



Edward Lee

Professor of Law, Chicago-Kent College of Law

Camille Utterback and the Technology of Interactive Art

Posted: 11/04/2010 3:19 pm EDT

If Picasso were living in our digital age, one can only wonder what he would have thought. A founder of cubism at the start of the twentieth century, Picasso was perhaps best known for abstracting objects into geometric shapes, but then reconstructing and depicting them on the canvas with the appearance that the objects are being viewed from multiple viewpoints. Picasso, who scoffed at being limited to one style, probably would have enjoyed being able to use today's computers with his artistic creations, notwithstanding the quote famously attributed to him: "Computers are useless. They can only give you answers."

Of course, today, computers do more than that. They can be used in seemingly limitless ways, often to add tremendous value to our endeavors. They often make things more efficient, such as making it quicker and easier to communicate with people around the world. They also can make things more beautiful by stunning us with creations perhaps never imagined before. Instead of providing only answers as Picasso supposedly decried, computers can instead provoke our powers of creativity, imagination, and even playfulness.

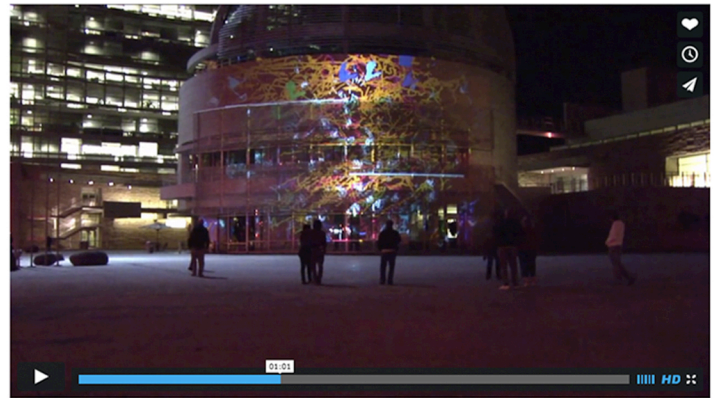
This week, I witnessed this firsthand at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, where Camille Utterback, a 2009 winner of the MacArthur Foundation "genius" award, lectured about her interactive, computational art. In her work, Utterback explained that she attempts to "combine what hasn't been combined before."

For example, in her work "Text Rain" (with Romy Achituv), Utterback uses the letters from the text of a poem projected onto a screen--reminiscent to me of letters swirling in a bowl of Alpha-Bits cereal--to create the appearance it is raining letters. A video camera feeds footage of any spectators present onto the same screen, so the letters appear to be raining on the spectators. But that's not all. The spectators' movements (as captured by video) are processed by Utterback's computer program so they influence the movement of the letters on the screen. To see this stunning work in action, watch the video below:

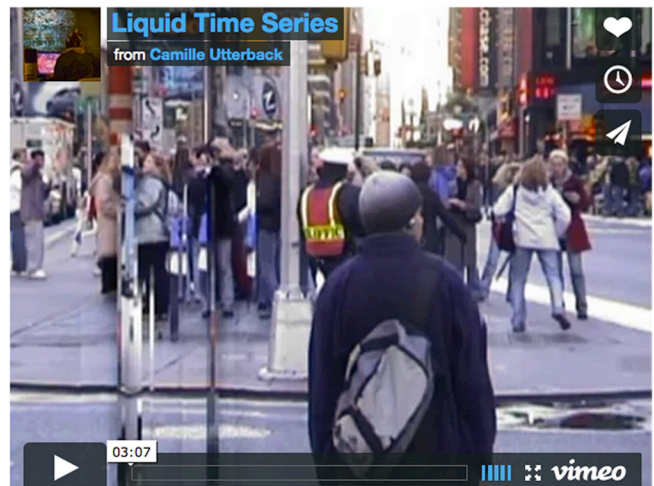


What "Text Rain" beautifully captures is interactivity between the spectator and the art being perceived. The artwork is not static. It actually moves and responds to the spectator. Even more, Utterback's art encourages collaboration among viewers to participate together, in part to figure out the "rules" of the artwork and how it responds differently to different movements and to a different number of people. Some of the computer's responses will be easy to discover, while others may be more difficult to unravel.

Utterback's interactive art has the potential to transform radically how we construct our public spaces. It's not surprising that her innovative artwork has been commissioned by numerous cities and airports to adorn public spaces. For example, her work "Abundance" (shown in the video below) transformed, for ten days, the San Jose City Hall Plaza into a social, interactive space.



My favorite work of Utterback's is "Liquid Time," located in the San Jose Airport. The work involves video images of different scenes that fragment on the screen in response to a spectator's movements. The fragmentation looks not only like the video is turning to liquid, but also like one is traveling back in time to an older period of the same scene. To see "Liquid Time," view the video below:



Liquid Time Series from Camille Utterback on Vimeo.

The multiplicity of viewpoint, both in time and space, achieved by Utterback's stunning piece is truly amazing--and a fitting homage to Picasso's cubism. Were he living today, Picasso would no doubt have a field day.