



## Quick Fade to Black

Janice Kerbel's *Cue* (2012) evokes a silent spectacle. The series of 36 black-and-white silkscreens of overlapping geometric forms on square sheets of paper ranges from barely visible to almost black. Repeating or cropped circles, a hovering trapezoid or irregular polygon, ovals and oblongs combine to suggest a scene or space, movement or mood. *Cue* grew out of *Kill the Workers!* (2011), a play written to be performed by stage lighting and first realized at Chisenhale Gallery, London, in 2011. To compose the ten different shapes that appear and disappear or intensify and fade in *Cue*, Kerbel drew upon the

Figure 1: *Kill the Workers!*, 2011. Installation view at Chisenhale Gallery, London, 2011.

script, technical cue sheets, and sketches from *Kill the Workers!*, where a combination of 36 lanterns were cued in dramatic succession to tell a story (fig. 1). The result in *Cue* is a three-act progression of images in which a circle in the upper left quadrant emerges as the protagonist in a more-or-less obscure tale.

When Kerbel was writing *Kill the Workers!*, she made use of what she calls “topographic” drawings to visualize the different lighting configurations (fig. 2). She soon realized that a reversal took place in the translation from lighting to drawing. A scene becomes brighter and brighter as light accrues, but a drawing gets increasingly dark as marks in ink, crayon, or pencil accumulate. This recognition led to *Cue*, in which inked forms take on the task of storytelling. In both *Cue* and *Kill the Workers!*, the formal elements are static. Neither the lights

nor the shapes move around in their arena of play. For the lights, this was a consequence of the technology, since the fixtures Kerbel chose to use at Chisenhale were stationary, positioned in the corners of the square field that became her stage. In *Cue*, Kerbel used a series of screens in which the shapes were also fixed in place. To get the ten shapes to tell the story, she combined them in different configurations, repeating, pivoting, suppressing, or overlaying them in the sequence of prints, and printing with six different grades of black ink.

Unlike the neutral moniker *Cue*, the title *Kill the Workers!* immediately conjures a revolutionary struggle—the stuff of intense drama and politics that might easily become

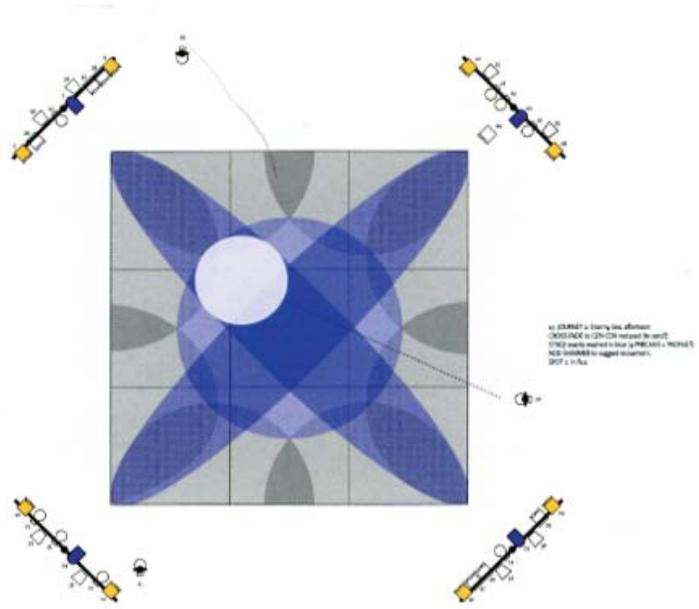


Figure 2: Working drawing for *Kill the Workers!*, 2011.

6 the subject matter for theater. Yet in this case, it also indicates the lights themselves. Referred to as “workers” in British theater lingo, these floods do the “work” of general illumination, as opposed to the spotlight, which focuses on individual actors or objects. Kerbel imagines a struggle in which the spotlight seeks to resist its prescribed function “in order to join the workers” (figs. 3 and 4). Neither a precise metaphor for society nor a parody, the conflict here seems to involve the nature of perception and communication. Can light become visible to the extent that it commands our attention? Without an object to illuminate, can an alternative story be told? These are the conceptual terms in which Kerbel describes the work, and yet she also allows for us to imagine a more epic conflict by alluding to revolutionary rhetoric in her title. Such allusions are not ironic, nor are they meant as the kind of provocation sometimes found in Minimalist works that used charged titles while claiming a lack of content. Instead, Kerbel orchestrates complex amounts of information into poetically simple works of art that both contain and deny the masses of material that contribute to their ultimate form. There is a conscious interplay here between intellect and emotion that does not seek to privilege either one, but rather to set that very opposition on end. Much like Kerbel’s oeuvre overall—which has investigated topics such as crime, gambling, geography, astronomy, architecture, cartography, and ornithology—this work comes off as deceptively simple, understated in an extreme sense.

Kerbel has described how she thinks of the shapes in *Cue* as doing a variety of representational jobs. Following a sort of semiotic structure, she sees them working as icons to represent a particular object like a door or window, but also symbolically through convention to indicate something less tangible, such as moonlight or sensation. Finally, she lets them function as the “workers” do in theater, to illuminate (or darken) the overall space. Kerbel expects that the narrative she has conceived for *Cue*, as in *Kill the Workers!*, will become legible only in the most rudimentary way. She describes this story in very general terms: “The prints—each a cue, or state of light—move from an imagined interior space, through an argument, a farewell, three journeys to a clearing in a wood, into dusk, a dream, moonlight, and finally a dream again, where invisibility (black) prevails.”<sup>2</sup> Thus introduced to her logic, we can see a door or river, or recognize the static circle as an analogue to the spotlight. The actual script she worked from suggests a more explicit story line (fig. 5): we learn that Act I takes place in a domestic interior, that the window and door “encroach on SPOT,” and that the three journeys take place on a “hot dusty

road," a "stormy sea," and "lost in a forest." And yet we are meant to embrace the progression of shapes in a less narrative way. The prints should stand alone as instruments of our curiosity, engaging us in a visceral or felt manner.

*Cue* emphasizes a process of abstraction or reduction that has existed to different degrees in Kerbel's oeuvre to date. Earlier projects combined investigation and fantasy, conceptualizing realities or impossibilities that she either desired or found tempting, such as a bank heist or an island paradise. Gifted with an intense imagination, she has followed a practice that moves from daydream to research to the invention of new forms or formats for communicating her ideas, while remaining in the realm of the hypothetical. For *Ballgame* (2009–, fig. 6), for example, Kerbel has spent countless hours analyzing historical records



Figures 3 and 4: *Kill the Workers!*, 2011. Detail view.

Are lengths of each journey the same? Patches different from below.

20. TRANSITION

of sink? → simultaneous?

**ACT III**

19. CLEARING IN WOOD, Dusk  
ENTER GOBO.

Remove side edges  
Gobo is wider + disappear  
Gobo - Vastly Focused.  
Fades before reaching bottom  
main for edges

[SPOT 2 SINKS into first moments of JOURNEY 3, then slowly BUILDS towards end of CUE.]  
[ROAD remains constant.]  
[GEN COV v low. Patched intensity.]

[CROSSFADE SPOT 2 to SPOT 3.]  
[FANSPREAD FROM JOURNEY 3 to CLEARING IN WOOD. ROAD should roll up (in direction opposite to its roll in) while CLEARING IN WOOD slowly lifts from the ground.]

[final stages of FANSPREAD FROM JOURNEY to CLEARING.]

[BUILD GEN COV, patchy and low intensity. NOTE: there is to be a marked difference between CLEARING and JOURNEY 3 above. More stillness. More air. Later in day. Slightly moody, almost melancholic.]

[USE GOBO: LEAFY BREAKUP half stage] 1/15 PA 96 CLIFF  
[Stage BISECTED, with dusk light falling MID intensity in large softly focussed area Centre to Down Stage R (see drawing). BISECTED]

3-3-DUSK SPECIAL? Remainder of stage (ULUR) at very low intensity, with some variation for mottled effect. Should appear to be late afternoon. DUSK-TRV-#344  
Violet-COLOUR-ACCENT-4090  
Dusk-Yellow-Green-#327-Forest Green]

[SPOT located edge of CLEARING illuminated by SOURCE 3 mid intensity? Adjust position of clearing and intensity so SPOT remains as if on border. He is tired.

to produce the audio track for a "mathematically average game."<sup>3</sup> Each player's name, at-bat, error, hit, and even the length of play is determined by the mean of statistics from the past century of baseball.<sup>4</sup> Kerbel recasts dry information as an enlivened game, made strange by the removal of ambient stadium noise and the insertion of the voice-over into the space of art. The audio play remains a potential script for a game that could never really happen, a simultaneously idealized and banalized set of innings that contains the possibilities for every game that could ever be played.

Like *Cue* and *Ballgame*, the broadsides that constitute *Remarkable* (2007) are raucous, yet still. A series of six poster-like works, they use the antiquated

form of the broadside in large format. Through seemingly loud and attention-grabbing language, each poster presents characters for an imagined sideshow, such as the Barometric Contortionist (fig. 7), Faintgirl, or Blindspot, who is described as "the shyest person alive." A related six-paneled work, *Three Ring* (2010, fig. 8), announces the acts

Figure 5: Detail of working script for *Kill the Workers!*, 2011.

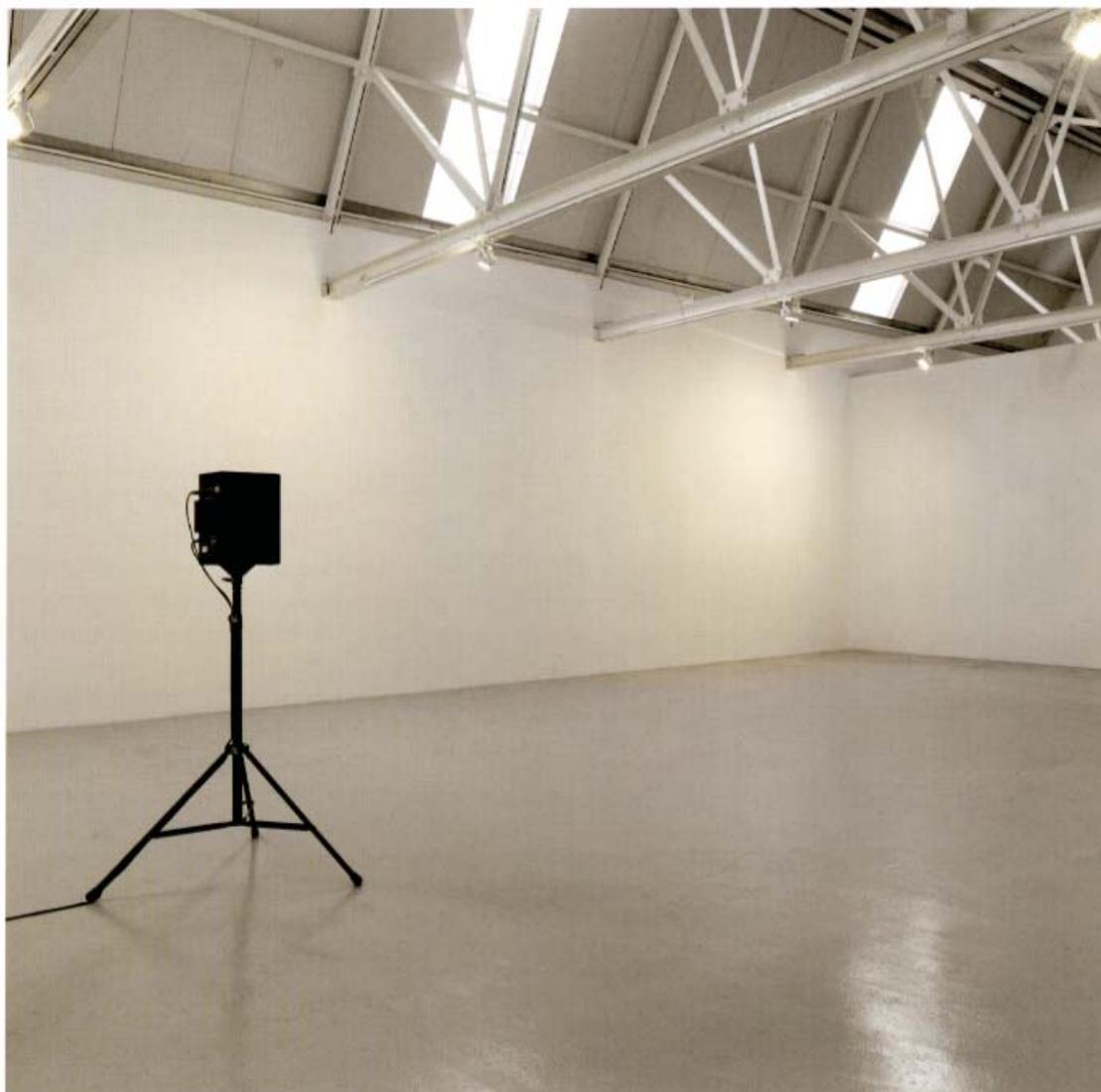


Figure 6: *Ballgame*, 2009- . Installation view at greengrassi, London, 2009.

# ELEMENTAL PHENOMENON

!! BLOWING IN FOR ONE DAY ONLY !!

"The ease of a child and the spirit of a maelstrom" – "An emotional act of co-ordination and grace"

**A GENTLE RAIN. AN AUTUMN BREEZE. A SUDDEN BURST OF SUN.**

INTRODUCING

## THE TEMPERAMENTAL BAROMETRIC

# CONTORTIONIST!

### & HER SYNCHRONISED MERCURIAL CAT

A changeable force commanding atmospheric permutations of unthinkable influence as far as the eye can see. **A PASSING CHILL. A FLASH OF HEAT.** Experience subtle shifts and dramatic modifications. Ups and Downs. Highs and Lows. Come prepared for the most cyclonic show of extremes ever imagined. **THUNDER. LIGHTNING. SEISMIC TREMORS.**

**INEXHAUSTABLE. INFINITELY VARIED. FEATS TOO NUMEROUS TO RECOUNT.**

"Splits body and soul with spiritual excellence ... Torques atmosphere like the muscles in a face."

on center stage. Kerbel sets the typography for these images digitally, but she spaces each letter individually as if she were using moveable type.

Each poster makes use of varying fonts, type sizes, and phrases to characterize its performer or act. As we read the oversized text, we conjure the seedy barker beckoning us to buy a seat in the big top, but at the same time, we feel an uncanny distance from the spectacle.

Outmoded and nostalgic, broadsides date back to the 17th century and mark a starting point for the commercial imagery that drowns out our visual field today. Rather than echoing a critique of such culture, however, *Remarkable* allows a bittersweet wish fulfillment through the invention of characters such as The Regurgitating Lady whose freakish talent is, like that of an old ragpicker, to recover lost things (fig. 9). The poster

Figure 7: *Remarkable: Barometric Contortionist*, 2007.



HERE TODAY—GONE TOMORROW!  
 THE  
**REGURGITATING  
 LADY**  
**THIS REMARKABLE BEING,**  
 WHOSE EMETIC POWER ALONE HAS EXCITED THE IMAGINATION OF ALL  
 THOSE WHO HAVE LOVED AND LOST, AT LONG LAST RETURNS—  
**A GOLD WISHBONE  
 A PORCELAIN FIGURINE  
 A DOG CALLED MAGGIE**  
 BEHOLD Engraved Heirlooms Returned To Once-Careless Daughters; SEE  
 Abandoned Treasures Handed Back To Grown Men; WATCH Lost Let-  
 ters Delivered, Snatched Handbags Recovered, Family Fortunes Restored.  
**!!A DIVINE ACT OF FATE AND POSSESSION!!**  
**!A SELFLESS GESTURE OF CHARITY!**  
**WELCOME BACK WITH A GASP**  
 Things MISPLACED, Things STOLEN, Things FORGOTTEN  
**COME ONE — COME ALL**  
 THE MUNDANE AND THE VALUABLE; THE ADORED AND DISCARDED.  
*coins, shoes, glasses, keys; hats, umbrellas, diaries, et cetera.*  
 FINAL DAY.

Figure 9: Remarkable: Regurgitating Lady, 2007.

Her works of art comprise more than the final objects she chooses to exhibit. Instead of showing all her research, Kerbel makes prints, audio recordings, or plays that encompass the processes of fantasizing, thinking, and making that she has undertaken. In this way, all the information that she has accumulated is brought to rest. As Kerbel has stated: "I want the things I make to be, first and foremost, exactly what they are."<sup>7</sup>

Janine Mileaf  
 Chicago, 2012

- 1 Jamie Stevens, "Interview with Janice Kerbel," Gallery Publication (London: Chisenhale Gallery), March 2011. Accessed on-line at <http://www.greengrassi.com/Artists/Bio?aid=13> on 31 July 2012. 13
- 2 Lani Yamamoto, "Interview with Janice Kerbel," i8 Gallery, February 2012. Accessed on-line at <http://www.greengrassi.com/Artists/Bio?aid=13> on 31 July 2012.
- 3 Janice Kerbel, email correspondence with the author, 31 July 2012.
- 4 "To come up with the numbers for the 'average' game, I have actually looked at the past 91 years of regular season games played (1920-2011), with National and American League splits (eliminating designated hitter). This proved to be the most accurate, and manageable way of working the numbers." Janice Kerbel, email correspondence with the author, 31 July 2012.
- 5 See Mark Godfrey, "Deadstar," in Janice Kerbel, *Deadstar* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Locus +, 2006), pp. 1-9.
- 6 Janice Kerbel, email correspondence with the author, 18 July 2012.
- 7 Ibid.