

Trance in the Virtual Realm

A Conversation with Choy Ka Fai

Interview: Mi You

"The Third Prince", gameplay demo, "The Wanderer" installation, video still, 2020 © Choy Ka Fai

Over the past year, artist and choreographer Choy Ka Fai has been on a long research journey throughout Siberia, Taiwan, Vietnam and Singapore, documenting obscure shamanistic practices in an ultimate quest to conflate the technological and supernatural realms. Curator Mi You, who had joined him in Siberia, interviews him on his findings during this rather bizarre odyssey. Although neither has any sure answers yet, Choy speaks of an artificial intelligence or an avatar that could be half human, and well, half something else.

Mi You: Where did your interest in choreography and the supernatural begin?

Choy Ka Fai

Choy Ka Fai: I'll go back to my work in 2012 to 2015 with a project called "Soft-Machine". I made a series of interviews with 80 choreographers, where I tried to find out about dance in Asia. Suddenly it felt like I was an expert in choreographic ideas. After two or three years of showing this project, and after hundreds of hours of interviews, I felt a bit stuck and bored. I was thinking, "What should I do next?"

Somehow the opportunity opened for me to work on one of butoh's founders, Tatsumi Hijikata¹. I knew that currently a lot of people were doing work about either him or its other founder, Kazuo Ohno. Around that time my Japanese lighting designer was telling me a story how he went to Mount Osorezan, a place where shamans call for dead spirits. A friend of his, a Japanese playwright, had gone to summon the spirit of Samuel Beckett through a shaman. Immediately my mind connected this with Hijikata. Because even if everyone was making work about Hijikata, nobody really knew what he was or had been thinking, and perhaps I should call for him. That was the light-

bulb moment, and for another two years I worked on this project titled "Unbearable Darkness".

It's quite messed up, because I'm actually Christian by faith. When I went down this path to make this art project and I called for him, I didn't expect him to come. But it was something I experienced personally, and I believe that he was there talking to me. Later on, when I did a transcription of the interview, it confirmed my feelings, because he was really talking about art concepts and choreographic ideas that I don't think the shaman [who was channelling him] would have known. I had three or four interview sessions with this spirit.

That led to me to look for things that are other than human in this spiritual realm. What surprises me is that there is something that is invisible. You can't see it but you can't disagree with it. You have to respect it, whether you believe it or not. Over the past two years, I've called this the "paranormal dance experience", and it's led me to my current research.



Cosplay pole dancer, Taipei, "Cosmic Wanderer" research, video still, 2020 © Choy Ka Fai



It's been a natural progression from the human to the paranormal, and finally to the supernatural.

MY: Were you ever affected by these sessions?

CKF: I have quite a neutral spiritual aura, so I'm not easily affected by either the darker or the brighter side. A few people have told me this, that I'm quite suited to do this kind of research compared with someone who would be affected by these kinds of presences.

MY: Can you share with us more about these encounters with the supernatural, especially over your travels in different parts of Asia to develop your long research project "CosmicWander"?

CKF: My journey began in Taiwan in December 2019 quite naively. I had seen some news on a young female spirit medium who was also a popular live streamer on the Internet, as well as a bikini model. I was fascinated by this story, so I searched for this woman and met her. From then on I just kept looking and observing.

At the end of April there was a major 10-day walking pilgrimage for the goddess of the sea, or Matsu, as she is known in Taiwan. I decided to go on my own and join the crowds. Her worshippers bring the statue of Matsu to different temples as a kind of religious exchange. To walk with thousands of people for days – that bodily experience was quite transformative for me. Walking and purely experiencing sort of shuts down the rest of your senses.

Looking at the supernatural through the lens of culture is a way of understanding humanity more.

I was quite amazed because of their use of technology too. They actually put a GPS on the statue, and the followers could lock onto her location through an app, so they knew where the goddess was and could view her through a live-stream camera. At the same time the spirit and temple mediums were communicating with her, asking her where she wanted to go at any particular juncture. It was all happening live and it was interactive.

MY: There is also the involvement of politicians who endorse the ceremonies.

CKF: Yes, this pilgrimage plays out on such a big, national scale. There were firework displays, the business community came out, the LGBTQ+ community was there too with their gay-pride flags, even the president came for the ceremony. It was maybe the first time that I had seen such a large impact of religion, and it led me to really question why people are so fervent. Looking at the supernatural through the lens of culture is a way of understanding humanity more. Most of these Asian deities are created in the image of humans too.

MY: This was more of a festive, communal moment for you. But you've also had very different experiences, such as being in Siberia in the middle of nowhere. Can you tell me about those encounters too?

CKF: Yes, again on a German news broadcast, I had seen a shaman in Siberia. It was hard to find out more information or locate him, but we went to see what we could find. It was a kind of spiritual tourism over six or seven days traversing

Lake Baikal, and eventually we got ourselves invited to an event in Arshan.

It was basically a meeting between the shamans from two states to hold a co-operative signing or understanding. We saw about 30 different shamans. We didn't know what exactly was happening, but we knew it was a ceremony. Suddenly, everyone began to move at the same time and go into trance. They were using a lot of drums, and you could feel the vibrations. It was all quite powerful.

MY: When you were reflecting on recording the research, you felt that it could not fully represent the moment – not just because of the technical limitations, but also because there was essentially something more multi-dimensional than what we could simply perceive. Do you remember when we were interviewing a man called Valentine?

CKF: The shaman with three thumbs?

MY: Yes. There's this Chinese science fiction novel called "The Three-Body Problem", by Liu Cixin, and it talks about a person who is in a 'quantum state'. You can never fully capture how he looks because he's always changing. I had that experience with Valentine while you were recording. There was something shadowy over his face.

CKF: There was another experience I'm reminded of where something was missed. We were at Shaman Rock at Lake Baikal, in the most sacred land of the Buryat shamans. I was trying to understand what was so special about that place, but there were so many humans, cameras and noise that it definitely lost a bit of its aura. There was also a group of New Age tourists who were meditating in front of the rock, so it was a strange mix.

But as I learned more, I saw that the Siberian shamans were like bonesetters, and could help to heal people.

There are definitely more people from the West who are attracted to this sort of ancient culture. The more advanced our

technology is, the more people want to go back to traditional wisdom and belief systems. I've been thinking about those ideas – ancient technology or wisdom – how much they've evolved over hundreds of years, and how relevant they are for our everyday life.

What is the relevance of looking at shamanistic culture? In Asia, these rituals are mostly about alternative medicine. When I began researching, I admit that like anyone else I exoticised them. But as I learned more, I saw that the Siberian shamans were like bonesetters, and could help to heal people. In Vietnam they said that if you had a yang disease, you went to the Western medicine hospital. If you had a yin disease, it was something that no one could explain, and you would have to go to the shaman.

MY: How does this research map back on your interests in technology and dance?

CKF: These alternative-healing forms brought me back to an earlier work called "Dance Clinic", where I tried to use technology to help dancers to become better choreographers, but in a funny way. I wanted to explore whether artificial intelligence (AI) could be a form of medicine or at least a placebo.

AI always seems to float about as a part of my creative journey. When I was working with the Japanese butoh ghost of Hijikata, I was thinking of ways to re-engineer his presence. That was the first time I experimented with motion capture. The question was whether we could take the dance moves from his archive, allow a machine intelligence to understand all this movement, then create a dance of 'the now' even when he had passed away. This technology is already possible with audio, where if you send an AI an hour of a person's audio recording, it can generate a speech that sounds like the same person.² I want to apply this to the choreographic dance experience.

MY: Some of the most surprising moments in watching "Unbearable Darkness" were when Hijikata's avatar began to make really strange twisting movements that perhaps

no human being could ever achieve. What was essentially a glitch became the most interesting thing because it surpassed both the technology and the human.

CKF: Well some people can detect the presence of ghosts through electromagnetic waves, and I believe that the motion capture sensor could pick up these wave patterns as well. From a scientific point of view, you could say that different theatres had different cabling and this caused the glitches. But either way you look at it, we experienced a lot of 'drifting' in the software that had not been calibrated or programmed. 30 minutes into the show, the avatar began to drift because of some electromagnetic interference. Visually it was so beautiful, because it was twisting in the opposite direction for 360 degrees. We had five different avatars for Hijikata that represented his ages from 20 to 50. Because we didn't reset the system, it felt like every 20 or 30 minutes the avatar would deform on its own and go into a ghostly state. We were inspired by Francis Bacon's paintings, so it was fitting that the avatar would go into this half-human, half-ghost state.

MY: This reminds me of a scientific experiment where researchers were trying to establish a connection between Google Deep Dream and what people see when they're on drugs. The researchers would feed people these Deep Dream images through virtual reality (VR) headsets.³ Basically they concluded that the brain would react in a similar way.

I tried to create a technological ritual, to invite a spirit into an avatar or digital body in VR so that it can communicate with us.

CKF: Moving from "Unbearable Darkness" to "CosmicWander", my proposition for this current project is to create a parallel spiritual universe in virtual reality – to collapse the spiritual and the technological worlds. After using motion capture with Hijikata, I wanted to know whether I could use the same technol-

ogy to work with different shamans and capture the dance of their deities. It's simpler to say, of course, because there are so many states of being possessed by different spirits.

There's a point at which technology becomes magic.

So I tried to create a technological ritual, to invite a spirit into an avatar or digital body in VR so that it can communicate with us. I'm working to create a VR trance experience which was similar to what we saw that particular morning in Siberia, where all these sensors were aligned. I have also been working with several shamans and a motion capture device, either in an academic way to record the dance notations, or by asking them to go into a state of trance. I'm now attempting to translate that experience, and amplify it through technology.

MY: Do you feel the result will be more invisible than visible, such as how the magnetic field was altered with Hijikata's avatar?

CKF: There's a point at which technology becomes magic. As a creator I want to find ways to work with the invisible, but at this point it's still stuck at the basic level of a human life form. When I recreate these experiences in my trials, 90% of the time the technology cannot keep up. When I've choreographed a dancer who is moving like the Siberian shamans past a cognitive state, the vibrations are so minute and intense that the motion capture system becomes confused. Of course, I have to understand that a lot of the technology is not built for this purpose.

I am working with different artists and scientists to look at how to move beyond these limitations. That's where the narrative becomes important – how we can contextualise these experiments, and what do they tell us about ourselves.

MY: That's a great way to end. What we can project onto AI only tells us more deeply about our fears or hopes, and these are the things that only make us more human. 🗡️

Full length version first published on <https://so-far.online/trance-in-the-virtual-realm-a-conversation-with-choy-ka-fai/>



- 1 Butoh is a form of Japanese dance theatre founded in 1959 by Tatsumi Hijikata and Kazuo Ohno that rejected Western styles of modern dance or ballet in favour of an entirely new, playful, grotesque and absurd aesthetic.
- 2 This is also possible with video and deepfake technology, which has been used to resurrect dead personalities like Salvador Dali. Read more: www.theverge.com/2019/5/10/18540953/salvador-dali-lives-deepfake-museum
- 3 Keisuke Suzuki, Warrick Roseboom, David J. Schwartzman & Anil K. Seth, "A Deep-Dream Virtual Reality Platform for Studying Altered Perceptual Phenomenology", Scientific Reports, 7, no. 15982 (2017), [www.doi.org/10.1038/s41598-017-16316-2](https://doi.org/10.1038/s41598-017-16316-2)

Choy Ka Fai
CosmicWander: Expedition
 KINDL – Zentrum für zeitgenössische Kunst
 6.-22.8., 12:00-20:00
 Deutschlandpremiere | Ausstellung

Choy Ka Fai
Postcolonial Spirits
 HAU1 | 12.+13.8., 18:00 | 14.+15.8., 17:00
 Weltpremiere