradition in that the resulting melodies for her songs operate with the harmonies common to a western musical tradition. Consonance, as opposed to disconsonance. A very familiar scheme based on the harmonies achieved in the

spacing of notes, in that every note and the fifth note after that on the eight note scale, is harmonious. This is the basic principle on which composers such as Bach, Handel, Mozart, and Beethoven among many others_x worked, and throughout history it is inherent in western folk songs. In the present day_x it is utilized in a simple form by most pop-singers. One often hears the cliché of the "three chord band", which is largely interpreted as a derogatory remark. The three chords in question, an example being, the chords of C, G, and F, (6), are applicable to all the notes on the eight note or diatonic scale. The chord as opposed to the note employs a number of notes in harmony to provide one overall notion of those combined notes and are generally used to support individual notes or give a certain emphasis or character. There are many permutations of this, but for illustrative purposes I have chosen the simplest of examples of note and chord combinations. One of the most complicated uses can be found in the music of J.S. Bach, where he combines these basic harmonies with subtle changes in key, such that the piece ends a half-note away from what it started in without one disharmonious moment.

"I try to scale it (music) to
a human level so that it
doesn't seem to come out of
nowhere". (7)

Although, not aiming for the classical musical complexities of Bach, Anderson's music does, as I have stated, refer to that tradition as it applies to the folk or pop-song. Anderson combines notions of the pop-song, folk-song and elements of what we call modern music. The use of loop magnetic tape, for instance, where endless and unvaried repetition is available, synthesizers, where a note played can be sustained and constant for any duration, unlike a piano or violin, where there is an obvious beginning and end to the notes. With the developments in Germany during and after the World War II and subsequent developments in other countries of the synthesized sound through computers, the shape of the note, it was found, could be constructed from beginning to end. While a straight line on an oscillograph represents one sort of sound, it being the finest sound (becoming inaudible at a certain point), while "white noise", the ^{most} dense of sound, is represented by all types of lines, those straight, waved, squared, sawtooth and all the degrees of these, so on an oscillograph it looks like

a wide, blurry, active band. Through these developments and further developments in computers, it is now possible to "draw" the sound where, from scratch, the sound can be designed and constructed visually. This method was employed by Laurie Anderson in the composing of her most recent L.P. 'Mister Heartbreak'. It serves as yet another example of her interests in the multiple possibilities in mixing visuals and sounds where one, actually or metaphorically, becomes the other.

One cannot refer to the music of Laurie Anderson in isolation, for she, unlike a musician, is not concerned with simply the structure of music in its literal sense, that of the organisation of sets of notes, but with it as a language, as something that has meaning. Language in this broad sense, is central to Anderson's approach and in this sense she and John Cage share common ground. Cage, operating within the category of musician or composer, rather than that of the fine arts, has an approach to music that is as much to do with the language of music as it is to do with the actual structure. These concerns are exposed in his methods of making music and are re-emphasized in his writings. Many concerns that Cage sets up immediately seek to broaden the concept of the term 'music' so that it includes noise and chance occurrence of notes. The objects he uses to make music often have their own completely separate history of associations, such as household commodities and environmental sounds. One piece Cage performed involved the presence of an orchestra, which for the duration of the performance, remained mute. Thus, the performance became made up of the noises issued from the audience (coughs etc.) For this piece then, it was the audience that provided the random score.. It raised the question of interpretations of sound and the meaning it communicated and the questions that occur with that meaning as well as redefining the hitherto passive role of the audience or spectator.

Anderson engaged in a not too dissimilar idea in her performance in Paris (Autumn Festival; Paris 1979), where in order to deliver the texts, she learned French phonetically (by ear) and using this meant that although she was speaking, she was never absolutely sure what she was saying and hence depended almost entirely on the response from the audience, so in

a way, the communication or "feed-back" from the audience became more important. The presence of an audience thus plays a greater practical role in this event.

In relation to Cages' work, just as the notions of music are examined and challenged, so too, are the notions of language and its communicability in the case of Anderson's situations,

"Say what you mean
Mean what you say". (8)

With the work of Anderson as with the writer William Burroughs, it is infinitely more effective to have the author deliver ^{his or her} their own work. Burroughs treats his work similar in a way to Anderson's treatment of her own work in that, accounts of many situations are often juxtaposed in a seemingly random order, and sometimes the typed sheets containing the work are altered, cut, and relocated so that even sentences are deformed and take on a curious (non) coherence.

Parallels in the fragmentation of information can be seen in both Burrough's and Anderson's work. Yet both their work, each as a whole, portray a very visible account of their respective situations and achieve a depth and density necessary to portray that reality. In public performances of his work, Burroughs too partakes of the formal concert set-up in that he occupies one illuminated spot on stage and addresses the audience from that one position throughout the readings. The readings are valuable because, they are added to by the character and animation of Burroughs' voice.

Character is a very important aspect of the work of Anderson and the sheer weight of her intentions on this level can only be obtained at a live performance. She does not build characters as much as take them from the immediate environment. They include the Mailman, Student, Butcher, series and more abstractedly, the various voices, whose of authority, friendly, intimate,

"hail a taxi voice,
and the interview voice" (9)

So at one point, she appears to be having an intimate conversation on the phone, her end of the "conversation" being the only one audible, where the words are spoken in a soft, warm way, and the next, we (the audience) become passengers on a commercial plane where our attention is demanded by the "captain". This reaction of our illuminates, through this context much of what is being done with language in the "normal" everyday situations.

The manifestation of the mutual sympathies each has for the other, are to be found on Anderson's recent L.P. Mister Heartbreak, where both Burroughs and Anderson carry out variations on the song, Sharkey's Day.

What we have witnessed in the Laurie Anderson we know and her work is the practical application of notions on the broadening out of the concept of the role of art, a synthesis of many of the ideas present in the 1960's with such groups as those involved in multi-media and many of the performance artists, along with an examination of language with a depth that reveals its complexities and ambiguities.

-27-

C H A P T E R I I I :

- (1) Ken Hallings, "A Warner Communications Co.",
Performance Magazine; No. 25, p. 15
- (2) "Laurie Anderson: Language is a
virus from Outerspace". New Musical Express,
26th June 1982, p. 28
- (3) From the song, "O Superman" off the L.P. record,
Big Science, Warner Bros. Inc., 1982.
- (4) Ibid.
- (5) John Cage, " Experimental Music
Silences, p.
- (6) Notes applicable to the chord of G, for example,
are D, G and B; and to the chord of F are C, F
and B.
- (7) Philip Smith, "A Laurie Anderson Story", Arts
Magazine, Jan 1983 p. ^
- (8) From The South Bank Show.
- (9) William Furlong, "Laurie Anderson: An Interview",
Audio Arts, Vol. ^

CHAPTER IV - ALAURIE ANDERSON'S COMMUNICATIONS WITH THE MEDIA IN RELATION TO HER WORK

"Ethics are the aesthetics of the future" Lenin

The above statement was taken and altered by Anderson for one of her songs, to read, "Ethics are the esthetics of the few, of the few, of the future". The initial statement contains one meaning (or set of meanings) and by her alterations Anderson had given an extra meaning without the sacrifice of the first. As Patricia Stewart paints, "Anderson weaves multi-media fragments ... into performances which cross-reference visual and linguistic puns with philosophical questions". If our notions of aesthetics were ever categorized as being part of a fine art activity exclusive to all other activities, well then, this statement by Lenin can inform us on two broad issues. The first being a clarification on the meaning of "Aesthetics" which is bound up with an idea of beauty and perhaps perfection and is not restricted to a two-dimensional field as in painting, or even sculpture objects but exists, because, it is an idea, in many other (more abstract) activities. Where in classical sculpture, for example, one can associate different features of that sculpture with the authors concern for aesthetics, but in other areas, those outside fine art such as business politics or communications they are perhaps not so readily pinpointed, nevertheless, since aesthetics is not a concrete thing, but an idea, its application to these other areas is thus readily conceivable.

The second issue, is that referred to by Rauschenberg, when he claimed the inseparability between art and life, so aesthetics, being a generally agreed upon set of codes, can therefore, apply as much to life as to art. Anderson then, by her alterations changes, or rather, adds a further issue to this for ethics being the esthetics of the few, suggests that Lenin's statement, while it may contain truth, is not necessarily universal in that, it is to a percentage of people and not the total to whom it applies. One cannot say because of the lack of the necessary information whether this

might be to do with class or education. It is very close to the relatively recent notions of non-objectness that has been an art issue manifest by the workings of performance artists. Lenin's statement is, I believe, applicable to Anderson's situation as a contemporary artist, in that because she involves herself directly in her work that of her performances, she does not exist as merely an anonymous author of the pieces, she herself becomes an integral and active and therefore critical part of her work.

"The Laurie Anderson we know
is clearly an assumed personae". (1)

Because of the nature of performance, this is not altogether unusual since in most cases the artist becomes or is the work and vice-versa, but it is acute in its obviousness with Anderson through her contact with the media in situations outside her staged pieces, that of the condition of her interviews with various sources such as television, art magazines, and various other publications.

It is these interviews that enable one to observe yet another poignant aspect of her work and ideas, for her contact with media outside her performance or other work takes on some of the elusive qualities of the latter. There is no situation in these interviews where she gives any literal explanation for what she does but rather she uses metaphor and a deliberateness that satisfies, in an abstract way, the demands of an interview situation. Interviews seek to know the author of an action after the action, such as a singer after the song, the artist after the piece of work, the politician after the election, and we are given to believe we will then have a greater or more concrete impression of that author and we will be in a better critical position with regard to their work, after the interview. This, of course, is not always the case. Our knowledge of someone through their work is often up-ended by an interview and in some cases there is no value at all in the interview in relation to author and work, particularly perhaps with artists, because the nature of the work is not so readily explicable.

Through interviews, one is more informed about the relationship between interviewer and interviewee than simply the person being interviewed in

isolation. This makes the situation conditional and dependent where the position of the interviewer could wield influence over the affair to the detriment of the interviewees' intentions. There is another consideration in this also, and that is, the end publication in which the interview will finally be recorded. This can be over a massive range of magazines to television or radio. The strength of these mediums as makers of definitive truths is central to the problem of communication. Since on top of the verbal, written language, used, there is also the inherent language of the medium itself.

Because of the nature of the work of Laurie Anderson, that of her contact through her work with areas other than those of fine art, or art object making, she has been the subject of interest to such publications as The New Musical Express, many fine art related magazines, and television. The three particular publications that I will use as an illustrative example are the editions of The New Musical Express, the televised South Bank Show and the more specialized View magazine, all of which dealt with her with a certain amount of depth. Each of these publications have their own specific intentions and interests along with the general ones common to them as a group.

In contrast to this, there is the New Musical Express article which, appeals strictly to a popular culture with strong musical tendencies with great emphasis on style. It concentrates in its overall tone on sharp delivery with a liberal use of casual phrasology. Andersons' contributions to this in terms of her expressions in the form of quotes blend easily and very well with the overall tone of the article and these expressions are markedly different from those in the televised South Bank Show, the View magazine interview or indeed any other. 'This is taking into account the art of editing on the part of the publication). Anderson is much more diplomatic in commenting on the art world in The South Bank Show, than she is in the N.M.E.

In The South Bank Show, she is in sympathy with an art gallery visitor's confusion about the resemblance between Barnett Newman's White Square, and their "Bathroom Tile" (6), and so refrains from a direct statement on the piece itself or its own history, whereas in The New Musical Express, she seems much more brash when she states:-

"The people in the art world are
incredibly snobby about things that
are commercial and say, How could you
have sold out like that, how could you
be working with a company?. I just
think art world politics are 12th
century, really complicated". (7)

The casualness of her comment on art world politics is misleading for
these politics are the very ones Anderson has been dealing with as an
artist for the past ten years. Moreso, perhaps than other artists because,
the nature of her work demands the involvement of more than one person to
carry it out on a technical level, unlike object making where the sculpture
or painting takes place privately and is subsequently made public.

At the same time, this comment appears very valid and direct within the
context of the rest of the article.

Anderson is indeed a manipulator of events, as much of the media as she
is of "contents and messages" (8). She shows that she is not devious
in this manipulation as much as she is knowing of it. It is through
these media publications and the way in which Anderson deals with them
that makes concrete notions prevalent in her performance and other work.

"I've been looking and thinking
about the human voice ...
My work is based on the voice
and what it means to speak to
people, what conversation is". (9)

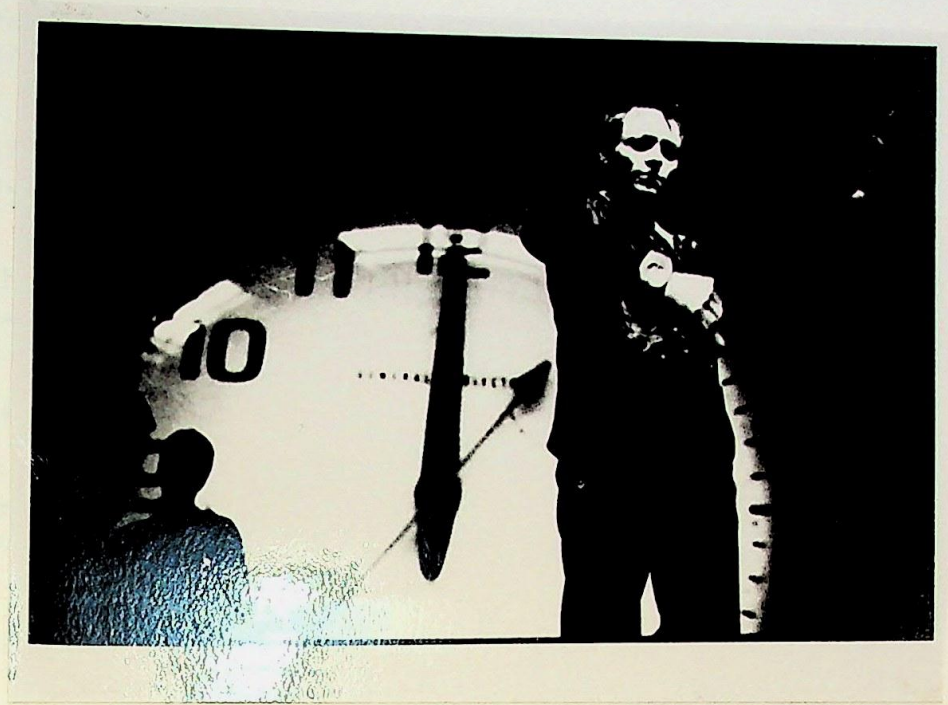
The non-specificness that is so much a part of her verbal (and other)
deliveries in her performances occurs again in her interviews. This,
within the context of fine art, from which she operates, is significant
and is illuminating with regard to her ideas overall. She is not, I
believe, in such a state of ignorance or naivete that she, "treats all
her technological aids as playthings and does not acknowledge or address

the fact that it is mechanization that allows her to do much of what she does". (10), as is put by Paul Yamada in a recent review.

Her use of such equipment and the apparent casualness with which she uses it, takes on new meanings or implications in relation to the other aspects of her work and ideas.

"Well, I walked uptown and I saw
a sign that said: Today's lecture -
Big Science and Little Men. So I
walked in and there were all these
salesmen and a big pile of electronics.
And they were all singing. Phone
lock loop. Neurological bonding.
Video disc. They were singing: We're
gonna link you up. They were saying,
We're gonna Phase you in". (11)

It is not, or at least should not be, regarded as a privilege to be in a position to use such equipment on such a scale, this privilege being bestowed on us by the Gods of the technological and mechanical age as is suggested by Yamada. She does not elevate the status of equipment she uses by "sleight of hand" (12) and does not promote heroism through manipulation of it. If the mythical hero or God is acknowledged by her, it is with dubiousness and while she might acknowledge its existence, as a potent myth, she exposes it at the same time by suggestion for what it might really be. With her combination of a sophisticated knowledge of recent art and a sensitivity to art history, inside and outside of performance art, along with an acute awareness of current events on the popular culture level, Anderson has succeeded in stimulating hitherto dormant issues concerning art in a way that is immediately enlightening and entertaining.



13.

C H A P T E R IV:

- (1) Craig Owens, "United States, II", Art in America; March, 1981, p.112
- (2) Melvin Bragg, "Twilit Intensity", Art Monthly; No. 74, (March 1984), p.
- (3) John Wyver, "From the Parthenon", Art Monthly; No. 75, (April 1984), p.
- (4) Ibid p.
- (5) For example: Charlton Heston playing the role of Michaelangelo in The Agony and the Ecstasy (film) 1965.
- (6) From The South Bank Show.
- (7) "Laurie Anderson: Language is a virus from outer-space", New Musical Express; 26 June, 1982, p. 28
- (8) Paul Yamada, "Laurie Anderson at the Kennedy Centre", New Arts Examiner; April 1984, p. 32
- (9) Robin White, "Laurie Anderson Interview", View Vol. II, No. 8, p.1
- (10) Paul Yamada, p. 32
- (11) Laurie Anderson, "United States, part II", Chantal Pontbriand (ed) Performance Text(e)s and Documentation, p. 162.
- (12) Paul Yamada, p. 32

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