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HALEAKALA, INC.
59 WOOSTER
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NEW YORK
10012

(212) 925-3615

Laurie Anderson Grows as a Performance Artist

LAURIE ANDERSON, who will be at the Orpheum Theater on Second Avenue tonight at 7:30 and 10 and tomorrow night at 7:30, is a "performance artist" — a term that often draws blank stares of incomprehension from those outside the vanguard arts scene. Yet Miss Anderson is about the best and most popular practitioner of that art form. She has appeared here frequently, she tours Europe regularly, and she has won all sorts of critical acclaim.

Performance art has its roots in the cavortings of Futurists, Dadaists and Surrealists in the first decades of the century, and in the happenings of the 1960's. But it is really a 70's phenomenon, the product of visual artists who felt constrained by the static, impersonal nature of a conventional exhibition and chose to involve themselves directly with the audience's perception of their work.

Miss Anderson was born in Chicago in 1947 and has lived in New York since she came to Barnard College in 1966. She has a B.A. from Barnard in art history and a Master of Fine Arts from Columbia University in sculpture; she also studied with Sol LeWitt. But her work had moved decisively into the area of performance by the mid-70's,

and her reputation has developed rapidly both here and in Europe, where American performing artists, composers and theater people have often received a more sustained and sophisticated welcome than they do in their native land.

Miss Anderson's performance art is unusual in that she is a composer, as well. She plays the violin, and practiced it steadily until 1969. "I have seven brothers and sisters, and we had a family orchestra while I was growing up in Wayne, Ill., which is in horse country about 50 miles outside of Chicago," she recalled the other day in a coffee shop on Second Avenue. "Giving up practicing the violin was one of the few things in my life that I am really proud of. I was becoming a technocrat, and I wanted to do other things, too."

Those "other things" include poetry, composition and the overall shaping of a visual environment for her pieces. Many kinds of "performance art" are in reality embryonic operas, mixed-media experiments that may soon blossom into full-scale pieces of musical theater. Miss Anderson says her work has been consistently based on words and their declamation. Over the past few years the scope of her ambition has broadened. The words are sung as well—

as spoken; the textural references have expanded out to include more than just first-person narrative; slides and films and even other characters now populate the stage.

All of this might sound just a bit self-indulgent, but Miss Anderson controls the flow of her material with a rare sensitivity and wit. Her program at the Orpheum consists of most of the second part of Part 2 of a cycle called "United States." Miss Anderson said that she hopes to mount the full, four-part, six-hour cycle somewhere in New York in the spring.

The texts are cryptic yet somehow warmly accessible, too. They partake of popular song and street poetry, yet aspire beyond that. The music, in turn, often recalls underground New York rock in its energy and coolly minimalist drama. But it is also entirely idiosyncratic, with layers of heavily filtered vocal sounds meshing with sound effects and, at the Orpheum, four live instrumentalists along with Miss Anderson's violin.

With her punk haircut and waiflike demeanor, Miss Anderson might seem so much the product of Manhattan's SoHo that she was limited by it. Yet she is by no means just a local favorite. Since 1976 her European performance

schedule has grown steadily, such that now she spends over half the year abroad or performing elsewhere in the United States.

Last May she completed her first orchestral score, an extended performance piece entitled "Born, Never Asked" that received its premiere from Robert Hughes and the Oakland (Calif.) Youth Symphony. Dennis Russell Davies, the forward-looking conductor who recently left the St. Paul Chamber Orchestra for the Stuttgart Opera and other German posts, has suggested to Miss Anderson that she expand the orchestral score into a full-length piece of musical theater, scheduled for Cologne in 1982.

Credentials mean something only insofar as they reflect the genuine interest that people have in an artist. Miss Anderson has won that sort of supportive attention from connoisseurs ranging from punks to European opera directors to intellectuals of the avant-garde. But ultimately what makes her performances noteworthy even to those who stand outside such categories is the sheer charm and energy of her work: she is a powerful creator and a powerful performer, and such phenomena don't come along all that often.

John Rockwell