This LEA publication has a simple goal: surveying the current trends in augmented reality artistic interventions. There is no other substantive academic collection currently available, and it is with a certain pride that LEA presents this volume which provides a snapshot of current trends as well as a moment of reflection on the future of AR interventions.
Not Here Not There

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Not Here, Not There: An Analysis Of An International Collaboration To Survey Augmented Reality Art

Every published volume has a reason, a history, a conceptual underpinning as well as an aim that ultimately the editor or editors wish to achieve. There is also something else in the creation of a volume; that is the larger goal shared by the community of authors, artists and critics that take part in it.

This volume of LEA titled Not Here, Not There had a simple goal: surveying the current trends in augmented reality artistic interventions. There is no other substantive academic collection currently available, and it is with a certain pride that both, Richard Rinehart and myself, look at this endeavor. Collecting papers and images, answers to interviews as well as images and artists’ statements and putting it all together is perhaps a small milestone; nevertheless I believe that this will be a seminal collection which will showcase the trends and dangers that augmented reality as an art form faces in the second decade of the XXIst century.

As editor, I did not want to shy away from more critical essays and opinion pieces, in order to create a documentation that reflects the status of the current thinking. That these different tendencies may or may not be proved right in the future is not the reason for the collection, instead what I believe is important and relevant is to create a historical snapshot by focusing on the artists and authors developing artistic practices and writing on augmented reality. For this reason, Richard and I posed to the contributors a series of questions that in the variegated responses of the artists and authors will evidence and stress similarities and differences, contradictions and behavioral approaches. The interviews add a further layer of documentation which, linked to the artists’ statements, provides an overall understanding of the hopes for this new artistic playground or new media extension. What I personally wanted to give relevance to in this volume is the artistic creative process. I also wanted to evidence the challenges faced by the artists in creating artworks and attempting to develop new thinking and innovative aesthetic approaches.

The whole volume started from a conversation that I had with Tamiko Thiel – that was recorded in Istanbul at Kasa Gallery and that lead to a curatorial collaboration with Richard. The first exhibition Not Here at the Samek Art Gallery, curated by Richard Reinhart, was juxtaposed to a response from Kasa Gallery with the exhibition Not There, in Istanbul. The conversations between Richard and myself produced this final volume – Not Here, Not There – which we both envisaged as a collection of authored papers, artists’ statements, artworks, documentation and answers to some of the questions that we had as curators. This is the reason why we kept the same questions for all of the interviews – in order to create the basis for a comparative analysis of different aesthetics, approaches and processes of the artists that work in augmented reality.

When creating the conceptual structures for this collection my main personal goal was to develop a link – or better to create the basis for a link – between ear-
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EDITORIAL

These are four elements that characterize the work of contemporary artists that use augmented reality as a medium. Here, is not perhaps the place to focus on the role of ‘publicity’ in art history and artistic practices, but a few words have to be spent in order to explain that publicity for artworks is not solely a way for the artist to gain notoriety, but an integral part of the artwork, which in order to come into existence and generate interactions and engagements with the public has to be communicated to the largest possible audience.

By then, Kusama was widely assumed to be a publicity hound, who used performance mainly as a way of gaining media exposure. The publicity obsession, or the accusation of being a ‘publicity hound’ could be easily moved to the contemporary group of artists that use augmented reality. Their invasions of spaces, juxtapositions, infringements could be defined as nothing more than publicity stunts that have little to do with art. These accusations would not be just irrelevant but biased – as in the case of Sander Veenhof’s analysis in this collection – the linkage between the existence of the artwork as an invisible presence and its physical manifestation and engagement with the audience can only happen through knowledge, through the audience’s awareness of the existence of the artwork itself that in order to achieve its impact as an artwork necessities to be publicized. Even if, I do not necessarily agree with the idea of a ‘necesary manifestation’ and audience’s knowledge of the artwork – I believe that an artistic practice that is unknown is equally valid – I can nevertheless understand the process, function, and relations that have to be established in order to develop a form of engagement and interaction between the AR artwork and the audience. To condemn the artists who seek publicity in order to gather audiences to make the artworks come alive is perhaps a shortsighted approach that does not take into consideration the audience’s necessity of knowing that interaction is possible in order for that interaction to take place. What perhaps should be analyzed in different terms is the evolution of art in the second part of the XXth century, as an activity that is no longer and can no longer be rescinded from publicity, since audience engagement requires audience attendance and attendance can be obtained only through communication / publicity. The existence of the artwork – in particular of the successful AR artwork – is strictly measured in numbers: numbers of visitors, numbers of interviews, numbers of news items, numbers of talks, numbers of interactions, numbers of clicks, and, perhaps in a not too distant future, numbers of coins gained. The issue of being a ‘publicity hound’ is not a problem that applies to artists alone, from Andy Warhol to Damien Hirst from Banksy to Maurizio Cattelan, it is also a method of evaluation that affects art institutions and museums alike. The accusation moved to AR artists of being media whores – is perhaps contradictory when arriving from institutional art forms, as well as galleries and museums that have celebrated publicity as an element of the performative character of both artists and artworks and an essential element instrumental to the institutions’ very survival.

The publicity stunts of the augmented reality interventions today are nothing more than an acquired methodology borrowed from the second part of the XXth century. This is a stable methodology that has already been widely implemented by public and private art institutions in order to promote themselves and their artists. Publicity and community building have become an artistic methodology that AR artists are playing with by making use of their better knowledge of the AR media. Nevertheless, this is knowledge born out of necessity and scarcity of means, and at times appears to be more effective than the institutional messages arriving from well-established art organizations. I should also add that publicity is functional in AR interventions to the construction of a community – a community of aficionados, similar to the community of ‘nudists’ that follows Spencer Tunick for his art events / human installation.

I think what is important to remember in the analysis of the effectiveness both in aesthetic and participatory terms of augmented reality artworks is not their publicity element, not even their sheer numbers (which, by the way, are what has made these artworks successful) but their quality of disruption. The ability to use – in Marshall McLuhan’s terms – the medium as a message in order to impose content by-passing institutional control is the most exciting element of these artworks. It is certainly a victory that a group of artists – by using alternative methodological approaches to what are the structures of the capitalistic system, is able to enter into that very capitalistic system in order to become institutionalized and perhaps – in the near future – be able to make money in order to make art. Much could be said about the artist’s need of fitting within a capitalist system or the artist’s moral obligation to reject the basic necessities to ensure an operational professional existence within contemporary capitalistic structures. This becomes, in my opinion, a question of personal ethics, artistic choices and existential social dynamics. Let’s not forget that the vast majority of artists – and AR artists in particular – do not have large sums and do not impinge upon national budgets as much as banks, financial institutions, militaries and corrupt politicians. They work for years


2. Isabelle Loring Wallace and Jennie Hinh, Contemporary Art & Classical Myth (Farnham; Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2011), 94.
with small salaries, holding multiple jobs and making personal sacrifices; and the vast majority of them does not end up with golden parachutes or golden handshakes upon retirement nor causes billions of damage to society.

The current success of augmented reality interventions is due in small part to the nature of the medium. Museums and galleries are always on the lookout for ‘cheap’ and efficient systems that deliver art engagement, numbers to satisfy the donors and the national institutions that support them, artworks that deliver visibility for the gallery and the museum, all of it without requiring large production budgets. Forgetting that art is also about business, that curating is also about managing money, it means to gloss over an important element – if not the major element – that an artist has to face in order to deliver a vision.

Augmented reality artworks bypass these financial challenges, like daguerreotypes did by delivering a cheaper form of portraiture than oil painting in the first part of the XIXth century, or like video did in the 1990s until now, offering cheaper systems to move beyond the fractures and barriers of institutional vs. revolutionary, retaining the edge of their aesthetics and artworks, is what will determine their future success.

These are the reasons why I believe that this collection of essays will prove to be a piece, perhaps a small piece, of future art history, and why in the end it was worth the effort.

Lanfranco Aceti
Editor in Chief, Leonardo Electronic Almanac
Director, Kasa Gallery

In the 1960’s, artist Robert Smithson articulated the strategy of representation summarized by “site vs. non-site” whereby certain artworks were simultaneously abstract and representational and could be site-specific without being sited. A pile of rocks in a gallery is an “abstract” way to represent their site of origin. In the 1990’s net.art re-materialized the art object and found new ways to suspend the artwork online between website and non-site. In the 21st century, new technologies suggest a reconsideration of the relationship between the virtual and the real. “Harlinks” such as AR codes attempt to bind a virtual link to our physical environment.

Throughout the 1970’s, institutional critique brought political awareness and social intervention to the site of the museum. In the 1980’s and 90’s, street artist such as Banksy went in the opposite direction, critiquing the museum by siting their art beyond its walls.

Sited art and intervention art meet in the art of the trespass. What is our current relationship to the sites we live in? What representational strategies are contemporary artists using to engage sites? How are sites politically activated? And how are new media framing our consideration of these questions? The contemporary art collective ManifestAR offers one answer.

“Whereas the public square was once the quintessential place to air grievances, display solidarity, express difference, celebrate similarity, remember, mourn, and reinforce shared values of right and wrong, it is no longer the only anchor for interactions in the public realm. That geography has been relocated to a novel terrain, one that encourages exploration of mobile location based monuments, and virtual memorials. Moreover, public space is now truly open, as artworks can be placed anywhere in the world, without prior permission from government or private authorities – with profound implications for art in the public sphere and the discourse that surrounds it.”

ManifestAR develops projects using Augmented Reality (AR), a new technology that – like photography before it – allows artists to consider questions like those above in new ways. Unlike Virtual Reality, Augmented Reality is the art of overlaying virtual content on top of physical reality. Using AR apps on smart phones, iPads, and other devices, viewers look at the real world around them through their phone’s camera lens, while the app inserts additional images or 3D objects into the scene. For instance, in the work Signs over Semiconductors by Will Papenheim, a blue sky above a Silicon Valley company that is “in reality” empty contains messages from viewers in skywriting smoke when viewed through an AR-enabled Smartphone.

Air is being used to activate sites ranging from Occupy Wall Street to the art exhibition ManifestAR @ ZERO Biennial 2012 – presented by the Samek Art Gallery simultaneously at Bucknell University in Lewisburg, PA and at Silicon Valley in San Jose, CA. From these contemporary non-sites, and through the papers included in this special issue of LEA, artists ask you to reconsider the implications of the simple question wey (where are you now?)
Augmented reality (AR) has unprecedentedly extended contemporary artist’s horizon in multiple ways enlarging the possibility and opportunity for creative actions. AR opened up a new hybrid dimension to explore, with infinite possibilities in terms of size, complexity and spatial reach of artists’ virtual creations, but it allows for the crossing of former physical limitations; such as country borders or museum walls. With the freedom of not having to alter the physical space to put up any markers, GPS-based augmented reality delivers the power to do and make anything anywhere. However, the impact of such virtual creations and additions does not come naturally as GPS-based AR artworks are simultaneously present and not present. Since they remain invisible so long as no device is pointed at them, a smart strategy needs to be deployed to bring their presence to the attention of the audience. In order to achieve a crucial level of (local) awareness and/or publicity, the parallel virtual reality needs to be relevant to its real world location. Relevance might lead to publicity, and publicity helps bring the otherwise invisible phenomena to life, allowing them the possibility of making an impact on the world in which they appear. This impact then in turn leads to further publicity, creating a circular cause and effect loop, which necessitates one of these elements as a trigger to get the cycle started. This cycle can be described as follows: Impact-Publicity-Awareness-Interaction-Visibility-Interference-Publicity.

As the practitioners of ‘AR interventions’ have been exploring different ways to make their AR experiences impactful without being dependent on modifications in the physical space, what are the strategies they use to overcome the intrinsic invisible nature of GPS-based augmented reality? Is there a future for the phenomenon of the AR Intervention and if so what kinds of future interventions are to be expected?
The placement of additional artworks by thirty fellow artists spread across the museum was a success because of viral publicity beforehand, which took off because of the foreseeable relevance of the planned exhibition and the new insights it would provide on issues related to the use and ownership of space. The exhibition did not only provide these insights, nor did it simply augment reality in a visual way; it actually changed the organizational reality of the (art) world. Even though, autonomous interventions into museums have been an art practice for decades, this intervention marked a new situation. Not only did the show occupy all six floors of the museum, as well as a newly installed virtual seventh floor, but it was new in the sense that the works could not be removed from the museum. Furthermore, the MoMA had no way to prevent the exhibition's unofficial opening, short of prohibiting all iPhone use on that particular day.

The exhibition could have been stopped only if MoMA would have prohibited iPhone usage. But what if the audience would have worn Google Goggles or even unobtrusive AR contact lenses? The organizers of We AR in MoMA decided to give the show an indefinite duration, letting it become part of the permanent collection of the museum. This signaled that the control over museum content has shifted. Everybody is in control, as viewer or as creator.

One of the undeniable outcomes of the MoMA show, is that it has led to the formation of an artists collective Manifest.AR, consisting of likeminded artists working within the global virtual domain. Besides this, an unexpected effect could be that the show delivered a boost to the phenomenon of virtual interventions. To effectuate their launched manifesto, it seemed obvious to Manifest.AR that the 54th Venice Biennale had to be the next event in line for an AR intervention, extending it with an augmented reality pavilion to mark once more the rise of a new space, one not under the control of any one country. While preparing this follow-up event, it appeared that many groups and individuals were planning similar activities; The Invisible Pavilion, Venice Augmented, The ARsenal are just a few examples of the many other interventions announced. It triggered artist Sander Veenhof to act on this, initiating an intervention within the intervention by spreading flyers calling visitors to “STOP the virtual infiltration of the 54th Biennale.” A fully incomprehensible act to people who at the time were not even aware of the on going massive virtual intervention, since the act occurred within a visual arts context and not a tech-art context, this level of incomprehensibility was acceptable. The flyer included the sincere sounding statement “Art should be real,” to initiate a discussion on that crucial aspect of AR art. In view of the fact that many people tend to confuse the terms ‘materiality’ and ‘real,’ the question as to whether virtual art is real is surrounded by controversy. The virtual artworks at the 54th Biennale were really there, not elsewhere. In cooperation with Les Liens Invisible, Manifest.AR was there organising tours along the various artworks existing in numerous parallel virtual universes, available through various apps and platforms.

If something was worth campaigning against, it should have been the unstoppable growth of new platforms and alternate realities. AR is the new 2.0; it is the Second Life of the past. Art institutes have embraced AR and are joining the “first app to do this” quest, while at the same time the commercial world is constantly creating new virtual spaces. A fresh new browser and corresponding augmented world is being launched almost every month. The rise in popularity of the augmented reality phenomenon goes hand in hand with a decline of its impact. With so many parallel realities, the importance of each individual outing in any of the realities is waning. Besides the many functional uses of AR for small niche groups, what is the future of the medium as a mechanism for activist purposes? It risks losing the capabilities for that. What about virtual interventions into political domains or addressing issues such as workers’ rights within a semi-public domain such as Apple’s iOS platform, with seemingly endless growth and a closed ecosystem? Can augmented reality interventions of the future still be relevant enough to create a real impact and cause real trouble?

It would be a positive sign for AR in general if a troubleshooter were to succeed in proving some legal action as a result of an AR intervention, but currently that seems highly unlikely. Paradoxically, the same can be said for the chances of the suing party winning such a case. What does a GPS spot actually hold? The spot itself is just a combination of two innocent floating point numbers, while the specific data attached...
to it, be it a JPEG image or 3D rendering, can only be experienced with a certain piece of software. How does the suing party begin to construct a case? Can the publishers of Air browsers be held responsible if a company or organization objects to the positioning of certain material in their backyard or within their premises? Can AR platforms be forced to remove content? What if augmentations and GPS-locations could be offered as separate components, as div packages to users? What if augmentations, created by anonymous creators, reside on unknown servers, accessed through torrent-based peer-to-peer networks? Will individuals be prosecuted for viewing, or placing, anti-commercial, anti-governmental or other sorts of ‘inappropriate’ content at the ‘wrong’ location? That in turn then raises the question of what is inappropriate content? An in-depth court case would be a very welcome way to find the answer to all of these questions in an empirical way. The Internet is full of material that is considered to be on the edge, but not illegal or forbidden. What if all that content is taken to the street? Such a move would be significant and perhaps provoke censoring requests if there were only one single shared virtual parallel universe, but at this moment there is not yet one major provider of an ultimately relevant global AR universe.

Google seems to be the best-equipped candidate to be taking up that position as they already know in great detail how our world looks in terms of 3D geometry. The recent announcement of their AR goggles is an indication they are getting ready, but do we want Google to be the sole entity controlling our global hybrid space? Selling advertisements and deciding what content we can see, and what not?

The experience of Facebook shows how we reluctantly had to accept that one commercial company has become the de facto ruler of our online social universe, or should we even skip ‘online’? A situation is looming similar to that we can already see with Facebook, where we have come to accept one commercial company as the de facto ruler of our online social universe. It is too late to make any radical changes, but in terms of the global AR space there is still ample time to make radical changes. At the moment, there are too many alternative realities, which is not good. Soon, there might just be one relevant parallel reality, but this situation is equally undesirable. It is time then for a new intervention from the AR community, and it has to be soon. It is time to intervene on the meta-level, to develop an alternative model as the basis for a crowd driven parallel virtual society, one which could co-exist alongside a commercial giant that will undoubtedly rise to rule over our virtual surroundings. For now the virtual world is an invisible space, but it is undoubtedly a fundamental part of the semi digital world of the future. The virtual space should remain open to creative input by anyone, it should be uncensored, governed democratically and ruled by people’s common digital sense. Designed as a world of GPS-encoded augmentations stored on peer-to-peer networks, it will ensure the alternative virtual universe shall never be bought or integrated into a competing commercial reality, safeguarding the space to keep creating invisible augmented reality interventions – in your face. ■

REFERENCES AND NOTES

SANDER VEENOHF
interviewed by
Lanfranco Aceti & Richard Rinehart

Is there an ‘outside’ of the Art World from which to launch critiques and interventions? If so, what is the border that defines outside from inside? If it is not possible to define a border, then what constitutes an intervention and is it possible to be an act as an outsider of the art world? Or are there only different positions within the Art World and a series of positions to take that fulfill ideological parameters and promotional marketing and branding techniques to access the fine art world from an oppositional, and at times confrontational, standpoint? For a long time, there has been a thriving art scene beyond the walls of the museum and art institutions. Still, the brick walls of the museum were symbolic in defining what should be considered art: what was worth seeing and what was not. Street art has been taken out of its context and brought into the museum, Uninvited additions of artworks in to the museum have been taking place for a long time but it was the institution and the curator within it to decide what deserved to be preserved. With augmented reality, the situation has radically changed because digital virtual additions cannot be removed from the space. It is up to the artist to decide where to exhibit and it is up to the audience to decide what to view. This is an artistic practice that can be done in groups and independently as much as the engagement of the audience with the artwork can be realized by a single or a group. The usage of a mobile phone to see AR installation is just a prototype, it is my belief that in the very near future we will have more sophisticated ways to experience the multi-layered world around us with its unlimited amount of AR options. This means there will of course be a strong need of filtering; also the virtual space will need to be curated but the dynamics between artist, audience and curator will not replicate the current hierarchical frameworks. There has been a shift that has brought more power to the artists and the audience; a shift that obviously did not come from the ‘inside’ of the art institutions. This paradigm shift had to be demonstrated and initiated by outsiders. I believe it took place when Manifest.AR set-up a 6 floor exhibition within the iconic MoMA museum, without invitation, without notice, making their point.

“In The Truth in Painting, Derrida describes the parergon (par- around; ergon, the work), the boundaries or limits of a work of art. Philosophers from Plato to Hegel, Kant, Husserl, and Heidegger debated the limits of the intrinsic and extrinsic, the inside and outside of the art object.” (Anne Friedberg, The Virtual Window: From Alberti to Microsoft (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2009).) Where then is the inside and outside of the virtual artwork? Is the artist’s ‘hand’ still inside the artistic process in the production of virtual art or has it become an irrelevant concept abandoned outside the creative process of virtual artworks?

In terms of the production process, there is no difference between art which consists of physical material and art which consists of virtual phenomena. The same artistic ‘hand’ is involved in shaping the artwork originating it from raw materials. Computer code as paint, the keyboard as brush. Even AR art suffers from decay and artistic randomness, just as physical artworks do. The evolving version numbers of AR browsers make sure AR is a phenomenon and process in flux. I wish to state that materiality and virtuality are
There are similarities between the intervention in the MoMA and Banksy’s guerrilla art. They can both be seen as having an origin in street-art, now having transitioned into the spaces of official institution; first uninvited, then gradually becoming welcomed. As homage to Banksy, I included a ‘Banksy re-enactment,’ augment in the ‘We AR in MoMA’ show. It was a cut-out version of the famous photo of Banksy putting up his work on a museum wall. During the opening of our show in the MoMA in 2010, he joined us to repeat his action, virtually, and uninvited.

In addition to just copying the practise of guerrilla exhibiting using new means, we did explore the radical new opportunities of AR. Things that were previously not possible. An example is the launch of a virtual 7th floor on top of the MoMA building. This could have, of course, been conceptual piece inspired by George Brecht and written on a small white paper, but nowadays it can be made for ‘real,’ virtually. AR is causing a revival of conceptual art. The earth encapsulating virtual artworks, BiggAR for example, is on its way to become the biggest artwork in the universe. Within the AR art domain, which is considered by many people to be invisible, BiggAR will eventually be the first invisible AR artwork; an artwork in transition to become a conceptual piece.

Virtual interventions appear to be the contemporary inheritance of Fluxus’ artistic practices. Artists like Peter Weibel, Yayoi Kusama and Valie Export subverted traditional concepts of space and media through artistic interventions. What are the sources of inspiration and who are the predecessors that you draw from for the conceptual and aesthetic frameworks of contemporary augmented reality interventions?

The nature of augmented reality confronts us with new opportunities of exploration. What are the sources of inspiration and who are the predecessors that you draw from for the conceptual and aesthetic frameworks of contemporary augmented reality interventions? The intervention in the MoMA was obviously inspired by Banksy and his guerrilla placement of carefully contextualised artworks in museums worldwide. There are similarities between AR art and Banksy’s art practice. They can both be seen as having an origin in street-art, now having transitioned into the spaces of official institution; first uninvited, then gradually becoming welcomed. As homage to Banksy, I included a ‘Banksy re-enactment,’ augment in the ‘We AR in MoMA’ show. It was a cut-out version of the famous photo of Banksy putting up his work on a museum wall. During the opening of our show in the MoMA in 2010, he joined us to repeat his action, virtually, and uninvited.

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In the representation and presentation of your artworks as being ‘outside of’ and ‘extrinsic to’ contemporary aesthetics, why is it important that your projects are identified as Art? The nature of augmented reality confronts us with a problem when wanting to define the intrinsic and extrinsic properties of an AR artwork as these are non-separable. Augmented reality is defined by a combination of reality and an addition to reality. If not related to its context or interwoven with its surrounding, a creation is not augmented reality. It might be 3D modelling or graphic design, but only the manifestation of the creation within its intended surrounding makes it an augmented reality artwork. Its intrinsic quality needs to be judged on the extent in which it integrates successfully with its surroundings. Does it provide added value or even have an impact on the newly arisen hybrid situation? The artwork if it does not have intrinsic aesthetic properties on its own cannot be defined as non-art, there are also other criteria that emerge from the integraton of the artwork with the space and the audience. AR artworks cannot be judged according to metrics and definitions that have been in use until now.

In search of new formats unique to our semi-digital world, Veenhof’s projects range from technically driven concept art to geo-based participative storytelling experiences. His recent works foremostly exist in the augmented public space worldwide, accessible through a smartphone. To Veenhof, AR provides a perfect environment to work on projects in which virtual elements and physical components truly integrate and mutually empower each other, leading to a result that could not be possible otherwise. Veenhof is one of the founding members of Manifest.AR, a collective of artists creating their works in augmented reality. Best known for their uninvited exhibition in the MoMA NY, the group showcases new opportunities for artists and audiences in a world in which physical borders and limitations are no longer relevant.
Sports++, 2011, Sander Veenhof in cooperation with V2_Lab.
Format: soccer stadium repurposed for virtual massive multi-player gaming (copyright: photo taken by Sander Veenhof).
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Format: virtual infiltration into the White House and Pentagon (copyright: photo taken by Sander Veenhof).
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Deadly Cuts To The Arts

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