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AND AUDIO VISUALS IN INFORMATION
TECHNOLOGY CONFERENCE (AVIT)



In the Leeds Corn Exchange, a thousand or so punters are enjoying a party to remember courtesy of local promoters Most Wanted and their Technique night. The Stanton Warriors, Plump DJs and FreQ Nasty are just some of the breakbeat elite rocking the crowd, but the DJs are only half of the show. From all around the amphitheatre-style venue, images flash, beam and wink at the crowd. Stylised footage of grooving clubbers, abstract tones and patterns, cute animations, provocative art school sloganeering and raided TV footage compete and collide on the projection screens surrounding the dancefloor. It's one very successful way to ensure that the transformation of the Corn Exchange from daytime shopping centre to night-time pleasure dome is pulled off with some style. It's also the crowning glory in an event that has brought VJs from across the world together for AVIT, a three day conference of information-sharing, visual displays and partying.

VIRTUAL COMMUNITIES

The VJs - video or visual jockeys - are the individuals and crews ringed around the top floor of the Corn Exchange controlling all the imagery from computers and consoles and AVIT is perhaps the best evidence yet of the burgeoning international community that has grown up around their art.

Short for Audio Visuals in Information Technology, AVIT is the 'real world' representation of the virtual community that exists on www.vjforums.com, a website launched by Swiss VJ Exhale in April last year to give VJs the opportunity to pool knowledge and expertise. Following the success of the Leeds event, conferences under the AVIT banner are being planned by affiliates in the USA and Australia. Proof, believes AVIT's Todd Fath, that the underground VJ culture that has been building steadily for the last decade is fast reaching critical mass. "The event at the Corn Exchange was a great success," explains Fath. "We had a great cross-section of VJ styles and VJs turned up from Switzerland, Croatia, Brazil, Israel, The States, Holland... Ten years ago VJing didn't even exist but it's growing into a viable alternative to established media. It's drawing together a very dynamic, forward-thinking group of people who have invented new jobs for themselves and built a platform to influence people through their work."

ON THE MONEY

Back in autumn 1998, DJmag ran a story investigating the emergence of VJ crews like the Light Surgeons and Hexstatic, pioneering collectives on a mission to take club visuals way beyond the light show, lasers and psychedelic backdrops that typified the early days of the club scene. Back then, the main players were convinced that the emerging VJ scene would eventually develop into a DIY sub-culture to rival that which surrounds DJing. Three and a half years later, their predictions look to be bang on the money.

Vjforums.com, for example, has attracted over 1300 registered members in the months since it was launched. Elsewhere on the net, you can find masses of VJ-dedicated material at the likes of www.vjcentral.com,

www.audiovisualizers.com or www.VJs.net. In the UK, the AVIT conference in Leeds came on the back of VJs.net's own audio-visual spectacular, which took place at London's Ocean venue over the summer. Both are now scheduled to become annual events. Wherever there are people putting on clubs, reckons Todd Fath, you can bet there are VJs ready and able to supply a visual accompaniment to the night's sonic adventures.

According to Ninja Tune co-owner Matt Black, who continues to push boundaries in the field through his Coldcut outfit, the expansion of VJing is a natural consequence of technological advances that have made the craft accessible to anyone with a computer and a bit of creativity.

"DJing and DIY music has had a massive impact over the last 15 years," states Black. "Now we have the possibility of being able to experiment with electronic art in the same way. When I started the equipment and technical know-how you needed to VJ restricted it to real geeko techies and even then you were limited to mixing between VHS tapes. Now it's easy to get your hands on a set-up that allows you to manipulate audio visual material in real time."

The proliferation of powerful computer hardware and software enabling users to play with moving images in real time is, claims Black, a development parallel in significance to the development of the first mass market samplers.

COMING OF AGE

Another strong indicator that the VJ may be coming of age is the fact that companies have now begun to manufacture and market specialist VJing equipment. Like the Hippotizer, a purpose-built visuals mixer that VJs like Todd Fath, VJ Kriel and VJ Anyone believe is on its way to becoming the VJ equivalent of the trusty 1210 turntable.

The availability of affordable, powerful easy-to-use VJ technology and the enthusiasm of the VJs themselves may have helped to popularise VJing, but it means little unless there is a genuine appetite among clubbers and promoters to experience the fruits of the VJ's labour - and pay for the pleasure. Although the VJ's profile is still nowhere near as big as their record spinning counterparts, the visuals crews have made inroads into clubland over recent years. Having proved those who dismissed their popularity as a short-lived fad wrong, VJs are now a regular feature of club nights of all varieties.

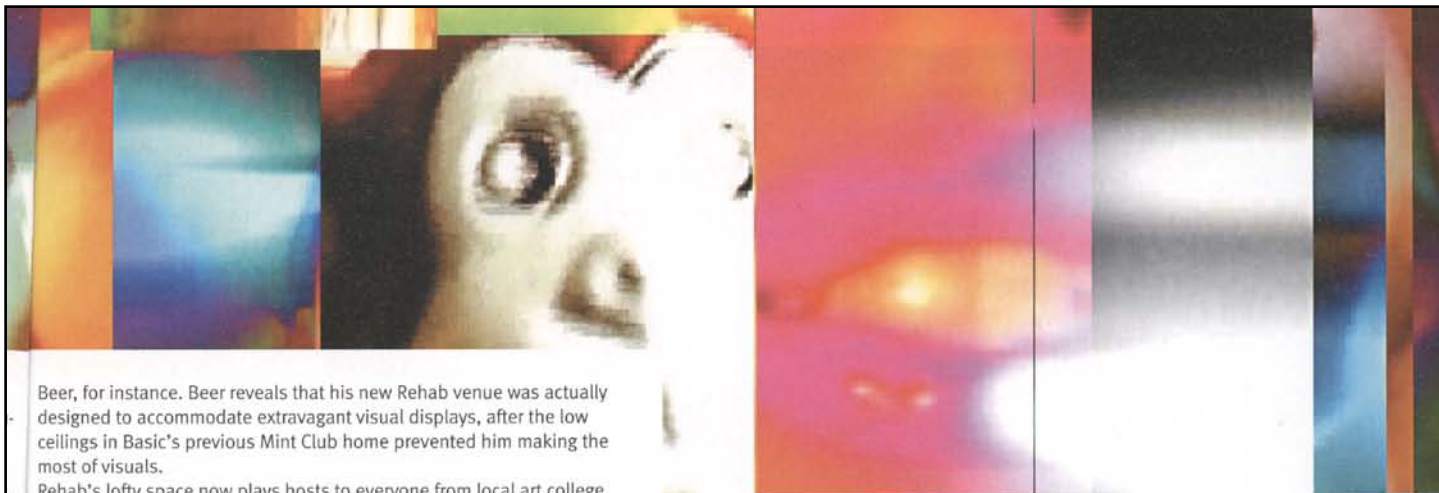
The next step, argues rising star VJ Anyone, is for the dance scene to move beyond the novelty factor and apply the same critical criteria to VJ performances as they do to DJ sets.

"I think VJs are gradually weaving ourselves into the fabric of the dance community," muses Anyone. "It used to be that having visuals at a night was seen as a bonus but it's becoming the standard. There's a great enthusiasm for visuals generally but what will determine the future of VJ culture is whether people can begin to make a choice about what they actually like instead of just saying, 'Oh cool, they've got visuals.'"

CRITICAL APPROACH

The time when the merits of an Anyone set are as hotly debated as those of a Tenaglia or Tiësto marathon might still be some way off, but there are already those in the wider dance scene who are beginning to take a more critical approach to VJing. Like BacktoBasics promoter Dave





Beer, for instance. Beer reveals that his new Rehab venue was actually designed to accommodate extravagant visual displays, after the low ceilings in Basic's previous Mint Club home prevented him making the most of visuals.

Rehab's lofty space now plays hosts to everyone from local art college crews to Vjing superstar VJ Kriel, but only if they first meet Beer's strict quality threshold. Along with décor, lighting and, of course, the music, VJs can be crucial in building the character, atmosphere and energy of a night and must be subject to the same high standards as any of those other elements.

"Visuals can be really important in building the ambience of a night," comments Beer. "It's something I've always found exciting, but it reached a point where everyone was doing them and doing them badly, so now if you're going to use them, they have to be good. It's also important as a promoter to have an input to what images are used so that they actually relate to the night."

In the run-up to Basics' recent 'doctors and nurses' themed birthday party, Beer spent time sourcing suitable 'Carry On...' style clips for VJ Kriel to blend into his visual mix during the night. It's an amusing example of how VJs can help to create that crucial ambience in a club. In Kriel's opinion, however, a really good VJ can also do a whole lot more.

CONNECTION

Former artist in residence at Radio 1, Kriel has played parties from Space Ibiza to the Love Parade. He believes that a VJ who is doing his job properly will connect with and fire up clubbers in the same way as a great DJ. "I'm not going to kid myself that I alone can make people dance," admits Kriel. "But if Carl Cox or whoever can get people dancing, then a skilled VJ can come along and add that extra 10% that has everybody scraping themselves off the ceiling. If it's done properly it's a lot more than background. I have people come up all the time saying I totally changed their night."

To VJ properly, Krill emphasises, is no mean feat. Not only must the VJ have fresh, interesting material to work with and total control over his equipment, but they must also be clued-up enough about the music the DJ is likely to play to be able to anticipate and respond to peaks and breakdowns. Along with the likes of VJ Anyone, Kriel is from the nu skool of VJing, with the emphasis on entertainment and working with a DJ rather than making esoteric arty or political statements. He leaves that side of things for his high-art oriented VJ work, like the 'Bye' project which saw him collaborating with ex-Dope Smuggla Tim Sheridan and dance choreographer Sarah Worsop for a performance piece in Tate Britain. In February Kriel will be hooking up with Sarah Worsop again to provide visuals for Snag, a dance performance at posh arts venue the Queen Elizabeth Hall, with Basic's Dave Beer manning the DJ booth. It's indicative of the art world's increasing interest in VJing, an interest which VJ Anyone and his co-promoters at London visuals night Vectors sought to capitalise on with their recent Livefeed event.

ESCAPING THE CONFINES

Taking over a Hoxton gallery space, Livefeed was the latest attempt to take VJing away from the clubs and present it as art/entertainment in its own right. VJ Anyone views such events as an important strand of the developing VJing scene, turning the arty crowd onto what VJs can do and allowing VJs themselves to create a full-on visual experience in a way that is often difficult in the confines of a club. To explore the full potential of VJing, argues Anyone, VJs must be allowed to work with the space and surround clubbers with images far more comprehensively than they are at your average discotheque.

Having ended their residency at AKA, Vectors are currently on the hunt for venues that will give them the freedom to carry out Anyone's aims. Placing greater emphasis on clubbing as a visual experience is one obvious way to expand the VJ's role, but others believe things can go much further. For Robin Brunford of trailblazing VJ veterans Hexstatic, visuals in clubs are just one manifestation of an audio-visual revolution that is set to explode as the spread of high speed broadband internet connections gives VJs and others the chance to broadcast their work to the masses.

"Until now TV and film have been the last bastion of corporate control over the media, but that's changing," says Brunford. "With a DV camera and software like i Movie, you can already make broadcast quality film at home and when broadband really comes on-stream it will mean you can basically start your own TV station from your bedroom. We're seeing it already with sites like www.piratetv.net. At the moment the penetration isn't quite there but it will happen."

PREDICTIONS

On the club side of things, Hexstatic have been instrumental in pioneering integrated audio-visual DJ/VJ sets, mixing sound and visual samples from TV, film and music into funky multi-media performances. It's an area that Coldcut's Matt Black has also explored to great effect and he predicts we'll see many more people doing so in the future. In fact, Black firmly believes that the day is coming when DJing itself will be seen as just one aspect of VJing. After all, he reasons, why would coming generations of computer-savvy kids choose to mix records exclusively when there's a whole world of other media out there waiting to be fucked with? Dismiss him as a crank if you like, but remember it took 20 years for mix DJing to grow from its origins on the 70s New York club scene to a worldwide DiY culture. VJing has been around for less than a decade and already it is attracting thousands of devotees from every corner of the clubbing planet, which just might be enough to give the Tenaglias and Tiëstos of this world something to think about. **DJ**

GENERAL VJ SITES

- www.VJforums.com
- www.avit.info
- www.Vjs.net
- www.audiovisualisers.com

VJ TECHNOLOGY SITES

- www.vjampro.com (Coldcut-developed Vjing software)
- www.isualjockey.com (real-time animation software developed with VJs in mind)
- www.green-hippo.com (home to the Hippotizer, purpose-built VJ mixer)

INDIVIDUAL VJ SITES

- www.kriel.tv
- www.anyone.org.uk
- www.AVinIT.co.uk (Todd Fath site)
- www.ninjatune.net (for Hexstatic and Coldcut)

■ Charles Kriel VJs as part of the Snag dance project at the Queen Elizabeth Hall, London, on 7th & 8th February.

■ Hexstatic's 'Solid Steel: Listen & Learn' mix CD is released 27th January on Ninja Tune. Hexstatic will be touring an audio-visual mix based around the CD.

