



On the uneasy dance between knowledge and information.

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Akram Khan

British-Bangladeshi choreographer and performer Akram Khan challenges the seeming contradiction between static sculptures and moving dancers. The power of the statue, he says, lies in how its immobility prompts movement in the observer while, conversely, the moving body can make the viewer still. He's been exploring this theme since he began creating his unique fusion of contemporary and South Asian classical dance traditions in 2000. Speaking from London, where he co-founded the Akram Khan Company, he addresses our tendency today to privilege information over wisdom, the connection between dance and our ancient past and the invaluable reactions of children.

Your 2010 work, *Vertical Road*, which was inspired by traditions in Sufi Islam and the poetry of Rumi, meditates on the difficulties of wresting oneself from the horizontal road of earthly time and living along the emotional, transcendent "vertical" path. Has that latter road become even harder to follow of late? Our ancient myths were based on gods. Now we've replaced gods with hu-

mans because we're able to create technology and use it to our advantage. But I think that technology will replace us when it figures out that it doesn't need us any longer, and then it will be the new god.

In filming a new documentary, *Can We Live with Robots?*, for the UK's Channel 4, I've asked people who work in that field: What makes us human? I think we need to return to this question because we're so numb today, which is probably why we're unhappy. It's a very traumatic time, but we're not feeling it. We're living in a moment when governments employ shock treatments at an epic scale, and people are occupied and made numb while massive changes occur. We're unable to move forward or backward in any way.

What are the benefits of change and transformation? All change is violence because we are very accustomed to habit. When you create a ritual by doing something again and again, it—and you—slowly become absent, because it's familiar. You move away from the present, where you should be living. We must continue evolving. This isn't about changing govern-





Akram, 43, will retire from full-length performances in 2018. His last solo will be in *Xenos*—a new production to mark the centenary of the First World War.

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ments; that’s not enough. Every individual must transform in order to survive, and this is violent because anything uncomfortable is violent to your senses. And you never know what you’re going to change into. Even when you plan it, it’s unknown.

Have we entered an age of anesthetization, in which feelings of discomfort, whether through art or other means, are vilified as we search for constant comfort and happiness? I think so. The capitalist system isn’t working. We have grown up watching advertisements that tell us that we need this or that, and our hunger and thirst for more new things has not dwindled. It’s actually growing, even after we meet our basic needs of safety, shelter, food and water. We think we require much more to be happy, but we’re not happy with the hundreds of thousands of things that we buy every day.

The thing is, the old capitalist and imperialist myths have not quite died, and the new myths haven’t yet been born. We’re in a

myth gap. And the problem with creating new myths is that, every year, we have to create more new myths. We can’t keep up, especially with the speed of technology and its advancements.

How can art, and dance in particular, speak to this present crisis?

Art is the bedrock of what makes us human. Our sense of reflection, of learning, happens through seeing and exploring the world and our stories through mediums other than politics and television. It allows us to see those stories in a more ancient way. The popular conception is that with each generation, we become more intelligent. Many ancient tribes, however, believe that with each generation we become less wise. We feel we’re more intelligent because of our immense access to information, but that’s not the same as knowledge. Knowledge is information that is fully embodied and experienced. There’s a huge difference between the two, and right now, we are in awe of information rather than wisdom. Dance

carries our ancestors inside us like a living museum that’s constantly transforming. But dance is simultaneously carrying with it the future. The body is a means to explore and express how we’re feeling in a very sacred, spiritual way. It allows us to be in touch with our five senses again, to take us out of numbness. The body doesn’t lie. Especially on stage. When you see people lie in dance, you know it’s a lie.

What can we learn from children, in terms of experiencing art and gaining wisdom?

Children constantly remind me that everything is possible. They’re very connected to the truth. When something isn’t working, they switch off, and when it’s genuine, they click in. We’ve learned the art of hiding what we feel, but children don’t do that. They haven’t yet conformed to numbness. We educate them into that, but in their youth, they are purely listening to their instincts—which is how we all used to be. At the heart of creativity lies instinct, and at the heart of instinct lies creativity.

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