

ARTFORUM

PERFORMANCE

ALL IN THE FAMILY

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Constance DeJong and Tony Oursler, *Relatives*, 1988. Performance view, The Kitchen, New York, 2018. Constance DeJong. Photo: The Kitchen.

THE SETUP of writer-performer Constance DeJong and Tony Oursler's performance *Relatives* is simple: a large boxy television sits on a stand at center stage, flanked by two stools. As the TV plays a video created by Oursler, DeJong delivers a fragmented monologue, gesturing to the screen as one would a PowerPoint presentation, or a friend, following its movements, touching its surface, talking to it, finding in it familiar faces of relatives, real and imagined: DeJong's great-grandmother, mother, uncle, older sister, and younger sister, all representations of family buried just under the glass, where time is good

to them. While DeJong occupies one stool, the other stool seems to anticipate the arrival of one of her kin, as if their presence might materialize through her words alone.

A restaging at The Kitchen in New York City—the same venue at which it was presented in 1989—this iteration of *Relatives* served as a double-edged play on the act of remembering. Oursler’s video served as the scenery for, and archive of, DeJong’s family history; indeed, the screen captured their presence more fully than the performer’s own memory. But rarely did that archive fall into the trope of the family album; at no point did a snapshot or home video appear. Rather, the disparate characters, scenes, colors, and symbols onscreen felt strangely cold: The bloodline behind the mashup of images could not have been discerned without DeJong’s guidance. As she recited her lines, or read from flashcards and a printed script, she was conscious of the absurdity of her story, at times making wild leaps of logic, explaining how each of her family members was obsessed with, or involved in, the business of self-representation.

The narrative begins with a still image of an 1896 painting by Albert Pinkham Ryder titled *Constance*, which depicts a figure slumped in a wooden boat on a vast green sea. DeJong launched into an analysis of its composition and possible sitters: “The professionals have been speculating that perhaps the original bobbing boat was some kind of divan, and that Ryder was depicting a classic deathbed scene... We in the family know quite certainly that it’s great-grandmother Emma Trausch.” This self-referential meditation on the “official version” of an artwork’s narrative and the exact nature of artistic labor then transitioned into a weather report, a children’s hand-puppet show, a commercial break, a dubbed Kung-Fu movie, a game show, pictures of family crests, video games, and a field of blue.



Constance DeJong and Tony Oursler, *Relatives*, 1988. Performance view, The Kitchen, New York, 2018.
Constance DeJong. Photo: The Kitchen.

On the particular evening I attended, the television malfunctioned about fifteen minutes into the performance. The video dropped in and out, spawning a curious fusion of the television's circuitry with DeJong's behavior. Somewhat flustered by the disappearance of the images that were meant to illustrate her next trains of thought, she deviated from her script, remarking on the apparent demonic possession of the technology, or the fact that the children's show host kept disappearing at inopportune moments. She seemed to embody the character in her great-grandmother's dubious story from a childhood spent in Transylvania, in which a woman takes a nap outdoors and awakens with a terrible headache that never goes away. That poor woman's woes were caused by an insect that crawled into her nose and planted its eggs in her brain; in DeJong's case, one could say that she was instead infiltrated by the cathode rays of the television, which deposited its thoughts and narratives into her neural pathways. She seemed to speak as the television, becoming part of its cast. "We don't need a weatherman to know which way the wind

blows,” she explained, quoting Bob Dylan during a period of drop out on the TV, “but I am here.”

At one point in the video, a cloud front moved slowly across a US map. It looked like the fractal patterns designed by DeJong’s younger sister on the computer at her job, where she is perpetually alone. “The fractal is a way of seeing infinity,” DeJong proclaimed. Infinity here is conjured in the pixelated zoom into the Pinkham Ryder painting, the loosened paint chips of which supposedly give way to the rising image of the performer’s great-grandmother, the progenitor of DeJong’s story. That infinite zoom is also the only way to identify the extras in blockbuster films, one of whom might be Lorna Lanne, DeJong’s grandmother, when one rewinds and pauses the scene to see a glimpse of her profile. And if one zooms back out, beyond the frame of the painting, or of the film itself, one can see the infinite number of other stories and moving images that might have been recorded onto a VHS to resemble a family lineage, generations of aspirations to be seen and known. As DeJong’s uncle said: “That’s how easy it is to make believe.”

Mira Dayal is an assistant editor at Artforum.

Constance DeJong performed Relatives, her collaboration with Tony Oursler, on March 23rd and 24th at The Kitchen in New York City.

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