



JANI RUSCICA
HELSINKI

Jani Ruscica – Scene Shifts takes us on an alluring journey that delivers the unexpected [Forum Box; August 12–September 4, 2011]. It leads us around the world, stopping off in seemingly familiar and far away locations. We visit several of Europe’s major cities and also touch down in Alaska, Egypt, and Chile. On another level, the exhibition really takes us nowhere. Pieced together from various sources, the journey is very much an intellectual one. It presents a virtually random compilation of images, sounds, and scientific data referencing recent and historical events. It subjects us to fragmented and disjointed narratives full of contradictory impressions that not only bring us to the limits of comprehension, but also prove revelatory.

The subtitles for *Travelogue*, 2010, have been culled from writings on the city of London, England, including books by Peter Ackroyd, Tom Bullough’s *The Rough Guide*, and internet blogs. It features excerpts variously describing London as labyrinth, human body, wilderness, and site of constant CCTV documentation. Meanwhile, the film actually depicts a bright, high-ceilinged old classroom whose contents and purpose evolve with considered and extended viewing. We first see it as someone’s study or studio. It is empty but for a table and chair. Then it is arranged for a presentation that no one ever attends. The rows of empty chairs face a creaking apparatus: a large piece of white fabric scrolled about two vertical rollers whose movement sparks cinematic and theatrical associations. Are we to think of it as a screen onto which to project personal visualizations drawn from the flow of subtitles? But the camera doesn’t linger on this performance. It pans about the room, revealing details of the interior, and offers glimpses of the rails along which it periodically tracks. The work makes us aware of the gap between word and image, and of the vagaries of opinion. Attempts at resolving the inconsistencies mire us in speculation.

In some respects the equally accomplished second film, *Scene Shifts, in six movements*, 2011, comes across

like a sequel. Ruscica takes us through a series of locations represented by postcards, a movie set, and an example of Chinoiserie. He begins by juxtaposing a cheerless street scene in a backlot with a French-speaking African’s description of Paris in the 1950s. As the film proceeds, the narration unfolds in a range of languages, as well as through music. In the final episode, the camera pans across a frieze-like Chinese scene painted on the body of a harpsichord on which the musical composition *Les Chinois* is played. In its sweep, the work cites examples of cross-cultural influence and assimilation, draws attention to the historical fascination with foreign cultures and pastoral settings, and illustrates some of the ways in which they have been exoticized, misrepresented, or plainly misunderstood. The actions of the camera, which do not escape notice, reinforce the shifts. That repertoire—composed of close-ups, pans, a lens that occasionally pops out of focus, a second glimpse of tracking rails, and an animated sequence—contributes to the work’s disorienting quality.

The film projections bracket the photographic series *Anyplacewhatever*, 2011, presenting different views of a single stool on an empty stage, and the performative *Sounding back (proposition for an anthem)*, 2011, which involves the intermittent musical interpretation of same-day seismographic readouts from a dozen international locations. According to Ruscica, the work entails “the aural interpretation of specific locations that are somehow free of cultural references or specificities.” For the viewer, interpretation is at once impossible and full of potential, as permutations run through the entire exhibition. These complex representations remind us that there are alternative ways of perceiving our surroundings. Interweaving so many art forms, *Jani Ruscica – Scene Shifts* not only suggests that we expand our focus, but that we also critically reconsider how it is possible to look and listen.

—John Gayer

JOHN SALVEST
KANSAS CITY

John Salvest’s provocative and timely two-part project *New Cornucopia and the Big IOU* conveys both the monumentality of the economic crisis facing America today and the dearth of clear solutions [Grand Arts Memorial Hill Park; September 2–November 1, 2011].

IOU/USA, 2011, is a site-specific, temporary public artwork located in Memorial Hill Park. Sited near the Kansas City Federal Reserve Bank, amid historic monuments invoking America’s past—Pioneer Mother and World War I Memorials—*IOU/USA* asserts itself as a mirror of the hopes and dreams that fueled American industry and capitalism, and as one of the consequences of the economic policies that led to America’s vast debt.

With its one hundred five stacked steel shipping containers, the work towers close to seven stories high. Amid a grid of multi-colored units, white-toned containers sporting the acronyms IOU and USA on opposite sides offer a declarative and foreboding statement. Inferences to modern and postmodern art abound—the grid, Constructivism, Minimalism, Conceptual Art, socio-political critique—smartly fusing aspects of twentieth-century art and history in a bold, relevant statement that resonates with the wider public.

Written across the containers’ aged, textured surfaces of peeling paint, dents, rust, graffiti traces, and logos are signifiers of industrialism, capitalism, trade, consumption, and accumulation. Now void of the caches of products they once carried to consumers worldwide, the empty receptacles are emotionally loaded, speaking to an overwhelming, chilling awareness of the fatal flaws of a behemoth global system of commerce boasting promise and power. *IOU/USA* succinctly encapsulates Americans’ rampant, fearful ambivalence toward the failures of capitalism: deny, accept, reject, maintain, or change.

In her essay, Grand Arts Artistic Director Stacy Switzer describes the work’s multivalence, noting: “activists of most any persuasion could read the work as a rallying

ABOVE: Jani Ruscica, still from *Scene Shifts, in six movements*, 2011, HD video, stereo sound, 13 minutes, looped [courtesy of the artist and Forum Box, Helsinki]