

## THE SECRET PROJECT

**A quiet revolution in new media work.**

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Interdisciplinary collaborations, especially those involving new technologies, are flavour of the month for dance-makers, audiences, critics and theorists alike. And while a frenzy of cross-art form fervour unites choreographers with artists of every hue, much of the dialogue feels more like a clash than a collaboration.

In this attention-grabbing context it is hard to spot the value of quiet companies like **half/angel**, based in England and Ireland under the direction of Jools Gilson-Ellis and Richard Povall. Born in 1995, from a synthesis of their skills as, respectively, choreographer, dancer and writer, and composer and digital artist, **half/angel** has evolved organically over a series of projects into a company with a body of knowledge which is giving rise to subtle shifts in performing paradigms. Yet **half/angel** work outside the spotlight of much contemporary creation, perhaps because both partners are also academics, (Gilson-Ellis currently lectures in English at University College , Cork and Povall is the senior fellow at Middlesex University's RESCEN, the newly created Centre in the Performing Arts, he also teaches part-time at Oberlin Conservatory of Music in the United States).

Perhaps however, it is more due to these artists' slow and thorough creative process which led to the publication of the CD-Rom, *mouthplace* in 1997, and progressed into live performance only after years of research at international new media centres. **The Secret Project**, the new dance theatre performance, installation and website which the group previews at The Banff Centre for the Arts, Canada with the world premiere at The Firkin Crane, Eire, is a paradigm of **half/angel's** exhaustive approach and may finally lead to a wider recognition of their work. This production is such a clear expression of their aims and such a logical evolution of the ideas explored within the CD-ROM, that it has been applauded wherever it has previewed, even before such expert audiences as those gathered at the International Dance & Technology Conference in Arizona early this year.

**The Secret Project** is the synthesis of extensive research into interactive technologies. In the CD-ROM, Gilson-Ellis and Povall unpicked their personal skills and built them back together in an exploration of the relationship between text, image and sound. Fascinated by the quest to mediate experience through technology, the artists built a number of complex interfaces which confounded typical linear on/off approaches to interactivity and created a confused and confusing series of liberating relationships between virtual and physical worlds.

The experience of this complexity led to a desire to further explore the human/digital relationship and the artists plunged into experimentation with MIDI software which converts motion into information which can be processed in a number of other ways. Exploring the potential for movement to trigger pre-recorded and live sound, video, still images and lighting, set up a further set of challenges to **half/angel's** attempts to redefine the body in space. Instead of pursuing the immediate gratification of the spectacular effects available to choreographers of responsive environments, they focused upon the refinement of their subtle techniques. In 1996, residencies at the Studio for Electronic and Instrumental Music (STEIM) in Amsterdam, and Firkin Crane Dance Development Agency in Cork, began the creation of the live production which is now coming to a close in a pre-production residency in Banff.

**half/angel** adapted BigEye motion capture to find ways of responding to the quality of movement and the relationships between more than one body in the space. Having gained a certain fluency with the interfaces between text, sound and image in their screen-based work, Gilson-Ellis and Povall were clear that live performance provided the logical progression of their explorations into the human dynamic driving all interactive technology. The addition of live manipulation of environmental effects such as sound and light offered the "entanglements" where **half/angel** locate the key to creative explorations of space. Povall says: "In such work, odd corporal confusions arise between whether one moves in space or utters text. We are interested in what these new technologies conjure as 'secret' and how our other (Irish and French) secrets might bleed into such a performative tool. Such secrets are corporeal, cultural, wrought from pleasures and repressions. This shifting sense of the 'secret' continues to orient our thinking on the making of this work, where utterance of text can control movement and movement can control the utterance of text." In the performance, personalities merge with digital environments in ways that are utterly

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dependent. The nature of the movement triggers the nature of the sound, which in turn has an effect upon the movement of the performer. Povall is clear that, "this represents a different kind of compositional paradigm in which traditional notions of composition – building whole complex structures that are reproduced or interpreted by performers – are fundamentally challenged. As the artists adapt the technology to meet their demands, the software becomes extension of the body, with all the invisible nuances of human motivation. Quiet, moving, and modestly unspectacular, **The Secret Project** which I observed was an inspirational obliteration of much new media work, where ideas and emotions prevailed over the modes of their communication.

In the hour long performance, Gilson-Ellis will dance with fellow Irish-based choreographers Cindy Cummings and Mary Nunan. There will be performances in Cork in November 1999 before further Irish and English touring in Spring 2000. In other spaces the work will be shown as an installation, where the audience discovers through their own movement. A series of "haptic" touch-sensitive sculptural boxes, linked by Ethernet to digitised sound files, are activated by the movement of the audience's hands, releasing "sonic ghosts" in fragments of text, breaths and sounds responsive to the quality of the movement.

The website: [www.adpa.mdx.ac.uk/rescen/rp/secret/secret.html](http://www.adpa.mdx.ac.uk/rescen/rp/secret/secret.html) gives further opportunities for individual interaction and takes the project to the worldwide audience it deserves. It now remains for **The Secret Project** to find its audiences before Povall and Gilson-Ellis move with their ideas into another protracted period of research, leaving us to roll with the punches of less measured new media explosions.