

Between 1950 and his death, the artist and impresario Jonas Mekas (1922–2019) made more than one hundred radically innovative, often diaristic films and video works. He also founded film festivals, cooperatives, archives, and magazines and wrote film criticism and poetry. *Jonas Mekas: The Camera Was Always Running* is the first major publication in English on this pivotal member of the New York avant-garde scene, presenting an extensively illustrated, in-depth exploration of his radical art and restless life.

Born in rural Lithuania, Mekas made his way to New York, where he became a central figure in the overlapping realms of experimental theater, music, poetry, performance, and film. This book brings his work alive on the page with sequences of stills from film and video, photographic series and installations, and archival documents. Leading scholars examine his work and influence, and a timeline expands our understanding of his life.

Edited by Inesa Brašiškė,
Lukas Brasiskis, and Kelly Taxter

With essays by Ed Halter,
Melissa Ragona, Kelly Taxter,
and Andrew V. Uroskie

ISBN 978-0-300-25307-8



9 780300 253078

Printed in Singapore

BRAŠIŠKĖ
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JONAS MEKAS

THE CAMERA
WAS ALWAYS
RUNNING



LITHUANIAN
NATIONAL
MUSEUM
OF ART



Yale

JONAS MEKAS



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Jewish Museum, New York

Under the auspices of the Jewish Theological Seminary of America

The Lithuanian National Museum of Art, Vilnius

Yale University Press
New Haven and London

JONAS MEKAS, THE LIVING THEATRE, AND THE PLACE OF PERFORMANCE

- NOTES
- 1 This story has been repeatedly mischaracterized throughout the literature, from the earliest newspaper reviews to the catalogue of the Judson Dance Theater published by the Museum of Modern Art in 2018. Even the late Sally Banes, in her invaluable detailed study *Greenwich Village 1963: Avant-Garde Performance and the Effervescent Body* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1993), writes: "On October 17, 1963, the IRS shut down the Living Theatre . . . that night, too, Jonas Mekas filmed *The Brig*" (182), and elsewhere, "it was Mekas who crossed police lines . . . to make a documentary film of *The Brig* at its fateful last performance when the Living Theatre had been closed down and sealed shut by the IRS; it was Mekas who realized the weight that a permanent record—especially of *that* night's performance—could have" (76–77). Two completely separate events are being conflated in these accounts. In his "Movie Journal" column, Mekas clearly states that he shot the film in late February 1964, almost four months after the initial incident with the IRS and the "street theater" it inspired. For an account of this earlier episode, which Mekas most certainly did not film, see John Tytell, *The Living Theatre: Art, Exile, Outrage* (New York: Grove Press, 1995), 187–91. Perhaps adopting something of Mekas's own penchant for self-mythologization, authors have opted to create a more streamlined and dramatic version, or simply to repeat a story they had read without question.
 - 2 Jonas Mekas, *Scrapbook of the Sixties: Writings 1954–2010* (Leipzig: Spector Books, 2005), 58.
 - 3 *Ibid.*, 54. The final phrase of this quotation, "not knowing what will come next, like real life," is a retrospective clarification by Mekas for the 2005 collection. These final words do not appear in his original 1965 column in the *Village Voice* or in its republication for his 1972 *Movie Journal* anthology, where he instead concludes simply by emphasizing his sense of compulsion: "I had to film it." Jonas Mekas, *Movie Journal: The Rise of a New American Cinema, 1959–1971* (New York: Macmillan, 1972), 190.

Jonas Mekas, the Living Theatre, and the Place of Performance in the Emergence of a New American Cinema

Andrew V. Uroskie

On a cold night in late February 1964—through a basement coal chute, under cover of darkness—Jonas Mekas broke into the Midway Theatre off Times Square accompanied by Judith Malina, Julian Beck, and the cast of the Living Theatre.¹ They had all been there the night before for what was supposed to have been the final performance of Kenneth H. Brown's *The Brig*. The company had been served with an eviction notice, and that evening's performance was to mark the end of its fifteen-year residency in New York. But Mekas had been overwhelmed—by the work as well as the occasion. After a few minutes, he stormed out of the crowded theater to wait alone outside, possessed by an idea: out of the ephemeral experience of a live performance, he would craft an unscripted documentary record on film.

Three years earlier, Shirley Clarke's cinematic adaptation of *The Connection*, the Living Theatre's prior effort, had become one of the breakthrough successes of the fledgling New American Cinema. Yet Mekas did not wish to follow Clarke's path: "I am not interested in adapting plays, I always said so." He would produce "not an adaptation of a play" but "a record of my eye and my temperament lost in the play."² This was what had necessitated his sudden departure: "I didn't want to know anything about what would happen next in the play," he later wrote in his "Movie Journal" column for the *Village Voice*. "I wanted to see it with my camera. I had to film it, not knowing what will come next, like real life."³ Outside the theater,



Still from *The Brig*, 1964.

the cast and crew agreed that they would return the following evening to reprise the performance one last time for Mekas and his camera. But when they arrived, the eviction had already gone into effect; the doors were padlocked by the theater's owner. By urging them all to break in that evening, Mekas effectively insisted on reprising not simply the play but the very street theater for which the company had become infamous.

Just four months previously, the IRS had closed the Living Theatre's long-standing home on 14th Street and Avenue A—ostensibly for its failure to pay back taxes.⁴ After Beck and Malina refused to leave, the police locked them inside and erected a barricade. A crowd gathered on the street to offer support and encouragement. The next day, addressing the assembled crowd from his window, Beck announced a final, illegal performance. That evening, followers, along with several members of the press, were secretly admitted to the theater by way of a fire escape and an upper-story window. The police allowed the performance to go on, but afterward Beck and Malina were arrested, bail was set, and the two were released pending trial. By then *The Brig* had attracted significant attention, and perhaps sensing an opportunity, Irving Maidman—the wealthy owner of several New York theaters—came to the rescue by offering his Midway Theatre rent-free so the production could continue. At least, he did so until February 1964, when he abruptly changed his mind and began demanding a Midtown rent the Living Theatre could not possibly afford. And so once again the police were called, the doors padlocked, and another break-in ensued. But this time Mekas did not merely read about it in the papers—he resolved to be an active participant. His participation serves to index a vital, historically neglected exchange between postwar radical theater and the emergence of American independent cinema.

Since their origins in the 1970s, the academic disciplines of film and performance studies have tended to be carefully demarcated from that of art history. Yet the actual history of experimental film, performance, and what now sometimes goes by the facile and restrictive rubric of “visual art” were thoroughly imbricated, both socially and aesthetically, in the New York of the 1950s and 1960s.⁵ The model of Beck and Malina's Living Theatre provided a framework for understanding both the social and aesthetic importance of the New American Cinema to Mekas in the early 1960s. These two dimensions—the social and the aesthetic—were becoming ineluctably intertwined through new models of “realism” and the disintegration of boundaries between “art” and “life” across both performance and film. Mekas's experimental documentary *The Brig* (1964) functioned as a culmination and a break, both the summing up of a certain period of investigation and commitment he had shared with the Living Theatre and, following its departure, the beginning of a new path (see pages 58–62).



Production still of *The Brig*, 1964.

- 4 The Living Theatre had a habit of not enforcing admission charges, and they did not bring in enough money to pay the actors a regular salary. According to Tytell, the company had not paid its full taxes in years and the IRS had always been content to look the other way. It is unclear what finally tipped the balance. One possibility may have been the New York World's Fair, which had caused a citywide crackdown on a wide range of cultural institutions deemed by the mayor's office to present an “unhealthy” image of the city. Rising rents may have been another problem: this is what Amos Vogel describes as forcing the closure of his legendary film society Cinema 16 after fifteen successful years.
- 5 See, for example, Alan Licht's tribute to Mekas in the pages of the music publication *The Wire*, where he describes Mekas's profound influence on the growth of an intermedia arts scene in New York that comprised several generations of practitioners across postwar avant-garde music, film, and performance: <https://www.thewire.co.uk/in-writing/essays/jonas-mekas-alan-licht>.



Eight stills from *The Brig*, 1964.

- 6 Mekas claims to have attended “absolutely every screening . . . of the so-called experimental films in Cinema 16’s whole existence. It became my Sunday Church, my university.” Scott MacDonald, *A Critical Cinema 2: Interviews with Independent Filmmakers* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), 82. The “so-called experimental films” actually constituted but a small fraction of the diverse, wide-ranging exhibitions Vogel assembled from documentary, scientific, and educational films from around the world—one of the many differences that distinguished Mekas’s Film-Makers’ Cinematheque from Vogel’s Cinema 16.
- 7 Haidee Wasson, *Museum Movies: The Museum of Modern Art and the Birth of Art Cinema* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005).
- 8 David E. James, *To Free the Cinema: Jonas Mekas and the New York Underground* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 9.
- 9 Scott MacDonald, *Cinema 16: Documents Toward a History of the Film Society* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2002), 18–19.

The history of postwar avant-garde cinema in New York quite literally begins in the world of independent theater, when Maya Deren rents the Provincetown Playhouse in Greenwich Village to screen and discuss her own works outside the highly regulated system of commercial cinema. Inspired by Deren’s audacity (and intrigued by her capacity audiences), Amos Vogel used that same theater to inaugurate his independent film society Cinema 16 the next year. Cinema 16 quickly grew to become the largest independent film exhibitor of the 1950s, as well as an indispensable source of information and inspiration.⁶ As the film historian Haidee Wasson has written, the independent cinema theater in America was explicitly modeled on the independent theatrical playhouse.⁷ Promising an art free of both commercialism and censorship—the rhetoric Mekas would employ in the founding of the New American Cinema Group in 1961—was stirring and dramatic for the time, but it had been employed in countless independent stage programs in lower Manhattan going back to the 1920s. And postwar experimental film and experimental theater shared not only audiences but also numerous physical spaces. Mekas’s own Cinematheque alternatively occupied, shared space with, or gave ground to a number of theatrical venues over the brief course of its peripatetic existence.

From the founding of the New American Cinema Group in 1961, the Film-Makers’ Cooperative in 1962, and the Film-Makers’ Cinematheque in 1964, Mekas’s insistence on building an infrastructure for experimental film was not merely an effort to showcase a certain kind of film but to foster institutions through which a new generation of artistic experimentation could develop.⁸ Far more than providing a venue for accessing a common experience, he was creating a novel community. For many years, the Coop was physically located in Mekas’s apartment, and meetings, screenings, and discussions took place there throughout the day and night. The intimacy of this community, and the lack of separation it implied, marked a decisive shift from the detached professionalism of Vogel’s Cinema 16. Indeed, Vogel castigated Mekas for his lack of critical distance from the filmmakers he quite straightforwardly promoted.⁹ The Coop, known for its intimacy and intensity, was modeled on Mekas’s experience of Beck and Malina’s Living Theatre rather than Cinema 16.

- 10 Mekas, *Movie Journal*, 2–3.
- 11 Stan VanDerBeek’s first use of the term “underground” to refer to experimental film is from “The Cinema Delimita: Films from the Underground,” *Film Quarterly* 14, no. 4 (1961): 5–15. His reference to the Living Theatre is from *Jonas Mekas, Conversations with Film-Makers* (Leipzig: Spector Books, 2018), 177–78.

In the second-earliest review selected for his anthology *Movie Journal*, Mekas describes the extraordinary atmosphere that attended the 1959 retrospective of Maya Deren’s films, including the long-awaited New York premiere of *The Very Eye of Night* (1952–55; released 1958). The place was “bursting with people—sitting everywhere on the floor, standing by the walls, on the stairway.” He underscores the aesthetic and social importance of the event in almost existential terms: “a most unusual and exultant moment for a film poet to experience in this sober world.”¹⁰ The scene is reminiscent not of an ordinary movie audience but specifically the intense, crowded, participatory audiences for which the Living Theatre had become known. It also speaks to the vitality and the importance of the Living Theatre as a venue for the New York experimental film community in the 1950s, in the years prior to the founding of the New American Cinema Group and the Film-Makers’ Cooperative. Mekas himself had originally helped to implement a lecture series Deren had held at the Living Theatre since the mid-1950s. Stan Brakhage, whose experimental films would become almost synonymous with the New American Cinema, had traveled from Colorado to show and speak about his films at a Living Theatre event in 1958. Mekas would later recall that as the moment when he first came to appreciate Brakhage’s importance—a recognition that proved pivotal for his own shift toward the American experimental film by the end of the 1950s. When Stan VanDerBeek coined the term “underground cinema” in 1959, he was showing his earliest experimental films at the Living Theatre simply because “there was *no* place to show them” otherwise.¹¹

Cinema 16 and the Living Theatre were both founded in 1947, the year Jackson Pollock began using the drip technique that came to be seen as emblematic of a newly immersive and highly performative model of “action painting.” And over the course of the 1950s, the popularity of Cinema 16, the Living Theatre, and the collaboration of Robert Rauschenberg, John Cage, and Merce Cunningham would form the foundation of a major turn toward performance by the late 1950s. Together, they laid the seeds for Happenings, Fluxus, and the Judson Dance Theater of the early 1960s, which would, in turn, spur the rise of video and performance art by the end of that decade. These groups were all intertwined not simply at the level of aesthetic form but also of institutional structure, in terms of establishing new norms of exhibition and spectatorship, and, ultimately, of the critical discourse surrounding late modernist art. It was from within this richly interdisciplinary nexus that Mekas began to exhibit and champion the New American Cinema.

- 12 Judith Rodenbeck, *Radical Prototypes: Allan Kaprow and the Invention of Happenings* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2011), 153. See, in particular, Rodenbeck's chapter "Madness and Method," one of the rare critical elucidations of the links between experimental theater and early performance art in this period.
- 13 Michael Kirby first introduces his idea of "non-matrixed performance" in "The New Theatre," *The Tulane Drama Review* 10, no. 2 (1965): 23–43. He would subsequently elaborate a continuum of stages between "complex acting" and "non-matrixed performance" in "On Acting and Not-Acting," *The Drama Review: TDR* 16, no. 1 (1972): 3–15.
- 14 Mekas, *Movie Journal*, 5.

Malina and Beck had become accustomed to a peripatetic existence for their Living Theatre, staging their avant-garde works in "spaces as scavenged—and often as ephemeral—as the junk materials Beck used for his collaged sets."¹² When nothing else was available, they had employed their own apartment as a makeshift theater. Mekas adopted their model in establishing the Film-Makers' Cooperative—which he ran out of his own apartment—and his Film-Makers' Cinematheque, which he was forced to relocate more than a dozen times over the course of the 1960s. But the Living Theatre also proved a model for Mekas in terms of its concrete elaboration of a space for an alternative community. In addition to presenting plays that spoke to the social and political questions of community, Beck and Malina also used their theater as a space for the articulation of community—hosting poetry readings and dance concerts, film screenings, and political organizing for their General Strike for Peace activities.

Mekas had known Beck and Malina practically since arriving in America but especially since moving to Greenwich Village in the mid-fifties, when he founded the journal *Film Culture*. They were fellow poets, as well as friends and neighbors. Beck wanted to establish an independent "poet's theater"—just as Mekas, after Deren, sought to establish an independent "poet's cinema." Both Mekas and the Living Theatre spent most of the 1950s looking to Europe for inspiration. But by the end of the decade, both shifted simultaneously in the direction of a new model of realism, one grounded in the manner in which American artists—in painting and sculpture, performance and film—sought to challenge the aesthetic demarcation between art and life. In Robert Frank and Alfred Leslie's Beat film *Pull My Daisy* (1959), as in Jack Gelber's play *The Connection* (1959), contemporaneous with Allan Kaprow's *18 Happenings in 6 Parts* (1959) and George Brecht's *Toward Events: An Arrangement* (1959), traditional demarcations between art and life, between acting and nonacting, were being radically transformed by the introduction of what Michael Kirby termed "non-matrixed performance."¹³

In his "Movie Journal" column, Mekas specifically references the Living Theatre in his spirited defense of Robert Frank's critically maligned *Pull My Daisy*, finding it "as much a signpost in cinema as *The Connection* is in modern theatre."¹⁴ Mekas saw both as pointing toward "a new sensibility" in the arts that would prove vital to his critical elaboration of the New American Cinema in the years to come. One aspect of this shared sensibility lay in the rejection of



Cover of *Film Culture* 39, Winter 1965.

- 15 David James, *Allegories of Cinema: American Film in the Sixties* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 92.
- 16 Mekas, "On the Baudelairean Cinema," May 2, 1963, *Movie Journal*, 85–86.
- 17 Mel Gussow, "Jack Gelber," *New York Times*, May 10, 2003.
- 18 Mekas, *Movie Journal*, 69–70.

traditional narrative structure through what David James called a "profligacy" or "careless expenditure" of action: "De-centered and only loosely structured, it distributes the authorship of its action casually among the participants rather than constraining them to the singleness of pre-extant narrative necessity."¹⁵ This loose, distributed structure emerged as a hallmark of what Mekas called the "Baudelairean cinema" of Jack Smith, Ken Jacobs, Ron Rice, and Bob Fleischner.¹⁶

But an equally important dimension of this new sensibility was the transformation of the idea of "acting" and the "actor" by means of a confusion, even elimination, of what is traditionally understood as "character." Frank and Leslie's *Pull My Daisy* was ostensibly a film about the Beat lifestyle, but it was based on Jack Kerouac's play *Beat Generation*, in which Kerouac himself provided voice-over narration, and the poets Allen Ginsberg and Gregory Corso were "cast" in the role of Beat poets. While some reviews praised the work for the authenticity of its depiction, we might just as easily describe a confusing *mise en abyme*, wherein neither the audience nor perhaps the actors themselves could tell where their "acting" stopped and their real-life "character" began. Similarly, *The Connection* is oriented by a Pirandellian play-within-a-play structure that frequently left the audience confused as to what was scripted and what was improvised, what was being simulated and what was not. The play begins unusually with a message from the director, who informs the audience that they will be witnessing the making of an underground film in which heroin addicts onstage will improvise scenes from his script loosely related to their real lives. Two cameramen are indeed seen to be filming; there are stumbling and awkward silences, live jazz by musicians of obvious talent, and a director who frequently stops the production when he deems that things have gotten "out of hand." The audience is panhandled during an intermission, after which real heroin is circulated. In at least one performance, an actual overdose occurred onstage. Spectators reportedly fainted at regular intervals over the course of the performance.

The playwright Edward Albee claims to have been thoroughly "affected and energized" by the play, finding it "exciting, dangerous, instructive and terrifying."¹⁷ But for Mekas, it was the deliberate *lack* of drama that pointed to a refreshingly new aesthetic of realism: "Nothing happens. . . . They talk, they goof, they play jazz. No ideas arise, no dramatic climaxes occur—or, if they do occur, they are of little importance, they don't change anything. . . . It shows something of the essence of our life today only because it is about nothing. It doesn't point at truth—it sets truth in motion."¹⁸ Beck understood



Film-Makers' Cinematheque flyer for a program featuring Ron Rice, 53 Berkeley Street, Boston, March 28–30, 1967.

Gelber's elongated temporalities as crucial to a newly realist aesthetic: "What had been passing for realism was not real. There had to be pauses. Directors had to learn to let actors sit still for a long time in one place as in life, and actors had to learn to adapt to this new idea. . . . we had to risk embarrassment, we had to risk boring the audience, but it had to be done."¹⁹ A new realism based upon deliberate withdrawal of dramatic action, the inclusion of lengthy encounters with silence and stillness, even at the risk of boring the audience, and the portrayal of socially ostracized individuals then deemed outside the pale of commercial representation—all marked elements Mekas embraced. When Andy Warhol turned to filmmaking in the years to come, Mekas both personally encouraged and publicly celebrated these qualities in his work. *The Connection* was a watershed for the Living Theatre and the off-Broadway theater movement more generally, garnering considerable attention and favorable reviews, especially for a work considered shocking by so many. But *The Connection* quickly became a watershed for the New American Cinema as well—consequential not simply for its aesthetic innovations but because of the material social and political consequences that it engendered.

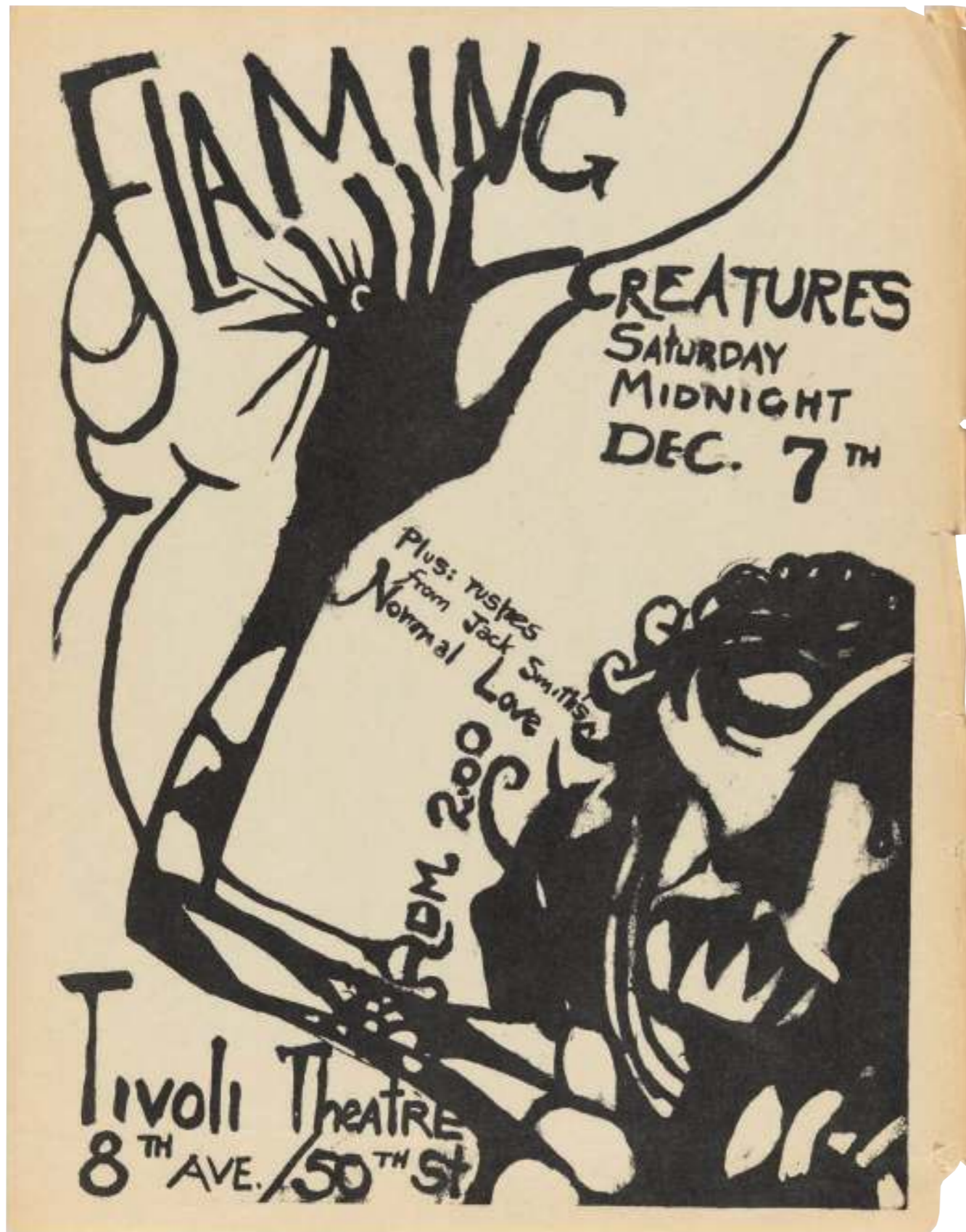
Shirley Clarke employed virtually all its original cast members to create a film adaptation that premiered at the Cannes Film Festival in 1961, but she was subsequently denied an exhibition license in New York due to the work's extensive use of profanity. Technically, film licensing was required only for public, commercial screenings; private film societies such as Cinema 16 could circumvent government censorship so long as none of their members filed an official complaint. But Lewis Allen, the film's producer—with help from Clarke, Mekas, and others from the New American Cinema Group—turned *The Connection* into a vehicle to force a legal challenge to the city's licensing laws and de facto censorship.²⁰ Publicly announcing an unlicensed exhibition at the D. W. Griffith Theatre in Manhattan on 45th Street in the heart of Broadway's theater district, they effectively forced the police to intervene.²¹ When they arrived, they found the projection booth locked from the inside and had to forcibly break in to stop the screening. The filmmakers had invited notable critics to attend and the resulting media debacle created a public-interest story about censorship that proved wildly successful: the legal case advanced quickly, and the resulting decision established that the First Amendment prohibited censorship of art based on vulgarity, a decisive victory for the 1960s counterculture against the 1950s establishment.²²

Salacious or prurient content, however, remained outside First Amendment protection, which is why the screenings of Jack Smith's *Flaming Creatures*, beginning in April 1963, were repeatedly met with police harassment, arrests, and theater closures. Mekas initially tried to skirt the law, technically presenting Smith's films "free of charge" so as to adhere to the noncommercial rule governing

- 19 Julian Beck, "Storming the Barricades," in Kenneth H. Brown, *The Brig* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1965), 26–27.
- 20 Together with Mekas, Lewis Allen, the film's producer, had called the original meeting of what would become the New American Cinema Group, and had helped draft the group's first public statement explicitly demanding the elimination of all film censorship and licensing requirements. See "The New American Cinema Group" and "First Statement of the Group" in *Film Culture* 22–23 (Summer 1961): 130–33; MacDonald, *Cinema 16*, 18–19.
- 21 Bosley Crowther, "Screen: 'Connection' Here and Gone: Adaptation of Gelber's Play at the Griffith: Controversial Movie Is Shown Only Twice," *New York Times*, October 4, 1962.
- 22 Film censorship declined sharply in the later 1950s when the U.S. Supreme Court overturned a ban on Marc Allégret's 1955 film *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, arguing that absent any visibly prurient content, the First Amendment prohibited censorship on the basis of an immoral "idea" alone. "Obscenity" thus remained the only valid criterion for censorship, and in the case of *The Connection*, the use of the colloquial slang "shit" for heroin was judged to be vulgar but not obscene. See Laura Wittern-Keller, *Freedom of the Screen: Legal Challenges to State Film Censorship, 1915–1981* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2008). John Gruen chronicled the rapid transformation of language in Greenwich Village publications like *Fuck You: A Magazine of the Arts*, and in his "The Four-Letter Word and How It Grew," in *The New Bohemia: The Combine Generation* (New York: Grosset and Dunlap, 1966), chapter 5.



Still of William Redfield in Shirley Clarke's *The Connection* (1961).



Theatrical release poster for Jack Smith's *Flaming Creatures* (1963) at the Tivoli Theatre, 1963.

- 23 J. Hoberman, *On Jack Smith's Flaming Creatures (and Other Secret-Flix of Cinemaroc)* (New York: Granary Books/Hips Road, 2001), 39.
- 24 VanDerBeek, "Cinema Delimina," 8. Smith later came to resent Mekas for the way he felt he had been, in the words of Callie Angell, "put on display as a kind of poster child for the promotion of freedom of speech in the arts," with Mekas exploiting the scandal "to get publicity for himself and his organizations." Callie Angell, "Batman and Dracula: the Collaborations of Jack Smith and Andy Warhol," *Criticism* 56, no. 2 (2014): 164–65.
- 25 While censorship was diminishing overall in this period, *Flaming Creatures* was still judged obscene. *Roth v. United States*, 354 U.S. 476 (1957), held that an expression is obscene (and thus unprotected by the First Amendment) if "the dominant theme of the material taken as a whole appeals to prurient interest." Art, by definition, does not fit this category, but rather than the status of "art" being an affirmative defense against obscenity, a work's prurient appeal was understood to undermine any potential claim to the status of "art." Thus, in the case of *Flaming Creatures*, the defense attempted to call eleven witnesses (including Allen Ginsberg, Susan Sontag, and more than a half dozen university professors and filmmakers) to testify that the film was a work of art and thus not obscene, but the presiding judge would not allow any of them to testify to this effect—ostensibly because its salacious nature was already established. An appeal eventually made it to the Supreme Court, but their guilty verdict was affirmed in June 1967 (and by the supposedly liberal stalwarts Justices Earl Warren and William J. Brennan Jr., no less). See Brian L. Frye, "The Dialectic of Obscenity," *Hamline Law Review* 35, no. 229 (2012): 232. *Roth* was not reversed until 1973.

unlicensed films while soliciting donations for the "Love and Kisses to Censors Film Society."²³ Yet, throughout his "Movie Journal" columns of the period, one finds Mekas becoming increasingly radicalized by the harassment. Less and less willing to allow his fledgling artists to remain "secret members of the underground"—as VanDerBeek had described them in 1961—Mekas sought an increasingly confrontational strategy of forcing *Flaming Creatures* into the public eye. As with *The Connection*, Mekas imagined that it might become the vehicle through which to incite a more general legal and social transformation.²⁴ That December, he rented the Tivoli Theatre in the heart of the Manhattan theater district to present Smith with *Film Culture's* annual Independent Film Award, yet the theater management refused to allow the screening to proceed when it realized the film was unlicensed. The result was a performance of street theater that saw Mekas delivering the award outside on the roof of a parked car in front of hundreds of supporters. Weeks later, Mekas would be physically wrestling with authorities at a film festival at Knokke-le-Zoute, Belgium, attempting to show *Flaming Creatures* after the film jury informed him that its screening was impossible under Belgian law. Finally, two months later, he would be in police custody, the film impounded, and *Flaming Creatures* would get the trial he had wanted, even if the resulting verdict would not be what he had hoped for.²⁵

This link between art and social change was something that had characterized the Living Theatre since the beginning. Mekas had not previously been arrested, and was shocked and horrified by the experience, but Beck and Malina already had a long history on that score. Declared anarcho-pacifists, they had held antiwar film screenings and benefits for various pacifist organizations at the Living Theatre since the early 1950s, and Malina had first been arrested in a War Resisters League opposition to the Operation Alert civil defense drill in 1955. As Dee Garrison has described,



Membership card for Love & Kisses to Censors Film Society, front and back, 1963.

the civil defense drills of the 1950s and early 1960s were an organization of biopower on a massive scale, with eight million New Yorkers legally required to go underground each year when citywide sirens signaled a mock attack.²⁶ Perpetuating conditions of fear and servility through the inculcation of a permanent state of war, it was an effort at mass regimentation, a disciplining of the civilian population to the vicissitudes of an uncontested extra-civilian authority. A 1955 pamphlet distributed by the war resister Dorothy Day stated, “We will not obey this order to pretend, to evacuate, to hide. . . . We know this drill to be a military act in a cold war to instill fear, to prepare the collective mind for war.”²⁷ At Malina’s trial, the judge labeled her a murderer, held her responsible for the (mock) deaths of three million New Yorkers, and was so outraged by her lack of deference to his authority that he had her involuntarily committed to Bellevue psychiatric hospital.²⁸ She and Beck were further radicalized after they were both arrested at a similar demonstration in 1957. Mekas may not have been arrested, but he was definitely involved. A short sequence from *Lost, Lost, Lost* (1976) places him at one of the later demonstrations from 1960 or 1961, where he captures what was surely the demonstration’s most conspicuous and powerful image: a woman holds a large placard—“THERE IS NO SHELTER IN NUCLEAR WAR”—while nursing an infant. Garrison claims that the unusually large number of women at these demonstrations had an effect on both the media coverage and the police response, but that the specific imagery of young mothers holding their infant children was what turned the tide within media coverage and led to the public’s rejection of civil defense drills, which the government would abandon in 1962.

Yet despite the resurgence of the peace movement, by the spring of 1963 the Cold War was heating up. After a brief moratorium, the Soviet Union had resumed nuclear testing, the Cuban Missile Crisis had brought America to the brink of nuclear war, and an ever-increasing number of young men were being deployed to a local insurgency in Vietnam. Soon, the government accelerated the draft as American involvement in the war grew. While Mekas was preparing the premiere of *Flaming Creatures*, the Living Theatre was involved in organizing the New York General Strike for Peace. Simultaneously, they were preparing a new production that aligned their political action in the streets with a correlative ambition for the theater. The ruthless regimentation and disciplining of soldiers’ bodies within *The Brig* represented the flip side of the polymorphous sexuality of Jack Smith’s anarchically liberated *Flaming Creatures*. The controversies surrounding both spoke to the power of the body in this moment—conceptualized as a site of production and reproduction, discipline and resistance at the intersection of art and life.

Kenneth H. Brown, who wrote *The Brig*, served from 1954 to 1957 in the US Marines, stationed in Japan. After returning



Still from *Lost, Lost, Lost* (1976).

- 26 “8,000,000 in City Go to Shelters,” *New York Times*, May 4, 1960.
 27 Dee Garrison, *Bracing for Armageddon: Why Civil Defense Never Worked* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 76. On the typically unacknowledged significance of women’s protests against the civil defense drills, also see Garrison’s “Our Skirts Gave Them Courage: The Civil Defense Protests in New York City, 1955–1961,” in *Not June Cleaver: Women and Gender in Postwar America, 1945–1960*, ed. June Meyerowitz (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1994), 201–26.
 28 Garrison, *Bracing for Armageddon*, 91.
 29 Judith Malina, “Directing *The Brig*,” in Brown, *The Brig*, 83.

late to base one night, he was punished by thirty days of physical assault, psychological humiliation, and emotional degradation in the Fujiyama brig. A fellow prisoner he knew there left in a strait-jacket from the experience. *The Brig* was Brown’s attempt to document, as precisely as possible, the meticulous rituals of the prison. For Malina, this precision was key to sustaining the more general idea of the brig as ritual structure—a model for the coercive power of a carceral state so vividly exemplified by her experience with the civil defense drills. In language that presages Michel Foucault’s analysis of biopower in his famous study *Discipline and Punish* a decade later, Malina described *The Brig* using terms specifically intended to deflate and subvert the soaring rhetoric of President John F. Kennedy’s 1961 inaugural address. Where Kennedy had demanded, “ask not what your country can do for you—ask what you can do for your country,” Malina responded, “whether that structure calls itself a prison or a school or a factory or a family or a government, that structure asks each man what he can do for it, not what it can do for him, and for those who do not do for it, there is the pain of death or imprisonment, or social degradation, or the loss of animal rights.”²⁹

Mary Caroline Richards’s 1958 translation of Antonin Artaud’s *Theater and Its Double* had become an instant sensation throughout the downtown performance community years before, but *The Brig* offered the company its first opportunity to engage with the radical “theater of cruelty” Artaud had proposed. Less script than score, Brown’s instructions articulated a strict disciplinary structure, blocking out bodily movements in space that deliberately throttled all vestiges of improvisational freedom. The action takes place within and around the circumscribed space of a literal cage.

Two stills from *The Brig*, 1964.



The cast's preparation did not consist of learning lines or even "getting into character" so much as absorbing the grueling bodily rituals of basic training—internalizing the prescriptive manner in which every spontaneous action would be circumscribed:

Every action, even every step they take is hedged about with requests and rules. . . . Every action must be done efficiently, in the proper posture, with the proper gestures, according to the rules—or punishment ensues. Every action is also an occasion for the guards to humiliate the inmates by reminding them of their completely debased status. . . . They must constantly show their deference to the prison authorities, and they are relentlessly beaten or given other sorts of cruel punishments for the smallest infractions of what seem like utterly arbitrary rules.³⁰

In the early 1960s, after the victory of the "Greatest Generation" in World War II but before the national trauma of the Vietnam War, Americans still tended to venerate the military, associating it with the virtues of honor and sacrifice, duty and respect. It was into this cultural atmosphere that *The Brig* dropped like a bomb: the casual brutality and systematic dehumanization of men in uniform toward those who were ostensibly their peers was shocking, disorienting. Critics uniformly described the work's grim power, even if most felt it was too excessive to endure: "A fist in the guts, a mad ritual of degradation." "A nightmare." "Throbbing, claustrophobic." "Terrifying, devastating, shattering, relentless." "An act of conscience, decency, and moral revolt." These were the words and phrases they used to describe their experience—not so much of watching a play but of inhabiting the almost incomprehensible situation to which the play gave rise.

Mekas attended the performance only on its closing night. Why had he waited so long? He regularly writes of viewing works multiple times, and especially after Malina and Beck's arrest and eviction in October 1963, he would have known the precarity of their situation. Still, he had waited until the last possible moment. Perhaps he was building up the intensity of the experience, knowing that it would mark the end of an era: the final closing of the Living Theatre in America. Having been so influential in fostering the downtown performance scene—one that had nurtured him, provided him with a model of community that tightly integrated art and life—they were now leaving to seek freedom in the Europe he had long left behind. They were leaving him behind, too, with the responsibility he had only just assumed in founding the Coop and trying to secure a viable cinema screening space after the loss of Vogel's long-standing Cinema 16.

Three stills from *The Brig*, 1964.

Why was Mekas so adamant about wanting to film *The Brig*? It might seem obvious: not only had he long respected the Living Theatre, but Clarke's adaptation of *The Connection* had proven quite successful, bringing attention to the New American Cinema at a crucial phase, and even helping to initiate a transformation of the censorship laws against which Mekas had inveighed. Nevertheless, it is clear that Mekas had no interest in doing something similar, or he would have approached Malina and Beck long before that final night. "I am not interested in adapting plays," he wrote in his column, "I always said so."³¹ And yet there he was, waiting outside the theater on the closing night—having had to leave because he was consumed by the idea that he simply *had* to film the performance. "I wanted to see it with my camera." Without prejudice, without forethought, without expectation or anticipation. Not adaptation but documentary—or, more precisely, a kind of performance documentation.

Months before, Mekas had been hired by *Show* magazine to create a prototype *Film Magazine of the Arts*, intended to be a regular report in film form, covering New York dance and theater, music, and Happenings. Mekas collaborated with Ed Emshwiller and David Brooks on photography, and Barbara Rubin on editing, but the finished film was rejected by *Show* and destroyed. (According to Mekas, it was deemed insufficiently commercial.) The work print, which Mekas fortunately retained, provides an extraordinary glimpse into a world of performance from this period that has largely been forgotten, and only survives—poorly served—by still photography and textual descriptions.

The Living Theatre's new production provided Mekas with the occasion to continue this kind of performance documentation, yet he initially harbored no plans to do so. But on that closing night of *The Brig*, something about the intimacy and intensity of his encounter—both the piece itself and the significance of its occasion—led him back to performance documentation from a radically different angle. "Suppose this was a real brig; suppose I was a newsreel reporter," Mekas wrote, unable to dislodge the thought.³² Yet this "suppose" was not about manufacturing a cheap hoax, an attempt to hoodwink the audience into thinking that he had somehow managed to surreptitiously infiltrate an actual military jail. His "suppose" is that of an actor striving to inhabit the role, or, in the case of *The Brig*, the place within what Malina called the brig's overdetermining "structure."

Mekas called his film "an essay in film criticism" intended to "undermine some of the myths and mystifications of cinema vérité." But he makes clear that this was not about cinema vérité as such, but specifically an application of "cinéma vérité (direct cinema) techniques to a stage event." The work is an "essay" in film criticism

Two stills from *Film Magazine of the Arts*, 1963.

(original meaning of the term: a testing, trial, or experiment); an essay concerning the possibilities of performance documentation. “I threw myself into it, and I used it as raw material, as it happened, as if it were a real event—which, in truth, it was.”³³ To treat the action of *The Brig* as a “real event” is precisely to treat it as a performance and to acknowledge its reality as such, rather than seeking to adapt it to a more “cinematic” form.

And the reality of *this* performance—the way in which the actors were not simply taking on roles but had allowed themselves to be molded and manipulated by the structure of the brig—seemed to necessitate that Mekas no longer afford himself the typical distance required of a neutral documentation. Rather than remaining at a remove, he felt compelled to throw himself *into* the performance, even at the cost of interrupting it:

I remained inside the brig, among the players, constantly stepping in their way, disrupting their usual movements and *mise-en-scènes* . . . this kind of shooting required an exhausting concentration of body and eye. I had to operate the camera; I had to keep out of the cast’s way; I had to look for what was going on and listen for what was said; I had to make instantaneous decisions about my movements and the camera movements, knowing that there was no time for thinking or reflecting; there was no time for reshooting, no time for mistakes: I was a circus man on a tightrope high in the air. All my senses were stretched to the point of breaking.³⁴

This breathless description is the diary of a performer, a description of filming as a kind of performance. Mekas doesn’t just place himself inside the cage among the performers, he describes how arduous it was for him: lugging multiple heavy cameras and backup recorders, stopping and starting while trying to maintain continuity. In describing his action in and among the ensemble, he seems caught between the roles of active participant and neutral observer, with the thrust of his “essay” lying in how he navigates this duality. Must he “keep out of the cast’s way,” as an observer, or must he keep “stepping in their way, disrupting their usual movements,” like a fellow participant? His description reflects the ambivalence of the situation within which he has placed himself, where he aspires to document, simultaneously, both those actions taking place all around him, as well as his own reactions to those actions. His solution is doubled attention, a layered recording of recording, in which he situates himself within the very performance he is seeking to document.

Even before the recording commenced, Mekas seems to have been caught up in a kind of guerrilla theater. He had felt compelled to film the work, even—or was it *especially*?—if it required that the



Two stills from Storm de Hirsch, *Newsreel: Jonas Mekas Shooting the Brig*, 1964.

cast restage the play one last time, *for him*—thus effectively including him among the participants—and additionally required that they all, together, break into a locked venue, engaging in a trespass that mimicked the conditions of that now notorious performance four months prior, when the Living Theatre was evicted from its long-standing home in Greenwich Village and could no longer afford to remain in New York. Whether or not it had been his explicit intention, Mekas managed to make himself an indelible part of the performance that final night—part of that which he had set out to record. Storm de Hirsch was fully conscious of the way in which Mekas had stepped over the line from distanced observer to engaged performer when she opted to film Mekas’s own act of recording that night in her *Newsreel: Jonas Mekas Shooting the Brig* (1964).

As might be expected, the resulting film was quite distinct from the theatrical work it documented. For the original production, there was no proscenium stage. Audiences were seated behind a chain-link fence; they remained a moderate distance from the actors, and the entirety of the space and the action within it were always visible. By contrast, even Mekas’s widest shots afford only a partial view of the space, and most of the time his camera is so close to the actors that only an individual or part of an individual is visible. And once we move within the cage, everything happens so close to the lens that it is impossible to see anything but fragments. Our perspective is constantly in motion, often vertiginous.

Clarke’s adaptation of *The Connection* had been painstakingly shot on a professional soundstage, with 35mm film, in clear, even

lighting. While technically proficient, it had the perverse effect of draining much of the gritty realism from the environment, making the flophouse set look like a Hollywood simulation. Mekas's documentation of *The Brig*, by contrast, was a professional cinematographer's nightmare. The harsh, undiffused lighting made the shadows dark to the point of invisibility and the scorching intensity of the lights frequently flared out into blur. We are never given a proper establishing shot with which to set our bearings but are thrown into the middle of the action, which confronts us on all sides. We turn and turn, but almost nothing in the film is seen at a remove. It is impossible for us ever to place ourselves at an intellectual or emotional distance from what is taking place.

Similarly, Mekas's audio recordings of the performance are explosively "hot." If microphones are placed too close to the source, the voices are driven far beyond the safe limits of the recorder. The natural curvature of the recorded waveform becomes clipped and angular, resulting in harsh cacophony of inhuman timbres. Voices dissolve into squeals and fuzzed-out noise—an effect not unlike the distortion postwar electric guitarists were achieving by intentionally overcranking or otherwise mistreating their amplifiers. Mekas had been especially attracted to the sounds of *The Brig*, its incessant "stamping and running and shouting," and the tortured soundtrack he produced accentuated the play's chaotic soundscape into an incessant clamor of half-human noise.³⁵ As in Warhol's early films, the result derives not from something planned but from a decision not to correct an accidental artifact of the recording process. Mekas had simultaneously recorded both optical and magnetic soundtracks as insurance against failure, and could have cut among them to select the cleanest version for each section. Instead, he did the opposite: *combining* the optical and magnetic soundtracks to deliberately accentuate the distortion he had discovered on the "hottest" recordings.

With only ten-minute film reels, Mekas had been forced to repeatedly stop the play to avoid missing any of the action. On every changeup, he had asked the cast to redo their last sequence so as to ensure continuity of action. In typical documentary filmmaking, these overlaps would obviously be edited out to ensure seamless continuity, but Mekas decided to include the entirety of the uncut reels—not unlike what Andy Warhol (who himself had learned filmmaking from Mekas and Marie Menken) was then doing in his "portrait" films of 1964.³⁶ In this original version, short sequences would have thus repeated from a slightly different perspective at regular ten-minute intervals: a self-reflexive gesture that would have conspicuously foregrounded the work as an act of performance documentation.³⁷

Both Malina and Brown, discovering that certain scenes had not been captured, implored Mekas to reshoot them, and out of respect, he agreed to do so. But he ultimately refused to incorporate any of that new footage, arguing that it lacked the spontaneity of the

- 35 MacDonald, *Critical Cinema* 2, 93.
 36 Mekas was the one who gave Warhol the idea of filming the Empire State Building and, after Menken got them all access to a nearby building from which to shoot, Mekas did the actual filming of *Empire* (1964) while Warhol and others sat around talking. Mekas did not mention his involvement when the film was screened at his Film-Makers' Cinematheque. See the interview: <https://henitalks.com/talks/making-of-andy-warhols-empire/>.
 37 These repetitions were still present during the original screening, and Mekas describes Beck and Malina agreeing with him to leave them in. Nevertheless, once David and Barbara Stone agreed to distribute the film, they decided to eliminate all of the overlaps "for distribution's sake," and the original version appears to have been destroyed. See MacDonald, *Critical Cinema* 2, 93. The footage was given to his brother Adolfo to trim down but not otherwise manipulate: "Now I have seen the play, I said to myself; now I have ideas about it; now I can't edit this footage without dragging in my post-thoughts and post-considerations." See Mekas, *Movie Journal*, 192.
 38 *Ibid.*, 192, 194.
 39 Sheldon Renan, *An Introduction to the American Underground Film* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1967), 167.

original: "I already knew the action, I knew the movements, and even against my will, I began anticipating the action. It turned out lifeless, so I threw the footage out." They also objected to the soundtrack, in which the dialogue was often distorted to the point of incomprehension. But again, Mekas held his ground. *The Brig* was his "gift" to Malina and Beck, "those two beautiful human beings . . . as mad as I was; their devotion to their art . . . fantastic and beyond reason." But for that very reason, it could only be something deeply personal: "a record," yes, but not of the play alone, rather one "of my eye and my temperament lost in the play."³⁸

So what had Mekas actually created, in the end? Not a cinematic adaptation of the play, in any accepted sense of the term. But also not a straightforward documentation, such that future scholars or performers might reconstruct the precise reality of the historical performance. *The Brig* won the grand prize for Best Documentary in the 1964 Venice Film Festival, which says something about the instability of this category in the wake of Neorealism, with the rise of cinema vérité, the resurgence of the newsreel, and a proliferation of performative models among the arts that seemed to demand new forms of time-based documentation.

As late as 1967, Sheldon Renan could describe *The Brig* as Mekas's most frequently seen film.³⁹ Today, looking back at Mekas's total oeuvre, it can seem like an incongruous anomaly. But if Mekas eventually came to be known for his complex film diaries—art wrested out of the mundane circumstances of his everyday life—the fact remains that the "mundane" circumstances of Mekas's life were inseparable from an extraordinary artistic community within which he always situated himself. And that rather than seeking to elevate the mundane into the mythopoetic, Mekas's films poetically document the lived communities that undergird the poetry of creation and the life of art.

It seems no accident that it was only in 1964 that Mekas began to shoot the material that would come to constitute *Walden* (1969), the first of his major film diary compilations that would come to define his mature style. And his statement for the 1975 catalogue

- 40 *Film-Makers' Cooperative Catalogue*, 1975, 178, as cited in James, *To Free the Cinema*, 109.
- 41 For an overview of Mekas's early film criticism and his wavering commitment to cinematic realism, see John Pruitt, "Jonas Mekas: A European Critic in America," in James, *To Free the Cinema*, 51–61.

for the Film-Makers' Coop might even be read as a belated rejoinder to Malina and Beck—explaining his refusal to incorporate any of the later footage of *The Brig* regardless of what was missing or how it might affect the result:

To keep a film (camera) diary, is to react (with your camera) immediately, now, this instant: either you get it now, or you don't get it at all. To go back and shoot it later, it would be restaging, be it events or feelings . . . it has to register the reality to which I react and also it has to register my state of feeling (and all the memories) as I react. Which also means, that I had to do all the structuring (editing) right there, during the shooting, in the camera.⁴⁰

Up until 1964, Mekas had been torn between his ethical commitment to documentary realism, on the one hand, and his celebration of the absolute idiosyncrasy of individual creativity, on the other. In more than a decade of film criticism, he had wavered between the two, and in his own nascent practice of filmmaking, he had not yet landed on a suitable form for his aesthetic ambitions.⁴¹ The singularity of feeling Mekas discovered in his experience of filming *The Brig*—the necessity he had felt to capture the immanent intensity of an aesthetic and personal experience—seems to have solidified for him the model of a film diary as a spontaneous and performative practice, a mode of preservation and creation that might prove equal to the task of bridging art and life.