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FROSTY RECEPTION

Jörg Heiser chills out at the Icehotel

Photographs: Malin Ahrensson



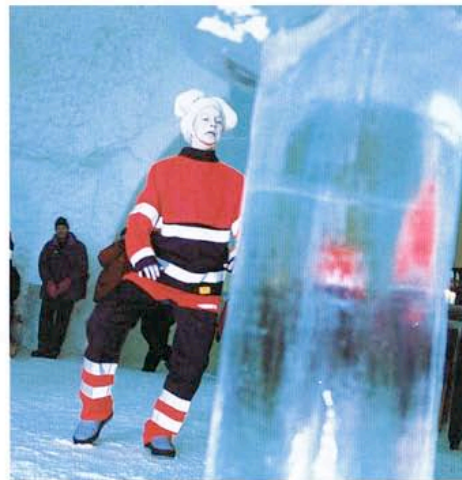
• Christer Juren Ice Cinema, Icehotel, Sweden 2001

In 1976 Jeffrey Valance bought a frozen chicken and arranged a proper funeral for it in a pet cemetery. This was not just any old frozen chicken; it was Blinky the Friendly Hen.

Twenty-five years later the cold fate of Blinky has returned to haunt Valance. Having been holed up in northern Sweden to teach at the Art Academy of Umeå, he discovered a place that encapsulates the theme park anxiety of his hometown Las Vegas: the Icehotel. Located 160 miles north of the polar circle in the small village of Jukkasjärvi, every single part of it – the snow-white vaults, the crystal clear columns, the tables and chairs, sculptures and chandeliers, even the glassware – is made of ice cut from the nearby river. The name – Icehotel® – is marketed professionally and on view to the world

on the web ([www.icehotel.com](http://www.icehotel.com)). It's a place which triggers childhood dreams of glistening Winter Wonderland palaces and Superman resorts, where you spend the night in cavernous suites like a sleeping-bag mummy bedded down in reindeer hides, watched over by transparent polar bear sculptures. It's a place that calls for odd rituals to glow at the heart of its dead beauty; a place where Blinky's icy legacy can bloom.

Consequently, Jeffrey Valance initiated 'Art on the Rocks', a day and night of events at the Icehotel. Performance pros followed the call of the cold, as did students from Umeå, Göteborg, Malmö and Stockholm. With expectations spreading out like frost patterns, arriving there cooled me down. At first, the lines of cabins and the check-in looked like those of any other hotel. I had to pass



• Butch Unit Grotto Ice Bar, Icehotel, Sweden 2001

through a defile of snow to encounter the first example of frozen architecture – and the Reverend Ethan Acres. Clad in a polar bear costume, he led the shivering flock (it was about  $-20^{\circ}\text{C}$ ) into an igloo chapel with an ice altar and frozen biblical friezes, before embarking on a sermon about the connection between angels and cookies. If any hint of irony still resonated after the first few warm-up sentences, it was soon swept away by the sheer Alabama bible-belt sing-song of his voice, as he shook his shoulders like a perfect gospel preacher. Then, before the congregation's eyes, the Reverend threw off his bear suit to reveal angel's wings and linen nappies. Transformed, he married Valance and his long-time partner, artist Victoria Reynolds. The audience, wrapped up warmly and fully gloved, applauded with a sound reminiscent of penguins beating their wings together.

People waddled off to the epiphany of the Icehotel: a long arcade of columns and pointed vaults, eerily glowing in every shade of white and blue. Inside one of the pillars insignia shimmered as if trapped since ancient times (they were actually sponsor's logos, from Ericsson to Absolut). Local sculptors exhibited what looked like post-Brancusi ice-Cubism. An intense blue light emanated from a kind of crypt. It turned out to be coming from a video projector behind a perfectly functional screen made out of a large, smooth plate of ice. What a cinema. Rather than risk their health by reviving performance art's bare skin tradition, quite a few of the contributors showed video and performance hybrids. Cecilia Parsberg, for example, told the story of her quest, accompanied by a friend from Soweto, for a rough diamond – 'ice' in slang – by smuggling the find all the way from South Africa to the polar circle to present it 'live' to the audience (*Ice*, 2001). My Andersson blurred the line between mediated and physical presence the opposite way: she walked out of the Icehotel with a video camera pointed to the snow-covered floor, seemingly transmitting simultaneously onto the screen via a long cable, until she fixed the camera to a tripod outside to capture a picturesque night-time landscape with moon and stars. Suddenly a figure at a distance ran

across the image and vanished, like a ghost, right in the middle of it. Puzzled, some followed the cable like Ariadne's thread, only to find it cut off at the end – the scene had not been 'live', but entirely recorded beforehand.

The Icehotel seemed to provoke the Swedes into examining their national stereotype. Ann Magnusson, for example, gave a performance as a blonde-wigged fairy in a dragon-boat of ice; she recounted stories of her Swedish granny baking cinnamon rolls by twisting the lyrics of Abba songs (turning 'Mamma Mia' into 'Grandma Mia'). In the cinema she showed a scene from the 1960s film *I Take Sweden*, in which a bewildered Bob Hope spies on half-naked couples hopping into the bushes of the Swedish countryside, while Franky Avalon breaks into the chorus of 'I Take Sweden', and the blonde girls' choir answers 'ja, ja' like a tribal chant. Smorgasbord must have sounded a lot like Smorgasbord back then.

However, Magnusson didn't allow her audience to revel in the cheesy, leading them back to the chapel for a harsh reality check. Long after the 1960s' dreams of the Swedish midnight-sun porn paradise had given way to the AIDS-crisis, her brother died of the disease in 1998. She decided to honour him – a childhood fan of Viking rituals and hamster funerals – with a ceremony on the frozen river, which included a little jar with his ashes being burnt with a substitute toy Viking ship, and two Barbie dolls to guard him to Valhalla. It wasn't only the night's grim cold that pierced people, but maybe also the uneasy feelings generated by the incorporation of a dead person into a performance. Blinky was a friendly hen, but she wasn't the artist's sibling.

Eventually, as I had both hoped and feared, I stayed the night: a comforting  $-5^{\circ}\text{C}$ , watched over by 5 foot high rock-crystal prisms. I fell into a deep sleep until I was woken at 7.30 am by a dashing lady serving hot fruit tea. The others had already left, to catch their trains and flights, and so I strolled for one last time through the deserted ice palace, the odour of cold cigarette smoke and alcohol the only remnants of the night before. Still, I felt fresh and well preserved.



• Ann Magnusson Icehotel, Sweden 2001



• Reverend Ethan Acres Icehotel, Sweden 2001



• Siv and Sophie In the Ice Restaurant, Icehotel, Sweden 2001