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Laurie Anderson Has a Message for Us Humans

For half a century, she has taken the things we know best— our bodies, our rituals, our nation — and shown us how strange they really are.

Laurie Anderson. Philip Montgomery for The New York Times

By Sam Anderson

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When the Hirshhorn Museum told Laurie Anderson that it wanted to put on a big, lavish retrospective of her work, she said no. For one thing, she was busy. She has been busy now for roughly 50 years, hauling her keyboards and experimental violins all over the world to put on huge bonanzas of lasers and noise loops and incantatory monologues that she delivers in a voice

somewhere between slam poetry, an evening newscast, a final confession and a bedtime story. Although Anderson plays multiple instruments, her signature tool has always been her voice. Words emerge from her mouth deliberate and hyperenunciated, surrounded by unpredictable pauses. She piles up phrases the way van Gogh piled up brush strokes.

Over the course of her incessant career, Anderson has done just about everything a creative person can do. She has helped design an Olympics opening ceremony, served as the official artist in residence for NASA, made an opera out of “Moby-Dick” and played a concert for dogs at the Sydney Opera House. She has danced the tango with William S. Burroughs and flown to a tropical island with John Cage. And she is still going. As Anderson once put it to me, during a brief pause between trips to Paris and New Zealand, just before a Carnegie Hall performance with Iggy Pop: “Lately, I’m doing a stupid amount of things.”

On top of all this, Anderson had philosophical qualms about a retrospective. She is 74, which seems like a very normal age to stop and look back, and yet she seems determined, at all times, to keep moving forward. She is a perpetually cresting wave, a little green shoot constantly emerging from its seed. The last thing she wanted was to stop and stand still and be institutionalized in a big museum. This is the paradox of Laurie Anderson: What makes her worthy of a retrospective also makes her basically retrospective-proof.

Anderson’s response to the Hirshhorn was a counterproposal: How about a show of entirely new work?

“In some ways, I wasn’t surprised,” Melissa Chiu, the museum’s director, told me. “She’s so interested in the here and now. We had to make peace with that. We made a decision, early on, to say: OK, Laurie’s got this.”

The Hirshhorn gave Anderson the whole second floor and then followed her lead. (There were a few exceptions. When Anderson proposed filling part of a room with stinky wet mud, the museum, citing policy, said no.) The result is a show called “The Weather,” a sort of nonretrospective retrospective of one of America’s major, and majorly confounding, modern artists. Chiu says the show is less a traditional exhibition than a giant artist’s project that happens to be set in our national museum of modern art.

The Hirshhorn sits right on the National Mall, midway between the Washington Monument and the Capitol. This makes it the perfect site to showcase Anderson’s work. She has always been obsessed with America; her whole career, as she describes it, has been an attempt “to tell and retell the national story.” This is, of course, a fraught, impossible project. But then Anderson is a fraught, impossible storyteller.

“Americans have traditionally demanded coherent and simple national stories,” she has written. “Now many of these stories no longer make any sense. But so far nothing has replaced them. We are in story limbo, and for a storyteller this is an intensely interesting place to be.”

Anderson’s stories tend to be broken and fragmented, unfinished, nonlinear, elusive, pointless — stories about the impossibility of stories. They are often gender-fluid. (She appears, sometimes, as a character called Fenway Bergamot, a male alter ego with thick eyebrows and a mustache.) In place of coherence, in place of the machine logic of propaganda, Anderson inserts dream logic, joke logic, the self-swallowing logic of Buddhism. She likes to hollow out triumphant national stories and fill them with doubt. She once summarized “The Star-Spangled Banner,” for instance, as “just a lot of questions asked during a fire.” (“Say, isn’t that a flag?” she asked, pointing into the distance. “Couldn’t say,” she answered, “it’s pretty early in the morning.”)

Chiu told me, with what sounded like a mixture of awe and anxiety, that she could imagine Anderson wanting to change the Hirshhorn show even after it was installed.

I asked Anderson if she could see herself doing this. Absolutely, she said. In fact, she was planning on it. She wanted to hang her new paintings in the museum and then paint over them, right there on the walls. She even fantasized, aloud, about painting over them again after the show opened.

When I mentioned this to Marina Abramovic, one of Anderson’s longtime friends, she laughed admiringly.

“Laurie is a total nightmare for every gallerist,” she said.

At various times, the Hirshhorn show was touch and go. There were issues with paperwork, logistics. There was a whole pandemic. At one point, Chiu told me that Anderson basically disappeared.

“She’s offline,” Chiu said.

“She’s offline?” I asked.

“Yes.”

“Did she send out a declaration or something?”

“No, she just told us that she was going offline.”

“OK,” I said.

“Until it subsides,” she said.

“Until it subsides?”

“Yes,” Chiu said, and paused. “She’s very mysterious.”

“I learn about things by talking about them.” Philip Montgomery for The New York Times

One winter day, Anderson invited me to her studio at the end of Canal Street, right where it meets the Hudson River. She has been working here since the 1970s — since the downtown glory days of Warhol, Basquiat, CBGB, Patti Smith, the Ramones, David Bowie, etc. etc. etc. I sat there petting her scruffy terrier, Little Will, while Anderson talked to me about basically everything in the universe. She told me about ponies (“If ponies were people they’d all be in jail”) and donkeys (“They have the best memory in the animal kingdom”) and about how the Hudson River is full of seahorses — not the elegant tropical wiggly jewels that you tend to see in aquariums, but New York City seahorses. Survivors. “Funky, brown, crusty,” she said.

I had come prepared with a notebook full of nervous sweaty questions, because Anderson is an icon of the avant-garde, a titan and a pioneer, and her career is so staggeringly full and deep and weird that my brain kept breaking whenever I tried to think about it. But my questions turned out to be unnecessary. Anderson is maybe the easiest person to talk to I have ever met. A conversation with her is self-propelling and unpredictable, an instant flood of ideas and funny stories and book recommendations and factoids. Did you know that a mosquito, in really bad storms, can hang onto a raindrop and ride safely toward the ground? Anderson will pause to show you viral videos on her phone and websites on her laptop. She will ask questions — “Have you noticed that?” or “How do you

handle that?" or "Do you think so?" — and then she will actually listen to the answers. Because of the circles she moves in, even the most basic stories about her life can sound like outrageous name dropping. She had just been to Yoko Ono's 87th birthday party. She told me a funny story about Donna Karan and quoted something Brian Eno once told her. ("You don't tell other people what's in your bank account — it's the last taboo.") At one point, she was reminiscing about Alice Waters, an old friend, when suddenly her phone rang, and the caller ID actually said, right out loud, "Julian Schnabel." That's what it's like to be around Anderson.

"I'm a really blabby person," she told me. "I learn about things by talking about them."

After a few minutes, however, the conversation paused. Anderson asked if I would mind helping her carry some stuff down the stairs. She had to rehearse, later, with a cellist she'd been improvising with. Of course not, I said. Anderson is small and slim and slight, a sort of national heritage site of a human being, and I told her I would be happy to haul whatever needed hauling.

"How about one of these?" she said. She handed me a small electrical cord, neatly coiled. "And one of these?" She handed me a second cord.

Anderson, meanwhile, walked over to a huge black box, roughly the size of a filing cabinet, the kind of mysterious case a magician might drag onstage for the final trick of the night. She heaved it off the ground, then proceeded to lug it, all by herself, down a narrow spiral staircase. I followed her with my two cords. It became clear to me that she hadn't needed my help at all. She just had something to do, and she wanted to keep moving while we talked.

One floor down, in her music studio, Anderson clunked the black box down. She knelt and opened it, revealing a whole nest of sci-fi-ish equipment: keyboards, screens, metal frames, a shipyard's worth of cords and wires. This, broken into pieces, was her performance rig — a big block of gear that she has assembled and disassembled and hauled across the world infinite times.

She is the American heartland affectionately alienated from itself.

For the next 30 minutes or so, I watched Anderson unpack and construct this rig. She worked with deep absorption, with quick expert movements, clonking pieces together, kneeling and then popping upright, tightening knobs, unfolding frames, zipping zippers, testing the connections of cords. It was strangely mesmerizing. Every time I thought the case was empty, she would pull out something else: a microphone, an iPad, a synthesizer, a chunk of wood. Before long, Anderson had assembled a multilevel architecture of screens and keyboards. One entire keyboard was just for her feet. From somewhere, I didn't even see where, she pulled out a futuristic-looking violin, and she hooked it over her shoulder, and then suddenly the whole rig started to vibrate with noise: thumping bass, organ

chords, tinkling piano, wild gusts of piercing sustained notes. She seemed to be marshaling whole armies of instruments, lining them up in different formations, setting them against one another. Anderson has been perfecting her command center for decades now, streamlining it and juicing up its weird powers. Watching her bring it to life felt less like watching a musician prepare for a rehearsal than like some kind of religious ceremony: a ritual, a discipline. The equipment and the noises it made seemed to reach down into her bones and spirit.

Anderson, her assistant told me, insists on setting this whole rig up herself, every single time, whether she is alone in the studio or about to play Carnegie Hall. Sometimes, when Anderson is setting up out in public, on a stage, she will avoid interruptions by wearing a disguise: a roadie T-shirt and a long black wig. It is minimalist but, apparently, extremely convincing. One time, Anderson told me, a close friend came up to her before a show, while she was absorbed in constructing her rig — and she asked Laurie Anderson, from just inches away, if Laurie Anderson was in the building yet.

Laurie Anderson in her studio in 1980. Allan Tannenbaum/Getty Images

Iggy Pop, who grew up in a trailer park in Michigan, helped me understand something essential about Anderson.

"Is she from Ohio?" he asked me, in a voice so deep and rough and weather-beaten I worried it was going to blow out the speakers in my phone.

"Illinois," I said.

"Close enough," he said.

Then he explained. “She has this really nice, steady, clear energy,” he said. “She looks straight at you and doesn’t bring any problems with it. That’s something special about her. There’s some clear-cut, no-nonsense, Midwest stuff in there.”

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This is the elemental force that Iggy Pop was picking up on: Midwesternness. Although Anderson has come to be associated with New York, with Europe, with cosmopolitan intellectualism, her baseline vibe is extremely Midwestern — normal, practical, unpretentious, conspicuously kind. This is a good way to read her work — all those avant-garde stories spooling out around familiar things (weather, sweaters, pet dogs, J.F.K.). She is the American heartland affectionately alienated from itself. Anderson is the middle of our nation asking out loud, in a spirit of loving curiosity, what on Earth it thinks it is doing.

Anderson was born in 1947, into a large, eccentric family outside Chicago. She was one of eight children. Growing up in that household meant marinating, constantly, in language and stories. One of her brothers was named Thor; a sister was named India. At dinner, each child was expected to tell the story of their day — a recitation that could go on indefinitely and include a baffling variety of incidents and styles. On Sundays, their grandmother took the kids to church, and Laurie became fascinated by the dreamlike surrealism of the Bible: “talking snakes, an ocean that suddenly parted to form a road, stones that turned into bread and dead people brought back to life.” These stories, Anderson would later write, “were the first clues that we live in an irrational and complicated world.” Two of Anderson’s younger brothers were twins, and as kids they invented a private language so elaborate that it drew the attention of a linguistic researcher. It was, in other words, a perfect childhood for producing Laurie Anderson: deep normalcy inflected by sharp stabs of strangeness.

With so many people around, Anderson found it easy to slip away and do her own thing. She relished her freedom. She took long bike rides and went ice skating on ponds. In elementary school, she joined an all-girl gang that threatened to poke boys’ eyes out with sharp sticks. In sixth grade, Anderson founded a painting club whose members posed for each other nude. Every day, for many hours, she practiced her violin. On Saturdays, she took the train to Chicago, where she would study painting at the Art Institute and play in the Chicago Youth Symphony.

Anderson’s parents were a study in contrasts. Her father was personable, funny, affectionate. Her mother was formal, distant, intimidating, hard to read. Anderson describes her mother as a kind of bottled-up genius: She went to college at 16, married young and immediately started having children. In her rare spare time, she read voraciously. She designed the family’s house herself. One of

Anderson's earliest memories is of waking up in the middle of the night, around 4 a.m., and seeing her mother still awake, alone, reading. "She was very smart, very focused," Anderson told me. "She really should have been, like, the head of a big corporation. But she got caught in a generation of women who didn't get to do that. " Every morning, when Laurie left the house, her mother would offer a single word of advice: "Win!" Anderson remembers thinking: What does that mean?

Later, the voice that Anderson would use in her art performances — that distinctive blend of casual and formal, fluid and halting, warm and cold — was a combination of her parents' voices. Her father's sly deadpan; her mother's precise, ironic detachment.

In college, Anderson studied biology for one year. But this only confirmed her desire to make art. In 1966, she moved to New York and dove headfirst into that world. She studied at Barnard and wrote reviews for Artforum. At the School of Visual Arts, she studied sculpture with Sol Lewitt and Carl Andre. The trend, back then, was to make huge, heavy steel monoliths, but Anderson decided to work mostly with newspaper. She would pulp The New York Times and shape it into bricks, or cut multiple newspapers into long, thin strips and weave them together. Already, she was manipulating stories, slicing and crushing and blending them.

The art world, Anderson realized, was not set up to showcase storytelling, this art form she had learned to love as a child. Museums were designed for objects, not the human voice as it moved words through time. Early on, Anderson became obsessed with the challenge of smuggling stories into art galleries. She began experimenting with audio, video, performance. Her work became increasingly about voice: looking for the line between voice and nonvoice, speech and nonspeech, story and nonstory. She built a talking "robot" out of plywood and organized a concert for car horns. She made little clay figures, onto which she projected Super 8 films so that the statues seemed to move, to speak, to live. "Fake holograms," she called them. Little by little, she managed to bring her Midwestern origins into New York. She found a way to invite the whole art world to sit down at her childhood dining-room table.

Marina Abramovic first heard about Laurie Anderson in 1975. Abramovic was living in Europe at the time, hand-to-mouth, sleeping in her car, traveling from one country to the next to do the performance pieces that would eventually make her reputation. She and her partner, Ulay, would braid their hair together and sit back to back in a gallery for 17 hours, or they would get naked and run across the room and repeatedly slam into each other and fall over. In the midst of all this, Abramovic heard about something wild happening down in Italy: A young American woman was doing street performances in Genoa. Every day she would pick a different spot in the city and stand there playing some kind of cyborg violin — it had tape loops and speakers inside of it, so the violin would play prerecorded violin music, and the American would stand there and play the violin along with itself. A "self-playing violin," she called it. But that wasn't even the best part. The best part was that this young American was playing her experimental violin while standing on ice skates, and the

blades of the skates were frozen into two huge blocks of ice — so as she played her cyborg violin, as crowds of baffled Italians gathered to watch, the ice blocks she was standing on would slowly melt, and eventually the skates would clunk down onto the pavement, and that would be the end of the performance. Anderson would stop playing and walk off. She called the piece “Duets on Ice.”

Marina Abramovic thought that this was basically the most wonderful thing she had ever heard of. Soon the two artists met. The first thing they talked about, Abramovic says, was money. Like most young artists, they were hustlers, eking out a living from stingy gallery owners. Anderson approached it all as a kind of game. She had inserted herself into the European art circuit through a fabulous deception: She wrote to roughly 500 venues and told them, falsely, that she had booked a European tour. Would they like to be added to it? As she tells it, 498 venues said no. But the two that said yes were enough to get her going. From there, she improvised. She dragged her huge black box — the keyboards, cords, lights, amps — back and forth across the continent. To Abramovic, Anderson seemed small and vulnerable. But she quickly learned not to underestimate her new friend.

Anderson performing “Duets on Ice” in Genoa, Italy, in 1975. Photograph by Paolo Rocci, via Laurie Anderson

“I always have this feeling to protect her,” Abramovic told me. “I feel bigger, you know. I come from Montenegro, which is like a world of strong warriors in the mountains. But I don’t think she needs protection. Really, she’s a very stable little strong baby. Not weak at all.”

Today, Abramovic looks back fondly at those old European struggles.

“It was so incredibly pure,” she told me. “The art was no commodity. You were doing it because you believed in it. There was so much purity and innocence.”

Anderson, despite all her success, still works in this spirit. The anti-careerism of her career is part of what has made her illegible, and often invisible, to mainstream audiences. Although she is a legend in some circles, she is totally unknown in others. She remains uncategorizable in a way that strikes me as both naïve and deliberate, pure and perverse, simple and profound. She moves in the tradition of John Cage, Fluxus, Schoenberg, Warhol. I mentioned to Julian Schnabel that I was having trouble summarizing Anderson’s career. “Well, it’s not really a career,” he said. “She’s really unemployable.”

If people outside the art world have heard of Anderson, it is probably because of her song “O Superman (For Massenet),” one of the least likely pop hits in music history. Anderson recorded the song in a studio she set up in her hallway. It is eight minutes long, with a background beat that is entirely a loop of Anderson’s voice, heavily processed, saying the word “Ha.” On top of this — ha ha ha ha ha ha ha — she layers cryptic and haunting electro-poetry: “So hold me, Mom, in your long arms. In your automatic arms. … Your petrochemical arms. Your military arms.” (The song was inspired by the 1979 Iran hostage crisis, although you wouldn’t really know it, going in cold.) Anderson had 1,000 copies of “O Superman” pressed; she kept them in her apartment and sold them, personally, via mail order.

Then, in 1981, the ridiculous happened. Anderson’s experimental art song caught the attention of an influential English D.J., and “O Superman” shot up the British charts all the way to No. 2. It was voted best single in The Village Voice’s influential Pazz & Jop critics poll — tied for the top spot with the Rolling Stones’ “Start Me Up,” a song that is its opposite in basically every way. The music critic Robert Christgau called it “the pop event of the year.” Iggy Pop told me the “O Superman” video was the only thing on MTV that year that he could relate to. A British distribution company ordered 80,000 copies. Warner Brothers signed Anderson to an eight-album deal. Pitchfork would later rank her ensuing album, “Big Science,” the No. 22 album of the 1980s, adding accurately: “Listening to Laurie Anderson’s first album is like sitting down with a strange form of life that has been studying us for a long time.”

Anderson was suddenly a paradox: mainstream avant-garde. Her scrappy little art career morphed, almost overnight, into touring, songwriting, recording. She poured her creativity into increasingly elaborate stage shows. She got tired, for instance, of projecting films onto screens — she hated trapping all those moving images inside of flat rectangles. So she made screens that were cylinders,

cubes, spheres. She started projecting things onto couches, into corners, onto huge pieces of crumpled paper. She wore a big white canvas dress and projected images onto herself. She put cameras on violin bows and microphone stands.

When Iggy Pop finally saw Anderson in concert — this multimedia assault of loops and text and voice and images — he was duly impressed.

“She was up there alone with her fiddle,” he said. “I don’t remember what was said, but what I took away was just that she had big balls. Those stages are huge, you know? And there she was, all by herself. Boy, I thought. That’s a heavy chick.”

He laughed apologetically. “Hey, you can take the boy out of the country, you know?”

Anderson met Lou Reed in 1992, in Munich, at a music festival. They were each, in different ways, underground royalty. Reed was a legendary rock-’n’-roll badass: former frontman of the Velvet Underground, critically acclaimed solo artist, author of the 1970s hit “Walk on the Wild Side.” Anderson didn’t really know who he was. Again, she was very busy. After the festival, Reed suggested that they meet up in New York. Sure, she said. How about in four months?

Their first date was at an audio-equipment convention; they met in the tube microphone section and spent all afternoon discussing gear. Anderson didn’t realize it was a date until Reed invited her to coffee, then a movie, then dinner, then on a walk. “From then on,” she writes, “we were never really apart.”

Well, they were and they weren’t. They met later in life, when both were established in their careers. Anderson remained, as always, busy and free. They never fully moved in together; she kept her own space and continued to disappear, for long stretches, to drag her black box around Europe. In New York, she worked at her studio on Canal Street. Reed stayed at his apartment on 11th Street. They each had a view of the Hudson River, and Reed would call her sometimes during the day to point out an interesting cloud. Then they would stay on the phone together, looking at it for a while.

Reed was notorious, in music circles, for his fiery temper. But everyone was struck by how in love he was with Anderson. It was one of the great wonders of the world. Anderson mellowed Lou Reed. As Reed’s biographer Anthony DeCurtis puts it: “People who met them together and expected the fearsome Lou Reed were struck by how puppyish he could be around her.”

Anderson and Reed in 2002. Richard Corkery/NY Daily News Archive, via Getty Images

“She was always running all over the world performing and doing all these things,” Schnabel told me, “and he missed her quite a bit. But at the same time, he was so impressed by her. He kept saying to me: ‘You know, she’s a genius. Laurie is a genius. You know that?’ They really loved each other a lot. And they got so much from each other, in the most buoyant and loving way.”

Reed wrote lyrics about Anderson: “I’ve met a woman with a thousand faces, and I want to make her my wife.” But they didn’t marry until 16 years after they met. It was a grand romantic gesture. In 2008, the two of them were talking on a cross-continental phone call — he was in New York, she in California — and Anderson said that she regretted never marrying. Reed insisted that they marry the next day. So they did. They met each other halfway, in Colorado. Immediately after the ceremony, they went off together to perform in a show.

Just a few years later, Reed got sick: hepatitis C, diabetes, liver cancer. He worked, stoically, to keep up his regular life. He dressed every morning. He did tai chi. But soon he started to decline. A liver transplant seemed to be working for a while, until suddenly it wasn’t. One particularly bad day, Reed and Anderson went to visit Julian Schnabel’s studio in Montauk. Everyone was horribly depressed. Schnabel set up a huge canvas and told Anderson to paint. She didn’t want to. She had given up painting decades before. But Schnabel insisted. So Anderson picked up a brush and made some black marks. Suddenly she could not stop. She slathered the canvas in black. When she was done, Schnabel looked at her work. “You know,” he said, “red can be black. So can pink.” For some reason, in that moment, Anderson found the idea of pink being black terrifying. But eventually she took his advice. She started to experiment with colors, started to love painting again. At her Hirshhorn show, Anderson’s favorite room features only new paintings: no multimedia wizardry, no noise, just big canvases covered with splashes of color.

In 2013, Lou Reed died. It was late October. The last thing he asked for was to be taken outside, into the light. Anderson, of course, was by his side.

“I have never seen an expression as full of wonder as Lou’s as he died,” she wrote afterward. “His hands were doing the water-flowing 21-form of tai chi. His eyes were wide open. I was holding in my arms the person I loved the most in the world, and talking to him as he died. His heart stopped. He wasn’t afraid. I had gotten to walk with him to the end of the world. Life — so beautiful, painful and dazzling — does not get better than that. And death? I believe that the purpose of death is the release of love.”

I spoke with Anderson for this article, off and on, for nearly two years. Which means that our relationship spanned multiple apocalyptic spasms. Pandemic. Public murders. Protests. Insurrection. Storms and fires. I asked her, multiple times, what it all meant. What story could we tell ourselves about this moment? But she always seemed to defer. It’s too early to tell that story, she said. We have to wait and see.

The last time I saw Anderson, my family and I had just come back from Oregon, the place of my birth, a place I tend to see, still, through the idealized glow of early childhood. After two years stranded on the East Coast, I missed it terribly. But out in the real world, Oregon had changed. Downtown Portland, after months of clashes between protesters and the police, was largely boarded up. People were living in tents on the sidewalks and streets. Early on our first morning, we woke up to the sound of a woman screaming outside, over and over. We walked past human feces on the sidewalk. It was the middle of a deadly heat wave, the hottest temperatures ever recorded, and to the east wildfires were raging out of control — in every direction, the horizon was blurred by smoke. The ragged trees of my youth, up on the hills, looked like ghosts. Finally we drove south, away from the big cities, and the smoke only thickened. Some of the most beautiful places I have ever been, my favorite places on Earth, were nearly unrecognizable. You couldn’t see the scenic mountains right on the edge of town. The air was like barbecue smoke. It felt like an apocalypse, like a failed society.

In her studio in New York, Anderson told me that she, too, has been thinking about the end. The collapse of civilization. The possibility of human extinction. What stories will be possible, she asked, when everything is gone? Can we tell a story if no one is listening?

“She has this really nice, steady, clear energy,” says Iggy Pop. Philip Montgomery for The New York Times

Anderson said she has become obsessed, lately, with artificial intelligence. An Australian university she has collaborated with has created a text engine designed to write in three styles: Laurie Anderson, Lou Reed and a combination Anderson/Reed. You just have to feed it a little information — six words, or a photo — and it will produce, almost instantly, a whole virtual text.

The program isn’t perfect yet, Anderson said. Roughly a third of what the computer spits out is total nonsense — “monkeys with typewriters” — and another third is just boring. But the final third is surprising, even authentic, some kind of new fresh magic. That final third is what keeps her coming back. Sometimes she sits there with the hunger of an addict, feeding words and pictures into the engine, seeing what comes out. For a long time, she would save the texts. They felt so precious. After a while, though, she realized that the texts were infinite. She could have one whenever she needed it. So she read them and then let them go.

Anderson got out her laptop, turned it toward me and opened the A.I. text box.

“Ask it a question,” she said.

I thought for a second. “What is the story of America?” I asked.

Anderson typed it in. After a few seconds, the A.I. answered with a long paragraph in Anderson’s voice. It was actually a good impression — it talked about America elliptically, as Anderson would, using a metaphor of a theater production. “Theaters who really know what they’re doing don’t just copy other people’s lines but rework them, amplify them, make them their own,” the fake Anderson said, and the real Anderson read it aloud. “And people tell each other their story which is called the story and there are lots of stories about betrayal and redemption and love and hate and heroism and sacrifice and the end. And then of course there are the countless movies that are made every day by some kind of action hero or action hero with a lot of running and talking and bravery and some sort of democracy.”

Not bad, we agreed.

Then Anderson ran that same question through the A.I. — “What is the story of America?” — but asked it to answer in the voice of Lou Reed.

The computer answered with a poem:

> The story
> Of the dirt
> It hurt
> To be so good
> And then to be so bad
> You should
> Not have come
> All the way
> From Europe and back again
> Just to see
> What would happen
> To these people
> If they found out
> What you had done
> But what could they do
> With all the evidence
> That they had gathered
> Both from you
> And from others
> Namely, from your face
> The albino friend
> Who came disguised
> As a bird from the air
> To ask for money
> Because he or she was worth
> More than you or your parents
> Were worth more
> Because of what
> They did in the name
> Of whom you were made
> The bondsman walks slowly
> In front of me
> Holding his audience
> Until I walk
> Slowly in front of him
> Toward the light at the
> At the end of the streetlights

Anderson read this out loud to me: this poem about America, her lost country, in the voice of her dead husband, ending with the discussion of him moving toward one final light. She did a few more Lou poems, including one in which he spoke in the most intimate terms: "my eyes are thin and dry, my

heart is beating very fast." Anderson's whole career has been about voice, voice as presence, and here — in the room with us, coming out of a computer — was her husband's voice. I asked her how that felt, to hear this simulacrum, this computer-Lou, referring to himself like that.

"Wonderful," she said. "Just great. He's talking to me from somewhere else. I definitely do feel that. The line is pretty thin for me."

Finally we fed the A.I. a photo of one of Anderson's recent paintings, a huge whirl of color that she hung in the Hirshhorn a few weeks earlier, then painted over and renamed "Autumn." We fed it to the A.I. and waited. We waited longer. We kept waiting. The A.I. had nothing to say.