

A compared analysis of Vivian Maier's Work

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Introduction

These are mere personal thoughts and notes, I have no critique background nor did I receive any formal training for that field and purpose. In other words I have no credentials to make my point very valid. So these are just personal impressions from what I know and feel about photography. And I believe the work of Vivian Maier requires some study [and there seems to be nothing like that in January 2011, right after the first exhibition of her work, a time which is probably much too soon for a serious work]. My thoughts might appear superficial and not documented enough but they are my 2 cents. I hope that others, much more qualified than I am, will take time in commenting Maier's work sooner or later.

One point which is raised here and here [on the internet] is to which extent the work of Maier was derivative. But we got almost no direct information about which work from other photographers she had access (except a collection of books that we don't know when she got them). So I will try to figure out which are the photographers who might have influenced her, or at least to who she could be related from the perspective of her photographic vision.

Don't ask me to say that she was better than X or inferior to Y. This makes little sense to me. What I want to do is to roughly put her work into perspective with other photographers that did a similar kind of work (i.e. mostly street photographers) within a similar time frame.

One difficult thing in assessing Maier's work is that we have to compare materials which, on one side, has been often harshly edited by the photographers themselves and their curators, whereas we are left with very small portions from a wide and unedited-by-her body of work in the case of Vivian Maier. A photographer's vision is not only built at the moment of the exposure but also owes a lot to how the work is edited afterwards. In the case of Vivian Maier this stage of editing the work has been eluded at the time of her living and that task is carried out now by third parties, decades after the photographs were produced and with almost no insight on how she would have worked out her material. As much appealing as some pictures might seem to us now there could be a "nostalgia" or whatever bias in the images selected, an inclination for historical documentary value that comes across, and from which the work itself was probably devoid. After all we don't know how many pictures were rejected by Cartier-Bresson, Levitt etc.. and that would appear to be fantastic shots if unveiled today. Those are probably numerous.

Also one note concerning the date of some of the Maier's pictures I will use: those are the one that I could get from what is publicly available on blogs etc...which I am not sure how they were established. It is an important factor but at this stage I can not do otherwise than trust those dates.

Part 1: Vivian Maier, Lisette Model and Diane Arbus.

If you ask me which photographer the Maier's work (unveiled so far) seem to be related the most I would say Lisette Model.



By the way Maier and Model strangely share some early very similar biographical details, separated by a time lag of about 20 years (earlier for Model). Both women had an Austrian Jewish father (who died when they were young) and a French catholic mother. Both were baptized Roman Catholic. Although Maier was born in New-York and Model in Austria they both spent a significant part of their youth in France, where they meet some artistic figures and got formal photography training (at least we can assume so in the case of Maier), before emigrating/returning to the US. At this point their life has diverged, Maier becoming a nanny when Model pursued a career as a photographer.

Maier shares with Model many stylistic features as well as an inclination for similar “characters” as subject matter. There is the use of glass reflections, an inclination to expressionism, and also for doing close-up of people body parts (Model’s “Legs” series)



Photograph by Vivian Maier



Photograph by Lisette Model



Photograph by Vivian Maier

But one thing that strikes me is the very likeness of self-portraiture.



Lisette Model. Self portrait



Lisette Model. Self portrait



Vivian Maier. Self-portrait

It is difficult to argue whether or not, or to which extent, Maier was influenced by Model. There is no biographical information known so far that says she was in contact with her work. Maybe the two ladies have naturally developed similarities in their vision, Maier ignoring Model's work. Maybe the common features of their early life has contributed to build a similar outlook on the world.

But despite obvious similarities there is in my opinion some noticeable difference in the tonality, the "social statement" contained in the pictures – and it may have to do with what Colin Westerbeck referred as "a lack of distance" when speaking about Maier's images. Whereas Lisette Model's eye is often critical, distant and sometimes on the verge of caricature, as an early

precursor of Martin Parr, Maier is much more into light irony and empathy towards her subjects. I would say that the “Mary Poppins” (a word that was used to describe her) often points out in Maier’s work. But again, this impression is based on the work publicly available so far, compared to what has been edited for Model.

At this point it has to be noted that Maier was fond of cinema. She was said to sometimes refer herself as a movie critique, and I feel that it shows in some of her photographs. She sometimes shoot the people to give them the feel of actors, she seem to have liked to shoot well-dressed people etc... In other words she showed some aesthetic refinement and maybe a tendency to romanticize that, more often than not, inhibits the work from having a more critical, cynical and/or social dimension. That could lead to say some of her work suffers of being somewhat shallow, too much romantic, but we can argue that Helen Levitt did the same, in the sense that she would wear out the social dimension from her pictures – though she used other strategy for that.

The fact that **Diane Arbus** was a pupil of Lisette Model, and that Model’s influence was a key factor for Arbus later work might have something to do with the parallel made between Maier and Arbus. But I believe that the comparison between Maier and Arbus lies on rather superficial aspects though, including the use of square format. The point is that if you use a square format for doing street portrait or environmental portrait you are likely to come close – superficially – to Arbus aesthetic.



Photograph by Diane Arbus

But I believe that Arbus derived from Model a much more “psychological” approach to photography. An inclination for a certain expressionism, and extreme, often marginal, characters are the obvious starting points of Arbus later work, but they don’t definite it completely. Also at one point of her career (early 60’s) Arbus ceased to be the genuine street-photographer that she has been briefly, in the strict sense of the SP tradition. She seemed to have needed more overall intimacy. On the other hand Maier’s approach has remained very “street” throughout her life and her style of street portraiture, though sometimes highly original, is rooted in the street tradition.

I won’t risk myself to develop an extensive analysis of Arbus work, which is very complex and for which there is lot of already existing materials. But one point which I find interesting though, in the context of a comparison with Maier, is the relationship of subject matter to the background, the direct environment as it is described in the photograph. It is true that some work by Arbus, especially outdoor candid shots, might come close to some of Maier’s portraits. But whereas Maier often uses more classical strategies (based on graphical relationships, playing with perspectives, lines and textures), Arbus would often create a sort of intriguing continuum between her model and what is all around (which sometimes is very cluttered and has no graphical obviousness), with

a resulting quasi-impersonation of the surrounding – to the point that in some pictures it mimics the model him/herself. With Arbus the relation main-subject-to-background ceased to be graphical or documentary, but instead expands the psychological dimension of the image. She has been extremely influential on later generations of photographers for that.

Maier was a prodigious street portrait maker, probably one of the best ever. Her work shows an incredible instinct and spontaneity, as well as technical excellence for that kind of image. But it does not involve that compelling, unsettling psychological closeness which is present in Diane Arbus most iconic shots. Actually I believe the works from Maier and Arbus differ deeply in nature.



Photograph by Vivian Maier

Part 2. Vivian Maier and Helen Levitt.

When it comes to comparing Vivian Maier's work with other photographers, Helen Levitt comes to me as second to Lisette Model, but strangely for quite opposite reasons.



Photograph by Vivian Maier

The kind of people and scene captured in Maier's work is often close to what Levitt would shot in New-York City, although the people photographed by Maier are often of better standard of living than the ones in Levitt's work. Anyway these are rather common subject matters for street photography, especially for the period that spans from the 40's up to the 70's.

Instead the very common point I find between Levitt and Maier is a tendency to "romanticize" the reality, to make it stage-like, and also to convey empathy for the people photographed (hence why I said the reason is opposite to that of Lisette Model).



Photograph by Vivian Maier

In the case of Levitt the situation is more sophisticated than it seems though, especially when considering her favorite subject matter, i.e. children from poor neighborhoods.



Fig 1. Photograph by Helen Levitt

With Levitt there is a more or less conscious tendency for setting up a choreography, which includes not only the ability to capture compelling people's gesture, but also involves a "situational" dimension. By that I mean a specific use of the environment, the elements of cityscape used as backdrop, which is often transformed through her lens into a fantasy scenery or stage for kids game, as opposed to be used as a documentary background. That point is well developed in the essay by Sandra S. Philipps about Levitt for the SFMOMA book [1]. After her early practice of photography, in the 30's, and the decisive encounter with Cartier-Bresson of whom she admired the work (and who pushed her to attend Fine Art galleries and look at paintings) she has developed a sharp, focused and conscious sense of composition. And Levitt did most of her career in the direct neighborhoods of her home, she knew well the places she photographed. Her framing is not lousy nor casual but instead is highly rigorous and often conceived in a way that it creates a sense of finite space at the relevant scale for the kids playing – despite the constraints imposed by candid and unplanned shots in urban environment. A consequence of that is that the social and sheer documentary dimensions of the image are relegated to a secondary level, giving the picture a sort of floating, timeless and fantasy vibe.



Fig 2. Photograph by Helen Levitt

One of Levitt's most emblematic shot is – to me – the one with the little girl and two cars (below), shot in color in the 70's. Not only it is an extremely compelling image but is also paramount of Levitt's conceptions.



Photograph by Helen Levitt

Here the background has almost completely eluded its documentary dimension and comes out as a quasi abstraction. And the “performer”, the little girl, whilst anonymous, shines through an improbable body language. But nevertheless the lack of facial expression, the human dimension and its related empathy is still here, yet very powerful. This picture is a little poem, a masterpiece of ambiguity which we don't know if it belongs to tragedy or comedy.

By offering such fleeting moments, “decisive moments”, Levitt was one of the then (40's and onward) important figure of street photography genre to give it a twist and make it distinct from sheer reportage and documentary photography. In that she was close (in my opinion the closest) to Cartier Bresson conceptions, which were nurtured by apprenticeship with painter Andre Lhote, and in some way she worked that out in a more focused manner than the famous French man did. It opened the door to a more elusive, stage-like conception of street photography that later on (although they may not owe that much to Levitt's stylistic and aesthetic approach) will be pushed much further by people such as Winogrand, Friedlander etc...

The effort put in Maier's work might not have been brought to the same level of articulation than Levitt. But who knows ? We can only judge today from a recently discovered material which is still largely unknown. Anyway at this stage there is an essential element in Maier's style which is the seemingly extensive use of square format. I will maybe later on conclude this analysis series in saying that the use of square format was to Maier a strength as well as a weakness – being plenty aware that it may sound like a premature sweeping statement. But if the forthcoming publishing of her work confirms the early impression that she was much more at her ease with the square format than the horizontal and vertical crops (especially the horizontal) I believe this deserves some thoughts. And one thing that comes to my mind by looking at the many shots published from Maier so far is that she tends to make a rather systemic usage of her Rolleiflex TLR. Subject matter is often centered and distance from it varies not much, which is probably a combined effect of square crop and waist-level viewfinder position. This works well for portraiture but shows limitation for other situations.



Fig 3. Photograph by Vivian Maier

If one compares the shot above (fig 3.) with the ones from Levitt (fig.1 and 2) we can see the problem posed by the use of square crop in somewhat similar situations. On the Maier's shot (fig 3.) the composition is well constructed on the scalar motives behind. It is rather brilliantly framed for that matter by the way. But the kids' group dynamic and consistency suffers from the resulting "square" logic (both crop and motives) whereas Levitt found the relevant place to develop a consistent and ballet-like "story" by combining moment and frame.



Photograph by Vivian Maier

Similar things could be said of street portraiture when comparing Maier to Levitt e.g. with the 2 shots below. Here to illustrate the difference coming from using square frame, waist-level view as opposed to horizontal framing. Both are remarkable images on their own right.



Photograph by Helen Levitt

Coincidentally Helen Levitt, who was 13 years older, died just a handful of days before Vivian Maier, in March 2009.

Part3: Vivian Maier and Cartier-Bresson.

I'll start this post with a general comment following a review [2] of the recent Vivian Maier show in Chicago, written by Dave Fultz on The Online Photographer, and especially about that statement which I find curious :

Her portraits of adults on the other hand are curious. There is a peculiar sort of neutrality to many of them that some might say is a discursive style choice but that I find lacks the direct human connection that is so often the mark of truly great street photography

In the following comments reader Ken Tanaka replies:

Her images of adults are, indeed, quite detached and treat the subjects like zoo spectacles. But I, personally, like that very much. I'm not that interested in engaging with people as subjects, either.

... which I think offers a better perspective. Indeed I disagree with Dave Fultz initial statement, not in the fact that her stare on adults is curious, but on the critique about lack of connection. Actually many great street photographers show that detachment (and by the way the controversial sayings from Colin Westerbeck about Maier was to argue the exact opposite!), and speaking of “treating the subjects like zoo spectacles”, Garry Winogrand, a master of the street genre, had few to learn from anybody else on the matter.

And there is often the same sort of detachment, “neutrality” with Cartier-Bresson as well, that sort of aristocratic outlook on the world. And the resulting tension between detachment and empathy can every so often make great images.



Photograph by Henri Cartier-Bresson



Photograph by Henri Cartier-Bresson



Photograph by Vivian Maier

Actually it might be not a very good idea to draw a short comparison of Maier's work to that of Henri Cartier-Bresson. But it is difficult to imagine that a street-photographer of the generation of Vivian Maier could have ignored the seminal Cartier-Bresson. What did she saw from HCB ? Did she like it and did that influence her ?



Photograph by Vivian Maier



Photograph by Henri Cartier-Bresson

I find that, in the like of Cartier-Bresson, Maier had a remarkable sense of geometry. She was seemingly often after compositions involving multiple and complex lines with resulting neat images. Furthermore there are few architectural shots from Maier that testimonies her concerns about such sharp lines and patterns. Check out the very interesting one below. [next]



Fig 1. Photograph by Vivian Maier

It would be interesting to learn about chronological data about those architecture shots. The one published so far seem to have been done at a later point of her life. So I am not sure if the architectural shots helped her to build up her composition skill for more street images, if it was a new direction, or if more simply it was part of her routine to alternate people shots and such architecture shots. One thing though is that on some occasional pictures one can see how she would interlace the idea of strong lines and street vibe, such as in the one below.



Fig 2. Photograph by Vivian Maier

Compare that shot (fig 2) to that of the airport before (fig 1). Note the exact same use of triangle in the upper left corner.

Although these are far to be my favorite sort of shots, and in my opinion and more importantly not the most personal kind of thing she came up with, they undoubtedly show Maier's concerns and high level of consciousness for geometric lines. But whereas Cartier Bresson was often after curves, Vivian Maier was seemingly more keen to use sharp lines for backdrops. One can say that the geometry conceptions of Maier were more "masculine" than the one from HCB in some way.

Actually I find her work sometimes evokes André Kertész much more than Cartier-Bresson.



Photograph by André Kertész

... or ... well ?...



Photograph by Vivian Maier

Although Cartier-Bresson can be held responsible for having established a sort of classicism of street and reportage photography, some further stylistic evolutions are more or less embryonic in his work, that prefigures what people such as Winogrand and Friedlander would do, especially the use of multiple-layers and “peripheral vision”.



Photograph by Henri Cartier-Bresson

Part 4: Vivian Maier and the “modern”: Harry Callahan, Garry Winogrand, Lee Friedlander

A “modern” approach to street photography, starting from the late 50’s often involves a “peripheral vision”, that is literally opening the frame and capturing much of what’s all around, instead of focusing on / detaching a main subject-matter (albeit its juxtaposed motifs). The resulting images often have multiple focal points, would suggest multiple, sometimes opposite, energies and directions and every so often involve of tension(s) and visual dissonances. Many old rules are broken. One could make a comparison with tonal music as opposed to polytonality/polymodality (and by the way it is interesting to note that jazz music went through a similar evolution at the very same period with musicians such as Miles Davis, Bill Evans, John Coltrane, Jimmy Giuffree ...)

Examples of these new conceptions are the ‘Providence’ photograph from Harry Callahan.



Harry Callahan, Providence, 1968

... and this famous photograph below from Garry Winogrand.



Garry Winogrand - Dealey Plaza, Dallas, 1964

These new conceptions requires most of the time to frame into an horizontal aspect ratio (as opposed to square format and portrait format) which sounds rather logical because the world and its energies are largely organized horizontally.

But actually there is a new, less rigid sense of frame in photograph which is being developed here, together with the use of lenses of wider angle than used before. And although it is sometimes wrongly perceived as lousy, casual (“snapshot”), there is a concern with filling the frame with as much information as possible (as Winogrand put it) often organized in complex and multi-layered manner (Friedlander), as opposed to narrow down and straighten the perspectives around a simple subject-matter.

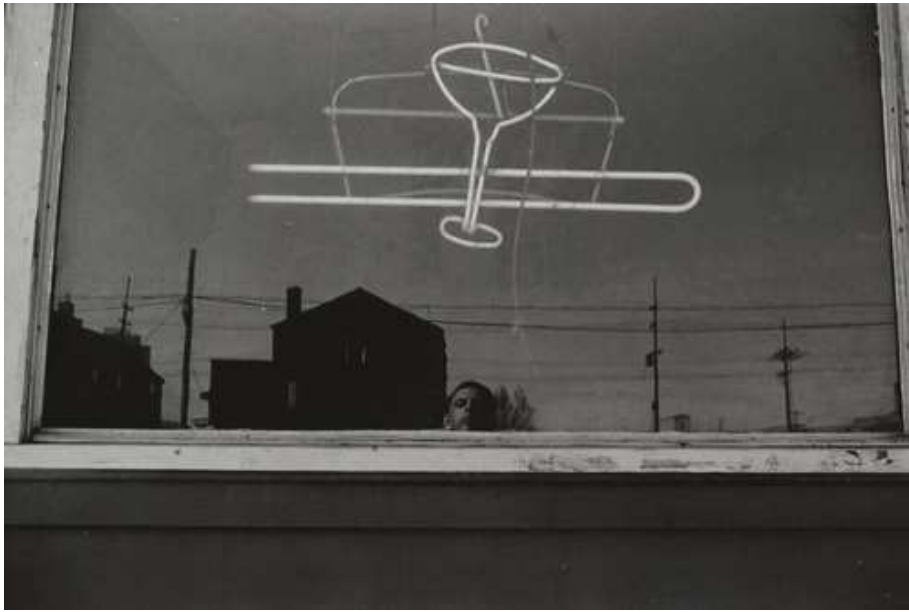


Lee Friedlander - Texas, 1966



Garry Winogrand - Los Angeles, 1969

Also from a rather psychological point of view it is a more ironical and detached way to look at the world around is achieved. Even the portrait pictures (straight portraits or more environmental one) would benefit from the horizontal aspect.



Lee Friedlander - Self Portrait, 1966

Exception to horizontal framing are for example the vertical shots that Winogrand did, especially of women. But in that case the combination of very wide angle and tilt would make it fit into this new aesthetic.



Photograph by Garry Winogrand

Another consequence of this approach is the decline of empathy in street photography and a higher detachment. The photographers seem to be engaged on a broader visual level rather than simply on one or two individuals detached from the background. Empathy leaves place to a disconnected, elusive, and sometimes a “cartoonesque” or an aggressive vision of the world (Garry Winogrand), or a “slower”, colder and more abstract one (Callahan, Friedlander).

This point is important when it comes to political and sociological themes evoked in photographs since the (western) world (especially America) then went through major changes and events (Civil Rights Movement, the Vietnam war, the Feminist Movement...). But the most seminal figures of this new wave of photography would choose not to deal very seriously (i.e. politically) with all that, as opposed to a more radical form of photojournalism which was developing. Hence the controversy (and misunderstanding) around images such as Winogrand’s iconic mixed couple carrying chimps which is unsettling in the context of the rising of political correctness. And both Winogrand and Friedlander were heavily criticized for so-called “reactionary vision” in their women images and nudes. But as a matter of fact they were seemingly interested with the sheer visual aspect of photography first and foremost rather than by making political or sociological statements.

“I photograph to see how things look like photographed”... at this point the divorce with photojournalism is complete so to speak and other major “straight”-photographers of the forthcoming generation such as Eggleston and Shore would likewise elude the political and sociological content from their work.



William Eggleston - Mississippi, 1969

I think that Maier's work does not set well into this new approach and instead remains remote thereof. Especially her sense of framing seem to have been inspired by more classical concerns, and it is likely that her use of square format was for her a showstopper to embrace these conceptions (not meaning that using that square crop was a no-go itself – see Friedlander use of it). Also she seems to have favored a closer proximity with subject matter and been concerned about faithful and detailed description, as opposed to a more elusive vision.



Fig 1. Photograph by Vivian Maier

Fig 1 (above) and fig 2. (below), two photographs from Maier that I find have a “Winogrand vibe” in it. Fig 2. is very interesting, involving some “uncertainty” and is derogatory to Maier’s usually rigorous and balanced framing. How many of that sort did she shot ?



Fig 2. Photograph by Vivian Maier

... Could be that she focused more on her acquired strength and was more willing to refine her skills. Anyhow the evolution of her work from the 60's and onward is still a bit of a mystery. Especially since there is very few work done with 35mm published so far to figure out if she successfully made a shift in her stylistic approach – or at least if she intended to make a shift. Some clues about that can be found in a recent interview with John Maloof [3] but what we learn is not very promising ...

From the mid 1970's through 1995, she definitely has a change in style. She switches to color in the mid 70's, uses a 35mm camera (mostly a Leica), and I get the feeling that she is seeing the world differently at that time. Her work becomes more abstract in some respects, but also very literal in others. I'll explain. Her abstract work often involves found objects either on the curb, in a garbage can or a similar setting. Some are quite good but there are so many that just leaving me scratching my head as to what she was trying to get across with the picture. The literal work is usually angled towards political, racial, or religious views. She seemed to be a liberal and of no known religious beliefs and so she would document graffiti, newspaper headlines, and racist slogans on park benches, for example. People were still in her photos, but it wasn't a dominating content at this time.

... or maybe it is ?



Fig 3. Harry Callahan - Atlanta, 1984

Did Vivian Maier had the “Atlanta” picture from Callahan (fig 3. above) in mind when she shot this one below (fig 4. below) ? But it is likely that the one from Maier is much older.. Anyway I am not sure that those two images are very comparable otherwise than just its main subject matter, the red spotted dress. The background and light condition seem to play as much as a prominent role in Callahan's composition whereas Maier seemed to have been drawn by the hand gesture in the first place.



Fig 4. Photograph by Vivian Maier

Of course that does not mean that she was kind of outdated at one point. She was not, that does not make sense. But it is worth to mention that her style does not achieve a comprehensive coverage of street-photography. This is worth to be mentioned at a time when one can read here and here many hyperbolic statements about Vivian Maier.

Conclusion.

No real conclusion to be made at this point of the discovery of Vivian Maier's work. Out of 100,000 negatives she made throughout more than 40 years only a handful are published when I write these lines. Indeed some of the photographs she did are quite strong. She had a sharp eye and her spontaneity was remarkable. Her work is deeper than a mere "hit or miss" routine and instead seems to convey something about her. Also her technical skill was very well developed.

I am more doubtful about her work being so much "ahead of time" as it was mentioned here and here. I see it has involving multiple influences which makes sense, and also probably she did a fair amount of experimentation to make it move forward, which makes sense as well. What I miss so far is a broader sense of consistency, not in the work itself, but in the evolution of it. It is probably way too soon to figure that out.

Sources

"Vivian Maier" on John Maloof blog: <http://vivianmaier.blogspot.com/>

"Vivian Maier" on Jeff Goldstein blog: <http://www.vivianmaierphotography.com/>

[1] Helen Levitt - SFMOMA - ISBN 0-918471-20-6

[2] "The Vivian Maier Show: A Brief Review By Dave Fultz

" http://theonlinephotographer.typepad.com/the_online_photographer/2011/01/the-vivian-maier-show-a-brief-review.html

[3] "An Interview with John Maloof" <http://blakeandrews.blogspot.com/2011/01/q-with-john-maloof.html>