

Ragnar Kjartansson on finding the right kind of ambition



November 11, 2016 - In 2013, the Icelandic performance artist Ragnar Kjartansson had The National perform their song "Sorrow" nonstop for six hours in front of a live audience at MoMA PS1. The resulting video piece, "A Lot of Sorrow," is also six hours long. In 2016, Kjartansson had solo shows at the Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal, The Art Institute of Chicago, The University of Buffalo Art Gallery, and the Museum of Contemporary Art Detroit. In 2016-2017, he has solo shows at the Barbican Art Gallery in London, the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden in Washington, D.C., and Luhring Augustine Gallery in NYC. An 2016 NPR piece was titled "[Art Star Ragnar Kjartansson Moves People To Tears, Over And Over.](#)" He recently [punked Yoko Ono](#).

As told to Brandon Stosuy, 2779 words.

Tags: [Art](#), [Music](#), [Process](#), [Beginnings](#), [Collaboration](#).

Your work deals with duration and repetition—things unfold over a period of time, or the same thing happens over and over. I was curious how fatherhood may have shifted your notions of this kind of thing. Parenthood is kind of based on the same concepts, all said.

That's a good question. But it's not shifted anything, really. With my daughter, and with juggling everything, there hasn't been a profound change in how I look at time. Though, with a lot of these works, when I was performing them myself, there was an escapism. There has always been escapism in them. After I had children, and stuff happened and I became very happy in each moment, I haven't been as desperate to jump into those escaping pieces.

Maybe it's different here because there's so many children around in Iceland. When you have a child yourself, it's like, "Ah." You really know what the drill is already. There's so many kids around in the friend group and everything that there hardly was a difference.

But, I'm thinking now, and maybe there was. Maybe there's something profound that I haven't yet realized. The profound thing has mainly been about trying to be a different human being. The practical stuff.

Your practice has stayed relatively the same, and the way you make art and the way you think about producing it has shifted.

It has—always. I was so lucky, the way I make art has always been very relaxed, in a way. I was a really desperate musician. The art thing was always relaxed for me. I got the desperation out of me doing the music thing, I guess. The art practice has really blended with life. That's also probably why I like to use time and repetition so much, because that is real life. It's almost like getting art and the performative into sync with the real life, which is always very durational and very performative.

The ideas of rhythm and repetition also apply to music. Why do you think you were frustrated as a musician, and do you think some of your art practice grows out of these ideas of being a musician?

Mostly because I'm not really a good musician when shit hits the fan. It was always very forced. Forced and pretentious, but the weird thing is that visual art is somehow a better, more relaxed place for a pretentious person. You can play much more with notions of fantasy and things like that as a visual artist. It always has to be about the truth, be it music or literature or art or anything. We always go back to Keats, "Truth is beauty and beauty is truth." The musical truth is very unforgiving, somehow. The visual art truth can be much more complicated.

That's at least my perception of it. When I was doing music, I always felt like I was really trying very hard. I was doing visual art on the side just to enjoy myself, so I did all these performances to do something that was somehow total freedom. That's probably also the great thing that the visual art world has. It's just this total freedom; you can be absolutely free to do whatever you want. It just has to be some kind of a personal truth.

I guess the same goes for music, but music is much more... At the end of the day, it has to be the song. The song just has to be really good to be not totally useless and meaningless.

You have, now, an ongoing collaboration with The National, what is that like for you combining very explicitly a band—an actual band, an ongoing band—with your artistic practice, bringing those two worlds together?

Yeah, it sort of feels natural because it's the same thing that's been going on here in Reykjavik with friends. Basically, we just clicked and have been working on stuff together. At the end of the day, collaboration is never about crossing media or blah, blah, blah, blah. It's always just about friendship and mojo, I guess. You want to dabble with stuff. You want to continue having a good time. That's what collaboration is.

Have you ever thought about trying to add yourself into one of their songs? You can come in and play some guitar or something. Or do you want to stay in the role of the artist?

They allowed me, once. You know, I was really always this desperate musician and then, last year at Eaux Claires Festival they invited me on stage to sing in front of 30,000 people. It was almost like in those computer games when you can really do some kind of trick, hit Enter, and you just jump over many levels and you're sort of at the end level board with the princess. So, it was just such a kick. That night, this whole rock and roll dream of mine just suddenly happened, and I was satisfied, and it was great. I did it and it was great—and I have no ambition to do it again. *[laughs]* It was just awesome. Absolutely crazy.

You went to the top and realized, "All right. This is as far as I can go. I don't need to do this again."

Yeah. Or just, "How could I do this again?" It's also just to realize it's a weird thing to be there on this big stage. It really felt like playing in a pub. It's almost the same feeling, somehow, of doing a concert. It's this wonderful, wonderful... If there's a connection to the audience, it's just this wonderful feeling. But it was a bit more epic than that, though. It felt pretty epic. It was really great. But that was just them being nice to me.

The collaboration with the band was just "A Lot of Sorrow," I'm not really collaborating with the band more than that. Me and Bryce and Aaron and Gyða and Kristin (formerly of the Icelandic band múm) have been doing this little weird band of ours. It's called [Forever Love](#).

We met here in Iceland last summer and wrote songs. It's almost like a song cycle of love songs from poetry books here on the bookshelf in my home. We just took Bertolt Brecht's *Love Poems* and just made a song out of it. So it's all guaranteed good lyrics, which is always good. *[laughs]* Yeah. It's Bertolt Brecht and Sylvia Plath and stuff like that.

So you still want to make music, but in a way that aligns with your art practice and less like a stand-alone thing? Or is it something you want to pursue in a lower-key way with friends?

Yeah, or also not think about it somehow. This is something that's inspiring and fun to do, and we're going to make a record out of it and no more thought than that. Music is awesome. What killed the fun for me was the ambition. Ambition can be a depressing bitch.

Do you feel ambitious with your art, or does that come naturally, so it doesn't feel necessarily the need for the ambition? It's just something you feel free with and you're able to do more easily?

I feel really free with it. Of course, there is always the ambition to make interesting artwork. I think that's healthy ambition. The unhealthy one is you want to "make it big" with something. Ah, that's so depressing. I've been gladly rid of that when doing artwork. I'm really ambitious in making them shine, for what they are, and that's kind of how far it goes. That it's not meaningless. I mean, that is a pretty big ambition, trying to make stuff that's not totally meaningless and useless. I guess ambition is it, at the end of the day. Maybe it's the difference between desperation and ambition because I was a desperate musician.

I've talked to a few people who've had one path they wanted to take, then they did something on the side for fun, it came to them more easily, and they realized that was the path they should be taking. It was the easy thing to do, and then you're like, "Holy shit. I've been doing this for years and this was actually the thing that I'm good at."

You know the Danish fairytale writer, H.C. Andersen, who wrote all those timeless tales like "The Emperor's New Clothes" and "The Ugly Duckling," he was always writing some grown-up novels and poetry too, that nobody cares about, and he just did the fairy tales for fun. I think it's probably pretty common. Why are you banging your head against the wall? Nothing comes out of it, really. Then again, there are other stories of people who bang their heads through the wall and they create a masterpiece.

The reason that I thought to ask, initially, about having a child is because I was thinking about the way some of these works take a long time to unfold. I remember taking my kids to see [your collaboration with the National] "A Lot of Sorrow"; they were there for a half-hour before they were like, "Alright, let's go!" Then we had to leave. If I was just there as an individual, I would've watched the whole thing.

Yeah. But I've always considered these pieces to be, at the end of the day, a painting or a sculpture. The duration is only for the performers; the audience can just enjoy it. You go to the Metropolitan to look at the Bruegel painting. You can look at it for one minute and just take it in, or you can decide to sit down and watch it and go and have some coffee and watch it again and spend the whole day with it.

I really want my pieces to be works that don't... This probably comes from being raised in the theater. I always had to go through the whole thing. The theater is such a violent place. Sit down and watch this whole thing from beginning to end. The freedom of the visual art... For one thing, it's just visual. It's there and you can watch it for as long as you want. That has always been very much my thing. The pieces take a very long time, but I never look at them myself the whole time. It's not what it's about. It's not about the duration. It's that the duration creates a sculpture or a painting in this space.

Ragnar Kjartansson recommends:

"Gold Mats, Paired (For Ross and Felix)." (the artwork by Roni Horn from 1995)

Amadeus (the movie by Milos Forman from 1984)

World Light (the novel by Halldór Laxness from 1937-1940))

Gilded Palace of Sin (The Record by The Flying Burrito Brothers from 1969)

The Beauty of The Husband (the book poetry by Anne Carson from 2001)

The other day I was trying to teach my daughter this rimur thing. We were with Steindór Andersen, who's worked a lot of Sigur Rós. We were with him, up at a farm; he's a carpenter and he was doing stuff and he was trying to teach her some rimur. I was really trying to teach her this, and she said to me: "There's nothing more boring in this world. You really are repeating this so much. There's nothing more boring than repeating stuff again and again." It was so good when she said that to me.

I don't expose her so much to my work. I don't think it's that much fun for a kid. She goes accidentally and sees it. She doesn't care. It's just like any other job. It's just like watching a race, "Oh, that's a job. Whatever."

In some ways, kids do love repetition. If they're allowed to do it themselves.

Right, it's almost like if they're allowed to do it themselves, or decide it themselves. Do you want to listen to the same story on a tape over and over and over again? But you can only force repetition on grown ups. Grown ups are polite, they can take it.

Grown ups are also wanting to look for something profound. They want to make sure they're there for the whole time to be able to say, "Oh, yeah, we made it for the six hours."

I think it's also this relationship to religion and Buddhist theory and stuff. That's why people think it's important to stay. They're looking for the enlightenment in repetition, which you, weirdly, always find. It doesn't matter what you repeat, you always find some kind of enlightenment in that repetition. Even if it's just taking time to do something, to just do one thing for a lot of time instead of being scatter-brained.

Recently I went to CNN and saw an article about you, which mentions the ongoing project you have that involves your mother spitting in your face. Has it been weird to cross over into a non-art world? Your conceptual performance art piece is on a site where people who don't necessarily pay attention to art are suddenly being confronted with it.

It just happened now with the show in London. It's just like, "Poof." There was so much exposure. I was really excited about the CNN thing because I said something about Kanye West in it. I was like, "Kanye West checks out everything that is about Kanye West. If it's on CNN, he probably has seen it. Ha, ha, ha!" That was the kick I got from it. I was like, "Kanye has definitely read it." And he probably checked out my shit and was like, "Oh, that was lame," but whatever. He probably didn't.

He might come calling.

You never know. You never know. But I think not. I think he's more clever than that. *[laughs]* It feels great, but I guess it's also a strange mentality you have to this kind of thing when you're raised in Iceland. Being famous is really not a big thing in Iceland. It's so easy to be famous in Iceland, so somehow, I don't get psyched up about it. If I'm totally honest with you, it tickles my vanity, of course. It really does.

But it's a curious feeling because I'm always like, "Why should people care?" I find it mind-boggling that people go and see this and try to make something out of it. Sometimes people can be offended and I totally understand that. I'm just like, "Okay. Of course. You're from a very different background. Our interests are very different."

I never feel awkward with it. I find it fun. When some mother sees me and my mother and she becomes really offended and sends a letter to the museum like, "Why are you showing this disgusting piece when my kid can see it?" I just find that cool that she's offended by it. I'm flattered because, in this day and age, that somebody's offended. It's really total flattery.

You could re-stage this piece in a few years with your daughter.

My daughter said that to me, when she saw it. "Yeah, then we can do it later when I get older." Like, what the hell? I'm like, "Okay. I don't know. I don't know."

It's kind of about our relationship, me and my mother's, and how it evolved. It doesn't matter how good of parents we are. We try to be good parents. But I think my daughter, and your children, they are always going to have complicated relationships with us. There's always something we did wrong, no matter how good we try. That's another thing with my mother. I really love her, but there's always something a bit *[laughs]* to this parent-child relationship. This work is really a way of somehow dealing with that. In an arty way, I guess.

Name

Ragnar Kjartansson

Vocation

Artist, Part-time Musician

Fact

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Photo: Elisabet Davids