

FREEDOM POSTER.

In spring 2008, posters with the text *FREEDOM – announcing a contest to find the best solution* suddenly appeared in the city space of Tallinn overnight, inviting the passers-by to express their opinion about the monument controversy that was occupying a prominent place in public debates at the time. Only some weeks earlier, a petition campaign had been launched, largely on the initiative of cultural workers, making an attempt to stop the building process of a war monument that had been commissioned by the Ministry of Defence and was to be erected in the framework of extensive festivities celebrating the 90th anniversary of the Republic of Estonia.

However, the critical intention of this anonymous poster action wasn't all that obvious. For example, the media first speculated whether this was some kind of advertisement campaign. On the street level the empty space of the posters was mainly utilised as a public garbage bin where dirty words and cynicisms were written, but there were also people who used the opportunity to express their opinion about the War of Independence Monument. When on the one hand, the aim of these posters was to create a mechanism that would physically visualise the plurality of opinions (including large scale opposition) about the planned War of Independence Monument, then on the other hand this action brought attention to a very important shift in meaning which characterises the discourse surrounding the monument. Throughout the years in public discussions, the monument had frequently been referred to as the monument of freedom or liberty (the so-called liberty statue) and at other times, the War of Independence Monument. As it finally became clear that it is the victory monument commemorating the War of Independence that was going to be built, the fact that the planned monument does not address the idea of democratic liberties at all caused disappointment. 'Freedom posters', however,

invited viewers to return to the original meaning of this word. To be more precise – these posters did not address the subject of the monument directly, but announced a contest for finding out the best solution to the so-called problem of freedom.

The 'freedom posters' obtained a somewhat double context through the fact that they were immediately criminalized, coinciding with another heated debate that was dominating public discussions in Estonia at the time. As a reaction to the mass protests that followed the relocation of a Soviet WWII memorial in Tallinn in April 2007, the government had proposed a law amendment, the so-called 'April package', aiming to increase the powers of the police. A civil movement No To Police State! had been initiated in opposition to it, raising questions about democracy and freedom of speech.

Even though the 'freedom posters' were originally conceived as a protest action, there is another perspective I would like to propose. In line with the discourse of counter-monuments, pioneered by Jochen Gerz ja Esther Shalev-Gerz with the Monument Against Fascism, War and Violence – and for Peace and Human Rights in Hamburg (1986), we could look at the 'freedom posters' as a performative, temporary, egalitarian and participatory monument that inverts the authoritative logic of traditional monuments. In a situation where there is now a triumphant neoclassical war monument in the centre of Tallinn, trying to pass as a monument for freedom, it is tempting and maybe even somewhat comforting to think of the 'freedom poster' action as the actual monument for democratic liberties.

Text by Airi Triisberg, art critic.