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Button- Pushing, Egg-Frying, and Other Performative Acts

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Button-Pushing, Egg-Frying, and Other Performative Acts

— Cornelia Lund

In recent years, my work with visual music has often led me to reflect on the combination of this genre with performative components. Such combinations can take extremely diverse forms, with the extent of the performative aspect varying substantially. In the case of cinematically pre-produced visual music, we have the minimal performative act of the screening required to render a film visible and audible.¹ When visual music is created live, by contrast, then its production becomes a more or less perceptible performative act. Where sound and image are created exclusively on a computer, the performance basically consists of button-pushing—an act that audiences often feel to be unrewarding when viewed as a stage show.

A particular problem can be the fact that audiences find it difficult to grasp the relationship between the generation of image and sound and the audiovisual product. This circumstance has led to various solutions in the form of interfaces that provide a broader performative scope. The Edirol CG-8, for example, allows images to be manipulated by hand in an infrared beam—similar to the principle of a theremin.² Beyond the interface solution, there are other approaches and ideas looking at how the association of sound and image can be complemented by additional performative elements. For instance, the artist Ulrike Flaig, who performs with the musicians of Perlon Ex, has announced that she would like to expand her visual contribution—up to then, directly editing video signals in real time—and start incorporating performative actions like frying an egg on stage.³

This desire corroborates the thesis postulated by Matthias Weiß in his essay “Images of Performances—Images as Performances. On the (In-)Differentiability of Music Video and Visual Music,” according to which visual music generates or triggers performance. He is referring here primarily to the situation in clubs, however, where visual music provides an audiovisual environment for the dance performance of the clientele.⁴

I would like to take up this notion of visual music acting as a trigger for performance and pursue it in relation to dance performance in particular. In the club situation mentioned above, dance performance is not an inherent component of visual music, but it is nonetheless conditioned by it and at the same time complements it so as to become one component of a kind of trinity of image, music, and dance.

¹ See Matthias Weiß. “Images of Performances—Images as Performances. On the (In-)Differentiability of Music Video and Visual Music,” in: Cornelia Lund, Holger Lund (eds.). *Audio.Visual—On Visual Music and Related Media*. Stuttgart: Arnoldsche Art Publishers, 2009, pp. 88–101.

² See Cornelia Lund, Holger Lund. “On the Aesthetics of Contemporary Visual Music,” <http://www.lundaudiovisualwritings.org/aesthetics>

³ Cornelia Lund, Holger Lund. “Interview mit der Künstlerin,” in: Andreas Bauer (ed.). *Ulrike Flaig. Von Zeitentzerrzonen und Nacht-U-Boten*. Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2007, p. 90f.

⁴ See Weiß 2009, pp. 93–96.

The close affiliation between visual music and dance was apparent as far back as the visual music of the 1920s (which was generally cinematically generated), even though there was no direct performative collaboration in this case. In 1923, for example, the dancer Valeska Gert transposed Walter Ruttmann's *Opus II* from the context of the cinema to that of the stage, screening it as an introduction to her production of *Salome* and as a calculated allusion to a change in her conception of movement and theater.⁵ Visual music in its "absolute film" guise has repeatedly been used as a kind of paradigm for dance and choreography, it must be seen as being closely associated with a concept of cinematic form dance, and it has even been described as the ideal form of "absolute dance."⁶

Later on, in the 1960s, for example, in the context of the expanded cinema movement, we find combinations of film, music, and dance performance. Although the cinematic element is still reproduced here, it is increasingly becoming an improvisatory participant in the live performance by means of active interventions in the screening, such as moving the projectors, changing the focus, etc. A good example here is Andy Warhol's *Exploding Plastic Inevitable* (1966/1967), a series of events frequently mentioned throughout this book. They featured a combination of planned dance performances and spontaneous dancing by the spectators, so that the performance was triggered on many different levels.⁷

More recently, live music and live video have often been incorporated into dance performances on stage, although the emphasis is not the same here. The composite parts may be the same, and therefore there is the same trinity of image, music, and dance, but it is not so much the visual music that triggers the performance, as the performance that integrates the image and sound and works together with them. It is also questionable whether what is produced within this paradigm is actually visual music. While image and music can of course be meaningfully and purposefully combined in this kind of context too, more frequently they act as no more than musical accompaniment and cinematic backdrop to a dance performance. Technological advances such as the Isadora software, however, which allows real-time manipulation of image and sound by the dancers themselves, have the potential to render image and sound equal parts, and at the same time may represent a reversal of the movement: no longer would visual music generate the performance here, but rather it would be the performance that generates the visual music.⁸

But the genre of visual music is also experimenting with dance—going beyond the dance performance of club clienteles and making dance a component of improvised live interaction. For example, the experiments of Kurt Laurenz Theinert extend the interaction between the abstract patterns produced by his visual piano and his

⁵ Many thanks to Susanne Foellmer for pointing this out to me.

⁶ By film critic Wilhelm Diebold, for example, in reference to his contemporary Walter Ruttmann's *Lichtspiel Opus I* (1921). See Gregor Gumpert. *Die Rede vom Tanz. Körperästhetik in der Literatur der Jahrhundertwende*. Munich: Fink, 1994, p. 216.

⁷ Moving images became actual participants in the sense of live performance when video technology was introduced at the end of the 1960s.

⁸ For information on Isadora, see <http://troikatronix.com>, date of access: November 23, 2017.

musical partners so as to include a dance component that acts on equal par with the images and music (See Figures 1–4).

At an event held in summer 2007, we tried out another type of performative interaction between image, sound, and dance.⁹ Two drummers, Anja Füstli and Alexandar Nesic (the latter is also a video artist), recorded short dance sequences on video with the dancer Alexandra Mahnke. These sequences were edited and grouped by motif in such a way that it became possible to use them to create a kind of live choreography during the actual performance: the two drummers played live music together, and at the same time they used their drums to control the video sequences via MIDI signal receivers, to play them and to manipulate them during the process (See Figures 5–7). The two musicians were seated on either side of the projection screen, so that their performance was visible and it was possible to relate their movements and the resulting sounds to the filmic dance performance on projection. In this case, then, we have neither the audience nor a person on stage dancing to visual music, rather it is the music, or more precisely the beat, the rhythmic, and the dynamics that trigger and condition the visual part of the visual music. Thus, the dancer is made to dance exclusively by the music. The musicians are musicians and VJs in one. The difference to VJing (in which any kind of material of either dancing or non-dancing individuals can be represented as dance effects set to music) is, first, the collaboration with the dancer, who had adapted her actual performance during the recording of



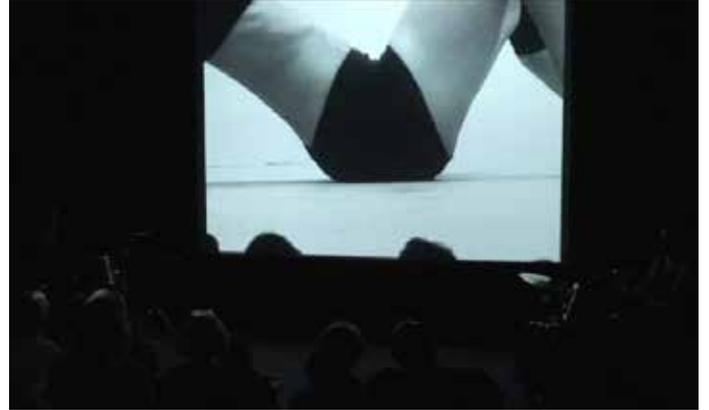
Figures 1–4
 1 *Raum – 3 Aspekte*, part of
Visual Music live & discussed.
**Audiovisual performance on May 6,
 2007, fluctuating images,
 Stuttgart, with Alexandra Mahnke
 (dance), Kurt Laurenz Theinert
 (visual piano), Markus Birkle
 (guitar).**
Photos: Hans-Peter Mahnke.

the video sequences to the medially transmitted final product, and, second, the role of the music. The latter is not only a participant in the visual component, rather it triggers it by means of the technical interface and also determines its ultimate form.

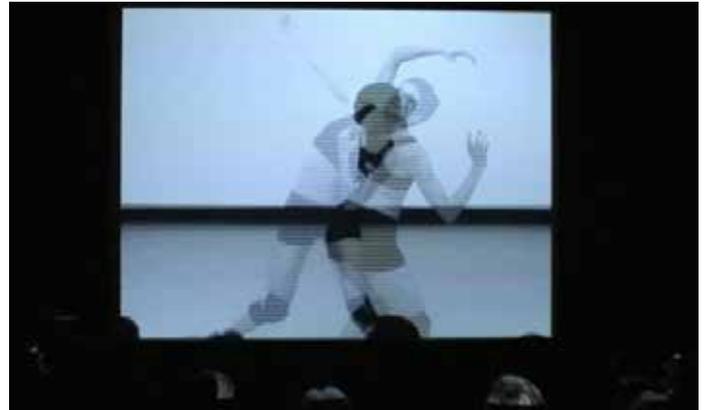
The position of the drums on the right and left of the projection screen was also reflected in the control of the image sequences: it was possible to use the impulses arriving from the right and left to invert the sequences by 180 degrees, which allowed the musicians to make the dancer perform against herself, in a sense, by alternating from right to left. In this way, a genuine audiovisual drum battle was created.

⁹ *Exploring Party. Party as Art. From Warhol's EPI to the Present*. Württembergischer Kunstverein Stuttgart, June 16–23, 2007. <http://www.fluctuating-images.de/en/node/175>, date of access: November 23, 2017.

The trend toward experiments that specifically seek to combine visual music and performative components (especially dance) must also be seen in relation to the fact that visual music is increasingly moving out of the clubs and into contexts of more concentrated awareness. These are often in the nature either of classical stage settings or of the viewer's situation in an art context. Both of these, however, are situations in which visual music only very rarely provokes performative (re)actions in the audience. And so, the performative aspect of visual



Figures 5–7
Trigger-Drums & Dance, part of
Exploring Party. **Audiovisual**
performance on June 16, 2007,
Württembergischer Kunstverein
Stuttgart, with Anja Füsti (drums),
Alexandra Mahnke (dance),
Alexandar Nesic (drums)



music can increasingly be found in its presentation—often as a third component on equal par with sound and image, and often in the context of experiments that are embedded in theater and stage settings. Which brings us full circle again.¹⁰

▷

¹⁰ See, for example, the work of the dancer and choreographer Fabian Chyle, who has repeatedly experimented with live music and live videos in his productions: <http://www.fabianchyle.de>

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