AISTHESIS

DISCOVERING ART WITH ALL THE SENSES

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Simple Reflections on Plastic

Nicola Farina

For a material which we commonly call plastic, it may appear to be an intellectual sophism to describe a context different from, and antithetical to, the one in which it commonly serves its purposes. While plastic is firmly anchored to the material of the world, through its objectual transformation it assumes forms which equip it to perform concrete actions in support of human life. The invention of this material has enabled man to produce an infinite diversity of items which accompany, assist and facilitate his operational needs. The heterogeneity and adaptability of plastic has occasioned an uncontrolled, hypertrophic development in all areas of doing and being, fostering unlimited use and a culture of artificial products. Over time, through the endless variety of its mutations and applications, it has been the fate of plastic to undergo an aesthetic reappraisal in which the concept of good (in the sense of cheap and long-lasting) is now paired with the concept of beauty (in the sense of attractive appearance). It is probably due to this transformation that the common perception of plastic as durable and non-perishable is now associated with the fascination of the accessible sublime. Eternal, ethereal beauty within reach of anyone who desires it.

However, there has been little eagerness to look closely at the ethical aspects of a revolution which has literally colonized our world, the earthly one in which we act and the mental one in which we process our actions.

Perhaps we have been so caught up in the thrill of the possible - which plastic has deluded us into expecting - that we have forgotten the visionary power of the imagination. The power of visionary thought pushed beyond the limits of contingent reality might have alerted us to the extreme, shocking scenarios which are now impinging on our atrophied consciousness, awakening us from the sleep of reason which produces monsters. And here we are in the present, our own time, one in which a bitter war that was never foretold is being waged between nature and artifice.

I believe that only Art can mediate between the contestants in this unresolved conflict. If Science can find ways of combating and reducing the plastics which have polluted our universe, Art – by educating us to think sensitively - can bring about an ethical

regeneration in the way we customarily behave. Through creative practices, Art can teach us how every material, whether natural or man-made, has a profound relationship to our senses and is nourished by a shared original sense: the incipit of a sensory event, understood as vision, as the source of the idea which, in taking form, finds an achieved and equally expansive state.

The artistic event is an inescapable threshold connecting the territories of nature and artifice because it does not take on the responsibility of achieving functional aims, but operates as the free expansion of an idea. This alchemical process can be triggered by means of the purification of the material in the primary filter of the creative spirit of the begetter, i.e. the artist as reference model, or any individual who appreciates and embraces the moral example.

This gives rise to a sort of phenomenology of the inner being, no longer split between its spiritual dimension and its own experience. An education tending to harmony, balance, respect and coexistence, in which progress, the evolution of technique and technology, the production of new materials and the introduction of new uses can stem our decline into compulsive consumerism.

This, I believe, may have been bequeathed us by the great artists of the past who pondered the destiny of man, who sought codes of profound humanity in their languages, highlighting in the aesthetics of form something more than a philological reading of belonging and heredity, demonstrating how it is possible to accomplish life in inanimate matter, how alongside real life we can imagine an ideal life, how the inert state of artificial matter can bind itself to animate life and generate new life, and how within this third life dwells the hope of radical change.

This becomes evident if we draw near and position ourselves in Alberto Burri's poetic dimension, moving into the realm of his "Plastiche" where the contrast with fire bends, contracts, and stretches apart the surface which, in the very act of deforming, takes on form, a new identity, a new existence.

Or how, in the early works of sculptor Tony Cragg, the plastic remains of objects washed up on the sea shore are recomposed into common everyday forms, macro objects or macro images made up from a mosaic of other objects with disparate shapes and colours and offering a concrete instance of the Gestalt relation, based on the principle that "the

whole is greater than the sum of its parts". In other words, the totality of what is perceived is determined by the sum of its constituent sensory stimuli, and by something more which enables us to understand the form in its entirety, recalling the principle of social, economic and ecological coexistence.

And again, Michelangelo Pistoletto's "Terzo Paradiso" (Third Paradise) where the graphic symbol for infinity, modified by the addition of a third ring, becomes an axiom of the harmony possible between artificial culture and nature, evolving in multiple iconic and performative representations. I would also like to mention his important "Italia riciclata" (Recycled Italy) in which the morphology of our peninsula is realized with plastics, scrap and waste which the artist reappropriates and whose sense he tranforms.

Claes Oldemburg employs objects replicated on an enlarged scale and betrayed by the use of synthetic and plastic materials which determine a drooping form, weighed down by gravity, indicating the futility of possession and the fatuousness of human destiny.

Pino Pascali, with his "Bachi da setola" (bristleworms), opens up the artificial universe to irony and disenchantment, no less than to a veiled nostalgia for a lost golden age when mankind lived in harmony with nature.

Christo's "Wrappings" in synthentic fabrics (nylon and polyester), by bringing about environmental mutations which we can experience, or concealing historical works of architecture, create in the onlooker a sort of metaphysical bewilderment.

Anish Kapoor's monumental installations in stretch pvc transform space into contemplative space, evoking our inner dimension through the dialectic between solids and voids.

Loris Cecchini interprets the nature-science relation through technology and recourse to synthetic materials which dilate the microcosm into a new habitat where artifice and nature coexist, striking a perfect balance.

Not least, there is Cracking Art which makes playful, multisensory, performative use of plastic , with entertaining forays into the environment.

They are just a few examples...

So, plastic and plastic materials can evolve from their original functions and become activators of sensibility, vehicles for gaining access to that spiritual dimension which

Kasimr Malevic calls “non-objective sensibility”, which does not identify with the apparent form or the explicit function, but with man’s empathic capacity to catch a glimmer of his own reflection in animate or inanimate realities, turning the “inappropriate” into that “appropriate” which is necessary for relationship and consciousness.

The Art Universe: how can we explore it (in the absence of certain prerequisites)?

Massimiliano Trubbiani

Even children are aware of it by now.

Art is a basic component, an integral part of our culture and history.

To get straight to the point: people with visual impairments cannot (yet) avail themselves of a valid education in art and aesthetics, and do not (yet) enjoy complete access to our artistic and cultural heritage, despite the notable advances in recent years.

Until comparatively recently, to our shame, very little attention was paid at a social level to the artistic needs of the blind and partially sighted. The so-called “visual arts” were to be be enjoyed only by those who had the necessary prerequisite: sight.

Otherwise it was all pointless.

But how can a blind person see a painting, or a sculpture, or the features of a temple, or the interior of a basilica…?

“If they can’t see, let them stay at home instead of going out and causing problems”.

Nowadays we can state with absolute certainty that also a blind person can enjoy (though in a different way) the wonders of art…with the necessary forethought, though, so as to ensure that artistic sites are equipped with the proper aids and supports that can act as aesthetic catalysts.

The appearance of museums and cultural sites which provide these features testifies to a renewed attention to the artistic needs of the visually impaired.

Needs which are not felt merely by the few, as we shall soon discover.

Even children know what this is about: education.

The problem, if we can call it that, needs to be addressed right from the first years of kindergarten. No question: the blind person needs to be educated in art and aesthetics

from a tender age. Only in this way will they be able, as adults, to appreciate the aesthetic and cultural value of a work of art, which they discover and make their own by means of study and tactile explorations, with the help of reproductions , i.e. typhlo-didactic aids.

Let’s consider them, these typhlo-didactic aids.

Those artifacts which are used by educators to assist them in, say, introducing pupils to the history of art are called supports or aids. But they can be used for other purposes, in other areas that may involve people with visual impairments. The so-called typhlo-didactic supports are extremely important in ensuring effective teaching and hence a grasp of the subject on the part of the end-user which is acquired quickly and proves lasting.

Not to beat abut the bush: how are these typhlo-didactic supports made? Are there various types?

Yes. Let’s say that there are as many types of aids as there are needs to be met by them. These supports are markedly different from one another, both in terms of their teaching functions and their cost of manufacture. Let’s try to list all of them, discussing their pros and cons, offering a quick overview based on a clear criterion. Every type of teaching has characteristics which can be made use of depending on the aim to be achieved.

It may seem pretty obvious but the most accessible art form for the blind is...sculpture!

And this is the first kind of typhlo-didactic support.

Sculpture, whether the original or a cast, is understood here as an object having three dimensions, wholly independent of further cognitive mediations (as is the case with other types of didactic aid). Thanks to its three-dimensional nature, the visually impaired can explore the object from any side, thus enabling them to recreate in their minds a precise tactile image of the subject represented (ah, I nearly forgot to mention that the tactile image is exquisitely mental).

So the first kind of tactile aid particularly suited to didactic-cognitive purposes is none other than sculture!

It’s no accident that the Museo Omero collection is made up of casts of the most important artworks to have come down to us, intact or otherwise…

And there’s no overlooking the fact that this is a new departure...especially the use that is made of these copies, the products of many Italian plaster cast galleries.

The history of the plaster cast is complicated and goes back a long way, as far as the Athenian galleries of the classical age; but the use made of these copies is generally didactic – in art schools, for example, for life drawing or sculpture exercises – whereas the uses to which they’re put by the Museo Omero are genuinely innovative!

So, of all the different typhlo-didactic types, sculpture (the three-dimensional object) is the one that comes closest to reality.

Another example of a three-dimensional typhlo-didactic aid are the small scale reproductions of pieces of architecture or architectural features (orders, decorations etc.) which are very useful in helping the visually impaired in the difficult task of appreciating the art of architecture.

It’s only by reducing the scale that a building can be shown in its entirety.

So that the visually impaired can get a better, more complete understanding, the architecural model should contain apertures which allow the interior to be explored.

Just as for sculpture copies, the architectural models are made of plaster, resin, wood (which is probably the favourite material for tactile purposes - due to its organic nature, its warmth to the touch, and the smells that it may give off...).

As a typhlo-didactic support, in second place comes the sculptural relief, which then divides into high relief and low relief. And there’s no shortage of differences between the two!

Let’s have a look.

The high relief has moulded volumes which emerge for more than half their extent from the smooth, and flat base, preserving a fair amount of pure, unencumbered three-dimensionality, free of perspective planes, foreshortenings and other distortions.

Low relief, on the other hand, has moulded volumes which emerge for less that half of their extent from the flat base, and can easily contain perspective flattening, i.e. distortions which seem to belong more to the world of drawing and painting than to sculpture.

Compared with the tactile exploration of a sculpture in the round, these types of support present one – or two – further levels of difficulty…

These two modes of representation could be understood, conceptually, as a sort of transition from the solid volumes of a sculpture in the round to the two-dimensionality of a drawing. The volumes slowly lose their solidity, deflating almost, leaving just the lines which make up the forms, projected onto a flat sheet.

As regards the practice of tactile exploration as a means of understanding, the high relief lends itself to exploration with the same sort of facility as sculpture in the round, its close relation. This is not the case with low relief due to the gradual loss of three-dimensional features and the introduction of perspective devices, like foreshortening, which simulate visual behaviour.

So, pursuing our coverage, we come to the representational method known as Relief Drawing. Also in this case, it divides into numerous facets, each with its own features…

By “relief drawing” we mean a sheet of paper (or other similar material), flat however, from which emerges a sign in relief, no higher than a millimetre.

The relief in question doesn’t aim to (and anyway, cannot) simulate the volumes of the objects to be represented, but it can skilfully depict the lines, the points and the surfaces: hence the structure of the object, its esssential form, projected onto the paper surface.

But for this representational technique it’s always advisable to avoid perspective images in favour of frontal or compositionally simple images.

Not that this ever happens!

The client frequently arrives with fairly complex images which are often not easily intelligible.

In these cases you proceed with a pronounced synthesis of the source image...where you aim to represent just the key subject(s), leaving out the rest. If the image will allow it, it ought also to be divided by fifths or planes of depth, represented physically on separate tables.

All this happens because it goes against the very nature of relief drawing which, as we mentioned at the beginning, is useful for representing schematic images.

If you need to represent a three-dimensional object - like a scupture or, even better, a piece of architecture – you need to resort to orthogonal projections which are more effective in their simplicity and more true to the nature of this technique.

There’s no denying that this method may present the visually impaired with major understanding difficulties, though these difficulties can be alleviated by choosing simple subjects and observing the syntactical rules of the tactile code for translating the image.

But it shouldn’t be rejcted wholesale! The relief drawing also has some advantages, not just limitations, which it takes a thorough knowledge of this language to fully appreciate, and thus head off the risk of unsatisfactory results.

But the first rule, approved by common sense, is to understand that in order to translate an image and make it fully exploitable by a blind person, you need to perform a specific task regarding the interpretation of the object (painting, photograph, etc.), so as to select the essential features, those that are easiest to depict when using this method.

This highlights the important role of the draftsman who acts as a sort of mediator between the thing to be depicted and the visually impaired end-user.

Let’s say it again (it won’t do any harm): relief dtawing is an appropriate technique for representing simple objects, frontal images, devoid of any perspectival artifice, like architectural plans, maps, geometric or architectural drawings (e.g. the facade of a building).

A relief drawing properly executed communicates its contents very well and lends itself to a fairly rapid tactile reading.

Where this category (relief drawing) is concerned, it’s important to mention that different techniques are used, each with its own particular way of reworking the object in question so as to make it suitable for tactile exploration.

Hence every technique produces different results, all of them extremely interesting; the choice of one technique in preference to another will be determined by the need to solve a specific problem of an educational kind, and a different one every time.

Because of its speed and simplicity in producing relief drawings from printed images, the technique most in demand is the so-called “Minolta oven” (though, in fact, Minolta hasn’t produced this sort of technology for years).

The support consists of a special kind of paper known as micro-capsule.

These are heat-sensitive cells mixed into a sort of paste which is spread on one side of the sheet. It’s on this sheet that you print the drawing, strictly in black and white, of which you want a relief

rendering. The sheet is then passed through a special infrared oven which can produce varying degrees of heat.

At this point, exposed to the hot blast, the heat-sensitive cells literally swell, but only at the point corresponding to the previously printed black mark .

The unprinted parts of the sheet remain smooth.

It’s a popular technique because it’s simple and relatively low-cost: all you need is a photocopier and/or an inkjet printer, the small infrared oven and microcapsule paper.

The difficulty lies in producing a drawing which effectively translates the image that you want to explore and understand. To get round this problem, it’s possible to download ready-made designs in black and white, ready to be printed and used.

So far so good, but the technique also has its drawbacks: it’s more suitable for depicting simple images, viewed frontally; more complex images create confusion because of the complexity of the lines and of the other features.

Furthermore, it only produces reliefs of a uniform height, roughly one millimetre: it’s not possible to provide for a more dynamic tactile experience that would allow the user to perceive the depth of certain images.

Again, the relief mark produced is not very clearly defined precisely because the heat-sensitive cells swell automatically, with no possibility of controlling their expansion.

Despite all this, the relief drawing on microcapsule paper remains the most sought-after product for typhlo-didactic aids.

A close relation of relief drawing on microcapsule paper is the relief produced with screen printing. The kinship is mainly a question of the type of result you obtain, but with some important differences.

The screen printing process, which can only be carried out by fully equipped printing works (and that's the first of the differences), allows reliefs in a silicone material, transparent or coloured, to be printed on previously printed panels.

Moreover, the characteristics of the material used (silicone rubber with its typically high elasticity and adhesiveness) means that you can print not only on paper, but on plastic, metals, glass and wood. This technique is very often used for panels and tactile maps for use outdoors, but also in publications of a different kind.

That said, it is an industrial technique which cannot be managed on your own.

Like the oven technique, the screen printed relief is of uniform height, and this can be a drawback.

Advantages include the fact that the relief mark is perfectly legible to the touch, clearly defined and distinct from the base; it is also possible to superimpose the reliefs on images visible to the eye (drawings, text), so its educational usefulness is twofold.

Belonging to the relief drawing category there are some techniques which I describe as hybrid because their nature is such that they exhibit plastic, volumetric and material features which link up with the concept of relief drawing.

The technique/language known as Gaufrage, or embossing, produces extremely interesting reliefs, beautiful to the sight and touch, and capable of more than one height level.

Production is almost exclusively an industrial operation. A press is necessary, as well as the means to acquire a matrix and counter matrix in materials which are highly resistant to torsion.

The relief requires extremely strong pressure from the press, which can arrive at several tonnes. The elasticity of the fibre counter matrix allows the pressure to be spread equally over all the contact surfaces, enabling the paper to mould itself to all the forms of the matrix without tearing or distorting.

This technique makes possible reliefs of different heights, from half a millimetre to a few millimetres, making it suitable for creating reliefs similar to those produced plastically.

They are quality products, very pleasing and attractive to look at and to explore with the hands.

Given the very high production costs, it’s a technique that calls for large press runs.

Another very useful technique/language for preparatory tactile purposes is collage, used mainly for creating tactile books.

The tactile book, devised in order to stimulate the creativity of children enjoying the full range of senses, can also be very useful for the visually impaired.

These books are made up of images reproduced with different materials, many of which are in common use and come from everyday objects (feathers, fabrics, cards of various thicknesses and textures, buttons, aluminium foil, etc), used as a sort of reference – at once perceptual, visual, tactile, auditory and symbolic – to the things shown in the illustrated story.

By adding some text in Braille, or recorded sound effects and verbal comments, these books become inclusive, fully-fledged teaching tools, suitable for the sighted and visually impaired alike.

Tactile books are easy and economical to produce and you can even make them yourself at home.

If anything, what is more complicated is to gain a knowledge of the expressive, tactile, sensory qualities of the material so as to be able to make the image, or the story that you want to depict, intelligible to the touch.

By comparison with the other modes discussed, the great advantage of the tactile book lies in the considerable imaginative and evocative power of the various materials when skilfully arranged among themselves. It’s that which stimulates the imagination, the tactile, visual, auditory senses of the user.

The various materials can have the tactile, visual, and also auditory characteristics of the materials which compose the object represented in the book, or at least evoke it to some degree.

For example, if you want to depict the sea, you can use sheets of aluminium foil, preferably slightly undulating and crumpled, so that by touching and moving them you experience sensations akin to the real: sea water that is cold, smooth and makes the same characteristic sound when gently moved.

Or clouds, for example: their soft, white appearance (though in reality impalpable) can be suggested by using very airy cotton...or the earth, using sand mixed with sawdust, attached to a support, reproduces the same warmth and texture.

Collage is an inclusive mode, an activity which promotes equal opportunities by enabling the visually impaired pupil to take part alongside those with no sensory deficit.

In fact, having developed a heightened tactile awareness, the visually impaired pupil could even take a leading role in helping the “able-bodied” pupils make the tactile illustrations.

The expressive, didactic mode of multi-material collage is a very useful activity for all categories of users, enabling them (especially the younger ones) to develop an aptitude for creative manual work, improving their psychomotor coordination which, alas, is increasingly neglected in today’s youngsters.

Seeing with the hands is possible; learning to see throught touch is indispensable

Azzurra Pizzi

It was the need to learn new methods and the desire to forge a career path which led me to enrol on the national training course on accessibility to the culural heritage, devised by the Museo Tattile Statale Omero in Ancona, and held last April.

Fascinated by the breadth of the programme and the calibre of the organization, as well as by the wide-ranging involvement of the lecturers, I arrived at the museum in the Mole Vanvitelliana – one of the symbols of Ancona – with the idea of letting myself be guided towards novel explorations which would prompt unbiased reflections, offer different viewpoints and reveal horizons free of preordained academic criteria.

My mother's illness has often had a bearing on my own conduct, but the specialist diploma in historical and artistic heritage made me aware of a priority: to try to fill some gaps concerning the role of art, over and above a knowledge of historical periods, the changes that have followed on from one another, with their respective artists, patrons and collectors.

I was concerned to question the traditional museological canon, to reflect on the concept of copies and their possible effective uses, to consider the needs but also the resources latent in the various ways of enjoying art adopted by the different publics, and to turn a critical eye on the issue of cultural inclusion, pondering the conditions required in order to create a multisensory museum space.

Learning to look while setting aside the primacy of sight had become crucial – and still is, given that nothing is ever definitive since everything is susceptible to change and to possibilities which are constantly emerging.

The following subjects were addressed during the course: besides the presentation of relevant legislation, technological aids, the specifics of visual impairment, blindness,

deafness, the characteristics of inclusive architectural design, educational services, teaching equipment, the planning of complex pedagogical programmes based on the aesthetics of the hand, the main focus of the course in its day to day progression was the recognition of tactile qualities. The analytical discernment practised by the sense of touch provides us with information (too often casually taken for granted) about temperature, smoothness, texture, weight, and the multiple variables potentially present in surfaces and the processes that they have undergone.

In order to guide tactile and kinaesthetic exploration, the nature and dimensions of the materials used cannot be disregarded; time, too, is essential so that you can gradually build up a mental image, slowly and subtly developed through sensitivity to details and associations.

In this sense, the haptic experience in the museum's contemporary sculpture room proved extraordinarily illuminating in making me actively aware that we can see different things through touch: a specialist guide led me blindfold in front of a sculpture about which I had received no information except where the top was. So, unconstrained by visual stimuli, I started to touch the work whose dimensions, on a first impression, seemed quite small. Following advice to start from the highest point of the sculpture, I gained a sense of a slender figure whose anatomy, to my fingertips, seemed to present some simplifications: it was rough in some places, vibrant in others. The intense mental activity triggering associations brimming with references drawn from art history called up the repertoire of the so-called primitive arts and the impressions conveyed by artists such as Pablo Picasso, to name but one.

The image steadily took shape as a result of the unusual added data, and the discoveries of tactile exploration were supplemented by the smells of the metal alloy which gives substance to the sculpture. After recognizing the main constituents of the piece and revolving the plinth to get a feel for the workmanship in the round, I removed the blindfold and instantly recognized Marino Marini, an artist whom I had studied in depth because he was integral to the subject of my Master's thesis.

My fingers had been touching a dramatically modelled work of Marini, Il Giocoliere ("The Juggler"), from 1953, cast in bronze and patinated.

Marini's formal hardness, observed and noted by the critics, had revealed itself beneath my touch and I had at last been able to feel the irregularities of the plastic passages which make his works memories of the past: in attempting to process the complex mental image, I recognized the influence of Etruscan-Italic art, I felt the distortion and the harshness.

If, then, the form is grasped, if the meaning insists on the cognitive domain and the symbol belongs to the interpretative sphere, art serves to develop and extend our abilities because it implies building up a grammar of forms.

Through touch, the gap separating the two entities, i.e. the work of art on the one hand and the onlooker on the other, really is eliminated: if the former returns to life – from a material, tactile viewpoint – the artist who conceived, manually produced and physically created it, is known because his work is felt and re-traversed. The person who experiences the artwork ultimately becomes an actor, protagonist, interpreter - no longer the hasty consumer of art, satisfied (and perhaps not that much) with the contemplative vision afforded by the retina.

By dint of its universality one could argue that art is not merely a formal game but amounts to a representation of the essence of things, becoming a pursuit provided with its own cognitive function.

The perceptible world is not merely appearance but reality which can be known, and when you grasp the form, you experience pleasure and gain knowledge: the sensitivity which produces the pleasure is not separate from the intellect, whose task it is to perceive form.

For example, Aristotle held that beauty is synonymous with adequacy to form: he thought that a thing is beautiful when it completely fulfils its purpose, which coicides with its form, and art – one of the dianoetic virtues proper to the rational soul – is the ability to produce (with the aid of reason) any object which fulfils this requirement.

By listening to accounts of the experiences of experts in this field, imbued with a deeply informed sense of the urgency for art to be accessible, I came to understand how for everybody – and not just for the blind and those with visual and/or auditory deficits – it is important to touch in order to make our knowledge of what is around us complete, just as it is true that (to borrow a comment from Italo Calvino) we write so as to make it possible for the unwritten world to express itself through us.

The great twentieth century storyteller repeatedly described the loss on the part of contemporary man of the conscious use of the five senses, stressing, too, man's very approximate tactile sensitivity. Calvino also said that for each of the senses he personally had to make an effort to master a range of sensations and nuances: like him, I, too, wanted to change myself and understand how much we have effectively seen, how much we have helped the world to see itself, to be present.

Art creates and transmits "visuality", impressions which are visual, and these must be made available to everyone. And if the hidden signs are to be searched for, as Calvino said of mushrooms, the world is not a panopticon but a pancripticon and we must vary our propositions, find new ways, discarding the beaten track in favour of accessible thought, nurturing our multimedia aptitude in the full awareness that "to touch is to know, to know is to represent, to represent is to communicate". The Sardinian artist, Maria Lai, approached the journey as a metaphor for research, and even today her Geografie conjure the possibility of the conjunction of distant planets and invite us to discover unexplored places: she herself said that she always sought cosmic spaces that were highly tactile, and invented new ones. If "to create an emotion is to bring all these different tactilities together", then let us continue to travel and learn to see through touch. Or, to put it in a way that invokes the etymology, let us learn "to make contact through touch and tact".

Aisthesis. Discovering art in every sense

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