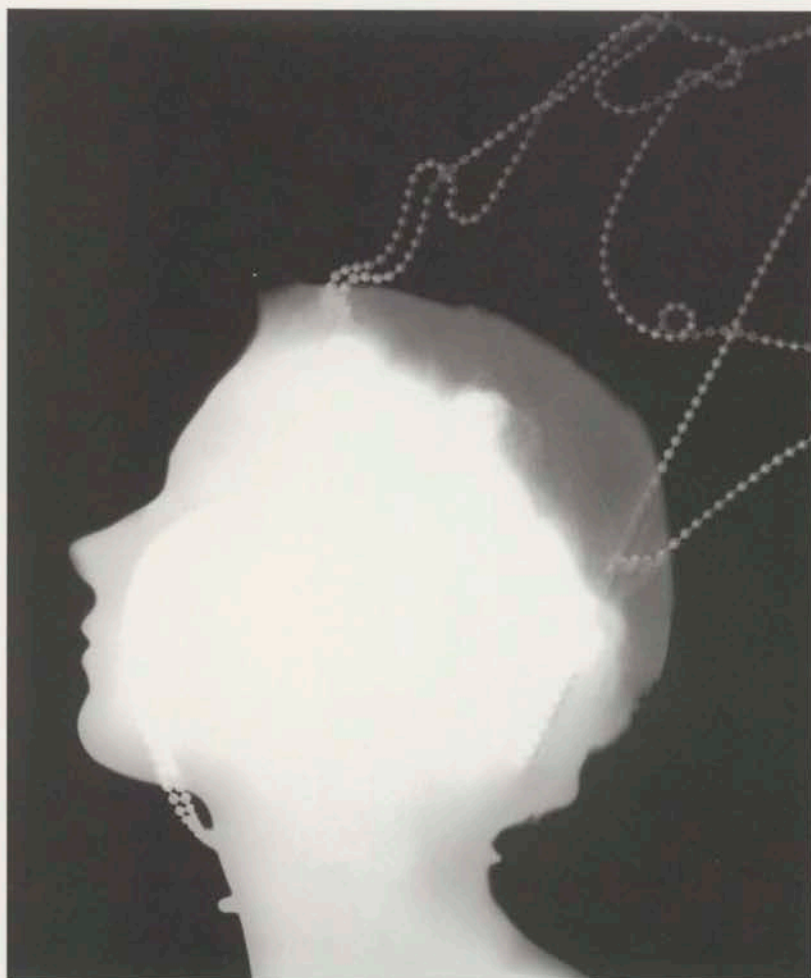


THE LONG DREAM OF WAKING
LEN LYE CENTENARY 1901-2001



79 Ann Lye (*White on Black*), 1947 (photogram 596 x 496mm)
Len Lye Foundation Collection

Celebrating the centenary of Len Lye's birth, this profile is intended to be the first in a series of profiles on one of New Zealand's most internationally acclaimed artists. It presents a brief chronology of his career and, most importantly, it provides an opportunity to present a suite of Lye's own writing. With its infectious enthusiasm, Lye's creative writing talent was recognised early on by his writing contemporaries and companions Robert Graves and Laura Riding Jackson.

The six works that follow stem from the extensive *Happy moments* recollections. Lye's working method involved many edits and rewriting of his texts. This selection is from a version dated December 10, 1962. Originally entitled *Nine rememberings*, only six are reproduced here as the works *Flash*, *Rainpool* and *Black sun* have been reproduced elsewhere.

While not explicit in Lye's work, the connection to writerly movements such as surrealism and dada is evident in Lye's recourse to the unconscious in his creative process; what he has referred to as the 'old brain'. The intuitive and improvised basis for much of his work connects strongly to the development of modernism in Europe and the USA.

Since 1980 the Govett-Brewster Art Gallery has been the home of the Len Lye Archive. Bringing Lye's works to New Zealand is a homecoming of sorts. While Lye cannot be wholly reclaimed into New Zealand's nationalist art canon, the memories represented here are certainly significant as they refer to Lye's memories of New Zealand, and his early, formative experiences.

Greg Burke, Director

ROOSTER

This place of some early operations was on the outskirts of Wellington in New Zealand at a place called Miramar and I was boarded out with a gang of kids who lived as a family all called Rooney. Lye stood out like a sore thumb and, as most kids take for granted, I was always hungry but I'm Cinderella's kid brother around the place including always feeding the rotting hens. If I sound peeved it's because I disliked a great dirty white rooster that had a shoe tied to his leg to stop him from flying up at everyone, but it didn't stop him from flying up at my face, flapping and scrawling and flinging all he had at me day after day at feeding time. Maybe he couldn't reach a grown-up's face but he could reach mine.

All the hens and any other rooster that this thing let live cackled and scratched around in a large sloping backyard of clay and bird dirt, and when it rained this 'pug' clay was unbelievably slippery and I never learnt to negotiate its slopes in barefeet either during or after rain; but there were nice places in the higher part where devil grass and other weeds grew. I sometimes sat up there savouring the joy of a hardtack biscuit which I tackled before tackling the rooster and feeding the dogs, and other odd jobs.

School was more than two miles away and I walked there and back every day. One day I got back and the whole place was deserted except for hens; there was usually someone about. It was most unusual. The house was built on a fairly steep slope and we went up two flights of steps on the back of the house to get to the kitchen door. The steps led to a big wooden-railed landing at the top, a regular captain's deck for observation outside the kitchen.

So I was in the kitchen and there was a plain broomstick handle leaning in the corner of the room behind the door. I got an inspiration: spear the rooster.

I went out to the landing absolutely inspired and knew I couldn't miss. I raised my spear and flung it with a coiled-up spring in my arm. I knew it. He gave one great screech and fell down dead. It hit him smack between the shoulders and I felt I had witnessed a miracle in my spear's flight, and that I was a saint,

newly anointed. I never let on I did it.

In fact, I have just been raising my arm to help me better describe the feel of that spear in my nine-year-old hand. I didn't get much feeling of a spear but I did get the feeling of the halo that hovered over my head for that moment. At the time I could have touched it.

SEN SEN

At an early stage of the game I used to walk to school. I went on my own and, either on the way to school or on the way back, I'd always stop for a daily check on all the things in a sweet shop. I knew all the things in its big clean window: barley sugar, icing things, boiled sweets, boxes of chocolates; but the thing I looked at most was a packet of Sen Sen chewing gum. Packets of Sen Sen were arranged on the middle tier, a little to the left. I'd look at them front on and then I'd step up by the door and look at them from the side, something like a bird eyeing a worm.

One day mother was mixing scones on a long drainboard under a window by the pantry. I watched her sprinkle flour on the clean, washed board and fix the scones and asked her, "Mum, have you ever tasted Sen Sen?" She said, "No, what is it?" I said, "Chewing gum." She said, "Oh." Then she said, "What about it?" I said, "I wondered what it tasted like." She said, "How much is it?" I said, "A penny." She said, "I'll give you a penny." And she cleaned her hands and went and got it.

That moment floors me: I had never tasted chewing gum; I was too young for pocket money; and I didn't know I could ask.

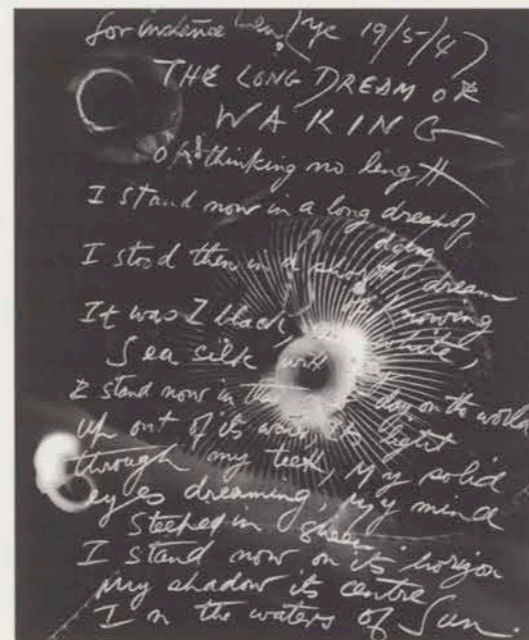
POWELL

I was six when this big man was part of things. He was tall and thick with black eyebrows. His hair was as black as a crow's back. He had blue eyes. He was going to make our family fortune out of soot. He had a secret way of making black boot polish out of it. I was in on it. He had barrels of soot he got from the chimney sweep and I kept some in cardboard bootboxes. We mixed it up with waxy stuff and put it in flat, round brass tins. His name was Powell and he became my stepfather.

Powell took us all on a boat to a lighthouse. The boat we went on was a thin, black government boat with a bow that curved underneath like a yacht. It had a long bowsprit that stuck way out ahead. I stood on deck holding my young brother Phil's hand and we watched some big black fish guide us through some Sound. I heard some people shot them sometimes.

I don't know what Powell's first name was but it should have been Adam to go with the marine Garden on Eden he took us to, where he showed me how to feel I was part of the sea. He was showing me how to clean fish at the sink and I was up close to the cleaning board as he opened up the fish bellies with a knife. He showed how fish have insides like mine with hearts and livers and they use air too. The sun came through onto their silvery insides as he showed me what went on and, for a moment, I knew what it felt like to live in the sea. I felt it in my heart and breath but mostly in my belly. Fish innards are more than offal. They're what it feels like to live in the sea.

This great big man went mad after we had been two years at the lighthouse. Years later when I asked my mother where Powell



35 Long dream of waking 1947 photograph 596 x 498mm
Len Lye Foundation Collection

1901 Born July 5, Christchurch, New Zealand
1915 Attended evening art classes at Wellington Technical Institute where he studied under Linley Richardson, who steered Lye into thinking about individualised theories of art

1919 Studied briefly at the Canterbury College of Art. Made numerous studies from Canterbury Museum collections
1920 Departed New Zealand for Australia to get near a film camera
1923 Saw *Pearls and savages*, a documentary

on tribal life that fuelled his interest in filmmaking
Worked for Filmads, Sydney
1923/ Resided in Western Samoa
1924
1926/ Worked passage to London on the liner *Euripides* Met Eric and Celandine Kennington via Elizabeth Muntz and shared a studio with Eric
1927 Guest exhibitor *Seven and five*

1928 Became a member of the Seven and Five Society and was included in exhibitions until 1934
Tusalava premiered at the London Film Society with live music
1929 Attended a London Film Society workshop
1930 *No trouble*, a collection of Lye's writing, published by Seizen Press, Majorca (Robert Graves and Laura Riding)

1935 *A colour box* received a special award at the International Film Festival, Brussels. The film was released by John Grierson's General Post Office Film Unit
1936 *The international surrealist exhibition* New Burlington Galleries, London
1944 Emigrated to United States of America
March of time Director under Richard de Rochemont

1958 *Free radicals* at World Fair International Film Competition, Brussels second prize
1961 *Bewogen beweging (art in motion)* Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam and touring to Moderna Museet, Stockholm, Louisiana Museum, Copenhagen and Musée d'Art Moderne, Paris
An experimental demonstration of tangible motion sculpture Museum of Modern Art, New York
1965 *Len Lye's bounding steel sculptures* Howard Wise Gallery, New York
1967 *Toronto international sculpture symposium* High Park, Toronto
American sculpture of the sixties Los Angeles County Museum, Los Angeles
1969 *Kinesthetics* Howard Wise Gallery, New York

1970 *Propositions for unrealised projects* Howard Wise Gallery, New York
1976 *200 years of American sculpture* Whitney Museum, New York
1977 *Len Lye: kinetic works* Govett-Brewster Art Gallery, New Plymouth Visited New Zealand
1978 *Dada and surrealism reviewed* Hayward Galleries, London
1979 *Len Lye* National Art Gallery, Wellington
1980 Len Lye Foundation established
Died May 15, New York

was she said he was in a New South Wales lunatic asylum. I didn't ask why. I supposed it was the best there was.

OCTOPUS

I have never killed a tiger but once I found an octopus twice the size of a double-bed in a low-tide rock pool. This was back at Cape Campbell lighthouse on the east coast of the South Island of New Zealand. The rocks at the end of the point were chunky and craggy, about a quarter of a mile on past the lighthouse. The crags were not high but went down into water-filled crevices and there was no good wading anywhere there.

The places for enclosed water were steeply irregular and seaweedy but some of these pools could be got down into; they made a change from the sandy tide-pools in the flat platform of rocks further down the coast, and were good to clamber around on. I was clambering around examining one weird pool that made an irregular basin with a deep trough around the edges, one part of the trough went down into a great crack to the open sea, and the other part disappeared into the depths of a hole at the other side, like going down a sink; when I nearly fell over. I'd never seen a big one before.

What I was looking at were a lot of tentacles oozing up from the deep part and I watched. It was a big octopus all right and it seemed to be heading for the rocky basin of the more shallow part. First I went to the flat gravelly neck of the point to find a stick to stop him from getting away and found a piece of two-by-three-inch timber, about five or six feet long. Then I got the biggest rocks I could lift. Sure enough he was still messing around and his head had come out and I let him have the biggest rock, a good sharp one, and more, and more.

I got him between the big rocks in the shallow part, and I jabbed and poked and prised with my stick and went berserk and, my God, in an utter frenzy I killed him. Judging by the mess, he had a lot of ink. I don't think I told anyone about it, not even to get my younger brother to come out and take a look. I felt quite good about it but a little strange. Now I know. They're marvellous things but they look no good to a kid; I had my first moment of utter madness, quite a long one.

THE WATCH

When I was eleven I told my mother I didn't believe in God. She was a devout Roman Catholic and called in the priest. He sat me down and had some good arguments but, when he likened the moon and night and day to a watch, and told me someone had to wind them up, that was enough. I felt I knew as much about what went on with the sun and moon, and the wind and the tides, as he did. My feeling of inner conviction became so strong that my brain lit up for a moment. I saw that I could really think for myself.

I told my mother it was no go. When she saw that I was one little lamb that wouldn't follow everywhere that Mary went she got me to go to mass every Easter. When my mother died I stopped going.

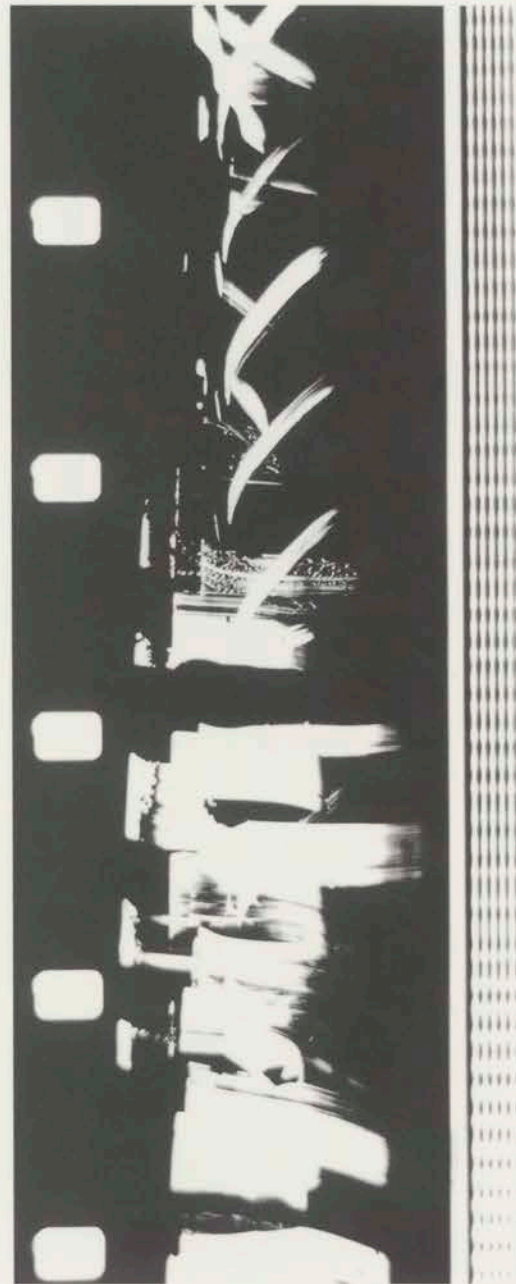
SUNDAYS

Sundays were special when I was twelve. I'd go to sleep Saturdays knowing what would happen. Other days would be getting up to deliver papers before school and sell them at night outside the Railway Station. Sundays I was in the clear, not even going to church, although Phil, my brother, went.

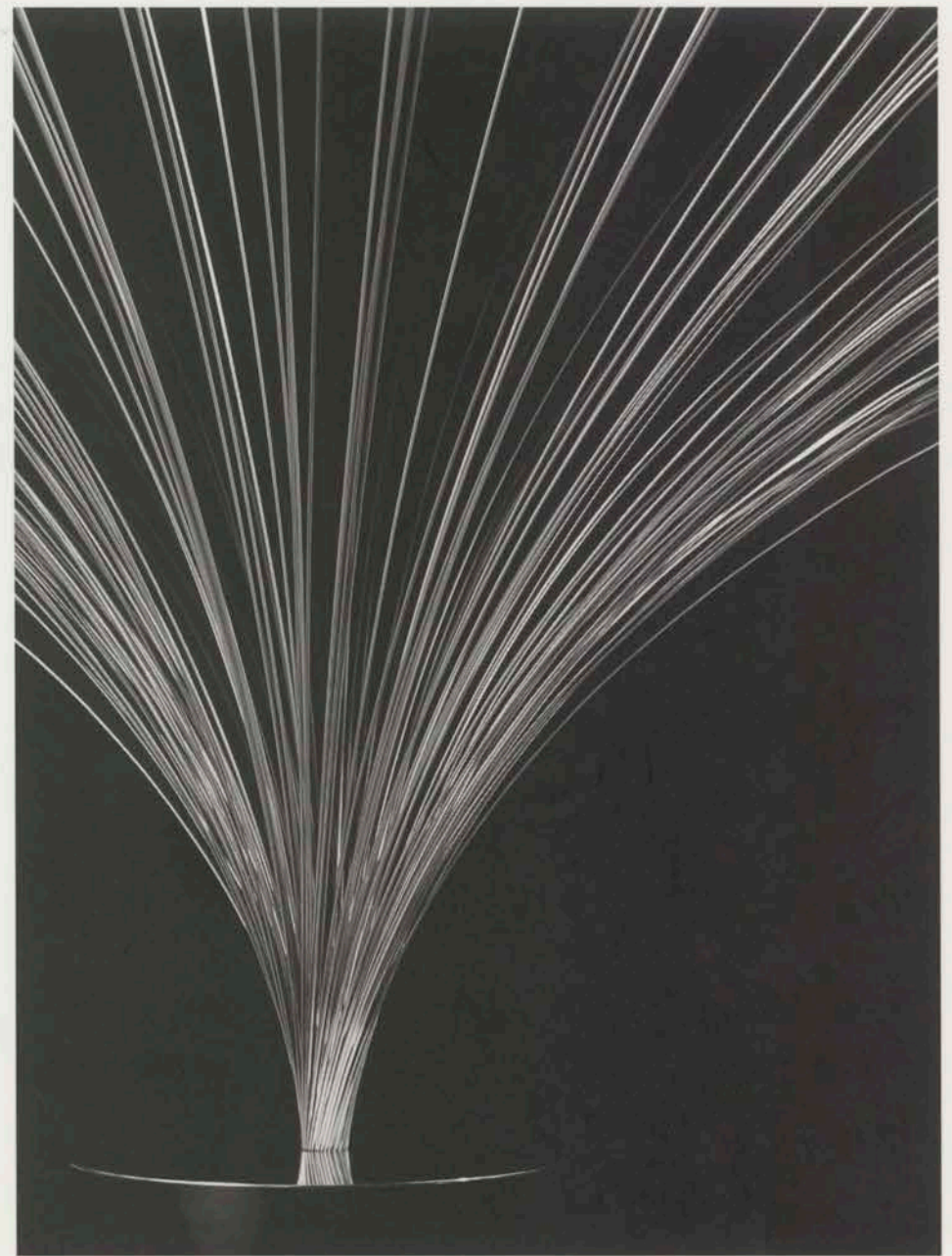
What was good about Sundays was that every Saturday night when we were off to sleep my mother put something on our bedside tables. Out tables were made from painted fruit-cases with cotton-print curtains in front. We each had a bed in our upstairs bedroom. Mine went along the wall with its foot by the window. Phil's went along parallel with mine against the opposite wall. Our bedside tables fitted snugly into the corners of the chimney-stack that jutted out, separating our beds a bit. It was papered as part of the walls.

Every Sunday the table standing in its little corner was the first thing I'd look at. On it would be a little brown paper-bag with tightly twisted folds at its corners. It was full of boiled sweets. With it would be the latest copy of *Comic cuts*.

To see those things always there every Sunday morning gave me my best waking up moments; even better than Christmas.



Free (radio) (detail) 1958 5 min 35mm black and white film
Len Lye Foundation Collection



Fountain (detail) 1963-1976 stainless steel, laminated wood base, motor 4600 x 930 x 930mm
Govett-Brewster Art Gallery Collection