

INTERVIEW WITH JANICE KERBEL

Jamie Stevens: How did you come to the decision to work with theatrical lighting for your new piece Kill the Workers!?

Janice Kerbel: I had been working with voice as a material and during that period I was always trying to find a way to give form to something that could not be seen. I wanted the voice not only to describe but also to have a physicality. I was thinking a lot about how a particular type of voice exists in theatrical forms. I began to think about a form that had an equal presence - unphysical yet spatially defining - and light seemed to be commensurate to voice. This made me wonder if light could be modelled in a similar way. Voice is obviously attached to language and I wondered whether there might be a language to light, a less identifiable type of language. The one element running through almost all of my work is this question of visibility; trying to find form for things that otherwise can't be seen. Light is the very element that allows objects to be seen; I wanted to take away the object and work with the mechanics of seeing - to look at what actually enables visibility, formally and aesthetically.

Works of yours that use voice, such as the radio play Nick Silver Can't Sleep (2006) and the baseball commentary piece Ballgame (2009), all have a clear relationship to writing. Where does the process of writing sit with Kill the Workers!?

Initially, I thought I would write a play, which I would then use to write the lighting design. But it soon became apparent that what I actually should write was a play for the lights themselves. The script became a composite of something between a cue sheet and a script. Whilst it's written in language, it's written in a language that only the lights themselves can speak.

The piece still has a title – Kill the Workers! – and a dramatic structure. What was the narrative arc you envisioned at the genesis of the project?

The work went through many stages of development but the title was always important. I wondered what 'kill the workers' signalled, in terms of being a revolutionary play. Within the piece, the revolution is the attempt of one sole spotlight to understand what its capacity is outside of the ascribed conventions of theatre. The 'workers' are the house lights – the floods which give overall illumination. 'Workers' is the shorthand term used in theatre. The spotlight has a completely different function – to illuminate objects or people with a direct focus. In this piece, the spotlight seeks to resist this role in order to join the workers.

Can light ever just be seen as light alone? The play doesn't have a figure to light and, without that figure, light is barely visible. The one light that is most dominant, the spotlight, is striving to be invisible so it is trying to rebel against its regular usage. So 'kill the workers' would mean to turn off the house lights and let the illusion begin. In a way, it's a call for something that's outside – a different kind of illusion.

Referencing revolution within theatre immediately brings to mind a host of diverse plays and writers (from Les Misérables to Bertolt Brecht) – what is your relationship to theatre beyond this new work?

I go to a lot of theatre. I certainly didn't write the piece in the style of one type of theatre though. I wanted *Kill the Workers!* to make sense in terms of the language of theatrical lighting and, also, to sustain the hypothetical narrative. I want to sustain an idea that if a troupe of actors were to come into the gallery, a play could be performed. That's also impossible, of course, because the play isn't written for actors, only lights, but that potentiality is still needed. I want the work to feel as if something is being withheld. Also you come into an empty space, immediately thinking about who are the workers – have they been killed, is it us, is it an instruction or proposal or is it something which is being resisted? I wish I had a better understanding about that in terms of the exact title; it's not ironic, it's not a directive, but perhaps the question of what it means in relation to the act of seeing is what I am trying to understand in producing the work.

Your work often seems to have an ambiguous narrative purpose, in which very precise structures are built upon fictive beginnings – such as with your voice works and also with the Remarkable (2007) series of graphic prints. Are fiction and fictional narratives a central concern for you?

To be honest, that's what I look to more than other art forms. I somehow understand or relate to fiction better. I

want to understand how narratives can take form physically and within the context of visual form.

How has your involvement progressed with the technical aspects of lighting design for Kill the Workers!? With other works you have often taken on different strategies that require a certain state of removal, for example via the particular technical codes of sound editing or typography.

With every work I make I try to understand the logic and use the language of a given form. For example in *Ballgame* I stick to the language of baseball commentary as ardently as I can and it provides the defining structure but then in the edit it becomes material to be worked. If it's the recorded voice, a line drawn digitally on paper or in this instance lights, in the end it all gets modelled in a similar way.

So the editing process feels similar across different media?

Yes, surprisingly it does. There is a lot of overlap in the process of writing and editing the material. With the text posters that I made (*Remarkable*, 2007), the process of writing, editing and layout became one and the same. Similarly the process of writing and editing *Kill the Workers!* was quite similar, which I am really surprised by. Most of my works are digital in a way, so there is also that similarity, although lighting was at once perhaps the most complex and the most rudimentary. What's really important is that the work has physicality while maintaining a reference to something else. The physicality of the voice, for instance, refers to events happening elsewhere but I want to shift the focus to its physical, formal presence in the same way I try to do with lights.

A potential link could be made with this new work to structuralist film-making, which again was trying to produce or interrogate the relationship between the mechanical source of light and its power to represent ideas. Is that work that you're interested in or familiar with?

What I had looked at a lot along the way was animation, early animation which used shapes and forms to try to communicate something outside of language. This play doesn't have movement, it doesn't have moving lights, only shifts in time, which perhaps is where you might draw a link.

So in terms of formal presence, do you think of the lighting structure in Kill the Workers! as sculptural?

I think of it as material. I'm not sure what would make it more sculptural than painterly, or more sculptural than performative, in terms of what it can do.

Recent solo exhibitions of yours have consistently produced a fairly spartan atmosphere, not dissimilar to the exhibition aesthetics of early conceptual art. Are you interested in that reference point?

That can be read back into the work but I don't know if that's my intent. I am obviously informed by and interested in that history but my immediate decisions are the result of the desire to remove anything extraneous, to strip the work down to its barest essential. No distractions. So the material which is so ephemeral anyway – whether it's voice, light, or text on paper – asks you to think about that form which itself is trying so hard to refer to something else. So while this piece is trying to take you into the play, at the same time it's saying 'no, look at this'. Or the voice is taking you to the baseball game but so much is stripped away that you can't go there, you have to listen to the voice.

That becomes interesting now, working within the realm of theatre, which often does all it can to represent in an immersive way.

Totally. It wants to transport you. Yes, perhaps this piece is doing the opposite – I hadn't thought of it like that. It wants you to be here.

One of the main differences between theatre and this exhibition is the way that the audience is framed. Do your working processes constantly refer to an audience?

I make decisions based on how the work will occupy the space and I do think about audience in that I want lighting transitions and changes to be visible. I want time to be made visible. There should be some kind of ambiguity for the viewers as to where they belong – are they within or outside of the work? While this piece was written in the round, it also made reparations for a mobile, rambling audience.

You have invited John Tilbury to give a talk at the gallery during the exhibition. Tilbury's context is in

improvised music, attempting to produce a different type of listening, where the spaces and relations between notes provide room for unlikely associations or a different type of consciousness within the listening process. Your work often seems to over-emphasise one sensory perception, are you interested in provoking a different process of engagement?

For me, that's an ambition – to work in that kind of Dionysian way, which is much more responsive, while still maintaining a strong link to structure. I'm always trying to balance those two things.

In this instance, your focus is on the optical and you said that the editing process is often similar across projects but does that mean that you do feel a certain confidence in how your ideas will manifest themselves, even when taking on a completely new technical discipline, such as with Kill the Workers!?

Yes, it's like I have to start from the beginning each time. I didn't really know anything about lighting, just as previously I didn't know anything about voice, or baseball. The other process that remains similar is the writing of the text, which I spent a lot of time on for *Kill the Workers!*. I would like to develop *Kill the Workers!* into a publishable script; a script for lights that exists in written language.

Writing about your work often focuses on what is regarded as your preoccupation with the idea of logic. Is logic a useful concept for you?

Maybe that's not the right word, though. It's more about trying to inhabit a structure, listening to the structure and doing what it wants but then once it's stripped away from its use value you have a form that is completely estranged and can be looked at formally. It's not really logic but the mechanics of a thing that drives the work. Maybe the term 'logic' is shorthand for that discussion. The one thing I don't ever want is for there to be any frivolity in the decisions that I make. I want my decisions to be determined by the material, while allowing for a sense of disobedience in terms of how it is used.

Janice Kerbel interviewed by Jamie Stevens, Exhibitions & Events Organiser, Chisenhale Gallery, March 2011.