

Interviews

Influence, Passion, Process

Lucien Samaha in
conversation with Walid
Raad, Part II

In Part II of this conversation between Walid Raad and Lucien Samaha, Samaha talks about how he approaches photography, his influences and inspirations (or not), and the way his images are perceived by those who view them. Raad asks Samaha about a show he staged once at Lombard Freid in New York, and the self-portraits Samaha has taken throughout his life, which appear almost like 'proto-selfies', given the current trend for self-portraits taken by mobile phone cameras. In this discussion, Samaha then proceeds to define what a self-portrait is to him, and talks about the criteria he would use to judge whether something is indeed a self-portrait or not. What emerges in these ruminations is a portrait of the photographer himself.

Walid Raad: Can you speak about seeing/reading/thinking about a photograph or an artwork that affected you deeply and that, in a way, shaped the way you make images?

Lucien Samaha: I am not certain of any artwork that may have had any impact prior to my taking up photography in 1973. At that time, as part of the high school photography class, I was introduced to mostly women photographers as my teacher Agnes Fromer, and another woman, Lin Oakerson, who was in charge of the yearbook photography production, were both feminists to a certain degree. The names that are clear in my mind are Mary Ellen Mark, Annie Leibovitz, Judy Dater, and Imogen Cunningham. There was one other woman photographer whose work was shared with us in class, but I don't remember her name, and I am pretty sure she is no longer among those spoken of, at least not regularly. I can't say that I was fascinated by Imogen Cunningham, and although I was initially impressed with the other women at the time, I do not now care for any of their work.

I can't really think of a single photograph that has affected me deeply but rather the oeuvre of certain photographers that to this day delight and intrigue me. Foremost is the work of Jacques-Henri Lartigue. His photographs immediately conjured up images I had regularly seen and devoured in our family archive, the work of the man who raised me, the husband of my aunt Loulou, Robert Mitri, who took photographs exclusively at family occasions and parties in Lebanon from the 1950s and 1960s. I have not found any evidence of anything later than that. His equipment was rudimentary and his technique a bit naive, but there are images in his work that are astounding and beautiful. So when I first saw Lartigue's photographs, I immediately connected. Historical yet classic and modern in so many ways, there was almost always laughter and joy. He seemed to live in a world oblivious of the big wars of their time, an elegant world almost nostalgic of its own self,

which he captured so well. The immediate reaction to a fashionable lady walking her dog, or a woman halfway up her climb onto the back of a donkey; he seemed to be always ready and alert and, as I appreciate so much, not so concerned about everything being sharp and clear and free of movement. I am really fond of his ability to capture that in-between moment.

Other photographers who have also had great influence on me are Robert Frank and Garry Winogrand. However, and curious enough, the one artist whose work has had the most impact, visually, socially and intellectually is Federico Fellini. Curious, because Fellini was a meticulous *metteur en scène*, a master composer of his images, to the degree where he even created water out of plastic sheets in *Casanova*. It is extremely rare for me to set up a stage, even for portraits. I prefer to find a setting or make do with the one I am in. And yet somehow, Fellini defines creativity for me, perhaps because he does so well something I am either not capable of doing or have not dedicated enough of myself to achieve.

If I were to name just one, not for influence but for inspiration, it would be Federico.

WR: In your show at Lombard Fried, *The Flight Attendant Years, 1978–1986* (6 June–2 August 2013), you displayed many images that included yourself. Some were self-portraits while others were photographs taken by colleagues or friends or others. Can you say something about photographing yourself and whether you make a distinction between self-portraits and photographs of yourself taken by others?

LS: I may have been naive at the time, but I can never forget my shock when, during a conversation with a friend at the opening of Richard Avedon's *Evidence* at the Whitney in 1994, I discovered

that the photographer didn't load his own cameras and possibly didn't even press the shutter. A few years prior, I had a very good friend who printed and toned for Deborah Turbeville. I was baffled because in this particular artist's work, there are so many nuances in the toning and other special effects, and one never sees credit given to the printer. I have always been, and still am, a person who simply wants to do everything myself, from loading film (if that ever becomes the case again) to shooting, to processing and printing.

Recently, the gallery asked me if I would consider having my work printed on silver gelatin paper by a lab, as I no longer have my own darkroom facilities. The request came not due to any dissatisfaction with the quality, but rather an issue whether vintage imagery should be printed in digital format. I considered doing some testing, but eventually persuaded them to let me continue making my own digital prints.

My first photo assignment, again back at that infamous high school photography class, was to do a series of self-portraits. I set up the camera, a 35mm Kowa hand-me-down from my father, on a very rudimentary and shaky tripod, and took photographs of myself in a dirty, broken mirror, reflecting the setting sun from a basement window behind me, with an ironing board and hanging linens somewhere in the reflection. I was around the age of 15 or 16 at the time. To date, I have several thousand self-portraits.

I have often grappled with the distinctions between a self-portrait that I have taken of myself and one that is taken by someone else. In the end, it is all dependent on the circumstances and the people involved.

The Olympus XA allowed me to start doing self-portraits by simply hand-holding the camera and pointing it at myself at arms length or

in a mirror. In fact, I just received a Facebook message just two days ago from a friend:

I finally managed to go see your gallery show. Sorry I wasn't able to go when you were still in town. Great show, nice gallery! Congratulations! I love your self-portrait in the bathroom with the period wallpaper. You of course preceded a HUGE phenomenon with that...

So, in my opinion there are a couple of situations where I consider a portrait of myself as a self-portrait:

1) A photograph where I have set up the camera on a tripod, or any solid surface, aimed at myself (alone, within a group, or simply part of myself) and I, or someone I ask, triggers the shutter either directly on the camera, through a cable release, a self-timer, or a remote device. In my case, a camera may no longer be the only device I use to make a self-portrait, but also a computer's webcam or a scanner, and in some recent projects, a variety of imaging tools combined to process and re-process original data to create the final 'self-portrait'.

2) A social occasion where another person asks to use my camera to take a photograph of me, if it's a snapshot. In the case that this person actually sets up the shot, with exact location and directs me in a certain way, then it would not be a self-portrait.

Portraits that I would not classify as self-portraits are, of course, photos taken by others for the express purpose of making a portrait of me, particularly if they are professionals. In the instance where they are friends, and if I don't have my own camera, which is highly unlikely, and I ask to have my picture taken the way I want to set it

up, and they are simply pressing the shutter, then this would be a self-portrait. There are many instances where others send me snapshots of myself, formerly in print form, and in the last few years almost exclusively in digital form. These would not be self-portraits.

WR: What are the central themes in your works? Are there certain concerns that you find yourself drawn to time and again?

LS: I would love to photograph everything, and as I've had or created great opportunities to photograph a lot of things, a list of themes would be long indeed, especially since I am still discovering new 'themes' by way of the archive database. If there is a central theme it would be photography itself. I might show someone a series of candid portraits and they would say I am a people photographer; then I could show someone else some of my vast archive of street photography and they would say I am a street photographer, until I pull out the landscapes, and so on. I am simply addicted to taking pictures. That said, there are of course some notable methods that thread throughout my work.

My love of the 'process' influences the way I shoot in most situations. What others may see as a lazy composition, or lack of control, is in effect either intentional, or in some cases intentionally accepted rather than rejected. I like to concentrate on one principal subject or figure in the frame and allow the rest to do whatever they happen to be doing, if anything at all. There is an element of surprise in this method that allows the act of photography to be relished later, in former days in the darkroom, and now on the monitor, when one discovers other sub-plots heretofore undetected. This, along with the experimentation I mentioned previously, allows me to differentiate my kind of photography from so much that is practiced with full control over composition and lighting, mood and emotional intent, not simply by the auteur but

often by art directors and editors. As a matter of fact, I have a category of photographs from the time when I was shooting on film that resulted from pressing the shutter to advance to the 'first' frame, when in fact a first image was recorded of wherever the camera was pointing. Some of these are partially fogged by light entering the chamber before the full closing of the camera back, and they can be quite beautiful.

This of course does not mean that I do not actively pursue a wide variety of subjects on a regular basis and have been since the very beginning, including trees, and cars, and tram wires, and sunsets, and mannequins in shop windows, and many of the clichés that have existed in and out of the history of photography. Furthermore, the digital archive, with its categories and keywords and the ability to randomize the sequence of images in catalogues and to cross reference, has allowed me to discover other patterns or 'related subjects' that I had not previously imagined.

From another view and beyond the single image, there are larger concepts that interest me and that have governed not only my photography but the reasons why I have waited so long to show most of it. Ever since my late teens and my exposure to photographic publications and exhibits, I've wanted to photograph, publish, and exhibit, but I just never knew or attempted to find out how to gauge my own work. I made time for, and found joy in, photographing, but not the rest. There was also a sort of insecurity about the meaning and/or 'value' of what I was photographing, combined with a notion that it would possibly make sense and acquire value as it aged.

My most recent exhibit, *The Flight Attendant Years, 1978–1986* (2013), is a case in point. My motivation to take those pictures was no other than I loved photography, and I had decided that becoming an FA would give me opportunities to travel and

photograph exciting and glamorous places. I sincerely do not recall thinking back then that it was glamorous, particularly when I attended on certain really glamorous First Class passengers. The show has been successful on a critical level because it contains elements of the nostalgic, the then ordinary as well as the behind the scenes of the world of flight attendants, considered by many to have been glamorous. In this sense, my archive is full of these sorts of images and stories, but again, taken by someone who was more in love with photography than necessarily what I was photographing.

On the other hand, although I have taken pictures of a few celebrities, of monuments, and objects of grandeur and glamour, I discovered that I also enjoyed photographing the mundane and the familiar. Somewhere in my development as a photographer I was impressed by statements to the effect that most people don't look at and don't 'see' their surroundings, and I took on that challenge, perhaps thinking I was doing something unusual or rebellious only to find out later, as I became more familiar with the history of photography, that it had been common practice for a long time. Also, and very importantly, I was fascinated by a Susan Sontag idea that even something ugly can be made beautiful simply by photographing it, by giving it that attention, or in her exact words: 'To photograph is to confer importance.'

The more conceptual aspects of my work deal a lot with chronology, synchronicity, and obsolescence, on both a personal as well as a global level. I am often hounded by the major philosophical question whether what I am doing in my life is indeed a contribution to a better world. What is the role of art in general, and mine specifically, in a world so full of art and images? Are the photographers who are documenting wars and crime really making a difference? Are those who are conceptualizing another kind of world really having an effect? Or is it all a choice for passing our

time while we're here and not having to grow our own food? When I was barely a teenager, a friend's older brother who was into spiritualism told me an anecdote about an Ethiopian woman who would leave her children and her tent in the village to go and fetch water. She would find a spot in the desert and dig one foot deep and wait for the water to come up. Sometimes it would take hours for this to happen, at which point she would fill her vessel and go back home. Had she dug only a few inches more, she could have gotten the water right away, but she chose the wait. It was her intention to spend this time alone, perhaps reflecting, perhaps doing something else, but this is the quality of time she had decided for herself.

Ever since I took my first photographs I was hooked, and decided this had to be a major part of my life. And the way I decided to do it was by having photography as my companion rather than my occupation. I can still do whatever else I want and, most of the time, take pictures while I am doing it. Not that I haven't sought out short term curiosities to approach and document, but in the end, it's all of those curiosities, short and long term combined, that have ended up being the different chapters in my life, and the sets of assets in my archive.

To read part I of this interview between Lucien Samaha and Walid Raad, follow this [link](#).

To explore an online archive Samaha produced especially for Ibraaz Platform 006, follow this [link](#).

Lucien Samaha (b. 1958, Beirut) is a New York-based photographer whose work has been shown internationally, including in exhibitions at the Museum für Moderne Kunst, Frankfurt and at the Cooley Gallery, Reed College, Portland. He was a finalist for the 2004 Nam June Paik Award. After his time at

TWA, Samaha worked for Eastman Kodak Company and then as a DJ on the 107th floor of the World Trade Center, continuing to document his hours at work and his personal life.

About the author

Walid Raad

Walid Raad is an artist and an Associate Professor of Art in The Cooper Union (New York, USA). Raad's works include The Atlas Group, a fifteen-year project between 1989 and 2004 about the contemporary history of Lebanon, and the ongoing project titled *Scratching on Things I Could Disavow: A History of Modern and Contemporary Art in the Arab World*. His books include *The Truth Will Be Known When The Last Witness Is Dead*, *My Neck Is Thinner Than A Hair* and *Let's Be Honest, The Weather Helped*.

Raad's works have been shown at Documenta 11 (Kassel, Germany), The Venice Biennale (Venice, Italy), The Hamburger Bahnhof (Berlin, Germany), The Museum of Modern Art (New York, USA), Home Works (Beirut, Lebanon) and numerous other museums and venues in Europe, the Middle East and North America. Raad is also the recipient of the Alpert Award in Visual Arts (2007), the Deutsche Börse Photography Prize (2007) and the Camera Austria Award (2005).