

Celebrating Jonas Mekas

Birth of a Nation

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presented in association with the Canyon Cinema Foundation

Jonas Mekas (1922–2019), tireless advocate for the underdog, was without a doubt the world's foremost advocate for personal/underground/avant-garde cinema. As a poet, publisher, filmmaker, curator, critic, archivist, rabble rouser and hopeless romantic, his cultural influence cannot be underestimated. Born in Semeniskiai, Lithuania, Mekas emigrated to the U.S. in 1949 (after imprisonment in a German labor camp and life in a displaced persons camp), fell in love with New York City and immediately took to filmmaking, a practice he maintained to the end of his life, eventually pioneering the personal diary into an epic film genre. By 1955 he was co-publisher (with his brother Adolfas) of *Film Culture*, a journal articulating the aesthetics of underground cinema which was published quarterly until 1995, while his *Village Voice* column "Movie Journal"—which ran 1958–1978—presented weekly updates on the New York underground scene of the day while cultivating community and bracingly attacking mainstream cinema. A visionary infrastructuralist, Mekas' establishment of the Film-Makers' Cooperative (in 1962) and Anthology Film Archives (in 1970) ensured that underground and personal film would be preserved and cherished for generations.

In this screening San Francisco Cinematheque and Canyon Cinema celebrate the life of Jonas Mekas with a special screening of his 1997 film *Birth of a Nation* (1997): 160 portraits/appearances, sketches and glimpses of avant-garde, independent filmmakers and film activists, filmed 1955–1996, a celebration of Mekas' artistic community and adopted homeland. (Steve Polta, San Francisco Cinematheque)

Birth of a Nation (1997) by Jonas Mekas; 16mm, color, sound, 85 minutes; exhibition print from Canyon Cinema.

Why Birth of a Nation? Because the film independents IS a nation in itself. We are surrounded by commercial cinema Nation same way as the indigenous people of the United States or of any other country are surrounded by the Ruling Powers. We are the invisible, but essential nation of cinema. We are the cinema. (Jonas Mekas)

List of filmmakers and related friends and film activists who appear in the film, in order of appearance: P.

Adams Sitney, Peter Kubelka, Ken Kelman, Hollis Melton, Ken Jacobs, Larry Jordan, Florence Jacobs, Harry Smith, Henri Langlois, Annette Michelson, Gerald O'Grady, Hollis Frampton, Sidney Peterson, James Broughton, Joel Singer, Stephen Dwoskin, Dore O., Werner Nekes, Kenneth Anger, Andrew Noren, Jacques Ledoux, Ed Emshwiller, Saul Levine, Larry Gottheim, Pascale Dauman, Ray Wisniewski, Taylor Mead, Michael Snow, Ricky Leacock, Stan Brakhage, Jane Brakhage, Barry Gerson, Willard Van Dyke, John Whitney, Pola Chapelle, Morris Engel, Stan Vanderbeek, Amy Greenfield, Bruce Baillie, Chantal Akerman, Sally Dixon, Will Hindle, Michael Stuart, Robert Creeley, Friede Bartlett, Scott Bartlett, Jud Yalkut, Adolfas Mekas, Callie Angell, Charles Levine, Bhub Stewart, Nelly Kaplan, Claudia Weil, Annabel Nicholson, Birgit Hein, Piero Heliczer, Peter Gidal, Kurt Kren, Wilhelm Hein, Malcolm Le Grice, Carmen Vigil, Bill Brand, Regina Cornwell, Akiko Imura, Taka Imura, David Crosswaite, Gill Eatherley, Amy Taubin, Tom Chomont, Peter Weibel, Carla Liss, Robert Huot, Guy Fihman, Claudine Eizykman, David Curtis, Barbara Rubin, Kenji Kanesaka, Anna Karina, Leo Dratfield, Gregory Markopoulos, Robert Beavers, Robert Kramer, Pamela Badyk, Cecille Starr, Jerome Hill, Donald Richie, Fred Halsted, David Wise, Sheldon Renan, James Blue, Ernie Gehr, Richard Foreman, Robert Polidori, Leni Riefenstahl, Amalie Rothschild, Lillian Kiesler, Shigeo Kubota, Jerry Tartaglia, Dan Talbot, Louis Marcorelles, Michel Auder, Dwight MacDonald, Viva, Leslie Trumbull, Kit Carson, Paul Shrader, Shirley Clarke, Bosley Crowther, Dimitri Devyatkin, Ulrich Gregor, Sheldon Rochlin, LaMonte Young, Robert Gardner, Vlada Petric, John du Cane, William Raban, Tony Conrad, George Maciunas, Alberto Cavalcanti, Jim McBride, Peter Bogdanovich, Gideon Bachmann, Christiane Rochefort, Jerry Jofen, Rosa von Praunheim, Hans Richter, Roberto Rossellini, Lionel Rogosin, Robert Haller, Storm De Hirsch, Marcel Hanoun, Jerry Hiler, Bruce Conner, Myrel Glick, Paul Sharits, Barbara Schwartz, Lewis Jacobs, Ian Barna, Carolee Schneemann, Anthony McCall, Diego Cortez, Leslie Trumbull, Adolfo Arieta, Louis Brigante, Coleen Fitzgibbon, Stewart Sherman, Charles Chaplin, Len Lye, Tati, Allen Ginsberg, Valie Export, Hermann Nitsch, Andy Warhol, Jack Smith, Analena Wibom, Robert Breer and Raimund Abraham.

“Jonas Mekas, the fabled Lithuanian-born artist and experimental filmmaker who was widely regarded as the father of underground cinema, and whose New York loft was a nexus of the 1960s avant-garde, died at his home in Brooklyn on Wednesday, aged 96. James Fuentes, his dealer, confirmed the death and said Mekas had been suffering unspecified health problems for about six months.

“Mekas was born in December 1922 in the village of Semeniskiai. He was 16 when the Second World War began, and later wrote that his brother, Adolfas, and he were imprisoned in a labor camp by the Nazis. At the end of the war, after studying in Mainz, the brothers were resettled to America by the International Refugee Organization. Although they originally meant to go to Chicago, they wound up in New York.

“In 1954, they founded *Film Culture* magazine, which celebrated experimental, non-commercial films and offered discussions of avant-garde ideas. Four years later, Mekas found another audience as the first film critic for the *Village Voice*, and soon began hosting film screenings at his home for artists and luminaries such as Robert Frank, Salvador Dalí, Yoko Ono. The Velvet Underground rehearsed in the space and Mekas reportedly introduced lead singer Lou Reed to Andy Warhol who went on to produce the band’s debut album. In 1969, Mekas co-founded the Anthology Film Archives on the Lower East Side of Manhattan, which quickly became a mecca for rare and experimental films. It continues to preserve and screen films today.

Mekas’ own films were flickery, diaristic, and lacking in obvious narrative, so that mystery and intimacy were elevated above all else. He was awarded the prestigious Grand Prix at the Venice Film Festival for his 1965 film *The Brig*, which he made with Adolfas, and which was based on a play about a Marine Corps prison. Another film, *Reminiscences of a Journey to Lithuania* (1972), was added to the National Film Registry of the Library of Congress.

Mekas enjoyed numerous museum surveys in Europe, including at the Museum Ludwig in Cologne, the Serpentine in London, and the Beaux-Arts Museum in Brussels. But Fuentes says he never received the attention he deserved in the US during his life. ‘I’m eager and hopeful that American audiences will have the opportunity to access his work in a way that that they weren’t able to in his lifetime,’ he says.

“It’s kind of a strange to feel shocked that he’s passed because he was 96 years old,” Fuentes told artnet News. “He had this life force and energy that very, very few people have, and it made everyone around him think he was immortal. He’ll be dearly, dearly missed by me and all of us [at the gallery]. I feel like I’ve lost a family member today. Jonas’ legacy will clearly live on through his writing and his films in an incredible way.” (Henri Neuendorf: “Jonas Mekas, a Patron Saint of New York’s Avant-Garde Film Scene, Has Died at 96.” *Artnet*. www.news.artnet.com/art-world/jonas-mekas-obituary-1446562)

In the very end, civilizations perish because they listen to their politicians and not to their poets.

—Jonas Mekas

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