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Monumental
Laurie Anderson's "Habeas Corpus," at the Park Avenue

by Alex Ross
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For decades, Anderson has been holding a skeptical mirror up to America's shiny pop surfaces and techniques of social control.
CREDIT PHOTOGRAPH BY PARI DUKOVIC FOR THE NEW YORKER

Visitors to Laurie Anderson's installation "Habeas Corpus," which occupied the Park Avenue Armory for three days at the beginning of October, were confronted with sights and sounds of imposing strangeness. Suspended from the ceiling of the Armory's Drill Hall was an oversized disco ball, which, fixed in cold beams of light, could have doubled as the Death Star. Myriad reflected dots created the impression of a night sky, one that curled around the walls and onto the floor. The ball turned slowly, giving the vertiginous illusion that the vast room was rotating. Playing over speakers was an ominous electronic rumble: pings and beeps, distorted voices suggestive of military transmissions, murmurs of recorded conversation, howling wind. The dominant element was a mass of feedback generated by six electric guitars leaning against amplifiers; this was "Drones," a piece designed by Anderson's late husband, Lou Reed, and performed by Stewart Hurwood. Anderson invited various musician friends to improvise in the space. When I stopped by, on the first afternoon, the saxophonist Stan Harrison was playing along with the guitar overtones, ambling about as he issued sustained pitches and bent them this way and that. Later, the saxophonist Louie Belogenis executed angular melodic figures while the trumpeter Stephanie Richards added soft, lustrous tones.

It was a cool, dark, hypnotically enveloping environment—an echt-New York happening that made you feel as though you had been transported to the mythic seventies, when musicians who made money driving cabs staged free-form events in seedy downtown lofts. "Whoa, awesome," people said, as they walked in. But the centerpiece of the installation was an apparition of ambiguous magnificence. At one end of the Drill Hall was a sixteen-foot-high sculpture of a seated human form, onto which was projected a silent video image of Mohammed el Gharani, a Chadian raised in Saudi Arabia, who, in the wake of the September 11th attacks, was sent to the American detention camp at Guantánamo Bay, held there for seven and a half years, and tortured. Authorities claimed that he had belonged to a London-based Al Qaeda cell; his lawyers, from the legal-action group Reprieve, responded that he had never been to London and was only fourteen when he was arrested. In 2009, an American judge ruled that the allegations against Gharani were baseless, and he was released. Anderson, who has previously staged events involving live feeds from prisons, became interested in Gharani's case earlier this year, and persuaded him to be filmed in West Africa, where he now lives. Because Gharani, like every other Guantánamo detainee, had effectively been declared a non-person—someone to whom the elementary protection of habeas corpus does not apply—Anderson made the compensatory gesture of monumentalizing him. Seated with his arms at his sides, staring blankly ahead, Gharani unmistakably resembled the sculpture in the Lincoln Memorial.

Every hour or so, there was a recorded video clip of Gharani speaking. Passing over the worst of his suffering at Guantánamo, he told of his debt to Shaker Aamer, a fellow-detainee who helped him to remain sane, and of his effort to learn English by writing with soap on the door of his cell. His manner was genial, his grim stories leavened by moments of mordant wit. Only after a while did the link between the seated figure and the surrounding sonic fabric sink in: among the assaults to which Gharani was subjected was the blasting of loud music, accompanied by strobe lights. We were, in a sense, reliving Gharani's torture, even as the hip downtown soundscape unfolded.

The installation was on display from noon to seven each day. Anderson remained in the background, but in short evening sets she appeared on a stage on one side of the space and assumed the familiar role of avant-pop performer, speaking and singing over deceptively simple musical backgrounds. The program included her most famous creation, the 1981 song "O Superman." When that piece made its unexpected journey onto the pop charts—before it, Anderson had been little known outside New York circles of performance art and experimental music—it came across as an exercise in postmodern absurdism, playing off answering-machine messages and other ephemera. Within the "Habeas Corpus" apparatus, it took on eerier implications: "This is your mother. Are you there? Are you coming home? . . . Here come the planes. They're American planes. Made in America. . . . When love is gone, there's always justice. And when justice is gone, there's always force."

The indie vocalist Merrill Garbus also performed, repeatedly singing the phrase "Don't take my life away." At the end of the set, the two women were joined by Hurwood and Shahzad Ismaily, on guitar, in an amorphous, abrasive improvisation. Then, in a further disorientation, Anderson surrendered the stage to the Syrian vocalist Omar Souleyman, a former wedding singer who fled to Turkey after the onset of the Syrian civil war and has lately become an indie-pop cult figure. As the keyboardist Chadi Kerio summoned a virtual band on his Korg synthesizer, the Armory underwent a final transformation: the simulation of the night sky now conjured a dance party in the desert. Anderson wanted to leave her audience with a sense of liberation, but, haunted by the weird, grand whole, I can't say I went home with a spring in my step.

With its thick textures and blaring message, "Habeas Corpus" seems an outlier in Anderson's four-decade catalogue, which more often teases us with oblique implications, cryptic confessions, and free-floating aphorisms. People like to think of her as the doyenne of downtown quirkiness: they recall her symphonies for car horns and for barking dogs, her residency with NASA, her various adventures in the limelight with Lou Reed. Yet her work has always had a political undertow—after all, she inaugurated her recording career with a song called "It's Not the Bullet That Kills You (It's the Hole)." For decades, she has been holding a skeptical mirror up to late-capitalist America: its shiny pop surfaces, its techniques of social control. Her pioneering mastery of digital technology allowed her to manipulate her own persona, even to change gender; by way of a digital filter, she has assumed a deep-voiced male guise that she describes as the Voice of Authority. Her feminism is sometimes blunt. In the 1989 song "Beautiful Red Dress," she notes that the average wage for women had risen to sixty-three cents for every dollar made by men, and adds, "With that kind of luck, it'll be the year 3888 before we make a buck." In an ambient musical atmosphere poised between pleasure and dread, these formulations can take on Delphic power. Listening to "Another Day in America," which appears on her 2010 album, "Homeland," I found myself shuddering at the line "Your silence will be considered your consent." The Voice of Authority, which Reed nicknamed Fenway Bergamot, delivered that one, with melancholy finality.

The insinuating complexity of Anderson's world view is on display in her new documentary film, "Heart of a Dog," whose soundtrack will soon be released by Nonesuch Records. Ostensibly a memorial to Anderson's beloved rat terrier, Lolabelle, the work interweaves the personal and the political, the confessional and the essayistic. The tribute to Lolabelle—a gifted animal who expressed herself in various media, including painting and piano playing—enfolds other losses. You sense an unspoken grief for Reed, who died in 2013, and, more explicitly, unease over changes in the New York cityscape. Recounting walks with Lolabelle in the West Village, Anderson takes note of machine-gun-toting guards, automated cameras, and the pervasive "If You See Something, Say Something" slogan, which she relates to the philosophy of Wittgenstein. She also tells of taking Lolabelle into the mountains, where the dog found herself targeted by hawks. They descended with their claws out, then decided that she was too big to carry off. On Lolabelle's face, Anderson says, was a "brand-new expression": for the first time, the dog began to worry about the sky. Anderson asked herself where she had seen that anxious upward glance before, and recalled the faces of her neighbors in the weeks after September 11th—the fresh fear of destruction from above. "We had passed through a door," Anderson intones. "And we would never be going back."

Another version of that anecdote could be heard in an

auxiliary station of the "Habeas Corpus" installation. In one of the Armory's smaller rooms, where high-society officers of the Gilded Age presumably relaxed after their drills, visitors saw tiny 3-D images of Anderson and Lolabelle, seated in equally tiny chairs. The self-miniaturization was, perhaps, intended to acknowledge the relative smallness of the artist's own experience in comparison with what Mohammed el Gharani had endured. At the same time, the conjunction of stories from New York and Guantánamo seemed to crystallize Anderson's intention: she was drawing a line between the fear of evil and the evil that fear can create. ♦