

Art

Laurie Anderson's Twilight Zone Sensibility

Hunter Drohojowska

During her performances, Laurie Anderson sings or speaks in some eight different voices, ranging from the deep, male, authoritative voice of an airplane pilot to the mechanized tones of an answering machine. None of these voices seems to belong to the small figure on stage with the short punk haircut and the unmatched black jacket and pants. As she alternately intones or proclaims her songs, the darkened stage is hit with a barrage of slide show images from the Anderson lexicon: ideograms and cartoons, drawings, foreign words, photographs from TV news. But there is no clear relationship between what we see and what we hear, just as there seems to be only a vague association between Anderson's fictional voices and her factual presence.

This schism between hearing and seeing, the fragmented collage of voices and anecdotes that constitutes a Laurie Anderson performance, stands for both the substance and symbol of contemporary culture. The first performance to be fully realized in this style of the "Electronic Cabaret" was titled "Americans on the Move." It embodied the discontinuity that seems to prevail as one of the only constants in our society. This performance became "Transportation," part I of Anderson's two-day performance "United States."

That the wry humor and dark anecdotal observations of Anderson's performances struck a sympathetic chord was evident after her *O Superman* sold more than 800,000 copies.

Anderson's performances are sculptural, a matrix of visual and verbal information that is the manifestation of a long artistic evolution. While the performances are the body of her art, the skeleton and muscles that provide its shape and strength are the years of extra-performance activity: between 1969 and 1983 she collected photographs with text, documentation, found objects, films, books and drawings. These works are the subject of an exhibition at Frederick S. Wight Gallery through March 4.

It is at this exhibition that we see how the performances came to be. Just as a sculptor in steel will repeat shapes, lines, colors and materials, Anderson has built

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up a compendium of anecdotes, both fictional and autobiographical, sound effects, and visual tricks that recur in cycles.

For example, the hilarious tale of her session with a psychiatrist is presented in triplicate: in a film titled *Dearreader*, as documentation in stills and text, and as an installation called *At the Shrinks*. Here, the viewer sits in a darkened room — much of Anderson's work is experienced in the dark, which is the way she works — facing a tiny white plaster figure on the floor. A film of a seated psychiatrist is projected on the white surface while Anderson's deadpan voice narrates: "I used to spend time going to the psychiatrist. She had her office set up so that she was sitting in the corner and on one side of her was a window and on the other a mirror. She could tell by slight movements of my eyes whether I was looking directly at her or out the window or at the mirror. I looked at the mirror a lot and one of the things I noticed was that on Monday the mirror was perfectly clean and clear — but by Friday it was covered with lip marks. This was one of those processes that surprises you at first but that eventually you come to take for granted, even to depend on."

"One day, more or less in passing, I said, 'You know, it's like the lip marks that gradually appear on your mirror.' She looked surprised.



Howard Rosenberg

"'What lip marks?' she said. 'Suddenly I realized that because of the way the sun was coming in the window and hitting the mirror at an angle, she couldn't see them. 'Why don't you come and sit in my chair?' I said. I had never seen this woman in any other position except in her chair, but she rose up (she could actually walk), crossed the room, and sat in my chair. She said, 'Oh. Lip marks.'"

"The next time I saw her was the last. She said she had discovered that her 12-year-old daughter had been coming into her office during the week and kissing the mirror, and that the maid would come in on the weekends and wash off the marks. And it was then I realized we were seeing things from such literally different points of view that I wouldn't have to see her again."

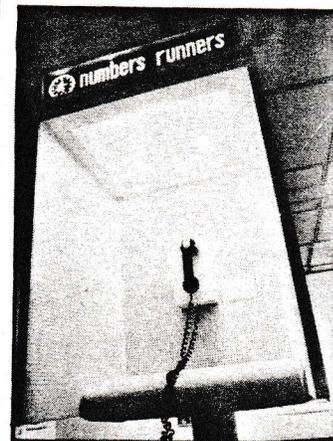
While the story is amusing, it also demonstrates Anderson's fascination with the multiple interpretations and perceptions that accrue to any story/image/sound, and the malleable division between truth and fantasy. Hers is the sensibility of the *Twilight Zone*. By compressing time through memory, operating on the edge of absurdity, denying specific identity, and manipulating the audience, she inevitably elicits that contemporary rhetorical question, "What's

going on?" She is the mistress of the strange couched in the familiar, a surrealist.

Anderson's subtle wit — "I am in my body the way most people drive their cars" — falls somewhere between Orwell's *1984* and *Saturday Night Live*. A perfect example is "Numbers Runners" (1978): an altered telephone booth. You pick up the receiver to hear Anderson's sexy voice asking if you're there, and why you aren't talking. You respond only to hear your own voice amplified after a split second delay. She keeps demanding, you keep trying to answer. The sensation is eerie, frightening, the ultimate communication breakdown by which your very existence is denied.

One object that relates to the performance of "United States" is a world map silk-screened onto plexiglass in three colors. When you put on glasses with red and green lenses, the map appears layered in three dimensions, with different countries and the state of California just floating in space, disconnected from their continents. Through a pair of headphones, you alternately hear the sounds of airplane motors and honking geese. Again, the anchor is pulled up and you are suspended psychologically, just like those countries and states.

Anderson often performed her early texts with William Burroughs, and her writings owe him a certain debt. As Janet Kardon points out in her perceptive catalogue essay, Anderson amplifies discontinuity in a tradition of the New York avant-garde of the 1950s and 1960s, codified in the paintings of Robert Rauschenberg, by Merce Cunningham in dance, Robert Foreman in theater, and John Cage and David Tudor in music. Kardon writes that these figures have established the ground out of which Anderson, a member of a new generation, "works with ease and aplomb, carefully organizing and orchestrating the random in a way that denies it (method) even as it invokes it (effect). The effect, in other words, is random, although the method is not."



Slobodan Dimitrov

A new, improved Ma Bell.

Anderson has built on the conventions of the most advanced contemporary art and melded them with popular culture in a surrealist blend that is utterly at home in its own time.

The Trisha Brown dance company will be performing *Set and Reset* with music by Laurie Anderson and visuals by Robert Rauschenberg on February 24 and 25, 8:30 p.m. at the Wadsworth Theater on Wilshire Blvd., Westwood. Tickets are \$12, \$10, and \$4 (full-time students) and are available at UCLA Central Ticket Office, 825-9261. ■