

Len Lye

The Body Electric

24 November 2010 – 13 February 2011

First and Second Floor Galleries and Tower Room

Individuality is the rock of Happiness

Happiness is the vehicle of Individuality

Now is the bump of both

Len Lye

This is the first retrospective exhibition in the UK of work by Len Lye (1901–1980). Comprising film, sculpture, painting and drawing, it reveals the artist as a remarkably inventive figure, and thoroughly engaging.

The title of this exhibition refers to Walt Whitman's poem 'I Sing the Body Electric' (1855). The poem, an exultation of physicality and the relationship of body to soul, resonates with Lye's own philosophy of 'Individual Happiness Now' and exemplifies the values that he believed were intrinsic to a tolerant egalitarian society.

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 and Cedric Morris, impressing them as "a man from Mars who saw everything from a different viewpoint." Lye drifted into London's film industry, assisting on the production of commercials, whilst developing his skills in the medium. His first authored film *Tusalava* (1929) was a short animation that assimilated influences from Samoan, Māori and Australian aboriginal cultures into a surrealist sequence of writhing biomorphic shapes that played out an orgiastic life-cycle. He continued to paint, but film-making was his main interest during the 1930s.

Commissioned by the General Post Office (GPO) Film Unit in London, Lye produced a number of films that have since become acknowledged as seminal in the history of moving imagery. He developed his own distinct style and techniques of “direct” film-making, whereby colour was painted straight onto celluloid. *A Colour Box* (1935), for example, is a stream of abstractions that seems to flow through the projected frames. He added stop-frame puppetry in *Kaleidoscope* (1936) and Gasparcolour, stencils and deregistration effects in *Rainbow Dance* (1936). *Trade Tattoo* (1937) involved the superimposition of coloured abstraction on documentary footage of factory workers.

Such experimentation was not so evident in the propaganda he was obliged to produce during the war, but afterwards, having moved to New York in 1944, Lye made his most avant-garde films, *Color Cry* (1953) and *Free Radicals* (1958). The latter was the outcome of expressionist scratching into the emulsion layers of black film stock.

It is the means by which you directly etch, that is, scratch with a needle, right into the celluloid, or paint right onto celluloid so that the color sticks to it. If you know animation you can control this type of direct designing on your film celluloid and create motions under control in a sequential way ... But if you also synchronize the visual accenting with sound accenting of music with say, a rhythmic beat, then you've got something you can look at ... One enhances the other, one sharpens up the other.

Around the late 1950s, Lye started to make kinetic sculpture, or what he then referred to as “tangible motion sculptures” (or “tangibles”). *Blade* (1958) is an early example, two metres high, a shiny strip of cold rolled steel alongside a steel rod with a 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*, made during the next few years, were quieter, meant to evoke “spray in a fountain, the glimmer of a fire, or the play of wind in a wheat field”. The one here, from 1976, is a mesmerizing, gently rotating four metre-tall spray of over a hundred vertical steel rods clasped together at the base.

In the 1960s Lye made a number of works that featured steel bands, looped through a motor. *Universe* (or *Loop*, 1963–1966) was especially popular when exhibited in New York in 1964, due to a percussive effect resulting from the impact of a small ball suspended from above. An article in *The New Yorker* published at the time, described an encounter with both the artist and his work: “Listen” [said Lye].

He pushed down on the top of the ring, released it, and as the steel sprang into motion, rapped it smartly with the flat of his hand. A clear fluctuating tone rang out. He tapped it with a cigarette lighter, and a different tone joined the first. "We'll get these in the parks and gardens, and have tapes of the sound they make playing along with them – have them dancing to their own music, you know."

I, myself, eventually came to look at the way things moved mainly to try to feel movement, and only feel it. This is what dancers do; but instead, I wanted to put the feeling of a figure of motion outside of myself to see what I'd got. ... I didn't know the term 'empathy' – that is, the psychological trick of unconsciously feeling oneself into the shoes of another person – but I was certainly practising it. I got so that I could feel myself into the shoes of anything that moved, from a grasshopper to a hawk, a fish to a yacht, from a cloud to the shimmering rustle of ivy leaves on a brick wall. Such shoes were around in profusion ...

When not observing motion I felt it in my actions. For example, I worked outdoors for a living and I didn't move an inch without consciously trying to feel my various muscles working in rhythm while I enjoyed the motions my body made, shovelling, riding, sewing up wheat bags.

Indeed, I got my feeling for motion down to the most subtle of empathies, such as the way both ends of a pen waggled in relation to one another as I wrote, or how my eyeballs moved in their sockets as I scanned lines of print. There isn't a motion that one cannot isolate and feel in relation to one's own solid body.

During the late 1950s and 1960s Lye became identified with Kineticism, the "movement movement", often thought of in relation to other artists such as Jean Tinguely, Takis, Pol Bury, Jose de Rivera and George Rickey. With hindsight, we see him as a more maverick figure, whose artistic trajectory – springing from antipodean sources – was bound to crossover occasionally with cultural mainstreams. This exhibition conveys such complexity as well as the simple joys that inspired so much wonderful work.

It had been raining all night and there were these marvellous fast little skuddy clouds in the blue sky. As I was looking at those clouds I was thinking Wasn't it Constable who sketched clouds to try and convey their motions? Well I thought, why clouds, why not just motion? Why pretend they are moving, why not just move something? 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, after all there were melodic figures, why can't there be figures of motion?