

Utopia, Heterotopia, and Mediatopia: Rethinking Foucault and Performativity in Krisna Murti's Video Artworks

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ABSTRACT

As the epoch of space confronts us with its multiplicity of networks, a new architectonics of space has begun to raise its own construction. Foucault's terminology of utopia and heterotopia has covered the delineation of the other spaces, spaces which invert, mirror, suspend, and neutralize the real spaces of society. With the propagation of moving images into the space of our daily life, every space at any given moment can turn into an image of utopia as well as a construction of heterotopia. As Foucault says, now is the epoch of space, now is the time to re-value and re-define the contemporary space we live in.space.

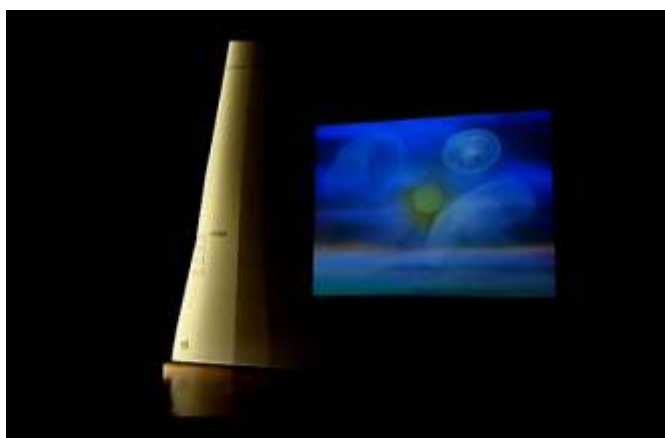
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● *Utopia* ● *Heterotopia* ● *Media technology* ● *Performativity* ● *Space appropriation* ● *Art appropriation* ● *Foucault*.

The (Reversed) Utopia

The 23 video art and installations of *Mediatopia* reflected the journey of one of Indonesia's renown artists, Krisna Murti. Each of the works articulates the artist's thoughts, interpretations, as well as his critiques, dabbed with the characterized sense of humor, on the various intersections that occur between man and screen, between society and media, and between the illusive and the real.

Through his various verbal and visual expressions, there is no indication that his engagement with the new media has been the result of a fleeting emotion that normally occurs when a new technology has arrived. His preoccupation with the media seems more like an attempt to dialogue with the space he is living in, a space that is changing and evolving with the complexity of the real and the unreal, the merging of the two, and the addition of the multiple layers of time dimensions.



The Bubbles (Studio Krisna Murti, 2002) in *Mediatopia*
– Semarang Contemporary Art Gallery (2010)

The theme of the exhibition, *Mediatopia* or media-utopia, was to represent how Murti's bodies of work articulated the cultural shift in contemporary society,¹ interpreting new meanings, and framing the issues of images and media technology as the prime agent of change in the world and of society's concept of utopia.

By definition utopia is illusive, it does not have a concrete place though it does have direct relations to the real spaces of society. Foucault's term of

utopia is constructed upon the the understanding of external space, as opposed to Bachelard's phenomenological conception of inner space, that this external space has curious properties of being in relation with all the others, but in such a way as to suspend, neutralize, or invert the set of relationships designed, reflected, or mirrored by themselves.²

In Murti's video artworks, the society's concept of utopia is portrayed as a notion of thought that is formulated by the image construction of the media. One of his video works, *The Bubbles*, renders models of images that are created incessantly by the media, images that are obviously swallowed by the society as the *true* values until those bubbles of dream suddenly burst and leave the heedless in their scattered illusions. Another Murti's creation, *Fruitification*, is a seven-minute video showing sequences of moving images borrowing the 17th century Dutch still-life style, reflecting the condition of an agrarian society that has been consumed by imported food and goods. In these videos, the society's ideal world of utopia seems to be solely defined by what is lauded on the screen rather than what is formulated through thorough discussions between self and other members of society. And so imported food and goods become the necessary elements to reach the utopia rather than the efforts to reach such quality by ways of maximizing local resources. A total reverse conception of economic utopia from the former 19th century versions by Morris and others. It has now become the utopia of the media rather than the utopia of the society.



Sequences of *Fruitification* (Studio Krisna Murti, 2002) in *Mediatopia*
– Semarang Contemporary Art Gallery (2010)

The (Mirrored) Heterotopia

Murti's video artworks did intend to bring into question the various

intersections that occur between man and screen, between society and media, and between the illusive and the real. In his talk on *Violence of the Image*, Baudrillard has described the state of these relations as a growing 'integral reality' where everything must logically want to disappear.³ The computerization of images has eventually murdered the image itself because the reference has vanished and no longer exists, and we will soon reach the end of the imagination of the image.⁴

Foucault termed his utopia and heterotopia as *the other spaces*. For utopia, because of its imaginary characteristic, and heterotopia for its manner that reflects other spaces, accomodates crisis, illusion, differentiated groups, fragments of time, and other juxtaposition of spaces. Cinema, *the space of the image and the virtual*, falls in one of Foucault's definition of heterotopia. When the multiplicity of moving images has been so expounded that it is now able to appear in any place at any time, that every place can suspend, neutralize, or invert the set of relationships designed, reflected, or mirrored by themselves, what can now be called as the other spaces?

According to Foucault, the current epoch of space is marked by simultaneity, juxtaposition, proximity and distance, concentration as well as dispersion. The experience of being in the world is now formed by the non-linearity of time, it is shaped by the experience of multiple networks connecting the multiple points of reference.⁵ In the opening chapter of *The Order of Things*, Foucault's explication of *Las Meninas* discusses the heterotopic nature of the painting's spatial configuration, though the term *heterotopia* itself is never used.⁶ The discussion of mirror imagery conveys the idea that patterns of resemblance can occur between things despite the spatial distance separating them: "There is something in emulation of the reflection of the mirror: it is the means whereby things scattered through the universe can answer one another."⁷

Can they answer one another? If they can, does proximity determine the quality of their relationship? If it does, what defines the proximity between the spaces?

The Mediatopia

One of the distinguished features in Murti's exhibition is the manner of how these bodies of work construct a sense of real existence of the spaces. What was meant to be apprehended as utopia appeared closer to Foucault's heterotopia. Foucault did emphasize the existence of heterotopia as real

places and that this era is the period of time when space is reconstructed and re-valued.



Empty Theater (Studio Krisna Murti, 2010) in *Mediatopia*
– Semarang Contemporary Art Gallery (2010)

Murti's exploration with the media technology demonstrates his sensitivity towards the contemporary situation where a new spatial architectonics is constructed, the architectonics of moving images, a construction of space which have become a large part of our living world that it is now almost impracticable to differentiate between the real and the virtual. Murti's gesture can be as simple as merely playing with the dimension. His *Empty Theater* video installation, was projected life-size to demonstrate the diminishing boundary between the real and the unreal.

The bodily connection between viewer and the moving image of the ten *wayang* figures eliminates the inactiveness of spectator space and the disassociation previously existed between the spectacle and the spectator in cinema space. The juxtaposition of time-space between the space of the projected *wayang* figures and the space occupied by viewer's body still exists, nonetheless the two spaces dissolve when viewer relates his body with the projected images. In the projection space, Murti solidifies a cultural condition where a change of appreciation towards the traditional art of *wayang* indicates the vanishing course of this art form. Figures that were once considered heroic and honored have faded and are almost non-existent in contemporary life. The bodily relation between viewer and the projected space was purposely created by Murti to connect the reality of the disappearance of a tradition which was once part of the local everyday life. In this relation, a real space is created between the viewer and the projected moving image.

Empty Time displays a different relation between viewer and the projected moving image. The presentation of the *Bedhaya Ketawang* dancers was made on a floating translucent screen, giving the viewers an alternative to

observe the presentation from both sides. There is a different interplay between the real and the non-real. The side of the translucent screen that confronted the projector was the first capturing space, while the other side is the mirror of the original capture. The position of the screen and the projector in the gallery blurs the idea between an original and its mirror image.

In this setting the viewer is confronted with a dilemma of originality. There is a change of spatial orientation on each side of the screen, but apart from that, is there any essential variance?



Empty Time (Studio Krisna Murti, 2002) in *Mediatopia*
– Semarang Contemporary Art Gallery (2010)

Unlike *Empty Theater*, in *Empty Time* there is no correlation between body and the moving projected image of the *Bedhaya* dancers, not just because there are differences in dimension and scale, but there is also a *denial of time*. The delay of time in the presentation constructs an imaginary wall between the time-space of viewer and the time-space of the dancers. To capture the whole movement, viewer has to stop and synchronize his time-space with the dancers'. The time delay was acute to emphasize the need to observe details, to arrest the aesthetic of movement that has been disremembered in contemporary life because of the commodification of time and the heightened efficacy in the day to day activities.

In his other video installation, *e-ART-h-quake* no.3, Murti changed spectator's viewpoint from frontal view to spatial. The wheat layer on the floor exchanged the need for a screen which normally used to capture image. The projected image shows recorded movement of water on sand and reef. The recorded sound of wave adds another layer of representation in this space installation.



e-ART-b-quake no.3 (Studio Krisna Murti, 2010) in *Mediatopia*
– Semarang Contemporary Art Gallery (2010)

The sense of hyperreality is strengthened by a performance within the installation. A performer sits on the white layer of wheat and plays with the imaginary sand. Performativity can explain a dynamic construction of a reality in a fragmented, layered and hybrid context.⁸ Murti himself defines performativity as an active participation to be involved.⁹ In many of his works Murti does call upon the viewer's attention to actively experience the contemporary spaces that have been progressively molded by the media technology. Viewers' involvement, their bodily space appropriation, is the element that brings Murti's Mediatopia closer to real spaces rather than to the imaginary concept of utopia. Each of his topos simultaneously reflects, challenges and mirrors spaces in the real life of modern society. From this view, Murti's artworks are probably more accurate to be regarded as *Media(hetero)topia*.

Performativity: appropriating the new topos

Since Galileo discovered the earth revolution, the understanding of 'place' has changed into a moving point in time. Stability is just a condition where there is an infinite deceleration of time. The current epoch of space is a matter of arrangement; arrangement between points and elements, of data storage, circulation, points of reference, and the various classifications of human elements to achieve certain objectives.¹⁰ It is important to note that Foucault wrote his essay when ARPANET was still a research project commenced by a small group of scientists in one of MIT's secluded labs. The multiplication of networks through the birth of digital network must have exceeded even Foucault's own expectation.

It is true that not all real spaces have undergone 'desacralization' because of the proliferation and the infiltration of the projected images. As Foucault said, some of the spaces in reality are still protected by values that are

purposely kept by many institutions or by the practice of human life itself.¹¹ Therefore, there are still concrete differences in certain places.

But the proliferation of moving images has given birth to the multiple relations between the visual experience of space and the practical experience of everyday life, or more correctly termed, through performativity. Before Foucault's essay was published, Benjamin had already discussed this understanding of space perception, a perception that is acquired through two opposing processes, the process of concentration and the process of distraction.¹² The process of concentration is such that is needed when a work of art is appreciated by a viewer, while the process of distraction, according to Benjamin, is most seen in experiencing the work of architecture. Building is appropriated through two processes, through the daily use of it and through the process of perception, or through the visual and the tactility of the space. Appropriation of a work of art such as this cannot be understood through the process of concentration, because tactile appropriation can only be gained by daily use and not through attentive recognition. And in experiencing architecture, habitual factors determine what is perceived by the visual. Even in the process of visual perception, architecture space is largely experienced through incidental visual perception rather than through attentive recognition. For Benjamin, space appropriation of this kind has to be analyzed further to find its essential traits or values, because in this era where reproduction of works is exploding, perception cannot be done merely with optical contemplation. Perception can only be mastered by gradual experience of daily life, guided with the sensoric appropriation. In other words, through performativity.

Benjamin says: "Reception in a state of distraction, which is increasing noticeably in all fields of art and is symptomatic of profound changes in perception, finds in the film its true means of exercise."¹³ It is in the world of moving-image that public gain the position of the critic, nevertheless they do so in a state of distraction. It is in the world of cinema that society has the privilege to mirror themselves and find their various 'other'. Nevertheless, they do so in a dissociative manner. When the proliferation of moving images has met us halfway into our everyday space, it is going to be a battle of whose dream of utopia will finally come to its end.

Murti's *Mediatopia* was intended to awaken the viewer's attention to actively observe the multitude of images that have been formed and ushered by the media technology. That is performativity in Murti's *Mediatopia*. The reluctance to appropriate media space has given power to the media itself to

capture public in the process of distraction that is unguided by other sensoric appropriation. The video installations of *Empty Time*, *Empty Theater* and *e-ART-b-quake no.3* seems to offer a glimpse of the establishment of a new space, the architectonics of moving images, which not only can evaluate, re-evaluate and consolidate meaning, but also can take the viewers back to the process of fully appropriating space. There is no utopia, there is no heterotopia. But there is another topos, a different kind.

End Notes:

- ¹ Rifky Effendy, 2010, *Mediatopia: Karya-karya Krisna Murti 1993-2010*, Semarang Contemporary Art Gallery.
- ² Michel Foucault, 1967, *Des Espace Autres*, transl. by Jay Miskowiec, *Architecture/ Movement / Continuité* Journal October 1984
- ³ Jean Baudrillard, 2004, *Violence of the Image*, Open Lecture given at the European Graduate School, EGS, Saas-Fee, Switzerland, <http://www.egs.edu>
- ⁴ *Ibid.*
- ⁵ Michel Foucault, 1967, *Des Espace Autres*, transl. by Jay Miskowiec, *Architecture/ Movement / Continuité* Journal October 1984
- ⁶ Danielle Manning, 2008, *(Re)visioning Heterotopia: The Function of Mirrors and Reflection in Seventeenth Century Painting*, SHIFT Queen's Journal of Visual and Material Culture Issue 1, Queen's University and The University of Western Ontario
- ⁷ Michel Foucault, 1966, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*, Routledge, London and New York, 2002, p.22
- ⁸ Katerina V. Bruch, 2010, *Approaching the body in new media arts. Some reflections about the work of Krisna Murti, Mediatopia Exhibition*, Semarang Contemporary Art Gallery.
- ⁹ Krisna Murti, 2010, *Wayang Wong, Performativitas dan Digitalisasi, Mute! Theater Exhibition*, Bentara Budaya Jakarta.
- ¹⁰ Michel Foucault, 1967, *Des Espace Autres*, transl. by Jay Miskowiec, *Architecture/ Movement / Continuité* Journal October 1984
- ¹¹ *Ibid.*
- ¹² Walter Benjamin, 1969, *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction in Illuminations*, transl. by Harry Zohn, Schocken Books, New York, p.240
- ¹³ *Ibid.*

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