

The Blue Curtain

by Mihnea Mircan

Remco Torenbosch's ongoing project is an oblique look at post-1989 Europe, with the blue flag of the European Union (EU) as allegorical segue. The project inventories, the different shades of blue produced in Europe's cheaper workshops, where economic expediency and colour-code miscalibration destabilise or corrode the symbol, withdraw from the flag the uniform quality it aspired to: that of a vera icon of European communal-ity, an impression of the reconciliatory, cloudless sky overlooking it.¹ Were they assembled diachronically, these chromatic flickers would work like stills in an abstract film, where insufficiency or excess—too much or too little blue, blue of a different kind—would register as contamination, as the various degrees to which a parasitical presence manifests itself, carrying the film into other narratives than that of sameness. The colour of the flag is never the right one: the dispute here does not seem to be so much one disuniting original and failed copies, but an endless string of imperfections from which no model can be wrested. The rhetoric of European homogeneity is pierced by machinic Freudian slips, while 'plan' and the repeated 'accidents' in its execution begin to illustrate each other's impersonal nature, to correspond to one another as the failures—gigantic or geopolitical, microscopic, technical and equally anonymous—of the same desire. Torenbosch's monochrome film and the ghostly flashes that disrupt its seamless flow document the spasms of a political construct. Within the modernist canon, the function of the monochrome is to arrest vision and confine its motion to the epiphanic concreteness of the picture plane. Invoking the diversions of Yves

Klein, Blinky Palermo or Derek Jarman is of similarly limited applicability here, yet these references do bring a speculative museological dimension to Torenbosch's project. His vacant and chromatically hesitant flags might be conceived as ethnographic exhibits in a future museum of political history, artefacts that indirectly visualise social convulsions and economic disparities. There, in the 'Europe' gallery of such a museum, the flags might be installed in relation to another attempt to materialise a political figure of speech: the Iron Curtain. What the Iron Curtain had held apart, the European flag mends—the assets, transactions, debts and losses in an economy of affects and representations that unites Europe's incongruous 'halves', be they organised along East-West, or North-South axes.

It will be a matter of curatorial sensitivity to discuss, in tandem, the caesura between how subjectivities were fashioned at the two sides of the Curtain, and today's efforts to inscribe hefty bureaucracy, financial scandals, racially-motivated deportations, the continent's centres and ghettos into the same, shared political project. The Iron Curtain was of uncertain size (but presumably very large) and occupied an indeterminate location (but presumably zigzagged through the very heart of what had been, and is again, 'Europe'). The vast, intractable hiatus in political and cultural exchange it metaphorised is incommensurate with the efficiency with which this obstacle was dismantled and sent to the historiographic junkyard in 1989. The European flag too oscillates between different regimes of representation. Of imprecise size and colour, it flutters somewhere between

the low-wage places where it is manufactured and the ceremonial occasions where distinct ideas of Europe, that its distinct hues of blue might be correlated for, temporarily forget what differentiates them in order to respond to some fresh crisis.

A museum is a place where a demonstration is under way, to do with how different objects register the passage of time, with the roles they are assigned in inaugurating or consolidating genealogies—the pasts from which today's citizens desire descent. In the museum, a prologue to the contemporary is both articulated and demarcated, as the anteriority from which the present inevitably proceeds. To extend this speculative thread, it might be argued that the question "what is Europe?" engenders difficulties not unlike those of 'the contemporary'. Rather than in itself, the contemporary is to a larger extent conceivable via an arc through the future, as the sum of alarming emergencies, moral, political, social and environmental gridlocks it accelerates towards. Europe too exists as a temporal anamorphosis, as the 'picture plane' where distinct timelines are superposed or interwoven. There is a default of the European notion, one that merges the economical or geopolitical motivations, as well as the rhetorical benefits, on which this transnational construction rests, its severe iconographic deficit and the spectral monuments that adorn Euro banknotes, its projected origin in Athenian democracy and the resolute response to today's Greece as toxic ballast. It is in times of crisis and anxiety that these fractured narratives and abstract obligations are made (agonic) flesh, and that another

Europe embodies as a gravity-defying, hybrid body, struggling to insulate and police its suddenly perceived outer edges. Echoes of these layered stories are captured—and rendered allegorically, even if that means the allegorical simplification of an allegory that had grown beyond any coherent legibility—in the azure apathy of Torenbosch's flags.

I would like to return once more to that territory—ideological in the real world, curatorial in our makeshift museum—shared by the blue blanks of the European flag and the rusting detritus of the Iron Curtain, the info kiosks of today's statistics and the theatrical deus ex machina of the Cold War. The site where they prop each other up in museological demonstration, so that history appears as both tangible and unfolding at an imperceptible remove. If there is a precedent for this juxtaposition between ruin and displaced emblem, it might be a painting that the visitors to the Vatican often overlook: Tommaso Laureti's *Triumph of Christianity over the Pagan Idol*, spreading across the ceiling of the Hall of Constantine. This painting too inaugurated a new epoch, in ideology and image-making, it too maintained the recognisable remnants of the vanquished adversary (rather than pulverise that adversary into a fine dust), in order to reinforce the supremacy of the new effigy. Shattered to bits, Apollo's statue lies at the bottom of its former pedestal, now occupied—somewhat awkwardly—by the Crucifixion whose revelation Apollo has had. The new and the obsolete, that which begins and that which does not end when the new occurs, appear to be dialectically inseparable in a painting that, to equal extents,

represents Constantine's manoeuvre to replace pagan symbols with Christian insignia and ensure the iconographic consolidation of the Empire, as well as captures the curatorial effect of Counter-Reformation politics. Rather than argued for, or expounded upon, the superiority of Christian faith is vigorously enacted, played out in the illusionistic non-site where the scene takes place and in the broken marble of the statue.

Our museum draws a temporal bridge between the current ideological vacuum, whose dutiful maintenance, one of the European Union's central concerns, and a time when Europe was producing more history than it could consume, to quote Winston Churchill's apocryphal aphorism about the Balkans. It looks at how models of European citizenship or the diffuse sense of an European self were upheld or debilitated by symbols of togetherness and declarations of war, by odes to prosperity and decrees of austerity. With the Curtain suddenly lifted in 1989, each of its sides revealed to the other incomplete identities, excessive or insufficient selves unprepared for cooptation in a story with a singular denouement. After the self-refutation of Eastern Communisms, understood either metonymically or prophetically as the demise of Communism, the liberal cosmology was free to unfold toward whatever messianic destiny awaited it.

The disappearance of a brutally enforced paradigm of consensus and the emergence of a paradigm of indignation and reparation—with vastly different rhetorical and practical manifestations across the Eastern Bloc—was followed by the

historically unique episode of another free, absolute consensus around liberalism. Throughout the 1990s, experiments in market liberalisation collided with nationalist furore, and the arias of populism were sung against the hastily executed backdrops of globalisation. The European Union papered over the fissure, and the flag designed by Arsène Heitz and Paul Lévy in 1955, with its 12 (only 12, obstinately 12) stars, was the source of desire, political vociferation and self-colonising angst. It presided over endless rehearsals of European polyphony. It was summoned, as omen or warning, in response to either the melancholy of catching up with such a future (Jurgen Habermas' "catching-up revolution" evacuates from the post-89 upheavals any radical, transformative aspirations, so they remain mere attempts to make up for lost time) or the susceptibility to embrace the providential ideologies, however patchy or corrupt, that would infuse the daily bathos with some sense of exceptionality.

Revolving around an unfixed common denominator, Remco Torenbosch's flags compress this story, as well as other European parables of disparity and appeasement, of political spaces smooth or striated. Purified and removed from their conventional festive position, the flags might be the best instrument we have to picture the alkahest of a new European sociability, and to imagine what the residue of that alchemical transformation—the making stable, porous and predictable of a continent—might be.

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By the early 20th century, the industry in the developed world often involved immigrants in "sweat shops", which were usually legal but were sometimes illegally operated. They employed people in crowded conditions, working manual sewing machines, and being paid less than a living wage. This trend worsened due to attempts to protect existing industries which were being challenged by developing countries in South East Asia, the Indian subcontinent and Central America. Although globalization saw the manufacturing largely outsourced to overseas labor markets, there has been a trend for the areas historically associated with the trade to shift focus to the more white collar associated industries of fashion design, fashion modeling and retail. Areas historically involved heavily in the "rag trade" include London and Milan in Europe, and the SoHo district in New York City.



Studio view (detail)