

INTRODUCTION ■ ■ ■ ■

WHAT IS VJING? It means improvising with visuals, specifically those rendered via projected light. The expression originally referred to the Video Jockey (as a counterpart to a Disc Jockey), but it's more accurately Visuals Jockey—a general descriptor that encompasses older, non-video avocations such as “running the light show.” Martha Quinn and Kurt Loder notwithstanding, the term VJ, as used here, has nothing to do with appearing on television to introduce advertisements.

Faster laptop computers and digital projectors now offer VJs fundamentally new powers of visual improvisation. In fact, those two are all you need: a laptop and a projector, along with some free software. Some have compared these developments to the invention of musical instruments, or at least of a new class of instrument. But let's not go too far; the ability to generate visuals on-the-fly is nothing new. Puppeteers, theaters, circuses, and operas have been doing it all along (within the constraints of the physical world, despite all the clever rigging). In the 1890s, the color organ created moving visuals without the physical constraints (but all of the subsequent tinkering with masks, lenses, and filament shapes still couldn't make the definition sharp enough to create recognizable pictures). Film was always clear and infinitely controllable (too bad it's a dead, stored archive rather than a live experience). Video and computer graphics did finally make it possible to manipulate imagery arbitrarily, liberating a basic form of expression from long-endured limitations (yet the equipment was, until recently, prohibitively expensive). Okay, maybe this *is* like the invention of musical instruments—live musical instruments, somehow coming after the invention of recordable ones.

So what's the big deal about its being live? As we're flooded by well-produced, mass-marketed, canned media product, this is easy for us to forget. The big deal is, every moment is unique, just like in life. And with apologies to Plato, the truest reality is the one we're living in, the world outside our door, rather than any flickering shadows on the wall. VJing connects with the moment and connects with others. It's a gift for the people you're with, never to be duplicated. Yes, you're using video technology, As Seen on TV, but it isn't meant to earn you future glory, to be delivered through a one-way channel to people you'll never meet. It isn't for a detached audience, sitting somewhere else.

Today, VJs perform most often in dance clubs to accompany a DJ. This lineage is a blessing and a curse. Clubs offer a fun atmosphere and a receptive crowd, but, as an audience, they aren't paying much attention to the visuals on the screen. People are there to dance, so the DJ has the power, and the VJ plays second fiddle. There is no visual substitute for the physically energizing, visceral power of a beat, and audio scratching has a magical ability to evoke the inflections of speech without using words. Video scratching, meanwhile, is more likely to evoke the instant replay on *Monday Night Football*.

But there's another side of DJing, its cultural collage—selecting, mixing, and juxtaposing music and other sounds to draw parallels and distinctions among the sampled components. And for this creative intent, VJing blows DJing away completely. The VJ's palette is far broader, encompassing any imagery at all, recognizable or obscure, abstract or representational, iconic or ambiguous. The elements can also be combined more freely, anything mixed with anything, without worrying about key, or beats per minute, or whether they sound good together. The dissonances a VJ creates are cognitive, not musical.

Furthermore, VJing has far more subversive potential than DJing. This characteristic is essentially built-in, thanks to intellectual property laws. A DJ in a club that pays its ASCAP dues is legally covered, but for VJs, the best performances happen in private or at non-commercial events, because they have fewer legal limits on source imagery. VJs who sample need to operate beneath the culture industry's radar. Any VJ who performs at a superclub knows that in the meantime, someone else is putting on a more diverse and challenging show for friends in their living room.

So VJs are spreading their wings and traveling in new directions, out of the club and into places where audiences sit and pay attention. Some perform solo, while others work with dance troupes and musical ensembles. Others add live video to karaoke and improv comedy. And most of them would probably be up for all of the above.

Major creative shifts are happening as well. VJs are beginning to experiment with narrative, which the field has been mostly lacking. There's nothing about live video that precludes storytelling—it just hasn't been done much yet. We have plenty of Man Rays, but who will be our D.W. Griffith or our Orson Welles? Who will be our Chuck Barris? This vast new territory needs pioneers.

With all of its media and electronics, VJ could pass for the next phase of advanced, technology-fed alienation. But underneath, it's more like cooking. You collect the best, freshest ingredients you can find, mix them together the way you and your guests will like them, and then you serve it up and enjoy the special time together.

After the photograph and the phonograph, after television and radio, sight and sound lost some of their authenticity. We can now no longer be sure if we

saw something in person or on TV. But we don't have smell-a-vision, and a delicious meal is always a direct, unmediated experience. And when we remember it, we know that our senses had engaged with the world in a living moment, that we weren't just tasting someone else's characterization.

That's what VJ does with all the fantastic new video technology we have. It takes it back from Big Media, serves it up just for us, and makes it delicious.

San Francisco, 2005