



Emily Martin

Ilene Segalove: Whatever Happened to the Future?

Interview with Ilene Segalove
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Whatever Happened to the Future?, Ilene Segalove, 1987

Emily: Your gallerist, Tom Jancar, offers your work as the “missing link” between the artists of John Baldessari’s generation and that of the Pictures Generation. How do you see your work in this external art historical discussion? What was the lived experience of this like?

Ilene: I did kind of fall through the cracks a little bit between the Baldessari generation and the Pictures Generation, partially because I wasn’t a painter or a photographer per se. I had been dabbling with different mediums depending upon what I wanted to express and John used to always say to me “Why don’t you just stop this video nonsense and start doing large photographic pieces?” At the time, I was doing a lot of narrative photographic work which I’ve done on and off through the years, but I just said, “Well, I really like TV, you know?” and he kept saying, “But nobody

can see it.” Because at the time nobody even had an RF hook up. “Nobody can see it and nobody can buy it.” And I said, well, I still feel really compelled because the fact that I could actually make TV was blowing my mind. I didn’t know that I could do something that could be inside that box. To me, that was pure magic. So, I defied him, which was probably foolish cause I possibly could have been more on the track to becoming a blue chip type photographic conceptual artist. But I mixed it up, so, you know, this “missing link” actually feels like a good moniker for me, as he put it.

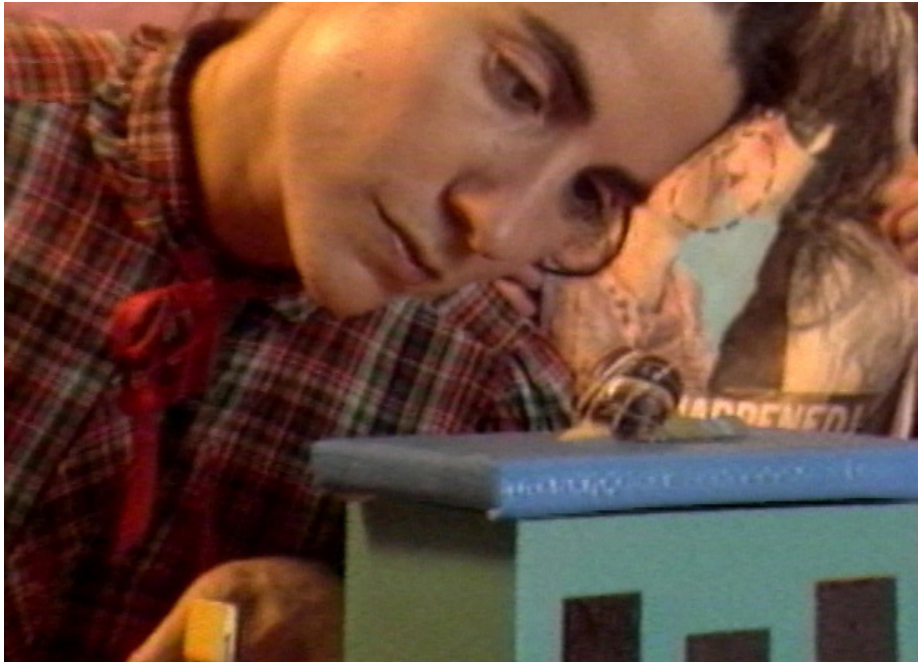
It was really strange, I think, being a West Coast video artist versus an East Coast video artist. I don’t even think we were called that at the time because video was pretty much a new word.

Emily: At the time, were there other artists working in video

that you felt had the same attachment to the medium? Ones who also didn’t want to give that up or that you felt you could relate to stylistically?

Ilene: You know, Wegman moved to New York, which was a very significant move on his part. I think he was doing kind of off-the-wall personal pieces that were charming and funny. We were in a lot of shows together because our work had a sense of humor to it, which was kind of unique to some of the work created early on. I mostly knew a lot of people that were in Hollywood who were producers and directors and writers, very successful people, high end people. And they always were enticing me to participate more in that world.

And if I think back now, I think I would have become a television writer and learned how to do it properly and made some



My Puberty, Ilene Segalove, 1987

innovative programs. But, I just couldn't imagine being part of a system that required that I run through 5,000 other eyes and minds before I saw what I wanted to do on the screen. And also, the power of an artist generally is that they can work solo. I mean, they can have other people make their work for them, but, you know, they're independent minds. And Hollywood is not that for sure.

Emily: Did you have any real interest in working in network television at all?

Ilene: I don't think I had the ambition to do much of that, nor the capacity to work in a business context. I mean, I made that video, *What is Business?*, because I had no idea what it was. The fact that the bottom line is more important than the content is still hard for me, despite all the great stuff there's been.

I mean, *Succession!* There are so many shows that are just remarkable. But at the time—

and we're talking a long time ago—there weren't a lot of opportunities and not too many artists that slid into the back door of that reality and sustained themselves that I'm aware of.

Emily: What did the production of videos like *My Puberty* and *Whatever Happened to the Future?* entail? In what ways were they similar or different from more traditional television and film sets? They feel like their own mini-TV episodes.

Ilene: Now, that was the intention, that it was like, a fun show, you know? The production was more elaborate for *My Puberty*. I got a grant through Channel 4 and the BBC for a program called *Ghost in the Machine*, I think. I had a big budget for that one and I rented a stage and I had a nurse on hand because I had kids and I had a producer, Karen Murphy, who actually produced *Spinal Tap* and other shows. She was a friend of mine. Yeah, we kind of did it for real. We had people signing papers and insurance. And the truth of *My Puberty*, though, was

I had actually hired a young girl to play me.

I wasn't going to play me. I was going to stand next to her at times and echo her. I had like eight grand on the stage rental and the night before the production she got sick, or said she was. And fortunately, I was small enough to fit into her costumes. So, I showed up on the set and made a better piece, I think, because of it. I was 36 playing a 12 year old, but I wore her clothes, and thank God I could. The next day we shot on the stage and you know what it was? It was so intense to have a whole crew on hand, including a special effects person so that the goo would come out of the snail. I couldn't take it seriously, to a degree, and it scared me. I think I have the capacity to be, like, a good director or a writer on a, quote, "real program," but I think it requires a certain stamina and ambition that I just didn't inhabit. It wasn't part of my innate nature. I like thinking about things, I think, a lot more than making them, to be honest. So, both of those were pretty elaborate sets, not to the same degree as some TV and film sets, of course, but we had all the crew and when I watched the credits roll, there were a whole lot of folks involved.

But if I had to wake up and do that day after day after day after day after day, I don't know what would happen to me. Maybe I'd grow up, finally, and get a job. It's too late now, you know, making. What's the difference between art and that? You know, I don't know sometimes.

Emily: Thinking of those earlier Portapak videos, did that form of making feel like making TV without all of the people? Like a more pure form of making

television for yourself, of yourself and life?

Ilene: Yeah, and for like the five other people who are going to watch it. I liked doing extra credit reports at school and having them read and impressing the teacher. So, I think I'm used to impressing about five people with my, you know, originality and tenacity.

The Portapak, first of all, as we know, is not all that portable. It basically really screwed up my back shoving that thing onto my left or right shoulder. My God. That said, I usually shot out of the trunk of my car. But, *The Mom Tapes* was definitely a schlep into the house and, you know, I don't know how to express it. It's sort of ineffable. I was always so overwhelmed by the power of the camera and the TV that making these pieces really made me nervous. I was nervous doing them. I just felt like, "Oh my God, I can't believe I'm doing this. This is so huge, even though nobody's going to see it." It was unnerving, and that could be just a reflection of my nervous system, but when my mother swam across that pool with that mask on, I could not do another piece with her for a long, long time because I realized she would do anything for me. And that scared me. That scared me.

Emily: Yes, people sometimes get into that TV star fantasy and can surprise themselves.

Ilene: Yeah, and she had never been in the deep end of that pool, by the way. She was nervous to get in that pool because she'd never gone in that way. She was going, "Okay, here we go!" which is sort of how I felt

every time I picked up the camera, "Here we go!" I had so many more ideas and so many more possibilities than I actually recorded because it was scary, and I don't know how to explain it. It just seemed like to take reality and put it inside that box was a real act of courage.

Emily: Did you ever think at the time that there was a possibility that lots of people could/would see it eventually?

Ilene: Yes, but I wasn't sure how. When video first became kind of something to think about, a curator at LACMA asked a bunch of video artists to come to show their videotapes to her, because she thought, well, we should see what this is. People just didn't know what it was at the time and it really did not exist. So, I went and other artists went and nobody except me brought their machine, but I brought my VCR. And before I did, she was just sitting there trying to watch videos without having a capacity to. She was literally in her office looking at nothing. So, I brought

my equipment in and other people could play their tapes. And my point is that that was how crazy and ridiculous it was at the beginning. We thought that public television would be much more of a welcome arm to our work. It was not. I mean, I think I had a piece on PBS or WNET or something somewhere, but it wasn't until I think Kathy Hoffman or David Ross put together compilations that things were a little more possible. I thought it was a dead end, and in a way, it kind of appealed to me because it was such an anomaly.

Emily: Yes, and in the case of a tape like *Coal Confession*, it's a confessional medium. It's intimate, this hidden tape that you think really only you and five people will see.

Ilene: Yeah, or I hoped nobody [would see] because, God, I was so scared somebody would find that out. Doing a video diary was kind of innovative at the time, I guess. I wish in many ways I had done more of those. I wish that I thought more in serial



The Mom Tapes, Ilene Segalove, 1974

terms. I wish that I had done more photographs like *Close but No Cigar*, where I dress up like other people, but I'm not Cindy Sherman. I couldn't make a lifestyle out of doing the same thing over and over. As much as that is brilliant to do because it creates a—I hate to say the word—brand. It creates a style that's true. Very recognizable.

Emily: What was it like with the introduction of the Portapak and being able to have that possibility of capturing yourself and reality like that? When it happened, did you feel like it was a big shift in things?

Ilene: Yeah, I was at UC Santa Barbara. I was taking a sculpture class because that's what they called anything that didn't fit any other category. I was taking a sculpture class with an artist who's now not on this planet, but his name was Roland Brenner, and he brought a Portapak to class. I'd never seen such a thing. It was probably 1970 and I remember being horrified by it because it was like a crack in

reality for me, that this was an option now, that I could actually do something that made sense to me because I wasn't a sculptress. I wasn't wanting to cast in bronze, I didn't want to build stuff out of wood, and I wasn't a printmaker. I didn't like the process, all that rolling up in the ink. And painting? Forget it because that was just passé. Ceramics was messy and photography didn't even exist as a fine art form yet; it was considered more of a craft. I didn't know where I fit, but I knew I was an artist of some sort, and when I saw the Portapak I realized this was my medium even though it scared me so much because, again, it represented something that had had such influence over me growing up.

Emily: Which was television?

Ilene: Oh, absolutely. It was the best.

There's nothing better than sitting there, and then eventually with a remote control. My God. It was my favorite piece of furniture, you know? And that's

why, when I got the license plate "TV IS OKAY," it was kind of an act of power even though a lot of people got in conflict with me over it. People really argued with me at gas stations and so forth; they would say "Film. Film is okay. TV is stupid. It's crap."

Emily: Yeah, I mean, people have just started in the last 20 years considering TV as any kind of art form.

Ilene: Well, I think with HBO, you know, that was. And, you know, leave it to me. I'm such a contrarian, as soon as it becomes more ubiquitous or more of a possibility, I stop doing it.

Emily: Did you have any television shows that were inspirational for you or that you felt like the imagery just stuck in your head?

Ilene: Well, first of all, I always wanted to be a cartoonist when I grew up. So, I loved *Mad* magazine and *Archie* comics. I love the color palette of Technicolor movies. That's stuck in my head. *My Puberty* is very much a color palette video. But I never grew up to be a cartoonist because I'm not really good at drawing. Ernie Kovacs, of course. Soupy Sales, who was someone I actually knew that did a local program in L.A. *Fractured Fairy Tales* definitely influenced me. They were these twisted stories that were cartoons, but they always had this kind of secretive edge and I think my videos were always that. I kind of spoke from the voice of a 12 to 19 year old, a voice of a girl who I'd never heard before on television. I loved the *Donna Reed Show*. *Father Knows Best*. *All in the Family* crap. You know, these kind of pseudo-



My Puberty, Ilene Segalove, 1987

happy people. But I think the Technicolor palette really made me swoon.

My mother always told me that people were people, but at heart, everybody was the same. I grew up mostly in Beverly Hills, so there was this kind of double standard of Rita Hayworth looking like this gorgeous woman when we saw her in the movies, but then I hung out at her house when I was young because I was friends with her daughter and I saw Rita as a messed up, drunk, self-conscious human. So, I hope that all my pieces have a certain kind of multilayered insight that reflects that kind of thing. It's sort of superficial and then hopefully there's a depth underneath it. I didn't want to be a self-conscious artist.

Emily: What was it like going from the black and white of the first Portapak to one of the first color video cameras in a video like *Where is God? The Dive*?

Ilene: It was exciting for me. I mean, I'm not a film noir fan. I like it, but I wasn't attached to the black and white. And now when I look at it, it's much more charming and it has this other kind of gravitas. But, it was much more my style to shoot wildly colorfully because that is more the cartoon, so I really felt like it was an entry more into a dimension that I understood, could use, and play with much more. You see that shift in *The Mom Tapes*, I think. We go from black and white and bounce into color with that shot of the shoes I have on the wall. That was kind of heaven for me.

Emily: Is *Whatever Happened to MY Future?* your last video?



Whatever Happened to the Future?, Ilene Segalove, 1987

Ilene: Yeah, and that was 2012. It seems like I did it two weeks ago. I mean, life is crazy. I think it kind of wraps up my history because *Coal Confession* really was my first official video and *WHMF?* is the last official video. I just felt that it sort of summarized the best of what I had been doing with the look of the first piece, the humor in it, and its pathos. The turning off the TV set at the end, you know, it brings us kind of back into the old TV.

Emily: And what about the older video the title references, *Whatever Happened to the Future?*

Ilene: You know, *Whatever Happened to the Future?* is not a very—in my mind—successful video. I always thought it was a failure because the ending seemed to have a hokey solution. Although at the time, my parents really did have fake rocks in the front of their house, and that was their house. I just couldn't believe that they had fake rocks, but I

understand it now as a homeowner. They just didn't like the mess of the other rocks. They were kind of breaking down and falling apart. The fake rocks never fell apart.

I think the video was initiated by that idea and then the rocket ship ride to the moon. The background on that is, because I was growing up in Beverly Hills, my friends and a lot of their parents were big shots in Hollywood and they had access to a lot of stuff. My dad was a scientist. We didn't have that kind of cachet, but I got to go to Disneyland with a bunch of other kids, with these people in the know, and they showed us how the rides were fixed. Like there wasn't really a fire on Tom Sawyer's Island, it just looked like a fire.

Emily: It was just an illusion.

Ilene: Right, it's like "Santa Claus isn't real, kids!" and you're like five and there goes your whole

childhood. So, I wanted to kind of do a piece about being deceived.

I had my girlfriend, Allison, who's an Emmy Award winning National Geographic documentary producer, writer, and voiceover actor play me because she was an actress and I didn't think I could learn the lines. I thought it'd be fun to have somebody else do that, just like I was planning on having happen with *My Puberty*.

Emily: Do you like playing yourself? Or do you prefer someone else do it?

Ilene: I really like *My Puberty*. Of all my tapes, I like that one the best. I think it says what I needed to say and it looked beautiful. And I like that I could pull it off as, you know, as a kid. So that's probably my favorite. I also really like a couple of *The Mom Tapes*. My mom died in 2017, so I like seeing her. And my dad in *The Dad Triptych*.

Ilene: But as I get older, they are starting to maybe be more like home movies. Do you watch *Succession*? You know how they start off with this sort of pseudo home movie? That's really common now at the beginnings of things. That was quite a show, wasn't it?

Emily: Definitely, it's a great show. Do you have a favorite TV show?

Ilene: I really like *High Desert* with Patricia Arquette. You know, I just go from show to show, to show to show.

Emily: Do you watch everything?

Ilene: I watch a lot of stuff and



Whatever Happened to MY Future?, Ilene Segalove, 2012

prefer episodic. My boyfriend likes movies, so that's a problem for me. I don't like movies that much. I appreciate a 90-minute arc, but I just really like feeling like I'm having company with the people that I'm watching. I feel like they're my family, my tribe, and then when it's over, it's really hard. It's hard to say goodbye. I don't miss those people from *Succession* though, I have to say. But, I miss looking forward to Sunday night, you know, waiting. Waiting for the clock to tick.

Emily: Were you ever interested in appropriating television through the means of video collage as a primary form of video-making? I'm thinking about the work of an artist like Dara Birnbaum.

Ilene: Well, there's a lot of it in some of my pieces, like in *Why I Got Into TV and Other Stories* and then more in *Other TV Stories*. But no, I really...

Emily: Wanted to make your own TV?

Ilene: Yeah, I'd rather talk about the TV repairman. I don't think

I was an editing freak. I mean, I loved editing radio when I did public radio, and I did that for many years. I loved editing my shows using a blade and tape and just cutting together programming. But, video was too... the hardware was overwhelming. I didn't like sitting at the monitors. I liked being out more. The mechanics of editing didn't appeal to me and that's what's required to make the concept successful. Also, I like to have a beginning, middle, and end. You know, what can I say? I'm a sucker for a sort of, conventional storyline.