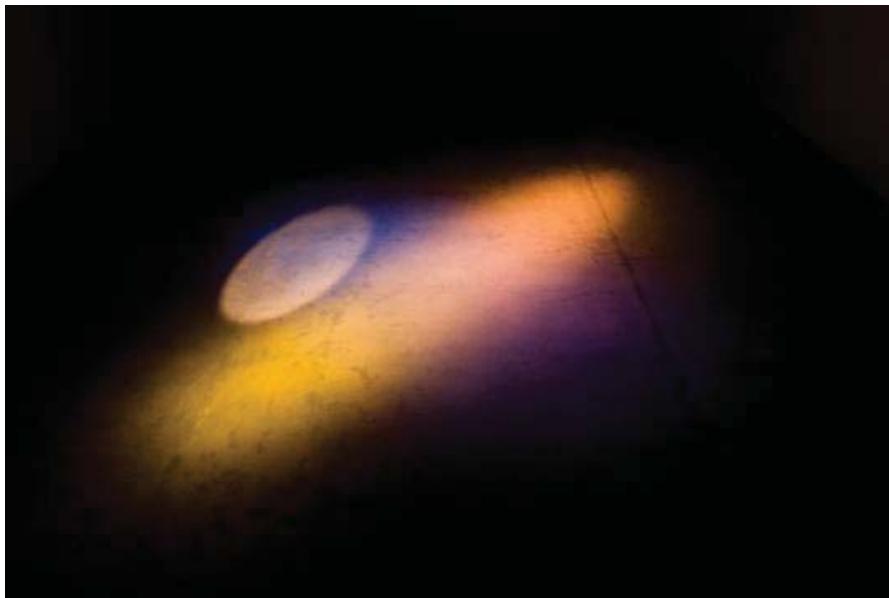


Janice Kerbel: Killing the Workers

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Janice Kerbel, *Kill the Workers!*, 2011, 24-minute play for stage lights. Installation view, 'Kill the Workers!', Chisenhale Gallery, London, 2011. Photograph: Andy Keate. Courtesy the artist and greengrassi, London

*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.*¹

— Janice Kerbel

In 'The Stage as "Virtual City"', the third chapter of Manfredo Tafuri's hefty *La Sfera e il labirinto (The Sphere and the Labyrinth)*, 1980 — a book that summarises many of the concerns that occupied the Marxist architectural historian through the 1970s — we accompany the author as he traces a complex exchange between stage and street, between experimental theatre and modern metropolis. The theme itself is not new; the notion of the mutuality of these spaces has been expressed at least since the conception of the *theatrum mundi* was developed in its modern form in the seventeenth century. However, beginning in the milieu of late nineteenth-century Symbolism, we find a fundamental shift in these terms, with the theatre no longer operating as a mere metaphor for the world, but as something like a training ground or laboratory for the ordering of bodies in social space itself. Or so Tafuri argues in his dense account of theatrical avant-gardes, starting with German writer and director Georg Fuchs, whose Künstler-Theater (Artists Theatre) in Munich, founded in 1907, aimed to confront actor and audience by means of a mechanised stage that could be thrown forward into the auditorium. This was just one contribution among many in these years — the theatre designers Adolphe Appia and Edward Gordon Craig come immediately to mind — toward 'the affirmation of the conventional worth of the spectacle, the problem of the reunification of the spectacle and the audience, as well as that of the overturning of artifice into real life' — all, Tafuri insists, in the name of 'the recovery of a collective catharsis ... the recovery of a portion of unalienated space'.²

Such a recovery was, in Tafuri's pessimistic dialectic, doomed to failure, an impossible reconciliation in a world whose material basis resisted any such attempts at aesthetic resolution. In this sense, Dada and Futurist performances proved more realistic in their embrace of a metropolitan grotesque — of the sheer anarchy of the capitalist marketplace — which they would set out to mimic rather than dominate. Subsequent avant-garde theatre, in the Soviet Union and at the Bauhaus, would operate within these poles, recognising the futility of locating a space of non-alienation, and instead proposing the complete training of a body joyously subsumed to the reified structures of industrial labour. This, in Tafuri's estimation, remained true even when the avant-garde's innovators believed they were constructing counter-cities in their theatres, forming new communities that fused actor

and spectator. Walter Gropius's Total-Theater of 1927, an unrealised plan designed for Erwin Piscator, proposed a flexible arena stage surrounded by the audience. It was a direct inheritor of Fuchs's experiments, managing only to 'sing independently the hymn of victory of the negative that has taken over the real from which that theatre tries to isolate itself'.³

The negative, here, is identified with a technology mistakenly understood as liberated and liberating. Beyond the stage equipment mentioned above, this technology impinged upon every aspect of experimental theatre in the twentieth century, perhaps nowhere so extensively as in László Moholy-Nagy's *Light-Space Modulator*, a light-and-motion machine constructed both as a tool for projection and as a kinetic sculptural object in its own right. While it had a long genesis over the course of the 1920s, scholars have pinpointed the moment of its realisation in Moholy-Nagy's experiments with stage design in 1930.⁴ Indeed, the so-called *Light-Prop* could be considered a radical reformulation of a theatre without actors, a theatre whose drama consisted solely of the play of coloured light and shadow. In this he was hardly alone: Tafuri traces an influential strain of Bauhaus theatrical experiments dedicated to the elimination of the human element, reduced to a marionette or even more drastically superseded, as in the kinetic light experiments of Ludwig Hirschfeld Mack, among others.

The *Light-Prop*, which today sits inert at Harvard's Busch-Reisinger Museum in Cambridge, MA, must be imagined as a curious amalgam of rational organisation and something close to necromancy. We can enumerate its parts and their functioning — the rotating assembly, the programme of over one hundred coloured lights — but as the artist himself admitted, its appearance when in operation was something else altogether:

*For almost ten years I planned and battled for the realisation of this mobile, and I thought that I had familiarised myself with all its possibilities. I knew by heart' what all the effects would be. But when the Light-Prop was set in motion for the first time in a small mechanics shop in 1930, I felt like the sorcerer's apprentice. The mobile was so startling in its coordinated motions and space articulations of light and shadow sequences that I almost believed in magic.*⁵

What was the nature of the magic conjured forth by this *Zauberlehrling*? Perhaps we might find a suggestion in Moholy-Nagy's description of *Ein Lichtspiel schwarz weiss grau* (*Lightplay Black White Grey*, 1930), an abstract film based on the operation of the *Light-Prop*. At the conclusion of a long list of actions and effects, he writes, 'blinding moving light flashes. Revolving spiral, reappearing, again and again. Rotation increases; all concrete shapes dissolve in light.'⁶ All concrete shapes dissolve in light... Given the artist's exposure to radical political currents flowing westward from the Soviet Union in the wake of 1917, how can we not read this as an aesthetic transcription of Marx and Engels's famous characterisation of capitalism's constant revolutionising of the means of production, in the passage of their 'Manifesto of the Communist Party' that begins 'All that is solid melts into air...'?⁷ Even Moholy-Nagy's evocation of Goethe's sorcerer's apprentice finds its echo in this same text, just a few paragraphs later, when they write of how 'modern bourgeois society, ... a society that has conjured up such gigantic means of production and of exchange, is like the sorcerer, who is no longer able to control the powers of the netherworld whom he has called up by his spells'.⁸ The *Light-Prop*, cobbled together in the mechanics shop, magically proposes to redeem this demonic world of production, but despite its creator's best intentions only manages to imitate the alienating technology it set out to conquer. Watching it for the first time, Moholy-Nagy *almost* believed in magic.

Janice Kerbel's *Kill the Workers!* (2011), which she describes as 'a play for stage lights',⁹ summons up and radically undoes Moholy-Nagy's precedent — rewriting this early twentieth-century experiment and in the process suggesting a new understanding of theatre's relation to the political. Installed at Chisenhale Gallery in London, which commissioned the work along with the Badischer Kunstverein in Karlsruhe, *Kill the Workers!* consisted simply of a group of theatrical lighting rigs stationed around a roughly square area; the 'play' took place over 24 minutes, divided into three acts that condensed the actions of a day. The narrative, told only through shifts of the light's intensity, pattern and colour, recounts the adventures of a single spotlight that wishes to become 'open white' — that is, lighting with no colour filter — by joining with the working lights, the illumination used in a theatre when the performance is not underway and stage lighting is not on. In a narrative whose particulars we might have difficulty grasping if not for the guidance of the gallery's accompanying pamphlet, we follow the spotlight's odyssey, from the evocation of a domestic interior to the journey it takes down a hot, dusty road, across a stormy sea and into a forest, before finally achieving the dream of open white.

We might begin by noting the almost complete inversion of the terms of the avant-garde trajectory with which we began, in what would appear to be a reinvestment in the language of traditional theatrical spectacle. Moholy-Nagy's kinetic machine, occupying the centre of the performance space and with its technological premises always visible, has been replaced by entirely orthodox lighting

rigs discretely placed at the edges of the dramatic scene. If Kerbel does not reinstate the proscenium, she nevertheless refuses the avant-garde's insistence on merging stage and spectator, demarcating an area on the floor for her light-play; in principle nothing stops the viewer from entering this space, but the lingering protocols of art spectatorship tend to keep one at the margins of the action. And, of course, we note the return of narrative, even of the traditional tripartite structure of classical drama, in her scenario.

Indeed, in commenting on *Kill the Workers!*, Kerbel hardly mentions the experimental tradition. She does discuss the significance of early animation and its utilisation of 'shapes and forms to try to communicate something outside of language', presumably referring to a history of abstract film-making, from Hans Richter's and Viking Eggeling's animations of the early 1920s through the work of Oskar Fischinger and Len Lye in the following decade — a history within which Moholy-Nagy's *Light-Prop* is often read.¹⁰ But more often Kerbel invokes conventions of theatrical lighting that date to the end of the nineteenth century, notably the contrast between 'realistic' lighting that mimics the appearances of nature and the kind of 'symbolic' lighting that seeks to convey mood and produce atmosphere more abstractly.¹¹ Her play opens with the former's naturalistic lighting effects for its domestic scene, evoking light passing through a window, while later scenes symbolically narrate arid landscapes or tempestuous seas through washes of colour of varying intensities. But even as the spotlight-protagonist negotiates these two conventions, it seeks to leave its narrative inscription behind and become *light* itself, open white. The allegorical overtones of that longing seem too significant to overlook, redolent as they are of the desire for the total merging of subject and object, so important for the German Romantic tradition, but also of the Marxist yearning for the proletariat to become a class 'in itself', no longer subsumed to the instrumental demands of capital's narrative.



Janice Kerbel, *Ballgame*, 2009, audio play, dimensions variable. Installation view, greengrassi, London, 2009. Photograph: Marcus Leith. Courtesy the artist and greengrassi

Kill the Workers!, while adopting a new format for Kerbel, clearly derives from her recent work, most notably perhaps her performative pieces for voice:

*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. [...] 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.*¹²

That concern is evident as early as *Nick Silver Can't Sleep* (2006/07), her 'radio play for insomniacs' that recounts the impossible love of two nocturnal plants; it is also found in *Ballgame* (2009–ongoing), Kerbel's dramatic monologue narrating the course of a statistically average baseball game. The latter also shares with *Kill the Workers!* a provocative emptying-out of the exhibition space: *Ballgame* consists only of a large speaker mounted on a stand in the middle of the gallery. But whereas in *Ballgame* the spoken narration stands in for the missing players, in *Kill the Workers!* nothing is missing, strictly speaking — Kerbel initially toyed with the idea of devising a script for a play and then taking away the actors, leaving only the lighting behind, but in the end rejected that approach and devised a play specifically for light itself.¹³ Finally, we might also compare *Kill the*

Workers! with her series of fairground advertisements, *Remarkable* (2007/2010), which sketched vivid descriptions of imaginary characters through posters composed in traditional letterpress typefaces. In each of these works Kerbel plays with established codes, inhabiting the clichés of sports commentary or of the sideshow barker, and in a sense *Kill the Workers!* occupies a similar terrain: she had to learn a great deal about lighting design in order to create the cue sheets and rigging diagrams that structure its oblique narrative. Yet something in *Kill the Workers!* exceeds the logic of these earlier works and places us uneasily in a terrain beyond her clever, subjectivist conceptualism.

That excess is signalled, of course, in the work's very title. Its exclamation and ambiguity are so distinct from the more matter-of-fact appellations of much of her art. Who are these workers? We learn from accompanying materials — wall text and press release — that in theatre the term refers to those lights used when a performance is not in progress, but the phrase nevertheless retains some vague (counter-)revolutionary connotation. It seems to hearken back to those other dramatic experiments contemporaneous with Moholy-Nagy's *Light-Prop*: workers' theatre, Brechtian epic theatre and the like. Or, in its non-figuration, it might be seen to evoke El Lissitzky's children's book *Pro dva kvadrata. Suprematicheskiy skaz v 6-ti postroikakh (Of Two Squares: A Suprematist Tale in Six Constructions*, 1922), which tells a fable of the superiority of the new Soviet order using the language of geometric abstraction. 'I wondered what "kill the workers" signalled, in terms of being a revolutionary play,' Kerbel notes, and — whether theatrical term or political injunction — in order to come to terms with this curious *Lichtspiel*, we will have to ask just what 'revolutionary' might mean in this instance.¹⁴

Within the piece,' she explains, 'the revolution is the attempt of one sole spotlight to understand what its capacity is outside of the ascribed conventions of theatre.'¹⁵ The spotlight is typically used to highlight an individual actor or object on stage, drawing the audience's attention to a particular point; by extension, we could say that it is itself the most 'individual' of theatre lights. Kerbel's spot, however, seeks to escape this assigned role to join the working lights, those anonymous journeymen of the theatre that provide overall illumination. This could be seen as a version of one of the classic themes in revolutionary theatre: the bourgeois individual who refuses his or her class inheritance in order to join with the proletarian masses. *Kill the Workers!* might be understood, then, as a little primer in politicisation, told in the form of a fairy tale about a spotlight that rejects its destiny and sets out to be something else. But Kerbel is also asking us to look beyond the narrative and find a fundamentally political element in theatre's very structure, in what we might call its refusal to fix things in their 'proper' places. Another way of explaining this would be to echo Jacques Rancière and say that the politics of *Kill the Workers!* resides in the way its story of the spotlight stages a conflict between the universal and the particular — more specifically, the particular's desire to become universal. For Rancière, the short-circuiting of these categories is the very basis of politics, which commences when the singular destabilises 'the "natural" functional order of relations in the social body' by standing in for the whole.¹⁶ In this telling, the spotlight becomes the 'part with no part' that unsettles the structured ensemble of the conventional theatrical codes of lighting, where each element has its assigned place. Kerbel recounts the story of a light refusing its proper role, or its designated station, and of its desire to become one with those lights that refuse theatrical illusion, refuse spectacle — the generalised lighting of the house.

And here its distinction from Moholy-Nagy's avant-garde experimentation comes into focus. Moholy-Nagy pursued a dream of unity in which actor and prop, stage and light, would become one, immersing the spectator in a new sensorium. His was a dream of undoing theatrical alienation — its seemingly constitutive separations — but as we have seen that dream proved an all too uncanny echo of the technologies and forces of production reshaping the life-world of early twentieth-century capital, with the *Light-Space Modulator* evoking the necromantic conjurations of the sorcerer's apprentice for the artist. Kerbel doesn't tarry with magic, however. Her play for stage lights reinstates traditional theatrical technologies, her tale is told within the floor space delimited by her lighting rigs. *Kill the Workers!* recounts its story of destabilised identities, actions and spaces by working within the conventions of the theatre — or at least *some* of those conventions — not by contesting them. And this is precisely the source of its sly subversions, its refusal to fix things in their proper places through a commingling of aesthetic vocabularies that troubles the assumptions of theatre and gallery space alike. But it is also a refusal of the proper name: the spotlight's quest for open white, its move for the impossible, has obvious resonance with an artist who has herself most frequently sought to remain hidden, inconspicuous and indiscernible in her working processes, an artist who has disappeared within the conventions of her chosen genres.

Of course, this is not to deny a fundamental ambivalence in the work. The title's command signals the moment when the house lights are dimmed and the play begins — the moment, in other words, in which we ourselves participate as spectators. In watching *Kill the Workers!*, our ability to perceive its subtle light-play requires first that the gallery space be darkened. The spotlight-protagonist may succeed in its quest for 'open white', but only within the prescribed 24-minute

cycle of the drama itself. It can join 'the workers', but only on the condition that the actual working lights are out. Lurking just offstage is that entire apparatus, social and economic rather than technological, that continues to determine the visibility/invisibility of the artwork.

Footnotes

1. Janice Kerbel, 'Five Things I Think About When I Think About Huebler', *Untitled*, no.28, Summer 2002, p.55. ↑
2. Manfredo Tafuri, *The Sphere and the Labyrinth: Avant-gardes and Architecture from Piranesi to the 1970s* (1980, trans. Pellegrino d'Acierno and Robert Connolly), Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1987, p.96. ↑
3. *Ibid.*, p.110. ↑
4. See Andrea Kaliski Miller, 'Films', in Eleanor M. Hight (ed.), *Moholy-Nagy: Photography and Film in Weimar Germany* (exh. cat.), Wellesley, MA: Wellesley College Museum, 1985, p.128. ↑
5. László Moholy-Nagy, 'Abstract of an Artist', *The New Vision and Abstract of an Artist*, New York: George Wittenborn, 1947, p.80. ↑
6. L. Moholy-Nagy, *Vision in Motion*, Chicago: Paul Theobald, 1965, p.289. ↑
7. Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, 'Manifesto of the Communist Party', in Robert C. Tucker (ed.), *The Marx-Engels Reader*, 2nd ed., New York: W.W. Norton, 1978, p.476. In the years prior to his move to Berlin in 1920, Moholy-Nagy had been close to radical circles in Hungary, particularly those around Lajos Kassák and the journal *MA*; he reportedly attempted to join the Communist party, although he was denied membership because of his wartime allegiance to the Austro-Hungarian monarchy. ↑
8. *Ibid.* ↑
9. See, for example, 'Kill the Workers!' (press release), London: Chisenhale Gallery, 2011, available at <http://www.chisenhale.org.uk/archive/exhibitions/index.php?id=117> (last accessed on 28 May 2014). ↑
10. See Kerbel's exchange with Jamie Stevens: 'Interview with Janice Kerbel' (exh. leaflet), London: Chisenhale Gallery, 2011, available at http://www.chisenhale.org.uk/archive/exhibitions/images/JKerbel_interview.pdf (last accessed on 28 May 2014). ↑
11. See J. Kerbel in conversation with Catherine Wood [audio recording], 14 April 2011, Chisenhale Gallery, London, available at <http://www.chisenhale.org.uk/archive/exhibitions/index.php?id=117> (last accessed on 28 May 2014).
12. 'Interview with Janice Kerbel', *op. cit.* ↑
13. See J. Kerbel in conversation with C. Wood, *op. cit.* ↑
14. 'Interview with Janice Kerbel', *op. cit.* ↑
15. *Ibid.* ↑
16. As paraphrased in Slavoj Žižek, 'The Lesson of Rancière' (afterword), in Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics* (trans. Gabriel Rockhill), London and New York: Continuum, 2004, p.70. ↑