

Stirring Motion

Len Lye – Motion Composer at Museum
Tinguely, Switzerland

by Stefanie Bräuer

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Local art historian and media studies scholar Stefanie Bräuer walks us through a recent exhibition titled Len Lye – Motion Composer in Basel, Switzerland that presented a historically comprehensive overview of New Zealander Len Lye’s work in filmmaking, kinetic sculpture, painting, and other media. The exhibition ran from 23 October 2019 until 26 January 2020 at Museum Tinguely, a museum dedicated to Jean Tinguely who, like Lye, created kinetic sculptures. So far the most thorough presentation of Lye’s art in Europe, the exhibition was organised in partnership with the Len Lye Foundation and the Govett-Brewster Art Gallery in New Plymouth, which houses the collection and archive of Len Lye.

On entering the exhibition *Len Lye – Motion Composer* at Museum Tinguely in Basel, the visitor is confronted with a broad range of media: In the entrance area alone, a kinetic sculpture is presented alongside painting and film. In the first gallery, the spectrum is extended to textile works, writing, photograms and drawings from his early work in the 1920s and 30s (Fig. 1). Lye was undeterred by the multitude of possible materials and techniques: He used a variety of methods to explore his equally expansive interests in (for example) psychoanalysis and Indigenous as well as Western modernist imagery.



Fig. 1a: Installation view with works by Len Lye: *Polynesian Connection* 1928 (left), *Unit* 1925 (center), *Tusalava* 1929, silent version (projection) © 2019 Museum Tinguely, Basel. Photo: Nicolas Lieber.



Fig. 1b: Installation view with works by Len Lye: *Polynesian Connection* 1928 (left), *Unit* 1925 (center), *Tusalava* 1929, silent version (projection) © 2019 Museum Tinguely, Basel. Photo: Nicolas Lieber.



Fig. 2: Installation view with works by Len Lye: *Kaleidoscope* 1935 (monitor on the left), *Marks and Spencer in a Japanese Garden (Pond People)* 1930 (right) © 2019 Museum Tinguely, Basel. Photo: Nicolas Lieber.

The self-taught painter, poet, experimental filmmaker and kinetic sculptor was born in Christchurch, Aotearoa New Zealand in 1901 and passed away in New York in 1980, where he had been living since 1944. In between he spent time living in Sydney (1922-1926, with interruptions for travels to Pacific Islands such as Samoa, Fiji, the Cook Islands and Tonga in 1924-25) and London (1926-1944). The exhibition is structured roughly chronologically and provides a broad overview of Lye's oeuvre, with an emphasis on the relationships between various media. The most prominent link between these is the artist's fascination with motion, as reflected in the exhibition's title *Motion Composer*, a label chosen by Lye to describe his occupation. His investigation of what he called *figures of motion*, a term derived from melodic figures, connects his work in sculpture and film.^[01] This reference to music is common in the context of early 20th century avant-gardes and paved one of several ways into abstraction. Lye's first experimental film *Tusalava* (1929) employed abstracted imagery and was initially meant to be accompanied by a music piece for two pianos, scored by Lye's friend and collaborator Jack Ellitt, during its premiere screening in London in 1929. Even though sound film has been established as state of the art around that time, *Tusalava* didn't have a sound track and Ellitt's original score remains lost. It is one of the exhibition's achievements to take the volatile histories of moving image into account by presenting two versions of *Tusalava* side by side: A 7-minute version based on a 2008 archival project, shown with the standard 24 frames per second and accompanied by a score composed by Eugene Goossens, and a silent version,

projected at a slower speed and resulting in a longer running time of 10 minutes.

The word *tusalava* is Samoan, suggesting “in the end everything is just the same”, but the work’s visuals draw upon imagery related to Aboriginal Australia.^[02] The exhibition itself does not discuss issues of modernist primitivism or Lye’s pastiche approach of appropriating Indigenous cultures, though these issues are critically examined in the accompanying three-volume catalogue, paying heed to both Lye’s early 20th century context and present-day repercussions. As curator Megan Tamati-Quennell acknowledges: “What is missing from the discourse about primitivism and Lye’s implication in it, are the larger issues of Indigenous dispossession, land loss and cultural imperialism.”^[03] But as art historian Ann Stephen points out in her catalogue essay, *Tusalava* is currently being reclaimed and thereby fed back into a cross-cultural exchange, citing as an example the film’s inclusion in a 2015 performance by the Yamani Indigenous women’s group.^[04] Lye’s leanings to exoticism are equally apparent in his *Totem and Taboo* sketchbook from 1922-26 a facsimile of which is published as the third volume of the exhibition catalogue.^[05] This sketchbook includes excerpts from Sigmund Freud’s 1913 study of the same title, illustrating Lye’s vivid interest in the unconscious and consequent contributions to the Surrealist movement, which culminated in three of his works being included the 1936 International Surrealist Exhibition in London. Two of these Surrealist works are shown in Basel, alongside other pieces from the 1930s (Fig. 2).



Fig. 3: Len Lye, *Rainbow Dance*, 1935, (Filmstill), 5', 35mm, colour (Gasparcolor), sound; production: Basil Wright, Alberto Cavalcanti, by GPO Film Unit, for Post Office Savings Bank; Camera: Frank Jones, Music: Tony's Wife (Rico's Creole Band), Sound editing: Jack Ellitt, Dance: Rupert Doone; First shown: 1936, *Venice Film Festival* © Courtesy of the Len Lye Foundation and the British Postal Museum and Archive.



Fig. 4: Installation view with works by Len Lye: *Blade* 1962, reconstructed 2018 (left), *Witch Dance* 1965, reconstructed 2016 (center), *Loop/Universe* 1963 (right), series of photograms from 1947 (right) © 2019 Museum Tinguely, Basel. Photo: Nicolas Lieber.

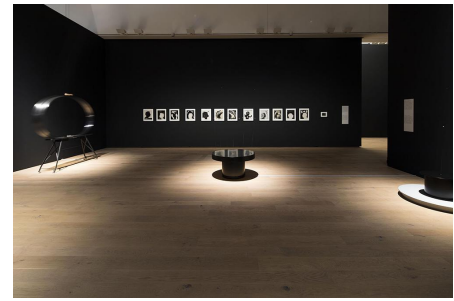


Fig. 5: Installation view with works by Len Lye: *Loop/Universe* 1963 (left), series of photograms from 1947 (on the wall), *Witch Dance* 1965, reconstructed 2016 (center) © 2019 Museum Tinguely, Basel. Photo: Nicolas Lieber.

During the same prolific period, Lye produced a number of colour films with accompanying music, presented in the exhibition through monitors and projections. These films negotiate a free-wheeling experimental approach (Len Lye is known as an innovator of several direct-film techniques of cameraless animation) with institutional practices, commercial applications and technical affordances. *Rainbow Dance* from 1935, for example, was commissioned by the General British Post Office's Film Unit to advertise for the GPO Savings Bank. Set to Cuban dance music, various elements rendered in intense colours swirl and stir, creating an electrifying sense of motion. The methods employed include stop-motion animation in combination with live-action footage and hand-drawn backgrounds, as well as direct-film techniques. The latter involved painting directly onto the filmstrip and the use of stencils to apply paint. According to film scholar Alla Gadassik, stencils may be understood as a pattern storage and stencilling as a way of creating distinct *figures of motion* during the process of cameraless animation.^[06] Additionally, *Rainbow Dance* makes use of the specific colour-separation process available at that time through extensive post-production at the optical bench to create vivid colours (Fig. 3). Lye summed up the process of synthesising these artificial colours as follows: "In other words, an artist separated the colours instead of leaving it to the colour filters. [...] *Rainbow Dance* is a combination of black and white

photographic records equalling densities of colour which are printed on Gasparcolor film stock.”^[07]

In the late 1950s, a while after having settled in New York City, Len Lye set filmmaking aside and turned to kinetic sculpture. He began to explore the torsions, tensions and oscillations of thin metal rods and sheets, experimented with different scales and investigated the ways in which they produced sound. Set in motion through motors connected to timers, the sculptures were programmed to move in specified progression over the course of one evening or during the length of an exhibition. These arranged sequences of kinetic movement may be likened to choreographies. In fact, Lye presented his works as performers dancing to music, such as on the occasion of an evening event at MoMA in 1961. As Andres Pardey, curator of the Museum Tinguely exhibition points out in the catalogue introduction, the tie between Lye and Tinguely rests not only on both artists’ preoccupation with kinetic sculpture, but also on a more direct connection: Jean Tinguely was in the audience of the MoMA event and Lye, in turn, repeatedly made references to the Swiss artist.^[08] In the exhibition, Lye’s sculptures are lit directly from above, staging them in an impressively dramatic way and associating this contemporary presentation with previous theatrical installations (Fig. 4-5). In the same room, a series of photograms from 1947 showing the outlines of some of the artist’s friends and acquaintances offers the opportunity to think about the context in which he realised his New York pieces. However, the show chooses a monographic approach and focuses on Lye’s life and work while leaving aside the socio-economic contexts facilitating his accomplishments. The artist’s working conditions during his New York years and the fact that his achievements in the field of kinetic sculpture were made possible by his partner Ann Lye’s support and earnings as a successful real estate agent goes unmentioned in the exhibition.^[09]

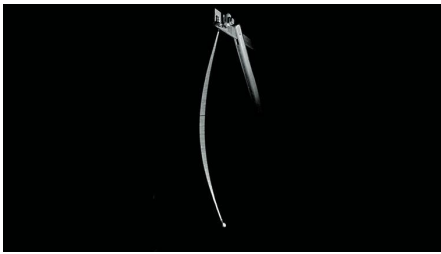


Fig. 6a: Len Lye: *Sky Snake* 1965, reconstructed 2019 © Courtesy Len Lye Foundation Collection; Govett-Brewster Art Gallery/Len Lye Centre. Photo: Olivia Webb.

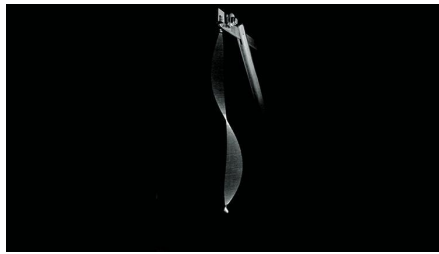


Fig. 6b: Len Lye: *Sky Snake* 1965, reconstructed 2019 © Courtesy Len Lye Foundation Collection; Govett-Brewster Art Gallery/Len Lye Centre. Photo: Olivia Webb.



Fig. 7: Installation view with works by Len Lye: *Sky Snake* 1965, reconstructed 2019 on the occasion of the exhibition © 2019 Museum Tinguely, Basel. Photo: Nicolas Lieber.



Fig. 8: Installation view with works by Len Lye: *Universe Walk* 1960s, maquette (left), *Fountain I* 1960, reconstructed 2007 (center), *All Souls Carnival* 1957 (projection) © 2019 Museum Tinguely, Basel. Photo: Nicolas Lieber.

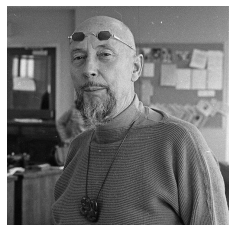
In the next gallery, one is met with a swirling metal bead chain niched in an alcove and suspended from the ceiling: *Sky Snake* is presented as a reconstruction specially executed for this exhibition, an enlarged version of the original work exhibited in 1965 (Fig. 6-7). In fact, Len Lye intended his kinetics to be built at a larger scale than the sizes chosen for their initial implementations. In that sense, his sculptures may be understood as models, as is demonstrated in the exhibition's final gallery (Fig. 8). Here, the visitor is confronted with sketches and maquettes from the 1960s, mapping out possible future realisations of the works in outdoor settings, such as an ambitious lake project including a temple. This massive scale certainly invokes an imposing grandeur dwarfing the potential observer. Yet at the same time, Lye caricatures this monumentality by adding some elements of light-hearted playfulness to his sketches which, for example, make the proposed lake resemble an amusement water park. The New Zealand-based Len Lye Foundation, established shortly before the artist's death in 1980, continues to execute

reconstructions and large scale versions of his sculptures and thereby carries on Lye's legacy.

Footnotes

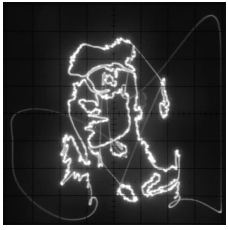
01. See Roger Horrocks, 'Motion, Time, Energy', in *The Long Dream of Waking. New Perspectives on Len Lye*, ed. by Paul Brobbel, Wystan Curnow, and Roger Horrocks (Christchurch: Canterbury University Press, 2017), pp. 39–58 (p. 48).
02. See Paul Brobbel, 'Stopped Short by Wonder: Aotearoa to Hammersmith', in *Len Lye. Motion Composer. Texts, exh.-cat. Museum Tinguely* (Heidelberg: Kehrer, 2019), pp. 15–27 (p. 24).
03. See Megan Tamati-Quennell, 'Kua tae mai te wa, e whakapuru ai tatou i nga kowhao o te waka. The Time Has Come When We Must Plug the Holes in the Canoe. Len Lye's Use of Indigenous Art', in *Len Lye. Motion Composer. Texts, exh.-cat. Museum Tinguely*, pp. 49–61 (p. 57).
04. See Ann Stephen, 'The Oceanic Primitivism of Len Lye's Animation "Tusalava" (1929)', in *Len Lye. Motion Composer. Texts, exh.-cat. Museum Tinguely*, pp. 29–43 (p. 43).
05. See Roger Horrocks, 'Len Lye, Totem and Taboo Sketchbook', in *Len Lye. Motion Composer. Totem and Taboo Sketchbook, exh.-cat. Museum Tinguely*, pp. 99–102 (p. 100).
06. See Alla Gadassik, 'Trade Tattoos: Animation Stencils and Readymade Movement', in *The Long Dream of Waking. New Perspectives on Len Lye*, pp. 184–203 (p. 192).
07. Len Lye, 'Experiment in Colour', *World Film News and Television Progress*, 1.9 (1936), 33.
08. See Andres Pardey, 'Len Lye: Composing Motion', in *Len Lye. Motion Composer. Texts, exh.-cat. Museum Tinguely*, pp. 9–14 (p. 13).
09. One finds a brief aside from Wystan Curnow in the exhibition catalogue, though, referencing "some help from Ann who set herself up in the real estate business." Wystan Curnow, 'Len Lye and the Distribution of the Sensible', in *Len Lye. Motion Composer. Texts, exh.-cat. Museum Tinguely*, pp. 99–107 (p. 103).

Biographies



Len Lye (1901–1980) was a New Zealand artist based in London and, from 1944 onward, in New York, whose practice included experimental film, kinetic sculpture, painting, poetry, photography and textile work, among other media. He is known for his kinetic sculptures and primarily for his experimental film, having introduced new direct-film techniques to cameraless animation. His films are held in archives such as the New Zealand Film Archive, the British Film Institute, the Museum of Modern Art in New York, and the Pacific Film Archive at University of California, Berkeley.

www.lenlyefoundation.com www.govettbrewster.com/len-lye



Stefanie Bräuer is an art historian who works at the intersection of art history, media studies, film history and the history of science. Currently, she is pursuing a doctoral thesis on the implementation of electronic imagery in early 1950s experimental film. Parallel to her research, she has taught courses on the history of audiovisuality, as well as on the theory and culture of digital media at universities in Switzerland and Germany. www.medienwissenschaft.philhist.unibas.ch/de/personen/stefanie-braeuer

