
A beautiful struggle - Meeting Dainis Ozolins

Add new comment

Interview with Dainis Ozolins by Aivis Gailitis Transcribed by Alise Ziemule and translated by Rūta Vimba



Dainis Ozoliņš is organising interventions at the local and national level, and has through his own experience ascertained that the belief in disability to impact things is delusional. After gaining visibility at the local level with his activism, right now Dainis is establishing a new political party, writing poetry and composing a book. Whilst sharing his experiences about creative activism, hollow laughter turns into distressed conclusions about the current situation in the country.

HOW IT ALL STARTED

Mašta: When did you start to organise?

DO: The first seriously addressed political interventions started in the year 2009, after I returned home from England where I worked for a while. The way back was interesting itself - I was riding a bicycle in the wintertime, and due to lack of money I got stuck in Brussels ... it wasn't easy ...

Then I went to Grantēns [local artist and activist] - with financial support from America he had already had experience with organising various exhibitions and performances. He painted landscapes, houses, architecture, and was not really into political art - but then the crisis started and everything stopped, there was no money anymore. I also lost my job. While I was visiting him once, we were drinking and we both got an idea - the local elections are coming, we need to figure out something! Then the idea for our first direct action was born - we established our own party "Taisnā līnija" (from Lavian - The Straight Line) and in an old abandoned building opposite the city council we fixed up an art gallery "Pretdome" (from Latvian - Anti-council), where we exhibited paintings from local artists as well as the Italian artist Uscita Rossa.

In the pre-election time we also did some campaigning, went to the official gatherings and spread the program of our party amongst the politicians. We even gave one to Godmanis (Latvian ex-prime minister), together with a present - a painted switch to switch the Latvian economy to the right direction. Unfortunately he didn't take it with him, just secretly left it there on a bench.

We are more or less politically independent, working in pairs and if we want to organize an action, we invite our friends.

Mašta: And the more people You attract, the better?

DO: In this case - the less people, the better. Then there are fewer risks of interference, and less illegal responses from the politicians such as beating. We already had such - it was when we got kicked out of the "Pretdome". On the first day of the elections we insulated the outside of the house with rags. Police came and told us that we can't do that. If we do it, then only on the inside of the house. We left everything as it was and in the next day they came and took everything off without our consent.

The actual situation was that the house was half in ruins and by protesting against the ruined buildings in Liepāja as well as against poverty as such we touched a political issue. I think that nowadays political art in Latvia is rarely seen. It was developed in communist times, but nowadays very few people are

doing it. We try to tackle political issues with everything we do - music, paintings and performances.

Mašta: What was the reaction in society and media to "Pretdome"?

DO: We got visitors every hour, mainly young people and some politicians. I welcomed them and told them about every artwork. Earlier we had the art centre K@2 which organised something similar, but generally for Liepāja it was something new, something cool.

Mašta: And media attention?

DO: "Rekurzeme" came, "Kurzemes vārds" came ... (regional media). Imagine, the politicians found out about our action only after reading about it in the newspaper. They freaked out a bit and had some respect towards "Pretdome", the headquarter of the political party "Taisnā līnija".

As we were protesting against abandoned buildings, we also achieved some things. For example, after we went to the main city architect and pointed out that there were many abandoned buildings and the city was turning into a ghost town, they removed one of the abandoned and half ruined buildings next to the city council.

Mašta: But people probably don't have money to invest in renovation ...

DO: The matter is not in the money. I'm convinced that it's possible to find a solution, some kind of system, for example, let people live there for an appropriate price and maintain the house, or invent some laws so that the city can take over the house.

SENDOFF OF THE FUTURE OF LATVIA

Mašta: Which of your actions do you see as the most successful?

DO: The coffin action "Sendoff of the Future of Latvia" - we went 200 km by foot whilst pulling a coffin. In the beginning I wanted to walk naked from the airport to Liepāja. But then the girlfriend of a friend of mine was leaving for Germany and he was really upset. We got the idea that he could get a goat, paint it red and go to meet the girl. But then, instead of the goat, he suggested - Do you have a coffin? Yes, I do, - I said, - But I need four people to carry it. In the beginning nobody volunteered. In the evening before leaving we were drinking and a friend of mine told me - "Listen, I don't really understand your idea, but as you are my friend, I'm gonna help you". So we went. During the action my friend came to understand the idea and supported it as well as many other people we met on our way - they hosted us, fed us and bought medicine for our chafed feet.

Mašta: Why do you see it as the most successful action? Because of the attention

garnered, or achievements?

DO: I was already known locally for my performances and Mr. Sesks (The mayor of the Liepāja, the city, where Dainis lives) is calling me a genius, because I achieve what I want - for a week after this action I was in the centre of media attention and nobody could do anything to me, also because there was nothing illegal about it.

I see that one of the most significant aspects of this action was the following health workers' strike. The government decreased funding for the health sector, threatening the existence of the regional hospitals. People were losing jobs and were forced to leave the country to look for jobs abroad. My action was exactly about that - to protest against irresponsible emigration. In this situation I think I kind of encouraged the health workers and their strike caused a state of emergency in the country.

LIFE AS AN ACTIVIST

Mašta: So how do you see your life as an activist?

DO: It's my mission. I don't want to feel powerless. When I don't have money, I act and think and do. Money isn't the key to everything. Rather than failure, I'm more afraid of causing something terrible, that I will cause something terrible in society. I can cause trouble for anyone. I am horribly subtle.

Mašta: So that's what stops you from doing as much as you maybe would like to?

DO: Yes, because everything has to be planned very, very carefully. Also after the action with the coffin some gangs were looking for me ...

Mašta: But what urges you to do all these things, to seek the attention of the public?

DO: All my life I have known what poverty is. I always was and still am poor. You know, I have the feeling that I should have been born earlier - because when the new life started (after the fall of the USSR), I was a kid and could not do a lot. In those times Latvia as a state went bankrupt. In my home there was nothing to eat, my parents divorced and my mother as a disabled person could not find a job. We were always living hand-to-mouth.

When people talk about the rocketing of the 90's, the embezzlement of the state, I perfectly understand what it's all about because I experienced it all on my own skin and it had a heavy impact on the quality of my life. And this humiliation doesn't disappear; it lives in my memories, so when I grew up I started to analyse and think about why the situation is as it is.

I have come to the conclusion that it is delusional to think that you can't have an impact ... from my own experience I can say that its possible to influence the system quite fundamentally. Now I am fighting against those, who made my childhood as shitty as it was. I wasn't the only one either - also in the neighbourhood - who experienced all of this.

Mašta: Your actions are mainly targeted against the policy of the ruling power ...

DO: Well, our state and basically the whole post-soviet space has been looted. This is a state with thieves on its base. For example ... my grandfather was working in the linoleum factory. It was an old factory that operated for more than hundred years, since the times of the czar(before the First World War this part of Latvia was the territory of the Russian empire) through all the political changes. Then suddenly, after the fall of the USSR, it'ss gone. But I'm telling you it's all coming back it's gonna rebound through the children who suffered.

WORKING WITH CREATIVE ACTIVISM

Mašta: What is creative activism in your opinion?

DO: It is a person who creates new ideas, sets a certain target, for example, to fix the living conditions or some spiritual values. Creative activism colours the industrially grey life into vivid and meaningful hues.

AG: This definition could also refer to some factory, where a designer is inventing a new chair. What is the difference?

DO: Creative activism is directed to the freedom of action, to dedication. How to define it better ... it's like getting rid of thoughts in order to realize your vision about the topic. Its like a movement. Like a tribal dance arround the fireplace. It is a dance, a song, a suggestion, a development of the thought of society. At the same time the aim of the creative activism could be to convert people to beauty ...

Mašta: And can you achieve a lot with creative activism?

DO: Yes. Eventhough you have to face the incomprehension of the people, its doable. You have to struggle a lot though to find that hook to bring the people in. You have to go through some hell to achieve performance, what is simple and effective, and, if needed, beautiful.



Visuals by:
Aivis Gailītis
