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## EPHEMERALISM, SEQUENTIALITY, AND WRITING BY HAND: EMMA CLAYTON IN CONVERSATION WITH CONSTANCE DEJONG

**2017 marks the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the initial publication of Constance DeJong's long out-of- print novel, *Modern Love*. Critically acclaimed in its time, *Modern Love* is now back in print, in a new facsimile edition co-published by Ugly Duckling Presse and Primary Information. On April 4<sup>th</sup> 2017, DeJong performed from the novel at The Kitchen, where she had performed a one-hour radio version of the novel in 1978. Amid these notable happenings, UDP intern Emma Clayton spoke with DeJong at Hunter College, where she is a Professor of Art/Combined Media. Her work is represented by Bureau Gallery, NYC.**

**Could you speak about the role re-articulation, repetition, and recurrence play in your work?**

You know, it's a strategy or a device, almost a structuring device in a time based medium, which of course performance is, but I actually think books are too. At the time that I was writing *Modern Love* it was almost a popular idea among artists a bit older than me who had used it in a way that I found very interesting. There were examples from performance—Yvonne Rainer and Trisha Brown using repetition and restart. The soundtrack that I played in the *Modern Love* performance was written by Philip Glass,

there again involving repetition, although he wasn't the only composer using repetition. Even among visual artists, you know, repetition in the work of Warhol and in painters and such. When I was in my late twenties and started writing that book I certainly had absorbed it by osmosis, and then by more than osmosis considered it as a way to sort of reset the narrative. By that I mean the narrative is, for want of a better word, moving forward, but repetition is useful to reset it back, and then move with a different forward continuity from the repeated place. And that as a strategy, especially for maybe the first third of *Modern Love*, was very useful, because it's polyphonic, there's more than one strand of narrative going on. I was also interested in memory, and it's also a kind of memory device—you repeat something, but on the second or third repeat you're actually in a completely different place.

**Within that forward moving narrative and then jumping back, and with writing the book serially, did you employ any type of writing structure?**

No, I just wrote into the dark. Which I still do, perhaps now with a tiny bit more ease. The seriality wasn't serial in the way that sometimes means seriality, like in visual arts. The seriality was a way for me to be engaged in the project. Almost, I put the gun to my own head to produce it and it was a way of manifesting the work into the world. I designed and printed and distributed each issue of this serial by mail. I was maybe of a nature that, the serial just suited me temperamentally. What, I'm going to wait around for the keepers of the gates to say "yes darling, do come in, we think you're worthy"? You know, at that time, maybe I still am, I was more like fuck you, who are you, you know. So producing this serial was agency.

**Forward motion, like a propellor...**

Yeah, get into the world. I started performing it, which was another way for it to be in the world. And I thought about 19th century novelists. They often had agents or publishers who published the serials but I've always been enchanted by how you (one of the public), would subscribe. You would pay into a subscription for so and so serial, say George Elliot's or Dickens'. It's a really interesting, call it business model if you will, but it can also be a very self sufficient and independent way of doing things, which would all happen digitally now.

**In an interview with Jennifer Krasinski for *BOMB Magazine* you said 'narrative is sequential, you can't escape it'. When you perform, do you see that as a way of escaping that sequential narrative, through the interruptions you can play with, with music for example?**

No I don't. I just think it's a reformulation of a kind of sequentiality (if there is such a word). I think the escape, so to speak, from sequential can happen, but in environments where one can escape, which I've done in navigated works. You, as a user, navigate the work on the computer, mouse driven, and the piece, which is made of narrative, resets itself every time you turn it on. You venture, as it were, through a

sequence of whatever happens in that moment. There isn't a meta sequence. So that's a true escape. Within that, on a smaller scale, there's the sequential. You, the user, can't rewrite every one of my sentences, you know what I mean. There are moments of sequential. I'm working with Triple Canopy on something for the internet, and that can have programming that does something similar—where there isn't a meta sequence. There are modules and the module is a sequence, but the experience of the module is multiple sequences. So that's a true escape. I'm often working on a project base with the performances. So there's a core of material, almost always written language, ideas, and subject matter, from which comes a book, some objects, a performance, etc. In performance, for me, the doing and differentiating from the fixed sequence of that same material in book form, is something I really enjoy doing. You called it this seamless arrangement—it's almost this kind of adaptation.

### **A completely reformulated work...**

Yeah, and I do it in different ways. In seemingly more casual adaptations than the one I did at *The Kitchen* (2017), I will seem as if I've left the formal text. But it's a moment of adaptation. As soon as I finished writing *Modern Love* I decided to make an audio version of it—an adaptation, it isn't word for word. So right away I stepped into adapting my own material. I wanted to make a radio program, adapting it for multiple speakers. I asked Philip Glass to write some thematic music, and I got a residency with one of the world's great audio engineers—Bob Bielecki, my first sound engineer, genius. We would call it now perhaps an audiobook, or a podcast. I thought it would be on the radio. A total folly, because the BBC makes some space for drama and books, but we don't. Certainly at the time it was almost non-existent. Now that exists as podcasts—often an independent venture.

I didn't, and still don't, have a sense of 'the primary work is the text'—I think all the various parts of the project are in play. I don't make a hierarchy out of it. I've always had a relationship to the material that is fluid, which isn't really about the escape from sequence, but it is a kind of malleable and porous way of working that is with me even now.

**On reading *Modern Love*, and thinking about that porous nature and the disruption of narrative, I couldn't help but draw parallels with the work of Chris Kraus, *I Love Dick* especially, and I know that you were colleagues and friends with Kathy Acker (also noted for her interruption of narrative). I was wondering how you think about those parallels, or whether you see relations between your works?**

Of course. I'm a reader as much as a writer. It wasn't that long ago that Chris interviewed me for her book, the Kathy Acker book [*After Kathy Acker*, Semiotext(e), 2017) and brought back to my mind things I hadn't thought about for a very long time. I think something that Kathy and I shared, which came from each of us separately as opposed to coming out of us knowing each other, and I hope this doesn't sound too

nerdy and odious, was this notion of the constructed 'I.' The constructed first person singular being constructed as a multiplicity not a singularity. It's a bonafide narrative strategy we had in common and importantly, with some urgency in our respective narratives. In my work very differently than Kathy's. Kathy identifies that construct as a multiple, as do I, but Kathy identifies that first person singular with her own name as well, which at that time was very original. Now it's been done to tedium and I wanna kill the young hipster so called post-modern person who does it again like 'oh it's so clever and my name's on the cover and I'm the character.' It's sad how a bonafide, vivid, and urgent construct becomes whittled into a cliché, in one's own lifetime. It's groaning. That's perhaps my problem. Perhaps I should see it from a different vantage point which is that, no, that's a bonafide contribution and invention to narrative writing and just other people are using it, it doesn't belong to a couple of individuals or one person. But I don't. Perhaps it's because the writing itself, in which that is borrowed and used, is unsatisfactory at large. But that was a

shared view of narrative and, in my case, it was a shared view of self. Now, there I think Chris and Kathy go on a street that I don't walk on. Because my first-person self is a multiple package that changes, and is not autobiographical. In my work, I have no interest in examining that constructed first person singular as a self that might be considered to belong to a 'real life'. That has become almost a genre, this bio-fiction, which has evolved over some decades. It's in *I Love Dick* and it's in Chris' writing. I think there's a bit more artifice in Kathy's approach to that. There's a tremendous amount of artifice in my approach to it. I'm happy to be the queen of artifice. I will wear that tarnished crown, or cross.

**Would you therefore say that the self you consider in your work is located externally rather than introspectively?**

No, I don't think it's a binary like that. We are creatures of both and then some. To overuse the word porous, I think some of us have a lot of porosity between internal and external, or a different sense of balance and at times, prioritizing so-called external events overstates the externalized in a way—as if they're not products of the mind and of thought, to call those interior. I've thought a lot about those distinctions simply by it being brought to my attention by people noticing it in the work. What does one call an event? Does the event have to be describable in language as, 'she walked across the room?' I want to acknowledge multiple presences.

**It can be experienced without notation and delineation...**

It's experiential. It's quite hard, but I've been trying to use it in writing. I'm really interested now in how we discount, for some of us, a third of our life—sleep and dreaming. I've become really intent on this huge event, dreaming, that's been discounted in our culture for a really long time. We are at a time with brain science and neuroscience, but most of the investigation of the workings of the so-called brain are very mechanical and material—as if there it is, a body of cells. It's like a line was

drawn in the sand after Jung and Freud, and very few people have ventured into that sand again.

**It's like taboo...**

It is! In terms of considerations of the interior or exterior, and the construction of self and/or this construction of the first person singular 'I'—one almost never reads of dreams when thinking about the constructed elements. One almost never finds dream experience within narrative. Do you? Can you think of any examples?

**No, apart from the classic 'she woke up and it was all a dream...'**

Yeah, it's been made a cliché. We've not been interested in, we've not investigated, we don't know. We don't have a language for it. It's fascinating. Such a huge part of the day.

**True, we don't have any kind of interrogative linguistic framework or line of questioning around that.**

I've been doing serious research, and there's almost nothing. There's a lot of new age, wonky con-artist stuff. And I've found some interesting writing from the late 19th century, when there was a moment where people wanted to take on dreams in a serious way. But it is a poverty.

**How are you beginning to negotiate that—the taboo realms of these subjects which are clichéd primarily? I was also wanting to ask you about how you negotiated the difficulties in dealing with the topic of love?**

Well, I think it's kind of important to tread the taboo. At the time I wrote *Modern Love*, one was oppressed by notions of love voiced upon the culture, period, but especially on women concerning paradigms and expectations. So some of that conscious negotiation was

going on, which included mocking and making fun of the paradigms, and of the self in my narrative that was trying to throw them off. We all got mocked in *Modern Love*. I have a strong aversion to narrative that scolds me, that tells me what things are, how to do and live. That adheres to a perspective, a dogma, that didacticism. So in *Modern Love* you don't come upon a new oppressing set of paradigms—that women will be this. The work is certainly a lived moment, and continues to be—urgent environments and realities. They stand in for more particular environments and settings, such as a certain room, or a city by name. But you know, the world of ideas is an environment, and a location as well. It's a temporal location. It may have attributes that aren't material, but it is a location.

**In a way, that agency and urgency forms a context, the need to do.**

Yeah, and I think that, if you want a little more about your previous question—Kathy and I lived in the same neighborhood, she sublet my apartment you know, we talked. There was an urgency. Again, manifested in narrative, in fiction, very differently in her work from my work. Certainly she and I shared that. I'm sure other writers of our age and of that time did as well, but I didn't know that many others. I think a thing that's in *I Love Dick*, and in *Constance*, and *Kathy*, was the inclusion of material that wasn't an obvious constituent of the 'fictional narrative'. Now of course, Melville in *Moby Dick* has tracts about whales, and Bram Stoker in *Dracula* has tracts that are informational, historical, research based. But that was a fairly uncommon element of fiction writing. I think it still is very pronounced in my work, where there is a heterogenous kind of material—that there is not a singular strata of what participates in a fiction narrative. I think that was coming very to the forefront in my work and Kathy's work. There's a veering off, and that's kind of interesting.

**Thinking about this urgency, what makes you so eager to traverse mediums? The not staying within one communicative medium, in reference to working across forms, how you spoke about working from a core and fragmenting out.**

I really can't say. You would think that I would have had an insight about that. I think it's partly to do with my understanding of language as a time based medium. I hear it sonically, I write it sonically, I produce it in terms of rhythms, I produce it highly constructed. That sounds like audio-video, and performance, to me, as much as the page. And even the page is something that I have always had a visual relationship to. I'm a pain-in-the-butt demon to work with because I have ideas about what the page should look like. That's as much as I understand. That there is a sharing of time-based. That's all I know.

**What type of anchor points do you use within time, and your experience of it, yourself?**

It's not static, it's not a fixed point. I've been thinking recently about becoming an elder. And not just becoming one, but anchoring myself to time as, 'Oh, I am an elder'. And an elder's relationship to time is very acute. There aren't tomorrows. When you're thirty there's tomorrows and then some. That's a relationship to time that's very different than there not being futurity. I rather like it. I like it a lot. It makes things very vivid. I think probably for almost everyone, what you call the anchor to time, changes—if we get to live a bit of decades. I was thinking about that sense of time we almost lose, that non-time time of the inquisitive child—you can look at something, and you can look at it, it seems like hours. We almost don't retrieve that at other times in our life. It's really an interesting temporal relationship.

**Thinking about language as a time-based medium, and then your work with performance, and this idea of location, I was interested by your decision to locate voice outside person, or within objects. For example, in *Modern Love* there is the passage where the protagonist is in India and the environment**

**almost becomes the voice and character that is playing out. Also, thinking about your piece *Pillow Talk* (2003).**

Those are two different things. But to answer one—I have a longstanding interest in the inanimate animated by mind and animated by language, which we all do and have done. It's so accessible and common to all of us, but I've kind of pulled it out of the fabric to think about it, to make works not about it, but to make works be that. They're vessels of memory. Inanimate things are archives of the invisible. I've been interested in unthreading those invisible things. And different cultures with different belief systems approach that notion of the inanimate very differently, and how the inanimate is animated by mind or language. A work of mine from 2013 called *SpeakChamber*, involves three different cultural belief systems that negotiate that place. I should be finished with it, but I'm working on some spoken texts now, for these things I call 'talking photographs', which is what *Pillow Talk* is, and damn. There I am again. With an object that is a vehicle for simply being an object in a present moment, but is also an object whose biography involves Mao and China and the cultural revolution and you know, here we go. Because I don't write or think in stories, these become the ignition of narrative, from an idea not from a story. But, in that segment of *Modern Love*, that's more about polyvocal narrative—you have a preceding vocality, that's probably identified by an 'I', or a character by name, and then suddenly that vocal isn't what's vocalizing. It becomes an unnamed vocalizing. And then by the end it actually moves into a third person narrative because it says 'the woman was traveling alone in India. She was eating ice-cream because it was her birthday'. You are the reader. You know that's the 'I' character that you already have met in the book. But that's language's potential for a slight of hand. Again, I don't do that as a technical feat. To talk about that interior/exterior thing, we do it all the time in our mind. Thinking, daydreaming, wandering about. I mean you're somebody else, you're thinking for somebody else, an old version of yourself, you're remembering, and you're not confused. It's not confusing to live in a vocal polyphonic environment. And it's something that has engaged me in my writing, and continues to.

**I haven't quite thought of it like that before. That when it's made so concrete on a page, when not stating subject or voice, it appears confusing, but it's something that we experience very fluidly all the time.**

Yes, we do. And you're not alone. I've had my time to dwell on it because it's a part of my work and of me so, I've lived in that room for a while. And now in that room is dreams, and people who contact us from the dead. The work I donated to the auction [Ugly Duckling Presse's Art Auction, May 2017] is spirit writing. I've been making a project called *Nightwriters*, which is basically an insomniac narrator whose bed is under a skylight. The only thing she has to do is look through the skylight and get really interested in stars and she starts drawing them and making asterisms and her hand becomes guided by, or inhabited by, something. So three astronomers come through the skylight and spirit write and so she, and therefore we the readers, become

acquainted with three women who most of us haven't heard of: Caroline Herschel, Annie Jump Cannon, and Henrietta Swan Leavitt— three major astronomers. So now in that room of polyphony are the 'voices' of these spirit writers. I know it was always a con, spirit writing, but I think it's interesting that we even, as a culture, as a species, invent these things.

**There's desperation in there.**

Yeah, they reflect this desire, and a loss. And my drawings are chalk on black paper because the con artists in the séances doing spirit writing would often use chalk boards—it was a trope of séances. I think it was because then they could wipe it off and not get arrested.

**Reading about your new work, and the spiritual side of it, I was considering your close working relationship with Tony Oursler, and wondering whether that influence has come from working with him throughout your career? Or has it always been something very intrinsic to yourself?**

No, no, it was something that cemented a friendship more than 30 years ago. It was a common interest, and believe me, there aren't that many people, especially at the time, who would have a 'serious' conversation about those seemingly absurd belief systems. I knew things he didn't know and vice versa, and we have continued that conversation for over 30 years. Maybe some people will know of Tony and *Imponderable* (2015 - 2016), which is a recent, spectacular work at MoMA. 5-D film work, also big archive, also 500 page book with many essays in it about some of the beliefs and practices that he's been interested in for most of his life. One of the interests that we also share is in the invisible histories—the discredited and ignored. Something like spirit writing, at times is also fueled by specific, topical events. The Civil War spurred con artists into both spirit writing and spirit photography, preying on the grief of the country which had never lost that many people to a war. It was a death consumed, death obsessed nation. If you weren't obsessed with civil rights you were obsessed with the death produced by the Civil War, and in that context certain so-called spiritual ideas came on. Yet if now you are reading about the Civil War, it's very unlikely that you would read a section about that part of the history of the nation and of that time. They're willfully and maliciously ignored, hierarchy-ed down.

**Do you have any idea why it's at this point in your work that you're coming to start to really try and work with these spiritualities?**

I can't say that I do. I'm offended by people being superficial about so-called spirituality. And I have private interests that have remained private for most of my life and it's very willful on my part to turn that around—which I did a little bit in *SpeakChamber*. It came from a commitment to the material that I was mentioning earlier, about this investigation of the inanimate. And to knowing a community of Tibetans for decades, and having travelled and so on, I was aware of an astonishing

belief system that is unknown to us. Where an inanimate thing is penetrated and co-habited by the mind, and by repeated practice and visualization and, it's not correct to call it prayer, but it's a thinking. That slapped me in the face in 1977 when I first encountered it. It really was a jolt and I never put it down. So with *SpeakChamber* it was like OK, if I'm really getting down on this interaction between the animate and the inanimate, and want a heterogeneous approach to it, there's this glaring example that I know. A very old friend idea I activated. Amateur astronomy is another old friend, a ~~huge~~ part of me, and I wanted these three astronomers to have place in a narrative that I'm writing. And I'll be god-damned if I'm gonna write a researched, historical fiction where I make them walk around and talk and wear clothes and be this thing called a character. Characters are abhorrent. I don't get it as a device. So I had to get them into the narrative. Spirit writing was how I could draw them literally into the narrative. This is my folly, and everyone can have a good laugh—to me that is a very legitimate way to locate in the narrative, through the hand that's drawing. Much more legitimate than this creaky, clanky old thing called character that has to walk and wear clothes.

### **Very concrete formulations...**

Yeah, although never go to the bathroom somehow. And I had spirit writing at hand because I had a huge, ongoing, years old interest in it. I actually have an engagement with handwriting, period. I have a fascination with it, with handwriting and artists who make their work with handwriting. Which is rather unusual, but there are a few.

### **That intrigues me. Looking through your work, it's so much placed into technologies, for example your current project, 'Radios'. How does that weave together?**

They're ideas that coexist and I don't think they're in conflict with each other. The handwriting and the ever-changing technology I've had to learn for wanting to make a certain work—just co-existing interests. Thinking about handwriting now is different to 20 years ago, simply because it's really disappearing. I have students now who aren't taught to write by hand.

### **How do you feel about that?**

Well you know, we do lose things and things change things. Generally, if one is living in a moment where something is disappearing, people get very upset and up in arms and it's the end of civilization or something. But I've read a lot about technology over time. This is in my bag right now [DeJong pulls out a book]—*Haunted Media, Electronic Presence from Telegraphy to Television* by Jeffrey Sconce, which is a really interesting book about belief systems which inform the rise of certain technologies. For me, the rise or the appearance of new technologies has been in my life since birth, so other things have dropped off. It's just how it is. It doesn't alarm me.

**Does it affect the way you think about making work? Within your work there seems to be thoughts on broadcast or dissemination or communication. Do you have to very directly think about those terms of communication, or do you find you just flow with the media?**

Well, communication is a snaggy word. If I thought about communication I would probably be a greater participant in social media or have a podcast. So I don't think of it that much as communication—isn't that interesting? I think of it as form of function and materializing work. I am working on something where there would be a more regular audio presence on the internet. A performance stops and starts and then it's gone. But the internet is not discreet. It's just there. Always and anyone.

**There's something about placing the ephemeral, you dealt so much with that...**

I am, I am an ephemeralist.

**To take an ephemeral moment and place it somewhere that then is, not always broadcast, but accessed at different points.**

Yeah, and it's a very different kind of time-based time. I mean, now in our culture and in several other cultures we know about personal access. Every day, every hour of the day — we don't even think about it. It's actually not that old.

**Going back to that idea of communication, when I used that term I was more thinking about it in terms of your ability to feed your ideas through certain mediums, and the reception of this in a particular way. Has that had to change? Have you enjoyed the reception changing?**

Oh I see. You reminded me that I want to back up to —I'll try to say this very simply. I was never burdened by what a writer is. Which in my culture, and especially in my city, New York City, it is very conservative and rigid. It's so constricting. I had an interest and ambition, an engagement with how language could act, how language could perform, where language could operate, where it might be sited. Now those things involved having to invent the locations and the sitings and hence—'she makes talking objects!', and talking photographs and public artworks and language infested, language infused things. That precedes an involvement with technology. The involvement with technology is necessitated by this investigating where language might go other than the page. One has ideas for forms and then to make those—I had to know and learn and become familiar with technology so I could use it. I wouldn't say that I'm interested in technology. I'm not somebody who's going to start writing essays about the role of technology in culture and what's happened to handwriting. I might. Until recently that wasn't the interest—it was need to know. I learned, I taught myself, I took little tutorials, I paid people to teach me. Often, a technological part of a work will be truly beyond me. So I collaborate with technicians frequently, and work together with their knowledge to make the idea happen. The one time that technology interested

me, and that I went after it, was for the escape from the sequential—when mouse-driven navigation came into being. That's what it presented itself to me as—an interesting escape, and another way to construct narrative. So right away it was the technologies that could do something. I think it was Stephen Vitiello who introduced the idea of Tony Oursler, Constance, and Stephen collaborating, and then that collaboration ended up being a commission of Dia's (1995). Before our collaboration, Dia's commissions were concrete. There was that tradition—an exhibition for a year of material work, mostly men, minimal. But the new director, Michael Govan, was very receptive to the idea of a digital work. So there was a vehicle, a way to make that work. It was a very new coding, it was painful. Just made our hair fall out how long and hard it was. Then we were fools because we thought that CD-Roms had entered the world as a way of experiencing time based work. Wrong. They vanished. They were like 8-track audio tapes. They were here and gone. Now it could just be on a cloud. You can still find a CD player but you can't find the hardware and software to drive a CD-Rom.

**And it doesn't bother you that that access has been lost now?**

It doesn't bother me, oddly. Also, the prospect of correcting it is beyond me. I'm really busy and the prospect of taking that on as a project is hugely time consuming. But it's interesting—there's three of us and no one is bringing this thing on fire as an idea. It's strange.

**I feel like we live in a world where we are constantly trying to grapple to hold onto things. It's funny, I feel you can tell you're a time-based medium artist because you're fine that things have been and gone and its done it's thing—when artists are often so precious about work and preventing the deterioration of work.**

Yeah, yeah. Partly initiated by the reissue of *Modern Love*, I've been thinking about old work. I live on many streets. One of those streets is the visual art world and it started me thinking about 'wow, people have retrospectives,' you know, at a certain age and a certain accumulation of work. I thought up a notion of a time-based retrospective that I'll do next season, wherein, instead of there being an exhibition where all the work is in one place at one time, there are performances over time that address all of the work in different combinations of programming the nights. So to do that I had to go into a closet and dig out all the old formats for the performances that I did. They start with cassette videos this big [*shows with hands*] and move forward into mini DV tape—that's the most current. There's one thing that's on a card. So everything before the card, even if it's digital, still has to be re-formatted. It all has to be re-formatted. To go onto media players. It's such a job.