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Jonas Mekas: Film-maker, archivist, activist and poet

Reviewed by James Swinson

Exhibition at the Serpentine Gallery and BFI Southbank film season, London

December 2012 to January 2013

In recent years, the life and work of Lithuanian-born and US-based film-maker Jonas Mekas has been celebrated in a number of international art venues. These include Documenta 11 (2002), the 51st Venice Biennale (2006) and MoMA PS1 (2007). This represents late recognition in the mainstream visual arts for a film-making practice maintained by Mekas since his migration to the United States as a post-World War II refugee. This belated upsurge of interest in his work led to the retrospective exhibition at the Serpentine Gallery and programmes of screenings at the British Film Institute (BFI) in London and the Centre Pompidou in Paris. These events were timed to coincide with Mekas's 90th birthday. This high-profile attention in a wider public domain also coincided with the historical endgame of material, analogue film as a creative medium and a culture, one that Mekas has played an important role in developing and conserving.

The opportunity for unique and comprehensive access to his work promised to provide not only the basis for understanding his contribution to avant-garde film but

it also raised unresolved questions about curatorial and programming practices for the moving image. The decision to profile Mekas simultaneously in the Serpentine Gallery and the BFI's Southbank cinema enabled audiences to contrast the cinema auditorium and the gallery as locations for the experience of moving image. As it turned out, it also contrasted the two technologies: the analogue and the digital, the film projector and the data projector. The advent of video projection in the early 1990s coincided with speculation on the demise of film as a medium for cinema, which had intensified with the approaching centenary of the Lumière Brothers' first film projections (Swinson 1998). The curatorial decision at the Serpentine to transfer Mekas's film works to digital video suppressed the crucial aesthetic and technical differences between the two media for the spectator and with it the possibility of deeper a understanding of the historic development of Mekas's work, and moving image in general. Other recent exhibitions have been much more sensitive to these issues: for example, *Film in Space* (Camden Art Centre, 2013) celebrated the projection of 16mm film with a selection of faithfully reproduced Expanded Cinema works associated with the London Film-makers' Co-op.¹

Mekas's contribution to film culture has been underscored by his determination to provide an alternative cinematic vision to that of commercial cinema at all levels of production, distribution and exhibition. His world-view was informed by his enforced migration with his brother Adolfas from rural Lithuanian in the wake of the German invasion of the country in 1941. He and Adolfas spent the rest of the World War II in forced labour camps in Germany, and then in refugee camps after the Allied liberation of Germany, before finally emigrating to the United States in 1949. His

distrust of the state was formed not only from his encounter with Nazi tyranny but also from the Allied carve-up of Europe at Yalta, a process that annexed Lithuania to Joseph Stalin's USSR. Denied a viable future in their homeland, the Mekas brothers opted for the lesser of two evils and set sail for New York.

On their arrival in New York in 1949 Jonas and Adolfas first settled in Williamsburg – at that time an impoverished district favoured by fellow displaced Lithuanians. Growing up in Lithuania, Mekas's creative practice had been literary; he wrote poetry that reflected on his rural surroundings but it was in this immigrant district in America that the brothers had their first taste of cinematography. They learned to operate lightweight 16mm cameras developed for their mobility in the battlefields of Europe, and these they used to document their new surroundings. This built on their experience in post-war Germany where they had obtained a 35mm still camera, with which they photographed the streets of cities dismantled by conflict, recording the lives of their dislocated inhabitants.

Survival as a refugee required quick adaption to a changing environment. In Williamsburg, Jonas and Adolfas felt alienated by the militaristic nationalism adopted by sections of the Lithuanian refugee community keen to maintain their national identity. The brothers preferred instead to turn outwards towards the deterritorialized, emergent culture of post-war New York. Mekas has claimed that he could only conceive of writing poetry in his native tongue and that his film-making practice enabled him to develop a viable poetics in a new location. This position

echoes Raymond Williams's observations about the emergent avant-gardes at the turn of the twentieth century:

It is a very striking feature of many Modernist and avant-garde movements that they were not only located in the great metropolitan centres but that so many of their members were immigrants into these centres, where in some new ways all were strangers. Language, in such situations, could appear as a new kind of fact: either simply as a 'medium', aesthetic or instrumental, since its naturalised continuity with a persistent social settlement was unavailable.

(Williams 1989: 77)

For Mekas, the new form that gradually emerged and became central to his practice was the diary film. Deploying his clockwork Bolex like a snapshot camera capturing small fragments of time, he documented his daily life: wanderings in the streets of New York, the changing seasons, visits to friends and trips to the country. Mekas accumulated a collection of shots over a protracted period of time, slowly constructing a substantial personal archive. These fragments of everyday life were assembled in different permutations by Mekas, slowly crystallizing into films like *Lost Lost Lost* (1976), *Walden* (1969) and, more recently, *As I was Moving Ahead* (2000) and *Occasionally I Saw Brief Glimpses of Beauty* (2000) and *Outtakes from the life of a Happy Man* (2012). Mekas's documentary methods are a clear demonstration of the much-overlooked advantages that avant-garde cinema has over commercial cinema. Experimental film-makers could work to an extended production schedule that was economically impossible in the mainstream. *Lost Lost Lost* used footage shot

between 1949 and 1963 and existed in a number of assemblages such as the 20-minute film *Grand Street*, which Mekas dismantled in 1960, until he had the funding in the 1970s to construct the film in its final form.

Alongside his contribution as a film-maker, Mekas has been a seminal figure in the development of film culture in his capacity as an organizer and writer. He was initially drawn to Amos and Marcia Vogel's film society, Cinema 16 (1947–1963), which screened experimental alongside educational films. However, Mekas was critical of the Vogels' mixed programming and in reaction set up alternative screenings in which he established the single film-artist show. Most importantly, in 1962, along with a small group of film-makers, he founded the New York Film-makers' Cooperative, which was inclusive, non-selective and allowed individual film-makers to decide which films they wanted in distribution (James 1992: 9). They also received the full rental payment minus the Co-op's overheads. The Co-op encouraged the development of a network of film-makers facilitating the exchange of information and Mekas organized a concurrent programme of screenings. In the mid 1960s:

[...] the underground was coming into full flower and an unprecedented social visibility, not to say notoriety, with works in which the tradition of social realism associated with New York was rapidly giving way to bizarre sexual extravaganzas. (James 1992: 10)

These included Jack Smith's *Flaming Creatures* (1963), which, when screened with Jean Genet's *Chant d'amour* (1950) by Mekas in New York in 1964, led to his arrest for obscenity. The New York Film-makers' Cooperative was instrumental in inspiring similar organizations including Canyon Cinema in San Francisco, New Brunswick Film Co-op in Canada, ABCinema in Denmark, The Sydney Filmmakers' Co-op and the London Filmmakers' Co-op.

Mekas also promoted independent and avant-garde cinema in the journal *Film Culture*, which he founded in 1955, and in his numerous publications including columns in the *Village Voice* and *Soho News*. In 1969, Mekas was instrumental in founding the Anthology Film Archives – an international centre for the preservation, study, and exhibition of film and video, with a particular focus on independent, experimental, and avant-garde cinema – with Jerome Hill, P. Adams Sitney, Peter Kubelka and Stan Brakhage.

The Exhibition at the Serpentine Gallery, London

[...] but after all with Mekas, film's the thing. If you aren't already familiar with his work, my advice is to treat the show as a delightful introduction to the main event, the season of his films being presented at the British Film Theatre beginning on Thursday – and if you can't manage that, at least buy a DVD compilation of short works for sale in the shop. (Dorment 2012)

The Serpentine Gallery, the ex-tea house luxuriating in the genteel pastures of Kensington Gardens is an awkward gallery space with a capacity to bleach politics and social engagement from the most radical of practices. The 'Gustav Metzger' exhibition in 2009, curated by Hans Ulrich Obrist, Julia Peyton-Jones and Sophie O'Brien, provides a prime example of this; the inappropriate site and curation threatened to undermine Metzger's credibility as an artist and activist whose work hinges on a lifetime of scepticism about art institutions and markets. Metzger was 83 at the time, and Mekas turned 90 during his show at the Serpentine, so it is likely that both artists were reviewing their legacy and taking the opportunity to gain recognition from a wider audience in the later stages of their lives. Obrist and Peyton-Jones also curated the Mekas exhibition; it is not clear, however, how much either artist contributed to the selection and installation of their work.

At the entrance to the gallery for the Mekas exhibition several prints were on display with a price tag leaving us in no doubt about the commercial objectives of the hang. The first room was dominated by *Haikus*, a whole wall of digital colour prints each featuring a blow-up of three 16mm film frames selected from Mekas's films. The frames were not consecutive and were chosen to create images quite distinct from Mekas's films, in which he adopted a strategy of refusing to cut within shots. The integrity of his sequences were here flagrantly flouted and the prints on show included a disproportionate number of frames with recognizable celebrities, misrepresenting entirely the frequency of their occurrence in Mekas's films; this disparity was further reinforced by the video piece on the left wall, *George's Dumpling Party* (1971), a film transferred to video and shown on a video monitor in

which Fluxus artist George Maciunas plays host to Andy Warhol, John Lennon and Yoko Ono. This emphasis on celebrity belied the serendipity of Mekas's encounters with the rich and famous in New York, and his lack of concern for their status as commodities. Sadly many of the press reviews of the exhibition lazily focused on the prominent documentation of celebrities, as if this was all he set out to do, thus failing to provide any serious consideration of Mekas's extensive contribution to film culture. Adrian Searle's review in *The Guardian* exemplified this approach. He ignored Mekas's quest to document the everyday in favour of informing us that 'his films captured John Lennon in bed, the Velvet Underground deafening a room full of psychiatrists, and New York during the high point of the last real avant-garde' (Searle 2012).

Projected onto the opposite wall was *WTC Haikus* (2010), a love poem to the World Trade Centre whose buildings dominated the Soho skyline where Mekas lived for twenty years. To make the work, Mekas returned to his archive to find footage from 1975 to 1995 that included the twin towers and various activities in their vicinity. The short film is a compelling example of the archive strategies German film-maker Harun Farocki also advocates and exploits in his practice. Together with media theorist Wolfgang Ernst, Farocki identified the possibility of storing and searching archives on the basis of visual concepts rather than by texts and keywords associated with the image. They argued that such an archive would be facilitated by parameters that can be set in contemporary data-based film archives using time code, enabling searches for shots reoccurring across an exhaustive range of disparate film productions (Farocki and Ernst 2004: 261). For instance, Farocki's compilation of sequences on the theme of *Workers Leaving the Factory* (1995) was

inspired by the Lumière brothers' historic 45-second sequence of the same name (1896). Farocki combined footage on the same theme harvested from a range of very different films and provided a practice-based prototype (Farocki and Ernst 2004: 237). Similarly, Mekas's archival interest in the poetics of time and memory led him to traverse his own twenty years of archive footage with the object of paying homage to the absent edifices so dramatically erased from the New York skyline.

At the Serpentine, just beyond the WTC piece, a projected video provided direct insights into Mekas's important role as a major archivist and programmer of avant-garde films alongside the intrinsic archival aspects of his own practice. Captured by the cameraman Auguste Varkalis under Mekas's direction, *Laboratorium Anthology* (1999) documented scenes from the life and work at Anthology Film Archives, featuring Mekas performing and working amongst the vast stacks of film cans, tapes and publications. On a wall adjacent to the projection was hung the *Anthology Film Archive Banner* (1970) in bright red appliquéd satin reminiscent of a trade union banner.

Reminiscences from Germany (2012), another archival work on show at the Serpentine retraced Jonas and Adolfas's original journey across Germany in the 1940s, revisiting the towns where they were held in labour camps and subsequently in displaced persons camps in Elmshorn, Flensburg, Wiesbaden and Kassel. The work eloquently combines the original still photos from the period with film and video footage shot on visits in 1971 and 1993. The soundtrack includes readings from Mekas's diaries of the time, current reflections and extracts from the work of

Wolfgang Borchert. A young writer from Hamburg, Borchert was best known for his play *The Man Outside* (1946), which offered rare insights into the German experience of defeat and desolation. Borchert was around the same age as Mekas, and in 1947 when he was 26, his life was cut short following illnesses brought about by his harsh treatment as a vocal opponent of Nazism throughout the war. With the exception of Heinrich Böll in *Der Engel schiewig/The Angel was Silent* (1995), very few German writers directly addressed the disastrous consequences of the Third Reich in the immediate aftermath of the war, and Borchert's essays and plays resonate with Mekas's own recall of the formative experiences of exile and displacement. Mekas and his brother had seen many films that influenced them but, in their judgement these 'had [...] little understanding of what life in post-war Europe was like' (MacDonald 1992: 81). This prompted Adolfas to write their first film script about displacement challenging what they saw as attempts to create entertaining melodramas out of the drab, and indeed, tragic realities of post war Europe. However, as Mekas recorded, 'Nothing was ever done with it. We had no means, we had no contacts, we were two zeroes' (MacDonald 1992: 81).

Mekas nonetheless went on to become a prolific film-maker and *Lavender Piece* (2012) a wall-mounted grid of sixteen video monitors ran short clips of Mekas's films (various dates). This was a particularly indecipherable and pointless curatorial exercise, which resembled little more than electronic wallpaper. The imposed multiple screen montage was unnecessary, and redundant, given that the original works were themselves characterized by a complex but seemingly effortless montage.

The centrepiece of the exhibition in terms of scale and location, gracing the middle room of the Serpentine, was a projection of *Outtakes from the life of a Happy Man* (2012), the most recent of Mekas's diary films. *Outtakes* was assembled non-chronologically, the opening shots documenting the editing process, with Mekas's hands shown in close-up working the film splicer and film footage, spool to spool, on a manual winding bench. The film is an essay on memory recall, emphasized rather than refuted by his voice-over declaring, 'images are my memories. Images are all real. Memories are gone, images are here and they are real, every second is real. On the screen it's all real. Who cares about memories?'

At 90, Mekas is perhaps now acknowledging that his memories are no longer his alone but, as a personal assemblage of shots, they pass through a trans-subjective poetic process and are made available as collective memory.² Sadly, the installation space for the screening worked against reflective contemplation, providing no seating or indication of the duration of the film. As in so many gallery projections, the audience hovered on their feet or squatted on the floor in a state of hesitant, should-I-stay-or-should-I-go uncertainty.

Overall the exhibition was flat, amorphous and unimaginative, providing little rational thematic order or chronology to help us engage with the work of such a highly innovative and creative practitioner. The poor lighting, the decision to transfer 16mm films to video and the apparently random selection and installation decisions were frustrating and confusing enough for committed followers of Mekas's life and

work; for a new audience, it is hard to imagine what impression they drew from the experience.

The BFI screenings

The programme of Mekas's films at the BFI at least allowed for his work to be considered in the reflective space of the cinema auditorium, projected as the original 16mm prints. This offered the opportunity for a deeper, immersive engagement with his unique contribution to experimental and avant-garde film-making. The BFI showed a commitment to the work as film without attempting the unnecessary imposition of another layer of curatorial conceptualization that obscured rather than enhanced the appreciation of the original work.

In his interview with Scott MacDonald (1992: 77–108), Mekas credits the influence of fellow film-maker Marie Menken (who was born in Brooklyn to Lithuanian parents) and also the work of American composer, artist and writer John Cage. In films such as *Notebook* (1963) Menken developed an everyday diary structure for her material, which helped Mekas to recognize the possibility of this approach for his own films. In addition she 'helped me to be at peace enough to leave much of the original material just as it was' (Macdonald 1992: 91). Menken also made use of handmade inter-titles in her films, which correspond to the occasional mechanical typewritten titles and notes that Mekas uses to enhance the poetics of his own films. From Cage, he learned that 'chance is one of the great editors' (Macdonald 1992: 91). Fragments of film measured in seconds, shot hours or days or weeks apart, could be brought

together in editing to create a multiplicity of connections and patterns of meaning. These insights helped to shape the form of the major diary films *Lost, Lost, Lost* and *Walden*. Footage produced on a Bolex is silent and Mekas frequently recorded wild track sound in the street, which he cut with music, his own poetic voice-over observations and statements, and random recordings off the radio that was always playing in the cutting room as Mekas worked.

Menken's influence restrained Mekas from interfering with the integrity of the shots. The film was assembled in chronological order with no cutting within each shot/event. This respect for the length of the shot inscribed each one with a unique intrinsic time, which remained unmolested in post-production. This strategy applied to the Bolex aesthetic deployed by Mekas foregrounds the quality of time in each encounter of the camera and the subject. Every shot is a distinct event where the in-camera editing is dictated by the virtual interaction of the gestural movement of the hand-held camera and the dynamics of the framed subject. The Bolex itself offered opportunities for creative manipulation of the image when shooting: variations in film speed and exposure, different types of film stock modulating colour balance and grain, and the facility to wind back the film allowing for multiple exposures. This produced the potential for a painterly bricolage of colour and texture that added layers of meaning to the image. Mekas never had his prints regraded in the film laboratories to iron out the inconsistencies in film stock or exposure, accepting the chance variations in the film as a unique marking of the moment (MacDonald 1992: 97).

Mekas has embraced digital video alongside his continued commitment to analogue film, which, despite his advancing age he may well outlive as a viable medium. He has recognized the Internet as a powerful means for the archiving, distribution and exhibition of moving image, and his website is far more informative and sophisticated in its organization than the Serpentine exhibition. His video diary piece *365 Day Project* (2007) is elegantly presented online as an interactive grid, where the spectator can actively select and view his diary clips with a click of the mouse.

Mekas, as an exile and refugee remains a figure remarkably untainted by bitterness and recrimination. The dialogue he has established in his diary films between himself with the camera and the subject hints at a new kind of subjectivity: biographical, but not self-centred, creating a profoundly dialogistic poetics that observes the world with humility and empathy.

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Notes

¹ Film in Space was an exhibition of film and expanded cinema selected by Guy Sherwin at Camden Arts Centre, and ran from 15 December 2012 to 24 February 2013.

² The trans-subjective effect is a concept developed by Felix Guattari (1995) in his challenging of the classical opposition between the individual and society.