



salt 9: Jillian Mayer

salt 8: Jillian Mayer

January 17–August 17, 2014

On the 28th day of June in 1984, Jillian Mayer was born in a hospital in Ft. Lauderdale. Her father filmed the entire event on his VHS camcorder. Being born on camera is not atypical for Millennials, those born between 1980 and 2000. Mayer likes to joke that her birth was her first, and best, piece of performance art. Being able to rewatch and share a personal event that earlier generations would have perceived as deeply private is a typical Millennial characteristic played out everyday on the Facebooks, Instagrams, and Twitters of the online world.

At the entrance to her *salt 9* exhibition, a digitally edited version of Mayer's analog birth video depicts the artist giving birth to her self, to her virtual identity (fig 1). A framed script displayed next to the video positions the event as premeditated and rehearsed. It is clear that the video is set in a hospital room, but an uncanny green glow suggests that actors are performing against a green screen¹, preparing themselves to be digitally relocated to any virtual location in post-production.

By replacing her mother's head with her own, Mayer ostensibly controls her self-birthing into



fig. 1. Stills from *Giving Birth to Myself*, 2011. VHS video transferred to digital and edited. Edition of 5 + 2 APs. Courtesy the artist and David Castillo Gallery, Miami.

an online virtual world that is public and detached from the body. Mayer's explicit sharing of a "private part" jarringly exposes the contemporary breakdown between public and private space. Shot from the point of view of the expectant father, the video has two camera angles, one of the mother's head and one of her vagina. The latter, completely detached from the body, reads like a prop, a stand-in or a symbol. As in any routine gynecological doctor's visit, a white sheet separates the lower half of "Jillian Mayer's" body from the top, effectively dissociating the reproductive organs from the person. The camera shows no body connecting the two. Mayer's use of this trope, this separation of head and body, de-emphasizes the body. Online, there is no place, need, or value for the body. The mind, untethered by physical limits, can be free in its construction of identity.

Mayer invites visitors to consider the construction of their own virtual identity by converting the *salt* gallery floor into a green screen. Just as she symbolically births her own online identity at the entrance of the gallery, visitors are also born into a digital space of infinite possibility as they cross the threshold of the gallery. After asking the question, *who do you want to be?*, Mayer offers some

¹ Green screens are used in chroma key compositing, or color keying, a technique used in digital post-production that has the special effect of making human subjects appear somewhere they are not. Two layers of images are merged, one with an actor in front of a green screen and one with the desired "location." Because the color green differs so greatly from human skin tones, the green screen tone can be removed from the composite image, revealing the actor in front of the virtual location.

possibilities in her 2013 piece *Insert Strategy* (cover). The inkjet image on transparent acrylic is a screenshot of Mayer's computer displaying 300 JPEG thumbnails. Each JPEG is titled after a different celebrity but the image content of each file is the same photo of Jillian Mayer. Jillian Mayer is Jay Leno. Jillian Mayer is Kanye West. Jillian Mayer is Nicole Kidman. According to the algorithms of Google Image, should Mayer upload these JPEGs, her picture would populate image searches for these celebrities. It would be hard for Mayer to hi-jack an identity as public as that of Nicole Kidman, but what about the lesser-known Erica Durance, Sarah Carter, or Laura Wiggins? Since the advent of photography in the mid-nineteenth century, it has been understood as a mimetic, documentary medium. Photo = truth. Since the advent of Google Image, the definition of truth has been stretched. If a Google Image search for "Laura Wiggins" turns up six images of Jillian Mayer and three of another woman, Jillian Mayer is effectively Laura Wiggins. Today we look to search engines to define our world, to tell us what is real. Offering a way to control the construction of one's identity within the networked system, *Insert Strategy* exposes a moment when the virtual world defines the physical world, creating an alternate reality.

Like the pioneering photographer Cindy Sherman or the cutting-edge video artist Ryan Trecartin, Jillian Mayer often dons surreal makeup and elaborate costumes before she turns the camera on herself. But, unlike those artists, Mayer is not always performing as a character. In her 2011 vlog² *I Am Your Grandma*, Mayer performs fourteen

² A video log; a journalistic video embedded on the Internet meant to communicate on a personal level with a broad audience.



fig. 2. Stills from *I Am Your Grandma*, 2011. Video. 1-minute loop. Edition of 5 + 2 APs. Courtesy the artist and David Castillo Gallery, Miami.



fig. 3. Werner Pawlok. *Leigh Bowery*, 1988. Color photograph. Dimensions variable. © Werner Pawlok. Image courtesy Studio Werner Pawlok, Stuttgart, Germany.

bizarre versions of herself (fig 2), each a part of the Jillian Mayer that she is introducing to her unborn grandchild. Mayer's costumes are inspired by the eccentric makeup and designs of legendary club promoter-model-performance artist Leigh Bowery (Australian, 1961–1994). In the 1980s and 1990s underground club scene in London and New York, Bowery wore outlandish getups to provoke the public but also to express different aspects of his own identity (fig 3). In her video too, Mayer is presenting the complexity of her inner self to the online public as well as to her unborn grandchild. Certainly, Mayer is a chameleon-like performance artist, but what she is expressing is more universal: identity is a fluid performance of multiple selves in constant construction, online and IRL³.

Jillian Mayer appears in four artworks in *salt 9*: one video, one sculpture, and two photos. She is a mother and a baby, a physical reconstruction of a digital representation of reality, 300 celebrities, and herself. Use of the word "herself" is appropriate here because only one image of the artist is actually designated a self portrait, *Self Portrait on*



fig. 4. *Self Portrait on October 5th*, 2013 in North Carolina, 2013. C-print, 60 x 40 inches. Edition of 5 + 2 APs. Courtesy the artist and David Castillo Gallery, Miami.

October 5th, 2013 in North Carolina (fig 4). Ironically, without that title the subject of the photograph would be unidentifiable because the image is so overexposed that the sitter's face is washed out. This photograph made its debut online in the fall of 2013. Untitled and untagged, it was only loosely recognizable as a self portrait because it was surrounded by other self portraits on the artist's Tumblr page. Why would she post such a bad photograph that obscures her face? After all, overexposure is a photographic error. Or, in the online world of identity formation and maintenance, perhaps it is a tool. With parents uploading ultrasound images, friends tagging late-night party pics, and companies adding employee handles to marketing tweets, our virtual identities are largely affected by online users other than ourselves. Mayer's defiantly obscured self portrait combats this "overexposure" of identity. By only posting non-identifying images, a user could participate in the sharing culture of the

³ Internet slang for In Real Life

Internet while still maintaining control of her own image. As facial recognition software continues to be developed for government and marketing purposes, tactics like this could be increasingly attractive to those wishing to maintain privacy.

Mayer's new website <http://selffeed.com> takes advantage of the lack of control the Internet affords by aggregating selfies⁴ as they are uploaded. By co-opting images that users post in an attempt to manage their online identity, Mayer highlights the Internet's open source, cut-and-paste culture. Without consent, a simply-coded algorithm divorces these self portraits from the user-controlled context of an Instagram account. Meanings change as these images transform into symbols of an online society obsessed with self-promotion. Any sense of the individual offered via profile stats, "friends," or post history is lost instantaneously. Perhaps most interestingly, the original poster, whether purposely or unwittingly, becomes a collaborator integral to Mayer's project.

Mayer is a highly collaborative artist. To produce her work, she activates a network of friends and specialized professionals—animators, sound mixers, make-up artists, 3D printers, coders, etc. This is not unusual for artists: a painter might hire someone to stretch and prepare canvases; a sculpture might hire a fabricator. But Mayer's collaboration extends past this artist-selected and -controlled network. Much of her artwork requires the participation of a viewer to be activated.

⁴The Oxford Dictionary named "selfie" Word of the Year in 2013, and defines the term as follows: a photograph that one has taken of oneself, typically one taken with a smartphone or webcam and uploaded to a social media website.

Since Mayer uploaded her vlog *I Am Your Grandma* to YouTube.com in 2011, the bizarre 1-minute video message to her future, unborn grandchild has received 2,578,092 views, 22,420 likes, 1,695 dislikes, and 7,384 viewer comments.⁵ Moreover, the YouTube post has spawned countless spoofs including choreographed dances and remakes by five-year olds, an Internet troll, college students, a fake plastic cat, Darth Vader, the guitarist for rap metal band Limp Bizkit Wes Borland, and a Cabbage Patch Kid. By enlisting the visual language and tools of viral videos and online chat boards, Jillian Mayer investigates the (im)possibility of authenticity and the multiplicity of authorship.

Because she situates them in the social networks of the Internet, Mayer's videos are relational aesthetics projects. In 1998, French art critic Nicolas Bourriaud defined relational aesthetics as "a set of artistic practices which take as their theoretical and practical point of departure the whole of human relations and their social context, rather than an independent and private space."⁶ In relational aesthetics projects, the artist creates a social situation, the viewer becomes an active participant, and a shared social experience becomes the artwork. Rather than an encounter between a viewer and an object, relational aesthetics art produces intersubjective encounters where meaning is defined collectively. The social act of liking, sharing an opinion, virtually yelling at another commentor, reblogging, or posting a spoof becomes part of the art project. Jillian Mayer's YouTube channel, Vimeo account, Facebook

⁵ Statistics at time of press.

⁶ Bourriaud, N. (2002). *Relational Aesthetics*. Dijon: Les presses du reel, p.113 (French 1998).

page, and Twitter feed abound with stories of human connection.

Mayer's reach goes well beyond her own pages. When Yahoo!Sports reposted Mayer's collaborative 2012 video *Adventures of Christopher Bosh in the Multiverse*, a new audience lit up the chat board with contributions that look nothing like those posted on Vimeo. Mayer embraces this "architecture of participation."⁷ By accepting the web's uncontrollable context and by being open to malleable meaning, she enlists an ever-expanding audience of collaborators and challenges the traditional artist/viewer relationship. Viewers become active creators of content and meaning; the artist becomes a spectator as she watches her project morph at the hands of multiple users in different contexts at the same time. As Brad Troemel described in his 2013 article *Art after social media*, "The utopian disposition for art online most idealistically views the near-infinite world of digital images as a kind of commons, a place where the value of art is not located in its ability to be sold or critically praised but in its ability to continue to be remade or reblogged for whatever purpose its network of viewer-authors find significant."⁸

What is inspiring all this Internet participation? What does it mean to leave a timeless video message on YouTube for your unborn grandchild? To display all the world's selfies on one website? To upload your soul to the Internet? Cloaked with commercial rhetoric and poppy soundtracks, Mayer's videos and websites are designed for mass appeal but ask serious questions about human connection through and with the Internet. Many Internet functions and applications have

become such a common part of everyday life that we may not stop to think about how these technologies are transforming our social, economic, and political relations. In fact, "good design" is contingent on a seamless integration with our current lifestyle. We are not supposed to notice anything new. In this respect, the Internet and many digital technologies are invisible. Though the Internet requires huge warehouses for server storage and an army of maintenance workers, it is perceived as a light and airy, hard-to-pin-down "cloud."

In May 2011, English writer and technologist James Bridle set up a Tumblr account aimed at making visible the virtual world's seamless integration with the real world. He called the image/video blog the New Aesthetic. Pulled from real life as well as the vast online network, Bridle's posts consist of satellite views, surveillance cameras, information visualization, glitches, IRL voxel sculptures, retro 8-bit graphics, and other visuals that rupture the perceived distinction between the digital and the physical. Bridle suggests the New Aesthetic is "an echo of the society, technology, politics, and people that co-produce them."⁹ It is more representative of an emergent worldview than it is a critical essay or an artistic movement. The increasing appearance of the visual language of digital technology in the physical world, as tracked by the New Aesthetic Tumblr, is evidence of the contemporary blurring of virtual and physical reality, of human and machine.

⁷The nature of systems designed for user contribution; concept in which a community of users contributes to the content or design and development process; coined by tech-guru Tim O'Reilly in 2004.

⁸Troemel, Brad. "Art After Social Media," *Art Papers*. July/August 2013. p 13.

⁹<http://new-aesthetic.tumblr.com/about>



fig. 5. Still from *Mega Mega Upload* (part of the short film *#Postmodern*), 2013. HD video. 14 minutes, 28 seconds. Edition of 5 + 2 APs. Courtesy the artist and David Castillo Gallery, Miami.

Like Bridle's New Aesthetic, each of Mayer's projects is designed to call attention to our synthesis with digital technology and the World Wide Web. Whether she is investigating modern identity formation online or challenging the standards of creative authorship, Mayer is bringing attention to how our lives and interactions are forever changed by technology. Consider her viral hit "Mega Mega Upload" (fig 5). Launched on YouTube as a teaser to her 2013 short film *#Postmodern*, the 3-minute pop sing-along repeats "All I want to be is the original who goes straight from analogue to digital. All I want to be is the original who transcends and leaves the physical." This self-proclaimed tutorial for "How to Live Forever in a Few E-Z Steps (Preparing Your Mind for a Post-Human Existence)" touts the transhumanist theories of futurists like Ray Kurzweil. Kurzweil is a vocal promoter of what he calls The Singularity, a purported rapidly approaching moment when man and machine will unite to greatly increase man's intelligence and lifespan. We may not yet have tiny digital machines regulating our bodies from our bloodstreams, but our reliance on technology is undeniable.

Our smartphones might as well be attached to our hands. Some of us speak more through online forums than our mouths.

Exactly how this growing reliance will alter our perception of the world and our interaction with it remains open for debate. Richard Louv, journalist and author of the 2012 book *The Nature Principle: Reconnecting with Life in a Virtual Age*, says that the real hybrid mind utilizes our experiences with nature as well as with technology to increase our intelligence, creativity, and productivity. The more high-tech we become, Louv says, the more nature we need to boost mental acuity, promote health, build sustainable economies, and strengthen human bonds. Numerous studies from myriad disciplines support the benefits of spending time in nature, but, assuming such a physical need exists, how can we reconcile it with our increasingly deep integration with technology? What would a balanced digital/physical world look like?

In 2002, artist Corey Arcangel (American, born 1978) hacked a Super Mario Brothers video game cartridge to remove everything from the game except the white clouds floating against the blue backdrop. He uploaded the resultant *Super Mario Clouds* (fig 6) to the web, essentially creating a slow-moving, 8-bit color replica of the natural sky to be contemplated online. In Mayer's 2010 video *Scenic Jogging* (fig 7), she races to stay surrounded by computer-generated images of idyllic nature projected against Miami's urban streetscape. This past summer, Mayer invited visitors to swing among digital clouds in her installation *Swing Space* (fig 8). In her 2014 *salt* exhibition, Jillian Mayer brings two technology-mediated displays



fig. 6. Cory Arcangel. *Super Mario Clouds* (still), 2002– . Hand-made hacked Super Mario Brothers cartridge and Nintendo NES video game system. Dimensions variable. © Cory Arcangel. Image courtesy Cory Arcangel and Team Gallery, New York.

of nature to the windowless space. First, the floor is covered with sand. Though it is recognizable as sand, this sand is neon green and could be used to transport visitors anywhere virtually via color keying. Second, one wall of the gallery is filled with white clouds and blue sky. This soothing vista is entirely digitally rendered and powered by a high-definition projector. A reassuring message appears in the clouds and disappears, as if written by an acrobatic airplane.

“You’ll Be Okay,” the machine says.

Whitney Tassie
Curator of Modern and Contemporary Art



fig. 7. Still from *Scenic Jogging*, 2010. Video. 1-minute loop. Edition of 5 + 2 APs. Courtesy the artist and David Castillo Gallery, Miami.



fig. 8. Installation view of *Swing Space*, 2013. Video projection, swings. Dimensions variable. Courtesy the artist and David Castillo Gallery, Miami.

Jillian Mayer (American, born 1984, lives Miami) received her BFA from Florida International University in 2007. In 2010, her video *Scenic Jogging* was one of 25 selections for the Guggenheim's *YouTube Play: A Biennial of Creative Video* and was exhibited at the Guggenheim museums in New York, Venice, Bilbao, and Berlin. Recent solo projects include *Love Trips* at World Class Boxing, Miami (2011), *Erasey Page* at the Bass Museum of Art, Miami Beach (2012), and *Precipice/PostModem* at Locust Projects, Miami (2013). Mayer's short films *Life and Freaky Times of Uncle Luke* (2012) and *#Postmodem* (2013) were selected to premiere at the Sundance Film Festival. This past year, she was an artist in residency in Berne, Switzerland as a Zentrum Paul Klee Fellow; in Greensboro, NC as an NEA Southern Constellation Fellow at the Elsewhere Museum; and in Sundance, UT as a New Frontier Story Lab Fellow. Currently, Jillian Mayer is preparing for an upcoming solo exhibition at the University of Maine Museum of Art.

salt 9: Jillian Mayer is the ninth installment of the Utah Museum of Fine Arts' ongoing series of semi-annual exhibitions showcasing work by emerging artists from around the world. *salt* aims to reflect the international impact of contemporary art today, forging local connections to the global and bringing new and diverse artwork to the city that shares the program's name.

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