

English Urban, American Rural

ROB BARNARD

JULIAN STAIR

curator Claire Wilcox
sponsor Pearl Dot Furniture

ARCHITECTURE AND POTTERY

'this architectural spirit' Walter Gropius¹

Herbert Read wrote that 'Architecture is a necessary art'.² Is pottery a necessary art? Both have been constants in man's life since ancient times. Both buildings and pottery enclose and contain space. Both share the same means by which they are understood and become familiar to us. In the cultural theorist Walter Benjamin's words, 'Buildings are appropriated in a twofold manner: by use and by perception- or rather, by touch and sight'.³ Even more importantly, pottery and architecture share the same *method* of being known. As Benjamin states '...tactile appropriation is accomplished not so much by attention as by habit.'⁴ Architecture is about people and use, and pots are about people and use. Domestically, they stand in opposite ratio and scale to the human form, architecture dwarfing it and at times acquiring a 'canonical value's'. Pots, however, are subjugated to the human form, at its service. As domestic objects within the domestic scale of rooms, pots simply provide smaller, differentiated interiors for that which we value. Clay vessels are to hand scale and, like the imprint of the potter which clings to them, receive their benediction and rebirth in the hands of the user. What is left of all the movement and motion of their making is still, patient, reanimated only with drinking and pouring, washing and emptying, breaking and burying.

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1 Walter Gropius, *Reply to Arbeitsrat für Kunst Questionnaire*, 1919

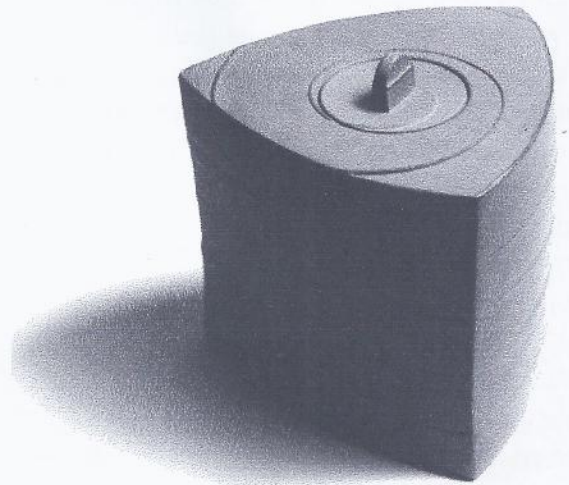
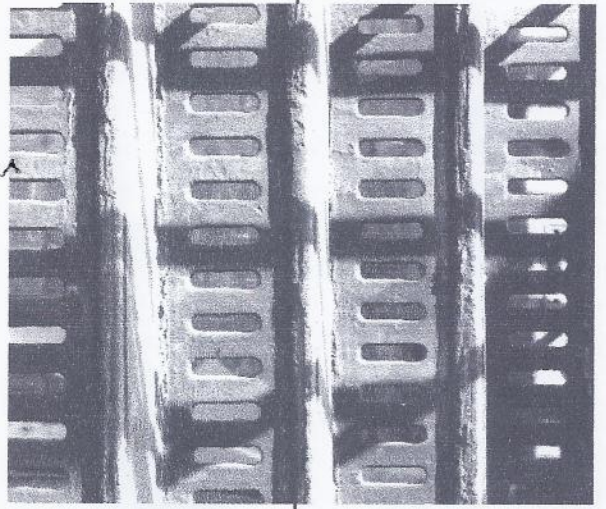
2 Herbert Read, *What is Revolutionary Art?* 1935

3 Walter Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, 1936

4 *Ibid.*

5 *Ibid.*

The experience of architecture is a simultaneous, collective one, from both outside and in. The building is actually entered into. The private, domestic space is experienced from within by habit, routine, is an incubator for personal lives, thought, pleasure, isolation. When it succeeds, architectural space and its decoration reinforce our sense of ourselves; it disturbs only when it jars, or brutally impacts upon us. Pottery, too, reinforces our sense of ourselves. The degeneration of craft work and plurality of mass produced objects is rarely seen, however, as a failing, or lack in our lives. The loss of the unique and hand made is not grieved for, nor is the lost dynamic between interior and object in what the potter and writer Edmund de Waal describes as 'The gap of understanding between makers and architects' ⁶ in the post-war craft world.



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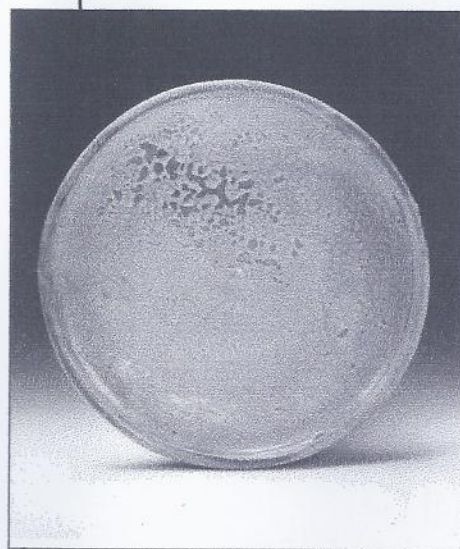
⁶ Edmund de Waal, 'Back in London', A Contemporary Response to Lucie Rie and Hans Coper, 1997

Hand made or not, craft possesses a familiarity, even a reassuring lack of novelty—a pot is felt to be known, even before it is held or used. It exists in multiples, there will be more, there have been more. The space in which it is contained, however, the architecture of room, building, landscape, is singular, at least from the outside. If a furnished building is a series of interiors within interiors, the smallest and the last a cup to hold liquid or a pot to hold flowers, then this cup or pot is the most intimate of contacts. The impact of such an object, and its potential significance diminishes with its reduced scale, down to the size of an egg cup, which would be thought ludicrous if it had aspirations of great solemnity. It's hard for an egg cup to be epic. And yet our experience of living is felt through our daily physical contact with artefacts. Each component in our daily lives creates a fragment of our whole experience of existence; grit in the eye, a flower in the hand, to be reassembled as the sum of our reality. A careful, beautiful cup has social significance, it clarifies our sensations of experience and re-experience until it breaks, or is put away. Pottery, like architecture, has a metaphysical capacity, and when a pot is good, this matters more than its usefulness. Esther Leslie wrote 'Crafted objects, specifically the pot, provide a model of authentic experience, the experience of a person imprinted onto the objects that he or she brings into being...'⁷ Pottery is tangible and hard, but also, as a mode of expression, powerful. As Herbert Read wrote, it is 'at once the simplest and the most difficult of all arts. It is the simplest because it is the most elemental; it is the most difficult because it is the most abstract.'⁸

⁷ Esther Leslie, from a lecture given at the University of East Anglia, *Dreams, Toys and Tales*, 1997

⁸ Herbert Read, *The Meaning of Art*, *Saber & Saber*, 1931

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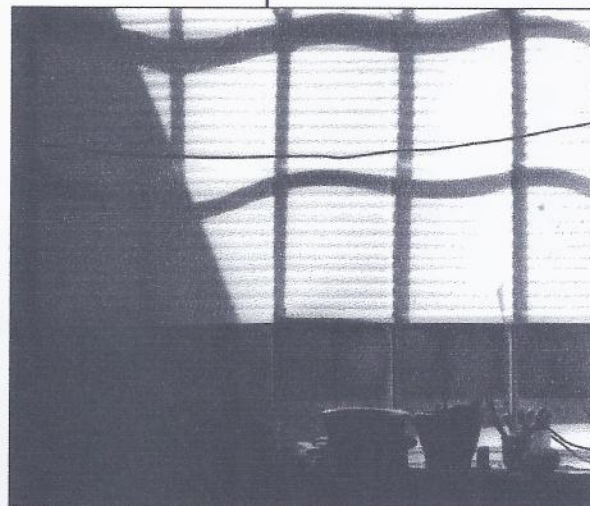


THE POTS

Rob Barnard and Julian Stair's pots are satisfying, desirable, sure. They also chart thought, through the sensory, collective means of physical touch, sight, use, about human aspirations, their own and a collective idea of the *potential* of human beings.

Julian Stair's pottery is a pottery of reason. It possesses a formal coherence, structural vividness, clarity of function. His pots are about aspirations to the ideal, what humans can be, that they are worthwhile. His interest in formal issues, elegance and balance has as its ideal the balance of the emotion with the intellect. His work is that of an idealist in pursuit of the unattainable, and therefore engaged in the most human of all activities, to reason, apply logic, build and construct in a conscious state of human awareness. The red structures possess a diffused geometry. The writer and dealer in Cubist art, Kahnweiler, wrote that 'Architecture and applied art realise in space these basic forms (cube, sphere and cylinder) which we always demand in vain of the natural world'.⁹ But Julian Stair's surfaces are not straight lines, his planes and angles not engineered. There is a residue, an element that reinforces the tremulousness of the human form, appreciated by touch.

⁹ Daniel-Henri Kahnweiler, *The Rise of Cubism*, 1920

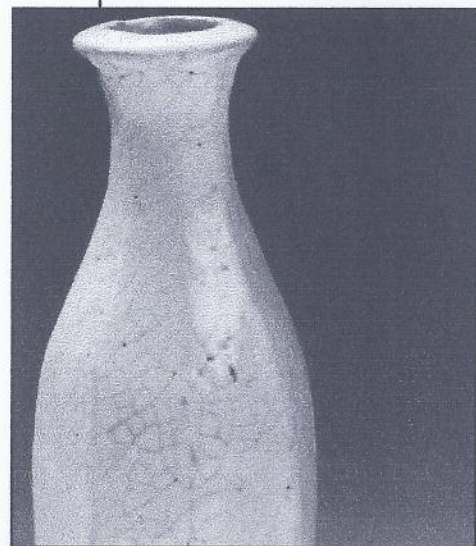


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Rob Barnard's work might be said to be about humanity, frailty, asymmetry, expressed by 'unfinished' edges, pocked surfaces, images not necessarily of the edifice of culture, order, discipline, but the darker side of life. He quotes D.T. Suzuki, 'hoping that people might realise that there was a philosophy behind my 'sloppy' technique.' Suzuki wrote '...disregard of form results hen too much attention or emphasis is given to the all importance of the spirit. When you would ordinarily expect a line or a mass or a balancing element, you miss it, and yet this very thing awakens in you an unexpected felling of pleasure. In spite of shortcomings or deficiencies that no doubt are apparent, you do not feel them so; indeed, this imperfection itself becomes a form of perfection. Beauty does not necessarily spell perfection of form.'¹⁰ His pots are also sensuous, plastic, statuesque, have delicacy, a pottery not so much of reason but of compassion, for fallibility. He reminds us of the real state of human affairs, not the image we construct of ourselves, and he takes, in part, responsibility for it.

10 D.T. Suzuki, *Zen in Japanese Culture*, Bollingen Press, 1932

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'A rationalist to his London fingertips' as Margot Coatts wrote of Julian Stair ¹¹, he has lived all his life in cities - in Bristol, Los Angeles and London for the last 20 years, with studios in Brixton and now Camberwell. The son of parents who were both painters, he was imbued with an atmosphere of critical discourse from the cradle. His father was part of the St Ives community in Cornwall in the 1950s and 60s and mixed with artists such as Patrick Heron, Roger Hilton and Bernard Leach. In contrast, Rob Barnard was brought up in Kentucky, and ran away from school into the marines, and to Vietnam. His subsequent ceramic education took place in college in Japan, where he remained for the next 4 1/2 years. A unique amalgam of American and Japanese culture, 'between points', as he described it, his work is appreciated in Japan in a way in which it perhaps can never be elsewhere.

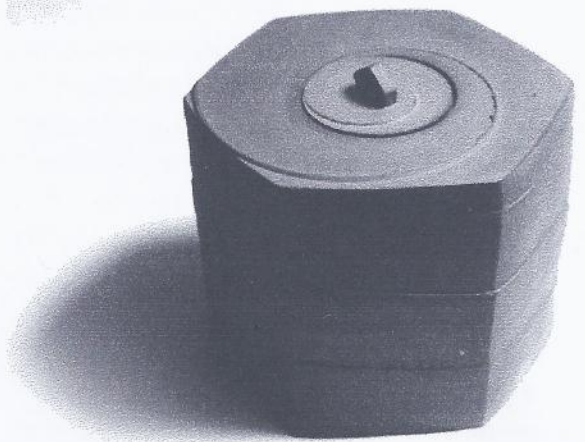
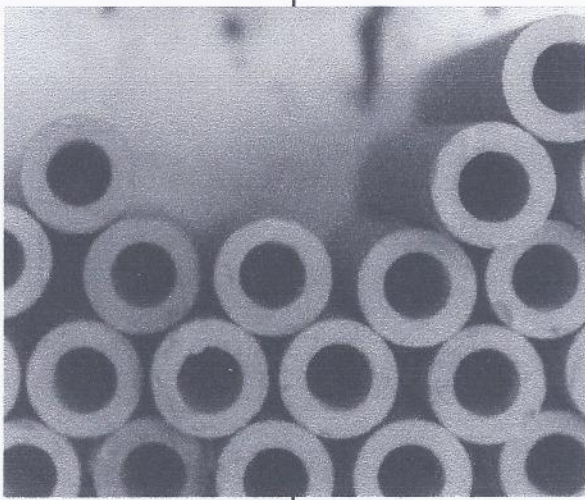
Why did Rob Barnard return to rural America, and build a cabin in the middle of a wood in Virginia? The struggle to establish work that was thrown, wood fired, rough to the touch and darkly obscure in an American ceramics scene that was celebrating glaze and funk must have been a hard one. His white statuesque work was hardly more accessible despite the sensuality of its glaze. Similarly, why did Julian Stair push away a successful career in porcelain pots and bowls to make domestic thrown pottery, radical at a time when the non-functional vessel and ceramic sculpture were dominant. From urban, complex London, Stair rented a grey washed wooden house in the middle of rural Virginia. Knowing hardly any one apart from Barnard, he began a range of table ware with a unity of intent and of process. Lying behind the repetition of cup after cup lay a deeper sense of a connection between past form, rational thought and the modern condition.

In his first public lecture in London in 1877, William Morris expressed his utopian vision of the regenerative and nurturing powers of the decorative arts to '...make our streets as beautiful as the woods, as elevating as the mountain-sides; it will be a pleasure and a rest, and not a weight upon the spirit to come from the open country into a town; every man's house will be fair and decent, soothing to his mind and helpful to his work: all the works of man that we live amongst and handle will be in harmony with nature, will be reasonable and beautiful: yet all will be simple and inspiriting...'¹² Morris looked to the decorative arts to provide solace to the inhabitants of an increasingly industrialised landscape. Despite Modernism, this concept of the power of the decorative arts to calm and inspire, and bring people closer to creative beauty is something that remains with us in our dreams of craft, evening classes and interiors, particularly in relation to pottery. The 19th century idea of retreat from the harshness of the industrialised environment and the alienation of city dwellers, into an idealised pre-industrial past, with dignity of labour and unselfconsciousness, created a melancholy litany for the 20th century.

Barnard and Stair do nothing to console this litany. Unique, distinct, difficult, they challenge the reassuring aura of William Morris's idealistic vision, have no relationship to the unknown, humble potter of Bernard Leach, the dominant figure of studio pottery and Soetsu Yanagi, the leader of the Japanese folk craft movement. Theirs is a pursuit based on a material consciousness, the hand's experience of raw matter. Their work has purposefulness, discipline, and of course beauty - of a sort, and it remains within the 'known' forms of historic pottery, from bowls to jugs to lidded jars. The certainty of their pot-throwing is the starting point from which they take off into the uncertainty of intellectual enquiry.

11 Margot Coatts, *Crafts Magazine*, May / June, 1997

12 William Morris, 'The Lesser Arts', *Hopes and Fears for Art*, 1917



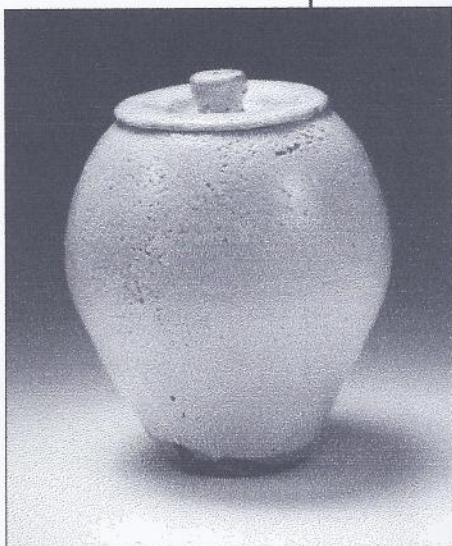
JULIAN STAIR

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Can their work profoundly influence our lives? Surely this is something more than familiarity, is simply another route for questioning ourselves, like any other art form. To Walter Benjamin, the hand was an essential metaphor. 'Salvation includes the firm, apparently brutal grip'¹³. The hand-made in Stair and Barnard's work is fluent, unique, the antithesis of the mass produced object, but 'brutal', radical in its content, uncompromising for the receiver who expects pots of tradition, convention, attractiveness, reassurance. Instead of reassurance they can disturb. Their beauty is often a severe one. A plate that scrapes, a dark form, an austerity and blinding purity, a swelling form with tiny bud-like arms, a cup and saucer so deep and dark it seems like a pool of bitterness itself. Salvation from modern alienation may come from craft, even craft can shock; these pots express gloom, uncertainty, as well as celebration, exultation. Pottery translates their understanding of experience, as solace, and its counterpart, despair. Their work is informed by darker sources, from Rob Barnard's experience of war and Julian Stair's anguish at his first child's death in a series of dark funerary jars, unembellished, and final.

¹³ Quoted by Esther Leslie in *Dreams, Toys and Tales*, 1997

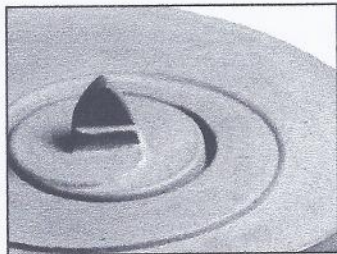
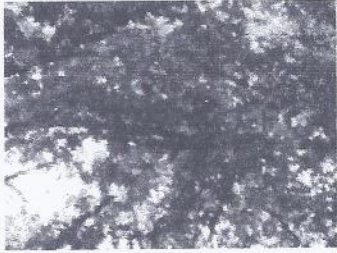
ROB BARNARD



CONCLUSION

Stair and Barnard's argument for pottery is not only made in their work, but is spoken for in their writing too. Each taught himself to write, another struggle by lamplight, with the darkness of the critical consensus outside. They argue that pottery has the capacity to express humanity through sight, touch, thought. Nostalgia and reassurance are their last priorities. We dare to ask what something is for or how much it costs with trepidation. Their pots speak to us in a form and shape that we can understand, but make us question the nature of art and pottery itself. To own a pot is not necessarily to understand it. The dialectic of pots is a complex one, their very familiarity, which we know by 'habit', lulls us into an affirmation of regeneration, that we are at one with the spirit of the potter, and our own pasts, by their connection to the earth which they are a conduit of. They seem to take responsibility for our present and make it humble and worthwhile again by the potter's activity, as if they were praying for our craft souls while we get on with the life of the uncreative. Today, Morris's ideal does not exist, if it ever did. Making pottery is difficult enough, in the wake of such impossible idealism and the corollary of the potter as a modern anachronism. Both potters believe that theirs is in fact a living, evolving language, as they need to in order to make their preoccupations worthwhile. Their need is to prove this, by means of a language that is only half- translatable, half lost. Walter Benjamin in his essay 'The Task of the Translator' described different languages as ultimately untranslatable, the result an assemblage of shards, in Esther Leslie's words, 'as the gluing together of fragments of a vessel. These fragments must match one another in the smallest details, but must not be like one another... According to the doctrine of *tikkun*, vessels of God's attributes were broken and this breaking of the vessels scattered divine sparks in fragments throughout the material world. These fragments must be brought together, the pots remade, in a task both secular and divine.'¹⁴

¹⁴ Esther Leslie, *Dreams, Toys, and Tales*, 1997

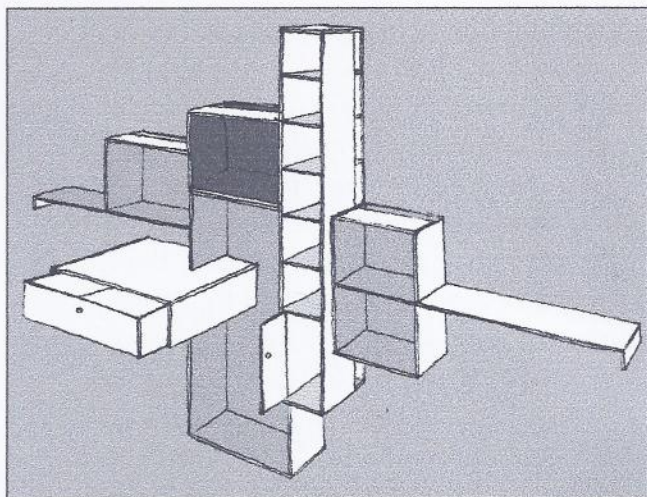


As individuals, Julian Stair and Rob Barnard share a profound isolation, whether that of the wood dweller, working in silence, miles from the nearest mall, or the urban dweller, cycling amidst the fumes and grime of Camberwell to a cavernous Victorian warehouse. From different locations, with different nationalities, languages, lives, they found a shared strength and tenacity of purpose, and some of the same faiths, in the past forms of pottery and the means of making work, even a shared language between the divide of 4,000 miles, urban London and rural Virginia, a European modernism and a Japanese / American aesthetic. Differentiated and isolated by a shared purpose in something so particular and exotic (they make whole what is shattered by modern life) we find in both pots and men an attractiveness and unattainability in equal measure. They determine to prove that pottery, to return to Herbert Read, like architecture, is a necessary art.

Claire Wilcox
1997



Images in the catalogue contrast the objects with the locations in which they are produced.



The Display System

Most display systems are considered as a neutral background to the work. In this system Shillam + Smith are investigating a different approach. Here we show each piece within its own environment and enjoy the playfulness of giving each enclosure a different background. Our intention is that each piece is discovered anew.

The need for artificial light is obviated by the very simple device of a slot (at the top or side) which serves to highlight and backlight the object.

This is a prototype for a set of domestic furniture which we hope to go into manufacture with Pearl Dot Furniture Workshop. We are currently looking for an international retail partner.

The pieces are modular, fitting together in a number of ways. They include a simple drawer and cupboard.

Unfinished Russian birch ply and brightly coloured laminates on the wearing surfaces is an echo of the contrasts between this show of rural glazed and urban unglazed pottery.

Individual pieces can be made to order.

Rob Barnard

1. Bowl
h. 12cm x w. 33cm £500
2. Vase
h. 22cm x w. 14cm £400
3. Vase
h. 24cm x w. 12cm £350
4. Plate
h. 4cm x w. 27cm £300
5. Covered Jar
h. 22cm x w. 18cm £400
6. Bottle
h. 25cm x w. 11cm £300
7. Bottle
h. 24cm x w. 15cm x d. 12cm £300
8. Bottle
h. 23cm x w. 7cm £250

Julian Stair

9. Teapot
h. 21cm x d. 12cm £250
10. Faceted Vase
h. 32cm x d. 18cm £300
11. Hexagonal Caddy
h. 15cm x d. 16cm £350
12. Oval Caddy
h. 18cm x d. 16cm £300
13. Triangular Caddy
h. 14cm x d. 14cm £350
14. 6 Coffee Cups
h. 9cm x d. 15cm £50 each
15. Triangular Dish
h. 6cm x d. 38cm £400
16. Rounded Dish
h. 7cm x d. 53cm £550

Shillam + Smith 3

Shillam + Smith believe in the civilising influence of urban life. We are part of a movement dedicated to the regeneration of the urban environment, embracing mixed developments including public and private cultural, commercial and domestic architecture. Our work is modern, urban and humanistic.

Part of the pleasure of urban life is found in the proximity of different cultural influences. This non commercial gallery is seen as a catalyst for such exchanges between the arts. Shillam + Smith 3 is located in the same building as Shillam + Smith Architects. It is dedicated to showing contemporary work of all types.

Acknowledgments

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Display system sponsored by Pearl Dot Furniture

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