

**ART  
THAT  
MOVES**

the work of

**LEN**

**LYE**

roger horrocks

**includes DVD  
of films and  
sculptures  
by Len Lye**

*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 in 2009, this lively art book will be re-released in 2015 alongside a new edition of the biography – as the art and life of Len Lye continue to fascinate readers in New Zealand and around the world.

'Kinetic art is the first new category of art since prehistory', ex-pat New Zealand artist Len Lye boldly claimed in an essay in 1964. In *Art that Moves: The Work of Len Lye*, Roger Horrocks – author of a best-selling biography of Lye – explores what Lye meant by this, and how his own work in sculpture and film bore it out.

*My book is about an important artist and a big idea, Len Lye's idea that movement could become the basis for new forms of art. . . He believed that only a few of the possibilities of movement had so far been tapped. This book aims to explore what the world of art – and the world in general – may have looked like through the eyes of an artist whose passionate interest was 'the mystery of motion'. – Roger Horrocks*

The well-illustrated book also includes a DVD containing a short documentary by Shirley and Roger Horrocks alongside brilliant footage from Lye's films and of his sculptures in motion. In this book Len Lye's art moves again – alert and alive.

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*.

# contents

Introduction	i
one Precedents	7
two Len Lye: A Kinetic Biography	37
three The Art of Motion	88
four The Films	139
five The Sculptures	177
six Len Lye Today: Conserving, Restoring and Building Kinetic Art	201
Acknowledgements	239
Notes	241
Len Lye Resources	252
Index	254



Lye with his sculpture *Storm King*. Courtesy Erik Shiozaki.

# introduction

**T**HIS BOOK IS BOTH ABOUT AN IMPORTANT ARTIST – LEN LYE – AND about a big idea: that movement (or motion) can be composed as art. Lye believed that only a few of the possibilities of the idea had so far been explored. His writings supplied the theory for a new kind of art, and his films and kinetic sculptures demonstrated the practice. To get to know them is to learn to look at movement from a new perspective. In a 1964 essay, ‘The Art that Moves’, Lye wrote:

Kinetic art is the first new category of art since prehistory. Its cultural value rates with that of both painting and sculpture . . . [but] it took until this century to discover the art that moves. Had we taken the aesthetic qualities of sound as much for granted as we have taken those of motion, we would not now have music. But now, in kinetic art, we have begun to compose motion.<sup>1</sup>

Artists’ manifestos tend to overstate their case, but my book seeks to show that Lye could strongly support these claims by the power and originality of his films and sculptures. In addition, his essays represent a highly ambitious and coherent attempt to theorise an art of movement. By working in this area, he felt he could express his ‘most poetical sense of being’.<sup>2</sup> My book aims to explore what the

world of art – and the world in general – may have looked like through the eyes of an artist whose primary interest was ‘the mystery of motion’.<sup>3</sup>

I was first drawn to Len Lye’s work by the energy of his films. After corresponding with him for several years, I went to New York to meet him, and ended up working as his assistant for the last months of his life. His personality was as lively and surprising as his art. While helping to pack up his work and personal papers to be shipped to the Govett-Brewster Art Gallery in New Zealand, I was amazed to discover how wide-ranging his career had been. I went on to research and write a book about his life – *Len Lye: A Biography* – published in 2001.<sup>4</sup> I continued to derive great pleasure from his films and sculptures, and decided a couple of years ago to follow up with a book about his work. Public interest in Lye was increasing, and people kept asking me for information about how exactly he had made his art. Also, sensing the fact that his work was based on an unusual approach, they wanted to learn more about his ideas.

As I researched this book, I found myself coming to share Lye’s obsession with ‘the mystery of motion’. What exactly is an art of motion, and is it really as new as he claimed? There are studies of kinetic art, but I felt that none of them was persistent enough in seeking to analyse the aesthetics of literal movement. From Lye’s perspective, the development of such an art called for new thinking about artistic form and a new approach to the training of artists. Like the related term ‘energy’, movement is ubiquitous in our lives, but we seldom analyse its meaning or its implications. We leave that to physicists and mathematicians, who provide impressive but highly technical formulas such as Newton’s laws of motion or Einstein’s  $e=mc^2$ . When I re-read Lye’s own writings, both published and unpublished, I was struck by the care he had devoted to thinking about the human experience of movement and energy in personal and practical terms.<sup>5</sup>

Not that these were his only interests. His independent habits of mind led him to pursue experiments in many areas of art, and his other discoveries also deserve to be discussed and celebrated. But having come to see his theory and practice of ‘the art that moves’ as his most important contribution, I decided to make it the central focus of this book. Movement for Lye was all-pervasive – it was ‘absolutely nothing or everything, ask any electron, atom or molecule, light, sound or any vibration mental or otherwise . . . . So movement needs all the insight possible . . .’<sup>6</sup> He was fascinated by what science was discovering about the flux of energies in nature, on both a microscopic and an astronomical scale, and he sought

opportunities to discuss such matters with scientists. But his primary concern was to shape his own 'figures of motion' via the technologies at his disposal.

He was well aware of the attempts by traditional forms of art to imply motion – such as the Japanese prints of curling waves. And, 'since prehistory', dance had been exploring literal movement through the medium of the human body. He included dance as an important element in kinetic art, but he saw that technologies such as film and the electric motor produced new forms of motion which 'freed us from the restricted anatomical range of dance movements'.<sup>7</sup>

Today we have access to new forms of technology that can further enlarge the scope and potential of kinetic art. The powers of the computer can be used for many purposes, from the animation and circulation of images, to the production of large-scale versions of the sculptures that Lye designed but could not realise during his lifetime. His aesthetic continues to be just as relevant to the digital age as it was previously, as a guide to the dynamic ways by which artists can make best use of their resources to 'compose motion'.

Many critics and curators have recognised the originality of Lye's approach to movement. For example, when a new national art museum for Germany – the Kunst und Ausstellungshalle der Bundesrepublik Deutschland – held its opening exhibition in 1992, it presented its selection of the 100 most original artists of the 20th century. These were artists who had created 'masterpieces', 'extraordinary objects', 'seminal' works that had served to 'mark decisive points' in the history of art.<sup>8</sup> Lye was represented both by his sculpture *Universe* and his film *A Colour Box*. In explaining his inclusion alongside better-known artists such as Picasso, Dalí, Mondrian and Pollock, the catalogue quoted Lye's comments: 'Motion sculpture is a distinct form of modern art . . . [My] sculpture, extending the infinite variety of fundamental patterns of movement, emphasizes the beauty of motion *per se*.'<sup>9</sup>

Pontus Hultén, the director of the museum and the main curator of this exhibition, was an enthusiast for kinetic art. But not everyone in the art world has shared that interest. While there have been other important museum appearances of Lye's work – such as a one-person exhibition of his films, sculptures, paintings and photograms at the Centre Pompidou in Paris in 2000, and a string of recent exhibitions in Australia (such as ACMI in Melbourne) – he has tended to remain better known to fellow practitioners than to the public at large.

His reputation has also suffered from the ups and downs of kinetic art in general. The art of motion had a great surge of popularity in the late 1950s and early 1960s, when the work of many artists was included in survey exhibitions.



ABOVE Lye's work bench for making films in the 1950s. BELOW Some of the stencils he used to make hand-painted films in the 1930s. Courtesy Len Lye Foundation.



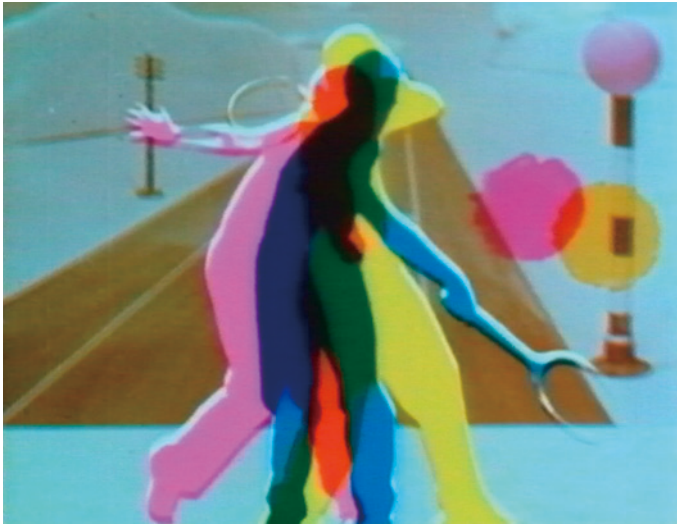


Those shows drew large, enthusiastic crowds, but once the novelty had worn off, the category of kinetic art passed out of fashion. One of the problems was the uncritical, loose and all-inclusive way the concept of kinetic art was used, which made art critics impatient. While Lye's ideas were solid and specific, they were not heard in the midst of the hype. Kinetic art suffered not only from the art world's short attention span but also from the reluctance of many museums, dealers and auction houses to get involved in the maintenance and repair of motorised sculptures. It was more comfortable to return to the silence and stillness of traditional forms of art. Kinetic art was also not in tune with the cynical mood of post-modernism, which saw the genre as tainted by a naïve enthusiasm for science and technology. Individual artists such as Alexander Calder, Jean Tinguely, Vassilakis Takis and George Rickey continued to have exhibitions, as did Lye; and a few younger artists such as Rebecca Horn and Tim Hawkinson have gained international reputations through their innovative work with movement. But the idea that kineticism might represent a significant new 'category of art' has ceased to receive much attention.

Lye's deeply serious, manifesto-style advocacy of kinetic art looks back in some respects to 20th-century modernism, but that field of activity was more complex than we tend to acknowledge. Modernism opened up many new paths, and not all have become well-worn. Movement is a particularly clear example of business that remains incomplete because of 'the overwhelming technical and financial difficulties attending all kinetic experiments' (as Jack Burnham put it in 1968), and because of the problems of art-world politics described above.<sup>10</sup> Lye hoped that his work was 'going to be pretty good for the 21st century', and as Chapter 6 will document, his work and ideas are in fact having a delayed influence.<sup>11</sup>

This artist did important work in two media – film as well as sculpture – which gave him an unusually broad perspective on 'the art that moves'. Unfortunately, his major essays on the subject are either out of print or have never been published. My book aims to provide the first detailed account of his art of motion that covers both theory and practice. Many thoughtful critical essays have been written about particular aspects of Lye's work but there is not, to my knowledge, any text that focuses on what he regarded as his core concerns. This is not to imply that an artist's perspective on his or her own work should be regarded as the last word on the subject – but in Lye's case it seems useful as the starting point.

I will concentrate on his work in film and sculpture, but will also explore aspects of his painting, photography and writing that reflect an interest in movement.



Lye, frames from the film *Rainbow Dance*, 1936.  
Courtesy Len Lye Foundation.





*Water Whirler* in one of its most active phases.  
Courtesy Govett-Brewster Art Gallery.

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