

**Sam Kim**

talking with Rachel Bernsen

**Rachel Bernsen:** I spent the morning looking at the video of your work and was really fascinated by the fact that I was able to watch 3 things back to back from 2001, 2003 and 2004. I want to start by addressing something that I felt I had a real connection to in your work. It's an issue of cultural identity that might be present in it. We're both from Minneapolis, that's a connection, both grew up in a homogenous community and you're Korean and I think, because you're not blond...

**Sam Kim:** I'm not blond.

**RB:** Your experience growing up in the suburbs of St. Paul, MN, might be similar to an experience that I had growing up in Minneapolis, MN: being identified as other.

**SK:** For you, really?

**RB:** Yeah, because I'm Jewish, olive skinned I have dark thick curly hair. I didn't fit into the Minnesota mold: Blond and Lutheran.

**SK:** This is true, very blond and very Lutheran. Uber Lutheran.

**RB:** And especially in the 80's.

**SK:** That's a really important point to make.

**RB:** Growing up in the 80's in Minnesota was much more homogenous than it is now. I wanted to point out that, for me, that played a really large part in shaping my identity as an adolescent and as a teenager and what I saw in your work, especially in *Placid Baby* and *Nobody Understands Me*, was this kind of backdrop of the fixtures of adolescence juxtaposed by a real anxiety, sense of isolation, a restlessness. These are the things that I saw. There was a real juxtaposition there. I'm wondering if you've thought about these things, and want to address this question of cultural identity and being Korean in the Midwest?

**SK:** (laughter) Oh, that's such a great question. The way that I work is to test what's foremost on my mind and just let it exist and just let it be, and kick that out in the studio and see what happens. And, I think in some profound and other ways, yes, certainly that's going to be a lifelong preoccupation in some respects and, you know, maybe at certain times, more obvious than others. But yeah, that's my historical narrative. I'm not saying narrative in terms of the dance; let me be very, very careful about that, because I'm not interested in that at all.

**RB:** No, and I didn't see that in your work. I didn't see a narrative. These were images that I got. In *Placid Baby*, from the set, I almost got this "after-school special" feel, but the movement did not suggest that at all. There's a lot of restlessness in the movement, along with anxiety and isolation, as I said before. I saw that to a very different degree in *Nobody Understands Me*. It was almost like a more grown up version of *Placid Baby*, in a way. And I don't mean grown up in terms of the evolution of you as an artist, I mean it was addressing issues of someone who is post adolescent.

**SK:** It's really interesting, the language that we're using. This stuff did come up. I noticed that with the synopsis that different critics would write and the way that it was written about. There's this

constant sense of youth, which is great, and then there are certain terms that I'm totally ok with, and then others that were very literal. They're grasping, and they're getting at something. And they are approximating something, and then I find that the language is very insufficient. Some of the terms that you're using are really, really interesting because they are very different than what the critics picked up on, which were words like "cheerleader."

**RB:** I didn't think cheerleading.

**SK:** That's because there wasn't any. I think the critics were literal-minded, and you're absolutely right. That's incredible. I love the fact that you're from the Twin Cities (Minneapolis/St. Paul) as well, and you *know* what that setting was. And for me now, it's just fodder at this point to either play with or not. But it is very much a part of who I am. I think it's definitely had a huge impact on me as an artist in terms of the eyes that I use to filter the world in, and the way that I digest information, it's very much from this literal, metaphorical, physical position of being marginalized. I mean, look at this thing that we do. You can't be any more marginalized, even in this city that's home base for the marginalized of the world. We're even at the edges of that as a contemporary artist/choreographer/dance person.

It's there, you know. I never very deliberately decided to go: oh, you know, I want to make a piece necessarily about this. I think it's just there, inherently there. And that was my preoccupation, and I'm glad that it at least registers strongly in a particular way. And then, let me talk about the idea of using the trappings of things. Using the trappings of adolescence, which for me is always a perennial fascination of somebody in turbulence: that there's so much possibility, but there's also a lot of, when you say anxiety, I find that really, really exciting because there's death in there as well, the death of possibilities. You could move this way, you could move that way, you could go to college on the West coast and it could determine a whole lot of other stuff, but it's such a liminal state, it's really fascinating. There's a whole lot that is just not going to be known, determined, dictated until much later.

**RB:** What I'm curious about—and I know that you don't consciously set out to make work that addresses these issues—but I'm wondering about the new piece, *Avatar*. I haven't seen it and I don't know anything about it, but I'm wondering if these issues are coming up in your current work, in the way that your process is going and the way that you're dealing with ideas, movement ideas or set ideas.

**SK:** No, not in any apparent way to me. Maybe it's something I'll look back on later and go: yeah, of course, that was obvious. But no, this process has been so different. I'm alone and it's been wonderful and painful. There's a certain exquisite kind of freedom attached to really being alone, with yourself, and just having to face that. My rehearsals have been very long and very erratic. Sometimes I'll lie on my back for too many hours and warm up the way I need to, to address all my injuries first and then get going.

**RB:** I know this isn't the first solo that you've done, *dumb dumb bunny* was originally a solo.

**SK:** But, DDB I never intended... I always knew that it was going to go to this much bigger place.

**RB:** This is a new process for you, then?

**SK:** Exactly. I think the idea of liberty and freedom has been so very important to me. And this is getting into political territory, too. In this day and age it's so difficult to get all your dancers together, and to do all your grant writing, and so on. I feel that this project is very special to me because I've just insisted on making it fun. It has to be easy and it has to be calm on a certain level, and you know what, fuck it, if I do a different dance on all three nights, that's just the way it's going to be (laughs).

**RB:** Is the piece going to be improvisational?

**SK:** Ah, improv; that's such a loaded topic. Certain parts, I believe, will be. But there'll be a ton of specificity to it, and I never, ever characterize my work as improv, even if there are moments in it that are definitely improv driven.

**RB:** It all comes from a very specific place?

**SK:** Yeah, and (even if it is improvised) I do it enough times that in the end it'll still be this recognizable entity. So, that's kind of my directive with *Avatar*, to keep it wide open. Don't feel any constraints, do exactly the thing that you want, because that's the only thing that we have. We don't have anything else. There's no money, there's no fame, (laughter), there's nothing to fear, so just fuck it, do it. In *Avatar*, for me, I'm questioning very deeply rooted assumptions of the form itself.

**RB:** Of the form that is dance?

**SK:** Yes, the culture of dance, which entails all of those things. I think everything is tied up together in very specific ways in my mind. Take for instance the format of class, which I've been thinking about a lot because I'm about to start teaching a choreographic workshop called Revision, through Movement Research. I'm really excited to do it and to have a higher level of discourse, because I think that's what the larger dance culture needs. We're ghettoized because we're not getting validation from our criticism, or from other institutions so, there's that in my mind. And I have all these questions: Why that? Or in a traditional technique class, why does somebody stand in the front of the room and the rest of the class is standing in rows facing this person? There's a hierarchy and certain assumptions....

**RB:** Are you thinking about those issues of hierarchy in your process?

**SK:** No, but I think it all comes back to the body: what do you have when you're working in a solo format? I think the stakes are high, and like I said, I've been really enjoying the freedom, and trying to keep it a very pleasurable open process. But there is a lot of fear surrounding because I'm exposing what's writ on my body and really going into that and going, okay, if certain movements come up again and again, is there some sort of technique embedded in that? Why do I favor that? Why? What is that?

**RB:** How are you exploring those things?

**SK:** It's a system of... that's a terrible word. I don't even want to say system, because it's not like that. In fact I'm trying to break those systems. If you have a system, why do you even have a system? It's sort of a very diffuse kind of... okay, this feels right for now, which is for me to look back at an improvisation: that was 45 minutes; o.k., what did I like? Why am I responding to it? Or, stop looking at video because it's fucking up your perception because it's a Hi8 crappy camera, and you don't like the rehearsal clothes that you're wearing, and your hair looks stupid and bad, so you have to stop looking at that and start moving again. Or, construct a highly, highly, highly deliberate phrase in 15 steps... So I think it's a dialogue. And again, I'm really just trying to have a dialogue with myself in an incredibly honest and painful fashion. I think what I'm saying too, is that it's kind of moving between just doing and having an unmediated experience—whatever is existing in my body, just kick it out and don't analyze it, don't think about it—versus going back and being meta-cognitive in some way and go, oh, that! That's what I'm doing.

**RB:** Do you feel like inside of that is where assumptions about the form come up for you?

**SK:** Yeah, letting them come out. Identifying them, ripping them open, discarding them.

**RB:** What are some of those assumptions that you feel like you're working against or you're thinking about?

**SK:** Beauty is involved in some way, this idea of technique. This idea that you imbibe and digest from somebody... There's legacy involved, there's hierarchy involved, there's a sense of right and wrong that gets instilled somewhere along the line, and we're barely out of that tradition, barely. I can't say that strongly enough. Graham started this whole beast. Just now are we starting to get away from the tyranny of technique. And even now, still in certain circles, choreography is nothing more than a showcase for technique. It means that there's a lot of ground that can be covered. We just don't know that much about the form. So, that's what going on in the process of *Avatar*. I chose the name *Avatar* because it's this idea of a complete manifestation, the paragon of an idea, something that embodies that idea. There's also this idea that avatars can be deities that come to earth, like Vishnu is widely known as an avatar.

**RB:** Are these ideas that you're working with?

**SK:** I'm kind of responding to the form of solo itself. It's a whole other animal. You don't get the luxury of being in space with another body, which instantly sets up a different kind of relationship, it just does. So, what is the form demanding? What is that?

**RB:** When you talk about avatars, did you have a specific inspiration that led to the title?

**SK:** No, I think it was more diffuse and organic. Coming off from DDB, which has been foremost on my mind for the past year or so, which in the end is going to be a very big group piece. So, my mind was very much with that and it was hard to switch gears because this commission just kind of fell into my lap and so it was hard to switch and I thought I would do a solo with a number of other people involved as guests.

**RB:** Is that still a possibility?

**SK:** Yeah, like I said, if I want to throw something in the night before opening night, why not?

**RB:** How would the other people be in relationship to the solo?

**SK:** I don't know, I'm just saying that I'm going to keep that door open. In regard to the piece, with the exception of maybe one or two (pieces) did they ever come tumbling out of me very fast and sort of very well formed. There's no bolt of lightning, no sense of this is exactly what it is. I think these things can't be known until you're in the studio and you get going and discover what's there.

**RB:** Letting the piece unfold inside of a desire for self-exploration. Is that what you're saying?

**SK:** For me, there's an implied directional process, and it's not outside in; it's very much driven by what's happening in the studio, which I think is a culmination of what's happening in your personal life, what's happening in the world, what's inspiring you, what's not. All of those things that inform in some very oblique ways end up manifesting in surprising ways.

**RB:** What are some of the inspirations that are moving or driving you forward right now?

**SK:** That brings me back to your other question about the title of *Avatar*. I try to select these things very carefully. I write about my pieces very carefully. All these things should be informing people specifically about what the work is. I really believe in that. Naming a thing feels kind of mystical, it's very powerful and I did have some alternative titles in mind, but *Avatar*, to me really captured at least the process and identity of this work.

Now, things that have come up, that have been preoccupations that were there: this idea of body panic. I steal that idea from some literature I had read on David Cronenberg. I've always responded to his work and I think it's just that he has a very astute sense of an uncontrollable body, a body that goes awry, that just morphs, that becomes horrific and bloody and gross, and intestines and entrails...you know. So, that's been an interesting concept for me to play with. There are zombies too. I'm totally infatuated with zombies. I really feel like a nine-year old boy (laughs).

**RB:** It's almost like you're interested in what the body is capable of in a decomposed or even a post-mortem state. You were talking about beauty earlier and now it sounds like you're in a place of kind of...ugly.

**SK:** I want to be careful with ugly, because ugly can then be appropriated as another idea, which I think people have played with a lot. I think mine is very anatomical, very surgical. It's actually my love of these things.

**RB:** What draws you to those things? Have you always been obsessed with or interested in these things?

**SK:** I think it's the idea of the morphing body that is out of your control, which inevitably comes back to the idea of aging, which inevitably comes back to the idea of death, this idea of everything being finite, really. I got my wisdom teeth pulled at a very early age, maybe 14, and it was bloody. Two of them were impacted so they had to cut through gum and you're on gas, and I remember feeling very good, very, very good for a limited amount of time, and then very nauseous and really feeling like I was going to puke in the middle of this surgical procedure, and yet not even having the energy to shout it out and tell them. Here was the body in such a flesh and bone kind of way. I came out of the surgery and there were bits of ground-up tooth, bone, kind of scattered through my mouth and being able to bite down on that and feel the grit, and then not being able to open your mouth. And it just became this psychological apex of something; a new understanding of my body.

**RB:** That it was very vulnerable?

**SK:** Vulnerable and bloody and... Then the thing that I would do was to constantly work my jaw. I can still feel the sutures. It's a very strong tactile memory sensation of sutures that are holding the gum. It's a recurring memory that's coming back and being something to me. Let me clarify, that a lot of the process, the meta-cognitive part has really been about relational ideas of this kind of memory, this jaw thing. And, it *doesn't* matter and no one is *ever* going to know, and it *doesn't* matter, but I've been able to make a connection and that's what reads.

**RB:** In seeing your work, I'd never be able to guess at a narrative, but it is interesting that we do make real connections between experience and the creative process, and that those experiences are what inform what it is that we do in the present moment, especially when we're in the studio. It's interesting to hear you talk about specific experiences and how they manifest in your work.

**SK:** That's where you get that wonderful mixture of clarity and mystery. There are very deep relational connections going on in the choreography that are inherently elusive. You're not going to have the language to explain what's going on but that's the form of dance. It's what's so rich about dance. I mean, wow, look at what the form has to offer as opposed to projecting some very arbitrary thing on top of it which by the way, is also clearly legible to the audience, and then you get a certain kind of fakery or trickery going on.

**RB:** In your work, you do create a world that you are existing within, in the performance. And I wonder, what is that world? I want to know and I make assumptions. I know set is very important

to you. It gives us literally and figuratively a backdrop for your work. What are you thinking about for *Avatar*?

**SK:** It's never been a deliberate thing. It's not my m.o. to think about this first and that second and that third, but I am definitely visually oriented and the environment, the physical setting has always been important to me. The setting for *Avatar* is going to be very stripped down. Mulberry Street Theater is an interesting theater. One of the things that make it interesting is that they have mirrors stage right, in the theater space. That's something that I want to play with. I'm stripping it down. It is what it is. I'm not going to bring anything in, maybe some lighting equipment.

**RB:** You're using what's available to create a kind of self-contained environment?

**SK:** I want to talk about this film that was kind of a source of inspiration. There is a very specific solo in the film *Beau travail* by Claire Denis, which is based on Herman Melville's story, *Billy Budd* which is an amazing story. It's loosely translated in this film. It's about all these men doing militaristic kind of stuff and that goes on for a very long time. Finally this Captain has a fall-out with the Billy Budd character and then goes off to do his own thing, and he's about to kill himself and then, cut. All of the sudden he's in a disco tech and he's all alone and smoking a cigarette and then busts out into this amazing dance, and it's incredible and it's not anymore than forty-five seconds to a minute long, and it is riveting and it changes the whole landscape of everything you saw in that last hour and a half.

**RB:** It's like all of the sudden you know who he is in some way.

**SK:** I love how you phrase that, and then you really know who he is, you get the essential reveal. It's an epiphany and it's so bizarre and it's such a huge systemic break in the movie and it's perfect. It moves it to this whole other level. That was a moment for me, and I feel like I learn more from that than I do from watching dances.

**RB:** Do you want to have some kind of revelation in this work? We think it's going one way, and then something else is revealed?

**SK:** Things like film and other genres are just wonderful and have been instructive for me in terms of how do you construct an amazing surprise, or construct a piece that really doesn't give away anything in its guts until the very end. And not that it has to be the very end, but to really be truly surprised is really difficult these days.

**RB:** It's especially a challenge in live performance.

**SK:** Oh yeah, you're competing against...

**RB:** So, this is something that you're interested in, in being able to re-create in some way the sensation one gets in watching a film like, *Beau Travail*. Being able to do that in live performance?

**SK:** I don't want to say re-creation. It's not so much that but: what is the form and what can it do? We still don't know what might be so shockingly compelling, after all is said and done. There are certain narratives, and they're cultural, and they're western, and they're just old as the hills, in terms of what we think comprises this craft. I don't have any answers. It's just a premise I'm working from. I think that's how I'd phrase it.

**RB:** Are you considering what the audience will be experiencing (in the watching) when you're making work?

**SK:** Always, as a matter of fact. And asking, when you go see dance, what do you want to see? There's a set of expectations that the house brings and the audience brings. And it's always a

mingling of that with what is actually going to happen that night which is the profundity of doing something live. You never know what you're going to get. Of course I'm always looking at it through the lens of the outsider, the "Who is going to see this?" What's going on here? There's a lot of information the minute that someone takes the stage. Someone could do two movements and you can say it's Limon-driven, for example. It's all incredibly present, legible and understandable. Then you have some real information that you're going to base other assumptions on in terms of where this might go. I'm not saying that assumptions are fair, but assumptions are made.

**RB:** I want to address music, your musical choices and how that might affect the movement choices that you make. Whether you stay wedded to the music in any way, or how you choose to move away from it, and how that might be shaping the current piece? Music seems to be very important in your work.

**SK:** It is, and it's one of those things that is becoming too big for its own good.

**RB:** What do you mean by that?

**SK:** In NUM, there was a very specific reason that I selected the Vince Clarke music. There's the layperson that says that just sounds like 80's synth crap and then there's the next person who says, oh, Depeche Mode, Erasure...yes, that's all Vince. And it's so gay! The music was just so gay! I wanted to use that music for all of that: for its literal affect, for its nostalgia, for my personal relational quality with it. Again, it was never the rhythm, the melody, or any of that. It was the culture of the music. I was also trying to look at the function of music. Music can be an opiate at a certain time in life; it's a way to stamp your identity, to declare who you are.

**RB:** I definitely felt that was the way you were using music, as a kind of cultural identification.

**SK:** Even as a way out, a source of escapism.

**RB:** I want to ask you about time. When I say this thing about creating a world, it does seem like things happen inside of a moment in time in your work. Music has something to do with setting that up as it's from a specific era. It does give it a kind of insulated sense of time.

**SK:** That's an interesting point of entry. When you say that, do you mean present time or do you mean historical time?

**RB:** I mean the trajectory of the piece itself, from the beginning to the end of the piece.

**SK:** Yeah, there's a real dive into a moment. I was just at the Biennial the other day and I decided not to feel guilty if I passed by stuff that didn't instantly grab me. So I ended up watching a lot of time-based stuff, which is film, essentially. And there is something called "Torqued Chandelier Release" that is simply this chandelier that is hung in black space, 'cause that was part of the thrill too, this contrast between these crystals and this infinite, velvety, really solid black. And it would just twist and turn; sometimes it sped up, sometimes it would be painfully slow. And I was like "wow, this is my favorite choreography of the year. I can watch this 24hrs. a day." It was just so fascinating, so riveting. And it was a very hermetically sealed, moment. There is no frame of reference whatsoever, other than the chandelier itself, there is just black, such impenetrable black. Again, that was something that was very instructive of filtering and contextualizing and just giving that much of a frame to have that moment. And you're right; there is something about that that is fascinating for me. It's very contained.

**RB:** It also seems to be addressing an emotional place, a singular emotional place, or a moment in time that evokes an emotional state.

**SK:** That's a thrilling thing to hear, that this time-based event is evocative to you in that way. To me that's thrilling to hear. I think that's the most I can do, really. You're right, there are these glancing references to history and experience, but you're right that there's something I really want to examine that takes place in a very contained environment and moment that is always worth looking at and very interesting to me.

**RB:** You always get a sense of a moment, which I think you do successfully because you're interested in shaping what's around it, how we see it, in every way. There's a lot of tension created from all those different elements coming together.

**SK:** And that's what the form can do. You get so much opportunity to paint everything, if you choose, and I'm not saying you have to use everything, but the visuals, the sound, the placement of audience, directing the eye, lighting. All these things are so rich with potential to color everything, and that's what's kind of terrifying about this particular premise that you have all the freedom in the world to construct something, what are you going to do?

**RB:** How do you pare it down?

**SK:** Well, I think *Avatar* is a response to that (laughter) because I'm going to this super pared-down place. One thing that maybe is more apparent in certain works than in others—not just in mine, but in others' too—is a really incredible stylistic consistency. Say, you have a friend and she dresses a certain way and her handwriting is a certain way and her speech pattern is a certain way. All these things are clues. This is how we read people and when somebody is like that and there's this incredible stylistic consistency—what other people may call voice—it's incredible, it's like, wow, you carry your own syntax with you wherever you go! It's awesome and it's something that's one of my huge desires whenever I go to see a work. I hope I'm going to get that. I hope that's not going to be suppressed. It's generosity. That's exactly what I want to see, that degree of revelation.

**RB:** In the work and with the individual performers?

**SK:** I was really talking about the work revealing a very essential thing about that person. It goes back to whether or not you're really willing to show it. I've always responded to that. People who are able to imagine these things so strongly, so forcefully that you can't help but know it's that person. It is originality, and it is voice.

**RB:** So, this is something that you've always aspired to in your own work? Allowing for the 'real' voice...allowing you to be vulnerable...

**SK:** Oh, vulnerable. Exactly.

**RB:** In order to reveal the 'real' thing?

**SK:** Yeah, because you can sense it and smell if it's being withheld. If there's fear, if there's holding back, if there's some other agenda that comes pushing through, like: you want me to think that you're beautiful, you want me to know that you're flexible, you want me to know that you can do a back bend...I don't care!

**RB:** So, how do you deal with those things when they come up for you in your process? Because they inevitably come up!

**SK:** Of course they do, which is the painful part. I'm choreographing *Avatar* and I'm performing *Avatar*, and you're right, this stuff inevitably comes up.

**RB:** The things that you've been taught that dance is about...



**SK:** I'm trying to remain very open and playful with the process and I think there are things I'll have to do to deceive myself. I can watch video of myself and be completely turned off by the pants I'm wearing. The actual movement can be fantastic, but I won't see it because I'm so fuckin' put off by the silhouette of my pants! Which is completely retarded! So I'm thinking about instilling certain checks and balances, which is a lot about other people coming in to do certain parts to allow me to deal with it outside of my body, so I can not deal with those issues. I'm not saying I'm riddled with these issues, only as much as the next person.

**RB:** I relate to that.

**SK:** You have to be playful and flexible in the way that you approach that, and I think that it is going to be fun to get to project it on somebody else.

**RB:** Do you ever just let yourself come up against these walls and then embrace these things, maybe allowing it then to take you somewhere else? Or do you find yourself really trying to move away from them?

**SK:** I'm getting better, you grow up, you care less. It will get in the way. I will hit the wall...

**RB:** In what other ways does that affect your process, and do those issues get into the work somehow?

**SK:** It's not something I'm going to build into the work itself, it's about the way that I approach the work. I'm just insistent enough nowadays, and have been through this enough now to know what it is, call it for what it is, and get past it. It's not worth it. Why would you let something as dumb as that stop you dead in your tracks? When, really, you're on the way to something that's much more interesting. When there's a kick ass female performer on stage, who is just so confident in the way that she eats up space, and maybe can't kick her legs up high, that's the essential thing that you're going to see, their confidence. It's not a handicap; you just have your own way of being in your body. Sit with it. There's a ton of range to be had, just because you can't get your ankle up to your nose... don't worry you can still have a life. It's good; it's going to be great. That's what it is for me: that came up, I see what it is, I recognize it, and say to myself: move on, keep going, which is not to say that I don't feel it, that it's not troublesome and painful.

**RB:** Unfortunately we have to leave it there. I want to thank you very much Sam.

**SK:** Thank you Rachel, these interviews are fantastic.

**RB:** I appreciate all of your answers; they were quite informative... and brilliant.