Camille Utterback and Painting By George Fifield

Imagine the projected representation of an abstract painting on a wall. As the viewer walks in front of the projection, they discover that they are changing it through their movements. They become the paintbrush. This is the interactive installation art of Camille Utterback.

Around the turn of the millennium, video cameras and sophisticated programming in a new generation of installations eliminated the mechanical interface, the touch screen or joy stick, and replaced it with one we are all intimately familiar with: our bodies. Finally, the entire audience could participate simultaneously and enter into collaborations with one another. The possibility of communal interaction gave these installations a new power.
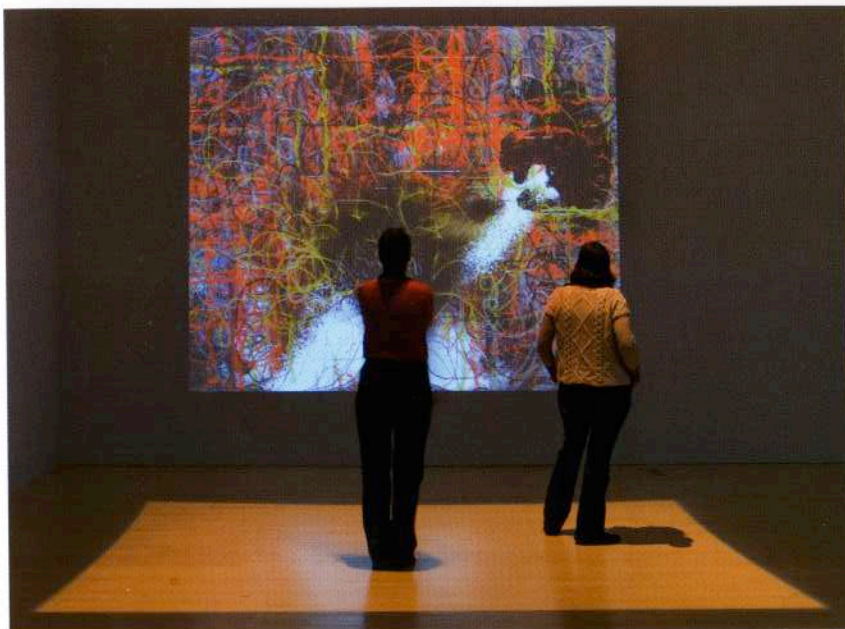
The recent recipient of a 2009 MacArthur Fellowship, Utterback's early works focused on text and movement, and in recent years her first love of painting has influenced a series of projected interactive installations. *External Measures 2003* (2003), *Untitled 5* (2004) and *Untitled 6* (2005) are dynamic compositions that react to people's motions in organic, painterly imagery. In this she joins artist such as Bruce Nauman, Richard Serra, and Robert Morris who were inspired by a 1950 documentary by Hans Namuth in which he filmed Jackson Pollock from underneath a large sheet of glass as the artist created an action painting on its surface. This famous film helped advance the notion that the artist's physical actions themselves could construct the meaning of painting.

"Originally trained as a painter," Camille explains, "I work in a tactile and intuitive manner. For years I created abstract paintings —working by pushing and playing with paint until a composition and texture emerged. When I transitioned to technology-based media, I found it essential to engage with the medium at the level of code and electronics. By writing my own software and designing my own interfaces I free my work from the limits and assumptions of commercially based tools and products. After years of doing my own programming, I have now reached a degree of facility writing computer code where it feels simil arly fluid and supple as painting. This freedom again allows ideas to emerge while I work. Not only can I tinker and play with the foundations of the media, but I can also take advantage of mistakes and serendipity in the coding process itself."

Utterback is also working out the structure of interactivity. These three works by the artist are comprised of a video camera mounted on the ceiling next to a projector. The camera is pointed down, reading the positions and movements of the viewers as they traverse a lit rectangle on the floor. The video signal passes through a computer, where her code works it's magic, and then out to the projector pointing at the wall. Depending on the space, they can be quite large. For *Act React*, an exhibition of interactive installation art I curated at the Milwaukee Art Museum in 2008, they measured 11 feet high by 14 feet wide. In this large space, the painterly action of making marks involves a joint effort between technology and multiple humans.

In *External Measures 2003*, the program generates lines even when no viewer is present. The viewer's contribution begins as erasure of the lines, creating a dark field. At the edges of this field, lines of saturated color appear, spreading throughout the projection. The human presence is fleeting and fungible, the effect more akin to drawing than painting. In *Untitled 5*, a group interaction

have but how the motions of others succeed. One person might run around while another might stand still gently waving their arms. Each action will cause different imagery, but in addition they are collaborating with those who came before and those who will follow.

What does it mean to make the act of painting involve the viewers interactively? No one would place a finished painting in a gallery with a palette and brushes and ask to audience to add their own marks to it. That might be a type of performance art or a happening, but not painting. What Utterback is doing is using the metaphorical act of painting as a way to draw her audience into a conversation with her about the structure of the rules she presents them with. Her art form is code and how we interact with it, not paint and canvas. To encourage gestural activity, as in that film of Pollock, is what she is after. But hopefully that will make her audience look differently at the next de Kooning or Rauschenberg they see. ■

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ABOVE
From: *External Measures* series, installed at the Milwaukee Art Museum

takes place over time. As one moves, a brightly colored line marks one's path, and when one exits, the line becomes an armature for numerous splotches of color. The arrival of the next visitor pushes these splotches away, but they swarm back to build swaths of color. Each person changes the effects left by the preceding interaction.

In *Untitled 6*, the work's computational rules are even more pronounced, the colors are bolder, and the composition more three-dimensional. When one viewer crosses the recorded trajectory of his or her predecessor, the earlier marks explode along the lines of their own stored pathways. The composition becomes a complex collaboration between a sequence of participants and the work's computational system. Patient exploration—of not only one's own marks but also the marks of those who follow—is rewarded.

It is this collaborative nature of the work that makes it stand out. In a large installation, a number of people can interact with the work at the same time, allowing them to see not only what effect they