

French Phenomenology of Art and Metaphysics

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Abstract: This article examines the relationship between French phenomenology of art and metaphysics. More specifically, it highlights four points. Firstly, French phenomenological aesthetics is characterized by a certain ignorance of the renewal of artistic questioning initiated by Anglo-Saxon aesthetics. Secondly, French phenomenology of art is a metaphysics of art, which considers that works of art contain an ontological (cosmophanic or theophanic) revelation. Thirdly, French phenomenology of art is part of the “theological turn of French phenomenology”. Authors tend towards theology or “cosmotheology”. Fourthly, French phenomenology of art, which is a metaphysics of the sensible, possesses the theoretical means to think philosophically about conceptual art.

Keywords: French phenomenology of art, Metaphysics, Conceptual Art, Jean-Luc Marion, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Mikel Dufrenne

I am thinking of aurochs and angels, the
secret of durable pigments, prophetic
sonnets, the refuge of art.
Vladimir NABOKOV, *Lolita*

1. To overcome the metaphysics of art

In his 1963 book *Introduction aux arts du beau*, Étienne Gilson condemned the philosophical gesture of questioning art from a metaphysical point of view, *i.e.*, from a certain conception of what reality is:

The first hypothesis is that art is essentially a privileged view of the world, or, as we say, an intuition. We don't always agree on what this view reveals to the artist, but it might not be inaccurate to say that, as a general rule, the philosopher identifies the object of the artist's intuition with what his own philosophy holds to be the substance of reality. (Gilson, 1963: 9)

Traditionally, philosophers begin by establishing what they mean by “reality.” They then turn to art, develop an “aesthetic,” and make the work of art the place where reality is revealed or concealed. In other words, philosophers understand art as another philosophy rather than as something other than philosophy. Étienne Gilson was aiming for the entire history of the philosophy of art, which ultimately turns out to be the history of the metaphysics of art. “The vast majority take it for granted that art is, in the final analysis, a kind of knowledge” (Gilson, 1963: 7). This history of the metaphysics of art begins with Plato. In *Ion*, Plato introduces the highly metaphysical (if not religious) theme of the “enthusiastic” artist, the poet inspired by a god or muses. In *Republic* and *Sophist*, Plato inaugurates the ontology of the work of art, according to which the work of art exists in a certain mode, a mode of its own that distinguishes it from other things, namely as a “simulacrum” (*phantasma*), *i.e.*, as a copy of a copy of an intelligible Form or Idea. Such an ontology of the work of art only makes sense from a metaphysical perspective, one that understands the sensible world as populated by things that “participate” in intelligible Forms. At the time Étienne Gilson writes, the situation has not changed. He refers explicitly to Henri Bergson, whose rare remarks on art draw the consequences of his metaphysics of duration: works of art set aside the appearances that our intelligence interposes to bring us face to face with reality, *i.e.*, with duration¹. Against this philosophical gesture, Étienne Gilson proposes to disassociate art from metaphysics (or, to put it another way, art from truth) and situate it on the side of beauty, *i.e.*, pleasure. In so doing, he subscribes to the eighteenth-century “aesthetic” perspective, which identifies aesthetic experience with the experience of “disinterested” pleasure.

In the same years as the publication of his *Introduction aux arts du beau*, two concomitant events would profoundly change the situation.

1/ The first was an event in the history of art. It was the emergence of new artistic forms (happenings, performances, installations) and movements (pop art, arte povera, conceptual art, minimal art). Nowadays, artists sometimes create works of art that contravene traditional fine art criteria. Consider Marcel Duchamp’s iconic *Fountain* (which began to be considered a work of art in the 1950s) and Andy Warhol’s *Brillo Boxes*, exhibited at New York’s Stable Gallery in 1964. These works aren’t particularly beautiful, they’re not necessarily produced by the artist himself, it’s hard to see what distinguishes them from non-artistic objects, and so on.

¹ “For Bergson, too, the root of art is an intuition, a certain exceptional way of seeing, and, basically, a kind of contemplation” (Gilson, 1963: 125). “What is an artist? He’s a man who sees better than others because he looks at reality naked and without a veil. To see with a painter’s eyes is to see better than ordinary mortals” (Bergson, 1972 [“Conférence de Madrid sur l’âme humaine,” 1919]: 1201).

2/ The second event belongs to the history of the philosophy of art. At the end of the 1950s, the analytical philosophy of art began to take shape. Three texts, in particular, were to play a considerable role in renewing our appreciation of works of art. These were Morris Weitz's article "The Role of Theory in Aesthetics" (Weitz, 1956), Arthur Danto's article "The Artworld" (Danto, 1964), and Nelson Goodman's chapter "When is Art?" in his book *Ways of Worldmaking* (Goodman, 1978: 57-70). In these texts, these authors argue that a thing does not exist in the mode of a work of art but, on the contrary, becomes a work of art through the effect of an institutional context. To put it like Nelson Goodman, a thing "is" not a work of art, it "works" as a work of art when it is installed in a place of art. The stone picked up on the road *is* not a work of art, but it *works* as a work of art when exhibited in an art museum. As a result, if we remove the context, the art museum, we *ipso facto* remove the artistic value of the thing. Placed back on the road, the stone ceases to work as a work of art. From this perspective, a work of art is no longer something that exists in the mode of a work of art and exists as such because it has metaphysical significance because it reveals reality. The work of art becomes a social and historical reality. On the one hand, it is a *social* reality because it exists only within a given society. It exists only for individuals who have learned what this cultural production called art is. On the other hand, the work of art is a *historical* reality because it depends on a certain conception of art that was dominant at a given time. What recent art history teaches us, according to Arthur Danto, is that the essence of art is to have no essence. It is no longer possible to assign necessary and sufficient criteria to art.

The extent to which the "first wave" of analytic philosophy of art has determined our contemporary ways of apprehending works of art is often overlooked. In the foreword to the collective work *Les Théoriciens de l'art*, Carole Talon-Hugon formulates a theoretical position that corresponds to our current vision of art (Talon-Hugon, 2017: IX-XX). There are no things that exist in the mode of a work of art and reveal reality to us. There are only "theoretical nebulae" that make us apprehend certain things as works of art. What's more, we live in an age where antagonistic "paradigms" coexist with difficulty: the "modern" paradigm, according to which a work of art is a beautiful thing produced by a genius, and the "contemporary" paradigm, according to which a work of art is that which undermines the modern paradigm of art: that the artist is genius, that the work is beautiful, and so on. In her philosophical and personal history of art, Carole Talon-Hugon defends the more radical idea that we live in an age characterized by "disartification." The anti-art of the twentieth century (Dada, Surrealism, Russian Constructivism) led to a generalized "ratification," *i.e.*, a considerable broadening of the concept of art. This generalized artification has led to what Harold Rosenberg calls a "de-definition of art,"

i.e., a complete indetermination of what we mean by art. Since we no longer know what art is, anything can claim to be art. How, then, can we continue the speculative effort to think about art? There's every reason to believe that we should give up philosophizing about art and turn to the sociology of art, which alone is capable of uncovering the socio-economic mechanisms that transform an individual into an artist, or a thing (whatever it may be) into a work of art.

Aside from the contestation of the essence of art and the disartification, perhaps the most striking development of the last sixty years has been the emergence of what Gérard Genette calls "the conceptual regime of art" (Genette, 1997). For a conceptual artist such as Joseph Kosuth or Sol LeWitt, the work of art lies not so much in the sensible thing that gives itself to our sensibility, not so much in the object exhibited in a contemporary art museum, as in the concept that presides over its realization (at least its possible realization). Henceforth, the sensible thing fades away in favor of an idea or its commentary. This is what has led Carole Talon-Hugon to say that the "aesthetic paradigm of art" (Talon-Hugon, 2014) (that is, the apprehension of art on the basis of aesthetic experience, *i.e.*, on the basis of *sensible* experience) is outdated, and constitutes no more than a circumscribed moment in the history of art and the philosophy of art. Since the work of art resides in the discourse that accompanies the object or performance, it is up to the artist and qualified representatives of the art world, rather than the philosopher, to express themselves on the works of art.

2. French phenomenology of art

We can only truly understand the specificity and originality of French phenomenology of art if we bear in mind the very particular context in which it is embedded, the main features of which we have just outlined. What characterizes it is its refusal to overcome the metaphysics of art. While most philosophers of art today have definitively turned their backs on this "cumbersome tradition" (Genette, 1998: 10-11) of the metaphysics of art, French phenomenologists of art continue to think of art as possessing a metaphysical dimension. Heirs to Heidegger's *The Origin of the Work of Art* (1935-1936), they maintain that the work of art exists in a specific mode, distinct in particular from the mere thing or tool. A thing is a work of art when it is created by an artist and reveals reality. In contrast to the Anglo-Saxon perspective, French authors maintain that a thing is a work of art independently of the institutional context in which it is found. (Or to be more precise: in order to become a work of art, a thing needs not an artistic context, but a certain attitude on the part of the receiver, what Mikel Dufrenne calls "aesthetic perception".) In "Le Doute de Cézanne" (1945), Maurice Merleau-Ponty argues that the works

of art of the Aix-en-Provence painter lead us back to the world of perception. In *Phénoménologie de l'expérience esthétique* (1953), Mikel Dufrenne asserts that works of art express the artist's world, which is one of the many faces of being. In *Le Poétique* (1963), he goes so far as to argue that Nature expresses itself through poets, thus reviving Plato's *Ion*. In *Regard Parole Espace* (1973), Henri Maldiney defends the idea that works of art retrocede from the world of perception to the world of feeling. From *Art et existence* (1985) onwards, he goes further, declaring that art reveals being. In *Voir l'invisible. Sur Kandinsky* (1988), Michel Henry argues that Kandinsky's works reveal "Life," its perpetual oscillation from enjoyment to suffering, and from suffering to enjoyment. In *La Croisée du Visible* (1991), Jean-Luc Marion contrasts the "idol" and the "icon," asserting that the icon leads us back to the invisible counter-view of the divine archetype.

Such a gesture, that of persisting in subscribing to the metaphysics of art, calls for five observations.

First observation: French phenomenologists of art have done little to confront Anglo-Saxon aesthetics and the profound renewal it has implied in the way art is viewed and thematized. In the opening pages of *Art et existence* and *Ouvrir le rien : l'art nu*, Henri Maldiney sweeps aside the perspective he sums up as "anti-art." The work of art is not the result of an "investiture" by art world professionals that precedes it. The being-work of a work of art "has no one under from which it proceeds: it is its own departure in view of itself" (Maldiney, 1985: 8). In other words, the work of art imposes itself as such. (It's doubtful whether this is satisfactory when we consider the *readymades* or *Brillo Boxes*, of which Arthur Danto reminds us that, from the point of view of perception, there's nothing to distinguish them from supermarket boxes.) For his part, Mikel Dufrenne worries about the contemporary future of art and the indeterminacy of the concept of art in *L'Œil et l'Oreille* (1986). As he writes,

And today, the field of art is expanding even further, to the point of exploding the concept that once unified it. But it's not just the boundaries of art that are breaking down, it's also the boundaries that specialization used to erect between each art form; everything that is invented today seems unclassifiable: an environment, an installation, a performance, where do you situate them? (Dufrenne, 1986: 124)

Jean-Luc Marion is the latest author to venture into the Anglo-Saxon perspective. In his article "Le phénomène de beauté," he refers explicitly to Arthur Danto's "The Artworld" (Marion, 2020). He gives him credit for having perfectly embraced the theoretical contours of

contemporary art, which is both conceptually rich and sensorially poor. But he immediately condemns this contemporary art, which lacks the “saturated phenomenon of beauty” (a beautiful thing is sensorially rich and conceptually poor), a condemnation that drags the analytical philosophy of art down with it.

Second observation: some may be surprised to hear these metaphysical remarks coming from aestheticians who claim to be part of phenomenology, *i.e.*, a philosophical movement inaugurated by the overcoming of metaphysics. We recall the lines from *Logical Investigations*, according to which phenomenology

does not contain, in what it establishes scientifically, from the beginning, and in all its subsequent steps, the slightest assertion concerning a real existence; consequently, no metaphysical assertion, nor any assertion coming from the natural sciences, and especially from psychology, can in it function as a premise. (Husserl, 1901: 23)

What is the significance of this statement? For Husserl, phenomenology is not metaphysical in the sense that it seeks not to prove the existence of the world but to describe the appearance of the world and the mode of donation of things to consciousness. This is the starting point for the introductory sequence of *Concept d’ambiance. Essai d’éco-phénoménologie* (2020), in which Bruce Bégout condemns what he calls “the dominant model of phenomenological analysis” (Bégout, 2020: 37), particularly in France, which is characterized by a “search for the transcendental conditions of appearing without [...] much attention to the concrete donation of this or that phenomenon” (Bégout, 2020: 37). For Bruce Bégout, phenomenology must be what Husserl wanted it to be, namely “an analysis of the how (*quomodo*) of donation, and its articulation to its what (*quid*)” (Bégout, 2020: 38). Yet many French phenomenologists, starting with Renaud Barbaras, go beyond this framework to venture into metaphysics. According to Bruce Bégout, these philosophers themselves recognize that they “have moved on to something else” (something other than phenomenology), “they have tipped over into metaphysics and ontology” (Bégout, 2020: 38). If, therefore, we follow this understanding of phenomenology as essentially extra-metaphysical, then the whole French phenomenology of art, resolutely metaphysical, is in fact extra-phenomenological.

It seems to me that there is very little evidence of a “metaphysical extraterritoriality of phenomenology” (Marion, 1984a: 7). Let me put forward two brief arguments on this subject.

First argument: phenomenology is irreducible to Husserlian phenomenology. Jean-Luc Marion has clearly shown that the transition from Husserlian to Heideggerian phenomenology

involved a rehabilitation of ontology. For Husserl, as we have just seen, phenomenology is inaugurated by a neutralization of traditional ontology, which questions the existence of the world. “In a regime of reduction, there is no longer any question of being” (Marion, 1984b: 163). Henceforth, what matters is no longer that the world exists, but the way in which beings appear, *i.e.*, are constituted by transcendental consciousness. Heidegger marks a turning point. In the years 1925-1927, Heidegger understood phenomenology as the method of fundamental ontology, that is, as that which leads the gaze of the being to its mode of being. From Husserl to Heidegger, we witness a resurgence of *metaphysica generalis*.

Second argument: Husserlian phenomenology is already metaphysical. There are many ways of proving this assertion. Suffice it to recall some famous formulas from *Ideen I*, whose metaphysical character is not questioned. In §49, Husserl defines consciousness as “a system of being closed in on itself,” “a system of absolute being,” a definition reminiscent of the Leibnizian monad. Husserl shifts absoluteness to the side of consciousness (Husserl, 1913: 163). He then has this Latin assertion, which we find in Descartes, for example: “Immanent being is therefore indubitably an absolute being, in the sense that by principle *nulla ‘re’ indiget ad existendum*.” (Husserl, 1913: 162) Consciousness needs nothing other than itself to exist. What does Husserl do? In his own way, he repeats Descartes’ error, when Descartes moves too hastily from the certainty that I exist to the definition of my mode of being as *res cogitans*. From the fact that things not only give themselves to me, but are also constituted by me, Husserl deduces that if the things that appear cannot exist without me, I can exist without them (this is the meaning of the hypothesis of the annihilation of the world). Since my existence does not depend on them, I exist in the mode of independence and, therefore, of absoluteness, an absoluteness that is divine. Husserl’s gesture is thus, in a sense, to identify two branches of *metaphysica specialis*, namely rational theology and rational psychology: it is in the old rational theology that the new rational psychology finds its formulation, *i.e.*, the metaphysics of transcendental subjectivity. In short, while Husserl puts “general” metaphysics out of action, he does not put metaphysics “in general” out of play.

Third observation: French phenomenology of art has not escaped what Dominique Janicaud called in 1991 “the theological turn of French phenomenology.” This point can be demonstrated at two distinct levels of depth. At a first, superficial level, there can be no doubt that Jean-Luc Marion’s aesthetic perspective is theological. In his text “L’aveugle à Siloé,” he paradoxically praises Sulpician art, reputed to be in bad taste, and then Catholic liturgy (Marion, 1991: 113-115). We need to dwell no longer on this point, which confirms Dominique Janicaud’s harsh assessment of Jean-Luc Marion’s aesthetic work. I would like to highlight a less

superficial level of the theological turn in French phenomenology of art. In my book *L'Art et le Monde* (2021), I tried to show that Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Mikel Dufrenne, and Henri Maldiney were moving towards a sophisticated form of theology that I proposed to call “cosmotheology” (Bobant, 2021). These three French authors start from an extra-phenomenological premise, namely that the world before appearing to the subject is burdened with a form of obscurity. This is the Kantian thematization of the world as *Ding an sich*, confirming Grégori Jean’s diagnosis that “all phenomenology remains Kantian” (Jean, 2021: 26). The world’s entire existence depends on its appearance. So, before appearing, *i.e.*, before the subject, the world does not fully exist. As a result, the world produces man, and the artist in particular, in order to appear and exist fully. Man is what the world gives itself to overcome an ontological lacuna. As Mikel Dufrenne explicitly states, the artist is “the being that Nature must invent to complete itself” (Dufrenne, 1963: 203). How can we fail to see in such a speculative scenario a resurgence of *metaphysica specialis*, of rational theology, of the theological thesis that God needs man? Under its *kosmos* guise, being is ultimately revealed as *theos*. In short, the phenomenology of French art is not only metaphysical but also, and more precisely, theological or cosmotheological.

Assuming that French phenomenology of art is fundamentally metaphysical, we would still have to ask whether it is necessarily theological. My answer is negative. French phenomenology of art is theological only as long as it is extra-phenomenological. If you link French phenomenology of art to phenomenology, you dissociate it from theology and cosmotheology. This is precisely what I have attempted to do in the second part of *L'Art et le Monde*, basing my reflection on the cosmology developed by Renaud Barbaras in *Dynamique de la manifestation* (2013). By arguing that the world without a man is always already on the side of manifestation, we give ourselves the theoretical means to overcome the resurgent Kantianism that undermined the perspectives of Merleau-Ponty, Dufrenne, and Maldiney. Basically, what’s at stake is a certain understanding of the fundamental phenomenological gesture. The recent issue of the review *Alter* (which brings together contributions from fifteen French phenomenologists, each attempting to formulate their own idea of phenomenology) demonstrates that there is no fundamental agreement on the meaning to be given to phenomenology¹. It’s as if there were as many understandings of phenomenology as there are phenomenologists. So, in my book *L'Art et le Monde*, I unknowingly formulated my “idea of phenomenology.” This idea is as follows. It consists in a radical reading of the universal *a priori* of correlation. This correlation is not the

¹ “Idées de la phénoménologie”, *Alter. Revue de phénoménologie*, Hors-série, 2023.

face-to-face encounter between the transcendental subject and the transcendental world. This is a Husserlian reading. According to Husserl, the world does not exist independently of its appearance, and its appearance does not exist independently of a transcendental subject that constitutes it. But it seems to me that the second formula (the transcendental formula) is Kantian rather than phenomenological. The properly phenomenological intuition consists in disassociating the appearance of the world from transcendental subjectivity. The real correlation is not between the subject and the world, but between the world and its appearance. The world is not to be found elsewhere than in its apparitions; apparitions are apparitions *of the world*. The whole point of a consistent phenomenology is to allow for an understanding of the world that does not include the existence of a transcendental subject in the equation. This is what Renaud Barbaras does in the perspective he develops between *La Vie lacunaire* (2011) and *Le Désir et le Monde* (2016). In short, the metaphysics of phenomenological art must not be theological, or cosmotheological, but cosmological.

3. The metaphysics of the sensible

Fourth observation: It is particularly striking to note the refusal of French phenomenologists of art to think about contemporary art, and conceptual art in particular. We saw this with Jean-Luc Marion, who contrasts beauty without concept with concept without beauty. Contemporary French writers on conceptual art prefer to turn away from this approach and build a phenomenology of art based on works from the late nineteenth century (Marion and his *Courbet*) and the first half of the twentieth century (Michel Henry and his *Voir l'invisible. Sur Kandinsky*). Why such a refusal?

There are two possible reasons.

First reason: French phenomenologists don't seem to acclimatize well to the characteristic irony of contemporary works of art. An overturned urinal, excrement packaged in ninety cans sold at a gold price, an unmade and soiled bed, a machine that produces excrement, an inflatable Christmas tree in the shape of an anal plug temporarily installed in Place Vendôme for the FIAC, a banana taped up at the Art Basel Miami Beach fair all seem to lend themselves to laughter and scandal rather than to "serious" and metaphysical questioning.

Second reason: the metaphysics of art by French phenomenologists is defined as a metaphysics of the sensible. The work of art performs a phenomenological *epochè*, *i.e.*, it takes objectivity out of the equation. It leads us back from being as an identifiable object to being as a sensible thing. The power of sensible qualities then appears. The power of sensible qualities,

first and foremost, to surpass themselves in favor of meaning. Acidity and yellow color “sketch” the sensible thing lemon. The “yellow tear in the sky over Golgotha” (Sartre, 1948: 14) in Tintoretto’s *Crucifixion* signifies anguish. The power of sensitive qualities to surpass themselves for the sake of the atmosphere is also apparent. The colors and shapes, the tranquil pose of Mary and Jesus in Caravaggio’s *Madonna dei Palafrenieri* in the Galleria Borghese, exude an atmosphere of delicacy, of extreme gentleness. Following Mikel Dufrenne, we can say that this atmosphere is a “world” and that it reveals one of the faces of Nature, so that works of art, through their sensitive qualities, reveal the world.

This is where the difficulty faced by French phenomenologists of art comes in. Conceptual art sidelines, even rejects sensitive qualities. It neutralizes not objectivity, but sensitivity. Yet “how can we deny a work of art this intuitive-sensible dimension, which is not only given to us in it but constitutes its very gift?” (Maldiney, 2020: 14). Mikel Dufrenne expresses his embarrassment in a 1986 text:

And we know how insistently art today is reflected upon and theorized, and how artists claim for themselves the benefits of this theorization. Witness the art that calls itself conceptual, or the art that exhibits its own means of production, or the art that is above all critical and engages in a polemical relationship with the dominant ideology. Yet it seems to me that this reflexivity is not enough to specify art and that it detracts from its vocation: the aesthetic experience it provokes then concerns only the understanding, the idea refuses to appear in the sensible, and indifference or boredom sometimes replaces pleasure or enjoyment. But authentic aesthetic experience requires that sensibility be solicited, and pleasure experienced. (Dufrenne, 1986: 115)

Conceptual art diverts art from its vocation. It speaks to the mind rather than to the senses. It is of the order of the idea rather than the sensible. The aesthetic experience it provokes is inauthentic. In other words, contemporary art is not really art, but a reality we don’t know what to do with. It’s as if conceptual art were the *punctum caecum* of French phenomenologists’ metaphysics of the sensible. This would confirm the now-accepted view that French phenomenological aesthetics is outdated (and has been overtaken by Anglo-Saxon aesthetics) and is, at best, no more than the philosophical aesthetics of modernist painting.

It seems to me that contemporary phenomenologists of conceptual art (especially Mikel Dufrenne) have failed to see that their metaphysics of the sensible does not end where conceptual art begins. In fact, a closer look at conceptual works from the 1960s, such as Robert Morris’s *Card File* (1962, a file drawer that describes the work’s creative process), Joseph Kosuth’s

One and Three Chairs (1965, a chair, a photograph of a chair and a translation of the word “chair”), Robert Barry’s *Closed Gallery* (1969, a closed exhibition room in front of which is written: “During the exhibition the gallery will be closed”), demonstrates that conceptual art is still working with sensible qualities. To activate the meaning of the work of art or the meaning that is the work of art, the receiver must first relate to the file drawer, the three instantiations of the chair, and the sign warning of the art gallery’s closure. What’s more, we find in conceptual art the first power of sensible qualities that we’ve uncovered: the power of sensible qualities to carry meaning. The conceptual gesture does not consist in neutralizing sensible qualities, but in exacerbating the power of sensible qualities to signify, to efface themselves in favor of meaning. A number of works of conceptual art reside in words, like Sol LeWitt’s instruction manuals or Josip Vaništa’s descriptions of paintings he didn’t make. Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s *La Prose du monde* definitively demonstrated that linguistic meanings do not exist outside of language. The verbalization of conceptual art has the sense not of an overcoming of sensible qualities, but of a radical use of those sensible qualities that are language signs.

Finally, there is no reason to dissociate aesthetic experience (sensible experience) from conceptual art, nor to dissociate French phenomenology of art from contemporary art. French phenomenology of art, and hence the metaphysics of the sensible, is not an archaic or outdated philosophy of art. On the contrary, it has its whole life ahead of it.

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