

# Ragnar Kjartansson

## *The Visitors*

November 18, 2016–February 12, 2017

Upper-Level Galleries



Icelandic artist Ragnar Kjartansson is internationally celebrated for performances that playfully combine the roles of musician, ardent fan, actor, and impresario. Instead of approaching art as a solo endeavor, he often involves collaborators who work with him to orchestrate alluring situations that are rich with symbolism and sensuality, conviviality and communal effort.

Kjartansson's performances and videos can take hours, even days or months, to unfold. They often involve the playing and replaying of musical phrases and songs, exploring correlations between repetition, boredom, and a complete absorption in the stretching out of his absurd and endearing experiences. The meaning of these situations comes more from the evolving relationship between musicians, artist, and audience than any fixed script or planned outcome. While Kjartansson pushes the limits of endurance for his collaborators, he congenially accepts that audiences will come and go as they please, experiencing the work in its entirety or in brief episodes.

One of the most immersive of such works is *The Visitors*. This video installation was filmed in the 43-room Rokeby Farm, a run-down mansion in Dutchess County, New York, that has been owned by the famed Astor family and their descendants for over 180 years. Eight musicians—one per screen—are spread throughout the home, each in his or her own room, wearing headphones through which they can hear one another perform. A ninth screen shows people outside on the front porch—the home's inhabitants and neighbors, as well as friends of the artist—who form a choir that sings along with the musicians in the house.

Although the musicians are connected auditorially, they play and sing in isolation, collaborating without bodily cues, eye contact, or other sensory interactions beyond the electronically delivered music. The spectacle of inward-looking musicians

striving toward expression as an ensemble seems to offer a microcosm of a culture in which meaning is often formed through technological interfaces between the isolated self and a larger community. Together and apart, the musicians, all friends of the artist, create a haunting melody built around the phrase “once again I fall into my feminine ways” (a line from a poem by Kjartansson's ex-wife, artist Ásdís Sif Gunnarsdóttir). They are led by Kjartansson himself, who cuts a commanding yet somewhat comical figure as he sits—pale, pudgy, and naked—in a sudsy bathtub. Strumming his guitar and singing, the artist occasionally raises an arm, either to demonstrate emotional intensity or to parody a musical conductor.

Beautifully illuminated and composed, the filmed vignettes of musicians in each room are rich with the details of a fadingly glorious mansion that contains the ghostly vestiges of its past occupants. Matching the home's sense of wistfulness and loss, the music is like a dirge. It starts softly with a near-painful melancholy and slowly swells to a stirring crescendo. Arranged on screens throughout the gallery, *The Visitors* prompts viewers to come physically engaged—to move from one screen to another to follow the urgent intimacy of the music. As the performance comes to a close, the musicians leave their posts and, still singing, join the group on the porch. No longer alone, they slowly walk from the house to the field below, continuing to sing together in transcendent harmony.

Stunning cinematography and the cohering structuring of picturesque architecture and haunting music make this performance exceptionally seductive. Yet it is perhaps most memorable for this culminating scene, in which the performers move from deep and isolated introspection to vibrant social interaction.

**Mark Scala**, Chief Curator





# About the artist

Ragnar Kjartansson lives and works in Reykjavik, Iceland, where he was born in 1976. He studied in Reykjavik at the Iceland Academy of the Arts as well as in Stockholm at the Royal Swedish Academy. His art has been exhibited worldwide, with recent solo shows at the New Museum in New York, the Migros Museum für Gegenwartskunst in Zurich, and BAWAG PSK Contemporary in Vienna. In 2009 he represented Iceland at the Venice Biennale's International Art Exhibition and in 2011 he received Performa's Malcolm McLaren Award for his performance piece *Bliss*. The first major survey of Kjartansson's work was on display at the Barbican Centre in London earlier this year and is at Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden in Washington, DC, through January 8, 2017.

## *The Visitors*, 2012

Nine-channel video projection, Edition of 6 and 2 artist's proofs, 64 minutes

Music: Davíð Þór Jónsson and Ragnar Kjartansson

Lyrics: Ásdís Sif Gunnarsdóttir

Sound: Chris McDonald

Director of photography: Tómas Örn Tómasson

Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Graham Gund to the Gund Gallery at Kenyon College, the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, and Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston. Courtesy of the artist, Luhring Augustine, New York, and i8 Gallery, Reykjavik

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Ragnar Kjartansson. *The Visitors* (stills), 2012. Nine-channel video projection, 64 minutes. Photos: Elísaf Davíds. Courtesy of the artist, Luhring Augustine, New York, and i8 Gallery, Reykjavik

