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the light surgeons

THEODORA SUTCLIFFE SHINES HER SPOTLIGHT ON CHRIS ALLEN

'The weirdest thing I ever found on Super-8 was a home movie I bought when I was in Holland. It was really weird but kind of touching: this 70-year-old woman doing a bit of an erotic, naked show in her bedroom, obviously for her husband.'

Super-8 collecting is a voyeur's dream. Endless abstracts of other people's lives, sold off like ancient prams or thrift shop art at car boot sales and flea markets around the world. But Chris Allen, the core of freeform collective The Light Surgeons, has come a long way from geriatric frolics.

As a teenage skateboarder, he began making simple scratch films – mutilating found footage and projecting it onto walls. His obsession took him into club visuals in 1992, when painted backdrops and a little UV were still the norm. The then-innovative techniques – filming old B-movies frame by frame with a 16-millimetre camera and reanimating them, looping ancient home movies, running 8 or 9 films separately on different walls, floating graphics from instruction manuals – are now so familiar on television and video, and (of course) in clubs and bars as to seem almost obvious.

'Doing all these trendy club events, which advertising and TV people came to, we just saw our stuff being ripped off all over the place and that was really annoying,' he says.

The shift from visuals to performance came when The Light Surgeons started supporting bands such as Propellerheads and Sneaker Pimps on tour, after which things really took off. 'We were doing Cornershop's visuals when they had that big number one, and we toured America with Oasis doing massive venues, which was ridiculous: it was just a whole army of trucks and PAs being literally flown into stadiums.'

The crossover from 'mixing with light' into film flowed organically. 'The way we've approached film is very different from the traditional way it's taught. We've approached it from that sample culture, that music culture, of taking a piece of something and repeating it and building it up and making a groove out of it and taking it somewhere else. It's non-linear, like Sticklebricks, taking a piece and moving it around and slotting it into place.'

Now working with Jude Greenaway (a cousin of filmmaker Peter), the Light Surgeons' work is more traditionally narrative – or, at least, includes the spoken word. A series of interviews with (mainly) homeless people – made during a Budweiser exhibition in the States – form the core of *Electronic Manoeuvres*, a 90-minute performance piece that toured with the ICA's onedotzero film festival. And the pilot for a series of 5-minute films has already been sold to a Swedish company.

As filmmaking becomes more accessible, thanks primarily to DVD, The Light Surgeons are on the edge of the new medium. 'It's not so monopolised by equipment now,' Chris explains. 'The fact that you can actually make a film in your bedroom is quite amazing. I always compare it with what happened to dance music. The fact that you could make a record in your bedroom changed music and we're seeing exactly that with film and television right now. You've got the Internet, which allows you to broadcast anywhere in the world. You don't have to go through a TV station. You can become your own TV station.' And, beyond TV, they're beginning to make their own music, utilising DVD to make track and promo one seamless entity.

It's a strange world – from clubs to stadium gigs to commercial installations to London film premieres and (nearly) the Tate. 'I got a phone call from Tate Modern, before the gallery opened, saying, "We really want you to do an installation." I couldn't believe it! I went in and looked at it and thought, "Shit, we're going to get our own piece in the Tate. Forget doing night-clubs..." Then it got to talking money, and they were like, "Can you put your projectors in?" And I was like, "Put all my equipment in your gallery for two months for no money?!... I'll do the work for nothing, but I'm not paying for the equipment. Get a sponsor.'" In the end, economics won out over art-house prestige, but at the tender age of 26 it seems likely the big curators will be back.

With a megabucks installation commissioned by Bloomberg News, and the forces of commercialism hammering on the door, what next for the Light Surgeons? 'My ideal is to be a musician, really, but in a visual way. To make films, but with music.'