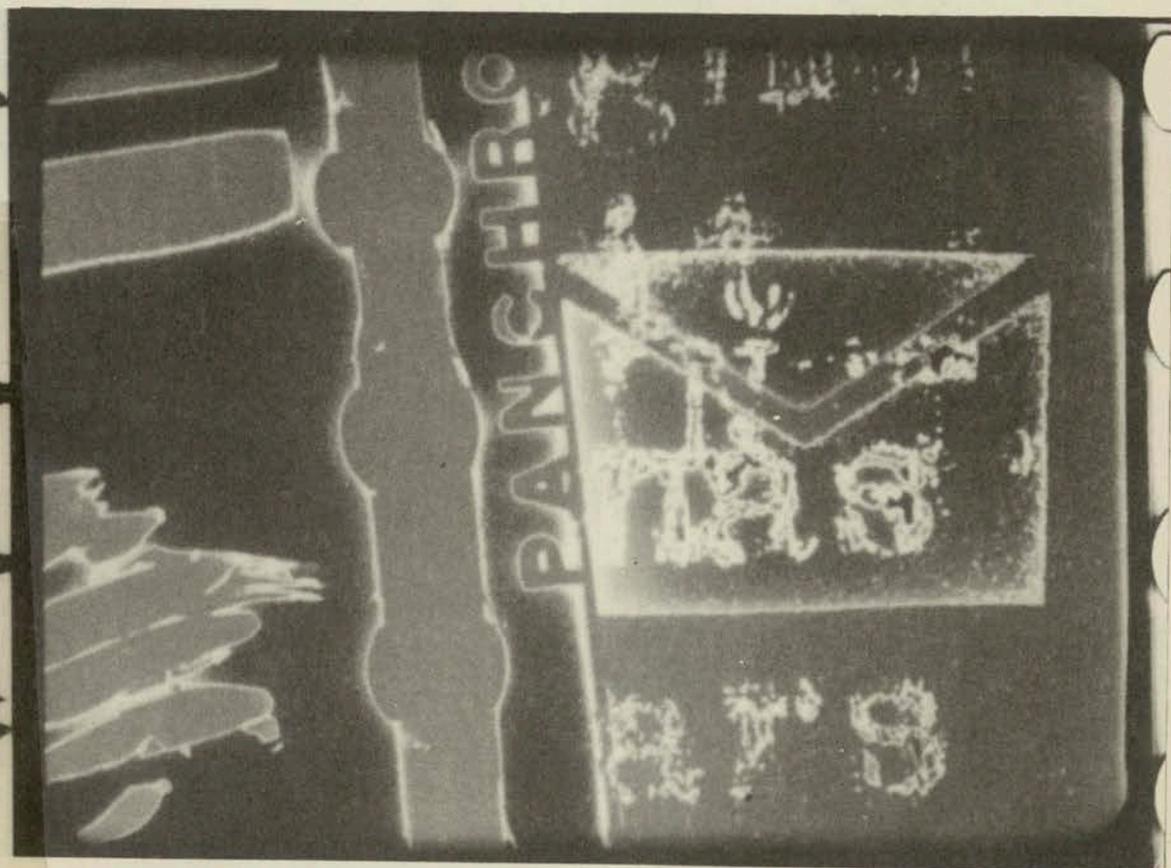


IMAGES IN MOTION

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## IMAGES IN MOTION

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12 MAY - 10 JUNE 1990

GOVETT-BREWSTER  
ART GALLERY  
NEW PLYMOUTH NEW ZEALAND

## IMAGES IN MOTION

### Introduction and acknowledgements

Len Lye made his mark on the international film community by pioneering direct film -- the process of making film without a camera. He is also an influential precursor of the artists who are shaping a new film culture here. This territory is rapidly becoming a feature of New Zealand's cultural landscape.

This exhibition provides an opportunity to view Len Lye's films alongside a programme of recent works by a new generation of innovative film and video artists.

The Gallery is grateful to the lenders to the exhibition: the artists, the Len Lye Foundation, the Queen Elizabeth II Arts Council, the New Zealand Film Archive, the National Film Library, Pagan and Flying Nun.

The Gallery wishes to thank Roger Horrocks for his curatorial input and essays. We also thank the National Art Gallery, the New Zealand Art Gallery Directors' Council and Dominion Television Rentals (New Plymouth) for supplying video equipment, and Frank Stark and Jan Bieringa for their assistance.

John McCormack  
Director

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BOX 647 NEW PLYMOUTH, NEW ZEALAND

ISBN: 0-908848-04-8

COMPILATION: JOHN McCORMACK  
DESIGN: VERNE BARRELL  
PRODUCTION TYPIST: LORRAINE ROEBUCK  
PROOF READER: BARBARA MARE  
PRINTER: ARIES PRINT, NEW PLYMOUTH

Cover image: A still from Lye's film, Trade Tattoo 1937.

GOVETT BREWSTER ART GALLERY



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## LEN LYE — 50 YEARS OF EXPERIMENTAL FILM-MAKING

Len Lye's extraordinary career as an experimental film-maker spanned more than fifty years. It's a career that gives us fresh perspectives on the history of film-making and the history of modernism in art.

The first films that Lye saw as a child in New Zealand - in the 1900s and early 1910s - belonged to that unique period when the film medium was so new there was still little agreement about its basic forms and techniques. Audiences were still fascinated by the sheer novelty of moving images on a wall. While the origins of other arts such as painting, sculpture and music remain lost in history, the emergence of the art of film was witnessed by our own grandparents or great-grandparents. (The first centennial of this art is due to be celebrated five years from now.)

When Lye was in his mid-teens, an American film-maker named D.W. Griffith made a feature-length film, *The Birth of a Nation* (1915), which succeeded in codifying the basic narrative and editing conventions that have remained in force ever since. The film broke box-office records all over the world, including New Zealand. Lye, when he became a film-maker, wanted to return to the openness of possibility that had existed in the early days. He remarked: "*For me, all film is D.W. Griffith.*" He saw an urgent need to "*get out of the D.W. Griffith technique*" because the narrative language of film had grown so monolithic. Even animation, potentially the freest form of film-making, had become a slave of "Griffith". For example, Walt Disney's cartoons obeyed the same rules of editing as live-action films. Lye preferred the work of earlier animators such as Emile Cohl which were based on doodling or what Paul Klee described as "taking a line for a walk."

It was not that Lye avoided mainstream films - on the contrary, he was well-known at his local cinema in Greenwich Village for his uninhibited response, laughing or sobbing his way through the latest feature-films. But as an artist he could not understand why the limitless potential of the medium had been narrowed down to a single set of formal possibilities, the Griffith technique, which had not only come to control Hollywood but had also (in the 1950s) taken over television.

This radical desire for openness that was basic to his thinking about art had been shaped by the early years of modernism. Modern art was born at the same time as the film medium. Many of the modernists felt a strong affinity with the new medium --- Marcel Duchamp, Man Ray, Fernand Leger, Hans Richter, Laszlo Maholy-Nagy, Salvador Dali, and the Futurists Bruno Corra and Arnaldo Ginna were some of the artists who made films. Avant-garde magazines such as *Les Soirees de Paris* reviewed the latest slapstick comedies alongside exhibitions by Picasso and Braque. But film was a difficult medium and many experimental projects were never completed. The direction that modernist film-making should follow remained an open question.

In the early 1920s Lye who knew a great deal about overseas developments in art was struggling to modernise his own work. At the time he could find no one in New Zealand who shared such interests. In European modernism he saw a hunger for new possibilities that matched his own, a high ambition for art that could actively create new forms of reality. In the mid-'20s he came to the



Len Lye, film-maker.

conclusion that one of the best ways to achieve this radical aim was to develop the medium of film.

Modernism also alerted him to other research areas - non-Western art, tribal art, cave art. That modernists should be attracted to ancient forms of art may seem paradoxical, but those forms provided many ideas to artists attempting to break out of the Western tradition - wanting to escape from Brunelleschi and Alberti (shall we say) as Lye wanted to escape from Griffith. Lye shared the Cubists' enthusiasm for African art, but his years in New Zealand, Australia, and Samoa gave him an equally strong interest in Maori and Aboriginal art, and in the tapa and tattoo designs of the South Pacific.

Lye's first completed film *Tusalava*, screened in London in 1929, brought these interests together in a synthesis of Maori art, Aboriginal art, and abstract art, together with a Samoan title. There had never been an animated film like it. Though *Tusalava* was praised by avant-garde artists and Film Society members it frightened away the film producers who might have financed the sequels Lye wanted to make. For the next five years he could not afford to rent film equipment. Finally in a burst of lateral thinking he began to explore the possibilities of painting directly onto celluloid. This proved to be a very fruitful discovery which he summed up in the phrase "Look ma, no camera!". Direct film-making (as he called the new method) offered a way out of the Griffith technique of editing. Not that the method was easy - a strip of film was so small that it was very difficult to control the images. But Lye had trained his hand and eye through years of "doodling". Also relevant was his knowledge of tapa and other forms of hand-painted design.

To pay for the processing and sound-track of his direct films Lye agreed to add brief advertising slogans. To help to get the films into cinemas he added popular dance music or jazz. This was a strategy that other avant-garde film-makers (such as Oskar Fischinger in Germany) were using at the time. The only way to finance experimental films was to give them a double appeal --- to charm casual viewers by the use of bright colour and lively music, while challenging serious viewers with the complexities of modern art. Lye was happy to use music with strong rhythm because it provided a framework for his images "to dance with" (in synchronization) "or against" (in counterpoint).

His films of the 1930s reached a huge audience. Colour films were still a novelty and his hand-painting produced colours brighter than those obtained by any camera. Screenings of his films in cinemas were often noisy --- some customers booed, others cheered --- and newspaper reviewers rushed to join the argument. The films won awards at international festivals. By 1938 Lye was sufficiently well-known for *Time Magazine* to publish a profile that described him as England's alternative to Walt Disney.

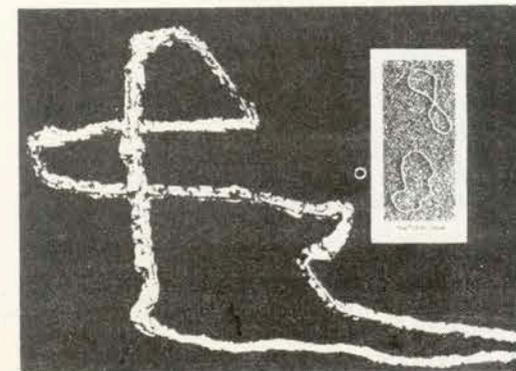
Though he continued to make hand-painted films he was determined not to repeat himself. He said: "Every film I got, I tried to interest myself in it by doing ...something not previously done in film technique." In *Rainbow Dance* (1936) and *Trade Tattoo* (1937) he invented a new way to use film processing methods, transforming black-and-white footage by brilliant colours, mixing realism with abstract images. In *North or North-West* (1937) he attacked "the Griffith technique" head-on, defying the usual rules for editing live action. Unfortunately all that the Post Office, the sponsor of the film, had wanted was a simple little drama about

the need to address letters carefully! The Post Office asked for the most experimental sequence to be removed and this unfortunately has been lost. Nevertheless, the rest of the film was still strange enough for it to be screened at Surrealist exhibitions.

For *Colour Cry* (1952) Lye developed a new style of direct film-making. He placed textiles, oddly-shaped objects, and colour filters on a strip of film then exposed them by the *photogram method* to create complex, layered images. These abstract shapes were synchronised to an eerie, howling blues by Sonny Terry. In *Rhythm* (1957) he experimented with jump-cutting, a technique familiar to viewers today but greeted as highly original at the time. His later films, *Free Radicals* (1958/1979) and *Particles in Space* (1979) explored yet another range of direct film-making possibilities - scratching rather than painting designs onto celluloid. He gave away colour and concentrated on patterns of light in darkness, stripping the film medium to its most basic physical elements. Such films come as close as the medium has ever come to Abstract Expressionism or gestural painting. The links between Lye's film-making and contemporary art were always strong --- in the 1920s and '30s images from his films were exhibited alongside the work of abstract artists: in the late '30s his films were included in Surrealist exhibitions, in the late '40s and early '50s he screened his films at The Club which was the meeting-place of the Abstract Expressionists, and in the late '60s and early '70s he contributed both films and sculptures to vanguard exhibitions of kinetic art.

In New Zealand the tendency has always been for experimenters to drop out after two or three films, discouraged because of lack of support, or to turn to more commercial forms of film-making. But Lye could never make a film without trying out something new, even though it tended to throw his current sponsor into a panic. He believed that: "There has never been a great film unless it was created in the spirit of the experimental film-maker. All great films contributed something original in presentation, manner, or treatment."

This concern with experiment never meant that Lye wanted films to be solemn or pretentious or boring - his own work was always sensuous and full of humour. In his words: "This wisdom wisecracking is my amusement", a way to avoid "dags on the mind, mental stultification." To add a final comment from a 1936 essay about abstract films: "Adverse criticism from a box-office point of view is no doubt legitimate. But...(there is) the hope that there will eventually be a demand, not solely for films of the literary (or narrative) type, but also for colour films that will convey pure sensation."



Still from *Free Radicals* 1958

## EXPERIMENTAL FILM-MAKING IN NEW ZEALAND

Why are experimental films important? One answer would be Len Lye's assertion that: "*Experimental film-making is as basic to the development of screen treatment as the application of basic research is in technology.*"

From this perspective it is striking to consider how little encouragement is offered today to film and video-makers engaged in *research*. Moving images have become increasingly present in our lives through home video cameras, films rented on video, films and videos in the classroom, pay TV channels, satellite TV, portable TV sets, and many other new developments. Yet the wide range of new equipment has not been accompanied by a comparable variety of new forms and styles. The research and development seems to have been devoted entirely to the new technology. When we examine the films and television programmes themselves we find the pressures of the marketplace producing a high degree of standardisation; there are more television channels yet those channels look basically the same. Life on television must be squeezed into half-hour and one-hour slots, with little room between the ad breaks for anything complex or original. In the cinema most films follow a standard pattern of narrative in the Hollywood tradition - one aspect of what Lye called the *Griffith technique*. Films are also expected to have a smooth, slick style and a huge budget that includes high-tech special effects.

To find basic research in Lye's sense we must turn to experimental films and videos - work that is low-budget and often (by necessity) low-tech, interested in challenging rather than in flattering the viewer. To quote Lye again, a good film of this kind is "*something stripped of all outside padding to leave only its concentrated core.*" And: "*it moves on and off the screen and you aren't forced to see it if you don't want to. After all the fuss...there's nothing left but a few designs complete in themselves, unattached to history or sentiment, done because (the artists) were feeling good and not goofy.*" Such films and videos are hard to find - they turn up at film-makers' co-ops, art schools, film societies, and fringe festivals. For nearly thirty years the QEII Arts Council has been the main local source of support. In the last ten years public art galleries have begun to provide a regular venue for work of this kind.

Not everyone approves of the term *experimental film* - some prefer *independent* or *alternative* or *avant-garde* or *fine-art film*. Nevertheless, a label of some sort is needed to identify art that goes against the current, art that flows away from the mainstream --- in any one of a thousand possible directions. We are fortunate to have Len Lye as an ancestor, a role model of the film-maker who insists on thinking laterally. He proved that good films could be made on small budgets, provided there was enough imagination at work to overcome the technical constraints. Lye was a do-it-yourself artist, a classic example of the resourcefulness that has always played an important part in our film history. He also exemplified the *intermedia* approach, the ability to combine or work in different media which has continued to be a strong feature of New Zealand film.

Among the films and videos to be screened at this gallery, *Drum/Sing* is based on a collaboration between director Gregor Nicholas and the music group *From Scratch*. Nicholas used to design the lighting for the group's live performances. *From Scratch* is led by Philip Dadson who is not only a composer but also a

sculptor and film-maker, as illustrated by *Earthworks*, (the record of an art event as well as a film in its own right). Many of today's film and video artists are graduates of the *Intermedia* course taught by Dadson at the Elam School of Fine Arts.

Robert Jahnke, the director of *Te Utu*, is well-known as a book illustrator. Greg Burke, represented here by *Viewing*, has incorporated his films and videos into gallery installations. Artists such as Chris Knox (*Turning Brown and Torn In Two*) and Fetus Productions (*Back Beat*) write and perform the music on the soundtracks of their films, and they have also screened those films as part of their concerts. Richard Von Sturmer and Charlotte Wrightson (*The Search for Otto*) have worked together in a number of media -- as writers, as members of avant-garde rock groups such as *The Plague*, as singers (chanting in overtone style to accompany films), and as performers (*The Humanimals*). Mixed-media work always runs the risk of becoming diffuse rather than concentrated, but these artists succeed because - like Len Lye - they have a coherent set of interests that informs their work in all media.

The artists represented in these screenings have been committed to experimental work for a number of years. Another striking characteristic is the preference for working collectively - *City Group*, *Fetus Productions*, *From Scratch*, and the *Humanimals* are a few of the groups of artists who have chosen to pool their skills, often working anonymously under the group name.

In the 1910s and '20s Len Lye attempted to break down the conventional boundaries of the fine arts in New Zealand by including Maori art as an equal partner with Pakeha art, and also encouraging local artists to be more aware of the cultures of the South Pacific. Today artists such as Philip Dadson, Gregor Nicholas and *City Group* incorporate a similar cultural diversity in their work. *Springbok*, made during the Springbok rugby tour of New Zealand, explores problems of communication between one culture and another - Pakeha and Maori, New Zealand and Africa. Its landscapes have Maori historical associations.

The Maori film-maker Robert Jahnke made the remarkable animated film *Te Utu* during a period of study in the United States. *Body Speak* by Gregor Nicholas runs the gamut from Pacific Island to European ballroom dancing. Peter Wells' film *Little Queen* reminds us that it was not long ago that New Zealand art and society were still dominated by British influences. Today's art is helping us to come to terms with our unique cultural location, able to share both Europe and Polynesia, able to look East as well as West.

Such forms of *research and development* lead a precarious existence in New Zealand as the medium of moving images continues to be dominated by the feature-film industry and the television broadcasters. Experiment tends to be an acquired taste for we have all grown up on the film equivalent of fast food. We need to resist the growing commercial standardisation of the medium, celebrating diversity in film and video-making wherever we find it. To quote Len Lye's essay *Is Film Art?*: "*Now neither the box office feature maker, nor the industrial film producer, can afford to risk experimental treatment of highly original work....The fine-art film requires urgent consideration if an important aspect of (our) culture is to advance.*"

## MUSIC VIDEOS

In the 1930s film-makers such as Oskar Fischinger and Len Lye used jazz and dance music to give a popular dimension to their art. Today the genre of *the music video* (a catch-all term that includes films as well as videos) has attracted many experimental artists. For example, an artist such as Laurie Anderson could go from the pages of *Artforum* to the British Top 40 charts with her single *O Superman*, promoted by an innovative music video.

In New Zealand many film and video-makers have done experimental work in this genre -- Chris Knox, Keith Hill, Merata Mita, Chris Barrett, Bruce Morrison, Fetus Productions, Stuart Page and William Kedell, to name only a few. The QEII Arts Council has been open-minded enough to sponsor a number of these remarkable meetings between fine-art imagery and pop-culture music. Much of this work has been associated with the innovative record labels Flying Nun and Pagan. The tradition of art school bands has also generated some interesting art school videos.

The music video has been an incredible melting-pot of styles and influences. Anyone familiar with modern art will see images borrowed (consciously or not) from Expressionism, Surrealism, Pop Art, and other movements. Len Lye's technique of painting and scratching on film has often been used. Unfortunately the free-for-all atmosphere of the early years of music videos has not survived. Recent years have seen the growing dominance of mainstream (top 40) artists, promoted by Hollywood-style videos with lavish budgets and slick production. In New Zealand this shift was reflected in TVNZ's replacement of Radio With Pictures by the more cautious C.V.; then C.V. was cancelled, leaving no outlet for music videos except for top 40 shows such as Ready to Roll. In retrospect the first wave of music videos resembles one of those great periods in rock music such as the mid-1960s or the period from 1977 to 1981 when there was a brief break-out from commercialism. Even today the music video has its mavericks and innovators, though we are now more likely to see their work in an art gallery or a night club than on television.

Roger Horrocks May 1990

## FILMS BY LEN LYE

### TUSALAVA 1929

A silent animated film  
9 minutes

### COLOUR BOX 1935

The first of Lye's handpainted ('direct') films, and according to some historians the first film ever made completely this way. It won a Special Prize at the 1935 Brussels International Film Festival.  
4 minutes

### KALEIDOSCOPE 1935

A 'direct' film sponsored by Churchill's Cigarettes.  
4 minutes

### RAINBOW DANCE 1936

A film made for the GPO Film Unit. Lye manipulated the three colour separations of the Gasparcolor system in a very original way.  
5 minutes

### BIRTH OF A ROBOT 1936

Puppets and models are brought to life in this animated film for Shell Oil.  
7 minutes

### TRADE TATTOO 1937

A GPO film which applies the experimental methods of RAINBOW DANCE to the Technicolor process.  
5 minutes

### COLOUR FLIGHT 1938

A 'direct' film made for Imperial Airways which combines painting and complex stencil patterns.  
4 minutes

### PARTICLES IN SPACE 1979

Lye's last major film which combines black and white 'scratch' patterns with African drum music and sounds produced by Lye's kinetic sculptures.  
2 minutes

### SWINGING THE LAMBETH WALK 1939

A 'direct' film based on a popular piece of dance music.  
4 minutes

### COLOUR CRY 1952

The first experimental film that Lye made in the United States. It employs the 'shadowgram' or 'photogram' method of direct film making. The music is by blues singer Sonny Terry.  
3 minutes

### FREE RADICALS 1958, revised in 1979

A black and white 'scratch' film, which won second prize at the International Film Competition at the 1958 Brussels World Fair. The drum music is by the Bagirmi tribe of Africa.  
5 minutes

### RHYTHM 1957

The process of assembling a car is brilliantly sped up by editing. The film was designed as a commercial for the Chrysler Corporation. Although it won several major awards, the Chrysler Corporation decided not to use it.  
1 minute

### TAL FARLOW 1980

A black and white 'scratch' film, completed after his death by his assistant Steven Jones.  
2 minutes

### N. BY N.W. 1939

A live action film for the GPO, about the dangers of wrongly addressing a letter.  
7 minutes

### MUSICAL POSTER 1940

Another 'direct' film translating jazz music into abstract patterns. It also includes some animation sequences of words which emphasize the need for security in war-time.  
3 minutes

RECENT NEW ZEALAND FILM AND VIDEO

GREGOR NICHOLAS  
**BODY SPEAK** 1982  
12 minutes

GREGOR NICHOLAS  
**DRUM/SING** 1985  
22 minutes

PHILIP DADSON  
**EARTHWORKS** 1971  
12 minutes

ROBERT JAHNKE  
**TE UTU** 1980  
8 minutes

PETER WELLS  
**LITTLE QUEEN** 1983  
17 minutes

FETUS PRODUCTIONS  
**BACK BEAT** c1984  
4 minutes

FETUS PRODUCTIONS  
**HAVE YOUR FUN** c1984

GREG BURKE  
**VIEWING** 1985  
18 minutes

RICHARD VON STURMER,  
DEREK WARD AND  
CHARLOTTE WRIGHTSON  
**THE SEARCH FOR OTTO** 1986  
17 minutes

CHRIS KNOX  
**TURNING BROWN AND TORN**  
**IN TWO** c1981  
4 minutes



Still from Body Speak

CITY GROUP  
**SPRINGBOK** 1981  
15 minutes

CITY GROUP  
**PIER** 1984-85  
10 minutes

CITY GROUP  
**NORTH/SOUTH PROJECT**

**TRACKING DIRT** 1982

2 minutes

**FLIGHT CROWDS** 1985

2 minutes

**DITCH** 1984

1 minute

**VALVEGRIND** 1985-86

4 minutes

A selection of recent music  
videos from Flying Nun.

