SOUNDING THE SOCIAL

Musical forms from indie rock to *sha'bi* offer artists new opportunities for personal expression and critical engagement with popular culture.

Ragnar Kjartansson: *A Whole Lot of Sorrow*, 2013, 6-hour performance by the National of their song "Sorrow." Courtesy Luhring Augustine and MoMA PS1, New York, and Galleri i8, Reykjavik. Photo Charles Roussel.

by David Markus

IT'S APPROACHING 6p.m. on a spring evening and there is an air of excitement inside the VW Dome at MoMA PS1 in Long Island City, where a large audience has gathered to witness Ragnar Kjartansson's *A Whole Lot of Sorrow* (2013). For the past six hours, indie rock band the National has been performing the same song—a lovelorn ballad called "Sorrow" from their 2010 album *High Violet*—over and over again before a perseverant crowd. This isn't the first time Kjartansson has subjected a hummable three-minute tune to prolonged repetition. For *Bliss* (2011), the Icelandic artist enlisted a rotating cast of opera singers to perform the concluding aria from Mozart's *The Marriage of Figaro* for 12 consecutive larynx-flaying hours. One might expect such brash invariability to foil the emotional crescendo that is an enduring convention of popular spectacle. But in the waning minutes at PS1, the atmosphere is rife with the same giddy anticipation one feels at the climax of a typical rock concert.

As the performance passes the scheduled six-hour mark, and the final notes ring out of what everyone expects will be the last of the hypnotic anthem's 100-plus iterations, a collective outpouring of exuberance engulfs the dome. They made it. We made it. "Fuck yeah!" shouts one particularly enthused audience member.

Suddenly, Kjartansson is up on stage, whispering something to the performers. Beneath the sustained guitars

DAVID MARKUS is a PhD candidate in comparative literature at the University of Chicago. See Contributors page.

and the applause, a pattering of 16th note drumbeats—the song's signature opening—becomes audible and, unexpectedly, the performance starts up again. A few half-hearted shouts of approval are heard from the front rows, and the clapping that accompanied the opening bars of previous versions hesitantly recommences, but much of the audience is perplexed. The performance has already comprised one long series of encores, and few seem to have expected—or to have wanted—the show to go on.

The willful evasion of denouement in musical performance is hardly new; avant-garde composer John Cage spoke of "music without beginning, middle or end."[1] In interviews, however, Kjartansson forgoes references to modernist composition and avoids sophisticated explanations of his work. He recently attributed inspiration for his PS1 performance to the fact that he "just really love[s] the National."[2]

One detects in Kjartansson's self-described "shamelessly sentimental" attitude[3] echoes of the calculated ingenuousness of Andy Warhol, whose matter-of-fact adoration for the objects and people appearing in his work was integral to his public persona. Indeed, among the significant precursors to *A Whole Lot of Sorrow* is Warhol's "Exploding Plastic Inevitable" (1966-67), a touring nightclub performance that combined Warhol's films with rock music by the Velvet Underground.

The "Exploding Plastic Inevitable" marked a historical collision between the avant-garde and popular music, two realms that remain closely intertwined today. Consider Jay Z's appearance this past July at Pace Gallery, New York, to film a music video and promote his new album. For six hours, the hip hop mogul danced with the likes of artist Marina Abramović and MoMA PS1 director Klaus Biesenbach while repeatedly lip synching his single "Picasso Baby," a rap song composed of boastful references to the art world and the meretricious culture of luxury with which it has become synonymous.

One may be hard-pressed to distinguish between Jay Z's marathon performance at a commercial gallery and the happening Kjartansson staged at MoMA PS1 under Biesenbach's direction and inside a geodesic dome named in honor of its corporate sponsor. Nevertheless, to Kjartansson and other contemporary artists, the dominant paradigms of cultural production are rarely as monolithic as they might appear. As a commercially sanctioned aesthetic form endowed with the potential to bring people together across sociopolitical boundaries and cultural milieus, popular music (along with its related modes of performance, dance and visual culture) offers itself to contemporary art as a privileged terrain for exploring not only the structures of desire promoted by the culture industry but the interweaving of personal and public experience in contemporary life.

THE FOUR MULTIDISCIPLINARY artists discussed below—Kjartansson, Itziar Barrio, Katarina Zdjelar and Hassan Khan—borrow from the legacy of avant-garde composition while reflecting on the role of popular music in shaping social interactions and everyday performances of identity. Across their various works, music serves as a point of access to the social sphere, a means of measuring, or *sounding,* complex dimensions of subjectivity, cultural difference and shared affective response. This marks a continuation of paths forged by artists like Dan Graham, whose video *Rock My Religion* (1982-84) explores the relationship between rock music and religious expression, and Adrian Piper, whose performance *Funk Lessons* (1983) sought in African-American music and dance a means to bridge racial divides. In addition to their interests in the communal potentialities of music, what unites this particular group of artists is the importance they place on irreducible aspects of emotional and sensorial experience; it is in the lapses within received orders of behavior and understanding that they discover aesthetic possibilities.

At 64 minutes, Kjartansson's *The Visitors* (named after the final album by the Swedish pop group ABBA) is modest in length compared to some of his other performance-based works. Nevertheless, it is among the artist's most ambitious undertakings. For this multichannel video work, Kjartansson commissioned a number of friends from Iceland's flourishing music scene to accompany him to Rokeby Farm, a dilapidated Hudson River Valley mansion. Situated in private corners of the 43-room house but connected to one another via an elaborate network of cables, mics and headphones, Kjartansson and company perform a sweeping, emotional ballad, the lyrics of which derive from a letter sent to the artist by his ex-wife. Delivered with a sonority that rises and falls in great waves, the song has a chorus that is cryptic in its simplicity: "Once again I fall into my feminine ways."

Two stills from Kjartansson's installation *The Visitors,* 2012, 9-channel video projection, 64 minutes. Courtesy Luhring Augustine and Galleri i8.

At Luhring Augustine Gallery, New York, where the work was presented last February, several of its nine different projections, each with its own dedicated audio channel, were arrayed along the walls of the gallery, while others hung back-to-back at the center of the space. Viewers passed between the intimate audiovisual orbits of each individual performer, all the while surrounded by the polyphony of the collective. Filmed lazing in a soapy bathtub, the group's nominal front man—none other than the six string-strumming Kjartansson himself—is merely one voice among many. If there is a center to this circle of sentimental grandeur, it is the Rokeby mansion, which offers its pastoral decrepitude to Kjartansson's camera with the same hospitality exhibited by its regular inhabitants. (The latter, an eccentric, creatively minded band of heirs to the property who gathered together on the house's front porch and lawn, sing along throughout.)

A mixture of sweeping romantic sentiment and self-consciously salutary humor, single-take authenticity and cinematic ostentation, *The Visitors* treads a thin

line between the affective and the affected. Kjartansson's fixation on melodrama is easy to dismiss; less so is his adoption of musical performance as a model of togetherness in which the one and the many appear coextensive. Immersed in their solitary aural and physical spaces yet compassionately attuned to the modulating sounds of their peers, the "visitors" before us—if only within this highly orchestrated context—offer a vision of what philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy has referred to as "being singular plural."[4]

AT THE OTHER END of the social spectrum from the communitarian paradigm expressed in *The Visitors* is a different mode, that of the charismatic pop icon who reflects and embodies the dreams and desires of the masses. The fantasy of public adulation is a recurrent theme in the work of Basque artist Itziar Barrio. In *We could have had it all* (2012-13), a multimedia artwork inspired by the chorus to Adele's 2010 hit single "Rolling in the Deep," Barrio reflects on the relationship between illusory pursuits of fulfillment and the power exerted by the image of the popular artist.

In its first iteration, the work comprised two separate elements: a video projected inside the Teatro Arriaga (a lavish proscenium-style theater in Barrio's home city of Bilbao) and an audio track installed in the theater's adjoining plaza. The video, filmed inside the Teatro Arriaga itself, is composed of a series of tracking shots and stills that mimic the camera work in Adele's concert video *Live at Royal Albert Hall* (2011). The soundtrack of Barrio's work is a looping instrumental refrain based on the opening bars played at the same Adele concert.

Throughout most of Barrio's video, the Basque theater's seats and stage remain empty. During brief slow-motion segments, however, one catches glimpses of two women collaborators: Chavisa Woods, a New York-based poet, and Maialen Lujanbio, the first widely known female practitioner of the Basque improvisational song technique known as bertsolarism. Though the two poets are shown speaking and singing into a pair of microphones, their words are muted, appearing solely in the form of subtitles. Only in the plaza outside the theater, where a number of speakers were arranged in a circular formation, could their voices be heard.

Here one could listen to a recording of Lujanbio's strange and beautiful bertso. This alternated with audio from a performance by Woods, recorded at New York's Bowery Poetry Club, in which she engaged her audience in a "people's mic" version of the lyrics to Adele's song, calling out lines one at a time and having them repeated back to her in the manner made famous by the Occupy movement. Staged in a public square that has frequently hosted protests and assemblies, the installation suggested that *having it all* could refer to more than just an individual's need for romance or the acquisition of material possessions.

The desire expressed in the piece is for experiences generated by a collective and held in common by a public, a sentiment echoed in the words of the two women. "Our life is spent /seeking faraway dreams," sings Lujanbio, responding to Adele's song in her own words, "he who has one wants two /the one who has two wants three . . . /who made us believe that /we might have had it all?" Following her transformation of Adele's song into a protest-style chant, Woods reads a poem of her own in which a fragmented sense of individual identity leads to a political and erotic awakening. She evokes a "storm that came and /redistributed my knowledge of myself," before asking (of her viewer? of her would-be lover? of Adele?), "where is the communism in your love?"

Music serves as a point of access to the social sphere, a means of measuring, or *sounding*, complex dimensions of subjectivity, cultural difference and shared affective response.

The image of a microphone appears alongside Adele's likeness in a series of prints Barrio made following the video installation. A clichéd emblem of musical celebrity, the microphone could serve as a symbol of the individual star's imperious charisma. Yet in Barrio's project, the amplified voices of Lujanbio and Woods are disembodied, decentralized and distributed across both the theater and the square. Rather than captivating an audience with a masterful performance, the performers appear only in an empty theater. They reimagine pop music not as vehicle for cultish devotion, but as a shared cultural form and one possible component of a thriving public space.

Top, Itziar Barrio: *We could have had it all*, 2012, video, approx. 9½ minutes; at the Teatro Arriaga, Bilbao.

THE MUSICAL PERFORMANCES staged in the video work of Katarina Zdjelar frequently allegorize broad social or political realities. In a piece titled *My Lifetime (Malaika),* 2012, we observe rag-tag members of Ghana's National Symphony Orchestra rehearsing "Malaika," a tune popularized internationally in the 1960s by artists such as Miriam Makeba, Harry Belafonte and Pete Seeger. Throughout the work, Zdjelar's camera remains concentrated on the scored sound boards and corroded brass instruments of a clearly underfinanced ensemble as well as on the languid gestures of the players, which bespeak a general fatigue precipitated by their ordinary lives as day laborers. This atmosphere of weariness is reflected in the music itself, which ambles along, not quite on tempo, not quite in key. Introduced into

Bottom, Katarina Zdjelar: *Everything Is Gonna Be*, 2008, video, approx. 3½ minutes. Courtesy Circus, Berlin, and SpazioA, Pistoia.

Ghana by the British, European orchestral music sits uneasily within the country's rich musical traditions. Bearing the burden both of national pride and colonial heritage, the performers in Zdjelar's video—one of whom nods off in his seat at the video's conclusion—are arbiters of a hybrid cultural form whose vitality in its present context appears to have been exhausted.

A different sort of lassitude is on display in a video titled *Everything Is Gonna Be* (2008), one of several works presented by Zdjelar at the 53rd Venice Biennale in 2009. This piece confronts us with a cast of white, mostly middle-aged men and women singing a choral rendition of the Beatles' "Revolution." The video was filmed in an interior adorned with the trappings of middle-class domesticity. The performers Zdjelar has commissioned for the work—members of an amateur Norwegian choir—bop their heads or sway side to side while stumbling through John Lennon's ambiguous appeal for political temperance. Mildly uplifted by the music but exuding complacency, these amiable Europeans serve as a suitable emblem for pop music's neutralization of radical sentiment.

Many of Zdjelar's works concern the failure to perform the requisite demands of social or aesthetic conventions. In certain pieces this failure is engendered by the limits of cultural adaptation. *Shoum* (2009) depicts Serbian workers struggling to decipher the lyrics to a Tears for Fears song. *The Perfect Sound* (2009) features a group of recent immigrants to the Netherlands working with a voice coach to eliminate their accents. For Zdjelar, who was born in Belgrade and lives in Rotterdam, these frustrated attempts to participate in a global culture of glossy pop songs and accentless speech highlight the status of language as site of social and political power, while opening new artistic possibilities.

"Parapoetics" is the term Zdjelar uses to describe the aesthetic effects resulting from the accidental nonconformity to conventional orders of meaning. Parapoetic expression is exemplified in Zdjelar's video *One Or Two Songs on Someone or Something in Particular* (2007), which features a young woman, shot in close up, strumming what sounds like an electric guitar, apparently with no technical knowledge of how to play it, and humming along. As the sound modulates from chaotic to semi-melodious, we witness the pleasures registered on the girl's face, and we experience, in turn, the subtle sensations of an expressive form prior to its formalization.

A DELIBERATE TURN AWAY from codified structures of meaning can likewise be observed in the recent work of Hassan Khan. A staple of the Egyptian cultural scene for well over a decade, Khan began his career performing electronic music in dance halls around Cairo. In recent years he has increasingly engaged with an evolving form of Egyptian music known as *sha'bi*. Although the word means "popular" in Arabic, Khan insists that the genre be understood as separate from commercial forms of music. Born out of performances at weddings and community celebrations, *sha'bi* is defined by Khan, in a manner resonant with the parapoetics referred to by Zdjelar, as that which "escapes the performer, the uncontrolled tic, the spit, the curse, the hoarse and broken voice."[5]

In addition to exhibiting his sculptures, photographs and video works—a number of which were recently featured in a solo exhibition at SALT Beyoğlu in Istanbul—Khan has performed his synth-heavy *sha'bi* compositions at various institutions in the U.S., including at the Queens Museum in New York and the Slought Foundation in Philadelphia. His music also features in *Jewel* (2010), a video that has been instrumental in broadening Khan's international visibility since its glowing reception at the most recent New Museum triennial in New York.

Zdjelar: *My Lifetime (Malaika)*, 2012, video, approx. 5½ minutes. Courtesy Circus and SpazioA.

This work opens on a primordial scene. What appears to be a prehistoric fish swims amid a constellation of blinking cobalt lights. A minute and a half in, the frame freezes and the sea creature crystallizes into a semi-abstracted image, which dissolves into a pattern of lights on the side of a rotating speaker box. This progression corresponds with a change in the music, which shifts from an atmospheric overture to a melodic, beat-laden dance track. One has the sense of a leap not just from the amphibious to the terrestrial, but from the imagined to the manifest. This transition between representational registers dramatizes the creative act in its inception.

As the camera continues to pull back, two men are revealed. One is middle-aged, mustachioed and clad in a leather jacket. The other is a 20-something in a tidy button-down shirt and slacks. For the next four minutes, this odd couple performs an energetic dance comprising a mix of improvised and choreographed gestures. Though their gazes frequently lock and their movements are mutually responsive, they neither touch one another nor venture across the threshold delineated by the speaker box, which continues to rotate at the center of the frame.

The idea for this video came to Khan during a taxi ride in which he glimpsed two men dancing on a Cairo street corner to a homemade speaker bejeweled with flashing lights. Created not long before the 2011 Egyptian revolution, *Jewel* figures a fervent encounter between a delegate of the old Cairo and one of the new. Brought together by shifting rhythms, they forge a language whose rules, like those governing their country, have yet to harden into stone. ○

Hassan Khan: *Jewel*, 2010, video, 6½ minutes. Courtesy Galerie Chantal Crousel, Paris.

1. John Cage, "Autobiographical Statement," 1990; johncage.org.
2. Sabine Mirlesse, "Ragnar Kjartansson," July 3, 2013; bombsite.com.
3. Ibid.
4. See Jean-Luc Nancy, *Being Singular Plural,* Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2000.
5. Hassan Khan in conversation with Omar Kholeif, "Against Interpretation," Nov. 2, 2012; ibraaz.org.