FOOTAGE FETISH
AMY TAUBIN ON JONAS MEKAS

JONAS MEKAS, now eighty-two, has lived—and continues to live—many lives. For six decades his work in film, video, and poetry has been largely diaristic, so one’s first impulse is to approach it through his remarkable biography. For those familiar with avant-garde film, Mekas needs no introduction: He is the indispensable archivist, curator, fund-raiser, and proselytizer for a genre of moving image work that is precariously poised between the art world and the art film. It is largely through his efforts to create an infrastructure for avant-garde film—he founded the Film-Maker’s Cooperative, the Filmmakers Cinematheque, and Anthology Film Archives—that a small, economically disadvantaged filmmaking practice has a place in cultural history and continues to be accessible to its small, dedicated audience. Since arriving in New York in 1949 as a displaced person from Lithuania—an anarchist poet who fled the Soviets only to be captured by the Nazis and sent to a German labor camp during the war—he has been making movies. From the mid-’60s through 2000, he edited the footage he collected almost on a daily basis with his handheld 16 mm Bolex camera into a series of twenty-odd films, among them at least two—Diaries, Notes, and Sketches (1969; aka Walden) and Lost, Lost, Lost (1976)—that some (including this writer) count among the greatest works not only of avant-garde film but of cinema in its entirety. (Not a caveat but a disclosure: I have known Mekas for over forty years and am one of hundreds of friends and acquaintances occasionally glimpsed in his films. He has influenced my life in many ways, most concretely in that he recommended me for my first weekly writing job in the late ’70s, sealing, for better or worse, my fate for the next twenty-five years.)

What we could call Mekas’s film poetics sprang in part out of economic necessity. Since film was expensive, he developed a method of shooting in short bursts of one, two, or three frames before turning the camera elsewhere. Thus a single second of film could, theoretically, be edited in the camera into twenty-four discrete images. Although in practice Mekas varied the length of his shots, the impression one has as a viewer of his films is of images that are simultaneously intensely present and elusive as memory. The images are gone before we can fully grasp them. Like still photographers, Mekas has always attempted to capture the essence of the moment, but for him as a filmmaker that essence is found in movement, the instantaneous transformation of present into past. That transformation is reified by the sound tracks he constructs at his editing table—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’s films are intensely personal meditations on recorded memory and also comprise a cultural history of New York in the second half of the twentieth century from the point of view of an outsider attuned to both the underground and the mainstream.

In 1983, when Anthology Film Archives was in one of its many financial crises, it was suggested to Mekas that perhaps he could raise money by selling limited editions of still images extracted from his films. The “Frozen Film Frames,” which were, like the films themselves, shaped in part by economic necessity, spawned a new chapter in Mekas’s career. They have been exhibited in museums and galleries worldwide, most recently in New York in a show titled “Fragments of Paradise” at the Maya Stendhal Gallery, which also included Mekas’s recent video installation work. (Pieces from this exhibition will travel to the Venice Biennale this summer, where Mekas is representing Lithuania.) Printed from color slides, each of the “Frozen Film Frames” is an image of a strip of 16 mm film—usually three but occasionally two or four frames in length—typically including the row of sprocket holes on one side and the optical sound stripe on the other. Some strips have been selected to show the collision of two images at the edit point; for example, a nearly abstract pastel blue-green seascape gives way to a close-up of a red flower. Others show the changes in focus, color, and contrast that occur when a handheld camera is pointed at a single subject for three frames (the equivalent of an eighth of a second). When the images are of celebrities (as perhaps too many were in the show at Maya Stendhal), their fan-boy aspect tends to overshadow what is formally and historically compelling and moving about them: that they fetishize the materiality of the filmstrip at the very moment the medium itself is about to become a ghost. And not just any filmstrip but specifically 16 mm reversal film—the rough, workhorse stock of American avant-garde filmmaking that brands and connects practitioners as varied as Mekas, Stan Brakhage, Michael Snow, and Jack Smith—which Mekas cherishes. It’s hardly an accident, then, that around the time of making the first “Frozen Film Frames,” Mekas pretty much put away his Bolex in favor of a video camera, which allowed him, for the first time, the luxury of shooting in real time (tape is cheap). Much of this video has been shown in multichannel installations like Dedication to Fernand Léger, 1987–95/2003, in which twenty-four hours of family video diaries that Mekas shot over nine years are shown on twelve monitors, two hours on each, the sound mixing into a not unpleasant cacophony. Installation opens the possibility of a different kind of social space for moving-image work, but one that is necessarily less meditative and less compatible with the subtle layering of time past and present that distinguished Mekas’s films. In a recent conversation Mekas said, excitedly, that he had just begun to explore digital, nonlinear editing. I suspect that a few years from now the installations that have brought him to the attention of an entirely new audience will seem provisional—the first steps into a world after film.

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From Artforum. May 2005