

‘Nail Your Colours to the Mast’

“Greece or Italy sell me an island, I’ll call its independence & host the migrants & provide jobs for them building their new country”

ACCEPT CHANGE

Exhibition design + catalogue: We Became Aware; Tomas Lootens & Valentijn Goethals Flag 'Accept Change' on AB Dambis: Olivier Goethals Curators:

**Liene Jākobsone¹
& Manten Devriendt²**

Flags contributions

**Rafael Berny, Stijn Dries, Henry
Holmes, Jakub Jekiel, Philip Kortess
Sybren Lempsink, Philip Lyaruu,
Daan van Mousch, Andreas Mulder,
Sjoerd van de Reep, Oscar Sanders,
Aris Stefani & We Became Aware**

(These flags were conceived during a class by We Became
Aware for Masters of Form at 'Academie voor Bouwkunst',
Amsterdam NL—2015)

The exhibition is part of the Sculpture Quadrennial Riga 2016, Conservatism and Liberalism

1. Liene Jakobson is a graduate architect, holds a MA in design and currently is doing a PhD research about critical design. Previously she has attained a BA degree in fine arts, painting. She has organised the series of PechaKucha events, guest lectures by foreign and local architecture and design professionals and design workshops, among others. Co-founder of the architecture and design studio Sampling.

2. Manten Devriendt is an architect and urban planner. He has been a supervisor of architecture courses in universities in Riga and Ghent and local consultant for architecture offices 51N4E and Neutelings-Riedijk Architects in Latvia. Co-founder of the architecture and design studio Sampling.

This year Flanders and Latvia are celebrating 20 years of bilateral relations and cooperation. Over these years both partners have collaborated in a number of areas in the spirit of true cooperation. One of the sectors which has benefited of this cooperation has been the contemporary art scene. Several artists from Latvia have spent time in Flanders and have benefitted from this exchange of artists between both partners. This kind of cooperation and exchanges have stimulated and produced a fertile ground and framework in which these artists have been able to exchange and learn from one another.

It is in that spirit that this year several artists from Flanders are participating in the 2016 Riga Quadrennial. The Collective Olivier Goethals, Valentijn Goethals and Tomas Lootens are participating with a huge 'Accept Change' flag and an exhibition of flags while Kim de Ruysscher exhibits one of his first works, INSIDE from 2006.

I wish the participating artists all success and would also like to thank Manten Devriendt (Sampling) and Tom Lokere for their support in making Flanders participation a success.



How to design a flag?

Flag is something that we are used to see everywhere, but almost never take a closer look. However, among thousands of different flags, we immediately spot the combination of colours and forms that we identify ourselves with. It is a piece of cloth often loaded with such a heavy meaning, that its correct use is determined by the law and its misuse is even punishable. During our lives we often witness events where a flag is a part of, but rarely think of all the different forms it takes and meanings it assumes. We use flags as means of communication or to mark important moments of our lives by turning them into ceremonial actions where flags are involved.

The flags have a significant role in our society, yet their presence is so very evident that sometimes we are not even aware of it. But let's think for a while of all the various situations where a flag is involved.

Probably the first thing we might think of is a flag as a sign of occupation or appropriation of something—a territory, a city or a building. When a group of people takes over a place they want to communicate to others that it is their property in order avoid unnecessary fighting that could happen if another group of people would try to settle down in the same place. If a certain group of people (a nation, ethnical group, etc.) proves to be more powerful than others, they do not even have to start a fight. Only seeing them arrive—and the flag communicates their identity—makes the adversaries surrender.

This is also the reason why the sea pirates developed the flag with the skull and bones. Even if all of them were not united as a society, they all had the same objective—to convince others to hand over all their possessions. The flag in this case served as a clear message: the pirates often did not need to use their force because their intentions were communicated by the flag, they were known for being aggressive and brutal, so everybody wanted to avoid fighting with them.

As a similar sign of occupation a flag was planted also on the moon to mark the arrival of the man. It was definitely not meant to frighten someone else away from that particular place or to

inform about someone's possession of it. It was rather done to symbolically celebrate this event of appropriation of another heavenly body by the humans. However it is interesting that the flag that has become a symbol for the achievements of the whole mankind, happens to be the flag of one particular nation, which accomplished this space mission.

National flags represent the country's military power and therefore their use in certain occasions is also regulated by strict protocols. It is hoisted along with the sounds of the national anthem; it is folded in a particular way; it is draped upon one's coffin demonstrating the person's loyalty to the country.

The flag of a nation is sometimes also used to represent the country's official language—it is quite common on the internet websites or other interactive digital systems where a choice of a language is offered to the user. This kind of application of a flag is not officially regulated by law, but it can cause politically incorrect situations or at least unpleasant moments, because many languages are shared by different countries worldwide, and many nations have several official languages. This example illustrates the inconsistent relationship between our various identities—people identify themselves with nations, ethnic and language groups, and there are flags that represent states and flags that represent regions. Through all these overlying identities and meanings the flag can become quite a sensitive element also outside the realm of protocols and laws.

But what if we had to design a new flag? Most of the national flags have been created long ago in a process that is very different from what it would be if a graphic designer had to design a brand new flag right now. Besides, the current design of the flags is also a result of numerous adjustments that have been done for a variety of reasons, which means that their design is not what it ever was intended to be.

Also the process of appropriation and acceptance of a flag by the group of people, who are united under this flag, is different.

In case of a historic flag, it is already loaded with meaning that is transmitted through generations and some minor changes in its design do not affect it. But in case of a new flag: should we base our design on the symbols of past or should take the chance to construct the bright future? Or should we try to embed the existing national symbols in a contemporary flag design?

Some people seem to have understood what a good design of a flag should be: according to the North American Vexillological Association one should follow 5 rules in order to design a good flag¹. And the rules are:

1. **Keep It Simple.** The flag should be so simple that a child can draw it from memory.
2. **Use Meaningful Symbolism.** The flag's images, colors, or patterns should relate to what it symbolizes.
3. **Use 2 or 3 Basic Colors.** Limit the number of colors on the flag to three, which contrast well and come from the standard color set.
4. **No Lettering or Seals.** Never use writing on any kind or an organization's seal.
5. **Be Distinctive or Be Related.** Avoid duplicating other flags, but use similarities to show connections.

These rules might seem quite straightforward, but at the same time not so simple to fulfil; and that, in case of an existing community in a given territorial and historical context. But the project “Nail Your Colours to the Mast” was even more complicated. The task given to the designers was to design a new flag to a non-existing community living in a not-yet-defined place. This seemingly absurd concept was triggered by the proposal of the Egyptian billionaire Naguib Sawiris² to buy an island in the Mediterranean Sea and to offer it to the refugees of the Syrian war as a safe place to stay and to build their own country.

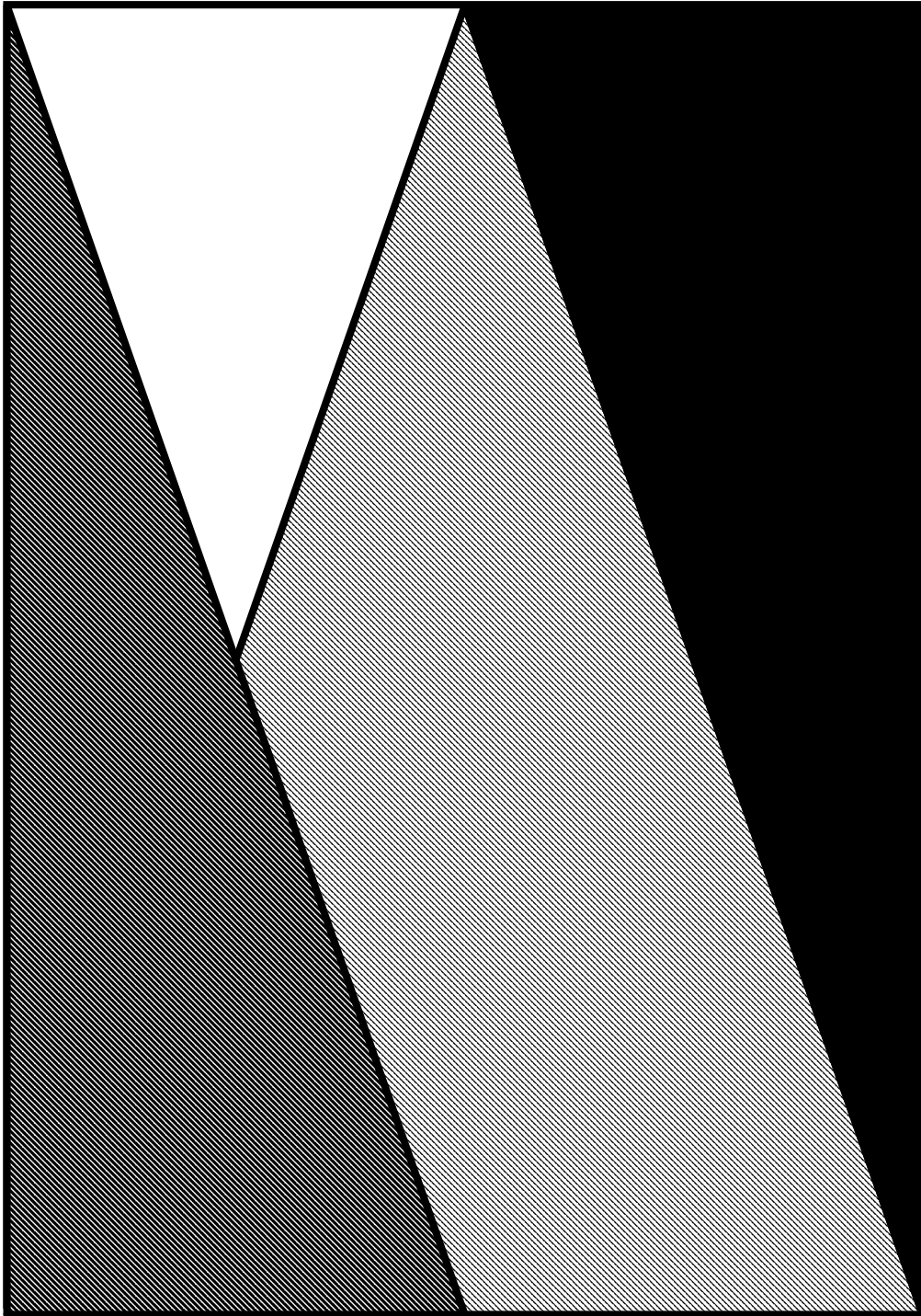
To complete the task designers had to imagine how this speculative group of people would be, what kind of values and history they would share and what kind of future they expect. And only then they could start to consider the graphic qualities of the flag and try to translate the envisioned symbols and meanings into a visual language.

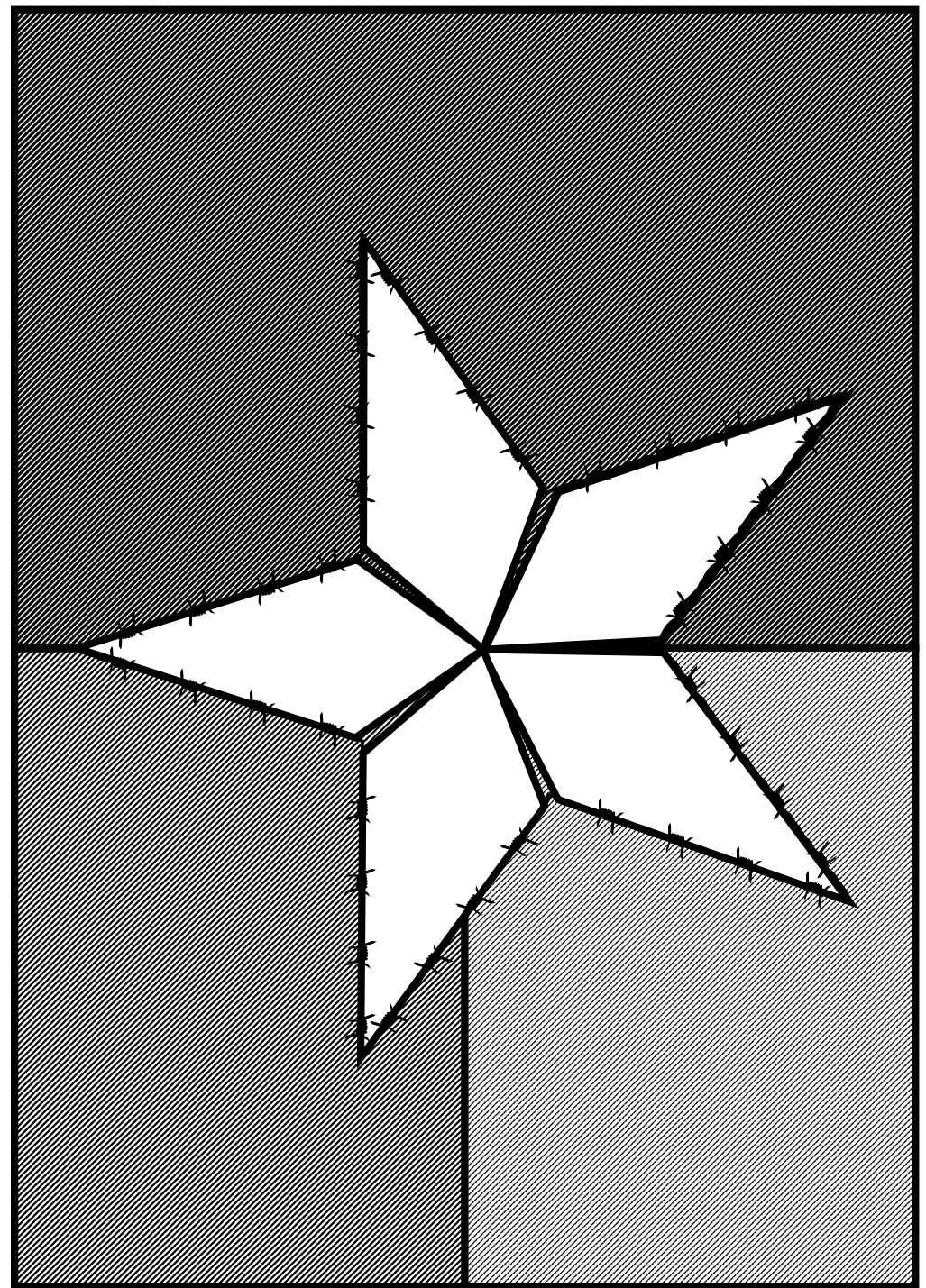
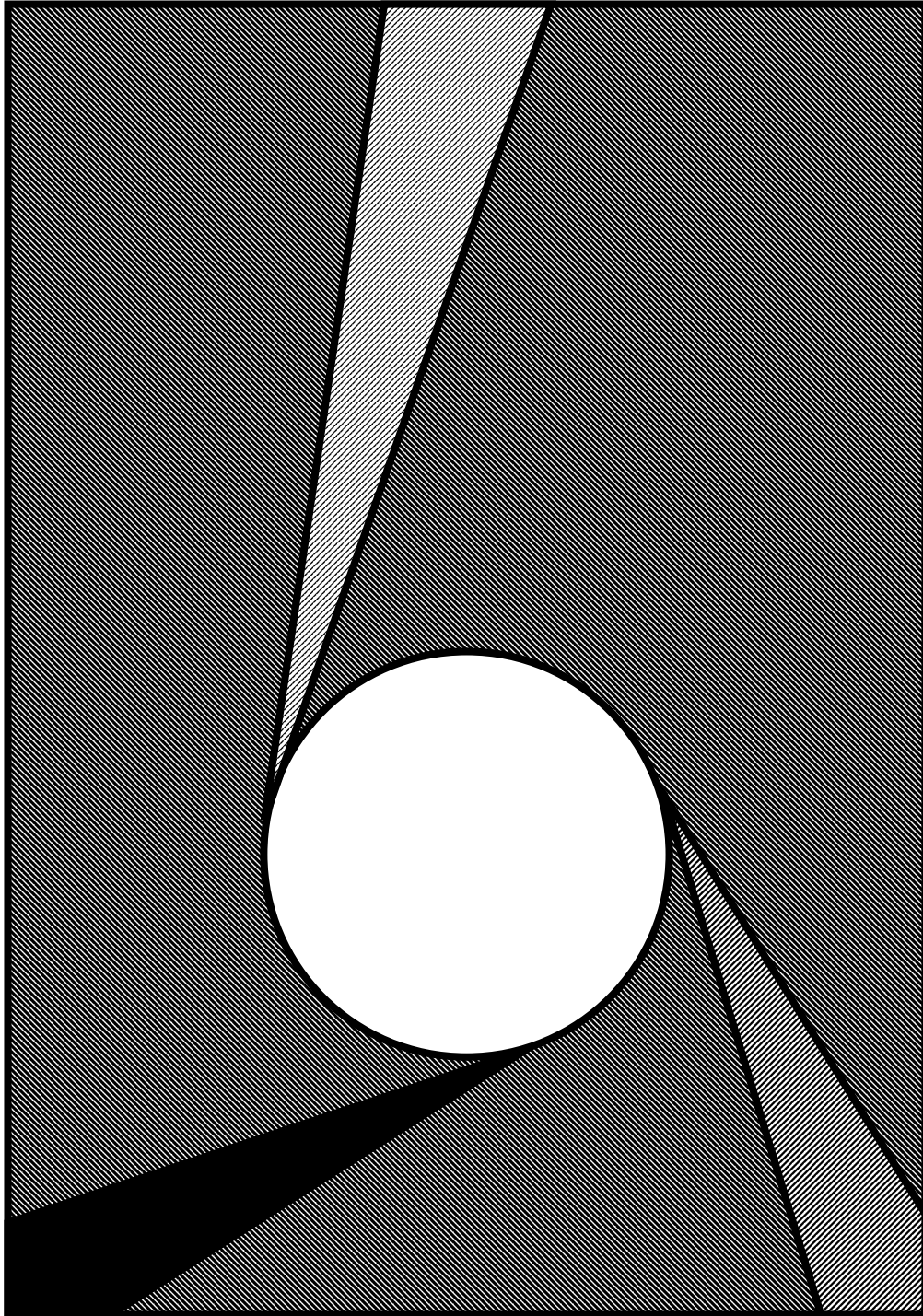
Design of a new flag for a new community implies also other challenges and provides an excellent opportunity for a thought experiment. For instance, to what extent a flag can influence the development of this community; can it contribute to a greater consensus among all the different people; can it favour their sense of togetherness; can it create identities? All these questions, although very speculative and hypothetical, tackle also the meaning of a flag in the contemporary society in general, leading the designers to a deeper understanding of many other interrelated concepts.

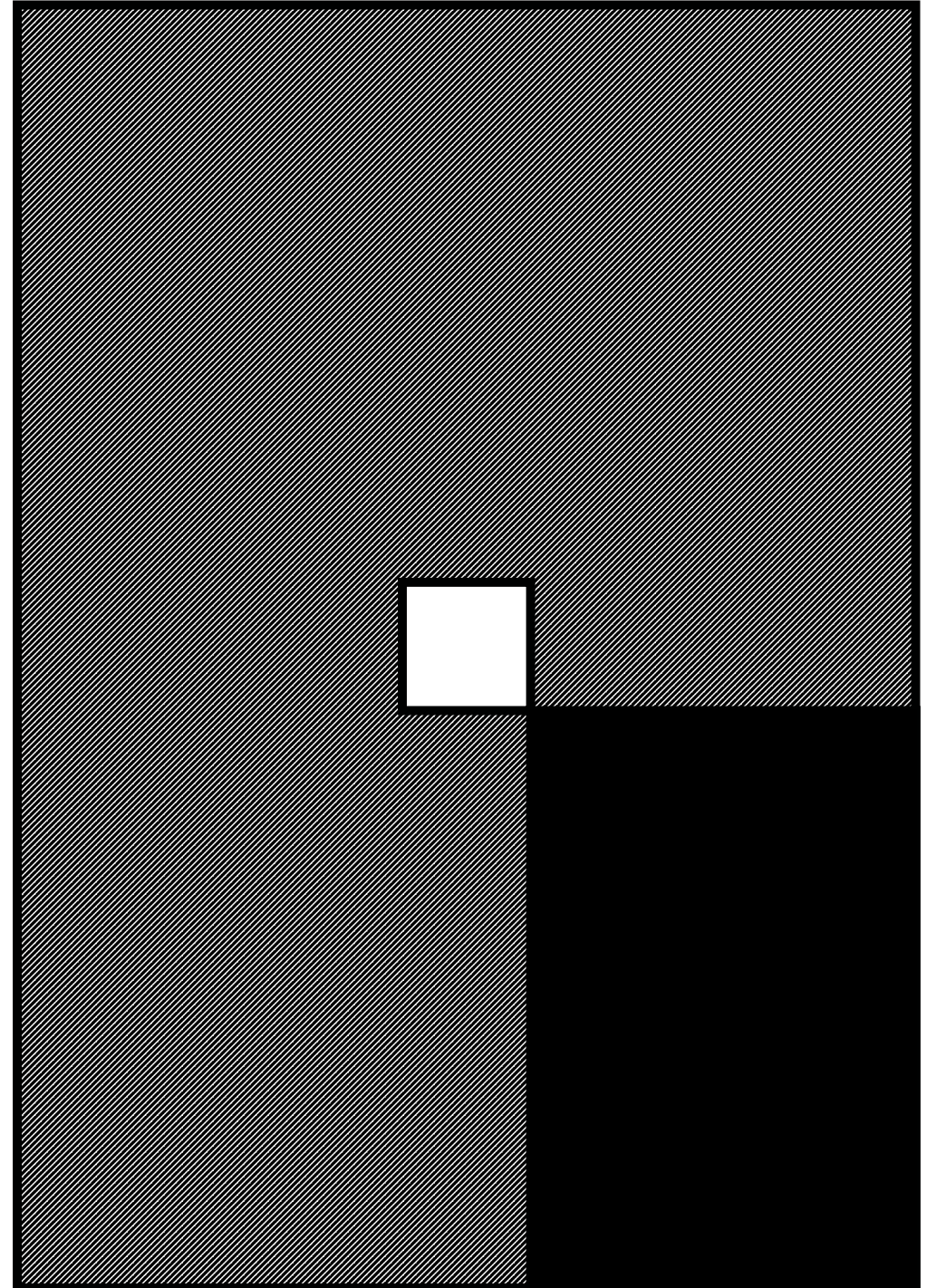
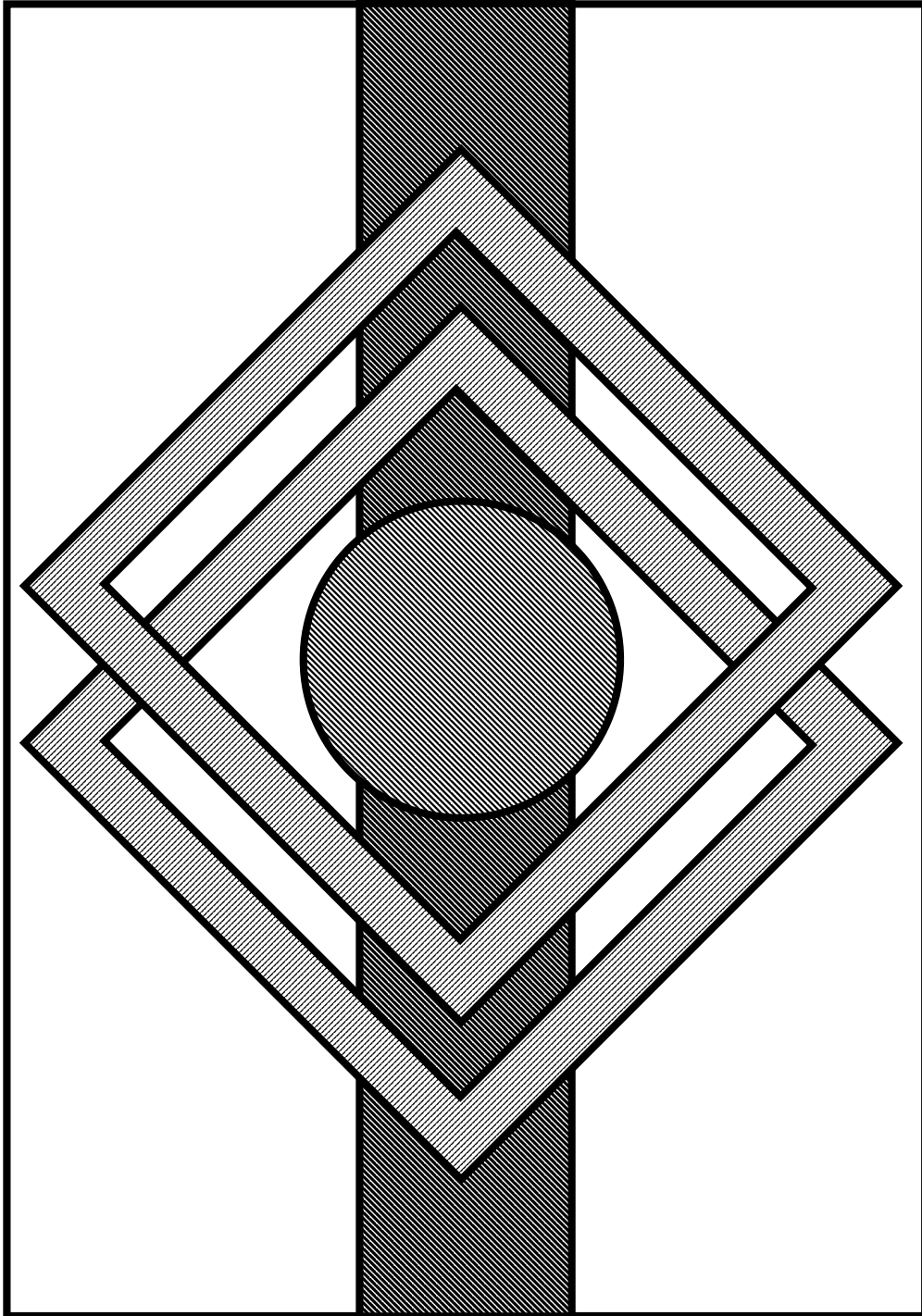
The results of this project are exhibited in the Latvian Museum of Architecture. But what has a flag to do with architecture, one might ask. For us architecture in a broader sense means all the physical structures that shape the space and organise people's lives, and a flag is a very small, yet a very powerful tool that can be used for that purpose.

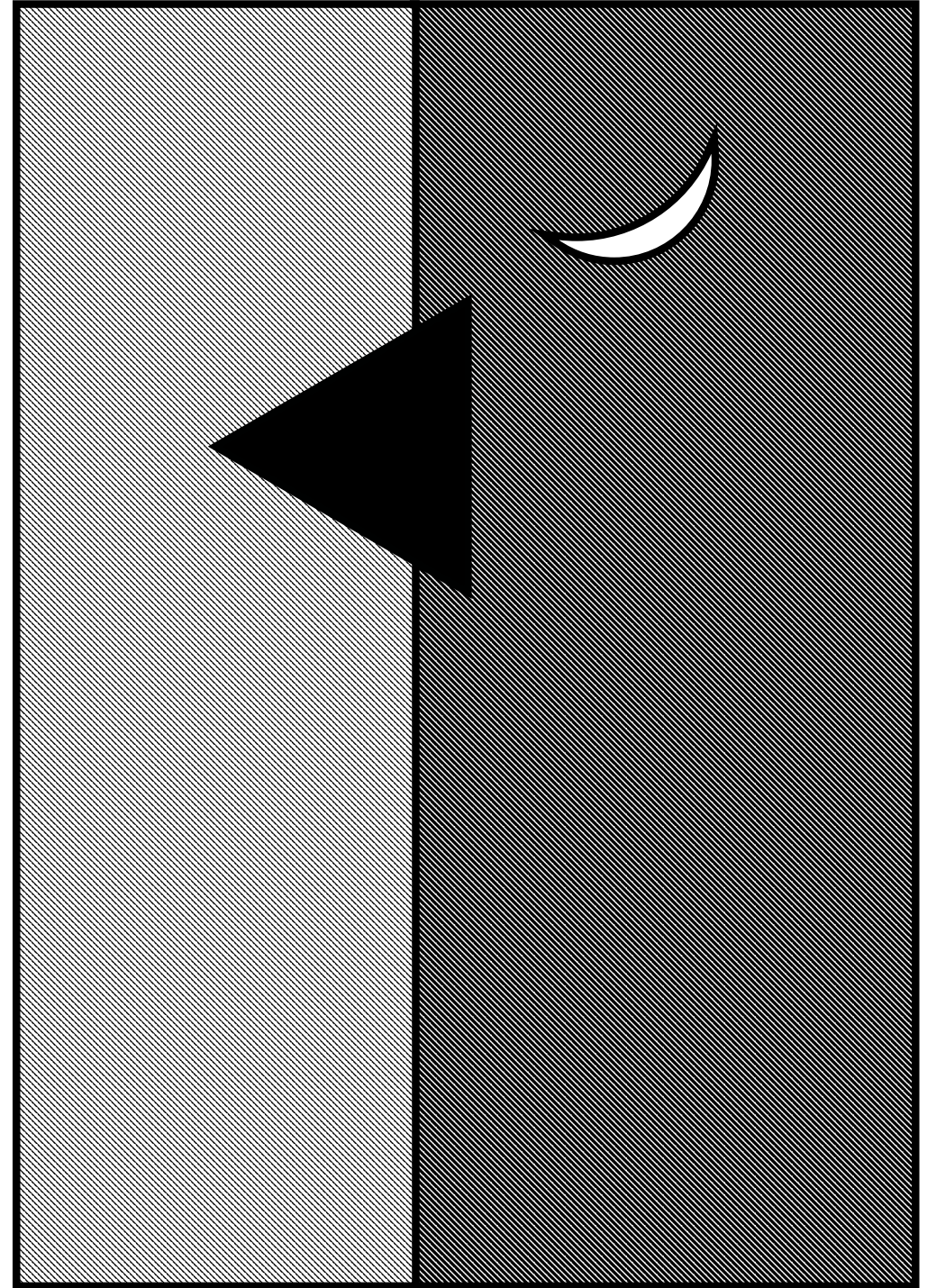
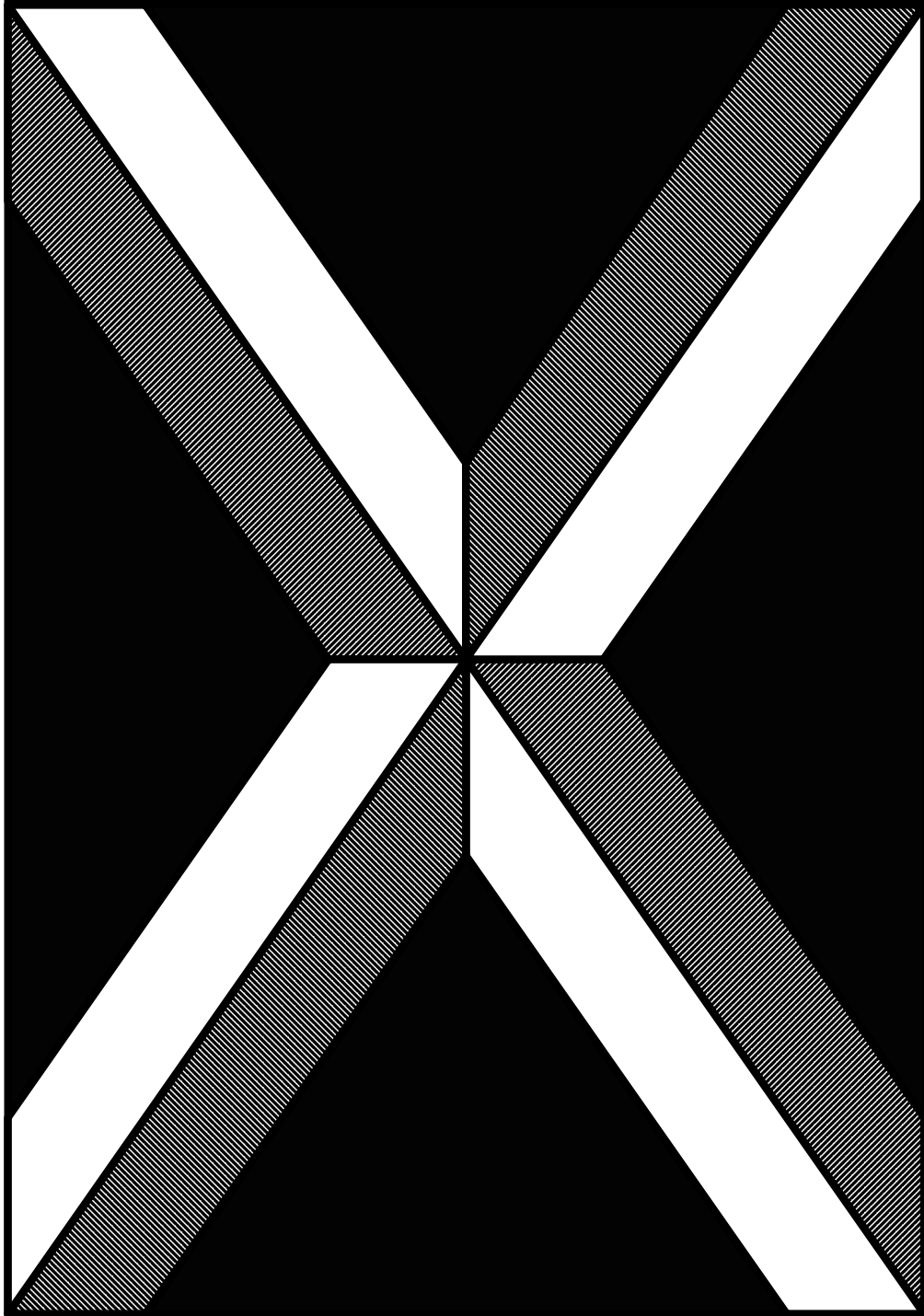
1. *Kaye, T.* Good flag, bad flag: How to Design a Great Flag. North American Vexillological Association, 2006.

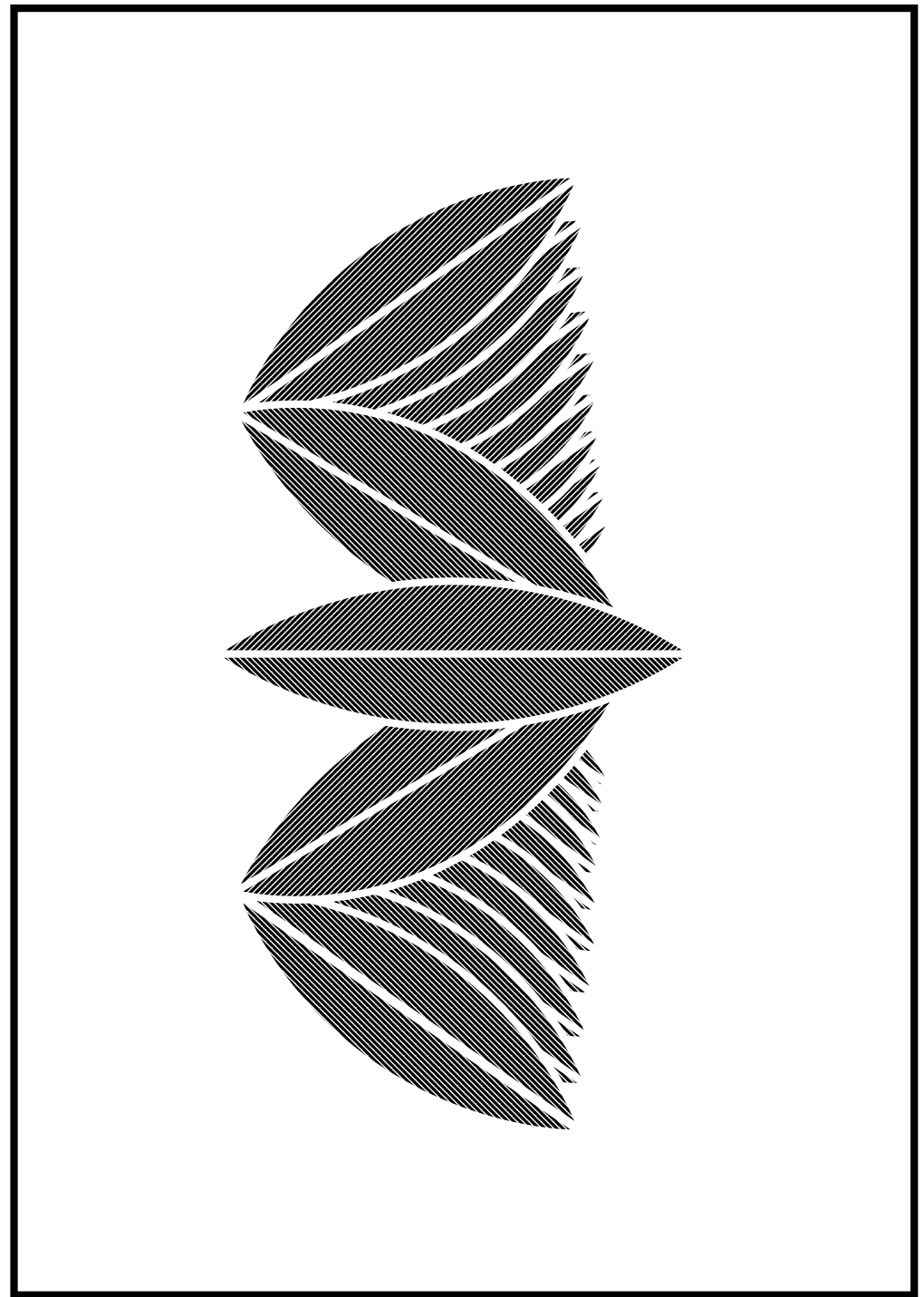
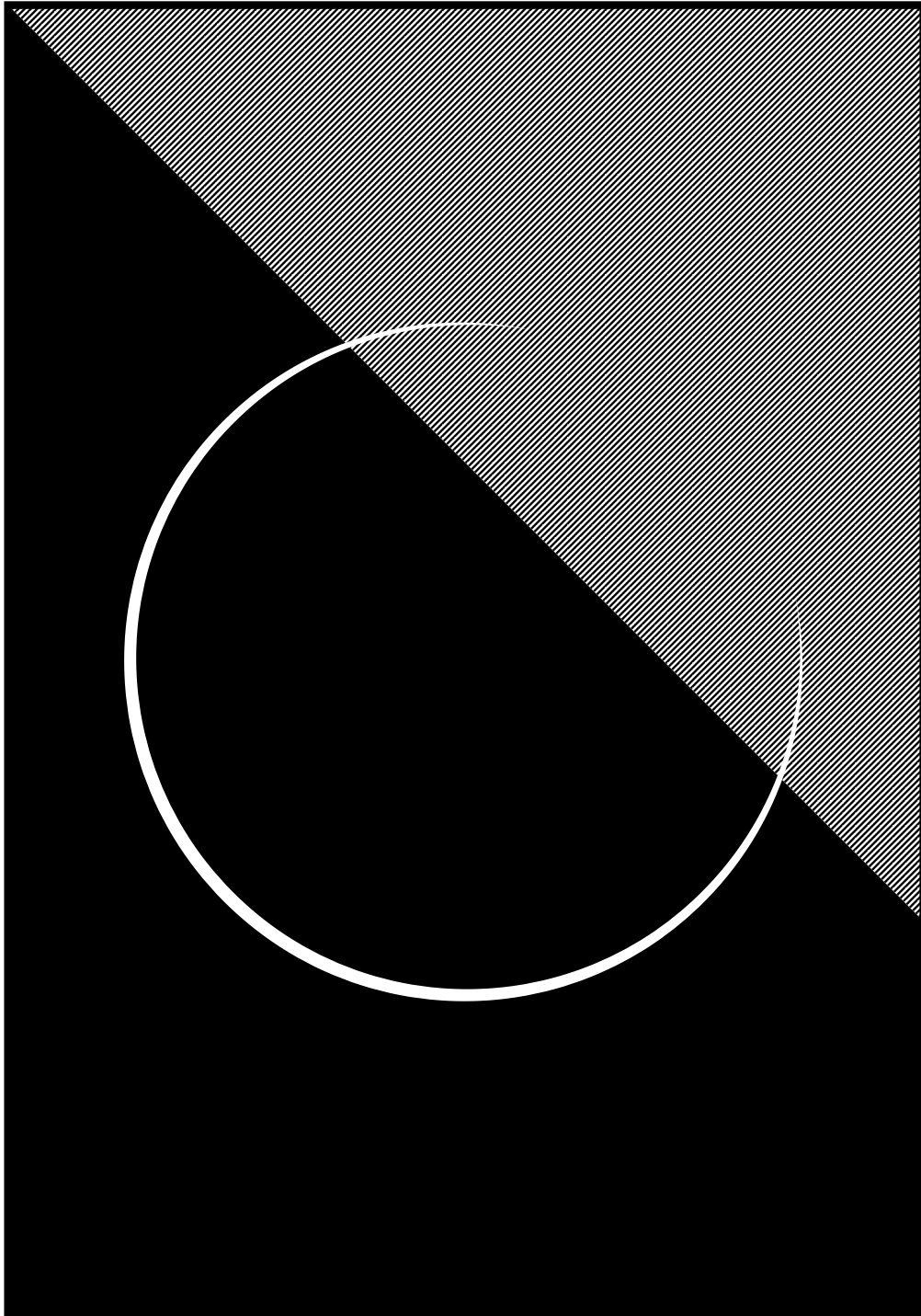
2. *Sawiris, N.* [NaguibSawiris]. (2015, Sept. 1). Greece or Italy sell me an island, ill call its independence and host the migrants and provide jobs for them building their new country [Tweet]. Retrieved from <https://twitter.com/NaguibSawiris/status/638753801655177217>

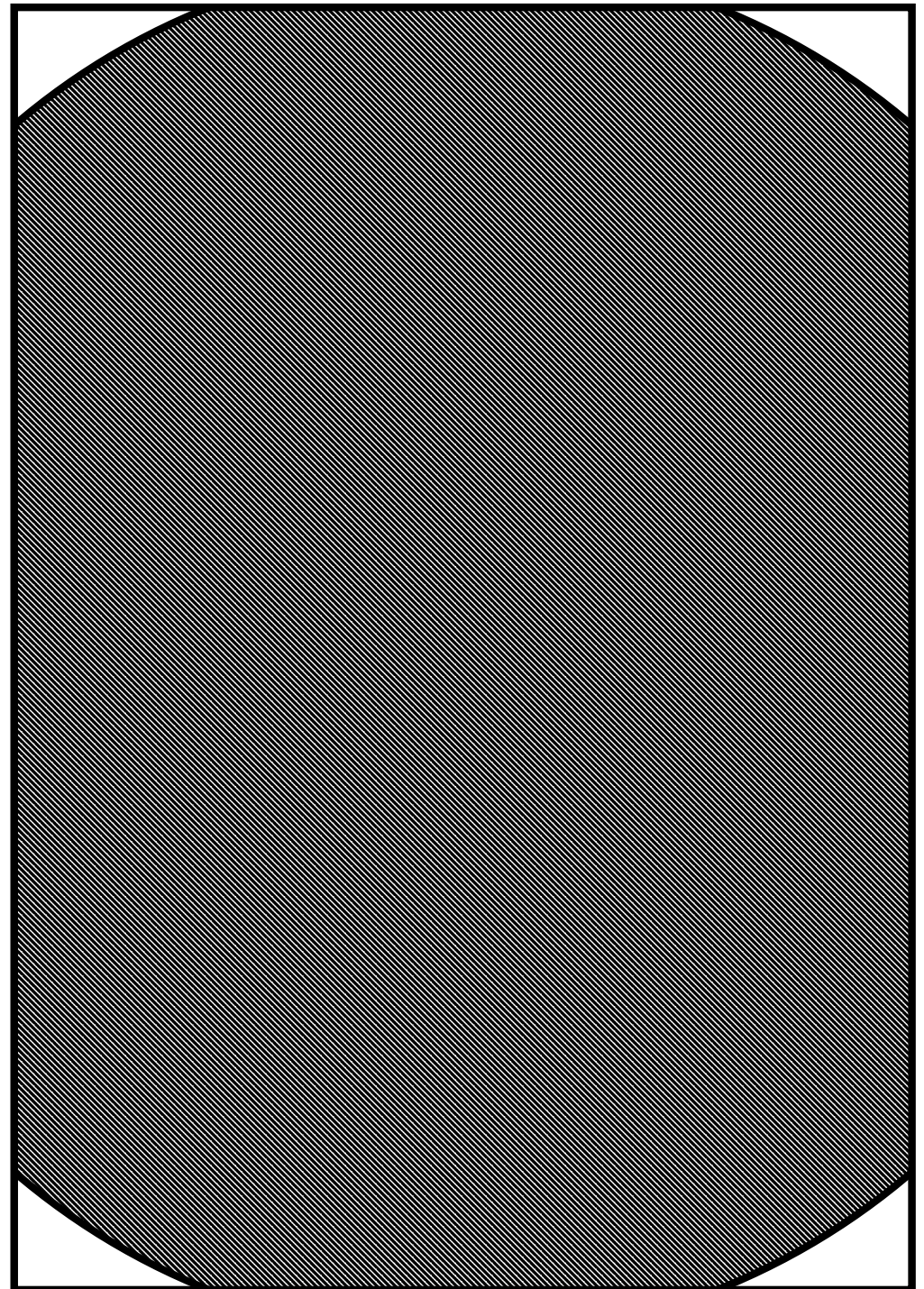
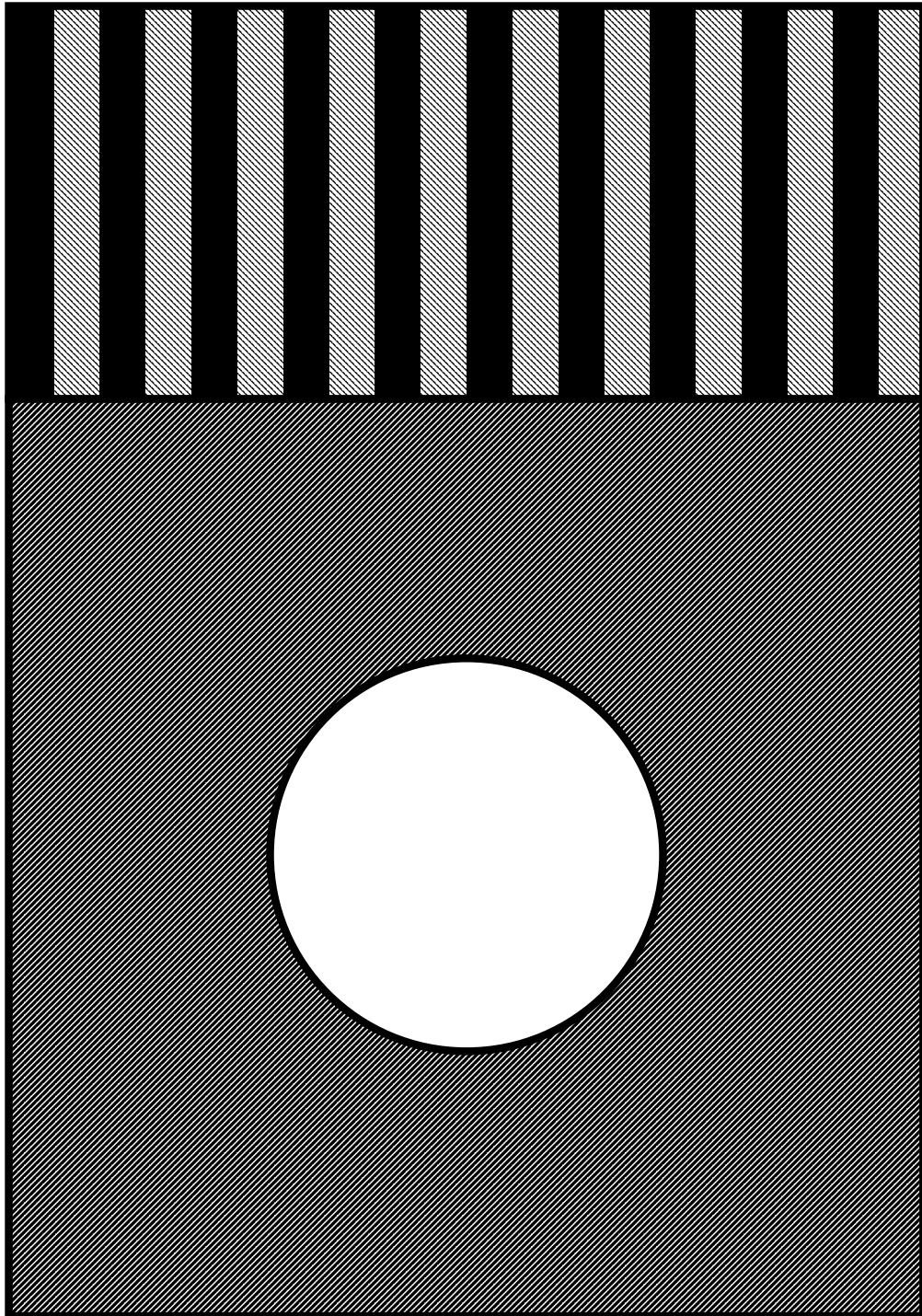


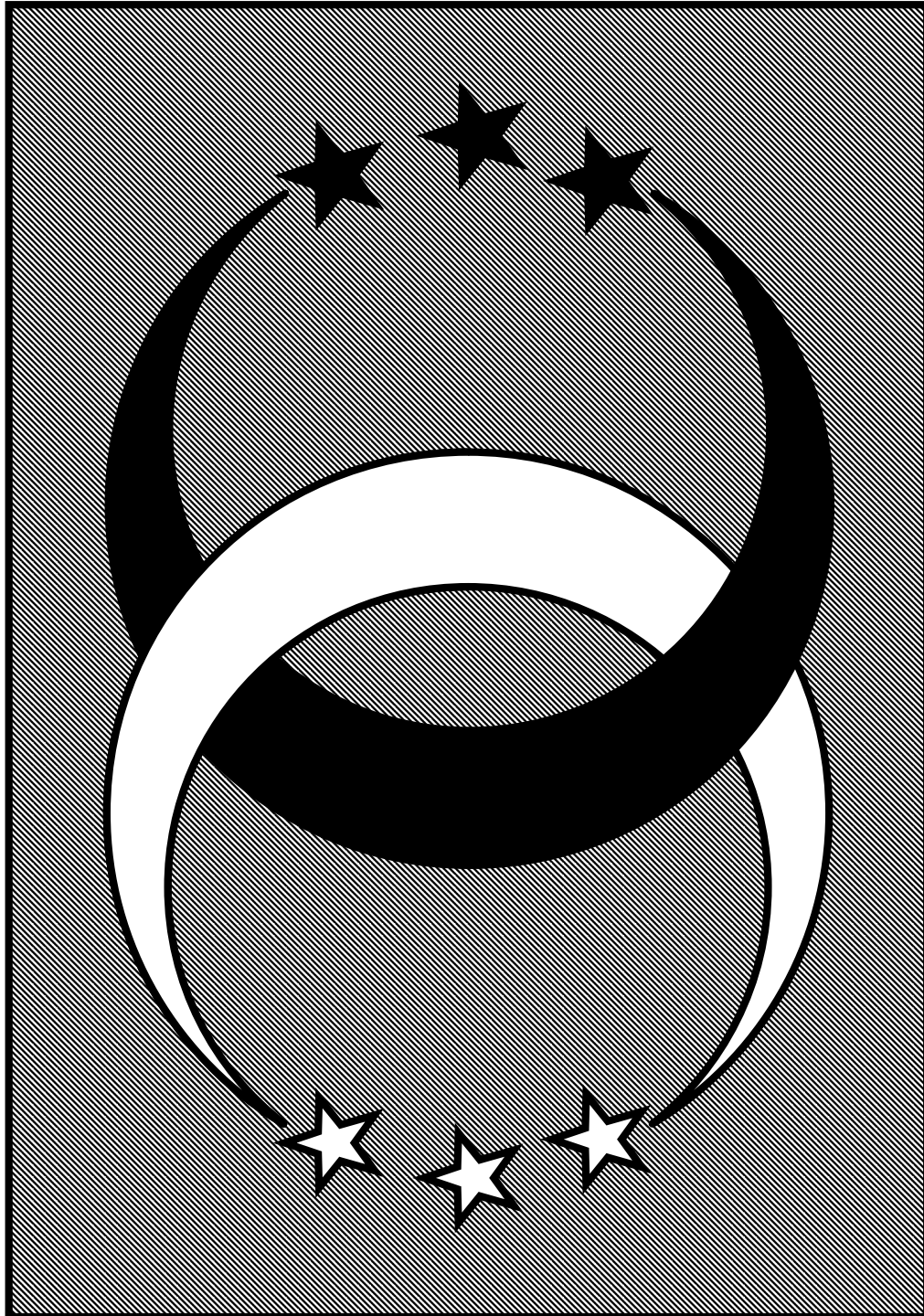












Tell us about how this project of flags began. And do the results encourage you to continue making flags?

Making flags for us started out of necessity, like most of our projects. In 2012 we were given the keys of an empty industrial building in the old harbour of Ghent—the place we will use as a workshop and a studio space until the year 2018.

We named this place 019, since it is the 19th project by Smoke & Dust—a record label and a production platform that we run together with Tim Bryon. We spent the first year before the opening almost entirely on stripping and cleaning the building and Olivier Goethals, who is an architect, together with the others devised various ways of planning and clothing it.

Eventually during one cleaning session we found an old wooden flagpole. We repaired it and fixed it back in the original place on the facade of the building. Then we impulsively designed a kind of in situ flag that remained there as the only form of communication until the opening. It was surprising for us to see how cheap and easy it was to produce a flag and how much impact this one object had on the building and its surroundings.



The first flag at 019, November 2013



Flag V.Vale^(US), September 2014 © Valentijn Goethals

From that time on we never stopped producing flags. For every new project or exhibition that takes place in 019 we ask the artist



The Flag show with Willem Boel^(BE), Paul Elliman^(UK), Ilke Gers^(NZ), Olivier Goethals^(BE), Bert Huyghe^(BE), Ine Meganck^(BE), Quenton Miller^(AU), Phill Niblock^(US), VVale^(US), Giacomo Verneda^(IT), Colin H. Van Eeckhout^(BE) & We Became Aware^(BE), December 2015—April 2016. © Olivier Goethals

to design a flag. The projects we work on are very experimental, and are not intended to reach a broad public. But since 019 is situated on the busy ring road of the city of Ghent, a flag can make a difference. Besides, 019 is also a non-profit project and we cannot afford to work other than experimentally, let alone to invest money in communication.

In 2014 we replaced the original wooden flagpole with a new aluminium pole and subsequently added 13 other flagpoles. This was the beginning of a series of group exhibitions. Now works by local and international artists are continuously exhibited there in an original, but also affordable way and in one of the most visible spots of the city.

Following all these design projects of different artists has become also a perfect platform for experiments with this medium. We are now 130 flags further and it is interesting to see how these flags already have their own lives, independent from 019. So, for instance, after an exhibition in Courtray in which we invested all our budget in a huge flagpole, Olivier developed a plinth for it.

This made it possible to place the flag in other sites, turning it into an exhibition platform itself. It became a travelling display for 7x11 metre flags—very unique and impressive dimensions.

This all has led to the situation where the roles are often reversed: we receive enquiries and proposals from artists who want us to exhibit their work. We were also asked to give a “Vexillology” lecture course at the Academy of Architecture in Amsterdam, and the results of our collaboration with the students are included in this publication.

Which artists have taken part in your exhibitions? Can you tell us about some of these projects?

The last three giant flags were designed by Tauba Auerbach^(US), Rem Koolhaas^(NL) and Deter Sinister^(US). The latter is a collective from New York that proposed writing a text over the link between a USB stick and the harbour of Ghent. This text was published on a ‘dead drop’—a hidden USB stick, which was fixed into the concrete plinth of the flagpole. The flag featured a huge logo of a USB stick and served to communicate the existence of the hidden stick.

Another project was a series of 13 flags designed by Hana Miletic. She is an artist from Brussels who once found the notebook of an unknown rapper on the ground. The notebook had



Dexter Sinister^(US), March—May 2016. © Michiel De Cleene



Hana Miletic, October 2015. © Valentijn Goethals

evidently been used for developing lyrics. So Hana together with a group of musicians held a performance in 019 where she executed these lyrics. Some of the texts were also translated onto the flags. The act of placing this material in a totally new and unintended context worked really well.

By the way, this was not the first time we put this kind of ‘found’ material on a flag. Just before the opening of 019 someone sprayed the words ‘Eat the Rich’ on the door, which at that moment was the only lettering on the building. To begin with, we found it very annoying, but quickly we realised that it would be more interesting to embrace it. And we turned this ‘design’ into our official logo: so we now have ‘Eat the Rich’ stamps, it is featured on our invoices and promotional communications, and can often be seen on the flags as well.



‘Eat The Rich’ graffiti at the 019 entrance + Eat The Rich Flag. © Michiel De Cleene & Valentijn Goethals

When we first designed a set of 5 giant flags we were actually commissioned to create some kind of intervention with our existing flag collection on the banks of Leie—the river that flows through the city of Courtray. We had only one restriction from the office of Waterways and Sea Channels: we had to keep in mind that there is intensive freight ship traffic on Leie. These ships communicate with signal flags and it was important not to interfere with these flags. But for us this warning caused exactly the opposite reaction: we immediately forgot about our archives and produced an entirely new work based on the signal flags. The final project consisted of 5 flags that contained information that only the skippers could understand. And we’ve never heard from the Waterways and Sea Channels since.



The first 5 giant flags by We Became Aware, Courtray. June — September 2015 © Valentijn Goethals

Do you also have to obtain an approval from the city of Ghent before you hoist a flag or are there other kinds of agreements in order to avoid conflicting with official regulations?

We have never asked for approval from the city authorities. If we did, there is a high chance our projects would be rejected. However, the city has always reacted positively to the results.

Next to the flagpoles we also have a 58-square-metre illegal billboard on the facade; we have installed a streetlight in a public car park and obstructed a part of it with a 30-metre-long bench. If we asked for official approval for such interventions, it would, after a long bureaucratic process, most likely be denied, while after the realisation the city authorities have always been present and reacted positively. Besides, these are all well considered decisions that, in our opinion, make a contribution and improve the area. After we discussed this approach with the American writer Mathew Stadler, he proposed his design of a black flag with the text ‘We Don’t Ask’ on it.



Billboard Series#02, Dirk Zoete, February — May 2016 © Michiel De Cleene



Flag Matthew Stadler (US) May 2015

Have you also gained new insights into the graphic design of a flag, as historically it has mostly been based on similar principles? Perhaps you have discovered some kind of evolution or even trends in the flag design.

Although we both are graphic designers, flag design was something new also for us. But after all we have learned so far, it has become clear that there are certain conventions in flag design and they are there for a reason. Over the last few months we have seen a bit of everything, but the ones you remember are the simple graphic designs that are simple to 'read'. A good flag has much in common with a good logo: both have to work in small as well as in large size; both have to be easily reproducible in a drawing. The project 'Nail Your Colours to the Mast' is a perfect illustration of it —the concepts of the flags designed by the students are very clear; the colours and symbols they have used are simple.

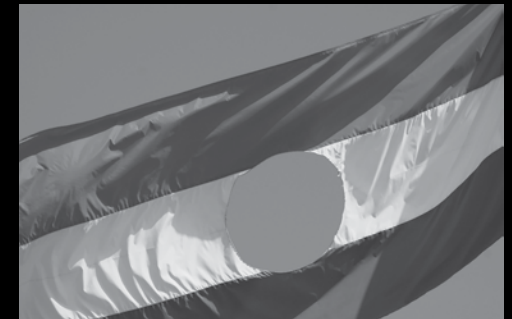
That, however, does not mean that it came easy. During the design process we asked students to present every week one existing flag and then we analysed it all together. And after some

time you really start feeling what works and what doesn't; you realise that beauty is in the simplicity and directness.

For instance, there are lots of flags with a hole in them, because during revolutions people have cut out the symbols of political powers that they were fighting against. Also the flag of Libya, which in the period between 1977 and 2011 was simply a green rectangle, is an interesting case. The flag of Saudi-Arabia is always double—two flags sewn together. This is done in order to make the inscription on it readable from both sides.



A Romanian flag with a hole, the symbol of the 1989 Revolution



A Hungarian flag, from which the coat of arms has been cut out, Hungarian Revolution 1956



The flag of Saudi-Arabia



The flag of Libya, 1977—2011

Could you explain in a little more detail the aforementioned historical examples? The flags with a hole in never really became national flags but served as a sort of transitional flags.

And do you make a distinction between 'real' flags and artists' flags?

That could be true, but unfortunately we know too little about it. Many of our flag projects were created very impulsively. Although other artists have designed their flags with a different approach, for us there has not yet been a serious reason to research this history. Certain flag designs play with the elements from existing flags and thus create moments where the spectator cannot be sure whether it is a 'real' flag or not. This is something we also tried to achieve with the project 'Nail Your Colours to the Mast'. At the same time other artists create explicitly new designs and use a flag only as a medium for their work. We find both paths exciting.

Recently the future of a nation-state is often questioned. Do we still need to unite nations according to ancient or freshly created identities? In other words, do we still need flags?

Lately, we have been confronted with the absurdity of borders more and more often. Not so long ago we were driving easily into Serbia while a few meters away from us thousands of people were waiting to get over the border.

Identities are flexible and can change rapidly. And it is in contradiction with this wish to classify and divide societies. Borders and nations are very slow and cumbersome concepts that can never manage to be up-to-date with the real situation, and our task is to raise awareness of it.

But traditionally flags are also a sign of an appropriation and occupation, and in theory there is nothing wrong with that. As we already said, for us it becomes interesting when flags evolve. They are not new and we don't think they will disappear so soon, though the perception of a flag can change. We used to think that a flag is something static, but if you look at the history of flags even only

in the last century, you can see that they are in constant change. There are dozens of versions of the American flag that have all been the official national flags for some period.

Despite its heavy ideological loading a flag is merely a composition of forms and colours that is easily variable and accessible for everyone. Maybe right now more than ever there is need for new flags!

So you suppose that there will still be flags, at least in the near future, that it will be necessary to renew and redesign flags and that their design has to be flexible and adjustable, because this is what you have learned from the past. That means you are creating flags for the present ideological context. But have you ever considered making flags for a kind of futuristic or speculative situation (similar to what critical design does —questioning hypothetical realities through real design proposals)?

The flags that we produce are indeed interpretations of a recognisable and realistic style; besides, they are designed not only by us, but also by many other artists who have taken part in our projects. In a way these designs are all proposals of future ideas. They just take the form of a flag, while in reality it happens the other way round— flags originate as a consequence of a real event or change.

For example, Olivier has designed some flags in which he succeeded in embedding political critique through subtle adjustments in colour and symbols of existing flags. There are also lots of 'World flag' designs, yet there is, of course, no official institution that could decide what flag could represent the whole world. We think something



Olivier Goethals, Greece (0) / Greed (1)



Olivier Goethals, Palisra



Rem Koolhaas, European Flag Proposal



Olivier Goethals, Flamand



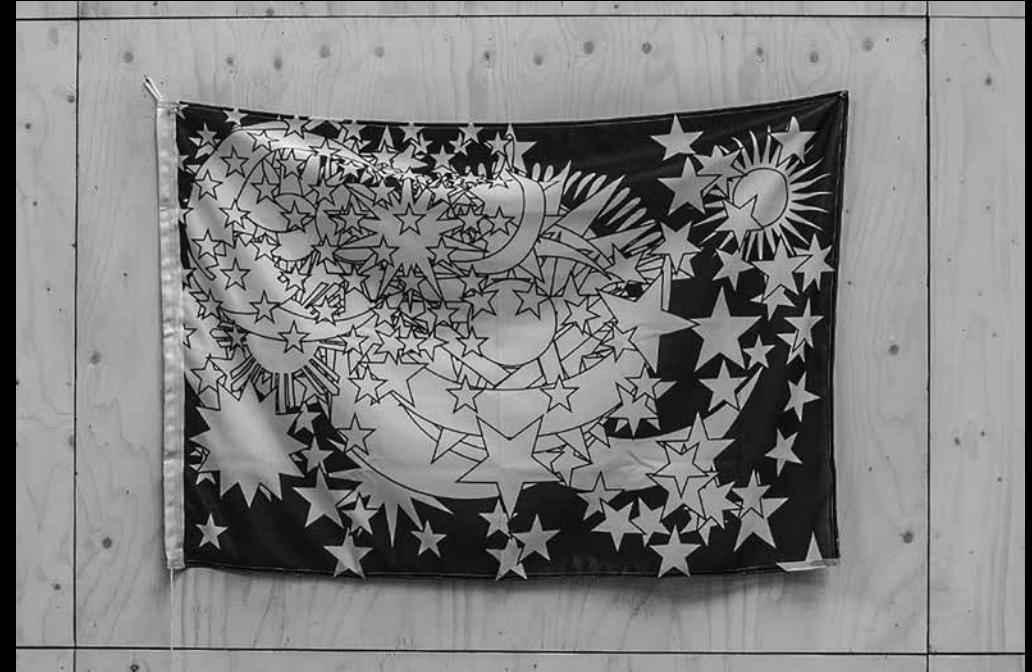
Maarten Vanden Eynde, "Europe: Mutatis Mutandis"



We Became Aware, Nail Your Colours to the Mast

Manuel Raeder, The Bold / Italic Flag Show
All images © Valentijn Goethals

similar will be relevant only at the time when people start travelling away from our planet in significant numbers.



We Became Aware, Long Play Picture Transmission Potential, December 2014 © Valentijn Goethals

This flag that we designed in 2014 could also serve as a perfect flag of the world. We discovered that out of all the national flags there are only around 90 flags that feature heavenly bodies. So we took all these elements and combined them together in one flag design.

There are interesting flags also in films and one can find websites with entire collections of fictional flags. Even though all these flags are situated within futuristic settings they mostly remain quite recognisable.

We Became Aware

Sawiris, N. [NaguibSawiris].
(2015, Sept. 1). [Tweet].

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status/638753801655177217](https://twitter.com/NaguibSawiris/status/638753801655177217)

OLIVIER GOETHALS