

Soft sandwiches, street fights and surrealism: Marlene Marder's memoir of Swiss punks Kleenex/Liliput



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‘Unashamedly, primitively brilliant’ ... (clockwise from top left) Marlene Marder, Regula Sing, Lislot Ha and Klaudia Schifferle. Photograph: Sam Mumenthaler

The guitarist's diary of their formation and early tours gets its first English translation, offering funny, biting, absorbing insight into the influential band beloved by the likes of Kurt Cobain

On 29 March 1978, Marlene Marder leapt into her new existence. She was watching punk band Kleenex's first show, at Zurich's Club Hey, when their guitarist and only male member declined to return for the encore. For him, the late Marder wrote in her diary, "Kleenex was a bit of weekend fun". But for Marder, Kleenex offered a more profound form of liberation. She told bassist Klaudia Schifferle and drummer Lislot Ha that she knew the chords and climbed on stage.

The moment marks punk's *Jahr null* in what may seem like the least punk place imaginable: *Switzerland*. Like British punks X-Ray Spex, Kleenex named themselves after a disposable object, acknowledging an increasingly pervasive consumer culture (ironically, they later had to change their name to Liliput after a threat from producers Kimberly-Clark). If Poly Styrene's lyrics subverted advertising-speak to warn of its insidious creep, Regula Sing launched Kleenex beyond commodification by singing in various languages, including gleeful nonsense words she invented - "Hexa-pod, hell-cat, helter-skelter, hop-scotch!" - to express the women's joys, challenges, desires. Their sound was a hungry puckish splatter: John Peel's endorsement landed them on Rough Trade, whose founder Geoff Travis was struck by their joyousness, a contrast to angry British punk. "They were unashamedly, primitively brilliant," he says. "The way they chanted their vocals was not like anything else."



Kleenex: Hedi's Head - video

Kurt Cobain was another famous admirer: the inclusion of “anything by Kleenex” on a list of his 50 favourite albums introduced the band to a new generation a decade after their split in 1983, and led to Marder overseeing a reissue of their catalogue on *Kill Rock Stars*, home to many bands from the riot grrrl movement they had helped to inspire.

But in 1978, there were perilously few figures to fire Marder’s imagination – save her hero Siouxsie Sioux – and her diary of the band’s first three years is a striking document of self-actualisation. Her *Tour-Tagebuch* was first published in German in 1986. Seven years after her death in 2016, her funny, biting, absorbing words have been translated into English, a labour of love by the book’s DIY publisher, Grace Ambrose. Simply titled *Kleenex/Liliput*, Marder’s diary is bolstered by contemporaneous (often translated) magazine and zine interviews, and the overall volume is as illuminating an outsider’s perspective on what had seemed a well-worn, male-dominated punk history as Viv Albertine’s *Clothes, Music, Boys*. It’s also a lovely document of Europeans encountering the strange banality of 70s Britain: the “soapy” coffee, the lingering spectre of the Yorkshire Ripper, multiple trips to see the *Muppet Movie*, a quizzical first bite of “those soft, white triangular sandwiches encased in plastic so the halves don’t come apart and curl up”.

Translation is an interesting proposition for a band that resisted legibility, eschewing the dogma of punk and feminism to express pleasure and rage on their own terms. Marder came to Kleenex having rejected the Zurich women’s music scene for its drab, oppression-centric lyrics and characterisation of aggressive music as somehow macho. (She also took strongly against their dungarees.) Kleenex’s proposition was bold, says Travis: “Slightly surrealistic, slightly oppositional, creating a world of their own but which was not excluding anybody but inviting you in. They didn’t seem to have any fear of ridicule.” Translator Jen Calleja, a British writer and punk musician in the bands *Sauna Youth* and *Monotony*, taught herself German after moving to Munich aged 18 and embedding in the local DIY music scene. “I worked really hard for [the diaries] not to sound like a perfect literary product,” she says. “It’s really difficult to translate a text that’s not literary or perfect and make sure it really is representative of the voice of the person.”

At the outset, Marder played a rented guitar and described Kleenex as playing “this outrageous music, technically wrong, but with total conviction”. The band were hired as a novelty fill-in act at Zurich venue the Mascotte: “All we had to do was play our four songs, spit and smoke on stage – that would be punk – and nothing more would be asked of us,” she writes. They accepted in exchange for free rehearsal space, but walked when the venue owners, harbouring ambitions of nurturing a showbiz stable, balked at their anti-commercialism. Within months, Marder developed strong principles, defying expectations of female musicians (“we play fast and aggressively”) and railing against journalists, industry bullshitters, predatory roadies and her insufficiently serious bandmates. (I contact two former members but both say they prefer to let Marder’s words stand alone.)

Unlike rapidly crowding London and New York, Kleenex had a blank slate for self-invention in Zurich, where there were scarcely any places to play. Peter Fischli later became an acclaimed visual artist alongside David Weiss, but in 1978 was a recent art school graduate who found his calling making imagery for the city’s fledgling punks. “It was how to start being an artist,” he says. “It was being liberated from the pressure of *doing art*. You do something and you can see it in the street or in a shop. That was attractive.” Kleenex often wore all white, and Fischli – who dated Schifferle, also an artist who shaped the band’s aesthetic – saw the opportunity to reject punk’s already-calcified look, creating images using spaghetti and toy records, or repurposing a local bakery logo for a poster that swapped the baguette under a boy’s arm for an LP. It set them apart. “If you want to do something different, you have to know what the mainstream is,” he says. “The other Swiss punk bands were pretty much imitating the English style.”

Rough Trade’s Travis was “astonished” that Kleenex were from Switzerland. “I had no idea what their real circumstances were, what their parents did or where they came from. In those days we really just concentrated on the work. There’s a kind of purity to that. You can hear whether people are sincere in the notes they play.” (Predictably, much of the British music press invoked stereotypes about cuckoo clocks and yodelling when writing about them.) Travis signed the band after *Sounds* magazine made their debut EP single of the week and Fischli smuggled 500 hand-folded copies into London. In 1979 they came over to tour with Cabaret Voltaire and the Raincoats – until the Cabs’ girlfriends refused to let them tour with women and English punks Spizzenergi stood in.

Raincoats singer and bassist Gina Birch describes reading Marder’s account of the tour as “incredibly evocative ... so many women started bands in that period. It was so weird how so many of us suddenly found that we could be in a band, and before we didn’t know we could do that.” She “loved” Kleenex. “This naive, shrieky minimalism. But I thought we were better!” Today, she says, she hears them differently. She recalls writers aligning Kleenex with Dada. “Maybe that was accidental but they were doing that in their own way. It’s pretty avant garde. I just heard Julian Schnabel talk about how every time he looks at certain paintings it’s like he sees them for the first time. When I heard Kleenex later it was like I heard them for the first time.”

Birch's bandmate, singer and guitarist Ana da Silva, recalls Kleenex encountering the unfamiliar in Britain and responding in a way that suggested their joyous linguistic chaos came naturally. "They wanted to have their clothes washed and in those days, obviously nobody I knew had a washing machine. So they went to the local launderette and when the clothes came back, they had shrunk. Klaudia was like, 'Shrinky dinkt Shrinky dinkt!' No wonder the Raincoats looked how we did. Our trousers were always 20cm too short. Because Kleenex were quite pristine they were quite shocked with the way we dressed! It was funny to see the things that were new to them because they came from a different place. Nowadays everything is the same everywhere."

Marder's determination grows more fierce - *attitude becoming form* - as her diaries progress: "I'll start over a hundred times if I have to," she writes. Calleja loved Marder's "caustic, low-energy way of reporting things, her vitriol and rage, and her honesty. She knew who she was and she would take that out on other people if they didn't meet her standards." Fischli characterises Marder as "strong willed"; da Silva calls her a "driving force. She could be quite sharp. She wouldn't take any shit. She learned to do that by touring and doing gigs because there's always dangers, confrontations, disagreements."

More than once, Marder describes Kleenex being attacked in the street. "Most guys can't deal with women not behaving how they're expected to," she writes of the first of many such altercations. On the UK tour, Spizzenergi behaved like stars, says Birch - "we were all in one van and they would yell at each other from the front to the back and be very show-offy" - and the speed-addled roadies' disrespect for the women ranged from listening to AC/DC during soundcheck to watching porn backstage. ("The fact that we don't want to fuck doesn't compute in their ape brains," writes Marder.) "We didn't see eye to eye with Spizzenergi," laughs da Silva. "They were a very different kettle of fish. The Raincoats and Kleenex did what we wanted to do, not: we have to do this because a man from the record company is saying we should do this to be more successful or more adorable."

There were also challenges closer to home. Marder writes openly about Kleenex's inter-band strife, particularly with Regula Sing, who she suspected was being physically abused by her boyfriend. The band slagged each other off in the press and Sing departed after the tour, replaced by a run of singers that settled with Astrid Spirit. "It's very real," da Silva says of Marder's unvarnished account of their fighting. "People always colour or avoid certain things [in their recollections]. They don't want to offend. But she was just writing as it happened."

While Kleenex were away, discontent was brewing in Zurich. In May 1980, the city was overwhelmed by blazing protests after young people searching for a space to call their own raged at the city's opera house receiving a multimillion-franc renovation while the planned youth-oriented cultural centre Rote Fabrik received no funding. Known as the *Opernhauskrawalle* (opera house riots) and *Züri brännt* (Zurich burns), the unrest lasted two years and was ultimately successful. It produced a temporary youth centre, the "Autonomous Youth Centre" AJZ, and the Rote Fabrik, upending preconceptions of the Swiss music scene as a bland extension of the country's military neutrality.

Liliput played frequently at the Rote Fabrik, but were disconnected from the action. While in 1981 new saxophonist Christoph Herzog told German magazine Spex that he took his energy from the protest movement, Marder was more apathetic: the AJZ's future wasn't guaranteed, which "makes you wonder why so many people are still working and renovating it", she said. "You put all your energy into it and the next day the whole thing's destroyed. And if you do nothing then they'll use that against you." She was right: the youth centre was closed after 11 months, although the Rote Fabrik endures.

Yet Marder still retained her optimism about liberation through music. "Everyone knows everything's shit," she told Sounds in 1981, "but why write songs about it? ... When there's a gig, we want to have fun, entertain ourselves and forget about it for an hour." That year's riotous single Eisiger Wind saw Spirit declare "For my sake I never / Request to soften from my way": one critic likened it to the radicalism of Grandmaster Flash on the Wheels of Steel. Marder's diaries end soon after, but Liliput would subsequently release the band's only two full-length albums, 1982's self-titled and 1983's *Some Songs*, their sound growing subtler and more complex, straying even from post-punk's fertile tendrils. Their aim, they told their friend Niklaus Wyss in 1983, was "to trust in your own power - with the risk that you might not succeed".

Liliput's final incarnation of Marder, Schifferle and Spirit would split that year for drably pragmatic reasons, when Spirit became pregnant. Marder would establish a record shop and booking agency in Zurich and later work for the World Wide Fund for Nature. She died of cancer in 2016.

Despite being rivalled only by Yello and Grauzone in the annals of Swiss alternative music, Kleenex/Liliput are hardly part of the country's cultural fabric: Switzerland's arts council paid for the translation of Marder's diaries, says Calleja, "but they'd never heard of Kleenex". For publisher Ambrose, Marder's legacy is having the confidence to declare one's potential. "The most moving parts of the book for me are when Marlene taps into the sublime parts of making music," she says. "Listening to your record on vinyl for the first time, the unspoken electric connection you develop with the best of bandmates, hearing something in your head and finally having the skills to know how to play it on your guitar." While physical space in Zurich was in short supply, Marder understood that imagination was limitless, and unconquerable.