

ARTFORUM

INTERVIEWS

CONSTANCE DEJONG

December 26, 2018 • Constance DeJong on the disembodied voice and introspection



View of “Let me consider it from here,” 2018–19, the Renaissance Society, Chicago.

For four decades, Constance DeJong has demonstrated what language is capable of—how it can be more than just a delivery system for the conventions of novels and short stories. Her scrupulous writings, recordings, and performances are typically suffused with sensitivity and humor, confessions and criticisms. Below she discusses how “the movement of thought” across the mind is a source of structuring language for her and her new works

in “*Let me consider it from here,*” a four-artist show on intimacy at the Renaissance Society in Chicago, which is on view through January 27, 2019.

THIS IS THE FIRST TIME I’ve exhibited audio works that aren’t embedded in an object, such as a chair or a bench that emits sound when a person sits down. Here, the sound is disembodied and installed in a tall-ceilinged, large room with four alcoves inside a Gothic-style building. In two of the niches, and in two places in the room’s open space, I’ve placed umbrella speakers that guide the sound down, though there’s a softness to all this, and it sometimes rises back up, given the acoustics of the building. I was hoping the installation would provide intimacy, as I’m interested in the experience of something that’s both there and not there. The disembodied voice has been a concern of mine since I was a child, when I would glue my head to a transistor radio under my pillow every night. I was able to achieve a bit of that by using these speakers, which satisfied me. You step into each zone and experience the work by just standing there and listening.

The narratives are made of candles, night, insomnia, and a skylight. Those elements, in their particular ways, initiate content-in-motion remote from clock-time, from quotidian activities. An ordinary candle flame conjures a Wells Fargo banker making off with his millions in the anxious view of the insomniac in *Bedside*, “with your tiny circumference of food clothing shelter cinched up tight in bed at this hour, going on four in morning...” I’ve been exploring the second person, you, as a subject. The audio narratives range from about four to seven minutes each. One was a text I had used before in another context, in a radio work, but I reedited, rerecorded, and reengineered it for this show, while the others were written in 2018 with the idea that they were audio works for me to perform. Recently, I’ve started performing with just spoken language and aural material onstage. Numbers of people have seen me perform over the years with video, but I’ve derived this new interest so there’s no visual.

My fascination with sound came about rather slowly. In maybe 1978, I was sitting in my kitchen on Ninth Street getting ready for the first reading of my book *Modern Love*. I noticed I wasn’t looking at the pages anymore, and that I was just speaking. It was a micro-epiphany about real time and sonics for me. It was also an initiation of confronting what I always knew silently, as someone putting language on the page: the time-based

nature of language, the changing velocities, the speed, the sequence, and so on. All of that is now central to my work—whether in performance, on a page or a screen, in objects and installations. But it was a slow dawning to involve myself so directly in the way I do now, and it was my good luck to discover that about myself because I find straightforward readings quite difficult—it's not a fit, to be reading from a piece of paper as a live event.

[video]

Excerpts from an interview with Constance DeJong.

Now when I read, during a performance, it's because within the narrative there's a moment of text: a letter, a paragraph from a book, or something like that—something that is, within the narrative, a written text. When I perform, there's a distinction between the read language and the spoken language. That difference is important to me. For instance, I performed one of the texts during the opening of the show in Chicago. That one features a character that has a bunch of friends near their bed on the floor—i.e., books. During an insomniac moment, after a bad dream, the character remembers a quote from Elizabeth Bisland's *Dreams and Their Mysteries*, written in 1896, and through the character I read this text:

. . . night after night, with calm incuriousness we open the door onto that ghostly underworld, and hold insane revels with fantastic spectres, weep burning tears for empty griefs, babble with foolish laughter at witless jests, stain our souls with useless crime, or fly with freezing blood from the grasp of an unnamed dread; and with morning, saunter serenely back from these wild adventures into the warm precincts of the cheerful day, unmoved, unstartled, and forgetting.

I have an ongoing interest in dreaming, unlike most of today's neuroscientists. It's a topic that's been pushed off to the side in the US, though there are a bunch of events related to it. You can go to a dream fair in Las Vegas, and somebody will tell you what it all means. Since Freud, it's as if we've drawn a line in the sand, and we've not progressed, and that baffles me because, of course, if we're fortunate we sleep and dream every day, for a considerable portion of our twenty-four, diurnal cycle.

As a young person I discarded chronological and alphabetical order, in addition to various other systems we force language into when composing fiction and narrative. At first, this was with a not very clear awareness in response to writing conventions. But as time went on, I became increasingly aware of the movement of thought. It's something we're all familiar with: for example, you're waiting for the bus, but you're thinking about ten years ago, and also, did you turn off the gas? It goes on and on—we're always in many different time frames, for *a lot* of waking life. I suppose I've paid attention to that, and it's a source of structuring. I don't have to use language as a delivery system for any manipulative, controlling binaries or chronological clock time. Rather, I use associative thinking as a basis for how I put language together in my work, and it eliminates whole subjects that don't interest me. It focuses me.

It's true that I work with ideas of narrative structure and that process, in part, is about recognizing a space of introspection. If you think about narrative work—be it cinema, performance, opera, novels, you name it—it's very outward. For me, introspection is an ineffable and ephemeral thing, definitely not navel-gazing, and it has crept into the very substance and form of my present work.

— *As told to Lauren O'Neill-Butler*

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