

Speaker: Alvaro Cassinelli

Talk title: ‘Embodying Elusive Realities’

Time: Tuesday, May 15, 2011

Place: MIT Media Lab (75 Amherst St (at the corner of Ames St.))

Abstract:

In this talk I will present some of my works as a media artist and researcher and show how, depending on the academic/social context, these can flip as a Necker cube between the realms of Media Art and HCI research. I will talk in particular of some attempts at **embodying and giving intentionality to elusive realities** such as Time, Space and Light, so they can be actors capable of **performing** with humans in public or private spaces. This include for example deformable walls that remember the past; robots made of light (or “tangible photons”) that interact with humans to make music, scan surfaces, or print books in real time; self-configuring video “plumbing” that transverse continents; interactive knowledge voxels attached to real space (to store and retrieve data); laser auras that extend emotions (more or less capriciously); the use of the body as a controller as well as a surface for projection (or “skin games”); the introduction of minimalistic, iconic displays as an alternative to the pixilated screen; several experiments on mediating the Self with technology (including devices to help people with disabilities); and finally a new paradigm for a sustainable ubiquitous computing world - among other miscellaneous but related topics.

I am not concerned about what these experiments *are* (ontologically or academically speaking). Indeed, any attempt at classification ends up projecting these “quantum social experiments” into any one of many possible boring Eigenstates - and any meaningful artistic or scientific discussion is dead. I am interested instead in the evolving, entangled states. Accepting to deal with these entangled objects rewards us with a true, multifaceted **human experience**.

My stand is that we are in a flourishing era of creativity and industry, playing with tools that enable us to tamper deeply into the very fabric of reality (at least in a phenomenological sense) and that this **bootstraps directly or indirectly into the experience of the Self**. This is as distressing as it is fascinating: we live in **psychedelic times**, mediated through a range of (more or less ethically acceptable) technologies... The problem is that this feedback (between what we produce and what we become as a consequence) is generating unstable oscillations and ripples of anxiety in the human soul. I often sense we are loosing control of the boat: we no longer rely on deeper, past experiences to understand and give meaning to the world. Instead, we simply *react* to it – we are becoming animals in a self-constructed Skinner box. **The place for human experience is shrinking, because technology gives us what we (think we) want too quickly.**

An antidote to this situation may be to welcome new practices and social actors for evaluating our desires and creative endeavors in real time - this may effectively regulate the feedback loop. In this context, I have chosen (did I?) to walk the thin line between Art and Science – often falling to either side and so far with unnoticeable bruises. From the research perspective, I see media art installations as an ideal platform to perform “ecological” experiments on human-computer interaction and human perception; at the same time, applying the results of scientific research (including technological breakthroughs) to the field of media arts enriches its vocabulary - if done with a critical eye. This implies a constant attitude of “switching hats” (as R. Gold would put it) that corrects the impedance of the loop by introducing feedback from various social actors - and as a consequence helps building a form of **meaning that can be interpreted across disciplines**.

So, even if at a superficial level I am interested in the design of human-computer interfaces and media art installations using state-of-the-art optoelectronic technology (laser light, custom vision chips, etc), at a deeper level what I really look forward is building things that may be perceived simultaneously as technological solutions as well as devices capable of reframing the original problems these solutions try to address. Works that open the eyes, that creates awareness by generating more questions than answers - **questions about the technology itself, and questions about the relevance of these problems in a social or personal context**. I like to think about interaction as a **koan** emerging from seemingly technical solutions whose elegance - or fancifulness - takes precedence over its function and induces reflection about the role they play in our life, and how they change our minds. One could call this **technological koan(s)**, cognitively disruptive technologies - or simply Art.

The key is to maintain always a tangential view on stuff; a concrete example: I have been always fascinated by the *aesthetic* of the Machine. The machine perceived not as a tool (not even as a kinetic sculpture), but as another actor in “my” world, with its own requirements of space and time, its idiosyncrasies and needs (and I am not talking about robots here). We need to relate to our own creations with due respect, because they are not completely “our” creations: we are theirs too.

Through the talk, I will address once and again several preoccupations as an artist, researcher and human being. However, one central preoccupation that drive my scientific research and inspire my work as a media artist is the following: to which extent are we capable of augmenting/mediating our existence through technology in a way that empower us as human *actors*, instead of burying us in artificial layers with more and more idiosyncratic rules of interaction? Should there be some guidelines towards the design of a **sustainable artificial physics** - a superset of the “intuitive physics” we all learn as children?

Short bio:

Alvaro Cassinelli was born in Uruguay in 1972. In 1992 he obtained both the French and Uruguayan Bachelor degree, and a grant to pursue his studies in France. With an

Engineering degree in Telecommunications (Telecom ParisTech), a master on laser and matter interaction and a Ph.D in Physics (University of Paris-XI), he moved to Japan to work as Assistant Professor at the University of Tokyo (Ishikawa-Oku Laboratory), first as leader of the Optoelectronic Group, and then leader of the [Meta-Perception Group](#), a group specialized on Human-Computer Interfaces for enhancing human communication and expression. He is also co-founder of the Devices that Alter Perception workshop. Independently experimenting in the field of Media Arts since 2004, he has been awarded several prizes as a Media Artist, including the Grand Prize [Art Division] at the 9th Japan Media Art Festival (2006), an Honorary Mention at Ars Electronica (2006), an Excellence Prize [Entertainment Division] at the 13th Japan Media Art Festival (2009), the NISSAN Innovative Concept Award (2010), and the Jury Grand Prize at Laval Virtual (2011).