

LEN LYE

a biography Roger Horrocks



There's a real buzz around artist Len Lye at the moment. An amazing 13,000 people visited the new Len Lye Centre in New Plymouth in just the first week, and the crowds continue. Lye is now acknowledged as one of the most important artists New Zealand has produced – and his colourful personality and dramatic art make him a particular favourite ('Our most vivacious artist' said North & South in September 2015). His work appeals to all ages. His sculpture dances, as do his films, with their infectious jazz and Cuban dance music.

First published to acclaim in 2001, this classic biography is now back in print – as the art and life of Len Lye continue to fascinate readers in New Zealand and around the world.

Len Lye: A Biography tells the story of an extraordinary New Zealander – a brilliant artist with an international career who never lost the informality, the energy and the independence of spirit of his South Pacific origins. Lye (1901–80) was a charismatic artist of enormous talent who became a leading figure in international modernism. He was a gifted innovator in many areas of the arts – film, painting, sculpture, photography and writing. Horrocks' exhaustive study of Lye was the result of twenty years of research and is based on interviews with many of those close to the artist, as well as on voluminous documentary sources. At the same time, Lye's colourful personality and dramatic life make this a page-turner. It places Lye, unquestionably, alongside Mansfield and Hodgkins as a great New Zealand expatriate artist. Generous illustrations give striking examples of Lye's art and a vivid sense of the man and his world.

This 2015 reprint includes a new chapter on Lye's remarkable posthumous career, which has included both controversy and triumph.

Professor Emeritus **Roger Horrocks** is a writer, film-maker, magazine editor, and influential teacher, the founder of the Department of Film, Television and Media Studies at the University of Auckland. An expert on the life and work of Len Lye, Horrocks has written books and curated exhibitions of Lye's work, directed a film about Lye and wrote the libretto for *Len Lye: The Opera*.





Family photographs of Lye with his wife Jane and children Bix (born in 1937) and Yancy (born in 1940).
In the garden photo (above) there are strips of painted film hung out to dry on the clothes line.

COURTESY BIX LYE AND YANCY McCAFFREY

introduction

Len Lye stood out even within the colourful worlds of art and film for his singularity. In the words of painter Julian Trevelyan, 'He was like a man from Mars who saw everything from a different viewpoint, and it was this that made him original.'¹ Lye's exuberance, his unique taste in clothes, his quirky turn of phrase, and his free-wheeling life style made him a legendary figure among fellow artists and film-makers. These were outward signs of the deep and uncompromising commitment to experiment and risk-taking in the arts that sustained him for more than 60 years as he applied his innovative approach to film, sculpture, painting, photography and writing.

Lye was a member of many important art groups, starting with the Seven and Five Society in London in the 1920s and the international Surrealist movement in the 1930s. In the same decade he was part of John Grierson's GPO Film Unit, and contributed as a writer and artist to notable avant-garde magazines and publishing ventures. Moving to New York he became involved with the Abstract Expressionist painters and the underground film-makers of the 1950s. In the following decade he played an important role in the international upsurge in kinetic art. He was never tempted to slow down and just a few months before his death at the age of 78 he completed a remarkable series of paintings and one of his most radical films.

As the first account to bring together the many facets of Lye's eventful and singular life, this biography suggests that his personality was as remarkable as his art. Ann Lye (his wife) once said, 'Len's greatest creation was himself', and the poet Alastair Reid felt similarly that 'his day to day life was some of his best work', making him 'the least boring person who ever existed'. As I researched the biography I found that the mention of Lye's name almost always produced a warm welcome and a rush of anecdotes about (in the words of sculptor Kenneth Snelson) 'this crazy, excited and exciting guy'.² Photographer Barbara Ker-Seymer spoke for many of his friends when she warned me it was an impossible challenge to capture such a personality on paper.

I was also drawn to attempt the biography by the unusual breadth of Lye's journey through twentieth century art. He was one of the rare examples of an experimental artist able to appeal not only to artists and critics but also to a broad

public. Today his films are still screened regularly on MTV Europe and at rock concerts. His kinetic sculptures have attracted record crowds in a way that is rare for abstract art, and while viewers may not feel they understand his work they are fascinated and stirred by it. Lye's art has often been surrounded by controversy — from the noisy mixture of cheering and booing that greeted his first direct films to the debates today about the setting-up of his giant sculptures in public places. Such polarised responses have at times helped to make the artist prominent in popular culture as well as high culture.

This biography differs markedly from previous accounts of his life because they have tended to rely on a few sources. Though reticent as a young man, Lye became a lively interview subject in his later years and most critics and curators were happy to use his colourful anecdotes without bothering to seek independent confirmation. It's not that the artist was trying to deceive anyone but that his mind worked in a particular, creative way — he liked dramatic stories, he disliked boring details, he turned memories into myths. His anecdotes conveyed the spirit and mood of his experiences but streamlined the facts. Many artists have indulged in personal myth-making but Lye was an extreme case, particularly in his later years. When asked to date an event or painting he would offer an answer that was as confident as it was unreliable.³ It is sobering to observe how many essays and catalogues have continued to recycle the same answers as facts.

The present biography is the result of research spread over two decades in search of independent sources and reliable evidence. I should add that the artist gave his own blessing to my project and encouraged frankness (he was never comfortable with an 'overload of lauding').⁴ As my research developed I was pleased to find that what I uncovered — the details he had forgotten or transformed — were just as interesting in their own way as his streamlined memories. In the late 1970s and through the 1980s I was fortunate to be able to interview many members of Lye's generation who have since died — including the artist himself, his brother Philip, his first wife Jane and second wife Ann, friends who had grown up with him in New Zealand, and artists and technicians who had worked with him in England. Jack Ellitt, now (in 2000) living in Australia at the age of 97, is one of the few surviving colleagues from those early years.

I would describe the method I have adopted as similar to a documentary film, in particular an 'over the shoulder' approach that sticks as close as possible to its subject. I have often used Lye's own words complemented by interviews with the people who were round him. I have tried to keep my own commentary to a minimum but have not hesitated to add contextual information where it was needed. In seeking the immediacy of an observational documentary I have

allowed first-hand accounts to carry much of the narrative. Direct quotations tend to interest me more than paraphrase because of what they reveal about personalities, contexts, and contemporary discourses. Together with the oral history I gathered through interviews, I was fortunate to have at my disposal a rich archive of Lye's own writings in which he put on record the personal flavour and meaning of many of his experiences, often as a case study to illustrate his theories of the 'old brain'. It took me years to find my way round this chaotic collection of fragments and drafts but ultimately it proved a goldmine. My 'new brain' biography (with its independent sorting of facts) provided a structure that could carry the texture of the artist's 'old brain' descriptions.

I was pleased when a reader said the book felt at times more like an autobiography than a biography. Some readers may, however, be disappointed that I have not done more of the work for them by supplying more generalisations and judgements. Certainly I have formed a number of opinions but I am keeping most of that material for a later, more technical book. I decided that writing an accessible biography was the first priority because of the breadth of interest in Lye (not only among specialists) and the fact that discussions of the man and his career have almost always been fragmentary and under-researched. My task was to fill in the gaps (or as many as possible) and to present his personality in a way that was more rounded, more coherent, and more immediate.

To stress a documentary approach is of course not to pretend that the results are purely objective. Any account that has had to be assembled from thousands of small pieces of information necessarily involves numerous acts of interpretation. While pointing towards my own conclusions, I have nevertheless tried to maintain a certain openness by providing readers with enough data to allow them to make their own judgements. Such an openness seemed to me appropriate for a book premised on the belief that our traditional ways of thinking about modern art have not done justice to the complexity of the field nor been fully able to accommodate a maverick such as Lye.

Part One of the biography covers the artist's early development in New Zealand, Australia, and Samoa. Part Two looks at the blossoming of his art in England, where he made a number of important films and paintings. Part Three (which is chronologically the longest) surveys his career in the United States where he made kinetic sculptures as well as films, before re-establishing his links with New Zealand in the final years of his life. Lye's critics have tended to work within traditional frames of reference by focusing on one medium or one country at a time, thus providing us (for example) with a New Zealand Lye, a British Lye, and an American Lye. While that approach has yielded valuable insights, it is

only by tracking all the phases that it becomes possible to understand the lifetime coherence of his interests and to appreciate his disregard for boundaries.

The account of Lye's early years holds a special resonance for me — and perhaps also for other New Zealanders — in documenting the emergence of one of the country's first modern artists. I hope overseas readers will also find it interesting as the story of someone from the working class in a small, colonial country who, in the course of educating himself, becomes so passionately involved with modernism that he ends up a member of the international avant-garde. I would also suggest that a knowledge of his New Zealand origins is necessary to an understanding of the sources of his art and some aspects of his personality. Not that this was a simple matter of nationalism, for Lye created his art as much in rebellion against his environment as in sympathy with it.

My search for visual evidence turned up a profusion of photographs, enabling his daily life to be observed through the eyes of friends, lovers, and fellow artists. It also seemed important to present a broad range of his art, in so far as an art of motion can be illustrated on the page. Strips of film, blurred shots of sculpture in motion, and sequential photographs can be more informative than static images.

Bringing together the many sides of Lye's career has left me in no doubt that — in addition to providing us with new insights into the history of modernism — he is still an important artist for today. He developed a distinctive physical or kinaesthetic way of understanding movement that is yet to be fully grasped by critics or fully exploited by artists. He also arrived at an original conception of the unconscious mind, its links with the body and with the process of making art. It has at last become technically possible to realise some of the plans he left behind for giant kinetic sculptures. His films continue to delight audiences and influence animators, and in a medium too often ruled by commercialism and conservatism he provides an alternative role model — that of the passionate artist and innovator. To quote a comment made in 1997 by another risk-taking director, Peter Greenaway: 'Len Lye was a perfect example of trying very, very deliberately to put the perfect characteristics of the projective image into new places. [We need] a brand new cinema which will fit the imaginations of the next century.'⁵



Above: 'Polynesian Connection', Lye's 1979 acrylic painting based on a batik he first exhibited with the Seven and Five Society in London in 1928. COURTESY LEN LYE FOUNDATION

Below: The 'Pond People' in this 1930 batik were among the creatures Lye planned to animate in a sequel to his film *Tusalava*. This batik had the alternative titles 'Fresh Water Things' and 'Marks and Spencer in a Japanese Garden'. COURTESY LEN LYE FOUNDATION





Above: Lye's letters were always free-wheeling. This one to his daughter Yancy shows him at his typewriter and Ann in the garden. It is signed 'Love, L & A'. COURTESY YANCY McCAFFREY



Left: After Lye's job at the March of Time ended in 1951, his wife Ann went to work as a model, appearing in ads such as this for tools and home appliances. COURTESY LEN LYE FOUNDATION

Below: The Lyes owned a 1928 Model A Ford Coupé for their trips to Martha's Vineyard. (She was the driver, he was the decorator or customiser.) COURTESY LEN LYE FOUNDATION



Below: The Lyes at home at 41 Bethune Street in 1958, showing Ann's restoration of the original brick walls and wood floors. Furniture was purchased cheaply at auctions. Behind Ann is a small painting given to Lye during his Seven and Five days by Ben Nicholson. COURTESY LEN LYE FOUNDATION



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