

Vivian Maier

UNKNOWN
TO MYSELF

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AND SILVESTRA SBARBARO

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Who was *Vivian Maier*, a nanny?

A photographer?

She was basically a stranger who went through life looking after other people's children and gazing at the world through the lens of her Rolleiflex until John Maloof, who had casually got hold of thousands of her negatives, showed her photos to the whole world. Since then, many people have been rummaging inside her life, in search of clues that might reveal some mystery of this secretive woman.

We have chosen to let her pictures talk, as the only real statement that, perhaps unwittingly, she has left us.

I'm Nobody! Who are you?
Are you — Nobody — Too?
Then there's a pair of us!
Don't tell! They'd advertise — you know!

Emily Dickinson

NOTE BY THE AUTHORS

The photographer's story is told by a *Vivian in 2008*, imagined as an old woman in her Chicago home, using a voice-off while videos related to text contents are shown.

Pensiero fotografico di Vivian (Vivian's photographic thought) is developed as a long monologue by a reciting voice which, though present, remains in the background because the centre of the scene is taken by the photographer's video-projected snapshots, which accompany the narrative rhythm and capture the spectator's attention.

This aesthetic choice was deliberately made so as to give centre stage to the uniqueness of her gaze that, also through her self-portraits, reveals her soul and the singularity of her journey in photography and in life.

For the writing of this monologue we used some texts whose reading stimulated our imagination. We gratefully wish to remember: *Vivian Maier: A Photographer's Life and Afterlife* by Pamela Bannos (The University of Chicago Press, Chicago 2017); *Vivian Maier. A Photographer Found* by John Maloof (Harper Design, New York 2014); *Vivian Maier: Street Photographer* edited by John Maloof (8powerHouse Books, New York 2011); *Vivian Maier Self-portrait*, edited by John Maloof (powerHouse Books, New York 2013); *Finding Vivian Maier* by John Maloof and Charlie Siskel (Genres: Documentary, Biography, Mystery - 2013).

However, beyond those sources, this monologue is a work of fiction that takes its cue from an irrefutable reality: the life and art of Vivian Maier. Names, characters, places, events, locales and incidents are either the products of the author's imagination or used in a fictitious manner. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or actual events is purely coincidental. The text must be understood in its entirety as a work of fantasy.

It stemmed essentially from the emotions aroused by her photographs.

We have imagined moments and secrets of her existence starting from the soul that emerges from the fragments of life caught with her Rolleiflex, perhaps in an attempt to make them eternal.

Patrizia Ercole and Silvestra Sbarbaro

The monologue *Unknown to myself - Vivian Maier* was played in a national Premiere in Genoa, on 3rd and 4th June 2019, for the celebration of ten years from the death of street photographer Vivian Maier, during the 25th *Festival Internazionale di Poesia di Genova "Parole spalancate"* (Genoa International Poetry Festival "Wide-open Words"), directed by Anna Biserni and Patrizia Ercole, interpreter: Patrizia Ercole.

I took all those photos to try to find my place in the world.

Mine is the story of a shadow.

Vivian Maier

Characters

Vivian in Chicago, 2008

Vivian's photographic thought

Vivian's photographic thought – Sometimes I wonder at what moment photography became the centre of my existence. I go over the past in my mind. I see my mother again, proudly showing me the newspaper article about her beloved friend Jeanne.¹ I was too young to be able to read it, but I can still recall my thrill when I saw Jeanne's familiar face printed on the large paper. Her gentle face was so far from my mother's sad and angry face. In her house, which for some time was ours too,

¹ Jeanne Bertrand (born 26th September 1880 in Agnières-en-Dévoluy, Le Dévoluy in France, died on 28th October 1957), was a professional photographer who had the honour of appearing on 23rd August 1902 on the front page of the *Boston Globe*, Boston's main newspaper, which published a photo of hers and two of her portraits, together with an article praising her talent as a young photographer. She was the one who passed on to Marie and her daughter Vivian her passion for photography in 1930 in New York, when she, Jeanne, put them up for some time at her home.

she had covered one of the living room walls in Kodak advertisements depicting “Kodak Girls”: they were young girls, always fashionable, lively and independent. I was fascinated by that image of an energetic woman, always on the move. Perhaps what I have become is the reflection of that image.

Vivian in 2008 (*voice off*) – I was born in New York in 1926, while my family was falling apart. It was a freezing Monday in February; incessant rain kept pouring and filling the streets with puddles that reflected shabby frontages and a play of clouds and shadows, the future scenarios of many of my snapshots.

New York received me with indifference: who cares about an immigrants’ child born in a messed-up family?

Maybe someone gave me an absent-minded look while I was passing by pushing a pram, but none of them escaped my look.

I gazed among the lines of faces which told of tears and smiles, I observed their gestures, their anger, their tenderness, the drop-outs who lived in the street. I liked lingering on the frailness of the elderly and children, on the shadows stubbornly stretching behind them or before their uncertain steps, sometimes firmer and more confident than their own bodies. I would get shamelessly close to their lives, shielded by my camera: a barrier between me and the world.