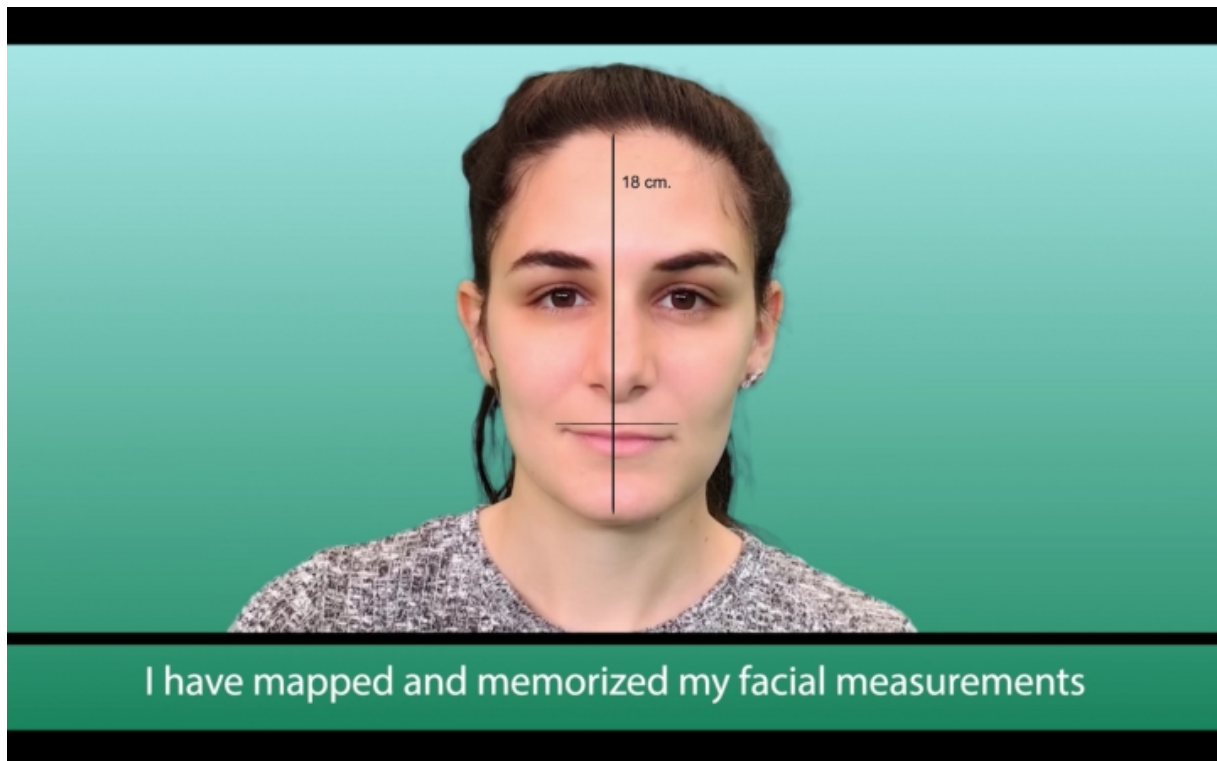


HYPERALLERGIC

An Artist Measures How Her Face Is Recognized and Monetized

At first, Jillian Mayer's image, in which she meticulously measured the contours of her face, had the effect of an advertisement.

Monica Uszerowicz March 28, 2017



Jillian Mayer, "MEASUREMENTS" (2017), from "IMPRESSIONS" (screenshot by the author for Hyperallergic)

In 2014, artist Jillian Mayer measured, in sedulous detail, the contours of her face. On top of a professional, stoic photo of herself, she placed lines and numbers indicating the distance between her chin and forehead, two cheeks, the tip of her nose and the tip of her earlobe, the bottom of her brow to the top of her eyelid, and the vertical length of her lips, from the Cupid's bow down.

The image appeared in *Flaunt* magazine and, with Mayer's Mona Lisa gaze, looking beautiful and maybe indifferent, it had the effect of an advertisement. Alongside the image were these words:

My face is a set of points and measurements between features.

Already, I am aware of my height and width at several varying points on my body.

These are the ways I am identified, grouped, and advertised to.

I have mapped and memorized my facial measurements as they relate to each other.

This is how I identify myself personally and externally.

I do this exercise every five years. You should do the same.

“The female face doesn’t seem out of place in advertisement,” she told me over e-mail. “As such, the directions for facial measurement exist subtly.” It’s true: thumbing through a magazine, it takes a moment to recognize Mayer’s work as anything other than some sort of ad. The words slink in, unsettlingly — a testament to the power of advertising’s tropes: there is nothing here being sold, and yet the femininity of her features alone rendered it, to my brain, a sales ad.



Jilian Mayer, “IMPRESSIONS” on a billboard in Los Angeles (photo courtesy Ellie Cardoza, Ana Frost, and David Castillo Gallery)

In reality, though, the instructions pointed to the computative qualities of the human face. Is that, you wonder, how Facebook knows to tag me in a photo — by the particular measurements of my own visage?

Two years later, in November 2016, this image, now titled “IMPRESSIONS,” debuted on a billboard in Los Angeles in the same format, developed in collaboration with OUTFRONT Media and curator Anna Frost for Bas Fisher Invitational in Miami. This time, the photo — adapted for a large-scale presentation and including the same annotations — was somehow creepier and yet even more appropriate, given the ubiquity of advertising in LA. On another billboard, the same photograph appeared without measurements. Instead, each of Mayer’s features was overlaid with neon-green cross-hairs: small, mapped points utilized for facial recognition technology. The accompanying text read:

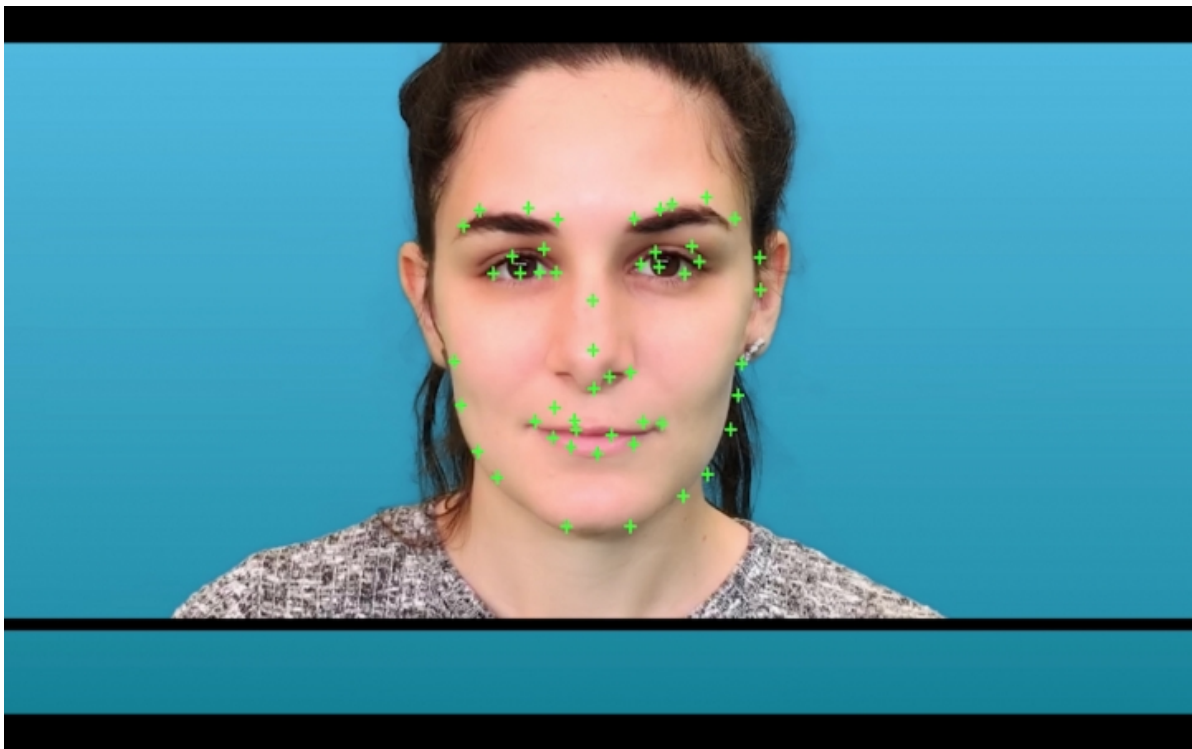
My expressions are a calculable system of metrics.

You don’t have to try and figure out what I am thinking anymore, I’ll make it easy for you.

What decision I might make, where I look next and how.

You can sense my heart rate, and I see yours.

It’s like you know the real me.



Jillian Mayer, “ARROWS” (2017), from “IMPRESSIONS” (screenshot by the author for Hyperallergic)

In an age of facial recognition, Mayer's use of marketing rhetoric renders our projections — that imagined reality of our own ideas and feelings, cast onto another person like a canvas — literal and technological. Can the body itself be a measurable algorithm? Can the emotions contained therein be calculated, like formulas?

After the billboards were taken down, Mayer made two videos to accompany the project, entitled "ARROWS" and "MEASUREMENTS," which debuted at the Borscht Film Festival in Miami at the end of February and were posted online in March. This year's edition, entitled Borscht Diez, referenced the Spanish word for the number 10 (it was the festival's 10th edition), the English word "dies" (with a Z) — and subsequently, death and rebirth. The festival's theme examined Miami's impending doom due to sea level rise, and the city's eventual recolonization by the corals that form its limestone bedrock.

The videos' inclusion was fitting: How will we understand our own physicality in the future? It is at best uncomfortable to know our faces are digitally recognizable en masse, and the technology, like any other institutionalized system, is already faulty: racist, sexist, haphazard, and "out of control." At least Mayer's "IMPRESSIONS" allow for a brief reclamation of her own body.

Jillian Mayer's "ARROWS" and "MEASUREMENTS" debuted at the Borscht Film Festival, Miami, and are now on YouTube.