

Hopeless and Beautiful

Icelandic artist Ragnar Kjartansson's nine channel hour-long film installation, *The Visitors*, was the popular hit of Artes Mundi 6. **Ric Bower** talks to him about a career that spans pop music, durational performance and two projects for the Venice Biennale.

Ragnar Kjartansson's provenance as a performer and creator is formidable, with a CV that extends back to the 90s when he was an aspiring pop star. His durational celebrations of the creative act seem to affirm, as he describes it, not only the hopelessness but also the beauty inherent in the human condition.

Ric Bower: You spent a full six months in Venice in 2009 making a painting a day of your friend for your performance *The End*. Have you been offered the keys to the city, or your own executive toilet perhaps?

Ragnar Kjartansson: That's what I thought would happen, but sadly not. In fact, it is so unfair...

RB: It must have been amazing to have that length of time to concentrate on one aspect of your practice and to get pissed with a friend on a daily basis. I understand you drunk beer constantly. What did you talk about?

RK: He is a very profound guy; we talked about Nietzsche because that was what he was reading at the time. The painting is a performative thing in itself for me. I love to talk and paint. I used to dress up to paint when I was in art school. During the abstract modules I would dress up like an action painter and chain smoke. My practice is more about the theatricality of it all than the performance *per se*.

RB: You're immersed in Icelandic sub-cultures. What's the scene like?

RK: Pretty much the same as in the UK, I think. It is confident because we have the likes of Sigurlaug Gísladóttir and Björk and they show up to concerts. The fact that they never moved away brings a certain confidence. I was in a band called Trabant. It was electro-clash with nudity and glitter, very camp, like Queen. It was a really good rock 'n' roll show, and the music was... well, all right. I remember, we did a tour round Britain on the toilet circuit. We had just been signed by Southern Fried Records, which is Norman Cook's label, and we thought we were about to make it big time. We had this tiny fucked-up tour bus; you could feel the semen in the fabric of the seats. I remember we were somewhere in the Midlands. There were maybe ten teenagers in the audience staring blankly at us as I was singing my heart out. All my clothes were off apart from the gold knickers. The song climaxed in crescendo of guitar madness and, as the feedback faded, I heard a Brummie-accented voice shout, "Get off the stage you faggot". I understood Britain so much better after that tour.

RB: Expectation is a terrible thing, in music and in art. Everyone is so ready to measure your successes and failures with their own particular units of measurement. How do you deal with that?

RK: I was so ambitious when I was in rock 'n' roll. We did a gig once and there were important journalists watching; when the gig did not go so well I threw myself in a ditch and cried... for real. I never had any expectations with my career in art though; it was something I did on the side. I still play a lot now. The musicians in *The Visitors* are all friends and we play together. It's like a musical social club.

RB: The performative element of music, the repetition, and even the ritual, all seem to be tightly woven into your practice.

RK: Yes, I once had a great night drinking whisky with the artist Ulay. He told me he had been studying aboriginal cultures and spiritual rituals, and to try and understand them through performance art, he took the faith out of them, turning them into humanistic rituals. I really liked this idea. My own work is coming out of a Chekhovian outlook, 'it is all hopeless but it is beautiful'; that is my worldview, in so many ways, and it leaks into my work.

RB: A kind of bitter sweetness.

RK: Yes, yes. I was raised really religious; my mother is very religious even now. Sometimes I miss it.

RB: Did your faith just walk out one day?

RK: Sort of. It was not the problem of →



evil, or anything like that. It was the problem of religious people. So many of them were arseholes, it just doesn't make sense. I still miss that feeling, but I gained a lot in its place.

RB: Can you tell me how you've come to understand the place relationships have, both in your life and in your practice?

RK: Relationships have such a big place in my life. I use art to keep friendships alive. I am an individualist, but I believe we are alone together. We collaborate and work as friends in communities, like being jazz musicians; one day we are the Miles Davis band and the next we are the Dizzy Gillespie band, depending on whose idea we are running with. I believe in camaraderie and I get obsessed with people. It's like childhood when I would go out and play with my friends; that's what I do now with my work. Making work with my friends is more fun than just meeting up for a beer!

RB: And so with music, which way are you drawn? Towards Apollo or towards Dionysius?

RK: I am drawn to both. In my work there is blues and country, but there's also German *Lieder*. I always seem to use western music in my work, I am not sure why. I think that tension between the forces of order and the forces of chaos is what it is all about in many ways. The band I have listened to most in recent years is undoubtedly The National. I made a piece with them, *A Lot of Sorrow*, where they played their three-minute, twenty-five second song, *Sorrow*, live on stage, repeatedly and continuously, for six hours. I assumed the role of the roadie, bringing the musicians food and water throughout the performance.

RB: It must be an interesting starting point, when you know their work so well but they, the band, don't know you.

RK: Pop stars, like them, are used to that situation. You never really know them anyway; you just think you do.

RB: What is it about the process of repetition that changes something?

RK: It becomes sculptural somehow and, most importantly, repeating something takes the narrative out of it, it becomes solid. I come from a background in painting; it feels like I am turning songs into paintings by repeating them. My approach comes from artists like John Cage, Chris Burden and Marina Abramović. —→





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Ragnar Kjartansson at Cardiff School of Art & Design, Ric Bower, 2015

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The End - Venice, Ragnar Kjartansson, June 2009
Performance installation
Six month performance during the 2009 Venice Biennale during which 144 paintings were made
Commissioned by the Center for Icelandic Art.
Photo: Rafael Pinho
© Ragnar Kjartansson: images courtesy of the artist, Luhring Augustine, New York, and i8 Gallery, Reykjavik

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A Lot of Sorrow, Ragnar Kjartansson and The National, 2013-2014
Single channel video
Edition of 10 and 2 artist's proofs
Duration: 6 hours, 9 minutes, 35 seconds

A Lot of Sorrow took place at MoMA PS1, as part of Sunday Sessions. Sunday Sessions is organized by Jenny Schlenzka, Associate Curator with Mike Skinner, Producer and Alex Sloane, VW Fellow. Photographs: Elisabet Davidsdottir
© Ragnar Kjartansson and The National: images courtesy of the artists, Luhring Augustine, New York, and i8 Gallery, Reykjavik.



RB: You've mentioned elsewhere about your particular fascination with the practices of female artists, can you expand a little?

RK: I just find it amazing that half of humanity, until recently, did not have a voice. Perhaps the first female artist to bring her own body into the arena of art discourse was Carolee Schneemann and she is still alive. I think that, in 100 years, the likes of Joseph Beuys, Andy Warhol and Jeff Koons will be side-lined by the great revolution in feminist art.

RB: Are you planning on growing old gracefully?

RK: I have a great role model, on that front, in my godmother, who was a Lieder singer. She was born in 1900, she always wore black gowns with white pearls and she had no furniture in her tiny basement flat.

She grew old very gracefully and was super, duper cool. Age is the greatest luxury we can have as human beings. It is better than the alternative after all.

RB: When your six-month performance, *The End*, was over you were in possession of 144 oil paintings of your friend. How do you relate to the objects that come into being through your practice?

RK: Icelandic culture is 1100 years old, but it is not a culture of objects; there are no old castles or revered objects to speak of, there are just stories. Because of this, visual art did not really get going in Iceland until the early 20th century and, in my view, it did not really resonate properly with our culture until the conceptual movement got going.

RB: Did you become dissatisfied with painting?

RK: I still paint regularly now; I was never dissatisfied with it as a process. My practice just led me in a different direction. I paint figuratively, I can't think in a way that results in the creation of abstract works.

RB: How do you balance being an informal ambassador for a small but proud nation, and all the inevitable agendas surrounding that position, with the demands put on you by the international art market?

RK: It's not a big issue in Iceland. We have our independence now and there is no longer that struggle and insecurity to deal with.

RB: Do you feel the role of an artist in today's society carries a responsibility?

RK: I am a very political person in my private life but my work seems to be quite decadent. My socialism does not always shine through perhaps. I really believe in art but I find it ridiculous to believe in *my own* art. Four years ago Jp Morgan threw a party in 2013 when I was in Massimiliano Gianni's Arsenale show. Their richest clients were there and the champagne was flowing. When the time came for me to say something, I stood up and said "Dear people, thank you for affording me this opportunity to share my work with the world and now please join me in singing *The Internationale*."

RB: You're always very stylishly turned out. How many suits do you have and do you have a walk-in wardrobe?

RK: I stash them in my daughter's room, she is four and she says to me: "Why do you keep your suits in my room Daddy; why can't you keep them in your room?" When I turned thirty I decided I would always wear a suit.

RB: And, finally, what really bores you?

RK: The only thing that really bores me is my own insecurity. —CCQ

Ragnar Kjartansson is represented by Luhring Augustine in New York: luhringaugustine.com and i8 Gallery in Reykjavik: i8.is.

Artes Mundi 6 was at National Museum Cardiff, Chapter and Ffotogallery, 24 October 2014 - 22 February 2015