

*zerodrifter*

SAMPLER

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Thomas Kling

*zerodrifter*

*selected poems 1983-2005*

SAMPLER

*translated from German  
by Andrew Duncan*

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## 96 glints in 96 eyes

ANDREW DUNCAN

Thomas Kling (1957-2005) published successively the volumes *testing of heart-strengthening remedies, flavour enhancer, fuel rods, rotting, night. vision.equipment, Long-distance Trade, Soundings, Evaluation of Flight Data*. His collected poems run to 975 pages. He rarely used capital letters, a trait he said referred back to Stefan George, another poet from Kling's home town of Bingen. Kling went to school not far away, in Düsseldorf.

A quick look at the indigenous *Rezeption* of Kling reveals keywords such as, *on the boundary between oral and literary; speech archaeology; speech installation; polyphony; performance-oriented; punk; velocity; media freak; slang, street talk; topography of cities*. But most of the commentators have talked about virtuosity, how you can isolate the elements of poetic creation which are difficult and how Kling outstrips all the competition in just those aspects. The polyphony mentioned is his vocal ability to differentiate, rhythmically and tonally different voices running like strips through the texture of the poem, and how the rapid jump-cuts of the verbal text are saved from chaos by this differentiation and also act as a foil to exhibit it to perfection. When Kling wrote a ten-page sequence about bird song (*vogelherd, microbucolika*) there was a latent self-reference to himself as someone who could sing like a bird and, undoubtedly, utter vocal lines that imitated all those birds. Perhaps no other poet has had that stunning combination of hypervivid visual sensibility and hypervivid acoustic sensitivity to all aspects of the verbal sign.

As this would imply, translating Kling is like diving from a church steeple. Success seems the least likely outcome. What do I know about his style, after spending so long feeling along it, syllable by syllable? That it represents a version of the sublime based in hypersensitivity and a silencing of the self to reach pure receptivity. That it is reactive to an amazing frequency width of signals from the outside world, from zenith to pupil. That it is unlike anyone else. Nonstandard spellings – often transcriptions of Rhineland dialect or pronunciation – are a regular feature of Kling's work. I have not reproduced this because the effect in English is displeasing. I am not sure why but the implication of slang in English is overwhelmingly casual and negligent, whereas Kling's poems demand acuity all the time.

One place to start is with a horizon of around 1977 and a musical style: punk, very popular in Düsseldorf and having its headquarters there in the Rättinger Hof, a club/bar to which Kling dedicated three 'documentaries'. Technically, this implied a style of speed, with endless rapid cuts and short snatches, surely composed into larger wholes but at first unmediated and stripped of an interpretative voice-layer. 'Zero drifter' is a kind of translation of '-zerhacker', (in the first line of 'Rättinger Hof zb 2'), a key word because it is so complicated in meaning. The basic meaning is 'chop to bits' which is a reference to dancing because it also contains the word *Hacke*, heel. So it's about punk dancing, inimical to floors. But 'zerhacker' is also an electronics term for a device which chops up a signal as a way of stabilising it against brief fluctuations. It is used for example in "zero drift" amplifiers and especially in car radios. This archaeology of words is typical for Kling. Because we are in a club in the throes of a rock gig, amplifiers are quite important. We are in the product placement region of Little Richard talking about a "solid sender": e.g. "My Marlinda/ she's a solid sender/ you'd better surrender." The idea of cutting a signal up into a million segments too brief to be consciously heard is a sly reference to Kling's style: blurring speed, endless cuts, then unity at a higher level. A picture in a fly's eye. After the hacking up the poem is integral, not a frass of fragments. So I ended up with *zerodrifter* as the overall title. (Punk as in crumbling wood fit for tinder could be translated as *morsch*, the title of Kling's 1996 book.) There is a selected poems of Kling in Germany called *skull magic*, which I didn't like as a title.

Kling preferred the word *sprachinstallation* (speech-installation) to 'performance'. Perhaps this drew attention to the predominance of sound, perhaps it was because 'performance' had rather degraded implications. He keeps using the English word *Sound*. This is more specific than the English source: it flows out of contexts like "the Mersey Sound", like "Look" (the look of a film) it means something recognisable, a feature cluster that moderates a variety of signals and repeats itself. A dandyish word, it ends up as theme song or actually product recognition. The key to short sharp phrases is to catch the call-signs of scenes and experiences, the clusters we use in a kind of neurological trick to orient ourselves in the thousand plains of culture. There are some tunes we want to hear again.

Politically, punk meant not fungus-softened dead wood but a strong reaction against the existing dominant poetic style of new subjectivity (*Neue Subjektivität*) as well as unnervingly fast time signatures. In one remark Kling said that no German poetry between 1965 and 1980 had

brought any progress in technique. A wipe-out. Grandiose perhaps but encapsulating the revolt with which our poet began. A combination of hypersensitivity and aggression would be a turn-off. Kling actually did express some aggression towards this generation, accusing them of sentimentality, smugness, and woefully run-down poetic technique. (Austrian poets were excepted from this write-off, aimed at the Federal Republic. I don't think the Democratic Republic featured much in Kling's thinking. Priessnitz and Brinkmann were the '60s poets he excepted from his lament.)

Kling identified *Mediatisierung* (something like *the condition native to media freaks*) as the main new factor arriving in the late Sixties. Poetry is made of information and the universal availability of information, the data discount supermarket, changed the rules for poets. Punk was a dandyish pose and drew that pose in everyday dress from a dedication to media experience which went further than anyone had yet imagined. The 'expert' in the culture of the Republic must now spend time watching clips of rock bands on YouTube and have some grasp of what the Düsseldorf punk scene was. I suspect that the New Subjectivity wave had recognised, in the wake of McLuhan, the power of media products to create a community between consumers, and had explored a passive extension of that community (based to a great extent on rock records and American films) in a way which led the poem itself to atrophy. If you both listen to the same Joni Mitchell album, or both have the same personal reaction when watching TV news, that is a bond. The sharing is implicit and does not need much verbal information to be passed. The poets of that wave don't have a place in the history of poetic style because they had dropped technique out of the poem. The next step was to drop the poem altogether and simply be media voices as DJs on the radio, columnists in newspapers, etc., affirming bonds with people exactly their age but not bothering with the mechanics of writing a poem.

The demo was actually the home of youth culture for a few years, the public space to which poems referred back. The poems were committed (or ideologically debt-laden?), swimming on a big, woolly, youth-culture-togetherness feel in which they had a notably passive and derivative role. Demos march away and collective feels move on. For people Kling's age – and mine – it was obvious around 1976 that the hippy/1968 promise was not going to be kept and that the future had to be rethought from the ground up. For Kling, that meant rejecting the ideal of dropping out and getting with a work ethic and command of technology.

Transition to a new and shining world of endless data meant the end of conventional ethics – the obsolescence of a finite set of literary playing-cards as the basis for poems which cycled through an equally finite set of positions. Kling was not writing poems about the government. You can't write about interactions in the world in a form language so many times poorer than the formal range of the world. Poetry had to go through complexity to come back with anything meaningful about justice and rights. The protest generation closed the gap between youth culture and 'poetry' and our poet stuck with youth culture but redesigned the new poem so that it was data-rich and no longer dumbed-down to meet an anti-verbal generation. Reliance on photos was the medium for this: people were used to abundant information presented as photos and moving pictures. Kling is supremely an "audio-visual" poet. His books from DuMont included CDs in the package.

The need to be a Nice Person and so to deliver Nice Words means that you can't depict human self-interest, rapacity, tendency to dominate. As these are the axes on which most human situations are constructed, this inhibition excludes you from describing almost any human situation tellingly and vividly. Any writer who gets tired of this and returns to descriptive writing is going to be accused of damaging a beautiful ideal. Most idealists are guilty of self-idealisation – not least in Germany. A certain earnest lyricism of the mid-century was a remake of religious discourse with its abstraction, its vagueness, its regression, its apparent generosity. It was due to fade from view a few minutes after religious discourse faded from view: double parallel downward curves. Modernity had a new pulse train. Kling did not set himself out as a person nicer than everyone else.

That 'new subjectivity' is not a familiar concept to English readers because it was not of export quality. It seems to be inevitable that, when a literary style has reached final conclusions and terminal exhaustion, young poets should be immersed in it and react with passionate negativity; and that the people whose cultural assets are poems written in that style should by then have become editors, members of prize panels, professors, etc., and be in a position to be shocked by the impiety of the young. But meanwhile there was a generation that no longer wanted to be guardians of ethics.

Short units of sense generally mean a shallow attention, the flight of awareness constantly emptying out and sinking back to null. Rapid cuts start to work if they relate to a larger whole, a vortex, which is exciting

from whatever point we look at it. Then, cuts do not empty the attention flight but leave it floating, growing. Kling's ability to compose by a rattle of edits works only after a preliminary hunt for a subject which will engulf the eye as we look at it. He found his vortices, objects whose anatomy justified the flock of brief snatches and allowed spiralling cumulative effects, restless shifts of angle, serial climaxes. Kling's choice of subjects is one of the richest of any modern poet.

"Petersburger hängun" is another favourite theme for Kling, a phrase that refers to the way pictures were hung in a certain imperial palace, crowded and jammed up against each other, jostling for space. The poet uses this phrase to describe his portraits of cities. Again the quality of small units in large numbers jammed into a frame and forced to interact with each other is attractive to the poet. Flicker pictures. He likes the over-stimulation of so many channels of data and likes spatial order to be disrupted so that he can pick a route of his own. This is a visual aesthetic, he doesn't like emptiness, white spaces, reverence and the installation of sensory deprivation as the basis for elevated responses. The montages of super-vivid flashes to evoke cities (Vienna, Manhattan, etc.) are breathless. The footloose effect may be typical of the domestic image diet in an era of internet PC screens and digital files. Kling's immersion in this new landscape is a way of surrendering and winning, scoring as the top consumer in a new consumption land.

Critics speak of the absence of a lyrical I, a Me-poem. We have direct recording of sensation rather than having the "I" word frame the sensations (as assets? as owned things? as outpourings?). While I think an intense sensibility is basic to most of these poems, I concede that the word "I" and its relatives hardly ever appear in them. That hardly means that beauty has been exiled from this new form of poetry, that it has no room for the exquisite, the sublime, for landscapes and birdsong. Rather than reproducing a personality (as a religio-cultural asset, like an old church), Kling's work reproduces a state of desire, an optical craving. (The word *I* does appear in the poem about Walter Serner, which flashes back to the poet visiting Karlsbad with his mother aged 15.) It is not the pristine self which is authentic, but the poem.

Like the art historian Horst Bredekamp, who deals with the gestural language of politicians on TV side by side with the products of Renaissance portraiture, Kling has a boundless visual diet. He deals with TV as well as with paintings and, often, postcards or old photographs from the magnificent collections of museums. Whatever is a visual artefact

partakes of the same language. So many of his poems are based on visual experiences (there is no “I” in a photograph). ‘Retina scans’ could sum them up – but his is not a passive engagement. Look at ‘Larven’, where he is literally looking at a photo of Papuans, dating from Germany’s era as a hopeful colonial empire, but the poem is much more about the pre-suppositions of the photographer and about the marketing which creates expectations among the intended audience and so structures the visual experience. Kling doesn’t think you can look at a photo of Melanesians and get unmediated access to their souls. The surface of the photograph is a mirror which the unconscious views of the persons looking at it fill, and overflow the visual space.

We are dealing with a very rare ability to project oneself into external masses or skies of data, winged and disembodied like an angel, lifted by light. That very pure ability to lose yourself in passing over into what is forever alien, to know its defiant complexity, to flow into its patterns. With bat-like powers, sucking in the sky through one’s fingers, diving on loops of sound. Typical for our poet is the use of words from the technical language of TV directing and photography. Take the word “Strecke”, for example (used in the poem translated as ‘Black Forest 1932’). The word has several meanings but here is used specifically in the sense of a documentary photographer speaking of a “group” of photos which belong together. In a magazine you would call this a “spread” (*Bilderstrecke*), on the internet you would call it a “gallery” – I have used the word spread.

It may be helpful, if reading about portable bee-boxes, to have walked through a German forest and seen these wooden hives, moved into the woods so the bees can tuck into the local specialities. English bees, like English poets, prefer to stay at home. As Kling grabs information from images, there is the possibility of returning to the ancestral visual, the source. This brings the game to an end. You can’t flip the poem back to the photograph without a regression. Clearly you could collect a hundred or so photographs and create a sort of Kling-gallery. This would lose the transformation, the retina scan track. The third ‘data object’ is the pattern which the reader constructs in reaction to the poem, pursuing its original integrity and strangeness. Kling’s eye is sensitive to the tiniest flecks of dust and however far you pursue its courses there are always more details to recover. An available commentary on Kling’s Vienna poems recovers endless details which would surely elude someone who had not lived in Vienna. The documentary density yields us the security of a deep complex, stabilised by its multiple attachments to a reality which in the end

saves us from mere melancholy. He sees something we don't. Very well. The photographs may help.

The reception also records a transition with the First World War poems (in *Fernhandel*, 1999) from punk to a more deliberate and less intense style, with many pastoral and archaeological themes. It's hard to be angry over 40. The pace becomes more largo. More space is made for calm and long-period events. This allowed some of the most characteristic, unexpected, and profound works of our poet.

It is hard to explain why Kling has line ends splitting syllables. The effect seems to be a rapid tempo of some music already running which the poem is caught up in: where the poet doesn't react quickly enough the line end jumps in and breaks the syllable. The same is true of repeated definite articles, the stuttering effect is like someone dealing with music going too fast for him. This effect was alienating but belonged with the soundtrack of punk in the clubs, the permanently breathless tempo. It is documentary in its way.

Critics have picked up on the tag "gedicht ist ahnenstrecke" (in 'schwarzwald 1932' and meaning "poem is a spread of ancestors") in order to explore a personal mythology of German-language poetry to which Kling connected himself. We would start with Friederike Mayröcker, whose method of acquiring large numbers of short snatches of language fragments and sequencing them into larger poetic wholes leads directly to Kling. The psychological atmosphere of Kling is completely different, but the link is there. Kling's stay in Vienna (associated also with the poets Artmann, Jandl, Priessnitz) in 1980-1 was very important to his imagination of a style and subsequent technical development to the stage of being able to write poems in that style. More widely, Kling created a "spread of ancestors" for himself, as laid out in the selections of his *Sprachspeicher*, a revisionist work which is comparable to Mon and Heisenbüttel's 1973 *anti-anthologie*. Figures like Oswald von Wolkenstein, Walter Serner, and Rudolf Borchhardt now seem to be visible through Kling's eyes, more than in any other way. Maybe Austria didn't have the American influence that West Germany underwent, and this was the key to a much more adequate reaction to the primal modernist landscape, uncovered after the effective blanking-out by National Socialism.

I published a pamphlet of Kling translations in 1996. This was based on his selected poems of 1994 and reflected what I immediately responded to. I met him in April 2000 in Cambridge. The second time around I have paid attention to the poems which German commentators

were especially interested in, for example the ‘Ratinger Hof’ poems. These were not poems that I “got” on first reading, but they yielded more in the end. The ‘Ratinger Hof’ period is where Kling was closest to a collective culture and to everyone else his age. He almost never used youth-cult slang although there is the odd term like *flug* (a line, a hit) soaked up as a kind of sonic documentary. Translating slang from thirty years ago really would be a lost cause. I translated more poems in 2000 for a *Chicago Review* special issue on New German Writing and a whole lot in 2015.

I can’t remember who gave me copies of the special issues of *Schreibheft* and *text + kritik* on Kling but I am very grateful, they were indispensable.

ANDREW DUNCAN  
January 2019

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## ratinger hof, documentary report 1

*for juliette*

hands that crave for rice,  
for – shift of continents – zip  
fasteners: pill hands,  
acid “I AM AVAILABLE NIGHTS”  
in the crush my hand grows  
around the glass, later around her  
shoulder; her 19 year old on-off  
switch grows towards me; “I AM NOT  
AVAILABLE NIGHTS” teeth snip  
my optic nerve, it all splashes up  
against my leather armour, counter optic  
nerve, against her naked shoulder,  
against the teeth of the zips  
“SEA”: the insect crush;  
out of the throats of wasps splashes slogan  
on slogan, splashes the  
sting, stab “SLEEP” the  
sharpened:

LET THE PRINT STAMPER STAMP/  
RIGHT AWAY THE CHINESE HOROSCOPE/ SEND  
ME YOUR HOPI TELEGRAM/ I’LL GIVE YOU  
THE WORD GAROTTE SO YOU CAN TRY  
IT OUT ON ME/ “QUOTE MARKS”/ I  
CANT LIVE WITHOUT THE WORD PRRSHNG  
LEDDA PRISTAMPER TMP I feel her  
beautifully black antennae I want to get  
rid of my beautifully yellow one I give her the  
slogan

## ratinger Hof, documentary report 2

*If your mother only knew that  
her heart would burst in her body...*

UNDER THE -KICKERTOBITS the dancing your shoes to death;  
carefully waxed calves in front of crates  
of bock-beer bottles; the the kicking to bits;  
bulletin from dragée pupils, -skins,  
decibel throbs; crashed bulletin  
through milky glass, that's it, through partition  
panes; jerking iris, shaved pubis,  
decibel throbs, stamping light to bits the the  
kicking apart in her "boots must die"  
boots;

waltz is now the pogo! vulcanite  
against PVC! get with it! you bags with  
the the slipped out catheters with the in  
grown unpainted with the the  
nails on toes on sharp feet on bedridden  
in there in the old people's nursing home

(I see informing

through partition panes – nothing more  
from dragée pupils from tablet hand from  
congested skin from crumbling gums behind  
blue lips; but one more thing their verd  
verdun their verdun look end of  
bulletin) decibel throbs, plucked eyebrows.  
under the heel of light the the dancing to bits  
IN THE THIRD STAGE EVEN ONANISM NO  
LONGER WORKS THE PATIENT HAS NO N  
EED FOR GENITAL ACTIVITY A SI  
GHT A SMELL A TOUCH OR LIC  
KING OR KISSING THE SHOE SUFFICE

## Ratinger Hof, documentary report 3

*"o night! I have already taken  
on flying fuel..."*

night performance, liver damage,  
shrill study hour

HERE YOU CAN VIEW

ANITA BERBER/ VALESKA GERT

GENTLEMEN . . BUT CAN TURN OUT BADLY

is the outfit right? this is a show!

twilight west stand ("beaten by the  
crucial millimetres")

ranting -snatches

"sweet little ears", earlobes screwed with metal  
damaged leather, overalls, lightning  
transfers, fishbones in parallel-  
thrust; overrunning, -lapping  
ranting ("got my licence confiscated yesterday");  
our speech-meals total junk food, total  
corruption goods; "sweet little ears", we  
turn our mouths inside out NOW with the  
(refrigerator)nose wings (yacht instinct,  
"snorted a few lines"), incidental openly  
declared blitzkrieg eyefuck ("NOW  
SMILE!"); wrecked pairs of eyes (heavily  
veined), "be seeing you", gravel in  
the motor, you don't see anything but: hand  
over, reaching over of telephone numbers  
(NOW LICK!)

THE DIRECTORY OF HAIR; in

steep fullness, styled like awns of wheat, sprayed  
high noble disarray, two-toned,  
hawk-like hairdrying, a Cherokee wheel,  
in a Barbie cocoon, teddybear stiff, "light as  
champagne her sheaf", weekend-extension, Yves-Klein blue,  
tar ponytail, pattern on temples, exposed  
skullcap, "beaten by crucial  
millimetres!"

(let off the leash;  
ready, on the moment, for the jump;  
ready for the launch, the lads: bashing a  
few Kanaks flat, pupils bared,  
like armoured glass; stuffed full of good  
pills they are then chased under advancing  
tanks, “you got a Deutschmark for a taxi”);  
dead with fatigue, completely tanked up,  
operating theatre blue tinge,  
tar ponytail, skull pattern; around the whole  
hair register blabber damage; security is  
the main thing isn't it: AT FIVE THE LIGHT  
WILL GO ON ... UNMITIGATED LIGHT ...  
ARRIVAL OF PHANTOM PAINS ... AND  
FEAR THE COLD SHEET

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## **captain brehm's offshore effluent**

*(a marine piece)*

call out read off your richter scale  
sag down take the curve the fever  
curve sluice it; be sleep;  
be ray electric eel with the eyes  
through which the day goes the seaweed; be  
sleeping sickness; captain brehm cries  
out starts up from mangrove swamps  
(eel dream the tsetse) fly on his  
shoulder; his into-the-sea finger jabs  
in: captain b sluices his index  
finger at high-point celsius sluices  
his print run his fauna realm;  
has to unhook tiny animals all the time; visibly  
his brehm grows smallerandsmaller; his  
albums his elbes (tunnel) with (belly  
down) overgrowth must be sluiced;  
THE REPORTS: step off the snowdum  
(liana found in avalianche); coast guarding  
state of the street; ("it's coming your way  
along the a3"); path- and weather-watches; observation  
of stratocumulus hominidus and so on;  
the captain sluices himself into the sea: the air  
conditioning turned round croaking with  
a creak in time.

## hermesbaby, auspiciu 70

tongue flickering caress,  
first fruits your serious light  
-onscriptions;  
                  stored registers;  
leaning styrofoam (wall boards):  
crib tags drainage basins, future  
reservoirs; big strides through  
the room, besieged Bösendorfer;  
or, coat on your shoulders,  
in the museum café: your shying voice,  
the (bear's?) fringe down to your eyebrows;  
through the room the swallows chase  
without pausing their zigzag cry,  
feinting, and careful  
correction of course who  
wants to foresee that?  
                  such fought-for  
drinking water, (bird's eye) perspectives,  
reverse continental drift, public  
heart-address and -surge!  
                  written-on  
light your unbridled languages!

*(for Friederike Mayröcker)*

## direct transmission

kicks against the pianos, against  
tangled rummage tables, a  
letting off the chain!, unspeakable  
revolving-door vaudeville and unmentionable  
negotiable treadmill-showtimes; feeding  
of predators: on the scaffolding clustering  
primates, beetles scrabble for a lost leg, in the  
rumpled sheets a stall thronging unrep  
eatable insect system or clever  
whiffing of the wandering rat;

equipped; on the  
site on the tower the babel frontmen (see below,  
trowel high) twang their lute, twang  
that thing at Rapunzel time, gaze listed to roof window and  
descent to the seventh basement: pine flares stalac  
tite blinker; on gibbet staging, in front  
they are cheerfully knitting, further off the whee  
here we go: less by a head, piecework like a ninepin,  
("really, a noble effort");

equipped, walking-  
staves for all; behind the bars on the levels  
in the cemented granite: the pinball-  
flashing ("fink as in leather chairs", "leda to the  
swan at steel frequency", "tough, greyhound and diligent:  
come", "plan 3, the call is enough"), the flick-  
ering up and quenching straw manly basses reedy tenors  
ritual castrateria in the bunker choir, on the boards  
valkyrie effects of hissing dentures: ALREADY EIGHTY  
THOUSAND PERFORMANCES! OUR BELOVED CONVENTION  
-AL NAPALM OPERETTA! FEATURING GENOJACKPOT!  
("yes yes, a noble effort");

("brilliant CS grenades")

in retirement the  
modelling shadows; full of goldfinch shit  
the eyes morello cherries, fiddled shut



the grasshopper ear, from the crooked mouth burbles  
the duck gruel so at new moon the poet-  
zombies stump three times round the alder and  
quarter Grim's Moor to the point  
of nausea; stirring stirring stirring spatters  
lehmann compote in rilke's preserve jars; yes  
yes, coddled in dumplings (hand polished), art-  
coiffured burble in a tasselled cap oh  
unconscious incontinence in the land of Nod, mild  
-er corpse cosmetics TRAFFIC POLICE MAY WE JUST /  
YOUR IMAGE ISN'T VISIBLE / SORRY ABOUT THAT and fur  
ther retirement, diluted laurel, beak-sized  
cups OUR BABEL FRONTMAN RECOMMENDS: the  
cuckoo clocks and crucifix whittlers mightily  
by the critics on emptied nuts; else-  
where applies (the deeds below, *see above*): mistress of the pralines,  
show us your candied pubis!

SAMPLER