

Trauma und Erinnerung : Peter Weibel und Françoise Kollmann (Hrsg.)
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Introduction
Peter Weibel (2000)

S. 227 - 229

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 Favero, Deej Fabyc, 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 Aborigines. 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 anschluss, and Austria's part in National Socialist

crimes has not been adequately reappraised to this day. If traumatic experience means not being able to speak about something and not being able to hear or know something, then Austria is still traumatised by the NS era.

We can indeed find amnesia of one's own past particularly in Austria: the history of the period between the wars and the Third Reich was subject to a process of repression, combined with the loss of Austrian identity, the causes of which date back as far as the collapse of the Austro-Hungarian Empire.

Sigmund Freud founded psychoanalysis in 1895 and, consequently, wrote "The Interpretation of Dreams" (1900) and "Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious" (1905). The purpose of the joke, like the dream, is to articulate repressed contents that meet with resistance from the superego, albeit in a displaced, condensed manner, according to the linguistic principles of metonymy and metaphor. One of the most popular topoi of jokes that still touch on a sore spot of Austrian identity – badly damaged and injured since the collapse of the Austro-Hungarian Empire in 1918 – concerns the constant confusion of Austria, once a great power, but today very small, with Australia. In view of the fact that Australia is also known as "down under," it becomes clear that Austria regards this confusion as pejorative. In the joke, in the projection, the truth becomes transparent that Austria wishes to hide from itself, namely the fact that Austria is indeed peripheral and "down under" in the hierarchy of states. The traumatic experience of the collapse of the Austro-Hungarian Empire is retold in the form of a joke, a story, that both reveals and conceals. Tales could be told in Austria, too, precisely because nothing is told about its history, which is felt to be unpleasant from the fall of the Empire to the Nazi regime. The First Republic, as we know, was "the state that no one wanted". The Second Republic is founded on a lie, the role of Austria as a victim.

In his unfinished novel, equated by many with the works of James Joyce and Marcel Proust, Robert Musil retold this history of the land of Kakania, as Musil termed the Austro-Hungarian monarchy, later to be Austria, as the dramatic loss of Austrian identity, with the telling title of "The Man Without Qualities." In allusion, a contemporary writer, Robert Menasse, referred to Austria as "The Country Without Qualities". Amnesia with regard to history in the period between the wars and in the Third Reich was the result of these processes of repression that came to be known internationally as the Waldheim effect.

This fate of lacking identity, in my opinion a post-colonial effect, both on the side of the colonizers and the colonized – cf. the writings of Fernando Pessoa or Frantz Fanon focusing on the multiple and antinomic identities of Portugal and Algeria – is linked with the fate of modernism in the various countries, whose development was vehemently interrupted for many decades. One of the most important Austrian artists, Günter Brus – a member of the Viennese Actionists whose actions in the sixties unmasked the trauma of Austro-Fascism and its continuity after 1945 in a reaction formation, as Freud would say, in a negatively connoted return of the repressed (the cleansing or clearing of Fascist society, that did not occur, was replaced by smearing) – drew a joke in 1973 that is characteristic of this interrelation of political amnesia, confusion of identity and cultural anti-modernism. Of course, it does not refer to Australia but Austria, and the artistic practices it parodies are exactly those practices favoured and prognosticated by the avant-garde in Austria at that time. It is as telling as it is accurate that this is an exhibition for big brother Germany which perhaps plays a role similar to that of England for Australia.

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 Brus' 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 flee the art-historical shackles of abstraction and figuration, the two primary rivaling 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 Kaltenbeck, a fellow-traveller in the 1960s and 1970s, played a key role in selecting the speakers for the symposium and organising 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 Kaltenbeck, 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 Steinle, the Gesellschaft der Freunde der Neuen Galerie, Margot Goettsberger, Karin Buol-Wischenau and all other participants, whose expertise and work made the symposium and the publication possible.

Footnotes

- 1 Cat. "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