

## INTRODUCTION: VIVIAN MAIER

Vivian Maier (1926–2009) grew up in France but spent her professional life as a nanny on Chicago’s North Shore. It was not known until after her death that her estate contained over 100,000 photographic prints and negatives, many of astonishing beauty, none of which were publicized during her lifetime. Interest in her work has grown rapidly; since 2011, it has been the subject of eight solo exhibitions in Chicago, New York City, and Europe, as well as books and an upcoming documentary film. In this portfolio, we reproduce images of eight unique prints selected from an exhibition held at Chicago’s Corbett vs. Dempsey gallery in the summer of 2012. Because there is no full catalog of the exhibition and no surviving negatives, their publication here affords a larger public an opportunity to consider and enjoy them.

Much has been made of Maier’s privacy and her seeming outsider status, and there is a danger that the circumstances of her life—and the surprise of her posthumous discovery—may divert attention from the quality of her art. Likewise, her growing reputation as a “street photographer,” a chronicler of urban life, may belie the studied, beautiful composition that characterizes her photographs. The images reproduced here have been chosen, in part, to call attention to the sophistication of her technique. Maier’s portrait photographs artfully conceal a flattening technique pervasive throughout her work. Over decades, Maier took, on average, several photographs each day, many of them unpeopled images of such things as shadows, puddles, walls, and strewn objects. These little-exhibited or -discussed photographs make a pronounced effort to reduce three-dimensional subject matter to a two-dimensional geometric abstraction. This geometric reduction has a dramatic effect when Maier photographs human subjects, who appear projected forward from their flat frames, as if suspended. In *Man Sleeping on a Grate Next to a Brick Wall* the man nearly levitates. The shadow in *Child’s Shadow* bulges outward from the single plane of the wall, while the *Children on a Slide* hover in a depthless void. This powerful foregrounding technique may explain why her street photographs of people, which are neither posed nor planned, so often appear carefully composed.

The photographs reprinted here also demonstrate Maier’s unobtrusive presence as a photographer. Curator Jim Dempsey regularly interacted with Maier for more than a decade, yet when she asked to take his picture with her Rolleiflex camera, he recalls, “I doubted that there was even film in it. How little I knew. I didn’t even know her name.” Her approach was not to take photographs covertly, but to do so openly, with confidence that her presence

would elicit little reaction. Her subjects rarely look directly into the camera: children continue to play as if unobserved, and adults do not adopt poses. Her characteristic manner of stealing up on adults for close shots suggests she was quite aware that as a solitary, middle-aged woman she would be perceived as unthreatening and neutral, a person safely overlooked, even with camera in hand.

Maier's self-recognition may go a long way in recasting the "mystery" of her decision not to publicize her work. Those who knew her consistently describe her as extremely self-sufficient, and firm in her opinions on contemporary film and art to the point of stridency. Surviving notes and instructions to Chicago's august Central Camera Company likewise make it clear that she had her own judgments about the relative merits of her photographs, as well as strong preferences about the most advantageous way of printing her best work. Her privacy, while idiosyncratic, in no way reduces her to the status of a dilettante or outsider, and may simply reflect a total indifference to others' judgment.

If Maier should be considered as a private but committed artist, then it is valuable to mention her most obvious chronological and artistic peers: the street photographers Diane Arbus, Garry Winogrand, and Lee Friedlander. These three were famously exhibited at MoMA in 1967 under the rubric of the "New Document." Though Maier's work addresses similar subjects, she does not elicit the direct gaze from subjects so characteristic of Arbus, nor the mugging and half-conscious posing typical of Winogrand. Her interest in planes, reflections, and self-portraiture suggests an affinity with Friedlander, though these features tend to establish a frame for Maier, whereas they usually disrupt the frame in Friedlander's work.

Which photos will emerge as Maier's best or most essential contributions to the art will be decided only when her entire body of work becomes available and the particulars of her artistic practice, including her exploration of abstraction, are better understood. The most important consensus already exists: her work is beautiful. We thank the Corbett vs. Dempsey gallery for permission to reproduce these images, and Kate Rouhandeh for her help in securing permissions and preparing the images for publication.

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