EXCERPTS

SELECTED BOOKS

LAND.” Otechestvo is the literal word for “fatherland,” but it sounds high-flown and official to Russian ears, and is used mostly in poetry. Otechina is a word that suggests fatherland and motherland together, cleverly combining the root-word for “father” (otets) with a female ending, and is also little used. Like otechestvo, it has a role in the rhetoric of nationalistic politics.

By contrast, robota (motherland) is used by every section of the population, and its associations are far more intimate. If otechina and otechestvo relate to the country in which one is a citizen, robota is the place where one is born—a familiar place which has always been there. It is where one feels a sense of belonging, the warm hearth to which one returns. Robota is a

(Motherland continued)

identified, moreover, with the nation’s soul. Mikhail Lerman
ts distinguished between the complicated feelings he had for the imperial might of his otechina and the love he bore his robota in his famous 1841 poem Rodina. This conflict is expressed in the first line: “I love my otechina, but with a strange love!”

—From Rosamund Bartlett’s introduction

(Woodman continued)

wants us to think we know her, because she is not interested in being the subject of our scrutiny. In their self-portraits artists most often grope towards new forms of relation; they ask us to relate to them as a person, not that: there is always a subject, even when it is fictional. In Woodman’s self-portraits we have a thoroughgoing critique of her medium’s incapacity to identify a subject truthfully. Woodman is deliberately enigmatic. If she aspires to be enigmatic, she also uses that enigma to challenge photography’s capacity to describe and place its subjects. What looks to be obvious blocks interpretation. It is perhaps not surprising that some writers see Woodman in a photograph when the subject is really a model; we are intrigued by what we see, but the image itself misleads us. —From Chris Townsend’s essay

JEFF WAHL: SELECTED ESSAYS AND INTERVIEWS


I was interested in the way cinema affected the criteria for judging photography. Cinematography permits, and validates, the collaboration between photographer and subject that was largely excluded in classic documented terms. That exclusion limits photography, and so my first moves were against it—working in a studio with all the technical questions that implies. I had to learn some of that technique as I went along; that process was part of transforming my relationship to photography. At the beginning it was done in the spirit of contestation, but as I’ve said, it was not so long before I realized I’d lost that contest and realized that nothing I was doing was “outside of photography.” At that point—in the mid 1980s—I felt I’d worked myself into a position where I needed to come into a new relationship with the kind of photography I’d been questioning. As I saw more of the “new” photography in exhibitions through the ‘80s, I began to realize that I preferred Walker Evans or Wols to most of the newer work, and I preferred them to my own work, too. Classical photography might have been displaced from the center of attention by the newer forms, but it was not diminished in the process. It became stronger through having been confronted with alternatives, as far as I was concerned.—Jeff Wall in conversation with Jean-François Chevrier, Paris 2001

fine-art editions of fifteen, sized 12-by-12-inch plates to suit contemporary tastes. Then came a solo exhibition at the Frankfurt police headquarters which caught the curatorial eye of Harold Szeemann and included Odermatt’s work in the 2001 Venice Biennale. The exposure likely brought Odermatt to the attention of the DuSoleil’s Rondeau, who exhibited Odermatt’s work at the University of Chicago, firmly establishing his place as a prominent near-celebrity.

Odermatt’s stardom has led to the recent publication of a second monograph, On Duty (Steidl, 2006). It is an expansion of the same campy color photographs that were first published at the Art Institute, along with more than 160 other pieces that reinforce the notion that Odermatt’s work deserves a serious audience and that it should be considered in a context far beyond its narrow intent. In the introduction, Urs Odermatt explains that the pictures were created by his father to recruit for the dwindling police force in Nidwalden Canton. Some bring to mind The Pink Panther’s Inspector Jacques Clouseau, clearly staged pictures depicting policemen engaged in exercises and target practice. However, many of the photographs—such as the series of melted brake light fires—suggest a broader interest.

The images are clustered into subject categories: police setting up speed traps, officers typing, speaking, and instructing, and instructional pictures made for a children’s cartoon. Interestingly, the book includes several pictures of other police officers using a medium-format Rolleiflex (Odermatt’s choice) to photograph car wrecks, and setting up positions. The cover image portrays his former colleague, Mathis holding a Rolleiflex in the air (we learn from the back that Mathis died in 2004). One wonders how these photographs might differ from Odermatt’s. As it stands in the book they are strangely repetitive, producing a typology, but without the methodological rigor.

If the goal of On Duty is to consider Odermatt’s place as a Swiss police officer since 1960, then as a social document the Nidwalden police force is an intriguing and intriguing project. Opposite every picture are the names of their birthdates, and in some cases indications of their deaths. Through the pictures we become familiar with the faces of the men with whom Odermatt spent so much time and begin to read the book as a record of Odermatt’s contemporaries and of his humanity.