

# Camille Utterback's Series *External Measures*

By Lisa Dorin

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## Abstract

Camille Utterbacks' work is often discussed solely in terms of its pioneering approach to interactivity. For Lisa Dorin, who curated the *Animated Gestures* exhibition of Utterback's *External Measures* series, Utterback's project also lays claim to a rich art-historical lineage of nonobjective painting, abstract animation, and avant-garde film.



Camille Utterback: *Untitled 5* (2004)

Camille Utterback's flawlessly designed video animations are remarkably intuitive, giving themselves over immediately to playful interaction. In the three installations comprising the *Animated Gestures* exhibition at Art Interactive, Cambridge, MA, (March 9-May 13, 2007), unique abstract compositions are created through what Utterback refers to as an "aesthetic system that responds fluidly and intriguingly to physical movement in the exhibit space." Part of her ongoing *External Measures* series (2001- ), the selection consists of two single-channel projections, *Untitled 5* (2004) and *Untitled 6* (2005) (see review in *dichtung-digital*), and the first dual-channel piece of the group, *Alluvial* (2007), which was commissioned for a private collection and debuted publicly in the exhibition. As soon as viewers enter the zone of interactivity, they instantly recognize an abstract representation of their own movements within a projected picture plane, compelling them to engage in a corporeal exploration of their surroundings.

Despite the seeming effortlessness of this very direct relationship of physical movement to projected action, the algorithms required to successfully render the desired effects are anything but simple. The development of such software commands tremendous computational and analytic prowess. But by limiting the scope of each project to a finite range of exceedingly well-structured parameters, Utterback does not let the technology overshadow the aesthetic quality and intellectual content of the work. Beautifully multifaceted abstract imagery creates and sustains visual interest prompting questions about what the limits of the piece are and how the system functions. These installations reveal their complexities over time. Prolonged engagement encourages a larger examination of the expectations and desires we have of our own bodies as they relate to technology.

The fact that she was trained in traditional media informs Utterback's technology-based work. Her early oil paintings, such as *Pink Galaxy* (1995) display a comparable affinity for the abstract gestures, particular color combinations, and characteristic mark making that appear throughout *External Measures*. The palette of organic marks she employs in *Untitled 5* and *6*, resembles a variety of traditional drawing media-thick oil pastel or felt pen smears, delicate watercolor spots, chalky conté-crayon scribbles, and subtle pen and ink dots and lines-that are reflective of the artist's own hand. (Indeed some of the elements in both *Untitled 5* and *6*, for instance the "popcorn" shaped watercolor blotches were painted by hand and then scanned into the program.)

Often discussed solely in terms of its pioneering approach to interactivity, Utterback's project also lays claim to a rich art-historical lineage of nonobjective painting, abstract animation, and avant-garde film. Her current series calls to mind the notions of synaesthesia shared by Vasily Kandinsky and other early twentieth-century artists who, no longer content with representing the physical world, championed abstract over figurative painting. For these artists the subjective experience of pure non-representational color on canvas would ideally resonate in

much the same way enveloping quality of music. The desire to emulate sublime aural experience through visual means is surpassed in Utterback's case by a consummate ability to locate the sensation and meaning of the work within one's entire body. Such an interest in participatory artworks that draw attention to the body, also predates her involvement with new media technologies, as exemplified by *Preserves* (1992), an installation in which viewers were invited to pick up and investigate a set of sealed canning jars filled with combinations of food and female beauty products. No matter how acute the artist's mastery of the technology, her background in low-tech media and attendant sensitivity to surface textures and the physicality of objects facilitates the creation of fundamentally aesthetic and user-friendly interfaces.



Camille Utterback: *Pink Galaxy* (1995)

Utterback's innovative fusion of visual and physical, hand crafted and technological, is closely aligned with the early experiments of Oskar Fischinger, Hans Richter, and Walter Ruttmann who, armed with new moving-image technologies, abandoned static painting and looked instead to animation or "living abstraction." With their reliance on bodily participation as an integral element, *Untitled 5* and *6* comprise a brand of "living abstraction" surely never imagined by her predecessors. Dominating the view from the gallery entrance, these vibrant painterly compositions are static until someone enters the rectangle of light on the floor in front of each projection wall and triggers the on-screen activity. Suspended cameras capture live video and a computer program, written by the artist, deduces shapes, trajectories, movement, or lack thereof, and translates the information into one of a series of corresponding marks, erasures, or animated actions. In order to get there we must first walk through the combined zones of interactivity positioned between the two 8x10 ft suspended screens of *Alluvial*. Quieter, less immediately eye-catching, the initial imagery is made up of white and yellow points of light in a deep gray field. But rather than remaining fixed when not in use, the light specks twinkle star-like in a come hither gesture. As the title aptly suggests, we push some elements away and leave others—in the form of spiraling lines and coagulated deposits of dots—in our wake. In an exercise of deflected expectations, the movements that take place in the zone nearest to one screen have the most visual impact in the farther composition, and vice versa. The overall effect of this piece is calming, meditative, sublime; one is inclined to slow way down, to think more consciously about the implications of every movement.

Utterback and the other artists of her generation producing cutting edge digital time-based work find roots in the experimental spirit, if not the particular material and conceptual concerns, of mid- twentieth century filmmakers such as Stan Brakhage and his contemporaries. The earlier artists' investigations in pure light and color rejected the traditional narrative and aesthetic structures of Hollywood film and pushed the physical characteristics of film to extremes. Unlike her avant-garde forbears, Utterback rejects nothing. She adds to the rich lineage of abstract imagery by drawing upon these prior modes for how they inform the current techniques she embraces. Intimately tied to human bodies, her installations take on an entirely distinct set of issues, forming a hybrid space in which meticulously encoded software meets, and responds to, the arbitrary behaviors of viewers. Camille Utterback's singular artistic vision and seamless execution inverts the typical effects of contemporary technology, which she uses to draw us into (rather than away from) our own perceptions and physicality. The result is wholly infectious.



Camille Utterback: *Untitled 5* (2004)

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