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Author(s): Jeffrey K. Ruoff

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Home Movies of the Avant-Garde: Jonas Mekas and the New York Art World

by Jeffrey K. Ruoff

“All artistic work, like all human activity, involves the joint activity of a number, often a large number of people. Through their cooperation, the art work we eventually see or hear comes to be and continues to be. The work always shows signs of that cooperation.”
—Howard Becker¹

The Art World of Avant-Garde Film. Jonas Mekas is a central figure in the consolidation of the postwar avant-garde film community. His life and work are dedicated to the establishment of film as an art form. In this endeavor, he has collaborated in the construction of an art world, as defined by sociologist Howard Becker. In *Art Worlds*, Becker develops his institutional theory of art: “Art worlds consist of all the people whose activities are necessary to the production of the characteristic works which that world, and perhaps others as well, define as art. Members of art worlds coordinate the activities by which work is produced by referring to a body of conventional understandings embodied in common practice and in frequently used artifacts. The same people often cooperate repeatedly, even routinely, in similar ways to produce similar works, so that we can think of an art world as an established network of cooperative links among participants.”² The avant-garde film community may be thought of as an art world, a subset of the larger contemporary art world in the United States. As a critic, journal editor, distributor, filmmaker, exhibitor, fundraiser, archivist, and teacher, Mekas has fought to place film on equal footing with the other arts of modernism. Through his writings, lectures, and films, Mekas has worked to build a community of filmmakers and a sophisticated audience receptive to their art. I will explore Mekas’s contribution to the construction of an art world of avant-garde film in the institutional frameworks of production, distribution, exhibition, and criticism.

Through these various avenues, Mekas has cultivated the appreciation of film as a fine art form. As editor-in-chief of *Film Culture* in the 1950s, Mekas promoted the “*politique des auteurs*,” or auteurism, advanced by the critics of the French journal *Cahiers du cinéma*. Auteurism, as a theory of film criticism, prizes films, and especially Hollywood productions, to the extent that they may be seen as manifestations of an individual controlling sensibility, embodying the worldview of an author. Auteurism provides a framework for appreciating as art the products of the commercial film industry. As in the more traditional art forms

Jeffrey Ruoff is a Ph.D. candidate in Film at the University of Iowa. This essay tied for First Place in the 1989 S.C.S. Student Writing Competition. This essay is forthcoming in David James’s anthology on Mekas from Princeton University Press.

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of painting and literature, films are valued as the individual expression of artistic genius. Writing in "Movie Journal," his column in the *Village Voice*, Mekas made a typical auteurist claim: "A minor work of a true artist takes an important place in the totality of that artist's life work and must be approached with as much love as his masterpieces."³ Today, as director of Anthology Film Archives, Mekas presides over the canonization of avant-garde film as an art form within an institutional framework. Anthology was founded to preserve and promote an exclusive body of work, an "essential cinema."⁴

Significantly, Mekas's own films bear witness to this process, exemplifying Becker's claim that, "All artistic work, like all human activity, involves the joint activity of a number, often a large number of people. Through their cooperation, the art work we eventually see or hear comes to be and continues to be. The work always shows signs of that cooperation."⁵ I will enumerate the ways that Mekas's own films, in subject matter and style, lay bare the structure of the avant-garde film community in which he works and lives. Mekas's films provide an excellent case study of the ways in which individual works show signs of the cooperation of the larger art world. In Mekas's cycle of films, *Diaries, Notes, and Sketches*, the avant-garde film community and the New York art world emerge as the collective protagonist. Mekas's chosen style captures the institutional alignments of this growing artistic community. He maintains that his shooting style developed as a response to his own engagement in that community:

During the last fifteen years I got so entangled with the independently-made film that I didn't have any time left for myself, for my own film-making—between Film-Makers' Cooperative, Film-Makers' Cinematheque, *Film Culture* magazine, and now Anthology Film Archives. I mean, I didn't have any long stretches of time to prepare a script, then to take months to shoot, then to edit, etc. I had only bits of time which allowed me to shoot only bits of film. All my personal work became like notes. I thought I should do whatever I can today, because if I don't, I may not find any other free time for weeks. If I can film one minute—I film one minute. If I can film ten seconds—I film ten seconds. I take what I can, from desperation. But for a long time I didn't look at the footage I was collecting that way. I thought what I was actually doing was practicing. I was preparing myself, or trying to keep in touch with my camera, so that when the day would come when I'll have time, then I would make a 'real' film.⁶

Jonas Mekas's epic autobiography, *Diaries, Notes, and Sketches*, covers his experiences in America from 1949 to 1984. He immigrated to the United States in 1949, after living for several years in displaced person camps in postwar Germany. *Diaries, Notes, and Sketches* is over twelve hours long and, to date, consists of seven different works. These films are *Diaries, Notes, and Sketches: Walden* (1969), *Reminiscences of a Journey to Lithuania* (1972), *Lost Lost Lost* (1975), *In Between* (1978), *Notes for Jerome* (1978), *Paradise Not Yet Lost* (1979), and *He Stands in a Desert Counting the Seconds of His Life* (1984). These individual works foreground intertextual references; they demand to be analyzed together with his other films and writings. Mekas insists that each of his films

forms an integral part of an overall work entitled *Diaries, Notes, and Sketches*. In these films, Mekas reworks the aesthetic of home movies into his own personal style, a creative stylistic choice for a man who has no home. Through the central figure of memory, Mekas's immigrant autobiography attempts to reconstitute past experience and community in the new world. In his autobiographical films, he confronts the feeling of dislocation that frequently conditions the experiences of immigrants who straddle two cultures.

The avant-garde in both film and photography turned to home movies and snapshot photography in the 1950s and 1960s for new materials. Photographers of the social landscape—Robert Frank, Diane Arbus, Garry Winogrand, Lee Friedlander—reworked the aesthetics of the snapshot within the context of the fine art photograph. Like Jerome Hill, Bruce Connor, and Stan Brakhage, Mekas has found in home movies an aesthetic material suitable for his own filmmaking, using a collage technique derivative of experiments in other art forms. As Calvin Tomkins has stated, “Ever since Picasso glued a fragment of commercially simulated chair-caning to the surface of a canvas in 1911, collage had been for many artists the most seductive of twentieth-century techniques. Collage enabled the artist to incorporate reality into art without imitating it.”⁷ Through a collage of images and sounds, Mekas strives to make art out of fragments of everyday life. He calls on our associations of home movies to infuse his films with nostalgia. Many of the scenes of Mekas's family and friends clowning for the camera are virtually identical to actual home movie scenes. Mekas's casual first-person voice-over narration recalls the spoken commentary that often accompanies home movie screenings. As Fred Camper suggests, “A home movie screening is, as often as not, accompanied by the extemporaneous narration provided by the filmmaker, who usually doubles as the projectionist.”⁸ Mekas's voice-over commentary sounds spontaneous; he retains off-the-cuff remarks and grammatical mistakes for their conversational associations. Mekas's home movies are produced by, for, and about the avant-garde community. They document his participation in the New York art world.

Members of the avant-garde film community and the New York art world appear throughout *Diaries, Notes, and Sketches*: Ken Jacobs, Adolfas Mekas, Marie Menken, Gary Snyder, Gregory Markopoulos, Jerome Hill, Lou Reed, Harry Smith, Willard Van Dyke, Amalie Rothschild, Stan Brakhage, Gregory Corso, Leroi Jones, Peter Bogdanovich, Edouard de Laurot, Louis Brigante, Herman Weinberg, Tony Conrad, Ed Emshwiller, George Macunias, Robert Frank, Nam June Paik, Hollis Frampton, Norman Mailer, Hans Richter, Jim McBride, Richard Serra, Peter Kubelka, Annette Michelson, Andy Warhol, Allen Ginsberg, John Lennon, Yoko Ono, and P. Adams Sitney. Members of the international art cinema world make cameo appearances in his films: Henri Langlois, Nicholas Ray, Roberto Rossellini, Marcel Hanoun, Carl Dreyer, Lotte Eisner, and Barbet Shroeder. At the end of *Lost Lost Lost*, Mekas hints that his personal search for community in the new world has been fulfilled by his involvement with the filmmakers of the avant-garde. As Richard Chalfen argues of the function

of home movies, “The people who came together to be ‘in’ a home movie shall stay together in a symbolic sense, in a symbolic form, for future viewings. The home movie collection can be understood as a visual record of a network of social relationships.”⁹ Mekas’s films outline the cooperative network of social relationships of the new emerging art world of avant-garde film. In referring to Mekas’s films as home movies of the avant-garde, I am using a metaphor. In the following section, I will examine actual home movies to provide an interpretive framework for understanding Mekas’s chosen style.

Home Movies. In *Language and Cinema*, Christian Metz defines cinema as a “total social fact,” following French anthropologist Marcel Mauss.¹⁰ Metz, however, chooses to study only the specific cinematic codes in film language, the semiotics of cinema. I would like to reintroduce the notion that cinema is a total social fact, using home movies as my example. In his essay on the gift, Mauss writes, “Each phenomenon contains all of the threads of which the social fabric is composed. In these total phenomena, as we propose to call them, all kinds of institutions find simultaneous expression: religious, legal, moral, and economic.”¹¹ This holistic approach to culture is one of the distinctive features of ethnographic methods. Anthropological studies of visual communication provide valuable paradigms for studying home movies. In his pivotal article “Margaret Mead and the Shift From ‘Visual Anthropology’ to ‘the Anthropology of Visual Communication,’” Sol Worth outlines new directions in anthropological research. Worth makes a distinction between the use of images as data about culture and the interpretation of images as data of culture, between “using a medium and studying how a medium is used.”¹²

The anthropology of visual communication studies visual artifacts not only as records of the world, but also as someone’s statement about the world. In Allan Sekula’s words, “Every photographic image is a sign, above all, of someone’s investment in the sending of a message.”¹³ In addition to making images, then, visual anthropologists interpret the image-making of others. The most interesting research on home movies has developed out of Worth’s paradigm, “[In the anthropology of visual communication] one looks for patterns dealing with, for example, what can be photographed and what cannot, what content can be displayed, was actually displayed, and how that display was organized and structured.”¹⁴ Jay Ruby, Richard Chalfen, and Chris Musello’s research strategies in the anthropology of visual communication have followed Sol Worth’s insights.

Anthropologists of visual communication have shown how family albums and home movies, as cultural artifacts, provide highly coded and selective information about the social lives of the individuals depicted. Home movies offer conventionalized representations of the world through the cinema. A clearly defined etiquette exists for the types of images made, the circumstances under which they are made, and the persons and events represented. In addition, the contexts of exhibition are highly restricted. Richard Chalfen has defined this particular form of expression, centered around the circle of intimacy, as the home

mode of visual communication. Home moviemakers rarely edit their footage; the rushes are commonly shown in the chronological order in which they were shot. Other typical characteristics of the home movie include flash frames, over- and under-exposure, swish pans, variable focus, lack of establishing shots, jump cuts, hand-held camera, abrupt changes in time and place, inconsistent characters and no apparent character development, unusual camera angles and movements, and a minimal narrative line.¹⁵ Of course, these traits function perfectly well in their proper context; home movies are typically produced by, for, and about family members and friends.

Home movies and family albums call upon contextual information to produce meaning. To the intended audience of family and friends the significance of these documents is readily apparent, whereas they may appear repetitive or banal to outsiders. The anthropology of visual communication undermines the assumption that visual documents provide a reliable, not to mention objective, portrayal of social life. Avant-garde filmmaker Michelle Citron notes the selective record contained in home movies: "When I asked my father for the home movies my request was motivated less by sentimental feelings and more by my unpleasant memories. I somehow expected the movies to confirm my family's convoluted dynamics. But when I finally viewed them after a ten year hiatus, I was surprised and disturbed that the smiling family portrayed on the screen had no correspondence to the family preserved in my childhood memories."¹⁶ Citron incorporates this insight into her film *Daughter Rite* by contrasting optically printed sequences of her home movies with her spoken recollections of early childhood. Citron's memories of family life provide a framework for contextualizing the experiences of both her childhood and her home movies.

In the research for his book, *Snapshot Versions of Life*, Chalfen finds that photographs produced in the home mode of communication depend heavily on contextual information—captions, dates, names, places, relationships. Later, I will show specifically how Jonas Mekas's diary films rely on contextual information familiar to art world participants, information that he occasionally supplements for the viewer. The study of culture and communication presupposes attention to such context. In Jay Ruby's words, "The fundamental premise of this study [of visual communication in rural Pennsylvania] is that the unit of analysis should not be the product or artifact but the social context, that is, the community and the community members' social interaction with these events."¹⁷ Chalfen's home imagemakers often use rather nondescript photographs and movies as a springboard to a funny story or to a description of what was occurring at the time: "Anyone who has ever watched a group of people watching *their own* home movies or slides as the images appear on the home screen must have seen people 'involved' in a variety of ways; audience members frequently talk to one another, make various exclamations at the screen, tell stories, laugh, and sometimes cry, from sadness or happiness."¹⁸ This insight parallels recent photographic criticism by Sally Stein, Alan Trachtenberg, and Allan Sekula. In "On the Invention of Photographic Meaning," Sekula argues that only a contextual approach to pho-

tographic criticism may explain the meanings engendered by the viewing of a photograph. In his view, photographs must be viewed in the context of their original rhetorical function, as part of the larger discourse in which they originated, in order to understand their intended meaning.

Many cultural anthropologists work as participant observers to understand the culture that they study. According to Bronislaw Malinowski's famous dictum for ethnographers, "This goal is, briefly, to grasp the native's point of view, his relation to life, to realize *his* vision of *his* world."¹⁹ By examining home movies in their contexts of use, anthropologists describe the significance of the films for their makers. While we conventionally attribute accuracy and objectivity to visual documents, we forget the elements of social life, of physical and emotional reality, which they fail to reveal. Family photographs and home movies are not only the product of a mechanical device, but also the product of social relations.

The social dimensions of production, distribution, and exhibition of family photographs and home movies define the home mode of visual communication. As Coe and Gates note in their social and technological history of snapshot photography, "Despite the technical advances which had been made in apparatus and materials, snapshotters at the beginning of the Second World War were covering much the same subjects as their predecessors at the end of the last century and, indeed, their successors today. Snapshot photography was primarily a leisure activity and basic patterns of human activity do not change as much as one would expect from the great material changes which have occurred. Thus the snapshot shows a continuing repetition of a few perennial themes, within which there can still be considerable variety."²⁰ Material culture, such as family photography and home movies, depends upon an economy that affords leisure time and encourages consumption. Accordingly, then, home movies reflect the leisure activities of those who can afford both leisure and home movies. In the course of the twentieth century, the size of this group has grown, with a drop in the cost of mass-produced cameras and a rise in the disposable income of middle-class and working-class families.²¹ Jonas Mekas's films often incorporate a wide variety of typical leisure activities, which are both celebrated and undermined by the narrative structure. *Diaries, Notes, and Sketches* typically uses a solemn voice-over narration to counterpoint festive imagery, thereby suggesting the fragility of the visible world. In addition, Mekas's voice-over often overwhelms the immediate presence of the imagery through reminiscences of the past, making memory the central problematic of his films.

Recent writers note the contradictions between the celebratory characteristics of home movies—birthday parties, weddings, holidays, vacations—and the realities of everyday family life. The home mode of visual communication rarely deals with personal trauma and family strife. Divorces are as rare as weddings are commonplace. For ordinary home movies and family photographs, the social situations of production condition the range of subject matter. Nevertheless, viewers who are part of the intended audience of the home mode may read into the images just those emotions and incidents that the form systematically denies.

The emphasis on celebration never really limits the free play of memory. As Citron's example indicates, the home mode viewer cannot possibly divorce domestic imagery from all of the associations of family history. Occasionally a viewer's personal memories of childhood are contradicted by the visual evidence. Which one provides a more accurate rendering of experience? One friend's photograph of her mother shovelling snow—surely an innocuous subject—reminded her of her mother's desperate attempts to appear fashionable under all circumstances. Outsiders see only the visual surface of the events depicted, not their emotional substance.

In David Galloway's novel, *A Family Album*, the narrator envisions the circumstances behind the production of a series of family photographs. Galloway devotes individual chapters to the cameras, the photographers, and the individual photographs. His meticulous description of the imaginary contexts of production and use of these snapshot photographs sheds light on photography as an aspect of everyday life. He comments on how little we may actually know from a photograph, but also how much we may imagine: "This photograph of a boy with his arm around the shoulder of his dog is not merely a photograph; it is a document, an event, an artifact, a unique moment in time, an investment, an occasion, and the sole but intricate collaboration among cartoonist, photographer, boy, and dog."²² He describes the particular circumstances which lead a young boy into a photographic studio to pose for a portrait with his dog. Of this nineteenth-century black-and-white photograph Galloway writes, "When we consider the problem, the number of things not visible in this photograph bulks overwhelmingly large. Neither dreams nor fears are indicated here, though some are perhaps suggested. Nor are date, time, and place of death visible, though surely these are matters of considerable importance. We see neither the women this man will love, nor the ones he will cease to love, nor those to whom he will simply make love."²³ Galloway foregrounds the essential poverty of photography; it gives the appearance of context while eliminating its substance. His broad historical approach discloses the personal, social, technological, and economic significance of individual snapshot photographs from a family album. Ethnographers share with novelists an emphasis on experience as it is lived, remembered, and imagined by the subjects themselves.

Recently, theorists of the home mode of communication have come to recognize that this form contains such a highly selective slice of life that hopes for the discovery of broad visual cultural histories have been tempered by more realistic expectations. In Chris Musello's words,

Family photography and family photograph collections pose a number of problems for those who would understand them as documents of family life. Through knowledge of the social behaviors guiding their production and use, it would seem that they constitute conventionalized records of selected aspects of family life. But when viewers attempt to account for the ways in which home moders produce and interpret these images, it is frequently found that even the iconic references relevant to uses cannot be deciphered from these photos. Similarly, viewers often cannot determine

from a family photograph the range of contextual data necessary to interpret the events depicted, and they clearly cannot anticipate the range of significances attributed to the images by their users.²⁴

Musello concludes that as documents of everyday life, family albums share many characteristics with oral histories; they depend upon the vagaries of memory. To make sense of the home mode of visual communication, cultural anthropologists need to research the "native's point of view." They need to consider their own use of home movies and snapshot photographs to understand both perspectives, to be participants and observers.

In traditional American families, with a division of labor across gender lines, the mother often holds the position of family cultural historian, preserving examples of children's accomplishments, writing letters, choosing and editing the family album. As the authors of *Middletown Families* note, "Women in Middletown seem to enjoy the maintenance of kinship ties more than men do; men are more apt to stress the obligations involved. The greater involvement of women in kinship activities appears at every turn."²⁵ More specifically, as Chuck Kleinhans suggests, "Whether through scrapbooks, photo albums, or home movies and tapes, it seems like women are often the historians of domestic space and activity."²⁶ Although the father may be the absent "voyeur/cameraman" of family representation, the mother usually controls the subsequent editing and presentation of family life. For example, when my younger brother left home at eighteen, my mother began a major photographic inventory of the thirty years of our family existence, completing the family album, and providing individual copies for her five sons as they moved out of the home. Apparently, this rewriting and completion of family historiography at a later date in life is quite common, the unfinished business of parenthood and family consolidation. Recently, our home movies were transferred to videotape and, again, copies were made for the sons and their new families. In *Diaries, Notes, and Sketches*, Mekas uses the kinship associations of home movies to further the consolidation of the avant-garde film community, documenting the network of social relationships of this emerging art world.

Roland Barthes's phenomenological study of photography, *Camera Lucida*, culminates with a meditation on a photograph of the author's mother as a child. For Barthes, this image distills the essence of photographic reproduction, the certainty that the depicted scene existed in the past, that it "has been." In this photograph, he sees an image of his mother just as she was for him. He refuses to reproduce this snapshot of his mother as a child for our scrutiny, "I cannot reproduce the Winter Garden Photograph. It exists only for me. For you, it would be nothing but an indifferent picture."²⁷ He knows that for the outside viewer this photograph would have no meaning, no familiarity. We have no kinship with the image of his mother. The photograph would be a mere curiosity, another casual snapshot of an anonymous little girl. With the passage of time, home movies become a tenuous link to the past, often closely tied with childhood. Mekas's repeated references to childhood in *Diaries, Notes, and Sketches* make

these associations explicit for the viewer. Many couples find the birth of a child sufficient reason for the purchase of a still camera, a movie camera, or, increasingly, a video camcorder. The use of these recording devices decreases with the passage of childhood. Viewed as traces of a receding past and imbued with nostalgia, home movies are typically regarded as among the most valuable of family possessions.²⁸

Like all cultural artifacts, the contexts of production, distribution, and exhibition of home movies are integrally bound up with the movies' meaning. Through examination of the aesthetics, content, and circulation of home movies, we learn of the assumptions and goals of their users. With careful attention to these features, we may consider home movies as documents of some of the leisure activities of certain American families. By considering the home mode of visual communication from the inside we may understand the profound emotional investment these families have for their own family photographs and home movies, an investment that puts these artifacts among their most prized possessions. The possession and dissemination of home movies demonstrates the establishment of a new form of kinship relations, where ties to others are wound in reels of motion pictures that fade with time, revitalized only by the redemptive power of memory. Without familiarity, we have no home, only movies, no family, only photographs. In the following sections, I will provide specific examples of how Jonas Mekas appropriates these stylistic and contextual features of home movies in *Diaries, Notes, and Sketches*.

Home Movies of the Avant-Garde. In his films, Jonas Mekas refines a home movie aesthetic already invested with memories of childhood and family, taking advantage of implicit intertextual associations. As modes of visual communication, home movies rely on memory and familiarity. While it would be a misnomer to refer to *Diaries, Notes, and Sketches* as simply Mekas's home movies, these films nevertheless share remarkable characteristics with ordinary home movies: they take as their subject matter the everyday lives of his family and friends, focusing extensively on those moments typically celebrated by the home mode: childhood, travel, birthdays, weddings, and parties. *Paradise Not Yet Lost* focuses almost exclusively on Mekas's private experiences with his wife Hollis and their child Oona; he subtitles the film, "Also Known as Oona's Third Year." He directs his voice-over narration toward his three-year-old daughter, "O Oona, you will be looking at these images and it will be very vague, very distant. Everything will be gone, only the distant memories, fragments, will remain with you, forever." Concentrating on happy occasions of family life, the film culminates with the celebration of his daughter's third birthday. Mekas's shooting style, while a creative stylistic choice, incorporates many of the signature elements of home movies: flash frames, in-camera editing, rapid camera movements, abrupt changes in time and place, variable exposure and focus, and jump cuts. Memory, and the will to recover the past, permeates his films. Like home movies, Mekas's films frequently rely on intertextual and contextual knowledge on the part of the

viewer; familiarity with people and events depicted increases the viewer's emotional involvement. *Walden* relies extensively on the viewer's knowledge of the New York avant-garde community of the 1950s and 1960s.

The viewer's understanding of the final sequence of *Paradise Not Yet Lost* depends on knowledge of the history of American film. The intertitle reads, "That Winter Day Nicholas Ray Dying of Cancer Walked Down Spring Street." The viewer's appreciation of this shot may be enriched by the knowledge that Nicholas Ray was a famous American director; by first-hand knowledge of some of the films Ray directed—*Rebel Without a Cause*, *Johnny Guitar*, *Bigger Than Life*; by knowledge of the critical writings devoted to Ray's oeuvre; by familiarity with Wim Wenders's portrait of the ailing director, *Nick's Movie: Lightning Over Water*; and finally, by personal acquaintance with the director himself. The poignancy of this brief moment of an old man crossing the street in a snow storm depends on these intertextual associations. Needless to say, the shot does not communicate this meaning without the expository intertitle, a feature comparable to captions of family photographs and the running commentary that typically accompanies home movies. Similarly, in *He Stands in a Desert Counting the Seconds of His Life*, intertitles precisely designate the actuality footage, "Marcel Hanoun's Wedding January 7, 1971," "Fluxus Hudson Trip July 1, 1971," "Jim McBride Leaves Town July 10, 1972," and "Hollis Frampton Buried August 2, 1984 Buffalo, NY." As these intertitles imply, the film focuses on the events and personalities of the New York art world and avant-garde film community. Mekas's home movie aesthetic charts the artistic events and happenings of a fifteen-year period in New York, piecing found images into a collage of the art world.

As the above examples imply, to view a Mekas film is to participate symbolically in the avant-garde film community, to become a member, to share the struggles, to pay homage to the pioneers of film art. To some extent, all art invites this community involvement. As Patricia Erens notes in her case study of one family's home movies, "For all members in attendance, the movies provided a sense of solidarity and continuity, a renewed sense of 'family' and an increased commitment to the continuation of the annual get-togethers."²⁹ Mekas's films, however, make this invitation explicit within the context of the art world. The extensive list of avant-garde artists and filmmakers who make appearances in *Diaries, Notes, and Sketches* suggests the importance of this experience of community.

Mekas manages to make these home movie images our own, creating powerful emotional resonances in the viewer. Frequently, Mekas creates a mosaic of single frames and short shots that relentlessly break down and build up an image of the recorded scene. Ordinary home movies don't use single frame shots systematically in this way. Mekas periodically inserts intertitles that explain and contextualize the images. He also uses intertitles to organize and call attention to the artful structure of his films, indicating that some editing has taken place after shooting. Mekas consciously rejects the use of synchronous sound, and instead edits primarily in the camera, an unconventional production practice adapted

from home movies. By editing in the camera, and by using extremely short shots, he systematically fragments time and space. Just as Andy Warhol experimented with the long take in the early 1960s, Mekas rejects traditional notions of continuity editing in favor of a new realism borrowed from home movie practice.

Whereas Warhol experimented with the long take to foreground real time duration, Mekas explores a new synthetic form of pixilated editing, which incorporates shots as short as a single frame, $\frac{1}{24}$ of a second long. Few other filmmakers, with the exceptions of Bruce Connor and Gregory Markopoulos, have so fully explored the expressive possibilities of montage. *Reminiscences of a Journey to Lithuania* meditates on memory and loss, weaving through time like Marcel Proust's autobiographical novel, *In Search of Lost Time*. The narrator of *Diaries, Notes, and Sketches* seems forever bent on recovering the past, trying to rebuild fragments of an earlier world, preserving moments against the ravages of time. As Mekas recalls the frozen winter days of his youth in the voice-over narration, we see images of the summer harvest. The restless handheld camera and the rapid montage never hold long enough on any image to fix it in our mind; we never have time to hold on to the passing moments. The viewer experiences these images not in the present tense, but as memories. Mekas's home movie aesthetic posits memory as the interpretive faculty of his films. Memory restores the possibility of community and inscribes the individual in history, reforming the ties that bind groups together.

Reminiscences of a Journey to Lithuania records the filmmaker's return to his native Lithuania after twenty-five years abroad. The images are over-determined by Mekas's spoken recollections of childhood and youth during the Nazi period. This film weds Mekas's documentary and avant-garde tendencies, bridging the new worlds of the avant-garde film community and the expatriate community in New York with the old world of Lithuania. Mekas tells us that he came from a small town in Lithuania to New York City, through an aborted trip to Vienna and a detour through a Nazi labor camp in West Germany. In the course of the film, the filmmaker and the viewer move from New York City back to Semeniskiai, Lithuania before continuing on to Germany, and, finally, Vienna. In Vienna, he finds the company of several friends from the avant-garde film community—Ken Jacobs, Peter Kubelka, and Annette Michelson. The footage of the old market in Vienna burning at the end of the film serves as a harsh reminder of the destruction of war. The memories of devastation will continue to haunt the filmmaker and the viewer. The theme of the return of the wayward traveller, the exile, runs throughout the narrative. Repeated in the voice-over narration, Mekas returns to his uncle's advice, "Go west, see the world, and come back." *Reminiscences of a Journey to Lithuania* has a stronger narrative line than most of his other works. This narrative momentum also distinguishes the film from ordinary home movies. Relying on the structure of the journey, the narrative moves through space and time. Mekas integrates these three journeys—his initial flight from occupied Lithuania, his return twenty-five years later, and the narrative journey of the film—into a complex weave of memory, time, and place.

The first seventy minutes of *Lost Lost Lost* consist of black-and-white documentary-style footage of the displaced Lithuanian community and the anti-nuclear protests in New York City during the cold war era. Mekas's voice-over narration becomes more willfully poetic, invoking the classical persona of Ulysses as his muse. This motif calls attention to the theme of the journey and the return, "O sing Ulysses/Sing your travels/Tell where you have been/Tell what you have seen/And tell a story of a man who never wanted to leave his home/Who was happy and lived among the people he knew and spoke their language/Sing how he was thrown out into the world." Homer's *Odyssey*, the classic story of voyage and return, tells of Ulysses's quest to return to his native Ithaca after ten long years of wandering. The title of Mekas's film signals the impossibility of recovering the past, the futility of the journey home. As in Alain Resnais's and Marguerite Duras's *Hiroshima, mon amour*, spaces become invested with multiple connotations, past experiences dominate the present moment; Hiroshima is submerged in recollections of Nevers. In bidding farewell to the Lithuanian community at the end of "Reel Two" of *Lost Lost Lost*, Mekas also bids farewell to his earlier documentary shooting style, opting for a more experimental form. The development of a new home movie aesthetic signals Mekas's involvement with the New York art world; the founding of *Film Culture* magazine and the Mekas brothers' early attempts at avant-garde filmmaking follow.

In *Reminiscences of a Journey to Lithuania*, Mekas's persistent use of silence, brief musical passages, and asynchronous location sound creates a sense of absence and irreparable loss. Following the Central European composers Béla Bartók and Anton Dvořák, Mekas integrates folk and classical music on the soundtrack, moving effortlessly from one to the other. In this context, the folk motifs serve as archaic remnants of the past, inextricably linked to the family and the group experience of laboring, singing, and dancing. When Mekas goes to the collective farm for a celebration in his honor, we see various folk dances performed by professionals. Later that evening, family and friends dance to the sounds of an accordion. An intertitle simply states this association for the filmmaker, "When more than two Lithuanians are gathered together, they sing." In the *New World Symphony*, Dvořák invokes the African-American spiritual "Going Home" to create nostalgia through a folk reference.

In Mekas's films, the absence of synchronous sound, and the absence of location sound in the black-and-white sequences of New York in the 1950s, push the images into the remote past. This creative silence echoes an early era of technology in the silent cinema. We recognize the street life of Brooklyn as, in Barthes's words, the "that has been" of photographic realism. One catches a glimpse of lives that were lived. No period music comes to breathe false life into these frozen images of the past. Many documentary films, such as Connie Field's *The Life and Times of Rosie the Riveter*, try to animate archival footage by laying in sound reenactments and period music. Mekas accentuates our perceptual and historical distance from these scenes by commenting on just those features that his silent footage cannot reproduce; the sounds and smells of Williamsburg

in the 1950s. By using only one soundtrack, Mekas calls attention to the limitations of the recording apparatus. Like Brakhage in *Window Water Baby Moving*, Mekas advocates a cinema of poverty. Paradoxically, the very paucity of the cassette-recorded sound and the handheld Bolex camera images reinforces the documentary qualities of the film. The full-bodied voice-over narration, retaining the marks of the grain of his voice and the noises of the microphone, raises the soundtrack to the level of pure document, creating the impression of direct unadulterated sound. The images and the sounds seem to have been found, not made.

Mekas's voice-over narration, especially in *Reminiscences of a Journey to Lithuania*, contributes directly to his films' radically personal tone. In every way, his voice-over narration undermines the "Voice of God" narration typical of many documentary films. In those documentaries, the disembodied voice-over emerges from nowhere, disguising the traces of its production. There is no room tone, no microphone noise, no ambience, no background sounds. On the contrary, Mekas's microphone audibly clicks on and off, his voice hesitates, unsure of itself: "That early fall in 1957, or '58, one Sunday morning we went into the Catskills." He makes grammatical mistakes and laughs from time to time. As in his "Movie Journal" column of the *Village Voice*, Mekas addresses the viewer directly in *Reminiscences of a Journey to Lithuania*, anticipating audience response, "O these personal ramblings. Of course you would like to know something about the social realities. How is the life going there in the Soviet Lithuania? But what do I know about it?" Already in *Diaries, Notes, and Sketches: Walden*, Mekas experimented with direct address in the voice-over, "And now, dear viewer, as you sit and as you watch and as the life outside in the streets is still rushing, maybe a little bit slower, but still rushing from inertia, just watch these images. Nothing much happens. The images go, no tragedy, no drama, no suspense, just images for myself, and for a few others. One doesn't have to watch, one doesn't, but if one feels so, one can just sit and watch these images which I figure, as life will continue, won't be here for very long. There won't be small peaceful cities on the shores of oceans." This direct address displays the individuality of the narrator and calls forth the individuality of the viewer. At the same time, direct address breaks the frame of the film, calling attention to the space of the audience. Even more remarkably, in *Lost Lost Lost*, Mekas's voice-over directly addresses the aesthetic assumptions of his friends in the avant-garde film community: "I know I'm sentimental. You would like these images to be more abstract. It's ok, call me sentimental. You sit in your own homes but I speak with an accent and you don't even know where I come from. These are some images and some sounds recorded by someone in exile." The previous example neatly illustrates Becker's analysis of the role of audience expectations in art works: "Artists create their work, at least in part, by anticipating how other people will respond, emotionally and cognitively to what they do. That gives them the means with which to shape it further, by catering to already existing dispositions in the audience, or by trying to train the audience to something new."³⁰ Mekas challenges

the prevailing aesthetic of abstraction and formal experimentation within the avant-garde community in favor of his own personal documentary style. He outlines the importance of this collaborative dimension in a published account of the making of *Reminiscences of a Journey to Lithuania*: "My friends have been asking me: 'What are your brothers doing there? Where do you come from? How does it look there?' I put all that information into the titles."³¹ In *Lost Lost Lost*, Mekas speaks to his Lithuanian friends depicted in the images: "I see you, I see you, I recognize your faces, each one is separate in the crowd. . . . The only thing that mattered to you was the independence of your country. All those meetings, all those talks, 'What to do, what will happen, how long, what can we do?' Yes, I was there and I recorded it for others, for the history, for those who do not know the pain of the exile." Thus, while to the viewer these people may be strangers, we participate in the filmmaker's recognition of them years later, and we recognize ourselves as the others called upon to bear witness to their struggles. In *Off the Wall: Robert Rauschenberg and the Art World of Our Time*, Calvin Tomkins notes a similar tendency in Rauschenberg's silk screen prints of the same period: "Rauschenberg was starting to think of himself as a reporter, someone who bore visual witness to the constantly shifting, gritty, tension-filled life he saw around him in downtown Manhattan."³²

The technique of collage incorporates documents of social life into an artistic context. Mekas exploits this collage technique most systematically in *Diaries, Notes, and Sketches: Walden* though a pastiche of events, public and private, taking place in New York in the 1950s and 1960s: Hare Krishna celebrations, snowball fights, readings of Beat poetry, John Lennon and Yoko Ono's Christmas message, the Velvet Underground's premiere at Andy Warhol's Factory, phrases of Walt Whitman's poetry, meetings of Film-Makers' Cooperative, anti-war protests, and P. Adams Sitney's wedding. Like the photographer Alfred Stieglitz, Mekas establishes a new iconography of the city, using a small-format hand-held camera. Filming in all seasons, in all neighborhoods, and from all angles, Mekas finds new expressive possibilities in the cityscape. In the voice-over of *Lost Lost Lost*, he states, "There is very little known about this period of our protagonist's life. It's known that he was very shy and very lonely during this period. He used to take long, long walks. He felt very close to the park, to the streets, to the city. . . . These bits I'm recording here with my camera, these images, these bits that I have recorded from the places I have passed through. It's my nature now to record everything I'm passing through, streets, faces, cities." Mekas projects an old world peasant sensibility onto the technological wonders of the new world city. Like Alfred Kazin in his autobiography, *A Walker in the City*, Mekas combs the streets of his new home, making it his own, while looking for traces of the past and signs of a possible future.

Mekas makes explicit references to the history of documentary film in his works. *Diaries, Notes, and Sketches: Walden* opens with an intertitle "Dedicated to Lumière." A visit to La Ciotat train station in southern France in *He Stands in a Desert Counting the Seconds of His Life* commemorates one of the Lumière

brothers' early films, *Arrival of a Train*. In *Lost Lost Lost*, Mekas, borrowing the rhetoric of Vertov's *kino-glaz*, says, "I was there, I was the camera-eye. I was the witness and I recorded it all." One of the last sections of *Lost Lost Lost*, "Flaherty Newsreel," records the attempt to screen Ken Jacob's *Blonde Cobra* and Jack Smith's *Flaming Creatures* at the 1963 Robert Flaherty Film Seminar in Vermont. As Scott MacDonald notes, "Not allowed into the seminar, they sleep outside in the cold night (a wry reference to Flaherty's *Nanook of the North*) and the next morning commemorate their rejection with some ritual filmmaking."³³ Characteristically, Mekas also reports on this guerilla action in a 12 September 1963 column of his "Movie Journal" in the *Village Voice*: "We took *Flaming Creatures* and *Blonde Cobra* to the seminar, two pieces of the impure, naughty, and 'uncinematic' cinema that is being made now in New York."³⁴ Through these references to the history of documentary practices, Mekas makes explicit his own allegiances and the important documentary component of his works. Mekas's films, like most documentaries, refer to the world in which we live.

Mekas makes systematic use of the chance phrase, the image recorded as if by accident. Fred Camper sees these same characteristics in home movies: "Thus the home movie possesses a degree of randomness not present in more polished forms. It is indeed the combination of individual intentionality and technical lack of control that gives most home movies their particular flavor."³⁵ Mekas refines the unintentional and spontaneous aspects of home movies. The poetic phrasing and cadence of the voice-over narration, although nonchalantly spoken, testify to the thoughtful construction of his films. Mekas uses phrase structure to make startling rhythmic patterns: "And there he sits and he's so big and the machine is so big and the fields are so wide." At the beginning of *Reminiscences of a Journey to Lithuania* he states, "It was good to walk like that and not to think, not to think anything about the last ten years. And I was wondering myself that I could walk like this, not to think about the years of war, of hunger, of Brooklyn." The incongruity of the third term, "Brooklyn," startles the viewer. Yet, it makes the passage a more personal statement than the other, more general, terms. At the same time, the three references point to the shared experience of European immigrants, living in New York City, who left their countries during and after the Second World War. Mekas's heavy Eastern European accent itself carries the trace of his movement from Lithuania to America.

While Mekas does not use synchronous sound, he nevertheless establishes important sound-image relationships, often integrating location sounds with their apparent objects. Typically, we hear a sound before seeing a shot of its source. Mekas eschews simple literality, the coincidence of image and sound, for a more playful interaction. The narrator refers to his mother; we see a shot of a duck in the yard before seeing the expected shot of his mother. This strategy creates a narrative anticipation in the viewer, a desire to ferret out the subtle play of image and sound, to look and to listen. Unlike Connor's *A Movie* and *Valse*

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Triste, which explore the arbitrary nature of conventional sound-image juxtapositions, Mekas's asynchronous location sound, like a worn phonograph record or faded photograph, returns us to the scene of the past through the detour of memory.

While Mekas shows the impermanence of the present, he asserts the permanence of memory against the violence of history: "But oh those were beautiful days. Those were winters I will never forget. Where are you now my old faithful friends? How many of you are alive? Where are you scattered through the graveyards, through the torture rooms, through the prisons, through the labor camps of the Western civilization? But I see your faces just like they were used to be, they never changed in my memory. They remain young, it's me who is getting older." At one point in *Reminiscences of a Journey to Lithuania*, the rhythmic alternation of black-and-white footage, intertitles, and color footage breaks down. This narrative epiphany comes when the incessant barrage of images stops half way through the movie. We see only black leader while the voice-over states that the young man never made it to Vienna, that he ended up instead in a labor camp in Nazi Germany. Like Mekas's aborted voyage to Austria, the structure of the film is interrupted. The memory of the event crystallizes outside of visual representation.

Mekas uses the narrative device of black leader for dramatic effect in other films. *Lost Lost Lost* ends with a long voice-over in the darkness:

Sometimes he didn't know where he was. The present and the past intermingled, superimposed. And then since no place was really his home he had this habit of attaching himself immediately to any place. He used to joke, 'Oh drop me in a desert and come back next week, you will find me, I will have my roots deep and wide.' He remembered another day ten years ago, he sat by the beach, ten years ago with other friends. The memories, the memories, the memories. Again, I have memories. I have a memory of this place, I have been here before, I have really been here before, I have seen this water. Yes, I have walked upon this beach, these pebbles.

This voice-over passage suggests the title of Mekas's later work, *He Stands in a Desert Counting the Seconds of His Life*. In *Reminiscences of a Journey to Lithuania* when the brothers return to Germany and Adolfas lies in an open field of grass, Mekas's voice-over testifies to the will to remember: "In Elmshorn, Adolfas is lying exactly in the spot where our bed used to be in the labor camp. When we asked some people around, nobody remembered that there was a labor camp there. Only the grass remembers." This passage recalls the Jean Cayrol voice-over narration at the outset of *Night and Fog*: "Even a calm countryside, even a prairie with crows flying, crops, leaves of grass, even a road where cars, peasants, couples, pass, even a village for vacationing with a fair and a bell, may lead directly to a concentration camp." As in Stan Brakhage's *The Act of Seeing with one's own eyes*, Claude Lanzmann's *Shoah*, and Alain Resnais's *Night and Fog*, the impact of *Diaries, Notes, and Sketches* depends on our belief in the cinema as a witness to events occurring in the world. Mekas's films belong to

the avant-garde tradition, outlined by Warren Bass in “The Avant-Garde as Documentary,” that explores the referential and representational function of the cinema.³⁶

Art World Institutions: Film Criticism. Jonas Mekas’s films bear witness to the consolidation of the postwar avant-garde film community, documenting the cooperative network of social relationships of the emerging art world. Together with *Diaries, Notes, and Sketches*, Mekas’s writings have been instrumental in the construction of an art world of avant-garde film. Recall Becker’s description of an art world: “All artistic work, like all human activity, involves the joint activity of a number, often a large number, of people. Through their cooperation, the art work we eventually see or hear comes to be and continues to be. The work always shows signs of that cooperation. The forms of cooperation may be ephemeral, but often become more or less routine, producing patterns of collective activity we can call an art world.”³⁷ In addition to his films, Mekas’s work as critic, exhibitor, and distributor has contributed to the establishment of the new art world. In 1955, Mekas published the first issue of *Film Culture* magazine; he is still the editor-in-chief. In his first editorial for *Film Culture*, Mekas outlined his project for the years to come, “Like all art, cinema must strive towards the development of a culture of its own that will heighten not only the creative refinement of the artist but also—and pre-eminently—the receptive faculty of the public.”³⁸ As early as 1955, Mekas forecasts the development of a new art world. In a well-known article, “The Experimental Film in America,” Mekas again links the burgeoning avant-garde film community to the cultivation of an audience: “Undoubtedly one of the most important factors contributing to this change [in the growth of the American experimental film] is the increase in film education. The graduation of hundreds of students from University film classes, the work of the University of Southern California, The Museum of Modern Art Film Library, Hans Richter’s Film Institute at CCNY, Cinema 16, The Film Council of America and a steadily growing film society movement were all responsible for bringing good films closer and deeper into our communities.”³⁹ A fully developed art world needs an audience capable of appreciating its products. In Becker’s words, “Knowing the conventions of the form, serious audience members can collaborate more fully with artists in the joint effort which produces the work each time it is experienced.”⁴⁰ *Film Culture* demanded a sophisticated readership, with thoughtful articles by directors Orson Welles, Erich von Stroheim, and Hans Richter. These articles frequently derided the commercialism of the Hollywood film industry. Auteursism, championed by Mekas’s friend and colleague Andrew Sarris in the pages of *Film Culture*, rescued the films of certain studio directors from commercial oblivion. A fifty-one page article published in 1963, “The American Cinema,” formed the basis of Sarris’s reevaluation of the classical Hollywood cinema.⁴¹ In a 1957 editorial, Mekas bemoaned the state of film scholarship in America: “Recent visits to New York publishing houses revealed that the possibility of an audience for books on cinema is not even considered.

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Books are published—sentimental memoirs, company chronicles or popular pictorializations—but they are not what our colleges, universities and serious film students need.”⁴² Mekas recognizes that an art world of film, in addition to avenues of production, distribution, and exhibition, needs a discourse of film criticism to validate these works, to cultivate a more sophisticated audience, and to provide methodologies of interpretation.

In his “Movie Journal” columns in the *Village Voice*, which began in 1958, Mekas promoted the avant-garde cinema in a number of different ways. He consistently validated film through references to other art forms, as in the 2 May 1963 column: “These movies are illuminating and opening up sensibilities and experiences never before recorded in the American arts; a content which Baudelaire, the Marquis de Sade, and Rimbaud gave to world literature a century ago and which Burroughs gave to American literature three years ago.”⁴³ Mekas systematically criticized the resistance of the established newspaper and magazine critics to avant-garde film. In the 9 December 1965 column, he wrote, “These smart and literary critics are ignorant of the fact that cinema, during the last five years (and through a series of earlier avant-gardes), has matured to the level of the other arts.” He used his position as movie critic for the *Village Voice* to advertise screenings, as in this 13 June 1963 column: “This Saturday at the Gramercy Arts Theatre (138 East 27th Street) at 7, 9, and 11 p.m., a new film by Gregory Markopoulos, *Twice a Man*, will have its first public screening. The showings are a benefit for the completion of the sound track of the film.” *Lost Lost Lost* includes several shots of this premiere, signalled by an intertitle, “Premiere of *Twice a Man*.” In his writings and films, Mekas publicized the famous censorship battles of the early 1960s, battles in which he was frequently personally involved. At the beginning of *Walden*, we see P. Adams Sitney, Mekas’s friend and colleague, after being finger-printed by the police.

Mekas regularly issued manifestos, directly addressing various components of the expanding art world, as in this 23 January 1969 column:

From my discussions with other independent film-makers the following few points have come out and I would suggest that the university film festival organizers take these points seriously, if they don’t want to be boycotted:

1. Film-makers should not be charged any entry fees.
2. All films accepted for screenings should be paid rental fees designated by the film-makers. This applies to both competitive and non-competitive festivals.
3. If a festival is competitive, the jurors should see every film sent to the festival (that is, preselection should be abandoned).
4. If any monies are to be given out as awards it should be left to the jurors to decide how to divide the monies. There is a movement against ‘unanimous’ juries (where all jurors have to agree upon ‘the best’ film) and toward the personal selections of each juror.
5. Films should be shipped back to the film-maker immediately after the festival is over, at the festival’s expense.

That’s what more or less is in the wind. And since it looks like Ann Arbor doesn’t comply with any of the five points, it should be busted. Anyone who wants

to be a fink, here is the address: Ann Arbor Film Festival, P.O. Box 283, Ann Arbor, Michigan 48107.

Mekas himself regularly served on the juries of these festivals. He has been a successful fundraiser, promoting film as an art to the financial backers of the established art world and securing production funds for fellow filmmakers. In the 13 June 1971 "Movie Journal" column, in an interview with Harry Smith, Mekas stated, "I don't talk about money, you know. Because I don't have any. But I'm willing to hustle for people I believe in."⁴⁴ In *Reminiscences of a Journey to Lithuania*, we see Mekas in formal dress, his hair neatly combed, and the intertitle reads, "Having Tea With Rich Ladies." As Calvin Tomkins makes plain in his 1973 profile of Jonas Mekas for the *New Yorker*, "All Pockets Open," Mekas was an important resource for avant-garde filmmakers: "Whatever their feelings about the underground, though, critics and filmmakers agree that its development and spectacular growth since 1960 are due in large part to the efforts of Jonas Mekas. Stan Brakhage, whom Mekas considers the most important filmmaker in America, states flatly that without Mekas's help and encouragement at least a third of his films would never have been made, and many other filmmakers could say the same thing. 'Jonas has many pockets,' Brakhage said recently, 'and all of them are open.'"⁴⁵

Art World Institutions: Distribution and Exhibition. Mekas has also been instrumental in the creation of exhibition and distribution outlets for avant-garde film. In 1962, Film-Makers' Cooperative was founded to distribute the works of avant-garde filmmakers, because established distributors showed little or no interest in experimental works of varying lengths and subject matter. Any filmmaker could deposit prints of films in the cooperative and set the rental fee. Still today, the cooperative pays 75 percent of the rental fee to the filmmaker, while the remaining 25 percent covers the operating costs of the cooperative. The cooperative publishes catalogs of films currently in distribution. In fact, one entire issue of Mekas's journal *Film Culture* was devoted to publishing a catalog of the Film-Makers' Cooperative. Jim Hoberman describes the early days of the Film-Makers' Cooperative: "A crowded loft, filled with floor-to-ceiling metal film racks, projectors, screens, editing equipment, and a couch for homeless filmmakers (or, more often, Mekas himself) to crash on, the Coop became a twenty-four hour nerve center for the underground."⁴⁶ This non-profit distribution cooperative was founded to serve the interests of the filmmakers.

Following a similarly inclusive policy, the Film-Makers' Cinematheque was also founded in 1962 to exhibit the works of the avant-garde film community. The Film-Makers' Cinematheque screened all films submitted at a series of different theaters. Beginning at the Charles Theater in downtown Manhattan, the open screen policy encouraged would-be filmmakers and brought criticism from established critics like Amos Vogel: "The NAC's [New American Cinema's] proudly proclaimed policy of showing, distributing, and praising every scrap of film is self-defeating."⁴⁷ Anyone bringing a copy of a film was admitted free of

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charge. Later, screenings at the Gramercy Arts Theater were routinely interrupted by the police. Obscenity charges were brought against projectionists and filmmakers. Mekas publicized these cases in his "Movie Journal" column of the *Village Voice*. During a screening at the New Bowery Theater in 1964, police impounded *Flaming Creatures* and arrested Mekas and Ken Jacobs. Less than two weeks later, Mekas was arrested for projecting Jean Genet's *Un Chant d'amour*.⁴⁸

The founding of Anthology Film Archives in 1970 represents the final step in the construction of the art world of avant-garde film. As Becker suggests, "To persist, works of art must be stored so that they are not physically destroyed. To persist in the life of an art world, they must not only remain available by continuing to exist, they must also be easily available to potential audiences."⁴⁹ In *The Essential Cinema*, the manifesto of Anthology Film Archives outlines the founders' desire to preserve and promote a limited body of films: "Anthology Film Archives is the first film museum exclusively devoted to the *film as an art*."⁵⁰ The founders conceive of a body of works available to serious film scholars: "The cycle will also provide a unique opportunity for students of the medium to see a concentrated history of the art of film within a period of four or five weeks. One would have to travel extensively and spend a few years in film museums to acquire a cinematic education of equal magnitude."⁵¹

As Becker makes clear, this aesthetic decision-making process is necessarily exclusionary: "Aestheticians do not simply intend to classify things into useful categories, as we might classify species of plants, but rather to separate the deserving from the undeserving, and to do it definitively. They do not want to take an inclusive approach to art, counting in everything that might have some interest or value. They look, instead, for a defensible way to leave some things out."⁵² Seen in this light, this exclusive move on the part of the founders of Anthology Film Archives—Mekas, P. Adams Sitney, Ken Kelman, James Broughton, and Peter Kubelka—appears as an act of film criticism with important institutional ramifications. While this move has been justifiably criticized by filmmakers and scholars, it further consolidated the place of film as a fine art form in the United States. In the fall of 1988, after several years of reorganization and fundraising, Anthology Film Archives reopened in a new location on Second Avenue in lower Manhattan. The latest programming choices reflect an eclectic and expansive vision of the history of film. The archive has responded to criticism of its earlier policies with the most dynamic film programming currently available in the United States.

The Making of An Art World. In *Art Worlds*, Howard Becker offers the example of a work of art entirely produced by one person: "Imagine, as one extreme case, a situation in which one person did everything: made everything, invented everything, had all the ideas, performed or executed the work, experienced and appreciated it, all without the assistance or help of anyone else. We can hardly imagine such a thing, because all the arts we know, like all the human activities

we know, involve the cooperation of others.”⁵³ Through a fictive situation, Becker makes his case for the networks of cooperation characteristic of the art world. And yet, in his example, we see many aspects of the avant-garde film world of the 1940s and 1950s. Filmmakers lacked distributors, audiences, and sources of financial support. Few universities offered courses in the art of film. The discourse of film criticism did not frame film primarily as an art form, as the projection of an individual artistic genius. As late as 1968, Annette Michelson complained, “Neither the sophistication which has characterized the best literary criticism of our recent past nor the refinement of our current art criticism have begun to inform film criticism.”⁵⁴ In the following decade, Michelson, who has trained many film scholars during her tenure at New York University, participated in the consolidation of film studies in American universities.

Earlier avant-garde filmmakers like Maya Deren were obliged to make maverick performances to bring their works to completion. As Sheldon Renan notes, “After making films, and being unable to get satisfactory distribution or exhibition, [Deren] rented the Provincetown Playhouse in New York’s Greenwich Village, and exhibited them herself. She also distributed her films from her own home, publicized them with articles and lectures, and set up the Creative Film Foundation to provide cash awards and production money for experimental films.”⁵⁵

In his work, Mekas has followed Deren’s example. Until the publication of *Film Culture* in 1955, the creation of the New American Cinema Group in 1960, the founding of Film-Makers’ Cinematheque and Film-Makers’ Cooperative in 1962, the creation of the Film-Makers’ Distribution Center in 1965, and the establishment of Anthology Film Archives in 1970, individual filmmakers were obliged to fill many of these institutional roles simultaneously. In Becker’s words, “The development of new art worlds frequently focuses on the creation of new organizations and methods for distributing work.”⁵⁶

On 2 May 1963, Mekas wrote in the *Village Voice*, “Cinema needs its own Armory Show.”⁵⁷ Like the photographer Alfred Stieglitz, whose Gallery 291 promoted European modern art, Jonas Mekas presided over the transition of film to a fine art form in the United States. As Howard Becker suggests, “In a brief time, then, Stieglitz produced (on a small scale, to be sure) much of the institutional paraphernalia which justified photography’s claim to be an art: a gallery in which work could be exhibited, a journal containing fine reproductions and critical commentary which provided a medium of communication and publicity, a group of mutually supportive colleagues, and a subject matter and style departing definitively from the imitations of painting then in favor.”⁵⁸ Like Stieglitz, Mekas integrated cinema into the context of the exhibition and criticism of the fine arts. He helped to organize his fellow filmmakers into a coherent community. He facilitated the distribution of their films. Through his writings and lectures, he has worked to create a receptive audience for film as an art form. In his own films, Mekas bears witness to the artistic and political struggles engendered by

the construction of the art world of avant-garde film. In the community of filmmakers who constitute the new art world, Mekas finds a shared language and commitment, a new home that he celebrates in his films.

Notes

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2. *Ibid.*, 35.
3. Jonas Mekas, *Movie Journal* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1972), 74-75.
4. P. Adams Sitney, ed., *The Essential Cinema* (New York: Anthology Film Archives and New York University Press, 1975), v.
5. Becker, *Art Worlds*, 1.
6. Jonas Mekas, "The Diary Film," in *The Avant-Garde Film: A Reader in Theory and Criticism*, ed. P. Adams Sitney (New York: New York University Press, 1978), 190.
7. Calvin Tomkins, *Off the Wall: Robert Rauschenberg and the Art World of Our Time* (New York: Penguin, 1980), 87.
8. Fred Camper, "Some Notes on the Home Movie," *Journal of Film and Video* 38, no. 3-4 (Summer-Fall 1986): 12.
9. Richard Chalfen, "The Home Movie in a World of Reports: An Anthropological Appreciation," *Journal of Film and Video* 38, no. 3-4 (Summer-Fall 1986): 107.
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12. Sol Worth, "Margaret Mead and the Shift From 'Visual Anthropology' to 'the Anthropology of Visual Communication,'" *Studies in Visual Communication* 6, no. 1 (Spring 1980): 17.
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20. Brian Coe and Paul Gates, *The Snapshot Photograph: The Rise of Popular Photography, 1888-1939* (London: Ash and Grant, 1977), 15.
21. *Ibid.*, 40.
22. David Galloway, *A Family Album* (London: John Calder, 1978), 51.
23. *Ibid.*, 50.
24. Chris Musello, "Studying the Home Mode: An Exploration of Family Photography and Visual Communication," *Studies in Visual Communication* 6, no. 1 (Spring 1980): 40.
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26. Chuck Kleinhans, "My Aunt Alice's Home Movies," *Journal of Film and Video* 38, no. 3-4 (Summer-Fall 1986): 34.
27. Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981), 73.
28. Richard Chalfen, *Snapshot Versions of Life* (Bowling Green, Ohio: Bowling Green State University Press, 1987), 75.
29. Patricia Erens, "The Galler Home Movies," 23.
30. Becker, *Art Worlds*, 200.
31. Sitney, *The Avant-Garde Film*, 195.
32. Tomkins, *Off The Wall*, 115.
33. Scott MacDonald, "Conspicuous Consumption: The 1987 Flaherty Film Seminar," *The Independent* 11, no. 2 (March 1988): 12.
34. Mekas, *Movie Journal*, 95.
35. Camper, "Some Notes on the Home Movie," 11.
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50. Sitney, *The Essential Cinema*, vi.
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53. *Ibid.*, 7.
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