

MAY/JUNE/ July, 1972 SAIC NEWSLETTER
NEW TEACH: ELECTRONICS & KINETICS
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Communication, and Generative Systems

Leif Brush: TERRAIN INSTRUMENTS

by Gloria DeFilipps Brush

Leif Brush, in his Terrain Instruments outdoor installation series, is working with sound as a simultaneous adjunct to form, seeking and orchestrating actual natural forces rather than simply physically replicating them or synthesizing artificial sources. He uses outdoor space as the context for his constructions which electronically monitor and acoustically orchestrate tree dynamics, wind, snow, sleet, rain and other natural phenomena. Most of the current structures consist of weavings and meshings in air space of a variety of types and gauges of tuneable brass, steel and copper wire strandage, tubing and wire ribbons suspended carefully between tree clusters. To this point, his "Voltages from Nature" sound recordings have been made using limited crystals and magnetic transducers to sense atmospheric vibrational activity occurring on the wires. The Terrain Instruments are not scaled-up versions of existing musical instruments, but an expression of new research into form and sound.

The Art Institute school roof was the site, in 1969, of one of his earliest experimental installations. For the 1970 Fellowship Show, in which he was awarded the Anna Louis Raymond Fellowship, he installed a half-hexagram section in Gunsaulus Hall, borrowing fans from classrooms to simulate indoor wind. In the 1972 exhibition, he received the Art Sales and Rental Gallery Fellowship for his work with the Meadow Piano, and for a series of collages which focused on his increasing interest in global information gathering and processing systems and the interactions and poetics of weather. While a graduate student, he was appointed a Teaching Assistantship to develop and offer the Audible Constructs program on a teaching schedule of six hours weekly. Concerned equally with both technology and ideas, the classes introduced sound as an autonomous art form, and also explored, according to the interests of the students, ways in which sound could work with the visual media.

On leaving SAIC in 1972, he was hired as an Assistant Professor in the School of Art and Art History at the University of Iowa-Iowa City. A national Endowment for the Arts project grant allowed acquisition, in 1973, of professional quality recording equipment, and construction of new prototypes in the Iowa landscape. Working with physicists, computer scientists, structural and electrical engineers and music and art students with a Lindquist Center fellowship, he developed a proposal for an interactive, generative public-use sculpture, the Riverharps, which used natural forces as direct resources for sound orchestration.

In Fall, 1976 Leif assumed leadership of the sculptural area at the University of Minnesota, Duluth Campus. Located on Lake Superior's northeastern shore has provided excellent new opportunities for working with the environment.

A new tape presented as part of the "Imported Sources" performance in the February Performance/Midway series at the University of Chicago achieved the unification, through sound, of forest constructions and a spatial configuration which monitored shifts and stresses in the Meany ice shelf on Lake Superior. The Minnesota State Arts Board has just awarded Leif one of its comparatively rare individual artist's grants for construction of a new Terrain Instrument which, using more sensitive and diverse sensors and strain gauges to elicit sound from minute temperature variations, will provide new possibilities for more complex orchestrations and playings. A hoped-for L.E.D. transmitter and receiver link may eventually allow more direct mixing of audio from several acoustically-different environments, and his current plans include documentation using new sensors to enhance the range of the available natural "sound vocabulary:" prior to new constructions and orchestrations. This identification process would necessarily take into account the variables of seasonal changes, weather activity, surrounding forest conditions, and other natural phenomena which would affect sound coloration qualities.

One of Leif's major concerns is the urgent need for new aesthetic models and processes which can allow artists to expand the traditional humanistic bases

of art while fully using contemporary tools, technologies and media, he feels nature can continue as a prime source for artistic inspiration.