

Particles In Space

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This paper initiates an exploration into how modes of exhibition influence the experience, understanding and cultural representation of media artworks under emerging contemporary conditions. Viewing conditions establish new meanings and uses of virtual images, as well as offering alternative constructions of the social space of their exposition.¹ By turning attention away from concerns operating at the formal or 'local' level of the artwork itself towards the construction of exhibition conditions, the increasingly complex interactions between art, technology and society taking place today become more clearly pronounced.

Proceeding from a design research perspective, this paper plays its part within an extended critical examination that will centre principally on the curatorial design² process leading up to the realisation of the Len Lye exhibition premiering at the Australian Centre for the Moving Image (ACMI) in July 2009. Arguably the most comprehensive survey of the artist's career previously resulted in the exhibition, *Len Lye: Experimental Filmmaker, Sculptor, Photographer*.³ Touring to the Monash University Museum of Art (MUMA) in Melbourne in 2002, this exhibition coincided with the establishment of ACMI as a cinemedia centre dedicated to promoting the moving image in all its forms. By retrospectively casting attention back to the staging of this iteration of the exhibition and comparing it with the recent exhibition developed

¹ This situation becomes increasingly complex in new media installations where spatial considerations and exhibition design play a significant part in establishing the appropriate form of engagement required to achieve the aesthetic intentions of the artist. Conditions supporting the aesthetic encounter may be established by rendering the spatial considerations of exhibition as unobtrusive as possible (e.g. the 'Black Box' as a remediation of the neutrality of the 'White Cube' aesthetic), or through revealing the technologised apparatus incorporated as part of the artwork.

² The primary objective of this research is directed at developing the conceptual framework for digitally informed creative production of exhibitions. In developing this proposition, the term *curatorial design* will be used to encompass the practices that influence aesthetic experience associated with the art of exhibition. The curatorial design project proposes a critically informed approach to creative curatorial practice, particularly as this relates to the production of exhibitions that integrate digital mediation with spatial practice.

³ *Len Lye: Experimental Filmmaker, Sculptor, Photographer* was a joint exhibition between the Art Gallery of New South Wales (AGNSW) and the Govett-Brewster Gallery, supported by the Len Lye Foundation. The inaugural exhibition was held at the AGNSW in Sydney from 1 December 2001 – 29 January 2002. Subsequent exhibitions were hosted at the Monash University Museum of Art and Queensland Art Gallery, before culminating with a tour of New Zealand. The exhibition was comprised of a screening programme of his pioneering films, a large selection of photograms and three kinetic sculptures.

specifically for ACMI's Screen Gallery, this cumulative investigation provides an opportunity to review their respective installation strategies, exhibition design techniques and technological infrastructure. It is hoped that by focusing on such issues associated with exhibiting the work of Len Lye, a greater understanding of how the translation of filmic and interactive works in exhibition space has evolved in the intervening formative period.

Particles In Space: Len Lye exhibition at the Monash University Museum of Art (2002)

Len Lye (1901-1980; New Zealand) is recognised as a significant figure in the history of the moving image, first gaining acclaim for his experimental filmmaking while working in London and later New York before playing an important part in the kinetic art movement.⁴ Lye's overarching aesthetic can be generalised as a quest to produce 'total artworks' based on movement, light and energy. Connecting his otherwise disparate media practice – extending from photograms to experimental filmmaking to kinetic sculpture – was his preoccupation with expressing the 'beauty of motion' (Lye 1961: 75) through visual forms of abstract motion. While not exhaustive, the selection of works that were included in the 2002 survey placed emphasis on this central preoccupation of Lye's production: the guiding conception of 'art in motion', and art forms as products of energy and active material and perceptual forces at work.⁵ While these qualities exist intrinsically in his artwork, they also find a particular acuity of expression when spatially activated through exhibition.

By definition, any touring exhibition possesses the ability to modify its presentation in some degree to the distinctive character of exhibition spaces found at different venues. In order to adapt its inventory to the particular gallery spaces at MUMA, the installation was informed by instructions supplied in an installation manual as well as the observation of curators involved with its earlier staging at the AGNSW.⁶ In the

⁴ Lye's professional work in the fledgling commercial film industries in Britain and America was undoubtedly influential to his experimental animation. Having begun making animated advertising films in Sydney during the 1920s, Lye left for Britain in 1927 where he found work with John Grierson's groundbreaking GPO Film Unit. Moving later to the US in the 1940, he worked on the 'March of Time' newsreels as well as producing his own hand-etched and hand-printed abstract films.

⁵ According to curator Judy Annear: 'Lye was driven to use whatever means – words, film, music, metal, kinetics, photography, batik – to realise his singular vision of a universal life force which he saw as an appropriate subject for art. For Lye, that force was made manifest in motion'. With reference to uncatalogued documentation: Information Sheet for *Len Lye: Experimental Filmmaker, Sculptor, Photographer*. Sydney: AGNSW.

⁶ The exhibition was designed for the entrance level project space at the AGNSW and required a 7x7 meter projection room be built as a dedicated video viewing area for screening of the film program.

exhibition contract, the following spatial conditions (or 'Environmental Provisions') are explicitly stipulated:

- (i) temperature between 20 and 23C
- (ii) relative humidity at 55% +/- 5%
- (iii) recognised standard lux level for works on paper – 60 lux

While these specifications are of limited relevance to a discussion of curatorial philosophy, archived documentation of correspondence exchanged informally between various members of the curatorial staff of the two venues begins to offer some insight into the connection between the curated selection of artworks and the proximity and relationship of particular items making up the exhibition space:

In terms of exhibition design and installation requirements please note that the film component of the exhibition will require a video projector and a screening room. It is preferable that this is an isolated area distinct from, but an adjunct to, the kinetic sculptures and the photograms. The total area required needs to be about 400 square metres.⁷

Or, even more directly:

The relationship between things are quite important as is pretty clear I guess. The photograms need to 'speak' to each other i.e. the pairs of heads face each other but apart from that the sequence is very much up to you. The kinetics just need plenty of space to show them off to their best advantage. *Grass* and *Universe* are usually fairly close to the walls so you don't have to hide their power chords but, as you can see, we did it differently.⁸

Exhibitions promote a dialectical way of thinking about the relationship between art and viewing experience. For its part, the character of the footprint of MUMA's three defined galleries influenced to some degree how this relationship was coordinated spatially in the resulting installation. The unusual semi-circular entry 'portal' to the gallery complex proper immediately presented the viewer with the option of entering either of two adjacent spaces: to the left, a self-contained darkened space dedicated

⁷ With reference to uncatalogued documentation of correspondence dated 20 June 2001.

⁸ The directive for the works to be situated in direct relation to a wall surface were not adhered to in the AGNSW install where their exhibition design was 'in the round'. With reference to uncatalogued documentation of email correspondence dated 14 January 2002.

to viewing the continuous screening programme of Lye's experimental films; to the right, entrance into the first of two internally connected rooms where first the print and then the sculptural works were installed. In a sense, the photogram suite acts as the point on which the exhibition turns. While heralding Lye's later attraction to kinetic art, the photograms demonstrate a similar approach to those applied in his 'direct film' method where implements such as combs, saws, pins, and razors were used to scratch into the black film leader before sequencing the frames and overlaying musical scores. In films such as *Free Radicals* and *Particles In Space*, Lye effectively created multi-dimensional environments by playfully exploring the synaesthetic relationship between sound and image.

Similar principles are revealed in Lye's kinetics sculptures: deceptively simple pieces with motor-driven movement which generate intense soundscapes from the flexing, twisting and rebounding of metal parts. The first of these 'harmonics' (as the artist sometimes referred to them) was situated at the threshold of the final room located at the furthest end of the gallery complex: *Roundhead* is a small delicate work whose rhythmic movement of orbiting constructions emulate the circulation of planets. In contrast to this self-enclosed model, *Grass* and *Universe* enter into a relationship of reciprocal influence with the gallery's configuration and scale. The walls lining the cubic environment effectively act as a backdrop to the sculptures in this adaptation; most dramatically in the case of *Grass*, an interpretation of wheat fields buffeted by wind against an expanse of sky, or the reaction of seaweeds gently moving on the undulating surface of water is immediately conjured up. The form of the more imposing *Universe* – reinforced by the striking sound produced from the collision of suspended cork ball and looped strip of metal – contrasted dramatically with the gentle rhythms produced by its companions.⁹

***Particles In Space*: selected exhibitions at the Australian Centre for the Moving Image (2002-08)**

Supporting the primary investigation of Len Lye at ACMI the following abbreviated survey of selected exhibitions developed for the Screen Gallery offers an indication of ways in which the creative directors, curators and exhibition designers have

⁹ In communication between curators, it was noted: "*Universe* requires cleaning of fresh finger marks. Floor taped to provide a discrete visual barrier so that people did not get too close, but this has not stopped the hands reaching forward! Visitors have found this work the most captivating, hence their propensity to touch it. Cork balls cleaned once a week as more difficult to reach. Base should be wiped when dust appears on surface. The elastic attached to the cork ball can stretch and may need to be shortened as required so the sculpture is not too loud." With reference to uncatalogued documentation of email correspondence dated 24/01/02.

embraced the dialectical opportunities of exhibition space. As mediated spaces, these exhibitions reveal how an integrative approach to digital mediation and spatial practice underpins the conceptual framework for curatorial design.

Since its founding in 2001, ACMI has employed an extremely varied range of installation strategies. ACMI's opening exhibition, *Deep Space: Sensation & Immersion* announced that it would offer its visitors a 'transformative experience' of being immersed in the totality (kinaesthetic visual, aural and informational) of virtual artworks. As introduced by curator Victoria Lynn (2001: 17): 'The audience is invited to immerse themselves in the wonder of spaces, to explore their physical construction, their digital presence, their filmic pulse and their spatial expanses of colour and light'. In response to *Remembrance + The Moving Image* (twin-exhibitions curated by inaugural creative director Ross Gibson), Kevin Murray (2003) recognises the centre's unique opportunity to reflect critically on media art's relationship to cinema:

ACMI is in the unusual position of evolving its own context: it takes the moving image out of the cinema and into the gallery. Rather than experiencing film while trapped in the dark by comfortable seats, conspiratorial silence and ushers, ACMI brings this ritual into the public domain.

In design terms, this *technoaesthetic* has resulted in exhibitions that have minimised their formal reliance on the type of gallery, cubical and light-trapped interiors that predominated earlier, 'first-generation' exhibitions (contemporaneous with the Len Lye touring exhibition). While retaining their innate character as individuated systems, inventories of artworks have been 'mixed' in an open-ended space to create curatorially-inspired connections (*World Without End*, 2005) or thoroughly fused as part of enveloping sensory environments reinforced by distinctive interior architecture that challenge the traditional separation of art from space (*White Noise*, 2005). Characterising the exchanges in operation between digital media in real space, the monographic exhibition of Christian Marclay (*Replay*, 2008) exemplified how audio-visual experiences are symptomatic to their site of exhibition. Reflecting a broadening of its curatorial agenda, the possibilities of negotiating the combination of media and objects in a hybrid form of museological display has been broached (*Eyes, Lies & Illusion*, 2007).

Summary

The conceptual framework for curatorial design draws upon an integrative approach to digital mediation and spatial practice. The mediated exhibition environments introduced above extend the narrative and communicational possibilities for aesthetic experiences in the multimedial museum. The dialectical predisposition of curatorial design senses the implications that virtuality brings to a fuller reconceptualisation of the exhibition interface. By investigating an earlier case study involving the staging of a cross-section of experimental artworks by Lye in the first major survey of the artist in Australia in 2002, alongside a brief overview of exhibitions developed for the Screen Gallery at ACMI across the intervening period, this abbreviated text intends to establish a historical backdrop ahead of developing a more detailed and thorough critique of what the added 'dimension' of the exhibition form itself brings to the aesthetic experience, critical framing and historical positioning of a given artist's work within the canon of the media arts.

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