



LAURIE ANDERSON

MASS MoCA

In 1980, I quoted William S. Burroughs in the song "Language is a Virus (from Outer Space)." The idea of language as a virus fascinated me, since virus is also a language and acts in similar ways.

Language and virus share many basic traits and qualities: mimicry, contagion, infection, repetition, and deception. They both work through techniques like grafting. They both tweak basic meaning.

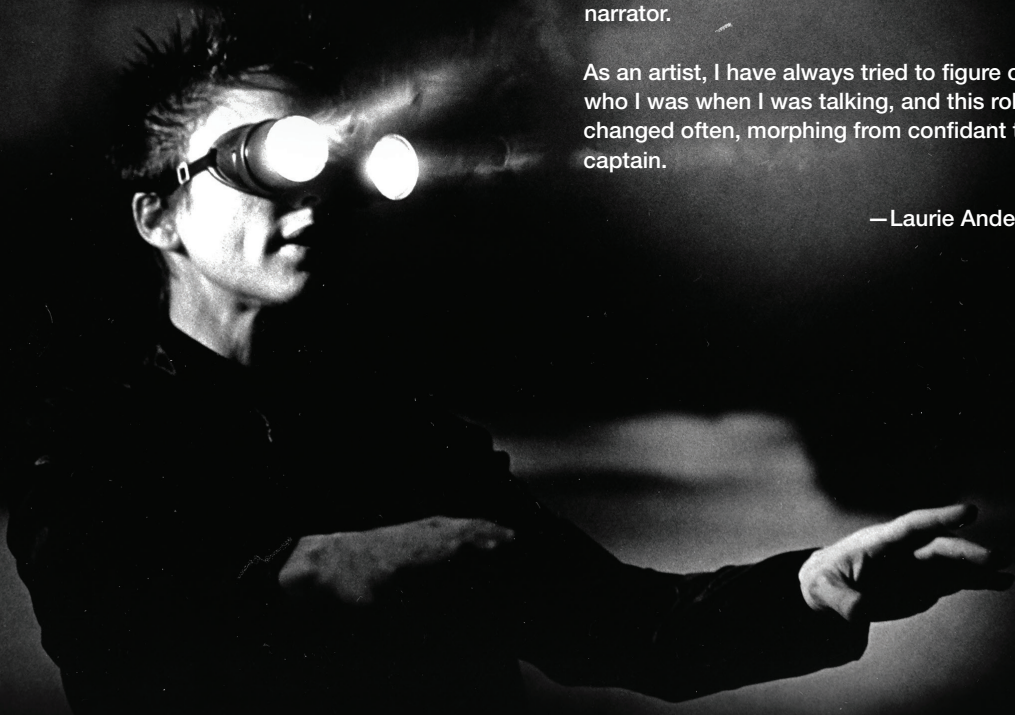
Both virus and language act like they're alive but are not. A virus is lifeless, has no cell structure, and has been called one of the organisms on the edge of life. Technically it is an agent. Like language, it can wedge its way into the codes, into the DNA, and change the basic meaning.

In the digital world, stories can go viral and spread at warp speed. Malware can rip through your files like a virulent disease and leave information in shreds. Words can be mashed, infected; your data can be collected, collated, misrepresented, and erased. Your online identity can be hacked and ground into spam.

Online, you often no longer know who's talking. Anonymity can facilitate venomous language. It can promote shaming and baiting. It can also shield and radiate. It's a big stage, a grand new language platform where people can be invisible while they vent, rant, or make impassioned speeches. On social media, stories spread almost instantly to massive numbers of people, and this is changing the basic nature of stories – how they're told, as well as the identity of the narrator.

As an artist, I have always tried to figure out who I was when I was talking, and this role changed often, morphing from confidant to captain.

—Laurie Anderson



LANGUAGE OF THE FUTURE²

For Laurie Anderson language is the most primordial element, a living, breathing thing, an entity that transmutes into story, music, sculpture, drawing, and even virtual reality. Language is a disease, but it is one we want to catch, one that heightens us to the foibles of humanity, in history and today, while at the same time it always has one eye trained on the future. For more than four decades Anderson has used language as a precision tool, her most fluid instrument, whispering stories into our ears, embodying us with her living, pulsing words.

In 1974, two years after graduating from Columbia University with her MFA, Anderson developed her first multimedia performance: *As:If*. Having studied the violin since age five, she set out to transform this traditional instrument. She says, "For me, the violin is the perfect alter ego. It's the instrument closest to the human voice, the human female voice... I've spent a lot of time trying to teach the violin to talk."³ In *As:If*, Anderson sat in a gallery wearing all white with ice skates embedded in frozen blocks of water, she played music, and she told stories about her midwestern upbringing, her Baptist grandmother, language, and the fickle nature of memory. This was the first time she put a small speaker directly into her mouth to alter her voice (a tactic she continues to use through vocal modulators). A year later Anderson performed *Duets on Ice* on the streets of Genoa, Italy. Again in all white with skates embedded in ice, she stood on the street and played a duet with her own violin, while telling stories to passersby. The performance ended when the ice melted. This duet was made possible through the invention

of a self-playing violin. Anderson fit the inside of the instrument with a playback device so that it could play while she moved the bow across the violin, allowing her to layer sound, story, and performance.

These early performances and instrument modifications form the backbone of Anderson's work even today. A habitual innovator, she has created books, albums, and performances that incorporate film, slides, recorded audio, live music, and spoken word. She was pioneering in her development of the *Tape-Bow Violin* (1974), a violin in which she replaced a traditional bow with magnetic audiotape, and fit the bridge of the instrument with a tape head for playback; the *Viophonograph* (1976), a battery-powered turntable set into a violin with a bow containing a needle; a digital violin (1985), a neon violin and bow (1982, 1985), and *The Handphone Table* (1978), which transforms the human body into a listening device. *The Handphone Table* began when Anderson was using an electric typewriter, and, in a moment of frustration, put her head in her hands, elbows on the table. She then heard the sound of humming transferred through the wooden table, up through her arms, into her ears. Frustration quickly turned into an "aha!" moment as Anderson realized she could use bone conduction to tell intimate stories and play songs inside one's body. Anderson says, "I wanted to make songs that were more like remembering than listening. So it would seem like you'd heard them somewhere before. And in the end, the same physical gesture—the head in the hands—was used in its invention as well as its reception."⁴



From the Air, 2008
Clay figure and video projection with sound. Photo by Will Brown.

As with the *Tape-Bow*, Anderson uses many of these innovations in her multimedia performances. In 1983 she premiered the eight-hour work *United States* at the Brooklyn Academy of Music. Divided into four parts—transportation, politics, money, and love—the work was a collective portrait of a country. Illuminated on stage by slides and projected films, Anderson told shifting stories illustrating the intertwined politics, power, and humanity of this country, painting an almost impossible picture of an impossibly complex place. Some vignettes were deadpan, such as the story of American farmers selling their silos to the federal government for the storage of nuclear missile heads, while others spoke directly to us, such as “O Superman” (1980),⁵ in which Anderson sings,

“Hello? Is anybody home? Well, you don’t know me, but I know you. And I’ve got a message to give to you. Here come the planes. So you better get ready. Ready to go. You can come as you are, but pay as you go. Pay as you go.” Here, Anderson encapsulates the isolation of Reagan-era politics while providing an eerie precursor to the Bush years, and even today’s fraught political system—making her a kind of diviner of the future.

Anderson continues to create ambitious performances such as *Songs and Stories from Moby Dick* (1999), a postmodern opera about authority, madness, and meaning of life; or *Delusion* (2010), which explores “the stories we tell ourselves about ourselves, our families, our country, and the world, and the porous

border between history and myth.”⁶ Across all of these performances and her numerous albums, Anderson continuously experiments with new media. For example, *Moby Dick* premiered the *Talking Stick*, a six-foot baton with a MIDI controller allowing her to access any recorded sound; or vocal filters, such as those that deepen her voice to a masculine register. All of these devices allow Anderson to shift the narrator of her works so that “Laurie Anderson the person” is not necessarily the only storyteller in the room, even when she is the only one on stage.

By refocusing voice, language, and narrative, Anderson reminds us that the stories we tell are beleaguered by the failings of memory and the effects of time. Since her days in art school—when she made sculptures from newspapers—stories, words, and the dissemination of language have always been her endgame. With her installations, Anderson has the power to use herself as a storyteller, to implicate her audience, or collaborate with remote participants. At *the Shrink’s* (1975), Anderson’s first foray into creating fake holograms, shifted her presence from in person to projected. The technique involved making a plaster sculpture of a miniaturized Anderson sitting in a chair, onto which she projected an image of herself telling a story about visiting the psychiatrist. The story involves an absurd moment resulting in the end of her therapy via the realization that people don’t often see the world in the same way. In 2008, she created *From the Air* (2008) using the same technique. This installation consists of two small sculptures of chairs, one occupied by Anderson and the other by her dog, Lolabelle (the subject of her 2015 film *Heart of a Dog*). The story in *From the Air* parallels Anderson’s experience of the terrorist attacks in New York on 9/11 with an

experience she had while walking Lolabelle in California. On the latter occasion, a group of turkey vultures threatened to snatch the small dog. Anderson confides that both the actual and potential attacks caused her to look up and be more palpably aware of the sky above. She states: “They can come from the air. I mean I never thought of that. A whole hundred and eighty more degrees I’m now responsible for!” With both of these works, the magic is not in the technology but in Anderson’s presence. For, as the videos cover their three-dimensional surfaces, and we as viewers—no, witnesses—sit down with them, an intimacy is achieved, making you feel like you are in the room with her, and she is telling her stories to you alone.

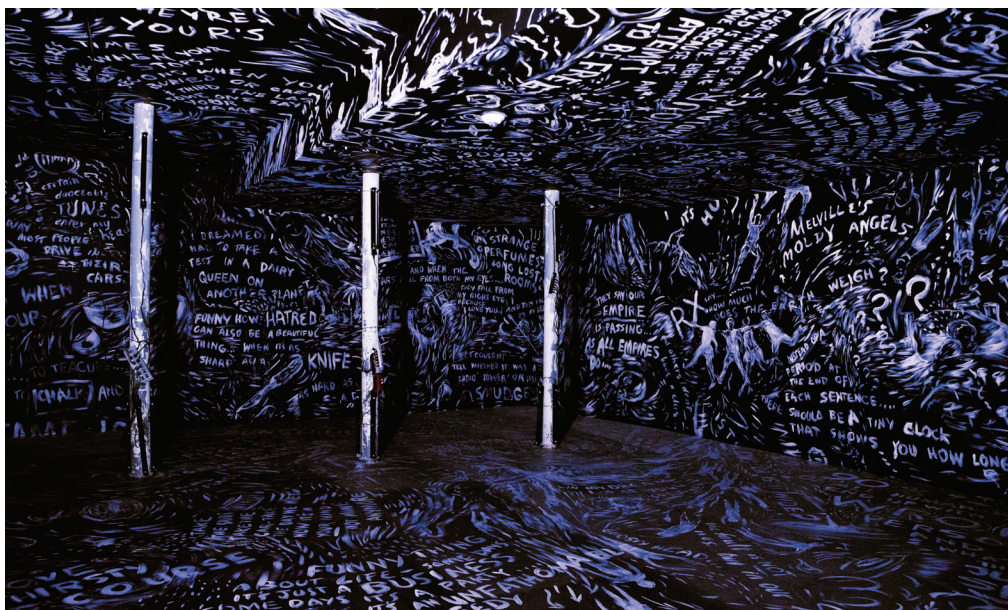
Anderson would go on to use this technique in *Dal Vivo* (1998). But, instead of using herself as the subject, she became interested in telepresence—or what she calls “the theater of the real time.” She was not interested in



Anderson performing *Duets on Ice*, 1975, with bystanders at Porta di S. Andrea, Genoa, Italy. Photo by Paolo Rocci.

just any presence, however; instead she wanted to create a work that would grant someone without freedom—an inmate at a nearby prison—the potential of escape, affirming the title of the work, as “dal vivo” in Italian means “from life.” Nearly twenty years later, Anderson would collaborate with Mohammed El Gharani, a former detainee of Guantanamo Bay detention camp, for *Habeas Corpus* (2015). At the Park Avenue Armory in New York, the former drill hall contained a large sculpture of a chair—three times life-size—close in scale to the Lincoln Memorial, and a mirror-ball producing a flickering constellation of light. On the large chair was a live-feed video of El Gharani projected from a purpose-built studio in West Africa. Though he cannot enter the United States, Anderson gives El Gharani the opportunity to tell his story, to speak to us, and to receive messages in return.

Furthering these experiments in remote embodiment, Anderson’s most recent investigations involve virtual reality (VR).⁷ Unlike most experiments in VR that are situated within gaming, Anderson endeavors to bring us into her world, to use this augmented state to tell stories interactively in a state of total immersion. The first of two VR works at MASS MoCA references a plane crash that Anderson survived in the 1970s. She has told this story through songs such as “From the Air” from *Big Science* (1982). She sings, “Good evening. This is your captain. We are about to attempt a crash landing...Put your hands over your eyes. Jump out of the plane. There is no pilot. You are not alone.” In *Aloft*, 2017, the piece begins with you sitting inside an airplane, which slowly dissolves around you until you are left hovering in space. There is no panic, no plummet, just objects drifting by that you



The Chalkroom, 2017
Virtual reality installation with Hsin-Chien Huang

can grab and hold close. Each object in your grasp tells a story, and Anderson's voice, as our pilot and guide, soothes any fear.

The Chalkroom, 2017, a second VR work, harkens back to Anderson's 1996 installation for the Hugo Boss Prize at the Guggenheim Museum in SoHo, New York. The early installation comprised a series of rooms—walls covered with drawings and text in chalk—surrounding an assortment of interactive storytelling devices. At MASS MoCA, Anderson takes this to the next level. Once again she covers the walls, ceiling, and floor with language and gestural drawings that glow in the black-lit space. She and her team mapped the actual room so that when you don the VR headset you begin in a familiar place. But soon you find yourself gliding through a labyrinth of rooms, as bits of text fly by and stories ring out in your ears. With these VR works Anderson is experimenting with a whole new way to talk to us, while also allowing us to shape our own experiences.

While Anderson frequently uses technology, she tells her stories in other ways as well. In 2011, the death of her dog, Lolabelle, triggered a series of works including her 2015 film *Heart of a Dog*, which explored her childhood and the deaths of her mother and Lolabelle. Anderson, a practicing Buddhist, imagined her dog in the Bardo—in which, according to *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, all living things must spend 49 days in preparation for reincarnation. Anderson's large-scale (10 × 14 feet) charcoal drawings of Lolabelle's journey are vast and gestural, open in a way that makes you feel like you can leap inside of them, like no-tech virtual reality. We stand with Lolabelle witnessing both chaos and calm. *Lolabelle in the Bardo*, April 18, is a vortex of energy, the dog hardly present. Of this Anderson writes,

"The dance of appearances. The racing mind. Luminosity. To live in the gap between the moment that is expiring and the one that is arising."⁸ On the other hand, *Lolabelle in the Bardo*, May 5, functions like a stock of memories, depicting multiple versions of the dog including one of Lolabelle playing the keyboard—a task she was taught late in life to combat boredom as her eyesight failed. In each drawing Anderson includes a Tibetan prayer wheel, always spinning like a dervish, symbolizing the cyclical nature of life and the stories we tell each other.

Even while surveying her work and its significant impact on art, music, performance, and technology, any time you speak with Anderson it is clear that she is most interested in what comes next. To that end, MASS MoCA will serve as Anderson's creative home away from home for many years to come—a studio for recording and art making; a think tank; a listening archive; a site for restaging historic performances and developing new ones; and, ultimately, a drawing board. In the spoken-word piece *Somebody Else's Dream*, Anderson says, "You know those nights, when you're sleeping, and it's totally dark, and absolutely silent, and you don't dream, and there's only blackness, and this is the reason, it's because on those nights you've gone away. On those nights, you're in someone else's dream, you're busy in someone else's dream. Some things are just pictures, they're scenes before your eyes. Don't look now, I'm right behind you."⁹ Anderson is right behind us, allowing us access to her dreams, whispering stories in our ears, while decoding the language of the future, a virus we now gladly harbor.

—Denise Markonish

¹ Laurie Anderson, *Stories from the Nerve Bible: A Twenty-Year Retrospective* (New York: Perennial, 1993), p. 6.

² The title comes from Laurie Anderson's song "The Language of the Future," which she first performed in 1978 at the Nova Convention, which celebrated writer William S. Burroughs.

³ *Nerve Bible*, p. 33.

⁴ *Ibid.* p. 48. The original *Handphone Table*, along with many of Anderson's early instruments, was made collaboratively with Bob Bielecki. A new version of the table has been rebuilt for MASS MoCA with updated technology, in collaboration with Anderson, Bill Brovold, and the San Francisco Exploratorium.

⁵ *O Superman* was originally released on the independent label, One Ten Records, after which British DJ John Peel championed the song in the UK, where it quickly reached #2 on the singles chart. This recognition led to Anderson's record deal with Warner Brothers and the re-release of the song on her first full-length album *Big Science* (1982).

⁶ Allan Kozinn, "Illusions Found In Our Narratives," *The New York Times*, September 22, 2010.
nytimes.com/2010/09/23/arts/music/23laurie

⁷ Anderson's VR works have been made in collaboration with Hsin-Chien Huang who she first worked with on an early interactive CD-ROM called *Puppet Motel*, 1995.

⁸ Laurie Anderson, *Boat*, exhibition catalogue published by Vito Schnabel, 2012.

⁹ From the album *The Ugly One with the Jewels*, 1995

Cover:
Handphone Table, 1978

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