

A Letter from
Greenpoint, 2004

Digital video, color, sound
Exhibition 20 min.; original 80 min.



Displacement and precarity took many forms throughout Jonas Mekas’s life. In January 2004 the building where he and his family had lived since 1974, 491 Broadway, was sold and he was forced to uproot his life once again. The building had been the last of the Fluxhouses, nonprofit housing cooperatives conceived by fellow Lithuanian émigré and artist George Maciunas as affordable live/work spaces for artists. *A Letter from Greenpoint* captures Mekas saying good-bye to his life in SoHo, New York, and starting again in Greenpoint, Brooklyn.

The film has an overtly convivial—even comical—tone, filled with moments of joy, friendship, and laughter. Now using video rather than 16mm film, Mekas pressed record and let the camera run, offering a real-time experience of his daily life, less mediated than ever before. Though he had experimented with video for fifteen years, the artist considered this his first mature work made in the format.

A Daydream, 2010

Digital video, color, sound
Exhibition and original 42 sec.

A Daydream is Mekas’s contribution to the film *One Dream Rush*. He was commissioned, along with forty-one other directors from around the globe, to create a forty-two-second film stemming from the realms of dreams that became part of the conglomerate film.

Requiem, 2019

Analog and digital video transferred
to digital video, color, sound
Exhibition 15 min.; original 84 min.



“Requiem Mass” by the nineteenth-century opera composer Giuseppe Verdi accompanies this film, made up of video material recorded over the course of two decades. Mekas worked on *Requiem*, his final piece, for over two years and until 10 p.m. the night before he died.

This film does not follow the score; rather, Mekas strung together disparate footage to create notable tension between image and soundtrack. Against the crashing crescendos of Verdi’s mass, Mekas juxtaposes tranquil, mundane imagery. Bombarding the viewer are the flowers, trees, and community gardens that surrounded his home in Clinton Hill, Brooklyn, and the East Village neighborhood around Anthology Film Archives, the experimental film institution he founded; vast wildflower fields somewhere in Europe and tiny creatures, such as turtles and bees, flash across the screen. Mekas swings between the urban and pastoral, invoking both feelings of great might and extreme vulnerability. Brutal, tragic images interrupt these movements, pictures that tell the story of the twentieth—and now twenty-first—century’s wars, humanitarian and climate crises, and the massive losses and displacements that follow in their wakes. Like a summation of life itself, these brief instants collide with so many passages of great beauty, Mekas’s “moments of ecstasy.”

Organized by guest curator Kelly Taxter, with Kristina Parsons, Leon Levy Curatorial Assistant, the Jewish Museum.
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JONAS MEKAS THE CAMERA WAS ALWAYS RUNNING

Guns of the Trees, 1962

35mm film transferred to digital
video, black and white, sound
Exhibition 12 min.; original 87 min.
Courtesy of Re:Voir, Paris



Jonas Mekas began filming his first feature, *Guns of the Trees*, in the summer of 1960, in collaboration with his brother, Adolfas Mekas, and the Polish-French filmmaker Éidouard de Laurot. Jonas’s poetic script is heavily influenced by the protagonists and attitudes of the Beat Generation. This group of poets and authors, who like Mekas came of age during World War II, made work that expressed their alienation from the exploding consumerist culture in the United States. Indeed one of its most famous poets, Allen Ginsberg, intermittently recites his work throughout the film. Mekas describes *Guns of the Trees* as dealing “with the thoughts, feelings and anguished strivings of my generation faced with the moral perplexity of our times.”

The film follows two couples, Gregory and Barbara (played by Adolfas and Frances Stillman) and Ben and Argus (played by Ben Carruthers and Argus Spear Juilliard). Their stories unfold in thirty short nonlinear scenes of their intertwined yet very different daily lives. *Guns of the Trees* is Mekas’s most traditional film, but its unorthodox structure provided a road map for films to come.

Walden, 1969

16mm film transferred to
digital video, black and white
and color, sound
Exhibition 36 min.; original 180 min.
Courtesy of Re:Voir, Paris



Walden is the first example of Mekas’s signature diaristic approach to film-making. Six reels quilt together scenes from his life, shot between 1964 and 1968. In its fragments and short blasts of imagery (“glimpses,” in the artist’s words), Mekas invokes his fluctuating emotional and psychological states as he navigates the social and cultural landscape of New York City, his adopted hometown. Mekas’s daily routines—communing with friends or working at the Film-Makers’ Cooperative—collide with watershed cultural events and figures including, among others: the first public appearance of the Velvet Underground at a 1966 psychiatrist’s convention in New York City; artists, poets, and filmmakers such as Andy Warhol, Allen Ginsberg, Stan Brakhage, Tony Conrad, and Barbara Rubin; and John Lennon and Yoko Ono performing their Bed-In for Peace at the Queen Elizabeth Hotel in Montreal. At one point Mekas narrates, “They tell me, I should be always searching; but I am only celebrating what I see.” In *Walden* Mekas moved beyond being solely the champion of New York’s exploding interdisciplinary art scene, solidifying his reputation as an avant-garde filmmaker in his own right.

Reminiscences of a Journey to Lithuania, 1972

16mm film transferred to digital video, color, sound
Exhibition 17 min.; original 82 min.
Courtesy of Re:Voir, Paris



The fragmentation that pervades his diary films, according to Mekas, took root in 1944, when at twenty-two years old he fled Semeniškiai, Lithuania. Mekas observed he was “shook to the foundations,” continuing, “All my idealism, and my faith in goodness of man and progress of man; all was shattered.” Mekas’s practice repeatedly explored the relationship between exile and creativity and was profoundly marked by the trauma of surviving both Nazi and Soviet occupations of his home country.

The three parts of the film feature Mekas’s time in each of his “homes”: his first years in the United States, the new home he made in Brooklyn alongside fellow immigrants; his long-awaited homecoming in August 1971, when he was finally able to visit his family and childhood home in Semeniškiai, Lithuania, after twenty-seven years in exile; and finally a visit to Vienna to see his filmmaker family, which included Peter Kubelka, Hermann Nitsch, and Annette Michelson.

Lost Lost Lost, 1976

16mm film transferred to digital video, black and white and color, sound
Exhibition 30 min.; original 180 min.
Courtesy of Re:Voir, Paris



Mekas begins *Lost Lost Lost* with early, documentary-style footage of his daily life within the Lithuanian community of south Williamsburg, Brooklyn. The film looks back at his earliest years in New York as he struggled to identify with his fellow exiles. At the same time, he felt increasingly distanced from Lithuania and Europe’s artistic legacies, both tethered to the past and recently tainted by yet another brutal war, World War II. The film-maker then turns to his burgeoning embrace of his new home’s counter-cultural scene.

His poetry, which narrates the film, frames this footage captured between 1949 and 1963. Mekas draws a parallel between himself and Ulysses (Odysseus), who incredibly and heroically journeys home after fighting in faraway wars. Mekas exclaims, “O sing Ulysses. Sing your travels. Tell where you have been. Tell what you have seen. And tell a story of a man who never wanted to leave his home. Who was happy and lived among the people he knew and spoke their language. Sing how then, he was thrown out into the world.”

Self Portrait, 1980

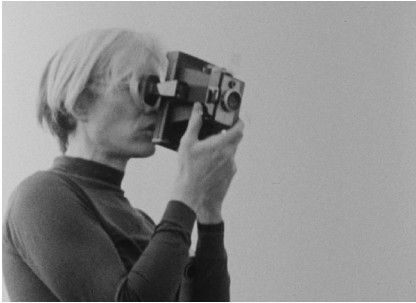
Robert Schoenbaum, cameraperson
Analog video transferred to digital video, color, sound
Exhibition 8 min.; original 20 min.



Mekas expounds in this video, filmed in Saint Paul, Minnesota, upon the pronunciation of his name, the unusually hot spring day, his beer, his hat, the nature of cinema, and his continuing feeling of displacement. In a lyrical monologue, Mekas playfully questions the truth of images and his own practice of filmmaking, which is rooted in the notion that the autobiographical is necessarily real. Flipping this approach on its head, Mekas appears but does not film himself in *Self Portrait*. “Which of many me’s really is making films, and which one is drinking this beer?” he questions. His response: “I do not know.”

Scenes from the Life of Andy Warhol, 1990

16mm film transferred to digital video, color, sound
Exhibition 8 min.; original 35 min.
Courtesy of Re:Voir, Paris



Scenes from the Life of Andy Warhol shows Warhol at his summer retreat in Montauk, New York, which he shared with friends, including Mekas, Peter Beard, Mick Jagger, Lee Radziwill (the younger sister of Jacqueline Kennedy, to whom the film is dedicated), her two children, and their cousins Caroline and John F. Kennedy Jr., among others. His remote cottages at the end of Long Island provided refuge, a quiet place for family celebrations, shared meals, and solitary moments in nature. Mekas’s film brings the inscrutable Warhol into close focus, presenting him unguardedly enjoying life’s small pleasures; like its filmmaker, however, Warhol always has a camera in hand. For both artists, the camera allowed engagement with a physical—even psychological—remove. In this way, the medium facilitated documentation while maintaining critical distance.

This Side of Paradise: Fragments of an Unfinished Biography, 1999

16mm film transferred to digital video, color, sound
Exhibition 5 min.; original 35 min.
Courtesy of Re:Voir, Paris



During the summer of 1972, Mekas taught photography and filmmaking to the children of former first lady Jacqueline Kennedy—John Jr. and Caroline—at the artist Andy Warhol’s home in Montauk. Footage from that summer was later compiled into *This Side of Paradise*, stitched together into an evocative, yet warm, portrait of the fiercely private and tightly knit Kennedy family.

As I Was Moving Ahead Occasionally I Saw Brief Glimpses of Beauty, 2000

16mm film transferred to digital video, color, sound
Exhibition 30 min.; original 288 min.
Courtesy of Re:Voir, Paris



Mekas randomly strung together more than three decades’ worth of film footage of his personal life, inspired by the chance operations the avant-garde composer John Cage used to create his music. The film delves into his relationship with his wife, Hollis, and his experience as a father to their two children, Oona and Sebastian. As Mekas describes, the film forced him to “submerge into it to really begin to feel what it’s all about, my life.” In turn, he invites viewers on an epic journey through his life events to create an immersive, meditative cinematic experience. The work is the last that Mekas made entirely on 16mm film, marking a turning point for the artist and a radical shift in his approach. After the completion of this work and for the remainder of his life, Mekas instead employed video and digital technologies.