



Party in the Sky

The Photo-DJ **Lucien-Samaha**

AUB ART GALLERIES, 2021

Party in the Sky

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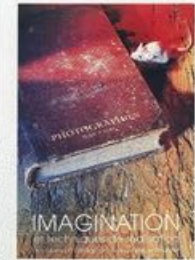
This exhibition brings to the attention of the public the activities of the Lebanese/American photographer, artist, traveler, archivist, and DJ Lucien Samaha. Born in Beirut in 1958, Samaha and his family moved to the United States when he was eleven. In the US he lived in many places and explored multiple careers. As an "airline brat" (as Samaha likes to call himself, recalling his early aerial voyages across the Arabian peninsula, as the first-class-seated son of a Middle East Airlines agent), his first long term job was as a flight attendant for Trans World Airlines (TWA). Then, in the late 1980s, he pursued a Bachelor of Science degree in photography at the Rochester Institute of Technology (RIT) thanks to a scholarship from Kodak; he had developed an interest in photography from an early age, owing to a family photography archive compiled by his amateur photographer Lebanese uncle. Even in the US, Samaha did not lose touch with his extended family in Lebanon, whom he visited every few years or so just before and after the Lebanese Civil War. After graduation from RIT in the early 1990s, Samaha first interned and then got a full-time position in the Professional Photography Division of Eastman Kodak Rochester NY. Samaha's other long-term occupations or short-term gigs included: data entry clerk, archivist and database designer/publisher of his personal lifetime collection of analog and digital photographs, nightlife paparazzo, fashion photographer, and New York City club DJ.

In some of his professional careers, says Samaha, he played a pioneering role. When employed by Eastman Kodak, he was part of the company's new working group in charge of marketization and promotion of the first commercially available digital photo cameras. He was the first photographer to field-test and use a Kodak DCS-100 (the first commercially available digital single-lens reflex DSLR camera) outside of company labs. And in the 1990s his name was mentioned along with other founding members of the Arab Image Foundation photography archive in Beirut. Samaha often mentions his part, as a DJ and nightlife entertainer, in introducing Lounge Music, an easy listening style whose rise to mass popularity music historians date to the late 1990s and early 2000s, in the nightlife locales of global metropolises. What's more, many elements in Samaha's careers connect and interweave. As a TWA flight attendant and popularizer of digital photography he has extensively documented

Lucien Samaha on the covers of magazines and newspapers reporting on the rise of digital photography technologies.

LE PHOTOGRAPHE

le magazine des professionnels photo vidéo n° 1487 Septembre 1991



Un livre pour
le photographe
créateur

Quality Lab
la nouvelle



KODAK SPECIAL

NEW AGE CAMERA TRIALLED FOR NEWS AUSTRALIA



Alan Farrelly, Editor Colour Planning for News Ltd., with Lucien Samaha (right) and Peter Ruttray at Kodak's camera demonstration.

The prototype of Kodak's new digital camera, designed specifically for photo-journalists, has been successfully demonstrated to senior



DJ MondoLucien pointing toward the corner of the 107th floor of the World Trade Center on March 29, 2000.

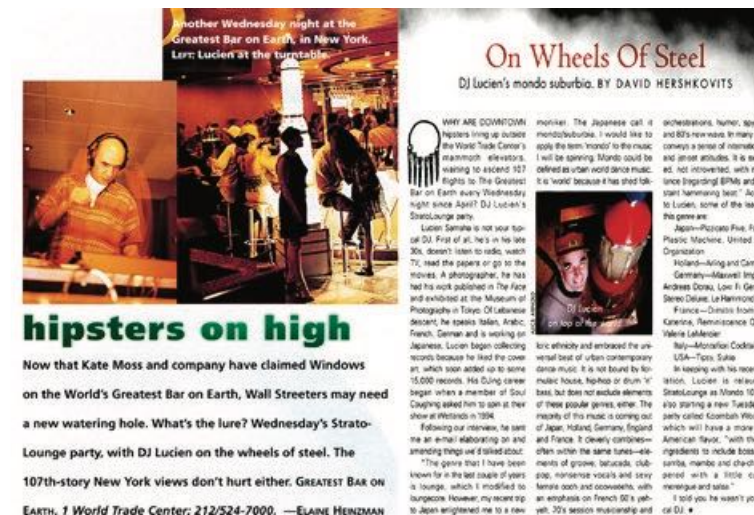
his flights, events, projects, layovers, colleagues, and places he has visited; and as a DJ and popularizer of lounge music, for many years he sampled records collected in the countries, cities, and continents that he flew into, over, and out of. Throughout all of this he kept compulsively photographing, at first in analog and then—after the big divide—in digital or using both formats.

While his traveling photodiaries, archival practices, and engagement with early digital photography have been featured in shows and exhibitions on several occasions, for this project with AUB Art Galleries we have decided to focus on Samaha's DJing and photography career. To introduce this project, we will first tell the story of one of Samaha's gigs.

From the second half of the 1990s until the second week of September 2001, Samaha DJed on the top floors of one of the “twin towers” of the original World Trade Center (1973-2001). He was known on the upper floors of WTC's Tower One, or the North Tower, as DJ MondoLucien, and sometimes as Lucien the Loungecore DJ. His parties ran every Wednesday night at a bar called the Greatest Bar on Earth, in the restaurant complex Windows on the World located on the 107th floor. The party was originally launched as “StratoLounge,” but then in 1997 Samaha renamed it “Mondo-107” (Mondo was the DJ moniker adopted after a trip to a CD store in Roppongi, Tokyo which had a section called “Mondo Suburbia,” and 107 was the floor number in the North Tower as well as an echo of “Agent 007”). Nightlife reviewers had mixed opinions about the Mondo-107 party, with some praising it and others calling it “the kind of tourist trap no New Yorker ever goes [*sic*] unless dragged by out-of-town visitors.” Regardless of reviews and ratings, the fact remained that even though his party may or may not have been the “best” or “greatest” in New York, it was certainly the “highest,” not only in the City but—at that time—on Earth. It was a “Party in the Sky,” as Lucien once described it.

Indeed, DJ MondoLucien's main audience was the international young crowd who lived and worked in the New York City area and the tourists. The latter were rushed by express elevators to the summit of this architectural monument to world trade and global markets, in search of authentic experience and the best view. It was for the tourists that Samaha mixed his records collected all over the world and stored in analog and digital formats on hundreds of CDs, LPs, and cassette tapes (which he pushed and dragged once a week on a set of wheels to the elevators running up and down the one hundred and seven floors of WTC's Tower One). In his parties he alternated between the local and the global, between the particular “home-tunes” and the universal appeal of best-selling, mostly American popular music culture. He would first play a “national” track (a Dalida for the French, Nena's “99 Luftballons” for the Germans, Pizzicato Five for the Japanese, Bossa Nova and Samba classics for the Brazilians), and then—after a short nostalgic return home—DJ MondoLucien would bring the homesick expats and tourists back to the 107th floor of the World Trade Center with Michel Jackson or Fatboy Slim. He takes great pride in having initiated the nightclub tradition of playing Frank Sinatra's “New York, New York” exactly at midnight, when the whole international party started singing the jazzy hymn to the City. He thought of his job in terms of designing moods, affects, and states of mind (or of no-mind, if one prefers) and thus providing a kind of transportation service, hauling his tourists between the low and the high, between the local and the global

Press reviews of Windows of the World's Greatest Bar on Earth parties with DJ-Mondo-Lucien Samaha, (late 1990-early 2000).

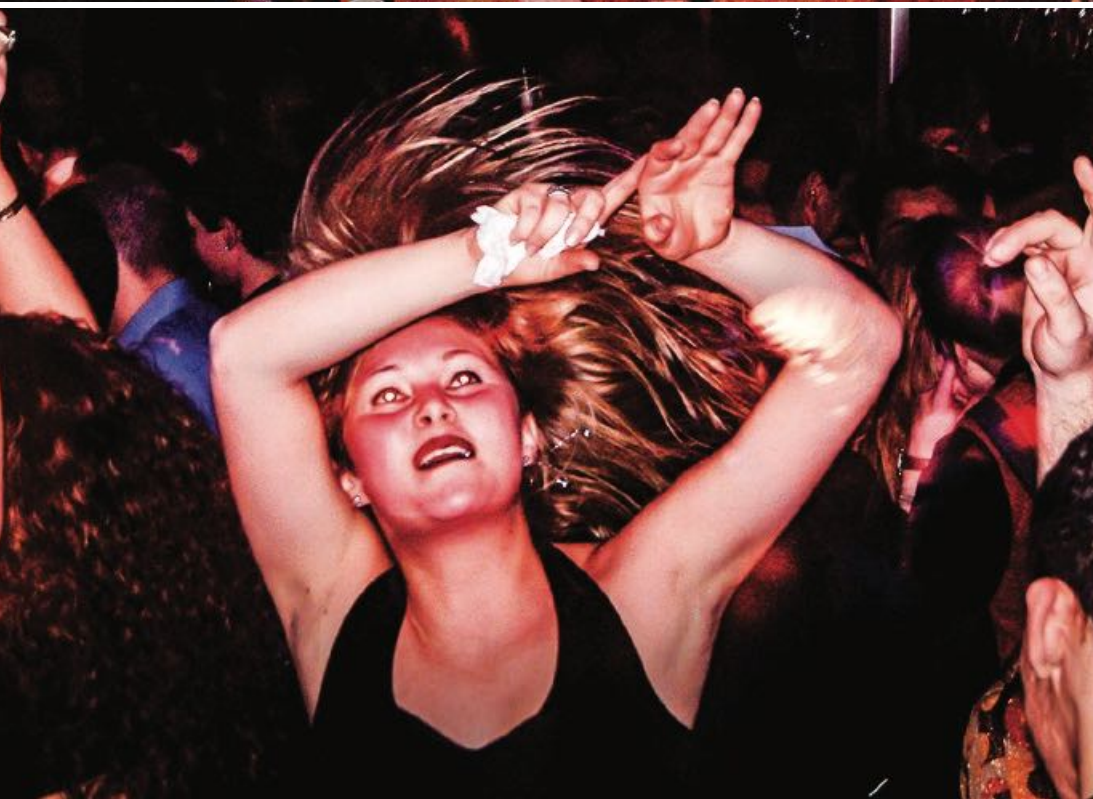




hotspots and products of mass cultural entertainment. Like the Twin Towers' express elevators, he carried intoxicated people from this bird's-eye view of a new world order celebrating precarious global commerce, down to earth and the safe abode of national economy and culture, and then back to the top again. For the tourist, the urge to globalize or Mondo-lize is simultaneously held back by the compulsion to cling tight to familiar national roots. And in some ways, DJ Lucien Samaha provided a much-needed symbolic meditation between two extremes of global capitalism fluctuating between national and global economy and culture; between a more or less familiar realm of necessity and the desire to escape into an unknown realm of freedom; between gravity and momentum; earth and sky; collective and individual.



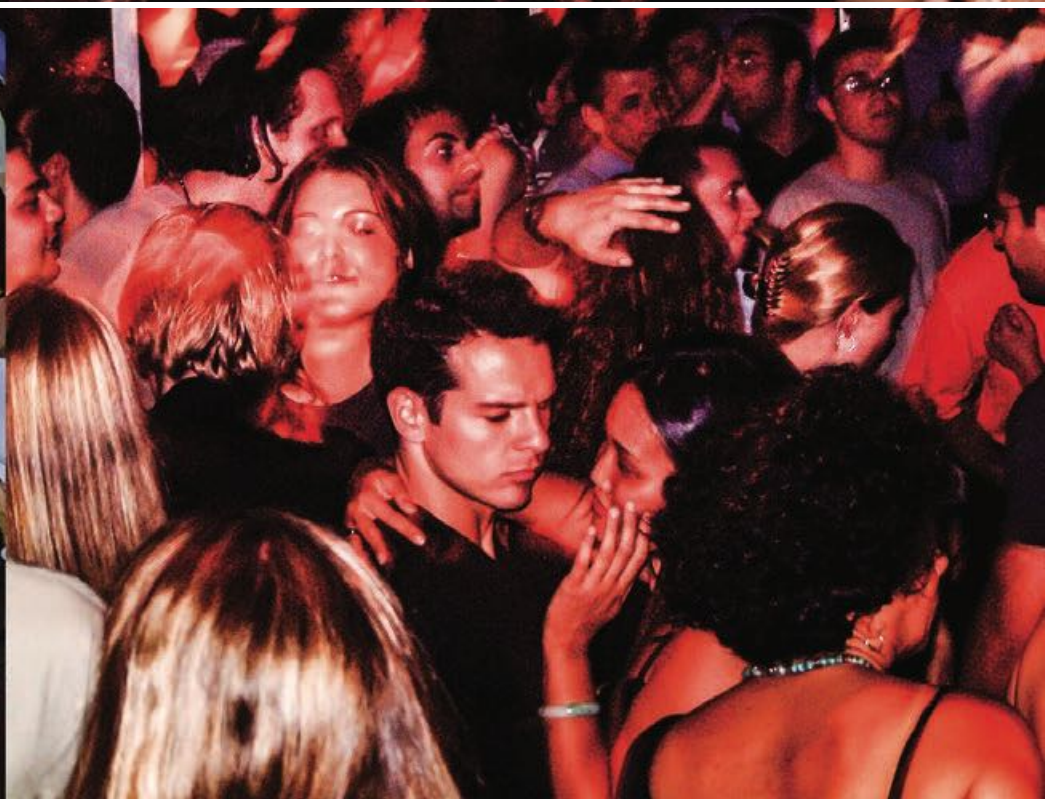
And while transporting tourists through states of national duty and transnational (or American) freedom, from his DJ perch he kept photographing them. Altogether, he made over 4000 shots of those attending StratoLounge and Mondo-107 parties during his tenure as DJ in WTC's Greatest Bar on Earth/ Party in the Sky. Some of these photos would later be selected and displayed in group or solo art exhibitions. The photographs also bore witness to one other important transformation in the world of visual representation, happening at the same time as the expansion of global trade and freedom for capital—namely the transition from analog to digital photography. In DJ-Lucien's photographic experience the shift began much earlier, during his employment with Eastman Kodak in the early 1990s, but in his authorial photographic practice the transition most clearly materialized during his WTC gig and in the passage from StratoLounge parties, which he shot entirely using an analog camera (a Contax T2), to Mondo-107, photographed with his new digital camera (a Leica Digilux 4.3). With the emergence of digital technologies and filmless computer cameras there was also the possibility to shoot [low-resolution videos](#) of his Party in the Sky.



Lucien Samaha (above), image from StratoLounge shot in analog in 2000, and (below) Mondo-107 shot with a digital camera in 2001.

Next page. Lucien Samaha (left), analog shot of Stratolounge party (1997), vs. (right) digital shot of Mondo-107 (2001).

The analog-digital divide was one significant split in Samaha's professional and personal life, of which there have been quite a few. He did not participate in "film is better than digital" public debates at the time, but did on occasion share his observations on the matter, agreeing for the most part that film provided a more tangible or "real" experience when compared to the new interpretations and manipulations of data by the computer that we call a digital camera. It was on the 107th floor of the WTC that DJ MondoLucien noticed that analog allowed for greater focus on process, encouraging photographers to trust their



own knowledge, experience, and fate; whereas the digital camera with its innovative viewfinder at the back compelled him to constantly check the results and correct his errors. The very new technological features introduced to eliminate mistakes – to remove any “contradiction” – made digital photography paradoxically more prone to manipulation and distortion. In the late 1990s, analog photography reached the zenith of its technological development, providing the greatest quality in terms of resolution, color, sharpness, speed, etc. But the digital had also its own advantages, one of them being a greater ability to control the image, and to upload the JPEGs to a computer for quick editing and/or distribution (a feature DJ-Lucien also used when mixing tracks to curate his own CDs, at a time when CD recorders and disks were prohibitively expensive). It was also on the dance floor of Mondo-107 that the photo-DJ Lucien-Samaha realized that both analog and digital formats were prone to manipulation of different degrees or kinds. For analog, it was using expired Kodak film and emulsions kept from his days at Eastman Kodak, or resorting to the various “cross processing” techniques fashionable at the time (and before that, dodging, burning, scratching, or painting the negative). And the new digital world opened a whole array of image-processing techniques, with unlimited potential to mock the whole idea of social or empirical “reality.” Technically, early digital CCD or charge-coupled devices were very sensitive to infrared light, so that his Mondo-107 party photos looked rather “hot,” or too reddish next to his earlier and much “cooler” analog StratoLounge party. One other great disadvantage of shooting with that particular digital camera was the “red eye effect” that made many tourists at the Greatest Bar on Earth look

“evil.”



But it was not only the interior of the twin towers that had a presence in Samaha's life. The exterior of the World Trade Center was also quite visible in his everyday life and photographic career. As a resident of Tribeca since 1993, these towers hovered over his personal life as they did over the entire Manhattan skyline for twenty-eight years. The buildings served as a "compass" in his daily life, letting him orient himself in the City, like so many other New Yorkers before the age of apps and mapping services. The antenna installed on the top of North Tower, right above his Party in the Sky, also provided the signal for his home television set. The towers had a significant presence in his photographic portfolio and archive, appearing in many photos that he shot over several decades in the neighborhood, as at times they were simply too large to avoid. Shot in black and white or color, negative or positive, analog or digital, from below or above, from land and sea, from different points in lower Manhattan, Samaha's photographs anchored these towers in the architectural scenery of the city, as unavoidable as their symbolic presence had been in the emerging era and geography of global markets.



Above and next page. Lucien Samaha, photos of friends at the top and bottom of the WTC towers (1980s).





Conceived before WWII, but designed and materialized in the first post-WWII decades, the original World Trade Center was the architectural complex to symbolize a new arrangement of world economic trade curated by American governmental and commercial institutions. As a brainchild of the Rockefeller brothers (the Twin Towers were sometimes called “Nelson” and “David”) they epitomized the latest phase of global economic and cultural capitalism. Tower One, where Samaha DJed, seemed at times to have been raised in order to illustrate Marx’s well-known architectural metaphor of economic base and ideological superstructure, explaining the principle of organization of modern capitalist societies. While the lower part of the tower offered 13,400,000 square feet (1,240,000 m²) of office space rented to the various corporations, banks, insurance companies, investment and pension funds, shopping malls, and governmental agencies (like the Port Authority) watching over American global interests, the upper floors of the North Tower were reserved for cultural activities. As per Marx’s metaphor, the economic base was the ultimate force that pushed art and culture forward, or as in late capitalism and in this concrete architectural case, pushed art and culture up to the light and clouds of ideology. On the very top there was an indoor and outdoor observation platform, which—on the clearest days—offered dramatic views and backgrounds to international travelers, and which Lucien also often visited and photographed.

The relation between the upper parts of the tower and the higher spheres of art and culture became evident on many occasions. The Twin Towers attracted all sorts of artists. Entertainers and street performers were lured by the iconic, shiny façade that called, or dared, them to climb it, or walk on ropes affixed between the two skyscrapers. The metallic minarets also lured Hollywood executives, who rented the towers’ image in order to help King Kong defend himself against police helicopters, or allow Superman to perform a daring public rescue, announcing his presence to Metropolis. In other words, the prominent structures were not only an emblem of the new economy but also a prop for popular and high culture.

Lucien Samaha. LMCC studio on 91st floor (1998). Moukhtar Kocache (below), the administrator of the LMCC artist in residence program, and one of the early members of the Arab Image Foundation, Beirut, at lunch break in the lobby of WTC (1998).





Lucien Samaha. Photos of the Vienna-based collaborative art group Gelatin moments after their removal of a single window in their artist studio on the 91st floor of the North Tower. The photos were taken one hour after their placing a prefabricated one-person balcony out to stand on, and to be photographed from a hotel room across the street.

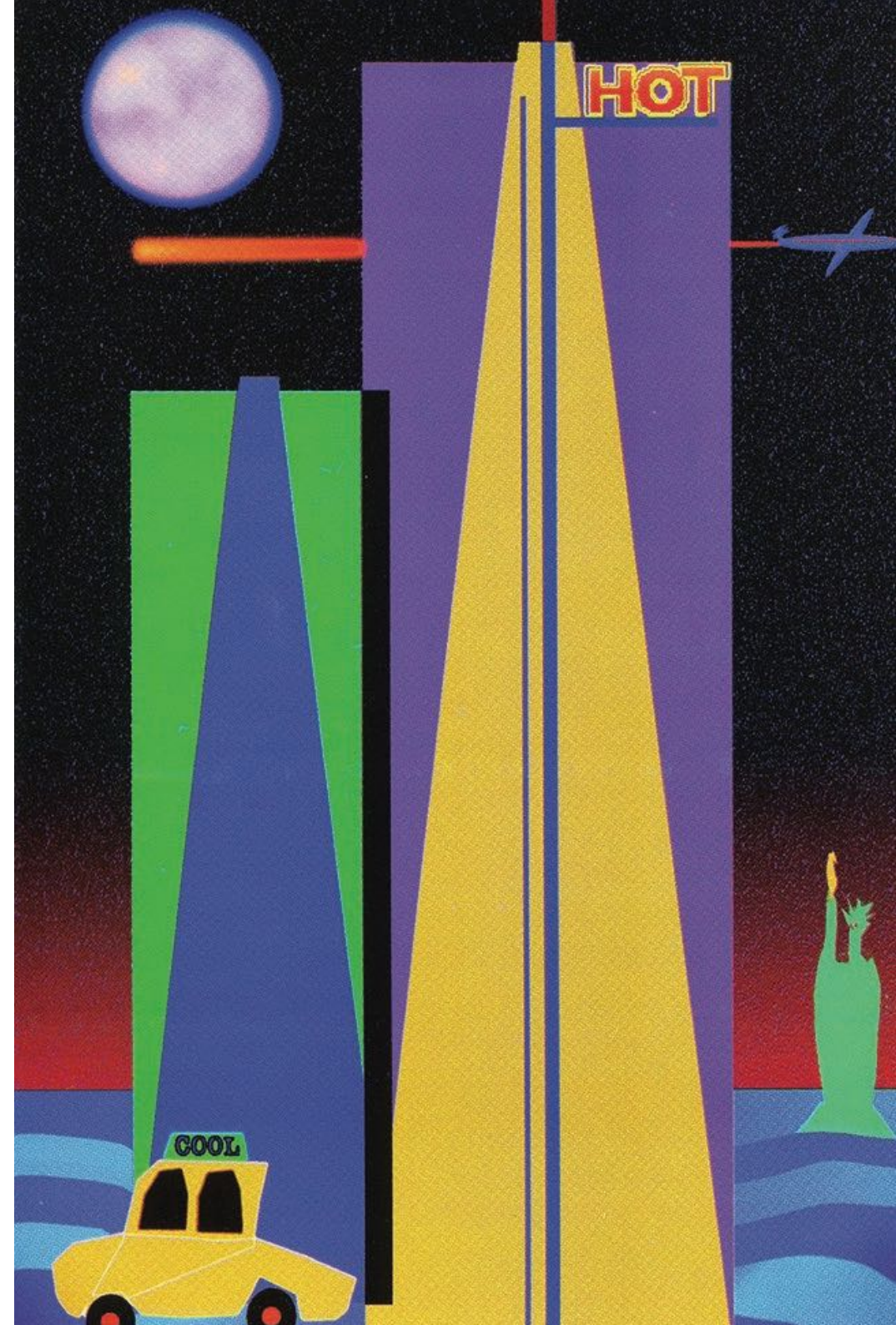
The high world of contemporary art, on the other hands, was more fascinated with the interior of these buildings. Numerous artists have attempted to capture the inescapable logic of globalization through the architectural rationale of these skyscrapers. Contemporary artists have photographed its empty, abandoned office spaces in order to suggest the emptiness and devastation brought by capital, or planned to light up the upper windows of the North Tower in order to spell their name, or performed spiritual pilgrimages from the bottom of the stairs to the top. Just a few floors below the Greatest Bar on Earth, two artist studios, which DJ-Mondo Lucien used to regularly visit and interact with, offered artist-in-residence programs. The Lower Manhattan Cultural Council (LMCC)—administered by Moukhtar Kocache, a close friend of Samaha and one of the early members of the Arab Image Foundation in Beirut—had two studios (one called World Views and the other Studioscape) located on the 91st and 92nd floors. Over one hundred and fifty artists from all over the world were accepted as residents in the LMCC program during its four-year existence.¹ One of these artists, and one other reason for Samaha's close interaction with the program, was his Austrian boyfriend Ali, who spent several months in residence only a few floors below the Greatest Bar on Earth.



The Twin Towers were also frequently present in Samaha's design work. Although not a trained graphic designer, he was often asked to make his own promotional material related to his gig in Tower One. On various occasions he produced business cards or flyers promoting his party on floor 107. One such flyer might today bring unwelcome attention: it shows the North Tower, "cool" at the economic base but "hot" at the top of the cultural superstructure, as well as a passenger jet flying right past the upper floors, where Mondo-107 was taking place— hinting toward Samaha's former career as a flight attendant.

Mondo-107 promotion flyer designed by Samaha (1997).

¹ See Moukhtar Kocache, "The Artist Residency Program in the Twin Towers," part of "September 11th: Art Loss, Damage, And Repercussions Proceedings of an IFAR Symposium on February 28, 2002," <https://www.ifar.org/nineelevn/911intro.htm>. Also, published in the special issue of IFAR Journal 4, no. 4/ 5, no. 1, "September 11th, Art Loss, Damage, and Repercussions."





(Above) Lucien Samaha. A waiter at the Windows in the World restaurant, the last photo taken on September 6, 2001 in the North Tower of WTC.

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The events on the morning of Tuesday, September 11, 2001 (one day before the next Mondo-107 party in Tower One) put a pause to Lucien Samaha's DJ career. American Airlines flight 11, a Boeing 767-200, was flown into the 94th–98th floors of the north façade of Tower One. The Twin Towers had been bombed before, and for similar motives. In 1993, a few months before Lucien moved into his Tribeca loft, a 1,200-pound truck bomb exploded in the parking garage of one of the towers, aiming at the economic base of the global order. In 2001, however, the attackers fixed their sights higher at the symbolic, ideological superstructure. The first impact hit the South Tower. The second one came only a few floors below the Greatest Bar on Earth, and a few floors above the LMCC artists-in-residence studios in North Tower. Seventy-nine of Lucien Samaha's co-workers (including cooks, waitresses, doormen, and other employees who were at that early hour serving breakfast to the first clients of the Windows of the World restaurant) were killed in the second explosion. A few floors below, it was later reported, one artist-in-residence with the LMCC program also perished in the collision. The symbolic impact came with vast material losses. Multiple works of art, artist documentation and projects, office archives, and other material generated and accumulated during the four-year LMCC program were lost in the explosion and the subsequent collapse of the towers. After 9/11 it was also revealed that a large number of corporate collections (e.g. the Citigroup art collection, for example, whose purpose was "to enhance the corporation's image and environment")² along with expensive samples of high modernism and works by Alexander Calder, Joan Miró, Louise Nevelson, and others, installed in and around the WTC complex, were also lost without trace, or were later recovered in the rubble of the collapsed structure only as forensic fragments of contemporary history.



2 Suzanne F. W. Lemakis, "The Art Lost by Citigroup on 9/11," part of "September 11th: Art Loss, Damage, And Repercussions Proceedings of an IFAR Symposium on February 28, 2002," <https://www.ifar.org/nineeleven/911intro.htm>.

Samaha learned about the attacks first thing in the morning while he was waking up in his Tribeca loft. He and Ali, the Gelatin artist-in-residence with the LMCC program, had been awakened by the sound of a jetliner flying very low above his loft, and then seconds later by an explosion. They rushed outside to look at the towers. Among the many thoughts circling in his head, Samaha wondered how long it would be before they finished the repairs so that he could return to his gig, or whether he no longer had to prepare his music selection that evening. Lucien also prayed to himself that this was not a terrorist attack from any party in the Middle East. The collapse of the North Tower knocked down the antenna, just above the Greatest Bar on Earth, and with it most of the TV signal all over Manhattan and part of Brooklyn, turning his television set for a long time into a generator of abstract images. In the course of one morning, the traumatic event also brought about a semantic transition: before 9/11, the Twin Towers were often called “ground zero” for New York City tourism, meaning a “starting point or base,” with DJ-Lucien’s Mondo-107 parties at their “hottest” point. Now they were not only a “site of devastating disaster or violent attack,” but themselves had entered the dictionary (“Ground Zero: the site of the former World Trade Center.”)



Samaha never commented much on 9/11. In numerous interviews and articles mentioning his DJ gig, he has addressed the topic only indirectly by occasionally exhibiting enlarged photos of “red-eyed” or “otherworldly and sometimes evil looking” crowds happily dancing in the highest, hottest, and Greatest Bar on Earth before that tragic Tuesday morning. He did revisit the event, however, through his archival and documentation practice. After 9/11 he spent considerable time scanning film, organizing, archiving, and inventing database techniques, and naming, numbering, and remembering the circumstances or the names behind the various analog negatives or JPEG digital files in his vast photographic archive. His archive today counts over a million images collected all over the world, with a significant part being from the US, Lebanon, and the 107th floor of the WTC towers.

A few closing words on the circumstances of this exhibition, and how and why it came about.



This exhibition opens at another global turning point and a crisis in Samaha’s countries of birth and of citizenship. The project was initiated in 2019, as part of Center for American Studies and Research (CASAR) activities at the American University of Beirut. It was first conceived as the Galleries’ response to the main theme at CASAR for that year, “Art in the Americas,” which encouraged participants to think about “America” not only in singular terms, for example as the undisputed leader in post-WWII geopolitics,

economics, and culture, but also in more plural if not pluralistic terms, in terms of its interactions with the rest of the world, especially the Middle East. AUB Art Galleries proposed the project “Party in the Sky,” offering it as another perspective on the cultural and political relations and dimensions in the interaction between the “Americas” and the “Middle East.” Samaha’s biography, and his various roles as artist, traveler, archivist, photographer, and entertainer on the top of World Trade Center, added nuance to much-told stories, and addressed from another perspective the complex relation between the United States and the Middle East, including Lebanon. It seemed to hold out the possibility of a reconciliation or at least a negotiation between so many problematic categories of contemporary global art, culture, politics, and life.



The CASAR series was canceled due to the economic, political, and public health crises in Lebanon following the year 2019. The ongoing economic crisis and later global pandemic brought Lebanon to a standstill, including many planned cultural, academic, and economic activities. AUB Art Galleries decided to continue online the CASAR-tailored response to the “Art in the Americas” series, due to a range of symbolic associations latent in this topic. It is not only that this year marks the twenty-year anniversary of New York City’s 9/11 terrorist attacks, but also that this anniversary happens in very close proximity to Beirut’s own 8/4 (often described as “Lebanon’s nine-eleven,” referring to the date in August 2020). The partial destruction of the city of Beirut resulting from the improper storage of ammonium nitrate transformed important areas and institutions of the city from ground zero of “cultural activities” in the Middle East into ground zero as a “site of devastating disaster and violent attack.” It was the second time that Samaha had witnessed such a semantic transformation, since the one twenty years ago in lower Manhattan. Many of Beirut’s architectural monuments, from the Ottoman and French Mandate periods, as well as cultural sites in the neighborhoods of Gemmayzeh and Mar-Mikhaël—including the Arab Image Foundation for which DJ-Lucien Samaha had been among the early members—were devastated or seriously affected by the explosion in the port. It is what can be recovered from these various explosions, shifts, and transitions—from digital to analog, from cool to hot, from economic (base) to cultural (superstructure), from local to global, from “ground zero” as entertainment to “ground zero” as terror, from 9/11 to 8/4, from America to Lebanon and from New York to Beirut, as well as the story of Photo-DJ Lucien-Samaha’s once-perpetual Party in the Sky—that this project aims to share with its audiences.

Octavian Esanu
AUB Art Galleries

Analog

StratoLounge parties in North Tower World Trade Center in the late 1990s shot
using an analog camera Contax T4.



















Digital

Mondo-107 parties in North Tower World Trade Center held during 2000 and 2001 shot using a digital camera Leica Digilux 4.3.

































American University of Beirut Art Galleries, Spring 2021

Party in the Sky

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