

O Superman & the Expectations of the Avant-Garde

Laurie Anderson is an interdisciplinary pioneer of arts, as developing a practice in multiple areas allowed her to meld ideas together in new ways. She played violin for the orchestra as an adolescent, learned painting from the Chicago Art Institute, took up a degree in art history at Columbia University, and went on to do journalism for several New York art magazines. Being exposed to a multitude of high-brow genres allowed Anderson an insight on abstraction, something she would capitalize on in her own work by playing with meaning. (Berghaus, p.217)

Throughout her own art, Anderson tied electronic equipment to her own performances in order to change the perceptions we have of previously ordinary things. In the song, O Superman, Anderson creates a drone by looping the vocal of a singular note, while talking rather candidly into the vocoder of a synthesizer. It's surprising to hear this eight minute track went on to be a chart-topping success, but important to note what makes it connect.

"The juxtaposition of these two main components of the show - technology and human body - created a synthesis that was contradictory on many levels: on the one hand, the personal, subjective element was objectified through the apparatus and made to appear cool and distanced; on the other, the electronic element was given a highly sensual and visceral character." (Berghaus, p.222)

Combining the narration of human experience with the performance of machines creates a distinct separation between the texture of what we're hearing and the context of its meaning. This gives each listener a distinct subjective experience of what they're hearing, rather than perceiving the song as one individual's interpretation of reality. By playing with expectations, Anderson is able to capture our attention and allow her monologue to speak directly to the listener.

O Superman asks us,
"Hello? This is your mother, are you there?
Are you coming home?"

Berghaus, Günter. "Avant-Garde Performance: Live Events and Electronic Technologies." ISBN: 1403946450. Chapter 6 Video and Multimedia Performance. p.179-235. Accessed April 12, 2023.