

*“Fahre denn hin, herrische Pracht, göttlichen
 Prunkes prahlende Schmach!
 Zusammenbreche, was ich gebaut!
 Auf geb’ ich mein Werk; nur eines will ich
 noch:
 das Ende, das Ende!
 Wotan in *Die Walküre* by Richard Wagner*

*For life is quite absurd,
 And death’s the final word,
 You must always face the curtain
 with a bow.
 Forget about your sin—
 give the audience a grin,
 Enjoy it—it’s your last chance anyhow.
 Monty Python (Eric Idle), *Life of Brian**

A glance into the abyss makes the end seem nigh. Ragnar Kjartansson invites us to a Dionysian festival in order to perform the great finale. Just as Wotan saw his downfall and hoped to find liberation in endlessness and timelessness, Ragnar Kjartansson teases with salvation offered through the eternal validity of art. How could it otherwise be explained that the first monographic publication of the thirty-three-year-old artist is already announcing the end? Or is there an implication of a messianic return? It is a book that uses empathetic texts by various authors to highlight Kjartansson’s work to date and also to let the artist have his say. It is not to be understood as a résumé, however. Nor would it suffice if one wished to see the title as a reaction to the global crisis whose effects were felt early on and with full force in Kjartansson’s homeland. Yet *The End* is not only the title of this publication but also of the project that Ragnar Kjartansson will be presenting for his home country, Iceland, at the 53rd International Art Exhibition—The Venice Biennale. There the Icelandic pavilion will be “a hyper-romanticized place” (see p. 75) and “a lighthouse at the end of the world, watching the verge of nothingness” (see pp. 87, 90)

Ragnar Kjartansson is one of the most exuberant and yet most genuine artists of his generation. Born in Reykjavik in 1976, his work swings playfully between

romantic melancholy and poppy lightheartedness, between egomaniac self-portrayal and altruistic self-sacrifice. It is human mortality, however, that is the *raison d'être* of this artist's work. The melancholic countenance is concealed by numerous humorist masks that present the viewer with a fantasy display. Kjartansson loves heroic pathos, great gestures. Serious intensity and disarming humor alternate in a game in which the Apollonian and the Dionysian wrestle with each other. In his performances and video works Kjartansson slips into a whole variety of roles. Alongside acting in costumes, music is another element that plays a significant role in his life. Performance installations such as *The Great Unrest* (2005), *Scandinavian Pain* (2006), *Schumann Machine* (2008), *Blossoming Trees Performance* (2008), *The End* (2009) or the video installation *God* (2007), live from synaesthetic interplay and emotional intensity.

Ragnar Kjartansson is so far the youngest representative of his home country, which first sent artists to the Biennale in Venice in 1960. Some of his predecessors there, such as Sigurdur Gudmundsson (1976/78), Magnús Pálsson (1980), Kristján Gudmundsson (1982), Hreinn Fridfinnsson (1993), Birgir Andrésson (1995), Finnbogi Pétursson (2001) or Gabriela Fridriksdóttir (2005), have influenced Kjartansson, and yet he has forged a path of his own and therefore cannot be compared with any other, neither in Iceland nor anywhere else.

If there is a characteristic of the Icelandic art scene of recent years, this can primarily be found in the uninhibited creative innovation that flourishes freely between all kinds of genres. The movement between the fine arts, music and theater, the amicable collaboration with musicians, designers, actors and artist colleagues is not performed by anyone as purposefully as by Ragnar Kjartansson, which makes him one of the most influential artists of his generation in Iceland.