
Janice Kerbel

Chisenhale London 1 April to 15 May

'Kill the Workers!' shouts the title of Janice Kerbel's new installation at Chisenhale, a cry that signals revolution. But there is little revolt to be found within the gallery, where Kerbel has rigged up four walls of stage lighting that project a silent show into the empty space at their centre. Among them is a spotlight, whose bright beam at times merges with the others in an extended illuminated dance, and occasionally shines alone, singular and dramatic within the darkened space.

The spotlight is, according to the info accompanying the show, at the centre of the mute performance Kerbel has written for the lights. The 'workers' of the title are not the proletarians one might imagine, but instead a reference to the theatrical lighting jargon used to describe the house lights that are manipulated to signal the beginning and end of a performance. In Kerbel's narrative, the spotlight is the central protagonist in the play, but longs to shed this uniqueness to be at one with the worker lights, to be lost within their 'open white'. Various scenes are enacted purely in light, depicting the spotlight's battle for anonymity.

It is easy to read a metaphor for society into Kerbel's tale, of the individual longing for conformity within the pack. Yet *Kill the Workers!* is equally an examination of the structures that lie within theatrical performance, and our understanding of these codes. As viewers, we recognise that the play has started when the house lights are dimmed: we know that this is the time to have a final cough before settling down to be absorbed in the action. In Kerbel's work, though, the house lights become part of the performance, and there is a confusing moment when they first come up, with the viewers left wondering if this is the end of the piece or just another section within it.

It is hard to shake off the anticipation that some kind of performance, with actors, might be about to take place under the lights too. The arrival of other viewers in the space, and the passing through of Chisenhale staff, all have a heightened



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emphasis, as though they might suddenly break into song or take to the boards. Even our own place within the installation is self-conscious: most visitors stick to the edges of the scene outside the lights, as if entering the space where the lights are moving is disrespectful to their performance.

Kill the Workers! relates to earlier pieces by Kerbel in which she has unpicked genres familiar to us and then re-presented them in new forms. Another installation piece, *Ballgame*, 2009, previously shown at Greengrassi gallery, consisted of a single speaker displayed in the space from which played the commentary of a live baseball game. Despite the oddness of its setting, the narrative was convincing, with the commentator well-versed in the language of the game. Yet the piece was entirely fictional, created by the artist following rigorous study of baseball commentary.

Kerbel has applied a similar academic thoroughness to the creation of *Kill the Workers!* She studied lighting design before writing a script for the lights, which she describes as being one that 'only the lights themselves can speak'. In doing so, she focuses on an element of performance that is usually taken for granted. In both this work and in *Ballgame*, she has worked to remove any aspect of the events, sporting or theatrical, that might allow us to get lost within their stories.

In *Ballgame*, we are given no visual stimuli to help conjure up the game, and the commentary reveals a startlingly average performance by the players, with few moments of drama. The work is not about the highs and lows that can occur within the sport, but instead about the form and structure of its unique language. Similarly, instead of providing the full absorption of a theatrical performance, *Kill the Workers!* focuses entirely on the lights, an aspect of the theatre largely used to supplement the action, and to emphasise certain moments and moods. In doing so, Kerbel makes her audiences work hard. Viewers visit the theatre and go to ballgames largely to lose themselves, and be absorbed for a time in something separate from their own lives. Kerbel's artworks attempt the reverse of this: to place the viewers outside these systems so they can observe how they are constructed. What narrative that remains in the works is devised not to draw viewers in emotionally, but to prompt them to look at the performances from a new perspective. ■

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