

It is a truth universally acknowledged that fashionistas are a po-faced lot, especially on the front row during fashion week. With showgoers typically attending 10-15 presentations a day, it takes something truly memorable to raise those perfectly plucked eyebrows, but London-based experience designers Silent Studios have managed it repeatedly. ‘Ooooh’s’, ‘ahhhhh’s’, gasps, giggles and even, in the case of one overwhelmed client, tears have greeted their shows for Burberry, Anya Hindmarch, Nike and the British Fashion Awards.

Creative director Nathan Prince and composer Liam Paton are the self-styled ‘John Lennon and Yoko Ono’ behind Silent Studios, bringing together sight and sound to create bespoke immersive experiences and content that blurs

# SOUNDS OF SILENT

the lines between film, music, art and design. Belying its name (a relic from their early days, when they’d work through the night trying not to disturb their flatmates), Silent has become a big noise across the fashion, food and music industries. From interactive arena visuals for Kasabian to a sensory tunnel installation for Nike and a synaesthetic Masonic supper, their work is a broad church, bound by a common thread of “making people genuinely feel something”.

## My beautiful-sounding laundrette

It was an evil washing powder with designs on world domination that first brought the pair together in 2001. Prince, a fledgling multimedia designer at Ogilvy-owned design studio Coley Porter Bell, was looking for someone to create the soundtrack to a “hilariously bad” Japanese arthouse film he’d made for WPP’s Blue Sky competition. Paton, a graduate of Liverpool’s Institute for Performing Arts, had recently moved down to London and was mulling over “going down the conventional route and joining a band” when his brother introduced him to Prince.

“Even with that first project, it wasn’t so much about how we made the film but how we presented it,” remembers Prince. ▣

Actions speak louder than words, they say. *Selena Schleh* hears London-based Silent Studios getting the message across loud and clear for fashion brands with ‘immersive experiences’, using intensely moving music, mind-blowing digital film, inspirational set design and more, for the likes of Nike and Burberry



Showing early imaginative flair, they commandeered an east London laundrette; Paton miking up washing machines to record the soundscape (“All these pensioners were coming in and getting really pissed off that we’d taken over the place.”) The resulting film scooped the top prize, and marked the beginning of a self-confessed addiction to “witnessing people’s reactions to our work... whether it’s one person with a set of headphones or 100,000 people going crazy at Glastonbury.”

Don’t you wonder sometimes about sound and vision?

From the outset, Prince and Paton were determined not to restrict themselves to a particular medium. While their peers were setting up traditional design agencies or animation studios, Silent based decisions on how creatively interesting the commission was, which has paid off in an extraordinarily wide skillset: they’re equally confident producing a light installation or a live-action shoot. While each project may be different, they see the creative process as broadly the same. “Our role is really to think about the experience, and what people see and hear and how it makes them feel,” says Prince. “We generally start with sound, because that shapes the whole thing.” Depending on the job, they’ll then bring in different experts: a lighting designer for anything more complicated than projections; a set designer, to render their vision within the physical space; and/or a 3D visualiser to simulate the experience. Perhaps the most interesting aspect of Silent’s method is the pivotal role given to sound. “So many people see music as a last minute call,

commissions from Hindmarch, they’ve worked with Bally, Victoria Beckham and Aquascutum. Their longest-running fashion relationship, however, has been with Burberry, which began with a small-budget atrium installation and culminated in 2012 with the headline-grabbing Burberry World Live in Taipei , a 360-degree immersive experience weaving live music, an eight-part film and digital simulations of the capricious British weather that saw models buffeted by autumn leaves, wind and rain. “Our paths crossed at a great time, when they were really pushing it digitally,” says Prince of their four-year collaboration with creative director Christopher Bailey on content for the brand’s catwalk shows in London and Milan, as well as live immersive events in the Middle East and Asia. Though fashion work brings its own challenges – like Burberry’s frustrating lockdown on overt publicity – it has thrust Silent’s work into a higher level of public consciousness. “If you do a commercial,” says Paton, “people might see it or they might not, but [catwalk shows] are seen by hundreds of thousands of people worldwide.” Nothing to fear but the fear of agencies Silent has been working within the fashion and arts sectors for years, but it’s only recently, says Paton, that the advertising world has woken up to the value of the bespoke experience. “Look at [immersive theatre pioneers] Punchdrunk. It’s memorable, you talk to your friends about it. And that’s what brands are after these days.”

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particularly in advertising, but because we approach [visual and audio] at the same time, one can influence the other,” says Paton. “If the music’s going to be big, visually it can be quite pared back, and vice versa.” A project that went stratospheric on both audio and visual fronts was Out Of This World, Anya Hindmarch’s cosmic spring/summer 2014 show, in which bags floated weightlessly amidst swirling planets and models space-walked above the runway, accompanied by a cosmic electro-orchestral soundtrack. “It was the opposite to a DJ turning up and playing a few tunes,” explains Paton of the composition process. “We worked closely with Anya over several weeks, working out the key moments of the show to build the soundtrack as if it were a film, basically.” Hindmarch was so overjoyed with the result, reports Paton proudly, that “she actually cried”. With an emphasis on live shows and audience engagement, it’s no surprise the fashion industry has embraced Silent. As well as repeat

“I’m not sure if it’s a post-recession thing, but people – especially younger people – are valuing experiences more than ever,” adds Prince. “They don’t just want to buy things, they want to do cool stuff.” As a result, the pair have noticed that brands are beginning to divert their advertising dollars from traditional TVCs to experience design. For many marketers, though, even those with a strong advertising tradition, experience-led design is uncharted territory – which is where Silent’s unique capabilities come to the fore. Prince gives the example of a recent project for Nike: to promote the brand’s Innovation Summit 2016, Silent created a ‘sensory journey’ down a 200m-long mirrored tunnel in New York’s Moynihan station, which used light, sound and even changes in temperature to suggest athletes racing en masse towards a common goal. “Nike have made so many amazing TV spots, they can do that with their eyes closed,” Prince states, “but we know how to design for a physical

space, rather than a screen. And that’s quite a specialised skill.” Commercial projects are their bread-and-butter these days, but Silent still aspires to work with people more than big-ticket brands. “Working with people like Brian Eno, David Lynch, Nick Knight and Heston Blumenthal, that’s where the real magic happens, because decisions aren’t based on fear,” notes Prince. Fashion brands are the exception. “Working with an agency creative team, you never get to speak to the end client,” says Paton, “which means the more ambitious or out-there ideas never get to them. Whereas in fashion you deal with the designer directly, and they’ve got the final say.”

Finding partners to make creative dreams come true

The desire to make brave creative work is also the reason they operate as a twosome. Over the years the studio has fluctuated in size: from 2007-2014 they were a trio with co-director Oliver Davies, and swelled to 10 staff at one point. But, “it felt like we were restricted by what we could output as a studio, rather than partnering with world-class outfits,” explains Prince. “Plus, my fee had to support 10 people so we had to say yes to everything.” One such ‘world-class outfit’ is Electric Theatre Collective, whom Silent joined in 2015. The collaboration of “mutual respect and need” is proving fruitful: with ETC’s VFX firepower behind them, says Prince, they’re able to push the creative envelope – “We can suggest things that we’ve always wanted to do, like procedural animation of CG characters, and they’ll make it happen,” – while still retaining an important level of autonomy. They’re currently working with ETC stablemates No Ghost, a young VR collective, on a digital installation for the upcoming MTV Europe Music Awards, based around a CG dancer that responds to hashtags. Asked about the influence of new tech such as VR and AR on their work, they say it’s key, though they’re wary of ‘box-ticking’ and using tech for tech’s sake. “We’ve always used technology to enhance an experience rather than base the experience on the tech,” states Paton. They’re enjoying experimenting with VR but its current solitary incarnation falls short of Silent’s aim to facilitate human interaction and experiences that bring people together, though Prince is confident that as the technology develops there will be more scope for group interaction. Also in the pipeline is an intriguing-sounding ‘cycle-powered’ installation for British designer Paul Smith, which will use the energy produced by pedal-pushing models to illuminate lightbulbs. With Silent’s expertise in engineering emotional experiences, it’s sure to light up (Botox permitting) a fair few faces, too. 8

- 1 Anya Hindmarch, Out of this World, spring/summer 2014 catwalk show
- 2 Nike, Innovation Summit 2016 experience
- 3 Burberry, Burberry World Live 2012



WHAT INSPIRES Silent Studios

What’s your favourite ever ad? **Nathan Prince** Jonathan Glazer’s *Surfer* for Guinness. To me it’s perfection. What’s the last film you watched and was it any good? **NP** A documentary about Swedish House Mafia’s last tour called *Leave The World Behind* by Christian Larson. **LP** *McConkey*, which is a compelling documentary. There’s something about [extreme skier Shane McConkey]’s lust for life and adventure that is completely captivating.

**Liam Paton** This changes all the time but my current favourite is the recent Jonah Hill ad for Palace x Reebok Collaboration (above). I can’t stop crying with laughter every time I watch it.

What product could you not live without? **NP** Don’t make me say iPhone. **LP** My Yamaha upright piano. There’s something about playing a real piano that you cannot get close to with any digital piano or synthesiser, however much you spend.

What are your thoughts on social media? **NP** I’m torn. I worry about the life we project and how that makes others feel: I prefer spending time with people. At the same time I post imagery of my life with a strange internal barometer. It’s projecting highlights of my life – to whom, I’m not sure. **LP** I have never fully embraced it as I know the commitment that is needed. I’m also a person that always forgets to take photos of anything, so that kind of limits what you can do with Facebook and Instagram.

How do you relieve stress during a pitch/shoot? **NP** I train in taekwondo for five hours per week, no matter what. That helps me to reset and forget everything for a couple of hours. **LP** It sounds strange but music is a great stress reliever for me, even though it’s what I do every day – playing my own music and listening to old albums from when I was younger and had very few responsibilities.

Tell us one thing about yourself that most people won’t know... **NP** I’ve won three medals at various national taekwondo competitions this year. **LP** I used to be in a band called Eskimo Disco and we got the guys that make *Pingu* to make one of our videos. It was a YouTube hit.