

# Jim Tucker: Len Lye Centre needs more sculptures all at once

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Last updated 12:00, July 15 2016



WORLDARCHITECTUREFESTIVAL.COM

Jim Tucker wants to see more of Len Lye's sculptures at the Len Lye Centre.

## **The Len Lye Centre rejects widespread criticism that it needs to be showing many more of the artist's sculptures.**

While acknowledging negative feedback about the scarcity of Lye kinetic works, centre managers say there are too many obstacles to expanding the numbers beyond four at a time.

The centre will open a new exhibition of sculptures in September that will include the second version of "Trilogy – Flip and Two Twisters", and three other sculptures.

That will set the pattern for the future, with the sculpture exhibition changing three times a year, with each occasion introducing four different works, say curator Simon Rees and Teresa Turner, the New Plymouth District Council's recently appointed manager of recreation and culture.

It means about a dozen different sculptures will be seen each year, which they say meets a perceived need to vary showings to meet visitor expectations, and is about the limit of the gallery's capabilities to manage the complex and fragile mechanical objects.

Rees said the local community provided the majority of visitors for most art museums around the world, and that was true of the Len Lye Centre, with Taranaki people making up 65 percent.

“So with the likelihood of people returning two or three times a year, you need to give them two or three different things. That means we have to cycle through the exhibitions.”

The Len Lye Foundation says it has 16 or 17 sculptures available for exhibition now.

Rees said some of those – Universe, Albatross, Firebush, Grass, and several versions of Fountain - had already been shown. With his approach, almost all of the sculptures would be seen by the end of next year. “That is a better strategy for developing a programme than throwing them all in at once.”

Rees said one criticism was that the 2009 Len Lye exhibition in Melbourne and the 2001 one in Wellington’s City Gallery were better “because they had more things. But exactly the same curator who has done the exhibitions here did the exhibitions there. With those showings, the objects were on display for three months and then they went away.”

Emanations, the Len Lye Centre’s current world-class display of camera-less photography by Len Lye and others was hugely expensive to do because it assembled work from galleries and collectors around the world. It was manageable partly because the objects were small and portable.

“To do a similar benchmarking exercise with sculpture - bringing in the work of other artists like George Rickey, Jean Tinguely, Jesus Rafael de Soto, Lygia Pape, Lygia Clark, the Zero group artists, Naum Gabo, Alexander Calder, et al - would cost over \$10 million. I can’t do that exhibition.”

Another constraint was the building’s architecture, said Rees. The first gallery at the top of the entrance ramp could show only large-scale sculptures, usually one at a time. “Small objects do not look very good in massive vacuum spaces. They tend to be under-whelming.”

Part of Lye’s concept for the 21st century was to create larger versions of his kinetic designs, and those were still coming. “But that will take up that whole space. Each one of these things is loud and in its own right.”

In earlier days, in the Terry Boon-designed Govett Brewster gallery, there were usually about four sculptures. “There was Universe, Blade - all loud. In the summer when Trilogy was up, it was just Trilogy because it dominates the entire gallery. People used to be happy with just Trilogy, but now we’re going to have Trilogy, plus three other ones.

“If we had an even bigger institution, of course, we could put more things up.”

He conceded the centre opened partially on the back foot last year when plans to show Trilogy in the adjoining Govett Brewster gallery were abandoned at the last minute when engineers could not get it going properly.

“The Len Lye Foundation are very experienced with Trilogy and know what an ideal performance is. It’s so popular within New Plymouth, and people know the sculpture well, and they know an ideal performance. The engineers couldn’t achieve the ideal performance, and (with) the high standard and the spirit of Len in mind, you don’t show it until it’s just right. The downside is, the public hasn’t seen Trilogy.”

Rees and Turner said they were not ignoring the results of this year's annual New Plymouth District Council satisfaction survey, which scored the Len Lye Centre at the bottom of 25 features and council services.

Turner said they were aware they had to listen to what the people who came to the gallery were saying. "We do acknowledge that there has been that feedback, and there has been the survey, and from our own internal surveys. We don't ask people what they think and then not think how we will respond to that.

"There's an expectation out there, and so we have to try to get it right to meet that expectation, as well as fulfilling that role in the more international space around Len's reputation."

Rees: "I can show you how things have changed. There has been the vinyl blacking out at the front door (to stop overly harsh light in the second level gallery), which has led to criticism that I've taken away the view shaft of the building.

"We've got new, expanded texts about history of the institutions as we enter. That's new. Then there's Len Lye's Colourbox on a big screen with headphones. There's a talking heads video of the current exhibition. It's evolving. This is not static. I'm even prepared to change exhibitions mid-flow – we add information where we can."

What he could do at the museum was prescribed by principles laid down in various papers written from 2003 by previous Govett Brewster director Greg Burke and council chief executives Rodger Kerr-Newell and Barbara McKerrow.

These regarded Lye as "an unusual multimedia artist" and listed 17 aspects of his work that need to be encompassed over time in the Len Lye Centre's exhibitions and activities (the list has since grown to 24).

A 2005 policy paper acknowledged that "some difficult decisions must be made to establish an appropriate catalogue framework that encompasses the specific complexities of his work.

Rees: "Across the structure of the two buildings, you have a cinema, you have an education space, you have the large works gallery, and Gallery 3, or what people call the main Lye gallery, and the Govett Brewster.

"So remember that curating is curating all of those things, and against a set of desires or wants for a well-established community. We want the Govett Brewster to have appropriate strength and presence. But it's not just about the sculptures."

In response to concerns about Canterbury University stealing the centre's thunder by holding the first showing of Lye works being developed there, Rees said such exhibitions were merely a testing ground.

"The new works need to be publicly tested for health and safety, tested in front of a slightly less vociferous and demanding audience before they come inside here. The copyright belongs to the Len Lye Foundation, and all of the papers and policies say that these objects can reside nowhere else apart from New Plymouth."

Rees and Turner said people should also remember Lye's sculptures in New Plymouth were not confined to the centre. A visitor's first encounter was often the Wind Wand on the foreshore walkway, and that option would soon be expanded by the erection of seven more wands at East End Beach reserve, commissioned and funded through the Art in Public Places Trust.

Asked if he was confident his approach was working, Rees pointed to visitor numbers in the first 11 months since the opening last year – 141,922 to the end of June, compared to the projected total of 96,000 for the first year.

“But as to the second year – I don’t mind admitting I’m terrified.”

### **Dimensions to Len Lye**

1. Sculpture; 2. paintings; 3. batiks; 4. paintings not by Lye but in the collection; 5. drawings and paintings on paper; 6. drawings and paintings on paper not by Lye but in the collection; 7. photograms; 8. other photographs; 9. writing (published); 10. writing (unpublished); 11. Correspondence; 12. other biographical records; 13. written documentation not by Lye; 14. miscellaneous (ie unpublished writing about Lye by others or theses); 15. slide-tape programmes; 16. other audio recordings; 17. Film; 18. direct filmmaking tools; 19. Video; 20. DVDs; 21. Len’s studio materials; 22. other biographical materials (not on paper); 23. Len Lye Foundation records; 24. Govett-Brewster records.