Jonas Mekas with his Bolex in Lithuania 1971

Jonas Mekas interviewed by Gilda Williams

Remains of the Day

Gilda Williams: *The title of the central filmwork of your recent Serpentine Gallery exhibition is* Out-takes from the Life of a Happy Man, *2012. This year you celebrated your 90th birthday. Is this exhibition a satisfied reflection on your long life, one spent immersed in art and film?*

Jonas Mekas: *Out-takes from the Life of a Happy Man* really is made up from out-takes, the footage I did not use, that did not fit into any of my completed films – ends and bits. I discovered I had a lot of it; time was passing and the films were slowly fading. It will all be gone soon and I was worried about it. I thought on this occasion, on the occasion of the Serpentine Gallery show, I will do something with all these remains.

When you returned to these out-takes and were re-editing your footage after perhaps 30 or 40 years, could you remember most of it?

I know exactly where I shot every bit, every little piece. I remember where I filmed it and every different circumstance. Yes, I remember every moment of it.

Is your filmmaking a kind of prosthetic memory for you; is it part of your memory?

Not the usual memory that people talk about, or what we usually mean by 'memory'. I do not work with 'memory'. I work with actual material, physical material, film – that's very real. I don't think of myself as working with memory but with real recordings of moments in the past, with whatever we have left. I work with concrete pieces of film that happen to contain moments from a certain place and a certain time, a certain situation. It is very real. And I don't think they are just personal. I think they are universal.

In contrast to the art gallery, in a cinema your sense of the actual space you are in disappears.

Yes, of course. To be cinema, it has to be that way – just you and the screen.

How do you choose when or what to film? Do you always carry a camera with you?

Oh yes, always. I have my camera with me right now, in my bag. But I don't make rational decisions about what to film, I don't plan. Whatever I film is a moment when something happens that triggers something – suddenly I have to take out my camera and film it. There is no explanation, no planning. The reasons I choose to film are invisible, they are never rational.

Obviously, sound is added afterwards. How do you decide how to join sound and image?

In this case the sounds are from my sound library. Just as I have collected images, I have collected sounds – thousands and thousands of cassettes. The music in this film is actually my wedding music. My wedding took place in Kremsmünster Abbey in Austria, a very old abbey, like 1,200 years old. You can hear the monks singing, the nuns singing – these are from my recordings. The piano is played by a Lithuanian musician and painter Auguste Varkalis, a very good painter and a very good friend. Everything in this work is part of my life.

You write in one of the wall texts how your life has witnessed so many tremendous 20th-century events – the rise of Soviet power and the invasion of the Nazis in

Jonas Mekas and brother Adolfas at the Film-Makers' Cooperative 1962

Award Presentation to Andy Warhol 1964 Andy Warhol's factory 16mm film frame

Happy Birthday to John 1996 John Lennon and Yoko Ono at the Museum of Syracuse 1971 16mm film frame

your homeland of Lithuania, your subsequent imprisonment in a forced labour camp near Hamburg during the Second World War, then your time in displaced persons camps across Germany after the war.

Unfortunately – or fortunately, perhaps – I was born shortly after the Communist revolution and shortly before the arrival of Hitler. I went through all the horrors of the 20th century. Yes, that was my fate, what can I say?

Yet you always seem able to focus on the redemptive moments of your life, the happy episodes of your everyday life.

Yes. I don't remember the unhappy parts – I don't try to remember. That's my nature. I don't remember for very long the horrors that were close to me. I could, I suppose, spend my time brooding on or remembering the horrors of the 20th century, but I'm not interested in that, that's not my nature. I concentrate in my work and in my life only on the celebration of life. That's what I am all about. I am celebrating life and having a joyful relationship to life. I am a propagandist for happiness and beauty. This show, this exhibition, is my manifesto: a manifesto for the celebration of life and happiness and beauty.

I think that too much in contemporary art – too much time, too many exhibitions, too much space – is dedicated to horrors, to the darkness of our civilisation. If you surround yourself with darkness it begins to affect you, those images start to affect you. When you go into a cemetery, you think about death, it has an effect on you. When you visit the Museum of the Inquisition ... you are affected by those horrible things. You leave depressed, you need a drink. But if you are in a field of flowers, you are affected by the flowers – you smile.

You were relocated by the UN Refugee Organisation with your brother Adolfas to New York in 1949, and by the early 1960s found yourself at the centre of the Avant Garde, working with filmmakers like Jack Smith, Maya Deren and Kenneth Anger, with poets Allen Ginsberg, William Burroughs and John Giorno, and with artists including Andy Warhol, George Maciunas and so on.

You didn't mention music, which was also at the centre – John Cage, La Monte Young and others. All the arts were being reinvigorated at the time, so much began in those years, or was brought up to date. But maybe we have been stuck too long on the 1960s. For decade after decade the interest was always on the 1960s, but now I think attention has moved forward – people are discovering the 1970s. Maybe that is good.

You have always worked independently, securing your own funding and working outside established institutions – in fact often inventing your own institutional models. I am interested in the strategies you invented to finance and organise your many ventures – Film Culture *magazine, from 1955, or the Film-Makers' Cooperative, which you founded in 1962 and which was funded by the artists themselves.*

Luckily, for my own personal work, I did not need money. My kind of films do not require money. But my struggle and all the fundraising – oh all the fundraising! – was always directed towards other projects. *Film Culture* magazine, the Filmmakers' Cinemateque (now Anthology Film Archives) – that is where all my work and effort in fundraising was needed. Film preservation, for example, takes quite a bit of money. I have spent much more time, many times more time, on fundraising than on making my own work. Fundraising is not easy for us independents – it never was and still isn't. We have always had very little support from the city or any official bodies. I'm still fundraising.

Did you fund your projects through cooperatives or through individual donors?
Mostly individuals. I have spent a lot of my life writing letters, making calls, trying to persuade rich people to support us. It is hard work. Fundraising is hard work, it's no joke. Some artists supported us too, by donating their art, which we sell. I bought the Anthology Film Archives building from the City for $50,000 in an auction in 1968 or so with an outright donation. But to fix the building cost me $1.8m. To transform this former courthouse and prison into a film museum ... you can imagine what it cost! I spent ten years of my life raising that $1.8m but I needed to create the Anthology. It was a nightmare. I still have bad dreams about it.

Were you surprised when film and video moved massively into gallery and museum spaces from the 1970s into the 1990s?
No, I wasn't surprised. I thought it was natural. It was hard work to convince some galleries and museums to embrace film, but not all of them. For example the Museum of Modern Art included film right from the start, since the 1920s. The Pompidou also included cinema from its very beginnings in the 1970s, thanks to Pontus Hulten, who was a visionary. But in the private galleries, it was really the introduction of video art that marked the change, mostly for practical reasons. It was much easier to present a video on a monitor than to project a film, which requires a projector and someone who knows how to operate it. Film projection is a much more complicated business than a video show. For the galleries it became very simple to show moving-image art because of the video cassette. The simplicity of the technology opened the door first to video and then to film.

In your films, you are not interested in staging events but in recording the everyday events going on around you.
That is my challenge. The everyday, the invisible, life around us, the daily life which we don't even notice – especially the art world, which seems to be totally uninterested in reality. They aren't even interested in colour. The art world seems to like things that are so boringly black and grey. But I crave colour. When I walk into the art opening I search for colour and most of the time I don't find it. So I'll go back to my movies. My challenge is how to see and record moments of daily life that pass as if invisibly. That is my challenge.

So much of the contemporary art-making I see around me – it's all an artificial, invented reality, with artists trying to be 'creative'. I'm very old-fashioned in that sense. I am interested in living things, like an anthropologist who is going with a tape-recorder and recording old songs that humans, somewhere, are still singing or dancing to. I'm interested in catching these moments of contemporary humanity, recording it. I don't need to create it.

Today everybody carries around with them in their phone a fairly sophisticated digital camera, recording daily minutiae, and we can instantly distribute this imagery over the internet. Would this have been the ideal means for your 'everyday' films? You have a very comprehensive website, jonasmekasfilms.com, and in 2007 you created there the internet project 365 Day Project *in which you presented a new short film every day, like a visual diary.*
The internet, to me, is just an extension of the telephone. It continues the history of correspondence, of having conversations by other means than face-to-face talk. This history is as old as the world itself, and the internet is just an extension of that history. It is a very vague thing for me to try to define what my art is, or what film art is. In fact it is hard to define what any art is, or how best to distribute it. I'll give you an example: a friend of mine from Naples, Giuseppe Zevola, worked in the Banco di Napoli, which is about 400 years old. He showed me stacks and stacks of ancient records in the bank – you know, cheques cashed, that sort of thing. And the bank employees from long ago, obviously very bored with their work, doodled in these books. These bank registers are full of doodles, hundreds and hundreds of these improvised little drawings, which Giuseppe collected. They look like the work of many contemporary artists that I see everywhere today – in fact they are often more interesting than a lot of what I see in the galleries.

So how can you say what 'art' is and what it isn't, or where best to show it or to find it? Where would you place these doodles? What's being exchanged today on YouTube or other websites is part of the everyday exchanges and conversations that have been documented in the past in other ways – why do we need to call things 'art'?

Do you call your films 'art'?
No! I am not an artist! I refuse to call myself that. I am not an artist. I am a maker, a filmmaker. I make films. I film with a camera or I videotape. To decide what is 'art' and what is 'not art' makes no sense. We must always remember that what we have left of art, what we call 'art history', is just what managed to survive. It is not the whole story. We know only about what religious fanatics and political fanatics did not manage to destroy, to say nothing of the earthquakes, fires and wars that destroyed plenty more. We call it 'art history' as if this history is complete but in fact very little is left. I was just told that Botticelli destroyed almost all his late work, something like 20 years' worth of works, hundreds of paintings, only because the religious fanatics around him told him it was sinful to paint the works he did. Botticelli was said to have been pressured into destroying much of his work. What is left of Botticelli, like all art, is just a fragment. What we see in the museums or what is written about in books, what we study in schools as 'art history', in truth is only the miserable leftovers that happened to survive the horrors of the past.

The same is true now. We have this visual flood of images, produced by all the tools at our disposal for recording and disseminating moving images. What will remain of it all will be only random pieces, fragments. Consider how quickly technology is changing. Already it is difficult for me to see material I recorded just five years ago. Recording formats become obsolete, the machinery dies out and vast quantities of recorded material turn invisible. They are only as permanent as the technologies that support them.

You have to remember that decisions about formats are made solely by businesses, making business decisions not artistic ones. Motion-picture film is disappearing purely for profit-driven reasons. Business people realised they could make more money with video than film, so everything moved to video. The production of celluloid has been discontinued and you can no longer find film labs, which are all closed. Business determines formats: it is certainly not the artists who are making decisions about dominant formats. Every two years or so, formats have to change for business reasons only – for money, for profit. We all have to buy and change everything. We are spending a lot of money now at Anthology Film Archives to transfer video art from the 1970s and 80s to new formats. We have to do all this work because we can no longer watch these works on the original machinery, which has disappeared. And of course this is bound to repeat itself as even newer formats will replace the current formats.

And there is always a loss in quality in any transfer of this kind.
Of course, there is always a loss. If a painting is made in oil, the content could only have been captured using oil paint. There are different contents that can only be caught in watercolour or inks. The exact same thing is true with moving image – what you can do with 35mm you can't do with 16mm, and what you can do with 16mm you cannot do with 35mm – much less with video or digital recording. The tool you use to make the image and the result are inseparably connected, you cannot transfer film to video and think it is the same thing. You are no longer seeing the film, you are seeing something else. The texture is different, everything is different – it is a completely different thing. All that is left is 'the story'.

Were you appalled when the Museum of Modern Art showed Warhol's films on video, as they did in 2010?
Yes, I called it a crime. It is a crime! For the Museum of Modern Art – and other major museums – to show films like Andy Warhol's 'Screen Tests' on video when it is still possible to show them as films – to project them – was criminal. In ten years' time it really will be very difficult to project them but in 2010 it was still possible to screen them properly. To present Warhol's films as videos really was a crime.

I would credit you with being among the first to take Warhol's art seriously – not just in the light-hearted context of Pop. Already in the early 1960s you understood him as a radical artist and filmmaker.
Of course we should take Warhol very, very seriously. The 'Screen Tests' are incredible: hundreds of portraits, unique in the history of portraiture. Warhol's early silent-film period, I think, is especially important. But even the sound period – I mean, *Chelsea Girls* is a monumental work, its complexity and richness still hasn't been understood. We still haven't understood enough how important that film really is.

Do you remember the circumstances behind the making of Warhol's Empire, *1964?*
I was walking with my friend John Palmer, carrying *Film Culture* magazines to be mailed. The post office happened to be in the Empire State Building. We stopped and we looked at it from a distance, and Palmer said, 'Ah, this is a perfect subject for Andy Warhol!', because Andy was interested in iconic images. 'Why don't we tell Andy?', I said, so we did. John Palmer's name appears in the Premiere announcement of the film.

That is very rare in Warhol's lifetime – he didn't like to openly share artistic credit, especially in writing. Despite all his assistants and collaborators, the art was always signed 'by Andy Warhol' alone.
Andy actually thanked John later for giving him the idea. Marie Mencken, a filmmaker and Warhol friend, worked at *Time Magazine* in Rockefeller Center, on the 40th floor or so. She let us in at night – without permission, of course. We went there with some sandwiches. I did most of the work. I set up the camera and loaded the film. We waited until each reel ended, then I changed immediately to another reel of film. It was quite boring, we just sat there nibbling at our sandwiches. But the film – it's a great movie. That kind of idea – duration art – was in the air already. La Monte Young had already made music by extending one single note into four or five hours, for example, and, of course, Andy had already made *Sleep* the year before *Empire*.

You have always been a writer alongside your image-making work – you wrote anti-Soviet and anti-Nazi propaganda, then you were a journalist and a poet, and text is often interspersed in your films. Are they parallel activities for you, writing and filmmaking?
Yes, but I wear many different hats, not just those of writer and filmmaker. They are all me.

A word that comes up often in your writing is 'paradise'. You use that term to describe your early childhood in a farming village in Lithuania, for what you found in New York when you arrived in 1949 and, later, in the 1960s.
Paradise means 'innocence' – where there are still patches of innocence, of nature, an innocence that has not been destroyed by any of the poisons produced by our civilisation. In every area you pick – what you drink, or what you eat, what you dream – you can find little that hasn't yet been poisoned. Whenever you find something that is still pure, where you know that what you are getting is not contaminated, by chemicals or whatever, that is innocence, that is paradise. There are still some fragments of paradise. And some of us are still trying to protect them, to see that they remain. That is what I am trying to do. Preserving films – it is like keeping seeds for the future, when maybe they can grow. There are still some fragments of paradise around us, but they are being eaten away, attacked, all the time. Like the corals in the ocean, eaten away by the pollutants. I think we are doomed, actually. I think our civilisation is doomed.

You have said that in Lithuania you are mostly a poet, in Europe a filmmaker, in the US a kind of maverick promoter, supporter, enabler and friend to avant-garde film.
That is still so. In Lithuania I am a national poet. When I work on my films they think I'm just wasting time. In the US some institutions have started recognising me as a filmmaker, but mostly they think of me as an organiser, a writer for the *Village Voice*, founder of *Film Culture* magazine. They admit and recognise now my contribution to the development and changes in cinema. In Europe, I would say they recognise all those aspects, in Paris especially. But now other countries in Europe are beginning to see my work too and accept me as a filmmaker, like here in the UK.

Do you have a favourite way that you like to be described?
One description of me that I liked was coined by Vincent Canby in the *New York Times* who said, 'Jonas Mekas does everything with the shrewdness of a farmer.' It's true, I grew up in a farming village and I am still a farmer. I plant many things. I water them, I see that they grow. I defend them – I see a lot of what I do as defending. I function as Minister of Defence, Minister of Finance, Minister of Propaganda. I do all those things, out of necessity. No one else was doing any of this, showing our films, preserving them, protecting. It had to be done – and it still does. I have done all those things without stopping since the 1960s. I did it all for the glory of cinema. ■

Jonas Mekas is at DOX Centre for Contemporary Art, Prague until 22 April while the recent Serpentine Gallery exhibition travels to MUAC Mexico 9 February to 19 May.

GILDA WILLIAMS is a writer and a lecturer on the MFA Curating programme at Goldsmiths College, London.