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BY JENNIFER HIGGIE
03 MAR 2003

Always Crashing in the Same Car

Arnold Odermatt



If Andy Warhol had known his contemporary, Arnold Odermatt, it might have alleviated a certain frustration the former was experiencing. 'I've met a lot of cops recently', commented Warhol in 1963. 'They take pictures of everything, only it's almost impossible to get copies of them.'¹

From 1948 until 1990 Odermatt was employed as a traffic policeman in the Swiss canton of Nidwalden and took hundreds of photographs, mainly of his fellow workers and of the towns and countryside where he worked and still lives. Surrounded by mountains and a large lake, Nidwalden was a fairly isolated place until 1976, when a major tunnel and bridge were built. As a result, Odermatt's photographs bear witness to an environment gradually coming to terms over the years with various degrees of encroaching modernity. Roads figure prominently: snowy lanes and wet streets contrast with bright new highways, which appear like fresh scars across valleys and forests, slicing through picturesque villages that huddle on the shores of photogenic lakes beneath leaden skies. These scenic detours, however, more often than not lead to the end of the road: a car crash.

Arriving at the scene of an accident, Odermatt would take one set of photographs for the insurance or police reports, and then take another for himself. His reasons for doing so are mysterious but the results are often strangely beautiful. Unlike the photographs of, say, Weegee or Mell Kilpatrick, in which stoic cops and horrified bystanders are pictured dealing in different ways with the reality of sudden injury or death, Odermatt empties the image of everything but the forlorn wreck and the landscape in which it came to rest: a crumpled car floats in a glassy lake beneath the Alps; a couple of abandoned shells tenderly touch bumpers on a charming wintry lane; an overturned VW Beetle reclines on the edges of a still river. Despite the often disturbing evidence of injury there is something oddly calming, even restorative, about these modest images, most of which are black and white. Odermatt scrutinizes surfaces like a sculptor on a budget; he has a canny eye for maximum visual impact with the most economical means. Denied movement and passengers, cars are reduced to the sum of their material parts; as devoid of horror as a log. Yet despite the crisp elegance of their composition, the pictures make apparent, in the most straightforward way, how life can be at once very strange and very ordinary - and how, by association, death is no different.

Odermatt has never considered himself an artist, although he recently had his first solo exhibition in the USA, at The Art Institute of Chicago. Originally trained as a baker and confectioner until allergies forced him to stop, he told the curator of the show, James Rondeau, that unlike photography 'the manual work of mixing, shaping and presenting baked goods and sweets was a truly creative endeavour'. Although cameras had been Odermatt's hobby since childhood, he was selected from a large pool of candidates for the police force because of his working knowledge of French. According to legend, he was 'discovered' by Harald Szeemann, who walked into a police station and spotted one of his photographs on the wall. ('I am for an art', wrote Claes Oldenburg in the 1960s, 'that grows up not knowing it is art at all, an art given the chance of having a starting point zero. I am for an art that embroils itself with the everyday crap and still comes out on top.'²)

Knowing that Odermatt was a policeman for over 40 years lends the act of looking at his photographs a curious vividness - an awareness that what you see is not the result of an urban artist dabbling in the quasi-surreal aspects of abandoned wrecks lying in Alpine idylls, but the work of someone who lived where these things happened, was employed to come to the scene of the accident and, however distressing it may have been, to record it in an image. The question of whether he became a police photographer because he was a frustrated artist, or was a regular officer who, in the course of doing his job, stumbled across a certain talent for photography, is rendered meaningless when you consider the pictures themselves. They make it clear that asking whether something is or is not art is often the least interesting question you can ask about an image or object. Although the photographs touch on many concerns of postwar art (seriality, the blurring of art and life, the car, cultural change ...), they are none the less very different from, for example, Warhol's use of a stock photograph of a car accident to articulate ideas about the ways in which our culture treats and transmits news, or how the mechanical reproduction of tragic events has created a culture numbed by or detached from certain types of horror. To Odermatt the body in the wreck of the car was not just another statistic - it could well have been someone he knew.



As Rondeau points out, Odermatt was taking photographs during 'what could be described as, albeit a little perversely, a golden age of car accidents'. In the early years of driving there were no laws regarding speed limits, seat belts or drink-driving, with the result that a car accident occurred almost every day. It is almost as if by returning time and again to the scene of the accident, emptying the image of its pivot - the damaged human body - and concentrating on the image's formal qualities, Odermatt was attempting to create an emotional distance from the violence that was being enacted upon his tightly knit community by the car (which, immobile and stripped of its splendour, comes across as both guilty party and victim).

Although Odermatt could be said to have taken the same photograph again and again, each iteration is subtly different. The shots record the kind of intense scrutiny you give something or someone when you can't work out what it or they mean. This sensitivity to detail is the humanity that illuminates each of his pictures. J. G. Ballard, a writer preoccupied with the impact of the machine age on the imagination, described the car - somewhat enigmatically - as 'a symbol that represents something which the mind tries to shield itself from'. Odermatt's photographs are somehow more elegiac than other records of accidents in which the violence is graphic. He deals with the interaction of flesh and the machine without numbing the intellect with horror, without making you turn away.

1. G. R. Swenson, 'Andy Warhol', *Art News*, November 1963, p. 26.
2. Claes Oldenburg, 'I Am for an Art ...', Oldenburg, *Arts Council of Great Britain*, London, 1970, reproduced in *Art in Theory 1900-1990*, Blackwells, Oxford, 1992, p. 728.

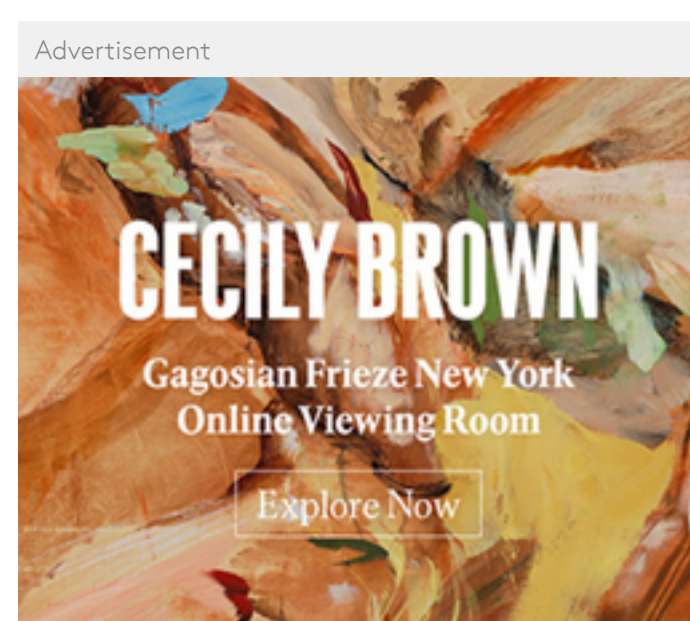
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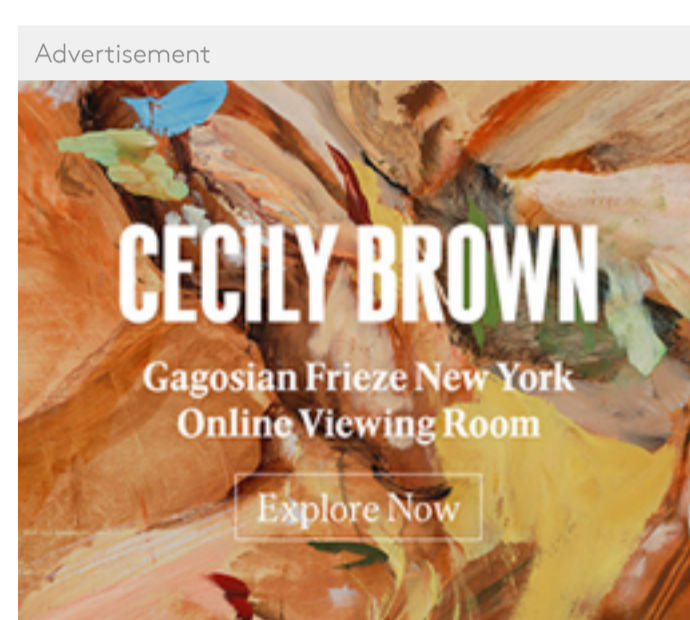
First published in Issue 73
March 2003

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