



1. Buochs, 1965. Gelatin silver print, 30 x 40 cm. Collection of Ellen and Jerome Stern, New York.



2. Oberdorf, 1969. Gelatin silver print, 30 x 40 cm. Private collection, New York.

Cars

and other Stories in the Photographs of Arnold Odermatt

A Volkswagen Beetle slowly sinks into a beautiful remote lake (Fig. 1); a demolished minibus lies on its top surrounded by pristine nature (Fig. 2); two VWs stand crushed together after a head-on collision (Fig. 3). Such images make up the typically abandoned accident scenes in Arnold Odermatt's photographs. These strikingly beautiful, peculiar, and often humorous images, created between 1939 and 1993, have only recently been discovered by the art world.¹

Born in 1925 in the small Swiss town of Oberdorf, Odermatt worked for the majority of his life at the local police station of the canton of Nidwalden. He was not only the first to capture accidents on film but also the first in Switzerland to introduce black and white photography as a means to document accidents. The photographic endeavors of the amateur photographer Odermatt encompass three distinct projects. While on duty as a police officer, Odermatt documented accidents by camera, complementing the police drawings made in situ. Then, after hours and after the fact, he would return to the scene of the incident to take another photograph—an afterimage that invariably beautifies, as if to rectify, the past traumatic event. A third group consists of color photographs that create a narrative portfolio of the locality of Nidwalden, its occupants and their activities, and a range of police occupations. These inscribe more than a half century of police and local history into our visual culture. While the documentary images of this third type are in color, Odermatt's police photographs and their subjective afterimages are black and white, reversing usual photographic practice to some extent.

Odermatt, who originally trained as a baker and confectioner, served as a police officer from 1948 to 1990 for the small canton of Nidwalden, which is enclosed by mountains and the lake Vierwaldstättersee.² Geographically located in central Switzerland, Nidwalden encompasses eleven small communalities such as Stansstad, Oberdorf, and Ennetbürgen. Today its population numbers some thirty-eight thousand people, most of whom



3. Buochs, 1966. Gelatin silver print, 30 x 30 cm. Private collection, New York.

are employed in the service sector and industry. In the late 1940s, when Odermatt began taking photographs, the number of inhabitants was fifty percent less than now and consisted chiefly of farmers and lumberjacks. About six hundred cars then crowded the underdeveloped roads of Nidwalden, with an average of one car accident daily and about ten fatalities per year: accidents indeed constituted the main occupation of police work. By comparison, today every second inhabitant has a car and there is only one fatality a year.

Long after World War II, when the car surfaced as a distinct commodity of democratic transportation in Europe and the United States, Nidwalden retained its agrarian character. Most of its Catholic population held politically conservative views—not until 1965 did Nidwalden adopt a modern Swiss constitution. This conservatism also penetrated the cultural life of Nidwalden: its people were reluctant to admit changes brought about by modernity and Nidwalden remained socially and culturally isolated until the mid-1960s. In 1964 Nidwalden became connected to the Swiss train system and in 1966 to the major European north-south freeway through the construction of a small bridge. It was not until a decade later that a major tunnel and bridge allowing modern access were completed. While these developments eventually opened up Nidwalden to the process of modernization, it was slow in coming. It is not surprising, then, that Odermatt's obsession with the technology of photographic reproduction was met with little interest from the local population. Although his fellow police officers appreciated his photographic endeavor to the degree that they supported the establishment of a darkroom at the station, the acquisition of and financial responsibility for technical equipment was left to Odermatt, who used his own Rolleiflex camera and chose to shoot his accident photographs in black and white.³

To photograph accidents, Odermatt usually positioned a tripod on the roof of a Volkswagen police van (Fig. 4). He would brightly illuminate the scene of the accident, enhancing the depth of focus to accentuate crisp, sharp details and create strong three-dimensional qualities. His use of close focus and attention to detail, also found in his color photographs, stands in sharp contrast to the surrounding landscape of the Nidwalden region, which lends itself to long views and beautiful, if not sublime, vistas. By pulling the far into the near, Odermatt's images provide a different perspective on central Switzerland than found in tourist brochures, television, and other popular visual sources.

In his color photographs Odermatt portrayed events such as parades, regional festivities, and the work of the local police. These latter photographs often served the function of promoting police work rather than documenting life in rural Switzerland. Yet while they are obviously staged, they don't come across as formal or official. Caught in their



4. Oberdorf, 1964. Gelatin silver print, 30 x 40 cm. Private collection, Berlin.

time through design, fashion, and equipment, they convey the particulars and arbitrariness of the everyday, its structures and its practices. In *Oberdorf, 1964* (Fig. 5), for example, we see three police officers at a shooting exercise. By employing a close focus, Odermatt fills their portrayals with life, emphasizing their individuality instead of idealizing or beautifying these figures of authority. Through this approach we glimpse reality as still present despite the fact that the photographs transport us back in time by way of their dated features. They convey Nidwalden as it was in the late 1940s and how it changed over the next fifty years.

Odermatt's afterimages of traffic accidents, although bearing similar technical features to the color photographs, are radically different in their deliberate aestheticization. As with other isolated agrarian refugees of modernity, Nidwalden's inhabitants were long untouched by modern changes. By contrast, the modern European city dweller in the late 1940s had been extensively subjected to the many shocks of modernization that attacked her daily—the sensory overload delivered by urban development, the entertainment and advertising industry, technological advancements, the brutality and destruction of two world wars.⁴ The people of Nidwalden had yet to adopt the disinterested and rationalized blasé look assumed by the urban populace as a protective shield against the over-stimulating sensations of modern life as described by Georg Simmel as early as 1903.⁵ In Nidwalden the experience of a car accident, even if frequent, was still able not only to shock the senses from the outside but to effect psychological trauma, and Odermatt's afterimages can be reflected upon as mechanisms of coping with the extremes of modernity.⁶ According to Freud, traumatic experiences turn into trauma once they leave lasting traces on our memory. We can avoid this psychological reaction if we can bring the incident in question into consciousness to discharge it, for example, through words and images.⁷ Thus we can argue that instead of letting the experience of an accident attack the subconscious, Odermatt pulled it into his and the viewer's consciousness. The photograph taken after the incident is not repetitive; rather, it is a means to gain control over past traumatic experience. Odermatt offers a subjective response that serves as an empowering antidote to the violence and brutality brought about by modern technology. Instead of retreating to pre-modern ideals, instead of creating nostalgias that feature the rural landscape as untouched by technology, Odermatt confronts modernity on its own terms, with the technology of photography.

We can assemble and consider as a narrative those accident photographs that Odermatt took after the disturbing scenes were devoid of blood, victims, and other traces of violence. We see the police on duty driving to the scene; we see the street as a site of minimalist markings rather than drastic violence. Sometimes the chalk drawings and the skid marks appear central to the photograph; sometimes they assume equal prominence with the car wrecks. The vehicles are shown as crashed into each other, as single wrecks, as



5. Oberdorf, 1964. Color print, 50 x 50 cm. Collection of Janice and Mickey Cartin, West Hartford.

modern intruders into the beautiful landscape, as sudden and intriguing counterparts to the built environment, and as the focus of interest for curious bystanders still trying to assimilate themselves to the automobile.

Most of Oederhoff's accident photographs either emphasize the object character of the car or present an overall geometric composition that anchors the damaged vehicles within the frame of the photograph. For example, similar to many landscape paintings, the composition in Fig. 2 is structured through irregular triangles supported by parallel lines that slowly create depth of space and visually fixate the VW van into the image. Striking too is the detailed realism employed to either assimilate the car into its setting (Fig. 2), or to set the one off the other, thereby affecting a disconnection between car and surrounding (Fig. 1). The image can acquire a surreal character if car and environment are distinct: idyllic landscape scenes, for example, are witnesses to these odd icons of modernity. Slowed down in their progress as instruments of mobility and functionality, the damaged cars can even look humanized, their lights sometimes acting like eyes that seem to gaze at each other (Fig. 3). They appear as ironic doubles of themselves when, due to their crashed positions, they hinder mobility instead of furthering it (Fig. 6). They can also look grotesque and humorous when their animated character governs the image (Fig. 7). In these photographs the cars appear to propel themselves, void of human drivers. Although Oederhoff captures unpredictable situations created by the accidents, he counters these chance occurrences by formally controlling the given scenes and altering their subject matter. The horrific becomes surreal, humorous, even beautiful. Yet while transforming reality into aesthetics he nevertheless retains the object character of the car.

Oederhoff's photographs always stress the car's characteristics as a vehicle of modern transportation. The onlooker usually views the car from a position where it still appears to be in motion, even if this motion is halted. In many of the afterimages it is the car that appears as subject, author, and actor. Depending on the degree of its destruction, it can seem to be a self-animated object in its own right or a remnant of modernity's still inadequate technological efforts. In each case, though, Oederhoff balanced the visual experience of destruction with aesthetic means. In *Dallenwil*, 1977 (Fig. 8), for example, the pole that completely demolished a Mercedes Benz serves as visual anchor to distract from the violence and destruction, persuading us to experience different parts of the car as abstracted and beautiful forms. However, they are more than abstract and autonomous forms: on one hand, Oederhoff emphasizes the cars' corporeality and three-dimensional qualities; on the other hand, the damaged parts in particular appear as highly malleable, as if they were made out of something other than hard metal. The out-of-control car is portrayed as controllable. The devastating and enormous power of the crash is thus transformed and fictionalized.



6. Buochs, 1958. Gelatin silver print, 30 x 40 cm. Private collection, Berlin.

In these aestheticized images, Oederhoff defers the experienced traumatic event brought about by an uncontrollable accident onto the cars. Insofar as his photographs render the object—the car, the modern machine—as subject, with the incompetence of the driver who caused the accident erased and the event of the accident remaining outside of the photographic frame, they are what Siegfried Kracauer termed memory images.⁸ The German philosopher, however, claimed that memory images, which go beyond the visible world to present subjectivity and truth, are not possible within the realm of photography. For him, photography only registers the surface of reality—its ornament, which loses meaning as time passes. Yet Oederhoff's afterimages, in contrast to the documentary photographs he took for police purposes, do appear, in Kracauer's terms, larger than life. As with his memory images, Oederhoff's afterimages appear as more than a copy of reality, more than one fragment among the many of which our world is comprised, more than one part of the visual archive of the latter part of the twentieth century. They embody subjective memory images in which Oederhoff shows himself in command over his referent, the damaged car(s).

Although created far outside the context of the art world, Oederhoff's photographs bring to mind associations with high and popular culture: their often minimalist language parallels much of the art of the 1960s, and the abstracted cars allude to the sculptural practice of John Chamberlain in particular and nouveau realist artists in general. With regard to subject matter, Oederhoff's images present direct opposition to Weegee's sensationalist crime photographs from the 1930s and '40s and Andy Warhol's flattened simulacra of car accidents from the 1960s. His photographs feature cars that are rendered as plastic objects and his investigations are devoid of sensationalism. In further contrast to Warhol, Oederhoff does not use already mediated images but creates them himself. At times his animated VWs recall the many Beetles featured in *Heimat*, or German homeland, films and other popular films during the last five decades.⁹ Yet it is not the various art and visual historical connections and disconnections which we can retrospectively establish for the photographic work of this art world outsider that makes his oeuvre important.

Oederhoff's aesthetic project is unique in that it offers a singular response to modernization. His images engage with problems of a belated modernization caused by the invasion of the automobile into an agrarian area. Oederhoff confronts the alienating and even traumatic impact of technology on the human senses. Rather than letting the shocks of modernity fragment his senses, Oederhoff creates images of empathy and sensuality that seek to control yet, importantly, also admit the progress of modernization as it penetrated his locality in central Switzerland. His essentially modern approach embraces authorship and subjectivity to negotiate a society's adjustment to the portrayed automobile. In his memory images we encounter how the icon of modernity, the automobile, in its pioneering days impacted us, sometimes literally and



7. Hergiswil, 1964. Gelatin silver print, 30 x 38 cm. Museum Schloß Morsbroich, Leverkusen.

violently through shock and trauma, and changed our perception. Yet Odermatt's images also appeal to our contemporary concerns with trauma—the collapse of subject and object, private and public, conscious and subconscious, reality and simulation, and present and past. He, in contrast to us, is still able to maintain these distinctions.

Sabine Eckmann, Curator

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1. The first public showing of Odermatt's photographs was not until 1993 in Buochs, Canton Nidwalden, Switzerland. Once discovered, their popularity quickly grew. Among other venues, Odermatt's work was selected for inclusion in the 2001 Venice Biennial. In 2002 he had his first museum exhibition in the United States at the Art Institute of Chicago. The present exhibition is the second showing of his work in this country.

2. Much of the information on Odermatt's biography is taken from James Rondeau, "Focus: Arnold Odermatt," exhibition brochure (Chicago: Art Institute of Chicago, 2002) and *Meine Welt: Photographien 1939-2001*, ed. Urs Odermatt (Bern: Benteli, 2001). Much of the information on Nidwalden is obtained from the website www.nidwalden.ch.

3. It took Odermatt some time to persuade his colleagues and authorities to accept his technological innovation. Much of the debate concerned the notion that photographs, in contrast to drawings, could be manipulated: drawings were seen as more truthful.

4. The shock as an essential experience of urban modernity is conceptualized by Walter Benjamin ("On Some Motifs in Baudelaire" [1939], in his *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn [New York: Schocken Books, 1968], pp. 163-65).

5. Georg Simmel, "The Metropolis and Modern Life," in *Rethinking Architecture*, ed. Neil Leach (London and New York: Routledge, 1997), pp. 69-79.

6. The accidents Odermatt witnessed were often brutal and graphic, and in many cases he knew the victims and their families personally. James Rondeau interprets Odermatt's afterimages as therapeutic (Rondeau, exhibition brochure, 2002).

7. Sigmund Freud. *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, 1920, ed. James Strachey (New York: Norton, 1990).

8. Siegfried Kracauer. "Photography" (1927), *Critical Inquiry* 19, no. 3 (Spring 1983): pp. 421-36.

9. In particular the film *In those Days—The Story of a Car*, directed in 1947 by Helmut Käutner, is worth mentioning. It features a wrecked VW that recalls its history during the Third Reich. Thanks to Lutz Koepnick for bringing this film to my attention.



8. Dallenwil, 1977. Gelatin silver print, 40 x 30 cm. Collection of Ellen and Jerome Stern, New York.

Biographic Information

Arnold Odermatt was born on May 29, 1925, in Oberdorf, Canton Nidwalden, Switzerland. He currently lives and works in Stans, Switzerland.

Select solo exhibitions:

- 1993 *Arnold Odermatt*, Seepplatz 10 (Buochs)
- 1996 *Meine Welt*, Viewpoint Gallery (Salford)
- 1998 *Karambolage*, Polizeipräsidium (Frankfurt am Main)
- 2000 *Karambolagen und andere Photographien*, Springer & Winckler Galerie (Berlin)
- 2001 *Carambolages*, Centre de la Photographie (Geneva)
- 2002 *Karambolage*, Museum Schloß Morsbroich (Leverkusen)
- Die Biennale Auswahl*, Springer & Winckler Galerie (Berlin)
- Karambolage*, Centre Rhénan de la Photographie (Strasbourg)
- Arnold Odermatt*, The Art Institute of Chicago (Chicago)
- 2003 *Arnold Odermatt*, Paul Morris Gallery (New York)
- Arnold Odermatt*, James Kelly Contemporary (Santa Fe)

Select group exhibitions:

- 1995 *Heimat: Auf der Suche nach der verlorenen Identität*, Jüdisches Museum (Vienna)
- Ein deutscher Sammler: ein deutsches Auto: Peter Ludwig und der Volkswagen*, Ludwig Forum für Internationale Kunst (Aachen)
- 1999 *Automobility - Was uns bewegt*, Vitra Design Museum (Lörrach)
- Wohin kein Auge reicht*, Deichtorhallen (Hamburg)
- 2001 *Plateau of humankind*, La Biennale di Venezia (Arsenale)
- 2002 *Macht und Freiheit*, Bieler Fototage (Biel)
- Arnold Odermatt and Ryuji Miyamoto*, Buchmann Galerie (Cologne)
- Aubes, reveries au bord de Victor Hugo*, curated by Harald Szeemann, Maison de Victor Hugo (Paris)
- Der Berg*, Heidelberger Kunstverein (Heidelberg)
- 2003 *Schnyder, Odermatt, Städeli*, Gesellschaft der Freunde junger Kunst (Baden-Baden)

Bibliography:

- 1993 Odermatt Urs, ed. *Arnold Odermatt, Meine Welt, Photographien 1939-1993*. Bern: Benteli Verlag.
- 2002 Finckh, Gerhard, *Arnold Odermatt: Karambolage*. Text by Irene Müller. Leverkusen: Museum Morsbroich.
- Arnold Odermatt, Die Biennale Auswahl, 32 Photographien für Venedig 2001*. Text by Harald Szeemann. Berlin: Springer & Winckler Galerie.
- Arnold Odermatt, Selected Photographs 1939-1993*. Text by James Rondeau. Chicago: The Art Institute of Chicago.
- 2003 Odermatt, Urs, ed. *Arnold Odermatt, Karambolage*. Göttingen: Steidl Verlag, forthcoming.

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