

# FOREWORD

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**THE APPEAL OF BECOMING A VJ** is obvious: we are junkies for power and flash. We imagine ourselves as Zeus or Thor at the eye of the hurricane, casting our lightning bolts above the fray. We look out with satisfaction across the swirling clouds.

We are born with an innate will to create visible action at a distance. It's the rush of shooting bottles off a fence with a rifle. It's calling someone you're about to meet on their cellphone when you can already see them across the café. As children, who didn't want to be the construction crane operator or the railroad engineer the first time they realized such dream jobs existed? You push a little button here and you see something big happen over there. It's a primal thrill.

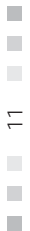
Maybe it comes from a behavioral tendency—rooted way back in our evolution—to appear larger than life, as a way to attract mates or frighten predators. Many animals carry out these bluffs instinctually, and it seems to succeed in saving their skins and passing on their genes. On the other hand, it's the basic drive of *Homo sapiens* alone to construct, to add complexity, to think big.

So back to Vjing, this relatively new art form. It is a tendril of modern culture evolving in the fertile soil of technology, energized by our primal desire to affect visible action at a distance. That's the theory, but where has this mixture of desire and technology taken us in actual practice?

In spite of our aspirations of Zeus-like omnipotence, VJs often feel more like the Sorcerer's Apprentice from *Fantasia*. Our magical objects take on a life of their own, with only occasional unskilled input from the protagonist mouse who summons their performance.

These humorously juxtaposed metaphors, Zeus and the Sorcerer's Apprentice, hint at where we're going: Mickey needs better command of the medium—tools that offer finer and finer grained control. Zeus wants to create whole new environments, alternate structures for the audience's relationship to moving pictures, contexts that go beyond the one-way, streaming rectangles of canned cinema and television.

If we look deep inside ourselves, we can sense the perfect medium. Imagine a galaxy of glowing stars. Your presence envelops the space, from a point of choreography at the center. Your consciousness becomes a vortex of glittering eels swimming with one mind, each of them a pixel choosing what to reflect. You see the visible in every direction, and control it fluidly at all levels—from the conceptual and editorial, through the composition of the image, right



down to the pixel level. Most difficult of all, the Holy Grail, really: your performance is dynamic, and can change on a whim.

The process of getting there has been a hard one for live visual artists, and its perfect form it will always remain elusive. Musicians, actors, and orators have been generating environment-enveloping performances for ages directly with their minds and bodies. Producing sound is natural, a byproduct of our breath. With visuals, it's been a centuries-old struggle against the laws of physical reality, waged with rigging, props, pyrotechnics, light, and shadow. And only relatively recently did we nail down cinema, photographic representation with a time component.

The hard-fought spoils? Cinema and television, with the cameras, projection systems and economic models they're linked to. Early, silent film, with its portable cameras, and early television, with its 100% live format, both promised a dynamic future. But artists who worked in these new media were captivated, understandably, by radical new powers of representation—at the expense of spontaneity. At the same time, the businesses that owned these media systems sought the profitability of duplication and mass-production. As a result, through most of cinema and television history, only scattered effort has gone into capturing the improvisational aspect of performance, the uniqueness of the present moment, and of each individual audience.

The history Paul delves into in these pages, then, begins with a process of evolutionary false starts and one-offs. The fingers of *Cultura* have been searching for a natural modality—the base stalk that will survive to be the proto-species from which the next generations will spring. In VJing, we have seen an accelerated snap into such a new modality. Over the last decade, the form has quickly evolved into a standardized medium that takes the best aspects of film and television, and opens them back up to spontaneity and live human interaction.

Just as in evolution, it was change in the environment that drove the new form into existence. Niches opened up in the culture, begging to be filled, while artistic resources became available as byproducts of other processes. Grazers, predators and scavengers roiled in a new, unexplored landscape of mixers, projectors, laptops, and software. Technology is our meteor. So, yes, it is obvious why someone would want to become a VJ at this point in the cultural timeline; there were rats before, scurrying between their holes at night, but the smart rats are stepping forward into the age of mammals.