

On Vivian Maier

The story of Vivian Maier is a haunting one, particularly in an age enamored of publicity and fame. Here is a woman who makes art that is comparable to any master of the twentieth century and never tells anyone, who creates a trove that is almost lost due to poverty and age. The comparisons with Emily Dickinson are obvious but Maier was out in the world with her camera walking the urban streets and feeling what was there. She was not a creature of a room. There are few rooms in her work. The plenitude and variety of city life must have spoken to her profoundly. Perhaps because she worked so much in a house with rooms and children, she treasured the openness of the streets.

To discover Maier's work was for me a shock. The various modes that I was accustomed to—how Walker Evans or Diane Arbus or Helen Leavitt made a photo—seemed to be incorporated in one person. It made me think that perhaps the issue wasn't so much the viewpoint of the individual photographer but the world that was out there for the photographer to capture. There was the aesthetic angle—the symmetry and asymmetry of objects and buildings and shadows and proportions. There was the wealth of human grotesquerie. There was the unselfconscious energy of people living their lives in the streets of America.

Maier has all of this but she has something more too. There is the gift of her anonymity. One feels that there is nothing between her and whatever she is photographing. There is something at once empathetic and fastidious at work. The camera—hers and, for that matter, any camera—is

at a remove from the world. Taking photographs is a strange process that makes something limited out of something unlimited. (Certain Indian tribes, such as the Hopi, forbid cameras on their reservation. The camera is a spirit robber and reducer.) Yet when we look at the limited photo, it is possible that we may have an intimation of the limitless. This makes for a very modern procedure—recondite and bracing, mechanical and intimate, always paradoxical.

In many a photo there is an aura of socialized feeling surrounding the photo. This is particularly true of photos from the 1930s or the 1960s or certain public events—an inauguration or funeral—the photographer is recording. I don't feel any socialization at work in Maier's photos. I don't feel she has any ideological stake in what she is photographing. This makes her work both pure and impure. She responds to the thrill of the simplest moment and scene, yet she is cunning. She is aware of how much a scene can contain. She relishes the complexity and fullness that may be there. Every moment is adventitious. Maier grasps that. Sometimes her grasp is soft—a boy peering into a large empty carton—and sometimes it is steely—a drunk being hauled off by two officers of the law. Sometimes it is downright dizzying as in the photo of a young couple, both persons of color, where the woman is holding some balloons. To their right, outside a door are some white people. The couple stands in a degree of shadow; the white people are in bright outside light. Above the couple is an exit sign. The looks on the faces of the couple are extraordinary and commonplace—serene, pensive, weary, abstracted. One feels that the whole world of race in the United States has been encapsulated in one photo but there is no sense of finger pointing or making a big statement. The photo is quiet, exquisitely so.

The word that comes to my mind in looking at many of Maier's photographs is their humanity. She has the knack for getting at the human race in its unguarded moments. One of the unsatisfactory qualities of portraits is that the occasion is so often an artificial moment, more the presentation of a face rather than a face. Some photographers, such as Avedon, seize on this; others, such as Arbus, spend much energy trying to fight through this dilemma. The faces that Maier seizes on are not composed but, rather, are in the midst of life. Even when the people are by themselves, one feels how life has acted upon the person to make that person's body and face be what they are. The people may be derelicts or they may be middle class women waiting at a bus stop; they may be children looking out a car or they may be two men looking at a shop window but there is always a quality of the fluid actuality of being. It's as if Maier is saying, "Here it is. You can take it or leave it but it is what it is."

Such an attitude is the opposite of the attitudes that have taken hold since the 1960s and that stress the manipulation of images. Warhol's work revels in the notion that the surface is all there is and that any surface can be manipulated to create more surfaces. If the surface haunts, it's because the manipulation of the original image haunts. We are in a hall of mirrors. We are also in the realm of anti-art. By "anti-art" I mean that the mystery that resides in humanity, the perpetual inability to get to the bottom of that mystery and the trying that art does despite that, all of these are of no worth. They are a lot of old-fashioned hoey, to put it bluntly. The world exists to be manipulated, conceptualized and theorized. Self-consciousness is all. Warhol epitomizes this. As a sort of anti-aesthete aesthete he is very serene, a veritable Corot, though it is hard to

imagine what Corot would make of him. So much of Warhol is garish but that is a judgment that has no application to the realm of manipulation. If anything it is a compliment.

Maier is possessed of great sensibility, shrewdness, openness and tact. When one spends time with her photos, one feels much larger as a human being. This seems to me to be the crucial test of an artist. Maier not only passes. She sets standards.

For more information about Vivian Maier see www.vivianmaier.com.