On an unusually hot and sunny spring day in London’s East End, Victoria Park was bustling with an awkward combination of pre-Olympic beautification construction and people making the most of the remaining green spaces. I drifted along from the park to Chisenhale Gallery, well aware that my experience there would likely contrast with both the leisure and the development activities dominating the area; after all, the title of London-based Canadian artist Janice Kerbel’s new Chisenhale commission calls for revolutionary action: Kill the
The protagonist in this 24-minute production is a spotlight that serves as a main attraction instead of an apparatus for illuminating live actors. During this play of luminescence, spectators lurk around the darkened perimeter, although there is nothing to stop them from joining the action. Throughout the production, the white spotlight reappears in a succession of distinct scenes. Each scene is established by changes in the so-called worker lights, which are amazingly mutable and also provide atmosphere. In one scene, for example, the circular white spot is a feature in a constructivist-style composition of geometric forms in primary colors. In another, it resembles the sun against the sky at dusk. These scenes call attention to an effective and elusive element in theatrical storytelling: the lighting. However, viewers intent on story have to construct one for themselves since the only self-evident narrative event is provided in the final scene. Here, the spotlight merges with the worker lights to produce a field of white light. In the search for self-expression the spotlight finds its strength in the company of the “workers” it once dominated.
Janice Kerbel *Kill the Workers!* 2011 Installation view Courtesy Chisenhale Gallery London / photo Andy Keate

The white light that resolves this production reads as a symbol of solidarity and is somewhat surprising given the title of the piece. Within the context of London, which in recent months has been fraught with upheavals, both physically in preparation for the coming Olympics and politically as students, educators and other members of the public rally together to protest devastating austerity measures, Kerbel’s piece offers an allusive tale with an optimistic end. Individualist ambitions merge with and then disappear within the strength of the masses to create openness and clarity—a pure white light.

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