

## Project Summary

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“Papermoon” is a contemporary retelling of the Chinese myth of Chang-O, the moon goddess, in the form of theater and video performance. Using poetry, dance, and video, collaborating artists Ann Poochareon and Emily Chang spin a traditional tale into an experimental production that combines multiple artistic genres with modern technology. The artists use real-time video processing with camera feedback and digital audio in conjunction with spoken word, movement, and classical Southern Indian dance.

There are numerous versions of the folklore surrounding the story of Chang-O, but this brief multi-media performance creates its own imagining of the ancient myth. “Papermoon” explores the melancholic life of Chang-O alone on the moon, as she slips in and out of a dream-world of reverie and memory, blurring the boundaries between the real and the imaginary. Through their perspective as Asian Americans bred and educated in the U.S., the artists use the project to explore mistranslation and reconstruction of culture between countries, languages, and generations.

## Project Collaborators

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*Emily Chang*, Performance Studies masters candidate, Tisch School of the Arts, NYU  
*Ann Poochareon*, Interactive Telecommunications Program masters candidate, TSOA, NYU

### Guest Artists:

*Pradeepa Jeevamanoharan*, Dancer  
*Chien Yuan*, Music Composer

## Detailed Project Description

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In this project, we attempt to explore the myth of Chang-O, the mother of ten suns and twelve moons, who stole the draught of immortality from her husband and flew to the moon. Chang-O is the female representation of the principle of “yin”, which is the cold and dark element of the yin/yang. The basic purpose of the piece is to reconstruct the story of Chang-O from fragments of the story based on different versions culled from our childhoods, from research, and from our imaginations. By constructing our own version of the story, we endeavor to create a distinctly Asian American myth, one that takes into consideration our particular transnational (U.S., Thailand, Taiwan, Sri Lanka, China), immigrant, modern, Western, and urban identities. Because of this, we draw from an array of cultures and backgrounds—traditional and modern, East and West—to challenge the lens of “Asian” art in the West, and to reassert the validity and verity of our own hybrid, self-constructed culture. “Papermoon” is myth-making in practice.

We want to explore the notions of reality vs. illusion through a portrayal of Chang-O’s life on the moon, particularly because it is a legend that is widespread in Chinese culture but not thought of as “real.” Through the use of interactive video technology, we aim to rethink the meanings of real and unreal, and to try to highlight the gaps between language and emotion by stressing the shortcomings of their interconnected relationship.

The performance consists of three sections. In the first section, “Wake,” a woman, face painted white, dressed in a white nightgown, lies on a giant piece of paper spread across the stage floor in a sleeping position, with hair fanned out around her head. As she begins to move about the stage, she will interact with voice-over text and projected textual images, as well as with original music.

A blackout will signal the second portion of the performance, “Dream.” In darkness, only the sound of scissors cutting paper can be heard, growing louder. A dream sequence video projection represents Chang-O’s world of the imaginary. Projections span across three sheets of fabric, each of different opacity, hung across the stage in front of one another. Color begins to seep into the scene. Colorful images are projected onto the three sheets. Behind the first sheet of fabric, a dancer, performing a hybrid form of modern and classical Indian dance, will begin to move to represent the fullness of movement and sound in this dream-world. This second section represents Chang-O’s “real, lived experience” through the unreal.

As video/text/music continues, the scene moves to the third section, “SLEEP.” the performer traces her own shape onto the giant piece of paper on the floor and begins to cut the shape of a silhouette. After holding up the paper devoid of the shape of her body on it, she lays it down and lies within the space where her traced body has been cut out. She now fills the absence of herself; she exists within her dreamed experience.

## Artist Statements

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### *Ann Poochareon*

As a new media artist, I am interested in exploring the performative aspects of interactive video technology and integrating them into stage performance. Treating video as a performative aspect, and not just part of the static set design or props, my goal is to see where and how video may be used to aid/enhance theatrical performance while maintaining the integrity of other elements on stage.

Working heavily with new media and various art technologies (digital photos, videos, computer graphics, the Internet, etc.) that attempt to create or imitate realities, I feel that the use of these technologies fall short at what us humans are only able to represent digitally, i.e. colors as series of numbers, movement and touch reduced down to digital data. With increase use of technologies in our everyday lives, are we then limiting our natural capabilities to what we are only able to see and hear? Ironically, while we attempt to create technologies that represents the real, the gap between what is real and what we know is real widens. In this production, real-time rendering of live video will be used to create the “unreal” -- the imaginary dreamworld of a mythical character whose story isn’t thought of as real but represents a familiar feeling and emotion universal to all human beings.

The usage of live video feed to create something that is imaginary, in other words, depending on something that exists to create something that doesn’t, in itself is an interesting twist and could be thought of as a process of working backward to explore the afore mentioned gap between reality and illusion. As an experiment to see whether video can become as much part of the performance as the human performer on stage, the real (body on stage) and unreal (visuals produced from the body on stage) co-depend on each other to tell the full story.

## *Emily Chang*

The underlying theories that helped formulate this performance project rely heavily on binaries: reality vs. illusion; language/text vs. emotion/corporeal; and presence/absence. The binaries, while all different in nature, are linked through the gap that lies between all of them. This project is an attempt to answer the questions that the gap creates: Is it possible to bridge the space between the binaries? When does reality end and the imaginary begin?

After studying various forms of traditional Japanese theater, I began to think about the dual portrayal of one character by two performers in bunraku puppet theater and in some kabuki. One performer will usually narrate the character's emotions and internal monologue, while the other performer (in bunraku, the puppet) represents the bodily presence of the character. The division between the corporeal and the text, as well as the division between the emotion and the language, highlights the disparity between being and meaning—what we exist as and what we mean to exist as. In the case of the quotidian, this manifests itself in the space between what we say and what we really feel. This disparity can also be thought of in terms of authenticity. Allowing that language is not enough to capture what the body feels, we can connect emotion and the corporeal with “what is real” and language that is inadequate to express these as “what is not real.” Particularly as someone who is losing fluency of her mother tongue and having difficulty communicating with family in English, I feel the gap between language and emotion to be a widening one.

The incongruence between what I mean versus what I say, or the real and the unreal (or perhaps, the not fully real), also is very relevant to representations of the real. Since much of my performance work in the past has dealt with technology and video projection, I feel that it is relevant to investigate the meaning of such technology in what is otherwise very organic artistic work. Do the images that project on screen fully represent what they are images are (in the vein of Plato's idea of “imitation”), or are they merely reflections of what is real? Does a body on stage necessarily represent what is “real,” particularly in an age of technological advancement? A Buddhist quote comes to mind here: “Both the flowers in the mirror and the moon in the water are illusory.” That is, though perfect images of the original source, the reflections lack the essence of the original. In the age of ubiquitous advanced technology and accessibility of “virtual” experiences via the internet, can the imitated experience become real? Which is the original source and which is the reflection/imitation of it?

Lastly, experience through reflection/imitation brings me to the topic of absence/presence. If one can experience “realness” with a live, material body in absentia, we can rethink the meaning of absence. Absence does not necessarily mean not being there, and thus not experiencing, anymore. Absence can be linked as much with real experience as much as presence can. In line with this project, I would also like to claim that physical absence—as manifested by one's lack of bodily presence in one's imagination or dream—can be just as “real” as lived experience. Thus, the reflection/imitation can become “authentic.”

## Artist Biographies

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*Emily C. Chang* is a performance artist, writer, and musician who currently resides in New York City. A masters candidate in performance studies at NYU's Tisch School of the Arts, she also comprises one-quarter of the Chicago-based panAsian spoken word group, I Was Born With Two Tongues, which was named in A. Magazine's "A List" of 2001's top 25 most influential Asian Americans. Her writing has appeared in Blu Magazine, the Columbia Poetry Review, A. Magazine, Monsoon Literary Arts Magazine, and Asianweek.com; and her voice has appeared in several spoken word/music albums, including Broken Speak and hip hop albums, Typical Cats and Denizen Kane's Tree City Legends. Recently seen at The Kitchen (NY) in Fred Ho's avant-garde jazz opera, Warrior Sisters: Adventures of Asian and African Womyn Warriors, she is also a founding member/director of Mango Tribe, an Asian American women's performing arts collective. Emily co-wrote/directed the premiere Mango production, Mangoes, Cigarettes, and My Mama's Hands (Chopin Theater, Chicago), and the 2002 production of Sisters in the Smoke (Vittum Theater, Chicago). In the summer of 2003 she codirected the sold-out run of Sisters in the Smoke at New York's HERE Arts Center's Mainstage.

*Ann Poochareon* is a new media artist living in New York City. She is a graduate student at the Interactive Telecommunications Program, NYU's Tisch School of the Arts. Ann works with any art medium she can get her hands and understandings on, from digital medium of photography, websites, video, 3D graphics, computer codes, microprocessors, interactive sculptures, and live video signals, to non-digital medium of writing and performance. She was recently seen at SIGGRAPH 2003, the largest computer graphics convention in the U.S. as a presenter of live performative tools for 3D characters. Ann collaborates with other artists to create work that addresses social and political issues. She's involved with the Research and Development Division at Eyebeam, a New York based non-profit organization dedicated to art and technology. She is a co-producer of Hello Kitty is Dead Productions, a video production group addressing female identity and issues. She is also a member and technical guru of Mango Tribe, an Asian American women's performing arts collective.

*Pradeepa Jeevamanoharan* is the co-founder/director of Diaspora Flow a non-profit arts organization dedicated to providing a forum for artists of color and facilitating connections between artists and youth. She has also danced with Women in Motion and has debuted solo work in New York and Minneapolis.

*Jienan Yuan* composes music as a cathartic for his emotional isolationism and internalized melancholia. He recently composed film scores for three award-winning shorts and is currently developing a sound installation project for a gallery exhibition. Additionally, he is a member of the artist groups Project: A and the Asian American Artists Collective Chicago.