



In 1984 UAA artist Ken Gray commemorated each changing season with a different solstice or equinox exhibit. Here he balances eggs on end to celebrate the coming of spring.

"Plumb Cottage," a sensory sculpture designed by Ken Gray especially for 1985 Very Special Arts Festival at Anchorage Historical and Fine Arts Museum. It is a spectator activated audio environment.



## Hands-on Sculpture

by Betty Carlson

The severely spastic child seemed fascinated and smiled as she watched an electronic exhibit. The child's mother told a stranger nearby she had seen her seven-year-old smile only once before.

The exhibit was a sculpture created by artist Ken Gray, the man to whom the mother spoke. Gray, assistant professor of art at the University of Alaska-Anchorage (UAA), frequently joins exhibit audiences to observe responses to his work.

He said the experience made him aware of another community to reach with his art. "That community, which I have endeavored since to enrich, is the handicapped," he said.

But he felt his work could be even more suited to the handicapped—that they should touch it, work with it and

learn from it. He was able to obtain grant funds from UAA to create work specifically for this special community. An engineer-turned-artist, Gray has now made many such works.

He also found a forum where he can show works to individuals and, with their teachers, monitor the work's impact. That forum is the Rainbow Factory, the Anchorage-based offspring of the National Committee, Arts and the Handicapped, an educational affiliate of the Kennedy Center in Washington, D.C.

What is this work that brings smiles to quiet children and stimulates handicapped students? A simple answer would be that it's high-tech modern art, but it isn't that simple.

To artist Kurt Lauckner of Eastern Michigan University, it is intelligent

sculpture that accepts intelligent inputs from the immediate environment and reflects them back to the viewer.

For artist Tsai Wen-ying, born in China and educated in the United States where he has been recognized for his exhibits, it is cybernetic sculpture that depends upon human sounds to act as a kind of electric stability of the work, creating vibrations and sounds.

But for London-born Gray it is electrosculpture, a word he coined in the early 1970s.

The work of these artists is related by its use of technology: computers, radio waves and electronic gizmos. All depend on some external stimuli to complete the work. Yet Gray's art goes beyond incorporating external stimuli. He said his work is about people and

about processing information. He wants people to get involved with a piece of his work and he wants to get something back in return, to interact with others through the work.

"Ten people could easily be working on one piece together, like a concert," said Gray, who feels art has been locked away in ivory towers far too long.

"They need to touch it, to breathe on it, to do things to it one never does to art in a museum normally, and my work does things back so it creates a living activity."

When Goodwin Trent, director of the statewide Very Special Arts Festival, contacted Gray about participation in the Rainbow Factory, he was looking for something that would stimulate exploration and interaction among children.

In response Gray created "Sensory Center"—three brightly-colored plexiglas boxes, one activated by touch, one by breath and one by the swing of a pendulum. In Trent's words, "It was the hit of the festival."

Trent is excited by the work Gray has created for their program. He said Gray is "one of those people who has learned to function in an adult world but has retained a childlike curiosity...that sometimes challenges the rules."

Gray admits he has tried, with his art, to break down the axioms of museums which are: do not touch, do not make noise.

He thinks art should stimulate and create new awareness in people that was not there before. "So that one may suddenly think, 'Oh! I recognize that! Yes! This relates to me—and this to that over there!' It may even be a disturbing awareness, but it is about realization," he said.

In conjunction with his work for the Very Special Arts programs, Gray represented UAA at the International Forum on Arts and the Handicapped at the Kennedy Center in May 1984.

Gray has been using electronics with his work for the past fifteen years. Along with working with the handicapped, he has recently created a sociopolitical suitcase series. According to Gray, works in this series have been enthusiastically received at exhibits in Anchorage, Juneau, Vancouver, British Columbia, and in San Jose, California, where he exhibited at the Computer in

Art, Design, Research and Education (CADRE) conference early in 1984.

The suitcase idea was in response to the transiency of Alaskans. Gray feels art should be responsive to its environment. He saw "people carrying with them their possessions, their heritage. They left homes and families. They arrived here with just what they could carry. And that's their sense of being."

The CADRE exhibit piece which was placed in the foyer at the convention is "Gesture Decoder Stereo."

Gray closed his eyes as if visualizing the process as he describes it.

"The suitcase is filled with radio communications energy. As you put your hands into the suitcase it disturbs the energy and produces radio waves and radio interference on left and right-hand modulators. These signals are transmitted by FM radio waves to two computers—one that memorizes and decodes activity of the right hand and one that memorizes and decodes the activity of the left hand. So one can make any arbitrary gesture into this vacuous-looking suitcase and it will be interpreted by the computers into computer-generated images and sounds." He finished the explanation triumphantly.

One can imagine a fairly dull suitcase if the audience failed to be the creative interference that set the process in motion. And according to art critic Jan Ingram, it isn't easy to drop

one's inhibitions and begin to interact with a piece of electronic art. But after one's self-consciousness passes, curiosity takes over.

Ingram says Gray's work has brought another dimension to art in Anchorage.

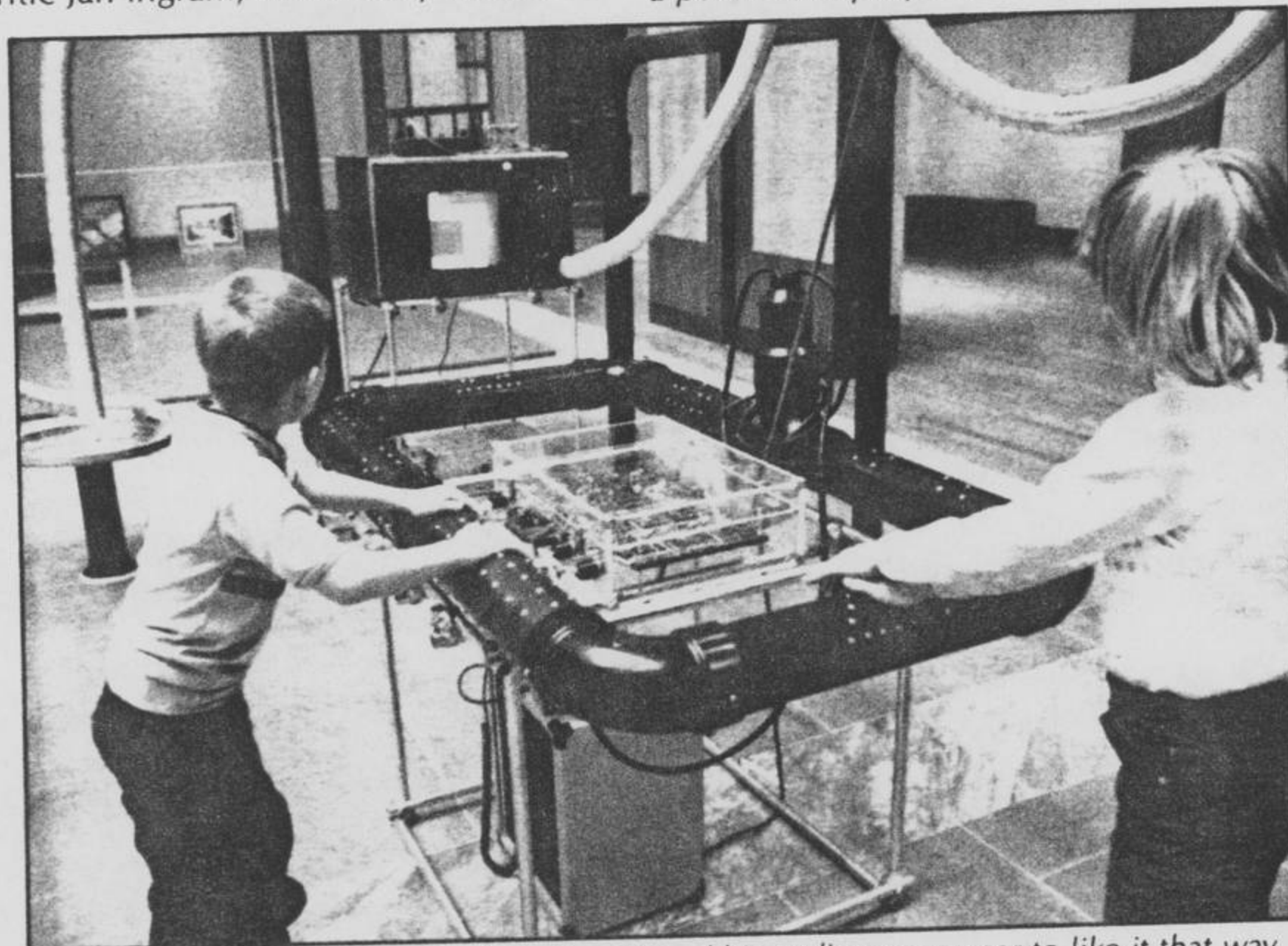
"I've seen his influence in younger artists, not just copying, but incorporating, and that's very good."

Gray likes working in the university environment where he believes new ideas are always being generated and where he feels he can "research new ideas, new realities, new ways of experiencing what we have around us."

And whatever they are—those new ideas—Gray will wire them into a suitcase, a cello or some equally unlikely object where a child or curious adult will be able to experience Gray's interpretation of them.

The author interviewed Gray for *Sciarts*, a publication of the UAA College of Arts and Sciences. Gray holds a master's degree in art from the Royal College of Art in London. He was in England this summer working on several projects. Gray's work was also featured in the Anchorage Times after an April experiment where he aimed colored spotlights at water vapor pouring from the Anchorage municipal power station. The experiment "convinced a local art committee to award Gray his first public art-commission" to create his "Vapor Fountain" as a public arts project.

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Interactive sculpture is Ken Gray's trademark and his audiences appear to like it that way.

WILLIAM HAYS