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Heimo Zobernig



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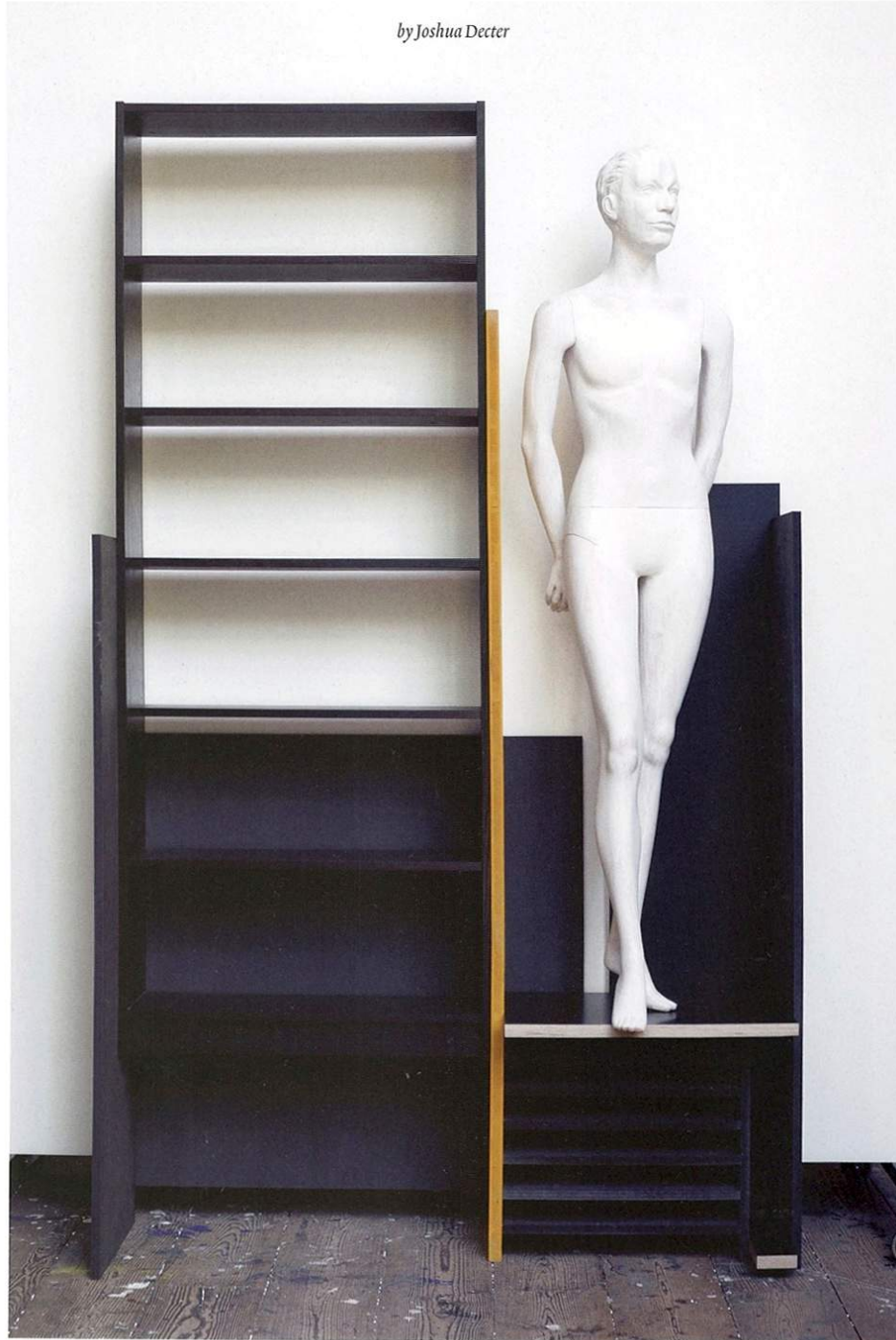
Venice Biennale

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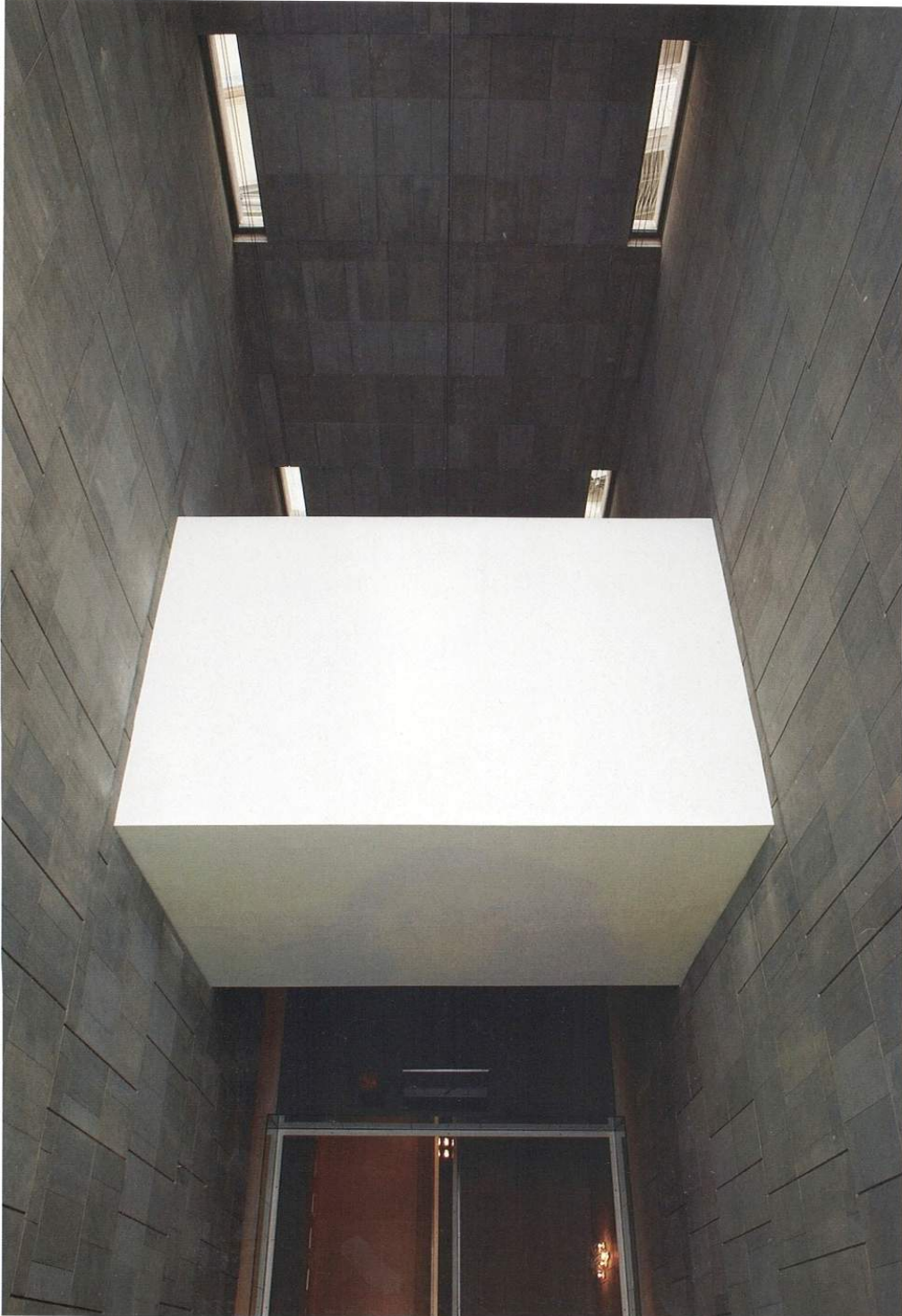
This is (not) Heimo Zobernig's project for the Austrian Pavilion of the 2015 Venice Biennale

by Joshua Decter



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May 2015

93

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Heimo Zobernig will represent Austria at the 56th Venice Biennale. At the initial time and place of this writing – Thursday, 12 March 2015, in Mexico City – I have no idea what Zobernig is planning for the Austrian Pavilion. And it is better not to know in advance. Why give it away before it needs to be given away? Several days later, as this writing continues in New York City, I remain in the dark. There's really no doubt that Zobernig is an excellent choice: he's arguably Austria's most significant living contemporary artist, having received a survey show in 2013 co-organised by the Reina Sofia, Madrid, and the Kunsthhaus Graz. For his 2011 non-retrospective show at the Kunsthalle Zürich, the artist bathed the entire exhibition in red light, thereby playfully recoding the works and suggesting a kind of new-millennium gesamtkunstwerk. These recent shows, by the way, should be a cue for us institutions: it's about time for Zobernig to have a survey there too.

Still, I'd prefer to add something more than just another hagiographic essay to the already voluminous amount of writing (including my own) produced about this artist over the past few decades.

And so it occurred to me that to spice things up a bit, another path could be taken: speculate about what Zobernig *might* do in Venice. Of course, writing is not a crystal ball, and this text is not predictive engineering, yet it's possible to offer clues regarding what he might have in store for us at the Biennale. Or, rather, what will just have opened by the time this text goes public. At least one thing *seems* certain, even if this is more projection than speculation: Zobernig will engage with Josef Hoffmann's original design of the 1934 pavilion building. Given the artist's history of cannily rethinking art's interdependence with design and architecture, Hoffmann's early-modernist building would seem to be an ideal site for surgical tweaking.

Since the 1980s, often in dryly humorous, occasionally self-mocking neovaudevillian ways, Zobernig has deftly manipulated the modernist codes that underpin geometric abstraction in visual art, design, display and architecture. He amplifies

this language not to destabilise the social space of art presentation, or to perform an orthodox form of institutional critique of the museum's power, but rather to underscore how exhibitions are always in some way constructed, even theatricalised situations. Zobernig synthesises supposedly opposed characteristics: a rigorous analysis of the spaces of art as a way to rethink interconnections between painting, sculpture, architecture, design, place and utilitarian things (ie, appurtenances and furnishings) on the one hand, and an irreverence regarding his own mastery, on the other. It's the contradictions simmering just beneath the surface that make Zobernig's work crackle and pop. I identify something of Michael Asher's context-driven dialectical spirit in him: the reality that art frames the institutional spaces it appears in and that those spaces in turn reframe the art (the architectural frame occasionally becoming the art, *per se*).

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Zobernig seems intuitively to grasp spatial design both as a discipline with its own set of aesthetic principles, as well as an instrument for reengineering how publics encounter the places of contact between art and its frames. In his

oeuvre, exhibition design can become 'the art', and art can become the 'exhibition design'. Zobernig allows space to perform itself back to us, as a platform for art – even if the art, itself, becomes the platform, stage, podium, chair or other seemingly innocuous element to navigate built space. And though his work exudes the confident intelligence of a well-engineered grammar – a grammar developed through recursive, tautological reworkings of the language itself – there is also something that suggests it is not completely comfortable in its own skin. Or maybe I'm just thinking about Zobernig's videos, such as *Nr. 12* (1996) and *Nr. 24* (2007), wherein he appears, a bit awkwardly, *only* in his own skin, stripped naked to the world – the artist's body as an almost accidental vehicle for the performance of intersections of televisual media, painting, sculpture, theatre, comedy and other phenomena. The body as the first and last architecture.

Ohne Titel (in red), 2011 (installation view,
Kunsthalle Zürich at Museum Bäregasse, 2011).
© Stefan Altenburger Photography, Zürich.
Courtesy Kunsthalle Zürich

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opening pages, left *Untitled*, 2009, mixed media,
244 × 148 × 50 cm. Photo: Archive HZ. Courtesy the artist and
Simon Lee Gallery, London & Hong Kong

opening pages, right *Weißer Kubus (White Cube)*, 2002.
Photo: Mumok, Vienna. © the artist. Courtesy Mumok, Vienna

above Documentation of the making of a video
installation included in *Heimo Zobernig*, 1996,
Renaissance Society at the University of Chicago.
Courtesy Renaissance Society at the University of Chicago

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In 1995, I authored an essay titled 'Unmistakably Art, Anything But Art: Zobernig's Subversive Doubt', which originally appeared in the catalogue of the artist's exhibition at the Vienna Secession that year. What follows is a reassembling of fragments from the text, serving as a preamble to my speculations about what might happen in Venice:

- Art, for Zobernig, has at the very least a double life.
- Is Zobernig a conceptual artist? And what does it mean to be named a conceptual artist today? Is he producing meta-statements, or something akin to meta-art? Does anyone really know the difference between art and meta-art, anyway? And what do we make of Zobernig's smooth integration of painting into architecture – or is it the other way around? For his 1994 exhibition at the Kunsthalle Bern, Zobernig deftly set into motion a number of conceptual and material conversions: painting into place, place into painting, painting into object, architecture into painting, painting into object, and architecture into object.
- Is this thing what it appears to be, or is it something else? Is it a painting? Architecture? A sculptural object? None of the above?
- Take away the apparent order established through systems of cultural distinction, and things begin to fall apart in the loveliest way imaginable.
- When is architecture both architecture and not architecture? When is it the product of an art activity that creates the similitude of architecture.
- And when is sculpture at once sculpture and not sculpture? When is it the product of an art activity that creates the similitude of sculpture.
- For instance, when is a café at once a café and not a café? When it is the product of an art activity that creates the similitude of a café.
- Zobernig produced the similitude of a café, and yet this similitude was also a real, functional, café.
- As a complex object/art object located within an architectural field of visible and invisible structural relations, a Zobernig painting becomes a material signifier for an intervention – a sign that becomes the index for site.
- For Zobernig, painting is camouflage for an art activity or an art condition. Painting is a mask that makes art look more like art.
- A Zobernig painting is certainly an actual painting, but it is also quite possibly something other than a painting.
- When is a painting at once a painting and not a painting? When it is the product of an art activity that creates the similitude of a painting.
- And when is an art object or art activity at once an art object/art activity and not an art object/art activity? When allegory takes over.
- The allegorical function of an art object or an art activity brings it into a narrative (or meta-narrative) relation with both everyday life and art. Art cannot be taken for granted. Why? Because it no longer takes itself for granted – if it ever did.
- As art begins to distance itself from itself in order to become more like an everyday thing, it moves closer to what it is already.
- In other words: an extraordinary-everyday thing.



Heimo Zobernig, 2012 (installation view, Palacio de Velázquez, Madrid, 2012).
Photo: Joaquín Cortés / Georg Petermichl.
Courtesy Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, Madrid

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top *Untitled*, 2012, acrylic on canvas, 100 × 100 cm.
Photo: Todd White Art Photography, London.
Courtesy the artist and Simon Lee Gallery, London & Hong Kong

bottom *Untitled*, 2012, acrylic on canvas, 100 × 100 cm.
Photo: Todd White Art Photography, London.
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And to conclude: my speculations, educated guesses and questions regarding what Zobernig might do in Venice:

- A performance of the production of the exhibition; the exhibition conceived as a performance.
- Reenactments of early theatrical pieces in which elements of conceptual art and performance art converge.
- A selection of early geometric abstract paintings.
- Sculptures that play with minimalist tropes wherein painting and object merge.
- Shall we play tennis on a concrete slab conceived by Zobernig?
- The exhibition space as discursive and social space, as an exhibition.
- The White Cube Is Always a Temporary Construct Until It Is Not.
- Monochromes. Stripes. A grammar of geometric abstraction in painting.
- Are these tables, sculptures, both, or something else?
- The use-value of art determined by the public within the frame of a social contact zone engineered by the artist.
- A room within a room: the museum-as-architecture composing rooms for art inside other rooms.
- Documenta 9 restaged within the Venice Biennale: the public's access to the artworks is blocked.
- Backstage as frontstage as backstage: all the world's a stage, including the pavilion.
- Reconfiguring the extant walls of the pavilion to resemble the artist's initials: HZ.
- A video of the artist walking naked through Venice projected onto the exterior and interior walls of the pavilion.
- Event-space pavilion: a podium, seating, Internet café and other functional appurtenances doubling as art objects assembled for a series of readings, discussions, talks and other social gatherings during the Biennale.
- The exhibition as the grammar of the exhibition.
- The pavilion is furnished with chairs. The chairs may be repurposed from other places within the Biennale ecosystem, or from elsewhere in Venice. The chairs may be custom-made according to the artist's specifications, or designed in collaboration with another artist.
- A tribute to the late Franz West, with whom the artist collaborated, most notably for Documenta X.
- Chairs are artworks too. And not. And.
- Multiple projection screens placed in relation to one another to suggest a constellation of projection screens. The exhibition is always a *screen* for something else.
- A monochromatic painting is always just a painting and also a screen for something else.



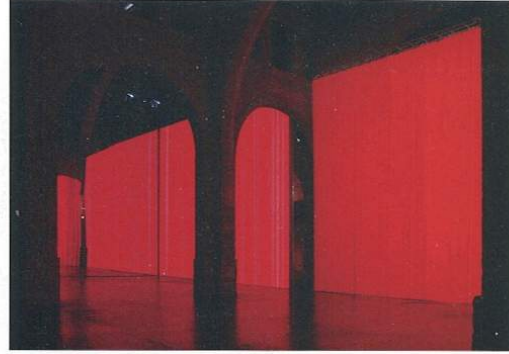
top *Untitled*, 1999, Parsol blue glass, glass overlay, angle steel, lacquer, 74 × 74 × 74 cm. Photo: Archive HZ. Courtesy the artist and Simon Lee Gallery, London & Hong Kong

bottom Heimo Zobernig, 2014 (installation view, Kestnergesellschaft, Hanover, 2014). Courtesy Kestnergesellschaft, Hanover

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- Visitors to the pavilion are invited to design a Zobernig poster for the exhibition; the designs are displayed throughout the duration of the Biennale.
- Zobernig places reflective materials on the walls of the pavilion, mirroring the space. The space is doubled, and publics are doubled.
- A video showing the artist, naked, wrestling a malleable object; the video is accompanied by a presentation of the object itself, a kind of artwork-prop-artwork.
- Halfway through the run of the Biennale, Zobernig deinstalls the exhibition, and reengages the space with a different set of actions, gestures, works or things. The process is documented, and the video screened for the remainder of the Biennale.
- An immense white cube is built into the space, connecting two extant walls. It becomes a permanent feature of the pavilion.
- Mannequins are distributed throughout the space; some are displayed within structures, some clothed in T-shirts, while others are partially painted. The mannequins are stand-ins for the artist, or a surrogate public welcoming the public.
- Zobernig restages – in compressed and respatialised form – his entire 2003 Mumok survey in the pavilion.
- The pavilion becomes a black-box theatre for a series of theatrical productions and screenings.
- Zobernig redisplay replicas of three cabinets originally made for the 2003 exhibition at Kunsthau Zug, *Josef Hoffmann and the Wiener Werkstatte*; the cabinets were designed and produced in a prison workshop in Switzerland by the artist, a master carpenter and two inmates of the prison. The pavilion as prison?
- Red curtains (theatrically lit) are draped over the extant walls of the pavilion, suggesting a stage set for an exhibition about to take place. Videos are presented behind certain curtains, and the artist's publication designs are archived in glass cases. The exhibition is a layering of facades.
- A bluescreen video features Zobernig, naked, accosted by three anonymous figures in chroma-key jumpsuits; they tape over his mouth and genitals, erasing body parts. The three tormentors heap art magazines and catalogues onto him, and wrestle him down, enacting a symbolic obliteration of the artist.
- Various grid paintings are installed on a large gridlike armature. Grids over grids. Additional paintings are displayed within cagelike structures that connote art storage systems; each day, a new work is taken out of 'storage' and displayed on the structure's exterior.
- The artist introduces a new wall into the Hoffmann building that exists, almost invisibly, as both sculptural object and architectural element, altering the public's experience of the liminal qualities of the pavilion space.
- Zobernig delegates all curatorial decisions to the commissioner of the pavilion, as an artistic-curatorial gesture.
- The commissioner decides to delegate back all curatorial responsibilities to the artist. ar



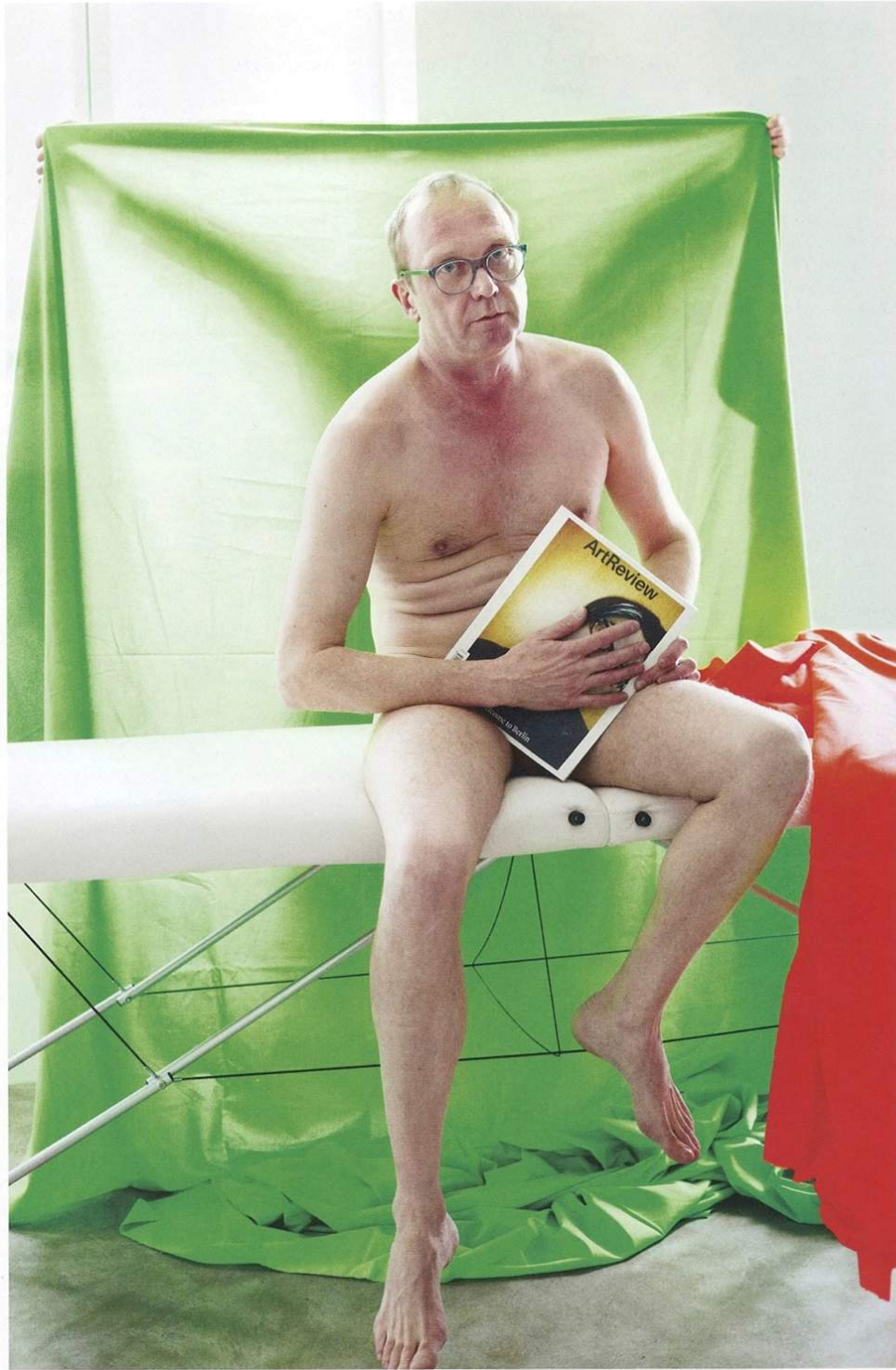
top Heimo Zobernig, 2009 (installation view, CAPC Musée d'Art Contemporain, Bordeaux, 2009).
Photo: F. Deval, Mairie de Bordeaux.
Courtesy CAPC Musée d'Art Contemporain, Bordeaux

bottom Untitled, 1993, synthetic resin lacquer on particle board,
202 × 102 × 35 cm. Photo: Archive HZ. Courtesy the artist

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Heimo Zobernig, Vienna, April 2015. Photo: Till Janz



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