

Jim Skuldt

Jim Skuldt Born 1970, Minnesota; lives and works in Los Angeles. Skuldt is a graduate of California Institute of the Arts (MFA, 2005) and was awarded a Triangle France residency in Marseille in 2006. In 2007 he was awarded a California Community Foundation Emerging Artists Fellowship and a Durfee Foundation ARC Grant. His work has been shown at Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions; the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles; Art in General, New York; the Elizabeth Foundation for the Arts, New York; High Desert Test Sites, California; and Friche la Belle de Mai, Marseille.

In conversation with Susan Bell Yank

Susan Bell Yank: In your Cold-Based Production series, *Cold Beer*, *Ice Rink*, and *Production Freezer* coexist within a three-thousand-square-foot former meatpacking plant (aka *ICELAND*), where you house a disassembled touring stage. What concerns initiated this project?

Jim Skuldt: I had spent months fixated on trying to get hold of the forty-eight-foot-diameter dual-ring circular rotating touring stage formerly belonging to Neil Diamond, which had toured worldwide in the mid-nineties. My bargaining power was pretty low as the price I had offered for it was zero dollars. So when it finally materialized, I was given a week to haul it away lest it be scrapped for its aluminum nuggets.

In an urgent search for storage space, I stumbled upon this derelict meatpacking plant. It had been vacant for two years, had been squatted, and was flooded with sewage. It was a disaster. But there was this quasi-forensic folkloric residue surrounding the plant that seemed to resonate with the secondhand historiography of the stage and its trajectory. Syringes, stuffed animals, bloodstains, and hundreds of cockroaches compiled a trail of selective specificity that mirrored the way peripheral support elements of the stage had been traced throughout the entertaining of millions.

The plant, made up of multiple walk-in freezers and refrigerators, is ridiculously particular, as if it had evolved to impede casual usage. The front door had been sealed off completely such that it formed a creepy little airtight room at the end of a twenty-foot hallway (I had to cut open the rear entrance with a blowtorch and Sawzall just to fit things through the door). Beyond this, the segmented nature of the space obstructs any sizable assembly of the arena artifacts. As such, the materials are bound to dormant and mixed-state configurations. So in many ways, these spatial constraints played into distributional strategies that I had been interested in and seemed to propose a structural means of stockpiling phenomena and repositioning nodes.

SBY: How do you envision visitors participating in this space?

JS: When I was about nine, my fourth-grade class went on a tour of the Wonder Bread factory that was next to our elementary school. I don't know if I was at the dentist or what, but somehow I missed the tour. On top of that, I was rarely allowed to eat Wonder Bread as a kid, so the whole thing took on this sort of mystique. From there my brain went on to progressively conflate that event with several other awe-inspiring site visits I had seen on television.

Many of those spaces seemed to deny a certain interactivity by imposing high-stakes constraints so that if you'd let go of the handrail to touch the cave popcorn you could find yourself getting funneled through a chocolate drainpipe. Others would simply set out to placate participatory urges by allowing the viewer to bear witness to more experienced humans in the act of participating.

So I guess I picture a visit to *ICELAND* as something like that elusive über-visit must have been. You may get to witness the recuperation of a delicious ice-cold beer

from within the seven-thousand-case-capacity stock-olfrigerator. You may participate in the delicious flavors and effects of beer, which may taste even better thanks to all of the terrible excitement. You may see operatives in cold-safe work suits in the process of mining ice deposits or driving the Zamboni. And if you lick the metal freezer door, your tongue may stick there and will probably hurt. But all of these glimpses are subject to a real process in motion and the unabashed titration of its transparency.

SBY: While touching on notions of sociability, your work seems to have a slightly darker edge. What is your relationship to Nicolas Bourriaud's notion of "relational aesthetics," like the convivial work of Rirkrit Tiravanija or Tom Marioni (*The Act of Drinking Beer with Friends Is the Highest Form of Art*)?

JS: Well, I can really relate to those sorts of aesthetics. But sometimes when I'm done with all of the relating, I'm not so sure that something inclusive has happened. When things are spoken of in a way that highlights their social qualities, I wonder how far those exchanges can extend beyond the moment of supposed inclusion—what about the part where those pals start vomiting at 3 a.m. and pass out in the bathtub?

I think any time a group of people stand around and ask, "What are we in the act of doing?" the brain may be getting some well-deserved attention. But it doesn't seem that such meta-reflection need be isolated to relational or convivial moments. This should be able to happen in the most alienating situations (or even in complete isolation). Honestly, some of the most interesting things I've come across are things to which I can, in no way whatsoever, relate.

Neil Diamond's Web site speaks of his ability to transform his concerts into "intimate encounters" between himself and millions of people. That's pretty heavy. It reminds me of this time I went to a Ratt concert and how the guy with the microphone claimed he wished that he could have intercourse with each and every girl in the audience. Even back then, all of that seemed pretty preposterous, though ambitious. But it is precisely this sort of highly segmented collective pleasure that seems to be such a hit in utopic asocial urban models played out in contemporary sprawl-based infrastructures such as Los Angeles.

Distribution I, 1999
Dual-ring circular rotating touring stage formerly belonging to Neil Diamond
Active configuration
Recuperated fan photograph, Internet

Studio Diagram (as ICELAND)
Recuperated diagram, enhanced

ICELAND, 2008
Interior photograph
Courtesy of the artist

ICELAND, 2008
Interior photograph
Courtesy of the artist

