

# AN UTOPIAN INTERVENTION TO FACE THE APOCALYPSE

GORLEBEN'S "FREE REPUBLIC OF WENDLAND"  
AS PROTEST PERFORMANCE, ECO-VILLAGE  
AND FOUNDING MOMENT OF THE GERMAN  
ANTI-NUCLEAR MOVEMENT

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## RÉSUMÉ

En 1980, des activistes antinucléaires ont occupé un site de forage exploratoire pour un dépôt nucléaire dans une région isolée près de la frontière intérieure de l'Allemagne. Ils y ont établi un village provisoire, le déclarant leur micronation, la "République libre de Wendland". Soutenue par de nombreux artistes, notamment le collectif théâtral Theaterwehr Brandheide, la manifestation est devenue une intervention complexe ainsi qu'une performance écologique. Grâce à sa théâtralité inhérente et à son engagement avec le public, l'invention a eu un impact profond. Il s'agit d'une articulation utopique sur fond d'apocalypse : face aux dangers nucléaires, le village et ses artistes créent une (p)reconstitution théâtrale d'un contre-récit utopique. Le village devient un modèle pour un mode de vie différent, plus solidaire et (éco-)durable, expérimentant avec la construction de bâtiments en matériaux de récupération, l'énergie solaire et la démocratie populaire. Parallèlement, le collectif théâtral tente de combiner le théâtre populaire itinérant et l'autosuffisance. Le village et le groupe ont cherché à atteindre la durabilité de différentes manières, dont beaucoup peuvent être reconnues dans les formes actuelles de protestation au sein des mouvements pour l'environnement et le climat. Au regard de son actualité, il est plus que temps d'examiner cette intervention complexe, qui a jusqu'à présent été négligée dans le domaine des études culturelles.

### MOTS-CLÉS

Lutte Antinucléaire, Micronation, Pratique Théâtrale (éco-)durable, Intervention, Performance Utopique

## ABSTRACT

In 1980, anti-nuclear activists occupied an exploratory drilling site for a nuclear repository in a secluded region near the inner-German border. Here, the activists set up a provisional village, declaring it their micronation, the "Free Republic of Wendland". Supported by a range of different artists, most notably the theater collective Theaterwehr Brandheide, a highly complex intervention and ecological performance was created. Through its inherent theatricality and its multi-layered engagement with the public, the invention achieved an immense impact and media reach.

It is a utopian articulation against an apocalyptic backdrop: in the face of nuclear dangers, the protest village and its artists create and (pre-)enact a utopian counter-narrative. The village becomes a model for a different, more solidary and sustainable way of life, experimenting with building from discarded materials, solar energy and grassroots democracy. Alongside this, the theater group experiments in a mixture of popular traveling theater, collective work and self-sufficiency. Both the village and the group strove for sustainability in different ways, many of which can be recognized in today's forms of protest within the ecological and climate movements. In view of its topicality, it is overdue to examine this complex intervention which has thus far been overlooked in the field of cultural studies.

### KEYWORDS

Anti-nuclear Protest, Micronation, Sustainable Theatre Practice, Intervention, Utopian Performance

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## GORLEBEN'S "FREE REPUBLIC OF WENDLAND" AS PROTEST PERFORMANCE, ECO-VILLAGE AND FOUNDING MOMENT OF THE GERMAN ANTI-NUCLEAR MOVEMENT

In May of 1980, on a clearing in the forests of Lower Saxony, a dusty wasteland created by a forest fire near the border of divided Germany, a new state was founded: the "Free Republic of Wendland". A micronation, proclaimed in protest. Farmers, local environmental activists and various leftist groups built a village of shacks from collected wood and demolition materials – they printed passports, hoisted their flags, erected barriers, a canteen kitchen, a community center, solar showers and flower beds. For four weeks, the protesters built and lived on site, experimented with alternative forms of democracy, organised an extensive cultural programme and ran their own radio station. A sophisticated alternative community emerged, a utopian dwarf state somewhere in the middle of nowhere. Musicians and theater makers were also committed to the occupation, most

notably the local independent theater collective Theaterwehr Brandheide, whose performances in the village provided the founding myth and the protest anthem. The protesters knew about the ephemeral nature of their utopian community and constantly prepared for the inevitable end of their collective, immersive and durational performance – their eviction by the police, who would ultimately move in with massive force and between six and ten thousand officers.<sup>[1]</sup>

What was the reason for this act of resistance? A nuclear reprocessing plant was to be set up in this very clearing and a nuclear repository in the old salt dome below. The temporary village was erected at the site designated for exploratory drilling and verification of 'appropriate' geological conditions. Looking at the entire performance as direct action, it can be considered a classic occupation in the leftist tradition. Although the Chernobyl disaster was still almost six years to come at the time, an accident had occurred just the previous year at the Three Mile Island nuclear power plant in Pennsylvania, USA. Fears among the local population were correspondingly high, especially as scientists classified the salt dome as unsafe for the indefinite storage of nuclear waste. On top of this, already operating reprocessing plants, such as Sellafield in the United Kingdom or La Hague in France, had already experienced a number of incidents.

The protest event is regarded as a central, iconic and consolidating moment: a positive, community-building historical point of reference for the German anti-nuclear movement, the ecological movement and the German Green Party, which had been founded only a few months earlier (e.g. Rucht, 1980, 1994 and 2023). Accordingly, the

<sup>[1]</sup> Up to the present day, figures vary depending on the source, weekly magazine *Spiegel* reported six thousand officers in 2015 (Maeck, 2015), leftist daily newspaper *taz* ten thousand in 2020 (Paul, 2020), and so did conservative *Welt* in 2010 (DPA, 2010).



Free Republic of Wendland has received attention from historians, sociologists and political scientists, but it seems downright negligent that it has so far been ignored by cultural and theater studies as a performative and theatrical protest event. The same applies to the participating theater makers from the Theaterwehr Brandheide, whose experiments with a mixture of popular theater, collective work, extensive touring and self-sufficiency can be considered an early attempt at sustainable theater practice.

The village simultaneously served as an assembly, a performative pre-enactment of a different society and a deeply theatrical event, a staging of protest geared towards iconic images and public attention. This publicity was both conveyed by media coverage and in the live situation of spectatorship, resulting from the steady stream of daytime and weekend visitors. In fact, one could speak of a touristic setting with its inherent, specific theatricality. A further increase in the theatricality of the occupation came with the eviction: Singing, non-violent activists holding balloons were confronted by a massive deployment of police, including helicopters, squadrons of horses and bulldozers. Overall, the Free Republic of Wendland must be described as a highly complex intervention that developed an immense media reach and impact, utilizing its inherent theatricality and multi-layered play with the public.

In this essay, I will examine the village life and the eviction as a theatrical protest performance and then turn to the participation of the Theaterwehr Brandheide in the anti-nuclear movement. In doing so, I seek to explore the great topicality of this multi-layered intervention, put the anti-nuclear movement into perspective as an environmental movement and examine the relationship between theatricality, performativity and sustainability.

The occupation of the drilling site and thus the existence of the tiny Free Republic of Wendland lasted quite exactly one month, from the 3rd of May 1980 until its eviction on the 4th of June. Around five hundred people lived permanently on site. Participants, organizers and supporters were made up of the local population, especially the affected farmers, local environmental and civil rights activists, as well as people from the far-left and alternative milieu who had traveled from all over Germany to join the protest (*apud Atomexpress*, n.º 20: 22). A much larger group joined in for short or weekend stays, so that up to two thousand people had to be accommodated at weekends. In the short time of its existence, over fifty buildings were erected in the village (*apud Ziegler*, 1981: 12.04 mins), including the large, elaborately constructed community center and two towers, each eight to nine meters high, one of them serving as a broadcasting station for the village's own radio. The dusty wasteland with its ubiquitous remains of the forest fire created a seemingly apocalyptic atmosphere and held the impending ecological disaster constantly present at the level of bodily experience. One protester recalls the situation as follows: "It was a scorching summer with lots of dust. (...) everyone [was] dirty or dusty" (*apud Ziegler*, 2020: ca. 25.00 mins, my translation).





FREE REPUBLIC OF WENDLAND, 31 MAY 1980,  
[F] PAUL GLASER/PICTURE ALLIANCE VIA GETTY IMAGES.



## THE VILLAGE AS AN ECOLOGICAL UTOPIA MAKESHIFT EXPERIMENTS IN SUSTAINABLE LIVING

The very construction of the village contributed significantly to its utopian appearance: It was not a mere collection of camping tents and marquees, planted in nature as industrially manufactured consumer goods, but rather a settlement made of collectively hand-built structures. It was a largely sustainable construction method that today would be called upcycling: there was enough timber, mostly burned wood, on the site to erect the small republic. Findings from demolition sites such as old doors and windows were built into the shacks and given a new function. Even though the activists had received some donations of new timber and the rainproofing with tarpaulins was not a particularly sustainable solution, the experimental-sustainable construction dominated overall: Some huts were even built from straw bales or old glass bottles and clay (*apud* Schaar-schmidt, 2015: 139).

The main source for my performance analytical approach to the occupation is the film documentary *Der Traum von einer Sache* [*The Dream of a Cause*] (Ziegler, 1981). It was produced by a local activist film cooperative and serves as a medium of the activists' self-portrayal and self-reflection. It is a "performance documentation" in the sense of Philip Auslander and thus an example of the theatrical version of the chicken-and-egg problem: Is such a film made to document a performance, or is the performance carried out for its filmic documentation? (Auslander, 2006) For long sequences, the documentary portrays the collective construction work, showing groups of cheerful activists carpentering, carrying logs, or digging holes and all of this takes place collectively in a relaxed atmosphere, often accompanied by laughter, banter and music (Ziegler, 1981).

The village was continuously expanded and developed. After the construction of residential buildings and infrastructure facilities, the collective efforts were directed towards the two "Trotztürme" [defiance towers] (Ziegler, 1981: 1.15.30-1.19.30 hrs), which also were erected without any use of machinery. Such fragile wooden scaffoldings, topped with small shelters for activists at lofty heights, making them difficult to clear and evacuate, have become a tradition that has also been adopted by the climate protest movement as seen most recently and very prominently in Germany during the protests against lignite mining in Lützerath, North Rhine-Westphalia, in 2023.

Other everyday practices and the way of life in the village are also featured extensively in the film documentary, showing for instance the collective work in the kitchen, activists eating, dancing, singing, sleeping, discussing and watering plants. It is rare that individuals are shown acting alone – the documentary instead focuses on groups serving the larger collective, the entire village. All these scenes serve to illustrate the lived solidarity of the small community: Those who play music have an audience, those who cook do so for everyone, those who dance or discuss do so together. The various infrastructural accomplishments are also presented, for example the makeshift solar cell prototypes for the "sun showers", providing people not only with lukewarm water, but with an immediate bodily experience implying the possibility of an ecologically sustainable world. Finally, a "planting campaign" involving "several hundred bushes and pine seedlings" (*Atomexpress*, n.º 20: 26, my translation) was carried out in the spirit of the protest slogan reforestation not reprocessing (*apud* Ehmke, 2015). It was above all this experience of everyday life in the makeshift village that the participants remembered and that became part of the collective memory, namely that the occupation was about a different way of life, a new understanding of democracy, a different society.

## THE VILLAGE AS A POLITICAL UTOPIA

### GRASSROOTS DEMOCRACY AND MICRONATION

Like other purported micronations<sup>[2]</sup> set up as an act of protest, of “personal expression and desire for attention” or for artistic purposes, the Free Republic of Wendland, in which all these incentives for the creation of a micronation combine (Hobbs / Williams, 2021: 97), displayed the symbolic, performative and theatrical aspects of statehood. They established border crossings, performed a founding ceremony, created a flag, passports and an anthem. However, the ephemeral republics’ performance of statehood appears to be more than a theatrical as-if – its citizens also engaged in experimenting with a kind of a representative grassroots democracy – albeit this may seem like an oxymoron at first glance. But let me elaborate: Community issues such as infrastructure, official declarations and strategies for facing the imminent eviction were discussed in a large number of small, informal affinity groups with opportunities for all citizens to participate. These affinity groups in turn sent delegates, often adopting a rotation system, to the “Sprecherrat” [Council of Spokespersons] which negotiated consensus-based decisions or proposals. In daily meetings following the consensus principle, the proposals were reported back to the affinity groups (*apud* Halbach / Panzer, 1980: 163-166). Thus, despite its short-lived existence, the Free Republic of Wendland had a well-developed political system, particularly in

comparison with most other micronations (*apud* Hobbs / Williams, 2021). Additionally, the Speakers’ Council assembled in the “Freundschaftshaus” [House of Friendship], which served the triple purpose of cultural centre, community hall and as the republic’s representative building. The very centre of the octagonal wooden structure was the exact point where the exploratory drilling was to be carried out and its sturdy construction allowed gatherings of about four hundred people around an open fire at its centre. This House of Friendship was the representation of the project’s core messages: protest, resistance, sustainability, community and democracy.

Theatricality is inherent to the Free Republic of Wendland simply due to the limitation of its existence. Facing the imminent eviction, it existed to an extent in a permanent mode of the theatrical as-if. Nothing here is lasting; every building, structure and arrangement is ephemeral like a theatre performance, a theatricality that is further reinforced by the staging of statehood. As art historian Doris Rebhan has pointed out, micronations or “fictional states” critically refer to the general nature of nations as imagined communities in the sense of Benedict Anderson, held together by invented traditions in the sense of Eric Hobsbawm (*apud* Rebhan, 2020: 181). The main symbol and invented tradition of the protest village was the “Wendenfahne” [Wendian flag], displaying an orange sun rising against a deep green background. The Wendian passports served to establish affiliation with the squatters’ imagined community: Anyone who wanted to enter the protest village, even those who just wanted to visit for sightseeing, needed a passport and hence to become an ‘official’ citizen of the Free Republic of Wendland. The Theaterwehr Brandheide also made a significant contribution to the invention of traditions: The group wrote the (albeit unofficial) anthem of the Republic and performed it for the first time at the House of Friendship. A male

[2] Law scholars Harry Hobbs and George Williams define micronations as “self-declared nations that perform and mimic acts of sovereignty, and adopt many of the protocols of nations, but lack a foundation in domestic and international law for their existence and are not recognized as nations in domestic and international forums” (Hobbs / Williams, 2021: 97). Their survey of micronations states that in 2021 around a hundred of these entities existed worldwide. Drawing on a vocabulary with a strong theatrical affinity, Hobbs and Williams further describe them as “‘wannabe states’”, which “perform acts of sovereignty” (*ibid.*: 72).

member of the group appeared at the opening ceremony in character as a chairwoman of the local heritage society. Performing a mock ceremonial speech, he introduced a typical invented tradition, “rooted in the remotest antiquity” (Hobsbawm, 2012: 14), by referring to the locality as an “ancient Wendish cult and labour site” (Ziegler, 1981: ca. 14.20 mins, my translation), which had allegedly been discovered at the exact spot intended for the exploratory drilling. Celebrating the beginning of its reconstruction as an eco-topian vision, the performance oscillates between satire and genuine political statement, helping to establish the theatrical framing of the protest village as well as its humorous, playful and optimistic atmosphere (*apud* Ziegler, 1981: 14.20-16.20 mins).

While playful, humorous protest strategies and alternative ways of living – as represented by the iconic Kommune 1 – already played a major role in the German countercultural movement of 1968 and were then transmitted to the Free Republic of Wendland through the participation of people from the anti-authoritarian Sponti movement (*apud* Kasper, 2019), it should be noted that the founding of a micro-nation can also constitute a radical gesture of delegitimizing the existing political and economic system. Prominent examples range from the “Kalakuta Republic”, proclaimed by activist and musician Fela Kuti in protest against the Nigerian military junta in 1970 to far-right and increasingly violent groups like the US-American Sovereign Citizens and their German equivalent, the so-called *Reichsbürger* [Citizens of the German *Reich*]. And although the Free Republic of Wendland’s playful theatricality sets it apart from the bloody seriousness of movements such as the *Reichsbürger*, who are driven by contempt for the current social and political order in its entirety (*apud* Ginsburg, 2021: 34-35, 66-70), there is still a clear anti-statist rejection featured in the Republic’s passport:

The holder of this passport is a citizen of the Free Republic of Wendland and thus indicates that a state which does not guarantee the integrity of its people in body, mind and soul, which cannot maintain the natural balance between humans, plants, animals and minerals, (...) is no longer his or her own! (Freie Republik Wendland, 1980, my translation)

This statement also reveals the extent to which the early anti-nuclear movement has already developed an ecological awareness at this point. While this excerpt still lists human well-being – including “body, mind and soul” – in first place, it clearly embraces a holistic ecological approach, as the philosopher Arne Næss called it in 1970: “deep ecology” (Næss, 1973: 95), understanding nature not as a human habitat, but as an ecosystem that must be protected in its balance, including the minerals in the Gorleben salt dome.

## TOURISM, SPECTATORSHIP AND MEDIA RECEPTION

Another aspect that contributes to the theatrical character of the occupation are the many visitors the village attracted – arguably, the Free Republic of Wendland quickly became a tourist destination. In the film documentary we see day trippers strolling through the village (*apud* Ziegler, 1981: 25.55-26.55 mins); the curious local population and groups of senior citizens made the journey, so did the youth organization of Germany’s Social Democratic Party (*ibid.*) and nuclear opponents from all over Germany (*apud* Reimar, 1980: 23-23). They came for a quick sightseeing tour or stayed for a few days to participate in discussions, visit concerts or take part in the construction work. The boundaries between tourism and activism were fluid: A young man in the documentary tells us that he has traveled



here over the weekend and would love to stay longer, but has to write exams the coming Monday (*apud* Ziegler, 1981: 1.17.45-1.18.00 mins). The village depended on tourism in two ways: on the publicity it generated, but also financially, since the pass fees provided the main source of income for the community.

From today's perspective, this form of tourism, involving thousands of people traveling to the remote village, is not exactly a sustainable practice, but it contributes significantly to the theatricality of the protest. The presence of the visitors creates an interplay of spectatorship and performance, a theatricality that is characteristic for touristic settings (*apud* Kennedy, 2009: 94-115). This theatricality is also perceived by the participants, as one villager feels uncomfortable and describes his experience as follows: "I stay seated at the table and act all confident. I try to suppress the feeling that we're being looked at like exotic animals in a zoo, but it doesn't work" (Reimar, 1980: 23, my translation). In this perception, the entire village becomes a *mise-en-scène* for tourists and the media: "The need for public relations (...) dwindled down to busily building and carpentering and creating a lovely, imaginative village atmosphere for the visiting crowds and press" (J.P., 1980: 13, my translation). As accurate as this observation may be, in retrospect it underestimates the subversive-critical potential of this theatrical *mise-en-scène*. It is exactly this level of carefully designed and well thought out details that makes the utopia enacted in the village so topical to this day. The documentary shows the village design efforts at their peak on the morning before the eviction: colorful flags flutter in the wind, banners hang from the wooden buildings, we see flower beds and fenced trees, a decorative fabric border with a floral pattern on the roof edge of the communal kitchen, traditional North German carved horse heads on the gable of the bathhouse, improvised

wooden seating groups in front of the huts and flowered bed linen in the windows (*apud* Ziegler, 1981: 1.20.25-1.23.15 hrs). The village thus displays a theatricality similar to "living history" museums", which theatre scholar Rebecca Schneider includes in her analysis of theatrical re-enactments (Schneider, 2011). Only, the protest village is rather a *pre-enactment* of a more democratic, more sustainable, more ecological world, in which the living conditions are rather 'historical' in their simplicity – and thus also a temporarily performed instance of a de-growth society.

## THE SPECTACLE OF BEING EVICTED

During the eviction, the theatricality of the occupation intensified even further. Critical voices within the movement described it as the "Spektakel des Abgeräumtwerdens" [spectacle of being evicted] or the "Räumungsshow" [eviction show] (*Atomexpress*, n.º 20: 22 and B.W., 1980: 20). Through their consistent non-violence, the activists provoked a situation, in which the police inevitably became performers in a *mise-en-scène* the villagers arranged for them: Thus, they employed an activist tactic, which US media-activist duo The Yes Men succinctly described as "hiring unwilling actors who might be good at their jobs, like the police" (Bonanno / The Yes Men, 2015: 00.26-00.33 mins). Indeed, the police played their part very well: Their arrival resembled a military incursion into the idyllic village, with helicopters, armoured vehicles, bulldozers, squads of riders and dogs, water cannons and between six and ten thousand police officers in riot gear (figures vary, *supra*).

The behavior of the villagers contrasts with this martial display: Some try to hand out sheets with protest songs to police officers

(*apud* Ziegler, 1981: 1.30.00 hrs), others pat their horses and feed them sugar cubes (*apud* R.P., 1980: 13). A member of the radio crew, who stayed until the very end, recalls how they welcomed the police officers with wine and paper streamers (*apud Atomexpress*, n.º 21: 19). While bulldozers destroy the last huts, just before the police begin to carry the activists away, as a last utopian and festive moment, the villagers, having formed a sit-in blockade, begin to sing and release hundreds of colorful balloons (*apud* Ziegler, 1981: ca. 1.34.15 hrs). The film documentary shows the large-scale police operation in images reminiscent of war movies. The iconic image of helicopters against a sunset from *Apocalypse now!* is even quoted directly (*apud* Ziegler, 1981: 1.32.59-1.33.11 hrs). “It’s important that you (...) shoot it very carefully. Videotape it well” (Bonanno / The Yes Men, 2015: 1.40-1.45 mins) – that is the Yes Men’s other essential recommendation for this kind of theatrical interaction with the police, and it is also followed in exemplary fashion.

## THE FREE REPUBLIC OF WENDLAND AS AN ARTISTIC INTERVENTION

Concluding this analysis of the Free Republic of Wendland, I will discuss it as an instance of theatrical intervention with recourse to activist and sociological theories. According to American sociologist Gene Sharp, the act of “non-violent occupation” in itself represents a method of “(physical) intervention” (Sharp, 1973: 280-281), while the potential impact and efficacy of artistic interventions can be described, following French sociologist Chantal Mouffe, as produced by the interplay of acts of disarticulation and rearticulation, i.e. in our case criticizing the nuclear industry and pre-enacting a utopian counter-vision (*apud* Mouffe, 2008). While the Free Republic appears

to be a prime example of Mouffe’s thesis, its complexity and multi-layeredness can be analyzed more accurately by drawing on Patrick Reinsborough’s and Doyle Canning’s activist theory of different categories of “points of intervention”. In this context, “points” are conceptualized as spatial, but also as collective-imaginary and ideological targets of activist endeavors (Reinsborough / Canning, 2014). According to Reinsborough and Canning, the occupation and the protest village firstly target a “point of destruction” (*ibid.*), more precisely of past and impending *environmental* destruction: The village is located in an apocalyptic landscape, which is the result of a forest fire and, at the same time, protesting the nuclear repository with its danger of leakage. The visible environmental destruction on the surface is a prefiguration of what is potentially to come, and this is not by coincidence, but by an act of arson in 1975 (*apud* Ehmke, 2015). Anti-nuclear activists quickly and publicly suspected that the nuclear industry itself was behind this act of arson, as did the singer-songwriter Walter Mossmann in a popular protest ballad he wrote for the occasion (Mossmann, 1980). A second “point of intervention”, the “point of assumption”, which can be described as located in the collective imaginary (Reinsborough / Canning 2014), is addressed by elaborately pre-enacting a different, peace- and colorful way of life and thus overwriting the image of the early anti-nuclear movement as a bunch of violent troublemakers conjured up by the conservative media (*apud Atomexpress*, n.º 21: 19 and *Gorleben Aktuell*, n.º 11: 3, 10). The intervention thus consists of the activists’ efforts to counter this public image with the protest’s general playfulness, the activists’ non-violent behavior and cheerful performance during the occupation as well as the friendly and hospitable overall appearance of the makeshift village. Thus, the intervention into the imaginary aims at establishing a collective eco-topia by pre-enacting it in the makeshift temporary village.



## THEATERWEHR BRANDHEIDE

### POLICE VISIT AT THE PROTEST VILLAGE

This complex interventionist entanglement is enriched even further by the theatrical interventions of the Theaterwehr Brandheide, whose performances in the village, in the manner of Augusto Boal's invisible theatre, intentionally lack any clear framing as such. While I have already discussed the first of these appearances, the speech given in the role of the chairwoman of the local history association at the opening ceremony, I will now turn to a second one. One day, the collective marched up to of a border crossing of the Free Republic of Wendland, dressed as police officers carrying a white flag and a banner bearing the message "We want to become free Wends". The small police unit declared that it wanted to "take the side to which the victory belongs" (Ziegler, 1981: 1.08.14-1.10.31 hrs, my translation). What follows are three satirical, comical numbers about the incompetence of the police, their fanaticism for order and their obsession with bureaucracy. The comedy is highly physical and mime-like in its portrayal of the militaristic, smug demeanor of the police officers (*apud ibid.*: 1.10.32-1.15.27 hrs). Since the performance is received by an enthusiastic audience at the House of Friendship, it must be considered purely affirmative, strengthening their morale and collective identity. But via its film documentation, the performance is addressed to a broader audience – thus its mediatization allows for it to unfold a potentially more subversive impact beyond 'preaching to the choir'.

Most importantly, the performance provided the Free Republic with its protest anthem, an adaptation of Pink Floyd's *Another brick in the wall* with rewritten lyrics: "We don't want no policemen, we don't want no state authority, cop brutality, bureaucrats, your hearts are cold. Hey cops, throw away your batons! The fight for our homeland,

that is not just a phrase! The Wendenland, it has been freed. We are not leaving here" (Ziegler, 1981: 1.13.55-1.15.27 hrs, my translation). The instrumentation matches the rebellious attitude and is as improvised as the entire village: in addition to a single saxophone, the group uses drumsticks without drums, a bottle with a stick as a triangle substitute and two pot lids, banged against each other. The song is immediately taken up by the audience – later on, the village community adds a second verse conveying an ecological message: "We don't want no eviction, link your arms together now, planting trees and building houses, our hearts, they have warmth" (Bonson, 1980: 192-193, my translation). Inside the village, the song turned into a smash hit and was repeatedly sung during the eviction (*apud* Ziegler, 1981: 1.26.40-1.36.30 hrs), making it the most effective artistic intervention by Theaterwehr Brandheide.

## THE THEATERWEHR AS AN ACTIVIST

### COLLECTIVE PIONIERING ECO-CONSCIOUS THEATRE-MAKING

Beyond their direct involvement with protest interventions, the Theaterwehr Brandheide shared the Free Republic of Wendland's efforts in pioneering sustainable, environmentally conscious working methods and ways of living. Thus, in the last section of my essay, I will leave the protest village and focus on the Theaterwehr as its most theatrical agent: Existing from 1977 to 1982, they were one of the first German-language theater collectives to operate in a rural area (*apud* Kranixfeld / Flegel, 2022: 103) and dedicated themselves to site-specific topics. At the time of their participation in the squatting project, the Theaterwehr was already known for their 1977 anti-nuclear production *Heiße Kartoffeln* [*Hot Potatoes*] (Theaterwehr Brandheide,

1979: 6-83), addressing the nuclear industry's land-grabbing tactics against local Wendland farmers during the early years of planning for the deep geological repository at the Gorleben salt dome. The play was the first and most successful of their three productions, with an extensive tour of about one hundred and twenty performances (*apud* Krause, 1980) and a broadcast on national TV. The play focuses on the perspective of the local farmers, a “folksy, whistle-blowing play against the nuclear industry (...), which wants to talk the potato farmer Mr. Pankow out of his land”, as it is announced in the TV guide (*Diese Woche im Fernsehen*, 1979, my translation). However, this somewhat trivializing synopsis doesn't do the play justice. Its political indictment is clearly spelled out with the appearance of criminal henchmen of the nuclear industry who use deception, blackmail and forged evidence against the protagonist. *Hot Potatoes* combines its criticism of the nuclear industry, growth ideology and consumer society with satire, comic scenes and characters in the tradition of the Commedia dell'Arte. It is a piece of traditional *Volkstheater* [folk theatre],<sup>[3]</sup> popular theater, a very lowbrow comedy with an inevitable happy ending, which almost anticipates the Gorleben occupation as a large protest festival. In the final scene, a modern adaptation of the legend of St. George is staged, in which the villagers sing of the hero's fight against the dragon in his “modern knight's armor” – an activist's basic outfit. The dragon, in turn, stands as an easily decipherable metaphor for the nuclear industry, spreading destruction of apocalyptic proportions. This mixture of political agitprop and comedic popular theater is not atypical for the 1970s. At this time, the Italian playwright Dario Fo, with his Commedia dell'Arte-inspired political comedies and satires, enjoyed immense success in West Germany.<sup>[4]</sup>

[3] The group itself identifies with this genre in their founding manifesto (*apud* Klugmann, 1979: 137).

[4] The Theaterwehr also refers to Fo as one of their “major role models” (*ibid.*)

Of course, the attempt to spread inconvenient (eco-)political messages using a popular genre and broad comedy is still made today, for instance in Adam McKay's science fiction satire *Don't Look Up* from 2021 – the popular art form here being the star-studded Netflix production, the ultimate *Volkstheater* of the modern age.

Like many other groups within the then exponentially growing German independent theater scene (*apud* Büscher, 1987: 189-191), the Theaterwehr Brandheide was also an experiment with a self-determined and collective way of living and working. Uniquely, however, the group also emphasized a sustainable way of operating: they lived together in a remote forester's lodge near Gorleben and cultivated a self-sufficient garden, striving for sustainability in both a social and an ecological sense. However, as the group's success grew, the gap between vision and reality became increasingly clear. Their vision was essentially made up of two rather romantic ideas: On the one hand, the fantasy of roaming the countryside in a horse-drawn wagon like a medieval or renaissance traveling theater troupe (*apud* Klugmann, 1979: 117); on the other hand, the longing for an intact environment and a countryside refuge (*apud* Klugmann, 1979: 138). As a practical economic model, Theaterwehr combined self-sufficiency and touring theater, being mainly concerned with independence, societal dropping out (*apud* Klugmann, 1979: 119, 145) and self-realization (*apud* Klugmann, 1979: 138). As a social and artistic collective, they strove to free themselves from the constraints, production pressures and hierarchies of the theater system (*apud* Klugmann, 1979: 114-121, 125-126) as well as the achievement- and consumer-oriented society in general (*apud* Klugmann, 1979: 135-136). The group hoped to establish their own microcosm and develop a sustainable common practice through regular training (*apud* Klugmann, 1979: 142).



What is articulated as a period-typical opting-out fantasy can also be analyzed as a very contemporary endeavor to achieve a more sustainable way of life and theater production: the engagement with local issues, long production periods and continuous collective self-education together with striving for food self-sufficiency. All of this can be found today in current concepts of sustainable theater and *Green Theatre* – only the continuous touring activity from a geographically remote location does not really fit in the picture: “We (...) pack the costumes, stage, props, the few spotlights, boxes, crates and cables into our ‘green car’, and the seven of us climb in” (Moser, 1979: 159, my translation). Although this may not be climate-neutral, traveling together as a troupe and the reduction in equipment are in line with contemporary recommendations for sustainable mobility in the performing arts (*apud* Julie’s Bicycle, 2011: 7-9). Plus, it is ecologically better for the theater to come to the people than the other way around (*apud* Haas / Umathum, 2022: 97). However, the mobility-intensive reality of independent theater could not be reconciled with their goal of self-sufficiency, as collective member Helen observes: “In the two days that we are at home now and then, nobody feels like (...) thinking about how the garden should be prepared for the next year” (Klugmann, 1979: 145, my translation). Though sustainability as a concept is not part of the Theaterwehr’s self-reflexive discourse, its vital importance for their vision becomes evident when they reflect on the achievements of two years of collective work in 1979. Rather than celebrating their success, they criticize that they grew too quickly, going on a major tour and investing in new equipment before they succeeded in consolidating their alternative lifestyle (*apud* Klugmann, 1979: 142, 146). Soon after this review session, the first members of the group left and the theatre group finally disbanded in 1982.

## CONCLUSION

The Free Republic of Wendland achieved a great radiance and immense reach, which, as we have discussed, the intervention generated from its (eco-)theatricality and (eco-)performativity. As a media- and publicity-effective protest, it raised a considerable amount of public attention; as a consolidating, performative community experience, it is still seen as a source of strength and a point of reference by the environmental movement today. In addition, the example of Theaterwehr Brandheide shows how the artistic and activist efforts of the collective, their striving for sustainability, also prefigure the precarious struggles of today’s independent theatre scene(s).

In a concluding outlook, I will outline the traditions connecting the anti-nuclear and today’s climate movement. A comparison from a theater studies perspective would be particularly worthwhile with regard to their forms of assembly and their strategies in confrontation with the police. By comparing their methods, it is possible to shed light on their numerous parallels in their forms of action, tactics and symbols: occupations and blockades, treetop occupations and defiance towers or the yellow X, standing for the looming “Day X” that needs to be prevented. The fact that certain traditionally leftist, anti-nuclear aesthetic displays of resistance have been appropriated by the far right also requires further investigation. The greatest and most obvious similarity between the historical and contemporary environmental movements is their apocalyptic mindset and narrative, be it the warnings of nuclear catastrophe or climate collapse. Both crises are invisible at first glance, hard to grasp and denied by parts of society, but they are immediate and existential threats. The vital urgency coupled with the widespread ignorance becomes the central source of strength for the movements. As Jill Dolan writes: “perhaps the seeds of utopia are only present at times of failure and apocalypse” (Dolan, 2005: 58).

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