VJ Towards Media Art – A Possibility of Interactive Visual Expression

Kenta Motomura

Iwate University

Abstract:

 A VJ works for visual effects in a dance club. The VJ's work is interactive and improvisational. The VJ has an interactive relationship with the place, and reacts to the music, which is produced by a DJ. The expression form consists of the art elements as "light", "motion", "sound (music)", "interactivity", and additionally "real-time". This new stream of expression can reach at the field of media art. The possibility of uniting self-expression and nature-simulation by expecting parametric interactive tools is a suggestion here.

Keywords: VJ, Bauhaus, color-music, art elements, interactive visual expression

1. What is VJ?

 In this paper, "VJ" does not stand for "video journalist", but for "video jockey" or "visual jockey", who makes "live visuals". In Japan, the VJ was born in the (dance) club scene at the end of the 20th century, and has been promoting the movement of image production there. We can see this movement as a worldwide simultaneous event. In many countries, the role of the VJ (or VJ-team) at a club party is receiving much attention among clubbers (= club-people).

 This study is based on the author's theoretical research of the Bauhaus[1] and practical research of VJ activity[2]. The new possibility of "VJing" as an expression form is focused upon.

 As a matter of research object, the 'VJ' is not yet in the right field. He is too young to be admitted by any authorities. It is still not easy to find the terminology of "VJ" and "VJing" in the field of art and design, even in cultural studies. Therefore the current "homeless" VJ should be assessed somehow in a field of studies, for example by finding some relevance to the stream of art. Until now, the existence of the VJ has been limited to a supporting role at the club scene, concerts and fashion shows, etc. Here, however, a VJ will be dealt with as a latent potential artist, and his structural elements of expression will receive much attention.

2. VJ in the club scene

 The club scene can be recognized as the cultural underground. That is neither ready-made "art" style, nor "pop" culture. We can see the birth of new expression form there. Then, what kind of place is the club where young clubbers meet? Of course this is the place where people listen to music created by a DJ (disc jockey), dance and drink. Thus the club has at first the function of entertainment. From the point of view of the requirements of the clubber, this is the place where they can escape from their ordinary life, release bottled-up feelings and enjoy a sense of freedom. Also it is the place where they can feel a sense of

togetherness in a trance and take their chances for communication with each other. These functions of the club, like catharsis, trance and communication, have played an important role for the rising young club culture.

From ancient times, music and dance were expressive actions for religious ceremony, such as ritual dance, and for forming a group which aimed at a certain goal. For that effective place, throughout the history of man art had been helpful as a variety of fields, such as architecture, painting, sculpture, theater, costume and tools. We can see the same situation in the club scene. About the DJ's role there, Bill Brewster and Frank Broughton wrote in their book *Last Night A DJ Saved My Life - The History of the Disc Jockey*, "the DJ is today's lord of the dance" [3]. "So the DJ is part shaman, part technician, part collector, part selector and part musical evangelist. Doubtless he is a craftsman, the expert at making people dance. (…) The truth about DJing is that it is an emotional, improvisational artform and here the real scope for artistry lies. A good DJ isn't just stringing records together, he's controlling the relationship between some music and hundreds of people." [4]

The DJ provides clubbers with dance music while performing. Ready-made music in records will be re-mixed by his scratching or filtering. The DJ makes the unique taste of music and dancing atmosphere in the club. The reaction of the people makes the DJ decide the next action. Thus a DJ plays music in an interactive improvisational artform. This is the work of the "lord of the dance".

The VJ plays a supplementary role with visual media for the ritual direction. Before the birth of the VJ, visual effects and identification in clubs were done by posters, flyers, lights and people's fashion. The lights were especially important for the live direction of effects at the parties in clubs. Flashing of strobe light, fluorescence by black light, reflection of mirror ball, flamboyant laser light and various color lights, sometimes with smoke or bubbles, the means of direction was done by the switching of someone in charge. The newborn VJ brought the moving image into the place and heightened the value of visual effects.

This visual direction by the VJ (Fig.1) is able to adjust the image for the moment of the music and atmosphere. Usually by "motion typography", he can also show text data, like names of the party or DJ, song titles and some messages.

Fig.1 The visual direction by the VJ in the club scene (VJ: the author of this paper, at the "TRANCE NIGHT")

3. Construction of expression by VJ

Creating live visuals by the VJ is practiced mainly through video mixing at the place of activity, and the methodology of VJing is similar to the DJ's construction with two records. Generally, as the DJ manipulates sounds with a mixer and two turntables, so the VJ manipulates visuals with a mixer and several image

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sources. The sources are videos in VHS or DVD form, which are made in advance, live image through hand-held camera or fixed camera, and mixed image through software mixer on PC, etc. These are connected to a hardware mixer, and mixed or switched by the VJ impromptu. The improvised visuals are shown on the screen by digital projector or directly on the TV monitors.

The development of the software mixer (=VJ soft) and the progress of the performance of personal computers were the cause of the current expansion of the VJ scene. About this advent of 'VJ soft' the Japanese CG artist Daizaburo Harada wrote in *VJ2000* the following:

"Until now, 'to play' was not in the spotlight in the world of visuals. (…) but at the present when we have circumstances of non-linear editing, after the movement of analog to digital and computer-centering, the part 'to play' has been seen close-up under the name of so-called interactive."[5]

This interactive relationship between a VJ and his circumstances is the base of real-time changing of visuals. Then, how can his live manipulation act in response to the situation in good time? At the party, the VJ (or VJ-team) uses visuals from some sources. The live manipulation of the VJ performance depends on the function of the software and hardware mixer.

When the VJ constructs visuals with dance music, for example, tempo (BPM), tone, meaning of the lyrics and development of the song, the performance of the DJ and the reaction of the clubbers can be a factor of timing for the manipulation. When and how a VJ can change his visuals is the question of his sensitivity and technique. With his soft-hardware mixers, while reacting to the beat of the music, he mixes and switches the sources of the visuals and adds visual effects or motion typographies one by one.

The "art elements" are the basic structure of visual creation. For the "visual literacy" of art works these were historically concerned by the artists, such as Wassily Kandinsky, Paul Klee, László Moholy-Nagy and Josef Albers at the Bauhaus, and then by György Kepes who wrote *Language of Vision* in 1944.

The expressive activity by VJing is so-called 'playing visuals'. As a musician plays an instrument and makes sounds, so a VJ makes visuals. This expression style with "live"-feeling is improvisational. This aesthetic structure of the expression form consists of the art elements as "light", "motion", "sound (music)", "interactivity", and additionally "real-time". The characteristic work of the VJ can be recognized as an interactive visual performance with music rather than editing film.

4. Color-music as background of VJ

Since the old days, the unity of art (visual expression) and music (audio expression) has been formed in religious ceremony or amusement, and has an important role for the effective atmosphere. Pursuing the possibility of expression with visual and auditory (and sometimes bodily as well) stimulation is easily found not only in media art today, but also in the history of developing "color-music". This system consists of a piano-like instrument, and projects colored light while playing the instrument.

Kenneth Peacock wrote in his article *Instruments to Perform Color-Music: Two Centuries of Technological Experimentation*, about the history of the experimental device as "light-projection instrument" from the eighteenth century. This kind of proposal for the performance by Louis-Bertrand Castel in France was the first. His *clavecin oculaire* (visual harpsichord) as a model which was completed in 1734, initiated the innovation of audiovisual combining. In the USA in 1877, Bainbridge Bishop constructed a system of "painting music", which was to be set on top of a home organ (Fig.2). Following on from this, "the best-known color instrument"[6] of the nineteenth century is Alexander Wallace Rimington's *Color-Organ*, which became the genetic term of devices projecting colored light. In 1925 at a music festival in Germany, Alexander László's device, the *Sonchromatoscope*, which employed his own system of notation, was introduced. This kind of artistic experiment also happened at the Bauhaus as well. Ludwig Hirschfeld-Mack tried making a kind of color organ, *Farbenlichtspiele* (color-light play) [7] for his audiovisual shows with his own music. The other, *Clavilux* developed in 1922 by Thomas Wilfred was the "most famous of the experimental color-instruments" [8]. Here we can find an influence by the Bauhaus. Peacock wrote, "Kandinsky's theory that geometrical patterns supplement non-objective use of color possibly influenced Wilfred's work."[9]

The concept of "motion" was practiced in painting at first at the Bauhaus. Kandinsky and Klee were using dynamic composition, structural form and "arrow" in their drawings and paintings. By adopting a dynamic point of view, the "still image" becomes more lively and powerful as an expression.

As "moving image", which contain time shaft, Moholy-Nagy's works are remarkable. We can find his idea and practice in *Painting, Photography, Film* (1927), and later in *Vision in Motion* (1947). His research about synthetic art and motion was the latest art experiment, and encountered a new literacy of art. He tried to introduce new-coming technology for creative activities. His suggestions in his books are blooming in art and education due to the rise of today's expression with multimedia.

Fig.2 Bainbridge Bishop's device for color-music (1877)
(Bainbridge Bishop, A Souvenir of the Color Organ, 1893)

In the stream of color-music, the Japanese media artist, Toshio Iwai's *Piano - as image media* in 1995 is a remarkable artwork as an interactive audiovisual

installation, produced at ZKM / the Institute for Visual Media, Karlsruhe, Germany. This system consists of mainly a MIDI piano, two computers, trackball and button, two projectors and screens. Not only an artist or a technician, but also a spectator can use this system and be involved with the interactive expression. Iwai wrote about this work as follows: "Use the trackball and button to position and place 'dots' on a moving grid on the lower projection screen. These dots constitute a virtual score which triggers the piano keys, which in turn project computer-generated images on the upper screen. The patterns you create with these dots generate simple melodies and related visual formations." [10]

We can recognize the history of color-music as the background of VJ and a possibility of the expression in this general survey.

5. VJ within the Bauhaus-ideas

The Bauhaus, which established the foundation of modern design, and had a great influence worldwide, was founded in Germany by the architect Walter Gropius in 1919. In the foundation declaration, there were "synthetic art" under architecture and "recovery of the handicrafts" as main themes. At the Bauhaus-week and the Bauhaus-exhibition in 1923 "art and technology – a new unity" was declared as a slogan, and "the integration of art and the technology" became the most important theme. It is a historical fact that the movement tries "synthetic art" as an integration of the various fields of art and "the integration of the art and the *machine*-technology" experimentally. However, the Bauhaus can not only be looked at as history. It extends

a range even in "the integration of the art and the *electronic*-technology" under today's art scene. Even today, it can be said that it keeps living as "the digital Bauhaus" or "the electronic Bauhaus." Today if we think of "synthetic art" in the electronic technology time, "media art" which integrate image and sound information are focused. Media art have the possibility of new synthetic art beyond the frame of visual art and music.

A VJ works also in this condition and shows the possibility of his expression. At the Bauhaus University Weimar, which succeeded to the legacy of historical Bauhaus, "VJ" became one of the research projects as "VJ - towards an electronic art" [11]. Current VJ projects suggest to us the artistic possibility of VJing and the developing tools for VJs in the future. Thus, in the summer of 2004 at Cafe Moskau in Berlin, "ContactEurope VJ Festival 2004"[12] was held as a project, which was the first trial to show that VJing was recognized as a new form of visual art.

6. VJ towards media art – a suggestion

We should keep focusing on the VJ and his interactive improvisational performance expression as a new category of art. For his "real-time" manipulation, unique software and hardware tools are also expected, because the possibility of his expression artform gives us the key to open the new field of art.

DJs and VJs in the club scene express themselves in their own way. With electronic-technology, we can develop not only the way of "self-expression", but also "nature-simulation"[13]. Typing an algorithm for the simulation by an

information technology engineer creates the virtual world. In a way, he is a "creator" of the world. The view of "micro cosmos" by self-expression and the view of "macro cosmos" by nature-simulation can be connected by electronic-technology .

Fig.3 Uniting self-expression and nature-simulation

(Suggestion: the development of parametric interactive tools)

 As a suggestion here for uniting self-expression and nature-simulation is the development of expecting parametric interactive tools (Fig.3). The changing of "parameter" of the tools for the VJ expression, and of the algorithm for the simulation is the common possibility of the manipulation. With this manipulation, united interactive improvisational performance by the VJ will be able to be realized. By the fader or the knob of the expecting tools real-time reaction becomes possible. Thus, the VJ can use the algorithm of the nature-simulation for his own self-expression. An installation of media art based on this system is also possible, even if the term "VJ" vanishes in this case. At this time the VJ is a media artist.

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