



Len Lye: A Biography, by Roger Horrocks.

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William Graves

I was sitting next to a young American student who was majoring in cinema in California. The when, the where, and even whether the student was male or female escape me entirely. All I remember was this person's statement: 'You knew Len Lye? Wow! He was the creator of the direct film. Wow!'

On my way to Texas in 1961 to become an oilman, I spent a fortnight in New York with Len and his second wife, Anne, being shown the sights in Greenwich Village. Father wanted me to get acclimatized before I flew south! They had known each other since 1926. I had always admired Len's batiks, which hung on the walls in Canellun. I was 'betrothed' to Yancy, Len's daughter, as a (half) joke between Robert and Len when we were new-born. However, I found Len so unassuming that I had not realized, until I heard the student's remark, Len Lye demigod reputation as a film-maker. And it was not until I read Roger Horrocks's biography that I really got to know Len Lye.

Len Lye was born in Christchurch, New Zealand, in 1901. His father was among other things a lighthouse keeper and Len was largely self-taught. In his early years Lye made a close study of the art of the Maori. When he heard about the Futurists in overseas art magazines he was excited to learn that other artists were engaged in experiments similar to his. In the early 1920s he spent several years in Australia and the islands of the South Pacific, especially Samoa. He studied the dance rituals of Polynesia and the Australian Aborigines. In Australia he became involved with film-making, which he saw as an ideal medium for his 'art of motion'.

In 1926 he worked his passage to England as a stoker and, through the painter Eric Kennington, settled in Hammersmith and lived on a barge, the *Avoca*. There he met Riding and Graves. Initially he worked on batiks and produced several Seizin and Hours Press book covers, and the dust jacket for Graves's *Good-bye to All That*. He spent a few months in Deyá in 1930. His first film, *Tusalava*, which he completed in London in 1929, was unique in style – as a semi-abstract animated film influenced not only by modernism but also by Maori, Aboriginal and Samoan art. The film was partly funded by his friends, Robert Graves and Laura Riding. His breakthrough came in 1934–35 when he discovered that he could make films by drawing directly on to celluloid. This

also overcame the fact that he could not afford to hire a film camera. He found he could create 'pure figures of motion' by painting, stencilling or scratching. With the right ink and brush he could (to use Paul Klee's phrase) 'take a line for a walk' or make it dance along a strip of film.

Lye found an enthusiastic sponsor in John Grierson, who screened Lye's films to add a splash of colour and humour to the programmes of black and white documentaries produced by Grierson's Film Unit, which he ran for the General Post Office publicity section. Lye worked for the Unit during the war.

In 1944 he moved to New York and contributed to an upsurge in experimental film-making in the USA. In the 1940s and 50s he came to know many of the abstract expressionist artists, screened his films at their parties, and felt an affinity between their paintings and his films. Despite his failure to find sponsorship he continued to make films. In *Color Cry* he extended the 'rayogramme' method in new directions, using everything from strips of film to patterned fabric to accompany a spine-tingling blues song by Sonny Terry.

Although Lye still made films he was mainly involved in his later years in making motorized metal sculptures. As a sculptor he programmed strips of stainless steel to vibrate and spin at selected speeds, creating 'figures of motion' and flashes of light similar to those found in his later films. His sculptures produced metallic sounds so that each piece seemed to be dancing to its own soundtrack. Lye first exhibited his sculptures at the Museum of Modern Art in 1961, and subsequently took part in many group exhibitions of kinetic sculpture in Europe. His works range from small constructions that move in an exquisitely slow, sensuous way to huge pieces that create a thunderous noise and shake the walls of the gallery.

His work and ideas continue to influence those involved in kinetic sculpture and experimental animation. He was honoured for his originality in 1992 when he was included in 'Territorium Artis', the opening exhibition at the Kunsts- und Ausstellungshalle in Bonn. This exhibition grouped him with artists such as Picasso, Duchamp and Brancusi as one of the hundred great innovators of twentieth century art. Len Lye died in New York in 1980.

Graves and he remained friends throughout his life, and this is reflected in Horrocks's biography. As well as Laura Riding, they had many friends in common: Eric Kennington (Graves wrote the introduction to Kennington's exhibition in 1918), John Aldridge, Tom Matthews, Norman Cameron, Alastair Reid, Ruthven Todd, all of whom are familiar to Graves scholars.

Their paths intertwined. According to Horrocks, Nancy Nicholson lived on the *Ringrose*, a barge, with the children in the months leading up to Riding's defenestration. It was moored next to the *Avoca* where Lye had lived and which belonged to A. P. Herbert. The *Ringrose* had been previously occupied by Jack Elliott, who married the Graves children's nanny, Doris Harrison. Geoffrey Phibbs then moved on to the *Avoca*. (R. P. Graves, in his *Robert Graves: The Years With Laura*, has the names of the barges switched, with Nancy on the

Avoca, and Phibbs on the *Ringrose*). Len Lye visited Mallorca in early 1930 with John Aldridge (whose painting of Graves hangs in the National Portrait Gallery), Jane Thompson (later his first wife), and the sculptress Kanty Cooper. (Cooper kept a journal, which may be an interesting source of Graves material.) Later, in the 1960s, Graves stayed with the Lyes on his visits to New York.

I found Roger Horrocks's biography absolutely fascinating. It both allowed me to know Len Lye and also filled in with all sorts of details not covered by the Graves biographies. His material includes many interviews and his chapter notes are exhaustive. Horrocks spent twenty years researching and writing it and it shows.