

**POGÁNY CSILLA**  
**THE ANDERSONIAN PERFORMANCE ART**

**Ph.D. Thesis**

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Performance art and the problematic of body, communication, multimedia, modern society, the psychology of modern man and globalization have drawn the attention of numerous foreign and an ever increasing number of Hungarian aesthetes, art historians and theatre critics. Performance art has proved to be a viable genre for almost half a century (the beginnings of modern performance goes back to the 1960ies having its roots in the Futurist, Dada and later Bauhaus experiments, but there are theories according to which the origin of the genre should be sought much earlier), a fact that alone can justify its research.

## METHODS

In the elaboration of the thesis the ontological<sup>1</sup> and hermeneutical approaches were applied. Tamás Bécsy points out that genres cannot be defined as easily as different art forms because „they don't have a special form”. Their characteristic principles are less detectable, and „can be shown only by way of analysis”.

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<sup>1</sup> Bécsy Tamás, A dráma lételméletéről, Akadémia Könyvkiadó, 1984.

Bécsy Tamás, A színháték lételméletéről, Dialóg Campus Kiadó, Budapest-

Pécs,1997.

Defining a genre means to present its components, its operating principles and its origin.

Therefore I tried to outline the Andersonian performance taking all these into consideration. Following this line of thought has affected and defined the structure of my writing.

## ACHIEVEMENT

The goal of the thesis was to present the characteristics of the Andersonian performance art, more specifically of her multi-media works (electronic operas

## SUMMARY

The introductory part of the thesis tackles the issues connected to the new sensitivity, the possibility of redemption by way of the body, the theatre of desire.

Modern man needs a new kind of sensitivity and perception. From now on, the relation between the idea and its elaboration, art and non art, the personal and impersonal, high- and low culture should be tackled differently. Art has changed, leaving the premises of museums behind. Traditional approaches to culture view art as a critique of life ( moral, social, political), whereas in modern culture art is the extension of life (not necessarily rejecting moral valuation).The art object modifies our conscience and sensitivity, and it cannot be considered a mere means by which we communicate

our thoughts and moral views. Improvisation has gained considerable importance. In his essay, *In the New Spirit and the Poets*, Guillaume Apollinaire considers that the artist (the poet above all) seeks truth. In this process, he relies on „common and critical sense”, „holistic outlook on life”, „sense of responsibility”, „curiosity” and „taking aback”. He speaks about „the synthesis of arts” that endows the artist with „unbelievable freedom” who is the elaborator of new prophecies and conceives his art by way of experimentation. Seeking new possibilities presupposes failure as well, which helps the conception of oeuvres in the new spirit. Apollinaire believes that the artists of the new age will finally create a modern art.

In the second part (*A theoretical Approach to Performance Art*) the questions regarding the definition of the genre are tackled (performance), Richard Schechner’s and Robert Wilson’s performance models are presented; then the relations between body and politics, between performance, language and modern media, the importance of story-telling in performances, poems in performances and instruments used in performances are analyzed in Laurie Anderson’s art.

We can witness the manifestation of this new sensitivity in the art of the American performance-artist Laurie Anderson, who explores the possibilities offered by modern technology and by the great variety of the means of communication. Her complex

performances comprising unique visual and acoustic effects are tuned up by the help of the computer. Thus we can experience the reconciliation of art and technology (science) and its fruit: bringing to acquiescence of the modern man with the world he lives in.

Performance art as a concept was first applied in the 1970ies in the case of ephemeral, time- bound, process-oriented works of conceptualist and feminist artists. Its appearance has been commonly associated with the shift that took place between modernism and postmodernism, that has brought along a more open kind of art work (vs. the art object) the essence of which lies in the „transaction” that takes place between the artist, work of art and the receiver. Its interdisciplinarity, anti-hierarchical feature and need for co-operation , its aleatory and undefinable characteristic have been considered signs of the post- modern, nevertheless , Robyn Brentano draws the attention to the fact that these are true also for the modernist experiments and the traditional forms (rites) as well. In the case of performances, we cannot speak of individuals or characters (these occur in the illusionist theatre). The „hero”/”heroine” of performances surpasses the individual in many respects similarly to Dionysus in the rite connected to him. In the meantime, the artist has an important role in the rebirth by acting as a mediator. The performer is thus a medium through which reality finds its way by breaking through illusion. Performance art offers the freedom of experimentation and gives way to social and cultural critique. Its undefinable character, straight- forwardness, open form and indirect

medium makes possible for the viewer to face the most painful fact, it becomes the high day of the human spirit.

Laurie Anderson started her career as a conceptual artist , so social and political analysis are both present in her work. The problems connected to the Individual and History, the Individual and Society and the Individual and the Myth are in the focus of her performances being topics characteristic of the avant-garde. These performances reflect the condition of the individual, her ethical and spiritual crisis, nevertheless , the uncertainty of the individual doesn't prevent her from having the courage of her own convictions.

The themes she tackles in her performances are similar to those which are in the focus of the US public opinion, thus the gulf war, the problem of women's salary and of the military expenses, national debt etc. are embedded in her works.

The characteristically avant-garde attempt to fuse life and art obviously refers to politics as well. Due to its anarchist attitude, the realm of politics is criticized. This way her works often reflect social abuses. The United States and Empty Places are inspired by the US policy. Political acts can be performed only with the help of the body, which in the bourgeois consumer society stands for the exploitation of the body ( pornography, nudes) and not for freedom as György Péter points out in his writing, *The Only Copy*. Performance artists share the opinion that the body represented as above symbolizes hollow beauty, business interest and enhances

political exploitation and with the help of their works, they revolt against the objectified and expropriated body. The revolt can be radical (Gina Paine, Chris Burden) or disguised (Laurie Anderson), but it is present in every performance work.

Laurie Anderson manages to hinder the expropriation of the body by applying different technics with the help of which the performer can switch identities before they get objectified, and which become the expression of artistic freedom. This is the principle which keeps the characters of Moby Dick in motion where the artists have several different roles. In concordance with Walter Benjamin's concept about history and the spirit of the avant-garde, Laurie Anderson doesn't play any of the main roles (Captain Ahab, Ishmail) , she rather focuses on the supporting characters ( e.g. Pip) rendering new meanings to the story of the White Whale.

From the 1970ies on the new media are questioned, and the central theme of many works of art becomes the medium itself. Language becomes the manifestation of playful creativity and experimentation, and in the meantime the object of Laurie Anderson's thoughts. She turns towards language as a medium with the curiosity of the philosopher, the interest of the linguist and the creativity of the artist.

William S. Burroughs' writing, *The Electronic Revolution* influenced considerably Laurie Anderson's relation to language and the technics applied in her performances also show traces of

Burroughs '. One of the main topics she adopts in her performances is the communicative value of language and the limitations of human language.

Stories constitute the backbone of Laurie Anderson's performances. Even though they do have a chain of events and actions , her stories lack a plot, and they are not likely to have a coherent and logically communicated message. They do not have a proper „story” , the artist seems to choose them at random. Thus, there is no tension. The Andersonian stories despite their strongly personal tone cannot be considered confessions either. The sometimes ironic, objective and impassive attitude does not make this possible. The stories often belong to her personal past, but her present day ego doesn't identify with the ego of the past.

The lyrical atmosphere of her stories finds its way into her verses. Besides the more objective attitude necessary for stories, which occupy a position between the Individual and Them, she has felt the need of a different kind of utterance. Her verses are extremely sincere, friendly talks. The dialogue takes place between the stage and the audience (not on the stage) with the help of Pilinszky's „expressive silence”.

Laurie Anderson is one of those performers who have a literary vein as she is the author of literary texts. William S. Burroughs was her friend and has had a considerable influence on her work , Shakespeare has inspired her. One can detect Blake's and



Whitman's images and atmosphere in her metaphysical poetry, and Herman Melville's *Moby Dick* was the starting point for her electronic opera, *Songs and Stories from Moby Dick* (1999).

The last part of the thesis (*Issues Connected to Performance Art*) deals with technology and the language of the future, the problematic of Gesamtkunstwerk, and womanhood. *The Hungarian Reception* attempts to summarize the echos of Laurie Anderson's art on the Hungarian scene and to draw the artistic portrait of the performer based on interviews made in Hungary.

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