

Kevin Concannon, "Laurie Anderson," *Art New England*, April 1983, pp. 6-7.



Laurie Anderson

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Berklee Performance Center/Boston
Laurie Anderson

Laurie Anderson's widely anticipated media extravaganza, *United States*, landed briefly in Boston last month for four performances to benefit Cambridge's vanguard media arts organization, Center Screen.

Anderson performed without a band, occasionally accompanied by saxophonist Perry Hoberman (who doubles as projectionist), on a stage dominated by a large, imposing projection screen, keyboard at each side, and a podium center stage.

Anderson's newly found popularity rests largely upon the success of her debut album, *Big Science*, which includes the hit *O Superman*. And although the crowds at the Berklee Performance Center were clearly drawn from this audience, Anderson conspicuously omitted the song from her program, which featured selections from parts III and IV of the *United States* cycle. While Anderson thus avoided pandering to the pop crowd in the most obvious possible way, she nonetheless carried off the role of the ingratiating chanteuse-on-the-charts.

In a brief program statement, Anderson asserts that *United States* describes not simply a country but any technological society. What *United States* describes, however, is not a country or a society but rather the world of Laurie Anderson the artist, the personality. On several occasions Anderson mounted the center-screen podium, affecting the air of a high priestess on the altar, serenading the stream of images with her quirky violin playing. With this recurring gesture, the element of distance which has characterized her work to date was transgressed. She compares her work to that of Melville, Hemingway, and Mark Twain, claiming to share their perspective: off shore, on the road. The spoken pieces in the performance, however, were replete with self-reference—not of the modernist variety but rather of a self-serving nature.

In *New York Social Life* she reminds her new fans of her artistic credentials through a "conversation" with her dealer: "Hi Laurie! How's your work going?" "Oh great. How are things selling?" "Oh well, it's not the 70s, you know. You just keep working. We'll have to have lunch." At another point she recites a review of her show: "Laurie Anderson: a baffling blend of music, slides, tapes . . ."

Anderson shone brightest with her comic sight gags. (In several recent interviews she has stated that she sees herself as following in the great tradition of stand-up comics, citing Lenny Bruce.) In *False Documents*, a piece about a gypsy who misreads her palm, Anderson dons an extra pair of arms. She assumes that there must be a "translation problem," but before she can extend her other palm for clarification, the gypsy offers her own. She is waiting for money.

This humorous vignette provokes a disturbing analogy. Is Laurie Anderson finding or losing her true identity? If she chooses the path of pop stardom, she'd better check out the competition. Devo has stood the test of time with similar fare, less pretension, and more cohesive results. And fewer people know their names.

Kevin Concannon