



Press release

## RAGNAR KJARTANSSON

25 August 2016 – 5 February 2017  
Copenhagen Contemporary, Papirøen

**It is with great pleasure that Copenhagen Contemporary welcomes you to its opening in the old paper halls with among other things two large installations by the up-and-coming young Icelandic artist Ragnar Kjartansson. In recent years he has charmed and challenged the world with his music-based performances and his large-scale video installations which take a humorous and poetic-philosophical look at both the banalities and subtleties of our everyday life.**

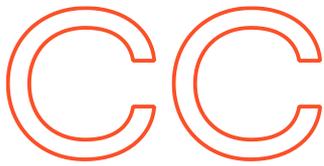
With hectic exhibition activity in the USA and Europe over the past few years, Ragnar Kjartansson unfolds his talent in many different media, with references to literature, film, theatre and music. Often he appears in his own works; at other times close friends and family form the cast. Kjartansson also incorporates personal anecdotes and memories, which means we can easily identify with the tragicomic and human drama he involves us in.

### **Staged tableaux**

Ragnar Kjartansson's works reflect the bittersweetness of our own lives. He presents this to us in his staged tableaux, which often involve music and many performers: the eternal repetitions of daily life, Nordic melancholy, the dramas, joys, sorrows and painful truths that Kjartansson can find, for example, in the poetry of the pop song.

Ragnar Kjartansson has himself played music for many years and often stresses the importance of growing up in a theatrical family. His works in fact often function as stagings and compositions full of pathos and humour without an actual narrative. Instead he works conceptually with repetition – with long-lasting repetitions that may unfold over several hours, days and weeks. In 2009, when he represented Iceland at the Venice Biennale, it was with a performance in which, for the whole six months of the Biennale, he painted a picture a day of one of his friends who posed for him in bathing trunks while they smoked and drank.

### **A lot of sorrow**



As can be seen in the performance-based video installation *A Lot of Sorrow*, Kjartansson finds a romantic *Weltschmerz* in the melancholy of the pop song: “Sorrow found me when I was young / Sorrow waited, sorrow won” sings the lead singer in the band The National, Matt Berninger. The performance took place at MoMA PS1 in New York in 2013 and was a collaboration with The National, who played their 3:25 minute song *Sorrow* live over and over again for six hours. Along the way Ragnar Kjartansson himself handed out food and drink to the band.

The melancholy mood of the song is emphasized in the chant-like repetition, which both magnifies the meaning of the song and almost empties it out.

Various camera angles follow the band’s increasingly intense struggle to complete the process while the audience remains in suspense, absorbed in the melody and its emotions, and in following the different personalities in the band along the way.

### **Scenes From Western Culture**

In the second major video installation, *Scenes from Western Culture* (2015), which was shown for the first time at his major exhibition at the Palais de Tokyo last year, Ragnar Kjartansson has staged a series of everyday situations: a couple dining, children playing, a woman swimming, a couple making love, a house on fire, etc. The nine large monitors function as filmic paintings or living tableaux of our Western life, idylized by Kjartansson with inspiration from the French Rococo painter Antoine Watteau apparently with both love and a critical sting.

Kjartansson has said that he had the idea for the work while driving in a taxi from JFK Airport to New York, and *Careless Whisper* was on the radio: “Suddenly I got Western culture claustrophobia, because it’s everywhere and it’s always the same songs; it’s always *Careless Whisper* somewhere”.

### **The performance tradition**

Over the years Ragnar Kjartansson has created his own highly seductive version of the performance tradition. As described in the lengthy portrait of him in *The New Yorker* recently, the early performance artists of the 1960s including American Bruce Nauman, Allan Kaprow and Chris Burden defined their practice in opposition to the theatre: no narrative, dialogue, costumes, stage design or wish for the works to break with reality. Later the Serbian artist Marina Abramovic, among others, softened up these requirements and made room for drama and try-outs – but still without theatrical illusion.

Kjartansson has completely abandoned these prohibitions and in his performance plunges into the theatrical, recalling among other things the absurd dramas of the writer Samuel Beckett. With his own personal interpretation of Nordic melancholy from artists and popular culture such as Edvard Munch, Halldór Laxness and ABBA, Ragnar Kjartansson’s works offer an experience of art that reaches out to the viewer. The works demand no more than a willingness to spend time sitting and experiencing them.

### **About Ragnar Kjartansson**

Ragnar Kjartansson was born in 1976 in Reykjavík (Iceland), where he lives and works. He graduated from the Iceland Academy of Art and the Royal Academy of Art in Stockholm and represented



Copenhagen  
Contemporary

Iceland at the Venice Biennale in 2009, where he participated again in 2013. He has won great international recognition in recent years and has had solo exhibitions at a number of museums in Europe and the USA, including at ICA Boston, Guggenheim Bilbao, Bilbao, New Museum, New York, Palais de Tokyo, Paris, the Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago, the Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal, Canada and the Barbican Art Gallery, London.

Further information:

Jannie Haagemann. Senior Curator.

M: +45 3146 3003. [Jannie@cphco.org](mailto:Jannie@cphco.org)

[www.cphco.org](http://www.cphco.org)