



CAMILLE UTTERBACK

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San Francisco artist **Camille Utterback** (b. 1970) creates interactive installations and dynamically generated animations in which she heightens viewers' awareness of the relationship between their bodies and the technology that exerts an ever growing impact on their lives. To make her installations, Utterback programs video tracking software and writes code that digitally translates body movements into ephemeral kinetic images. Through algorithms she has devised, Utterback lays the groundwork for a give and take, in which physical gestures interact with abstract symbolic expressions such as poetry, film, and painting, which in turn prompt the participant to explore further gestural expressions in anticipation of an evolving and deeply engrossing interface.

These translations of gesture seem at first random; then as more is observed about the consequences and possibilities of tracing certain actions, the parameters and range of effects allowed by the digital interaction become more evident. A visual system—a game and its rules, and the roles to be played to make it all work—begins to reveal itself to the participant, who is enticed to take pleasure in exploring the body's relationship to this unfolding language. Utterback is interested in showing how digital interfaces "provide the connective tissue between our bodies and the codes represented in our machines."¹ How do we physically and psychologically change through our links with machines that may free us from certain limits, yet may take us further away from our selves or even impose new means of directing our thought processes? Speaking of her work in the context of today's interactive technology, Utterback says that:

My work is an attempt to bridge the conceptual and the corporeal. How we use our bodies to create abstract symbolic systems, and how these systems (language for example) have reverberations on our physical self is a matter of great concern to me. The dialog between these two realms...is particularly relevant to our contemporary culture as we aim to grapple with the ramifications of virtuality and our increasing relationship with the interfaces and representational systems of our machines.

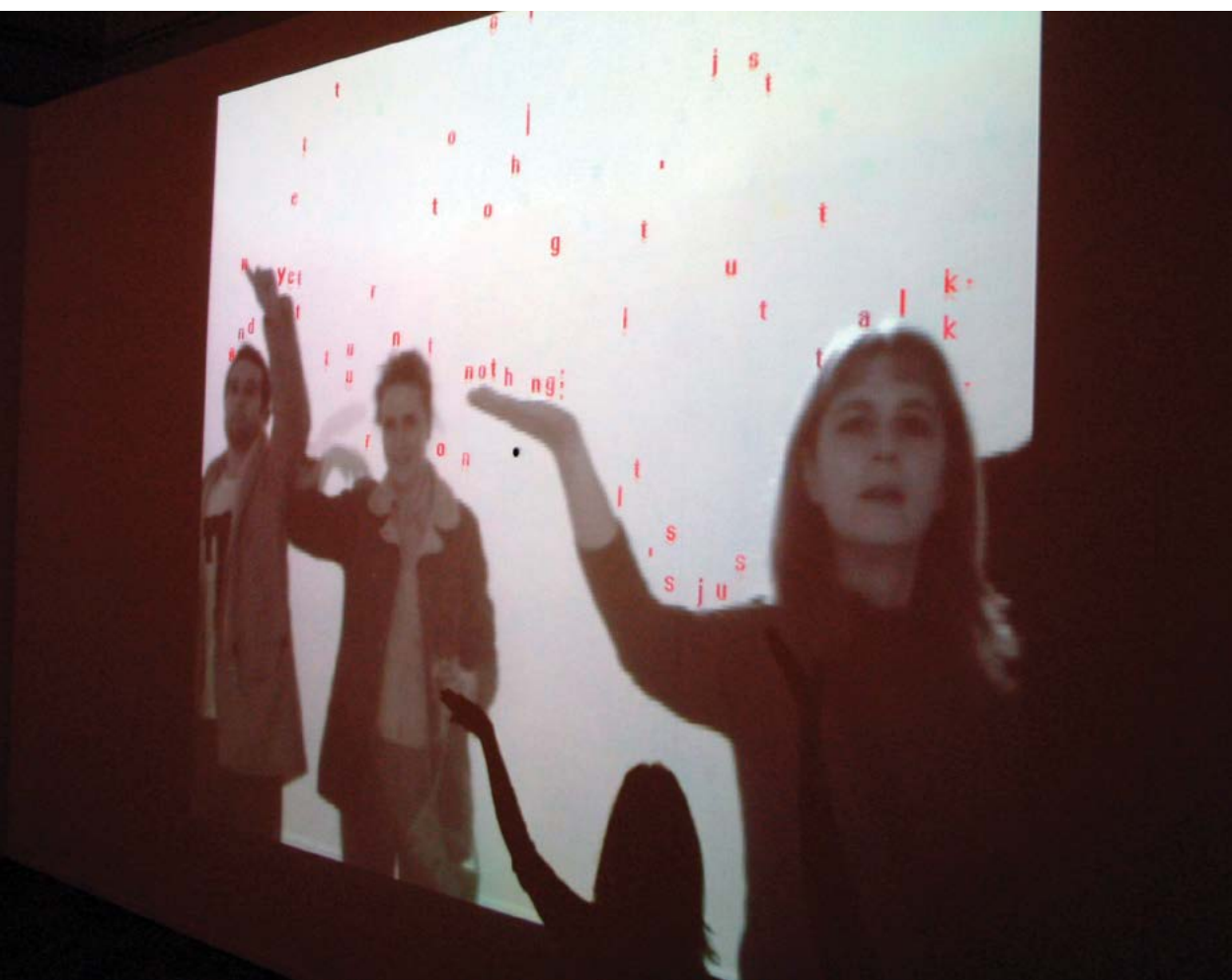


Fig.1

This exhibition presents four interactive digital installations, including the landmark work, *Text Rain* (1999, fig.1), created by Utterback in collaboration with Israeli artist Romy Achituv. In this work, letters, words, and phrases from a poem cascade like discrete objects onto the projected image of a viewer/participant, to “rest” momentarily on heads, arms, and shoulders. Paradoxically, the image of the participant’s body seems more visible through the accretion of letters,

even as they fall through spaces left by bodily gestures, float further down and eventually vanish. As letters accumulate, words and phrases begin to appear. The text is never easy to read, yet its concrete presence causes us to see language as a thing that derives meaning from its intersection with the body. Utterback says that, "Reading in this piece becomes a physical as well as cerebral endeavor."

The letters, words, and phrases in *Text Rain* were excerpted from the poem "Talk, You," by Evan Zimroth:

**I like talking with you, simply that:
conversing, a turning-with or-around, as in
your turning around to face me
suddenly, saying Come, and I turn
with you, for a sometime
hand under my under-things,
and you telling me
what you would do, where,
on what part of my body
you might talk to me differently.
At your turning,
each part of my body turns to verb.
We are the opposite of
tongue-tied, as if there were such an
antonym; we are synonyms
for limbs' loosening of syntax,
and yet turn to nothing; It's just talk.²**

Utterback has excised the overt eroticism to emphasize the sensuality of a more purely linguistic *pas de deux*. The last phrase, "It's just talk," suggests that language helps us plumb one body's relationship with another, while never becoming a surrogate for the actual physical encounter that may make talk unnecessary. It inserts yearning into the equation, making the space between desire and fulfillment a corollary to the space between body and words (language cast as a thing that stands in for bodily engagement). When two

people posture in front of the *Text Rain* screen, they might interact with letters (which seem to touch them in a delicate, even caressing way) as much as with each other. Neither an accolade to nor an indictment of digital interactive technology, this is a reminder that mediated interactions may seduce us with their apparent magic, they may even inspire new ways of connecting people, but they do not replace physical touch and direct interaction between people.

A different discourse between body and image is found in the dynamic fields of two works in Utterback's *External Measures* series (2001–present, fig. 2), in which a more complex set of software rules yields an imagery of seemingly hand-painted marks, lines, and forms—Utterback, indeed, was trained as a painter. These interactive installations evoke the vocabulary of gestural abstraction, especially the works of such artists as Jackson Pollock (1912–1956) and Willem de Kooning (1904–1997), who are known for the physical way in which they used their entire arms, even bodies, in sweeping applications of paint. For them, painting was thought and intuition harnessed to the broad gesture; the finished work is a subjectively determined stopping point of the accumulated record of a series of actions, some covered up or obliterated, others painted over but still visible.

In describing the sequential action of her animated paintings, Utterback explains that:

they evolve as visual marks react to each participant's movements in multiple ways. New marks appear as a person starts to move in the space, but each set of marks is remembered, and can be reactivated by the next person's movement. Painterly smears are created as marks are pushed from their initial location, and then attempt to return to their starting point. Older layers of movement are erased by the contours of participants' bodies, and streams of dots emerge from locations where a person has stood still. Layers of time in the installation space are inscribed in the visual layers of imagery that emerge.³



Fig.2

The series of marks digitally traces and records the evolution of a “painter’s” process. Paint never dries, the process ends only by the participant stopping and leaving the room but its trace remains for the next person to play with. As in art history, one attainment leads to another; but where once this resulted in fixed stopping points (called paintings), in *External Measures* it is translated as a never-ending evolution of images.

The cause and effect proposition of the *External Measures* series is conceptually straightforward—for each action, a mark or set of marks appears. Subsequent actions alter and eventually erase those marks. An earlier series, *Liquid Time* (2001–02), relates to irrational causalities across time and space, the contingent nature of perception, and a disembodiment that reflects a contemporary existence mediated by electronic imaging. In *Liquid Time—Tokyo* (cover), a video clip made in the city shows people going about their busy lives. When participants approach the screen, the movement disrupts the view into fragments and undulations. As they move even closer, some sections of the filmed imagery appear to be dramatically altered by the approach, shifting into motion, while others remain constant. Upon the participants’ retreat the disruption diminishes, surface coherence returns; business goes on in Tokyo as if nothing had happened. The illusion of a malleable link between the body’s movement and the flow of time yields an effect of dislocation, what the artist calls “video cubism” that arises from the fracturing of imagery that seems coherent and real, but is actually digital and unreal.

However technologically determined these interactive experiences may be, Utterback’s artworks’ significance rests with their activation of basic human responses: the pleasure at the sheer gracefulness of the animated images, the gratification at being able to participate in their unfolding, and the intellectual stimulation that comes from integrating abstract language with physical movement to posit a new level of communication. Even in works that are not interactive, such as *Floating World*—an algorithmically generated watercolor painting in which marks, strokes, and atmospheric areas move, expand or contract as the program

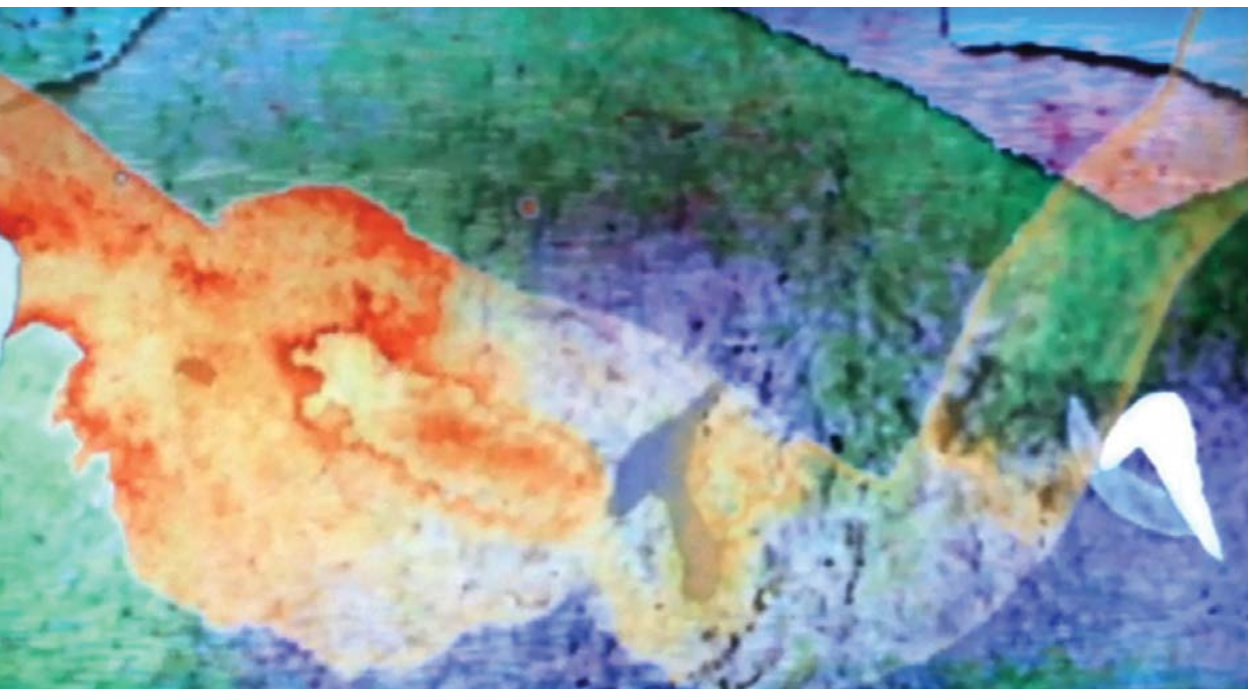


Fig.3

dynamically selects these elements—the viewer can sense the composition’s organizing principles as they reveal themselves over time (2012, fig.3).⁴

Utterback’s use of intersecting languages is transparent; as with Nintendo’s Wii or other interactive gaming platforms, we know we are in a system that allows us freedom to choose from a limited range of actions to create an equally limited range of outcomes. But while playful and energizing, Utterback’s systems stand apart from other interactive systems in which we participate, like Google, Facebook, and the latest generation of cell phone technology, which are novel at the beginning but which quickly become “natural”—and therefore critically unexamined—parts of our communicative lives. Such developments liberate

us from our physical need to be present, with the risk of making our bodies themselves seem irrelevant. In Utterback's work, we are reminded that the bodily engagement of the physical-digital interface is, in the end, an important part of any technological equation, which we should not allow ourselves to lose.

Mark Scala, chief curator
Frist Center for the Visual Arts

Illustrations

Cover: Camille Utterback. *Liquid Time—Tokyo*, 2001. Interactive installation; custom software, video camera, computer, projector, and lighting. Courtesy of the artist

Figure 1: Camille Utterback and Romy Achituv. *Text Rain* (installation view), 1999. Interactive installation; custom software, video camera, computer, projector, and lighting. Courtesy of the artists

Figure 2: Camille Utterback. *Untitled 5* (installation view), 2004. Interactive installation; custom software, and computer. Courtesy of the artist

Figure 3: Camille Utterback. *Floating World* (detail), 2011. Generative animation; custom software, and computer. Courtesy of the artist

Notes

1. Unless otherwise noted, all quoted material is from the artist's website:

<http://camilleutterback.com/>

2. Evan Zimroth, *Dead, Dinner, or Naked* (TriQuarterly Books, Northwestern University Press, 1993), p. 40.

3. Camille Utterback, e-mail message to author, October 29, 2012.

4. The title is derived from the translation of the Japanese term Ukiyo-e, a type of printmaking in which the imagery emphasizes the ephemeral pleasures of the world.

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Gordon Contemporary Artists Project Gallery

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