

Into Another Dimension

By JULIA M. KLEIN

IN Camille Utterback's "Text Rain," letters pour down on images of visitors that are projected on a wall. As the visitors move, the letters react and combine into phrases. In the version at Phaeno, a science center in Wolfsburg, Germany, the phrases are weather-related metaphors, in both German and English, like "fair-weather friend" and "calm before the storm."

Ms. Utterback, who lives in San Francisco, said she was less interested in conveying information than in having people "think about the difference between something conceptual and something physical" or "make a hypothesis, and then test it with their bodies."

Now, her work and that of other installation artists is increasingly in demand by science centers and children's museums, as

Art installations find fertile ground in science centers.

they seek new ways to attract and engage visitors.

"As art evolved away from two-dimensional works and static sculptures, the science center has filled a void," said Joe Ansel, whose exhibit-design firm Ansel Associates Inc., in Point Richmond, Calif., often commissions installation art. In such environments, he said, "more adventurous works can be done" and the works are easier to maintain.

And unlike art museums, science centers often see interaction as an essential part of a display. "We look for artwork where a visitor can enter and become part of the art," said Mr. Ansel, who has used work by 30 installation artists at Phaeno.

But dealing with science museums sometimes necessitates artistic compromise, said Ned Kahn, whose installations are often based on natural phenomena like fog, fire, avalanches and tornadoes. The educational requirements of the typical science museum exhibition, he said, can be at odds with the sense of mystery and provocation valued by

artists.

"The art world cuts you almost infinite slack, whereas science museums are at least hoping that someone comes out with some greater understanding of something," he said. "I'm much more interested in discovering things that are just intriguing to me. Some have been useful in a science museum teaching context, some less so."

Yet Mr. Kahn, a 2003 MacArthur Fellow, said he spent 13 mostly happy years at San Fran-

rector, Jane Werner.

Among the museum's interactive artworks is Osman Khan's "The Table," in which visitors place colored objects on a white table and watch as the colors bleed out and pour across the table. "It's all done with computers and projections," Ms. Werner said. "Kids love playing with the objects, spinning them across the table. At the same time, there are great conversations about how it's working."

At the Science Museum of Min-

nesota off-guard," Mr. Shapiro said, and demonstrate that "science isn't necessarily this sort of sterile, lifeless subject."

Scott Snibbe, a digital installation artist in San Francisco, combines whimsy with educational content. The California Academy of Sciences, in San Francisco, bought three of Mr. Snibbe's pieces, all of which draw visitors into playing games. In "Arctic Ice," players try to unite a polar bear with her cub in a game designed to illustrate global-warming issues. In "Bug Rug," visitors learn about insects while trapping them digitally, and "Galápagos" explores how different species colonized the islands made famous by Charles Darwin.

Mr. Snibbe started a company, Snibbe Interactive, in January 2007 to market his work. He has designed a dramatic immersive installation on the creation of life for the Nemo Science Center in Amsterdam and another on the properties of light for the Science Museum in London. And he is working on pieces for the Museum of Science and Industry in Chicago and the Denver Museum of Nature and Science.

"Museums seek out artists precisely because they want mystery, elegance, meaning," Mr. Snibbe said. "Ultimately, we all want communication and magic."

But not every piece of installation art in science museums is interactive. For Phaeno, Mr. Kahn created "Fire Tornado," which he described as "a 30-foot-tall swirling pillar of burning kerosene."

Lately, Mr. Kahn has been designing a sculpture for the Children's Museum of Pittsburgh, in collaboration with the landscape architect Andrea Cochran, that will be part of the revitalization of Allegheny Square Plaza, the site of the museum. The piece, a cubical forest of about 100 evenly spaced poles, each 30 feet high, will spray a cooling "sphere of fog" in the summer and steam in the winter. Visitors will be able to walk through what Mr. Kahn called "this whole weather and light environment."

Mr. Kahn previously worked with architects and engineers to design the Pittsburgh museum's new facade — as a wind sculpture. "There are days when I sit in my car and I watch it," said Ms. Werner, "and it's so beautiful that it makes me cry."



INTERACTIVE Camille Utterback in her San Francisco studio with the model of an L.E.D. wall she designed for a library.

cisco's Exploratorium, which encouraged him to "generate these things, put them out on the floor, refine them."

Mr. Ansel also worked at the Exploratorium and said it offered not just pioneering interactive exhibits but also an "intensely creative" salon environment for artists. The Exploratorium's artist-in-residence program nurtured stars like Mr. Kahn and Trimpin, a sound sculptor and composer who was a 1997 MacArthur Fellow, and has inspired similar programs elsewhere.

At the Children's Museum of Pittsburgh, for example, a program called Tough Art helps artists learn how to make pieces "robust enough to stand up to our audience," said the museum's di-

rector, Jane Werner. He specializes in "motion control" installations whose aim, he said, is to pique curiosity and inspire a sense of wonder.

One of his first works was a lobby installation at the Minnesota museum called "Pipedream I," which uses bubbles like pixels to create an image in 16 tubes. His latest, more complex iteration of this idea, "Pipedream IV" at Discovery World in Milwaukee, employs 96 tubes and allows visitors to have their pictures taken by a webcam and "see their face percolate up the marquee."

"Showing science and technology being used to create art — something that's impractical, whimsical or silly" — can "catch