

ROB FLINT

PERFORMANCE, IMPROVISATION AND IMAGE-PROCESSED VIDEO



Rob Flint performing with Ticklish at EARational Festival, 's Hertogenbosch, Holland 2003 image© Josef Blersch

What is 'Live Video Performance'?

Performing with something designed for playback seems like a contradiction, but it happens all the time. Recording and replay have altered music; live sampling, scratching, remixing and bootlegging pre-recorded material into new compositions is commonplace. Once dance music and hip-hop had transformed the Disc Jockey from a functionary into a prestigious main act, some people wanted to use images as DJs were using sound, so purpose-built video and multimedia software now exists, allowing the performer (or 'VJ') real-time cut, paste, and loop techniques that previously provided broadcast professionals with action replay for Match of the Day, or special effects and filters on Top of The Pops.

As any video editor knows, accelerating computer processor speeds and intensive data compression now permit a portable computer to do things formerly possible only in specialized studios, radically changing small-scale film and video practice. For those using video in performance, this enables instant editing, real

time processing and easy synchronised playback of audiovisual material. As well as club visuals, and VJ sets, video projection frequently accompanies older performance forms like opera, theatre, and dance, extending moving pictures beyond the context of cinema and the television.

The less glamorous counterpart to club VJ's scrubbing (or 'scratching') video footage is the familiar remote control interface through which we consume video and television. While some may wish to manipulate moving images in real time for performance, the technical capacity to do so affects contemporary culture more widely. Our apprehension of news media and home entertainment images is inflected by the ability to repeat and replay sequences at will. 'View on demand' cable television, DVD players, hard drive video recorders, vector-based web graphics, and video games, all enable non-linear interaction with moving pictures, blurring distinctions between viewing and editing. But does this apparently creative relationship with images give us any more control over their meaning?



Left: Screen Grab from 'VJamm software showing performance clips for replay

Right: Rob Flint (aka scopac) performing with Kev Hopper at the Hayward Gallery 2003 image© Ben Johnson

Sound and Moving Image

'VJing' can be compared with earlier traditions of experimental film and video, particularly in relation to music. There is a long history of film works synchronising images to sound, and an even longer history of attempts to perform with light. In 1730, French Jesuit monk Louis Bertrand Castel built an ocular harpsichord for playing coloured light by revealing and concealing tinted panes of glass using a keyboard¹. Futurist Bruno Corra, in 1912, imagined a 'Chromatic Music' that matched colours to the tempered scale, and 1939 Charles Dockum used his Dockum Mobilcolor Projector to create 'moving visual music'. Film artists like Hans Richter, Viking Eggeling, John Whitney, Len Lye, Harry Smith, and others, explored the synaesthetic properties of combining soundtrack and moving light, and Jordan Belson's 'Vortex' concerts showcased such works, linking image and music performance in San Francisco between 1957 and 1960. Oskar Fischinger, inventor of another light instrument – the 'lumigraph' – contributed (uncredited) to Disney's *Fantasia*, and the history of animation is intimately linked to these early works of abstract cinema². Popular animation gives us the term 'mickey mousing' for the expressive combination of musical sound and visual action, described by film sound designer Michel Chion³ as:

"... following the visual action in synchrony with musical trajectories (rising, falling and zigzagging) and instrumental punctuations of action (blows, falls, doors closing)..."

Sound, he suggests:

"...helps to imprint rapid visual sensations into



memory. Indeed, it plays a more important role in this capacity of aiding the apprehension of visual movements than in focusing on its own substance and aural density."

Improvising images to music accomplishes this conversely; visual movement is adapted in response to sound, beat matching cuts in synchrony with tempo, pitch, and other values can, like the work of the early abstract pioneers, make complex visual counterpoint to the music.

Film, Video and Performance

Film's linear playback seems to exclude it from real time manipulation, but works such as Annabel Nicholson's *Reel Time* (1973) used a sewing machine to punch holes in a film loop that deteriorates to destruction⁴ and *Man with a Mirror* (1976-present) sees film artist Guy Sherwin interacting with footage of his younger self in a complex play of projection and reflection. Sherwin's *Newsprint* (1972-2003) and *Railings* (1977) uses direct printing over the optical soundtrack to generate sound and image concurrently⁵ This immediate causal connection achieves a direct link between sonic and visual experience.

By contrast, while bit-encoded video permits non-linear audiovisual manipulation in a way that spooled film did not, the image/sound relationship of club visuals and VJ culture tends to be less direct, being performed as a mutual accompaniment. The intuited synchronisation of sound and image by the performer is the performance, making it closer to the improvisational culture of music, than to the more rigorously counter-intuitive tendency of recent art.

In the seventies Vito Acconci, Dan Graham, Bruce Naumann, Marina Abramovich, and Richard Serra made videotapes of performances that in some cases were only intended for the camera. The ability to monitor recording and transmission directly onscreen extended the 'live' immediacy of video beyond that of celluloid film, and the real time nature of the video process was important, but the artwork remained a playback object, as with most artists' films. Their minimally edited, neo-documentary, approach flavours recent British art practice, influencing the videos of say, Gillian Wearing, or Tracey Emin, utilizing the social immediacy of video rather than exploring its technical properties.

Image-processed Video

Closer in spirit and lineage to the abstract film tradition are those 'image-processed'⁶ works of the analogue video era exploring the composition of the video and TV image. In 1963, Nam June Paik and Wolf Vostell used magnets to distort the television image on a cathode tube, intervening in the broadcast 'flow.' Later Steina and Woody Vasulka used video synthesizers and feedback to affect the image in more specific, controlled ways, exploring video and sound as electronic signal, and audiovisual experience as a movement, rather than an object.

Gene Youngblood's 'Expanded Cinema,' of 1970⁷ is a manifesto for this generation of artists. His McLuhanesque view of new forms saw the processed image as a tool for consciousness-development and resistance to the formulaic world of commercial film and television. In this atmosphere, in New York, Stan Vanderbeek pioneered underground mixed media events like the 'Movie Drome' and the Vasulkas established The Kitchen – a site for experimental work combining the didactic examination of new media, with the playfulness of performance. Recently Steina Vasulka's *Violin Power* (1992-ongoing) uses the action of a bowed violin to control the forward and reverse motion and the process of a video image:

"In 1991, after having experimentally interfaced my acoustic violin with a variable speed video cassette player, I bought a MIDI violin and a Pioneer Disk Player. Interfacing these instruments with a computer gave me an instant access to any frame of video on the disk as well as access to fast/slow and forward/backward movements..."

The resulting fusion of analogue instrumental performance, and digital moving image manipulation, is a concert hall counterpart of dance floor oriented VJ 'scratching'. Steina is an accomplished violinist, developing a dialogue between musical flow, and the scrubbed images.

MIDI, Music, and Multimedia

One fundamental characteristic of multimedia tools is that modal values – volume, tone, colour – become interchangeable through reduction to bit encoded data. For musicians this transposition of one mode into another has been achievable since 1983 by means of MIDI (Musical Instrument Digital Interface). MIDI enables diverse electronic instruments to communicate instructions between them. Playing piano notes with a guitar, for example, or triggering recorded samples depending on the loudness or pitch of the singing voice. Potentially, this extends synaesthesia beyond the interplay of audiovisual modes – colour equals pitch, etc – into haptic territory. Physical action can trigger a colour, or a sequence of notes.

The STEIM institute in Amsterdam has been experimenting with MIDI, and developing media controllers and interfaces for electronic performance since the seventies. Here programmer Tom Demeyer, collaborating with Steina Vasulka, developed 'Imag/ine' – software designed to accomplish the tasks of *Violin Power* more directly, by manipulating video stored on the computer. 'Imag/ine' is complex to use, without the user-friendly graphic interfaces of mainstream software. It condenses much image-processed analogue work of the seventies and eighties into a digital form, with the expansion of connective possibilities that computer-based tools allow, and the potential to improvise with these processes.

Performance and Multimedia

Such tools make image-processing video in real time much easier, though not automatically more interesting. Making tasks easier changes what performing those tasks, or watching others perform them, means. Automating an action might miss the point of it.

Similarly, complex processes triggering video and sound with touch-sensitive gloves, or intricate image tracking on the motions of a dancer, sometimes beg the question "Why not use the remote control?" Developing more arcane interfaces doesn't necessarily reflect on the nature of the interface itself in its social form. The problem lies in finding ways of using the tools that goes beyond the mere demonstration of their technical capabilities. Artists working in analogue media have often misused or disassembled their medium to reveal intrinsic properties hidden by conventional use, as in the case of filmmakers revealing sprocket holes, scratches, and leader tape to draw attention to the artifice comprising the film image. In bit-encoded software media, errors and glitches disturb only the surface, since their relation to function is arbitrary. Action becomes data rather than being translated into another kind of equivalent energy. Most experimental performance MIDI tools and software are in some way

about recovering that lost connection between action and equivalent motion by creating a gestural interface. When improvising with video, the problem becomes how to foreground its live-ness, so that the viewer experiences something distinct from film or video playback.

VJs, DJs, and Performance

This is why VJ culture, and VJ-dedicated software, like Camart's 'VJamm' exploits a concept of 'scratching' that derives from the DJ's manual manipulation of vinyl LP discs on turntables. The name 'VJ' itself suggests this connection. The pioneering work of DJs like Kool Herc, Grandmaster Flash, and others in the seventies is still a vital cultural paradigm for expressive combinations of automated and human processes. Scratching and sampling in sonic culture are often seen as entirely synonymous, but the non-linearity of the original method – 'scratching' the needle on the disk permits reverse as well as forward motion in the groove – precedes the entirely different means by which non-linear data access is achieved in bit-encoded 'digital' media. In the performance of DJ duo Coldcut, the foremost proponents of the VJamm software, the VJ/DJ correlation comes a full circle as video images of manual 'scratching' by DJs are themselves rhythmically (and virtually) scratched as part of the show, which includes other recorded musical instruments similarly audio-visually sampled and replayed into the live mix. Performance footage re-establishes the causal connection between the electronic, digital, and acoustic musical forms, although the sounds could be connected to any action at all, as in the prototypical MIDI example.

The Future of Video Performance

New software develops the use of video and multimedia performance for a range of contexts beyond club-based VJing. Isadora is designed for use by dancers, and SoftVNS, NATO 0+55 and Jitter, can achieve complex media combinations. These three all operate in a programming environment called Max/MSP, developed at the IRCAM institute in Paris, but now marketed from the US. They are powerful software tools, and the online discussion surrounding them tends to focus on programming and code, rather than on the content of the playback or performance.

Perhaps the VJ is a transitional figure, mediating the growing archive of images that hails us in everyday locations from street advertising to PowerPoint presentations by enacting some control over them ("Remix your TV!" says the VJamm website). The strange dialectic of automating tasks to solve problems and then attaching the appearance of effort to

Steina Vasulka
performs
'Violin Power'

those tasks will undoubtedly continue, as it raises questions beyond technical accomplishment. Why is it more interesting to watch someone wrestle with an instrument, instead of turning a dial, when the output might be identical? But rather than nostalgically dismissing multimedia performance in these terms, we should make work that recognises and reflects on that dislocation.

Rob Flint

Notes

1. Details of the synaesthetic tradition and further sources can be found at: <http://www.paradise2012.com/visualMusic/musima/>
2. See Le Grice, M. (1977) *Abstract Film and Beyond*. London: Studio Vista. For descriptions of this and other film-as-performance works.
3. Chion, M. (1994) *Audio-vision: Sound on screen*. New York: Columbia University Press. pp121-122.
4. Guy Sherwin is profiled at the luxonline website: <http://www.luxonline.org.uk/>
5. Furlong, Lucinda, 'Notes Towards History of Image-Processed Video: Steina and Woody Vasulka', *Afterimage*, December 1983 reprinted on the Kitchen website with a wealth of other related material: <http://www.vasulka.org/Kitchen/index.html>
6. Now out of print, but also available online at: <http://artscilab.org/expandedcinema.html/>

Rob Flint (aka scopac) is an artist who works with projected images and performance, often in collaboration with musicians and sound artists. He is a longterm member of audiovisual group 'Ticklish' and has performed with a wide range of sonic experimentalists including Toshimaru Nakamura, David Cunningham, Steve Beresford and Kaffe Matthews.
See: www.scopac.org

