

138 Len Lye: (above) *Rainbow Dance*, 1936; (above right) *Trade Tattoo*, 1937

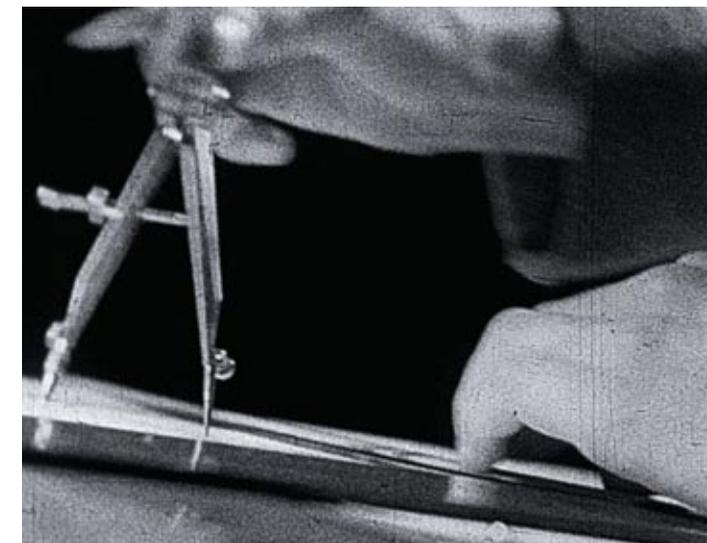
whole being animated a-typically to classical music, a much-abbreviated version of Holst's *The Planets*. Lye approached film technology with fascination but was utterly unorthodox in its use, though he generally managed to gain the respect of the 'experts' and technicians he worked with. He recognised, for example, that the new Gasparcolor and Technicolor systems were related to artists' silk-screen printing techniques,⁷¹ and that using them he could radically alter and intensify colour in the film image. With the help of Technicolor technicians, he made *Rainbow Dance* (1936) for the GPO into an essay in non-natural colour, with moving actors rendered monotone and flat like the stencilled shapes that surround them; everything changing colour following the artist's design, elements of one sequence dissolving into another. For *Trade Tattoo* (aka *In Time With Industry* 1937) he took shots drawn from documentaries being edited by his contemporaries at the GPO, *Night Mail*, *Drifters*, and *Song of Ceylon*, and turned their imagery into flat, still-readable areas of colour, then assembled them into a film-collage on the theme of international trade. Once again he structured the film to a Cuban jazz score, this time from the Lecuona Band, and accelerated the film's pace with jump-cuts in the action, and interwoven textures of hand-drawn lines, stencilled dots and superimposed words, to 'keep in time' with the music (one of the film's graphic slogans). With *A Colour Box*, *Rainbow Dance*, and *Trade Tattoo* he achieved a degree of control of pictorial shape, colour and movement rare in film.

Lye's first entirely live-action film *N or NW* (1937), though hampered by awkward actors and a silly story about mail that goes astray because given the wrong postcode (upsetting a romance), becomes a winning demonstration of how to invent your way out of narrative trouble. Lye had already filled the story with inventive camera-angles and visual effects (one shot is taken *through* a table-top), but his skill lay in his restlessly cutting together of fragments of what were obviously poor 'takes', so once again the action (and now speech) proceeds in sideways jumps, keeping in time with the tempo provided by Fats Waller and others.

Lye's wartime live-action films contain isolated sequences of creative camerawork and editing,⁷² but generally his scope for invention was limited, and he experienced the same frustrations on moving to New York in 1944 to work for the *March of Time*. In the post-war period and still in the USA, his film-making remained tragically limited by absence of enlightened commissioners

or public funding, though he managed to make three acclaimed works, *Color Cry* (1952), *Free Radicals* (1957–63) and *Particles in Space* (c.1966). But most of his creative energy during his American period was channelled into his extraordinary kinetic sculpture⁷³.

Norman McLaren (1914–87) had already experimented with hand-painted films while a student at the Glasgow School of Art, unaware of Lye's pioneer work in the field, but his first significant films *Seven Till Five* (1933) and *Camera Makes Woopee* (1935) were both live-action studies – the first on a day in the life of the school, the second about its annual Christmas ball – made for the School's Art Film Group. His anti-capital/anti-war film *Hell UnLtd* (1936), made with his fellow sculpture student Helen Biggar, which mixes live-action and model animation, gained him an invitation from John Grierson to work at the GPO Film Unit, where he made several live action films before returning to the paint-on-film technique with the figurative *Love on the Wing* (1938), promoting the 1930s novelty of airmail. An image that it contained of scissors momentarily turning into a penis was considered 'too Freudian' by the British film censor, and the film was suppressed, but McLaren had found his style, and the majority of his films from this period onwards were hand-painted, and contained figurative elements: stick-men, birds, stars, baroque flourishes etc. Only rarely could he resist the temptation to charm. A pacifist, he moved to the USA at the outbreak of war and was commissioned by Hilla Rebay to make two short 'non-objective'⁷⁴ works *Dots* and *Loops* (1940) for the Guggenheim collection. In these he took the synthetic sound experiments of Moholy and others further, accompanying the on-screen acrobatic hand-drawn shapes with abstract sounds generated by marks drawn onto the area of the filmstrip reserved for the soundtrack, and so producing what were probably the first widely seen films to use this technique. While in New York he worked with Mary Ellen Bute who was already



139 Norman McLaren: *Seven Till Five*, 1933; experimental hand-painted strips c. 1940s; (overleaf) strips from *Synchrony*, 1971.





2.4 Politics and Identity

Sexual Liberation? : Feminism : New Romantics : Identity : The Body : Social Space

SEXUAL LIBERATION?

Besides the sexual freedom introduced by 'the pill', the 1960s in Britain are associated with the ending of censorship in literature and theatre, and the rise of a political and social counter-culture that found expression in the events of May 1968 and the 'underground'. In his response to the period *Bomb Culture*, Jeff Nuttall suggests that 'movies and magazines were called Underground because they were so totally divorced from the established communicating channels, and because they were intensely concerned with [turning society's] ... obsession with sex and religion into a weapon against the spiritual bankruptcy which begat the bomb'.¹ As a part of its anti-establishment libertarian agenda, the British underground press – *IT*, *OZ*, *Ink*, *Friends* – noisily opposed censorship and demanded honesty in representations of sex and discussion of sexuality (though it was generally happy to perpetuate the exploitation of women in its own choice of images), and championed new British writers who explored these themes. Yet the iconic underground 'sex' films screened in London in the 1960s were all American – Anger's *Scorpio Rising* (USA 1963) with its fetishisation of the male body, Andy Warhol's *Couch* (USA 1964), *Chelsea Girls* (USA 1966) *et al.* with their various couplings, Tom Chomont's homoerotic psychedelia *Phases of the Moon* (USA 1968) and *Love Objects* (USA 1971). Nuttall – whose sometimes erotic drawings graced many of the early editions of *IT* – recalled a conversation on the subject in a Bayswater café in 1964: 'Tony [Balch] and Bill [Burroughs] were talking about films. They were unimpressed by Jack Smith's *Flaming Creatures* [USA 1963] – Tony had seen a Brakhage birth film [*Window Water Baby Moving*, USA 1959] at Knokke, was enthusiastic. He had passed out watching it'² (one measure of a film's integrity). The only contemporary artists working in Britain to similarly challenge the sexual evasions and euphemisms of mainstream cinema were also American – Carolee Schneemann, Sandy Daley and Stephen Dwoskin.

Schneemann (b.1939), who worked in London from the late 1960s into the early 1970s, brought with her the recently completed *Fuses* (USA 1964–67), a celebration of lovemaking ingeniously filmed by herself and her lover James Tenney, the camera both passing between

(Opposite) *Arbeit Macht Frei (Work Makes Free)*, Stuart Brisley, 1973.