

ON



STAGE

ANDERSON WARY OF THE VERY DIGITAL REVOLUTION SHE'S PLUGGED IN TO

BY ANNE MARIE WELSH, ARTS CRITIC

I've worked with technology all my life as an artist," says the pioneering performer Laurie Anderson. "But the whole digital revolution is kind of leaving me cold. You're supposed to get excited. But why?"

Her skepticism is a surprise. After all, this is the artist who created one of the most ambitious multimedia epics ever, her eight-hour, interdisciplinary "United States" (1983).

But here she is, on the phone from Canal Street in downtown New York, calling her "The Speed of Darkness," a "kind of tirade." It's also, she says, a collection of stories and songs about

the future of technology, art and us.

DATEBOOK

"The Speed of Darkness"

8 p.m. tomorrow; *Sushi Performance and Visual Art*; 320 11th St., downtown. \$35-\$40 for assigned seating and street party afterward — (619) 235-8468 or (619) 544-1482; \$25 for general seating — (619) 220-TIXS.

"Darkness" playfully refers to Einstein's speed-of-light hypothesis, but the piece is about "what happens to stories and images when they're in that digital world, when things are sped up. What I mostly think about that world is that it is one of the most successful marketing campaigns of the 20th century," Anderson says.

"It's managed to persuade people that they need a lot of stuff, that what people need is to keep up. That way (technology) turns into a kind of threat. Unless you get this stuff, you'll be left in the digital dust. ...It's been successful because it's appealing to fear."

Anderson describes the accumulation of digital gadgets as "a personal arms race; you have to keep acquiring this arsenal of stuff. And to what end? Is it really making your life a whole lot better?"

In the performance, her single stream of monologue extends her skepticism to artistic uses of technology as well: "It's also a little about what it's like to be an artist in that



GERT KRAUTBAUER

Playful, pioneering Laurie Anderson questions the technology that makes her art possible in "The Speed of Darkness," a performance highlight of inSITE97.

inSITE97

her childhood training on the violin and added music to her storehouse of media when, soon after graduation, she met composer Philip Glass.

world, a content-provider, as people put it..."

She changes the piece, which had its U.S. premiere last year, just a bit for each performance, several of which were at the MeltDown Festival in July on London's South Bank. Whatever the venue, though, "Speed of Darkness" focuses on three places — a theater, a mental hospital and a control room that merge to form late-20th-century techno-culture.

The nimble, fiddling content-provider claims: "I myself have been going back to pencils and three-dimensions. That's why it's so great to be in an artists festival (like inSITE97), with people who aren't necessarily going for the latest thing in technology."

She says she worries that some of the brightest artistic minds now are fixated on computers and have gone corporate: They're working for Disney.

"What exactly does Disney have to do with culture? What is their purpose? Some of their songs and some of their movies are just wonderful, but really they're cartoons. And they're for kids. A lot of us aren't kids. We're left here with Disney World and Mac World."

Which brings up another "Speed of Darkness" theme: "One thing it's about is trying to find a place to hide ...Where do you go to escape this cheeriness, this cartoon music?"

Life's work

Anderson's official bio goes back exactly 25 years.

That year, she earned a master's of fine arts, in sculpture, from Columbia University, wrote art reviews for *Art in America* and other magazines, created a car concert in Vermont called "Automotive," and "spent the winter wearing no coat."

She's been all over the artistic map ever since. She returned to

DOWNLOADING THE INSIGHTS OF LAURIE ANDERSON

Laurie Anderson is a self-professed tinkerer who writes programs for the digital processors that layer her music. But she questions the revolution that makes her work possible. A few nuggets of her wit and wisdom:

■ "If you look out into the Net, it's like taking a ride in suburbia. There's nothing there. It's not the giant heaven it's hyped to be."

■ "The thing that scares me is that every day, technology is getting more global, corporate, monolithic and impossible to escape. Recently, someone said the saddest thing about the fall of the Berlin Wall is that you can no longer defect. There's nowhere left to go."

■ "The play part of (computers) is so restrictive: The games are violent, and involve learning to follow more rules. When I hear Clinton saying every child has to know how to operate a computer, I worry about what he means. This is a country already so obsessed with work; is this just a way to train another generation of workers? What about the wacky uses of technology? The nutty side is getting eaten up by the bureaucratic, corporate side — let's see the joy of that kind of communication."

■ "In my more chauvinistic moments, I'm proud of an American-designed system of communication. We haven't been ahead in the technological area since the Second World War. This is made by people who tinker and that's a really wonderful thing to have invented. Maybe we shouldn't complain that the people who invented it still don't know how to use it. The question: Is what will we use it for, instead of just buying more of it."

■ "We need to learn how (computer technology) can be free and fun, rather than just another job. It will be young artists who show us how, people so used to working with it that it leaves them free to break a lot more rules."

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HIGH-TECH MADNESS

ANDERSON

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"He was inspiring and so were people like Steve Reich. There was a kind of freedom in their music that was really exhilarating. The violin is my instrument; I've played it since I was 5, though I had stopped for a while. I picked it up again as a kind of prop. Then I taught myself a lot about electronics, about digital processors that I write programs for. I'm a tinkerer."

In 1974, she and such artistic pioneers as Glass, Dickie Landry, Keith Sonnier and Gordon Matta Clark began working on each other's pieces, loosening the boundaries between their art forms.

"We were very aware that we were creating an entirely new

scene," says Anderson, a scene "later known as Downtown."

By 1976, Anderson was performing in virtually every "alternative space" in the United States, carrying "a big black case of violins, tapes and various gadgets." Gradually, she came to "feel more or less like a traveling salesman," even now, she tours a great deal and thus considers herself a "working girl."

Her breakthrough from alternative darling to pop star came with her 1981 recording "Oh, Superman," which rocketed to No. 2 on the British pop charts; soon she had a contract with Warner Bros. records, which released such acclaimed albums as "Big Science" and "Mr. Heartbreak."

Layering sound hypnotically as did Glass and Reich, Anderson also told stories, sometimes speaking, sometimes singing, often with her voice electronically altered. The ef-

fect was haunting, as if the minimalist pulse suddenly had given birth to humor and drama and social commentary.

Rock fans and art critics both cheered; high and populist art converged.

A question of self

Then in 1983, Anderson opened her eight-hour multimedia show "United States" at the Brooklyn Academy of Music and toured it to London and other stops in Europe; she also shot the concert film "Home of the Brave," with her antic fiddling, her band and backup group, projections and animations.

Along the way she met and toured with avant-garde writer William Burroughs. "Meeting Burroughs," she says, "taught me how to use the word 'you.' I was known

as a kind of autobiographical artist. He taught me a new form of address that does a lot of things. It connects you to an audience in a new way."

Anderson has taken her magical, electronic violin into the dance field, doing her first score for choreographer Mary Overlie in 1975 and one of her more important for "Set and Reset," a collaboration with choreographer Trisha Brown and painter Robert Rauschenberg, in 1983.

More recently, she's been an inspiration to her lover, Lou Reed, who dedicated his uncharacteristically tender "Set the Twilight Reeling" album to her.

Despite the "tirade" against computer technology in "Speed of Darkness," Anderson says her work isn't becoming acoustic or even simpler. "I just hope I use (technology) well so that it becomes more or less

transparent, so it becomes a way of telling stories."

One of the most likable traits of this chameleonlike, 49-year-old performer is her own self-questioning. "To tell you the truth," she says. "I'm kind of a fraud. Here I am talking about the evils of technology and there still are 50 plugs in the show."

"It's like saying to the kid, 'I'm going to go into my computer room, but don't you get one.'"

"It takes a long time to figure out what they can do and can't do, how they can help you. You have to get past the voodoo aspect — not being afraid, but not worshipping it either."

"Not that I have any answers, I never have. I wouldn't tell you what to do. But one of the things I'm saying is, 'Don't believe everything you hear, including (from) me.' The piece is for people who like to think about things like that."