

Strategies of Protest from Wrocław: The Orange Alternative or the Riot of the Gnomes

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Abstract

In the 1980s the people of Poland demanded freedom and political change in their country by staging their discontent with the communist system. Alongside strikes and demonstrations of the now famous trade union *Solidarność*, there were other forms of urban protest, such as the happenings of the Orange Alternative from Wrocław. Although according to the recent academic work on pro-democracy movements in Poland, these protest strategies do not play a key role, their contribution to Poland's transformation to democracy should not be overlooked. By focusing on selected happenings staged in the urban setting at the end of the 1980s, I will analyze the creative ways in which the Orange Alternative used the inner city of Wrocław to produce new forms of protest. In doing so, I will examine the ways these forms of protests differed from those of other groups, especially *Solidarność*. Further, I explore the significance and influence they had in the process of Poland's transition from communism to democracy.

Keywords

Orange Alternative, protest, Poland, 1989, happening

These beings—living in the woods and in books, feeding on mosses, mushrooms and berries—are mysterious creatures. It is hard to say whether we are dealing with mammals or if we can actually call these dwarfs humans. Neither the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, nor the *Short History of Wojewodschaft's* Commissionship, nor any other work of great knowledge speak of gnomes in any other terms except to describe them as goblins hanging around in the woods. . . . In the People's Republic of Poland dwarfs are not singular beings. On June 1 at 3 pm they will show themselves on Świdnicka Street near the clock.¹

At the end of May 1986, this excerpt of text circulated in Wrocław. One could find it lying on the street or in university and school toilets, in busses, and on park benches. And it raised some questions. What do gnomes have to do with the People's Republic of Poland? Is a children's play to be presented in the inner city on June 1? Most readers did not take the flyer seriously; they regarded what was written there as a joke or a prank by some youngsters. The opposite was the case: The gnome became the symbol of one of the most notable movements of peaceful protests in Wrocław. In the 1980s, members of a group calling itself the "Orange Alternative" (*Pomarańczowa Alternatywa*)² staged a number of playful and unconventional protests in public

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spaces, thereby playing an important role in the political change that was to take place in Poland in 1989.³ The question of how significant the group's contributions were to those changes⁴ has, however, been largely ignored by both journalistic and academic outlets.⁵ Instead, the trade union *Solidarność* and its key role in the political turmoil have taken center stage in the public debate. This has led to a one-sided portrayal of the Polish opposition, which does not do justice to its actual diversity. Especially since the mid-1980s, when things got quieter around *Solidarność* as a consequence of martial law, a number of other opposing groups, such as the "Federation of the Fighting Youth" (*Federacja Młodzieży Walczącej*), a group called "Freedom and Peace" (*Wolność i Pokój*) or the aforementioned "Orange Alternative," which is the focus of this essay, were active in Poland.

In drawing attention to the subversive power of the happening, the Orange Alternative showed new possibilities for creating a critical counterpublic. Thus, it broke with traditional cultures of protest used in Poland up to that point on both a level of content and form. By drawing on Jacques Rancière's concept of the *politique* that describes the negotiations and debates around aesthetics in a public sphere as a primary characteristic of political action, the following essay aims to analyze the aesthetic and content-related particularities of the Orange Alternative's political protest. At the same time, its significance for 1989 in Poland will be discussed.

Public, Police, and Politique

The lack of an autonomous public sphere is one of the constitutive characters that differentiates totalitarian regimes—such as the socialist regime in power in Poland since the end of World War II—from democratic societies.⁶ According to Jürgen Gerhards and Friedrich Neidhardt, mass media can reach the largest number of addressees.⁷ Thus, following the Soviet example, in Poland during that time, all mass media were controlled by the state and served the Polish United Workers' Party (*Polska Zjednoczona Partia Robotnicza* [PZPR]) as the most important propagandistic instruments.⁸ Any attempts to express disagreement in newspapers and on TV were quickly inhibited in such systems. This does not mean, however, that the only public spaces in existence had been created by the regime. In spite of and precisely because of these strong mechanisms of control, forms of public communication were created, ones that evaded the state's regulations at least for a short while.⁹ Magazines, leaflets, and pamphlets circulating in the underground as well as strikes and demonstrations¹⁰ serve as examples that made it possible to give a voice to topics ignored or unheard by the official discourse. Naturally, the state took ruthless action against any form of dissent.

According to Nancy Fraser, these forms of public communication can be called counterpublics: Having made the experience of not being able to voice one's concerns in the prevailing public sphere, these excluded groups try to create discursive counterpublic spheres in order to express oppositional mindsets. Thereby, they make utterable what is not otherwise heard in the prevailing public.¹¹ Thus, Fraser stresses that mechanisms of exclusion in particular and the resulting conflicts have to be viewed as motivators for the creation of public sphere. In regards to the situation of the People's Republic of Poland, this means that there is a tension resulting from the constant controversy and negotiation over what was allowed to be discussed in the public sphere and what was not.

In the words of the French philosopher Jacques Rancière, this state could be described by the term *politique*. While the term politics commonly refers to a form of statesmanship and its functional mechanisms, Rancière suggests terming this system "police." It is up to the "police" to ensure the establishment and stabilization of a certain order, which regulates to what extent individual subjects can take part in the community: "The police is . . . an order of the visible and the sayable that sees that a particular activity is visible and another is not, that this speech is understood as discourse and another as noise."¹² Hence, the police can be understood as the guardian

of a particular division of the community, a “partition of the sensible” (*le portage du sensible*). While those belonging to the order of the “police” are free to speak their minds, thus can take part in the order of the visible and sayable—which is a sphere of “aisthesis”—the voices of the others will only be perceived here as noise. This is why these others do not participate in this sphere of the sensible. However, they have the capability to undermine the status quo and to inscribe themselves into this sphere of “aisthesis”: It is only when this group starts to demand its participation by making visible what did not have the space to be visible, and by making audible what previously was only perceived as noise that this group’s members become political subjects in the order of the community of visible and speaking subjects.¹³ *Politique* thus originates in the interruption of the dominating order of the “police” by “institution of the part of those who have no part.”¹⁴ Thus, one can say that the public sphere is what Rancière terms a sphere of the sensible. It is a sphere in which people not possessing any visibility or audibility—no “aisthesis”—claim these for themselves by bringing their voice and body into this sphere. Hence, this sphere is characterized by conflicts and negotiations.

It becomes obvious that Fraser and Rancière’s arguments are closely related: Through identification and articulation of dissent, one demands access to the prevailing public sphere. By this inscription into the sphere of the sensible, a counterpublic is created and pushed into the realm of the visible and audible. In this process, the person articulating their dissent becomes a political subject. “Aisthesis” thus becomes the dividing line between partaking and non-partaking in the public sphere.

The Aggravation of the Situation since 1980

Looking back on the situation in the People’s Republic of Poland, it becomes clear that the articulation of dissent—consequential examination about what was allowed to be public and what was not—had steadily intensified since the strikes¹⁵ of August 1980.¹⁶ In the wake of the Gdańsk Agreement,¹⁷ trade unions that were not associated with the party (a singular occurrence in the Eastern bloc) as well as students’ associations were formed. Under the patronage of *Solidarność*, independent newspapers and bulletins were started, which the worker’s party had no choice but to accept as an alternative to official media outlets.¹⁸ From July 31, 1981, representatives of *Solidarność* were even able to pass a bill requiring that starting in October that same year, all encroachments made by censors had to be marked in the published texts. Decisions concerning censorship could even be challenged at the main administrative court.¹⁹ The law, however, was only in use for seventy-two days. General Wojciech Jaruzelski nullified this bill in his proclamation of martial law²⁰ on December 13, 1981, and tightened measures against dissidents were taken immediately.

During the night of December 12, militia and motorized reserves of the civil militia (*Zmotoryzowane Odwoły Milicji Obywatelskiej* [ZOMO]) stormed the editorial offices of the independent newspapers and bulletins. They confiscated or destroyed the printers and requisitioned the papers and deactivated phone lines. Journalists who in previous months had expressed solidarity for the oppositional forces were fired or arrested. The heads of the party also made sure that no information other than what they wanted to be known about these incidents were circulated both within and outside of the country. A reporter of the German magazine *Der Spiegel* described the circumstances as such: “As if Poland was located in the Hindu Kush rather than the eastern parts of Central Europe, only few reports passed censorship and were made available to the outside. Poland vanished behind the curtains of martial law, which fell heavily over the country.”²¹ Furthermore, with the introduction of the martial law, *Solidarność* was banned, rendering void all rights they had gained in the sixteen months prior to that. The following excerpt from the Military Council’s Decree of National Salvation speaks to this:

Any form of meeting, as well as the organization and realization of a public event in the areas of Arts, Sport or Recreation, as well as all public gatherings, require the approval of the recognized administrative body. . . . The rights to strike or protest are repealed. . . . Whoever organizes or leads a strike or protest will be subject to a prison sentence of up to 5 years. . . . Whoever participates in a strike or protest can be subjected to a jail term of up to 3 month or a punitive fine of 5000 Zloty.²²

The Martial Law was yet another attempt to prohibit any form of visible or audible dissent. Oppositional forces were once again removed from the public field of vision, thus the sphere of the sensible. Consequently, all initial attempts to dispute the laws (via strikes, protests, or manifestations) were brutally struck down.²³ This is why Solidarność moved all its operations to the underground along with all other independent groups who now opted to work conspiratorially. Nevertheless, even in these times, a negotiation for visibility and audibility, quite literally a fight for “aisthesis” can be detected.

The Subversive Power of Art or the Gnome as an Articulation of Dissent

Within the first months of the proclamation of the martial law—when the use of one’s own body was too dangerous for any kind of public protest—signs of protest were made visible in the public sphere with the help of graffiti on the walls. Here, the walls served as a stage where images and signs became expressions of a political iconography of protest. Most of the graffiti postulated a survival of Solidarność. Slogans like “Solidarność lives on” were directed against Wojciech Jaruzelski. Soon after, however, troupes delegated specifically to this task painted over these graffiti. Only big white stains remained on the walls. In Wrocław, Waldemar Fydrych (who was a student of art history at the time) and a couple of sympathizers started drawing dwarfs onto these stains.²⁴ Soon afterwards little men with colorful hats could be seen on the house walls of other cities like Warsaw, Krakow, Lodz, and Szczecin. Fydrych himself as well as comrades and imitators had put them there. He explains his idea as follows:

1. Society is to be encouraged to produce more inscriptions on the walls, so the number of stains will increase and with that the face of the cities will be transformed.
2. In the appearance of the cities, the number of gnomes is to increase in accordance with the conventions of socialist surrealism, and thus go from quantity to quality.
3. With the emergence of the gnomes, the surrealist revolution is to be evoked.²⁵

Programmatically, the idea to draw gnomes on the white stains on the walls goes back to the *Manifesto of Socialist Surrealism*, which Fydrych had authored as early as 1981 as a member of the “New Culture” movement (*Ruch Nowej Kultury*), which had been created at the University and at the Academy of Fine Arts in Wrocław during the events of August 1980. The “New Culture” movement formed a contrast to the Independent Student’s Union (Niezależne Zrzeszenie Studentów [NZS]). The latter saw itself as an alternative to the Socialistic Union of Polish Students (Socjalistyczny Związek Studentów Polskich [SZSP]) and focused its efforts primarily on improving the conditions of studying. The “New Culture” movement (where Fydrych was active), on the other hand, aimed to transform the consciousness of their fellow students as well as people outside the university context through art. The statute of the movement thus defines its goal as the attempt “to overcome the estrangement from the self experienced by people living in industrial societies through cultural activities.”²⁶ The *Manifesto of Socialist Surrealism* hence became the idealistic foundation of the movement. Specifically addressing his “reasonable readers,” Fydrych calls for a rejection of rationality: “It is worth finding out whether the cancer of rationality has already feasted on your brain. But: The lost still have a chance . . . Kill reason!

Illiterates have a clearer way of seeing paintings and pictographic script. There is no other way back to nature."²⁷ Through breaking with reason, the way to fantasy and surrealism was to be paved:

A surrealist does not ask questions. He knows that life is an adventure. Vista is not a prerequisite. . . . You know exactly that imagination is an endless world. Everything can be its image, but only under the condition that it does not behave fawningly towards the so-called practical world. . . . Obviously, no force exists that could limit the countless worlds of the imaginations. Imagination surpasses all without regard to actual forces. Imagination lives in us as long as it is free.²⁸

According to Fydrych, it is this irrational view of the world that not only allows one to free oneself from the constraints of the everyday life but also to see the entire world as a piece of art. He writes, "ultimately, the whole world is a work of art."²⁹ Every creature is part of this artwork. This is why, instead of analytically reflecting one's desolate situation, individuals should devote their present to the imagination. They should actively form the artwork that is their everyday life and take joy in being alive.³⁰

For Fydrych, the gnome on the walls works in this sense of the imaginative: As a fairytale creature, whose origins lie in fantasy, the gnome entered the dismal life of the urban space in a time of war by being spray-painted on the walls. It transcended the borders allocated to him and linked its colorful world of the irrational with the gray reality of this world. Through its sudden appearance, the figure of the gnome demanded visibility in places where its invisibility was decreed with the technique of whitewashing. The gnome was able to enter the world of real socialism as a creature of imagination and it did not behave amicably towards it. Instead, it brought disruption into the order of the police regime. In Rancière's terms, it hence functioned in a manner of the *politique*. This becomes particularly obvious because the pictures of the gnomes are not only a visible element in a space that was not designated for them but also because their appearance prompted a discussion in the public sphere. Representatives of the police order did ponder the origin of the gnomes and their meaning: Were they to be taken seriously as political symbols or were they merely juvenile pranks? Should the gnomes be painted over like other graffiti or are they harmless enough to remain on the walls? Suspicions of dissidence went so far that when painters were caught in the act they were arrested and subjected to lengthy interrogations. One of the arrested groups, for example, had to sign a document attesting to the apolitical nature of the gnomes.³¹ Even Radio Free Europe and the BBC discussed the meaning of the gnomes and eventually interpreted them as secret codes of a children's and youth organization of *Solidarność*. Marcin Harlender remembers, "In a very serious program, it was reported that a children's *Solidarność* was founded in Poland in the beginning of 1982, still in winter. [They were said] to paint gnomes on the walls to signal that a member of the secret service was living in this house and a ZOMO worker in that. That was utter nonsense."³² The gnomes had nothing to do with *Solidarność* or its forms of protest. Instead, their appearance denied any modes of interpretation projected on them.

The Gnomes Come Alive

It was only with the repeal of martial law on July 22, 1983, that the gnomes became a serious problem for the police and introduced a new dimension of protest: On the June 1, 1987, the spray-painted creatures slipped into human bodies. Singing children's songs and doing little dance routines, they mixed with passersby on Świdnicka Street, the main street in Wrocław's inner city. They handed out sweets and hand-sewn gnome hats and invited everyone to join them in walking the streets and celebrating the International Children's Day, which was being honored on that day. The people dressed up as gnomes belonged to an association of young people and students,

which had its origins in the aforementioned “New Culture” movement.³³ As the former voice of the movement, the magazine *Orange Alternative* served as the eponym for the group.

With their campaign on International Children’s Day, the Orange Alternative formed a counter-event to the celebrations of the PZPR taking place at the nearby market square. Predictably, such behavior, and with it an unlicensed event in the public sphere, was to draw resistance from the political system. Waldemar Fydrych remembers that he “assumed that the militia would run around and rip the hats off of peoples’ heads. Yet, the militia surprised [him]. They started arresting the gnomes.”³⁴ Officially, the militia’s intervention was characterized as an act against possible disruptions of the public order.³⁵ In reality, however, it was precisely this intervention that caused public unrest and irritation. The activist Agata Saraczyńska remembers: “The militia came and forced us into their car. Children were crying because they were putting away their gnomes. And when they took us away in the car, people outside were lining the street.”³⁶

This example makes evident that the Orange Alternative was employing a specific form of protest: The language of the happening. Originating in New York, where in 1959, the artist Allan Kaprov brought forth this art form with his piece *18 Happenings in 6 parts*, happenings refuse the conventions of static art and instead focus on action. The spectator becomes the actor.³⁷ In the 1980s, the Orange Alternative adopted this form of active art. Their focus, however, was less on destabilizing the conventions of static art, but on questioning the political, societal, and cultural situation in Poland through artistic engagement. Therefore, they left behind the galleries as the predetermined space for art and took to the streets. Świdnicka Street, the most important street in the inner city of Wrocław, became the pivot of their events, and the street’s clock served as the meeting point for everyone involved.

The Orange Alternative announced their events by handing out flyers, which had the motto, date, and time of the next happening as well as an invitation to join in on them. Their summons can be divided into two categories. The first set were simple invitations to join, such as, “Come, you won’t regret it,”³⁸ or “Come to the meeting!!! You are no worse than Snow White and equal to the Snow Queen.”³⁹ The second set of invitations included instructions. For the happening of the *Day of the Agent* on March 1, 1988, the flyer read, for example:

Accordingly, we ask you to wear black glasses, a hat, a trench coat or a leather jacket or alternatively a cloak. Take wiretapping equipment with you: an auditory tube, a funnel or a microphone. Microphones integrated into umbrellas or canes are advisable. Those of you who love Scotland Yard are asked to appear with tobacco pipes. Bringing along dogs could be an advantage. . . . Behave freely, ask passersby to show you their documents. Show them the inside of your coat, where your badge of office will be clearly visible.⁴⁰

In contrast to the theater, where the instructions of the director to his actors are absolute, the flyer directives are optional for the readers. This means that the potential addressees can, but do not have to, adhere to the directions. If they do decide to follow them, it is still up to them whether they want to attend to them pedantically, modify them, or simply use them as a point of reference, but eventually depart from them completely. As a result, every happening of the Orange Alternative was characterized by a great extent of unpredictability and spontaneity. It was dependent on the actions of the flyer addressees but also on the reactions of those joining the event spontaneously. A report shows how much anxiety these unpredictable happenings caused the security forces: “The convention of spontaneous participation that such an event beckons allows people—and this includes rowdy elements—to join in uncontrolled, which can lead to countless unforeseeable incidents.”⁴¹ Thus, it was difficult for security to prevent the happenings in advance. During the happenings, they had a hard time controlling the sphere of what can be seen or said. On the *Day of the Agent*, for example, hundreds of people followed the invitation of the Orange Alternative and acted as agents. Krzysztof Albin, a member of the group, remembers,

“People were dressed up as agents of different special units—Japanese SB, CIA, MI6, Security Service of the Czar—and they asked passersby to see their documents, thanked them kindly in the proper British way. This alone was absurd because everyone knew that, in such situations, brawling and trouble were the daily fare.”⁴² The intervention of the militia escalated the situation further: Now officials started checking IDs. What followed was a reciprocal checking. According to Krzysztof Albin, at a certain point in time there was no telling anymore who was checking whom.⁴³ An unreal world once again entered the real world. This time it came not as gnomes but as imaginary security agents right at the center of Wrocław.

It may be surprising that the “birth of the gnomes” happened outside the capital city. But there is a possible explanation: Julius Tyszka states that only a city like Wrocław could ensure the creation of such an original attitude and activity as the Orange Alternative represented.⁴⁴ This falls in line with the fact that from a political as well as from a cultural perspective, Wrocław was one of the most important cities in the People’s Republic of Poland. After the Second World War, it had been one of the cities aiming for a fast rebuilding of its cultural life:

A group of cultural-scientific experts had reached Wrocław with President Drobner in May 1945; and their achievements outshone those of all their colleagues. The number of quality of dramatic, symphonic and operatic performances, often in half-ruined auditoria, was truly amazing. . . . At the première of Moniuszko’s *Halka* on 8 September 1945, the Opera was packed. At the première of *The Barber of Seville* in December, the lights went out for hours.⁴⁵

In the following decades, Wrocław became a lively center of the Arts and Culture shaped predominantly by the Grotowski Laboratory Theatre, by directors like Jerzy Grotowski, Kazimierz Braun, and Helmut Kajzar and the International Festival of Open Theatre. Furthermore, the presence and workings of authors like Tadeusz Różewicz and many visual artists helped this development.⁴⁶ In the course of the strikes of August in 1980, Wrocław—along with Gdansk—also became one of the centers of the opposition and the domain of the *Solidarność*. During their 16 months of legal existence, about a quarter of a million people in Wrocław, among them 86 percent of the workers, joined the trade union. Even a third of the PZPR activists joined bringing the local authority of the state to a halt.⁴⁷

Negotiations of Public Sphere and the Absurdity of the Socialist Everyday Life

The examples mentioned here show that the apparatus of power in the People’s Republic of Poland did not approve of anyone showing any kind of presence in the public sphere without prior approval—no matter how harmless it was. It was precisely this regulation of “aisthesis” that the actors dressed up as gnomes were rebelling against. Krzysztof Albin stresses that “we were fighting for it to become normal that a guy could play his guitar underneath an underpass without the militia arresting him for it.”⁴⁸ The living gnome became the symbol of this fight as well as the biggest challenger of Wrocław’s militia. In the eyes of the Orange Alternative, however, the militia on the street was by no means their fierce adversary. Instead, they saw them as their co-actors. Fydrych’s manifesto implies that “even a single militiaman on the street was a work of art.”⁴⁹ The secret service, on the other hand, was of another opinion, as is made clear from their records, which were kept under the krypton “MEDIUM.” Here, the potential risk the group posed is plainly stated:

Cloaked in an air of apoliticalness, [this group] propagates harmful contents aimed against our state, which intend to undermine and ridicule its institutions and structures, as well as its sanctioned/ acceptable forms of societal action. During the happenings, school children are being instructed how

to act when confronted with organs of the MO, turning them into a potential basis for future oppositional pools. According to operative investigations, it is to be expected that this group's activities will escalate. Furthermore, it seems probable that their attempts to infiltrate other social classes will intensify.⁵⁰

When studying the records of the state security, it is evident how much the state struggled to categorize the Orange Alternative. It took about a year before the name of the movement was even registered in their records. More than once, they tried to attribute the Orange Alternative's actions to other preexisting organizations, groups, or activists. Groups such as the movement "Liberty and Peace," the "Independent Student's Union," and the "Inter-School Oppositional Committee" (Międzyszkolny Komitet Oporu [MKO]) were mentioned. Yet, the Orange Alternative differed from these groups not only in their protest form, but also on a level of content.

Similar to other oppositional groups, the Orange Alternative grappled with themes that were virulent in the political climate of the time. However, their approach specialized in exposing the absurd mechanisms of everyday life in socialist Poland. They never did this in a literal or direct manner, but always playfully and with the help of metaphors. In the same way as their happening *Day of the Agent* had caricatured measures of control and surveillance taken by police forces, the group's actions focused on everyday problems of those living in the People's Republic of Poland, such as the shortage of hygiene products, especially the shortage of toilet paper. One of their flyers reads, "Socialism, with its extravagant inclination to sharing of goods and its eccentric societal model, has elevated toilet paper to the most heavenly dream. Right now, this dream cannot be achieved."⁵¹ The Orange Alternative decided to approach this phenomenon with the happening *Who Is Afraid Of Toilet Paper?* Their primary focus was the connection between the shortage of such a fundamental resource as toilet paper and the fact that this seemed to be particularly common in states governed by socialism. Therefore, in their flyers the Orange Alternative asked, "Can socialism be intensified with the help of toilet paper? Is the toilet paper an ally or an enemy to the world revolution? Can chewing gum replace toilet paper?"⁵² In this context, they even printed a quiz onto their flyer, which asked what the waiting lines in front of the toilet paper purchasing places signified. One possible answer read: "[They signify] the leading role of the Communist Party in a society of Developed Socialism."⁵³

Finally, on October 1, 1987, the gnomes handed out this socialist rarity on Świdnicka Street. They did not, however, pass out whole rolls of the scarce commodity (which the Orange alternative itself did not possess), but instead they frugally gave out single sheets of paper, one sheet per person. According to the flyer of the happening *Who Is Afraid Of Toilet Paper?* they also planned on handing out sanitary napkins—another scarcity during the times of socialism—on that day. "Sanitary napkins are the vessels on the giant waves of reality. You, gentlemen in-civvies and not-in-civvies, clutch at sanitary napkins."⁵⁴ Because of the intervention of the militia, however, this action was cancelled, as the flyer distributed on October 12 announces.⁵⁵ It was not until March 8 in the following year, on International Women's Day, that they tried to distribute sanitary napkins among the people. As a result, Waldemar Fydrych was given three months in prison for disrupting the public order.⁵⁶

The happening on the anniversary of the October Revolution provided another occasion for the group to unveil the absurdities of everyday life. In the countries of real socialism, the commemoration of the October Revolution was one of the most important public holidays. Every year, celebrations were organized: Important party members were invited and speeches on the success of the system were given. These celebrations, however, were not open to the public. On the seventieth anniversary of the revolution in 1987 such festivities were given in Wrocław. The Orange Alternative saw it as a further absurdity of Polish Socialism that such a historic event whose very purpose it was to "transfer the power to the people"⁵⁷ was being commemorated without them being present. This is why they demanded public participation. On their own

initiative, they decided to commemorate the events without the involvement of the state on the eve of the anniversary.⁵⁸ In a flyer, they announced their intentions:

Comrades!!!

The day the great proletarian October Revolution broke out is the day of a very significant event. Right now, this holiday does not have a celebratory eve. Comrades, the time has come to break through the passivity of the masses. Let's start to celebrate the eve of the Great October Revolution. Let's meet as early as November 6 at four o'clock on Świdnicka Street under the "clock of history."⁵⁹

The eve was to resemble the spirit of the revolution.⁶⁰ As per the *Manifesto of Socialist Surrealism*, they envisioned a reenactment of the historical situation of seventy years ago in Wrocław and wanted to re-create several fighting units. They opted for the "Bar Barbara" as Wrocław's Winter Palace, where they planned for all participants to have red-beet soup (*Barszcz czerwony*) as a symbol of victory after the event. In general, the color red—because of its historic significance—was selected as a symbol of recognition for the participants:

Comrade, please dress ceremoniously in the color red. Wear red shoes, a red hat, and a red scarf. If you don't possess a red brassard, or any other red element of clothing, ask your neighbor for a red bag. If you don't own a red flag, paint your fingernails in red. If you really, truly, don't own anything red, you may want to purchase a baguette with ketchup.⁶¹

The security service was alarmed: "On posters, banners and flyers, they placed contents that ridicule and defame commonly recognized memorial days celebrating events of our most recent history and the institutions of our state."⁶² Since the flyers were distributed anonymously, officials had no way of knowing the identity of the organizers or the number of participants, thus leaving them no opportunity to prevent the happenings in advance.

To keep the damage to a minimum, strong measures of security were put in place: All entries to Świdnicka Street were guarded by troops of militia, who were to prevent participants from accessing the street. By official order, the "Bar Barbara" was to remain closed for the entire afternoon.⁶³ Nevertheless, the Eve of the Great Socialist October Revolution could not be prevented and dominated public life in the inner city for more than two hours: Hundreds of people had followed the invitation of the Orange Alternative. They were dressed in red or were equipped with red accessories or dressed as historic figures, such as the sailors of Braşov. The Orange Alternative had elaborated a plan beforehand to help the actors to break through the security measures of the militia. Their strategy was to start their attack from several directions at once and to overexert the troops in the process. The event started at four o'clock. Fydrych describes it as such:

In the very beginning they [the militiamen] repel an attack of the armored cruiser "Potemkin" made from cardboard, which was hidden in the technical bookshop "Kwat." Then they pacify—with some effort—the linen cruiser "Aurora." In the direction of Rynek, they fight off a well-planned attack of the sailors of Braşov dressed in black and some anarchists waving a black flag. Although the crowd dressed in red chants, "Revolution! Revolution!," the militia hold their ground. Even the "Red Guards'" desperate offensive . . . fails. It was supposed to conquer the "Bar Barbara," proclaim the overthrow of the general and put the power in the hand of the people. The "Bar Barbara," however, had already been closed down by the security service.⁶⁴

Through megaphones, the militia proceeded to ask people to remove all red accessories and clothing. Everyone who denied this request was arrested. Those whose red clothing had been spontaneously taken tried to find other red items and, following the tip on the flyer, they purchased baguettes with ketchup at the snack stall near the church of Saint Dorothea. This to lead

to arrest and caused a temporary closing of the snack stall. Even those who were wearing red and happened to be walking on Świdnicka Street without any intention of joining the happening had to answer to the police.

Mobilizing the Masses

The name Orange Alternative suggests that the movement meant to present an alternative in a polarized Poland in occupying interspaces and politicizing in its own way. Similar to the way in which the gnomes were positioned between the paroles of the opposition and the covering white paint of the security forces during the time of the martial law, the protests of the Orange Alternative stood between *Solidarność* and the policing order of the PZPR. Bronisław Misztal stated that “the Orange Alternative movement bridges the gap between the dichotomous social and political forces.”⁶⁵ The Orange Alternative offered an opportunity to become politically active to those who did not identify clearly with one of the other two groups, giving them a chance to not only feel a sense of belonging but also a sense of involvement. Jarosław Wardęga’s testimony speaks to this: “Muslims, Hindus, young open Catholics, people who didn’t care about politics, those who couldn’t accept the bloody fight communism was fighting with the serious but invisible forces of the underground: All of them were yearning for change. Yet, it was unthinkable to them to join one of the two constellations. One was unacceptable because they didn’t agree with them, the other was too hermetic.”⁶⁶ Even a highly acclaimed member of the Wrocław chapter of *Solidarność*, Józef Pinior, had to admit: “I was weary of *Solidarność*; especially the fact that they were forming more and more alliances with the Catholic Church tired me. This is not supposed to be a criticism of the church, but I didn’t think these close ties were right. They resulted in a loss of independence. The Orange Alternative helped me to take off my mask.”⁶⁷

There were many others who—like Pinior—felt more drawn in by the actions of the Orange Alternative than by the manifestations of *Solidarność*. Many also appreciated that they were free to join the protests whenever they wanted without having to enter into a commitment, such as signing up for a membership. No one had to officially join the Orange Alternative; it was completely based in voluntary action. Krzysztof Albin explains its structure as follows: “[Within the Orange Alternative], there was a group that called for the happenings, helped to realize the various events, and was always part of the actions. Then there was a group of people who came to the happenings. . . . What the Orange Alternative accomplished was to create situations where normal people could [and did] take part in.”⁶⁸

With every happening, the Orange Alternative’s success grew, made clear by the growing number of people participating. While in the beginning it was predominantly high school and university students who came to the events, as time went on workers and intellectuals, too, felt drawn to them. This is how the movement succeeded in forming a coalition between people from various social backgrounds and different age groups. As Józef Pinior confirms, it was the first time for something like this to occur since the strikes of 1980: “Even workers took part in the Orange Alternative movement. It was great; it was unbelievable that re-convergence took place here of all places. Twice in my life, the first time in 1980; the second time with the Orange Alternative, I saw that it was possible to conquer the differences that usually exist between the workers and the intellectuals.”⁶⁹

Many of the participants had never protested in their lives.⁷⁰ It’s all the more surprising that they were willing to be arrested for it since not only the members of the groups but everyone who joined their actions had to expect repercussions. In this context, Zuzanna Dombrowska notes that “being part of the Orange Alternative meant nothing else than to be prepared to go to jail for being a gnome.”⁷¹ Yet, people’s courage and determination grew; they wanted to free themselves from the shackles of fear and to express dissent, and they were willing to be subjected to any form of harassment to do so. Jolanta Skiba states:

One didn't believe one's eyes looking at Świdnicka Street and seeing the crowds that were playing there. Some of these usually serious people were behaving like children. It was like they disengaged with the blockades of fear. Everyone knew that they were surrounded by militia, that militiamen were there, yet they did what they wanted. They gave out that silly toilet paper; they walked around in red jackets and hats, and celebrated the October Revolution. . . . I was under the impression that it was how they overcame their fear. . . . Back then, absolute freedom reigned on Świdnicka Street. From a certain point on, they all did whatever they wanted.⁷²

When looking at the protests of the Orange Alternative through the eyes of the state security services, the records show two things: Firstly, they state that civilian actors gradually overcame their fears. Secondly, they speak to the fact that this resulted in a testing of limits. The happening *Revolution of the Gnomes* from June 1, 1989, serves as a good example of this. Spontaneously, a student, Iwona Tyszkiewicz, had decided to paint a flower on a militia-bus coming towards her, and was arrested for it.⁷³ Her arrest triggered a besiegement of the bus and led to calls for her release. When the driver turned on the ignition to start driving, masses of people blocked the bus. Eyewitness reports even state that those gathered there went so far as to “rock the bus from one side to the other for a couple of seconds.”⁷⁴ Consequently, officials held out the prospect of releasing Tyszkiewicz on the condition that the crowd stopped rocking the bus. Her release was celebrated so wildly that one of the students, Aleksander Żebrowski, even climbed on the roof of the militia-bus.⁷⁵

With the growing success of the Orange Alternative, their popularity outgrew the city of Wrocław. In time, there were many imitators in other cities. In Łódź and Warsaw, for example, happenings were held under the name of the Orange Alternative even without the help of Fydrych and his colleagues from Wrocław. In the cities near the coast, the Green Alternative (*Zielona Alternatywa*) started to use happenings to fight for ecological goals. Furthermore, activists of *Solidarność*—having sneered at the activities initially⁷⁶—showed more and more interest in the initiatives of the Orange Alternative. In this context, Bogumiła Tyszkiewicz remembers: “When the Orange Alternative became big, when more and more people participated in the happenings, we peaked the interest of the grown-up oppositionists. I was invited for tea by some people who are famous today.”⁷⁷ Krzysztof Jakubczak, too, notes: “The adult section of *Solidarność* was losing ground during that time; they had no ideas. That's why they started to glue themselves to the Orange Alternative.”⁷⁸ Indeed, more and more supporters of *Solidarność* started to participate in the happenings, and even started to use them for their own purposes. On photos of some of the later happenings, one can discern logos of the union and union slogans like “*Solidarność* lives” in between the banners of the Orange Alternative that typically say things like “We love you nonetheless.” Fingers forming a “Victory Sign” can also often be seen on the pictures of the happenings. One photo of Krzysztof Jakubczak's collection⁷⁹ shows a whole crowd of people dressed as gnomes holding up this sign typical for *Solidarność*.

Conclusion

In order to challenge the hegemony of the Communist Party in the People's Republic of Poland, various oppositional groups used different strategies of protest to make their voices and opinions visible and audible in the public sphere. Their strategies ranged from strikes, demonstrations, to forbidden memorial celebrations and caused the emergence of a counterpublic. Among these groups, the Orange Alternative from Wrocław stands out in a number of ways: Its members opted for an uncommon form of protest removed from the capital. Through the art of the happening, they critiqued the everyday life in communist Poland, taking the gnome as their symbol. This is how they entered the “sphere of the sensible”; the sphere of “aesthesis.” In a world that operated under the order of the police, they voiced demands that complied less with the world of art but rather with the reality of society: Individuals were not to perceive themselves as prisoners of their situations; instead, at any given time and situation, they were to actively engage and make use of the

range of actions at their disposal. This way the Orange Alternative managed to position itself between the Solidarność and the PZPR, thereby starting to bridge the gap between those two fighting parties that were steadily losing their relevance. The Orange Alternative succeeded in mobilizing people from all social classes to participate in their happenings, helping them to slowly overcome their fear of the order of the police. The movement's contribution thus was to reactivate Poland's culture of protest, which had been in decline due to martial law, thereby paving the way for the trade union Solidarność. On the whole, the Orange Alternative's unique approach and its role during the changes of 1989 can be considered as unmatched, both inside and outside of Poland. And the gnomes live on to this day. Every visitor to Wrocław can find them.

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Notes

1. Flyer, "Krasnoludki," AZiO: Pomarańczowa Alternatywa I-2, t. 1, lata 1981–1987.
2. The origins of the name "Orange Alternative" are unclear since there are different explanations given by both its supporters and the secondary literature published on the subject up to now. The word "alternative" suggests that the group understood itself as an alternative to the hitherto existing opposing groups. The word "orange" is a lot less clear. One possible explanation is that the movement saw itself as a successor to the Provo-Movement from the Netherlands. Except for the fact that the Provo-Movement saw itself as an alternative and that orange is the national color of the Netherlands. However, there isn't a lot of evidence to support this thesis. Another theory proposes that the color orange resulted from the mixture of the colors red (symbolizing communism) and yellow (symbolizing the Catholic Church). The movement did not associate with either of these two groups or any organizations linked to the groups. Its activities stood between both institutions.
3. It is important to note that the "Orange Alternative" has only been insufficiently researched thus far. The few essays published on the subject primarily deal with personal experiences and observations of the members. The effects of the happenings have up to now been neglected. Archive materials have been analyzed sparsely, and documents of the state security service have been ignored completely.
4. For further literature on the political changes in Poland in 1989, see Timothy Garton Ash, *The Polish Revolution: Solidarity* (London: Penguin, 2002); Hartmut Kühn, *Das Jahrzehnt der Solidarność* (Berlin: Basis Druck, 1999). For a comprehensive overview on the events of 1989 in different countries of the Eastern Bloc, see Ivan Schelényi and Balazs Schelényi, "Why Socialism Failed: Toward a Theory of System Breakdown—Causes of Disintegration of East European State Socialism," *Theory and Society* 23 (1994): 211–31.
5. With the exception of Bronislaw Misztal's essay, "Between the State and Solidarity: One Movement, Two Interpretations—The Orange Alternative Movement in Poland," *The British Journal of Sociology* 43 (1992): 55–78.
6. Cf. Jörg Requate, "Öffentlichkeit und Medien als Gegenstände historischer Analyse," *Geschichte und Gesellschaft* 25 (1999): 5–32, 26.
7. Cf. Jürgen Gerhards and Friedhelm Neidhardt, "Strukturen und Funktionen moderner Öffentlichkeit: Fragestellungen und Ansätze," in *Öffentlichkeit Kultur Kommunikation. Beiträge zur Medien und Kommunikationssoziologie*, ed. Stefan Müller-Doohm and Klaus Neumann-Braun (Oldenburg: BIS Press, 1991), 31–89.
8. Cf. Łukasz Kamiński, "Stukturey propagandy w PRL," in *Propaganda w PRL. Wybrane problemy*, ed. Piotr Semków (Gdańsk: Instytut Pamięci Narodowej, 2004), 10–13.
9. Countless examples can be found in Jan C. Behrends et al., *Sphären von Öffentlichkeit in Gesellschaften sowjetischen Typs* (Frankfurt: Peter Lang Press, 2003).

10. The first big strikes and demonstrations took place in Poland in 1956. Further unrests happened in 1968, 1970, and 1976. As a consequence of the strike of August 1980, it came to a culmination of strikes and demonstrations, which died down during the time of the Martial Law. Towards the end of the 1980, there was another rise in oppositional activities. To read more about the history of strike and demonstrations in Poland, see Andrzej Paczkowski, *Strajki, bunty, manifestacje jako "polska droga" przez socjalizm* (Poznan: Poznańskie Towarzystwo Przyjaciół Nauk, 2003).
11. Cf. Nancy Fraser, "Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actual Existing Democracy," in *Habermas and the Public Sphere*, ed. Craig Calhoun (Boston: MIT Press, 1992), 109–42.
12. Jacques Rancière, *Disagreement. Politics and Philosophy*, trans. Julie Rose (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 29.
13. Cf. *ibidem*, 35f.
14. *Ibid.*, 11.
15. For a comprehensive overview on the strikes of August 1980, see Garton Ash, *The Polish Revolution*.
16. Garton Ash sees Poland's history as an occupied country and the resulting history of resistance as one of the main reasons why these significant labor protests took place specifically in Poland out of all the states in the Eastern bloc. See Garton Ash, *Polish Revolution*, 3ff.
17. The Gdańsk Agreement was negotiated between the strike-committee and the government of the People's Republic of Poland. This was the first time in the history of "real socialism" that the negotiating power of an oppositional group was recognized and acted upon: The government agreed to realize twenty-one demands of the strikers.
18. For further reading on the independent press in Poland, see Justyna Błażejewska, *Papierowa rewolucja. Z dziejów drugiego obiegu wydawniczego w Polsce 1976-1989/1990* (Warsaw: Instytut Pamięci Narodowej, 2010).
19. Cf. *ibidem* 151ff.
20. For further reading on Martial Law in Poland, see, for example, Andrzej Paczkowski, *Wojna polsko-jaruzelska. Stan wojenny w Polsce 13. XII. 1981-22. VII. 1983* (Warsaw: Prószyński i S-ka, 2007).
21. "Polen: Die Aktion 'Kanarienvogel,'" *Der Spiegel*, December 21, 1981, 86–96, 86.
22. "Dekret o stanie wojennym," *Trybuna Ludu*, December 14, 1981.
23. Probably the most well-known and simultaneously the most brutal example of the measures taken is the "pacification" of the "Wujek" coal mine. Several strikers were killed in the process. Cf. Hartmut Kühn, *Das Jahrzehnt der Solidarność* (Berlin: Basis Druck, 1999), 284f.
24. Cf. Bogdan Dobosz and Waldemar Fydrych, *Hokus Pokus czyli Pomarańczowa Alternatywa* (Wrocław: Aspect, 1989), 9.
25. Waldemar Fydrych, "Przełamywanie struktur akademickich na terenie Wrocławia w sztuce w latach 1980-1985," in Dobosz and Fydrych, *Hokus Pokus czyli Pomarańczowa Alternatywa*, 20–42, 31.
26. Translated (and quoted) from Waldemar Fydrych, *Przełamywanie struktur akademickich na terenie Wrocławia w sztuce w latach 1980–1985*, 20–42, 21.
27. "Manifest surrealizmu socjalistycznego," AZiO: Pomarańczowa Alternatywa I-2, t. 1, lata 1981–1987.
28. *Ibid.*
29. *Ibid.*
30. *Ibid.*
31. Cf. *ibid.*, 9.
32. See Padraic Kenney's interview with Agata Saraczyńska and Marcin Harlender in *Wrocławskie zadymy* (Warsaw: ATUT, 2007) 303–313, 307.
33. With the introduction of Martial Law, the "New Culture" movement had dissolved. In the second half of the 1980s, with the efforts of Waldemar Fydrych, it reformed and began to operate under the name "Orange Alternative."
34. *Pomarańczowa Alternatywa. Rewolucja Krasnoludków* (Warsaw, 2008) 40.
35. Cf. AIPN WR 053/2522, t.1. k. 62–63.
36. Kenney, *Wrocławskie zadymy*, 307.
37. Cf. Elisabeth Jappe, *Performance Ritual Prozeß. Handbuch der Aktionskunst in Europa* (Munich: Prestel Press, 2000), 17; Allan Kaprow, *18 Happenings in 6 Parts*, in *Happenings*, ed. Michael Kirby (New York: Dutton, 1964), 53–83.
38. Flyer "Papier toaletowy," AZiO: Pomarańczowa Alternatywa I-2, t. 1, lata 1981–1987.

39. Flyer "Krasnoludki i PRL," AZiO: Pomarańczowa Alternatywa I-2, t. 1, lata 1981–1987.
40. Flyer "Dzień Tajniaka," AZiO Pomarańczowa Alternatywa I-2, t. 2, lata 1988–1990.
41. AIPN Wr 054/1005, k. 2.
42. See Kenney, *Wrocławskie zadymy*, 319.
43. Cf. *ibidem*
44. Cf. Juliusz Tyszka, "Orange Alternative: Street Happening as Social performance in Poland under Martial Law," *New Theatre Quarterly* 56, (1998): 311-323.
45. Norman Davies and Roger Moorhouse, *Microcosm: Portrait of a Central European City* (London: Pimlico, 2002), 446.
46. Tyszka, 312.
47. Cf. Davies and Moorhouse, 480.
48. Kenney, *Wrocławskie zadymy*, 313–20.
49. "Manifest surrealizmu socjalistycznego," AZiO: Pomarańczowa Alternatywa I-2, t. 1, lata 1981–1987.
50. AIPN WR 054/540 k.2.
51. Flyer "Kto się boi papieru toaletowego?" AZiO: Pomarańczowa Alternatywa I-2, t. 1, lata 1981–1987.
52. *Ibid.*
53. *Ibid.*
54. *Ibid.*
55. *Ibid.*
56. *Ibid.*
57. Flyer: "Rewolucja," in *Pomarańczowa Alternatywa. Rewolucja Krasnoludków*, 63.
58. Cf., *ibid.*, 60.
59. Flyer: "Prawda nas wyzwoli," AZiO: Pomarańczowa Alternatywa I-2, t. 1, lata 1981–1987.
60. Cf. Flyer "Rewolucja," in *Pomarańczowa Alternatywa. Rewolucja Krasnoludków*, 63.
61. *Ibid.*
62. AIPN WR 054/1005, k. 2.
63. Cf. Fydrych, 67.
64. *Pomarańczowa Alternatywa. Rewolucja Krasnoludków*, 64f.
65. Misztal, 58.
66. Kenney, *Wrocławskie zadymy*, 345–48.
67. *Ibid.*, 357.
68. *Ibid.*, 303–13.
69. *Ibid.*, 357–58.
70. *Ibid.*, 347.
71. *Ibid.*, 320.
72. *Ibid.*, 358f.
73. AIPN WR 20/94, k. 139.
74. AIPN WR 20/94, k. 136.
75. For further information on the consequences of these actions by Aleksander Żebrowski, see Berenika Szymanski, *Theatraler Protest und der Weg Polens zu 1989. Zum Aushandeln von Öffentlichkeit im Jahrzehnt der Solidarnosc* (Bielefeld: Transcript Press, 2012), 245ff.
76. Cf. Kenney, *Wrocławskie zadymy*, 342f.
77. *Ibid.*, 343.
78. *Ibid.*, 331.
79. The picture is published in *Pamięć i Przyszłość* 2/2008, 61.

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