

**BORN DIGITAL:
ONE PHOTOGRAPHER'S LEGACY**

A profile of Lucien Samaha

Most fine art photographers are meticulous about their work – getting the focus, the light, and the color just right; printing their images on the perfect paper; and making sure all materials are archival so that their vision will have the best chance to survive in this carefully orchestrated state of perfection for as long as possible.

Not so Lucien Samaha. With over 400,000 images on file and rapidly growing, it would be impossible for him to print them all. And he doesn't want to. For Lucien, photography is not about the perfect image, it is about a cultural and social experience – how we relate to each other through photographs and through the experience of being photographed.



From Lucien's archive: Liberace, Fran Liebowitz, and Liberace's assistant.

Lucien has been photographing the world since he was 14 and he has not stopped since that first photography class. Born in Lebanon, raised in Virginia, he moved to Chicago after high school where he became a flight attendant for TWA. Traveling the world, Lucien moved through the worlds of fashion and art, which he captured through his ubiquitous lens.

In 1988 he became the first ever Eastman Kodak Company Photography Scholar and attended Rochester Institute of Technology where he graduated with Highest Honors. Following his graduation, he worked for Kodak, introducing digital photographic

technology to professional journalists around the world, teaching workshops to members of Reuters and Associated Press, and helped produce the prestigious Eddie Adams Workshops. (By the way, those first digital cameras? They were \$20,000 each.)

While at Kodak, Lucien was on a committee, discussing issues of longevity and fading in photographic prints. He suggested a campaign called "Meant to Fade," which would glorify faded images as instant vintage photographs. He almost got fired for that, but the concept stuck. Later, he created a series of artist books – called "Meant to Fade."

As a master printer, he loves to work in a collaborative way with clients who subvert the meaning of the printed image by appropriating their materials from the internet, or who trust him to give them something they never thought could happen. Lucien will take it as far as you want to go. Although he appreciates the technical perfection and control of a Thomas Struth or Gregory Crewdson and the perfect set-ups of Jeff Wall, Lucien is "more turned on by something for the heart, than the brain."



From his archive: Mondo, an event that Lucien regularly DJ'd at the top of the World Trade Center.



From his archive: Neighborhood kids from Dortmund with Lucien in his photo installation at Phoenix Halle for the Naim June Paik Award in 2004.

Children from the neighborhood would come and hang out in the room, while he talked to them and took more pictures for his files. The archive itself became, in his words, "a living process and an object that demanded constant care and feeding," as he added as many as 1,500 new images a day.

Two years later, at Reed College in Portland, Oregon, he installed himself at a desk in their Cooley Gallery, continuing his process of relational practices. Photos were hung on the walls of the gallery and visitors could choose a photo from the exhibition to keep. He took a picture of each visitor with the image they chose. If they wanted to know the story of the photo, they had to send him a photo of that photo. He received many emails back, some containing several photos of the photo in various locations.

Lucien Samaha meets the world through his camera and his pictures. He is an artist who is interested in the "chance of something" – the chance meeting of people, the chances of imperfection. Like classical artists, he is interested in beauty; unlike them, he is not interested in perfection. He leaves scratches on the film of cheerleader pictures he took in high school. But it's not about NOT altering ("I love Photoshop!"). It is also about altering reality and taking it to another extreme. In his own words:



Technology, the future – how do we know how we will perceive images? The beauty of today is not the beauty of tomorrow.