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JEREMY SHAW

Interview by
Joël Vacheron

Portrait by
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Jeremy Shaw moved from Vancouver to Berlin seven years ago. He found the inspiration to make a brilliant album with Circlesquare, *Songs About Dancing and Drugs* (2009), and never moved back. Visual artist, music composer, dance lover or modern-day healer, Shaw uses various channels for exploring the peripheries of perception. Cruising smoothly from pop culture icons to pseudo-scientific experiments, his works are mostly an attempt to translate the mechanisms and symptoms that deal with transcendental experiences.

Joël Vacheron: How come you moved to Vancouver from Berlin seven years ago? Was it because of the vibrant electronic music scene?

Jeremy Shaw: I moved to Berlin for numerous reasons – but yes, the forward-thinking music culture was definitely among them. Circlesquare was always received very well in Berlin and the allure of an affordable life that provided me with more time and space in a city that valued music and art was undeniable to me at that moment (and still is).

What are your current musical directions?

Over the past few years, I've taken a break from Circlesquare and done a fair bit less in terms of music – most of the music that I've made more recently has been for my art works, and so has been dictated by what the piece has called for conceptually rather than what I would necessarily be making if I'm writing music for music's sake. Todd Shillington (Konrad Black) and I have recently revived working together on a collaborative project called There in Spirit and will have some records out in the next year. It all operates along a kind of New Romantic Science Fiction trajectory – like, soap opera techno.

How did you manage to become acclaimed as a visual artist as much as a musician?

I have always been working on both a visual art and music practice – but rarely integrating the two. I suppose that my art may have seemed secondary due to the kind of constant exposure that music gets when you're working with labels and on tour but it's always been there with equal rigor.

Berlin has become a reference within a lot of your artwork. For *The Image of a Generation* (2011) you put up thousands of posters of the film *Christiane F*, outlining the slogan in several languages. What inspired that?

Watching *Christiane F* was my first experience of seeing Berlin. I was 12 and I rented it purely based on the fact that David Bowie had a cameo. I watched it many times over the years – and beyond the news footage of the Berlin Wall falling, it was really my only vision of the city until much later. I was very drawn to the city's dystopian atmosphere and strung-out teenagers – like many suburban kids, I was drawn to lots of things of that nature. When I moved to Berlin, I met people from all over the world who had had a similar experience with the film: it being their almost singular vision of the city and what they had measured it against when first arriving in their new home. Everyone spoke of going to the Bahnhof Zoo area and being shocked at how clean it had become. Another thing was that the people I met who had actually grown up in Berlin seemed virtually unaware of the global cult status of the film – to them it was simply 'required-reading' in high school. With *The Image of a Generation,* I reprinted the original theatrical posters from the release in nine different countries and languages, and mixed them in with contemporary advertising without any additional information – to tap into a sense of shared familiarity of the recent past. The name of the work comes from the main slogan attached to the marketing of the film, which was then translated into many languages. To me, it remains the image of the 80s generation in Berlin – or at least, it remains *my* image of that generation, constructed while growing up on the other side of the world.

Counter-cultural topics are present throughout your work, especially in early pieces like *Best Minds Part One* (2007). What is it that fascinated you about subversion, exploration, identification and rites of passage?

I've always been drawn to periphery culture – either actively or as a spectator. I don't know why; it's just been inherent in my nature from long before I had any way of rationalising it. Even when I was very, very young, I remember seeing anti-drug PSAs during Saturday morning cartoons and getting excited, anticipating when I was going to be old enough to have access to the drugs they were talking about. My own experiences early on with things like skateboarding, graffiti, hip-hop, hardcore and drugs evolved into research around the experiences and rituals of others. This interest has long moved beyond anything needing to be justified as marginal or subversive, though. I'm up for anyone's attempt at transcending time – from a single person meditating to a gigantic Evangelical mass in rapture.

For *Transcendental Capacities* (2008-2014) you built a photography studio to make aural emanations visible. Could you describe other methods or setups that you developed to show manifestations of transcendence?

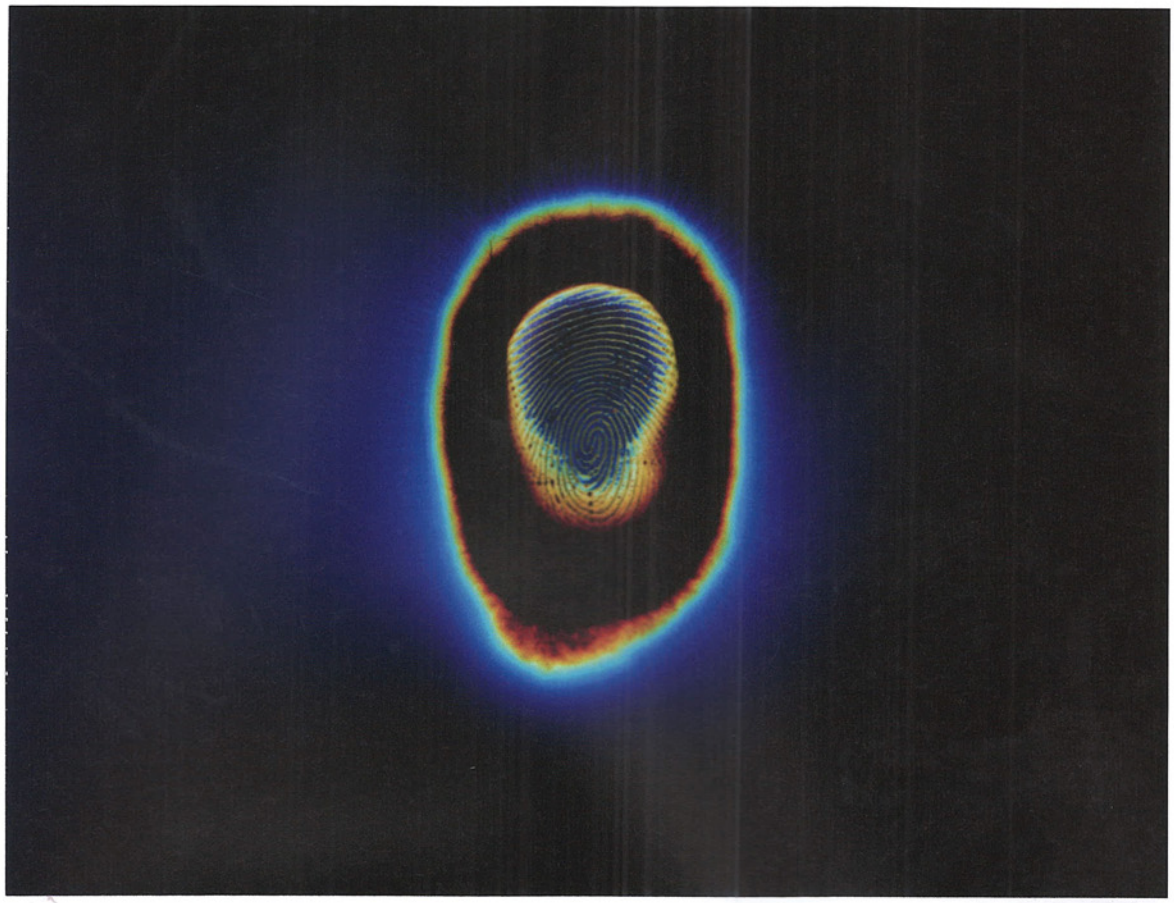
My work is very often based around an attempt to translate transcendental experience. This can take shape as anything from a document of a physical ritual that I manipulate in post-production to a scientific attempt to visually map these notions that I then transfer to a more populist form. But, regardless of the disparate nature of the source material, it all eventually boils down to the age-old notion of humankind's desire to escape the present – and the subsequent struggle to translate this back to others.

With regard to this desire to escape the present, do you miss live performance with its feedback loop of direct energy between you and the audience? A situation that provides its own kind of transcendence...

I do. I really don't miss anything else about touring at all except those 50 minutes on stage. The travel, set-up, displacement and all the waiting around became very mundane, but I really grew to love playing live and experiencing the instant gratification of that loop you talk of. I still DJ a fair bit, which can have a similar effect at times, but I don't know if I would ever deem it transcendent – at least, not from my side of the stage.

Your video installation *DMT* (2004) creates links with the first photographs of "hysterical" patients in the 19th century and footage of LSD research in the 50s and the 60s. What is your position on scientific experiments?

Well, I am definitely an advocate of the re-introduction of psychedelic drugs and plants into science and medicine. The tiny amount of research that's been permitted in recent years proves that these things can be overwhelmingly positive in treating numerous afflictions – and likely many more that we aren't yet aware of due to the totally paranoid banning of such research in the 70s.



It seems that more and more voices, following differing agendas, are lobbying against drug prohibition. Is it just a way to put some grey areas under economic control or could this process of legalisation increase human consciousness?

It could increase human consciousness, undoubtedly. Lifting bans on mind-altering drugs would help lift the stigmas associated with them and those who use them. The introduction of controlled distribution and production would also mean a regulation of potency and grades in circulation, along with better information of dosage and methods. These things obviously need very considered regulations, and yes, the economic factor could be dubious as we all know who would likely end up profiting financially. But still, the fact that consumption of consciousness-expanding drugs is currently illegal for free-thinking adults in most parts of the western world, is totally nuts.

In the 60s, cybernetic artists used stereo gear, slide projectors, strobe lights and LSD to transform the mindset of individuals and connect them to others. Do you also consider that small-scale technologies can help us to reach alternate states of consciousness?

Yes, absolutely. There are infinite ways and combinations of ways to reach an altered state – and I don't think the scale of the technology matters at all, simply the way it's being used and the desire to attain it.

In his book *How the Hippies Saved Physics: Science, Counterculture, and the Quantum Revival* (2013), David Kaiser shows how the crucial landmarks of quantum mechanics were placed by a group of science mavericks. Considering that borders are becoming more and more porous, do you feel that artists are currently in a position to influence the realms of science and technology?

There is a current wave of artists working in a speculative manner that I feel should be considered quite seriously by the science and tech industries. Their perspectives on new technology and its integration in society are very insightful and unique – so would at least inform, if not influence. I think that artists in general should be considered by a larger audience within science, technology, philosophy… their influence shouldn't just be restricted to areas deemed "cultural".

With *Quickeners* (2014), you reworked footage from an old ethnographic film portraying a Pentecostal Christian sect and the result is a sort of psychedelic mockumentary. What is the place of irony in your approach ?

With *Quickeners*, I reverse-engineered archival footage to fit a science fiction narrative by manipulating the audio so that the subjects could be saying what I wanted and editing the film so as to further illustrate their moments of catharsis. The story follows a tiny group of Quantum Humans – the next evolutionary phase post-humanity – who are experiencing a foreign urge to feel as their human being predecessors once did: a desire to believe in something that is not scientifically proven. I will often use an outmoded medium or style to confound the production date of the work, taking measures to maintain the technicality and aesthetics of another time. This creates an initial familiarity and comfort with the audience, a suspension of belief from which the potential to subvert is strong. I find this a very effective way of discussing ideas around parallel/multiple/future realities.