



## DIY! The Potential of *Strike Poster*

Keeping the idea in mind that art itself has a political potential, I want to take a closer look at a new form of expression that emerged during the upheaval on the Maidan, namely at *Strike Poster* (*Спрайк Плакат*). This phenomenon unites old and new communication strategies by combining the established media form of the poster with the new and, nowadays, omnipresent communication media like internet, social media and social networks. To identify what is specific and unique about *Strike Poster* and what can be considered “traditional”, I shall compare it with the *ROSTA Windows*, former propaganda posters of Soviet Russia. My main focus will be the idea of autonomy and participation raised by the strike posters. Assuming that images can actually *do* things and hence can become active participants of protest, I want to examine how these images are made, by whom, and with which consequences.



The first point of comparison is the historical context in which both phenomena took place. The *ROSTA Windows* existed between 1919 and 1921, that is after the October Revolution in 1917 and during the Russian Civil War that ended in 1922. During that time many different parties were struggling for power – a struggle that had a huge and brutal impact on the civilians. The political posters were meant to inform the population about the current events and to form their attitude and behavior. *Strike Poster*, on the other hand, emerged on the 1<sup>st</sup> of December 2013 as a

direct reaction to the violent suppression of student protests by the Berkut forces on the Maidan. The by then peaceful demonstration changed in character and became a mass protest that resulted in the tragic events of mid-February. In both cases, society found itself amidst a phase of upheaval, by implication the *ROSTA windows* as well as *Strike Poster* appeared in times of political turmoil and change.

Secondly, I want to compare the space where the *ROSTA windows* and *Strike Posters* were distributed. Due to the Civil War and economic problems many shop windows in Soviet Russia were empty. The initiators of the *ROSTA windows* decided to use them for their political posters. First, they were published in Moscow, later they spread to other cities as well, e. g. Petrograd, Charkov and Odessa. Agitation trains and ships were used by the government to distribute the posters, so that its message could reach even the countryside. What might be surprising, is that sometimes the artists needed only 40 min – 1 hour to transform a governmental telegraph into a public poster. *Strike Poster*, on the other hand, is a phenomenon that started on *Facebook*. Posters, uploaded and shared by the users, could be printed and utilized all over the world. They were highly distributed on the Maidan, but due to the new technology they were and still are available for everyone who has access to the internet. The files can be used in every possible way: as actual posters for demonstrations, on billboards, as icons in social networks, for happenings, photo shootings etc. So, even though the *ROSTA windows* were already widely spread in Soviet Russia, *Strike Poster* shows a whole new dimension of distribution by using new technologies. This way the posters become apparent both in the analogue and in the digital world.



As a third point I would like to reflect on the participants' role in both phenomena. As the term *ROSTA* indicates, the *ROSTA windows* were initiated by the Russian Telegraph Agency, the state

news agency in Soviet Russia. The agency hired well-known artists and poets, e. g. Mayakovsky, to design and manufacture the posters. The Russian avant-garde was partly included, otherwise students helped out with the production. Thus, Mayakovsky chose which news was to be displayed on the posters, but the news itself came from the Russian Telegraph Agency. *Strike Poster* for its part was initiated by a few artists from Kiev who wished to articulate their personal position regarding the brutal events on the Maidan. The slogan of *Strike Poster* reads “Enter, download, print, use”. From the very beginning of the initiative everyone was invited to participate in the production and distribution of new posters. Images could be sent in by anyone. Ideas were partly developed in teams, which changed the concept of authorship. As visitors of the site should not only observe and receive but actively participate, they consequently became “producers”. Soon other Ukrainian cities joined in too and, eventually, the concept spread globally with activists from all over the world taking up the idea. The general access to *Facebook*, social media and image editing programs allowed many people to join the movement and to show solidarity, independently from their whereabouts. Thus it can be observed that although the *ROSTA windows* and *Strike Poster* both emerged in the context of social and political upheaval, their initiators and participants were completely different. As a result, we can find entirely diverging concerns and contents on the posters.



The *ROSTA windows* displayed current political events but in the form of state propaganda. The posters showed news about war, economic problems and possible solutions, international developments and concrete daily problems of society. The main idea hereby was to educate the mainly analphabetic Revolutionist and to stabilize the system. However, the “producers” of *Strike Poster* pursued a contrary strategy. They rejected the politicians and the current political system and articulated a strong wish for change within their messages on the posters. They emphasized

the individuality of each person and, at the same time, the collective identity constituted by those individuals. The underlying keynote hereby was that the union of small, and by themselves, rather weak pieces can form a strong force that actually can change something. This force was visualized by new symbols of solidarity and collectivity, e. g. a drop in the ocean. Brett Bloom wrote that art is about “attempts to rebuild or reorder the world in ways that are more just, egalitarian, or seek to dismantle abusive, hierarchical elements of society”<sup>1</sup>. *Strike Poster* can be seen as such an attempt.



My last point of contemplation is the visual language of the *ROSTA windows* and *Strike Poster*. The former were influenced by the Russian avant-garde, thus they show graphic simplicity and few colors. They were designed to be visible from afar and to be easily understandable for their illiterate audience. The images had no perspective but were designed in a rather simple way, they showed no individuals but highly stereotyped and exaggerated personages. On the other hand, *Strike Poster* disposes of a highly heterogeneous range of styles. There are photos taken by solidarity groups from different countries, modified screenshots from the news, classical caricatures, pictures from pop culture with newly adjusted slogans and the already mentioned new symbols from and for the Maidan movement.

A recapitulating comparison of both phenomena shows that even though certain similarities can be found, the main idea differs. The general function of the posters remained the same: it's all about political agenda. However, considering the contents and aims of the initiatives we found enormous disparities: whereas the *ROSTA windows* were brought into being by the government in

1 Brett Bloom: A Magical Land of Roving Santa Claus Armies, Pirated Energy Drinks and a Giant Squatted Urban Village: Political Activities in Denmark. In: Josh MacPhee/Erik Reuland [ed.]: *Realizing the Impossible: Art Against Authority*. Oakland/Edinburgh 2007. P. 130 – 152, here p. 132.

collaboration with some avant-garde artists of high standing, *Strike Poster* was created by the population to criticize the government and articulate its own attitude. Whereas *ROSTA windows* followed an organized, elite concept, *Strike Poster* was open to everyone. The communication in the case of the *ROSTA windows* was a one-sided one, directed from the government to the people. *Strike Poster* is a movement that originated inside the population and the messages were oriented in two directions, towards the government to criticize it and towards the people to generate a sense of community and solidarity. Thus we can say that the relation of sender and receiver altered.

“Traditionally, the very notion of collectivity was often seen as a political/ideological issue, with collectivity assigned to the Left as a concept that privileged a subversive notion of collective artistic endeavour as resistance against dominant capitalist art forms and as performative critique of social institutions and political structures.”<sup>2</sup> We have to ask ourselves whether collectivity itself is still subversive or whether this has fundamentally changed due to modern media forms. Should collective creativity and authorship nowadays be considered as commonplace?

In the end, one question remains: What is *Strike Poster*? Is it the attempt to create new symbols? Is it a concept based on the idea of a self-responsible collective, which is supported only by a few activists? Or is it the reflection of a real change within the society, a shift from lethargy to self-responsibility, which is merely made visible by the posters and could likewise be found in other elements of the daily life on the Maidan, like e. g. the high level of self-organization. Is it a wish for change or is it part of an actual transformation?

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2 Gerhard Fischer/Florian Vassen: Collective Creativity and the Dialectics of the Collective. In: Idem: *Collective Creativity. Collaborative Work in the Sciences, Literature and the Arts*. Amsterdam/New York 2011. P. xiv.

## Literature

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