

WHIRLWIND: CONVERSATIONS WITH LAURIE ANDERSON

For over twenty five years Laurie Anderson has startled the public and inspired fellow artists with an uncompromising, highly personal investigation into contemporary American life. Her iconic work--combining voice, performance, film, technology, sculpture, and other mediums in an ongoing study of the relationship between private and public experience--is widely credited with having pioneered the territories within performance, audio and video art that are now so heavily traveled by younger artists. Laurie Anderson was one of the first to fuse these mediums in a trans-disciplinary approach; in its frankness and wit, her oeuvre is particularly American.

In January 1974 Laurie Anderson had her first exhibition at Artists Space. For the first three seasons all of the shows were selected by more established artists. For instance, Jonathan Borofsky, Scott Burton and Barbara Kruger were selected respectively by Sol LeWitt, Claes Oldenberg and Jane Kaufman. However, the most magical combination was Vito Acconci selecting Laurie Anderson. Twenty Five years ago it would have been difficult to have linked them artistically. Anderson was just beginning and Acconci had already created some of his more seminal pieces. But today one can easily see the common threads-- their distinctive use of language and voice and a voracious interest in American life as a template for their ideas. Probably most compelling is their ability to defy convention and trends at all costs, essentially to work and thrive outside the narrow confines of the art world.

As unorthodox as it was twenty five years ago to show Laurie Anderson and many of her colleagues, it is equally unorthodox today for Artists Space to be giving a solo exhibition to an established artist. It is also unorthodox that Laurie has agreed to return a quarter of a century later. However, out of all the artists we have shown over the years, no one is more fitting to launch our 25th Anniversary than Laurie Anderson.

Laurie Anderson: Whirlwind looks at an historical cross section of Anderson's audio work by introducing to the American public *Whirlwind* -- a three dimensional sound installation; *Handphone Table*, first exhibited in the Projects Space at the Museum of Modern Art in 1978 and a selection of historical performance photographs taken from Anderson's archives.

In interviewing Laurie it is always fascinating to see where she goes with a simple banal question, how the more straight forward can illicit a grand story. I was interested in time and memory, the recent past, but also the greater picture of time, someplace between an hour glass and a crystal ball. I was also drawn to the more practical or day to day things such as: was she nervous in her early performances, what does she think about on stage, etc. These interviews took place respectively in January and June 1998, portions of which will be reprinted in our anniversary book *5,000 Artists Return to Artists Space: 25 years*.

Claudia Gould
Director

Laurie Anderson: The first sound thing I did--I wouldn't actually call it a performance, was something up at Lewiston Stadium at City College where I was teaching. It was called *O-Range*. Some of the images from the first Artists Space show were from that piece. There's something great about a giant piece of architecture like that stadium. Lately, I've been working on a lot of songs for *Moby Dick*, my next performance, and one of the images that I keep thinking of is when Herman Melville visited the Parthenon--and what it must have been like for him to see this giant thing, this pile of old bones in the middle of an enormous landscape. It must have been so startling--a white whale beached in the middle of Greece. But that's the thing about working on *Moby Dick*, everything starts looking like it. Melville dedicated *Moby Dick* to Nathaniel Hawthorne who he had a kind of crush on. He really respected him, but Hawthorne didn't really like the book. Melville was devastated. The next book that Melville wrote he dedicated to a mountain.

As for the show, along with *Whirlwind*, I might show a few other images from other sound pieces, maybe an image of *Duet for Door Jam*, a piece that used contact microphones or *Duets on Ice*, *Acoustic Lens* and *Handphone Table*.

Claudia Gould: How did you meet Vito Acconci?

L.A.: I met Vito Acconci in 1973 through Dan Graham. I'd met Graham through Richard Nonas. I was involved in a couple of artistic groups at that point. One was a group with Gordon Matta-Clark, Richard Serra, Phillip Glass, Dickie Landry, Tina Girouard, Suzy Harris, and Jene Highstein. It was the party group. We had a lot of fun and worked on each other's projects. The other group was more serious, or just different. They overlapped a bit. It was made up of Dan Graham, Sol Lewitt, and Vito Acconci. Vito got plunked in there because he was starting to do things in galleries, even though they were poetry readings turned into installations. That group was wild!

During the Artists Space show in early 1974, I was always running over to Richard Nona's house because he had a lot of stuff there and I'd say, "I need to get this and that!" And he'd say, "Jene will help you." It was really this very loose way of helping each other. That was the most fun I had with a group of artists. Places like Artists Space were so important for us then. Like most young artists, we were dependent on banding together. The physical bases for us then were Food Restaurant, The Kitchen, Artists Space, and Paula Cooper Gallery. Eventually everybody left the group. They'd start to tour, or whatever you want to call "touring"--we'd go over and do an installation in Stockholm, or a show here or there. We just couldn't keep up the daily contact.

I first performed at Artists Space in 1974, a few months after my exhibition. In the performance, called *As: If*, I wore all white. The dress functioned as a kind of film

screen, upon which images were projected. In early performances like that one, I was interested in the use of one basic form--in *As:If* it was an arc. Most of the basic shapes are derived from forms near where I live.

C.G.: Were you nervous performing at Artists Space, what were you thinking about on stage?

L.A.: On the evening I performed *As:If*, I was nervous about whether the microphone I had strapped under my right underarm with an improvised mike-clip would fall out. It really looked ridiculous but I gave it a try. I wanted to have my hands free to do other things. This was before reliable remote wireless microphones. At that time, I did a multimedia show, which meant I used slide projectors, Super-8 film, big cables, and microphones strapped with a belt to my chest. I wasn't that nervous at Artists Space, probably because I'd done so much public performing when I was younger. As a kid, I used to perform in front of people for the Talented Teens, USA group. I was a dorky American teenager from Illinois, but here I was doing shows for people like the mayor of Brighton, England, or for U.S. sailors on a ship in Nice, France. I would give *chalk talks* which meant I'd draw really, really fast on huge pieces of paper on a specific topic, such as American life. Because I was really fast at cartoons, I would ask someone from the audience to come up and I would do caricatures of them while we talked. That was the entertainment--and it was really fun. So, during the Artists Space show in 1974, I felt more vulnerable than nervous. I kept asking myself, why am I saying all these things about my life and my grandmother! It was a very unusual thing to do then. There was no such thing as autobiographical art, which is what it was called a few years later.

C.G.: I know you taught poetry on Rikers Island when you were in your early twenties. If you were in your twenties today can you imagine what you would be doing -- do you think you would be teaching poetry to prisoners?

LA: I taught poetry because I thought I could change the world. And I wasn't the only one operating under that assumption. There were a lot of artists who wanted to do something to effect the culture. The drug, post-Vietnam generation was doing a lot of political work. Political in the sense that you'd go out of your realm a little bit to see what was happening.

What would I be doing if I was in my twenties today? (laughing). I can't even imagine being in my forties today! It's very hard to say. I don't have a very good memory. I can't envision transporting my twenty-year-old self into the nineties. It's a really hard thing to do because you're so affected by what surrounds you.

C.G.: Do you talk to young artists today? And what are they interested in?

LA: Computers. It's hard to avoid doing digital things today. I'm waiting, of course, for the backlash--which I believe is just around the corner. I'm interested in how

they get an image of themselves from their computers. You often name things on your computer with your own name, "L.A. text" for example, and then somehow you're in there. Part of your mind is now in there, and it can never die in there. Even if your computer dies, you can always somehow resurrect it. So you can create a very controllable small world. Anyone who's worked with digital graphics can understand the impulse of wanting to scan absolutely everything they see and touch into their computers. If I can only get it in there, then it can be part of my world, and I could control it. So that's the aspect about work now that's the most problematic, I think. For myself, and for young artists, the hardest thing to do is to resist that impulse. That's why I'm rebelling against rectangles. I'm so sick of them. The stuff I'm making for *Moby Dick* is real jagged and non-rectangular.

C.G.: It sounds to me you are talking about what the post-war painters like Jackson Pollack or Lucio Fontana were thinking about fifty years ago: how to free themselves from the picture plane. It's very similar. Yet now, although the issues are similar, there seems to be more of an interest in control that concerns you.

Do you ever get the past and the present mixed up?

LA: Well, I use repetition in my performances by telling stories over and over. Like in my last tour, *Stories from the Nerve Bible*, I told a story about almost dying in the Himalayas. Actually, I thought that I could neutralize the story by telling it over and over--something that really scared me. In fact, I sort of relived it every night. It was the first time this had happened to me, that a story had ceased functioning as a piece of text as part of the performance. But this story continued to live by repeating it. I felt like I was back there every time I told it. That was eerie, I don't know why that happened. But in many cases, when I rely on my memory, I certainly get mixed up. The thing that makes *Moby Dick* refreshing to work on is that these aren't my memories. I'm working with another person's text. But, of course, Melville's very much about memory--so there's no escape.

C.G.: If you lived a hundred years ago can you imagine what you would be doing?

LA: Probably I'd be doing laundry, like most women did then. I guess the gentlest outlet for creative women was doing watercolors and writing. I don't think I would have assumed a pseudonym.

C.G.: What about a hundred years from now?

LA: I don't think a hundred years will be so radically different from now. If you think of New York at the turn of the last century, a lot of the neighborhoods looked the same. Yeah, there are a few more ATM machines around. But I think that it's still a city about walking and contact in the way it was then. In a hundred years there'll be a lot more skyscrapers, but I bet a lot of this will survive that.

C.G.: But what do you think you'd be doing?

LA: It depends on the network of communication. I'm somebody who likes live situations. Just when you think live music is dying, a hundred new clubs crop up. I mean, look at what's happening this Summer with music in New York. It's unbelievable. You think it's going to be all digital and it's not. It's a lot of people who just get out there and play.

C.G.: The end of the 20th century is so much about the experience industry, what Times Square is moving toward or Disney's influence on our culture, basically the interest in controlling Americans leisure time. Do you try and control the audiences's experience, is this something you are consciously thinking about as you go on stage?

LA: I try to make a situation that's open enough so that people can come into it and make up their own minds. That's always been my mode. I also pay attention to what happens in the first minute. I make the jump-cut wide enough in that first minute, so that people know how far they have to jump to get it. If you ease people into something, sometimes they don't whether they have to participate with logical jump-cuts. If you make a connection that is really wild, then people will see that they need to make wild leaps of faith in terms of the logic. If it's funny enough, or moving enough, or interesting enough, then you have made a template with which you can do daring things. But if you try to use logic to move people in slowly then I find that it doesn't work as well. You've got to be crazy from the word "GO" is what I'm saying. I want to make people understand that this is going to be a different kind of experience. It's not going to make the usual type of sense.

C.G.: Were you thinking about this 25 years ago when you first started performing?

LA: I was. You say who you are and then make a leap. I try to make it fun and worth it to take a leap.

C.G.: Can you tell me a little bit about *HandphoneTable* and why you want to put this in the same context as *Whirlwind*, since the pieces are so different.

LA: I want to include *HandphoneTable* because it's about privacy. A lot of these audio pieces are about public presentation, but they're also about a very private sound experience. *Whirlwind* is three-dimensional sound. In the way that I'm tired of rectangles, I'm tired of stereo. I want something that has more dimension in it. That's why I made *Whirlwind*. By standing at certain points underneath the piece, you get a different sonic picture. I'm not thrilled with interactive stuff right now. People assume that if you push a button something's going to happen. It's not a thrill anymore. It doesn't give anybody a sense of control at all. I think it actually takes that away in a funny kind of way. You don't know what's going to happen when you push the button anyway. The illusion that you're doing something doesn't mean you control it. I'm more interested in a loss of control. I'm interested in viewers losing their expectations.