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# *Jonas Mekas'*

## *Performative Writing*

### Colophon

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“The body and art of an amateur come into close contact to be perceived.”<sup>1</sup>

1

Avant-garde reverses social, political, and aesthetic hierarchies. An avant-garde attitude rejects the institutions and conventional grammar of the past. As widely known, Jonas Mekas’ attitude of recording a “reaction to life” with a Bolex camera, video camera, and digital camera without a break for decades, inherits the attitude of the 20th-century avant-garde, which rejected the distinction between life and art imposed by art institutions. After leaving Lithuania and settling in New York, Mekas adhered to the contradiction of completing the incomplete, that is, the attitude of pursuing rhythm and contingency throughout his life as a writer, poet, director, critic, archive operator, and film activist. In particular, Mekas filmed frame by frame and edited directly on a camera without connecting sequences. Therefore his Bolex camera and his shooting and editing methods became an absolute symbol for the art of “presentness” and art as a form of life.

Jose Luis Guerin, who exchanged video letters with Mekas, probably had similar thoughts about Mekas’ work.<sup>2</sup> In a letter, with admiration and love, Guerin repeatedly quotes Mekas’ statement that making films is a “response to life.” However, in his reply to Guerin, Mekas says that this statement is both true and false. Is it true because his camera recorded and reacted immediately to life events as they occurred? Is it false because his camera had already reflected his introspective gaze when it recorded life? Or is it false because he rejected the status of an artist who actively responded to life and chose to “take a step back” from life? In Mekas’ response, we can vaguely sense that he remains a writer who rejects his authorial identity.

1. Roland Barthes, “Vingt mots-clés pour Roland Barthes,” *Le Magazine littéraire*, février 1975 in *Œuvres complètes*, t. IV, p. 861.

2. José Luis Guerin & Jonas Mekas, *Correspondencia Jonas Mekas - J.L. Guerin*, 2011, 96min.



To begin with, we must point out that Mekas became a writer in a way that distinguishes him from classical authorship. Mekas' work of continuously and repeatedly recording subjective life experiences with a camera, whether it becomes art or film, raises questions about the concept of classical works. We also know that Mekas' work belongs to the lineage of cinematic diaries, which are a branch of personal films. What kind of writing is diary writing, and what exactly is a diary? A diary is a type of writing that does not require qualifications to write. The diary is not only intimate writing but also open writing. A diary was a type of writing that anyone could write if they had the ability to read and write before it became connected to publication or became the exclusive property of the writer before the era of blogs and social media. It was a type of writing that could be done even without considering the need for someone to read it or without anticipating evaluation or reaction. It was also a type of writing that could be done without creating characters, plots, or themes. Diaries were peripheral writing that provided opportunities for marginalized subjects, such as women, to write. For this reason, various disciplines such as literature, literary theory, art history, visual theory, film theory, anthropology, cultural theory, history, philosophy, psychology, and sociology have shown interest in the genre of diary writing, its practice of writing diaries, and the subject who writes diaries since the 20th century. Mekas made a diary film within this trend of re-examining a diary and diary writing.

However, as an avant-garde self-writing, Mekas' diary is also an anti-diary that goes against the form of a classical diary.<sup>3</sup> The same point can be read in his slippery reply to Guerin's tribute to the creator of the cinematic diary. Mekas' diary work becomes an anti-diary through the performative intervention of temporality and physicality. For example, he does not care about the classical form of diaries, which indicates time markers such as years, months, and days, except for leaving tags for seasons such as "midwinter." He intentionally avoids the chronological order between the past and the present. His diary is a hymn for capturing a fleeting moment, but at the same time, and it is a work that thickly weaves a long time. And it's like a poem that sings of evanescent inspiration, but it's also like a stream that never dries up. In his work, the moment of "immediacy" and the time of "reflection" oddly coincide.

3. Lee Song Yi. (2021). "Polyphony, Hybridity, Femininity – Feminine Writing in Nicole Brossard's *Journal intime ou Voilà donc un manuscrit*," *Studies of French Culture and Arts in France*, 78, pp. 142-171.



A diary is a genre bound by time. People who write literary journals that record their lives in writing are closely tied to their sense of time. While diary writers are bound by time, writers control time. Diaries begin with a record of the date, and one of the purposes of writing a diary is to remember events associated with dates. Reading a diary involves tracking the progression of events that follow the dates and the inner progression of the individual in response to them. Writing a diary is a repetitive and ongoing process that spans a lifetime. Diaries can encompass a lifetime of writing, but the diary is fundamentally different from an autobiographical record of one's life because it takes the unpredictability and spontaneity of daily life and uses it as both content and form.<sup>4</sup>

In a diary, especially a diary in text form, there is a time gap between the experience of events and their recording. Therefore the temporality of the past as a recaptured moment exists as much as the now of spontaneity. In this time interval, an artist's subjectivity appears. Those who experience an event record the moment they experience with the perspective and emotions of the moment of recording. Thus the diary frequently crosses the two "presents." At the same time, a diary written with the interval of time becomes the result of constructive action. Facts are arranged in order instead of being listed as disorganized fragments. It happens a video diary sometimes erases these time intervals. Because the record of private events in a filmed diary or video diary is "simultaneous" with the experiences. Since the advent of the smartphone camera, the simultaneity of experience and record has expanded to the simultaneity of experience, recording, and sharing.

What about Mekas? On the one hand, Mekas' cinematic diary seeks the simultaneity of experience and record, pursuing a direct reaction to life.<sup>5</sup> On the other hand, Mekas' *Walden* (1969), *Lost, Lost, Lost* (1976), *As I was Moving Ahead, Occasionally I Saw Brief Glimpses of Beauty* (2001), and *Out-Takes From the Life of a Happy Man* (2013), in which past time constantly invades the present moment, are examples of creating a gap between events and records. The layers of time, memories, and feelings of loss are prominently displayed in these films. Those who pay attention to these elements argue that Mekas' work should be called a "diary film" instead of a "film diary" in which private daily life is regularly or repeatedly filmed.<sup>6</sup> Isn't Mekas' Diary film the result of reordering and structuring footage of family, friends, cities, and seasons taken with a compact camera? Weren't the works

4. Laura Rascaroli, *The Personal Camera*, (NY: Columbia University Press, 2010), p. 120.

5. Ibid, p. 128. Lascaroli said that the filming process of Mekas, which implies a distance to an event, is a reflective process even if it occurred simultaneously with the events because the reflective process is not possible in written records, but arises from the gap between events and their composition.

6. Regarding the distinction between a film diary and diary film, see David E. James, "Film Diary/Diary Film: Practice and Product in Walden," in David E. James (ed.) *To free the cinema: Jonas Mekas and New York Underground*, (NJ: Princeton University, 1992), pp. 145-179. James defines that the moment a film diary, which has the character of a personal record, is disclosed to others, it becomes a diary film. In this case, the screening is a key element that constitutes the diary film.



of Mekas created through the structured process of “recording, revealing, and preserving?”

Moreover, Mekas is an artist who performs editing in two different methods. He is an artist who performs direct editing on a Bolex camera while shooting and also an artist who edits footage piles that have been shot for years or even decades. Music, voice-over, and intertitles are added, and the time of editing overlaps with the time of the shooting. Scenes that directly reveal the emotions of the present when looking at past footage are inserted into the editing process. Mekas does not hide the fact that the “emotion” of the present when looking at past footage is the principle that guides his editing above all else. In other words, the process of modifying and rewriting the chronological order of the footage according to the present emotions exists. Mekas does not try to disguise everyday events as “facts” by “reconstructing” them through editing. Through the insertion of voice-overs, he does not present a closed, self-absorbed, or imposing “self.” The rewriting, according to Mekas’ emotions, rather increases the disorder of time centered on the present. In terms of rewriting that increases disorder, Mekas’ diary is distinct from classical diaries or autobiographical techniques. Disorderly present expresses strange and surprising connections between events and spacetime that are truthfully false rather than reconstructed truth. Therefore, the flashes that appear in Mekas’ films are moments that exhibit the truth of the photogram, where “the time and space of the past and present collide within subjectivity”<sup>7</sup> of the present. This passage reveals the assertion of experimental contemporary cinema, which aimed to discover the units of film language in photograms rather than in continuous motion images. Drawing on Christian Metz’s differentiation between image, description, and narrative according to their relationship with time, if we examine the scenes of Mekas, they do not unfold according to the “order of time,” nor are they depicted “simultaneously.” Mekas’ photograms show the collision of time “outside of time.”<sup>8</sup>

In particular, the case of the circus sequence in *Walden* corresponds to this. He captured the circus acrobatics in fleeting moments, completely removing the sense of movement from the circus, which was a fascinating subject for 19th-century artists to reveal the movement of a big city. Aglaja Veteranyi, an example of experimental diaspora writing, described her childhood with a circus troupe with the sentence, “Is there really a circus in heaven?”<sup>9</sup> The circus has

7. Éric Thouvenel, “Des lettres d’amour au cinéma : Walden de Jonas Mekas (1964-1969),” *Lettres de cinéma : De la missive au film-lettre*, (Rennes: Presses universitaires de Rennes, 2007), <http://books.openedition.org/pur/875>.

8. Christian Metz, “Remarques pour une phénoménologie du narratif” (1966) in *Essais sur la signification au cinéma*, (Paris: Klincksieck, 2003).

9. Aglaja Veteranyi, *Why the Child is Cooking in the Polenta*, Translated by Bae Suah, Workroom Press, 2021. For Veteranyi, who wrote, “Striking the circus tent is the same everywhere, like a big burial ceremony,” the circus is a terrible paradise rather than a happy one.

always enchanted children, and in the same way, it enchanted Mekas. Although an incredible display of movement occurs, we remain in place, and time stops under the circus tent. Mekas, who used to go to the circus with the children of his fellow directors, filmed the circus with childlike innocence, and this scene appears in many of Mekas' films as a happy moment when the past and present collide. Among the diary film as an anti-diary, the circus scene as an anti-kinematic sense, and the sense of time as an anti-chronology, Mekas glanced back at his hometown, family, friends, city, the time that had passed, the time that was passing, and himself.

### 3

Mekas' playing with the camera in his hand reminds me of what Roland Barthes called the attitude of an amateur.<sup>10</sup> Hobbyists, non-professionals, and amateurs are often referred to "those who lack skill and rigor and do not have an active relationship with creation." However, Barthes thought differently. For him, an amateur does not refer to a person with an inferior status compared to that of a professional or a person who enjoys the work of an expert with a unique taste, but an "attitude," and refers to a person who creates rather than an audience or a spectator. He wrote that an amateur "creates only for his or her *jouissance*" without expecting recognition from others or reciprocity from the market like an "artist."<sup>11</sup> With this attitude, amateurs are interested in the "act" of writing rather than the "work" as a result. It is no coincidence that fragmented thoughts and diaries are Barthes' important works.

Why do amateurs create? How can an amateur continue one's activities without considering time, ability, and gain? Amateurs can work with active love. The amateur's activity is to record the rhythm of love. For this reason, Barthes emphasized the importance of the body in the activities of amateurs, writing, composing, and drawing. Amateurs' activities are always bodily activities that "use their muscles."<sup>12</sup> This is why Mekas' filming can be considered an amateur activity. Mekas was not an artist who revealed his presence in his work with his face, body, and voice. Nevertheless, his body, always holding the camera, is sensed in his work. The train that the young Mekas was riding, the subway in which old Mekas crossed New York, the window sill of an apartment, and the senses of Mekas sitting on these places arrive at us.

10. The modern French word "amateur" has two meanings. It has the meaning of the Latin "amator," which means lover, and also has the meaning of someone who is in contrast to those who engage in professional or professional activities.

11. Roland Barthes, "Réquichot et son corps," *Œuvres complètes*, t. IV, (Paris: Seuil, 2002), p. 396.

12. Roland Barthes, "Vingt mots-clés pour Roland Barthes," op. cit., Roland Barthes, "Variation sur l'écriture," *Œuvres complètes*, t. IV, op. cit.



Amateurs write, play, and create for themselves, and the diary is a genre that is often associated with amateurs. This is not because diaries are common genre but rather because they are performative and not necessarily meant to be shared or published. However, amateurs typically work alone, acting as stowaways or idlers. Their activities are characterized by idleness<sup>désœuvrement</sup>, which involves disengaging from active reactions.<sup>13</sup>

“(at least some of the writers and in my case) those who dedicate themselves to writing feel they are detached from the world. They are not just physically withdrawn from the world; they feel disconnected from the world to the point of feeling guilty conscience and separated from (worldly) values. Away from well-known worldly values is, in some ways, a departure from solidarity, a relinquishment of everyday collusion. They still exist with the world through detours, but sometimes they have difficulty in detours. Those who want to write and those who write often feel that they are living as (of course, secular) renegades.”<sup>14</sup>

Although Barthes cherished the solitude of amateurs, he also imagined a gathering of amateurs (“société d’amateurs”) and envisioned a utopian society emerging from this gathering. Isn’t this utopia none other than a utopia of friendship?

Autotheory, a feminist theory established under the influence of Judith Butler’s concept of gender performativity and affect theory, suggests the idea of life writing. Life writing includes performative citation as one of its methods.<sup>15</sup> If Mekas’ diary writing can be seen as another form of life writing, then Mekas’ performative citation can be seen as a way to create a utopia of friendship. The first person to use the term Autotheory was the writer and curator Paul B. Preciado. Through this term, he attempted to redefine first-person writing, which has been referred to as feminine writing and denigrated, including diaries, letters, autobiographies, and memoirs.<sup>16</sup> First-person criticism by contemporary women and queer writers often shares similarities with academic writing, as both are based on theories and philosophy. However, this type of writing can also be viewed as autotheory, as these writers incorporate their personal experiences and lives into their work, using theory as a lens for reflection and analysis. *The*

13. Roland Barthes, *La Préparation du roman I et II: Notes de cours et de séminaires au Collège de France, 1978-1979 et 1979-1980*, (Paris: Seuil, 2003), p. 638.

14. Roland Barthes, op. cit.

15. Laurent Fournier, *Autotheory as feminist practice in art, writing and criticism*, (Cambridge, MA: The MIT press, 2021).

16. Laurent Fournier, op. cit., p. 7.



*Argonauts*, written by Maggie Nelson, a poet, essayist, biographer, novelist, art critic, and art historian, is a representative example of autotheory and life writing in contemporary literature, art, and art criticism. Nelson experienced meeting and marrying her gender-fluid lover, Harry Dodge, abortion, and medical treatment for his trans identity. In the book, she documents the body changes, interactions, and conversations in these processes. It is worth noting that she did not limit her writing to the memoir genre. This is because memoirs are the name of static writings that adhere to genre expectations and categories, while life writing is an “active practice” that is being done “at present.” Nelson and Dodge continue conversations on topics such as gender, family, and queer, citing essays, literature, poetry, and philosophy from French post-structuralists such as Michel Foucault, Gilles Deleuze, Julia Kristeva, feminist theorists such as Luce Irigaray, Monique Wittig, Judith Butler, and other prominent authors such as Donald Winnicott, William James, Susan Freeman, and Susan Sontag. Among these, the text of Roland Barthes is particularly important. It reiterates Donna Haraway distinguished between fact, which belongs to the past, and fiction, which belongs to the present, and emphasized the importance of fiction and present. The life writing, which Haraway would probably have called “speculative fabulation” or “string figure,”<sup>17</sup> makes up the lives and identities of Nelson and Dodge intersubjectively and intertextually. In the same way, life writing is different from writing, which describes the life and ‘expresses’ identity through events that have already happened. Life writing is performative writing that aims at ‘constructing’ the narrative of life.

17. Donna Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*, Choi Yumi (trans.), (Paju: Manongji, 2021).

#### 4

The cinema is often defined as a space where the body and mind regress. Psychoanalysis is a theory that holds that regression occurs when a problem belonging to one developmental stage of human growth is not completely resolved and remains as a trace in the next stage. The cinema is a privileged place where regression takes place. In a dark cinema where the connection with reality is loosened, the cinema audience watching the screen activates the inner projection. And for this reason, the scenes projected on the screen of the movie theater tend to be compared to inner imagination or dream work. Psychoanalysts also use cinematic terms like sequence or screenplay to describe daydreams or unconscious fantasies. It is said that the





unconscious continues like fragmentary sequences, and fantasy is like a screenplay with multiple entrances.<sup>18</sup>

A diary, like a movie theater, has a regressive attribute. A diary is a space not open to others, and writing a diary is repetitive writing only for oneself. Because of this, the diary has the attributes of a maternal space, a regressive space, and an artificial paradise.<sup>19</sup> Then, how about Mekas' diary film and Mekas' cinema, in which footage from the past is played repeatedly? Are this diary and this movie theater also spaces of the unconscious and regression? Here again, let's think about Mekas' practice and his friendship community.

Éric Thouvenel viewed *Walden* as a film that explores the dialectical relationship between the private and the public; the political and the artistic; the individual and society; and the independent filmmaker and capitalism. He emphasizes that it is a movie that seeks to be open to others instead of remaining private and assumes intimacy with the audience. To sum up, this is not a diary film but a letter film. Especially in *Walden*, there are scenes of Cassis, John Lennon with Yoko Ono, the visit to Marseilles, and the visit to Stan Brakhage. These scenes break the flow of the diary film. Mekas transforms *Walden* into an audio-visual postcard sent to friends, audiences, and films through these scenes.<sup>20</sup>

Mekas has often said, "My films were letters to my friends."<sup>21</sup> However, it is not necessary to classify Mekas' films as letter films instead of diary films. This is because Mekas' films do not belong to specific films in the form of letters. Rather, his films are simply expressions of friendship and serve as a letter to his friend. The bond of friendship is strengthened through the shared experience of watching these films together.

In Mekas' work, time and memory are clearly revealed but simultaneously denied. Mekas "writes" the memory and forgetting which are simultaneously occurring.<sup>22</sup> Mekas does not preserve memories as in writing memoirs but rather performs anti-diary writing. He writes for his "jouissance," having a sense of instability and playfulness.

He also writes as an amateur who has withdrawn from the commercial system of exchange and (the life of) the reward system. He writes for his friends while remembering and forgetting. Through writing, he creates his identity as a founder of a filmmaker cooperative, an anthology film archive operator, and an underground film director. Just as Maggie Nelson penetrates her life by quoting Deleuze

18. Jean Laplanche and Jean-Baptiste Pontalis, eds. *Fantasme originaire, fantasme des origines, origines du fantasme*, (Paris: Hachette, 1985); Jean Laplanche and Serge Leclaire, *The Unconscious and the Id*, (London: Rebus Press, 1999).

19. Laura Rascaroli, op. cit., p. 117.

20. Éric Thouvenel, op. cit.

21. "art which we do for each other, as friends," Jonas Mekas, *Anti- 100 years of cinema manifesto*.

22. Jonathan Isserow, "Retroactive subjectivity in documentary film," *Studies in Documentary Film*, 14(2), 2020. Jonathan Isserow calls this "retrospective resignifying."



and Butler, Mekas penetrates the history of cinema by quoting Adams Sitney, Peter Kubelka, Stan Brakhage, and Nam June Paik. Citation is not just an act of transferring the authority and words of a text. A citation is rather an act of conveying inspiration and information by penetrating the text and another person. Nelson identifies indications of emotional pain in a writer's sentences and connects the writer's theory to the theory of life. In a similar way, Mekas identifies hints of laughter in the cameras of his underground friends and joins them in laughing, eating, drinking, dancing, and shooting films together.

In *Walden*, a German broadcasting team visits to report on the state of American underground films. The broadcasting team wanted to find images and incidents that could be cited as underground ideas. Mekas and his colleagues who assisted in the investigation found this situation to be strange. In the same film, the episode of visiting Hans Lichter contrasts with the German broadcasting station's visit. Mekas and his colleagues visit Hans Richter, a senior in experimental films. The footage of this visit shows an anti-monumental encounter with a monumental figure. Mekas mentions this encounter. The German broadcasting team tried to find authoritative references they could cite, but Mekas cited colleagues and their lifestyles that influenced his current work. Mekas' citation is another name for intimate relations.

Who is Jonas Mekas? He is the one who dances with a camera, the one who writes with a camera, the one who writes down the records of the lost and regained paradise with his beloved friends, and the one who practices inaction.

