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# A Manifest Cyborg: Laurie Anderson and Technology

Julie Malinda Goolsby

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# A MANIFEST CYBORG: LAURIE ANDERSON AND TECHNOLOGY

by

Julie Goolsby

Under the Direction of Mary Hocks

## ABSTRACT

This thesis seeks to demonstrate that although Laurie Anderson's performance works are technologically driven and often involve gender play, seemingly transgressing the gender binary, ultimately she reinscribes traditional gender norms. On the one hand, Anderson has been a pioneer in the use of electronic technology, which is significant considering she is a woman and electronics is a male-dominated arena; on the other hand, her ambiguously-gendered cyborg persona, which does often raise awareness about gender stereotypes, ultimately reinscribes traditional gender norms. Although I consider these issues as they pertain specifically to Anderson, the significance of this project lies in the broader picture. Are there limits to gender performativity? Is it possible to break traditional gender norms? Must gender norms constantly reinscribe themselves regardless of new technology? As gender norms are deeply rooted in society, they are difficult to escape, as Anderson's work demonstrates.

INDEX WORDS: Laurie Anderson, Gender, Gender norms, Gender performance, Technology, Cyborg, Identity

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by

Julie Goolsby

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

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2006

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## Introduction

Laurie Anderson has been an artist for over thirty years. Part of the avant-garde New York art scene of the 1970s, Anderson emerged as an artist at a time when performance art was embraced by artists as a critical and vital medium. Anderson also made art objects, but her identity as an artist became anchored primarily in performance and remains so today. Her innovative use of electronics, in particular, situates her as an important contemporary artist.

Anderson's work is grounded in an ironic juxtaposition of content and media. Collaging elements of culture through the voices of music, art, and performance, Anderson creates a provocative bricolage of ideas, images, text, and sound through her use of technology. Her work has encompassed a wide range of media, from drawing, etching, and book design to photography, film, and digital technology. Clearly an artist who thrives on hybridity, Anderson's performance pieces are a multi-media synthesis of visual and musical elements. Drawing from her interests in phenomenology, Wittgenstein's language games, storytelling, and American literature, Anderson fuses her observations and questions about culture in the United States into surrealistic performances.

In an exhibition catalog of Anderson's work, Janet Kardon, then director of the Institute of Contemporary Art at the University of Pennsylvania, categorized Laurie Anderson's work into four "overlapping stages." These categories span the various media and formats that Anderson has used throughout her career. The first category Kardon identifies is what she refers to as "language objects." Kardon dates these works from 1969-1972, early in Anderson's career, and includes the many objects and



sculptural works Anderson was creating such as collages, etchings, and artist's books. Kardon refers to the second stage as "Autobiographical works." These pieces range from 1972-1975 and include her early "one-person performances with minimal props." The third stage in Anderson's work is referred to as "Multifaceted performances." This category, dated 1976-1979, includes performances such as *For Instants* which incorporated "visual elements, texts and music augmenting the artist's persona." The final category is "Electronic cabaret" and ranges from 1979 to 1983, although it is still relevant in her present works.<sup>1</sup> These works encompass Anderson's performances and installations that integrate electronic manipulation into the pieces.<sup>2</sup> These categorizations identified by Kardon are quite useful in tracing the trajectory of Anderson's work. From the beginning, her works have been interactive, from her artist's books to her performances.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Over the course of her performance career, Laurie Anderson has constructed a stage persona— Laurie Anderson the performance artist — a façade concealing her "real" identity in daily life. Anderson's persona is particularly interesting since she often has presented herself as a sort of cyborg, a human-machine hybrid.

In some ways there is a disconnect between the intersections of technology and gender in Anderson's performances due to cultural expectations. On the one hand, Anderson has been a pioneer in the use of electronic technology, which is significant considering she is a woman and electronics is a male-dominated arena; on the other hand,

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<sup>1</sup> Although Kardon's catalog was published in 1983, this final category still holds true for Anderson's work up to the present time.

<sup>2</sup> Janet Kardon, "Laurie Anderson: A Synesthetic Journey" in *Laurie Anderson: Works from 1969 to 1983*, exhibition catalog, 7 (University of Pennsylvania: Institute of Contemporary Art, 1983).

her ambiguously-gendered cyborg persona, which does often raise awareness about gender stereotypes, ultimately reinscribes traditional gender norms. It is my intention to examine the role of technology in Anderson's performances, both in terms of identity and as a subject throughout her works, particularly as it intersects with gender performativity within the performance context.

Anderson draws heavily from technology and language, both historically male-dominated areas. Anderson infiltrates, interrupts and re-interprets these typically male-codified arenas to develop her narratives. Interestingly, she uses some of the very same media she wishes to critique in order to construct her pieces; in other words, she uses technology and stories drawn from western culture to reflect, decipher, and comment on the roles of technology, language, and politics in American culture. Her ambivalent love-hate relationship with technology has been at the core of her performances, along with her penchant for storytelling.

Gender is without question a key component of identity and marker of power. Traditional gender roles assume that certain signifiers and behaviors are enacted by an individual based on his or her biological sex. This notion of roles locks gender categories into a binary system based on biology. As theorist Teresa de Lauretis has noted, the concept of gender indicates one's social "relation" to other members of society as opposed to existence as an isolated individual. She clarifies the connection between gender and power concisely: "Although the meanings vary with each culture, a sex-gender system is always intimately interconnected with political and economic factors in each society."<sup>3</sup> Typically, societal expectations require women to present themselves in

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<sup>3</sup> Teresa de Lauretis, *Technologies of Gender: Essays on Theory, Film, and Fiction* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1987), 5.

roles that are passive, submissive, and geared towards the care-taking of others. In contrast, men are expected to be active, aggressive, and assume leadership roles. We see these roles reiterated constantly in our daily lives, particularly through mass media. Many facets of media, such as print and television ads for cosmetics, dieting, plastic surgery, and dating services, as well as film and television shows, reinscribe gender roles. Furthermore, these ads and images support specifically heterosexual gender norms.

These expectations have become established as a means to maintain society through a policing of behaviors. Gender norms control and position individuals within society, even those who do not fit within those norms. As theorist Judith Butler points out, to be outside the norm is still to exist in relation to the norm.<sup>4</sup> Since certain norms are assigned to specific gender roles which men and women are expected to adopt based on their biological sex, it becomes clear that these are in fact “roles”; in other words, gender is a constructed idea resulting in role-playing or performance. As Butler has pointed out, Simone de Beauvoir expressed gender performance quite well with her statement, “One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman.”<sup>5</sup>

Anderson’s use of masculine-gendered clothing and digital vocal manipulations to construct her stage persona has generated much discussion. Critics and scholars have questioned whether to interpret her appearance in terms of androgyny or transvestism.<sup>6</sup> Regardless of how one reads Anderson’s gender construction, the question remains: does she really challenge notions of traditional gender norms through her ambiguously

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<sup>4</sup> Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender* (New York and London: Routledge, 2004), 42.

<sup>5</sup> Simone De Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. H.M. Parshley (New York: Vintage Books, 1989) quoted in Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble*, (New York and London: Routledge, 1990, 1999).

<sup>6</sup> Craig Owens especially has considered this question in his essay, “Sex and Language: In Between,” in *Laurie Anderson: Works from 1969-1983*, ed. Janet Kardon, exhibition catalog, 48-55 (University of Pennsylvania: Institute of Contemporary Art, 1983).

gendered persona? In the following chapters, I demonstrate that although Anderson's works are technologically driven (therefore seemingly transgressing the binary relationship between male and female domains) and often involve gender play, ultimately she reinscribes traditional gender norms. Anne Balsamo makes a poignant observation regarding the image of the female-gendered cyborg which is certainly relevant in the case of Anderson's cyborg persona: "Female cyborgs, while challenging the relationship between femaleness and technology, perpetuate oppressive gender stereotypes."<sup>7</sup> Anderson's cyborg is not about "transgressed boundaries, potent fusions, and dangerous possibilities"<sup>8</sup>; rather her persona is still grounded in the binary between male and female and still reveals and perpetuates gender norms.

Although I consider these issues as they pertain specifically to Anderson, the significance of this project lies in the broader picture. Are there limits to gender performativity? Is it possible to break traditional gender norms? Must gender norms constantly reinscribe themselves regardless of new technology? As gender norms are deeply rooted in society they are difficult to escape.

## **Method**

Donna Haraway's critical essay, "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century," provided a theoretical basis for interpreting Anderson's hybridized existence, as Anderson has incorporated so many components and roles into her works, including visual art, music, electronics, film, and inventions. Beyond her incorporation of various working roles (such as musician,

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<sup>7</sup> Anne Balsamo, "Reading Cyborgs Writing Feminism," in *The Gendered Cyborg: A Reader*, ed. Gill Kirkup et al., 151 (London and New York: Routledge, 2000).

<sup>8</sup> Donna Haraway, "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century," in *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women* (New York and London: Routledge, 1991), 154.

photographer, designer, etc.), there is the notion of Anderson presenting herself as a sort of cyborg in many of her works where she blends electronic technology with her physical body, including examples such as her use of a vocal harmonizer and the “drum suit.” Haraway discusses the notion of a cyborg existence in terms of identity, politics, technology, and power—all categories explored by Anderson as well.

Poetry scholar Carrie Noland’s analysis of Anderson’s work as the embodiment of Haraway’s theory of a cyborg subjectivity is useful in considering Anderson’s cyborg persona. While I agree with Noland’s argument that Anderson’s work “combines what Haraway calls an apprehension of ‘intense pleasure in skill, machine skill,’ with an intimation of the crisis of subjectivity that an encounter with technology may entail,”<sup>9</sup> I disagree with her notion that Anderson’s persona is genderless.<sup>10</sup> I do find much of Noland’s analysis applicable to my project, particularly in thinking about Anderson’s interactions with technology and her use of identity, but I primarily align myself with Anne Balsamo’s critique of Haraway. Although Haraway’s ideas are important and serve as a foundation, it is Balsamo’s interpretation of Haraway’s ideas that guided the focal point of my argument.

Balsamo critiques Haraway’s notions of the cyborg as a useful metaphor for women. Balsamo, citing actual cyborg figures from literary and film texts, notes that the gendered cyborg ultimately reproduces gender stereotypes, although the female cyborg is somewhat more challenging than the male cyborg because the masculine is already associated with rationality and technology, whereas the feminine is aligned with emotions

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<sup>9</sup> Carrie Noland, “Laurie Anderson: Confessions of a Cyborg,” in *Poetry at Stake: Lyric Aesthetics and the Challenge of Technology* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1999) 185-211.

<sup>10</sup> Noland refers specifically to Anderson’s “genderless robot” persona in *Home of the Brave*. Noland, 204.

and nature. The cyborg image or metaphor plays into ideas of “human difference”<sup>11</sup> and complicates notions of duality. Although “cyborg identity is predicated on transgressed boundaries,” as Balsamo states, she also demonstrates that Haraway’s notion of the cyborg as transgressive is problematic because the cyborg in fact actually serves to “reinsert us into dominant ideology by reaffirming bourgeois notions of human, machine and femininity.” Balsamo does think it might be possible for the cyborg to present images that do “disrupt stable oppositions,” but in order to do so we must move away from cyborg images which are predicated on “upholding gender stereotypes.”<sup>12</sup>

Balsamo also makes the interesting observation that the historical trajectory of women has followed a similar path to that of technology. Intersections between women and technology have led to women being “forced to become like the cyborg.”<sup>13</sup> For example, women were essentially human computers in the early days of computer use. During World War II women often computed complex “ballistics trajectories” and later were employed as many of the computer programmers/operators who automated ENIAC, the wartime electronic decoding computer. They were known as the “ENIAC girls.”<sup>14</sup> Women telephone operators were also quite cyborg-like as they created the connection between two parties and were required to speak according to specific guidelines and scripts.<sup>15</sup> Even today, many automated telephone services are programmed with a female voice. The notion of the female as a machine clearly ties into notions of the female as

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<sup>11</sup> Balsamo, 150.

<sup>12</sup> Balsamo, 155-156.

<sup>13</sup> Balsamo, 152.

<sup>14</sup> Jennifer Light, “Programming,” in *Gender & Technology: A Reader*, eds. Nina E. Lerman, Ruth Oldenziel, and Arwen P. Mohun, 295-326 (Baltimore and London: The John Hopkins University Press, 2003).

<sup>15</sup> Lana F. Rakow, “Women and the Telephone: The Gendering of Communications Technology,” in *Technology and Women’s Voices: Keeping in Touch*, ed. Cheris Kramarae, 207-228 (New York and London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1988).

object and the male as subject, in this case as the inventor or the director of such technologies. Anderson does further complicate this relationship, however, as both the performing subject and the point of interface and object of the audience's attention.

I consider the intersections between gender and technology in Anderson's works through a thematic analysis of her work, including four of her primary works: *United States, Parts I-IV*; *Home of the Brave*; *Puppet Motel*; and *End of the Moon*. I refer to various materials to complete my analysis, such as video recordings, CDs, and printed lyrics. Chapter one focuses on the relationship between technology and performance art history; chapter two considers technology as Anderson's ongoing subject matter; and chapter three analyzes Anderson's use of technology and identity. I conclude by discussing the stronghold of gender norms not only on society in general but also on technology in particular and Anderson's strategies to elucidate them through her cyborg persona.

## Chapter One: Technology and Performance

Technological innovations have both influenced and been appropriated by artists throughout history. Arguably one of the most significant technological inventions to affect art practice was photography. Photography presented not only a new way of creating images, but also a shift in thinking about and representing time. Eadweard Muybridge and Etienne-Jules Marey established “instantaneous photography, or ‘chronophotography,’” which allowed the photographer to capture motion in such a way as to break down movements into fragments. Muybridge’s images of horses in motion or women walking up and down stairs from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century are two examples. These images profoundly influenced artists at the time, particularly the Futurists and Dadaists, such as the pivotal Marcel Duchamp.<sup>16</sup> Photography and its “offspring”— television, video, and film— have not only *influenced* the way artists visually interpreted their ideas, but have also been *adopted* by artists as media, particularly later in the 20<sup>th</sup> century in video art and the work of some performance artists, notably those of the “Media Generation,”<sup>17</sup> such as Anderson, and artists working in computer and cyber-based arts. These electronic media opened up new avenues for artists interested in time-based work (e.g. Performance) to interpret and represent subjectivity.

Anderson’s background in art history, both as a student and an instructor, has informed her performances. She was inspired by sitting in a darkened room watching the projected slides in art history class. The influence of her experiences in the art history

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<sup>16</sup> Michael Rush, “Introduction,” in *New Media in Late 20<sup>th</sup> –Century Art* (London and New York: Thames & Hudson, 1999), 12-14. Marcel Duchamp’s oil painting, *Nude Descending the Staircase* (1912), was most likely influenced by these photographs.

<sup>17</sup> RoseLee Goldberg, *Performance Art: From Futurism to the Present*, revised and expanded ed., *World of Art* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 2001), 190.



classroom on her work is evident in her use of slide projections during many of her performances. Anderson's experimental use of music and technology follows a history of art movements such as Futurism, Dada, and Fluxus. Furthermore, other elements of her performances are informed by her art historical knowledge, such as costume and the often unexpected juxtapositions of images and text, both of which are indebted to earlier movements such as Surrealism and the Bauhaus. Even her narrative style can be linked to art history, particularly Surrealism. Anderson's intellectual interests in language and philosophy combined with inspiration from several male writers and performance and spoken word artists, such as Vito Acconci, William Burroughs, and John Giorno, also helped Anderson to shape her ideas.<sup>18</sup> In this chapter, I trace the historical connections between performance, technology, and Anderson's work. By doing so, I intend to show how her work is rooted in art history and how technology has influenced performance.

Although performance became firmly rooted as an art form in the 1970s, its history reaches at least as far back as the Futurist movement which began during the 1910s and lasted until World War II. Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, an affluent Italian poet, established Futurism as an art movement in 1909 when he published his Futurist manifesto in *Le Figaro*, a Parisian newspaper. Initially more propaganda than action, the Futurists became known for challenging the artistic and literary establishment with a desire to incite their audiences to anger and an interest in "speed and a love of danger."<sup>19</sup>

An interest in machines, noise, war, and violence shaped Futurist performances. Marinetti's definitive performance was *Zang Tumb Tumb* which led to the development of "noise music," pieces that involved mechanical and industrial sounds rather than

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<sup>18</sup> RoseLee Goldberg, *Laurie Anderson* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 2000), 18.

<sup>19</sup> Goldberg, *Performance Art*, 11-14.

musical instruments. Theatre and dance pieces required mechanical, robotic bodily movements from the performers. The Futurists also created works using the cutting-edge technologies of the day, including film, and towards the end of the movement, radio pieces.<sup>20</sup> Following the Futurists were the Dadaists who produced absurdist works inspired by the chaotic state of the world as a result of World War I that were aggressive and rejected bourgeois society. Essentially, Dada was more of a “worldview” with members who sought to challenge artistic expression through their notions of what was later termed “anti-art.”<sup>21</sup>

A clear precedent for some of Anderson’s work can be seen in Futurist and Dadaist works, especially their experimentation with sound. An early piece by Anderson, *An Afternoon of Automotive Transmission*, which was a concert performed with car horns, distinctively draws from the Futurist interest in experimental music.<sup>22</sup> Furthermore, the Futurist use of mechanical movement to appear robotic seems antecedent to Anderson’s development of a cyborg stage persona. Her interest in electronic technology as a key theme also links back to the Futurists’ preoccupation with mechanical technology.

The absurd juxtapositions that often occur in Anderson’s work are much in keeping with those of the Futurists, Dadaists, and Surrealists. However, Anderson’s motivation is quite different from that of these earlier artists. Whereas they sought to challenge bourgeois society through their shocking actions and bizarre performances, Anderson’s intentions are more subtle and rely on the intellectual surprise of unexpected

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<sup>20</sup>Goldberg, *Performance Art*, 18-30.

<sup>21</sup> Robert Atkins, *Artspeak: A Guide to Contemporary Ideas, Movements, and Buzzwords* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1990), 70-71.

<sup>22</sup> Goldberg, *Laurie Anderson*, 37.

combinations of words and images coupled with her unique stage persona as opposed to the often loud, brash, and odd behavior deployed by the Futurists and Dadaists.<sup>23</sup>

Anderson's work reflects a sophisticated awareness of Surrealism which arose from Dada in 1925 with the publication of the *Surrealist Manifesto* and lasted until about 1938. The Surrealists continued to explore Dada interests such as chance and found objects, but their work was also strongly influenced by their interest in dreams and the unconscious.<sup>24</sup> Automatic writing and memory were key influences that also inspired Surrealist performances. Like the Surrealists, an interest in dreams as source material often appears in Anderson's work. A very early piece she created, *Institutional Dream Series* (1972), sought to document the influence of place on her dreams. Anderson had a friend photograph her sleeping in various public places such as Coney Island and the women's bathroom in the library at Columbia University. When Anderson awoke, she recorded her dreams in writing. The photographs were displayed along with written descriptions of her accompanying dreams.<sup>25</sup> Anderson's interest in dreams has continued to influence her work over the years, in works such as her audiovisual installation *Dark Dogs, American Dreams* (1980) and frequently in songs such as "Sharkey's Day" and "Blue Lagoon," both featured in *Home of the Brave*.

The German Bauhaus movement is referenced in Anderson's work, particularly in some of her costuming. Although Bauhaus works were experimental and considered an important site for the development of performance in Germany,<sup>26</sup> they were "never intentionally provocative or overtly political as [those of] the Futurists, Dadaists, or

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<sup>23</sup> Goldberg, *Laurie Anderson*, 11.

<sup>24</sup> Atkins, *Artspeak*, 156.

<sup>25</sup> Goldberg, *Laurie Anderson*, 38-39.

<sup>26</sup> Goldberg, *Performance Art*, 97.

Surrealists had been.”<sup>27</sup> Bauhaus theater director Oskar Schlemmer, a painter and sculptor, created productions such as *Figural Cabinet I* and *Figural Cabinet II*, which exemplified the Bauhaus interest in creating a “total art work” (or *Gesamtkunstwerk*<sup>28</sup>) that united artists from various disciplines in one work. Schlemmer incorporated painting and sculpture concepts through experimentation with light, costume, and sets<sup>29</sup>; his costumes were “designed to metamorphose the human figure into a mechanical object.”<sup>30</sup> Anderson references Schlemmer’s costuming in *Home of the Brave* with her use of stylized masks. The masks are white with simple outlines indicating facial features, giving the wearer a puppet-like or robot-like appearance. Schlemmer’s masked figures were meant to emulate robots, as the performers moved in a stiff, mechanical fashion; Anderson’s figures also move in a similar manner, referencing the Bauhaus performance aesthetic. Anderson’s intention is similar yet her figures are more about the integration of the body with the digital world than mechanical robots. Anderson sports a white suit and an indeterminate gender as she begins the film with a narrative about the workings of binary code. Anderson draws on her art history knowledge to pay homage to Schlemmer with her use of the masks while creating a piece that is very much her own.

Besides the visual elements of Anderson’s performances, such as costuming and movement, music and sound also play a critical role in her work. An important influence on Anderson’s approach to composing and musical experimentation was musician and composer John Cage. Cage’s manifesto, *The Future of Music*, was founded on the

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<sup>27</sup> Goldberg, *Performance Art*, 120.

<sup>28</sup> Goldberg, *Performance Art*, 54. This term was first used by Wagner a century earlier. It continued to be influential not only with Dada, but also the Bauhaus and beyond. Anderson’s work clearly incorporates the notion of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* as illustrated by her integration of a variety of artistic media.

<sup>29</sup> Goldberg, *Performance Art*, 110-119.

<sup>30</sup> Goldberg, *Performance Art*, 106.

premise that we hear noise wherever we are and that it is possible to consider noise as music; his theories were largely influenced by his interests in chance and Zen Buddhism. In past works Anderson has sometimes used Cage-like techniques such as chance, “found sounds,” and numerical patterns to create musical scores.<sup>31</sup> Furthermore, Anderson follows a Buddhist approach in her creative work as well.<sup>32</sup>

Another critical art movement which highly influenced Anderson was Fluxus,<sup>33</sup> a movement which in many ways was indebted to the experimental concepts and work of John Cage. Originating in Germany during the 1960s, Fluxus spread to other northern European cities and New York City; it was comprised of an international group of artists who produced mixed-media events, and shared an interest in social change rather than artistic style: “Rather than an alliance with popular culture, Fluxus artists sought a new culture, to be fashioned by avant-garde artists, musicians, and poets.”<sup>34</sup> Anderson’s work both contradicts and aligns with Fluxus notions. She has been both at the forefront of the avant-garde and an icon of popular culture through an unexpected popularity with mainstream music listeners.

Fluxus artist Nam June Paik, along with his collaborator from 1964-1991, avant-garde cellist Charlotte Moorman, was a significant contributor to the use of electronics and experimental music in performance as well as installation art. In many ways, Anderson’s interests and concerns paralleled Paik’s. Paik was highly influenced by the rise of television, and subsequently video, during the 1950s and 1960s. One of Paik’s and Moorman’s most famous collaborations was *TV Bra for Living Sculpture* (1969) in

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<sup>31</sup> Goldberg, *Laurie Anderson*, 63.

<sup>32</sup> Laurie Anderson, “Time and Beauty,” in *Buddha Mind in Contemporary Art*, ed. Jacquelynn Baas and Jane Jacob, 113-121 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004).

<sup>33</sup> Goldberg, *Laurie Anderson*, 16.

<sup>34</sup> Atkins, *Artspeak*, 78-80.

which Moorman wore a “bra” of two small television monitors which displayed various images activated by the sounds of her cello.<sup>35</sup> The two continued to challenge notions of music and television throughout their collaborations.

Anderson and Paik share a “love-hate relationship with technology,” and an interest in television and pop culture as Paik has often sought to “convert television from ‘a passive pastime to an active creation.’”<sup>36</sup> Also both artists have bridged the gap between High Art and pop culture, Anderson through her multi-media performances and cross-over into mainstream music, and Paik through his imaginative and fun reworking of the television medium. Paik’s intention was to challenge the role of mass media and technology by creating an active and often interactive media experience for audiences, much like Anderson.

During the late 1960s and into the 1970s artists questioned the gallery system and the importance of the art object. The disdain for the art object resulted from its function as a commodity to be exchanged within the gallery system. Performance art, which could not be purchased, became a strong force in the 1970s as a result of the rejection of the art object. Many feminist performance artists found performance to be an especially useful way to bring awareness to women’s issues, particularly those related to women in the arts.<sup>37</sup>

Anderson began showing her work, at first mostly sculptural pieces, in the 1970s. By the mid-1970s, Anderson was beginning to incorporate technology with her body during her performances as she related autobiographically-based stories. For example,

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<sup>35</sup> Günther Berghaus, *Avant-Garde Performance: Live Events and Electronic Technologies* (Hampshire and New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2005), 125-126.

<sup>36</sup> Berghaus, *Avant-Garde Performance*, 198.

<sup>37</sup> Jeanie K. Forte, “Women’s Performance Art: Feminism and Postmodernism,” in *The Routledge Reader in Gender and Performance*, ed. Lizbeth Goodman and Jane de Gay, 237 (London: Routledge, 1993).

she wore her “screen dress” during her piece *Songs and Stories for the Insomniac* (1975) “onto which film was projected as she played the violin and told stories.”<sup>38</sup> Anderson’s burgeoning interest in experimental music and electronics continued to develop, eventually leading to her transition as part of the Media Generation.

As performance art entered the 1980s, the Media Generation explored an interest in collapsing the boundaries between high art and popular culture as well as a return to the art object, resulting in a highly commercialized art world. Performance artists began to explore mass media, and there was less interest in intellectual underpinnings. The lines between art and media and performance and theater became quite blurred. As part of the Media Generation, Laurie Anderson’s work during the 1980s and into the 1990s fits into this category, given her blending of electronic multi-media along with images from popular culture. Anderson crossed the border between the avant-garde and pop culture with her piece “O Superman” which soared to number two on the British pop charts.<sup>39</sup> Initially viewed with disdain by others of the avant-garde, eventually crossing over became much more common as the distinctions between high art and popular culture continued to blur. This collapse has also meant the demise of the avant-garde and the emergence of the post-modern aesthetic.

The rapid expansion of electronic media in the 1980s and 1990s, such as computers, video games, virtual reality, and the Internet, was influential in the development of new art forms, known collectively as Media Art. Technology and the intersections between human and machine became prevalent themes among many artists, particularly with Virtual Reality and the Internet. In many ways, much of this work is

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<sup>38</sup> Goldberg, *Laurie Anderson*, 139.

<sup>39</sup> Goldberg, *Laurie Anderson*, 90.

“more akin to a theatrical performance” because it is dependent upon the viewer’s interaction.<sup>40</sup>

As performance art has entered the 21<sup>st</sup> century, technology has continued to play an important role. Some performance artists create elaborate, professionally lit and styled photographs. Others have continued to explore film and video. One of the most recent technological innovations in performance art is the use of the Internet.<sup>41</sup> Anderson was an early innovator in merging art with the Internet. During her *Stories from the Nerve Bible* tour (1995), she created “The Green Room,” a website where fans could post their comments and chat with her.<sup>42</sup> While the intention of Anderson’s website was to communicate with her fans, many performance artists have used the Internet as a site for performance itself, whether through video or avatars coupled with viewer interaction.

Anderson has used age-old techniques such as story-telling and music to convey narratives that highlight the ubiquity of technology in everyday western life while also acknowledging the potential dangers of technology. While other artists celebrate technology, such as Stelarc who physically integrates his body with machines,<sup>43</sup> Anderson raises questions about our relationship with technology. Communication, whether through verbal or written language or visual images, forms the heart of Anderson’s concerns as she draws our awareness to our immersion in the Information Age.

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<sup>40</sup> Berghaus, *Avant-Garde Performance*, 239.

<sup>41</sup> Goldberg, *Performance Art*, 224-225.

<sup>42</sup> Goldberg, *Laurie Anderson*, 167.

<sup>43</sup> Stelarc has explored the intersections between body and machine throughout his career. More recent work includes the use of Virtual Reality and the Internet. See Berghaus, “Performances in Cyberspace,” 251-257.



Clearly Anderson's knowledge of art history has been an important influence on her performance work. By following the avant-garde tradition of combining experimental music and technological innovations in her performances she has not only woven her work into the art historical dialogue, but also helped lead the transition of performance from the avant-garde into the postmodern.

## Chapter Two: Technology as a Subject in Anderson's Work

When I began to write *United States*, I thought of it as a portrait of a country. Gradually I realized it was really a description of *any* technological society and of people's attempts to live in an electronic world. — Laurie Anderson<sup>44</sup>

Anderson's early work resulted from experimentation with various multi-media, including film, projections, and experimental music. As Anderson became more involved with technology in her work she also became more conscious of its role in society. This awareness led to a shift in her work from merely using technology as a medium or form of experimentation to a way of commenting on technology itself. As she says in this quote, "Gradually I realized it was really a description of any technological society and people's attempts to live in an electronic world." By saying "gradually" Anderson notes that her consciousness was developing as she worked; she became more cognizant of the issues that were important to her and to the implications of technology both in society in general and within her work. Through her ironic use of electronics in her performances, she began to use her technological knowledge to show the embeddedness of technology in society and vice versa, subsequently emphasizing the immersion of gender in technology as well.

Anderson's use of a variety of media, including slide projections, film, animation, photography, digital imagery, and music, among others, constitutes a sophisticated engagement with multimedia that is a critical aspect of her work. By multi-media I am referring to Anderson's use of these various media within single performances. Media theorists Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin present several concepts in their book, *Remediation: Understanding New Media*, which are useful in considering Anderson's

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<sup>44</sup> Goldberg, *Laurie Anderson*, 89.

use of multimedia throughout her performance career. These concepts are: hypermediacy, transparent immediacy, and remediation.

Hypermediacy is media that self-consciously references and incorporates other media; the internet is a good example because it draws upon book-related concepts such as “pages” as well as animation and video.<sup>45</sup> Media that intends to remove traces of its presence and appear “real” is classified under transparent immediacy. Bolter and Grusin cite the examples of linear perspective and the smooth brushwork used in Renaissance painting (and other forms of realist or hyperrealist painting). These techniques were used to minimize the viewer’s awareness of surface in order to give the viewer the impression of looking through a window, while submerging the realization that one is actually looking at a painting.<sup>46</sup> The window metaphor continues to be important to instances of both immediacy and hypermediacy. A common contemporary example is the windowed format of the computer screen used in computer programs and websites. Remediation refers to presenting the same content in a different medium. A book that is adapted into a film is a common example.<sup>47</sup> Websites, which rely on hyperlinks to allow the user to move from one web page to another, are another example of the remediation of books.

In terms of Bolter and Grusin’s theory, Anderson’s work draws primarily upon hypermediacy and remediation. Most of Anderson’s performances, especially works prior to *End of the Moon*, can be classified as examples of hypermediacy as she pulls together a wide variety of media. Anderson’s sophisticated self-conscious spectacle of media dazzles the audience while foregrounding the power and ubiquity of media and

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<sup>45</sup> Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin, *Remediation: Understanding New Media* (Cambridge, MA and London: The MIT Press, 1999), 31.

<sup>46</sup> Bolter and Grusin, *Remediation*, 21-25.

<sup>47</sup> Bolter and Grusin, *Remediation*, 44-45.

technology in our everyday lives. Her keen ability to incorporate these media, along with her sophisticated convergence of high art and popular culture, has situated Anderson as a post-modern artist.

Examples of remediation occur particularly in moments where she has remediated texts, such as passages from the Bible or *Moby Dick*, or even her own works. These instances of remediation are important because they reveal not only Anderson's clever ability to integrate and reinterpret other texts with contemporary multimedia, such as with her more theatrical performance, *Songs and Stories from Moby Dick*, but also her deep understanding and manipulation of these texts as important cultural documents which continue to influence many of the ideas and beliefs framing the overarching structures of dominant American culture.

While Bolter and Grusin's theory is useful in elucidating the broader strokes of Anderson's sophisticated understanding and manipulation of various media, its efficacy becomes limited when analyzing Anderson's work on a more detailed level. For that reason, in the remainder of this chapter I seek to unpack Anderson's use of technology as a subject by first looking at Anderson's personal influences and attitudes concerning technology and then tracing the historical trajectory of her use of technology in her performances.

### **Anderson and Technology**

Anderson acknowledges that her work is often, ironically, "highly critical of technology."<sup>48</sup> She has made some poignant observations about technology and its place in our society. Her own attitude about technology is rather ambivalent; it has been a

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<sup>48</sup> Paul Tschinkel, "Laurie Anderson: On Performance," ART/new york, VHS (USA: Inner Tube Video, 2001).

useful tool and often an important presence in many of her works. She admits to having eleven computers yet also observes that “technology [is] splitting us pretty cleanly into people who have the stuff and the people who don’t. And for the people who can’t keep up, life is going to get really, really hard.” Her feelings about the internet are also equally ambivalent — she finds that the “Web is pretty anti-social.”<sup>49</sup>

In her essay, “Control Rooms and Other Stories: Confessions of a Content Provider,” Anderson discusses the convergence of art and technology, her working method, and what it means to be an artist in contemporary society.<sup>50</sup> The primary thread in the article is the relationship between technology, art, and society; she considers the notion of the artist’s role as that of a “content provider.” Comparing the Pequod from *Moby Dick* and the Starship Enterprise from *Star Trek*, Anderson observes that both are operated by teams of people using powerful technology in order to maintain control. She makes a striking analogy between these fictional quests for control and the “personal control rooms” we create in our homes with our computers and Internet access, and asks, “Is technology taking the human on a reckless ride to nowhere?”<sup>51</sup> By personifying technology as an active, potentially destructive agent and humans as its helpless passengers, she in fact indicates a *lack* of control among those of us with home computers and the Internet. Those who are able to afford such technology in their homes have access to information, giving them a certain edge over those who do not; however, how much power and control is really gained? Who is providing the information that is

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<sup>49</sup> David Holthouse, “Strange Angel,” *Tweak: Phone Tag*, 1996, <http://www.tweak.com/phonetag/anderson/> (accessed September 4, 2005).

<sup>50</sup> Laurie Anderson, “Control Rooms and Other Stories: Confessions of a Content Provider,” *Parkett* 49 (1997): 127-135.

<sup>51</sup> Anderson, “Control Rooms,” 135.

accessed? Who are the “content providers?” The power lies with those who truly control the technology and the information transmitted by it. The “captain” is invisible yet the ship continues to travel, indeed carrying us along on a ride which may, in fact, be to nowhere.

Anderson’s early explorations of technology began with a playful experimentation with electronics and experimental music. Gradually she began emphasizing technology as a subject as well a medium. She has noted the close relationship between media, politics, and technology,<sup>52</sup> relationships which have guided her performances since the late 1970s. In the following sections, I will discuss Anderson’s focus on technology as a subject within some of her most significant primary works.

### **Early Works**

In Anderson’s earliest sculptural works, such as *Handwriting (Mudra)* (1972) and *New York Times, Horizontal/China Times, Vertical* (1971), her interest in incorporating the body and language was already evident. These works were made from manipulated newspaper. Anderson created *Handwriting* by pressing her hand into newspaper pulp, creating a Mudra, which is a Buddhist hand gesture. *New York Times, Horizontal/China Times, Vertical* was constructed by weaving strips of each newspaper together.<sup>53</sup> Both of these works play on notions of language and communication as well as the body, themes which have remained important throughout Anderson’s work.

Following these early sculptures created while she was a graduate student, Anderson began to explore performance and the use of multimedia, such as projections,

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<sup>52</sup> Nicholas Zurbrugg, “Laurie Anderson,” in *Art, Performance, Media: 31 Interviews* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), 27.

<sup>53</sup> Goldberg, *Laurie Anderson*, 33-35.

film, and audio. Anderson's early relationship to technology was more about play and experimentation than critique. Works such as *Duets on Ice* and *Duet for Door Jamb and Violin* demonstrate both Anderson's clever inventiveness and wit.

In 1975, Anderson performed *Duets on Ice* throughout New York City and Genoa, Italy. During this piece, she wore ice skates embedded in ice as she alternated between telling personal stories and "playing" a violin outfitted with a pre-recorded cassette tape loop featuring cowboy songs. She played until the ice melted.<sup>54</sup> In Anderson's *Duet for Door Jamb and Violin* (1976) she stood within a doorway and played her violin. She had rigged the door jamb with contact microphones and whenever her bow struck one of the mikes, the knock was amplified. Both of these early works include Anderson's signature violin either augmented or used in an unusual, humorous way. The violin has remained a key component of Anderson's performances throughout her career.

Anderson's *As:If* from 1974 was a precursor to *Duets on Ice* as she also wore ice skates encased in ice. This piece included many of the elements and themes that have become important in her work including: "her Midwestern background, her grandmother, religion, a fascination with language and memory." In this work Anderson also began to use some of the inventions and ideas that recur in other works, such as projecting slides and placing a speaker in her mouth to alter sounds.<sup>55</sup>

A piece from 1978, the *Handphone Table*, was an interactive sculpture in which the viewer would sit at the table and place his or her elbows at specific points on it.

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<sup>54</sup> Josephine Withers, "Feminist Performance Art: Performing, Discovering, Transforming Ourselves," in *The Power of Feminist Art: The American Movement of the 1970s, History and Impact*, ed. Norma Broude and Mary Garrard, 158 (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1994).

<sup>55</sup> Goldberg, *Laurie Anderson*, 60.

These points were connected to metal rods inside the table which were in turn connected to a cassette player. The individuals placed their elbows on the table and then cradled their heads in their hands allowing the pre-recorded music to be transmitted through vibrations in the bones of their arms to their hands. They could then hear the music through their hands as if they were wearing headphones. Here Anderson has more directly merged the physical body with technology; the sound waves literally travel through an individual's physical body in order to be heard. The listener's body becomes integrated with a machine therefore becoming cyborg-like. Clearly, as shown in this work and others, Anderson's interest in merging the body with machines was already emerging.

### **United States**

So hold me Mom, in your long arms,  
 your petrochemical arms  
 your military arms  
 in your arms  
 in your electronic arms.  
 —“O Superman”

Anderson's groundbreaking performance piece, *United States Parts I-IV*, was framed around the idea of technology's place in society and our relationship to it. This piece was nearly eight hours long and was performed over the course of two evenings, with visual and audio spectacle much grander than Anderson's earlier works. Developed from an earlier work entitled *Americans on the Move* (1979), *United States* comprises four parts: transportation, politics, money, and love. Composed of film, music, narrative, and projections, this piece is a dynamic synthesis of media, a fine example of



hypermediacy. Issues of consumerism, communication, power, and authority all meld together to form a dark, humorous, and ironic commentary on American culture.<sup>56</sup>

Anderson has described her work as an ongoing project to “picture the United States, which is also a background for everything my work is about: memory, language, technology, politics, utopia, power, men and women.”<sup>57</sup> She has constructed complex narratives from her observations about American society, weaving together multimedia and multi-leveled commentary about what it means to be an American. Essentially the work is about U.S. culture and our relationship to technology. There are also references to the space program, a theme that recurs in later works as well. Scott Cummings has determined: “Without being naively optimistic or simple-minded, *US: I-IV* seeks to empower its audience to confront the sweeping changes being wrought by advanced technology and our near absolute dependence on it.” Cummings ultimately affirms Anderson’s *United States* as a wild ride through an imaginative interpretation of American culture with an undercurrent of cautionary fascination with electronic technology.<sup>58</sup>

*United States* opens with a piece called “Say Hello,” which explores modern forms of travel and the ambiguities of language. However, the speaker is an interesting aspect of this piece, which is seemingly about looking for direction. Anderson uses her own voice (a woman’s) to ask: “Hello. Excuse me. Can you tell me where I am?” as she hypothetically stops at a gas station to ask for directions. She answers with her manipulated “voice of authority,” her “male” voice: “You can read the signs. You’ve

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<sup>56</sup>Goldberg, *Laurie Anderson*, 86-90.

<sup>57</sup>Laurie Anderson, *Stories from the Nerve Bible: A Retrospective, 1972-1992* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1994), 7.

<sup>58</sup>Scott Cummings, review of *United States: Parts I-IV*, by Laurie Anderson, *Theatre Review* 36, no. 2 (May 1984): 249-252.

been on this road before.” In this short vignette, the male voice gives direction to the female seeking guidance. Anderson also uses her disguised voice to describe an accompanying image, a drawing of a man and woman standing side by side. The image is from the plaque that was affixed to the *Pioneer 10* spacecraft. The man has his hand raised, and the woman stands passively at his side. Anderson uses her “voice of authority” to explain that “in our country, we send pictures of people speaking our sign language in Outer Space.” Her use of the “voice of authority” to explain this image fits with the message encoded within it. According to this image (and the voice), it seems that men are the active speakers of this “sign language,” and women are merely standing by, waiting for direction.

In his essay, “Sex and Language: In Between,” Craig Owens discusses Anderson’s *Pioneer 10* plaque sketch, which she used in both *Americans on the Move* and later in *United States*. Owens explores the signification of the image, noting that the male figure’s upraised arm not only presents a confusing gesture – does he mean “hello” or “goodbye”? – but is also phallic in nature. Owens describes the *Pioneer* image as closed systems that “fail to communicate with each other.” Anderson enters the space between the two figures to act as moderator.<sup>59</sup> The sketch signifies sexual difference, identifying the phallus as the “privileged signifier.”<sup>60</sup> This was a significant yet seemingly simple commentary on the structure of power.

In “The Language of the Future” Anderson uses the Harmonizer to lower the octave of her voice and invoke her “voice of authority.” Using this vocal mask, she tells her humorous yet dark tale of technology and vulnerability as experienced on an airplane

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<sup>59</sup> Owens, “Sex and Language,” 55.

<sup>60</sup> Owens, “Sex and Language,” 50.

forced to attempt a crash landing. As a result of this experience, a fear of flying develops, leading the individual to seek out understanding seatmates on subsequent flights. On one of these flights, “he” sits next to a young girl who speaks a different language: “computerese.” Anderson relates the girl’s speech to electronics, the notion of circuits switching on and off. She ends the piece with this stanza:

This  
is the language  
of the on-again  
off-again  
future.  
And  
It is Digital.

On one level, Anderson comments on the fast-paced nature of technological developments: “One thing instantly replaces another.” However, she draws another analogy between these technological changes and language. We are all speaking in code. We create “circuits” through communication with one another. We also participate in creating electronic circuits through our use of electrical machines. Another line in this piece says: “Current runs through our bodies and then it doesn’t.” Our very bodies contain electrical energy, transmitted by neurotransmitters throughout the body, operating within an electrochemical code that allows them to communicate various bodily functions and responses. In many ways spoken language and digital coding are metaphors (and vice versa) for this organic system of communication. Anderson has often explored a curiosity about the relationship between bodies and electricity (often in terms of electricity applied to the body and the inherent dangers). Although the body operates using electrical energy, too much can be deadly; perhaps this is a fitting metaphor for overdependence on technology.

A short segment follows “The Language of the Future” that links voice and language to the use of the telephone, a device that translates spoken language into electrical transmissions and then back into spoken language. This segment relates to notions of circuits, both electrical and spoken, as well as themes of surveillance, an inability to escape a closed circuit. Anderson uses her natural voice to present this piece as a telephone rings:

Please do not hang up.  
We know who you are.  
Please do not hang up.  
We know what you have to  
Say.  
Please do not hang up.  
We know what you want.  
Please do not hang up.  
We’ve got your number:  
One...  
Two...  
Three...  
Four...

The accompanying projected text culminated with the line, “We are tapping your line.” The refrain, “Please do not hang up,” instructs the listener not to disconnect, not to break the circuit, implying an inability to escape the omniscience of technology. An underlying threat is invoked as well: “We know who you are...We know what you want...Please do not hang up [because]...We’ve got your number.” If you try to escape, you will be found. Furthermore, the “we” is ambiguous; a present yet unseen source of power. To be integrated in the contemporary, western, technological circuit collapses notions of privacy resulting in a seemingly inevitable existence within an unavoidable panopticon.

Surveillance, along with military power, is also a main theme of “O Superman (for Massenet)” which occurs in the second part of *United States* and was inspired by “O Souverain,” from Massenet’s opera, *Le Cid*.<sup>61</sup> With her altered, roboticized voice, Anderson sounds like one machine communicating with another machine as the “answering machine” picks up. A message begins: “Hello? This is your mother. Are you there? Are you coming home? Hello? Is anybody home?” The tone shifts as the robotic voice says, “Well, you don’t know me, but I know you. And I’ve got a message to give to you. Here come the planes.” The machine seems to have a disconcerting, omniscient consciousness. Anderson uses the answering machine voice as a metaphorical way of showing not only how interwoven technology is in our daily lives, but perhaps also as a warning of the potential for technology literally to take over our lives, like HAL in Stanley Kubrick’s *2001: A Space Odyssey*, or to give a more recent example, the artificial intelligence gone awry in *The Matrix* trilogy.

Shifting to themes of space and place, “Big Science,” presented near the end of part III, opens with the sound of a howling wolf, evoking a sense of open, isolated spaces. The line, “It’s cold outside. Don’t forget your mittens,” indicates taking a trip of some sort; venturing outside into the cold, the unknown. Descriptions of driving along and asking for directions, the resulting answer to which every turn is marked by some new development to come (“Well, just take a right where they’re gonna build that new shopping mall...”) alludes to being lost in a constantly changing land. There is a mocking reverence for technology and fast-paced society:

Golden cities. Golden towns.  
And long cars in long lines.  
And great big signs. And they all say:

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<sup>61</sup> Goldberg, *Laurie Anderson*, 90.

Hallelujah. Yodellyheehoo. Every  
 Man for himself.  
 Ooo coo coo. Golden cities. Golden  
 Towns. Thanks for the ride.

At the end of *United States*, Anderson performs “Lighting out for the Territories,” which revisits the themes in “Say Hello.” In this piece, Anderson speaks with her own voice as she walks out onto a diving board suspended over the audience, wearing her “headlight” glasses. As she walks with her arms outstretched, emulating a sleepwalker and an automobile at the same time, she again asks, “Hello. Excuse me. Can you tell me where I am?” to which she replies:

You’ve been on this road before.  
 You can read the signs.  
 You can feel your way.  
 You can do this  
 in your sleep.

Whereas “Big Science” describes a sense of vastness and disorientation, “Lighting out for the Territories” alludes to our connection with technology, both literally and figuratively; Anderson’s automobile-like appearance seemingly references our “car culture,” in which we tend to be very reliant upon our vehicles as a means of transportation and exploration as well as a marker of personal identity. In both of these segments Anderson taps into notions of space and place and feelings of isolation and alienation (“Every man for himself”). It seems that the landscape, viewed from the ubiquitous automobile, is both familiar and ever-changing. This play on travel and exploration references America’s history of colonization and pioneering while referring a little sarcastically to technological progress with lines like “You’ve been on this road before” and “You can do this in your sleep,” especially coupled with her interpretation of the contemporary

American as a somnambulant automobile. We are driving blindly, perhaps on a “reckless ride to nowhere.”

### **Home of the Brave**

Now, I’m no mathematician but I’d like to talk about just a couple of numbers that have been really bothering me lately, and they are zero and one. — “Lower Mathematics”

In *Home of the Brave*, Anderson shifts to a more deliberate emphasis on language, digital coding, and society. A complex piece of hypermediacy, this work incorporates many of the same elements as *United States*. *Home of the Brave* opens with “Lower Mathematics,” in which Anderson appears dressed in her white Oskar Schlemmer-esque mask and a white suit. Using her “voice of authority,” she proceeds to describe the significance of zero and one in computer coding humorously. The two numbers are assigned very different semiotic meanings in our culture: a zero is a “nobody” and to be “number one means to be a winner.” Anderson’s character explains that really no value judgment should be placed on either because they are both equally important as the “building blocks of the Modern Computer Age.” Perhaps this could also be interpreted as a play on the notion of the gender binary where an individual is expected to be either a man or a woman, with patriarchal society framing man as “number one” and woman as “zero.”

Following this opening segment, a giant representation of a television serves as a backdrop for much of the performance. Performers are silhouetted against the “screen,” portraying characters such as baseball players and a dancing couple. Videogames are referenced in the film projected behind the performers during “Sharkey’s Day” and “Sharkey’s Night.” We see an animation in the blocky style of 1980s videogames of a sun and then a moving highway, dotted by trees. Anderson’s fascination with emerging

electronic media at the time forms a clear theme in this work. She continued to explore an interest in computers and videogames, which eventually led her to develop *Puppet Motel*.

### **Puppet Motel**

There's this idea that people staring at their screen is a kind of lonely experience, and to a certain extent I agree that it is not a very social thing, but on the other hand you could say that it's antisocial to stay home and read a book as well. — Laurie Anderson<sup>62</sup>

Anderson's 1995 CD-ROM, *Puppet Motel*, opens with one of her recurring icons, the electrical outlet. In order to "enter" the game, one must click on this outlet, symbolically "plugging into" the game. Created as a "virtual building of thirty-three rooms, including a hall of time, a planetarium, a Green Room, an aquarium, and an anechoic chamber," viewers can listen to recordings from Anderson's performances, edit her computer animation, and even edit *Crime and Punishment* in the "Detective Room."<sup>63</sup> Many icons from her work appear, such as the violin, ice skates, airplanes, telephones, televisions, and flashlight.

In this work, Anderson not only draws on hypermediacy as she incorporates elements of various media, such as books, music, and animation, she also remediates works, in this instance primarily her own (although she does draw on others, such as *Crime and Punishment* and the Ouija board, both adapted here as part of a computer game). Originally it was also possible to access the internet via the *Puppet Motel* CD-ROM, a unique feature at the time. Additionally, Anderson created a website in conjunction with her 1992 performance, *Stories from the Nerve Bible*, called "The Green

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<sup>62</sup> Goldberg, *Laurie Anderson*, 168.

<sup>63</sup> Goldberg, *Laurie Anderson*, 168-171.



Room.” It lasted for six months (the length of the tour) and allowed fans to contact Anderson and, in turn, Anderson to respond.<sup>64</sup>

Jon McKenzie declares that Anderson’s *Puppet Motel* is “an interactive tour de force, both conceptually and intellectually” and notes that “in this interface of cultural and technological performance, the guest is the performer.”<sup>65</sup> *Puppet Motel* complicates notions of performer and audience as the viewer can make choices about which icons to click on, what information to look at, and which games to play. However, viewer choices are limited by the selections available and the links connected by the icons.

I attempted to explore *Puppet Motel* with limited results. Since the CD-ROM was released in 1995, it does not run especially well on newer operating systems.<sup>66</sup> I found it to be quite like *Stories from the Nerve Bible*, Anderson’s retrospective book, only more interactive.<sup>67</sup> Much of the same material is included. Furthermore, it has a hypertextual quality as it provides links to explore diverse elements from Anderson’s performances. This hypertextual quality clearly remediates the notion of a book.

The textual quality of Anderson’s work has been noted by Craig Owens. Owens recognized that not only was performance itself a critical medium for Anderson, but it also served as a nexus for her many interests and abilities. Through the entire process, from planning to the actual performance, Anderson has used her skills as a “writer,

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<sup>64</sup> Goldberg, *Laurie Anderson*, 167-169.

<sup>65</sup> Jon McKenzie, “Laurie Anderson for Dummies,” *TDR: The Drama Review* 41 no. 2 (Summer 1997). Academic Search Premier, via Galileo, <http://www.galileo.usg.edu>.

<sup>66</sup> Tim Merritt, of the Instructional Technology Center in the College of Education at Georgia State University, pointed this out to me. The packaging calls for using MAC OS 7.0 or higher; the system I used was 9.2 which was apparently too advanced. Although I could view some screens and interact with the program to some extent, I was repeatedly kicked out of the program, and I also found it difficult to move between links.

<sup>67</sup> Indeed, given the retrospective nature of the book, *Stories from the Nerve Bible*, this is most likely Anderson’s intention.

composer, inventor, draftsman, photographer, filmmaker, and musician.”<sup>68</sup> Owens considers Anderson’s pieces to be more akin to texts rather than “works.” He states a “work is an object produced by an author; whereas the text is a permutational field of citations and correspondences, in which multiple voices blend and clash.”<sup>69</sup> This observation certainly fits Anderson’s performance pieces which combine and recombine so many elements, both in terms of media and subject matter. The hypertext metaphor extends beyond *Puppet Motel* to the actual performances themselves as Anderson often cross-references her works. In this sense, the very nature of Anderson’s performances remediates the book and, subsequently, the internet. Recurring icons, images, and anecdotes form links between Anderson’s performances.

### **End of the Moon**

Why is it that Outer Space is always somehow about the future? And not about the vast and ancient past? In *The End of the Moon*, space is a stand-in for our shifting attitudes towards the future, our dreams, hope, and sense of direction. — Laurie Anderson<sup>70</sup>

More recently, Anderson has utilized her experience as the only artist-in-residence at NASA to explore society’s relationship with technology. When asked why she chose to participate with a government agency, knowing her disdain for the Bush administration, Anderson said the following about her experience at NASA: “As sad as I am about being in the United States these days, NASA is genuinely exciting” and on her interest in spending a year at NASA: “I like the scale of space. I like thinking about

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<sup>68</sup>Craig Owens, “Amplifications: Laurie Anderson,” *Art in America* 69, no.3 (1981): 121.

<sup>69</sup> Owens, “Amplifications,” 121.

<sup>70</sup> Laurie Anderson, program notes from *The End of the Moon*, Ferst Center for the Arts, Atlanta, GA, November 11, 2005.

human beings and what worms we are. We are really worms and specks. I find a certain comfort in that.”<sup>71</sup>

Anderson’s most recent work is *The End of the Moon*, which she began touring in 2004. *The End of the Moon* presents a low-key, melancholic reflection on the current political state of the United States. She states: “I wrote this when we were going into this war with Iraq [after 9/11], and what I lost was my country. I think that I am not alone in feeling this way: this feeling of uneasiness, and sadness and loss.”<sup>72</sup> Relying primarily on spoken text, the piece is supported by simple stage props and visual imagery, along with “music [used] primarily as punctuation.”<sup>73</sup> This piece does not involve elaborate stage sets or extensive, elaborate computer effects; rather, Anderson relies on “nearly invisible gadgetry,” using her laptop computer and less obtrusive contemporary wireless digital equipment.

Anderson’s use of miniaturized contemporary digital equipment masks the various components of her performances. By concealing the presence of technology for the most part, Anderson completely directs the audience’s attention to her narrative which is generally quite serious and sad as she frames the work around the deadliness of modern technology vis-à-vis September 11<sup>th</sup> and the war in Iraq. She refers to technologies such as military spying and the anxious uncertainty lurking within us in the wake of terrorist activities. The hidden technology of Anderson’s performance, punctuated at moments by her use of the digital violin and video camera, perhaps hints at

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<sup>71</sup> Deborah Solomon, “Questions for Laurie Anderson: Post –Lunarism,” *New York Times*, January 30, 2005, <http://www.cc.gatech.edu/~jimmyd/laurie-anderson/work/interviews/2005-01-30-deborah-solomon.txt>, (accessed September 19, 2005).

<sup>72</sup> Steve Dollar, “Laurie Anderson Puts on her Flying Squirrel Suit,” *Stomp and Stammer*, April 2005, 8-9.

<sup>73</sup> Martin Patrick, “Not Walking but Falling: Laurie Anderson’s Adventures in George W. Bush’s America,” *Art Monthly*, no. 284 (March 2005): 1-4.

this ever-present yet often unseen use of technology. Anderson's use of "invisible" technology not only simply reflects current available technology, but also illustrates the embeddedness of technology and, ultimately, technology's power in our lives.

Anderson's reference to the moon in the title of this piece has multiple meanings. There is the direct reference to her experience as NASA's artist-in-residence, but the allusion goes deeper. Anderson speaks to the loss of romanticism surrounding the moon as it is quickly losing its mysterious place as a "final frontier." The military has set its sights on using the moon as a base for digital surveillance of the earth. Exploring the moon is not a romantic notion; it's a way to spread our "military arms" even further. The idea of the "man in the moon"<sup>74</sup> looking down on you becomes rather uncomfortably real. Anderson's ongoing theme of technological surveillance resonates disconcertingly.

She speaks more directly about the military use of technology that she had addressed more playfully (albeit somewhat ominously) in earlier works such as *United States*. Granted, it has also been about twenty-four years since Anderson performed *United States*, and her perspective has no doubt also been influenced by the fact that she is now nearly sixty years old. Anderson alludes to "Say Hello" and "Lighting out for the Territories," the pieces that begin and end *United States*, as she asks "Hello. Excuse me. Can you tell me where I am?" creating a link between the two works. This time these words ring out with a sense of real sadness and disorientation.

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<sup>74</sup> The "man in the moon" serves double duty here as an example of gendered discourse and, ironically, the close relationship between gender and technology as a metaphor for the use of military (i.e. patriarchal) technologies.

## Conclusion

Over the course of her career, Anderson has moved from “playing” with technology to making it the actual subject of her work. Her exploration has become increasingly reflective and wary of technology while, ironically, relying on technology to convey her ideas. With *United States* she found her “voice” and continued to follow the thread of technology’s immersion in society and vice versa. She created a hypermedia spectacle of many of her ideas and icons, some of which she had been developing in prior performances, and many of which she would continue to return to in subsequent performances. Following *United States*, Anderson produced *Home of the Brave*, which was lighter in tone than *United States* and focused more on the musical performances of Anderson and the other performers.

In contrast to her other spectacle-imbued performances, her low-tech *Speed of Darkness* tour of 1996-1998 focused more on the negative aspects of technology. Ironically, with the possible exception of her more theatrical *Songs and Stories from Moby Dick*, Anderson has continued to explore new technology and then subsequently produce works which are critical of the importance of technology in our lives. Her most recent work, *End of the Moon*, is, as she has said herself, her saddest work to date.

Anderson has shown a continued ability not only to learn and apply new technologies, but also to merge many different media into a coherent work. She has culled from all facets of media, including drawing, photography, film, television, texts, videogames, computer games, the internet, and music. Additionally, she has incorporated a variety of cultural icons as recurring images in her work, such as the telephone, airplanes, and electrical outlets. Her sophisticated crafting of hypermedia has enabled

Anderson to forge new ground within the avant-garde as well as mainstream culture. She has both borrowed from and redefined media self-consciously over the course of her career, firmly establishing herself as a post-modern artist. Anderson's ability to synchronize so many elements of popular culture with artistic, musical, and philosophical concepts has resulted in works that are complex and rich in interpretation.

### Chapter Three: Technology and Identity in Anderson's Work

For Anderson as for Haraway, there is no route back to a thoroughly organic state; accordingly, the task of the contemporary artist is to reconfigure identity as cyborg identity, to take control of and exploit all the possibilities offered by various modes and degrees of technological intervention. — Carrie Noland<sup>75</sup>

The purpose of this chapter is to look at how Laurie Anderson has used technology, particularly electronic technology, to explore identity in her performances. Craig Owens notes that it is not just Anderson's physicality, but also her use of electronics that makes it possible for her to embody her characters: "it is the technology facilitating this effect that becomes the subject of her work."<sup>76</sup> Anderson's use of technology makes it possible for her to shift her voice, to access accompanying vocals, and to interface with various bodily "accessories," such as her "headlight glasses." All of these components are vital to Anderson's construction of a cyborg persona, which is a useful metaphor for the embeddedness of gender within technology.

In her essay, "Reading Cyborgs Writing Feminism," media theorist Anne Balsamo notes the reinscription of gendered identity embodied by cyborg figures. Both male and female-gendered cyborgs reiterate gender norms although the female cyborg is more challenging as the combination of femaleness and technology remains unusual. In general, the female cyborg does not transgress gender norms as it is fashioned within the codes of male sexual desire, intended as an object for the male gaze. The cyborg body highlights notions of difference yet the gendered expectations remain the same. Essentially Balsamo critiques Donna Haraway's argument that "cyborgs stimulate the

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<sup>75</sup> Noland, "Laurie Anderson," 187.

<sup>76</sup> Owens, "Amplifications," 123.

feminist imagination by rendering ambiguous the human/machine construct.”<sup>77</sup> Balsamo does not view the cyborg figure as “ambiguous”; rather it is an image which highlights and reinscribes clear differences between gender norms. Similarly, Anderson’s cyborg persona emphasizes gender roles and the integration of those expectations within technology and discourse.

In this chapter I examine how Anderson’s use of technology intersects with her explorations of gender. Using Balsamo’s critique of Haraway as a framework, I focus my analysis primarily on two of Anderson’s earlier works in which the cyborg persona is most prominent: *United States I-IV* and *Home of the Brave*; I also considered to a lesser degree her CD-ROM, *Puppet Motel* and “What You Mean We?,” a piece from her *Collected Videos*. I have broken down my analysis into themes: the body, gender and sexuality, voice, and, finally, the violin.

### **The Body**

What I really want to say is that if instruments are props, then human bodies are too.  
— Laurie Anderson<sup>78</sup>

From her earliest performances, Anderson has explored an interest in interfacing technology with the human body. Sean Cubitt has noted of Anderson’s performances: “In each instance, visible and audible, there is a second ambiguity – one between human and machine, hinging on the possibility of reconstructing whatever has already been constructed.”<sup>79</sup> Anderson manifests her stage persona as a cyborg—blending boundaries between body and technology as well as other boundaries, such as gender. Carrie Noland

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<sup>77</sup> Balsamo, “Reading Cyborgs,” 156.

<sup>78</sup> Anderson, *Stories*, 35.

<sup>79</sup> Sean Cubitt, “Laurie Anderson: Myth, Management and Platitude,” in *Art Has No History! The Making and Unmaking of Modern Art*, ed. John Roberts (London: Verso, 1994), 281.



states: “Because Anderson conceives of the body as an apparatus, she can interface this body with other types of apparatuses in a search for the perfect machine.”<sup>80</sup> This conception of the body as apparatus allows Anderson both to interact with various electronic equipment as a “cyborg” and also, at other times, to seemingly remove the body altogether.

In Anderson’s *United States* the unifying theme is the exploration of a society immersed in and controlled by technology. Anderson pursued this theme through her physical engagement with electronic technology. At one point Anderson put battery-powered lights in her mouth, and at another she had them attached to the palms of her hands, creating the illusion of being lit from within (she also put battery-powered lights in her mouth and on her hands in *Home of the Brave*).

Also in *United States*, she wore her “audio glasses” which had a contact microphone attached to the bridge. When Anderson knocked gently on her head or clicked her teeth, the microphone picked up the vibrations and amplified them. Anderson’s body became a musical instrument during her “Drum Dance” segment in *Home of the Brave* during which she wore her drum suit, a suit threaded with sensors which activated the sounds of drums whenever Anderson pounded on them.

At the end of *United States*, during “Lighting out for the Territories,” Anderson wore her “headlight glasses” and proceeded to walk blindly out onto a diving board positioned over the orchestra pit, her arms outstretched like a sleepwalker. Anderson asks, “Hello. Excuse me, can you tell me where I am?” a refrain from the opening segment of the performance, “Say Hello”; she appears to be a human-automobile. Anderson evokes a sense of blindness and vulnerability in our relationship to technology.

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<sup>80</sup> Noland, “Laurie Anderson,” 197.

Furthermore, Anderson's metaphorical appearance as an automobile emphasizes her interest in the merging of the body with technology. Anderson has stated, "I am in my body the way most people drive in their cars," prompting Noland to note that "Anderson's car analogy suggests that the body can be conceived or experienced as a detachable part, a membrane that encloses the 'I'...but simultaneously provides the 'I' with its means of locomotion."<sup>81</sup> Anderson becomes a prop in this segment as she "embodies" the automobile.

Anderson blurs the boundaries between the body and machine as she both creates the illusion of the electronic body (i.e. the battery-powered lights) and uses equipment that depends on the interaction of the body for full effect, such as the drum suit and the audio glasses. By occupying the "role" of a machine (or human-machine), Anderson's body becomes further objectified, again emphasizing the notion of the objectified female body, again reiterating Balsamo's observation that the female cyborg upholds gendered stereotypes.

Pushing the notion of subjectivity further, Anderson has created replicants of herself: the digital clone and the digital dummy. In "What You Mean We?" first presented as part of the PBS series, *Alive from Off Center*,<sup>82</sup> Anderson uses a clone, created by digitally compressing video footage of herself. Dressed as a man, complete with a fake mustache, she also uses her "voice of authority" for the clone's voice. In the video, Anderson appears alongside the clone. The clone functions to help Anderson with her many responsibilities, to be a sort of alter-ego. Odd in appearance and not especially brilliant, at the end of the piece, the clone has himself cloned, resulting in a ridiculously

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<sup>81</sup> Noland, "Laurie Anderson," 196.

<sup>82</sup> *Laurie Anderson: Collected Videos*, produced by Laurie Anderson (Burbank, CA; New York, NY: Warner Reprise Video, 1990).

tall female figure with a tiny head and large hands. These images are humorous, and they also highlight a certain absurdity in gender construction.

The term “clone” generally refers to a copy. On the surface, Anderson’s male clone seems to imply gender mutability. However, Anderson’s use of the clone illustrates a *performance* of gender which again highlights gender difference. Anderson and the clone do seem to reverse stereotypical gender norms; for example, Anderson relaxes with the newspaper while the clone works on a new song. The female clone-of-the-clone at the end exaggerates certain stereotypically female characteristics, such as long hair and long fingernails. In this last scene, Anderson herself, the original, is not present; the two clones sit side by side, suggesting not only the constructed nature of gender, but also the performativity of subjectivity in general. Anderson, the original, is embodied in these two versions, or distorted copies, of herself, which seem to represent different aspects of Anderson rather than a complete copy.

The digital dummy, which represents a digital version of the ventriloquist’s dummy Anderson used in her *Stories from the Nerve Bible* tour, is a recurring feature of Anderson’s 1995 CD-ROM, *Puppet Motel*. Both the ventriloquist’s dummy and the digital dummy resemble Anderson. The ventriloquist’s dummy used in *Stories from the Nerve Bible* wore a suit like Anderson’s and came complete with its own tiny violin that played synthesized chords. The dummies, like the clone, enable Anderson to replicate herself, in this case creating distorted copies of herself. These “copies” allow Anderson seemingly to extend herself, rather than to embody an alter-ego such as the clone. Although Anderson does not seek to challenge gender norms with the dummies as she

attempted with the clones, they do demonstrate Anderson's interest in pushing the boundaries of the body and subjectivity.

### **Gender and Sexuality**

According to Craig Owens, Anderson has admitted that "her treatment of sexuality is deliberately ambiguous" and that she sees herself as an intermediary between ideas and objects.<sup>83</sup> Owens discusses Anderson's ambiguously gendered appearance. He argues that the common interpretation of her appearance as "androgynous" is incorrect as androgyny involves the embodiment of "physical attributes of both sexes." Owens describes Anderson's appearance as an act of transvestism since she has worn male-gendered clothing but has not physically changed or augmented her biological sex. He asserts that "In the transvestite, the signs of both sexes exist side by side, but they do not mix. The transvestite, then, is situated in between (either/or; oscillation); the androgyne, on both sides at once (both/and; communication)."<sup>84</sup> I agree with Owens; Anderson's transvestism is evident not only in her clothing, but also in her use of vocal changes, or "vocal drag." Transvestism provides a critical component in Anderson's work as it allows her to accentuate gender differences whereas androgyny would create blurred boundaries therefore masking the gender role distinctions she seeks to demonstrate. Her transvestism stresses the connections between maleness and power; the men's suit and the lowered voice are both signifiers of maleness and, subsequently, patriarchy.

In the opening sequence of *Home of the Brave*, Anderson's 1986 feature length film, Anderson and the other performers wore strange, stylized masks which were inspired by the costume designs of Oskar Schlemmer, the Bauhaus artist and designer (as

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<sup>83</sup> Owens, "Sex and Language," 50.

<sup>84</sup> Owens, "Sex and Language," 50-51.

I described in Chapter One).<sup>85</sup> Noland refers to Anderson's masked character as a "genderless robot."<sup>86</sup> I disagree; the character is coded as male through signifiers such as the white suit and tie Anderson wears as well as her lowered voice, her "voice of authority." Furthermore, this character is inscribed on a female-gendered body. If one considers "that only the feminine is marked" as gender, with the masculine gender operating as the "universal person,"<sup>87</sup> perhaps by reading this character as male it could ultimately be interpreted as genderless. However, this is complicated by the fact that Anderson, a female, is portraying this character, thereby performing the *idea* of maleness or genderlessness through costume and voice, ultimately reminding the viewer that she is a woman dressed in drag and not quite so genderless after all.

By wearing the suit and changing her voice, the end result is really an emphasis on difference rather than a merging. It is interesting to me that Anderson found it necessary and useful to dress as a man. There seems to be this notion that male appearance is somehow less distracting because part of the reason Anderson chose the black suit (in earlier works such as *United States*) was to submerge her own identity and presence to remove the focus from herself as an individual. The "invisibility" factor of the men's suit perhaps alludes again to the embeddedness of patriarchy. By wearing a men's suit, Anderson takes on the signifier of male authority, representing patriarchy. This is perhaps particularly true of the black suit, which also fades into the darkness of the stage set. The white suit, such as the one Anderson wears in *Home of the Brave*, is obvious and flashy by contrast. Anderson has noted that she was asked to wear a brighter

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<sup>85</sup> Schlemmer was very interested in creating robotic, mechanical-looking characters, which relates to Anderson's interest in technology and the notion of technology in our lives, as a part of us.

<sup>86</sup> Noland, "Laurie Anderson," 204.

<sup>87</sup> Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 13.

colored suit so she would be more visible to the stage crew. Beyond this practical purpose, perhaps the white suit could represent a more didactic side of patriarchy, rather than the more imperceptible aspect. There is also the added dimension of a specifically *white* male patriarchy given the color of the suit. This difference, this “adding-on” enabled through drag, still fits with the cyborg notion; she is able to adapt and augment herself. However, in the end her changes in appearance do not result in a gender transgression but rather an appropriation of patriarchal power.

### **Voice**

In performances, I loved to use the lowest setting on the Harmonizer, a digital processor that lowered my voice, to sound like a man. This was especially effective in Germany. When I spoke as a woman, they listened indulgently; but when I spoke as a man, and especially a bossy man, they listened with interest and respect. — Laurie Anderson<sup>88</sup>

A critical moment in Anderson’s career occurred in 1978 when she participated in the Nova Convention at the Entermedia Theater in the East Village. This was a “two day festival of performances, readings, film screenings, and a panel discussion in celebration of the author William Burroughs.” Several of the other performers, including Burroughs, John Cage, and John Giorno, were important influences on Anderson. This experience was significant for Anderson because it was both the first time her “work had become known to this broad cross-section of artists, writers, and musicians” and the first time she used the vocal Harmonizer to lower the octave of her voice, an element that would become a key aspect of her performance pieces.<sup>89</sup>

Interestingly, although Anderson often uses electronic technology in her performances, she considers it to be the “least important thing” about her work. She

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<sup>88</sup> Anderson, *Stories*, 131.

<sup>89</sup> Goldberg, *Laurie Anderson*, 58.

observes that storytellers have always used different voices, and she views her use of technology simply as a tool. Sensitivity to voice influences Anderson's vocal multiplicity. She notes that we all have a wide range of voices, depending on the situation. For example, she observes that everyone has "their confessional voice, their telephone voice, and their most intimate voice talking to their dearest loved ones, to name just a few."<sup>90</sup> Although language is Anderson's essential medium, she considers tone of voice as well as visual context to be instrumental in establishing the meaning of her stories.<sup>91</sup>

Anderson has often served as a sort of "hub" between narratives. She moves easily between vocal changes, seeming to host a variety of characters, as well as operating a variety of musical instruments, many of them augmented in some way (e.g., her many violins). The "voice of authority" is one of Anderson's significant "voices." Achieved by lowering her voice an octave through an electronic instrument called the Harmonizer, Anderson's voice is filtered to sound like a man's voice. At other times, Anderson has manipulated her voice to sound robotic. She has achieved this by using a Vocoder ("voice coder") which processes the voice to sound robotic. For example, in her most famous piece, "O Superman," Anderson uses the Vocoder to sound mechanical, to emulate a living machine.

Anderson's use of the "voice of authority" and the robotic voice functions as a sort of vocal drag, which highlights the associations between gender, power, and voice. As Anderson pointed out with her comment about using a man's voice in Germany, the male voice is accorded respect and power, whereas the female voice is not. While

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<sup>90</sup> Anderson quoted in Zurbrugg, "Laurie Anderson," 27.

<sup>91</sup> Zurbrugg, "Laurie Anderson," 32.

Anderson's use of these vocal manipulations does draw awareness to these associations, at the same time she also reinscribes these expectations by enacting them in her performances.

### **The Violin**

For me, the violin is the perfect alter ego. It's the instrument closest to the human voice, the human female voice. It's a siren. — Laurie Anderson<sup>92</sup>

Although Anderson formally trained as a visual artist, she incorporates music into her performances and is often recognized as a musician. Trained as a classical violinist as a child, the violin has continued to play an important role in Anderson's performances; she has gained recognition for her unique use of the violin and electronic music. Since music and digital code are both languages, it seems fitting that Anderson would be interested in combining and exploring the two, given her penchant for language. Digital processing allows her to manipulate language and sound in a much more sophisticated manner.

The violin has been a constant companion and a continuous site of innovation for Anderson over the years. Her experimentation has its roots in works by avant-garde artists such as John Cage, Nam June Paik, and Charlotte Moorman. Anderson has used several different kinds of violins throughout her career. An early example is the "Viophonograph," which was a violin augmented with a record turntable. A needle was inserted into the bow, and each band on the record contained one note; the pre-recorded tune played when Anderson applied her bow,<sup>93</sup> effectively complicating the idea of "live" music. Anderson's "tape-bow" violin was one of her most significant versions.

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<sup>92</sup> Goldberg, *Laurie Anderson*, 77.

<sup>93</sup> Goldberg, *Laurie Anderson*, 77.



Developed with help from engineer Bob Bielecki, this violin incorporated pre-recorded cassette tape on the bow, which was then played by running it across the tapehead attached to the violin. This allowed Anderson to conflate the appearance and expected sound of the violin with unexpected sounds, such as the cowboy songs from *Duets on Ice*. Anderson's neon violin, used in *United States*, produced a buzzing glow due to the neon tube placed inside. The digital violin, also created with Bob Bielecki, allows Anderson to access sounds stored digitally in the computer. For example, in *End of the Moon* when Anderson runs her bow across the violin, a haunting, polyphonic chord emerges, punctuating her stories.

For Anderson, the violin operates like a prop as much as it does a musical instrument. It allows her to punctuate and embellish ideas as well as serve as the focal point of a piece; it gives her another voice, an "alter-ego" as she says. This "embellishment" operates much differently than the covert nature of Anderson's male drag. In this case, the violin stands out, drawing attention to femaleness. The violin is much like the dummy — it serves as an extension of Anderson. For Anderson the violin the violin is a stand-in for the female body, in this case, specifically Anderson's body.

The notion of the violin as similar to the "human female voice," particularly that of a "siren," alludes to a sense of power and even danger inherent in the violin, and subsequently, the female voice. By interpreting the sound of the violin as the embodiment of the female voice, the violin can then be conceptualized as female, and thus as another point of gender analysis in Anderson's work. However, the mythical sirens led men to their deaths; they were powerful, deceptive, and deadly. By associating the violin with the sirens, the power of the female voice, and, therefore, the female, is

relegated to darkness and evil intentions— the “femme fatale”—the stereotypical strong female as dangerous and deceitful.

Anderson’s violin draws together four of the most important aspects of her work: technology, the body, voice, and gender. This synthesis between these components situates the violin as a metaphor of the cyborg, specifically the female cyborg. By considering the violin as more than simply part of Anderson’s image as a post-modern bard-storyteller, it becomes a symbolic echo, a reminder, a reiteration of Anderson’s cyborg persona and, therefore, further illuminates the cultural entanglement of gender within technology and discourse.

### **Conclusion**

Throughout her career, Anderson has played the role of the technologically enhanced storyteller, a postmodern cyborg-sage, who has made the fine line between the entertaining, spectacular elements of technology and its dangers the subject of her work. This persona has served as a useful nexus, allowing her to move fluidly between roles and stories, as she presents herself as a human-machine hybrid, the ultimate metaphor for her work. The contradictions inherent in her persona have presented an intriguing opportunity to question notions of subjectivity, both more generally in terms of our collective relationship to technology, and, more specifically, the intersections between technology and gender.

On a collective level, her works illustrate our dependence on technology, such as the Internet or the telephone. Anderson’s performances show the darker side of technology and society as well, for example in *End of the Moon* when she describes the military’s intentions for using the moon as a base for spying. We are all implicated in our

reliance on technology yet the centers of power are not always apparent; we are caught in the matrix, so to speak.

Beyond showing our collective relationship to technology, Anderson draws more direct connections between gender and technology. The not always obvious yet ubiquitous power of patriarchy is the authority that Anderson references with her men's suits and vocal drag. The transvestite aspect of her cyborg persona couples a highlighting of gender difference with human-machine hybridity; Anderson underscores the intertwined relationship between humanity, technology, and gender.

Aside from emphasizing the intersections between subjectivity and technology, Anderson's works elucidate the cultural embeddedness of gender in discourse as well. For example, Anderson's reference to her violin as the voice of a siren at first seems like a poetic metaphor. Further unpacking of this comparison, however, reveals that it is coded with far more gendered meaning than Anderson may have intended.

Both our collective and our personal experiences with technology and language are informed by a firmly rooted system of gender norms. Anderson's work, at times playful and other times serious, uses imagery, music, and narration to explore these relationships through an ironic use of technology. Her combination of low tech methods with high tech equipment creates a synthesis between human and machine, both literally in terms of her cyborg persona and figuratively in terms of her sophisticated use of language coupled with electronics.

## Conclusion

Laurie Anderson began her artistic career as an art historian and sculptor and then moved on to experimenting with technology in early performances such as *Duets on Ice* and *Songs and Stories for the Insomniac*. Anderson's work since the 1970s demonstrates how she has become more immersed in using technology as a medium. She began to explore it as a theme, particularly in terms of the United States and other technological societies. Her groundbreaking performance, *United States I-IV*, which developed from *Americans on the Move*, was Anderson's "talking opera," composed of dazzling multi-media along with songs and narratives woven from her ideas and observations of popular American culture, specifically in regards to our relationship with technology. Technology has remained a primary theme in her work along with gender.

As an artist and musician who has traveled both the avant-garde and the mainstream circuits, Laurie Anderson's position as a performer is founded in hybridity. This hybrid existence has translated into the use of a cyborg persona in many of her performances, allowing her to act as a physical transfer point for ideas, stories, and technologies. Anderson has used her cyborg persona to engage a variety of media in her work. This engagement has resulted in a series of performances that can be considered as an ongoing hypertext, with ideas and icons creating links within and between her works. Anderson's continuous remediation of technologies reinforces the hypermediated quality in her work.

Anderson's deployment of a cyborg persona has provided a unique site for examining gendered subjectivity. While Anderson has drawn attention to gender difference, she has, in fact, continued to reiterate gender norms. As I have shown in this

thesis, although Anderson works with technology, which is stereotypically considered a male domain, and has been quite innovative in electronic music as well as visual art, her use of a supposedly genderless cyborg persona has ultimately reinscribed gender norms.

By wearing a man's suit and using voice filters to sound male, Anderson reinforces the patriarchal notion that men are the center of authority; she does not actually challenge the idea. For example, as she noted about her German performances, she was taken more seriously by her audience, particularly men, when she spoke with her electronically lowered voice. However, she does succeed in drawing awareness to the embeddedness of gender in society and technology, which is itself a critical result of her work. Even works which are not so much about gender, such as *End of the Moon*, still convey the message of technology's "hidden" power in our lives. In this work, Anderson used little spectacle, yet it is the most technologically advanced performance she has produced to date. Anderson's strategic use of gender in her performances demonstrates the strength and complexity of binary gender norms in shaping society.

Anderson metaphorically refers to our ability to augment our bodies through technology, yet fundamentally still maintain the same subject position, by using technology to alter her voice and appearance. Gender and sex are mutable categories as Anderson also illustrates with her digital dummy and clones, yet the gender norms we attach to those categories remain fixed and much more difficult to dislocate. The position of the gendered cyborg may indeed harness a multiplicity of identities, but it is unable to disrupt the normalized expectations for specifically gendered subject positions. Anderson's exploration of a cyborg identity is helpful in elucidating the complexities of gendered subjectivity as well as the stronghold that cultural ideas of gender maintain.

It seems that there are indeed limits to gender performativity. Gender is performed within the confines of gender norms. To go outside of those boundaries would mean moving beyond gender, transgressing the notion of gender norms. However, if one transgresses those boundaries, the transgression still occurs in relation to them and, hence, in relation to gender norms, as Judith Butler has pointed out in *Undoing Gender*. Even if one is androgynous or a transvestite, those categories are still based upon ideas of what it means to be a “normal” woman or man. As in Anderson’s cyborg persona— she only assumes the clothing and vocal characteristics of a man: she is in drag. But to be in drag, a transvestite, is still to be in relation to gender norms.

Anderson’s use of the dark suit in works such as *United States* illustrates the seemingly “invisible” power of patriarchy and at the same time reminds us of the distinctions, both in dress and authority, characterized by gender norms because we are aware that she is a woman dressed as a man. The invisible power evoked through the dark suit is contrasted by Anderson’s violin “embellishments.” Anderson describes the violin as the embodiment of a siren, which not only references the notion of a powerful female as a femme-fatale, but also alludes to a casting of the feminine as frivolous or applied as opposed to the embeddedness of patriarchal power.

Since gender performativity is the performance of some aspect of, or opposition to, gender norms, then it seems that it is not truly possible to break traditional gender norms. While one may challenge the norm in general, again, such a transgression would only be a transgression if it were in contrast to those norms, and so it is not possible to dismantle them. As Anderson points out in *Home of the Brave* when she describes the zeroes and ones of binary code, a very likely metaphor for gender, both are important yet

one is culturally valued more than the other. Furthermore, you are either one or the other or somewhere in relation to the two; you are still caught in the system.

Analyzing Anderson's work and considering her deployment of a cyborg persona through the lens of Anne Balsamo's critique of the female-gendered cyborg demonstrates the deep entrenchment of gender norms within technology and society. My final concern when considering the significance of my project was whether or not gender norms must constantly be reinscribed onto new technologies. Given that new technologies are built upon existing technologies, then, yes, it seems that gender norms will continue to be reinscribed. As previous technologies and ideas about them are already framed around societal notions of gender norms, it seems that emerging technologies which are mapped onto them (e.g. the binary code) will also continue to reiterate such expectations. However, perhaps as artists such as Anderson and others continue to explore technology and gender in their work they will find ways to challenge gender norms more effectively.

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