



# Making a Difference Through Atmospheres: The Orange Alternative, laughter and the possibilities of affective resistance

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## Abstract

The paper focuses on affective resistance with an emphasis on the context in which resistant action emerges, and on the liberating power of laughter. It adopts the approach of ‘affective ethnographic history’ to examine the activities of the Polish oppositional artistic collective, the Orange Alternative (OA), between 1986 and 1989. The OA organized interventions in the streets of Polish cities which engaged the general public as participants. The focus of the interventions was on the creation of affective atmospheres leading to affective transitions in the participants from fear to the lack of fear. The paper contributes to scholarly debates on resistance in three ways: (1) it proposes that resistance and its efficacy should be assessed not in terms of the form of resistance, but through consideration of resistant action in relation to the context of its emergence; (2) it demonstrates how affective resistance operates through affective atmospheres that result in affective transitions to the state of lack of fear; and (3) it reconsiders the significance of laughter as an affective force that has liberating consequences both within a particular resistance assemblage and beyond it.

## Keywords

affect, affective atmospheres, affective transition, affective transmission, laughter, Orange Alternative, Poland, resistance

## Introduction

The literature on resistance has often drawn a dichotomy between ‘everyday forms of resistance’ (Scott, 1985) and acts of public confrontation. While the former have been criticized for being ineffective (Fleming, 2013), the latter have been subject to critique on the basis of their heroicization of hard-line, sacrificially driven rebels (Courpasson, 2017). Recent debates within

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organization studies on resistance have sought to move away from dualistic conceptualizations of ‘hidden’ and ‘public’ forms of resistance, questioning the dichotomous evaluations of some forms of resistance as those that ‘work’ and those considered to be futile gestures (Courpasson, 2015, 2017; Fleming, 2016).

Our study builds on these attempts to bring more nuance to the understanding of resistance and its efficacy. It focuses on acts of resistance that are performed in public spaces, but that do not explicitly take the form of a protest against the authorities. Similarly to Courpasson and Marti’s (2019) view of everyday hidden resistance under conditions of oppression, we see public non-confrontational resistance as an important step that people take *for* themselves rather than *against* the enemy. Our contribution to the literature on resistance draws on work that calls for greater consideration of affect in organization studies (Fotaki, Kenny, & Vachhani, 2017). We pay attention to affect as ‘found in those intensities that pass from body to body [and] in those resonances that circulate about, between, and sometimes stick to bodies and worlds’ (Seigworth & Gregg, 2010, p. 1). Our focus is on the ways in which, through being transmitted between bodies, affect operates as a ‘contagion’ (Brennan, 2004) that mobilizes those who experience it; how, as a result of affective intensification, affective transitions (Hynes, 2013) occur within the bodies experiencing it; and what this means for our theorization of non-confrontational resistance in organization studies. While a growing body of work has highlighted the importance of affect in resistance (Ashcraft, 2017; Hynes, 2013; Pouthier & Sondak, 2019), further research is needed into how the mobilization of affect can be deployed for the purpose of non-confrontational resistance, what form this resistance might take, and what effect it might bring in terms of unsettling existing power relations. Against this background, our paper is guided by the following question: *How might we reconsider the role of non-confrontational acts of resistance through the lens of affect?*

We draw on the case of the Polish oppositional artistic collective the Orange Alternative (OA), and specifically its activities between 1986 and 1989 – the last four years before the fall of the Iron Curtain. Inspired by assemblage thinking (DeLanda, 2006; Deleuze & Guattari, 1988; Richmond, 2018) and by calls to employ the concept of atmospheres to empirically study affect (Michels, 2015), we consider the OA’s interventions in terms of resistance through exploring the creation and manipulation of affective atmospheres (e.g. De Molli, Mengis, & van Marrewijk, 2019; Michels & Steyaert, 2017) by the collective. The events engaged citizens in ways that mobilized parody and surreal humour, for the creation of atmospheres of laughter (Emmerson, 2017) in which dissipation of fear in the participants took place. Attending to ‘the affective dimension of resistance’ (Hynes, 2013, p. 562), we contribute to current thinking on ‘the efficacy of resistance’ (Courpasson, 2017, p. 1278) through asserting that non-confrontational, ‘soft’ forms of resistance must be seen as effective if they bring about change at the affective level. We argue for reconsidering the liberating role of laughter in assessing the effectiveness of resistance.

The paper also enriches recent work that stresses the importance of the spatio-temporal context in which resistance emerges (e.g. Courpasson, Dany, & Delbridge, 2017; Courpasson & Vallas, 2016; Daskalaki & Kokkinidis, 2017). We suggest that rather than using predetermined criteria to assess resistant actions and their efficacy, it is necessary to understand their meaning, and the difference they make, particularly, in affective terms, in relation to the context of their emergence, be it political or organizational. As Ashcraft (2020, p. 9) reminds us with reference to studying contemporary capitalism, ‘power has long operated affectively’. We explain how, in the case of OA’s interventions, their subversive role can only be comprehended through taking into account the prevalent affective atmosphere of fear in 1980s Poland and recognizing it as a means through which the political regime maintained power and control over society. In showing how the OA’s artists, using aesthetic labour (Böhme, 2003), succeeded in creating and manipulating atmospheres that led to affective transitions (Hynes, 2013) – from fear to lack of fear – in the participants, we

contribute to organization studies research that, in appreciating the importance of aesthetics, space and affect, considers organization and organizing as atmospheric phenomena (Borch, 2010; Beyes, 2016; Michels & Steyaert, 2017; De Molli et al., 2019). We point to both the possibilities and limits of crafting atmospheres (Michels & Steyaert, 2017), and, in doing this, of influencing the formation of resistance assemblages (Daskalaki, 2018).

In the remainder of the paper, we first briefly discuss the need to appreciate the affective dimension of non-confrontational resistance in a particular context, and locate our approach within assemblage thinking. We then explain how the creation of affective atmospheres can lead to affective transitions and propose reconsideration of the liberating role of laughter in assessing the efficacy of ‘soft’ resistant action. Subsequently, we present the methodology underpinning our study of the Orange Alternative’s interventions and examine the collective’s activities with an emphasis on their affective dimension. Finally, we discuss the contributions of our research and directions for future study.

## **Appreciating the Affective Dimension of Resistance in a Particular Context**

Traditionally, organization studies scholars investigating resistance have stressed the importance of overt, confrontational actions, while expressing scepticism towards considering ‘soft’ forms of dissent as acts of resistance (e.g. Fleming, 2016). This work has been characterized by caution towards researching ‘mundane and quotidian articulations of resistance’ and overstating the effects of non-confrontational acts, including ‘clandestine attitudes such as cynicism and irony’ (Fleming, 2016, p. 106). Indeed, researchers have pointed to the actual change-preventive consequences of ‘decaf’ (Contu, 2008) resistance, highlighting that such activities, including the use of humour, serve as a mere containment device.

This perspective has been subject to scrutiny in recent debates which have advanced understandings of resistance informed by consideration of the specific contexts in which ‘things happen’ (Daskalaki & Kokkinidis, 2017, p. 1304; Courpasson et al., 2017; Courpasson & Vallas, 2016; Juris, 2008). To move away from the dichotomy of confrontational/effective versus non-confrontational/ineffective resistance, paying attention to the spatio-temporal context in which resistance emerges enables greater nuance in consideration of different modalities of resistance, such as mundane and everyday politics (Fernández, Martí, & Farchi, 2017), infrapolitics (Böhm, Spicer, & Fleming, 2008; Mumby, Thomas, Martí, & Seidl, 2017) and post-recognition politics (Fleming 2016; Reinhold, Schnugg, & Barthold, 2018). It also allows the expansion of our thinking of resistance from ‘in’ to ‘around’ organizations (Mumby et al., 2017). As recent studies have shown, attending to the non-antagonistic practices of collective resistance performed under specific circumstances can lead to greater appreciation of the contextually embedded significance of non-confrontational collective resistance (Courpasson, 2017; Courpasson & Martí, 2019; Fernández et al., 2017).

A promising avenue for advancing this appreciation lies in extending our knowledge about the meaning and effectiveness of non-confrontational collective resistance through drawing on work that links resistance with affect (e.g. Ashcraft, 2017; Hynes, 2013; Hynes & Sharpe, 2009, 2015). In a manner that resonates with organization studies scholars’ calls to develop a more complex understanding of the ‘anatomy’ of resistance (Mumby et al., 2017), Hynes and Sharpe (2009) assert that understanding resistance solely with reference to individuals consciously saying ‘no’ to the existing order is too reductionist. This is because it overlooks an affective dimension to resistance which, as Hynes explains,

operates beneath and between both individual and collective struggles – a more-than-reactive, barely recognizable, less-than-conscious mobilization of bodily potentials, which is an exploitation of the margins of openness in every situation, an activation of new capacities of bodies and an interruption of our more determinant modes of sociality. (Hynes, 2013, p. 573)

Affect forms a non-discursive basis for our thoughts and actions. Kuhn, Ashcraft and Cooren (2017, p. 60) insist that as ‘the moving flow of sensory force that animates worlds’, affect ‘makes a difference’. Affect is key to the operation of power because ‘power is *effective* when *affective*’ (Ashcraft, 2017, p. 47). Recognizing the link between power and affect (Ashcraft, 2020; Clough & Halley, 2007) implies the existence of an analogous connection between resistance and affect. This makes it pertinent to not only acknowledge the affective dimension of resistance, but also to understand the *complexity* of affective resistance (Ashcraft, 2017): *how* resistance can and does work through affect in specific contexts.

One approach to studying the complexity of affective resistance draws on assemblage thinking (DeLanda, 2006; Deleuze & Guattari, 1988; Richmond, 2018), which recognizes the social as ‘materially heterogenous, practice-based, emergent and processual’ (McFarlane, 2009, p. 561). Assemblages are unstable, dynamic and open interactions and connections between different components (Deleuze & Guattari, 1988). By mapping how different objects and bodies come together yet constantly change, assemblage thinking offers a distinct lens for ‘analysing interrelations between power, politics and space’ (Müller, 2015, p. 29). Adopting assemblage thinking with regard to resistance offers an alternative to that of closure, linearity and singularity of a political project frequently presented in traditional accounts of resistance. Instead of rigidifying resultant formations, it recognizes changing relations of stability and flux (McFarlane, 2009). Seemingly autonomous, spontaneous interventions, collective overt oppositional struggles and non-confrontational ephemeral events temporarily come together as composites of elements, which are more than just the connection between diverse sites and fields of action within a given context. Through these entanglements of singular heterogenous elements across different times and spaces, resistance assemblages (Daskalaki, 2018) can be formed and exert their influence within ‘assemblages of assemblages’ (DeLanda, 2016, p. 3), since a singular component of assemblage ‘may be detached from it and plugged into a different assemblage in which its interactions are different’ (DeLanda, 2019, p. 11).

## Creating Atmospheres Through Assemblages

Assemblages can be formed by constellations of elements located across different times and spaces, but also by elements gathered in a particular specific time-space. ‘Tied’ to a particular place, assemblage produces a specific atmosphere: a ‘geographical phenomenon in which a particular assemblage “gains place”’ (Shaw, 2014, p. 88). To grasp the spatio-material dimension of affect, manifested in the dynamic between bodies, materials and space, the concept of ‘affective atmospheres’ has been embraced in geography (Anderson, 2009; Ash, 2013; McCormack, 2008) and more recently in organization studies through research attending to the process of aesthetization of organizational space and the vitality of matter (Bell & Vachhani, 2019; Beyes & Steyaert, 2012, 2013; Michels & Steyaert, 2017). An affective atmosphere is understood as a relational affective phenomenon, emerging from the presence of a constellation of subjects and objects (Böhme, 1993). It is felt individually, acting as a ‘bridge between emotion and affect, the personal and the general, the discursive and the non-representational’ (Bille, Bjerregaard, & Sørensen, 2015, p. 36). Focusing on atmospheres involves engagement with shared and collective sensory experiences (Bille et al., 2015), and, since atmospheres are contextually embedded, calls for attention to the ‘specific cultural sensitivity’ (Reckwitz, 2012, p. 255) of those experiencing an affective atmosphere.

Atmospheres, even if they remain beyond the control of specific agents (e.g. Alcadipani & Islam, 2017; Michels & Steyaert, 2017), can be, to an extent, created and manipulated. Böhme (2003, p. 72) describes the process of creating atmospheres through reference to the concept of ‘aesthetic labour’ which he defines as

the totality of those activities which aim to give an appearance to things and people, cities and landscapes, to endow them with an aura, to lend them an atmosphere, or to generate an atmosphere in ensembles.

Since atmospheres influence people at the affective level, the manipulation or modulation (Beyes & Steyaert, 2011; Michels & Beyes, 2016) of atmospheres constitutes a form of power exerted at that level. This influence occurs through a process of ‘affective transmission’ (Brennan, 2004) between bodies as they ‘receive, read, and respond to messages at the particle level (. . .) through their own filters of affective residue, or the energetic “baggage” they bring to a scene’ (Ashcraft, 2020, p. 19).

Organization studies scholars have researched the creation of atmospheres in relation to organizations and organizing processes such as urban street performances (Michels & Steyaert, 2017) or film festivals (De Molli et al., 2019). By contrast, Massumi’s (2010) discussion of the ‘political ontology of threat’ draws attention to how, in contemporary politics, power operates through the creation of an atmosphere of threat, and therefore through inducing fear in people. Massumi’s (2010) example gives rise to questions about whether and how the creation of affective atmospheres can also be mobilized in the service of resistance. Put differently: is it possible, and if so, how, to create affective atmospheres that counter those through which the dominant regime exercises power? We see the possibility of this way of resisting through creating atmospheres that accomplish affective transitions felt collectively by people. In their account of the anti-globalization movement, Hynes and Sharpe (2009, p. 10) illustrate the idea of an affective transition when describing a shift in the collective mood of protesters, manifested in ‘the passage between the state of being “asphyxiated and blinded” to the state of having “arms locked more tightly”’. While Hynes and Sharpe (2009) focus on confrontational resistance, we explore the possibilities of resistant action through effort aimed at creating affective atmospheres, the primary purpose of which is the accomplishment of affective transitions resulting in affective states opposite to those created by the dominant regime of power. We consider the creation of such (counter-)atmospheres as an example of resistance through aesthetic labour. Before illustrating this empirically through reference to the activities of the Orange Alternative, below we elaborate on the significance of laughter in affective resistance and argue for reconsideration of its liberating role in assessing the efficacy of ‘soft’ resistant action.

## **The Liberating Power of Laughter**

We have argued above for an exploration of how resistance might be possible through the creation of affective atmospheres aimed at accomplishing affective transitions, resulting in felt affective states opposite to the state of fear triggered by the atmospheres created and maintained by the dominant regime of power. Of particular importance to our investigation is the role of laughter – as distinct from the intellect-oriented concept of humour – in the ‘transmission of affect’ (Brennan, 2004) and ‘affective transition’ (Hynes, 2013). Laughter and humour are often seen to operate primarily at an idealist and individual level, whereby humour is conceptualized as a cognitive activity, and laughter as the bodily reaction to humorous exchange (Morreall, 1983). Much scholarship, including work within organization studies (Butler, 2015; Karlsen & Villadsen, 2015), has underplayed the effects of laughter in its own right, typically reducing laughter to the representation of humorous events.

The idea of laughter as a phenomenon exceeding a simple representational categorization – crucial to the understanding of the link between laughter and resistance – can be found in Bakhtin’s (1984) account of the pre-modern meaning of unrestrained, belly laughter and Bataille’s (1954/2004) work on laughter’s corporeal, embodied and affective qualities. For Bakhtin, laughter-inducing carnival not only involves a temporary suspension of hierarchies and divisions, a shared experience of the utopian ideal of community and freedom, and an ‘escape from the usual official way of life’ (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 8), but by disrupting economies of representation, subversive laughter is also an assertion of freedom. Similarly, Bataille (1954/2004), through criticism of modernity as ‘limiting what we think and we imagine it is possible to think’ (Lerman, 2015, p. 15), rejects negative interpretations of laughter, which reduce its meaning by submitting it to a hierarchy of civilizational values that locates the ‘critical’ within reason and not the body. Such a conception of laughter disregards its corporeal and life-affirming qualities (Vlieghe, 2014) and its impact on oppressive structures. In contrast, both Bakhtin and Bataille recognize the liberating power of laughter, thus reclaiming a pre-modern approach to laughter as a shared limitless experience of connectedness and sovereignty (Zwart, 1996). Here, laughter – a contagious affective force – extends the limits of individuation and ‘opens the subject to its affective outside’ (Lawtoo, 2011, p. 75).

Laughter represents a privileged moment of atmospheric intensity, when ‘each isolated existence opens itself to the contagion of a wave and those who laugh together become like waves of the sea’ (Bataille, 1954/2004, p. 98). This positioning of laughter as interpersonal, somatic and affective engagement offers a promising avenue for analysing the role of laughter when exploring the affective aspect of resistance. In addressing the question *How might we reconsider the role of non-confrontational acts of resistance through the lens of affect?* we examine what laughter does to people at an affective level – i.e. what the idea of a ‘liberating power of laughter’ means in an embodied way – and what the implications of this are for our understanding of the efficacy of resistance. We do this while focusing on the affective atmospheres created and modulated by the OA, considering them as resistance assemblages, aimed at accomplishing affective transitions – from fear to lack of fear – in the participants.

## Methodological Reflections

### *Studying affective atmospheres*

Empirical studies of affective atmospheres have typically used ethnographic methods, including a photo-ethnographic approach (De Molli et al., 2019), video ethnography (Michels & Steyaert, 2017) and auto-ethnography (Michels, 2015). We set out to explore the activities of the Orange Alternative – a Polish oppositional artistic collective that used parody and surrealism as modes of protest against the authoritarian government regime – driven by an interest in how atmospheres are assembled through mobilizing different human and non-human components, and how new atmospheres emerge during collective events (Sumartojo & Pink, 2018). We approached the OA’s interventions as assemblages (Deleuze & Guattari, 1988), defined as ‘intermingling and arrangement of heterogeneous elements’ (Slack, 2012, p. 144) and agencies (Fariás, 2011) that are socio-material in nature.

Within organization studies work on resistance, Daskalaki (2018) draws on the concept of assemblage to analyse powerful yet often ephemeral, locally enacted events. Just (2019), on the other hand, applies the notion of assemblage in examining affective intensifications within the dynamics of digital organization. Since ours was an historical case, with some of the archival material illustrating emotions articulated by people rather than affect, we had to develop a way of ‘working back’ to affect and affective atmosphere through engagement with the resources available

to us: photographs, our own memories and affective responses shaped by our ‘affective habitus’ (Reckwitz, 2012), and accounts by the OA’s members. The objective to re-imagine the affective atmosphere of the OA’s events guided this endeavour.

## Data

We focused on the OA’s activities between 1986 and 1989. To address the challenge of how to capture the atmosphere of past events, we drew from two Polish archives, Ośrodek Cyfrowy Karta (OCK) and Ośrodek Pamięć i Przyszłość (OPiP), and the content of the website Muzeum Pomarańczowej Alternatywy. The majority of the sources were available in a digital format and included leaflets, flyers and printed announcements of interventions relating to the activities of the OA in three Polish cities (Wrocław, Łódź and Warszawa) over a period of four years (1986–1989); press accounts of the OA published after 1989; additional documents on the OA founder, Waldemar Fydrych; and 761 digitized photographs of the collective’s interventions. We supplemented the visual data with narratives by 15 significant figures in OA, including members of the collective and participants in its interventions from six Polish cities between June 1986 and July 1989 (Dardzińska & Dolata, 2011). We saw their reflections as valuable for re-imagining the affective atmosphere of the OA’s interventions; as Stephens (2019, p. 267), following Deleuze, notes, ‘as affect has an effect on sensation, it’s mostly recognized on reflection’. All material was translated from Polish by the authors.

We acknowledge the limitations of the archival material-based approach in that atmospheres are only partially materially mediated. Nevertheless, we did not attempt to re-imagine the atmospheres of the OA’s events purely as ‘outsiders’. Both authors lived in Poland throughout the period in which the OA was active and have their own personal memories of the OA’s interventions and their atmospheres, as well as the underlying atmosphere of fear in 1980s Poland. This is important, because, as Reckwitz (2012, p. 251) points out, ‘there is no such thing as a pre-cultural affect’, and atmospheres are ‘always already connected to a specific cultural sensitivity and attentiveness (. . .), a specific sensitivity for perceptions, impressions and affections’. In that sense, our own ‘affective habitus’ (Reckwitz, 2012) was itself a reservoir of ‘limitless amounts of implicit knowledge’ (Reckwitz, 2012, p. 251), helpful in re-imagining the atmospheres of the OA’s interventions.

## Analytical strategy

We term our approach an ‘affective ethnographic history’, which combines the retrospective approach of ‘ethnographic history’ (Decker, Kipping, & Wadhvani, 2015) with ‘affective ethnography’ (Gherardi, 2019) as a style of research, ‘taking into account cultural events and their meaning’ (Hassard, 2012, p. 1437), and attending to participants’ recollections of affective encounters. Our analytical strategy involved a three-stage process, aimed at identifying and examining (1) affective context, (2) affective atmosphere and (3) affective transition.

We first focused on the *affective context* of the OA’s interventions, specifically attending to the affective state of fear produced by the power regime. We then used the digitized archival sources and the accounts of the collective’s members to trace the material grounding of the atmospheres, and to investigate how these were organized, staged and ‘manufactured’ (Bille et al., 2015) by the OA. Second, seeking to retrace the *affective atmosphere* of the interventions, we interrogated the archives for material that was concerned with the affective dimension of the actions, focusing on those that attracted the largest number of participants. Our ‘knowing’ of affect was necessarily derived from ‘re-reading’ affect back from representations of emotions, feelings and atmosphere in the data – both

the photographs and the participants' narratives. We followed Anderson and Ash's (2015, p. 38) argument that identification of atmospheres is 'an act within a practice of description that attunes to the composition of an atmosphere and the emanation of an atmosphere from some kind of ensemble'. Third, we tried to uncover the *affective transitions* that took place during the OA's interventions. To facilitate our search for patterns of experience (Ayres, 2008), we subjected the reflective accounts by the OA's members written after the interventions to thematic analysis (Boyatzis, 1998). We filtered and examined data for intrapersonal and interpersonal aspects, and expressions of interactions and intensities that occurred among individuals, including members of the OA, non-members and participants in interventions, as well as members of Polish civic militia.

## The Orange Alternative and Affective Resistance

We have divided the empirical analysis into three sub-sections, which relate to three areas of literature to which we seek to contribute: (1) affective context of 1980s Poland; (2) creation of affective atmospheres by the Orange Alternative; (3) affective transitions during the OA's interventions.

### *The affective context of 1980s Poland*

The formation of the artistic collective the Orange Alternative in 1982 must be located within the context of Poland's post-World War II history. Before the emergence of an organized opposition, Solidarity, in 1980, the government had faced active resistance on several occasions, including working-class revolts in Poznań in 1956 and the Baltic ports in 1970 – with the latter being met with state force and resulting in the tragic outcome of an unknown number of people being killed by their compatriots (Ascherson, 2013) – as precursors to the events of the 1980s.

After December 1981, following the proclamation of martial law, political opposition was suppressed. Almost 10,000 people were interned, without charge, between 1981 and 1983, with many imprisoned until the political amnesties of 1984 and 1986 (Paczkowski, 2006). Throughout the martial law period, citizens were coerced into signing 'pledges of loyalty'; official institutions were placed under the control of military commissars and industrial sites were militarized. Night-time curfews and internal travel restrictions were imposed and people faced a threat that dissent could be punished by fines or arrest. Although the martial law period officially ended on 22 July 1983, up until the first democratic elections in 1989 the state maintained strict control over civil liberties and political life, punishing those who engaged in open, confrontational resistance against the government. At the affective level, the regime of power operated through fear (see Massumi, 2010).

In light of the suppression of opposition, certain forms of artistic and 'non-confrontational' intervention, organized by different subversive groups that brought people out on to the streets, became popular until the collapse of the regime in 1989. Probably the best known among these are the activities of the artistic collective the Orange Alternative, with an agenda that focused on cultural change and attempting 'to deepen aesthetic sensitivity, to build constructive ethics, and to establish humanistic social relations' (Misztal, 1992, p. 59). The collective's interventions were organized around events which the organizers dubbed 'carnivals' or 'snow-clouds' and aiming to infuse protest with colour, parody and laughter, and to make it part of everyday life.

The popularity of the OA's activities also needs to be understood against the background of the 'political ontology of threat' (Massumi, 2010) through which the power regime operated throughout the 1980s, and which resulted in the public's reluctance to become involved in overt resistance. As one of the OA's founders explains: 'We [the OA artists] felt very strongly that social activism

was diminishing and fewer people were interested in strict political activism' (Jakubczak, archive). The OA's non-confrontational interventions provided a 'true alternative [to] endless celebrations of the grim past, grey present and hopeless future' (Misztal, 1992, p. 75). For both the OA's members and the general public, involvement in these events was less risky than the confrontational activities of mainstream opposition.

The OA's origins were inspired by the creative attitude of the Dadaists and influenced by Surrealism that found expression in their *Manifest Surrealizmu Socjalistycznego* (*Manifesto of Socialist Surrealism*; Fydrych, 2014). It announced:

The only solution for the future and for today is surrealism [. . .] After all, the whole world is a work of art. Even a single militiaman in the street is an object of art. Let's play, our fate is not tragic. There is no point in suffering since we can be happy.

In the *Manifesto*, the OA made explicit that it viewed the world in aesthetic terms – as 'a work of art'. The document alluded to the OA's focus through mentioning the 'militiaman in the street' and declaring: 'let's play'. In 1980s Poland, the image of a militiaman in the street was symbolic of the threat of direct confrontation – possibly violent and with tragic consequences – between the authoritarian regime and the citizens. Countering these connotations, the *Manifesto* emphasized the centrality of play, happiness and joy. These were also placed in juxtaposition to the constraining rationalism and idealism guiding the experiences of 'philosophers' – a term used by members of the collective to describe the attitude of the leaders of mainstream political opposition:

Rationalism can only be explained by a fear which discourages imagination [. . .] A true rationalist is like a knight. His (*sic*) constrained motions seemingly protect him from slipping into joy.

The above excerpt points to the affective state of fear; a fear that constrains imagination and precludes the possibility of joy. As an antidote to fear, the OA put forward the exhortation: 'let's have a wholehearted laugh'. Here, laughter was considered a medium through which a sense of fear would dissipate. Emphasizing the affective and corporeal aspects of collective laughter, the OA adopted a strategy of organizing street-based artistic interventions, involving ordinary people, engaging in public, non-confrontational actions that did not explicitly aim at undermining the political authorities. For example, the collective organized marches on days that were traditionally celebrated by the official regime, such as the Militiaman's Day, the Miner's Day and the October Revolution Day.

Through a strategy of over-identification with, and appropriation of, the regime's symbolic elements, the collective staged artistic interventions as an exaggerated 'affirmation' of the political system, resulting in the participants realizing 'that the whole Communism in which we lived was primarily just ridiculous' (Dąbrowska, archive). Through aesthetic labour, the OA formed resistance assemblages (Daskalaki, 2018): events which always involved surrealist and ambiguous activities, and as such confused the militia tasked with policing them. Organizing and directing the interventions was an act of resistance by the OA. The efficacy of this resistance was understood by members of the artistic collective in terms of inspiring collective endeavour and mobilizing affect to open up the possibility of dissipation of fear and, thus, the emergence of another affective state in response to the dominant regime. While a removal of fear was the 'affective target' of the interventions – with laughter seen as crucial for 'liberating' people from fear – the organizers referred to 'joy'<sup>1</sup> as the main characteristic of the atmospheres they intended to create during the interventions. Below we discuss how the creation of such atmospheres of laughter (Emmerson, 2017) was accomplished.

### *The creation of affective atmospheres by the Orange Alternative*

The creation of affective atmospheres by the OA required a particular ‘know-how’ relating to the application of ‘paratheatrical, para-artistic’ (Olewińska-Syta) methods in organizing interventions:

The Orange Alternative was winning with the system because it was able to laugh at it, but more importantly knew how to organize the skills, potential and excitement (. . .) of a whole generation of young people. (Kapała, archive)

The atmospheres involved a complex assemblage that consisted of both pre-existing conditions of affective intensifications that presented the artists with affordances (see Alcadipani & Islam, 2017; Just, 2019) such as the streets of the cities in which the interventions took place, since, as Fydrych asserted, ‘in Poland (. . .) the streets give the most freedom’. The atmosphere of the street, and hence that of the OA’s events was also influenced by the weather, as ‘nicer’ weather enabled the creation of a ‘much more cheerful’ atmosphere (Bielicki, archive).

The interventions were carefully planned, with a general ‘scenario of events’ prepared in advance; the design of the ‘scenarios’ had a built-in openness in expectation of affect intensifying and circulating, and in knowledge that an affect’s ‘emergence remains unstable and unpredictable’ (Michels & Steyaert, 2017, p97):

We knew that the secret of a counter-culture is the ability to keep in consciousness ‘a question mark’ regarding what to do next. It allows to maintain spontaneity and to avoid [the extent of] planning that would lead to becoming rigid. (Olewińska-Syta, archive)

The collective’s approach stood in contrast to the late socialist urban aesthetic of grey, adornment-deprived streets with their inconspicuous pedestrians, and to the usual forms of protest such as strikes and marches. A lot of attention was paid to colour as a ‘carrier’ and symbol of cheerfulness in the context of 1980s Poland:

It had to be colourful and cheerful and in that grey reality it was a challenge so we used all that we could to create a picturesque atmosphere with fairy tale dresses, face masks and even Christmas decorations. (Olewińska-Syta, archive)

Another element of the assemblages was sound. The organizers were equipped with ‘whistles and drums, so [everybody] sang and shouted’ (Roman, archive). The atmospheric qualities of music were deliberately deployed – as Hughes (2016, p. 438) explains, ‘improvised music (. . .) creates new political imaginaries and spaces for claims to be made’. An OA member recalls one of the interventions as follows:

Around 60 people climbed onto the bus; we were wearing absurd clothes borrowed from the theatre, sombreros, swords, halberds, various bizarre pieces which did not fit together, but this wasn’t the point, the point was for [the atmosphere] to be fun and colourful. We had printed out the lyrics of widely-known songs for collective singing, because there’s nothing better during an event like that than collective singing. This is an activity that integrates people a lot and creates a strong community. (Jakubczak, archive)

Another element of the assemblage – and another aspect of the OA’s aesthetic labour put into creating the atmospheres of the interventions – involved preparing and carrying banners with ambiguous or absurd sounding slogans, such as: ‘There is no freedom without dwarves’ (paraphrasing the Solidarity movement’s slogan ‘There is no freedom without Solidarity’), ‘Dwarves of all countries unite!’ (paraphrasing the ruling Party’s slogan which adopted the final phrase of

Marx and Engels' (1848) *Communist Manifesto* 'Working men of all countries unite!' as its tag line), or 'Out with Gargamel!', alluding to the name of the evil wizard in the children's cartoon *The Smurfs* ('smerfy' ['smurfs']) was the commonly used word for militiamen, referring to their blue uniforms).

The planning of the interventions assumed that militiamen would eventually put an end to the event. As representatives of the ruling regime, the militiamen were given a central role in the scenarios invented by the OA's members:

The militiamen were also indispensable marionettes in these spectacles (. . .) after all, had it not been for them, there would not have been anything funny or valuable in our actions. The point was exactly for them to turn up and to arrest everybody. (Kasprzak, archive)

To intensify the affective charge (see Anderson, 2009) of the atmosphere, the OA organizers would deliberately plan to extend the event in time and to gradually increase the level of surreality in the unfolding of the interactions between members of the collective and the participants on the one hand, and the militiamen on the other:

Oftentimes, we would prolong these activities (. . .) Some [people] would have been arrested, then others would appear (. . .) So after a while, in a militia van there would sit a Snow White, a Teddy Bear, a few dwarves. (Skiba, archive)

Such tactic of introducing one surreal element – for example, a person dressed up as Snow White – into the assemblage, followed by other absurdly dressed individuals – would both allow for a longer duration of the events and for building up a sense that what was happening was not serious, and provoking collective laughter among the participants. Unsurprisingly, these tactics were not always successful. The quote below, relating to an intervention organized in Wrocław in 1988 on International Women's Day illustrates an unsuccessful – due to adverse weather conditions and a behaviour of militiamen that went beyond the usual, non-violent arrests of a few participants – attempt at creating an atmosphere of laughter:

We prepped our banners, pulled from the wardrobes some old clothes and wigs belonging to our mothers, stuffed our breasts with whatever was available and were ready (. . .) Unfortunately, the weather was not on our side, the wind was mercilessly strong to the point where our banners were turned inside out, pouring rain meant that our shoes were full of water, but we continued marching until, as expected, the militia rushed to intervene. They were more violent than we expected so we had to disperse and run away. (Bielicki, archive)

Such incidents reminded the OA's members that there was a limit to their ability to manipulate the atmosphere. Aware of the indeterminate nature of affordances (see Alcadipani & Islam, 2017; Just, 2019), the collective engaged in aesthetic labour, consisting of simple strategies of using colour, sound, music, 'ridiculous' outfits and banners to instigate both the transmission (Brennan, 2004) and transition of affect (Hynes, 2013) among and within the participants:

We knew that the power of the event lies in its simplicity. The OA was not about conceptual art. Rather, it was something akin to *directing sea waves*. *The dynamics* of the OA was *pulsation*. (Olewińska-Syta, archive; emphasis added)

In the sub-section below, we elaborate on affective transitions – to which the metaphor of 'directing sea waves' alludes – taking place during and as a result of the OA's interventions.

### *Affective transitions during the OA's interventions*

In late 1980s Poland, public displays of laughter by citizens were rare as, in general, people were suspicious of strangers. Nevertheless, in this rather gloomy context, the OA managed to trigger 'affective transitions' (Hynes, 2013) from fear to lack of fear, collectively shared during the artistic interventions, as 'cheerfulness and joyfulness of all participants was spreading to the streets' (Kasprzak, archive).

The collective's aesthetic labour resulted in crowds joining the OA's members in the celebratory marches. At times, 'it was ten thousand of us all wearing silly orange hats, dancing in the street – what a ball it was!' (Grzymalska, archive). The corporeal nature of dance distinguishing it from actions based on reason and thinking, and comprising spontaneous bodily responses and movements, created affective intensifications, leading to enhancing and multiplying the 'feel good' of togetherness.

The cheerful mood of the OA's members, dressed in carnivalesque outfits, some carrying banners, others musical instruments, playing and singing, approaching pedestrians and inviting them to join, would 'spread to the street' (Kasprzak, archive). The incidental participants would also burst into uncontrollable laughter. Through laughter, affective transition would occur in the participants' bodies, and the previously prevalent sense of fear would dissipate. As the OA's members recount witnessing and experiencing the affective transitions that took place during the interventions:

Most of the time it was so funny, sometimes it was a few thousand people who happily laughed and played. Even now I do not understand how this omnipresent fear vanished (. . .) [These activities] were one big fun, ridiculing the system, and a complete lack of fear (Kapała, archive).

It was as if something had broken in us. We were laughing together and all the greyness of our existence started to be slightly more colourful. (Kwiatek, archive)

As the above excerpts suggest, laughter was the vehicle through which the 'omnipresent fear' would 'vanish'. This contagious, collective laughter did not have a specific 'cognitive' content that could be intellectually 'understood'. It was capable of 'breaking away' the grip of fear over the participants' bodies because of its corporeal, unrestrained and affective character.

The intervention on 1 June 1988, International Children's Day – *Rewolucja krasnoludków (Dwarves' Revolution)* – in Wrocław provides an illustration of how the atmospheres created by the OA brought about affective transitions. The intervention gathered 10,000 people, the majority of whom were wearing orange hats: the aesthetic symbol of the OA. The hats were distributed to participants to make visible their affiliation with the 'dwarves revolution'. The event's date and location coincided with the 'official' International Children's Day event organized by the city's authorities. As Fydrych recalls:

The city's authorities contributed to [the event's success] as they organized in the same location a huge event which was expected to absorb the [OA] event's participants. However, something else happened. The dwarves imposed their programme onto the gathering. At 16.00, unexpectedly, within a few minutes, the walking crowd put on the [dwarves'] hats. 10,000 people moved down Świdnicka St and the Market Square, leaving behind [the entertainment of] a show of dogs trained by the militia and a judo performance (Fydrych, archive)

The act of distributing and putting on orange hats both triggers and communicates the emergence of a different affect, a wave going through the crowd and connecting the previously apathetic

bodies in excitement and expectation of something about to happen. With this new energy came movement, directed by the OA: the crowd started to march away from the ‘official’ event, down the streets of Wrocław.

The organizers of the ‘official’ event wanted to attract the public to watch the kind of ‘entertainment’ that was consistent with the affective landscape of threat and fear characterizing 1980s Poland. While the citizens were invited to come out to the streets on a sunny day to celebrate Children’s Day – a seemingly completely innocuous occasion – the spectacle prepared for them, i.e. the show of skills mastered by militia dogs as well as the throws, pins and strikes demonstrated by judo wrestlers carried connotations of danger, violence and forcefulness.

However, as a result of the OA’s intervention, an opposite affect emerged and enveloped the event. The 10,000-strong crowd of ‘dwarves’, singing, laughing, holding hands, walked past the Voivodship Council’s building, throwing candies inside it through the open windows. Here, laughter needs to be considered not only as the vehicle through which affective transition occurred, but as an entangled aspect of the assemblage of resistance (Daskalaki, 2018) curated by the OA. It both mediated the affective transition and signalled its occurrence.

The affective transitions during OA’s interventions brought about a surprising reversal of roles: previously uninvolved members of the public became more courageous in their encounters with the militia, whereas militiamen became passive, even fearful, in confrontation with the unusual, non-confrontational ‘oppositionists’:

Until recently militiamen had this great power based on the fact that everyone was scared of them, but here no one was afraid [. . .] Very quickly these very funny and absurd events organized by and for young people were joined by old ladies, Church members and activists. They were not afraid to hit the militiamen with their umbrellas, while the militiamen were afraid to do anything to them. (Jakubczak, archive)

All these examples testify to the artists’ belief in the liberating power of laughter, including the possibility of a durable change of power relations within the Polish context:

We thought that if every ‘average’ citizen were to get arrested whilst uncontrollably laughing and would hug the militiaman rather than fear him, then the system would collapse. (Kasprzak, archive)

In the discussion below, we consider in more detail the role and effectiveness of OA’s actions as affective resistance, and the role of laughter within them.

## Discussion

This paper has been guided by the following question: *‘How might we reconsider the role of non-confrontational acts of resistance through the lens of affect?’* The analysis has generated insights into the meaning and effectiveness of resistant action in the context of its emergence. Through including the affective dimension of resistance (Hynes, 2013) we have been able to put forward implications for understanding that non-confrontational resistant action can be carried out to accomplish change at the affective level, with an emphasis on the liberating power of laughter. On this basis, the paper makes three distinct contributions to the literature on resistance, which we elaborate on below.

### *Assessing resistance and its efficacy in relation to the context of its emergence*

Building upon Courpasson’s (2017, p. 1297) recognition of the potentially misleading consequences of ‘the theoretical separation between hidden (. . .) and public resistance’, we propose a

shift away from understanding resistance and assessing its efficacy along the dimensions of individual versus collective and hidden versus declared resistance (Mumby et al., 2017). The case of the OA unsettles the distinction between ‘hidden and ambiguous’ (or, as we refer to them, ‘non-confrontational’) and ‘declared and oppositional’ (‘confrontational’) acts of resistance. We suggest a move towards acknowledging that other variations of resistance might exist, for example, as illustrated by the OA, collective resistance involving actions that operate in-between hidden and declared acts of opposition.

The OA’s artistic interventions share some of the characteristics of collective infrapolitics (hidden, ambiguous modes of opposition) and insurrection (collective public and declared acts of opposition; Mumby et al., 2017), yet they also differ from them. Like collective infrapolitics, the modes of resistance used by the OA were ambiguous and not directly confrontational. Simultaneously, they were public acts of resistance, albeit a resistance that deliberately adopted a non-confrontational, i.e. not insurrectionary, format. While the OA was an oppositional organization, the artistic interventions that engaged Polish citizens deliberately did not mobilize oppositional forms of protest. Importantly, engagement in these activities did not pose a threat to the participants’ safety or lives because they were not illegal, even though their subtext was subversive. Put differently: the OA’s interventions were strategically designed to appear ‘innocent’ in order to confuse the authorities, and to encourage the citizens to participate in them. They were able to ‘make a difference’ because they deliberately disrupted distinctions between the ‘hidden and ambiguous’ and the ‘declared and oppositional’.

Further, we propose a contextually driven understanding of acts of resistance. Instead of viewing a particular form of resistance as an absolute criterion for assessing which actions ‘work’ and which are futile gestures (Courpasson, 2015, 2017; Fleming, 2016), we suggest that researchers should examine the efficacy of resistance in relation to the context and conditions in which a particular form of resistance has emerged. To evaluate what actions should be considered as resistance and whether they should be seen as effective, we must have a granular understanding of multiple aspects of a context, be it a political regime or an organization which people might want to resist: how power is exercised, including at the affective level, what actions are permissible, what sanctions follow resistance, what the effects of power are, and how they are felt affectively. In putting forward a context-driven understanding of resistance and its efficacy, we contribute to existing work that views resistance as spatio-temporally embedded (e.g. Courpasson et al., 2017; Courpasson & Vallas, 2016; Daskalaki & Kokkinidis, 2017).

### *Appreciating the affective dimension of resistance*

An in-depth understanding of the context within which resistant action emerges necessitates greater attention to the affective dimension of resistance (e.g. Ashcraft, 2017; Hynes, 2013; Hynes & Sharpe, 2009), since one of the things people might want to resist is the prevailing negative affective state, such as fear, in which they live or work. Affective states are an inherent element of power relations in a given context and, therefore, changing them – for instance, through accomplishing transition from fear to lack of fear – changes the power relations themselves. With regard to resistance in organizational contexts, appreciating the affective aspect of both power and resistance requires reconsideration of how we view seemingly soft forms of resistance. Rather than dismissing non-confrontational resistance as no more than a ‘safety valve’ (Fleming, 2013), it is important for organization studies scholars to consider the affective outcome of such forms of resistance vis-a-vis the affective effects of the managerial power in place in specific organizational settings. We propose incorporating into the theorization of resistance in organization studies the notions of affective transmission (Brennan, 2004) – the spread of affect from body to body – and affective

transition (Hynes, 2013) – a process which results in a different affective state – into our understanding of how resistance operates affectively.

As our analysis has demonstrated, a promising approach to researching affect and affective transitions empirically is through studying affective atmospheres (Anderson, 2009; Michels & Steyaert, 2017). The analysis has provided insights into the OA's aesthetic labour (Böhme, 2003) aimed at creating, in the streets of Polish cities, atmospheres leading to affective transitions in the participants from fear to lack of fear. Our research contributes to the organization studies literature on atmospheres by showing empirically both the possibilities and limits of creating atmospheres. We have demonstrated: (1) how the creation of atmospheres can be 'organized' and executed through strategic application of aesthetic labour, i.e. how atmospheres can be planned in advance, prepared and 'directed' by bringing together various elements; and (2) how atmospheres cannot be predetermined since their affective outcome remains unstable and unpredictable (Michels & Steyaert, 2017). The research also supports the assertion that it is possible, through deliberate effort at affective resistance, to create counter-atmospheres to the affective atmospheres of fear maintained by regimes that operate through the 'political ontology of threat' (Massumi, 2010).

Our exploration of the possibilities of affective resistance has been underpinned by assemblage thinking (DeLanda, 2006; Deleuze & Guattari, 1988; Richmond, 2018). Following the work of Daskalaki (2018), we have considered the OA's interventions as assemblages of resistance. With reference to the artists' actions and their outcomes, we have illustrated how different elements of the assemblage can be orchestrated, and also how affordances invite actions but do not determine them, since a variety of elements might not react in a way intended by those who have attempted to create a particular atmosphere (see Alcadipani & Islam, 2017).

### *Reconsideration of the significance of laughter*

Another contribution of our study lies in emphasizing the value of laughter, with our perspective on laughter closely aligned with that of Bakhtin and Bataille. As Pouthier and Sondak (2019, p. 3) contend, resistance 'can manifest in counteracting forces of laughter, compassion and awe, whose emergence can sustain us in our struggles and help us challenge oppressive norms'. Rather than seeing laughter as ineffective or even counter-productive in terms of resistance (Contu, 2008; Fleming, 2013), we propose reconsidering it as both a *medium* and *manifestation* of affective transmission between bodies, and of affective transition from the state of fear to the lack of fear within individuals' bodies. As a medium of affective transmission, laughter spreads from one person to another, leading to affective intensifications. At the level of individuals, through laughter, a transition from the affective state of fear to lack of fear takes place in the bodies of those experiencing it. On account of its affectively liberating power – i.e. what it 'does' to people's bodies – we suggest considering laughter as a meaningful and effective vehicle of resistance in political and organizational contexts characterized by fear.

Laughter, by passing between individuals and being transmitted (Brennan, 2004) through the 'contagion of a wave' (Bataille, 1954/2004, p. 98), epitomizes uncensored, collective bodily experience. The effect achieved by the OA during the artistic interventions was unrestrained, carnivalesque belly laughter (Bakhtin, 1984), connecting and liberating through its life-affirming qualities (Bataille, 1954/2004; Courpasson & Martí, 2019). As the analysis has demonstrated, the interpersonal transmission of affect (Brennan, 2004) that was triggered by the OA had as its outcome affective transitions (Hynes, 2013), consisting of movement from the affective state of fear to lack of fear. It was therefore successful in countering the affective influence of the dominant power regime (Ashcraft, 2017) aimed at creating and maintaining fear in the citizens (see Massumi, 2010). Being able to feel fear dissipate and to experience the lack of fear in the body, even in

encounters with the militiamen, mattered a lot to people in 1980s Poland, and constituted an ‘affective pathway to freedom’ (Pouthier & Sondak, 2019) for them. To appreciate the role of laughter in resistance, then, requires appreciation of the qualitative difference that the erasure of fear makes to people.

Finally, our argument for reconsideration of the significance of laughter in resistance gives rise to questions about the extent and durability of the effects of the OA’s interventions beyond the individual events. The collective was active for a number of years and organized numerous events, staged in different Polish cities, throughout the 1980s. According to its members, the interventions contributed to building capacity for confrontational resistant action in Poland. Proving this claim empirically is beyond the scope of this paper. However, on a theoretical level, drawing on assemblage thinking requires that we are open to the possibility of affective resistance exerting impact beyond a specific resistance assemblage. This is because assemblage thinking allows us to see acts of resistance as interconnected and influential within ‘assemblages of assemblages’ (DeLanda, 2016, p. 3) – which we might also refer to as an ‘overall assemblage of resistance’. The same people who experienced the affective state of the lack of fear and the transgressive, liberating and life-affirming power of unrestrained laughter (Bakhtin, 1984; Bataille, 1954/2004) during the OA’s interventions would later find themselves in different situations, bringing this embodied knowledge of the possibility of a different ‘affective fact’ (Massumi, 2010) into other assemblages. The OA’s events would also lead to altering people’s affective dispositions (Reckwitz, 2012) and to shifting the affordances of public spaces and streets, so that the same grey streets with pompous official events that maintained affective states of fear would gain new connotations as elements of different assemblages.

## Concluding Remarks

Our analysis has demonstrated how artistic interventions that engaged citizens through creating and manipulating atmospheres succeeded in accomplishing positive affective transitions at a time when fear and apathy undermined people’s capacity for resistant action and for imagining the possibility of a different future. We conclude with recommendations for future research.

We call for further studies of resistance as embedded in specific contexts – be it political or organizational – and for recognizing that what may appear trivial or even counter-productive in one context may be significant and consequential in another, especially for those involved at the time. Further research is also needed in relation to affective resistance, both in organizational settings and towards political regimes. Within organizational contexts, this endeavour requires an understanding of the predominant affective atmosphere of the organization and its implications for the workers’ affective states. Insights are also needed into atmospheres in organizational spaces of ‘soft’ resistance, the affective intensifications they are characterized by, and what this means for affective transmission and transition in people. In relation to contemporary politics, it is important to study the possibilities of affective resistance and the role of art and artists in the context of the rise of authoritarian populist nationalism in many countries. This includes Poland, where the political regime continues to ‘rule through fear’ (Dorn, 2017), as exemplified by the country’s authorities’ rhetoric against LGBTQI+ people (Karpieszuk, 2020), and where therefore there is currently an acute need for aesthetic labour aimed at dissipating fear and facilitating an affective shift to a state of lack of fear.

Finally, to better understand the political effects of affect through ‘considering the locus of political responsibility in a human and non-human assemblage’ (Bennett, 2010, p. 36), we suggest conducting investigations into the non-linear connections between resistance assemblages and changes in the interactions of elements that have shifted from one formation to another (DeLanda, 2019).

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## Note

1. The word ‘joy’ is a literal translation of the Polish word *radość* used by the OA to describe the collective mood of those who participated in the collective’s interventions. This colloquial meaning of *radość* is akin to ‘fun’ and not synonymous with the Deleuzian/Spinozian approach to ‘joy’ as a positive agentic force of bodies increasing their capacity for action.

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