

Q&A: Alex Koch, Imaginary Media

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[Alex Koch](#) is a man of possibilities. As co-founder of [Imaginary Media](#), an innovation laboratory, Koch combines his various areas of expertise, including projection mapping, filmmaking, and production, to develop first-of-a-kind immersive environments. As a projection designer, Koch has worked with regional theatre, Off-Broadway, and Broadway. Some of his notable accomplishments include the Broadway production of [Irena's Vow](#) at the Walter Kerr in 2009, [Goodbar](#), a rock opera performed at [The Public Theatre's Under the Radar Festival](#), and the world premiere stage version of Ralph Ellison's [Invisible Man](#). His work as a film producer has been seen at the [Tribeca Film Festival](#) and others. Koch has taught master classes at Colorado State University, University of North Carolina Wilmington, Hamilton College, and now, at the [Live Design New York Master Classes for Lighting and Projection](#), to be held June 2-4 at NYU Tisch School of the Arts and The Gallatin School. *Live Design* caught up with Koch about his latest projects.

1. What projects are you currently working on?

As a freelance projection designer, I'm working through the preview period of [The Liquid Plain](#) at the [Signature Theatre](#). This is the New York premiere and second production of [The Liquid Plain](#) since the [Oregon Shakespeare Festival](#) in 2013, which I also designed. The previews are pretty amazing. There's an open flow of ideas and willingness to experiment in the room that is a huge credit to all the creative team involved.

I'm also in pre-production for [Marley](#), a bio-musical experience, premiering at [CenterStage](#) in Baltimore. I worked with the writer/director [Kwame Kwei-Armah](#) closely through the fall and winter as we ramped up production on the projection content. We're developing an animation style drawn from a wide-range of influencers, Caribbean artists, filmmakers, etc. Imaginary Media, the Brooklyn-based event and design studio I

co-founded, is managing the workflow for a dedicated team of illustrators, composers, and 3D animators. We've got well over an hour of content to deliver by mid-April and then right into revisions during the tech weeks. It's totally awesome.



2. What challenges have you overcome during a recent project?

Marleyis inherently challenging on every level. My company was formed to create live-event, technology-related solutions and innovations, and we're handling the real-world pipeline and delivery questions. The forest I'm currently working through is locking down the content's aesthetic style. I knew I didn't want to challenge the audience with archival images that would rival the talent on the stage. I want our cast members to have *their* universe to perform in. Working with the director closely over many months, we found ourselves attracted to the idea of drawing and building our world by hand. From newscasts to travel montages, concert crowds to Trenchtown, the handmade content allows us to morph, scale, and form to support an emotional journey. How do you reinvent an icon for two hours? You take the audience to a new place, a familiar but alternate universe. I think projection can do that.

3. How does your experience in both theatre and film, as designer and producer, affect your creative process?

As a producer for film or a designer in theatre, the job is to get 100% of the creative goals achieved with the available resources. The film producer needs to be clever and see the parts for the whole, the end game. As a designer, especially in the conceptual phase, you need a kind of epic naivety. What is the most vivid, extreme, and surprising way to tell this story? I let the designer in me put that out there before the bottom-line and the calls for subtlety. As a producer, I want to get to the end without having broken the bank or the team, and when we get there, I want the director and audiences to be excited. Designer, producer—I don't think there's one way or the other for me; I need both hats.



4. What are the differences in projection design for theatre versus narrative film and installations?

Working in all three is the best. The mediums have huge overlap of toolsets, but the process and the results go off in different directions, and they inform each other. Film gives you total control of the audience: Move the camera, and they move. Stop time and everyone is frozen. Reverse, and repeat. I think anything is possible. Video installation and experiential work have the same set of potentials as film, but once the audience is up and walking, you don't have that guarantee of eye-contact with the audience. You want to make something that they'll miss if they turn, and so the conversation you can have becomes driven by uncertainty. Theatre is the medium I go to for the impossible challenges, not to play down the effort and ingenuity elsewhere, but in the theatre, *everything* is working against us. The audience can see all too well the difference between a projected body and a real one on stage, and so the projections fall way back in their authenticity. Projections need to be expanding the world of the story or adding an element to the conversation, more like underscoring. It's really rare that they should be a focal point of attention in the theatre.

5. What project or person has influenced you?

Working with Arian Moayed on [Goodbar](#), a live concept-album inspired by the book and movie *Looking For Mr. Goodbar*—it was a feature-length film behind a rock band, totally cueable internally to each song and featured hugely in the performance. I think it was actually a combo of film, projection, design, and immersive environment. There just weren't any right answers to how to craft the look for the content. Arian and I must have shot every single song four or five times. Over two years of development and monthly performances, I had 3D animators, composers, multiple DPs, sign-language experts, fight choreographers, and a handful of celebrity cameos flowing through the production pipeline. We finished off with a featured spot in the Public's Under the Radar Festival in 2012, and I learned that Arian's crazy-whack mind had composed something really coherent and hugely original. I'd been in the forest for so long building, building, and building, and there was this finely tuned madcap experience at the end. It was inspiring and about as rewarding as anything I've done yet.



6. What inspires your designs?

Movies and paintings—that's where it's all at for me. I don't think I can watch enough movies. Among other things, I never seem to have time to watch. What is achieved in narrative and documentary film, through the medium's entire history, is a complete design textbook. I think there will be a time when projection designers innovate looks that are taken into film. Designing projections within film is something I'm doing more of, but there's just so much to take from everything in film, Hollywood blockbusters included. And then there are paintings. I try to hit the [Metropolitan Museum of Art](#) whenever I'm struggling. Look at J.M.W. Turner's paintings, and check out that light: How can you do *that* on your set? It forces me back into the process every time.

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