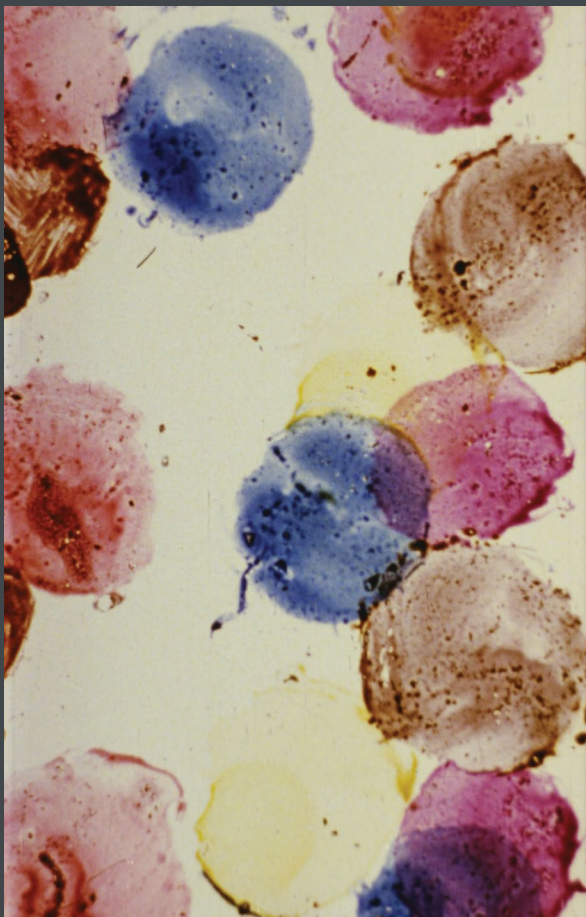


25 Jul – 29 Nov

2015

# Projection Series #1 Len Lye's Colour Box



Projection Series 1: Len Lye's Colour Box  
25 July - 29 November 2015  
Daily, 1pm  
Running time: 51 minutes

Len Lye Curator: Paul Brobbel  
Assistant Len Lye Curator: Sarah Wall

Images: Unless otherwise stated all material courtesy of the Len Lye Foundation and the Govett-Brewster Art Gallery, from material made and preserved by The New Zealand Archive of Film, Television and Sound Ngā Taonga Whitiāhua Me Ngā Taonga Kōrero.

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Govett-Brewster Art Gallery  
Private Bag 2025  
New Plymouth 4342  
Aotearoa New Zealand



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THE LEN LYE FOUNDATION *Len Lye*



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Len Lye on film set, 1937.  
Unknown photographer  
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Gallery and Len Lye Centre

The Govett-Brewster Art Gallery/Len Lye Centre launches a brand new state-of-the-art 62-seat cinema, for audiences to experience the films of Len Lye and local and international cinema. The cinema welcomes you to see historical experimental film, contemporary artist's moving image and regular film festival programming.

At the heart of the Len Lye Centre's cinema programme is the return of the Govett-Brewster's Projection Series, our quarterly film programme surveying the landscape of historical and contemporary fine art filmmaking.

Len Lye's Colour Box marks the first projection series, presenting nine colourful, musical and technically thrilling short films by Len Lye – our man in the world of experimental film.

# Len Lye's Colour Box

**Len Lye's films must be seen to be believed: an exquisite and subtle range of vibrating color; an enchanting and original synchronization of visual images and gay music; a brilliant interweaving of live action shots, special photographic effects such as photomontage, solarisation and silhouette, and lettering, drawing, stencilling, stippling, painting, all done in direct technique. His films are made with a perfect sense of rhythm, pace and composition, and best of all they possess a quality often lacking in experimental film, wit.<sup>1</sup>**

Created by painting abstract shapes directly onto celluloid "in close symphony with music",<sup>2</sup> Len Lye's *A Colour Box* (1935) – the film from which this Projection Series takes its title – stands today as a masterpiece of colour filmmaking. An example of Lye's "direct" application of paint on film, *A Colour Box* leads us into a survey of his "vibrating", colour saturated films made between the 1930s and 50s, first in London and then New York. Showcasing his experimentation over two decades, these films, from *A Colour Box* to *All Soul's Carnival* (1957), are examples of Lye's pursuit of "art in motion", a task that occupied his prolific career across film, kinetic sculpture, painting, and drawing. It is precisely this preoccupation with movement, his "perfect sense of rhythm, pace and composition", that makes Len Lye one of the most colourful and critical artists to have worked with film. "[I]f there was such a thing as composing music," Lye wrote, "there could be such a thing as composing motion".<sup>3</sup>

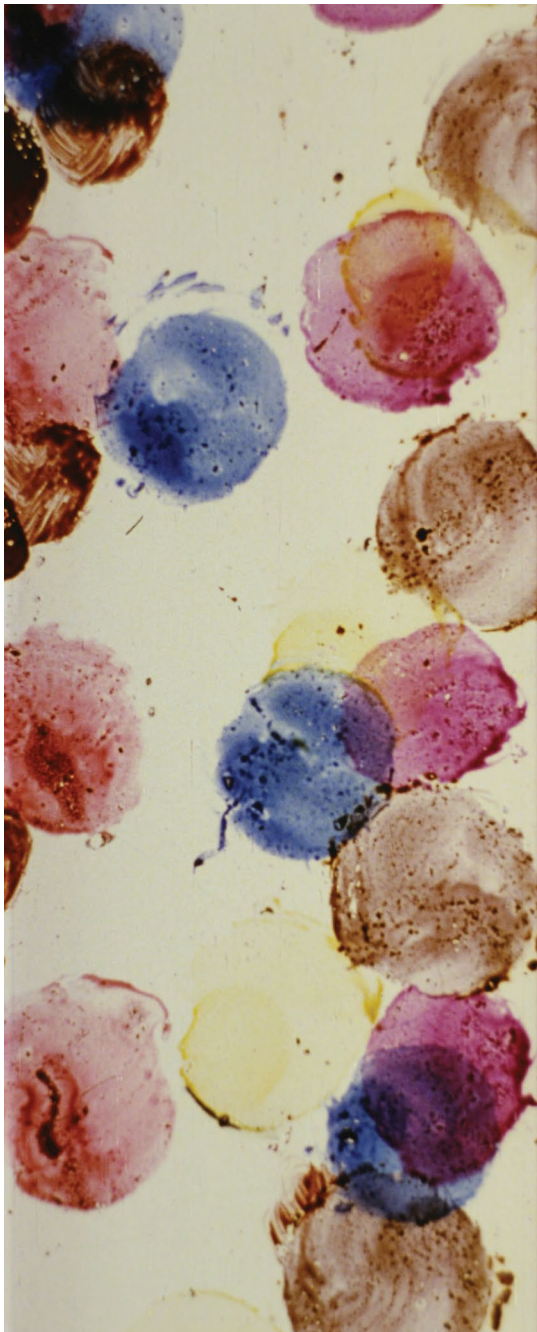
Lye had an intimate, physical relationship not just with mark-making, but the medium of film itself. Lye's experimental films were made using a variety of "direct" or "cameraless" film techniques and improvised materials – by means of painting, scratching, and stencilling directly on celluloid using equipment such as combs, blades and mesh. A pioneer of "direct" film and an innovative colourist, the remarkable quality and significance of Lye's work was quickly recognised. His film *A Colour Box* "so impressed" the jury at the 1935 International Cinema Festival in Brussels that a new category focusing on "fantasy film" was

established specially so that it could receive an award. Dubbed by the British press as "the English Disney",<sup>4</sup> another of Lye's "phantasmagoric colour offerings",<sup>5</sup> *Colour Flight* (1938), drew comparisons with the celebrated animation studios (then the benchmark for colour animation) with *Time* magazine enthusiastically hailing it "as art, as entertainment, and as the freshest stuff of its kind since Disney arrived".<sup>6</sup>

Lye first became familiar with the possibilities of "direct" film in the 1920s in Sydney. Working at Filmads Ltd., a company producing animated advertisements, Lye experimented with scratching lines onto black film strips and projecting the images on screen.<sup>7</sup> His introduction to musician Jack Ellitt in Sydney in particular proved to be a significant one, with Ellitt later composing and editing music for many of Lye's films. It was in London, however, where Lye established himself as an experimental filmmaker. Britain's first film society was founded just one year before his arrival in 1926, and here Lye saw his first experimental films by the likes of Oscar Fischinger and Hans Richter. Lye's first film, *Tusalava* (1929), was co-funded by writer Robert Graves and the London Film Society, where it premiered in 1929. Made using conventional animation methods by photographing thousands of individual drawings, it was incredibly labour intensive and time consuming, and perhaps unsurprisingly Lye never again produced a film by this method. His next film, *Full Fathom Five* (1935), was a "direct" film – made using the cameraless (and more economical) method of painting on film.

The 1930s was a decade of great formal experimentation in film and an intensive period for Lye. In London Lye encountered a burgeoning avant-garde scene that was unmatched in the regional art scenes of Australia and New Zealand. He was invited to be a member of the Seven and Five Society, exhibiting with the leading group of the British avant-garde including Ben Nicholson and Barbara Hepworth, as well as the British Surrealists at the 1936 International Surrealist Exhibition. Lye's experiments with "direct" film drew the attention of John Grierson, Director of the General Post Office (GPO) Film Unit. Lye landed a job making films at the Unit, an association which proved particularly fruitful, its creative network leading to commissions from other commercial sponsors, including *Kaleidoscope* (1935) for the Imperial Tobacco Company, the puppet-animation film *Birth of the Robot* (1936) for Shell-Mex and BP, and *Colour Flight* (1938) for Imperial Airways.

The GPO Film Unit was hugely important for experimental film and animation in Britain. Founded in 1933 to produce sponsored documentary films relating to GPO activities, under Grierson's directorship the Film Unit commissioned some of the most innovative documentary films of its time.<sup>8</sup> The Unit provided a crucial platform for many of British cinema's best-known and celebrated filmmakers, not only from the documentary



All Souls  
Carnival (1957)

movement (such as Grierson, Alberto Cavalcanti, and Basil Wright, among others), but animation (including Lye, Lotte Reiniger and Norman McLaren). For Lye, the Film Unit provided an opportunity to continue his experiments with film, with the success of *A Colour Box* paving the way for further bold colour productions for the GPO. Between 1935 and 1940 Lye produced four films for the Unit, *A Colour Box*, *A Rainbow Dance* (1936), *N. or N.W.* (1937) and *Trade Tattoo* (1937). Each of the films carried a postal-related message: *A Colour Box* and *Rainbow Dance* promoted GPO postal and banking services, *N. or N.W.* the importance of correctly addressing mail, and *Trade Tattoo* the need to post early.

In *Rainbow Dance* and *Trade Tattoo*, Lye experimented not only with abstract patterning but the application of colour to black and white film. “The amount of technical knowledge of colour shown in this film” wrote filmmaker and GPO colleague Alberto Cavalcanti, “and in [Lye’s] next *Trade Tattoo* (1937), is formidable”.<sup>9</sup> Of the films Lye produced during this period, *Trade Tattoo* stands out as one of the most technically and aesthetically intricate. Created using the outtakes of GPO Film Unit documentaries (including Cavalcanti’s own *Night Mail*, 1936), Lye completely transformed the monochromatic footage showing scenes of mail-sorting, cargo loading, and other such work, with hand-painted colour images and stencilled patterns. Stencils made from cardboard, metal and even celluloid sprockets, were used by Lye as tools to quickly and effectively reproduce figures and patterns into what Alla Gaddasik calls “arrangements of motion” – “spinning circles” to accompany “rotating” tractor blades, and “criss-crossing strips” of a speeding train – to convey the kinetic “rhythm of work-a-day Britain”.<sup>10</sup>

With the onset of the Second World War, commissions for experimental films diminished. The propagandistic *Musical Poster #1* (1940), sponsored by the Ministry of Information, was the last “direct” film Lye made in Britain before he embarked on a more than decade-long hiatus, turning his attention and efforts to producing documentary films. In 1941 Lye began making “information” films for the Realist Film Unit – a production house founded by documentary filmmaker and GPO alumni Basil Wright. Lye made seven black and white documentaries on a number of wartime subjects, from newspaper distribution to salvaging tin tubes. His work at the Realist Film Unit led to a job with the international newsreel program *The March of Time* in New York. In 1944 Lye left London for Manhattan, where he worked directing documentaries and newsreels for *The March of Time* until 1951, when he turned his attention once more to experimental film.

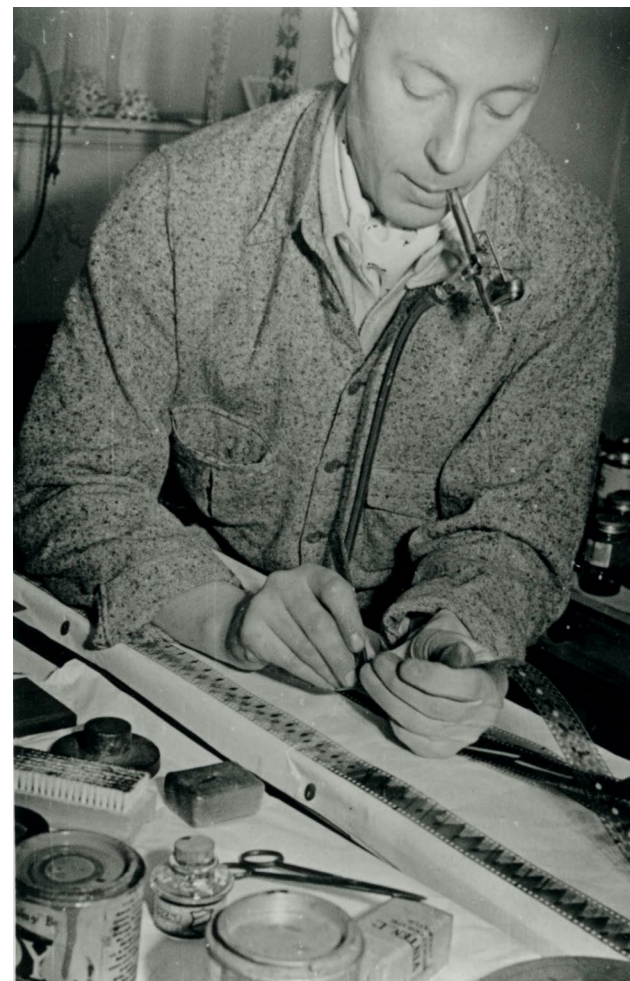
Lye spent most of the 1950s working on a number of commercial and non-commercial film projects. He started part-time employment at an advertising agency, advising on special effects for television, and creating some “sample” animations for companies such as Life

magazine and Cheerios.<sup>11</sup> For the most part, however, the advertising industry in America found Lye's experiments much too radical, and it wasn't long before he left the agency. One of the few commissions Lye obtained during this period was *Rhythm* (1957), a one minute film for the Chrysler Corporation which won the New York TV Art Director's Award, but was subsequently disqualified as it was never formally broadcast. Not all his experiments, however, went to waste. *Color Cry* (1952-53), made with test strips Lye had created for a television campaign, marked Lye's return to "direct" film. Using the photogram technique, Lye placed objects and materials such as transparent gels and patterned fabrics, blades and string, on strips of photosensitive film stock which he then exposed to light. While Lye had experimented with photograms previously (notably making a series of photogram portraits in 1947), the application of the photogram method to film was rare.

For his final colour film, *All Souls Carnival* (1957), Lye returned to the hand-painting techniques of *A Colour Box* from more than 20 years earlier. A collaboration with the Canadian composer Henry Brant, the pair worked independently on images and music, with the resulting correspondences between image and sound left to chance. Screened with live music at the Carnegie Recital Hall in New York on 3 March 1957, this spirit of chance resulted in a film of "iridescent shapes and forms burst with vivid colours"<sup>12</sup> dancing alongside Brant's *All Souls Carnival*. Brant's classical musical differed from the jazz and popular dance soundtracks of Lye's earlier colour films, as Brant explained, "Len's work was so direct, with the actual paint on the film. So I wanted the organic sounds of acoustic music".<sup>13</sup>

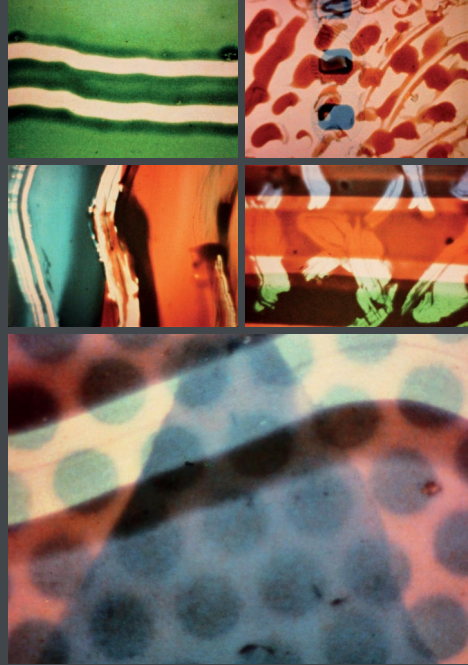
Following *All Souls Carnival* Lye embarked on new experiments with film, his pursuit of "art in motion" triumphing in *Free Radicals* (1958), made without complex colour procedures purely from scratching lines into black film leader. Lye's final films were "scratch" films. His revised version of *Free Radicals* (1979), *Particles in Space* (1979) and *Tal Farlow* (1980), each extended the direct film experiments he first developed almost half a century earlier. The wonder at Lye's films has not diminished with time. Looking back, the fact that these films were made prior to immaterial digital media is all the more striking. To return to the opening quote, "Len Lye's films must be seen to be believed".<sup>14</sup>

**Sarah Wall,**  
Assistant Len Lye Curator



Len Lye in film studio, 1939.  
Unknown photographer  
Len Lye Foundation Collection,  
Govett-Brewster Art Gallery  
and Len Lye Centre

1. Adrienne Mancia and Willard Van Dyke, "The Artist as Filmmaker: Len Lye," *Art in America* 54, no. 4 (July-August 1966): 102.
2. Len Lye, *Music and Movement*, unpublished manuscript. Len Lye Foundation Archive, Govett-Brewster Art Gallery/Len Lye Centre, New Plymouth, New Zealand.
3. "Ray Thorburn Interviews Len Lye", *Art International*, 19:4 (1975), 64.
4. "Len Lye - The English Disney", *Sunday Referee*, 10 November 1935.
5. T.S. Lyndon-Haynes, "Documentary Over Europe", *The Cine-Technician*, (July-August 19w39): 63.
6. *Time*, 12 December 1938. Quoted in Roger Horrocks, *Len Lye: A Biography* (Auckland: Auckland University Press, 2001), 170.
7. Horrocks, *Len Lye: A Biography*, 55.
8. For a history of the GPO Film Unit, see Scott Anthony and James G. Mansell, eds., *The Projection of Britain: A History of the GPO Film Unit* (London: Palgrave MacMillan/BFI, 2011).
9. Alberto Cavalcanti, "Presenting Len Lye", *Sight and Sound* (Winter 1947-48). Quoted in Jack C. Ellis, *John Grierson: Life, Contributions, Influence* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2000), 89.
10. Alla Gadassik, "Trade Tattoos: Animation Stencils and Readymade Movement", in Paul Brobbel, ed. (New Plymouth: Govett-Brewster Art Gallery/Len Lye Centre) (forthcoming).
11. Horrocks, *Len Lye: A Biography*, 254-55.
12. *New York Times* review. Quoted in Robert Robertson, *Cinema and the Audiovisual Imagination: Music, Image, Sound* (London: I. B. Tauris & Co Ltd), 63.
13. Roger Horrocks, interview with Henry Brant, 1989. Quoted in Roger Horrocks, *Art that Moves: The Work of Len Lye* (Auckland: Auckland University Press, 2009), 164-65.
14. Mancia and Van Dyke, "The Artist as Filmmaker", 102.



## A Colour Box 1935

4 min, 35mm Dufaycolour, sound

The first of Lye's commissions for the GPO Film Unit, A Colour Box is a lively exploration of colour and movement. Made by painting directly onto film, abstract images of "waves, stripes, blobs of violent tints", as described by a critic from London's Daily Herald, were synchronised by Lye's friend and collaborator Jack Ellitt to the popular tune of La Belle Créole, a piece of dance music by Don Baretto and His Cuban Orchestra.

Courtesy of the Len Lye Foundation and the British Postal Museum and Archive. From material preserved by the BFI National Archive and made available by Nga Taonga Sound & Vision



## Kaleidoscope 1935

4 min, 35 mm Dufaycolour, sound

Kaleidoscope was sponsored by the Imperial Tobacco Company as an advertisement for Churchman's Cigarettes. Wanting to expand the "direct" film techniques of A Colour Box, Lye experimented with stencilling on film. Working closely with Jack Ellitt on its musical synchronisation, Lye's brilliantly coloured stencilled and hand-painted images dance to Beguine d'Amour by Don Baretto and His Cuban Orchestra.

Courtesy of the Len Lye Foundation. From material preserved and made available by Ngā Taonga Sound & Vision. Digital version courtesy of the Govett-Brewster Art Gallery



## The Birth of a Robot 1936

7 min, 35mm Gasparcolour, sound

For The Birth of a Robot – an advertising film for Shel-Mex and BP Ltd – Lye's vivid colours come courtesy of Gasparcolour, an emerging type of colour film. Lye worked on this elaborate, colourful puppet animation with Humphrey Jennings acting as colour consultant and producer, and Jack Ellitt on the music – which includes excerpts from Gustav Holst's orchestral suite The Planets.

Courtesy of Shell Global and the Len Lye Foundation. From material preserved and made available by Ngā Taonga Sound & Vision.



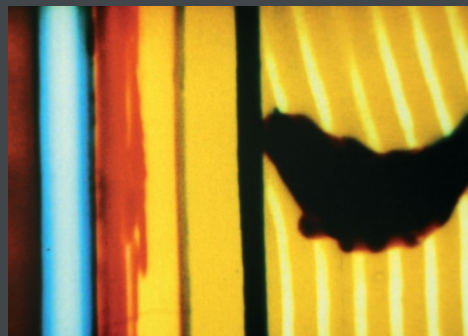
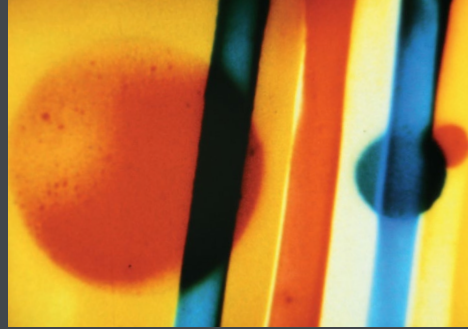
## Rainbow Dance

### 1936

5 min, 35mm Gasparcolour, sound

Lye's second film for the GPO Film Unit, *Rainbow Dance*, combines live action footage of a silhouetted dancer overlaid with stencil-patterned imagery to create a fantastically layered and abstract world of colour and movement. Lye's use of Gasparcolour's three film strips was extremely original – filming the dancer in black and white, and adding colours during the footage's development and printing. The film's imagery was synchronised to the jazz sounds of *Tony's Wife* by Rico's Creole Band.

Courtesy of the Len Lye Foundation and The British Postal Museum & Archive. From material preserved and made available by Ngā Taonga Sound & Vision.



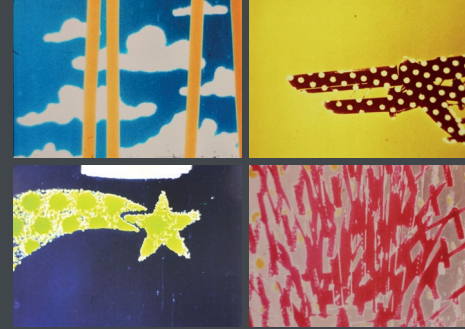
## Colour Flight

### 1938

4 min, 35 mm Gasparcolour, sound

Sponsored by Imperial Airways, *Colour Flight*'s hand-painted and stencilled imagery moves to a soundtrack of rumba by the popular Cuban orchestra, Lecuona Cuban Boys, and Honolulu Blues by jazz band Red Nichols and his Five Pennies. As an Imperial Airways pamphlet describes the film: "Trumpet notes dance in greenish whirlwinds against a background of purple and violet".

Courtesy of the Len Lye Foundation. From material preserved and made available by Ngā Taonga Sound & Vision.



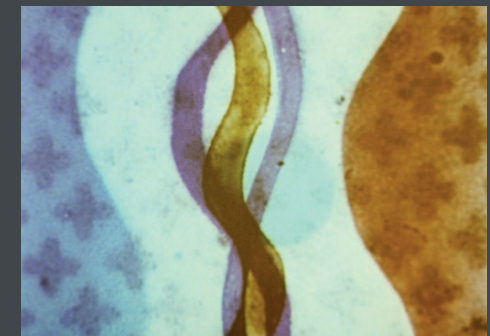
## Trade Tattoo

### 1937

5 min, 35mm Technicolor, sound

A GPO film production, *Trade Tattoo* was made using existing film stock – black-and-white off-cuts from GPO Film Unit documentaries including Alberto Cavalcanti's *Night Mail* (1936). His most complex experiment in film processing, Lye completely transformed the found footage, adding hand painted images and stencilled patterns, and using techniques such as montage and jumpcuts, cued to Lecuona Cuban Boys' "rollicking" music.

Courtesy of the Len Lye Foundation and the British Postal Museum and Archive. From material preserved and made available by Ngā Taonga Sound & Vision.



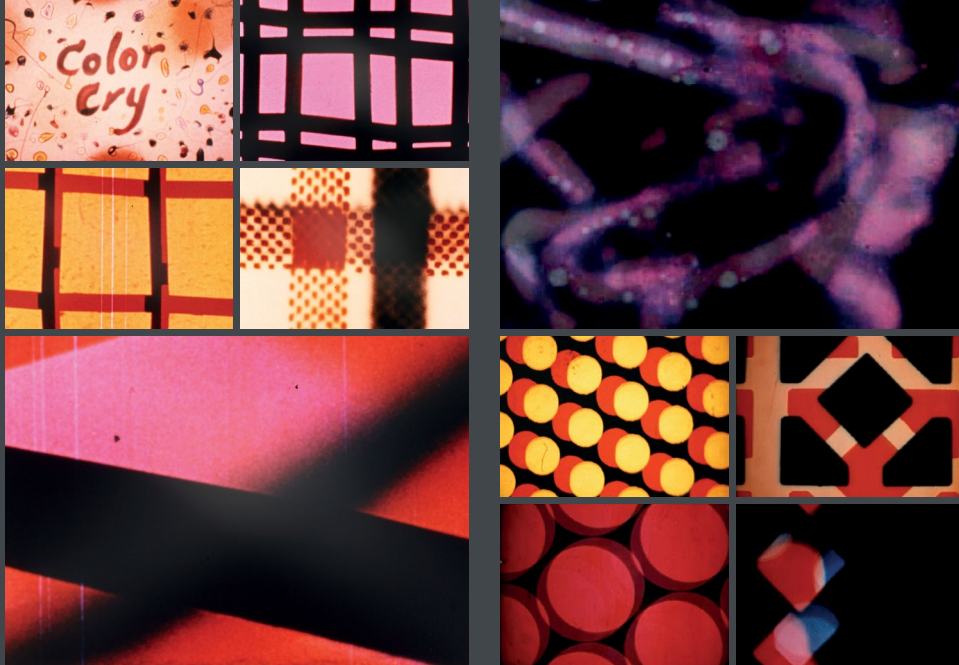
## Musical Poster #1

### 1940

3 min, 35mm Technicolor, sound

The first of what became known as Lye's wartime films, *Musical Poster #1* was sponsored by the British Government Ministry of Information to generate awareness of the presence of spies ("Careful! The enemy is listening to you"). An animated information film, *Musical Poster #1* presented slogans with hand-painted wave patterns and images synchronised to the jazz standard *Bugle Call Rag*.

Courtesy of Shell Global and the Len Lye Foundation. From material preserved and made available by Ngā Taonga Sound & Vision.



## Color Cry

1952-3

3 min, 16mm Kodachrome, sound

Lye returned to experimental filmmaking in the 1950s with *Color Cry*. Made using the “rayogram” technique of placing objects and materials, such as stencils and gels, on film and exposing it to light, the resulting film shows ribbons of wavering colour and textures, patterns and shapes. The images move to Sonny Terry’s energetic rendition of the blues song *The Fox Chase*, played on the harmonica and include his signature vocal hollers, which Lye interpreted as the cries of a slave fleeing a lynch mob.

Courtesy of the Len Lye Foundation. From material preserved and made available by Ngā Taonga Sound & Vision.

## All Souls Carnival

1957

16min, 16mm colour, sound

His last colour film, *All Souls Carnival* was created by Lye to accompany music by Henry Brant. Screened with live music at the Carnegie Recital Hall in New York on 3 March 1957, for a long time this film was believed to have been lost, but the first nine minutes were later located and restored by Roger Horrocks with the assistance of Brant himself, the Museum of Modern Art, and the New Zealand Film Archive. While a recording of Brant’s music was added, the sequence of the images was intentionally left free.

Courtesy of the Len Lye Foundation. From material made available by the Museum of Modern Art, New York and preserved by Ngā Taonga Sound & Vision. Digital version courtesy of the Govett-Brewster Art Gallery