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“Can You Say Hello?” Laurie Anderson’s *United States*

Herman Rapaport

And I said: Listen, I’ve got a vision.
I see myself as part of a long tradition
of American humor. You know – Bugs Bunny,
Daffy Duck, Porky Pig, Elmer Fudd,
Roadrunner, Yosemite Sam.

And they said: ‘Well actually, we had
something a little more adult in mind.’

And I said: ‘OK! OK! Listen, I can adapt!’

– Laurie Anderson, *United States*

“Hello. Excuse me. Can you tell me where I am?” A voice unsure about a turn made in a car at night is asking for directions. “Hello. Excuse me,” the voice says, aware of its hollowness, its persistence. “Hello. . .”

Searching for a whereabouts on a darkened nightclub stage, the voice of Laurie Anderson casts us deep into the precarious loneliness and awkwardness of post-modern space. It is here that saying “hello” sounds life-threatening, that initiating conversation can seem at once natural and mindlessly flippant, while disintegrating into a number of confusing tonalities and gestures bordering on nightmare. A postmodern United States. Which is to say, a postmodern unification and minimalization of experiential states, a voyage into those common experiences within which the reduction of meaning and neutralization of apprehension betrays uneasy polyvalences. Call it the exacerbation of deadpan.

In our country, this is the way we say Hello. It is a diagram of movement between two points. It is a sweep on the dial. In our country, this is also the way we say Good bye.

Curious that the easiest gestures which are so close to us conceal a crazy semiotics.

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"Say Hello" is a gesture through which bodies become signs. For example, on a spacecraft there are drawings suggested by Carl Sagan in which the outlines of a man and a woman are sketched. They are sixties figures, the woman with a rather awkward though seductive posture, the man a bit more erect. It is the man, interestingly enough, whose right arm is bent up at the elbow in a ninety-degree angle. For it is he who is supposed to make contact first. "Do you think that They will think his arm is permanently attached in this position?" Anderson's blunt question is expressionless, exposing the fatuousness of "big science," the silly presupposition that aliens are going to be able to read our "signs." She suggests that in a postmodern culture scientists are so overspecialized that when it comes to basic questions they are enormously obtuse. No one has noticed that saying "hello" is exactly the same as saying "good-bye," that even if aliens could read our signs, they would be confused. The fallacy of science: "let $x = x$," the "united state."

I

United States. It is a performance piece of several hours' duration which is narrated, illustrated, and accompanied by music. A short version has been released in a five-record set by Warner Brothers, and texts with photographs have been published by Harper and Row.¹ "Say Hello" marks the beginning and end of the performance and has iconic force, reminding us of a dial or clock not only marking the beginning and end but also providing a sense of gradation or change during the piece. "Say Hello," then, is the temporal and spatial analogue to the clocks on Anderson's projected image of the United States, which is to say, in *United States* greeting takes on spatial attributes. Indeed, the whole of *United States* can be read, watched, and listened to as an analysis of how communication is determined by the conditions of postmodern space. In this sense, Anderson undertakes an anthropological project which attempts to define postmodern consciousness in terms of how communication is subordinated to an artistic frame of reference, a framework within which the question of how things are situated in space becomes of greatest importance.

Postmodern architecture is intriguing because it manifests a subtle articulation of what Robert Venturi (in collaboration with Scott Izenour, Denise and Scott Brown) views as elite and vernacular cultures.² Charles Jencks acknowledges this articulation when he writes, in *Architecture Today*,

A postmodern building is doubly coded – part Modern and part something else: vernacular, revivalist, local, commercial, metaphorical, or contextual. In several important in-

¹ Laurie Anderson, *United States* (New York: Harper and Row, 1984). All quotations cited from this volume. Anderson has been developing this performance piece for about a decade; in interviews during the 1970s it is sometimes referred to as "Americans on the Move."

² *Learning from Las Vegas* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1977), 6, 119, 152. "Bauhaus Hawaiian" is a typical expression used by Venturi in discussing those moments in which high and low, elite and vernacular, come into contact. I should add that whereas Venturi does use the word "vernacular" in order to express the stylistic tendencies of any architectural orientation – i.e., "commercial vernacular," "electronic and space vernacular" – he does separate this use of the term from elitist contexts as in the phrase "Classical vocabulary," p. 106. Venturi's point is that the vernacular is the *general* appropriation of high culture's unacknowledged symbolism.

stances it is also doubly coded in the sense that it seeks to speak on two levels at once: to a concerned minority of architects, an elite who recognizes the subtle distinctions of a fast-changing language, and to the inhabitants, users, or passersby, who want only to understand and enjoy it.³

Postmodern space, in other words, conflates elitist domination with spontaneous vernacular modes of apprehension. Use of the vernacular, in particular, helps speed up public comprehension and ensures that people will not be required to ask reflective questions; since the new is somehow always old and familiar, what one sees is self-evident, literal. Jencks speaks for the elite when he says that "the inhabitants, users, or passersby . . . want only to understand and enjoy [post-modern architecture]." He means that passersby are immediately to accept the relation set up between elite and vernacular cultures. That the postmodern building is, in fact, not a unity but a coalition of styles is frankly admitted by postmodern architects. Again, notice Jencks who reflects on the postmodern classicism of Michael Graves's work.

It does not try to achieve the integration, consistency, and propriety of a Vitruvian or Palladian language, but rather attempts to reach out to a variety of languages – including the industrial style – in an effort to be more broadly based.⁴

Postmodern architecture is, in this sense, cumulative but not integrative, aesthetic but not organic, vernacular but not anti-authoritarian. Postmodern space signifies a medley of architectural rhetorics whose interplay is appreciated on a meta-stylistic level which cannot be reconciled within a single interpretive glance. The work is composite and made up of stylistic zones which often break down into time zones, since the work's coherence ultimately depends upon our ability to locate, date, and align the discontinuous and fragmentary suggestions of various periods and practices of both high and low culture. The work's coherence is therefore accidental, or what we might consider forced in the baroque sense. But thanks to the work's rhetoricity or semiosis, these stylistic fractures only strike us as playful and consonant revisions of old styles which nostalgically remind us of something at once familiar and fresh. If, as some architects assume, architecture is really to be defined as a "sphere of influence" rather than in terms of pure formal concerns, the influence of postmodern architecture is transmitted by way of heterogeneous styles whose manner is to "invite" the eye, or to "say hello." It is in this sense that the play with the vernacular is important, since it functions to make people receptive to space even while, as a violent interplay of styles, postmodern architecture keeps that space at a distance, asserts an aesthetic remoteness of space from within what is familiar.

Because Anderson's *United States* is a "performance piece," it begins with the assumption that as landscape the U.S. is a postmodern work, that ours is a society in which elite and vernacular cultures are often so intimate that the difference between them is sometimes undecidable. This undecidability is conveyed through the literal, the use of commonplaces and clichés that delimit what reality is supposed to mean for

³ Charles Jencks and William Chaitkin, *Architecture Today* (New York: Harry N. Abrams Inc., 1982), 111. It is Jencks's well defined contrast between the elite and the vernacular that I stress in this paper.

⁴ *Architecture Today*, 13.

us. It is as if the vernacular were always saturated with authoritarianism, hence becoming sinister, and as if the authoritarian were always being contaminated by the vernacular in such a way that it seemed ridiculous, idiotic in its oversimplification of complex thoughts. This transference between vernacular and elite is reflected everywhere in postmodern architecture. In Anderson's *United States* we hear the rhetoric of that transaction taking place within a particular spatial condition. This transaction is thematized in "Voices on Tape," which contains reference to an empty room being monitored after twenty years by a microphone and a tape recorder for sound residues. The phrases supposedly captured on the tape recorder as well as the whole "scientific" project are delimited by the question of spatiality, for it is as if space itself were talking. What is recorded in "Voices on Tape," which is recited in poor German (and refers to Goethe's last words), is the collision in this space of elitist culture (science) and a vernacular culture (i.e., "Goethe ist ein diplomat," "So viele licht hier"). Obviously, the frame of the room as space imitates the empty stage which Anderson herself is occupying, and the collision of elitist and vernacular styles is emphasized through the engagement of ordinary talk with sophisticated electronic equipment. In "Say Hello" as well, one notices how something simple in the vernacular, when performed within an authoritarian or elitist space – i.e., Carl Sagan's noble experiment to talk to aliens – becomes an embarrassment. Here it is not so much that a class of speakers is resisting high culture, but that the vernacular itself displays innate potentials for making scientists appear idiotic. Conversely, however, in a song-piece entitled "O Superman," authoritarianism saturates vernacular or popular culture in such a way that behind flimsy expressions we intuit something murderous and catastrophic. Indeed, the placid crying of birds in the background of the piece suggests extinction, because by way of mass culture the sounds of nature have become associated with authoritarian messages about living in a world where life is becoming extinct. Yet this message is communicated by way of muzak, that is to say, by a very unthreatening, even pleasant, experience. And it is this "invitation" to consider disaster which constitutes a postmodern receptivity or familiarity with that which is life threatening.

So hold me Mom, in your long arms . . .
 in your automatic arms,
 your electronic arms,
 in your arms . . .
 So hold me Mom, in your long arms,
 your petrochemical arms,
 your military arms,
 in your electronic arms . . .

As map, the United States itself is conveyed to us in a very child-like and inoffensive manner, its time zones demarcated with the appropriate partitions and clocks. *United States* performs these zones and in doing so develops themes like greetings, love, signs, women, outer space, government, homelessness, catastrophe, science, business, ethnocentrism, objects, rituals, etc. Like Brecht, Anderson is not rigid about final versions of her work, and *United States* is very much a collage of music, words, and pictures which the performer can change at will without really disturbing the overall scheme. Perhaps it is because the tonality of the performance as a whole is so strong that the individual parts of *United States* do not depend upon plotting or sequencing

so much as they do upon "voicings." In this sense music is a crucial element, sustaining a number of moods which saturate the individual song-pieces. Like a postmodern building, Anderson's work stresses the accidental and the element of surprise, not to mention the fundamental ambivalences about how elite culture affects popular culture and vice versa. That is, *United States* is about space as a "sphere of influence" which comprises ambiances of meaning that are, like postmodern buildings, at once extremely self-evidently literal and yet intellectually unassimilable because of their blending of extremely subtle harmonies of elitist and vernacular expressions. The four zones of *United States* represent 1) travel, 2) politics, 3) money, and 4) love. As Stephen Melville has observed, the "bits" and "parts" of *United States* have connections "at once tenuous and multiple, over-determined to the point that the whole takes on the simultaneous coherence and arbitrariness of a dream."⁵ Each of these temporal/spatial zones is associated with a movement, like panning, dropping, grabbing, standing free. And these visual "movements" suggest a mode of erotogenetic developing which concerns not just body zones but stages of personal growth. Yet if *United States* incipiently concerns such notions of growth, it does so only to show, contrary to an American emphasis on development and getting ahead, that America reflects a network of relations which only lead to a postmodern condition of advanced underachievement, a *Gesamtwerk* of late capitalist underdevelopment. In itself this is already a part of the American postmodern landscape, for what one detects is the collision of vernacular styles signifying a purposeful retardation of critical power, a stunting of conceptual development, a preference for instantaneous motifs, nostalgic fixations, cultural leitmotifs. Instead of styles which show a capacity for development and growth, the postmodern displays little more than resonance or the power of evocation, what Fredric Jameson considers the commodification of the unconscious.⁶

II

Whereas architects consider questions of form and function or, more recently, the semiotics of architecture, Anderson notices space less as an area in which to be confined than as a surface to be crossed. In "On Modern and Postmodern Space," Alan Colquhoun has written that "modern" architecture involves

[the] blowing apart of perceptible urban space, its insistence on high-rise housing, and the precedence it gave to fast automobile circulation. It seems that what started as a utopian critique of nineteenth-century housing conditions turned into nothing more than what was needed for the success of twentieth-century economic centralism, whether in the form of monopoly capitalism or socialist bureaucratic control. This raises the whole problem of the unbridgeable gulf between what the individual can perceive and feel at home in, and the vast, abstract infrastructural network that is necessary for the operation of the modern consumer and media-based society.⁷

⁵ Stephen Melville, "Between Art and Criticism: Mapping the Frame in *United States*," in *Theatre Journal* 37:1 (March 1985): 38.

⁶ Fredric Jameson, "Architecture and the Critique of Ideology," in *Architecture, Criticism, Ideology*, ed. Joan Ockman (Princeton: Princeton Architectural Press, 1985), 67, 75.

⁷ Alan Colquhoun, "On Modern and Postmodern Space," in *Architecture, Criticism, Ideology*, 108-9.

Colquhoun is very much aware of modern space as a dimension of mass culture, which is to say, the production of space as a sphere of influence whose purpose is to advance a "media-based" culture. Architecture itself functions as a medium, a network that makes possible the propagation of a utopian but elitist culture dependent upon consumption as much as upon production. Central to this view, Colquhoun points out, is the fact that at the turn of the century architects and social planners begin to think of space as pre-existent and unlimited, as abstract and essentially undifferentiated.

Anderson's *United States* is largely about how a vernacular culture is situated within this modernist notion of space. In a section of Part 4 of *United States* entitled "The Stranger," Anderson projects four pictures of suburban houses onto a screen behind her. The houses are typical of those one would find in a current real estate market booklet, though the styles Anderson has chosen are somewhat similar: two-story houses built in the 1950s or thereabouts. As she projects the photographs, Anderson comments: "It's the one with the pool." "It's the one on the corner with the big garage." "It's the one with the fir tree in the front yard." "Leave the lights on. It's twilight." Anderson intuits that even though the houses are all different, their owners would probably demarcate their homes by means of vernacular descriptions, such as "it's the one with the pool." Differences are extremely minimal in the vernacular imagination, as if it were impossible to describe where one lived in terms of explaining the architectural style. For vernacular culture has adapted itself to the idea that living space is so abstract that only some very minimal detail can distinguish one place from another. "It's the one with the fir tree in the front yard." Similarly, with respect to a map of the United States, it is only the minimal cue of the time zone which really differentiates one zone from another. For once more, space is abstract, undifferentiated, monotonous and above all, limitless in the eyes of the "developer."

Space, because it is so abstract, is less a place in which to live than a flat surface to traverse. Anderson suggests that this traversing occurs in the service of communication, since it is through making and breaking contacts that the postmodern individual comes to be. Most striking is that the subject undergoes a certain reduction as it becomes more and more involved in crossing space for the sake of establishing communication. Anderson symbolizes this condition through references in words, pictures, and music to the image of a dog.

I came home today
and you were all on fire.
Your shirt was on fire,
and your hair was on fire,
and flames were licking all around your feet.
And I did not know what to do!
And then a thousand violins began to play,
And I really did not know what to do then.
So I just decided to go out
and walk the dog.

"Walking the Dog" reads like a poem by Éluard, though its surrealism underscores the mobility which allows one simply to walk out on someone in trouble, that mobility which we have in common with dogs. In "Dog Show," we are told:

I dreamed I was a dog in a dog show.
 And my father came to the dog show.
 And he said: That's a really good dog.
 I like that dog.

The identification of narrator and dog suggests that the more minimal one becomes the more attractive one becomes. And it suggests that the minimalism of a canine condition is the primary means by which we gain access to others.

And then all my friends came and I
 was thinking:
 No one has ever looked at me like this
 for so long.

The subject as dog is "safe," for such a subject has the mobility through which to break off relations which demand obligations of the subject and establish relations which make possible a certain necessary popularity. For Anderson, the dog is a floating signifier, an ideal traverser of postmodern spaces.

In a postmodern age, *United States* is not so much a celebration of modernism as it is a demonstration of the degree to which we have internalized what previous generations considered alien and pernicious. Anderson's suggestion that we have acceded to the condition of dogs is less a criticism of our postmodern condition than a recognition of what we really are, an acceptance that we succeed best when we take on a dog's minimal being. The disinterested condition of our canine existence is what postmodern architects take as endemic to our aesthetic relation to space: mere traffic, non-consciousness. Since postmodern space is meant to be minimally hermeneutic for the casual passerby, urban complexes withdraw from intellectual reflection and apprehension. Not only do these buildings not belong to us — they are, after all, "private property" — they refuse even to appear as constructions worthy of attention, themselves but postmodern dogs. Yet, as Anderson notices in "Dog Show," it is such vacuity that elicits an elongated staring whose expansiveness is a measure of a failure to grasp the object. "No one has ever stared at me for so long, for such a long time, for so long." Postmodern space thus becomes phantasmic and dreamy as the gaze is dissipated in the massive thereness of the inappropriable.

This resistance of mass culture to appropriation is what facilitates the fugitive glance, the trafficking of the self through space. Visually we find ourselves moving through space rather than in it, a point made in another work about America entitled *Koyaanisqatsi*. A film about postmodern space with music by Philip Glass, *Koyaanisqatsi* suggests that life is a condition of being reduced to mere traffic. But whereas *Koyaanisqatsi* sickens with its prolonged redundancies of futile transit in New York City and Los Angeles, Anderson's *United States* investigates our trafficky relation to postmodern ambience in more nuanced and individualistic terms. For Anderson is more receptive (less modernist) to the fact that our conversations and intimate encounters are patterned on a mode of inhabiting space which has much in common with transitional states of consciousness, with a travelling consciousness. Our conversations resemble travel on an expressway, where we are always suddenly encountering signs indicating entrances, exits, continuations, turn offs, detours, mergings, speed signs, and so on. Like a track, talk is made up of cues indicating direction, facilitating

passage, noting locations. Which is to say, talk is itself embedded within the codes of postmodern space. Notice, for example, "New York Social Life."

Hi! How are you? Where've you been? Nice to see you. Listen, I'm sorry I missed your thing last week, but we should really get together, you know, maybe next week. I'll call you. I'll see you. Bye bye.

Or,

Listen, Laurie, uh, if you want to talk before then, uh, I'll leave my answering machine on . . . and just give me a ring . . . anytime.

These excerpts from "New York Social Life" focus less on the outrage of an awkward discourse painfully aware of its own compulsion towards insincerity, a wavering between sympathy and selfishness, than on the superficiality of conversation as a slick surface of ready-made signs or gestures used to establish contact or quickly break it off. In business such discourse is called "one minute management." In "New York Social Life" it appears that the persona has been depressed; yet the conversations surrounding her use a rhetoric of concern to maintain an interpersonal network whose purpose is to map an individual's relationship within a social system. Concern is merely an excuse for finding out "are you there?" The notion of The United States as map, then, so basic to Anderson's work, relates to the true purpose of postmodern talk: to determine where one is on a social grid when *en route*. To make telephone calls, therefore, is to establish something close to radar contact with other entities, a notion reflected in Anderson's fascination with airplanes, missiles, and spacecraft. We are ourselves but vehicles that not only cross space but are monitored; hence the answering machine in "New York Social Life" as a monitoring device which fulfills a primary condition of postmodern communication: to make contact and check in. Conversation itself is superfluous. For in a postmodern world it is through tracking that we affirm our niche in a community always on the move, and our attachments, obligations, and sympathies are only ways of facilitating the kinds of contact needed to perform a map of social relations. Feelings, concerns, issues, and information become what dogs often are for people: excuses to open and close conversations. They are merely "switches." Much of *United States*, then, is a performance of the use of operators through which conversations become less important as messages than for the making and breaking of contacts in the Jakobsonian sense.⁸ The purpose of communication is to draw people's relations, to map our position, rather than to enter into situations as part of day-to-day experience. To "walk the dog" is precisely to negotiate inhabiting a space on the margin of "situations" such that one can "relate" without having to be related. Performance art itself is but the re-enactment of this mapping or "drawing" of relations.

⁸Roman Jakobson, whose linguistic theories are so central to structuralist linguistics, has advanced a well-known communication model based on the polarities *addressor/addressee*. Between these two terms we find *contact, code, message, context*. Perhaps *contact* is the most abstract, suggesting the purely phatic. However, in Anderson's work contact becomes privileged. See Roman Jakobson, "Closing Statement: Linguistic and Poetics," in *Semiotics: An Introductory Anthology*, ed. Robert E. Innis (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985), 145-75.

But such minimalization of content and maximizing of contact requires "undercommittedness," weak social relations which Anderson exaggerates through tautology. Undercommitment makes for bonds that are strong enough to establish one in a position without allowing that position to solidify into a situation in which one can become bound. The tautology is crucial because it asserts position without defining what occupies this space. We see this attitude towards space in postmodern architecture, which promotes circulation, immediacy, passage, movement, and creates space that depends upon weak contacts in order to establish circuits for commercial success. In *United States*, Anderson, well aware that she is herself a postmodern topos, writes of herself,

Well I was trying to think of something to tell you about myself and I came across this brochure they're handing out in the lobby. And it says something I wanted to say – only better.

It says: Laurie Anderson, in her epic performance of *United States Parts 1 through 4*, has been baffling audiences for years with her special blend of music . . . slides . . . films . . . tapes . . . films (did I say films?) . . . hand gestures and more. Hey hey hey hey hey hey hey! (Much more.)

The tautology of saying "I am what this says I am" allows for a re-performance of pre-established relations, mainly those set out in the promotional literature. Anderson and her work are established as a sign which involves a stable contact rather than a specific content. The promotional material is not an accurate description of what Anderson does, because its function is not meant to be mimetic; rather, it is supposed to make familiar through the manipulation of easily assimilated signs. The point is to give the performer position or location (space) at the expense of definition. In this sacrifice of definition, Anderson gains freedom and ambiguity which allows her to be many things in many places while as contact always remaining minimally the same. It is in this sense that she "deconstructs" the border between identity and difference, that she appears as something at once determinate and indeterminate.

The tautology establishes Anderson as postmodern motif, as a statue (to the extent that she is fixed as minimal cue), as a "really good dog." This relates to the business of performance art generally, in that success is everywhere based on such minimalization, since one must be active as a contact in proximity to other contacts on a performance map: other performance artists, entertainers, singers, actors. Anderson becomes like a movie star whose conversations on television talk shows ironize the fact that speaking in person on camera does nothing except reinforce one's minimal reference or position relative to others in the media and society at large. In this sense the performer acts as a complex signifier whose significance is syntactic. This minimizing of the performer as content and maximizing of the performer as contact or relay reveals a structuralist view of television, a view that accounts for the great power of this medium for entertainers: it activates and maps the reduction of the star to a point which is related to a mobile array of faces and figures presenting themselves synchronically on contiguous stations. We may not be particularly interested in or fascinated with certain figures as agencies of a visual content but these figures nevertheless become meaningful in terms of how they are set up as references with respect to one another. In this sense the communication between figures is intimately connected within a televised space, predicated on the conditions of postmodern, structuralist space. Indeed, it is the

figure's vacuousness or minimalism which allows for its powerful mobility as cursor within an electronic system of mapped and transitory relations. Hence to have character in this context becomes a measure of one's inability to become present as something determinate. One accedes to becoming "Pac Man," for example, and in large part Anderson's *United States* is a long meditation about how such reductions are performed or imitated.

It is in terms of this performance, however, that we see not merely the minimalization of the artist but also its powerful propagation within a media culture. For this reason, Anderson's work becomes strangely allied with mass culture. She herself accedes to an authoritarian system of cultural production by disseminating her work through Warner Brothers and Harper and Row. Therefore in Anderson's performance art we see the easy alliance of both vernacular and elite culture, the postmodern replication of a hegemonic structure which has alarmed some critics of her work. Hegemony, as critics like Dick Hebdige use it, is "a situation in which a provisional alliance of certain social groups can exert 'total social authority' over other subordinate groups, not simply by coercion or by the direct imposition of ruling ideas, but by 'winning and shaping consent so that the power of the dominant classes appears both legitimate and natural'"⁹ And yet, one could argue that this replication of the hegemony is itself but an imitation of something occurring in our culture generally, that in performing the hegemony Anderson is also miming it, and that in doing so she is releasing or activating resonances within the collision of vernacular and elitist cultural expressions—resonances which undermine that hegemony's efficacy as a stable equilibrium in which the power of the elite culture appears natural. In *United States* Anderson performs the postmodern hybridization of the elite and vernacular, as established through the transmission and overlapping of media whose spatiality is the "united state." In doing so Anderson "performs" the hegemony's illusory unifications and subtly reveals its dissonances and discrepancies, but without necessarily enacting a critical stance of her own, a stance which would be recovered merely as another ideological or theoretical formation intended to dominate a field of relationships.

III

I had this dream
and in it I wake up in this small
house . . . I'm not
a person in this dream; I'm a
place. Yeah . . . just a place.

In *United States* woman is herself considered a space or topos of postmodern existence. And as such she is tautological, minimal. Especially in the last part of *United States*, Anderson explores not merely the position one occupies on a map of social relations, but the existential "mood," as Heidegger might have called it, of postmodern being. This mood is already well anticipated in "modern" literature, and particularly

⁹Dick Hebdige, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (London: Methuen, 1979), 15–16. Hebdige attributes this definition to Stuart Hall.

important in this respect is Marcel Proust's depiction of Albertine in *Remembrance of Things Past*. Marcel recounts his apprehension of the tom-boy at Balbec in this way:

To be quite accurate, I ought to give a different name to each of the selves who subsequently thought about Albertine; I ought still more to give a different name to each of the Albertines who appeared before me, never the same, like those seas — called by me simply and for the sake of convenience 'the sea' — that succeeded one another and against which, a nymph likewise, she was silhouetted.¹⁰

Throughout Marcel's lengthy descriptions of Albertine in *Remembrance* we notice that she is viewed as a topos that is refracted, luminous, and surfacy. She is approachable but not appropriable. Like the movie star of the silver screen she is a topos of projected light, a minimal being whose indistinctness becomes a measure of her power to fulfill her ambitions as a social climber, to become "known." Of all the women Marcel meets, Albertine is the closest to being "nothing." For she says and does nothing that might give substance or ballast to the impressions she makes. Even the fact that she is a bicyclist only emphasizes her vacuity and her fugitive qualities. She is, finally, more like an atmosphere than a character, a minimal finitude that is only traced or drawn from within the hypotheses of a hypochondriac's mercurial wishes and fears. She is, in terms of Marcel's mean-spirited jealousy in *The Captive*, a crazy-quilt map of possible liaisons whose constructions are as fantastic as they are plausible in the wake of Marcel's careful trackings of Albertine's movements.

There is, admittedly, little of the high seriousness of Proust in the flippant portrayal of postmodern woman in Anderson's *United States*, no sense of judgment in this anything-is-okay world. And yet in the song-piece "Blue Lagoon" (a poem in the form of a letter), the speaker, named "Blue Pacific," has everything in common with Proust's Albertine. For like Albertine, Blue Pacific is a surface, an atmosphere of modulating moods; like Albertine, she is a tourist whose state is an undercommittedness of consciousness, a studied underachievement; and like Albertine, she appears to sleep even while awake. Blue Pacific is that enigmatic surface basking in the unaccountability of its actions, slipping into habitual and monotonous personal abandonments that are unconsidered and unrecoverable. Like Albertine, Blue Pacific is beyond remembrance of things past.

Blue Pacific's letter is read to an accompaniment of sonorous music: overlays of the new consonance, unfocused, busy, in suspension, the metallic drumming contradicting the Pacific references. The heat and lazy acquiescence to dives by the wreck, the nightly swims in the lagoon, sunbathing — all these are submerged in waves of aural unfocusing. Anderson's slow and deliberate reading accentuates tonal registers of depression, lassitude, longing, and also a remote pleasure and bliss within a space of quiet forgetfulness reminding us of lotus-eaters by the beach. As a whole, "Blue Lagoon" does not try to achieve integration or cohesion, but ripples out into a variety

¹⁰Marcel Proust, *Remembrance of Things Past* (New York: Random House, 1981), 1, 1010. The passage occurs in the final passages of *Within a Budding Grove* where many extremely lyrical pages are given to the description of Albertine and her little band of friends.

of tonal saturations as Blue Pacific modulates attention from the letter to the weather, from her remembering cities to her dreams about perfect places:

I got your letter. Thanks a lot.
 I've been getting lots of sun
 and lots of rest. It's really hot.
 Days,
 I dive by the wreck.
 Nights,
 I swim in the blue lagoon.

I always used to wonder who I'd bring
 to a desert island.

As in a postmodern structure there are meta-textual allusions: to Shakespeare (a quotation of "Full Fathom Five"), Melville ("And I alone am left to tell the tale . . . / Call me Ishamel"), T. S. Eliot, Adrienne Rich (diving by the wreck), but also to the film *Blue Lagoon*, starring Brooke Shields. These intertexts are not cited; they simply merge or float into Blue Pacific's reveries, suggesting, however remotely, a vague but poignant hostility towards men and paternity (the death of the father in Shakespeare, the death of Ahab in Melville, the death of parents in *Blue Lagoon*, the rejection of males by Rich, Amfortas in Eliot, etc.). Here the intellectualism of the allusions meets the tonality of burnt-out existence, particularly with the desperate last stanza in which an S.O.S. can be detected: "Love and kisses . . . / Blue / Pacific / signing off."

Although Blue Pacific knows where she is on the social map of leisure, she has nevertheless lost self-reference, closure. She is at the furthest limit of attenuated contact and lies, as such, in the heart of postmodern mass culture, basking in the sun at a high-class resort. Whereas Proust's Albertine is capable of harboring secrets, Blue Pacific is emptied of all interiority. She is herself the island space on which she lies, a sleepy surface suspended in the water. "Days, / I dive by the wreck. / Nights, / I swim in the blue lagoon." Her name, Blue Pacific, itself resonates with contradictions that defy coherence, while communicating an overall sense of tranquility; for "Blue Pacific" simultaneously suggests "sad ocean," "sad peacefulness," and the play of light on a beautiful sea, azure and calm. Perhaps "Blue Pacific" isn't a name at all but just the topos associated with a flotation of voicings, the dissipation of woman into landscape. "I'm not a person in this dream; I'm just a place. Yeah . . . just a place." And yet, despite this dissolution of voice into space we feel traces or residues of volition uneasily affirming themselves. For the narration suggests a question never explicitly formulated but hovering: "But if I am what everyone desires to be, why don't you want me?" Traces of willed confrontation make up an under-consciousness of words, a submerged, marginal insistence which pleads from beneath: the "wreck" in Shakespeare, Melville, Eliot, Rich, and *Blue Lagoon*. It is this "wreck" that the "letter" elides even as it sounds its depths, careful to avoid intimacy.

Readers will notice that as "poetry" the lyrics of "Blue Lagoon" are reminiscent of an American poetry written in a self-consciously flat and laconic style in which collo-

qualisms typically introduce pathetic ironies of everyday life. One is reminded of not only Adrienne Rich, but of Howard Nemerov or Carolyn Kizer. Anderson's lyrics, however, are not meant so much to satirize as to re-perform the pretensions of the well-craftedness of poetry while carefully abandoning them. For it is in the awkwardness of approximations that Anderson captures tonalities of an American lingo. Her project is to produce a mock-up or facsimile, to draw, as it were, from real life a model in the medium of the things themselves. In this sense performance art is by nature ephemeral, since the copy offers itself as something almost interchangeable with the object it mimes. That is to say, the performed work deconstitutes the difference/identity between object/facsimile. It is, to recall the work of Jacques Derrida, deconstructive. However, Anderson's trace-work has much more in common with the autistic drift of the New Realism. Its translation into performance occurs by way of figures like Yvonne Rainer, a dancer associated with the Judson Dance Theater, who in the mid 1960s drew up a chart outlining the relation between objects and dance. In this schema she opposes "illusionism" (objects) to "performance" (dance), and she has written: "The artifice of performance has been reevaluated [in the sense that] what one does, is more interesting and important than the exhibition of character and attitude, and that action can best be focused on through the submerging of the personality; so ideally one is not even oneself, one is a neutral 'doer.'" Also, "the display of technical virtuosity and the display of the dancer's specialized body no longer make any sense."¹¹ Rainer was especially interested in translating objects into performance such that "the dance equivalent is the indeterminate performance that produces variations ranging from small details to a total image."¹² This is precisely what Anderson's version of the new realism achieves as a performance: the production of an indeterminacy whose variations are at once extremely nuanced and unpredictable, yet uncomfortably faithful to the "objects" themselves. In this performance personality is submerged, as Rainer suggested twenty years ago, and technical virtuosity is abandoned. In "Blue Lagoon" we see the apogee of this type of performance insofar as the tonalities of a represented object, Blue Pacific, are performed in such a way that character itself is never quite established, since the performer has successfully "submerged" herself in a neutrality of doing. The performance of the words, themselves so reminiscent of contemporary American poetry, accedes to an anonymity through which both the apparatuses of elite and vernacular culture can be heard in what literary critics today call a "dialogic relation," that is to say, an interpenetration of cultural voices.¹³ However, whereas dialogic structures are often polyvalent, massive, complex, in Anderson they are achieved much more economically through a minimalist approach that is much closer to Yvonne Rainer's notions of minimalist dance than has, perhaps, been recognized.

¹¹ Yvonne Rainer, "A Quasi Survey of Some 'Minimalist' Tendencies in the Quantitatively Minimal Dance Activity Midst the Pletora, or an Analysis of Trio," in *Minimal Art*, ed. G. Battcock (New York: Dutton, 1968), 267.

¹² *Minimal Art*, 272.

¹³ M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, ed. and trans. Michael Holquist and Caryl Emerson (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981).

IV

In "Postmodernism and Consumer Society," Fredric Jameson talks about the postmodern production of "blank parody" or "pastiche," and he notices it not in performance art, but in film.¹⁴ Jameson argues that postmodern parody has the aim of pointing out the "death of the social subject" — the end of consciousness — and the total degradation of language. What Jacques Ehrmann addressed in the late sixties as a "death of literature" on the avant-garde horizon has in our time become, in Jameson's view, a generally recognized feature of contemporary life. Hence in place of authentic works we have merely retreads, pastiches.

Pastiche is, like parody, the imitation of a peculiar or unique style, the wearing of a stylistic mask, speech in a dead language: but it is a neutral practice of such mimicry, without parody's ulterior motive, without the satirical impulse, without laughter, without that still latent feeling that there exists something *normal* compared to which what is being imitated is rather comic. Pastiche is blank parody, parody that has lost its sense of humor.¹⁵

With respect to cinema, pastiche marks, in Jameson's opinion, a loss of a historical point of reference, that basis upon which satire in previous periods depended. For Jameson, "blank parody" is an indictment of the decadence of consumer culture, a formation of art which is symptomatic of an ahistoricism, an anti-intellectualism. At issue is the perception that such art is not simply uncritical, but fundamentally anti-critical — that it is, as Susan Sontag noted long ago, "against interpretation." In this sense, a work like "Blue Lagoon" or *United States*, as a whole, maintains its position as a relation between elite and vernacular culture that replicates something very fundamental to our society: a presentation of a now which is inaccessible to critical consciousness, which elides the very capacity to gain that point of view by means of which contemporary culture can be evaluated, thought, represented.

"Blue Lagoon" uses "blank parody" or "pastiche" not to indict postmodern space, but to perform it. In an observation reminiscent of Yvonne Rainer's remarks above, Anderson has said, "In a performance . . . you don't have to have character. If you want to talk about earthquakes all you have to do is say 'earthquakes.'" With regard to space itself, she has said, "You become aware, because of [the sending of standing] waves, of your placement in the room. It's like being blind, in a sense, because you feel the space behind you; it's a way to prevent falling into an illusion, into film space."¹⁶ Both of these statements address questions of how representation or illusions are "framed" in a mimetic sense, concerned not with structuring an uncritical space so much as with the production of an ambiguous or undecidable space within which sonorities, textures, or tonalities can be aired, and within which their incipient judgments, worn and torn through use, can make themselves felt. Character or "film space" only gets in the way in that it pre-structures our apprehension of ephemeral

¹⁴ Fredric Jameson, "Postmodernism and Consumer Society," in *The Anti-Aesthetic*, ed. Hal Foster (Post Townsend: Bay Press, 1983), 111–25.

¹⁵ *The Anti-Aesthetic*, 114.

¹⁶ Interview with Laurie Anderson in *View* (January, 1980), rpt. in *American Artists on Art*, ed. Ellen Johnson (New York: Harper and Row, 1982), 241–42.

nuances, which have become so much a part of our everyday talk. As a texture of worn out American vernacular, "Blue Lagoon" signals a blending of speech: the clichés of vacationers, the institutionalized lyric, the ham radio operator, the talk show, and so on. Within this surprising harmony or consonance, critical space is filled in and judgments apparently suppressed. And yet, within this foreclosure of criticism we still hear the traces of judgment, the residues of attitudes, the under-consciousness of vacuity. Especially in "Blue Lagoon," pastiche is less a celebration of the death of the subject than it is the performance of authoritarian colonization, the taking over by mass culture – that articulation of the vernacular and the elite – of the subject whose very acquiescence is a measure of historical consciousness. Jameson views this colonization of the subject as an effect of postmodern art in any case; however, the effect is not intuited from without by the critic, but is always already part of the act of performance itself.

Anderson's work is not part of a historical forgetting, but is an attempt to describe accurately through pastiche how the articulation of vernacular and elite cultures manages to suture the historical subject. This suturing paradoxically elicits experiences of a decentered and detotalized consciousness whose nostalgic, vernacular expressions reveal an uncomfortable alliance between elite and vernacular cultures. In "Blue Lagoon" the vacationing woman is at once consonant with elite culture, that of the "island vacation," and dependent on ready-made expressions with vernacular overtones. In fact, her reliance on banalities ensures that she can gain, at the cost of decentering, what is known as coverage, reach, extension. That is, by acquiescing, she accedes to a particular kind of power: "I always wondered who I'd bring / to a desert island." The emphasis, then, is not upon who one is, but upon where one can be.

Rather than searching the wreckage of culture for depleted bits of language, Anderson looks for expressions which resonate in terms of the postmodern relations between vernacular and elite culture. Hence one has to be sensitive to the possible kinds of vernacular bits and pieces which Anderson could successfully appropriate, what we might call the postmodern lexicon of everyday life. To this degree, *United States* is merely a mimetic depiction of our world; it is "realistic." The problem is not so much that art has changed but that our world has changed, for there is certainly something very new about recognizing in phrases strange medleys of tonalities, at once silly, pathetic, vacuous, uncritical, cynical, naive. Indeed, even in such words as "hello" the fate of speaking and being appears to be determined.

If historians like Michel Foucault have analyzed at length the cultural implications of institutionalized spaces, noting the impact of such spaces on communication, artists like Laurie Anderson have performed such spaces as a communicative structure, one in which the relationship between elite and vernacular cultures is awkwardly reflected through an accumulation of details which, however consonant, reveal their suturings. In some societies (such as that of Brazil, for example) one necessarily observes the stratification of discursive practices in terms of pronounced class antagonisms; but in American culture one must interrogate the democratization of such practices, the blending of differences whose sharp edges or antagonisms are invaginated, fused, harmonized. In this sense, Anderson's postmodern work resembles an architecture adept at assimilating extremely heterogeneous modes of stylistic expression, a space in which

a hegemony of stylistic relations suggests an effacement of the line between dominator and dominated, even as the social subject has been defined in terms of the spatial and communicative relays particular to a postindustrial capitalist society. In Anderson this is often particularly relevant for the condition of woman – in large part, Anderson's social subject – to the extent that like *all* social subjects, she must perform in a way that stresses copying, imitating, borrowing, assimilating, appropriating, taking on styles, phrases, attitudes, forms, notions which come from outside – from a culture that prefers not to express domination in terms of subjecthood, in terms of naked power. Indeed, to exist in this kind of culture one must be prepared to be decentered, assimilated, appropriated, prepared to understand that living requires less and less effort from us, since success depends not upon being able to challenge the system and hence attempt to master it, but to acquiesce, as Blue Pacific does, to its resonances, its uncritical pathways of thought. Unfortunately, to perform successfully in such a life is to become like a dog in a "dog show," to become a floating signifier, to have people say, "that's a really good dog; I like that dog." Postmodernism is easy, provided one knows how to access others, how to perform the "map," how to say hello. "Can you say hello?"