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## ArtSeen

# Jonas Mekas, Open Archives

By [Caitlin Anklam](#)



Installation view: *Jonas Mekas, Open Archives*, Mana Contemporary Chicago, 2023. Courtesy Monira Foundation and Jonas Mekas Studio.

“By trying & failing I discovered that my real love is real life, & my real challenge is, and now I know it will remain, to record with my camera, not a brush, the poetry of real life around me.”

—Jonas Mekas, from a note titled “FRIENDS, Re: WATER COLORS and ACRYLICS which I had promised to you.”

### ON VIEW

Monira Foundation at Mana Contemporary Chicago  
*Jonas Mekas, Open Archives*  
February 23, 2023–January 26, 2024

In the spring of 2020, the Monira Foundation at Mana Contemporary began a newsletter called “[Open Archives](#).” Every Wednesday at 8:30 am for a hundred weeks, they sent out an image of one not-previously-shown object from the archives and studio of Jonas Mekas, the documentary filmmaker, poet, and founder of Anthology Film Archives.

In *Jonas Mekas, Open Archives* at Mana Contemporary’s Chicago location, the exhibit employs a straightforward curation: Moving clockwise around the room, the objects follow the order of the newsletter’s release, the gallery lined with small gray floating shelves, one object per shelf.

The ephemera featured includes scrawled poetry and doodled flowers, a box of raw amber, photographs of family, Mekas’s Chelsea Hotel key tag, a coconut addressed to Anthology Film Archives (no one seems to know the story), a hand drawn map of lower Manhattan (everything below City Hall and Yoko Ono’s apartment labeled as “nothingness”), his Teamsters Union membership card, and various pieces of paper scribbled over with phone numbers, confessions, notes to self. In a corner, one note reads “I do not live horizontally: I live vertically!” and the full calendars on display and a daily schedule—broken down into half hour blocks—prove it.



Installation view: *Jonas Mekas, Open Archives*, Mana Contemporary Chicago, 2023. Courtesy Monira Foundation and Jonas Mekas Studio.

*Jonas Mekas, Open Archives* creates a portrait of Mekas through presenting the objects from his archive not as an addendum to an exhibition or in order to build a particular image of him, but on the materials’ own terms. Upon entering the exhibit, I was drawn to the two objects on the gallery’s central wall that face the room’s entrance. On the left is a box with its contents spilling out, labeled in black marker as the “Sweater and scarf I left Lithuania with...”. On the right is a small drawing of a young boy emerging from a dark forest. The gallery notes include this description by Mekas: “This picture by Kazys Šimonas, as it appeared in SAULUTE (the SUN), a monthly magazine for children, summarized the dreams of my childhood. I always saw the boy in the picture as myself. That was me, in that picture, walking out in the wide, mysterious world...”. Both the box and the drawing serve as distinct portraits of Mekas: one at the moment of his displacement, the second as he continuously viewed himself, oriented towards awe.

Mekas’s film *Out-Takes from the Life of a Happy Man* plays in the gallery’s adjoining room, which has been converted into a screening space lined with red velvet curtains. The film was chosen in part because it shows many of the objects included in the exhibit, such as the hot splicer he edited his films with, which appears in the opening and closing shots of *Out-Takes* as Mekas, his hands moving slowly, carefully wraps the film strips around the apparatus.



Installation view: *Jonas Mekas, Open Archives*, Mana Contemporary Chicago, 2023. Courtesy Monira Foundation and Jonas Mekas Studio.

In visiting the exhibit and viewing *Out-Takes*, the images Mekas was drawn to grow obvious in repetition: New York streets in snowfall, friends laughing, trees and flowers, moments he describes in his films and writing as “fragments of Paradise.” Lukas Brasiskis, curator of the 2022 Jewish Museum retrospective, *The Camera Was Always Running*, wrote that in Mekas’s diary films he “eschewed both linearity and hierarchy, instead presenting a churning whirlpool of times past and present.”<sup>1</sup> Mekas’s films are a wash of images, a flood; the only pauses are provided by the fragments of text and poetry that surface in intertitles (watching *Out-Takes*, I remembered that the first time I heard someone say the word “intertitle” I thought they said “intertidal”).

In the gallery, looking at the objects on their metal shelves, all on the same plane, I was reminded of something a professor had said to me in college: that there is no hierarchy in a diluvian event. When Mekas was asked why his opus *Walden* had a three-hour run time, he said it could just as well have been five; he was never working on individual projects but on one infinite film. He would refer to himself as a filmer, not a filmmaker—emphasizing action rather than description. Those I know who spent time in Jonas’s apartment describe it as a deluge of objects, with shelves of boxes stacked to the ceiling, each labeled with the various contents inside. Mekas, known for his experimental documentary filmmaking, is seen in *Open Archives* as not only a documenter of his life in film, but an avid archivist of it as well.

1. Lukas Brasiskis, *Jonas Mekas: The Camera Was Always Running* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2021).

## Contributor

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