



LEN
LYE TRILOGY A FLIP & 2
TWISTERS

TRILOGY, TANTRA & TERROR

Tyler Cann

To see Len Lye's 1977 *Trilogy (A flip and two twisters)* at what he once called the 'the swingiest art gallery of the Antipodes, the Govett-Brewster in New Plymouth, New Zealand' is to make a sort of pilgrimage.¹ Situated nearly as far as possible from Lye's New York studio, it is the culmination of his work in programmed steel sculpture, and the only one to be realised in his lifetime on the massive scale he envisioned. The difficulty of installing and maintaining the work means it does not often travel. You must come to it, and it is only shown every other year or so. This is fortunate for the work, as over time it rips itself apart—in 1999 half a *Twister* sheared off and dropped straight to the floor as it ramped up to a triple harmonic.² This cyclical reappearance and potential danger give the experience of *Trilogy* a somewhat ritualistic character. Lye would have imagined the three-flight ascent to its viewing deck full of portentous suspense. Like coming upon a cliff edge, the work's gravitational pull involves both risk and vertiginous pleasure. Indeed, Lye envisioned his *Flip* and *Twisters* as key figures in a monumental *Temple of lightning* enacting a grand myth of creation in the deserts of California or the Australian outback. While we may never see such a temple realised, for modern art's cult followers, the exhibition of *Trilogy (A flip and two twisters)* at the Govett-Brewster comes close.

As what might be called a 'pilgrimage to the sublime', *Trilogy* is not alone in mid-century modernism. Mark Rothko's *Chapel*, and Jackson Pollock's 1943 *Mural* (now in Iowa at Peggy Guggenheim's bequest) come to mind as grand artistic statements in locations remote from the traditional centres of artistic production and marketing. Unlike these spaces of tragic contemplation, however, *Trilogy* does not fall 'somewhere between the easel picture and the mural.' Rather, the 'expanded field' Lye envisioned for the work puts it more in line with environmental projects such as Robert Smithson's *Spiral Jetty*, which surfaces from Utah's Great Salt Lake on occasion to receive a trickle of art pilgrims before being reclaimed by the tides. Perhaps more apt would be Walter de Maria's *Lightning Field* in the New Mexican desert, it was completed in the same year as *Trilogy* and requires its viewers to stay overnight. Indeed, at the climactic finish of Lye's imagined *Temple of lightning*, a 150 foot steel band shoots a 25 million volt arc of electricity through *Flip* and into a 'sun ball' twelve feet in diameter.³

Even without such high voltage, *Trilogy's* whirling scimitars and riotous paroxysms make a tremendous impression. Never were 23 kilograms of stainless steel so terrifying and so liquid, so ferocious and so glaringly sexual all at once. Even though its blades were scarcely eight and a half feet long, the 1965 version of *Flip and two twisters* seems to have provoked truly primal fear during its exhibition at Berkeley the next year. Philip Leider, no friend of kinetic art generally, wrote in *Artforum* that the work 'manages to compress so ferocious an energy that the viewer stands paralyzed, gripped by an emotion almost of terror.' He continues:

The whiplash strain on the steel produces a series of frightening, unearthly sounds in perfect accord with the mood of barbaric energy that seems to have been released. Installed by itself in a black-painted room, the viewer comes upon Lye's Trilogy as he would come upon a volcano. The effect is beautiful, frightening, utterly beyond the petty limitations of the other artists in the exhibition.⁴

Trilogy's terror seems to come from the work's striving toward excess. The *Twisters'* spinning helices may be spectacular, but their expenditure of energy comes to seem profligate, almost obscene. They spin too fast and too freely for comfort, even if they do form graceful harmonic curves. *Flip* is not so free to whiplash, but all its pent up twisting energy releases with a flood, **a kind of cascading avalanche of sound** as Lye put it.⁵ What is terrifying about *Trilogy* is the magnitude of its energetic pulse.

Given this furious drama of tension and release, it is no wonder Ann Lye called *Trilogy* **the sexiest work Len ever made.**⁶ The sexual analogy is common among the work's reviews. Dore Ashton remarked that *Flip's* erotic undulations 'were reminiscent of a belly dance.' Echoing Lye's own loose iconography for the *Twisters* as 'spermatozoa' and the *Flip* as 'womb',⁶ Barbara Rose related them to the ancient Hindu *lingam* and *yoni* figures. She saw its sexuality as sublimated, **a re-enactment of the sexual embrace in dialectical terms, an idealised sexuality as high spiritual union in the Hindu sense...**⁷ As the *Flip* finally shudders and inverts itself, we cannot but recognize those climactic, orgiastic convulsions. While Lye was comfortable with such anthropomorphism, he also felt it was superficial, saying, **I go along with both these literal and symbolic types of association, for, after all, they may make the viewer feel at home with their imagery long enough to dig deeper—and perhaps come to respond unconsciously to their underlying significance in relation to energy.**⁸

We might ask then, what is this 'relation to energy'? It seems to be that kinaesthetic commingling of pleasure and anxiety itself, the spark generated in the body as we witness these Tantric tantrums. Lye's preferred term for his medium was 'tangible motion sculpture,' implying physical contact. Of course, in the context of the art gallery, to touch is taboo, and in the case of *Trilogy*, could be absolutely fatal. But even as we keep our distance, it is the body that the sculpture addresses. As with Lye's 1965 *Blade*, one can feel the gallery shake in the work's more violent episodes. As the *Twisters* spin into double and triple harmonic curves, we might feel the hair on the back of the neck stand up, or a vertiginous tingling at the base of the spine. In the gallery jaws drop and smiles crack; some catch their breath and hold it, others sigh. These effects come at the nexus between eye, mind, and body, at the point where the boundaries between them blur. Vision here becomes more like taste, hearing or smell. Its stimuli physically enter the body, act upon it and react with it. Just as *Flip* turns in on itself, there ceases to be a distinct outside or inside to the spectator's body. *Trilogy* reveals our porous relation to the external world.

Lye never tired of reminding his listeners that the viewer needed to feel empathy with his work as you **'unconsciously feel yourself into another's shoes'** It seems that Lye himself could hardly do otherwise when confronted with a pattern of motion. From age ten he practiced such compassion until he **'could levitate with the curling smoke, scud with the wind blown leaf, sashay with the reflection of masts on water, shimmy with the flapping flag, glide with the snake. ... There isn't a motion that one cannot isolate and feel in relation to one's own solid body.'**⁹ Lye sought to cultivate this kinaesthetic sensitivity in his viewers, via tactics of shock and awe if necessary. He usually explained his penchant for scaling up his work by saying, **'A three foot shrub falls over and it's a lot of "so what." But when it's a 300 foot redwood tree, then you stay and your mouth opens with a little bit of awe about energy, weight, gravity, and that's the stuff we're made of, and that's something.'**¹⁰ The scale of Lye's work may rely on a 'rhetoric of power', but he was also careful to state that, **'The motto is, never make the size of the figure so great it shrivels the anatomical stance of the beholder down to the size of a peanut.'**¹¹ In an early sketchbook, Lye wrote, **'The Tenderness Compensates for the Brutality.'**¹² He was paraphrasing Freud on social relations, but it could serve as our maxim for *Trilogy's* own social dynamic.

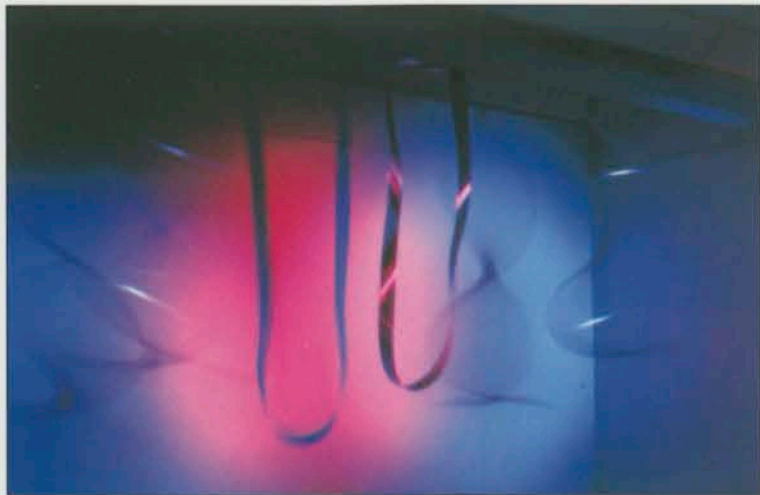
To get the scale Lye desired requires a great deal of technical expertise, and Lye was no engineer. He couldn't even drive a car. The existence of the Govett-Brewster's *Trilogy* is entirely due to his supporters in New Plymouth, in particular John Matthews, whom Lye called 'an engineering genius' and 'my one and only patron ... half my age.'¹³ In fact, the work's size is specific to the Gallery's dimensions. Spurred by Ray Thorburn's suggestion to the Govett-Brewster's second director, Bob Ballard, in 1974, Matthews went to Lye's studio in

Warwick, New York to propose a retrospective at the Gallery.¹⁴ After some weeks in Lye's studio, he returned to his Fitzroy Engineering workshop in New Plymouth to produce another eight-foot version of *Flip and two twisters*. Nine months later he perfected a full-scale working model, but when Matthews returned to New York to show the results, Lye announced that to get the scale right for the gallery, the work would have to be at least twice the size.¹⁵ That such a thing was even possible was by no means clear, but Matthews, to his credit, did not balk. Instead he persevered for another year, and with the help of electronic controls developed in New Plymouth specifically for the work's 1/20th horsepower motors, the gargantuan *Trilogy* we see today was realised.¹⁶ Lye himself was overjoyed that New Zealanders would devote so much time, energy and expense on his behalf. That the gallery is a converted cinema suited Lye (a 'converted filmmaker') very well. He wrote to an old friend that the Govett-Brewster **'happened to show my film and my steel crackerjacks perfectly as if made for the job. Perfect is a word to write a hundred times and it was, I mean, perfect.'**¹⁷

Shortly after the first exhibition of his *Trilogy (A flip and two twisters)* in 1977, Len Lye wrote (but never sent) a letter to Philip Leider, saying the enlargement **'compounded the power of the work and put it in the running for the century's best art image. If you think the 8 footer was energy incarnate wait 'til you see the Govett's. It's goddamn Mecca stuff.'**¹⁸ By 'Mecca' Lye refers not to the focal point of Islamic prayer and pilgrimage, but to the *Temple of lightning* he had been envisioning for the previous two decades. For all the power of Lye's *Temple* and *Trilogy*, he always saw them as deeply humanistic, dedicated to inspiring individual creativity and freedom through an empathic transference of the art's wild energies. A viewer open to the work's Tantra as well as its terror may well agree that *Trilogy* is indeed 'in the running.'

(Footnotes)

- ¹ Unpublished and unsent letter to Philip Leider dated April 1978, Len Lye Foundation archives, Govett-Brewster Art Gallery.
- ² Govett-Brewster Art Gallery, *Trilogy (A flip and two twisters)* accession file 77/1.
- ³ Len Lye, "Considering a Temple" in *Figures of Motion* (Roger Horrocks and Wytan Curnow, editors), Auckland: Auckland University Press, 1984, p88.
- ⁴ "Kinetic Sculpture at Berkeley", *Artforum* May 1966, pp40-42.
- ⁵ Lye, "Considering a Temple", *Figures of Motion*, p89.
- ⁶ Roger Horrocks, *Len Lye: A biography*, Auckland: Auckland University Press, 2001, p308.
- ⁷ *Ibid.*, p308.
- ⁸ Unpublished note dated March 6, 1977, Len Lye Foundation archives box 25, Govett-Brewster Art Gallery.
- ⁹ "Len Lye: Shaman, Artist, Prophet" in *Len Lye* (Jean-Michel Bonhours and Roger Horrocks, editors), Paris: Centre Georges Pompidou, 2000, p220.
- ¹⁰ Lye, "The Art That Moves", *Figures of Motion*, pp84-85.
- ¹¹ *Ibid.*, p82.
- ¹² David Grieve and Peter Kerner in cooperation with KQED-TV, *Directions in Kinetic Sculpture* (film), Berkeley: University of California, 1966.
- ¹³ Lye, "Considering a Temple", *Figures of Motion*, p88.
- ¹⁴ Unpublished sketchbook 2, Len Lye Foundation archives Box 3, Govett-Brewster Art Gallery.
- ¹⁵ Unpublished and unsent letter to Philip Leider dated April 1978, Len Lye Foundation archives, Govett-Brewster Art Gallery.
- ¹⁶ Horrocks, p355.
- ¹⁷ John Matthews, personal interview, 25 April 2003.
- ¹⁸ *Ibid.*, pp355-357.
- ¹⁹ Letter to Barbara Ker-Seymour, quoted in Horrocks, p364.
- ²⁰ Unpublished letter to Philip Leider dated 1978, Len Lye Foundation archives, Govett-Brewster Art Gallery.



This special profile on *Trilogy (A flip and two twisters)* is the second in a series of publications which examine specific artworks by Len Lye within Lye's own practice and a broader art historical context. The essay "*Trilogy, Tantra and Terror*" was written by Tyler Cann, a Doctoral candidate at Harvard University researching mid-20th century kinetic art.

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On 24 April 1980 and shortly before his death in New York, Len Lye signed a trust deed with New Plymouth City and the newly established Len Lye Foundation. The deed provided for his collection and archive to be shipped back to New Zealand to be housed and maintained at the Govett-Brewster Art Gallery.

The deed provided for the collection to stay in and around New Plymouth, either at the Govett-Brewster Art Gallery, or in a building especially acquired or constructed for the purpose of conservation and display of the collection.

Since 1980 the Govett-Brewster Art Gallery has worked in partnership with the Len Lye Foundation to provide national and international access to Len Lye.



Govett-Brewster Art Gallery

The Govett-Brewster Art Gallery is a museum that fosters the development and interpretation of contemporary art.



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