
Arnold Odermatt – Beyond the Seven Mountains

The Unsanctioned Artist's Candid Eye

Caroline Recher

Translator: James Gussen



Electronic version

URL: <https://journals.openedition.org/etudesphotographiques/3472>

ISSN: 1777-5302

This article is a translation of:

Arnold Odermatt, par-delà les sept montagnes - URL : <https://journals.openedition.org/etudesphotographiques/3225> [fr]

Publisher

Société française de photographie

Printed version

Date of publication: 21 November 2011

ISBN: 9782911961281

ISSN: 1270-9050

Electronic reference

Caroline Recher, "Arnold Odermatt – Beyond the Seven Mountains", *Études photographiques* [Online], 28 | novembre 2011, Online since 18 June 2014, connection on 11 June 2022. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/etudesphotographiques/3472>

This text was automatically generated on 11 June 2022.

Propriété intellectuelle

Arnold Odermatt – Beyond the Seven Mountains

The Unsanctioned Artist's Candid Eye

Caroline Recher

Translation : James Gussen

The author wishes to thank Jörg Ebeling, Sophie Collombat, and Galerie Vallois, who provided her with special access to Arnold Odermatt's work; Arnold Odermatt, Urs Odermatt, and Jasmin Morgan for their generous availability; as well as Clément Chéroux, Caroline Smout, Roberto Cortesi, and Gilda Bouchat for their thoughtful assistance and invaluable advice.

- 1 Once upon a time, there was a Swiss policeman named Arnold Odermatt, whose photographs long went unnoticed, but who then achieved international recognition when the photographer himself was past retirement age. Born into a family of eleven children in the canton of Nidwalden in 1925 – his father was a forester – Arnold Odermatt initially apprenticed as a baker and pastry cook.¹ He was forced to leave that profession, however, because of an allergy, and by chance he ended up joining the cantonal police, where he spent the next forty years. He was responsible in particular for road safety in this little canton isolated in the middle of Switzerland, hemmed in by the Alps and Lake Lucerne.
- 2 At the age of ten, Arnold Odermatt won a camera in a competition and taught himself how to use it, which grew into what can only be called a passion for photography. He took his twin-lens Rolleiflex with him wherever he went, photographing the people and landscapes of the region and later his wife and children. He also incorporated photography into his day-to-day work, using it to document traffic accidents, which were quite common at the time.
- 3 However, Odermatt's hobby was met with indifference by those around him, and for fifty years he captured tens of thousands of images which, carefully stored and organized, languished in his attic, until one day in the early 1990s, his son, Urs Odermatt, himself a director and filmmaker, came upon them.² The retired policeman's photographs were published in a book edited by his son, and recognition for the work

grew steadily. Exhibited in 1998 at police headquarters in Frankfurt am Main during the Frankfurt Book Fair, the black and white images of vehicles damaged in accidents caught the attention of the celebrated curator Harald Szeemann,³ who showed them at the Venice Biennale in 2001. From that point on, the Swiss policeman's photographs were internationally acclaimed. Three books were published by Steidl,⁴ one of the most prominent publishers in the photography world, and his images were exhibited by numerous museums and galleries in Europe and the United States.

- 4 All of the prerequisites were in place for the creation of an 'Odermatt legend' that would be especially attractive to the contemporary art world. Like Eugène Atget, Jacques-Henri Lartigue, and Miroslav Tichý, Odermatt belongs to that special category of 'outsiders' discovered late in life, cut off from the art world and unconcerned with concepts or declarations of intent. As a figure of 'artistic innocence,' he compels us to question the shifting boundaries between art and non-art, between art and art brut or 'outsider art.' Arnold Odermatt's work is difficult to categorize because it seems to include both applied professional photography when he is 'on duty' as well as amateur photography when he is 'off duty.' What is certain is that the power and originality of his images, in contrast with his complete absence of formal artistic training and his long isolation, problematize what may be called 'artistic intention' and its role in the quality of the images produced. Is a self-taught photographer with no formal training who has never called his images 'art' therefore devoid of *Kunstwollen*? Because it is so difficult to make assumptions about intentions that are not expressed as a conceptualized and verbalized desire to 'make art,' I will consider the unrecognized character of Arnold Odermatt's practice, but will do so without using terms like 'naïve' or 'outsider,' which are too fraught with connotations and too reductive. In what follows, I will suggest that these belatedly recognized artists be referred to as *unsanctioned* artists (*artistes non-homologués*). This term is an indirect reference to one of Dubuffet's earliest essays on art brut;⁵ it makes it possible to group together the various 'irregular'⁶ practices by virtue of their contrast with official art world channels, without, however, stigmatizing them by setting up a dualism in which art is opposed to non-art. The term 'sanction' signals official recognition, but does it alter the nature of what it consecrates?
- 5 The contrast between images that satisfy the art world's expectations in terms of their quality and a photographer who stubbornly refused to seek any kind of critical recognition for his work seems to endow Odermatt's practice with an obvious appeal as something 'instinctive' and 'authentic.' In this case, artistic innocence and authenticity even seem to enhance its value. In what follows, I will seek to define more clearly how the appeal of this 'innocence' of the unsanctioned artist is expressed in Arnold Odermatt's critical reception and what it reveals about a certain notion of the photographer 'with no artistic intention.'

Accidents and Intentions

- 6 Arnold Odermatt is primarily known through two bodies of his work: images of car accidents (usually in black and white) published under the title *Karambolage* (Crash), and color photographs of police officers engaging in a variety of both routine and out of the ordinary activities. The *Karambolage* photographs are, as it were, his trademark; it is through them that he acquired his notoriety. In the early 1950s, when he joined the

Nidwalden police, Odermatt made sure that taking photographs would be part of his new job. Despite the misgivings of his superior officer, he insisted on incorporating photographic documentation into his vehicle accident reports, although standard procedure was simply to include a sketch. Little by little, he elaborated a method that he later taught to colleagues in neighboring cantons: by setting up a tripod on the roof of a small van, he obtained an elevated vantage point and an optimal angle.

- 7 He now developed a two-fold practice, with documentary images made to accompany police reports and, by contrast, with those he made for himself once his official work was done. These latter images present striking views of damaged, broken down, or smashed vehicles; close-ups that highlight the sculptural, even abstract quality of the crushed and crumpled metal; or clean, uncluttered compositions depicting the idyllic landscapes of central Switzerland. It was these images that were chosen by Urs Odermatt as the policeman-photographer's quintessential subject for *Meine Welt* (My World), the first publication of his father's work, and later for the book *Karambolage*. These are also the photographs that caught the attention of Harald Szeemann. And finally, these are the photographs that provoked a critical response and helped to identify Arnold Odermatt with his profession and the role of photography in it. The photographs from the 1970s showing the Nidwalden cantonal police engaged in target practice or rescue drills, taking fingerprints or directing traffic, were originally intended to be used in slide shows at schools in an effort to inspire interest in the vocation of police work. Published in the book *In Dienst* (On Duty) and hung in a number of galleries, these photographs further established this identity of the 'policeman-photographer'; they were generally appreciated as kitsch.
- 8 Charmed and amused by this colorful figure, critics reacted to his images with surprise, irony, or skepticism. In one of the first articles to be published on Arnold Odermatt – it appeared in 1996 in connection with an exhibition at the Viewpoint Gallery (Salford, UK) – the journalist Joe Laniado questions the artistic value of the *Karambolage* photographs in these terms: 'Despite their presentation here in the context of "art," Arnold Odermatt's photographs are essentially forensic ... In this light, the peculiar pedestrianism of the images, instead of being a quaintly interesting Swiss-Twin-Peaksy thing, becomes merely a policeman's objectivity. There is no drama or discernible commentary; the subject of his naive eye is the aftermath of vehicular accidents – broken cars.' This 'naive eye,' then, is incapable of seeing anything but what is,⁸ and the Swiss policeman, who at this point is still unknown, is regarded as completely devoid of artistic talent. In short, the appeal of his images lies entirely in the fact that they have been recontextualized by being hung in an art gallery. The status of the *Karambolage* photographs seems problematic and unclear, and in this and other articles there is a certain confusion regarding the purposes for which they were initially taken. Few critics seem willing to consider the fact that if Arnold Odermatt, a self-taught photographer 'with no artistic intention,' took a second set of images for his own personal use, sometimes well after the first set specifically connected with his job, it may not have been solely from a desire to produce additional documentation.⁹
- 9 Whereas in Laniado's article the photographer's 'naïve eye' is regarded as a limitation, the same naiveté appears as a source of additional charm and value in the many articles by critics and journalists published since the validation conferred upon Odermatt by the 2001 Venice Biennale. The 'legend' of Arnold Odermatt is mentioned in virtually every article. The description of his photographs of accidents with their 'admirable

added aesthetic value,¹⁰ his 'hieratic compositions,'¹¹ and his 'subtly atmospheric style'¹² is regularly preceded or followed by a discussion of the colorful, provincial, and modest character of the photographer himself. The contrast between the person of the photographer and the quality of his photographs is an implicit expression of the writer's surprise at this exception to the rule, but that sentiment is also frequently made explicit by a terminology that speaks volumes: 'instinctive,' 'intuitive,' and 'authentic' are terms that one finds in numerous articles both in the press and the specialized literature. In short, because 'this eccentric'¹³ has no artistic training, his images must owe their success to a kind of mysterious and unexplained 'intuitive formal logic.'¹⁴

- 10 This notion of an authenticity understood as a type of naïve art is particularly evident in the work's French reception, which is culturally marked by an image of Switzerland often tinged with irony or condescension. In Germany and the United States, where Odermatt's work was recognized earlier,¹⁵ the paternalism does not arise although there is the same fascination with this unconventional figure. The precision of his photographs' framing and composition and even their 'rigid' quality,¹⁶ the orderliness and clarity of the photographs of accidents and policemen at work, and also of his family, are quite frequently associated with the self-taught photographer's nationality and profession. The irony and humor that emanate from some of the crumpled metal and scenes enacted by the Nidwalden police are more often than not attributed to the temporal distance that separates the images from the viewer, to the fact that their current reading is taking place in an artistic context infatuated with all things 'retro.' *Astérix et Obélix en Helvétie*, Jacques Tati, and the *Gendarme de Saint-Tropez* are summoned in an effort to explain the allusions that would make the sophisticated viewer appreciate this 'unintentional humor.'¹⁷ For while critics concede that Odermatt possesses 'a canny eye for maximum visual impact with the most economical means,'¹⁸ an eye that 'understand[s] how to frame absurdity,'¹⁹ a 'masterful eye for the grand composition of a photograph, for the one true framing,'²⁰ it remains above all *an eye* which 'does not editorialize,'²¹ one that possesses an 'objectivity which is not that of an intellectual procedure'²².

- 11 In his catalogue essay for the photographs exhibited in Venice, Harald Szeemann calls Arnold Odermatt an *Augenmensch*,²³ literally an 'eye man.' This term – which is typical of the kinds of expression that German is able to create by virtue of the malleability it shares with all synthetic languages – is tantamount to identifying a human being with one of his or her organs. It nicely encapsulates the issues surrounding the figure of a photographer who does not conceptualize his work and rejects being labeled an artist, but who – it is claimed – instinctively produces good images. In short, the prevailing view is that Arnold Odermatt's 'artistic virginity' gives him privileged access to a more original and perhaps more archetypal vision of the world.

Snow White

- 12 Even more than a legend, the story of the policeman-photographer is a veritable fairy tale. Arnold Odermatt, who often expresses himself by way of anecdotes and images, uses a revealing expression when he describes his meeting with the Swiss photographer Werner Bischof. That encounter represents the only contact with the larger world of photography that Odermatt remembers from all his years of isolation as

a self-taught provincial. The meeting took place in 1953, when Odermatt was providing security for Jawaharlal Nehru, who was visiting the region. Recognizing Werner Bischof, who was on hand to photograph the Indian prime minister, the policeman took the opportunity to introduce himself and express his admiration. Bischof, he says, seemed quite surprised that ‘this little photographer from beyond the seven mountains’ was acquainted with his work. The German expression used by Odermatt – ‘hinter den sieben Bergen’ (beyond the seven mountains) – is an allusion to the tale of Snow White. When the queen, who is jealous of Snow White’s beauty and believes her to be dead, asks: ‘Mirror, mirror, on the wall / who in the realm is the fairest of all?’ the mirror answers: ‘You, my queen, are the loveliest here, / but beyond the mountains, where the seven dwarves dwell, / Snow White is thriving, and this I must tell: / She is a thousand times fairer.’²⁴

- 13 Fairy tales are traditionally regarded as a colorful form of folk wisdom reserved for children. In the psychoanalytic approach of Bruno Bettelheim, however, which broke new ground, fairy tales are understood differently – as a symbolic language that illuminates and organizes the operations of the human psyche, that makes the soul’s impulses comprehensible and gives them meaning, and that ‘states ... existential dilemma[s] briefly and pointedly.’²⁵ From this perspective, the tale of Snow White may be seen as an invaluable tool for grasping the discursive issues surrounding the figure of the unsanctioned artist, provided one goes beyond a strictly Oedipal reading such as Bettelheim’s and thinks in more general terms. Like Snow White, Arnold Odermatt, a ‘little photographer from beyond the seven mountains,’ embodies purity, innocence, and *candor* – a term whose etymology, with its links to whiteness, takes on special significance here. Behind the seven mountains, shielded from the jealousy of an evil stepmother who envies her her beauty, Snow White is protected by the seven dwarves, who scour the mountains in search of iron and gold. In exchange for their protection, she must take care of their dwelling, where everything is ‘tiny and indescribably dainty and spotless.’²⁶ It is difficult not to be reminded here of the stereotype of Switzerland as a kind of geographic strongbox or safe, and not to see Arnold Odermatt’s artistic isolation on the shores of Lake Lucerne as a kind of exile among industrious, orderly, clean little men.²⁷ As in the tale of Sleeping Beauty, after she has been poisoned by her stepmother, Snow White must be awakened from her sleep by a prince, at which point she will be able to leave her exile. In the same way, the Swiss policeman’s photographs – most of which, moreover, are still undeveloped negatives²⁸ – can be ‘awakened’ (*réveillées*) and ‘revealed’ (*révélées*)²⁹ by an external gaze. This innocent beauty, unconscious of itself, requires the intervention of someone from without who is more sophisticated and more conversant with the ways of the world and the customs of the court. In Odermatt’s case, it took no less than two Prince Charmings acting as ‘revealers’ (*révélateurs*).³⁰ The first was Urs Odermatt, who, with his professional eye, was able to select, present, *develop*, and promote his father’s work by grasping the formal and aesthetic issues that linked his photographs with current taste.³¹ Following this first awakening, Harald Szeemann’s recognition of Odermatt’s work functioned as a kind of legitimation on the international scene at the forty-ninth Venice Biennale. The latter marks a turning point in Odermatt’s critical reception. Thirty-two *Karambolage* photographs were exhibited by Szeemann in the context of the exhibition *Platform of Humanity* at the Corderie dell’Arsenale, together with the work of Victor Marushenko on Chernobyl.

- 14 The story of Snow White is one of a pure and innocent beauty that is envied as such. This unselfconscious beauty seems to enjoy a special status, a superiority that has to do precisely with its disinterestedness, just as the artist who has not been deflowered by artistic training or by consciousness of the formal and conceptual issues associated with his medium is viewed with admiration. Urs Odermatt says it himself: his father's disinterested perseverance in continuing to take his photographs for fifty years, despite meeting only with indifference and incomprehension, makes his photographic activity even more admirable.³² 'Undeniably, it is precisely the fact that these images were made for the photographic journal (*photographisches Tagebuch*) of the civil servant Arnold Odermatt, who assembled his collection obsessively and with great craftsmanship and technical skill but ultimately without any speculative artistic intention, that today lends this collection the honest authenticity which is so admired by connoisseurs of photography throughout the world.'³³
- 15 This model of unconscious beauty may help us to recognize that what is actually at stake in the reception of an original body of work that does not claim to be rooted in an explicit artistic intention is precisely an ambivalent admiration for a form of purity and disinterestedness. This nostalgia for a lost innocence is the same yearning that informs modernity's appeal to the art of 'primitive peoples,' the 'naïve,' the 'insane,' and the 'innocent.' Unlike the jealous queen, the sophisticated world of contemporary art does not go so far as to kill this coveted beauty, but it will, like an ogre, appropriate and feed on it. Moreover, while the ostensibly intact and candid beauty of unsanctioned art may be coveted, it also provokes condescension. Snow White is more beautiful than the queen, but she is also more foolish; on three separate occasions, she permits herself to be tricked by her stepmother disguised as a peddler.

The Photographer's Candid Eye

- 16 Innocence, regarded as a little something extra, and the ambivalence it provokes, which combines admiration and condescension, make it possible to read the reception of Odermatt's work as informed by the confluence of a number of *topoi* present in the art world since the early twentieth century. 'Modernism drew its inspiration from two principal sources: the exotic arts, especially so-called "primitive" art, and the work of autodidacts, of children and people cut off from the mainstream art world, especially inmates of mental hospitals,' writes Jean-Hubert Martin in the exhibition catalogue *Dubuffet et l'art brut*.³⁴ Where photography is concerned, one might add to this list the avant-gardes' fascination with utilitarian and applied photography and the manner in which they appropriated scientific, journalistic, and advertising images.³⁵ Whether he or she is called primitive, naïve, *brut*, or outsider – a list that could also be expanded to include the professional photographer with no declared *Kunstwollen* – these various different *topoi* of the unsanctioned artist all have in common that, for modernity, they serve as a vehicle for the attractive idea of an innocence understood as a disinterestedness in the artistic act.
- 17 The surrealists went into raptures over Atget, the 'Rousseau of photography,'³⁶ while in 1963, John Szarkowski called Lartigue 'a true primitive.'³⁷ Doesn't Odermatt – this 'Facteur Cheval [Postman Cheval] of photography,' as one journalist describes him³⁸ – belong to the same tradition of unsanctioned artists who are intensively creative and innovative but 'innocent'? Although his nationality, his profession, and his anointment

by Harald Szeemann – who is known for having discovered a number of other ‘outsider’ artists, including Miroslav Tichý – sometimes seem to draw him into the camp of art brut,³⁹ his work is generally regarded as occupying a kind of gray area between obsessive amateurism and naïve creativity. If Atget and Lartigue are mentioned in a number of articles on Odermatt,⁴⁰ this is because all three of them are perceived in a similar manner: like the paintings of Douanier Rousseau and the palace of Facteur Cheval, their photographs inspire the fantasy of a raw and naïve creativity. ‘One is tempted to call them naïve,’ wrote Harald Szeemann of Odermatt’s photographs selected for the Venice Biennale, ‘but “fresh” (*unverbraucht*) is probably a better word. Henri Rousseau would measure the distance between his models’ eyes in relationship to the length of their noses in order to capture their essence. Whether it be a wild animal or the poet’s muse, all of his subjects look at you the same way, right from within their unusual physiognomic proportions ... The police officer takes his photographs just as the customs officer painted, completely wrapped up in and focused on his work, hiding the human form behind a vehicle also driven by a human being.’⁴¹

- 18 This ‘freshness’ shared by unsanctioned artists gives rise to an entire imaginative world, which revolves around a virginity of vision. The innocence of the artist’s intention is thus transferred to his or her gaze, and the ‘innocent eye’⁴² becomes associated with the utopia of a vision regarded as ‘virgin,’ pristine, and open to the world, not filtered through academic or aesthetic canons. A journalist criticized Lartigue, the professional painter, for painting with a ‘hand undirected by the brain.’⁴³ This very same absence of intellect, however, seems to become a positive attribute in the case of Lartigue, the amateur photographer, who is applauded for his ‘fresh perceptions, poetically sensed and graphically fixed,’⁴⁴ as if for the amateur or ‘outsider’ (and all the more for the photographer, a point to which we will return later on), thought were superfluous or even a handicap. The unsanctioned artist sees, senses, and registers impressions instinctively; his or her ingenuous (*candide*) eye is a blank or white (*blanche*) canvas that can cover itself with novel and original visions. And yet, as Nelson Goodman writes in his book *Languages of Art*, the notion that any object could be perceived ‘under aseptic conditions by the free and innocent eye’⁴⁵ is a product of the ‘myths of the innocent eye and of the absolute given,’ which are ‘unholy accomplices.’⁴⁶ ‘Both derive from and foster the idea of knowing as a processing of raw material received from the senses, and of this raw material as being discoverable either through purification rites or by methodical disinterpretation.’⁴⁷ This is an excellent description of the nostalgia for an art that is raw (*brut*), primitive, and innocent. According to this view, Atget, Lartigue, and Odermatt all possess an eye that is naturally free and thus do not need to rid themselves of encumbering knowledge. But as Goodman also writes, ‘reception and interpretation are not separable operations; they are thoroughly interdependent.’
- 19 The notion that there are innocent artists (innocent in terms of their intention as well as their eye) valorizes those who discover and promote them. Indeed, in order for the genius of the unsanctioned artist to be revealed to the world, a second gaze is required, one endowed with a mind that is able to conceptualize and contextualize. The very same logic was at work in the Cubists’ fascination with ‘primitive’ art: ‘African and Oceanian artists were regarded as completely ignorant of any aesthetic conception. It was thought that they made beautiful things without knowing it, for the benefit of both professional and amateur artists, who could discern their aesthetic qualities and reuse them in their works.’⁴⁸ Thus, the process by which unsanctioned artists are legitimated

both showcases their talent and implies that they are lacking something: an intelligence that would allow them to put into words what they apprehend ‘instinctively’ in their images.

- 20 The temporal gap in the reception of the work of Odermatt the *Augenmensch* suggests that the reverberations with the Düsseldorf School and art photography are involuntary. ‘Odermatt is not a chronicler or cataloguer in the mould of a Becher, Strüth or Ruff,’ writes Joe Laniado. ‘He does not appear to be interested in the idea of accident or randomness, as an artist might be.’⁴⁹ Similarly, Natasha Egan comments: ‘Seeing these works hanging at the Art Institute of Chicago, one was reminded of Susan Sontag’s keen observation in her 1964 essay ‘Notes on Camp’: ‘What was banal can, with the passage of time, become fantastic.’⁵⁰ There is no doubt that the passage of time has changed the way we look at these images. When we look at Odermatt’s images more closely, however, we cannot help but wonder if they really do owe their appeal exclusively to their remoteness in time, if it really is possible that they came out so well ‘in spite of him.’

‘In Spite of Himself’

- 21 The way in which critics have presented Arnold Odermatt’s photographs, combining and at times confusing the amateur artist, the ‘primitive’ or ‘naïve’ artist, and the ‘outsider’ artist, takes on special significance in connection with photography. If Odermatt produces good art without being aware of it, with an eye that is ‘untouched by artistic culture,’⁵¹ can he, by extension, produce good images ‘in spite of himself,’ as suggested by Sophie de Santis’s short article ‘Arnold Odermatt, photographe malgré lui’ (Arnold Odermatt, A Photographer In Spite of Himself), in which the Swiss policeman is also described as an ‘artist in spite of himself’?⁵² The terminology, used in a number of articles, which casts Odermatt’s work not only as intuitive but even more as accidental, emphasizes the automatic aspect of photography, which is regarded as producing images that are essentially products of chance. ‘Photography has always been an art of the accident,’ writes Barry Schwabsky in an article from 2003.⁵³ And the *Karambolage* photographs do seem to emphasize the accidental character of photography. In the article by Joe Laniado cited earlier, while the sight of certain overturned vehicles is ‘bizarre’ and ‘perhaps even ironic,’ ‘the irony and wit seem to be there in spite of, not because of Odermatt – they are also accidents.’⁵⁴ Does that mean, then, that the self-taught photographer, captivated and even hypnotized by the scenes he captures, depressed the shutter release of his camera without really meaning to?
- 22 More perhaps than other art forms such as painting, sculpture, and installation, photography seems to be linked to reality in a relatively contingent manner. The subject of the photograph, as it were, simply asserts itself. The fact that, from a purely mechanical perspective, it is so easy to take a photograph would, in this sense, make it possible for photographs to be taken that elude the person who takes them, and succeed *despite him or her*. It is well known that occasional photographers are capable of bringing off beautiful images by accident. And yet this view would seem to be based primarily on a documentary conception of photography which ignores the importance of selecting and setting up shots, posing one’s subjects, and inventiveness. This notion of a photography ‘in spite of itself’ makes it a perfect ally of the ‘innocent eye’ in the ‘raw’ (*brut*) representation of reality. But Goodman also writes that ‘in representing an

object, we do not copy such a construal or interpretation – we *achieve* it,⁵⁵ adding that this ‘is no less true when the instrument we use is a camera rather than a pen or brush.’⁵⁶ The work of Arnold Odermatt is extremely wide-ranging and has many dimensions that have not yet been revealed to the general public. But what remains constant in his working method is the lengthy preparation time and the care with which he selects and stages his shots. Whether it be his images of accidents, the day-to-day work of the police force, his family, or moments from his own everyday life, the composition, a mastery of natural and artificial lighting, and the use of a tripod are indispensable components of the work of this sophisticated photographer, for whom ‘a lot of things happen before the photograph is taken.’⁵⁷ Anything but accidental, Odermatt’s images display a flair for the humor of situations for which he is rarely given credit.⁵⁸ Indeed, the terms ‘unintentional’ and ‘in spite of himself’ occur especially frequently with reference to the humorous aspect of his images, which tends to be regarded as entirely a product of their decontextualization and the temporal distance that separates them from the contemporary viewer.⁵⁹ On closer inspection, however, photographs like Stansstad, 1967, which shows tire tracks running straight into the lake beside a sign that reads ‘Stansstad, idealer Ferienort’ (Stansstad, ideal vacation spot), or Hergiswil, 1967, which shows a policeman brushing the accumulated snow off a sign that warns drivers of the risk of skidding, reflect an unmistakable desire to poke fun. While the images of police officers at the firing range or practicing CPR, which look like an ‘unintentionally parodic survey of the [Swiss] federal police,’⁶⁰ may look kitschier now than they did when they were taken, the photographer may well have meant them to be funny as a way of appealing to the schoolchildren who were their intended audience.

- 23 The photographs of headlights melted in a fire, the contrast between a turquoise car and the beige and gray cars surrounding it, the Dantesque image of municipal government offices buckling under the weight of papers and files : all of this indicates a sharp eye, a keen sense of composition and staging, and a great command of photographic technique, but it also points to an active and open mind, one that, while it may not have a conceptualized and verbalized artistic intention, at least has a clear formal intention. Moreover, Urs Odermatt explains how his father made them pose so long that all his models were on the brink of exasperation. One among many examples is the photograph of Urs, age three, jumping off the couch. Perfectly lit without the use of flash, it took lengthy and detailed preparation to get the lighting right, and many rehearsals to perfect the leap itself. Similarly, when Arnold Odermatt describes how he furtively put a bunch of flowers back in its place beside a flower truck damaged in an accident to get a better photograph, it suggests an intentional act which directly refutes the idea that he didn’t know what he was doing and was driven to take his pictures by an unconscious instinct.
- 24 These examples also show how difficult it is to characterize a photographer’s work as art brut. Dubuffet defined those artists who are ‘untouched by artistic culture’ by the fact that they ‘take everything (subjects, choice of materials, modes of transposition, rhythms, writing styles) from their own inner being.’⁶¹ And yet the specific kind of meeting between the inner and outer worlds that takes place in photography involves a shifting balance between phenomena of projection (the selection and setting up of the shot) and phenomena of reception (the snapshot), in which the expression of a reality that would be exclusively drawn ‘from [one’s] own inner being’ – a notion every bit as utopian as that of the ‘free and innocent eye’ – is more difficult than in painting or

sculpture. It is telling that the sole exhibition to focus on the links between photography and art brut (*Create and Be Recognized: Photography on the Edge*, which took place in San Francisco in 2004) primarily featured works that used collage.⁶²

From Artist to Artwork

- 25 The diversity of Arnold Odermatt's work, whose various aspects are gradually being revealed in a playful collaboration between photographer father and filmmaker son,⁶³ underscores the difficulty in reaching a nuanced appreciation of the status of the unsanctioned artist and of the potential complexity of the medium of photography as an undeclared practice. It is by recontextualizing Arnold Odermatt's various thematic series that one develops a richer understanding of the documentary conception generally invoked in discussions of his work; the photographs of damaged vehicles, the shots of the police officers' daily work, the Nidwalden landscapes, and the images of his family are all born of different intentions and contexts. This recontextualization reveals how the photographer, his eye ever on the alert, could seize each opportunity to continue a visual exploration; as such, it would be extremely difficult not to describe this impulse as aesthetically driven.
- 26 Over time – especially in Germany, where his work is best known – critics have ceased to emphasize the person of the photographer and have concentrated instead on the photographs themselves. It is as though now that the process of legitimating the unsanctioned artist is complete, one could finally do as Roland Barthes recommends – leave the artist aside and position oneself as a viewer, allowing the work its autonomy.⁶⁴ Whether Arnold Odermatt's photographs are art or not is declared to be 'the least interesting question';⁶⁵ a Berlin journalist writes: 'I realized very quickly why he was so famous.'⁶⁶ The 'Swiss policeman' is simply referred to, more and more often, as a 'photographer' or 'artist,' and the fascination with his atypical career is waning. As Vincent Huguet writes in his essay for the exhibition *Arnold Odermatt: On and Off Duty* at Galerie Vallois in January 2011, 'On and off: while his relative isolation and his epoch put him upstream of *homo photographicus*, of digitisation, of the discipline's public and critical triumphs, he remains a striking reminder that images achieve the status of art not through nostalgia, but because our eyes can see things today that they couldn't see yesterday – things which, nonetheless, were already in the full flower of their existence.'⁶⁷
- 27 While Arnold Odermatt's keen eye may indeed be largely free of artistic 'oxidation' (to borrow another expression from Jean Dubuffet),⁶⁸ that does not mean it is naïve. It is completely understandable why his persistent, independent, and autonomous practice should provoke fascination. Nevertheless, beyond the seven mountains and far from the canons and concepts of sanctioned art, Arnold Odermatt, who was neither Candide nor Snow White, knew very well that speaking in images is a subtle art.

NOTES

1. All biographical details are taken from an interview conducted by the author with Arnold Odermatt and his son Urs Odermatt on June 9, 2011, in Baden, Switzerland.
2. At the time, Urs Odermatt was doing research for his film *Wachtmeister Zumbühl* (Constable Zumbühl, 1994). The film's main character is a policeman who also takes photographs when the mood strikes him. Urs Odermatt used his father's photographs in the film and hired him to work on the set as a film still photographer. The screenplay has been published together with seventy-nine photographs by Arnold Odermatt: Urs ODERMATT, *Wachtmeister Zumbühl* (Bern: Benteli, 1994).
3. See Tobia BEZZOLA and Roman KURZMEYER, eds., *Harald Szeemann: With By Through Because Towards Despite: Catalogue of All Exhibitions, 1957–2005* (Zurich: Voldemeer; Vienna: Springer, 2007); Florence DERIEUX, ed., *Harald Szeemann: Méthodologie individuelle* (Zofingue: JRP Ringier, 2007).
4. Arnold ODERMATT, *Karambolage*, ed. Urs ODERMATT (Göttingen: Steidl, 2003); *In Dienst (On Duty/En service)*, ed. Urs ODERMATT (Göttingen: Steidl, 2006), trilingual edition; *In zivil (Off Duty/Hors service)*, ed. Urs ODERMATT (Göttingen: Steidl, 2010).
5. Jean Dubuffet refers to 'cultural art' as 'approved art' (art homologué). See Jean DUBUFFET, 'Crude Art Preferred to Cultural Art' [translation of *L'art brut préféré aux arts culturels* (1949)], in *Art in Theory, 1900–1990: An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, ed. Charles HARRISON and Paul WOOD, 605–8 (Oxford, UK and Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1993). [I have chosen to translate 'non-homologué' as 'unsanctioned' rather than 'unapproved,' because the term 'unapproved art' is commonly used to refer to art suppressed by the government of the former Soviet Union or other totalitarian states. – The translator]
6. Ibid., 606.
7. Joe LANIADO, 'Arnold Odermatt,' *Frieze*, no. 31 (November–December 1996): 75.
8. Or as Jean-Sébastien STEHLI writes in *Photosensible*, his blog on the website of *Figaro Madame*, 'Odermatt shows life as it is': 'Arnold Odermatt, Le Facteur Cheval de la photo,' posted February 11, 2011, <http://blog.madame.lefigaro.fr/stehli/2011/02/odermatt.html>.
9. The photographs we know today are exclusively the images Odermatt took for his personal use, not the documentary photographs he took for his work. This is a fact that critics often fail to recognize. The *Karambolage* images are thus not forensic photographs.
10. Konstanze CRÜWELL, 'Die Akte Arnold Odermatt,' *Frankfurter Allgemeine Sonntagszeitung*, no. 42, October 21, 2001, p. 60.
11. Natacha WOLINSKI, 'Arnold Odermatt à contresens,' *Beaux-Arts Magazine*, no. 227 (April 2003): 96.
12. Barry SCHWABSKY, 'Arnold Odermatt – Reviews: Chicago,' *ArtForum International* 41, no. 5 (January 2003): 142.
13. Sophie DE SANTIS, 'Arnold Odermatt, photographe malgré lui,' January 17, 2011 (www.lefigaro.fr/arts-expositions/2011/01/17/03015-20110117ARTFIG00759-arnold-odermatt-photographe-malgre-lui.php).
14. James RONDEAU, *Arnold Odermatt, Selected Photographs 1939–1993*, brochure for the exhibition of the same name at the Art Institute of Chicago (October 22, 2002 – January 20, 2003), n.p.
15. In Germany, where Arnold Odermatt's work was first shown, more than twenty exhibitions were held in galleries and museums between 1995 and 2011. In the United States, his work has been known since 2002, thanks to an exhibition at the Art Institute of Chicago. In France, however, despite two exhibitions in 2002 (*Carambolages* at the Centre Rhénan de la Photographie in Strasbourg and the group exhibition *Aubes: Rêveries au Bord de Victor Hugo* at the Maison Victor Hugo in Paris, which was curated by Harald Szeemann), Odermatt's work didn't begin to reach a

larger audience until 2006 and the group exhibition *Accidents* at Galerie Vallois, which was followed by two solo exhibitions in 2009 and 2011.

16. DER SPIEGEL, 'Polizisten mit Geweih,' June 25, 2006, p. 182.
17. .See J.-S. STEHLI, 'Arnold Odermatt, Le Facteur Cheval de la photo' (note 8) and Hubert SPIEGEL, 'Sie jagten Nepper, Schlepper, Bauernfänger,' *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, no. 93, April 21, 2007, p. Z5.
18. Jennifer HIGGIE, 'Always Crashing in the Same Car,' *Frieze*, no. 73 (March 2003): 79.
19. Jonathan SCHULTZ, 'Arnold Odermatt: Photographing the Calm after the Crash,' August 18, 2010 (wheels.blogs.nytimes.com/2010/08/18/photographing-the-calm-after-the-crash).
20. K. CRÜWELL, 'Die Akte Arnold Odermatt' (note 10), 60.
21. J. SCHULTZ, 'Arnold Odermatt: Photographing the Calm after the Crash' (note 19).
22. J.-S. STEHLI, 'Arnold Odermatt, Le Facteur Cheval de la photo' (note 8).
23. Harald SZEEMANN, 'Der Sensation den Wind aus den Segeln nehmen ...,' in *Arnold Odermatt: Die Biennale-Auswahl, 32 Photographien für Venedig 2001*, p. 5 (Berlin: Springer & Winckler Galerie, 2002).
24. 'Snow White,' in *The Complete Fairy Tales of the Brothers Grimm*, trans. Jack Zipes, 1:216–17 (translation modified) (New York: Bantam, 1988).
25. .See Bruno BETTELHEIM, *The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales* (New York: Knopf, 1976), 8, and see also 23–28 and 194–215.
26. 'Snow White,' in *The Annotated Brothers Grimm*, ed. and trans. Maria TATAR (New York: Norton, 2004), 245.
27. .In her 2003 article on Arnold Odermatt, Natacha Wolinski refers to Jean Paulhan's book *Guide d'un petit voyage en Suisse*, in which the author likens the Switzerland of 1945 to a 'preserve (for provisions and necessities instead of chamois and reindeer),' (Paris: Gallimard, 1947), 10. See N. WOLINSKI, 'Arnold Odermatt à contresens' (note 11), 96.
28. .Of the sixty thousand negatives that lay dormant in the photographer's attic, only a little more than a tenth have been published; Arnold Odermatt continues to develop the rest as required for publications and exhibitions.
29. [The French word also means to develop a photograph. – The translator]
30. [The French word also refers to the 'developer' used to develop photographs in the darkroom. – The translator]
31. .Trained by the Polish directors Krzysztof Kieślowski and Edward Żebrowski, Urs Odermatt lived for a long time in Berlin. His most recent film, *Der böse Onkel* (The Wicked Uncle, in theaters in 2012), reflects a staunchly contemporary, even radical aesthetic.
32. .Comments made during the interview of June 9, 2011 (note 1).
33. .Urs ODERMATT, 'Notizen zu einer späteren Karriere: Arnold Odermatt' *Nidwaldner Kalender*, no. 143, 2002: 113.
34. Jean-Hubert MARTIN, 'Dubuffet fonde l'art sans le savoir,' in *Dubuffet et l'art brut*, ed. Jean-Hubert MARTIN, 14 (Milan: 5 Continents, 2005).
35. .See for example László MOHOLY-NAGY, *Malerei Fotografie Film* (Mainz: F. Kupferberg, 1967), a reproduction of the 1927 Passau edition; or the journal *La Révolution Surréaliste* (1924–1929).
36. .Waldemar GEORGE, 'Photographie vision du monde,' *Arts et métiers graphiques*, no. 16, special issue (March 1930): 134, quoted in Guillaume LE GALL, 'Atget, figure réfléchie du surréalisme,' *Études photographiques*, no. 7 (May 2000): 95.
37. John SZARKOWSKI, *The Photographs of Jacques-Henri Lartigue* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1963), n.p.
38. .See J.-S. STEHLI, 'Arnold Odermatt, Le Facteur Cheval de la photo' (note 8).
39. .The article that goes furthest in this direction is Claire MOULÈNE, 'Droit au brut,' *Les Inrockuptibles*, no. 792, February 2, 2011, p. 106–7.

40. .See among others Irene MÜLLER, 'Durchbrochene Wahrnehmung: Absichtsvolle Arrangements zufälliger Momente,' in *Karambolagen* Gerhard FINKH, 21–28 (Leverkusen: Museum Morsbroich, 2000); and Ricarda VIDAL, 'Caspar David Friedrich through a Broken Windscreen: Arnold Odermatt's Peaceful Crash Scenes,' *Static*, no. 7 (July 2008): 12 (static.londonconsortium.com/issue07/static07_vidal.php).
41. .H. SZEEMANN, 'Der Sensation den Wind aus den Segeln nehmen...' (note 23), 5–6.
42. .See Alain SAYAG, 'A Free and Innocent Eye,' in *Lartigue: Album of a Century*, ed. Martine D'ASTIER, Quentin BAJAC, and Alain SAYAG, trans. David Wharry (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 2003), 12–19.
43. .*LE TEMPS*, March 24, 1924, quoted in A. SAYAG, 'A Free and Innocent Eye' (note 42), 16.
44. J. SZARKOWSKI, *The Photographs of Jacques-Henri Lartigue* (note 37), n.p.
45. .Nelson GOODMAN, *Languages of Art: An Approach to a Theory of Symbols* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1976 [1968]), 7. See A. SAYAG, 'A Free and Innocent Eye' (note 42), 18.
46. .N. GOODMAN, *Languages of Art* (note 45), 8.
47. .*Ibid.*
48. J.-H. MARTIN, 'Dubuffet fonde l'art sans le savoir' (note 34), 15.
49. J. LANIADO, 'Arnold Odermatt' (note 7), 75.
50. .Natasha EGAN, 'On Duty: Arnold Odermatt,' *Aperture*, no. 188 (Fall 2007): 84.
51. J. DUBUFFET, 'Crude Art Preferred to Cultural Art' (note 5), 607.
52. .S. DE SANTIS, 'Arnold Odermatt, photographe malgré lui' (note 13).
53. .B. SCHWABSKY, 'Arnold Odermatt – Reviews: Chicago' (note 12), 142.
54. J. LANIADO, 'Arnold Odermatt' (note 7), 75.
55. .N. GOODMAN, *Languages of Art* (note 45), 9.
56. .*Ibid.*, 70, n. 8.
57. .Interview of June 9, 2011 (note 1).
58. .With some exceptions, such as Christina TILMANN, who refers to the 'characteristic Odermattian situational humor' in 'Dein Fotofreund und Helfer,' *Der Tagesspiegel*, January 6, 2007 (tagesspiegel.de/kultur/dein-fotofreund-und-helfer/795172.html).
59. .See for example H. SPIEGEL, 'Sie jagten Nepper, Schlepper, Bauernfänger' (note 17), 25; and Natasha EGAN, 'On Duty: Arnold Odermatt,' *Aperture*, no. 188 (Fall 2007): 84–86.
60. .*DER SPIEGEL*, 'Polizisten mit Geweih' (note 16), 182.
61. J. DUBUFFET, 'Crude Art Preferred to Cultural Art' (note 5), 607.
62. .See John TURNER and Deborah KLOCHKO, *Create and Be Recognized: Photography on the Edge* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 2004).
63. .The next book planned for publication (by Steidl) will be called *Nach Feierabend* (After Work); it will consist of series closer to what Arnold Odermatt regards as 'pretty photographs': trees, landscapes, portraits, etc. (forthcoming).
64. .Roland BARTHES, 'La mort de l'auteur,' in *Le bruissement de la langue* (Paris: Seuil, 1984 [1968]), 63–69.
65. .See J. HIGGIE, 'Always Crashing in the Same Car' (note 18), 79.
66. .Tim ACKERMANN, 'Die Polizei, dein Helfer und ein Reh,' *Berliner Morgenpost*, June 26, 2011 (morgenpost.de/printarchiv/kultur/article1682730/Die-Polizei-dein-Helfer-und-ein-Reh.html).
67. .Vincent HUGUET, 'Arnold Odermatt, On and Off Duty,' press release published by Galerie Vallois for the exhibition of the same name, January 14 – March 5, 2011, available online at Arnold Odermatt's website: www.nordwestfilm.ch/vallois_vincent_huguet.pdf.
68. J. DUBUFFET refers to 'cultural art,' which 'is mixed with ideas,' as an 'oxidized' art; 'Crude Art Preferred to Cultural Art' (note 5), 606 and 607.

ABSTRACTS

As the 'Facteur Cheval [Postman Cheval] of photography,' the 'Monsieur Jourdain of the traffic police,' and an 'artist despite himself,' the Swiss photographer Arnold Odermatt, who was discovered in the 1990s when he had already passed retirement age, is often treated by critics and journalists as an exotic and colorful figure. There are many factors that have helped to create the 'Odermatt legend' and to make it especially attractive to the contemporary art world. Like Eugène Atget, Jacques-Henri Lartigue, and Miroslav Tichý, Odermatt belongs to the special category of belatedly discovered 'outsiders' who are cut off from the art world and care little for concepts or declarations of intent. As a figure of 'artistic innocence,' he provokes a mixture of admiration, condescension, and skepticism. It is not easy to grasp his images, which are neither entirely documents nor entirely fictions, neither wholly the product of mastery nor of instinct. Are notions of the photographer's 'naïveté' and his supposedly 'unintentional' humor simply clichés, or do they express an ambivalence on the part of the contemporary art world, a mixture of nostalgia and envy, toward an oeuvre without pretensions that is nonetheless gripping, 'authentic,' 'instinctive,' 'brut'?

AUTHORS

CAROLINE RECHER

Caroline Recher is a doctoral student in art history at the Université de Lausanne and is being advised by Kornelia Imesch-Oechslin. Her dissertation deals with the representation of suffering and the figure of the victim in news photographs and contemporary art. In 2010–11, she received a grant to study at the Centre Allemand d'Histoire de l'Art in Paris. In 2011, she will publish a text on the painter Jacques Walther's series *Traversées* and an article on Alfredo Jaar's *Rwanda Project*.