

ART
INTERACTIVE

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Art Interactive presents:

animated gestures

MARCH 9 – MAY 13, 2007

Camille Utterback's flawlessly designed interfaces invite playful interaction, prompting viewers to recognize an abstract representation of their own movements within a projected picture plane. The algorithms required to successfully render the desired effects are anything but simple; however, Utterback does not let the technology overshadow the aesthetic quality and content. By limiting the scope of each project to a finite range of exceedingly well-structured parameters, the artist ensures that her installations are easily accessible—revealing their complexities over time.

• *Pink Galaxy*, 1995 (fig. 1)



• *Preserves*, 1992 (fig. 2, detail)



The three installations in *Animated Gestures*

are part of the artist's ongoing *External Measures* series, which Utterback began in 2001. They consist of the single-channel projections *Untitled 5* (2004) and *Untitled 6* (2005), and *Alluvial* (2007), a dual-channel piece commissioned for a private collection and debuting publicly at Art Interactive. In each installation, a unique abstract composition is created through what Utterback refers to as an "aesthetic system that responds fluidly and intriguingly to physical movement in the exhibit space." When a viewer enters the designated area in front of the projection screen, his or her shape is captured by an overhead camera, which communicates the information to a computer program that translates movement into one of a series of corresponding marks, erasures or animated actions in the projected composition. The palette of organic marks 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. Utterback's early oil paintings, from her pre-technology art-making days, such as *Pink Galaxy* (1995) (fig.1), display a comparable affinity for the abstract gestures, particular color combinations, and characteristic mark making that appear in the *External Measures* series. Similarly, her interest in participatory artworks that draw attention to the body, also predates her involvement with new media technologies, as exemplified by *Preserves* (1992) (fig.2), 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.

Often discussed in terms of its pioneering approach to interactivity, Utterback's work also lays claim to a rich art-historical lineage of nonobjective painting, abstract animation, and avant-garde film. The *External Measures* series calls to mind notions



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of synaesthesia—defined here as the unity of the senses and by extension diverse artistic practices—specific to the early twentieth-century and shared by a number of artists led by Vasily Kandinsky. No longer content with representing the physical world, they championed abstract over figurative painting. The subjective experience of pure color would ideally resonate in much the same way as the enveloping quality of music. This 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. Her innovative fusion of visual and physical, hand crafted and technological, is closely aligned with the early experiments of Oskar Fischinger, Hans Richter, Walter Ruttmann, and others who, newly armed with moving-image technologies, abandoned static painting and looked instead to animation or "living abstraction."

Avant-garde film of the mid- and late twentieth century, exemplified by the works of Stan Brakhage and his contemporaries, by definition rejected the traditional narrative and aesthetic structure of Hollywood film, producing an expanded visual language more closely related to the complexities of ocular perception.¹ Intimately tied to human bodies, Utterback's experiments transcend these avant-garde techniques; her installations form a hybrid space in which meticulously encoded software meets (and responds to) the arbitrary behaviors of viewers. Unlike her avant-garde predecessors, Camille Utterback rejects nothing, but rather accepts and incorporates what has come before, both on its own terms, and also for what it offers in relation to the current techniques she embraces. By way of a singular artistic vision with a seamless execution, Utterback adds to a rich lineage of abstract imagery and inverts the typical effect of contemporary technology, using it to draw us into, rather than away from, our own perceptions and physicality. The result is wholly infectious.

Lisa Dorin

¹ William C. Wees, *Light Moving in Time: Studies in the Visual Aesthetics of Avant-Garde Film* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press), pp. 1–9.

Camille Utterback has exhibited her work in more than fifty shows on four continents. Highlights include The Valencia Institute of Modern Art, Spain (2007); The Itaú Cultural Center, São Paulo, Brazil (2006); The New Museum of Contemporary Art, The American Museum of the Moving Image, New York (2003); The Taipei Museum of Contemporary Art (2001); The Ars Electronica Center, Austria (2000). She has been awarded a Transmediale International Media Art Festival Award (2005), a Rockefeller Foundation New Media Fellowship (2002), a Whitney Museum commission for their ArtPort website (2002), and a US Patent (2004). Collectors of her work include Hewlett Packard, The Pittsburgh Children's Museum, and The La Caixa Foundation. She currently lives and works in San Francisco. More info at www.camilleutterback.com.

Lisa Dorin is Assistant Curator of Contemporary Art at the Art Institute of Chicago, where she organizes *focus*, a series of one-person exhibitions by international contemporary artists, and is currently producing a catalogue of the museum's film, video, and media collection.



Exhibition Checklist:

All works in the collection of the artist unless otherwise noted.

1. *Untitled 5, 2004*: single-channel projected interactive computer animation
2. *Untitled 6, 2005*: single-channel projected interactive computer animation
3. *Alluvial, 2007*: dual-channel projected interactive computer animation collection of Jay and Shoshana Dweck
4. Development screen shots from *External Measures* series, 2005-2007: digital inkjet prints on paper

Art Interactive would like to thank the following for their support:

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Kera MacKenzie
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All images courtesy the artist.

Front cover: installation view *Untitled 5, 2004*

This page: installation view *Untitled 6, 2005*