

RIOT MATERIAL

An Atmospheric River of Wonder in Laurie Anderson's *The Weather*

by Nancy Kay Turner
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All images courtesy of the artist and The Hirshhorn

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"What are the days for? To put between the endless nights. What are the nights for? To slip through time into another world." -Laurie Anderson

"Stories are our weather" -Laurie Anderson

Laurie Anderson is a Renaissance polymath whose staggering breadth of knowledge, insatiable curiosity, technical virtuosity and conceptual rigor form the basis for her superb exhibit at The Hirshhorn. Simply titled (though not so simple) *The Weather*, it is billed as an immersive multimedia experimental exhibit, but really it is an otherworldly investigation into what it means to be a human in this twenty-first century. Intensely personal as well as political, it is a revelation, encompassing eerie video projections, kinetic talking sculpture, operatic oil paintings, invented conceptual violins, complex installations, multiple soundscapes, and everywhere words static and moving painted on floors and walls surrounding the viewer.

The exhibit is as surprising and unpredictable as the weather itself. Anderson, a Midwesterner, poignantly reminds us of a time long ago when talking about the weather was considered safe in polite company (when religion, sex, money, and politics were off limits). "Nice weather we're having!" "Beautiful day, isn't it?" Oh, how much has changed. Now the weather itself is politically charged due to the controversies surrounding the validity of human-caused climate change. In a lecture delivered recently, Anderson talked about how our stories are now stored in "the cloud," and they rain down upon us in relentless torrents.

With this wide-ranging exhibit, Anderson interrogates the cultural "climate" we exist in without resorting to didactic lectures. Ultimately interested in the stories we tell others and ourselves, Anderson is able to make the most arcane subject accessible by seamlessly merging text – fables, myths, quotes – with image, sound, motion and cutting-edge AI technology.

The viewer first enters a darkened series of rooms, hallways and foyers painted black, lit strategically and bathed in a beautiful body of sound – which all-the-more adds to the mysterious ambiance without drawing undue attention

to itself. A mesmerizing video of Anderson, dramatically clad in a white suit as she moves in a ritualistic manner to a throbbing heartbeat ("Drum Dance," from *Home of the Brave*, 1986, video, black and white, sound 0:53 min.), sets the effective tone. It is reminiscent of conceptual musician and performer David Byrne's use of the body to punctuate his music. Throughout this exhibition there is a sense of being wholly in the body, feeling the thrum of heartbeats through hallways as if passing through the narrows of a birth canal, or being encased in a womb and hearing the muffled sounds of words flowing like blood.



Installation view

Then come two 'wordless' installations the viewer walks through. The eerie "Citizens" (2021). The audio features the repeated sound of nineteen knives scraping against honing steel. The high-pitched rasping is broken only by the occasional clang of metal striking metal. There is a string of tiny humans standing or sitting (like a chorus line) in a horizontal diorama, behind plexiglass – embedded in darkness. It's as if citizens are extinct animals that can only be seen in a futuristic natural history museum – like dinosaurs. Strangely disorienting and unsettling, the citizens appear like weird recreations, or holograms, of actual people standing, sitting, squatting and shifting ever so slightly so that their movements are almost undetectable in a way that alters our perception.

One then enters a long passageway with red flags on robotically controlled poles, which sway left and right, ("Salute," 2021, eight flags on robotic arms, custom software, sound and test by the artist Mechanical design by Smooth Technology). The flags moving up and down and wave in random patterns in a pointed commentary on patriotism (especially after the January sixth insurrection and failed coup). As both "exhibits" are devoid of any text,

the viewer forms their own opinion as to the intended meaning, though the robotic arms clearly send a dark message of inherent menace.

"Chalkroom," one of my personal favorites, is a mesmerizing 10.39-minute black and white video, a projected work excerpted from a virtual reality piece when Anderson had collaborated with longtime friend, Hsin-Chien, back in 2017. Due to Covid, the viewer walks through a narrow hallway towards an intriguing portal (instead of seeing this through a headset). Black and white, hand-painted images rapidly flash by – like some trippy digital wallpaper – while the viewer walks in the opposite direction. This action warps one's sense of time, place and even the space itself. Wildly inventive, it is a magical mystery tour creating an almost out of body experience. I felt like I was walking through a three-dimensional Keith Haring painting.

Following on this piece, one emerges blinking into an enormous room that the indefatigable Anderson, 74, hand painted (without assistants!). Entitled "Four Talks," words and figurative images completely cover the walls and floor, creating a womb of stories that seeks to enlighten, educate, disrupt, entertain and surround the viewer – all while telling poignant and ambiguous tales that blend truth and fiction in a tantalizing brew of thought made manifest. These short stories, aphorisms or quotations are first person narratives in poetic formation, like e.e. cummings, where the visual structure is a key component. Here are some samples:

WHEN MY FATHER DIED WE PUT HIM IN THE GROUND

WHEN MY FATHER DIED IT WAS LIKE A WHOLE LIBRARY
HAD BURNED DOWN

IFYOUTHINKTECHNOLOGYWILLSOLVEYOURPROBLEMS
THEN YOU DON'T UNDERSTAND TECHNOLOGY - AND
YOU DON'T UNDERSTAND YOUR PROBLEMS

LESS LIKE AN OBJECT AND MORE LIKE THE WEATHER
-JOHN CAGE

SOME SAY OUR EMPIRE IS PASSING AS ALL EMPIRES DO
(OTHERS HAVEN'T A CLUE)

In the midst of this swirling cacophony of sound, as well as its tsunami of images, sit three free-standing sculptures, along with one sculpture attached to the wall. Each sculpture delivers a different message shrouded in grief. The most poignant is the golden canoe, damaged and

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adrift on a jet stream of words ("To Carry Heart's Tide (The Canoe)," 2020 wood, resin and paint.). The canoe in Greek mythology ferries people to the River Styx and the Underworld. It would seem to be a fitting memorial for a year of stupendous loss. Part of the text nearest the boat says "...carotid artery's/to carry heart's tide/united/in duet." Perhaps it's also a tribute to her husband, Lou Reed, to whom this exhibition is dedicated, along with her longtime friend John Cage.



Installation view

Anderson takes familiar animals, as well as ordinary objects, and imbues them with a mystical energy in this large installation. "The Witness Protection Program (The Raven)," 2020, conjures up Edgar Allen Poe's somber eponymous poem, which speaks to the narrators mourning of his lost love and the importance of remembrance. Mute in its suffering, it is a symbol of unimaginable loss and unremitting change.

Whereas "My Day Beats Your Year (The Parrot)," 2010/2020, foam, metal stand, electronics and sound) features a supernatural sounding electronic voice (sounds like, and may be, Stephen Hawking) discussing the unprecedented wildfires, dying coral reefs, and rising sea levels. The fourth piece, "What Time Can Do" (Shaking Shelf)," has objects on it and an accompanying text "hope was a tchotchke sitting on a high shelf along with other fragile things....every time a train went by, the house shook and things fell off the shelf. Each time this happened they were replaced by cheaper and cheaper things until nothing was left but a collection of cheap unbreakable plastic junk." Designating "hope" a tchotchke, or bric-a-brac – something small and unimportant – is both poetic

and sad.

There is no beginning and no ending here. Rather, the mind is portrayed as a porous membrane through which all manner of competing information or misinformation bleeds. It is a 21st century distractible brain existing in a world of conspiracy theories, alternative facts and the incessant chatter of a 24-hour news cycle blended with intensely personal dreams and fears creating an overwhelming sense of anxiety and dread.



Anderson pairs a video called "The Lake" (2015, 1:52 minutes, black and white) with a short story written in a matter-of-fact, confessional tone, though the sinister ambient music gets the heart racing. Written in the first person, Anderson is the presumed storyteller, where she recounts babysitting her two siblings and taking them for a stroll in the evening on a frozen lake when the ice cracks, plunging the stroller with the toddlers into the freezing waters. The narrator's first thought is "Mom's gonna kill me!" She is able to dive in twice and retrieve both siblings, averting a catastrophe. She runs home screaming, a twin under each arm. When she arrives home and tells her mother what had happened, her mother marvels calmly that she was such a good swimmer and diver! Anderson says that when she thinks of her mother now, that comment is what she had been trying to remember. Since Anderson is one of 8 children, 4 boys and 4 girls, and was one of the older children, this could be the truth. It could also be entirely invented or merely embellished; either way it reads like an O' Henry short story. Many of the stories Anderson writes on the walls demonstrate her sly sense of humor, impeccable comic timing, and her ability to twist the ending and deliver a surprise. She's like a conceptual Will Rogers – folksy but pointed.

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There are 10 galleries here filled with 51 works of art – way too much to discuss in this review. Simply put, *The Weather* is an extraordinary exhibit, unlike any I have ever seen. The prodigiously gifted Anderson is a national treasure – a painter (there are 7 enormous cinematic figurative neo-expressionistic oil paintings on display), an inventor of musical instruments with which she performs (many are on display here), a filmmaker, composer, writer, a Harvard lecturer (the Norton Lectures are now available on YouTube) and the first (and last!) NASA artist-in-residence.

Although the theme of loss permeates this exhibition – the loss of loved ones, of life, of freedom, of democracy, or a shared reality – there is paradoxically a sense of wonder at the many mysteries of the world still to be unraveled, and at the vitality and resourcefulness of human beings. Anderson crafts our fears, concerns, thoughts and stories into a magnificent and seamless whole that illuminates our current moment with enormous grace, intelligence and compassion. It is not to be missed.



Installation view