

ARNOLD ODERMATT

SELECTED PHOTOGRAPHS 1939–1993

AS A CITIZEN, A PUBLIC EMPLOYEE, AND AN UNDER-RECOGNIZED ARTIST,

Arnold Odermatt (b. 1925) has been making beautiful, eccentric, sometimes haunting photographs for more than sixty years. Because of the essentially, idiosyncratically archival nature of the work, however, his images have rarely been considered within a fine-art context. This **focus** presentation at The Art Institute of Chicago is Odermatt's first exhibition in the United States.

Odermatt was employed as a traffic policeman in the Swiss canton of Nidwalden from 1948 to 1990. He produced many of the photographs under consideration here in conjunction with and as complements to the documentary images of car accidents made to accompany police and insurance reports. Other images record the activities of his colleagues, or scenes of daily life and the landscape around the villages of Oberdorf, where he was born, and Stans, where he resides. Although not formally trained as an artist or technically trained as a photographer, Odermatt has combined an appreciation of form and composition with a practical need to capture details of accident scenes or police procedures. The result is a wholly original, surprisingly poignant compendium of both ordinary and extraordinary moments in everyday life.



Oberdorf, 1964. Courtesy Springer & Winckler Gallery, Berlin.

Odermatt seems to have been drawn to scenarios—some actual, some staged, all in their own way authentic—that proudly express a typically Swiss provincial character. Made over a working life of more than forty years, Odermatt's images reflect a powerful sense of place as much as they record particular moments and incidents. The unique character of the canton of Nidwalden—with its small, even quaint, alpine towns—emerges as a principal subject of the work. Surrounded on three sides by mountains and on the fourth side by a large lake, this rural region was largely isolated from the rest of Europe until the late 1970s. During the many decades Odermatt was making pictures, most people in Nidwalden had been born there, knew their neighbors, and remained there all their lives. Generally speaking, the region was conservative, its

residents regarded as resistant to change and skeptical of anything out of the ordinary. In 1976, however, the construction of a major tunnel and bridge connected the canton to the outside world, bringing an unprecedented influx of new cars, new people, and new ideas to Nidwalden. The rapid, dramatic changes that resulted had a direct, profound impact on Odermatt's daily experiences as a traffic policeman.

Given this historical framework, one can recognize in all of his images a self-conscious awareness of impending, or perhaps inevitable, change. Odermatt, however, is equal parts sentimental and pragmatic. His pictures record a world that may have been vanishing, but they do so without resorting to nostalgia. Instead, they quietly assert local history, and, in the process, register an attempt to discern an essential civic character amidst radical growth and change.

ARNOLD ODERMATT EXPERIMENTED

with photography as a hobbyist from the age of ten, but despite his love of the camera, there were few, if any, professional opportunities involving photography open to him. He trained as a baker and confectioner until persistent, mysterious allergies prevented him from continuing in the job. (Curiously, Odermatt fondly recalls the manual work of mixing, shaping, and presenting baked goods and sweets as a truly creative endeavor, but remains modestly circumspect about identifying his photography as art.) Seeking a new livelihood, Odermatt applied for a highly desirable position with the local police force, and although he lacked specific experience, he was selected from a large pool of candidates because of his working knowledge of French.

When Odermatt began working in the late 1940s, automobile accidents were the stock in trade of a traffic policeman's routine. Speed limits, seatbelt laws, drunk-driving penalties, and the like had not yet been federally mandated, and auto accidents, both major and minor, were nearly epidemic. In his early years on the job, as Odermatt tells it, a car accident occurred almost every day, resulting in some ten fatalities annually—an appalling statistic considering that the region's 20,000 inhabitants owned only about 600 cars among them. By the 1990s, he recalls, accidents became far less common, causing perhaps one death a year, although the population had doubled and the number of cars on local roads had increased to 30,000. Given

these remarkable estimates, one could say—albeit a bit perversely—that Odermatt became a traffic policeman during a golden age of car accidents.

In 1940s Nidwalden, few modern technologies were employed by the police force. When necessary, officers documented traffic accidents with drawings made on site; not surprisingly, Odermatt met with some skepticism when he showed up for work toting his Rolleiflex camera. An unwitting pioneer, he became the first person in his region to use photography as an integral part of police work. His colleagues eventually acknowledged his commitment to—if not the usefulness of—his practice, and he was allowed to set up a darkroom at police headquarters; to Odermatt's amazement, the municipal authorities even paid to run water pipes to the space. After that, however, all responsibilities for equipment, supplies, and development were his own. (Economic reasons determined his choice to work mainly in black and white.) Over time, he came to regard his engaged, inventive practice as a documentarian and social observer as having wider implications that compensated for the more quotidian aspects of the job.

When called to the site of a traffic accident, Odermatt's usual procedure was to make two sets of images: one for official police business (filed in the accident report, submitted to an insurance company if necessary, or on occasion printed in the local newspaper); and one for himself. He quickly learned that an elevated viewpoint allowed for some



Stansstad, 1959. Courtesy private collection, Miami.

emotional and intellectual distance from the scene and enabled him to capture maximum visual information within a single frame. His *modus operandi* was to set up his tripod on a platform atop a Volkswagen police van. With these initial shots—destined to be relegated to files or attached to forms—Odermatt cared only to record necessary information. (He also hoped that the images might serve as deterrents. Most of the accidents he witnessed or documented involved drivers under the influence of alcohol; Odermatt believed his photographs could serve as cautionary reminders, encouraging fellow citizens to drive more safely.)

The images that Odermatt made for himself depict the same scenarios as the official photographs, but their purposes and meanings are infinitely more complex and personal. Literally and

figuratively, they are taken from a different perspective, guided by an intuitive formal logic. The production of these curious counterparts to the routinized police photographs became a therapeutic activity for Odermatt. The accidents were often violent and graphic, the victims—possibly even his friends or acquaintances—might be wounded or dead. In order to cope with his ongoing exposure to such scenes, Odermatt wanted to create and possess a set of images that abstracted the trauma. The dead or injured do not appear in these pictures, which, despite the subject matter, are never macabre or sensational. On occasion, Odermatt would return to photograph hours after the accident, when the violence of the crash had abated. Shifting his position on the roof of the van or moving to another point in the surrounding landscape, he was able

to treat the scenes in terms of their pictorial or compositional possibilities, or to approach the damaged cars in terms of their sculptural qualities. In this way, Odermatt extracted aesthetic or poetic elements from otherwise banal or painful situations—not so much re-imagining as re-imagining the scenes.

At times Odermatt went to great lengths to make an interesting, resonant, or beautiful image. In conversation he recalls the circumstances around a 1953 image of a Volkswagen partially submerged in a lake (*Buochs*). The accident in question happened in the early morning darkness, and the abandoned vehicle was not discovered until daybreak. After making the requisite photos, Odermatt realized that, in order to get the angle he wanted for further shots, he would have to wade knee-deep into the water. His fellow policemen derided him as crazy; one even went so far as to complain to a senior officer that Odermatt had defiled the uniform by getting it wet for such a silly reason. In retrospect, the complaint seems petty and small. At the time, however, Odermatt remembers that he was deeply affected by his colleagues' failure to understand what he was trying to accomplish.

In fact, Odermatt's images inspired little local interest during his tenure. On occasion, selected photographs might be displayed in the police station, or employed as teaching aids in traffic school. With some encouragement from his superiors, he did produce a series of color photographs for the promotional purpose of enhancing the public image

of policemen and their work. In 1979 Odermatt prepared a group of these color portraits for a slide presentation, given on the opening night of a newly built station house. He recalls few attended. Following Odermatt's retirement in 1990, his son, Urs, reviewed his father's archive, published them in the book *Meine Welt* (*My World*), and developed a fictionalized film project using some of the images. This led in quick succession to an exhibition in a Frankfurt police station, representation by a Berlin-based art gallery, and inclusion in the 49th Venice Biennale in 2001. Ironically, it is only the attention of the international art world that has prompted the people of Nidwalden to take an interest in the depth and breadth of Odermatt's pictures.

BY DINT OF CIRCUMSTANCE, many of the car accidents Odermatt documented involved one or more Volkswagen Beetles, commonly known as "bugs." Viewed from a contemporary perspective, the preponderance of the same type of car seems conceptual—almost like a premeditated serial investigation. In reality, Odermatt insists, there were just a lot of Beetles; they comprised upwards of 30% of the cars driven in and through Nidwalden during the years he was working. Indeed the VW Beetle was, and remains, the most purchased vehicle in the history of the automobile. Eventually, the presence of one or more bugs became an animating feature of Odermatt's photographs.



Hergiswil, 1949. Courtesy Paul Morris Gallery, New York.

In some cases Odermatt chose to present an overview—including the expanse of roadway, the arrangement of accident markers, redrawn tire tracks or skid marks, gathered onlookers, etc.—in a way that focuses the viewer's attention on the action of the accident itself. One image from 1963 (*Hergiswil*) depicts a crowd gathered across three lanes of traffic to observe a two-car crash. A policeman can be seen diagramming the accident as traffic continues to pass. Interestingly, a VW Beetle is present, unscathed, parked in the distance; this is a rare appearance of the bug in a supporting, rather than starring, role. In other instances Odermatt approached at ground level to make pictures that focus on the physical, almost sculptural, interaction between two cars. In one beautiful winter scene, for example,

he captured the aftermath of a head-on collision between an older and a newer model, the face-to-face fender bender suggesting history confronting the present (*Hergiswil*, 1949). In another image two cars locked at an oblique angle block a residential road, the cause or course of the accident difficult to imagine (*Buochs*, 1958). In still other cases, Odermatt trained his camera even more closely on the physical damage, documenting points of impact and the material consequences of collision with wholly abstract results (e.g. *Hergiswil*, 1964).

The picturesque Nidwalden setting often conditions the emotional register of the images, which can be uncanny in their charm. Regional markers—such as vernacular alpine architecture, remote roads, the mountainous landscape, and inclement weather—can carry



profound associations while also offering clues as to the causes of the accidents. The effect may be suggestive rather than strictly informative, as in an image of a solitary car emerging majestically from an icy lake or, in another example, nestled incongruously in a densely wooded area (*Emmetten*, 1969). Atmospheric conditions—mist, rain, snow, darkness, dampness—can serve an important purpose, blanketing the scenes in tranquil, still silence, muffling the jarring, crashing noises necessarily associated with the now-abandoned wrecks.

ALTHOUGH ODERMATT REMAINS reluctant to describe himself as an artist, his lifelong project most certainly can be understood in an art-historical context. Odermatt knows and loves the thematically linked series produced by Swiss photojournalist Werner Bischof in the 1940s and early 1950s. His work also calls to mind such diverse sources as Weegee's "scene of the crime" pictures of the 1930s and 1940s (while lacking both their graphic nature and sensationalism), Andy Warhol's interest in the banal spectacle of disaster and accident in the 1960s, and even Gabriel Orozco's serial investigations of the poetics of chance in the urban environment in the 1990s. Ultimately, however, Odermatt spent the majority of his life absorbed in a very private practice. His images have been rescued from the obscurity of their original purpose in a way that he neither sought nor predicted. Today, he is pleased but somewhat dismayed by the international attention his life's work is receiving.

In a single career, Odermatt encapsulates many of the debates about art and photography that have played out over the last century, during which so much visual practice has been variously concerned with breaking down the barriers that separate aesthetic experience and everyday activity, or, as we have come to say in shorthand, art and life. Situated at the distant periphery of this artworld debate but nonetheless aware through experience of its basic premises, Odermatt devised a quasi-systematic method of extracting from a single incident two very different kinds of images: one photograph that attempted to offer evidence or objective data, and another that answered to personal needs or subjective truths. Facts and fictions, documentation and interpretation collide and blend. In retrospect, it is nearly impossible to distinguish the evidence from the art, to valorize one classification of image-making over the other. Odermatt's long career—as both a policeman and an artist—spans the years, as well as one of the most significant art-historical conversations, of the twentieth century.

JAMES RONDEAU
ACTING DEPARTMENT HEAD
MODERN AND CONTEMPORARY ART



Herginwil, 1968. Courtesy private collection, Berlin.

ARNOLD ODERMATT

Born Oberdorf, Switzerland, 1925

Nidwalden Police, 1948–90, reaching rank of First Lieutenant, Head of the Traffic Police and Deputy Commander

Lives and works in Stans, Switzerland

CHECKLIST

Herginwil, 1968. Courtesy private collection, Berlin; *Stans*, 1964. Courtesy Paul Morris Gallery, New York; *Beckenried*, 1977. Courtesy Paul Morris Gallery, New York; *Herginwil*, 1966. Courtesy private collection, New York; *Witz*, 1955. Courtesy private collection, Frankfurt am Main; *Stansstad*, 1959. Courtesy private collection, Miami; *Ennetmen*, 1969. Courtesy Springer & Winckler Gallery, Berlin; *Stansstad*, 1967. Courtesy Springer & Winckler Gallery, Berlin; *Langeweile*, 1973. Courtesy Springer & Winckler Gallery, Berlin; *Herginwil*, 1961. Courtesy private collection, Stockholm; *Ennetbürgen*, 1972. Courtesy private collection, New York; *Ennetbürgen*, 1955. Courtesy private collection, Brussels; *Buochs*, 1958. Courtesy private collection, Berlin; *Ennetmen*, 1958. Courtesy Springer & Winckler Gallery, Berlin; *Herginwil*, 1963.

Courtesy private collection, Hamburg; *Herginwil*, 1949. Courtesy Paul Morris Gallery, New York; *Buochs*, 1957. Courtesy private collection, New York; *Herginwil*, 1965. Courtesy private collection, Munich; *Buochs*, 1972. Courtesy collection of Janice and Mickey Cartin; *Beckenried*, 1983. Courtesy collection of Janice and Mickey Cartin; *Stansstad*, 1958. Courtesy collection of Janice and Mickey Cartin; *Stans*, 1957. Courtesy collection of Janice and Mickey Cartin; *Ennetmen*, 1958. Courtesy collection of Janice and Mickey Cartin; *Stans*, 1961. Courtesy collection of Janice and Mickey Cartin; *Stans*, 1963. Courtesy collection of Janice and Mickey Cartin; *Stansstad*, 1963. Courtesy collection of Janice and Mickey Cartin; *Oberdorf*, 1964. Courtesy collection of Janice and Mickey Cartin; *Herginwil*, 1964. Courtesy collection of Janice and Mickey Cartin; *Oberdorf*, 1964. Courtesy collection of Janice and Mickey Cartin; *Ennetmen*, 1964. Courtesy collection of Janice and Mickey Cartin; *Herginwil*, 1965. Courtesy collection of Janice and Mickey Cartin; *Strandbad Buochs*, 1965. Courtesy collection of Janice and Mickey Cartin; *Stansstad*, 1965. Courtesy collection of Janice

and Mickey Cartin; *Stans*, 1965. Courtesy collection of Janice and Mickey Cartin; *Stans*, 1965. Courtesy collection of Janice and Mickey Cartin; *Buochs*, 1965. Courtesy collection of Janice and Mickey Cartin; *Stans*, 1965. Courtesy collection of Janice and Mickey Cartin; *Herginwil*, 1966. Courtesy collection of Janice and Mickey Cartin; *Herginwil*, 1967. Courtesy collection of Janice and Mickey Cartin; *Herginwil*, 1969. Courtesy collection of Janice and Mickey Cartin; *Stans*, 1969. Courtesy collection of Janice and Mickey Cartin; *Beckenried*, 1979. Courtesy collection of Janice and Mickey Cartin; *Stansstad*, 1981. Courtesy collection of Janice and Mickey Cartin; *Oberdorf*, 1969. Courtesy collection of Janice and Mickey Cartin; *Herginwil*, 1972. Courtesy collection of Janice and Mickey Cartin.

Note: checklist in progress at time of publication.

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Buochs, 1958. Courtesy private collection, Berlin.

SELECTED ONE-PERSON EXHIBITIONS

2002

Karambolage, Centre Rhénan de la Photographie, Strasbourg
Die Biennale Auswahl, 32 *Photographien für Venedig 2001*, Springer & Winckler Gallery, Berlin (cat. with essay by Harald Szeemann)
Karambolage, Museum Morsbroich, Leverkusen, Germany (cat. ed. by Gerhard Finckh)

2001

Karambolage, Centre de la Photographie, Geneva

2000

Karambolagen und andere Photographien, 1949–1987, Springer & Winckler Gallery, Berlin

1998

Meine Welt, Viewpoint Gallery, Salford, England

1998

Karambolage, Police Headquarters, Frankfurt

1993

Sceplatz 10, Buochs, Switzerland

SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

2002

Der Berg, Heidelberg Kunstverein, Heidelberg
Aubes: Réveries au bord de Victor Hugo, Maison de Victor Hugo, Paris
Ryugi Miyamoto, Arnold Odermatt, Buchmann Galerie, Cologne
Pouvoir et Liberté, Journées Photographiques de Bienne, Switzerland

2001

La Biennale di Venezia, Arsenale, Venice (cat.)

1999

Wohin kein Auge reicht, Deichtorhallen, Hamburg (cat.)
Automobility—Was uns bewegt, Vitra Design Museum, Weil am Rhein, Germany (cat.)

1995

Ein deutscher Sammler—ein deutscher Auto: Peter Ludwig und der Volkswagen, Ludwig Forum für Internationale Kunst, Aachen (cat.)
Heimat—Auf der Suche nach der verlorenen Identität, Jüdisches Museum, Vienna

SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY

Birnbaum, Daniel. "More Is Less." *Artforum* 40, no. 1 (Sept. 2001), pp. 155–57.
Johnson, Ken. "West Side: The Armory Show on the Piers just keeps growing." *New York Times*, 23 Feb. 2001, p. B33.
Mullins, Charlotte. "Death Row." *Contemporary*, no. 2 (Feb. 2002), pp. 26–31.
"My World: A Swiss policeman photographed his colleagues at work in the 1960s." *Doubletake* 7, no. 4 (Autumn 2001), pp. 109–13.
Odermatt, Urs, ed. *Arnold Odermatt, Meine Welt. Photographs 1939–1993*. Bern: Benteli Publishers, 1993.
Vetrocq, Marcia E. "Biennale Babylon." *Art in America* 89, no. 9 (Sept. 2001), pp. 104–15.
Wülfflen, Thomas. "Arnold Odermatt." *Kunstforum*, no. 136 (Aug.–Oct. 2001), p. 89.



Buacha (detail), 1957. Courtesy private collection, New York.

GALLERY TALKS

WEDNESDAY 13 NOVEMBER 2002

12:00 P.M.

Exhibition curator James Rondeau
G.139

WEDNESDAY 11 DECEMBER 2002

12:00 P.M.

Karen Irvine, Curator
Museum of Contemporary Photography,
Chicago
G.139

RELATED TALKS

MONDAY 9 DECEMBER 2002

2:00 P.M.

"What's New at The Art Institute of
Chicago?"

Exhibition assistant Whitney Moeller
G.100

THURSDAY 12 DECEMBER 2002

1:00 P.M.

"Twentieth-Century Art"
Exhibition assistant Whitney Moeller
G.100

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Nancy Lauter McDougal, Whitney Moeller,
Paul Morris, Annie Morse, Felix Naef,
Urs Odermatt, Tania Passafiume, Britt Salvesen,
Alexandra Schild, Dorothy Schroeder,
Doug Severson, Robert Springer, Tamra Yost,
John Tweedie, Jeff Wonderland, Tina Vlachy.
Special thanks are reserved for the artist. JER

Cover: *Beckenried* (detail), 1983. Courtesy
collection of Janice and Mickey Cartin.
Back Cover: *Buacha* (detail), 1968. Courtesy
Springer & Winckler Gallery, Berlin.

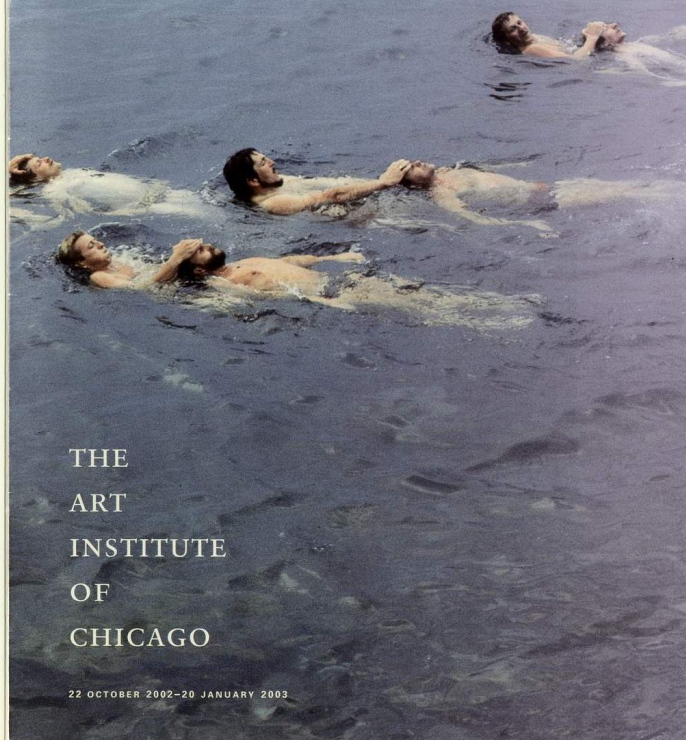
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ARNOLD ODERMATT

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THE
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22 OCTOBER 2002-20 JANUARY 2003