

CONVERSATIONS A PHOTO ELYSÉE PODCAST

EPISODE #2 – ROGER EBERHARD TRANSCRIPTION

Katie Kheriji-Watts

Welcome to *Conversations*, a podcast by Photo Elysée that invites you, behind the scenes of a photography project. In this series of episodes, we're exploring the work in progress of the eight artists nominated for the 2025 Prix Elysée, an international photography prize supported by Parmigiani Fleurier. I'm your host, Katie Kheriji-Watts.

Roger Eberhard is fascinated by landscapes of all kinds, what they reveal and what they hide. This Swiss photographer uses the camera to explore the not-so-obvious histories of places that have been changed by human exploration, industry, and politics. He's been nominated for the Prix Elysée with a 12-chapter project titled *Meanwhile*. It spans 300 years of human history and is taking him all over the world, from Berlin to Chicago to the Arctic Ocean. Roger and I talked about vulnerability, being stuck in traffic, and the luck that comes with shooting on location.

Roger, it's so lovely to meet you. I would just like to start quickly by asking you for people who've never met you before, just to introduce a little bit about yourself and who you are as an artist and a photographer.

Commenté [AZ1]: I would just like ?

Roger Eberhard

My name is Roger Eberhard. I was born in 1984 in Switzerland. I studied photography in the US and fine arts in Switzerland, and I've been doing this for about 20 years now.

Katie Kheriji-Watts

As you just mentioned, you're from Switzerland, and I believe you live there now. You just mentioned also that you spend a lot of time in other countries, including the United States, Canada, and I believe, Germany as well. I was curious about how living abroad has influenced you as a photographer.

Roger Eberhard

Well, obviously in the US and in Canada, first, I lived in Canada for two years assisting a commercial photographer, which was my first look into photography. Then I moved to California and studied photography at Brooks Institute. This obviously shaped my photography in ways like learning the medium. I went to a very technical school. I studied commercial photography. I became a very technical photographer. That obviously helped me making large prints now. After that, after five years in North America I moved to Berlin for about 11 years or 10 years in total. There I was surrounded by lots of artists, lots of galleries. I went to see lots of shows. That probably influenced not so much my technical side of my art practice,

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but more the visual stuff that goes with it and scenography in galleries, etc. It was just a very artsy environment, and I loved it. There were lots of parties and good fun. I enjoyed the artistic life during that time. But I've moved back to Switzerland seven years ago, and I live now very secluded, so quite the opposite of my time in Berlin.

Katie Kheriji-Watts

For people who might not be familiar, what does it mean to be a “technical photographer”?

Roger Eberhard

I wouldn't consider that a term “technical photographer”. I went to a very technical school. So, the technical aspect of photography, the exposures, everything was on film still. There was nothing digital yet. It was very important. In terms of what I meant by it, it was more being capable of making extremely sharp photographs that hold up with high resolution, hold up in large prints. That's what I meant. I don't think otherwise it's a proper term.

Katie Kheriji-Watts

Okay, so it's really about how to use a camera and how to make sure that you're getting the best quality images from the materials that you're using. That's fantastic. Switching to the artistic side, you say that many of your artistic projects reflect your interest in political geography, and I was wondering if you could explain what that term “political geography” means to you and why you are so interested in it.

Roger Eberhard

Political geography to me is, well, looking at a landscape through the eyes of what has happened to it politically, how politics, nation-states, borders, etc., have shaped landscapes, whether this is actually visible in the field or just as an add-on, knowledge-wise : a loaded landscape, places that used to be battlegrounds. Obviously, you don't see traces of that. But at the same time, when you speak about such a landscape, you always refer to the wars that have been fought on it. That's what I'm interested in this : landscapes that I don't visit just for their beauty. That's something that I'm not interested in at all, but more for their history, for their potential, for their conflict-solving possibility.

Katie Kheriji-Watts

Why is this interesting to you specifically as a photographer?

Roger Eberhard

I think it's interesting to me as a person. This is where my own interests lie. I think I'm just into it, I guess. What I'm fascinated by in photography is that it's such a clash between visible and invisible. What I'm talking about most is actually not visible in the landscapes. I'm fascinated by this aspect of how you get time and politics into a landscape without actually showing it. Just by sheer context or by just me being there makes it a political landscape.

Katie Kheriji-Watts

Could you give me an example of maybe one of the first projects you did as a photographer that really looked at and tried to examine this idea of political geography?

Roger Eberhard

I think that almost all of my projects, at least for me, had this baseline, this interest. But for example, the project that I did called *Norma*, one of the earlier works where I photographed a street outside of the city of Hamburg that had houses on that were completely empty. But the government Hamburg kept them up. They were heated during the winter. The streets were cleaned, the grass was taken care of just so that it continued to look like a normal street. This happened because Airbus, the airplane company, extended their airport in Hamburg, and it became too loud to live there. The government in Hamburg bought all of these houses up. People moved out. But the rest of that village didn't want to live in a ghost town. The government in Hamburg decided to almost create a Potemkin village in this place. This is obviously a very political act. It actually took a vote. At the same time, it is an interference in the landscape that you could barely see. You had to know if you drove past the street, you'd have never known that all of these houses were deserted. This would be one of the earlier projects. Then obviously, my large border project that I did between 2016 and 2020 would be another example of such a political geography project.

Katie Kheriji-Watts

What's your border project?

Roger Eberhard

I photographed places that used to be divided by borders. Places that had no longer borders. Either borders have moved away, empires collapsed, or natural phenomena as melting glaciers shifted borders or wars moved borders. So yeah, I photographed that.

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Katie Kheriji-Watts

Where was one place in the border project that really spoke to you the most or that you had the most maybe feelings about when you were shooting there?

Roger Eberhard

I think the border in Vietnam was quite intense. First, it was quite an intense trip to that Benhai River. At the same time, the Vietnam War was the first, maybe not the first, but one of the first wars that was heavily televised, was photographed extensively in the media, was brought home. I grew up with a lot of imagery from that war somehow. Also, they threw movies to. To actually be standing at this place, a super serene, small, quiet river in the middle of the jungle, and knowing that at the same time, 60 years prior, many lives were lost because of that border, because of that conflict, was fascinating.

Katie Kheriji-Watts

You've been nominated for the Prix Élysée Prize with a project that's based on the idea of synchronicity, I think really builds on this practice that you've been developing around political geography and looking into the hidden histories of different types of landscapes. I was wondering if you could tell me about the inspiration for the project that you've been nominated for.

Roger Eberhard

I think the earliest inspiration that I can come up with for this project, the earliest time that I knew I wanted to do something about this idea of simultaneity was being stuck in traffic or being in a subway and very close to a lot of people, looking into their faces and realizing that all of them have very rich lives, grand or sad experiences. Knowing that our experiences, our realities, will probably never come closer and interfere with one another more than right at this moment, I always found fascinating and a bit sad at the same time. But I think then at that point with knowing people that know and understand and internalize this aspect that we all have our realities, and they may be grand or sad, etc., become more humane about other people's feelings. Especially in a polarized world, that's hugely important and that's hugely humane to know that we all have our own worlds that we live in, and they can be quite separate from one another. And none of these experiences is more important than the other person's experience. So that's what I think led me to this topic.

Katie Kheriji-Watts

And how did you go from this initial inspiration idea to something a little bit more constructed and that your project is now based on?

Roger Eberhard

I think that took about 20 years. That was quite a journey. I always wanted to do something about this, simultaneous events, what happened elsewhere. There's a radio program in Switzerland, and it goes through the calendar year, and you can listen to something that happened on this day 25 years ago, etc. This brought me to this project where I wanted to explore big events, the biggest events that we can think of for human history, for the course of human history, and research something that happened on the very same day elsewhere that was not of this great significance, at least not to the world- Maybe to a community, maybe to a family. It was as big, as important, maybe even more so. This is where I'm at now. This is what I'm doing.

Katie Kheriji-Watts

As far as I've understood, your project is really based around, first and foremost, 12 major historical events from the last 300 years or so. How did you arrive at those dates and events?

Roger Eberhard

I actually reached out to my peers. I asked 20 people in 20 different countries on all continents to name what they believe are the 12 most important events for the

course of human history. And then I just did math. I chose the events that were chosen the most by all of these 20 people. The 20 people actually gave 141 unique answers. There was a huge variety. People didn't really agree on that many events, which is at the same time fascinating and maybe to be expected. I didn't really think about what would come out. I waited until I received these answers. But at the same time, the variety actually, I thought was super interesting and will somehow be in this project as well, maybe as a short text. Then I went from there. I had these 12 events at the end that everybody could agree on, and then I started researching.

Katie Kheriji-Watts

I was curious why you decided to crowdsource this list of events instead of just deciding for yourself, basically.

Roger Eberhard

Probably exactly because there were 141 answers at the end. If you ask me what the 12 most important events in the last 300 years are, I come up with a Western, scholarly male in his 40s outlook on the world. This is exactly what I didn't want. I have a very varied pool of people, and that showed them the answers. I didn't just want this Western look.

Katie Kheriji-Watts

Could you tell me a few of the events that ended up being part of the 12 that you picked for your project?

Roger Eberhard

The earliest event that is in the project is the French Revolution in 1789. Then it goes to Haitian Revolution, the population of slavery in the United Kingdom, to the publication of Karl Marx's *Capital*, to the World War I, to the atomic bomb in Hiroshima, and it ends up with COVID.

Katie Kheriji-Watts

Covid was the last most recent event.

Roger Eberhard

This is the most recent event, exactly.

Katie Kheriji-Watts

Why don't we start with this first date, the French Revolution. You've turned these 12 dates into 12 chapters, some of which you've already started working on. Why don't you tell me a little bit about the chapter related to the French Revolution?

Roger Eberhard

The French Revolution, I found a super fascinating story. In the beginning, I thought the researching events that were so far in the past was the most difficult because there were no newspapers at that time and it was difficult to access archives, et cetera. But I found this fantastic story about a Scottish explorer, Alexander McKenzie,

trying to reach the Pacific Ocean through the river systems in Canada. But he reached the Arctic Ocean instead on the 14th of July 1789. He was quite disappointed. He wrote to his cousin. This is the River of Disappointment, et cetera. It's the second largest water system that he mapped after the Mississippi. It's named after him. He's a big hero. He actually went back there four years later and discovered the water passage to the Pacific Ocean as well. This was a coincidence. It's a wonderful story. I flew to the Arctic Ocean, photographed the last few days that he must have spent. I photographed the river, what must have been his last few days before realizing I'm not in a sweet water system anymore, but all of a sudden this is an ocean. I think he must have realized quite late because the river gets quite wide, and it doesn't change much in the beginning between the river and the ocean. I can relate or I could understand how he must have felt like: "Darn it, I'm not in a river system anymore. I'm still going north. This is not what I wanted to do." I photographed that and then I photographed maps that he drew in the studio. I went to a museum in Portland, that historical society that had maps that he made. I photographed a rose that is named after him, etc.

Katie Kheriji-Watts

I'm actually quite curious to hear a little bit more about your on-site work, following in his footsteps in this river system in the Arctic Ocean. I think that's probably a place not a lot of people have been to. It sounds like it might be a difficult place to just be in physically. What's it like for you as a photographer, maybe using this as an example, to really go on site and to shoot and how? Tell me a little bit about your process of doing that.

Roger Eberhard

I think it's fine. It's a huge trip, especially coming from Switzerland. This was a 48-hour trip just to get there. It was six flights in very small planes. At that time of the year, when I was there, they had 24 hours of daylight, so you could technically shoot at any time you want. The sun was always low if there was sun out. Unfortunately, when I arrived, it rained for the first three days, and it was just... There was no sky, it was just gray. You head out a lot. You try because you have a limited amount of time there. You have to beat your inner slacker. Quite often, I think a lot of landscape photographers or people that are out in the field know this. It's not that much fun getting up at, I don't know, 3:00 in morning just because the weather app tells you between 3:00 and 5:00, it might be dry. You have to anticipate luck a little bit. You never know when something good might happen. You have to talk to a lot of people. In my case, I ended up the photograph that will be in the book is taken from an airplane, from a very small airplane. I met these Americans that traveled all the way up there from Washington State just to go to a graveyard from this guy, the Mad Trapper, that passed away in the '30s, that was shot by the police in the '30s. They charted this small plane, and I was able to hop on and photograph from that plane. This is probably the key shot. You just have to be on your toes and hope for the best and just make it work.

Katie Kheriji-Watts

Tell me a little bit about this image from the plane. What does it actually look like? And why is it the one that you picked out of all the pictures that you shot during your time there?

Roger Eberhard

It's a photograph of the McKinsey Delta. You see that there is not just one river going through the landscape, but it's hundreds of lakes, of small river arms, maybe even thousands. You understand how difficult it must have been to navigate through this. You see trees. It's right below the tree line. So, the further north you get, the closer you get to the Arctic Ocean, you don't have trees anymore because you're too far north. And you just see green and blue. You don't see a single house for kilometers and kilometers. It's just extremely vast, open country. It shows extremely well what 250 years ago, Mackenzie did.

Katie Kheriji-Watts

Did you think about the French Revolution at all while you were there?

Roger Eberhard

No. I'm grateful for what happened there during the French Revolution. Obviously, the project is not about belittling these main events. There's no way you can do that. They are significant for the reasons, and they have shaped our lives already. They probably have shaped me in ways that I'm doing what I'm doing right now. All of them combined and many more. But I'm there for a completely different story that I'm trying to tell.

Katie Kheriji-Watts

As you mentioned, this is only one chapter of a much larger project that's meant to have 12. It's still an ongoing project, which is the case for all of the nominees of the Prix Elysée. I was wondering how being nominated for this prize evolves your practice as a photographer.

Roger Eberhard

I think what is interesting and a bit difficult at the same time, and probably the other nominees agree, I don't know, I haven't talked to any of them, is that normally at this early stage in making a project, I would never talk about it publicly. I would not show work from a project this early. You're at a stage where you're quite vulnerable still. I was in Arles this summer for a festival. People knew about the project. There was this small write-up I did that was accessible. People could read what my project was about. Quite often, and specifically once during dinner, there was a big discussion about this project at a stage where I had to answer very critical questions, almost. I was not nearly prepared for this. I think this is certainly what makes it different from past projects for me.

Katie Kheriji-Watts

The idea of being more vulnerable and open at a place in the project where things aren't quite settled, and that maybe feels a little bit uncomfortable.

Roger Eberhard

At the same time, there's anticipation, which is great. I'm not down talking it. This is also something that I have barely experienced. People are looking forward to what I'm doing now.

Katie Kheriji-Watts

Roger. I have one final question for you. What excites you the most about the creative process?

Roger Eberhard

Finding a way of telling a story that I had in my mind for a long time. Going back and forth and trying out different things until I reach a point where I say, Yeah, this is actually what I want to convey. This is what I want to tell people. Projects have different narrations. Some are bigger, some are smaller. Some are simple, almost snapshot works, and others need a lot of preparation. I think this, trying to find the right voice for the project that is in my mind.

Katie Kheriji-Watts

It's very interesting that you say voice because I wouldn't have thought, what's the link for you, I guess, between when you say voice and photography? How do those match up?

Roger Eberhard

I guess I speak quite often about a visual language. It's a way of how I talk about work. What is the visual language that I apply to certain things? It makes a huge difference whether I photograph something moody or photograph something very colorful and bright, or if I photograph something with an expired Polaroid camera, an expired Polaroid film, or on large sheets of film or with a digital camera. You have options on how to create a language. I think this is what I mean.

Katie Kheriji-Watts

Thank you so much for taking the time to speak to us. Thank you. I wish you the best of luck for your project, regardless of whether you end up being the final prize winner for the Prix Elysée. It was lovely to talk to you. I'm very excited to see what the next chapters of your project are going to be.

Roger Eberhard

Great. Thank you so much.

Katie Kheriji-Watts

Yes. Thank you so much.

You've just been listening to *Conversations*, a Photo Elysée podcast produced by Louie Creative – the content creation agency of Louie Media. If you liked this series, please comment and give us a rating. I'm your host, Katie Kheriji-Watts. All episodes were written by me and produced and mixed by Gautam Shukla with the help of Anouk Solliez, with music by Pierre-Antoine Wucal. This series was produced by Eloise Normand, with the help of Lola Lellouche, in close collaboration with Photo Elysée. Special thanks to Julie Dayer, Lydia Dorner and the entire museum's team as well as the photographers who generously shared their stories with us. The Prix Elysée is the result of an exclusive partnership between Photo Elysée and Parmigiani Fleurier. Photo Elysée, Museum for Photography, is a Museum of the Canton de Vaud managed by the Plateforme 10 Foundation.