ARTnews

Laurie Anderson and Julian Schnabel Talk 1970s New York, How Art Connects People, and More

by Andy Battaglia
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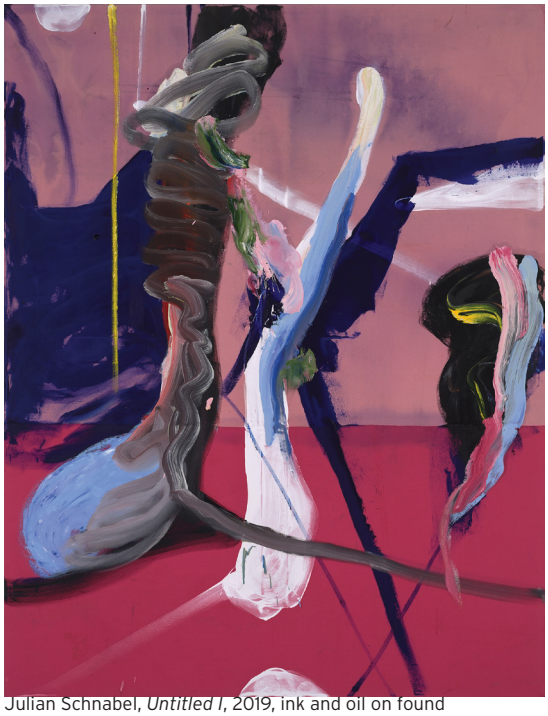
Julian Schnabel and Laurie Anderson at her Greenwich Village home. WESTON WELLS FOR ARTNEWS



Julian Schnabel, *Untitled I*, 2019, ink and oil on found fabric. ©JULIAN SCHNABEL/ARTISTS RIGHTS SOCIETY (ARS), NEW YORK

Laurie Anderson has been working and performing in many different mediums since the 1970s, when she came of age in a downtown New York milieu in which art forms expanded and boundaries between genres began to blur. She became a pop music star when her song "O Superman" hit the charts in 1981 and helped propel her album *Big Science* into the new wave canon, but she never ceded her avant-garde credentials as she continued to experiment and collaborate widely. In 2015, at the Park Avenue Armory in New York, she presented a high-profile staging of *Habeas Corpus*, a multimedia installation work that included video footage of Mohammed el Gharani, who had been detained by the U.S. military at Guantanamo Bay for more than seven years and struggled to find freedom after he was released. A restaging of that piece will feature in a major survey of Anderson's work opening in May at the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden in Washington, D.C.

Julian Schnabel — who got to know Anderson by way of her late husband, musician Lou Reed; they were married from 2008 until his death in 2013 — rocketed to fame as a painter in the '80s, when his big, brash, and expressionistic style ran counter to convention in the New York art world at the time. In recent years, he also established himself as a filmmaker, with features including *Basquiat, Before Night Falls, The Diving Bell and the Butterfly* (which was nominated for four Academy Awards), and At Eternity's Gate, the latter starring Willem Dafoe as Vincent van Gogh. Schnabel has a show of paintings, opening March 6 and running through April 18 at Pace Gallery in New York, that features large new works made on materials procured in Mexico.

Both artists joined *ARTnews* in conversation at Anderson's home in Greenwich Village.

Laurie Anderson and Hsin-Chien Huang's virtual reality experience *To the Moon* at the Manchester International Festival in 2019. MICHAEL POLLARD

ARTnews: What is the earliest formative memory you have of an experience with art?

Laurie Anderson: Her name was Mrs. Himmelfarb and she was a painter in our town. She was teaching kids to paint, and I was watching her paint tomatoes. She said, "Kids, you've got to make them really big! They've got to be like they taste!" She had the most joyful feeling about it. I remember her studio was just an absolute mess. Gertrude Himmelfarb, from Glen Ellyn, Illinois — a painter who did mostly tomatoes.
Julian Schnabel: Why paint anything else?
Anderson: They were unbelievable. Do you remember the first work of art you saw?
Schnabel: I spent a lot of time by myself when I was little because my brother and sister were much older. I spent a lot of time drawing, under the table in my kitchen. I had a world under there. You know the magazines that said, "If your son can draw a horse's head in a paddock, then maybe he's talented and can go to a famous art school"? My mother asked me to draw something like that, and the fact that I could do that was a sort of Pavlovian beginning. It was something my mother liked — so I ended up doing it more.

The first major painting I remember seeing was *Aristotle with a Bust of Homer* by Rembrandt at the Met. There was light coming out of the painting. The light was *emanating*. It seemed like something I wanted to get close to—and also the dark space within.

ARTnews: How did the two of you first meet?

Schnabel: We both knew Gordon Matta-Clark. He was with a performance artist at the time who didn't need her big studio and rented it to me so I could paint. Gordon used to come over, and he saw some paintings I was doing — really not like things people were making in his group at the time. He was very nice and introduced me to [gallerist] Holly Solomon.
Anderson: Did you ever show with her?
Schnabel: I was in a group show called "Surrogates/Self-Portraits", in 1977. Were you in that show?
Anderson: I think so. How do you find out for sure? It's slipped through the mists of time...
Schnabel: I would say yes. I had a painting in that show called... I don't know if *Jack the Bellboy* was in that show. It might have been. Or it was that *Pisa* painting, an orange one with a poplar tree in the middle. The orange one she sold for $700. I bought it back years ago.
Anderson: Oh, I know what I had in that: *Self-Portrait into the Edge of a Mirror*. Looking into the edge of mirrors sideways puts your head into this really odd sort of grotesque split.
Schnabel: We were on different paths immediately. Anyway, Gordon got sick and he was dying of pancreatic cancer. Laurie used to come over and visit him, so I would see her regularly. But we never really talked. I knew of her but never *really* until Lou and Laurie got together. Then we started seeing each other a lot.

ARTnews: Had you known Lou Reed before?

Schnabel: I actually met Lou quite late [in 1987], but I felt like we always knew each other.
Anderson: Like brothers.
Schnabel: I had this idea of making a requiem for Andy Warhol and I told John Cale at Andy's wake. He spoke to Lou about it and told me that Lou said he thought I would take it over, so he didn't want me to be involved.
Anderson: That sounds like something Cale would say *about* Lou — not necessarily something *Lou* would say...
Schnabel: I saw Lou at a screening somewhere and said, "You know, it's weird, you and John are going to do this thing, but it was my idea — and I heard you didn't want me to be involved." He said, "I never said that!" Ultimately, John and Lou made a beautiful record out of it called *Songs for Drella*. Lou and I didn't meet until Andy died, but once we did, it was like a house on fire. He was so familiar to me — and me to him — that we became very, *very* close. You always got the ball back in your court with him.

ARTnews: What do you mean by "ball back in your court"?

Schnabel: If you had a question, you got a good answer. He didn't miss anything. He was really listening. He didn't miss a beat. It felt like you were in the presence of some really great intelligence, and he was also warm. He has a reputation for being irascible or curmudgeonly, but I can

tell you he was so sweet to me—always. I could ask him anything and there was nothing he wouldn't do.

Anderson: When you mentioned your painting *Jack the Bellboy*, I immediately thought of Lou's songs, because he had this way of looking at people that you do too. I can imagine a song by Lou called "Jack the Bellboy" in a second. He had this curiosity in looking at other people and wondering, Who are you? What are your interests? Why are you like that? He wanted to know, not for some ego-driven reason but out of real curiosity.

Schnabel: He had insight into all sorts of things, and he had a lot of heart. *Berlin*, the record he made in 1973, was one of my favorite records ever — it was like the soundtrack to my life for a long while. The sadness in it just filled me up and made me feel like, If I'm going crazy, it's OK — *he* survived. I didn't know at that time that I was going to be a filmmaker, but I thought, If I ever do make a movie, I'd like to make a film of *Berlin*. Then time went by, things happened, and, ultimately, after 30 years of knowing each other, we made one.

Laurie Anderson sleeping on the sand at Coney Island for her photo series *Institutional Dreams*, 1972–73. COURTESY THE ARTIST

ARTnews: How did that come to pass?

Schnabel: I was making *The Diving Bell and the Butterfly*, and Lou said someone wanted to put out a production at St. Ann's Warehouse and asked me if I would do the sets. I was in France and had all of these paintings in my studio of Chinese wallpaper prints that I wanted to put around the stage, and I said it would cost $16,000 to send this stuff over. He said they didn't have that, so I said, "OK, forget it — you and me will finance this thing. We will put in $50,000 apiece and pay for the shipping and whatever else, and we will own it."

It was funny because, a couple days before Lou died, we were sitting on the couch watching it together. He got a real jolt out of it. He was just mesmerized, and he said, "Who paid for this? The *authors*!"

ARTnews: Both of you are strongly associated with New York City in different ways. What is your opinion of the city now?

Anderson: I was just in Berkeley and Alice Waters gave me a book about *Chez Panisse*, and it hit me so suddenly and so hard how much New York has changed. There's this free speech movement in Berkeley and all these people doing music and art and food and politics — radical politics. New York used to be so communal. Now everyone is doing their own professional careerism and it is just utterly different. I wonder how I can make a Berkeley in New York, because that is really what I want to do — to be in a situation based more on friendship with people and doing things rather than career-oriented stuff all the time.

Schnabel: I think you try to make yourself available. When you were reading recently at the Brooklyn Public Library, you were sticking your head out and opening your arms and saying to everybody, "We are in a situation, and we're all in it together. I'm willing to say something about it. What do you have to say?"

Anderson: That was something called "The Size of the Con", about the corporate art world and corporate cultural world and what's happened. It's a *long* text. But then, just last night, I played John Zorn's scene at the Brooklyn Stone. Zorn is a communal guy, and it was great — just a hole in the wall, where you can make music that really sounds different. Last week we played at the Walt Disney Concert Hall in L.A., and that is a big corporate scene.

Schnabel: What you are open to is connecting with people. When somebody performs, it is very different than if you are painting in a studio, and you have this way of communicating with people where you actually bring a sense of community with you. You have groups. You invite people over. You want to communicate. It is part of your temperament. At the same time, you give birth to communication for other people too—and it goes into your work. Willem Dafoe said something about being an actor: "When I am doing it, I feel like I'm awake. I *want* to be awake." I think your way of being awake is to bring other people along with you, like that notion of New York when we were younger.

ARTnews: How is the city most different to you now?

Schnabel: It's a pity because I know that Lola, my daughter — she grew up in the city and knows a bunch of people — I

feel like they like leaving the city rather than being in it. I feel like the outside pressure of what we were talking about — careerism — hovers over and dismantles that kind of friendship. Sometimes I think of Instagram and what happens with people showing whatever the hell they do. Like eating a hot dog — oh, *far out*!

Then I think of someone like James Nares in 1976. He had this wrecking ball attached to a cable that was tied to that bridge that goes across Harrison Alley [in Tribeca], and this fucking ball is going back and forth while he films it. He did all the camera work himself. There was a guy who spent some time doing that during the day, and then he just goes home and goes to sleep. But he does it, films it, and then it is there. There's a kind of integrity to the gesture. It was not designed for people to just digest it immediately and spit it out.

Anderson: On the other hand, I was just invited to do something with musicians and ironworkers in Brooklyn — they're setting trombones on fire and sawing things in half while playing them. I was like, "Wait a second, that sounds like Gordon Matta-Clark." So there's still stuff going on.

Schnabel: You can put down cement, but art will creep up through the cracks. But obviously, unfortunately, fascism and greed are enemies of art. We are living in a time when that shit is breaking up communities and the kind of flexibility young people need to be themselves.

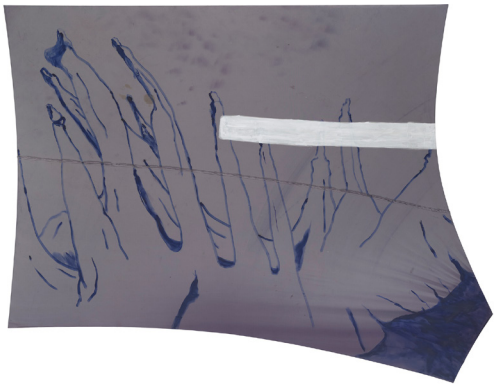
Anderson: I think it's partly generational. All of us are lonelier and more stressed out.

Schnabel: But your work engenders something that is alive. People can see my paintings and the paintings will stay there — it's a rudimentary quality of painting. It doesn't matter if I have another show. But in what you do, there's something like electricity, and part of what you are doing is, in the present, getting at something that has a cause and effect. It effects change — and makes people feel liberated. That's amazing. You're going to kill me because I have so much affection for you, but you have this unfathomable energy and desire to share that really changes people's lives.

Anderson: That's music. It comes from music — a very emotional and communal thing. There's nothing like live music. And now museums are trying to do music, which is just awful, usually. They don't have good sound systems. There's no place to sit. It doesn't work. It's weird.

ARTnews: Speaking of museums, what are you putting forth in your Hirshhorn show — and how significant is its setting in Washington, D.C.?

Anderson: It's significant to be in the middle of the fray. It's not a retrospective, and it's shaded toward the political. There are some *Personal Service Announcements* that I did a long time ago. It was interesting to do those because Warner Bros. wanted me to do some video for a record,



Julian Schnabel, *Lagunillas I*, 2018, oil and gesso on found fabric. ©JULIAN SCHNABEL/ARTISTS RIGHTS SOCIETY (ARS), NEW YORK

Laurie Anderson with a projection of Mohammed el Gharani in *Habeas Corpus* at the Park Avenue Armory, 2015. STEPHANIE BERGER

but instead of doing that I said I was going to do personal announcements. They had *nothing* to do with the record — they were about things like the national debt. But they just thought, Here's an artist doing a video and we can put it on MTV. It was really satisfying to do something in a big context like that and yet be subversive. We are also going to remount *Habeas Corpus* [a 2015 video installation featuring footage of Mohammed el Gharani, who had been detained by the U.S. military at Guantanamo Bay]. I went over to meet Mohammed, who is having a really hard time still. Every time he goes back to Chad he is arrested and tortured. He has been in 10 countries since he was out of prison.

Schnabel: Can't he just stay in one place where he is safe?

Anderson: He's not safe anywhere. They have agents following him around. It's criminal what we are doing to those people. It is not enough to just keep them in there for 10 years and torture them, but make sure that they can never go anywhere and be safe. We updated his story when I went over last summer and shot some stuff with him. I don't know how it's all going to come off — I have no idea.

Schnabel: Are you scared to speak up? Are you scared to show what you want to show? Are you going to compromise

what you're going to show because of fear? I would say no. You seem to be the most fearless person I know.

Anderson: I have a lot of fear.

Schnabel: But you are always going to be provocative and you're not going to compromise because you think it is too radical. You're going to say what you have to say.

Anderson: One thing is that a museum is not really my world. It's all of these white walls, and I come from a place where everything is dark. One of the things we're going to do is make some of the spaces dark to show a combination of a lot of things that I hope hang together. It's problematic for some people because there are paintings, film, music, politics. For a lot of people that's confusing.

Laurie Anderson's film *Sidewalk*, 2012. PHOTO: AMY KHOSHBIN. COURTESY GLENBOW MUSEUM, CALGARY.

ARTnews: Do you have confidence that art can still enter into the broader political conversation?

Anderson: One thousand percent – it just does it differently than other things. What is radical action now? I'm going to unlike you on Facebook – whoa, wow, that's *amazing*. But there's nothing worse than somebody saying, "those old days in the '60s." Who wants to hear about that? In Brooklyn last night, traffic was backed up. Why? Because there was a huge demonstration spread out over the whole city. There were all of these people marching in the streets, for the FTP group, and I thought, Don't underestimate what's going on.

ARTnews: What for you is most pressing politically?

Anderson: The justice system in this country – people have lost a huge amount of confidence in it. You could just watch the impeachment and realize there is no justice system. It's not about justice – it's about power and money. Justice is almost an antiquated concept. Chelsea Manning is one of my heroes, and I was on a panel in Houston with

Julian Schnabel, *The Patch of Blue the Prisoner Calls the Sky I*, 2019, oil on found fabric ©JULIAN SCHNABEL/ ARTISTS RIGHTS SOCIETY (ARS), NEW YORK

all of these women who had been imprisoned – Chelsea, Pussy Riot, a bunch of other people. It was so wild to learn what the experience of prison for women was like. The guy who was running the panel asked, "What did you learn in prison?" And they all said the same thing: "I learned to depend on other people, and that they would help me." Who says that? Most people would say "I want revenge" or whatever. But they said they learned to depend on each other. Only women prisoners would say that, and that's something to listen to – these women who are not pounding a desk and saying, "everything is wrong!" There were saying: "People help you."

ARTnews: Julian, new paintings that you're showing at Pace Gallery were made on materials from Mexico. What drew you to them as a different kind of medium?

Schnabel: The paintings are on cotton material of a kind that was covering up a fruit market in a jungle. They were tied with ropes in a village in the middle of nowhere, to block the sun so that people can sell oranges or have a toy store. People find whatever can work for them and sew it together, and the sun burnt the material and made this incredible color – I was drawn to that. I was driving and saw this pink material, so I bought it and went to some other markets from one small town to the next. They were very happy to sell them, and I guess I see something in the material that is an opportunity. It's a palimpsest. It has history – there is a story in it. When I started working in Mexico, I tied the material between palm trees, and it made an irregular shape. The sun had made images of itself radiating in parts that were hidden because they were tied in knots. When it was unraveled, these rays were

going out, and then I responded. But I've been painting on found objects and materials for a long time...

ARTnews: What do you like most about that material as a surface?

Schnabel: The color is amazing — it seems like lightning. You can't make a color like that. I'm always surprised when I look at painting that looks so generic because people accept materials and ways of working that are not a surprise. I made a painting of Willem Dafoe for the movie about Vincent van Gogh. I had to make a painting of him as a prop in the movie, and then I noticed that van Gogh made paintings of his own paintings, so I thought maybe I could do that — and made a painting of Willem as van Gogh as a plate painting. So I'm painting an image that is recognizable from a painting that I'm looking at. But working on these other paintings, I'm not looking at anything, so there is a kind of freedom that is more evident. But when you conform to an image that you might be seeing, that is also a port of embarkation because when you start painting it, it becomes something you never figured you would do. Your hand and your mind are working, but something in the middle of all that is occurring — which is the same thing as when you are hitting a note or making a sound. It has to do with your unconscious or your subconscious — or that space in between.

ARTnews: You taught Willem to paint for his role in *At Eternity's Gate*. What was that process like?

Schnabel: If he was sitting here he would say, "He taught me how to see." When we sat down and looked at a tree, his first impulse was to draw the whole tree. I said, "Don't try to do that — just look where the light is hitting and just paint the light. Do you see shadows in there? Paint that part now..." If people are going to watch a movie about a painter, they better believe the guy's painting. You know, Willem was not scared to act — but he was scared to paint.

ARTnews: Lest it be like watching an actor who obviously doesn't smoke fumbling with a cigarette.

Schnabel: That's true. *In Before Night Falls*, there was a guy who was supposed to smoke a cigarette in a kind of arabesque moment and I watched him, this fucker, put the cigarette in... I said, "Is there somebody around here who actually smokes?!" It's amazing how difficult it is to have somebody do the simplest thing. But through repetition you can abandon something at a certain moment and do something you didn't do before. Or you can hope for that. Once I started making these van Gogh paintings, I was discovering something about painting that I hadn't done before — and I was discovering something about van Gogh that I thought I had known but now know more deeply. Maybe that is why people make art. They are looking for something they didn't know.

Anderson: We are all looking. When you see somebody paint something you have never seen before, that is the greatest feeling of freedom. That changes your mind more than anything. Somebody might drone on about freedom, and then you just see something that is really free and think, Oh, *that's* what it looks like. You get the feeling of it — and not by talking about it endlessly.

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