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ART

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ARTSEEN

Cordy Ryman: Monkey Mind
 Symphony
 By Ekin Erkan

Mark Rothko
 By Phong Bui

Picasso: A Cubist Commission in
 Brooklyn
 By Pepe Karmel

A Foreigner Called Picasso
 By Mary Ann Caws

In Dialogue with Picasso
 By Phyllis Tuchman

Critics Page

The Miraculous Jonas Mekas

By Phong Bui



Anyone who has followed Jonas Mekas’s remarkable contribution to the avant-garde film community in New York City and beyond, especially artists from younger generations, has come to admire how integrated his worldview was, at once both intimate and monumental, in all the many-roles he undertook during his lifetime. He was a poet, a writer, and a publisher, as well as editor of *Film Culture* magazine, critic in the *Village Voice*, and co-founder of Anthology Film Archives and The Film-Makers’ Cooperative. And since his death in 2019, many other subtle advocacies and support of creatives in his community have been gradually coming to light.

For anyone who may think they’re creative but not intelligent, or intelligent but not creative, or whatever the criteria of their aspirations and imperfections, Jonas’s synthesis of life and work is most applicable and useful, especially in our current time when fear of technology’s progress and the inherent speed and coldness it brings to our lives is ubiquitous. From the rise to prominence of radio in the 1920s, television in the 1950s, the internet in the 1990s, as well as Twitter and Facebook in 2000s, and Instagram and TikTok in 2010s, we have had to navigate between speed and slowness in art as well as in life. The very function of art’s purpose is to offer slowness, either in on-the-spot responses or to be digested as later contemplation. Imagine, for instance, Jonas’s friend Andy Warhol without his film production. His silk-screened paintings and his sculptures may have been viewed only as pictorial means of quickly made work for fast consumption. On the contrary, imagine Warhol without his silk-screened paintings and sculptures, in which case his films would easily be conceived as vastly too slow for passive intake. I remember walking with John Updike for a few blocks in early April 1989 on Bleecker Street. After having read his review of Warhol’s retrospective at the MoMA that year (published as “Fast Art: The Sweatless Creations of Andy Warhol” in the *New Republic*), in which he had essentially made up his mind that Warhol’s work was perfect for the time-pressed viewer, I remember asking him whether he’d seen Warhol’s films, for example *Sleep* (1963) or *Empire* (1965), both of which last more than five hours. Updike’s response was that he hadn’t. Imagine Warhol without Jonas. Warhol attended daily film screenings at Filmmakers’ Cinematheque, then social gatherings at Jonas’s loft next door on Park Avenue South and 28th Street as early as 1962, which prompted him to make films and create his own version of social gatherings under the banner of the Factory.

In fact, unlike Warhol’s predictable deployment of speed in his paintings and sculptures and slowness in his films, Jonas’s films are endlessly unpredictable. They are unfailingly infused in part with aspects of transcendental poetry evoking Emersonian and Whitmanesque embodiment of democratic vistas, and in part with his own status of being an immigrant. Both of which are manifest in Jonas’s personal rhythm that embraces both speed and slowness of time, which, through his mediation with jump cuts and fleeting images, the varied fabrics of intimate moments are fluidly revealed. Jonas poignantly expressed this mediation of the in-between condition to me in the winter of 2004, saying, “I was born in Lithuania. I live in New York City. But my true country is culture.” In this remark we see that Jonas went one step further than Horace Kallen in his legendary essay “Democracy versus the Melting Pot” (published in the *Nation*, 1915). Kallen argued that instead of assimilating immigrants into the melting pot under the premise of broadly Anglo-Saxon American identity, they ought to be free to exercise their distinct cultural heritage and the differences that they brought with them. Kallen’s idea of cultural pluralism is analogous to a symphony, a musical platform from which each player is embraced for their specific instrument with a specific sound, each contributing in unison to the symphonic sound. Rather than a melting pot, America can be a nation of nationalities.

The question is: how can culture serve as a substitution for Jonas’s country, and in which form can it manifest through his work? On one hand, there exists a certain pain and sorrow from being caught in the in-between space of the old country that the immigrant left behind, and the new culture in which they’ve arrived. This entails assimilating, adopting, adapting, and blending into a new environment without awareness of the pressures of conformity that can erode their resolution to stand firmly alone, which in turn affects their ability to stand with others. On the other hand, there exists the option to surrender to the power of *negative capability*—to live with great uncertainty, not knowing how their passion for the arts and humanities may dictate their lives—which is exceedingly rare. It is in this latter, more difficult choice that Jonas found his *inner freedom* to express fully his potential and love for bohemian life: to exist on the edges, rather in the center of things. He declared in his “Anti-100 Years of Cinema Manifesto” (1996):

In the times when everybody wants to succeed and sell, I want to celebrate those who embrace social and daily failure to pursue the invisible, the personal things that bring no money and no bread and make no contemporary history, art history or any other history. I am for art which we do for each other, as friends.

Having spent many late nights talking, eating, drinking, and dancing at Jonas’s first live/workspace in Greenpoint (2003–2015), then the second in Clinton Hill (2015–2019), I’ve always admired how Jonas had set up an environment where everything, things in-between things, seemed to breed creative energy with joy. This is to say there was no hierarchy in his daily agenda—be it reading the newspaper, talking on the phone, writing, having lunch or dinner with friends, or working on new exhibitions. Every time I was there, I felt a perpetual, concentrated flow of imagery that seemed to affirm any small thing, any tiny fragment in space which had potential to become something else significant. Everything that lies in-between the eternal and the transitory, the absolute and the particular, never fails to be impregnated, ready to be born as a poem, a film, or the space of an object, a book, a glass of wine, etc., that resonates a spark of energy from having been moved from one place to another. The entirety of the space is therefore a work of art.

Soon after Jonas’s death, with the consent of Eugene Lemay, Ysabel Pinyol, and Jonas’s son Sebastian Mekas, I proposed his second live/workspace be replicated and housed at Mana Contemporary, under the supervision of the Monira Foundation, as an open archive. It’s our wish to share with artists, students, and the general audience how a live/workspace can turn into a living organism that feeds everything, things between things, things among things: from Jonas’s editing table, his typewriter, his immense library, to endless printed matters and artifacts. This exhibition, curated by Ysabel Pinyol, is a small example par excellence of Jonas’s monumental commitment to his life as an art form, an equivalent of Walt Whitman’s “Democratic Vistas”: (*I am large, I contain multitudes.*)

Contributor

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