

Filmmaker Jonas Mekas on documenting your life



October 10, 2017 - Born in Lithuania in 1922, Jonas Mekas is a filmmaker, writer, critic, and poet. He survived a World War II labor camp and postwar displacement before immigrating to New York in 1949 to embark upon a career in the arts. His work as an experimental filmmaker is legendary (he's been referred to as "the godfather of American avant-garde cinema"), and at the age of 94 he continues to work with Anthology Film Archives as an archivist and a historian. Mekas is currently prepping a variety of books for publication, organizing his personal archives, writing poems, and documenting his daily life. His newest book, *A Dance with Fred Astaire*, is described as a collection of anecdotes and ephemera: "Memories, diary entries, conversations, and insights sit alongside collages of postcards, newspaper cuttings, film negatives, lists, posters and photographs, envelopes and letters, book covers, telegrams, cartoons, and doodles."

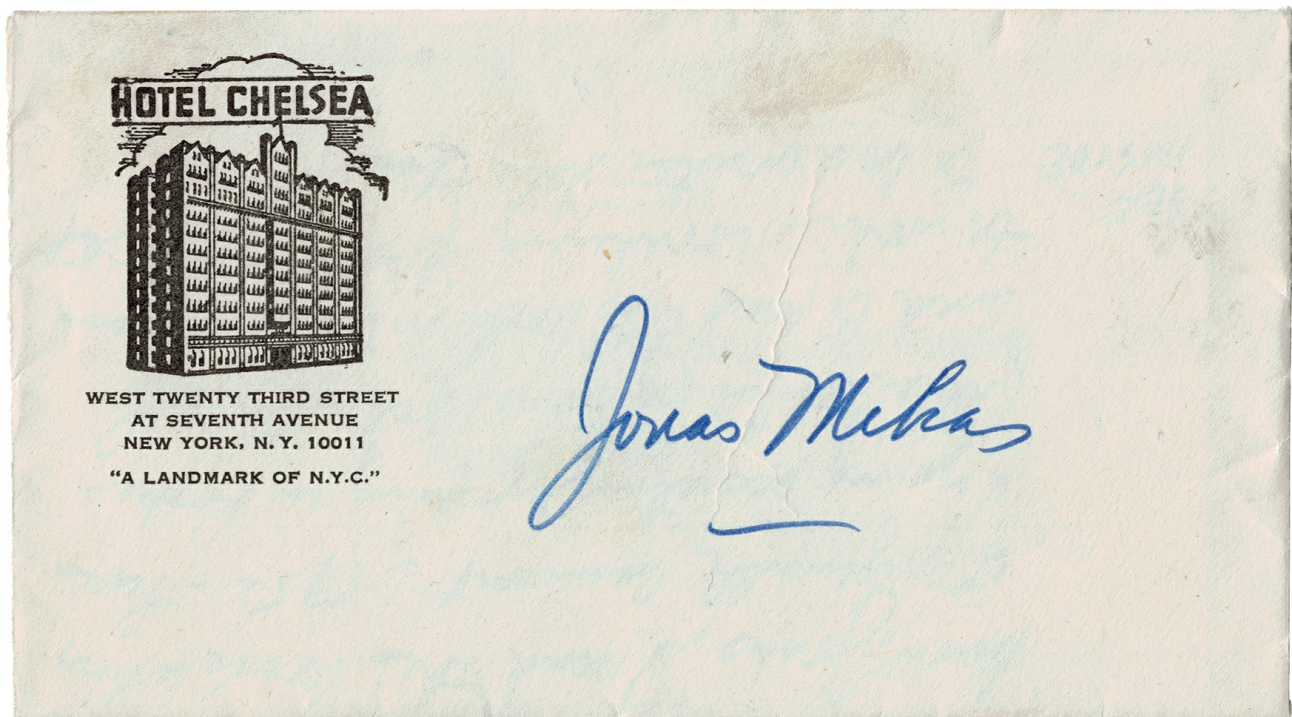
As told to T. Cole Rachel, 2270 words.

Tags: [Film](#), [Writing](#), [Process](#), [Independence](#), [Education](#), [Multi-tasking](#), [Focus](#).

Your book, *A Dance with Fred Astaire*, presents an abstract portrait of your life. It's a collection of bits and pieces, all kind of ephemera organized like a collage.

It's the way I felt. It's a collage. When you make a collage there is no real logic. You cannot explain it. You just feel that's how it fits. The beginning and the end usually matter, but what's in between can be a little more mysterious. It is similar to what I would do in my films. I permit a lot of chance. Exercising too much control is no good.

The book represents my life, which is not an island. I was very connected within so many different people and events. They are all reflected here, memories of some of those events, people. You could say it's an autobiography in form of anecdotes. It's more of a public record of my life, but not so much about my personal life. There is very little truly personal stuff in it.



Were you ever interested in writing a straightforward memoir about your life?

I don't have time for that. There are fragments of that in this book, but I think my films are my biography. There are bits and fragments of my personal life in all of my films, so maybe someday I'll put them together and that will be my autobiography.

It's interesting that you mention that. Much of your life is documented in your films, going all the way back to beginning of your filmmaking. These days everyone documents themselves all the time, but back when you started that notion seemed very novel.

It just felt normal to me because before the films, I wrote everything down. Before I got the camera, I wrote things down. This year there will be a new edition of my book, *I Had Nowhere to Go*. That book was written before I made films, when the only thing I could do was write down what was happening to me. All the way back to age six I was writing things down. I kept a diary. Even before I learned to write I was trying to keep a diary. Why did I do that? I have no explanation.



Was it a way of making sense of what was happening around you?

No. I didn't care about that when I was growing up. Nobody cared. Teenagers don't care about shit. And they don't care now. [Laughs] It was just a thing I always felt I had to do.

People talk a lot about your films, but you have a poetry practice as well.

Occasionally I still write poems. It comes from a different part of me. When you write, of course it comes from your mind, into your fingers, and finally reaches the paper. With a camera, of course there is also the mind but it's in front of the lens, what the lens can catch. It's got nothing to do with the past, but only the image itself. It's there right now. When you write, you could write about what you thought 30 years ago, where you went yesterday, or what you want for the future. Not so with the film. Film is now.

Are most of your decisions intuitive? Is it a question of just feeling when something is right or when it isn't?

I don't feel it necessarily, but it's like I am forced-like I have to take my camera and film, though I don't know why. It's not me who decides. I feel that I have to take the camera and film. That is what's happening. It's not a calculated kind of thing. The same when I write. It's not calculated. Not planned at all. It just happens. My filmmaking doesn't cost money and doesn't take time. Because one can always afford to film 10 seconds in one day or shoot one roll of film in a month. It's not that complicated. I always had a job of one kind or other to support myself because I had to live, I had to eat, and I had to film.

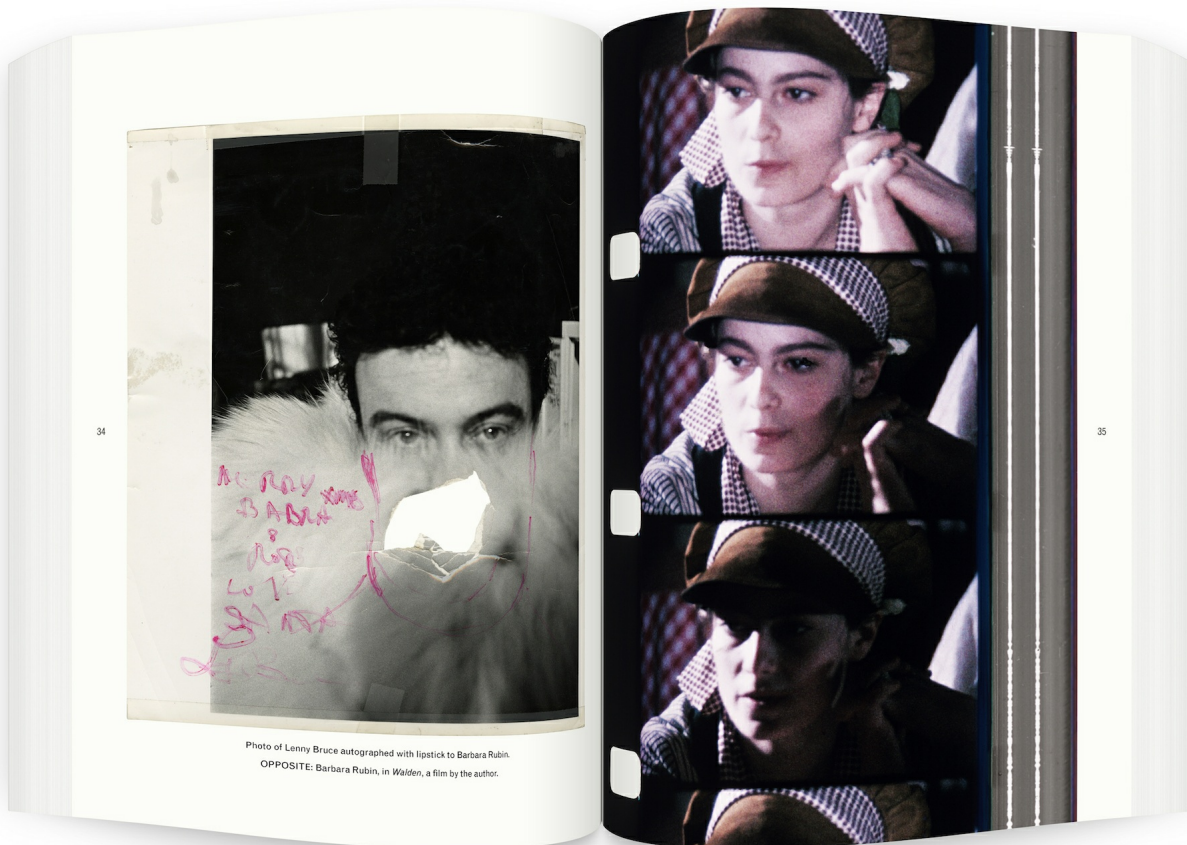


Photo of Lenny Bruce autographed with lipstick to Barbara Rubin.
OPPOSITE: Barbara Rubin, in *Walden*, a film by the author.

How do you feel about art schools? Is being an artist something that can be taught?

I never wanted to make art. I would not listen to anybody telling me how to do it. No, nobody can teach you to do it your way. You have to discover by doing it. That's the only way. It's only by doing that you discover what you still need, what you don't know, and what you still have to learn. Maybe some technical things you have to learn for what you really want to do, but you don't know when you begin. You don't know what you want to do. Only when you begin doing do you discover which direction you're going and what you may need on the journey that you're traveling. But you don't know at the beginning.

That's why I omitted film schools. Why learn everything? You may not need any of it. Or while you begin the travel of the filmmaker's journey, maybe you discover that you need to know more about lighting, for instance. Maybe what you are doing needs lighting. You want to do something more artificial, kind of made up, so then you study lights, you study lenses, you study whatever you feel you don't know and you need. When you make a narrative film, a big movie with actors and scripts, you need all that, but when you just try to sing, you don't need anything. You just sing by yourself with your camera or with your voice or you dance. On one side it is being a part of the Balanchine, on the other side it is someone dancing in the street for money. I'm the one who dances in the street for money and nobody throws me pennies. Actually, I get a few pennies... but that's about it.

You've made lots of different kinds of films over many years. Did you always feel like you were still learning, still figuring it out as you went along?

Not necessarily. I would act stupid sometimes when people used to see me with my Bolex recording some random moment. They'd say, "What is this?" I'd say, "Oh nothing, it's not serious." I would hide from Maya Deren. I never wanted her to see me filming because she would say, "But this is not serious. You need a script!" Then I'd say, "Oh, I'm just fooling. I'm just starting to learn," but it was just an excuse that I was giving, that I'm trying to learn. I always knew that this was more or less the materials I'd always be using. I was actually filming. There is not much to learn in this kind of cinema, other than how to turn on a camera. What you learn, you discover as you go. What you are really learning is how to open yourself to all the possibilities. How to be very, very, very open to the moment and permitting the muse to come in and dictate. In other words, the real work you are doing is on yourself.





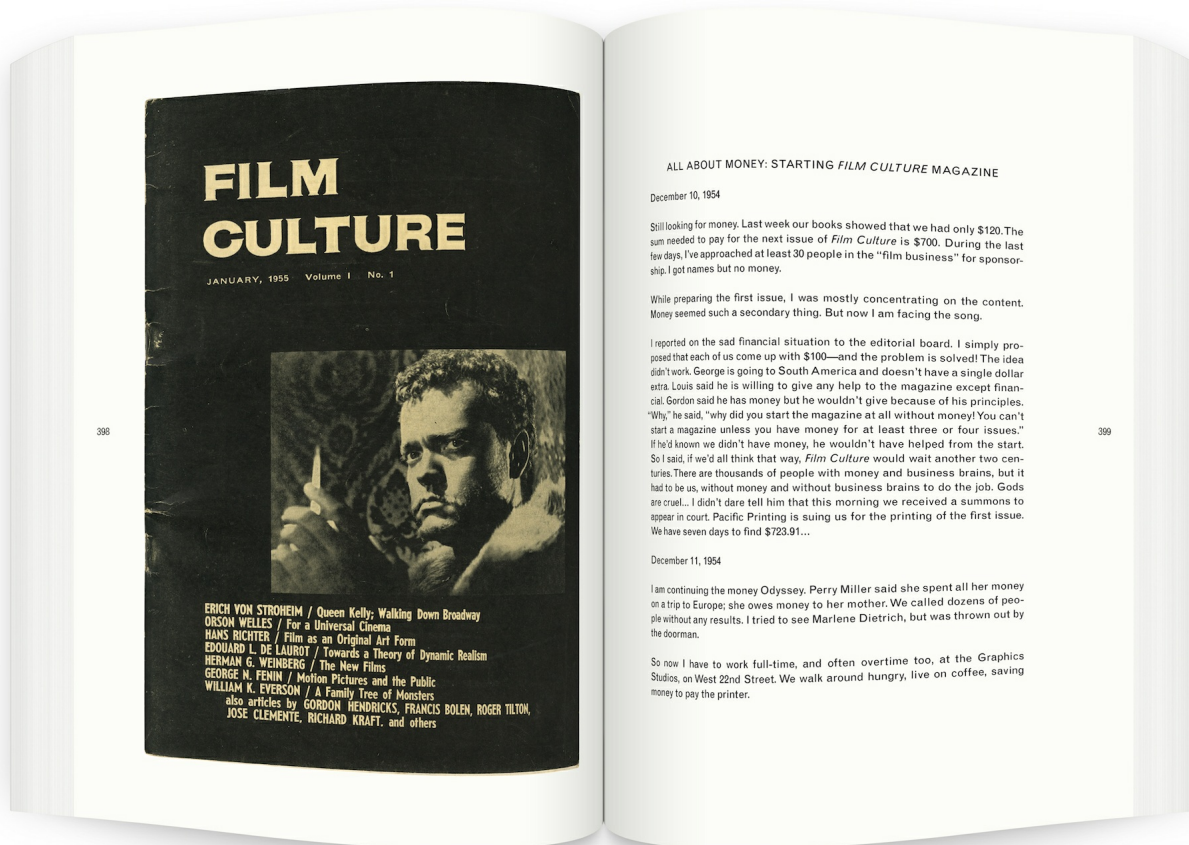
You have always been a pioneer, not only in how you have made your films, but also how you show them. How has technology changed that for you?

Now I do a lot of installations with multiple monitors or multiple screen pieces. It's interesting what happens when the viewer begins to have eight monitors or even 16 monitors to look at. You don't stay on one. As a viewer you begin to edit, make your own movie, just in the way you look at them. The film remains film, but then you can do many other things with it. I extract images. I make prints. I can do many other things with it. I'm always interested in those possibilities.

You are a kind of master archivist. I'm looking around this space—which is packed with stuff, but it all appears to be pretty meticulously organized. How important is it to not only document your work, but to also be a steward of your own archives.

You have to. For me there is constantly somebody who wants to see something in the archives, so I have to deal with it. I cannot neglect them. These are my babies. I have to take care of them. I learned very early that it's very important to keep careful indexes of everything so that it helps you to find things easily when it's needed. For example, I have thousands of audio cassettes, in addition to all the visual materials. I have a very careful index of every cassette. I know what's on it. You tell me the name of the person or the period and I will immediately, within two or three minutes, be able to retrieve it. People come here and look around and say, "Oh, how can you find anything in this place?" No, I find it very easily.

I always carry a camera with me in order to capture or record a couple images and sometimes conversations. Evenings, parties, dinners, meetings, friends. Now, it's all on video, but back when I was using the Bolex camera, I always had a Sony tape recorder in my pocket—a tiny Sony and that picked up sounds. I have a lot of those from the '60s, '70s, '80s. Hundreds and hundreds. I have books which are numbered, each page has written down what's on each numbered cassette. I don't index everything, that would be impossible, but approximation is enough. I advise everyone to do this. Record things. Keep an index. It's very important.



What's your next big archival project?

I'm working on a new library for [Anthology Film Archives](#). For two years I have been working on fundraising for an additional floor on top of the current building for a paper materials library. We have a huge collection at Anthology and most of it is in boxes, not available to scholars or anybody. On the side of the building, there is an empty lot. We'll have a café there to help us financially because Anthology is always losing money. We are losing our programs. So we are actively raising funds for that, but we still have several million that we need to raise. It's funny, most of the help is coming not from film people or from film industry. There must be some industry producers or famous actors that could just pick up a few million and build us a library and we'll put their name on it if they want. Most of the help is coming from artists donating works of art, which I'm trying to sell. Artists have been very, very generous and understanding.

Aside from all of those projects, do you still have a sort of day-to-day creative practice?

I never needed a creative practice. I don't believe in creativity. I just do things. I grew up on a farm where we made things, grew things. They just grow and you plant the seeds and then they grow. I just keep making things, doing things. Has nothing to do with creativity. I don't need creativity.

Do you still keep a journal?

A video. Here is my pen. [pulls small video camera/recorder out of pocket] I shoot lots of video. I stopped writing maybe 30 years ago. I stopped keeping a written diary. Now my diary is video. I shouldn't say I don't write at all, every day I write many many emails. There is a lot of writing connected with what I'm doing. I could plaster all the walls with the fundraising letters and emails I've written.

In the future our collected emails will be defining historical documents of our lives.

Yeah, maybe, but computers crash, everything disappears, and technology changes. I sometimes think there won't be anything left. Yes, we'll have what's in the books and some hard drives for some time, but those drives will also crash or become extinct. DVDs, some of the music records from 75 years ago are still playable, but some of the DVDs from 20 years ago don't play anymore.

And the last remaining company that still made VCRs recently went out of business.

So, all of this new technology, it's okay for now... but it's very temporary. You could almost look at it from a spiritual angle. All technology is temporary. Everything falls to dust anyway. And yet, you keep making things.



JONAS + BUTCH LOOKING. BY JOHN.

Photo credit: John Lennon

All images from [A Dance with Fred Astaire](#) by Jonas Mekas, Published by ANTHOLOGY EDITIONS

Essential Jonas Mekas:

[As I Was Moving Ahead Occasionally I Saw Brief Glimpses of Beauty](#) (2000)

[Reminiscences of a Journey to Lithuania](#) (1971-72)

[Jonas Mekas' Online Diary](#)

[Out-takes from the Life of a Happy Man](#) (2012)

[I Had Nowhere to Go](#)

[Jonas Mekas' Archives](#)

Name

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Vocation

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Fact

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Color Polaroid by Chuck Close in association with 20x24 Studio, 2017