



Jonas Mekas at Maya Stendhal

Jonas Mekas, the 82-year-old filmmaker and guiding spirit of Anthology Film Archives in Manhattan's East Village, has exhibited widely in Europe in the past decade, including at Documenta 11 in 2002. His first solo show at the Maya Stendhal Gallery presented a select survey of 40 years of films, stills and memorabilia. A modified version of the show traveled to Venice, as Mekas, a *New Yorker* since 1948, represented his native Lithuania at the 51st Biennale. The gallery is to be commended for finding new ways to exhibit and market a sprawling body of work by this influential filmmaker and poet. Mekas has yet to earn full recognition for inventing a style of arranged intimacy that has become common practice in contemporary video art.

The visitor was equally jarred and seduced by the dissonant sounds and flickering images produced by the simultaneous play of 11 short loops, vintage films and recent videos transferred to DVD. These were shown on LCD monitors installed in white boxes, signed by Mekas in silver ink and mounted on the wall. In one loop, Elvis, recorded at his first New York concert in 1972, stalks around the stage in a white skin-tight jumpsuit. In another loop, a video recorded in 2003, Mekas prowls his cluttered home studio. The 15 stills on view, dubbed "Frozen Film Frames" by the artist, were close-up photographs of filmstrips, sprockets and all. They typically show two or three full frames, enough to capture the minute changes of Warhol talking with his hands or the desolation of a snowy stretch of SoHo. Seeing John and Yoko on their knees in a beseeching pose, while overhearing "Amazing Grace" from another film, has the effect of suggesting that a current of spirituality energizes Mekas's documentation of everyday beauty. The arrangement at one end of the gallery of a single large wall projection flanked by stacks of three monitors resembled a filmic altarpiece.

Two side rooms displayed other examples of Mekas's work. In one, a heap of old journals, calendars, and address books, yellowed with age, were piled in a Plexiglas vitrine. Mekas's pithy poetry was calligraphed on the walls in black marker. Cut-up bits of film were scattered on the floor; some of them had been re-photographed and were being projected randomly in a slide show, a nod to John Cage's influence. A video installation titled *Dedication to Fernand Léger* (2003) filled the other side room. An ellipse of a dozen television monitors sitting on white stools faced inward. Each showed two hours of home movies, adding up to a daylong film inspired by a text the French painter wrote in 1933 recounting a dream he had of 24-hour film showing the ordinary life of a family. Mekas's piece, of his own family shot over a period of seven years, is an

estheticized version of the unruly expanded cinema that he helped pioneer in the 1960s (it also recalls Douglas Gordon's *24 Hour Psycho*, 1993, and Lorna Simpson's *31*, 2002). Its humble grace was a welcome alternative to the film stills, which are suffused with nostalgia and celebrity.

-Daniel Belasco