Let's Take Back Control! Of Our Imagination

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The Crisis of the Imagination

The crisis of the European Union is explained to us as a political crisis, as an economic crisis, and as a humanitarian crisis. These descriptions are accurate, but they seem to bypass a more structural crisis that underlies them: the crisis of the imagination.

In art discourse it is a reoccurring tendency to describe the importance of art in a political sense in terms of the imagination. If we cannot imagine a different future, how could we ever act upon such future politically? In this line of reasoning, artistic imagination might even precede political action. But there seems a second dimension to the crisis of the imagination that is less often invoked, namely the lack of imagination when it comes to understanding how devastating our present actually is, how little change the stakeholders of our reality are willing to accept, no matter how many alternative imaginations we confront them with, and no matter how “realistic” or “democratic” these alternatives might be.

This dual crisis of the imagination—a lack of imagination to understand our disastrous present as much as to project our desired future—is best illustrated through the Brexit dichotomy. One side of this dichotomy is defined by the Leave camp, an amalgam of opportunist Tories and racist ultranationalists, and consists of the projection of a mythical past, fueled by the residual sense of superiority of a decaying Empire. The other side of the dichotomy is defined by the Remain camp, led by the Eurocratic elite, who propose the continuation of what they consider to be the proven formula of brutal austerity politics, in the guise of liberal democratic reform. Neither the Leave nor Remain

camp seems to grasp that what they propose as a return to the past or continuation of the European cartel's business as usual forms a competent answer to the devastating crises that we are facing. The endless renegotiations of Brexit, with the aim to maintain a global market while staging a separation, will only deepen the disillusionment of the Brexiteers. The continuation of the austerity doctrine will just as well deepen existing inequalities and the further erosion of whatever remains of the right to self-determination of EU member states, creating the conditions for the Nationalist International of Wilders, LePen, and the rest of their cronies to gain strength.[1]

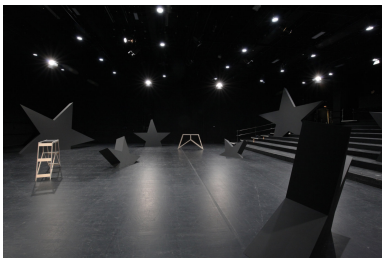

Fig. 1. Studio Jonas Staal, *New Unions: Act I-V* (2017), HAU Theater, Berlin. Photograph: Lidia Rossner.

The Leave and Remain camps are positioned as opposites, but actually rely on one another fundamentally. The Eurocrats' austerity politics, a euphemism for economic terrorism, fuels the desire for a "return" to national sovereignty under the by now famous Brexit banner "Let's Take Back Control!" Simultaneously, the rise of the ultranationalists has reenergized pro-European forces; compared to the racist and violent future-pasts they propose, the status quo of the austerity elite suddenly comes across as salvation. As such, the Leave and Remain camps form two competing factions in the same hostage situation: either way we choose, we will inevitably support the legitimacy of the other. In order to reclaim not our borders but our political imagination, it seems essential to reject both options and stand firm on the demand of a third, fourth, or fifth option to come.

Fig. 2. Remco Torenbosch, *EU* (2011-14).

Both the Leave and Remain camps address the crisis of the European Union, either through a prolongation of the present (Remain) or as a return to a mythical national sovereign past (Leave). In both scenarios the imaginative category of the future is absented in addressing the organization of our present. So how can we stand firm in the face of Brexit and say, "I prefer not to," while instead engaging a propositional future—the third option, or "third space"?[2] Is a Parallel Union, a Transcontinental Union, or a Transdemocratic Union not within the grasp of our imagination? And if the imagination is indeed the site of struggle for artists and cultural workers, what propositions have they contributed in order to imagine our disastrous present, as much as desired futures?

Bureaucratic Blue

Remco Torenbosch's EU (2011–2014) is an oblique look at the state of Europe, its metaphors, and its legislative quid pro quos, with the blue flag of the European Union as segue. The project zooms in on the color of the fabric, rather than on the emblematic nature of the flag, as well as on chromatic fluctuations, the materiality of the weave, and possible symbolic and political correlates of these, as much as it zooms out to inspect a political landscape where those shades of blue register as distinct figures profiled against distinct ideological grounds. In its presentations the project

emulates an aesthetic—chronologically anterior to the particular abstractions it is concerned with—by which it could be taken, if perused too quickly, as yet another exploration of modernism's purified monochromes or as an archival display. Yet the dialectic of the project does not sublimate that which might be unresolved in its constitution in order to produce the metaphorical upward thrust of painterly modernisms: rather, materialities and the circumstances of productions and the murky negotiations they stand for are maintained as terms of comparison. Torenbosch's monochromes are both indexes of the poetics of Europe and tangible correlates for tensions at the heart of a geopolitical entity, to-ing and fro-ing between centers and frontiers, ideological bird's-eye views and netherworlds of undervalued labor, aspirational élan and its vexation or anticlimax.

Resulting from extensive research into the archives of the European Union, EU inventories the variable iterations of the Europe blue, a gradient of the color variations of fabrics woven in Europe's cheaper workshops, generally situated in the marginal geographies to which once booming Western textile industries have relocated. Seen from the perspective of the place of production, their symbolic work can be construed in an anamorphic manner: as a series of vistas, fragmentary and refractive, of the center from the periphery. The starless flags do not so much reinforce the homogeneity—political, social, or cultural—which is their ostensible mandate, but appear as distorted echoes of an utterance no longer perfectly decipherable, inflected by vernacular and contaminated by misunderstanding. Economic expediency and imperfect color code calibration merge in a sea of different blue hues as backdrop for the twelve stars of the European Union, ranging from an apathetic azure to the ultramarine. Torenbosch does not prescribe whether these should be read as bootleg copies, cheaper stand-ins for the lapis lazuli of political communality, or as blue screens against which a multiplicity of political performances and visions can be projected or post-produced. They are maybe both, and thus equivalents of the idiosyncrasies and disparities of the EU, its mediation protocols and federal dilemmas, and finally of the Zeno paradox, where "catalyzing convergence" and other tropes of European unanimity have to keep up with realities of deregulation or devolution, pockets of autarchy, and the uneven rhythms of integration.

Interpreted within its own secular theology, the European flag should appear as a vera icon of political accord, a contact image of the cloudless sky overlooking the quasi-mythical reconciliation of EU countries. Yet the too much or too little blue in EU, and the epistemological noise that results from the gamut of those shades without a standard by which they could be evaluated, short-circuits this narrative and deviates its emblems to other trajectories of image-making in recent art history. Torenbosch's images recall stills from a blue film, Yves Klein's transcendental contractualism, or a capitalist realist conflation of a rectangular blue canvas and the abstract representation of

blue on a rectangular canvas. As visitors to the installation we are only privy to an erratic system of mechanical reproduction and cannot see the actual blue of the EU flag, to the same extent that we cannot opt firmly for either of these interpretive avenues. The dispute here does not seem to be so much one disuniting original and failed copies, but a muted polemic within an endless string of imperfections from which no model can be wrested. A unifying fiction is punctuated by error or slight discrepancy, while the “plan” and the accidents or miscalculations in its execution begin to illustrate each other’s impersonal, anonymous nature, as ghostly flashes and contradictory manifestations of the same desire, as the interlocking parts of the same incoherent whole.

Fig. 3. Geert Wilders, leader of the Dutch Freedom Party (PVV), cutting a star from the EU flag in front of the EU Parliament building in Brussels on May 20, 2014. Photograph: ANP / Martijn Beekman.

Without the Stars, the Ultranationalist Abstraction

A bizarre performative follow-up on Torenbosch’s research into the EU’s incoherent monochrome are the stars publicly removed from the EU flag, transforming its surface one star closer to becoming a monochrome. Simultaneously, removing one’s star from the flag is a performative nationalistic embodiment of Brexit’s slogan “Let’s Take Back Control!”—liberating, as it were, one’s national star from the gravity of the circle. Think of Geert Wilders, for example, leader of the ultranationalist Dutch Freedom Party (PVV), at present the second-largest political party in the Netherlands. On May 20, 2014—the year Torenbosch concluded his research—Wilders traveled to the European Parliament in Brussels, where he cut the “Dutch” star from the EU flag. In a similar performative act, during manifestations of the Leave campaign for the Brexit referendum, the flag of the European Union appeared with one missing star: that of the United Kingdom (this in full disregard of the plurality of stars—Scotland, Northern Ireland, Wales—which exist parallel to it, two of which voted in majority to remain part of the EU). The EU flag in these ultranationalist performances is turned against itself: the void of the star that “returned” to national sovereignty becomes far more powerful an image within the flag now that the remaining stars form an incomplete circle. The incoherent monochrome of ever-changing shades of blue becomes the canvas of yet another abstraction: the hole in the flag, a gateway to the future-past of the national-sovereign myth.[3] What never was, can come again.

The removal of the Dutch star, or the United Kingdom’s star, from the flag of the EU also reveals the further paradoxes of the EU’s imaginary (or the absence of it). Originally founded by six countries, the EU flag contains twelve stars, which represent today’s twenty-eight member states. When one of these states decides to remove “its” star from the incoherent monochrome, a new abstraction appears as a void, but it is not very clear exactly whose star has been removed. Wilders and the Brexiteers remove an average of 2.3

member states from the flag when they cut “their” stars away from the circle.

An awkward interdependency has also been instituted within the design of the EU flag, which did not change each time new member states were added to or—more recently—departed from the Union, but instead aims to represent a union in which it is not just the states’ stars that are aligned one to another, but in which the states are aligned within the stars as such, with 2.3 states per star, on average. Such uncomfortable iconographic imagery fits the Eurocratic project well, as famously pronounced by Wolfgang Schäuble after the Greek election of the Syriza government, when he stated that national democratic “elections cannot be allowed to change an economic program of a member state!”[4]

The political reality of the EU might be best exemplified not by the circle of stars, but rather through the awkward multistate star. Your election is not just your election, it is someone else’s too; someone or something that never appeared on the ballot, but might very well close down your banks and force you to rely on welfare. Framed as a bastion of liberal democracy, the EU essentially continues to operate like the original cartel that stood at the basis of the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC): if a member of the cartel does not pay up, it will either be forced to pay off its debt (through a Mafia-like “offer they cannot refuse”) or be removed from the cartel altogether.[5] Democracy has nothing to do with the process in which Syriza was forced to become the extended branch of the Troika, and in which the Greek parliament was transformed into a ceremonial entity at best. The crisis of the imagination is also revealed when we think, counter to Schäuble, that democracies can “change too many things.”

Through what tools do we take back control of our imagination? How can we turn voids into propositions? How can we reclaim past and present through that category most controversial and least explored today: that of the possibility of a future?

Fig. 4. Ian Macfarlane, *United Kingdom Passport* (2017).

Monochrome Memes

> *After 43 years, we have pushed the door ajar. A rectangle of light dazzles us and, as our eyes adjust, we see a summer meadow. Swallows swoop against the blue sky. We hear the gurgling of a little brook. Now to stride into the sunlight.*

– Tory MEP and Leave campaigner Daniel Hannan, from his book What Next: How to Get the Best from Brexit (2016)

It might be argued that the question “What is Europe?” engenders difficulties not unlike those of “the contemporary.” Rather than grasped in its own elusive identity, the

contemporary is to a larger extent conceivable via an arc through anxious futures, as the sum of the alarming emergencies, moral, political, social, and environmental gridlocks towards which the present accelerates. Europe, too, exists as the interweaving of different timelines. There is a default of the European notion, one that synchronizes the economic or diplomatic motivations on which this transnational construction rests within the rhythm of a cosmology of sorts. There is another timeline, of temperamental fractions and circumstantial alliances, of opportunistic readjustments and GDP arithmetic—the minutiae of a catechism. And then there is the suspended, vertiginous time of crises and apparitions, when the European narrative enters epiphanic drive and "flashes up at a moment of danger." It is at such extraordinary moments that otherwise invisible transactions, discontinuous narratives, and abstract obligations are made agonic flesh, and that another Europe embodies as a combat-ready entity, struggling to insulate or police its suddenly perceived outer edges or internal breaches. Brexit was doubtlessly such a seism, affecting various layers and levers of Europe's political metabolism. The Union absorbed the first shockwaves, and public confidence in its mission and necessity is on the upswing.

Yet another effect of such tremors of the geopolitical terrain is that they make painfully visible the iconographic vacuum where opponents meet, the visually barren field where their clashes occur, the absence of the emblems which, in their iconoclastic, fraught reciprocal relation, would recode political conflict as what Bruno Latour has termed the "iconoclash."[6] Nothing, other than the fluttering blue flag, is there to figuratively render the divergent imaginations of what is being held up for scrutiny or offered for debate, their polemical thug of war. This we may call the domain of the counter-allegory. One of art's foremost figural machines, susceptible like any other stylistic strategy to be instrumentalized as political sleight of hand, allegory operates between mutually invisible referents. Things too vast, complex, or sensitive in their proximity to the very core of a symbolic order are addressed obliquely, so that a reciprocal, dynamic relation between referents indicating one another permanently but never "seeing" each other is orchestrated on the two sides of a "wall of correspondence." The Iron Curtain was possibly the last instantiation of such a semiotic construction of impasse and transfer. It 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 diplomatic hiatus it symbolized is incommensurate with the efficiency with which this obstacle was dismantled and sent to the historiographic junkyard after 1989, and with which the dei ex machina of the Cold War were retired. What the Iron Curtain had held apart, the European flag mends, so that these figures would appear as different equations of the same assets and exchanges, debts and losses, in an economy of affects and representations that unites Europe's incongruous "halves," be they organized along East-West or North-South divides. The historical move from how political subjectivities were

fashioned on the two sides of the Iron Curtain and today's efforts to inscribe hefty bureaucracy and substantial inequalities, the continent's centers and ghettos, into the same shared political project are episodes in the same iconology, but in the sheer sense of forms of allegiance and protest, of an imaginary of thought and action, the European project struggles with a dramatic visual deficit. There is very little to see here, just the more or less blue ennui of flags in front of European Commission headquarters and the generic monuments adorning euro banknotes. A counter-allegory manifests as a representational void, as a volume of absence.

Brexit is again the preeminent example for a collective, "popular" response to this insufficiency. A visual insurgency multiplied many times over the visual output deployed by Leave and Remain campaigns, with—among many other metaphorical connectors—memes of stars falling out of circular alignment and into other, darker or more radiant order, of firmaments multiplying more rapidly than the scenarios of political calculus, illustrating anticipation or unease, despondency and elation, with litanies of no-man-is-an-island and figures of insular pride or contempt. This collective response of visual citizenship was a kinetic burst that seemed geared to fill up, via its horizontal proliferation, outgrowth and retweeting, impulse and feedback, a representational vacuum; to intervene in it by multiplying and confusing partial answers, by the "more" of its "less," by a surplus of insufficiencies in agonistic dispute. Think of the gigantic corpus of images of the Leave campaign bus, decorated with the promise that a substantial sum of money would be no longer sent to Brussels as part of its diabolical monthly extortion, but awarded to the National Health Service (NHS). That unfortunate distortion of the truth was made viral via strings of red memes, like pathogens that infest its low immunity.

Halfway between the blinding rectangle of light through which Hannan invites Brexit true believers into a Narnia-like fold in the constitution of the world, whose clear skies and pastoral fecundity they can now enjoy without the admonishments of Guy Verhofstadt and the new, anguished figures of separation generated on social media platforms and in activist silk-screen printing studios, one image merits special attention. The architecture and design website Dezeen organized an unofficial competition in the spring of 2017 to design a post-Brexit UK passport.[7] Ian Macfarlane's stunning—and winning—proposition is a cover that transitions between the burgundy EU passport and the dark blue of the old, pre-EU British passport. Its tonal gradient between the two colors, with the blue upper half seeping over the maroon lower half, is adjusted to the result of referendum, with the 52 percent "spray-painting," in the words of a member of the jury, "over the interests of the other 48 percent."[8] Looking like a freeze-frame from a structuralist film, the cover of the passport is eloquently bidirectional in terms of the fraught political narrative it describes or presages, that it situates between unclear pasts and futures. Dawn or dusk, smooth transition forward,

nostalgic return, ominous darkening or a perpetually unresolved overlap between colors, each unable to distinguish itself fully by covering the other or by a clear-cut coexistence—all these possibilities are part of its haunting ambiguity. Macfarlane's profound anachronism, where colors and the ideologies they index are pressed together, only to reveal syncopated fade-ins and fade-outs, delineates a site of crisis. Its arrested chromatic passage indicates crisis—as convulsed paralysis, as a floundering in stasis—according to Lauren Berlant, as "an emergency in the reproduction of life, a transition that has not found its genres for moving on."[9]

Fig. 5. NSK State Pavilion, 2017. Image courtesy of IRWIN.

Black on Black

Another monochrome—flickering, mobile, multiplying to the scale of a sociology—could both sit within an archival museum display or be taken as an emphatic sign of the limits of such a regime of representation, of the art museum's capacity for containment. Between the Art and Politics galleries of some future museum, the black rectangle addressed here is a fragment from (rather than a metaphor of) a life-size entanglement of globalized worlds and localized places, of muddled boundaries, onslaughts of the "new" and tribulations of the "old." In 1992, the same year that they unfurled a twenty-two-square-meter piece of black cloth in central Moscow for their performance Black Square on Red Square, the Slovenian collective IRWIN initiated the transformation of Neue Slowenische Kunst, a dissident platform they had shared with the band Laibach and the theater company Scipion Nasice, into the NSK State in Time. The manifesto of this transformation describes the State as an infinite political entity without physical boundaries; an abstract organism, a suprematist body "ever-inspired by the moment of grace of its becoming," existing "in time yet at the same time transcending time."[10] The initiative was a response to the contemporaneous nationalist commotions in Yugoslavia and an attempt to imagine alternatives to dire political circumstances; to rethink social cohesion along different coordinates than the time and space of the nation state. The collapse of Yugoslav socialism in the beginning of the 1990s and the subsequent disintegration of the federation led to the emergence of a multitude of new political entities. IRWIN proceeded to create the spectral, artistically edited double of this process of autonomy, to test other forms of statecraft than the claim to independence (or the claim to an absolute political reality) and its martial protection. The project developed by setting up temporary embassies and consulates, the NSK Folk Art Museum (any artifact produced by a citizen qualifies for inclusion in the collection), peacekeeping regiments, post offices, and by issuing passports to whoever applied to become a citizen of the state. With a few exceptions the project grew at a steady pace within a relatively well-defined class of politically minded art lovers. But this ghostly, artistic doppelganger of statecraft and officialdom was to lead a strangely real life: during the 1990s, the largest number of NSK passports were issued in Sarajevo at the end of the

war (1995), and many art world anecdotes return to the point of actual borders being crossed with “imaginary” passports.

Starting in 2004, and picking up speed in the following years, this pattern changed dramatically as the NSK passport website[11], which looks drily “legitimate” and features an emphatic disclaimer from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Ljubljana, was flooded by thousands of citizenship applications from Nigeria and neighboring countries. Applicants were attempting to acquire NSK State passports in the belief that these would enable them to travel to Europe, move to Slovenia, or move to the country of NSK.[12] Instead of rejecting such requests as a parasitical outgrowth or deviation from the original project, IRWIN continued to print the passports while engaging with the prospective citizens and advising them on the political goals and uses of the State in Time. However, to a significant extent the project had been re-scripted and taken over by other actors, hijacked or hacked by motivations very different from the ones on which it had been premised. To quote IRWIN again, “How did a symbolical object that had been sold in the (art) market of the First World for fifteen years and is recognized—regardless of its ambiguity or precisely because of its ambiguity—as an art object, become a functional document in the Third World? In short, how did the word become flesh?”[13] An exhibition, preceded by elaborate research and an extensive PR and communication campaign, that the artists presented in Lagos in 2010 attempted to map out these questions in dialogue with local passport applicants. A different view of the contemporary world emerges from those hours of interviews; a fractured one, commensurate with “ours” and alien in equal measures.

If the State in Time had initially been confined to the spectrum of political aspirations and projections of the art world, seeking to recuperate from the historical avant-garde a totalizing rhetoric and a transformative ambition, those aspirations were ultimately exposed to their unforeseen consequences, spilling over into immediate political forms—and doing so in unmanageable, ambivalent ways. If the project had initially been formulated in reaction to the ferocious nationalism in Yugoslavia in the 1990s, the turn of events in the second half of the 2000s situated it between two wars: one opposing variations of the same ideology of nationhood in the post-1989 world, the other—diffuse, but no less fierce—occurring across the North-South divide. This was, of course, a predominantly financial disparity resulting from the uneven application of the same economic ideology in different contexts, unfolding at a time when Europe was once again reconsidering border policies against a background of resurgent populism. A political art project met with an unintended outcome, which it could only partly assimilate in its own logic and only incompletely translate or recode in artistic terms (but which, significantly, it neither tried to obviate or adapt to a preexisting template). The resulting work defies the conventions and scales employed by the exhibition—any exhibition—or the museum of art, unable to accommodate the amplitude and complexity reached by the application of its own protocols in contexts

known or only intuited. It can be argued that the current form of the project is not the starkly black NSK passport or the other insignia and paraphernalia of the project, but the beliefs and hopes of the 15,000 (and counting) citizens of the NSK State. This loss of scale manifests the pulsating political core of the project and indicates the inadequacy of any attempt to frame and exhibit it: we can understand this as either an impossibly complex allegory of the museum's own political projections, or as an eloquent failure to segment the breadth of the project into constitutive, metonymic, or mirror images, subsequently framed for art world consumption. The museum of art, to return once more to the spectral doubling hinted at above, is infiltrated by another, impure museology, while political processes at large encounter, in the making of such a project, their jumbled, full-scale allegory.

Oscillating between the notions of a stateless community—the utopian drive in Modern gear—and that of a state without a nation, the NSK State speculates on the possibility of a political formation that does away with territory, a purely artificial structure of principles which will have severed the umbilical cord of ethnic origin, political belonging, and cultural rootedness. How does one make state art in the service of a nonexistent country? How does one protest in the name of an incompletely imagined or defined political alternative? How can we picture another museum within the space of the existing ones—the still-echoing promise of institutional critique—while avoiding fueling phantasms of rejuvenation and transparency which are either art's great service to neoliberalism or a self-defeating evasionism, projecting an illusory "outside"? In a stroke of genius that reasserted the momentum of the project by weaving together the increasingly untenable equation of national identities that underpins the Venice Biennale and the severity of the ongoing migrant crisis, IRWIN opened a NSK Pavilion for the 2017 edition of the lagoon extravaganza. Featuring an upside-down desk designed by Ahmet Öğüt and staffed by migrants living in bureaucratic limbo in various European cities, brought to Venice to perform duties of issuing and stamping passports, as well as a substantial program of publications and debates, the pavilion registered as a three-dimensional puzzle of jurisdictions, where the empathetic rhetoric of contemporary art, proclaimed either from a moral high ground or articulated in the "relational" glee of togetherness or grassroots initiatives, encounters destinies broken by conflict and famine, stories whose soul-crushing brutality and sheer statistical numbers come close to the effect of a negative sublime. Meanwhile, the extraterritorial jurisdictions of art in Venice collide with Europe's manifest unpreparedness to respond to the magnitude and severity of this event, its inadequate legal toolkit to grasp and incorporate in some form a blurred, directionless, anguished sociology of political biographies in transit, of obliterated points of origin and uncertain, illusory terminus. Tweaking, perhaps unfortunately, Derrida's punning vision of democracy, migrants are "coming" and "to come." IRWIN's pavilion draws as much on the tropes of being an actual state under imaginary circumstances as on those of an imaginary state under real circumstances. The

collective suggests—using the signifiers of statehood and officialdom as much as those of art—that tearful appeals to compassion on the one hand and the sociological yard-sticks of operatic nationalism (of which we would recall here a question that resonates its perpetual ineptitude and untimeliness, “how many is too many?” and to which “how early or how late is it to ask such a question?” is an immediate response) on the other are complicit in the same fallacy. From the perspective of IRWIN’s propositions and Berlant’s formulation of crisis, such instances of critical, spasmodic arrest are offered precisely the forms in which an exit strategy and a moving-on might be conceivable. These indicate that the “genre” of a response to the crisis of migration, to the interruption in the circulation of lives that it exacerbates, can only be the judicial: a giving of rights and the taking of another European oath.

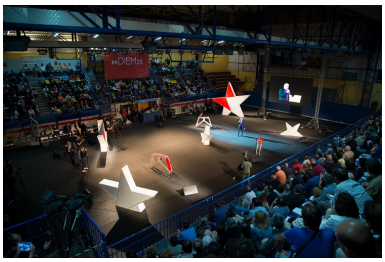

Fig. 6. Studio Jonas Staal and DiEM25, *New Unions: DiEM25* (2017), Sporting Basket Arena, Athens. Photograph: Jonas Staal.

The Monochrome as Horizon

From eurocratic monochromes of uncertainties to ultranationalist monochromes of closure and phantasmal return, the black NSK passports are monochromes not of a supposed abstraction, but of a horizon. With each additional citizen of the State in Time, the monochrome widens into a space that is both tangible and embodied in the form of those holding citizenship of this stateless state. Simultaneously, it occupies the space of the imaginary carried by the collective desires for a union that rejects the dichotomy of the Remain/Leave axis. The NSK State in Time imagines the worst of the present and simultaneously the possibility of future, acknowledging the duality of the crisis of the imagination. Popular rather than populist, it aims to mobilize the collective imagination, the collective political desire, for that state which we always wanted but were too afraid to ask—a known unknown that we must now transform into our demand.

The twenty-first century has turned into the dark scenery of a new authoritarian world order rising. From Temer in Brazil to Trump in the United States, from the ultranationalist and fascist parties emerging in Europe to the Erdoğan regime, their monochromes are those of national flags and cultural mythology, a Europe as a Game of Thrones. But the twenty-first century is simultaneously the scenery of new social assemblages and imageries emerging, from the manifold social movements that manifested against the Iraq War and the new fascisms in the making, to the pan-European movements and platforms that depart not from our current being-state in Europe, but from Europe as a category that can articulate statehood anew. Can we perceive the State in Time in transnational initiatives, such as the Plan B conference or the emergence of the Pan-European Democracy in Europe Movement 2025 (DiEM25), founded by former Greek finance minister and economist Yanis Varoufakis and Croatian philosopher Srecko Horvat?[14]

Recent DiEM25 assemblies—an alliance of non-parliamentary and parliamentary democratic parties, platforms, progressive academics, and artists—have decided the movement would run as an actual party for the first time in the European elections of 2019; the first political party that would begin not on a municipal or national, but rather European level, present on every ballot in the European Union. To vote for DiEM25 in Germany would simultaneously mean voting for DiEM25 in Greece. It would mean that, from rethinking or reimagining Europe as a cultural project, the limited means of election would be used to trigger an imaginary of the act. Voting DiEM25 would be to enact a different notion of Europe, or better, a different notion of a union. Is that not the essence of a collective, performative, institutional critique? The use of institutional boundaries and exclusions folded back against themselves. European elections do not allow us to vote for the Union, but only for national parties of our own member states within the union, making visible why a new union has not been possible within our given institutional predicament, while enacting the possibility of such a union against the odds.

Such a “pre-enactment” of a federal union within the present-day cartel—mobilizing existing institutions to partake in one that is yet to come—essentially embodies a hybrid practice of real-life science fiction. Rather than overthrowing a given political structure, the structure is challenged to a maximum to perform something it cannot be, but the gesture makes this process of becoming imaginable, and once it is imaginable—once the future has been experienced affectively, even though it is not yet present—it has already become too real to ignore. From the imaginable, we move into the realm of the inevitable. Is it not the same for that ever-recurring proposition of the universal basic income? Or even of transnational human rights? As far as they exist, they only do so in a partial matter, between imagination and fragmented practices. But their imaginary has been pre-enacted too many times to close the lid on the possibility of them becoming fully real. Art’s power might not be executive in nature, but its radical imaginative capacity has the potential of making its realization a question of time—the time needed to occupy the future. And that begins by taking back control over our imagination as our collective site of struggle.

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in The Hague, the David Roberts Art Foundation in London, and Fondation Ricard in Paris. Mircan edited the books *Hans van Houwelingen: Undone* (2012), and *Cross-examinations* (2015), and has contributed to numerous exhibition catalogues, artists' monographs, and magazines such as *Manifesta Journal*, *Mousse*, and *Afterall*.

Jonas Staal is an artist based in Rotterdam and Athens. His work focuses on the relationship between art, democracy, and propaganda, including interventions in public spaces, exhibitions, theater plays, publications, and lectures. He is the founder of the artistic and political organization *New World Summit* (2012-ongoing), and the campaign *New Unions* (2016-ongoing). Recent solo exhibitions include *Art of the Stateless State* (Moderna Galerija, Ljubljana, 2015), *New World Academy* (BAK, basis voor actuele kunst/ Centraal Museum, Utrecht, 2015), and *After Europe* (State of Concept, Athens, 2016). Group exhibitions include the 7th Berlin Biennale (2012), the 31st São Paulo Biennial (2014), and the Oslo Architecture Triennale (2016). Staal is a regular contributor to e-flux journal, and published several books, including *Nosso Lar, Brasília* (Jap Sam Books, 2014) and *Stateless Democracy* (BAK, 2015). In 2018 he received a PhDArts from the University of Leiden on his dissertation "Propaganda Art in the 21st Century".

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1. The terms "Nationalist International" and "Austerity Union" resulted from the economic policy paper of the Democracy in Europe 2025 movement. See DiEM25, *DiEM25's European New Deal: A Summary,* 2017, https://diem25.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/170209_DiEM25_END_Summary_EN.pdf
2. In the words of Homi K. Bhabha, "It is that Third Space, though unrepresentable in itself, which constitutes the discursive conditions of enunciation that ensure that the meaning and symbols of culture have no primordial unity or fixity; that even the same signs can be appropriated, translated, rehistoricized and read anew." Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London/New York: Routledge, 1994), 37. The third space was revisited in relation to the present-day European crises in Lorenzo Marsili and Yanis Varoufakis's *Il Terzo Spazio* (2017).
3. It is useful to mention in this context the "revolutionary" iteration of this same strategy, when in 1989 Romanian anti-communist protesters stuck their heads through cut-out flags or used the flag as political ponchos (the emblem of the communist party being excised from the center of the banner), which would become defining images of the era.
4. Yanis Varoufakis, "Why we must save the EU," *The Guardian*, April 5, 2016, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/apr/05/yanis-varoufakis-why-we-must-save-the-eu, accessed March 2018.
5. The notion of the European "cartel" is introduced by Yanis Varoufakis to understand the continuation of the Union of Coal and Steel in the present-day European Union. See Yanis Varoufakis, *And the Weak Suffer What They Must?: Europe's Crisis and America's Economic Future* (New York: Nation Books, 2016).

6. Bruno Latour and Peter Weibel, eds., *Iconoclash: Beyond the Image Wars in Science, Religion and Art* (Karlsruhe: ZKM, 2002).
7. See https://www.dezeen.com/2017/04/11/brexit-passport-design-competition-winner-ian-macfarlane-1000-pound-prize.
8. Ibid.
9. "A crisis… appears therefore when the transitions of the present are revealed as precarious by the loss of genre and a hyperactive scavenging for genre. These scatterings of agency are crises of genre, and crises of genre are crises of the common. As predictable relations of cause and effect no longer obtain, the concept of event itself suddenly appears post-normative, which is to say that during crisis times the event emerges not as a thing that goes without saying but as a genre whose conventions are stunned, disorganized, and open for change." Lauren Berlant, "Austerity, Precarity, Awkwardness," (November 2011), https://supervalentthought.files.wordpress.com/2011/12/berlant-aaa-2011final.pdf, accessed January 2018.
10. "First results of the NSK State Citizens' Congress," http://times.nskstate.com/first-results-of-the-nsk-state-citizens-congress, accessed March 2018.
11. See https://passport.nsk.si/en/the_NSK_passport, accessed March 2018.
12. Inke Arns, "The Nigerian Connection: On NSK Passports as Escape and Entry Vehicles," *e-flux journal*, no. 34 (April 2002), http://www.e-flux.com/journal/34/68336/the-nigerian-connection-on-nsk-passports-as-escape-and-entry-vehicles.
13. IRWIN, "State in Time," in NSK State in Time, eds. IRWIN (NSK Information Center and Doljenski Muzej, 2012), 7.
14. For more information on DiEM25, see https://diem25.org.