



Bernard Plossu: A Lesson in Poetical Anthropology

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Bernard Plossu : A Lesson in Poetical Anthropology

“To make a start,/ out of particulars”

William Carlos Williams, *Paterson*.

“La nature est un temple où de vivants piliers

Laissent parfois sortir de confuses paroles;”

Charles Baudelaire, “Correspondances”.

A photographer does not study; he sees. And he cannot but “make a start out of particulars”, he cannot have “ideas but in things”: he has to be wherever he is. He exists in an in-between space, in a process through which the world (the real, reality, the word chosen is not important here) rises to him, bathes him, and forces him to resolve at each and every moment the question of self and other, of resemblance and difference, in a manner more conscious than any other human being.

Bernard Plossu who has been photographing people, their lives and environments for 25 years brings his own visual contribution to that definition. He was born in Vietnam in 1945 of French parents, was raised in Paris, and started a photographic and traveling career by going to Mexico in 1965, where he followed anthropological expeditions, eventually doing reports for magazines. He then moved to California in the early 1970’s, before settling in Taos, N.M., in 1979, while never ceasing to travel extensively in France and Africa. New Mexico became a paradoxical home for him, close and distant at the same time, rich in potential because of its alien quality, rich also because of a proximity, a sort of concentrate of everything he had been pursuing in his photographic life. In that part of the world, in a nation emblematic of a multitude of cultures, much of the history of the Western World since the beginning of modern times seemed to be inscribed: contacts of Latin and Anglo-Saxon cultures, encounter of whites with non-whites (“primitive”, “savage” cultures), and confrontation of all with the landscape.

Plossu, however, is no anthropologist. He is a producer of forms. A photographer does not study; he sees. And he cannot but “make a start out of

particulars”, he cannot have “ideas but in things”: and whatever his conception of culture, it is first and foremost a gaze.

Photography is rather helpless at imparting understanding. We have known that for a long time : Brecht, Adorno, Benjamin (to quote but a few) raised that point long ago. Photography shows us envelopes, outward appearances that could be called “free” or “free floating” insofar as they are ready to be enlisted in many different regimes of truths. Yet being “quasi-perceptions” they have a particularly privileged relationship with the world—an economy—a fact which makes them interesting mediators of *intermediate* status.

Plossu fully plays with this ambiguity—one of his books was called *Intermediate Landscapes*—in a personal exploration of fundamental anthropological questions, but asking them through a tactile, poetic world. His whole work—and particularly that done in New Mexico which is exemplary—is a painful attempt to solve the problem of otherness—which implies a fundamental solitude—as well as that of the founding link between human beings that Paul Ricœur defined so well in terms of contact and exchange between beings who are at the same time sufficiently similar and sufficiently dissimilar.¹ The connection of similitudes is what culture means for him, and to photograph means to try to find the proper resonance (as physicists speak of resonating systems), the proper *correspondence*.

In Plossu’s work this can be seen in his peculiar nomadic relation with the territory and the intermediate/ambiguous distance he keeps with the subject, thus opening new perspectives on the question of identity.

I — Sedentary vs. Nomadic Existence

New Mexico, as contact zone between three radically different economies of the land, because of its small population and vast territory sums up many of the problems of the relationship between man and the land which pervade American history. It also represents, on the territory of the United States, the third summit (the other two being the East coast and California) of a triangle of forces so characteristic of American mythology and maybe best formulated in Jack Kerouac’s canonical *On the Road*.

Almost symbolically, New Mexico was for Plossu the end of the road (at least a temporary one). After first discovering North America through Mexico, i.e. through its Latin side, after basking in the sun of the Pacific coast when it was the scene of social turmoil, it was in the characteristic, difficult and even secret South West that he decided

¹ Paul Ricœur, “La marche du siècle,” France 2, November 4, 1992.

to settle in 1978. After years of nomadic existence, after travels which had led him all over the world, the change of mental and physical relationship between the individual, culture and the territory was a difficult process for him: working on the familiar, the repetitive was disturbing, paralyzing for a photographer who, like the characters of *On the Road*, relies so much on surprise and new stimulus, who keeps his eyes on the next piece of the world which keeps him dreaming. Acclimatization was difficult, writes Gilles Mora in his introduction to *New Mexico Revisited*; Plossu caught many allergies as if planting roots produced antibody reactions.² He felt that a sinking into the materiality of the place, an immersion into its soil and weather would interrupt his creative process based on encounters and flashes of sudden revelation. In a way, familiarity does not breed contempt but complication and block, for those photographers. Then came a process which revitalized Plossu's eye: his son was born and the place—Taos, N.M.—made sense; it became reunited to the line of his own (his)story, it connected with all the other places which had shaped his existence: Vietnam where he was born, Grenoble and the Alps where he spent his holidays, the African desert that he discovered with his father when he was 13 (a critical age when the rite of passage into adulthood takes place) and where he made his first photograph, forever linking the paradoxical grandiosity of the desert, of infinite space, with the photographic act and the chain of generations.³ Shane anchored Bernard, the father, in this specific place.

Despite these newly established roots Plossu did not make New Mexico into a quiet, peaceful home. In fact his gaze never settled, it simply kept exercising itself repeatedly upon the same object, the same limited locale, defining it slowly through layers of photographs. The themes became repetitive, the eye tried again new configurations. The view was always of the outside of things, from the road or even the car, often of the road itself. But appearance, surface, gives way to existence and essence, a deeper understanding of life through the elements:

the photographs in this album are not reportage done quickly just going by; they are images of the country *where I live*, where the sun, the dust, the rain, the mud, the wind the snow, the altitude (7,000 ft.), the smells teach me everything. To photograph is *more than to see what is "beautiful."* It is the need to understand, and to try to explain.

² Bernard Plossu, *New Mexico Revisited* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1981).

³ "the immensity of the horizon of African space. It was then that I took my first picture and it was then that the idea of becoming photographer entered my mind. [...] My son Shane was born in the American desert." (Bernard Plossu, *The African Desert* (Tucson: Univ of Arizona Press, 1989); interestingly enough *The African Desert* was published in a series also including *Four Corners Country* and *Hopi Photographers/Hopi Images*.)

These images are about the place *where my son was born*, in Taos, on July 14, 1978, and this book is for him. [*NMR*, v, my italics]

Plossu—who believes that if there is a culture it is deeply conditioned by the territory, and that you may only know it by difference with what you are, which presupposes that you must first try to know thyself—recreated the conditions of the roamer. “The only feat in traveling is to decide to leave.” What counts really is the first incremental move which suddenly breaks the usual horizon and makes you access “elsewhere.” “Walking is the best way to go from nowhere to elsewhere.”⁴ Seeing—and existence—begin as soon as the body starts moving in space, and which is constant preoccupation in his images where the trace of the photographer’s body is often present. So when Plossu says that the New Mexico countryside is the Wild American West [*NMR*], it should not be taken as a sign of his falling into the “exotic” trap.⁵ Beyond what appears as a cliché, I see in fact the emergence of a specific analysis of the relationship with the land, both violent and extreme, elemental and self-revealing (“it taught me everything”). In this context, a “pioneer” is not simply someone who comes first, paves the way, but someone for whom the whole gamut of possibilities is open, someone who is confronted with the tremendous historical responsibility of making choices, of traveling these roads, and of trying new configurations. This creative exploration—the metaphor of the artist as traveler must be pursued as far as possible with Plossu—which builds unseen-before ensembles, is the artist’s peculiar responsibility towards other men. With his permanent nomadic life—even when “settled”—Plossu is like the bee, fertilizing new flowers, a perpetual inventor of new combinations and “interbreeding.” The dry, waterless, almost purely mineral desert is one of his “endroits fétiches”, and New Mexico’s semi-arid landscape provides all the conditions for this visual asceticism.

His fascination for the desert and nomadic existence might explain why his vision is radically dry, economical, unlyrical. Why also, as opposed to what he did elsewhere—in California, in Africa, in Europe—he stresses landscapes over portraits, the environment instead of the people.⁶ Plossu is not interested in the green lushness of the farm or the oasis, or even in the mountain sublime. His subject is the Garden of

⁴ *Photographies. 1963-1985* (Paris: La Difference, 1985), 7.

⁵ Let us for instance look at the pictures Bernard Plossu made (in California and the SouthWest) in 1976 for a book called *Go West*. (Bernard Plossu & Marc Saporta, *Go West* (Paris: Le Chêne, 1976). They are nothing but confirmation (or repetitions) of prefabricated images, of a West of postcards and coffee-table books. There are nothing but stereotypes, with wide-angle shots, saturated Kodachrome colors and absolute clarity.

⁶ This statement seems also true when one checks through the wider body of unpublished but selected work (see his record group at the Cabinet des Estampes, Bibliothèque nationale).

Dust.⁷ The dry, waterless, almost purely mineral desert is one of his favorite haunts, and New Mexico's dusty semi-arid landscapes provides all the conditions for this visual asceticism.

Dust is indeed a rich metaphor for the photographer. Dust and sand are a dislocated trace of the past as complex organized matter returned to the elemental, as sign of the infinity of time, and which adapts to all shapes and contours, lends itself to all visions and potentialities, keeping the traces—the negative imprint—of passage. Dust and sand are memory.

If Plossu's New Mexico is a Garden of Dust, it is also a land of dirt, of snow, of mud, of cold winter rain, of burning bright shining sun, as if perversely he was only interested in the very enemies of the photographer: dust, rain which attack the camera, excessive lighting which bursts the grains of silver on the film, insufficient light which leaves large zones unimpressed, blank, infinitely deep and full of mystery. Plossu relishes in the transient, the hardly visible, the elusive rather than the visible, the permanent, the fixed: "Climate is my topic. Rain, heat, snow, wind./ What I see in a landscape, what I take: its climate. Desert at noon, when everything becomes transparent, invisible./ [...] Traveling is not about crossing borders but about changing smells." [*Photographies* 7.] Not the topography, the outward forms, but the climate; not the change of scenery/scenes, but that of fragrance; not the "Be" but the "Being", as if the essence of the culture of place was in the transience, in an unstable *process*—never a stabilized object.

Between the elemental on the one hand, the ever moving and the ever out-of-focus on the other, the thread is Plossu's gaze which constantly establishes connections, draws parallels and correspondences. Could New Mexico then be a mere pretext, be interchangeable with any other place on earth? In fact, it is neither unique nor generic. While much American "landscape" photography since the 1930s (from Walker Evans down to the New Topographers) has built the myth of modernity on the concept of "anywhere USA" (meaning in fact "anywhere Western World" in a sort of perverse ethnocentric operation), Plossu reinvents a New Mexico very much *his* own and very much *its* own, a world impossible to dissociate from a *longer chain of meaning* which gives it its richness and which is as unique as Niger, Egypt or Grenoble are unique (unique does not mean exceptional), places with, literally, a *local color*: "How would I feel about New Mexico if I ever left it? When I think about it now, I see the memory of something brown, brown all over. [...] If I ever left, would I miss it, so soon?" he

⁷ *Garden of Dust* is the title of one of his books. It is a series of miniature (11.4x7.6 cms) landscapes all taken in the New Mexican desert: *Le Jardin de poussière. The Garden of Dust* (Paris: Marval, 1989).

wrote—premonitorily—in a letter to a friend.⁸ Reality reaches up to the photographer and his gaze ties all the loose threads connecting them to the rest of his world through a form: “Every place becomes a photographic regret of the places the photographer has left for good.” [Mora, *NMR*, 9.] And although Plossu’s New Mexico—more greyish than sunny, more disturbing than enchanting—is indeed a strange land, it is neither more nor less so than one’s own face when one looks at it in the mirror: it is man’s land.

II — Distance

“To make a start out of particulars.” Because the *only* problems for an artist are problems of forms. “No ideas but in things.” Ideas are for philosophers and critics. And from his difficult parallels/juxtapositions, strange matings, there rise harmonics of happiness and meaning which cannot be exhausted by words. For Plossu belongs to the race of sensual photographers. His is not an intellectual approach—although he is well read—but an instinctive one, not symbolical but almost carnal, heavy with the rich texture of life and matter. At odds with the cold precision of most American landscape photographers or the highbrow games of a Lee Friedlander or a Garry Winogrand (even though his pictures may occasionally bear some surface resemblance with theirs) he is at his best when he is the most instinctive, when he displays that intelligence and that freedom of form that seems to have come to him “d’emblée” when he first used a camera seriously during his stay in Mexico in 1965-66.⁹ It is only when he tries consciously to be metaphotographic [*NMR* 72, 73], that he loses his sharpness and his originality.

The first problem he had to deal with, Mora notes, was that of previous representations of the established myth of the South West (Strand, Weston, Adams, and Frank, but one could also quote Lange or Friedlander). Finding the right distance is the crucial problem of aesthetics. Too distant the artist loses himself, too close he is blinded. The light parody of Walker Evans in Raton’s Main Street [*NMR* 81] does not bring us any great understanding of the *genius locii* or of photography for that matter. Plossu is slightly more successful with a debunking version of *Moonlight over Hernandez, N.M.*, by Ansel Adams with *View from Llano Quemado* [*NMR* 35]. All the somber drama of Adams’ picture has disappeared leaving a soft play of sunlight on an otherwise rather ungainly landscape. His versions of the church at Ranchos de Taos [*NMR* 18, 32, 33], coming after many others are perhaps the best examples of his way of dealing with the inescapable heritage of the most photographed building of the area. Rather than trying any kind of direct commentary, or attempting to deal with an artifact

⁸ Letter to Gilles Mora, quoted in “Bernard Plossu’s Re(new)vision,” *New Mexico Revisited*, 9.

⁹ *Le Voyage mexicain* (Paris: Contrejour, 1990).

highly symbolical of the cultural *rapproches de forces*, he focuses on these adobe walls *as* adobe walls and makes them *his* formal problem, one of light and shadows, of straight lines and curves, doing full justice to the architectural object while connecting it in the course of his work with a wall in Africa or a restaurant table in Paris.

Despite its prestigious photographic past, New Mexico's landscape has not yet been completely colonized by signs. It is rather the landscape which has colonized representation. His (late) work *Garden of Dust* aim at both celebrating metonymically a great civilization through its environment and of deconstructing the sublime vision of White artists which have made it a temple or a cathedral, "de-monumentalizing" by shifting the distance.

"Intermediate" is the keyword of Plossu's vision of New Mexico. His New Mexico is not a land of sunshine and dramatic vistas, and yet neither is it a bizarre ("odd" [*NMR* dust cover]), godforsaken, melancholy place. Sublime or cataclysmic visions are utterly foreign to him. His choice of small size prints, in *Garden of Dust* for instance, does not so much imply intimacy between viewer and print—as Stuart Alexander suggests in his preface to the book—as it breaks the monumentality, thickens the screen of representation by reducing the transparency of the picture, and forces us to rediscover through concentration all the intensity of the texture of landscapes which resemble etchings: sudden execution following long concentration, as that of the archer who has mentally reached his target many times before he actually throws his arrow. Hardly what you expect from a road photographer, traveling light with one camera fitted with one lens, catching life as a flux, *committed* observer of *his* life.

His choice of technique—the 35-mm camera—quite distinctively places him in the European tradition (Robert Frank who "introduced" the substandard camera to American photography was indeed a European even though most of his followers were American¹⁰). Yet I think one should be wary of generalizations. Although the light weight of the equipment allows a proximity with the subject, with the quick of life, a possibility to extend the "realm of photographable scenes", and the "standard" 50mm lens a (false) rendering of the eye perspective, their real effect may be quite different when used by Henri Cartier-Bresson, André Kertész and Bernard Plossu. The 50mm lens indeed suppresses the extreme foreground (strictly speaking it is a slight telephoto) making the gaze "jump" as it were beyond the foot of the photographer and, in confined spaces such as cars, provoking an extreme compression. It is an *excluding* lens, a focusing lens, choosing, picking out the elements of the scene, as opposed to wide-angles which include (and thus juxtapose). (That technical feature would be enough to

¹⁰ I do not see the fact that Lewis Baltz for instance used a 35-mm camera to shoot Park City as a counterexample. In this instance he used it with a tripod and extremely low speed microform film, which is a way of making the 35-mm work like a view-camera.

oppose Plossu to Frank, or Friedlander, or Winogrand, who all are on the side of the wide angle.)¹¹

The 50mm lens forces the observer to be close enough and yet allows him to remain at a distance, to reach out and yet keep his position. It is a sort of hand/gaze held out, ready to be trained back/returned: look at his “Taos Scene” [*NMR* 25] chosen for the cover of the book. The eye is at the right distance, neither intruding on a moment of relaxed exchange, on a partly private scene, nor remaining an uncommitted observer of a partly public scene, not shunning the sensuousness of the sight and yet not overplaying it. Commitment and withdrawal; sense of propriety, respect, exchange.

The real and metaphorical distance with the subject is clearly present in his use of “screens”, of rain and of unsteady camera. Like Corot, his artistic reference, the painter of dusk and dawn, of wetness and mist, Plossu sees New Mexico as differently as possible from its traditional image. He plays with half tones, with greys and fuzzy shapes, often shooting from behind a windscreen, or under rain, leaving the world at the same time fully recognizable, present and yet radically distant [*NMR* 44, 48, 53.]. These forms, however, do not participate in a sense of flux (as they do in Frank, Winogrand) but in the construction of mystery. Soft shapes, veiled bodies of the African desert, sand storms, a whole world of roundness—already seen in the contrast between the clear lines of black and white lights on the Ranchos de Taos church and the boulders at the bottom—is both the essence of life and its unknowable mystery.

His pictures are indeed remarkably mysterious: here, in New Mexico, faces can hardly be seen if at all, often going away, back to the camera; people are present as mere elements of the landscape, and their real presence is felt through tracks left in the mud, the sand, or, their means of transportation (cars, trucks) or their dwellings—especially Indians, in a word through their traces on the landscape. His seemingly simple snapshots are in fact pieces of accumulated layers of resistance, filters and riddles.

What resists is the world, its otherness; what connects is its similarity. And Plossu plays on this tension, on the distance, the presence/absence, refuses the fusion of the eye/I (the annihilation of distance). In its place, he suggests a concept of passage and circulation.

Little needs to be said about the theme of the road itself. In that respect Plossu follows the structuring pattern of much American photography which has long identified the transversal dimension as characteristic of American space. He slowly grew, however, out of this identification to reach a much more complex and comprehensive level by making the lines of visual circulation (of exchange) between the

¹¹ It comes as no surprise that amateur cameras are now equipped with either wide angle lenses (35-40 mm) or telephoto, but avoid the very difficult 50mm. “The 50mm lens [...] simple only in appearance [...]” (Plossu, *NMR*, 17).

front and the back, the bottom and the top, the earth and the sky the core of his images. These can be roads, ladders but even houses and trees—which often in the South West are “artifacts”, at least the sure sign of the presence of Man, often simple shapes which recurrently form openings. V-shaped lines [NMR 38, 39, 90], broken fences, clearings, grounds sliced by lighting, the visual motif of the back/front exchange/passage and its corollary, the difficulty for the photographer and the viewer to see through, do not project any kind of information about the landscape but a conception of human intercourse.

Hardly ever straight, more often long and winding, often branching, tapering off as they recede, these roads rarely open onto any concrete object/place and hardly lead anywhere [26, 27, 92]. The most beautifully telling example of all these may well be the one closing the book [92]. As a virtual concentrate of all Plossu’s motifs (curve, trace, matter, points and surface, gracious movement like a dance) it calls on many “symbolical” readings as do the branching dirt roads [27]. What is significant here, however, *because* of the road, is the horizon and the sky occupying a full half of the picture. In this wonderful mirror-like face to face in which Plossu acknowledges that half of our world is the sky, the road gently leads (the gaze) from the photographer-I (“here”) to the subject (“there”), to that forever moving/receding line, the horizon.

The sky is of paramount importance in New Mexico iconography. His New Mexico skies are no heaven, though; not mystical, somber, bombastic. They are mere grey pages which haunt human beings (one understands why he claims to have also been strongly influenced by Malevitch) because they have to write their destiny, every day, ceaselessly as their traces are blown off by the wind, washed off by the rain, erased by other traces.

And yet Plossu knows that under the “vast American sky” lies much of the mystery of the place, so much so that a careful analysis of his New Mexico pictures reveal that it is the sky which decides the framing. This is how I understand the first picture of a flash of lightening of ambiguous direction (going up or down?), connecting sky and earth; or the perfect quarter arch of a rainbow descending dead on the First National Bank in Albuquerque [NMR 84]; or again the Albuquerque service station [NMR 43] where the road (after all in logical connection with the building) has disappeared in order to include the sky (three quarters of the picture) against which stand the “artsy” little tower, the telephone wires, the name of the gas company, and, almost hidden but highlighted by an “intruding” street lamp on the right, the ever present mountains.

Mountains are the other thread running throughout *New Mexico Revisited*, even in the less interesting images [61, 64, 65], a constant reminder of nature, a permanent witness of human agitation. They are in the background of most pictures leaving between them and the photographer long expanses of scraggy brushes, sage or

otherwise; sometimes they even absorb and dilute the church in the foreground [74]; and often Indian buildings—particularly the Pueblo de Taos—are treated as visual equivalent of the mountains [31, 90]: gradual steps towards the sky, superhuman, discrete but obsessive presence in the middle distance. For there lies one of the most essential relationships for Plossu. As black and white are in permanent visual dialogue as part of the same truth of the world, the cold stone, the warm clay of the adobe, mountains and buildings are part of a long complicity of life, made of the same matter, and both submitted to time as the juxtaposition of a dilapidated wall and a butte—both rock/stone vestiges—seem to tell us [76] or that of the Taos Pueblo and its adjacent mountains—an image which is among the most beautiful and revealing of his pictures [77].

III — Otherness

Although Plossu definitely is a photographer of culture, he does not tell us much about Indian civilization, the Spanish influence, or the conquest of Anglo Saxon America. He hardly describes or makes a detailed inventory of the place, or “covers” New Mexico. He seems to pay more attention to what is left of the native Indian culture and to the strong Hispanic influence more than to Anglo-Saxon America which made the South West, thus raising the question of “real” identity. What makes the South West be as it is? What makes the world be there or not be there? This problem is deepened by a systematic deconstruction of the tourist’s gaze and of exoticism. What happens then to the supremacy and assurance which constitutes the tourist’s position, and even though it works in the opposite direction, the exotic one as well.¹² Are we in the world we see? or outside it? So many questions—formal ones—that lead the viewer to wonder insecurely but permanently about difference and otherness. For Plossu does not *understand* for us, nor does he provide answers: he only works with questions which challenge us in our role as spectators, all the more so as he uses different formal solutions, not one fixed “style.”

His images are devoid of folklore—few folks and no lore—or of any “angle.” In other words Bernard Plossu, although taken in by New Mexico, as it were, is not lost in admiration for the landscapes, their American immensity, or for the quaintness of Spanish-Indian culture, nor does he become wittily ironic showing surrealistic juxtapositions of objects and signs everywhere. In fact his approach is both respectful and perfectly at ease. It is *free* in the sense that not being an American he has no ax to

¹² The tourist reconstructs the world along perfectly safe, familiar lines; the exotic gaze builds a construction which is *stereotypically* different from his world but on his own terms. Both negate an otherness which can never be reduced to one’s own identity: it is radical and stays that way.

grind, no bad conscience to appease, no regrets. His gaze is foreign yet familiar, and as he is not within the dialectics of the Dream which governs most American photography and most of our reading of it, his New Mexico is new without quite being the New World. Fresh I would say, different and familiar, but it makes us realize that the familiar is anything but familiar.

Plossu seems to say: what can I understand of Indian culture and religion (present as “themes” in his pictures)? What can I understand of the impact of Western culture, of mercantilism, of capitalism on them? Nothing or very little. He does not compose an essay on “what it is to be Indian” as others make essays on what it is to be poor (which is the next step after “this is what the poor look like”), or even who make the poor “speak for themselves”. He takes a purely photographic posture: this is why there is no stealing, transvesting, or duplicity in his gaze.

Confronted with such complex and ancient cultures and mixture of cultures Plossu does not act as a documentarian. When he does, in his rare attempts, with rodeos, streets of small towns he is hardly convincing: his images deserve to be forgotten because they are too literal and yet not enough, more specific than truly revealing encumbered in visual reminiscences. He is not a teacher or a “metaphor monger” either; he is a poetical anthropologist.

He feels that the complexity of that world and the fascination it exerts on the photographer cannot be met “head on” by a European photographer, however friendly. Neither naive nor insensitive or “objective”, he does not, however, celebrate Indian culture either. He does not cry over their plight. His gaze is not political or historical. But their absence as individuals from his New Mexico pictures compared with the presence of their constructions establishes a culture of place in which Plossu sees underground links connecting whole the living world.

Plossu also found that he shared with this land the culture of latinity, in the form of a special relationship with sun and sky, where the dryness hides long, wet winters rains, where a special light gives it weight and coherence much beyond the Mediterranean shores, and much beyond Latin, Greek or Arabic views of the world. For what founds latinity is the mosaic, a paradoxical unstable unity which is the contrary of the American theory of the melting pot. It is the sometimes difficult but inescapable living together of groups united by a common light, common skies, common smells; it is a never ending *process* of confrontation, acceptance and denial, but never a surrendering.

His dedicating *Garden of Dust* to the memory of Cochise is not an apology of Indian culture. It is an apology of resistance, which means being oneself. Plossu is not a colonizer of the gaze; and yet he knows that looking is judging according to the only possible filter/grid—one’s eyes. So, instead of judging, he decides to expose himself, to exhibit his self, to say “I”. And thus he chooses to play his subjectivity to the full, stating that the environment allows them to communicate because there he can feel and

suffer as they do: thirst, dust, cold, rain, the extremes of New Mexico weather, beyond irreconcilable differences. Neither a philosopher nor an environmentalist, he is a conscience.

Yet if Plossu connects places, playing similarities as universals, and joining in one coherent vision, all the deserts of the world but also the roughness of New Mexico with that of Rome he does not mean to suggest there is only one culture, that of humanity. Or rather he substitutes a concept of universal history to that of specific histories

By looking at others, other cultures, other worlds, Plossu does not negate the otherness of others—as opposed to imperialist cultures/gaze which destroy and at best absorb it—but poses it as being radically the basis of our humanity. In that respect he follows—albeit unconsciously—the most important message of a key work for the understanding of the meaning of otherness, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*: I cannot be the other, and culture is at best a partial, fragile, moving set of shared beliefs, a temporary association of similarities in which the individual participates.

Less radically formal than Frank or Friedlander, not as universalist as Cartier-Bresson or Adams, paddling gently against the current of contemporary American ideology, he rehabilitates personal values against the abandonment to a vague concept of “plurality” and “difference”—ethnic or otherwise. For he knows that when we want to be the others—or at least when we shun being ourselves, i.e. we first do not accept our position in the world because we have lost the faith in ourselves—we become nobodies: we are condemned to repetition, dissolution and death, for we only live in and by confrontation, which implies strong beliefs, as photographers know only too well. And yet, somewhere, somehow matter is unified. “To make a start,”—i.e. to become, to escape one’s nature—“out of particulars.”