Janice Kerbel: Diagramming Desire
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Janice Kerbel, Kill the Workers!, 2011, 24-minute play for stage lights, 7 lantern tripods with scaff bars, 38 lanterns, 4 colour scrollers, 6 colour gels, 1 gobo, dimensions variable. Installation view, 'Kill the Workers!', Chisenhale Gallery, London, 2011. Photograph: Andy Keate. Courtesy the artist and greengrassi, London

The protagonist of Janice Kerbel's radio play *Nick Silver Can't Sleep* (2006/07) is a nocturnal subtropical perennial in bloom, longing for another who blossoms just once a year.[1] Nick Silver (*Nicotiana sylvestris*) is also an insomniac, who craves sleep with the same sultry, melancholy yearning directed at his would-be lover, Cereus Grand (*Selenicereus grandiflorus*). Throughout the fifteen-minute play, the polymorphous eroticism of plants becomes entangled with their narcotising properties, as Nick's desire for Cereus competes with, and is ultimately overwhelmed by, an opposing drive towards unconsciousness. Time expands and contracts as weeks, months, seasons and years appear to pass in a single night — a dreamlike temporality, redolent also of the cyclical rhythms of the vegetable world. Breathily, drowsily, Nick awaits his languid Cereus, only to succumb to the vertiginous pull of sleep at the precise moment of her blossoming.

The exuberant eroticism of *Nick Silver Can't Sleep* might initially seem surprising, given the cerebral work for which Kerbel has become known. Yet the elegant script, which the artist developed in conversation with botanists, insomniacs and sleep scientists, is characteristic of her restrained yet audacious practice. From the early work *Bank Job* (1999), in which Kerbel meticulously planned a heist at an exclusive London bank, to more recent projects like *Kill the Workers!* (2011), where programmed stage lights, free of actors, perform their own mythic odyssey, Kerbel has marshalled painstaking research and conceptual rigour in the service of subversion, utopianism and sheer, freewheeling whimsy. Whether it takes the form of a script, a set of plans, a map, a series of posters, a website or a performance, Kerbel's work evinces what I will call a diagrammatic logic, whereby lush situations are conjured by ostensibly arid means. Despite its bureaucratic connotations, the diagram has the potential to connect divergent realities and temporalities, a transgressive force that is mobilised in Kerbel's practice.

Nick Silver Can't Sleep reactivates the once-famed licentiousness of botanical science, described by David Lomas as a 'science of perverse sexuality'.[2] During the eighteenth century, botanist Carl Linnaeus and others likened the stamens and pistils of flowering plants to the male and female sexual organs, causing Linnaeus's followers to be labelled 'sexualists'.[3] The polygamous and hermaphroditic characteristics of the vegetable world were seen to embody a polymorphous

perversity celebrated in Erasmus Darwin's poem 'The Loves of the Plants'(1789).[4] As Lomas has demonstrated, the eroticism of the plant kingdom was repressed for much of the nineteenth century, only to resurface in the work of the Decadent writers and subsequently in Dada and Surrealism. Marcel Duchamp's *La Mariée mise à nu par ses célibataires, même* (*The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even*), or *Le Grand Verre* (*The Large Glass*, 1915–23) envisages the bride's desire as her 'blossoming', as an ethereal body that hovers, cloud-like, in a state of perpetual anticipation.[5] Cereus Grand is just such a bride, botanically destined for a missed erotic encounter. Her predicament encapsulates Kerbel's interest in producing 'work that suggests the promise of a subsequent state while rendering any such fulfilment obsolete'.[6]

Despite its complex and potent symbolism, Duchamp's *Large Glass* eschewed florid means of expression in favour of the pseudoscientific language of the diagram. For David Joselit, the diagram was one of three visual tactics — along with the readymade and montage — deployed in Dada to articulate the historical rupture between the textual codes of the book and the visual codes of cinema.[7] The diagram operates across and between these two symbolic registers, its hybridity just one manifestation of what he calls its 'semiotic mobility'.[8] Emerging at moments of historical crisis, then, the diagram maps relationships between divergent modes of representation and disjunctive temporalities.[9]

Kerbel's most explicitly diagrammatic works are the *Home Climate Gardens* (2004) she developed during a residency at the Tyndall Centre for Climate Change Research at the University of East Anglia in Norwich. When Kerbel was researching these drawings in the summer of 2003, a European heat wave saw the highest recorded temperature ever in the UK. In the kind of vicious circle that motors climate change, the effects of global warming led to a surge in the use of air conditioning, which resulted in blackouts across Europe. For Kerbel, such events underscore the contradictory nature of our relationship to the environment: 'We have utopian desires but they are undermined by dystopian habits.'[10] Inspired by recent innovations in adaptive architecture, in which buildings are designed to respond to their surroundings and inhabitants, she produced a series of ten digitally rendered garden plans for indoor environments, including wall-mounted gardens for a council flat, a respiration garden for a gym and a window-box garden for a revolving restaurant. The spatial structure of each garden and its distinctive flora are determined by a floor plan of the interior and a description of its unique climatic conditions. Plants are schematically mapped using circles, ellipses and star shapes rendered in broken, dotted and double lines of varying thicknesses. Each shape is labelled with the acronym of a particular species, in a 1930s geometric typeface that summons the utopian dreams of that moment even as it jars with the insistent futurity of Kerbel's unrealised designs.
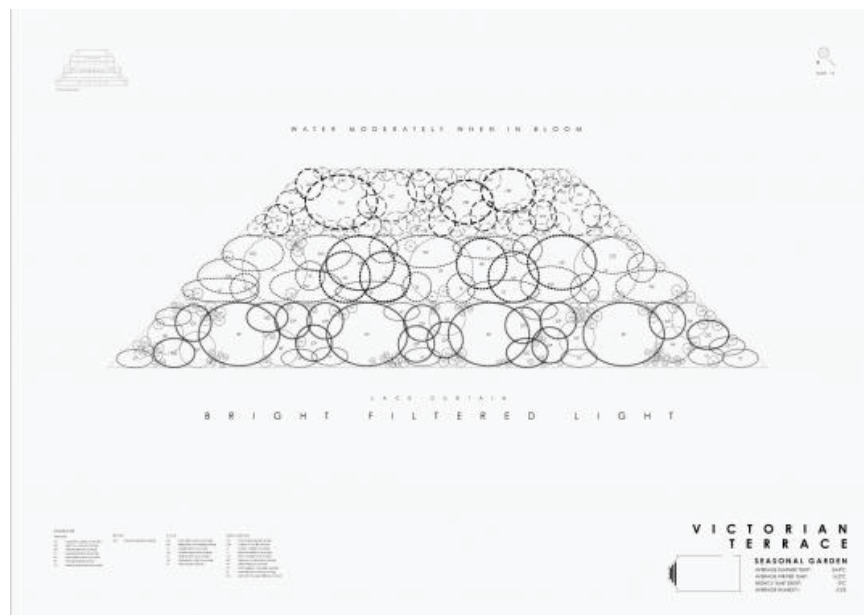
Janice Kerbel, Home Climate Gardens — Victorian Terrace: Seasonal Garden, 2004, 1 of 9 inkjet prints on paper, 84 × 118.4 cm. Courtesy the artist and greengrassi, London

Writing on another utopian project, the plans for the anti-capitalist city New Babylon drawn up by Situationist artist Constant between 1959 and 1974, Anthony Vidler has remarked on the 'unaccountable *veracity*' of this imaginary metropolis, 'its sense of potential realisability, or even its sense of already having been constructed'.[11] He attributes this in part to Constant's appropriation of existing architectural structures, the designs for which are combined and reconfigured in order to

generate a new type of reality.[12] As Vidler points out, all utopias do this to a certain extent: 'no place could be understood as a potential good place if we did not in some way find our own place in its habitat.'[13] Like Constant's designs, Kerbel's *Home Climate Gardens* draw on a repository of readymade symbols, scientific terminology and vintage typography in order to project a kind of future that is rooted in the past but still believable in the present. Yet while Constant spoke of his wish to realise New Babylon, Kerbel acknowledges the ineluctable schism between utopian visions and attempts at their realisation. 'The fact is that plants really don't want to be inside,' she notes. 'So while they have this promise of producing these beautiful, lush gardens — the plan tells us this — in reality, it may be nothing like that.'[14] In isolating the plan from its realisation, Kerbel distils the radical potentiality of this graphic mode.

Jakub Zdebik has likened Kerbel's *Home Climate Gardens* to islands encircled by the home, each one a 'model of the world within the world'.[15] The island paradise is the subject of an earlier work by Kerbel, *The Bird Island Project* (2000–02), which envisages a fictional island located at a precise set of geographical coordinates in the Bahamas. Drawing on research into the topography, flora and fauna ecologically feasible at such a location, Kerbel produced a website including maps, photographs and written accounts of the island and its rare endemic bird, the Exuma Emerald. Visitors to the website are offered the chance to purchase a time-share in one of eight luxury villas on the island from a series of architectural plans, and invited to input their preferred dates and annual income.[16] The verdant idyll so evocatively conjured on the website is thus threatened by the prospect of luxury tourism before a single traveller has set foot on its shores.

In creating an imaginary island, Kerbel engaged with one of the dominant tropes of utopian thought since Thomas More's foundational *Utopia* of 1516. Indeed, Kerbel's island takes an identical form to that described by More: a crescent shape that curves in on itself, protecting a large, sandy bay from the elements.[17] The utopian nature of *Bird Island* is reinforced by the promotional rhetoric of the website, which promises 'a luxurious lifestyle tempered only to the rhythm of your own, unique desires'. But with timeshares of variable lengths available in eight different villas, potential investors might be left wondering how their 'unique desires' will compete with those of the island's other visitors, not to mention its indigenous species. 'If calypso music entices,' the website's sales pitch goes, 'a band from one of the neighbouring islands will be brought in for a night of starlit dancing, and [you will have] round-the-clock access to a selection of boats always ready to whisk you off on an adventure or gentle sail through the Cays.' In pandering to such rampant individualism, *Bird Island* is rendered as a multidirectional field of impulses, which could ultimately tear it apart. Here I am reminded of Joselit's remark that, in the context of Dada, 'diagrams assault commodity fetishes not by eroding their contours, but by demonstrating their semiotic and physical mobility, which, if intensified sufficiently, may cause the fetish to collapse altogether.'[18] The internet — with its nodes and connections; its smooth, invisible flows of desire, information and capital — accelerates the circulation of commodities in a manner intensified to the point of detonation by Kerbel's parodic website.

In 2005, Kerbel was awarded a residency at the Ucross Foundation in Wyoming — a remote converted cattle ranch in a landscape dotted with defunct mines and the ruins of the settlements that had risen up around them. She became fascinated with these ghost towns and, taking the term literally, began to imagine a town inhabited by spectres. In typically interdisciplinary style, Kerbel used plans for ideal cities, topographic maps and astral charts in order to create this imaginary settlement, a town called Deadstar. In Kerbel's print series *Deadstar* (2006) buildings and trees are positioned according to stellar constellations, and their names — Aquarius, Cetus, Pegasus — reference their shimmering blueprints in the sky above. Cartographic symbols from a range of sources were combined to plot the town's features: some copied by hand, others scanned into a computer, still others subjected to a combination of manual and digital procedures. For Mark Godfrey, *Deadstar* speaks to the broader predicament of drawing in the age of digitisation, where it occupies a ghostlike position, between the handmade mark and the digitally rendered line.[19] Godfrey persuasively argues that artists today are less concerned with whether drawing is expressive or diagrammatic than with whether it is 'real' or 'virtual'. Yet there is an extent to which the diagram already oscillates between these two poles. In the late nineteenth century, the semiotician Charles Sanders Peirce proposed that the diagram elides 'the distinction between the real and the copy', prompting Vidler to describe it as 'an instrument of suspended reality'.[20] The spectral zone articulated in *Deadstar* is thus exemplary of the space of the diagram, which hovers between the real and the copy and embodies at once past, present and future realities.

This semiotic and temporal mobility is also evident in *Remarkable*, a series of posters originally commissioned for the 2007 Frieze Art Fair in London. Appropriating the sensationalistic language and bold typography of nineteenth-century fairground posters, Kerbel's silkscreen prints herald the arrival of a series of extraordinary performers, who perpetually fail to materialise. This state of 'suspended reality' is facilitated by the promotional power of the poster, which announces and, to a

certain extent, conditions future events. By adopting the outmoded rhetoric of Victorian mass entertainment, Kerbel was able to comment in a coded yet pointed fashion on the contemporary spectacle of the art fair, its atmosphere of frenzied anticipation and its hyperbolic vocabulary.[21] Although entirely text-based, the *Remarkable* posters share Kerbel's diagrammatic approach: each poster constitutes a map of logical relations, with key words printed in larger font sizes, so that the most important elements take up the most space. Rather than reading the posters top to bottom and left to right, our eyes ricochet from one superlative to another ('FAINTGIRL ... THE TRUEST ... AND FAIREST ... MOST DELICATE ... SINCEREST ... MOST INFALLIBLE...'), echoing the distracted, haphazard trajectories of the fair's visitors. As in *The Bird Island Project*, competing impulses are stimulated and intensified, like so many charged vectors of desire.

The lurid sideshows simultaneously promised and withheld by Kerbel's *Remarkable* posters indicate the importance of performance in her recent work. In *Nick Silver Can't Sleep*, *Ballgame* (2009–ongoing), *Kill the Workers!* and *DOUG* (2014), the spatial dynamics of the diagram are held in tension with the durational structure of the script or score. Like certain diagrams, the script functions as a plan intended for enactment, but rather than mapping a spatial field, it describes a set of actions that unfold in time. In *Ballgame*, the actions are those of a baseball game, narrated over a single speaker in an otherwise empty gallery. While the *Remarkable* series heralds the appearance of incredible performers in the future, *Ballgame* mimics a live commentary on a baseball game — its narrative is in fact pre-recorded and meticulously scripted. The game that unfolds is based on the average figures and stock phrases of one hundred years of baseball's history, resisting the exceptional occurrence just as it withholds the visual spectacle of the live sporting event. Yet despite this dispassionate use of statistical analysis and the calculated withdrawal of visual pleasure, the recording conjures a remarkably vivid picture of this utterly fictional game. As in *Nick Silver Can't Sleep*, the recorded performance flamboyantly exceeds the restrained script, distancing the plan from its realisation.

The relationship between the script or plan and its enactment is further mined in the installation *Kill the Workers!* and the related series of silkscreen prints titled *Cue*, also from 2011. A 'play for stage lights', *Kill the Workers!* follows a spotlight's quest to merge with the 'workers' — the house lights that signal the beginning and end of a theatrical performance. In *Cue*, this narrative unfolds over 36 prints as ten basic shapes and six grades of black ink are combined. Based on the topographic drawings for each lighting state or 'cue change' in *Kill the Workers!*, the prints invert the tonality of the lights, so that more layers produce darker rather than brighter shades. Engaging with the language of geometric abstraction, these elegant, monochromatic prints of overlapping circles are also reminiscent of Venn diagrams, which are used to show the logical relations between collections of sets. Concerned with intersection, union, difference and complementarity, these illustrations are not too far removed from the narrative of inclusion and exclusion staged in *Kill the Workers!* — their transgressive potential echoing the revolutionary tenor of the work's title.[22]

If, as I have argued, a diagrammatic logic pervades Kerbel's practice, it is not necessarily disconnected from the more fantastical elements of her work.[23] While the diagram can doubtless function as an instrument of bureaucracy and administration, it has also been mobilised throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries as an impulsive, subversive and desirous device. Although Joselit resists the temptation to allow the legacy of Dada 'to tug it away from its historical moorings', his suggestion that the diagram emerges at points of historical crisis might be usefully applied to our present moment.[24] If Dada's diagrams emerged in the rupture between the textual and the cinematic, the plans devised by Kerbel negotiate the rift between the analogue and digital not by surpassing the diagram but by embracing its radical mobility.

Footnotes

1. *Nick Silver Can't Sleep* was commissioned by Artangel and performed by Rufus Sewell, Josette Simon and Fiona Shaw on BBC Radio 3's *The Verb*, 28 October 2006. The full script and further details of the project can be found at http://www.artangel.org.uk/projects/2006/nick_silver_can_t_sleep (last accessed on 18 June 2014). ↑

2. David Lomas, *Narcissus Reflected: The Myth of Narcissus in Surrealist and Contemporary Art* (exh. cat.), Edinburgh: The Fruitmarket Gallery, 2011, p.115. ↑

3. *Ibid.*, p.114. ↑

4. Erasmus Darwin, *The Botanic Garden, Part 2: The Loves of the Plants, with Philosophical Notes*, Lichfield: J. Jackson, 1789. ↑

5. Michel Sanouillet and Elmer Peterson (ed.), *Salt Seller: The Writings of Marcel Duchamp (Marchand du Sel)*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1973, p.42. ↑

6. Janice Kerbel, artist's statement, *The Impossible Necessity* [blog], available at

http://impossiblenecessity.wordpress.com/janice-kerbel/ (last accessed on 18 June 2014). ↑

7. David Joselit, 'Dada's Diagrams', in Leah Dickerman and Matthew Witkovsky (ed.), *The Dada Seminars*, Washington DC: National Gallery of Art, 2005, p.223. ↑

8. *Ibid.*, p.236. ↑

9. Joselit notes that 'what has been called the post-War "dematerialisation" of art ... is founded in a diagrammatic visuality that ... is purely semiotic'. *Ibid.*, p.238. Further, Benjamin H.D. Buchloh has associated the diagram with art made after the Holocaust, specifically the drawings of Eva Hesse. See B.H.D. Buchloh, 'Hesse's Endgame: Facing the Diagram', in Catherine de Zegher (ed.), *Eva Hesse: Drawing*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006, pp.117—50. ↑

10. Quoted in 'Tyndall Centre and Norwich School of Art launch science and fine-art exhibition' (press release), Norwich: Norwich Gallery, Norwich School of Art and Design and Tyndall Centre for Climate Change Research, University of East Anglia, 2004, available at http://www.uea.ac.uk/mac/comm/media/press/2003/oct/Tyndall+Centre+and+Norwich+School+of+Art+launch+science+and+fine-art+exhibition (last accessed on 16 July 2014). ↑

11. Anthony Vidler, 'Diagrams of Utopia', in C. de Zegher (ed.), *The Activist Drawing: Retracing Situationist Architectures from Constant's New Babylon to Beyond*, Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2001, p.83. Emphasis original. ↑

12. Here Vidler quotes Gilles Deleuze on the diagram: 'Every diagram is intersocial and in a state of becoming. It never functions to represent a pre-existing world; it produces a new type of reality, a new model of truth.' G. Deleuze, *Foucault*, Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1984, p.43. Translation Vidler's. ↑

13. A. Vidler, 'Diagrams of Utopia', *op. cit.*, p.83. ↑

14. Terence Dick, 'The Map-Maker', *Canadian Art*, Winter 2006, p.50. ↑

15. Jakub Zdebik, 'A Short Atlas of Janice Kerbel's *Home Climate Gardens* Drawn According to Temperate Coordinates', *The Brock Review*, vol.10, 2008, p.56. ↑

16. The website can be found at http://www.bird-island.com (last accessed on 18 June 2014). ↑

17. See Thomas More, *Utopia* (1516, ed. George M. Logan and Robert M. Adams), Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002, p.41. ↑

18. D. Joselit, 'Dada's Diagrams', *op. cit.*, p.237. ↑

19. Mark Godfrey, 'Deadstar', in Janice Kerbel, *Deadstar: A Ghosttown* (artist's book), Newcastle: Locus +, 2004, p.7. ↑

20. A. Vidler, 'Diagrams of Utopia', *op. cit.*, p.85. ↑

21. For an in-depth analysis of the *Remarkable* series within the broader history of text-based art, see Kim Sukhie Dhillon, 'See It Now or Miss It Forever: Materiality, Visuality and the Written Word in Janice Kerbel's Recent Artwork', *RACAR: Canadian Art Review*, vol.36, no.1, June 2011, pp.16—28. ↑

22. Regarding her own contemporaneous work *Venn Diagram (Under the Spotlight)* (2011), artist Amalia Pica has noted that in 1970s Argentina Venn diagrams were banned from primary school curricula for encouraging subversive thought. Cited in Margaret Iversen, 'Index, Diagram, Graphic Trace', *Tate Papers*, issue 18, October 2012, available at http://www.tate.org.uk/research/publications/tate-papers/ index-diagram-graphic-trace (last accessed on 18 June 2014). ↑

23. Godfrey suggests that 'there has always been a charming and quirky disconnection between the academic rigour of Kerbel's research ... and the fantastical ends to which this research is put.' M. Godfrey, 'Deadstar', *op. cit.*, p.8. ↑

24. D. Joselit, 'Dada's Diagrams', *op. cit.*, p.238. ↑