

## ABOUT LEN LYE

Len Lye is one of New Zealand's most celebrated artists. His international reputation stands primarily on his achievements as a filmmaker and kinetic sculptor.

"One of my art teachers put me onto trying to find my own art theory. After many morning walks...an idea hit me that seemed like a complete revelation. It was to compose motion, just as musicians compose sound. [The idea] was to lead me far, far away from wanting to excel in...traditional art."

Len Lye had this revelation, while still a young man. It was to endure as the central theme of his life and art for the next sixty years generating an extraordinary body of works including films, paintings, drawings, writings and sculpture.

He was drawn to modern art by its enthusiasm for creating "new forms" - in Lye's terms, finding new imagery to "carry" the kinetic feelings that could be discovered in the body. Lye's sense of movement was always kinesthetic and physical, not purely a matter of visual patterns.

Lye is a clear example of that very rare type of artist who is equally at home in different media. As a young man he was one of the first sculptors in the world to work with movement; and the sculpture he made during the 1960s and 70s (in the collection of the Whitney Museum, the Chicago Art Institute, the Albright-Knox Gallery and other major museums) is among the best kinetic art of any period. He was also a highly original painter and writer.

Len Lye on the set of *Fountain of Hope*, New York, 1959.

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From the breadth of his experience he was able to approach each art from an unusual angle, and so he came up with such radical ideas in the 1930's as making films without a camera ("direct films"), or using Technicolor to transform footage into colour patterns as brilliant and unexpected as those of modern painting. His range of talents and inventiveness, combined with a lively personality and a remarkable life story, make Len Lye a compelling subject.

Lye was the pioneer of many film-making techniques, including 'direct animation', the process of drawing and scratching designs directly onto film. He made his first animated film in 1929 and continued experimenting with new film-making techniques to the end of his life in 1980. Throughout his 50 year career as a film-maker, Lye saw animated film as a perfect medium for experiment. He wanted animators to be "free radicals". He once wrote: "There has never been a great film unless it was created in the spirit of the experimental film-maker. All great films contribute something original in manner or treatment".

Lye was also a pioneer of 'kinetic sculpture' (sculpture that involves movement), making his first experiments around 1920. He wrote: "One of my art teachers put me onto trying to find my own theory of art. After many early morning walks an idea hit me that seemed like a complete revelation. It was to compose motion, just as musicians compose sound. This idea was to lead me far, far away from...traditional art". He saw his work in film and kinetic sculpture as part of the same attempt to develop a new art of motion.

Lye was interested not in objects moving but in what he called, "pure figures of motion". He came closest to this idea in his film, *Free Radicals* (1958, revised 1979) with its black patterns etched into black film and also in startling kinetic sculptures such as *Flip and Two Twisters*.

Lye was born in Christchurch, New Zealand in 1901. When he heard about the Futurists in overseas art magazines he was excited to learn that other artists were engaged in experiments similar to his. In his early years Lye made a close study of the art of the Maori, the indigenous people of New Zealand. In the early 1920s he spent several years in Australia and the islands of the South Pacific such as Samoa. He studied the dance rituals of Polynesia and the Australian Aborigines. In Australia he became involved with film-making which he saw as an ideal medium for his "art of motion". His first film, *Tusalava*, which he completed in London in 1929, was unique in style - as a semi-abstract animated film influenced not only by modernism but also by Maori, Aboriginal and Samoan art. The film was partly funded by his friends, Robert Graves and Laura Riding.

His breakthrough came in 1934-35 when he discovered that he could make films by drawing directly onto celluloid. This was an inspired solution to the problem that he could not afford to hire a film camera. He found he could create "pure figures of motion" by painting, stenciling or scratching. With the right ink and brush he could (to use Paul Klee's phrase) "take a line for a walk" or make it dance along a strip of film.

Lye enjoyed the sense of restless energy in hand painted shapes, which he saw as perfectly suited to the vigour and "resonance" of jazz music. Later, when he began to make motorised metal sculptures, he took a similar interest in the way strips of metal could be made to vibrate.

To finance his films it was necessary for Lye to add advertising slogans. This was the way that experimental film-makers, such as the German animator Oskar Fischinger were financing their films. (Incidentally, Fischinger and Lye admired each others work, and there were strong affinities between the films made in the 1930s by these two great animators). Lye found an enthusiastic John Grierson who screened Lye's films to add a splash of colour and humour to the programmes of black and white produced by his G.P.O. Film Unit.

and *Trade Tattoo* Lye experimented with the new colour separation processes such as Technicolor, taking footage and re-colouring it in a dazzling way so that it looked like a cubist painting or a collage by Matisse.

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In 1944 he moved to New York and contributed to an upsurge in experimental film-making in the U.S.A. In the 1940s and 50s he came to know many of the abstract expressionist artists, screened his films at their parties, and felt an affinity between their paintings and his films. Despite his failure to find sponsorship he continued to make films. In *Colour Cry* he extended the 'rayogramme' method in new directions, using everything from strips of film to patterned fabric to accompany a spine-tingling blues song by Sonny Terry. In *Free Radicals* and *Particles in Space* he gave up colour to concentrate on the most basic elements of the film medium - light and movement. He developed new symbols of "energy" scratched onto black film with a variety of tools ranging from ancient Indian arrowheads to modern dental tools.

Many animators have picked up the idea of direct film-making and used it in their own way. Norman McLaren, a fellow member of the G.P.O. Film Unit was deeply impressed by *Colour Box*. After Grierson gave him a job at the Canadian Film Unit, McLaren had a long and notable career as a direct film animator, and to this day many viewers confuse Lye's films with McLaren's. The two film makers were friends and always spoke generously about each others work. Lye's influence has also been acknowledged by many avant-garde film makers in the United States.

Although Lye continued to make films he was mainly involved in his later years in making motorised metal sculptures. As a sculptor he programmed strips of stainless steel to vibrate and spin at selected speeds, creating "figures of motion" and flashes of light similar to those found in his later films. His sculptures produced metallic sounds so that each piece seemed to be dancing to its own soundtrack. Lye first exhibited his sculptures at the Museum of Modern Art in 1961, and subsequently took part in many group exhibitions of kinetic sculpture in Europe. His works range from small constructions that move in an exquisitely slow, sensuous way (such as *Fountain* and *Grass*) to huge pieces that create a thunderous noise and shake the walls of the gallery.

His work and ideas continue to influence those involved in kinetic sculpture and experimental animation. He was honoured for his originality in 1992 when he was included in "Territorium Artis", the opening exhibition at the Kunsts- und Ausstellungshalle in Bonn. This exhibition grouped him with artists such as Picasso, Duchamp and Brancusi as one of the hundred great innovators of twentieth century art. Lye wanted to build giant versions of his sculpture in open landscape, to "pay homage to the energies of nature", and he left detailed plans. Today, after his death, the Len Lye Foundation is building those giant works in New Zealand.

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