

MAY

The Continuous Present

A Review of Constance DeJong's *It's Always Night* (2024) and *Modern Love* (1977)

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Constance DeJong, "Selected printed matter and videos," installation view

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Kunstverein München

May 4–June 30, 2024

It's Always Night

Performance, May 5, 2024, 4 pm

When Constance DeJong and fellow artist Dorothea Tanning established the shortlived imprint Standard Editions after meeting in a party in Paris in the mid 1970s, they envisioned a uniform series of books with titles stamped in bold, white lettering and shadowed by solid black. The cover of each volume would have a distinctive shade. Unlike the “un-nameable color . . . a pale orange gone paler over time” picked by Tanning for her novella *Abyss* (written 1947; published 1977), the shade of red chosen by DeJong for her debut novel *Modern Love* (1975–77) is almost too intimately familiar for comfort, just like the text itself.¹ “A deep, dark red to match the color of the blood that’s zooming through my veins,” the color threatens and seduces with the promise to break open the thin layer that separates inside from outside, one person from another.²

Before its publication, the text was conceived as a series of volumes, “distributed one at a time through the USPS to a 500-person mailing list.”³ Even as a complete object, the book holds onto its fragmentary beginnings, presenting a series of temporally and spatially isolated vignettes and connecting them through portals of memories, relationships, or even ancestry. The narrative voice that creates these associations is itself an untethered thing. It’s the disembodied voice of a writer, seeking something, anything, to write about. The voice constantly and effortlessly slips away from a net of time that tries to ensnare it. Lines repeat themselves verbatim, history is rewritten with contradictions, past and future coexist in a continuous present.

The voice of the book, like a high signal, and then another. From India, Paris, early modern England, rural Oregon, and back to New York, we drift between confessions, histories, and fantasies. Shifting in tone, assuming a new disguise for each new scenario, the voice of the book possesses a restless limitlessness, unconstrained by identity: “My name’s Constance DeJong. My name’s Fifi Corday. My name’s Lady Mirabelle, Monsieur Le Prince, and Roderigo. Roderigo’s my favorite name. First I had my father’s name, then my husband’s, then another’s. I don’t know. I don’t want to know the cause of anything.”⁴ These episodes accumulate and accumulate, condensing and condensing into a handheld book-shaped form. What is left is a little work of art.

What keeps the narrative of *Modern Love* together, despite being scattered over continents and centuries, is the idea that it is, at its heart, a love story, a story of real love. The narrative converges upon the moment in which our lovers, Charlotte and Rodrigo, realize that their relationship, loosely defined over the course of their five years together-but-separate, has finally expired. Charlotte stands at the door of Rodrigo’s room with a letter that she has scrawled and re-scrawled a dozen times. Rodrigo wallows, drunk, in his room. Everything that happens before this moment seems to lead to it, and everything afterward seems to stem from it.

Modern Love remains one of the few published pieces of DeJong’s writing still in print, rereleased in 2017 by Ugly Duckling Presse and Primary Information as part of their Lost Literature series. The reissued version of *Modern Love* is a near-perfect facsimile of the original, forty years after its first publication.

Today, DeJong’s words can still be witnessed in live performance, recalled from memory by the artist herself. The practice started with the first reading of *Modern Love*, when DeJong realized she didn’t need to look at her notes to remember what to say. DeJong describes these works as “adaptations.”⁵ Rather than word-for-word recitations, the monologues are delivered as spontaneous utterances, rephrased slightly with each iteration, conscious of what is lost in the translation between mediums. With her lilting cadence, DeJong’s rhythmic speaking voice imperceptibly advances on the shoreline of the audience’s attention like a lapping wave. Sometimes she is accompanied by music. In her reading of *The Lucy Amarillo Stories* (1977), the story of a girl who picks up the names and identities of the people she meets along her road trip from the East to the West coast of the United States, a live harmonica plays a repetitive tune composed by her friend Philip Glass. Most of the time, however, DeJong is alone onstage.

Her most recent performance, *It’s Always Night*, took place at Kunstverein München on May 5, 2024, in the form of an assemblage of disparate works gathered loosely around the titular quote, taken from the very first page of *Modern Love*.

Everywhere I go I see losers. Misfits like myself who can’t make it in the world. In London, New York, Morocco, Rome, India, Paris, Germany. I’ve started seeing the same people. I think I’m seeing the same people. I wander around staring at strangers thinking I know you from somewhere, I don’t know where. The streets are always crowded and narrow, full of men. It’s always night and all strangers are men.⁶

Her performance is divided into four parts, each accompanied by a unique image on a television screen to her right. First, a photograph of “Mike’s dog” with *Modern Love* in its mouth: this part retraces the outline of the book, drawing out the passages that resonate in our present moment. Some lines ring out like sirens: “we’re being told the war is going to end, the economy is steady.”⁷ It’s a direct quote from the book, published in 1977, but the exact same thing could be said today, in the same incredulous tone.

The text, written nearly half a century ago, exists unchanged. What all this reiterating and reissuing proves is that, for DeJong, the past is something that needs to be spoken and re-spoken into existence. It is an invention, an inconsistent story, built from a mixture of lies, fantasies, and some truth, that we repeat to ourselves about who we are and why things are the way they are. Through her retrospective performances, it seems like the past is something with which DeJong, now a septuagenarian, is coming to terms. Today, some might perceive her work as an anachronism, born out of the unique cultural moment of New York in the 1970s that came to define a new kind of artist, the New Media Artist. The cohort that DeJong belonged to at that time included Kathy Acker, with whom she shared an affectionate rivalry, having upstaged her with the debut performance of *Modern Love* at The Kitchen in New York as part of a double bill on January 25, 1976. Although Acker was the more provocative of the two, both women believed in writing as a limitless experimental medium and were equally committed to liberating the novel from its conservative history. While Acker would go on to enjoy popular attention for works such as *Great Expectations* (1980) and *New York City in 1979* (1981), DeJong would remain in relative obscurity, her defining work considered a “forgotten classic” of “lost literature.”

Back in Munich in 2024, DeJong closes the first chapter of her performance. She takes a brief pause to chat with the audience before moving on to a candlelit confession, accompanied by piano music, then to a broadcasted rant riddled with wild conspiracy theories (“The Queen of England was a cannibal, Finland doesn’t exist, the Apollo moon landing was a fake”), picked up on an augmented radio with LEDs that respond to the amplitude of what is being said. DeJong ends with a meditation. Looking towards the night sky, as a cure for her insomnia, she begins to plot her own constellations, or “asterisms,” between those “small bodies of light blinking in the dark night.” In this gesture, she finds a way of making sense of the infinity of information that she is faced with, a way of orienting herself in an endless sea of single data points.

DeJong’s insomnia is also our insomnia. Her words put us in contact with the undercurrent of persistent anxiety and insatiable curiosity that permeates our shared contemporary reality, keeping us all up at night. Her sensitivity to the ambient mood is the same sensitivity with which she channeled the spirit of 1970s New York in *Modern Love*. Her words, and the way she delivers them, make every instant feel like a culmination, pulling us into the present and holding us there.



Constance DeJong, “Selected printed matter and videos,” installation view

- 1 Constance DeJong, "A History of *Modern Love* (As Told by Constance DeJong)," Ugly Duckling Presse Blog, March 28, 2017, www.uglyducklingpresse.tumblr.com/post/158941870944/a-history-of-modern-love-as-told-by-constance. Accessed June 11, 2024.
- 2 Constance DeJong, *Modern Love* [1977] (New York: Primary Information, 2017), 8.
- 3 DeJong, "A History of *Modern Love*."
- 4 DeJong, *Modern Love*, 10.
- 5 Constance DeJong, interview by Jennifer Krasinski, *Bomb* (April 2017), www.bombmagazine.org/articles/2017/04/03/constance-dejong/. Accessed September 23, 2024
- 6 DeJong, *Modern Love*, 3.
- 7 Ibid., 167.