

# AURORA FORUM AT STANFORD UNIVERSITY

**Laurie Anderson**

**Art + Invention Speaker Series**

**Presented by Stanford Lively Arts  
and  
The Stanford Institute for Creativity in the Arts**

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**Mark Gonnerman:** Good evening and welcome to the Aurora Forum at Stanford University. I'm Mark Gonnerman, the Forum's director, and I thank you for taking time out to be with us this evening for a public conversation with Laurie Anderson.

As I was preparing for tonight, I learned that our guest was awarded the Dorothy and Lillian Gish Prize in the Arts in 2007 [Applause], and as I looked further into that I found the citation that was read when the award was conferred. It recognized an artist "who has made a contribution to the beauty of the world and to mankind's enjoyment and understanding of life." And I thought, That's it! Our guest tonight is an artist who has made an outstanding contribution through art and song to the beauty of the world and through story to humankind's enjoyment and understanding of life.

She's an international art rock star who practices certainly the world's oldest, and probably most important, profession: that of storyteller. She is famous for inventing musical instruments and using technology in highly innovative ways, but she's been heard to say that "technology is the least important thing about what I do." She has many, many voices. I think even her alter egos have alter egos, and that leads me to regard her as a very highly evolved human being. She can even keep track of all those voices. We can talk about that.

It's really an honor for us to be here with you tonight. Please join me in welcoming Laurie Anderson to the Aurora Forum stage. [Applause]

Our conversation tonight is presented by Stanford Lively Arts and the Stanford Institute for Creativity in the Arts, with further support from the University Office of the Provost and Stanford's Office of Public Affairs. This is the fifth in our "Art + Invention" conversation series this year, and that would not have happened but for the vision and leadership of Jenny Bilfield, who is the executive and artistic director of Stanford Lively Arts, and Lisa Mezzacappa, who is the coordinator of on-campus engagement when artists such as Laurie visit our campus. So let's give them a round of applause, too [Applause].

Many of us are here tonight because tomorrow evening in Memorial Auditorium, right behind us, we're going to have the experience of *Delusion*, a piece of yours that opened at the Cultural Olympiad in Vancouver in conjunction with the Winter Games, and that you just performed at the Barbican in London a couple of weeks ago. I understand that you've been in the house all day getting ready for tomorrow night. What's in store?

**Laurie Anderson:** *Delusion* started out as a two-person play. I wanted to make a play where there was no resolution – where there were two characters, and they each had a really opposite and very vivid idea of what was going on, and totally opposed. And at the end of the play, you would be left with these vivid and opposing ideas, both absolutely true and absolutely mutually exclusive. And you would be able to sit there and hold them like that and not lose your mind. I never feel that resolution expresses what happens in life. That's how it started: as a play for two people. Then it took a bunch of different turns. For a while, it turned into a movie with some music. That's the thing about being a multi-media artist; you start in one thing and it turns into another thing, and nobody says, "It looks really different." So you start on an opera, and it turns into a potato print, for example. [Laughter] Nobody cares except the people who commissioned the opera. "What's this potato print?" [Laughter] So I don't mind, you know? Things morph into other things, so this turned into some music with images, and that's part of what you'll see tomorrow. Then some stories came drifting back in, and now it's about twenty stories, and they do have this element of opposition in them. They also have an alter ego in it, as well, so this is sort of another voice that expresses these things. To be super pompous, it's about the way we tell stories and the way, let's say, our observations about the way our minds work.

**Gonnerman:** It sounds like it's about processes of discovery.

**Anderson:** That, and just noticing, I'd say, rather than discovering. I'm a miniaturist. I just kind of say, Look at that. For example, I was just in London and ran into this great bookstore there called School of Life. School of Life is kind of a bookstore; it only has about twenty books. But it's run by a guy, a writer named Alain de Botton, who wrote, I think, *How Proust Can Change Your Life*.

**Gonnerman:** *Status Anxiety* is another great book of his.

**Anderson:** Yeah, great book. And a number of other ones. He was also the artist-in-residence at Heathrow for a while, for a week. [Laughter] I want to mention something that happened at Heathrow that he was describing because it's on this level of noticing as opposed to, let's say, inventing. Because he's the artist-in-residence, first of all, he describes how the airport works. You know how when you're going through an airport, you're just sort of like a suitcase; you're passing through. It's really not something you have a grip on. But he really shows you how Heathrow works: what comes in, the workings. It's fascinating. But he also describes how you move through that place. There's one description that is so beautiful. It's a description of people's faces as they come into the arrivals area, and the way their expressions change in about .4 seconds from one thing to another. You come out into arrivals and even though you know that all

of your friends have said they're really too busy to come and meet you at the airport, you think that maybe one of them might come [Laughter] or there might be another person who ... except that you broke up with them two years ago, but maybe they'll be there. And another one who might be there died ten years ago. Anyway, there you are coming out – and you have a .3-second scan of the people who are there – with this look on your face that has been kind of arranged a little bit and then it switches as you realize that nobody has come to pick you up at the airport, and as per usual, you're going to get a cab and you're going to go by yourself. You have adjusted to ... you have gone into your adult mode of: I can accept this; I knew no one was going to meet me at the airport. He notices this and describes that little toggle between one expression and the other. It's that kind of thing that I as an artist really appreciate – things that are not so unusual but you kind of go, "Oh, I know what that is."

**Gonnerman:** School of Life: what's that?

**Anderson:** School of Life is just a kind of, let's say, bookstore, because it has a few of them, but basically every day they invite someone to come and talk about whatever. You realize what a specialized culture we live in, and nobody's really going, "Here's a way that you could do this." And they are, in fact, specialists in a lot of ways about certain things. It's really fascinating.

So I just decided to try to open a branch in New York City because there really is a need for something like that. I think it would be a fantastic place to have to go to.

**Gonnerman:** So if you were going to give a School of Life lecture right now, what do we need to learn?

**Anderson:** It wouldn't be on a need-to-know basis. [Laughter]

**Gonnerman:** What would you like us to know?

**Anderson:** What I would just feel in the mood about talking about, and I would hope that it would be like that with other people, too – just stuff that they're interested in. Because I don't know you; I don't know what you need. You don't know me; you don't know what I need. But we know what we're interested in, and we have common enough interests so that we're kind of like, Hey, that would be interesting to check out.

It's the same way I feel about art. I don't think it's made to make our lives better. I don't think that's the point of it. I feel that that's a very nineteenth-century way to look at the function and purpose of art, because if you think it's going to make lives better, better for who? Better for you, better for whose people over there, better for who? What do you mean? I'm not sure what it means. So I think that maybe basing it on something interesting to say would be a better way to go. If I were going to talk about that now, I would try to talk about some of the things, actually, that have been spinning off from *Delusion*, this thing that I'll be doing tomorrow night. One of them is what we learn from dreams, because it recently occurred to me that I'm going to be sixty-three in a

month or so, which means that I'm not somebody who.... Let's say I sleep an average amount, which I do. I'm not one of those people who sleeps "Three hours – that's all I need. Three hours is plenty for me." No, I need like, you know, eleven or twelve hours is good for me. [Laughter] I enjoy that part. But let's say I was sleeping seven. That means that I've been asleep for twenty-one years – doing what? I'm actually making a little book now because my dream self has just gotten to the legal age of twenty-one [Laughter], so I thought, I'm going to look at this person and see who they are and what they've learned and if they've gotten out of any of those loops that they're in every night and any of the other things – mistaken identities, in particular, where something that you're very good as a dreamer – doing that every night. That's what I find. I truly dread when somebody starts telling me their dream and they're going, "My father was walking down the road. No, wait, wait, no. My uncle was walking down the road. No, wait, not a road." Ahhh, please stop telling me your dreams! You're telling it like it was a movie that was directed by someone. It wasn't. It was something just for you, really. [Laughter] And isn't it nice that you have things just for you.

**Gonnerman:** Unless they're Laurie Anderson dreams.

**Anderson:** No, I did collect some. You're holding this book *Night Life*. Now some of those things, which I thought were.... But they're all quirky like that.

**Gonnerman:** All your dreams.

**Anderson:** Most of them. I don't have really iconic ones that are....

**Gonnerman:** What's the story behind this book?

**Anderson:** Well, I was on a tour of something called "The End of the Moon." "The End of the Moon" was my report of my time as the artist-in-residence at NASA – very weird gig. [Laughter] Anyway, I had written a very long poem about that experience called "The End of the Moon." I did this as a tour with music and stories and sort of like that. It was the same thing every night. Never do this to yourself, especially if you don't have any acting skills. I'm not an actor, so I don't have any protection against repetition, so if I'm saying the same thing every night, it's kind of a torture. So because I was in this loop of the exact same words for an hour and a half every night, my mind went wild at night inventing whatever: headless singing squirrels, just on and on, all sorts of things. I was just desperate. It was really just overactive. So out of self-defense, I had my computer drawing tablet next to the bed, and as soon as I would have one of those dreams I'd try to wake up and just draw it and write very roughly what had happened. That helped a lot because it turned it into some other thing; it pulled it out of my mind and made it a graphic thing. It's something you could look at and go, "Whoa, headless singing squirrels." [Laughter] It gave me a little bit of distance, and as an artist, 95 percent of my work is editing, so just looking at things and going, "Umm, no. Oh, maybe...." So it treated it like works of art, but it wasn't, the same way that you sort of think your dream is a movie, but it's really not. Then I put them in this book.

**Gonnerman:** “Headless squirrels are singing/ Their voices are strangely tangy/ Smell of new cement/ A raw, unhappy feeling in the air.”  
There are a lot of smells in your dreams.

**Anderson:** Well, I guess that it’s obviously the sense of memory and, I guess, also it’s not just Proust but elephants who have the longest memories and the biggest noses. There’s something very much.... And also, you know, there’s a really wonderful trip you can take along a little sort of pilgrim path from ryokan to ryokan around Kyoto. You go on this little thing, and every monastery that you stop at will serve you a meal in a box of drawers. In each drawer there’s maybe, let’s say, six purple cubes, and each one of those will trigger these intense memories, because it’s memory food. It’s an incredible meal because.... Of course, most of taste is smell, so it’s triggering a number of amazing things. It’s really a wonderful walk to go on. And then the next day all of those things are coming back over and over again. They’re really simple things like chalk, and suddenly, Boom, you’re back in the second row of first grade smelling chalk, and you can’t believe how you got there. But it’s very, very, very vivid. It unlocks something that’s super-clear.

**Gonnerman:** I understand that *Delusion* has to do with remembering your mother, who died last year. She was born in 1926. What’s the connection with the art and the memory of your mother?

**Anderson:** Well, you have to come to the show. It’s a funny kind of thing about that because I *never* once mentioned that in any kind of description of this work, ever. She is kind of weaving through this thing called *Delusion*. It’s about many other things, but I think that people picked up on that maybe because, in a way, it’s sort of ... because it went into some sort of taboo territory about mothers, so I think that was why people were relating to it. It’s about many, many different things, and she’s one of them. But very, very briefly, there’s a description of her death, which was something that was very amazing. It was kind of like watching Voltaire die. She was very ... “Absolutely no, I don’t want any notice of my death, no memorial, no contributions to your favorite charity. Nothing of that. Just basically live your life; that’s what I want you do to.” It was very stark. So I described some of the things about that in *Delusion* because it made such a huge impression on me.

But there are many things about politics in this thing. It also updates itself all the time. Last week in London, they had their first televised debate, American-style, so they got their first taste of what it’s like to see their candidates try to improvise, which was a shock to them. It was really a shock because they’re always just doing the script. For me, as somebody involved with stories, I’m fascinated with politics because it’s all about stories: listening to the candidates tell their stories about what they think the future will look like, or based on stories from the past – what we’ve done then.

So it’s all stories. We don’t necessarily have to call it fiction, but it’s all stories. Your candidacy can rise or fall on your ability to tell a good story, as we know from the Bush years, when we were told a story about the weapons, and so on. It had all of the elements

of a good story with an evil person. It was a really good, well-told story. And we realize also that a good story does not have to be a true story, and also that stories are powerful. Stories can start wars. Stories can end wars. Stories are how we live.

In the British elections, all of these guys are telling their stories, and I was remembering how these stories could win or lose, and thinking back to Bush and Kerry. I don't know if you remember that debate, but I just remember that one question that for me, I think, decided the entire election. It was a single question, and the question was super simple. The question was, Do you love your wife? George Bush, do you love your wife? He gets the banjo out and starts playing, "I met her at a barbeque. She was the prettiest girl there, and I loved her, and I love her still." George, ten points; great. Okay, John Kerry, do you love your wife? First tip-off here is you watch and you can see – high-def TV is pretty good – you can see the little twitch in the mouth, not for long, but anyway.... "Well, I married up," [You're like, Ohhhh!] [Laughter] talking about the Heinz ketchup-or-whatever heiress. And you're like, John, very bad. Strike one! So then he goes on. He realizes he's made a mistake, so the next thing he says, is, "But my mother... [and you're like, "Ohhhh! John, don't put all the women in one category: your wife, your mother, same thing, mix them all together.] [Laughter] Then he says, "My mother, on her death bed [Ohhhh! Your political career is over, John Kerry!] said to me three things." Everyone's so bummed out at this point. "Integrity, integrity," and of course you've guessed the third: "Integrity." And everybody knew at that point that that question had tipped the whole thing. You look into someone's mind and that's what they're coming up with, impromptu, not on the book, and you realize, Whewww, this guy should not be the president. [Laughter] He just cannot think on his feet, plus the way he's putting thoughts together is really sad.

**Gonnerman:** So the Democratic National Committee could use an artist-in-residence. [Laughter]

**Anderson:** Well, I think most places in this country could use an artist-in-residence.

**Gonnerman:** Talk more about that. It sounds like when you describe *Delusion* and you're interested in portraying how the mind works and you're interested in what artists do and creativity, is there something distinctive about the way artists' minds work?

**Anderson:** Well, we're not running for anything, generally. Well, actually, maybe that's not true. Maybe artists have certain ambitions, as well, and maybe we do want people to think certain things about us. Probably we are running for things. But we're running for different things. I found out a lot about this particular situation at NASA when I was working as the artist-in-residence there for two years. As I said, a bizarre job that they gave me, this multi-media artist, which they thought I was going to do something probably more like sexy techno stuff. Then when I said I was going to write a long poem, they were like.... [Laughter] "Why would you do that?"

But it was fascinating to work there. The first thing I realized was that artists and scientists work in many of the same ways. Scientists don't know what they're looking

for, either. Also, they work in a very similar way. You get a hunch, you get an idea, then you make something, and then you see how it's working. But the most important thing is the question of how do you know when it's finished. How do you know when it's finished? In order to know when it's finished, you have to know what you're making, so it kind of loops around. Anyway, it was a fascinating job in which I learned a lot of things from not only robotics engineers but also nanotechnologists. There were a lot of really, really, really interesting conversations with people. I should also say I was not just the first artist-in-residence at NASA; I was also the *last* artist-in-residence at NASA. [Laughter] There was a senator who was looking at the budget and he was like: "\$33 trillion for spy satellites (there's a lot of military stuff); \$47 kajillion for tile – whatever – research; \$20,000 for an artist-in-residence! What? This is outrageous!" [Laughter] He was very proud that he found that item and was announcing it, so it was gone.

Like you say, I think it would be great to have an artist-in-residence at NASA, and I'm trying to push for that for someone else to step into that. Same thing with Congress: It would be interesting to have an artist-in-residence in Congress; [Laughter] interesting in a Supreme Court. How about the White House? We have a different way of looking at the world, period. It's just a different way of seeing time. However, I have to say that there are many programs at NASA that have amazing timelines. There's one that has a 10,000-year timeline. You should see the white board for this thing. [Laughter] It's the greening of Mars, because we're going to go somewhere, and Mars is the most likely place, so we're terraforming it, bringing oxygen, we're getting it ready to go there. And now that we know so much about taking care of planets.... [Laughter]

**Gonnerman:** Yeah, we're really good at that.

**Anderson:** We're good at that. We're going to take care of Mars: terraform it, make it just like us. But maybe we're going to get a little bit better. I think we're getting better at that. Do you think we are? We can get back to that later in the question-and-answer part. You can think about that. [Laughter]

**Gonnerman:** I'd like to get back to time, too, but before that, I'm interested in time in your own life story. When did you really claim your vocation as an artist? It was interesting to learn that when you graduated from high school you came out to Mills College in 1965. Then the next year you went to Barnard. You were pre-med at Mills and then you went to Barnard and studied art history. What happened? Did it have to do with a sense of vocation?

**Anderson:** Nobody ever asked me what I wanted to do, so I never decided. So I would kind of do what I wanted to do at the time. I still do. I've never decided what I'm doing, and I highly recommend that as a way to live. Multi-media artist is a good term; it means nothing, you know. It means you could write a book this year, and next year you could make some sculpture, and no one's going to say, "You're writing a book. That's not multi-media." So you're free. You're not in somebody's bin. You're always getting stuffed in a bin, but you have control over that. You can make a wider definition of what you do, and then you're not trapped. That's helped me a lot in terms of making things.

**Gonnerman:** So you go from Illinois to the San Francisco Bay Area to New York. Did somebody at Mills say to you, What do you really want to do? How did that transpire?

**Anderson:** No, I left Mills.... I liked Mills except that, at that time, you had to wear long skirts to Wednesday dinners. So I thought, I'm getting out of here. [Laughter] I can't do that. I feel like I'm in drag. I couldn't do it. I just didn't like it, so I left. New York seemed like a good place to go. I don't like schools, anyway, so in New York I just lived downtown and I sort of went to school when I felt like going to school, and it was a good way to learn things. I learned a lot of things that way.

**Gonnerman:** So is it that early on you tasted freedom in the process of making art, and you liked that feeling?

**Anderson:** Well, I always liked making art. I'm not sure it was the freedom part that was the most important. It was more like the pleasure part ... making paintings or playing the violin ... just making great sounds or hoping you would make great sounds. The freedom part was important, too, but mostly it was just fun.

**Gonnerman:** Let's talk about *Homeland*, which is going to come out in the middle of June. It was fun but also an arduous process.

**Anderson:** No, that wasn't fun.

**Gonnerman:** And yet you persevered. It was amazing to learn when you were talking in a music class here at Stanford yesterday that you put it together out of 100,000 sound files.

**Anderson:** Here's the story of this record. I thought, Instead of sitting in your studio trying to write songs, how about just go out and play them? So I just booked a bunch of dates, like some club dates and things. I got some musicians I like. I had one or two sketchy ideas of what I would do song-wise, and the other things were improvised. We just changed them every night. One night I would be talking about work – working and different.... One night was dedicated to Karl Marx and Herman Melville because those books were written rather close in time. One was “Workers of the world, unite!” and the other one was “I'd prefer not to” (*Bartleby, the Scrivener*). It was a whole evening about work, and there were just different ideas about it. There were stories and there were songs about things, and very improvised. Then, as I would build up these songs, I would make them more ... they would become longer, more elaborate, or whatever, and then I played them with very, very different groups of people: Mongolian throat singers, jazz guys, electro-pop people, all sorts of people ... sort of the same songs.

Then got back to New York and said, Okay. And this was all under this kind of loose umbrella of a record called *Homeland*, or project called Homeland. So we began recording it, and it was boring, actually. The studio version was just like.... You know how you make something and then you try to make it better, and it's just more boring.

It's more organized, but it's more boring. It's very hard to acknowledge that and recognize it and then just throw it away because it's hard to throw stuff away. Plus, the people I was working with ... I had run out of time and money on the project and they all left. I was like, Ohhh. So I'm left with 100,000 Pro Tools files of ... one is a viola line that came from a year and a half ago in Sweden, and another one was a horn line that came from somewhere else. It was sort of the same song but not really the same tempo, not really the same.... And everyone had left. I'm by myself looking at this stuff, going, Ohhh. It's the closest I ever came to going crazy. It was really.... And to know what's in every one of the 100,000 files is also a real torture. So you're feeling almost as if everything broke. It's shards of a building and you're going, Where could that go? Plus, I was doing a lot of other projects, so it became like a hobby. I was working on it a couple of days a month, trying to make this into.... But the reason I wanted to do this is that live music has a kind of crazy spark that studio stuff often doesn't. Not always, but in my case it just didn't have that inventive, sort of free thing when people are having a really good time making music. I put those all together and I finally finished it, but it was really, really difficult. I kept trying to keep in mind.... It features these Mongolian players who are from Chirgilchin. I heard them first in a really beautiful ... my favorite New York museum, which is the Rubin Museum, and they often have really wonderful musical events. So this Chirgilchin was playing there and they were Mongolian throat singers, so in other words, you have the fundamental and then all the harmonics, so it's pretty much like a radio tuned to twelve stations at once. Then they're playing these homemade instruments: igil, which is the Mongolian version of erhu, the Chinese two-stringed instrument. And a beautiful combination: My instrument is viola, and so to hear these two violin-type sounds from two different sides of the world is really nice because the igil is like [imitates sound of instrument], and the Western viola is [imitates sound of viola], with lots of vibrato. I love the way those two sounds combine. Plus, working with these guys was wonderful. When I first heard them, I invited them to come to the studio and play with some New York musicians, and the second it started, it was just beautiful. It was like something was really happening musically.

So I invited them on this tour and, first of all, you think the world is small? The world is big. For them to get home: an eleven-hour flight to Moscow, four-day train ride, three days in a car, and then a day on a horse. It's far. So we were playing a concert a couple hours north of Lisbon one night, a beautiful summer night outside. The notes are like [imitates sounds] ... not bashing into walls anywhere but just expanding into the dark night. It was a beautiful concert. Afterwards, they're packing up their instruments, their igils, and they're walking off into the night. I said, "Where are you guys going?" It was like a two-hour drive to Lisbon. Their Russian manager had forgotten to arrange transportation for them, so they were walking off into the night. Why? Because they're nomads. This is not like Americans saying, "Where's the map?" [Laughter] No, off they went without a question – an eleven-, twelve-hour walk without a thought.

I learned so much from these guys about time and music and being in the world. When you jump out of your own little world of what's supposed to happen, when, and why, it becomes a much different experience. They're on this record and are kind of threading through it with their very different sense of time, very different sense of melody, but

somehow blending with the other instruments – taking little threads of their stuff and putting it all together and seeing how it mixes up.

**Gonnerman:** Well, congratulations on pulling that together. I've heard an advance copy and it's beautiful. We're all looking forward to hearing it and talking about it when it comes out in June.

Time. The first song on *Homeland* is called "Transitory Life." I think a preoccupation with time runs through all your work. You're fascinated by it. I have a lot of questions about it. I wonder if that preoccupation comes from your grandmother convincing you that the end of the world could come in 1957 and that that concern has motivated you somehow. Do you think there's a connection there?

**Anderson:** Yeah, partly. I'm very affected by sort of apocalyptic stuff. On the other hand, she was a missionary who was.... She went to Japan to convert Buddhists to Southern Baptist or something. [Laughter]

**Gonnerman:** What year?

**Anderson:** She went in the thirties, and didn't speak a word of Japanese, but hoped that she would just get the message across by singing hymns and things. And they're like, What the haaaah? [Laughter] But she was a very vain Southern lady who made her own clothes and made her own hats. Her hats were very elaborate. They were very beautiful – very beautiful, dripping with birds and grapes and feathers, and sequins. So her audience would go: I like those hats, though. So she taught them to make hats. She was someone whose hobby was growing roses, and they taught her how to cut bonsai roses. It was, I think, a very good exchange. It's pretty hard to convince other people of what you believe, you know, especially if you're just singing – not going through any basic things, just singing. The other side, though, of the family was the Swedish evangelical mission covenant church – Lutheran branch, as you know – and basically this was a coffee church. The sermon is: Let's be nice to each other; that would be a good idea. There was no God, there was no nothing. It was just: It would be good for you, it would be good for me, if we're all really kind to each other, so let's just do that. Everyone was like .... [Laughter] and down to the fellowship room and get wired on coffee! [Laughter]

**Gonnerman:** Do the coffee ritual.

**Anderson:** Coffee ritual, so the rest of the day you're like .....! [Laughter] I'm going to be kind to everybody and they're going to be kind to me.

I enjoyed that very much. I really don't like authority, so I really liked this ability ... this kind of teaching that was about that: It's up to you. But on both sides, they were interesting. But you...

**Gonnerman:** Oh, I told Laurie that I'm a pastor's kid.

**Anderson:** PK.

**Gonnerman:** A PK, [Laughter] which, if you know about that, and you know me, probably explains a lot. [Laughter]

**Anderson:** What does it explain?

**Gonnerman:** Well, I don't want to say anything that would cause any difficulty in my family, but you become very attuned to the gap between what people say and what they do. And growing up in the church environment, as I did, it was really the gap between what's in the stories – in the scriptures – and what's going on around me, and why are we taking this seriously? And that opened up a kind of critical distance that has really made life very interesting all along. I think that ability to stand back and see what's going on is key in the process of growth of awareness, and it never ends once you cross into that. Yeah.... [Laughter]

**Anderson:** I was also impressed by the hypocrisy, but also by the madness, because we would have this ... I don't know if you had those little felt boards where you put the Bible figures covered with felt on the boards to act out the stories. These were adults who were doing this, and they were talking about talking snakes as if there were really talking snakes. I thought, This is amazing! These adults believe that snakes talk!

**Gonnerman:** Midwestern biblical surrealism. [Laughter]

**Anderson:** Yeah! Exactly. And there were a million things like that, so I loved those stories. I still do. I love those stories so much because they're just mad. They're so deeply mad ... and strangely true. There are many levels of those stories that I really loved.

**Gonnerman:** Plus the theater – the theater of going to church. So it sounds like your grandma got saved in Japan, learning how to do the bonsai roses. You've said that you trust so much more practices like that or you trust so much more the concrete things people actually do than the realm of ideas, and yet the realm of ideas is so much a part of your art.

SIDE B

**Anderson:** My art is really about story. I'm in love with words, and ideas are something else. I like the way that you can tell a story that's about a story, which is the way *Delusion* starts. I'm interested in the mechanisms that you use really to go on: the stories you tell yourself so that you can go on; the stories you tell yourself about who you are or how it all works. In my case, it was this mechanism of ... you probably use it once in a while, too ... the donkey and the carrot. Your life is about: Well, if I do this, then I'll get this prize or reward, or whatever.

**Gonnerman:** The talking donkey and carrot.

**Anderson:** Talking? No, the donkey is just hungry. It doesn't talk. [Laughter]

**Gonnerman:** The biblical donkey?

**Anderson:** Oh, no, it's not a biblical.... It's the donkey of desire. It has this carrot in front of it. You dangle the carrot and the donkey trundles after it. You get these prizes and keep going and that's the way it works until, as I describe in this story in *Delusion*, my donkey died. It just went: I don't care; I'm stopping, that's it, it's over. That's the beginning of this thing. What do you do when that mechanism stops working? Or, as I put it – this is my favorite line in Melville: “What is a man if he outlives the lifetime of his God?” What do you do if...? Where do you go? What do you want? So it begins with that and then goes through a series of things about traveling through dreams and desire and various other things.

**Gonnerman:** We'll soon open up and hear from our guests and have some audience-inspired conversation. I want to switch gears just a bit because you're been such a force in the introduction of new technology into the arts. Here we are in Silicon Valley. We're surrounded by all this technology. It's becoming an extension of who we are: surrogate memories. We're immersed in it. This is the water that we're swimming in. It was in a piece of yours in, I think this was '97, '98, or so: “The Speed of Darkness.” You make a comment and you talk about technology as being very big and complicated and something that we don't really understand. You say, What do we do with something this big and complicated that we don't really understand? We worship it. I'm wondering, because I know you've wrestled with this veneration for technology, what's your own experience now? Are you pulling back as an artist and becoming more spare in your use of technology? What's the trajectory here with you and technology?

**Anderson:** I was always pretty spare. I like technology. It's great. It's fast, it's very flexible, it's becoming smaller and smaller. I love it and I hate it, just like everybody else. Like everybody else, you just resent it as well as like it and love it. The most frightening thing, I think, for most people is the increasing unlikelihood that you will be able to get off the grid. I love getting lost. I want to get lost in the world, and I'm getting more and more attached to this stuff. It's very, very hard to do that. But I think that anything like.... It's not just technology that we worship because it's big. It's other big systems. Let's take the big system of expertise, for example, or this monolithic idea that you're – as opposed to a gadget-wielding person – that you're not very ept. We live in a place – in a country – that kind of encourages this kind of infantile behavior. For example, let's say, Oprah – these kinds of shows that try to encourage you to believe that there's something wrong with you. There's nothing wrong with you. You're trying to get through your life. You have some things to figure out, but it's not like there's something that's wrong. Or, on the other hand, you don't really even know what you need. Ask your doctor if you're going to need something. Ask *yourself* if you're going to need it! Come on. Or, the best example is maybe currently banking. We feel that you will not be able to grasp the complexities of the financial system, so we can't really go into that, so let us rob you blind while we just encourage you to think of yourself as

unable to understand that – unable to understand it. But because we're not making shoes, because we're not making so much stuff – bread, shoes – we're dealing with information and we have to convince each other that our areas of expertise are useful to use. That's how it's kind of working. I have a song on *Homeland* called "Only an Expert Can Deal with the Problem," and it uses a lot of examples of people who are experts at various things and assume that you will not be able to understand it. So that's, I think, like technology. And that has a little bit to do with technology, too, because do you really understand how this stuff works? On the other hand, do you need to?

I was asked to be on the opening ceremony committee for the Athens Olympics, again because I have this multi-media-whatever-techno background. So I'm at these meetings and I was just really feeling super burned out on technology at the time, so I was really not the right person to have at these meetings. They said, We're going to have a giant crane come in and then it's going to drop this, and there's going to be a big turntable. I said, "The crane? I wouldn't use the crane. This giant turntable with an interactive... I wouldn't use that." They were like, "Okay, what do you like if you don't like any of this?" So I said, "You people," [I hope I didn't say that] "Everything was invented here: tragedy, physics, algebra, history, poetry, sculpture, everything. Why don't you just.... Anyone can push a button, Boom! and have something big happen. Are you excited about that? Boom! Wow! Something happens. You know, we're a little bit over, Switch the lights on and they come on. Wow! Boom, boom!" I said, "Anyone could do that. Why don't you just take this big field you have – this big opportunity – and write 'Know thyself' on it? That's the hard stuff to do. Anyone can push a button." Anyway, I got fired from that job, too. [Laughter]

I had a tutor there, by the way, who was a really amazing guy. I was the only American on this opening ceremony committee, and I have to say, these were the smartest people I have ever met, and I had no doubts why they were the descendants of the people who had invented everything. We would be thinking of whatever topic or gizmo, and they would turn it to an angle that I had never imagined could exist. It was just.... I couldn't imagine thinking of it from that angle. I'd never turned it that way. I said, "Whoa!" I had a tutor – they gave me a tutor – who would help me in Greek history because it was very important that the opening ceremony had the feeling of what the Greeks did to our world. My tutor was the guy who was basically an archeologist in charge of repairing the Parthenon, piece by piece, grain by grain. They've been doing this for like 500 years – putting it back together after the bomb. Anyway, it's going to take another 500 years, but they're really doing a good job on it. I said, "Listen, I have a question for you that I have to ask," and I felt confident asking this question because this guy looked exactly like Plato, [Laughter] or at least like the busts of Plato that we have. I said, "I want to ask you a question which is, Why is it that when everything was invented a thousand years ago, why aren't we a thousand times smarter? Why didn't we build on all of that? Why didn't we just expand, explode? The momentum was there. What happened?" He said, "Okay, I'll tell you my theory, and that is that people came to the Parthenon in those days to give offerings to Athena, the goddess of war and wisdom. They brought things for her. There are statues of people taking a step – the Kouroi – and they put them around the Parthenon, and eventually they got a little more and more competitive. They got more

and more lifelike. They got more and more looking like the musculature. It felt like they were breathing. But they were parking these things around the Parthenon like a bad biennale, you know. It looked just chaotic. So people were coming to this place.” And this I will never forget. He said, “I can’t pray in an art museum,” and that was haunting to me. So all of these people who had come to pray saw this stuff and then they just went back to where the gods lived, in the caves and the secret groves and the mountains and the clouds, where they could have this relationship. So I thought, What kind of situation was this in which the need to believe trumps the need to know something? Then all I had to do was think of my own country, where people just need to believe something. They have to believe it. Forget having to know; it’s not as urgent. So what is it that you want? That question always haunts me of his description of that.

**Gonnerman:** Let’s open up to audience questions. We have microphones, so please speak into them. Raise your hand and someone will find you.

**Question from the Audience:** How has your experience in New York changed since 9/11?

**Anderson:** Well, at the very beginning, and just at the very, very beginning, I was (and actually I still feel that to some extent) I was very touched by it – by the lack of revenge. There was nobody there who was revengeful. Everybody there was thinking and saying, This is so bad. This had never happened to anyone, and there was a kind of incredible tenderness there. You know how you always wonder when you live in a place, if something really bad happened, would anybody help me. Or, if I ran down the street on fire, or if my house burned down, or this whole neighborhood collapsed, what would happen? Would it be every man for himself or not? You always kind of wonder that. Where do you live? Who are these people? We found that out. That was an incredible experience. People helped each other. They risked their lives for each other. They ran in to help other people. They didn’t run away; they ran towards the fire. Who was it, Artaud, who said, “What would you take if you were running away from a burning building?” He said, “The fire.” Anyway, people ran into the buildings.

Now, of course, it took an amazing turn a few days later, but the dominant feeling and result from that, I think for all New Yorkers – for many New Yorkers and for most of the people I know – was that we were very touched by it, very devastated by it but very touched by it, by the feeling of people helping each other. So my feelings about being an American, which were getting a little frayed, let’s say, were greatly reinforced, and it’s not every country where that would happen. It really isn’t. It’s not. But it happened in our country, and I think in many ways Americans are tremendously generous, and to see that was really worth ... it was one of the best things I’d seen in my life.

When I was in London a couple of weeks ago and that volcano was erupting in this beautiful plume on a beautiful blue day (of course, for every New Yorker...), and it was full of particulate matter. This was not just a cloud of air and water; this was full of glass and rocks and fortunately not people. But it did remind me of that. Plus, then of course for the UK it was really strange because for four days there was not a plane in the sky,

and you do feel this nostalgia for a lost world when there's no noise. People are just walking and they're not doing that. And I remember that from 9/11, as well. There was this kind of real purity and tenderness. That's what I remember of it. And it's still in New York somewhere. It, of course, was almost instantly distorted into this call for revenge, which was something that I think people really didn't genuinely feel but didn't also identify as strategy because it was disguised as something else. It was disguised as, Let's protect ourselves, and so on. It was not like the dominant feeling, which was, Let's never let this happen again to anybody – us or anybody else.

**Question from the Audience:** I work primarily with undergraduates as an adviser, and they're all Latino and low income. I try to urge them to follow their passion. I want them to be creative and free, but they feel so constrained, often by income, family demands, expectations of themselves, maybe filtered through the eyes of their high school teachers or their peers. I'm wondering how to use story in a way that puts them in a story that's different from what they've known up to that point? What advice would you have for me?

**Anderson:** Well, whenever I talk to young artists who are like, Should I be an artist? How can I be an artist? That would be crazy. Rembrandt, Van Gogh: those are artists, not me. And besides, what would my friends think, my parents? What would they think of me being an artist? And I have to say to them, first of all, "I hate to tell you this, but not that many people care what you do. [Laughter] They care as much about what you do as you care about what they do. Think about it. Not a lot. It's not going to rock your world if that person becomes an artist. Okay, parents might have a temporary moment or two, saying 'Maybe you should do something to make more money.'" That's usually the argument: you'll be poor. And, of course, being poor is the worst thing that could happen to anybody in this country.

One of the things ... I worked on something called "Happiness" for a while. It came out of this frustration of expectations. I felt like I was only doing what I was expecting, somehow. My negative mantra was, "Expectations, experience," because I was only experiencing what I expected. Of course, you've got to make a plan. You execute the plan. But then, if you're just living out the plan from day to day, it's just like, What am I doing? And I'm supposed to be an experimental artist. I thought, Start experimenting; what are you doing just realizing your plan? Now, whether your plan is to go to school, get married, have this certain job, and then you're just living it out, it gets very claustrophobic.

So I decided to put myself in a bunch of situations where I didn't know what to do, didn't know what to say, how to act, that would be awkward, just to see what would happen, just to throw a wrench into my plan. One of the jobs I took was at McDonald's. I worked at McDonald's for a while near my studio in New York. One of the things I noticed, first of all, was that my co-workers were all struggling with paying the rent, and they were often second or third job. They were holding three jobs down. Just as a sideline, I'll tell you, Peng and Anna were my main co-workers. They were Chinese Americans and they were running the whole place like a Chinese opera. Everything was

very dramatic: everything on time. So they were asking me, “Where are you from?” They said, “Aren’t you...? Let me see, aren’t you German?” I said, “Well, I’m not really German.” I went into this kind of this way-too-complex description: “I’m a little bit of Swedish and a little bit of Irish and a little bit of...” And their eyes were glazing over, so I said, “You know, let’s say I’m German. I’m basically German.” [Laughter] So from then on they called me the German. “Let the German do the mopping.” “Let the German do the Flurries.” “Let the German do the...” After a while, I was thinking of myself as German, which really helped me do the job a lot better. [Laughter] One of the things I noticed, also, at McDonald’s was: I was on the breakfast and lunch shifts was that breakfast was a good breakfast. It was eggs, bacon, biscuits, juice, and coffee. For most of my customers, this was their only meal of the day, and it was real food. In New York, it’s very striated. I’m a Starbuck’s person, so I pay \$9 for a Frappacino or whatever, blah, blah, blah. And we’re kind of taught to look down on people who have McDonald’s coffee. We’re just taught that. That’s what we’re taught: to look down on people who don’t have much money. That’s how we teach people here. Anyway, the price of coffee went up six cents; it went up from \$0.99 to \$1.05. So the day that the prices went up, I would talk to my customers and say, “Good morning, welcome to McDonald’s.” I was wearing a thing that said, “Laurie.” Several people I knew came in and never said anything to me, not because.... They just didn’t recognize me because I wasn’t supposed to be there so I wasn’t there. [Laughter] Plus, fast food: you’re in a rush. You’re looking up and deciding what to have. So I was incognito. I said, “Listen, the price of the breakfast has gone up six cents.” Every single person left. They didn’t have the extra six cents. It had been budgeted. That’s what they had for food, and they didn’t have one penny more.

So I think that when you tell kids who are very budget conscious, money conscious, well, it’s hard to say to people, “Money doesn’t matter.” It’s really hard to say that because money does matter. But I think one of the efforts that would really be good to make in this country is to try to maybe think of other things that matter rather than how much you make. You’ve all been at a party where somebody’s looking at you and going, “You’re not worth talking to, literally. Your dollar sign is hanging over your head; it’s hanging over your head. And you know how that works. Is that a great way to...? Capitalism won and all that, and that’s great, but, you know, especially for young people starting out, to have that as a big thing – it’s not going to necessarily give them the happiest life possible.

On the other hand, it’s scary when you’re starting out as a young artist. I remember an artist who spent a long, long time with me trying to convince me of this because I kept saying, “I can’t be an artist because I’ve got to pay my rent. You don’t understand. I can’t just be an artist.” He just kept saying, “Do your work.” I was like, “Richard, that’s impractical. I have a studio. I have bills.” He kept saying, “Do your work.” I was like, “This is making me crazy.” Finally, it took me a very long time to interpret what he was saying. What he was saying was a very simple thing. It was just a priority thing: that if you first of all want to pay your rent, you’ll pay your rent, but probably you’re not going to have a lot of time to do your work. If you really want to do your work – if that’s your first thing – you’ll pay your rent. You will. You’ll pay your rent. It’ll happen. It just

depends on where you're going to put your best energy, your best energy. Because if you go, My best, most energetic, thing is going to be, What am I going to make? What's it going to look like? The other stuff – really, it's not brain surgery. Even to someone who was just a novice and kind of going, Oh, my God, I'm a young person who's.... I think, encourage them to do what they want. Now, what they want may be to pay their rent, which is good, too. Then you have someone who would love to build a beautiful house. That's a wonderful thing to do. Not everybody needs to be an artist. That's ridiculous. Their work of art is to make a great place to live and to be happy in and to do whatever they want to do: have kids or ride bikes or whatever.

I have no illusions that being an artist is some great calling. I really don't. I don't think it's some exalted thing. It's just it's a thing that people like doing. That's it. When you think of what is a museum going to look like 5,000 years from now, I think it's going to be much more about humans' ability to experience life. And however you do that, whether you're riding a bicycle or building a house or making a painting, or whatever it is, it's about experiencing life, about being awake, waking up and seeing things, hearing things. So maybe in 5,000 years, we'll all be so bionically enhanced that our experience of the world will be so much more magnified: huge ears, huge eyes that can look and see details on Mars, ways that we can move beautifully, and ways that our minds can be sharp. Making stuff is just a way to sharpen our minds and enhance our experience of the amazing beauty of everything – to wake up to that. So however you want to do that is great. I wouldn't tell students to sacrifice whatever to make more things. I think that in 5,000 years, that museum director is going to say, This little golden horse made in Assyria in the year 3,000 B.C. is a beautiful thing that humans made that taught them how to see and taught them how to hear. It's just a little ... it's a tchotchke. It's just a little thing. But the real thing is how much do you love life and love seeing things. It isn't what you make, really. It's how open you can be to it, I think.

**Gonnerman:** Well, Laurie Anderson, thank you so much for being here and for magnifying our experience of life. You're always welcome back to the Aurora Forum. Thank you, and good night. [Applause]

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**Laurie Anderson** is one of America's most renowned—and daring—creative pioneers. Recognized worldwide as a leader in the use of technology in the arts, she is known for casting herself in roles as varied as visual artist, composer, poet, photographer, filmmaker, electronics whiz, vocalist, and instrumentalist. Her new work, *Delusion*, debuted at the Vancouver 2010 Olympic Winter Games and was presented by Stanford Lively Arts in Memorial Auditorium on May 5, 2010. Visit <http://www.laurieanderson.com>.

**Mark Gonnerman** is founding director of the Aurora Forum.

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