

BOMB — Artists in Conversation

Constance DeJong by Jennifer Krasinski

"We were relegated to Chick Lit, romance novels, our subjects were love and motherhood and other sexually-defined things. *Modern Love* mocks that, to some degree. It pushes back."



Constance DeJong. *Series One Radio, Pink Knight Roland*, 2015–16, vintage radio reengineered with Arduino board, SD card, amplifier, and LEDs. Three performances—*On a Street*, *On the Parlorfloor*, and *On the Road/In a Car*—are programmed to play in random sequence each time the radio is turned on. The LEDs fluctuate with the audio amplitude. All imagery courtesy of the artist.

Words disappear and reappear in the world all the time, and if one is a writer, one exists in part believing books have a cosmic timing all their own. Writer and artist Constance DeJong initially published her first major work, the novel *Modern Love*, in 1975–76. Serialized as five chapbooks, she designed, printed, and distributed it herself, then released a "proper book" through her own imprint, Standard Editions, the following year. She also performed the book—not as a reading or play, but as a kind of mark of narrative in time. Later, her texts spun into sound installations, audio objects, talking photographs, and other books. While DeJong continued to carve her very own space in literature and art, *Modern Love* fell out of print.

When I was first given a copy I must confess that the title turned me off. *Kind of cheesy*, I thought. After all, what's a more overwrought, exhausted subject for a novel—for anything, really—than love? And yet, I read it. And then, I loved it. The supple, groovy slipstream of her prose; the collapsing of time, voice, and genre; her recasting of the limited roles fictional characters are made to play. Now, in 2017, it seems nothing less than a masterpiece.

This month, Modern Love is being republished by Primary Information and Ugly Duckling Presse. For the occasion, DeJong and I spoke about the book's origin, and how language and text are central forces from which all of her many projects spin. Hybrid creators like her can be difficult to define, to name, and as we chatted, I told her I would try to come up with something, a way to describe her practice without the crutch of commas or hyphens or slashes. I still haven't found the right words—which, truth be told, says precisely everything about her.

Jennifer Krasinski *Modern Love* is a novel and a performance as well. How did it happen that you began thinking of literary text as performance, as distinct from a work of theater or giving a straightforward reading?

Constance DeJong I've always been strongly engaged with language as a time-based medium. In the writing, that meant an attention to velocity, rhythm, pacing, conspicuous composition and structuring—and eventually, sonority. I was preparing for my first reading—what I ended up calling a performance—and while I was rehearsing in my kitchen, I discovered that I wasn't looking at the pages any longer, that I could speak the text. That was a kind of epiphany because of my interest in time—in *real time*. I didn't want the page to be the past, and the viewer to be the present. I was interested in this area in which language could be embodied and seem to construct itself in real time. So your experience of the text—you being the audience—is in real time. It's becoming, unfurling, unfolding, which makes it not a reading, but a performance. And from then on, I thought differently about what performance is.

JK Where did your ideas about language and time come from?

CDJ Initially, the Surrealist writers, the Dada writers, and other people of language who didn't address writing as a terrain of literature with conventions for one to occupy. Someone like Cocteau who embraced hybridity, unfixed to one medium or form. Gertrude Stein, of course, for whom language was a material, among other things. Marguerite Duras and Nathalie Seuraud, and Robbe-Grillet and Le Nouveau Roman.

JK Did you initially conceive of yourself as a novelist? Or a writer? Was there a particular literary space you were trying to inhabit?



CDJ I wasn't concerned with fitting comfortably into a space. If there was any desperation, it was *trying to find the work*—trying not to be a second-tier Gertrude Stein. In the '70s and '80s, I was living and working in New York within a particular artistic community that was quite porous. There were filmmakers and choreographers and musicians and visual artists of very different stripes, who gave me a perspective on form-making, which is different than fulfilling a convention... short story, novel, maybe novella, the three prose conventions.

JK You didn't feel stuck out in the margins.

CDJ No, I didn't. There was a lot of exploratory work going on. Ideas were everywhere, and in very different forms. I was fairly young and in this community, there was almost something we could call a *zeitgeist*, which inhabited me. There was a certain urgency having to do with women's self-determination, equal rights, and seizing agency to contribute a voice into the public. I had that urgency.

JK So it was the urgency to have a kind of presence?

CDJ To have multiple *presences*: for writing, for literature, for language-based forms. That sounds very grand, but as a woman one experiences the oppression of paradigms from multiple arenas and sources. One that mattered to me—that still matters to me—is the oppressive paradigm of women in literature, which fueled some of the thematics of *Modern Love*. We were relegated to Chick Lit, romance novels, our subjects were love and motherhood and other sexually-defined things. *Modern Love* mocks that, to some degree. It pushes back.

JK Were you talking about this with other women, other writers?

CDJ The one person with whom I talked a lot was Kathy [Acker]. Kathy was urgent like I was urgent about this thing called "writing," this thing called "literature," and its many tangents, including sexual politics and shop talk, the things you don't talk to everyone about. We used to, you know, make coffee dates and talk about verb tenses.

JK I wanted to ask you about character and voice, and how you see those elements reflecting and refracting one another. In *Modern Love*, the "I" of the narrator is such a slippery thing—or rather, it's seamlessly woven through many characters and voices: Charlotte, Fifi, Roderigo, the unnamed female narrator. You've put them all in a graceful dance together.

CDJ Oh, thank you for noticing. I've always been really aware that the first person singular is a construction; it's a character. That dance is a sleight of hand, which I learned early on and still use. Language is fluid, and right now I'm doing sleights of hand with verb tense in a way I've never done before, so that past present and possibly future can stand in a single sentence—so you move through tense, through time, quite fluidly. It sounds very nerdy. (laughter)

JK Writing is a very nerdy matter. (laughter)

CDJ I want every word to matter. I don't want words that don't matter. I don't want space and air around things. I want narrative to be able to be in its totality, to be heterogeneous, to have a heterogeneity. To put its arms around disparate locations, people, subjects, in terms of the world of ideas—and I want that to succeed as narrative. Narrative is sequential, you can't escape it. If you want to escape it then you work in a form different than a book. It's words, sentences, paragraphs, pages. I'm fanatical about sequence, and how sense and meaning can be made from a system of order that isn't recognizable as alphabetical, chronological—one that has a different mechanism to the structure. That has always been fuel for my writing, and it has never gone away.

JK How did Dorothea Tanning come to be a part of the publication story of *Modern Love*?

CDJ In my brash, probably somewhat naive way, when the book was finished, I went where all American writers went get published: Paris. (laughter)

JK You just flew to Paris with your manuscript?

CDJ More or less. I had one introduction at Éditions Seuil, but the top dog there ended up saying no. Quite accidentally, I crossed paths with Mimi Johnson while there, and she said, "Oh, come! My aunt is having a party." And her aunt was Dorothea Tanning. So I went, and we met, and I gave her the serialized version of *Modern Love*. She read it and we met again later, and she said something very direct like, "I have money. You're very smart, a person of literature. Let's publish." So it was my good fortune. With her help, I started Standard Editions and published *Modern Love* as well as an unpublished manuscript of Dorothea's from 1947, *Abyss*.

JK Did she ever see you perform?

CDJ I remember vividly that she came to a performance at the Kitchen, and it was just a microphone and a light and a stool—and this woman, *me*, speaking text the whole time, and an hour later, it's over. Afterward—Dorothea was very colorful, very opinionated and outspoken—she said something like: "Somebody has to come out and shoot you with a gun! Something has to *happen!*"

JK What did you say to that?

CDJ "Duly noted." (laughter) You know, I liked being efficient. I liked being a solo performer. "Have text in hand, will travel." (laughter) I didn't have to have an assistant. I didn't have to have a roadie. I could pretty much set up everything myself with whoever was at the space, quickly teach them the cues, and do my thing.

JK When you perform your texts, it's always a bit different than the written version, yes?

CDJ It's an adaptation. There are things that don't work in performance because they're written so specifically for the page. For *Modern Love*, I'd do another sleight of hand: I would choose sections and edit them together, making the pieces flow. I still do that, though now I'm writing what people call "short form," I guess. I heard someone introduce me at a performance recently as a "short-form writer," which I'd never heard before. Like, short in relation to *what?* A flabby, 400-page novel?

JK Literary people can be so *literal* sometimes. (laughter)

CDJ It's always plagued me—not knowing what to call what I do. It's not very important now, it sounds like splitting hairs, but when I was first touring, people would ask: "What is this? Who is she?" So I would hyphenate: "writer-artist-performer." It was so awkward. But it continues to come up. I mean, think of Borges. What do we call his writing?

JK I suppose now, we just refer to his text as "a Borges." He's now his own thing. So how do you describe your "short forms"? What are they? Where are they?

CDJ The current "short forms" have two lives. First, they have a life in a series of radio pieces I'm making. I've been reengineering vintage radios to digitally play texts that I record and then program into them with Foley and other audio material. My radio interest goes back to 1978, when I performed on stage with a radio playing my spoken text. Second, I've been revisiting and reformulating my thinking about sound: about spoken text alone, spoken text with musical material, and on and on. It's been a big tangled bunch of thinking. So I'm working on a number of pieces, and I asked this very gifted electrical engineer to build a pedal for me—a guitar pedal—so in performance I can be that woman sitting on the stool who does nothing but talk, but with my foot I can bring in pre-recorded material that mixes with my speech in a way that I've never done before.



A short excerpt from DeJong's *Series One Radio*, 2015. Performance by Jim Fletcher.

JK So the pedal doesn't manipulate your voice as much as it composes you—your "I," as it were—as a chorus of multiple voices.

CDJ Yes. I'll just have a sequence of cues. I can have two of me, three of me, the voice of somebody else. It's a sound work, really, when it's live.

JK Have you performed with the pedal already?

CDJ No. I've been busy finishing a recent series of texts, and the radios too. I've never been a gallery artist, but just a few months ago I became represented by Gabrielle Giattino at Bureau.

JK That's a very new space for your work.

CDJ *Very*. I did a performance at Bureau in 2013, a kind of duet with an iMac, which was really a one-off thing. And then in 2016, we went to lunch, and she asked, "Would you want to be represented by me?" She knew of the radios, and these talking photographs that I make, so in the sense of units and material things, it makes sense. It's not really so surprising. I've always worked from a core of material, and from that core comes a book, a performance, an audio object or sound installation or, once upon a time, a CD ROM—an entire constellation of forms.

JK What's the core material you're working on presently?

CDJ It's called *Nightwriters*. Very briefly: there's a narrator who's had insomnia for a long time, and has the good fortune to have a skylight in her bedroom. And so the skylight becomes my vehicle for an exchange between where she is in the bedroom and deep space, and parts of history. She stares at the sky because she can't sleep and starts drawing asterisms on a transparent piece of paper, and one night her hand writes: "Oh Be a Fine Girl, Kiss Me."

JK She draws from the stars? How beautiful.



An image from DeJong's forthcoming project *Nightwriters*, 2017.

CDJ Asterisms are something we do as a species. We connect the stars into shapes we recognize. People have done this forever. So she's drawing asterisms and writes, "Oh, Be A Fine Girl, Kiss Me," which through graphology she learns is actually the handwriting of Annie Jump Cannon, an astronomer who most of us have never heard of. "Oh Be a Fine Girl, Kiss Me" is a mnemonic—is Annie's mnemonic for her discovery that there were seven classifications of brightness of stars.

JK What does your narrator make of this?

CDJ Well, it happens a second time, with Caroline Herschel, another astronomer who some of us know because her brother William is rather well known (sigh). Herschel was from the eighteenth century. And on another night, when there's too much snow on the skylight to see through it, the narrator is on her computer and finds the spirit of a third astronomer, Henrietta Swann Leavitt. Cannon and Swann Leavitt were both at Harvard into the twentieth century. All three made significant discoveries via pattern recognition, in a way. All three are a part of *Nightwriters*.

JK Time and space and stars and story, all in a single slipstream: a "DeJong."

CDJ The substance is astronomy, but it's many other things too: my flow, my heterogeneity, which is a thing that's remained, even though it's metamorphosed over time. What's remains constant is the treatment of these artifices—these things called characters—as multiple selves, almost without exception. It's kind of a through-line, I suppose, but one doesn't plot these things, or think about staying on a particular track. One just follows the work.