

# Framing the Unframed: *Avalanche*, an Art Magazine

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**Abstract** Between the 1960s and 1970s, art practices such as performance, conceptual, and land art challenged the very possibility of framing the artwork and clearly demarcating the boundaries that enclosed it. In this context, art and artists' magazines assumed a pivotal role as they became the medium and site for the presentation and dissemination of these new art forms. This essay examines *Avalanche*, a magazine published between 1970 and 1976 in New York, and analyses how this periodical framed new art within its paper boundaries while at the same time expanding this art in time and space and showing the processual nature of the framing processes.

**Keywords** Art magazines. Artists' magazines. Framing in art. *Avalanche* magazine. Art of the 1960s and 1970s. Contemporary art.



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Experiments in visual arts between the 1960s and 1970s challenge traditional modes and models of art production and reception.<sup>1</sup> The idea of an artwork as an individual object, as a ‘thing’ with clearly defined borders, is called into question. Through multiple strategies, artists shift the focus from the end product to the production process. The work of art is de-materialized and as a result may become a concept or an action that highlights the relationship between the artist, the work, and the audience. These shifts impact the very possibility of ‘framing’ the artistic work, making it difficult to define the boundaries that enclose it and create the conditions for its specific experience. Traditional reflections on the ‘frame’ typically emphasise its isolating effect and ability to distinguish the work as a self-enclosed whole from what surrounds it (cf. Simmel 1994, 11-12). In its position as a margin, the frame “defines what is framed as a meaningful world, as opposed to the outside the frame, which is simply the world experienced” (Stoichita 2015, 67). The act of framing is, in this sense, deeply intertwined with the production of a representation: the framed object ceases to be considered part of the world in which the viewers live and becomes an object of contemplation (cf. Marin 2001, 356-7; Conte 2020, 12). The framing processes of an artwork therefore allow its aesthetic fruition. Nevertheless, as soon as an artistic work is no longer contained in, or reducible to, a clearly delimited material site, it becomes difficult to establish framing processes and to draw a line that separates the work’s interior from the exterior world. The boundaries of the work become the object of negotiation and the work itself becomes an ‘aggregate’ of the many representations that can be produced through media such as photographs, videos, films, or artist’s books, each of which articulates its content in its own way. The work expands through the processes of its own mediation and representation.

The process initiated by the avant-garde between the 1960s and 1970s not only concerns the limits of single works of art but also the contexts of their presentation, those institutional frameworks that determine the behaviour and perception of the viewers. Art moves beyond museums and galleries, and the boundaries between art and life, artist and spectator, natural environment and work of art, are transformed into thresholds where art research develops. With respect to their frames of reference, the observers undergo a process of disorientation. This is often seen as the necessary condition to trigger

<sup>1</sup> In this essay, I am taking a new analytical perspective and expanding on what I previously wrote about the magazine *Avalanche* in my “*Avalanche: rivista, medium, voce d’artista*” [published in Laudando, C.M. (ed.) (2017). *Performativity: Networks, Bodies, Narrations*. Morlacchi Editore: Perugia] which was published as part of a research project that received funding from the European Union’s Horizon 2020 Research and Innovation Programme under the Marie Skłodowska-Curie Grant Agreement No 747881.

the process of transformation of the reality which the new art sets as one of its goals. In 1971, conceptual artist Adrian Piper, while commenting on the series of pieces titled *Catalysis*, writes:

Art contexts (galleries, performances) are becoming untenable for me. They are being overwhelmed and infiltrated by pieces of other disintegrating structures; political, social, economic. They preserve the illusion of an identifiable, isolable situation, much as discrete forms do, and thus a prestandardized set of responses. Because of their established functional identities, they prepare the viewer to be catalyzed, thus making actual catalysis impossible. (Piper 1971, 235)

Granted then that art research challenges the very possibility and opportunity to mark the limits of the work of art, granted that the very frames and contexts of the art field are disrupted, it is crucial to ask whether, and how, it is still possible to frame events, performances and concepts as artworks and to turn them into a representation meant for an audience.

The key role of magazines in this context cannot be overestimated. Faced with the changes that affect the artwork and the means of its distribution and reception, magazines, thanks to their distinctive qualities, provide the perfect response to the emerging needs. They make experimentation with new forms of art creation and presentation possible. They promote artists and alternative art spaces and allow artists and editors to reach a new audience without the intermediation of museums and art institutions. The growing importance of periodicals is part of a more general interest in the press and its seriality, which also affects the catalogue and the book, and is conveyed mainly, but not only, by conceptual art movements. Needless to say, magazines start playing a pivotal role in the field of visual arts well before the 1960s. Nevertheless, at this moment in time, they become, explicitly and with unprecedented force, the very place of construction of the artwork as well as the means for its dissemination and presentation (cf. Phillipot 1980, 52). In 1976, in an essay written on the occasion of the *International Conference on Art Periodicals* and of the exhibition *The Art Press* (Victoria and Albert Museum, London), John Walker identifies the major paradigm shifts occurring since the late sixties – including the downgrading of the physicality of the art object in favour of its conceptual component – as the driving force behind the enhanced importance of art periodicals (1976, 50). As Walker puts it:

Towards the end of the decade there was a vogue for post-study and time-based work (Land art, Performance). The initial difficulty galleries experienced in assimilating such work, in obtaining

items for display and for sale, was soon overcome by promoting documentation of artistic behaviour to the status of fine art: a series of photographs of a landscape or an action was transformed into a 'photo-work'. Such material was ideally suited to reproduction and magazines such as *Avalanche*, *Flash Art* and *Interfunktionen* took full advantage of this fact. (Walker 1976, 50)

To an art that challenges the boundaries of the frame, magazines offer a new possibility of framing and thereby create the conditions for its aesthetic fruition. At the same time, the magazine frame is not meant to enclose, once and for all, conceptual and time-based art but to expand it in time and space, so proving to be an ideal medium for this kind of art. This essay examines in particular the magazine *Avalanche*, published in New York by Willoughby Sharp and Liza Béar between 1970 and 1976, and considers it as a significant example of the central function of magazines for the new art.

The array of periodicals that emerge or establish themselves in these decades is as wide and varied as their objectives. Alongside the major international art magazines, a network of art and artists' periodicals also emerges, often associated with local scenes but projected on a transnational discourse. These are meant to give space to art practices otherwise neglected by the mainstream art press, in that they typically follow contemporary developments from an avant-garde position. Among the many periodicals, we can find *Avalanche*, *Art-Rite*<sup>2</sup> and, later, *High Performance*<sup>3</sup> in the United States, *Art-Language*<sup>4</sup> in the United Kingdom, *ArTitudes* in France, *Data*<sup>5</sup> in Italy, *Dé-coll/age* and *Interfunktionen*<sup>6</sup> in Germany, and *Gorgona* in Yugoslavia. This group of periodicals linked to new artistic practices quickly builds an 'alternative' to the mainstream art press. In a short essay from 1978, Edit DeAk and Walter Robinson - co-founders of *Art-Rite* together with Joshua Cohn - venture into a provisional categorisation of 'alternative' periodicals and highlight some key features of this field:

"Alternative" is used to describe a layer of the art world that is both nonprofit and in opposition to the commercial art institutions. Where the commercial structure attempts to consolidate and codify, the alternatives try to accommodate; they deal with the live nerve ending of turmoil —with what is on the verge of

<sup>2</sup> See Allen 2011 (121-45)

<sup>3</sup> On this magazine, see Sorkin 2003.

<sup>4</sup> On the *Art & Language* collective, see Bailey 2016.

<sup>5</sup> See Bordini 2007.

<sup>6</sup> See Allen 2011 (201-25) and Mehring 2004.

formulation. Of course the alternatives are not really that radical (one does not often hear of a revolution with nonprofit status), but they do offer more choices to the aspiring fine artist. The alternatives are a means of survival and proliferation with a populist aura: they provide focus for communities, place control of culture in more hands, and question elitist notions of authority and certification. (DeAk, Robinson 1978, 38)

The 'alternative' periodicals are a space opportunity for the new, for what is not yet fully formed and formulated. They pluralise access to discourse on art and its processes of recognition and legitimation. Diversified strategies are chosen by each periodical to establish its footing in the public sphere of art. In addition, original experimentations are carried out with the many formal possibilities offered by the periodical. This is why DeAk and Robinson advise their readers: "Please remember that many contemporary art magazines do not fit well in any category, or fit well in more than one, and that members of a category are not necessarily similar" (1978, 38).

*Avalanche*'s 13 issues provide a particularly interesting example of what 'alternative' magazines could contribute to the art of the time and, in particular, to the processes of its framing. By adopting *Artforum*'s square format, *Avalanche* makes clear its intention of challenging - while acknowledging its debt to - the predominant art magazines of the time, as already pointed out by Gwen Allen in her seminal book *Artists' Magazines: An Alternative Space for Art* (2011, 101). While innovating the magazine medium, *Avalanche* collects and communicates the radical impulses of renewal that come from new art forms. As previously mentioned, these are the years of the de-materialisation of the art object, according to the definition given by Lucy Lippard (1997) in her groundbreaking publication from 1973. The experiences of conceptual art, performance art, and land art, question in different forms and ways the material, permanent, and transportable character of the artwork and its object/commodity features, while proclaiming the inadequacy of museum institutions. The notion of medium specificity as advocated by art critic Clement Greenberg (1993) is actively rejected by cross-genre art practices relying on the body, performance, photography, and video.

In this regard, the 'magazine' has a pivotal role: it no longer simply offers an informative supplement 'about' self-contained works of art, but it becomes the site of their exhibition and/or the vehicle of their representation. Conceptual art finds a medium in the magazine while performative and environmental practices find a means of documentation and presentation. In a context of radical transformation of art, the magazine also becomes a tool for catalysing the voices of movements, trends, and individual artists, contributing, as Allen (2011) shows, to the construction of an alternative artistic culture. It

is no coincidence that publications such as the previously mentioned German magazine *Interfunktionen* emerge to document the protest against the exclusion of the new art forms from Documenta 4 (cf. Allen 2011, 207-10).

It was in this historical setting that *Avalanche* was born. Firmly anchored in the New York art scene and its alternative spaces, it provides them with a significant platform.<sup>7</sup> Its origins date back to 1968 and the chance encounter between its two editors, Liza Béar, a translator and editor based in London, and the New Yorker Willoughby Sharp, an art historian, independent curator and supporter of the avant-garde. They met on the occasion of Béar's first visit to New York, when artist Graham Stevens had tasked her with retrieving a film of his from Sharp. The anecdote is told by Béar and Sharp themselves in the contribution *The Early History of Avalanche* (2005, 2). Despite relying over the years on the support of some collaborators and the work of artists and photographers, Sharp and Béar take charge of the magazine practically on their own, carrying out almost all the interviews and curating the publication in all its details. Although both the idea for the magazine and the first interview with artist Carl Andre take place in 1968, for economic and distribution reasons the magazine first appears two years later, in October 1970 (cf. Béar, Sharp 2005, 3). Joseph Beuys features on the cover of the first issue which is almost entirely devoted to land art. Printed on high-quality glossy paper, the first eight issues of *Avalanche* are in a 9 3/8 inch square format. Between 4,000 and 6,000 copies are printed, each issue coming out at irregular intervals. In 1974, due to increases in paper costs, *Avalanche* adopts a newspaper format, which will be maintained until the last issue is released in the summer of 1976 (cf. Béar, Sharp 2005, 3). The programmatic aims of the magazine are embedded in its name, as confirmed by Sharp in an interview given to Allen twenty-five years after the final publication:

The word "avalanche" and what it signified was very appealing to me because obviously I saw myself as a renegade. I had hair that I could sit on, I started smoking marijuana in '64 and was still smoking at that time, and I wanted this thing, this magazine, to represent a cultural breakthrough, something that an avalanche does. It reconfigures, breaks down the old structure. (Sharp 2016, 65)

Just like an avalanche, the magazine aims to break the old structures and radically reshape the artistic landscape of the present. 'Framing' *Avalanche* in specific categories is complex. It is not an artist magazine in the true sense, nor is it comparable to mainstream art

<sup>7</sup> See Allen (2011, 95); Ballmer (2011, 22); Béar, Sharp (2005, 10-12).

magazines because of its conception and profile. A possible classification of the periodical is provided by Sharp himself in response to a survey of contemporary art magazines conducted by *Studio International* in 1976. Asked about *Avalanche*'s target audience, he replied: "*Avalanche* is essentially an artist's art magazine" (Sharp 1976, 158). The prime position of the artist, here emphasised by Sharp, is descriptive not only of the audience but also of the contributors to the magazine. *Avalanche*, in fact, does not employ writers. The artists are invited to collaborate in the preparation of sections dedicated to them within the magazine and are interviewed by Béar and Sharp (cf. Sharp 1976, 158). *Avalanche*'s defining and all-informing trait is precisely the decision to put the artist at the center of the editorial project and to participate in the struggle for their conquest of a prominent position in the art system – also when it comes to the processes of interpretation of the artist's works and the discussion of the aesthetic projects in which they are included.<sup>8</sup> The prime focus on artists is also clearly shown by the covers of the first six issues, which feature close-up portraits of Joseph Beuys, Bruce Nauman, Barry Le Va, Lawrence Weiner, Yvonne Rainer, and Vito Acconci. In addition to conveying a declaration of intent, such an iconic design makes the magazine instantly recognisable (cf. Miller 2010). The internal articulation of sections and contents reflects the key position of the artists, in particular in choosing to eliminate reviews and art criticism. Whereas critics typically hold the power to 'frame' artistic creations through categories and concepts, thereby setting the conditions for their interpretation, *Avalanche* proposes a full reversal; it entrusts the interpretative task to the artists themselves and disintermediates their relationship with the readers. As Sharp puts it: "*Avalanche* obviates art criticism; our first priority is enabling the artist to communicate directly to the *Avalanche* audience" (Sharp 1976, 158).

Each issue begins and ends with advertisements which are purposefully not placed among the contributions to avoid any element of disturbance. The advertisements also bear witness to the twofold nature of *Avalanche*: deeply rooted in the New York context where it operates and yet simultaneously aimed at an international target. While the majority of the advertisements concern New York galleries, art spaces, and artistic enterprises, there are also advertisements for foreign galleries such as Attico (Rome, Italy), Rolf Ricke (Cologne, Germany), and Galerie Germain (Paris, France), and the events they organise. This shows not only the international scope of the magazine, but also that the artistic avant-garde that find space in *Avalanche* and in its advertisements is essentially a transnational phenomenon. Advertisements,

<sup>8</sup> Concerning the programmatic goals of *Avalanche*, see Allen (2011, 100-03) and Ballmer (2011, 21-2).

along with revenue from grants, subscriptions, and sales, are the magazine's main source of income (cf. Sharp 1976, 158). However, these are not enough to cover expenses and prevent the shutting down of the magazine in 1976. In that year, Sharp quantifies the production cost of each issue at \$6,000 (1976, 158).

Opening with a section titled "Rumbles" dedicated to news and the list of the latest publications, the contents of the magazine consist mainly of interviews - carried out almost entirely by Sharp and Béar - art document(s) and, to a lesser extent, (textual and photographic) artwork(s) made specifically for the format of the magazine. Articles and essays, such as Sharp's *Body Works*, which appeared in the first issue (1970), are rare. The magazine gives ample space to land art, body and performance art, conceptual art, and also music and dance - as evidenced by Yvonne Rainer's image on the cover of issue no. 5 in the summer of 1972. In short, *Avalanche* is not linked to a single, specific movement or trend, but instead stands as a platform where the different experiments of these years can find a space to meet, cross over, and reflect. Among the recurring names featured in the magazine's interviews, art pieces, and documents are Joseph Beuys, Dennis Oppenheim, Richard Serra, Terry Fox, William Wegman and Vito Acconci. Issue no. 6 in the fall of 1972 regarding Vito Acconci, is of particular interest as the focus is entirely on his work. For once, the magazine becomes the space for a fully-fledged 'solo' exhibition on paper.

*Avalanche* simultaneously serves as a magazine, exhibition space, and art medium. As suggested by Allen, in order to define the role of *Avalanche*, one should look at the several meanings of the notion of 'support'. She argues that the magazine is both a physical support and a medium for these new ephemeral and time-based art forms and, at the same time, functions as a support in their establishment in the public art sphere and art market (2011, 94). It is precisely in this capacity that the magazine offers a structuring to new art, framing it within well-defined boundaries, and facilitating its dissemination.

The 'interviews' conducted by Béar and Sharp are one of the most defining elements of the publication.<sup>9</sup> Their tone is informal, direct, sometimes intimate and ironic, recording a dialogue that maintains the characteristics of oral communication and does not exclude moments of diversion, breaks, or changes in rhythm. In the first four issues, while named in the interview title, the speakers are subsequently differentiated only by graphic differences in the fonts used: standard, italic, and bold. Priority is thereby not given to the authorship of individual statements but to the participatory and non-hierarchical character of a shared path of discussion. The search for adequate concepts to describe and capture new artistic practices thus

<sup>9</sup> See Allen (2005; 2011, 104-11) and Ballmer (2011, 22-3).

acquires a processual, performative and temporal character - as is much of the art discussed in the magazine's pages. An example of this is provided by Willoughby Sharp's interview with Lawrence Weiner, which appears in the fourth issue published in the spring of 1972:

Then what are the general cultural precepts that you assume other people share?

**The basis of cultural history until now.**

Well, that's very vague.

**No, it's not, it's very specific, meaning what has shaped your culture and mine.**

There are very few people who accept a certain sentence as art.

**"Very few people" doesn't mean anything.**

You're assuming a lot. You assume that I agree with...

**I haven't said that I assume that you agree or disagree. When you deal with a piece of mine, you come across it as a sentence. It's just verbal.**

It could be.

(Sharp 1972, 68; emphasis in the original).

The interviews have a documentary quality. They are the recordings of a temporal process. This makes their transcript something of a trace, as attested by the attention with which, in numerous cases, the dates, places, and modes in which they were carried out are indicated as well as by the fact that the interviewed artists participate in the editing process. It is precisely this 'document' quality that informs the relationship of the magazine with much of the art presented and published in its pages.

While accounting for the constitutive relationship between *Avalanche* and the art it documents, Allen refers, in the aforementioned volume, to the concept of 'non-site' by Robert Smithson (2011, 94-5). This refers to the specific dialectic that is produced in the artist's work by the process of removing material finds from one 'site' and relocating them to the place of their presentation, i.e. the museum or the gallery.<sup>10</sup> The notions of 'document', 'trace', and 'non-site',

<sup>10</sup> Allen, in particular, refers to an interview, *Discussions with Heizer, Oppenheim, Smithson*, published in the first issue of *Avalanche*, where Smithson explains the notion of 'non-site': "There's a central focus point which is the non-site; the site is the unfocussed fringe where your mind loses its boundaries and a sense of the oceanic pervades, as it were. I like the idea of quite catastrophe taking place...The interesting thing about the site is that, unlike the non-site, it throws you out to the fringes. In other words, there's nothing to grasp onto except the cinders and there's no way of focusing on a particular place. One might even say that the place has absconded or been lost. This is a map that will take you somewhere, but when you get there you won't really know where you are. In a sense the non-site is the centre of the system, and the site itself is the fringe or the edge" (Smithson in *Avalanche*, 1, 1970, 67).

although different from each other and not interchangeable, all converge in indicating how the magazine functions as a framing device for the new art. The magazine's space, while not necessarily identical to the space of the work, nevertheless becomes key to its representation and exhibition. The works of land art, the performances, the pieces of body and conceptual art are framed, through images and texts, in the paper boundaries of the magazine and, having been distinguished from their surroundings, acquire a form which is then presented to the readers. *Avalanche* acts as an exhibition space that gives visibility and greater audience-reach to time-based art experiences, works made in places that are difficult to access, and performances that have only been witnessed by a very limited audience. Framing these works in the magazine's space allows the reader who glances through the pages to access them aesthetically. In line with its programmatic intents, the magazine thus contributes to the shift in the paradigms of art production and reception. Ephemeral, conceptual, and performative artworks are not framed as self-contained objects/works, of which the magazine provides mere depictions, but are articulated in a specific form – and frame – through their medial translation on paper.

The primary vehicle of these processes of representation and exhibition are photographs, along with artists' interviews, and texts. Leafing through *Avalanche* several strategies of representation can be identified, for instance the recurrent attempt to convey, through series of photos, the shift in the work of art from product to process. However, the magazine never chooses one single mode of representation of new art. Each contribution is conceived individually and depends entirely on the peculiarities of the artistic project to which it belongs.<sup>11</sup> The photographic medium can function as a simple document concerning the creation process; it can be a device for the presentation of the work or a place for its representation, as in land art. In this latter case, great care and attention are given to the choice of framing and camera angles. Photographs can also become an integral part of the artistic intention of the work, as can be seen in Vito Acconci's *Drifts* and *Conversions*, both published in issue 2 of winter 1971. An extract from the text of *Conversions* reads:

Photograph as a move (an avowal made to the viewer: presentation of a course of action): photograph as offer (an advance, an invitation to the viewer): a performance can be the occasion for an activation of biography – the performer is anchored as the subject for biography. (Acconci 1971, 94)

As Béar and Sharp later write in describing their work: “*Avalanche*

<sup>11</sup> On this point, see the other examples provided by Ballmer (2011, 24-5).

was a unique media phenomenon in an age that crossed borders freely, a cross between a magazine, an artist book and an exhibition space in print” (2005, 1). In this regard, based on a narrative made of actions, images, and texts, *Avalanche* participates in the process through which these works become historical-temporal objects or artworks. The art practices of which *Avalanche* is a document, medium, and exhibition space are not confined to a single place or time, even in the case of performance, but unfold in a transmedial space which includes their presentation within the magazine. In this process, within the specific relationship that occurs between the different media devices, the aesthetic experience and the role of the viewer/reader are opened to a continuous redetermination.

The intention to introduce a radical change in the art system and to deny its commodification turns out to be partially tamed by its capture within the ‘framework’ of the magazine. The unframing to which part of the new art aspires ultimately establishes a dialectical relationship with the framing practices that enable their representation and dissemination. The experiential immediacy of performance art becomes visible in the mediated space of its documentation; the site specificity of land art becomes accessible through its photographic representation; the de-materialisation of the artwork translates into new forms of materialisation and commercialisation. This dialectic explicitly indicates the field of tensions with which the avant-garde of this period is confronted, with the aim, on the one hand, of questioning the consolidated practices of art production, conservation, and exhibition, and with the need, on the other, of finding alternative forms of art presentation and communication. *Avalanche* responds to this need and opens up new possibilities. Within this framework, the struggle for the central position of the artist and the renewal of the medium of the magazine cannot be seen as two distinct elements. They are two parts of the intention to promote a paradigmatic change in the art field and to provide new forms of art reception.

In the course of subsequent developments, the art system and its institutions have proven capable of re-containing within their framework even the most critical and radical attempts of the artistic experiments of the 1960s and 1970s. In this regard, we can refer to the description of the paradoxical developments of conceptual art in the postface of Lucy Lippard's *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966 to 1972*:

Hopes that “conceptual art” would be able to avoid the general commercialization, the destructively “progressive” approach of modernism were for the most part unfounded. It seemed in 1969 [...] that no one, not even a public greedy for novelty, would actually pay money, or much of it, for a xerox sheet referring to an event past or never directly perceived, a group of photographs documenting an

ephemeral situation or condition, a project for work never to be completed, words spoken but not recorded; it seemed that these artists would therefore be forcibly freed from the tyranny of a commodity status and market-orientation. Three years later, the major conceptualists are selling work for substantial sums here and in Europe; they are represented by (and still more unexpected- showing in) the world's most prestigious galleries. (Lippard [1973] 1997, 263).

However, the process as described by Lippard does not only entail a restoration of the paradigms from which the new art tried to escape. Although the ability of this art to dissolve all boundaries has proved to be an illusion, these art experiments have managed to question traditional models of art creation and have opened art institutions to new media and materials. This has resulted in the redefinition of the function of the artist and art, its space, and its relationship with the beholder. The consequences of such a renewal can be seen today in the effort by large international museums to redefine their paradigms of collection, conservation, and exhibition in relation to ephemeral, time-based and live art practices. If the work no longer has an individual and undisputed material site, then the processes of its framing necessarily become plural, open to the intervention of different agents who negotiate its representation and reactivation, and unfold its potential meanings over time. The processes of framing the work of art, which are necessary to mark its boundaries and allow us to experience it, become temporal, open to revisions and new interpretations. They frame the artwork but at the same time expand it, showing the incomplete and temporal character of the framing process itself. *Avalanche* was seminal in launching this path of renewal, leaving an indelible mark on the history of the art of the 1970s and its subsequent reception.

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