

CONVERSATIONS A PHOTO ELYSÉE PODCAST

EPISODE #5 – SAMUEL GRATACAP 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.

Samuel Gratacap has spent the last 17 years focusing his lens on the complex topic of international migration. He's a French photographer and journalist who uses the camera to turn an abstract word like conflict into individual stories that capture some of the best and worst of humanity, often in extreme situations. He's been nominated for the Prix Elysée with a project titled *Welcome Europa*, which documents the journeys of people trying to get into the European Union through the Western Balkans. We talked about danger, border politics, and whether art has the power to change society.

Samuel, for people who aren't familiar with you and the work that you do, could you just introduce yourself?

Samuel Gratacap

Yes. I'm Samuel Gratacap. I'm a photographer. I mainly work in places of conflict, with people on the move, people who are in exile and places of confinement. It's been now almost 15 years that I'm working on this topic, mainly in Mediterranean areas. And now for the Prix Elysée, especially for this prize I was nominated for, I'm working in the Balkans area, Western Balkans.

Katie Kheriji-Watts

I'd love to hear you speak a little bit about another photographer that you really admire and who's maybe influenced your work in some way?

Samuel Gratacap

I remember about one specific photographer called James Nachtwey. I was quitting my art school at that time, and I was a bit lost, but I was still taking photographs. I've rented this DVD about James Nachtwey, *Documentary and Life*, and I was quite surprised about the life of this guy. I was as well impressed because it was a bit sensational, this documentary. But yeah, a lot of admiration for this great photographer who is working mainly for photojournalism, going into every bad situation and every place is related to violence in the world. He was there every time. So, I was like "wow, it's impressive." But I have to say that I'm quite far away from him

regarding how to produce an image. And, as well, in the project itself, I'm not only into photojournalism, but I'm also not only into that way of showing my pictures. Nachtwey was a big step for me because maybe it was related to my own life as well.

Katie Kheriji-Watts

Is there a scene from the documentary that stands out in your memory?

Samuel Gratacap

I remember one precise scene about Nachtwey being taken apart. There was like, a violent scene, street battle fight. I don't remember even if there were some weapons or not, but I remember there was fire, and some people were getting upset about the presence of Nachtwey in making pictures. It's something that's related to the work of a photographer, like documenting and trying to report about places that some people could accept your presence and that you're photographing them. Some people don't. It's always something you have to deal with, the agreement of the people. And something I didn't know, there was a fixer and a translator with him. He was not alone as he was pretending to be in this documentary. I'm used to it. I work with fixers and translators. So yeah, I remember this precise scene.

Katie Kheriji-Watts

You mentioned earlier that you went to art school and that your main focus at the time was doing more things like painting and performance art. So how did you end up doing photography?

Samuel Gratacap

I ended up into photography because I started when I was working with this art collective related to post-situationism. I was photographing with them. I always, since my 16, 17 years old, I was always playing with the normal stuff when you teenager, there is a camera around and you start photographing. But at some point, when I entered an art school, I started discovering the dark room and how to develop and how to make some prints in the dark room. And at that precise moment, I was really impressed. And it was magic for me. It was like "okay, I'm going around, I'm registering what is surrounding me. I'm coming back to this dark room and there is an image of it." I could put the image and the photographs together in sequence. Then it's a story. I was really fascinated because I was quite stuck with paintings. I wanted my art to be related to what was surrounding me. And with painting, it was really hard to speak about what I was doing. I was 19 or 20. But when you're doing something, it's good to push it. And maybe photography was my thing, not paintings.

Katie Kheriji-Watts

You've mentioned situationism a few times. For people that might not be familiar with that movement, could you explain it briefly?

Samuel Gratacap

Situationism is a movement born into the late '50s, early '60s. And Guy Debord was one of the theoreticians who wrote this book called *La Société du spectacle*. It was like a manifest in that time criticizing capitalism and the way that art and cinema could be related to this “société du spectacle”. It was quite visionary because his approach was to anticipate something which would happen, like capitalism, advertising. But it was not only criticizing, but it was also proposing several ways to behave and to confront yourself. So, he invented several theories. One of them was the *Théorie de la dérive*. It was how to behave in a different way that everybody behaves in the streets, for example. The idea of Debord was to propose also a way to imagine the city and to live in the city. Guy Debord wanted to connect the periphery more to the city center and to disconnect the city center from the periphery.

Katie Kheriji-Watts

A lot of your work over the last 15 years has focused on international migration, especially due to conflict. I was wondering if you could tell me the story of how and why this became your main focus?

Samuel Gratacap

I started to work on migration in 2007. If I'm going deeply into why, maybe I'm still trying to find the answer because now it's been 15 years and I'm trying to get some answers from the others. But working on that field, working on that topic, if I can call it a topic, it's not only finding one answer. There are many answers and many questions that are coming in every project I'm doing. There is not only one answer, but I think I'm quite admiring how people could make their lives in such conditions because my country is making their lives harder. But it's really hard to find an answer to this question.

Katie Kheriji-Watts

Can you tell me a little bit about the story of maybe the first time that you were really taking pictures on migration situation?

Samuel Gratacap

I was a student in art school. It was 2007. Our previous President, Sarkozy, was making his own campaign about migration, pushing them back to their own countries, and he was making his campaign about it. I was 25, and for me... I had to confront myself with this reality and not only read newspapers and articles about this. So, I managed to enter – we call it *Centre de rétention*. It's the detention center for migrants in Marseille. And for me, it was the first time that I confronted myself with this reality. It's actually a prison. It was during that time, a 15-days sentence for the people who were arrested in the streets of Marseille. And then they were put there, into this detention center for migrants, just to make agreements with several different consulates to find out where they are from. And once they find out where the people are from, they could send them back to their country. This program is still going on in France almost 20 years after. But the fact that the France and Europe change a lot regarding the

treatment of the people, no, it's 90 days detentions. It's not 15 days, it's 90 days. Our actual Ministry of Interior wants to go up to 120 days now.

When I was doing this, I was doing some sound recording with the people I could find there. I could not find the same people as every time I was going there. The people were changing. This was not the same because it was only a 15-days sentence. And yeah, I found many stories, many different stories. Many people were working, but it was the same treatment, 15 days. So, this place was called the "1515": 15 days of detentions, 15 minutes of judgment. The idea was to make, we call it expeditive judgment, expeditive justice, just to be effective because they were preparing the presidential campaign.

Katie Kheriji-Watts

Could you tell me briefly about one of the images that you shot during your time in this detention center in Marseille?

Samuel Gratacap

It lasted six months. There are many photographs. If I'm doing this same project today, I will do it completely differently. I was not even a photographer during this time. I was a student. But I remember one guy in a suit. I remember an old guy as well. We were working in the field. Mohamed, he was from Morocco. I could see that all his life he has been working. You could see it on his hands. I remember one situation – and we come back to the Nachtwey situation – when two youngsters, and I think they were minors, which is illegal in France to put minors into detention center. I'm pretty sure they were minors. They arrived and they rejected the idea to be recorded. And they just want cigarettes and money, and they just want to take a break because for them, it was really hard inside. And it was a really hard situation for me as well because they were really tough and rough with me, that I was doing shit, that I was doing nothing for them. And it was actually true and real that I could not take them and bring them outside of the detention center. And photography is not helping that way.

It was maybe one of the first times I confronted this type of situation, but it was not the last. I have strong moments in my mind, but some are not related to one, two photographs, but more about the situation. So, some moments are not recorded. And for me, maybe it's the moments that I remember the most. This fact of some people that don't want to be recorded at photographing is something we have to deal with, and we have to understand why it's happening. Maybe sometimes we, photographers, convince ourselves that our job is on the good side because we are showing the reality of a situation. But sometimes it could deserve the people, and sometimes the people, they just don't want to be photographed.

Katie Kheriji-Watts

Your work comes with a lot of complicated ethical considerations. You've been nominated for the Prix Elysée Prize with a project that focused primarily on the

Balkans. Tell me a little a bit more about the reasons for you wanting to shoot images from this particular area right now.

Samuel Gratacap

I've been working a lot about migrations and places of confinement in Mediterranean area, so different countries, France, so I just said Italy, Lampedusa, and Tunisia, and Libya. This is the Central Mediterranean, and we call it "Central Mediterranean route". But there is another route to enter Europe. There is one close to Spain, and there is another one the Balkans. It's the second one. Sometimes it became the first one. I'm quite interested in the Balkans area because this specific area, these six countries were part of the Western Balkans. They are not part of the EU, and they have wanted to be part of Europe for 20 years now. And now European countries are playing this game with these countries, which is the same game they are playing with Turkey. Their membership will be evaluated regarding how they will stop migration. If they are not managing well, they won't be part of the EU. It's the same that I've faced in Libya. So, when Europe is trying to find a way to stop migration, they could make agreements with militias, with some people who are not actually respecting the fundamental rights of the people in exile and the rights to get asylum, to seek asylum, for example. For me, it's really a shame that our countries are turning into that position. I knew it before with Libya, and they are doing the same with Balkans. For me, this behavior from European countries has repercussions on the life of the people. I want to show these repercussions. I want to show this violence, psychological violence, but as well, violence from police. I want to show the other side as well, the solidarity towards people on the move. There is one part of Europe, the young people, people from Germany, people from England, from Spain, from Italy, from Belgium that I met already. They are moving from Europe to the Balkans areas, trying to show and to help and to bring medical support, for example, and bring warmth and humanity to places where humanity is failing away. And for me, it's really important to show it as well, not to show only one side, which is important to show, like violence and the behavior of Europe. Europe is putting money, paying guys that are actually beating people, and it's... *c'est grave*. I don't know. It's a shame.

Katie Kheriji-Watts

It's a serious matter. For people that might not be familiar with the countries that comprise the Balkans and the Western Balkans in particular, can you just say what countries we're talking about?

Samuel Gratacap

There are six countries which are: North Macedonia, Albania, Montenegro, Kosovo, Serbia, and Bosnia.

Katie Kheriji-Watts

You mentioned that it's recently become one of the most, if not the most, traveled route into the European Union. Do you have a sense where most of the migrants that are taking this route are coming from?

Samuel Gratacap

It depends on the time. It depends on the agreement. They managed to make agreements, Italy with Libya, for example. If they are working with Libyan authorities and they managed to stop migration from these routes, people will and will find a way to pass to another road. Regarding the Balkans, people are mostly coming from Syria and Afghanistan, some of them from Morocco, Tunisia, and Egypt. There are different ways to move. It's not only going alone through the mountains because there are smugglers. And that's the other problem is that when you're closing some roads, when you are building walls, you are forcing the people to find other ways to go and to pass through the fences. And there is There's always a way, but people will have to pay, and they will have to pay a lot. So, when politics are making laws, they will help in parallel ways, which are like smuggling and smugglers, and it will cost a lot.

Katie Kheriji-Watts

You were mentioning earlier that your project, which, by the way, is called *Welcome Europa*, documents various forms of border violence, essentially. But it also really is trying to take into account these different volunteer initiatives that offer solidarity and also hospitality. I was wondering if you could tell me a little bit more about your process, and specifically the process that you have behind shooting images that are capturing really all sides of a story, both these really intense forms of political violence, repression, but also people who are really coming together and volunteering their time to try and be as welcoming as possible, especially to people who are fleeing situations of conflict and violence. So, what's it like for you to hold that dichotomy in your hand? And how do you make sure as a photographer that you're getting all of the images that represent the full picture of the story that's happening?

Samuel Gratacap

That will be very pretentious for me to say to you that I'm gathering all the images necessary to pictures the solidarity. Because I'm photographing some people who don't want to show every one of their actions because some of their actions could be named as illegal. I used to work with *Solidaires*, with some people who are making very strong actions towards migrants just to create safe passage. And in that type of situation, everyone is illegal. Everyone is acting as an outlaw. Police, activists, and people were crossing. So, I'm trying to build stories with time, not only in one shot, two shots. It will be very hard for me to picture the reality if I'm going once and coming back and saying "okay, this is the reality." No, I've been there only twice. One time for scouting, just meeting people and trying to understand how they work.

Katie Kheriji-Watts

And when you do that, you don't take pictures?

Samuel Gratacap

A few. I was going as well on my own. So that's actually a very good way to know if the reality is fitting mine. And when you're going alone on your own close to a border,

you will meet the police, right away. So, it's what I've done and what I faced in between Hungarian and Serbian borders. I improved the Hungarian surveillance system. In five minutes, they were catching me. I was taking pictures of this "Wall of Shame", we call it. It's 175 kilometers of fences between Hungary and Serbia, built by Viktor Orbán, far-right Prime Minister of Hungary. So, I'm having that experience, going on my own, and then I'm meeting people, and I'm sharing my experience with them about the police, about what I've seen, and they are sharing their own experience. And then we start working together because I want to show their actions. But for me, it's really hard in one shot to get the proper picture. So, I will have to come back at least twice and go in another part because for me, it's important to picture the solidarity, but it's important as well to go to some places related to violence. I'm quite interested between the border between Turkey and Bulgaria and Croatia and Bosnia because from the testimonies I get from the people on the move and from the solidarities themselves, I can see that the most violence points are that point. They are beating people with electricity. They are actually walking on the people. They are putting them on the ground, and they are walking on them. They are taking all their belongings. They are burning their belongings. They are taking money. They are shooting in the air with guns. This is Europe. This is Bulgaria and Croatia. They are part of Europe.

Katie Kheriji-Watts

Do you think of your work as being dangerous?

Samuel Gratacap

Yes, my work is dangerous, but I think not in these particular areas. There are some gangs, robbing and taking money from the people, there's what, kidnapping people as well, kidnapping people, and making the same as I've heard in Libya, kidnapping people and then calling the family just to take money from the families. My work is dangerous, yes, because I'm going to some places where smugglers are working and sometimes, and it's not related to this project in the Balkans, but where there are conflicts. So, I face really dangerous situations.

Katie Kheriji-Watts

Has that ever made you want to stop taking pictures?

Samuel Gratacap

No, actually, bad situations make me more mature. I never think about stopping my work, but more stopping putting my life into that situation. But you cannot predict. You can't predict danger. But if you're going to a war zone, automatically your life is in danger everywhere you're stepping.

Katie Kheriji-Watts

Hearing you say this, it's almost like you were mentioning this documentary earlier with a photographer who was well known for going into war zones, into different situations. And it's somehow like you've stepped into the documentary, and you've become the person that you saw on the screen.

Samuel Gratacap

No.

Katie Kheriji-Watts

A version of it. You don't think so?

Samuel Gratacap

No, because we don't have the same background.

Katie Kheriji-Watts

Okay.

Samuel Gratacap

I just make the connection because I was fascinating with the life of these guys. I'm trying to find some way to show in different way and different supports, like media, just to bring testimonies and to not being the first character of this story. I think I feel like James Nachtwey is more into being the first character, and I'm not.

Katie Kheriji-Watts

How does being part of the Prix Elysée align with the goals you have right now as a photographer?

Samuel Gratacap

Prix Elysée is a big step. It's a very good chance to be nominated to start something because it's been two years now that I'm thinking about going to the Balkans. When you have something in mind, you try to find a way to produce it. And first, it's good because with this amount of money, I could start this project and work as I want to do. It means with my medium format camera, with my film, not digital, working with Polaroids as well. I have a few of them still, even if they are not produced anymore. This relation with photography that I built when I was a student, I want to keep it safe to continue that way to be a photographer. As I said before, I work as well in the field of journalism, and I have to work with digital when I work in the field of journalism because we have to be quick. In a second, we have to send the pictures, and it's really not the same way of working.

Katie Kheriji-Watts

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

Samuel Gratacap

What excites me the most is when I have to think about whether I'm, for example, making a book or an exhibition. For me, it's really exciting and challenging to put the reader or the spectator in front of an experience with photography, with sounds, with video, with the space, space of the book, an exhibition space. So, the reader of the spectator could really be close to my experience and to the experience of the

people I'm photographing. This is really exciting for me because I noticed that some people could change their way of looking at migrations, for example, because of an exhibition. So, for me, it's quite important. People who are coming to me, I say, Thank you. And what is really exciting, but also really hard, is when you're starting something. Because when I'm starting a project, I'm trying to convince myself that it will be okay for four or five months. But every time I'm spending at least three years on it, two or three years, and I'm satisfied because when you have time, you don't have money, but you work with your own time and your own consideration, and you can see that people and places are evolving.

It's really good to project myself into that long-term vision. After 15 years of taking photographs, you don't have the same reflexes. You I work differently, and I can say that I'm more effective. I'm more convinced of what I want to do, what I want to say. So, I have the same excitement, but I'm going more into one specific point. I don't want to lose time because there is an emergency. That's why I took a step into journalism as well, because I felt the need to testify about what was going on, and I felt more free when I was doing some documentary project. We have the responsibility to testify and to show this reality and to picture it, not to be forgotten.

Katie Kheriji-Watts

Thank you very much.

Samuel Gratacap

Thanks to you.

Katie Kheriji-Watts

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.