

THIS ISSUE HOMEPAGE <input type="checkbox"/>	IN THE MAGAZINE <input type="checkbox"/>	PRINT ARTICLE PDFS <input type="checkbox"/>	SUBSCRIBE ONLINE <input type="checkbox"/>	BACK ISSUES <input type="checkbox"/>
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WEB ONLY ARTICLE

Brief Glimpses of Beauty: Jonas Mekas at the 2005 Venice Biennale

By Jon Davies

The situating of Jonas Mekas' career retrospective at the 51st Venice Biennale's modest, tucked-away Lithuanian pavilion was no mere patriotic nod to the artist's nation of origin. It was more significantly a manifestation of the show's primary theme, elaborated by his characteristically descriptive yet lyrical title: *Celebration of the Small and Personal in the Time of Bigness*. For in Mekas' whimsical and slyly astute logic, Lithuania is a small country and the United States —the unfortunate dominion of his adopted home of 56, New York City—is the paradigmatic big country. In *I Had Nowhere to Go*, the far-reaching and frequently wrenching diaries that cover Mekas' long displacement from home and eventual migration to the US, he makes his argument crystal clear, directly addressing the denizens of big countries on July 19, 1944: "Let the big countries fight. Lithuania is small. Throughout our entire history the big powers have been marching over our heads. If you resist or aren't careful—you'll be ground to dust between the wheels of East and West. The only thing we can do, we, the small ones, is try to survive, somehow...You created this civilization, these boundaries, and these wars, and I neither can nor want to understand you and your wars. Please, keep away from me and look after your own affairs. That is, if you still understand them yourselves! As for me—I am free even in your wars!"

In the Mekas universe, "small" is synonymous with everyday life: there is nothing that brings the man more joy than spending time with friends and family, travelling, being in nature and partaking of the fine arts, especially music, "personal" filmmaking and poetry. By contrast, "big" is institutionalized power: imperialism and war-mongering, bureaucracies and ivory towers, "impersonal" filmmaking and much of modernity and its soulless mass culture. Perhaps more than any other filmmaker, Mekas has positioned the

individual creative will of the artist—his own persona: romantic, fanciful, curious, shy, European, haunted—as the most powerful force against authority of all stripes.

However, no one does "smallness" quite as big as Mekas: many decades often elapse between the photographing and the editing of his footage into a final film; these films frequently run over three hours and catalogue hundreds of moments of transcendent beauty while documenting scores of esteemed individuals; and these subjects are some of the biggest names of 20th-century history: Jackie O, John Lennon, Elvis Presley, Andy Warhol and the entire New York avant-garde of the 60s and 70s are just a few of the celebrities on display in Venice.

Mekas makes these towering figures small through his primary filmic formal strategy: the glimpse. Every subject is captured in an impressionistic way, rendered as fleeting poetic images caught briefly in Mekas' memory/camera before his promiscuous eye moves on to its next visual encounter with the world. Similarly, audiences have always been encouraged to consume



Mekas

Articles in this Section

Double 'O' Heaven: The Vertigo Pop and Phantom Desires of João Pedro Rodrigues
By Johnny Ray Huston

Web only

Peter Watkins—Notes and Questions: (3) *Edvard Munch*

By John Gianvito

Brief Glimpses of Beauty: Jonas Mekas at the 2005 Venice Biennale

By Jon Davies

and in the magazine...

The Beat Goes On: The Films of Nagasaki Shunichi By Christoph Huber

Severed Ties: Forgotten Singaporean Cinema Remembered

By Brandon Wee

Peter Watkins—Notes and Questions: (2) *La Commune* By John Gianvito

Mr. Costa Goes to Vienna By Quintin

Mekas' feature-length films with a casual air befitting his own modest attitude. Especially in longer films like *He Stands in a Desert Counting the Seconds of His Life* (1985) and *As I Was Moving Ahead, Occasionally I Saw Brief Glimpses of Beauty* (2001), viewers are encouraged to enter and leave the films at any point thanks to their fragmentation into sketches, vignettes, and musings that Mekas employs in opposition to linear narrative development. This makes Mekas' features much more appropriate for viewing in a gallery space than some of the more unfortunate curatorial decisions at the Biennale and in the contemporary art world in general. (At the top of the list would be Rosa Martínez's short-sighted projection of Kidlat Tahimik's 1977 classic *Perfumed Nightmare* in the *Always a Little Further* exhibition; it was a travesty seeing people spend 30 seconds with this immensely complex and comic feature-length narrative film.) Tellingly, Mekas comes closest to narrative in what is both his shortest feature and the one that is arguably the most private as it documents the exile's return to his lost home, his career masterpiece *Reminiscences of a Journey to Lithuania* (1972). Mekas has even stated that his artistic output should not be regarded as distinct films, but one continuous—indisputably monumental—life's work of the process of "filming."

In the Lithuanian pavilion, *Home Videos* (1987-2005) further elaborates and deepens Mekas' commitment to "smallness." It is a variation of his *Dedication to Fernand Léger* installation previously seen at his major solo show *Fragments of Paradise* earlier in 2005 at the Maya Stendhal Gallery in New York (and prior to that at the Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris), and which employed twelve monitors screening 24 hours of Mekas' footage of his family. It was intended as an approximation of Fernand Léger's dream (recorded in 1933) of a new technology that would permit one to record 24 hours in the lives of a couple without their awareness. To experience *Home Videos*, one must enter a circle of eight monitors that stand on pillars with screens just below eye level facing inwards. Each monitor is accompanied by its own soundtrack, each filling the space and vying for your immediate attention—as do the images—which is physically impossible. Mekas surrounds you with an altar constructed of minutiae, enclosing you in the most intimate scenes of the artist's life. Hours and hours of home video footage, each recorded domestic moment a perfect example of the smallness Mekas lives for: there are many musical and dance performances, many animals, many children, friends and family are seen in the great outdoors and eating meals, and the seemingly random footage celebrates their simple pleasures. Lithuania makes an appearance in news items taped off of the television, history mediated and humbled by the small screen. Mekas does not mind if you channel-surf; in fact, he encourages it: "Make your own movie out of this material by moving from one monitor to another and still another... have a good time!" he suggests in the press release. Of course, Léger's once-fantastic idea has now been taken straight to the bank many times over. The differences between Mekas' immersive home videos and the current cultural obsession with constant surveillance and maximum self-exposure are dramatic and profound, but essentially Mekas' moments of reality are casual, uncontrived, artful and slight, and doubly potent precisely because of their humility.

This footage spans the entirety of Mekas' years working with video. Of course, we cannot expect the same experience from this "interactive" video installation as we can from his edited films: there are no intertitles, so important for Mekas' anti-illusionist cinematic style ("nothing extraordinary has so far happened in this movie...titles tell you right there what's going to happen"); and his voice—one of the most unmistakable in the cinema—is absent, as is any extra-diegetic music. Another difference is that the video footage lingers on long takes rather than indulging in frantic fast-cuts, trembling pixilation or dynamic camera movements. In a recent, as-yet-

unpublished interview with Swiss scholar Michael Müller, Mekas claims that because shooting video takes a few crucial extra seconds longer than shooting with his Bolex, it is not capable of recording the precise, affecting moment, but its unhurried aftermath instead. The effect of this change in technology is an increase in the duration of shots, and a reduction of their intensity. (In a parallel logic, he claims his editing of film was done by elimination, whereas his editing of video is done by selection.)

Despite the fact that Mekas shoots exclusively in video now (he does still edit previously shot celluloid), the remainder of the pavilion was filled with films. A second room featured an installation of films on video and one video on video that had originally been mounted for *Fragments of Paradise*. One wall supported a large projection flanked by six monitors, each of which screened a different short work completed between the mid-60s and the present: from the thrilling *Notes on the Circus* (1966) to *A Movie for Maya: Father and Daughter* (2005), which features presumably father and daughter cats blissfully grooming each other in slow-motion video. Each is a small gem, naturally, their vigour was undiminished despite being crowded together into one large, compartmentalized screen.

This retrospective in Venice was neither Mekas' first nor his most comprehensive; it did not include very early non-diaristic films like *The Brig* (1963) or any examples of his "Frozen Film Frames," which have been widely exhibited. Something as ostentatious as a retrospective is a double bind for a consummate collector like Mekas, for no single exhibition could ever bring to light even a small percentage of what he has amassed. But the meek Mekas voraciously records life in order to "shout" about it, as Warhol cleverly put it in *POPism*, to share and to champion the lives of the bohemian and the dispossessed with others, first cinephiles and now art audiences. His videos do not shout as loudly as the films, taking a more quiet and languid approach instead; Mekas has claimed that the letter—an intimate communication between two individuals—has now become his preferred mode in both video and poetry.

Another room hosted projections of his major feature-length films all the way from *Walden (Diaries, Notes and Sketches)* (1969) to *A Letter from Greenpoint* (2004)—which Mekas considers his first "real" video work after 17 years of practice—thus allowing us to compare and contrast his oeuvre over 35 years. Not surprisingly, *A Letter from Greenpoint* is about a journey of displacement, from Soho—where Mekas lived for 30 years—to Brooklyn. All of Mekas' image-making can be seen as an attempt to grab hold of every moment, to ground himself in a congenial present after suffering through such immense uncertainty and horror during World War II. This most recent work shows him reflecting on the changes that will come from the far shorter and less harrowing move uptown. This reputedly warm and funny piece puts Mekas front and centre more than ever before: he comes out from behind the camera and trains it on himself as he drinks and sings with his friend Ben, makes a late-night, flashlight-illuminated confession to the camera lens when he cannot sleep, and even unsuccessfully proposes marriage to his cat. Video has not altered his creed: the medium may have changed, but the man remains the same. He even begins his letter with an extended scene of a man singing a Lithuanian folk song as if to prove it.

Jonas Mekas, *Celebration of the Small and Personal in the Time of Bigness*, June 12 to November 6, 2005. Lithuanian Pavilion, 51st Venice Biennale. Liutaurus Psibilskis, commissioner, Lolita Jablonskiene, co-commissioner.

[BACK TO TOP](#) |