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## ***Camille Utterback and Untitled 5***

The use of the digital interface in interactive new media art installations is the focus of my research. Interactive new media installations are technologically based artworks that rely on subject interaction. By subject interaction, I mean that the subject participating in the artwork is expected to provide some kind of input, or make a physical contribution towards the creation of the installation. The subject's direct physical involvement in the creation of the artwork raises interesting questions about viewer participation in art, but also about the relationship between the body and technology, objects and subjects, passivity and activity, vision and touch, stillness and movement and image and art making in general. In what follows, I will focus on one of these relationships –the relationship between passivity and activity and how it affects the image making process. I will do this through a critique of new media artist Camille Utterback's interactive new media installation *Untitled 5* (2004).

### **Towards an Interface Criticism**

One of the main aims of my PhD research is to critically evaluate the use of technology in contemporary art. A critical re-evaluation of some of the basic ideas of what technology is and what it does in artworks is significant because, I argue, it presents a challenge to notions held by historians such as Jonathan Crary (2002), who posits that concepts such as interactivity, media spectatorship and subjectivity are predicated on "the relative separation of a

viewer from a milieu of distraction and the detachment of an image from a larger background.”<sup>1</sup> Cray’s interpretation fits, to a certain extent, the specific technology (the peep show) and time period (19<sup>th</sup> Century) that he is describing. However, I argue that notions of detachment and separation when applied to new media artworks, as they consequently have been, are problematic.<sup>2</sup> This is because they create interiorized and privatized experiences, thus positioning technology, and the images they help create, in the artwork they are located in as a matter of aesthetic choice on behalf of the artist. This, I argue, isolates the subject from the artistic process, ultimately creating separate objects and subjects. Such a separation, as media theorists Christian Ulrik Andersen and Søren Bro Pold (2011) posit, is troubling, not only because it produces divisions, but because these divisions perpetuate a specific Kantian model of aesthetics that, they state, favors “beautiful transparency over the sublime opacity of the hidden programming interface.”<sup>3</sup> There are, however, ways to begin to dissolve boundaries between subjects and objects as well as idealized, Kantian notions of beauty in new media art installations. One such approach, as Andersen and Pold inform us, is interface criticism.<sup>4</sup>

For Andersen and Pold, interface criticism involves a “critical discussion of the computer and how it relates to art and culture today.”<sup>5</sup> To summarize their theory: interface criticism questions fundamental notions about technology such as agency, medium specificity and aesthetics. Thus it requires a critical discussion around how technology is related to culture and aesthetics, and how art has developed around technology. In doing this, Andersen and Pold argue, and I agree, that we can begin to develop an approach to analyzing the technology not as a “stable perspective”, but as a “critical paradigm” in the humanities field.<sup>6</sup>

It then becomes important to take seriously the aesthetic aspects of technology in contemporary art, as it constitutes, among other things, what Karen Barad (2007) sees as an abrupt break with representationalist “Cartesian habits of mind.”<sup>7</sup> Representationalism, as Barad states, is the “belief in the ontological distinction between representations and that which they purport to represent; in particular that which is represented is held to be independent of all practices of representing.”<sup>8</sup> Similar to the notions of Kantian aesthetics very briefly critiqued above, representationalism is, as Barad states a Cartesian by-product, a “particularly inconspicuous consequence of the Cartesian division between ‘internal’ and ‘external.’”<sup>9</sup> Therefore, representationalist Cartesian habits of mind, for Barad, are modes of thinking that rely on notions of detachment and separation in order to divide things (subjects and objects) into static, homogenous categories (humans and

machines).<sup>10</sup> To understand the significance of Barad's argument more clearly and how it relates to Andersen and Pold's notions of interface criticism, we might consider Camille Utterback's interactive new media installation *Untitled 5*.

### ***Untitled 5***

*Untitled 5* consists of a closed-circuit camera, a computer and a projection screen. Upon entering the gallery space, the camera detects the subject's presence and movement. This information is processed and projected onscreen as a set of brush strokes or as Utterback calls them, painterly marks. As the participants move the marks move with them. For example, if the participant moves to their left, the mark will follow them and move to the left of the screen. If they move to their right, the mark will follow them and move to the right of the screen. What emerges out of this interaction, as art historian Nathaniel Stern (2013) states, is an artwork that "continually transforms over time as layers of persistent marks and bodies feed back between interaction, performance and image."<sup>11</sup>

In addition to the marks, a colored line appears on the screen, which maps the participant's trajectory. When the participant leaves the installation space, the line breaks apart and becomes a set of spots. The size of these spots directly correlates to the subject's "in-activity or stillness."<sup>12</sup> So if the participant spends three minutes interacting with the work, the line will break apart and become a set of imperceptible dots. If they spend one minute interacting with the work and two minutes standing still, then the line will break apart and become a set of splotches. The current participant interacting with the work can then push these splotches and dots around the screen using their bodies. As they are pushed, these dots and splotches begin to blend into each other. If they are not moved, they attempt to migrate back to the center of the screen.<sup>13</sup> Together these marks, lines, dots and splotches form an artistic composition that Stern writes, create intersections between "movement paths and who does or does not follow them" as well as connections between "different moments of time [and] different bodies in space."<sup>14</sup> In doing this, Stern argues that Utterback's work creates "slightly different conceptual-material encounters" by highlighting the multiple relationships that the viewer/participant is able to form "with her [Utterback's] artwork, and with art-and mark making more generally."<sup>15</sup>

I agree with Stern's critique of *Untitled 5*. I believe the marks, lines, splotches and dots are acting in conjunction with each other (as well as in conjunction with the participant) in order to create the on-screen composition.

Collaborative art making and an exploration into the creation of a different type of aesthetic system via embodied interaction are indeed, as Utterback writes in her artist statement, the main aims of her work.<sup>16</sup> However, I argue that this exploration is only partially translated in practice. This is because the compositions that appear on the screen, as New York Times art critic Ken Johnson (2007) tells us “are not that captivating.”<sup>17</sup> In other words, the visuals can be described as boring (i.e. they are pretty, but not interesting) and the aesthetic system that Utterback claims to create via subject interaction does nothing different. Instead, I argue that the composition simply describes a finite and rather banal space bounded by the rules of its own system.

For example, the ultimate goal of *Untitled 5*, as Utterback states, is to “create an aesthetic system which responds fluidly and intriguingly to physical movement in the exhibit space.”<sup>18</sup> The participant(s) interacting with *Untitled 5* are expected to engage with the on-screen images. Meaning can be produced, on behalf of the participant, through embodied interaction. Meaning is not to be understood as a Kantian manifestation of the artist’s identity or personality. Meaning should emerge out of the participant’s interactions with each other and with the artwork. Yet, I argue that the human-to-computer interaction, the resulting aesthetic composition and narratives that this artwork promotes are restrictive. This is because *Untitled 5* is organized from within, governed by internal lines of code and specific rules that Utterback has purposefully hidden from the subjects.<sup>19</sup> Utterback has not revealed these rules to the participants because she wants them to discover the internal structure and composition via exploration, as she believes that this will create a less prohibitive and more embodied type of interaction with and in her work.<sup>20</sup> As she writes: “While the specific rules of the system are never explicitly revealed to participants, the internal structure and composition of the piece can be discovered through a process of kinaesthetic exploration. Engaging with this work creates a visceral sense of unfolding or revelation, but also a feeling of immediacy and loss.”<sup>21</sup>

Concealment of the underlying rules, as media theorist Florian Cramer (2011) tells us, becomes an issue when applied to artworks that rely on computerized technology, as he believes it implies “a separation of ‘users’ from ‘programmers’ based on different access privileges to machine functions granted by the respective interface.”<sup>22</sup> In other words, the deliberate concealment of the underlying rules that govern *Untitled 5*, by Utterback, creates a separation of the participant from the artist, and in effect, the artistic process. Separation occurs because the participant has no access to the technical or aesthetic system they are interacting with, other than knowing that they can move the on-screen images around. This separation, combined with

the fact that Utterback believes that interaction with her work produces a visceral sense of unfolding, immediacy, revelation and loss, (and the fact that participants who have interacted with the work like Johnson found it boring or difficult to operate) is telling. It demonstrates that Utterback expects every single subject to move their bodies or act, think and feel in a certain way, that everybody interacting with the work is the same. In assuming this, I posit that she is standardizing, thus constraining, the interactions and experience that the participant has in the installation. What participant “interactions” become in this system then, are a series of pre-programmed behaviors mapped to physical movements of a subject. The regulation of participant interaction, however, not only undermines notions of subjectivity, but it also reveals a much more troubling inconsistency hidden in theories of aesthetics, interactivity and media spectatorship.

*Open ended invitations and controlled spaces of passive response*

Theories of contemporary aesthetics, as art historian Kate Mondloch (2010) tells us, consider the subject’s active participation in, and with, artwork to be progressive because it engenders “an empowered, critically aware viewing subject.”<sup>23</sup> Theorizing subjects in this way, is important to these texts, she states, because it allows us to begin to counter “passive or resigned viewing” by providing an experiential and interactive encounter for the subject.<sup>24</sup> Mondloch however is skeptical of this automatic praise of participation and interaction lavished on installation art, as she believes it pits: “active, open-ended reception... against passive consumption.”<sup>25</sup> As she writes: “by necessitating active spectator involvement, whether implicitly or explicitly, installation artworks may simultaneously constitute environments of controlled passive response.”<sup>26</sup> Simply put, Mondloch finds the glorification of interactive and participatory aspects of artworks on behalf of theorists and artists like Stern and Utterback disconcerting, as it creates, to an extent, active vs. passive dichotomies in installation art.<sup>27</sup> While not applicable to every single interactive new media installation, this dichotomy, I posit, is evident in both Stern’s critique of *Untitled 5* and in the artwork itself.

Interaction in *Untitled 5*, for instance, is understood by Stern to constitute an open-ended invitation by the artist to the subject to create, participate and to become, to an extent, co-creator of the work.<sup>28</sup> Utterback, as Stern states: “invites participants to make and find meaning in and with and as an embodied and relational corpus.”<sup>29</sup> Contrary to Stern, I argue that the invitation that Utterback extends to the subject, while embodied and meaningful, is not reciprocal or interactive. Rather, the viewer/participant interaction occurring in her work is, to a certain extent, a set of semi-choreographed reactions performed by a semi-passive subject who is

responding to a very constrained set of computerized actions that have been pre-programmed by an active, yet absent Artist. That is to say, the supposedly open-ended interactive exploration occurring in *Untitled 5* is imposed on the subject by the artist and the technical and aesthetic make-up of the installation itself. In this way, *Untitled 5* unintentionally creates an active vs. passive dichotomy by pitting an active Artist against a passive viewer/participant. Thus, I argue that *Untitled 5* is not, as Utterback and Stern argue an open-ended participatory experience, but rather it should be seen, to borrow Mondloch's term, as a controlled space of passive response.<sup>30</sup>

Given this, I posit that *Untitled 5* is simply rearranging previously posited aesthetic and technological systems and theories, instead of critically exploring them and creating different ones.<sup>31</sup> It is simply reinforcing a standardized vocabulary of visual motifs and modernist categories of art and technical production – specifically an understanding of art as the manifestation of a human subject as raised by art historian Amelia Jones (2006).<sup>32</sup> Reinforcement of these notions is only exacerbated in Stern's analysis of Utterback's work – particularly his statement that the on-screen composition in *Untitled 5* references: "the affective and performative.... possibilities of Abstract Expressionism à la Jackson Pollock."<sup>33</sup> So, while Utterback is attempting to go beyond the surface of the machine by prioritizing the aesthetic aspects of technology and the artwork itself, *Untitled 5* could be criticized for replicating problematic representationalist systems and contemporary modes of artistic practice.

Representational systems, however, can be, as Barad writes: "sometimes explicitly theorized in terms of a tripartite arrangement...in addition to knowledge (i.e., representations), on the one hand, and the known (i.e., that which is purportedly represented), on the other, the existence of a knower (i.e., someone who does the representing) is acknowledged."<sup>34</sup> When the acknowledgement of an artist happens, as Barad posits that: "it becomes clear that representations are presumed to serve a mediating function between independently existing entities." This assumption of mediation is significant because it creates a gap between the subject and the object. And this gap raises questions around the accuracy of representations, concepts of mediation and notions of image creation. Do the marks and lines in *Untitled 5* accurately represent the physical forces they are modelled after? What exactly is it that is being mediated? Why is it being mediated? Who or what is doing the mediation? Who exactly is the artist in this installation? Is it Utterback? Is it the subject? Or, is it a combination of both?

In an attempt to explore similar questions, scholars and artists like Barad,

Stern, Andersen and Pold and Utterback struggle to develop understandings of the possibilities for socio-political, cultural and aesthetic interventions that move beyond the restrictive frameworks of representationalism, Cartesianism and Kantian notions of aesthetics. It is possible to construct coherent philosophical positions (such as Andersen and Pold's notion of interface criticism) that begin to critically question the basic premises of these aforementioned notions. However, completely breaking the dichotomies ((inter)active vs. passive), the object/subject gaps and the confusion they create is not as simple as it appears. It requires, as Barad posits, skepticism towards Cartesianism and "a rethinking of the nature of a host of fundamental notions such as being, identity, matter, discourse...and agency."<sup>35</sup>

I argue that one such rethinking occurs, to an extent, in *Untitled 5*. For instance instead of trying to fill this gap between the subject and the object and resolve the confusion it creates through the acknowledgement of the existence of a singular creator, Utterback exploits it. This exploitation occurs, as media theorist Roberto Simanowski (2011) states, because Utterback has turned the body of the viewer/participant into a paint brush – an artistic instrument employed in an ever changing visual feedback system.<sup>36</sup> Designation of the human body as paint brush, for Simanowski, is significant, because he argues it breaks with traditional representational theories that treat the visual experience of the subject as the object of perception. Thus it enhances and critically examines, rather than suppresses, the human body's role in the processes of perception and image making.<sup>37</sup> As he writes: "Although traditional Western art...served the eye as locus of perception, in interactive art, the interface is no longer exclusively focused on vision but engages the entire body and turns it into a privileged site for experience."<sup>38</sup> Following on from Simanowski, an understanding of interactive new media installations and the images that they create that takes account of the fact that the participant, the images and the processes that bring them into being, be they socio-political, technical, biological, aesthetic or cultural are not ontologically separate entities, has the potential to open up a space for a different, more critical approach to thinking about images and image making. I argue it points to the development of different ways of working with, in and possibly beyond, what could be seen as inadequate definitions of interactivity, participation and aesthetics in interactive new media art installations.

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<sup>1</sup>Jonathan Crary. "Gericault, the Panorama and Sites of Reality in the Early Nineteenth Century." *Grey Room 09*, Fall, 2002. Pg 5-25. Crary's

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interpretation could also be criticized, and has been by theorists such as Erkki Huhtamo (2011) and Andre Gaudreault, Nicolas Dulac and Santiago Hidalgo (2012), for prioritizing one particular part of the experience (the visual/sight) over the other forms present, thus glossing over the whole haptic experience of the viewer/participant.

<sup>2</sup>Theorists and historians who have done this include, but are not limited to: Lev Manovich (2001, 2005) Paul Dourish and Genevive Bell (2011), Laura Marks (2002), Anne Friedberg (2009).

<sup>3</sup>Christian Ulrik Andersen and Soren Bro Pold. "Interface Criticism, Aesthetics Beyond Buttons" in *Interface Criticism: Aesthetics Beyond Buttons*. ed. Christian Ulrik Andersen and Soren Bro Pold. (Arhaus, DK: Arhaus University Press, 2011). Pg 13.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., Pg, 9.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., Pg, 8.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., This approach, according to Andersen and Pold, combines recent theoretical developments in the cultural studies and media theory fields in order to critically investigate interfaces, "what they mean for – and how they function in –contemporary culture". (Andersen & Pold. Pg 10).

<sup>7</sup>Karen Barad. *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning*. (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007). Pg 49.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid.,

<sup>9</sup>Karen Barad. *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning*. (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007). Pg 49.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid.,

<sup>11</sup>Nathaniel Stern. *Interactive Art and Embodiment: The Implicit Body as Performance*. (Canterbury, UK: Glyphi Limited, 2013) Pg, 133.

<sup>12</sup>Camille Utterback. *Untitled 5*. 2004. Found online at:  
<http://camilleutterback.com/projects/untitled-5/>

<sup>13</sup>Camille Utterback. *Untitled 5*. 2004. Found online at:  
<http://camilleutterback.com/projects/untitled-5/>

<sup>14</sup>Nathaniel Stern. *Interactive Art and Embodiment: The Implicit Body as Performance*. (Canterbury, UK: Glyphi Limited, 2013) Pg, 135.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid., 136.

<sup>16</sup>Camille Utterback. *Untitled 5*. 2004. Found online at:  
<http://camilleutterback.com/projects/untitled-5/>

<sup>17</sup>Ken Johnson. "Back to the future – New technologies meet old ideals at the Boston Cyberarts Festival". The Boston Globe, April 27, 2007. Found online at:  
[http://www.boston.com/news/globe/living/articles/2007/04/27/back\\_to\\_the\\_future/?page=full](http://www.boston.com/news/globe/living/articles/2007/04/27/back_to_the_future/?page=full).

<sup>18</sup>Camille Utterback. *Untitled 5*. 2004. Found online at:  
<http://camilleutterback.com/projects/untitled-5/>

<sup>19</sup>Camille Utterback. *Untitled 5*. 2004. Found online at:  
<http://camilleutterback.com/projects/untitled-5/>

<sup>20</sup>Ibid.,



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<sup>21</sup> Ibid.,

<sup>22</sup> Florian Cramer. "What is Interface Aesthetics, or What Could it Be (Not)?" in *Interface Criticism: Aesthetics Beyond Buttons*. ed. Christian Ulrik Andersen and Soren Bro Pold. (Aarhus, DK: Aarhus University Press, 2011.) Pg 120.

<sup>23</sup> Kate Mondloch. *Screens: Viewing Media Installation Art*. (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2010). Pp 25-6.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.,

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., Pg 26.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.,

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., Active vs. passive dichotomies, for Mondloch, are problematic because they assume, among other things, that one entity is more involved in the installation, thus, has more influence over and its' actions are more valuable than, the other passive entities located in the same art work.

<sup>28</sup> Nathaniel Stern. *Interactive Art and Embodiment: The Implicit Body as Performance*. (Canterbury, UK: Gyliphi Limited, 2013) Pg, 134.

<sup>29</sup> Nathaniel Stern. *Interactive Art and Embodiment: The Implicit Body as Performance*. (Canterbury, UK: Gyliphi Limited, 2013) Pg, 134.

<sup>30</sup> Kate Mondloch. *Screens: Viewing Media Installation Art*. (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2010). Pp 25-6.

<sup>31</sup> Specifically, I argue it is rearranging Kantian notions of the Artist as genius or technology as a transcendental subject who "knows", Renaissance notions of art – specifically painting and photography – as raised by Jonathan Crary (1990) as a "window onto the world" as well as Cartesian positionings of the body as a detachable image in relation to technology.

<sup>32</sup> Amelia Jones. *Self/Image: Technology Representation and the Contemporary Subject*. (New York, NY: Routledge, 2006) Pp 2-3.

<sup>33</sup> Nathaniel Stern. *Interactive Art and Embodiment: The Implicit Body as Performance*. (Canterbury, UK: Gyliphi Limited, 2013) Pg, 136.

<sup>34</sup> Karen Barad. *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning*. (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007). Pg, 46.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.,

<sup>36</sup> Roberto Simanowski. *Digital Art and Meaning: Reading Kinetic Poetry, Text Machines, Mapping Art and Interactive Installations*. (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2011.) Pg, 124.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.,

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.,

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