A Short Atlas of Janice Kerbel's *Home Climate Gardens* Drawn According to Temperate Coordinates

Jakub Zdebik

The Gail and Stephen A. Jarislowsky Institute for Studies in Canadian Art
Concordia University

Abstract: *A Short Atlas of Janice Kerbel's Home Climate Gardens Drawn According to Temperate Coordinates* focuses on a series of blueprints representing gardens meant for urban spaces. Yet none of these gardens were meant to be constructed and rather will remain on the page. This article focuses on the black and white aesthetics at play in the works and the dual elements of line and text that yield a space for imagination. By focusing on a particular piece, *Indoor Island Garden*, the article questions what the concept of the island yields for thought through notions of geography and cartography.

Fig. 1: Janice Kerbel, *Indoor Island Garden*, 2004, (*Home Climate Garden Series*), Edition: 5 + 2 AP, 69 x 99 cm, Inkjet Print on Paper. Image reproduced with permission from Janice Kerbel & Galerie Karin Guenther, Hamburg.

Precise black outlines on white paper trace gardens intended for a city. According to these plans, the gardens are meant to fit most lithely into urban spaces un-primed for botanicals. To admit to the cliché from the get-go, they are islands of verdure in the urban landscape. But these diagrams also outline the virtual possibilities of the black and white elements of a drawing. The black lines on the white page are the essential elements that conjure a space through representation. What these virtual plans for gardens stake is the potential force captured in a drawing's strictest elements, the depth of imagination of simple geometric shapes, and also the urgent notion of environmental space within the urban setting.

Janice Kerbel is a Canadian artist based in London, England and has designed a series of urban gardens meant to remain on the page. Each garden is represented in black and white as architectural plans collected under the name *Home Climate Gardens* (see Fig. 1). For example, *7th Floor Council Flat* is a plan for a garden hung on the wall to save space. *Victorian Terrace House—seasonal bay window-garden* fits into an unexploited space of urban architecture and *Laundrette—hanging garden* is a garden designed to be suspended from the ceiling, benefiting from the humid air of a Laundromat. Most interestingly, *Indoor Island Garden* is not made for a specific space, but is a specific space in itself. The composition seems minimal, delicate and abstract. It is also the collapse of the garden-as-island formula that covers greenery with imagination. I would like to explore what kind of space it occupies as a garden on paper, a potential garden on paper that is also an island.

Kerbel's *Gardens* are meant to be commentaries on climate change and urban habitat. She writes that: "Even under threat, nature continues to be seen as a metaphor," and as a metaphor, nature keeps giving us a potential model for thought.¹ Kerbel explains how the contradictory attitude towards climate change is based on the push of utopian desires and the pull of dystopian habits: "The natural environment is threatened by the built one."² We are not able to imagine the environment, to figure out how to solve the problem of climate change. Even scientific data is up for debate. The question posed through Kerbel's aesthetic strategy centers on the figuring of the environment, giving it a shape and laying out a ground for action.

Jens Astoff, a critic of Kerbel's work, explains that the series proposes the dichotomous coexistence of natural and artificial environments. The artist takes into consideration "light, temperature, and humidity conditions of commercial and domestic spaces" and constructs individual gardens around each of these obstructions.³ But what is crucial to the success of Kerbel's diagrams is the way these conditions and spaces are conveyed. The drawings give priority to "lucid visual communication above aesthetics, but Kerbel's graphic, pseudoscientific style leaves that much more room for viewers to conjure their own images of her alternate realities."⁴ How can a pseudoscientific style leave room for viewers to conjure their own images? How can this pseudoscientific aspect, the point of which might be construed as the illusion of objectivity, give more room for the viewer's imagination? Mark Godfrey describes the series along these objective lines: "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."⁵ The plans are based on interlacing texts and images. The austere lines of a drawing will lead us to a description of Kerbel's works. But we can also follow these lines into their ontological depth: we can see how Kerbel's drawings thrive lushly in the imagination of the viewer precisely because they are rendered in a sober, elegant and scientific style.

One possible grip in this paradox of scientific, objective style provoking more imaginary spaces is the schism that exists between the plan of the garden and the fact that these gardens were never meant to be realized. The drawings are not "proposals or halfway stages toward fully realized plans."⁶ "Instead," Godfrey continues, "they are objects with their unique texture."⁷ He does not explain why these plans, blueprints or diagrams, which are usually understood to be objects of mediation towards the full realization of the object they represent, are in themselves objects in their

own right. Instead, he offers this proposition: “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.”⁸ Other critics have also presented the view that: “Her works provoke a sense of uncertainty in the viewer, before the realisation hits home that the plans are not sketches, proposals or objectives, but rather independent and finished artworks, which then take on different meanings of their own.”⁹ There is an unbridgeable schism between the plan and what it is supposed to designate. The plan stops short of fulfilling this function and instead remains art. It is not without a pointed insight that Kerbel’s drawings have been compared to “traditional landscapes sketches or still-lives.”¹⁰ But they are landscape sketches for an age whose relationship with objectivity is thorny. Before getting to the imaginary depths a potential garden can occupy, it is first necessary to consider the aesthetics of space represented in Kerbel’s work and their ontological potential.

I. The First Part: The aesthetics of the black line on white paper

In what follows, I will explore the aesthetic apparatus of Kerbel’s work by showing the effectiveness and depthlessness of the black line. For this, the sobriety of the models must be considered as the source of versatility in her style. Thus, I will consider Michel Foucault, Stephen Werner and Jean-François Lyotard’s views of the line. These thinkers have philosophised the line to its depthless dimension and therefore provide a critical framework within which to assess the unresolved potentiality that infuses Kerbel’s work with a sense of oneiric vision. First, I will look at the gardens from the perspective of 18th century botanical classification, then I will frame the drawings of gardens as blueprints and finally as plans containing visual and textual elements.

Kerbel’s gardens consist of diagrams in which images and words intersect. There are legends and insets, codes and directionality. It is the sum of these elements that creates a closed system indicating objectivity. From this style of objectivity, Kerbel springboards and reaches for a virtual dimension that is the source of tension in her work.

Since these diagrams represent gardens, let us begin with botany. Foucault, in the section of *The Order of Things* entitled “Classifying”, describes the epistemological shift that occurs in 18th century botany through a modification of the spacing between the visual and the textual. Out of an *adroit* concentration of terms spawns a formula that defines natural history as “nothing more than the nomination of the visible.”¹¹ Classical botanists step into the modern era of natural history by ceasing to read things in nature as signs. Instead, nature itself signifies something. Botanists confine themselves to the observable surfaces of things and describe them as the things they really are. Based on his formulaic definition, Foucault proposes that the function of natural history is not to deal with flora, but solely to shorten the distance between observable objects and a system of representation.¹²

And so, smells and tastes of plants are discarded because they are considered too variable and unreliable; they are replaced with more rigid elements, such as surface visibilities and, to a limited extent, tactile observation (rough versus smooth). As Foucault succinctly summarizes: “The area of visibility in which observation is able to assume its powers is thus only what is left after these exclusions: a visibility freed from all other sensory burdens and restricted, moreover, to black and white.”¹³ The extraneous elements are filtered out of the representation, but they reside in the distance between the graphic representation and the thing. The graphic representation embodies this distance and shows its paradoxical depth. This area of visibility is made up of lines, surfaces and forms; these, in turn, define “natural history’s condition of possibility.”¹⁴ The potentiality of the objects drawn is provided by their style of representation, which is, in this case, black on white.

The elegant aesthetics of the clean black lines on a white surface at play in Kerbel’s art can be compared to the restrained vocabulary of 18th century plates in the *Encyclopédie*. Remaining within the

time period considered by Foucault, Werner looks upon the encyclopaedic plates as blueprints because of their simple smartness. Clean lines in botanical diagrams are what make Foucault think of the possibility of a structural change between empirical and representational dimensions. Sobriety is needed to isolate a function in order to categorically move an object from dimension to dimension. It is the sobriety of the line of the plates that makes them so versatile for Werner. According to this train of thought, Kerbel's blueprints are more than just representations of gardens. They capture the potentiality of a garden or, more succinctly, potentiality itself.

Werner explains how the aesthetic of the sober black lines were applied in the plates of the *Encyclopédie* not only to depict inanimate objects, but also to illustrate activities such as farming or cork-making, in effect, tracing blueprints of actions. He is able to deduce a virtual dimension from these illustrations. He traces the story of how the illustrative style reserved for the depiction of a machine also came to be suitable for the illustration of humans and their activities. It is the story of our mechanized human condition, starting in the time when the countryside was being abandoned for the city. A simple line is the vehicle through which to convey a complex and dynamic moment of history in a given corner of the world. Presently, long after the migration that brought about industrialization, Kerbel is trying to find little agrarian zones within overfull urban territories.

The term "blueprint", so far removed from its original designation as an architectural plan, is employed by Werner because it designates clarity and function; it is a drawing whose purpose is to depict an object in such a particular way that the person who follows the lines of the drawing will be able to build that object. The blueprint is taken "out of the orbit of the mimetic."¹⁵ The simple copying—that is, the translation of a subject into a representation—is endowed with another, more complex, dimension. A finely drawn, detailed blueprint cannot capture its subject's full portrait: "This state can only be achieved when a blueprint has been put into use, and a building or machine constructed. Until such a time, its final or definitive shape exists only in outline."¹⁶ Werner turns the blueprint into a blueprint-concept: a function is extracted from one blueprint and applied to different types. A blueprint is turned into a blueprint-concept when the function that is abstracted from an original object is then applied to a different one within the limited scope of the isolated elements constituting the concept. This function makes the blueprint versatile. Beyond the ontological positioning of plan versus object-to-be-realised, Werner points to the scaffolding of the blueprint: the process. If the minimal unit of the blueprint is the line, then the process is geared towards it and consequently, the object depicted can then be trained on potentiality.

In his book *Discours, figure*—first published in 1971 and still untranslated into English—Lyotard considers the ontology of the line in relation to the letter. He carves out an unrepresentable fissure between the line and the letter that can be compared to the space of structure between the real and the representation in Foucault. Except that here, Lyotard introduces an element of contrariety into the objective scientific construction. The presence of truth and illusion in systems already formed through the visual/textual duality is under scrutiny. This should bring us closer to the depth of Kerbel's diagrams, consisting as they do of visual and textual elements. Lyotard reintroduces a sensory element into the system, which the botanists in Foucault's example were filtering out. And so, while pursuing the vegetational thread, we are reminded that an over-reliance on the objectivity of the line can be illusory: "It is not that we could ever apprehend the real itself, as we pick a flower after having cleared it from the surrounding herbs. The decoy and the real come together not as contraries in a system, but at least as a *thickness* that has its recto and its verso together."¹⁷ The real is indeed not something to be plucked like a flower; it is an aberration that emerges in the space between signification and knowledge. It emerges by clashing, as a distortion. By clashing, the real makes itself felt on the surface of discourse. But the real only makes itself felt by its effects and these effects are not always truth itself but sometimes illusions. The recto and the verso of the depth emerge on the surface of the system of black lines on white surfaces. The real

emerges as a depth on the surface of the system in the way that shading is added to a line drawing. It makes the object drawn seem three-dimensional, real, floating above the surface of the page. Of course, all the while, it is just an amalgam of strategically placed lines, but they are positioned as calculated decoys: an amalgam of lines that are not sticking out of the page at all—they are still on the surface of the page—they just look three-dimensional. They are illusions, aberrations, but by coming off the page, they also clash with the flatness, the order of discourse, and therefore offer a possibility of capturing the real.

In an interview with Terence Dick, Kerbel explains how she painstakingly made sure that the gardens she was creating could be real: “The choice of plants was dictated by light, humidity and the conditions in each room.”¹⁸ However, all efforts leading towards their possibility was prevented by a simple truth: “But the fact is that plants really don’t want to be inside. So while they have this promise of producing these beautiful, lush gardens—the plan tells us this—in reality, it may be nothing like that.”¹⁹ Kerbel’s gardens are decoys meant to trap the real through their constructed objectivity, their scientific aesthetic. These gardens are as real as they are firmly planted in a potentiality that allows for their existence on the page. The viewer can inhabit the promise of this space without having to witness a withering of the gardens in their urban settings.

II. The Second Part, in which Gardens Are Described as Islands.

What is the space *Indoor Island* occupies? Is it in the frame which surrounds the drawing hanging on the wall? Is it the imaginary home for which the garden could potentially be destined? After having established how a black and white system can open an ontological depth, we will now look at how the island pictured—or suggested—through lines, and on a broader scale, the gardens that Kerbel illustrates as individual islands framed by the home, can also offer deep dimensions of imagination on their own. This is the second part of the double depth of the line depicting an island.

What can an island tell us about an image, and what can the *image* of an island tell us about thought? An island, as Peter Sloterdijk explains in his *Sphären* trilogy, can also be a greenhouse, a space capsule or even a garden—something artificial and isolated. And so now the object that Kerbel designs by using black lines, the gardens themselves, will be opened to a virtual yet real dimension. Sloterdijk’s “sphereological” theory of islands, capsules and greenhouses bends towards the possibility of animated interior worlds. Taking the analogy further and basing his theory of islands on the philosophy of Gilles Deleuze, these worlds, in their multiplicity, create assemblages or rhizomes of the sea: archipelagos consisting of similar islands.²⁰ In effect, each island is a model of the world within the world.²¹ Like Deleuze, Sloterdijk introduces the notion of the frame within the idea of the island: “It is the framing force that gives to the emergent force of the island a boundary, as if these surfaces without context were a sort of natural work of art corralled by the sea, from which emerge a sort of sampling of nature.”²² Of course, it is from a philosophical perspective that these models of islands can give us a clue about the functioning of our thought process.

Sloterdijk makes a plan of his own using the image of the island. He extracts certain essential traits from islands and thus turns them into epistemological models. The ocean is the isolator providing the conditions for the appearance of a “world-model,” which, in turn, is characterized by an insular climate. Climate becomes the ontic element of the isolation process. Sloterdijk summarises that “[t]he island experience is of a natural climate.”²³ According to this line of thought, especially when applied to Kerbel’s gardens, we would only be able to understand nature if we make artificial support systems for nature within our homes. Based on this duality of isolation and climate, Sloterdijk proposes artificial types of islands: “When we want to understand an island, we have to construct island prostheses that repeat all the essential traits of the natural island...From the form of replacement we finally understand what we have with the first form.”²⁴ We are going to learn of the

complexity of the earth only when we have to start replacing it bit by bit. Accordingly, the first artificial model is the absolute island in the shape of the capsule—such as a ship, a plane or a space-shuttle; the other type is the climatic island—greenhouses, biospheres, winter-gardens.²⁵

In Kerbel's case, it is the private isolation of these gardens that makes them islands. "A humid bathroom," she writes, "may offer the same climatic conditions as an island in the South Pacific without the risk of extreme weather events and coastal erosion; similarly, the climate of a centrally-heated office block is akin to a fragile desert habitat."²⁶ This is more than the transcription of nature into a black and white mode of representation; it is the transposition of nature into a functional model to represent not the look of nature but the potential force of nature. But we are not drawing from nature, we are drawing towards nature. And so, if the atmospheric and climatic conditions must be taken into consideration so that the cargo of a space shuttle thrives, a variety of conditions—light, plant, temperature, humidity and space—are considered by Kerbel in relation to her work so that the gardens she draws survive like islands.

Deleuze considers the formation of islands as a model for the emergence of thought: "Take the Idea of an Island: geographical dramatisation differentiates it or divides the concepts into two types, the original oceanic type which signals an eruption or raising above the sea, and the continental drift type which results from a disarticulation or fracture."²⁷ The latter type of islands—the continental islands—are described as "accidental, derived islands. They are separated from a continent, born of a disarticulation, erosion, fracture; they survive the absorption of what once contained them."²⁸ The former type, however, has the element of organism incorporated into its detailed definition: "*Oceanic islands* are originary, essential islands. Some are formed from coral reefs and display a genuine organism. Others emerge from underwater eruptions, bringing to the light of day a movement from the lowest depths."²⁹ Oceanic islands "rise slowly; some disappear and then return, leaving us no time to annex them."³⁰ Finally, these islands about which Deleuze is writing do not remain static geographical organizations. The image implies a necessary dynamism: "The Island dreamer, however, rediscovers this double dynamism because he dreams of becoming infinitely cut off, at the end of a long drift, but also of an absolute beginning by means of a radical foundation."³¹ It is the oneiric aspect of the island brought about through isolation, the oneiric aspect that is present in the subject of Kerbel's *Indoor Island*. This makes the viewer dream of an island in a home as a real possibility.

Isolation functions as a framing device connecting thought to the environment. This is how the diagrams of gardens offer a platform for reflection on an environment that does not simply support us, but is also intricately linked to our thoughts. After all, geography "is not merely physical and human but mental, like a landscape."³² Robert Smithson, the artist famous for his Earth Art masterpiece *Spiral Jetty*, 1970, has himself designed an artificial garden as island—*Floating Island to Travel Around Manhattan Island*, 1970. It was meant to be pulled by a tug-boat around Manhattan. This project remained *in potentia* during his lifetime, existing only as a plan on a page until recently, when the project was actualized. But it is for his synthesis of thought and geography that he must be mentioned here. The artist describes a mental landscape where the earth and the mind coincide: "One's mind and the earth are in a constant state of erosion, mental rivers wear away abstract banks, brain waves undermine cliffs of thought, ideas decompose into stones of unknowing.... This movement seems motionless, yet it crushes the landscape of logic under glacial reveries...."³³ In the oneiric aspect of geography described by Smithson we find a function for thought: "...the image thought gives itself of what it means to think, to make use of thought, to find one's bearings in thought."³⁴ The persisting metaphor of geography serves to organize, and this organization is captured in the representational quality of spatial diagrams.

Indoor Island shows the dreamer its colours through a cartographic activity of applying the legend to the plan. The colour and lushness of the island come from each individual plant and their

tropical allure. The legend at the bottom edge of the piece assures us that the plants are tropical, thus making the fantasy possible. The single palm tree (*Cocos Nucifera*), represented by the largest circle on the left of the kidney-shaped amalgam of circles iconically solidifies the garden as an island. Intensive directives such as temperature, water needs and sunlight brighten the space in which we imagine the garden to grow, giving the work an affective perspective. Each circle of the diagram is a world within a world forming an archipelago of circular shapes while at the same time underscoring its diagrammatic nature as a plan—each circle interlocking with several others in the manner of a whimsical Venn diagram. The precise and discreet lines control a potential yet real space. Once these elements are in place, the viewer is free to dream the possibility of this island. A whole imaginary apparatus is at play; it ebbs and flows between the virtual and the actual. Kerbel's elegant blueprint balances temperate outlines and creates an amalgam of multilayered resonance. On flat paper, we dip into the depth that surrounds the artificial garden emerging as an abstract island.

¹ Janice Kerbel, *Home Climate Gardens*, 2003

² Ibid.

³ Jens Astoff, "Janice Kerbel," *Artforum* (July 15, 2004), <http://artforum.com/archive>

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Mark Godfrey, "First Take: Mark Godfrey on Janice Kerbel," *Artforum* 44.5 (2006): 183.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Moderna Museet, *Janice Kerbel* (Stockholm: Moderna Museet, 2007).

¹⁰ Godfrey, 183.

¹¹ Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (New York: Vintage Books, 1973), 132.

¹² Ibid., 130.

¹³ Ibid., 133.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Stephen Werner, *Blueprint: A Study of Diderot and the Encyclopédie Plates* (Birmingham: Summa Publications 1993), 110.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Jean-François Lyotard, *Discours, figure* (Paris: Klincksieck, 1971), 17. Author's translation.

¹⁸ Terence Dick, "The Mapmaker," *Canadian Art* 23.4 (2006): 50.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Peter Sloterdijk, *Sphères III: Écumes: Sphérologie plurielle*, trans. Olivier Mannoni (Paris : Hachette, 2005), 274.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid., 275. Author's translation.

²³ Ibid., 276.

²⁴ Ibid., 280. Author's translation.

²⁵ Ibid., 279.

²⁶ Kerbel.

²⁷ Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, trans. Paul Patton (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 219.

²⁸ Ibid., 9.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid., 219-20.

³² Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *What is Philosophy?*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Graham Burchell (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 96.

³³ Robert Smithson, "A Sedimentation of the Mind: Earth Projects (1968)," in *Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings*, ed. Jack Flamm (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 100.

³⁴ Deleuze and Guattari, 37.

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