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Bernard Plossu

The American Years

Unpublished images 1966-1985

Curator

Marc Donnadieu



Place
Jean-Michel
Basquiat
Paris 13



Los Angeles, California, 1980 © Bernard Plossu

PRESS RELEASE

BERNARD PLOSSU

The American Years

Unpublished images 1966-1985

Opening on Thursday 23 March 2023, 18:00 - 21:00

An undisputed figure in contemporary French photography, recently awarded the Florence & Damien Bachelot Collection Print Prize along with printer Guillaume Geneste, Bernard Plossu discovered the United States in 1966, travelling from Mexico where part of his family was based and where he had initiated a few years earlier, in Chiapas, a cinematographic and photographic practice. Bill Coleman, one of his most faithful friends, was to be his guide. 1966 to 1974 were for him years of discovery of American society and of multiple encounters, in particular with the protagonists of the American counter-culture. From 1974 to 1985, he was deeply immersed in the American West. In 1977, he even settled in New Mexico and started a family there, until his irrevocable return to France in 1985.

"In photography, you don't capture time, you evoke it. It flows like fine sand, eternally. And the changing landscapes do not change anything. You don't take a photograph, you 'see' it, and then you share it with others. I practice photography to be on the same level as the world and what is happening."

Bernard Plossu

It is therefore in the face of the immensity and of the diversity of American life, which suddenly offered itself to his European gaze, that his photographic practice was to take on its full scope with its characteristic way of transcribing encounters and feelings.

The images of Bernard Plossu's "American years" are less like the logbook of a stay of almost twenty years in the United States than a true existential experience whose thread stretches like the long roads that cross the various states of the West, playing with borders and on which he plays the tightrope walker between chance and destiny. The different stages were prosperous and the journeys dazzling until an unpredictable and definitive end. "America: Love it or Leave it"; "So Long", replied Bernard Plossu, his head full of images and his eyes still sparkling.

Since 2007 and the exhibition "So Long, vivre l'Ouest américain 1970/1985" at the Fonds régional d'art contemporain de Haute-Normandie, no other in-depth work had been done on this formative period of his work.

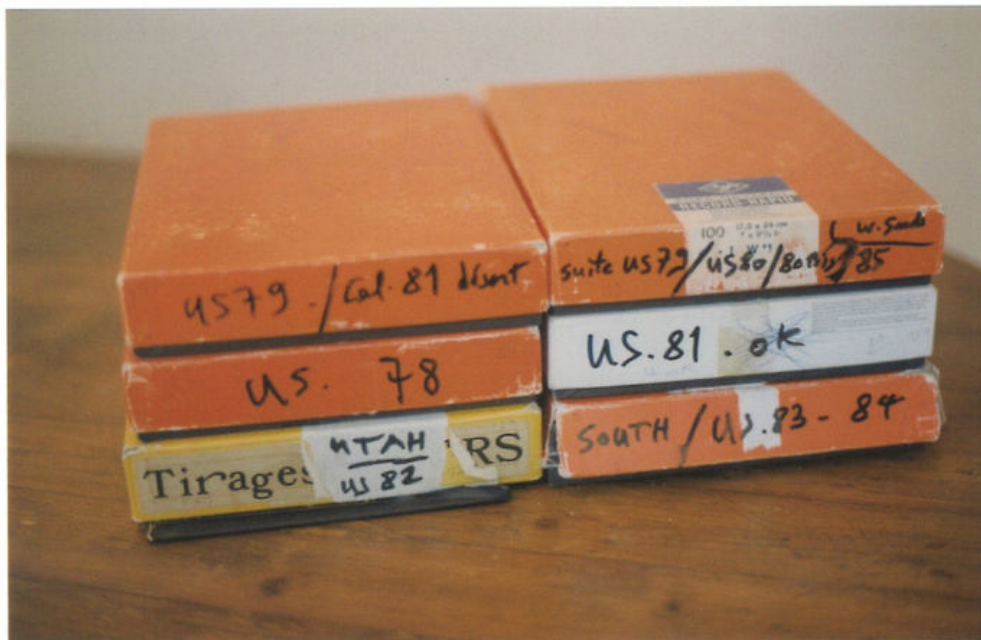
Thanks to the miraculous discovery of 6 boxes containing nearly 860 reels and more than 200 prints not yet inventoried, Bernard Plossu has now delved into his entire archive of these "American years". It is therefore a considerable sum of previously unpublished images that is now available to us. This is a real event both for the knowledge of Bernard Plossu's photographic work and for our vision of the United States during the decisive decades of its history through the eyes of a "Frenchie".

In an exceptional exhibition, the Galerie du Jour presents some of the unpublished and recently found prints relating to Bernard Plossu's American sojourns during the years 1974-1985. The images unfold freely on the wall, like road movies without beginning or end, where the American reality merges with its own mythology.

This project follows on from the six previous projects on Bernard Plossu's American period:

- "Go West", a book published by Éditions du Chêne in 1976 (Bernard Plossu's second book after "Surbanalisme", now out of print);
- "Le Jardin de Poussière", published by Éditions Marval in 1989 (now out of print);
- "So Long, vivre l'Ouest américain 1970/1985", exhibition at the Frac Haute-Normandie with a catalogue published by Éditions Yellow Now in 2007 (now out of print);
- "Far Out! Les années Hip : Haight-Ashbury, Big Sur, India, Goa ", book published by Médiapop Éditions, 2011 (work mainly based on two reports published by the magazine Rock & Folk in 1970 and 1971);
- "Western Color", exhibition at the Rencontres d'Arles accompanied by a catalogue published by Éditions Textuel in 2016;
- "Mark Cohen/Bernard Plossu. Americas", exhibition at the Galerie du Jour in 2017.

Marc Donnadieu, curator.



A photo of Bernard Plossu's personal boxes containing the 860 exhumed films.

(c) Bernard Plossu



Côte Californienne, 1979 © Bernard Plossu

Arizona, the country of Cochise, the chief of the Chiricahuas Apaches, New Mexico, Colorado, Utah, Nevada, California, Western Texas and Western Oklahoma, it is this immense desert which goes up to the sea, up to the Pacific Ocean, hot in the South in the palm trees and close to Mexico (Los Angeles), foggy and oriental, reminiscent of Scotland even sometimes, in the North, the superb region of Big Sur (San Francisco)...

It was there that I arrived by an extraordinary chance, at the age of 21, with my friend Bill Coleman! We had just come from Mexico where we had met.

And I would return there all the time, as much as possible, in this gigantic West, crossing the roads and tracks little by little, over the years, everywhere, until I settled there, for good, at the beginning of the winter of 1977, near Taos, on the high plateaux, at an altitude of two thousand two hundred metres, in the land of the sage where Shane was born on July 14, 1978!

From there, it was also on foot that I discovered, with my friends Dan and Doug, the wilder corners of this "garden of dust".

These photographs are the itinerary of the years when I stayed there for good, of those endless roads, season after season...

They are also a testimony of a way of life of the people of the West, in towns or in out-of-the-way places, of their cultures, whether they were Indians, Chicanos or Anglos, until 1985 when I returned definitively to Europe...

—
Bernard Plossu
July 2006

(extract from "So Long, living the American West 1970/1985",
Frac Haute-Normandie & Éditions Yellow Now, 2007)

TO BE SEEN AT THE EXHIBITION

(Free visuals for the press)



BERNARD PLOSSU

Arizona, 1979

Courtesy Galerie Camera Obscura
& Galerie du Jour agnès b.



BERNARD PLOSSU

Arizona, 1984

Courtesy Galerie Camera Obscura
& Galerie du Jour agnès b.



BERNARD PLOSSU

New Mexico, 1985

Courtesy Galerie Camera Obscura
& Galerie du Jour agnès b.



BERNARD PLOSSU

New Mexico, 1983

Courtesy Galerie Camera Obscura
& Galerie du Jour agnès b.



BERNARD PLOSSU

San Luis Obispo, Californie, 1979

Courtesy Galerie Camera Obscura
& Galerie du Jour agnès b.



BERNARD PLOSSU

San-Francisco, Californie, 1981

Courtesy Galerie Camera Obscura
& Galerie du Jour agnès b.



BERNARD PLOSSU

Los Angeles, Californie, 1980

Courtesy Galerie Camera Obscura
& Galerie du Jour agnès b.



BERNARD PLOSSU

Orange County, Californie, 1983

Courtesy Galerie Camera Obscura
& Galerie du Jour agnès b.



BERNARD PLOSSU

Santa-Fe, New Mexico, 1979

Courtesy Galerie Camera Obscura
& Galerie du Jour agnès b.

The American Experience by Bernard Plossu

by Lewis Baltz

When Bernard Plossu came to the United States in 1977, he was already recognized in France as a photographer, which implies that he was among the designated successors of the French tradition of reportage. Plossu has always remained faithful to this tradition, although his years in America have changed his vision in unexpected ways. He had travelled to the United States several times before marrying an American and living in New Mexico. His first visits had been photographic missions, like his trips to Mexico and Egypt; an extension of the ideology of reportage extended to exotic subjects. If the homogeneous cultures of the Third World intrigued the cosmopolitan European, it seems that he was also very attracted to the banality and alienation of contemporary life in America. This aspect of American society has been a source of inspiration - if one can use the word - for generations of American photographers (not to mention writers) and for such famous European visitors as Henri Cartier-Bresson and Robert Frank. Plossu's early American work is in the tradition of his illustrious predecessors. His first contacts with America's culture - or, from a European perspective, its lack of culture - are a reaction against American life, all of its blatant superficiality. But it was never like Plossu to be satisfied with superficialities, and he deepened his vision by becoming familiar with his subjects. He soon saw, in the mad solitude of the American West, something deeper than a post-surrealistic juxtaposition of Hopi ritual and television lunch trays.

Sartre made two particularly important observations about America. The first was that, unlike Europe, the cities were often younger than their inhabitants. The second was that in America the streets of the cities run in a straight line towards the horizon - as if towards infinity. These remarks are characteristic of the considerable effect that American space has on a cultured European. It is hardly an exaggeration to say that for a sensibility formed in a world of closed perspectives, rooted in human history, apprehending the empty vastness of the American West is a bit like losing one's gaze in the abyss. Americans are affected in the same way.

Joan Didion, an American author who herself described this experience of the American West with great beauty and precision, wrote in her review of Norman Mailer's *Executioner's Song*: "...The subject itself...is this immense emptiness of the Western experience, an antithetical nihilism... [The negation] of most forms of human effort, a fear so close to zero that human voices fade away, like writing in the sky. Under what Mailer calls "the immense blue of the terrible sky of the American West"... Nothing really matters." Didion was not the first to see the space of the West as a metaphor for nihilism: Dos Passos had already suggested a similar reading; in the end, it was Mailer, in his introduction to "*Executioner's Song*," who was most concise: "There were the mountains, then the highway, then nothing."

Plossu's masters are Corot and Malevich; two painters whose subject matter is hard to reconcile, except by the elegant quietism of each. Over the years spent in New Mexico, we see less Corot and more Malevich in his photographs; Corot's landscape, the garden of light, is made harsher by the experience of American solitude, and is transformed into a garden of dust, a garden of ashes. This is not to say that Plossu has become an American photographer, an impossible transformation that he does not wish to make. He has never really traded his European humanism for American nihilism, nor abandoned his pathos for American irony. But he has achieved an understanding that allows both points of view to coexist in his perception. During his time in New Mexico, Plossu learned that American photography was not just an iconographic index of exotic subjects, brilliant in their banality, but above all a set of attitudes, strategies, and pictorial ideologies, both determining America's understanding of itself and determined by it. Plossu's American work has antecedents; he had found New Mexico in Senegal long before he found Senegal in New Mexico. Metaphorically, Plossu already knew the American desert before he decided to move there. Plossu never abandoned Europe or the French photographic tradition; rather, he added a world to the world that was his by birth. There is something overtly romantic about the image of a French photographer reading Celine in a Ford parked overnight on the moonlit plateau of Monument Valley. There is something unsettling about a young father watching his much-loved, half-American son play among the sage plants of the New Mexico high desert.

Obviously, there is something more: Plossu's images, eloquent in themselves, are also fragments of Bernard Plossu's American reality. One cannot untangle the web of influences that make an artist what he is, but these fragments are pieces of what makes the man and the photographer. For all his culture, his intelligence, Plossu the photographer draws more from direct experience than from strategy or theory.

If there is a rational explanation for the affinity he claims with the German expressionist painters, it is undoubtedly their belief in art as a means of transforming everyday experience into a universal language of emotion. In a strictly professional sense, Bernard Plossu put his artistic identity at risk by moving between two distinctly different photographic traditions; he himself took the risk of being a Frenchman exiled in America, never a fully assimilated European, but so well shaped by his American experience that he could have felt half a stranger in his native France. This did not happen, because Plossu is a harsh judge of his influences, and uses his environment more than he is influenced by it. If his sense of light and space, i.e. of form, changed between Paris and Santa Fe, it is likely to be less because of the objective differences between these places - important as they are - than because of the differences that these places brought about in his sensibility. Above the vagaries of place and tradition, Plossu stands, in a sense, on the borders of cultures. Plossu also stands a little on the side, alone. Singular.

Lewis Baltz

Sausalito, 1985

Extract from « So Long, vivre l'Ouest américain 1970/1985 »

Frac Haute-Normandie & Éditions Yellow Now, 2007

INFORMATION



About La Fab.

La Fab., the place of the agnès b. endowment fund, opened in January 2020 in the heart of a new Paris, place Jean-Michel Basquiat in the 13th arrondissement.






The Fab. houses the Librairie du Jour and two exhibition spaces: a space dedicated to the agnès b. contemporary art collection and the Galerie du Jour.

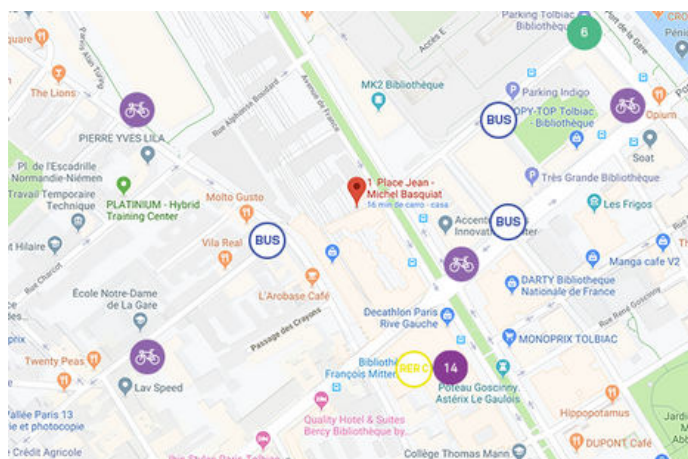
The layout was designed by agnès b. in collaboration with architect Augustin Rosensthiehl.

Access

La Fab. - Place Jean-Michel Basquiat - Paris 13e

Wednesday - Saturday 11am - 7pm / Sunday 2pm - 7pm

-  Ligne 14
Bibliothèque François Mitterrand
-  Ligne 6
Chevaleret
-  RER C
Bibliothèque François Mitterrand
-  Lignes 25, 61, 62, 71, 89, 325
-  Vélib
rue Paul Casals, rue du Chevaleret



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Let's be friends !!



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