

In his »Memory Bureau«, the Swiss artist **Mats Staub** collects moments of reflection to understand what has taken place, why it happened and how we have become what we are

The Gallery of Listening People

by Claudius Grigat (Publik-Forum, Frankfurt, October 2013)



What are the ten most important events in my life? Markus (49), an editor from Basel, Switzerland, attempts to answer this question. He begins with: »JUNE 1985: Having just graduated from high-school, I was crossing the Lorraine Bridge on my way home from Basel and thought to myself, actually I can do anything I want to, the world's my oyster.« The tenth event on his list: »SEPTEMBER 2010: Bea told me about Tom.« Markus is one of the participants in Mats Staub's latest project. This »web-based long-term project« focuses, as do the majority of works by the Swiss artist, on memories and, just like most of the others, achieves its aims and objectives through various forms of participation: Anyone who wishes to is invited to visit the project's website and – after reading through the instructions and, needless to say, anonymously – add the ten events which they consider the most important in their life. It is accompanied by a poster campaign. An essential aspect of Mats Staub's works is to encourage as many people as possible to remember their past. »Actually all my projects are more or less a type of »audience questioning,« he explains, adding about his art in general: »I think it's good when people stop and remember things. I mean this in a literal sense. We need to pause for a moment, take time to contemplate on what has taken place, why it happened, how we have become what we are – and whether it should stay that way.« Mats Staub unearths these moments, more specifically the memory of them, using every available media source.

Condensed memories

In a more radical approach than for the »Ten of My Most Important Life-Events« project - in which an event can be described in one or several sentences together with a specific date - Mats Staub uses two other projects to put people's memories into a more compact form: »The Names of Love« and »Holidays«.



These projects are more about placeholders, about names and numbers.

The »The Names of Love« project consists of video recordings of people who simply state the names of the »loves of their lives« one after the other: »Ferdinand« says an old lady after a little thought, and before adding »Friedhelm«. The film is not longer than an average love song video – and yet the room, in which the video installation has been set up, is filled with a symphony of names from the respective loudspeakers of the various screens.

In contrast, »Holidays« shows people contemplating questions that can be answered with a single number, for instance: »How many different professions have you had?« Or: »How many people did you got to know in the past twelve months?« The young man needs 33 seconds before answering. He takes a deep breath, purses his lips, starts counting silently, gives a little grin, counts again, has a brief laugh and then says, with a little uncertainty: »35?« Both works are condensed to their absolute essentials: The telling of love and life stories reduced to just the names and numbers of lovers and events respectively. The recollection of memories, and the stories which they reveal, takes place in the mind. As the viewer, you watch the faces of »substitutes« as Mats Staub likes to refer to them. The faces of substitutes, who reminisce about the people they have loved and their own lives, faces that can be scrutinised over and over again, and from which the memories can almost be interpreted. The aim, of course, is to also evoke your own recollections and memories: »I just love watching the viewers, studying the people answering the questions in »Feiertage«, who unconsciously start using their fingers to count. This is what I want to achieve,« says Mats. And: »When it actually happens, I feel elated!«

Dialogue memories

Watching someone remembering their past – this just has to be the brainchild of someone with a theatrical background. Mats Staub is an experienced dramaturge, but felt the spatial and temporal constraints of the theatre environment were restricting his creativity. This applied, above all else, to the one-way communication which actors have with the audience sat in front of them. His second strategy, besides the extreme condensation of meaning, is extensive dialogue. A journalist once referred to it as the »art of dialogue«. It was during his teenage years that Mats realised: »If the conversation was good, the evening was good. You can't beat a good conversation. I still aim to get into conversation whenever the opportunity arises. It simply enriches my life!«

This is particularly clear in »21«, a work he designed for the re-opening of Künstlerhaus Mousonturm in Frankfurt am Main in 2012. This project involved him talking to the residents of a local retirement home. The gist of the dialogue: How people experienced their coming of age. However, it was not enough to simply ask questions, something Mats Staub has enjoyed doing ever since his childhood and which was all part and parcel of his previous job as a journalist. (»That's what I liked best about journalism: Being allowed to ask questions.«) On the contrary, in this project he needed to be an active listener, while becoming part of the conversation and providing an insight into his life – talking about *himself* at twenty-one years of age, for example: »1993 was a year in which so many things happened.« In other words, a real conversation: »I need to feel a sort of connection to the people.«

Mats Staub recorded and edited all the conversations with the old age pensioners before returning to the retirement home and presenting an audio collage of their memories to them. The one and only condition was that they remain silent while he filmed

them listening to their own stories. Once again, the viewer can watch someone reliving their memories: »I like this listening face!« says Staub. But this time you can also listen to the respective stories. For example, the one told by Helga Winterstein, who turned twenty-one in 1945. She sits and listens to her own voice: »I can see it as though it was yesterday; my father was in hospital in Bad Homburg. He called me to his bedside and said ... »Helga, you're responsible for Guenther now« ... my brother, who was three years younger than me, and our mother. »They're not able to look after themselves.« The corners of her mouth begin to twitch, she swallows once, twice, presses her trembling lips together and narrows her eyes until they are just slits. This provides immediate, emotional access to these memories. The audience embarks upon a journey through a »gallery of listening people«, as Staub calls it. »I was interested in creating a sort of parallel narrative,« he says, »visitors hear exactly the same as the person they are watching, just not at the same time.« And that triggers something – initially within the dialogue partners. A few months after the recording, Helga Winterstein claims to have rediscovered her own story. She said to herself: »My God Helga, you've forgotten everything. Everything you experienced back then. But actually you were so brave at the time.« However, it was something she had to come to terms with all by herself, she explains. And then, with steely determination and a strong voice: »This interview conveyed a feeling of strength and dignity, ultimately, about myself!«

However, talking about the past triggers a response not only from those telling the stories, but also from those watching the videos. The voices and people's reactions to their own memories have an almost captivating magnetism, the images amplify the memories, feelings are accessed and experienced directly. This inevitably sets you thinking about your own past. And it only takes two or three film clips before you start asking yourself: What about me when I turned twenty-one? What actually happened that year – and above all else: What did it mean to me? This is the reason why Mats Staub wishes to continue this project, in different cities, with different people of different age groups, and with totally different memories of being twenty-one.

Storytelling memories

The project entitled »My Grandparents« has for many years been one of the activities of his »Memory Bureau«, a title that quite clearly indicates he is not concerned with the romanticisation of memories, but the work of remembrance. And this is particularly successful when dialogue becomes the medium of storytelling. Just like the story of his grandparents who met in Africa. It is a story he has told many times. Usually to people younger than himself, people sitting opposite him in his grandmother's favourite chair, who then begin to talk about their own grandparents based upon a photo they have brought with them. For example, Magdalena Nadolska, who speaks into Staub's microphone: »All I know is that my grandmother always looks beautiful on each and every photograph. Her eyebrows always appear to be over plucked. It's something that always fascinated me; that her

eyebrows were almost non-existent, and before she left the house, she always used to pencil them in jet black.« And just as with Magdalena, these conversations always bring very personal details to the surface: »Another thing that has left a lasting impression on me was her genuine care for the food served up for each meal. It's still the same with me: I hate it when, for instance, my sister's children sit at the table and say: »I don't like it.« Then I actually say: »You know what grandmother always used to say: »You eat what is set before you!«

These are the moments Mats Staub looks for. If you ask him why he is so interested, positively fascinated, in memories, you receive what initially appears to be a somewhat surprising answer: »The present. The present is a key aspect for me, as opposed to becoming »caught up in nostalgia.« I'm not really interested in that at all. It's more about coming to terms with things that occurred in the past – in order to use this knowledge to shape the present and the near future.« As in the case of Magdalena, who at some stage realised where her particular relationship to food comes from. Mats Staub's experience has shown that dialogue is the best way to achieve these goals: »For me personally, the best thing is a conversation where the participants invite each other to tell stories. Ultimately, it should end in a story, but I believe conversation is the catalyst for remembering things.« And he never seems to tire of this, as there are actually no key themes that keep recurring on a regular basis. With one exception, perhaps: Death.

For instance, Magdalena Nadolska can remember her grandmother's death quite clearly: »The night she died, she suffered a coughing fit. It actually woke me up, but I didn't realise what was happening at first. She then said to my mother: »It's over, I'm going to die.« My mother replied: »Of course you are, you always say that. You've said that every time up to now.« And then my grandmother said: »No, no, this time I can really feel it: God is coming to take me.« A short time later, she passed away peacefully surrounded by her loved ones.« According to Staub, Magdalena is not the only one with such vivid memories: »The death of a grandparent is a particularly important theme of the grandparent project. It has to do with childhood impressions which stay with us and which – no matter how long ago it happened – are told in an extremely descriptive manner ...it has a kind of existential character ...,« adds the religious science graduate, »and this is what links religion to our memories.« And what actually leads him to the second key aspect of remembrance, besides present actions based on our past experiences: »The other reason why memories are so important for me – for me personally – is the way they are so deeply rooted within us; in other words, it's a way of listening to our inner voices.«

Cross-generational memories

The »My Grandparents« project reveals yet another aspect that is always present in the question of remembrance according to the Swiss artist: Cross-generational communication. It is not without reason that, as with many of his other projects, this project

revolves around the dialogue between various generations, or several generations talking about each other and learning from one another: »Our parents and grandparents are the people who were here before us and who can describe things – something a book or film can ever replace.« It is true to say that not everyone's life finds a place in *history*, but there is a *story* to tell about everyone's life.

According to Staub, it is often about discovering the truth, whatever that may mean: »There is, for example, an emotional truth and perhaps also a factual one. Evidence for some of the stories from the grandparent project is, to say the least, a little thin. Storytelling can quickly become fictitious at some point.« Is this false interpretation necessarily »untrue«? Staub says: »It can be a case of self-deception or self-delusion, something I don't particularly like. Nonetheless, a good story, even if it is factually inaccurate, can still convey a lot of truth. This is true, for instance, of the majority of the classic biblical stories.« And he adds: »It's most probably not possible to remember anything without a little bit of fantasy ...!«

Mats Staub, born in Bern in 1972, lives and works in Basel and Zürich, and wherever his projects take him. He studied Theatre Studies, Journalism and Religious Sciences in Bern, Fribourg and Berlin. In the past, Mats has worked as a journalist for various publications and as a dramaturge at Theater Neumarkt in Zürich. He has been creating art projects in the transitional area between theatre and exhibition, journalism and science since 2004. More information about Mats and his work can be found at: www.matsstaub.com