

Bad Dad

Jutta Koether

Connection reflection neglection correction erection.

... or nothing at all.

My cv: maybug, fly, my father's at war, my mother's in Pomerania, Pomerania's burnt to the ground, maybug, fly ... if that fits on one page. When was I born? ... What is one to make of life?

How to cover up artistic malpractice.

She, too, became his victim.

—Polke-speak *Day by Day* ... *they take some brain away*, 1975

More German ethnographic Pop.

A woman settles a score.

We demand everything.

Everything's connected, nothing fits together.

The moral wilderness.

—Koether-speak, *20 Minutes (20 Minuten)*, 1990

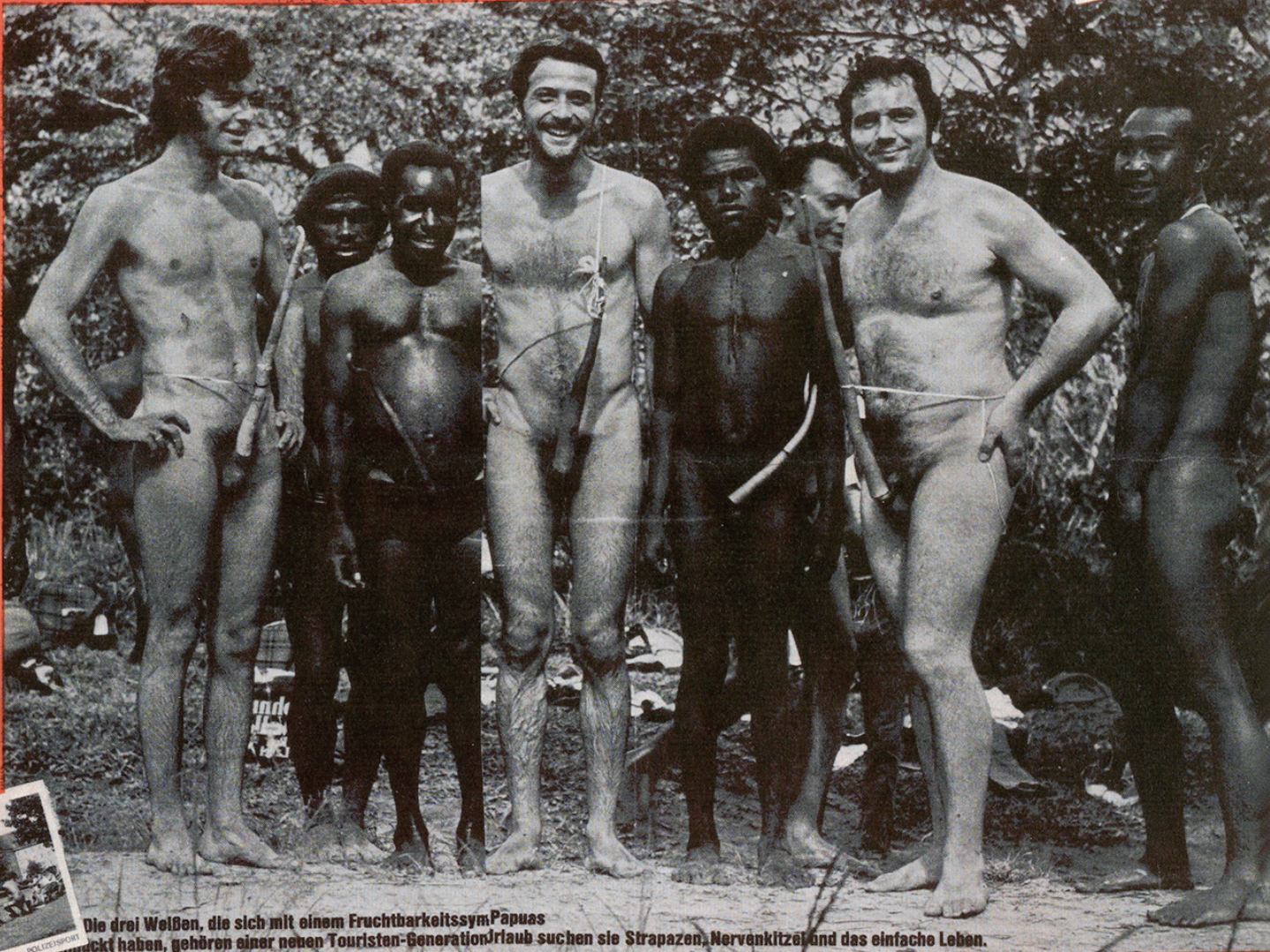
For a native of Cologne, born in 1958, for an artist who formatted herself in terms of her art in the 1970s and turned to painting and performance art, endeavoring to write a text about a possible, a real effect of the phenomenon that was Sigmar Polke is at the same time an act of instant retraumatization/reinspiration and a small meditation on her own future. So I have intercalated my red drawings as a filter. An intuitive work on picture and history. They were made in the 1980s. Now I allow myself to do it again.

This portrait of my recollections is perhaps not as authentic as an encounter with the artist at the bar (only from afar, at the Roxy or the Kurfürstenhof in Cologne); my perspective cannot be that of a "true" contemporary witness, nor is that the intention; and I was never a "student of," ... although I now hold a professorship in the very place where Polke also taught for many years (from the late 1970s to 1992), at the Hochschule für bildende Künste in Hamburg, Germany. That's a real link between SP and me.

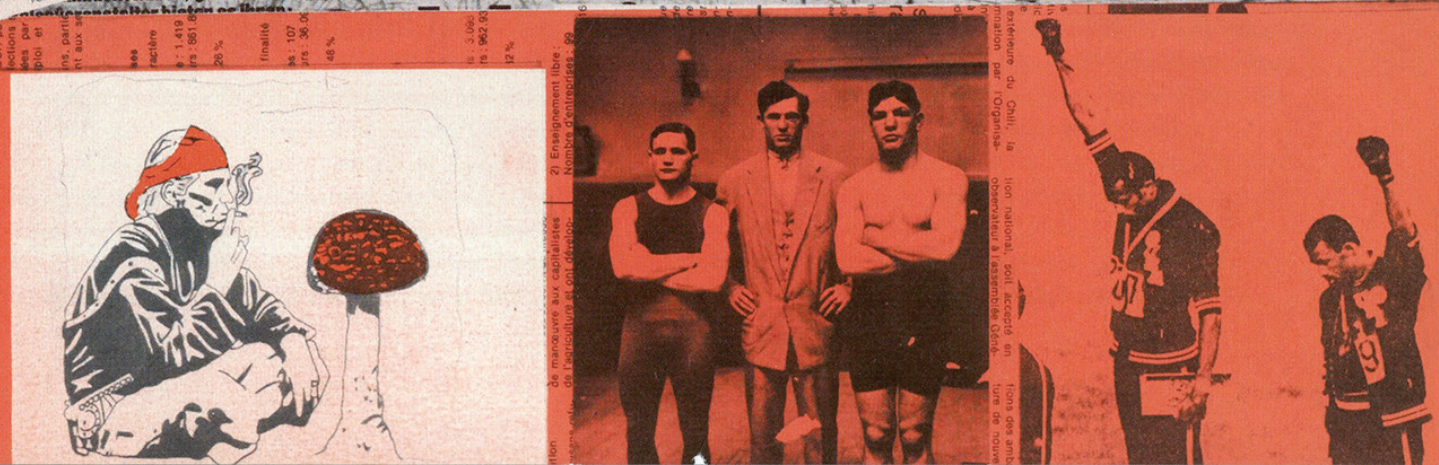
And yet I am also incapable of the art historian's distancing perspective because I know that in the end I did stand beneath the cloud or in some zone of influence that bore the name Polke.

In any case the Polke-cloud represented an ominous idiosyncratic attitude toward life that also spilled over into misanthropy, perhaps even a certain madness as a way of

Opposite: **Fig. 1** Sigmar Polke with Achim Duchow, Astrid Heibach, and Katharina Steffen. *Day by Day ... they take some brain away* (detail). 1975. Artist's newspaper issued for the São Paulo Bienal, page: 16 1/2 x 11 1/2" (41 x 29.6 cm). Publisher: Bonner Kunstverein, Bonn. Edition: 800. The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Linda Barth Goldstein Fund



Die drei Weißen, die sich mit einem Fruchtbarkeitssymposium
beschäftigt haben, gehören einer neuen Touristen-Generation an. Sie suchen die Strapazen, Nervenkitzel und das einfache Leben.



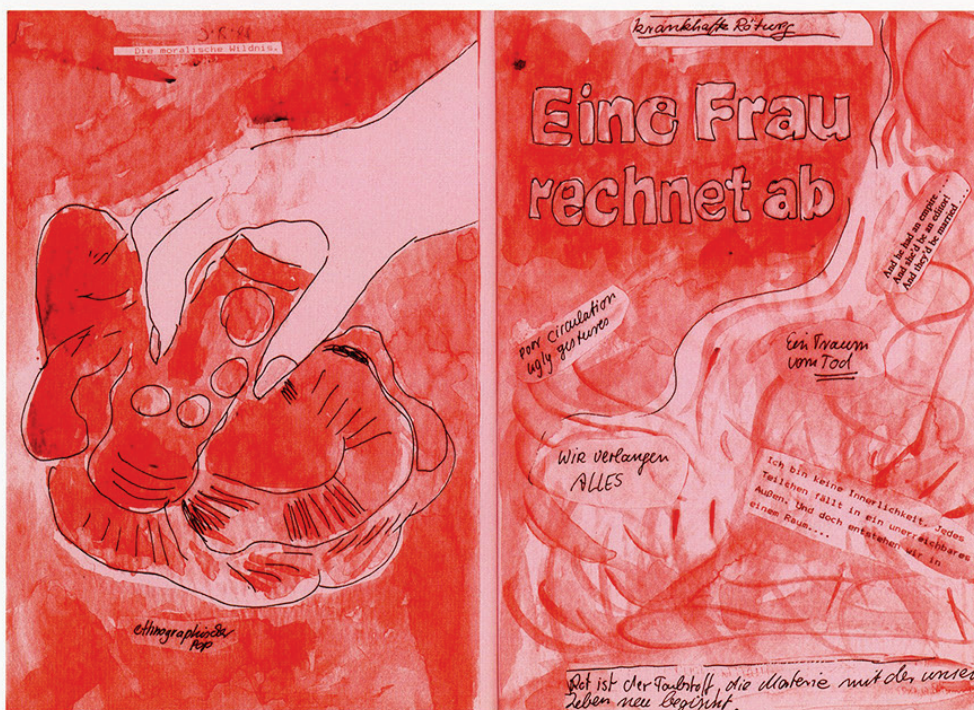


Fig. 2 Jutta Koether. Four drawings from *20 Minuten: Aufzeichnung-recording*, 1989. Artist's book, each: 8 ¼ x 5 ½" (21 x 15 cm). Publisher: Galerie Monika Sprüth, Cologne

life. As well as the uncontrollable, independent aesthetic phenomenon Polke, driven by an eccentric notion of freedom. When the artist was still among the living, he was to my mind something like a walking paradox of incompleteness; indeed, he embodied the broken but inexorable myth, a type also seen in other grand Bad Dads, cultural potentates, idiosyncraticists produced by the countercultures . . . Neil Young, for example. But lonely and misanthropic. A type of artist who refused to be pigeonholed and who performed, practiced, rather than being seen doing painting in the classical sense. But who never stopped maltreating painting.

And always bore something disconcerting and strange within him that grew stronger over the course of the years.

Polke was never the Good Artist, the Paragon, the Reliable Quantity; he was always the opposite of all that. But he was not only the one whose quips people feared most—he was also the most awake and took the biggest risk of all those culture-producing men born in 1940s Germany, before the end of the war, who made it their mission to come to terms with, or address, the defective cultural constitution of West Germany.

And whose attitudes and actions did come to strongly influence those born in the 1950s.

It's all a question of the wounds and vulnerabilities of these men. Of men who were born during the war, into the structures of Nazi Germany.

His offhand sketch of a curriculum vitae brings that up. Mentions the mother metaphorically consumed by fire, the father at war, and the maybug that flies (the artist), and then the question, "What is one to make of life?"

Everything revolved around this question. Everyone wanted to forget and do something new. A fresh start, reconstruction. Forgetting and repressing the fathers who had wrought such havoc.

It was up to art, then, to do something.

Triggering the emotional potential of art, invoking it, trashing it, demonstrating forms of engagement. A quest for intensity and drama, an expansion of the senses and what have you, in order to let feelings and bad puns run wild.

West Germany in full denial. People look around themselves. Look to the West. The earliest emergence of a media society. Pop art becomes the universal visual language as well as the distinguishing element.

Polke's Pop depends, on the one hand, on Francis Picabia, on the other hand, on Robert Rauschenberg, Andy Warhol, etc., but of course always more, and more drastic, in the distillation.

Bad Pop Culture. Bad Dad Mad Dad Mad Cap



Laughing *Lauging* Bad.

Like many of his generation, he became a father himself much too early, which in turn led him to rebel against fatherhood in drastic ways.

But can consternation actually also be critique? I always appreciated Polke because he did manage for a while to name this consternation, to examine it, to be annoying; because he precisely didn't just illustrate it with paintings but really let you feel it in his materials and his switching between techniques and his creative skill and de-skilling.

And so he also re-created painting in Germany in very disjointed ways . . . in what to my mind was always a performance called Polke as well. The Polke-cloud on which you could drift away. To New York, for example.

"Connection reflection neglect correction erection," Polke wrote in *Kunst-Nachrichten* in 1977. Words that name all essential components: these were the fundamental conditions of artistic production in West Germany.

That was something I already understood as a (high school) student in the mid-1970s and then later processed in/through drawings and collages. The red sheets you're looking at don't look like Polke, but they are about him (fig. 2).

The term "ethnographic Pop" was a label someone had attached to Polke in a review. I included it, and other remarks on Polke, in these drawings. The same goes for the technique of tracing (though in my case, without a projector), of wildly gleaning images from anything—from the visual potential of just about anything that went into print around you. All in all, a process of learning the vocabulary. A theater of forms.

Polke was mentioned so frequently in conversations about art and the search for models, for points of reference. When people needed to describe who they wanted to feel affiliated with—with which representation of painting, with which mode of artistic action—it often came down to an either/or: Richter/Polke.

Although I can only speak for myself on this point:

Richter embodied rigor, order, concept, skill, rationality, discipline, obedience, growing up early, optimism, the project of self-definition; Polke, by contrast, stood for disorder, restlessness, play, the courage to blur boundaries, clownery, ambivalence, the project of self-differentiation.

It is interesting that they were living in the same city (Cologne) for many years.

Day by day . . .

When was it—in the early 1980s?—people would say,

"Polke is stupid and lies." I don't know who first circulated the phrase. But it went around among the men . . . like Michael Krebber, Albert Oehlen, Martin Kippenberger, Werner Büttner. Back then I was always trying to figure out what that was supposed to mean.

And I built myself a bridge to something the English punks said about John Peel (a legendary radio DJ who helped spread punk culture but also had his own style and a very determined standpoint that sometimes ruffled feathers and triggered debates)—what they said was, "John Peel is a cunt," which also had me at a loss about where it was coming from, but the point was that it was this very open insult and at the same time confirmed the status of the dysfunctional dad and implied emotional acceptance of him. A demonstration of love, really, for a father who didn't want to be one and couldn't be one either.

That sentence echoed in my head for a long time. Polke is stupid and lies. Why would they say that? Because he's a Bad Dad. And that's a good thing.

But beyond that sentence, there were other criticisms people raised in the early 1980s . . . people who'd already started dissecting Polke's oeuvre into stages . . . so, everything from the mid-1970s on, after he'd left behind the more traditional terrain—drawing, painting—for more post-Fluxus-like activity, collective productions, photography, film. Then there was his experimentation with the technical aspects of living (a sort of experimental communal life on that farm at Willich) and the artistic productions that in turn arose from it.

Polke: enduring contradictions. No mercy, nowhere.

I'm very interested in this story because it moved me. I never even exchanged words with the man himself. Because I didn't have the courage. Or was still too young to want to be the butt of stupid jokes and/or because in the end they tended to be machines for the production of injuries, these men whose access to the world was so damaged that I protected myself from them.

But I was also curious, and I decided to integrate the idea of German ethnographic Pop as a crucial gift from Bad Dad into my own reddish and feminine-tinted world. But also as a way of addressing doubt, of not just affirmatively accepting the image of the world.

Bad Painting: working through/manifestations of a trauma. On the other hand it becomes a brand as well.

Polke was Bad Dad, but he was also a Lost Dad. Lost in Space. Lost in the Markets. Lost in very different qualities of his oeuvre but also in the very unorganized and often confused ways people talked about his art. And perhaps this assignment is no more than yet another building block in that panorama, weird enough as it is. Bad Dad, also a tragic figure, corrupted and scarred by the many equivocations he wantonly helped produce, the overdoses of projections and dislocations.

So one never arrives anywhere here. Nor did he furnish himself any comfort zones. Perhaps, later on, those church windows in Zurich. But in the pictures, drawings, prints, he really never did . . . no, there's no place to feel sheltered here. Bad Dad working. The work: internalized wounds don't heal; they drive an outward-directed production.

Perhaps there was also something about the man that triggered this sort of thing. At the time, the family of a friend had a dog called Polke. "I wanna be your dog!" Iggy Pop sang.

Taking contradictions to extremes. Yes, he certainly did. The personal contradictions embedded in those of the Western, and more specifically the German, world of postwar cultural politics from the mid-1960s into the mid-1970s. That's something that came to mind when I looked at the work by SP I'd been assigned.

Day by Day . . . they take some brain away is the title for a 1975 work that explores Polke's attitude toward painting, his career, his output at the time (fig. 1).

At the 1975 São Paulo Bienal he was given an award. He claimed that the project was "a book about women or the story of a woman."

He had decided to produce a sort of magazine that would illustrate his relation, rife with contradictions, to the world, to society, and to West German culture, and his discontent with the contribution he himself had made up to that point. Embedded in collages is a conversation, a sort of performed interview with Katharina Steffen . . . that emerges and submerges between the pages of pictures, a manuscript typed out on a typewriter in red ink that looks like another kind of artwork.

An edition of eight hundred. (A year later the whole thing was republished in a collaborative project, a catalogue gazette he made with Georg Baselitz and Blinky Palermo.) These connections still existed at the time . . . even if Polke.

In any case, the work contains several typical Polke phrases:

"My project is to always hold a breast in my hand like an apple, like a sinful apple."

Or, "Makeup is beautiful and makeup is so modern, so open-minded etcetera. Any other questions?"

Or, directly addressed to the interviewer, "Or do you imagine that you embody something? The questions you're asking here, these questions really need to be such that they have nothing to do with you, or do have something to do, and that the answer, let's say, that one answers them without going too personal . . . that sort of social map, or a road map to art? Or nothing at all."

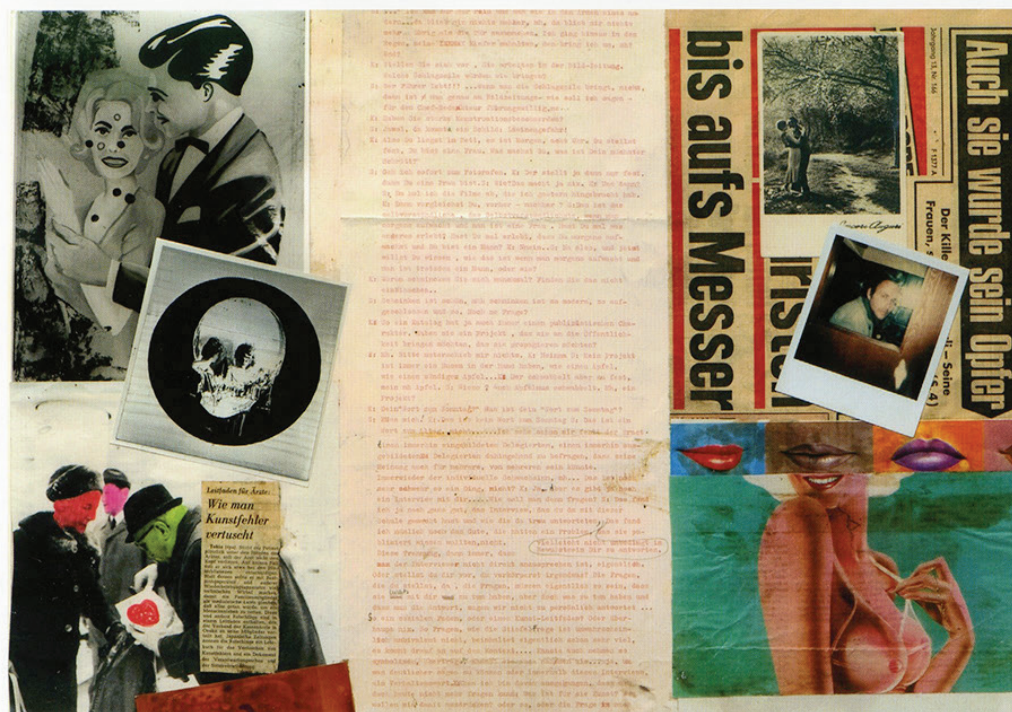


Fig. 3 Day by Day. 1975. Two of twenty collages of cut-and-pasted printed paper, typescript, and photographs with pencil, ballpoint pen, felt-tip pen, and spray paint, each approx.: 24 7/16 x 16 13/16" (62 x 43 cm). Private collection, Bonn, courtesy Galerie Christian Lethert, Cologne



Fig. 4 *Sveno-Test: Projective Method That, with the Help of Toys, Captures Unconscious Problems in Children and Adults (Sveno-Test: Projektives Verfahren, das mit Spielmaterial unbewusste Probleme bei Kindern und Erwachsenen erfasst).* 1970. Gelatin silver print, 8 1/4 x 11 3/8" (21 x 29.5 cm). Friedrich Wolfram Heubach

Be that as it may, the conversation also addressed the very complex relationship between men and women as well as the interrelations of animals, massacres, war, Polke with art, and, more generally, everything with everything.

Never really reconciling oneself. The longing to do so remains. As does the impossibility of that longing being fulfilled. Existential matters are treated, but in the way of Bad Conversation.

Bad things. Speech acts. But they primarily serve the performance, serve the (fake) bewilderment of the counterpart. Not an assemblage, really . . . but a theater of forms and slogans. Paintings sometimes playing their part as paintings, but sometimes not.

All of it a strangely overflowing evil bouquet. Severely psycho-driven material.

This 1975 document is also one of bafflement; the mode of excess, which for its part is about to generate a new middle-class smugness, must be broken. Perhaps not precisely broken but submitted to what one of his Sceno-Test photographs bears as part of its title, "projective method" (1970, fig. 4). So he for his part stuck with the figural register: Polke in the Sceno-Test: a projective method that uses the stuff of play to grasp unconscious problems in children and adults.

More broadly conceived, however, the projective techniques in Polke's work expand beyond this experimental arrangement. They permeate it. He is the one who stirs up and remixes the techniques like a DJ.

Bad Dad/father of Bad Painting. So he goes about grasping the unconscious problems of individual artistic expression and society, of processes of value formation. It would be going too far to say that he invents or depicts them. It really is the techniques that make content from this time on.

"Day after day . . . they take some brain away" is a line from "All the Madmen," a song by David Bowie. This is how the lyrics actually go:

"Cause I'd rather stay here/With all the madmen/Than perish with the sadmen/Roaming free."

Yes, their generation (Bowie, too, is Bad Dad material) knows this massively conditional kind of freedom . . . which perpetually runs up against its limits, opens up and closes horizons in equal measure, can't shake off the past, and entangles itself in the market economy that conditions the postwar pop cultures through which existential matters twist.

It was also through Polke that I got to know William Blake, as well as William S. Burroughs . . . around that time. There was now another variant of the Bad Dads: the Queer Bad Dads. And it was through Polke that I understood

what Walter Benjamin meant about culture always also being barbarism.

A more-than-difficult struggle over what one may call "imagination."

Just open to any page of *Day by Day* to get a sense of the ugliness and inevitability of (psycho-)realities, of the fear of finitude and disintegration, with these almost hallucinated Bad Jokes and the production of multiple faux pas.

But what you also encounter time and again is the imperative to perform yourself.

There's a whole lot of Polke in *Day by Day*. In photographs, drawings, Polaroids, newspaper clippings, but, most important, in the text by/with Steffen. Everything he does "speaks." An outflow of speech acts. Fluxus, but also already something like protopunk zine design.

Or you can look at it as a playbill for a theater of social forms. The expansion of the repertoire. For purposes of communication/teaching, in a process that equally pursues the production of value and its destruction. There are similarities here with other Bad Dads, although they perhaps may not have seen it that way.

In any case, some of the reflections I've jotted down here took place on the way from and to the HFBK Hamburg. And there are others that I didn't jot down, about his influence in terms of attitude, presentation, self-conception, dialectical thinking, and/but also the tolerance for baloney, profound pain, being an artist in many ways, and for self-experiments in becoming a nonartist, reliably unreliable techniques.

Imagining Bad Dad as a woman, perhaps. Or as a column instead of a cloud, or a cloudy column. Whatever—and as for the consequences for painting and for what can then still be taught:

The real light source is his/her imagination! §