

First Take
MARK GODFREY ON JANICE KERBEL

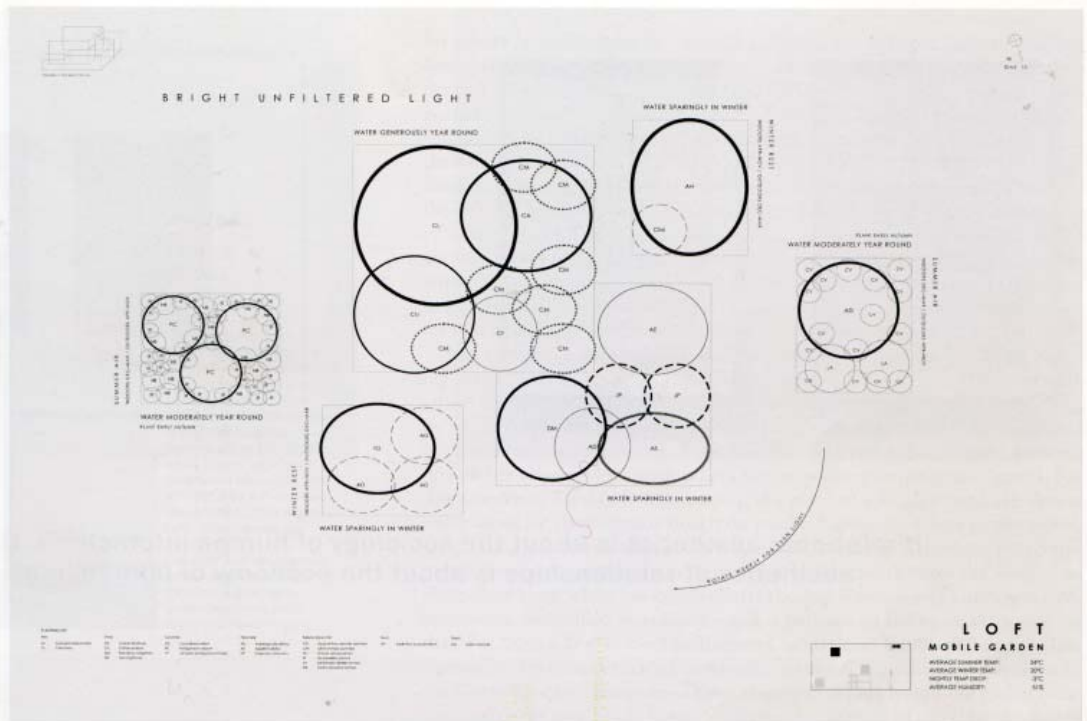
JANICE KERBEL'S WORK improbably melds dreamy, escapist longing with the meticulous research of a botanist or a rigorous master thief. By coupling these two modes of thought, she addresses questions of ecology, tourism, surveillance, and urbanism with an uncommon poetry, as in *The Bird Island Project*, 2000–2002. The work began with Kerbel fantasizing about a paradise where she could holiday but ended up as a precise representation of a fictitious yet geologically possible atoll in the Bahamas. Ready for tourist development, the island is inhabited by the Exuma Emerald, a bird that's utterly imaginary yet ecologically feasible—a point that Kerbel ensured by working with an ornithologist to determine how the bird might look and sound. Ultimately, the project came to comprise a promotional text, an Internet site, various drawings and maps, and a CD of the mysterious Exuma Emerald's calls.

More recently, Kerbel has deployed the medium of drawing exclusively, as in "Home Climate Gardens," 2003, a series that resulted from a residency at the Tyndall Centre for Climate Change Research at the University of East Anglia. There Kerbel designed indoor gardens for various spaces such as gyms, student apartments, and council flats, paying attention to their different environmental

conditions (the gym, for example, would be very humid; the student apartments unheated for long spans of time). Each garden could be maintained easily by typical users of the space, and the various plants would not only thrive together but would also look fantastic. If, that is, they were ever planted.

The drawings deploy many different graphic codes: Plants are represented by circles of varying thickness; the function of the space is designated in a near-Bauhaus typeface; and the garden's location within each room is indicated by an inset architectural plan. Carefully juxtaposing contemporary and historical forms of notation, Kerbel shuns both the illustrational and doodling styles that have characterized drawing of the past ten years while also avoiding the gestural marks common to the medium in the late 1960s. But for all their intelligence and negation, Kerbel's drawings prompt us to picture lush gardens, albeit through images completely unlike traditional landscape sketches or still lifes of flowers.

Attending to the disjunctive character of their signs, the careful viewer discovers that the drawings are not—as one might first expect—proposals or halfway stages toward fully realized plans. Instead, they are objects with their



Opposite page, left: Janice Kerbel, *Home Fitting #13 (detail)*, 2003, pencil on paper, 39% x 27 1/2". Right, Three details from Janice Kerbel's *Bird Island Project*, 2000-2002. This page: Janice Kerbel, *Home Climate Gardens: Loft*, 2003, ink-jet print, 46% x 33".

If Janice Kerbel's "proposals" were indeed realized, the fantasy would crumble in an instant. So in place of Lawrence Weiner's famous dictum that "the work need not be built," she insists that the work *cannot* be built.

own unique texture. This odd status is typical of Kerbel's exhibited works, which seem like schemes for future development but are in fact final results—outcomes that deny the possibility of further resolution and therefore keep us imagining what the works themselves refuse to picture.

Sometimes this ambiguous status is compounded by a peculiar kind of paradox: If the "proposal" were indeed realized, the fantasy would crumble in an instant. So in place of Lawrence Weiner's famous dictum that "the work need not be built," Kerbel insists that the work *cannot* be built. If, for instance, anyone were to develop Bird Island, the eco-environment Kerbel describes would be ruined. An even better example of this paradox is her ongoing series of "Home Fittings" drawings, begun in 2001, which start with the artist determining how to traverse a given space (such as the Canadian Cultural Centre in Paris) without making any noise or casting any shadows. Kerbel then produces architectural plans of the spaces, on which a series of lines and dashes describe her undetectable route. Although these plans might seem to serve as exact instructions for would-be burglars, they would only yield the same silent and shadowless path for someone of Kerbel's exact height and weight, leaving us

with a perfect description of an activity that's impossible to re-create. What seems to be a precise and objective document turns out actually to be a record of the contingencies of her body in a particular space.

Kerbel is presently busy with two new projects. A residency in Wyoming got her thinking about ghost towns and the night sky, and she has started designing a new town for ghosts, with buildings oriented to match the configurations of constellations of dead stars. Working as an urban planner might, she is taking into account the daily needs of the illusive denizens while also putting to use in her plans all the different cartographic signs found on town maps of the past fifty years: Her drawings of the towns thus become as indefinable and undatable as their spectral residents. Next up will be a garden for insomniacs, containing some of the hundreds of plant species that bloom in the moonlight. Yet what will see the light of day will be not a physical garden but another impossible proposal. As a related project sponsored by Artangel, Kerbel is writing a play whose characters are night flowers. I wouldn't be surprised if its eventual audience is kept awake at night, wondering how the actual plants might look. □

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