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'I Didn't Move Here to Avoid Chaos'

Laurie Anderson has sustained her long career in art by finding new ways to talk like Laurie Anderson.

By JOHN LELAND

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She does a very good Laurie Anderson imitation.

It was early February and we were in her Canal Street studio, where she has worked since 1975. Ms. Anderson, 69, was demonstrating some custom software for her electronic violin and talking about a new prize for emerging artists that the Kitchen, the venerable performance space, was introducing. She did not think it should be called

LIONS OF NEW YORK

The Avant-Garde Artist

the Laurie Anderson Prize. "I wouldn't want to get the Laurie Anderson Prize," she said, flattening her voice to that of an extraterrestrial ingénue. "Because then I'd have to talk like Laurie Anderson."

Pause.

"And. Do. Some. Quirky. Thing."

She returned to her conversational cadence. "I wouldn't want to saddle somebody with that," she said.

For Ms. Anderson, talking like Laurie Anderson has been the basis of a varied and chimerical career, sustained through six books, a dozen albums, multimedia performances for human and canine audiences and an acclaimed documentary film. Her hair no longer has the spiky look she wore for her 1981 oddball hit single, "O Superman," but she is still doing Laurie Anderson, which is to say, working on four books; preparing for performances with her friend Philip Glass; creating virtual reality environments for the Massachusetts

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DAMON WINTER/THE NEW YORK TIMES

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Laurie Anderson's Glorious, Chaotic New York

by John Leland
April 21, 2017



Laurie Anderson, 69, this month at her home in New York. Ms. Anderson recalled that when she moved to the city in the 1960s, "I was going to go to a dark and dangerous place that was going to be really unpredictable." Credit Damon Winter/The New York Times

From performances for "six people in a loft" to "O Superman," MTV fame, and her time with Lou Reed, the artist reflects on her many years in New York.

As a teenager in suburban Chicago, Laurie Anderson was a cheerleader, star of the senior play, an editor on her school paper, runner-up for a Junior Miss scholarship and the girl voted most likely to succeed. In New York, she studied sculpture with Sol LeWitt, played the violin while wearing ice skates frozen in blocks of ice, recorded a song that reached No. 2 on the British charts, was queen of the

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artists that the Kitchen, the venerable performance space, was introducing. She did not think it should be called the Laurie Anderson Prize. "I wouldn't want to get the Laurie Anderson Prize," she said, flattening her voice to that of an extraterrestrial ingénue. "Because then I'd have. To. Talk. Like. Laurie. Anderson."

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"I'm a journalist," she said. "It's tough to write something in moments like this, when people are already on the verge of going crazy trying to patch their lives back together, mostly through the stories. My fear is that I won't be able to describe it. I'm teaching myself a lot right now in trying to talk about what stories are, how you make them up, what the difference is between fiction and reality. I build those fictions all the time and call them my life."

"I'm not that hopeful about what's going on here," she added. "I was talking to one of my Buddhist teachers this morning and I said: 'Let's say we do wipe ourselves off the face of the earth. How does karma work then, if there are no humans?'"

Ms. Anderson is also grieving: for her mother; her friends David Bowie and Carrie Fisher; the critic and writer John Berger; Mr. Reed. Also for her dog, a rat terrier named Lolabelle, who once appeared with her and Mr. Reed on Charlie Rose's talk show. On the show, Ms. Anderson held

the dog in her lap while Mr. Reed touched Ms. Anderson affectionately – they were not married yet – and told Mr. Rose: "She writes, she paints, she does photography, she sculpts. She's a tech head. There's nothing she can't do." In 2015, two years after Mr. Reed had died from liver disease, Ms. Anderson made a documentary film about Lolabelle's death, "Heart of a Dog," in which Mr. Reed is absent until the very end. On April 29, she will include one of his guitar drones in a performance at the Highline Ballroom. He was, she said, still very much a living presence in her life.



Ms. Anderson performing in 1983 at Dominion Theater.
Credit Brian Rasic/Getty Images

"I learn from him every day now," she said. "I have since he died. Every single day I see something in my house that he put there for me, a note or a piece of paper or a book that he had written in, or one of his shirts. He's very, very present for me. It's not like, 'Oh, my dead husband.'"

On an afternoon in April, Ms. Anderson was drawing and smearing chalk images for the cover of a book called "All the Things That I Lost in the Flood," which she described variously as a book about language and loss; about Hurricane Sandy; and as a career retrospective, going back to her first performance, in the early 1970s, playing a violin filled with water.

It was a time before New York's downtown art world had found its shape or a market. SoHo had just a few commercial galleries and two restaurants, one of which was run by artists. She once compared the scene to Paris in the 1920s.

"There was a big party every night," she said. "We talked a lot. We were really serious. We knew we would change



Ms. Anderson and her husband, Lou Reed, in 2002. Credit Richard Corkery/Daily News Archive, via Getty Images

the world. We were probably pretty obnoxious. Did a lot of drugs. A lot of sex, drugs and rock 'n' roll. Well, not so much rock 'n' roll. But sex and drugs for sure. Lots."

"I'm always trying to think, did we really have that much fun?" she added. "How much am I idealizing my childhood as an artist? Probably some. It was tough. When I got this place, there was no roof. Snow came in here. And holes going down into other places, big ones. No water and no electricity, so we tapped into the city for free electricity and we hauled water up and we had wood stoves. It was really fun."

Ms. Anderson moved to New York in 1966 to attend Barnard College, finishing her graduate studies at the School of Visual Arts and Columbia just in time to fall in with a coterie of peers attracted by the cheap rents

downtown. Setting the pattern for her career, she threw together a little bit of everything, working in sculpture, painting, music, film, literature, computers and gender bending, all of it layered with wide-eyed curiosity and knowing ambivalence.

"It was a wonderful time," said Mr. Glass, 80, who used to leave his son at Ms. Anderson's sculpture studio in the East Village while he worked a day job, mostly doing construction. "There wasn't a lot of money, but there was constantly something going on. People didn't have careers then, they had work. We didn't know what a career was. We were artists. It didn't occur to us that you would make a living at it someday.

"There was very little support for that generation of artists. There was none, in fact. The big support system



Ms. Anderson with the composer Philip Glass, left, at Carnegie Hall in March. Credit Rebecca Smeyne for The New York Times

was the artist community themselves. So we were at each other's performances, quite often at empty lofts."

If the artists were poor, Mr. Glass said, they were also able to live very cheaply. "My first loft was down by the fish market, and I paid \$30 a month," he said. "I don't think I'm fantasizing, but I tell young people it was much easier then."

For Ms. Anderson, the center of that scene was Gordon Matta-Clark, whose site-specific work included cutting shapes out of abandoned buildings, even sawing buildings in half. Mr. Matta-Clark, who died in 1978, organized a group of artists called Anarchitecture, who held long discussions that often ended in dance parties and eventually had a group show at 112 Greene Street, a cooperative gallery where artists were allowed to knock holes in the walls or floors. Ms. Anderson became a regular.

"Laurie was new in town also and we all started hearing about her," said Richard Landry, a saxophonist who moved to New York from Louisiana to play with Mr. Glass and later performed with Ms. Anderson. "It was a communal affair. I had a place at 10 Chatham Square. I cooked once a week, and the art world came there, including Laurie. The whole art world would eat and party or whatever."

Through the photographer Marcia Resnick, Ms. Anderson got a large loft at the western edge of Canal Street with views of the Hudson, above a methadone clinic. Many of the lofts had no doors, Ms. Resnick said, and the patients would wander into people's homes. The city was spiraling toward bankruptcy, but for artists, the chaos offered opportunity.

"I didn't see it as collapse," Ms. Anderson said. "I saw it as a very exciting thing."



Ms. Anderson with her dog Willie near her home in TriBeCa. Credit Damon Winter/The New York Times

I saw it as a pioneering thing. I didn't want to live in a city that was organized. I left the Midwest so I could leave that kind of organization. I didn't move here to avoid chaos. I came for the excitement of it, and I was not disappointed." After an American military operation to rescue hostages in Iran crashed and burned in 1980, Ms. Anderson wrote a song about technological failure. Echoing Jules Massenet's 19th-century aria "O Souverain," she called it "O Superman," and got a \$500 grant to record it in her loft. It sounded like nothing else from the era.

"Her work wasn't so different from early Dada performances, or Russian spectacle, or Happenings," said Bob George, who released "O Superman" on his One Ten Records, and ran the projectors at Ms. Anderson's early performances. "There was the idea that you're telling a story and you're making it visual. At first I don't think it

was linked so much to the music. Laurie wouldn't say, 'I'm a musician.' She's more in that line of the peculiar speaking voice, Jimmy Durante and Leonard Cohen and Groucho Marx, that kind of recitative talk singing."

When Mr. George played the record on John Peel's popular British radio show, it became an instant hit.

"That was bizarre," Ms. Anderson said. "I was, 'What are the British charts?' As soon as I got over there, and several hundred screaming people would follow me everywhere, outside my limousine, I'm like, this is ridiculous. I never believed that one. Even at the time, I was: Have a good time with this, be an anthropologist. It's really bizarre and manufactured. These people didn't know I existed until last week, and next week they won't again, and that's got to be fine with me."

LAURIE ANDERSON

It also helped that she had developed a recognizable image, a little androgynous, a little cyber, said Jane Crawford, the widow of Mr. Matta-Clark, who arranged work for some of the performance artists, including Ms. Anderson.

“The Dutch and the Belgians didn’t respond wholeheartedly to Laurie’s work until she got a haircut,” Ms. Crawford said. “She had long hair, and when she got her spiky punk cut, then suddenly her work became very cool and she was just embraced with open arms. It’s kind of shallow, but that’s how it was.”

“O Superman” changed everything. Transported from the rarefied world of avant-garde performance art – “six people in a loft,” as she described it – Ms. Anderson was suddenly a figure on MTV and in popular music magazines, signed to a long-term contract with Warner Bros. Records.

By the time she met Mr. Reed, at a 1992 concert commemorating Kristallnacht, the 1938 anti-Jewish pogroms, in Munich, both were established figures in their spheres. Mr. Reed changed her relationship with the New York City, then changed it again as he developed hepatitis C, diabetes and liver disease.

“Before I met Lou, I would work at night every night. I’d just go to work. But the second we got together, we went out every night. We saw things every night: plays, movies or just a social dinner, music, readings. Every night. At first it was hard for me. I was more interested in working. But then I began to really love it. And Lou was completely into that. Even with restaurants, he would want to try every new kind of thing: Can you believe that opened up, let’s go check that out. He had so many favorite chefs, and he was developing food for diabetics with different chefs and he would go and check them out. It was endless. It was the greatest fun. Plus he was much more generous than I was in terms of watching things. We would go to a play and I would think, Oh man, that thing was just a dog, and he would go, ‘Yeah, but didn’t you see the way that one actor did that thing?’ He was so generous about it.

“And if there was nothing new to see, on Friday nights we’d go see the armor collection at the Met. This city is full of the most amazing things, and we really used to do it.”

They talked about gear and about writing, the solidity

of images and elusiveness of language. He took her to the dog show; they were named king and queen of the Mermaid Parade. Mr. Reed’s abrasive side, she said, was just a stage persona, conjured when it suited him. “I almost think of it like one of his leather jackets,” she said. “He put it on when he felt like it. If he wanted to get to the front of a line, jacket comes on, metaphorically, and he’s Lou Reed. He knew what game he was playing. He played it well. I think people assume that celebrities are trapped by their fame. Some are not. Some are using it, having fun with it, goofing on it.”

During Mr. Reed’s last years, she curtailed her travel to care for him, and when he died, she gathered friends to share thoughts about him for 49 days, coinciding with the period Tibetan Buddhists believe the dead spend in a transitional realm called the bardo, when they are sometimes accessible to the living.

She often saw Mr. Reed in the bardo, she said. “I saw confusion sometimes, and disorientation,” she said. “I saw freedom and great joy. They’re intense pictures, and they’re obviously made of desire and intuition. I trust my intuition, I really do.”

She got a new dog, a Border terrier named Little Will, and resumed work, often in collaboration with very different kinds of artists. She performed with the Chinese dissident Ai Weiwei using Skype, when Mr. Ai was still under government surveillance, and this weekend plans to join Devendra Banhart at the Coachella music festival in Indio, Calif.; in 2015, she had a mock wedding ceremony with her friend Sophie Calle, the French conceptual artist. In November, along with Brian Eno, she gathered 1,000 people together in Copenhagen to sing “I Can’t Help Falling in Love With You” one morning. Speaking of her work now, she said it was the same thing she had done for the talent portion of the Junior Miss competition: “What I did was stories and drawings,” she said. “It’s not that different.”

On a recent evening, while leaving her loft on Canal Street to meet a friend for dinner, she noted how little of the neighborhood that had incubated her early career remained.

“When I moved to New York, I was going to go to a dark and dangerous place that was going to be really unpredictable,” she said. “Just sitting on this corner since 1975, just a million things happen around you.”

LAURIE ANDERSON

“When I got here, March and April were fishing boat times,” she said, meaning that police boats would fish out bodies that had frozen in the river over the winter, then floated downstream. “And then there were all the insurance fires. There’s just as much chaos as there ever was. It just looks different. I didn’t expect to see guys in herds running up and down the river, for example. You see them mostly on their lunch hour, young stockbrokers, and they’re running in herds. This is a big, huge difference from when I got here. New York was a city you went to alone. You didn’t go with your school friends. You came by yourself, and you started over. I don’t get that sense with these guys. They’re herd guys: Oh, you’re going to Penn, I’m going to Penn, let’s go to New York, we’ll room together, we’ll run together, we’ll herd together, we’ll make a ton of money together. And then there they are. Go and watch them. It’s really wild.”

She told this story in other conversations as well. It was classic Laurie Anderson stuff: gently dystopian, with nods toward both progress and reversion. She had learned to write in the second person from William S. Burroughs, she said, and from Jean-Luc Godard that a story needs a beginning, middle and end, though not necessarily in that order. But as she told the story and retold it, it remained wholly her own. After 40 years, still, no one tells stories like Laurie Anderson.