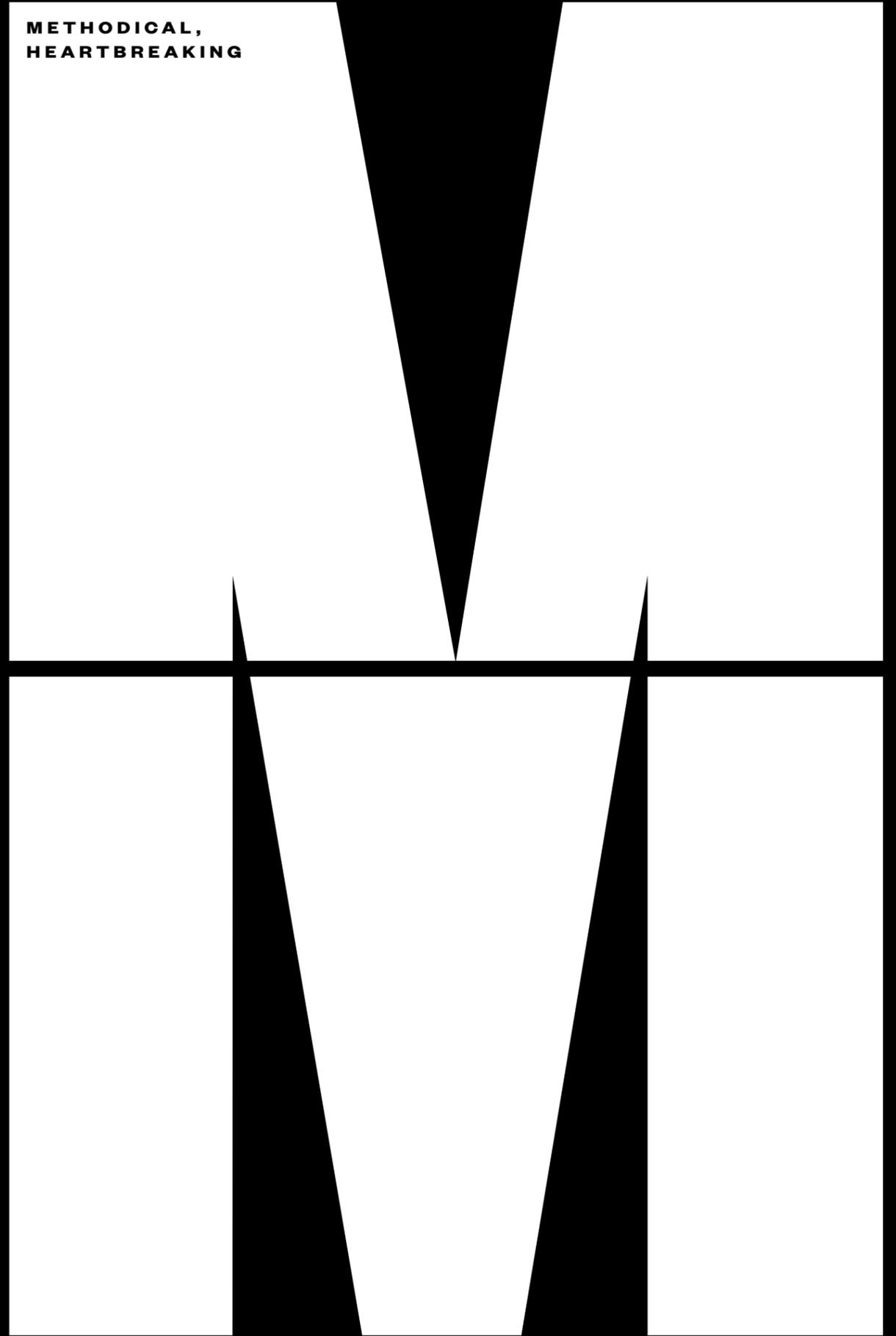
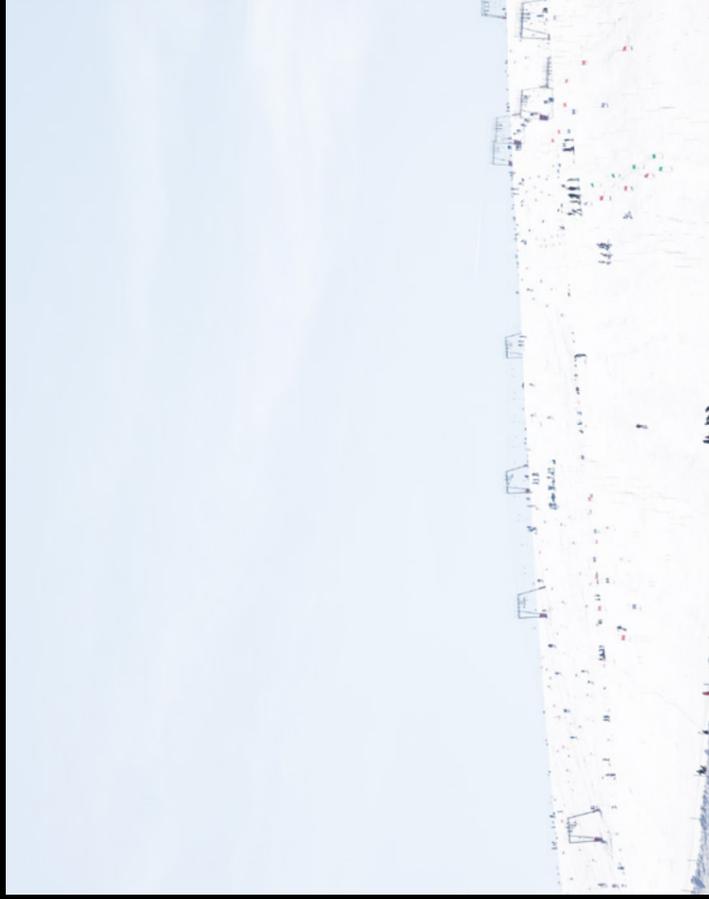




**METHODICAL,
HEARTBREAKING**





Italian photographer and filmmaker **WALTER NIEDERMAYR'S** subjects veer between the most sublime and the most oppressive locations on earth. What connects them, says **KATYA TYLEVICH**, is both their seeming neutrality of vision and strong sense of ethical questioning.



It is a Zen exercise, to sit like this with artist Walter Niedermayr and his wife and work partner, Cristina Busin, in front of a large computer screen in their utilitarian white studio space in Bolzano, Italy, sandwiched between the mountains outside. The sun is close to setting and a big mosquito inside has everyone on edge except Niedermayr, who seems as transfixed by the films he's showing me as by whatever audible reaction I might give to them.

This isn't easy viewing, by the way. Like his photographs, some of Niedermayr's films may take place in vast beautiful alpine settings (even

those aren't necessarily easy on the eyes, for reasons of intention), but others take the viewer into claustrophobic institutions for 'reform', healing, retribution and death. Niedermayr's work deals with both oppressive spaces and the oppression of spaces. His settings can be deceptively serene (the great outdoors), or the very opposite (prisons, hospitals), but they are both representative of how contemporary humans treat space and how space treats contemporary humans.

Although Niedermayr seems to work with a brush of neutrality, upon further inspection it's evident his art is charged with a spirit of criticism,

pushing buttons about ethics and morality. Is it moral to build a concentrated, dense metropolis (aka a ski resort) in a previously unmolested section of the French Alps, then to leave that false town abandoned when tourism shifts elsewhere? 'My work does raise questions,' says Niedermayr. That much he'll give me.

I keep my eyes on the screen. We watch several films in a row, launching into hour one of viewing with a sad, meditative documentation of two toddlers living with their mothers in an Italian prison (*Agente Apri*, by Niedermayr and Marina Ballo Charmet, 2007). The cameras quietly follow

each child as a volunteer takes them by hand from prison and leads them out towards compulsory playtime in the world beyond. We watch as the children first wail and whine, not wanting to leave their mothers—the volunteers coax them with promises of candies. Later, the children wail and whine, not wanting to return to their mothers, one bar-laden security checkpoint at a time.

The film is endured rather than watched for pleasure; it is methodically heartbreaking. Niedermayr doesn't give a straight answer when asked whether his intention is to put some sort of prison reform in motion, at least as it pertains



Opening spread
Artefakte 52, 2002

Previous spread
Les Deux Alpes 30, 2013
Dôme des Petites Rousses 11,
2013

Above
Stubaier Gletscher 86, 2013

Next spread
 Portrait by Alexei Tylevich, 2014
Rohbauten 8, 1999

Following spread
Artefakte 8, 1999

Final spread
Rohbauten 44, 2001
Raumfolgen 79, 2002

**“IS IT MORAL TO BUILD A CONCENTRATED, DENSE METROPOLIS
 (AKA A SKI RESORT) IN A PREVIOUSLY UNMOLESTED SECTION
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to children. He tells me that he never walks away from a work feeling its purpose is complete. He returns to each project, working in ongoing series: among them, Rohbauten (Shell Constructions), 1997; *Artifacts* (Artifacts), 1992; *Bildraum (Image-Space)*, 2001, and *Iran*, 2005–08. Which is to say, neither the questions evoked by his work nor the answers provided by the artist can ever be considered final.

We transition into a film that seems light-hearted by comparison, almost absurd. Here, Niedermayr loops a video of extreme

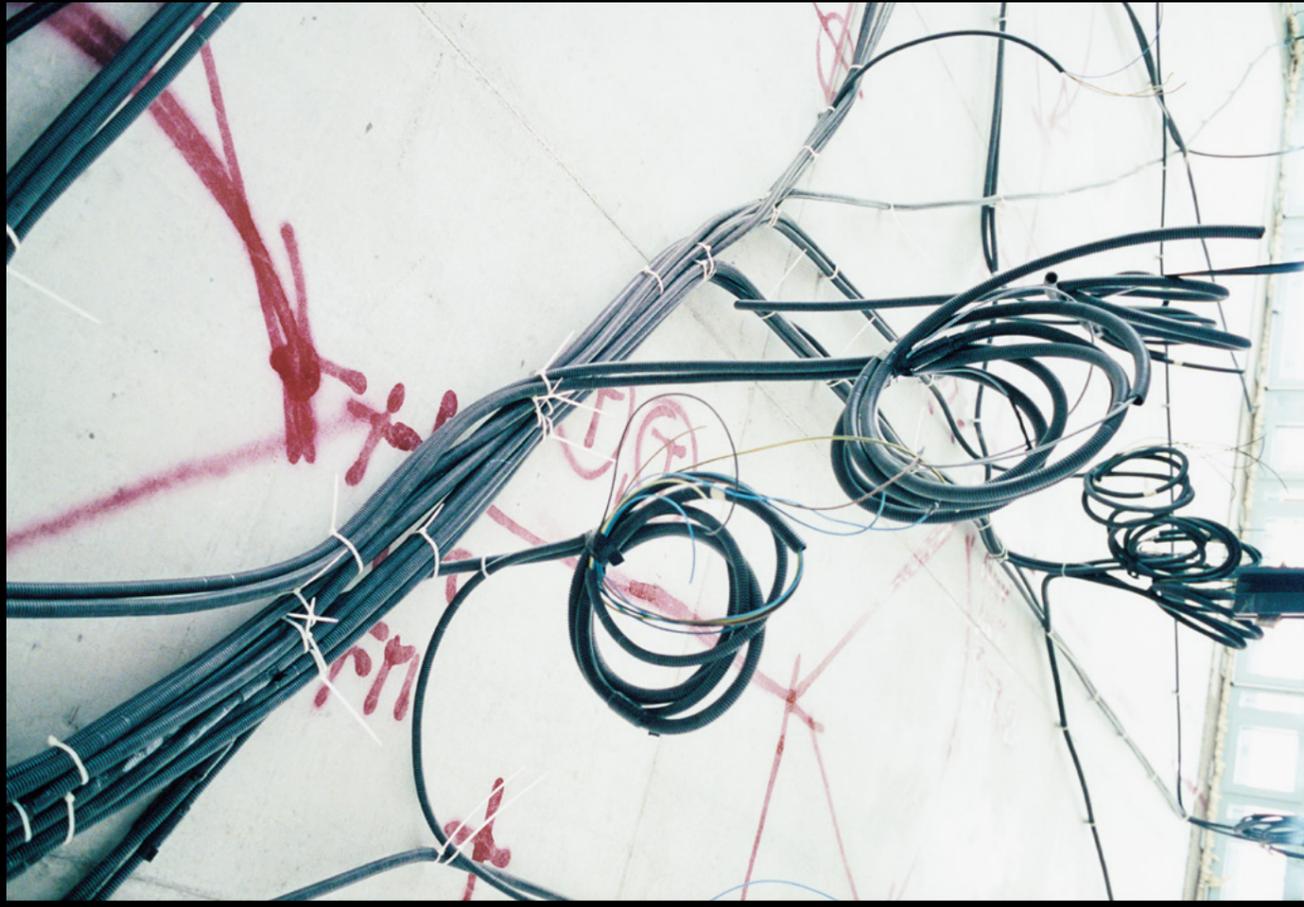
mountain-bikers, trying to stay upright on their bicycles as they descend the French Alps (*GoPro*, 2013). They ride downhill on solid ice and fall—bodies over bikes, limbs on top of strangers. Then, on unsteady legs, bodies, and wheels, they continue downwards, all of them with GoPro cameras on their helmets.

Niedermayr remarks on the ‘disconnection’ these athletes demonstrate, particularly by wearing cameras on their heads—future viewing of the event perhaps takes precedent over its actual physical experience. Although a feat of

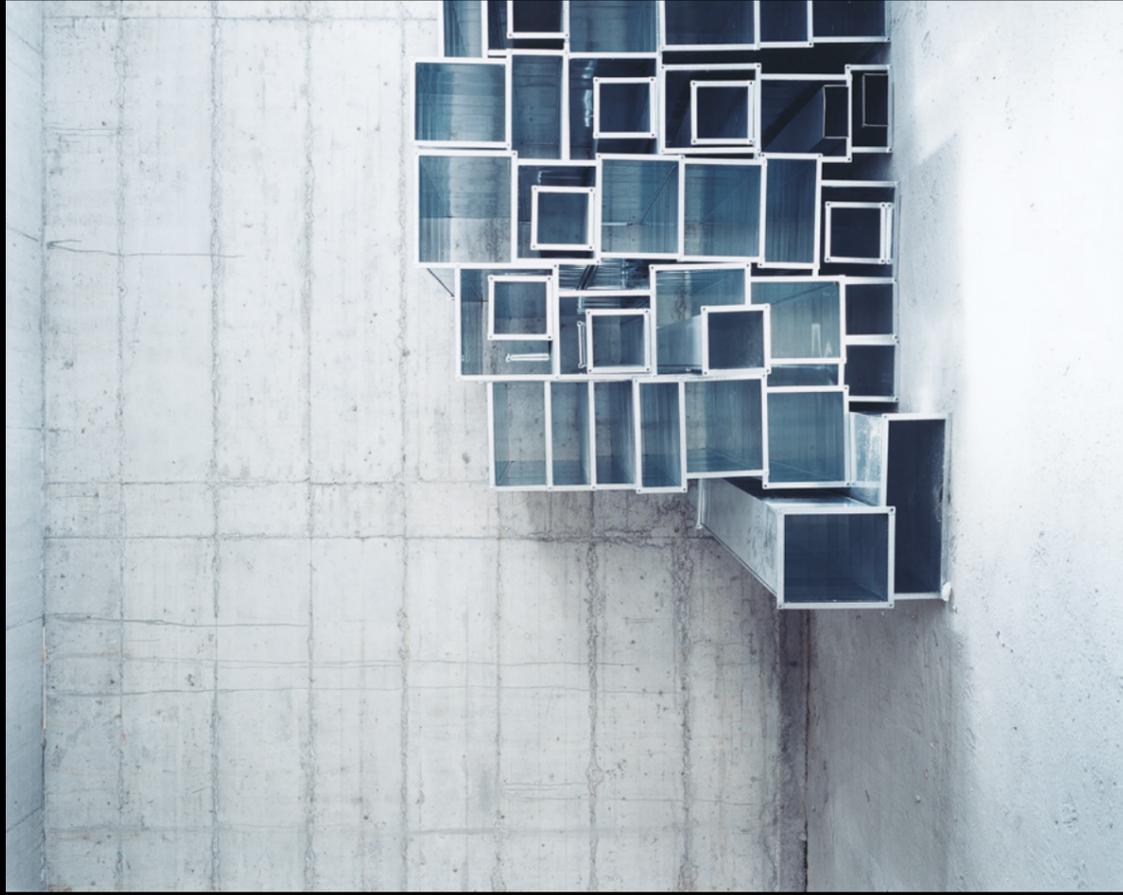
impressive adrenaline, the sport has arguably little to do with ‘connecting’ with the outdoors, unless we consider connecting bones to ground. Even so, the outdoors flash by in peripheral vision. I personally don’t have a bone to pick with oversimulation, which is perhaps why I don’t initially see the artwork for what it is: a portrait of the overlooked and a resonant parable for a present-day existence. Physically here, but mentally elsewhere.

Stark, clear and mercifully without trace of new-age optimism or nostalgia, Niedermayr’s

works are particularly relevant in revealing a contemporary mentality of ‘show me a picture, or it never happened’. The works also comment on Niedermayr’s own relationship to his surroundings. He captures foreign elements in natural landscapes, but he himself (*The Artist*) is a foreign element in any landscape. In a hospital or prison, he is often an unwelcome visitor. Some of those shoots are stopped before they even start. ‘I don’t try to possess any power over my subjects, never,’ he says. ‘I don’t want to provide an [aerial] military view of anything, either.’ Instead,







“HUMAN INTERVENTION HAS CONSEQUENCES IN THE LANDSCAPE. WHETHER OR NOT THE CONSEQUENCES ARE NEGATIVE IS A HUMAN CHOICE.”

his views are human and subjective, far from surveillant. They raise those perpetual questions of how we see, what we choose to see, and how we understand what we see.

Eight diptychs from Niedermayr’s series *Raumfolgen*—works realized in prisons, hospitals, schools and monasteries in the early 2000s—haunted a room at the Central Pavilion Giardini at the Architecture Biennale in Venice this year. They were selected for their depictions of institutional corridors: long, anonymous footpaths towards experiences of convalescence or its antonym.

Disconnection is also at the heart of these photographs, which I visit prior to meeting Niedermayr. The selection shows a spatial disconnect between inhabitants and passers-by, between a journey and its purpose, and between the viewer and whatever waits behind closed doors. These aren’t the types of photos that collectors like hanging on their living room walls, Busin and Niedermayr tell me. The photographs tend to fare better in public forums (curated shows) rather than private collections, perhaps because of what they ask their viewers to confront.

Niedermayr’s photographs of alpine landscapes may seem more appropriate for a home—less obvious in their confrontations, perhaps. Deceptively so. ‘In reality, we have no natural landscape,’ says Niedermayr, so the Alps as we experience them today are as much a human assemblage as is a prison. ‘No matter where I’m photographing, I look for situations in which humans are changing or restructuring their surroundings.’

A seemingly tranquil photograph of a snow machine—*Portrait 44*, 2014—obsolete in the

summertime mountains, strikes on something inspiring or beautiful at first glance. But it also asks ugly questions of its viewers, namely: What kind of danger does this manmade weed pose to its surroundings? Human intervention has consequences in the landscape,’ says Niedermayr. ‘Whether or not the consequences are negative is a human choice.’ One thing the artist hopes to consider is, ‘How do we continue to coexist with nature?’ This is a question of alarming resonance at present. Niedermayr raises it with the sad gravity of a melting ice cap.

