The Art of the VJ:

The Origin of a Complete Art

Janae Almen

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VJ: What Is It?

With the constant inundation of audio-visual stimulation, it is difficult for the average person to go for more than a few hours, or even minutes, without the assault of electronic media. It is almost required that sound and image appear together; and, one without the other may be seen as ineffectual. People now expect that audio materials to be accompanied by images and visa versa. With electronic music commonplace, and the DJ now seen as a valid musical performer, something was needed to fill the void of watching actual instrumentalists, singers and conductors on stage. The art of the VJ or Video Jockey has taken this role and become a crucial part of electronic music performance. (Other explanations for the initials are video jam or visual jockey [1].)

The term VJ caught on in the early 1980s as a title for television presenters on the new MTV (Music Television) network. Yet, the modern VJ does not simply play video, he or she manipulates it in time and synchronizing it to music[2]. The VJ creates a symbiosis of image and sound, mixing video just as audio DJs mix music[3]. This live performance may take place in art galleries, on concert stages or in night clubs. Film-maker Patricia Moran, Ph.D. describes "Vj-ing" as the "smoke that unites stage and screen" for an audience of viewers and participants[4].

Video as art has permeated the art and commercial worlds simultaneously, leading some art critics to decry it and knock it down as a legitimate artistic field. VJ art can be seen as a tool for

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[1] Patricia Moran. 2009. "VJ Scene: Spaces With Audiovisual Score." *VJ Theory* (August). http://www.vjtheory.net/web_texts/text_moran02.htm (accessed April 17, 2011), 1.

[2] Xarene Eskander, ed. *'vE-"jA : Art and Technology of Live Audio-Video.* San Francisco: Lumens, 2005, 1.

[3] Daniela Tordino. 2007. "Musical Language in the VJing Art." *VJ Theory* (January). http://www.vjtheory.net/web_texts/text_tordino.htm (accessed April 17, 2011), 2.

[4] Patricia Moran. 2009. "Poetics of Correspondence." *VJ Theory* (April). http://www.vjtheory.net/web_texts/text_moran.htm (accessed April 17, 2011), 1.

promotional events, such as for beverage companies or mobile phone providers[5]. But that does not prevent some intellectuals from singings its praises. Kathleen Forde, curator of the Electronic Media Performing Arts Center in New York, believes that: "VJ-ing is no longer eye candy. Rather is a profound audio-visual art form that is distinctive to performance in a digital age[6]." Some scholars trace the art of the VJ back to artists like Steina and Woody Valsulka who searched for the "ground principle of the video image"[7]. In fact connecting the spheres of image and sound even further, Steina received her formal training in music in the Prague Conservatory[8]. Since VJ's origins lie firmly in the hands of both fine artists and popular culture; it is a celebration of the best both worlds can offer.

However, this modern marriage of visual and aural is nothing new, since the ancient world intellectuals are acknowledged the link between the aural and visual senses. The Greek philosopher and mathematician, Pythagoras, originally defined harmony as peace and a general feeling agreement according to his mathematical definition of balance that pertained to musical intervals as well as colors. This idea prevailed in European and Islamic thought until the Renaissance[9].

Nineteenth-century Symbolist artist, M. K. Ciurlionis painted by following musical laws. He believed that melody could be created for the eyes with the movement of form. His exotic colors were the harmony, while the character of the movement of the color symbols created the

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[5] Ibid, 1.

[6] Michael Faulkner, ed. *Audio-Visual Art and VJ Culture.* London: Laurence King, 2006, 8.

[7] Ibid., 18.

[8] C3 Foundation. 2010. "Steina and Woody Valsulka." *Center for Culture and Communication.* http://www.c3.hu/scca/butterfly/Vasulkas/cv.html (accessed May 9, 2011).

[9] Bill Alves. 2005. "Digital Harmony of Sound and Light." *Computer Music Journal* 29, no. 4 (Winter): 45.

rhythm[10]. While his contemporary poet V. Bryusov predicted in 1899 that art and music would merge into a new art form. He wrote, "I have dreamt of a visual art similar to the existing audible art for the ears, about ever-changing combinations of features, colors and lights[11]." Bryusov's dream has clearly come to life through the twentieth-century's exponential growth of technology.

Image and Music: Beginnings

Before the modern VJ's arsenal of DVD players, laptop computers, hardware and software, inventors sought to create musical instruments that were also visual. One of the earliest examples was the magic lantern which was invented by Christiaan Huygens in 1659[12]. However primitive designs can be traced 1646[13]. It was a luminous device than used candlelight or lamplight to project an image painted in color on a glass slide. The light was increased by a concave mirror and two convex lenses magnified the projected image [14]. Magic lantern shows were accompanied by a narrative as well as music. More than one lantern could be used simultaneously to create a dissolve effect and simulate movement[15]. The grandfather of film, Alexander Black

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[11] Ibid, 61.

[12] Koen Vermeir. 2005. "The Magic of the Magic Lantern (1660-1770): On Analogical Demonstration and the Visualization of the Invisible." *The British Journal for the History of Science."* 38, no. 2 (June): 128.

[13]Alexander Black and Burnes Hollyman. 1977. "Black's Picture Plays: 1893-1894." *Cinema Journal* 16, no. 2 (Spring): 27.

[14] Vermeir, 128.

[15] Vreni Hockenjos. 2003. "Time and Place Do Exist: Strindberg and Visual Media. " *PAJ: A Journal of Performance and Art* 25, no. 3 (September): 51.

put on elaborate performances in the 1890s using actors and intricate musical scores[16]. At the same time Swedish playwright, August Strindberg, incorporated magic lanterns and photography to create a gallery of moving images to accompany his plays. Light effects and music added to the drama and created a "dream-like" mood[17].

The next leap forward in audio-visual technology was Louis-Bertrand Castel's 1725 invention, the color harpsichord. It was also known as the ocular harpsichord or color organ. The various versions worked according to the same principle which was to create a physical analogy between sound and light. A key press would link to colored glass and a lamp or candle would project the color onto a wall[18]. In fact, these color keyboards used the same techniques of mapping pitch to hue or spatial height that modern software does[19]. Bainbridge Bishop's 1893 design incorporated gradients of color to better illustrate the harmonic relationships between the notes played[20]. Electronic versions of the color organ came into use in the early 20th century. Scriabin introduced the electronic color organ at the 1915 premier of his synesthetic symphony *Prometheus: A Poem of Fire*[21].

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[16] Black and Hollyman, 29.

[17] Hockenjos, 57-58.

[18] Annett Dekker. 2003. "Synaesthetic Performance in the Club Scene." *Nederlands Institut voor Mediakunst.* http://www.montevideo.nl/ (accessed April 24, 2011), 2.

[19] Alves, 45.

[20] Bishop, Bainbridge. *A Souvenir of the Color Organ, with Some Suggestions in Regard to The Soul of the Rainbow and the Harmony of Light.* New Russia, NY: De Vinne, 1893, 5.

[21] McDonnell, Maura. "Visual Music." Sounding Visual. http://www.soundingvisual.com/visualmusic/ (accessed April 24, 2011).

Interest in color organs lasted until the mid-twentieth century. In 1960, *Science and Mechanics* magazine published a how-to article on constructing your own do-it-yourself color organ at home. In the 1970s commercial color organs briefly came in vogue as an accessory for hip bachelor pads, but the fad disappeared quickly[22].

As the phonograph became the way in which most people listened to music, a market emerged for record players that would also display images. In the early days of the phonograph listeners would simply sit and watch the record spin as the music played. One 1923 observer wrote, this was "an unthinking inheritance from the days when we had no phonograph, and when we naturally had to look at the performer." Two of the earliest examples were the stereophone and the illustrated song machine. Both were invented in 1905 and connected to a cylinder player (early record player) and rotated images on cards in time with the music. An article from the period described the illustrated song machine as "What the public has wanted since the first automatic machine (phonograph) was placed on that market." About three decades later music educator, Albert Weir, designed his "projecting phonograph" in 1936 for his music classes. The players would project images along with the music that displayed education information and images that related to the piece being played, while the students listened and watched[23].

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[22] Paul Spinrad,. *The VJ Book.* Los Angeles: Feral House, 2005, 19.

[23] Mark Katz. *Capturing Sound: How Technology Has Changed Music.* Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2010, 24.

Video, Film and Technology Meet Music

After World War II, the arts became more interrelated. Various art movements including Pop Art (Andy Warhol), Minimalism (Terry Reilly and La Monte Young), Fluxus (Nam June Paik, John Cage and Yoko Ono) and the Beat Generation (Seymour Locks) all encouraged visual and audio collaboration. At this time the term "multimedia" was coined to describe a joint relationship between the arts and technology. Moreover, with the work of painter Allan Kaprow and composer John Cage, a synthesis between the public and the performer was born. Kaprow coined the term "happenings" for synesthetic art events and installations where involvement from the audience was necessary. Happenings set the ground work for the interactive computer installations and the DJ/VJ rise in the 1980s[24].

San Francisco art professor Seymour Locks gave an improvised presentation at a 1952 art-education conference. He took a regular classroom overhead projector and swirled wet paints around in a dish along with a performance of improvised jazz. The result was quickly adopted by the artistic counter-culture. The technique became known as a "wet-show." The wet-show became a part of art gallery shows, small concerts and other Beatnik happenings. The movement was not markable due to its live nature and remained underground where it still exists [25]. Current VJ Sue C. includes wet-show as part of her set-up[26].

Andy Warhol took inspiration from minimalist composer La Monte Young's compositional strategy called "reductive negative." Reductive negative consisted of extending content by con-

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[24] Dekker, 4.

[25] Spinrad, 19-20.

[26] Faulkner, Michael, ed. *Audio-Visual Art and VJ Culture.* London: Laurence King, 2006, 170.

tinuous repetition. Warhol took this idea and transferred it to film loops. He then set the result to Young's *Composition #9* (1960) which consisted of a long sustained notes that were then played along with four identical recordings of the same audio. The result was ear-splitting. Warhol and Young later collaborated on film and music projects including Warhol's stasis films *Eat* and *Sleep*[27].

Warhol took his audio-visual art to another level with his 1966-67 touring production *The Exploding Plastic Inevitable.* The show consisted of five film projectors, slide projectors (which were intermittently moved by hand to look as though they were sweeping), four varied speed strobe lights, mirror balls, colored moving spots, pistol lights, three record players and loud-speakers being played at once, the Velvet Underground and Nico performing live, dancers and shadow projections[28]. The show was total cacophony. but it was one of the first creative ventures to bridge "pop" with "art." Moreover it can be seen as the first big step on the way to the current DJ/VJ scene[29].

Without the invention of a hand-held video camera, modern video art would not exist. The Sony PortaPak was introduced in 1967 and became an important tool for artists to use to explore the ever-increasing role that technology was playing in culture[30]. Fluxus artist Nam June Paik championed the use of the PortaPak and quickly emerged as the leader in the new world of video art.

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[27] Joseph, Branden W. 2002. "My Mind Split Open: Exploding Plastic Inevitable." *Grey Room* 8 (Summer): 80-107, 85.

[28] Ibid., 81.

[29] Dekker, 5.

[30] Reena Jana and Mark Tribe. *New Media Art.* Cologne: Taschen, 2006, 8-9.

Many of Paik's video experiments explored the relationship between the visual and the aural. He invented an image synthesizer which allowed for the live manipulation of image and sound[31]. He also incorporated musical idioms like rhythm, speed and form in his video art. He designed an art form in which sounds, words, images, colors, shapes and pulses all worked and functioned together[32].

Paik often worked with cellist Charlotte Moorman and he designed two audio-visual pieces for her. The first was entitled, *TV Bra for Living Sculpture* (1967), which was a bra made of two small television sets. The images on the television sets were modulated by her live violoncello performance[33]. The other major piece that Paik created for Moorman was *TV Cello* (1971) where he built a working violoncello out of three television sets. The instrument only had one string and did not produce the usual tone of the cello, but made electronic noises. The three televisions each displayed a different feed. The first showed the direct feed of the performance; the second consisted of footage from various cello performances; and the third, depicted an intercepted television feed that was manipulated by her playing. After Moorman passed away in 1991, Paik created new footage for the cello from Moorman's past performances with the instrument[34].

Paik drew frequent inspiration from composer John Cage and the two were close friends. When Cage died in 1992 Paik wanted to immortalize his mentor with a piece, so Paik built *Piano*

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31 Tordino, 2.

32 Moran. "Poetics of Correspondence.", 3.

33 Gene Youngblood. *Expanded Cinema.* New York: P. Dutton and Company, 1970, 309.

34 Walker Arts Center. "TV Cello." *Arts Connected: Tools for Teaching the Arts.* http://www.artsconnected.org/resource/91669/tv-cello (accessed April 24, 2011).

Piece (1993). *Piano Piece* consists of thirteen monitor screens, video cameras mounted on tri-pods, videotape players, a piano stool and an open upright piano. A computer program by Richard Titlebaum plays some of Cage's works while footage of the composer appears on some of the screens. Other players hands were also filmed including those of Paik who was originally trained as a classical pianist. Music and image not only occur in real-time as the piano plays, but the moment continues to live on suspended in time through the computer and taped video components[35].

At the same time as Paik's was creating his multimedia pieces, technology was rising to a central role in the music world. The "Disco Era" (1973-1979) heralded the birth of a myriad of media formats and the popular music genres that still define "electro-pop" today. These include: house, ambient, electronica, hip-hop, snap, trip-hop, dub, crunk, garage, hyphy and techno[36]. The role of the audience or "the masses" became central as music was primarily created for dance clubs. Producers were now the center of recorded music, while club DJs were central to live performance. It was not long before the synesthetic video visual effects inspired by the light shows and wet-shows of 1960s became part of the audio DJs arsenal.

The VCR became affordable in the late 1970s, and nightclubs installed two-deck systems for simple video editing. Prior to this video equipment was expensive and video editing and performance was only possible at venues, such as universities, that had the necessary financial resources. As more and more professional video editing equipment came on the market, the more affordable second-hand hardware available. In large broadcast cities, artists scooped up obsolete,

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35 John G. Hanhardt. "Nam June Paik." *Arts Since 1900.* http://www.dicea.unifi.it/~sbert/guglielmi/ArchIII2005-2006/nam%20june%20paik1.pdf (accessed April 25, 2011).

36 Lin, Tan. 2008. "Disco as Operating System: Part One." *Criticism* 50, no. 1 (Winter): 83-100, 83.

but workable equipment. The new video artists eagerly founded a new community dedicated to the creation of club video[37].

The claim to the official earliest club "VJ" is up for grabs. Some European focus on Amsterdam's Club Mazzo where the DJs sought to use their own visual materials as part of their performance as early as 1978. At Club Mazzo the video was not just an ambient fixture, but part of their philosophy and regular practice. Video material along with the music was meant to provide social messages and a "renewed" mindset; however it was not before commercialized messages and flashiness overtook meaning[38].

In North America, the focus is on New York City's Peppermint Lounge in the late-70s where video mixing and underground video was an essential part of the décor[39]. They called their video artists, VJs to distinguish them from "high-art" New Media video artists[40]. The Peppermint Lounge became "VJ University," training members of its staff in the art of video mix. To represent their ground-breaking achievement, the club added the image of Neil Armstrong planting the U.S. flag on the moon[41]. An image that has become synonymous with MTV.

In 1981, MTV launched and became a sudden success. The term VJ became most often associated with a television presenter, just as a radio personality is known as a DJ. Although MTV hijacked VJ as a term, its influence increased interest in video production and live video performance. The role of the relatively anonymous video collector, performer and technician even-

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37 Spinrad, 21.

38 Dekker, 9-10.

39 Spinrad, 21.

40 Dekker, 1.

41 Spinrad, 21.

tually gained wider recognition and original sense of the term is now broadly understood. MTV also made the New York club-video the desirable "look" for visual media and advertising companies embraced struggling video artists with high-paying Madison Avenue gigs[42].

VJ Art Today: The Laptop Era

In 1976 Steve Wozniak and Steve Jobs founded Apple Computer and in 1977 they introduced the Apple II. Also in 1977 the Tandy TRS-80 computer was released and sold 10,000 units in the first month[43]. In 1984 Apple released its Macintosh and the Graphical User Interface or GUI became the standard for personal computer operating systems[44]. Without the birth of the personal computer, modern VJ art would be impossible. The laptop is essential to every current setup. Many artists will use two, along with audio and video mixers, several digital cameras and MIDI keyboards[45]. By the 1990s some VJs were already writing their own software, hacking video game controller and bending circuits. No two VJs will use the same hardware the only trait that all VJs have is the desire to create art fueled by technology[46].

Video mixing software and audio-video software have been around since the 1980s and some standards are emerging. Often an artist will have some software they choose for real-time video

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42 Ibid., 21.

43 Jana and Tribe, 11.

44 Faulkner, 19.

45 Tordino, 2.

46 Eskander, 12.

editing and one they use for post-production on their clips[47]. Softwares that are used for both audio and video include: Isadora, KeyWorx and Max/MSP-Jitter. VJ only softwares include: Arkoas, VJamm, Modul8 and Flowmotion, and they operate similarly to their audio software cousins[48]. Post-production softwares include: Adobe's After Effects and Premier Pro and Apple's Final Cut Pro[49]. Most recently many VJs, such as Michael Faulkner's D-Fuse collective, use Vidvox's VDMX (previously GridPRO) and Apple's Quartz Composer along with audio software like Apple's Logic Studio and Abelton's Live to create their live audio-video manipulations[50].

No matter the software and hardware, the VJ art form works best when the creator has an understanding of psychoacoustic principles [51]. However VJs do have three different options when choosing content. First, they can select visual material to be seem completely random. Second, they can choose material that is fixed, like a musical performer following a score. Or third, they can improvise based on external sensory factors. A combined approach is the most desirable. Live interaction between the human and the digital trigger leads to variation [52]. The marriage of video and audio work best when images are mapped to specific sounds and conscious content decisions are made[53].

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[47] L. Hermes Griesbach. 2006. "Ah-Ha: Narrative Structures in Reactive and Interactive Video Art." *VJ Theory* (December). http://www.vjtheory.net/art/ah-ha.htm (accessed April 17, 2011), 5.

[48] Tordino, 2.

[49] Griesbach, 5.

[50] Dustin Driver. "D-Fuse: Cold Fusion." *Apple Pro Profiles.* http://www.apple.com/pro/profiles/d-fuse2/index.html (accessed April 24, 2011).

[51] Joran Rudi. 2005. "Computer Music Video: A Composer's Perspective." *Computer Music Journal* 29, no. 4 (Winter): 36-45, 36.

[52] Griesbach, 1.

[53] Rudi, 36.

VJ art is temporal and therefore closer to music than mainstream visual art. The art "lives" in rhythms, frequencies and time-gaps; VJs speak in musical language [54]. The video creation and manipulation process is closely related to composing music, and when done artfully increasing music's meaning and storytelling capacity [55]. Since they work in an immediate art form, VJs choose the colors and speed of their work based on feedback from the audience[56]. Like jazz VJ art is improvisatory, but it also is based on algorithms. The VJ works by combining fixed images with movement and abstract and figurative images to create an atmosphere. Even figurative images become abstractions when viewed in temporal flux. The opposite is true too; the abstract can suggest figurative images [57].

Integration of audio and video techniques allows artists to expand their expressive capabilities. Art becomes all-immersive and capable of creating a synesthetic experience. As predicted by Bruysov, visual art and music have merged into a new unique art form where one almost can not exist without the other. Norwegian computer music composer Joran Rudi expressed it well when he wrote video adds to music, "An additional layer of resonance for the listeners and greater opportunity for reflection or appreciation of complex interconnections of meaning and suggestion"[58]. The VJ along with the DJ have ushered a new era of real-time art. The complete art has arrived!

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54 Tordino, 4.

55 Rudi, 45.

56 Tordino, 4.

57 Moran, 2.

58 Rudi, 45.

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