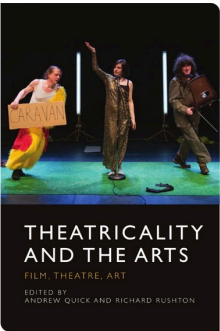


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Film, Theatre, Art

Edited by Andrew Quick, Richard Rushton

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3. Theatricality and Dissonance: Frictions in Contemporary Networked Performance Practices

By Jane Frances Dunlop

It is hot at Gasworks, a small gallery in southwest London, and it is busy. The space on the street is filled with people drinking; it is a muggy May evening in 2017. This is the opening of *Hollow Tongues*, a virtual reality installation and performance from (play)ground-less. In the foyer, a rendered landscape plays on a monitor beside a desk where someone hands out beers. Nearby, there are thick curtains that led into a room that is plush deep pink and dark red. The room has velvet curtains around the walls and a thick carpet. At the door, there are white cloth boots to put over shoes before entering. The sound of voices fills the room: the soundscape is being created live by the four artists and streamed into the space. Four artists are performing. Sarah Bayliss, María Angélica Madero, Ninna Bohn Pedersen and Belén Zahera trade VR objects and text within the virtual space they have created for the purpose of performing together from four different cities in as many countries. There is a jar of candies near the door and pillows on the ground, people sit listening and sucking candies as they watch others take their turns with one of the Oculus Rifts. Inside the Oculus, the rendered landscape shows a tongue that seems to jitter as it turns before it all goes black and the landscape changes.

A few months later, I am tired and it is the middle of the night as I sit in front of my computer. A green halo of Zoom screensharing outlines the screen and instantly my desktop is mirrored on a monitor in Melbourne and San Francisco. I am performing as part of *Documents of the Future: Invitation to Edit*. Beside me on stage, and in the gallery, a projection of a Google Doc. Images drop in and words appear in different colours from different cursors. The document is being edited by artists located elsewhere, by numbers of the audience who sit with the laptops and phones open as they watch. We are all together taking part in making something of this digital place. I'm next to them, in three places at once: it is midday Sunday 9 September and I am onstage in Melbourne at the Australian Centre for Moving Images as part of Channels, a festival of experimental video works. It is evening Saturday 8 September and I am part of the performance installation at CTRL+SHFT Collective, a gallery space in San Francisco, USA. It is very early in the morning in London, where I sit bringing up videos and speaking softly to the camera as my performance unfurls on my screen. The event is many screens, mirroring many desktops. The artists who participate and perform get tangled in with the audiences who are present and shifting about the document. It is unruly, contained by screens but messy and too much within them. I perform for an hour and then go to sleep.

This chapter focuses on how the 'back-and-forth' relations that occur via the internet – a technology with ever-growing centrality in the contemporary social landscape – matter for performances and performative art practices. I will consider these two works in order to think about what is happening when internet-mediated relation is performed. It is, I will argue, the theatricality of both these works that lends a broader critical

relevance to them. ‘Theatricality,’ as work by performance scholars such as Tracy Davis and Thomas Postlewait (2003), Marvin Carlson (2002) and Josette Féral (2013) have demonstrated, does not simply reference spectacle in theatre but is a concept that accounts for a process – both in artistic performance and within social life – wherein the construction of performance *as* performance is visible to its spectators. It is a concept that brings attention to the relation between spectator and the performer (or object, event, space). My focus is on that process within performances that make use of the internet and specifically on how theatricality assists in generating what I term ‘dissonance’, the affective consequence of how emotional and technological politics become imbricated. Dissonance emphasises the inharmonious or discordant. It implies an imperfection that aligns both with the noise and friction of technological communication (Chun, 2016; Galloway, 2012; Mejias, 2013) with the various ways (near) failure characterises performances (Carlson, 2002; Bailes, 2011; Stein, 1988) as well as our experiences of relation. This chapter investigates why and how that dissonance is valuable as a tactic for understanding and approaching relations mediated by the internet.

Theatricality is a kind of performance noise: it both confirms and exposes the conventions a performance operates through. Building on this, my use of theatricality will provide a means of understanding the dissonance of relation produced in the sites and shared moments instantiated through internet-situated performances. By internet-situated performance, I mean performances that enfold in meaningful ways on the internet and are also sustained through the internet. Dissonance can be understood as one approach to what Donna Haraway, with reference to the work of Marilyn Strathern, terms the ‘muddles and tangles’ that productively trouble attempts to create

universalised perspectives (Haraway, 1988; Haraway, 2016; Strathern, 2004). Strathern and Haraway are among the feminist scholars whose approach to knowledge making and understanding inform my own work both philosophically and artistically. They draw attention to the tensions that belie a universal perspective, and call for a productive engagement with those tensions. Their emphasis on the ‘muddled’ or ‘tangled’ is an acknowledgement of the difficulties that come with resisting universalising perspective. In a sympathetic theoretical move, Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing’s *Frictions: An Ethnography of Global Connection* argues for friction as a critical strategy for nuancing universals (2011, 6). Acknowledging that universals have a value in research, Tsing’s book uses friction to provide a theory for situating those universals: these ‘engaged universals’ are complicated by attending to the frictions between macro and micro contexts that universalising concepts often erase. Here, I use friction primarily to describe technological difficulties. However, the artworks I consider and create as well as the critical propositions I make are a consequence of entangled social and technological systems. For this reason, Tsing’s use – the friction between different conceptual scales and research paradigms – provides nuisance to both technological rendered friction as well as to the tensions of theatricality. These frictions underwrite my artistic research, an example of which is part of the case studies I discuss here. These frictions, and their possibilities, are also the bedrock of my epistemological agenda: I begin and end with them, in my artwork and in my research.

Theatricality

Theatricality brings to the stage the frictions which trouble the notion of a ‘frictionless

user experiences'. It occurs in artworks that remind us that there are frictions, some that we experience and some that are invisible to us as consequence of our privilege. And, in return, these works provide a means for clarifying why the spectatorial emphasis of theatricality continues to be a vital artistic tactic. The artworks that are the focus of this chapter amplify the digital operations that mediate our relationships. Both works not only make use of the tropes of tools of networked communications but also invite the audience into them. They spectacularise the now ubiquitous and often mundane processes that mediate our relationships and thus, turn our attention back to those processes. They evoke a theatricality that relies on an exchange between the spectator and the spectacle, a friction that shows both operations as well as the intersubjective agreement as to what those operations are.

Both the artworks I discuss here are products of the internet. They are occurring online, are supported by networked processes that enable them to manifest something between multiple geographic locations with various actors affecting what occurs. They are products of the internet and they are products of their time. Both make use of the networked communication processes that abound around us, the ease with which these tools mediate us and with which we access them. Artists involved in each have extrapolated from their lives, not just their collaborative processes but also the ways in which they conduct their relationships with friends, family, lovers. At ACMI, the audiences bring their own computers and participate. At Gasworks, the audience is asked to stay off the internet so that the VR can load faster. These works respond to and occur within the technical and social processes of the internet. At each, the spectators understand the context; the relationships that are staged within them and the technologies that mediate them. They are artefacts of contemporary digital ubiquity,

postdigital in the sense that these tools are present and ordinary aspects of daily life (Chun, 2016; Berry, 2014; Berry & Dieter, 2015). *Hollow Tongues* and *Documents of the Future* are reflective of the persistence of the internet as a communication tool and its widespread adoption as a central facet of life throughout vast areas of the world.

In this chapter, I will argue that theatricality can be approached as a kind of performance friction, produced by something comparable to the glitch or noise of technologies that draws our attention to malfunctions and near or real failures. I propose dissonance as an (aesthetic and) affective quality that is consequence of an imbrication of technological and emotional frictions specific to digital ubiquity. Following this, I contend that theatricality provides an artistic context and support for what I term dissonance. The emphasis on relation and the conventions within the frame of the theatrical are extrapolated into the interactions and systems that are the basis of interface functions. Through theatricality, the internet communications processes brought onstage by these performances provide valuable insights into the ways that relation and sociality are enabled through these technological processes.

My use of theatricality develops from theorisings of the term that are rooted in theatre and performance studies. As a quality of performance, a focus on theatricality enables critical assessment of what happens as these artistic modes begin to take on, and take place within, networked communication. Whereas performativity brings attention to the generative possibilities of performance, theatricality focuses on the relational implications. Drawing from the work of key performance studies scholars (Carlson, 2002; Davis, 2003; Féral, 2013; Foster, 2002) as well as social anthropologic approaches (Goffman, 1959; Burns, 1972), the definition of theatricality I propose –

and that I am working with throughout – relies on two interwoven aspects:

- 1) an engagement with – such as a reiteration or intentional/‘artistic’ deviation – with established conventions that a performance reproduces. The ‘failure’ to make invisible and the resulting visibility of these codes (be it socially reified codes or generic conventions) suggests an awareness or volition in their reiteration that differentiates theatricality’s ‘performing’ from performativity’s ‘doing’.
- 2) the presence of a spectator who experiences, evaluates and reflects on a performance’s engagement with ‘conventions’.

Central to theatricality is its ability to mark a moment where a performance is seen to be functioning as a performance, a quality that can be attributed to artwork and social performances alike. Theatricality is a concept that highlights the spectator, the audience, the beholder as a person who enters a relation with an artwork. It foregrounds the agency a person (the spectator, the audience, the beholder) has within the meaning that is made from a work of art, meaning that is contingent on and a consequence of the relation between a person who sees a work and an artwork. In the theatre, this weighting of the audience-performer relation offers conceptual framework for understanding performance as a practice of social relation. Similarly, noise – in the context of technological communication – is a result of the imperfections of a connection, a failure to perform as expected. It confirms that there is a connection being made between two parties even if that relation struggles or fails to seamlessly occur. The awareness of being inside a system of relation, be it a digital communication operating through the internet or performer-spectator relation of performance, that connects theatricality with dissonance here.

Tracy Davis, in 'Theatricality and Civil Society', argues that the historical usage of the term is significant for linking between theatre and spectating to the way intersubjectivity is experienced in the public sphere. Davis argues that spectatorship rehearses an ethically responsible relation to the other, its ability to 'bring into being self-possession of a critical stance' (Davis 2003, 153). This 'self-possession of a critical stance' is integral to how theatricality reflects my aim of articulating the critical possibilities of relation and subjectivity that unite theatricality and dissonance. It is a quality that is associated with the spectatorial experience of a performance, a quality that relies on the viewer's evaluation of a given work. When thinking through a visibility or attention to the emotional and technological politics of internet communication, theatricality provides a tactic for understanding these systems as intertwined. It foregrounds a relational experience, relying on the presence of both performers and audiences to feel the work's working.

In highlighting processes of construction, it provides a means for locating the effects of performance in the ongoing exchange between the various positions the work enables. Theatricality's historical association with a failure to produce perfect representations (Bailes 2011, 7; Davis 2003, 139), and the emphasis on the theatrical frame it creates, aligns productively with glitch, noise and friction in digital technologies. By bringing audiences into the sites of performance, an 'invitation to edit' the performing document or an immersive virtual environment within an immersive installation, these works necessitate an awareness of the performances as performances. As Davis writes, 'The actor is always conscious of being on stage: it is the audience who occasionally forgets this, and in doing so may believe that the actor is more (or less) than he is' (Davis 2003,

139). Here, the theatrical nature of these works and the position of the audiences within each are a means of positioning technology as an actor. The layers of mediation and intermediality create an intense consciousness of being onstage, a being onstage which is – in these works – synonymous with being on the internet. Each work stretches to find a sense of being together within and despite the digital tools they use, an experience that mirrors sense of connectivity and distance that characterise internet communication more broadly.

Dissonance

In *Off the Network* (2013), Ulises A Mejias's study of the political and social value of sites defined in opposition to networks such as the internet, Mejias argues that we need to understand that noise communicates presence (2013, 17). This 'noise as presence' underscores difference, communicating 'alternative subjectivities' (ibid., 16-17). Similarly, the theatrical communicates presence within the theatre as the spectator accounts for their evaluating position. This is, as I will discuss later, where the critical possibilities of theatricality are located. The attention of presence enables evaluation and reflection. Through the attention to relation present in theatricality, these artworks make it possible to more clearly see how the technological functions of internet communication become metonymically related to the emotional and affective experiences they mediate. Relation, as network connection and as affective experience, is always subject to imperfection and irritations. This emphasises how we are performing our relationships through these technologies; it highlights the conventions and assumptions systems operate with and foregrounds the necessary give and take of

spectator-performer relations.

In *Hollow Tongues* ((Play)ground-less, 2017a), the audience is invited to step into the moments shared by the four artists within the virtual site where these artists meet from their various international locations. This happens in various ways, in the sound installation of the room and in the virtual environment of the Oculus. However, in none of them is there a sense that this relation is false because it is performed between multiple places. Their distance from us, from each other, does not undermine the fact of their being 'together'. It is the ability of the work to create this together, a together that feels nervous as the performers pull together from different time zones and a person waits anxiously for their turn, which makes the work interesting. It is a nervousness Gertrude Stein first found in the theatre: the sense of emotional times out of sync between audience and performer (Stein 1988, 95). A similar nervous friction is present in *Documents of the Future*: the document unfolds so quickly, and from so many points. It is impossible to see it all at once, to understand all the threads that are running through it or to know all the voices present. Still, the audience is invited to jump in at any point and to participate in the flow, to navigate it in their own way. The document offers a cohesion as much as it demonstrates the fractal nature of mediated relation. The presence of two artists onstage, monitors displaying their desktops where they participate in the document, underlines this. Like the feedback sounds of tongues licking microphones in *Hollow Tongues*, the physical presence of live bodies creating the work and their entanglement with the devices that mediate them is central. It is a performance, but one that brings with it the dissonance of internet-mediated relation. The theatricality of the performance operates along the line between the artistic performance and the social performance that instantiates it.

The unreality of the rendered space, the eerie blue commander centre glow, the tactility of the noise of voices and licking, the many bodies present and contributing to the artworks, the confused and dispersed sites create as well as complicate the sense of being together in *Hollow Tongues* and *Documents of the Future*. The affect is complex as it strains across geographical distance and technological difficulty. ‘Together’ can be temporary and intense, a generous affect caught in with the accumulated frictions that characterise dissonance. The frictions and abrasions of relation can take many forms. A feeling of together is the result of their accumulations, the tensions between points of relations and the feelings that collect in them. It is produced through the performance friction that renders both conventions and audience-performer relations visible in their (mal)functionality. The together that occurs in the sites and the shared moments that are formed and reformed through these artistic practices demonstrate the functions of relation. Dissonance marks the strain between relationships and network connections that brings unease and instability into these processes of relation. It allows the unease of imperfect understanding to be paralleled by (and tangled in with) the epistemological possibilities and perspectives that these artistic practices index.

These instances serve as a reminder that technological and emotional difficulties are produced with inconsistent impacts; who feels friction and why is not evenly distributed. Focusing on the dissonance of together in internet-situated contexts becomes a means of understanding both the impact of contemporary mediating technologies as well as broader social abrasions of relation: the dissonance of together online highlights other frictions of relation. When artists make use of this dissonance, they reposition this tension as a means of understanding the present and generating

complex futures. The social and technological strains or stresses of friction mark the instances when actual exceeds the imagined: as a system (be it a network or cultural narratives of meaning) comes into contact with the practical specificities of the world, it rubs. The tensions created, between the expectations or lack thereof, by a performance's (in)ability to reproduce theatrical conventions, confirm a work as performance while also troubling the category.

Dissonance is a term that addresses the already occurring ruptures of experience and perspective as they intersect at the point of an artwork or performance. As many artists and theorists have shown, anyone who is not white, cisgendered and straight-presenting runs the risk of the technical difficulties that result from inbuilt assumptions in technologies' cultural models (Blas & Gaboury, 2016; Chan 2014; Chun 2009).

Thinking theatricality into digital ubiquity, it is possible to understand how systems position us spectators and how artworks entangled within these systems draw our attention nearer to their functions. It is the failure to become really real that makes theatre theatrical: for digital communications, the same is true. The promises of frictionless user experience are a promise that the systems that move information will never be seen. When we see them, we are made subject to the internet's objecthood: we see it, see ourselves in relation to it. It is then that we can understand the frictions as affect.

Documents of the Future: Invitation to Edit and *Hollow Tongues* both capture the frictions of social and technological processes that mark collective efforts: the strain of systems in moments that, as Wendy H. K. Chun writes '*our media matter most when they seem not to matter at all*, that is, when they have moved from the new to the

habitual' (Chun 2016, 1; emphasis in original). Technologies and cultures develop together, each strand solving and creating problems for the other, and each the product of a 'collective effort'. Performance – and its ability to move between the social and the artistic – enables us to critically consider how the increasing ubiquity of internet communications contributes to how relationships are performed in the twenty-first century. They are performances that aim, and both succeed and fail, to create a shared space between multiple locations. They extend the utopian promise of global connectivity into performances where bodies and technologies are crammed together in a glitchy real-fake spaces that test the limits of that promise's possibilities. In *Hollow Tongues*, this is apparent as the network and the equipment available strain to hold the performance that occurs. The work overburdens the space, there are too many people, and the network, there is too much information. In doing so, it makes apparent the frame that it performs within and for as something that is both disrupting and disrupted by the performance. It is a theatrical effort to create a site of collaborative unity within a virtual space, one that plays absurdity into both its use of performance and visual art as well as in its relationship to technology.

In the promotional image for *Documents of the Future*, a Google Doc reads 'Less like an object, more like the weather'. The doc is open on a desktop (my desktop), alongside an image of Pavarotti in a microwave and video of a cylindrical cloud. The performing document is 'more like the weather': it is changeable and ongoing. It is not still or settled, nor safe. Prior to the performance, the artists officially involved decided that the document would be archived periodically in case someone entered the document and erased it all. This potential risk underlines the intimacy of the document, and of the desktops that are shown across the stage. These are private spaces, usually used to

collect and consider our thoughts before sending them out in more formal ways. Social media theorist Nathan Jurgenson proposes the term ‘augmented reality’ for addressing the disintegrating difference between on/offline (Jurgenson 2011). He argues that it is necessary to move beyond the dichotomy of online and off-line space – what he calls digital dualism, the belief that on and off line are separate spaces – into critical considerations of how we live in augmented reality, when distinction is no longer relevant, useful or even readily apparent. Artistic interventions and engagements with the internet reflect the intimacies of our social exchanges and the frictions that they produce. Theatricality here is both artistic consequence as well as a strategy for bolstering these frictions. It is a means for extending the unpleasant, annoying or inconsequential effects of these frictions in ways that draw our attention back towards the things we always already know and experience within digital ubiquity.

In contrast to *Hollow Tongues*, the staging of *Documents of the Future: Invitation to Edit* is High Digital. Cool blue light fills the stage at ACMI, a stage that has monitors placed around a large projection screen and multiple people sitting at laptops. The stage is sterile and dark, in contrast to the overabundance of information and images that are unspooling on the screens. Each monitor mirrors a desktop: different perspectives of the document are visible are the two artists downstage (Nikki Lam and Katie Paine) who are contributing live. In the video documentation of the performance, more screens are visible in the audience as people take photos and contribute to the document themselves. The performances overlap, different voices coming from the performances that overlay the document. Around the 55 minute mark, Caroline Sindere begins to explain that she is leading a tutorial on being a social media break-up coordinator. With a slowly rising volume, my voice begins to drown out her instructions. Instead of the

clearly detailed emotional and technical processes that are the centre of Sindere's work, there is a fast torrent on abstract language as I talk about trees and the past and the future. Sindere moves between a direct to camera 'camgirl' style address and her desktop, 'Now, I will return to sharing my desktop' cuts through the feedback noises, sounds of typing and my rapid speech. Instead of seeking unity, these works make use of the friction of relation as it is paralleled by the tensions of digital mediations. The mediating effects of contemporary digital technologies are just one way that our interactions with one another are subject to cultural and social frames. It is the multiplicity of these frames, and the ability to understand digital technology as a perhaps newer and evolving frame, but as also nonetheless implicated in a broader fabric of mediation by material and conceptual processes, that is essential.

Conclusion

In the theatre, theatricality is most present in the moments when a performance oversteps its bounds and, as it does, the audience members begin to reflexively evaluate that overstepping. In life, it is present in the moments where our participation and reiterations of social norms are visible. In both cases, it relies on an exchange between the performer and the spectator. Theatricality occurs between the spectator and the work, it is inherently an importantly relational: as Davis writes, theatricality is the 'way we experience intersubjectivity in the public sphere' (2003, 127). Theatricality, when it occurs, underlines a collective participation in world imagining. It reveals the collectively held conceits through which an imaginary – the fictional world of a performance or our notions of a public – is held. Dissonance is an effect that is bolstered

by theatricality, it runs parallel to relation that theatricality names, to the emphasis that exhorts the beholder. Through theatricality, the spectator pulls an artwork into position within the world. They are affected and affecting, they are able to evaluate and understand how this work has come to be. When a thing is theatrical, its spectacle shows; it becomes impossible to forget that it is made of stuff that means to pull on our attention.

Art, particularly performance, is always responding to the context it is made in: performance as an art form is imbricated with the ways in which social relations are enacted publicly. The mediation of relation, through emotion and various cultural frames, here becomes interwoven with technologies, enabling artworks that are implicated not only in the technical or social specificities of a contemporary moment but also in the mutually constituting relation of these different specificities. Tracking the response of artists to digital forms tracks the ways in which technologies become entangled (are already entangled). It is an acknowledgement of the always already political nature of technologies; always already implicated in the systems through which society functions. Technologies shape the world, as much as they are shaped by it, and our containment is often an exercise in catching up. Over the period of writing, this has been borne out by the EU General Data Protection Regulation 2018 coming into effect (Burgess, 2018); by the presence of Mark Zuckerberg at hearings in the USA and Europe that interrogate corporate responsibility in this new context (Madrigal, 2018; Stone, 2018) and by the continued critiques of social media networks such as Facebook (Burrington, 2015; Cadwalladr, 2019). Artworks situated on the internet provide a double service of capturing mediated relation within a specific moment, as well as interrogating and making strange its processes in ways that enable critical perspective.

It is in the centrality of the spectator that the theatricality returns to the alterity, the intersubjective relation as generative of knowledge. The political importance of the spectatorial experience Davis articulates as key to theatricality is not dissimilar from what Jacques Rancière refers to as ‘dissensus’. In his book *The Emancipated Spectator* (2009), Rancière defines dissensus as an expansive kind of social disagreement that shifts ‘perception and signification’, examples of which can be found between spectators as well as between spectators and artists in their understandings of the meaning of a work: dissensus ‘means that every situation can be cracked open from the inside, reconfigured in a different regime of perception and signification’ (2009, 49; see also Rancière 2004, 84). He argues that this dissensus is key to the political possibility afforded to the subjectivity of an ‘emancipated spectator’: spectators are able to construct their own meaning, constructed from an artwork’s relation to their given context and existing knowledge (Rancière, 2009, 49). However, Rancière’s emancipated spectator is only one articulation of the counter-construction of knowledge and meaning that operates in the arts, particularly in performance. If, as Davis argues, theatricality is the moment of critical distance, what she refers to as ‘enabling effects of active dissociation’ that ‘bring into being the self-possession of a critical stance’ (Davis 2003, 153), then applying this dissociation to the ways in which social life is immersed in digital culture enables us to take a critical stance on how we are currently reassembling the social.

This chapter is a very contemporary exercise: it is about the practices of relation that occur in the technologies of a specific moment. As such, the objects of my analyses will move into the past very quickly. However, my intention has been to focus on the apparatuses of relations as much as – more so, even – than the particularities of

technologies. For this reason, I hope to be able to both give an account of a particular moment in the evolving response of artistic practices to the internet while also providing a framework for engaging more broadly with the imbrications of artworks, technologies and social practice. I have focused on what occurs at the intersection of the “in process” qualities of performance and technologies. It is through the interwoven frictions of performance and digital technology, of practices of relation with the frames that mediate them, that I have aimed to define internet-situated art. At one point the script for *Hollow Tongues*, the artists say:

And yet, no-thing always turns out to be something.
 So let us pretend, for a moment,
 that we can touch, that we can meet,
 even knowing that the pronoun we will also disappear,
 that we will disappear in the future. ((Play)ground-less, 2017b)

In this fragment, the will to be sharing space is a shared space that the artists and their audience occupy even as it disappears. The text references the trading of pronouns – I, you, we – that indicates intersubjective relation (see, for example, Benveniste 1971). We are all in a moment together, a virtual site within the gallery site that is framed by the aurality of four bodies performing with technologies together. Vitality, the aim here has never been to resolve that friction. Friction is present in all our current practices of relation, in all the ways that our current practices of relation are always already performing the social into its future iterations.

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