Projection Series #12
Oskar Fischinger and Len Lye

1 Dec 2018 – 26 Jan 2019
Screening: Saturdays, 1 pm
Approximate running time: 34 minutes
Curated by: Michelle Wang
Film notes by Michelle Wang
Projection Series coordinated by Paul Brobbel
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The Govett-Brewster Art Gallery/Len Lye Centre’s state-of-the-art 62-seat 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 Govett-Brewster/Len Lye Centre’s cinematic programme is the Projection Series, our regular film programme surveying the landscape of historical and contemporary fine art filmmaking. This twelfth instalment of the Projection Series presents the work of Oskar Fischinger and Len Lye side by side.
Oskar Fischinger and Len Lye

Curated by Michelle Wang

“...music is not limited to the world of sounds. There exists a music of the visual world.”

Oskar Fischinger

“...if there was such a thing as composing music, there could be such a thing as composing motion.”

Len Lye

In 1934, Oskar Fischinger made Muratti greift ein (Muratti Marches On), an ad for Muratti cigarettes. A year later Len Lye was sponsored by Churchman’s Cigarettes to make Kaleidoscope. That they made cigarette ads within a year of each other speaks to the many uncanny parallels that can be found in the lives and careers of these two pioneers of experimental filmmaking. The two knew of each other and admired the other’s work, but it is regrettable that they had never met in person. Their films, however, will have the opportunity to meet in this Projection Series, which will hopefully show both their striking similarities and their fundamental differences.

They were born only a year but a whole world apart: Fischinger in Gelnhausen, Germany in 1900 and Lye in Christchurch, New Zealand in 1901. They both grew up in small towns before being drawn closer to artworld centres: Munich and Berlin for Fischinger and Sydney and London for Lye, before both ending up in America, but on opposite coasts, LA for Fischinger and NYC for Lye. Germany in the early 20th century was a key site for cinematic innovation and Fischinger found himself in the centre of the Absolute Film movement with other filmmakers like Walter Ruttmann, Hans Richter and Viking Eggeling. Perhaps for this reason Fischinger began making his first film *Wax Experiments* in 1921 while Lye did not begin his first film *Tusolava* until 1927.

As early experimental filmmakers, they were both interested in pushing the possibilities of the medium but did so in different ways. Fischinger’s work is associated with visual music while Lye’s might be better described as visual motion. When Lye saw a screening of Fischinger’s *Studie nr 7* in...
London he thought it was: “Mighty good for a few seconds of it,” but to Lye, the formal exploration of animation techniques in the Studies would have seemed too methodical and the fact that the visuals were synchronised too closely with the soundtrack would detract from a focus on pure motion. Fischinger wanted to make an art that would match music’s abstract but emotional power while Lye was aiming for instead was “just a few moments of real kinesthesia” in order to create a bodily sense of movement in the viewer. This led Lye towards the camera-less technique of painting directly on to celluloid as the imperfections inherent in the technique captured the movement of the artist’s hand. The film where Lye got closest to achieving an art of pure motion was Free Radicals where Lye’s scratched designs straight onto black 16mm leader.

It is significant that they both make references to music when discussing their work. The popular classical music that Fischinger often used stands in stark contrast to the jazz and tribal music that Lye preferred. Their choice in music has a corresponding impact on their animation, as the motion that Fischinger composed was much more regular and controlled than Lye’s. His visuals would sometimes look as if they were choreographed to orchestral music, such as in films like Komposition in Blau (Composition in Blue). One critic, Jorg Jewanski, described the music that Fischinger used as “middle class”, but Fischinger may have only used this music in order to make his films more palatable to audiences.

He might have actually wanted to use music that was more like Lye’s. Fischinger had previously used percussion music for Raumlichtkunst, but in the mid 1930’s Fischinger was discussing the possibility of collaborating with the composer Alexander László on a project where the music would be “not music at all but a tapestry of sound woven of rhythm and dynamics - i.e., a sort of Negro music that has no melody, that delivers rhythmic and dynamic intensifications and that can induce dance ecstasy.” This description sounds exactly like the music Lye searched for and found in the drums of the Bagirmi tribe to accompany Free Radicals.

In reality, Fischinger had a more experimental relationship to music. Both Fischinger and Lye experimented with optical scores, but Fischinger also made groundbreaking experiments with synthetic sound in the early 1930s. Furthermore, Fischinger also made silent films such as Radio Dynamics where the film’s visuals are powerful enough to stand alone which show that Fischinger, as he stated, was not interested in just illustrating music. For Lye, the sound was more important; his films lose much of their power...
when seen without the accompanying music and he admitted as much:
"They don’t look at all good because they are done for sound, with sound.”
As a filmmaker interested in composing motion and generating a sense
of motion in the viewer, Lye needed the extra sound energy to amplify the
visual imagery. For this reason, Lye need sound and visuals to sync to some
extent but not too closely. The relationship between sound and visuals in a
Lye film can be thought of as syncopated in the same way that the rhythm
and the beat is syncopated in jazz music.

Both Fischinger and Lye made advertising films and other commercial work:
Lye directed the weekly new series March of Time and Fischinger worked
as an animator for Disney and Paramount, produced a film for MGM and
had worked on a number of commercial projects back in Germany.
With their commercial work in mind, another difference in their experimental
work becomes apparent. Fischinger was interested in exploring both
experimental and traditional animation techniques which can be seen in
a film like An American March which has a ‘cartoonish’ feel in its use of
colour and outlined shapes. Fischinger felt that Disney’s animation was
too conventional and terminated his contract early over drastic changes
made to his abstract designs without his consent, asking for his name to
be omitted from the credits. He was convinced he would become more
famous than Disney one day and would not want to be associated with
what he considered tasteless work. Lye worked with found footage in ways
that Fischinger did not and his mastery of editing with quick cross-cuts in
Rhythm point to the years Lye spent working in a documentary film crew.
In other films like Rainbow Dance and Trade Tattoo, Lye explored ways of
mixing found footage with direct filmmaking techniques.

Despite the discussed project with László in the 1930s never coming to
fruition, Fischinger was a much more productive artist and had a more
practical view towards making art, producing approximately 50 films and
over 800 paintings in his lifetime. Just as Fischinger was willing to use
music that appealed to general audiences, he was also more open to
procuring funding. In 1940 Fischinger signed a contract with Guggenheim
curator Hilla von Rebay which stated that in return for $2000 to go towards
the making of An American March, Fischinger would have to give her
four prints of his films worth $800 and return the $2000 from any profits
made. Lye’s relationship to sponsorship was more ambivalent, he knew
that sponsorship would make it easier to make films financially, but more
difficult artistically. Lye found an ideal relationship in London with the
General Post Office (GPO) Film Unit where they agreed to pay Lye a fee as
long as there was an advertising message for the Post Office somewhere in the film. The four films Lye made for the GPO were almost pure artistic freedom with an advertising message tacked onto the end. Nevertheless, in the end, they both gave up on finding funding for their films, with Lye saying that: “I will not make another fine art film until an institution sponsors me to make one.”

It is telling that after they shifted their focus away from filmmaking, Fischinger focused on painting and Lye on kinetic sculpture. In Fischinger’s broader artistic practice there is a greater commitment to abstraction than Lye’s. Fischinger’s films have an emphasis on geometrical form which mean they can be easily be absorbed into the context of abstract painting as a form of painting in motion. Music and abstract art have had a long and fruitful relationship; painters such as Paul Klee and Wassily Kandinsky often looked to music for formulas of abstraction and often titled their paintings based on musical terms. Lye’s broader artistic practice cannot be so easily linked to any singular movement, but his interest in visual motion leads him to continue exploring these ideas in the less expensive and less time intensive medium of kinetic sculpture.
Oskar Fischinger

*Muratti greift ein* 1934
2.38 min., digital transfer from 35mm
colour | sound

In the mid 1930s, Fischinger made two commercials for Muratti Cigarettes that animated cigarettes to look as if they were marching and dancing. At one screening that also showed *Komposition in Blau* at a small art cinema in Hollywood, the audience stomped and shouted for it to be played again. It was this screening that caught the eye of a Paramount executive who offered Fischinger a job and an escape from Germany in 1936.

Len Lye

*Kaleidoscope* 1935
3.33 min., digital transfer from 35mm
colour | sound

Based on the success of Fischinger’s ads and the newly acknowledged power of ‘soft sell’ advertising, the Imperial Tattoo Company commissioned Lye to make a film advertising Churchman’s cigarettes. Lye took this opportunity to further explore direct filmmaking techniques and the cigarettes were abstracted into flat rectangular shapes with a short advertising message at the end.

Oskar Fischinger

*Studie nr 7* 1931
2.30 min., digital transfer from 35mm
black and white | sound

Between 1929 and 1933, Fischinger made a number of black and white films set to popular, classical and jazz music. These films were animated with stills drawn on paper with charcoal. This film was shown at a screening of experimental films in London that was said to have inspired Lye as a filmmaker. Len Lye saw *Studie nr 7* in London and said that “the dynamic dance of abstract light wouldn’t go out of my mind.”

Len Lye

*Free Radicals* 1958
4.09 min., digital transfer from 16mm
black and white | sound

This was the first of Lye’s black and white films made by scratching onto black 16mm leader. By directly capturing the movement of his hand, *Free Radicals* exemplifies Lye’s ambition to create an art of pure motion. The African music is a tribal tribute to Yoruba, the god of lightning, and it perfectly accompanies the “little zig-zags of electricity” that zap across the screen.
Len Lye

Rhythm 1957
1.03 min., digital transfer from 35mm
black and white | sound

Made as a promotional film for the Chrysler motor corporation, Lye used rapid editing to speed up the assembly of a car and set it to African drum music. Rhythm won first prize at a New York advertising festival despite this but was later disqualified because it had never been screened on television. Film critic P. Adams Sitney wrote of the film: "Although his reputation has been sustained by the invention of direct painting on film, Lye deserves equal credit as one of the great masters of montage."

An American March is the only film that might suggest that Fischinger once worked for Walt Disney. In this short film, Fischinger animates colourful shapes with an American flag in the background. With the outlined shapes and the use of rainbow colours it is Fischinger’s most ‘cartoonish’ film.

Oskar Fischinger

An American March 1941
3.45 min., digital transfer from 35mm
colour | sound

Len Lye

Komposition in Blau 1935
4 min., digital transfer from 35mm
colour | sound

Komposition in Blau explores the use of stop-motion by animating brightly painted wooden cubes and cylinders moving in time to an operatic overture in an imaginary blue room. At various points in the film the boundaries of the room are dissolved when the floor is mirrored or liquified. At this time Fischinger was busy making commercial films, this film gave him an outlet for his experimental ideas.

The different character of Lye’s use of sound and image is most pronounced in All Souls Carnival. The film was a collaboration between Lye and composer Henry Brant to be screened with an instrumental group in the Carnegie Recital Hall in New York. Brant and Lye made their parts separately and whether the two would synchronise or not was left up to chance.

Oskar Fischinger

Komposition in Blau 1935
4 min., digital transfer from 35mm
colour | sound

Len Lye

All Souls Carnival 1957
12 min., digital transfer from 35mm
colour | sound

The different character of Lye’s use of sound and image is most pronounced in All Souls Carnival. The film was a collaboration between Lye and composer Henry Brant to be screened with an instrumental group in the Carnegie Recital Hall in New York. Brant and Lye made their parts separately and whether the two would synchronise or not was left up to chance.