

Colorado Daily, November 21, 1975

Leif Brush makes art of today's scientific trash

by Jennifer Heath

Wagner's Ring Cycle exploded ("...Surf the Ring. It's quite a ride.") at the Music Hall on Tuesday night without benefit to vocalists or melodies. Instead, the jarring atmospheric sound effects that Wagner might have used--had he access to electronics and Leif Brush's Terrain Instruments--were performed alone. Brush, the University's visiting artist this week, makes these effects with what he calls Audible Sculpture.

With "Cricket Chord Monitors," glass rods, transducers, magnesium "Signal Discs," modulated lasers and scanning electron microscopes, Brush records the movements of water, wind, bushes, thunderstorms, insects and snowflakes. He then spontaneously blends the sounds on tape, unorchestrated and unchoreographed. A synthesizer was used in his second piece, 1975-1976 Network Mode: Brush Passaround--not by Brush, but by a friend. However, much of the concert had the sonorous purity of a synthesizer rather than the soft subtle redundancies one associates with nature's voice. Nevertheless, Leif Brush's technology and art is strong and original.

A scuffed assistant professor of art at the University of Iowa, brush began his career in radio and television announcing. The army taught him basic electronics--he claims to know very little electronics and calls in engineers or physicists to help put his ideas to work--but he dead-ended because "there was nothing I was doing that was my own."

Finally, he enrolled at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, where he received a Masters in Fine Arts, found "thinking time" and an outlet for his "science-art."

Directed by the premise that there are "scores in nature" that can be tapped with the "right kind of sensors and interceptors," Brush began in 1968 to organize the trees, bushes and grasses into an earthly symphony. His obsession is the scientific methods for using these "instruments."

Excited by technology, he appears to be a man divided between science and art. His philosophy of art, however, denies art's restrictiveness to itself. "After my visual training, I'm kind of prejudiced against the eyes having it always and always. Art is probably going down for the last time if it overlooks some kind of integration. Science is going to steal the show. There are more things that have greater impact, as a body, than visual art. Science is bearing down on us. You need a force to match a force and the artistic force alone isn't going to do it. Creativity is up against the phenomena and imagery that science is coming up with.

"After four years at Iowa, my decision is to devise a curriculum so that the art student has access to any resources in the university--no door would be closed. For example, there would be something going on in physics that the art student could use in the form of a foundation course.

Leif Brush is one of the very few artists who are developing a technological art, though there are others who are using sound, John Cage, for example, recorded traffic, footsteps and silence. Brush is "bored" by man-made sounds, except where man is reacting to the rhythms made by natural instruments.

The player of the Signal Discs is not inventing his rhythms, but responding to those of the tree. Brush does not necessarily use musicians either but people who are "really curious to satisfy the nooks and crannies of their minds and have never met satisfaction with any other kind of sound. It triggers some really dormant things in the head."

Brush is filled with ideas about recording more sounds--the growth of a tree root, for instance--but he is not (sic.) interested in making visual images from his recordings. He feels that he has opened up new subjective images for the exploring artist to experience and use.

But if most man-made sounds are garbage to Brush, he also says that "a lot of stuff I'm interested in, science regards as noise. If they're seeking these enormous large-scale computer models, there's lots of noise they don't want--interference. Their by product stuff is of interest to me."

Science's trash, in other words, is used in the same way that some artists are using video feedback. And, of course, Brush is not only anxious that artists look outside of art for inspiration, but that scientists look into art perhaps for humanization. Brush doesn't want anyone's mind "cheated out of anything."

In the fall of 1976, Brush will receive a grant to further his explorations--this time with a satellite to receive the noises made by people in Iowa counties. The noise will be specific to what the noise-makers' choose and will culminate at the satellite in one full symphonic sound. Whatever the results, Brush's vision is to

"survey, explore and overhear the natural dynamic goings-on." He would like to take his tapes to Germany next summer and use them in an upcoming performance of Wagner's Ring Cycle. That would probably suit Wagner just fine.