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Interview with Servando Barreiro

Transcript of a video interview conducted by Cornelia Lund and Sara Luna Ruíz in the framework of "AV Assemblies. Conversations on Sight and Sound," a project by Ana Carvalho, Cornelia Lund, and Sara Luna Ruíz. Links: <http://servando.teks.no/?about>, @barreiroservando

My name is Servando Barreiro. I'm from the northwest of Spain, Galicia, next to Portugal. I'm a transdisciplinary artist. I could say that I'm a media artist or electronic artist, with a background in electronics, in electronic product development, to be precise. And then I switched to sound. That is my true passion.

When I moved to Madrid, I discovered that it's actually possible to do art with electronics. Because, when studying for your career, they show you that you can fix washing machines, you can fix cars, you can fix electromedicine. But it was in Madrid that I discovered that, you can actually make art with electronics and sensors. And that was the way I chose.

- SL (Sara Luna): What is your journey with electronic arts? Which kind of methods do you use?

When I moved to Madrid, I was lucky enough to be in the right place at the right time. There was a place called MediaLab (<https://archivomedialabmadrid.org/en/>), a hub where all the media artists met and exchanged.

Now, most people know Arduino, this open-source board for doing electronic arts. I was in Madrid when the first workshop in the world was held. And the creators, David Cuartielles and Massimo Banzi, were present. It was really an honor to be there. And it was even free. MediaLab was an open place for anyone interested in electronic digital culture. And there were free workshops. You know, they paid the artists to go there, teach and share and show their work. And I was lucky enough to be there.

When I had just moved to Madrid, I had a regular job, which was not my thing. And then someone was saying to me: "You're an artist." And I said, okay. He called me because in Reina Sofía – that is the most important contemporary art museum in Spain – they were looking for

visual artists. There was going to be an international exhibition and they had already curated many artists from different parts of the world. But there was no Spanish artist. So, the curator wasn't happy with what he was seeing so far. That is how I got offered the chance to create a small video art piece.

And this was on a Friday, and on Monday, the DVD was flying to New York.

And then, a couple of days later, I got the "Yes, you're going to be the one representing Spain in this international exhibition."

And, well, that was cool, but it wasn't totally my thing. That would be more electronic, more Martian, more abstract in a way. I was fascinated by VJ software and digital effects, moving colors, shapes without a defined motif. So, I met the right people and I became a VJ.

It was fantastic because I was working just three days a week at night and I had the rest of the week free to go to MediaLab and learn about other technologies. I could learn about Arduino, or pure data processing. I met people who still have a group nowadays, an open group, called Creative Coding Madrid (<https://www.facebook.com/CreativeCodingMadrid/>).

All these people were there in that moment. You could share your work with others, exchange code, get better, share learning resources. So that's what happened, that all these people were there, who are THE ones doing things in Madrid and in Spain.

And in 2008, I moved here, to Berlin. It was also a great time because Berlin has so many alternative places for showing different kinds of art.

I learned many things here. I got better at programming with Pure Data, open source graphical programming. I got to the point of becoming an expert, doing also important corporate work with it.

And I started travelling to do artist residencies. In Austria, for instance, I was living on a boat on the Danube. Or I was at Ljudmila in Ljubljana, Slovenia. They gave me money and a nice Airbnb. Ljudmila is a media lab, a space for people to learn and develop electronic ideas and art ([https://wiki.ljudmila.org/Ljubljana_Digital_Media_Lab_\(M3C\)](https://wiki.ljudmila.org/Ljubljana_Digital_Media_Lab_(M3C))).

Many people trusted my process – and that's my story. I've been jumping a bit from one place to the other, being a VJ for many years. Now, there are less VJ gigs in a way, but there is still visual art, and I am finding new ways, whether it's video mapping, LEDs, or lasers. If you did VJing back in the day, working with LEDs or lasers is a similar experience, involving questions of: when, what, how, movement, shape, color, space and sound.

- C (Cornelia): When you worked as a VJ, how did you collaborate with the musicians? Or did you do the music yourself? How do you conceive of it now in your work?
- SL: I saw a performance you did at an AVJam event in Berlin, which opened a very collaborative space. And you also create mixes with other people. What role does collaboration play for your practice as an artist?

It's always important. I see it like jamming, since I also play music. So, I play instruments, the guitar, a bit of synthesizers, drum machines, I even program. And I'm part of many bands. When you're jamming, people might think that, if you play the guitar, for example, you go to a jam and you play the guitar, very strictly. But what you do in real jams is that you take your

guitar, you go there, you play, you talk to your friends, and then, at some point, maybe you sit at the drums for five minutes, or you play the bass for a song, or you ask: “Oh, what is that machine that you have there?”

It is normal to be curious about what the others are doing and about the technologies. It happens in music jams, but a little bit the same also happens in visual jams. For instance, there is this open source browser based visual live coding system called Hydra. I love Hydra. It is very fast, and the fact that it runs in a browser means that you can use it anywhere. I showed it to a friend who also happens to play music. So, when we meet, maybe I focus on color and he focuses on shape. So, he’s coding to change the shapes and I’m coding to create a color palette. And then maybe we switch, or I play some music while he is doing visuals and vice versa. It is a very fluid process.

What I would like to add that back in the day, it was much easier and fun to collaborate among VJs, for a technical reason. When we started doing VJing in the early 2000s, computers had a composite video output or an S-video output. You could connect them to a TV or to a video projector. And then Edirol aka Roland made a funny, small, affordable mixer called the V4. If you are a seasoned VJ, you know the V4. It was really, really cool because you could not only connect a video camera, you could have a live video feed, and if you were collaborating as a group, you could even have up to four cameras, switch between the cameras, add effects, colorize ...

You could also connect a DVD or even a VHS player to this mixer as a backup. Because, back in the day, the computers crashed a lot, or they got super-hot. Back then, the videos were 320 by 240 pixels, photo JPEG, so barely any compression. Which made the computers kind of complaining, getting super-hot. And it was normal that we connected two laptops and the V4 mixer. Sometimes we were actually superimposing the layers. Someone took care of the background, having a more picturesque image and someone did computer graphics on top, maybe with a black background. Then you could apply Luma key and make the black transparent. This was fun because you were creating something, the other person as well, and both together were creating something new.

Sadly, I haven’t seen something like this in a while. There are new mixers with HDMI outputs, but the technology became way more expensive, and the laptops more stable. So, the scene became a bit more individualistic in a way.

But back to collaboration: When collaborating with bands, the thing would be to listen to the music to get familiar with the tracks, to find out what kind of emotions you get from the tracks. If it sounds dreamy, psychedelic, then maybe you get ideas: “Oh, I’m going to use more waves or watery clouds.” Or if a track is more techno, then the images are going to be more flashy, stroby, colorful.

- C: Talking about the early 2000s: at that time, the VJ software was clip based. You probably prepared clips for your gigs. Very few people were working with live coding, it wasn’t really possible with those heating computers.
But I have come to realize that now, with the new technological possibilities and with AI coming in, the visuals have become very fluid and that they are not so much clip based any longer. How do you see that?

I am happy that you ask this question because I come from these origins of clip based VJing. First it was motion dive.tokyo and Arkaos. Then I discovered Isadora and made my own software to make visuals by triggering clips and also even fix images and text. Sometimes, there were DJs, let's say, Oscar Mulero, so you had to show the name on the screens. Or, in some places, they would give a lot of importance to the logos, and some acts like Pacha or Dansu, had special logos that you would have to show every once in a while.

I had more than a thousand video clips and I might still have more than 500 from the old days. Because the thing is that the old school becomes new again. I realized that there are these very dense LED displays; they are very powerful, but they are actually low res. So, you have this thing that fills up a stage but if you look at the resolution, the width is actually sometimes not even 500 pixels. When you play the old clips from the old days on these LED screens, they look amazing. With a video projector, you might see the compression artifacts, but if you play the clips on one of these LEDs, they look amazing.

I was telling people that it is important to have clips. I remember, for instance, when people were doing visuals with processing in the early 2000s, they maybe did a scene with floating 3D cubes. When they were doing visuals, one had to be ready for half an hour of floating cubes. Maybe there were more, less, bigger, smaller, rotating faster, slower. But it was floating cubes because it took time to change the code. The resolution was nice and you had all that power to control the image that you didn't have in a video clip. There was someone, for example, who used a Joystick to control the images. But the disadvantage was that that you had the same motive going on for a rather long time.

Nowadays, there is new software in which you can make code that does something. Floating cubes, for example, but then you have another code which allows you to move very quickly from one thing to another. You can actually do stories with code by timing the elements of the storytelling.

With clips, it works differently. For me, it is the visual equivalent of being a DJ. A DJ doesn't play. I mean, some DJs are also producers, so once in a while they play their tracks. But usually, a DJ just plays music that other people made. And me as a VJ, back in the day, there were clips I made. I love graffiti, street art, abstract things, nature is part of the inspiration.

But from the thousand clips I had, maybe 100 were mine. But the rest were shared clips; we used to exchange, physically, on hard drives. It was like: "What do you have in there?" We were exchanging software and clips; some software came with a small library like Modul8 or Resolume. And many people used these clips here and there. And when you were an expert, a VJ, and someone was playing the dancing skeletons you knew that it was footage from some library.

With AI, things are changing in new directions. I am not really a fan, I have to admit. I use it mostly for audio, for little things. It can start an idea and then I build on it.

In the game of AI, if you don't trust, you lose. Because it is going to be here, whether you like it or not. So, it's better to always keep an eye on developments and grab whatever seems interesting, or saves time, for example. That's how I see it.

- SL: This is very interesting because the clip sharing reverts to the question of how collaboration also evolves in time in this kind of field. It is very different for animations because they produce everything and it becomes a clip of five minutes. But that doesn't work for VJing because you have six, seven hours of movement. So, it's not realistic.

That is what I am always saying: Many people, for instance, studied 3D, maybe a bit of Blender or 3ds Max. They generate a couple of clips and play them, but their aesthetic is very similar. I think, it doesn't matter to have produced a really, really amazing clip – if you play that for six hours.

I've been a professional VJ for some while. I did visuals for Die Schöne Party here in Berlin, and it always was about 4, hours, 5 hours. And I did visuals in festivals and there was DJ Hell, or well-known bands like Moby or Fangoria. Sometimes you just get called to a festival, maybe even as a team of four or five VJs to rotate. And suddenly you get told that you are going to do visuals for Ellen Alien. And maybe you're going to do visuals in a chill out area or maybe you're going to do visuals in a reggae festival. I did all these things – and when you have nature clips, architectural clips, train clips, dancing skeleton clips, universe clips, computer graphic clips, you are ready for everything, always.

You can change the speed, the color, mix it with something else, make it more abstract, more concrete. When I was doing visuals with a friend, we even had a game. If there were lyrics in the song, it was about who was faster at finding something corresponding to the lyrics in our clips. It was a game to have fun while doing visuals.

- C: Are there any artists or musicians that have been very influential for your work?

One very important audiovisual artist for me is Robert Henke. Robert Henke aka Mono Lake. I saw him for the first time in 2000 in Galicia, in a very small club, close to my hometown. When you are a musician, there is no bigger impact than when you discover 'the thing'. And for me, that was Robert Henke. When I entered the place, there was this music, very different from what I had heard before. It was definitely electronic music, but it wasn't club music 4x4. It was a very dubby electronic. This music triggered images in my mind, it was really like the perfect music for visuals. Even though, at that time, there were no visuals in this place, but the music itself felt very inspiring. Robert takes a lot of care of his music; there is the rhythm, but then there are field recordings. You know, maybe he goes to a bird park and records the sound of the birds or even insects with special microphones and then incorporates that into the music and into a new concert. It sounds very digital, but many of his works are actually field recordings. He also builds his own software to create the things he hears in his mind.

So, at the event at that small club, I had the chance to speak with him. I was very impacted by the music. I still play it once in a while. I got to meet him and he is a super nice person. After the concert, I approached him with my back then very, very, sloppy English, to tell him how much I loved what he had played and how amazing it sounded. He was performing with a laptop in the year 2000. That was rare. And he asked me what I had been using. Then he actually opened his PowerBook G3, turned it on for me and there it was: Max MSP. He showed me what could be done with it, that it was like a virtual synthesizer. That gave me an enormous motivation to explore this software. I immediately knew this was edgy, that it was not like just using a preset that someone made. It allows you to make whatever you want with code that is understandable. And later on, Henke also worked with lasers. He has been exploring different kinds of technologies. So, for me, he is one of the most influential artists.

And the second place could be Jan Jelinek. Also very influential, but more organic. Jan Jelinek samples jazz records, but in weird moments. Maybe the saxophone player breathes, and he samples that inhaling, and with that he then creates a rhythm. It sounds very much like tape, analogue, old school warm, while at the same time, it is super contemporary.

- SL: I would like to ask you one last question about politics. What is your perception of art and politics? Do you think that the artist has a certain kind of responsibility in that regard in general? And how do you position your own work?

Art has this power, especially for the people who become influential, to deliver some messages, to show things. Other people in the streets who say the same things might get beaten up. When you are an artist, since everything can be interpreted in different ways, it is easier. I don't think it is a responsibility, but art has always been there to help and inspire people to do the right thing and to be in the right place. So, it is a resource to communicate something with art, not necessarily an obligation.

That's how I see it, because, in my practice, I get inspired by shapes, for instance. I love light installations, refractions and de-fractions, very abstract things. It is very difficult to associate that with politics. It is part of the discourses to create beauty, something that doesn't really need an explanation and it doesn't relate with very traditional things. I like to trigger ideas in the same way as if you were sitting next to a river, hearing its sound and maybe a leaf falls and starts floating, doing a weird movement. That can inspire me, or a tremendous butterfly that passes. More like cracks, moss, the branches in a tree. It is nothing specific that inspires me, it is beauty – whatever that is, because in the end it might be very personal. But I am looking for that, I am looking to create a mind state, especially with my music. What I try is to create sound that inspires, that triggers memories in people. Sometimes I play an instrument, but in more abstract music, I use sound textures that trigger memories and make you go: "Oh that sounds like the engine of the boat I used to take when I was seven to cross the canal."

- SL: Thank you! It is so special that you do both, sound and visuals at the same time, so you embody the intersection ...

Yes, for me they are superconnected. It is kind of the same at the end.