

step out *designer, meet your doppelganger!*

BY JUDE STEWART

UNCANNY PARALLELS BETWEEN GRAPHIC DESIGN AND ELECTRONIC MUSIC ARE BRINGING TWO CREATIVE WORLDS EVEN CLOSER TOGETHER.



SVEN GAREIS AND TIMM RINGEWALDT OF VJ TEAM MONITOR-AUTOMATIQUE. PHOTO: JULIA V. VIETINGHOF

A diamond needle skitters across a platter, then drops into a groove. Dad says the needles cost the earth and forbids you to touch the turntable while it's playing. But the record shines deliciously, like a woman's dark hair wound around the platter. So you touch it. Pretty soon you're touching it constantly, startling yourself with new sounds, like communiqués with gorgeous aliens. One day after school you're caught man-handling the records shamelessly, cracking the diamond needle to bits, making a fantastic racket. Sound familiar?

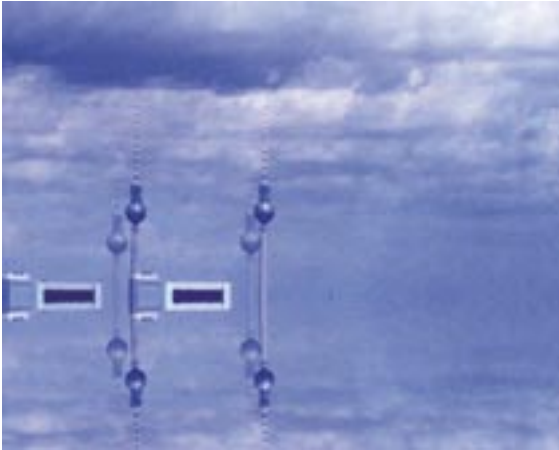
Maybe not. Perhaps you were a good egg and respected the hi-fi. Then again, as a young designer your sins probably ran parallel to the baby DJ's: snipping pictures from your mother's magazines, repapering your bedroom walls with doodles, like curling vines. Remember the startling joy of signing your name in a new font of your own devising? Then as now, nothing beats the bang of putting two disparate images, colors, or sounds together; just a little tweak can make an image fresher or a line of music extra-hot. To some, a talent for collage and juxtaposition is a mere knack, not art. To designers and DJs, though, it's the lifeblood of how they create new things.

Designers and DJs don't just live overlapping lives; increasingly they're actually the same people. In many ways, these creative disciplines share a common, decidedly post-modern personality. Their work deceives in its simplicity: How artistic is it, really, to make new sounds or images by tweaking or rearranging existing

ones? Converted in a single generation from analog to digital technologies, designers and DJs have learned to shrug off disbelievers who question the artistic value of their collages, or who scoff at art forms like theirs with a more populist or applied bent. Both groups have grown and splintered into niche specialties. *Design* is a huge umbrella term covering graphic, type, environmental, industrial, and other subcategories. DJ music ranges from turntablism—scratching or otherwise using a turntable as an acoustic instrument—to electronic music producers, who use old- and new-school technologies to mix samples and found sounds into fresh new music. Not only do many designers moonlight as DJs, the visual jockey (VJ) trend pairs visual designers and musicians even more closely, creating live shows in which visuals and music interact and comment on each other. Like any new collaboration, the results can be mixed: at its worst, pure eye candy bopping to a beat; at its height, a gorgeously engrossing experience. Examining the dovetails and challenges common to DJs and designers holds clues to where we are heading creatively.

In the dance halls and design studios of Berlin, mixing images with sound is natural. Berliners have always pursued radical experiment in politics, music, and art. The city's electronic DJs and VJs are pressing the limits of music forward, making video-montage and live electronic performance a positively expressive art.

"DJs react directly to the audience and pick the records as they go along. It makes total sense to hear it live," says Heiko Hoffman,



TOP: MONITOR.AUTOMATIQUE'S PRONTOPHOT TECHNOLOGY ALLOWS CLUBGOERS TO TAKE STILL IMAGES OF THEMSELVES, WHICH ARE DYNAMICALLY MIXED TO THE BEAT AND DISPLAYED CLUBWIDE IN SECONDS. TIMM RINGEWALDT THINKS OF PRONTOPHOT IMAGES AS CAPTURING "PEOPLE'S LONGING TO BE SEEN."

MIDDLE, BOTTOM: STILLS FROM *ALEXANDERPLATZ GTI*, A VJ SET FOR "BERLIN REMIXED," A SCREENING EVENT IN FEBRUARY 2004 CURATED BY OLIVER BAUERHENN FROM BERLIN'S CLUB TRANSMEDIALE (WWW.CLUBTRANSMEDIALE.DE). MUSIC BY MIWON (WWW.MIWON.DE).

editor-in-chief of *Groove*, the leading international magazine for electronic music and DJ culture. "With electronic live sets, the main challenge is finding new hardware where you can more easily interact with the music," he continues. "The keyboard and mouse are not really the best way to deal with music." This difficulty bears a striking resemblance to designers' struggles with their own technology, such as the frustrations of drawing freehand with a mouse.

Ten years ago, electronica's capabilities as a live art were limited to mostly crude novelties: first adding keyboard effects to prerecorded music on DAT; then inserting preplanned sequencing loops live to laptop-driven music. "But with software like Ableton's LIVE, it makes it easier to say: 'Okay, I have this beat and this loop or sound, let's put them together, right now,'" Hoffman explains. "The computer is fast enough nowadays; the crucial thing is that it all works in real-time." Hardware-software combinations like Final Scratch-Traktor FS allow DJs to network together MP3s on laptop or iPod, sequencer loops, CDs, and old-school wax and manipulate everything manually—whether by scratching or by madly twisting knobs and levels on a mixing board.

The urge to improvise electronic music live in some ways resembles the current trend among designers to use computers to make tactile, handmade-looking images. In both cases, "perfect" computer-generated art feels cold until an improvised, rough-edged touch awakens its expressive power.

On the visual side of things, VJs like Monitor.Automatique, Bauhouse, Visual Kitchen, and Lillevan are matter-of-factly blurring all kinds of creative divides. Their work fills crumbling post-Communist dance clubs and philharmonic halls alike; as designers, they move easily between traditional design work and improvised VJ/DJ sets. The imagery ranges from film reels and still photography to mad animations and abstract shapes and colors.

Timm Ringewaldt and Sven Gareis are great-granddaddies in the VJ world, having collaborated as Monitor.Automatique since 1996. (They've recently separated to pursue independent projects: Ringewaldt as Autokolor and Gareis as Telematique.) "We work with a combination of self-programmed software tools and analog video hardware," says Timm. "Our style is inspired by pop art and Cubism, but also by the aesthetics of surveillance camera images," he continues. "We're constantly trying to reinforce the connection between the people present and the place where the event takes place." Since many VJ events happen in historically loaded sites like Café Moskau, a former Stasi hideout in East Berlin, surveillance images give their work a feeling both intensely human and unsettling.

Their VJ set *Alexanderplatz GTI* offers a powerful example of how this process works. The loop begins with a panorama of Berlin's Alexanderplatz, an iconic image of Communist squalor and one of the few such places to survive the massive reconstruction obliterating most traces of the East's past. The panorama broadens and syncopates to music. Shadows tip and bend back, cars skitter in the parking lot, then the bottom of the frame bleeds into stripes of color, distortions of the scene above. Soon the stripes orchestrate these scenes in uncanny ways. A band of horizontal stripes feeds a new picture piece by piece into place: Karl-Marx-Allee, formerly Stalinallee and scene of the 1953 worker's riots, now simply a major traffic artery. The music is moody, introspective, sexy in its restraint, building to unseen ends. Scene after scene reprise East Berlin with its many layers: brutal, nostalgic, disappearing under twiddling construction cranes. The loop ends with the East Berlin TV tower, another quintessential image. The silvery ball of its observation deck hangs in full blue sky, which rapidly darkens until a band of palely lit windows blink out. Watching Monitor.Automatique's work, you get a hint of the immersive power of music and images interacting, a sound-landscape that invites you to lose yourself in sight, sound, detail, and movement. Marcel Duchamp, a true king of the cut-and-paste, nailed it when he said, "The only thing that is not art is inattention." 