



Press conference:

Tuesday, 22 October 2019 | 10:30 am

Opening:

Tuesday, 22 October 2019 | 6:30 pm

Press images:

tinguely.ch/en/presse-download

Len Lye – motion composer
23 October 2019 – 26 January 2020

Born in Christchurch (NZ), Len Lye (1901-1980) is one of the most important experimental filmmakers of the period 1930–1960. Living first in New Zealand and Australia, then from 1926 in London, and from 1944 in New York, he created a fascinating body of work that encompasses not just film but all artistic disciplines, much of which, including his kinetic sculptures, has yet to be discovered. In the exhibition «Len Lye – motion composer» at Museum Tinguely, the full breadth of Lye's oeuvre will be shown from 23 October 2019 to 26 January 2020, with a special focus on relations between different media. Museum visitors are invited to discover Lye's universe with more than 100 artworks and to explore his life's work through a variety of medium including films, sketches and sculptures. 23 and 24 October, a symposium organized in collaboration with the Seminar for Media Studies of the University of Basel will examine Len Lye's oeuvre, which includes experimental, documentary and advertising films as well as kinetic sculptures and buildings and will discuss Lye's impact on 20th century avantgardes. The exhibition will be complemented with a film programme at the Stadtkino Basel presenting four films by and about Len Lye.

Early years in New Zealand and the Pacific

Lye was born in 1901 into a family of modest means. After the early death of his father, he lived with his mother and brother at the home of his stepfather Ford Powell who worked as a lighthouse keeper in Cape Campbell. This was the time, he said, when he had his first experiences of light and movement – themes that would occupy him throughout his life. He described the moment when he found the motif of his art as follows: he was thinking about John Constable's *Cloud Study* and about the way the painter imitated and conveyed movement: «All of a sudden it hit me – if there was such a thing as composing music, there could be such a thing as composing motion. After all, there are melodic figures, why can't there be figures of motion?»

He began drawing movements, in small notes and spontaneous doodles. At the beginning of the 1920s he spent several months in Samoa where he came into contact with the rich life of its indigenous people. During his years in Sydney (1922–26) he made the *Totem and Taboo Sketchbook* into which he transcribed Sigmund Freud's text *Totem and Taboo* on the right-hand pages, juxtaposed with drawings of objects from various cultures (from Samoa, Africa, the Māori of his native New Zealand, the Australian Aborigines) and works

by Russian Constructivists that struck him as related both aesthetically and in terms of content. His eye unobstructed by Eurocentrism, he created a work that was without parallel at the time, relating objects and cultures without any form of hierarchy or ranking.

London – ‹Direct Films›

In 1926, Lye arrived in London and soon, besides paintings that often explored his subconscious and batiks that played with the formal idioms of foreign cultures, he made his first film, laying the foundations for his fame as an experimental filmmaker. 1929 saw the first screening of *Tusalava*, an animated film in which abstract figures and shapes relate to one another, becoming entangled and united. In the Surrealism-influenced circles in which Lye moved, this ten-minute film, accompanied by live music by Jack Ellitt (that has sadly been lost), made a big impact. In the mid-1930s, this was followed by Lye's ‹direct films› for which he painted and wrote directly onto the celluloid, making a key contribution to the technique of camera-less film. *A Color Box* (1935) was a colourful film with a soundtrack of Cuban dance music that advertised Britain's post office. Other films followed and, through their use as advertising for various companies in cinemas, reached a broad audience. The combination of abstract colour film and modern music was revolutionary and rightly earned Lye a reputation as the inventor of the music video.

New York

After World War II, during which Lye made propaganda for the British, producing much admired films like *Kill or Be Killed* (1942), he lived in New York City, pursuing his career as an experimental filmmaker. In 1947, he also made a series of photograms: portraits in which he applied the idea of camera-less film to still photography. One of the most radical films from his New York period is *Rhythm* (1957) in which the workings of an American car factory are presented, with a soundtrack of African drum music, as a dance of technology. In *Rhythm*, and even more in *Free Radicals* (1958/1979), he used the technique of scratching into the emulsion of black leaders, giving the films a raw mood.

Tangibles – sculptures

At the end of the 1950s, Lye turned his attention to kinetic sculpture, quickly developing concepts for around 20 *Tangibles*, as he called them: sculptures driven by electrical motors, performing programmed sequences of movements based on simple principles like rotating a bunch of steel rods or shaking a sheet of steel. With these sculptures, he struck a chord at a time when people were looking for new art, for machines and movement. As early as 1961, he was able to show these works at the Museum of Modern Art in New York on the occasion of a lecture performance in which he explained and presented his ideas of programmed machine sculpture. Lye understood his sculptures as models that he wanted to realise on a larger scale. Because he lacked both the technical know-how and the financial means, most never moved beyond this project stage, but his will to up-scale was shown especially in the drawings for *Sun, Land and Sea* (1965) that only came close to realisation years after his death in 1980.

Lye's role in the kinetic art of the 1960s should not be underestimated. His vision for using programmed machine sculpture to create a whole new kind of art paved the way for much that is now familiar and taken for granted – in the field of kinetic art, but above all in the fields of land art and installation where Lye played a pioneering role.

Lye's work today

Len Lye died in 1980. Knowing he was terminally ill, he created a foundation for his life's work, ensuring that his estate returned to his native New Zealand, where it is preserved and studied at the Govett-Brewster Art Gallery in New Plymouth. The Len Lye Foundation looks after his work and is authorised, in line with the artist's wishes, to produce replicas of his kinetic works and to make programmed machine sculptures accessible to today's young audiences.

Curator of the exhibition: Andres Pardey

Catalogue

The exhibition will be accompanied by a three-volume catalogue that takes an in-depth look at the artist's oeuvre: A volume of essays documents the current state of research on Len Lye; an illustrated volume shows the works in the exhibition in more than 300 colour plates. The third volume contains a full facsimile of the *Totem and Taboo Sketchbook*, making it available to a broad public in its entirety for the first time. Available at the museum bookshop: 58 CHF. ISBN 978-3-86828-960-2 (German edition), ISBN 978-3-86828-961-9 (English edition)

Len Lye – a symposium on motion composing Wednesday to Thursday, 23–24 October 2019

An international symposium will examine Len Lye's oeuvre, which includes experimental, documentary and advertising films as well as kinetic sculptures. Speakers from New Zealand, Canada, Australia, Germany and Switzerland will discuss Lye's impact on 20th century avantgardes. In cooperation with the Seminar for Media Studies of the University of Basel. The symposium will be spoken in English and is open to the public, admission is free.

Venues: Eikones Forum Basel and Seminar for Media Studies, Basel

Len Lye film programme at Stadtkino Basel Tickets: www.stadtkinobasel.ch

Sunday, 13 October 2019, 1 pm

A Flip & Two Twisters

Using archive footage and film excerpts, documentary filmmaker Shirley Horrocks paints a striking portrait of Len Lye, with a special focus on his kinetic sculptures.

Wednesday, 23 October 2019, 6:30 pm

Thursday, 31 October 2019, 9 pm

Len Lye's Colour Box

Everything is rhythm in the handmade films of Len Lye. The programme presents his colourful, playful abstract and semi-abstract experimental and art films. With an introduction by Len Lye biographer Roger Horrocks, Auckland, NZ.

Thursday, 24 October 2019, 6:30 pm

Len Lye on the Home Front

From a surreal film poem about eating well and food rationing to a disturbingly intense educational film about close combat, these are Len Lye's propaganda films made for the British Ministry of Information in the 1940s.

With an introduction by Govett-Brewster Art Gallery Len Lye Curator Paul Brobbel, New Plymouth, NZ.

Friday, 25 October 2019, 6:30 pm

Doodlin': Impressions of Len Lye

Documentary by Keith Griffiths about the life and work of Lye. This charming film focusses on Lye's film work.

General Information:

Title: Len Lye – motion composer

Address: Museum Tinguely | Paul Sacher-Anlage 1 | 4002 Basel, Switzerland

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Opening hours: Tuesday – Sunday, daily 11 am-6 pm

Websites: www.tinguely.ch | www.lenlyefoundation.com | www.govettbrewster.com

Social Media: @museumtinguely | #museumtinguely | #tinguely | #lenlye

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THE LEN LYE FOUNDATION *Len Lye*

