

Rachel Valinsky, 'Constance DeJong and Tony Oursler on Relatives,' *The Kitchen Blog*,
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Constance DeJong and Tony Oursler on Relatives

By Rachel Valinsky



Mar 13, 2018

On the occasion of the [re-staging of Relatives](#) nearly thirty years after it was first performed at The Kitchen, Constance DeJong and Tony Oursler spoke to Curatorial Fellow Rachel Valinsky about the history of the piece and their collaborative practice.

Constance DeJong

"After seeing me perform Tony invited me to see his work and, almost immediately, he suggested we collaborate. I was using pre-recorded audio in performance and wanted to introduce video in my live work. Tony was like no one. His video sensibility was unique, partly a generational difference: he was 26 and had made, in single-channel videos, a very compelling co-mingling of DIY methods (drawing, paint, cardboard, etc.) and time-based technology. That early Oursler aesthetic is in *Relatives*.

WESTERN FRONT FEBRUARY 1988



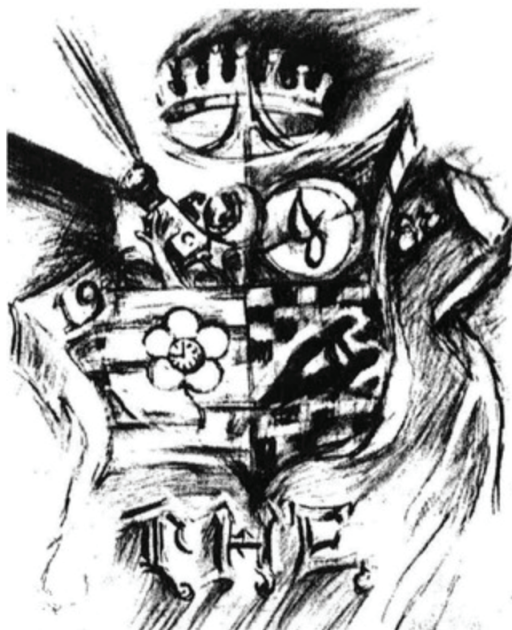
CONSTANCE DEJONG AND TONY OURSLER - PERFORMANCE FROM N.Y.C.

"We shared a number of interests. We were both already invested in and investigating narrative/non-narrative, and thinking about how narrative could move from moment to moment, be structured. We spent a long time, months, meeting and becoming collaborators. Tony's first interest in collaborating with me was in a performance, so we had a form leading our thinking together.

"Previous to *Relatives*, I had performed texts I had written for print form. I'd speak them from memory as they had been written (*Modern Love* was adapted for spoken text performances and into an audio work). But *Relatives* is a text to be spoken only. It was written for a duet made of speech and video. The two together make the text or narrative... neither stands alone as a work unto itself.

"The overarching narrative idea that became *Relatives*, was based on my less-than-favorite literary 'genre', the family saga. In particular, the fictional family in *Relatives* has a member in each successive generation who is working in/appearing in the primary visual technology of their generation. Painting first, video games/fractals (computers) last. Because family members are identified with a particular moment of popular visual technology—film or TV or computer games—we used extant (not original) examples to make clear that character-to-media identification; that is, *Relatives* uses actual early black and white film, or an actual kung fu film, or actual video games...though all the appropriated material is affected visually and sonically to participate in *Relatives*' narrative and in the aesthetic being developed. Tony was keen to make from scratch the early black and white TV episode of a children's Saturday morning show, rather than edit and transform a pre-Mr. Rogers kids TV show with puppets. Live shows with puppets/marionettes and a human were popular in the era we were addressing. There were Clarabelle, Howdy Doody (marionettes), and Buffalo Bob; or, Kukla, Fran and Ollie, for example.

RELATIVES



"Albert Pinkham Ryder's 1896 painting *Constance* was more of a subjective choice than other material from film and television and popular culture that we used. As a lover of Ryder's dark skies with moons and moonlight, I was partial to his paintings; and the painting is in Boston where we were doing some of the work on *Relatives*; we were given permission to use an image of the painting, which includes a representation of a woman and baby, thus fitting perfectly into the purposes of the fiction I was writing. Personal and objective considerations fell into place with Ryder's painting.

"We were working in the dark in a way. Neither of us had produced a performance like this, made of concurrent language and video.

"David Ross, the director at the ICA Boston at the time, first invited us to premier *Relatives* as part of the programming around an exhibition titled *The BiNATIONAL: Art of the Late '80s*. For two years after the opening night, *Relatives* was invited to be in many US and European venues—museums, galleries, small theaters—often inhospitable or challenging spaces with bad acoustics, no lighting...not designed for performance. I traveled alone frequently with the piece; we built it to be manageable so that it did not require a huge technical set up. The on-stage elements therefore were quite

simple: me and my Madonna mic, the television, and some lighting in the areas where I performed...left, right sides of the screen, and a space in front of the TV. The biggest challenge was to perform with a pre-recorded 'co-actor' that is precisely the same every show no matter what I'm doing. So I had to be very precise every show, hit a cue 37 minutes into the piece, actually pretty much at every minute of the piece I have to be right on it. I use to think of it as my Olympiad.

"The piece was included in the 1989 *Whitney Biennial*... so, too, was an Eleanor Antin performance work. It was the first time performance as a specific form was curated/included in the Biennial. *Relatives* evokes an iconic image of a person and a television. In 1988 a television was the most common screen device." -Constance DeJong



Constance DeJong and Tony Oursler, *Relatives*

Relatives

by Tony Oursler and Constance DeJong

*A story about a fictitious family's geneology traced through a succession of appearances by family members. The characters are portrayed as bit players—people forever in the background—in the fields of painting, photography, the movies, television, and computer technology. *Relatives* combines Constance DeJong's spoken text with video by Tony Oursler.*

Friday and Saturday, November 18 and 19, 8 pm

The ICA Theater, \$6 ICA and MFA Members, students, and seniors, \$8 general. See ticket information below.

Tony Oursler

"In 1982 or 1983, I was teaching for a semester in the wonderful tundra of Minneapolis at the Minneapolis College of Art and Design. I always think the best art schools are the ones that are somewhat isolated. The closer they are to a Skinner Box the better the results. That said, there was a lively punk rock scene, the mysterious purple Prince who was somehow connected to everybody, Hüsker Dü, and even my friends Sonic Youth, who came through for one of their earliest tours. It's against this backdrop that I stumbled into a performance organized by Diane Shamash for Constance DeJong. Simply, her performance changed my life. It was a bare-bones setting, but as DeJong performed with no props or effects she was able to spin a rich texture of kaleidoscopic images and characters with her language. I couldn't help but connect her hypnotic abilities with technology. It seemed to me that her complicated narrative structure was somehow analogous to jump cuts, dissolves, broadcasts, transmissions, and all manner of amplifications and distortions associated with mass media. Or perhaps it was an extension of the tradition of oral narrative reacting to the flood of

media culture. These ideas quickly became a starting point for a number of collaborations over the years, including *Relatives*, which was completed in 1988. The Beats' use of the cutup was certainly informed by TV channel switching opening up new narrative panoramas. But perhaps the duality of hypnosis and interactivity implicit in TV culture had already spawned a sort of meta-narrative happening every night in people's living rooms? When constructing this work together we played with the idea of a dialogue between live and pre-recorded characters and the duality and mutability of image and text. *Relatives* attempts to register these narrative relationships to a cast of bit players strewn across a vast history of mediums and technologies. As always, our memories have migrated in various forms to oil paintings, home movies and videos, snapshots, and social media, only to be reshuffled by successive generations. DeJong takes a circuitous route through this terrain, pointing out an unlikely family history while always returning to the dilemma of the relationship between the individual and the screen.

"Much of this work could not have been produced without the help of faculty and students at the Massachusetts College of Art where we wrote and rehearsed *Relatives*. At the time I was teaching installation and video at the school, which had a very active media department, including film, performance, and video, as well as very advanced computer graphics. There we also had the good fortune to meet and collaborate with composer Neil Leonard who's original score for *Relatives* is a major contribution to the work. Boston also had a very active curatorial commitment to media and the arts, particularly at the ICA. Curator and producer Kathy Huffman, associated with the CAT Fund and the ICA Boston, was heavily involved in the production of *Relatives*. Without her enthusiasm and input, this project could have never been completed." -Tony Oursler

For more on *Relatives* visit [The Kitchen archives](#).

Images: 1) Constance DeJong at The Kitchen, 1989. Photo © Paula Court. 2) Flyer for February 1988 screening of *Joy Ride™* at Western Front, Vancouver. Photo by Anne Turyn. 3) Program cover for 1989 performance of *Relatives* at The Kitchen with an illustration study for the video. 4) Excerpt from *The ICA News*, Volume 6, Number 1 (Fall 1988).
Courtesy of the ICA Boston.