

perhaps his project was as much about testing limits – his own, as well as those of the fabricators, the architectural, historical and institutional structures of museums and, of course, of the viewer – as it is about sculpture. His work throws down a challenge, aggressively asserting art’s pivotal place in our environment and in our lives, stubbornly insisting on its centrality. When I nerved myself to ask him what he would say to people who describe him the same way that he had described the Duveen Gallery – ‘overblown, authoritarian and a bit heavy-handed’ – he smiled and replied, ‘It’s partially correct!’

At the Serpentine Gallery, as a companion to the Tate show, there was an exhibition of Serra’s large-scale black-and-white, oil-stick-on-canvas drawings. These represent another side of the ‘hard man’ of sculpture. Serra had always made drawings alongside his sculptures and, though two-dimensional, they pack a punch as powerful in their way as any of his sculptures, their rich, pitch-black surfaces sucking in the light like black holes. In this instance they were like deep, resonant echoes of their three-dimensional counterparts, commanding the gallery spaces of the Serpentine just as authoritatively. Among them was a pair of rectangular drawings, their bottom edges aligned with the floor, firmly standing their ground and holding their own in the light-filled North Gallery. Entitled *Two for Rushdie*, 1992, he explained that he had been thinking about censorship of his own work but also about censorship in general and against Salman Rushdie in particular, adding presciently: ‘That kind of censorship isn’t just intolerance, it actually leads to repression of the kind that ended up with Rushdie’s life being threatened.’ Little did we know then how much worse it would become.

Patricia Bickers

Lucas Samaras 1936–2024

By all accounts, Lucas Samaras, who died in his home in New York City on 7 March, was a character. Woven into the reviews and essays about his work throughout his lifetime are descriptions like ‘flamboyant’, ‘extravagant’, ‘non-conforming’, ‘against the grain’, ‘subversive’, ‘wildly

individualistic’, ‘wizard-like’ – and even ‘pathological’. Born in Western Macedonia in 1936, his mother brought him and his sister to the US in 1948 during the Greek Civil War. They joined his father who had emigrated earlier, settling in New Jersey in the working-class town of West New York on the other side of the Hudson River from New York City. Samaras straddled these two worlds well into adulthood. His investment in doing this was played out in one of his early and infamous installations, when he moved the entire contents of his childhood bedroom to a New York City gallery and more or less lived there for a month. *Room #1*, 1964, was installed at the legendary Green Gallery where it formed a room within a room, on sale for \$17,000. (Neither Samaras nor Dick Bellamy, the gallery owner, were motivated by money and it went unsold.)

The biographical note behind *Room #1* is worth thinking about: it came about because of a house move, a disruption of continuity, and the room itself accommodated living and working, and so could be considered as much studio as bedroom; it held his bed, books, paintings, sculptures, clothing and the bric-à-brac that accumulates over time. Samaras considered it a ‘personal gesture’ that showed the ‘totality of the artist’. It was messy and full, but also modest in size. I find it oddly moving to think of a young man in his late 20s, a full player by that time in Manhattan’s downtown art scene, going home each night to sleep in his childhood bed. *Room #2*, 1966, which by contrast was nearly empty, being clad with mirrors inside and out and occupied by only a mirror-clad chair and table, survives, and is in the collection of the Buffalo AKG Art Museum (there is a connection worth pursuing to Yayoi Kusama’s mirrored rooms, but for another time). This framework of nesting and mixing one’s living and art-making continued: Samaras later lived and worked in a series of tiny apartments in New York City where the same integration happened. In a virtual studio visit with Samaras, carried out during the Covid-19 lockdown from an apartment on Manhattan’s Upper West Side (in a tall, modern building that overlooked the Hudson River towards New Jersey), he described how he had been living alone there for 20 years, and in the photographs he shares you see

everything together at once: his tools and materials, artworks, creature comforts and – of course – him.

Samaras made his way as a young artist through the Happenings scene (he performed in Allan Kaprow’s *18 Happenings in 6 Parts* in 1959), after which he started making boxes filled inside and covered outside with found materials: ‘erotic objects’ akin to similar work by fellow New York artists Carolee Schneemann and Joseph Cornell. From there he moved to assemblage furniture and then photography, driven seemingly by novel technologies: Polaroid, video, Photoshop and more recently NFTs. Photography became his main medium; another consistent feature of Samaras’s work was his own presence: clothed, naked, old, young, and often intently gazing directly at the camera, and thereby the audience. But he was relentlessly experimental and seems to have turned his hand and mind to everything: in the 1990s he made an extraordinary collection of 22-carat gold jewellery cast from chicken-wire models. In the Pace Gallery catalogue for the 1998 show that presented this work, *Lucas Samaras: Gold*, the artist describes a connection between the material and a gold coin tossed to him by his father by way of a goodbye (Samaras wouldn’t see him for another nine years); it also described how Samaras starved himself for the two years it took to make the jewellery collection.

In writing this tribute I have to make an admission: I wrote a pretty nasty review for this magazine of a Samaras exhibition at Waddington Gallery in 2004, and I’m sorry about this. I don’t disavow the critique I wrote of his ‘Photofictions’, but I see now that I mistook what it is to take a critical edge and I aimed it at him, or perhaps his taste. I think now I would give more generous attention to the ways Samaras invented. I think now that whereas my expectations lay with a more editorial approach or a strategic positioning, Samaras put everything out there and I appreciate this a lot more now. At the end of the Covid virtual studio visit, Samaras said to the interviewer: be happy with your life. That’s a pretty good way to end things.

Alison Green

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