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In Conversation with Jonas Mekas

by Juliet Helmke, Noah Dillon, Margaret Graham, Taylor Bell, Caroline Dumalin, Sara Christoph, Tom Winchester, Aldrin Valdez, Suzanne Brancaccio, Nayun Lee, Ambereen Karamat, Marco Greco, and Jillann Hertel DelTejo

On the occasion of his recent solo exhibition *To New York With Love* at James Fuentes Gallery, Jonas Mekas, the indefatigable advocate of American independent cinema, graciously took the time out of his busy schedule to meet with the graduate students of the Art Criticism and Writing program at the School of Visual Arts for an in-depth conversation.

Juliet Helmke: What was the impetus behind borrowing money for that Bolex camera two weeks after you had arrived in New York?

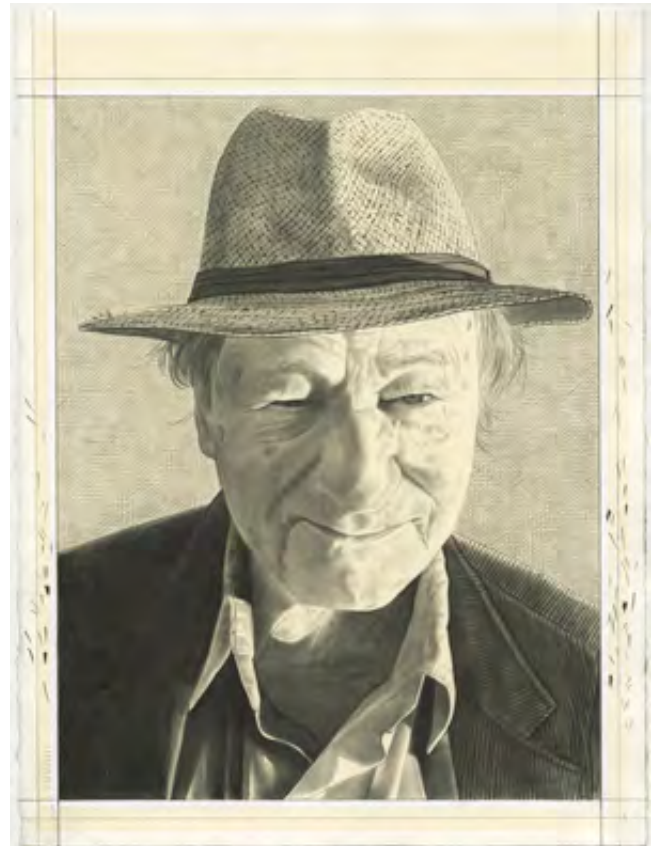
Jonas Mekas: Because I wanted to make movies!
[Laughter.]

Helmke: Did you always want to pursue filmmaking?

Mekas: Not always. I was born on a farm and when I came to New York I was already 27. So imagine the many, many things that preceded that. But I had arrived at that point where I wanted to make movies. And to make movies, you have to have a camera. Just to begin to fool around.

Noah Dillon: What was your youth in Lithuania like? How did you come to realize that you wanted to be an artist and/or a writer? Was there some pivotal moment or experience that encouraged you? Did your parents support this desire?

Mekas: I think, and I am not saying this as a joke, I was first hit by the Muses when I was about 6 years old. One evening I improvised my first rural epic poem to my father, all very down to earth, very



Portrait of the artist. Pencil on paper by Phong Bui.

realistic, about the work my father did that day, going to the mill, taking horses into the pasture, etc. I remember that moment as if it happened today. I remember my voice, I remember the intensity, I remember how my father listened to it in amazement. He could hardly believe it. All I have been doing since is trying to approach the intensity, concentration, and ecstasy of that moment, of that evening. And yes, my father and my mother always knew I would be leaving the farm for something else, and they always supported me. Because I was needed on the farm I was taken to primary school only when I was 9. So I started reading and writing very late. But from age 6 I began keeping a diary in pictures, drawings. As soon as I learned to write, at age 9, I began writing it, and writing poetry. I published my earliest poetry in children's magazines at age 12. I buried all my early diaries and writings, since they contained stuff against Soviets and Nazis, before running from Lithuania in 1944. I have no doubt they have well rotted by now.

Margaret Graham: In your films, old and new, there seems to be a distinct rejection of time as a linear entity; the past is the present is the future. Was this a conscious decision in the editing or did it manifest naturally as an extension of your personal philosophy?

Mekas: Actually, I'm making video now. Video cameras record images on tape, movie cameras record on a filmstrip. Both films and videos are moving images, motion pictures. But the instruments are very different. The same is true for painting: the different means available all lead to the same end. As to conscious decision making, I do everything automatically and intuitively. I'm neither a psychologist nor philosopher and therefore don't know much about it. I suspect that it's a combination of unconsciousness and consciousness, guidance or knowledge. I don't think I'm stupid. When I have a need to film something, it comes from the unconscious, but will go on to touch upon the conscious. It's very difficult to distinguish them.

Taylor Bell: Your work seems to focus on the past and the concept of transience—the constant comings and goings of the people around you. Why do you think that is, and how does cinema allow you to re-discover this theme?

Mekas: Really? Can you name me one example where people talk about the past? Besides, the video camera can film only the present, what's there now. I cannot film the past. The footage that I'm recording right now while talking to you will be past in one year. So I have 60 years of past material, but nobody in it talks about the past. It's always about now: drinking, singing, and so on. As time goes, it becomes past. And it will be.

Caroline Dumalin: Yet in the *365 Days Project*, which is dedicated to your loved ones, your deceased friends and peers are equally present as the living. I'm referring to your visits to Jean Genet's prison and Joseph Cornell's house and the use of archival footage of Harry Smith and Nam June Paik. Do you consider video a supreme medium for remembrance, more so than any other

today?

Mekas: I happened to be there in Paris, in that area where Genet was in prison. I didn't plan on videotaping it beforehand. It just happened. It's nice to have some documentation of important figures, writers, poets, who have affected your life. They're like your friends, so you record a memory, you pay tribute to them. It's very normal.

Sara Christoph: Your relationship with the camera is indeed remarkably natural. It almost feels like an extension of you, as if it were an integral part of how you process the surrounding world. After the *365 Days Project* was over, in January of 2008, did you go through any sort of withdrawal, or did you continue to film for a little bit?

Mekas: No. [*Laughter.*]

Christoph: One of the films in the *Pieces* series posted on your website narrates your experiences in Andy Warhol's Factory on East 47th Street. You discuss his screen tests as being one of his most original contributions to the art world, one that is often overlooked by museums. I'm wondering how these film portraits influenced you, and if there is a connection with your recent video work, considering the often direct relationship between your face and the camera?

Mekas: I was just stating a fact. It was not a question of influence at all. Everybody's doing their own thing. Although in some cases there are influences. One way or the other, all of us influenced each other continually, often by confirming something. For instance, around 1960, I began filming with my Bolex camera and became especially interested in orchestrating with single frames. Then I saw Marie Menken's work, and she had been doing the same thing since 1955! It's not necessarily influence, but a confirmation that you're on the right track.

Dumalin: On the day marking the middle of your project, July, 2007, you admitted that you were still "struggling with the images of reality, how to imbue it with, transport it into poetry."

Mekas: It's a big struggle and I'm still struggling now. Poets have always struggled. The haiku, for example, is the art-form which absolutely comes closest to reality and is also the formal ecstasy of what poetry can achieve. In cinema, the camera can only film reality, that is, what is in front of it. But how to achieve this formally? It's a question of essence and how to structure it, so that it can contain reality and at the same time transport it into a completely different plane! It is a challenge I think that poets have—and we will be facing it forever. I have been trying in the *365 Days Project*, I continue to try today, and I will keep trying until the day I won't be able to try anymore.



"World Trade Center Haikus" (2010). Single channel video. Betacam SP / DigiBeta Master. 13 minutes, 58 seconds. Edition of 3 + 2 AP. Image courtesy the artist and James Fuentes LLC.

Dumalin: It's interesting that you put the concentrated form of the haiku and reality side by side, seeing as life itself is often a bothersome storyteller, wearing us out with irrelevant plots, repetitions, and digressions. Did your struggle specifically involve finding beauty or highlights in each and every day of the year, like it usually does for most people?

Mekas: Highlights come from what you are, what interests you. You go through life as a sleepwalker until something unexpectedly stops you, jumps at you, touches you, and then you look. There are sounds all around and suddenly you listen to something. Why? Because your whole past dictates to which things you are attracted at certain moments. You notice something and you don't know why.

Dumalin: Like an antenna?

Mekas: Ezra Pound's "Artists are the *antennas* of the human race." Yes, there is no answer as to why you suddenly stop, notice, or film something. It's not just with haikus, there was also a period when the poet William Carlos Williams went down to reality.

Graham: Apart from the haiku, what are your thoughts on the dichotomy between form and content in art? Is one more important for you than the other?

Mekas: In 2001, the architect Raimund Abraham invited me to teach a cinema course at the Cooper Union. The course title was something like "Beautiful, Inescapable, Absolute Relationship Between Technology, Form, Content, Style." You cannot detach any of those things. As to technology, what you can do with 8mm, you cannot do with 35mm and vice versa. Likewise, what you can do with inks you cannot do with watercolors or oils. The tools already determine the subject. Every new tool, like video or internet, opens up completely new possibilities of content. And it brings with it something else that did not exist before. So it's all interrelated, absolutely connected.

Graham: I believe that also goes for Ezra Pound’s idea of making everything new. In our day and age, artists are mostly concerned with the formal aspect because of the feeling that the content has all been done before, it’s all been said before. But how it’s said—

Mekas: You cannot create new art just by concentrating on new forms! But on the other end, you see, this crazy concentration on new forms could pull in the content. Some people get obsessed with some formal thing. To really *bring* it to life, you may need a new technology.

Dillon: In that regard, can you explain what video means for you now as opposed to film in that early period?

Mekas: It’s something very basic. For instance, the Bolex is very different from the Mitchell, which is one of the key cameras in Hollywood commercial cinema. When I carry my Bolex and see a moment happening, I subtly press my button and the camera rolls and captures what’s in front of it. With video, I see something, I pull out the camera, I connect the power, and press it. By then already four seconds have passed. The climax of the event is *gone*. Video gives me the post-event. That’s one thing. The Bolex got me into restructuring reality completely by means of single frames. With video you can only do that by editing with new technology. But not while taping; it runs continuously. So I got involved, very involved with exploring the possibilities of single, long takes, without editing. I gravitated to real life situations. Video also permits you to go into any situation. You don’t have to carry lights! It’s a different tool. With video, my editing became choosing those moments where I succeeded in catching unique moments of real life. And it has nothing to do with what I did with my Bolex, with colors, and rhythms. That ended around 1990. One of the reasons I switched from film to video was that sometimes when I was traveling abroad, or going to universities, they had seen my films and they asked, “Can you show how you do it?” That’s finished. Because if I would try to show them, I would just imitate what I did before.

Tom Winchester: When you interviewed Emile de Antonio in 1969, he described his work as “collage” and claimed that such a method is necessary in film, to make the real come out of all that mass of footage. Do you agree?

Mekas: Not “necessary!” That doesn’t matter. More and more filmmakers were recording reality. That was the reality. And of course, de Antonio thought that was already a lot of material. Then video came in! Imagine what he would say about that amount of material! [*Laughs.*] It’s very normal, there’s nothing special about it. Every filmmaker shoots one hundred times more film than what you see on the screen as a final. And the same happens now with video.

Aldrin Valdez: In the January 12 entry of the *365 Days Project* you mention that you didn’t feel like

doing anything particular that day, apart from listening to beautiful music. Could you elaborate on the importance of music in your life?

Mekas: There's not much to say. I grew up in a village where everybody sang. There were no orchestras, no rock bands, no nothing. But in the evenings, on the weekend, after and during work, we were always singing. So it became part of my life very early on.

Graham: What would you do if you couldn't make movies anymore?

Mekas: I would do what I did before I came to New York. When I did not have a camera, I was writing. One's obsessions or drives gravitate to the means that permit one to do what one wants to do. In the displaced persons camp in Europe, you could not get cameras or film. But here I *could* get it. So I did. One always works. Or, maybe, I wouldn't do anything! Who knows?

Helmke: The way you film people is quite informal and, from what I understand, it's easy for the subjects to forget they are being filmed.

Mekas: People don't usually take me seriously. [*Laughter.*]

Helmke: In that case, do you have to be aware of their reactions?

Mekas: No! We are here, right now, in this room, by this table, but we are not consciously trying to be aware of each other. We are just here, sitting, conversing. We are just *being* what we are. So it's the same whenever I'm filming whatever I am. The awareness is there, but we don't think about it.

Helmke: Have you ever hesitated to exhibit anything that you have captured on film?

Mekas: No. I never film anything that is *improper* in some way. I don't know what I would have to film in order to be embarrassed by it later. I don't get into such situations. I am a very normal human being with a very normal life. If I'm embarrassed, I'm embarrassed that I filmed it so badly! And if I have done so, then I cut it out and throw it out.

Lee Ann Norman: When you were writing about film of the '50s to the '70s, the country was in a state of great cultural, political, and social transformation.

Mekas: Same as now.

Norman: Exactly. So I was wondering how you see the role of experimental film in society in the present? Do you suppose it has changed from then?

Mekas: It never really had a role. [*Laughter.*] It was always part of cinema, as an art. The avant-garde is like a frontier, the frontline of cinema. And all cinema—including Hollywood—reflects reality. In fact, sometimes the worse the film the more it reflects real life. The other thing is that it has become more complex since the '50s. Imagine cinema today as a big tree with different branches—as there is with literature or any other art. There are narrative as well as non-narrative or more abstract types of branches. Narrative forms can branch into drama, fantasy, musical, *film noir*, detective, western, etc. Then, of course, you have documentary: journalistic writing in newspapers and magazines, and *cinéma vérité* in cinema. Non-narrative forms were developed after 1950, mostly in the United States. Later, in 1980, England and France took over. So, what's the function of literature and poetry? What's the function of narrative and non-narrative cinema? What happened is that, until the '50s, cinema could express only one part of what we are all about. That is: the desire to listen, stories, experiences, of say *1,001 Arabian Nights*. But we also need to express those older, more subtle parts that cannot be expressed through narratives, through characters, through protagonists, and instead only in literature and dance and music. Very indirectly cinema had to develop all those other forms. And it *has* developed in those last 60 years, so that now cinema is a full art just as literature or any other art and just as our human experience can be expressed through cinema. That's what happened! That's where we are.

Dillon: Your writings from the '60s and your later films have a deep moral sense to them. What kind of morals, do you think, were driving your films in that early period?

Mekas: Muslim, Christian, Rosicrucian, Taoist, Pantheist. Where I come from, I'm basically a Pantheist. Does that answer your question? [*Laughter.*] It's right to be nice and good. Be free and do everything that you wish as long as it does not interfere, damage, or hurt others. There is a limitation to freedom. I don't believe in total freedom.

Jillann Hertel DelTejo: You do seem free of institution, yet your work is being taught all over the world in film and media studies programs. What do you hope—if you hope anything at all—is being relayed about your body of work in these sort of institutional settings that you would want students to take away?

Mekas: I don't know what people get from my films or writings. Each one gets what one needs at that moment and at different times. I don't know. I cannot answer that. I consider myself a maker of things. I'm a farmer. You can do whatever you want and keep moving ahead. I'm still moving ahead.

Suzanne Brancaccio: In your writings from the '50s and '60s, you express an obvious distaste for Hollywood cinema.

Mekas: No! I was very much into Hollywood cinema! I actually began in writing scripts—I want that to be known. I started *Film Culture* magazine in 1954. It came from a bunch of friends: Peter Bogdanovich, Andrew Sarris. We spent our nights on 42nd street, which in 1953, '54, '55, had like 15 movie theaters playing all night. Different genres or the same films, we knew it and we loved it and that's why we started the magazine. And it was, for 10 years practically, dominated by writings about and interviews with Hollywood directors of the world, meaning the world, Hollywood. And then, 10 years later, I noticed that there is so much coverage already of commercial cinema, and that there was so much happening in the independent field—the avant-garde as it was called, “underground”—and decided that I should give more space to that. In the beginning I was reviewing Hollywood and independents at the same time. I was the only writer on cinema in the *Village Voice*. And then the time came around, '58, maybe '62, when there was so much happening not only in commercial film, but also in the independent film, for instance the *Nouvelle Vague* was coming. I felt it was impossible for me to see and cover everything. I told Andrew Sarris, my co-editor at *Film Culture*, “You cover the commercial, and I will just concentrate on the independents.” That's when a new sort of direction came in.

Nayun Lee: What if you did not live in New York? Can you imagine your work and life without New York City?

Mekas: No, I cannot do that. Maybe I would have become another Joseph Conrad. Because just before I got my papers made by the United Nations refugee organization so that I could come to the United States, I was enlisted to work on a ship between Le Havre, France, and Sydney. So before I was called to the ship, suddenly somebody in Chicago made some papers for me to come work in a bakery in Chicago. And I said, “Okay, here I come!” But then the ship landed in New York, by miracle. I came out on the 23rd street pier, went up a few floors, looked through the window and said to my brother, “New York! We're in New York! Chicago? We would be crazy to go to Chicago! We are in New York!” [*Laughter.*] And that was it.

Brancaccio: In *Letter to Penny Arcade*, you attribute a lot of who you are to New York, a place that you say “saved your sanity.”

Mekas: In the post-war period I think I was becoming totally disillusioned with everything. Finished. I did not believe anything. So, when I came to New York, I was suddenly like, look, there is something interesting, something alive, something exciting.

Brancaccio: How do you think your experience here has shaped who you are as both an artist and a person, in relation to your earlier years in Lithuania?

Mekas: In Lithuania I was in paradise. Then I was thrown out of paradise. No use in talking to you

about paradise, because paradise, in my childhood, involved a lot of humanity, imagination, and poetry. And then you are suddenly thrown out into reality and into the West. In my childhood there was poetry, and the rest was prose. Both are real—they are part of the same.

Ambereen Karamat: Can you tell me about your poetry in relation to your film and writing?

Mekas: I only answer this indirectly. We have now, what, seven arts? And those seven arts express a different aspect of our being, our experience, our total memory, the needs of our bodies down to the deepest atoms of our being. There's dance, there's drama, there's singing. If we would need only one, if it would be that simple that we could express ourselves only through, let's say, dancing, that would be great! But, we are more complicated. We cannot express all that we are and progress further only through dancing—we have all these other aspects. What I'm trying to say, what I can express through poetry, I can only do through poetry, not through cinema, motion, or images, and what I can do through moving images, can only be done through that. So it's like different aspects of my being, the totality of what I am, my experience. We need cinema and all those arts—not for self-expression or recording the past, but as a tool for moving forward and growing. Self-expression, creativity...who needs it! [*Laughter.*]

Marco Greco: In your essay “Experimental Film in America,” you wrote that the mistake of those filmmakers who try to adapt James Joyce’s stream of consciousness method to cinema is that they adopt no moral stand. Do you consider experimental film within the same category, meaning, is there morality within experimental film?

Mekas: Everybody has moral sense, whether it's experimental or not experimental. You may have a kind of weird morality. But what is morality? How we perceive humanity and our relation to it? That's unavoidable, that's part of it; you cannot separate it. We are moral even when we are immoral, whatever morality is in any given society. But you cannot detach it, it is there. How you relate to other human beings, that's maybe what morality is.

Graham: It seems like you're filming all the time, and you say that you've been filming since you got a camera. And you have hours and hours of these motion pictures in storage. Do you ever watch things that you've filmed? How much time do you spend watching your films in relation to how much time you actually spend filming?

Mekas: The early film stocks were made of nitrate; they were fragile and inflammable. Some museums, like the Museum of Modern Art, never screened them because it was dangerous. But then they discovered they were deteriorating, melting, and becoming gooey. But Henri Langlois, who ran *The Cinémathèque Française*, was always screening the originals, and his originals were always in good shape! And why? Because he was constantly airing them, and the Museum of Modern Art was holding this precious old stuff that was "dangerous," and because they were not aired, much of it was self-destructed. And Langlois was always laughing, "Enjoy, screen those films, they like to be screened!" And his prints survived and now MoMA is borrowing them. [Laughter.]

Likewise, I discovered that my film color footage from 1950 is still in good shape, because I never put them in any special place. Those which were kept in rooms and remained unlooked at, faded, and eventually chemicals gathered and destroyed the film. Books like to be read, music likes to be played, film likes to be screened and seen, and the same with video, people, drinks, and everything else.

Dumalin: You recently presented at James Fuentes's gallery work titled "World Trade Center Haikus." It brought to mind the *Destruction Quartet* from 2006, which you showed exactly one year ago at the same location and also incorporates your old footage of the WTC Towers. In both films, 9/11 is detached from its date. In *Destruction Quartet* it is seen from and connected to earlier damaging histories, such as the demolition of the Berlin Wall. "World Trade Center Haikus," on the other hand, is mostly composed of archival footage of your family and, therefore, seemed to me like its intimate, gentler counterpart. Did your emotions toward the event change a lot between the making of both films and do they account for this in your eyes?

Mekas: Both pieces came by pure accident. *Destruction Quartet* was an answer to Liutauras Psibilskis's request to participate in a show in Sidney that he was putting together around the theme of destruction. I reviewed all the film and video footage that I had regarding "destruction." The four pieces that I chose from my material cover a wide range of destruction: political, terroristic, and



Image courtesy the artist and James Fuentes LLC.

artistic. The new piece, “World Trade Center Haikus” was a result of me going through unfinished, unedited film material which was beginning to fade, and it was about time that I did something with it. As I was going through it, I discovered that I had many, some 50 different views of the World Trade Center that I had filmed between 1970 and its destruction. Just around the same time, as I was going through the footage, James Fuentes called me telling me that he wanted to open his new gallery with my work, preferably with downtown material. That was it. I made the decision right there and then to make my own Hokusai cycle, “WTC Haikus.” It was all dictated by the footage itself and by the call of a friend. While pulling out the WTC footage, however, I decided to leave some of the preceding and following footage in, which was, in most cases, family footage. That personalized the haikus and made them more intimate. I did not want it to be just plain buildings. I have to tell you that I liked to look at the buildings from a distance but whenever I had to be inside the WTC buildings, for one reason or other I felt a kind of terror and was happy to leave them. I never felt good inside them, for what reason I do not know. I did everything to avoid them. By the way, in 2005 I went to Mount Fuji, hoping to film it. I stayed near it for three days but the clouds that covered Mount Fuji never parted, and I never saw it. I went back to Tokyo without seeing it or filming it.

Dumalin: The beginnings of Fluxus in SoHo have received a great deal of attention lately. Billie Maciunas published a memoir of her late husband George around the same time that the book *Illegal Living: 80 Wooster Street and the Evolution of SoHo* was released. At the launch reception of the latter on September 21, you shared some inspiring stories about George’s commitment to the cooperative. The present focus on historical Fluxus made me wonder about the legacy of Fluxus as art today. Is there still a place for its ideas in these times? Do you see any young artists working in a similar spirit now?

Mekas: Fluxus’s most intense period ended, I think, with the death of George Maciunas in 1978. But again, like the seeds planted by the other art movements of the 20th century, they are embedded in whatever artists are doing today. But there is a sort of neo-Fluxus movement happening very actively in Lithuania. Some 10 months ago, in a Soviet era Health Ministry building, a Ministry of Fluxus was opened, with many daily activities and many—maybe a hundred or more—rooms available to artists to do their stuff. I was there this past May and I found it very exciting. Nothing like that is happening in Paris or New York. The way I see it, Fluxus resembles in some ways the Warhol phenomenon. Both Warhol and Maciunas produced so much work, that every year or so a new aspect of Warhol is being presented for the first time. It will be same with George Maciunas. I think, for the next 10 or 15 years, exhibitions devoted to different aspects of Fluxus in museums. Which means, Fluxus is not yet history.

Dumalin: The activities of Jonas Mekas certainly aren’t. A large retrospective of your work, curated by Hans Ulrich Obrist, has been scheduled to take place at the Serpentine Gallery in London in 2011. Can you reveal anything about that or future projects you feel passionate about?

Mekas: Next week I will be in London and that's where we'll make the final decisions regarding my Serpentine exhibition. All I can tell you now is that it will consist of several installation pieces I have shown in other galleries or museums, including "World Trade Center Haikus." But most of the works, films, videos, installations, etc., will be new. I have been very busy these last three years and much of what I've done nobody, not even my friends, has seen. To coincide with the Serpentine exhibition, there will be other satellite exhibitions of different aspects of my work taking place in Budapest, Vilnius, Paris, and a few other places. To answer your question about what I am doing now, I just completed a two hour movie, *Sleepless Nights Stories*. There are about 20 stories in it, it's a new kind of narrative. It's not like anything else I've done before. And now, for the next couple of months, I will do nothing much else but work on completing and editing all of my film footage that I still have on my shelves, fading. It will be my last movie as a film, my *Fading Film*. I say "nothing else" but I know at the same time that I'll be putting more stuff on my jonasmekasfilms.com. And who knows what else I may become involved in during the next weeks and months? I am a very weak person; I do not know how to say no.