Visual Music (1)
by Holger Lund

Definition and brief history

A new audiovisual discipline has conquered the raves, the clubs, the parties and concerts, but also galleries and museums over the last several years, combining filmic images and music in a public space. For an initial attempt at definition we might call this discipline "Visual Music". The basic layout here is that visuals, mostly sequences of digital video, are produced live to the music of DJs or real musicians within an environment. The images are mostly associative and cyclical, very seldom do they follow a narrative. They are projected by video beamers, or they are playing on monitors (cf. fig. 1, beamer projection by the pressplay VJ team, Meppener Lichtnächte 2001; and fig. 2, monitors at the now closed Liquid Sky, Cologne 2002).

fig. 1

fig. 2

At the end of the 1990s, mostly due to developments in the digital media, VJing had a marked rise in popularity; the power of processors and the capacity of graphic cards had vastly improved. Since 1999, the electronic gadgetry to produce visuals to music live and in real time – called real time processing – has been readily available.

There is a number of parallels between DJs and VJs, the most obvious being the word formation: 'VJ' is built in analogy to 'DJ', even if the meaning isn't quite as clear and might stand for either Visual or Video Jockey. The DJ literally jockeys the disks, mostly vinyl records. (2) In the beginning, DJs were simply radio hosts, then in the 1970s they started to create music programs with one track flowing seamlessly into the next. The first VJs were presenters too; when in the early 1980s MTV started to broadcast, their presenters were called VJs, an appellation that is rarely used today.

The VJ not only takes his name and certain techniques – like sampling or looping – from the DJ, the analogy is much deeper. DJs select, combine and mix vinyl, CDs or digital files from a personal repertoire, sound designing events in clubs and discos. VJs select, combine and mix video or animation sequences from a personal repertoire at these same events, being responsible for the visual design. Especially the mixing, live and in real time, is what they have in common. Shared techniques are sampling, looping and

remixing; and often looped sequences or repeating beat patterns will find their equivalent in looped visual material.

A major difference lies in the source of the materials they use: DJs only seldom play completely self-produced material, they rather haunt well-stocked record shops. There is no such thing as a well-stocked clip store for a VJ, so they mostly use their own material, pre-produced or filmed live at the event. In effect, the VJ carries more functions. While the DJ mainly designs musical environments, the VJ often is technician (installing the visual gear), inventor of images, producer and visual designer all rolled up in one person. As a visual designer, apart from video he also delivers light and colour – which can result in serious conflicts. VJ and light technician might try to trump each other, with the result of clubs getting too bright. Tobias Rapp from the taz, a German newspaper, recently lamented: "I just couldn't find the dark that should have cloaked our many disbehaviours, the kind of fun that gets you out on the beat that late at night anyway." (3)

Visuals may be abstract or figurative, but only seldom are they narrative. (4) The loop as favourite cyclical structure often makes visuals non-linear. In the end, when images are produced to connect to the music, they form a kind of Visual Music. (5) One might also think of it as a form of live cinema, often projected onto several screens or played on monitors, carefully placed to fit the design of the location. Cameras, mixers, software, FX pedals, projectors, monitors and the site-specific situation, these taken together form a dynamic dispositive that might be called the VJ's real instrument. One can define his activity as "medial room design".

Materials used for the visuals are partly sequences of images that are self-produced or animated, but also sampled sequences taken from movies or television. These sampled sequences may be left as they are, or they can be treated, run through effects or freshly contextualised in a recut of scenes. Sampling is the central strategy embraced by both VJs and DJs here, as both build new structures by recutting preproduced materials.

A close look at the VJ's dispositive reveals that what they produce rather resembles a live anti-cinema. There are no fixed timings, the recipient is free to access or exit the stream of images at will. Dramaturgic possibilities are limited and mostly linked to the length and the mood of the music. Perception is easily distracted and the audience unable to follow narrative developments over a longer time. It almost seems as if the VJ created an unfocussed perception, exactly what Walter Benjamin held against the cinema of his time. (6) The gaze of the viewer has no axis to follow, and this completely changes the recipient's situation: so he strolls around the rooms, or starts to dance.

Apart from distracted perception, VJs face another problem when playing clubs: they have to team with the DJ, but they may not dominate proceedings, as the primary function of a club is as a dancehall. Once people's interest starts to switch from the music to visuals they stop dancing, and the promoter

or the DJ will wish for an interlude of more abstract material on which it is more difficult to focus and easier to move.

Perhaps it is these problems that lead VJs to leave the music venues (rave, club, party) and enter public spaces like galleries and museums; spaces that are less hip to play in, but that offer a higher attention ratio. Some VJs also react to the situation by preferring the production of visuals on DVD in the studio to a live context. DVDs can be consumed in a rather less distractive environment, like on the living room TV, or a computer screen.

It is not easy to define the exact moment in historical development when the visualisation of music became Visual Music. The development can be divided into four major phases: (7)

1. Colour Music has been existing since Renaissance times, coupling music with shades of colour and light; the colour organ is its dominant instrument.
2. Experimental film of the late 1920s and early '30s especially the so-called "abstract cinema" by Oskar Fischinger or Len Lye, is increasing the vocabulary for the visualisation of music in moving images.
3. In the 1960s, the Expanded Cinema movement – Andy Warhol's Exploding Plastic Inevitable or the Single Wing Turquoise Bird – are carrying film into the environment, which becomes a potential projection screen in its entirety.
4. Visuals. a) Using VHS tapes as medium, analogue visuals are projected in the 1980s and '90s, for stage shows and raves at the first, then venturing into the clubs.
   b) Digital visuals are produced on computers since the late 1990s, in clubs and on festivals, but recently venturing into cultural institutions.

Visual Music differs from other forms of music visualisation. It uses different techniques and different images than Colour Music, as the latter mainly tried to translate sounds into light and colour. Experimental film listens to a completely different brand of music, and Visual Music is more deeply connected to the rhythm of the sound than happens in Expanded Cinema or Video Art. And it doesn't need the star personality at the centre of attraction that defines music television. In other words: the music is always off screen, there are no instruments or players to be seen. In music videos the band mostly is on screen (even though just to simulate playing their instruments). Until now, Visual Music has been a live event mostly, distinguishing it from pre-produced music video clips. But the borders are blurring, now that Visual Music is increasingly produced for DVD in live recordings and studio productions. (8)

Present situation and possible future developments

During the 1990s, DJs could become pop stars or influential musicians using their turntables as instruments. For the VJ, the situation always was different.

At least in a club, he is still supposed to serve the music, even if some VJs slowly seem to approach a DJ's prominence. An indication here is the size of the lettering, when VJ sets are accorded similar status to the DJ sets on flyers and posters. VJs usually work at live events, producing something completely temporary that can't survive beyond the venue and the event of a performance. They play to a rather limited audience. But meanwhile the first audiovisual clubs have opened. The Before 45 in London, for example, promises a "cinematic drinking experience, where the screen, rather than the sound system, is in the focus of the night". (9)

Resident VJs are the founders of audiovisual DVD label Addictive TV who promise, "We play AV mixes, oddball animations, leftfield music videos, film remixes and other twisted stuff." (10) One meets a similar situation at media art clubs and visual lounges – just witness the Remote Lounge in New York, opened in 2001 – placing the focus on screens that define the spatial conception (fig 3 a–c: Remote Lounge, New York).

Fig 3 a–c: Remote Lounge, New York, 2001

The relation between musicians and VJs will definitely change, as new technical possibilities open up for dedicated personalities interested in annihilating the dividing line between musician and VJ. Addictive TV suppose that "there may be more AV artists coming through now, guys doing both visuals and music." (11) Simultaneously producing sounds and images can prove too much in a live situation, as will be seen later on, but audio companies are always working on the necessary gear.

A special example here is the Pioneer DVJ-X1 (fig. 4), an audiovisual sampler and mixer that allows a VJ to scratch DVDs in real time like vinyl records.

Fig 4: Pioneer DJV mixer

The DJV mixer has a programmatic name, combining the terms DJ and VJ, and it really allows manipulation of sound and image in real time. Audio CDs and video DVDs can be mixed for editing, montage and treatments, in a way that would have required intensive post-production some years earlier. The Kaoss Pad from Korg and Edirol's V4 are also very advanced technical equipment for the simultaneous live mixing of audio and video data.

One can easily reach the limits when mixing both sound and images, which recently happened to Minimal Techno DJ Richard Hawtin. He used a custom built multi-medial control unit for his Plastikman project at the Mutek Festival in Montreal, June 2004, which had been developed by several international development teams: the CTRL Live Controller, running the Touch video software from Derivative and Ableton's audio software (fig 5).

Fig 5: The CTRL Live Controller

This control unit allows Hawtin to trigger and manipulate more than 120 audio, video, light and effect parameters in real time. Hawtin pre-composed the first and last tracks of the concert, in between he completely improvised. The control unit was especially developed for these improvisations. But critics found the audiovisual results somewhat problematical: "Video projections time and again went dark, the mix seemed awkward, the whole set lacked coherence and suspense." (12) In Hawtin's own appraisal of the concert, "The main problem artistically was that I wanted to keep all the possibilities open on the very first gig. The sheer mass of information I had to handle was overwhelming. It would have been better to organise the set more closely and stay within certain limits. The only thing I knew before was which track to start with and which was the end. Everything else was going to be a spontaneous decision. But that's why the set sometimes loses focus. But this set-up really allows me to immediately tie a visual loop to the audio. It's mostly a matter of practice, before I can use it to effect." (13)

An easier way is to form a so called AV team, in which a VJ works closely with a musician to develop sets together. These AV teams are on the rise; some of the best known formations, besides Addictive TV, are Rechenzentrum, the LabLand series by Pfadfinderei and Modeselektor at the WMF Berlin, Yoshi Sodeoka and his team, George Millward & Brian McClave and the Mellowtrons. The rather unenviable work situation in clubs may be one reason for the formation of these teams. DJs and VJs are not usually booked for stylistic compatibility, often they meet for the first time at the night of the event, a situation that doesn't help to develop a more intense interaction between sound and images.

This method of booking betrays something of the status that club owners that VJ and audiovisual set-up have in the eyes of club owners. To them, the main interest is to offer an additional service for the customer that goes beyond the usual light and colour effects. The VJ changes the atmosphere, offering a kind of live tapestry of images where the movement of these images should tempt the audience to get moving themselves on the dance floor.

This situation – distractive and altogether with limited possibilities to really perceive visual music in a club context – does something to explain the interest of VJs, but also of DJs and musicians, to find other public environments for performances. And cultural institutions seem to have expected them with open arms. Even if opportunities still are mostly restricted to lobby or lounge areas instead of the exhibition spaces, and even if one-off events are the norm rather than more permanently installed exhibitions, the speed with which Visual Music is conquering these institutions is something spectacular. Especially when considering the fact that this very contemporary Visual Music has existed for only a couple of years, and stems from a club scene which is not regularly frequented by most curators.

There are several reasons for such quick assimilation. Museums go clubby as part of a marketing strategy, to reach a younger audience. (14) There are probably two aspects that cultural institutions want to avoid here: an over-aged clientele, and maybe being blamed for once more missing the latest media trend – remember that video art had been practiced for 20 years before it was officially sanctioned by art institutions in the late 1980s.

An institutional context can change the perception and categorisation of a design product or an artwork. It can raise or dissipate the suspicion that a certain product may indeed be Art with a capital A, and that way it acts as a regulator. The regulative function of cultural institutions means that Visual Music, as it frees itself from the dance floor – which is institutionally as far from an art context as you can get – will be received as something exactly like Art, as long as it plays in art institutional lounges or museum exhibitions. The museum is itself an institutionalised definition of what Art is, making it very difficult to classify anything on display there as something else.

In the end, a definition of Visual Music and its potential still hovers between media art and media design. What, in a club context, is simply a service to the customer, becomes something completely self reliant within an exhibition space; and in most cases the character of the work will in fact adopt to the event: works displayed in art institutions usually feature a much closer interplay between sound and filmic images, especially if they are pre-produced for DVD, following a much finer compositional aesthetic, in contrast to the live action of the club.

These DVD productions of Visual Music receive attention from a completely different corner, from the music industry. The industry's market shrinks: since 1997 sales have dropped 50 percent; in reverse the turnover of music DVDs has increased by 60 percent in the first half of 2004 alone. That may partly be due to the popularisation of DVD players which have been sold to a mass market at very low prices recently. Such growth rates of course cannot keep up over a time. But still, within the shrinking market of the music industry such numbers are duly noticed, which is why there is an increasing investment in music DVD production. Cell phone manufacturers have also become focussed on audiovisual products: in autumn 2004 the Motorola RAZR V3, capable of playing mpeg4 clips, hit the market, and Nokia offered a kind of visual radio, streaming video for the Media Phone 7700. Sony Music Entertainment have announced a collaboration with Intel to create an application for music videos for mobile phones. Quite clearly music videos will no longer be restricted to TV screens and the internet, but will become mobile. A development that is mirrored in video game systems and mp3 players that additionally support video formats.

What follows is a hunger for content. Even beyond the traditional music video which features the musician in action, the demand for a visual element to the music must be met. Not all of the off-screen productions will be relevant combinations of audiovisual elements. There are tendencies towards mechanisation, towards the auto-synchronised display of the Winamp program. Maybe the fact that it's mainly audio companies that design audiovisual gear suggests that the DJ or musician is supposed to handle it all. Some programs automatically connect clips or loops to certain elements of the music, for example bass and treble, to avoid a monotonously machine-like "on the beat" editing and an all too perfect synchronisation with the sound.

The further development of Visual Music as an audiovisual amalgamation will probably see music and visuals on a completely equal footing. This tendency might be strengthened by the DVD as a medium which allows, or even supports genuinely audiovisual studio productions. These will play a major role, as music television, internet, mobile phones and other gadgets desperately require content to play. First influential steps towards the new aesthetic were made by Coldcut/Hexstatic with their CD plus CD-ROM editions "Let Us Play" (1997) and "Let Us Replay" (1998).

With the DVD going strong, new DVD labels crop up; some of them completely concentrating on the production and distribution of Visual Music. Important labels today include Addictive TV, Moonshine Movies, Dalbin, Din AV, onedotzero and EYEICON. (15) They don't use videos to promote music, they support and sell Visual Music as an independent genre. And even traditional record companies start thinking audiovisually, if you listen to this message from Steve Beckett, founder of the Warp Records label: "When I look at recent developments, our records in three or four years will always also include images. The DVD is definitely on the rise." (16) A development of the medium which is exemplified in the new Pfadfinderei/Modeselektor release "Labland". It doesn't come out as an audio CD at all, there is only the DVD with the image as an integral part of the product from the start. And this even several months before Modeselektor released their first official audio album.

Counter to this trend, the sharing of music files in internet communities, or legal downloading from mp3 sites, create a visual vacuum that is acutely felt. It even drives young listeners now to mostly steal record covers – and not the records themselves! – from their local music store. This is were the big industries see a market for music videos and DVDs, media that offer the chance to visually create an image, to visually represent and to visually reindividualise music where the files bear no individual image. Music videos and Visual Music here might work as a kind of extended cover art.

But before Visual Music, no matter how close to the video clip, can become a stable presence on the market, there has to be an audiovisual slot in marketing, and in record stores. Right now a look at the distribution channels for genuine studio productions of Visual Music reveals them to be still at a rudimentary stage. The confusion on the DVD and audio CD market is interesting to witness. There is simply no space designed for Visual Music on DVD in music stores, the separation is between traditional audio CDs and DVDs featuring commercial music clips or live documentations of concerts. The genuine combination of music and visuals, that has been practiced live and in the studio for some time now, falls between the cracks in the current market situation – but it is to be expected that commercial interests will soon remedy that situation.

Perhaps one should keep the market in mind when reflecting that the theory and practice of VJing have gained academic laurels between 2002 and 2003: a colloquium and a seminar on the topic were held at the Universität der Künste in Berlin, further seminars were offered at the Bauhaus Hochschule Weimar, the FFH Potsdam, the Kunstschule Wien, the FH Vorarlberg and at the London Institute of Contemporary Art, among others. An act of appreciation by academic institutions that was accompanied by institutional contests and festivals for VJs.

Most VJs have a professional background as graphic or web designers, architects, computer programmers and sometimes artists. As seminars on

VJing are offered by media, design and art academies only since very recently, there are no academically trained VJs yet, but this is liable to change.

In the USA, the situation is different. Their modular education system supports the development of genuine AV artists, but these typically avoid having to cope with the potential chaos of a live performance – remember the experiences of Richard Hawtin – but visualise their own music one thing after the other in studio productions. Their education means that AV artists have skills both in music and film production and aesthetics. They can approach a theme through corresponding techniques in both media, like editing or sampling.

In 1925, Walter Ruttmann had a vision: "There will be a completely new type of artist, whose only a potential still, right between painting and music." What that might look like today can be seen in the video "Small Room Tango" by the young AV artist Gabriel Shalom from New York. For his video, Shalom recorded the music, acted a musician on screen, filmed and produced the venture himself. The editing is central to Shalom's audiovisual art, and he detaches images of hands playing piano from the accompanying soundtrack, creating a dance of intercuts instead of a dance of the fingers (fig. 6 a–c). The play is on on-screen vs. off-screen visualisations of music. At first the music seems to be part of the screen image – "what you see is what you get" – but the speed of editing increases and every cut renders the music further off-screen, disassociating it from the images and focussing attention on the montage technique itself.
Shalom calls his approach "videomusic" not "musicvideo". This could be a possibility of visual music, to be thought from the point of video (and video techniques) instead being an added part to a pre-existing music. The way for audiovisual thinking is opened.

Fig. 6 a–c, Gabriel Shalom, stills from "small Room Tango", 2004

Notes
(1) This essay is a version, revised and enlarged in November 2004, of the author's contribution to a colloquium on art history and gender at the Berlin Universität der Künste in 2002.
(2) It seems that the term "discjockey" was first used by *Variety* in 1941. Cf. Kluge, Friedrich, *Etymologisches Wörterbuch zur deutschen Sprache*, Art. Diskjockey, Berlin/New York, 1999. For a short historical essay on the DJ cf. Poschardt, Ulf, „Le pantha rhei digital", in: Centre National d'Art et de Culture

Georges Pompidou (ed.), *Sonic Process. Une nouvelle géographie des sons*, exh. cat., Centre Pompidou, Paris, 2002, p. 80ff.

(3) Tobias Rapp, „Hang the VJ", in: *taz berlin lokal*, 1 July 2004, p. 27.

(4) For narrative visuals cf. www.syntheticstar.com/kleinpro.htm or some of the mixes from Moonshine Movies (ed.), Mixmasters, Episode 1–5. A fusion of film an electronic music, produced by Addictive TV, DVD, 2002–2003.

(5) Cf. Romano, Tricia, „Hybridelity", in: *Artbyte*, Vol. III, No. 6, March–April 2001, New York, 2001, p. 52–59 or www.artbyte.com/mag/mar_apr_01/hybrid.html. The term Visual Music goes back to the 1970s and 80s when it was mainly used to designate certain live musical accompaniments for films that developed parallel to analogue visuals. Cf. Veruschka Bódy and Peter Weibel (ed.), *Clip Klapp Bum. Von der visuellen Musik zum Musikvideo*, Cologne, 1987, passim.

[6] Cf. Walter Benjamin, *Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit*, Frankfurt a.M., 1969.

(7) Thanks go to Niklas Völker for letting me use his unpublished Diplomarbeit „Visuals. Die Entwicklung von der visuellen Musik zum Vjing", 2003. Contact: www.pfadfinderei.com. Also see Kraus, Stefan, „Qualifikationsvorhaben visual music", 2003, www.uni-weimar.de/~kraus10/aaoa/.

[8] Cf. the Mixmasters series FN 2 and the „sound motion V.01" DVD from Palm Pictures, 2000.

[9] „Addictive TV", in: *Lodown* #40, March 2004, p. 80.

[10] loc cit.

[11] loc cit.

[12] Heiko Hoffmann, „Plastikman live", in: *Groove*, #89, August/September 2004, p. 93.

[13] loc cit.

[14] An example is the Staatsgalerie Stuttgart's KunstClub, which expressly targets people under 40. Cf. www.staatsgalerie.de.

[15] Cf. www.addictive.tv; www.dalbin.com; www.din-av.de; www.onedotzero.com and www.eye-con.tv.

[16] Christoph Braun, „Video Re-Vision", interview with Steve Beckett, in: *Groove*, #90, October/November 2004, p. 9.