

Laurie Anderson

born 1947 in Glen Ellyn, Illinois, USA; lives in New York, USA

Biography

Visual Arts and Music

In the Exhibition

Studies in art history at Barnard College, New York

1972: Completes Master of Fine Arts with focus on sculpture at Columbia University in New York; studies under Sol Lewitt and Carl Andre

1977: Develops the *viophonograph* and conducts other experiments with sound

Collaborations with William S. Burroughs, Peter Gabriel, John Cage, Philip Glass, and others

Since 1995: In partnership with Lou Reed, whom she married in 2008

2004: First artist-in-residence in the NASA program

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Visual Arts and Music

As a media and music pioneer, the performance artist, inventor, and poet Laurie Anderson became an important figure in the US postwar avant-garde as early as the 1970s. In addition to the invention of innovative electronic instruments, such as the *viophonograph* (1977) or the *vocoder* (1981), which she repeatedly used in later performances to distort her voice in order to flirt with gender roles, she experiments with text, image, body, and technology both visually and acoustically. In spite of the tremendous impact of new technologies—especially evident in her lavish stage shows with large and multiple projections—Anderson has reservations about them. As promising as the cybernetic utopia (the fusion of man and machine) may seem, the needs of life and sensuality should not be suppressed by it.

The boundaries between visual and audio are not easy to define in Anderson's oeuvre. Even though music is the focus of her work, the artist expresses herself as a painter, filmmaker, and sculptor. This, in turn, manifests itself in stage designs for performances or the most recent virtual reality installation *Chalkroom* (2017), in which a tension between technology and aesthetic practice is repeatedly created.

The content of Anderson's work draws on experiences from her cosmopolitan life, which she processes humorously and allegorically by reflecting herself in her environment. She focuses on political and social issues, and she is particularly critical of social hierarchies, which she questions in relation to gender roles.

Progress in automation and the computer technology that grows out of it have fed the techno avant-garde throughout the industrialized modern period, with visions of man and machine becoming one. The brutal cyberneticist belief in progress is challenged by Anderson through disclosures of the vulnerability of this technological ideal. As a media artist who is able to fuse the interface between art and science in an experienced manner, she pleads for a consistently human reception of new technological possibilities and refers to the unconditional necessity of man in a techno utopia.

Her *Headphone Table* installation from 1978 is a participative sculpture with a specific sound experience that involves the body of the person viewing it. Sound waves are transmitted via the forearm bones and the

palms of the hands into the ear by means of two transfer surfaces, which are embedded at the head of each table. Anderson thus refers to the resonating body of the human skeleton, the importance of which is all too often overlooked in the reception of sound. Music recordings can be heard at both ends of the table, one vocal—i.e., human voices—and one instrumental.

Chalkroom (2017), a project realized by Anderson with the Chinese media artist Hsin-Chien Huang, is a virtual animation that makes it possible to explore a parallel linguistic, visual, and sound reality. This is also where Anderson's pictorial skills come into play; the black-and-white drawings correspond to the style of her painting.

In her early days, Anderson was in contact with some of the iconic artists of New Music such as John Cage or Philip Glass but did not directly follow their avant-garde approaches. As part of her fundamental examination of technological developments and utopias and their trans-human promises, she first engaged with instruments as the musician's tools and questioned their possibilities in the existing milieu. This led her to the invention of the *viophonograph*, a violin that she technically updated by mounting an electronic pickup on the bridge and installing a recording device inside. The violin bow is a specially recorded magnetic tape that plays forward and in reverse as it is bowed.

Author: Lona Gaikis



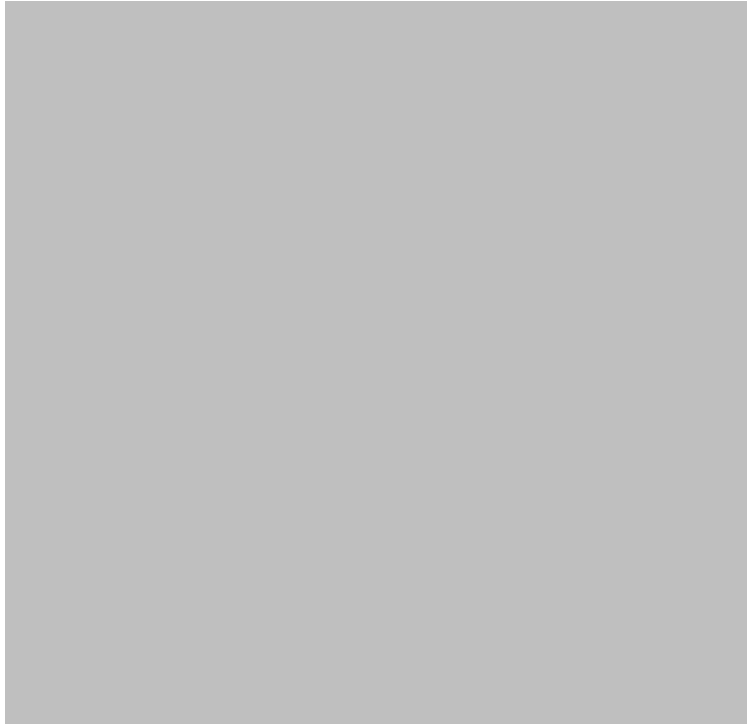
Laurie Anderson, »Viophonograph«,
1976
b&w photograph. Photo: Bob Bielecki,
Courtesy the artist and Sean Kelly



Laurie Anderson, »The Handphone
Table«, 1978
Wood, 31.34 × 35.9 × 60.04 inches.

Gallery, New York; image via
artcritiqued.com; © Laurie Anderson

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Laurie Anderson, »The Chalkroom«,
2017
Virtual reality installation with Hsin-
Chien Huang. Photo: Zoran Orlic; image
via massmoca.org; © Laurie Anderson

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In the Exhibition

Musee d'art contemporain de Lyon.
Photo: Blaise Adilon/MAC Lyon; image
via mac-lyon.com; © Laurie Anderson

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Laurie Anderson, »Big Science«, 1982
Label: Warner Bros. Records, 1 × Vinyl,
LP, Album. Image via discogs.com

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Laurie Anderson

O Superman, 1982, with Laurie Anderson, 7:27 min

With this song, part of her larger work *United States Live*, Anderson made it to number 2 on the UK singles charts in 1981 after it was promoted by the influential British radio presenter and DJ John Peel. It shot to fame as a result, having previously been barely known outside of Anderson's artistic circles. First released as a single, the 1982 song was part of her debut album *Big Science*.

The content of the song relates to the core theme of her work: technology and communication versus humanism. In a mix of pop music video, info-clip, and prophetic oracle, she sings of her homeland, the United States of America, and its technological and geopolitical conquest. Inspired by *Arie Ô Souverain, ô juge, ô père* (O Sovereign, O Judge, O Father) from Jules Massenet's opera *Le Cid* (1885), the introduction is a repetition of the text »O Superman / O Judge / O Mom and Dad,« whereby »Mom« and »Dad« are to be understood both as an allegory of the homeland and her mother tongue.

Against the background of the hostage-taking in the American embassy (Nov. 4, 1979–Jan. 20, 1981) and specifically triggered by the tragic crash of a military rescue helicopter near Tehran, this song is a critical reflection on imperial power interests and violence, which Anderson ultimately contrasts with the hegemony of Mother Earth.

'Cause when love is gone, there's always justice.

And when justice is gone, there's always force.

And when force is gone, there's always Mom. Hi Mom!

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