Video spa
Krisna Murti’s treatment of the senses

Indulge yourself with a break from tiring modern activities. So why not choose now for Video spa as a ‘cleansing’ therapy and revitalization of your daily life? [...] A therapy for the mind. Video spa is a treatment for those who have already tried a normal spa, but it is also recommended to everyone else, especially to all of those who are longing for freshness of mind.¹

Video spa

Krisna Murti presented his video installation ‘Video spa’ in Galeri Nasional Indonesia (Indonesian National Gallery), Jakarta, from 16 to 23 December 2004 and in Gaya Fusion of Senses Gallery, Sayan, Ubud, from 16 to 18 March 2005.² The catalogue (Krisna Murti 2004b) called the work a ‘Videotherapy by Krisna Murti’ and a ‘Therapy for everyday living’. The video installation combined video images, performance elements, and audience participation to offer ‘therapeutic’ experiences to viewers at different times and locations. Murti collaborated with performers Surin Welangon and James Bennett, video editor Arifin M. Badruddin, and sound artist Moro. Characteristic of Murti’s


² I would like to thank Krisna Murti for his inspiring conversations and generous assistance with this research. The University of New South Wales in Canberra kindly provided financial support for travel to the Netherlands and Indonesia as part of a Special Studies Program. Many thanks also to the International Institute for Asian Studies (IIAS) in Leiden for being my host during my fieldwork preparation in the Netherlands.
work and the installation genre in general is that it combines various artistic media, stimulates and is shaped by the interaction between artist, work and audience, and, as a consequence, does not have a fixed form, but takes different shapes under different circumstances. Both in Jakarta and Ubud, video images were projected from three different outputs on three separate but connected larger-than-life video screens (2.5x3m each). On each of the three screens the same or similar images were shown simultaneously, but with variations in camera angle or graphic modification.

Illustration 1. ‘Video spa’ (Krisna Murti 2004). Photo courtesy of Krisna Murti.

The video projections start with computer-manipulated images of the performer Welangon, floating freely in meditating Buddha pose against a background of grassland and mountains. The accompanying sounds are high-pitched, monotonous and ceremonial, as if inviting the audience to participate in a ritual. The meditating figure disappears in a sea of fire, which could refer to the stress and heightened emotions of modern life, but also to the first phase of a cleansing process. The fire is replaced by the sounds and images of a waterfall and people swimming and enjoying the freshness of the water. The sounds of dripping water follow, alternating with the high monotonous tune from the first scene. This may signify that people in the initial stage of
the ‘therapy’ are still moving back and forth between two conflicting states of mind, or between their ‘old’ and ‘new’ selves.

New images of the waterfall are shown, with a young romantic couple sitting high on a rock. A poem in English is layered out over the three screens, containing strings of words of which the meanings and sounds refer to different feelings and sensations:

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The words slide down on the screens in sync with the movement of the waterfall, followed by images of bathing people and close-ups of stones in the water. Suddenly the screens turn black and the text ‘Close your eyes’ appears in white, accompanied by the high-pitched tune. This interlude offers viewers a moment of rest, in which they can meditate and reflect on the images, sounds and messages with which they have been confronted so far.

After a fade-to-black of a few seconds, the text ‘Open your eyes’ is shown, which in conjunction with the sounds and images of water lilies signifies the final phase of the video therapy. Cows are grazing on a lush green field, and the high-pitched tune announces the return of the meditating figure, surrounded by colourful lotus flower animations. After a series of realistic lotus images, the meditating figure floats on a computer-animated blue lotus from the waterfall moving in the direction of the audience, while making mudra gestures with his hands, which represent the ‘turning of the wheel’ or teachings towards enlightenment in Buddhism.

Next are blurred images of a Buddhist monk, performed by Bennet, in a desolate landscape. Subtitles and a voice in English represent the monk’s wisdom, which includes the warning that ‘the ocean of Samsara is full of sea monsters that constantly threaten us as we seek to cross to the other side’. This refers to the Buddhist concept of samsara, or the endless cycle of birth and rebirth that can only be escaped through enlightenment. The video presentation concludes with the images and sounds of birds in their natural setting of forest and grassland, and a montage of crowing roosters against a background of seas and beaches. The bird sounds are meant to awake the audience from being half asleep, dreaming or meditating, to a state of full consciousness, and to signal that they have successfully gone through the spiritual journey and cleansing process.
Both in Jakarta and Ubud, the audience was only allowed to enter the exhibition space individually or in pairs, in order to enhance their personal video therapy experience and sense of participation. The visitors were positioned in relaxing chairs in front of the three screens, and in Ubud even received a massage by their personal masseuse. The exhibition in Bali was opened with a night performance in which video screens were placed behind a swimming pool. The water in the pool was decorated with flowers, and several Western and Indonesian female guests in swimming suits were given a footbath of water and flowers as well as a neck-and-shoulder massage. Once the projections started, the female participants were instructed to enter the pool and swim in front of the video screens. In this way, the video imagery was expanded from the flat video screens into the space where the audience was situated.

Murti’s installation is a multilayered work that can be interpreted in various ways. There are many references to Hindu-Buddhist culture, such as the meditating figure, the Buddhist monk, the lotus flowers, the monotonous tune, the elements of water and fire, the cows and other animals. According to Murti (2004a), the element of water also represents the concept of wudhu in Islam, the ritual ablutions performed before praying. At the same time, he said he was inspired by international popular culture, particularly The blue lagoon, a US film from the 1980s about two shipwrecked children who gradually grow into a romantic relationship with each other on a lush tropical island. Murti combined all these different elements to invite the audience on a journey to heaven or paradise (tamasya ke surga).

Murti has a mixed Javanese-Balinese background, which he himself sees as an advantage to freely adopt and take critical distance from both Islamic and Hindu-Buddhist traditions and other aspects of Javanese and Balinese cultures. He is a much-travelled artist who has had residences in Japan (1999) and Singapore (2006), was an invited speaker and guest lecturer in Cuba (2001), Spain (2002) and Australia (2003, 2004), and has participated in many international solo and group exhibitions, including the prestigious Biennale in Venice (2005). Murti prefers spontaneous bonds between individuals with similar interests and ideas, to communal claims based on preconfigured notions of nationality, ethnicity or religion.³

In ‘Video spa’, Murti combines Hindu-Buddhist elements with technologies, cultural artefacts, and social experiences he has brought back from his journeys, such as video projections, computer animations, poems and subtitles in English, swimming pools, relaxing chairs, recreation activities, and beauty treatments. The installation goes beyond a simple portrayal of a clash

³ Personal communication, Jakarta, 15-4-2008.
between ‘tradition’ and ‘modernity’, and evokes a sense of cosmopolitanism or cosmopatriotism (Jurriëns and De Kloet 2007), in which various cultural traditions are juxtaposed, questioned and amalgamated. In ‘Video spa’ as well as much of Murti’s other work, these traditions are explored through a certain lens, focusing on the mass-mediated character of contemporary life. In this article, I argue that Murti’s creations can be seen as forms of televisual metadiscourse, and include an important critique of Indonesian and international television and consumer culture.

**Video art as televisual metadiscourse**

Murti is an artist who strategically positions himself outside the institutional structures of the mainstream media industry, while at the same time appropriating technologies and discourses from this industry for his own work, especially his video art. Born in 1957, he graduated in 1981 from the prestigious Indonesian arts academy at Institut Teknologi Bandung (ITB, Bandung Institute of Technology). After a period of experimentation with poetry, painting, printmaking, collage, photography, performance and installation art, Murti in the early 1990s became the first Indonesian artist to intensively use the medium of video. In less than 20 years, he has created approximately 40 video art projects. He is also a lecturer at Institut Seni Indonesia (ISI, Institute of the Arts) in Yogyakarta, and has written numerous essays and newspaper articles on video art (Murti 2009). In his creative work, lectures and writings, he has expressed his concern about how the mass media, particularly television, have influenced politics, culture and society, and changed people’s notions of time, space, body and gender.

In light of these concerns Murti’s work should not solely be seen as cutting-edge contemporary art, but also be viewed in the broader context of recent developments in media and society. This context includes viewers sending letters to newspaper editors complaining about the quality of Indonesian television; media scholars and observers writing books with titles such as *Matikan TV-mu!* (Shut down your TV) (Sunardian Wirodono 2006); and Komisi Penyiaran Indonesia (KPI, Indonesian Broadcasting Commission) urging radio and television organizations to improve their production and broadcasting standards. These are all reactions against what the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (1998:20) calls the ‘structural corruption’ of the broadcasting world. According to Bourdieu (1998:20-1), this corruption has manifested itself in the ‘symbolic violence’ of genres that cater for large audiences and are unlikely to cause any political controversy. Another symptom is the ‘circular circulation of information’, or the phenomenon that the same news item is digested over and over again by media institutions that decide...
on the newsworthiness of something primarily by measuring its coverage by other media institutions (Bourdieu 1998:30-1). These observations are also relevant to Indonesian television, which is currently dominated by the symbolic violence of melodramatic soap operas (sinetron, an abbreviation for sinema elektronik, electronic cinema) and the circular circulation of ‘news’ items in endless runs of infotainment shows.

Television metadiscourse such as Murti’s work can expose the structural corruption of television by revealing the medium’s impact on society as well as the impact of external factors – whether commercial or ideological – on television itself. It can also shed light on the historical development of the medium, including the evolution of television genres, and thus enhance audiences’ media literacy. The advantage of using the concept of televisual metadiscourse is that it acknowledges television’s potential for self-evaluation, and also relates to cultural expressions that make use of the same or similar devices as television but do not belong to the television world as such. Bourdieu (1998:13, 64) briefly addresses the benefits of ‘on-screen criticism of the screen’, but restricts his analysis almost entirely to television and newspaper journalism. The US media scholar Robert Stam (1985) uses the concept of ‘reflexivity’, which is close to metadiscourse’s meaning of ‘discourse about discourse’. However, Stam (1985:16; see also Stam, Burgoyne and Flitterman-Lewis 1992:202-3) applies reflexivity positively only to literature and film, and argues that television’s reflexivity is ‘of a peculiarly ambiguous and often debased kind’. This observation does not hold true when the recent phenomenon of ‘quality television’ (Elsaesser, Simons and Bronk 1994) is taken into account – which may achieve the aesthetic and also critical sophistication found and admired by Stam in film and literature⁴ – or when the broader idea of the ‘televisual’ is applied, which includes video art and any other medium that makes use of television’s discursive devices of language, sound and vision.

Murti’s ‘Video spa’ can be conceived as a form of televisual metadiscourse, as it is not only about people trying to find enlightenment and to escape samsara through reflection and meditation, but also about a therapy to cure people of the ordeals of internationalized Indonesian media culture. The video therapy with its slow, aesthetic and relaxing images and sounds of waterfalls, pools, flowers and animals is meant as an alternative to the fast, noisy and intimidating messages of contemporary television genres such as

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⁴ In his recent work, Stam is much more positive about the critical potential of television. In his and Ella Shohat’s brilliant Flagging patriotism; Crises of narcissism and anti-Americanism (2007) special attention is devoted to television comedy’s capacity to deconstruct US politics. According to Stam and Shohat (2007:247), a programme like Jon Stewart’s Daily show ‘serves up more of the truth than the conventional serious news’.
commercials, music shows, and soap operas. The quote from the ‘Video spa’ exhibition brochure (Krisna Murti 2004a) at the beginning of this article is a deliberate parody of the slogans used in television commercials. Murti is aware that a work like ‘Video spa’ does not stand a chance of appearing on television, as it does not meet the ideological and commercial dictates of the media market.

Interestingly, the catalogue presents ‘Video spa’ not only as an alternative spa treatment for the eyes (mata), but also for the mind (mata hati). In this way, the video installation establishes direct links between three human aspects: the senses, the body and the mind. This is inspired by ideas from Balinese Hindu-Buddhist culture, but also refers to the reality of modern everyday life. The Indonesian art critic Agung Hujatnikajennong (2004) rightly observes that ‘The imaginary images in “Video Spa” address the problem of “physicality” in modern society, where the function of the “physical body” is no longer autonomous, but controlled by its psychological relations with the world of imagery’. This also means that Murti’s work suggests a combined treatment of the body, the senses and the mind as the best remedy for the mental and physical disorders caused by the mass media.

Murti’s critique of the media and his treatment of the senses in ‘Video spa’ and his other more recent art are significantly different from those in his early video installations. The early art, created at the end of Soeharto’s totalitarian New Order regime and the beginning of the Indonesian process of social, political and economic change known as Reformasi, combined comments on the media with criticism of Indonesia’s political regime. While the current work provides serenity as an alternative to the noise and vulgarity of contemporary media culture, Murti’s earlier installations rather aimed at catharsis by imitating and overstating the mechanisms of the mass media. Some of the work used audio-visual ‘terror’ (teror), or shock-effects and sensory overload, as a strategy to annoy or energize the audience, revive their senses, and make them critically rethink the fanfare and fantasies presented by the mass media (Kuss 1999:30). Three examples are: ‘The President brand panty liners’ (1998), ‘Learning to queue up to the ants or “status queue”’ (1996) and ‘Foodstuffs are ethnic, never racist’ (1999).

The video film ‘The President brand panty liners’ is a parody of commercials for sanitary napkins, and reacts to the abundance of ads on Indonesian television as well as a controversy surrounding the 1999 race for the Indonesian

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5 The brochure was distributed in addition to the exhibition catalogue (Krisna Murti 2004b).
6 Personal communication, Jakarta, 15-4-2008.
7 Gambaran-gambaran imajiner dalam ‘Video Spa’ menyinggung persoalan ‘ketubuhan’ dalam masyarakat modern, di mana fungsinya sebagai ‘tubuh fisik’ tidak lagi otonom, melainkan dikontrol oleh hubungan-hubungan psikisnya dengan dunia citraan.
presidency.\(^8\) It makes fun of the detailed and pseudo-scientific information of television commercials by showing the multi-functionality of the fictional ‘President’ panty liner, which can be used as blindfold, compress and tea bag (Krisna Murti 1999:49, 65, 77). The central scene shows blood-stained panty liners inscribed with the texts *kekerasan* (violence) and *machoisme* as blindfolds over the eyes and face of then President Habibie. Habibie became Indonesia’s president in 1998 after the resignation of Soeharto, whom he had assisted as vice-president for several years. Serving merely as a transitory figure to the 1999 elections – Indonesia’s first democratic elections in more than 40 years – Habibie spoke out against the prospect of having a woman – that is, Megawati Sukarnoputri, leader of the popular opposition party Partai Demokrasi Indonesia-Perjuangan (PDI-P, Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle) – as the next Indonesian president.

Murti’s work suggests that the abundance of television commercials for women’s products does not open the eyes of viewers, particularly men, to give them a better understanding of women, but rather reinforces female domestication and subordination in Indonesian society. President Habibie is branded a macho, someone who is an accomplice in the symbolic violence against women in politics and the media, and blind to the psychological and physical violence against women in daily life. The video also contains clips from a popular film about the female national hero Kartini, to demonstrate the paradox of a society that adores the image of this historical proponent of women’s rights, but at the same time accepts imagery creating and representing harm against women. In exhibitions, Murti showed the video on a television monitor that was hung above a urinal, to dramatically force males to rethink gender relations while holding their penis.

The video installation ‘Learning to queue up to the ants or “status queue”’, created during the final Soeharto years, also had presidential succession as one of its themes (Krisna Murti 1999:72). It consisted of a video film, television monitors, pieces of cut wood and dried leaves, long cloths carrying text, and modified *petulangan* – wooden coffins that are burnt during Balinese Hindu cremation rituals – in the shape of lions. Krisna made the lions with the help of Balinese artisans over a period of six months. The exhibition of the installation at Soemardja Galery at ITB was opened with a performance by Wawan S. Hoesin and Ine Arini (Krisna Murti 1999:72).

The lion *petulangan* were lined up in a queue, each of them with their head directed towards an individual television set, and standing with their feet on miniature television units surrounded by pieces of cut wood and dried leaves. This setting suggested that the lions were watching television. The video film shown on the television screens was about the communal behaviour of ants.

\(^8\) Krisna Murti, personal communication, Jakarta, 15-4-2008.
The coffins, wooden logs, and leaves were representations of a ‘recycling process’ (Krisna Murti 1999:72), or more specifically, signs of the anticipated step-down and succession of Soeharto. According to Murti (1999:72), the lions were references to Indonesia’s political leaders, who studied the discipline, hard labour, and communal spirit of the Indonesian common people, represented by the ants. The long cloths, which were hung from the ceiling, had written on them Balinese aphorisms that admonished the elite to learn from their subordinates (Agung Hujatnikajennong 2005:52). At the same time, the political elite intended to crush the small people, as suggested by the miniature television monitors under the feet of the lion petulangan.

From a media point of view, the video installation could also refer to the Soeharto government attempting to monitor and control the broadcasting media, and secure Indonesia’s social and political ‘status quo’. These attempts eventually turned out to be futile, as the media – like a nest of ants – were too diverse and dynamic to be monitored, and contributed importantly to Soeharto’s fall and the initiation of the process of Reformasi. In other words, the ‘status queue’ of control and order failed to produce the status quo desired by the New Order government. Hujatnikajennong (2005:52-3) wrote about this video installation: ‘In hindsight, this work was something like a prophetic vision, suggesting that someday those in power would be brought down in part due to the power of those very technologies that ruling powers try to control. For many, this is what seemed to happen in 1998 when Soeharto’s regime collapsed. ’

New Order media propaganda is one of the themes of the third early video installation, ‘Foodstuffs are ethnic, never racist’. This video installation presented an arrangement of pink toilets; inside the toilet bowls were pictures of different dishes and explanations about the origins of the food. The toilets were surrounded by two walls with projections of enlarged ‘Mooi Indië’ style paintings, and a third wall on which was shown the film Pengkhianatan G30S-PKI (‘The treason of the 30 September [1965] movement of the PKI’) with

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9 The ‘Mooi Indië’ or ‘Beautiful Indies’ style is a painting school of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, which depicts a colonial vision of the Dutch East Indies with idealized landscapes engulfed in an atmosphere of nostalgia. In the 1930s and 1940s, nationalist painters such as Sudjojono rejected this style for not representing the reality and hardship of the daily life of the common people. For many decades thereafter, the landscape was discredited in the Indonesian modern art world because of its colonial connotations (Turner 2005). Murti is one of the first artists to revive interest in exploring and questioning the genre.

10 Partai Komunis Indonesia or PKI is the Indonesian Communist Party, which was allegedly involved in the 1965 coup countered by General Soeharto and the armed forces. Pengkhianatan G30S-PKI is a propaganda film that until 1998 was shown annually on Indonesian television in order to present the New Order version of the counter-coup that brought Soeharto to power (Heryanto 2006).
segments inserted from Indonesian television cooking shows. During the opening of the exhibition at Cemeti Art House Gallery in Yogyakarta, Murti also offered the audience freshly cooked food purchased from street hawkers outside the gallery (Rath 2008:8).

Similar to Murti’s other video installations, ‘Foodstuffs are ethnic, never racist’ brings together different narratives that at first sight may seem unrelated. I believe the work attempts to demonstrate the ideological character of different versions of ‘Indonesianness’ by juxtaposing and mixing narratives from various media and areas of human activity. The landscape painting genre shows an artistic version, the Pengkhianatan G30S-PKI film a political account, and the food pictures and television cooking programmes show commonly shared perceptions. The instructions on the toilet bowls explain that food that is generally considered to originate from a specific Indonesian place or region often turns out to have its roots outside Indonesia. Murti seems to question how it is possible that people can easily accept different types of foreign food as expressions of Indonesian ethnicity, while at the same time they use racial grounds to exclude certain groups from participation in Indonesian public life. By inviting the audience to eat food and look inside the toilet bowls, he does not merely suggest that the food, once digested, all looks the same, but also that there is a need for solid and objective historical research to trace back the origins of, and ideological motives behind, truth and identity claims that have been dominant in contemporary Indonesian society.

Murti’s early post-Soeharto work reads as a reflection on the euphoria and confusion of a society celebrating democratic reform while trying to come to terms with the traumas of the past. In reference to the early Reformasi period, art critic Amanda Rath (2008:7) confirms that there is a direct connection between socio-political climate and artistic creation in Indonesia:

For about one year (between 1998 and 1999), artistic expression leaned towards euphoric paroxysms and vitriolic indictment. It was as if the corpse of Suharto’s presidency was forcibly exorcised through vicious imagery, political satire, and propagandist art and literature. [...] It was during this period that Krisna made some of his most overtly political and aggressive work. [...] After this necessary period of collectively shared catharsis, many artists, like Krisna, began to weave constructive alternatives to the official version of national history and culture imposed by the New Order government.

Murti’s most recent work displays a shift of focus to cultural issues (which are of course still political in another way) of media and identity, and perhaps assumes the prospect of a more peaceful and stable future for Indonesia. While the totalitarianism of the New Order and the chaos of early Reformasi may have forced the artist to a complex and layered multimedia approach, now he often uses the single medium of video film for the in-depth exploration
of an idea. Examples are the videos ‘The bubbles’ (2003), ‘Empty time’ (2002) and ‘Wayang machine’ (2002), all three of which present metadiscursive comments on, and possible alternatives to, contemporary television culture.

‘The bubbles’ shows a computer-manipulated dreamlike imagery of jellyfish against a background of clouds and a sun-shaped lotus flower. The jellyfish are floating in the sky to the sounds of the late opera star Luciano Pavarotti. This European classical music is interrupted by the sounds of a female choir accompanying a classical Javanese bedaya dance performance. The choir and the dancers are visible in a bubble, which emerges on the screen and then moves far into the background. The Javanese music itself is interspersed with the voice of the Indonesian Islamic preacher Abdullah Gymnastiar (better known as AA Gym), whose talking face is seen in a second bubble. Pavarotti’s singing also returns, this time with a video fragment of the performer in a third bubble. To all the previous sounds are added the dubbed Indonesian voices of the characters of the children’s television series Teletubbies, of which a segment appears in a fourth and final bubble.

The images in the last three bubbles represent national and international television icons that enjoyed great popularity in Indonesia at the beginning of the 21st century, but do not have much of a presence any longer in the Indonesian public debate. By showing them as floating bubbles, Murti suggests the fragility as well as the mysterious and unknown sources of the popularity of these and many other media figures. Their popularity has been at the cost of classical art traditions such as bedaya, which have unavoidably turned into ‘media bubbles’ themselves, due to their exposure to all sorts of mediation and commercialization processes. Near the end of the video, the first bubble containing the Javanese dance and music performance returns to the foreground, thereby causing itself and the other bubbles to explode one after another, as if they were all involved in multiple interstellar collisions. This may represent the futility of the efforts of both traditional artists and modern pop celebrities to survive and try and make themselves heard or visible in a media landscape that is already overcrowded. The final scene of the video returns to images of jellyfish floating to the sounds of Pavarotti. This could either signify peacefulness, or indicate that at some point the old media icons will be replaced by new ones, whose source of fame is equally unknown except by those who helped to create the instant media hypes.

‘Empty time’ contains slow-motion images of classical bedaya dance from the sultan’s palace in Surakarta. The video uses a special camera angle, showing a row of female dancers from behind, and focusing on the synchronous gestures of their left arms. In the original dance, these gestures are very slow, but in the video they are deliberately slowed down even further. Murti explained that the visual effect created by the manipulation of the images was meant to attract the attention of youth, or any other group that had lost
interest in the traditional arts due to high exposure to the speed and density of modern communication technologies.  

‘Wayang machine’ also uses the modern technology of video for the mediation of a traditional art genre, in this case wayang or shadow theatre. The video tells the story of Bhisma, one of the main characters of the canonical wayang epic Mahabharata. Murti recorded dance movements of the Balinese performer Made Sidia representing the different characters in the story, and manipulated them to resemble the two-dimensional shape of the leather puppets used in wayang kulit. During public screenings, the video was shown on two or three screens with a size of approximately 3x4m each. Murti explained

11 Personal communication, Jakarta, 15-4-2008.
12 Murti prepared the script for the performance with Arya Sanjaya, a poet and theatre performer from Bandung. The video performance had singing in kawi (Old Javanese) with voice-over versions in Indonesian and English (Dewi Ria Utari 2002).
that Bhisma’s internal conflict represents the tension between Indonesia’s troubled past and its aspirations for an uncertain future (Wilson 2002). He also attempted to contrast the mechanisms of wayang theatre with those of the mass media. According to Murti, the shadows of wayang theatre stimulate the audience’s imagination, and allow them to construct their own story, or ‘play the video that is inside of them’ (Kompas 2-2-2002), while the mass media offer mere imagery with not much for the audience to think or fantasize about. In ‘Wayang machine’ and his other video creations, Murti himself has found a successful fusion between the use of advanced technology on the one hand, and established styles and methods that promote contemplation and creativity on the other.

Treatment of the senses, positioning of the self

Murti’s work engages viewers in a different, deeper way than journalistic forms of televisual metadiscourse. Media watch programmes such as Dewan pers menjawab (‘The press council responds’) on Indonesia’s public channel Televisi Republik Indonesia (TVRI, Television of the Republic of Indonesia), or the programmes Media watch and De leugen regeert (‘The rule of the lie’) on Australian and Dutch public television, discuss the production mechanisms behind media discourse and the media industry in rational terms from political, economic or purely professional perspectives. While Murti’s work provides similar insights, it pays specific attention to media consumption – how recipients experience and are impacted upon by television and other media – and also attempts to offer aesthetic and conceptual alternatives to mass communication. Murti made a deliberate choice to work with ‘alternative’, attractive and accessible media such as video, performance and collage, in order to be able to engage and educate the audience in matters related to contemporary consumer and communication culture.

One of Murti’s main sources of inspiration is the Korean video art pioneer Nam June Paik, who was the first artist to turn the ‘cold’ and distanced medium of television into a ‘hot’ and interactive device by placing a magnet on a television screen. The magnet turned media consumers into media producers, as it allowed them to distort and reshape the images on the screen. Previously, the images only reflected the commercial and ideological interests of inaccessible, top-down-oriented institutions with a monopoly on television production and broadcasting (Krisna Murti 1999:47).

From the work and writings of another video art pioneer, the American

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13 Krisna Murti, personal communication, Jakarta, 15-4-2008.
Bill Viola, Murti (1999:44) learned that the essence of video art is not the use of advanced technology, but the sharing of a vision or a thought. Even though his creations often emphasize the senses, creative imagination, and audience participation, Murti (1999:66) does not work impulsively, but conducts extensive research to develop a vision and express it in a piece of art. He also agrees with Viola that the artistic media in video art are not the camera or the screen, but the human experiences and notions of time that are generated by this form of art (Krisna Murti 1999:35). According to Murti (1999:50), everyone is able to think, memorize and react intuitively, which are all functions that steer a person’s ‘video sprouts’ (kecambah-kecambah video), or the capacity to edit, record and play images in one’s mind. Video art, then, functions as a ‘trigger’ (pemicu) that stimulates people’s imagination, and helps the video sprouts to develop into a full-grown ‘tree of life’ (pohon hayat) (Krisna Murti 1999:50). It is these analogies between the video camera and the human mind that make video art Murti’s medium of preference.

Murti (1999:53) calls his own work video publik (public video), which unlike ‘an art paradigm that emphasizes the aesthetic factor’ is meant ‘to serve the public interest’. He is concerned more about his bond with and impact on the audience than about his image as a virtuoso artist:

I give myself a role as mediator rather than creator. What I desire is to approach the public. I can suddenly become a stimulator or more precisely provocateur – because there is a need to dilute the rigidity of communication, or to lubricate the public’s cogwheel of emotion and logical reasoning.

Murti (1999:54) claims that it is unlikely that video art can solve major social and political problems. He also believes that it is difficult or undesirable for this type of art to have the same reach as mainstream television, although once he had the idea to project one of his video films on a mega-size television screen at a busy crossing in Bandung, in order to give the film a truly public

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14 As a result of the extensive research on which they are based, some of Murti’s video films resemble short documentaries. An example is ‘My ancestors are Sangiran man’ (1997), which has as its theme the discovery of an ancient Homo erectus fossil at Sangiran in Central Java. The film contains manipulated images of the Sangiran site and the fossil, and interviews with local residents – including the excavator of the fossil – and an Indonesian palaeontologist. In his work, Murti attempts to address certain problems and ironies surrounding the discovery of the fossil. For instance, he provocatively asks whether the relatively poor excavator and other local residents will also have to wait thousands or millions of years and turn into fossils themselves, before they will receive the same regard as the Homo erectus (Krisna Murti 1997).

character (Krisna Murti 1999:48, 59). He is convinced, however, of video art’s potential to mediate and create awareness about socio-political transformations, to show and promote plural realities (realitas plural), and to provide an alternative to the general conservatism and one-sidedness of the mass media (Krisna Murti 1999:54-5).

Collage is another medium Murti uses to comment on and criticize the role of the mass media. While his video films and installations invite the audience to participate in a dynamic process and undergo physical and mental experiences, his collages of text, paint and pictures read rather as direct, one-off statements. The collages examine how mass communication and consumer culture influence people’s positioning of the self, including their notions of gender and the physical shape of their bodies. In 2001, Murti travelled around Java and Bali with an exhibition of his collage work. The accompanying catalogue was titled Caring for Mickey, referring to Mickey Mouse, one of the iconic figures of global media and consumer culture. In several of his collages, Murti drew the image of Mickey over a selection of advertisement cuttings.16

Some of Murti’s collages focus on the contribution of the mass media to the construction of specific types of masculinity. Two examples are ‘Physically powerful man watching TV’ (2001) and ‘Physically powerful man frying a fish’ (2001). Each of the two collages contains a drawing of a muscular man training his triceps while performing the domestic duties of ironing and cooking, respectively. The influence of the mass media is shown by inserted cuttings of advertisements for food and household articles and, in the first collage, also a drawing of a television set. In these two works, Murti addresses the confusing messages from television programmes and popular magazines, which on the one hand attempt to domesticate men, but at the same time force them to keep up the traditional masculine image of physical strength. Murti (2001:xii) urges viewers to rethink such constructions of manliness and to ask themselves why men would need ‘muscles the size of Ade Rai’s’ – a

16 For instance, in ‘The pinky hair caring for Mickey’ (2001), magazine pictures of female media personalities and advertisements for food and domestic utensils are attached to a background of red paint. On top of the paper cuttings, Murti has drawn in black a nude mother figure wearing a pink wig, referring to the female sex, contemporary consumer culture, and the perfectability of the body. The one-eyed figure uses one hand to hold Mickey – who is smiling and pointing one thumb up – while her other hand holds a television set having on its screen the text telenovela – the genre of Latin American soap opera that is very popular in Indonesia – and pictures of actresses and bra advertisements. Arrows indicate the mother only has attention for the television screen and not for the little toddler behind her back, who seems to be asking for attention by raising his finger. In the catalogue, Murti (2001:iv) explains that commercial television conditions women to be domestic figures and pretty creatures, and turns them into the ‘caring mothers for hegemonic television culture’ (ibu pengasuh bagi kultur yang hegemonik). In other words, these ‘mothers’ demand the perpetual fulfilment of desires that are created by television itself.
famous Indonesian body-builder – when their main task is to hold an iron or lift a frying pan.17

In other collages, Murti (2001:viii) discusses the role of the mass media in terms of causing a conflict between inner and outer life, or a situation in which the private has been taken over by the public, and people hardly have any space left for reflection, meditation and imagination. ‘Replacement of human senses’ (2001) and ‘Jailed by senses’ (2001) represent portraits of the Hindu god and supernatural Mahabharata character Sri Kresna – perhaps a reference to Krisna Murti himself – and a Buddha figure, respectively. Kresna/Krisna’s senses and organs are overlaid with advertisements and touristy memorabilia, while the Buddha face has dozens of eyes, noses, mouths and ears from magazine cuttings. This suggests that the inner peace of both figures is disturbed by the ‘ecstasy of communication’ (Baudrillard 1987) of modern life. The tension between peace and meditation on the one hand, and power and technology on the other, is also represented in ‘In-out stupa’ (2001). This work depicts a figure that is a fusion between a Buddha and a robot, with its body covered in pictures of stupas as well as technological consumer goods (Krisna Murti 2001:xx).

Three fascinating collages that show how the mass media, especially advertisements, are perceived by the human senses and have a direct impact on the body and nerve system are ‘Ads man’ (2001), ‘Ads-cupuncture dots’ (2001) and ‘Dare to tweak the own ears’ (2001). All three have been inspired by the sight of public walls that have traces of paper left from endless layers of half-peeled and weather-stained poster advertisements (Krisna Murti 2001:xxi). In the works, the paper traces become dots that are connected to the nerves of a male human body. This suggests that the consumption of advertisements is a form of acupuncture that influences the consumer’s physical and mental health. In ‘Dare to tweak the own ears’, Murti offers a radical alternative for regaining control over one’s own body by presenting an ‘ads man’ who destroys his own face and main sensory faculties by tearing off his ears. The three collages show similarities with the work of the English painter Francis Bacon, as they represent the male face and body as if they had been analysed and reconstructed with the help of radiography.

Finally, in his collages Murti also reflects on his own position as media producer and consumer. In ‘Artists can do no wrong’ (2001), he uses a picture of himself smoking and apparently promoting a pack of cigarettes. Drawings

17 In another collage, ‘The two stigmas’ (2001), Murti (2001:xvi) depicts a figure with female breasts and a penis over a layer of advertisements. This is probably intended to undermine the media stereotype of female sensuality and male power, and to argue that humans do not fit strict gender divisions, but are driven by emotional and rational processes that are unpredictable and constantly changing.
of yellow arms and red Mickey Mouse nose and ears are added to the picture, while a cartoon text balloon reveals that Murti is thinking that ‘Artists can do no wrong’. A text beneath asks whether the artist’s act of (self-)advertising is a form of ‘soft commodification’. On the right side of the work is a portrait of the Indonesian television personality Joshua, ‘the wonderboy’ (Krisna Murti 2001:xiv), pointing his finger at Murti. According to the accompanying text balloon, Joshua is saying ‘You are what you eat’. The body of the boy consists of parts of a wrapping for a McDonald’s sandwich. Below the boy is written ‘hard commodification’, and the top right corner of the collage contains a statement that ‘artist = art curator = art historian = art critic’. While the boy himself certainly seems a product of what he consumes, by pointing his finger at Murti he rightly challenges the myth that artists are outside the capitalist system of production and consumption.

In a recent multi-media exhibition called Forbidden zone (Semarang, Ubud and Jakarta, March-May 2008), Murti addressed his formation as an artist not from the perspective of contemporary consumer culture, but from the historical and philosophical viewpoint of ‘ownership’ of media, images and meanings. The exhibition consisted of paintings and photo and video installations that were all variations on the landscape theme, which – due to the legacy of the ‘Mooi Indië’ style – had become the ‘forbidden zone’ of post-colonial Indonesian art practice. The theme was a reference to Murti’s education at ITB, which more than any other Indonesian arts academy was inspired by Dutch painting styles (Spanjaard 1990). Unlike many of his nationalist predecessors, Murti did not present the Western background of modern Indonesian art in terms of a conflict that had to be resolved, but rather as a reality that was problematic as well as interesting and in need of further exploration.

One way in which he problematized truth claims, or rather claims to the ownership of certain media, images and meanings, was by representing an act of resistance by Balinese rice farmers against tourists’ intrusion into their lives. These farmers place mirrors and other reflective objects in their fields, in order to create counter-flashes that obstruct the gaze of the tourists and...
prevent them from taking photographs. Murti represented such flashes of resistance in his photo installation ‘The glare’ (2008) and video installation ‘Mirrorscape’ (2008). Both works gave a hyper-real impression, as landscapes of rice terraces were shown in mirror image. This suggests that Murti attempted not only to portray the empowerment and emancipation of local people in their struggle against neocolonial control over forms of representation and ways of life. He also wanted to show that the glare now has become part of the Balinese imagination itself. In other words, hyper-reality, in the form of a mirrorscape reflecting its own glare, has become reality. Similarly, although colonial landscape painting and acts of defiance against this style are not linked to the ‘reality’ of the landscape as such, they are constitutive parts of Indonesian art history that continue to influence the life and work of contemporary artists.

In Murti’s landscape paintings, the theme of ownership of media, images and meanings was reflected in telling titles and unusual perspectives. For instance, one of the paintings portraying an empty road along terraced rice fields was titled ‘Do not take over’ (2008), which could either refer to Sudjojono’s resistance against the ‘Mooi Indië’ style, or the struggle of the Balinese farmers against the tourist-photographers. Another painting, ‘Mooi-moryscape’ (2007), depicted a mountain landscape in memory of the colonial history of Indonesian modern art in general, or Murti’s Western-style education in particular. The unusual oblique horizons in ‘Runway’ (2006) and ‘Plane eye view no. 2’ (2006) seemed to suggest the unstable, time- and ideology-bound character of the various perspectives in the Indonesian art world.20


Another example was ‘Amla[samara]pura’ (2007), which showed a road sign for the opposite
Another important aspect of the *Forbidden zone* exhibition was that it blurred the boundaries between the various media used. Photo and video installations were given painting frames, video films were slowed down to resemble static images, and paintings were inspired by photo and video montage. In this way, Murti undermined the traditional hierarchy of media, in which painting usually dominates the domain of ‘high’ art, video belongs to the world of pop culture, and photography resides somewhere in-between. He showed that each of the media was capable of telling an intriguing story, and that none had exclusive ownership of aesthetic quality and meaningfulness. At the same time, he also demonstrated that the choice of medium did matter. For instance, the video films, no matter how much they were slowed down, would always display a unique fourth dimension of time not found in photography or painting. Precisely by making his video installations resemble paintings or photographs, Murti made the audience experience the subtle differences between the various media.

Towards a media ecology

What still needs to be questioned, however, are Murti’s optimistic predictions about the possibilities of video art. To what extent will the medium really lead to ‘audience participation’, ‘militia’ (that is, social empowerment), ‘democratization’, or the realization of the ‘utopia’ of social equality, as frequently mentioned in his writings and conversations (Murti 2009)? Video art often involves high production costs, is exhibited in exclusive art galleries and museums, and only attracts the attention of a select audience of educated art lovers. More effective alternative media communication is arguably provided by community-based, low-cost alternatives to the Indonesian public and commercial broadcasting media, such as radio komunitas (community radio; Jurriëns 2003), televisi komunitas (community television; Nazaruddin and Hermanto 2009) and wajanbolic Internet (home-built wireless Internet) (Jurriëns 2009b), which have all been presented as media ‘for, by and about/from the people’.

Murti himself observes that it is not always easy to judge whether video artists are taking critical distance from contemporary consumer culture, or...
whether they are complicit in this culture or even reinforcing it (Jurriëns 2009b:279). Personally, I wonder whether the use of handy cams, computers and mobile phones for art or pleasure is not just another sign of the continuing individualization of people's life world, or whether these technologies are merely contributing to a trend of ‘narrowcasting’ that is far from the ideal of engaging in true dialogue with others in order to broaden one's horizons. This does not yet address the issue of the interests of the people and corporations behind the introduction and monitoring of new communication media. The Internet, for instance, apart from being a medium for individual expression and the building of transnational networks, is also the domain where software monopolies are established, personal information is commercially exploited, and search engines are politically steered.

Yet video has also grown in popularity as a medium of expression at the community level, especially among youth in the cities of Java and Bali. These youth often engage creatively in low-cost applications of video and other communication technologies, and organize events in public spaces that are easily accessible to the wider community. Examples of young artists’ collectives with an interest in the new media are Ruangrupa (‘Space of shapes’) in Jakarta, Video Lab and Common Room in Bandung, and House of Natural Fiber and Ruang Mes 56 (‘Mess hall 56’) in Yogyakarta. Murti has functioned as a mentor of these groups by promoting and participating in their exhibitions, discussions and other activities. He rightly points out that one of the most exciting aspects of such activities is that nationality, ethnicity, religion and educational background are not much of an issue, as the local youth communities actively participate in highly diverse international networks of video artists.

While the new generation of video artists has been brought up with satellite television, Internet and mobile phones, Murti still remembers a time that the main media for information and entertainment were non-electronic devices such as wayang theatre. He is not cynical about these changes in the Indonesian media landscape, but attempts to use his art and writings to search for collaborative strategies to understand and, if necessary, subvert the current cultural climate, which is partly built on media genres such as infotainment, soap opera, commercials, computer games and cyber-porn. It is within this context that Murti has strategically positioned his video art as a form of televisual metadiscourse.

As this article has shown, his artistic type of televisual metadiscourse does more than merely discuss the commercial and ideological mechanisms behind the mass media industry. It also provides insight into the cultural-technological features of various media (comparing video with photography and painting); the historical dimensions of different genres of representation (landscape painting); the position of the artist and the audience in processes
of mediation (discussing the impact of the mass media on the human body, mind and senses); and alternative forms of intermediality and interactivity (offering ‘video spa’ as an audio-visual therapy). 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. While media archaeology concerns the socio-cultural histories of media use (Manovich 1998), media ecology implies the analysis and possible reduction of the audio-visual noise polluting contemporary life. It aims at the creation of clean and open media landscapes, which sharpen the view and broaden the horizons of everyone passing through. The idea of video spa is one constructive step in the development of such media ecology, but many more artistic and non-artistic therapies will be needed to prepare us for all the challenges of the digital future.

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