

Unpublished note on Jonas Mekas

SEQ CHAPTER \h \r 1Notes towards a Sketch of Jonas

by

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Jonas Mekas is legend in today's artworld. He has been, and still is, a proselytizer for film art, a film producer, an unpaid publicist for those whose films he respects, an exhibitor, an magazine editor, a journalist, a fund-raiser, a film archivist, a film critic, an autobiographer, a poet, a programmer, and most important of all, a filmmaker. One might think that the legion of other activities that he has engaged in would have curtailed his development as a film artist, but this is not so. For, by any reasonable measure, Mekas is one of the greatest film artists.

Mekas currently lives in Brooklyn, N.Y, and works in Lower Manhattan. However, he came into the world in a far different place. Mekas was born on Christmas Eve, 1922, Seminiškiaj, Lithuania (a village of about twenty families.) He spent much of his childhood on the family farm, tending livestock and working in the fields. He graduated from public school in 1936 and became an agricultural labourer in a nearby village; here, he saw his first movies. It was also then, at 14 years of age, that he published his first collection of poetry. He attempted to enter high school in 1938, but school officials

deemed him too old for earlier grades, and would not permit him entrance. Frustrated, he spent the winter and spring of 1939-1940 catching up, and passed the examination admitting him to the sixth year of studies at the gymnasium (thus skipping five years.) This happened at just the time that the USSR annexed Lithuania; the conditions this take-over led to meant that, while attending school, he lived on milk and bread. Two years later the German army expelled the Soviets; in consequence, Jonas took up journalism, working for the local newspaper and also an anti-Nazi newsletter. He stayed in school nonetheless, and graduated at the top of his class. After graduation, he became editor of the local newspaper, organized the first dramatic theatre in Birzshai with his younger (by three years) brother Adolfas, studied acting, and travelled, giving poetry readings.

In 1944, after Lithuania was invaded by Germany, Jonas and Adolfas produced a typewritten broadsheet for his fellow Lithuanians that was critical of both the Nazis and the Soviets. The young anarchist poet had an anti-Stalin anthem, which he and his anarchist friends used to sing. He heard that the German secret police had identified the source of these broadsheets and, as he recounts in his extraordinarily plaintive memoirs, *I Had Nowhere To Go* (1991), the young anarchist poet fled, accompanied by Adolfas (now also a filmmaker, and a professor at Bard College). Mekas described to Jerry Tallmer how, when the Germans came to the Mekas farmhouse in Seminiškiaj in 1944, he “went out the window and into the potato field.” The last thing he glimpsed behind him was his father up against the wall, a German gun pressed into his back. Yet he could still

feel, 61 years later, the connection with nature that would help sustain him and provide the impetus for his poetry and films. “You do not forget an experience like that,” he told Tallmer. “Knowing my father had that gun in his back, and I, face down in the potato field, all in bloom, white blossoms everywhere. I still remember the intensity of every smell and every colour of that moment.”

He and his brother Adolfas hoped to escape to Vienna, where Jonas planned to attend university. It was not to be: their plan was thwarted when the German military police seized the train and diverted it to Hamburg and, finally, detained the pair, until 1945, first in a forced labour camp in Elmshorn, a suburb of Hamburg and, later, in a work farm at Flensburg. After the War, while living in camps for displaced persons, in Kassel and Wiesbaden, he studied philosophy at the University of Mainz from 1946-48 as well as with a fellow camp resident who instructed him in the Stanislavsky System. Mekas continued to write all the while, editing the camp newspaper and an avant-garde literary magazine for Lithuanian exiles, and brought out, in Tübingen, a volume of prose poems entitled *A Book about Kings and People*. The following year, 1948, a book of his poems, *Idylls of Seminiškiaj*, appeared, as well as a story in a short-story collection. *Idylls of Seminiškiaj* is a series of bucolic poems that presents concrete details of seasonal change in the country, farming activities, and communal existence, and the beginning of a theme of exile and a longing for home that would mark Mekas' work.

First Idyll: Old is rain gushing down shrubstems

Old is rain gushing down shrubstems,
cockgrouse drumming in the red summer dawn.
Old is our talk of this.

And of the fields, yellowing barley and oats,
the cowherd fires wetblown in lonesome autumn.
Of the potato digs,
the heavy summer heat,
white winter glare and sleigh-din down unending roads.
Of heavy timber hauls, stony fallows,
the red brick ovens and outlying limerock.
Then—by the evening lamps, in autumn, while fields turn gray —
of wagonloads ready for tomorrow's market,
the roads, in October, washed out and swamped,
the potato digs drenched.

Old is our life here, long generations
pacing the fields off, wearing down plowland,
each foot of earth able to speak, still breathing of fathers.
Out of these cool stone wells

they drew water for their returning herds,
and when the flooring in the place wore down,
or the housewall quietly started to crumble, they dug their
yellow clay from the same pits,
their sand gold-fresh from the same fields.

And even with us gone
there will be others, sitting out on blue fieldstones,
mowing the overgrown meadows, plowing these plains,
and when they come in at the end of their day and sit down to the
tables,
each table, each clay jug,
each beam in the wall will speak,
they'll have the sprawling yellow sandbanks to remember,
and ryefields swaying in the wind,
the sad songs of our women from the far side of a flax field,
and one smell, on first entering a new parlor,
the scent of fresh moss!
Oh, old is the flowering clover,
horses snorting in the summer night,
rollers, harrows and plows scouring tillage,
the heavy millstones rumbling,

and women weeding the rows, their kerchiefs glimmering white.

Old is rain gushing down shrubstems,

cockgrouse drumming in the red summer dawn.

Old is our talk of all this. (Translated by Vyt Bakaitis)

The work uses long lines and an epic pace to portray his childhood in the village. He described the people in the village and their various activities during the four seasons, as factually and prosaically as he could, avoiding what was accepted as poetic Lithuanian language. As he told Scott MacDonald, he strived to produce “documentary poetry.”

The following year, the brothers were transferred to yet another DP camp, this one in Schwäbisch Gmünd. They left from there for America. They arrived on October 29, 1949. In the DP camps, he had experienced his first urge to make film. In an interview with Brian Frye, he explains:

Then I saw . . . [a].movie, I think it was by [Fred] Zinnemann, made in Switzerland I think, *The Search* [1948], about displaced persons, made immediately after the war. And I saw it with my brother and we got very angry about how little understanding of the real situation there was in this film, about what it means to be displaced. We got angry and we started writing scripts. That’s when we decided to make our own films. That’s where it begins. But it wasn’t until we came to New York that we actually

began making films. You know, in a displaced persons camp, there is no way of getting money, a camera or film or anything. And when we arrived in New York, we had not really seen anything really decent. So it wasn't until late in '49 when we arrived in New York that we began going to MoMA (Museum of Modern Art) and seeing all the varieties of cinema. We rented a Bolex, the next week practically after we arrived, and started fooling around. That was the beginning.

Mekas told Scott MacDonald in an interview that he saw many movies the American army showed for free, and that he and Adolfas sometimes went into town and saw the post-war German productions. Later, when they went to study at the University of Mainz, which was in the French zone (the two commuted from Wiesbaden)—the brothers saw many French films. Still, the works that interested them the most “the movies that really got us interested in film were not the French productions, but (what is quite extraordinary, given what the two had lived through) the postwar, neorealistic German films. They are not known here—films by Kautner, Josef V. Baky, Liebeneiner, and others.” He analyzed the reason these German works appealed to him: “The only way they could make films after the war in Germany was by shooting on actual locations. The war had ended, but the realities were still all around. Though the stories were fictional and melodramatic, their visual texture was drab reality, the same as in the post-war Italian films.” Mekas, it

seems, has always leaned towards reality. In Heidelberg he “bought, by chance, a book on the theory of cinema”—whose title he doesn’t remember—that got him “very excited about the possibilities.” In the first weeks after arriving in America, Jonas also read some writings by Vsevolod Pudovkin and Sergei Eisenstein (whose writings likely reinforced the realist bent of Mekas’ thought). He told Scott MacDonald that he also read writing by Grierson and Rotha and watched British and American documentary films of the ‘30s and ‘40s (though he later came to feel that their influence sent him on a detour away from his native inclinations). He read Ernest Hemingway’s *A Farewell to Arms* on the boat on the way over. The directness and simplicity of that work were values that Jonas embraced (and Hemingway remains one of Jonas’ favourite writers).

Mekas and his brother settled in Williamsburg, Brooklyn in New York—or as he described the move in an interview with Brian Frye: “The United Nations Refugee Organization dumped me here because they were dissolving the displaced person camps in Germany. . . I am not an immigrant. I was brought here and I stayed here.” He could not return to Lithuania: “In Lithuania, my mother told me later, the secret Soviet police for one year were waiting for me in the bushes not far from the house.”

Life in America was tough for the brothers. Still, two weeks after his arrival, he borrowed the money to buy his first Bolex 16mm camera and began to record moments of his life. The very first script that the brothers wrote when they arrived in late 1949 was for a film to be called *Lost Lost Lost Lost*, a documentary on the life of displaced persons. The desire evident here, to chronicle, to record the everyday, was basic to his

poetry and would lie at the heart of much of much of Mekas' subsequent film work. (A few shots at the beginning of the 1975 film, *Lost, Lost, Lost*, are from footage shot for the earlier record of longing and exile: a slow-motion shot of a soldier, and shots of a family reading a newspaper, of a skating rink, a tree in Central Park) But then, as now, Mekas saw the everyday as charged by the political. The purpose the brothers conceived for *Lost Lost Lost Lost*, was to bring some facts to people's attention: that "the Baltic republics—Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania—were sacrificed by the West to the Soviet Union at Yalta just before the end of the war and ended up as occupied countries to which we could not return. We were taking a stand for the three Baltic countries that the West had betrayed." The film was left uncompleted after Adolfas was drafted. Jonas continued documenting everyday life, especially the activities of displaced persons in New York, Chicago, Toronto, Philadelphia, Boston. Continuing to work in the Brooklyn factories and spending all his money on film, he chronicled this reality without any clear plan or purpose. At the time he worked as a solitary artist and the work he produced belonged to no movement, no collective, not even to any community.

In an interview with David Patrick Columbia, he described the cinephilia that gripped him in 1950.

In 1950-51, my New York life begins. I keep stressing New York, because I don't know America. All my American life has been in New York. New York's movie life was very busy in 1950. First, on 42nd street between 6th

and 8th Avenue, there were maybe fifteen movie houses, and you could see everything You know, they were specializing: westerns, imported European films—'art' films, they were then called—comedies, short subjects, newsreels and so on. Now, if you wanted to see old movies and classics, you went to MoMA, which we did. And we did not miss a single day, because we wanted to catch up with everything. Or if you wanted to see newsreels, there was a theatre just for newsreels. If you wanted to see the avant-garde, the new experimental films, you went to Cinema 16 programs. Every month they had a new program. If you were of a more Trotskyite persuasion, you went to Club Cinema on 6th Avenue and 10th Street, where every Friday or Saturday night—I don't remember—they showed documentaries of a leftist persuasion. If you wanted to see very rare early silent films of various formats, you went to the Theodore Huff Society, again once a week, run by Herman Weinberg, Bill Everson, Bill Kenly and some other people. . . . Actually, the second evening after arriving in New York, I was already at the movies. I saw *The Fall of the House of Usher* [Jean Epstein, 1928] and *The Cabinet of Doctor Caligari* [Robert Wiene, 1920] on, I think, 16th Street or somewhere, at the New York Film Society run by Rudolf Arnheim.

The Mekas brothers would finish their factory work in Long Island City at 5:00 P.M. and,

without washing their faces, would rush to the subway to catch the 5:30 screening at the Museum of Modern Art.

Mekas soon discovered avant-garde film at venues such as Amos Vogel's pioneering Cinema 16. It is enlightening to recall the spirit of the time and the enthusiasm that the new forms of realistic film generated in post-war New York. In an article in *Hollywood Quarterly* (Summer, 1950), Amos Vogel wrote,

Cinema 16 has validated its original contentions: first, that there were scores of superior nonfiction films gathering dust on film-library shelves; and second, that there were large potential audiences eager to see them.

Cinema 16 offers films that comment on the state of man, his world, and his crises, either by means of realistic documentation or through experimental techniques. It "glorifies" nonfiction. It finds excitement in the life of ants, Hindustan music, microbiology, aboriginal life. It hails a film that is a work of art, but will not hesitate to present a film that is important only because of its subject matter. Its avant-garde films comment on the tensions and psychological insecurity of modern existence or are significant expressions of modern art. Its social documentaries stimulate rather than stifle discussion and controversy.

In the article's concluding paragraph, Vogel asserted that "increasingly, the nonfiction

film is coming into its own in the United States.” The disasters of war had turned peoples’ mind toward reality. The realist film, in one form or another, is a cause the Mekas, too, would champion.

Like the people around Cinema 16, whom Vogel described as organizing shows on a shoestring “by people with more enthusiasm than experience,” Mekas began screening his own films in 1953. In 1951 or ‘52, he had met Louis Brigante, who was editor and publisher of a monthly literary newspaper, *Intro Bulletin*, and, in 1953, opened an art gallery on the corner of Avenue A and 1st Street, which was known as Gallery East. Brigante invited Mekas to show some films there and he started screening avant-garde, experimental films there. In that same interview, Mekas states

In 1953, I started the first screenings of what was called at that time Experimental Films. I showed the Whitney Brothers, Gregory Markopoulos, Kenneth Anger. I started my own screenings at Gallery East, which was on Avenue A and 1st street. As you can see, I didn’t move very far... [Anthology Film Archives is at 2nd Street and 2nd Avenue] Also in 1953, a woman by the name of Dorothy Brown had weekend screenings in her loft on Ludlow Street. I helped her. Around the same time, Gideon Bachmann was running the Film Study Group, which I joined. I helped to write notes. Once a week or so, or every two weeks, we had screenings, usually with filmmakers present. And on it goes.

In 1953, too, Mekas began working at Graphic Studios, a commercial photography studio, where he stayed for five or six years. Consequently, he looked at a lot of still photography. Photographers, great and not-so-great, and some artists (e.g., Archipenko) would drop in. He acknowledges that he learned a great deal from Lenard Perskie, who ran the studio. This early exposure to the work of photographers (including art photographers) also would have reinforced Mekas' realist proclivities.

In January, 1955, Mekas put out the first issue of *Film Culture* magazine, which soon established itself as the key forum for discussion of issues around American independent cinema. *Film Culture* was devoted to auteurist criticism and featured writers such as Andrew Sarris, Peter Bogdanovich, Herman Weinberg. At first, Mekas spoke for reforming the studio-produced cinema, reformulating it along "independentist," auteurist lines. In the early 1960s, Mekas helped spearhead a collection of independent filmmakers known as the Group, whose numbers included Robert Frank and Peter Bogdanovich. Radically opposed to "official cinema," the Group declared in a manifesto, "We don't want rosy turns, we want them the colour of blood." The Group initially envisioned that it could create a commercially viable alternative to official cinema. "We refuse to continue the Big Lie of Culture," Mekas wrote sometime later. "You criticize our work from a purist, formalistic and classicist point of view. But we say to you: What's the use of cinema if man's soul goes rotten?" The cinema they called for, and dedicated themselves to bringing about, would be a cinema of redemptive potential—and to be so, it

would have to disaffiliate itself from the studio-produced cinema and become radically individual. "There is no other way to break the frozen cinematic conventions than through a complete derangement of the official cinematic senses," he proposed. As the New American Cinema Group proclaimed in its "First Statement" of 1961, "the official cinema all over the world is running out of breath. It is morally corrupt, aesthetically obsolete, thematically superficial, temperamentally boring. Even seemingly worthwhile films, those that lay claim to high moral and aesthetic standards, and have been accepted as such by critics and public alike, reveal the decay of the Product Film." The group committed itself to bringing forth a cinema of "personal expression."

He soon rejected this American auteurism and took up instead what we might characterize as an Emersonian advocacy. Mekas became the spokesperson for a radical, individual, personal, avant-garde cinema and *Film Culture* became the mouthpiece of the American avant-garde. In 1958, Mekas began writing his "Movie Journal" column for the *Village Voice*, spotlighting the newest and most radical filmmakers in New York City, and in the first three of four years of that column, we can see his conviction in the fundamental human importance of the new, radical avant-garde cinema consolidating.

In 1962, he founded the Filmmakers' Cooperative (FMC) with Emile de Antonio, Shirley Clarke and others. The FMC remains in operation and has the world's largest circulating collection of avant-garde films. In 1964, Mekas founded the Filmmakers' Cinémathèque, which eventually grew into Anthology Film Archives, one of the world's

largest and most important repositories of avant-garde films. With Stan Brakhage, Ken Kelman and P. Adams Sitney, Mekas formed the Essential Cinema Collection in 1970, one of the first attempts to establish a canon of avant-garde film. In the 55 years since he came to America, Mekas has kept busy as a missionary for films of staunchly independent persuasion. He became editor-in-chief of *Film Culture* magazine and remained the movie critic for the *Village Voice* newspaper from 1958-75. He then moved to *Soho Weekly News*, where he was movie critic from 1976-77. He was President of New American Cinema Group (Filmmakers Cooperative) from 1961-80 and film curator of the Jewish Museum from 1968-71. He taught film at higher education centres including Cooper Union, International Center for Photography, M.I.T., New School for Social Research, New York University. He lectured on film throughout the US, Europe, Asia and South America. He has been Program Director and President of Anthology Film Archives since 1970. He befriended Kenneth Anger, Stan Brakhage, John Cassavetes, Salvador Dali, Miles Davis, Robert Frank, Allen Ginsberg, Jack Kerouac, Henri Langlois, John Lennon, Norman Mailer, Nico, Yoko Ono, Nam June Paik, Lou Reed, and Andy Warhol—the present writer is also honoured to count Mekas as a friend.

In becoming an advocate for what in the “Anti-100 Years of Cinema Manifesto,” he called “small forms of cinema, the lyrical form, the poem, the watercolour, étude, sketch, portrait, arabesque, and bagatelle, and little 8mm songs,” for “the personal things that bring no money . . . for art which we do for each other, as friends” he had realized what Annette Michelson was to realize so many years later, in her revision

of “Film and the Radical Aspiration,” that the relation between capital and the forms of studio-produced cinema was different in the United States than it was in Europe—that the relation between the capitalist production system (the studio-system) and the forms the cinema adopts is so much more intimate in the United States than it is in Europe. The more intimate relation between film form and capital in America demanded that the American film artist develop a more thorough-going strategy: to bring the cinema back to a vital relation with the life-force of American culture demanded a more complete, more radical formal revision. In true Emersonian fashion, Mekas proposed the new generation of cinephiles would have to reformulate cinema, from the ground up. A panoply of new formal devices would have to be created, to facilitate the expression of the new human being than was emerging in the New World of post-war America. The new cinema would borrow from the authentic language of the spirit, the language that speaks of the internal world, the language of poetry. It would be a cinema of metaphor, of resonant, ambiguous imagery, a lyrical cinema, a cinema as intimate as poetry. It would have to be, as Emerson proposed for American poetry, a cinema of personal vision. (Mekas claims to have learned this first from Dostoevsky.) It would have to be a self-reliant cinema; thus, Mekas proposed that the new cinema would disaffiliate itself from the studio-produced cinema, and become radically individual.

Mekas’ conception of the cinema reflects a poet’s spirit, and it is important to realize that Mekas has continued to write, and publish poetry. All told, he has published six books of poetry. In addition to *Idylls*, there is *Flower Talk*, published in Chicago in

1961, which like *Idylls* is an intimate chronicle in quasi-diary form of the turning of the seasons, but also a record of the discovery and progress of first love. *Words Apart*, published in Chicago in 1967, is a poem of percussive line breaks and tentative, half-awkward enjambments, not unlike his films in its staccato style and in troubled interplay between the quotidian and the remembered, between presence and absence. This book was something of turning point in Mekas' poetic development, for it developed the extremely condensed, elliptical, fragmentary, almost paratactical style, and made use of the vernacular and quotidian that his later writings (and films) would rely on. Some of its features resemble those of *Idyll*, however, for *Words Apart* presents fragmentary perceptions of reality, in what seems an almost random accumulation; the work discovers, as its form evolves, a pattern (that of the turning seasons) that holds these fragments together. The tendency to create forms that unify fragmentary impressions, that evolve order out seeming disorder, is a constant in Mekas' work, including his films. Mekas' works exhibit a tendency to discover immanent meaning in that which seems to lack meaning, to discover presence is what seems, nearly, a phantasmal absence. *Poetry*, a "collected works," published in Vilnius in 1971, includes some previously unpublished poems and some extended versions of previously published poems. *Reminiscences*, published in New York in 1972, (and in translation in *City Lights Review* in 1987), deals with the poet's experiences in post-war Germany, and, as both his earlier poems and his films tend to do, finds redemption and meaning in the turning of the seasons. *Datebooks 1970-1982*, published in New York in 1985, radicalizes the

fragmentary paratactical form along the lines of his film work, and extends it into a longer, open-form work—even the title, *Datebooks*, suggests its affinity with his films, which are often in diary form. Mekas' most recent book of poetry is *Black Writing on the Gates of Dawn*. These books have established Mekas' place among the leading poets writing in Lithuanian.

Throughout the early 1960s, Mekas announced his convictions about the importance of a new cinema—a new cinema that would facilitate the expression of a new human being—in *Film Culture*; increasingly, these pronouncements were informed by Mekas' own filmmaking. Like his advocacy, Mekas' film work was fuelled by that Emersonian aspiration to develop unalienated modes of experience. Like many, he concluded that the most important condition for forming such modes of experience is the development of the capacity to live with one's immediate condition, to move beyond anticipation and recollection, so as to live in “the immediate now.” Thus, *Reminiscences of a Journey to Lithuania* (1972) revels in that moment when he almost forgets the pain of the war and of exile. “The years of war, of hunger, of Brooklyn,” receded, so the narration tells us, and for the first time Mekas experiences, “a moment when I forgot my home. This was the beginning of my new home.”

Mekas' use of autobiography represents an attempt to turn cinema away both from collective fantasy and from depictions of external reality—from that cinema that descends from Méliès' work, and, at the same time, from that cinema that descends from the work of the Lumière brothers. His use of autobiography represents an attempt to

undo the deleterious effects of a highly codified system of representation, to reverse the perspective of cinema, so that it points towards the self. Embracing autobiography is an aspect of Mekas' progression towards a radical Emersonian cinema: while he kept the self out of his earlier, more overtly engaged work to put emphasis on external realities, his isolation forced him to look inward (he never really felt a part of the ex-patriot Lithuanian community, some of whom advocated a military solution to the Soviet occupation of their homeland, and many of whom were antagonistic towards Mekas' literary modernism). This sort of diaristic cinema is unprecedented in American avant-garde cinema; the diary work of another Lithuanian-American experimentalist, Marie Menken, would appear just a few years later.

Mekas suggests in several ways that being rooted in the self gives the personal cinema its strength and its integrity. Mekas' highest term of praise in his critical writings is "realism." "Realism" a term that, in art criticism, is always a very slippery, but unusually so in Mekas' writing, for Mekas seems to mean by "real" depictions whose veracity is guaranteed by their being produced by an authentic individual—that is, by an exemplar of Emerson's authentic, self-reliant individual. Thus, Mekas praises Lionel Rigosin's *Come Back Africa* (1960), for "the very amateurism of the cast [that] becomes part of movie's truth and authenticity." A commitment to realism is evident in his first film project: in the late 1950s, Mekas made a twenty-minute long film, *Grand Street*, on the life of a street in Williamsburg, Brooklyn, populated mainly by immigrants, where he spent a lot of time. Around 1960 he took that film apart, for he was having difficulties finding a way to

chronicle everyday life. (We see some of the footage from this time in *Lost, Lost, Lost*, including the very first footage he shot, on Williamsburg's Lorimer Street.)

Mekas' own brand of realism, a realism that arises out of, and celebrates, the place where self and world meet, reaches its fully developed form in *Diary, Notes and Sketches* (aka *Walden*). The Albright-Knox Gallery in Buffalo decided to commission new works in music, dance, and film—Gerald O'Grady, another legend in the world of avant-garde film, had convinced the Gallery to include film. Mekas was given ten months to make a film: the gallery helped to make a print and paid the expenses. The intensity with which he worked on the film propelled Mekas to use the material that he could understand quickly how to shape. The work assumed a diaristic, autobiographical form.

As though to confirm the role of authenticity and the authentic self, Mekas associates a second term of value with "realism"; this second term is spontaneity. An entry in his Diaries, from September 5, 1960, praises filmmakers who work through "ignorance and confusion," and who have freed themselves from a "trust in clarity, in pre-planning where everything is predicatable." He proposes a similarly Emersonian conception of the value of spontaneity in his 1960 text, "The Cinema of the New Generation."

The spontaneity of the new American artist is not a conscious or an intellectual process; it is rather his way of life, his whole being; he comes to it rather intuitively, directly.

The new artist neither chooses this spontaneous route himself,
nor does he do it consciously; it is . . . the only possible route.

Mekas kept a diary from his boyhood in Lithuania until some time in the 1960s, when the time his film work required precluded his continuing. Here are some passages from the time he spent in the Schwäbisch Gmünd DP camp, about three months before leaving for America:

May 17, 1949

8 P.M.

Two drunks are walking along the street.

“Let’s go, let’s go . . .”

“Where do you want to go?”

“What? It’s raining.”

“Let’s go to the Truman street, *joptvaimat* (a Russian curse).”

They have a silent exchange, I can’t hear it

They both walk away.

A woman comes through rain, pressing a large empty plate to her side.

Down the corners of buildings noisily run streams of rain water. At the other end of the street—music, boyan. A man in green pants, his hands in

pockets, runs by, his head pulled into his shoulders, wet. A girl runs by. A voice from the window:

“Where are you running? Lost your key?”

The man in the window is whistling, the girl keeps running without acknowledging him and without turning back.

A man, all wet, slowly walks by, I know him, it's Grazys. Another man, in grey suit, black hat, his hands in trouser pockets, lifting them up so that the bottoms wouldn't get too soaked. Through the window I can hear a man's voice singing:

“O, Zuzana, sirdis mana,

koks gvenimas grazus”

(“Oh, Susanne, my sweetheart,

how wonderful is life”).

No change in the sky, but it looks like it's raining less. The puddles in the street, little streams, brooks of rain water rush along the edges of the street, down. Camp policeman with a new MP uniform. In the window—heads. Women, children.

The method adopted in these selections from his diary, of collaging impressions, is exactly the method of Mekas' diary films. Mekas films evolved towards this form when he put the influence of Grierson and Rotha aside and so came to understand the

photographic/cinematographic image as a matrix of self and world. Cage reinforced this new tendency in his film work, as through his influence Mekas came to accept that chance procedures (either the chance processes of accepting what comes to one in filming or the chanced process involved in simply stringing footage together) can produce meanings that transcend those conceived by the limited self and embrace those that arise at the point where self and world meet.

In a text of 1966, written when he was awarded the highest award of the Philadelphia College of Art, Mekas traces the origin of these Emersonian ideas about the authentic individual and value of spontaneity back to his experience of war.

And then came the war, and I went through horrors more unbelievable than anything I had read in the books, and it all happened right before my eyes -- before my eyes the heads of children were smashed with bayonets. ... Everything that I believed in shook to the foundations--all my idealism, and my faith in the goodness of man and progress of man; all was shattered. Somehow, I managed to keep myself together. But really, I wasn't one piece any longer; I was one thousand painful pieces.

It's really from this, and because of this, that I did what I did. I felt I had to start from the very beginning. I had no faith, no hope left. I had to collect myself again, bit by bit. And I wasn't surprised when, upon my arrival in New York, I found others who felt as I felt. There were poets and

filmmakers, and painters—people who were also wailing like one thousand painful pieces. And we felt there was nothing to lose anymore. There was nothing worth keeping from our civilized inheritance. Let's clean ourselves out, we felt. Let's clean out everything that is dragging us down—the whole bag of horrors and lies and egos.

The return to humanity degree zero correlated with a reduction of cinema, an elimination from the cinema of all that is artificial, contrived, false. Mekas unfolds these entailments in the same lecture

In cinema, this search is manifest through abandoning all the existing professional, commercial values, rules, subjects, techniques, pretensions. We said: We don't know what man is; we don't know what cinema is.—let's go in any direction to break out of the net that is dragging us down.

The lexis that Mekas used in developing these ideas reflects the poetics of projective verse that Charles Olson, Robert Duncan, Michael McClure, Allen Ginsberg and Robert Creeley offered. As in their writings on poetics, in Mekas' writings the act of creation takes on a performative dimension. The artist's sensory involvement in the

immediacy of the situation, and his or her immediate, unconceptualized response to that situation has paramount value. The artist's key ability becomes the capacity to feel and, and to have the spiritual strength and freedom, to respond to the "urgencies under hand," as Charles Olson put it. This is what Mekas proposes when he says, "Let us be completely open and listening, ready to move to any direction upon the slightest call, almost like one who is too tired and too weary, whose senses are like a musical string almost with no power of their own, blown and played by the mystical Winds of the incoming Age, waiting for a slightest motion or call or sign." This spontaneous, improvisatory tack, of following what "the field" (as poet Robert Duncan terms it) prompts one to do, reflects a longing to apprehend, even to assimilate oneself to, an uncontrolled reality, a longing for nothing short of a fusion of art and life. Autobiography, of course, is an ideal mode for reconciling art and life, as autobiography plays itself out in the space between art and life; its goal is nothing less than to form a new consciousness, to bring forth "the new human"; this is the quest of *Lost, Lost, Lost* (1975). Autobiography levels the distinction between art and life, precisely because it turns the practice of shooting into an event within life and integrates the practice of making art into the fabric of everyday life.

Concerning *Diaries, Notes and Sketches* (aka *Walden*, 1969), Mekas wrote in the catalogue of the New York Filmmakers' Cooperative,

To keep a film (camera) diary is to react (with your camera) immediately,

now, this instant: either you get it now, or you don't get it at all. To go back and shoot it later would mean restaging, be it events or feelings. To get it now, as it happens demands the total mastery of one's tools (in this case, Bolex): it has to register the reality to which I react and also it has to register my state of feeling (and all the memories) as I react. Which also means that I had to do all the structuring (editing) right there, during the shooting, in the camera. All the footage you'll see in the *Diaries* is exactly as it came out from the camera.

Immediacy thus became the key criterion of value in this new cinema; we can discover the marks of this immediacy in the resultant film's heterogeneous surface. The popular misconception of Mekas' films represents them as being shot off-the-cuff, a frame at a time, so the result is a relentless, extended pixillation. The most evident feature of this caricature is its misrepresentation, for there is extraordinary variety in Mekas' works—to accuse them of being composed a frame at a time, in relentless pixillation, is a little like accusing a poet of composing one word at a time, and of being concerned with the spaces, the gaps, the elisions between the words and the abutment of one word with another. In Mekas' films, the shifting relations between word and image, the alternation of intertitle and image, and of sound and silence creates a variegated surface. What is most important, Mekas' films generally have an episodic character, and Mekas treats each episode differently. The academic's portrait of Mekas fails to note that

he is a camera virtuoso, who plays the camera like a musical instrument, and he constantly generates new riffs. Watch any section of any of Mekas' longer films, and ask yourself, "how is reality being transformed?" If you keep this simple question in mind while watching *Reminiscences of a Journey to Lithuania* or *He Stands in the Desert* (1986), or almost any of Mekas' works, keep asking it and answering it, and you see that Mekas' work possess extraordinary variety. In fact, more than anything, these are extremely heterogeneous films, that proceed principally by parataxis. The effect of this parataxis resembles the effect of Ezra Pound's use of that form of construction—it transforms the image into a matrix where subjectivity and objective meet. For the images seem, at once, both to belong to the consciousness of their maker, and charged with the emotional valences his mind—or person, or soul—gives them, and autonomous, objective fragments. Furthermore, these fragments seem to be both of this world, and above the world—of the world due to their immediacy, and above the world, because of the transformations to which Mekas subjects representation. The principal trope Mekas employs is synecdoche, both spatial and temporal synecdoche, and synecdoche, paradoxically, relates his shot-fragments to the world from which they derive, inasmuch as it implies its continuity with that world. At the same time, the trope transforms these fragments by assimilating them to a new relational context, a context in which their meanings are wholly intrinsic. More than that, their fragmentary quality and their isolation one from the next suggest a series of epiphanies, each of which is wholly autonomous, but charged with fullness of meaning that makes it self-sufficient. In *Movie Journal*,

Mekas put it:

The camera now picks up glimpses, fragments of objects and people, and creates fleeting impressions, of both objects and actions, in the manner of the action painters. A new spiritualized reality of motion and light is created on the screen.

The spontaneity that Mekas advocates, the desire to capture experience in its immediacy is a methodological response to the dismembering of reality by the Second World War. The temporal coincidence of the diaristic recording of the event with the event itself holds out the promise of a way to heal the breach, to overcome division between the self and world.

Like the works of the Projective Poets, the form of Mekas' *magnum opus*, which he originally planned to call *Diary, Notes and Sketches*, is an open form work, a work whose form emerges in the process of the work's being created. Nothing makes this more evident than the way Mekas portrays his becoming a filmmaker. Artists' autobiography traditionally accorded special privilege to the artists' moment of election, the moment when they are called to assume the artist's vocation. By contrast, part way through *Lost, Lost, Lost*, Mekas comments, casually, that he bought a Bolex. The contrast points out that, *Diaries, Notes and Sketches* (aka *Walden*) has a non-hierarchic form, a form that accords equal value to all its contents. This is characteristic of open

form works. Like such extended, open-form works as Charles Olson's *The Maximus Poems*, Mekas' *Diaries, Notes and Sketches*, has an evolving form, a form that emerges through the compositional process. The use of the open form and the inclusion of heterogeneous elements leave the form of the work permeable to reality—a reality that comprises two moments, both the objective reality the filmmaker responds to and the reality of the filmmaker's responses. From moment to moment the work can move in new directions, take on a new shape. This serialized method of composition accords considerable autonomy to each fragment, and this autonomy increases the force with which each fragment asserts itself—adds to sense of immediacy and presence. This sense of immediacy is increased by the use of the characteristic features of the home-movie and other spontaneously created cinematic forms, including flash-frames, swish-pans, over- and underexposure, variable focus, lack of establishing shots, jump-cuts, hand-held camera, abrupt changes of space and time, unusual camera angles and camera movements, shifting cast of players, etc.

The disjunctiveness of the work, the shifting styles of ironization, and those characteristics that we associate with spontaneous cinema give Mekas' film diaries a quality of immediacy. However, Mekas' diary forms also evoke a sense of pastness, a sense of absence—a sense that memory, not immediate perception, is the hermeneutic faculty appropriate to his films. For the voice-over, with its poetic, subjective, but nonetheless vernacular, and tentative formulations—tentative to the poet of allowing interruptions, digressions and reformulations—, situates the imagery of the film in the

past. A particular strength of Mekas' films develops from an intricate and at times paradoxical relation between sound and image. As he edits, Mekas constructs his sound-tracks at his editing table—many of these tracks consist of first-person commentaries mixing remembrances with immediate responses as he views and pastes together images that are, by definition, ghosts from the past. Both mournful and celebratory, Mekas' films are intensely personal meditations on memory, time, loss, and recovery.

The voice-over stakes a claim to belong to the present, reflecting on imagery that belongs to the past. Thus, the voice over situates the imagery within the past, within the realm of absence that is the domain of memory. The voice, with its heavy weight of the past—the weary delivery that only increases the sensuous weight, the hesitancy that leads him to separate word from word, according each material force and by that very discontinuity stressing Mekas' distance from the experiences he recounts—all these features mean that the voice carries the burden of pastness, and acting together with the film's montage (which, in the case of *Diaries, Notes and Sketches* we can so easily, but incorrectly be taken as processes of adding sound, narration, and intertitles to the film) transforms the immediacy of experience into a chronicle assembled by the faculty of memory.

Furthermore, autobiography is a self-reflexive form; it involves the artist's turning his or her gaze upon the self. In literature, it is possible to represent the self reflected on, through using one of the simplest, most basic signs of our language, the word for the

first person singular. Film, curiously, cannot deal with this ubiquitous being with anything like the simplicity that language does. For, short of depicting oneself shooting by using mirrors, or other such artificial, mediating contrivances, the film has no way to represent the subject of the enunciation. It cannot pronounce its sign. Only the filmmaker's power of transformation, of taking an object from the real world and turning it into a self-object, can reveal the potency of that subject. We believe that we can sense something about the artist's state by examining the quality of the camera-handling, or the use of light, or colour. But those indirect and highly contrived references contrast with the simple, forceful reference to the "I" in poetry. So the perfect coincidence between art and life, seemingly guaranteed by autobiography, is disrupted by the incapacity of film to represent the subject of enunciation. The only hope for disclosing the transitory states of the filmmaker's subjectivity is to foreground the act of enunciation instead of its subject. What makes the application of Olson's projective method especially attractive is the fact that, in film, the subject of enunciation can never really be the enunciations' represented subject. Thus, there is a need to foreground the act of enunciation, and this need to foreground the act of enunciation is the basis for Charles Olson's open form poetics, or Robert Duncan's open field poetics, but it also provides a way for film, a medium that cannot represent the self within an image, a means of conveying aspects of the self.

Here then is another matrix of presence of the imagery. The absent subject of the representation is presented by the representation's formulation. This mingling of presence and absence is a cardinal feature of Mekas' films, reflected in the interplay in

his films of perception and memory, actual and ideal, reality as experienced and the reality that the artist longs for. The phenomenological status of the imagery of Mekas' films shifts register continually, between immediate experience and reminiscence.

The relation between presence and absence in the images in Mekas' films is extremely intimate, much more intimate than we have so far made it out to be. So far, it might seem that the spoken text belongs to the present and the image belongs to the realm of memory. But in fact, in his films, presence and absence cannot be separated according to media. Let us reconsider the text of 1975 concerning *Diaries, Notes and Sketches*. Mekas hinted at this in the text he wrote for the Filmmakers' Cooperative catalogue I quoted from above, when he stresses the need to be intimate with the camera's operations because "it has to register the reality to which I react and also it has to register my state of feeling (and *all the memories*) as I react."

Perception is a register that includes memory; so the image furnished by perception is overlaid by memory, and reshaped by memory. The rendering of images, apprehended in their raw immediacy is a mode of experience Mekas longs for, and sometimes attains, but only fleetingly. The reconstituting and restructuring of the image by memory does not begin with the editing, but only concludes. It begins right with the experience itself. Perception only rarely escapes the clutches of memory; the processes that structure memory almost always structure perception itself.

Thus, in *Diaries, Notes and Sketches*, the image of the New York is shaped by the image of Seminiškiaj, the image of Central Park is shaped by the image of the

nearby fields, the image of the artistic community in New York reflects the village community of his homeland. The absence that haunts every image reveals itself, too, in the fact that meaning is not immanent in the image. Mekas stresses this in *Lost, Lost, Lost*, when he says, "Everything is normal, everything is normal. The only thing is, you'll never know what they think. You'll never know what a displaced person thinks, in the evening and in New York." The breach between experience and its representation characterizes memory as well. Mekas stressed this immanence of memory in perception when, in a lecture on *Reminiscences of a Journey to Lithuania* he stated,

At first I thought that there was a basic difference between the written diary which one writes in the evening, and which is reflective process, and the filmed diary. In my film diary, I thought, I was doing something different; I was capturing life, bits of it, as it happens. But I realized very soon that it wasn't that different at all. When I am filming, I am reflecting. I was thinking that I was only reacting to actual reality, I do not have much control over reality at all, and everything is determined by my memory, my past. So that this "direct" filming becomes also a mode of reflections.

Same way, I came to realize, that writing a diary is not merely reflecting, looking back. Your day, as it comes back to you during the moment of writing, is measured, sorted out, accepted, refused and reevaluated by what and how one is at the moment when one writes it all down. It's all

happening again, and what one writes down is more turned to what one is when one writes than to the events and emotions of the day that are past and gone.

In a sense, the vast purview of *Diaries, Notes and Sketches*, the massive heterogeneity of surface which suggest a form of textual excess, its elliptical manner of self-presentations that reinforces this massive heterogeneity, suggests the desire to merge the self and reality, to integrate art with the text of life itself. The resolutely local, domestic, quotidian character of the films's subject, those every Emersonian qualities of the text, exist in tension with celebration of its transformative, and spiritualized, capacities that Mekas celebrates in, for example, the intertitle that quotes from Kafka's *Diary*: "Schreiben als Form des Gebetes". We could conceive this tension as one between the Emersonian man and the European, between the embracing of the New World, and the self-authenticating, self-reliant man who brings forth the world, in its full presence, through the act of genuine, Adamic perception, the vision of the child who has not yet lost paradise, and the European man, for whom making art is a constant effort at reparation, whose end is to restore the unity that is once lost. Mekas negotiates the conflicting visions with remarkable adeptness, and moves, in *He Stands in the Desert Counting the Seconds of his Life*, towards a New World reconstruction of Paradise.

Mekas' film output ranges from narrative films (*Guns of the Trees*, 1961) to documentaries (*The Brig*, 1963) and to "diaries" such as *Diaries, Notes, Sketches; Lost*,

Lost, Lost, Reminiscences of a Journey to Lithuania; Zefiro torna, (1992) and *As I was Moving Ahead, Occasionally I saw Brief Glimpses of Beauty* (2001). Still, it is probably fair to say that for six decades his work in film, video, and poetry has been largely diaristic. Indeed, his cinema can be thought of as one extended diary film: in 2001, he told Paris cineaste and art-museum chief Jerome Sans, “all my film work is one long film which is still continuing. I don’t really make films. I only keep filming. I am a filmer and not a film-maker. And I am not a film ‘director’ because I direct nothing. I just keep filming.”

Take the more recent *As I was Moving Ahead, Occasionally I saw Brief Glimpses of Beauty*: the work includes portraits of friends, family, and children—but what perhaps impresses one the most is the image it presents of nature in New York: snow, puddles of rain, or intense sun. The sun, heat, phenomena of nature seem to rule, even in New York (hardly the New York that most of us experience): we see streets in New York, with friends talking, people spending lazy summer days in the park or on the beach, people making food, intimate scenes, of love, a marriage, the birth of two children and glimpses of them growing up. The effect of the flow of images is that all images seem equally immediate, their object matter equally present (or equally absent). For one realizes, at length, that the film spans more than two decades, roughly from the late 1960s to the early 1980s. It is a composition of journals—an effort to keep the past present, to keep it from slipping away. At intervals, the flow of images is punctuated by typewritten sheets of paper filmed in close-up, inscribed with words such as ‘Beauty of the autumn in New

York' or 'Ecstasy of summer and being in New York' or 'Meanwhile uptown' and, again and again, 'Life goes on.' In Mekas' films, the mourning of a lost past is inextricably connected to the joy of living in the present moment. On the sound track of *Paradise Not yet Regained* (1980), Mekas recounts a tale that suggests his mythologizing bent, a parable that offers his reworking of the story of Adam and Eve. After they were driven out of Eden, while the pair rested in the deep shadow of a rock, Eve looked back and saw the glow of paradise exploding into little fragments. The pieces fell to earth in a heavy rain, covering the ground and Adam, who remained asleep. Eve did not tell Adam of this. So now, for Adams descendent, paradise still exists: the filmmaker gathers together the fragments of paradise that are scattered all over the world. This fiction offers the deepest truth about filmmaking anyone has articulated. And he said something similar in his poem, "From Nowhere: 2"

I pick

one thing,

the

thing itself

is

poetry,

dream

and

reality: (translated by Vyt Bakaitis)

The lost paradise of his Lithuanian village home becomes not exactly a paradise regained but a recovered serene joy at sharing with the circle of artists who form the citizenry of his new nation. More than once, Mekas inserts into such scenes of happiness, of human solidarity an intertitle that reads 'this is a political film.' Like his near contemporary, a fellow "bohemian" poet, Kenneth Rexroth, Mekas maintains that an altruistic joy in family and friends, a joy that is for all, is the most subversive political act.

Mekas' affirmation of the redemptive powers of beauty and of art, and his devotion to real film, has been as inspiration to all who make personal films. Often, in despair over the state to which personal cinema consigns those who give it their loyalty, I have taken strength from his testimony:

You may be wondering, sometimes, why we keep making little movies, underground movies why we are talking of Home Movies, and you hope, sometimes, that all this will change soon. Wait, you say, until they begin making real movies. But we say, No there is a misunderstanding here. We are making real movies. What we are doing comes from the deeper needs of man's soul. Man has wasted himself outside himself; man has disappeared in his projections. We want to bring him down, into his small room, to bring him home, where he can be, once in a while, alone and with himself and his soul— that's the meaning of the home movie, the

private vision of our movies. We want to surround this earth with our home movies. Our moves come from our hearts—our little movies, not the Hollywood moves. Our movies are like extensions of our own pulse, of our heartbeat, of our eyes, our fingertips, they are so personal, so unambitious in their movement, in their use of light, their imagery. We want to surround this earth with our film frames and warm it up, until it begins to move. . . . There is pain in the arts of the last few decades. The whole period of so-called modern art is nothing but the pain of our ending civilization Now we are looking, we are being pulled by a desire for something joyful deep within us, deep in the stars, and we want to bring it down to earth so that it will change our cities, our faces, our movements, our voices, our souls—we want an art of light.

In his memoirs, Mekas wrote about staring at New York from the deck of a ship called the General Howze, adding, “I am still staring at it, in my retinal memory.” Much of his memoirs are consumed with a core loneliness of a man displaced by war and ideology. Displaced from his own country, dropped by the U.N. in New York, he plunged into his new life, filming all the while. Practicing an art few know if, he remains an outsider; but, too, he has increasingly found—and founded—a new country, a new nation, conceived in liberty, composed by those figures of capable imagination who have dedicated themselves to keeping the soul from going rotten. With them, he has made

himself a home. In his remarkable “Anti-100 Years of Cinema Manifesto” he concludes: “The real history of cinema is invisible history. History of friends getting together, doing the thing they love. For us, the cinema is beginning with every new buzz of the projector, with every new buzz of our cameras. With every new buzz of our cameras, our hearts jump forward my friends.”

At the beginning of the third millennium of the Common Era, Mekas undertook to interview Stan Brakhage, certainly one of the most important artists of the twentieth century. He began by stating to Brakhage what by that point nearly all people concerned with contemporary art had long since discerned: “Here you are, Stan Brakhage, whom . . . most of those who write serious film criticism, or make movies, consider . . . the number-one living filmmaker, both in the importance of the body of your work and in your influence on other filmmakers.” Brakhage interrupted:

And here is what you are to me: in addition to being a great filmmaker who has forged ahead in an area where you are practically unique, that is, the diary, journal film, you are the only one who has created a believable, meaningful, extended journal across most of your adult life. In addition to this, you have found a way to sponsor films that you love and to create cooperatives through which they can be distributed; to create Anthology Film Archives so that they could be preserved and shown in a repertoire and continue today to be certainly the only place for what we

want to call Poetic Film. So, you have not only done these two things, but you also have this rich life as a poet. Not knowing Lithuanian, I can just read the English translations of your work, which are very moving to me. I don't know how you keep all this going.

I will close with an anecdote (recounted in "All Pockets Open," a profile of Jonas Mekas that appeared in the January 6, 1973 issue of the *New Yorker* magazine):

One rainy spring afternoon in 1967, Jonas Mekas and P. Adams Sitney were standing under a canopy on Lexington Avenue discussing their summer plans. Mekas was going to take a number of American underground films on a tour of European cities, starting in June. Sitney, a Yale senior and film theorist, would come over later to relieve him, and they were trying to decide where they should meet. On an impulse, Mekas suggested the Spanish town of Avila, birthplace of St. Theresa, whose autobiography he had recently been reading. "The moment I said the word Avila," Mekas recalls, "two fresh roses appeared on the sidewalk at our feet. They just appeared there, and the next moment an old man—a bum—also appeared, as though out of nowhere, picked up the roses, and placed them on the steps of a church next door saying 'These belong here.'" Mekas and Sitney decided on the spot to adopt St. Theresa as the

patron saint of the underground cinema. "From then on, whenever problems began to seem overwhelming, we called on her for help,"

Mekas says. "And it always seemed to work".

One St. Theresa manifests herself as another? Mekas' films and his industriousness in supporting the avant-garde cinema are likewise lessons in hope and in cunning.

R. Bruce Elder, filmmaker