

Hearing the visual

Curator Zsolt Gyenes speaks to TEODOR RELJIC about VAC – Visual Acoustics, an exhibition exploring the dynamics between visual art and sound, and forming part of the Valletta International Visual Arts Festival programme

How did the core idea of the exhibition first come about, and what were some of the dynamics you hoped to explore?

Various types of sensations lie at the basis of equally varied and divergent creative possibilities. What differences are there between the established compositional genres like animation, motion picture, and many others? What kind of role do artists who take an experimental approach to sound have, and how do they contribute to the debate of what is 'realism'? These and many other questions contribute to the rich diversity of issues that spring up from what we refer to as "visual music".

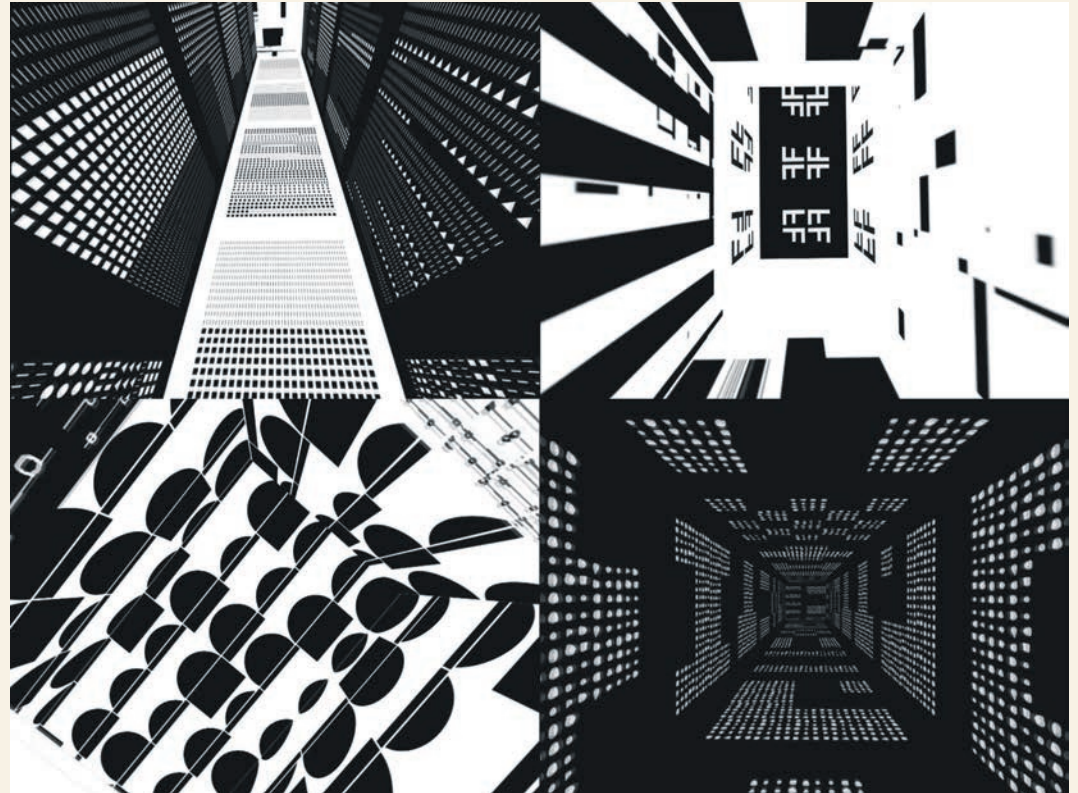
There are a variety of visual structures which could be called visual music. Classified as a specific type of (intermedia) art, visual music is principally concerned with the use of musical structures that make reference to and connect with visual expressions. In many cases, sound or music is transformed into pictures through a variety of means, but equally viable solutions in the opposite direction can be imagined too, particularly when the visual elements (and other structures such as text) are converted into sound. Visual music therefore, can be thought of as a search for a unified spirit.

The genre is known for

producing exciting experiments to match, synchronise (and sometimes a-synchronise) sound and (motion) picture. The different media are not perceived as one complementing the other, but are built together where one is determined by the other. One can step from one to the other through different transcoding, with the presented end product that can be termed as a visible acoustic. At the point where a sound event and a visual event meet in synchrony, the effect of "synchresis" (Chion) becomes particularly prominent.

I have started to organise different symposia in connection with the visual music for eight years. The first edition was held in Budapest ('Hear the pictures, see the sound! – Visual Music in the contemporary arts'), the next was in connection an art festival at the Balaton Lake in Hungary ('Hearing the eye, seeing the ear') – after it had a new (projected) edition in Budapest too. The last one had become an international event taking place at Kaposvar University and titled VACO.

Personally as artist and theorist I am interested mostly in the new possibilities of this genre. Which (new) passages can appear between the sound and pictures? What is the characteristic feature of synchrony



Stills from the film *Odysseus* by Gábor Palotai

or asynchrony? How we can interpret "synchresis"? What role does software and new technology play in all of this?

The fact is that we perceive our surroundings in a holistic fashion, so why should we renounce this in the field of art? Let's also remember that, strictly speaking, the visual music tradition stretches back to something like 300 years – it is, quite simply, a tradition that marries visuals through sounds and explores the correspondences that arise from this interlink. So our exhibition is perhaps an attempt to get at the age-old questions and inquiries that arise from this artistic phenomenon.

Given how it emphasises both the visual and the aural aspects of experience, how strongly would you say the exhibition reacts to Maltese realities in particular?

This exhibition does not intend to be representative of every aspect of current work in the visual music/acoustics genre. What we present here is a very small sample of the thinking and practice of the field. The artists' definitions of the theme are actually as broad as their work indicates, as they're working under no restraints or boundaries. Emanating from the (classical) pure silent visual music tradition, the exhibition looks at how artists using current technology recreate this form, where having a computer at their disposal, as a tool with a natural proclivity of combining visual and aural structures, contributes to the quantity and quality of works.

In most cases, these works present experiences that have not undergone research in the classical tradition, but rather lean towards the interest artists

have in the use of such unconventional media and the excitement of experimentation.

Through the computer, man has created an active, creative partner to produce wholly new aesthetic experiences. Through digital technology, visual-acoustic works of art experiment with new ways of merging sound and image, creating holistic works that meld traditional and digital media through a software-world, in search of realising a new, magical age.

There are some discernible differences in this exhibition between the Maltese and the other (e.g., Hungarian born or Polish) artists. The Maltese artists forming part of this exhibition have shown a preference for explicitly dealing with social realities. The interaction itself causes to activate the audience. The intentional (background) meaning in some cases directs to (social) realities (such as Pierre Portelli's *Economies of Desire*). The other exhibited contemporary works are mostly based on the avant-garde tradition, particularly geometrical abstraction (the forerunners of which would be the likes of László Moholy-Nagy, Gyorgy Kepes or Nicolas Schöffer). These artists rethink the tradition and present for today's audience, viewer (among these are Gábor Palotai, T. Bortnyik/Tubák, Jerzy Olek, László Zsolt Bordos and Zsannett Szirmay). In the latter case, we don't in fact get such a clear-cut reflection of social problems or the vagaries of 'common' reality, so the two approaches complement each other quite well.

On what basis were the chosen artists selected, and how would you say their idiosyncratic visions

contribute to the overarching ideas of the exhibition as a whole?

The invited artists for this event come from Malta, Hungary, Sweden, Poland, Germany and Austria. They use different techniques and tools, such as eye-tracking equipment, 3D mapping projection, interactive installation, audio-video, animation, data-generation, sound-texture and printing. The common thread throughout the exhibition is in its common goal – that of an approach that reflects the general feeling of our contemporary thinking, society and its relationship with the ever-changing technological landscape.

What would you say VIVA contributes to the Maltese visual arts scene?

Being based in Hungary and having spent some three or four months in Malta, forging healthy relationships with some contemporary artists from here, I can say I've established something of a connection with Maltese life and art. It's very exciting to see it unfold in front of you – what you have is fresh and contemporary, and it expresses itself against a backdrop of var-

VAC – Visual Acoustics will remain on display at Malta School of Art in Old Bakery Street, Valletta until May 4. Participating artists include: Matthew Attard, László Zsolt Bordos, Éva T. Bortnyik, Csaba Tubák, Vince Briffa, Matthew Galea, Antal Lux, Jerzy Olek, Gabor Palotai, Pierre Portelli, Zsannett Szirmay. Opening hours: 08:00-20:00 (Monday to Friday). The exhibition is curated by Zsolt Gyenes, and forms part of the Valletta International Visual Arts Festival (VIVA)



Economies of Desire: Radical disorder by Pierre Portelli. Photo by Vince Briffa