

Approaching the body in new media arts. Some reflections about the work of Krisna Murti.

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Time art and the performative turn in visual arts

Curiously, while new technology itself involves a plenitude of machines, wires, and dense mathematical and physical components, the art that has been born from the art-and-technology marriage is perhaps the most ephemeral art of all: the art of time.¹

During the 20th century, there has been a shift in the media used for creating works of art. The canvas, the materials used for sculptures (stone, wood, metal, and so on) were not enough to express artistic ideas and artists experimented with other means to expand their creative expressions. The avant garde movements of the early 20th century, such as Surrealism, Dadaism and Futurism are precursors of this turn that has broadened the way of understanding art. These artists were strongly influenced by technology and machines, photography and the new born cinema, which extended the spectrum of photography into a sequence of moving images, connecting art to notions of motion, time and the human body. The arts scene at that time was influenced by the works of Sigmund Freud about the mind and the unconsciousness, as well as by the writings of Friedrich Nietzsche and his reflections about human existence. Moreover, these theoretical thoughts assumed human being in its totality as a thinking entity, but also with emotions, feelings, and a changing and finite body.

The early sixties with its social and political changes, for instance feminist and human rights movements, a more openness towards sexuality and the body, and growing environmental movements, connected the human body in a totally new way. Back then, the attention was given to existential and phenomenal subject matters, exemplified for instance through the works of French theoreticians Jean-Paul Sartre or Maurice Merleau-Ponty; one interested in existential issues, the latter concerned with the image, art, the human perception and the body. In this context, performance emerges as a new genre in visual arts, using the body as a surface and playing an active role in the creation of works of art. Outside the theatre, these performances were either events or happenings taking place in galleries, artists' studios (so-called 'studio performances'), public spaces or any possible venue, which would give the context to the planned performance.

As we know, a performance is an art practice based on the body of the artist or someone else's body. It is always time-based, transitory, ephemeral and context specific. Usually it is a unique event, as it will never be reproduced exactly the same. It is an encounter and interaction of actors and the audience, and its bodily co-presence. Performances are related to the phenomenal as well as to the semiotic and symbolic body. The audience immerses in the atmosphere of a particular performance and spatiality 'happens' while the performance is taking place. In general, the audience plays an active role or becomes part of the performance itself.

Two movements, *Fluxus* (in Europe and the United States) and the *Viennese Actionism* (in Austria), had a strong impact in the position of the artist as a creator and the relationship of art and the human body. Their works used a variety of media, including painting, music, sculpture, performance, video or dance. Hybridity and mixture of elements defined these works and its instant - sometimes also improvised - compositions added an element of chance that reinforced the idea of time.

In order to keep these ephemeral events, performances were kept through video means. We can say that performance as an art form has been inextricably linked to video since its beginning. For instance, works by Bill Viola, Yoko Ono, Nam June Paik and his collaborative performances with cellist Charlotte Moorman, Nan Hoover, Joseph Beuys or the 'studio' performances of Vito Acconci and Bruce Nauman, are able to be seen until now thanks to video means. As aforementioned, the use of the body as a medium for creation relates

¹ Rush, Michael. *New Media in Late 20th Century Art*, p. 8. London: Thames and Hudson Ltd., 1999.

art with matters of time. A performance happens and the images resulting are saved in a video recorder. Video art itself developed from documenting to later experiment with video technology as a new media for creating art.

More than talking about performance, I prefer to use the term performativity² to explain a dynamic construction of reality in the context of a fragmented, sometimes discontinuous, multi layered, mixed and/or hybrid reality. As a term used in cultural sciences, philosophy and aesthetic theory, performativity emphasises an active and mobile construction of reality. It gives a reference frame on how to explain social and cultural phenomena in changing and mixed environments.

Performativity explains different ways of understanding reality, including subjects of study such as the body and cotidianity or everyday life. Actually, rituals or public acts such as weddings, birthday celebrations, sports or games, are some examples on how to describe this dynamic and active construction of reality. In this process of construction, certain models or experiences are repeated. For instance, in social rituals this process is clear by repeating the same phrases in ceremonies, but also by re-enacting some myths, battles or old tales. The notion of performativity refers to a theatrical setting of society and the creation of possible real, fictional or virtual worlds, in which everybody is capable of being either an actor or a spectator.

There is no hierarchy or opposed dichotomy in the use of this term, as roles may change depending on the position of the viewer/spectator/audience and the artist/actor/performer. Reality is depicted as a living entity, developing and moving with multiple layers and possibilities of interpretation. In this sense, the concept of performativity can be related to the concept of rhizome coined by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, as it describes structures in change, always moving and expanding.

If we want to talk about the development of contemporary art in Indonesia, we have to take into account the rich diversity of its cultural traditions, but also its simultaneous and overlapping realities, expressed in a tension between tradition and modernity. In Indonesia, the development of installation art began in the seventies, particularly in the works of the artists related to the *New Art Movement* (*Gerakan Seni Rupa Baru*), such as FX Harsono or Jim Supangkat. This movement brought social and political concerns in the foreground of creative expression. Political comments related to the situation of the country, specially during Suharto's downfall, were expressed mainly, but not only, through installations and performances. A younger generation of artists, such as Tisna Sanjaya and Arahmaiani started doing performance art in the late eighties, early nineties, almost at the same time when some artists, such as Teguh Ostentrik, Heri Dono and Krisna Murti experimented with video means for enhancing the ideas of their installations.

As we know, the *era reformasi* led to religious and ethnic violence, mostly against Chinese-Indonesian minorities. Artists during that time were strongly political and showed critical works related to the social and political situation of the country. Following this short introduction and terminology definition, I would like to use this context to give some reflections on some of Krisna Murti's works.

During the *era reformasi*, Krisna Murti did several installations about some hot topics in Indonesian society. Using television footage of daily cooking programmes, the artist created an installation with pink toilets spread in the exhibition space containing images describing a variety of dishes. Although its origin might not be only Indonesian, people usually don't make any distinction when they eat food. The piece is about the plurality of discourses in Indonesian culture, exemplified by the variety of food coming from different backgrounds. In the installation *Foodstuffs are ethnic, never racist* (1999), the audience has to move around and create their own piece by choosing elements of the installation. The audience participates in the art work by leaning into the toilets, walking around the space and finding out the different elements of this scenario, composed by wall projections of television cooking programmes, *Mooi Indies* images depicting Indonesian landscapes and film footage of Suharto's propaganda against communists. The title gives already a message of tolerance, since food cannot be classified in racist terms. The images projected on the walls show what mass media at that time considered as an alleged 'Indonesian identity', which Krisna confronts in his work as a compound of mixed elements.

Another work from that period is the video *Losing Face* (1999). Dressed in traditional Balinese clothes and a mask, the artist performs a stereotype mimicking his own cultural background. Krisna walks around a shopping mall, an underground station and a public cinema in Fukuoka, Japan, and all the images recorded

² The references I am using about the term performativity are based on my research entitled *Performativity in the visual arts*, done at IVAA (Indonesian Visual Art Archive) from December 2009 – end of March 2010.

are not about him. Instead, we see the reactions of the passers-by while Krisna is strolling around some crowded public spaces. *Losing Face* shows some cultural stereotypes that outsiders might have about Indonesia by exaggerating the dressing codes in a country that does not understand them. Krisna's character is in the wrong place wearing the wrong clothes. The work is about the artist's own concerns towards Indonesian society in the *era reformasi*, a period of crisis that generated a feeling of displacement, instability and disorientation. The video is also about how people were seeing Indonesia by that time, as some countries were careful about investing in Indonesia due to the uncertain situation that the country was living.

When Krisna Murti refers to Indonesian topics in his works, his tendency is to include many elements, instead of excluding and categorising them. His work is composed by many layers on how to interpret reality. He uses symbols, icons, metaphors and/or myths and leaves a common ground open for the audience and encourages their reflection about certain social and cultural phenomena.

Public video/Public body

Krisna Murti studied painting at Institut Teknologi Bandung. Besides working with painting, he is also known for his collages and installations, and best known for his video art works.

The artist calls his work *video publik* (public video), which means that is meant to serve the public interest. He considers that his role as an artist is the one of a mediator, a *provocateur*, a stimulator of ideas that makes people reflect about certain cultural, social or political matters (Jurriëns, 2010:14). The artist knows the power that technology has to attract and influence the public. For him, it is important to use the proper media to easily connect with the audience he wants to reach.

When I started video in 1990, apparently there were a lot of similarities such as an open language and how to optimize these media to engage people to become active participants in a process of social dynamics.³

In Indonesia, the use of media in contemporary arts appeared in the late eighties, early nineties. The experimentation with new media in visual arts was related to installation works, that included several media and materials. However, the development of installation art was particularly linked to a change in Indonesia's contemporary art scene, involved with the individual expression of the artist and not only as a collective or common shared art appreciation.

Since his early body of work, the artist has been concerned with mass media criticism offering an alternative way to understand media and consumer culture. Borrowing some words of Edwin Jurriëns, his video art can be considered as a *televisual metadiscourse*⁴ (Jurriëns, 2010:5). The many layers of TV and mass media criticism range from the hypnotising or placebo effect of mass mediated images and the creation of social cultural paradigms, expressed either through beautiful, young, successful and rich people in celebrity shows; through melodramatic soap operas (known in Indonesia as *sinema elektronik* or *sinetron*); or via reality or entertainment shows, usually Indonesian versions of foreign television bestselling programmes. In fact, there is a tension between media producers and its consumers, a *structural corruption of television*, dominated by the *symbolic violence*⁵ (Jurriëns, 2010:6) that does not offer many options for alternative television.

Being conscious about the power of technology and visual culture and its effects on possible audiences, the artist created the work *The Bubbles* (2002). The video starts and ends with the same image of a sunset sky and floating jellyfish. A few seconds later, an image of a lotus flower and four bubbles appear. The bubbles are comprised by examples of television programmes: a Muslim priest praying, the Indonesian version of Teletubbies, a group of *bedoyo* dancers and Pavarotti singing an aria. The background music is Donizetti's *L'elisir d'amore*, performed by Pavarotti. One by one, the bubbles start to explode. This video refers to the multiple influences that mass-mediated images offer to the audience. To be in some way 'rescued' from this image overload, the bubbles disappear and just the music and the empty sky remain, as a simple and smooth landscape for our senses. The video shows the multiple realities that television might offer, but, what would happen if we don't choose any one of them?

³ Personal communication with the artist, October 2010.

⁴ *Italics* mine.

⁵ *Italics* mine.

Krisna Murti is one of the video pioneers in Indonesia, who has been linking performing arts and performance since his earliest body of work. An example of this is the early video-installation *12 Hours in the life of Agung Rai, the dancer* (1993), in which the artist portrays twelve hours in the daily life behind the stage of the traditional Balinese *Cak* dancer Agung Rai. The video-installation includes television monitors put on the floor on a pile of rice husks and a number of photographs of the dancer.

Agung Rai was invited to perform during the opening of the exhibition. Matters of time and the distinction between the fictional (the dancer as part of the installation work) and the real Agung Rai come together in this piece. As a character, the dancer embodies present and past at the same time. The work is about ways of preserving real life events or moments, but also about fictionality and reality created by the artwork.

The work is not only about the life of Agung Rai, it is more about what he represents:

My idea was to expose himself representing an important body of a culture, not as a component of any artistic structure. I used video to ensure that my idea could be realized maximally. Video is the proper media to preserve memory as well as visualising realtime events. Together with the presence of Agung Rai, the work brings audience to the journey of realities which is recorded by a machine called video (could be also photography), 'live streaming/show' of the dancer shown on the monitor, even being able to directly 'touch' the actual body of Agung Rai. The audience can be able to experience the grey area in between those realities.⁶

There is a concrete time frame in which an action is being presented in 'real time' during which an event takes place. In that sense, there is a development of a particular story. For the artist, video is part of the performative tradition. It keeps an event of the past to be able to be repeated without having to have the real performers or the same context.

According to the artist, media technology has reinforced the hybridity of different art genres. By considering video as an extension of the body that expands possibilities of narration, Krisna's work has to do with performativity. The artist has experience both in front and behind the camera, and is capable of understanding the meaning and the power of moving images. In fact, Krisna Murti's video works and video-installations address the term performativity in its multiple terminology dimensions. Moreover, the artist considers that the video is in the viewer, as he/she is the one who interprets it in an active way. Performativity links actions with a theatrical setting of an art piece, in which actors (artists) and spectators (audience) are part of a fictional scenario in real time.

Some of Krisna's works are reflections on how fictional matters address reality, but also how reality becomes part of fiction.⁷ His works give a comment on cultural and social criticism through new media means. Besides this, he is also known for depicting traditional motifs through media art. His video-installation *Wayang Machine* (2001-2002) is an excellent demonstration of this subject matter. In this work, the artist re-interprets Indonesian tradition digitalizing traditional *wayang* shadow puppetry.

In an interview about *Wayang Machine*, the artist says:

Since the making of *12 Jam dalam kehidupan Penari Agung Rai (12 Hours in the Life of Agung Rai, the Dancer, 1993)*, to the appearance of my own body in the work called *Losing Face* (1999-2001), I like to understand further the limit between performing art and performance art. And from my whole experience, I understand that video can clarify the limit between 'representation and the representational', 'real time and artistic time or reality', 'memory and imagination', etc., even by using both of the binary terms all at once.⁸

Other Indonesian artists have also taken elements of tradition actualising them in a contemporary context, for example Heri Dono and his reinterpretation of *wayang* in paintings, installations and performances; Nindityo Adipurnomo and his observations about gender and society through his numerous interpretations of *konde*⁹, but also the younger generation, for instance Eko Nugroho and his *wayang* performances based on

⁶ Personal communication with the artist, October 2010.

⁷ Personal communication with the artist, February 2010.

⁸ Exhibition brochure of *Wayang Machine*, Barak Galeri, 2001.

⁹ *Konde* is an artificial hair piece used by women, mostly in special occasions, such as ceremonies, weddings or while

comics and daily life, or Kuswidananto aka Jompet and his explorations about the hybridity of Javanese culture.

Krisna Murti is an observer of his own cultural background. Being of both Javanese and Balinese origin, the artist takes elements from both traditions and uses new media to re-explore traditional performing arts. His video works have been influenced by Nam June Paik and his critical and alternative approach to television, and by Bill Viola, from whom he was inspired to explore more on his personal cultural background in relation to the moving image.¹⁰

Krisna's relationship to new media is in a way a sort of mystical one. With new media, he is capable to present the so-called 'unseen'. For him, it is important to understand what is the meaning of reality in video and what it is in 'real' life. His observations are about how projections work. He said: 'If you put your hand on it, it is a shadow.' Therefore, what we see is something intangible, abstract. He relates the concept of video to the concept of shadow and that is how he connects it to *wayang*. For the artist, videos are something intangible.¹¹

During a period of time, the artist was researching on *wayang* and video, connecting them in his artwork. He constructed three images based on *wayang* to illustrate his reinterpretation of the Mahabharata epic. Through an ancient Balinese poem, gamelan music and mantra characters, Krisna Murti experimented with media technology to reveal the so-called 'hidden' spirit.

To create this atmosphere and make the *wayang* in a way 'alive', the artist first recorded the dance movements of Balinese performer Made Sidia. After this, he digitally manipulated the three dimensional moving images into a two-dimensional *wayang kulit* leather puppet character. Explaining traditional characters through new media, one of his intentions is to show the performative aspect of the *wayang* shadow puppet theatre. Moreover, by actualising the old myths, he makes the young generation aware of the richness of their cultural background.

Following this direction, in the video *Empty Time* (2003), the artist presents a *bedoyo*¹² dance in slow motion, ten times slower than the original. The repetition of the movements in slow motion presents the dance as a kind of *mantra*. The video extends the dance in time and when the movements get slower, the attention goes to the details, concentrating on the movements of the hands, fingers, arms and the head. The artist considers that 'movement is not what we see, it is what we experience'. He says that video is a consensus that takes as 'real' something that is immaterial.¹³

However, tourist industry and mass media have weakened the ritual and sacred meaning of this dance. With this work, the artist retrieves and intensifies this traditional performance. Moreover, these images might attract the attention of the younger generation who might feel this extreme slowness as something different for their eyes, familiar with high speed images presented through mass media technology.

His latest piece, *Empty Theater* (2010), is about the dissolution and disappearance of the image. Dressed in *wayang wong* characters, the artist portrays a tradition that is still present, but almost disappearing. Once part of his own cultural horizon, Krisna Murti presents himself as an exotic object with no facial gestures, almost like a puppet. Similar to the collections of ethnology museums with a number of mannequins wearing traditional clothes, the work is about archiving and categorising cultural phenomena, but also about impersonation and masquerade (Amanda Katherine Rath, 2010:42-43). The photographs of the artist performing the tradition of *wayang wong* disappear leaving no trace, just like a sand twirl in a process of dissolution. Like a sand clock, the rests of the body disappear in time. What happens with it after its death? In this case, the body refers to a particular tradition and its duration of validity, that is uncertain. There is a nostalgic element in this piece, a reminder of a past in which this traditions were still part of daily life. *Empty Theater* is also about the inability of the artist to capture their original aura, but also about the loss of

performing traditional dances. This hair piece is part of the Javanese dressing codes.

¹⁰ "Bill Viola traveled to Japan, the Melanesian islands, even to Java, searching for the parallel aspects of video and *vidya* (knowledge and beyond). He was inspiring me to understand better my Javanese and Balinese ancestors belief. For example: the relation between video and the concept of shadow (intangible reality) and of *wayang kulit* (shadow puppet)". Personal communication with the artist, October 2010.

¹¹ Personal communication with the artist, February 2010.

¹² *Bedoyo* is a sacred dance performed at the sultan's palace in Surakarta. The dance is characterised by its slow movements and its ritual meaning.

¹³ Personal communication with the artist, February 2010

meaning of these traditions in our present time.

Body therapy and the senses: on media ecology and utopia.

In the video-installation *Video Spa* (2004-2005), the artist goes a step further and reflects about the positive effects that technology might have in our lives. The video-installation is about the relaxation of the inner and the outer body. *Video Spa* gives special attention to the audience, that becomes part of the installation. *Video Spa – a therapy for everyday living* puts technology in the service of the human body.

During the exhibition, the audience enters the installation individually or in pairs, sits on leaning chairs and gets a massage. Simultaneously, there is a large scale video that shows images of nature, lotus flowers and a person meditating in yoga position. The relaxation process starts through massage on their bodies, the sounds of the video, and the images that 'massage' the eyes. For each one of the participants it is an individual video therapy.

Using Hinduist and Buddhist elements, the video resembles a ritual, a sort of spiritual process that might lead to a journey of purification or enlightenment. Natural landscapes, water, lotus flowers, birds and relaxation music are part of this therapy for the senses. Water plays a major role purifying mind and body. *Video Spa* is about technology and relaxation, mental health and the connection of body, mind and the senses.

In a way, this relaxation video might make us forget for a moment the chaos of urban life. However, our corporality is restricted by mechanisms of control, such as for instance surveillance cameras. Moreover, advertising and mass media control our body: how to behave, how to move, what to hear or what to wear. Even tourist industry influences our travel choices, depicting for example Indonesia as a 'must' destination, mostly to the island of Bali, presented as a paradisiac island with natural landscapes.

A critical position towards the tourist gaze and the idealisation of landscape is illustrated in the video-installation *Forbidden Zone* (2008). For this video-installation composed by paintings, photographs and videos, the artist worked with rice farmers in the island of Bali. In fact, some rice farmers do a silent rebellion against tourists and interfere in the landscape by putting mirrors in the rice fields. When tourists want to make photos, a sudden glare appears and ruins the photograph. But, who is the owner of the image? The installation (*The Glare* series and *Mirrorscape*, 2008) features matters about ownership, not only of the image, but also of the land.

In fact, the notion of landscape usually depicts a place of balance and harmony, a fertile ground and exuberant nature. In fact, the idea of landscape is a sort of metaphor to get out from the routine of daily life. In this way, it becomes fictional for the foreign visitor. The real landscape is the one the farmers nurture to get their food, and the fictional landscape is the one (almost) untouched by human hands.

The former reflections on Krisna Murti's works depict different ways to understand the (performing) body using new media. According to the artist, video might lead to social transformation, in the sense that some topics might motivate the audience to reflect about some social, cultural and/or political matters. Krisna is aware of the position of the artist and his responsibility towards the audience in mediation processes. He offers alternative ways of interaction and intermediation between the audience and his artwork.

Murti's works present a *media ecology*¹⁴, as described by Edwin Jurriëns (2010:21):

Beyond merely television critique, his work presents an alternative vision of mixed environments where media and people harmoniously coexist and interact with each other. This attempt at promoting pleasant, effective and sustainable communication environments could be seen as the media equivalent of ecology.

New media offer possibilities of creation that go beyond time and space. Its correct, but also moderate use might improve our lives and expand our possible realities. Krisna Murti's way of understanding media art promotes serenity, calmness and relaxation as an alternative to the polluted landscape of mass media culture.

¹⁴ *Italics mine.*

When human and the culture remain moving and changing, at that moment there also appear the change in language, syntax and the readers' behaviour. I think, I have to employ the new language to minimize the gap between human and their environment, notably if we consider the importance of transculture. The digital technology for instance, I believe, it is not designed for human for the fulfillment of economical need, which is physical, but it must obey us to help and create new life balance for us.¹⁵

Mediatopia presents a way to understand media and utopia, offering balance and harmony in the use of technology. It is an utopian media landscape that broadens our horizon, as the one depicted in *The Bubbles*. This sheer and open landscape challenges the audience to be conscious about themselves, individually and in society.

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¹⁵ Personal communication with the artist, October 2010.