As part of “steirischer herbst 99” and in co-operation with the Ivan Dougherty Gallery of the University of New South Wales, Neue Galerie presented the exhibition “Telling Tales”, curated by Jill Bennett and Jackie Dunn, at Künstlerhaus Graz from September 25 – November 2, 1999. The exhibition featured fifteen contemporary positions of Australian art on the subject of memory/trauma/repression/collective memory.1 In their works, the selected artists (Ian Abdulla, Gordon Bennett, Pat Brassington, Anne Brennan, Jon Cattapan, Dennis Del Paver, Deej Faby, Julie Gough, Louise Hearman, Justin Kramer, Tracey Moffatt, Jill Orr, Mike Parr, Catherine Truman, Ken Unsworth) explored the personal traumas of their childhood and the collective repression of their country’s colonial past. The personal past was not isolated as individual history but rather, by means of personal experience and memory work, it was possible to forge a link to the collective history of a nation.

Starting from childhood memories and traumatic experiences such as the loss of parents or sexual abuse, the exhibition focused on the social and psychological aspects connected with the process of remembering, and how narrative processes structure the mechanisms of memory and repression. “Telling Tales” explored personal and collective biographies, the history of Australia, the dilemma of colonialism and the collective repression of problems related to the way Australia deals with the Aboriginals. However, the focus was not on objects of the past but rather – by highlighting personal experience – on lived memory, the process of remembering itself. Artists of different ethnic and cultural origins set out in search of a new “language of memory”, a language conscious of the subjective, fragmentary nature of our memory.

In various artistic media, from painting, photography, mixed media installations, video works to performances, the exhibition reflected an attempt to capture personal history as well as the history of a society or an entire nation in a memory shared and acknowledged as true by a community.

My interest in presenting this exhibition in Austria was one based upon aspects of cultural politics and psychoanalysis and had nothing to do with vulgar exhibitions with titles such as “Young art from England” or “Eight artists from Europe” or “Art from Scandinavia”, etc., that pursue reactionary geopolitics. Despite the fact that Australia gained prominence in Europe, too, thanks to its film industry and thanks to exporting its actors and directors to Hollywood, and although several of the artists featured in the exhibition have become very popular in the European art scene, the exhibition was not about forms of national presentation or national differences but rather about analogies. “Trauma and memory” could equally be the title of an exhibition of Austrian artists. However, “Trauma and forgetting” or “Trauma and repression” would probably be a more apposite title for the Austrian situation. For the traumatic experience of the corporative state, civil war, the ansschluss, and Austria’s part in National Socialist
There are, then, diverse and striking, strange and selected affinities between Austria and Australia, beyond the realm of phonetics and art (for example the excellent achievements in both countries with regard to body art, performance and media art). This was the reason for my interest in this exhibition. Australia could be a mirror for Austria and its hesitant reappraisal of its past. According to the logic of the joke and the unconscious, as illustrated by Bens' drawing, what Austria has repressed could return in the name of Australia. "Telling Tales" would then tell tales about Austria and not about Australia.

Another reason why this exhibition is relevant is the international trend of the avant-garde at the close of the nineties to focus on new forms of narration in order to free the art-historical shackles of abstraction and figuration, the two primary reviving movements in twentieth-century art. The narrative possibilities offered particularly by the media (from photography to film, from video to computer-based installation) are deployed in a differentiated manner in the service of the return of the real. This differentiation not only concerns the artistic methodology but equally so the concept of the real itself. Reality, in this context, does not imply a mimetic view of the visible, rather it is about the repressed invisible, the fictitious component in the construction of the real, and memory and utopia as actors of the present.

In connection with the theme of this exhibition I attempted to initiate an intercultural dialogue with the symposium "Trauma und Erinnerung/ Trauma and Memory: Cross-Cultural Perspectives". Franz Kahlenbeck, a fellow-traveller in the 1960s and 1970s, played a key role in selecting the speakers for the symposium and organizing and preparing the event. The symposium enumerated the great crimes of colonialism and racism, from the expropriation of the Aborigines in Australia, to the genocides in North America and South Africa to the Holocaust in Europe, naming them and investigating their common structural aspects, their differences and their singularities. Readers of this book will learn more than they wish to remember: facts and information on the machinery of power, the function of ideology, and the dark abyss of the human that cannot be spanned by any rope. I owe a debt of gratitude to the co-organiser of the symposium, Franz Kahlenbeck, and to the participants in the symposium for undertaking the work of remembering and reappraising traumatic experiences on behalf of many others.

Thanks are also owed to CA Director Dunst, Dr. Christa Stalale, the Gesellschaft der Freunde der Neuen Galerie, Margot Goetschberger, Kathi Buß-Wieschau and all other participants, whose expertise and work made the symposium and the publication possible.

Footnotes
1 Cfr. "Telling Tales", The University of New South Wales (Ed.), texts by Jackie Dunn, Jill Bennett, Nick Waterlow, Peter Weibel, 64 p., Ger./Engl., ISBN 0733404561

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