Digital Shamanism: On half-spiritual eyes and the Curation of Existences in Choy Ka Fai's Oeuvre
By Nicole Haitzinger

In a certain, albeit simplistic way, it would be possible to assign Choy Ka Fai's oeuvre – here especially *Softmachine*, *Unbearable Darkness* and *CosmicWander* – to an aesthetic of a globally circulating (post-) internet or post human art. The Berlin-based artist from Singapore studied Media Art there and afterwards Design Interaction at the Royal College of Art in London: this is evident in the virtuoso use of video and digital technology in his artistic works, which are presented in art institutions and festivals worldwide. Similarities to transmedia video works by US artist Ryan Trecartin, European theatre director Susanne Kennedy or artist Hito Steyerl are obvious: brightly coloured backdrops, hyper-realisation of figures, exhibition of the performativity of the digital, interfaces of real and digital bodies, voices alienated by synthesizers or playback as one signal among many, an ambiguous relationship between 'reality' and fiction. More precisely, it is an artistically motivated emergence of post-utopian scenes[1] in which traditional cultural practices, pop culture, science

---

[1] Nicole Haitzinger, „ Europa. Post-Utopian Stagings in the Present and in Modernity", in: *Dancing Europe. Identies, Languages, Institutions*, eds. Nicole Haitzinger and Alexandra Kolb (Munich: epodium, 2022), 27–36

fiction, everyday stories and questions about the ethics of the political are interwoven. In post-internet art, interfaces are constantly created through complex resonances between hardware, software and the physical body that are designed to overwhelm the senses. In contrast to the current media-critical philosophical and cultural studies discourse led by Byung Chul Han, post-internet art is characterised by a performative understanding of media and relational configurations of online and offline formats. In his writings, Byung Chul Han emphasises the negative effects of digital technology on civil societies and interprets the apocalyptic threats of the homo digitalis "as an anonymous human being" (without a 'soul') and the "digital swarm" (without collective consciousness).[2] Digital culture is already integrated into numerous cultural expressions and forms the life horizon of many 21st century existences. In this sense, digital media are to be understood as wayward and sometimes arbitrary messengers: in their acts of transmission, they have culture-creating, reality-constituting and event-generating functions, since they are structure- and form-giving, or as Ana Vujanović pointedly summarises it for the context of the performative arts: "From a materialistic-poststructuralist critical perspective it would mean that the medium materially intervenes in (a non-material, notional) content, however, the medium should be understood in Deleuzian or Massumian terms, as a field of sensation, affects, and events, and not only as a field of social concepts and the practices of its material signifiers."[3]

„There is a point at which technology becomes magic" (Choy Ka Fai)

(Post-)internet or posthuman art are certainly two facets that characterises Choy Ka Fai's artistic work. However, I would like to shed light here on another facet of his oeuvre that I believe is profound and particular, namely his 'curation of existences' against the horizon of the digital; I will return to the implications of an expanded notion of curating later. For Choy Ka Fai, the concept of existence by no means only encompasses human existence, but also numerous 'paranormal' phenomena, 'other than human in this spiritual realm', for example genderless spirit beings. In this sense, Choy Ka Fai queers 'centristically' circulating art discourses with a wink and humour. In doing so, he exposes their historical situatedness in a 'western' or colonial matrix.[4] Against any authenticity effect, his artistic work is characterised

---

[2] Byung-Chul Han: *Im Schwarm. Ansichten des Digitalen* (Berlin: Matthes & Seitz 2013), 19.
[3] Ana Vujanović, "The Choreography of Singularity and Difference *And Then* by Eszter Salamon", in *Performance Research*, 13:1, 2018, 123–130, DOI: 10.1080/13528160802465672
[4] See Choy Ka Fai's interest in the „metaphysics of the human body. Through research expeditions, pseudo-scientific experiments and documentary performances, Ka Fai appropriates technologies and narratives to imagine new futures of the human body." https://www.ka5.info/about/biography.html

by diverse interweavings of globally circulating and canonised as well as very particular references. For example, he formats *Softmachine* (2012–2015), a search for an inherently "spiritual" Asian body provoked by a statement by British choreographer Akram Khan,[5] according to the compositional principles of William Burrows' novel of the same name: "*SoftMachine* is the title of a novel by William Burroughs. He made a novel by cutting and pasting different novels. I see the body also as a Soft Machine that cuts and pastes and becomes a new machine by itself. The body is full of all kinds of technology that humans still have to explore fully."[6] Through a series of 80 interviews and in the gesture of documentarism[7] of various performative dance practices, he deconstructs the phantasm and stereotype of Asian dance in the singular. At the same time, the fascination for the metaphysics of the (human) body in general becomes evident.

In his next artistic work entitled *Unbearable Darkness* (2019–2021), he explores, documents and stages a hosting of re-appearance of the late Butoh dancer Tatsumi Hijikata. He appears as a metaphysical entity in the body of a shaman and finally, made possible by the technical apparatus of Choy Ka Fai, emerges in the form of various avatars. The Chilenean-Mexican choreographer Amanda Piña pointedly defines this practice of hosting the re-appearance of ghosts in contemporary performative and transmedial art with decolonial implications as compossession: "Compossession combines composition and possession, referring to different forms of knowing and knowledge, beyond a 'western' conception. As an alternative to the notion of composition, compossession operates in decolonial terms beyond the notions of time, space, subject, object proposed by 'the contemporary' as a continuation of modernity/coloniality."[8] An essential difference to the New Age shaman phantasm is that the hostings of re-appearances are by no means particularly theatrical or emotionally overwhelming; on the contrary, performative contemporary art accentuates the functional motor processes and vocal articulations of a compossession.

---

[5] "The Western perception of what is Asian, does not interest me so much. I remember Akram Khan saying the Asian body is inherently spiritual. So immediately I asked myself *what do you mean by the 'Asian body'?* There are more than 48 countries in Asia! This also triggered my expedition throughout Asia." Choy Ka Fai in conversation with Karlien Meganck from deSingel, Antwerp at Tanz im August, Berlin 2014, https://www.goethe.de/ins/id/lp/prj/tco/por/Choy/enindex.htm

[6] Choy Ka Fai in conversation with Karlien Meganck from deSingel, Antwerp at Tanz im August, Berlin 2014, https://www.goethe.de/ins/id/lp/prj/tco/por/Choy/enindex.htm

[7] Hito Steyerl, *Die Farbe der Wahrheit. Dokumentarismen im Kunstfeld.* (Wien/Berlin: Turia + Kant, 2018).

[8] Amanda Piña, "Ideas for a practice of 'Compossession'" in: *Endangered Human Movements Vol. 3 – The School of the Jaguar,* eds. Amanda Piña, Angela Vadori and Christina Gillinger-Correa Vivar, (Wien: BMfB / nadaproductions, 2019), 283–295.

In *Unbearable Darkness*, Choy Ka Fai re-engineers Hijikata's presence with motion capture and uses all available technological possibilities to enable the appearance of the ghost in the theatre space in the form of a performance or a 3D video game: "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 in this half-human, half ghost state."[9] Like most of his artistic works, *Unbearable Darkness* is conceived as genre-reflexive and durational. It is shown in different (and sometimes overlapping) formats (such as live performance, documentary film, website, performative installation, video game) and adapted and varied depending on the context and situation. In the format of the performance, the appearance of the Hijikata avatars is interwoven with a contextualising strategy of documentality in the sense of Hito Steyerl's conceptual profiling[10] that characterises Choy Ka Fai's work in general. More specifically, this means that he documents, for example, the research trip to the summoning and appearance site of the spirits of the dead, Mount Osorezan, a Japanese gate to the underworld, or the interview with the ghost Hijikata – embodied by the blind shaman Hiroko Matsuda – on film and incorporates these videos into the live performance as a commentary. As with *SoftMachine*, *Unbearable Darkness* embeds particles of a *shamanistic practice* in the context of contemporary art. But what are we talking about when we speak of shamanism?

Perspective 1: History with a capital H

If we look at the Eurocentric History of shamanism with a capital H, two aspects become clear: on the one hand, the contouring and demonisation of the shaman in monotheistic discourse, on the other hand, the equation of artist and shaman. The first picture of a native Siberian shaman was made by the Dutch scholar Nicolaes Witsen on one of his cartographic

---

[9] Mi You: "Trance in the Virtual Realm: A Conversation with Choy Ka Fai", in *so-far*, Issue 2, Artificial Intelligence, August 2019, https://so-far.online/trance-in-the-virtual-realm-a-conversation-with-choy-ka-fai/#
[10] "Documentality describes the permeation of a specific documentary politics of truth with superordinate political, social and epistemological formations. Documentality is the pivotal point, where forms of documentary truth production turn into government – or vice versa. It describes the complicity with dominant forms of a politics of truth, just as it can describe a critical stance with regard to these forms. Here scientific, journalistic, juridical or authentic power/knowledge formations conjoin with documentary articulations […]. Hito Steyerl, "Documentarism as Politics of Truth", in: *Jenseits der Repräsentation/Beyond Representation: Essays 1999–2009*, ed. Marius Babius (Köln: Walther König 2016), 181–187, 182.

expeditions in 1669: it shows a figure wearing reindeer antlers, a drum and clawed feet, a human-animal hybrid par excellence, described in the caption as 'the devil's servant'.

'Tungus Shaman; or, Priest of the Devil', Nicolaes Witsen, 'Nord en Oost Tartarye' (1692).

The image spread throughout Europe and established the prototype of the shaman as a collective phantasm. Secondly, and not coincidentally a parallel phenomenon to the discursively accomplished separation of ritual and theatre, the Enlightenment discourse of the 18th century leads to an entanglement of the categories artist and shaman: the individualised 'genius' artist of modernity, lifted out of diverse cultural networks, is endowed with a shamanistic energy whose origin is now 'found' (i.e. rather than invented or constructed) in the Stone Age and cave art in the first place.[11] The (male) artist is equated with the shaman in a formulaic and complexity reducing function and later even in his manifestation in European knowledge culture or makes this equation himself: "Despite a disconnect of several millennia, modern artists too, from Wassily Kandinsky and Vincent van Gogh, to Joseph Beuys and Marcus Coates, have been labelled as inspired visionaries who access the trance-like states of shamans, and these artists of the 'white cube' or gallery setting are cited as the inheritors of an

---

[11] On the discursive interweaving of Art and Cave in the beginning of 20th century see: Robert Wallis, "Art and Shamanism: From Cave Painting to the White Cube", in *Religions* 10, 54, 2019, 11–12. https://doi.org/10.3390/rel10010054; "The authentication of cave art at the turn of the twentieth century, then, provided archaeological evidence which lent empirical, chronological weight to the idea that shamanism and art have ancient, universal origins. The presumed affinity between shamanism and art was applied to Upper Palaeolithic cave art during the first half of this century, reifying the metanarrative of spirituality as the domain of human creativity and imagination, with shamanism as its origin, and cave art as the earliest form of its visual expression." (12)

enduring tradition of shamanic art."[12] 'Romanticising' and universalising resonances of a shaman phantasm determined by European patterns of reception can be observed right up to the cultural discourses of the present day: "Who are our shamans? Campbell: It is the function of the artist to do this. The artist is the one who communicates myth for today."[13]

The shamanistic paradigm in Choy Ka Fai's work, his slightly ironic search for the metaphysical 'Asian' body, his hosting of re-appearances of ghosts or his transfer of trance into the virtual realm, is completely different from the Eurocentric stagings of the artist as shaman. Perhaps the most fundamental difference is that the European artist shamans of the 20th century, like Joseph Beuys, still embody the topos of the singular artistic genius. Choy Ka Fai's stage of the many, his ensemble of 'real' (living or dead) and virtual figures, counters this grand narrative with something different. In a way, one can say that these are queer performances if one introduces an expanded understanding of queer here, which is not primarily based on sexual identity constructions, but understands queer in the sense of "the pleasures and difficulties of moving between multiple and layered identities"[14].

Perspective 2: The Shaman as 'Curador' of Existences in Decolonial Thought

For several years I have been researching decolonial art and writing practices in *The School of the Jaguar*[15] with Mara'kame Juan José Katira Ramirez, a 'shaman' of the Wixárika comunidad in northern Mexico. He interprets the term 'curator', abstracted in the global art discourse, as 'curador' in its potentially healing function of caring for a particular community. At the same time, he identifies with this kind of profession. Among the Mara'kame, 'curador' and 'shaman' are almost congruent. Both are 'cosmic diplomats' and particularly capable of changing perspectives. They mediate between completely different yet interconnected worlds and work to ward off manipulation attempts by protagonists of the metaphysical world and to maintain the precarious status quo of the (relational) existence of human life. This life is constantly exposed to many threats in the indigenous contemporary world.

---

[12] Robert Wallis, "Art and Shamanism: From Cave Painting to the White Cube", in *Religions* 10, 54, 2019, 1–21. https://doi.org/10.3390/rel10010054; Or more specifically on shamanism in 18th century: Gloria Flaherty, *Shamanism and the Eighteenth Century* (Princeton: Princton University Press, 2016).

[13] Joseph Campbell, *The Power of Myth*. (New York: Anchor, 1991), 91.

[14] Clare Croft, "Introduction", in *Queer dance. Meanings and Makings*, ed. Clare Croft (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 2.

[15] See the description and documentation of the School of the Jaguar: https://nadaproductions.at/projects/endangered-human-movements/school-of-the-jaguar

"So the relationship between human beings and gods is anything but harmonious – it oscillates between kinship and enmity, identification and antagonism. […] Therefore, visiting gods at their cult places often also means travelling to dangerous, alien worlds. […] The beings of the other world live in skyscrapers or family homes whose furniture resembles the film sets of pre-prime time series or television. Many underworld gods […] use modern electronic devices, and survey world affairs from offices equipped with flat screen. […] But one's world and that of the 'others' often are engaged in permanent conflict."[16]

Shamanistic practices are determined by different cultural, social and ecological conditions. Structures and manifestations differ from region to region and from continent to continent. Nevertheless, two principles can be named that appear in the most diverse shamanistic and cosmotheistic contexts: *Identity proliferation*, which is in contrast to the 'western' model of the modern individual (in the sense of autonomy and indivisibility) and the *immediate appropriation of alterities*, be they unknown gods, beings or new technologies. Referring to these two principles one could say that Choy Ka Fai's artistic oeuvre is profoundly based on digitized shamanistic practices in the sense of a constant shift of identities and appropriation of alterities. He provides in his work the structural and metaphysical connections between shamanism, art, pop culture and virtual realities.

Perspective 3: The half-spiritual eyes of 'The extreme self'[17]

"In the metaverse of today and tomorrow, I propose that contemporary dance itself can no longer stay within a physical house or stage, it is necessary to create dance that transcends across various media. Maybe dance has already become a trans-media practice, where the commune is the virtual, where dancing bodies are mere points of presence on social media, where the digital self becomes the extreme self that disintegrates into a crescendo of emojis." (Choy Ka Fai)

---

[16] Johannes Neurath: "Being more than one. Complex identities in indigenous modernity", in: *Endangered Human Movements Vol. 3 – The School of the Jaguar,* eds. Amanda Piña, Angela Vadori and Christina Gillinger-Correa Vivar, (Wien: BMfB / nadaproductions, 2019), 108–109.

[17] This is a landmark reference for Choy Ka Fai's current artistic work: Shuman Basar, Douglas Coupland, Hans Ulrich Obrist (eds.): *The Extreme Self: Age of You,* (Köln: Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther und Franz König, 2021). This small, curated art book is a brilliant visualisation of current trends in art and society at the intersection of analogue and digital.

CosmicWander (2019) represents a culmination of digital shamanism in Choy Ka Fai's oeuvre in which he uses different techniques of the aforementioned cultural phenomena to reveal 'paranormal dance experiences', the 'supernatural' and the excavation of transcendence. On his journey through Asia, Choy Ka Fai documented a variety of spiritual practices and shamanistic dances from different communities and assembled them into immersive installations: "My proposition […] is to create a parallel spiritual universe in virtual reality – to collapse the spiritual and the technological worlds."[18] In Taiwan, the most liberal of the Asian democracies, Choy Ka Fai discovered a special form of shamanism, namely the phenomenon of the Third Prince, which he translates artistically in *CosmicWander*. Third Princes are contemporary shamans of each gender, into whom the patron god Nezha enters and who ultimately serve the community by advising them on day-to-day issues and concerns. Basically, anyone can become a shaman once they have received the call from Nezha and have learned and followed the rules of the respective temple, regardless of gender, age or social status. Choy Ka Fai asked as part of his project *CosmicWander* what rules should be followed in shamanistic practice and the answer from the beta-alpha character with the lollipop in his laughing mouth is: "No cigarettes, no alcohol, no sex, no sex, no sex."[19]

Two aspects are particularly fascinating: (1) the multiplicity of the Shaman; i.e. a female shaman is an online live streamer during the day, for example, and in the afternoon and night she serves in the temple and lets the god enter her body in order to provide help and around midnight she poses as a bikini model; Third Princes sometimes have hundreds of thousands of followers on Instagram, their own YouTube channels, fandom and their digital devices and social media platforms are tools to switch between reality and the supernatural world. (2) Taiwanese shamanism is to be understood here as a gesture of resistance against repressive (political) regimes and restrictive normative worldviews. One playfully resists 'moral policing'. Cultural and religious appropriation becomes a catalyst for new visualisations and embodiments of deities at the interface between the human body and the digital world. Following the Taiwanese phenomenon of the Third Prince, Choy Ka Fai is currently working on the realisation of an android shaman in various formats, such as a video game:

---

[18] Mi You: "Trance in the Virtual Realm: A Conversation with Choy Ka Fai", in *so-far*, Issue 2, Artificial Intelligence, August 2019, https://so-far.online/trance-in-the-virtual-realm-a-conversation-with-choy-ka-fai/#
[19] See: https://youtu.be/tArqeJvxJPw

"In the wake of an entire generation having forgotten to communicate with their Gods, an Android Shaman was created. Her mission was to collect and decode information, to reclaim that lost ability. Seeking a time capsule containing ancient mantra, so she may use it to contact the Third Prince. The Android Shaman yearns for reconnection with the supranatural realm." (Choy Kai Fai)

Established formulas of rituals combined with the codes of VR in the format of story telling evoke a trance-like and potentially reality-altering experience in the disposition of contemporary art. The 'half-spiritual eyes' of the (extreme) self and the 'Curation of Existences' in Choy Ka Fai's oeuvre evokes an appearance of the many on different stages simultaneously, in the black box, in (post-)virtual space, in spiritual places of invocation and manifestation. His artistic work shows in many ways that our divided world stands in much larger transhuman constellations.