

Kad. Telling Tales, Irva Doughty Gallery, Sydney, Australia,
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Foreword (1999)

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Sigmund Freud founded psychoanalysis in 1895, writing *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900) and *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious* (1905) as a consequence. The function of the joke, like the dream, is to articulate in a transposed, condensed way repressed ideas encountering resistance from the superego, according to the linguistic principles of metonymy and metaphor. One of the most popular topoi of jokes that even today still hits on a sensitive point of Austrian identity, badly damaged and injured since the collapse of the Austro-Hungarian monarchy in 1918, is the fact that Austria is often confused with Australia. In view of the fact that Australia is also known by another name – 'down under' – Austrians feel this mix-up to be pejorative. The truth that Austria wishes to conceal from itself becomes transparent in this joke, in this projection; that is, the fact that Austria really is peripheral and 'down under' in the hierarchy of nations. The traumatic experience of the collapse of the Austro-Hungarian empire is retold in a joke, a story that both unmask and obfuscates.

In an unfinished novel, held by many to be equal to the works of James Joyce and Marcel Proust, Robert Musil told the tale of Kakania, as he named the Austro-Hungarian empire that was to become Austria, the story of a dramatic loss of Austrian identity, appropriately titled *The Man Without Qualities* (1930-34). A contemporary author, Robert Menasse, has consequently named Austria *The Land Without Qualities* (1992). A further term – the Waldheim effect – has been coined to describe the processes of repression that have led to Austria's amnesia regarding its history in the period between the wars and the Third Reich. Lack of identity is, in my opinion, a post-colonial effect, applying to both the coloniser and the colonised. This is evident in the writings of Fernando Pessoa and Franz Fanon, in which the authors deal with the multiple, antinomic identities of Portugal and Algeria. The 'lack', however, is connected with the fate of modernism, the development of which has been vehemently arrested for decades in certain countries. In the context of Austria this point has been emphasized by one of the most important Austrian artists, Günther Brus. Brus was a member of the Viennese *Aktionisten*, whose actions in the sixties uncovered the trauma of Austro-fascism and its continuity after 1945 in the form of what Freud calls 'reaction formation'; that is to say, a negatively connoted return of the repressed (the failure to clarify by fascist society was replaced by a smear campaign). Brus drew a cartoon in 1973 that characterises the link between political amnesia, confusion of identity and cultural anti-modernism. Of course, his cartoon refers not to Australia but rather to Austria and the parodied artistic practices are precisely those practices favoured by the avant-garde in Austria at that time. But the fact that this production is directed towards Big Brother Germany suggests a parallel with Australia, for which Britain occupies a similar role.

There are multifarious striking affinities between Austria and Australia, beyond the realm of the phonetic and the artistic (for example, the excellent achievements of both countries in the field of body art, performance and media art). This is the reason for my interest in this exhibition. Australia, in its hesitant reappraisal of its past, could assume the function of being a mirror for Austria. In accordance with the logic of the joke and the unconscious, as demonstrated in Brus' drawing, what Austria has repressed could reemerge in the name of Australia. *Telling Tales* would then tell tales of Austria and not simply of Australia. My interest in hosting this exhibition is thus of a cultural, political and psychoanalytical nature and has nothing to do with the vulgarity of exhibitions with titles such as *Young Art From England* or *Eight Artists from Europe* or *Art from Scandinavia*, and so on, pursuing reactionary geopolitics. This exhibition is also highly relevant at the close of the nineties when the international avant-garde is dealing with new forms of narration in ways that rethink the traditional opposition between abstraction and figuration, the two primary rivaling movements of the art of the twentieth century. The narrative possibilities offered by new media in particular (from photography to film, from video to computer-aided installation) are used in the service of a return of the real. But what is at stake is not only artistic methodology, but also the conception of the real itself. Reality is not seen as a mimetic conception of the visible, but rather focuses above all on the repressed invisible, on the part of fiction in the construction of reality, on memory and utopia as actants of the present.