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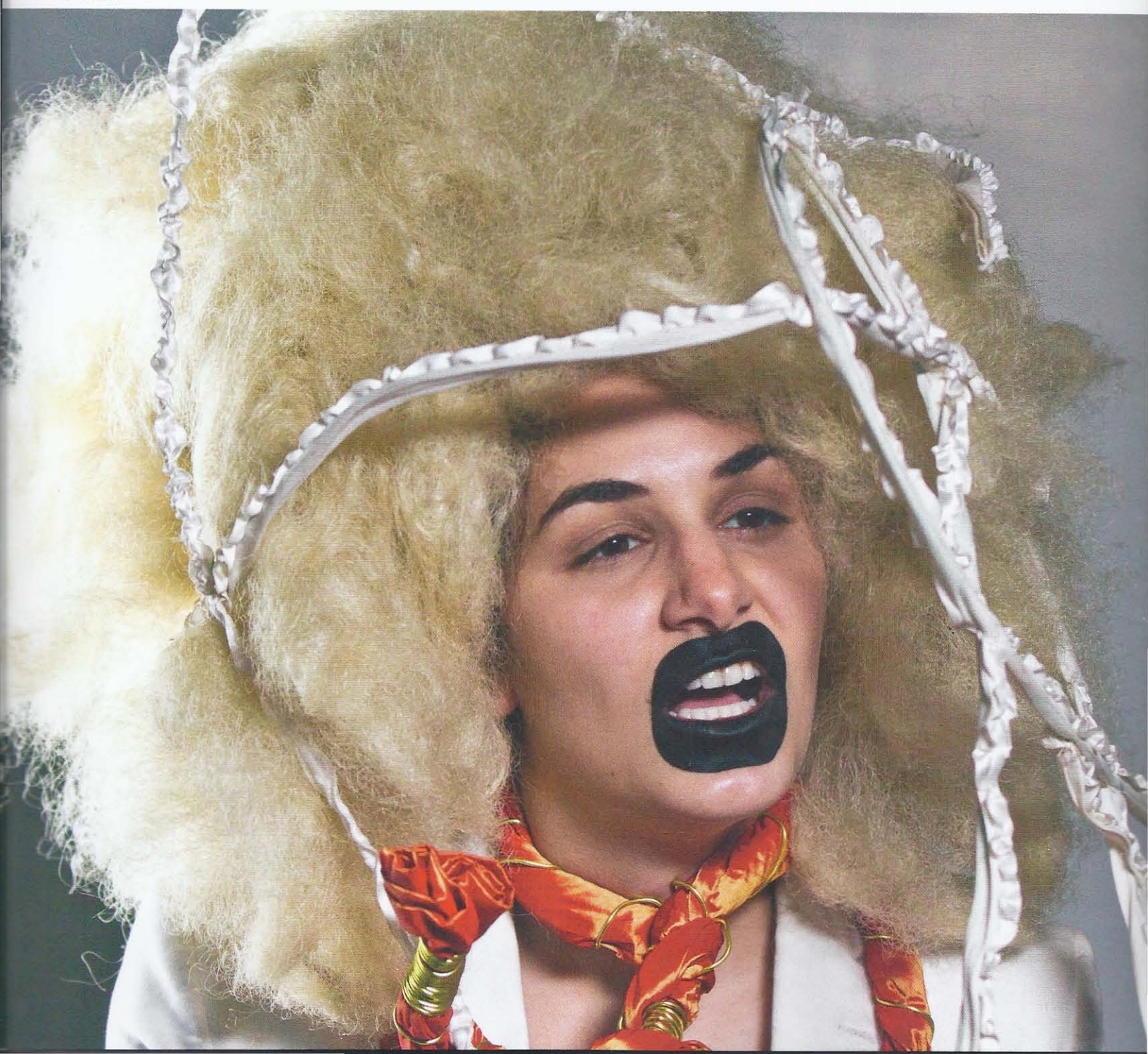


MULTIMEDIA
IDENTITY GAMES
JILLIAN MAYER

ARCHIVE
VS CULTURAL TABOO
ALYSE EMDUR

BATTLE
REPRESENTATION
+ THE GAZA FLOTILLA

SCENE
RADCLIFFE BAILEY,
HARMONY KORINE + MORE





Child of Technology: Jillian Mayer's Multimedia Identity Games

TEXT / ANNIE HOLLINGSWORTH

Jillian Mayer, a young artist born and raised in Miami, tells the story of a recent trip to Buenos Aires. She was displaying her collection of *Simpsons* finger puppets—crudely-knit interpretations of the characters sold around the world—which her Argentinian friend recognized immediately: “Oh, I love *Los Simpsons*, I grew up with them, they’re a part of my family!” Mayer says the same thing. In a nature-culture substitution, she claims to have grown up in the company of an animated family. She also credits *Full House*, *Family Matters*, and *Beverly Hills 90210* with major life lessons.

The identities of many young people were formed around the two-dimensional ethics and fictional family dynamics delivered nightly during prime time. Often, television characters were more influential than real-life role models. It was a different era, before the Internet, when characters and plot turns were a collective point of reference. Kids who weren’t allowed to watch TV were, for better or worse, disconnected from the mainstream. Since then, technological revolutions have drastically altered the relationship between individuals and the media they consume. Yet, sitcom logic continues to surface as once- voracious TV fans become cultural producers themselves. As an artist, Mayer is both a fan and a critic of television, indebted to the golden age of the sitcom and charting ahead into the still open-ended structure of the Internet.

Recently, Mayer has made a sudden and unconventional entrance into the international art world and the public eye—appropriately, on YouTube. In the summer of 2010, the Guggenheim Museum sent out an international call to video artists for *YouTube/Play*, a curatorial experiment designed to uncover new talent and explore the power of the Internet as a creative arena. The selection committee received over twenty-three thousand video submissions from ninety-one countries, which were uploaded to YouTube. Twenty-



five works were ultimately selected, including Mayer's *Scenic Jogging*, 2010, which was subsequently shown at Guggenheim outposts in New York, Venice, Bilbao, and Berlin as well as on a YouTube channel set up by the museum.

Six months later, Mayer was commissioned by the Miami-based Borscht Film Festival to produce three short videos. One of them, *I Am Your Grandma*, 2011, was posted on YouTube following the blockbuster festival screening. As Mayer and her collaborators predicted, the video went viral immediately, with over 220,000 hits in the first week. *I Am Your Grandma* was designed for mass appeal. Humor, short-attention-span pacing, and an addictive soundtrack by Miami-based band ANR—now available on iTunes—make it as engaging as a Super Bowl commercial break. A title screen introduces the video's content: "Video Diary Log: A Message to my Future Unborn Grandchild." Mayer posits video as a medium of lasting intergenerational communication, a way to accurately send the present into the future. She plays herself—the author—dressed in elaborate feature-distorting costumes inspired by legendary performance artist Leigh Bowery. *I Am Your Grandma* leans towards the fictional. On the internet, its intention and authenticity are totally undefined.

To date, *I Am Your Grandma* has gotten almost a million hits. It has been spoofed—mostly by kids. It has spawned micro-communities on Facebook and YouTube. Its title has entered the online *Urban Dictionary* as a slang term for "when something is really weird and terrifying and trau-

matizing in a way you can't forget." Online comments highlight the majority disposition of the Internet community—many honed in on buried sexual undertones and Mayer's shocking costumes in sometimes crude and raw language. A few proposed marriage.

Regardless of its unconventional exhibition history, *I Am Your Grandma* was originally produced for the art world, a context that does elicit more sophisticated viewer responses. A month before its Borscht Film Festival's screening, *I Am Your Grandma* was included in *Family Matters*, Mayer's first solo show [David Castillo Gallery, Miami; April 9–May 7, 2011]. Titled after the television show, *Family Matters* teased out a slightly different interpretation of *I Am Your Grandma*: the definition of individual identities within the family structure. Here, family roles become fictional constructions shaped by stereotypical expectations.

The details of Mayer's technology-driven debut are in perfect step with her conceptual territory. She plays games with popular media, the public, and the art world. Reception is central to the work: its fate and the layers of interpretation it accrues as it crosses channels and institutions are often as relevant as its message. Technology plays a deliberate, crucial, and multidimensional role in terms of production and as a means of intersection with public and private memory. Some of her visual references tap into specific cultural histories. Others are offered to a mass of anonymous viewers with an invitation for unqualified public response. In the context of the art world—Mayer's primary audience—viewers become subjects in



her nostalgia experiments as well as witnesses to sociological phenomena happening elsewhere.

In Mayer's practice, popular culture stands in for nature—it is our artificial garden. Her work puts forth a powerful assumption: following our birth into a biological world, we develop in an environment of manufactured cultural products. As *Scenic Jogging* succinctly demonstrates, gaps erupt when we fail to simulate nature's full complexity. Here, Mayer runs through a deserted urban neighborhood, attempting to keep up with projected nature scenes that move quickly across warehouse walls. The video's rapid pacing produces an acute sense of anxiety. Her character is perpetually unable to catch the landscape where, metaphorically, she could find rest. The nature images—idealized and simplified landscapes designed as default screensavers—are incomplete representations: insufficient and impenetrable. *Scenic Jogging* points towards a cultural dilemma: we may never be able to locate ourselves fully within a manmade world. Inevitably, uneasiness pervades.

In nearly every project, Mayer considers the implications of early identity formation within a manufactured reality. Her installations and video projects frequently include what she calls "boards"—two-dimensional painted scenes with cutout spaces for performers' bodies. The boards take us back to a world of children's entertainment clearly influenced by Saturday Morning TV, amusement-park photobooths, and the exaggerated world of *Pee-wee's Playhouse*. They also reference—albeit less directly—the faux-domestic interiors of sitcom world, theatrical sets where family dramas take place. Mayer's boards also generate funny and distorted images of bodies—like the costumes in *I Am Your Grandma*.

In *Family Matters*, childhood and family scenarios were reenacted through the boards—but something was always wrong. Characters were sited in cartoon-accident scenes, around a broken chandelier or under a fallen tree. Performers occupied the sets during the opening reception, their bodies extending out at odd angles. Their facial expressions were bored and nonchalant. Then, for the run of the show, the boards were left empty—a variation that allowed viewers to mentally insert themselves into the scenes. In both cases, Mayer externalized a Freudian creepy space, the dark side of family dynamics. A hint of morbid childhood imagination

mixed in with repression of physical violence and emotional trauma. Memory is the place where fantasy and reality become indistinguishable, a blurring made even more dramatic when measured against television morality.

Family Matters adeptly blends aesthetic styles from a specific media moment—1980s and 1990s television. As such, viewers of Mayer's generation are more likely to react viscerally to her board-based work. For this demographic, she plugs directly into the mainline of an earlier and more impressionable age, potentially surfacing all kinds of latent memory material. In other words, her viewers' responses are bound to be age-specific. On one axis is the path of identity development from early childhood, through adolescence and into adulthood. On the intersecting axis are rapidly evolving technology and popular media. Each viewer's specific intersection along these axes will determine which psychological stage her work activates. Postmodern cultural theory bemoans this specificity as the fracturing of a unified public.

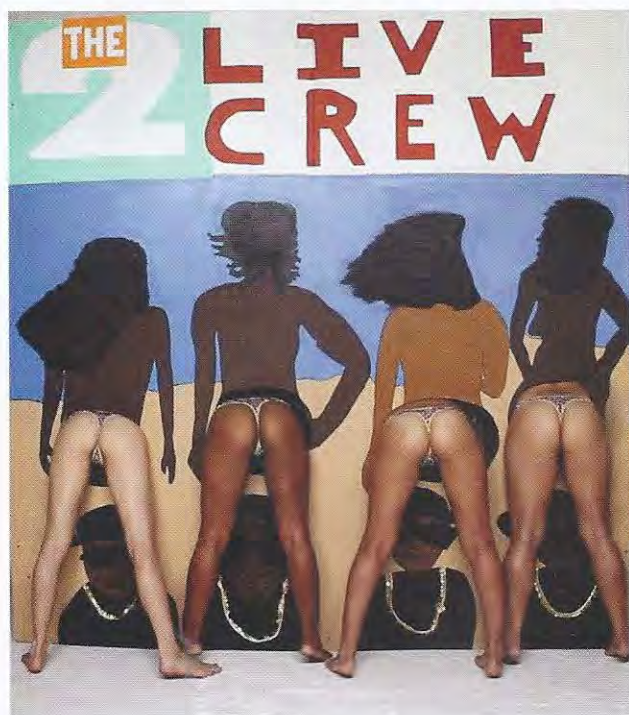
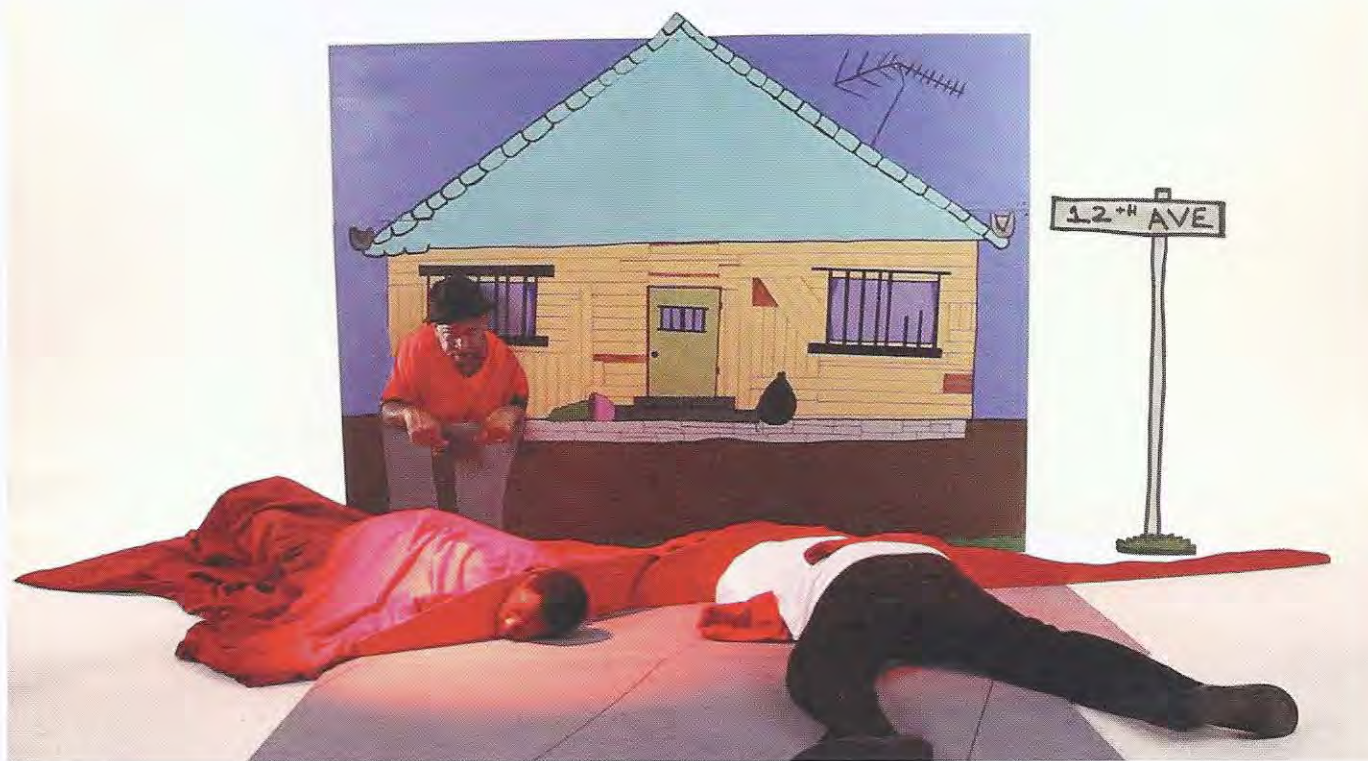
We As Me, 2010, a video featured in *Family Matters*, makes a light-hearted statement on the technological dimension of identity formation. Here, Mayer is less a critic than she is a fan. *We As Me* presents a pair of slightly disoriented characters: a red girl and a blue girl. They are divided aspects of an electronic self that can be reunited, in theory, by putting on a pair of old-school 3D glasses. It's just a joke, though. With or without the glasses Mayer provided for the exhibition, the two characters eventually find their way into a single image. They merge into a fictional Technicolor version of the artist, who plays herself. Here, again, "Jillian Mayer" is a constructed character, illustrating the fact that identity is fluid, culturally induced, and temporally specific.

Mayer's own childhood relationship to television characters clearly informs her work. She recalls:

They were real to me... that's how the youngest child is supposed to act. That's the relationship between the teenage girl character and the mother. They fight. You know. So then I thought, okay the cool character does do that in school, the girl that looks like the nerd is the nerd... I followed a lot of the cues they would give me on TV, I watched a lot of it and I would make jokes that it raised me.¹

ABOVE, LEFT TO RIGHT: Jillian Mayer, *Performance 018: Lawn*, 2011, color photograph, 23 x 34 inches, edition of 5; Jillian Mayer, *Performance 017: Living Room*, 2011, color photograph, 23 x 34 inches, edition of 5 / OPPOSITE, TOP TO BOTTOM: Jillian Mayer, *Performance 018: Lawn*, 2011, installation, dimensions variable; Jillian Mayer, *Performance 017: Living Room*, 2011, installation, dimensions variable





With reality shows now dominating the mainstream television market, the line between fiction and reality is even blurrier.

The short standalone film, *Life and Freaky Times of Uncle Luke*, 2011, made in collaboration with Rakontur Films and screenwriter Lucas Leyva, crystallizes the thematic and structural layers of Mayer's work. It also uses her boards as both stage and backdrop. Originally screened at the Borscht Film Festival and later shown in the group exhibition *Sum of the Parts* [David Castillo Gallery; May 14–June 25, 2011], *Life and Freaky Times of Uncle Luke* is a take on Chris Marker's cult 1962 film *La Jetée*. Pop culture phenomenon Luther Campbell—aka Luke Skywalker or Uncle Luke—is cast in the central role. In real life, Campbell is a Miami celebrity, former member of 2 Live Crew—the controversial group famous for sexually explicit tracks like *Me So Horny*—and future Miami mayoral candidate. Like the Terminator who became Governor of California and former Minnesota Governor/WWF wrestler Jesse Ventura, Campbell bizarrely blends personality with pop culture persona. Following the storyline of *La Jetée*, Campbell plays a slightly altered version of himself as a time-traveler who revisits his memories.

Uncle Luke begins in Miami's Liberty City, where the Luther Campbell character sees a man get killed. "Damn! Motherfucker just got cut! To the white meat!" The story then merges into actual events from Campbell's life. He rises to fame and is subsequently brought to trial for obscenity—in Leyva's script, the court case is "Stale White Bitches vs. The 2 Live Crew." Uncle Luke then fast-forwards through an imagined sci-fi future. Campbell wins the election for Mayor, survives a nuclear meltdown at the Turkey Point power station, and then, well, hopefully you have seen *La Jetée* and you get the picture. If not, you can watch it on YouTube for free, in the original French or with English subtitles.

Uncle Luke is undeniably entertaining—whether you get the references or not. It is a smart and intricately self-reflexive example of what cultural theo-

ABOVE: Jillian Mayer, stills from *Life and Freaky Times of Uncle Luke*, 2011, video, 7 minutes

rist Jim Collins has called “the perpetual circulation and recirculation of signs that form the fabric of postmodern cultural life.”² Mayer and her collaborators are quintessential bricoleurs. In *Uncle Luke*, street-credible slang and classic booty beats reconstruct a landmark of film history. High and low, art and entertainment, fiction and reality become multiple facets of an intellectually-integrated work that specifically depends on cultural quotation. The parallels are both narrative and structural. Whereas *La Jeteé* is constructed from stills, referencing the psychological relationship between photography and memory, *Uncle Luke* draws from the nostalgia power of Mayer’s two-dimensional boards.

As cultural theorist John Storey has observed, “we communicate through what we consume. Consumption is perhaps the most visible way in which we stage and perform the drama of self-formation.”³ When confronted by the culturally specific references found in Mayer’s work, viewers variably respond according to generation, education, cultural literacy, social status, geographic region, musical taste, and so on. To put it another way, response is a measure of the degree to which they identify with the cultural consumption patterns she has represented. The effect is most apparent in response-generating forums like the Internet, where it can literally be tracked.

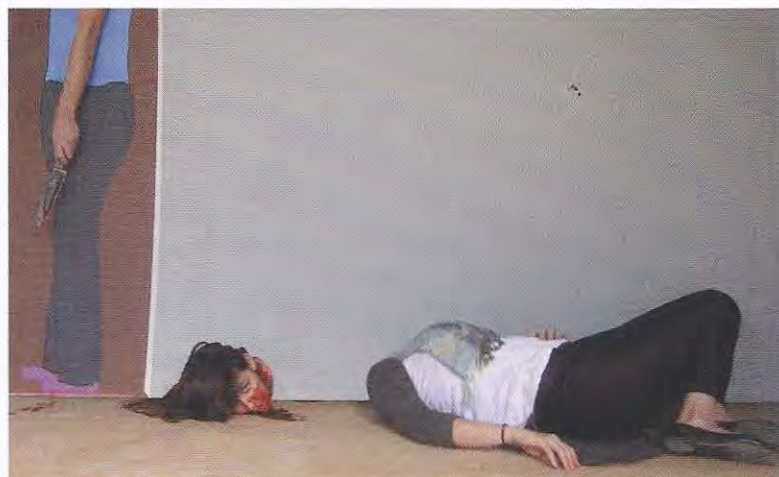
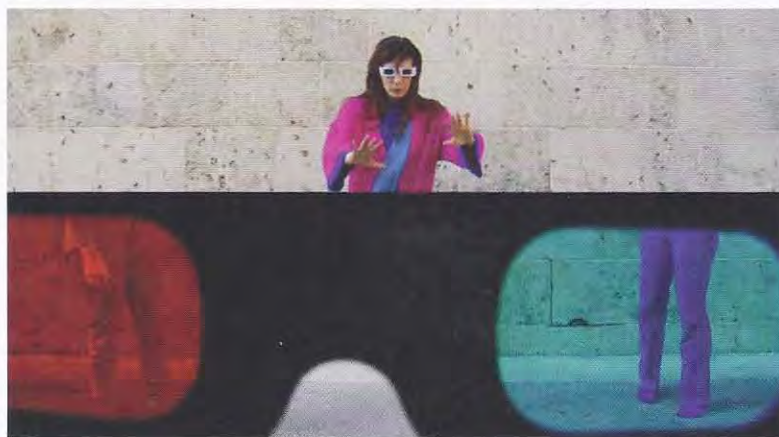
Mayer has only begun to unravel the possibilities of the Internet. A close look at her YouTube posts and Facebook pages—she has many: one for her real self, one for her fictional self, and now one for *I Am Your Grandma*—reveals that she is actively considering the possibilities of online social spaces as territory to be explored, exploited, and deconstructed. She also imagines new forms of online exhibition: something moderated, not quite the free-for-all of YouTube. Regardless, Mayer’s work is firmly tied to the world of television. We are, it seems, bound by our roots.

NOTES

1. Author’s conversation with the artist, July 1, 2011.
2. Jim Collins, “Postmodernism and Television,” in Robert C. Allen, ed., *Channels of Discourse, Reassembled*, London: Routledge, 1992, 327-353.
3. John Storey, *Inventing Popular Culture: From Folklore to Globalization*, Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2003, 72.

Jillian Mayer’s work will be featured in a solo show at World Class Boxing, a contemporary art space run by collectors Dennis and Debra Scholl, during Art Basel Miami Beach 2011. Mayer will present new work, including a video triptych on love.

Based in Miami and New York, Annie Hollingsworth is a performer, arts writer, and frequent contributor to ART PAPERS. Her work focuses on dance, visual art, and the space between them.



ABOVE, TOP TWO: Jillian Mayer, stills from *We As Me*, 2010, video, 1:32 minutes, edition of 5; BOTTOM: Jillian Mayer, *Performance 016*, 2011, color photograph, 16 x 20 inches, edition of 5