To start I will try to introduce our work focusing on different aspects of what we previously said in our video, and in order to do that I will present three primary reasons for this project as well as the guidelines for our inspiration.

The first reason and the most evident one consists of our complete refusal of the concept of copyright. If we agree with the famous first rule of communication by McLuhan “the medium is the message”, we can read the entire praxis of subvertising as a way of questioning what intellectual property is. For us this is both philosophical and political. Although we have diverging opinions, we do agree that it is absolutely unacceptable to forbid the reproduction of certain forms, shapes, combinations of colours or typefaces.

We are forced to see signs continuously, in the streets, in the underground, at our workplaces, but we are not allowed to give them the meaning we want. That’s why we cannot consider them as part of our culture: these signs are an expression of an artificial and imposed ethic, not the result of a collective process.

A brand is nothing but a sign and obviously allowing people to possess these signs would be dangerous for the profits of the CEO and investors. But let’s question this idea for a moment: How does the market value a brand? Take Nike: is their brand value equivalent to the sum of all the shoes, t-shirts, products and factories that the corporation owns? The answer is No. It is way more than this: it is the image that Nike has created, their so-called “brand identity” that makes them more valuable than another random sportswear maker.

But then how does the market value that?! A company’s success certainly depends on its investments in advertising, which translates into the visibility of its logo. So, the more a logo is visible the more valuable it is! But there is a paradox in this logic. To quote sociologist Henry Jenkins: “If it doesn’t spread, it’s dead”, which means an image that does not go viral has no value— very few people seeing the image is the equivalent of no-one seeing it. Copyright is a tool to protect the interest of capitalists (most certainly not the interests of the musicians, filmmakers, designers and authors of the content in question), and they do this by declaring it illegal to reproduce content in all circumstances not controlled by that content’s owner. And this restricts the spreadability of the content and therefore reduces its visibility.
In conclusion to this first point: Steal This Poster is an experiment to highlight this paradox. It is research on spreadability in order to challenge the logic of copyright. It is an experiment, because we know perfectly well that the ads industry is already changing (certainly not due to the action of subvertisers) but because today Google and Facebook have become the biggest advertising agencies, working mostly in a whole other sphere, not that of public spaces in our streets but rather online. This is a whole other issue and we are certainly interested in criticising this evolution, which gives us another good reason to put an anti-copyright website online.

Which brings us to goal number two: we want to create a network connecting volunteers and designers with radical groups who are looking for visuals for their campaigns. We aim to build bridges between those with different experiences of the same struggles. The artists and designers featured in our archive were working as volunteers for many radical groups around London. Michelle Tylicki and Matt Bonner, for instance, created designs for groups such as Extinction Rebellion, Black lives Matter, Anti Fracking Campaigns and so on. Illustre Feccia, Hogre and Doublewhy were involved in the right-to-housing movement, squatting in south east London and designing for and with Anti Raids Network, Housing Action Southwark Lambeth, and many other collectives. Our aim is to facilitate these kind of connections both here and abroad via the website.

Our third goal: legal protection. In the past some of our agents have been arrested because they were considered the authors of subversive posters. In all these cases, the arrests took place a few days after the action and the charge was due to the image’s content, not to fly-postering. Uploading free designs for download before an illegal campaign protects the authors of those designs. That is to say, the author of a certain design cannot be seen as perpetrator and the person poster also cannot be charged with spreading a copyrighted image, because the source was already available elsewhere online. To synthesise this notion: according to the law, responsibility for the violation lies with the party responsible for the initial dissemination of the used-without-permission copyright image, not with the third party re-using it.

Generally speaking, these are the principle tenets of our project. But, as also apparent in the video of the Lucha y Siesta experience, poster design is only one aspect of how creativity can be used in activism.

Michelle Tylicki, who designs posters part-time, is also working with her street theater group using practices theorised by Augusto Boal, such as the theater of the oppressed and the theater of the invisible, to denounce and challenge power. Recently in London there was a stunning campaign, also involving Doublewhy, which was organised in support of and with a sex-workers collective. The campaign was called “We walk among you”, and it denounced the hypocrisy of society towards sex-workers, asking for the decriminalisation of their work. It consisted of a subvertising action inside trains on the London Underground featuring choristers and a strip-tease.

In conclusion, we see STP as just the starting point to forming proper think-tanks—collaborating to find creative solutions against a common oppressor.
Our work with Lucha started with a call for help from the collective to artists in their community. This is what we mean when we say STP is not just a poster archive but a group providing the opportunity to create connections and collaborations. Every struggle is different and for each situation we try to develop different creative plans, of which subvertising and the use of posters is just one. This is also why we stress our connection with situationism. We try to think out of the box, as ‘guerilla advertisers’, in ways not limited to the use of one media or one strategy. It is experimental and can at times be confusing. We try at the very least to experiment with different techniques each time, or to find the appropriate medium corresponding to each particular case.

In the society of the spectacle images are everything, and I think acting on them, modifying them, distorting them, and creating alternatives can be a way to try and act on reality. They are important not only for the reaction we generate in the public and the press but also, and especially, for the effect they have on the people making them, using them and participating; the feeling of empowerment, of being able to act on our lives is very important; the strength of a movement comes from believing in the possibility of change.

We coordinated another action in Rome with the Communia collective, denouncing racism and power abuse by police officers and transport control officers on public transport. Our poster campaign echoed the style of the public transport company’s communications, subverting these materials to send our message: encouraging people to react to situations of abuse of power and informing them that they had the right to film such things going on. The media saw this campaign as “divisive” and one spreading a “message of hate”. So instead of talking about power abuse towards migrants, the discussion was turned into one of being with or against officers, and the right to further empower the law.

It is difficult. We can never be sure we’ll get the response we hope for. Basically, what we try to do is to trigger a reaction. Sometimes evaluating that reaction is difficult. Sometimes the outcome is disappointment on behalf of the people participating, due to criticism by the press about the activity. But I think we will not always have the praise of the media, nor is it what we should be striving for. Maybe the opposite is true: if an action is not criticised it may not be enough on point. So, to answer the question, the impact we generate is not always easy to measure or control.