

TV Channels and Socialization of Arts. An Interview with

ALI HOSSAINI

By Ernesto Menéndez-Conde

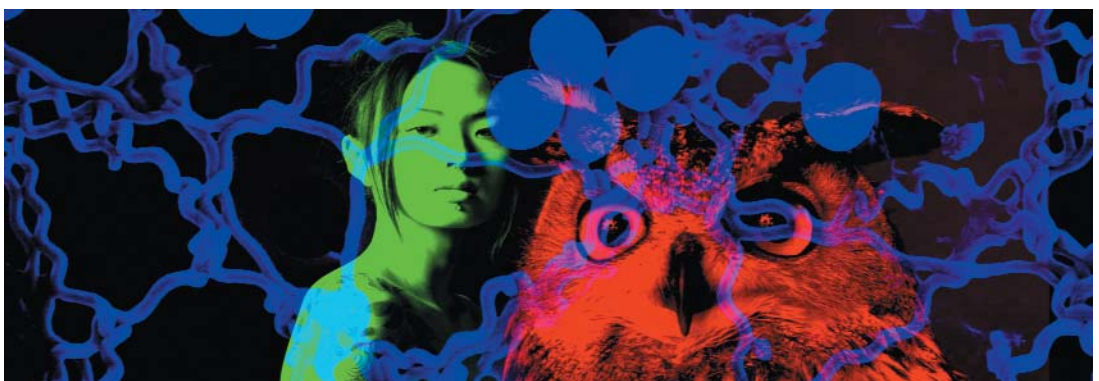
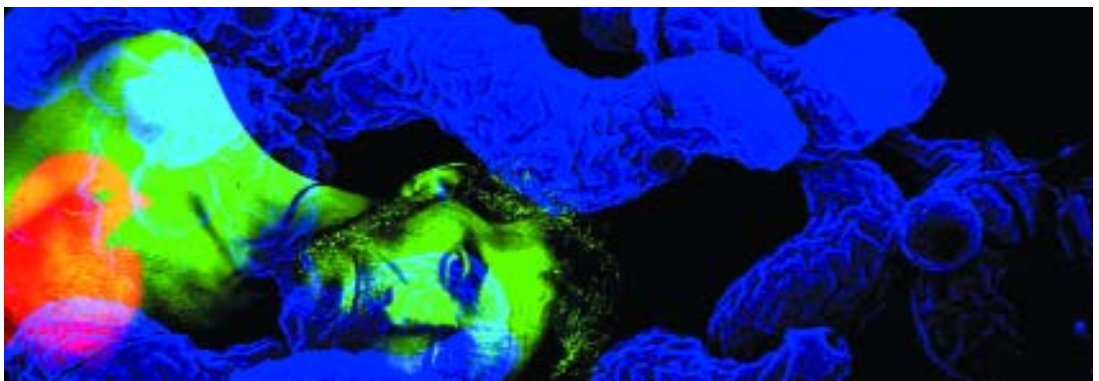
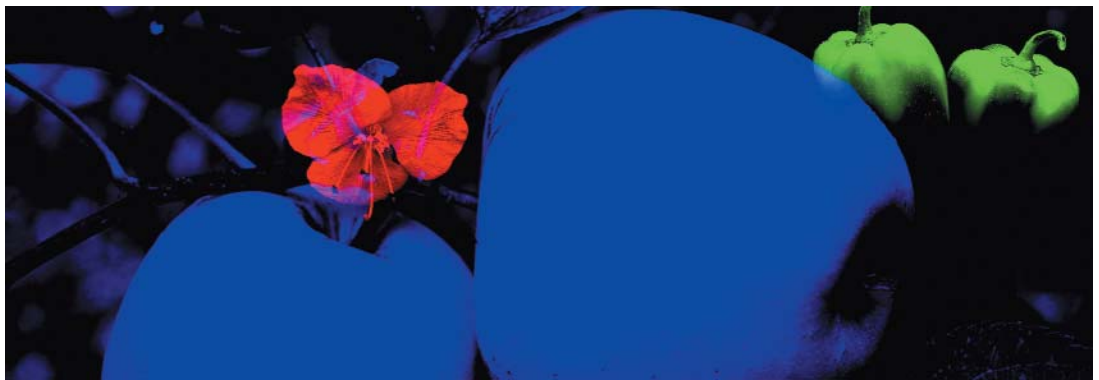
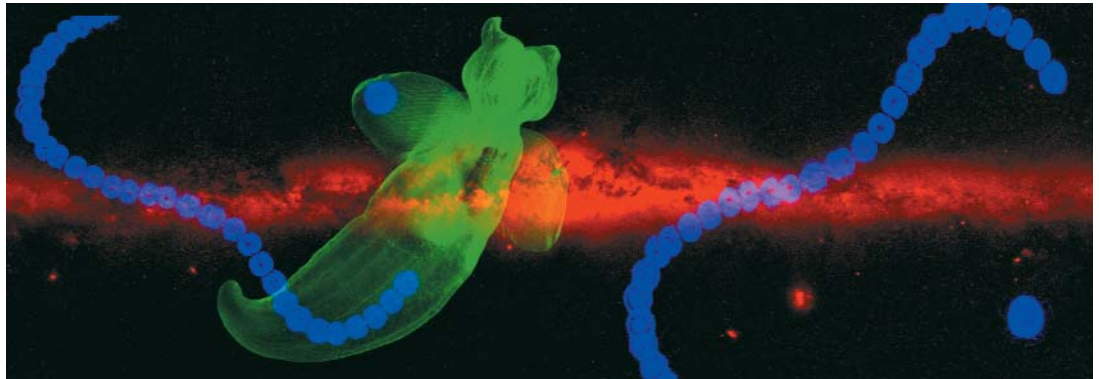
Artist and producer Ali Hossaini has developed a heterogeneous body of work, ranging from alternative and artistic ways of using TV channels and 3D generative animations, to visual poetry, and collaborations in a contemporary opera, among other experimental projects. His artistic proposals go far beyond disciplinary boundaries. Hossaini's writings about his own poetic and artistic goals are as visionary and appealing as his own work. For this interview I wanted to focus on Hossaini's attempts to socialize art by producing alternative and artistic TV channels. I was also interested in the possibility of defining, or at least contemplating, a common ground for such versatile work. This is an ongoing interview via e-mail, which we will publish in two parts.

Ernesto Menéndez-Conde: *On your website <http://art-lab.tv/>, you wrote:*

“I work at the intersection of philosophy, science and self-expression, projecting my intrigue with consciousness, mass communication and self-expression into media art projects.”

In many ways, this sentence summarizes your work in several mediums. I would like to ask you to go a little bit further in defining this “intersection.” How you would describe this space of convergence between philosophy, science and self-expression? Which philo-


Ali Hossaini
Ouoroboros, 2010
3D video
© The artist
Courtesy: the artist







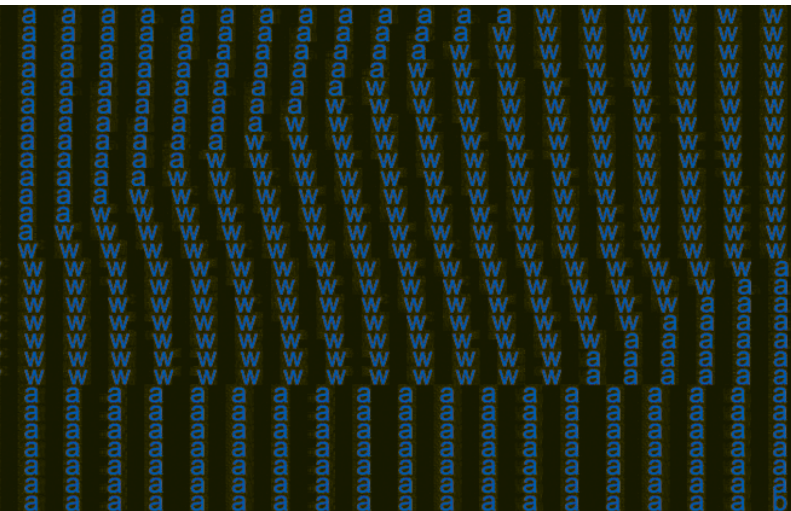
Ali Hossaini
Oceanic Verses, 2011
 HD video
 © The artist
 Courtesy: the artist

sophical approach or categories would you mention? Which science—or sciences—in particular? Which mode of self-expression?

Ali Hossaini: Asking about one of my earlier self-conceptions raises some interesting issues. When we arrive to a conclusion, we often project it backwards, as if we were always working towards it. I now define my artistic activities as bridging the worlds of science and spirit. Two or three years ago, when I wrote the statement you cite that purpose was not so clear. Here's the reason: I never intended to become an artist, and I avoided the identity for many years. I started calling my activities "art" because I could find no other social role for what I do. So the real answer to your question comes from my personal history rather than a neat conceptual package. My life has several phases, each of which inflects my work as an artist. As a youth I was sure to be a scientist, though I was also involved in performing arts. In university I studied science and mathematics, but I took my degrees in philosophy. Towards the end of school I became a black and white photographer and guerilla video producer, and then I followed a profession in television, launching and managing several channels.

It may seem like I have a lot of interests, but it's more accurate to say that I've doggedly pursued the same interests across boundaries. From childhood I've been fascinated by cameras, light and perception, and most of my activities have centered around optics and visual media. As a child I toyed with lenses and computers, and my dissertation, "Archaeology of the Photograph," traces the evolution of optics as a form of communication. For my research I learned photography and video, so it wasn't surprising, to me anyway, when I jumped from academia to commercial television. The skills and concepts were there, though not in an obvious way.

Even now I prefer to think of myself as a thinker and maker, or even visual poet, rather than artist. Art has become a loaded term, connoting a gritty market and grim elitism that I dislike. But I'll stick with it for the sake of clarity. For me making art (or whatever it is that I do) is a reflex that starts with contemplation. It's a chance to express myself without the scholarly or commercial constraints I pursue elsewhere. My artwork reflects my interests in nature, society and history, and it also embodies musings about what lies beyond the grasp of those disciplines.



Ali Hossaini
4 Monkeys, 2009/2012
Generative video
© The artist
Courtesy: the artist

Ernesto Menéndez-Conde: *Why did you switch from philosophy or critical theory to art?*

Ali Hossaini: After several years of studying philosophy, I decided to write my dissertation, *Archaeology of the Photograph*, on the origin of optics. In it I approached optics as a medium of communication, and I wanted to discover the social forces behind that mode of visual expression. My fifth grade teacher, Ms. Arrington, had cautioned us against philosophy, citing the example of Aristotle who argued how many teeth a horse must have rather than simply counting. The reference, from Aristotle's *De Partibus Animalium*, is not strictly accurate, but the point was well-taken, and I decided not to become another critical theorist writing about something where they lack practical knowledge. Instead I resolved to become a photographer as part of my research.

Aspiring photographers could train either as artists or journalists, and I chose art for reasons that are not quite clear to me now. I think it had to do with a girl. Whatever it was, I took to black and white photography, especially printing, with an overwhelming passion that remains. Film photography is an unforgiving medium, and it transformed the way I see in a way that offers infinite delight. It requires a strict personal aesthetic based in an understanding light, chemistry and the poetics of tone. My mentors, Lawrence Wilkenson, William Abranowicz and George Tice, taught using the Zone System, which requires intense visualization on the part of the artist, and, even though I work primarily in video now, the discipline of black and white photography underlies everything I do.

Ernesto Menendez-Conde: *Since the eighties you have been interested in the use of television as artistic medium. Please correct me if I am wrong, but it seems to me that, in order to keep its artistic character, such TV must pursue an alternative channel of distribution, outside of commercial, mainstream television. Which practices from commercial TV could be strategically used or taken by a TV with artistic purposes?*

Ali Hossaini: I have always been convinced that fine art can have broader cultural reach. To me the barriers between popular and high culture are not only artificial but detrimental to society. Traditional television is a passive medium, and I think artistic provocations would be far more effective if presented in living rooms. Art can develop a critical mindset, and I think it can also dignify character in a way that would have

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positive political events. The video art channel I launched in 2004, LAB, gave me optimism that this was possible.

LAB presented video art in the context of a commercial television line-up. It was really quite fun: we used all the devices of commercial TV, such as channel IDs, line-ups and promos, but we gave them an abstract twist that drew on complete creative freedom. The motion graphics were really beautiful! We also commissioned a considerable amount of original works of film and video art, including figures like Robert Wilson and Bradley Eros, artists who have a visual sophistication that could stand up to commercial standards.

I knew we needed popular as well as artistic credibility, so I sought phenomenal talent from every sphere. To attract audience I recruited movie stars from Hollywood and Europe. My mantra to colleagues was, “They’ll come for Brad Pitt and stay for the art.” By 2007 I was ready to launch some stunning works. Robert Wilson directs Winona Ryder in a version of Samuel Beckett’s “Happy Days.” A psychedelic film from Tony Oursler. Johnny Depp playing Rose Selavy. Unfortunately the channel was shut down before we broadcast any of it.

What could the next video art channel take from my experience? There have been many artistic interventions into television, but none of them have impacted the popular consciousness. I’d like to think LAB could have popularized artistic media by presenting a delightfully perverse twist on the elements of TV and also by producing work to commercial standards. Saying that people don’t like art because they don’t understand it is not always true. Commercial television attracts immensely talented designers and graphic artists, and



many of them produce refined aesthetics and sophisticated concepts. Audiences would expect an art channel to work to a high visual standard, and this means a considerable investment on the part of its founders.

Ernesto Menendez-Conde: *In your own words, which are the main differences between commercial television and experimental, artistic TV?*

Ali Hossaini: The main differences between these antithetical cousins is invisible. Commercial television seeks a market while experimental television, in its pure manifestation, exists as a kind of research. Experimentation represents inquiry, and experimental failures can be as interesting as successes, if the projects admits of either. Commercial producers are subject to well-established metrics like rating and reviews, and this has a big impact on how things get made. Experimental TV is so marginalized that its proponents operate with almost complete freedom within the resources they marshal.

Strong visceral differences also separate commercial and experimental approaches to TV. Drama drives commercial media, while experimental television often focuses on form, with the medium as the message, to borrow from Marshall McLuhan. Even so there is a great deal of formal experimentation in commercial media, from the shaky cam of early MTV to the casually surreal presentation of *The Office*. I do think we underrate the creative tensions that drive commercial media, but there's so much of it that innovation is often lost in the mix. Or adopted so quickly that it become a new normal.

When running the video art channel LAB, I held that experimental work could have commercial value, in other words, that we could experiment while caring about our audience. I saw the channel as a personal art project, one where I organized the work of others into my own vision for the brand. But I'm probably overselling myself. More realistically LAB



Ali Hossaini
Epiphany, 2008/2012
HD video
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was an effort in curation, and, when developing the programming, the difference between LAB and my other channels lay in two things: personal vision and creative freedom. If you think about it, you can't have one without the other, and I thought LAB could promote a new appreciation for individual expression in an industrial medium. Like film, television is almost always a collective effort, but LAB supported the work of artists working on a much smaller scale than your typical TV show.

Craft is another differentiator between commercial and experimental television. Whether commercial or experimental, television often has poor aesthetics. Still there is a surprising amount of sophisticated design woven into commercial media, and overall there is far more care put into commercial work. Too often video artists disregard craft, and there is no excuse for that neglect. I understand the conceptual turn of art, and I totally disagree with the neglect of aesthetics and craft, whatever the intent of a maker.

(to be continued)



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TVC Communism, 2011
Five-channel synchronized video installation
and LED monitor, color, sound; 5:45 hr (loop)
Courtesy the artists







would you mention? Which science -or sciences- in specific? Which way of self-expression?

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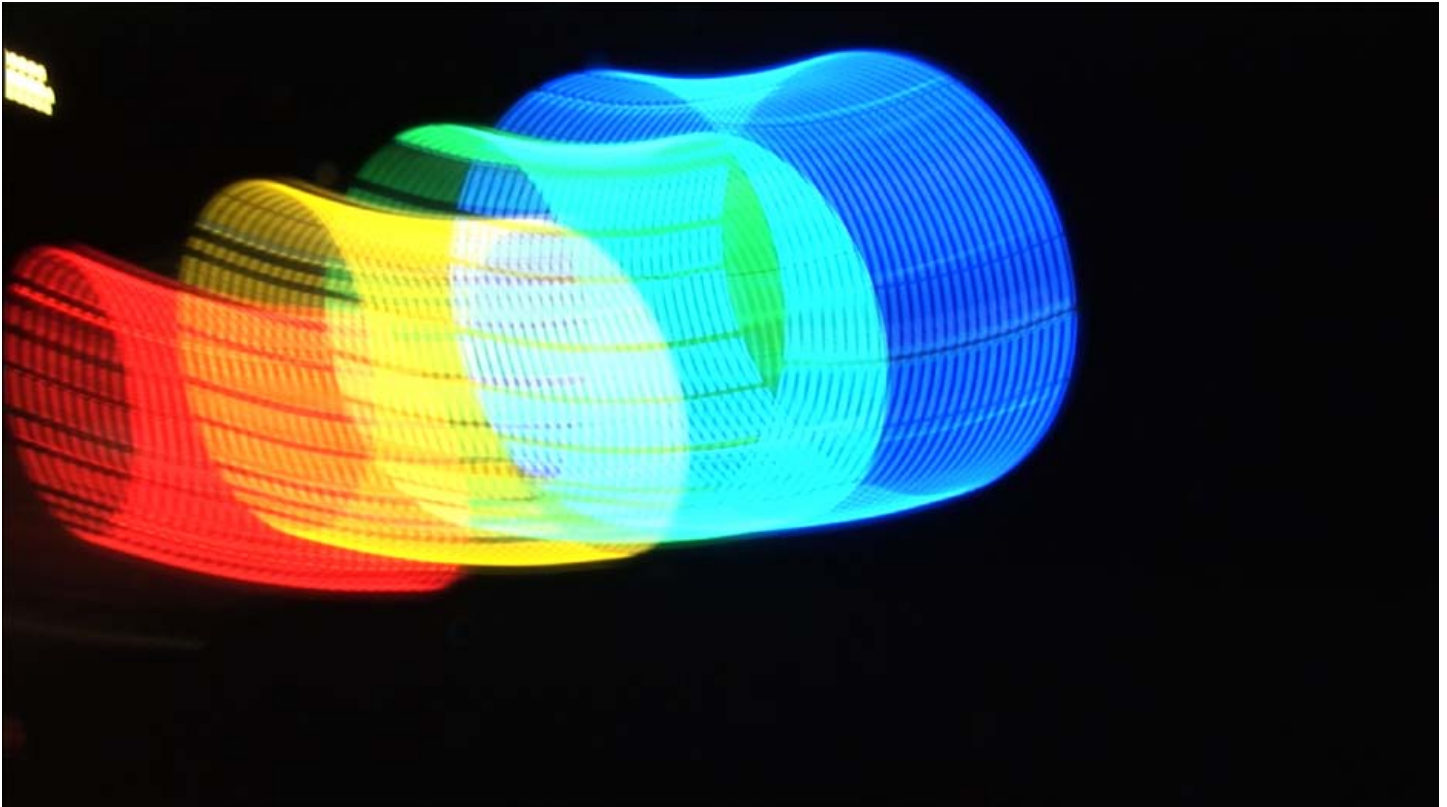
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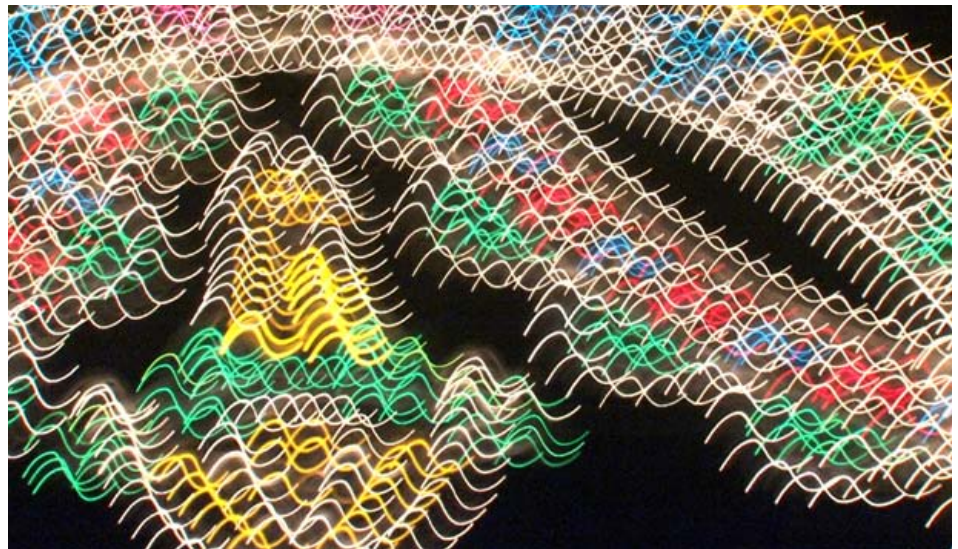
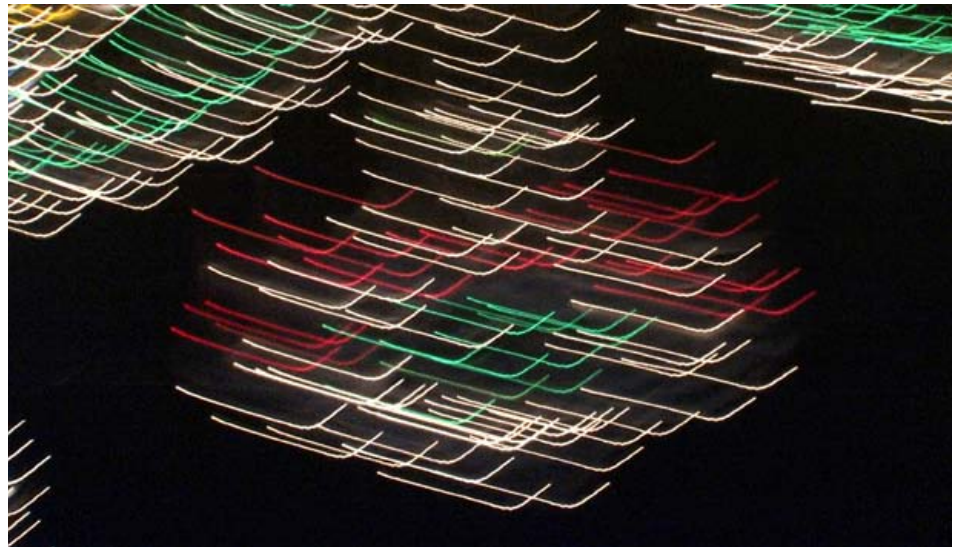
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