

Arriving as an exile from Lithuania in 1949, Jonas Mekas threw himself into the vibrant world of post-war Manhattan and soon became one of the leading figures in the burgeoning downtown arts scene. For the past 60 years, he has stood at the heart of New York's cultural life, collaborating with the likes of Andy Warhol, Allen Ginsberg and Salvador Dali, and founding Anthology Film Archives, today one of the world's most important repositories of independent and avant-garde cinema. He even taught the Kennedy kids how to shoot Super 8 film. All of this was documented with his ever-present 16mm Bolex camera. Mekas celebrated his 90th birthday last Christmas, and the occasion was marked around the world by a series of exhibitions and retrospectives of his work, at venues including London's Serpentine Gallery and the Centre Pompidou in Paris. Here, he talks of his long history with New York – the city he credits for saving his sanity.

‘On 29 October 1949, I made the following entry in my diary: “Yesterday, at about 10pm, the *General Howze* pulled into the Hudson River. We stood on the deck and we stared. 1,352 Displaced Persons stared at America. I am still staring at it, in my retinal memory. Neither the feeling nor the image can be described to one who hasn't gone through this. All the wartime, post-war DP miseries, desperations and hopelessness, and then suddenly you are faced with a dream. You have to see New York at night, from the Hudson, like this, to see its incredible beauty. And when I turned to the Palisades, I saw the Ferris wheel all ablaze, and the powerful searchlights were throwing beams into the sky. Yes, this is America, and this is the 20th century – harbour and piers ablaze with lights and colours. The city lights merged with a sky that looked man-made. In the north, there was a massive cloud, then it thundered, and lightning cut through it, lighting it up briefly and falling on the city to be incorporated into New York's lighting system. This gigantic manifestation of nature became

just another neon sign.” As I am rereading it now, some 65 years later, in Brooklyn, New York, it all comes back with the same power.

‘It was all a miracle. My brother Adolfas and I – two of the 1,352 who landed that day on the West 23rd Street pier, were brought here by the United Nations Refugee Organization, after being shuffled around for five years from one Displaced Persons' camp to another all over Germany. A job was secured for both of us at Mrs Hackel's Bakery, 8560 South Chicago Avenue, plus a train ticket from New York to Chicago – wonderful!

‘Immigration procedures done, we walked up to the top floor of the pier house, just to have one look at New York before boarding

for Chicago. We stood there by the window and looked for a long time at the roofs of the city. Then, both at the same time, we shouted, “Here we stay! It would be stupid to go to Chicago when you are in New York!” Our decision was swift and final, and pure genius. We knew that in Chicago we had a job and place to live and here we had nothing, but the die was cast. We swung our DP satchels over our shoulders and proceeded to Williamsburg, Brooklyn, where we knew a family with whom we could stay until we found jobs and a place of our own.

‘Before that crucial day, I had read a lot about America, from Kafka to Tocqueville, and although my views and thoughts about the country may since have gone through ups and downs, my feeling of love and amazement about New York has never changed. We grew together, New York and I. I was 27 when my feet first touched the rock of Manhattan and I decided then and there to remain 27. Because of the war, because of the Soviet and German occupations, and forced labour, and later, the displaced persons' camps, I had lost 10 years of my life. I didn't really have a teenage period. First, I was a child, lying under the trees of my village – a farm boy, taking care of sheep and cows – and then, suddenly, I was in New York. In between was horrible emptiness. It was here, in New York on that crucial day, that my life really began.

‘When I arrived in New York, I had been split into a thousand pieces. I was dropped here as war junk. I was an empty garbage can. I had nowhere to go. The only thing I could do was to completely submerge myself into the streets, the sounds, the people – everything that was New York. I came from post-war Europe, deprived, robbed of 10 years of what was happening in the arts. I was needy and thirsty and I grabbed everything I could. What others had seen and read and heard and learnt gradually, normally, myself and my brother tried to gobble up fast, almost choking on it, it was so exciting. Marlon Brando, Tennessee Williams, Henry Miller, Elia Kazan, Martha Graham, George Balanchine, Erick Hawkins... it was all at our disposal. And thus slowly, piece by piece, I began to build myself anew, to put those thousand pieces back together. That's why I say that New York saved my sanity and why New York is my life, my love.

‘Williamsburg, Brooklyn, in those days, was an immigrant dumping ground – among them were many who'd arrived after World War I and got stuck there, never even crossing the East River into Manhattan, and were now dying. After the Yalta Conference [in February 1945, held to discuss Europe's post-war reorganisation], very few of us who came from the Baltic States had any hope that we would ever to go back to our old homes. Many



Jackie Kennedy's sister Lee Radziwill, her son Anthony and his cousin John Kennedy Jr filming Mekas filming them on holiday in Montauk, in 1971, with the Super 8 cameras he lent them to teach them how to make movies

displaced persons just gave up. The Lithuanian community was living on memories and slowly fading away – it was very, very depressing. If the displaced persons' camps were my hell, then Williamsburg of 1949 was my purgatory. By spring 1953, I was choking. I had reached a point when I either had to face a nervous breakdown or run away. I chose to run. I escaped to Orchard Street in Manhattan. And that's where my real New York life begins.

‘My saving grace was that I arrived there at the time when all the arts were beginning to change. Soon after my escape from Williamsburg to Orchard Street, I discovered

the poetry scene, the art scene, the dance scene, the theatre scene, and wherever there was a reading, an event, I had to be there. It didn't take long for me to meet LeRoi Jones [now Amiri Baraka], Allen Ginsberg and Robert Frank... I sat in Robert Frank's loft on Third Avenue, in the dark, with Jack Kerouac improvising, drunk, the narration for the short film *Pull My Daisy*. John Cage, Buckminster Fuller, Guy Debord, Isidore Isou and Fluxus – I always considered that the Beat Generation. Those people were the real political movement of the period, and they changed attitudes to life and the structures in which we live.

Words by Jonas Mekas and Benn Northover

The story of the Lithuanian farm boy who became the godfather of American avant-garde cinema is part of Big Apple legend. Internationally renowned for six decades not only as a filmmaker, a poet and an artist but also as an activist, he is among the last of the real New Yorkers. His imprint on cinema and the city he loves has been indelible

JONAS MEKAS



‘All the arts activities I was interested in, in the late-Fifties, took place downtown, below 14th Street. Life was cheaper there. Of course, I loved the uptown theatre, and ballet and music, but our friends, and the seeds of what was to come later in the Sixties, were all downtown. ‘One of the crucial moments in New York, American and probably world cinema, was the 7 January 1962 meeting of some 20 independent filmmakers who voted to create the Film-Makers Co-operative. It was held at my third-floor loft at 414 Park Avenue South. That became the office of the Co-op and a meeting place for all film-makers, both local and passing through, as well as for poets, lost souls and the like. It was a busy place – every night, they used to bring along their new, finished and unfinished works. There were arguments, even fights about them. It was there Andy Warhol

would sit on the floor on many an evening – it was one of his “universities”. Likewise, Jack Smith, Ken Jacobs, Gregory Markopoulos and so many others. Even Dalí used to drop in – and Peter Beard, George Maciunas, Allen Ginsberg... The 17-year-old Barbara Rubin helped me to keep the place in some sanity and, a year later, she made her own film, *Christmas on Earth*. It was contagiously exciting.

‘The Belmore Cafeteria was across from the Co-op – a taxi-cab night-stop place, open 24 hours. Once all the downtown places like the White Horse, the Five Spots, the Cedar Bar and the Artists Club had closed, their clientele used to walk to Park Avenue South for a cab, and you’d see them in there – Robert Rauschenberg, Larry Rivers, Gregory Corso...

‘New York has always been liberal about free expression, but there have been periods when, depending on who was mayor or chief of police, there would be outbursts of puritanism. One such outburst was caused by the decision for the city to play host to the 1964 World’s Fair. Mayor Robert Ferdinand Wagner decided New York should be smartened up. Times Square, especially, suffered a lot during that clean-up – I don’t think it ever recovered. And the cleaning-up seeped into other areas too, such as the arts – many clubs were closed, and Lenny Bruce was arrested for obscenity and destroyed [he died before he could be released on appeal].

‘My own arrest for screening Jack Smith’s classic film *Flaming Creatures* – which, today, would seem so innocent – and Genet’s *Un Chant d’Amour*, was a part of that clampdown. Of course, I could have chosen not to screen them – I knew for sure I’d be arrested and I even had a half a chicken stashed in my pocket to keep me going, which I later shared with my cellmate! – but I had to do it. It had to do not only with the censorship, but also the city’s rule that every movie screened publicly had to be submitted to the Board of Licensing for

approval. I was arrested twice, and despite the great efforts of Emile Zola Berman, a criminal defence lawyer who came to my aid, and Susan Sontag and Allen Ginsberg, who acted as my witnesses, I got six months of a “suspended” sentence. It could have been much worse – the case went as far as the Supreme Court, where not-yet-confirmed Judge Fortas expressed his sympathy for me, which cost him the confirmation. But the Lenny Bruce and *Flaming*

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Creatures cases had created enough pressure that it didn’t take long for censorship and movie licensing to be abandoned in New York.

‘It was in the summer of 1967 that George Maciunas established the first SoHo artists’ co-operative building. SoHo was his dream, his magnum opus that began with his creation of the Fluxus co-operative building at 80 Wooster Street. I took the ground floor and basement for the Film-Makers’ Cinematheque and gave the basement to George to live in, and it became the headquarters for the creation of SoHo. From there, George conducted his

This page, from top: Mekas, centre, with video artist Michel Auder and Andy Warhol at the opening of the Anthology Film Archives, 1970; with his daughter Oona in a rainy SoHo street, from the 1978 film As I Was Moving Ahead I Saw Brief Glimpses of Beauty, about his family life.

*Opposite, from left: A 16mm multiframe from Mekas’s 1967 film Walden, showing actress and film critic Amy Taubin in Central Park, preceded by a snippet of text by Henry Thoreau, whose work inspired it; the poster for his Film-Makers’ Cinematheque on 41st Street, where Velvet Underground first performed for Barbara Rubin’s Caterpillar Changes festival and Warhol premiered his film *The Chelsea Girls**

tireless – and it seemed sometimes to both of us, hopeless – fight against the city, which was determined to prevent the creation of artists’ co-operatives in what they called Hell’s 100 Acres. But George won.

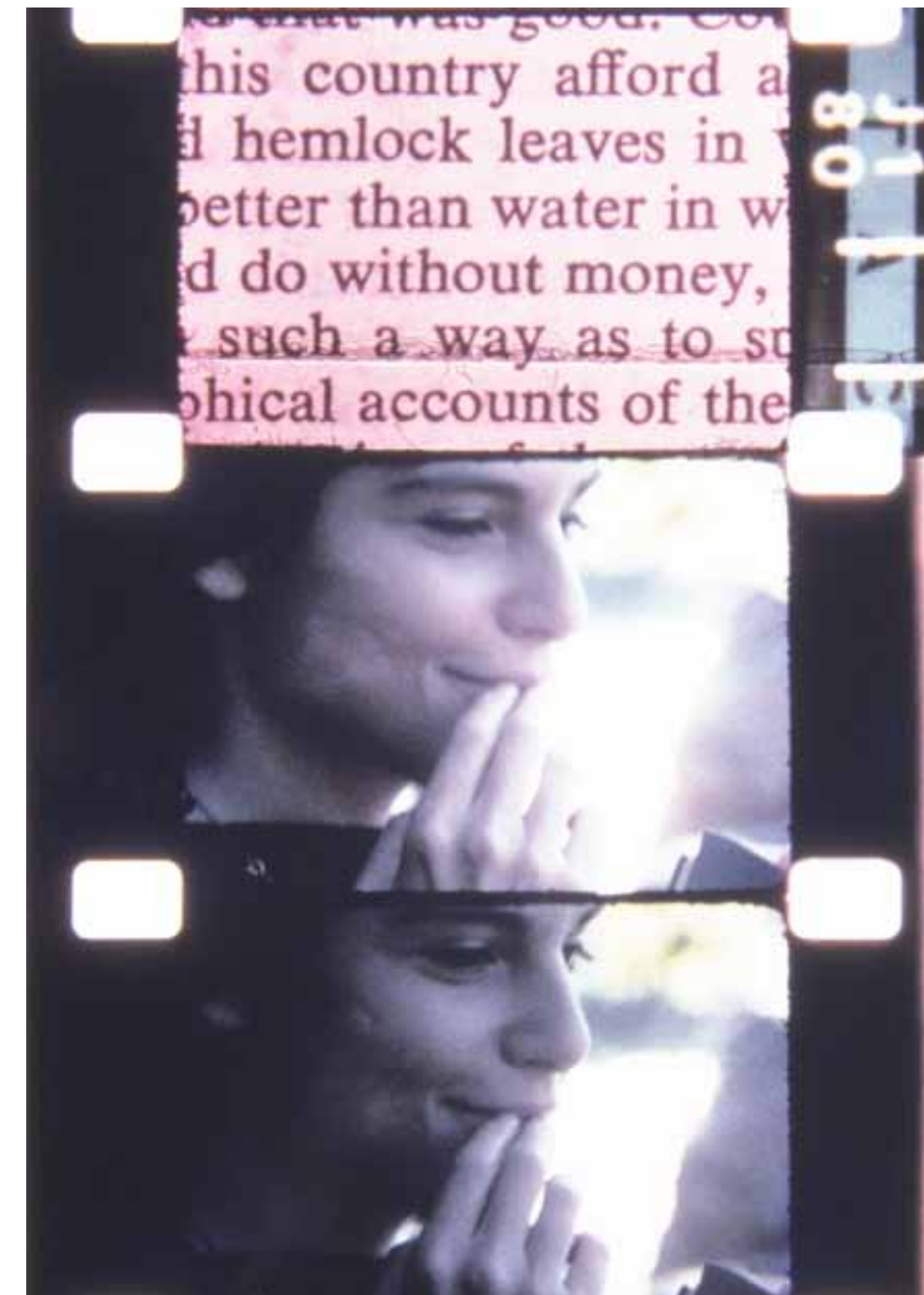
‘Later, after we’d fixed up 80 Wooster and began screenings, quite often I would sleep there. But my main abode for the next seven years was the Chelsea Hotel. It was an incredible place, with a boa constrictor belonging to a musician occasionally escaping from the 12th floor and scaring everybody. At least once a month, smoke from burning mattresses used to fill my room, from my neighbour Harry Smith’s visitors, like Gregory Corso, falling asleep with a cigarette in hand. My other neighbour was Janis Joplin, who had a habit of practising her voice at all the wrong hours. And then, there was Patti Smith,

Robert Mapplethorpe, Virgil Thompson, and Arthur Miller; and Valerie Solanas of SCUM [a radical feminist group]. Despite her desire to cut up men, she had a friendly attitude to me, and later, when she was in prison [for shooting Andy Warhol and his manager], to my despair; she chose me as her message-carrier for letters to the press about SCUM. I had no choice but to do it, because, otherwise, who knew what awaited me...?’

‘Soon after moving back to 80 Wooster, I became aware of the fragility of depending on rented spaces. As rent downtown began going up, I saw so many of them disappearing. That’s when I decided to buy the corner of Second Ave and 2nd Street – a small, dilapidated courthouse building – for Anthology Film Archives. It was the smartest thing I did. But it wasn’t an easy job to get it because my competitor was the legendary Ellen Stewart of La MaMa

Theatre. With the help of John McGettrick, my friend who later made a genius decision to develop what’s now known as the Red Hook area, we outwitted her. I bought it from the city in an auction, for \$50,000 – but it cost me 10 years and \$1,800,000 to transform it into a film museum. It took a lot of hard work, but we did it. What is still left to do is to build a library and café in the adjacent space. I take my lessons from those who built cathedrals – it took many decades to build them, so I know our cathedral of cinema will be completed one day too.

‘Now I live back in Brooklyn, but so much has happened in between. One thing’s for sure: the old Williamsburg is gone. Same way as the downtown Manhattan I knew is gone. Even SoHo as I knew it is gone. That’s what makes up the biggest part of my New York today: the places that are no longer there. Where is 34 Third Avenue and Robert Frank’s apartment,



where *Pull my Daisy* was filmed? Where is the Cedar Bar or that little second-floor bar on the corner of 8th Street and Broadway that only very few knew, where I remember having a drink with Elaine de Kooning? The other day I passed by the White Horse – it’s still there, so I walked in and had a beer. I thought I heard the voices of Robert Flaherty and Dylan Thomas, and Alfred Leslie’s loud, snarling laugh.

‘There are so many things that have gone. But I have to tell you: New York is like Dorian Gray. It’s always young. It’s always 27, like me, when I stepped off the boat that day in October of 1949. And we are bound together by life.’

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THE END

Jonas Mekas was in conversation with his long-time friend and collaborator, actor/director Benn Northover