DEADSTAR
Mark Godfrey

1. Ghost/Map

In 2005, Janice Kerbel left the bustle of her home in South London and her studio near King’s Cross for the wide open plains of Wyoming. She had been awarded a residency at the Ucross Foundation, a series of studios for artists and writers established in the 1980s when a local businessman converted a derelict 19th-century cattle ranch on land he had acquired to set up a programme to provide ‘uninterrupted time and space in which to nurture the creative spirit for selected artists and writers’.1 (Annie Proulx was an early Ucross resident, setting her story ‘Brokeback Mountain’ in the nearby hills.) As Kerbel would have realised during her stay, in its former derelict condition, Ucross would have been typical of the Wyoming landscape for all over the state there are abandoned settlements and mines, each standing as a silent witness to the failed commercial pursuits of the past. Settlers had exploited Wyoming for its natural and mineral resources, but their planning was short-sighted and their towns, short-lived: houses would be built on the valley floors next to the rivers where prospectors panned for gold, and once deposits dried up, no further use could be made of the plains. Rather than knocking down houses to plant crops in the only place they could grow, settlers just moved on and out. And so Wyoming is scattered with ghost towns - from the tiny Tinton on the South Dakota border to South Park City in the west, once home to a population of 4000, now a tourist curiosity.2

Turned on to ghost towns by the contingencies of this residency so far away from her home, Kerbel might have become interested in the phenomenon because ghost towns served as reminders of cities where she has lived, or rather the futures awaiting them: once petrol is used up, conurbations joined up by freeways might become desolate too. Perhaps she was just attracted to ghost towns because they were both romantic and mundane. Whatever the case, Kerbel considered the figurative term ‘ghost town’ in a literal way to conjure up a fantasy: she determined to design a town for ghosts, and to show her town on a map. This decision has resulted in her new work, Deadstar (2006), a large photogravure etching showing a map of the settlement she has invented.3

First Kerbel consulted books on ideal cities and utopian designs. These plans were helpful, but only to an extent: not because they were
unrealised, but because they tended to imagine a population of real beings. As self-appointed town-planner, her task was to identify the habits of the specific populace of her town. Ghost stories helped here, and Kerbel ploughed through them on the plains. She discovered that ghosts tend not to cross rivers and that they keep out of the wind. They avoid direct sunlight, preferring the shade. A town for ghosts would not need many roads, but since ghosts like to haunt graveyards and to linger in caves, it had to feature these.

But the map would not be completely fantastical: while imagining how a town for ghosts might possibly be organised to suit their needs, Kerbel also set out to understand in her project the geographical conditions that caused once living settlements to turn into ghost towns. Her ‘town-for-ghosts’ would at once create a fiction and represent the real history of so many now-deserted settlements. Kerbel studied topographic maps showing ghost-town sites and drew her own, locating her town in the same kind of landscape that Wyoming’s gold prospectors had settled: her contours showed one steep hill and a low-inclined valley with a river traversing the landscape. This was exactly the kind of country where gold could be panned, but soon a problem arose: how to situate the buildings of her ghost town in this topography? To treat the spectres’ residences as if they were conventional constructions and to arrange them according to the standards and traditions of towns-for-the-living would not do: a more ghostly distribution was required.

Ucross is miles from any major city, and at night the skies were darker than any Kerbel had seen. Street lights and pollution render stars invisible in London, but in Wyoming the stars were bright. Kerbel began to make small drawings of the night sky at regular intervals and the apparent movement of the stars could be tracked in the drawings’ slight differences. Another line of research opened up: the artist began to study astral maps and the language used to describe what she saw: ‘supergiants’, ‘white dwarfs’, ‘dead stars’. Like all distant stars, the latter are bodies whose light we see aeons after they emitted it, but dead stars have expired by the time their light reaches Earth. Visible after their death, stars are like ghosts, and making this connection, Kerbel not only found a name for her ghost town but solved her problem: the buildings of her ghost town would be plotted out according to the position of stars on astral charts. There were many charts to select from, but Kerbel chose a particular projection that showed the entire night sky at once. When she superimposed it onto her topographical map, most of the buildings were located one side of the river, and off the high slopes of the hill, keeping the residents out of water and wind and sunlight. (In this book, one can see groups
of trees and buildings from the town excerpted from the map, each corresponding to a named stellar constellation).

Kerbel’s map of the ghost town would indicate natural and constructed features: rivers, trees, shrubs, marshes, dwellings, motels, bars and shops, and many more elements besides. It was one thing to identify *what* these features had to be, and *where* they would be positioned in the landscape, but quite another to determine *how* they would be rendered on the map. Kerbel could have invented and drawn all these features herself, or appropriated and scanned every one from an existing single map, but deploying a consistent imaging system would mean that her final map could feel too homogeneous. To ensure the drawing would be as slippery and as timeless as a ghost, Kerbel determined to render the features in different ways using imaging devices from different eras. The marsh symbol was appropriated from contemporary maps, while the graveyard came from much older ones. To shade her river, Kerbel replicated Letratone dot tints reminiscent of early Ordinance Survey maps; these are transfer graphics that had been used in cartography before digital ‘infill patterns’. Not all Kerbel’s signs were appropriated – the building symbols were designed by the artist herself - and in some cases, the identity of a given symbol was extremely complex. The trees and shrubs, for instance, were hand drawn by the artist after standard tree images from 1950s architectural renderings, scanned into a computer, and reduced to tiny symbols: they were thus neither simply ‘original’ nor clearly ‘appropriated’, neither quite analogue nor quite digital - they were technologically uncanny instead.

Having made all these decisions, Kerbel had completed her map – but as an image, not as a physical object. At this point, it existed only in limbo as a large file that could be viewed on her computer screen. Parts of this file had been created by ‘drawing’ with various illustration programmes (the contour lines, for instance); other parts had been physically drawn on paper, scanned, adjusted and inserted into the image on screen. Now came the problem of how to deliver the entire image of the map from the computer screen onto a paper support for the final work as it would be shown in a gallery. The normal way of transferring a file from a computer screen to paper is, of course, to press ‘print’ and command an inkjet printer to reproduce the image. This mode would have been too simple for all the marks on the paper would have looked too contemporary. In addition, in materialising in such a straightforward way, the interestingly virtual status of the map in its manifestation on the computer screen would be lost. Once again, Kerbel needed a formal way...
to reflect her subject matter. She handed over a computer file with the image to professional printmakers; they prepared a wax-covered copper plate and transferred the image from the file to this plate in reverse. The plate was then immersed in acid, creating grooves in the very top layer of copper corresponding to the lines of Kerbel’s image. The copper was inked and wiped so that ink remained in the grooves. Finally, a heavy, slightly wet, cream sheet of paper was placed above the plate on an oversized printing press, and a roller passed over it to print the image. The paper now displayed Kerbel’s map – each of the contour lines and houses and other characters very slightly raised off its surface. The image occupies the central rectangle of the paper with a five-inch border running around it, so that the entire printed space (both black and white parts) is slightly indented from the level of paper at the edges. Kerbel’s completed work thus has the appearance of an old intaglio print even though parts of the process were digital. Generated by technologies dating back as far as the 1430s and by contemporary illustration programmes, the map is unsettled. And so, to sum up, we can remark that every decision Kerbel made in the process of drawing and making Deadstar was related to her subject matter: what topography to create; where to distribute residences; how to image the various contours, houses, vegetation, etc.; and which process to deploy to transfer image from screen to paper. Her map for ghosts is a ghostly map.

2. Map/Ghost

Deadstar brought together many strands of Kerbel’s research – enquiries about the history of Wyoming, about the conventions of astrology, about utopian town planning, etc. But in order to make more sense of the project, one might also recall the role of maps in conceptual art. It could be said that artists have long been drawn to maps because they are ghostly images: they seem real, but aren’t quite. But other terms tend to be used: maps are abstract and coded representations rather than iconic images of their referents. As such, maps were of use to artists moving away from abstraction by exploring the connections between the abstract and the readymade referential: unsurprisingly, some years after Flag (1954-55), Jasper Johns painted his first Map in 1961. By the end of the 1960s, many other explorations were underway. In 1969, for instance, John Baldessari looked at a map of California and decided to visit the sites corresponding to the locations where the ten letters of the state were printed. At each place, he constructed a giant
sculpture of the letter, working northwards (backwards from the ‘A’ to the ‘C’), and later gathered the ten photographs together. This was, he said, ‘an attempt to make the real world match a map, to impose language on nature, and visa versa’, but of course the work served to show how different maps are from their referents. Baldessari’s work recalls Borges’s story ‘On Exactitude in Science’ which describes a country whose cartographers drew up a ‘map of the Empire whose size was that of the Empire, and which coincided point for point with it’. In their zeal, the cartographers forgot that maps function as economic condensations of information, and collapsing the signifier and signified, the map ceased to function as a map and became useless. Left to the ‘Inclemencies of Sun and Winters’, it disintegrated into ‘tattered ruins’, a ‘Relic of the Disciplines of Geography’. (I’m tempted to say it became a ghostmap).

Like Lewis Carroll’s blank map from *The Hunting of the Snark*, Borges’s story fascinated Robert Smithson who used maps in various other ways. Most prosaically, they showed the locations of the ‘Sites’ from where he had taken the rocks that he showed in galleries as ‘Non-Sites’. Then there were Smithson’s collages or sculptures made from folding and cutting maps: as Ann Reynolds has argued, these were not attempts to turn the map back towards its physical referent, but ‘abstractions, albeit three-dimensional ones, of a previous abstraction’. If the referent was doubly distanced in these sculptures, in 1969 Smithson made maps whose referents did not even exist. He imagined the *Hypothetical Continent of Lemuria* positioned off the coast of East Africa. A map of the continent was constructed out of seashells found on the beach of Sanibel Island in Florida and placed inshore. The drawing for the work combined his handmade map of the coast of Africa showing where ‘Lemuria’ was hypothetically found, a printed map of the site in Florida where he had placed the shells, and an iconic representation of the map of shells. This last map seemed real and material, and was placed directly onto the ground, but it described something totally imaginary on the other side of the world. A seemingly less fantastical approach to cartography can be found in Douglas Huebler’s works of 1968. Huebler used shop-bought maps of Massachusetts, and on them he wrote very prosaic directions for road trips that the viewer was invited to take. The trips did not have to be taken, but if they were, ‘whatever is seen’ on the trip would join with the map as ‘the form of the work’. Huebler’s use of maps seemed totally mundane, and if made, the trips might also have been quite dull, but still these works relied on the possible gulf between the prosaic nature of the map and the imagined content of the
journey inscribed on them. As such, they also suggest starting points for Kerbel’s use of a map to ground the fantastical idea of a town for ghosts.

*Deadstar* shares some conceptual starting points with these historical map-works and extends their implications. Since all maps are abstractions rather than realistic representations, a map of an imaginary town only accentuates the very condition of cartography; though often a very mundane kind of representation, even the plainest map can be the starting point for imagined fantasies. Many of the earlier projects also reflected a more general scepticism towards the supposed authority and objectivity of maps: recognising that cartography is a means of controlling, quantifying and possessing space, artists have produced fictional maps to question these operations, and this political ambition also informs Kerbel’s project.8 Kerbel’s map also has parallels with more contemporary projects - Tacita Dean’s use of alabaster squares as found imaginary maps (Dean etches over the veins in the stone so they seem like rivers in a landscape), or Kathy Prendergast’s alterations of existing maps to create fantastical landscapes (for instance, *Lost*, 1999, a map of the United States where all place-names have been digitally removed, other than those including the word ‘lost’). But as far as the figure of the ghost is concerned, we would do better not to look at other artists’ work, but to think how it has haunted Kerbel’s practice.

In one series of works, *Studies for Home Fittings*, the artist herself behaved as a kind of spook: Kerbel worked out how to cross given architectural spaces without casting shadows or causing floorboards to creak, and then marked her undetectable tracks as lines and dashes on hand-drawn architectural renderings of the spaces. The drawings appeared as instructions for future burglars, but the routes only worked for the long-since departed artist, or someone else of her exact weight and height. This series began in 2000, and that same year Kerbel also made a set of diagrammatic drawings which described the different possible configurations of a *Home Conjuring Unit*. The proposed unit masqueraded as a typical IKEA-type flat-pack, but as the drawings showed, the pack’s materials could be turned into four types of furnishings that simultaneously functioned as magic props. Follow the first set of instructions and the materials would make a Bedroom wardrobe for spontaneous appearance; follow the second, a Storage chest for splitting in two. The third diagram described a Worktable for floating on air, and finally there was a drawing of Nest tables for quick and easy escapes. Thus in four ways, the unit would enable its imaginary user to turn into a spectral figure no longer subject to the physical constraints of the material environment. Of course
to all but their owner, who would recognise the card's identity. Again the cards were never to be played: Three Marked Decks were displayed as single printed sheets under glass, not yet even guillotined into 52 individual rectangles. In 1999, Kerbel also made Bank Job, an elaborate plan for the robbery of the Coutts & Co. bank at 15 Lombard Street in the City of London: needless to say, the heist was never carried out, and the work was arrested at the stage of the perfect, but never-to-be-realised plan. Later came The Bird Island Project (2000–02), this time a detailed web-based prospectus for a tropical island holiday resort, yet one that was never to be developed. The recurring trope of the 'unrealised scheme' in Kerbel's work most obviously functions to posit the primacy of desire over reality. Ideas are always better when imagined rather than realised, and admitting this, Kerbel simultaneously proposes schemes and withholds their actualisation. But another way of thinking about this aspect of Kerbel's work is that all her works are in limbo: hovering between plans and realisations, her schemes have a ghostly character. This is particularly true of this latest project: not only can a town-for-ghosts never actually be built, but even if we were to imagine that it could in the configuration Kerbel proposes, it would immediately cease to function. Since it is positioned in the kind of terrain that caused real settlements to fail, the town-for-ghosts would soon be rendered a ghost town (a ghost town, that is, where once had been a town-for-ghosts).

Though it should now be clear how Deadstar emerges from Kerbel's ongoing explorations, we should still acknowledge that the work is the strangest project in her practice so far. For it is one thing to plan a bank robbery that will not be undertaken, a card-scum that will never be played out, to conceptualise a holiday resort that will never developed, or to design gardens that will not be planted, and quite another to map a town for ghosts. If unrealised, the first four outcomes are still possible. Despite all the ways in which the new project reflects on specific historical and geographical details, it proposes a fiction that is not of this world. There has always been a charming and quirky disconnection between the academic rigour of Kerbel's research (whether planning the robbery, analysing Caribbean bird life, or identifying plant types) and the fantastical ends to which this research is put, but in this latest project the disconnection seems particularly absurd. Though (as I attempted above) one can chart how the various streams of the artist's research (into gold panning, town planning and star charts) converge like the tributaries in the river in Deadstar, it is still quite startling that all this research was directed to conjuring a town for ghosts. Is there a serious aspect to the absurdity?
Kerbel once wrote that ‘to align oneself with the impossible is to dream of a world which is not wholly defined by a means-end economy, where the laws of capital do not rule absolute and where knowledge is not assessed by use-value alone’. She wrote this while discussing the work of Douglas Huebler, but the elegant formulation helps to describe her thought as well, and to situate Deadstar not just as an absurd fantasy but as an urgent and resistant response to the conditions of contemporary life. But what seems so compelling about Kerbel’s practice is that if she dreams of the impossible, she does not do this as a juvenile escapist. To grasp this point, one only has to mentally compare the map of Deadstar with a still from The Lord of the Rings, or indeed with the weird and wonderful imaginary worlds depicted in the drawings of so many artist-contemporaries of Kerbel’s. Kerbel’s ghost town is closer to Milton Keynes than The Shire: everything is immaculately planned out, all the elements are clearly identified in a key, nothing is present unless necessary and functional. Kerbel’s work simultaneously dramatises the charms of dreaming and articulates the constraining features of the world that necessitates fantasy. Deadstar proposes that the imagination is the last refuge of freedom in a completely circumscribed and commodified culture, and at the same time acknowledges the limits of this freedom by miming in every aspect of its planning and appearance, the rigor and rules of this administered and bureaucratic world. Or to put it another way, the fantasy of Deadstar is everywhere haunted - by reality.

1  http://www.acrossfoundation.org/index1.html
2  http://www.ghosttowns.com
3  Deadstar is not illustrated in its entirety in this publication, but an account of its making and of its place in Kerbel’s work follows.
4  In fact Kerbel used Mollweide’s Equal Area Projection which collapses the entire sky (Northern and Southern hemispheres) into one diagram, allowing all the stars in the sky to appear at once. As she has explained, ‘this is an impossible orientation and I have chosen it to dislocate the town from any exact spot on earth from which the sky could be seen.’
Matthew Buckingham describes the problem of maps in the voiceover to his 2004 film 
Makelank: Everything Has a Name: 'By capturing land on paper, maps always construct
their worlds in the image of a society, placing the unobtainable within reach - drawing places
in order to possess them.'

See Benjamin Buchholz's account of these drawing practices in his essay 'Raymond Pettibon:
Return to Disorder and Disfiguration' in Anne Temkin and Hamza Walker (eds.),

It is worth thinking about Kerbel's new work in the context of other artists' responses to the availability of
digital drawing programmes. For some artists, digital programmes offer a means of making more and more
spectacular drawing; digitalisation also allows them to distribute finished work to supposedly new and
widespread audiences. Once the line and mark is freed from its paper support, drawing thus becomes a medium
that facilitates ever proliferating interconnections. Other artists reject the digital and display analogue forms
of drawing instead. Kerbel does not occupy either of these positions. As I have indicated, Deadstar involved
digital and analogue procedures but beyond the question of how it was made, the work seems to suggest
Kerbel's ambivalence to the digital. What might drawing be when it confronts digitalisation? Kerbel's answer
is that when drawing addresses itself seriously to its new technological condition, it produces a ghostly world
in which everything seems unfixed and increasingly disconnected.

In her essay 'The Index and the Uncanny', Laura Mulvey has argued that the uncanny properties of
photographic indexicality become particularly evident in the aftermath of digitalisation,
and that Wall's 'ghosts' acknowledge this uncanniness at the time of its passing. The essay appears

Janice Kerbel. 'Five things I think about when I think about Huebler'. UNTITLED, no.28,