

Len and I

A photograph of an elderly man, Jim Tucker, wearing a brown hat, glasses, and a jacket, standing in front of a large, complex kinetic sculpture made of many vertical, reflective metal rods. The sculpture is highly detailed and appears to be a large-scale architectural or artistic installation.

JIM TUCKER reveals the full story of John Matthews and the most remarkable art coup in New Zealand history:

In the end, it came down to one sleepless night in New York. It was in the autumn of 1975, when two men – one an artistic genius, the other a clever engineer from New Zealand – lay awake on separate floors of a Greenwich Village apartment building and wrestled with a dilemma that would determine their destinies, one way or another.

It wasn't as though John Matthews arrived at this pivotal moment without warning, however. Len Lye had done this before: his final grandiose costing for a kinetic sculpture at the Jewish Museum to commemorate the holocaust had left its trustees stunned, and they drifted quietly away.

The same had happened with the US big art foundations - Ford, the Guggenheim, and others. Sponsors ran from the room at the sheer audacity, scale – and cost – of Len Lye’s kinetic visions. Only one full-scale version had ever been built, a Wind Wand in Toronto that was so poorly interpreted Lye demanded it be dismantled.

Yet it still came as a shock. Matthews had returned to New York after many months of experimenting with long strips of recalcitrant stainless steel in his New Plymouth engineering company’s workshop, confident he had tamed the complexities of up-scaling one of Lye’s most controversial kinetic works, Trilogy.

As Lye had requested, he’d built a working model about eight feet high. It ran perfectly. Along with another kinetic sculpture, Fountain, it would be a crowning exhibit for the city’s relatively new, avant garde art museum, the Govett-Brewster Art Gallery, on whose behalf Matthews had travelled to meet fellow Kiwi Len Lye in 1974.

“So, I went back (in 1975) and said to Len ‘this is what I’ve got’, and I showed him what my bigger version of Trilogy was and how it would work,” he recalls 40 years later. “I had photographs, and I may well have recorded the sounds. And he was thrilled. He was really pleased. He sat me down with a rum and orange, and he said: ‘You know, John, it’s absolutely terrific, fantastic what you’ve done’.

“I’m sitting there thinking this is pretty good and I’m feeling quite pleased for myself, and I felt pleased for Len. And then he said: ‘But now we really have to talk about the scale’. And I became totally focused. ‘What do you mean, Len?’

“And he said: ‘Well, to really have the right impact on people we have to have the right scale, and to have the right scale it’s got to be much bigger than what you’ve done. The twisters have to be 25 feet long, and the whole work has to be scaled up accordingly’.

“I sobered up very quickly, and I’m thinking, ‘bugger this man’. I knew he’d done it before. I think Ann (Lye’s wife) probably told me. I thought to myself: ‘Do I really want to go through this nonsense? Do I really want to have all this crap? The point about scaling up that particular work was you didn’t just double everything. It’s all to do with kinetic energy and rotating masses. It’s factors of four, or more. It’s like starting again. I just thought ‘can I really be bothered?’

“Len said ‘Will you do it for me?’ And I said I would think about it. And that was the end of the evening. He just went off to his place. He probably said ‘we’ll sleep on it’.”

Or not sleep. Lye retired to his apartment on the floor below and Matthews headed for the tiny bed in a corner of Lye’s studio, where he always stayed during his regular visits to the Lyes in the 1970s. Rest eluded him.

“I’m sure he had a bad night, too, because he needed me as much as I wanted to work with him. I wanted to be involved, because I had a huge respect for him, but I didn’t have to be involved. That’s the point.

“In the morning I thought about it again, and I made a decision to take it on, because I decided that this guy was so crazy, but so brilliant, one of the few - if in fact the only - geniuses I’d ever met in my life. So I said to him: ‘I’ll give it a go, Len, but there’s no promises’. Because I wasn’t even sure we could pull it off.”

New Plymouth industrialist, mechanical engineer and arts philanthropist John Brodie Matthews is generous in his praise for the cast of dozens involved in getting the works of New Zealand's most internationally renowned artist back to his home country.

But when you hear what happened after Matthews met Lye in New York, and begin to understand the enormity of the task the young engineer embraced, there can be only one conclusion: Matthews is the main reason why an \$11.5 million temple to Lye's work will open in New Plymouth in July.

Why him?

There was no portentous sign in his childhood growing up in New Plymouth that he would accomplish such an extraordinary coup in the arts.

He recalls that although his father, Sir Russell Matthews, demonstrated a strong aesthetic in designing the beautiful garden surrounding the family's Tudor-style home at Tupare on the city's southern outskirts, he had no apparent artistic appreciation. And as a teenager he was appalled when Mary, his mother, helped raise funds to build a disastrously designed portico on the city's fine stone Presbyterian church, St Andrews.

"I never forgave her. It cemented for me a view that if you build something like that you have to do it well, otherwise you're stuck with it for a 100 years or more." It was a belief that would later drive his ambition for the Len Lye Centre.

Matthews's own aesthetic appreciation focused on music. He played clarinet in the school orchestra and saxophone in the school band, then leapt into the world of jazz after Mary bought him a Benny Goodman record (although his father forbade him from playing it in the house). Russell opposed his going to university – 'a waste of time' - but Mary encouraged it.

It was during his four years at Canterbury University School of Engineering taking a mechanical engineering degree (as well as commercial law) that Matthews turned to arts appreciation as a counterpoint to intensive study, during which even the holidays were spent working at engineering companies back home in Taranaki.

"It was relentless. Aesthetics weren't taught in engineering. The only time we touched on it was when (New Plymouth artist) Tom Kriesler came in to do a single lecture. It was wasted on most of the students, because they thought he was oddly dressed."

A real chance to immerse himself came after he'd done some OE in Chicago and returned to New Plymouth to run the family business, which was Russell Matthews' long-established road sealing company. The firm pioneered bitumen pavement in New Zealand (Currie St was the first, in 1914) and went on to seal most of Taranaki's roads, and many others around the country.

"My father made his fortune from being paid by councils to put the stuff down," he says. So there is something deeply ironic in his funding New Plymouth District Council to rip up the street outside the Len Lye Centre to create a streetscape plaza as an appropriate entranceway to the new building.

Back home in the early 1970s, Matthews met Monica Brewster and was enamoured of her vision for a contemporary art museum in the city, a project she seeded with a large bequest. The committee set up to realise her dream had been looking around for a home for it (the top of Marsland Hill or Churchill Heights were a couple of favoured options), and Matthews believed he knew just the right place.

“It used to be known as the ‘bughouse’. The Regent picture theatre. On wet days we were allowed to go there to watch Hopalong Cassidy westerns, but you spent half your time rolling Jaffas (the lollies) down the wooden floor. We used to sit up the back, there was chewing gum under all the seats, and you’d have nookie with your girlfriend.”

By now, the post-war movie era had passed the concrete building by. It was empty, capacious...and perfect for the gallery. With input from artist Michael Smither, a design was drawn up by architect Terry Boon. “Terry did a marvellous job of converting that theatre into what is to this day the structure of the Govett-Brewster Art Gallery.”

The committee, with Matthews now co-opted as a member, appointed John Maynard its first director. “(He was) a brash young guy from Australia, and a fabulous director, who took no prisoners and was as tough as steel.”

He needed to be. The committee set its sights on establishing an internationally renowned contemporary gallery showing the work of top artists from New Zealand and the Pacific Rim. There would be no place for local amateurs, a policy that rankles them to this day.

Maynard also found himself under attack from a conservative, provincial community, whose elected city councillors were outraged by one of the first shows, a series of installations by controversial artist Billy Apple. Mayor Denny Sutherland said one resembled “a dunny at Rugby Park”. The last straw was Apple placing (read “scattering”) broken neon tubing down the emergency exit stairway, with some of the bits arranged to spell the F-word on the top step.

It was just the beginning the committee wanted, and it helped put the gallery on the arts trail. After a couple of years, however, committee members perceived a need to take a major step that would capture international attention. American Robert H. Ballard - the second director, who’d replaced Maynard (Ballard now runs an art furnishings outlet in Washington DC) - thought he knew what would do the trick: some exhibits by Len Lye.

Len who? Nobody on the committee had heard of him, recalls Matthews.

They were hardly alone. Born in Christchurch in 1901, Leonard Charles Huia Lye had left New Zealand as a young man to work in Australia, then found his way to London where he found fame as a pioneer film-maker whose creations were made by painting and scratching designs directly on film stock. He moved on to New York, where he concentrated on kinetic sculptures, again leading the way in a relatively new field of art.

Word of his growing renown in European and American art circles had only just begun to filter back to the country of his birth. Nonetheless, the committee liked the sound of Ballard’s pitch, so he was asked to write to Lye to see if he was interested in providing something for the Govett-Brewster, perhaps films, maybe sculptures.

He replied saying he would be delighted to make available a couple of kinetic works, but he would need the help of a “clever engineer”.

Prior to that, in 1972 (according to Roger Horrocks in his seminal biography on Lye) New Zealand artist and educator Ray Thorburn had been to New York to see Lye, on whose work he was doing a PhD thesis. He returned hoping to persuade the National Art Gallery in Wellington to show his works, and was shocked at its lack of interest. Thorburn decided a strong provincial contemporary gallery might be a better option. He approached Ballard in New Plymouth.

Matthews remembers the committee deciding somebody should go to New York to suss out the work of the mysterious-sounding sculptor. It needed to be someone with knowledge of engineering, who could assess whether larger scale versions of Lye’s works could be made.

He volunteered, declining any offers of funding. “That puts you on a performance obligation, and I didn’t want to do that. I would rather go in an independent role.”

Ballard and Thorburn set up the visit. The latter met Matthews at an airport in New York, and was taken aback: the young engineer struggled off the plane on crutches and in plaster up to one knee. Just before the trip, he’d bought the fourth hang-glider seen in New Zealand (he’d wanted a hot-air balloon, but not even Hugh Hefner – who he contacted for help - could assist him with that) and then pulped his ankle after crash-landing on the maiden flight. It was the third major hang-glider crash in the country.

That presented a problem when they arrived at Lye’s apartment building in Greenwich St; how would they get up to the fourth floor studio? They managed it on an old goods lift, complete with concertina metal cage doors.

As they entered the studio, Matthews was struck by several serendipitous coincidences...and something odd: there was no sign of Lye.

The serendipity came when he saw pinned to one wall a *New Yorker* magazine cartoon – the same one Matthews had at home. “It showed two rats in a lab cage, one saying to the other: ‘Boy, have I got these guys fooled. Every time I pull this lever down they drop in a piece of cheese.’”

“I thought this was fabulous. I’d come across it at a doctor’s waiting room, and I tore it out and stuck it on the wall of my home office. I had it there all the time until the fire (that destroyed the home of John and Lynda Matthews) last year. So here I am going around Len’s studio and the same cartoon has been torn out of the same edition of the *New Yorker* and it’s pinned to the wall the same way I pinned it on mine.

“I knew then that Len and I were going to hit it off. And so it was.”

There were other portents. Lye had neatly labelled foolscap paper-sized boxes stacked along the studio walls, just as Matthews had for his files. And when Thorburn explained the exact positioning Lye wanted the sponge to be left in the shower-box, the engineer thought ‘yes, that’s what I’d want, too’.

Yet others would emerge – Lye’s liking for dark Captain Morgan (not Coruba) rum mixed with fresh orange juice (“it goes a gorgeous colour”), jazz...and girls. “We both liked dark

rum and orange, jazz, girls.” Lye’s well-known (in art circles) libidinous drive would also feature in his works, but more on that later.

The other immediate impression was unsettling: where was Len Lye?

“I found that terribly curious, and Ray didn’t tell me until years later that Len was as nervous as hell about whether we’d hit it off together, in the same way that I was nervous about it. So he wasn’t there. He’d gone upstate to Warwick, where they had a lovely little two-storeyed cottage. Apparently Ray phoned Len the next morning or maybe that night and Ray said ‘he’s okay’.”

Lye turned up next day, they connected, and so began several weeks of collaboration to decide what might best suit the Govett-Brewster gallery.

“It was a fabulous journey together, because he had all these studio models, drawings, piles and piles and piles of drawings, doodles. He’d pull out boxes and say ‘look at this’ and ‘look at that’. And then we had slide shows with audio tapes synched to them, with Len’s commentaries.

“I guess it just evolved, because it was Len’s game and he would talk about this work and that work, what we could do, and I would tell him whether I thought it was practical, whether we could build it.

“I was led by him. It was his eye, not my eye. For instance, what sort of pedestal to put it on? Or is there no pedestal, is it flat on the floor? And how do you make sure that the public, the viewers, don’t get in the way of the work and get their head sliced off or something?

“One of the gallery directors later got increasingly worried that when Trilogy’s twisters were flying around, if something went wrong or they failed or tore apart, someone might be seriously damaged. I mentioned this to John Maynard (who was no longer director) and he said: ‘Yeah, someone could get killed. It’s time somebody died in the name of art.’”

The pedestal discussions would register with Matthews many years later when he learned the New Plymouth District Council had abandoned plans to build a suitable plaza in the city’s Queen St, from which people would enter the Len Lye Centre. Likening it to building a temple on rough ground or having a beautiful painting held in a rotten frame, he offered to raise the needed funds, and was astonished when the council declined.

The centre will have its plaza, but only after Matthews offered to pay for some of it himself. There is a cost to that – some of the \$300,000 cost will be covered by what’s left of a donation of about \$130,000 he originally made to pay for an elevating platform in the large works gallery, to meet Lye’s wish that viewers be able to see works like Fountain from on high.

The viewing platform’s foundations are installed (paid for by Matthews), but the platform will now await future funding. It will remain an imperative for Matthews: “The Govett-Brewster had these beautiful layers that Terry Boon put into the building so you could stand up and look down on a work, and part of the presentation of Len’s works is also the lighting.

“It’s the backdrop and it’s the floor, and so on, and all that detail, and the pedestal that it sits on, but it’s also the lighting. The lighting’s incredibly important; the colour of the light and the spectrum of the light, and so on, and the intensity of the light.”

On his first encounter with Lye, Matthews was astounded by the artist's knowledge of the kinetic sculptures' main component - various types and grades and thicknesses of steel.

“Len was self-taught, but had this extraordinary ability to be an intuitive engineer. And he knew what to do with materials, including various steels, spring steel and stainless steel and so on. He could shape them and move them around and twist them and throw them and flick them and drop them on the floor, and produce all these images with lights flashing on them, and the sounds which we hear now.”

Lye took him on a train trip to New Jersey to visit a steel merchant. “We came to this great big warehouse that was full of steel. It was just marvellous. It was like walking with Len into Greenwich Village, because he's such a character, and the people in the steel store were going ‘Hey Len, good to see you’.

“He's got his own vocabulary, his own manner of speaking. He invented his own language, and he's carrying on with all these different words, and his spirit, and he's got this crazy little hat on, and he's jaunty, and he's upright, and he's got this little goatee beard, and he's chatting and laughing. Nobody minds that Len's there taking everybody's time up, because he's so interesting.

“And he's out there to show me what you do with steel. And so we went to the racks together – we were given access to this huge store, which had cranes running up and down and so on – and we pull out a piece of steel and he'd say ‘now, you've got to see this, see the way this flexes, and the way this shakes, and the sound it makes’, and ‘this is what you've got to do here’, and ‘this is what you've got to do there’.

“I found this incredibly interesting. It was the mark of respect I had for the man that he had developed the knowledge of these materials by doing that. Who the hell else would do that? He experimented all his life. It was in his psyche. It goes right back into his genes, no doubt about it. As Ann said once, ‘Len's greatest creation is himself’. He made himself to be quite a different sort of person.”

The sort of person who attracted others in droves, as Matthews observed during his days at the studio. There was a constant flow of students, acolytes, fellow artists and friends coming and going, many of them keen to work with the artist, to be mentored and taught.

That led to a problem, and it was a little while before Matthews realised what it was. One day somebody would be there working with Lye, the next they would be gone, never to be seen or spoken of again.

“They kind of went ‘poof’ and vanished, and it wasn't immediately apparent how it happened. Then I twigged that Len would grow tired of someone, bored with them, or had decided they weren't up to much, so he would let Ann know and she would have a quiet word with them not to come back. Ann was the hatchet girl. Len was just too nice to say it.”

Matthews was concerned about this. He wondered for a while whether he might be “poofed” along with the rest, that Lye would find him wanting, and one day Ann would give him the “don’t come Monday” whisper.

But he needn’t have worried. After Lye’s death from leukaemia in 1980, Matthews came across a letter Lye wrote to Philip Leider, editor of the influential New York arts magazine, ARTFORUM, in which Lye described Matthews as a genius.

“The swingiest art gallery of the Antipodes, the Govett-Brewster of New Plymouth, NZ, enlarged Trilogy from the Berkeley 8 ft to the Govett’s 22 ft...It’s goddam Mecca stuff. John Matthews who sat on its tail for two years is an engineering genius. John is my one and only patron...”

As this shows, Trilogy was one of the works Lye and Matthews settled on for the first Govett-Brewster Len Lye show, as well as Fountain, a podium with more than 100 polished slender steel rods flowering from it and creating a fantastic light show. Building the first larger-scale Fountain when he got back to New Plymouth was not too much of a challenge, Matthews recalls.

“The issue with Fountain was to get the finish that Len required. And this is the eye of the master that you have with great artists. So he’s right into detail, down to the finest degree, and I had to find the right kind of stainless steel rod of the right dimensions – that’s the diameter to length, the aspect ratio – so that it had the right sort of flex, and it was the right length.”

They needed a stroke of luck when it came to polishing the rods, after they tried various methods and materials, none of which gave the desired effect.

“Len had a way to finish the rods, and it turns out that he’d used what’s called a centre-less grinder. It’s two grinding wheels that are going in opposite directions, normally used for grinding round things, to get a particular finish or a particular size. But where the hell do you find a centre-less grinder in New Zealand?

“Somebody said try Cambrian Engineering up Carrington Rd, where Tony Smale said: ‘Well, we might have, John. We had one once. I wonder if we’ve still got it.’ And we went through this building, room to room to room, and we fossicked around, and underneath a whole lot of other stuff we found this centre-less grinder.

“It did a beautiful job. And I might add, the other day – because we’re now building a giant version of Fountain - I went up to Cambrian and asked if they had a centre-less grinder, and they said ‘yes, we used to have one and we’ve just thrown it away’. A sort of poignant moment in life. So we’re polishing the rods with belt sanders, a new way of doing it.”

Compared to that technical challenge, making a large version of the other sculpture, Trilogy, was a nightmare.

Always referred to by Lye as Trilogy-A Flip and Two Twisters, the work comprises two long, narrow, thin strips of stainless steel that hang from a ceiling mounting and move frenetically at the bidding of a complex system of cam shafts and electric motors. Between them writhes the provocative form of Flip.

The association with reproduction is inevitable, and most certainly intended by Lye, says Matthews. “As far as I’m concerned its spermatozoa and a beautiful vagina, all doing their own thing. Sex. Incredible sex. Flip, she’s working herself up into a frenzy, and everybody’s getting more and more excited. Think phallic symbols if you want to. Flip starts having orgasms, and the whole thing’s going crazy, and we finally have this great climax.

“That’s what TrilogY is about for me, and it’s absolutely what Len had in mind. It depends on how you want to read this incredible work - some people see something else. Everybody has a different kick on it, which is very important for the audience.”

He says sexual messages show in other Lye sculptures, as well, an example being Blade, of which Matthews built a large model for his home. It was displayed in Pukekura Park one summer, when a woman was overheard suggesting to her friend that the performance resembled frantic pelvic thrusting.

Another woman who once watched it with him later confided in Matthews that it gave her an orgasm. “I thought it was a helluva joke,” he says. Single at the time, he’d rather fancied her: “But I didn’t have a chance - Len got there first!”

Potential scatological responses aside, the technical problems facing Matthews when he got to work on TrilogY’s new enlarged form seemed increasingly insurmountable, even though there was small model in the studio, and he and Lye had spent a lot of time agreeing on the way the bigger work should perform.

“I’d say to Len, let’s get a stopwatch, and we would go through what Len called a figure of motion. We’d sit there together, frequently with our eyes closed, and Len would say, ‘right, okay, START, okay, leap into the first mode (makes noise of stainless steel shimmering), and we’d (more noises), and that’s going to be about 56 seconds. And then the next mode, and the next mode, and the next one. And we’re getting more and more excited.

“I wrote out the forms on newsprint, on long strips of paper. It’s a bit like composing music, spaces of time. Like, how long this little piece of performance would be, and then what that performance was, and how long would the next piece be, and what was it, and what sort of energy were we putting in here? And so you sort of read it. There would be text underneath, and there would be figures to do with what...”

There were many manual calculations. “A lot of it was intuitive. I was pretty good at that. You’d never do it nowadays, you’d crunch numbers through a computer.”

But the biggest problem was the behaviour of the steel. “The right grade of stainless steel was a real challenge, because then final work was made of Swedish stainless steel from Sandvik (now Sandvik Materials Technology), used for surgical instruments, razor sharp stuff.

“I didn’t use that for the prototypes, because it was difficult to find and horrifically expensive. I used regular, relatively cheap, 304-grade stainless steel to build TrilogY in the first instance. But it was destructible, and sometimes the stuff would wrap itself up, and would tie itself in knots, and self-destruct, and I’d have to take it to bits and unwind it and start again.”

The other problem was finding time and space. By now, Matthews also had Fitzroy Engineering, a company that within a few years would grow into one of the biggest

engineering outfits in the country as contracts flowed in for the Muldoon government's Think Big petrochemical projects at Waitara, Motunui and Kapuni. By the early 80s, Matthews had about 1500 employees.

The workshop was a busy place, so he had to wait until after hours to rig his Trilogy experiments to an overhead gantry crane in one of the workshops. He would work until after midnight most evenings, and at weekends, making sure his delicate and temperamental offspring was taken down and stored out of the way for his engineers to get on with their work each morning.

"It was sort of ironic. We had all these major things we were making for heavy engineering, and here was this very fragile sculpture."

His staff was intrigued, and some became involved. But mostly, Matthews would work alone on the Trilogy project over the next two years, at first on the one he thought Lye wanted, then on the vastly bigger model, the one that would eventually be installed at the gallery for a dramatic launch in 1977.

As we've seen, the first attempt wasn't what Lye wanted.

"After that, I came back to New Zealand and rang Cliff Stevenson, a brilliant mathematician at the Canterbury engineering school, and asked if he could help. He said it was an intriguing issue and he would have a look at it. I waited and waited and Cliff took forever, and I was in a hurry. Then after a number of weeks he called and said: 'I'm sorry John, it's mathematically insoluble'. I remember those words. Bloody hell. It was not what I wanted.

"So I had to start from scratch and build it intuitively. I bought more 304 stainless steel and rigged it up at Fitzroy Engineering. We did some big sums. You knew what the weight was, and you knew what the rotational energy was, and the kinetic energy was, and you knew what size motors to do, sort of.

"But how far was the eccentric to put the twists into the twisters, how many harmonics (visual shapes created by the rotating forms) could you get? Could you get the one harmonic, and then could you get the double harmonic, or the triple harmonic. And how fast would it be going to achieve the triple harmonic. You know, it's really slicing, making this incredible noise. Scary stuff.

"I had a brake-clutch free-wheeling mechanism that was out of this world. Again, it came from Bodine (electric motor company). And the DC (electric current) motors. And then the whole control system - when you open it up, it's all rotary switches. There's a shaft with all these rotating switches on it, all with little cams. A terrible thing to adjust.

"It wasn't very enjoyable, I must say. It was a helluva job, a helluva time. I was incredibly tired in those days. It was quite a lonely experience, I remember that. I didn't have anybody that was relating to me about what was going on. I had my own staff who helped, but it was really quite a lonely journey. It wasn't like the fun of being at Canterbury University where you had academics around you and all sorts of stuff to help you. I was really on my own. For months."

What kept him going?

“I think it’s just the way you’re made. It was a job that needed to be done. You either have a success or a failure; there wasn’t anything in between. It had to be Len’s stuff, which was to do with the performance, the way the works started, the way the works stopped, the way the works sprang into action, the electricity of the work, the whole business of becoming spell-binding.

“Sometimes you have to look at the work’s performance time and time and time again, and then you go away and you think about them, and then you go back and you do it again, and then you go away and then you come back and you do it again. And you do it the next day, and then you do it next week, and the important thing is that you make sure that the performance gets so tight...it’s like a belly dance, it’s choreography.

“Len taught me about that. I guess it’s like music. It’s like composers, composing a piece of incredible jazz. Does it have you on the edge of your seat all the way? Are you totally absorbed? There’s a baby crying, but you don’t hear the baby crying because you’re totally absorbed with the work. But you’ve got to be in tune with it, too.

“In my case, I’m the creator of Len’s design. Len tells me what he wants, and I’m the creator of what Len wants...but I’m also the audience.”

Everybody cried. Len cried, John cried, Ann cried, everybody was in tears on the day in 1977 when Trilogy was switched on for the first time in the Govett-Brewster Art Gallery.

Matthews had been back to New York to show Lye photographs and play him audio tapes of Trilogy when he finally got it right, but it wasn’t until that first gallery performance that the emotive power of his success finally overflowed.

“He just cried tears and tears, and that was nice to see. To see this fantastic man in tears. We were all in tears, but to see Len in tears was pretty humbling. Because it hit the spot...it works still. He had the small piece working at Berkeley, but that was different.”

The building of bigger scale and better performing Len Lye kinetic sculptures continues to this day, much of it funded by Matthews and done at workshops in New Plymouth, or through his sponsorship of post-graduate projects at the Canterbury University engineering school. One such is a fantastic work called Sun Land and Sea, which will spit lightning bolts. Matthews wants one for the lake on his Omata property.

A giant version of Fountain has been built for the opening of the Len Lye Centre, where it will feature with three of the previous Fountains, all four of them in the Large Works Gallery, the first one visitors see when they reach the top of the great entry walkway.

Matthews says there are 19 New Zealand-built interpretations of Lye’s sculptures, with perhaps another dozen or so to come. He has paid for many of them, investing hundreds of thousands, perhaps millions (he won’t say) of his own money.

He is understandably protective of the Len Lye enterprise. It has cost him more than money; in at least one case a lifelong friendship with architect Terry Boon, who hoped to design the centre, but who missed out in a selection process designed and driven by Matthews. “It was

deeply regrettable,” says Matthews. “It was awful for Terry, and for me, but the centre was bigger than both of us. We had to keep our eyes on the prize.”

His relentless drive to achieve the centre for his old artist friend has attracted allies, but enemies, as well. He dubs current district councillors (hell-bent on cutting spending) “the Good, the Bad and the Mad” and he rails at lack of consultation with the Len Lye Foundation he chairs since setting it up to care for Lye’s works, exhibitions and archives in 1980.

But he’s thrilled at the end result of the building project. His first look over the building in May left him more than impressed: “They’ve done a terrific job. It’s very, very good,” he says of the centre and the mainly local contractors who have put it together over the last two years. Like others of us who have toured the mostly-completed building he noticed hairline cracks in a few sections of the polished concrete floors, one of them across the stunning walkway up to the first gallery.

Here’s a thought: Len Lye once wrote a dissertation on cracks that appear in paving. He even made a slide-tape show about them, which he showed Matthews one evening over a few orange-rums. He quoted from a poetry line that said cracks are the things that let light in.

If he were alive today, is it too far-fetched to imagine him dancing jauntily up the grand walkway of his new temple, spotting a crack, marvelling at its eccentricity, and declaring: “Hah, motion. That’s perfect!” Possibly. Probably. Surely.