ON DUTY

A RETIRED SWISS POLICE OFFICER MAKES HIS WORK LOOK JUST AS GOOD AS IT POSSIBLY CAN.

by John Glassie

When Arnold Odermatt's black-and-white photographs of automobile collisions appeared at the 2001 Venice Biennial, almost no one in the visual arts world had heard of the retired Swiss police officer. The Biennial's curator, Harold Szeemann, first encountered Odermatt's photos a few years earlier, when they were on view at the police headquarters in Frankfurt, Germany. If the discovery wasn't exactly accidental—the visit was urged upon him by Odermatt's son Urs, a film and theater director and pro-tégé of filmmaker Krzysztof Kieslowski—the find itself was real enough: a compelling body of work that might otherwise never have seen, at least by international art standards, the light of day.

Odermatt, born in Oberdorf, Switzerland, in 1925, was already a camera buff when he joined the Nidwalden canton police force in 1948. He began using his Rollei-flex to photograph accidents as a way of supplementing the usual police reports, and continued the practice for the next forty years, until he left the department, in 1990. As one reviewer has written, he had "little apparent purpose beyond satisfying a gradually developing sense of how he thought such pictures should look."

Judging from Odermatt's book of these photos (*Karambolage,* or *Collision,* Steidl, 2003), he thought they should look well composed, rich in detail and value range, and, perhaps, with a kind of solemn respect for what had happened on the road, handsome. As requisitely noted by art writers, the crashed cars have a sculptural quality. Some of the best images, however, offer a broad, elevated perspective—Odermatt often shot from a tripod mounted on top of a VW bus—that places the crashes within a larger landscape: a long stretch of highway, an Alpine valley, the crossroads at the edge of a village. The human error, the loss of control, and the violent physical forces that caused the damage are gone. The wrecks are not only incongruous with their more peaceful, less erratic settings, but absurd within them, and somehow there's greater melancholy for it.

Since Odermatt's first major appearance in 2001, he has had solo exhibitions at the Art Institute of Chicago and at venues in New York, Paris, Geneva, Berlin, and Madrid. He's mingled and posed for photos with film director (and photographer) John Waters at the Winterthur photography museum—their exhibitions received double billing there in 2004. And the car-crash images were recently chosen by the post-rock band Tortoise for use on the packaging of the CD/DVD box set it released this past August.

Along with the notoriety, inevitable questions of intentionality have been raised. Some critics suggest that Odermatt's photos shouldn't count as art, since he didn't intend them that way. Of course, this is really a charge aimed at Odermatt's curators and dealers and, by extension, at Odermatt's son, not at Odermatt himself. "Never in my dreams did I see myself as an artist," the photographer has said. "I worked as a craftsman." But given how highly and happily democratized the gallery world has become in recent years, this kind of distinction seems to matter less and less. Besides, even if intent is a necessary condition of art, it is not a sufficient condition of *good* art.

Some of the exhibitions of Odermatt's photographs in the last few years have included samplings of another, very different line of his work. During the '60s, '70s, and '80s he spent a great deal of time staging and photographing quotidian scenes of policemen in action, using his department colleagues as models. A new book called *On Duty* (Steidl, 2006) collects more than two hundred of these tableau images—in vivid and verging-on-false color—of policemen pretending to do the things they do every day. An officer uses a broom to sweep snow off a highway sign. Another takes the fingerprints of a per-

Photographs by Arnold Odermatt
From the book On Duty, *published by Steidl, 2006*

petrator (whose face is outside of the frame). A helmeted policeman demonstrates a motorcycle maneuver as three others, lined up, look on. Others operate Teletype machines, stamp passports, participate in lifesaving drills, use file drawers, patrol lakes in boats, direct traffic.

Some of the enjoyment that can be had by looking at these police-work photographs is the kind one experiences when looking at vintage corporate filmstrips or other old promotional material. Since Odermatt evidently wasn't being ironic, or going for a retro look, the staged photographs have also caused some debate. "Here one really does feel that art status is being retroactively endowed in the absence of sufficient intentionality," wrote *Artforum*'s Barry Schwabsky about the police-work photographs included in the Art Institute of Chicago show. Because they were hanging in a museum of art, a discussion about

their status as art seems entirely fair. If mounted on the walls of a police station, a different discussion might be more appropriate.

Viewed in the pages of *On Duty,* the need to define them might give way to the strange pleasure of looking at them, however it comes about. The word on these color images, from the accompanying essay by Urs Odermatt, is that the photographer made them to bolster flagging interest in law enforcement as a career among area youth. If the intent was essentially to recruit, then it makes sense that Odermatt tried to make police work look just as good as it possibly could. And it should be said that, in their white belts, hostlers, and Vichy-style hats, these Swiss policemen really do look smart. Or perhaps he really saw police work this way—as almost perfect, with a kind of Swiss-precision romance. Either way, this is a man who, quite earnestly, loved his job. ✶

Back replaced by an inexplicably humorless figure—it's redeemed by the concert footage. This is the Dylan of *Desire:* the Jewish cowboy trailing flowers, feathers, and plumes, the shaman in Kabuki whiteface. Dylan performs "Isis" with stunning punk intensity, and "Tangled Up in Blue" peering out from under a floppy-brimmed hat, as if hiding from that song's emotional implications.

Continually circling back to the Rosetta stone of Dylanology—the mid-sixties electric shows in England—Scorsese's *No Direction Home* (2005) is essentially Nabokovian insofar as it doesn't believe in the chronological reality of time.[7] The definitive self-creation myth, it's a dialogic work: the old man conversing with

the hungry young boy across the decades.[8]

The film's first edit moves from a tight shot of Dylan in ravaged late-middle-age to the young harlequin keening *Like a Rolling Stone* before a booing London audience, offering as shocking a statement about the passage of time as the bone-to-spaceship jump-cut in *2001: A Space Odyssey.* (Bathed in psychedelic stage lighting, a little prince crowned with a corona of curls, the archival Dylan has something of the star child about him.)

A self-professed "musical expeditionary," Dylan has always looked to the future by embracing the past. Rather than condemn the counterculture hero for shilling lingerie and MP3 players, let's give him the benefit of the doubt about that recent iPod spot. At once classic and modern, this filmic footnote takes the familiar monochromatic look of the Apple commercials and nimbly applies it to Dylan: returning him to black-and-white, a solitary figure alone on a stool. ✶

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[7] Though Scorsese didn't shoot any of the footage, his framework showcases the work of other filmmakers (Pennebaker, Warhol, etc.) to tremendous effect. And it's an intensely personal picture: if in his best movies, Scorsese pours himself into his protagonists as assuredly as a great actor, the director accomplishes that same unlikely trick of projection and identification here.

[8] This is the witty, charmingly direct Dylan readers are familiar with from his memoir, *Chronicles* (2004).