

Lucas Cejpek

I AM THERE

INVISIBLE CINEMA 3 reads the sign above the entrance to the film theater in the *Film Museum*, and to the left of the closed double doors a sign points to the *Film Library* on the upstairs while the audience fills the lobby and the clock above the auditorium door reads 8:17 p.m., two minutes after the announced beginning of the film, when the bell sounds and the right wing of the doors opens and the audience surges into the theater, where the screen is already brightly illuminated, the curtains are drawn back, and under the screen there stands a table with three chairs – the furniture is black like the auditorium walls, that is, invisible. A young man with a hand-held microphone greets the audience and a specialist from Paris, who uses a camera the way Jonas Mekas did to explain the latter's now classic avant-garde film *Walden: If you understand the camera, you understand the film*, says Pip Chodorov – I strike up a conversation with him after the presentation because I liked the way he explains Jonas Mekas's aesthetics by showing how a *16mm Bolex camera* functions: the images are not reworked later, they come into being during the filming: fast motion, double exposures, still shots. The camera records no sound and makes noises as it films: *It sounds like a typewriter*. From the start, Jonas Mekas wrote poems and a journal, in Lithuania and in Germany, where he experienced the end of the war as a forced laborer. Since then he has continued in New York with a camera: *Diaries, Notes and Sketches* is the subtitle of *Walden* and the original title of all his diary films, which he breaks

down into parts for presentations and provides with different titles. *I don't really make films: I never stop filming.* In his poem *Words Apart* Mekas breaks sentences down line by line into words and syllables: *my / heart's / impul / -ses / drive / me / to / disrupt / my / rhythms.* The intertitles in *Walden* are written with a typewriter, and the quotations from Thoreau are filmed from the book that a friend gave him when he was editing image material taken during six years (1964-69): *It was there. Central Park is my Walden,* Jonas Mekas says after the presentation in the *Film Museum* – he is standing in front of the screen next to the table that is prepared for the audience discussion, and he is talking into the hand-held microphone while gesturing broadly with his free hand – he is 90 years old and he has time: *You may ask me any question. We have the whole morning.* – It is half an hour to midnight, the film lasted 175 minutes, and after the third of six reels there was a short intermission, which I used to retire to the *Filmbar* and find out more about Jonas Mekas in magazines and catalogs there.

I AM THERE

These images go: no tragedy, no drama, no suspense, Jonas Mekas says in *Walden* – his voice structures the sequence of images just as the music does, which he recorded during editing from radio and television, while the noise of the subway provides the keynote: *To me, the subway is New York,* Jonas says during the discussion with the audience, *it's always there.* – The temporal sequence of the diary is broken up by anticipatory shots and flashbacks, the film switches from black and white to

color because Mekas ran out of film stock, and the optics change because the *Bolex* wasn't working and a friend had a *Beaulieu* with him, so I used that. These are all controlled accidents.

I AM THERE

The music in the *Filmbar* is subdued, and the light over the bar allows me to read while the waitress washes dishes in front of me. She is using so much dishwashing soap that several times she has to wring out the sponge under running water before she can wipe off the grating on the drip tray of the coffee maker. – *Just images, for myself and for a few others*, Jonas Mekas says. *One doesn't have to watch, one doesn't.* – The images show domestic scenes (his children), parties with friends (shared dinners, a wedding), street scenes (workers, passers-by), the change of seasons in Central Park (flowers, young women, and flowers again and again). – An audience member asks how one can take part in a wedding with a camera? – *I am not observing, I am reacting*, says Jonas Mekas. *I am there. I am part of it.*

I AM THERE

You tell me if you need anything, the waitress says to me, and I order another small glass of *Zweigelt*. On the wall across from me there is a row of bottles, from whiskey to aperitifs. – *Do you mind if I pour the wine into your glass?* the waitress asks, *this one is cracked.* – *I have the camera and there is something in front of the camera*, Jonas Mekas says. *Nothing else exists. No poetry. You just do it.* – He is wearing a dark-colored

beret with his blue work clothes: jacket and pants, shirt; in the breast pocket of the jacket there is a red ball-point pen which he uses the next day to sign a catalog for me from his exhibitions in Cologne and London in 2009 and 2010, with his first and last names. Under them, in the middle, he makes a dot.

I AM THERE

In the gallery *Krinzinger Projekte* Jonas Mekas raises his glass to his friends in Vienna: *I Lift My Glass of Wine to You, My Vienna Friends!*, especially to Raimund Abraham, who died in 2010 and in 2002 had erected the *Austrian Cultural Forum* in Manhattan, in a building space only 25 feet wide; to Peter Kubelka, with whom Jonas Mekas built up the *Anthology Film Archives*, and to Hermann Nitsch, with whom he is opening his exhibition, which above all shows *spontaneous collages*: two, three or four frames are extracted from the material and organized thematically: *Reminiscences from Germany, To New York with Love, My Two Families, My Vienna*: his films run projected on film screens and on the walls.

I AM THERE

In the back room stands a wooden table, *491 Broadway*, Jonas Mekas's address, with a fresh loaf of bread and an open bottle of white wine, sausage and cheese and bulbs of garlic. *I always had so much to do that I didn't have time to eat. I lived exclusively off Italian sausage and goat's cheese, garlic, and wine.*

I AM THERE

The door to the work room for the gallery employees is open when I get there, half an hour before the opening, so that I can take photographs undisturbed: PLEASE KEEP DOOR CLOSED AT ALL TIMES says the sign on the inside of the door, and the rope that is supposed to close off the stairway across from the gallery entrance is hanging loosely against the wall, with a sign fastened to it that says PRIVATE.

I AM THERE

From among the writings on display I am particularly struck by a hand-written note: *Napped half the day, / no one / punished me / Issa* - The Japanese poet (1763-1827) described himself as moving along tirelessly, *like clouds and water*, while at the same time complaining about the rain that Jonas Mekas loves so much.

Translated by Geoffrey C. Howes

Lucas Cejpek Born 1956 in Vienna. Studied German Studies and English in Graz. Freelance writer since 1990. Director of radio plays. Theater director (short short plays). Latest book: *Wo ist Elisabeth? Roman*, Sonderzahl 2009. Lucas Cejpek currently resides in Vienna.