



THE END

RAGNAR KJARTANSSON

GOD

Cecilia Alemani

CHARACTERS

The artist standing in the foreground; eleven members
of the orchestra.

SETTING

A room luxuriously covered with rich pink satin
draperies; a stage to accommodate the orchestra.

TIME

The eternally present

PLACE

Unknown

ACT ONE

A handsome blond young man is standing in front of an orchestra, slowly swinging his hips. He wears a simple, smart tuxedo. His hair is perfectly combed, parted on the side. He holds an old-fashioned microphone in his right hand. Behind him, the orchestra—eleven musicians all rigorously dressed in black—begins to play a seductive riff—a few notes that start off warm and enveloping but will soon become hypnotic and then even nauseating as they are repeated over and over again for more than thirty minutes.

Initially it is just the piano, drums, and bass: they gently play together, while the other members of the orchestra stand around like little cute penguins. The singer strikes a couple of poses lifted straight out of a fifties Hollywood musical. After a few minutes, with a profound voice, the young man intones the first lines of the song. “Sorrow conquers happiness,” he sings. A few chords, and he sings again: “Sorrow conquers happiness.” And then again. And again. Over and over, slowly, each time with renovated passion combined with a strange sense of detachment that is slightly robotic. “Sorrow conquers happiness.”

The music grows in a crescendo; the harp, violin, and trumpet join in. It’s an old-time big band playing now. The singer raises his voice just a little, and delivers the same line. “Sorrow conquers happiness,” like a broken record, the needle skipping yet and again on the same track of the vinyl. He adjusts his hair, raises his chin a little, and off he goes. “Sorrow conquers happiness.” He is so devoted and so perfectly in character that you start doubting yourself, you start wondering if it’s you or him: has he really sung that same line one hundred and fifty two times? He changes expression and intonation, rolls the r a little more or softens his voice just a bit, but always repeats the same line. And where does that phrase come from? Sorrow conquers happiness. Don’t you feel like you have heard it before? Well, you have, for the last twenty-five minutes at least.

Now the strings all kick in, in a sustained pizzicato that is a little too heartfelt to be sincere. And then a harp solo. The singer moves his hands like a seasoned crooner, and looks up to the sky once again, with a gesture that has something too staged about it. The members of the orchestra have started singing too. It's a little choir now, an absurd Christmas carol: "Sorrow conquers happiness." The pink satin curtains that adorn the room seem to swing to the rhythm of the music, which carries on for a few more minutes before suddenly stopping, as though the singer was to wake up from an eternal dream.

INTERLUDE

There is an unmistakable predisposition toward the lures of spectacle in Kjartansson's work. *God*, one of his most renown pieces, was first realized in 2006 as a live performance at Museum van Hedendaagse Kunst Antwerpen and later it was recorded onto video in one single take, after more than eight hours straight of rehearsal. *God* is usually shown as a single-channel projection in a room that is wrapped in the same pink draperies that appear in the video: it is a simple, slightly cheap device that emphasizes the sense of over-the-top theatricality while also offering a degraded feeling of authenticity, as though the viewer had been offered the honor of *really* witnessing such a profound performance.

All throughout his work, Kjartansson seems to be concerned and fascinated by this tension between authenticity and simulation, between sincerity and sophistication. With its wealth of references to fifties Hollywood culture, the video *God* seems to hint to the good old days, when men were real men and women, real women. And yet we all know by now, and we all knew already back then, that the genuine masculinity and the intense femininity depicted by Hollywood were the result of a careful process of affectation, with its poses and codified gestures. They were imitations of life, as the title of a gorgeous Douglas Sirk Technicolor masterpiece reminds us.

Watching *God*, one is also reminded of Frank Sinatra and his Rat Pack and one cannot avoid thinking of classics such as Marilyn Monroe's *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*. Like many other artists of his generation, Kjartansson seems both fascinated and disgusted by the iconic power of those role models. It is not a form of nostalgia, but rather a natural inclination toward the aesthetic of melodrama. With its combination of affectation and sincerity, of theatricality and genuine sentimentality, melodrama might as well be the art form that best suits our times, and Kjartansson knows that perfectly well. His embrace of the banal is both heartfelt and carefully strategic, sincere and yet perfectly constructed.

Kjartansson seems to cling to clichés, wearing those worn-out identities and stereotypes like others would wear an old costume at a masked ball. His position is neither critical nor celebratory: it's rather a form of detachment that has something meditative about it. Just as he pronounces the same words over and over again—sorrow conquers happiness—Kjartansson seems to remind us that there is something incredibly reassuring in stereotypes, just as there is something soothing in repetition. Clichés are like lullabies or fairy tales—they all share an absolute faith in circular narratives and eternal returns.

Many of Kjartansson's past works make references to the Icelandic literary tradition of the saga cycles, which cast their roots into the fertile ground of mythmaking while evoking struggles and conflicts common to the whole human kind. A troubadour himself, Kjartansson incessantly weaves and unweaves stories like Penelope did with her shroud: it is as though he rejoiced being trapped in a prefixed scene without narrative, where the only thing left to do is performing the same scene over and over again. It is a Sisyphean effort that Kjartansson carries out, but one that he undertakes with a levity that is ultimately absurd, slightly idiotic.

Kjartansson manages to maintain a delightful expression all throughout the filming of *God*: proudly wearing his empty smile, he interprets the role of the artist

as entertainer, a Vaudevillian idiot savant. Certainly, in the cabaret-like setting of Kjartansson's performance survives the memory of the twenties avant-garde—the Dada and Surrealist love for cheap comedy. But in its endless repetitive and dehumanized performance, the artist also seems to hint at the tradition of the theater of the absurd: his song repeats itself like Beckett replays Krapp's last tape.

It might be just because of Kjartansson's Nordic origins, but one is tempted to read, hidden behind the pink curtain of comedy, a commitment to unveil the pain and desperation of the human condition. As in a Bergman movie, tension is often released with a final, expiatory



God, 2007
Video installation (exhibition view)

laughter. But then again, there is nothing to laugh about such a sentence: "Sorrow conquers happiness."

In spite of its quixotic absurdity, *God* also reads as a cosmic lamentation tinted with religious overtones. Pushing his voice to exhaustion, and yet pretending that everything is just fine, Kjartansson delivers his mantra, his litany, a prayer—a rosary of Hail Maries that is a masterful exercise in endurance through exuberant variations of the same words.

ACT TWO

Kjartansson and the many alter-egos that populate his videos seem to be trapped in the moment before existential choice. They seem to inhabit a space of eternal indecision and doubt, suspended between drama and happiness. All dressed like old-fashioned dandies, they might recall the characters that inhabit the pages of another Nordic hero, Søren Kierkegaard. In Kierkegaard's most renowned work, *Either Or*, human existence is divided into three different phases, each one described by the author's alter-egos and stand-ins. The aesthetic phase is the moment of the sensuous, which can transform even boredom into something interesting. Eventually the aesthete will fall into a condition of despair, an existential angst that leads one to recognize the limit of the sensual experience. On the other end of the spectrum stands the ethical phase, in which rational choices lead to commitment and responsibility. Both phases can be superseded by leaping toward the religious moment.

Like the protagonists of Kierkegaard's book, Kjartansson's characters seem to enjoy living between these two poles: they confront themselves with emptiness, both temporal and spatial, and live the same dilemma over and over again. "Sorrow conquers happiness," points at the two main existential stages of Kierkegaard's investigation. The singer in *God* seems to aspire to the religious while remaining anchored in the mundane.

This state of suspension might also explain the atmosphere of existential malaise that envelops *God*

and many other Kjartansson's works. In spite of its lush colors and seducing atmospheres, *God* is also an allegory of inaction, a state of indecision that is profoundly melancholic. Fixated as it is on its main character, *God* reveals a fascination with the self that turns into a narcissism of solitude.

After hearing the same sentence for the eighty-seventh time, I asked myself: What if God was in love with himself and yet so completely desperate for not being able to overcome sorrow with happiness? Fortunately, Kjartansson does not try to answer these questions. He keeps singing. He keeps doing his dirty job. The show must go on. And on. And on. And on.