

In my End is my Beginning
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The Disembodied Magic Body Situating the Self and its Clone in Laurie Anderson's *Dal Vivo*

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Abstract The exhibition project *Dal Vivo*, conceived by Laurie Anderson and Germano Celant in 1998 for Fondazione Prada in Milan, explores the relationship between the body, its translation into image and the related perception. The project features Santino Stefanini, incarcerated in San Vittore prison, whose presence is simulated through video transmission, disrupting temporal linearity and awakening consciousness. It invites re-consideration of unconventional existences, rather than focusing on prison conditions. Through theatrical, narrative and performative viewpoints, this paper aims at questioning the nature of art and life in a shared experiential space through the definition of a dialectical identity.

Keywords Laurie Anderson. Germano Celant. Body. Identity. Theatrical. Dialectical. Performative.

Summary 1 Introduction. – 2 Between the Body and Its Clone: Experiencing Floating Identities in a Liminal Space. – 3 The Exhibition as a Theatre of Encounter. – 4 Conclusion.

1 Introduction

Decadence is usually associated with the hope of renovation. (Frank Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending. Studies in the theory of fiction*, 1967)

The stage presents things that are make-believe; presumably life presents things that are real and sometimes not well rehearsed. (Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in the Everyday Life*, 1956)

In 1998, American visual performance artist¹ and musician Laurie Anderson, together with curator Germano Celant, realized *Dal Vivo* (12 June-12 July), a multimedia installation project conceived for Fondazione Prada exhibition space,² in collaboration with San Vittore prison in Milan.³

The primary aim of the project was to explore the specular dimensions of life, which can be lived and experienced in different and unconventional fashions, although these often remain incomprehensible

1 It is deemed appropriate to clarify that the combined use of ‘visual’ and ‘performance’ reflects a deliberate choice by the author, emphasizing the multidisciplinary nature of Laurie Anderson’s practice, her ability to engage with different media and to casually move “between disciplines, creating seamless borders by frequently crossing them” (Goldberg 2000, 12). Her aptitude for blending different media and transcending categories constitutes a pivotal element for a coherent understanding of the proposed topic, which will be further examined throughout the text. As an important introductory reference, it is compelling to consider RoseLee Goldberg’s insightful monograph on the artist, *Laurie Anderson* (2000), in which the author highlights the difficulties in classifying and categorizing her practice, identifying her work as a “fine tapestry” that intertwines “many disciplinary threads”, including music, visual arts, performance, theatre, sculpture, and multimedia installations (22).

2 Fondazione Prada opened its doors in 1993 and was originally located at via Spartaco 8, Milan. Its headquarters were then moved to Largo Isarco, in the southern area of Milan, in a former distillery dating back to the 1910s. The architectural complex was designed in 2015 by OMA, led by Rem Koolhaas.

3 *Dal Vivo* was originally conceived for the Kunsthalle in Krems, a small Austrian town nearby Vienna, where exhibitions were held in a deconsecrated medieval church. The museum proposed that Anderson project a site-specific video and sound work for this peculiar space. During the planning phase, the artist was most surprised to discover a maximum-security prison in the town center: from the bell tower of the church, she could directly see into the prison yard, including an armed guard stationed atop the security tower. This experience inspired *Life*, a live video feed projecting the image of an incarcerated person onto a life-size sculpture inside the church. “The piece shows contrasting attitudes to the body of the church (incarnation) and of the prison (incarceration)”, Anderson stated (Goldberg 2000, 180). Curators were thrilled by the project, especially as the artist expressed her interest in telepresence and the ways in which cameras were “changing the world and some things about attitudes towards the human body (incarceration versus incarnation) that distinguish the prison and the church” (Anderson 1998, 31). In fact, although the plan was not eventually completed in Krems, it served as a model for *Dal Vivo*, which was later exhibited at Fondazione Prada in Milan.

to many, like fairy tales, for instance. “And yet the story remains rooted in reality; it deals with the desire for transformation and the need to change one’s own present state” (Anderson in Celant 1998, 233). In the case of *Dal Vivo*, the artist engaged in narrating a real, personal story: Laurie Anderson decided to meet with people jailed in San Vittore and, after speaking with dozens of them, she finally encountered her ‘matching’ collaborator, Santino Stefanini.⁴ “I see it as a virtual escape”, he claimed when the artist asked for feedback on her project (Anderson in Goldberg 2000, 183). Stefanini ended up embodying the potential for reflecting on life as a multidimensional entity, from the perspective of the interplay between two institutions – prison and exhibition gallery – as well as the value of what each seeks to preserve. In this respect, Anderson was particularly interested in exploring the concepts of “incarceration and prison as a form of institution for ensuring public order” (Anderson in Corio 1998; Author’s transl.).

The exhibition took place in two rooms preceded by an oblong dark gallery, its floor covered in black sand, with a projection of the prison’s layout. This introductory space led to the first room, which displayed an installation of twenty-centimeter-high clay statuettes. On the surface of each statue, Anderson projected videos or films depicting herself seated, thus presenting different self-representations in the same space, with each of them simultaneously narrating different stories [fig. 1]. By speaking through physical alter egos, or even surrogate bodies, the artist transformed herself into a multifaceted storyteller. In the meantime, in the second room an almost hieratic life-size clay statue embodied Santino Stefanini, who was transported from the prison cell onto the surface of the cast via live cable projections [fig. 2].⁵ His figure, as well as all the others, was obtained “by carving the image from light” (Anderson in Goldberg 2000, 180): this movement of the body through the light, its transportation along different times and spaces, contains a magical feature representing the so-called

magic of the disembodied body. The prisoner is present in time but spatially remote. Voiceless, unseeing. *Dal Vivo* looks at the way telepresence has altered our perception of time and the body. (180)

4 Alfredo Santino Stefanini was a member of the so-called ‘banda della Comasina’, one of the most feared criminal gangs in Milan and its suburbs, led by Renato Vallanzasca between the 1970s and the 1980s. He was convicted multiple times, not only of his crimes (including armed robberies and one murder), but also because of his numerous escapes. Today, he lives under the custody of social services with permission to leave his apartment from 8:00 a.m. to 10:30 p.m.

5 The replica of the body was obtained through both recording and live broadcasting – “dal vivo”.



Figure 1
Laurie Anderson, *Dal Vivo*.
1998. Installation view.
Photo Travis Roozee.
Courtesy Fondazione Prada

Through the process of de-materializing the bodies and then re-embodying them into the exhibition space, Laurie Anderson explored the existence of a dimension beyond the gallery walls, crafting a metaphoric journey across the contrasts of the human condition suspended between dichotomies such as incarceration and incarnation, escape and invasion, as well as direct experience versus storytelling. It is right in this imbalance that a blurring space, or rather, a 'liminal' dimension, emerged following Turner's insights (cf. Turner 1982; Fischer-Lichte 2008) on how the linear interaction between the past and the present had been overturned through an image that can disrupt temporal regularity and awaken consciousness.⁶

⁶ The concept of 'liminal' space as a blurring and non-linear temporal dimension, as introduced by Victor Turner (1982) and later analyzed by Erika Fischer-Lichte (2008), will be further explored throughout the text.



Figure 2 Laurie Anderson, *Dal Vivo*. 1998. Installation view.
Photo Travis Roozee. Courtesy Fondazione Prada

2 Between the Body and Its Clone: Experiencing Floating Identities in a Liminal Space

Before delving into a deeper analysis of chronological disruptions, it is worth taking a step back to briefly consider Laurie Anderson's prior filmic and psychological projection, *At the Shrink's* (1975),⁷ as an instrument for identifying the key aspects that defined the artist's research on identity and its physical alter egos. At that time, she was already looking for systems to provide "a surrogate for herself as a solo performer" while engaging in experimentations with time alteration (Goldberg 2000, 54).

⁷ The installation was exhibited again, after twenty-one years, in 1996 at the Guggenheim in Soho.

Exhibited at the Holly Solomon Gallery in New York, the performative installation included a miniature statue sculpted in light. It represented “a fake hologram” of Anderson herself (54), in the form of a small Super-8 film projection of her image being cast on a clay sculpture carefully molded to conform to the proportions of her filmed body. Approaching the living sculpture, the audience could see the image moving while narrating a recorded story about a visit to a psychiatrist. This latter experience marked a significant turning point in Anderson’s research on her identity, her thoughts, and the ways in which she would perceive her personality. In 1975, at the age of 23, Anderson was suffering from a psychological disorder that led her to see a psychiatrist. While searching for words that would facilitate a dialogue with herself, this personal journey deeply inspired *At the Shrink’s*. During the sessions, every Friday, Anderson would notice lip marks on the mirror in psychiatrist’s consulting room, while on Mondays it was perfectly clean, but the doctor couldn’t see them from of her position. It was later revealed that her twelve-years-old daughter used to kiss the mirror every week. Anderson thought they needed to change their sitting position, so that the psychiatrist could see the marks on the mirror’s surface. It was right then that Anderson realized they were seeing things from such different points of view that she wouldn’t have to see her again (cf. Anderson 1993, 84). She was surprised that it was the psychoanalyst who couldn’t see, so much so that it was necessary for her to change their roles. “This is the crux of psychoanalysis” the artist explained, “to transfer yourself from one situation to another so as to observe yourself” (Anderson in Celant, Anderson 1998, 254).

By projecting a recorded video of herself recounting her feelings about this personal story onto the surface of the clay statue, Anderson used it both as a mirror and as a surrogate entrusted with her thoughts, thereby manipulating the perspective of the storytelling. This ‘delegated’ persona inevitably addressed the audience, which was Anderson’s aim from the beginning, although direct communication with them was altered by “doing a performance without being there” (Anderson in Goldberg 2000, 54). In this respect, Anderson’s open reference to ‘performance art’ is particularly significant as one of the most powerful aspects of *At the Shrink’s* – which will further resurface in *Dal Vivo* – insofar as it questioned the *hic et nunc* performance traditionally requires. Apropos of this nonlinear performance, Eu Jin Chua (2006) noticed that the use of ‘performance art’ in relation to *At the Shrink’s* is contradictory in its “alternative temporality” (Pensky 2004, 177), which deviates from the intrinsic *immediacy* of performance.

One of the most important notional definitions of performance is that it is predicated on the presence of both performer and audience in a particular time and particular space, on the embodied *immediacy* of the performance event, on 'live gestures'. (Chua 2006, 3; emphasis added)

This essay does not intend to discuss the origins and the evolutions of performance art, nevertheless it is worth mentioning Goldberg's insights on the 'notional definitions of performance', starting with how

by its very nature, performance defies precise or easy definition beyond the simple declaration that it is like art by artists. Any stricter definition would immediately negate the possibility of performance itself. (Goldberg 2018, 8)

Subsequently, the term performance artist appropriately describes Anderson,

not least because it is her unique contribution to the field that has made it so easy to use the phrase in mainstream journalism. Since it remains hard to define, though, [...] the reply to the question, 'So what is performance art, really?' is frequently that it is live art by a single artist - as amalgam of many disciplines, including music, text, video, film, dance, sculpture, painting - as in the work of Laurie Anderson. (Goldberg 2000, 22)

In the light of this set of connotations associated with specific vocabulary and definitions, I would argue for considering the notion of the 'performative', rather than 'performance art', as introduced by Erika Fischer-Lichte (2008).⁸ According to the author, the term reflects the questioning of boundaries between concepts and contexts of action, transforming them into liminal spaces by crossing

⁸ "The dissolution of boundaries in the arts, repeatedly proclaimed and observed by artists, art critics, scholars of art, and philosophers, can be defined as a performative turn" (Fischer-Lichte 2008, 22). The latter notion, as introduced by Fischer-Lichte, has been repeatedly discussed with reference to the visual arts, theatre, and dance. In particular, numerous academic fields such as philosophy, sociology, linguistics, and anthropology have re-examined performance as a means of addressing central issues in the social sciences, shifting their focus from a structuralist approach to the study of processes. Culture, especially in connection with ritual practices, staged situations, and the overall process of civilization, is now regarded as a form of performance. The idea is to invert the common understanding of performance in its everyday use and to demonstrate how it now signifies a state of alteration in what has historically been systematized and known as 'performance' (cf. Fischer-Lichte 2008).

thresholds (cf. Fischer-Lichte 2008).⁹ Within this performative device, Anderson did indeed activate a chronological short circuit by introducing what Max Pensky called “alternative temporality” (2004, 177), where the ‘fake’ performer’s body did not exist in the same time and place as the audience.

The use of sculptures as repositories for multiple personalities may indeed seem the most straightforward connection with *Dal Vivo*, although in fact it precisely in the discrepancy between real and projected time, and between real and ‘magic’ existence, that this connection fully emerges, especially in terms of methodology and theoretics. Laurie Anderson’s multimedia performative installations have always used special effects to dissolve boundaries between

the live and the mediatized, between perception and reality, and between the human and the inhuman. Technological interactions have transformed her storytelling projects from monologues into dialogues; ‘I’ easily becomes ‘we’ through the introduction of composited duplicates or electronic prostheses. (Ramirez 2011)

Santino Stefanini’s projected body progressed through the nonlinear stages of transformation first descending into the self, then experiencing its rebirth eventually leading to the discovery of a renewed dimension (cf. Celant 1998). This projection significantly differed from that of *At the Shrink’s*, as it was produced via a live cable broadcast from the prison.¹⁰ The title of the project, which is the Italian translation for ‘live’ – as in live telecast – indeed played on the echoing power of its wording, reflecting its multiple recurring meanings of “life-like, life-size, *live* [...] life sentence” (Chua 2006, 5); and at the same time recalling Anderson’s early unaccomplished Austrian installation, titled *Life*. In addition, these related projects also relied on entirely different dimensions for the statues: Stefanini’s image was projected onto a life-size sculpture, unlike Anderson’s miniature clones in the adjacent room.

⁹ The term *liminal* derives from Latin *limen*, meaning ‘threshold’ (cf. Turner 1982, 41). As part of the act of dissolving boundaries, Erika Fischer-Lichte focused on the need for humans to cross thresholds in order to “(re)turn to themselves as another. As living organisms endowed with a consciousness, as embodied minds, they can become themselves only by permanently bringing themselves forth anew, constantly transforming themselves, and continuing to cross thresholds” (Fischer-Lichte 2008, 205). It is precisely in this self-transformation that *Dal Vivo*, as a project on bodies and identities in time and space, seems to visualize the blurred and nonlinear temporal dimension of liminal space.

¹⁰ Anderson has often combined recorded and live elements in her performative projects: according to the artist, the live image conveys a sense of familiarity and intimacy, in which the filmed subject and the audience seem to share the same experience, in the same place, at the same time. Through this multimedia system, the performance appears to emerge simultaneously in both the past and the present (cf. Anderson in Celant 1998).

In the light of these tangible aspects, it is worth considering how oppositions slowly blended together within *Dal Vivo* incarceration and incarnation, real and projected body, live and recorded lives, material and immaterial. It is precisely in the distortion between diametrical dimensions that a metaphorical flux of energy explodes, and a unique image comes to the fore “wherein what has been comes together in a flash with the now to form a constellation” (Benjamin 1999, 463, N3, 1).¹¹ Despite the very blurring feature of the ‘dialectical image’, it is possible to draw a parallel between *Dal Vivo*’s temporal overturning and the notion of “alternative temporality” proposed by Max Pensky (2004, 177) when discussing the role of time within Walter Benjamin’s ‘dialectical image’.

Under conventional terms ‘past’ is a narrative construction of the conditions for the possibility of a present which supersedes and therefore comprehends it; Benjamin’s sense, on the contrary, was that ‘past’ and ‘present’ are constantly locked in a complex interplay in which what is past and what is present are negotiated through material struggles, only subsequent to which the victorious parties consign all that supports their vision of the world to a harmonious past, and all that speaks against it to oblivion. [...] Benjamin was convinced that behind the façade of the present, these otherwise forgotten moments could be recovered from oblivion and reintroduced, shoved in the face of the present, as it were, with devastating force. (Pensky 2007, 180)

Hence, the impact of the past on the present and vice versa represents a turning point in the perception of such temporalities and lives of the image, thereby revealing Anderson’s performative installations as states of in-betweenness, as

places of passage, or ‘rhythms’ [...]. In so doing, they attempt to wake the body – the performer’s and the spectator’s – from the threatening anaesthesia haunting it. (Féral, Lyons 1982, 174)

11 This is particularly relevant, especially with regards to the broader framework of N3,1 section, in which Benjamin asserted that “Every present day is determined by the images that are synchronic with it: each ‘now’ is the now of a particular recognizability. In it, truth is charged to the bursting point with time. It’s not that what is past casts its light on what is present, or what is present its light on the past; rather, image is that wherein what has been comes together in a flash with the now to form a constellation. In other words, image is dialectics at a standstill. For while the relation of the present to the past is a purely temporal, continuous one, the relation of what-has-been to the now is dialectical: not temporal in nature but figural” (1999, 463, N3, 1).

When oppositions merge, attention gravitates towards the instable transitional phase from one state to the next. The space that forms between these opposites becomes central, emphasizing the importance of this interstice as positive and active, especially “where that ‘threshold’ is protracted and becomes a ‘tunnel’, when the ‘liminal’ becomes the ‘cunicular’” (Turner 1982, 41). The aesthetic experience enabled by this performative multimedia installation can particularly be described as a “liminal experience, capable of transforming the experiencing subject” (Fischer-Lichte 2008, 174). In this context, the *liminal* represents thus a context of social and cultural hybridization, defining a border space where new models and paradigms could potentially emerge (cf. Bazzichelli 1999).

Hence, it is increasingly evident how *Dal Vivo*'s two opposite realities become intertwined within a liminal space that contains both and activates a flow of awakening, a re-semantization of identity reshaping the perception of dual isolation.

3 The Exhibition as a Theatre of Encounter

“I’ve made *Dal Vivo* because I’m interested in the theater of real time” (Anderson 2000, 180).

Instead of creating an art object, *Dal Vivo* produced an event¹² that involved not only Laurie Anderson and Santino Stefanini, but also the observers, listeners, and spectators (cf. Fischer-Lichte 2008). By adopting the form of an event, the project underwent a theatrical manipulation to “achieve the desired consonance” (Kermode 1967, 9). This transition from art object to art event led to the collapse of traditional binaries – particularly the pairs subject/object, spectator/artist – resulting in a theatricalization of the environment, where the scenography was redefined as a participatory space. Anderson used *Dal Vivo*'s theatrical setup as a medium to immerse both herself and participants into the intense, almost metaphysical experience of confinement, going through Stefanini's life in prison and personally taking part in the event. By interweaving theatrical practice with visual arts, Anderson

12 *The Transformative Power of Performance* highlighted the emergence of performance as an art event in its own right. By tracing the origins and the development of this conceptual and historical framework, Fischer-Lichte provided a pivotal contribution to defining the power of the event in tying the living process of the theatrical event to the fundamental processes of life itself. It is precisely in this convergence that *Dal Vivo* reveals its impact and opens to a shared experience with the spectators. Considering also Richard Schechner's insights on the activation of participation within meeting spaces, it is possible to identify a correspondance between Anderson's manipulation of time and space and the consideration that “participation occurred at those points where the play stopped being a play and became a social event – when spectators felt that they were free to enter the performance as equals [...] to ‘join the story’” (Schechner 1973, 44).

introduced a new approach to performance and performativity within this liminal space, where the transformations and social shifts prompted by the liminal phase affected not only the participants' social statuses but also their perception of reality. During such flexible temporalities, individuals could step outside their everyday roles and engage in behaviors that challenge societal norms and expectations.

This movement shifted the focus of artistic practice from the artwork - typically understood as an object - to the audience mirroring the transformation that anthropological thinking had brought to the field of performance. During the 1960s and 1970s, a number of experimental procedures emerged around the performative, with a particular emphasis on practices that expressed a plurality of forms already oriented towards the interchangeability of genres. Within this chronological frame, some performative practices started questioning the relationship with the realm of experience, thus abandoning the central role of the object (i.e., both the artwork and the text). As Claire Bishop pointed out,

Some of the best conceptual and performance art in the 1960s and '70s similarly sought to refute the commodity-object in favour of an elusive experience. (2012, 6)

Anderson set about reshaping this complex structure engaging in a critical reflection on entrenched aspects of society, thereby fostering a shift in social awareness insofar as performance, as both a response to sociocultural change and a potential catalyst for it, can generate transformation when it assumes an oppositional stance, often carrying a retroactive and reflexive dimension

Hence, it is worth noting how staging became a strategy of creation for her, with artistic and technical means enhancing Santino Stefanini's presence and the 'magical' feature of things; they directed the spectators' attention to "phenomenal beings, and rendered this phenomenal being conspicuous" (Fischer-Lichte 2008, 186). Consequently, the body of the protagonist, the object (i.e., the clay sculpture), the sound and video projections bared themselves to the spectators "in their own ephemeral presence" (2008, 186). The audience could experience that 'amalgam' RoseLee Goldberg described Laurie Anderson's practice as, which reunite multiple media under theatrical experimentation. By transforming the exhibition into an event, the artist bridged the gap between the artistic event and real life, inviting spectators on a journey from their own private space into the staged yet authentic, unacted prison environment. This is precisely the 'staging process of reality' that Goldberg envisaged as an instrument to guide the audience's wandering gaze and to reshape the traditional experience museums use to display (cf. Goldberg 2018).

Figure 3
Santino Stefanini nella redazione
di "Magazine 2", Casa Circondariale-Milano
San Vittore, 29 April 1998.
Photo Germano Celant



In the case of *Dal Vivo*, there is no role to play, as the script has been replaced by the image. Staging the presentation of the image and ensuring its survival are practices that can be connected to the 'rehearsal process' introduced by Richard Schechner (1981; 1985). Schechner developed ideas about how rehearsals serve as a kind of liminal phase or space for exploration, much like the space between structured performance and lived behavior. In his *Restoration of Behavior* (1985), he explored how rehearsals are not just occasions to get prepared or memorize but a space where behaviors are restored and reshaped, particularly emphasizing how, performers can often experience moments of profound self-revelation, as the boundaries between performance and real life collapse.¹³ The rehearsal process allows for deep reflection, self-discovery, and an alignment between the lived experience and the role being performed. What unfolds in *Dal Vivo*, therefore, is precisely this process of modification of the body, which came to assimilate both Anderson and Santino Stefanini, occurred "through an immersion into the self and a rebirth, culminating in a discovery of renewal" (Celant 1998, 244).

Unfortunately I'm still in prison, but after eleven uninterrupted years there are excellent prospects of obtaining benefiting through sustained good behavior and the reformation of my life, a life lived outside the rules of civil convention. Here I've reflected upon a past season. A mistaken journey that has produced a lot of grief for a lot of good people, and that has ruined more than thirty years of my life. But I still want so much to live. (Stefanini in Celant 1998, 176)

Subsequently, it is possible to affirm that one of Anderson's main purposes was to connect "the interior, visceral spaces of the body [...] to

13 Rehearsal process is utterly relevant within this subject, as it also "makes it necessary to think of the future in such a way as to create a past" (Schechner 1985, 39).

the architectural space”, evoking Richard Schechner’s insights on the function of rehearsal (1990, 102), by using such theatrical and performative strategies [fig. 3]. By exasperating the art-life union, space in *Dal Vivo* became a place of encounter, with the spectator directly involved in the story, attempting to reach the balance between prevailing information and an increasingly difficult attempt to experience.

4 Conclusion

At the end of this complex journey through the “theatralization” (Groys 2018, 73) of *Dal Vivo*, it is possible to attest the mutual and active exchange between theatre, performance art and visual arts, placing scenography in an ‘unconventional’ space where interpretation has been replaced by action (cf. Roman 2020). This marks a significant moment where scenography and contemporary installation converge in the exhibition space, thereby displaying an event and shifting the focus toward how contemporary art has become the

medium of investigations of the eventfulness of the events: the different modes of immediate experience of the events, [...] the intellectual and emotional modes of our relationship to documentation. (Groys 2018, 77)

Fondazione Prada’s exhibition space has therefore turned into a critical environment where the overlap between ordinary human gaze - present at the beginning of the exhibition - and controlled gaze - emerging at its conclusion - does not only take place but also becomes revealed. Despite its contrasting elements, the final experience appears strangely familiar, addressing that

need to speak humanly of a life’s importance [and to experience] a need in the moment of existence to belong, to be related to a beginning and to an end. (Kermode 1967, 4)

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