BAWAG Contemporary
BAWAG FOUNDATION

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Ragnar Kjartansson
Take me here by the Dishwasher
–Memorial for a Marriage

May 6 – June 26, 2011
Opening: Thursday, May 5, 2011, 7 p.m.
Press preview: Thursday, May 5, 2011, 10:30 a.m.
Performance: daily 4 – 7 p.m. (music: Kjartan Sveinsson)

Even if it does not look like it, the exhibition *Take me here by the Dishwasher* is a portrait. Ragnar Kjartansson, who describes himself as a hopeless romantic, is an Icelandic artist who mainly works in the fields of performance, theater, and music. Yet he is also into more traditional media such as painting, drawing, and video. Cultural history and myth, rituals, and a range of identities, grief, happiness, beauty, horror, drama, humor – such are the ingredients of an oeuvre for whose existence there is only one reason: a charismatic person's impulse to entertain.

Even the conception of the artist lies in a mist of reality and fiction. Kjartansson, who was born into a family of theater people, insinuates to have been sired on the set of Iceland's first erotic thriller. *Morðsaga* (Reynir Oddsson, 1977) featured his mother, Guðrún Ásmundsdóttir, as a lonely housewife, while his father, Kjartan Ragnarsson, played the plumber she calls in her dreams to repair the dishwasher. Ragnar was actually born in the month in which the love scene was shot. *Take me here by the Dishwasher* shows the decisive moment in a loop.

Ragnar Kjartansson has been interested in the role model of the artist from the very beginnings of his fast-moving career. His works may be seen as ongoing assessments of the status of the artist, his work, and the public. Who am I, where am I, what am I doing here, what has happened before I came here? The questions a method actor has to ask himself according to Lee Strasberg also seem to inform the technique of the exhibitionist artist who produces props for tableaux vivants and role plays that supply parts of his personal identity puzzle – a portrait of the artist as a painter of nocturnal seascapes, an opera singer in a rococo theater, and a lonesome cowboy with guitar in the Rocky Mountains.

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Since having witnessed Dieter Roth reading poems or cursing managers at Reykjavík University, Ragnar Kjartansson knows about the importance of presence. This is why his work is always live and definitely performative. For the question how art is born is as important as the result. The exhibition at BAWAG Contemporary also centers around a time-bound work, a work concerned with the moment in which art happens: ten troubadours (the artist has relied on the figure of the romantic hero in various contexts, whether in the form of a legendary troubadour, a fantasy version of Prince Valiant, or the man with the guitar) sing a dialogue fragment from the film *Morðsaga* in casual clothes; the music comes from Kjartan Sveinsson, the legendary keyboarder of the Icelandic post-rock band Sigur Rós. The troubadours are professional musicians, all of whom play the guitar. The figure of the man with the guitar, a symbol of rebellion in youth culture all over the world, has become almost an icon in popular mythologies. In the exhibition, this supersymbol strikes up a slightly exhausted alliance with beer and cigarettes. The performers meet on each day of the exhibition, smoke, drink, and sing their song. Thus, a social sculpture will emerge as a wrecked version of the perpetual return of the same; one may make out a little Nietzsche syndrome in the end. Beyond that, Kjartansson devotes himself to gender stereotypes with apparent pleasure and repeatedly explains that his art springs from feminism. The pathos that the image of the man with the guitar radiates is as welcome as the artist's sexualization through the instrument.

Kjartansson's method is one of unfolding an infinite number of stories, cycles, and absurd loops. He juxtaposes elements relevant for art with a body of nostalgic cultural references in his pasticcios, letting all distinctions seep away in an Icelandic mudpot.

Kjartansson's performances often go on for many hours or even days and require the artist's complete physical commitment. At the Manifesta 8 in Rovereto, for example, Kjartansson sang Schumann's *Dichterliebe (The Poet's Love)* accompanied by a piano eight hours a day for two weeks. The decadent version of the lieder recital had him donning an elegant black tuxedo with a bow tie, smoking thick cigars, and drinking

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champagne until he could not stand up anymore. In 2009, he represented Iceland at the Venice Biennial. Kjartansson set up his studio in a palazzo on the Canale Grande and furnished it with record players, guitars, and a couch. A prince of painting from head to toe, he produced one picture a day during the six months the event lasted. His friend Páll Haukur Björnsson, who wore swimming trunks of the popular sportswear brand Speedo, provided the artist's model. Kjartansson has repeatedly worked with members of his family, too. In his recently opened solo show *Song* at the Carnegie Museum of Art, his nieces Ragnheiður, Rakel, and Iris made their appearance in white dresses in the marble hall.

Kjartansson's serious and brilliant snapshots deal with love and friendship, beauty and broken hearts, love and death, happiness and pain, heaven and hell – never with victories, often with defeats. The name of his model is eternity.

In the gallery's backspace in the basement, Ragnar Kjartansson will present a very personal portrait of the Mississippi blues musician Pinetop Perkins (b. in Belzoni, Mississippi on July 7, 1913; d. in Austin, Texas on March 21, 2011), whom he reveres. "Eternal Pinetop" steps into the film, shot from one fixed position, like onto a stage. He wears elegant beige trousers, a white shirt, and his inevitable hat. Set on the outskirts of Austin, Texas, Pinetop's place of residence, Ragnar Kjartansson's film relates to Andrew Wyeth's famous picture *Christina's World:* we see a treeless, flat slope with a house looming on the horizon, but Wyeth's girl suffering from polio who creeps toward the house has been replaced by the 97-year-old Pinetop Perkins at the piano given to him as a present by eighty friends for his eightieth birthday. He begins to play the blues, repeats a passage played, mumbles something, and, looping through his melodies and rhythms, slips in some jingle or other. He smokes all the time, complains about the badly tuned piano, and, after forty-nine minutes, exits as laconically as he has come on stage.
Though the touch of the legendary oldest Grammy winner under the sun may be a bit blurry, his fan's and kindred spirit's video *The Man* (2010) preserves the ninety-seven-year-old Perkins's brilliant musicality.
(Brigitte Huck)

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Accompanying Program

May 25, 2011, 8 p.m.
Film screening
Morðsaga by Reynir Oddsson

June 8, 2011, 9 p.m.
Concert
Ragnar Kjartansson and All Star Band

June 15, 2011, 8 p.m.
Film screening
A Tribute to Kjartan Sveinsson

June 22, 2011, 9 p.m.
Concert
Violetta Parisini

Free admission
For details see www.bawagcontemporary.at
Subject to alteration

BAWAG Contemporary
open daily from 2 to 8 p.m.
Accompanying events
Guided tours
each Thursday at 6 p.m.
Admission free

Artistic director:
Christine Kintisch
Curator:
Brigitte Huck
Organization:
Elisabeth Hofbauer
Technical coordination:
museum standards

Curator concerts:
Stephen Mathewson
Curator film:
Norbert Pfaffenbichler
Educational program:
Wolfgang Brunner

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Oliver Ottenschläger
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Ragnar Kjartansson
Biography

Geboren 1976 in Reykjavík, Island | Born in Reykjavík, Iceland in 1976

Ausstellungen | Exhibitions

2011
Take me here by the Dishwasher–Memorial for a Marriage, BAWAG Contemporary, Vienna (solo)
Song, Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania (solo)
Figura cuncta videntis (the all-seeing eye), Homage to Christoph Schlingensief, Thyssen-Bornemisza Art Contemporary, Vienna

2010
Ragnar Kjartansson, Luhring Augustine, New York (solo)
The End, Walter Phillips Gallery, Banff, Canada (solo)
The End, The Sundance Film Festival New Frontier, Park City, Utah, and Hafnarborg – The Hafnarfjörður Centre of Culture and Fine Art, Hafnarfjörður, Iceland

2009
The End, the Pavilion of Iceland, 53rd Biennale di Venezia (solo)
The Reach of Realism, Museum of Contemporary Art North Miami (MOCA)

2008
Schumann Machine, Manifesta 7, Rovereto, Italy

2007
God, The Living Art Museum, Iceland (solo)

2006
Sorrow conquers Happiness, Galerie Adler, Frankfurt/Main
Repeat Performances: Roni Horn and Ragnar Kjartansson, CCS BARD, Annandale-on-Hudson, New York (solo)
Dreamland Burns, Mucsarnok, Budapest
Vienna Biennale, Vienna
Singing, Swinging North, Project Room Paris Photo 2006, Paris
Icelandic Art in the 3rd Millennium, Reykjavík Art Museum, Iceland
Contemporary Video Art from Iceland, KW Institute for Contemporary Art, Berlin
The Idea of North: an Exhibition about Sound and Site, St. Mary's University Art Gallery, Halifax, Canada
Momentum 2006, Moss, Norway

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2005
The Great Unrest, Dagsbrún, Reykjavík Art Festival, Eyjafjöll, Iceland (solo)
Invasion, Klink&Bank, Reykjavík at Berliner Liste, Berlin

2004
Oh my God, SAFN Museum, Reykjavík
Monument of Love, GUK+Gallery, Lejre (Denmark), Bremen (Germany), Selfoss (Iceland) (solo)
Intimacy (mit | with Magnús Sigurdarson), ASÍ Museum, Reykjavík, Reykjavík Art Festival
Étoiles Polares, Vooruit, Ghent, Belgium
Winter Mass, The Nordic House, Reykjavík
Aldrei, Nie, Newer, Gallery+, Akureyri, Iceland
Where do we go from here?, Tanya Bonakdar Gallery, New York

2003
Colonialization, Gallerí Kling&Bang, Iceland (solo)
Behind the Eyes, Bergen Kunsthall, Bergen, Norway

2002
The Times are Changing, Studio Alaska, Reykjavík
The Tiger and the Polar Bear, Gallery 21, Malmö, Sweden
Grasrót, The Living Art Museum, Reykjavík

2001
Hurt the one you love, Gallerí i8, Reykjavík
The Tiger and the Polar Bear, Slunkaríki, Ísafjörður, Iceland Polifony, The Living Art Museum, Reykjavík

2000
Konstar och jag vil knulla, Gallerí 1319 A, Stockholm
Videoinstallation mit | with Gunnhildur Hauksdóttir, Gallerí Nema Hvað, Reykjavík