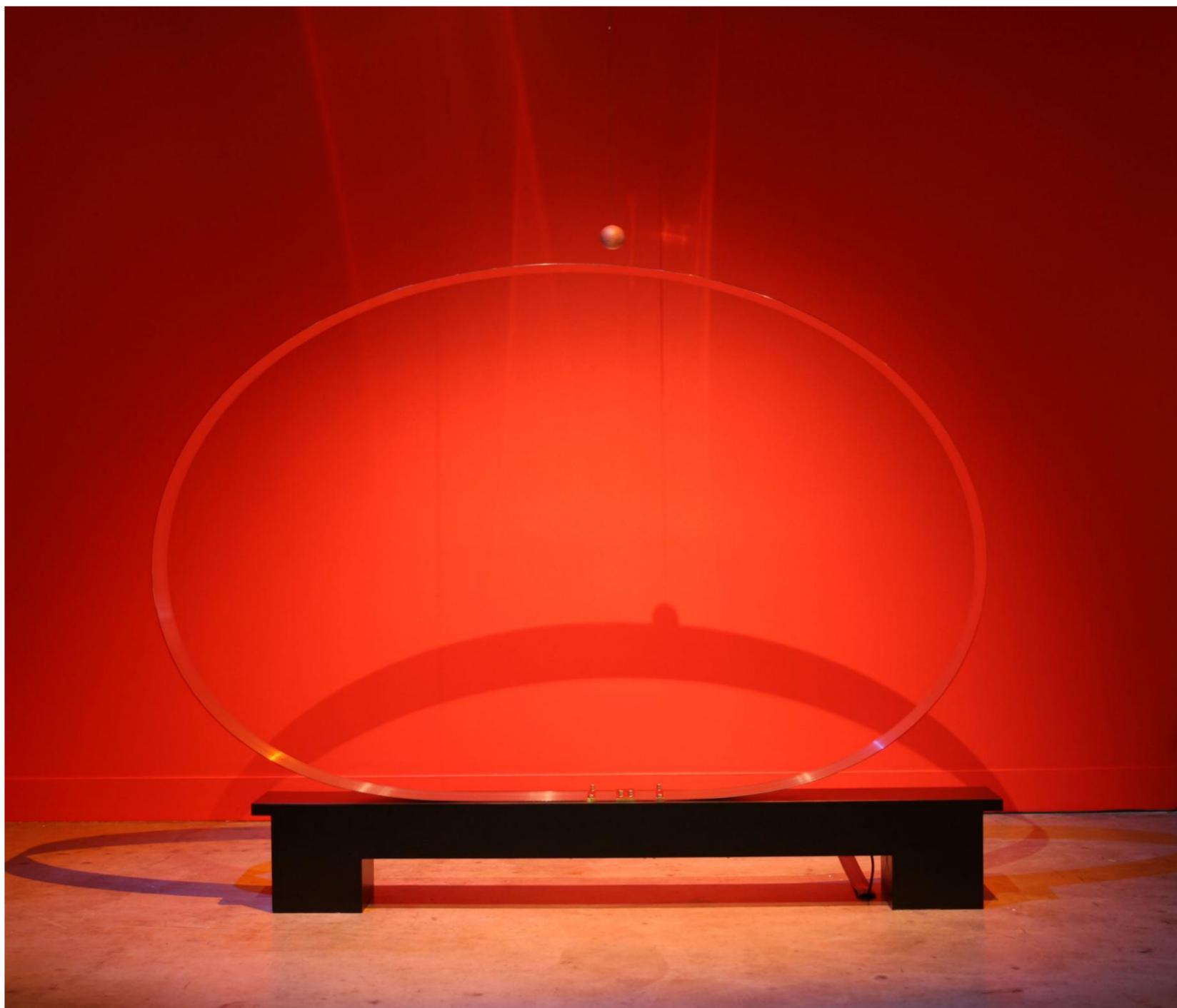


# Len Lye: Kaleidoscope

---



**Image credit:** Len Lye, *Universe*, 1963-1966 (1998 reconstruction), Len Lye Foundation Collection, Govett-Brewster Art Gallery. Photo by Bryan James.



THE LEN LYE FOUNDATION

Len Lye

THE FILM ARCHIVE



Civic Square, 101 Wakefield Street  
PO Box 2199, Wellington 6011, New Zealand  
Telephone: +64 4 801 3021  
Email: [citygallery@wmt.org.nz](mailto:citygallery@wmt.org.nz)  
Website: [www.citygallery.org.nz](http://www.citygallery.org.nz)

**City  
Gallery  
Wellington**  
Te Whare Toi

City Gallery Wellington is managed by The Wellington Museums Trust  
with support and major funding from the Wellington City Council

Wellington  
MUSEUMS TRUST



Absolutely  
POSITIVELY  
My Name is PŌWERE  
WELLINGTON CITY COUNCIL Wellington

City Gallery Wellington's Education service is supported by the Ministry of Education's LEOTC fund.

# Len Lye: Kaleidoscope

## Curriculum links

**Visual Art, Music, Dance:** Developing Practical Knowledge, Developing Ideas, Communicating and Interpreting

**Technology:** Technological Knowledge.

**Science:** Physical World

## About the exhibition

**March 2–May 26, South Gallery**

Len Lye is one of the most internationally influential and recognised New Zealand artists of the twentieth century. One of the first artists in the world to work with movement in tangible form, Lye was a visionary film maker, sculptor, poet, painter and 'composer of motion'. This exhibition focuses on Lye's film and kinetic works and is also the chance to see the New Zealand premiere of Lye's work *Ribbon Snake*.

*Len Lye: Kaleidoscope* is the most extensive exhibition of Lye's work to be seen in New Zealand prior to the opening of the new Len Lye Centre at the Govett-Brewster in 2015 and is proudly presented by City Gallery Wellington in collaboration with the Govett-Brewster Art Gallery in New Plymouth, the Len Lye Foundation and the Film Archive.

## About the artist

Len Lye (1901-1980) was born in Christchurch, New Zealand. As a child Lye was an exceptionally independent thinker and had an interest in movement, developing an acute awareness of the physical sensations he experienced on a daily basis. He recalled one of his most intense early memories was during the time he spent at the Cape Campbell lighthouse at the north-east tip of the South Island. *"Lye would lie in bed at night and watch the lamp at the top of the 22-metre (73-foot) lighthouse flash on and off, like a giant kinetic sculpture, creating complex reflections of light on the windows."*<sup>1</sup>

His fascination for movement became more focused when, as a young man he was working in a Wellington warehouse and taking part-time art classes at the Technical Institute. Lye was inspired by a comment his art teacher made around 1920, praising an artist for having developed his own distinctive approach to art. This comment stayed with Lye and over the next few months he began an investigation that would inspire his life's work: the idea that movement (or motion) could be composed as art.

After a period living in Australia and Samoa, learning about film and local indigenous art forms (he was one of the first artists of European descent to engage seriously with Māori and Aboriginal forms of art<sup>2</sup>), Lye returned to New Zealand. After a brief stay, aged twenty five, he travelled to London, making his way by working as a coal stoker on a steamship. In London he immediately joined the avant garde art community and worked part-time for a London animation company. After hours and with access to film equipment, Lye taught himself the traditional process of animation. His experiments with unwanted scraps of film from the editing rooms led to him becoming a pioneer of direct film making.

In 1944 he moved to New York. *"Though he had made kinetic constructions and small sculptures in the 1920s, it was not until 1958 that in a burst of creativity, Len Lye turned to 'tangible motion sculpture'."*<sup>3</sup> While he continued with film, Lye focused mainly on creating motorized, metal sculptures and the works he made during the 1960s and 1970s in New York are considered among the most acclaimed kinetic art of any period, drawing on the beauty and science of kinetic energy, magnetism and gravity.

## Featured artwork: *Universe* (aka *Loop* 1963-66)

Lye built and designed at least 32 kinetic sculptures during his lifetime, both small scale to larger scale works. *Universe* is a large scale, 6.7 metre oval loop made of polished steel that rests on a flat wooden base under which two electro-magnets sit. The magnets are timed to go on and off, tugging at the loop then releasing it, which allows for complex and unpredictable movement, going from side to side, bouncing upwards and narrowly missing or hitting a small ball suspended from the ceiling: *"Above the [steel] band hangs a compressed cork ball. Now that compressed cork, which we went all over the place to find, made the best tone of all...this sonorous sound."*<sup>4</sup>

## Artist's statement

*"Perhaps, deep in our hearts we would all like to be impervious to change of moods, opinions, and environment...On the other hand no one exists without some form of rhythm and motion occurring in one's makeup. From conception to death these are obviously an integral part of life; in fact, our sense of motion is so ingrained that it permeates our lives more consistently than any other single sensory phenomenon"*<sup>5</sup>

## Pre/post-visit activities

**Water Whirler (2006) is a giant kinetic sculpture by Len Lye on Wellington's waterfront.** Before or after a visit to City Gallery Wellington, view *Water Whirler* in action opposite Frank Kitts Park (only five minutes walk the Gallery). To learn more, go to <http://www.sculpture.org.nz/engine/SID/10007/AID/1155.htm>

**Watch *Kaleidoscope*, the film by Len Lye from which the exhibition takes its name:** [www.youtube.com/watch?v=EF\\_ehWEL0Wc](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EF_ehWEL0Wc).

Make a simple kaleidoscope inspired by the exhibition title and Lye's use of colour, shape and pattern in his film work.

**Create a dance and compose music inspired by Len Lye's work or your own surroundings.** What are local man-made or natural features that inspire you? Start by thinking or sensing what it might feel like. What movements come to mind? Can you think of a way to link the movements together to create a dance?

**One of the first exercises Lye did after deciding to explore movement was to sketch a range of everyday activities.** Observe closely a moving object. It might be a branch moving in the wind or a fly buzzing past. Focus on how these objects move. Follow their movements with a pencil on paper or a range of media. Drawings will look more like a series of marks and lines than the object being observed.

**Look at Lye's sculptures then create a kinetic artwork using materials at hand with contrasting qualities—flexible, dense, rigid, flimsy, magnetic, elastic.** Consider how the sculpture could move: with wind power, water, motorised, by the viewer physically moving around it or touching it? Spend time reflecting on how it could be improved, what its limitations are and how the design might change if it were at human or architectural scale.

**Music and sound is an integral part of Lye's work.** As an extension to the above activity, think about how music could be synchronised to the movement of your sculpture. What genre of music would be the best fit? Classical, dub step, reggae, electronica, folk, jazz, funk, hip hop?

Go to <http://www.govettbrewster.com/LenLye/Work/Sculpture.aspx> to see a slideshow of Lye's sculptures.

More information about the exhibition including the exhibition notes can be found at <http://www.citygallery.org.nz/>

Lectures about Len Lye and more film and video by New Zealand artists can be found at: <http://circuit.org.nz/artist/len-lye-study-page>

## Key terms

**Direct film-making.** In a hand-made process, Lye drew, painted, printed and scratched directly onto film doing away with the use of a camera. *Free Radicals* (1957–58) is a film included in the exhibition which has been made entirely of scratched white lines onto black (leader) 16mm film.

**Kinetic art** or 'tangible motion sculpture,' as termed by Lye, incorporates an element of mechanical or random movement, or which gives the illusion of movement by the use of optical techniques (Op Art)<sup>6</sup>.

An artwork made **posthumously** is one that was made after the artist's death. Lye designed many sculptures that could only be completed once technology had developed further than it had in his lifetime. Many of these designs have now been realised posthumously. *Water Whirler* is an example and was developed by the Len Lye Foundation based on Lye's concept and designs.

<sup>1</sup>Horrocks, R. (2009). *Art that Moves: The work of Len Lye*. Auckland: Auckland University Press, p.38.

<sup>2</sup>ibid, p.46.

<sup>3</sup>Govett Brewster Art Gallery. (2013). *Len Lye / Sculpture*. Retrieved January 31, from <http://www.govettbrewster.com/LenLye/Work/Sculpture.aspx>

<sup>4</sup>Horrocks, R. (2009). *Art that moves; The art of Len Lye*. Auckland : Auckland University Press, p 120.

<sup>5</sup>Horrocks, R. (2001). *Len Lye: A Biography*. Auckland: Auckland University Press, p.151.

<sup>6</sup>*The Thames & Hudson Dictionary of ArtTerms* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). (2004). New York:Thames & Hudson: New York.

