

THE KITCHEN

CENTER FOR
VIDEO, MUSIC
AND DANCE

ART IN AMERICA
March 1981

Amplifications: Laurie Anderson



• "The satellites are out tonight":
• from Laurie Anderson's *United
States, Part II*. Photo Paula Court.

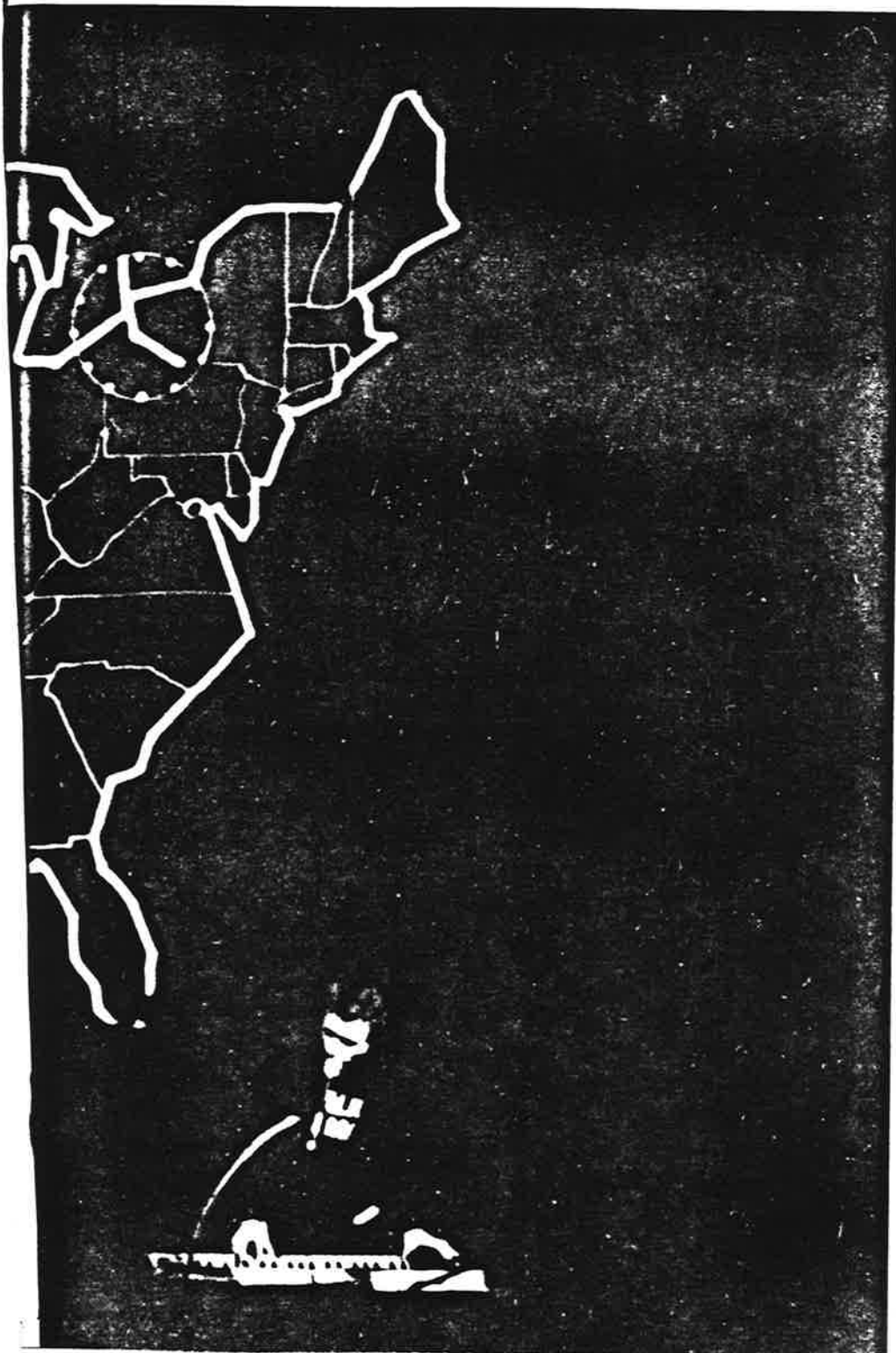
In "United States, Part II," a kaleidoscopic portrait of America on the brink of disaster, Anderson collaborated with the technology of electronic sound reproduction in such a way that she was multiplied into a variety of characters, voices and personas. Thus pluralized, she was stripped of the unique presence in space and time associated with performance art.

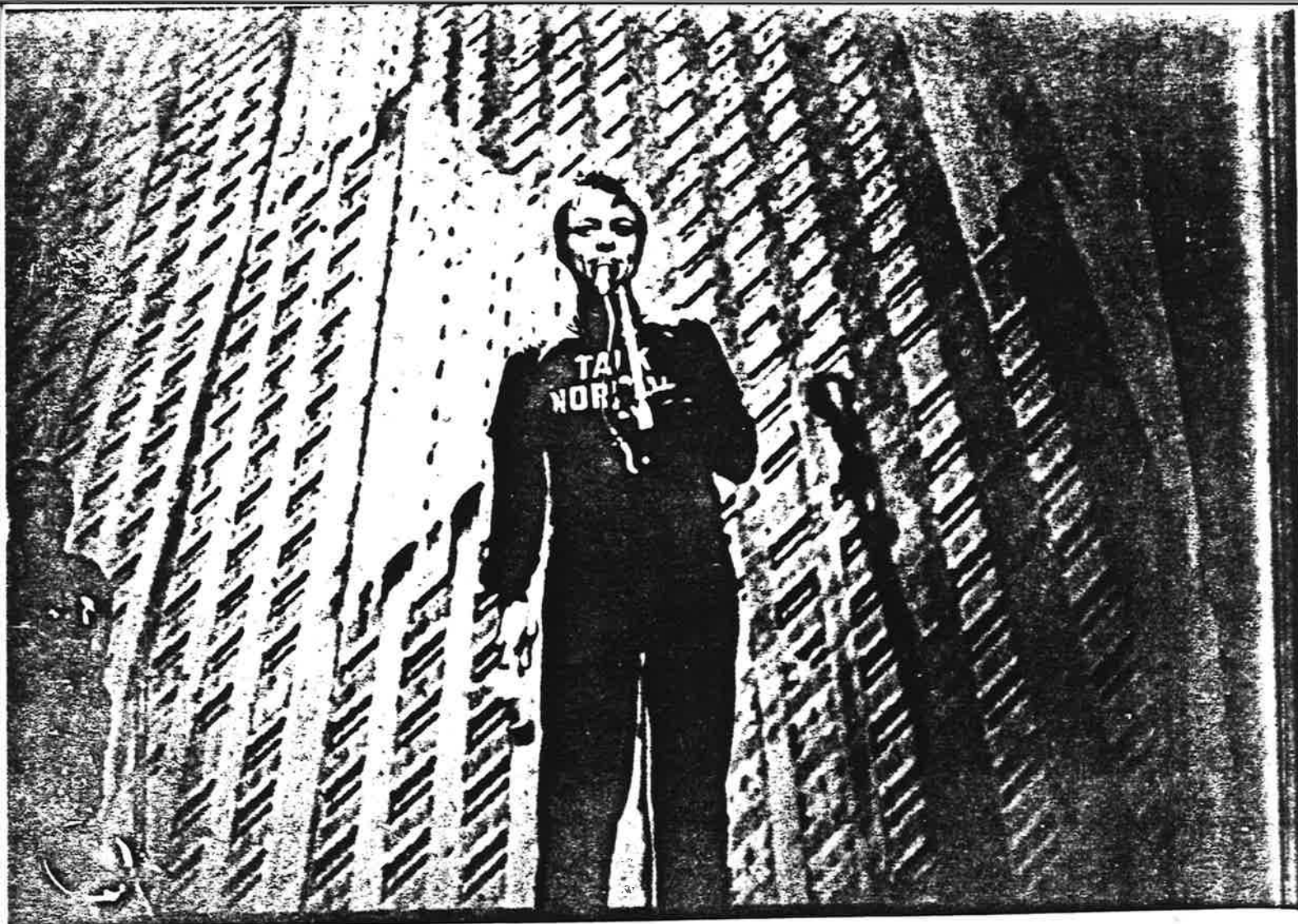
BY CRAIG OWENS

Laurie Anderson is a writer, composer, inventor, draftsman, photographer, filmmaker and musician. (The only activities conspicuously missing from this list are, of course, painting and sculpture.) Sometimes she mounts sound installations in galleries or museums; for the past two years she has been producing a record album; her texts have been published in a number of periodicals. But her activity as an artist is focused primarily in the performances she stages, approximately one new work each year.

For Anderson, performance is the mode which best allows the coordination of the multiple mediums in which she works. Thus, she has developed a format of thematically interrelated "songs" linked by verbal and musical interludes, supplemented with visual accompaniment (slides, films). While in her early works this format took the form of a recital—a musical program dominated by a single voice—her recent productions have become concerts—musical performances by several voices or instruments or both. While she often employs additional musicians, Anderson achieves the pluralization implicit in the concert form not by granting them equal status with her, but by submitting herself to an array of electronic devices which effectively multiplies her presence.

The distinction between "recital" and "concert" is equivalent to that which recent criticism draws between considering literature as either "work" or "text." Singular and univocal, the work is an object produced by an author; whereas the text is a permutational field of citations and correspondences, in which multiple voices blend and clash. (The text can span several works, as in Proust's seven-part novel.) Anderson's most recent "text," then, is to be a four-part panorama of contemporary American life. Part one, *Americans on the Move*, was presented in the





From "Don't Look Down," United States, Part II. Photo Paula Court.

spring of 1979 at The Kitchen; it dealt with transportation as a metaphor for communication—the transfer of meaning from one place to another. *United States, Part II* was presented last October at the Orpheum Theater, a converted vaudeville house on Manhattan's Lower East Side. Parts three and four are projected for this spring.

US II marked Anderson's recent transformation from a radiant mid-western Madonna into an expressionless, neuter "punk"—a transformation that corresponds to a shift in musical styles. Anderson's early, innocent musical vignettes have been replaced by the high theatricality and style-consciousness of "new wave." Musical styles imply specific personal styles; yet Anderson does not identify herself with either. Rather, she quotes them and, in so doing, maintains a distance between herself and her material. The Laurie Anderson we experience is clearly an assumed persona.

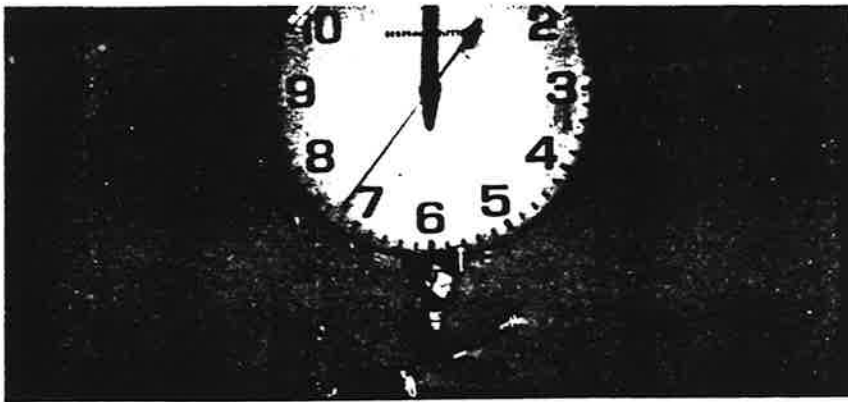
US II—13 musical numbers performed by Anderson and a five-person back-up group—imitated the format of

the rock concert and had the elaborate visual presentation associated with it. In previous works, Anderson's texts frequently proceeded as commentary on her images and their opacity, their resistance to explanation. But here the visuals—her most sophisticated to date—seemed designed to amplify her verbal and musical material. Using both film and slide projections, sometimes simultaneously, she presented a kaleidoscopic montage of metropolitan life: aerial photographs of New York City, sometimes in negative, sometimes enlarged so that the halftone screen was visible; skyscrapers; the Statue of Liberty; subway cars arriving and departing with monotonous regularity.

In terms of content, *US II* was overtly political, an image of America on the brink of disaster. A swarm of insectile helicopters hovered over a map of the Middle East. A film of the electronic video game *Space Invaders* was projected over a map of the United States. The evening concluded with a portentous vision of nuclear meltdown, as a film of the American flag spinning in a

washing machine—literally, being laundered—was superimposed over a negative image of the Statue of Liberty, its whites intensified, as if subjected to intense heat. The political message was clear; of all Anderson's works, this seemed to be the one in which her voice—in the sense of an opinion or position—was most unmistakable.

Yet we also identify an artist's voice as his or her presence in the work, and in this sense it was extremely difficult, if not impossible to locate Anderson's "voice." This is because the only access to herself that she allows is through all kinds of technological filters which amplify, distort and multiply her actual voice in such a way that it can no longer be identified as hers. Collaboration with the technology of sound reproduction characterizes Anderson's recent work, marking a radical shift in the direction of what has come to be known as performance art, a shift away from the esthetics of presence which has dominated that mode since its inception.



Magnified images dwarf the performer, distancing her further from us.



Anderson "transformed." Both photos Paula Court.

US II opened with a hallucinatory narrative about the French using babies in carriages as "traffic-testers." Anderson, standing center stage, isolated in the glare of a white spotlight, directly addressed the audience, using the first person: "I've been traveling a lot lately. . . ." Yet the voice we heard was clearly not her own, but that of the drawling, endearing simpleton now familiar to Anderson's followers and unavoidably reminiscent of Jack Benny. Anderson creates this character through the use of a harmonizer, an electronic device used primarily by musicians and which, in this instance, dropped her voice an octave. If to act is to assume a character, then Anderson does not act; she creates her characters electronically.

The text Anderson recited (and several others in *US II*) was recycled from her exhibition last year at Holly Solomon, where she presented a cast of characters in blurred photographic blowups, each accompanied by a short narrative text. Anderson, her voice electronically disguised, recorded these texts—accounts of dreams—on cassettes, which were playable on a console in the center of the room. The "re-run"—the incorporation of previous material into new work—illuminates the central role of technology in all her work: after all, technology has been defined as a way of doing things in a reproducible manner.

Criticism of dramatic texts conventionally interprets an author's characters as his spokespersons and attempts to locate the author's voice behind his characters'. That is, the author is supposed to speak through his characters; but Anderson's characters appear to speak through her. She is the medium which so many incorporeal voices require in order to communicate with us, the body they temporarily assume. (She also frequently treats herself as the physical medium of her work; in one of the most astonishing sequences

in *US II*, she used her own cranium as a percussion instrument, striking it with her fingers and electronically amplifying the sound.) But if Anderson treats herself as medium, then it is the technology facilitating this effect that becomes the subject of her work.

Thus, in the first song in *US II*—"Superman," a viciously ironic paean to a "superpower"—Anderson faced the audience from behind a keyboard, intoning the lyric into a microphone. Yet the sound that emerged was that of a chorus: Anderson was not accompanying herself on the keyboard; she was actually *playing her own voice*, multiplying it, and electronically modulating its pitch. Today, the singer need only speak; her equipment sings for her.

At the origins of what would eventually emerge as performance art, Robert Morris and Yvonne Rainer reduced the role of the performer to that of, in Rainer's words, "a neutral doer." The performer was no longer to project a persona to the audience; rather, he or she was identified in terms of the tasks he or she was called upon to execute. As radical as it may have appeared in the early '60s, this strategy, arising as it did out of a Minimalist esthetic, actually preserved the uniqueness and nonreproducibility of esthetic experience. Because the activities we witnessed referred to nothing anterior or exterior to their execution, our experience of the work was concentrated as an experience of pure *presence*. (In a similar way, the frequent use of repetition in Minimalist performance was designed to demonstrate the impossibility of perceiving the same material as the same; each time it was performed, it was different, hence unique.)

Most performance art is rooted in this strategy, defining the performing situation as, literally, the copresence of performer and spectator, much in the way that Minimalist sculptural instal-

lations require the presence and participation of the viewer in order to demonstrate the way in which perception is wholly immersed in and dependent upon the temporal and spatial conditions of viewing. Anderson, of course, is physically present on stage, but she interrupts the fantasy of copresence that links performer and spectator by interposing electronic media between them. She no longer performs directly for her audience, but only through an electronic medium. While the media literally magnify her presence, they also strip it from her. Her work thus extends and amplifies the feeling of estrangement that overcomes the performer who submits to a mechanical or electronic device: the film actor or recording artist.

Anderson presents a technologically cluttered landscape. Not only is her stage littered with mikes, amps, speakers, and other paraphernalia; she also represents America as thoroughly saturated by technology. In *US II*'s contemporary love song "Let X=X," it is no longer the stars, but satellites that come out at night: technology has eclipsed nature as the artist's subject. Today our experience of the world is comprised largely of the representations we make of it in photographs, films, on television. Yet the media present an "equipment-free"—the phrase is Walter Benjamin's—view of reality; except through elaborate acrobatics, the camera cannot account for its own presence in the scene it records. Like the eye of the perceiving subject for which it is a surrogate, the camera is that blind spot or "stain" in every image which permits the fantasy of presence—of reality directly perceived—to flourish. Anderson, by exposing rather than concealing the equipment through which she represents herself, destroys that fantasy. In its place, she shows us a world denatured by technology, and a self fragmented, pluralized, and thus dispossessed by its own representations. □