



Frank Rothkamm Moers Works 1982-1984 RUSSIA MONOCHROME VISION mv10 CD (2006)

Here's an interesting survey of the early tape works of this talented German composer, which he started making when he was only aged 16; he apparently did it almost in

isolation and, through the power of determination, invented his own personal and nigh-on unique electronic music system. Added to which it's got that early-1980s vintage which alone will make it a 'must-have' purchase in certain quarters. Rothkamm currently lives in NYC and showed up on our radar here when he sent his recent synth records *FB01* and *FB02*, which are brilliant pastiches of the Cologne school of early electronic music crossed slyly with science-fiction themes.

According to the notes here, the young Rothkamm started out composing piano music in Nürtingen, South Germany, at the age of 12; and like many serious modernists, he quickly figured out that he didn't like the restrictions of this classical instrument, or the clunky way of working it demanded. Two principal things disappointed him: the limitations of the klavier's timbral range, and the fact that he had to write out his compositions as musical scores. What he needed was a device that would let him make wide-ranging sounds, and (more importantly) record them direct to tape. This is the 'classic' dilemma that has been faced by many a 20th-century musical innovator; and you will know, for example, the inventive hybrid machines devised by Raymond Scott in America in an attempt to overcome this basic inconvenience. However, what's of interest to us is Rothkamm's personal solution.

By 1982, this young boffin had set up a 'system' which linked together a turntable, a shortwave radio, a phasing device and an EQ, along with two taping machines – one cassette recorder, and one reel to reel. It was effectively a primitive form of analogue sampling, with which he could process sampled snatches of sounds in real time. He worked monophonically. Additionally, he used 'irreversible additive overdubbing', which presumably means that he didn't have the luxury of selecting and manipulating his tracks in the way that he might if he'd bought a Portastudio. In fine, the work was 'fixed' a lot more quickly and he had to stick with his decisions once they'd gone down on the tape. I'd guess there's a real physicality to that working method which is pretty commendable. That same physicality shows up in the recorded sounds.

What you'll hear is 12 examples of the most ornery, determined, punchy and stolid analogue tape work ever to have been set down in the name of electro-acoustic music. It's so primitive and heavy-handed – and for the most part, so darn loud – that it tends to make the pioneering experiments of the French musique concrète school seem positively wispy in comparison. Plus, unlike them, Rothkamm has no time for lyricism or poetical interpretations; with him, what you hear is what you get! Superfluous to remark that this raucous, direct soundwork also beats the pants off any of that pompous digital-based swill you'll hear from a million over-subsidised Canadian tape-twiddlers on the Empreintes Digitales label.

It may give you more of an idea where teenage Rothkamm was coming from if you also understand that the majority of these tape works were composed for live performance; he thought his compositional methods were inspired by Punk Rock, for one. He took them to unusual locations; in 1984 he first performed the 'Fisch II' series in an abandoned ammunition magazine called the Pulverhaus. This old building could only accommodate 25 people in the audience. Three of the tracks, 'Industrie', 'Wasser' and 'Klavier' have survived from this notorious performance. 'Quartett' was composed for a theatre piece by Heiner Mueller, which (since it begins with throwing stones through windows) was presumably a fairly extreme piece of oppositional drama. Rothkamm's sonic treatment of the confrontational theme doesn't disappoint.

Although there's a Korg synth 'guesting' on a couple of tracks, and some of the pieces have been slightly reworked by the artist and others after the fact, for the most part this is still 100% analogue mono tapework genius, quite unique in method, and with a very physical capability that will amaze the few who hear it; a real 'bruiser' of a disc.

ED PINSENT 08/07/2007

FRANK ROTHKAMM MINI-INTERVIEW

EP I have been playing Moers Works, the CD of your early tape work on the Monochrome Vision label. I was deeply impressed by what I heard in this music, but then again if it's a period of your work which you don't care to discuss these days, I can understand that too.

FR As a concept driven artist, I love *Moers Works*: I was 16 when I started producing these works but it took a quarter of a century to collocate them into a coherent body of work, thanks to Dmitry from Moscow. He discovered them when *FB01* came out. It was reviewed under my label, Flux Records, so Dmitry went to fluxrecords.com and discovered my library of complete works. He didn't know where to go to find *FB01*, but discovered my work from the 1980s. Long story short, that's how the creation of the album came about. The pieces were originally recorded with very primitive means but I later mastered them with the most advanced tools. There is an inherent dialectic between the most primitive and most advanced. More on this subject is in my essay to *FB03 (E Pluribus Unum)*, which you should have on your desk.

However, *Moers Works* excludes a number of works from this period which have classical instrumentation. These surfaced on my CD, *Mystery of the Leaping Fish* (1997) and others will appear on upcoming albums. If I'm lucky enough to keep up the current rate of CD production, I have composed enough music in the past 25 years that it will take another couple of decades for all of it to be released.

EP What was the 'Fisch II' series, and why was it 'ambitious'?

FR *Fisch II* was ambitious because it was conceived as a cycle that takes place every two years. I had this initial secret event called *Fisch I*, which was performed in Greece when I hitchhiked there. So the first time *FISCH* was actually done was as *FISCH II* in Moers. It was performed at the Pulverhaus with 4 lights, 4 speakers, 4 actor/instrumentalists (with me on drums) and a fish in a fish tank, all of this happening accompanied by the sound tape. *FISCH II* was controversial, because I planned to kill a fish as part of the performance. In the end, the fish survived, and instead, I threw an axe into a fish tank. Being a very agile vertebrate, the fish easily escaped death.



EP What were the 'mathematics of permutation' that this analogue way of working offered you?

FR Permutation is the reordering of elements in a finite set. Let's say you have two elements: 1 and 2. The permutation of this set are 1,2 and 2,1. If you were a DJ with two records, you would have 2 possible ways to play those records in sequence. Now, let say you have 3 elements: 1,2,3. Your permutations (3!) would be: 123 132 312 321 231 213, but not necessarily in that order. The question I'm after is: what is the order that makes artistic sense? What is the sequence that somehow seems the only inescapable one, in which the sequence transcends the elements arranged in that sequence?

So in 'Wasser', 'Klavier' and 'Industrie' you can hear this quest for the perfect order of things very clearly, as the original sources are all taken from BBS sound FX vinyl records, no more, no less.

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