

Jonas Mekas: The Camera Was Always Running

Like many émigrés after World War II—and so many across the globe today—Jonas Mekas was profoundly marked by the refugee experience: the loss and memory of a home he permanently left behind in 1944. Mekas (born in 1922, Semeniškiai, Lithuania; died in 2019, Brooklyn) fled his native Lithuania fearing arrest by the occupying Nazis and the advancing Soviets. He was not Jewish but his artistic and clandestine resistance activities made him an enemy of both regimes. Mekas spent a year in a Nazi forced-labor camp in Elmshorn, Germany, and lived for the next four years in displaced-persons camps throughout the country. In 1949 the United Nations International Refugee Organization aided his passage to New York City. He arrived with his brother, Adolfas, in October, and they settled in south Williamsburg, Brooklyn, among other Lithuanian refugees.

Mekas never felt “at home” with his exiled countrymen. He instead found solidarity and immersed himself in New York City’s burgeoning counterculture community. He became a central organizer and then prolific filmmaker within the avant-garde community, promoting and making what he termed a “New American Cinema.” In 1961 he helped establish the New American Cinema Group with twenty-two other New York artists and filmmakers, including Shirley Clarke, Andy Warhol, and Jack Smith. In 1962 he cofounded the Film-Makers’ Cooperative, a new distribution channel for experimental film (still in operation today). In 1964—under the auspices of the Cooperative—he initiated the Film-Makers’ Cinematheque, a screening series hosted by a succession of independent theaters and cultural institutions throughout the city, including the Jewish Museum between 1968 and 1969. In 1970 he founded Anthology Film Archives, the first and still vanguard institution for experimental cinema. Through his work, he centered his outsidership and upturned his marginalized status as a displaced person, then immigrant, and finally artist.

He began filming in 1950, not yet sure what he wanted to achieve but committed to the act itself. For Mekas, the camera was a tool to fight against the wrenching loneliness of exile and to resist the violent erasures of being “other.” *Jonas Mekas: The Camera Was Always Running* spans the full breadth of his seventy-year career, during which he created nearly one hundred films and videos. Mekas was a storyteller of written and visual narratives that drew on his own experience. He first endeavored to capture the realities of immigrant life, which he felt had been totally ignored in art. He soon turned his lens toward the city’s creative community and later his family. The exhibition centers the “diary film,” his primary artistic contribution, an intensely stylized idiom that emerged from his extensive journals and poetry. His diaristic films rest on memory: the comingling of facts (the world he saw) and perceptions (how the world felt to him).

Mekas captured scenes from his daily life, which he called “glimpses,” a term expressing essence, momentariness, and incompleteness. The diary films unfold in an improvisational, collagelike fashion and juxtapose disparate times, places, and subjects. Title cards orient the viewer, descriptively or poetically setting and summarizing scenes, while Mekas’s voice-over narration creates a dialogue between artist and audience. In his diary films, Mekas eschews hierarchy and linearity, presenting a churning whirlpool of times past and present; places urban and pastoral; moments quotidian and watershed; family members, cultural icons, and public figures. This seamless collision of the very small with the larger-than-life suggests a radical interconnectedness that allows every person to leave their mark on history.

Kelly Taxter, Guest Curator

#JonasMekas

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