



DR Miri Segal: No regrets. (Reli Avrahami)

THE CALCULUS OF ART

By [Aviva Lori](#)

The first moment of the encounter with Miri Segal's video installation was a bit frightening. Having to enter a dark hall alone, sit on a black armchair, put on earphones and, for 10 minutes, give yourself up to what the artist has conjured generates a feeling of unease. Outside, people waited for their turn to enter the dark space. With a sure hand, Segal activated the instruments and left the hall. The armchair started to revolve. Saying "Stop the armchair, I want to get off" was pointless: There was no one there to talk to. After a few revolutions, at a comfortable pace which is adjusted to the eye of the beholder, the feeling of uneasiness gave way to curiosity and one could be receptive to what was happening on the screen.

On the back of the chair, adjacent to the viewer's line of vision, a projector screened Segal's video, which moved across the walls as the chair followed the images. "Place de la bonne heure" is the title of the solo show, which will open next week at the Dvir Gallery in Tel Aviv. Actually, the show is not really opening but reopening; it was already held in April and May, and is being mounted again due to public demand and at the request of several curators from abroad, who expressed a desire to come to Israel especially to view it.

The installation is a kind of road movie, accompanied by an original soundtrack by Uri Frost, formerly a member of the rock band Carmela Gross Wagner and, at present, Segal's partner. The journey begins in a square called Place de la bonne heure in Tel Aviv and moves from there, in a rough cut, to the Qalandiyah checkpoint and back again in an endless cycle.

Where in Tel Aviv is there a square with such a promising name? Between the Dan Panorama Hotel and Textile House by the sea, the city fathers have created a round public square with handsome vegetation, but the city's residents appear to be unaware of its existence.

"A landscape architect told me about the place, and it amazed me," Segal says. "Because to get to the offbeat site you have to climb stairs that are suspended in the air from four directions, and only then are these abandoned spaces exposed. There is a view of the sea from the square, but most of the time it is empty. Only once in a while do you find homeless people there. This square is a metaphor for the aspect of Israeliness that has a distorted conception of the environment, like building such a fertile garden in the air."

And the Qalandiyah checkpoint?

Segal: "The Qalandiyah checkpoint, which lies on an ancient Roman road, is the opposite of the Place de la bonne heure. It is throbbing with life. Until a year ago there was a vibrantly alive market there, which the Israeli forces evacuated. In the scene I am photographing everything is stuck, the cars are backed up, bumper to bumper, in an endless snarl-up, standing and not moving, only honking hysterically. It looks like the gate to hell.

"The connection between the two images draws a geographic comparison between the two squares. Both are places of 'togetherness,' which is to a degree fictitious. One is always empty, the other is subject to constant pressure. That, in my view, provides a very particular view of our existence here and of its reflection in the eye of the beholder."

Seven times eight

Five works by Segal are currently on display in a group exhibition at the Tel Aviv Museum of Art, entitled "Dreaming Art / Dreaming Reality," which is being held to mark the 10th anniversary of the Nathan Gottesdiener Israeli Art Prize, awarded to Segal in 2002.

Segal, 39, is a new face in Israeli art. Six years ago, as the holder of a doctorate in mathematics from the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, her career was focused on academia. In the short time since she decided to take up a new profession, she has succeeded in gaining an honorable place in the field of art, both here and overseas. Segal has achieved this without having attended any of the prestigious art schools - in fact, she never studied art systematically - and without rubbing elbows with the

teachers who set the tone in the art world and shape public opinion.

Miri Segal was born in Haifa to a middle-class family who were part of the Revisionist movement in Zionism (the precursor of today's Likud). "We were a normal family," she says. "Dad is an engineer, Mom is an accountant, and neither of them was involved with art." Her father immigrated to Israel from Romania in the 1950s; her mother is native-born, from a Haredi (ultra-Orthodox) family which goes back seven generations in Safed. "My maternal grandfather was a textile merchant and a cantor. He was a Haredi of the old type and used to ride a mule to Syria and Lebanon to buy fabrics. In my grandparents' house the languages spoken were Hebrew, Yiddish and Arabic. My mother abandoned the faith."

Both her parents are professional bridge players - her mother is a member of the Israeli national team - and very right-wing in their politics. "My mother had a brother who was killed in an operation of the Irgun [pre-1948 underground organization]; my father's parents had vineyards and a lot of property in Romania. After the Soviet communist occupation all my family's assets were expropriated and they lived very meagerly. I think those events affected each of them separately."

The daughter absorbed her parents' right-wing views. "In my early twenties I underwent an ideological transformation," she recalls. "The more my interest in myself developed, and the more my interest in my surroundings grew, the more my right-wing attitude from home was replaced by a left-wing approach."

Segal was not a very good student in high school, beset by problems of concentration and perhaps minor dyslexia, she says. To her father's disappointment, she failed her matriculation exam in mathematics (which she took for three points - the lowest level). "My father was a frustrated mathematician. His dream was to study mathematics, but he studied engineering in Romania. When I was a girl he used to give me riddles in mathematics."

Not wanting to reprise her father's career as a frustrated mathematician, Segal decided to fight her dyslexia. She sat for the mathematics exam again, this time at the five-point (highest) level - and passed. In the army she was a flight instructor on a simulator. After completing her service she enrolled at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, taking psychology and mathematics. "Until I started university it was hard for me to concentrate in mathematics. Maybe it had something to do with the dyslexia, which is felt less over the years, though when I am tired I can still make mistakes in

Hebrew, confuse right and left, and not know how much seven times six is - the hardest thing to remember in the multiplication table."

She was admitted to the department of mathematics, even though her psychometric score was not brilliant. "At that time almost everyone who wanted was accepted to mathematics, because so few people registered for it," Segal recalls. She eventually completed her doctorate and felt very sure about her choice and about the continuation of her career. "Mathematics interested me very much," she explains. "My doctoral thesis was on a subject that was close to a research group at Caltech, and the university sent me there a few times. My supervisor was Prof. Menachem Magidor, who is now president of the Hebrew University."

Invasion of privacy

Segal started to paint as a hobby during her student days. She studied drawing and painting in various departments. While doing her M.A. she applied to and was accepted as a student by the Art Teachers College, which was then in Ramat Hasharon, but she lasted only a month there.

"It gave the impression of being a place where there was a tremendous invasion of privacy, because in artwork one exposes oneself," Segal explains. "At that stage I wasn't yet ready for that."

She immersed herself into the tranquil life of the junior faculty at the university, as a student and a tutorial assistant. "Starting with the M.A., the university paid me a small salary. I had a steady job and a lot of spare time, so I could allow myself to paint. I had a studio in my rented apartment and at the same time I was a volunteer in the unit for social involvement at the university and gave courses in mathematics to gifted children and to children from Yeroham [a southern development town] who needed help."

Toward the end of her doctoral studies she went to San Francisco with the man who was then her partner, a professor of mathematics. He went to spend a year at an institute of mathematics; she completed her thesis and enrolled in the San Francisco Art Institute. "It is a private place that charges a very high tuition fee, because in the American art world it's terribly important to have a diploma," she says. "I didn't go there to get a diploma, because I only came for a year. I registered for only two courses, but the school let me audit courses and started to take an interest in my work."

During this period, Segal started to suffer from mild "schizophrenia": On the one hand, she dug deep and invested energy and much love in her mathematics thesis, but at the same time, art grabbed her hard and shook her up. "Before I went to San Francisco I had mainly sculpted and painted. Over there we rented a house in the Berkeley area, which belonged to Japanese people who had gone on sabbatical for a year, a wonderful house that was very well kept but a bit shaky. I did one sculpture in their kitchen but I was afraid I was wrecking the kitchen. So I painted a little, but I didn't have room to paint, either."

Her dilemma led her to a "cleaner medium" - she started to make video works. "I did most of the work from the car, where I kept all my equipment, and I started to work in video in the school, too. The two happiest years of my life were the first year of studying mathematics - the love of my life - and the year I lived in San Francisco."

Fictitious exhibition

Returning to Israel in 1998, she submitted her doctoral thesis, but instead of the usual postdoctoral track, Segal decided to devote herself to her second love, art. Before leaving San Francisco she organized a "fictitious exhibition" at the city's Museum of Modern Art.

What is a fictitious exhibition?

"I came to a decision to make the move to art, but my resume was hopeless. One big blank. It was important for me to enrich it. I decided that I was going to have an exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art, which was notorious for its lack of female artists. I sent invitations to all the VIPs in the city announcing a solo show by Miri Segal to be held at the museum on the floor of the permanent exhibitions. On the back of the invitation was a photograph of the hall where my exhibition was 'supposed' to take place. The photo shows paintings by Andy Warhol and Robert Rauschenberg, which are on permanent display there, and in the space between them is supposedly another picture - me in a gilded dress and on the back of the dress a circle is sewn, which is not completely decipherable on the invitation.

"I hired a private detective to document the event, because photography is not allowed inside. So, for a few Saturdays I stood in the space between the two pictures, with my face to the wall and my back to the audience, and froze for a few hours every time. On the back of my dress was an oval frame, inside which I was seen standing in the hall, in the space between the two pictures, with my face to the wall and my back to the audience.

"The first time a guided tour came by, people asked the guide who I was, and she didn't know what to say. After a while another tour came by with the same guide, and this time she said, 'This is what contemporary artists do. They look at paintings and paint themselves looking at paintings.' All kinds of art critics wrote about me in all kinds of papers, even in Germany."

Didn't you have qualms about forsaking mathematics?

"Serious qualms. It was hard decision, because I really loved mathematics and the decision also had repercussions with respect to my way of life and my income level. But I thought that if I did not try art at that stage, I would never be able to take it up professionally afterward."

There was also something else that made her change direction. She was pretty fed up with being referred to as the "meideleh" at mathematics conferences. "It was a nightmare," she recalls. "I attended mathematics conferences from the age of 25. Sometimes there was another woman there, but usually not, and there were 40 middle-aged men in whom sexism wasn't all that rare. The world of art, fortunately, is far more receptive to women, and that was a change that made me utter a big sigh of relief."

"Miri was a riveting mathematician," says her former supervisor, Prof. Magidor. "I was very frustrated and disappointed when she decided to leave, one reason being that I wanted to promote an academic career for women. I am very sorry that she left mathematics, at which she could have succeeded wonderfully, but on the other hand the art world benefited."

`Dvir took me on'

Segal moved to Tel Aviv, where she now lives in a rented apartment in Kikar Hamoshavot, near the old central bus station, an area which until not long ago was colorful and very much alive, populated mainly by foreign workers. Segal captured the neighborhood in one of her works, which she calls "Shfelat stav," (a play on words meaning something like "low autumn"), as an ironic counterpoint to "Ramat Aviv," the upscale city neighborhood whose name means, more or less, "high spring." She held her first exhibition in 1999, at the Dvir Gallery.

"After I got back to Israel," she relates, "I approached a few gallery owners and asked them to come to my studio, because it was impossible to explain or document my works or bring them to the galleries - some of them were complex, unfinished installations. Of all the people I contacted, only Dvir [Intrator] came, saw the works, and took me on."

"Dvir took me on" is a key phrase in the Israeli art scene. The Dvir Gallery has connections to museum directors, collectors, gallery owners and other people and institutions able to advance those artists the gallery believes in and wants to promote. After her 1999 show, Segal was invited to take part in group exhibitions at the Israel Museum in Jerusalem, the Tel Aviv Museum of Art and several international exhibitions, including a solo show at one of the most coveted art spaces in New York: P.S. 1 Center for Contemporary Art, in Queens, a museum owned by New York's Museum of Modern Art.

Afterward she had exhibitions in Lucerne, Munich, and in 2004 at the Lisson Gallery in London, with which Segal has been connected ever since. In 2002, the year in which she received the Gottesdiener Prize, she had a solo exhibition at the Tel Aviv Museum of Art and spent five months working at the art center of the Ecole des Beaux Arts in Nice, France. In two weeks she will return to France, this time to Paris, where she has received a studio and an apartment as part of a scholarship for artists awarded by the government of France.

Four years ago Segal started to teach at the Bezalel Academy of Art and Design in Jerusalem, so far on a part-time basis. To help make ends meet she worked as a consultant in mathematics to high-tech firms. However, in the past two years she has been able to make a living from art alone and is trying to integrate the sciences into her work. "The chair in my work at Dvir is a very basic and not very sophisticated example of the integration of technological means into art."

In another work of hers, which was shown in a huge hall in the Helena Rubinstein Pavilion of the Tel Aviv Museum of Art in 2000, a small image of the sea was screened on a wall. "All in all, it was very boring," the artist acknowledges. Most of the time nothing happened in the room, and the viewers left after a few seconds. Once in a while, though, without advance preparation, the image would suddenly open up and a huge wave flooded the room reaching almost to the feet of the astonished visitors. The soundtrack was of a laughing woman and the whole room seemed to fill up, awash in water and light.

"That was a work that dealt with the potential for contact between the artist and the viewer," Segal notes. "Instead of the viewer opening to the work of art, it opens to the viewer. The whole thing lasted for three seconds, and immediately receded."

Where do you see yourself in another 10 years?

"Art is a way of existence that has multiple difficulties, but I intend to continue with it. Video is not a picture you hang on the wall, so it is harder to see it and to sell. Works of mine have actually sold well. The collector Doran Sabag bought a video work from me, the Israel Museum bought one, so did other private collectors, whose names I cannot reveal, and in Lucerne all the works I exhibited were sold. In Paris an art space called Maison Rose recently opened and they also bought one of my video works, which will be part of the permanent architecture of the place.

"I have not succeeded in getting rich from this. Since I got involved in art, my standard of living has only declined. In the months I spend working on a production such as the exhibition at Dvir, not only do I not earn money, I also underwrite it with my own funds, which can reach NIS 20,000 or NIS 30,000. The game in this market is uncertainty: Your work might sell immediately, but it could take months before it is sold."

Are you a bit sorry that you left a more promising career?

"To engage in art is a great privilege, which demands a sacrifice of economic security. On the other hand, my art career has been relatively very brief, but I have already had successes, exhibitions in very prestigious places. I feel no regret; on the contrary, I am very happy to be engaged in art - though I sometimes miss mathematics."