

Searching for Blue in a Union Flag

by Charles Esche

Remco Torenbosch has adopted the European Union (EU). Or, at least, he has adopted its most familiar symbol and turned it into a research-based artwork. This is no easy feat for something which purports to be instantly recognisable, so much so that it has become the unremarkable backdrop to many stage-managed political summits of the blue suited, monochrome frocked elite that pass for the EU leadership. These unimpressive gatherings have become the means through which the EU communicates to its citizens in ways that serve mostly to emphasise how most EU politicians lost their spark and personal touch in the process of attaining their positions. In this bleak picture, Torenbosch has picked up on the flag as his subject as a direct means of perceiving what might be at stake and revealing what remains unquestioned. In the process he gives the EU flag a character of its own, complete with the quirks and idiosyncracies so often lacking in the politicians and bureaucrats themselves. Through formal means, the artist seems to be suggesting that we might have been looking in the wrong place to understand the kind of European Union that has been built. Perhaps the symbols of the EU are the clue to determining what the Europe of the twenty-first century might be, for better or worse.

Torenbosch's work traces the development of the EU flag and its iterations across the Union. The story of its design, its symbolism, the arguments over, and construction of, its iconography after the suicidal European war of the 1940s all speak of a particular history and regional sense of place. The blue that approaches the old Roman imperial purple but shies away from it at the same time speaks ambivalently about

Europe's place in the world today. The 12 stars, marking not the number of member states as in the US flag, but uncertainly signifying something related to Catholic Christian symbolism (while at the same time never being officially acknowledged), seem to be pregnant with the difficulties that the EU faces in understanding its continental and global role today.¹

The fact that the flag was itself designed for another organisation and simply adopted by default are all a piece with the ambiguity that seems to always overwhelm any deeper analysis of EU mythology.² The regional diversity of the blue itself, represented by the artist's inclusion in his work of so many versions of the flag manufactured in different states and often far beyond the EU borders, point out a paradoxical lack of standardisation within a rule-based, juridical community that imposes its will through the courtroom rather than the debating chamber. In Torenbosch's hands then, searching for the blue in the union flag becomes a political odyssey through the difficulties of being part of, and expressing, European unionism through collective means.

As an artwork, it seems to me to reach back to the problematising discourse around political symbolism that characterised Anglo-American cultural studies in the 1980s with such works as Paul Gilroy's *There Ain't No Black in the Union Jack* or the early dub poetry of Linton Kwezi Johnston. These projects, also explored in the USA by African-American artists like David Hammons, tried to undermine the symbolism of national images and reveal their imperialist or racist roots in order to replace or reinvent them. While Torenbo-

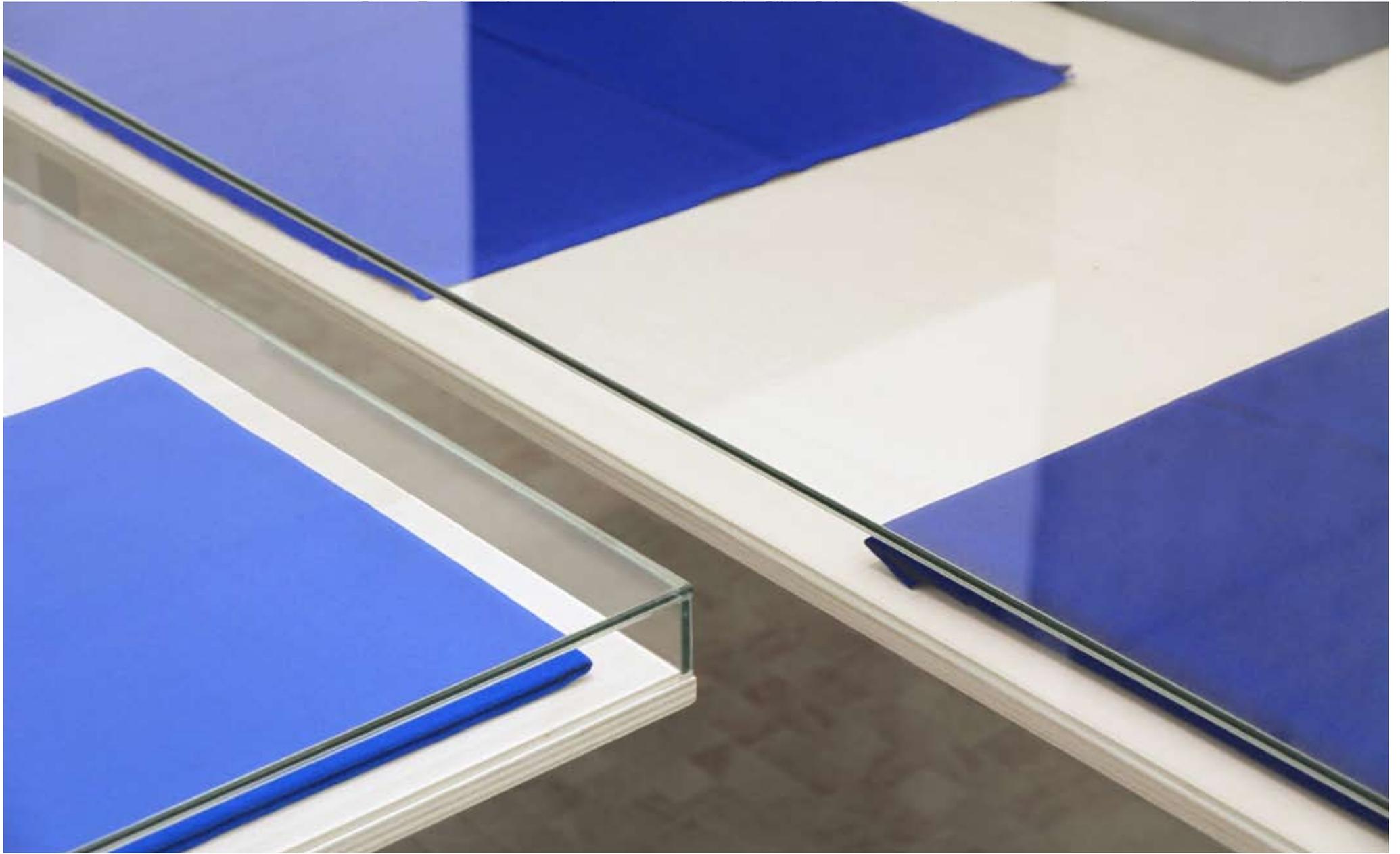
sch's project is much less overtly political, it nevertheless opens up the possibility of a discussion about EU symbols that are often obscured by bureaucratic strategies of avoidance. By searching for a flag and a colour, the artist reveals some of the loaded assumptions behind a simple piece of cloth and allows the continuing ambivalences and discontents of the EU to be approached from another angle altogether—an angle that might offer a more fruitful route to understanding how contemporary culture can play a part in reshaping European ideas in the future.

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The International Pan-European Union is the oldest European unification movement. It is independent of all political parties, but has a set of principles by which it appraises politicians, parties, and institutions. The International Paneuropean Union has four main basic principles: liberalism, Christianity, social responsibility, and pro-Europeanism. At the same time, it openly welcomes and acknowledges the contributions of Judaism and Islam whose heritage they share

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The advent of an elected European Parliament in 1979 saw the launch of a new initiative to find a European Community flag - and on 28 April 1983 the European Parliament decreed that the Council's flag should be Europe's official emblem. It was adopted by the European Council in Milan on 29 June 1985 and has been used by the European Union since 1986.



Installation view (detail, Kunsthalle Wien)