

# VALLOIS

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## Arnold Odermatt On and Off Duty



14  
January  
—  
5 March  
2011

### OPENING

Thursday 13 January  
2011

### Forthcoming Exhibitions

3 – 6 March  
Armory Show, New York

18 March – 23 April  
Mike Bouchet

6 May – 10 June  
The Big Society

curator: Alice Motard

The Odermatt legend is already firmly implanted in the art world: the Swiss policeman living in the remote canton of Nidwalden and “as part of his duties” taking photographs of the aftermaths of car accidents. Photographs that would doubtless now be slumbering in the archives of some obscure local lockup had not the late great Harald Szeemann stumbled on them one day and rushed them off to Venice and the 2001 Biennale. Another instalment in what’s a more or less traditional art world fantasy: the neglected genius suddenly thrust upon the attention of the world.

In this case the story’s neither completely true nor completely false. Because before Venice—as far back as 1993, in fact—Arnold Odermatt’s pictures had been shown more than once, in Switzerland, Germany, Austria and the United Kingdom: not bad for an “unknown” supposedly oblivious of the interest of his work. Nonetheless, it was the Venice breakthrough that definitively took the retired cop’s oeuvre across oceans and continents. Acclaimed first of all for his *Carambolages*, the black and white shots of car accidents that “illustrated” his reports, Odermatt gradually revealed the other strings to the bow of a committed craftsman: “on duty” depictions of policemen in their offices or on manoeuvres, road safety campaign landscapes, car headlights sculpted anew by fire; and more recently the “off duty” work, an unsuspected world of family life ranging from portraits of his smiling kids to straightforward souvenir stuff.

*On and off*, like a camera either ready to go or on hold: Odermatt today is just as he’s doubtless always been. *Off* because

he spent decades far removed from the world of creativity and from any notion that he might be engaged in something “artistic”; yet *on* too, because “never during working hours” wasn’t his style, and once the regulation shots were out of the way he took others “for himself”. Formal and aesthetic experiments begun in the late 1940s and steering scrupulously clear of the violence of Warhol’s *Accidents*: a car being winched out of a lake like a whale, for example, and collisions with all the sculptural beauty of that locomotive hanging off the facade of the Gare Montparnasse in Paris (in 1895!). *Off* because Arnold belonged to no school—Düsseldorf and the Bechers were a long way from the Nidwalden forests—yet *On* because in spite of everything his images call up distant echoes of the experiments of the 60s and 70s: from the taste for neutrality to intimations of the “conceptual”, and the vivid, virtuoso colour work from Lausanne in ‘64 and Bellinzona in ‘65. *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.

Vincent Huguet