

Performance seeks vaudeville – Composition as investigations – Collage is a false democracy  
– Spelling’s choices – Line defined by its closure: the function is nostalgic – Nothing without  
necessity – By hand – Individuals do not exist – Keep mind from sliding – structure is metaphor,  
content permission, syntax force – Don’t imitate yourself – We learned the language  
– Aesthetic consistency = voice – How does a work end?<sup>1</sup>

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Developed from a text of the same title published in the  
‘Lost in Spoleto’ insert to *Soanayway*, issue 2 (January 2019), a recently  
completed PhD thesis and presentation at BFTK#4 Event One (5 June 2019,  
London College of Communication, London).

By reading a work through a number of iterations (process, design, performance, review, continuous present) this text asks whether it’s possible to shape the language of library / archive catalogue descriptions to reveal the connections between a work’s various forms of embodiment – complimenting our understanding of where it *begins* and *ends*. In doing so, it gestures towards the contradiction implied by dematerialisation as it emerged in the 1970s; a context in which a number of artists explored the subversive associations between the social condition of language and representation through a variety of forms of textual distribution.

Materialised first as heterogenous encounters, via performance, installation, reading and exhibition, words were subsequently contained within published forms and formats (books, publications, magazines, journals, etc.), which continued the discursive process through re-distributed networks of exchange. These published forms are often the only surviving trace of dematerialised artworks, many of which remain excluded from critical assessment because of their paradoxical nature and the complication of *where* and *how* the work may be read, or even where it resides in institutional collections. This relates specifically to practices of women that reproduce certain types of fragmentation within the

<sup>1</sup> Excerpt from Ron Silliman, ‘FOR L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E’, in Bruce Andrews & Charles Bernstein (eds.), *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E*, vol.1, no.4, (August 1978), n.p.

2 This is a conscious reference to Aby Warburg's Mnemosyne project that sought to unite what Warburg saw as the continued influence of the classical tradition upon European art, through the translation, or transformation, of one gesture upon another. This *afterlife* of the symbolic, gave figuration the power to disrupt an historical present tense, described by the historian Alexander Nagel as a throwing together of the past and present, through a visual assemblage of a chain of symbols representing the continuity of assimilated gestures. The particular anachronic aspects of the project, formulated through tracing the gestures themselves (described as 'pathos formula'), positioned the images outside of a past or present, for a continuity that was punctuated through time.

material conditions of their work, a tactic of production often adopted as a result of different kinds of impoverishment — a lack of financial support, space, materials and time. Speaking, listening and gathering replaced the traditional need to produce objects.

As a locative practice, cataloguing places a set of vocabularies upon an item, attaching meaning parasitically — a language that latches, touches and stains leaving an indelible trace. Terms and descriptions are what remain of the work as it changes, they are the *afterlife*<sup>2</sup> of the connection. An item's designation not only allocates its position within a collection, but also establishes the material conditions used to identify it. When encountering works that exhibit a state of fluidity between forms, it is these terms and descriptions that activate the object and perform the function of interaction.

In some respects, the question of representation in relation to a book in an archive or an artwork in a library, bears some similarity to the reassessment of the notion of the poem as a 'preconceived object' — a set of 'words arranged on the page according to plan' — as posed by the writer Marjorie Perloff.<sup>3</sup> Provoked by questions in response to the improvised 'talk poems' of the artist David Antin, Perloff related problems of categorising "writing" of this nature to those that arose from performance and its particular relationship to artists whose work did not follow a linear progression of beginning, middle and end. Seemingly without structure, the writing of Antin — and others such as John Cage and Jackson MacLaw — was 'without form', and therefore, easily conceived, or reproduced, by anyone.<sup>4</sup> Contrary to that particular criticism, Perloff instead framed Antin's improvisational approach of 'remembering, recording, representing' within a theoretical discourse that placed emphasis on the frameworks of indeterminacy, which enabled seemingly 'structureless' writing. When related onto the page, Antin's compositional process of transcription, framed as 'neither text nor talk, but the active process of thinking', open out a consideration of a form 'constantly coming into existence through serial acts of assertion, rather than as the product of a discrete compositional process.'<sup>5</sup>

3 Marjorie Perloff, "No More Margins": John Cage, David Antin, and the Poetry of Performance, in *The Poetics of Indeterminacy: Rimbaud to Cage*, (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2005), pp.288–339 (p.288).

4 Ibid, p.290.

5 Ira S. Murfin, 'Talking Text and Writing Extemporaneity', in *Performance Research*, Issue 2: On Writing & Performance (Volume 23, 2018), pp.31–36, p.31.

## On Procedure

Constance DeJong's serial artist's book *The Complete Works of Constance DeJong I–V* was written and published by the artist between June 1975 and July 1976 as five independent yet interconnected publications. Produced during a period of intense artistic activity in the area of the Lower East Side where DeJong lived and worked, alongside those such as Jennifer Bartlett, Jacki Apple, Adrian Piper — artist-writers within a broader art community, that shared influences, cultivated in literature, rather than art, from European writers such as Jean Cocteau, who 'embraced hybridity, unfixed to one medium or form', Alain Robbe-Grillet, Marguerite Duras, Nathalie Sarraute, and, like her friend, Kathy Acker, the American, Gertrude Stein, 'for whom language was a material, among other things'.<sup>6</sup> The effects of Stein's influences through her approach to writing and voicing language forms that established presence through a multiplicity of sources, was according to Acker, due to 'her equation of language and breath, in which language was primary, so that it would have the power of breath'.<sup>7</sup> Both DeJong and Acker's writing would problematise designations of narrative and prose forms, through the intervention of embodied language — where speech transformed from the page through the body into the performance space. The confluence of this experimentation produced a situation where the speaking subject rejected the confines of representation, to disappear into language itself. As a consequence, the preparation and shape of text formations act as the location from which DeJong materialised presence, meaning that attention is dispersed across an array of materials, punctuated in time through acts of performance. Shifting between live event and publication, DeJong's work presents a relationship to categorisation that is ambiguous precisely due to the editorial and design procedures generated to produce her writing.

During the period the five books that made up *The Complete Works...* were being completed, the text was structured into a series

6 Constance DeJong, 'A History of Modern Love (as told by Constance DeJong)', <uglyducklingpresse.tumblr.com/post/158941870944/a-history-of-modern-love-as-told-by-constance> [accessed 28 March 2017].

7 Georgina Colby, 'Introduction' from *Kathy Acker: Writing the Impossible*, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016), p.7.

8 Barbara Reise was an American academic who came to London in the 60s with a Fulbright Scholarship to complete her PhD on Turner. The thesis was never completed, and Reise instead became one of the only women writers to work regularly at Studio International under the editorship of Peter Townsend. Reise's connections to artists in New York, was significant in building transatlantic relationships in the 1960s. She would also teach in Coventry under the invitation of Art & Language. The folder relating to Constance DeJong in her archive is where her artist's books and other ephemera are located (TGA 786/5/2/85).

10 Founded in 1972, Art Services is a (non-profit) company to provide production and management for multimedia performance, dance and theatre related works. Artists include John Cage, Philip Glass, Robert Ashley and Yvonne Rainer.

of spoken word performances beginning at The Kitchen on Sunday 25 January 1976 — an evening that was shared with Kathy Acker; which continued to Paris and London. With the books now complete, the performance was titled 'Modern Love', and iterations took place in Paris on 2 November and at The Women's Free Arts Alliance in London on 11 November 1976, at the invitation of the writer and critic Barbara Reise.<sup>8</sup> DeJong performed again back at The Kitchen on Friday and Saturday 21 and 22 October 1977. After publishing the last book in the series, DeJong visited Paris in the hope of securing a publisher for the complete manuscript. Following a rejection from Editions Seuil<sup>9</sup> DeJong instead started her own press called Standard Editions, with the support of the Surrealist artist Dorothea Tanning, who was the aunt of her friend, Mimi Johnson, the director of Art Services.<sup>10</sup> Standard Editions published *The Complete Works of Constance DeJong I–V* now as a single edition at the end of 1977, again retitled as *Modern Love*.

### On Design

The original serial books were typed on an IBM Selectric typewriter with the resulting manuscripts printed directly using a photo-offset process.<sup>11</sup> The books are small (21 × 18 cm), simply presented with an unadorned shiny blue cover, described by the artist as a 'salute' to Yves Klein. Printed on a white uncoated stock, the typeface is the IBM equivalent to Palladian, which is retained across the five publications, as is the pagination, which also runs continuously. Book I was published by The Vanishing Rotating Triangle Press (TVRT) in 1975;<sup>12</sup> a press established by the writer Ted Castle and artist Leandro Katz with financial support from Sol LeWitt, who were introduced to DeJong through her friendship with Acker.<sup>13</sup> As DeJong's concept for the project developed, she founded Mirror Press, Inc. and produced the subsequent editions II–V herself across 1975–76.<sup>14</sup> Each book was produced in an edition of five hundred that were sent by the artist to a mailing list, using

9 DeJong said: 'I went to Paris, because all American writers get published there!' (Ugly Duckling Presse Blog, 2017).

11 In a five-page text from DeJong in Reise's archive from which much of the details presented here have been derived, DeJong identifies the typewriter as an IBM Executive, in successive interviews she's described the Selectric. TGA 786/5/2/85.

12 Originally called Viper's Tongue Press, at a certain point the press transitioned to The Vanishing Rotating Triangle. They acted as a publisher but not a distributor.

13 Described in an email to the author (23/07/2018).

14 DeJong stated: 'A commercial print shop on Greene Street, gave me access to a "professional stapler" and paper cutter and flat table space for assembling each volume in the serial. The access was free in the after-midnight hours.' (Ugly Duckling Presse Blog, 2017).

the offices and distribution set-up through ArtServices, run by Mimi Johnson.<sup>15</sup> It was again through Acker that DeJong found the idea for distributing her books by the post, as Acker had produced her first serialised book *The Childlike Life of the Black Tarantula* in 1973 using a similar process.<sup>16</sup> Indeed, DeJong would reflect that the process of making ‘one’s own books’, with the development of inexpensive printing methods, was a practice more engaged with by the poetry community, as well as journals and political movements, yet relatively rare for works of fiction. Despite its ease, she voiced the concern of ‘inflicting my work on the unsuspecting recipients. And perhaps even more, I was hesitant to contribute to the growing proliferation of printed matter, especially in its least desirable form — junk mail.’ Without the services of a publisher however, it was the only way to circulate the material ‘rather than put it in a drawer’, and in addition it meant DeJong avoided ‘the slow-moving mechanisms of the commercial publishing’, an experience felt by many women writers of the time, stating the ‘difficulties [publishers] have in accepting / promoting new work, especially fiction, especially fiction by an unknown writer.’<sup>17</sup>

When DeJong came to publish the collected text as *Modern Love* through her imprint, Standard Editions, in 1977, she worked with the artist Jill Kroesen<sup>18</sup> to produce the typeset mock-up which was then sent for printing and binding, remarking that:

Kroesen was understanding of my attention to page details which are not exclusively visual matters. For example, to my mind the page turn effects the read, so we sometimes altered slightly the line spacing of a given page — an invisible alteration that allowed me to choose or control when / where the page turn occurred.

I designed the cover.<sup>19</sup>

The plot and the construct of the books themselves were conceived to operate on an individual internal structure, to be read as a singular edition and to slot into the larger framework of the five books;

18 Jill Kroesen left the artworld in 1985, after ten years in New York, where she worked and performed at The Kitchen, and featured in the Robert Ashley televised opera-serial, *Perfect Lives* (1984). Kroesen studied at Mills Centre for Contemporary Music in Oakland, which was under the direction of Robert Ashley at the time. She wrote several plays, including the cold-war soap opera, *Excuse Me I Feel Like Multiplying* (1980) and made an album, *Stop Vicious Cycles* (1982).

15 DeJong describes using the facilities of Art Services, including a ‘business bulk buying stamp’, to alleviate postage and envelope costs. (Ugly Duckling Presse Blog, 2017).

16 The distribution circumstances for Acker’s book are well known, and frequently referred to by Acker in interviews — she would use a mailing list compiled by Eleanor Antin to distribute her mail artwork *100 Boots* (1971), via the US postal service.

17 All quotes here are from the text in Reise’s file. TGA 786/5/2/85.

19 Email to the author (23/07/2018).

had to work up new acts continuously. It helped when she and Monsieur Le Prince, the owner, decided to cut back to weekly appearances. Rita started breaking rules. She'd speak a line or shout a word. No self-respecting mime would do that! She changed clothes on stage. She kind of peeled from one part of the act to the next. It was cute. It was still hard to keep up with the slavering public. They always wanted more. She wouldn't strip. She was an artist. She and Monsieur Le Prince had another business meeting. Two shows a month and maybe it would still be Ok. It had been four years for them with lots of success and enough money. Rita was a little tired. She thought the man standing in the door must have made a mistake. He looked out of place. She looked away from him. He came over to the table. "Excuse me but I'm looking for my brother, Monsieur Le Prince." "He just went out for a moment. Sit down." Jacques told her he'd never seen her perform, though of course his brother and many, many others had spoken endlessly about her great artistry. They began to talk. Rita invited him to that week's show. He came. She invited him upstairs afterwards. He went but only stayed a few minutes. He hated it up there. Her underwear all over the place. The single gas burner, the drafts, the dumb prints on the wall. He told her they should meet again somewhere else. When? Saturday. Where? 49 Boulevard Raspail. When? 9:00. She thought he was strange. She'd no idea why. Maybe it was that brief case he always drug around. His odd manners. He must be at least 35. Rita was too busy to think about him.

He was 40.

Jacques. A brief history.

First of all, he had an amazing memory. To assist this faculty he had notes. Hundreds and thousands of references and quotes on scraps of paper, clippings, copies of letters, letters sorted and

stored in envelopes. Filed by subject and name always at hand, added to used replaced, brought out again. Fifteen years worth of exact information. Memory guided him to his envelopes. Also to his books, in which he scribbled. To his journals in which he noted occasional thoughts as they occurred. It was an elaborate system centered on centuries of poetry, journalism, private papers, fiction, drama, philosophy, history. He was writing on every manner of human delight fear hope disbelief fantasy. It was going to be one of those complete encyclopedic chronicles of the western world.

On Saturdays, Jacques had receptions. He trusted word of mouth, his friends, their friends. All of Paris showed up. His open door policy reflected one side of his character. Jacques also had a conservative streak. No one cared. His guests thought him quaint, a little eccentric perhaps, peculiar at worst. Everyone had heard him give his little speech, his welcome to newcomers: "I confess I've remained very much a classic in the matter of salons. A salon in which one cannot follow or rejoin the woman one prefers, draw her away from the group, speak to her for a moment in a lowered voice in the shadow, address part of the general conversation to her and find oneself shining and receive a glance of recognition. . . . such a place is not a salon for me. Oh, may the French Salon never lose sight of these attentions. The lively wish to please, the animated, unfailing, charming graces of France!"

Rita took him aside. "Look Jacques," she said, "you can't go through life living in the past. It's not the 19th century. I mean, it's one thing to write about or think or even care about the past. But you can't live in it. You don't want to end up out of touch, talking to yourself alone." Years of worldly experience fell away. How could he possibly refuse? Her flashing black eyes. Her blue finger tips. Her green lips.

She was 25.

Another brief episode. Rita and Jacques. Rita and Jacques.  
Rita and Jacques. Rita and Jacques.

By the time we met it was all history. History? This is no subject for mockery! I want to tell you my opinions experiences ideas about history. About art. About everything. But she was only half-listening, reclining among the cushions. "I'm not interested in purely aesthetic people," Fifi sighed. We had just finished lunch; the afternoon was fading into evening; I was still full of impressions from the East. I was riding in a train. I was standing on a mesa in the Nevada desert. I wanted her to follow my momentum. "All my wordly experience fell away," I was explaining.

THE END

Book 1: First in a continuing series



TVRT NEW YORK  
1975

« Example pages charting the end of Book I of *The Complete Works of Constance DeJong I-V*, in its original typographic layout, also including the insignia of the publisher TVRT, (reproduced at 95% scale of original).

several character narratives intersect and overlap, with the story as an entity divided into several parts that are distributed across the series. The first two books contained a contents section, however the second was not structured into specific divisions, with DeJong using written insertions, changes in character or place to produce transitions or introduce a different scene. This method was continued for the subsequent three books and is reflective of the artist's writing strategy, which, through 'velocity, rhythm, pacing, conspicuous composition and structuring — and eventually, sonority', attempted to create a sense of liveness in the text. Written through the direct action of reading aloud, reproduced an embodiment of language in *real time*, where the artist realised they were no longer reading from the page and the words were, 'becoming, unfurling, unfolding', in the live moment.<sup>20</sup>

The exposure of these technologies, where language, speech, and text were subjected to the processes of embodied iteration, speak to this notion of an *afterlife* of language through its materialisation as print. For DeJong, the approach to reading aloud was to reproduce a series of actions, where page turning operated similarly to the punctuation of breathing. This intentionality was then transposed by the artist in a compositional arrangement of mechanised type — allowing for a particular assimilation of what Charles Olson had described as 'intervals of registration' — an interchange between the visual and verbal via the machinic.<sup>21</sup>

The Selectric was a typewriter and then some. All the letters were on a ball that turned as one typed each letter key, somehow placing the type exactly in the sentence sequence of letters. The machine's most important feature for me was that letters were individuated; that is the *m* is larger than the *i*; not the singular space of letters that gives typewriting its distinctive look.

I wanted the language to look like type.<sup>22</sup>

Here, the compositional field transformed into a narrative field, as

20 TGA 786/5/2/85.

21 From 'Projective Verse' by Charles Olson (1950); accessed via the transcription online: <<writing.upenn.edu/~taransky/Projective\_Verse.pdf>> [accessed November 2019].

22 Ugly Duckling Presse Blog, 2017.

DeJong translated between performance and documentary space. By interweaving narrative as both “talk” and “fiction”, DeJong’s writing presents an expansion upon Marjorie Perloff’s observations of the anecdotes that punctuated Cage’s ‘expository discourses’ in the collection titled *Indeterminacy*, similarly producing an interwoven continuity through a set of seemingly unconnected stories, as well as the ‘pure exposition’ of David Antin’s talk poems. When transferred to the page, Cage and DeJong’s use of the Selectric typewriter would describe their deviations. Cage used the twelve different font options provided by the machine to mediate an indeterminant route through the construction of the iterative text ‘Diary: How to Improve the World (You Will Only Make Matters Worse)’. DeJong in contrast, focused upon the distinctions between the letters of one font family to unify the indeterminant properties of her fictional narrative. Antin, however, favoured the IBM Executive, which allowed for the violation of right and left margins, stating ‘no typesetter in the world will produce a ragged left margin.’<sup>23</sup>

### On Performance

The directed form and circulation of *The Complete Works... / Modern Love* and its explication with indeterminacy to produce a narrative persona, however, finds more in common with Kathy Acker. When describing their friendship, the author Chris Kraus has remarked that their writing was ‘driven by strikingly similar questions. How to write prose that engages the reader without relying on an archaic narrative structure where invented characters move toward greater self-knowledge through a coherent plot?’<sup>24</sup> At the point when they read together at The Kitchen on 25 January 1976, only books I and II of *The Complete Works...* were finished, with DeJong working on III between January and February 1976. Acker was already published and working on her third “serial” under the name The Black Tarantula, titled *The Adult Life of Henri Toulouse Lautrec*, also published as a novel by TVRT.

24 Kraus, in her many novels that incorporate autobiographical details, has performed the idea of synthesis with Acker’s work. *After Kathy Acker*, published in 2017, is Kraus’s biography of the writer, written through those she was intimate with. There are several historical errors and omissions in the book, which further complicates how the reader is expected to relate to the material. This is a perhaps accidental destabilisation of an already unstable narrative.

23 Quoted from David Antin, William v. Spanos & Robert Kroetsch, ‘A Correspondence with the Editors, William v. Spanos and Robert Kroetsch’, in *boundary* 2, Vol.3, No.3, ‘The Oral Impulse in Contemporary American Poetry’ (Spring, 1975), pp.595–652.



» Documentation image from the performance of *Modern Love* at The Kitchen on 21 and 22 October 1977. This performance was produced after DeJong published *Modern Love* as a novel (as Standard Editions in July 1977), and included 'The Modern Love Waltz' written and played by Philip Glass. Photograph courtesy of the artist.

It was the first reading for The Kitchen; their first time presenting writers. Neither Kathy nor I actually read texts. Without consultation we each prepared a performance. Kathy enlisted a number of performers to deliver sections of her text, a kind of ensemble act. The performers were on the floor either sitting or laying on their stomachs. They did read from white pages of paper but no one would call their presentation a reading[...]. Beforehand, I was busy going over my text, recording it and listening to my delivery at my kitchen table and, in the process, inadvertently memorizing thirty minutes of text. Being able to speak text from memory became an idea, a way to produce language in real time; no paper between me and the audience and no end of control to the velocity, volume and syntax of the text.<sup>25</sup>

From this first attempt DeJong would establish a pattern of memorisation, which was counterpointed by a performative representation of reading, with her script operating as a type of prop. In later performances a recorded voice was introduced, layering speech within these specific representations of 'voiced' narratives that converged and diverged. The next time DeJong performed, this time in Paris on 2 November 1976, Books III–V were finished and the final manuscript of the now retitled *Modern Love*, was completed in July of that year. It was only then that she was able to read 'all five books straight through for the first time', and reflect upon how:

Certain thematic and structural elements establish multiple relationships between the individual books. Thus the small scale development and resolution of each book occurs within a larger context: the evolution of the material as a single unit or whole. In effect

<sup>25</sup> From the chapter 'Part One: the 1970s', in Brandon Stosuy, *Up is Up, But So is Down: New York's Downtown Literary Scene, 1974–1992*, (New York: New York University Press, 2006), p.29.

there's a kind of simultaneous evolution — the small scale and the larger occurring concurrently.<sup>26</sup>

By acknowledging this aspect of simultaneity DeJong problematised those previously understood notions of sequence designated as a formalising anchor of beginning, middle and end, for a formulation that emulated in part, both Antin's and Acker's strategy that took the active process of thinking as the primary medium, rather than talk or text. When transposed into the performance space, the live aspect of composition became conferred as "blocks" of writing arranged in particular formats, to utilise a 'different energy' of broken or continuous passages. This evolved to form '[a] shape or prevailing unity through [the] language, through its immediate and momentary progression: word to word, sentence to sentence.'<sup>27</sup> And translated into the polyvocal aspects of *Modern Love's* construct as a performance, where the written structure of serialisation played against a set of conflicting temporalities which destabilised, rather than reinforced, the author's identity. Instead, on-stage DeJong configured as a presence to be 'loosened', and 'laid aside' — dispersed across the different text forms she had reproduced, which she later described as 'an interesting mode to concretely work for or against our ordinary experience of successive time.'

For the performance in London on 11 November 1976 DeJong requested the following materials including: one rug (9 × 12"), a tape recorder, amp and speakers, a microphone with stand, a desk, a high stool, a regular chair and a directors-style chair. There were two specific spot lights and rose coloured gels organised at the last minute, significantly adding to the costs of staging the event.<sup>28</sup> The performance comprised several elements; DeJong sat on the high chair with a script and spoke, accompanied by a taped recording of an actor, David Warrilow, reading the description from Book I, and other pre-recorded material, music and extracts read by DeJong and others. Allan Harrison, a friend of Barbara Reise, sat on stage in one of the chairs with his back to the audience, playing the part

<sup>26</sup> TGA 786/5/2/85.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> There's correspondence from Reise to Theatre Projects Services haggling over the costs afterwards. TGA 786/5/8/8/2.

of one of the characters. When performed again back at The Kitchen on 21 and 22 October 1977 Philip Glass appeared with DeJong on-stage.

#### On review

In the combining of these procedures, from the editorial preparation of material, to the performance of text, and in the content of the work as a publication, it is possible to see DeJong's fiction as a form constantly coming into existence through serial acts of assertion, rather than as the product of a discrete compositional process. This proposition can be extended into the recording / review of these interventions as detailed in the New York-based magazine *Art Rite* (issue 14, Winter 1976) and London-based *Readings* (issue 1, February 1977).<sup>29</sup> Each article framed DeJong's work in a particular environment with the application of a specific contextual focus. Viewed now — these texts inform an understanding of reading and reception as a situated formulation of the process of recording — in this case with the audience as co-producers of documentation. Editorial position, publication design and other conditions that materially affected the relationship between the contributors and readers of each magazine equally contribute to a reading of DeJong's writing in another mediated environment. In *Art Rite*, a magazine firmly located in the scene that included artists such as DeJong, the contributor John Howell placed an analysis of *Modern Love* as a representation of women's writing that, alongside Acker, Piper, Bartlett, Apple and Carolee Schneemann, could only be understood through its use of personal or personalised content, by using the term "emotional", where feminism was dismissed as an 'implicit shorthand'. His criticality emphasised DeJong (and Acker's) literary influences, locating virtuosity in the writing of Robbe-Grillet and Beckett, but failing to find such qualities equivalently — a position that meant he also, critically, failed to understand the particular uses of voice and persona in so-called "confessional" writing. His representation

29 John Howell, 'Exegesis of the phenomenon of written art by women', (subtitled, 'A syntax of self'), *Art Rite* (issue 14, Winter 1976/1977), pp.32–35 and Will Milne, 'Constance DeJong, "Modern Love"', *Readings* (issue 1, February 1997), pp.12–13.

Constance Da Jong at the Women's Free  
10th November (?) 1976  
by Will Milne,

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ural centre in the middle of  
is a middle-sized room in a  
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her voice is never raised.  
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tape recorder plays someone  
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The Complete Works of  
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riety January)



Constance Da Jong "Modern Love"

### Notes on "Modern Love"

"Modern Love" is a performance which has evolved over a 12 month period and has taken a variety of forms during that time. It was first presented in January 1976 at The Kitchen in New York City. The London presentation was an expanded version of this original performance. And in December I recorded a radio version of the piece in a 4 track studio, using 4 voices, music and sound effects. Parts of the radio recording will in turn be used in a further expanded, live performance of "Modern Love". But since all versions are based on Books I-V of *The Complete Works of Constance De Jong*, perhaps it's best to say something about the original material.

Books I-V were written between July 1975 and July 1976. During the year, a 450 person mailing list received copies of the books as soon as they were produced. Each one took about 2-2½ months to write, and after preparing a camera-ready copy of the text, it was then printed by a photo off-set process. The books all measure 8" x 7", run from 30-50 pages, and are bound in identical shiny blue covers. The serial format engaged readers in the book-to-book progress of the work and now, when taken together, they comprise a serialized novel.

In "Modern Love", characters and events taken from these books are re-structured into a theatrical presentation where the elements of timing, setting, movement and music bring the narrative to life.

The choice to re-work the original material rather than simply read from the books was a question of interest on my part. I don't like presenting excerpts of the written work. The books are one thing and they're complete. And I like for the performance to be a complete experience in itself too. Consequently, "Modern Love" was put together as a narrative that stands on its own separate from the books, with its own internal structure and development. It was also put together with the considerations of live performance in mind. That meant working with the space, the movements in that space, the way it's lit and in general, providing an appropriate visual context for the language.

Within this situation, my own role is somewhat transitional. As both writer and speaker, I'm like a vehicle or medium for

Photo: Jane Clark

making the transition from written to spoken language. For the performance projects the language of two worlds: it retains the special characteristics of a written form and takes on the added dimension of a spoken form. In the end, "Modern Love" hovers somewhere between a traditional reading and a conventional play, and to make the best of both, it employs a range of speaking modes. Some material is read, some dramatized and some is narrated by a second speaker.

Originally, the second speaker was actor David Warrilow, who came on the set and facing a window with his back to the audience, read a long descriptive passage about India. The passage is an integral part of the text and is so beautifully rendered by David that I've retained this section although he cannot travel with the piece.

In London, Allan Harrison played his part by walking on and sitting with his back to the audience, while David was heard on pre-recorded tape. His voice disassociated from the person on stage creates a curious image, an effect similar to those movies where one sees the character and hears his 'thoughts'. In a theatrical setting, this completely familiar cinematic device was surprisingly effective. Or at least I found it so in this particular instance where the disassociation of voice and actor emphasized the strongly imagistic nature of this scene, both in its content and in its appearance.

Otherwise, "Modern Love" is essentially the story of two characters named Charlotte and Roderigo. Sometimes the story is seen through his eyes, sometimes hers and I do the talking for both of them, speaking less as a narrator and more often in their own 1st person voice. As Roderigo, I live, love, break up with Charlotte and go to outer space. As Charlotte, I live, love, break up with Roderigo and become Queen Elizabeth I. Other characters become the subject of my story: a questionable friend, named Fifi Corday. And a mysterious old man, named Monsieur Le Prince. Everyone's got their story and as a performance, "Modern Love" becomes one long made up of the others. People and events and places, the various parts are unified by establishing multiple relationships between them. Parts are interconnected by stylistic and structural elements as well as by repeated themes.

through successive moments, right to the end.

One last thing. Obviously, I'm interested in this work primarily from the stand-point of its being a piece of writing. It happens that my language is easily extended into live forms – be it radio or performance. Probably because in all cases, the concerns are similar. That elusive element – timing – is crucial in the books and likewise in "Modern Love".

In the books, I write with blocks or sections in mind and like to utilize the different energy of broken up and continuous passages. Consequently, I like to "see" these differences operating at their maximum potential. Mostly this just means the placement and the amount of print on a given page. Sometimes where the page turn occurs can be crucial. In all, I'd like to think that my lay-out decisions facilitate the reading experience – that they play a part in maintaining the flow and the energy of the writing.

In performance, the flow and the energy of the writing is partly up to me: I regulate and maintain the pacing of the material. But other factors also play a crucial part in the timing of the piece. I use lighting specifically for this purpose. Under ideal circumstances, "Modern Love" is theatrically lit, using spots, colored jells, black-outs, etc. The lighting augments the flow of the material and is a continuity of sorts that parallels the spoken continuity, under-scoring and emphasizing it. Similarly, the placement of pre-recorded material, both written and musical, enters into the flow of events and is another source of continuity and emphasis. My own voice, which is miked and sometimes mixed with the pre-recorded tape, and the mixing of sound which goes on throughout the performance can either break or implement that elusive element of timing. With regards to this, the London performance was greatly enhanced by the assistance of Dave Spathaky, who set up and ran the sound system.

The means of achieving the flow and energy of the writing is different in the books and in the performance. But the concern is similar. In both, I was concerned with evolving a shape or prevailing unity through the language, through its immediate and momentary progression: word to word, sentence to sentence, paragraph to paragraph, etc. It springs from a desire to use neither a single, major story-line nor a single, over-all structural design as the unifying agent. The more vital issue is to find ways of deriving formal structure and story structure out of language itself, rather than the other way round. Rather than impose onto language the beauty of design or the logic of plot. The only way to even approach the intrinsic, vital force of language is to force one's own to carry the greatest burden.

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Constance De Jong

seen by a good audience in spite of some complaints about the place being out of the way and difficult to find. It was at this point that the potential of the place for showing live or other essentially durational art work became apparent, and the then rent paying members decided to organise the eight showings of their own work. At this time there was no plan to continue showings on a regular long term basis, but the positive reaction of audiences and the interest shown by other artists who wanted to use the space persuaded the members of 2B to form a committee and organise the space on its present ongoing basis.

When we began to examine the situation with regard to the showing of live work in London we realised that no gallery or art centre actually specialised in the showing of performance work. Other galleries did show live work, but it was often in a space that was either devoted to, or actually contained a show of painting or sculpture in a traditional manner. Live shows in this context seem to provide a fill in or secondary activity to the main purpose of commercial galleries, which is ultimately that of selling work. Performances do attract attention though and spin offs in the form of documentation or preliminary work can become saleable items. However, the actual art work, the performance, remains unpackaged and essentially unsaleable unless the charging of an admission fee can be counted as selling the work. The selection of live work to be shown in a gallery context must also be determined principles that relate to painting and sculpture, such as the necessity to predetermine the work when in fact a 'final version' cannot exist until the piece has taken place, unlike the painting or sculpture which exists before it ever gets shown. An assessment of past work can be made but this often relies heavily on documentation or on hearsay, as few people go to see the whole of an artist's output, so the prediction of a future work's success on this basis is of limited value. Access to commercial gallery space is also limited by time factor. Main shows often run for three or four weeks and live work has to be fitted in the changeover period between shows, or done in the shadow of a wall mounted exhibition.

At 2B, we decided to invert the prevailing emphasis by which forms of art work are given precedence and gave priority to time durational work like music, expanded cinema, video and live performance. Because no long term installed work has to be taken into account, the demands on gallery space and time are such that no rigorous selection of artists is necessary, and working about six to eight weeks in advance, a broad spectrum of performed work accommodated. If an artist working in the field of 'one off' events feels capable of organising their own show, then there is really no reason why they shouldn't show at Butlers Wharf. By the nature of the organisation of 2B, artists do virtually all their own arranging. The members pay the rent and do general publicity for each month's programme, but as most funding bodies seem to have still not made up their minds

its own right.

Up to October 1976, 2B enjoyed a but variable audience, but people were put off by the out of the way location round about October, the venue being regularly in 'Time Out' and jointly 'Events' sheets with the London Film Co-op and the Acme Gallery. Also in the 2B Butlers Wharf 'Group Show' artists all showing work in one even followed by refreshment and entertainment took place on the 23rd. A combination of these items seems to have established a regular event that people took interest in on the occasion of the group show, the people who had 'always meant' trouble of finding their way to Butlers Wharf actually did so. From that time, audiences have been consistently good and maintained with an interest in live work now known whereabouts of Butlers Wharf, or 'The South Bank' as it has recently been known, which as an area in general now has more or less regular showing spaces Dance Studio or the various showing and in 'D' blocks. Other venues independent of established galleries and devoting themselves mainly to performed work of various kinds have started recently in other London with the newly opened Far Studios venue, and in Newcastle on the Ayton Basement which opened in December 1976.

80% of the 32 shows at 2B in the months since it was started have been performances. Some of these have been structural and others have been theatrical, and the remaining 20% presented has been either film or slide. This distribution of work has not been selected but simply by the demand of artists who wanted to show work, a ratio could vary in the future, dependent on artists' demands. Partly because of the experimental nature of much of the work shown and partly because art exhibitions are free, no admission charges have been made nor does 2B intend to make charges of admission in the future. It would seem somewhat unfair to charge people to see that cannot be critically predetermined in any attempt to predetermine performance work would go against the 'one off' nature of most pieces. A secondary form of live work like documentation, or an original tape or videotape piece which can be looked at, criticised, and then looked at again in an informed context can, I feel, be treated as a commodity, but the multiple and diverse forms of live work that exist in the present British context cannot in my opinion be subject to such pre-emptive critical or commercial constraints. In the light of this 2B Butlers Wharf intends to continue to use the access approach in relation to both audience and looks forward to the on-going and unbiased presentation of all forms of performed art-work.

David Critchley

however, provides a contemporaneous perspective of the inherent interpretation of women's writing at this time — something echoed by Lucy Lippard who reflected on Howell's article in 1977:

I quote it because I was interested that what Howell doesn't seem to like about a certain kind of woman's book is just what I like best about it. Discussing works by Connie de Jong, Kathy Acker, Jennifer Bartlett, Poppy Johnson, Carolee Schneemann, Adrian Piper, Marcia Hafif, Laurie Anderson, Vaughn Rachel, Jacki Apple, Brenda Price, Martha Rosier, Athena Tacha, Susan King, Carol Trantor, Michele Kort, and Alison Knowles, he discovered 'a sensibility, not a method of shaping writing conceived as utterance, not system[...]. A shift from metaphor to first person marks a reduction of formal means, not a refinement, as writing identifies with self and follows a short-cut across aesthetic distance to offer intimate discoveries, not virtuosity.<sup>30</sup>

In contrast, the magazine *Readings*, published by artist-editors Annabel Nicolson and Paul Burwell, placed an emphasis on the distinctions between artist and audience, focussing on work that was reproduced within the 'moment' and subjected to situations outside of the artist's control, as detailed in Nicolson's editorial for the first issue:

The emphasis of much contemporary work is on the perception of the event. Constant vigilance to the nature of one's responses is encouraged, particularly in relation to work that manifests within its own structural duration in time.<sup>31</sup>

*Readings* was a textual experiment with the type of indeterminate contexts reproduced within many of the practices covered in the magazine, drawing on expanded film, performance, and dance, which resonated with an interest in the inconclusiveness encountered

<sup>30</sup> Lucy Lippard, 'Surprises: An Anthological Introduction to Some Women's Artists' Books', *Chrysalis*, no.5 (1977): pp.71–84.

<sup>31</sup> Annabel Nicolson, editorial statement from issue 1 of *Readings*, February 1977, p.2.

in the ‘complexity and undecidability’ of everyday practices. The dissolve between the notion of art and life, like that of primary and secondary documentation is related through a ‘polyattentiveness’, captured through the writing strategies reproduced in the magazine, that extended from a format of review writing that incorporated multiple contributors. Collected together, the review of *Modern Love* layered observation and reflection from an audience member, with the artist’s response in a manner that replicated the durations and time signatures of the piece itself and its iterations — from November 1976 when the event took place, to January 1977 when Will Milne wrote his review, to February 1977 when DeJong wrote her response and the magazine was itself, published. The conduits of transmission, between the book, performance, the magazine and the individuals involved are observed within Milne’s text:

It didn’t fit the definition of poetry reading, nor theatre, or performance art. It was sort of a novel, but the language was more condensed and carefully composed. The words are re-worked from *The Complete Works of Constance DeJong* rather than being straight-forward extracts from them. The time span and scale was always varying, never clearly delineated, the characters were not clearly sculpted, but definitely happened.<sup>32</sup>

Following through the process of re-inscription, Milne’s interpretation of the undefined event in place of clarity and delineation, emphasised the ephemerality of the performance as much as the narrative that was reproduced within it. Being open to ‘perceptual responses’, as detailed by the magazine’s editorial, enabled a nuance precisely attuned for such uncertainties. DeJong responded to confirm that indeed, the work related as a working through of the shape and sense of language in ‘its immediate and momentary progression: word to word, sentence to sentence, paragraph to paragraph’, designed ‘to find ways of deriving formal structure and story structure out of language itself, rather than the other way around’.<sup>33</sup>

32 From Will Milne’s review, *Readings* (issue 1, February 1977), p.12.

33 DeJong in *Readings* (issue 1, February 1977), p.12.

## On a Continuous Present

In the books, I write with blocks or sections in mind and like to utilize the different energy of broken up and continuous passages. Consequently, I like to see these differences operating at their maximum potential. Mostly this just means the placement and the amount of print on a given page. Sometimes where the page turn occurs can be crucial. In all I'd like to think that my lay-out decision facilitate the reading experience – that they play a part in maintaining the flow and energy of the writing.<sup>34</sup>

Recalling Stein, DeJong emphasised writing and reading language as a simultaneous experience or 'continuous present' which stresses the vocalisation of speech, where 'the process of seeing is inseparable from the processes of saying'.<sup>35</sup> For DeJong, typographical and editorial treatments are inscribed as having a non-hierarchical relationship to language's very syntax, through the horizontal composition of prose. Words can exist alongside, or fuse with and become performance, notations of a found or original, a whole or excerpted nature, which can indicate something other than the narrative we know as fiction. Or, prose fiction can address the reader as non-fiction, the line between speculation and fact dissolved and forgotten. Fiction is therefore woven along with other forms and strategies of making; responding to the interdisciplinary and discursive nature of dematerialised practices. In DeJong's writing, Stein's notion of revision 'as continuous permutation', operated as a performative activity that was additionally invested in the transition and intervention of language into conventional forms. By examining these forms together according to their particular combination of qualities, rather than what they borrow from other disciplinary traditions, allows for an articulation that is perhaps constitutive of a distinct genre that belongs wholly to neither prose nor performance

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Gertrude Stein, 'Composition as Explanation', in *Selected Writings of Gertrude Stein*, (New York: Vintage Books, 1990), p.517.

— a genre in which text and performance are mutually determinant, relying on each other for their shape and realisation, despite a difference in temporality.