



# LAURIE ANDERSON: INVENTED INSTRUMENTS

Thursday, April 26–Saturday, June 9, 2018  
Ruth C. Horton Gallery

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# LAURIE ANDERSON: INVENTED INSTRUMENTS

"I wrote the song *O Superman* in 1980. It was about the failure of the hostage rescue mission in Iran when several helicopters crashed and burned in the desert in what was meant to be a demonstration of American technology and daring."<sup>1</sup>

In the introduction to her most recent book, *All the Things I Lost in the Flood: Essays on Pictures, Language, and Code*, Laurie Anderson offers, "At the root of all of these works are stories. They are the engines. Stories and words are what I love most.... This is a book about the many different strategies I've used to put words and stories into things."<sup>2</sup> Many people, of course, would assume that Anderson is all about multimedia technologies. "It's practical to use, but I don't want to venerate it. I want to be able to control it. When I catch myself thinking it's great, I tell myself that I'm a consumer who is only abiding by the laws of this global world where you have to have more and more and go faster and faster."<sup>3</sup>

This story is about Anderson's arsenal of invented musical instruments. A violinist since childhood, it is her alter ego. "It does my singing. With the violin I'm a little like a ventriloquist with a puppet. With the violin I can be the sensible person while it plays the madness in me."<sup>4</sup> Duets were often an explicit part of the stories Anderson told with her violins. Among her earliest performances was a piece called *As:If* (1974), which featured a prerecorded tape whose words she also spoke in real time, albeit slightly out of sync. At one point during the performance, she pours water into the violin and continues playing it—a "prepared" violin. Anderson describes *As:If* as a collection of stories about stories; the key story concerns a childhood drowning, thus the drowned sound of the violin.

The following year, she performed *Duets on Ice* (1975) in New York City and in Genoa, Italy. For *Duets*, she created the *Self-Playing Violin*, pictured here, which included, which included a prerecorded violin part emanating from a speaker in the instrument's body. As she played for passersby, she told a story about walking onto a frozen lake on the day her grandmother died, encountering a group of ducks whose feet were frozen into a layer of ice. Anderson performed with her own feet in ice skates frozen into blocks of ice; the performance ended when the blocks melted and she lost her balance.

For the *Tape Bow Violin* (1977), perhaps her most famous invented instrument (created in collaboration with Bob Bielecki), a tape playback head from a reel-to-reel tape recorder was mounted on the violin body, from

which the strings had been removed. A series of bows were also prepared, replacing the horsehair with strips of prerecorded audiotape, containing a variety of sounds. The *Tape Bow Violin* captured the imagination of the *Roanoke Times* and *World News* critic covering Anderson's 1981 Virginia Tech performance. "When the bow, equipped with a length of audiotape, is pulled across the tape playback head attached to the instrument, the sound that emerges is not that of the violin but a recording of anything from drums to the human voice. 'It's disorienting. What you're seeing is not what you're hearing,' explained Ms. Anderson. When the bow is pulled backwards, words like 'yes' come out 'say.'"<sup>5</sup>

Discussing a 1978 performance of *Say What You Mean and Mean What You Say* at Otis Art Institute in Los Angeles, critic James Moisan observed, "When she ran the tape across the head, the words were amplified and distorted, depending on the direction and speed of the bow. 'Say' backwards sounds like 'yes.' A fast bow resulted in an aspirate screech or scream, a slow bow in a groan or masculine voice."<sup>6</sup>

"I used this instrument to play lots of sounds, initially car crashes, saxophones, and barking dogs. Later I began to work with audio palindromes, words that produce different words when reversed. Audio palindromes are not predictable like spelling inversions. 'God' is always 'dog' backwards. With a lot of experimentation, I produced songs for this instruments that could be played forwards and backwards. *Say What You Mean and Mean What You Say* can be played in many backwards and forwards combinations since 'no' sounds like 'one' backwards, 'say' sounds like 'yes,' and 'mean' sounds like 'name.'"<sup>7</sup>

Asked what inspired the *Tape Bow Violin*, she explained, "I was playing the violin and trying to edit tape at the same time, and it was the same kind of rocking motion. You know, editing tape across the tape head and then quickly going in to play and record the violin. Pretty soon you start connecting them. That was all it was."<sup>8</sup>

On at least a few occasions, Anderson wired her own body for percussive sound. *Drum Glasses* (a.k.a. *Head Knock*), 1979, for example, amplified the sounds of Anderson striking her own skull. Trudy Willis described them as well in her 1981 review of the Virginia Tech performance. "Anderson's props included a plastic hammer.... A [contact] microphone taped to her glasses captured the beats as Ms. Anderson rapped her head with the plastic hammer."<sup>9</sup>





▲ Laurie Anderson performing in *Drum Suit*; image courtesy of the artist

Natural and architectural spaces have also been transformed by Anderson to produce sound. *Duet for Violin and Door Jamb* (1976) incorporated contact microphones as well. Standing in a doorway in which the jambs have been wired with contact mics, Anderson played violin. The width of the doorway determined the maximum length she could draw her bow across the strings before hitting the jambs. And when hit, they produced percussive sounds layered over the violin. Kicking the door open and shut supplemented the bow strikes on the jambs.

Among her most compelling audio installations, *Note/Tone*—originally shown as *Quartet #1 for Four (Subsequent) Listeners*, 1978—also exploits the idea of audio palindromes. A group of four speakers and triggering sensors placed along a path of light (marked “note” at one end and “tone” at the other) in an otherwise darkened gallery plays the sounds N-O-T-E in one direction, T-O-N-E in the opposite. Madeleine Burnside said, “...this piece requires the viewer to compose his or her own version of the work. The four noises are simple in themselves: two tones played on a violin are repeated over and over, the artist hums an approximation of the tones, there is the repeated voicing of a glottal stop and variations in pink noise. But this is a simplicity of elegance and produces a rich series of variations.”<sup>10</sup>

Richard Lorber, writing for *Artforum*, describes it similarly. “Moving along the shining line one hears from subsequent speakers repeating tape loops of a mellow violin phrase, a softly humming voice, another voice articulating ‘te te te te...’ and an indeterminate whoosh of traffic, wind, surf. A kind of ‘space smearing’ also occurs in that the triggering of any one sound produces a faintly audible

response from the neighboring speakers—intended, perhaps, as an acoustical lap-dissolve.”<sup>11</sup> Yet another writer described “four sequential sounds—‘nnnn,’ ‘oooo,’ ‘tttt,’ and traffic noise.”<sup>12</sup>

Writing about the *Tape Bow Violin* and its audio palindromes, James Moisan said, “Meanings fade in and out as sound frequencies went in and out of the spectrum of language and human perception. The piece was an evocation of the precarious nature of language.” Apparently, this observation holds true for the triggered sounds of *Note/Tone* as well.

At the Moore College of Art in Philadelphia, Anderson showed *Door and Wall Songs*, a group of audio installations including *Door Mat Love Song*. Using tape playback heads mounted to the bottoms of both standard and sliding doors, she embedded tapes in the floor that produced different phrases in different directions and distances. For *Door Mat Love Song*, “variations in the phrase derive from these seven words: *Audio Palindrome*

*“You...always...hurt...the...one*

*You always hurt*

*turns*

*what turns*

*hurts*

*the one you love*

*no evil*

*your turn*

*turn etc.”<sup>13</sup>*

While *Note/Tone* and *Door and Wall Songs* offered very public interactions, Anderson also showed *Handphone Table* (1978) the same year, a decidedly more private interaction. She said, "I decided to build a talking table. Inside the table were cassette decks and powerful drivers, which compressed the sounds and drove them up steel rods. The tip of those rods touched four plugs resembling pine knots embedded in the surface of the table. When you put your elbows on these plugs the sound rose through your arms via bone conduction. When you put your hands over your ears it was like putting on a pair of powerful headphones. Your hands became headphones. I wrote three songs for *Handphone Table*. The first song was a duet for two bass lines. On the left side was an acoustic piano with all the ringing harmonics. On the right side was a Fender Rhodes bass line. The sounds gradually panned from ear to ear. Another song was for violin, which was panned very extremely so it seemed like the bow was being drawn through your head."<sup>13</sup>

Anderson's great gift is indeed as a storyteller, but more specifically as a storyteller with an exceptional talent for making instruments and installations that demonstrate the limits and possibilities of language itself.

Kevin Concannon, Ph.D.  
Curator, *Invented Instruments*  
Director, School of Visual Arts, Virginia Tech

<sup>1</sup> Laurie Anderson, "This Must be the Place," from *All the Things I Lost in the Flood: Essays on Pictures, Language, and Code* (New York: Rizolli Electa, 2018), 53.

<sup>2</sup> Anderson, "Introduction," from *All the Things I Lost in the Flood*, 10.

<sup>3</sup> Anderson quoted in Jacqueline Caux, "Laurie Anderson," *art press*, no. 285 (December 2002), 27.

<sup>4</sup> Anderson in Caux, 29.

<sup>5</sup> Trudy Willis, "She Says It's Art," *Roanoke Times and World News*, 13 April 1981, C2.

<sup>6</sup> James Moisan, "Laurie Anderson Talks, Sings, Plays," *Artweek 9* (April 8, 1978), 13.

<sup>7</sup> Anderson, "Speak My Language," in *All the Things I Lost in the Flood*, 212.

<sup>8</sup> Anderson in conversation with the author, 4 January 1988.

<sup>9</sup> Willis, C1.

<sup>10</sup> Madeleine Burnside, "Review: Laurie Anderson," *ARTnews* (November 1978), 196.

<sup>11</sup> Richard Lorber, "Laurie Anderson: Holly Solomon and Museum of Modern Art," *Artforum* (December 1978), 69.

<sup>12</sup> Anderson, *Record of the Time*, ex. cat., 111-12.

<sup>13</sup> Christina Kubisch, "Time into Space/Space into Time: New Sound Installations," *Flash Art* (March/April 1979), 17.

## About the Artist

Acclaimed as one of the major performance artists of our time, Laurie Anderson is a composer, musician, storyteller, and film director whose work spans performance art, pop music, and multimedia projects. Initially trained in violin and sculpture, Anderson became recognized worldwide as a groundbreaking leader in the use of technology in the arts. Her work as a performance artist has been presented throughout the world, and her visual art has been presented in major museums throughout the United States and Europe.

For more information, please visit [laurieanderson.com](http://laurieanderson.com).

► Laurie Anderson  
Photo by Canal Street Productions

### ON THE FIRST PAGE:

*Digital Violin*, 1985  
Designed by Laurie Anderson with Max Matthews  
Violin with Synclavier interface  
6 x 26 x 10 inches  
Image courtesy of the artist

### ON THE COVER:

Image from *Drum Glasses* (a.k.a. *Head Knock*), 1979  
Video  
Dimensions variable  
Courtesy of the artist



## Curator's Acknowledgements

Thank you, Laurie Anderson, for your incredible work and generosity. It's a privilege to work with you and to share your work with our audiences. Jason Stern, thank you for your patience over the many months as this project developed; we are grateful for your diligence, your insights, and your good humor.

In planning the exhibition, thanks to Executive Director and Associate Provost for the Arts Ruth Waalkes, Moss Arts Center Curator at Large Margo Crutchfield, and Exhibitions Program Manager Meggin Hicklin.

Jasmine Edison at the School of Visual Arts and Trey King at the School of Architecture + Design provided invaluable research assistance.

Marcello Dantas, director, Magnetoscopio LLC, São Paulo, Brasil, curator of a spectacular 2010 exhibition of Anderson's work, has extended tremendous professional courtesy, answering numerous questions and providing key information.

Thanks to Ben Knapp and Ico Bukvic, organizers of this year's NIME conference, for providing the perfect opportunity to realize this dream!

## Works in the Exhibition

All works are collection of the artist.

### Invented Instruments

*Viophonograph*, 1977/2010

Instrument and electronics

24 x 24 x 6 inches

*Tape Bow Violin*, 1977/2010

Created in collaboration with Bob Bielecki

Instrument, magnetic tape, and magnetic tape playback head

24 x 24 x 6 inches

*Drum Glasses (a.k.a. Head Knock)*, 1979

Video

Dimensions variable

Projected in the exhibition at 12 x 10 feet

*Talking Stick*, 1998

With Bob Bielecki and Interval Research

Cylindrical aluminum instrument with electronics and controllers

60 inches

*Talking Pillow*, 1977-1997

Pillow, speakers, and media player

20 x 10 x 6 inches

*Tilt*, 1996

Aluminum level with speakers

24 inches

*Drum Suit (from Home of the Brave)*, 1986

Video projection

Dimensions variable

*Digital Violin* (designed by Max Matthews), 1985

Violin with Synclavier interface

6 x 26 x 10 inches

### Drawings and Documentation

Digital reproductions of original scans

Dimensions variable

*Three Architexts*, 1978

*Doormat Palindrome*, 1978

*Acoustic Lens*, 1978

*The Handphone Table* (Conceptual Drawing), 1978

*Cassette in Mouth/Pillow Speaker*, 1978

*Note/Tone*, 1978

*Artist Playing the Viophonograph*, 1977

*Tape Bow Violin Drawing*, 1977

*Stereo Decoy*, 1977

*Quartet in Quarter Notes for Sol Lewitt*, 1977

*Duet for Violin and Doorjamb*, 1976

*Duets on Ice, Genoa*, 1975

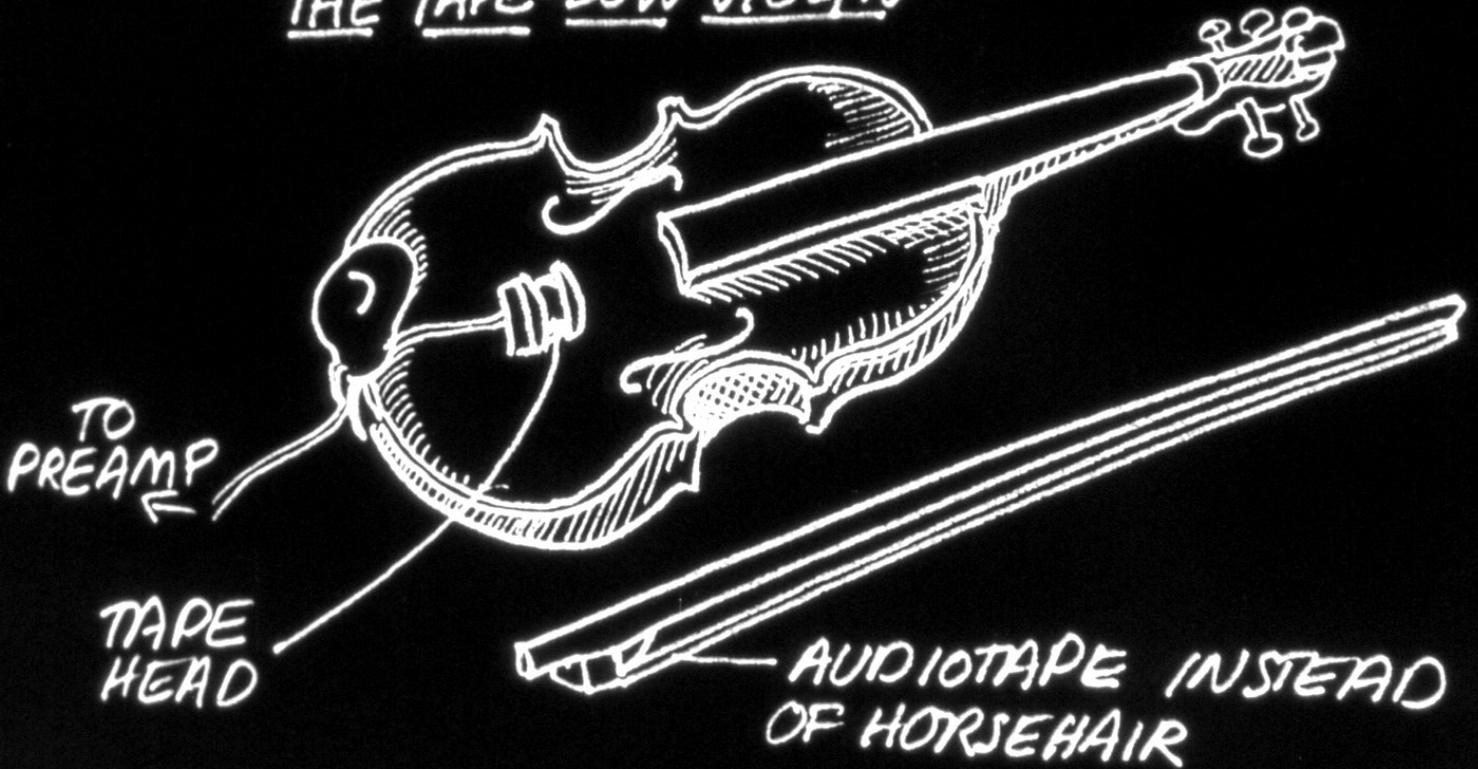
*Duets on Ice, from Notebook*, 1975

*As:If: (Playing a Violin Filled with Water)*, 1974

*As:If: Duck Decoy Drawing*, 1974

*Chord for a Room*, 1972

# THE TAPE-BOW VIOLIN



▲ Tape Bow Violin Drawing, 1977; courtesy of the artist

## Also on View

SoundScapes

Thursday, May 17–Saturday, June 9, 2018

Sherwood Payne Quillen '71 Reception Gallery  
and Miles C. Horton Jr. Gallery

ICAT: Open (at the) Source

Trace

Monday, April 30–Saturday, June 9, 2018

Francis T. Eck Exhibition Corridor

## Moss Arts Center Gallery Hours

Monday–Friday, 10 AM–5:30 PM

Saturday, 10 AM–4 PM

Admission free

To schedule a tour or class visit, contact [megh79@vt.edu](mailto:megh79@vt.edu).



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