

## **Constructing Community: The Performance Art of Laurie Anderson**

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### **Abstract**

For over half of a century, Renaissance woman and artist Laurie Anderson has written monologues, recorded multiple albums, made movies, travelled around the world playing electronic and orchestral concerts, taught art history, produced narrative performance art pieces-- and she is still creating. Anderson draws inspiration from sources that range from John Cage's compositions and philosophies to conversations she has overheard, from spiritual sources relating to her conservative Christian upbringing to insights coming out of her current Buddhist practice. Her performances focus on personal narratives and interests that highlight binaries of the internal personal and the shared human experience. Bridging the gap between mainstream and avant-garde, Anderson is able to address the most profound of human experiences—love and connection, in its many forms. Community in this thesis is defined as a couple or group of people who feel a sense of fellowship with one another, not necessarily caused by geographical, ethical, or political affiliation. The artist's ability to concisely express the complex emotions that constitute the chemistry of community and relationship is a result of balancing and fluidly integrating all of the forces in her performances and prioritizing the goal of fellowship. This paper will discuss the evolution of Laurie Anderson's work, influences, collaborators, and predecessors, and will explore their significance in the interconnected web of human relations that her creations construct and inhabit.

**Keywords:** Community, Performance, Laurie Anderson

### **1. Origins of Performance Art**

This paper discusses a brief summary of the origins of performance art in the Western World. "Live art" was the original term used to describe performance art: art that implemented movement and use of props and sets for the performers, in the 1920s.<sup>1</sup> The Dadaists used performance art to critique the bourgeoisie and their lifestyles. *Cabaret Voltaire* begun in 1916, was a nightclub where a group of European Dada artists performed. The *Voltaire* is understood to have been the first site to include female artists in performance art. This happened at a time when other fields in the art world were predominantly if not exclusively male.<sup>2</sup> Kinetic art offers the most successful rhetoric for categorizing Laurie Anderson's performance art, 'one has to be there in person to watch the work unfold in order to get the full effect' (a definition provided by art historians Craig McDaniel and Jean Robertson.)<sup>3</sup>

The requirement of time and experience in performance art serves as a platform to explain and question history as well as the political present. Performance art during WWII was used to explore themes such as questioning authority and authoritarianism along with the cultural and psychological effects of conflicts and violence occurring in civilian day-to-day life. Throughout its history, performance art has undergone many changes, often reflecting cultural and historical shifts. Repeatedly, the discussed medium is chosen as an outlet for those in society who feel oppressed or marginalized.

Around the 1960's, according to artist and art critic, Catherine Elwes, a greater divergence began between the performance art world and the theatre world, in part because of the Civil Rights movement. Performance art provided a public outlet for oppressed individuals to claim control of their own bodies, time, and express their identities and all that implies. In contrast, 1970s performance art mainly focused on cerebral motifs like dreams, metaphysics, and psychology. In the 1980s, focus shifted towards the effects of mass media.<sup>4</sup> In addition to these major themes, the democratic arena performance art provided created a forum for a more diverse array of issues to be explored by artists and audience members. Violence, oppression, politics, and power are some of the motifs that seem to be timeless in performance art.

A *happening* further incorporates the audience by requiring participation in the product and the meaning of pieces. *Happenings* include every medium of artwork, however, performance art and works still in process are especially common for these events. During the late 1940s and 50s *happening* type events took place at Black Mountain College, an experimental liberal arts college, including artists that Anderson has identified as influential to her work, such as John Cage. The first official *happening* took place at the Reuben Gallery in New York in 1959.<sup>5</sup>

*Happenings*, along with the increase of audience interaction in other art forms, such as assemblage, helped to stimulate a rich and interconnected community for artists by promoting each other's ideas shifting the focus to cooperation rather than solely competition amongst individuals. The philosophy of the 1960s Fluxus art movement in Europe encouraged audience interaction in multi-dimensional artwork, this movement took place in historical junction with the spreading of *happenings* in the U.S.

In contemporary art, interaction of forces other than the creator is a practice reiterated by many artists and art communities around the world. John Cage provides a fitting example of environmental effects on art. Cage is credited by many artists as being at the forefront of accepting outside conditions into the meaning and wholeness of an art piece and artistic experience. This philosophy is fully embodied in his piece *4'33"* (1947-48) which was a silent composition consisting of only the noise made by the audience and surrounding space while pianist David Tudor sat at his piano for around four and a half minutes without playing a single note. The increased cooperation between artists and the inclusion of audience members, regardless of artistic background, is what allows performance art to reach and move such a diversity of people.

The sense of inclusion and coexisting nature of the elements provides a platform for emotion to be truly and genuinely expressed and consumed. Starting a dialogue amongst the elements is what allows for a richer and deeper finished work. Anderson has involved the environment in her performance art since the 1970s. For example in her work *Sleeping in Public* (1972). This consists of a series of performances in which Anderson fell asleep in public places such as on the beach, in a courthouse, and in a women's bathroom and saw how the environment affected her dreams.<sup>6</sup> Anderson observed, eavesdropped, and dreamt completely soaking in her surroundings. The ability to intelligently absorb her surroundings, actively observing, is what makes Anderson such a significant composer and adapter.

Anderson, like many other performance artists throughout the last century, realized the potential that environment can bring to meaning in art works. The acceptance of environment carries further significance because it provides a human and organic experience. Day-to-day life is never experienced in isolation or in a vacuum and art created in such a vacuum seems sterile --and hard for viewers to relate to, therefore lacking in an approachable way for the audience to engage.

Anderson's art takes place in our own postmodern performance art culture. Postmodernism provides a vague but necessary stage for the beginning of Anderson's creation. There is much contention amongst art historians about what the meaning of "postmodern" implies. Overall, Anderson created her artwork in an artistic society that is postmodern, responding to industry by decentralizing and diversifying in medium unlike the 'over-specialization' required by capitalism. As Craig McDaniel and Jean Robertson explain, postmodern movements serve as an 'apology for capitalism.'<sup>7</sup> No lack of diversifying subject matter or media can be denied in Anderson's work. She also discusses 'post-modern' themes such as the sublime nature of simplicity and everyday occurrences. Her six-hour performance piece *United States* (1986) is a perfect example of a postmodern performance. In particular the lyrics of a song called *Let X=*, begins:

"I met this guy-  
and he looked like he might have been a hat check clerk at an ice rink,  
which in fact he turned out to be.  
And I said. Oh boy—right, again.  
Let x= x."

These lyrics embody the sublime and powerful nature of simplicity, stating that things may actually just be as they appear. Herman Rapaport, a theatre and performance arts scholar, emphasizes the postmodern phenomenon that takes place in Laurie Anderson's work. The overspecialization that results from postmodern society displays the parallel between scientists' and postmodern artists' struggles. That in fact scientists and artists have become so specifically targeted towards miniscule ideas, styles, or concepts that they lose sight of general and simple explanations, and the true power of these valid conclusions.<sup>8</sup>

## 2. Origins, Education and Fundamentals of LA Performance

Laurie Anderson was born in 1947 and grew up in Glen Ellyn, Illinois. She received her undergraduate degree from Barnard College in art history during the late 1969, and began teaching art history in New York City while simultaneously working on visual art and writing.<sup>9</sup> She frequently references her original interest in art history, which provides a wide array of cultural influences. She does not simply stick to cultural references from the art academia. But also uses references such as, for example, the novel *Moby Dick*, influencing a rock opera piece *Moby Dick* (1999) or Buddhist chanting, included in one of her movies *Heart of a Dog* (2015), allowing more connections to be made by various audience members, depending on their cultural history.<sup>10</sup>

In the 1970s, when she was attending graduate school, the group of artists she identified and worked with focused on creating a new world rather than directly critiquing culture and society as they are now.<sup>11</sup> The ability to create anew, as well as a generally hopeful attitude, is what allows Anderson's artwork to continue to be progressive and constructive. Without imagination in the present day and hope for the future, the content of Anderson's work would feel too personally reminiscent and would not appeal to such a wide audience.

When she started studying studio art her focus was mainly on sculpture, and many of her early works were made of pulped paper. From the beginning of her career Anderson built 3-dimensional sculpture in the early 1970s constructing "bricks" and installation pieces out of pulped and woven newspaper. These constructions expressed the importance of the news and of politics using a medium (newspaper) that is already part of shared experience and, so, further speaks to Anderson's prioritization of fellowship. The state of affairs for all people is significant to the meaning of the piece, and her work is intended, not for one person but for an experience shared by many persons.

Anderson's education and experience with sculptural art adds to her advanced understanding of three-dimensional space especially in regard to stage composition of figures and imagery during her performances. Anderson is said to have had a similar desire as Merce Cunningham, a renowned choreographer and artist, to manipulate figures and animation within a spatial composition.<sup>12</sup> Her focus on the sculptural arts decreased during her later undergraduate years, but the educational foundation, skill, and the multidimensional perspective still adds to the depth of her performances and understanding of space.

In her education, she eventually shifted gears to writing narratives and isolated phrases. Anderson's writing is not singularly her own ideas, she consumes art and writing and welcomes inspiration from others. This is an interesting transition that other performance artists, for example Allan Kaprow, has also undergone: starting with sculptural forms and evolving pieces into assemblages or installations to fulfill more of an experiential objective.<sup>13</sup> Laurie Anderson in fact started performing in the 1970s but her performances increased and matured during the 1980s, at a time when a larger population was consuming avant-garde art. Her performances continue to present day and still celebrate and explore issues of democracy, politics, feminism, civil rights, and personal identity.

Other communication tools were used in works to relay ideas in a wider variety of tones. Anderson's pieces have always implemented newer and older technologies and older philosophies, which allowed for a larger vocabulary, albeit non-verbal at times. The issues discussed and explored, while abstract, are familiar to most people much like the work of Valentine de Saint-Point, a female pioneer of performance art.<sup>14</sup> Most of her commonly dissected issues are familiar such as feelings of anger or grief, the Midwest, language, family, and memory. She also discusses the constant battles of binaries in humans' internal and external lives.<sup>15</sup>

Anderson does use her own life and experience as a reference to understand these human struggles and triumphs. Her narratives of childhood such as the grief she felt for Lolabelle, her dog discussed in her movie *Heart of a Dog* (2015), are relatable. Her journey through grief produced on film is not a merely therapeutic exercise. She discusses these very natural emotions to connect and grow with others. By exposing a vulnerable aspect of her psyche Anderson is able to extend a -- bridge, to explore death with the audience. There is no finite product or outcome that is planned, instead dialogue is urged and a summoning of memory in communion to reach a greater understanding.

'Body art', a term coined around the 1960s for performance art, specifically revolves around movement and functions of the body. Body art began to spread around the United States and was especially pioneered by female artists.<sup>16</sup> The physical nature of the movement allowed women to show control and power over their own bodies, which was a shift that the contemporary feminist movement sought to promote, as well as what conservative civil laws sought to defy. Anderson's work is not cultivated around feminist theory, but she does refer to herself as a powerful female. She also takes charge of her body through dance and movement while giving monologues, similarly to the work of other female performance artists like Marina Abramović, Yoko Ono, Martha Roseler, and Susan Hiller.<sup>17</sup>

Automatically scholars have analyzed Anderson as a feminist artist because of the authoritative demeanor she implements in her pieces. Especially during the time period at the start of her career in the late 1960s, examples of a woman in a role of active agent were often interpreted as a feminist power exercise. She dresses androgynously and has short hair but her overall demeanor is readably feminine. At times, Anderson has chosen to implement voice modifications to sound more masculine. She comments on this strategy in *Stories from Nerve Bible*, stating that 'the audience focused and gave her more attention when she used this pseudo voice'. She has written about the resistance individuals had towards her work, because she was a woman especially in working with technology and 'electricity'. Anderson takes a moment towards the end of her performance *Language of the Future: Letters to Jack (United States)* (2016) to use the "Voice of Authority", an electronic modification that she uses in some of her performances to mimic a masculine tone, to warn the audience of the manipulative and strategic language politicians use.

This vocal mutation stands in stark contrast to the melodic echo that Anderson utilizes earlier in the performance during her telling of the story describing her receiving a dozen red roses from John F. Kennedy. in the mail. The range of voices Anderson uses in her works can be seen as a tool to index the ideas and moods in which she wants her narratives to be heard.<sup>18</sup> Over the course of seventy minutes (most of her contemporary performances are around one hour long) Anderson can thus discuss issues like loneliness, manipulation, lying, and the power of love in truly disparate and authentic ways. Her monologues and narratives are punctuated with music that she plays on an electronically connected violin alongside the cellist, Rubin Kodheli, who sits on stage with her throughout the performance without saying a word. The artist's focus on politics in this particular performance is not coincidental and included her reflections on aspects of the 2016 presidential elections.

Mel Gordon, a scholar of theatre arts, states that, "Laurie Anderson has found herself concerned with a basic aesthetic dilemma that has troubled a number of other performance artists: how to create intensely personal art that is not just simple autobiography."<sup>19</sup> The balancing of personal narrative and global context is demonstrated in all of her contemporary work. In Anderson's performance *Language of the Future: Letters to Jack* she tells a story of her correspondence with John F. Kennedy and relates this intimate story to messages and correspondence that politicians use while campaigning and trying to gain supporters. An audience member can feel as though they know her personally because of her candid descriptions of moods and conversations with her relatives. During *Language of the Future* her everyday experiences are told in a sublime way, which creates awe, but they are never veiled as mystical, and thus they feel relatable to the audience. This connection with familial memories invites the audience to look back on their own childhood memories and contemplate them in a new way.

To contextualize the political nature of Laurie Anderson's art, it is useful to consider the example of *Habeas Corpus* (2015). *Habeas Corpus* involved a multi-media installation including noises of drones and a larger than life projection of Mohammed el Gharani, who was the youngest person held captive in the prison at Guantánamo Bay. The projection provided attendees with the opportunity to see a live feed of Gharani providing a sense of time, with their attendance only spanning a small fraction of his seven-year imprisonment. While *Habeas Corpus* (2015), *Language of the Future: Letters to Jack (United States)* (2016), or *Heart of a Dog* (2015) did not require audience participation, the meaning of the pieces would be unrealized without an audience and their reactions.

While most people have experienced the themes that Anderson discusses, she gives narrations from unique points of view. Sometimes these narratives are the artist's own but she also masterfully weaves in other influences. Roselee Goldberg states in Laurie Anderson's biography (which Anderson helped write) that, "She does not want to shock, she wants to enlighten in the everyday by using usual actions, imagery, and conversation."<sup>20</sup> Her goal is to intricately examine issues without alienating the audience, but involving them instead. The importance of the audience has often been highlighted in the history of performance art, and it is the most unpredictable element of the individual performance. Art, particularly performance art, thrives under chance operations, so this uncontained element is crucial for inspiration.

Anderson uses her own experiences, especially childhood memories, as anecdotes to demonstrate the global issues she addresses. She has many works that pertain to concepts such as the nation, censorship, and surveillance: increase in video monitoring in public New York institutions following the occurrence of 9/11.<sup>21</sup> The artist is in a constant

state of weaving together all themes that she deems relevant, and are relevant to most, and skews scale and priority of all themes to highlight our interconnectedness.

These themes, along with Laurie Anderson's monologues, translate easily as anecdotes and do not seem condescending or hard to grasp for the audience. She has spoken in first person in many performance pieces, as well as represented herself with a stand-in, hologram, or puppet. She uses filtering and elaboration to engage the audience in a less autobiographical narrative, which are devices she learned to implement when storytelling with her large family growing up. Anderson has identified herself as being a verbal writer and storyteller, but she has also stated that music emotionally moves her the most.<sup>22</sup>

This goes back to the fact that she played violin in the Chicago Teen Symphony in high school. Anderson continues to use her talents with the violin in her works and has pursued a musical career along with performance art, commonly incorporating music and music technology in her pieces. Anderson signed a contract with the Warner Brothers label and composed seven albums (around the 1980s).<sup>23</sup> By signing with Warner Brothers, Anderson lost some of her art supporters because her decision was seen as 'mainstream.' She responded that her decision, based upon the resources and financial support the company gave her to compose and play music, enabled her to create work which before she would not have been able to fathom. In a way, signing with the Warner Brothers record label added to her reflection of hierarchical structure economically in the contemporary world. Her performed allusions to censorship and influence of money and authority are immune to any rejections, in the art world, even her own despite ethical disagreement.<sup>24</sup>

The financial support also led to many musical inventions that Anderson utilized in her albums, like the tape bow and talking stick. The tape bow allowed for melodies played on the violin to be recorded and replayed, and the talking stick is a wireless tool that records any sound or melody. The financial support, furthermore, allowed the artist to make more art works without restrictions, and for this music and art to be distributed to a broader range of people. Anderson's ability to collaborate also demonstrates her appreciation of others' inspiration. An atmosphere of collaboration and audience inclusion is encouraged in the performance art world. That practice fosters a shared lexicon for creation and rarely raises questions of authorship because of the inbuilt acceptance of others' work for inspiration.<sup>25</sup>

Accepting the impact of external factors is one of the keys to Anderson's success. In *Duets on Ice* (1974), an early performance in which she played violin in ice skates frozen in blocks of ice on the street. The performance would end once she fell because the ice, in which her skates were frozen, had melted. While still retaining a certain degree of power as creator, Anderson yields her force to guide the desired outcome but does not act as a dictator who excludes the variations that may naturally occur from performance to performance. For example, the previously mentioned *Duets on Ice* changed in outcome from one performance to another depending on the audience and where it was performed. On the occasions of performing in Italy in 1974, Anderson's performance was narrated by an audience member in Italian, who was well meaning but also mistranslated much of the artist's message to a slowly growing audience, with this new narration the performance took on a whole new meaning that Anderson could not have produced alone. Anderson had initially chosen to freeze her ice skates in blocks of ice to reference the geese she had seen on the day her grandmother died, that were stuck on the lake because their feet had been frozen under a layer of ice. Instead the 'narrator' told a story of Anderson and her grandmother being frozen in a lake.<sup>26</sup>

### 3. Spirituality

Anderson's spirituality is deeply embedded in her everyday life and art. In graduate school she began practicing Buddhism and studying mudra gestures, a physical study of symbolic hand gestures, which often inspires her performance work and mainly influences her personal life.<sup>27</sup> *Awake* was a spiritual retreat that consisted of invited artists and workers in the arts industry to take seminars and workshops centrally focused on Buddhist spirituality in relationship to art related jobs. This series was organized by Mary Jane Jacobs, an independent curator. The invitation only aspect of *Awake* took place from April 2001 to February 2003 at the Green Gulch Farm Zen Center in Marin County these retreats focused on providing an environment for tenderness and thought to flourish, which would allow artists to have time to interact and work at self-care without the need of a material product or a deadline. Artists Bill Viola and Sanford Biggers were among the attendees, the artists collaborated and had planned time for reflection and introspection. Anderson attended and wrote an essay in reflecting her experience at *Awake*. Anderson took the time at these seminars to reflect on the motivation for her artwork, and brainstorm new or evolved methods 'to dissolve the boundaries between inside and outside,' in regards to struggles and experience.<sup>28</sup>

In part inspired by these retreats, Anderson ties spiritual and philosophical theory together during her contemporary performances to explore the meaning and ethical relevance of events. By openly sharing her spiritual journey of questioning and practice, she invites the audience to reflect on their own. Below is an example of a spiritual narrative Anderson shared at her performance at Moogfest Arts and Music Festival (2016):

Anderson partook in a silent meditation retreat with a group of Tibetan Buddhist Monks that entailed a two-week long canoe trip. Soon Anderson and the monks realize that their retreat coincides with a survivalist retreat, which entails team building exercises and ice breaking situations. The ‘survivalists’ talk late into the night around a campfire sharing stories of their individual woes and trials. They listen to each other, and are vulnerable around each other. The Buddhist retreat sits in silence and contemplation as the survivalists tell them how to put their tents up in a more efficient manner or how they can’t just poop without burying it.

The Buddhists practice mindfulness but some become frustrated, and Anderson certainly does. She is tired of hearing how lame these people are, and how they seek and receive happiness from unknitting a human web of linked hands. She illustrates her slowly rising anger and annoyance with the situation using vivid imagery and dialogue. She overhears the survivalists one night and discovers they are actually an incest support group. At this point Anderson is at her ends wit and despite the fact that these individuals are ‘victims’, she is still annoyed by their stories and still finds them revolting, desperate and limp. During her mindfulness retreat, Anderson ponders if she may in fact hate them. She describes this hate with a perfect balance of annoyance, anger, sadness, smugness that all of the audience has felt at one point in their own life. Ending the story with a realization that in fact she ‘hates these people’ because Anderson recognizes this same desperate limpness within herself, and criticizes herself in the same way she judges these strangers.

After this story, and many other humbling narratives, it is apparent to the audience that Anderson is still on her path of spiritual awareness. She is still sharing religious ponderings, because she still spends time understanding and exploring their importance. Much like any other place for worship, the attendance of a performance or art show, allows the audience to actively experience and event together. Anderson’s references to sacred text and prayer are in almost all performances, but what makes the pieces so similar to attending a sermon is the active participation of the audience and the intimacy felt in sharing memories.

Anderson’s urging for introspection, and recollection in memory, is also what is urged by priests, rabbis, and other religious speakers. This active listening and experiencing that an audience or congregation does, prompts the feeling of fellowship and community. The religious path is different for most people, but they seek community in mosques and temples in order to gather the strength and support they need for the spiritual journey.

#### **4. Sense of Place**

As mentioned in the introduction, Anderson began site-specific performance pieces in her twenties, falling asleep in public places such as on the beach or a bench in a hallway, and observing how her thoughts and dreams were influenced by the sleeping site. Since this time she has continued to integrate the subconscious in her work. Dreams proved to be an excellent narrative tool to demonstrate the moral of a story or meanings without the weight of reality. She does not generally make site-specific preparations to her contemporary performances, with the exception of installation pieces (ie. *Habeas Corpus*), but she inevitably allows the site to influence her pieces, requiring a unique identity with every performance. Anderson takes her environment into account just as she does with surrounding cultures and ideas.

Anyone attending the Kennedy Center in Washington, D.C. for a one of Laurie Anderson’s performance is easily impressed by the atmosphere and ambiance of created by Kennedy’s arts contribution. The Center is a building that contains multiple theatres as well as a hall of (world) flags. The theatre was commissioned under JFK’s administration to help support the arts especially in the role as an internationally unifying force, as well as an intra-national effort to increase the culture and general prosperity. Immediately upon entering the building, scarlet carpets cover the floor and art, curated by the US government, covers the walls. Picturesque views of the Potomac and of the D.C. skyline can be seen from the Kennedy Center terrace. The crowd is dressed in glamorous outfits, that can neither be worn for work or play, harkening back to when the Kennedy Center first opened crowds wearing furs and satin dresses chattering to each other before this opera or that ballet.

There is a certain feel of muting upon entrance, a hush promoted by the stateliness of the interior decoration. The beauty of the landscape and the architecture add to the excitement, and reassure the visitors of the quality of performance they will attend that very day. On the stage there is a cello and a violin set up. The duet is essential for

the performance, but everyone is there for Laurie Anderson. The set starts off with a classical and experimental collaboration between the two musicians and feels fairly improvisational but purposeful.

The same performance was done by Anderson at Moogfest Art and Music Festival in Durham, North Carolina in an old theatre with velvet seats. The theatre didn't feel as though it had as deep or rich a cultural history as the Kennedy Center had, but you could still feel a certain amount of human occupation and meaning in the setting. The theatre's unpolished nature reflected decades of people enjoying movies and other performing arts in the theatre. When this writer attended this was observed. There is a hush in the audience before the show, and the attendees are of a much more diverse age range and ethnicity than at the Kennedy Center. As a viewer the writer wondered how similar this piece would be to the last performance, of the same title done at the Kennedy Center, that occurred about a month and a half prior.

Some of the audience members have attended her performances of *United States* and other concerts in the 1970s up until now. The constantly stimulating rhythm progressions of music, visual aids, and narratives impel the audience to live in that moment and forget prior knowledge or expectation of this particular performance. She provides this rich, multi-sensory, approach as a spiritual aid for others to reach the experience of living in present moment. Laurie Anderson has been practicing this attentiveness for decades through Buddhist studies.

Some of the stories she shares are the same as the past performance of *Letters to Jack*, but told in a subtly altered way. This writer realizes this because the writer is paying attention to different parts of the story than previously. Another influence to the variation of the story is the place, and Anderson's reaction to the environment. She begins: she plays music both on a keyboard and on a violin and the music instantly transports.

## 5. Process

The context of a performance contributes to the felt tone, temporal rhythm, and aesthetics of a piece. The method and experimentation around the planning of a piece can also rely on place, but also takes into account messages, tools, and motives. Anderson has many approaches, often multiple strategies used in unity, to accomplish a vision or explore an idea. She uses phrases and scattered ideas to create performance art frameworks, and monologues. Anderson's connections with her childhood and Midwest upbringing frequently inspire references to her large family and her past. Anderson has stated that she began storytelling and "performing" to stand out to her parents and others because she had so many brothers and sisters growing up. She even returned to Chicago to give a performance at Ira Licht's *BodyWorks* (1975) which was only one year after she conducted her first performance piece.<sup>29</sup>

Even as Anderson developed her own voice and began to collaborate with other artists, she chose to not only collaborate with other musicians in song but also artists of all types to organize events, create inventions, pursue performance, and in her spiritual practices. She is also the only artist to have ever had a residency at NASA. Her love and critique of science is also echoed in *Big Science* (1982), one of her albums with Warner Brothers.

Anderson also collaborated with Bob Bialecki, an engineering ace, to alter violins. Some of the violins she has invented with him and other electronic engineers have recorded loops and can respond to other motions of her body during live performances. The violin that Anderson used during *Language of the Future: Letters to Jack* (United States) on March 6, 2016 was specifically designed to record segments of live stringwork while functioning as a traditional manual violin at the same time as the playback of the recorded clip. This type of violin is now used by other musicians and performers, but its original intellectual credit goes to Anderson and Bob Bialecki. Anderson identifies manipulating devices and voices with technology as a sort of play and fun, as well as a tool to broaden capacities of audio layering and expression.<sup>30</sup>

In all of her work Anderson implements multiple media to convey her message, whether it be in the planning process or in the completed product. Examples of this are her drawings made to plan performance pieces, as well as written out monologues.<sup>31</sup> In her latest film *Heart of a Dog* (2015), she includes her filming, writing, music, and drawing to create an experience for the audience that involves all of the senses. Her storytelling abilities do not only rely on being adept with words, but understanding how others digest visual and aural information. This multiple sensory approach invites an even broader audience to respond to her work in multiples ways.

For example, a performance in Washington D.C. on March 6, 2016, of *Language of the Future: Letters to Jack* (United States) which included video images, smoke, voice contortions and looping, and orchestral collaborating with electronic alterations. The performance took place in the Terrace Theatre in the Kennedy Center. Laurie Anderson's *Language of the Future* is a series that has been performed in multiple venues, this version of the performance was tailored to the specific site. The performance was site specific not so much because of props or

spacing, but because of awareness Anderson had to the history of the building. Stories that centered on JFK's campaign were used to tie campaigning and politics in general to Laurie Anderson's childhood correspondence with JFK.

## 6. Conclusion: Crafting Fellowship

Anderson has also taken written work by artists such as William Burroughs and Herman Melville. Burrough's quote, which Anderson returns to often in her pieces, "Language is a virus from outer space."<sup>32</sup> Anderson reiterates the themes of language in several of her performances. She highlights this quote by dressing up in a white astronaut suit with other figures on stage in her film *Home of the Brave* (1986). Ideas of communication are pivotal in Anderson's work because it is communication that connects people – Anderson's ability to communicate effectively with a large demographic of people makes her art successful. She appreciates and savors the power of communication and plays homage to language in many of her performances such as in *Language of the Future: Letters to Jack*.

Anderson's work explores several types of communication by relaying information and narratives by implementing different sensory experiences as well as several languages. The idea of communication stands for a fascination that Anderson has with difference types of people and cultures, and connections between these individuals and groups. The style of expression that Anderson decides to implement in her performances echoes the conclusions made in Howard Gardner's educational theories. These theories state that individuals learn through different senses and methods, not due to learning or mental disorders, but due to personal disposition. Understanding the different types and styles of connection, Anderson chooses to stimulate all senses when presenting an idea. Memory is often linked to smell, as passion is often linked to touch.

Anderson goes beyond even progressive stereotypes and considers that her audience is filled with different styles of comprehension. She appeals to auditory learners with her music and fluctuations of tone. She appeals to visual learners with her paintings and imagery, as well as text appearing on the screen even when she talks. She guides the audience to reference their own experiences and knowledge to encourage learners that must do to fully understand. Not a single sensation is left untouched and the viewer feels fully immersed in the material, even though the interpretation of specific parts of the performance, the intellectual, and emotional have an impact the conclusion that may differ from one perceiver, audience member to another perceiver the seated beside them.

Her inclusion of all senses to reflects her evolution as an artist towards considering community above individual, or herself. In Anderson's book *Stories from the Nerve Bible* her introduction states a desire to understand and explore the United States, memory, politics, language, and technology by 'sifting through countless' scores, art pieces, and movies. Anderson's ability to filter, polish, and work with factors in her own life and other observed environments is what makes the perspective conveyed so inclusive and successful in creating an intimate communion amongst audience members and viewers. As an active audience, these viewers become members of a larger conscious community, inspired by Anderson's artwork.

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## 8. Endnotes

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