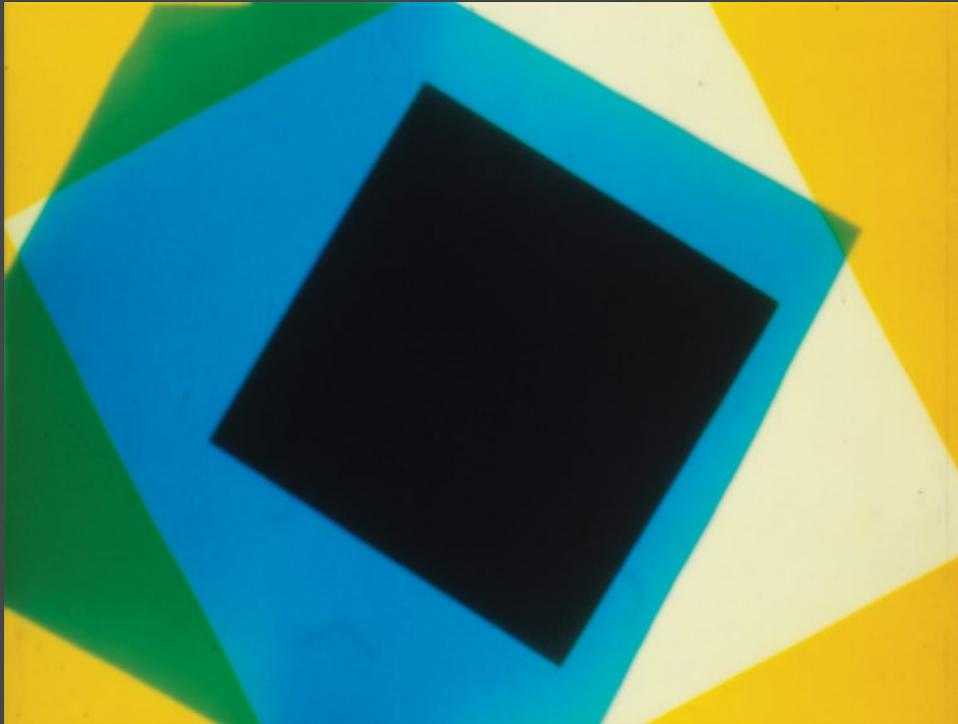


30 Apr – 9 Jul

2016

Projection Series #3

Syncopated Cinema: Six pieces of visual music



Projection Series 3
Syncopated Cinema: Six pieces of visual music
30 April - 9 July 2016
See website for times.
Approximate running time: 40 minutes

Curated by Frank Stark
Catalogue edited by Paul Brobbel

Images supplied courtesy of the Center for Visual Music except for *Begone Dull Care* courtesy of the National Film Board of Canada and *All Souls Carnival* 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.

Published in association with the
Projection Series #3 Syncopated Cinema: Six pieces of visual music

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Len Lye
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Cover: Mary Ellen Bute
Polka Graph 1947

Len Lye Centre Cinema
Photo: Patrick Reynolds

The Govett-Brewster Art Gallery/Len Lye Centre presents a brand new state-of-the-art 62-seat cinema, for audiences to experience the films of Len Lye and the wider world of local and international cinema.

The cinema presents 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 Art Gallery's 'Projection Series', a programme surveying the landscape of historical and contemporary art filmmaking.

Syncopated Cinema: Six pieces of visual music

Curated by Frank Stark

Director Whanganui Regional Museum

Len Lye loved to dance, they say – the life and soul of parties from Hammersmith to Greenwich Village. He had his own style, flamboyant and flagrant, which expressed his intense connection to music. He heard harmony and rhythm in the most unexpected places, like the thundering and clashing of his heavy metal sculptures. Lye's filmmaking was always done with an ear (and sometimes an eye) on the soundtrack. His first film, *Tusalava* (1929), while technically silent, was made for combination with a piano score by Australian composer Jack Ellitt. By the time he moved from *Tusalava*'s relatively conventional cel animation to explorations of direct film making such as *A Colour Box* (1935) and *Swinging the Lambeth Walk* (1939), cinema audio technology had developed to the stage where Lye could integrate his flow of images with a sound track on the film itself.

In the 1950s, after relocating to America, Lye was spending less of his time working in film – the costs of production and the difficulty of getting films funded and distributed were discouraging and he had plenty of other projects to capture his energy. However, he had not given the medium away entirely. His experiments in projecting film onto and behind New York jazz musicians, including Count Basie, in the mid-1950s gave rise to an ambitious collaboration with composer Henry Brant. The two had known each other's work for some time when they agreed to work on what became *All Souls Carnival*. They had enough confidence in each other to work separately before bringing their creations together at the Carnegie Recital Hall in March 1957, with Lye's film sequences projected behind an ensemble of classical and jazz musicians playing Brant's score. *The New York Times* recognised that 'the images and the music were not indissolubly synchronized' but 'they made an effect which was charming, poignant, playful and at times faintly mocking'. In performance the music did not accompany the film, nor vice versa. Instead the two elements twined around each other in a kind of counterpoint.

Like all of the films in this programme *All Souls Carnival* has music at its heart and goes far beyond simply using it as an accompaniment. These are the products of artists who set out to visualise sound and compose motion like music.

Oskar Fischinger was celebrated in 1930s Germany for his animated advertisements, his special effects work for other movie makers and his dazzling live cinema events. At the same time he was hard at work on other experimental animations, including a series of 12 black-and-white animation studies made to be shown in conjunction with musical recordings – arguably the first music videos. In 1931 Universal Pictures purchased the US rights for *Study no. 5* while *Study no. 7* was distributed as a short film shown before popular movies around the world. *Study no. 7* was made to work with Brahms' *Hungarian Dance No. 5*.

After the completion of the studies and the colour experiments which followed, Fischinger left Germany in the shadow of the Nazis' denouncement of his work as 'decadent'. Initially he took up an invitation to make short films for Paramount Pictures – with a dispiriting lack of results. He moved on to MGM where he made *An Optical Poem* (1937), but could not get other projects off the ground. He then tried his luck at Disney, working on the Toccata and Fugue section of *Fantasia*. Once again, he quit in disgust, dismissing the movie as 'the product of a factory'. While he completed his last substantial film project, the award-winning *Motion Painting No. 1*, in 1947 and concentrated much more on painting, he remains unchallenged as the founding figure of a kind of film making often referred to as 'visual music'.

According to Fischinger's biographer William Moritz, 'The "visual music" idea is an eternal thing. You can experience it just as you can a good piece of music a hundred times. Similarly, you can experience Fischinger's films freshly many times and notice new things.'

Evelyn Lambart and Norman McLaren met in 1942 at the National Film Board of Canada where McLaren was head of animation. McLaren asked Lambart, who was working in the art department, for help with a graphic effect for one of his films, setting in motion a long-running partnership. Ultimately Lambart worked as McLaren's co-director on six films. McLaren, originally from Glasgow, had been recruited a year earlier by John Grierson at the Film Board's creation and went on to establish himself as a giant of Canadian cinema and, along with Fischinger and Lye, a pioneer of abstract film making.

Begone Dull Care (also known as *Caprice En Couleurs*) was made in 1949 around a piano improvisation by fellow-Canadian Oscar Petersen's trio. It was the culmination of a process McLaren had called colour-music,



Mary Ellen Bute
Polka Graph 1947

developed at art school and further stimulated by his viewing of Lye's *Colour Box* in London in 1936. While he worked extensively with a variety of animation techniques, it was over a decade before he was able to combine his and Lambart's hand-painted experiments with reliable colour film printing technology to produce this euphoric yet precise interaction of sound and vision. The film follows the music's three-part structure and uses recurring visual motifs like the representation of the piano as a set of three lines and the shrinking of notes from bold lines to single dots as they fade away. Ultimately, as the playing builds to a strident finale, the screen fills with chaotic colour before falling back into step with the music.

A founding member of the Women's Independent Film Exchange, Mary Ellen Bute made short, abstract musical films through the 1930s, 40s and 50s. She had studied painting and stage lighting before collaborating on an early film with animator Joseph Schillinger. *Polka Graph* was made in 1947 as part of her 'Seeing Sound' series and combined Bute's visual experiments with Dimitri Shostakovich's polka from *The Age of Gold Op. 22*. In her own idiosyncratic style, Bute described her groundbreaking work:

for years i have tried to find a method for controlling a source of light to produce images in rhythm. i wanted to manipulate light to produce visual compositions in time continuity much as a musician manipulates sound to produce music... by turning knobs and switches on a control board i can 'draw' with a beam of light with as much freedom as with a brush... the creative possibilities are endless.

Jordan Belson was a recent painting student when he attended the 'Art in Cinema' screenings at the San Francisco Museum of (Modern) Art in 1946. He was particularly struck with the films of Fischinger, Hans Richter and McLaren and, like his contemporary Harry Smith, he was inspired to start making films himself. Belson's first film, *Transmutation* (1947), has been lost, but several of his other early works have been preserved. While he later renounced them as naive, at times they exemplify the finger-snapping, beatnik fervour of post-war San Francisco.

Belson was right at the heart of the San Francisco North Beach hipster world – he had designed and painted the facade of City Lights Bookstore and *Bop Scotch* uses gritty real-world images as the basis of the animation – particularly the surfaces of city pavements. The kinetic skipping of the film's visuals mimics and competes with the un-credited be-bop jazz music track.

Using a variety of animation techniques, Belson made films based on scroll paintings before becoming better known as a precursor of 1960s light shows and other immersive experiences.

From 1957 to 1959 he worked with sound artist Henry Jacobs on the Vortex Concerts, a series of electronic music events accompanied by visual projections at the Morrison Planetarium in San Francisco.

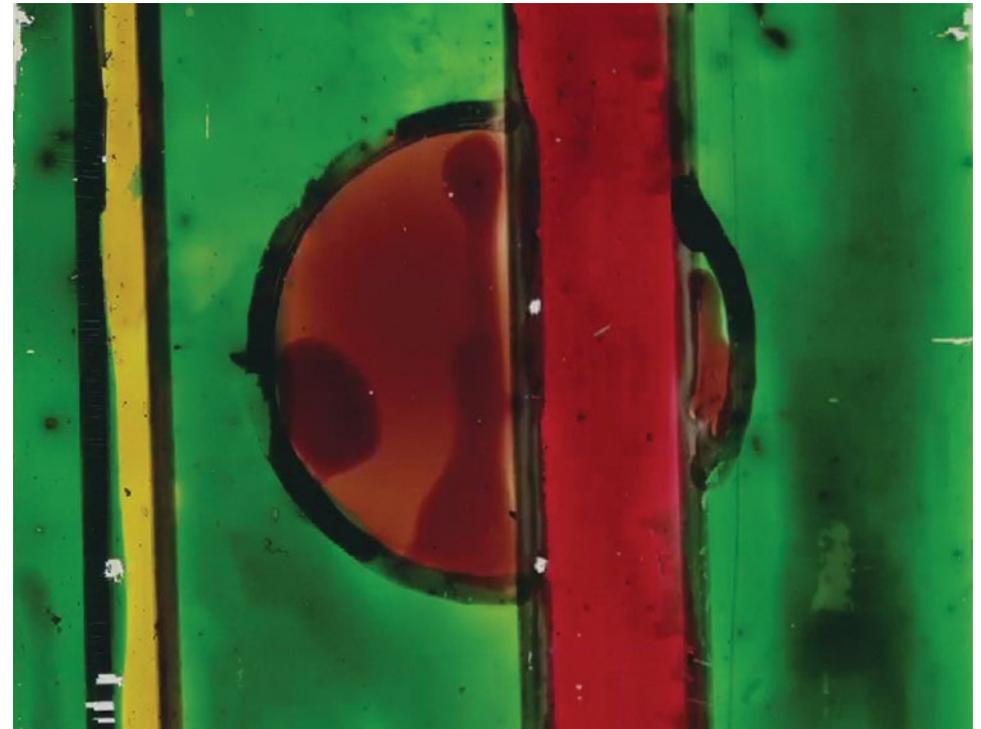
After stints at architecture and art schools, Brooklyn-born Barry Spinello devoted himself to the objective of combining music and painting into a single, integrated art form. His approach was to draw both sound and picture directly onto clear 16mm leader. While he worked obsessively and essentially alone, he did attract attention with composer/artist John Cage admiring his work in the influential *Source* magazine in 1970.

Sonata for Pen Brush and *Ruler* was completed in 1968. Spinello describes the process:

'I learned McLaren's method of painting sounds directly on the soundtrack... I worked on *Sonata* like a man possessed, determined to make a film, and a sound film, with no funds to do so. *Sonata* was made for three dollars worth of clear movie film and five bottles of ink, for a total production cost of nine dollars, plus seven months of my life: fifty hours per week for seven months – sixteen thousand individual frames, each one painted with love and care'.

Oskar Fischinger used cinema to accompany a 78 rpm recording of a popular classical piece, Norman McLaren made visible a jazz trio's interplay while Len Lye swapped solos with an avant-garde composer, but it was Spinello who was prepared to go all the way. In his work moving images and music cannot be separated – aurally or visually. They have become the same thing – film you can hear, sound you can see.

Frank Stark



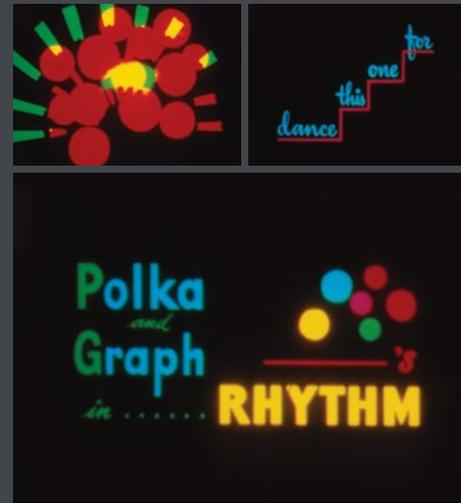
Barry Spinello
*Sonata for Pen, Brush
and Ruler* 1968



Bop Scotch 1952
Jordan Belson

3.14 mins.

Courtesy of the Center for Visual Music



Polka Graph 1947
Mary Ellen Bute

4.24 mins.

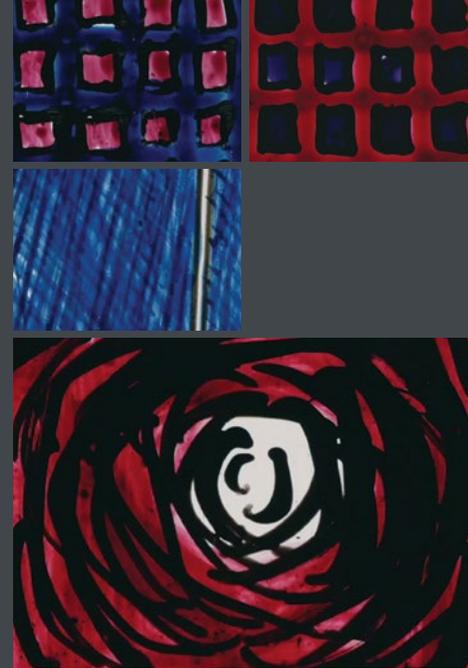
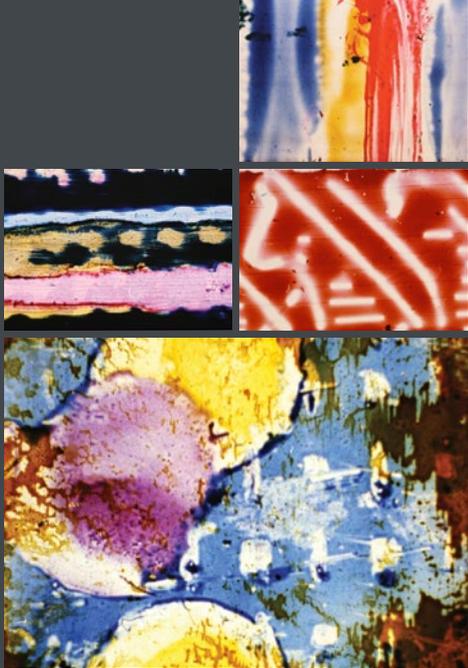
Courtesy of the Center for Visual Music



Study no. 7 1931
Oskar Fischinger

2.37 mins.

Govett-Brewster Art Gallery Collection



All Souls Carnival 1957
Len Lye

9.00 mins.

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

Begone Dull Care 1949
Norman McLaren and
Evelyn Lambart

7.47 mins.

Courtesy of the National Film Board
of Canada

*Sonata for Pen,
Brush and Ruler* 1968
Barry Spinello

10.00 mins.

Courtesy of the Center for Visual Music