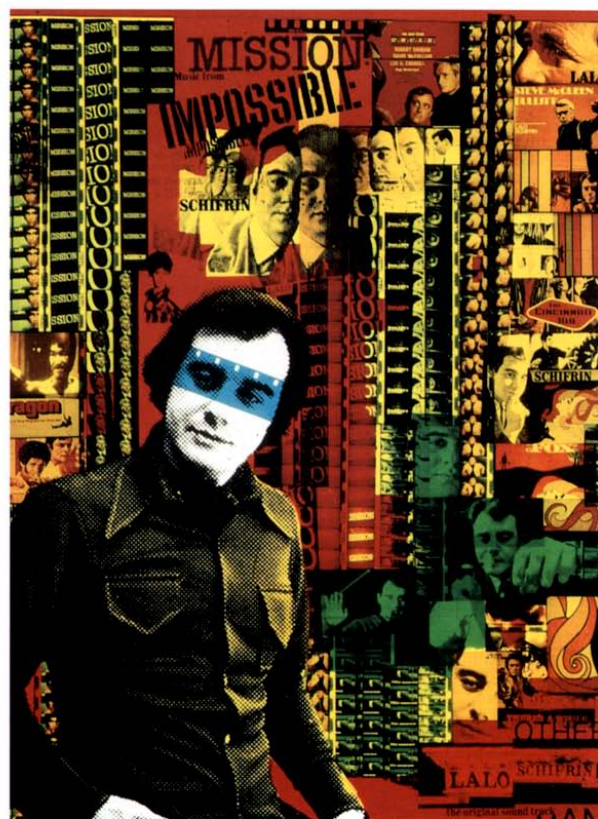
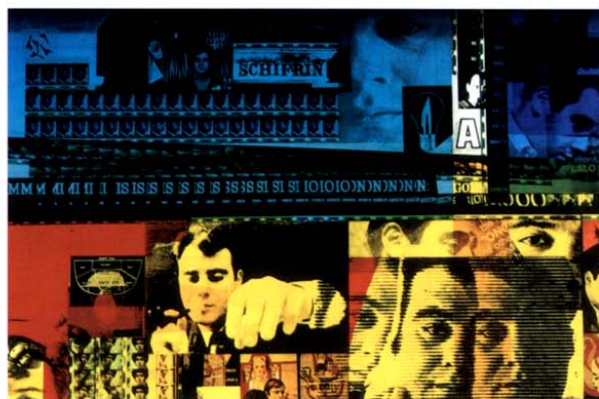


# Graphics International

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## The Light Surgeons

*Combining flat graphics with moving image in a decidedly lo-fi manner, the Light Surgeons multimedia performances have been livening up London's clubs for the last four years. Now they're set to diversify. Chris Barrett went to meet them.*

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1 | Surgeons logo on  
8millimetre film  
2-4 | Collage stills



Of the many people whose careers were kick-started in the Blue Note club on Hoxton Square, perhaps some of the most unusual were the team who provided the visuals – The Light Surgeons. The word 'Visuals' smacks of psychedelic oil patterns, flashing disco lights and 'trippy' images; wallpaper with light. The Light Surgeons provided something altogether more sophisticated. Using a bank of antiquated projection devices – eight millimetre and sixteen millimetre film projectors, video, and slide projectors the Surgeons created a visual experience, an amalgam of graphic and moving images, designed to work with the music, and create something greater than the sum of its parts.

The Blue Note has now gone, replaced by luxury apartments. The Light Surgeons have moved on too. Not physically (their office is just around the corner above the Brick Lane Music hall on Curtain Road) but how they create their work, and where they show it. New technology such as video and digital video now sits side by side alongside their characteristic raggle taggle collection of old projection devices. Most recently their particular brand of multimedia live performance has seen them appearing in Copenhagen, New York and San Francisco in the last month, and before that at the Stealing Beauty exhibition at the ICA.

Originally the Surgeons consisted of Chris Allen and Paul O'Connor, who met while studying graphic design at Portsmouth art college. With a lack of entertainment, and a passion for music the pair became involved in organising parties themselves; in particular providing the visuals. Later O'Connor moved to Ireland where he works as a graphic designer and operates a unit called The Light Surgeons there. The current team consist of Chris Allen, Andy Flywheel and new recruit Jude Greenaway. "Andy and I met in a place called Lee's Camera shop that used to sell all

sorts of old projection equipment" explains Allen. A mutual passion discovered led to their first collaboration. "I studied experimental film," explains Flywheel. I was always despondent that you couldn't get your films shown anywhere. I realised that if you show your films in a public space, then you've got an audience."

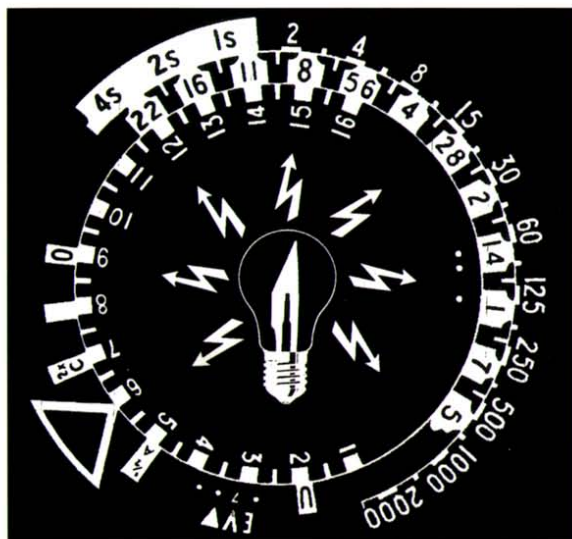
"We created our own medium really, and our own forms of showing our work outside the monopoly of cinema and television," continues Allen. "Those industries are essentially hard to get in to and hard to crack."

From humble beginnings working with Rob da'Bank at the Tea Room Des Artistes in Clapham, the team honed their skills and secured a few dates at the Blue Note that developed over time to their becoming almost a regular fixture.

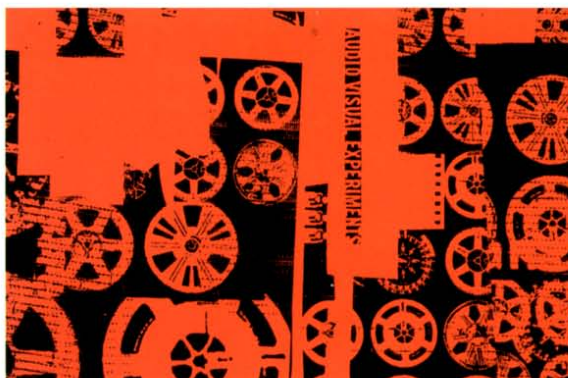
What makes the Surgeons work interesting and sets them apart from the many video jockey's around at present is the blend and variety of different techniques and technologies present in their performances. Redundant technologies are recontextualised and bits of film are sampled, looped and reworked into something new. Wildly differing images such as clips of Open University shows from the 70s or technical instruction manuals are combined with images of print graphics, inner city housing and type and text to create moods and illustrate ideas. All of the work though, whether sampled from other areas, or completely self-generated has had the Light Surgeons touch which makes it their own. "Everything we use has been produced by us," says Chris. "Whether its been sampled from someone else or shot by us. For instance I collect old instruction manuals which communicated through pictures. That was my interest really, how something can achieve a universal language →



The Light Surgeons  
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- 1] Surgeons logo on eight millimetre  
2] Surgeons logo  
3] Collage  
4] Still image



without it being in words." Their work does not conform to a conventional narrative structure however, but bypasses it, building instead on themes and ideas. "There is a story there but it's not presented in the way it is on television," explains Flywheel. "It's a pseudo narrative – a fragmented narrative. It's presented in a way where there's a juxtaposition of image and graphics. It's much more intertextual." The closest comparison – and the one they're most happy with – is with the music business. They use samples, overlaying and so on. Now they plan to take it further. "We were always interested in the area where music and film crossover and I think that's going to happen more and more," says Allen. Their work shamelessly samples pieces of other peoples films, but each time attempts to bring something new to it.

Working in similar areas as music and film innovators Hexstatic (whose seminal work *Timber* fused graphic and sound samples together to form a perfect crossover) and Coldcut they are exploring the link between time, space and sound. One of their last performances at the Blue Note saw them orchestrating live band using a video recorder timer as a metronome. "It was just a really simple way to orchestrate a large band, using the video as a linear base line," explains Allen.

These days though, the team works less with in clubs, and more with bands and music producers to create more of a performance. Other areas the Surgeons are exploring are producing recorded work (for television) and flat graphics. Allen created a portrait of Lalo Schiffrin for the *Swiftly* designed jazz mag *Straight No Chaser*, a collage created out of bits of eight millimetre film. These collages have now fed back into the live work and are used as projections in the images.

The Surgeons consider their approach multimedia in the truest sense of the word, using multiple screens, and working with space. The closest comparison is probably the multimedia shows husband and wife team

the Eames made in the 1950's. Until recently though, the technology they were using was largely redundant. "At some of the parties we used to do we'd have people from Saatchi's coming up and foaming at the mouth about how we'd put some graphics together and asking if we'd used Flame and Harry and so on and we'd say no, we just used what we had around us and were very resourceful," says Allen. When they wanted to put moving type on the screen, instead of compositing it in After Effects, they went out and found an old dot matrix display and filmed it writing *TheLight Surgeons*. This was layered and looped, and is now incorporated into their performances. "To this day we're still quite lo-fi," continues Andy. But that doesn't mean they're luddites; more recently video cameras have played a part, because of their ease of use, and also to bring new techniques to their work. "There's a lot of things you can do with video that you can't do with film, like feeding in live footage from, say a security camera for instance."

This Surgeons particular brand of graphic film performance is proving popular with bigger, and more influential clients. Aside from touring with musician the Herbaliser, Channel Four hired them for the launch party of *FilmFour*, and then again for a Sixties themed party they held. This month has seen them touring in New York, Scandinavia and across the UK. They also want to expand into other areas. Notably into recorded, rather than live work. "We're definitely interested in getting involved in recorded work."

"We'd like to get involved with the kind of thing Coldcut and Hexstatic are doing, combining sound and image," says Allen. "Also doing stuff where we're working to a script and there's a story. In a lot of senses its like being a designer as an illustrator – you take a brief and respond to it, but you also have to create something to enhance it. You've got quite a lot of freedom." □

