

The Object of Art in the Anthropocene: Generative Chairs and Hi-Vis Touches

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ART HAS CONSISTENTLY DONE ITS WORK OF RENDERING THE ORDINARY UNCANNY. Varieties of art have initiated and reflected reconsiderations of cultural objects and orders of time. Within the Anthropocene that uncanny making capacity also carries with it the forging of new connections between the human and more-than-human amid the performance of new spatial and temporal possibilities. This paper takes the example of Gay Hawkes' furniture constructed from packing cases after bushfire and Joan Ross's installations of colonial paintings refigured with hi-vis (fluorescent colour as used on high-visibility workwear etc.) and fur to think about both the materials these artists have employed to make their art and the cultural re-materialising that arises.

The Object of Art in the Anthropocene: Generative Chairs and Hi-Vis Vests Touches

Art has never enabled objects to remain ordinary. The Anthropocene has writ large the importance of assuming a decentred human amid a flattened ontology and lively networks of things and effects but art has long been creating and relating with objects that have challenged the assumed central place of humans. The materialised entities called 'art', only sometimes the more obvious 'object', have made themselves known to the human and more-than-human worlds in their

productions of desire and sensation. But the Anthropocene, with its sometime overwhelmingly wide lens, has given attention to art and afforded to its materialising 'objects' a particular urgency. As Heather Davis and Etienne Turpin suggest in *Art in the Anthropocene: Encounters Among Aesthetics, Politics, Environments and Epistemologies*:

Among this scene and its spinoff 'cenes, the cumulative effects of human activity are producing a 'homolith' that needs to be addressed not simply through staid political, economic, and rational approaches, but through the aesthetic, creative, and imaginative acts that define contemporary art practice. (11)

For Davis and Turpin; 'finding new approaches to posing problems is the work of both making art and making theory in the Anthropocene' (7). Following the liminal objects of art into their uncanny worlds is one way we might find those much-needed new approaches. Art has often been understood as uncanny; rendering the strange familiar and the familiar strange and perhaps most famously through the Surrealists. Within the Anthropocene art renders the familiar world strange as it brings home the unhomely of human impact within and upon the earth. For Giovanni Aloi (2018), challenging the intrinsic anthropocentrism embedded in our relationships with objects may show us their other forms and attributes, their 'histories that invite us to follow and retrieve agential engagements between human and nonhuman networks' (Aloi Loc.3425). We are going to follow the works of two artists, Gay Hawkes and Joan Ross. These artists' works grapple with ideas of settler culture, continuing colonialism, experience of extreme weather and human/animal/plant relations. They are also artists who move from very particular localised spaces while recognising the global in the making of that local. They are marked by the places they work from and mark us in turn.

Gay Hawkes is a maker of sculpture and furniture and producer of performance events and installations. The event I will be exploring was one part of her exhibition called 'The House of Longing' which was itself one part of a set of site-based exhibitions called 'Sites of Love and Neglect'. These exhibitions were curated by Jane Deeth as part of the 2017 *Ten Days of the Island* festival that runs annually in the state of Tasmania throughout March of each year. Joan Ross works across a range of mediums exploring, questioning and connecting the ongoing effects of colonialism in Australia, querying modes of consumption in her use of found objects and challenging notions of reproduction and representation through her interventions. The video and fur pieces I will be exploring come from national and private collections.

Generative Chairs: Gay Hawkes

It's hard—on a sunny, sunny, day with a breeze rippling the water, a tree with a new growth fuzz standing to the right—to think of this scintilla of land as a site of destruction both colonial and climatic. We are in Dunalley in southern Tasmania, a seaside village better known for the 'Best Fish and Chips'. In front of us is a memorial to explorer Abel Tasman's 1642 visit and right down near the shore, a gap. This is where the artist Gay Hawkes' studio used to be before the bushfires of 2013. Up the hill is another gap where her home, also lost in the fire, used to be. It is her installation/exhibition/performance we are here to participate in. The text on the Tasman memorial reads:

This monument was erected by the Government of Tasmania in 1942 to commemorate the tercentenary of the discovery of this island in 1642 by Hon. Abel Jans Tasman. Ships boats commanded by pilot major Visscher visited this bay on December 3rd 1642.

It is along this shore that Tasman's crew collected sea parsley and samphire and found fresh water. They also erected a flag. Following that flag planting Tasman (1642) wrote in his journal:

This work having been duly executed, we pulled back to the ships, leaving the above mentioned as a memorial for those who shall come after us, and for the natives of this country, who did not show themselves, though we suspect some of them were at no great distance and closely watching our proceedings (16).

So even before we begin we are already entangled in times and places. We are on Aboriginal land, lived in by the Palawa people for 42,000 years and never ceded. We are also on land claimed by Europeans 300 years ago, invaded, stocked with European animals and peoples and now monumentalised. We are on land that has been built on and land that has been fired. Capitalocene, Plantationocene and Anthropocene—we are in just the right place to consider the appearance and disappearance of existence.

Curator Justis Barrymore calls us all to attention. He asks us to think as we walk up the road a small way to the rebuilt Dunalley hall about what we would do if we lost everything? What would we build? What might we make? How and with what would we start again? A piper begins to play and we are slowly led off. Another man plays a double set of kettle drums that are hauled by a woman dragging them slowly via a rope over her shoulder. The music makes this hundred-metre or so walk an ambulatory wake. But it is also mid-morning and those not thinking of what it is to have lost everything are catching up and two kids are doing that time-

honoured boy-thing of displaying affection via the tallest patting, as patronisingly as possible, the head of his shorter mate, creating a back and forth response of squirming and lighthearted revenge. These small lifts of chatter and volleys of relationship also fit within this walk that calls up other forces and other feelings. For such a walk needs the ordinary to know that it is not.

We come to the hall and enter a dimmed purplish space with a curtained stage filled with pieces of wild furniture. In the soft gloom a set of cupboards takes on the shapes of granite tors and a chair with a wild branched back suggests an act of metamorphosis caught between forms, between being of service to the human world and seeking its own path towards tree.

The artist shushes us and quiet falls as the curtain opens to reveal another handmade cabinet on stage amid a shoreline of cuttlefish statuary festooned with shell poppies. A beautiful soprano begins to emerge from the cabinet, a hand coming out one side then another and finally the cupboard door opens and we see the face of the singer. I think of how bushfire reminds us that we are indeed all housed in wood; that our cloth of homeliness is made of stuff that is also made to burn. The shortening of that experience into the claustrophobic encounter of seeing a live body in this wooden cupboard is strange. On the one hand is the fearful mixture of wood and flesh, flame and skin and on the other perhaps some half human, half wooden army is being sung into existence. As the song ends the singer steps out of the cabinet and we are left with a woman and a wooden cabinet—a resurrection of the division between human and wood, culture and nature, subject and object. 'Material culture', as Julian Thomas writes in *The Trouble with Material Culture* (2007),

seems to rest on a distinction between an inner and an outer world, in which ideas issue out of the mind and then give form to lifeless matter. Conversely, and by the same process, formed matter leaves the realm of nature and enters that of culture. So 'material culture' represents at once ideas that have been made material, and natural substance that has been rendered cultural (4).

Art as a special realm of material culture both participates in these processes and reveals them as orders of performativity—repeated but with a possibility of destabilising both the nature and the culture they produce and participate in. The lights come on and we are all back in a hall, a hall rebuilt in wood. And all about us is art that is 'rebuilt', all vulnerable to fire and like one of the pieces—a fabulous memorial to beer, gin, and music—a salute to what gets one (human) through disaster. There are cabinets and cupboards and a sense of a room filled with stuff—the things that let us be at home, the things that enable our capacities so we can act in the world. Stuff is never just 'stuff'. It is with stuff that we perform

ourselves and through stuff that we relate. And this is lovely stuff. What gets one through is also there in the artist's thanks to St Vincent de Paul and RAW (Rural Alive and Well), both organisations that stick with fire victims beyond the first weeks of an 'emergency response'. Copies of Hawkes's poignant, funny, sharp shooting art booklet called *From the Busy Machinery of Longing—A Miscellany of Thoughts after Bushfire* sit on the desk asking us to slow down a little more, and saviour this space of pain and possibility.

We walk around the things, mostly made from broken up packing cases and storage pallets. They are items to furnish a home that does not exist and they are also exquisite recycling. The chair that seems caught between tree and chair worlds reminds us of this constant state of moving in and out of wood. We humans shape wood to furnish our life and to manage the temperatures of the more-than-human world but we also fight and legislate to keep trees of beauty while other trees are stubborn and insistent parts of landscapes that shape us into marginal farmers, artists, wood workers and recluses. One state government of Tasmania could be said to have been felled by trees—its corruption and complications too entwined with the roots and repayments of the forest industry.¹ Chairs ask us to think about exactly where we sit within the Anthropocene. Within what '(s)cene can what be seen? Hawke's work provides the kaleidoscope that lets us see the ever-moving environmental patterns, the deep history but also the poignant ordinary of the question—on what will this human sit tonight? What will a home look like that lives knowingly WITH the Anthropocene?

¹ See 'The Cost of Hubris' by Will Bibby in 'Tasmania the Tipping Point,' special issue, *Griffith Review* 39 (Autumn 2013): 66-73.



Figure 1: Gay Hawkes, Chair, 2016/17. Image and permission to reproduce here provided by the artist.

In Judith Butler's assaying of the spaces where people can perform their politics she writes: 'In effect, the demand for infrastructure is a demand for a certain kind of inhabitable ground, and its meaning and force derives precisely from that lack (2014)'. In a quieter register Hawke's furniture is also a querying after 'inhabitable

ground'. Clearly, she needs enough to actually live personally, humanly, but in her generous public performance of loss and of hesitantly connecting tree and chair, her pieces also query the processes that make chairs of trees that in effect makes the 'ground' habitable to humans.

The second part of this event is in the space next to the waterfront cafe, a building that survived the fire metres from where the artist's studio was lost. The capriciousness of fire is something always remarked upon as if we really believe the effects of fire contain an innate order and so are surprised when one house goes and a neighbour's doesn't, when a fragile glass survives and a steel frame melts. As if we who know so little about wind and flame and heat should still have been able to predict what would and would not survive. In this survivor space there is a series of dolls. Hawkes's mother had painted and dressed hundreds of dolls and the artist had had fifty or so stored in her studio. The fire took the dresses and most of the bodies, leaving behind a spectral set of now scarred and scorched porcelain heads. Hawkes has taken those remains and added new bodies of straw and wood. Hand-carved legs and feet, and some bodies of tied and matted grass. They are resonant. They have the patina of use and the patches of care. And like a well-worn transitional toy they suggest they will last but they also suggest they have already been loved. Or mistreated. Alongside these witchy figurines there is a video screen that shows a full-screen image of a young Syrian boy sitting outside a bombed out, burnt site, behind a table, selling some small things. He has propped an umbrella up between two concrete bricks and sits and waits. The camera zooms out from him to Hawkes sitting within the same re-created scene. There is a similar umbrella held by bricks, a simple table and Hawkes, waiting. This is the trauma and the tenderness of disaster. Losing 'everything' can include losing the sense of oneself, losing the usual markers of what is a 'normal' life but it can also burn into being connections across time and space between peoples who have also lost.

These are not claims to sameness. Syria is not Tasmania, Dunalley is not Aleppo. But where other people might see only the difference and violence of war Hawkes has suggested contact with that blackened Syrian home-scape. The tentative overtures of connection are marked by the performed similitude of the umbrella, the table of tiny stuff and the single person sitting. The body of the Syrian boy at work amid the ruins and the older woman at a different kind of work in her ruin. As Butler later states in the same lecture previously quoted:

We cannot talk about a body without knowing what supports that body, and what its relation to that support—or lack of support—might be. In this way, the body is less an entity than a relation, and it cannot be fully dissociated from the infrastructural and environmental conditions of its living.

We can see in Hawkes' installation that the umbrella and the table but also her chairs and impromptu cupboards are all relations not objects, not entities. Fire and ruination connect them, create them in part as individuated objects and also throw them into different assemblages of connection across global and deeply local events.

Joan Ross's Found Fur and Hi-Vis Revisioning

Joan Ross is a Sydney based artist who has made works of various sorts including a wonderful set of pieces made from found fur that she sourced from op-shops and tips and now both video installations and stills that have included colonial paintings, contemporary added elements (like tractors and workers) and the addition of hi-vis clothing on some of the figures in Day-Glo colours.

Joan Ross's recycling and refiguring appears as the embodied materialisation of the colonial in the contemporary. One of her earlier works is called *Muttonchops* (2003, kangaroo fur on found oil painting). It consists of a found painting of a chimney-potted foreground backed by a wispy clouded sky. Two 'mutton chops' of kangaroo fur have been slid over two of the chimneys that then frame the cloud and buildings as if a face. The flyaway nature of the fur also plays as smoke meeting cloud. A scene is set of mutton chopped colonial men resting in their tidy houses only to be interrupted by the smell of melted mutton fat which partially lit the colonial world of Australia as it rode into the Capitalocene on the sheep's back. The kangaroo fur came from Ross's collection that she created from found coats and bags and many, many, soft toy koalas which had been made from kangaroo fur. In this piece the kangaroo fur has been shaped by human hand but never entirely bound by it. The fur reaches beyond the roofs into the sky to make a second kind of smoke as a heavier cloud. This is a most affecting evocation of a colonised 'scape. The brown cloud of the always changing, always present but not always seen Indigenous world on the same canvas as the pieces of flesh that are the skin of the kangaroo. The 'native' kangaroo that has been killed, cured, sewn and cut to be finally pasted to become ghastly and ghostly on the roofs. A fragment of a children's Christmas song comes to mind:

Six white boomers, snow white boomers,
Racing Santa Claus through the blazing sun.
Six white boomers, snow white boomers,
On his Australian run.

'Boomer' is an Australian term for a big kangaroo that catches the sound of such an animal landing after each bound—boom, boom, boom—the snow-white colour some imperial fantasy. But in this work there is only the fragment, the trace, of all that kangaroo life. This bit of boomer is not racing through the sky but caught

against a roof, both of the land and stuck within settler culture. The song *Six White Boomers*, co-written by Rolf Harris, was banned in some childcare centres following his conviction on multiple charges of indecent assault.²



Figure 2: Joan Ross Muttonchops. 2003. Photograph taken by author. Permission to reproduce here given by the artist and the owner of the artwork.

In this labour of enabling poetic allusions and referencing political contexts this art work materialises the seen and unseen worlds that make up the modes Capitalocene, Anthropocene and Plantationocene. We remember that we cannot 'see' all the effects of capital, colonialism, racism and gender that contribute to the Anthropocene by standing with art that foregrounds the trace of vibrant pre-colonial life and the remains of it within the present. Traces and remains gesture to lost wholes but also provide palpable connection to what might be saved or arise in the future in a different order of connection as this small tuft of fur does. Does art in the Anthropocene convene the possibility of every thing's connection? Materialise *everything!* In this painting-cum-collage we can see, or are prompted to believe we can see, sense, imagine, the worlds of quiet colonial suburbia, mutton chopped men and their families at dinner, the kangaroos hunted off their lands and the Indigenous peoples organising and waiting. Art not as the great revealer

² <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-3366730/Childcare-centres-ban-convicted-paedophile-Rolf-Harris-Christmas-classic-Six-White-Boomers.html>.

but as the great connector between things—vibrant objects but also between the politics of gender, environment and race.

In a set of pieces, *The Claiming of Things* (2012), *I Dig Your Land* (2013) and *Colonial Grab* (2014) which are various revisionings of colonial landscape paintings, Ross has dressed human figures, added artefacts and recoloured some natural phenomenon like a river—in Day-Glo colours. As one order of the uncanny, making the strange familiar and the familiar strange, Ross's use of hi-vis clothing on the original colonial human figures distorts the temporal frame of the original colonial painting while confirming the role of colonist as a danger, something to be looked out for, watched. These hi-vis touches suggest a rhetoric of distinction that isn't exactly uncanny, more an exasperation, a kind of 'for fuck's sake' exhaustion with the way that the colonial efforts to possess Australia went on and on and go on and on. And although I call them 'touches' here they do not summon the senses but rather flatten them out. Day-Glo colouring does not invite relationality but rather repels it. The hi-vis highlights make absolutely seen the European figures that already organise and dominate the scene either as images in the work or as the organising logic of what is to be looked at and how.



Figure 3: Joan Ross, *VIP Lounge*, 2015. Image and permission to reproduce here provided by artist.

Although hi-vis clothing was first used on railways and roads we perhaps know it best now from building sites and constructions of all kinds. It's worn for 'safety' but it's also cock-a-hoop, look at me, let me be seen, 'building Australia'. The Joan

Ross touches afford us some notion of continuity between, ‘the colonial enterprise’, the climate sceptic, former Prime Minister of Australia Tony Abbott (who wanted to be known as the ‘infrastructure Prime Minister’³), Judith Butler’s politics of infrastructure and Gay Hawkes’ materialisation of another kind of infrastructure where builders wearing hi-vis played no part. The problem with hi-vis clothing, invented for its seeability and safety, is that it is now a way of disappearing into the city and into the Anthropocene. To wear Day-Glo coloured clothing is not to be seen but to be absorbed into an ordinary—of construction, of activity, of logical, seeable purpose. Infrastructure is what keeps the country going in this rhetoric: ‘infra’ meaning, below, underneath, beneath, and ‘structure’ meaning a manner of building, action or process of construction, arrangement and mutual relation of the whole. And buildings do make beautiful lies about progress. They have the appearance of capability and control and represent Western modernity writ large. This seems to be one of Joan Ross’s points that colonialism was more than the taking of the land, more than a system for exploiting resources—it was a re-ordering of the existent Indigenous world into a series of unexpected sites exploited in new and unusual ways. In one space it was the building of fences and in another the movement of new orders of gendered relations or making a river into an extractive site. Joan Ross wants us to see clearly that colonialism does not stop its work of re-ordering and organising land and people into increasingly extravagant fantasies of movement and colour. But in getting us to notice again via the Day-Glo, hi-vis materials, she makes for me a link between exhibition and extinction.⁴

We cannot say that we cannot SEE the logics of development, production, consumption and pollution that amplify the crisis of being, that the expression ‘Anthropocene’ attempts to communicate. The racial bleaching out that Meg Samuelson writes of (this issue) might be moving under the cover of highly visible clothing. And historically we cannot claim that we did not see the extinctions of creatures and cultural avatars like the Tasmanian tiger. It seems poignant, even poetic that the colour of the clothing we are wearing ‘for safety’ in a heating world is called Day-Glo. What’s glowing? How many days left, Joan Ross might be asking?

³ See: <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2013-07-17/abbott-promises-to-fix-queenslands-bruce-highway/4825422>.

⁴ The relationship between exhibition and extinction is one being explored with fellow researchers Penny Edmonds and Hannah Stark and I thank them for many useful discussions about this point. I also thank Hannah for her very helpful insight concerning art and infrastructure. My two anonymous readers also offered important corrections and extensions to my thinking for which I am also very grateful.

Artful Material

The realities of all that the expression ‘Anthropocene’ tries to signal, that is, the cumulative effects of all human-centred imaginings making a geological epoch—seems to call for a radical order of connectivity. An order of connectivity that depends upon the displacement of humans from the organising centre and the development of diverse modes of recognition, diplomacy, appreciation and acceptance of the other-than-human world. As we have seen, one of the most explored forms of this world is that of understanding in much more detail and with a much more charged political sensibility the idea of ‘materialism’. This is often made particular and discrete through the idea of ‘things’ and ‘objects’. Humans reproduce the colonial practice of coming to know other worlds through the efforts of particular interlocutors, specific objects that call-in humans. In the instance of the art ‘object’, produced organised and critiqued by humans the effort to ‘follow the material’ by being led by the material beyond the intentions of the artist is wonderfully challenging! As the following longish, highly connected quote (what else are citations from other authors and indeed other versions of ourselves but a mark of our always ‘substance thinking’) from Ingold suggests:

In a world of materials, nothing is ever finished: ‘everything may be something, but being something is always on the way to becoming something else’ (Ingold 3). Materials, as noted above, are substances-in-becoming (Barad 822): They carry on, overtaking the formal destinations that, at one time or another, have been assigned to them’. (Ingold)⁵

If we think of Hawke’s chairs and Ross’s fur and hi-vis eruptions, we have works that already signal that they are both remnants of other worlds and hold something in their particular substances; wood, fur, found paintings, videoed hi-vis that is unknowable. Yes, they overtake the formal frame of the piece itself but they also out-manoeuvre the organising institutionalism of the gallery and exhibition. For what is difficult to decide with these pieces, and perhaps most art, is what is the ‘formal destination’ they were intended for? Are not art’s effects very often contingent? The idea of the ‘becoming’ of materials seem to mimic the elegant lines of thinking that feminist theories among others worked through to bring into political consciousness processual forms of subjectivity. It also suggests the fecund, lively capacities of Deleuze’s reformulation of desire as productive. This seems to simply refigure materiality through a more inclusive idea of the human. Art’s effects already being contingent, ever without a known destination—

⁵ The references in the quotation are to: Tim Ingold, introduction to *Redrawing Anthropology: Materials, Movements, Lines*, ed. Tim Ingold (Farnham: Ashgate, 2011), 1-20; and Karen Barad, ‘Posthumanist Performativity: Toward an Understanding of How Matter Comes to Matter’, *Signs* 28, 801-31.

an invigorated sense of its material becoming, seems to extend an existing appreciation rather than convene a re-newed place and new labours of art within the Anthropocene. In Hawkes's work she has made art that does not simply 're-build' but shows what human 'building' does. Her work is 'survivalist' in the best sense of living beyond the forms of life humans previously lived.

Every small act of surviving bushfire loss becomes an act of reconfiguring a blasted scape into new sets of connections. No-one starts over again after fire, all is continuity and all is connection. But the materials to work with have changed, including one's own sense of self, including one's own understanding of embodiment. Just as the survivor of the disaster will be shocked by the care of strangers and the loving community of others who understand vulnerability, so they might see the indifference of institutional hierarchies and the cruelty of accepted policies and their policing. And just as the body is literally shocked, releasing erratic flows of cortisol and adrenaline so our relations to 'things' transform. Perhaps we could say that wildfire lets loose wild connections? To live with 'catastrophic' weather events within the Anthropocene will require more than the much-attacked climate science. It will need something more homey, but unlike any home any of we humans have lived in before. Perhaps only an artist, an odd one out, can whisper through her works a radical politics of connection between fire, people and stuff. Placing us on the possibility of a generative, liminal chair materialises the strange familiarity of the Anthropocene and its uncanny network, (a life if you will) of unlike stuff.

That life will involve a different relationship with the more-than-human. And I am thinking again of those particular pieces of found kangaroo fur in Joan Ross's *Muttonchops*. They have all the power of announcement that Aloi explores in relationship to 'speculative taxidermy objects', in

which the recalcitrant material indexicality of animal skin challenges the viewer on the grounds that that which is being presented is no longer an animal in the classical/objective sense of the term, and neither is it simply the encounter between artist and animal, but the *result* of human/animal relations defined by technocapitalist economies of the Anthropocene. (Loc.3367).

The fragments of fur let humans feel the consequences of our organised relations with animals and so much more. The repercussions of Anthropocenic organisation are on display—there is the fur, the ever-animal that is the revelation of the Anthropocene. But that touch of fur, that fur that draws us back to our senses as one materialising aspect of an artwork is also a shy proposal of a different ethic. Davis and Turpin argue that

‘art’s *labour* is both a sensing and a spacing of the shared separation of the Anthropocene. Whatever we humans are, we are now *in* the Anthropocene— sensing and spacing this *kairos* through our aesthetic apprehensions, political commitments, epistemic compartments, and environmental bonds inasmuch as we share in the separations it affords and overturns’. (21)

As a way into that ‘sensing’ and ‘spacing’ of shared separation, the flapette of fur does nothing at all and yet suggests everything. As Emily Eliza Scott writes of other works of art that relate to the more-than-human, ‘... in light of our immersion in an environmental crisis too big to apprehend—it is through probing the (indistinct) edges where human and non-human meet, that we might begin to feel our way (15). This skerrick of fur gently brushes against our existent ideas of space and time and tickles us to include others. Its quiet ethic is to ask; how do we approach a pocket of animal skin on a chimney? Which is to ask; how do we approach art in the Anthropocene? And the answer is—carefully. Yes, art will let us ask new questions in this time but only if our (human) approach is gentle enough, allusive enough, not to startle all of us back into traditional posturings. Art in the Anthropocene catches us up in a net of new connections but it takes time to follow its objects to our new histories and communities not based on commonality. This connective work of art suggests a new kind of infrastructure where Butler’s ‘demand for habitable ground’ may be met, not by bricks and mortar but by the fragile, interconnections of art.

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