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miya masaoka

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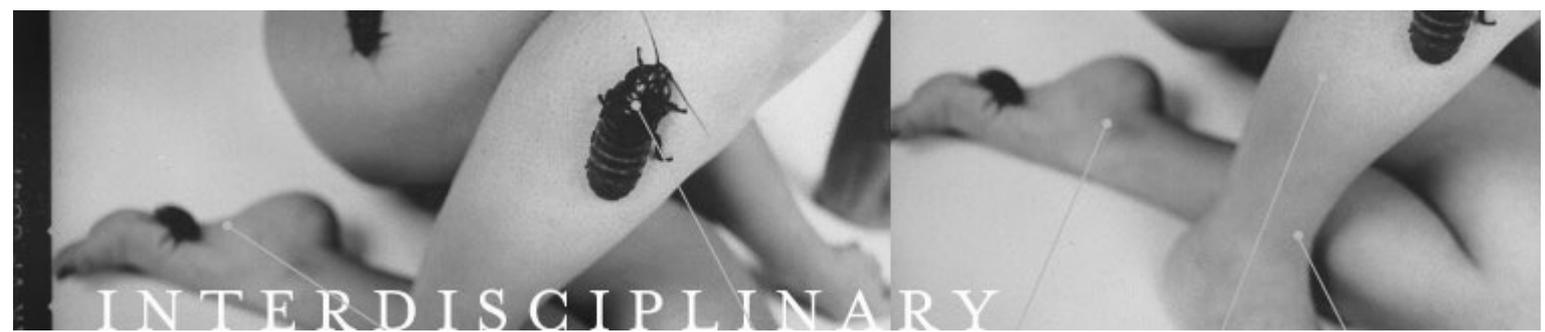
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Examining obsession

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by *Miya Masaoka*

October 20, 1999

Laurie Anderson talks about technology and audiences beyond the art world.

LAURIE ANDERSON HAS carved out a unique position in the American performance landscape. One of the few avant-garde artists to genuinely cross into the mainstream (she fills halls and stadiums worldwide and has seven recordings on Warner Bros. “Those were the days before they cared about making lots and lots of money,” Anderson, who now records for Nonesuch, says), she has remained reasonably unscathed.



Songs and Stories from Moby Dick, which opens at UC Berkeley's Zellerbach Hall Oct. 26, is her first large-scale multimedia production since 1995's *Stories from the Nerve Bible*. An extravaganza of image, sound, and philosophical ruminations, *Songs and Stories* combines enormous images of moving sharks eating themselves alive, three actors (in addition to Anderson), and a harpoon-shaped instrument called the Talking Stick, and renders the 19th-century epic a timeless backdrop for age-old questions. “What do you do if all the things that drive you — whether it’s fame, money, accomplishment — what if they disappear?” she asks. “What do you do then? How do you go on? Melville answers that in a fascinating way.

“I’m interested in those questions, too,” she says. “He came from a time of Emerson, Thoreau, transcendentalists, and people who really were Americans and were also workaholics. Still, we’re able to ask, ‘What are we doing here?’ ”

Master of minutiae, Anderson has an uncanny ability to tap the psyche and find meaning and humor in the most banal gestures of day-to-day existence, part of her charm, her success, and her shamanistic skill. She grafts the weighty novel *Moby-Dick* with her own sensibility, and one is struck with the realization that this is perhaps more than a good fit for Anderson's facile, anecdotal, jump-cutting style and fluid characters. Her musings can zigzag with the natural meandering of a whaling ship, yet have a solid deck on which to land from time to time.

Bay Guardian: *It's been a long road from performing with ice skates frozen in blocks of ice as you once did to performing on huge stages with large audiences and the glare of critics. Can you talk about how a common thread, how that artistic impulse is channeled into your multimedia Songs and Stories?*

LA: Yes, that was in 1974, and the ice blocks were a timing mechanism. I was playing my violin with the endless cassette loop, and when the ice melted, the show was over. That was for performing for people on the street, whoever was passing by. It was the first time I ever did anything for another kind of audience. It wasn't an art world audience. It taught me a lot about who I was trying to talk to and what kind of images I was trying to make. It was a breakthrough for me — doing things that were not directed towards the art world. I quickly understood that these non-art world people understood things very, very well. I didn't have to stay in that world. In many ways, that is what has been going on in my work, trying to resonate with people.

BG: *When Melville wrote Moby-Dick, it almost destroyed his career. With Moby-Dick he lost his readership, and the critics ignored it or said negative things.*

LA: Yeah, it sold about four copies. It really takes a few readings, there's so much in it, so many levels that it works on. I was inspired by the ideas, the imagery. I cut it down, boiled the blubber down to 90 minutes. My goal was to shape the questions: What are you looking for? What makes you go out and look for that? And to look at it from different angles.

BG: *Large pieces inherently involve collaboration with other artists and technicians. How do other members of the show's team contribute ideas to the development of the piece? Is there a collective process?*

LA: The interesting thing for me is working with actors, and it's been really fun watching them invent ways to move. Especially Tom Nelis, who's Ahab. We worked with different people who helped us move as a quartet, as performers. From Bill T. Jones, who came by and helped us, Myra Sapphron, who works with him, Davis Neuman, we had a lot of help with how to move. But in the end the performers invented their own ways — one of them by default: Tom Nelis fell into the orchestra pit in Philadelphia and broke his foot, so he had to do the rest on crutches. Now his foot is fine, but we thought the crutches were so great — he moves better on crutches than most people do on two feet.

BG: *Working with research institutions ... you worked with STEIM in 1992 developing the "invisible instrument," and now with Bob Bielecki and Interval Research developing the Talking Stick. You call it a digital sampler. What is in real time and what is not? Do you use any sensors? Are these all prerecorded samples or does it capture samples live as well?*

LA: It has some real time, but mostly not. No sensors. Mostly we using it for speed and volume, but it can be used in different ways depending on the software.

BG: *What language are you using for Talking Stick?*

LA: MAX. It's a wireless MIDI device that works on granular synthesis, so you can set the amount of definition that you want in a sound; it can be real gritty, or fine grained. It's shaped like a harpoon. I like to make instruments that are physical and not based on tech. It's six feet long and two inches in diameter.

Interval Research is one of the main sponsors for *Moby Dick*. I've worked with them for years, in a lot of new ways of using computers for sound and image. I visit once in a while, ask stupid questions, and sometimes the stupid questions are valuable, and sometimes its just tossing ideas around. There's such a tech explosion, and I try to work with it and resist it as well. The learning curve on a lot of this for artists is very steep. It's so addictive. I have the scanning disease. I want to scan everything in my computer and use the Fuzz Tool! It's so much fun to get involved with this stuff. In getting involved with it, though, as you know, often it's kind of easy to forget why you started doing it in the first place, because you get so involved in trying to make it work. The biggest danger, it's a big thing for me, knowing when to stop.

BG: *You hold a unique position in the art world, that of an artist who came from the avant-garde and has continued in your trajectory and successfully garnered a mass audience usually reserved for more commercial artists. The old adage is the more experimental, the smaller the audience. Have things changed?*

LA: It's tough for artists starting out, and maybe tougher than it was for me, because there aren't so many little art centers around — that kind of circuit isn't as strong as it used to be.

BG: *The loss of funding has had a huge impact on performance art as a genre.*

LA: And it's become a censor. There is zero money now — not that there ever was much money, but like when I started out, I got a \$500 Capp's grant, and I was *thrilled!* Just that someone noticed me.

BG: *What do you feel the impact of the loss of funding will be in the long run?*

LA: People will do stuff anyway if they really want to. And there is a really cool scene in New York anyway. There are artists doing stuff with just a chair, in their living room or their loft. Because there are no resources, no tech involved, what happens is that the writing becomes really good. It's stuff like monologuing, one-person things. You can erase a lot of the support systems (we have a situation where the mayor is trying to shut down a museum), but artists will work no matter what.

BG: *It's such a straw dog.*

LA: It is such an embarrassment to our city. And infuriating. It puts artists in the position of having to go, "Freedom of speech, yadi ya. Yes private, yes public, yes, no." Having to say, "Listen, Rudy, if you don't like this image in a library, will you shut the library down? Where are you going to stop? Just because *you* don't like it." For any artist it's kind of a testing ground, and as usual it will probably irritate enough artists so they make more things like that.

BG: *Does improvisation play a role in any of your work?*

LA: In solo things it does a lot. That's why every other piece I do is solo. It has a lot of tech stuff but I mix it myself. It's harder in something like this — we have to improvise if something doesn't work, and we have plans to improvise, but so far we haven't had to do too much of that. Because everything is capable of major crashes. But we do have backups of everything, and other ways to do things, like, "Thanks, we're ending the show here." But so far the worst was having Tommy falling into the pit. I had to put on the cap and do his lines.

BG: *In recent years new technologies such as the interactive CD-ROM, digital media manipulation, and Web-based hypermedia have become more commonplace, and, some say, heavily commercialized. Do you still have an optimistic, enthusiastic attitude towards the role these technologies will play in the arts?*

LA: I think they're useful for some things, I think that they don't sound or look very good — yes, yes, DVD will make it sound better and look better, but it's like I'm doing this really sloppy, messy three-dimensional theater thing, sort of as a reaction to the digital world,

BG: *You call your production sloppy and messy? Are you kidding?*

LA:

Well, you know, it's big, lots of big projections and things; it's run by lots of computers and made by lots and lots of computers. You don't really feel that it's very, let's say, "perfect," the way you can make a DVD "perfect." You edit it until it's perfect. The reason for that is my tirade against rectangles. I just hate them so much, I stare at them so much, you know: I do music on Pro Tools, I do the graphics on Photoshop and Premiere and After Effects, and I do the text in Microsoft Word, and I communicate with everybody by sending images and text and sound all over the place. I open up my computer, and it says, "Laurie's Hard Drive" and I think, "Oh my god, I'm trapped in there!" My life is in this box in there and it won't fit! It's a creepy feeling, being in there like that *feeling* that I'm getting sucked into that.

BG: *What are some other limitations of the digital world?*

LA:

The clearest example for me is silence. If we used silence in our conversation right now, or if you use silence in a theatrical situation, it can be very powerful. If you're in a conversation with someone, you're looking at them, and they're looking at you, and you stop talking, stop using language as your medium, and realize, "Oh my God, I'm looking at this person, their eyes and their hair, and they're looking at me, and they're seeing a lot of things that they're not saying, and their minds are working overtime getting all this information, and if you do that with a computer and any system that you're working with, it just shuts off — there's nothing going on, so *power down!*"

BG: *The use of computers changes the process of art-making on so many levels — their role as a rigid interface,*

shaping how work is created, storing work, transferring work — their impact is not insignificant. The problem that can arise is that because we are so dependent on them, we think of them as being ahead. Yet one thing people have to remember about computers is that they are how people thought yesterday, they're frozen, already off the shelves ...

LA: That's a good way of looking at it. But even if they do start catching up, it's a long way before they have the sixth sense that we do to understand and feel actual connection to other people, because theater changes things. I do feel that connection to people, and it changes the way work is done, making it more a collaboration. It's that way on a lot of levels for me — a collaboration with the people I work with, collaborating with the actors, and finally collaborating with the audience. It's amazing how much that changes things. Like the first night at the Brooklyn Academy of Music, and most people were donors, and you say something that is, well, funny, and somebody was laughing in the audience, and two other people said, "Shh, be quiet!" Like it was supposed to be sacrosanct. It was odd. It's really so much more fun when people, and when the audience goes, "I'll go along with that."

BG: *How do you approach the suspension of reality required of the audience for such a piece?*

LA: For me, it's very much about the jump cut. I usually think you've got to establish the width of your jump cut very early. In a show like this one, you have to say, here's the logical leap that we're asking you to make, and if people understand how far they need to jump early on, then it's less disturbing.

By page three of *Moby-Dick*, the so-called Ishmael character says, "Call me Ishmael" — which is the biggest trick line in the book — and immediately abandons that and starts jumping, starts talking about other things in other narrative styles. That has been my premise as well, as a writer: "Oh that reminds me, and by the way," that kind of thing. It's all about asides and all about taking the very long way about a story. Which is what Melville does, too. He says, "I'm traveling like a whaler." And that's not like how a merchant ship travels. A merchant ship delivers its cargo and goes from point A to point B. A whaler is out in a zigzag pattern, just looking, looking, looking. It's all about looking for something.

Laurie Anderson performs Songs and Stories from Moby Dick Tues/26-Sat/30, 8 p.m., Zellerbach Hall, UC Berkeley, Bancroft at Telegraph, Berk. \$18-\$42.  **(510) 642-9988** .

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