

FIRST U.S. MUSEUM SURVEY OF THE WORK OF JONAS MEKAS OPENS IN FEBRUARY 2022

Exhibition Surveys the 70 Year Career of the Lithuanian-Born Filmmaker, Poet, Critic, and Curator Who Shaped the Avant-Garde in New York City and Beyond

Jonas Mekas: The Camera Was Always Running
February 18–June 5, 2022

New York, NY, October 20, 2021--The Jewish Museum will present *Jonas Mekas: The Camera Was Always Running*, the first U.S. museum survey of the Lithuanian-born filmmaker, poet, critic, and institution-builder who helped shape the avant-garde in New York City and beyond. The exhibition coincides with the centennial of Mekas's birth and surveys his 70-year career. It includes 11 films, photography, and previously unseen archival materials that explore the breadth and import of Mekas's life, art, and legacy in the field of the moving image. During the final moments of World War II in 1944, Mekas was forced to flee his native Lithuania and unable to return until 1971. The relationship between exile and creativity is always at the heart of his work and will be the exhibition's central theme. *Jonas Mekas: The Camera Was Always Running* will be on view at the Jewish Museum from February 18 through June 5, 2022, and is organized by guest curator Kelly Taxter, with Kristina Parsons, Leon Levy Curatorial Assistant, the Jewish Museum.

"Jonas Mekas is widely recognized as the preeminent maker and promoter of the New American Cinema— a radical genre of filmmaking that erupted in the 1960s, and whose makers examined upturned norms of sexuality, gender, and labor," states Taxter. "A lodestar in the history of the postwar American avant-garde, Mekas's lifelong commitment to cultural and artistic movements outside the mainstream brought together and forged creative alliances amongst generations of artists working in diverse mediums."

After spending 5 years stateless and homeless in a Nazi work camp and then Displaced Persons camps throughout Germany, Mekas (b. 1922, Semeniškiai, Lithuania; d. 2019, Brooklyn, New York) emigrated to New York City with his brother Adolfas in 1949. A penniless, war-weary refugee, he nonetheless swiftly integrated into the city's thriving counterculture, becoming a central organizer, and later a prolific filmmaker, within the avant-garde community. Like many emigrés in the aftermath of World War II—as for so many across the globe today—his art was profoundly marked by his refugee experience: the loss, memory, and longing for a home he permanently left behind in 1944.

Over 70 decades, Mekas made 93 films and videos, amassing footage that was both a record of his life and a resource for his art. He was the author, founder, and co-founder of numerous artist-run cooperatives, distribution networks, and writings on film: in 1954, he co-founded *Film Culture*, the first journal of American film criticism; from 1958-71, he penned "Movie Journal," the first critical column on cinema in the *Village Voice*; in 1962 he co-founded The Film-makers' Co-op, among the earliest organizations to support experimental film production, screening, and distribution on a

large scale; in 1969 he co-founded Anthology Film Archives which became—and remains—a focal point for New York's experimental cinema scene; and finally, between 1968 and 1971, the Film-makers' Co-op presented the screening and conversation series *Avant Garde Tuesdays* at the Jewish Museum (a selection of these screenings will be restaged as a series of public programs).

Jonas Mekas: The Camera Was Always Running will present a selection of 11 films and videos in an immersive environment centered on the notion of displacement, how it manifests aesthetically and conceptually in Mekas's work and extends to its reception. His diary films are at the heart of this exploration, a focus that strives to elucidate the particular ways that he crystallized the stuff of lived experience. Drawing on Mekas's own structural logic introduced by his first diary film *Walden*, multiple screens each present a chapter from a single work. The works on view will span the entirety of Mekas's career, beginning with his first major work *Guns of the Trees* (1962) and ending with his last work *Requiem* (2019). The films will be shown on a schedule that repeats throughout the day.

Mekas's films are profoundly concerned with the passage of time. *Walden* (1969), poignantly narrates fragments of the social, cultural, and above all communal life that Mekas created in his adopted hometown of New York City, and comprises footage shot between 1964 and 1968. The six chapters comprising *Walden* will run simultaneously across six screens. *As I Was Moving Ahead Occasionally I Saw Brief Glimpses of Beauty*, completed in 2000 and Mekas's last entirely 16mm film, is a patient distillation of some 30 years of footage on parenthood and personal encounters condensed into nearly five hours. *Requiem* (2019), his final work which premiered posthumously in November 2019, contains video footage recorded over two decades. It will be shown for the first time in an exhibition format at the Jewish Museum.

Drawn from his experiences living through both the Soviet and Nazi occupations of Lithuania, *Reminiscences of a Journey to Lithuania* (1972) reflects on his long-awaited return to his home country after 30 years living in exile. Embracing video, computer, and even cell-phone technology as the years went by, Mekas continued to film life itself until the very end.

In conjunction with *Jonas Mekas: The Camera Was Always Running*, Film at Lincoln Center will screen from February 17 through 28, 2022, [a selection of Mekas's most essential film and video works](#), from his first feature length film, *Guns of the Trees* (1961), which exemplifies the existential, postwar ethos of the Beat Generation, to the majestic diaristic work which became his modus operandi, to the reflective and deeply moving final features that concluded his career.

The exhibition catalogue—the first U.S. monograph on Mekas—is co-published by the Jewish Museum, Yale University Press, and the National Gallery of Art, Vilnius, marking the openings of both the Jewish Museum exhibition and a near-concurrent Mekas retrospective at the National Gallery of Art, Vilnius, Lithuania (November 19, 2021–February 27, 2022). Kelly Taxter is co-editor with Lukas Brašiškis and Inesa Brašiškė, the curators of the Vilnius exhibition. The catalogue, published in English, will



include four essays that offer new scholarship on Mekas's contributions as a filmmaker and organizer, his impact on the cultural landscape of New York and cinema more broadly, and the theme of exile in his art. Taxter's contribution, "The Camera Was Always Running: Exile and the Artist Jonas Mekas," explores the link between Mekas's experience of exile and his emergence as an artist. Other contributors include: Ed Halter, Founder and Director of Light Industry, who examines Mekas's pivotal role as an administrator and founder of The Filmmaker's Co-operative, The Filmmaker's Cinematèque, and Anthology Film Archives; Melisa Ragona, Associate Professor of Visual Culture and Critical Theory at the Carnegie Mellon School of Art, is addressing Mekas's particular use of sound; and Andrew V. Uroskie, Associate Professor at Stony Brook University Department of Art, takes on Mekas's contribution to the development of interdisciplinarity through his work with The Living Theater.

Support

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About the Jewish Museum

Located on New York City's famed Museum Mile, the Jewish Museum is a distinctive hub for art and Jewish culture for people of all backgrounds. Founded in 1904, the Museum was the first institution of its kind in the United States and is one of the oldest Jewish museums in the world. Devoted to exploring art and Jewish culture from ancient to contemporary, the Museum offers diverse exhibitions and programs, and maintains a unique collection of nearly 30,000 works of art, ceremonial objects, and media reflecting the global Jewish experience over more than 4,000 years. The public may call 212.423.3200 or visit TheJewishMuseum.org for more information.

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