

## Serpents, Tsunami Boulders and Lightning: the more-than-human in the work of Len Lye, Takamasa Yoshizaka and Fuminori Nousaku, Motoyuki Shitamichi and Taro Yasuno

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More-than-human cosmologies, as expressed in contemporary art practice, present a plane for sensing and feeling the extent of the ecological strain on our planet. The relationship between geos, biota and Anthropos is untenable; we are divided by forced climate displacements for humans and the rapid mass extinction for a plethora of flora and fauna. From the intensifying tropical cyclones in Te Moana–Nui-A-Kiwa, the Pacific Ocean in 2019–2020, to the swathes of violently destructive wildfires in Australia and California sparked on occasion by dry lightning and fanned by strong winds, we no longer need scientific projections to hear and feel the shattering signs of climate change. Even the bastions of contemporary art can't escape the convergence of weather gone awry as art-objects and more-than-human waters meet. Venice, where I visited the Japanese Pavilion described in this paper, was later swamped by a deluge of lagoon water during the 58th Art Biennale in 2019. To radically shift our dealings with “others” is an urgent demand from the biota to weather systems, displaced humans and the more-than-human, at a planetary, as well as a situated scale.

The centripetal reach of a projected planetary scale in artworks is one way to propel us beyond our habitual encounters with the more-than-human. Art of the recent past suggests ways to situate current directions in art-making, where certain Modernists such as New Zealander Len Lye were, by turns, utopian or wary in their embrace of earthly, technological and social systems. A cosmological-technological plane suffuses Lye's unrealised propositions for a *Temple of Lightning* in the mid 1960s to 1970s revealed in his maquettes, propositional drawings and prolific writings, notes and slideshows. The *Temples* imagine architectural atmospheres at massive scales beyond the kinetic works developed in his lifetime, while drawing on his practical experience tests with milled Swedish steel and emergent electronic programming. Lye's atmospheric oeuvre has generative parallels to the collaborative Japanese pavilion *Cosmo-Eggs* (2019). In what follows, I recall Lye's *Sun, Land and Sea*, a marquette as a part of an unrealised *Temple of Lightning* in relation to my encounter with the Japanese Pavilion. The latter pavilion was curated by Hiroyuki Hattori and designed by Takamasa Yoshizaka and Fuminori Nousaku to house the Tsunami boulder video imagery of Motoyuki Shitamichi and the sound works of Taro Yasuno. I suggest both the historical and contemporary artworks generate “response-ability,” as Donna Haraway articulates, increasing our capacity to act on the extreme planetary signals through sensory modes of art practice (34).

I first heard the term ‘more-than-human’ in a workshop led by British geographer Sarah Whatmore in Sydney more than a decade ago. Whatmore had just written an influential cultural geography paper thinking through more-than-human worldly engagements in a “politically molten climate” (600). While she advocates for cultural geographers to *return* to the material world, I suggest that more-than-human intensities through materials and subject-matter have continually concerned artists. This might not always manifest as a dwelling on the minutiae of matter but often involve imaginings of a planetary scope. For instance, Krista Lynes of the artist collective World of Matter, a group who globally document resource exploitation, draws on Gayatri Spivak, to propose: “Planetary marks nature-cultural systems that may provide the source for a different political space and a different collective imagination” (Lynes 114). Although Spivak herself was careful to distinguish planet-talk from an unexamined environmentalism, referring to an undivided ‘natural’ space rather than a differentiated political space, for contemporary artists to conceptualise the planetary helps to make sense of specific regional struggles. So what can the notion of planetary, the more-than-human and a revisiting of systems thinking in modern art offer contemporary artists and our audiences?



**Fig. 1 Image:** Janine Randerson. *Author's photo taken inside the Japan Pavillion as the floods rose outside.* 58th Art Biennale of Venice in 2019. *Cosmo-Eggs* was curated by Hiroyuki Hattori and designed by Takamasa Yoshizaka and Fuminori Nousaku to house the Tsunami boulder video imagery of Motoyuki Shitamichi and the sound works of Taro Yasuno.

## Len Lye and Planetary Energies

To speculate on the cosmos, while remaining receptive to earthly ecologies and systems has roots in certain Modernist strands of practice. Len Lye understood his audience as sensing beings who would be thrilled, and even salved, by the sculptural encounters he proposed

for desert locations in large kinetic schemas including his inflatable creation, *Temple of Lightning*. In the Lye Foundation Archive in Taranaki, New Plymouth, Aotearoa, I sifted through piles of notes, sketches (some literally on brown paper bags), ‘blue prints’ on graph paper, and numerous slides shows with audio tapes, where Lye drew, modelled and talked his ‘outdoor kinetic complexes’ into being. *Sun, Land and Sea* (1965) is an unrealised marquette in wood, steel and plastic for a sculptural event housed inside the *Temple of Lightning*. The Marquette, less than a metre long, shows ribbons of steel across the wooden base and a round sun ball of wood on a metal pole that will strike a circular loop. Lye’s drawings and written descriptions bring it to life. This installation would be housed in an inflatable Temple, which often took the shape of a cumulus cloud built from fine rubber over a steel frame in his drawings, designed to house the kinetic figures that would stimulate intense sensorial experiences. The Temple would have a ceiling of vibrating metals that would produce a “thunder symphony” with cracking sounds, and air swooshes and “short circuiting like squiekles” (Lye “List for Sun”). Lye was obsessed with volcanic lightning and his figures of motion were often collaged with images of these energetic forces in his slide shows of the 1970s. He imagined a film could be intercut with a natural display of lightning within the Temple.

Natural and technological energies would be harnessed to lift humanity from the banality of the capitalist pursuit of “bread” into bone-shaking experiences for the audience. He richly described how natural motion and sounds amplify and “rinse our senses” with the more-than-human energies of storms, or crashing waves (“List for Sun”). His intense self-descriptions evoke an orchestra of the elements and the body; “the resonances are shivering my vertebra, resining my sinews, oiling my joints and relaxing my lungs, together with sounds of seaweed, cave-howling gushes, earth tremors, rain in water, porpoise whistlings, all without any eerie electronic quality, with only the natural sounds of metal and water to my ear drum’s skin” (Lye “Temple”). As a great explorer of his own subconscious, Lye relates how from the age of seven, he spent two years at the Cape Campbell lighthouse on the South Eastern tip of Te Wai Pounamu, New Zealand’s South island. He called the lighthouse the “Great Flasher” and described this place as where the seeds of the Sea Serpent motion sculpture took root (*Happy Moments* 46).

Lye’s deep sense of connection across technical, social and natural systems led to his positioning as a ‘Systems Artist’ by American art writer Jack Burnham. Burnham popularised systems theory in the cultural sphere by considering energetic systems and intersecting systems, drawing on Ludwig von Bertalanffy’s *General Systems Theory*. In the journal *Artforum* in 1968, Jack Burnham wrote that art resides not in material entities, but in relations between people and their environments. Willoughby Sharp also curated Lye into an exhibition of Systems sculpture in Mexico in the same year (Sharp). Lye’s environmentalism may be detected in a typed note from 1976 entitled “With an Ecological Heart” that he attached to a scientific article New York Times warning about the

exhaustion of natural resources. In this note he recalls the attention given to “time and nature” in cave paintings as a foil to “ruthless materialism.” He writes, “This form of myth-art is invested with the environmental and ancestral information which we each carry in our genes.” Lye highly valued Indigenous codes of social and environmental lore, yet he sought a spiritual “feeling” in pre-colonial taonga, treasures, that originated in museological encounters with artefacts rather than a deep connection with Indigenous people themselves (Tamati-Quennell 58). In modernity, Lye argues, our myths have “become unstuck” and we fail to balance our “social survival values with our social evolutionary values” (Lye “With an Ecological”). He intended for the Temple activity to be collaborative and he imagined European male artists from Robert Irwin, Jean Tinguely to Claus Oldenburg (the latter of course knew something about inflatables) to make additional works for the temple, along with poets, musicians and environmentalists.

Once the beholder is deep inside the Temple of Lightning, the intense spectacle of *Sun, Land and Sea* fuses solar, marine and meteorological energies in a live performance of metals. Lye recounts how the idea of a Sea Serpent ensemble took hold in 1965 after he slept in his studio with a thirty-foot-long steel ribbon, which he stretched out over the full length of the house. This Sea Serpent God, represented by a length of milled, Swedish stainless steel, is accompanied by six smaller ones on either side. He described this as a “chorus of serpents, each one hundred and fifty-feet long, a fifty-foot high Cave Goddess, and a huge Sun Disc, all to be housed in a Temple of Lightning” (“Temple of Lightning: Case History”). At the climax, the mighty Sea Serpent, with a bull-whip-like crack, becomes an undulating God of Tidal Waves who spits out a 25-million-volt lightning bolt in an explicitly sexual act of procreation. The realization of a form that could spit lightning was not merely a flight of the imagination for Lye; I found handwritten notes on his idea to create an arc of lightning with a Pittsburg high voltage engineering lab.

The temple assemblage suggests a powerful female force encountering the uncontrollable male energy in the form of an engineered wave. In this conjunction the power of the storm surge is an awesome presence, set amidst the procreative experience of all life. Tidal waves that usurp human efforts at coastal city dwelling are treated by Lye as powerful forces that should not be diminished. Amitav Ghosh argues that the coastal city-builders of Mumbai and New York, and I might add Tāmaki Makarau, Auckland and Cadi, Sydney have long-forgotten the power of Tsunami and storm surge which is increasing exponentially as the planet warms. Through a failure of imagination, we have suppressed the powerful forces of nature, but my sense of response-*ability*, the capacity to respond, is animated in the encounter with Lye’s marquette of *Sun, Land and Sea* and his vibrant written scripts.

### **Cosmo-Eggs: Tsunami Stones**

Len Lye and the creators of the Japanese pavilion *Cosmo-Eggs* in Venice brought together mythology and a male imaginary to hybridized creation narratives. A photographer of Tsunami boulders, a composer of Zombie music on robotic recorders, an anthropologist and an architect came together in the kind of interdisciplinary assemblage Lye had envisioned for his temples. *Cosmo-Eggs* takes a fusion of mythologies as a starting point from the creators' own region, while Lye voraciously consumed mythological stories largely from ancient and Indigenous sources, in museums and literature to inform his Temple narratives; sometimes called his 'Myth-Art Mecca.' The title *Cosmo-Eggs* is an amalgam of East Asian mythology of Egg creation stories drawn together by Toshiaki Ishikura, an anthropologist who specialises in comparative mythology about Tsunami, an insider to the region. He composed a series of wall texts in the Japanese pavilion, drawing on various mythologies, local beliefs, and folklore related to tsunami in parts of Asia such as the Ryukyu region (Japan) and Taiwan. There, the sun and moon are believed to have descended to earth and laid a single egg at the dawn of the earth's creation. The Snake is also an intensive figure for the play of birth and death in the installation; below is an excerpt from one of Ishikura's wall texts:

Near the Bamboo Island, a giant sea snake covered the hole on the ocean floor. The water rose higher and higher, until the sea flooded the island. Some of what the sea had swallowed was turned into coral reefs. A giant crab rose from the bottom of the ocean, it cut the sea snake with its claws, and finally the sea could recede again. (Ishikura 2)

The collaborators focused their research on certain myths about the origins of Tsunamis on the island chains of Yaeama and Miyako to form a new mythological story. The cosmic egg or world egg is a common thread in many East Asian mythologies, offering a narrative of mutuality despite the political tensions between Japan, Taiwan, China, Korea and of course Hong Kong. Ishikura's notion of 'co-diverse co-existence', an idea that builds on Japanese philosopher Kizo Ogura's 'co-diversity' between these different cultures informed the collaboration. An emergent question for curator Hiroyuki Hattori was "how and with whom can we co-exist?", extending his question to the non-human and the weather. The project is described as an experiment about how stories travel from person to person, from country to country and even the boulders act as story-tellers (Hattori 3). The method of womb-less birth from an egg evokes the strong life that emerges from objects that are as still as death. (Hattori 1). Within the stillness of an egg, or a boulder is the potential for rebirth which resonates in a region frequented by the natural disaster of earthquake and Tsunamis, and the increasing cyclonic weather as the climate warms.

Four large-scale video screens contain artist Motoyuki Shitamichi's black and white images of apparently still Tsunami stones on beach coves. Yet the inland Tsunami boulders are imbued with the strength of powerful forces that propelled them there and the

atmospheric conditions and movements of the creatures that now surround them. Both eggs and stones represent a cycle and a process of formation. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen writes in an excerpt in the exhibition catalogue; “Rocks are the archive in which we read that we dwell intra-catastrophe. They index the extinctions of remote epochs, extinctions that near again. They yield narratives of celestial fire, massive volcanic blasts, an atmosphere inimical to life, an earth gripped by ice, ablaze, overheated, engulfed in sudden flood” (63). Some images feature people, such as a group of children and their teachers who visit the Tsunami boulder, in homage to the natural monument to an extreme event. Ours are fleeting lives in relation to the enduring stone.

Fuminori Nouisaku’s architecture coheres the sound and video works with the device of centrifugal inflatable seating, paralleling Lye’s inflatable vision for the *Temple of Lightning*. When each gallery visitor comes to rest on the bouncy oval ring of the bright yellow-orange seat, the balance of air plumps all sitters to different levels. In addition, the pressure on the inflatable has the body-like function of lungs to supply air to a series of automated recorder-flutes. In my encounter, the volume of musician Taro Yasuno’s sound composition intensified as I collapsed my tired-out legs onto the seat, aerating robotic recorder flutes connected through fine, transparent lengths of tubing. Robot finger-like pads attached to Arduino circuits clatter over the holes of the giant recorders to adjust the harmonics, and occasional birdlike screeching sounds pierce the forty-three hour long composition. These sounds echo the punctuating flights of seabirds seen through the frame of Shitamichi’s images of the still boulders.

Although none of the exhibition ephemera refers to the aesthetics of emergency in the bright yellow inflated seating which reaches through to the floor below, the title of the sound piece, *Zombie Music*, suggests a composition that survives on a planet after humans too have gone. We sense a world without us, indifferent and precarious. The plethora of tubes emerging from a central emergency-survival cone indicate an ecological life support system of a kind. The spectre of eco-system destruction following the Great East Japanese Tsunami that triggered the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear disaster infuses the eerie sounds in the pavilion. *Cosmo-Eggs* offers the sensory envelopment of an inflatable surface combined with immersive sound; an experience during which the empathetic pull of the large stones is felt.

To conclude, Lye’s *Sun Land and Sea* was planetary in conception while set in the specifics of place, and there is an edge of violence in his lightning-fuelled artworks. His vision of a bolt of lightning hitting a symbolic round sun, or egg, is undoubtedly an expression of a male imaginary. Intense, sensorial encounters for Lye forced a return to the elemental unity of the body and world, in resistance to the dislocating effects of modernity. Through profound experiences of art, Lye believed that the individual (often conceived as a version of himself), would not only feel at one with the self, but also with the technological and

natural environments simultaneously. I am attracted to the speculative reach of Lye's vision, while acknowledging the masculine positioning that reveals that he was of his time. In a very different geopolitical context, the Japan pavilion offers intensive planetary narratives of connection across technology, nature, also designed largely by a group of men. While the stories of procreative mythology resonate with Lye's passions, the playerless flutes and inanimate objects seem to me to attune to all genders. The sound composition in *Cosmo-Eggs* was at times uncomfortable, creating a similar sense of the precarious balance between humankind, the technical and natural energies in the memory of the forces that cast giant boulders across the ocean that might one day supplant us. Despite the ahistoricism of these artworks, the energetic worlds created by the artists encourage a re-embodiment of the technical, manufactured and natural environments in which we all co-exist. With Whatmore, I suggest that the experimental demands of more-than-human, and even more-than-male modes of working and art-making, place an onus on actively engaging a greater range of animate and inanimate stakeholders. Our *responsibility* to act in a crisis increases when multiple sensory registers draw us into play.

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