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“THE LIGHT SURGEONS ARE KNOWN FOR THEIR EPISODIC, ROAD MOVIE STYLE PIECES”

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SOUND AND VISION

London's ever-mutating dance scene has spawned a new breed of clubber with a taste for cutting-edge visual experiences. Phil Hoad charts the rise of the VJ



Opposite page, top Wild Seahorses by Oversean for Addictive TV; below, clockwise from right, Loop Robot, Dan and Houseby at Zlab. This page, left Mixmasters series produced by Addictive TV; right, Coldcut; below Light Surgeons' APB show



much all you need," says Matt Black. VJing has always been technology driven. A VJ-friendly innovation will be the advent of e-paper, which may eliminate the need for expensive projection units and provide sharper image resolutions. The lightning growth of the DVD market is also good news. Recent DVD singles by artists like Underworld and Basement Jaxx have helped foster the audio-visual mindset, and full DVD-based VJing should be possible in about a year's time.

As technology stretches the boundaries, VJs are masterminding more grandiose schemes. Fully immersive environments, in which club-goers help

dictate the visuals, are on the cards. Coldcut is mulling over 'Live interactive realtime TV', a digital sound and image show it plans to take on the road, and has developed Gridio (www.gridio.com) – an interactive audio-visual installation for the Pompidou Centre.

Hanson believes VJing can relay artistic or political messages with more subtlety than other art forms. "It's being clever about it – it's more implicit. If a fine artist tried to do something similar, it would be Douglas Gordon-style: Psycho, slowed down to a 24-hour thing. It wouldn't talk to as many people."

AzLab agrees: "VJing gives you the opportunity to follow the mood and also

to put out a message. Which is important – whether it's just a psychological impression or a political message," says creative director Paul Cummings.

But it's primarily as an overall experience that VJing excels: an experience that's improving in synch with technology. And, in fact, by allowing us to mingle the senses, technology is leading us backwards. We're heading towards a clearer realisation of an old idea: synaesthesia, that 19th-century favourite beloved of artists as diverse as Rimbaud, Kandinsky and Debussy.

Recent videogames like Rez and Frequency, in which the player's action dictates the sound and visuals, also feed off the synaesthetic buzz and are heavily influenced by heady club atmospherics. Hanson sees the idea, which Baudelaire and Poe were writing about in the 1850s, as a modern reality: "People have always been interested in synaesthesia but it's more possible nowadays. I think the appetite is already there. People are already happy to indulge their senses."

1.1 Sam, Herbal nightclub. The room is energised now, the crowd hopping eagerly to the breakbeat tide as a heaving DJ box continues to produce one ear-scouring drum-and-bass classic after another. The Japanese VJ stares intently at his screen as, on the wall across the dancefloor, the rotor blades whirl and skyscrapers loom. And how are the visuals going down with the Hoxton faithful? A Stüssy-capped regular has no doubts: "I think they've got it just right." ■



KEY PLAYERS

Coldcut

Formed: 1986
VJ works: videos for Atomic Moog 2000 (1997); Timber (1997); Let Us Play LP (1997); Let Us Replay LP (1999); Gridio installation (2002); VJAMM software (available from www.ninjatune.net)

Soundbite: "When I was a little boy, I used to do sound and light shows for my family and charge them half a penny to see my robots and moon explorers in the dark flashing around with their lights and buzzers. I think I'm probably doing the same thing now." (Matt Black, below right)



Hexstatic

Formed: 1990
VJ works: videos for Coldcut's Christmas Break (1990); Natural Rhythm (1997); Timber (1997); Rewind LP (2000); forthcoming, not so literal LP (2003)
Soundbite: "People want visuals that are closely connected to the music, not just background disco wallpaper." (Robin Brunson)

The Light Surgeons

Formed: 1995
VJ works: Thumbnail Express short (2000); APB live documentary performance (2002); live visuals for Cornershop, The Propellerheads and Sneaker Pimps
Soundbite: "We want to create an audio-visual event where our distinctive style was applied as the focus to a performance, with emphasis on a visual or narrative journey."

Addictive TV

Formed: 1992
VJ works: Transambient C4 TV series (2000); Mixmaster ITV1 TV series; live visuals for Fatboy Slim, Carl Craig and 808 State
Soundbite: "VJing for a DJ is only more challenging in the sense that you're freeforming as you go along." (Graham Daniels)