



ON JONAS MEKAS

AMY HERZOG

Jonas Mekas's contributions to the history of avant-garde and experimental film are impossible to encapsulate—his prolific body of films and video diaries, his essays and critical writing (particularly his long running “Movie Journal” column in the *Village Voice*), his publishing (he was cofounder of *Film Culture*), his curation, and his ceaseless advocacy for the art of cinema. Mekas helped develop a new model for artist-led distribution through the Film-Maker's Cooperative, resisting both commercial and art gallery systems. His lifelong labor to establish Anthology Film Archives as a “cathedral to cinema” is perhaps his greatest gift to the experimental film community: a fiercely independent library, theater, archive, and gathering space “to advance the cause and protect the heritage of a kind of cinema that is in particular danger of being lost, overlooked, or ignored.”



Cinema, poetry, and music were core to Mekas's life practice: intimate, ecstatic, and deeply social. Being and work, for Mekas, are inseparable; "I make home movies," Mekas tells us in *Walden* (1969), "therefore I live." As esteemed a poet as he was as a filmmaker, Mekas has described his work in all formats as "documentary poetry."¹ These somewhat contradictory tendencies—to preserve the fleeting, and to take flight—run like a current through Mekas's career. Born on December 24, 1922 in the rural village of Semeniskiai in Lithuania, Mekas fled the country at age 22, fearful that his work at a Biržai underground newspaper would result in persecution from German and Soviet occupying forces.² He and his brother Adolfas were imprisoned in a German labor camp, and after the war, spent years in displaced person camps, unable to return home, before immigrating

to New York in 1949. Before the war years, Mekas wrote, his thoughts were consumed by books: "I was totally oblivious of my own life, my own past, my roots, ancestors. I had a total disinterest in life, in my immediate surroundings."³ But in his years of displacement, images, spaces, moments came to replace texts: "names of people, books, cities... even the titles of films... they've already faded.... Everything that I see, or read, or listen to, connects, translates into moods, bits of surroundings, colors."⁴ His diary entries materialize as fragmentary mood-images,

OPPOSITE Jonas Mekas, *As I Was Moving* (2000), frame enlargements. Courtesy the Estate of Jonas Mekas and Re:Voir.

ABOVE Jonas Mekas, 2000. Courtesy the Estate of Jonas Mekas. Photo: Boris Lehman.



FROM TOP

Jonas Mekas, 1951. Courtesy the Estate of Jonas Mekas.

Jonas Mekas, *Self-Portrait* (1980), frame enlargement. Courtesy the Estate of Jonas Mekas and Re:Voir.

Jonas Mekas, *Letter to Penny Arcade* (2001), frame enlargement. Courtesy the Estate of Jonas Mekas and Re:Voir.



material reflections not unlike the snippets of footage that would comprise his films. “Now that I am transcribing all my written diaries,” Mekas recalled, “I notice that already in the forties there are pages and pages of observations of what I’ve seen through windows, what I’ve heard in the street—a series of disconnected, collaged impressions. If one compares my camera work with those pages, one sees that they are almost identical. I only changed my tools.”⁵

In his war-time diaries, Mekas recounts in great detail “the various libraries of my childhood”: his uncle’s geography and foreign language collection, his brother’s collection of Marxist literature, a farmer two villages away with a trunk of novels, a socialist neighbor with a stash of leftist theory. Each of these collections was clandestine, treasured, and precarious (the farmer who lent him books was later shot for being a political subversive). Even as he began recording impressionistic images, literature and ideas remained a lifeline. Mekas and his brother Adolphas would travel hours from the DP camps to attend classes at University of Mainz, seeking out lectures and libraries and book stores. When they boarded the boat to leave Germany, they had ten shipping crates weighing 247 kilos: one contained clothing, and nine were filled with books.⁶

Soon after arriving in Brooklyn, Mekas borrowed money to buy a Bolex camera and began capturing images of life on the streets and in Williamsburg’s immigrant communities. “In keeping a notebook with a camera,” Mekas reflected, “the main challenge became how to react with the camera right now, as it’s happening; how to react to it in such a way that the footage would reflect what I feel that very moment.”⁷ This footage began the archive of raw materials that Mekas would return to, re-order, and collage with other images, texts, and voice overs. Rooted in the textures and materials of daily life, this mode of self-documentation is also an act of artistic assemblage:

“I myself I don’t know any more if the camera really doesn’t lie.... I take notes daily with my camera, then I string them together, and make what’s known as film diaries. And it’s all supposed to be true, real. In reality, it is not.... Time goes and passes, hours and days, and I don’t film anything. And then suddenly I film maybe three or four seconds.... But my life, in general, passes unfiled.... What I end up having in my editing room are... just little tiny... fragments.... So what I make up eventually are fictions I react to those moments strong enough to film them. And then I string them together and this is my life. So in one way it doesn’t represent the total reality.... it is a concentrate....”⁸

The countless hours of footage Mekas gathered create meaning cumulatively; between texts. Images, patterns, and gestures surface across decades: flowers, windows, snow, dinners

with friends, Central Park, cats, screenings and readings, street scenes, tables strewn with books, weddings, the staccato of a typewriter, friend’s gardens, pontifications, typewritten titles, more visits with more friends, glasses of wine (always), and Jonas’s voice.

Mekas’s idealism and evangelism for a free cinema played a significant role in shaping the city around him. “This city saved my sanity,” he recalled, “I embraced it, and the city embraced me.... I was hungry, thirsty, for art... a dry empty sponge. I took everything, and everything became part of me.”⁹ This consuming passion is most palpable in Mekas’s “Movie Journal” missives, which were exuberant, confrontational, and unapologetic. Refusing the tenets of traditional criticism, Mekas’s column reads like a travelogue from the front lines of the underground. A portrait of the city emerges between the reviews: venues and festival scenes, vice police and courts, fickle audiences, the quietness of the street outside a theater, the failings of independent newspapers, financing and real estate woes, arguments amongst friends. Throughout these records, one can map Mekas’s organizing efforts and collaborations as they carve out spaces for the art and the city he envisioned.

Yet passion makes for a messy organizing principle. Indeed, Mekas’s devotion to the vision of the individual was sometimes at odds with his efforts to sustain “disorganizedly organized” institutions to support their work.¹⁰ Passion can also serve as a cover for evading criticism. The establishment of Anthology Film Archive’s Essential Cinema canon, for example, generated pointed pushback. The Essential Cinema repertory of 330 titles was selected by a committee comprised of Mekas, P. Adams Sitney, James Broughton, Ken Kelman, and Peter Kubelka. The series was meant to provide an “uncompromising” survey of the history of cinematic art, shown on a permanent cycle, featuring an eclectic series of experimental, international, and commercial films (the titles were chosen, Mekas later recalled, based on their “passion”). While the original repertory list continues to be screened, expansion of the series was abandoned in 1975. From the outset, the Essential Cinema list and manifesto were critiqued for leveraging Anthology’s institutional clout to promote a hierarchical vision of art cinema (the cycle, for example, included the work 5 women filmmakers and 85 men, and was almost exclusively white). Feminist critiques of the “boys club” of the experimental film scene remain well warranted, and groundbreaking artists of color are missing from the canon. Even queer underground filmmakers Mekas celebrated questioned the project of institutionalizing the movement (Jack Smith’s invectives were particularly cutting, dismissing Mekas as a predatory nemesis, “Uncle Fishhook”).¹¹

Anthology’s larger legacy, however, which extends far beyond the Essential Cinema project, speaks to Mekas’s more ecumenical passions: collecting, preserving, and providing access to films, scholarship, and books to anyone with a thirst for the arts. In her nuanced study of Anthology’s history, Kristen Alfaro argues



LEFT Jonas Mekas, *Guns of the Trees* (1961), frame enlargements. Courtesy the Estate of Jonas Mekas and Re:Voir.

OPPOSITE Jonas Mekas, *The Brig* (1964), frame enlargements. Courtesy the Estate of Jonas Mekas and Re:Voir.



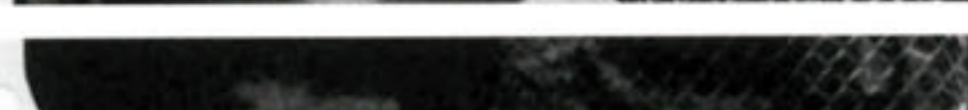
that early, more polemical aspects of the institution's mission (the Essential Cinema manifesto, and the austere Invisible Cinema theater) proved financially unsustainable, and were eclipsed by more democratic projects: the Film Study Center, the library and archive, preservation initiatives, partnerships with universities and museums, and providing a home for the collections of generations of film and media makers after their passing. These adoptions have included many artists whose works extend well beyond the original "Essential Cinema" canon, and who might otherwise have fallen into obscurity, or been lost entirely.¹²

In his films, Mekas's concentrated memory-images surface non-linearly, distanced by time, framed through titles and retrospective narration. This approach is at once lyrical and a survival tactic for a displaced person, navigating a history of political and personal trauma. It is also risky, in that individual recollections become divorced from contexts, and the blind spots of the artist, as active participant in history, are elided. Mekas

recalled an early childhood memory, a fascination with a man he would see in the post office receiving strange, beautiful packages of literary magazines, a man that he later learned was a famous Jewish poet. "I wanted nothing less from my life than to be a writer, a poet, like this gaunt, black-haired, ascetic, tall Jew." The poet, whose name Mekas never learned, was later shot by German soldiers; "most of the protagonists of my childhood are dead. Untimely dead."¹³ Mekas frames his refracted recollections as imperfect, and highly subjective. Nevertheless, through his lifetime of copious self-documentation, Mekas attained a certain status as a witness to atrocity, one which was recently called into question by historian Michael Casper in the *New York Review of Books*.¹⁴ Casper points to certain inconsistencies in Mekas's narrative, particularly around key dates in the early 1940s, years in which large numbers of Jews were massacred in and near Biržai. The newspaper Mekas wrote for was founded by the nationalist Lithuanian Activist Front, and was sympathetic to the German

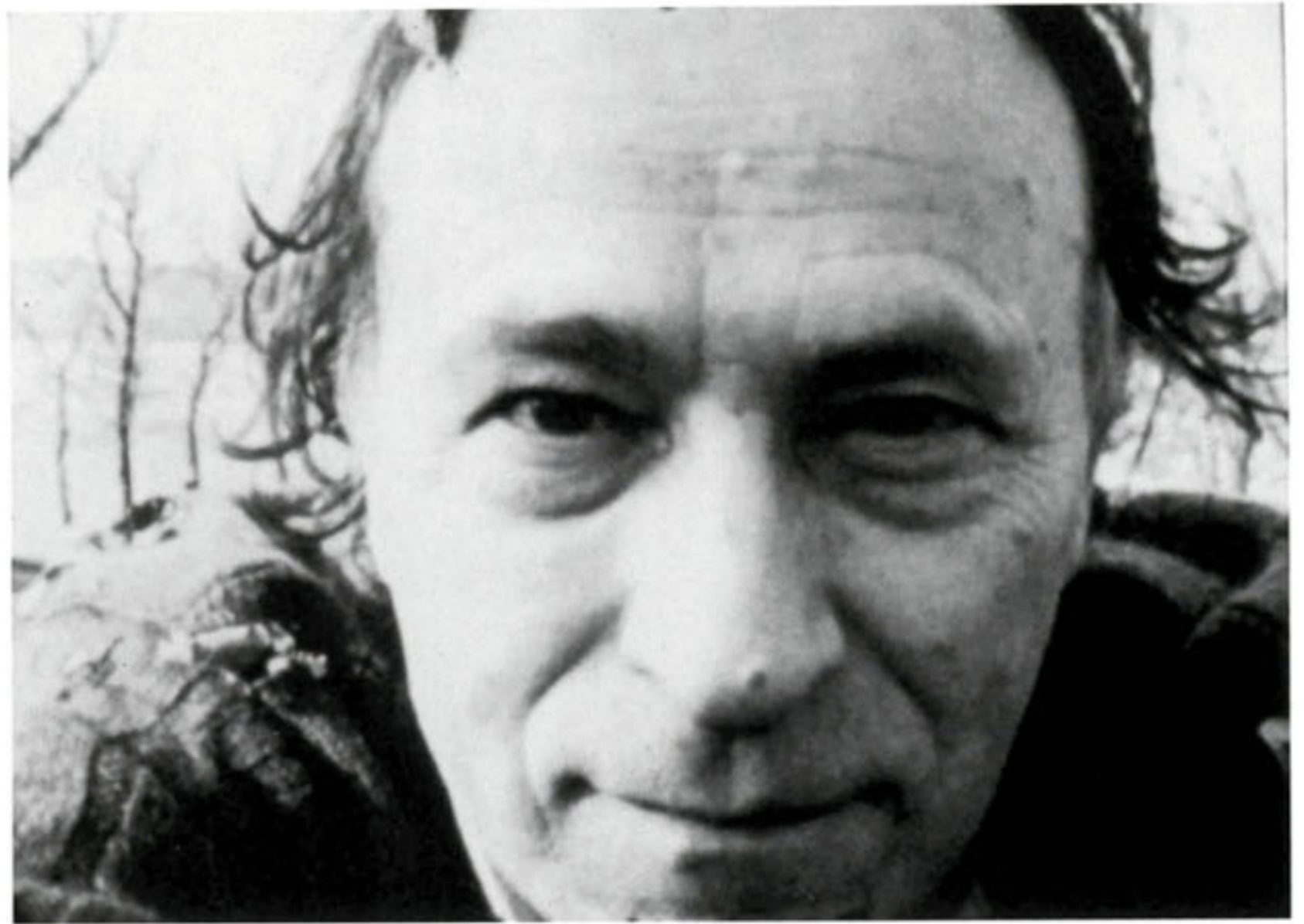


KODAK 83.





THIS SPREAD Jonas Mekas, *He Stands in the Desert* (1986), frame enlargements. Courtesy the Estate of Jonas Mekas and Re:Voir.



forces, frequently publishing pro-Nazi and anti-Semitic material. Casper is careful to note that Mekas's publications, all literary reviews and poems, contained no anti-Semitic material. But he does suggest that Mekas willfully misremembered, recasting himself as naïve observer when "his life during the war years was more complex than he made it out to be."¹⁵

These charges drew polarized responses from long-time Mekas champions and critics; friends reported that the incident had devastated Mekas. Soon after, in the summer of 2018, Mekas recorded a six-hour oral history interview with the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. The tone of the interview is earnest, and Mekas responds to Ina Navazelski's questions about life in Lithuania before and during wartime, recounting in sharp detail stories that have appeared in his films and writings, while also acknowledging the limits of his perspective: "but I am finding out now, also, how far off I was...."¹⁶

"If we begin to call a particular period black or desperate or lost," Mekas wrote in 1954, "the word has two edges: with one edge it cuts into the past, with another it cuts into the present and future, it acts upon us.... What counts, however, is what *we do* about it, once we know the truth."¹⁷ Truth about a desperate period may not be easily, or immediately, grasped. Given the centrality of the war and displacement to Mekas's autobiographical work, questions about selective memory must be taken seriously. It seems important, too, to consider the life practices that emerge from trauma. I'd point here toward a persistent emphasis in Mekas's work on conversation as praxis. Countless of Mekas's videos and writings take the form of dialogues. Mekas's diary films are comprised of revisited footage (much of that footage itself records of meetings and conversations), reconsidered, revised, and talked to, from the present. The past, here, is never known or complete, but accessible only through a ceaseless dialogue with the now.

In 2006, he posted "The First Forty," newly-edited, standalone versions of forty of his previous works as an introduction to a new, online audience.¹⁸ The first entry, *Cinema Is not 100 Years Old* (1996/2006), is a manifesto: "the real history of cinema is the invisible history of friends getting together and doing the thing they love." Mekas dons a hat and dances through in his 491 Broadway loft, a space made familiar to us from countless videos. I find his video letters perhaps the most revealing of his boundless generosity, and his willingness to question himself, returning to a conversation he feels he didn't adequately finish, or to a situation changed. His 1999 letter to John Hanhardt is especially affecting. Mekas becomes visibly emotional as he explains his reasons for abandoning a plan to merge Anthology with the Guggenheim Museum, which he insists must stay independent: "It's still a place where filmmakers from all over the world are coming, to place where they still belong, they feel it's a place where they can be part of something that is free...."¹⁹

Mekas devoted himself, quixotically, to independence, to a cinema of small forms, to a practice of small daily failures, to that which could not be sold. For this, and for the archive he built, we are forever in his debt. Mekas's generosity to his extended family was seemingly limitless, a family that grew increasingly more youthful and inclusive each year, always with the invitation to pick up a glass or an instrument and join in a moment of shared paradise: "keep moving ahead, my friends!"

Notes and Citations are online at:
www.mfj-online.org/herzog-mekas-notes/

