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Who Knows Vivian Maier?

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It's not very often that a story comes along to astonish and excite, but the tale of Vivian Maier is one such, and of such interest that I would like to alert our life writing community. I describe it first through the film version in which I encountered it, and then through a television documentary which I saw soon after. Reviewers and other commentators describe the subject in condensed ways which are also of interest as biographical micronarratives. The least you might know is the feature film's description by its maker: 'Finding Vivian Maier is the critically acclaimed documentary about a mysterious nanny, who secretly took over 100,000 photographs that were hidden in storage lockers and, discovered decades later, is now among the 20th century's greatest photographers. Directed by John Maloof and Charlie Siskel, Maier's strange and riveting life and art are revealed through never before seen photographs, films, and interviews with dozens who thought they knew her.'

Finding Vivian Maier begins with a young man on the hunt for illustrations for a book he is writing, and buying a box more or less on spec at auction. Inside he finds photographic negatives of such quality that he tracks down the buyers of the other boxes, and finds himself drawn into the beginnings and the makings of a huge archival and biographical project. He manages to identify the elusive artist, and locates a vast jumble of materials in storage. Slowly he begins to assemble contacts with people who knew her – not as an artist of extraordinary genius, but as a mysterious and eccentric nanny: Vivian Maier.

The young man, John Maloof, has devoted years to recovering Maier's work, patiently tracking down her life history and promoting her work through exhibitions, books, a website and a documentary film which you may be lucky enough to see on general release. For lifewriting scholars and practitioners, Maier's story is fascinating as a paradigm of self-woven mystery, unconventionality, disguise and performances. She worked as a

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nanny yet always had a camera with her – a twin eye Rolleiflex, a camera first issued in 1928, in which you look down to focus. That movement enabled her to get close to her subjects, helped by that curious understanding of personal space which good photographers enter with a respect in turn understood by their subjects. It also wonderfully disrupts much theorising about the gaze, because the gaze goes vertical, eyes ostensibly lowered, hence not the usual paradigm of the gaze as horizontal assertion associated with mastery. Maier photographed anything and everything, with a crisp awareness of light, shadow, composition, emotion and situation. Her tenderest subjects are children – happy, distressed, natural – and the dispossessed and downtrodden of big cities, especially Chicago and New York. Her self-portraits and landscapes are creatively original, yet recognisably stylish. She has an obvious and extraordinary genius.

Maier's photographs alone make the discovery of her a joy. But there's more to her. She was a hoarder, with a special penchant for newspapers. One (very obliging!) employer had to reinforce his study ceiling with a steel beam because Maier crammed in mountains of newspapers in her room overhead, buckling the floor. She acquired paper scraps, material fragments, ephemera, mementoes; she made little movies, recorded interviews at check-outs, spoke thoughts onto tape. Yet from the chaotically enormous collection of objects and images that count as her possessions, she becomes no more knowable. The psychology of hoarding usually supposes an intensity of acquisition and preservation as defence against a sense of lack, or as a bandage to some deep hurt. Maloof cautiously leaves space for those readings: that she had been abused as a child, that she had been violated somehow by men, though his film gestures to matrilineage as a more positive source of identity, including some surprising fictions. Maier played with her names endlessly, and her accent was also an autobiographical invention. Maloof's film toys with this mystery: he discovers she was born and bred in New York but that her mother came from France and Maier did return there. Her foreign-sounding accent is thus not authentic, argues one interviewee, a linguistics expert who in a move that may amuse academics everywhere, insists he can tell because his thesis was on the length of French vowels.

Maloof's film has a narrative ambivalence in that what starts as an enthusiastic quest to reassemble an artist's biography becomes anxiously aware of its powers of trespass. Maier's secrecy about herself in her own life makes Maloof increasingly uneasy about exposing her privacy, at the stage of the film where the audience is wholly complicit with recovery as uncovering. Maloof's discovery of Maier as person begins to exceed his discovery of her photographs, though he insists, and rightly, that her work is what really matters. Do we need to know about the artist to appreciate

the art? What if the artist is explicitly evasive? What if the artist's sense of identity is also artful? It is of course a striking irony that we talk of exposure: Maier treated personality as something not to be exposed, like one of the thousands of undeveloped rolls of film she left in mountains of boxes.

What can you learn about her from photographs of herself? She took many, often playing with windows, shadows, reflective surfaces. Two self-portraits made me gasp: in one, Maier stands before a circular mirror, reflected just off centre, so a series of diminishing reflections of self and mirror occupy the field of vision, spiralling into unknowability. That's really difficult to compose, and yet it looks so right, so natural, as if a person and their gift for seeing becomes a philosophical field of here shrinking into gone. An aura of brightness in the lighting makes it an inevitability to accept, not mourn. In another image, an evidently poor man is loading an angled piece of mirror onto a truck: snap and she has herself reflected in it, a sliver both joining a procession of artefact and detached from it. What alertness to see the possibility, and what quick grace to take it! And is it a portrait, a self-portrait, a double portrait?

Maloof's film is not a hagiography: about two thirds in, his interviewees start to testify to a dark side. A nanny who takes children to stockyards to see animals being slaughtered, a nanny who takes pictures as one of her charges lies hit by a car, a nanny whose hoarding became so compulsive she was almost walled up in her always-locked room…what humanity was sacrificed to her gift, or sublimated into it? Maloof finds one piece of evidence that suggests she did want her work to go out into the world; a professional photographer observes she lacked the edge that you need to get your work noticed. At first Maloof's efforts to interest photographic museums and galleries met with rebuff; bravely and creatively he found the means to mount exhibitions, so successful that public acclaim has forced a critical rethink. Popular interest has also dissolved the usual boundaries between biographical subject and biographer; Maloof's website invites democratic participation in extending our knowledge of Maier and her works.

The life of Vivian Maier (1926–2009) spans a great technological change. Her preferred camera is a sort of antique, yet it suited the imaging of here and now over decades. The materials of her biographical story are also quaint if you're under forty – millions of bits of paper, letters, receipts, newspapers (which she seems to have collected for gory headlines). Yet the methodology of reconstituting her biographical story is emphatically contemporary, as social media spreads the word and solicits further information. Maloof's charmingly ingenuous first move was to Google her name: he drew a blank. Now the web becomes a means of

spreading her fame, as teams of technicians work day after day to scan her photographs for posting online.

Maier dressed in outsize coats, clumpy boots, floppy hats in a style vaguely masculine and obviously unfashionable. The film shows comically how her eccentricity was accepted even in conservative neighbourhoods. Her French forbears thought it a bit odd that she found fields and rural faces beautiful; her American employers agreed she was weird but let her continue to stuff their clapboard houses with newspapers. Who is odd and who is weird here? Some of the children she cared for loved her enough to pay her rent in old age; others were warier, hinting at cruelty. These contrary impressions come across not as contradictions but as complexities. And as one interviewee shrewdly observes, living with others meant she didn't have to hold down a job to pay rent: she could fund the life she wanted, transient and self-determining. If loneliness came with it, so did freedom.

Maloof presents a compelling picture himself. Like A.J.A. Symons in *The Quest for Corvo*, he shares some of the travails of the hunt, and admits in small ways to the obviously giant compulsion that has grown from his initial interest. Does it outgrow him? Or can he outgrow it? He wasn't the only person to buy Maier's work and get excited, but he implies an identification. Maier's work is now his, always assigned as the Maloof Collection, and his work is about her. He bought the auction box in 2007, two years before Maier died – a tantalising overlap in the absence of his being able to interview her himself. His self-description is modest. You wonder how his life has been changed by hers.

British audiences have had a double introduction to Maier via an award-winning film by Alan Yentob, Creative Director at the BBC and currently presenter on the arts programme *Imagine*. In 'Who Took Nanny's Pictures?', broadcast in August 2014, Yentob focuses on Maier more as photographer than Mary Poppins, though some of his interviewees overlap with Maloof's list. I saw his film second and thought it addressed her art more seriously, or more as a given, noting from the start that her prints now command serious and rising prices: $2000 for a posthumous print, $8000 for prints made by her, a long way from what Maloof first charged when he sold prints on e-Bay. Yentob interviews Ron Slattery, the first person to buy her work – paying $250 for a box, casually inspected, from auction – and constructs a fascinating sequence in which the early buyers describe wary deals between themselves, each bringing wads of money and armed bodyguards. Going over much of the same biographical ground, Yentob makes less of mysteries and more of patterns; one of his informants, Pamela Bannos, makes a convincing case that Vivian continued a matrilineal pattern of women in domestic service, on their own

with small children. He makes more of Maier's solitude: where her beach photos from Chicago's North Shore feature child subjects, his version of her urban walks takes place after children's bedtimes, when she would head into the city by train and walk the streets of rundown neighbourhoods. Her indigent subjects, he proposes, were an antidote to the well-heeled bourgeois world of her employers and he brings in Sara Paretsky whose fictional detectives stalk the same area, who suggests Maier may have found it reassuring to know she was not alone in being an outsider.

Like Maloof's film, Yentob's is necessarily one of suggestions, speculation being the operative mode about Maier's shadowy life. Where Maloof sees Maier learning as she goes, Yentob puts forward a more ambitious story of self-education, tracking through photographs to show in 1952 Maier almost certainly went to an exhibition of French photography at New York's MOMA, outside whose entrance she photographed Salvador Dali. That makes Maier emphatically not an ingénue or an amateur, though she never made professional connections from photographer friends and employers. Yentob also constructs a more narrative arc about the vast body of work: that after 1968, with its riots and Kennedy assassination, Maier's outlook turns darker; she photographs grim fluttering headlines and garbage bins. In the 1980s, she simply couldn't afford to take as many photographs; her spirit and means dwindled.

What a paradox: a life so extraordinarily fully documented, yet elusive; a life so private, yet now public and contested. One Yentob moment follows the reel of film of a day, a spooled sequence of things seen, observed, represented, a visual diary. Maier's steps are spookily retraced by Pamela Bannos, an academic now working on Maier. Bannos, whose forthcoming book is titled *Vivian Maier's Fractured Archive: A Woman's Story*, emphasises that Maier's lifelong passion is emerging through eyes other than her own – and her subtitle is important in gesturing to a gendered politics of possession. Her website reveals she has been cut out of Maloof's loop and denied access to the materials he owns. Maloof and Yentob present variable Vivian Maiers; her photographs are evidence, convergent and divergent. In the phenomenon of 'viral Vivian', questions of ownership, editing and access go fuzzy in the Internet-accelerated romanticism for street photography. Is this fracture going to be important in understanding Maier as a photographer? As Bannos puts it, 'her eyes were her voice'. What are we hearing and how is it affected by the means by which we see?

Since Timothy Dow Adams put forward the idea of photography, writing with light, as life writing, we can think better about visual depictions as eloquent, voicing to their human subjects. Maloof strikes a thoughtful balance, promoting promotion yet protecting against hype, and he is careful about the implications of creating posthumous capital from

someone else's art. Yentob also packages Maier as a mystery, with an air of intrigue to hook audiences, though his film treats the complications of her life more straightforwardly. The bottom line has to be that Maier's photography is a revelation, and her story is surely intriguing for life writing. Go and see for yourself.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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NOTES

Finding Vivian Maier dir. John Maloof and Charlie Siskel (Ravine Pictures 2013) Official trailer http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2o2nBhQ67Zc
Alan Yentob (dir) 'Who took Nanny's Pictures?' (BBC, Imagine, 2013) http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b0366jd5
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