THE BROOKLYN RAIL

Laurie Anderson with Paul D. Miller

by Paul D. Miller
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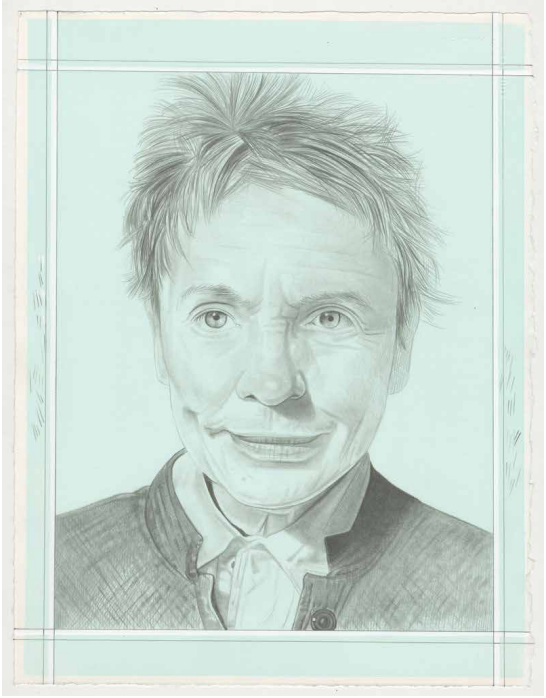

Portrait of Laurie Anderson, pencil on paper by Phong H. Bui.

On the occasion of Laurie Anderson's exhibition, *The Weather*, at the Hirshhorn Museum, Editor-at-Large, Paul Miller spoke with Anderson on episode #483 of the New Social Environment. Their discussion touches upon Anderson's attraction to the taboo, her desire to make a "walk-in comic book filled with words," and her fascinating collaboration with a supercomputer at the Australian Institute for Machine Learning.

Paul D. Miller (Rail): So Laurie, one of the things that I found really compelling about your show is that it gave us an overview of your work, and you migrate between a lot of different flavors and styles, which is incredibly beautiful and refreshing. I highly recommend the show to anybody who wants to feel like there's some hope for humanity in this pandemic era. There's a fun series where you went to sleep in public. There's very fun photos of you sleeping in a courtroom and in all sorts of quirky and radically unexpected spaces. Could you walk me through that a little bit?

Laurie Anderson: I was attracted to taboo, and public sleeping is a taboo, nobody wants you to sleep in public. You're so vulnerable. I was attracted to that idea of being vulnerable in public. I wanted to know what the barriers are between your sleeping mind and your waking mind, which is a border that I'm always trying to cross as a writer. And so I wondered if the sounds that I hear, or the feelings that I have when I'm sleeping in public—how will that influence my dreams?

I went a lot of places, like night court, which is a very noisy and chaotic place. I was successful only one night in night court. You're free to go, of course, and it is a very interesting scene. I spent a lot of time just looking at the cases that would come in. As a night owl, I like the weird company of justice being administered in the middle of the night. So I spent time there, but the court officer would always come in and try to wake me up. "There's no sleeping here, you have to go, and don't come back tomorrow either!" But you know, they can't really prevent me. Anyway, I would say it's pretty inconclusive. When I was sleeping on the beach at Coney Island did I find out whether the sound of the ocean influenced my dreams? Inconclusive. [*Laughter*]

Rail: In your Norton Lecture Series at Harvard you also mentioned this zone at the edge of dreams, the hypnagogic state. It seems to be a recurring motif in your work. A lot of your poetry circles back to that kind of that ambiguous space between the dream and the reality. There's a Chinese myth where a philosopher says he's dreaming about being a butterfly dreaming about being a philosopher—that kind of layered relationship to reality seems resonant with your work. For example, projecting film or video on still objects. I remember Tony Oursler used a similar approach to projecting on objects. Could you talk about these works?

Anderson: Yeah, I did the first one of these in 1975. I showed it to Tony a few years later when he and Mike Kelley were my students at CalArts. They're just film projected onto little clay figures. My problem was how do I get stories into a gallery? Who is going to sit around and listen to a story? You have to be pulled into a story, so I thought, if I have a really small storyteller, you will get kind of drawn into the scale.

This is a piece called *Citizens* (2021) that I made last summer and they are mostly my friends, sharpening knives. At the exhibition you come into this room and it sounds like ice skating. I mean, we're making this beautiful, very musical knife sharpening sound, but it is creepy, I have to say. There's something about a lot of people doing the same thing, when they're not in an orchestra, it's a little scary.

Rail: There's a layer of metaphor and history associated with knives, whether it be Caesar's assassination, or the Night of the Long Knives, which was right at the beginning of Hitler's rise to power—there's that political dimension, but still a sort of poetic lull.

There's an infamous phrase that you have in one of the pieces that says "language is a virus." It's got kind of an interior design, chalk, graffiti-esque vibe to it. Do you want to talk about some of the linguistic elements? I'm especially interested in the room in your exhibition that is immersed in language. There are fragments of your own work and appropriations of other poems. Do you want to riff on that for a moment? Because I think it's really nice.

Anderson: Yeah, I wanted to make a walk-in comic book filled with words. I'm not using exotic language. These stories are really, really simple. They're based on the four sculptures in this work. One is a very large piece—the size of a small Volkswagen, a Black Raven. And this is connected to a number of stories about birds, and their function as messengers.

In this particular case, the raven is surrounded by stories about the Ark, which is the topic of the opera that I'm working on. These are stories that are moving into that other language of song. In terms of stories about the Ark, the raven was the bird Noah sent out first. I love the story of that bird because he just disappears. He's like a void. No one ever heard from him again. He was not like the dove who comes back with the olive branch, like "I'm the UN symbol, It's all right! It's all good!" The black raven that took off, found who knows what, and never returned—that is a very interesting, let's say, message.

Installation view from *Laurie Anderson: The Weather* at the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, 2021. Courtesy the Hirshhorn Museum. Photo by Ron Blunt.

Burroughs is hiding around in this language somewhere. I've played with his words in lots of ways. "Language is a virus from outer space" is one of my all-time favorite quotes. Of course, now we know virus is a language, which is part of the reason we're in the Zoom world right now. We can't crack that code that the virus keeps changing, like language.

Rail: Burroughs always thought that language restructures the mind as it infects it with words. Obviously, he knew there was tremendous power in the manipulation of language. The beauty of your work in this room is about scale: you walk into a room, and you're in this floating cloud of words. It's really beautiful. In the seventies it seemed like there was a certain scene in the air. Can you talk a little bit about the scene at that time? How it affected your sensibility?

Anderson: Well, most of us could never imagine making a living from being an artist. We were free in a way that was really kind of still left over from the sixties and this idea that I'm just going to dance down a road. I don't know where it's going, I'm going to be free. We had utter disdain for people who knew what they wanted and were getting jobs, you know, what is it with these people? [*Laughter*] They wanted to forge ahead in some kind of cultural religious world of status, it was really funky. For artists it was really wonderful and borderless, you could do all kinds of different things and no one pushed you one way or another because it didn't really matter what category you were in. That was the world I grew up in as an artist.

Rail: I'd love to hear you talk about your work with CD-ROMs. Do you want to riff on some of the early work with CD-ROMs?

Anderson: Originally the show was going to be almost half or a third VR, because I've been doing a lot of VR with my collaborator, Hsin-Chien Huang, who I also did the CD-ROM work with. Both CD-ROMs and VR come from the world of gaming. I love that sense of game. The ideal audience for the CD-ROM was the people who are best at it, which is ten year-old boys. I was really happy that they enjoyed it!

What I love about VR is the relationship between body and mind. When you watch a good film, you wake up at the end, like who am I? Where am I? Am I a body? You've been paralyzed. You're gone, you've left your body. With VR, you need your body. You use it. You move through space. You look around there, you can look at what's back there, what's there? I really hope it's the future of visual imagery because it's so close to theater, and so close to having your mind and body collaborate in these crazy ways. I mean, I also love movies where you're paralyzed, and it's all happening in your mind, of course, but VR takes it a step beyond.

The early CD-ROM work had a lot to do with writing and storytelling, and how you do that. Language was at its core. At the core of all of this stuff is how to tell a story. It had one section that addressed writer's block. So here you are, you've got writer's block. The page paralyzes you, or the screen with a blinking cursor. What are you going to do? So this program began from the opposite end. Instead of starting with a blank page, it starts with a full page and a full novel—*Crime and Punishment*. And you can slowly substitute your friend's names for the Russian names, your cities and places for the Russian places, your situations for the situations in *Crime and Punishment*, and pretty soon you have a complete and coherent novel, and you won't be able to see the template of Dostoevsky underneath it. So there were these little game-like things that were in that CD-ROM, which you can no longer access because it's no longer in a format that can be read.

Rail: There's one or two pieces in the exhibition where you deal with autobiographical material, your childhood. There's a famous moment where I guess you were about to go swimming, and you had an accident and ended up in hospital. And they were reading stories to you. And you kind of had an allergic reaction to this incident. Can you talk about some of that work?

Anderson: Part of *Heart of a Dog* (2015) is the story from my childhood when I broke my back in a swimming pool accident. I thought I would just show off and do a high dive. I thought, "it can't be that hard." So I just flipped off the board and I missed the pool. I broke my back and spent a lot of time in the hospital. The doctors told me "you're not going to walk again," and I thought "what idiots!" I was twelve, and this was the first time I thought of adults as idiots. They would come into my room and read these super long stories about bunnies and rabbits, you know, adventures with rabbits and this kind of thing. That was when I first read *Crime and Punishment*, so these stories about the rabbits were driving me crazy, but I couldn't talk, and I couldn't move. I said to myself, please stop telling me about the gray rabbit! So, this was my memory of that.

Installation view from *Laurie Anderson: The Weather* at the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, 2021. Courtesy the Hirshhorn Museum. Photo by Ron Blunt.

And then years later I was getting some therapy on my back and he pressed on it in a certain way and that part of my body took me right back to the hospital. In one second I was in this long-ago hospital. The body remembers everything. Your mind may forget, but the body does not forget. I was in traction in the burn ward and there were all these other little kids there also in traction swinging in these little swings, so that they could be lowered into these liquid baths to cool their burns. And they would scream all night. So I was back in that place, and I could smell the way it smelled and hear that stuff. And I realized that the story I had been telling was the story I had made up, and actually I had forgotten how utterly afraid I was of all of that, and how I just made up this story. I mean, you tell the story that you can tell, and that was a story I could tell about that.

And so I would repeat that story about my going to the swimming pool and breaking my back and thinking adults were stupid. I told it so many times that it became true. This work was about what happens when you tell a story too many times. And it ended with "you get your story and you hold onto it and every time you tell it you forget it more."

Rail: Would you talk about the work you made as artist-in-residence in Adelaide with the Australian Institute for Machine Learning? Because I think the work that came out of that was really interesting.

Anderson: I got to collaborate with a language supercomputer! They said, welcome to the program, what do you want to do with the supercomputer? [*Laughter*] I said it's a supercomputer, doesn't it have any ideas? I mean… Anyway, I said, "How about we teach it to read the Bible?" Because everyone's always banging on that book: *That's what it says in the Bible, That's what it says!* So I thought, where did the Bible come from? Three streams of language: Hebrew, Greek, and Aramaic. Let's put those on faders so if you're reading a verse, you can push up the Greek, and you can see if maybe the increase in Greek makes it more rational? Then you pull that fader down, and raise the Hebrew, is it going to be more mystical? So we made the algorithms that way, and I have to say that it was a little inconclusive—as a lot of things are.

Then we put everything that I've ever said, or written into this supercomputer and they crossed it with the Bible. They sent me a nine thousand-page document: the Bible according to me, which was frightening because I recognized my voice. It had my style in it. And in this Bible, I'm telling you with great confidence about the creation of the world, what happens when man was given dominion over animals; I describe fiery floods and the end of the world and Revelation. Half of it is really, really bad poetry, and then a quarter of it is pretty interesting, and a quarter of it is fantastic. So, like every writer, I'm an editor. I mean everyone who writes is also an editor. That's a part of your job, maybe there are some writers who just write and never edit.

Rail: There are some novels there, continuous free form, stream-of-consciousness stuff. But there are a couple of things I want to unpack with machine learning and language. Because language is a kind of rule set. You have to choose tenses: your future, past tense, and so on, and one of the beautiful things about the way that you've engaged is that there's a sense of timelessness. You're in this ebb and flow where past, present, and future sort of blur. I think if there was a consistent thread in the theme of how you move between performance, literature, and then manifesting it with these installations, or going to CD-ROMs—it's a kind of linguistic critique of time. I'd love to hear some of your thoughts on that.

Because time, in our era, we felt that it's linear. But then you get to quantum mechanics, and you realize, okay, time is just a dimension. We live in four dimensions: three of space and one of time, but if you go up one dimension, you can really just see time. Einstein felt time was a simultaneous ocean. And you could just sort of dip in and dip out if you had the right technology, depending on whatever your dimensional access was. I would love to hear your thoughts on that, because language is such a powerful tool for you. It's been your DNA from the beginning: dreams, linguistics, and a sense of timelessness, how we frame the present with performance. Hopefully, that makes sense.

Anderson: I like your use of DNA. It's a thing that seems very colorful and useful for you. It is for me, too. I like to ask, "what is this thing made of? What's the engine?" Maybe it's a little abrupt to say this at this point, and maybe I should have mentioned it earlier, but I don't really think that we're here right now. I just have some doubts about it. So other than that, I think of time more like tempo or music than as an unfurling of end to end, or beginning to end.

Everyone says, "We're in the middle of the pandemic here," but what are they talking about? How are they chopping up time? I make a big effort not to chop it up. And in the music I like the most, like William Basinski, time has gone. There is no time in that, and it makes me feel free. I know that sounds super pretentious, but it really is true. I try to write that way as well, to move through time zones, eras. Just play with it, you know?

Rail: Yeah, that's the fun part about poetry, especially the way you engage it. I'd love to hear about the violins you re-crafted. There's a beautiful way of thinking about strings and tuning—well, can you talk about the Tape Bow violin?

Laurie Anderson playing the Tape Bow violin. Copyright © 1977 Babette Mangolte

Anderson: The Tape Bow violin is from 1977. I designed it with Bob Bielecki, who I've worked with on a lot of projects. There's a playback head on the violin, and audio tape on the bow instead of horse hair, so you can play it back and forth. I love it because it is about audio palindromes. I find it very musical to listen to things backwards and play tracks at different rates.

I did a bunch of projects with orchestras with this one instrument. Believe me, it's not easy to convince people in orchestras to play it. They said, "I have chops. I practiced for thirty years, and I do not want to waste it on your stupid instrument." A lot of violinists think chops are in the left hand,

fingers moving faster and very precisely, and expression is in the right hand, determined by the way your bow pushes and glides against the strings. I said, let's compare the way a non-violinist plays this thing with the way a professional plays it. The non-violinist had no control, and the violinist was able to get tremendous expression from it. Every time I've worked with an orchestra—and I'm working with one now on a work called *Amelia*—it is often a jam between the classically trained orchestra and the electronic stuff that I'm playing.

Rail: It's really powerful, and there's a dimension of sculptural elements here too, which makes me think of the materials and how climate change is affecting all that. Think about the materials that made a Stradivarius violin—the forest that wood came from is gone because of climate change. They've cut down all those trees, so you can never go back to that certain physics of sound that came from that wood. Whereas, what you're doing is playing with both materials with tuning systems and different approaches to performance.

I've seen a bunch of performances of the work over the years, and it's not every day that you meet someone who is a poet plus a really talented musician; plus you're doing electronics and organizing installations—each of those could make a very good career for one artist, but you combine it all. It's very twenty-first-century.

Anderson: The reason there are a bunch of black walls at the Hirshhorn is because I come from the dark world of concerts and clubs. It's not the white world of museums, where things are precious, and the lighting is even and pristine. I had to kind of fit into that, and I learned a lot, working with the curator Marina Isgro, the director Melissa Chiu, and their whole team. They gave me an opportunity to see what that world would be like in this world. It was really an interesting challenge, but in the end it's stories, ideas, sounds, and images.

Museums look different now than they used to, and they're a little bit more free-form and not so much about definitive works. In fact, in the gallery that has my paintings, I went in and said, "well, let's just touch up a few areas around the edges," and by the end of the day I had repainted some of them, and I realized this is a dream come true! To put a work in a museum, and then come in at night and keep working on them was really fun.

Rail: They're very charming paintings. They're in one of the last rooms before you walk around the curve and see work by Marcel Duchamp and Barbara Kruger. I would love to hear your thoughts on where the near future is going, because I think democracy and technology are in the middle of this huge collision course, and you're an artist who has navigated some of that terrain. Do you have any thoughts in the next couple of cycles of how multimedia is operating? Are you buying real estate in the metaverse?

Anderson: I mean, I think you can make amazing, daring, crazy work with a pencil. I don't buy the idea that the more tech you use, the better it is. You're just seeing so many of these giant shows where big things are moving around, and you think, "Wow, big technology is moving big things around. Whoa." Because we're all supposed to love tech. One of the phrases that I put several times in this show was a quote from a cryptographer, who I really love. He said, "If you think technology will solve your problems, you don't understand technology. And you don't understand your problems."

The exhibition is dedicated to Lou Reed and John Cage. I once interviewed John for Tricycle magazine. We spent a lot of time just doing what John liked to do, which is listen to the traffic and talk about plants. This was the summer before he died. You know, a lot of old people, they get so crabby and bitter. He was not like that. He reminded me of one of my very happy dogs. What is that kind of happiness? How did he achieve this incredible, open happiness? I believe that's what we're here for, to experience that happiness and bliss—that's what this whole scene is about, and to see a person who had done that, and was in that state was just mind-blowing.

It's with a lot of gratitude that I say that about John Cage, because the more I read about him and get a chance to think about what he was doing, the more radical he seems to me as an artist and as a thinker. I think it was John Luther Adams who said, "I don't think he was such a good composer, but he was a magnificent philosopher." When you're working with material, sometimes things other than the material come out.

Rail: Your show is a really life-affirming exhibition. I was totally blown away. Amusingly enough, Cage was also one of the first composers for turntables. He has a piece called *Imaginary Landscape*, which has always been one of my favorites. He did a collaboration with Sun Ra at Coney Island that I really love. And of course there's this whole scene of minimalism that was going on for a while that included Meredith Monk, Philip Glass, and John Luther Adams, who you mentioned. Do you have any schools of classical music that you reference? I know that lingers over your material a little bit, even though you're mostly in an electronic scene.

Anderson: Well, I was trained until sixteen as a classical musician, so that's always in the back. But I'm much more interested now in some of the filters I'm building for violin. They have this really interesting kind of stacking of dissonance but if you play it in a way that's melodic, it's just

mind-blowing. You're playing these really dissonant things that just make you want to cry. It doesn't easily fit into one category or another.

The original name of the show was "Everything is Listening," and it was about how the visual and the sonic are always colliding. A really interesting experiment that was done with a group originally associated with MIT was an experiment about creating algorithms for a way to translate light to sound. So there's a plant, and you play a piece of music and the plant is being moved microscopically by the sound waves that are banging into it. It's dancing, basically, responding to the bass and to the treble in all sorts of different ways. The idea is to record this motion, and then translate it into sound.

Their great example uses "Mary Had a Little Lamb," the song that Thomas Edison used in his breakthrough phonograph experiments. They play this song to the plant and film it, and then using some tricky algorithms they translate the visual data back into sound. And then you hear the plant singing. This is something I believed as a kid, I thought the whole room was listening to me if I was crying. If I had a bad day I could cry in my pillow and my pillow would somehow remember it. Or the curtains would remember. Everything was listening, everything would remember. And when I heard about this project I thought, "It's true! Everything is listening all the time." What if I'm playing the violin in front of you, and the hair in your eyebrows is responding to those sounds. If I could film your hair and translate it back into sound, you would have that piece of music. This is what I'm going for.

Rail: Let's talk about some of the poets that have influenced you. I've always thought you might have a relationship to some of the early expressions of Vladimir Mayakovsky or Velimir Khlebnikov, who called himself the "king of time." Who are the poets you think about? There's just so many different angles to think about how poetry informs your work.

Anderson: I'm a big fan of Rilke, because the imagery is so concrete. For nature poems, I love Alice Oswald. She is one of my recent favorites. Her description of very simple cycles is just profound. I find her really inspiring. I've been up-ending my libraries and it's really chaotic right now. There are so many books in piles, and some of the bigger piles are on topics like neuroscience.

Rail: I have a feeling that you've influenced many of our contemporary singers and songwriters who are thinking about multimedia and video, from Björk to Grimes, perhaps Janelle Monae, and so on, people who combine this in a performative mix with the arts, even bands like Sigur Rós, one of their guitar players, Jónsi he just had an exhibition at Tanya Bonakdar Gallery.

I'd love to ask you about how that informs some of your practice, because Björk, for example, says she's always been inspired by the icy landscapes of Iceland and how that influenced her. I've always felt that there's a little Laurie lingering over Björk. How does meditation inform your practice?

Anderson: Yeah, icy landscapes are inspiring`... these days I'm doing a ten-week study of breath. The study shows you the process of the mind in relation to, let's say, an icy landscape. The mind, in this case, is rendered as a condor who is flying above. He's gotten so far above that he can glide. He doesn't need to flap his wings or anything. So he's gliding, and the landscape is sharp, the condor is sharp. But then the condor's face starts getting more sketchy as you investigate the relationship of breath to mind and to the attention that you can pay, in this case, to the icy landscape. By the end of this process, there is no more condor, but there's a lot of landscape. So the one who's looking is gone, but the landscape is super sharp. I aspire to be gone, and that's what I try to do in meditation.

I never saw the difference between meditation and being an artist, it's the same thing, exactly the same thing. You don't have to believe anything, which I really like. You don't have to be utilitarian. You don't have to give people art that makes the world a better place. You're not obligated to do that. You just learn to see things as they are. Whatever that means. Now a lot of art is supposed to be helpful to people. I'm not on that page. I'm so not on that page, but secretly I am. Secretly I hope to be useful. But if I start out thinking that I'm going to say something or make something that's useful and correct—it just makes everything shut down in my mind. To be useful and correct, those are really important things, but they have nothing to do with art. Zero.

Installation view from Laurie Anderson: The Weather at the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, 2021. Courtesy the Hirshhorn Museum. Photo by Ron Blunt.