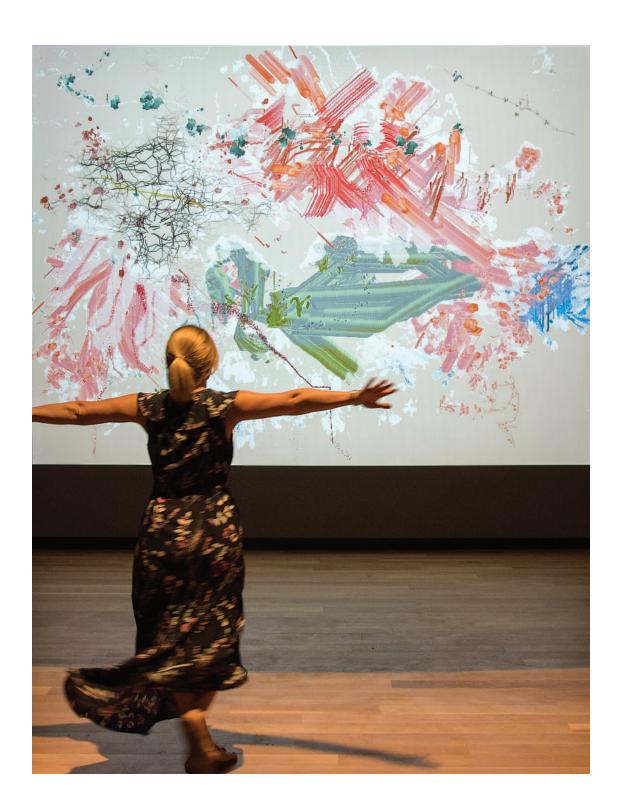


Set in Motion Camille Utterback and Art That Moves

INTRODUCTION

Dr. Andrew J. Walker, Executive Director



The Amon Carter Museum of American Art has encouraged creativity and vitality in American artists from its beginning. Founded by Amon G. Carter and designed by architect Philip Johnson, the museum opened in 1961, also the first year it worked with living artists through the acquisition of photographs by Dorothea Lange and the organization of an exhibition of sculptures and drawings by Harry Jackson. The next year, a three-part monumental sculpture by Henry Moore was installed in the plaza with a pedestal designed by Johnson in collaboration with the artist. The museum also organized an exhibition that year that surveyed contemporary practice on the West Coast through the work of forty-three artists including abstract expressionists Mark Rothko and Clyfford Still, Color Field painters Richard Diebenkorn and Sam Francis, and hard-edge painters Helen Lundeberg and John McLaughlin. This legacy continued through the decade, with the notable example being *Georgia O'Keeffe: An Exhibition of the Work of the Artist from 1915 to 1966*, a show that renewed attention in the seventy-nine-year-old artist's career.

From 1960 to 1970, a Tamarind Impressions subscription to the Tamarind Lithography Workshop brought over 2,500 lithographs by hundreds of artists into the collection. And while acquisitions of paintings and sculptures by living artists slowed over the next three decades, the museum continued to collect works on paper and especially photographs in this category. Relationships with artists that had begun in the 1960s, including Ansel Adams, Laura Gilpin, Eliot Porter, and Brett Weston, led to major exhibitions and acquisitions, adding depth and dimension to the collection through these and other deep monographic holdings. One of the Carter's most significant engagements with a living artist was its 1979 commissioning of Richard Avedon to create what would become his iconic series *In the American West*.

Recent years have witnessed an increase in the amount of artwork by living artists found on the walls of the Carter, including retrospectives of Barbara Crane, Frank Gohlke, and Will Barnet, whose exhibition celebrating the hundred-year-old artist coincided with the museum's fiftieth anniversary. Since then the Carter has commissioned work by Terry Evans, Sedrick Huckaby, and Gabriel Dawe, whose site-specific *Plexus no. 34* has become a destination piece in the collection.

Justin Favela and Camille Utterback are the latest contemporary artists to be engaged by the Carter, and their work demonstrates the continued synergy between art of the past and art of our moment. Sometimes the topics are the same, addressed in new styles, mediums, or technologies. Other times living artists update the conversation, making work that cannot be completely understood without historical context. Creative innovation is part of our shared DNA with living artists, and our engagement with them helps keep us alive and relevant.

Support for this exhibit has been generously provided by the Donny Wiley Memorial Fund at the North Texas Community Foundation, and by the Carl & Marilynn Thoma Art Foundation. The Thoma Foundation also lent work from its remarkable collection, including Utterback's *Untitled 5*, as did a local private collector. Our greatest thanks is reserved for Camille, whose brilliant work provokes important questions about our physical and social experiences. Her engagement with this exhibition and publication, always inquisitive and collaborative, improved them both, demonstrating the particular rewards of working with a living artist.





HOW TO BE IN THE WORLD CONCEPTUAL TO CORPOREAL IN THE WORK OF CAMILLE UTTERBACK

Kristen Gaylord, Assistant Curator of Photographs

When people interact with artwork by Camille Utterback, their usually serious demeanor in the museum setting gives way to surprise and curiosity as they discover their role in it, either by watching others engage with it or by venturing into it themselves (fig. 1). Her work feels like an intervention into the gallery space, and indeed her approach has been called "interventionist" as she has desired outcomes for her installations: "to draw attention to the connections between human bodies and the symbolic systems our bodies engage with." Utterback wants us to be changed by her work, to reenter the world with heightened senses that notice the liminal spaces between ourselves and the representational codes we rely on, between the corporeal and the metaphorical. As participants uncover the basic rules of each work, they adopt "an active and questioning stance," Utterback says, one with potential ramifications for other aspects of their lives.²

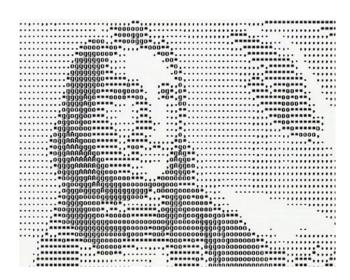
She calls the five works in her External Measures series "living paintings," but they are in fact projections that, by way of a camera, respond to presence, absence, and movement through a set of complex algorithms created by the artist. In *Untitled 5* (2004), for example, a body's presence within a lit rectangle on the floor, which the artist calls the "interaction area," generates clustered gray lines in the projection on the wall. Stillness renders as scattered dots; movement manifests as a colored line that, when the body exits the interaction area, becomes surrounded by a series of marks. All marks can be changed, erased, or overwritten, and marks that have been moved will try to return to their original position, leaving smears in their wake (fig. 2).³ These rules and their aesthetic outcomes prompt conceptual questions, like What does it mean to interact with absent bodies? How can art engage viewers as corporeal, not merely seeing, beings? What is the relationship between an artist and future observers of her work?

Trained as a painter, Utterback has over the years evolved into a skilled programmer to the extent that coding for her now "feels similarly fluid and supple as painting." ⁴ She considers the External Measures works as being in the tradition of painting, in particular the Abstract Expressionism of artists like Joan Mitchell and Helen Frankenthaler (fig. 3). ⁵ She purposely calibrates the aesthetic forms of her works to recall these paintings, from the gestural marks that appear in the projections to their aspect ratios and vertical orientation. And though the works are built with technological tools and media, they involve a low level of mediation for the participant, requiring none of the usual interfaces such as keyboards, monitors, mouses, or headsets. ⁶ All the supporting hardware is hidden, and only the most basic recognition of cause and effect is essential to engaging with her pieces.

At the same time, Utterback's works reveal their digital origins. Art historian Meredith Hoy has defined the "digital method" as additive, in which the underlying units of a whole are discernible, encompassing both pointillist paintings and pixelated computer art. In contrast, an analog modality values "continuity, density, repleteness, or irreducibility, ambiguity, and indeterminacy." Some of Utterback's works are wholly digital, built up of pixelated, additive elements like the letters and

numbers of *Text Rain* (1999) and *Composition* (2000) (fig. 4). But *Untitled 5* straddles this dichotomy: participants' movements elicit familiar gestural forms, digital copies of the artist's analog marks. It is digital in origin, but it satisfies analog values.⁹

Beyond visual similarity, Utterback has defined thematic overlap between her work and that of the abstract expressionists in the form of a question: "How do we perceive a human who was standing in front of that canvas who's not there anymore?" ¹⁰ Her answer provides a counternarrative to that mid-century movement's emphasis on individual heroes and the recognizability of their expressive gestures, which, considering the following generation's penchant for effacing, minimizing, or parodying authorship, can today seem self-aggrandizing. Whereas Frankenthaler, Franz Kline, Mitchell (fig. 5), Jackson Pollock, and Mark Rothko found ways to handle paint that became uniquely their own—identifiable from fifty feet away—Utterback filters her artistic authorship through



multiple levels of mediation. In $Untitled\ 5$ these include the scanned renderings of her own markmaking and the participants who add, change, and obscure those marks. Instead of a static painting or sculpture, $Untitled\ 5$ is an evolving, changing, deist world: the artist created a predetermined, complex system—and has left us in it.

The External Measures series lays bare the dis-temporality that lurks in gestural artworks. The immediacy of Pollock or Frankenthaler mid-technique becomes a ghostly presence when the works are displayed on the wall. We can imagine the artist stepping over the canvas on the floor, flinging a pigment-filled brush or pouring paint from a can, but we infer this from

indexical marks and art-historical knowledge (fig. 6). Time in such works is unidirectional, moving from us back to the artist. Conversely, in $Untitled\ 5$ time is multidirectional. Within the work, each participant is responding not only to the moment Utterback originally created the work, but also to other participants who have interacted with the piece, whether previously or concurrently; they might even anticipate the effects of the future visitors who may or may not come to be. This dynamic has been lyrically described by artist and writer Nathaniel Stern:

Utterback [...] introduces more generative complexities in her pixel painting that are not only affected by moving bodies, but still bodies, multiple bodies, and absent bodies, and these cumulatively collected marks interact with each other as well. The result is a continuous, hauntingly, and haltingly poetic moving image, which invites participants to make and find meaning in, with, and as an embodied and relational corpus.¹¹

This "embodied and relational corpus" highlights two outcomes of interacting with one of Utterback's installations. The first brings participants back into their own bodies, which is not an experience usually prompted by digital engagement. In 2002, before she'd created *Untitled 5*, Utterback wrote that she wanted to "show people that their interactions with computers do not have to be frustrating, deadening, and potentially debilitating. Instead, we can imagine and create a world where this interaction is seamless, intuitive, playful, and inspiring." ¹² Five years before the first iPhone was released, she was imagining the kind of integrated use of computers that would



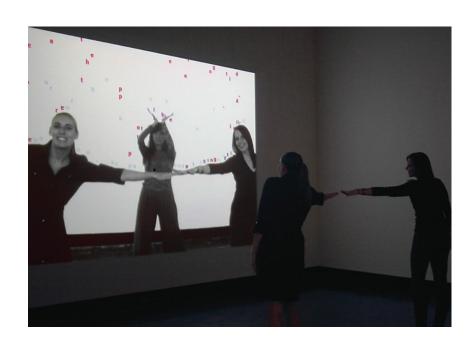


Fig 5. Joan Mitchell, *Ladybug*, 1957, oil on canvas

Fig. 4. Camille Utterback, Composition (screen detail), 2000, interactive installation

start to render the word "computer" superfluous, a point that seems even more germane today with smartphones, personal GPS devices, digital assistants, and smart-home appliances.¹³

As described earlier, Utterback minimizes the hardware a participant might require or even see in order to interact with these pieces—one way of making them "seamless, intuitive, playful, and inspiring," an experience she has called "transparent." Within the interaction area, the physical and visual experiences of art are fused, the creating and viewing unified by what Utterback calls "poetic interfaces." A poetic interface balances practicality and obscurity, avoiding being "purely functional" by introducing some level of unexpectedness to the user's experience while delivering



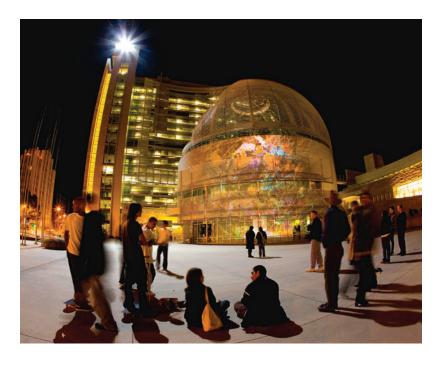
responses legibly and quickly enough to forestall frustration. Such interfaces rely on established relationships that the participant understands, instead of introducing new ones. Utterback has called these familiar, and so intuitive, relationships "metaphors," comparing the poetic interface of Text Rain, for example, to a mirror.¹⁶ The poetic interfaces of Untitled 5 and later works like Precarious (2018), which rotate movement from horizontal to vertical, might instead rely on metaphors of shadows or maps (fig. 11).

She has compared this marriage of form and function to concrete poems, "examinations of form as well as content. The structures of interaction in these pieces are meant to be part of the subject matter, not invisible substrates for the content." ¹⁷ In this way Utterback's poetic interfaces eschew complication and encourage attention to things otherwise taken for granted, an extension of the modernist approach that highlights mundane substrates like pages beneath words, steel within buildings, or canvases underneath paint. ¹⁸

Because participants can, as the artist says, "be present in either the real or virtual space, to seamlessly shift between the two, or to feel present in both simultaneously," there is also no encumbrance to communication among them—the second outcome of interaction with an Utterback installation. To "catch" more letters in *Text Rain*, for example, participants often cooperate, "holding hands or stretching coats and scarves between them" (fig. 7). The immediacy of that relationship is pushed further in *Untitled 5* as the interactions among participants can be both instant and prolonged. One viewer might walk across the space, leaving a line with marks in her wake. Someone else will cross her path, overwriting some of those marks and dislodging and distorting others. When those two participants, who may never have met, have each left the room, the interaction between them continues as the marks try to return to their original location. Other works by Utterback make this social aspect more explicit. *Abundance* (2007), a work that was installed in the plaza outside San Jose's City Hall, distinguished between individuals and groups, and indicated that difference by

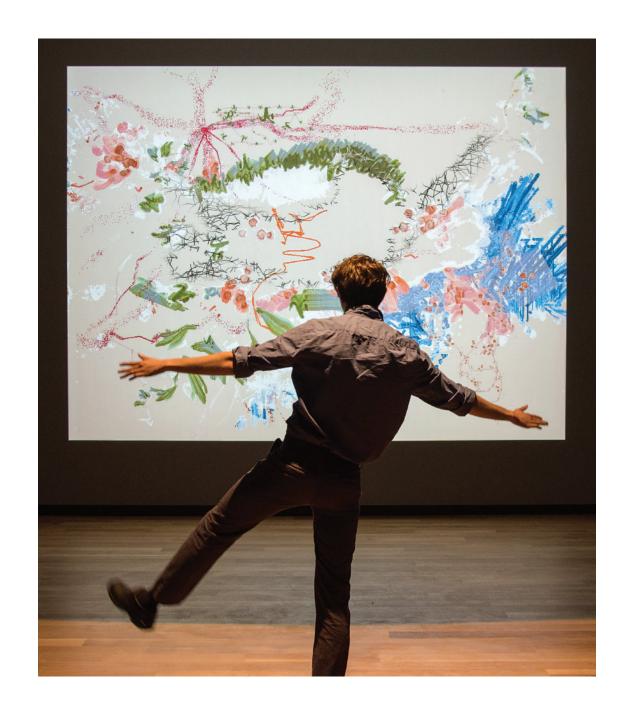
changes in hue and behavior of the animated forms (fig. 8). And in *Entangled* (2015), participants on each side of the central scrims are able to affect only the marks on their side, necessarily ceding some aspect of the combined composition to whomever is on the other side (fig. 9).²¹

Although descriptions of Utterback include words like "genius" (she was named a MacArthur Fellow in 2009), her work is often described—including, as we've seen, by the artist herself—as "playful." In some contexts, that word could be used to minimize art that is



interactive or created by a woman. But what it describes about Utterback's work is the combination of experimentation and discovery that it facilitates. As participants explore how their movements affect the projection, they are essentially learning a new set of physical laws. Watching them test actions and reactions, outcomes and consequences, I'm reminded of my toddler son, who is currently internalizing the rules of gravity, inertia, and resistance that most of us now take for granted. When he jumps up he comes down. When he pushes something it moves. What looks like mere play is actually the development of understanding how to be in the world.





CONVERSATION WITH THE ARTIST

Maggie Adler, Curator of Paintings, Sculpture, and Works on Paper

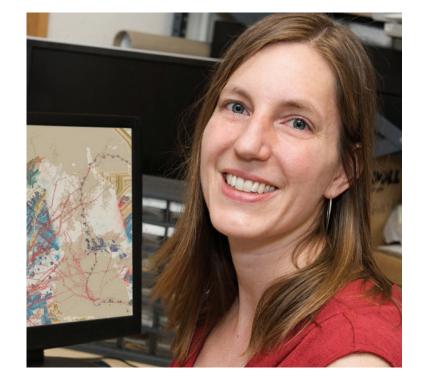
Maggie Adler: Everyone is very excited about having *Untitled 5* here. The other day, John Rohrbach, our senior curator of photographs, was describing the installation and he started dancing...which was the best!

Camille Utterback: That's great.

[My work] makes the gallery not a quiet space. I was on the phone with one of the people at my gallery, and he was like, "I don't know what's going on. It's so loud up there...hang on." And he went up and said, "Oh, it's just people engaging with your work." People dance around and start making all kinds of noise that they don't normally make when they are looking at paintings (fig. 10).

How much of visitors' engagement with the piece and the space is under your control, and how much is visitor-generated? Do you feel you're present even in your absence?

That's a question a lot of people ask about software-based work. In a sense,



I am absolutely in control. If you think about an Alexander Calder mobile, nobody would ask if he is in control. I have created all the rules that set up a possibility of what could happen, but those rules are open to people's movement in the space. People being tracked by the camera in my piece is like heat or wind in a kinetic piece, like a Calder mobile. But instead of arranging mechanical joints and how pieces of steel move in relation to each other, I've crafted algorithms about how shapes can evolve or how they change when a person is moving through the space. So there is a lot more variation possible because people are unpredictable, and all this rich data comes from their arms and their bodies and their speed. But it's not that there is infinite possibility. I very carefully write all of these different sets of rules, and I'm combining them to create effects that evolve over time based on how people are moving.

This story might be apocryphal about Sol LeWitt, whose work I think of in connection to yours. There was reportedly a wall drawing in which he wrote a set of instructions, but the results in the space upset him aesthetically because even though the instructions were followed, the outcome was not what he was expecting.

Right. It did something totally unpredictable. There is something that I think is very different about my work than a Sol LeWitt. In a LeWitt, the rules are often explicit. When you're in one of his installations you can see the rules that created that piece. They have already been enacted. You're experiencing the end result only. In an interactive installation like mine, you are not privy to the rules. There is something important to me about asking people to use their bodies to explore that space of possibility (fig. 11). But I try really hard to make some of those rules very clear so you can



10

find yourself in some way and establish where the camera is or what parts of you are being seen or reacted to. Then there are aspects that are much more complicated that I don't imagine you would ever figure out, like How are all those different rules functioning together to make an experience that is an artwork and not just an interface?

I've been thinking lately about the uncontrollability of watercolor and how sometimes when you lay down a drop, depending on how much water is in it, it spreads more than you anticipated. You've lost some control. In your work, the traces that people leave can be unexpected because they won't figure out how to manipulate the mark-making in any real causal way.

I try to create rules that combine in different ways. The piece is not really

just your movement. It's combining your movement with the movement of people who have been in the space in the past, and that's a whole ecosystem that is evolving over time. The conceptual aspect of that for me is about our shared spaces. So many of our computational interfaces are completely narcissistic. They are really about us. They take us out of a shared sense of space. We see that now in some of the debates we're having on social media. What is the public space, or what rules do we want those spaces to have? There are a lot of ways that my compositions evolve that are not just based on what you've done in the recent past.

So in a sense, it's about human connection, and you're in it, too.

Yeah. You can't control how the person before you moved, but as you move, you're pushing things around. It's the intersection between you and another person. I don't know if people can completely understand that just by exploring, but they have a sense that the piece is evolving in some way. So I guess that's something I'm very interested in exploring in our software interfaces: how can we use these systems to think about those connections between us as human beings that aren't always under our control?

Is that a larger preoccupation for you? The effects of people who came before us in society and who will come after us?

I love history, especially of specific places. So there's a set of my work that combines historical footage with current footage based on how you physically move, so views of the past and the present overlap in different ways. I'm always interested in how technology gives us more immediate ways to appreciate how the past and the present are interacting. Again, I think that's often missing in our software systems. It's always about the present, or worse, the future. There's a kind of utopian idea of time. We have to design software so that it holds the past or lets us access the past. I think the fantasy we have about digital technology is that it is new and the future and contemporary, so it's not as often used for representing the past in really rich ways.

A lot of what we do here at the Carter is twofold, which is to use contemporary art that addresses contemporary issues to give people access to the art of the past, and to enrich contemporary art by an understanding of precedent and the fact that people's preoccupations are often connected across centuries.

I have always been fascinated with and loved abstract expressionist work because there's something about standing in front of a painting by Helen Frankenthaler or Joan Mitchell where you can imagine their bodies standing there and their arm and their hand making these incredible marks. There's such a sense of somebody's presence. It's like this time machine and you can connect to their movement in their studio in front of that painting (fig. 12). I feel that with almost any painting. There's this magic of connecting to that person and



their brush in a different moment in time. It's fluid and beautiful and about us as human beings. So for me, the camera tracking is a corollary to that brush, and it lets anyone who's in the gallery space have that experience of their movement and their presence being recorded into the piece so that someone who comes in to the space later has that sense of someone having been there. It's a shorter timespan because it's not paint, and it's not by one person. But it's a different way to create connections between different moments of time.

In a way, it's a less narcissistic practice because you're sharing the artistic responsibility with people in the space. You're incorporating them as co-creators.

Fig 11. Camille Utterback, Precarious, 2018, interactive installation

There are bigger conceptual questions about systems in general and how much agency they give us (or not), and what our roles are in those systems, or what we can discern about them. I really hope that someone who's spent some time with one of my pieces—because they have to keep asking questions and testing those hypotheses—starts to learn to navigate the piece even though the rules aren't explicit. They test things out physically by moving. That's part of what I love about making this work is asking people to think about their own role in the systems around them. Hopefully you leave an experience with my work with a kind of different sense of agency—a questioning or testing the boundaries of what you can do with what you're stuck with.

Yes. How can you make the best of a certain situation?

Yes, because the visitors can't change the rules in my piece. They are stuck with exploring the system I have set up. There's a real imbalance of power in that sense. It's different than traditional works in that they're affecting it in real time, but there is this question of control. I try to be generous with those rules so that people don't feel stupid, so they can feel like there are things that they can understand. But then there are these aspects they maybe can't figure out directly because there are too many layers that are interacting. I think our world is like that. It's very dangerous to think you can control everything. It really has to be a negotiation, and we have to work together to change and shape the system.

Conversation edited for length and clarity
May 2019

ENDNOTES

¹Nathaniel Stern, Interactive Art and Embodiment: The Implicit Body as Performance (Canterbury, UK: Glyphi Limited, 2013), 127. Camille Utterback, "Unusual Positions," Electronic Book Review, 2004, accessed May 23, 2019, http://electronicbookreview.com/ essay/unusual-positions

³ On her website, Utterback describes these general rules of the work, acknowledging that there are more complex ones. Camille Utterback, "Untitled 5," *Camille Utterback*, accessed May 24, 2019, http://camilleutterback.com/projects/untitled-5/

⁴Quoted in George Fifield, "Insight: Camille Utterback and Painting," New American Painting 86 (February/March 2010): 178.

⁵ Tyler Green, interview with Camille Utterback, *Modern Art Notes* No. 90, podcast audio, July 25, 2013, https://manpodcast.com/portfolio/no-90-mary-reid-kelley-camille-utterback/

⁶ In describing *Untitled 5* I use the word "participant" instead of the usual "viewer" to indicate the work's interactive nature, but the role of viewer is also possible if one stands outside the interaction area and watches the projection, which will continue to change in the absence of human intervention.

⁷ Meredith Hoy, From Point to Pixel: A Genealogy of Digital Aesthetics (Hanover, NH: Dartmouth, 2017).

¹¹ Stern, *Interactive Art and Embodiment*, 134. Stern also points out that the uncertainty of the output of these interactions, which may or may not be aesthetically successful, mimics an artist's practice in his or her studio. Stern, *Interactive Art and Embodiment*. 136.

¹² Camille Utterback, "Designing Systems for Human Interaction, Not Human-Computer Interaction," 2002, Core?7, accessed May 22, 2019, http://www.core?7.com/reactor/utterback.html

¹³ She refers to Donald Norman's book *The Invisible Computer:* Why Good Products Can Fail, the Personal Computer Is So Complex, and Information Appliances Are the Solution (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT, 1998), which argues that computers will become so ubiquitous that they'll be invisible, the way motors are subsumed within appliances like blenders and hair dryers.

¹⁴ Camille Utterback, "Camille Utterback Responds in Turn," Electronic Book Review, 2004, accessed May 23, 2019, http:// electronicbookreview.com/essay/camille-utterback-responds-in-turn/ **FIGURES**

Figure 1. Camille Utterback, *Untitled 5*, 2004, interactive installation: custom software (color, silent), video camera, computer, projector, lighting. Installation view of *Set in Motion:*Camille Utterback and Art That Moves (September 3–December 8, 2019) at the Amon Carter Museum of American Art. Fort Worth.

Figure 2. Camille Utterback, *Untitled 5* (screen detail), 2004, interactive installation: custom software (color, silent), video camera, computer, projector, lighting, Collection of the Carl & Marilynn Thoma Art Foundation. Photo courtesy of the artist. © Camille Utterback

Figure 3. Helen Frankenthaler, Mountains and Sea, 1952, oil and charcoal on canvas, Helen Frankenthaler Foundation, New York, on extended loan to the National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C. © 2019 Helen Frankenthaler Foundation Inc./Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

Figure 4. Camille Utterback, Composition (screen detail), 2000, interactive installation: custom software, video camera, computer, projector. Photo courtesy of the artist. © Camille Utterback

 $\label{eq:Figure 5. Joan Mitchell, Ladybug, 1957, oil on canvas, The Museum of Modern Art, New York, purchase, 1961. © Estate of Joan Mitchell. Digital image © The Museum of Modern Art/Licensed by SCALA/Art Resource, NY.$

Figure 6. Helen Frankenthaler at work on a large canvas, 1969. © Ernst Haas Estate/Hulton Archive/Getty Images

Figure 7. Romy Achituv and Camille Utterback, *Text Rain*, 1999, interactive installation: custom software, camera, projector. Installation view of *Camille Utterback: Tracing Time/Marking Movement* (February 1–May 19, 2013) at the Frist Center for Visual Art, Nashville. © Romy Achituv and Camille Utterback

Figure 8. Camille Utterback, *Abundance*, 2007, interactive installation: custom software, camera, computer, projectors. Commissioned for the City of San Jose, CA by Zero1: The Art & Technology Network. On view September 28–October 6, 2007. Photo © Lane Hartwell

Figure 9. Camille Utterback, Entangled, 2015, interactive installation on scrims: custom software, computer, cameras, projectors, scrims, lighting. Commissioned for installation at the Contemporary Jewish Museum, San Francisco. Installation view of Camille Utterback: Sustaining Presence (January 24–March 26, 2017) at the Stanford Art Gallery. Photo: JKA Photography.

Figure 10. Installation view of Camille Utterback's *Untitled 5*, 2004, Amon Carter Museum of American Art, 2019

Figure 11. Camille Utterback, *Precarious*, 2018, interactive installation: custom software, depth camera, computer, projection, lighting. Installation view of *Black Out: Silhouettes Then and Now* (May 11, 2018–March 17, 2019) at the National Portrait Gallery, Washington, D.C. Photo Mark Gulezian. © Camille Utterback

Figure 12. Joan Mitchell in her studio, 1962. © Jean-Pierre Biot/ Paris Match via Getty Images

² Correspondence with the artist, June 24, 2019.

⁸ Hov. From Point to Pixel. 4.

⁹ Hoy, From Point to Pixel, 42.

 $^{^{10}}$ Green, interview with Camille Utterback.

¹⁵ Utterback, "Unusual Positions."

 $^{^{16}\,\}rm Utterback,$ "Designing Systems for Human Interaction."

¹⁷ Utterback, "Camille Utterback Responds in Turn."

 $^{^{18}}$ It should be emphasized, of course, that the invisibilities are learned and cultural, not inherent. Also, although the common examples are associated with modernism and the twentieth century, this artistic maneuver is prevalent throughout history.

¹⁹ Utterback, "Designing Systems for Human Interaction."

²⁰ Utterback, "Unusual Positions."

²¹ The attention to embodiment and interaction encouraged by Utterback's work belies hysteria about digital technologies and their solely detrimental effect on socialization. She believes that technology is neutral, and its effect on humanity is dependent on our (ab)use of it. Green, interview with Camille Utterback.

Set in Motion Camille Utterback and Art That Moves

September 14, 2019 - December 8, 2019 Amon Carter Museum of American Art

CARTERMUSEUM.ORG

3501 Camp Bowie Blvd. Fort Worth, TX 76107 817.738.1933



#carterart @theamoncarter