

camunico

Anish Kapoor

An *artist's* lesson for the
business world



Camunico in conversation with
Anish Kapoor about creativity, performance and
social good

The Kapoor Studio in South London is tucked away between a small park and the Thames River. But, as with the rest of Mr. Kapoor's work, nothing is what it seems. Tucked away aren't the right words, because Mr. Kapoor owns this street. From the outside, the set of buildings look like working class houses, but behind the tiny doors, quite unexpectedly, we find Mr. Kapoor's art studio. The place where he creates, sits, thinks and constructs his sculptures.

Anish Kapoor is recognised as one of the most important modern artists of this time. He was born in Bombay in 1954 and moved to England in the seventies, where he enrolled in art school. His work is influenced by both the Western and Eastern cultures. Typical effects in his work are the combination of sensual and female forms with strong and rough materials. He gained worldwide fame and recognition during the 1990 Venice Biennale, where he represented Britain. Ever since, he is known for his glass sculptures, unexpected purple circles in dark rooms, vast mirrors and moving objects shooting wax elements on a white wall. For the 2012 Olympics in London, he created his largest piece to date, a huge tower that looks like to have been blown over by the wind. Camunico talks to Mr. Kapoor about the impact of art in society and the importance of preserving old art for generations to come, as well as stimulating young artists to create new work.

Art is utterly useless

"I don't want to achieve anything with my work. Art is utterly useless. And it should remain utterly useless. In the history of objects, the less useless a thing is, the more value it has. So, the less useful art is, the more value it has. [Laughing.] It is interesting that in society, relative to scale and relative to most other things, art is worth a lot of money, even though it's absolutely useless. Fabulous.

But of course, it's not only an economic equation, art has all kinds of other values, but they're not nameable and you can't set out to achieve them, that's what's rather interesting about it. Someone can't say: 'I'm going to make art that is going to change the world'. You can say it, but it doesn't mean anything. So despite what the ambitions are, I think all art is nebulous, and that's a key thing.

However, having said it achieves nothing, we do need it. And it does matter. Art has huge social value, it somehow manages to tell us who we are, not literally but psychically.

That has to do with citizenship, with how we belong. Take for example the Dutch, at some level they belong because of Rembrandt. We identify ourselves through these role models. No artist can live in the Netherlands without recognising what Van Gogh, Rembrandt or Mondriaan did, that's just part of the deal. Society and culture are linked with each other and through that link we have a sense of belonging. That's the role of art in someone's life."

Create new culture

"We live in a time now where governments and people who think they rule us have been philistine and savage in their misunderstanding of culture and its social and economic role. In the UK it is beyond belief really. Such ignorance, it makes me mad. The money spent on artists is less and less, budgets from all kinds of governmental institutions are cut. From a social side, that's unbelievable. Let's think about the future for a minute. Why do people go to Amsterdam? To go to museums. It's just non-sense to take the view that culture can be pushed into the background and that it will be privately funded. It won't be. Private money always has an agenda. It demands a return. Public money says: 'Here's some money, now go and experiment and we'll see if something comes out of it.' There is no return demanded. The art world needs that kind of money, it's only out of experimental phases that we can go to new places.

Our endeavour is not just to preserve old culture, but to make new culture as well. If all the budgets on culture are cut down, it will affect cultural heritage in the long term. The great artists of the future will all be Chinese. Maybe there's nothing wrong with that, but in the UK we used to have 400 art schools, we now have 12. In China they open 400 art schools a year.

We seem to lose the recognition that what comes out of art school is a way of thinking that makes great businessmen, pop stars, theatre directors and of course artists. It's a huge mistake to cut the budgets for art schools just because it's not an academic study. We should stand up and make a fuss about these idiotic policies. I can do that from my position, of course, but all of us can stand up and make a difference."

Make a difference

“Three years ago I dedicated a work of art to Ai Weiwei. There is no such thing as giving selflessly, so I realised I was doing it for a reason. I discovered that it helped me to know that I had a voice. As an individual, I can make a fuss and make a difference.

I don't feel it's my responsibility to stand up against our Secretary of State, Maria Miller. It's absurd to put oneself in a place where all the measurements of what artists do is economic. Senseless. I don't want to speak to her about it, I have no wish to engage in it, it's against the core of my being.

I think there are lots of other ways to make changes. For me personally, I make my work, which I believe is deeply political, and I'm engaged with the other side of politics where there's a more open agenda in trying to make culture policy more insightful. I can't speak for other people, but everyone should determine and find a way to contribute. We all have a voice and we must use it.”

Aspiration

“I think a crisis doesn't have to do with money, but with aspiration. We tell our young people that they should aspire to have all the objects of the world, a nice car and a nice house, lots of pretty clothes. All those objects further stimulate an economic model of production. And all the economic models of production are based on the idea that nature is infinite, that it will provide forever.

Society seems to think that all this production is consumed and will lead to more production. Nobody talks about the aspiration to happiness. Or the aspiration to contentedness. These are very important human values. Spiritual values. So in my opinion, we need to rethink the whole question of 'what is crisis?'. We live in a world where millions of people starve every day. Crisis is a matter of how you define it.

The relationship between art and money is a different thing. Art and money have always been related to each other. Good art has always been close to good and bad money. That's just the way it is. Is it difficult to put a price on art? No, the art-world has a method for that and does it very successfully.

Private money has always been important for art and culture. With less public money, its contribution might become even more important.

As artists we have to remember, we are not Louis Vuitton; we don't make luxury goods. Too much of the art market is already related to luxury goods, some art can look like luxury goods but that doesn't mean it is. There's a difference between a singular vision and a nice handbag."

Experimenting

"I have no message with my objects. As an artist, I have literally nothing to say. Because if you have something to say, then you can just say it. We spend our whole lives being educated to be good citizens, doing the right thing, to be good husbands and good wives etcetera. We are educated to death, really, it kills us. It removes all creativity. Society requires us to be certain things. The only freedom an artist allows himself is the freedom to not know what you're doing. To start the day with no agenda and to let everyday be an 'I don't know-day'. The longer one can have 'I don't know-time', the deeper one can go. Experimenting is extremely important. Continuously opening up and breaking boundaries are crucial to making interesting work. There is this perception that an artist is a fool, that he sits around smoking and drinking all day. Well, first of all, some of us have normal working hours, but besides that, whatever the case is, out of these stupid things something deep arises, something that is unexpected, unknown, never seen before. So when I say that I have nothing to say as an artist, I mean that having something to say, always gets in the way of the creative process.

If I have something to say, I'll say it. But if you have nothing to say, if you can get to that place, something surprising, perhaps something extraordinary can happen. That's real ambition. In my case, the more 'I don't know-time' I have, the more creativity. One should find the time to sit and wonder. The less heavy the agenda, the deeper the work. If this can be done properly, freely, my view is that in the end there is more space for the viewer, because the personality of the artist is not in the way."

Intimacy

"One thing is very clear, art is very good at intimacy, at engaging the viewer. At saying: 'Come along and be part of this. Engage in the activity'. That's the way art can influence a person. The moment of exchange is intimate, it's interesting that an object can do that. To a certain level, the relationship with art is like with a lover. It is a one-to-one conversation.

I don't care if my art is accessible to anyone or not. I care if it's good or not. And I'm convinced that if it is good, it's accessible to everyone.

Pressure

"The biggest hurdle I took in life was trying to establish a practice that gives me freedom. I have a luxurious life now, imagine I can come to the studio and do everything I want, all day, every day. Incredible. That's real freedom. When I was a beginning artist, I didn't have the freedom to do that. I swept the dirt in the corner and made something from it, cause I didn't have any money to buy materials. Now, I achieved this freedom, I earned it. That is a countable reality.

As a successful artist, I don't necessarily feel the pressure to perform over and over again. I'm aware of it, but I don't feel it to be a pressure. Artists need to preserve the right to contradict themselves. All human beings have that right, but artists in a particular way. We can say something and then in another piece of art do the opposite, and we have the right to make bad art. It's necessary. And it can certainly leave the studio, bad art is part of what we do, we conduct our education in public.

Sometimes I look back and evaluate. I can see that I have had periods where I've been stuck or lost but that's fine. The whole point is that these periods are needed, otherwise I can't do the rest. I love being in the studio. Rather than travelling the world and setting up an exposition somewhere, I prefer being in my studio.

Inspiration

"I learn from other artists, but also from thinkers and philosophers of all kinds, such as Freud, Nietzsche and Schopenhauer. Other artists are inspiring because it amazes me what artists do and have done. For example Barnett Newman, to me he is the most mysterious and astonishing artist of 20th century. Something is going on in his pieces that is hard to name. Think about it: how many things have you seen in life that are mysterious the first time you see them and remain mysterious twenty years after? Not many.

Some art is able to let us wander through our own consciousness and ask ourselves questions such as: 'Where do we come from?' and 'What is being at all?' That's why abstract art is important, it can't necessarily answer those questions, but it can point to fundamentally mysterious things.

A country we can all learn from is India, because the Indian culture is mysterious. It has so many cultural layers that have been there for a long time, it's hard to reach beyond. For example, everything is ritualised in India, that has all to do with the layers of culture and history that are never let go of."

Change the world

"There are lots of things that I would like to change in the world. I thinks it's tragic that we have people who starve, that there's an inequality, that women are not on an equal basis with men, racism and sexism. There's so much to change, it's unbelievable. I believe that each of us can make a contribution. We live in a time where governments are unable and countries are unable to do so, which means it's up to us. It's up to individuals to make a difference.

The protests in Egypt are a good example, it's astonishing to see what has been happening there. The situation shows us that it's people who are standing up. The responsibility is shifting to the individual. And the power is shifting to the people. All over the world, the right and need to protest is huge and we should use it. Nations have less control of individuals and individuals have more ability to make a difference."

*Mr Kapoor was talking to Carlijn Vis and
Ron Soonieus of Camunico*

