

***Norbert Möslang: Cracked Everyday***

*“All of life consists of vibrations, and all of these relate to particular resonances. There are light waves, sound waves, microwaves... In this context you can start to combine things and, for example, use a radio as resonator for the waves from a remote control. And if it maybe doesn't work, then you just have to go on changing the frequencies and looking for connections until you've cracked it.”*

—Norbert Möslang

For over thirty years Norbert Möslang, both alone and in his ground breaking work with Andy Guhl in the legendary Voice Crack, has been forging a path through performance, audio recordings, room installations, public works, multiples, photography and video. His work revels in disruption, error and chaotic systems designed to teeter on the edge of utter destruction and revelation.

***Crash the System***

Born in 1952 in the Swiss city of St. Gallen, Möslang began playing the recorder at the age of seven in school. After a year, he was asked to join the accordion orchestra but soon quit when the instructor forced everyone to march around the classroom while playing. Undeterred, he went on to play harmonium and take piano lessons. By sixteen he was sitting in on piano with local pop and swing bands. He bought his first soprano saxophone at seventeen and taught himself to play, forming a free improvising duo with a local drummer in 1969.

Möslang first met Andy Guhl in 1972 at a rehearsal with a St. Gallen rock band. Guhl had dropped by to hear Möslang jam. The two struck up a friendship and soon thereafter started playing together, with Guhl on contrabass and Möslang on soprano saxophone. By 1973 they had given their first concert with a trumpeter in St. Gallen. The two continued working together as a duo and in 1977 found themselves performing at the prestigious Total Music Meeting in Berlin, the epicenter at that time of free improvised music in Europe.

Released on the Free Music Production label in 1977, *“Deep Voices”* became Möslang and Guhl's first entry into the annals of music history. Though sounding very much like an artifact of its time, repeated listens reveal the two already developing their own particular musical language, a dialog which in many ways reveals their music in the years to come, even when they had long since discarded all acoustic instruments. In addition to the use of *“home made instruments,”* *“Deep Voices”* gives another hint at the duo's future with the presence on stage of a lone cassette deck—needless to say, this was not there to record the concert, but to inject a bit of good-natured malfunctioning into the proceedings with, as Guhl explained in a later interview, *“electro acoustic studies”* running parallel to the music. Even today, *“Deep Voices”* still sounds fresh, like free jazz beamed in from an alternate universe.

Möslang and Guhl stayed in this mode of operation for *“Brissugo,”* the debut cassette release on their Uhlung Produktion imprint in 1980, and *“Knack On,”* a live recording from Innsbruck, Austria, released on Uhlklang in 1982. *“Knack On”* documents the duo's first real departure from acoustic instruments towards what would later become *“cracked everyday electronics.”* The sound is raw and brutal, with shards of radio static, white noise bursts and tearing metal colliding against absolute screeching saxophone mayhem.

### ***To Make Movement Audible***

Two performances held in the context of the burgeoning underground St. Gallen art scene of the early 1980's corroborated Möslang and Guhl's intent to move their sound investigations beyond the confines of the concert environment. In 1983 at the Szene, St. Gallen they exhibited their first room installation, "*Lokalstradio*," in which an array of radios placed on turntables distributed around a transmitter create an oscillating feedback system, phasing in and out of itself with the spinning turntables. In the same year they staged "*Werkstatt Eisen*" at the Grabenhalle, St. Gallen, taking a more actionistic approach to the idea of a room installation with a dozen people banging away on scrap metal. A recording of this performance became the second cassette release on Uhläng Produktion.

Around this time Möslang began performing solo, developing a feedback system for soprano saxophone, transmitter and radio. By hanging a radio to the bottom of his saxophone and attaching one pole of the transmitter's antenna to the body of the sax and one pole to his right hand, he could manipulate feedback from the radio by the moving saxophone and using his body to determine the sensitivity of the antenna. This proved to be a prototype for Möslang's later work, where body movement modulated magnetic and infrared fields of vibration, setting in motion audio and visual processes.

### ***Voice Crack***

1984 saw the release of "*Voice Crack*" and the first instance of "*cracked everyday electronics*" explicitly stated as the duo's choice of instrumentation. Starting with a lone static pop sounding like a pistol going off in some abandoned warehouse, "*Voice Crack*" blurs the lines between room installation and concert. Recorded on March 23rd, 1984 at the Gallery Corinne Hummel, Basel, this record documents the duo's first performance with "*cracked everyday electronics*" and evokes at times a version of David Tudor's "*Rainforest*" gone terribly awry. Although recorded in a concert setting, the intent of the performance resembles more the installation "*Lokalstradio*" in that a system of interacting objects and fields of interfering magnetic and infrared vibrations gets initiated, only to be abandoned to generate itself in ever-varying patterns. At some point the duo leave the performance area and let their instruments run themselves. "*Voice Crack*" sounds very much like an old factory slowly taking itself apart, with components falling away, fuses shorting out, random sputtering hums and static, the sound of an electro-mechanical entity slowly fading into rubble and dust. The performance ends when the duo pull the power.

In many ways the sensibility behind this performance owes much to Dziga Vertov's film "*Man with the Movie Camera*," to which in 1983 Möslang and Guhl first performed a live soundtrack in the Kraftwerkzentrale Kubel, an abandoned power station in St. Gallen. Vertov's credo was to record "*life at it is*," without theatrical subterfuge, as life might be without the camera present. Vertov's aesthetic influenced other artist's living in St. Gallen at this time, including the film maker Peter Liechti, with whom Möslang and Guhl created a soundtrack to Liechti's 1985 film "*Senkrecht Waagrecht*," and the visual artist Roman Signer, whose 1985 performance "*Ereignisse von und mit*" in the Grabenhalle, St. Gallen also included the duo.

### ***To Crack the Code***

Möslang and Guhl's work involved not only cracking the code or intended function of everyday electronic devices. As the Swiss art critic Ralph Hug observed, "The code of the seemingly autonomous action of a system's individual elements becomes subsumed by the

network, forming together to create a new aggregate.” This applied especially to the duo's concerts, where the musicians themselves, the individual machines, circuits and even waves of sound and light, gradually lost their individual identities to form a new pulsating entity. Another example of this was the 1985 performance *“Radio Laboratorium,”* where the public was invited to bring their own radios and tune in to transmitters placed on four tables distributed around the Grabenhalle, St. Gallen. Dictaphones and other appliances sent inaudible audio signals which could only be detected by tuning into the frequency from each transmitter. Tuning into the correct frequencies precipitated screeching feedback from the radios. The performance was documented on the cassette *“Radio Laboratorium,”* the fourth release on Uhläng Produktion.

During Möslang and Guhl's first tour of the United States in 1986, several concert venues announced them as *“Voice Crack”* and the name stuck. The self-released *“Kick That Habit,”* recorded in concert on May 31, 1986 in Birmingham, Alabama, captured the duo in full swing. Hearing this record it is no wonder that Möslang had been unceremoniously fired from the King Übü Örchestrü in 1986, his last gig as a wind player. 1986 also saw Möslang completely abandoning conventional instruments. He recalled, *“I found my saxophone and bass clarinet playing increasingly less stimulating. Electronic sounds were more compelling and the idea of working with movement and visual elements more interesting. Being fired from the King Übü Örchestrü, where one was meant to play very little, and that very quietly, also played a role in my move away from wind instruments and this particular world of improvised music.”*

*“Kick That Habit”* was anything but quiet or sparse. An epiphany in noise, the record sounds like a joyous rejection of all the musical shackles imposed on the duo by an increasingly anachronistic and reactionary European improvised music scene. The record kicks out the jams in such an uncompromising and confrontational way that it should come as no surprise that the duo could barely find places to play back home. As Jim O'Rourke would later write in the liner notes to a re-release of *“Knack On,”* *“Any thought of them playing at Total Music Meeting was about as rational as a Lynyrd Skynyrd reunion.”*

### **Acute Noises**

1987 began with a performance of *“Draht,”* a piece for 20 meters of amplified steel wire strung across the length of the Grabenhalle, St. Gallen. Played by Möslang and Guhl with sticks, violin bows, metal objects and their bare hands, the piece evoked the spirit of a raw electronic music, subsuming the performance space with shrieks, moans and interfering frequencies. *“Draht”* dates back to 1980 and was one of the duo's longest running performances, still being played until 1989. Verlag Vexer, an arts publishing house in St. Gallen, documented the 1987 performance as a cassette with accompanying booklet. In light of *“Draht,”* it is interesting to note that Möslang has worked as a violin builder since 1974.

In 1988 Voice Crack embarked on their second tour of the United States, stopping in New York City to record with free noise pioneers Borbetomagus, playing at that time in an expanded line-up with bassist Adam Nodelman. Entitled *“Fish That Sparkling Bubble,”* the recording goes beyond the sonic excesses of *“Kick That Habit.”* It is hard to imagine a recording studio being able to contain the ear-splitting volume and density of sound. Borbetomagus and Voice Crack first played together in 1984 at a concert organized by Möslang in St. Gallen. Listening to *“Fish That Sparkling Bubble”* it is clear that, in their own ways, both groups had followed a similar trajectory. Voice Crack and Borbetomagus were made for each other and *“Fish That Sparkling Bubble”* documents the two groups celebrating this realization.

## ***The Red That Screams***

1989 proved to be a watershed year for Möslang and Guhl. The premier of Peter Liechti's documentary film *"Kick That Habit,"* with Voice Crack as the main instigators, brought the duo much exposure and critical acclaim. Liechti's achingly beautiful film finds poetry in the seemingly mundane of everyday life and the bizarre in ordinary Swiss landscapes. A cameo appearance by Liechti, hacking a chair to bits with an ax, is just one of the many scenes in the film which belie the cliché of an idyllic Heidiland.

Percussionist Knut Remond, a friend of Möslang and Guhl's from St. Gallen, came into the Voice Crack fold, recording the sessions for 1990's *"Ear Flash."* This record marks a distinctively more refined sound for the group. Greater definition and separation of the individual instruments has replaced the earlier recordings' wall-of-sound ethic. Remond would remain with the group through 1994, recording on two more Voice Crack- Borbetomagus collaborations: *"Asbestos Shake,"* released in 1991, and *"Concerto for Cracked Everyday Electronics and Chamber Orchestra"* released in 1994 and recorded at, of all places, the Carnegie Recital Hall, New York City.

The duo also stepped up their art activity, initiating a series of multiples with *"Krachbox"* (1990) for Edition Kunsthalle St. Gallen, and *"Radio Korrigiert"* (1991), *"Platinen"* (1992) and *"2 Speakers Drumset Operiert"* (1992), all for Vexer Verlag, St. Gallen. They also managed to exhibit two new room installations, *"Wellenbad"* (1989) in the Kunsthalle, St. Gallen and *"Kiff That Habit—Crack That Code"* (1992) in the Kunstraum, Aarau.

Perhaps the most interesting collaboration from this period was *"A Hole in the Hat,"* a 1991 performance with Nam Jun Paik at the Kunstmuseum St. Gallen. Set against a wall of televisions showing a Joseph Beuys performance, Paik played piano and conducted Möslang and Guhl as they modulated a short wave radio with toy car remote controllers.

## ***Interferences***

By 1996 Möslang and Guhl began to record with European improvisers again, since then producing a long string of collaborations which would exceed the scope of this article to discuss. Several factors contributed to their return to the European stage, the most important being a renewed interest in electronic music by a younger generation of listeners and musicians, including one Jim O'Rourke, whom Möslang first met when he organized a concert in St. Gallen for Illusion of Safety in 1992. O'Rourke not only performed and recorded with the duo but vigorously promoted their work, re-releasing *"Earflash"* on his Dexter's Cigar imprint in 1996. The 1996 For 4 Ears CD *"Table Chair and Hatstand,"* with O'Rourke and Günter Müller, found the duo playing in a quieter, yet not necessarily more restrained mode. Another recording that same year from one of Butch Morris' conduction performances, *"Cond. #70 TIT for TAT"* provided further proof that Möslang and Guhl were brilliant improvisers.

Parallel to their packed performance and recording schedules the duo exhibited in 1995 alone the works *"Aetherfetzen," "Loop 1," "Surfing Songbirds," "Ballchannel"* and *"Loop 2."* Incredibly, they also found time to record a new Voice Crack CD in 1997, *"Below Beyond Above."* With cover artwork from their long-time friend and collaborator Alex Hanimann, *"Below Beyond Above"* marks the final phase of the duo's musical development. The studio had become a tool in and of itself, with all instruments recorded to multi-track and the resulting sound files later edited and re-assembled to create six tracks built around loops phasing in and out of sync, random bursts of static, pops and bangs pre-empting the surfacing structures.

The 1998 MP3 release *"Taken and Changed"* on the fals.ch internet label resulted in two

tracks, “*Yellow Cube*” and “*Orange Ashlar*.” The trademark Voice Crack “*knack*” is there but completely honed down to the essence of the sounds themselves, almost as if the duo were trying to penetrate to the very heart of their machines' circuits and diodes.

### ***Wireless Fantasy***

Released in 1999, the duo's last full-length CD “*Infrared*” continues where “*Taken and Changed*” left off, delving yet deeper into the internal world of interfering wave fields and crackling circuits. One hears the six tracks from inside the machine, looking out through a blinking diode. “*Taken and Changed*” also sounded harsher, unlike the follow-up vinyl release “*shock\_late*” on the Cologne Entenpfuhl label, which favored more discontinuous loops and an almost relaxed sense of ebb and flow. As Frank Dommert of Entenpfuhl wrote in the liner notes, “*Embedded in the carefully constructed layers are the duo's trade mark explosive sound events, which seem to have been placed with more delicacy than ever...sounding more like the shadow of some big bang, or like someone shooting into a pillow. Or as if they had dissected an explosion and used only some selected splinters.*”

Voice Crack's swan song, “*ballchannel*,” a seven-inch single released on Meeuw Muzak in 2000, retained only the splinters. Documenting the 1995 room installation of the same name, “*ballchannel*” takes the duo full circle back to the long player “Voice Crack,” the recording of an installation-as-concert with Möslang and Guhl sitting on the floor of a gallery in Basel surrounded by their whirring appliances and blinking lights sixteen years ago.

In 2001 the duo focused their energies on a major new sound installation commissioned by the 49<sup>th</sup> Venice Biennial. Using hydrophones to channel the underwater sound world of the Grande Canale into the church of San Stae, “*sound\_shifting*” results in a portrait of hectic Venice processed by a myriad of underwater acoustics and the church's voluptuous resonance.

An accompanying book with CD of “*sound\_shifting*” included a photo essay as visual adjunct to the sound work. Taken from hours of video footage recorded with an underwater camera placed near a gondola stop on the Grande Canale, the resulting video stills lend a hauntingly elegiac aura to the sound installation.

The 2002 exhibition “*two + one*” in the Kunsthhaus Glarus, Switzerland would be Möslang and Guhl's final exhibition together as well as their first each alone. Foreshadowing the duo's impending split, “*two + one*” featured the new works “*glass\_speaker*” (Möslang), “*readysound*” (Guhl) and, as if waving goodbye, a collaborative work from 1997, “*Speed Up*.” The duo went on to perform a handful of concerts after this, but by the end of 2002 Möslang and Guhl had decided to end their collaboration.

### ***Swings***

2003 would be a busy year for Möslang. The exhibition “*Electronic Music Archive*” at the Neue Kunsthalle, St. Gallen posed the question, “*What does electronic music look like?*” Curated by Möslang, over fifty musicians and visual artists, including Nicolas Collins, Tina Frank, farmersmanual, Institut für Feinmotorik, Phill Niblock, Pita, Yasunao Tone and David Watson were invited to show in the form of objects, room installations, paintings, drawings, videos, photos and performances their take on electronic music as visual inspiration.

Möslang also showed a new version of his work “*glass\_speaker*” at the Kunstmuseum St. Gallen. Here Möslang transformed the exhibition space into a huge resonating body by affixing transducers to the gallery windows and channeling the sound environment from outside. The windows became powerful loudspeakers, turning the space into an immersive, vibrating sound environment.

As if this all were not enough, Möslang released his first solo recording, *"distilled,"* as a three-inch CD on Aesova. Broken up into four segments, the twenty-minute composition starts with fields of radio static panning back and forth like tracer bullets in a night sky, gradually permeating and morphing into sounds generations away from their origin. Listed as a *"processed live recording"* from 2001, *"distilled"* illustrates Möslang's first move towards a more digital orientation in his work.

### ***How Does a Bicycle Light Sound?***

*"But what is the sound of a blinking LED bicycle light—that is, a tool the purpose of which could not be further removed from musical purposes, that instead was designed to increase road traffic safety?"* Published in the 2004 Volume 14 of the Leonardo Music Journal, this quote taken from Möslang's short essay *"How Does a Bicycle Light Sound?"* concisely states his modus operandi. *"For my purposes, the original—visual—function of the tool is irrelevant, which does not mean that it is not interesting. The interaction of light and sound produces countless possible combinations. It is an electronic playground full of linked acoustic and visual elements that can be used, manipulated and re-used as one wishes."*

Möslang's 2004 room installation *"capture,"* exhibited in Feldkirch, Austria investigates this nexus of light-becoming-sound with ten amplified fluorescent tubes laid in a group on the floor of the gallery space. Contact microphones attached to the lights amplify their hums, buzzes and clicks and send these sounds through an equalizer to a computer board. Working with a programmer, Möslang devised software to re-work these sounds in a constantly evolving generative system. Two loudspeakers projected the processed sound of the fluorescent lights back into the exhibition space. The piece works on both the auditive and visual levels, with all cables, power cords, open computer board and the lights themselves lending a strong sculptural element to the work, looking as if one had stumbled upon some aborted industrial experiment. Documented on the 2005 Cut CD *"capture,"* the audio component of the work is in and of itself a fascinating stand-alone.

The six tracks of Möslang's second solo recording, *"lat\_nc\_,"* released as the 2004 For 4 Ears CD, bubble and slide in a cauldron of dystopic loops and oblique shards of sound. Initially recorded in 2002, Möslang composed the tracks with his long-time engineer Pierre Bendel at Zack Studio, St. Gallen. Although now working more in the world of digital processing, Möslang still preferred the focus of re-working and mixing the final tracks in the studio.

### ***Chaotic Actions***

Möslang premiered two new visual works during 2005, *"meta\_pix,"* at the Transit Davos Wintersport, and *"karaoke\_landscape"* at the Gallery Luciano Fasciati, Chur. As in Möslang's solo recordings, these two new works pursued random processes through digital processing, exploiting software error and data flows. In *"karaoke\_landscape"* sound input from the gallery modulates the visual processing of a landscape projected onto a computer screen. Like an erratic etch-a-sketch, the picture slowly re-constituted itself in a haze of audio impulses. In *"meta\_pix"* web cams from the Davos department of tourism transmit a stream of mountain images processed by a data flow of weather forecasts from the Swiss avalanche watch. The resulting images depict alpen panoramas distorted by storms of data and transmission errors.

The 2005 composition *"hashed\_hush,"* a radio production for West Deutscher Rundfunk, presented Möslang moving completely away from cracked everyday electronics and working solely with digitally processed underwater recordings made in the Romanshorner Harbour of Lake Constance. This spellbinding work conjures up the ghosts of early tape music through a

haze of digital flotsam and jetsam, the final five minutes surging with clouds of dense full spectrum noise sucking one down the watery depths.

### ***Magnetic Fields***

Though still performing concerts with his table of cracked everyday electronics, Möslang's compositions and visual art continued to move further into the realm of the digital. His award-winning 2006 room installation "*get\_pic*," shown in Switzerland at the Gallery Luciano Fasciati, Chur and the Kunstmuseum St. Gallen, implements a stream of web cam shots from different locations in Singapore. Cut and re-sized randomly by software of Möslang's own design, the ensuing images surface in unsettling patterns on four computer monitors placed on the floor of the gallery. As with all of Möslang's work, nothing is hidden: the cables, exposed computers, and the naked LCD screens create a kind of high-tech art brut.

As with "*hashed\_hush*," Möslang's fourth CD "*burst\_log*," released in 2006 on For 4 Ears, was completely composed from previously recorded sound files—in this case the first three tracks of his 2004 CD "*lat\_nc*." As Möslang wrote, "*extensively processed and re-worked*," which is putting it mildly. The six tracks shine brilliantly, perhaps like the robotic space craft *Swift*, as it orbits the earth in the sun's glare, collecting data from gamma ray bursts, for which the CD is named. Rhythm takes a more prominent role on "*burst\_log*" than on previous recordings. The second track "*b1\_2\_7:43*," with its 160 bpm four on the floor, glaring bursts of static and a sequencer off on the right channel chattering wildly, would not be out of place on some futuristic dance floor.

Möslang pushed on in 2007, releasing his second CD for Cut, "*header\_change*," which used as source material the raw data from Swiss visual artist Silvie Defraoui's video stills, and premiered "*lightsound*," a new room installation for light-modulated greeting card sound chips. Since Voice Crack's demise Möslang has also collaborated either live or in studio with, among many others, Kevin Drumm, Dälek, Günter Müller and Ralf Wehowsky, with whom he has just released "*Einschlagskrater*," a seven-inch single on Meeuw Muzak.

As Möslang once observed, "For the last 20 years, various small electronic tools have been mass produced and thrown onto the market . . . just waiting to be cracked! This is the wreckage of Western civilization, as it were, and the musician is the ethnologist who collects and cracks this wreckage." We will undoubtedly not have to wait long to see and hear what he cracks next.