

LEN
LYE **FIVE**
FOUNTAINS
AND A firebush

7 DECEMBER 2007 – 24 FEBRUARY 2008

EXHIBITION

Published on the occasion of the exhibition *Len Lye: Five Fountains and a Firebush*, a Govett-Brewster Art Gallery exhibition curated by Tyler Cann
7 December 2007 – 24 February 2008

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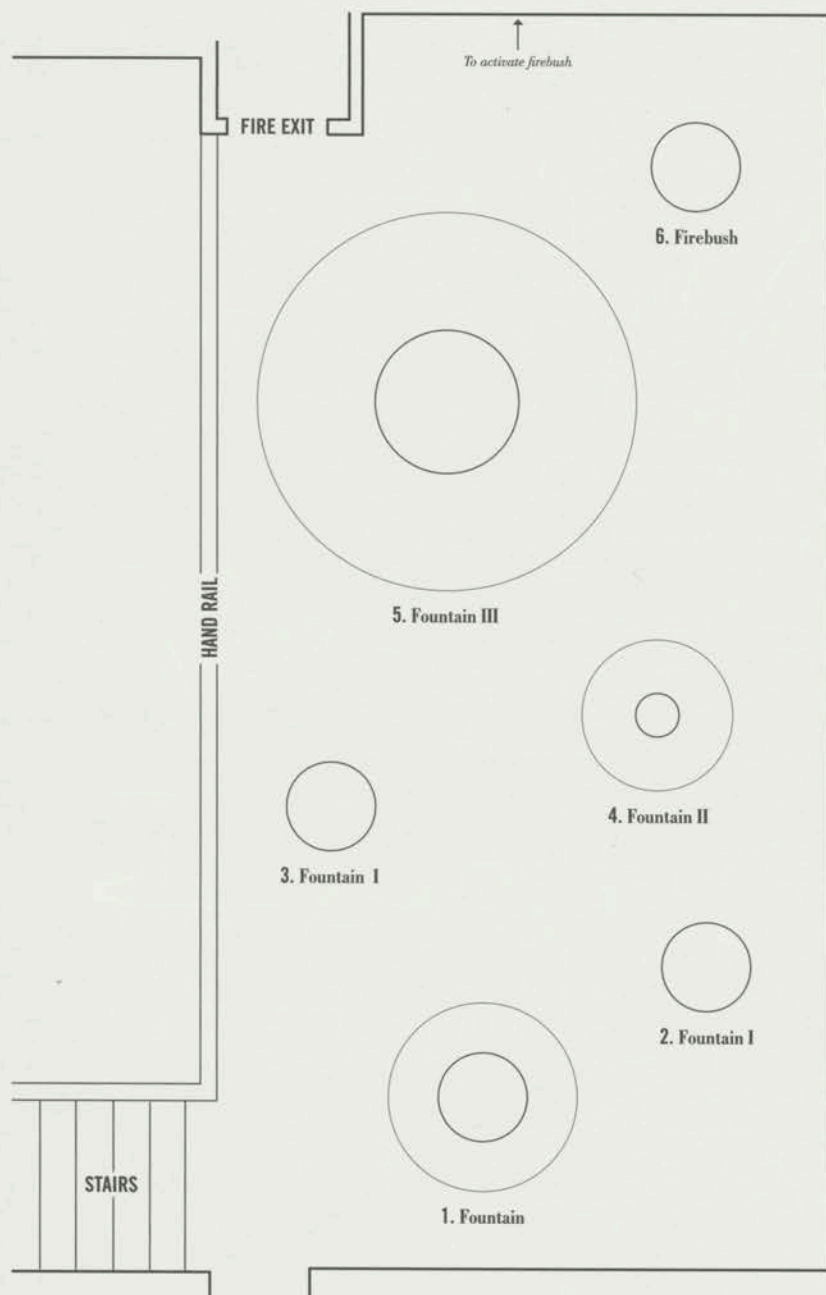
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COVER IMAGE: Len Lye with *Fountain*, c.1966
Image courtesy the Len Lye Foundation

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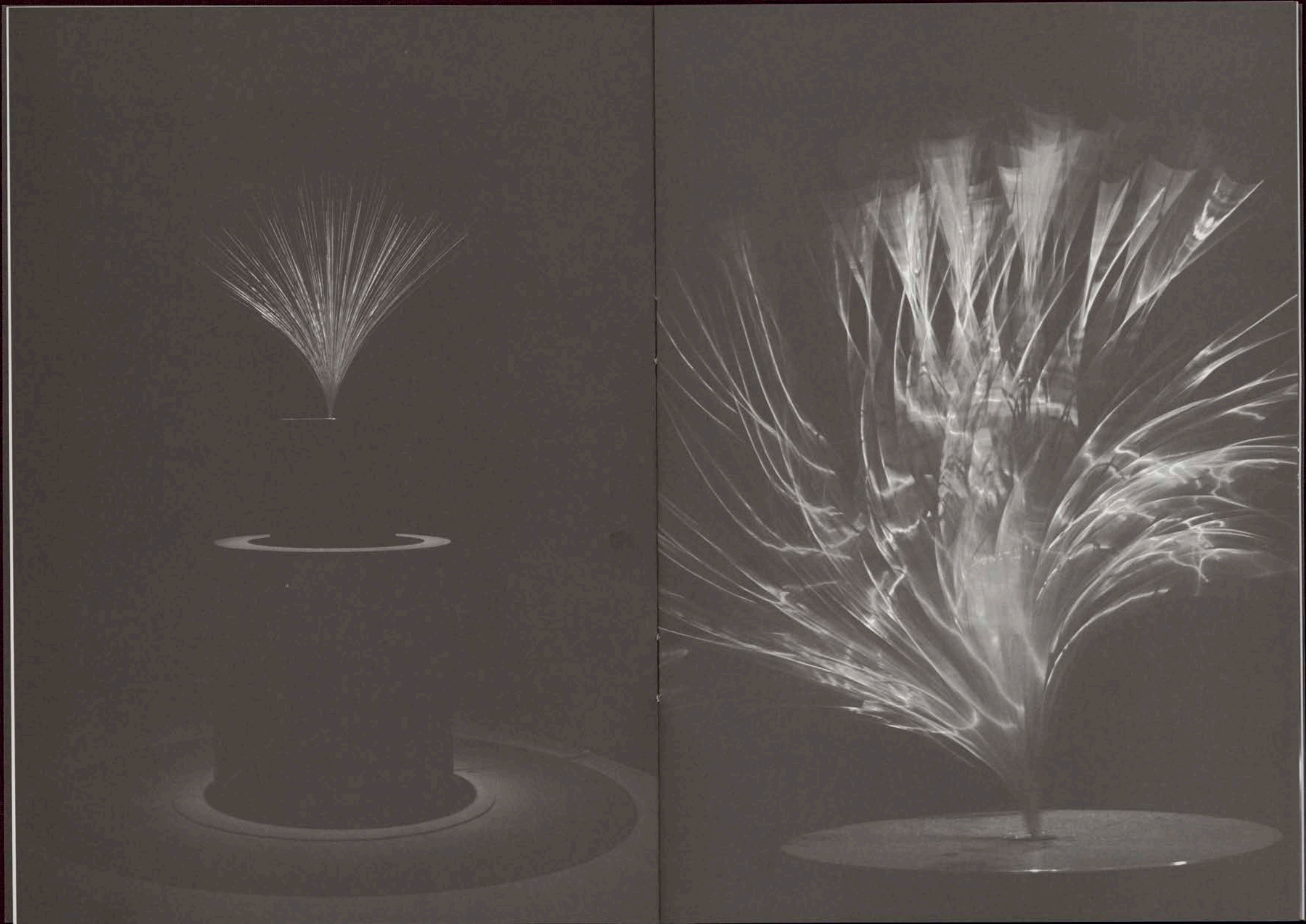


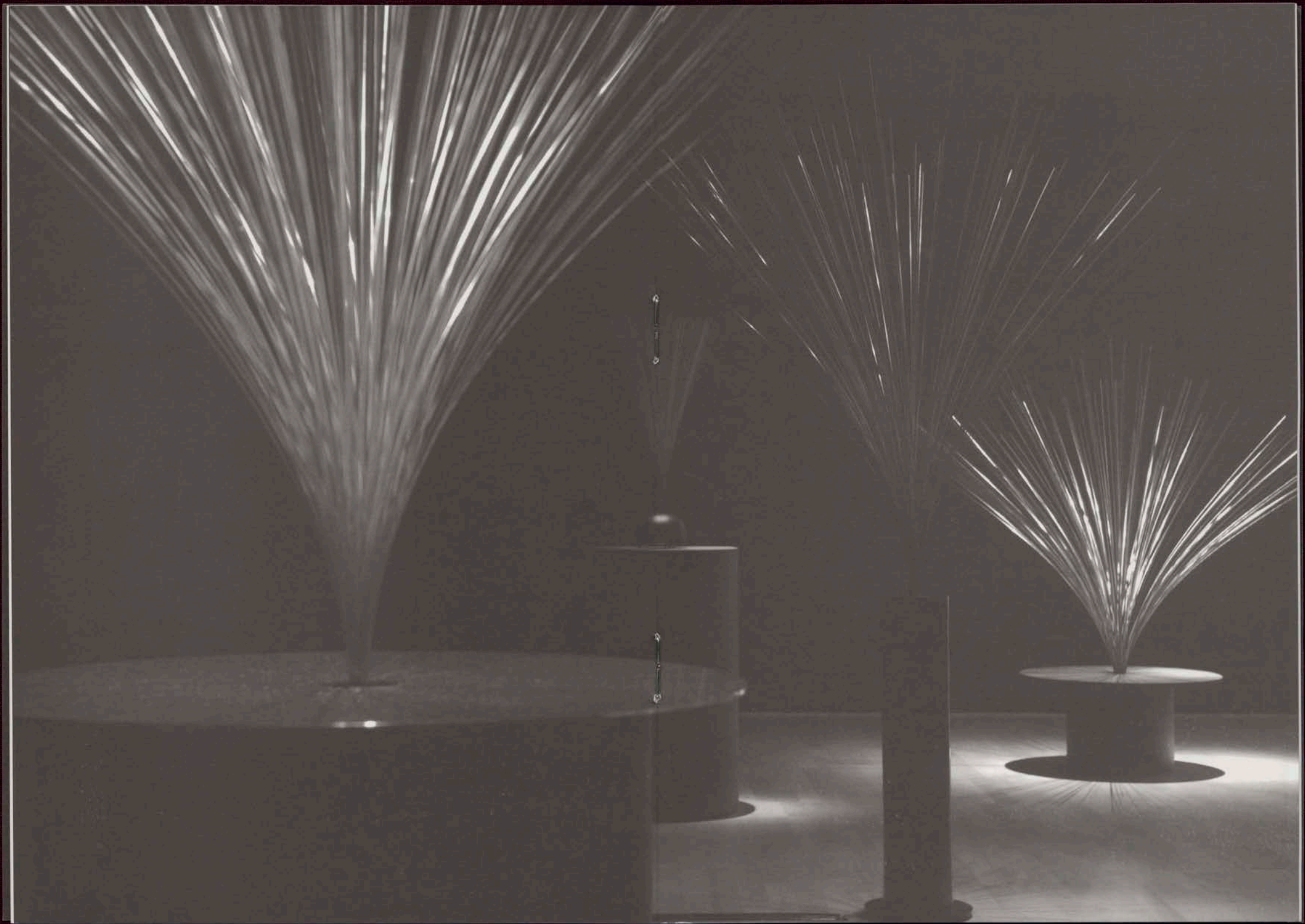


LIST OF WORKS

1. *Fountain* 1959
Stainless steel rods
2159 x 1829 mm (85 x 72 in)
On loan from the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York
gift of the Ford Foundation Purchase Program 63.10
Exhibitions include Museum of Modern Art, 1961.
2. *Fountain I* 1960/2007 (Reconstruction)
1020 x 700 mm (40 x 29 in)
Len Lye Foundation Collection, Govett-Brewster Art Gallery
3. *Fountain I* 1960
1070 x 1070 mm (42 x 42 in)
On loan from Len Lye's grandson, Benjamin Lindenhahn, New York
Exhibitions include Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), New York, 1961
4. *Fountain II* 1960
2740 x 2000 mm (110 x 79 in)
Len Lye Foundation Collection, Govett-Brewster Art Gallery
Exhibitions include Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam, Moderna Museet, Stockholm,
Louisiana Museum, Copenhagen, 1961
5. *Fountain III* 1976
3700 x 4100 mm (146 x 161 in)
Govett-Brewster Art Gallery Collection
Exhibitions include Govett-Brewster Art Gallery, 1977, Centre Georges Pompidou,
Paris 2000
6. *Firebush* (Dancing Fountain) 1961/2007 (Reconstruction)
1200 x 1900 mm (47 x 75 in)
Len Lye Foundation Collection, Govett-Brewster Art Gallery
Originally exhibited at MoMA, New York, 1961

All rods are stainless steel.





SIZE MATTERS: fountain

The last time several *Fountains* and a *Firebush* took the stage together under coloured lights and accompanied by music was in 1961, at an evening performance of Lye's work at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York. The idea of the current exhibition seems rather straightforward; six sculptures by Len Lye are brought together, five are titled *Fountain* and one, *Firebush*. *Fountain* is a gently rotating spray of stainless steel rods. *Firebush* has the same metal plume, though it shivers to an altogether different rhythm. Its title at Lye's MoMA exhibition was, in fact, *Dancing fountain*.¹ Of the *Fountains*, one is on loan from the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York, another is in the Govett-Brewster Art Gallery collection, and a third belongs to Len Lye's family. The remainder form part of the Len Lye Foundation Collection. Above their motorized bases, three of these works are about one metre tall, two are approximately twice that, and the largest—at over four and a half metres—stands twice as tall again.

Are these five *Fountains* not, in essence, the same work? What is the meaning, not to say value, of their individual histories, provenance, and scale? Standing in front of each one, or taking them in collectively, what difference do their differences make?

Answers to these questions are sure to vary. For some viewers, the 'aura' of originality surrounding each work will seem thoroughly contaminated by the presence of the others. Some visitors will be less disturbed by their multiple existence, recalling the long history of sculptural editions in bronze and other cast metals. Complicating matters, each work in this exhibition has its own history and relationship to the artist. Three were among Lye's earliest 'tangible motion sculptures' built in the late 1950s and early '60s, another was engineered toward the end of Lye's career, in 1976. And two works, including *Firebush*, are posthumous reconstructions created by the Len Lye Foundation in 2007. Perhaps some viewers will see in Lye's use of industrial materials, and desire for the posthumous creation of his works a challenge to the notion of a singular, original sculpture dependent on the hand of the artist for its significance.

Lye's own conception of his sculptures' authorship stands in a somewhat contradictory relationship to their production. Lye firmly believed that his kinetic sculptures expressed something of his individuality; he saw them as externalisations of a feeling of movement, tension and resistance to gravity particular to his own unique way of carrying the body. Born of the artist's sense of the physical body and despite their abstraction, Lye understood his works to bear an almost genetic resemblance to him, as a child might resemble a parent. However, Lye was rarely their only father. While guarding his concept for a figure of motion, the artist eagerly collaborated with engineers on the development and reproduction of his work. Lou Adler, a Greenwich Village radio and television repairman, assisted with the creation of Lye's first 'tangible motion sculptures', including *Fountain I*. Another owner of a machine shop a few blocks from Lye's studio, Morris Gross, helped to re-develop the work in 1963. *Fountain III* was engineered in New Zealand by Lye's collaborator John Matthews for the seminal retrospective exhibition of Lye's work at the Govett-Brewster Art Gallery in 1977. Around this time, Lye conducted a long interview with Matthews, detailing the artist's wishes for the posthumous development of several sculptures. From this and other material, the engineer and artist Evan Webb has reconstructed the motorised bases of *Fountain I* and *Firebush* for the Len Lye Foundation. Of mixed genealogy and generations, the *Fountains* in this exhibition amount to a history of Lye's sculptural practice as seen through the lens of a 'single' work.

Quite apart from their heterogeneous authorship, none of these sculptures is quite the *Fountain* that most captivated Lye's mind. That work, which only exists on paper, would have been far grander than the largest in this exhibition. In 1962, Lye developed detailed plans for a 30 foot (9.14 metre) *Fountain* for New York University. And as the artist embraced an increasingly utopian vision for his work, *Fountain* grew to 150 feet (45.7 metres), imagined in the midst of a lake and rotated by jets of water.

Lye was certainly not alone among modernist artists in making editions or wanting work built on massive scale. Constantin Brancusi, whom Lye admired tremendously, made six different versions of his famous sculpture *Bird in Space*, and in 1927 was commissioned to build one 48 metres tall. Ambitious painting in post-war New York aspired "beyond the easel" in size as well as composition². As architects like Philip Johnson and Mies Van der Rohe

fashioned cityscapes of new proportions and unprecedented austerity, Lye, like the kinetic sculptor Alexander Calder, saw the opportunity for an artistic counterpoint of appropriate dimension to the new architecture. Although he preferred to imagine his large works within dramatic natural landscapes, Lye made several proposals for *Fountain* in urban settings as well.

What Lye wanted to do with the size of his sculptures is in some respects analogous to what he was already doing as a film-maker. Before embarking on a career as a kinetic sculptor, Lye was well known for his camera-less, or 'direct' films, which he painted and scratched directly on film. The tiniest drawings on a strip of celluloid attained tremendous kinetic power when projected large on screen. Lye's ambitions to blow up his sculptures from small drawings and models may have been inspired by this experience. Moreover, Lye often explored the same forms and patterns of movement in his sculptures and film. At the same time as Lye was beginning his switch from film to sculpture, he created *Free Radicals* 1957-8, a film made up entirely of scratched white lines on black 16mm film. In several sections of this work, vertical lines waver near each other, flowing right, left and off the screen, an action reminiscent of *Fountain's* rods against a dark wall. In fact, Lye used *Fountain* to such an effect in his 1959 film *Fountain of Hope*, commissioned by the United Nations to commemorate UN Day. The film was the first public appearance of *Fountain's* steel plume, and was widely screened in cinemas and broadcast on television. The one-minute feature also included an image of Lye's sculptures superimposed against the UN Building in New York. This *Fountain* was approximately two metres tall, but the work was made enormous on screen and tiny in the living rooms of those gathered around the TV.

If such instant mutability of size is one of the hallmarks of film, the scaling up (or down) of Lye's sculpture itself has many more implications. While the projected image is dissociated from the size of the film, the plume of *Fountain* is materially dependent on the particular length, diameter and composition of its steel rods.

Doubling the length of these rods requires exponential increases in their strength and weight. The duration of *Fountain's* sway is also proportional to its size, and Lye timed the rotation of the motor to the time it took for the plume of rods to wave back and forth. The 'attitude' of each work shifts with scale as well. The small works have a quicker, livelier pace. Resting on plinths,

they are objects in the way the larger, more human-scaled works such as the Whitney's *Fountain* is not. The sway of the larger *Fountain III* towering above the spectator, by contrast, is larger than life. Explaining his inclination to scale up his work, Lye often made the point with a metaphor, saying "We react more to the splash made by a big fish than to the ripple made by a minnow."³ Whether comparing the fall of a three foot shrub to that of a redwood tree, or a small wavelet to the crash of a giant comber, in each case, for Lye, the quantity of energy increases with size, and therefore its affect on the spectator as well. As the redwood falls, Lye explained, "the viewer stands with a little bit of awe about weight, gravity, energy and that's what we're made of, and that's something."⁴ In Lye's equation, the impact of a sculpture is directly proportional to the work's size. With *Firebush*'s frenetic energies contained in a programmed performance, however, Lye explored the potential to release such energy within the scope of a small work.

If Lye wanted his kinetic works made into large public sculptures it was to increase their social, as well as physical impact. For Lye, drawing an audience together into a common experience of art was a manner of celebrating individuality, and the individual physical response of each spectator. To be sure, the flashes of light that seem to course through *Fountain*'s rods, the optical vibrations caused by their close parallels, and their absorptive destabilisation of figure and ground perception are all optical effects that are universally perceived. But these effects (more fully exploited in the kinetic work of Jesus Raphael Soto and the painting of Bridget Riley) are also dependent on the physiology of vision, and seem to locate themselves somewhere between the visual and physical planes of experience. As we sway with the *Fountain*, we are instantiated in its visual effects and relations of time, weight, mechanics and energy, but for Lye, this opened up a field for individual response rather than the mechanistic control over the spectator.

Adding a musical accompaniment to the performance of his kinetic sculptures is another way Lye sought to heighten their impact. At its 1961 debut at MoMA, Lye manually controlled the movements of *Firebush*, performing the work to the rhythm of African percussion. To accompany *Fountain I* and an early version of the Whitney's work onstage, Lye chose a modernist composition, Pierre Boulez's 1954 *Le marteau sans maître* (The hammer without master). Boulez's work, which sets surrealist poems by the French poet René Char to

serialist music, would have appealed to Lye for its use of instrumentation from many different musical traditions. His friend and collaborator Henry Brant, an American composer, may have had some influence over this choice. A few years earlier, in 1957, the two had considered Boulez's work to accompany Lye's direct film *All Souls Carnival* at Carnegie Hall.

Simultaneous to Lye's MoMA performance, the Govett-Brewster's *Fountain II* was included in the seminal exhibition of kinetic sculpture *Bewogen Beweging* (Moving Movement) at the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam. In his notes on the installation of *Fountain* for this exhibition, Lye suggested coloured lights be used in addition to white. With the addition of music and colour, Lye's presentation of *Fountain* edged toward the theatrical or cinematic. Of course, the work had already had a cinematic debut with the film *Fountain of Hope*, which was set to a choral work by Henry Brant consisting solely of the word 'peace' in a dozen different languages. The association of *Fountain* with the United Nations and its utopian appeal for world harmony is fitting given Lye's social aspirations for his kinetic sculpture. Springing from a common source, each rod of every *Fountain* vibrates according to its own length, pace and place. Equally attuned to the subtlety of individual perception and its potential for social agency, in the multiplicity of the *Fountains*, Lye might have seen the analogue of democracy.

1. Programme notes, Len Lye Foundation Archives, Govett-Brewster Art Gallery.
2. See Clement Greenberg, "Review of exhibitions of Jean Dubuffet and Jackson Pollock", *The Nation*, February 1947 and "The Crisis of the Easel Picture" *Partisan Review*, April 1948. Reprinted in *Clement Greenberg: The Collected Essays and Criticism*, John O'Brian, ed., v. 2, pp. 123-125, 221-225. Greenberg's 'crisis' was more to do with the development of a new 'all-over' or 'polyphonic' composition, but it is nonetheless true that the size of the work he championed, particularly that of Jackson Pollock, was also becoming increasingly large.
3. 'Notes on Programmed Motion Sculpture' 1965, unpublished mss. Len Lye Foundation Archives, Govett-Brewster Art Gallery.
4. David Greive and Peter Kerner in cooperation with KQED-TV, *Directions in Kinetic Sculpture* [film], Berkeley: University of California, 1966.

TYLER CANN

MUSIC

As Lye used during performance at MoMA, 1961

Fountains: Pierre Boulez, Le Marteau sans Maître
(The Hammer without Master), composed 1955.
Performed by Ensemble Intercontemporain, 2005.

Firebush: Rwandan ceremonial drums, Watutsi, from African Drums,
Folkways Records, New York, 1954.

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