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PICTURES 1-18 UNITED VISUAL ARTISTS; 19-22 RAY, 23-24 YEAST; 25-32 THE LIGHT SURGEONS; 33-38 D-FUSE; 39-45 ADDICTIVE TV

SOUND & VISION With an expanding palette of exciting digital technologies at their disposal, and a long line of DJs and musicians queuing up to work with them, **UK VJs, or 'Video Jockeys', are setting the world alight**

Are the noughties the decade of the VJ? Just this year in the UK, the number of milestones VJs have crossed is unprecedented: United Visual Artists (UVA) displayed live feeds from online databases with huge LED screens for Massive Attack's 100th Window tour; Diesel-U-Music added a VJ category to its series of prizes, awarding Exceeda as the most gifted independent VJ collective in the country; AVIT 2003 recruited more than sixty international artists for a four-day VJ festival in Brighton, as such the

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biggest VJ specific event in UK music history. The VJs' recognition has been long awaited, but judging by forthcoming projects to be unfolded to audiences worldwide, VJing promises to be more than an overnight sensation.

The roots of VJing are long and sinuous. The very first time moving images were integrated with music in a festive context is believed to be in 1966 when Andy Warhol hosted a 'Happening'. In New York's New Cinematheque, Warhol projected silent excerpts of his own films to live music played by The Velvet Underground. In the 70s a whole gamut of music acts that sexed up their performance with visual stimuli followed: Genesis and Pink Floyd revamped theatre props; Jean-Michel Jarre integrated laser lights; Kraftwerk used animated computer

graphics; Queen produced the epic music video Bohemian Rhapsody.

The trend snowballed. By 1981 virtually every pop act had to have a music video to promote their latest single. There were soon sufficient pop promos to fill an entire broadcasting channel, and so MTV was born. The term 'VJ' was promptly coined to label the MTV host, a direct transposition from DJ.

In the 90s DJs emerged as the stars of the global club culture phenomenon, moving centre stage; a position previously monopolized by bands. Visual artists and designers soon latched onto the DJs' ascension by re-appropriating the term VJ. For fans of club culture, VJ no longer meant MTV announcer, but visual selector, remixer, producer and live performer.

The earliest attempts to establish VJs on the same level as musicians were made through audiovisual collaborations released on CD-ROM. Timber, created by Coldcut (Matt Black and Jonathan More) and Hexstatic in 1997, was one of the most innovative and accomplished examples of its time. Here the music is delivered by rhythmically cutting the video's image and sound tracks simultaneously. As a result the associations between

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image and sound are so tight that Timber's images not only 'illustrate' the

music, but more precisely 'visualise' it.

It seems the success of the VJ is due in part to their engagement with new technologies. As with CD-ROMs in the 90s, VJs can dip into an ever-increasing pool of devices to capture, process, trigger and display visuals. More importantly these tools have become much more powerful, compact and light. A whole new generation of mobile VJs are turning up at gigs with little more hardware than a powerbook and portable DVD players, easily stowed in a flight case no bigger than a record box.

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Then again, The Light Surgeons are leading a counter movement, avoiding the lures of new technology by using the widest variety of visual sources possible. Of course they use digital imagery, but in combination with analogue video, 16mm film and 35mm slides — projecting and casting elaborate patterns of light and shadow onto a variety of screens.

The single most useful tool in the VJ's arsenal is the internet. Through the web, countless grassroots VJ collectives have enjoyed international recognition. Others have made a point of travelling to perform in 'technologically challenged' countries, using global awareness as the central theme of their visuals. Raya,

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YourMum and Yeast are three such examples. Their respective journeys have not been glitch free, and artists and hosts alike have had to be inventive in order to accommodate VJing within completely different cultural and technological contexts. But these exchanges also gave local audiences another view of the UK, a refreshing change from what is to be currently experienced on the world political stage.

In one such journey in 2002, Raya and Yeast went to Taipei (Taiwan), to perform at the closing event for the British Council's Sound Design album cover art exhibition. Their visual mixes included artwork from the exhibition along with dance tracks from the artists featured. At the time, VJ culture in Taiwan was practically non-existent, and Raya's knowledge of the local music scene somewhat limited, so they didn't know what to expect. But the crowd loved it. Furthermore, they knew every tune, every album cover. It seems that their visit has sparked a fuse and a local VJ scene in Taipei is beginning to develop.

For YourMum the interest was much more focused on engaging in an ongoing creative relationship with the local youths and talents in Tunisia. Art students assisted YourMum to create original content from filming street scenes, graffiti art and culturally significant landmarks, within a work experience scenario. Several performances have resulted from this project; a few more are on the way.

A VJ's aptitude lies not in having all the latest techno toys to play with. It lies in what is produced with these toys, and even more between them. As the word jockey implies, a VJ juggles, surfs, rides on a multitude of talents to provide the best visual solution of the day. This ability can be learned whilst VJing, then applied to a variety of practices, regardless of social or cultural context. More and more people believe in the educational values of VJing:

'VJing is a cultural form that brings together art and technology, expression and technique, skill and inspiration, planning and spontaneity ... Vjing is an imaginative form readily accepted by young people who for a variety of reasons find rewarding creative activities a rare experience. Remember that VJing is, mainly due to its alliance with club culture and DJing, in most young people's bloodstream. That creates a head start when it comes to teaching some core skills since you're working in an idiom that young people are receptive to.' St. John Walker of VJs.net

As the quantity of VJs expands, so does the diversity of creative places where they may be spotted. VJs still work with DJs, but also increasingly with bands, dance and theatre performers, with new media projects as well as self-contained

audiovisual shows. From these endeavours, all sorts of artefacts are produced, marking the VJ's presence and establishing VJing as an industry: themed festivals and club nights, dedicated software and hardware, specialised labels and agencies, focused workshops, specific online resources and merchandise.

VJing is turning into a global phenomenon, with local styles and specialties situated in different parts of the world. In Japan VJing is strongly associated with graphic design and architecture. In North America it is very common to find VJs in new media art galleries. In the UK, however, the trend is leaning much more to onstage performance and its relationship to live music. From early pioneers of British VJing like Hexstatic and Matt Black to the newest addition of rising stars like Yeast, all possess an amazing rapport with the musicians with whom they work. Whether it be for pioneering VJ labels (Addictive TV), holding residencies on mainstream broadcasting stations (VJ Kriel) or international acclaim (D-Fuse, The Light Surgeons), the UK is amongst the world leaders in producing accomplished VJs.

It may well be VJs that kick-start the next British invasion ●

VJ Anyone works at the crossroads between club culture, new media and live arts. He writes regularly in DJ magazine and hosts VJ Culture, a bi-monthly VJ screening at the ICA. For more information on VJ Anyone visit www.anyone.org.uk.

ONLINE RESOURCES

COLDCUT

Ninja Tunes' founding member and VJ pioneer
www.ninjatune.net/coldcut

HEXSTATIC

VJ pioneer and co-author of Timber
www.hexstatic.co.uk

UVA (United Visual Artists)

The VJs behind Massive Attack's 100th Window tour
www.uva.co.uk

EXCEEDA

Winners of the first Diesel-U-Music award for VJs
www.exceeda.co.uk

THE LIGHT SURGEONS

Internationally renowned VJs
www.thelightsurgeons.co.uk

D-FUSE

Worldwide producers of live performances and DVD projects
www.dfuse.com

ADDICTIVE TV

A group of visuals artists, creative editors, DJs, VJs and producers who run their own DVD label and produce the ITV1 music show Mixmasters
www.addictive.com

RAYA

Successful grassroots VJ collective
www.raya.org.uk

KRIEL

BBC Radio 1 resident VJ
www.kriel.tv

AVIT

Biggest VJ event of 2003 in the UK
www.avit.org.uk

VJS

NESTA funded VJ collective
www.vjs.net

VJ FORUMS

Worldwide online VJ resource centre
www.vjforums.com