

Press Release

Len Lye

The Body Electric

24 November 2010 – 13 February 2011

Ikon presents the first retrospective exhibition in the UK of work by New Zealand-born artist Len Lye (1901-80). Comprising film, sculpture, painting and drawing, often influenced by indigenous Antipodean traditions, it conveys the complexity as well as the simple joys that inspired the artist. Lye's philosophy of 'Individual Happiness Now' – a belief in the possibility of 'the best in human experience' for all – is embodied in his work.

Born in New Zealand, Lye travelled in the South Pacific as a young man, living for extended periods in Samoa and Australia, before sailing for London in 1926. There he quickly settled into an artistic community that included Henry Moore, Barbara Hepworth, Cedric Morris, Christopher Wood and writers Laura Riding and Robert Graves.

During the 1930s, Lye's main interest lay in film-making and he drifted into London's film industry. Commissioned by the visionary film unit of the General Post Office, he produced a number of commercials that are now seen as seminal in the history of moving imagery. These camera-less works used Lye's own distinct style and technique of 'direct' film-making, where colour was painted directly onto the celluloid film. Several of these films will be exhibited at Ikon, including *Rainbow Dance* (1936) with its Gasparcolour and stencil effects, and the later, more avant-garde films *Colour Cry* (1953) and *Free Radicals* (1958).

Around the 1950s, having moved to New York and discouraged by a lack of positive critical reaction to his films, Lye began making kinetic sculpture (which he referred to as 'tangible motion sculptures', or 'Tangibles'). Of these works Lye said, '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.' The Tangibles essentially consist of lengths of metal prompted into movement by a motor. *Blade* (1958) was one of the first, a 2m high shiny strip of cold rolled steel with a steel rod and cork ball at the top. Its base, fixed into a clamp, is vibrated to make the whole quiver whilst making sounds like a knife swishing through air, before a climax of dramatic S-shapes cause the ball to rebound in a kind of frenzy. The *Fountains* (1963-76) were quieter, meant to evoke the "spray in a fountain" by the rotation of hundreds of vertical steel rods up to 2m tall clasped together at the base, bending under their own weight.

IKON

Ikon Gallery, 1 Oozells Square, Brindleyplace, Birmingham B1 2HS
TEL. +44 (0) 121 248 0708 / FAX. +44 (0) 121 248 0709
WEBSITE. www.ikon-gallery.co.uk
Ikon Gallery is a registered charity no. 528892

Lye dreamt of scaling up these projects for public spaces, and drawings of his plans are included in this exhibition. Some were realised after his death and are also documented here, including *Wind Wand*, a 45m rod permanently installed on the beachfront of New Plymouth, New Zealand.

This exhibition, co-curated by Tyler Cann (Len Lye Foundation), is supported by Creative New Zealand.

Ends.

Note to Editors:

1. Press Preview, Tuesday 23 November 2010, 12-8pm
2. A selection of images is shown below
3. Ikon is open Tuesday – Sunday and Bank Holiday Mondays, 11am - 6pm. Free entry.
4. Ikon Gallery is a registered charity and receives core funding from Birmingham City Council and Arts Council West Midlands.
5. For more information and images please contact Helen Stallard, Press and PR Consultant, on 0774 033 9604 or h.stallard@ikon-gallery.co.uk

IKON

Ikon Gallery, 1 Oozells Square, Brindleyplace, Birmingham B1 2HS
TEL. +44 (0) 121 248 0708 / FAX. +44 (0) 121 248 0709
WEBSITE. www.ikon-gallery.co.uk
Ikon Gallery is a registered charity no. 528892



Len Lye
Rainbow Dance (1936)
Courtesy the British Post Office,
Len Lye Foundation, Govett
Brewster Art Gallery and New
Zealand Film Archive



Len Lye
Rainbow Dance (1936)
Courtesy the British Post Office,
Len Lye Foundation, Govett
Brewster Art Gallery and New
Zealand Film Archive



Len Lye
Fountain (1976)