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Visual Music in the Context of Multimedia Parties

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Visual Music in the Context of Multimedia Parties.
Württembergischer Kunstverein Stuttgart, June 16–23, 2007
— Holger Lund

Exploring Party was an event curated by Cornelia and Holger Lund that presented visual music in the context of the multimedia party.[1] It consisted of live performances, a graphic art installation, a monitor installation, film and video screenings, as well as lectures.[2] (see Figures 1–7)

In 1966, Andy Warhol gathered together the pop-cultural trends of the time in his show *Exploding Plastic Inevitable (EPI)*. The show featured music performances, multiple slide and film projections, a multicolored light show, dancers, performative acts, spectators as moving projection screens, and light agents equipped with flashlights.

The result was a new kind of hybrid event positioned somewhere between art and a party. Visual music was included in a performative sense—in part as direct music visualization, in part as image projection set to music. It was performed as the sum of the components listed above and, significantly, it was performed live. One might say that, as a real-time event, the party extracted visual music from the cinematic context in which it had hitherto largely been embedded, and then transplanted it not only onto the stage, but onto the entire venue, spectators included.

Figure 1
Exploring Party. **Exhibition,
June 16–23, 2007, Württembergischer
Kunstverein Stuttgart
© Florian Härle**

Figure 2
Exploring Party. **Audiovisual performance
by Pfadfinderei & Modeselektor,
June 22, 2007, Württembergischer
Kunstverein Stuttgart
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Figure 3
Exploring Party. **Modeselektor,
June 22, 2007, Württembergischer
Kunstverein Stuttgart
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[1] For further information on this project, see http://www.fluctuating-images.de/en/node/175, date of access: November 23, 2017.

[2] For details of the concept of and the program for Exploring Party, see ibid.

Until then, visual music had been clearly associated with film, for example in Oskar Fischinger's and Len Lye's cinematic experiments of the 1930s and 1940s. It had therefore been linked to an art form that allows sequential elaboration over time, not unlike music, which is another temporal art form that unfolds in time. The possibility of creating appropriate associations in film between musical sequences and sequences of images bore other cinematic fruits than just experimental and promotional works, however. These include Soundies and Scopitones,[3] for example, as well as musical films such as *Yellow Submarine* (1967/68). However, the act of associating cinematic images and music was almost always carried out in the studio. In other words, these were productions that went through the usual phases of scripting, shooting, and—especially important for the synchronization of images and music—postproduction, which is where the allocation and correlation of images and music is precisely calibrated.

However, it is Andy Warhol we mainly have to thank for the live screening of both cinematic and non-cinematic images, which are coordinated and combined with choreographies and light effects, and which are set to music that is also performed live.[4] And we also have to thank him for pioneering an approach that continues to influence today's performances of visual music by VJs and musicians who elaborate their visual and auditory components in real time.

A central impetus behind Warhol's concept would have been blending party and art. Maya Deren's cinematic experiment *Ritual in Transfigured Time* (1946) had already demonstrated that it was possible to

Figure 4
Exploring Party. **DJ Inverse Cinematics (aka Motor City Drum Ensemble), June 22, 2007, Württembergischer Kunstverein Stuttgart**
© Dominic Nemec

Figure 5
Exploring Party. **Audiovisual performance by Pfadfinderei & Modeselektor, June 22, 2007, Württembergischer Kunstverein Stuttgart**
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transform parties into art, but the practice became more widespread with the arrival of the Expanded Cinema movement in the 1960s—especially in its West Coast incarnation.[5] Now parties were perceived and used as an experimental art space and became a valid format for

[3] See Henry Keazor, Thorsten Wübbena. *Video Thrills the Radio Star: Musikvideos: Geschichte, Themen, Analysen.* Bielefeld: Transcript, 2005, pp. 57–66.

[4] Very soon after the *EPI* many other audiovisual multimedia shows were developed. See Alastair Gordon. *Spaced Out: Radical Environments of the Psychedelic Sixties.* New York: Rizzoli, 2008, pp. 46–57.

[5] See ibid.

experimental energy—energy that Warhol was one of the first to use by initially choosing a party context to test out his multimedia pop art performance *EPI*.[6]

The *Exploring Party* project examined the history of the party as an experimental artistic format, focusing in particular on music visualization—also in live contexts. The main reference for the theme of party as art was Andy Warhol's *EPI*, which was based on two main concepts: aggregation of media and interconnection between media—both of these live and in innovative ways. Given that some of the visitors to the *EPI* had been overwhelmed by the conglomerate use of media, feeling they were being exposed to a kind of multimedia overkill, the second idea—interconnection between media—seemed to us a better path to pursue.

This was the point of departure for *Exploring Party*, and especially for its live performances.[7] They showed how today, given the possibilities of real-time digital production and digital connectability, innovative interweavings of media can be achieved. Such interweavings mostly seem to happen in the domain of visual music, for this is the home base for new developments in audiovisual interconnection and this is where they are tested. Visual music as a contemporary aesthetic practice mainly has its origins in the club and party scene. Here it was advanced considerably—following the initial experiments in early avant-garde cinema and the Expanded Cinema movement—as a means to accompany dance music with fitting visualizations. That, in fact, had already been a concern of Andy Warhol in his *EPI*.
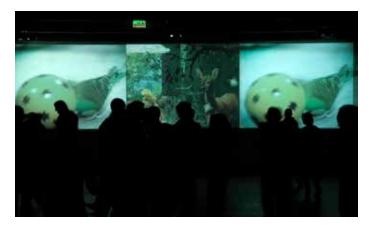

Figure 6
Exploring Party. **Audiovisual performance by Pfadfinderei & Modeselektor, June 22, 2007, Württembergischer Kunstverein Stuttgart**
© Damaso Reyes

Figure 7
Exploring Party. **Audiovisual performance by Yvette Klein and Christian Jamin & Dominik Eulberg and Triple R, June 23, 2007, Württembergischer Kunstverein Stuttgart**
© Dominic Nemec

And it was Warhol who in *EPI* used the experimental open space of the party and who examined artistic questions in a party context—thereby turning the party into an art happening. Party as art: this is where we come full circle again, where the circle contains both historical and contemporary media questions, as well as questions concerning the status of art, and also an attempt to find answers to these questions that go beyond the usual exhibition and presentation

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[6] The *Exploding Plastic Inevitable* was first held in a club—New York's Dom—and only subsequently toured the USA, also stopping off frequently in art institutions.

[7] See Anja Füsti, Alexandra Mahnke, Alexandar Nesic: *Trigger-Drums & Dance* on the DVD accompanying the book Cornelia Lund, Holger Lund (eds.). *Audio.Visual—On Visual Music and Related Media.* Stuttgart: Arnoldsche Art Publishers, 2009; also see Cornelia Lund. "Button-Pushing, Egg-Frying, and Other Performative Acts," in: ibid., pp. 170–178 and http://www.lundaudiovisualwritings.org/button-pushing.

formats. This is why party as art was not only a—reflective—theme of *Exploring Party*, but it was realized in a performative sense through live events.

One of the live performances was carried out by Pfadfinderei (visuals) and Modeselektor (music), whose *Labland* show has been seen and heard at the Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris and the Volksbühne Berlin, and who have performed a series of audiovisual events in Berlin's WMF club. As commuters between audiovisual collaboration in clubs on the one hand, and performances in art institutions on the other, Pfadfinderei and Modeselektor are perfect representatives for the theme of *Exploring Party*—the combination of party and art.

Which means we were not looking at party as art only from the art perspective (Warhol), rather we were equally interested in the club perspective. This is why the audiovisual partnership of Pfadfinderei and Modeselektor is mentioned here. In itself, a party in a club is just a party. Decoration, suggested themes, dressing up, dancers, light shows, music, performances—the function of each and every component is celebration and informal communication. No more, no less. But the use of visuals brings other aspects into play. Even if visuals were initially introduced to house and techno parties at the end of the 1980s in order to fill the visual vacuum created by the fact that instead of musicians playing instruments now there was only a DJ standing beside a turntable, visuals nonetheless bring more than a party atmosphere to the party. This might be due to the visual legacy preserved in the VJ's video material, which has often been sampled—its origins may be feature films, cartoons, or even art films. Image sequences are used for their colors, motifs, and patterns of movement, which have been adapted to the music in the best cases. The decisive point is reached when the question of the significance of the visual material arises. VJs are certainly interested in attracting attention with their visuals. That is why they choose specific image sequences. But if the aesthetic significance of the images becomes too strong for the viewers, then the visuals and their interaction with the music might absorb their attention and distract them from the party. And this is where art might enter into the equation, although it might lead to something else. However, an audiovisual event in a club can certainly create an aesthetic structure and significance that shifts the entire show into the direction of art. And art wants one thing: absolute attention. Which is why many VJs and audiovisual collaborations find it important to perform in locations where the level of attention suits their activity, and where their work is not perceived as a threat to the party. Such locations are usually art institutions, whose patrons are used to purposeful and concerted observation. This is the reason why there is a visible tendency on the part of audiovisual acts to seek out this kind of venue, for the art in the party is generally subject to certain restrictions in a club context that are not required in art institutions.

We therefore deliberately chose an art institution as the venue for the live performances in *Exploring Party,* with a view to giving party as art the best possible opportunity to reveal itself, without the commercial pressure of a club and without a one-dimensional party perception to the exclusion of aesthetic value.

Finally, to get back to Warhol again: music, cinematic images, dance—combining all of these in a live performance had been Warhol's aim in *EPI*. But the purpose of *Exploring Party* was not to reconstruct or even to imitate this approach. It was to reappraise it in the context of an art institution, using the new digital production methods available today. And it emerged that the potential combinations have by no means been exhausted yet. On the contrary, the union of musicians and image-creating VJs is becoming an increasingly solid combination— be it in the technology (e.g. audiovisual appliances such as Pioneer's DVJ-1000 DVD player or SVM-1000 audiovisual mixer),[8] or be it in software such as Max/MSP or audiovisual entertainment concepts like *mixmash* (which perform with music video programs),[9] or be it in audiovisual live concepts such as *Trigger-Drums & Dance*, or in audiovisual partnerships such as Pfadfinderei and Modeselektor with their wide-stage construction.[10]

The doors that Warhol pushed open are now wider ajar than ever before, and the spaces for events that follow are being accessed by ever more people, actors and viewers alike.

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[8] See http://www.pioneerelectronics.com/PUSA/DJ/CD-DVD-Media-Players/DVJ-1000 and http://www.pioneerelectronics.com/PUSA/DJ/Mixers/SVM-1000, date of access: November 23, 2017.

[9] See e.g. https://www.images2.co.uk/MIXMASH_DANCE_CLASSICS_Volume_6_2DVD_CA441006.html, date of access: November 23, 2017.

[10] See Codec aka Niklas Völker. "The Evolution of the Court Jester," in: Lund 2009, pp. 228–237.