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Interview with Claudia Larcher, Vienna

English translation of the interview conducted by Cornelia Lund in the framework of "AV Assemblies. Conversations on Sight and Sound," a project by Ana Carvalho, Cornelia Lund, and Sara Luna Ruíz.
Claudia Larcher: <https://www.claudialarcher.com/>

- Claudia, I would like to ask you to briefly introduce yourself and your artistic practice.

I'm Claudia Lacher, a media artist – or rather, a visual artist – who explores post-digital visual cultures. I make experimental films and video animations; I work text-based, but also with collages. 'Photography' is a tricky term, because I often work without a camera and instead use AI to combine images from my archive to create new ones. You could perhaps say it is a post-photographic process.

- The interplay between image and sound also plays a major role in your work. In your videos, for one, but you have also created audiovisual (AV) performances in the past, and have recently started doing them again. How did that happen?

It was a deliberate choice to create videos live, using VJ software that I taught myself. This field was quite a male-dominated sphere back then, meaning there weren't many role models. For me, it was more of an exploratory process to work out how to do it. I developed my own working methods, starting with photographs and images – some that I had taken myself, others that I had found. I animated and interwove them with sound, sometimes I even created the sound myself. However, I also often turned to colleagues, because I believe that sound plays an independent role and shouldn't merely serve as background to the images; rather, it should create a tension with them.

What's interesting about doing visuals in a club or at a concert is that you are involved in the live sound production. You can also use sound as a tool to manipulate images or speed – and

this live moment is uncontrolled. I think I have a bit of an obsessive-compulsive disorder where I always have to be in control of everything. For me, it was a process of letting go – an incredibly beautiful process that emphasises the moment. What is created is gone again in an instant, and usually can't be reproduced, because you have turned so many knobs that the process is impossible to reconstruct afterwards.

Error is also an important element here, one that can be highly productive. The same goes for the glitch, allowing these gaps, which become visible in digital systems – and then developing them further in a productive way.

I started out in friends' clubs. At first, I created the classical video wallpaper, but I soon realised that wasn't really the best approach for me. I actually found it more interesting to improvise live to accompany bands and DJs. Sometimes they would bring a USB stick or a DVD with a bit of artwork on it, but mostly I would draw on my own archive, using fragments that I had been developing over the years.

I worked in a very classical, minimalist style, using RGB planes, textures and lines. And I experimented with how to work in a minimalist way whilst still generating a diverse range of outputs. I repeatedly revised or built upon these outputs – some of which I also recorded. It was like a sort of chain reaction.

- It's interesting that you have also worked with visual material that the bands gave you. Were you familiar with their music beforehand? Did you rehearse with the bands, or were the performances completely improvised encounters?

Most of the time, I didn't know the musicians at all. They often came via Klein Records.

Christian Candid mainly invited people from London via the label

(<https://www.discogs.com/de/label/2059-Klein-Records?srsltid=AfmBOopNXNMqffPm0iZk4kKxZ0UGcQ5moBUtbNAQH1QU-lcp2JO817-C>).

Those were the days of MySpace. You couldn't listen to the music on Spotify, like you can today. Usually, I would just be given a description. Then the musicians would actually come on stage, perhaps handing me this USB stick about ten minutes beforehand – and that was that.

I found this loss of control really exciting. Things could just happen. Unlike at art college, there wasn't a committee standing there afterwards saying, 'No, that's completely out of the question'. In my university environment, everything was very strict and controlled, so it was the complete opposite for me.

I didn't even mention there that I was doing visuals. For me, it really was more of a hobby, or rather a form of practice, because I discovered a lot of things through creating visuals that I then used in my 'classical' fine art and experimental film practice. Through trial and error – for example, bringing together two images in a way you wouldn't otherwise have thought of. Take

that USB stick, for instance – at first, I had no idea what was on it. I plugged it into the VJ software and had a look...

- What software did you use? And what period are we actually talking about?

When I started out in 2006 and 2007, Modul8 (<https://www.garagecube.com/modul8-v2/>) was the most stable software. I also had an (analogue) video switcher, though. Not a traditional video mixer – those were very expensive. Modul8 still crashed from time to time, but I had this little video switcher box, a portable DVD player, and some visual material on a DVD – so it wasn't too noticeable.

The club was also really wild. I have always wondered what, if anything, of the visuals actually got through to the visitors, who had already been through various stages of intoxication...

- Yes, those whose main visual activity was VJing were facing the same situation. In your case, if I understand correctly, it was more of an experimental playground – and a side project. But those whose main venue was the club sometimes asked themselves the same question, which is why they ended up, for example, with us at fluctuating images (www.fluctuating-images.de), because there they had a more focused audience that hadn't already gone through those stages of intoxication. There was room for rehearsed performances and a more focused audience.

Another question: you live in Vienna, where the 'visualist' scene was – and still is – very large and significant. Did you see yourself as part of that scene?

Not at all. I didn't know Eva [Eva Fischer, sound:frame Festival] back then. It wasn't as if you would go to an event and start talking to people. Besides, I don't think that's really in my nature. I was – and still am – rather introverted – and I didn't know whether my visuals were any good at all.

There was no money to be made from visuals either. I can still remember laying my own cables a few hours before the event, because the cables on site were usually damaged or didn't work. They still worked for sound, but not for video ... And then I spent twelve hours on site and was paid 80 euros. That was simply the reality. But it was important too. If there had been too much money involved it might have spoiled the fun and that 'carefree' effect would have been lost. I found it very liberating to do that. At the same time, I was doing my traditional video work at university – and there was no overlap there.

But I have always found the scene very interesting and have really enjoyed attending the sound:frame Festival (<https://soundframe.at/#festivals>). I actually believe that it is still a parallel world to the fine arts scene. Just as experimental film, which is shown in cinemas, continues to represent a parallel world. And I wonder why that is still the case. It is actually completely crazy, because there is so much overlap.

- Absolutely. I find that extremely interesting. It is a bit similar to (German-speaking) media studies, where AV performances remain a rather ‘special’ field that isn’t really taken seriously. Historical manifestations such as visual music are, of course, taken seriously, but, in Berlin, for example, contemporary productions take place at CTM (<https://www.ctm-festival.de/>), transmediale (<https://transmediale.de/de>) or manifest:io (<https://www.manifestio.art/>), where they are, so to speak, neatly ‘tucked away’. And that’s where they usually stay – in terms of discourse, too.

You have been working extensively on and with AI for several years now. And you have developed a very critical, reflective approach to it – one that doesn’t simply treat AI as the latest trendy tool, but also considers how AI actually works.

You have also created an AV performance using AI, in collaboration with a sound artist. How did that come about? And what exactly did you do in that project?

It all began with an exhibition in Vaduz, where I displayed works created between 2020 and 2024 that incorporated AI in various ways. The exhibition was called Hallucinations (<https://www.claudialarcher.com/exhibition/vaduz>). I presented four projections in different formats. This was important to me because, historically speaking, not everything was always in 16:9 format. The early AI models produced square output – that only changed later on. And I wanted to incorporate that into the exhibition.

It seemed obvious to create an AV performance in the context of the exhibition, because Ursula Winterauer had created the sound for one of the works. She’s a brilliant composer who also performs live a lot: she plays the bass, works with her voice and performs using electronic media. She always has a table full of synths, cables and feedback loops. But there’s still analogue equipment too. It’s a give-and-take.

I hadn’t created any visuals for a long time, so I thought: let’s put on a performance as part of this exhibition. It turned out to be a sort of ‘seated concert’. I worked with fragments from the pieces featured in the exhibition. For example, there are pictures of flowers, from which I took visual material and fed it into the VJ programme. I didn’t want to generate everything from scratch. What I like to do is either use my own dataset or overwrite existing data. And with this flower series, I essentially ‘painted over’ a classic floral still life using an AI tool. That means you always have the actual image as a backdrop, so to speak, and use that, amongst other things, as a prompt. You can mix image and text prompts.

At the same time, I still had a lot of glitch footage from earlier performances – VHS footage, to be precise. It’s a media aesthetic, or a medium, that actually has a somewhat nostalgic or retro feel to it. And I am the age I am, so my visuals naturally have a certain aesthetic...

What interested me about the performance was that a glitch or VHS noise has a certain rhythm to it. And I thought it would be interesting to recreate the rhythm and the 'spirit' of VHS noise in a synthetic image within the performance.

That worked relatively well because AI is very good at overwriting small, short clips. Which brings us back to VJing, where you don't use long clips either and work a lot with loops, simply because they are more stable and can be modulated in different ways. I did, however, prepare these glitches for the performance. I could have generated them live, but I asked myself: what's the point? The rendering process can't be interrupted, and it usually takes longer. So, I worked partly with pre-prepared material and then added different textures. That means there are now VHS glitches that look like glass. The flatness of the original glitch is given a sense of depth. This results in strange clips which, I believe, still convey the media-archaeological aspect, but have also become something different. It's more of an entanglement.

We performed the piece in Vaduz and, funnily enough, it got quite a few views on YouTube (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a5rk3C0cy5g>). I don't know – I think we've ended up in a recommendation algorithm...

We were then invited to the Austrian Film Museum via the Vienna Business Agency, where we did what you might call a classic cinema performance – which was an interesting and different format (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ps80cwnnO_c&t=3s). We were also invited to PatchLab in Kraków (<https://en.patchlab.pl/>). We try to develop the performance a little further each time. We would like to make it more immersive – which, of course, is always a question of budget... We are constantly upgrading the technical set-up so that we will have the computing power needed to stage the performance in a dome, for example.

Because as soon as everything is generated live, computing power and stability become key factors. At the moment, we rehearse with sending each other feedback. I have always reacted to Ursula's sound. We are currently thinking about how I can generate sound from my visual material as well. We have already got a few methods, but the challenge is to make them work effectively.

- ...so that there is a meaningful interplay between image and sound. And have I understood correctly that you used AI before the performance, or were there also moments during the performance that were controlled by AI?

No, everything is pre-produced.

- Have you seen any performances lately using AI during the performance in a way that made sense or that you found interesting?

Let me think – when it comes to image generation... Actually, the first question we should ask is where we start to draw the line between machine learning, because even the VJ programme is

actually based on a form of intelligence. I can use plugins that I programme myself; I would say that is already a form of machine intelligence. As far as I know, a plugin using Stable Diffusion was available quite quickly on TouchDesigner, which allows you to generate images simply using prompts.

I have to say, though, that when working with AI, I often simply don't get the results I want. That's why I haven't yet had the courage to perform live with AI, because the images end up having that classic AI aesthetic, which I don't like. We are also currently reducing our performance set. I'm working on integrating TouchDesigner into the set, precisely because of this (plug-in) tool. But I am still thinking about how to pre-train the plugin so that it makes sense to use it in a live context.

It is also interesting that the audience usually has no idea when a performance really is live. That has happened to me before. I used to work with microscope cameras, filming and mixing live. I would sit there with my funny little film box, and only ten per cent of the audience realised what I was doing. There is always the question of how much of what is happening on stage needs to be explicitly conveyed in the performance for that 'live' moment to really come across.

And, as I said, I'm not quite sure yet where the 'live' moment in AI-generated content makes sense. Perhaps it is most productive to let the audience think along with it.

We are probably all familiar with the footage from the Massive Attack concert where they experimented with facial recognition, filming the audience and then projecting the images back. It was partly about making surveillance technology visible. I also find such approaches aesthetically interesting, but of course they have this additional mirroring effect for the audience. Perhaps we should be thinking along those lines.

- Making surveillance technologies visible is, in a way, a political approach. Your critical work on AI isn't entirely apolitical either. Does politics play a role for you? Do you take it into account, does it automatically come into play, or not at all? How does it work for you?

I believe that politics became an integral part of my work several years ago, simply because the state of global politics had become almost unbearable. At some point, you find yourself alone in the studio, asking what it's all for. Of course, you are always working with the outside world – you process it and reproduce it in some form. But because I have always worked with technology, my critical reflection is also specifically focused on technology. And the bias inherent in AI alone is a major issue. In fact, almost everyone ignores it because it works extremely well for most people in positions of power – that is to say, white old men – as they are favoured and this mechanism is, moreover, further reinforced. It is a very convenient tool for many, after all. For marginalised groups, of course, everything just gets worse. And that annoys me immensely.

That is why I have started researching gender bias in AI, and, in another project, I'm actively looking for measures, 'hacks' or self-empowerment tools that could subsequently be implemented and replicated on a large scale. It is a workflow that explores what can be done to counteract bias, so that certain processes – in my case, built architecture – become more inclusive. You could say that's megalomaniacal, but I think it's important too.

- You curated a project in South Africa together with Eva Fischer, for which you also engaged in local collaborations. If you really think about the whole issue in global terms, a whole range of other biases come into play – biases inherent in the technology itself, in both the hardware and the software, in energy consumption, and so on. Did that influence you as well?

Absolutely. It was very important to us to frame the project in political terms (<https://ai-for-dignity.com/>). The project was funded by the Austrian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which of course conveys a whole different level of impact.

South Africa wasn't necessarily our first choice, because it is a sensitive issue when two white women travel there to talk about AI. But we worked, for example, with Masakhane (<https://www.masakhane.io/>), a grassroots initiative where people volunteer to collect data to create a large language model that represents the approximately 2,000 African languages. Silicon Valley's hegemonic power monopoly is so immense, and all the systems operate in English. This means that everything is translated. Everything is simplified. And it is not just the language itself, but also the culture that is conveyed through the language. It is more complex than one might think.

The way we are all already using AI, based on a capital-driven structure – that is going to come back to haunt us in the future. That's why it was important for us to work with artists to draw attention to these issues. But also to continually offer a positive narrative or demonstrate a workflow in which everyone can get involved and make a difference. That is why Masakhane was also represented in the exhibition and at a joint symposium.

- To wrap up, I would like to shift the focus a little and, coming back to the field of AV, ask you whether there are any other performers, festivals or literature that have been or are important and inspiring to you?

When I first started to work with live AV performances, Billy Roisz (<https://billyroisz.klingt.org/>) was a huge influence – as a media artist and musician who had also worked at the intersections of image, sound and technology in various contexts. At the time, these intersections weren't really reflected in the academic world or the art scene. My background was that I have always loved going to concerts, even to see 'strange stuff' – electronic music, for instance, or the Klangforum Wien, if we are talking analogue. Then I discovered Billy Roisz and found it incredibly exciting how she generates images directly from sound. She also makes films for the cinema.

I then gradually discovered that there is an experimental film scene in Austria. I did wonder how it could be that I knew nothing about it – even though I had studied art. But the fields were really quite separate.

The Tanzquartier (<https://www.tqw.at/>) was also a major influence. I even attended workshops there where we worked with dancers. On the one hand, there was the sound aspect – whether synthetic, i.e. pre-recorded, or produced live – and on the other, there was the intersection with performance and video mapping. It was in this context that I first became familiar with Isadora (<https://troikatronix.com/>), actually before Module8. Isadora works very well for video mapping and sound when performing live.

And then, of course, Chris Haring with Liquid Loft (<https://liquidloft.at/>) was very important in Vienna. He was one of the very first to create video projections onto his own body. He has done some absolutely mind-blowing performances, for which he had to rehearse everything in advance to make sure it all worked out. In other words, what we can now do automatically, he had to rehearse manually to ensure it was spot on. These were very important influences for me. I eventually built my own set because I received a request from a jazz band. My very first performance took place at Birdland, a classic jazz club.

- That's rather unusual. Normally, visuals were more common in the context of electronic music; more in a techno club than in a jazz club ...

Yes. I think the techno club was fully booked. The 'cool guys' were there, and the 'girls' were allowed to watch and drink beer. But they weren't allowed to join in.

- Do you feel that's still the case? Or has it got better?

Things have definitely improved! It's hard to imagine from today's perspective. The male performers never wanted to show anything, either; they were afraid that they would lose their power... I ended up at a club, invited by colleagues – all men, too – but they didn't know anything about video technology and were glad to have someone who could help make the club a bit more professional in that respect.

- Are there any contemporary productions that you find particularly interesting?

It's probably been another 10 years now: I found Holly Herndon's concerts really interesting, where you walked through photogrammetric 3D spaces, just like in a first-person shooter game. It's a different kind of video production that doesn't require VJ software. I'm also currently thinking about how I could use AI productively to build environments. I would absolutely love to walk through one of my videos during a performance. That might be easier to achieve in the future.

I have the impression that AV performances are making a comeback right now. After the visual overload [of the 2000s], everyone was a bit tired at first. I was in a club in Tokyo where there

wasn't even any lighting. People were dancing in the dark and couldn't see one another. For me, that was a sort of zero point – and a very interesting experience. If anything, there was more focus on light and light shows, and less on specific images. It seems to me, though, that there is now a younger generation who really appreciate sitting together in a room and sharing that live experience.

That is also why Ursula and I are continuing to work on our performance, because I think that, in our digital age, spaces are being lost. The live experience is, after all, quite different from watching everything on a screen; and ideally, when a sensitive person performs on stage, that live spark is transmitted and creates a connection between the performance and the audience. We are still biological beings, and that seems to be getting somewhat forgotten at the moment.

See also the interview with Eva Fischer: <https://www.fluctuating-images.de/av-assemblies-interview-with-eva-fischer/>