

Laurie Anderson's "United States Part II"

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The use of parody and the languid, almost hypnotic performance style create a variety of effects for the audience—the sexual inversion, for instance, is initially funny, as are some absurd contrasts between the high emotionalism of Chekhov's speeches and the actors' flat delivery (Irina's line "I'll calm down in a minute" gets a big laugh). Familiarity with the play encourages a fill-in-the-gap reaction to the fractured information structure. The boredom that comes with stretches of inactivity seems at first to simply comment on the emptiness of the sisters' lives, but grows into a kind of indictment—these characters and their apologist are finally being held to account for their indolence and indecision and ennui.

As is often the case in Squat performances, real world events intruded by chance into *Three Sisters*—some evenings radio signals were inadvertently picked up over the sound system, adding a staticky overlay of contemporary news and current events to the Chopin sound score. Snippets of ABSCAM testimony and presidential politics faded in and out as the sisters sipped tea and recited their prompted conversations about the past, the possibility of happiness, the future in Moscow.

Laurie Anderson's *United States Part II* by Mel Gordon

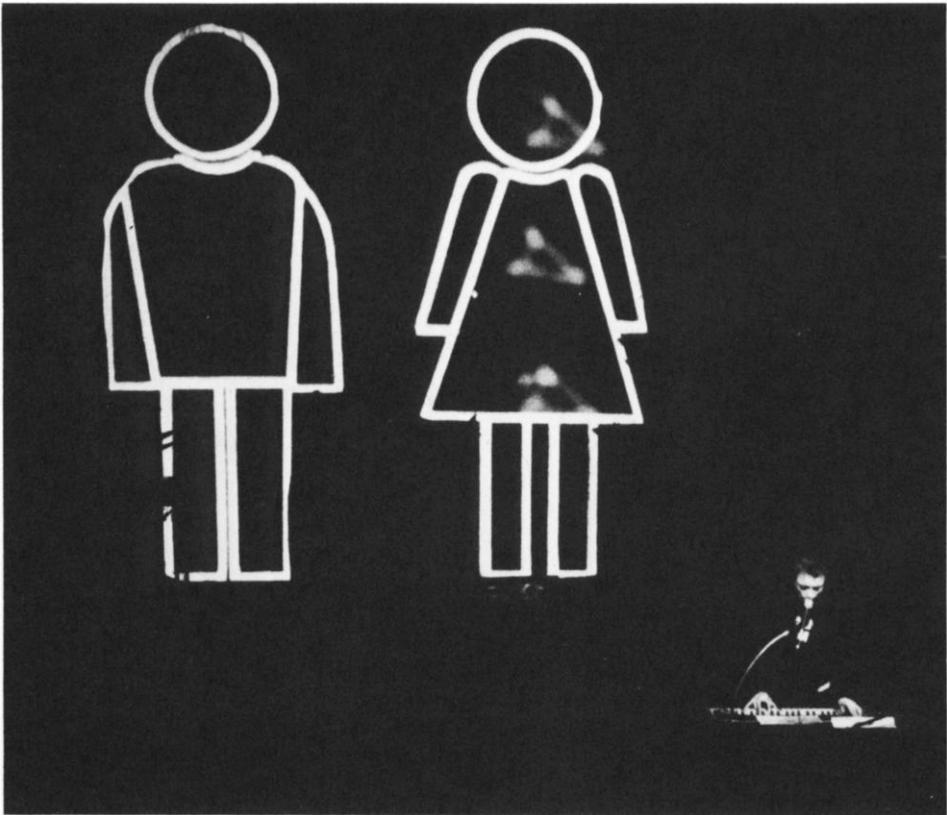
Laurie Anderson's production *United States Part II* received a considerable amount of coverage in the New York press in the last week of October 1980 with reviews in *The New York Times* and the *Village Voice* as well as an extensive cover story in the *Soho News*. The three or so performances that were announced for the Orpheum Theatre on Second Avenue were extended for at least three more presentations. Although they varied each night, the spectators themselves seemed to consist of an unusual fusion of Soho intellectuals and East Village punk-rockers. All this confirmed an earlier assertion by many critics that Laurie Anderson, despite the relative infrequency of her work, is now the best-known performance artist in New York.

United States Part II was the second of a four-part project that Anderson hopes to complete in the spring of 1981. Like the first in the series, *Americans on the Move* [see T86], *United States* blended spectacular visual and aural effects within a complicated and seemingly disconnected narrative and musical structure. The performance itself was divided into 13 sections and lasted 75 minutes. Anderson was accompanied by a band of seven vocalists and musicians. There was also a technical crew of four, who ran two film and two slide projectors.

- 1) **Superman Theme:** The band plays hard rock-like music. Anderson tells an anecdote about how speaking French without knowing it resembles the action of reading the list of ingredients on a cereal box as you eat it. She starts to tell how in France baby carriages are pushed out into the street between parked cars as a kind of traffic-tester. She then begins to beat a plastic toy gavel that gives off a beeping

sound. An image of a clock at midnight appears on the back screen. It disappears, and Anderson turns on a wristwatch with a lighted dial. She hits it with the gavel.

- 2) **O Superman! (for Massenet):** The sound of the gavel is picked up on a harmonizer that creates a pulsating beat. At the edge of a wide spotlight, Anderson makes hand gestures, such as the shooting of a gun, that leave large shadows on the screen. Occasionally her gestures are coordinated with the lyrics of the song she is singing. The song refers to Superman, her mother and father, and the leaving of messages on a telephone answering machine. It concludes with a statement that after love is gone there is always justice; after that, there's force; and after force, there's Mom.
- 3) **Talkshow (for Electric Dogs):** Anderson explains that during a television strike, print journalists had to substitute for TV reporters and that management felt everything they did was wrong: They squinted into the camera, they used big words, etc. Instead, they were instructed to use two-syllable words, "buzz-words." On the screen, these "buzz-words"—like "update," "hotline"—appear. The word "gridlock" is followed by a large grid projection. Suddenly, there is a film of hand gestures projected over that. Anderson plays an electric violin in the manner of a ukelele. Images of hands turn into a clock into a plate into a round map of Iraq and



Anderson and projections in "Let $X = X$ " section of *United States Part II*.

Iran into a plate of helicopter drawings into dancing hands silhouetted like animals, as dogs bark.

- 4) **Three Dreams: For Tape, Voice and Film:** An image of wrinkled sheets is seen. The stage is now bare. An audio recording of a boy talking about a surreal dream is heard over music from TV sitcoms. Anderson appears and comically describes a dream she had about being one of Jimmy Carter's many wives, none of whom has seen him. Paper silhouettes of a person are flashed to show movement. Slides of sheets levitating and dissolving are seen as an audio of Anderson is heard mysteriously repeating dream longings. She also explains how walking is just falling sideways. Finally a story is projected in red letters about how Anderson and her sister played a game called Red Hot, where they pretended that the ceiling was red hot and gravity had lost its pull as they struggled not to float upwards.
- 5) **Private Property:** Using a device that slows down her speech and lowers her pitch, Anderson tells a story about how William Buckley, the conservative author, was ejected from an Illinois mall for hawking his book because the mall owners told him he was on private property. Another anecdote told in that voice concerns the smoke rising from the barbeque pits of apartments that replaced broken-down factories. A film of trains entering and departing from a subway station is seen as electric sounds suggestive of railroads are heard. Anderson intones, "Do you want to go home? You are home."
- 6) **Neon Duet for Tape and Violin:** Anderson plays a violin with a large neon-lighted bow. She continues the keening sound heard in the previous section.
- 7) **Let X = X:** Vocalists and band accompany Anderson in song "Let X = X." As they sing, a map showing the time zones in North America appears with moving images of electric-game rockets and flying saucers. Later a block drawing of a growing boy and girl replaces the map. At the end of the song, Anderson breathes into the microphone, "It's a day's work just looking into your eyes."
- 8) **The Mailman's Nightmare:** The face of a mailman is seen on the screen with the image of a sheet. A recorded voice is heard. The mailman tells of a dream where everyone but him is a huge baby.
- 9) **Language Is A Virus . . . (for William S. Burroughs):** Anderson says comically, "Welcome to the difficult listening hour." In an octave lower and with an echoing effect, she tells a story of man coming home, finding all his wallpaper samples destroyed, and asks a stranger what he is doing in his home. The stranger replies that he is a soul doctor and that "language is a virus from outer space." This begins the song for the entire band. As they repeat the refrain, "letter words," such as "A Frame," "B Flick," "C Note," are projected alphabetically ending with "V Sign," "WW II," "X Ray," "Y Me?" "Zzzzzzz." Speaking in the song, Anderson explains that Japanese is not a language, just sounds and characters, as Space Invader figures crowd the screen. The words "Game Over" flash.
- 10) **Solo for Resonant Head, Violin and Pillow Speaker:** Anderson places microphone-goggles over her face and pounds her temples to create amplified knocking sounds. She picks up an electrically amplified violin and plays it. She puts a small flat speaker into her mouth and by inhaling and exhaling makes harmonica-like whining and roaring noises.

- 11) ***If You Can't Talk About It—Point to It: 2 (for Ludwig Wittgenstein):*** Anderson waves a baton manically, forming the sign of the cross. Paper figures are flashed on the screen. She points to a spectator. Insignias of a moving hammer, a rabbit, and airplane appear. Anderson repeats a nursery rhyme, "I see London, I see France, I seen those peppy Germans dance. . . ." She strikes her watch with the toy gavel.
- 12) ***Don't Look Down:*** Zooming and rapidly intercut negative images of Manhattan buildings are seen. Speaking in a little-girl voice, Anderson tells stories about how she broke into a staff meeting of a military headquarters, about a crippled dog, and about a man standing on the ledge of a building and the crowd below shouting, "Jump!"
- 13) ***Finnish Farmers:*** Anderson tells an anecdote about how the Russian paratroopers often died during World War II because their parachutes didn't work. During the invasion of Finland, Russian paratroopers sometimes fell through the snow 15 feet into the earth. The Finnish farmers would then find the holes and shoot directly into them. Another anecdote: during the 1979 drought in the U.S., American farmers sold property to the government for the construction of missile silos. An image appears on the screen of an American flag tumbling around and around in a washing machine. Anderson begins to play the keening sound on her violin. The Statue of Liberty is projected in negative. Words are projected over it: "Melting Pot," "Melt Down" and finally "Shut Down."



Light/Liquid/Mist in Korea ***by Stanley Kulikowski***

In September, Woo Ok Kim staged *Light/Liquid/Mist*, a Structuralist play, at the Drama Centre in Seoul, Korea. The script, written specifically for the production, was by Michael Kirby. Spectators at the Centre sit in a 500-seat semicircular amphitheatre. For this piece, the proscenium had been closed with a projection screen and, below the screen, a curtain composed of many vertical hanging bands of dark plastic tape. The half-round playing area in front of the proscenium had been filled with a raised wooden stage.

Each of the 16 scenes was introduced by a series of slides. Three huge images, showing more or less the same thing but from different angles, were projected side by side, filling the width of the proscenium. Three other pictures replaced them; the