

# ARTFORUM



Constance DeJong, *Flame*, 2019, spoken text and sound material on sensor-activated digital frame, 2 minutes 28 seconds, 9 3/4 × 11 7/8 × 6".

## Constance DeJong

### BUREAU

Where do words situate us? The ongoing clusterfuck of self-perpetuating post-truth doublespeak—intensified by dispatches from the nether regions of influencer live streams, conspiracy-theorist podcasts, how-to videos, hot-take pieces, and more—forces us to gird ourselves against the endless waves of stupid, suffocating chatter. How does one not feel marooned, adrift?

Thankfully we have Constance DeJong, who for more than four decades has expanded the material parameters of narrative by hybridizing performance art, radio theater, sonic composition, writing, drawing, and sculpture to highlight the fictive apparatuses that shape daily life. Every work in “Polymorphose,” the artist’s exhibition here, showed DeJong employing a variety of linguistic approaches that in combination made visitors experience a set of interlocking phenomena across space and time, via formats ranging

from sculptural arrangements and collaged photo experiments to talking furniture and handmade books with internet avatars.

The show opened with two works in the gallery's front room: *Window*, 2019, a modestly sized, sensor-activated digital frame containing a short, repeating video, and *A silent figure of considerable noise exists in handwriting*, 2021, a clean white light box housing a digital print featuring overlapping handwritten texts—a kind of calligraphic palimpsest. While none of the writing in the latter, illuminated by a ghostly radiance, is legible, all of it hums, as the title suggests. One sensed the nervousness of the hand behind the gnarled cursive, especially in the veils of lines and vaporous erasures surrounding it.

With *Window*, one encountered a veil of another sort: an up-close shot of a mesh screen sprinkled with beads of rainwater. Viewers saw nothing more than blurred foliage and foggy sky past the dampened net, but the spoken text that emanated from the piece, delivered by DeJong, touched upon a range of moments out of sight—such as the blowing of a “lonesome whistle,” “the airspace of daily drones,” and “the morning’s news transmission[s]” about Paul Manafort’s trial. Interwoven with the atmospheric sounds, including eerie foghorns and howling dogs, these perfectly punctuated linguistic riffs were oddly grounding. If this was a broadcast, then DeJong’s acoustic ambience and crooning, soothing tone situated us closer to Orson Welles’s radio mystery shows than the true-crime pablum of our current climate.

The artist’s delivery worked magic with the wonderfully wonky digital frame—far less sleek than a flat-screen or gaming monitor—an aesthetic choice appropriately at odds with the subject matter’s gravity and its personal and sociopolitical content. A similar interplay occurred in *Flame*, 2019, a motion-activated digital frame housing a short video featuring a lit candelabra on a table in a dusky room. Minor piano chords intensified the penumbral setting as the candles burned in front of us. DeJong spoke: “The last night of a four-day weekend in a cabin in the woods without electricity; the firewood’s running out.” The work traffics in losses—the deaths of real people (David Bowie, Leonard Cohen, Prince), as well as the loss of time and materials (“Our last candle dripped away”). This fire, however, wasn’t meant to tranquilize us, as does Netflix’s *Fireplace 4K: Crackling Birchwood from Fireplace for Your Home*. Rather, it took us somewhere that was

tenebrously black. As the artist explains, “We are in separate realms summoned by a bit of combustion in the dark.”

Leaving “Polymorphose,” I felt like I’d seen myself dispersed across temporal, historical, geological, and astral planes. So many of DeJong’s concoctions speak of “you,” the pronoun forcing us into the present moment, as well as those instances before and after it. This expansive imagining of time permeates DeJong’s equally wide-ranging oeuvre. Like the fictional insomniac of *Nightwriters* (2018)—an artist’s book and online digital project published by Triple Canopy—I wandered off, feeling as though there was “a needle inside me plus the axis of the earth plus the pen point [to] make a hybrid instrument, part protractor, part compass: a conspiracy of inner and outer magnetics.”

— Anthony Hawley