

RAGNAR KJARTANSSON  
THE VISITORS

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Mueller Family Gallery

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**Ragnar Kjartansson** (1976, Reykjavik, Iceland), lives and works in Reykjavik. Solo exhibitions of his work have been held at the New Museum, New York; Migros Museum für Gegenwartskunst, Zurich; Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh; and the Institute of Contemporary Art Boston, among others. In 2011, he was awarded Performa's Malcolm McLaren Award, and in 2009 he represented Iceland at the Venice Biennale.



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RAGNAR KJARTANSSON

# THE VISITORS

Incorporating elements of theater, music, and visual art, Ragnar Kjartansson creates performances that test the boundaries between reality and fiction, melancholy and parody. Often made with groups of other people, including artists, musicians, family, and friends, his work explores the nature of human connection and collaboration. For instance, the ongoing series of video works *Me and My Mother* examines the micro dynamics of the mother-son relationship; Kjartansson's mother, the actress Guðrún Ásmundsdóttir, repeatedly spits on the artist, in an act both transgressive and tender. Starting in 2000, this performance is repeated every five years and is inflected with subtle shifts as both Kjartansson and his mother age. Other past projects have mined family history; in *Take Me Here by the Dishwasher: Memorial for a Marriage* (2011/2014), the artist explored the myth of his own conception. Over the course of multiple weeks, ten troubadours sing and play for seven hours a day, accompanied by a clip from the Icelandic film *Morðsaga (Murder Story)* (1977). The film features Kjartansson's now divorced parents in a kitchen sex scene, and the troubadours' lyrics are a direct translation of their on-screen conversation. According to family lore, the artist was conceived the night after the scene was filmed.

A performative action—singing, playing, painting, spitting—that is repeated, drawn out, and returned to over an extended period of time, is a strategy that Kjartansson has often turned to. Kjartansson maintains these formal parameters while altering the staging, settings, and groupings of people, to different effect each time. Before turning to performance and music, Kjartansson trained as a painter, and he often draws from this background, not only as a trope for “Art,” but also conceptually; approaching sound as a visual artist, he treats it like paint or clay, layering and building it up. As he states, “It is the time and repetition that turns it into a sculpture” or a “mass,” building substance and materiality, a sense of embodiment.<sup>1</sup> This idea of sound as sculpture recalls the work of the artist duo Gilbert and George, and their *Singing Sculpture* (1968), a repeated performance in which they sang atop a table for up to eight hours at a time.<sup>2</sup> This “structuring” also recalls religious or spiritual ceremonies that foreground repetition and ritual in order to create a space for contemplation, meditation, or prayer.

In Kjartansson's 9 channel video installation *The Visitors* (2012), performance and its conditions are played out in a setting already loaded with meaning—Rokeby, a storied, rambling mansion built in the Hudson Valley, a region in New York State associated with the nineteenth century Hudson River School of painting, which idealized the American landscape as a marriage of the sublime and pastoral. Dating from 1815, the house is lushly distressed and still operates as a family home. Stationed in different rooms, Kjartansson and seven friends (along with the residents of Rokeby on the front porch) stage a musical production (arranged by fellow artist Davíð Þór Jónsson) while wearing headphones that allow them to hear one another. The house appears as an arrangement of rich, painterly tableaux occupied by the musicians.

The title of *The Visitors* is borrowed from Swedish pop group ABBA's 1981 album of the same name. Supposed to be their last, it was written at a time of breakdown in the group, including the divorce of lead members Benny Andersson and Frida Lyngstad. This reference connects Kjartansson's work to popular culture, while also pointing towards the artist's own real-life experiences: the lyrics in the piece belong to a text by artist Ásdís Sif Gunnarsdóttir, Kjartansson's ex-wife. In addition to its direct music-world reference, *The Visitors* participates in the visual language of music videos and popular culture through its staging and medium. However, while viewers may be accustomed to music videos as 3-minute advertisements for songs, this expectation is swiftly upended; at 64-minutes long, *The Visitors* breaks the entertainment barrier, pushing towards inarticulate emotion.

Shot in a single take and unfolding in real time, the performers seem always present, forever encountered in the now, as if the viewer were a neighbor who had just stumbled across the scene. The musicians are immersed in their own private worlds:

what the viewer experiences as an ensemble production is performed by individuals, alone. This tension, between singular performance and collective experience, maintaining the self while desiring to belong, is at the heart of *The Visitors*. Indeed, it is amplified by the way the audience comes to the performance, negotiating their own experience of the work while sharing the space of the gallery with other, unknown visitors.

This dialectic is also at the core of families and relationships. The lyrics of the song are sung in a round or a chant, repeated over and over again: “once again...I fall into... my feminine ways”. The phrase “feminine ways” suggests a set of predetermined expectations, bringing to mind the feeling of falling—acquiescing—into our own, old patterns and the taking up of outgrown roles despite our best intentions. Relationships can be both comfort and crutch. In Kjartansson's world, artistic practice becomes a fulcrum for relationships in the round—sex, divorce, fighting, comfort, and longing—and creates a space in which they are performed. One could compare it to a fun house mirror that distorts, only to reveal something true—what Kjartansson terms the “realness of pretending.”<sup>3</sup> This interplay between reality and fiction is a central theme in Kjartansson's work, one perhaps rooted in his upbringing. Both of his parents are theatre actors, for whom the stage or screen, rather than the home, was the space in which the complexities and difficulties of marriage—the erotics, disappointments, and separation fantasies—were acted out.<sup>4</sup> Sometimes, in order to be real, we perform.

By orchestrating performances in which the humble nature of human drama is scaled up to grand gesture, Kjartansson questions the traditional notion of the artist as solitary and heroic, often courting absurdity. This is pursued in different ways and in a deadpan, committed manner, leveraging a contemporary Icelandic context that engages, in a self-aware fashion, with the island's rich culture of storytelling, music, and reputation for melancholia. Whether Kjartansson is captaining the *S.S. Hangover* (2013), or undertaking a six-month painting performance at the Venice Biennale that pokes fun at the apparent pointlessness of art (*The End*, 2009), the effect is a wink that opens, rather than deflects. In *The Visitors*, this idea manifests in self-deprecation; Kjartansson plays guitar while immersed in a bubble bath. There is beauty in futile exercises embarked upon in earnest, and as Kjartansson believes, “Nothing is beautiful unless it is serious.”<sup>5</sup>

—ELENA HARVEY COLLINS  
CURATORIAL ASSISTANT

<sup>1</sup> Margot Norton, “Interview with Ragnar Kjartansson,” *Me, My Mother, My Father, and I*, ed. Massimiliano Gioni (New York: New Museum of Contemporary Art, 2014), 17-18.

<sup>2</sup> Kjartansson's work is also in dialogue with artists such as Marina Abramović, Francis Alÿs, and Phil Collins, who work with performance and endurance. In Collins's *They Shoot Horses* (2004), groups of Palestinian teenagers dance to a series of Western pop songs in front of a lurid pink wall, for two eight-hour sessions. At once irreverent and heartfelt, this piece engages critically with big picture geopolitics, while also foregrounding the humanness, identity, and emotion of each performer, as the dance marathon continues and the emotional tenor shifts from joy to exhaustion.

<sup>3</sup> Norton, 17.

<sup>4</sup> In 1983, Kjartansson's father wrote a play titled *Divorce*, in which Kjartansson's mother played the lead role.

<sup>5</sup> Norton, 17. Here Kjartansson quotes Icelandic writer Halldór Laxness, who is known for his poetic prose and novels about the everyday dramas of the Icelandic people. It also echoes a line from Anton Chekhov's play *The Seagull* (1895).

