

The Old City, So Far

A Conversation with Guy Raivitz



"I started this project in 2021," Guy Raivitz wrote,

"in conjunction with my anthropology studies at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. It began as an exploration of how the presence of the past influences present-day social reality in the Old City of Jerusalem. I was particularly interested in...the ways in which Islam, Judaism and Christianity have shaped the region throughout history."



With time, I realized that my main interests were the relationships between the stones of the Old City and the people who came to visit them, and the mutual need they have for each other. The combination of photography with a theoretical background in anthropology has also enabled me to examine the relationships between reality, the observer, and the text, as well as to question what kind of knowledge photography produces about the world.

To this end, I explored how a work of art can function in a social space, while maintaining its autonomy and its goal not to be fully understood.



This work focuses on the interactions between people and the Old City... It examines how pilgrims, tourists and locals relate to the space and experience sacred sites of their own faith and those of others.

Working with a large format camera is a slow process that requires staying in one location for an extended period. This continuous presence is also an ethical stance—I'm not aiming to be a fly on the wall, and I'm not hiding. I'm present in the field at eye level and aware of my agency. During my stay in one place, I'm exposed to people around me; I am subjected to their gazes, and sometimes I need to explain myself, and negotiate my place in the field.

The passages above are excerpted from Raivitz's most recent project, a zine-like publication which he released in 2024. I was intrigued with his approach and fascinated by the visual record he was compiling, and we set up a conversation in April of this year. What follows are parts of that conversation, along with additional, more recent images made in the Old City.

How I got to doing this work is an important question. When I finished my B.A., I was unhappy with life in the west... I wanted to look at life from a different place, to see what I could learn from a different culture, from different people. Without a really specific plan, I went to Africa, where I worked for a while in South Africa and later in Angola. I wasn't intending to go back to Israel, but I got sick and had to return. I was unsure about what to do next, but the thing that attracted me the most was to be a photojournalist.

In 2000, I started working for a newspaper in Israel. It was a good organization but I soon realized we were operating on different frequencies: they wanted news, I wanted to work on something of my own. And I was noticing something about religion and the role it plays in people's lives: it's a strong undercurrent, but it isn't really discussed very much in the media. So I took this on as a personal project and put together a photo-essay I called "Between the Lines". Ironically, I finished it right around the time of 9/11, and an American editor whom I showed it to told me: "Your pictures are beautiful... I might buy one to hang on my wall, but not to print."

Later, in 2005, I had the chance to start working with an anthropologist in Israel. For the next four years we did field work, studying and documenting cultural and religious occasions—Christian, Jewish, Muslim—and again, I ended up with a body of work, but no clients or market for it.

Between 2010 and 2012, I completed an MFA in Documentary Media at TMU in Toronto, and then I earned an Art Teaching Certificate at the Oranim College of Education, 2015 to 2017. Most recently, I've been studying at the Anthropology Department at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, as I mentioned earlier. So a lot of thinking and study has gone into what I'm now doing.

While I have opted to work with an 8x10 camera for more than a decade, at first I was trying to photograph in black and white, and the pictures weren't working. This was killing me; I didn't know what to do, and I also had to define a research question. There was a multi-layered reality in the Old City, and the question became, "What can I make of this?" So with the coronavirus ending, I started trying to make pictures that would be new for me, while also undertaking a kind of personal pilgrimage to and within the Old City.

"Documentary" is a very elusive term... I struggled with not having a literary narrative, and wanted to avoid falling into cliché. But eventually I developed a photographic narrative, one that was oriented to time, the presence of religion, and the layers of history.



At first, there were few tourists, people were just coming back to the Old City after the coronavirus. But even so, there was tension, between the church and the police; there were power struggles everywhere, and my 8x10 camera could get mistaken for a TV camera... I was close to getting official permission for my project when the war started.



What's inside the pictures is this idea of layers, or the idea of what Sugimoto called "the camera as a time machine": each exposure contains the entirety of that stay in the Old City. The work isn't gestural—rather, I'm putting myself with the camera in front of something that can go through me. Then I take a picture, and that's it.

There are places you can't go, so you don't look for a "vantage point" up above everything. I stayed at street level, sometimes with the tripod lower than eye level, always trying to work from where I actually was, and often returning to familiar places.

The Old City is one of the cultural centers of the world, so I ask myself, how am I a part of this? And as a photographer, how am I part of the photo world? Also, how can I teach, and encourage my students to work on personal projects and make photographs which are direct statements about their lives?

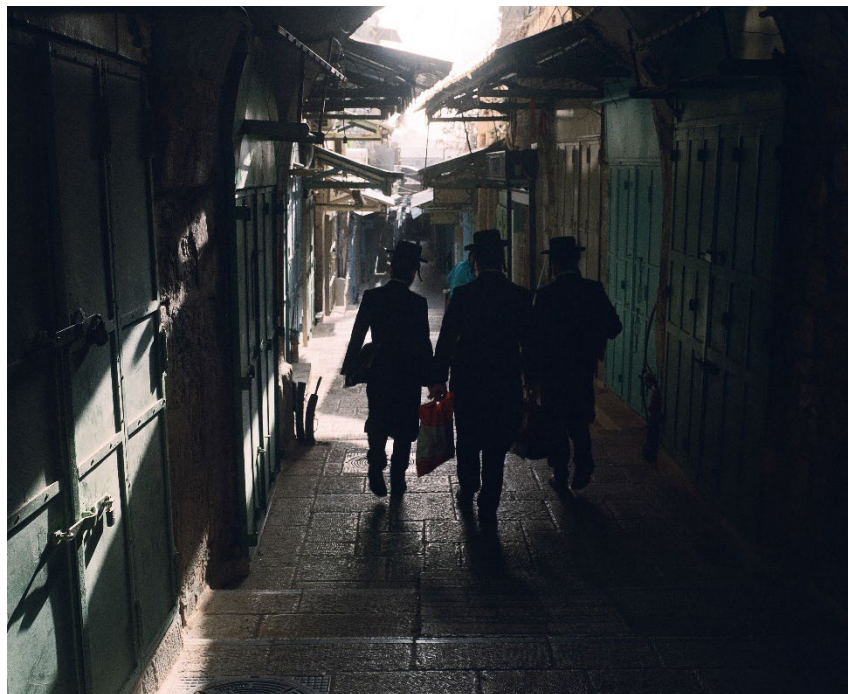


The war, to me, was the end of the state of Israel founded by my parents in 1948, but students are still obligated to service in the army. How can I as a grownup live with this? How can I preserve a sense of agency? It's very difficult to live and work where I disagree with everything, and feel the government is a disgrace. But you have to keep on as a human being, and so I keep working as a teacher—in a way, this is my act of resistance, or defiance. I talk to students about their lives, I tell them that "I can't tell you what you will do, but you are going to have a life... You don't have the luxury of being lazy or passive."

At the same time, I'm not afraid of transitional phases, I'm always thinking about what's next. You reach something new, then you can exhale... Each project is another layer, hopefully still developing. This is what my life is now.



Each picture takes its own route, people read them differently. But I want to give people a sense of being there... And if my work is any good, you will eventually ask yourself about your own life.



It was Stephen Shore who said that working with an 8x10, you have to “solve” a composition, and not all these compositions have been truly solved, so I want to continue. And in the same way, I’m trying to think about Robert Frank’s work, even though I am working with a different camera. His focus was often not on the faces themselves but on the crowd: his affinity was for the humanity of the moment. So this is where I’m trying to go.



Guy Raivitz’s work is on Instagram at <https://www.instagram.com/guy.raivitz/>.

In addition to more images from the Old City, he has posted there much contemporary reportage, including his work with 35mm and iPhone cameras.



All photographs © Guy Raivitz, 2021-2022