



An interview with Jillian Mayer

The art of storytelling.



by [Audrey Phillips](#) on 25/04/2016

When asked how she's doing, [Jillian Mayer](#) replies, "A mosquito bit my lip while I was sleeping. I had to wake up and take Benadryl because my lip started swelling. So, I guess... good?" Speaking to me via Skype, the research-based artist sits comfortably with her upper body against the pillow of her bed. I'm talking from my bed too, so the mood is casual. Mayer's sense of humour is somewhat of a signature to her extensive body of work, where she deals with critical topics — like identity in relation to technology and the merging of the two — in a light-hearted and easy way, helping her audience to take in its meaning.

Be it Hollywood, a gallery, or the internet —in among projects like '[selfeed](#)' (real-time updates of the #selfie hashtag on Instagram) or a [make-up tutorial](#) that teaches you how to hide from cameras and facial recognition algorithms—you will find Jillian Mayer there. Her work fits into any number of streams, where she's not afraid of commercial markets and doesn't pander to more obscure art scenes for credibility, yet often finds herself in their orbit. She co-runs [Borscht Corp](#) with frequent collaborator [Lucas Leyva](#) a production company that has produced a web series for MTV, and screened a number of shorts at the Sundance Film Festival. She's spoken on panels for SXSW, been voted one of 25 New Faces of Independent Film by Filmmaker Magazine, and had a video selected for the Guggenheim's 2010 YouTube Play biennial long before so-called 'internet art' became a trend, or the term 'post-internet' became a ubiquitous brand. Mayer's success as an artist lies in an astute awareness of markets and their respective languages, the power of storytelling and propaganda, and her ability to transcend and balance herself between cultural mainstreams and undercurrents, blurring these lines while addressing topics that appeal to both.



Jillian Mayer, '#PostModem' (2014). Video still. Courtesy the artist.

In her current solo exhibition, [*Day Off*](#), running at Miami's David Castillo Gallery from April 1 to May 31, Mayer invites attendees to simultaneously engage and disengage from their environment with a series of sculptural works called *Slumpies*. In seeing and interacting with these objects, one can't help but notice the fiberglass sculptures are made with a similar, albeit humorous and kitsch combination of tech, leisure, and lifestyle bent to that of products typically seen in chain retail stores and online catalogues. They're made to enable a person to rest or 'slump' on them in a way that optimizes, or ergonomically allows best use of a smartphone or device while in repose. Gallery-goers can lounge in public and comfortably search the web. In doing so one is very present in the space, but being present in this context means not being present, as the user is detached and drawn into their smartphone. The comfort and support of the *Slumpies* makes it easy for someone to forget they are in a gallery, even a body. "I think we are thirsty for information and stimulus at all times", she says, "Our obsession with newness, and always wanting to be fully updated, I can't help that, so I might as well encourage it".

A series of twelve videos, depicting two people in a snowy landscape wearing little more than Oculus Rift glasses, also comprise the exhibition. The moving image works —of the same name (but in caps), 'DAY OFF'—consider what Mayer calls, "being so engaged in virtual realities, that the player has lost touch with their current physical environment." Like that of the *Slumpies*, the video is another gesture attempting to render the body and physical environment unnecessary as all social interaction and stimulation occurs in the mind through VR technology. As with the *Slumpies*, one becomes isolated and connected all at once.

aqnb: All of your art projects deal with technology in some way, which is interesting on its own and is a relevant area of interest to a lot of media artists today, but what I find stands out and is very distinct about your work is that you manage to deftly straddle different industries, or 'worlds'. I feel like you are a powerhouse business person and you

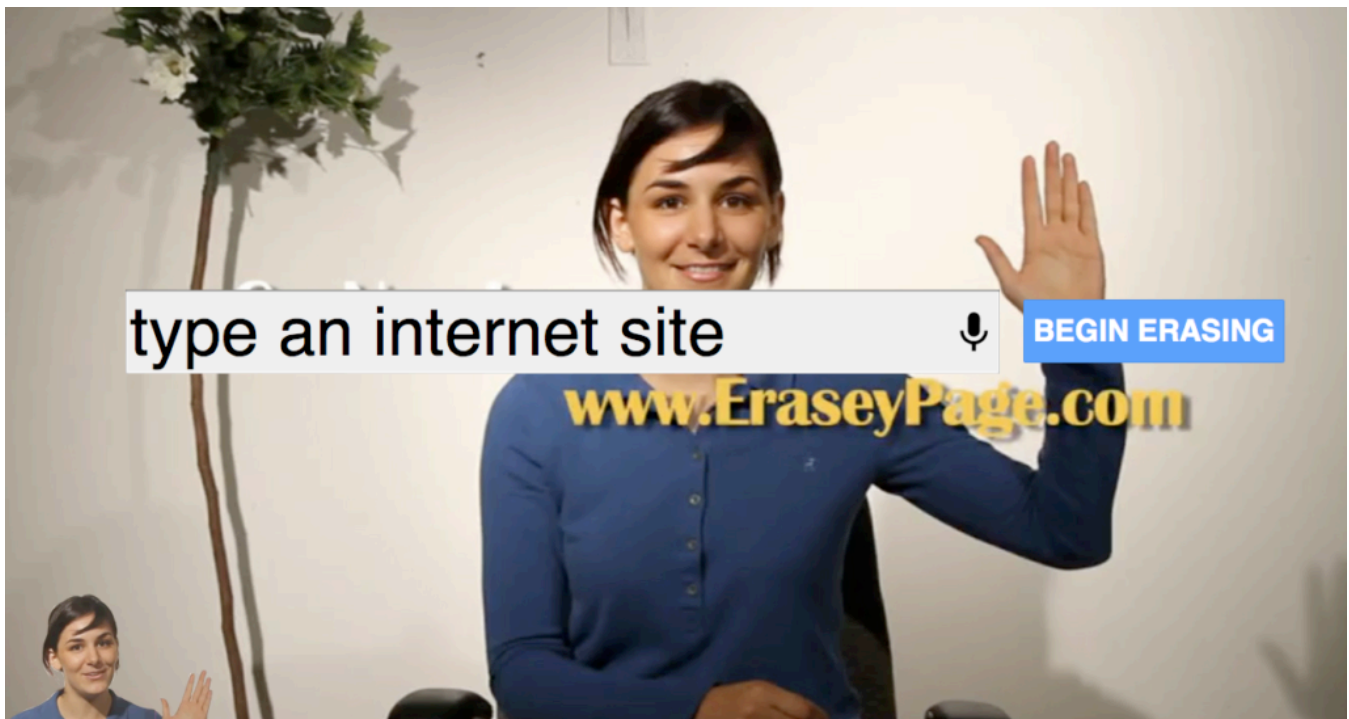
are able to read between industries very well. Could you talk about what that is like. Also, how does your thinking or the way you work differ between industries?

Jillian Mayer: I sometimes feel like a blind person walking around in a new land, to be honest. But ultimately, a proposal to a museum curator and a pitch to a TV network person has some common elements. But a TV person is thinking about reach to the masses, marketing, strategy, and their bosses, while I hope a museum person is thinking more about concept, conversation and the agency of the proposal.

I always knew I wanted to be an artist and also have a TV show of some sort. Probably because of how greatly I was shaped by hours of television-watching as a child. Now I stare at my phone. So that is why tech makes it into most of my work. It is because every idea has been affected by my engagement with a device.

Television entertainment was so interesting to me, especially as I traveled internationally because I realized how connected everyone was to certain characters and tropes. Audience and Reach are interesting facets as well. To anyone who has any interest in entertainment and/or versus art, I recommend the work of David Robbins, especially [this video](#).

So through going to the New Frontier Lab at the Sundance Institute, I realized that storytelling is the most human thing we've got and one can choose to embrace that if they like. That is a way one might be able to be successful in any platform or market. I'm not sure though, I will let you know later on when I figure it all out, if I ever do.



Jillian Mayer with Eric Schoenborn, Erasey Page (2012). Screen shot. Courtesy the artist.

aqnb: How storytelling plays into the success of a work is an interesting point. Do you feel that making a feature-length movie is the pinnacle of a video artist's career? I feel like communicating ideas, feelings, concepts in a simplified yet complex way that affects a mass audience is somehow way harder to do than any sort of video art. Though, I think the experimentation that it affords the artist allows filmmakers to incorporate new forms and refine the language of cinema.

JM: No. I don't feel a 90-minute feature length movie is important as some type of Mecca to anyone except a person that wants to make a 90-minute long video piece. Some formats are able to shape content. Half-hour shows are 22-minutes and 30-seconds because of commercials, so storylines are chopped down in order to fit a format. Therefore, the dimensions of that story are shaped by advertising necessities.

Also, experientially, a 90-minute feature is consumed differently in the gallery, versus a movie theatre, versus a cell phone; while someone is in the bath. It's hard for me to think in terms of these words like 'cinema' or 'video art' without understanding the associated markets. I guess they've already got me.

I feel like all these various genres serve different audiences and help us ultimately organize. If I am going to an experimental film screening, I assume it will not be strictly narrative but around 40 to 100-minutes long, maybe poetic and drifting like listening to a poem for an hour and a half. But if you take me to a movie, I might get to see the *Hunger Games*. Hopefully, it's the *Hunger Games*. They are really pretty great. I just watched them all last week.

aqnb: I love *Hunger Games*.

JM: They are very important and relevant.

aqnb: I agree completely and I am in love with Jennifer Lawrence. Why are they so important to you?

JM: Many reasons, one being they pass the Bechdel test. Two female protagonists can have a conversation not about a man for just a bit. That's a good thing.

It's interesting how not marketed to me the *Hunger Games* was. I really didn't hear about it much when it was in theatres, yet I am pretty infused with cinema, pop culture, and the net. I guess I wasn't their target audience.



Jillian Mayer, 'Slumpie' (2016). Install view. Courtesy the artist.

aqnb: I loved how the two male characters that were in love with Catniss Everdeen were portrayed basically exactly like women are in Hollywood cinema. It felt deeply satisfying for to me to see it. It was like every single trope or expectation one would have of a Hollywood film was reversed. I also didn't hear about it when it was out, and the movie poster really didn't appeal to me. It gave me a completely different idea of what I thought the movies would be like. I saw them recently and was enthralled. Propaganda plays a really strong role in the films — which explains why the movie poster looked exactly as it did. What are your thoughts on propaganda as a filmmaker and artist, and the power of tropes?

JM: Tropes are just another device of language and communication; things that people can instantly relate to, even if they make actual sense or not. You know what a person is saying, even if it literally makes no sense. The *Hunger Games* is great because the viewer is invited to see the propaganda machine first-hand through the exploits of Catniss from the resistance. She knows she is being used, but it's for the cause of the message.

Propaganda is important because it is advertising. Yes, it is something that can be manipulative because you're trying to influence others' thoughts, but it can also be fully designed and part of a whole package which can aid in world-creating and storytelling. I often feel connected and prefer to make video or film because it is in that medium that certain types of influence (i.e. propaganda) is inherent to the project formation. In video works, I can control the speed, lighting, edit points, and music to encourage the viewer to feel a certain way about what they are watching. That might be a harder feat to accomplish with a painting. Yes, certain colors do evoke certain physiological responses but it can be more of a challenge with a painting, that also doesn't have an active length of time in which the person should engage with the work.

In art, hopefully, your community will go on conceptual leaps with you. I feel like I often serve as a guide or a host through the idea I present so I can be more literal with my expectations. Since I also make installation work or the occasional media-crossing project, I sort of need my audience to feel okay with trusting me. If they feel threatened, they might not engage. Then no one would get to experience the work. Engagement is important to me.



Jillian Mayer, 'Day Off 6' (2016). Video still. Courtesy the artist.

aqnb: In mainstream film, the 'cinematic moment' easily carries the viewer but with art the viewer has to be brave enough to take that step alone. I think it tends to intimidate people who are unfamiliar with the language of art. I see a crossover between your experience in filmmaking and how you carry it over into your art with your attention to engagement, guiding, and audience control.

JM: I agree. I see little point in being an artist who makes work for artists referencing a time that occurred already in art. I am interested in a larger and more expansive conversation. Communication is the most human and beautiful thing we can do in our lives. The moment you give people another way to do so, it is embraced and devoured. That expands to new methods of conversation and telepresence (ie. phones, emails, texting, Tinder, Snapchat, Vox, etc.) Like I mentioned before, experience and identity are the roots of interest for me, communication and language is a tool for that. I tend to absorb and replicate in my work whatever I can that helps people connect; that often happens to be pop culture tropes, formulaic pop song patterns, etc —all in an effort to make my ideas more relatable to people outside of one group of people, the art world. The art world is not a big enough testing group for my research. I can't be certain the work is resonating on such a small sample group. I think if I wasn't an artist, I would have gone into social psychology.

aqnb: That's a really interesting way to think about art-making... What areas of research will you be venturing into in the future?

JM: I want to create a VR piece that is about getting pink eye from VR pieces.**

Exhibition Photos, top right.

[Jillian Mayer's Day Off is on at Miami's David Castillo Gallery, running April 14 to May 31, 2016.](#)

Header image: Jillian Mayer, 'Day Off 1' (2016). Video still. Courtesy the artist.