

Dancing in the Light of an Information Overload

Title	Dancing in the Light of an Information Overload
Subtitle	Not provided.
Lead-in / Abstract	Looking at the speed of technological implementation, activation in the development of a new, positive, contemporary consciousness seems necessary if we ever want to step out of Alice's ever-expanding Wonderland. One of the most important areas of today to focus on is the club scene, as it has always been the environment where youth culture gathers together most consistently and in its most significant numbers.
Participants and speakers	dekker, annet (NL)
Short biography of participants	Annet Dekker (NL, 1970) is a curator at the Netherlands Media Art Institute, Montevideo in Amsterdam, NL. She works in the area of new media: researched, published and curated media (art)exhibitions and debates. She presented at a.o. Siggraph 2004, Cosign2003, ISEA02, NGE2001, was part of the jury for CYNETART Festival04 in Dresden and ACM Multimedia 2004 in New York and is co-curator for Impakt Online and the Netherlands Film Festival. Subjects of interest are the influence of new media and popular culture on art and vice versa. Her current research involves the VJ culture: a phenomenon in history, presentation and

preservation. She also initiated Visual Sensations, a website for and about VJ culture and a VJ contest that will be touring the Netherlands and Belgium in 2004 in cooperation with Paradiso-Melkweg Production House.

Full text

Looking at recent trends in VJ performances it would not be an understatement to say that VJ is a new form of synaesthetic performance, a form that might develop in interesting ways. At times it may be thought that history is merely repeating itself, the only difference being a new medium. But one thing has changed dramatically and calls for new research and interest in this area: the audience is not composed of a few insiders anymore, but the whole synaesthetic experience is massified. Already we see the influence of VJ performances in museums, galleries and daily life. Questions arise which call for further investigation: What is the influence of all this media circuitry on existing art disciplines, on the position of the performer and of the audience?

For now, I focus on oral history. The remarks made by VJs today come from existing interviews and panels written or organised by various others and interviews I have conducted myself over the past months. These form the beginning of understanding a new phenomenon in the history of the live image. They will also show the intertwining of social developments, technological improvements and artistic expansion that occur when talking about VJ. Another question that logically follows is how to document and preserve these synaesthetic VJ performances for future reference.

Old skool VJ-ing

VJ's are said to push to boundaries and concepts of show, attitude and art direction, beyond the predictable perimeters of the pop and rock worlds. To describe a phenomenon as VJ culture one could start as far back as a few centuries. Once a VJ commented that he could see the Cavemen drumming in their cave in front of a fire, while one of them was playing with the shadows on the wall – Old Skool

VJ-ing"¹. I will not go that far and start my story at the beginning of the 1980s. Years after the successes of rock, punk and disco a new sound surfaced, which meant the breakthrough of the VJ as we know it now. The initial spirit of the House scene was one of togetherness, happiness: the gateway to collective community action and euphoria. The origins of the House movement lay in a belief, a belief in the self, as long term VJ **Peter Rubin** explains: "It was a personal liberating experience with a slow, primal beat and rhythm. 'My house is your house and your house is mine.' House culture was family."² This was both reflected in the name as well as in the staging of the events. Although the name 'House' was originally adopted from the legendary 'warehouse' in Chicago, the 'Spirit of House' developed in the '80s due to the more frequent use of private houses for parties.

Soon these House Parties turned into large gatherings of people who came to enjoy the music as one united group asserting their identity. Some people, like Dutch VJ **Micha Klein**, claim that the VJ came into play to give the parties a more profound look, a face or even an icon. But listening to others, it was much more a new element, an addition to a culture. Parties consisted of music, lights, paintings, live shows and many other things. As again Rubin describes: "At 'Die Macht Der Nacht' (1989/1992), we had hairdressers, still photographers, high wire artists performing over the dance floor while everyone danced below, fire artists – including fireworks artists!!!, theatre, black light artists, as well as other assorted goodies I'm sure I've forgotten. To say nothing of all the little stands selling various products made by the culture. All these elements were totally secondary to the main element of the evening – the PEOPLE getting together and communicating with each other".³

The House and Techno scene exploded as a social force throughout the world. It is important to realize the social situation at the time. In many ways the House parties of the late 80s and beginning of the 90s shared parallels with the rise of youth culture in the 60s. The starting years of club culture, coincided with the fall of the Berlin Wall and the Tianamen Square Student Protest; it also gave birth to the Love Parade, Mayday and Techno. The imagery of the VJs was mostly realistic, which engaged the clubbers into an involvement with life, and when it was abstract it was used as a means to give an alternative example to the processed MTV visualising of the day. The first VJs in the mid 80s did not conceive of their work as an extension from the world of music or art but, rather, they regarded their work as a form of progressive social communication. Their goal was to develop new theories and practices regarding visuals, music and social ideology. At the heart of these experiments was the presumption that the power and scope of sound and image in perfect balance could best meet the needs of these latest challenges. And a club was seen as an environment wherein one would not run away from reality but, rather, get the inspiration and renewed mindset to improve the conditions that exist within reality.

However, as culture became more and more commercialised, the social messaging which permeated the initial period of video mixing was replaced in great part by the flashings of the individual VJ. 1994-1995 marks the point where commercialism finally supersedes the idealism of the first generation. The new VJ was without politics. In the spirit of the House scene people in the mid 90s wanted to create beautiful images and create positive icons that were uplifting and would "give you a boost and a positive vibe for the whole day."⁴ There was talk of a new age, about opening new doors of perception, but everywhere you went these were nothing more than vague notions.

The influence of technology

Looking at young VJ nowadays, one of their first influences most say, is Music television station MTV. Regardless of all that can and has been said about the advantages, disadvantages or meaning of MTV, the fact remains that it did lead to a stronger connection between music and visuals. And the video clips that are being broadcasted 24 hours on MTV have become symptomatic for the speed of the visual and auditory languages of our time. Unfortunately most VJ's start out just doing that same thing, trying to project as many and colourful images as possible, bouncing up and down the music. The computer made it this process even easier, you could show and move as many different colours and forms as possible. Some older VJs, like Rubin comment that the computer "has taken the soul out of visualisation". He continues: "95% of the stuff I see looks exactly like all the other stuff I see. It's all surface design with no deep human meaning. Everybody's doing computer animation because live imagery is just too cumbersome to handle. (...) What results is either animation only or countless short loops of live action - a slick, choppy sort of MTV bastardisation. I find that the vast majority of VJ's care much more about all the fancy new technological toys, tricks and techniques than trying to work out ways of communicating to their audiences in a deeply human manner. It's not that these artists have no souls. It's that the technology, itself, still in its infancy, is driving the forces of triviality and commercialism. Which is only conditioning the public to view such material with no expectations other than surface gimmickry."⁵

But there is also another side to the growing technological developments. First of all, if it weren't for the cheaper camera's, projectors, computers, mixers etc, hardly anyone would have been working as a VJ and only few people would have had the chance to experience the events. The scene might have died out as did most of the experiments of the expanded cinema in the 60s. There are many VJ's now whose work can only be made through the assistance of computers. Their goal is not first and foremost political change, but they try to set new agenda's and create new languages.

And even scepticists, like the before mentioned Rubin, see a positive side to the increased use of technology, as he says: "One of the most revolutionary aspects of House culture was that they were one of the first generations to truly begin to actively organize like-minded communities throughout the world via cyberspace. Up until 1989/1990, House culture looked at the computer freaks as weird nerds with big eyeglasses who did nothing but sit in front of their screens all day. The "nerds" thought of House culture as "druggies, dropouts and losers". Around the turn of the decade, the two finally joined together. Once these two subcultures began working cooperatively, an ever-increasing number of social experiments in cyberspace followed, which laid the foundation for any number of social directions which exist today (message list projects and events, blogging, coordination of international funding and support resources, recognition and communication with third world youth cultures, creating bridges between street culture and traditional art communities, etc. etc. In other words, the identification and coordination of the global House Nation movement."⁶

That this is indeed a future that we are living now is exemplified by a few VJ collectives. These collectives show that the VJ experience of today is not just a fusing of different disciplines, but it is also an expansion of technological and international borders. Through live streaming internet connections participating musicians and VJ's world wide are connected to a live stage. Their play is mixed with the music on the stage and the visual input is projected onto various screens. Special developed electronics make sure that everything is synchronised. To still be able to unravel the different cultures and to grasp the global effect they ask the participants to comment on specific topics, ranging from political statements to examples from their popular culture. The musical and visual battle is played out on stage and can also be followed live on the internet in the confinements of the living room or the public space of a club.

The VJ performance has become more than just another way to try to get people to move in another world. These are performances that make a physical and psychological connection with the public through the synthesizing of various media like sound, image, smoke, smell, etc. The synaesthetic performances can be seen as the first attempts to create a virtual reality outside the confinements of the CAVE or specially designed suits, in spaces in which the participation of the public is crucial to the success of a performance. And by using multiple screens and various ways of editing, new narratives are being told that have an important influence on other disciplines like film, video, television and life itself.

The future of wonderland

As performances become more and more advanced this poses again and again new questions regarding documentation, description and reflection. The computer is of some help as it makes it possible to save and record material that is used. But it also poses more problems, as to how to document live streams and performances that occur at different places in the world at the same time. Or even more difficult, how to describe the experience. One way to make sense of this Wonderland in clubs is, as English artist **Scanner** points out: "I rarely consider 'one' or the 'other', in terms of sounds and image. It's only in the secondary process of elaborating through texts, interviews and conversation that the process of choice emerges."⁷ This is certainly a good way to start, but as these artistic activities are considered to be temporal events or projects and they often exist outside of the museum context, what does this say about the status of these events in the realm of the arts, and what does it mean for the preservation of such works? Although many artists themselves try to document as much information about their performance or installations as possible, when these valuable records are not centrally archived, they will probably not have a long live span. In the wider range of media art, an image in a catalogue is hardly sufficient to understand the working and meaning of the event. When it comes down to events that deal specifically with sensorial experiences, like many VJ performances, it becomes even more deficient. This leaves us with pressing questions: Which methods are emerging in order to open up the closed-circuit of the art system for discursive approaches? But also: should, and if so, how can these 'events' be presented and preserved for future generations to be experiences as part of our cultural heritage?

- 1 Kees Duyves, Piplab in: Eveline Stoel, 'VJ's stelen de show', in: Rails 2002
- 2 Peter Rubin, 'Chromapark and Beyond', in: Localizer 1.0 The Techno House Book (Gestalten Verlag, Berlin, 1995)
- 3 Peter Rubin, 'A bit of the past, a bit of the future,' in: Localizer 1.0
- 4 Jim Cook, 'Shallow happiness never lasts', in: Flash Art, October 1999
- 5 Peter Rubin in Groove Magazine (forthcoming Summer 2004)
- 6 Peter Rubin in Groove Magazine (forthcoming Summer 2004)

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