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## Laurie Anderson: The Weather

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## Laurie Anderson: The Weather

Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden | Washington, DC

September 24, 2021–August 2, 2022

For decades, Laurie Anderson has been a kind of storytelling polymath. At the forefront of “new media”—but ever mindful of the words above, told to her once by a cryptologist—her work defies

categorization and blends image, sound, and language. She has been nominated for multiple Grammys (winning one) for her work in the recording studio, charted new waters in the melding of electronic media and live performance on

*If you think technology will solve your problems, you don't understand technology and you don't understand your problems.*  
—Laurie Anderson<sup>1</sup>

**Figure 1.** Laurie Anderson, *Four Talks*, 2021. Installation view from *Laurie Anderson: The Weather* at the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC, September 24, 2021–August 2, 2022, courtesy of the artist. Photograph: Ron Blunt.



some of the world's grandest stages, broadcast innovative music videos, hung paintings in major museums, and even held the prestigious Charles Eliot Norton Professorship in Poetry at Harvard University—where she delivered, hands-down, the best Zoom lectures this writer ever attended. If one constant rings through her practice, it is that she has a way with words.

*The Weather*, her recent career-spanning survey at the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, took viewers through decades of Anderson's wide-ranging creative voice, completely encompassing a floor of the museum's windowless, cylindrical space. Curated by Marina Isgro and Mark Beasley, the exhibition hinged on a new site-specific installation of sprawling text and drawings the artist created in the summer of 2021. Accompanied by ambient sounds and four sculptures, *Four Talks* featured walls and a floor that mimicked a slate-painted room in Anderson's studio where she would draw "diagrams, stage plots, grocery lists, and song ideas," erasing them with a sock (fig. 1).<sup>2</sup> Bunched in places but winding and turning in others, Anderson's hand-written text moved viewers through the gallery in strange and unpredictable ways, almost as if they were falling and tripping over stories, quotes, and ruminations. Text and image switched from humorous musings over geopolitics—a battle over "who owns the moon?" or "some say empire is passing as all empires do...(others haven't a clue)"—to first person story-telling ("I dreamed I had to take a test in a Dairy Queen on another planet") and pithy quotes from famous figures (e.g.,

"Less like an object and more like the weather," by John Cage; "Civilization began when the first angry person cast a word instead of a rock," from Sigmund Freud).

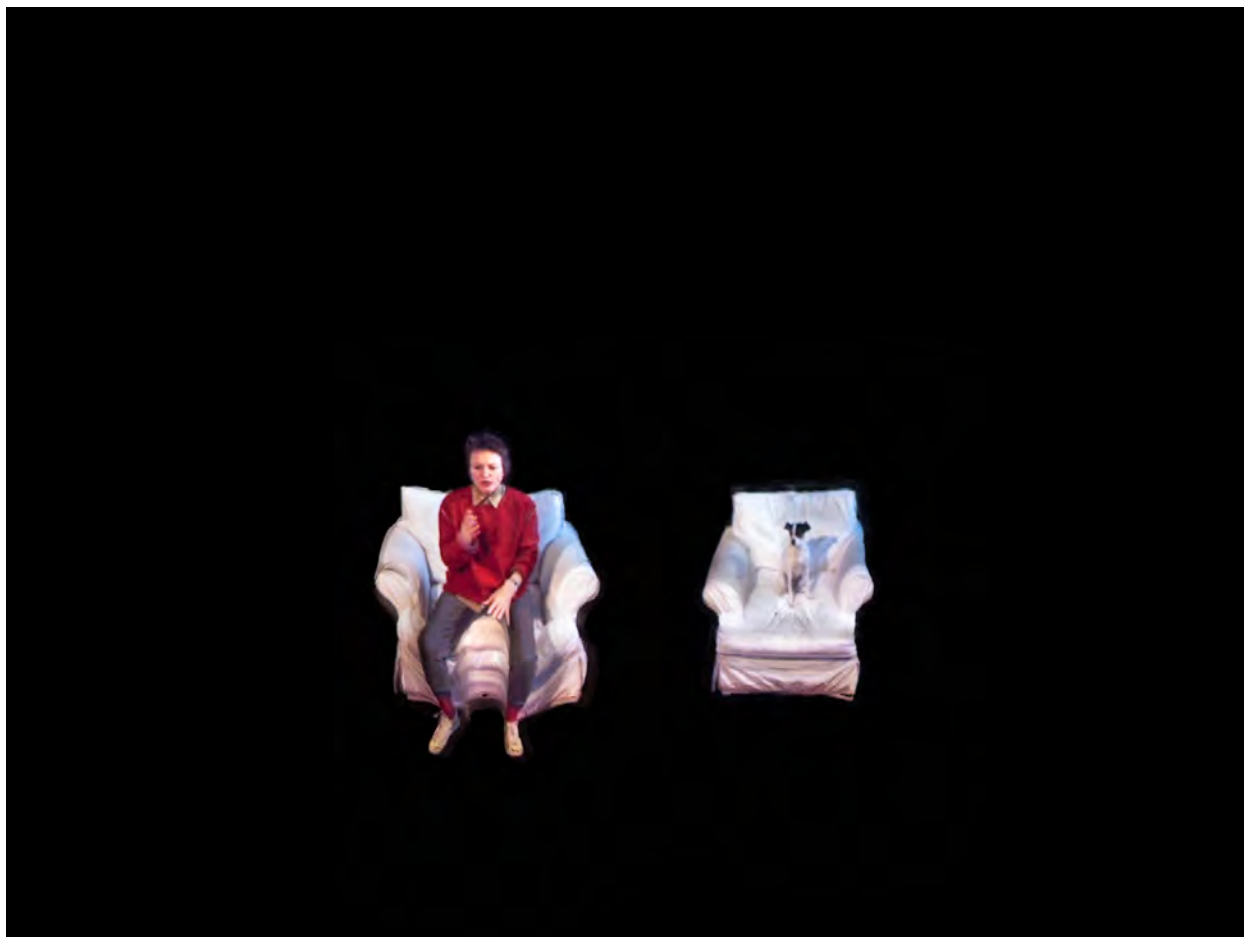
When paired with the disorienting soundscape of gongs, thunder, inaudible vocalizations, musical instrumentation, crickets, passing trains, and the computerized voice of the large parrot sculpture *My Day Beats Your Year (The Parrot)* (2010/2021), the effect was like moving through a collective unconscious. As the narrative switched from interior monologue to external observations and shared memory, it also pointed to sculptures within the room. The story of the raven, the first animal sent out after the flood (who never returned), surrounded the massive sculpture *The Witness Protection Program (The Raven)* (2020). Just below *What Time Can Do (Shaking Shelf)* (2021), a narrative began with "Hope was a tchotchke sitting on a high shelf along with other fragile things."

Seemingly random narrative details that read like so many asides, stories, observations, and declarations coalesced into a single, distinctive visual, sonic, and spatial experience—an effect Anderson also achieved in her pioneering and genre-bending work in music and on the stage. The Hirshhorn documented this history in recording and live performance—for which she is most widely known—in more historical galleries through video, photographs, posters, and some of her modified instruments, developed through experimentation and collaboration. These objects enriched but did not overtake the experience of visual artworks throughout the

show, which focused primarily on celebrating Anderson's studio practice. Broadcasting staccato beats throughout the adjacent gallery spaces, video documentation of *Drum Dance*, from her 1986 performance *Home of the Brave*, featured closeups of Anderson hitting her body to set off a wearable drum machine. Projected upon a black wall, Anderson appeared spectral, emerging from the ether much like her white drawings and text in *Four Talks*.

Theatrical lighting in darkened galleries similarly heightened the effect of Anderson's many video installation works, including *Habeas Corpus* (2015), a thirteen-foot foam sculpture of a seated figure hosting the projection of Mohammed el Gharani, one of the youngest detainees at Guantanamo Bay; and *Citizens* (2021), a row of nineteen tiny video portraits (including one of Anderson) staring into the camera as they sharpen a knife, each projected onto a small clay figurine—a monumental testimony and a lilliputian army preparing for battle. In another play of scale, Anderson and her dog appeared projected onto small figurines set in a corner in *From the Air* (2009) (fig. 2). Though the title comes from a song from her visionary album *Big Science* (1982), Anderson's tiny avatar spoke of anxiety about the unknown in parallel anecdotes, of her dog being terrorized by turkey vultures in the mountains and her downtown neighbors' trauma in the aftermath of 9/11.

Much of Anderson's recent installation work explores the anxieties of the twenty-first century's tense political climate. *Salute* (2021), a darkened hall filled



with ominous music of distorted anthems and clanging sounds, featured rows of eight red flags that performed a perverse animatronic dance as viewers walked down the central aisle, slightly curved from the Hirshhorn's round form. On the gallery wall, the lyrics of Anderson's major studio hit from thirty years prior, "O Superman," took on new meaning:

When love is gone,  
 There's always justice  
 And when justice is gone,  
 There's always force  
 And when force is gone,  
 There's always Mom.

So hold me, Mom,  
 In your long arms  
 In your electronic arms  
 Your military arms  
 In your arms  
 Your petrochemical arms  
 Your electronic arms.<sup>3</sup>

Elsewhere, her words were more emotional and biographical, as in the wall text that accompanied her silent short video *The Lake* (2015) that tells the story of when Anderson's twin brothers almost drowned as she attempted to take their stroller over a frozen lake to look at the moon. "I remember the

**Figure 2.** Laurie Anderson, *From the Air*, 2009 (clay fabrication by Maria Dusamp). Installation view from *Laurie Anderson: The Weather* at the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC, September 24, 2021–August 2, 2022, courtesy of the artist. Photograph: by Ron Blunt.

knitted balls on their hats as they disappeared under the black water.... I ran in the door and told my mother what had happened and she stood there and said, 'what a wonderful swimmer you are. And I didn't know you were such a good diver.'" In "A Story about a Story," (fig. 3) printed on the opposite wall in the same gallery, Anderson recalled a childhood back injury and a prolonged hospital stay, a story

she told many times the same way until, one day, the trauma and fear of the event actually resurfaced. “And that’s what I think is the creepiest thing about stories.... You try to get to the point you’re making, usually about yourself or something you learned. You get your story and you hold onto it, and every time you tell it you forget it more.”

Appearing directly on the gallery walls, these stories denied the authorial voice of the curator and prompted a very different kind of reading by the viewer. They furthermore complicated the conceptual works appearing in the same space that appropriated text or disturbed the relationship between text and image. *Scroll* (2021), Anderson’s collaboration with the Art Intelligence Agency and the Australian Institute for Machine Learning, uses a neural network to generate text mimicking the Bible or

Anderson’s own voice—a prescient project as we grapple with the ramifications of ChatGPT two years later. A series of woven newspapers and crosswords, taken from different parts of the globe and produced in 2020, together with the video projection *Sidewalk* (2012), projected upon a pile of shredded pages from *Crime and Punishment*, explore the tension between the material of the page and narrative meaning. Some of Anderson’s more conceptual early works in photography were also included here. *Object/Objection/Objectivity (Fully Automated Nikon)* (1973/2003) features street photographs of men, eyes barred out for anonymity, with typewritten captions of the catcalls directed at the woman behind the camera. In *Institutional Dream Series* (1972-73), the artist slept in public places around New York City. Along with each picture of her sleeping are

descriptions of her attempts to nod off and the dreams she had when she did.

Eight of Anderson’s newer paintings hung in one of the only brightly lit spaces of this sprawling exhibition. All completed in 2021, they take on the scale of Neo-Expressionism, employing some of the same expressive contour lines as the immersive wall and floor drawings, but in earthy reds and browns. Their mood seemed ominous and angry, perhaps echoing the COVID years of their creation. Paired with titles like *Guantánamo*, *The Beach*, and *And I Too*, they also engage language and narrative in

**Figure 3.** Laurie Anderson, *Sidewalk*, 2012. Installation view from *Laurie Anderson: The Weather* at the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC, September 24, 2021–August 2, 2022, courtesy of the artist. Photograph: Ron Blunt.





provocative and somewhat cryptic ways. Their formalism and this gallery's silence almost felt out of tune with the rest of the exhibition but, in a show that celebrates half a century of Anderson's expansive creative mind, they made sense. They flex that muscle of size and expanse in oil on canvas that has defined so much of the history of the American avant-garde yet maintain a consistent voice, where Anderson marches to the beat of her own drum.

In the exhibition's final gallery, historical artifacts and posters of Anderson's many performances surrounded *The Handphone Table*

(1978, recreated 2017) (fig. 4). Viewers were invited to sit in a chair and cover their ears, resting elbows on the table. A series of electronic sounds suddenly became perceptible through the vibrations of bones and head, something seen by others but experienced alone and in the body. This tension between public and private address, and the activation of the body through electronic manipulation, ran through the museum's spaces and Anderson's long practice, and rang in many viewers' ears long after the show's closing days.

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**Figure 4.** Laurie Anderson, *The Handphone Table*, 1978/recreated 2017. Installation view from *Laurie Anderson: The Weather* at the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC, September 24, 2021–August 2, 2022, Collection of the Exploratorium, San Francisco, courtesy of the artist. Photograph: Ron Blunt.

### Endnote

1. Quotation featured in site-specific wall painting and mentioned by Anderson in a 2022 interview on *60 Minutes*.
2. Laurie Anderson, *Snaux* (Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, 2022), i.
3. Laurie Anderson, "O Superman," *Big Science*, Warner Bros., 1982.