

LAURIE ANDERSON, THE PINNACLE OF NON-FICTION

Performance artist and musician Laurie Anderson tells stories about things ‘the way they are, not how they could or should be.’ Her muse is Lolabelle, her recently deceased terrier.

LAURIE ANDERSON HAS a problem that hardly seems surprising: she occupies “too many worlds.” Consequently, she is taking a pass on New York’s TriBeCa Film Festival, which takes place this week a stone’s throw from her apartment, and all of the associated parties, receptions and debates that draw dozens of local luminaries, including Robert de Niro, Jerry Seinfeld and Anderson’s husband, Lou Reed. “I occupy so many worlds as it is these days,” says Anderson, who stops pacing and sits down at her dining table. “It’s insane. I’m working on a project in the music world, I’ve got a meeting in a little while about an installation in a museum in Philadelphia, and after that I have another one about a writing project. It’s totally crazy. And hard to keep up with.”

She has similar objections to modern communication technology, despite surrounding herself with it. “Stuff like this,” Anderson says, pointing to the iPhone in her hand, “kills human concentration and makes it practically impossible for people to carry on a normal conversation with each other.” As if to drive her point home, she gets up to check the status of several large files in the process of being sent from her laptop. Bad news: “At this rate, it’s going to take eight hours.” She summons her assistant for help. Anderson’s love-hate relationship with technology is striking for an artist whose work leans so heavily on its innovative use. For starters, she invented several musical instruments including the “tape-bow violin,” which as the name suggests is a violin that is played with a bow strung with recorded magnetic tape. Another Anderson invention is the “talking stick,” a six-foot MIDI controller that resembles a baton and can be used to record basically any existing sound and play it back in short segments. Then there are Anderson’s signature voice filters, which change her voice to a deeper, masculine-sounding register, a technique that she likes to call “audio drag.”

Anderson incorporates all of these technologies in her performances and recordings. Her best-known work is “O Superman,” the hit song that established her name beyond art circles and reached number 2 on the UK Singles Chart and number 9 in the Dutch Top 40. Reciting the lyrics through a vocoder, her voice has a robotic edge as two simple chords created by the word “ha” loop endlessly. Birds chirp at random moments, and the song ends with a fading saxophone. Like so much of Anderson’s musical output, the more you listen to it, the better it gets.

DESPITE HER MAINSTREAM successes in the 1980s, which included her first solo album *Big Science* (1982) and the concert movie *Home of the Brave* (1986), Anderson regards the period without the slightest trace of nostalgia. “I’m very much aware that I am not part of the art world, but the art market,” she says. “And that everything is about money. It started in the Eighties.”

Consequently, the image of a lively artists’ scene in downtown Manhattan populated by the likes of Andy Warhol, Michel Basquiat and Julian Schnabel is mostly a myth, according to Anderson. “People started to realize: hey, we can sell this stuff. Especially in the visual world; paintings literally became money, and were treated like investments. It influenced how they were made: artists found it extremely difficult to take an inquisitive approach to what they created.”

No, the most interesting era was the 1970s, which Anderson rang in with a symphony for car horns in 1969 at the age of 22. “It was exciting and honest,” she says. “We made things because we wanted to; it never occurred to us to participate in any kind of market.”

During those years, Anderson graduated cum laude with a degree in art history from Barnard College, the renowned women’s university in New York. Fellow alumni include Jeane Kirkpatrick, the first female U.S. ambassador, singer Suzanne Vega and authors Edwidge Danticat and Jhumpa Lahiri. In 1972, she earned an MFA in sculpture at New York’s Columbia University, where she was working as an art instructor and art critic.

By the end of the 1970s, Anderson was primarily active as a musician. “The nice thing about making records and playing live is that you can at least see who is coming and how they respond. I wasn’t interested in creating paintings or sculptures that would disappear into someone’s house or art collection. I don’t know exactly what art is, but my favorite art forces me to look at things differently—which is what I try to accomplish, too.”

Over the years, one method to do that has been to turn to her alter ego, Fenway Bergamot aka the “voice of authority.” As Bergamot, Anderson sports a penciled-in moustache, beard and eyebrows and tells stories and reads poems in a deep, distorted voice. One of her crowning achievements was in 2003 when she served as NASA’s first and so far only artist-in-residence. The pseudo-otherworldly sojourn inspired her performance piece *The End of the Moon*, which Anderson staged on numerous occasions including the opening of the Olympic Games in Athens (2004) and the Holland Festival (2005). In 2007, she won the Gish Prize. Previous recipients include Frank Gehry (1994), Bob Dylan (1997) and Robert Redford (2008).

NOW, IN THE SPRING of 2011, Anderson’s life is occupied with grief. She is grieving the death of her

terrier Lolabelle, who died of cancer last Sunday. There is something almost noble about the black & white portrait of her displayed prominently in the living room. Underneath the stairs of Anderson's duplex apartment on Canal Street that overlooks the choppy Hudson, there is an unfinished altar made out of clay. The tribute to Lolabelle is a work in progress. "So sad. She was amazing; a true working dog, there for all of my recording sessions, always with me on tours. Her hearing was incredible; 800 times better than ours." During the past 15 years, Lolabelle served as a "source of inspiration for everything, every form of self-expression." It culminated last year in a concert that Anderson performed for dogs. The idea was conceived after a backstage chat with cellist Yo-Yo Ma. "We thought, wouldn't it be great to look up during a concert and see only dogs sitting there?" Anderson recalls. "That's when I decided: as soon as I get the chance, I'm doing it."

The opportunity arrived in June 2010 when Anderson was invited with Lou Reed to curate an art festival at the Sydney Opera House. Allegedly, the music, which included whale sounds at such high frequencies that human ears could not register them, drew extremely mixed reactions from the audience. Some listeners became very agitated, some wagged their tails politely and others regarded the stage with glassy-eyed stares.

The canine symphony was arguably the most apolitical of Anderson's work up until that point. "The last time my work was truly political was during the Bush years. Now that it turns out the world run by Obama looks exactly the same, I realize that no one can change it. Art can influence the world in a political sense to a degree, but politics hasn't been able to change the world in a long time. The energy of capitalism has gone beyond its reach."

According to Anderson, the world has entered "late capitalism." Still, she does not see it as the biggest story. "It's the *scariest* story because we can't change it. From now on all that matters is fame and money. And competition instead of cooperation."

She offers two unsolicited reading recommendations: *How to Be Idle* and *Liberty*. Both are by Tom Hodgkinson, an English writer. "He compares modern life to slavery: toiling for a huge conglomerate for the sake of being able to consume; why would you do that?"

Anderson is aware that she tends to rattle on. "Maybe this sounds like bullshit, but I really mean it. In my work, I try to create images that set me free. I recently did that in Rio by projecting film stills on a floor covered with shredded books and tiny handkerchiefs. I had a parrot tell the story that went with it. I don't even know where I got the idea."

Currently, Anderson is working on a collection of short stories. "It starts with the question: what was your childhood like? People often give full answers, listing everything they did. Like it's their Facebook page. But what if you ask what was your childhood really like? Our lives are so complicated and messy. As an artist, I want to tell things the way they are, not the way they could or should be."

This wish explains Anderson's affinity for authors such as Laurence Sterne and Honoré de Balzac, especially the latter. "He would look at a city and wonder: how does it actually work? How does stuff get to the city; how do people cook at home? Those are always the kinds of things that I want to know, too."

In that sense, Anderson's often strange and extravagant-seeming work is the pinnacle of non-fiction.

"That's true, despite the fact that my life is fiction to a large extent. I'm constantly imagining things. The world is made of stories." She returns her gaze to the picture of Lolabelle. "Even our dog told stories through the games she played and the routines she cherished. Life is only filled with fear otherwise. That's why my work is largely based on the notion that we inhabit a world of words first and foremost."

AFTER THREE SHOWS driven mainly by language, Anderson's latest work *Delusion* is a return to the "old-fashioned" hybrid of visual and musical experimentation. The piece debuted at the Olympic Winter Games in Vancouver (2010) and will be performed in Amsterdam as part of the Holland Festival. *Delusion* features a series of short musical mystery plays that shift between reality, dream and myth, according to the program book, which also says: "*Anderson explores the stories that we tell each other about ourselves, our family, our country and our world with her usual cool intellect as well as bursts of raw emotion, exposing the porous border between history and myth and dream and reality.*"

In the process, Anderson presents her audience with a universe populated by nuns, dogs, Icelandic elves, golems, ghost ships, archeologists and deceased family members. As she switches gears between everything from the mystical origin of the Russian space program to theories of time and speed, and from experiments using Switzerland's Hadron particle accelerator to our concept of time, she asks questions such as "Who owns the moon?" and "What do I say to my dying mother?"

Incredibly, the piece was originally intended to have a very simple structure. "It started out as a play with only two people," Anderson says as she puts on her coat—a loose tooth prompted an emergency dental appointment. "As you'll see, I tossed that concept. This weird hybrid result suits me better."

And with that Anderson rushes off.

Laurie Anderson: 'Delusion', Sunday, 12 June, 8:15pm, Muziektheater, Amsterdam, 90 minutes, no intermission