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ART, ARTEFACT AND NATURE IN GILLO DORFLES'S WORK.  
FOR AN UNDERSTANDING OF OUR AESTHETIC CONSTITUTION

Filomena Parente

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*Where Gillo Dorfles sees an 'aesthetic quotient' able to promote a right relationship between man and nature, and nature and artefact, the concept of objectualization accounts for the ambivalent consequences of man's appropriation of nature, occurring in the shaping of reality. This concept appears in the arts but also in the production of ordinary man-made objects. The latter recalibrates our own understanding of art and nature. Starting from a definition of objectualization, the hypothesis of an equation between artificiality and aesthetics will be found. Taking into account Dorfles's claim about redeeming the unnatural as nature in its being the product of man's creativity, we will assess his works focusing on the case of the artefact and graphic-musical object. Dorfles's theory will be applied without following the different levels of analysis entirely: phenomenological, since the relationship between men, objects and machine is intentional; functional, as art depends on the role, determining a significance inside social condition, but on a symbolic or formal level, insofar as determining a stable presence of the significance at the level of the aspect, the shape becoming a mirror of men. In the end our own aesthetic constitution will be found together with the recalibration of the relationship with nature and the world through an idea of form combining artificialness and naturalness.*

## 1 Introduction

In 2002, Gillo Dorfles states he could not have imagined the topic of a 'conflict' between nature and man as ongoing (Dorfles 2008, 275). He reflects on a little girl playing with a *tamagochi*, a very popular Japanese toy in the early twenty-first century. She seems different from the one with a rag doll as she performs operations given by the toy while the latter imagines a whole story (Dorfles 2008, 277), exemplifying Dorfles's issue by a lack of creativity. Such examples could lead us to place him among the hosts of apocalyptic voices, criticizing the modern world. Actually, quoting a well-known book title by Umberto Eco (2016a), Dorfles is neither *apocalyptic* nor *integrated*. Dorfles addresses this issue in 1968 in *Artificio e Natura* (Dorfles 2003a). In this work, the Italian aesthetician, artist and art critic aims to promote an adequate consciousness of the 'limits' and 'value' of the relationship between man and nature and between nature and 'artifice' (*artificio*) (Dorfles 2003a, 9). By the word 'artifice', Dorfles means a falsification of the right relationship of man with nature. But such falsification might be better understood at the end of our investigation, when we understand how artificiality is included in the idea of nature by the reflection on the everyday artificial object, among other ordinary phenomena.

For Dorfles (2003a, 162) the artefact is the first element people encounter, making it crucial to his inquiry. He observes that the world around us is an artificial environment, which results from man's intervention as a continuous process that shapes reality while appropriating nature. But when artificiality starts showing detrimental consequences such as pollution, and many critics blame technology, regretting a return to nature, he claims there is no such place to go back to. Furthermore, whether it is a matter of fact that a risk is embedded in the technological overtaking of human faculties (Dorfles 2003a, 35-36), we have to acknowledge our artificial world and release it from unnaturalness with an act of conscience (Dorfles 2003a, 31-32).

By the word 'nature', Dorfles means every organic being. However, what he means by 'redemption' is not equally clear. Contrarily to the nostalgic critics, he denies the 'absolute naturalness', that is a pure or primeval idea, as a myth used for justifying ideologies or preserving tradition (Dorfles 2003a, 25-36). The most relevant example is the appreciation of the third in music considered by the Ancient Greeks as a dissonance for a long time. This example demonstrates that a socio-political system is involved in aesthetic responses and that perception changes through time. Briefly, for Dorfles's aim, a common idea of nature is acceptable in so far as it needs to be studied in relationship with humans.

Dorfles's reflections will be discussed to understand the structure of an aesthetic study on nature and man, in which the redemption of unnaturalness is investigated from outside the mystic and nostalgic standpoint. Firstly, a hidden issue will be pointed out so as to outline the role that human artefacts – including art – have in the relationship with nature. Through this analysis, a key point will be found in a confluence of artificiality (human need to leave a fingerprint) and aesthetics (creativity), which are seen as two sides of the same coin. Such confluence will lead us in the field of symbols, which are the communicative structures of reality. Thus, the redemption will come as a reflection on the aesthetic constitution of man since human faculties give shape to reality. In fact, nature is organic as far as it is aesthetic, since nature is the process of continuous becoming and puts together the metamorphic development of plants and the iridescent vortex of the symbolic substitutions as well as artistic production.

## 2 Moving inside a tangle

Maybe the hidden issue of *Artificio e Natura* (2003) is *objectualization*, a concept used to point out the contemporary becoming 'object' of statues, paintings and musical performances due to commodification and fetishization but also to the critical use of such tendencies by the artists; to introduce the complexity of human appropriation of nature; and

point out man's risk of becoming the object of artefacts and machines. Objectualization in the latter occurrence is introduced in relation to technique elsewhere (Dorfles 2003b). Technique is the complex of the operational schemes we use to implement creative and productive processes. Whereas knowledge is divided into specialized fields, technology, on the one hand, is available to all, on the other, it overtakes human faculties, often subverting the order of things. Due to a lack of intentionality, we see many minds that are unable to embrace the entire operational scheme and confine themselves to the execution of a pre-determined task. This subversion happens also in ordinary practice. For example, in the use of household appliances, people do not know how machines work and adapt their needs, rhythm, and life to the machines' operations. In this case, objectualization is man's process of becoming an object, which happens due to his lack of knowledge and control over devices.

Dorfles refers to phenomenological considerations that cross one of the several "ways of the Post-Croce renewal" (D'Angelo 2017, 152), which enlivens the Italian debate. Even though further studies are needed to better understand his position, as well as touching semiotic and structuralist theories, it is claimed that Dorfles shares a phenomenological attitude (D'Angelo 2017, 164) from the so-called *Milan School*, a term designating a group of philosophers (Paci, Cantoni, Formaggio, Anceschi), who took over from Antonio Banfi (Zinelli 2012, 308). On the one hand, Dorfles is not philosophically formed, but in contact with those personalities. On the other hand, only some phenomenological connection points in his work are found that result from a generational interest (Cesari in Dorfles 2017, XV). Thereby, some of his ideas partially come from this theoretical atmosphere. In our specific case, the teleological and intentional structure of our operational schemes directly reminds us of Enzo Paci, with whom Dorfles has a deep confrontation. A constant correspondence was noticed between their research, which developed and led to a scientific approach to aesthetics by the means of



the concept of form connected to symbolic structures (Cesari in Dorfles 2017, XLIII-XLIV).

This occurrence of objectualization is a moment in this dialogue. Dorfles claims that when we use telephones, scissors and toothbrushes, we are performing a technique that follows an automatic conscience. The question of objectualization is presented as the technique's loss of intention (compare Paci 1967 in Dorfles 2003a, 23; Paci 1963 in Dorfles 2003b, 31); that is, its purpose (or *telos*). This conception of objectualization means that we might lack the knowledge of the 'ontogenesis' of the operational scheme; in other words, the understanding of the sense that constitutes the relationship the world is weaved of. This understanding is the ultimate sense of the concept of teleological intentionality that, according to Dorfles (2003b, 57-77), underlies everyday practices and kinetic rituals by which the body extends to artefacts and devices.

However, when the concept of objectualization is introduced in *Artificio e Natura* (2003) in reference to the relationship between art and nature, man and art, man and nature, Dorfles recalls the Hegelian-sounding sentence that states that, if nature is given once and for all, man exists since he doubles himself. Nonetheless, even owing much to Hegel, Dorfles cannot endorse his position as symbolized by the terminology: the word 'objectualization' substitutes for 'objectification' (Dorfles 2003a, 23).<sup>1</sup>

The statement opens to a tangle of inextricably intertwined intersections, about which little help comes from Dorfles. Without going into details, we can say that the risk of man becoming an object is meant as a form of alienation. Notwithstanding, human beings always make themselves a thing in a dynamic that has to be recognized as unavoid-

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1 Perniola (2017, 168) confirms the autonomy from Hegel.

able and constitutionally positive.<sup>2</sup> Here comes the second occurrence of the term. For Dorfles, man objectualizes in elements of reality to become human and not get lost in nature (Dorfles 2003a, 23). So, objectualization accounts for our relationship with nature when admitting an intertwining of mental processes and material work as well as the flowing of human consciousness in nature and reality.

Given that, objectualization is generally a translation of the conscience. Even though Dorfles never clears it up, we do not think he could deny it. Such a translation is better articulated in the man-made object process of production.

### 3 From the spear to the Coca-Cola bottle

If considered “from a rigorously aesthetic point of view” (Dorfles in Kepes 1966, 4) in our modern “forest” (Dorfles in Kepes 1966, 3; Dorfles 1968, 47) an artefact is a *Gegenstand*, not an *Object* (Dorfles 2003a, 43). It is a “direct and active manipulation of any matter whatsoever present in our surroundings” (Dorfles in Kepes 1966, 1).<sup>3</sup> Man creates it in response to one of his primal impulses, which is leaving a fingerprint on the world, whether it is “the primitive utensil” or “the most refined precision instrument”. Any man-made object has both a function and an aspect, a facet enveloping it, which is called ‘artistic’ or ‘aesthetic functionality’ (Dorfles in Kepes 1966, 1; Dorfles 2003a, 44). In other words, any artificial object is constitutionally aesthetic. Such aesthetic quality is double since artefacts have always constituted an extension as they have an ‘integrative’ and a ‘counterpositive’ value. On the one hand, they are suitable instruments for improving and prolonging the operational faculty; while, on the other, they are part of our environment, where they become autonomous and stand before man as if they

2 For a general view of the issue see Eco (2016b, 235-290). Dorfles and Eco have been found convergent in the interest in the communicative implications of the work of art and in some development of the concept of form; see Cesari in Dorfles (2017, LXIV-LXV).

3 Dorfles’ English essay translates some paragraphs of *Artificio e Natura*.

were an extraneous body, an element to be appropriated or discarded. In Dorfles's words:

the man-made object becomes analogous to that we can define as 'the nature-created object'; that is to say natural element spontaneously born but which can assume the character of an 'object' in the eyes of the spectator. (Dorfles in Kepes 1966, 2; Dorfles 2003a, 46)

The exchange and confusion between the unnatural and the natural reveal what we see as a constitutional ambivalence, whose exemplar case is the artwork. Dorfles thinks of tree trunks and hives used as artefacts in works of art as examples of the pleased observation of nature after man has camouflaged it and made it unnatural (Dorfles 2003a, 44). Until recently, art has constituted one of the aspects of human creativity, which is able to preserve and glorify nature. The artwork had reproduced it and been inspired by it, while, conversely, it had constituted sort of a natural product. Its characteristics were uniqueness and non-reproducibility (Dorfles 2003a, 18).

A tacit equation can be observed between artificiality and aesthetics, both coming from that primal creative impulse; the first becomes usefulness, while the second is its reflexive form. Both look at nature; one to take control, while the other to play with its forms. Without any conflict, nature and artefact mingle in the reflexive forms of our creativity. A game of giving and taking, whose ambivalence is almost poetic.

Only *almost* as, in front of the multifaceted and ever-changing contemporary scenario, Dorfles answers the question 'what is art?' with the idea of a function in a historical and social context, which comes together with its materials and techniques as an artefact that differs from ordinary things since it was created in accordance with freedom

(Dorfles 1967).<sup>4</sup>

Dorfles's functional conception of art is believed to explain the passage from uniqueness to reproducibility by analysing the relationship between use and form. With the advent of machines, they cease to diverge, making the artificial-aesthetic equation more evident. We state that the art-function does not mean a contingent role in society, but an operational vector rooted in human's faculty, that is, the possibility of activating the reflexive dynamic, typical of forms. Otherwise, the idea of artistic functionality would not be linked to a primal impulse.

Indeed, for Dorfles, the passage from handmade to mechanical aesthetically changes the way the man-made-object is produced. If the artisan's final touch was once waited for, now the aesthetic moment comes before the material production with its design (Dorfles 2003a, 45), determining the presence of what Dorfles calls 'aesthetic quotient' in everyday artefacts, that is, a formal quality sensed in things. Contemporary art saw it and started producing collages and assemblages, or still lifes, combining man-made objects together with natural ones up to the sixties, when Pop Art put ordinary things into galleries, intersecting the applied arts and their commercial involvement, and revealing an osmosis of high and low taste (Dorfles 2003b, 157).

Think of the Coca-Cola bottle. It substitutes tree-trunks as there is rarely a chance of manipulating formless materials. For us, it shows how the co-presence of the need of taking control while producing artificial instruments and playing with forms reveals itself deeply aesthetic, transforming the way we artistically leave a fingerprint (compare

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4 The definition of art has to be considered the question by which Italian Aesthetics tries to understand its limits, tasks and status, especially in relation to philosophy (Dorfles 1953; Russo 2010; Russo 2013). Consider the trajectory of Garroni (from semiotic to the non-special philosophy). On this, see also Eco (1968), where he compares Pareyson and Formaggio so as to find a *scientific* approach. Dorfles's position is different because of his non-philosophical background, in fact, his idea of *function* depends on the interest in arts like architecture and design, or disciplines like anthropology and psychology.

with Dorfles 2003b, 234). However, we seem to be moving away from our goal, since one could say that a Coca-Cola bottle has nothing to do with nature or poetry. Actually, it is the right direction as its plastic form invites us to grasp the bottle while symbolising the pleasure the drink gives us by reminding us of an attractive woman's silhouette. The aesthetical game of artificial objects reaches a completely unnatural perspective: the game of communication, where art's freedom means being able to not follow a normative nature, proper to a special kind of animal.

#### 4 On laughter, table legs and musical performances

From our point of view, Dorfles's best example of objectualization is the graphic-musical object *Stripsody* (1966) (Dorfles 2003a, 153), as it includes the first kind of objectualization we mentioned: the making of a performance into an object. *Stripsody* (Fig 1.) is one of Cathy Berberian's musical pieces, which objectualized as both a recording and a graphic book. Its score is truly a visual artwork designed by the painter Eugenio Carmi and plays with the comics pop-onomatopoeic language on the basis of an Eco's idea. In the introduction, Eco (in Berberian and Carmi 2013, 5-7) writes about the noises we are submerged in, explaining that their primitive suggestion works in Carmi's signs, and becoming a new musical language just like noises in comics (Berberian and Carmi 2013).

Dorfles thinks about comics as a metaphorical-communicative structure when it *objectualizes* man in figures. For example, a table leg that literally translates into a human leg (Dorfles 2003a, 94). Firstly, we report Dorfles's remark that, when we see a picture like that, we laugh. Animals do not laugh, so laughter is a human trait beyond the bio-physiological condition, indicating that humans are alien to nature and constitute a second artificial nature (Dorfles 2003a, 85). Secondly, the literal translation (present also in Berberian's original musical notation) and the making of music into a graphic object means transposing one

thing into something else, so music reports our on-going signification processes that consist of symbolizing and finding connections and analogies. Thirdly, the graphic score becomes an artefact, a book available for purchase, objectualizing the performance of the singer. Language and musical events become objects (Dorfles 2003a, 152).

The literal objectualization of a performance into artefact refers to the state of the arts at the time: their tendency to underline the material condition of artistic productions (paintings becoming empty frames, or material brush strokes, or holes in the space of the canvas). Similarly, the literal and symbolic transformations draw the attention on their condition of possibility: human faculties. For us, such a turn is based on the reflexive quality of form.

A step back. For Dorfles, man is not only a rational animal, he is also a symbolic one. Considering Cassirer and Vico (Dorfles 2017, 1583-1612), Dorfles uses a complex concept of symbol. We think that, since the symbol is anything which trades place with something else (Dorfles 2017, 756), it is a model of significant relationship (compare Franzini and Mazzocut-Mis 2010, 202). But this model depends on the inclusion of irrational or almost rational processes in his idea of mind, meaning the complex of human faculties in their relationship.

For Dorfles, the presence of symbolic elements is intimately bonded to human thinking because of a need for communications that goes beyond logic and rationality. Such communication uses more plastic and flexible means that are suitable for experiences, or even concepts, not yet rationalized (Dorfles 2017, 756-757). With no definite concept, human thinking produces significant forms, which eventually externalize human making. In other words, here, we find analogies, metaphors, figures, and images that move through significant substitution and communicate without concepts or with evanescent ones on a formal or plastic level. In coherence with the aesthetic functionality, this process of substitution also happens with the symbolic aspect of the artefacts;

for example, when we crave to drink a Coca-Cola or when the ballpoint pen starts dominating the market by an aspect that symbolises its functions (Dorfles 2017, 758) thanks to a correspondence between its shape and its significance (Dorfles 2001, 51).

Given that idea of mind and its connection with communication, the artificial world around us is a web of symbols and the result of the web of connections that conform to our mind and our hands (or machines). At the beginning, we discussed a web when it comes to the teleological intentionality. Both the intentional and symbolic structure account for the kind of relationship man has with reality and nature; one that pertains to the use of things and devices, and the second to the form. We add that two converging sides in an aesthetically constituted world conform to our own aesthetic constitution. Since humans are symbolic animals, who extend to useful and formal objects so they do not get lost in nature. In other words, animals leaving a fingerprint to remember that the world develops in a continuous, relational process, which is analogical to the metamorphic that becomes organic nature.

### **5 Redeeming or reflecting? A Question by way of conclusion**

The shape of the plastic Coca-Cola bottle invites us to satisfy our need using a significant-symbolic mechanism. The latter was also at work in the primitive impulse to create objects but recalibrates on the level of a second nature; as such, it reminds us of our fingerprint as well as our formal game. If the artificial-aesthetic equation appears to justify a definitive detachment from nature by determining an abyss between artefact and natural object, the aesthetic quotient persists even in the anonymous products of industry because their shapes are able to signify their function, putting the issue on a constitutive aesthetic level.

Dorfles thinks that one has to redeem the unnatural as natural with an act of conscience to resolve the conflict between artefact and nature. In the space of a relationship of appropriation, there is a line between man and nature where the objects are more or less man-made, more or less

natural, on the basis of the specificity of time. The task of distinguishing is ours by singular judgments (see Crawford in Kevy 2004, 306-324).

Such an approach is radically relational since it abandons the idea of a definition of its terms. It is acceptable because we believe that Dorfles has an *aesthetic* and *organic* approach to the issue. According to Dorfles, man and nature as well as artefact and natural object do not have to be thought of as opposites but as polarities that presuppose each other.<sup>5</sup> The *organic* quality accounts for the analogies and metaphors between them, leading us from the life of nature to the one of our symbolic minds. This organic vision is able to identify a negative element in the oscillation between poles by relying on conscience. Such structure seems coherent with Dorfles's view, when he refers to Goethe (Dorfles 2003a, 31; Dorfles 2017, 160-166) and distinguishes the 'artifice' as the falsification that is capable of subverting the right way of being and experiencing (Dorfles 2003a, 72).<sup>6</sup> But Dorfles's approach is also *aesthetic* since his redemption eventually means rethinking our constitution in the work of our mental structures and in the making that shapes reality; that is, an aesthetic work. Through the symbol, which is an iridescent form in metamorphic development and a vortex of analogical connections, an aesthetic quotient is installed in every object as a breach of conscience, relying on a formal quality, which reminds us of human faculties. Such a dynamic was retraced insisting on a coincidence between artificiality and aesthetics. This could have led us to Hegel.<sup>7</sup> However, the only real nature is a pole in a dynamic relationship; such nature is indeed artificial in a deeply aesthetical sense as far as it lives in metamorphic forms that communicate with us.

In conclusion, one has to sense an aesthetic quotient to redeem the unnatural by its forms. Without turning the oscillatory motion, our

5 See Perniola (2017, 9).

6 Or even *kitsch*. On *kitsch* and taste see Dorfles (1990; 2004).

7 We found it, for example, in Mecacci (2012, 179).



thought has to follow into an almost mystical and conciliatory vision of the world and society. Without mysticism and conciliation, the redemption will simply be called a reflection of and on our aesthetic constitution, underlying the commitment of our conscience with a fingerprint, which is neither the touch of the genius nor an abuse on something innocent but the trace of our work, whether it be a mental, almost irrational process, or the production of a new piece of reality.

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Illustrations

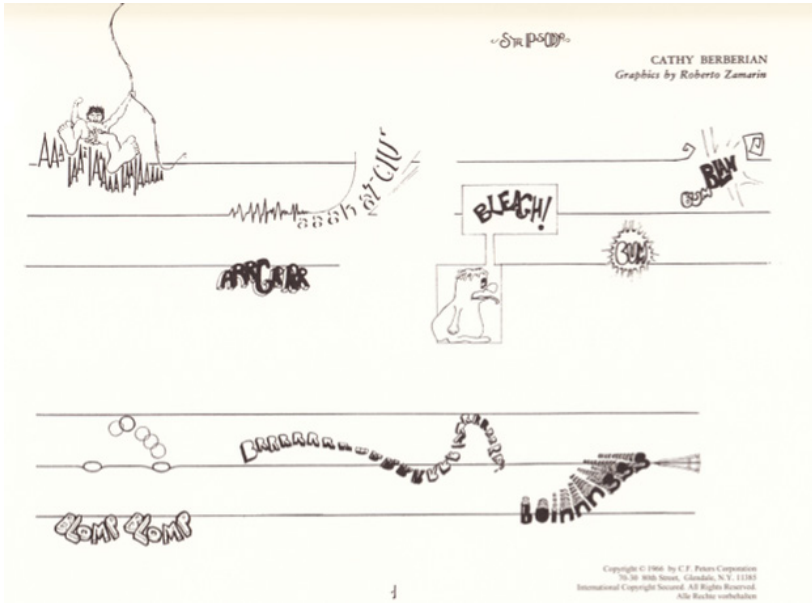


Fig 1. Fplanas24, Stripsody score (Wikimedia Commons, 2016). Reproduced under license: CC BY-SA 4.0. A page of the 1966 score of Cathy Berberian musical piece whose graphic is by Roberto Zamarin, an example of literal translation. The version designed by the painter Eugenio Carmi is instead both an artwork and the best example of objectualization.



# Notes on Contributors

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earned a Bachelor's Degree in Philosophy (2015) and a Master's Degree in Philosophical Sciences (2017) from the University of Bologna. Currently, she is a PhD candidate in the joint Florence-Pisa Doctoral School in Philosophy. Her project focuses on the intersections between Donna J. Haraway's work, Disability Studies, feminist posthumanism and technoscience, and also includes the analyses of science fiction narratives. She has published articles in these research areas. Her first monograph, a re-worked version of her Master's thesis on the embodiment of the birth control pill, is forthcoming (*Il corpo in/atteso*, Pisa, ETS). She has conducted a thesis-related research period in collaboration with the University of Oslo. In 2021, she has collaborated with Istituto Italiano per gli Studi Filosofici in a philosophical multimedia project.

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## FILOMENA PARENTE

graduated *cum laude* in Philosophical Science at the University of Naples "Federico II" (Italy) with a thesis in Aesthetics entitled *Andy Warhol, 1962. An analysis of Two Acrylics and of the Aesthetological Problems They Rise* after taking a Piano degree. Her current research is focused on the Italian aesthetician Gillo Dorfles with the aim of detecting and examining the unseen theoretical issues of his manifold and multidisciplinary enquiry. Her research interests are in Aesthetics, Philosophy of art, Music and Popular culture.

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## LAURA PARTIN

has a bachelor's degree in graphic design and a master's degree in the theory of contemporary art. After her master's studies, in 2012, she

obtained a scholarship in Venice at the Romanian Institute of Culture and Humanistic Research, thus continuing her artistic practice and the research project started during her master's degree, titled "The Aesthetics of Deception". The research, which is at the moment being developed as a thesis at Paris 8 University, consists in a parallel between certain contemporary art works and experiments in social psychology, as well as a genealogy of deception in the avant-garde movements of the 20th century. Its starting point of the research is an article by the British philosopher Peter Goldie titled "Conceptual art, social psychology and deception". The term "deception" refers to the expectations of the audience, deliberately bewildered in certain contexts. Certain contemporary art works and social psychology experiments have this necessary deception of the audience or participants in common. The similarity is the effect of the event on the audience and the reactions that reveal a social reality or recurring psychological mechanisms.

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