

Constance DeJong

BUREAU

This past May, Constance DeJong delivered twelve performances of *SpeakChamber*, 2013, a nearly hour-long narrative recited from memory. The gallery's intimate space was swathed in dark gray soundproofing foam, with a spotlight illuminating a chair where DeJong sat adjacent to a table supporting an iMac and a few books. Five simple wooden benches could accommodate a maximum of eighteen people per show. Unsurprisingly, all spots were claimed quickly by RSVP—DeJong, a beacon of video and new-media art, known for her collaborations (notably with Philip Glass for the 1979 opera *Satyagraha*), had not performed publicly in ten years.

The artist seamlessly wove together numerous stories, layering fact and fiction and invoking a litany of characters, sometimes speaking in their voices. Although mostly nonthematic, *SpeakChamber* addresses the histories and migrations of people as well as—and more intently—objects and their lost symbolism. Several vignettes focus on a person obsessed with a thing (or things), such as a designer who in the mid-1940s furnished Hollywood homes with goods from Germany and Japan, and a woman who buys secondhand clothes at a church flea market, only to disassemble and reconstruct them for resale. Throughout the performance, a slide show played on the iMac, keeping DeJong's pacing on cue while moving images washed over the screen—for instance,



Constance DeJong,
SpeakChamber, 2013.
Performance view,
May 24, 2013.
Constance DeJong.

Yet DeJong's monologue was not restricted only to the present progressive, à la Stein's "Composition as Explanation" (1926) nor, for that matter, was it concerned with modernist notions of progressing. Rather, DeJong conjured that effect through the use of embodiment and change: She did not passively recite a story but actively performed a text, letting it transform slightly during each iteration, which served as a poignant reminder that there is a limit to what can remain absolutely fixed in the mind. (During the four performances I attended, I noticed very subtle variations that kept me attentive and aware.) DeJong also presented physical variations of the piece in the space: The text was printed as a long scroll hung near the window, and it was published as a book, also titled *SpeakChamber*. In addition, an edit of the narrative was spoken as a voice-over in one of three videos playing on small screens that sat on the benches when DeJong was not performing.

What does an artist glean from years of repeating her stories aloud, or from studying the forms that narrative can take, the translation of mind to page, the adaptation of page to lips? Importantly, repetition has opened a space, a chamber indeed, for DeJong to access a rare kind of contemplation—that is, for seeing her work and life on a continuum.

—Lauren O'Neill-Butler

during a segment concerning, among other things, the provenance of a small Tibetan Buddhist statue in the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, the computer showed footage of an exquisitely tiled floor shot with a spy camera. At this point, DeJong interrupted her script for a short documentary clip of her recent chance encounter with a cabdriver relaying his distressing experience of emigrating from Tibet.

The piece evoked something of Gertrude Stein's concept of the continuous present.