

# The Bruce Lacey Experience: lifting a post-war British artist from obscurity



The major impact of David Alan Mellor's research has been to ensure the presentation and preservation of the artistic legacy of Bruce Lacey (pictured left) for the public, from his paintings to his whimsical robotic characters.

**Sussex researcher David Alan Mellor has helped restore the highly original and eccentric artist Bruce Lacey to prominence, preserving and representing his work for the public through his exhibition and monograph, *The Bruce Lacey Experience*, and his development of the Bruce Lacey Archive, work which has culminated in efforts by Tate to acquire Lacey's archive and artistic works.**

## Overview

Born in 1927, Bruce Lacey became established in the avant-garde scene of the 1960s through his performance art and mechanical constructions. Described as a 'modern-day magus in brightly coloured clothes', Lacey is sculptor, painter, film-maker,

artist, actor and inventor of a cast of whimsical robotic characters. He has worked with Spike Milligan, Peter Sellers and Michael Bentine, appeared in a film by Ken Russell and as George Harrison's gardener in *The Beatles* film *Help!*, and has been celebrated in song by Fairport Convention. Lacey's work shines a light on the visual culture of the 1960s. Now in his 80s, he is still working and performing, bringing together art and science in a lifetime's pursuit of eccentric 'making and doing'.

Over the last 20 years, the research of David Alan Mellor, Professor of History of Art (Art History, Centre for the History of War and Society, The Centre for Visual Fields) at the University of Sussex has resulted in the restoration of this highly original

and much neglected artist. To Mellor, Bruce Lacey presented a conspicuous example of neglect in post-war British art literature. By retrieving him from obscurity, his work provides an opportunity for new generations to experience the creations and bizarre imaginings of Lacey.

Beginning with research visits to Lacey in 1992, Professor Mellor encouraged him to refurbish the dilapidated kinetic sculptures of the 1960s that were still in his possession. Subsequently, in his book *The Sixties Art Scene in London*, and the related Barbican exhibition, Mellor began to analyse Lacey's work in relation to the shifting cultural contexts of the period, demonstrating his connections to the major movements of the 1960s. Interest in Lacey began to develop and, in 1999,

art historian Gillian Whately conducted an extensive interview with Lacey for the British Library and Tate began negotiations to purchase Lacey's *The Womaniser*. In 2004, Mellor contributed and wrote the catalogue for curator Chris Stephens' *Art and the Sixties: This Was Tomorrow* exhibition, featuring Lacey, at Tate Britain.

In 2009, Mellor and artist Jeremy Deller were commissioned to curate a Bruce Lacey retrospective. *The Bruce Lacey Experience* exhibition at the Camden Arts Centre charted Lacey's artistic development and celebrated his rich, diverse and vibrant career. The opening of the exhibition coincided with Mellor publishing an accompanying monograph and the simultaneous release by the British Film Institution of a documentary film of Lacey's life by Jeremy Deller and a retrospective of films by Lacey himself.

From 2009 to 2011, Mellor worked through Lacey's archive to establish a more comprehensive chronological framework, tracing privately owned examples of his sculptures and paintings, and conducting a new series of interviews with Lacey. As part of this effort, most of the artist's works were newly photographed and documented, and on this basis Chris Stephens, Curator of Modern Art at Tate Britain, is acting to acquire the Lacey archive and works from his private collection for Tate.

## Achieving impact

The major impact of Mellor's research has been to ensure the presentation and preservation of Lacey's artistic legacy for the public, particularly through its influence on the acquisition and curatorial policies of one of Britain's pre-eminent art institutions.

Chris Stephens has cited *The Bruce Lacey Experience* as highly influential in Tate's current efforts to acquire several more examples of Lacey's work for the gallery and, more importantly, the Lacey Archive as a record of his entire artistic production for the National Archive of British Art. Although such a large gallery purchase is expected to take several years to achieve, David Alan Mellor's work has greatly enhanced the ability to do so by demonstrating Lacey's importance and the extent of his achievement.

*The Bruce Lacey Experience* was received with great enthusiasm by reviewers and the gallery-going public.

The exhibition was widely reviewed in the national press and for national and international journals of contemporary art. Adrian Searle's review in *The Guardian* (6 July 2012) applauded the curating of the exhibition, and a review in the art magazine *Frieze* noted the whimsy and dedication apparent in both Lacey's and the event organisers' feats of retrieval and exhibition:

'... the most evocative object in the whole show was a small, battered handmade wooden fort, built by his father and used by Lacey as a boy to stage miniature siege re-enactments ... you found yourself marvelling that this resiliently fragile trinket could have survived its owner's nomadic and eventful life to catch up with him again, here.' Rob Young, *Frieze* (October 2012)

The Camden Arts Centre exhibition attracted over 19,000 visitors, far in excess of the expectations of the curators of the gallery for an exhibit of this kind, which would normally be 8,000 to 10,000. A similarly large footfall for a gallery of its size was experienced when the exhibit went on tour in October 2012 at the Newlyn Gallery in Penzance. The exhibition has also had longer-term effects, including continued contact from individuals discussing new projects: Glasgow Museum of Modern Art is considering restoring Lacey's large sculpture *Metamorphosis*. In addition, there has been widespread uptake of family and other outreach programmes such as the lively Make and Do sessions run by the Education Department of Camden Arts.

## Future impact

Professor Mellor is currently collaborating with both Tate Britain and Tate International on two exhibitions which promise good visitor numbers. These include an exhibition on Sir Kenneth Clark – renowned British art historian, author, museum director and broadcaster – at Tate Britain and *Time, Conflict and Photography*, an ambitious exhibition that forms part of the memorial events to mark the centenary of the outbreak of the First World War, which will open in November 2014.



'The exhibition and book greatly encouraged our recognition of the need for Tate to extend its representation of Lacey's art, ... I am confident Tate will secure Lacey's archive and there is no question that David's exhibition and accompanying book will have greatly enhanced our ability to do that by demonstrating Lacey's importance and the extent of his achievement. The projects have transformed the way Lacey is understood.'

Chris Stephens,  
Curator of Modern Art  
at Tate Britain

## Working with us

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For further information about art history research at Sussex, visit:  
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