

Review Life of Vivian Maier - Ann Marks - Utet - Doppiozero

The well-known American photographer Vivian Maier really never ceases to intrigue enthusiasts and professionals from all sectors, fully: there is something around her mystery that does not seem to bring peace especially to those who, after years of exhibitions, documentaries, conferences on her, don't want to stop adding pieces to the puzzle of her life. Ann Marks, a former manager of important New York companies, is one of the prey trapped in the net and in the aura of the photographer-nanny, known for street photography shots as well as self-portraits with her Rolleiflex in hand. That is how the book *Life of Vivian Maier* was born. *The unknown story of a free woman* published by Utet (2022): Marks, following in the footsteps of Vivian Maier and behaving like a true detective-hound, mapped every archive, registry office, institution that contained traces not only of the photographer's life, but also of her entire family history. In fact, the book starts from a very interesting crucial question: how much was the factor of madness present and, therefore, decisive in the life and family of Vivian Maier? This was in fact a topic always placed in second place in the narration of her story, sometimes leaking only sporadic information regarding an older brother with unidentified mental health problems. If we think of the testimonies collected by John Maloof - the true discoverer of the Vivian Maier case and director of the documentary dedicated to her (*In search of Vivian Maier*, 2013) - among the acquaintances of the woman or of the children now raised by her as a nanny, very conflicting impressions emerge, sometimes totally opposite: "Mary Poppins" on one side and "Bad Witch" on the other, cheerful and cynical, pleasant and severe. These opposites certainly bring to light a profile worthy of the attention of a psychologist, as well as a complex and stratified personality, who has learned to be in the world by trial and error that she had to make on her own, unaided by other points of reference. Behind Maier's shots hungry for humanity, then, Ann Marks tells us, there really is a world to take into consideration. This, one might say, can apply to everyone, authors and artists in particular, given the wave of biographical mythologization of the great of past centuries. In this case, however, the discovery of an enormous talent hidden behind an amateur with low ambitions adds ingredients to reach the unanimous favor of those who come across her story. Vivian Maier's life, needs emphasizing, begins in a totally disastrous family, from every point of view: her mother Marie - who abandoned Vivian when she was only a teenager - never managed to overcome her condition as an illegitimate daughter, trauma that caused her to develop an unstable and, in her later years, schizophrenic personality; Brother Carl was in and out of reformatory and prisons several times, until his expulsion from military service for drug use, and so on. This is how we become aware of a Vivian alone and without a reference figure, the possible origin of her future character contrasts. Undoubtedly, Vivian was the only one who managed to find an acceptable escape from the dramatic decline of her family, choosing what to do and where to go with a decision that also characterized her *modus operandi* in photography: Ann Marks focuses, in fact, on her peculiar "habit of shooting only once" (p.102), even in the face of unrepeatable moments, simply due to a strong self-confidence in one's abilities. The author of the book has really managed to trace a very detailed mosaic of Maier's life, step by step we can almost follow her decisions, rejections, interpersonal relationships with employers and scarce friendships. This type of operation makes us reflect above all in the recent historical context, in which an increasingly less scholastic conception of photography is finally arriving in favor of the creation of its first media myths: in a few years two films have been dedicated to as many masters of photography, Eugene Smith (in the film *The Minamata Case*, of 2020) and Nan Goldin with the recent, acclaimed film *All the beauty and*

the pain, making clear the need and the will of the general public to know the most important authors of photography as one might want to know Klimt or Van Gogh. It's no small matter: the way of understanding a discipline plays largely on the reception of a certain imagery by the public, and if the request is to understand who produced an image, it can only mean that image has actually touched consciences to the point of even arousing curiosity. Vivian Maier is in fact an extreme case of photography, a wildcard with which we know we can win the hand: her production, in which Ann Marks' book accompanies us with meticulous patience, has such usability that it can promptly and really speak to everyone: Maier's humanity is harmless even when it is bloody, and she is lucid even in dealing with the unfathomable emotional range of her subjects. Perhaps knowing the gloomy and traumatic context in which Vivian grew up we can better understand the hunger that moved the eyes of her twenty-five years, the age at which she really began to photograph. If the camera is often seen as a means of enhancing the human eye, i.e. an instrument capable of defining a truth that would otherwise be difficult to grasp, for Maier we can perhaps speak of a necessary filter, real "glasses", which rather than enhancing, they guarantee "the ability to establish a connection while keeping a distance" (p.217), at least making the sight itself possible. Thus we can imagine her, also thanks to Ann Marks' clear and fluid narration, sneaking into funerals to immortalize widows, or approaching the streets of the Bronx to collect testimonies of humanity that perhaps reminded her of her controversial emotional roots. Vivian Maier is best known for her images of children, subjects that she was able to observe closely with her craft: her "perennial reluctance to idealize her young subjects" (p.140) often causes her to be associated, in the book, with the photographer Weegee, known for his shots of crime news in New York in the same years in which Maier moved (and on which there is also one of the few films dedicated to the great photographers, *Indiscreet Eye*, from 1992). Although the similarity may appear forced, since Weegee's character worked for the newspapers of the time and founded a style that is both *noir* and poetic to represent mostly crime scenes and corpses, it is correct to underline the attention of both towards a special human truth, sometimes capable of manifesting itself in the form of contrasting elements: in Weegee we can see a letterbox announcing the imminent Christmas holidays and, just behind it, a helpless body lying with the signs of a violent death; in Vivian Maier the extremes meet within her own production, in which the well put together faces of high society appear, just as homeless people asleep on the bench and in bad shape, or her famous children in tears next to careless mothers in furs. Vivian Maier's condition, oscillating between life alongside rich bourgeois families and absolute poverty, undoubtedly gave her the ability to understand and contemplate a vast range of examples in which humanity can represent itself, eliminating from its gaze any possible veil or judgment. For this reason, Maier's shots appear clear in their desire to affirm, simply and sometimes with a sardonic smile, what she is, as she is: we have already dealt with the character of the photographer-nanny here on Doppiozero, highlighting the process according to which, by accumulating and sampling every human nuance - going to constitute a sort of photographic *Comédie Humaine* - Maier tried to find her own boundaries in a world that, as a young woman, had rejected and set her aside. Now, in the light of Ann Marks' discoveries about her, expanded by accurate appendices and a list of sources, we can assume that the voids left in Vivian during the stages of her growth have been filled by the exorbitance of faces, moods, situations you recorded. The very fact that many rolls of film had not even been developed can shed light in favor of this theory, in which only "having seen" made all the difference. One gets the vivid sensation, reading the book, that Vivian Maier almost managed to generate in many a deep regret of not having been able to know her, even only

through the media, when she was alive: it is not only the photographic talent - controversial too given the demonstrated lack of tact with which she approached even her most fragile subjects - leaving open parentheses and numerous question marks, but also her life carried out in a true existential limbo. A life employed by other families, entrenched within her boxes as they progressively filled to the brim with every paper trace of her passage - newspapers, tickets, diaries - and every slightest professional ambition as a photographer cut short by her growing organizational and communicative incapacity. Ann Marks' book may be precisely the result of such a void, the one that Vivian Maier's passage has left without giving the world enough time to notice her in order to ask her the crucial questions, so as to manage and to broaden as possible the pool of useful elements to get to know the photographer who has spent her life in marginalization, never finding any other peace except in making herself the only true guardian of her own mysteries.

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