

Lolita Jablonskienė

Vilnius Academy of Arts

Exhibiting Jonas Mekas: Causes and Narratives

Based on the exhibition history approach and theories conceptualising the convergence of avant-garde cinema and contemporary moving images, the article analyses a little-explored field related to the diverse creative practice of the renowned independent filmmaker and organiser of avant-garde cinema, writer and poet Jonas Mekas (1922–2019) – some of the most significant of his solo exhibitions that took place in the 2000s–2020s. The discourses and narratives that unfolded in their curation, which are continuing, supplementing, or changing the discrete perception of Mekas's different professional roles, are discussed.

Keywords: Jonas Mekas, curation, expanded cinema, contemporaneity, archive, immigrant cinema

Jonas Mekas (1922–2019), a renowned independent filmmaker, promoter of avant-garde cinema, and the founder of Anthology Film Archives in New York, has been the subject of much writing and talk all over the world, especially in 2022, when the centenary of his birth was celebrated with an extensive programme of events including talks, film screenings, and exhibitions coordinated by the Lithuanian Culture Institute and at least partly financed by Lithuania. According to the representatives of the Lithuanian Culture Institute, more than sixty events were held on this occasion.¹ This is undoubtedly an extraordinary scale of local and international representation of the Lithuanian artist of the postmodern era who lived in emigration in New York after the Second World War. To date, no other representative of visual art of the the Second World War refugee generation has represented Lithuania so widely and diversely. The

¹ A commentary by the head of the Lithuanian Culture Institute, Aušrinė Žilinskienė, on *Panorama*, Lithuanian Radio and Television, 8 November 2022, television programme, 37:23; www.lrt.lt/mediateka/irasas/2000241458/romoje-paroda-jono-meko-100-meciui-pamineti-pasak-rengiju-tai-didziausia-siai-progai-skirta-paroda-europoje.

case is also unique in the context of the Baltic countries, which have a common political and social history of the war and post-war period. This article aims to reflect on the causes of this phenomenon in relation to the strategies observed in Mekas's creative practice and the narratives of his works, as well as their curation in his exhibitions held in contemporary art institutions in the 21st century.

In Lithuania itself, specifically, in academic discourses, Mekas's avant-garde cinema and his other multifaceted activities have not yet received enough research attention. Apparently, the reasons are numerous. Ramūnas Čičelis, who defended his doctoral thesis *The Philotopic View of Jonas Mekas's Work* in 2014, wrote that the reception of the artist's work in Lithuania is complicated by the following elements: the small distance between his personality and work; the long-term lack of comprehensive knowledge about a great many art processes that took place in the West in the second half of the 20th century; the limited ways to access to Mekas's rich legacy, as 'only a dozen of Mekas's most important films are available in Lithuania (there are more than sixty films in his filmography)';² and, finally, the fact that many significant texts related to his life and work – as well as abundant documentary material – are held in the artist's private archive and are not systematised.³ While discussing this issue, art critic Kotryna Markevičiūtė, who reviewed the international exhibition *Jonas Mekas and the New York Avant-Garde*,⁴ curated by Inesa Brašiškė and Lukas Brašiškis and held at the National Gallery of Art (NGA) in Vilnius in 2021–2022, also noticed that 'the image of Mekas in the local collective consciousness still remains quite porous and fragmentary'.⁵ In her opinion, it is determined by the versatility of his work – after all, Mekas was a filmmaker, writer, organiser, and curator, thus 'the only way to grasp the essence of Mekas is to try to understand how all these roles

² Čičelis (2014): 44.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Brašiškė, Brasiskis, and Taxter (2021). The book was published on the occasion of the exhibition in Vilnius and the exhibition *Jonas Mekas. The Camera was Always Running* at the Jewish Museum in New York in 2022.

⁵ Markevičiūtė (27 January 2022).

overlapped, intertwined, conflicted, and coexisted in one person'.⁶ These various obstacles and challenges in the reception of Mekas's practice, in particular, the observed need for a multi-faceted approach, encouraged us to explore another under-analysed field: the exhibitions that address Mekas's practice from multiple angles. The article aims to highlight the discourses that were revealed and the narratives that unfolded through their curation, which continued, supplemented, or changed understanding of Mekas's different roles.

The author of this article took part in conceptualising and organising several presentations of the artist's works in exhibitions, and directly encountered a variety of narratives, which are elaborated in his work, or in which his work gets involved. Some of them are continuous and repetitive, but there also appear new ones, often related to current cultural and artistic issues, or urgent reflections on history and the present. This diversity is also enhanced by the repeated tendency to correlate the narratives to a specific place (e.g., presenting in Germany reflections of his life in displaced persons [DP] camps in Germany after the Second World War,⁷ etc.), which is supported by the wide network of Mekas's associates and friends, as well as the huge scale of his activities and works implemented over many decades.

Mekas's avant-garde films are mainly (and perhaps most suitably for this medium) shown in cinemas, where possible, using the equipment for screening 16 mm films. However, since the late 20th century – the date 1983 is mentioned in his biographies – and especially in the 21st century, the artist's work (films, frozen frames, photographs, etc.) and fragments of his archive are increasingly showcased in exhibitions staged by art institutions in many European countries, the USA, Japan, Australia, as well as in biennales focusing on the current state of contemporary art. They were presented twice in *documenta*, in 2002 by curator Okwui Enwezor, and in 2017 by curator Adam Szymczyk; in the international exhibition *Utopia Station* at the 50th Venice Biennale in 2003 by curators Molly Nesbit,

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ E.g., the exhibition *Reminiscences from Germany (Reminiszenzen aus Deutschland)*, Stadtmuseum, Wiesbaden, 2012, organized by the Jonas Mekas Visual Arts Centre, Vilnius.

Hans Ulrich Obrist, and Rirkrit Tiravanija; in the Lithuanian pavilion at the 51st Venice Biennale in 2005 by commissioners Liutauras Pšibilskis and Lolita Jablonskienė; and in the itinerant project *The Internet Saga* at the 56th Venice Biennale in 2015 by the curator duo Francesco Urbano Ragazzi.

Lithuanian art institutions and the state itself, as a funder of such projects, have also gradually become increasingly involved in the implementation of Mekas's exhibitions worldwide, possibly thanks to the success of his show *Celebration of the Small and Personal in the Times of Bigness* in the Lithuanian pavilion in Venice,⁸ and, certainly, due to the growing interest of international art professionals and the wider audience in this filmmaker/artist. Thus, to promote the country's culture abroad and to develop cultural diplomacy, in 2013, during the Lithuanian Presidency of the Council of the EU, it was Mekas's works that represented the country in Brussels. On that occasion, the BOZAR Centre for Fine Arts hosted the exhibition *Jonas Mekas / The Fluxus Wall* (curator Liutauras Pšibilskis, organised by the NGA in cooperation with the Jonas Mekas Visual Arts Centre).⁹

Cinema and contemporary art

Although the concept of expanded cinema, which embraces not only the specific medium of film but also the viewer's experience related to the place of its screening, originated back in the 1960s, the year 1990 is often identified as a particularly important turning point in film circulation. It marks the 'moving' of avant-garde films into museums and galleries and the beginning of a significant convergence with the field of contemporary art. This process was stimulated by several factors: first, the new and constantly improving technical possibilities of screening video projections in gallery

⁸ It was awarded a special jury mention, and in 2006, was staged several more times: at the Vilnius Contemporary Art Centre, the Baltic Art Centre in Visby (Gotland, Sweden), MONASH University Gallery in Melbourne (Australia), and the Contemporary Art Centre, Zamek Ujazdowski in Warsaw. A book was published on the occasion of the exhibition: Mekas and Pšibilskis (2005).

⁹ Pšibilskis and Jablonskienė (2013).

spaces, which emerged in the 1980s–1990s and replaced stationary film projectors; the interest of contemporary artists in the film medium and video installations; the aim of art institutions to provide viewers with new stimulating (and spectacular) experiences; and finally, the fact that due to the growing impact of new electronic (analogue and digital) media, cinema suddenly became an ‘old medium’ or, according to film critic and curator Dominique Païni, the cultural heritage of the ending century, which already needed to be protected and studied (musealised).¹⁰ In 1990, the Pompidou Centre in Paris held the exhibition *Passages de l’image*¹¹ curated by Christine van Assche, Raymond Bellour, and Catherine David, which consolidated this landmark by raising questions about the crisis of the established concept of the image and, in this context, reflecting on the relationship between the film and the space where it is screened. In Lithuania, the first international exhibition, titled *Sutemos / Twilight*,¹² that started this discourse (and, incidentally, presented at least one documentary film along with new video films¹³) was held in the Vilnius Contemporary Art Centre in 1998 and was curated by Kęstutis Kuizinas, Deimantas Narkevičius, and Evaldas Stankevičius.

In the exhibitions of Mekas’s works, a conceptual revision of cinema has been constantly taking place – every time an exhibition is installed, the issues of the interaction of avant-garde cinema with the environment of displaying contemporary art and issues relevant for both media of visual art are addressed. It is one of the most important discourses unfolding in the artist’s projects meant for galleries and museums. And it is quite likely that to a large extent it was inspired by Mekas himself, who was always looking for a place to show avant-garde films through his organisational activities (from an unauthorised screening for friends and associates in a hotel room in Knokke-le-Zoute, Belgium, in 1964, to the Anthology Film Archives, which opened in 1970, etc.). He often took an active part in selecting films

¹⁰ Balsom (2013): 21.

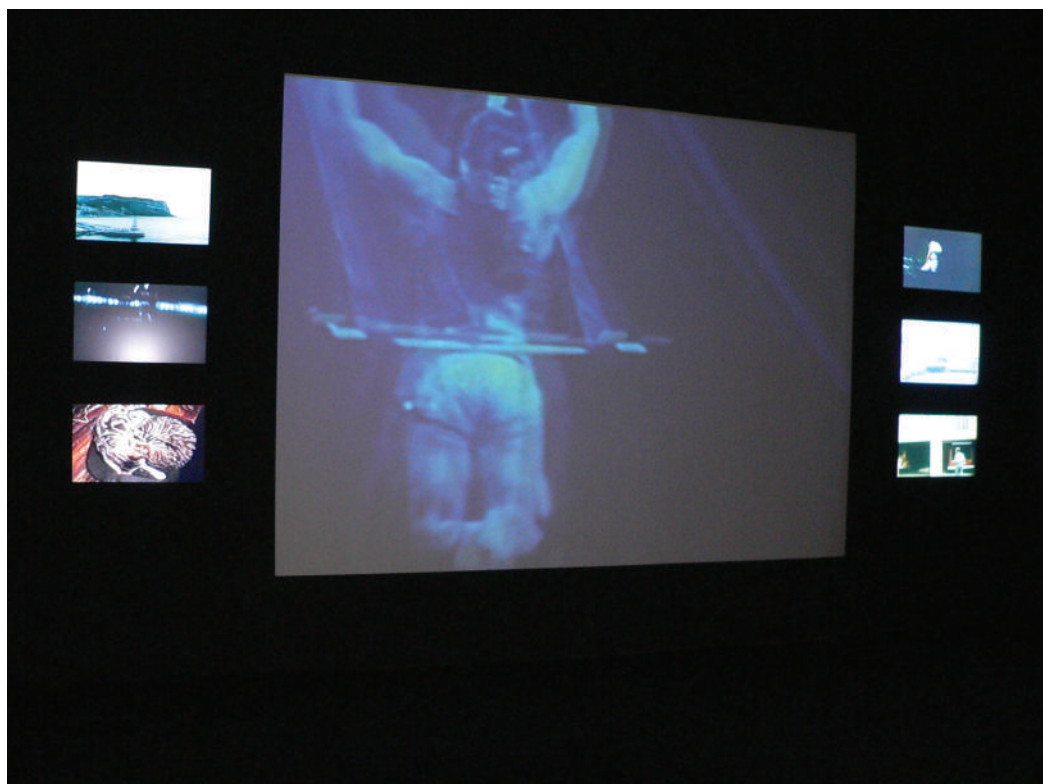
¹¹ *Passages de l’image* (Barcelona: Centre Cultural de la Fundació Caixa de Pensions, 1990).

¹² Stankevičius (1998).

¹³ Algimantas Maccina, *Tbilisi-89*, 1989, documentary video film. Maccina brushed up his professional skills under Jonas Mekas in the early 1990s.

and other items for his exhibitions, as well as in planning the mode of their display – in other words, Mekas co-curated these exhibitions, just like he previously compiled various programmes of avant-garde cinema.

This was the case while preparing the presentation of his work in the Lithuanian pavilion at the Venice Biennale in 2005. It was the artist himself who proposed the title of the exhibition (*Celebration of the Small and Personal in the Times of Bigness*), as well as, for the most part, the selection of films (all of them were transferred to DVD format for this project), while discussing the concept and exhibition plan with the curator Pšibilskis. Several ways of displaying moving images in a darkened gallery space – ‘the black box’ – were simultaneously used in the exhibition, offering different possibilities of experiencing the films. The installation *Home Videos* (1987–1995, video films) worked in a (historically) more conventional way – the work was shown on eight TV monitors, encouraging the viewer to move in a circle from one to another and, at the same time, perceive the work as a set of images and sounds acting simultaneously. Highlights of Mekas’s film diaries, and the then-most recent video, *A Letter from Greenpoint* (2004), were shown in a continuous loop as large-format video projections, allowing visitors to sit and watch them for a long time, possibly returning and re-immersing themselves in the cinematic flow. The third means of displaying moving images was their collage on the gallery wall (somewhat reminiscent of image links on the internet): a projection and six surrounding flat screens showing short films by Mekas (Fig. 1). If in a larger group exhibition the variety of displaying moving images had already become the norm, the corpus of films by a single artist, especially an avant-garde filmmaker, employing such a wide range of means – although easily subject to fragmentation due to their peculiar segmental structure – exceeded the purely functional limits of display and became an eloquent representation of film ‘passages’ (according to the title of the aforementioned exhibition at the Pompidou Centre) in modern culture. Digital images, screen collages, and experiences of different temporalities in the space controlled by the viewers themselves all complemented – or even transformed – the customary interpretations accompanying the usual screening and watching of avant-garde films.



1. Lithuanian pavilion at the 51st Venice Biennale “Jonas Mekas. Celebration of the Small and Personal in the Times of Bigness”. Installation view, 2005. Photo by Liutauras Pšibilskis. Courtesy of the National Gallery of Art, Vilnius

In almost every exhibition held during the last twenty years, the curators together with the artist proposed new ways of rethinking the film medium and especially the spectatorship of films. For example, Mekas's solo project at the Serpentine Gallery in London in 2012, curated by Hans Ulrich Obrist and Julia Peyton-Jones, presented *Lavender Piece* (Fig. 2), specially constructed for this exhibition, in which (possibly) all films by Mekas shot on 16 mm film were collected and simultaneously



2. Jonas Mekas. *Lavender Piece*, 2012. Installation view, exhibition "Jonas Mekas", Serpentine Gallery, London. Photo by Jerry Hardman-Jones. Source: https://artmap.com/serpentine/exhibition/jonas-mekas-2012#i_wop7c

screened in a block of sixteen TV monitors. This has unified the artist's vast corpus of films into one installation, revealing the undoubtedly significant element they all contain. According to the critic who reviewed



3. Jonas Mekas. *Idylls of Semeniskiai / Semeniškių idilės*, 2012. Installation view, exhibition “Jonas Mekas”, Serpentine Gallery, London, 2012. Photo by Jerry Hardman-Jones. Source: https://artmap.com/serpentine/exhibition/jonas-mekas-2012#i_wop7c

the exhibition, ‘views of streets, snow, people, portraits of the filmmaker are mixed without a narrative theme or a chronological order, evoking an instantaneous self-portrait of the artist, composed of glimpses selected by his gaze, rather than images of his body.’¹⁴ Mekas’s poems *Idylls of Semeniskiai* (1948) were presented in this exhibition using a somewhat similar collage principle (Fig. 3), thus becoming, to use the term applied by the Lithuanian art historian Erika Grigoravičienė, multimedia image/texts.¹⁵ The sketch-like installation consisted of an array of sheets of printed text and frozen frames of films unpretentiously attached to the

¹⁴ Busetta (2013): 162–168.

¹⁵ Grigoravičienė (2016): 235–267.



4. Exhibition “Jonas Mekas. The Camera Was Always Running”. Installation view, The Jewish Museum, New York, 2023. Photo by Dario Lasagni. Source: <https://thejewishmuseum.org/index.php/exhibitions/jonas-mekas-the-camera-was-always-running>

wall, thus emphasising the independent and interdisciplinary nature of the artist’s work.

Kelly Taxter, the curator of the exhibition *Jonas Mekas: The Camera Was Always Running* held in the Jewish Museum in New York in 2022, took it a step further offering a new take on experiencing cinema.¹⁶ Each

¹⁶ The project commemorated the centenary of Jonas Mekas’s birth.

of Mekas's eleven most significant films screened at the exhibition was broken into chapters of equal duration, which were simultaneously projected on separate, although adjacent, screens arrayed in a semicircle (Fig. 4).¹⁷ The viewer sitting in the middle of the room could see almost all of them in their field of vision. A reviewer of the exhibition describes the way in which the curator's gesture defamiliarises cinema:

One's vision can shift from screen to screen, disrupting the temporality of the film and providing an ecstatic spectacle outside of the traditional bounds of cinematic time. But this jagged hemispherical view is only part of the installation. One must move around the gallery to perceive each chapter's soundtrack, as the audio is siloed by directional speakers that spray only so far beyond each screen. In this way, sound and image are estranged, and roving viewers can create their own sonic (and visual) mix of the room.¹⁸

'Images are real'¹⁹

The specially constructed and even emphasised simultaneous mix of image and sound in the space, typical of the curated exhibitions of Mekas's works in recent years, is just a step away from the multiplicity of digital images, their proliferation, and pervasive omnipresence, that marks 21st century contemporaneity. More than one curator who collaborated with the artist, as well as exhibition reviewers, have drawn attention to this fact and have even perceived a certain presentiment or prophecy of the future in his late practice: 'obviously you anticipated a lot of what's happening now with digital technology: the blogs, the video blogs, through your diaries', said Hans Ulrich Obrist,²⁰ while the curators Francesco Urbano Ragazzi asserted, 'One day, I am sure, the century will be mekassian. Indeed, maybe the century is already there. Do we not all have a camera in our pockets

¹⁷ From the early *Guns of the Trees* (1962) to the last *Requiem* (2019); among them *Walden* (1969), *Reminiscences of a Journey to Lithuania* (1971–1972), *Lost, Lost, Lost* (1976), *As I Was Moving Ahead Occasionally I Saw Brief Glimpses of Beauty* (2000), and others.

¹⁸ Levin (17 May 2022).

¹⁹ Jonas Mekas's quote from the film *Outtakes from the Life of a Happy Man*, 2012.

²⁰ 'Conversation between Jonas Mekas and Hans Ulrich Obrist. January 20, 2015', in Eunhee and Francesco Urbano Ragazzi (2017): 200.

that makes us, at least potentially, independent filmmakers? Do we not all, or almost all, keep a visual diary on our timelines where we gather the insignificant and yet happy moments of our existence?’²¹

The impulses of this discourse are indeed evident in Mekas’s creative practice and the new ways of disseminating moving images that caught his interest in the 21st century. The YouTube platform was born in 2005, and already in 2006, Mekas uploaded his video diary to the internet, presenting the episodes edited from previously digitised footage under the general title *The First Forty*. In 2007, he carried out a large-scale project titled *365 Days*, capturing every day (as he did in his films) moments of mundane life, people he met, places he visited, and thoughts he had in short video diary entries, and uploading them on the internet. In these works, Mekas once again re-conceptualised the film medium in relation to the place of its presentation – in this case, the internet. Extended, often several-hours-long film diaries, albeit consisting of temporally discrete segments, were replaced by short ‘video messages’ – fragments of non-linear, dispersed time, which the internet user could choose to view freely, not necessarily in a predetermined order. Incidentally, *365 Days* was also shown in exhibitions including *Jonas Mekas / The Fluxus Wall* in Brussels, 2013 and *Again, Again It All Comes Back to Me in Brief Glimpses* at the Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art in Seoul, 2017, curated by Francesco Urbano Ragazzi. Along with film installations and frozen film frames exhibited in a variety of ways and often in large numbers, the project created an intense, continuous, not always clear, and sometimes even tiring flow of images, in which everyone could choose what they wanted to focus on. This also became a metaphor for contemporaneity – a collision of the film medium and a digital space that was brought maximally close to reality, because, for Mekas, images are real: ‘Images become reality. We live the pictures. In the darkness of a cave, in the light beam of a film projection, among the pixels of a screen, in the depths of our memory. / This is Re-Reality. A reaction to reality. A reality that is repeated. That is

²¹ Francesco Urbano Ragazzi, ‘Keep Going Ahead! Jonas Mekas and the 21st Century’, in Eunhee and Francesco Urbano Ragazzi (2017): 152.



5. Jonas Mekas. *In an Instant It All Came Back to Me*, 2015. Installation view, exhibition "Jonas Mekas. *The Internet Saga*", Palazzo Foscari Contarini, Venice, 2015. Photo by Giulio Favotto.
 Source: <https://www.mousemagazine.it/magazine/mekas-palazzo-contarini-2015/>

reproduced. It takes time, like music. That stutters uncertainly as it makes itself. That goes back whilst looking forward. That stops for a moment to never stop.²²

The authors of this quote, the duo of Italian curators Francesco Urbano Ragazzi, who did a few collaborations with Mekas, develop this narrative the most consistently in curating his exhibitions. In 2015, they put up a remarkable presentation of his work in Venice within the framework of their broader research project *The Internet Saga*.²³ In this show, spread across two locations, the curators looked at Mekas's work as a long-lasting, multifaceted, non-linear narrative – perhaps reminiscent of a saga – and tested various methods of circulation of moving images as well as their environments that testify to contemporaneity. Outtakes from Mekas's film diaries, selected by the artist himself, were shown on

²² Francesco Urbano Ragazzi, 'Reality First/Re-Reality', in Eunhee and Francesco Urbano Ragazzi (2017): 34.

²³ The project was implemented in cooperation with the cultural attaché of the Republic of Lithuania in Italy and the Lithuanian Culture Institute.

the screens installed in one of Venice's first fast-food (burger) restaurants situated in Palazzo Foscari Contarini, in a mundane, democratically inclusive environment that also functions in the value system of mass and entertainment culture. Meanwhile, the work *In an Instant It All Came Back to Me* (2015), consisting of more than 700 frozen frames printed on transparent membrane and mounted on glass, turned the huge windows of this historical building into a monumental (internet-inspired) 'stained glass' piece (Fig. 5). According to the curators, the exhibition presented in this building acted 'as an internet metaphor in between different eras and materials, history and commerce, farce and authenticity, and the elements that define relationships in the virtual space'.²⁴

The archive

It seems that Mekas and the archive are like elements from the well-known formula 'x+y = love', even though the artist himself repeatedly explained publicly that he was not a collector or archivist: 'I don't collect things, I just do not throw anything away. And I know very well where everything is placed. In a minute I can find the tiniest thing that was put away a decade ago. You see, I'm a diarist, thus everything that comes into my loft immediately becomes part of my working materials, even if I don't know what and when I will need it'.²⁵ Of course, this often emphasised relation is primarily implied by the very basic principle of Mekas's filmmaking, wherein he would constantly revisit footage filmed at various times – like an archive – and keep editing and re-editing fragmentary outtakes not linked by a coherent narrative with many overlapping different time frames; these would also function as an (only partially organised) archive of images. An equally significant role in consolidating the archival approach is played by his lifelong ambition to establish the Anthology Film Archives and his work supporting the activities of this institution.

²⁴ 'Lietuvis paskelbtas pirmąją šiuolaikinio meno žvaigždę internete', *lrytas.lt*, 30 April 2015, www.lrytas.lt/kultura/daile/2015/04/30/news/lietuvis-paskelbtas-pirmąją-siuolaikinio-meno-zvaigzde-internete-3281654.

²⁵ Pikūnas (23 January 2019).

However, one more aspect that validates the aforementioned equation is also worth noting – the embodiment and reflection of the ‘archival impulse’ in the exhibitions of Mekas’s works. In an eponymous article published in 2004,²⁶ Hal Foster analysed the archival approach that became relevant in contemporary art at the turn of the 20th and 21st centuries (mentioning, among others, the Scottish artist Douglas Gordon, who made a film with and about Mekas, titled *I Had Nowhere to Go* in 2016),²⁷ claiming that ‘archival art is as much preproduction as it is postproduction: concerned less with absolute origins than with obscure traces (perhaps “anarchival impulse” is the more appropriate phrase), these artists are often drawn to unfulfilled beginnings or incomplete projects – in art and in history alike – that might offer points of departure again.’²⁸ This pro- (rather than retro-) actively perceived principle of operation of the archive once again allows us to relate Mekas’s creative practice to the context of contemporary art.

When looking into his exhibitions, one cannot fail to notice that for many of them, perhaps encouraged by the curators, or responding to the exhibition’s theme or occasion, he produced new installation-type works from his extremely diverse (not only film) archive, often, as already mentioned, conceiving these works site-specifically, relating them to the context of the show, and revealing a personal connection to the place (its history or present). For the exhibition *Jonas Mekas / The Fluxus Wall* held in Brussels on the occasion of Lithuania’s presidency of the EU Council, Mekas not only selected ‘archival’ material about Fluxus performances and their participants (photographs, documents, films), but also suggested to include in the exhibition a completely different – tangible – installation from ready-made objects: traditional festive Lithuanian woven sashes that were given to him as gifts over many years (Fig. 6), thus addressing the celebratory occasion of the exhibition. For the presentation in the Serpentine Gallery in London, the artist produced a series of photo prints,

²⁶ Foster (Fall 2004): 3–22.

²⁷ In Lithuania, prominent examples of employing this approach include the works of Deimantas Narkevičius, Dainius Liškevičius, Aurelija Maknytė, and others.

²⁸ Foster (Fall 2004): 5.



6. Jonas Mekas. Installation. Installation view, exhibition “Jonas Mekas / The Fluxus Wall”, BOZAR Centre for Fine Arts, 2013. Photo by Mindaugas Mikulėnas. Courtesy of the National Gallery of Art, Vilnius

titled *To London with Love* (2012), from images that he captured with his camera while attending independent film festivals held in this city in 1970 and 1973. Dozens of frozen frames presented in many of his exhibitions were also selected from his archive. It is not easy to categorise these works by Mekas – they are both sequels to his films and, at the same time, archival installations of contemporary art. Their hybridity encourages a critical reflection on the state of both media in contemporaneity, especially in its digital dimension.

An equally important aspect is the application of the archival approach in the curation of Mekas's exhibitions. The most often employed common strategy is the musealisation of the artist's personal belongings (e.g., video cameras, ego-documents, magazines published by him, poetry books, etc.), usually presenting them in display cases as historical relics. Brašiškė and Brašiškis, the curators of the exhibition *Jonas Mekas and the New York Avant-Garde* held at NGA (one of the first large-scale exhibitions organized after Mekas's death), offered a different take on the archive. As the idea was to present the artist not only as an avant-garde filmmaker, but also as an organiser and promoter of independent cinema, his huge archive became the basic means (and medium) of representing his multi-faceted practice.²⁹ According to the curator Brašiškė:

After realizing what a large part of the day Mekas would spend on other activities than filmmaking, or, rather, how he would try to squeeze films in between other activities, we had to figure out how to talk about it at the exhibition. It is a quite different narrative supported by ephemera, papers. This is how the archive emerged as an important exhibit. The exhibition architects Petras Išora and Ona Lozuraitytė helped to showcase it by designing a monumental table and the lighting needed for this kind of exploratory gaze.³⁰

This piece of furniture – a table or platform – helped to produce a different structure of the exhibition space by integrating a horizontal viewing plane next to the customary vertical ones and thus offering a mixed way of perceiving the exhibition and the material presented in it (Fig. 7). Many documents, photographs, and printed matter from Mekas's private archive were arranged on the table in thematic groups and displayed with films by Mekas himself and New York's other independent filmmakers shown on TV monitors. Viewers could experience this rich, diverse archival situation by walking around, stopping at one or another exhibit, or sitting down in front of the TV, shifting their gaze from a text to a photographic or moving image, and combining different modes of

²⁹ After Mekas's death, the archive has been under the auspices of the Jonas Mekas Estate that takes care of his legacy.

³⁰ Aksamitauskaitė (21 January 2022).



7. Exhibition “Jonas Mekas and the New York Avant-Garde”. Installation view, National Gallery of Art, Vilnius, 2021. Photo by Ugnius Gelguda. Courtesy of the National Gallery of Art, Vilnius

temporality. Perhaps due to the inevitable parallels with other phenomena of the New York avant-garde of that time, this part of the exhibition – based on the archival principle – evoked associations with the ‘aesthetics of administration’ (to borrow a term of Benjamin Buchloh),³¹ developed by conceptual artists in the 1960s and employed in their exhibitions, instead of the traditional museum display.

³¹ Buchloh (Winter 1990): 105–143.

Exilic cinema

In many exhibitions of Mekas's works held in various countries in one way or another, the artist was presented as a figure of exile: a refugee of the Second World War, an immigrant, who was born in Lithuania, in the village of Semeniškiiai, fled from the country (together with his brother) in 1944, and after several years spent in DP camps in Germany, moved to New York in 1949 where he became an avant-garde filmmaker and curator. It was inscribed in Mekas's biographies used to promote these projects or inform the audience, and evident in the purposeful selection of films and other exhibits; moreover, it often became one of the main narratives considered by the curators or even the dominant approach of the exhibition. This is well reflected in the article by Taxter,³² the curator of the exhibition *Jonas Mekas: The Camera was Always Running* at the Jewish Museum in New York, in which she interprets Mekas's cinema as 'fundamentally immigrant', highlighting the 'interesting paradox of Mekas's work': although he 'invoked his exilic narrative to express an unquenchable, existential loss that he carried his entire life, his forced flight – its upheavals, disruptions, and losses – allowed him to evolve as an artist',³³

When analysing the curation and also representational aspects of exhibiting the artist's work, it is worth taking a closer look at the discourse of 'immigrant cinema'. The phenomena of film (as well as the contemporary moving images) related to migration of both the mid- and late-20th century and our times are a relevant and expanding field of research. They are explored (and defined) based on various theoretical approaches: the hybrid character of such cinema is emphasised referring to Gilles Deleuze's film studies,³⁴ while the cultural studies approach is evident in the concept of interstitial cinema (acting as interlayers in the

³² Kelly Taxter, 'The Camera Was Always Running: Exile and the Artist Jonas Mekas', in Brašiškė, Brasiskis, and Taxter (2021): 27–46.

³³ Brašiškė, Brasiskis, and Taxter (2021): 14.

³⁴ Marks (Autumn 1994): 244–264.

conventional social and film systems).³⁵ The author of the latter, Iranian-born American film director and researcher Hamid Naficy,³⁶ also calls films created by immigrants ‘accented cinema’ and distinguishes three types of such filmmaking: exilic, diasporic, and ethnic.³⁷

From the viewpoint of the issues explored in this article, Naficy’s discussion of the different relationship of these types of filmmaking to real and perceived homelands is important. The first type, to which the author also attributes Mekas’s work, is often characterised by the personal experience of exile, each time revisiting and evaluating the relationship with both the real and adopted homeland: ‘as partial, fragmented, and multiple subjects, these filmmakers are capable of producing ambiguity and doubt about the taken-for-granted values of their home and host societies.’³⁸ Diasporic and ethnic cinema is always more related to the experience of collective trauma and the preservation and emphasis of collective identity in the dominant social and cultural structure. This, in Naficy’s opinion, encourages the viewers to recognise the ethnic content and signs of identity in these films prior to the author’s artistic visions or stylistic innovations.³⁹

The ‘exilic’ character of Mekas’s films, expressed in his individual film language, which testifies to the reflexive relationship with the ‘lost’ and ‘constructed’ places of living and the fluid, hybrid identity transcending the boundaries of the political and cultural aspirations of a particular ethnic diaspora, is undoubtedly an important incentive for the extensive international circulation of his work, often facilitated by the involvement of Lithuanian institutions which in the case of Mekas’s exhibitions privilege the story of an individual over that of a collective in representing the country.

In the curation of the artist’s exhibitions, this aspect of his life and work is highlighted by using various structural and experiential means.

³⁵ Naficy (2001).

³⁶ Kelly Taxter also refers to this author in her analysis in the above-mentioned article.

³⁷ Naficy (2001): 11.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 13.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 17.



8. Exhibition “Jonas Mekas. Let Me Dream Utopias”. Installation view, Rupert Centre for Art and Education, Vilnius, 2019. Photo by Andrej Vasilenko.

Source: <https://artnews.lt/pracitis-visada-utopija-jono-meko-paroda-leiskite-man-svajoti-utopijas-rupert-centre-52976>

A two-part photographic installation *My Two Families* (2012) was displayed in the exhibition at the Serpentine Gallery, with portraits of Mekas’s relatives on one side, and portraits of his friends, colleagues, and people he met in various circumstances on the other. According to a reviewer of the exhibition, these two hemispheres of the filmmaker’s emotional universe, as well as the films and frozen frames selected for the exhibition, visually represented his dual identity.⁴⁰ In addition to the works *Reminiscences from Germany* (2012) and *Images from Purgatorio* (2012), evidencing the experience of the loss of homeland and forced relocation, one could also see the film *Birth of a Nation* from 1997,

⁴⁰ Busetta (2013): 162–168.

which (re)constructed the ‘discovered’ – art – territory and its characters: artists, poets, musicians, etc.

From the exilic discourse’s viewpoint, the reflection on the site and the exhibition’s context also plays an important role in the presentations of Mekas’s work. In a conversation with politician and musicologist Vytautas Landsbergis held on the opening of the exhibition *Jonas Mekas / The Fluxus Wall*, the artist said, ‘Now it seems to me that any place where I stay at least a little longer than a couple of days, is my place. I can relate to any place. Any place is my home. Due to the fact that I was displaced in the world, the whole world became open to me.’⁴¹ The embodiment of the relativity of place, which combines the real and the imaginary, could be experienced in the exhibition of films and poems by Mekas titled *Let Me Dream Utopias* at the Rupert Centre for Art and Education in Vilnius (2019, curators: Justė Jonutytė, Kotryna Markevičiūtė, and Yates Norton, architects Ona Lozuraitytė and Petras Išora), in which viewers got involved in the installation by reversed and, as a result, somewhat fantastic, unreal images of Rupert’s outdoor environment that found their way into the gallery with the help of a camera obscura (Fig. 8).

Conclusions

The relations between cinema and contemporary art (and spaces for viewing them), the circulation of moving images in contemporaneity, the potential of the archive and the specific character of exilic cinema – important narratives developed in the curation of Mekas’s exhibitions – offer a particular insight into his work (especially his late work), and, more broadly, into the current state of avant-garde cinema. According to film scholar Erika Balsom, today, the moving image in contemporary art constitutes a primary site at which notions of cinema have been renegotiated and redefined.⁴² Exhibitions that addressed and reflected on these discourses, with the curators often working closely with the artist

⁴¹ Jablonskienė (2014): 19–20.

⁴² Balsom (2013): 11.

himself, encouraged the production of Mekas's new works of a hybrid nature in between avant-garde cinema and contemporary art, and led to their multi-format display in art institutions. His strategy of the 'always running camera' capturing countless moments of life manifests in films as a collage of heterochronic episodes, and in his exhibitions, marked with a distinctive 'film aesthetic', it is spatialised in installations that (de)construct streams of moving and still images. An important role in Mekas's exhibitions is played by the linking of the narratives presented in them to a specific place and its time – past and/or present. Two temporal regimes: the memory of the archive and the current reception of its subject-matter, are also often matched by the curators thus creating mixed narratives that reflect the multi-layered nature of contemporaneity.

In staging the exhibitions of Mekas's works, objectives of both international curators and institutions and Lithuanian cultural diplomacy often coincide due to the urgent narratives developed in Mekas's creative practice and its curation, linked by his individual-style exilic cinema which transcends the goals of the preservation and representation of the ethnic cultural identity.

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Jono Meko kūrybos viešinimas: priežastys ir naratyvai

Santrauka

Straipsnyje, remiantis parodų istorijos prieiga ir teorijomis, konceptualizuojančiomis avangardinio kino ir šiuolaikinių judančių vaizdų susiliejimą, analizuojami mažai tyrinėti klausimai, susiję su žymaus nepriklausomo kino kūrėjo ir avangardinio kino veikėjo, poeto Jono Meko (1922–2019) įvairiapusiška kūrybine veikla – kelios reikšmingiausios jo personalinės parodos, surengtos 2000–2020 metais. Aptariami šių parodų kuratorių taikyti diskursai ir naratyvai, tęsiantys, papildantys ar keičiantys diskretišką įvairių Meko profesinių vaidmenų suvokimą.

Reikšminiai žodžiai: Jonas Mekas, kuratorystė, kinas išplėstiniame lauke, šiuolaikybė, archyvas, imigrantiškas kinas