Identity Matters

Against the blue sky of the Western world, the stars represent the peoples of Europe in a circle, a symbol of unity. Their number shall be invariably set at twelve, the symbol of completeness and perfection.
— Council of Europe. Paris, 7–9 December 1955

Identity Matters is a 2016 digital animation consisting of the official European flag and three new variants by artist Tobias Donat. Like the official flag, Donat's versions consist of twelve stars against an azure field, not arranged in the form of the circle, but in alternative constellations – as absolute unity, an elongated line, and a complex field. For *Identity Matters*, the four flags – the European flag in use since 1955 and Donat's new design proposals – are animated in a consecutive loop as an ever-changing symbol. Together they thus form a new visual identity for a Europe that is on the move and in constant change.

The design of the official European flag was introduced in 1955 by the Council of Europe and is attributed to Arsène Heitz and Paul M. G. Lévy. The flag consists of a circle of twelve yellow five-pointed stars on an azure background. All of the stars are aligned, with one point straight up, as on the face of a clock. The number of twelve stars is unchangeable and symbolizes perfection, completeness, and unity. For example, the Zodiac has twelve signs, the biblical nation of Israel has twelve tribes, in Greek mythology, there are twelve gods, the year has twelve months, and the clock has twelve hours. The blue of the background was chosen to symbolize the common sky over Europe.

From its founding in 1949, the Council of Europe sought an idea for a common symbol of an integrated, peaceful Europe. A committee discussed specific projects for the first time on August 18, 1950. In subsequent years, more than 200 design proposals were submitted, of which the Consultative Assembly chose ten coloured designs and presented them to a panel for discussion. Arsène Heitz, an employee of the postal service in the Council of Europe, submitted a number of designs, among them flags with 15, 16, 11 and 13 stars in different arrangements, of which the Consultative Assembly favoured the design with 15 stars and included it in the discussion. However, the decision-making Committee of Ministers voted against the 15 stars and in 1955 commissioned Paul M. G. Lévy with the implementation of the final design in which twelve stars are arranged in a circle. In 2004 Lévy challenged Heitz's authorship in an interview, claiming he himself had submitted a design of twelve stars before receipt of the contract. The enduring debate over the authorship of the design, as well as the five-year-long decision-making process, draw attention to the difficulties finding a common symbol of Europe.

This new visual identity designed by Tobias Donat refers to the current challenges facing Europe in times of global change. Conceived as an animation, the European flag is released from its rigid symbolism and morphs into a symbol of a European identity that is constantly recontextualized and redefined. In essence, *Identity Matters* draws attention to Europe's decisive power in our globalized future world.

Flag of Europe, 1955

Tobias Donat, *New Flags for Europe #1*, 2016

Tobias Donat, *New Flags for Europe #2,* 2016

Tobias Donat, *New Flags for Europe #3,* 2016