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INTERVIEW WITH CHRIS ALLEN

Optical Surgery

Text: Debbie Kate

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Profile

Info: Christopher Thomas Allen, Director of visual display unit - The Light Surgeons.

Untold: Has 2 cats, and a whole collection of these superhero-like lycra bodysuits (an inversion to the concept of the blue screen technology costume), bought in Tokyo.

3 things Chris can't live without: Marmite, tea and cats.

Quote: Be respectful to other people on your way up, as you may meet them again on the way down.

My greeting chat with Chris began with him gushing on how Singapore's landscape is a barometer of its immaculate presentation. Here for the onedotzero festival, the affable light surgeon used a Hansel & Gretel analogy to associate the island's architecture, "it's beautiful pastel paint colors remind me of sweets, but somehow seem unreal." Such is the compelling mind of the erstwhile Graphic Designer with Beggars Banquet Records (1995-1996). An intelligent, inquisitive and inspiring personality, his unique vision truly justifies his bright phenomenon.

How did the Light Surgeons (LS) get its start with live visuals?

I graduated as a graphic designer from Portsmouth University. We had a really good theatrical department where I did Media Studies, so that was quite an influence. My Dad was a photographer and he would always bring along his equipments when we went out. So I grew up with that whole thing.

Upon graduation, I returned to London. I was actually already doing visuals before college, in this club my brother and I started in 1992. My brother who is a DJ/producer at Ninja Tunes collected records from a young age. Together with him and some friends (The Herbaliser), we did visuals for the 'Ninja Tunes Night'. This was around the time of acid jazz; funk; hip-hop; breaks and those original stuffs that people sampled.

The whole visual thing is indirectly linked with the rave scene - like trance tunnels; graffiti artist; hip-hop music and contemporary graphic designers. I was drawn to all these varying influences of club culture and thought, "hey look, there's no one's doing it, why aren't they doing it?" My brother was a DJ, everyone else was being a DJ. So I thought I should do something else, something different.

You've worked with so many different artists. So tell us who are you favorite music act and designer/design collective, and why?

Hip-hop, jazz, funk - my musical influences stem from my brother and growing up in that sound era. But I recently re-discovered folk music, ironically through the ipod. I grew up copying music so the ipod was great! The way you collect records is like your shoes or clothes collection or something - it reflects ones taste. But as a white boy growing up with these musical influences, I felt like I didn't really have an identity. So I went back to my roots, to musicians like Bob Dylan. Folk music to me embodies minimalism; amazing songs with potent lyrics and political power. They didn't need a laptop, just a guitar.

I'm actually looking more forward to something new. Music has always been about recreating a bygone era. So I think creating a new musical wave altogether would be exciting.

For design, I like Ian Swift; The Designers Republic; Tomato; Malcolm Garrett - too many actually. It's an immersive culture and to promiscuous to point out one. But as a creative person I've become more aware of focusing on my own work, and less concerned with other's work. Now I tend to shut off from things that are too visual - like science magazine and novels that make me find ways to visualise them. I think too many visual influences around makes one regurgitate other's ideas. I'm trying to free myself from that.

LS are known for their usage of provocative political imageries in their visual display sets. What is the message you try to impart with these images?

I'm not sure how bold it is, rather more of an obligation to question and provoke the audience to think. Instead of creating pretty visuals and aesthetically beautiful works, we're more interested in what it says. When we have the freedom to express ourselves and comment on the world around us, it seems only right to look at subjects that are deemed political. Everything has a political ramification. The sooner we realise this, as a society of consumers, the quicker we can change it for the better. Maybe I'm an idealist! But what the f@x#, you got to start somewhere.

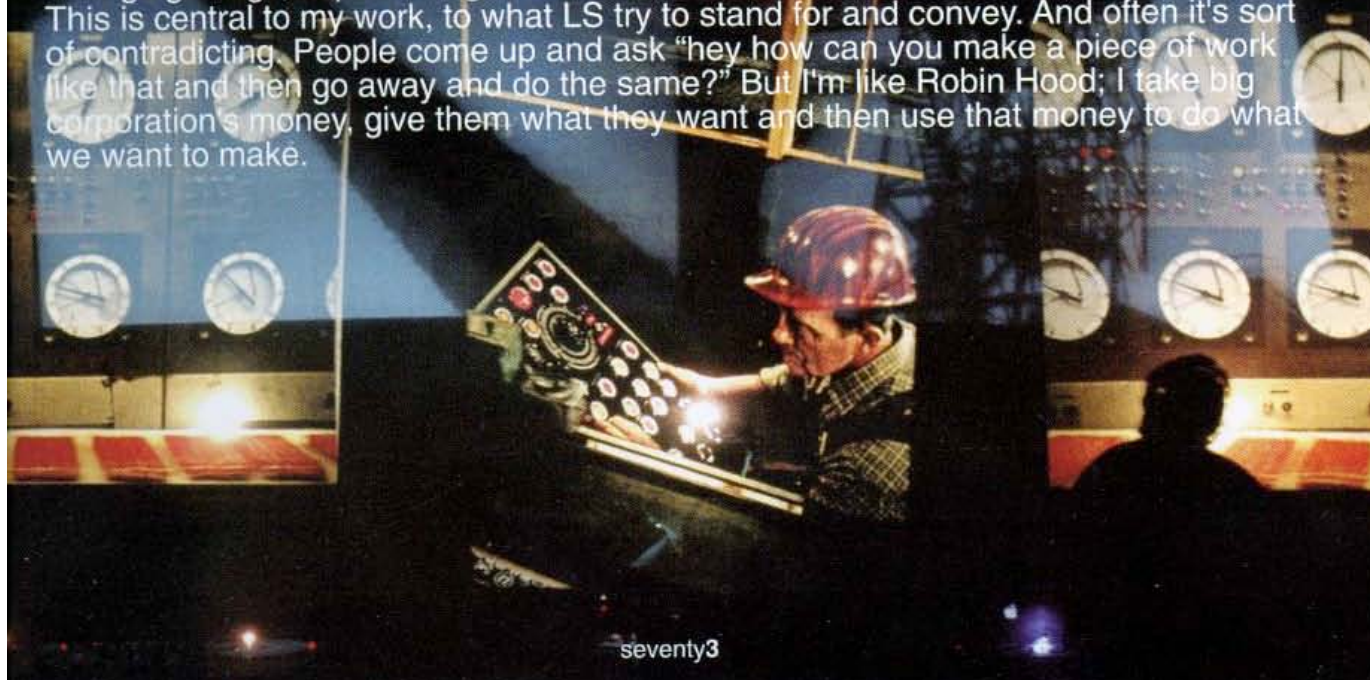
So what has been the highlight in your career so far?

What's really worth mentioning, to me - instead of the boring who's who of bands we've worked with - is that for the last 6 years, we made our own films and developed our own audio visuals through collaborations. It's something we've wanted to do for a long time that is finally becoming a reality.

Do you find that your live visuals experience affect the way you approach your digital film productions?

I like the concept of 'happy accidents' - the creative energy that comes with freedom. But ultimately I think it's about a balance, the ability to perform and improvise. It's about the structural and deconstruction process that can work together. I guess the main difference is that film is a business that allows for more longevity.

Like I did an interesting project at a museum in London - an axiological study on people through their living spaces. I'm interested in doing things that speak to a wider audience, instead of just graphic designers. I mean, what's the point of preaching to the converted? There are a lot of festivals that sometimes try to reach out beyond an ordinary audience, and that's not going to change anything. I'm interested in changing things, in producing work that makes people think; and not just entertain. This is central to my work, to what LS try to stand for and convey. And often it's sort of contradicting. People come up and ask "hey how can you make a piece of work like that and then go away and do the same?" But I'm like Robin Hood; I take big corporation's money, give them what they want and then use that money to do what we want to make.



As an artist yourself, what are your views on the convenience of advanced technologies?

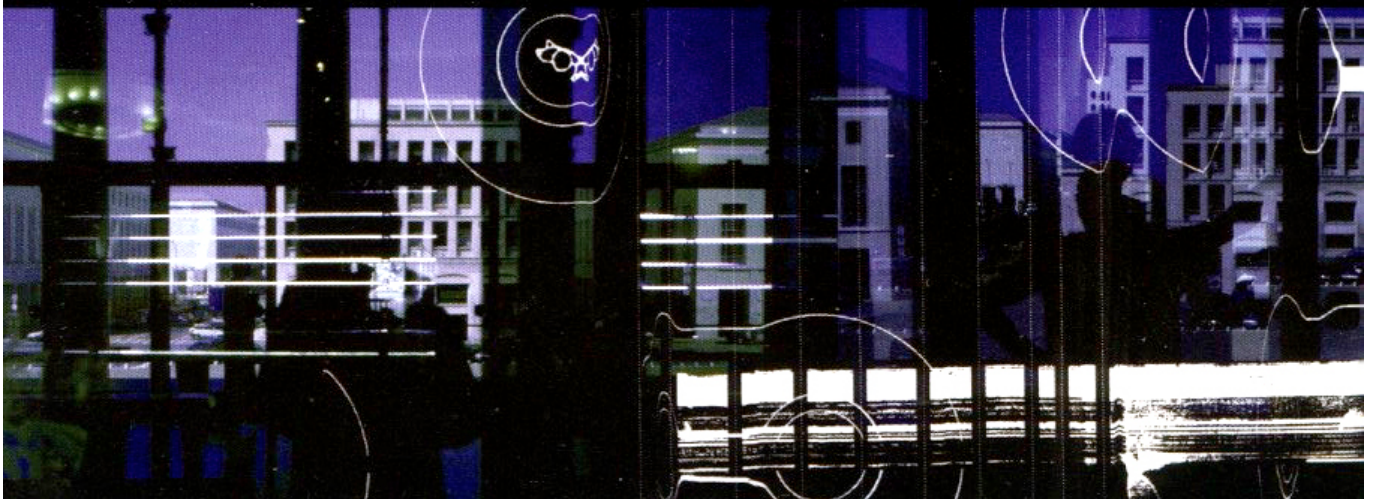
I think limitations allows for more creativity. The unlimited possibilities that technology provides today, makes people forget what they really want to convey with their work. I feel creative ideas should drive technology, and not the other way around. You see this not only in the visual culture but everywhere. People should remember that it should be about ideas and content, and not do it just because it is a new trend. Limitation is a god-sent that forces you to create within that space. It's a human qualm that prevents a lot of silly and unnecessary things. There're a lot of unnecessary cultures out there if you ask me.

I think popular cultures swing both ways - we go from minimalism to an elaborate kind of crazy design. Like chandeliers, a minimal opulence that has almost become like Lego™ now - "oh lets take this and that and put them all together, and hey! It's new". It is how the world operates, but people take it in a different way. People take juxtaposition as the new, but that's not what it is about. You need to know the reason why you're putting things together, or incorporating certain elements and references to it. Like you can take a computer, reference some film and put in a sample and go, "alright I made something. Great! I'm a film maker, a DJ or an electronic musician." But they don't really consider why they're doing it, and haven't thought of it before doing it. It strips away the essence of creativity. That's the problem with the high speed of culture - there's less time spent thinking about what they're doing, or why they've done it.

That's why limitation is good. People that have it, produce more profound works that have more meaning.

Was there any city you've visited that changed your whole creative perspectives?

Not a city, but before you get there. It's the spaces between places that intrigue me. You see a sort of mono-culture that exists between world cultures. But if I had to pick one city, Japan - for its vibrant culture. It's more commercial than England is. It's like a trophy cabinet of sorts to me. It has these beautiful things from all over the world, brought together and showcased in one place. But in a twist, it's ultimately empty in a way. In terms of its art and the work that we've made, then it's San Francisco. I used to skateboard when I was younger, so it was like going to Mecca; a religious experience that has been carried forth in life. It's got this mythological kind of effect over me. I find it fascinating when a place or somewhere you've already been to, is still amazing every time.



What was the boldest project you had to undertake, that pushed you beyond your own limits?

Everything we've made kind of has this innate craziness. But one that I thought was bold, groundbreaking, or in a way sort of fortuitous - the fact that it happened at a certain point in time when all these things converge - was this visual project we made titled 'APB - All Points Between'. It was the 1st audio visual real performance of its kind in the world that I can think of. It helped that onedotzero gave us the platform to develop it.

It was an ironic thing actually. Bloomberg wanted to create installations for their offices in London, so they paid us to travel around the world shooting footages for about 6 weeks. Through this project, we were able to combine all its production fragments, together with other projects we'd been doing and concepts made over the years, and sort of piece them together to create a story. We fully saw things happen very organically. We were traveling in America doing another exhibition project, when we met and interviewed this guy, Robert Alan Weiser, in Venice Beach, who was sort of a street philosopher. He talked about how life goes back and forth.

So it was an amalgamation of all these events that happen in this performance, APB'. And the idea kind of came to our head exactly after September 11! It suddenly gave it all this kind of real significance, commenting on content with meanings. I think that was the boldest statement I've ever made. It took people by surprise and made them cry when watching it.

From that interview with Robert, we made 2 short films, 'Thumbnail Express' and 'City of Hollow Mountains'. Bits of that narrative was later used in 'APB', along with re-edited George Bush speeches - way before anyone was doing this sort of stuff. It was emotional, political, thought provoking and just an amazing piece of work that had everything coming together, and ended with an uplifting effect. It was actually sampled in the beginning of 'Never Never Land' by Unkle. That was us, we made that. That was part of our performance, and they sampled it.



If you can make work that move people, then I think you're a lucky person. Everyone's got the ability to be creative and realise their imagination; if they remove the barrier in their mind. Culture creates that barrier because if not, then all hell would break loose. People are controlled, but they can break that down. They don't see that technology helps them to jump that wall in their mind, and not limit their abilities.



design: the light surgeons

Who are your top choices for musicians and designers/design collectives - who achieved to great success, the bold movement to defy commercial expectations?

Ah, simple! Radiohead and The Designers Republic.

What projects are you currently busy with and what interesting future collaborations can we expect?

Loads! We're hopefully starting a residency project, with this place called 'Impact' in New York. It's a totally new piece of work, untitled at the moment. We're hoping to make it into an album - a new electronic-folk-hip-hop audio visual performance that will be released as a DVD through 'Impact', sometime next year. I'm interested in developing myself as a film maker. Hopefully LS will develop itself into more of a DVD label - to establish it as a platform for myself, and other audio visual artists to basically release stuff. There's also another international public art project. Unfortunately, I can't talk about it due to contractual agreement.

Last but not least - Illustrate a flag that best represents The Light Surgeons.

Share an image that to you, depicts bold.

The image I've chosen was created, way back in 1980, by an artist-friend of mine called Peter Kennard. It's a photo-montage commissioned by the Labour Party here in the UK, as their anti nuclear symbol. I think it speaks for itself; but seems somewhat ironic with Blair's Labour Party in power today!



For more information on The Light Surgeons, log on to:
www.thelightsurgeons.co.uk

