



**Individual
Happiness
Now!**

Curated by Tyler Cann

GB70993
LYE

INDIVIDUAL HAPPINESS NOW!

In early 1941, while in refuge from the London Blitz, the New Zealand-born artist Len Lye was nagged by the thought; while the Allies were fighting heroically against fascism, no one had convincingly articulated what they were fighting for. Democracy was the familiar answer, but what was democracy for? The typewriter cleaned and oiled, and spurred by a native sense of ingenuity Lye put the question to himself. His answer was outwardly simple and coined in a snappy phrase: *Individual Happiness Now*. 'When I was bonked by the apple of the words for my idea,' he wrote:

I was levitated onto my bike, and biked around country lane corners shouting, more like bellowing, Individuality! Happiness! Now! ... I can in memory still match my bike spokes turning with an exultant larynx vibrating!

And as a mission statement for good government, who could disagree? But *Individual Happiness Now* (IHN) was not just a disarming political slogan. Rather, in Lye's text, the words represented three interconnected values he felt could form the basis of a humane society transcending nationalism, political ideology and religious difference. Lye believed that if all anti-totalitarian nations joined in making *Individual Happiness Now* their common cause, both the war, and the peace would be assured in their favour. The theory's promise of a fundamental truth unifying humanity exerted a gravitational pull on him. In one form or another it drove his work for the remainder of his life.

Like many mid-century artists, Lye believed the work of art contained a distilled sense of his unique persona and that its viewers might enhance their own sense of selfhood in response. Individuality was not defined as the special preserve of artists, but inherent in everyone's unique experience of the body and its relation to the external world. For Lye a clear feeling of purpose and identity, grounded in sensory awareness, was the key to enduring happiness. And central to both individuality and happiness was an appreciation of the fullness of time, a feeling of living in the Now.

Lye expressed these links in a short poem:

**INDIVIDUALITY IS THE ROCK OF HAPPINESS
HAPPINESS IS THE VEHICLE OF INDIVIDUALITY
NOW IS THE BUMP OF BOTH.²**

The exhibition *Individual Happiness Now!* weaves four decades of Lye's work around this collision of art, life, politics and happiness. In addition to selected writings, the exhibition includes his drawing, painting, photographic works, film and kinetic sculpture. Following Lye's all-encompassing theory, the show takes a synthetic perspective, suggesting both thematic and formal relationships between the disparate moments and media in his oeuvre.

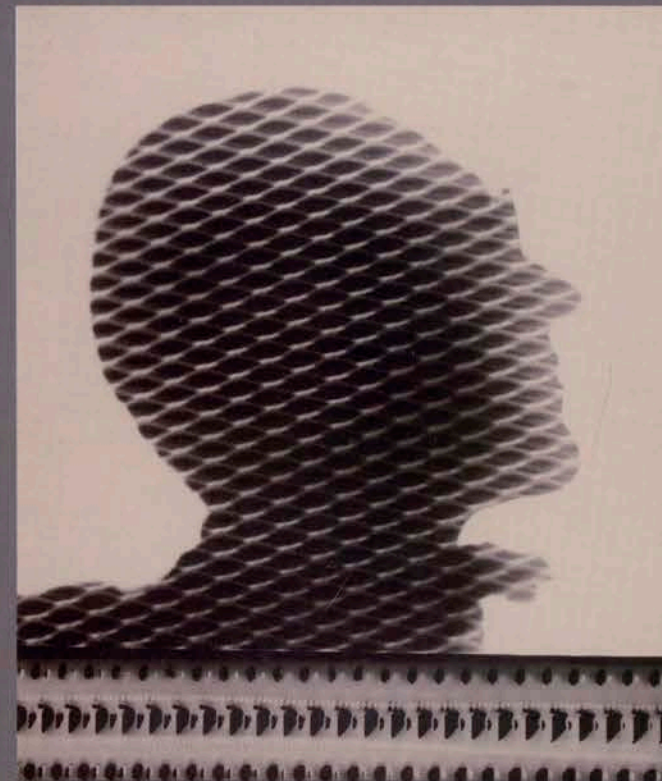
NOW IS NOT A SECOND³

Lye's own fluid conception of time informs this approach. In an early *Individual Happiness Now* manuscript he suggests that the human experience of time is not like a line stretching from birth to death:

And if you insist on having one, well, it's like a ball of twine wound around the 'now' of the day, age, moment, and life of a human being. ... Time is a core, and the present, or 'now' is the centre from which short-cut lines can be drawn to all circumferences.⁴

On thin, buff paper are four abstract sketches in ink (figure 1). Undated, but likely from the 1930s, they are nothing more than a smattering of cursive lines. Lye termed 'motion sketches' his works that depict the movement, rather than the appearance of their subject. If these (never shown before) drawings are representational even in this sense, they translate – almost simultaneously – that movement outside the body into fleeting gesture from inside. Lye's grasp at present-ness in the movement of his hand across the page is akin to Surrealist experiments with automatism, and prefigures the aesthetics of Abstract Expressionism.⁵ As a series of autographic/automatic marks, some of the lines also bear similarity to Lye's own signature, as seen etched on the brass plate in the centre of his sculpture *Universe*. Seeking to find the root of identity at the 'core of time', in these lines Lye also takes a short-cut to infancy and its continuous present-tense. This regression to a moment when thoughts and anxieties of past and future are undeveloped was the artist's attempt to focus consciousness on embodied sense experience, and keep it full of wonder.

Lye's 1947 photograms of newborn children (figure 2) highlight this process, and they too mark presence in time. Created simply by exposing photo-sensitive paper to a brief pulse of light, the photogram is unmediated by lens or mechanism. Whatever Lye's



3. Le Corbusier. 1947, photogram, 335 x 440mm



8. *Universe* 1963, Len Lye Foundation reconstruction, steel on wood and laminated wood base, magnets, cork ball, 220 x 250 x 28cm



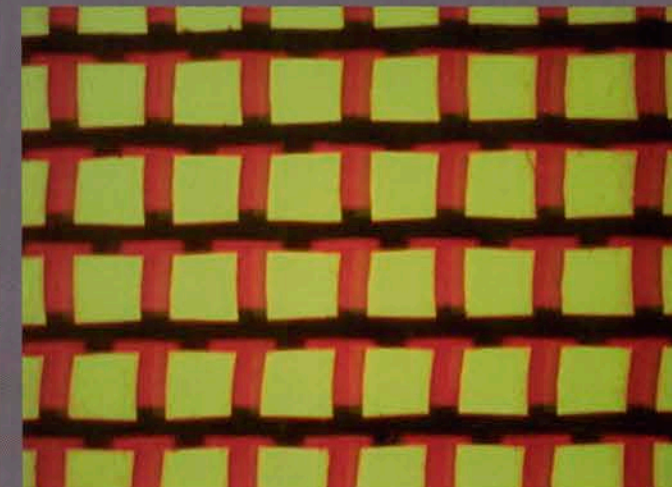
4. 3 Jan 1938 (Abstract study of motion) pencil on paper, 184 x 200mm



5. 3 Jan 1938 (Abstract study of motion) pencil on paper, 184 x 200mm



6. Film still from *Rainbow dance* 1936, Gasparcolour, 4 minutes



7. Film still from *Color cry* 1952-3, 3:30 seconds

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subsequent layering and reversals, the photogram underscores photography's indexical flavour. That is, the physical inscription and 'thereness' of the figure traced in the flash of light. Many of the photograms are portraits of well-known individuals; included in this exhibition are the profiles of W.H. Auden and the architect Le Corbusier (figure 3) in addition to Lye's own self portrait. Le Corbusier, who likewise dreamed of a synthetic art fostering social cohesion, is here paired with the photogram of Alfred Bishop, a plumber who had simply come to do repairs. Like the drawings, the photograms are statements of an individual's presence in a particular time and space. As in the 'motion sketches' above, their 'Now' confronts the viewer as a discrete moment, or a layered series of moments, carried over from the past.⁶

It is this, art's primal and slippery temporal condition which Lye explores in works referencing the beginnings of organic life, or the origins of human experience and artistic creation. Lye made a lifelong study of prehistoric art, and like Jackson Pollock or Barnett Newman, he imagined his work as an attempt to re-create the 'first' painting on both formal and thematic levels. The fourteen abstract pencil drawings in this exhibition (figure 4-5) bring to mind the artist's assiduous copies of prehistoric cave paintings. They are all dated the same day, 3 January 1938, but the time they mark is extended. The drawings seem to have a rough sequence, which can be read as an abstract landscape disintegrating into a tangled ball of lines, or as the reverse process, creating form out of chaos. In whatever direction viewers read these works, they imaginatively construct movement in the space between them. The drawings may well sketch out ideas for an abstract motion picture.

Of course, Lye is best known as an innovator of direct, or cameraless filmmaking, but the threads between his films and work in other media are tight. Many of Lye's films are essentially drawings, paintings, or photograms on film stock, unfolding in time as a durable, repeatable experience of the 'Now'. The 1936 *Rainbow Dance* (figure 6), for example, uses a combination of live footage, stencils and other painting techniques to create an exuberant, slightly quirky film for the British Post Office Savings Bank about the happiness that accrues from saving one's wages. However hybrid the techniques involved, the film remains an expression of its own medium. All of the colours were created using the cyan, magenta and yellow emulsions contained in the Gasparcolour film stock itself. Another film, the 1952-3 *Color Cry*

(figure 7), is in fact a very long photogram. Lye worked countless hours in the dark to create layered, shifting patterns with screens, fabrics, ribbons, strips of metal and coloured gels.

To further emphasise the connection between Lye's motion pictures and 'tangible motion sculptures', Lye's reconstructed kinetics *Universe* 1963-76 (figure 8-9) and *Blade* 1959-1976 (figure 10) are presented under coloured lights. Though unorthodox at first glance, this represents a return to their historical moment. Lye's kinetics were shown under similarly coloured gels in their 1961 debut at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, and in the Govett-Brewster's own 1977 retrospective of his work. A drawing of Lye's also shows *Universe* under sky blue and amber lighting. *Blade's* quivering, flashing coloured steel band – already like an enlarged strip of film – becomes surprisingly more liquid and transparent under the shifting colours. As reflected light plays around the room, it is like stepping inside one of Lye's films. With the move from "motion sketch" to the motion picture, Lye also introduced music into his work. This, too, is further developed in his kinetics. Lye's sculptures generate their own soundtrack, and this natural synchronisation of motion, colour and music edges toward synaesthesia. Depending as they do on the tension between the motor (or magnetic) force and the steel's elasticity, Lye's sculptures have a degree of inherent chaos. Although the choreography remains the same, every performance is slightly different. Each time the work enacts itself, it marks a unique experience of the 'Now'.

To stress the internal consistency of Lye's work is not to diminish its historical specificity. *Individual Happiness Now* was a theory born in wartime, at a moment of grand moral, ideological and military contest. Its utopian aspirations coincide with a modernist urge to totality and penchant for manifestos, but also with Lye's actual part in the war effort. As a member of the Realist Film Unit, Lye created films for the British Ministry of Information. As one might expect, his 'propaganda' films are highly original, leavened with abstract animation and resourceful forms of storytelling. Quite apart from its warning that the enemy is always listening, Lye's jubilant abstract film *Musical poster #1* 1941 would surely have been denounced as degenerate by the Nazis. (It seems his 1935 film *A colour box* had already been shouted off the screen by Goebbels' brownshirts.) Another of Lye's Realist films, *Newspaper train* 1942, tells of the difficulties of distributing the news in the midst of a war. Its technical ingenuities and accent on 'the better world we can, and must create' resonate with Lye's

social vision. With thanks to the Imperial War Museum and the New Zealand Film Archive, the gallery is pleased to present this film for the first time in New Zealand.

Though it emphasises the immediacy of sense experience, *Individual Happiness Now* is by no means a call to selfish hedonism. On the contrary, for Lye, individual happiness was contingent on the universal opportunity to develop and express one's identity. As he wrote:

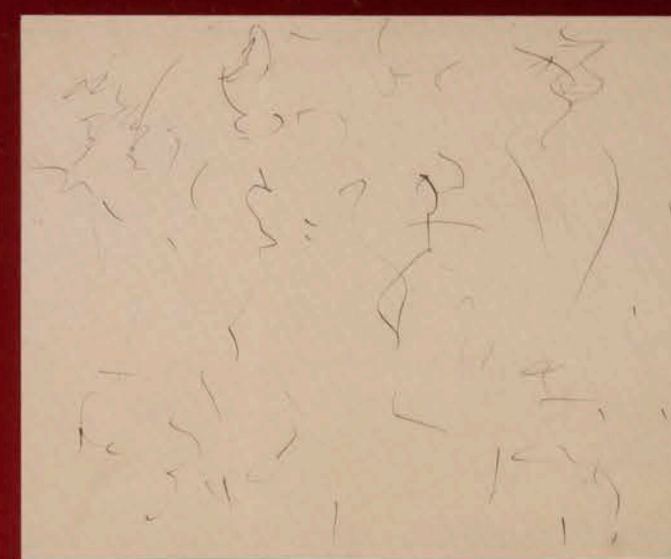
**THE CULMINATION OF THE URGE FOR
HAPPINESS OF THE WHOLE HUMAN RACE
IS AT ITS CLIMAX IN THE EVER PRESENT
MOMENT NOW.⁸**

In their co-written IHN manuscript, Lye and his friend Robert Graves suggest the creation of a Ministry of Happiness to ensure just this. As an official counterweight to the Nazi proclamation of 'The New Order', they recommended *Individual Happiness Now* as something Totalitarianism could never offer.

IHN's promise of massive social change made it both Lye's inspiration and affliction. As a lateral thinker unaccustomed to the demands of reasoned argument, the years he 'thunk it out with ideology'⁹ were hard fought. Lye wrote, edited, and re-wrote his manuscripts with the intensity of one possessed. And judging by their volume, repeated articulation seemed the only exorcism. Despite some promising leads, *Individual Happiness Now* was never actually published, and always remained an unfinished project.

Perhaps the fundamental contradiction inherent to Lye's vision of state-administered happiness is one reason for his struggle. Today, Lye's determination to unify humanity under the banner of *Individual Happiness Now* must surely seem naïve. Its utopianism is distinctly passé; its blanket assumption of universal individualism gone by the board. So what does the theory, or the work, have to offer? For all its idealism, *Individual Happiness Now* remains an admonition to resist administered existence, and find what he termed 'self-serenity' in the simple aesthetics of momentary existence. Like his theory, Lye's art speaks to the singular joys of being and time. Fascism aestheticised politics, and Lye responded by politicising happiness. Hurray for IHN.

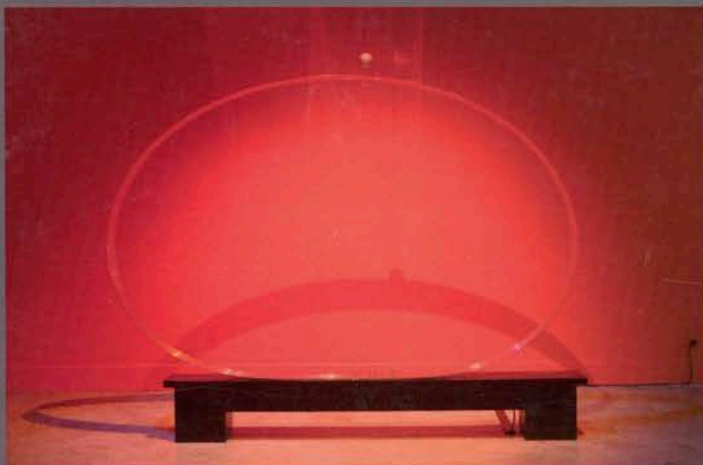
HURRAY FOR IHN. – Dylan Thomas¹⁰



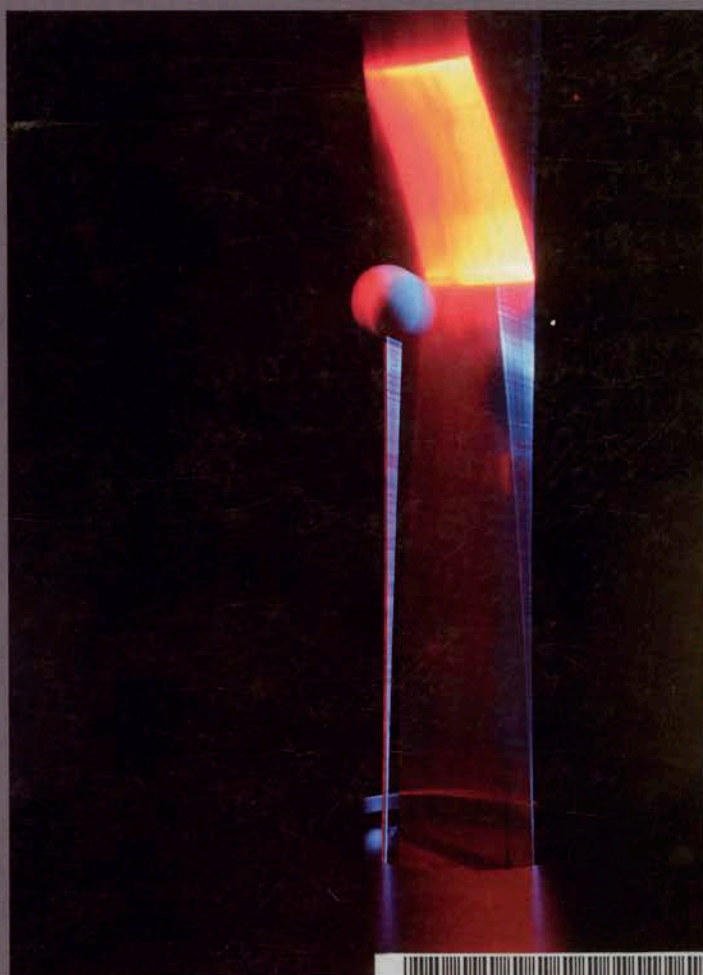
1. Motion sketch c.1930s, ink on paper, 249 x 198mm.
All works Len Lye Foundation Collection, Govett-Brewster Art Gallery



2. New born babe 1947, photogram, 335 x 440mm



9. *Universe* 1963, Len Lye Foundation reconstruction, steel on wood and laminated wood base, magnets, cork ball, 220 x 250 x 28cm



10. *Blade* 1972-76, Len Lye Foundation modified reconstruction, steel on wood and wood base, with motor, 285 x 180 x 180cm

NOTES

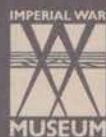
1. *Somewhat Autobiographically*. 1975. Unpublished mss. Len Lye Foundation Archives, Govett-Brewster Art Gallery. p. 23.
2. *Finding the words Individuality, Happiness and Now*. 6 March 1941. Unpublished mss. Len Lye Foundation Archives, Govett-Brewster Art Gallery. p.1.
3. *Finding the words Individuality, Happiness and Now*. p. 1.
4. *Finding the words Individuality, Happiness and Now*. p. 11. Edited slightly for clarity.
5. Wystan Curnow, *Lye and Abstract Expressionism in Len Lye Paris: Editions de Centre Pompidou*, 2000, pp. 205-212.
6. For a discussion of the temporal split within the indexical sign and its relation to Jackson Pollock's work see Rosalind Krauss, *The Optical Unconscious* Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1994, pp. 259-266. An excellent discussion of this in relation to early film and the history of vision is also found in Mary Ann Doane, *The Emergence of Cinematic Time: Modernity, Contingency, the Archive* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002, pp. 69-107.
7. William Moritz. *Len Lye's Films in the Context of International Abstract Cinema*, in *Len Lye Paris: Editions de Centre Pompidou*, 2000, p. 194.
8. *Finding the Words Individuality, Happiness and Now*. p. 8.
9. *Somewhat Autobiographically*. p. 21.
10. Roger Horrocks, *Len Lye: a biography* Auckland: Auckland University Press, 2001, p. 186. This was the complete text of a telegram sent to Lye in 1941, signed by Thomas and John Tunnard.

Published in 2006 by the Govett-Brewster Art Gallery in association with the exhibition *Len Lye: Individual Happiness Now!* 3 December 2005 - 13 March 2006 at the Govett-Brewster Art Gallery, New Plymouth

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Images courtesy of the Len Lye Foundation

ISBN 0-908848-09-9



THE LEN LYE FOUNDATION

Len Lye

THE FILM ARCHIVE

Royal Kaitiaki Ōhau Te Whānau Whaitiri - The New Zealand Film Archive

NEW PLYMOUTH
DISTRICT COUNCIL
newplymouthnz.com



PUBLICATIONS

Queen Street
Private Bag 2025
New Plymouth
New Zealand

tel +64 6 759 6868

fax +64 6 759 6872

mail@govettbrewster.com

www.govettbrewster.com



34600007480707