ARTFORUM

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Katy Siegel

10.11.10

Views of Americanana, 2010. Left: Josephine Halvorson, *Cabinet*, 2009; Robert Gober, *Untitled*, 1994-2010. Right: H.C. Westermann, *Dustpan – Amaranth*, 1972; H.C. Westermann, *Dustpan – Douglas Fir*, 1972; Kara Walker, *Jockey*, 1995; Elaine Reichek, *Sampler (Above the Fields)*, 1999; Donald Judd, *Chair*, 1991/2002; James Turrell, Nicholas Mosse, and Bill Burke, *Lapsed Quaker Ware*, 1998.

Katy Siegel recently organized "Americanana" for the Bertha and Karl Leubsdorf Art Gallery at New York City's Hunter College, where she is an associate professor of art history. This fall, London-based Reaktion Books will publish her latest volume, Since '45: the Making of Contemporary Art. *The exhibition is on view until December 4.*

AMERICANA*NA*. Everyone leaves off the last "na." They think it's a typo. But I wanted it to evoke the absurdity of European settlers using Indian words to name soccer clubs and suburban streets, or the new urban woodsmen butchering pigs in Brooklyn, or the countless other attempts in our culture to recover a lost past. The title also echoes *Indianana*, a not very well-known work by Mike Kelley, and so it's a little tribute to him.

The artists in the exhibition are not reproducing Americana in a straightforward way. Instead they are self-consciously coming out of it and reiterating or reworking it in some new fashion—whether for some social or political purpose or just with the consciousness that this is something they are recovering. You can see it in Robert Gober's butter churn covered in barnacles. It's like something old that has drifted away and then returned crusted with time.

The idea for the show came out of research for my new book. I realized that there is a strain of American contemporary art that is focused on American history, production, and social values. That's not as emphasized in the book itself—it's a minor motif. Yet among all the social histories I covered, this was the most vibrant in terms of visual material, and it deserved an exhibition.

"Americanana" doesn't go off on a lot of tangents. And we're not talking about folk art—there have already been good shows about *that* old weird America. This is an exhibition featuring artists who are interested in common American objects—painted signs, quilts, butter churns, rubber stamps, and copper kettles—and particularly in the way they are made. These are things anyone could make without being a professional artist or going to a fancy school; though they require skill, they are not fussy, labored, or self-conscious. This is a tradition Donald Judd, for instance, wrote quite a bit about, and it's very evident in his work. No one has really studied this subject, but Judd's library contained many catalogues of Shaker objects and furniture, available because these things were undergoing a revival in the US as part of American taste-making in the 1960s.

Part of what drew me to this subject is that postmodernist theory was bad at addressing the fact that American history is a history of revivals, and also its traditional anti-capitalism. Today we see—correctly—America as one of the chief countries imposing capitalism on the world. But in the nineteenth century, capitalism was seen as European and as something that was being imposed on America, at the cost of the traditional independent man, the artisan and farmer, and on communities like the Shakers. It is this pre-superpower America that comes back again and again in contemporary history and culture.

I think today's resurgence is sparked by the feeling that capitalism is collapsing. The global business culture that seemed so permanent to people ten years ago now offers limited rewards. There's also the decline of America as it becomes one nation among many, which allows us to see more clearly the particularities of America and American history. Just as Japanese artists have attended to what is

particularities of America and American history. Just as Japanese artists have attended to what is Japanese, or as Korean artists have considered Korea, American artists are now looking at their country through local lenses.

— As told to Lauren O'Neill-Butler

CONNECT PERMALINK TALKBACK (0 COMMENTS)

Wooloo

10.08.10

Views of "New Life Residency," 2010.

Known for "New Life Copenhagen," an initiative that paired international visitors with host families during the city's climate summit last year, the collective Wooloo is currently operating "New Life Residency" as part of Manifesta 8 in Murica, Spain. For this project, the group has invited five artists to live and work entirely in the dark. In addition, each artist has been paired with a visually impaired assistant. Here, cofounders Sixten Kai Nielsen and Martin Rosengaard describe their latest project.

WHEN WE WERE PRESENTED WITH the curatorial investigation by Manifesta and the Chamber of Public Secrets into the history of the visual, we found it worthwhile to consider a broader view of this chronicle. We wanted to explore the impact of visuality on human history as a whole—the effects of society's seemingly uncontrollable production and consumption of images. How could we imagine something different? What would a nonvisual world be like?

We have also been interested in the artist residency as a form. Especially now, in a financial crisis, as it's the only way many artists can afford a studio. Yet most contemporary residency programs seem to have a very odd idea of isolating the artistic "genius" for him or her to create work. With "New Life Residency," we wanted to do it differently—we wanted to create a situation that would not be comfortable or give room for the artists to "be themselves," but rather the opposite.

In short, these were our initial thoughts when we came to Murcia. Then we encountered the city and began meeting its blind community. Being visually impaired in Murcia means walking through the streets to get things done, or working by selling lottery tickets, for instance, on behalf of ONCE, the local organization for visually impaired people. We began talking to these men and women, asking them if they knew about Manifesta; they didn't. Actually, it seemed like no one locally had heard about the biennial. We began to think even more about the relation between Murcia and Manifesta. And the more we thought, the more we wanted to do something that didn't pretend to understand the city or region. Because of course we don't. We wanted to create a situation in which the artists were lost.

Most of the participating artists normally produce visual work. But the most important reason we selected them is for their interest in experimentation and their proposed collaboration with their assistant, as well as their ability to go beyond simply presenting a fixed work in a dark space. The selected artists all demonstrated awareness of the fact that what they initially proposed will most likely end up being very different due to the process. A lot of applicants seemed to forget that this is a residency program, not an exhibition series.

We found the participating assistants by speaking to them. ONCE has also been a tremendous help in communicating our initial idea. Funnily enough, only women wanted to take part. We spoke to several visually impaired men, but they were not interested. For us, this work is not about a challenge of darkness as much as it is a challenge of collaboration; to leave the visual production behind and see what is left. This project is also a lot about translation and communication. And what can be lost (and gained) in that process: A language barrier is present in some of the collaborations, but no more than is already the case between Manifesta and Murcia. We see this as part of the project and an integrated part of working internationally in a local setting.

All of our work explores new ways of living and working together. This has been our interest since we built wooloo.org, our very first social sculpture, almost ten years ago. Today, the website functions as a working platform for artists and cultural producers, but in the beginning, it was also an experiment in online space—long before Facebook and the social network explosion we see now. Overall, the mission of Wooloo is to explore new ways of living together on this planet. Each of our different projects is, in one way or another, a social experiment in collectivism. The antiglobalization movement has this slogan —"Another World Is Possible." We agree, but we would like to take another angle: What world is

possible? Let's begin the testing now, please.

— As told to Dawn Chan

CONNECT PERMALINK TALKBACK (0 COMMENTS)

art&education

Sam Green

10.04.10

Sam Green and **Dave Cerf**, ***Utopia in Four Movements*, 2010.** Performance view, San Francisco Film Festival, May 2010. Sam Green.

Utopia in Four Movements *is the latest critically acclaimed project by San Francisco–based filmmaker Sam Green and sound artist Dave Cerf. This "live documentary," which explores the utopian impulse for community through the collective experience of cinema, will play at the Kitchen in New York on October 7, 8, and 9 with special musical guests the Quavers and Brendan Canty; additional screening dates can be found here.*

AFTER I FINISHED *THE WEATHER UNDERGROUND*, I started to think about making a new film about the utopian impulse and the fact that we seem to be living in an anti-utopian time. I knew that I didn't want to have interviews with academics or create some historical survey about utopian desires. I wanted something that was more emotional—a meditation using history to try to make some sense of the present. The four different stories I selected for this piece try to tackle that inquiry, some more explicitly than others.

I shot these four different stories over several years, edited them all together, and then showed the rough cut to people but it didn't actually seem to make sense. No one understood the connections. I realized I needed to provide some sort of explanation and decided to try a voice-over. But I don't really like voice-over films, so I was very hesitant to do it. When I was invited to do a presentation, I contacted Dave Cerf (who made the sound track for *The Weather Underground*) and asked if he would play music while I talked about the project and cued clips from the segments using PowerPoint. There was something really lovely about it. I became interested in the distinctions between a voice-over movie and a movie where someone is talking in person. There are a lot of differences, namely the live element. But what does that mean? What is it about that liveness that charms me? Then we did another presentation, and then one more, and at a certain point I realized: This form actually works!

Usually, I make a film because I'm smitten with one particular thing. All four segments of this work come from that impulse. The Esperanto episode is the most overtly about utopia. I knew vague things about Esperanto, as most people do. I thought it was invented in the 1950s or something like that. Then I came across more details about its history; it was actually created in the late 1800s, which surprised me. Its real heyday was in the '20s and '30s, and so it coincided with this blossoming modernist interest in utopia. People believed that by being scientific and rational we could make a radically better world. It caught my attention because, in a way, the arc of Esperanto sort of parallels the rise and fall of that modernist utopian impulse. Hopefully, the themes and histories of each of the four sections resonate with one another and create a larger set of questions and ideas. It's nice to do something that falls between film and performance because you can pick and choose the elements you like from either tradition. One thing I've always hated in film is that at the end there's the credits; in a way, it ruins the moment. You've got to sit there as five minutes of credits scroll by. So it has been great to have the credits printed in a program that you can look at later. There's also an essay in the program by Rebecca Solnit, which gives some context to the piece. She touches very eloquently on the connection between utopia and having this live cinematic experience.

Figuring out where to show the work has been an interesting process. We've performed at film festivals, but we're also doing screenings at art centers like the Wexner and the Walker. In the art and performance worlds, it's been easy to work with people. But at film festivals it has been more of a challenge. Every venue we've worked with has been totally different, and so each show varies depending on things like the distance between the stage and the audience. It's a complicated work—the music, words, and images have to line up.

I didn't really have a road map for the performance, so we've been figuring it out as we go. I think over

time we're making it looser, but it has required a certain amount of tightness. Still, each time we try new things. When we premiered it at Sundance somebody asked a question right in the middle of the piece, which was funny and also thrilling. I like the possibility of these sorts of interventions, and we're slowly inviting more of that.

— As told to Lauren O'Neill-Butler

CONNECT PERMALINK TALKBACK (0 COMMENTS)

art&education

Gregg Bordowitz

10.01.10

Paul Chan's costume sketches for Gregg Bordowitz's *The History of Sexuality Volume One by Michel Foucault: An Opera*, 2010. Left: Pope. Center: Michel Foucault. Right: Cop.

Gregg Bordowitz is a writer, AIDS activist, and artist. In 1993, he produced the autobiographical documentary Fast Trip Long Drop*, which considers events around his experience testing positive for HIV antibodies in 1988, and in 2004 MIT Press published a collection of his texts,* The AIDS Crisis Is Ridiculous and Other Writings: 1986–2003*. Here he discusses his latest project,* The History of Sexuality Volume One by Michel Foucault: An Opera*, which has a work-in-progress showing at Tanzquartier Wien October 1 and 2.*

ABOUT A YEAR AGO, Paul Chan asked me to come by his studio to discuss an idea he had for us to collaborate on an opera based on Michel Foucault's *History of Sexuality*. We immediately began working on it as a way to hang out and have fun together, and we quickly decided that we wanted to make something on a Wagnerian scale, maybe even something that was impossible to produce—like what Karl Kraus did with *Die letzten Tage der Menschheit* [The Last Days of Mankind]. We wanted to challenge ourselves, so we came up with a scenario for all three books that involves dozens of characters, from Diogenes to Martha Stewart.

A curator in Vienna (Achim Hochdörfer) got wind of the project and asked me if we were interested in doing a work-in-progress production. I told him that it was nowhere near completion and in fact it was impossible to complete, but he was persistent. Paul and I had sketched out the story, and I had already outlined some of the melodic ideas. So I wrote a libretto in two months. Paul made five character sketches.

There are five performers in the piece—six, actually, if I count myself. Foucault is the protagonist. There's a character called Ephebe, Foucault's love interest who represents the man-boy love relationship that Foucault is preoccupied with in all three volumes of *History of Sexuality*. There's Sigmund Freud. There's the pope, and also a cop, who functions as the universal image of the law. The cop is sort of a dominatrix, and I think Paul had the idea of a female justice figure in mind when he sketched the costume. In Paul's original drawings, Foucault is wearing assless chaps with a prosthetic penis that dangles below the zipper, and Kristine Woods, the costume designer, has fabricated an extremely beautiful and very large felt penis that extends pretty far below the crotch line.

So you have the three main figures that Foucault considers when addressing sexuality: psychoanalysis, the law, and Christianity, as well as the man-boy love relationship of ancient Greece. Foucault represents the main arguments of the book. Freud, the cop, and the pope are figured onstage as demons or ghosts that haunt Foucault, and they all talk over his shoulder. The only person who directly addresses Foucault and vice versa is Ephebe. It's the only relationship in which the characters recognize each other. Their relationship not only comments on Foucault's own reflection on homosexuality in ancient Greece; it is also the narrative motor of this version of the opera. The sixth character, which I play myself, is the California academic. His job is to introduce Foucault at a lecture. That part is very small and I don't sing. Everyone else in the cast is fabulously talented except for me.

The opera is going to be composed musically through improvisation with the performers, and I will be directing. There is no written music. I can't write or read music, but I have some basic melodic ideas. There is another sound component, a kind of ambient piece that I produced on my computer with my assistant in Chicago. It will be playing at the same time as the opera is being sung; it's more about texture than anything else. It could be a big mess! And that's the challenge and the fun of it. I'm really delighted to be working in this way where I'm making up a piece with five other people two weeks

before the performance.

I came to Vienna in the middle of the summer to cast the opera and was extraordinarily fortunate to meet performers associated with Tanzquartier Wien, which is coproducing the project with the MUMOK. I got an amazing cast. All of the performers are well known in Austria. Everyone immediately got what I was trying to do with the concept and the melody, and when I sang my version to them they said to me that they thought it sounded like medieval chant. I went to Hebrew school for a while. I didn't mention it, but that's largely where I'm getting the tunes from. There's a liturgical style to it.

I wrote the libretto in such a way that I wouldn't use direct quotations from the book. Each line counts to ten syllables: Some of it is iambic pentameter, and some of it rhymes, but not all of it. While the music is improvised, for the most part it will be set in the rehearsal. But there will be variability. I will give the performers permission to try things onstage. I'm not expecting identical performances, but I also don't expect a large range of variation between the performances. One of the reasons I cast myself in a small role was because it occurred to me that it would be more fun to be onstage than to watch the opera.

I have here in front of me the copy of the *History of Sexuality: An Introduction* that I read when I was nineteen years old. It's almost the case that there are more sentences underlined than not underlined. The opera attempts to recapture the excitement that I felt upon first reading the book, which is bound up with my romantic relationships at the time and my discovery of sexuality as a teenager approaching my twenties. My job as a director of this opera is to infuse Foucault's ideas with all of those feelings of excitement and enthusiasm I had for the book when I was that age. It's about Foucault as an intellectual hero. And that's one of the reasons for this project: I'm testing my relationship to these books that were fundamental to my growth as a young person.

— As told to David Velasco

CONNECT PERMALINK TALKBACK (1 COMMENT)

art&education

Rebecca Warren

09.28.10

Left: **Rebecca Warren**, ***The Main Feeling*, 2009**, handpainted bronze on painted MDF plinth, 114 x 30 x 28 1/2". Plinth: 64 x 26 3/8 x 26 3/8". Right: **Rebecca Warren**, ***Mord*, 2002,** handpainted reinforced clay on MDF plinth, 7 1/2 x 15 3/4 x 8 1/4". Plinth: 43 1/4 x 29 1/8 x 29 1/8".

The London-based artist Rebecca Warren is well known for her clay and bronze sculptures, which have previously referenced the "masterful" output of a range of artists, including Auguste Rodin, Edgar Degas, Willem de Kooning, and cartoonist Robert Crumb. A pair of solo shows featuring her new works at the Renaissance Society and three monumental bronzes commissioned by the Art Institute of Chicago open on October 3.

THE BRONZES THAT WILL BE EXHIBITED at the Art Institute were first made in clay, the same size as you see them in bronze. That is, the bronzes weren't made as maquettes to be scaled up later for casting. Instead, they are casts of things sculpted by hand to an immediate, real scale. This has a subtle influence on what you are looking at: It was always big, slabby, twisted, built up with wet malleable material under gravity, and that's what has been fixed in bronze. The heights of the "plinth" part of the sculptures were, in part, determined by the heights of the glass parapets. I wanted the sculptures to peek over the lower parapet but to be shorter than the highest parapet. That way they serve as the binding force for the differing heights. Since they're higher than one of the parapets, they also exceed, but just by a bit, the limit of that roof. It also means the feet of the sculptures are around face height. They are awkward to look at, or to look up at, so you have to make that bit of effort, bending your neck, adjusting your eyes to the sky.

The sculptures are also visible from vantage points outside the terrace. They act as a response to Chicago's famous modernist architecture, inasmuch as they evoke maximalism or the extra-rational. But the sculptures face inward toward each other, giving themselves a solidarity separate from any context. It is this triangulation of their own dynamic that allows them to not necessarily have to adapt or assimilate to the city. And yet the surfaces are not harsh or reflective, so the sculptures can still roll with the city, with anything.

For the show at the Renaissance Society, I have made mainly new work—a combination of pieces in clay, steel, and bronze. I wanted areas of intense color concentration in the space. They are, in a way, an extension of similar, earlier sculptures that were smoother and sweeter. These new ones are uglier and more awkward, like chewed-up Meissen ware. For the earlier pieces, I had thought of Otto Dix and depictions of Weimar corruption and excess. For these, I kept thinking of an imagined modern Weimar—like *The Hills.* There's also a backward sequencing for a few of the sculptures. *The Other Brother 2* and *A Culture* look like family, with one seeming older, rustier, and more provisional than the other, although the one that appears to be the original was, in fact, made later and perversely is covered with a Perspex case. I have also made four steel sculptures. I like that the size of one of them was partly determined by the size of the lift—I had to reduce it by a couple of inches at an advanced stage of its development, so in a way the lift restriction became a deciding aesthetic factor.

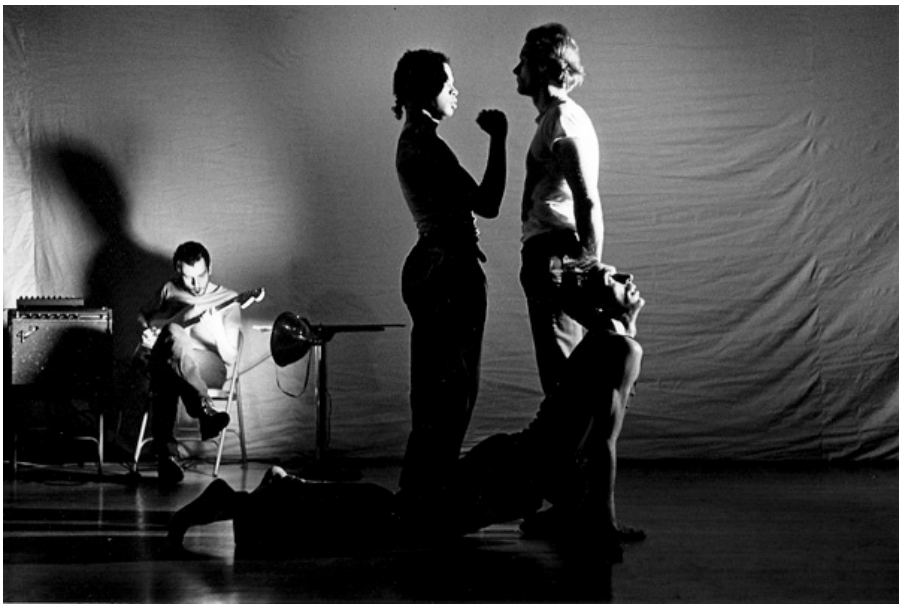
The Renaissance Society is a bit baroque, which helped me to develop an idea of what could work in there. Similar to "Feelings" at Matthew Marks Gallery and my Serpentine exhibition last year, I wanted this show to work a bit like a vitrine, or one of my vitrines, where the separate items energize certain elements in one another. I also wanted the arrangement to enact those preparatory states that are a hallmark of such shows: where afterward, everything gets dispersed or housed in splinter groups. In this show, I wanted the viewer to see the moment when the relationships between the physical objects become like the relationships between the ideas being worked on. You can see families of memes and motifs in the work. The various materials start off contrasting along gender lines—in their qualities of durability, brittleness, rectilinearity, and crumbliness. But these qualities are never stable for long, and they start to invade one another in ways that I find interesting.

— As told to Lauren O'Neill-Butler

CONNECT PERMALINK TALKBACK (0 COMMENTS)

Ishmael Houston-Jones

09.26.10



Ishmael Houston-Jones with Chris Cochrane and Dennis Cooper, *Them*, 1985/2010. Performance view, PS 122, New York, 1985. Clockwise from left: Chris Cochrane, Ishmael Houston-Jones, Jonathan Walker, Donald Fleming (floor). Photo: Dona Ann McAdams

The New York–based choreographer Ishmael Houston-Jones has been a leader and educator in the field of contemporary dance for over thirty years. This year, the New Museum and Performance Space 122 are coproducing the twenty-fifth-anniversary version of Them*, a controversial work that Houston-Jones made in collaboration with the musician Chris Cochrane and the writer Dennis Cooper. On September 30 and October 3, 7, and 10, audiences can view rehearsals for* Them *at the New Museum as part of a project called* Them and Now*. From October 21 to 30, PS 122 will present an updated version of* Them*. Here Houston-Jones discusses the work's origins.*

THE FIRST TIME I heard about Chris Cochrane was also the first time I saw him play, at a club called 8BC in a destroyed building on Eighth Street between avenues B and C. They had liquor there, but it was more of an arty club. I thought his music was incredible. It wasn't so much punk rock but it was punk-influenced. There was a lot of musicianship.

When I first met Dennis Cooper he was reading at some club on the West Side. There was a buzz about him before his arrival in New York; people were really excited. I didn't know him at all. He'd been publishing *Little Caesar* out in LA and there was a performance place called Beyond the Baroque out there that he was the leader of. When I heard him read, I was shocked that literature could upset me so much. It was something from *Tenderness of the Wolves*. And after I said, "Do you want to work with me?" And he said, "Sure," even though he didn't know who I was.

That was probably 1985, and at the time there was a whole community around PS 122. It was artist-run in those days. I would go to the Kitchen in SoHo, but PS 122 was in my neighborhood and it was sort of a clubhouse. The art and dance worlds then weren't as geographically spread out, nor were they quite as professionalized. (Dancers today have much greater facility, I've noticed.) It was very downtown Manhattan–centric. We never went to Brooklyn. Now the scene is very dispersed. To see edgy or interesting stuff you really have to travel. It's not terrible. It's a different mode of relating, and thus a different kind of community today.

"*Them*" comes out of a long tradition of my one-word titles. I think it's actually the name of a 1950s horror film about giant ants, which has nothing to do with the piece. The first line Dennis reads is, "I saw them once. I don't know when, or who, they were." *Them* evolved over time. There was a short version in 1985 at PS 122, essentially a work in progress. It was Chris, Dennis, myself, dancer Donald Fleming, and the actor Jonathan Walker; and the institution's director, Mark Russell, asked us if we wanted to expand it.

Like many of my dance works, *Them* is a highly scored improvisation. The movements are not illustrative of any of the other elements: The music, the dance, and the text happen along three parallel tracks. Near the end there's this looping section where two guys are on a mattress. They push each other up, then push each other down. After that they disappear and a dancer, who used to be me, is brought out by a figure in black and thrown blindfolded onto a mattress and an animal carcass is thrown on top of him and there's this wrestling scene and then it ends.

The mattress and animal carcass were a sort of acknowledgment of AIDS. People were dying—friends, people we knew. There was panic. The carcass on the mattress came from a dream my friend had. In it he woke up and he was lying next to his own dead body; he would try to throw it out of bed, but it kept coming back on top of him. It's also about my fear of death. I still can't change a mousetrap. I'm really squeamish around dead things.

There was a time when the Meatpacking District used to be an actual meatpacking district. There were buildings filled with animal carcasses. I remember I had my mind set on having a goat, and I went around to all these places and none of them had one. There was this place that had mostly pigs, but there was one goat, really beautiful, with all its fur still on. I couldn't go back to get it until 4 AM, so I brought one of my dancers with me and we put it in a bag—it looked like a human body. We took it in a cab back to my place on Suffolk Street. At the time the building was really hot and I tied it with an electric cord and hung it out the window overnight. The next day I put it around my shoulders and carried it to PS 122, just in time for the dress rehearsal. We're not sure where we're going to get the goat this time around.

— As told to David Velasco

CONNECT PERMALINK TALKBACK (0 COMMENTS)

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