



DEATH AND BIRTH IN MY LIFE

INTERVIEW WITH MATS STAUB

Your work is the result of a reflection on memory, often based on real individual or family stories. What is the place of this new project in your career so far?

Mats Staub: All my creations have a strong autobiographical part. One of my first projects, *Mes grands-parents* (*My Grandparents*), was born of the fact that, as a child, I thought I knew my grandparents well, only to realise as an adult that that wasn't the case at all. I had to ask questions around me. That was the basis for that first conversation project. Several other subjects followed, leading to four video installations, and to this new theatrical project. What ties my work together is my passion for real conversations. I used to conduct interviews with each of the participants. I then tried to create a project in which I wouldn't be the main interlocutor. In Johannesburg, where I presented the *21* installation, someone I was working with asked me about the death of my brother. Listening to my answers, her face took on really moving expressions. And I thought I could show the changes happening within all of us. I then made a list of the deaths that left a mark on me, to understand how they'd affected my life. My instinct told me to add births as well. There had to be, in this project, both the beginning and the end, those two moments in life which delineate an obvious before and after. Things had already changed for me when my godson was born. He was five when his father died of cancer; today, he's ten. This tragic event transformed our relationship, strengthened it. What changes in people's lives after experiencing a loss or a birth became the main focus of my project. For me, change came through loss, which is why the word "death" comes before the word "birth" in the title.

If *Death and Birth in My Life* is a video installation, it is reminiscent of theatre in its narrative device. How did you create the scenography?

There's something of theatre because this work is based on a specific duration and an idea of community. As in a normal situation, the show begins at a set time and includes an intermission during which the spectators can grab something to eat or talk to one another within a shared space, a shared atmosphere. I really want to create small ephemeral communities based on sharing. Those existential subjects that are death and birth aren't often addressed outside of the family, and I wanted to change that. I've also presented my work in museums, but I always come back to the theatre because the audience is used to this artistic form in which a narrative unfolds over a set duration. It's a place that provides us all with space for our own stories and emotions, where we can take the time to be together, at a different pace.

How did you choose the participants, and how did the conversations proceed?

For Avignon, as for all the other places we've been, we started with presenting the project to the Festival, before going on a public search for new participants. The main challenge is to bring together the right two people to have a conversation about their experiences with death and birth, and I'm still experimenting in that regard... In my previous projects, I asked questions of the participants, I let them react, I intervened, I cut things in editing. Here, I give directions because it is my role as host, but the subject has to arise by itself. I force myself to follow the rhythm of the conversation and not to change the shape it takes. The only cuts I do are when the conversation goes on too long or the emotions become too intense. Before we begin, I give the participants the text I wrote about my own experience, because I want to share something personal with them. I also ask them to try to write a similar text, not to repeat it afterwards but to prepare for an exchange. The key idea is to share this time and to be at once listener and storyteller, to listen to the other's experience and to build on it to move to another memory. I try to create an intimate and safe space in which two people, sitting down as if for a banal conversation, can really listen to each other.

This experience of sharing makes us realise we aren't the only ones to face those moments, and that every experience holds value. We set up two cameras and the cameraman and I stand behind a black curtain, two metres away. The participants can therefore feel our presence. As soon as I feel that they need me, I go to them to reassure them. I never let anyone leave in tears after some strong emotion, which can happen. We always set aside some time to recover from this intense state, to calm down.

Why this long, evolving form? What drove you from one continent to another, from Europe to Africa?

I like the idea of long-term projects, because they allow me to take my time, to follow new leads, and thus to go in new directions, including geographically speaking. The map of my journeys also includes autobiographical elements, personal memories that go back to the story of my grandparents, who were from Switzerland but met in Tanzania in 1928. As the first idea for this project came to me in Johannesburg, I wanted to include South African stories right from the start. And after working in the Congo and in Mali, I was even more interested by this idea of an opening between Europe and Africa, while remaining very careful of avoiding the clichés associated with different cultures. Some films can be shown anywhere in the world, others have to be seen in a more local context to be understood. My African experience showed me different ways of handling emotions and gave the project a more political aspect, which is also important for me.

This experience, full of humanity, turns out to be a way for the word to be freed, similar to a mourning, or even healing, process, and seems to be just as cathartic for the audience as it is for the participants...

There is indeed a healing side to the project, and I think it's something art can provide, this experience of sharing, of truly being listened to. I see theatre and festivals as the perfect places to talk about those topics and bring people together. Spectators and participants alike can feel it. It's a project that's still changing today. I'm definitely not the same person I was two years ago, when I started it. It's an organic transformation, tied to time but also to the experiences I've gone through, thanks to the testimonies I've collected, which have allowed me to better understand and accept the loss I've lived with for five years and the new emotions that event brought to the surface.

Do the participants tend to keep in touch, with each other or with you?

Yes, some of them did. During filming for one conversation, two German women truly connected and became friends. The structure, the form I want to give to each of my projects has to offer something to the participants. It would be impossible to keep in touch with all of them, but the project is like an exchange of gifts, people give their stories but get something out of it, too. In a way, the goal is already achieved when the conversation takes place. Spectators are also given the opportunity to write letters to the participants. I didn't to have a "guest book," I wanted something that would be more personal, to allow spectators to continue the conversation with those who wanted to. We provide people with notebooks in which they can write letters, and which everyone can read every night. At the end of the show, the letters are sent to the participants. It lets them know where their conversations have been, and what audiences perceive of them. Which creates a new circle, what you might call a virtuous circle.

Interview conducted by Malika Baaziz the 26th February 2020 and translated by Gaël Schmidt-Cléach