

# Len Lye & I



**JIM TUCKER** tells the story of one of the most remarkable art coups in New Zealand history:

John Matthews and the Len Lye Centre in New Plymouth. *Photos: Rob Tucker*

**I**n a fire that destroyed one of New Zealand's great private art collections last year the nation lost works by Michael Smither, Allen Maddox, Tony Fomison, Graeme Clements...the list goes on.

But the blaze that burned down John and Lynda Matthews' rural house and gallery also claimed something equally precious to the New Plymouth businessman - a framed cartoon he once tore from the pages of a 1970s *New Yorker* magazine he was reading in a doctor's waiting room.

The sentimental value lay in its connection to Len Lye, whose art Matthews later secured for New Plymouth's contemporary art museum, the Govett-Brewster Art Gallery. After being closed for the last two years for a \$17 million makeover, the gallery was due to reopen in late July, joined at the hip to the new Len Lye Centre, the first art museum in Australasia dedicated to a single artist.

The cartoon connection was made in 1974, when Matthews first flew to New York to meet Lye on behalf of the Govett-Brewster Art Gallery Committee to check whether the eccentric expatriate Kiwi sculptor and film maker might provide some works for the four-year-old gallery.

After being met at the airport by New Zealand arts educator Ray Thorburn, who had befriended Lye while completing a PhD thesis on the artist, Matthews arrived at Lye's fourth floor Greenwich Village apartment building to be struck by several coincidences.

Pinned to one wall was the same *New Yorker* cartoon: "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 knew then that Len and I were going to hit it off."

There were other portents. Lye had neatly labelled foolscap-sized boxes stacked along the studio walls, just as Matthews had for his files back home. 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: Matthews shared Lye's liking for Captain Morgan dark rum mixed with fresh orange juice ("it goes a gorgeous colour"), jazz...and girls. The artist's well-known (in art circles) libidinous drive would also feature in his works, but more on that later.

Another immediate impression was unsettling: there was no sign of 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'.

"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?"

The pedestal discussions would register with Matthews many years later when he learned the New Plymouth District Council had abandoned plans to convert the street outside the new Len Lye Centre into a suitable plaza. 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.

**I**n the end, New Plymouth's Len Lye deal came down to one sleepless night in New York. It was nearly a year after he first met Lye, in the autumn of 1975, when Matthews returned from 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 TrilogY, one of the kinetic sculptures they had chosen.

As Lye requested, he'd built a working model about eight feet high. It ran perfectly. Along with another sculpture, Fountain, it would be a crowning exhibit for the Govett-Brewster.

"I went back and showed him what my bigger version of TrilogY was and how it would work," he recalls 40 years later. "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 he'd done something similar with the Jewish Museum (which pulled out of negotiations with Lye).

"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.

"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."

**N**ew 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 the temple to Lye's work wound up in a small New Zealand provincial city.

Why him? There was no portentous sign in his childhood growing up in New Plymouth that he would accomplish such an extraordinary coup. His early 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 his mother bought him a Benny Goodman record (although his father forbade him from playing it in the house).

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.

A real chance to immerse himself in the arts came in the late 1960s after he'd done some OE in Chicago and returned to New Plymouth to run the family business, Sir Russell Matthews' long-established road sealing company.

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. He suggested the gallery be located in a former movie theatre, the Regent, and was co-opted onto the gallery committee.

John Maynard was the 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. Maynard 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 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.

After a couple of years, 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.

According to Roger Horrocks in his seminal biography on Lye, Ray Thorburn had returned from New York in 1972 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.

**O**n 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. 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 was 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. But there was something odd going on: 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.”

Matthews wondered for a while whether he might be “poofed” along with the rest, 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.

It was just as well. Building the first larger-scale Fountain when he got back to New Plymouth was not too much of a challenge, Matthews recalls, but 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 it’s 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



Trilogy, as it has been shown at the Govett-Brewster Art Gallery in recent years. A new model has been built for the refurbished gallery.

symbols if you want to. Flip starts having orgasms, and the whole thing's going crazy, and we finally have this great climax.”

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 New York 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.”

The biggest problem was the behaviour of the steel. For his prototypes, Matthews couldn't afford the horrifically expensive Swedish stainless steel (used to make scalpels) that Lye specified.

“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, with 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. 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.

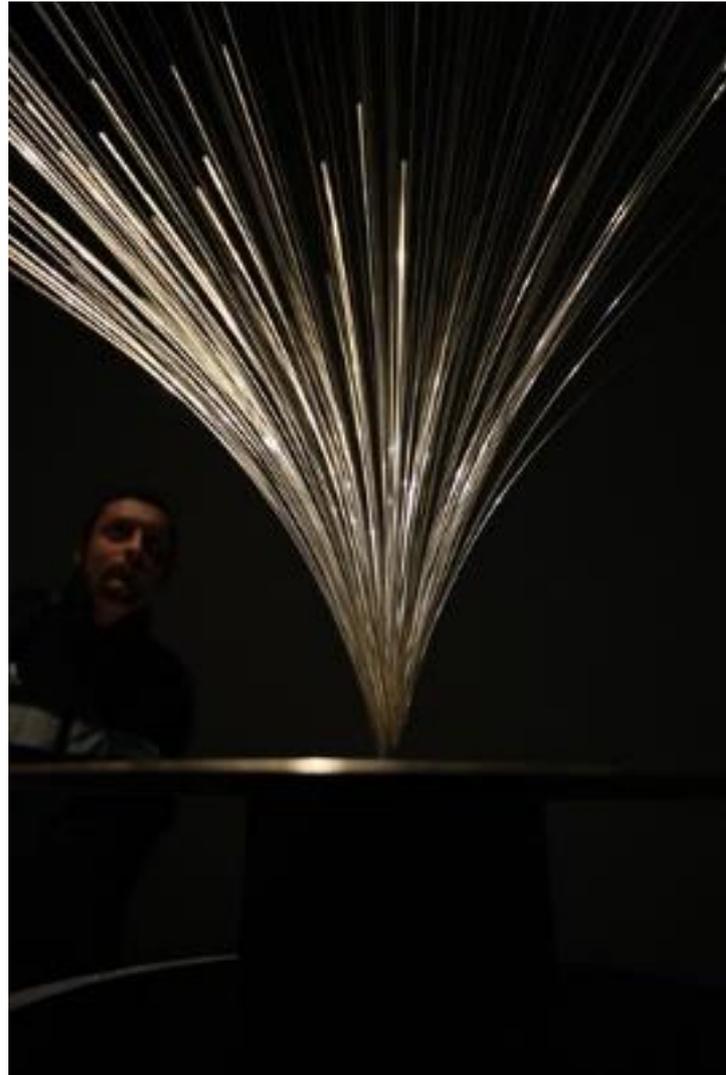
His staff was intrigued, and some became involved. But mostly, Matthews would work alone on the Trilogy project over the next two years, at first on the one he thought Lye wanted, then on the vastly bigger model, the one that would eventually be installed at the gallery for a dramatic launch in 1977.

Prior to the second attempt, he had consulted Cliff Stevenson, a mathematician at the Canterbury engineering school, but after a number of weeks Stevenson called back with the message that it was “mathematically insoluble”.

“So I had to start from scratch and build it intuitively. 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? And how fast would it be going to achieve the triple harmonic. You know, it’s really slicing, making this incredible noise. Scary stuff.

“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.”

The building of bigger scale, better performing and computer-aided 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



An early version of Fountain, one of four that will be shown in the opening exhibition.

work called Sun Land and Sea, which involves a sea serpent that will spit lightning bolts. Matthews wants one for the lake on his Omata property.

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.



Managers for the main contractor, Clelands Construction, on the walkway to the first Len Lye Centre gallery. The columns are clad on the outside with stainless steel.

He's thrilled at the end result of the building project. During a tour in May, though, he was disappointed to see hairline cracks in a few sections of the polished concrete floors.

But here's a thought: Len Lye once showed Matthews a dissertation he had written on cracks that appear in paving. 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!"

