

# CURRENTS & ARTS

THE SAN DIEGO UNION-TRIBUNE • MONDAY, SEPTEMBER 29, 1997

## inSITE97 opens with a dig at digital

By Anne Marie Welsh  
ARTS CRITIC

**L**aurie Anderson's performance Friday on the loading dock of the ReinCarnation Building in downtown San Diego had all the trappings of an Event: a chic arts crowd, the thrill of a freshly restored public space, a quintet of dignitaries reading proclamations from the presidents of Mexico and the United States.

But unlike Ernesto Zedillo and Bill Clinton, whose greetings droned, Anderson has the wit and timing of a good comedian.

Anderson's "The Speed of Darkness" was a playful, disturbing rant against the digital revolution —

### PERFORMANCE REVIEW

you know, those gadgets that let Anderson loop sound and alter vocals, even for this performance.

With just her electronic fiddle, a keyboard and a few digital processors, Anderson relied mostly on that oldest of instruments, the human voice. Speaking over two microphones with her caressing, teasing delivery, she spun yarns with little morals, like storytellers from time immemorial.

The big urban crowd might have been a tribe sitting around a campfire.

Still cutting an agile, elfin, androgynous figure with her spiked hair and simple black suit, Anderson performed with little of the visual and electronic paraphernalia that have helped make her international reputation.

Sure, her electric violin filled the block around 10th and J with massive sonorities, her sound loops circled and roared, her voice switched timbres (and sexes) through the magic of digital manipulation.

But the words were the thing — a collection of about a dozen songs and stories that streamed and meandered like water through a riverbed. Her awesome range of reference spanned Star Trek and St. Thomas Aquinas, the Unabomber and Moby Dick. Some fables were elliptical and enigmatic, others familiar and a mite banal.

The best passages were straight-shooting tall tales, like the one about a simulated journey to the moon; participants answered questionnaires to test the trip's potential as a family vacation. When they emerged four days later, the guinea pigs were sure they'd been there. Imagination was their saving grace; it kept them insane.

Anderson reserved her most caustic comments for the virtual communication of the Internet, "that empty highway" where you can contact Elvis in a seance, learn how to trap a beaver in Alaska or wear an electrode-studded rubber suit to have cybersex.

"A lot of information," she concluded, "isn't better than no information at all."

Gradually she depicts a technoculture in which human experience can be completely controlled, though ironically enough no human intelligence is in charge. Anderson deftly makes us aware of another irony — that she is both a fascinated perpetrator of this technological madness, and also, potentially, its victim.



# Anderson

Performance artist uses, ridicules high-tech

*Continued from E-1*

"The Speed of Darkness" actually sped up as it veered toward its ending. Its last story was about a teenage girl on a plane, a savvy kid already speaking the language of the future. In her, technospeak emotions switch on and off, moods are mere modes, and a wrong flick of the switch can end communication.

Anderson then segued into two songs. The first was an echo-chamber treatment of "Speed of Darkness" themes; the last was a creepy wordless image of the ultimate nightmare in technology-reliant art.

In that piece, she placed a pillow speaker — a denture-sized device — in her mouth. Standing at the microphone, literally wired, she opened and closed her lips over the



**Highway to nowhere:** *Laurie Anderson kicked off inSITE97 with her playful, disturbing riff on digital technology, "The Speed of Darkness."*

tiny speaker, from which one of her violin compositions could be heard. The human voice had been replaced by a creepy electronic toy. Yuck.

Anderson's performance was the kickoff to inSITE97, the exhilarating exhibit of site-specific public art on both sides of the San Diego-Tijuana border. Her performance and the festive atmosphere surrounding it would have been better served had there been less speechifying beforehand.

After the *real* organizers and government reps made their statements, one of the inSITE97 artists gave a mock speech. At first, Andrea Fraser, dressed in elegant white, seemed sincere, speaking the gobbledygook about multiculturalism and diversity that wins grants, but no listeners.

But as she shifted personas, introducing (and becoming) a grateful artist, an arts bureaucrat, a city father, a Pete Wilson clone and the head of a multinational corporation sponsoring the event, she reframed

the whole evening in its true late-capitalist political context.

Though she wielded her clichés with lethal accuracy and deadpanned with the satiric innocence of Jonathan Swift, on Friday night, Fraser only prolonged the wait for Anderson. She'd have been effective, though perhaps less discomfiting, in a solo show.

Otherwise, this was one provocative and celebratory evening, a cultural christening ceremony not only for inSITE97, but for the ReinCarnation project, for Sushi Performance and Visual Art (now with its headquarters there), and for the east edge of downtown, which looks sure to be energized by the project.