

16 Jul – 16 Dec

2016

Projection Series #4 Man Without a Camera



Projection Series #4:
Man Without a Camera
16 July - 16 December 2016
Approximate running time: 24 minutes

Curated by Paul Brobbel, Len Lye Curator
Texts by Paul Brobbel and Sarah Dalle Nogare
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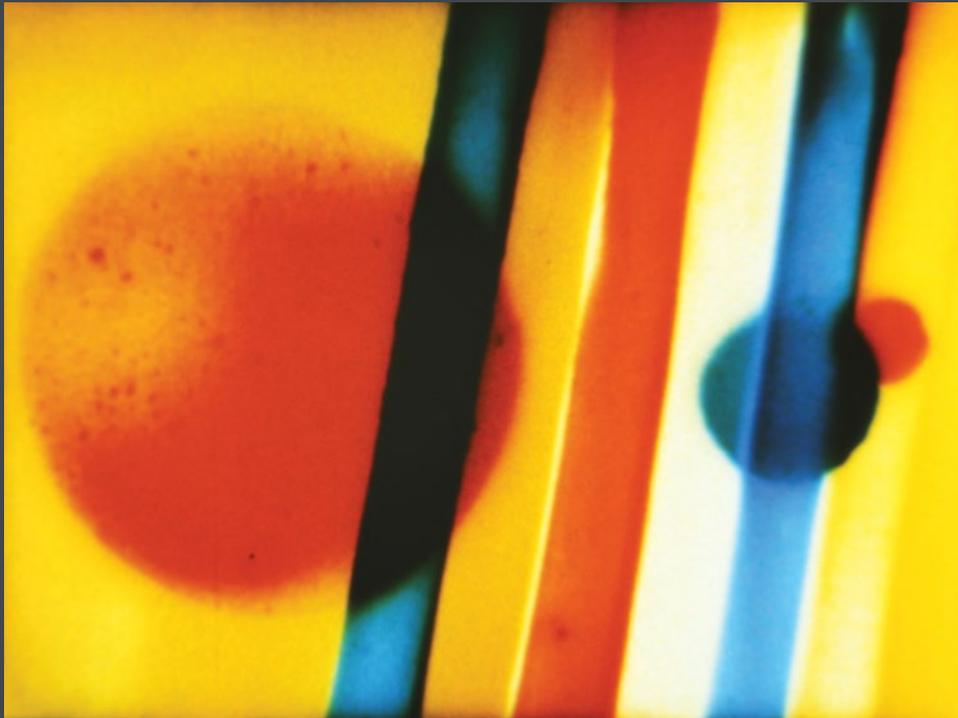
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The Govett-Brewster Art Gallery/Len Lye Centre's 62 seat state-of-the-art cinema encourages audiences to experience the films of Len Lye and the wider world of local and international cinema.

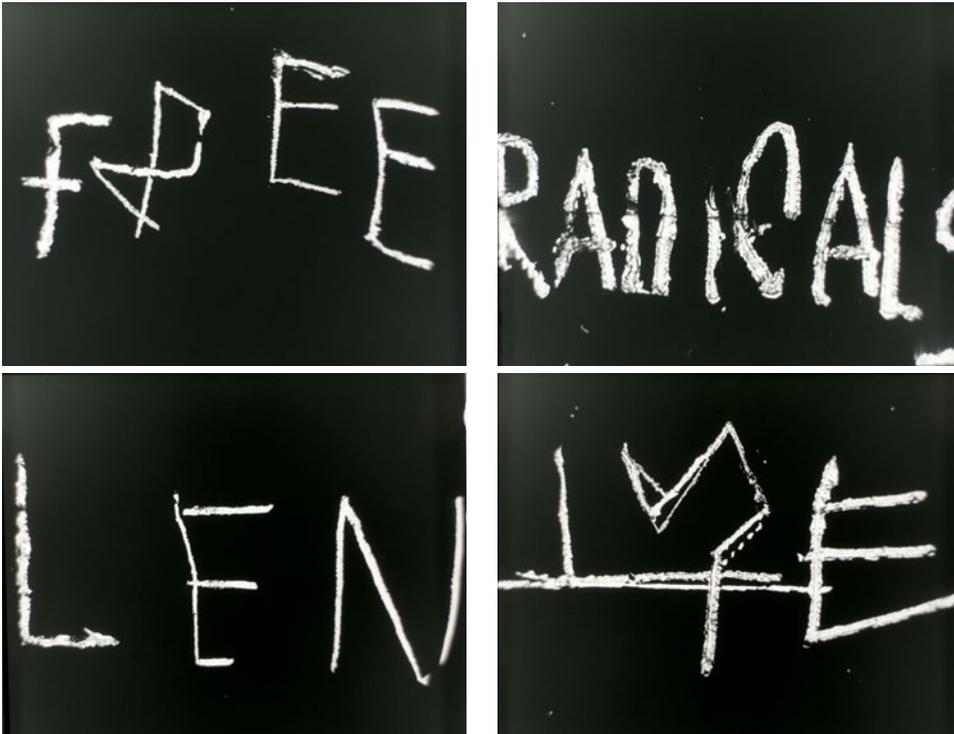
The cinema welcomes you to see historical experimental film, contemporary artists' moving image and regular film festival programming. At the heart of the Len Lye Centre's cinema programme sees the return of the Govett-Brewster Art Gallery *Projection Series*, our regular film programme surveying the landscape of historical and contemporary fine art filmmaking.

Man Without a Camera

Curated by Paul Brobbel

Len Lye Curator, Govett-Brewster

Art Gallery/Len Lye Centre



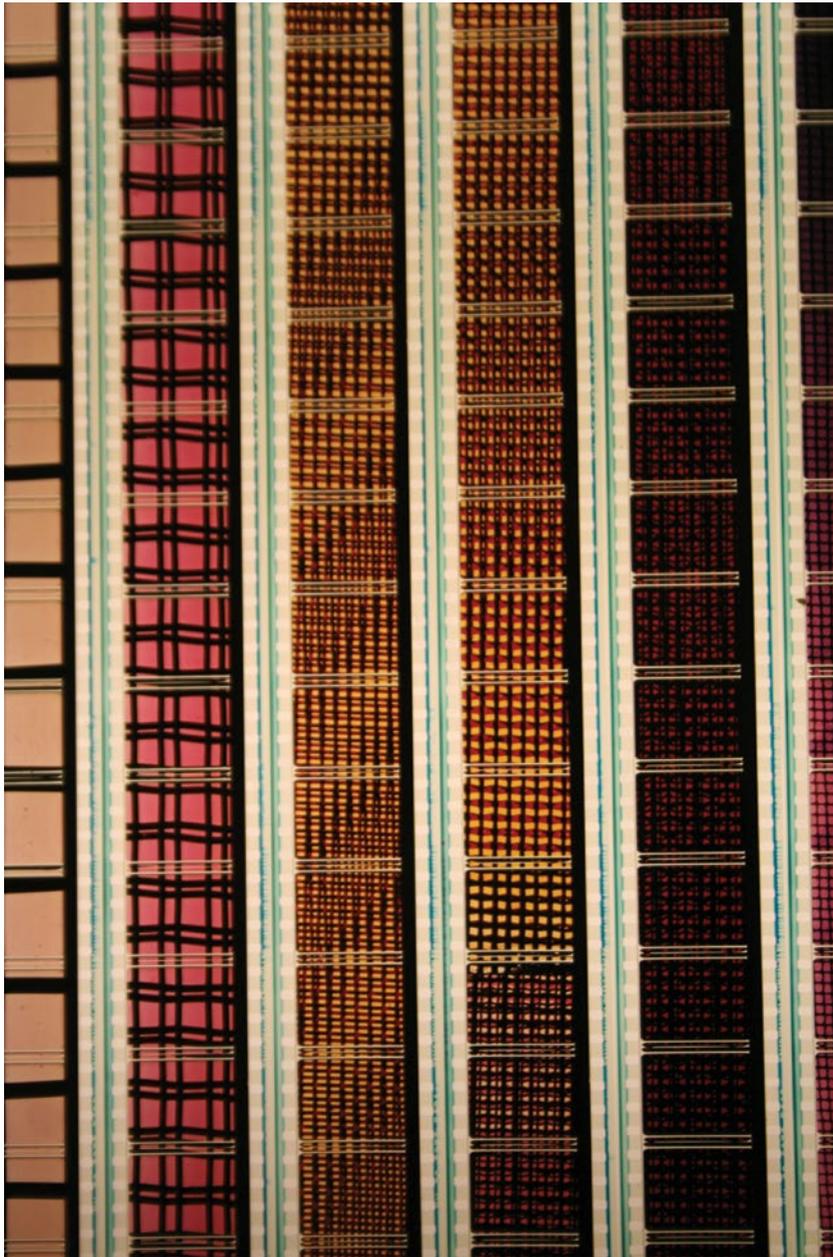
Stills from *Free
Radicals* 1958

Man Without a Camera presents a short selection of Len Lye's films that showcase the flair and skill of a filmmaker abandoning the conventions of camera-made cinema. While New Zealand born Lye worked in a number of cinematic fields, it is Lye's particular achievement in this experimental mode – direct filmmaking – that puts him in a class of his own.

Most films are understood as a large number of sequential photographs, captured onto a reel of film and then projected onto a screen. The maker of a direct film, however, works straight onto the film stock, drawing, scratching, painting, and even collaging. This was where Lye made his mark as an experimental filmmaker *par excellence*, and forged a career explicitly interested in making a new kind of film. Lye argued that he was rejecting the 'Griffith technique', a reference to D.W. Griffith, the famed US director and acknowledged father of modern cinema (or Hollywood, as we often called it).

So how far from Hollywood did Len Lye get? *Free Radicals* would be the best answer. Completed in 1958, this film is recognised not only as Lye's masterpiece but as a masterpiece within all cinema. Across four minutes of film, Lye distilled cinema down to its two core elements, light and motion. Scraping away black film leader (a layer of black emulsion) to reveal the clear celluloid beneath, Lye made a scratch, or a break in the film surface, for the light of the film projector to pass through. Repeating the same scratched figure in sequences – through the imperfections of the artist's hands – created a jittery, dancing effect.

Man Without a Camera includes a short excerpt from the 1968 CBS documentary *Art of the Sixties: When Walls Come Tumbling Down* in which Lye demonstrates his scratch technique. You can see the delicate nature of the task with the artist working on such a small (16 mm.) canvas. However, each of Lye's scratched figures was more than simply a mark on film. Lye noted that he wanted to take a sense of motion similar to that which a dancer feels and capture it outside of the body: 'I try to pin down a kinetic figure on film to make a feeling I feel at the back of my head –



16 mm film strips
from Color Cry 1953

or is it below my ears at the back of my neck?' It's not surprising that Lye's interest in kinetic sculpture coincided with the development of *Free Radicals*, each mode guided by Lye's interest in composing with motion.

Lye produced a number of scratch films (including *Particles in Space* and *Tal Farlow*), his name almost synonymous with the 'scratch' technique. His career, however, includes numerous acclaimed experimental works – typically featuring innovative variations on direct method techniques – and none more so than *A Colour Box*, perhaps the textbook example of direct filmmaking. In this 1935 film, produced for the British Post Office and screened in British cinemas, Lye painted directly onto the film stock. In this instance the film was clear (rather than the black of *Free Radicals*) and the application of a semi-translucent layer of colour resulted in one of the most vibrant and colourful films of early cinema. Like *Free Radicals*, the hand-applied visuals have an imprecise and natural feeling, starkly contrasting with the idea of cinema as a modern technology (the complicated and innovative colour processing on some of Lye's films would have seemed perverse to the processing lab technicians!). Lye's paint could even break free from the arrangement of frames, running long flowing motions rather than a static series of pictures.

One of the virtues of direct filmmaking is the lack of equipment and personnel needed to create a film. Lye could effectively work on his own, his role as director in complete technical control of the project. The downside to this was the time and labour needed to produce even a short, four minute film. Towards the end of *A Colour Box* Lye introduces a message from his sponsor through words painted onto film through stencils (many of Lye's films were vehicles for corporate or governmental advertising). In subsequent films Lye would use this stencil technique to quickly and efficiently layer animations directly onto his strips of celluloid. *Colour Flight* is a 1938 film sponsored by Imperial Airways showcasing the same essential direct paint on film technique as seen in *A Colour Box* with the addition of sequences of stencilled imagery (the Imperial Airways *Speedbird* logo features prominently, flying through stars and clouds). Although subtle in *Colour Flight*, Lye used such techniques to the extreme in the slightly earlier *Trade Tattoo* (1937).

Experimental films took a backseat during the 1940s as Lye turned his hand to more conventional documentary films but by the 1950s he was again innovating with the direct method. The 1953 film *Color Cry* was another colourful cinema landmark, this time using light instead of paint. Working in a darkroom, Lye placed patterned stencils (metal meshes and perforated fabrics) over unexposed colour film. When light was cast over the film stock, an impression of the stencil would remain as light burnt onto the film through the gaps. This was an extension of the photogram

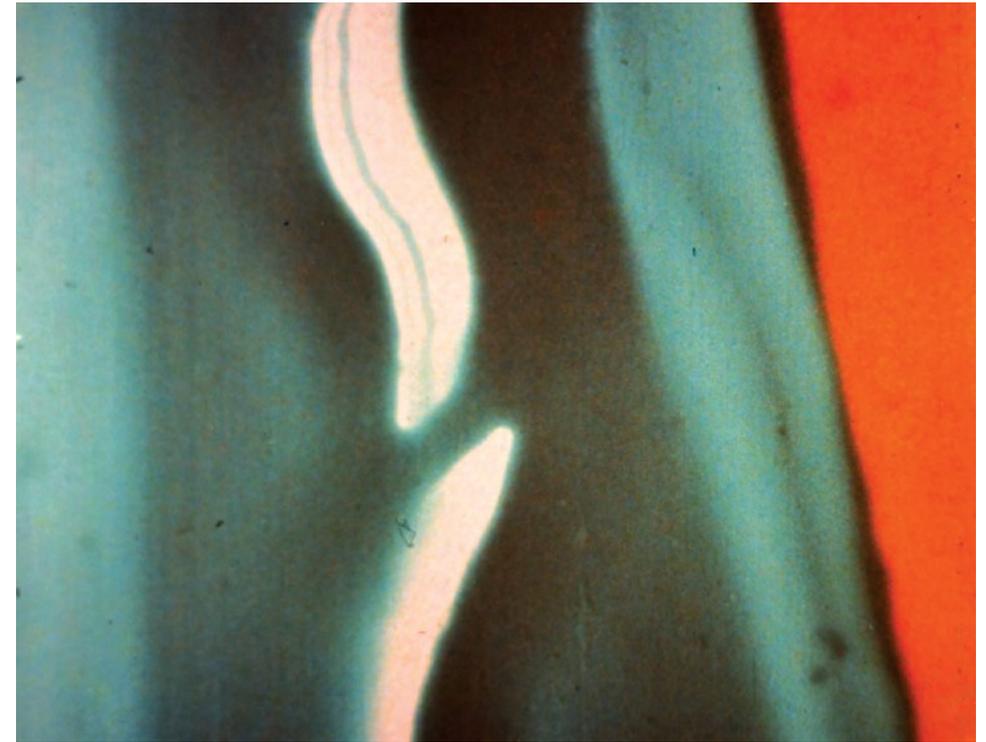
method employed by photographic artists and well known to Lye outside his film practice. Lye's additional innovation in *Color Cry* was to use colour filters on the light source, effectively painting the film with light.

Lye's filmmaking reached a crescendo in the 1950s. Works like *Color Cry* and *All Souls Carnival* demonstrate the restless innovation of a master filmmaker. Yet Lye's scratch films were something of an end point.

Free Radicals brought Lye international acclaim, winning a prize in the prestigious 1958 International Experimental Film Festival in Brussels and the respect of future filmmaking generations. Lye, however, realised he had reached an impasse, unable to financially continue with his filmmaking in a wider world that valued it so little. Lye was fighting for film to be more than the 'Cinderella of the arts', and with *Free Radicals* Lye possibly felt he had won the battle but lost the war. He declared he was on strike as a filmmaker and committed his remaining decades to kinetic sculpture.

Other filmmakers have produced handmade films to rival Lye's work. The Canadian filmmaker Norman McLaren worked with Lye during the 1930s in London where they both directed experimental advertisements for the GPO Film Unit. McLaren devoted his career to filmmaking, building a substantial body of handmade work that has historically eclipsed Lye's own. American Stan Brakhage's innovation with direct filmmaking included *Mothlight*, his 1963 film made by sandwiching moth wings and other natural detritus between splicing tape and contact printing onto film. More recently Lissa Mitchell's *Rain* (1998) demonstrates the direct method in practice in Lye's homeland while the US based British filmmaker Jodie Mack's practice is as broad, colourful and thrilling as Lye's own.

Delving further in Lye's films we discover many modes of filmmaking, from the conventional cel animation (*Tusalava* 1929), stop-motion animation (*Birth of the Robot* 1936) and live action (*Newspaper Train* 1937). The heart of Lye's practice, however, lay in the direct method. Beyond the films presented in *Man Without A Camera* are many other such handmade works, particularly the joyous *Rainbow Dance* (1936), *All Souls Carnival* (1957) and the experimental tour de force *Trade Tattoo* – each a unique expression of the cameraless form.



Still from
A Colour Box 1935



Art of the Sixties: Walls Come Tumbling Down 1968

16mm colour transferred to digital

Sound, 2.00 mins. (excerpt)

Len Lye features in this 1968 CBS television documentary alongside other notable American artists Jackson Pollock, Claus Oldenburg and Robert Rauschenberg. The footage captures Lye in his New York studio demonstrating his kinetic sculptures and, in this excerpt, his scratch film technique.

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.



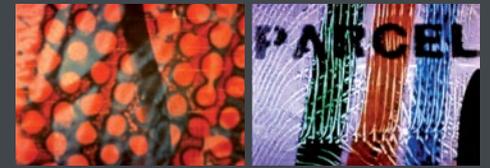
Free Radicals 1958

16mm B/W transferred to digital

Sound, 4.23 mins.

Free Radicals is recognised as Lye's greatest cinematic achievement, dubbed 'an almost unbelievable, immense masterpiece' by the great American filmmaker Stan Brakhage. Lye scratched designs into black film leader with a number of unusual scribes from arrowheads to dental tools, producing a profound reduction of film to its two essential components: light and motion.

Courtesy of the Len Lye Foundation. From material preserved and made available by Ngā Taonga Sound & Vision. Digital version by Park Road Post Production and Weta Digital Ltd.



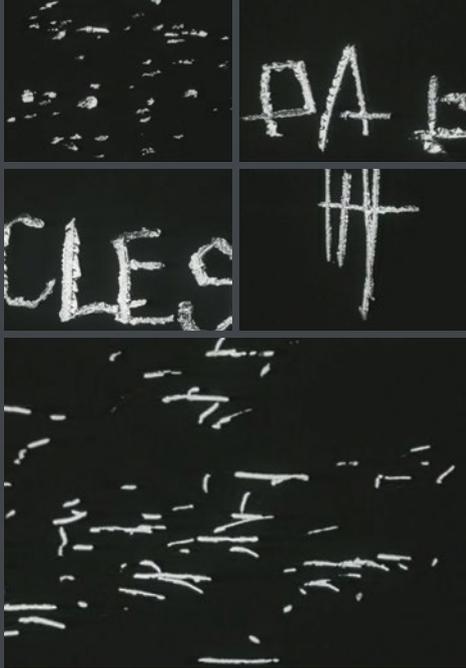
A Colour Box 1935

35mm B/W transferred to digital

Sound, 4.00 mins.

A Colour Box was the first of four films Lye produced for the General Post Office Film Unit and one of a number of innovative films produced by Lye through the 1930s. In this case, Lye painted directly onto clear celluloid. The synchronisation of Lye's visuals alongside a piece of popular Latin jazz music marks an early step in the development of the modern music video.

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 Ngā Taonga Sound & Vision.



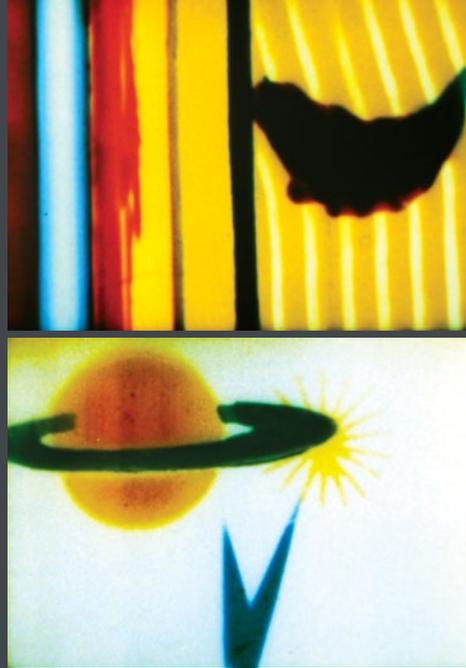
Particles in Space 1980

16mm B/W transferred to digital

Sound, 3.17 mins.

Particles in Space is a scratch film that Lye laboured over for many years, beginning in the late 1950s and completed several decades later. Lye describes the piece as 'particles in space that spin and change momentum and speed and go "thrang thrup" between galaxies'. Like *Free Radicals*, *Particles in Space* involved a soundtrack of drumming but also, in this case, the crashing sounds of various Lye sculptures.

Courtesy of the Len Lye Foundation.
From material preserved and made available by Ngā Taonga Sound & Vision.
Digital version by Park Road Post Production and Weta Digital Ltd.



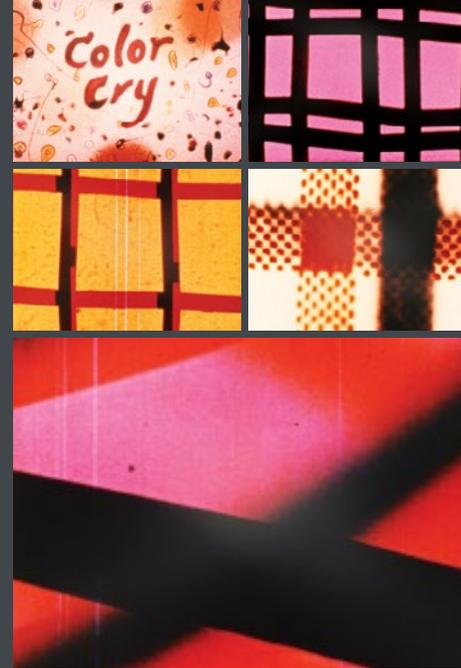
Colour Flight 1938

35mm B/W transferred to digital

Sound, 4.00 mins.

Colour Flight is an advertisement for Imperial Airways made by Lye towards the end of his run of classic 1930s experimental films. Like *A Colour Box*, *Colour Flight* uses hand-painted imagery, however, Lye adds a number of sophisticated stencil animation sequences.

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



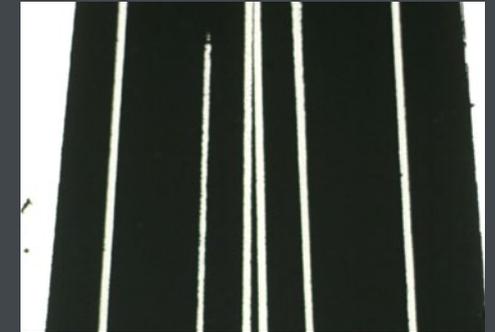
Color Cry 1953

16mm B/W transferred to digital

Sound, 3.00 mins.

Color Cry is one of Lye's most innovative experiments with film, using light rather than paint as part of the direct method. Lye worked in the dark, exposing film to coloured light through patterned stencils. Essentially a photogram (or cameraless photograph) method of filmmaking. The soundtrack in *Color Cry* is Sonny Terry's blues recording *The Fox Chase*.

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



Tal Farlow 1980

16mm B/W transferred to digital

Sound, 2.14 mins.

Tal Farlow is another scratch film from the 1950s completed many years later. Lye's geometric lines accompany a contemporary jazz tune *Rock 'n' Rye*, mimicking the slinking fret-play of guitarist Tal Farlow in another advance towards the music video.

Courtesy of the Len Lye Foundation.
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