



# PROCHE

## INTERVIEW WITH GRÉGOIRE KORGANOW

Your exhibition, *Proche* (“close” in English) plays with the various meanings of the word.

**Closeness between the different people photographed after their visit to a friend or family member in prison; closeness to the urban environment—the no man’s land that stands mere yards away from the prison; closeness of the words of the prisoners through videos of anonymous people reading their letters.**

**How did you immerse yourself in the prison environment to photograph those portraits, those “zones,” and to film those readings?**

**Grégoire Korganow:** The first time I worked on the topic of prison, it was for a commission for a documentary film by Stéphane Mercurio. I documented the daily lives of the wives of prisoners: meals, children being put to bed, everyday gestures. Afterwards, Christian Lacroix, then artistic director of the Rencontres d’Arles, offered to show my work on fashion... and asked me if there were other series. I showed him those portraits of women, which was a very different work from what I’m known for. In the end, they led to an exhibition and to immediate recognition. It was in 2007, and since then prison has never left me... even though I never thought I’d go back once I was done with that first series.

**Why are you interested in the world of prisons?**

Prison found me; I think I can say it like that. It’s a world characterised by a powerful and unique relationship to bodies, to violence, to fear, and to all sorts of power relationships; to male communities as well, which is a topic I’m interested in, and which I’ve been working on in a different way in my *Père et fils* (*Father and son*) series. Don’t get me wrong: I don’t ever feel safe in prison! Everything is under pressure, and it’s a pressure that never lets up. To shoot photographs in this very different space is a personal challenge, the desire to tame this reality without falling into the trap of demagoguery. Every time I go there, it’s with the desire to be extremely precise, and it’s that precision that has guided my work from the start.

**There’s no directness to your portraits. They show a sensitive and reserved aspect in the way you approach those “visitors.” In what state of mind do you take those pictures?**

There are different ways of taking photos of or in prison. My way of doing it is like standing on the very threshold, on the tip of my toes... My libertarian tendencies mean that I will always refuse to exercise power. But taking photographs means having power over someone. How then to divert the power inherent to the act of photographing? By giving the “subject” the opportunity to escape. I always create “framing devices;” I create protocols, and I always think beforehand about how I’m going to approach people. From a formal point of view, my approach to photography is very classical. I have a background in applied arts; I grew up with the idea that beauty is attractive. I don’t like to constrain people. I come to photography with more humility than modesty. Photography is creation, it’s striving towards something. It’s not an affirmation.

**The portraits (*L’instant d’après* (*The Moment After*)), just like the zones outside prisons (*Périphéries* (*Peripheries*)) show a form of delicateness, of suspense, of vibration, even of a twist in the way you establish a touching distance with your subjects. There’s no “assault” on the subject, no crudeness. Could you tell us more about how you work?**

You just have to look at the brothers, sisters, mothers, wives, and friends in the *L’instant d’après* series to see this twist, this gap, this suspended moment. I often draw a mark on the floor and ask people not to step out of it. Visitors coming out of the prison are always tense. Taking their picture with a specific lighting is an attempt for me to break away from the decisive moment championed by humanist photography, to focus instead on a longer time, a suspended time where something can happen.

Action is no longer in the image itself but in the trace left behind. And in a form of waiting, of vibration... The protocols I set up, as simple as they are, are demanding, because those people are physically agitated when they exit the visiting room, just like the dancers I photograph before a performance! To try and “freeze” them, to make them refocus on their bodies can reveal a slight twisting of a hand, a tilt in the way they hold their head. The body tells us much, and emotion is born of those small things that draw our attention...

**The third part of the exhibition is connected to the first two by a question you asked inmates: “What do you dream of?” Called *Mon rêve familial (My Familiar Dream)*, it takes the form of a selection of letters you received and of videos of anonymous people reading some of those very moving letters...**

For each exhibition, I try to start from the raw material I collected, to organise it, and then to create a form that would reveal it. When I discovered those letters, I was moved by their richness, their literary quality. I had to find the right way to showcase them. Right around then the yellow jackets movement started. I asked anonymous people on social media to come read those letters. People felt the need to speak. I set up a studio in the 16th arrondissement in Paris, near the Champs-Élysées... There were so many volunteers, come from all over France, that I had to make a selection. We worked over six days with 120 people. They faced three cameras, were asked not to step outside of the mark I’d drawn on the floor. I gave them a letter to read at the very last moment. It was a time of silence, of deafness. To allow voices to speak for other, unluckier voices had a restorative effect for a lot of people.

**With those devices and this desire to share, would you say that there is an ethics to your work?**

As a libertarian, it isn’t so much an ethics that I feel, or the desire for one, but a certainty: we can only live together if we are deeply aware of ourselves. This is the only way to connect, at least potentially, with others. In the photographs and videos I make, I give my “subjects” the opportunity to show this awareness of themselves. I want to incorporate them into a collective story. Some of them are really struggling, and I try to find the opportunity to help them find their place in society. Many of us aren’t heard, considered, respected. As an artist, I try to place people back within themselves, within their bodies, while giving them a role in this collective story. As for the audience, I would be happy if this exhibition allowed them to step to the side, to change or shift their perspective. My role isn’t to awaken consciences, but behind the photographs and videos, I invite people to ask not whether prison is necessary or not but what it reveals about us—letting people disappear behind those walls, die of boredom, and be exposed to so much physical and emotional violence. Because for most of them, incarceration is their only future. What does that say about us, individually and collectively? This exhibition encourages people to ask themselves those questions, with emotion playing a central part.

**An exhibition during the Festival d’Avignon is also the opportunity to meet a different audience. In that sense, *Proche*, by its scenography, looks almost as much like a performance as an exhibition...**

To be honest, I come to the Festival d’Avignon every year; I love its diversity in terms and shows and artists. To have an exhibition here is to give a “performing arts” dimension to a work made of photographs and videos. It allows me to imagine an itinerary for the festivalgoers, through different sequences, like so many layers of emotion that would create a unique journey towards spaces, faces, writings... The scenography was created with Bernard Bréchet, and the idea is to immerge the spectators in a sound environment in which the noises of prison mix with those of nature. Through those portraits of unknown people who just visited someone in prison, they will be able to feel the “rise” of an invisible, deeper, almost subliminal image: that of the inmates themselves. We’ve created an environment we hope will encourage at once sensations and contemplation. It’s a perfect fit for the Église des Célestins.

Interview conducted by Marc Blanchet in February 2021 and translated by Gaël Schmidt-Cleach