



Laurie Anderson “ArtSPEAK” at Bob Rauschenberg Gallery

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by Sandra Hale Schulman

FORT MEYERS, FL—Love, loss, memory, sound and rat terriers were in the waves rolling through artist Laurie Anderson’s mind as she gave a heartfelt, multimedia ArtSPEAK@FSW Lecture at the Bob Rauschenberg Gallery in Fort Myers, Florida, on January 24, 2015.

Anderson, one week into a month-long artist in residence stint at the nearby spacious waterfront estate of the late Robert Rauschenberg on Captiva Island, gave the talk as an overview of her multi-layered career along with a brief update on projects she was working on during the residency.

Long considered one of America’s most innovative and influential artists, Anderson is back in public view a little more than a year after the death of her husband, Lou Reed. The renowned musician, singer and songwriter died of liver cancer in Amagansett in October 2013.

Anderson never mentioned Reed in the hour-long talk, nor did his name come up in the 15-minute Q&A that followed. Instead it was her past work involving memorial and remembrance that was the focus of her engaging, personable and often very funny presentation.

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Laurie Anderson at ARTSPEAK. Photo by Jane Hart.

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After offering a brief overview of current work—a writing project, work with New York’s Park Avenue Armory, and a film—and some voice triggered projection demonstrations, Anderson launched into a

remarkable story about the effect her little rat terrier Lolabelle had on her life and her work.

First she recalled a conversation she had with cellist Yo-Yo Ma while the two were waiting backstage before a concert. She admitted she often played her music for her dog and confessed that she had some apprehension about the upcoming performance. At that point, the cellist said to her, “Wouldn’t it be great if you’re playing a concert and you look out and everyone’s a dog?”

“So I thought if I ever get a chance to do that,” Anderson said, “I’m gonna do it.”

This thought led to an actual Concert for Dogs she composed at the Sydney Opera House, with hundreds of dogs and their human owners filling the hall to hear it in 2010.

A year later Lolabelle developed cataracts and went blind.

“This was terribly traumatic for such a feisty little spirit,” Anderson said. “With no sight she can’t run and now needed other senses to take over. So I put some keyboards on the floor and taught her how to play.”

Lolabelle took to the task with wagging, barking enthusiasm, all captured on a video Anderson screened as part of her talk. Lolabelle even did some live gallery performances, becoming an art star in her own right.

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When Lolabelle passed away a year later on Palm Sunday, Anderson was struck by a passage she had read in “The Tibetan Book of the Dead,” which she said stated that “for 49 days you’re in the Bardo, and it describes in a really fascinating way how you lose your senses and how your mind dissolves as you prepare for another cycle. At the end of that 49-day period, you are born in another form, and, in my dog’s case, what was at the end of that 49th day was my birthday, June 5th. Where does that energy go?”

Anderson began memorializing Lolabelle in a series of huge 10-foot by 14-foot canvases called “Lolabelle in the Bardo,” one of which was exhibited at the Parrish Art Museum in Water Mill in 2014. A pair of legs in the composition might belong to Anderson’s late husband, Lou Reed.

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“Lolabelle in the Bardo” by Laurie Anderson, 2011. Charcoal on paper, 10 x 14 feet.

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Anderson also spoke of what she considered a bizarre reaction to this series, with people expressing their surprise. “What is this,” she recalled them saying, “You’re a painter, too?”

"I found that so awful and strange," she said. "I wanted to be an artist, to be free and have no rules. But then you get into this world and they want to put you in boxes. You're not so free."

She told another story of how one of her larger projects based on prisoners was actually banned by Homeland Security in the U.S. The work involved inmates being guarded, lives suspended in time with those imprisoned stripped of the right even to use their own self image.

She designed a piece showing bodies frozen in limbo with sound and word projections on them. Despite international acclaim for this big budget piece, she still cannot perform the work in America due to its incendiary political content.

After the talk, Anderson held a meet-and-greet and signed posters in the gallery on January 24, 2015, the final day of the "RAUSCHENBERG: China/America Mix" exhibition.

Anderson and Rauschenberg worked together on the Trisha Brown Dance Company's production of "Set and Reset," a dance piece that debuted at the Brooklyn Academy of Music in 1983. Anderson wrote the music for the piece, "Long Time No See," which she performed with Richard Landry. Rauschenberg designed the set and costumes and collaborated with Beverly Emmons on the lighting design.

The Bob Rauschenberg Gallery was founded in 1979 as the Gallery of Fine Art on the Lee County campus of Florida SouthWestern State College/FSW (then Edison Community College). In 2004 the Gallery of Fine Art was renamed the Bob Rauschenberg Gallery, to honor and commemorate the college's longtime association and friendship with the artist.

For more than three decades until his death on May 12, 2008 on Captiva Island, gallery curators worked closely with Rauschenberg to present world premiere exhibitions, including multiple installations of *the ¼-Mile or Two Furlong Piece*. The artist insisted on naming the space the Bob Rauschenberg Gallery (versus the "Robert Rauschenberg Gallery") as it was more consistent with the intimate, informal relationship he maintained with both the local Ft. Meyers and southwestern Florida community and the FSW campus.

Writer, director, visual artist and vocalist Laurie Anderson has earned acclaim for groundbreaking projects spanning the worlds of art, theater and experimental music. Best known for her multimedia presentations and innovative use of technology, she has published seven books and her visual work has been presented in major museums around the world.

Anderson has received numerous awards, including the prestigious Dorothy and Lillian Gish Prize in 2007 and Pratt Institute's Honorary Legends Award in 2011. She is currently an artist in residence at the Center for the Art of Performance at UCLA and the Experimental Media and Performing Arts Center in Troy, New York.

BASIC FACTS: Bob Rauschenberg Gallery is located at 8099 College Pkwy, Fort Myers, FL 33919. www.rauschenberggallery.com.