

*'Art is Going to Save Us' -
The Self Perception of the Mumbai Art Sphere in Contemporary Art Galleries*

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Abstract

The definition and overall perception of contemporary art remains a point of discussion and debate in the current age. It is imperative to contextualize the same in developing countries as this perception varies vastly in different socio-economic groups and therefore for this study, we focus on examining it for India. Foremost, this paper attempts to find an objective definition for contemporary art for this study to be based upon. Subsequently, we conducted a brief qualitative study on the perception of contemporary art in Mumbai, India, from the perspective of three different primary groups associated with the art sphere. These include the art gallery personnel (curators, overseers, and owners), the exhibiting artists, and the gallery visitors. The overall result of this study shows that most of the participants are open and understanding of contemporary art. However, many art galleries we visited were not welcoming to the common public, as they were physically closed off. This leads to a divide between the common public and the people in the art sphere. A few potential new media routes are considered to improve the engagement of the larger Indian population with contemporary art. Further insights in relation to the preferences of Indian audience are noted and discussed.

Keywords: Art, Exhibitions, Sociology, Contemporary Art, Perception

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1. Introduction

This paper deals with two main concepts - 'contemporary art' and the 'art sphere.' Before exploring how these two concepts correlate, we believe it is imperative to establish their definitions, which will thus contextualize our point of view and the study to come. Interestingly, contemporary art, as a definition, is still debated, with academia not married to what it concretely stands for. This therefore seeps into the nonacademic crowd and most individuals use contemporary art synonymously with 'modern art', 'post-modern art' and 'post-colonial art' (Karlholm, 2017; T. Smith, 2009). After examination of several academic sources, we felt that the available literature in an attempt to clear this confusion, has alienated us more, and has been unsuccessful in presenting a holistic definition due to constant contradictions. Therefore, to break out of this vague paradigm, we would like to define it by summarizing the literature based on our secondary research. This definition attempts to be objective and concise, and while it might not cover all the possible outlooks of the paradigm, we try to encapsulate the overall essence of the same.

Defining Contemporary Art

For Terry Smith, a richly cited researcher for his exploration on the meaning of contemporary art, the global condition of *contemporaine* in art is defined by four concerns, which he briefly notes as 'time, place, mediation, and mood' (T. Smith, 2009, 2011). However, Andrew McNamara raises an interesting argument, while explaining Terry Smith's exploration; the argument states, that based on Smith's own classification process of art history, hasn't contemporary art at any particular moment in time, been contemporary, and consequently, is it possible to have a permanent condition of the contemporary? (T. E. Smith, 2009) To answer such musings, Terry defines contemporary art as 'The World's art'; consequently, what makes contemporary - contemporary, are issues wider than art. On a similar note, P. Osborne defines contemporary art as post-conceptual art. Here, 'post-conceptual art', is an art theory which states that the concept or idea is superior to traditional aesthetics or the selected medium (Osborne, 2010; *Post-Conceptual and Neo-Conceptual art Explained — CAI*, 2022). From these two prominent notions, it can be discerned that contemporary art as a whole, is just a presentation of a current concept, without relying on the superficial visual quality of the art piece. *Therefore, we define contemporary art as a unique technique of presentation of concepts or ideas that are relevant to the current moment in time.*

Another notion that this paper focuses upon is 'the art sphere'. This is used to refer to anyone who is related to art curation, artwork creation or production, art sales and auctions, and art collectors. Furthermore, this also constitutes professionals and academicians who have been researching or studying fine art, design, or similar disciplines. This definition is important, as in this paper, this 'art sphere' will be contrasted with the 'layman,' which we refer to anyone who is not in the art sphere and is not in any capacity involved with fine art or design. It is important to note that art enthusiasts or people who enjoy going to art galleries also are considered as 'layman' for the purpose of this research.

2. Literature Review

This literature review details an interpretation of the current database available for the perception of contemporary art and art Galleries in Modern India. This is important, as our research deals with studying how such perception can be changed and improved; how can the

art world be expanded to be more inclusive and intriguing for people outside the art world and the self-defined 'art sphere.'

Review Methodology

The examined timeline was of the recent decade (2013 to 2023), as this research deals with the perception of contemporary art and we believe publications older than a decade would be outdated for this topic. For the purpose of this study, popular research databases were examined for results. Most of the results were irrelevant and returned literature in regard to perception of contemporary art and art galleries for nations excluding the Indian sub-continent. This signifies that this kind of research has not been well explored in India. In addition, when we tried narrowing down the research results to include 'India', many of the results started referring to Native American Indians. Consequently, we can infer that there is not much literature defining and understanding the perception of contemporary art by the Indian people. Out of the limited relevant results, most of the results were pure anthropological studies that dealt with the perception of the upper class and the exclusivity of art galleries, and no solutions or alternatives were proposed for this perception. Therefore, a research gap was clear, wherein, very little research is done on the perception of a lay man about Indian contemporary art.

Review of Relevant Literature

From the relevant literature that was shortlisted, this review mainly focuses on relevant papers as well as a book by Thorstein Veblen - 'The Theory of the Leisure Class's (Veblen, 1994). The article by Savia Viegas (Viegas, 2001) does not touch upon art galleries, but details a very interesting interpretation of the perception of museums by common people, specifically the Prince of Wales Museums in Mumbai which does contain art, albeit not contemporary. Viegas explains that most of the visitors (about 60%) of such museums are people from lower socio-economic strata traveling from villages and rural localities in big groups to experience the museums. This is contrary to the West, wherein, as according to Vergos's survey, museums and art galleries are usually populated with educated, 'high-status' visitors. (Vergo, 1989) Viegas hypothesized that being present in such a building and being a part of an establishment that doesn't discriminate on the basis of caste and religion (something that they are used to in their local area's establishments), makes them feel included. Furthermore, it allows them to 'role play' as the upper class, as these places belong to the urban elite areas, and are usually associated with an upper-class pastime (Viegas, 2001).

"Reactions to the exhibits are often generally very positive. Since the very idea of a museum has a class context attached to it, rural visitors dare not exclaim anything otherwise and prefix and suffix their visit/experience with very positive exclamations." - (Viegas, 2001)

This argument proposed by Viegas translates into but also contradicts the statements made by Sooudi (2012). In her article, she discusses the perception and the inner thoughts of the populace of the South Mumbai art scene. According to her research, the galleries she attended were closed off small spaces that did not advertise themselves at all, thus separating themselves from the general public. They were meant for a closed circle, a club of sorts, wherein everyone knew everyone and newcomers were not welcome. However, she discusses that despite the art sphere's distaste for outsiders, they rely on them to drive the art valuation, hence coming up with the concept of a 'businessman scapegoat'. According to her hypothesis,

the small art sphere in India likes to remain purist and unadulterated by monetary valuation for art. They like to judge each other's creations based on the notion of 'good taste', which they believe is acquired from art education, class, and social high standing (Veblen, 1994). However, it is the people that come from new money that drive art sales for contemporary art - the outsiders. The perception of the Mumbai circle for them is negative and vain. They believe them having 'no taste', taints the Indian contemporary art sphere. The notion of 'taste' and 'no taste' is interesting and is discussed in detail by Veblen. He introduces the concept of "conspicuous consumption," where individuals engage in extravagant and wasteful spending to display their social status and wealth. Therefore, this signifies that art is a sign of wealth, and of status. But how did it become that way, isn't art, especially contemporary art, supposed to be about expression and identity? Isn't art supposed to be an autonomous body? (Mignolo, 2009).

These arguments are somewhat explored by Nataliya Komarova, in her study of emerging art markets in the world - India and Russia (Komarova, 2017, 2018). This comparison really shines light on the outlook of Indian contemporary artists when it comes to being a successful, as compared to Russia, where public and government institutions are on the forefront of art education, art display and sale. In India, these are driven and governed by private entities, with the Indian government having close to no regulations when it comes to contemporary art curating. This forces Indian artists to make art 'for-profit', or to cater to what buyers demand, thus 'tainting' the integrity of art, which Sooudi's article outlined as something Indian art sphere is revolted by (Sooudi, 2012). But the causes and consequences are linked to one another and unless a public intervention happens, these private establishments will continue to cater to the 'businessmen scapegoat' despite their aversion to it.

Knowledge Gap

The perception of the general Indian public of Indian contemporary art seems largely unexplored. However, the general rural public of India is interested and open to be a part of cultural spheres, as it makes them feel included with the urban public. However, it is the upper class in the art sphere that enjoys their exclusivity and likes to keep out of the general public's eye. They deeply rely on the outsiders to sell art and sustain their societies. Therefore, the potential for change and inclusion exists, but realizing this potential will necessitate substantial efforts. These efforts must focus on dismantling exclusive norms and raising awareness among the Indian general public, alongside introducing them to art.

3. Study Methodology

For the purpose of this study, 23 art Galleries were shortlisted in the Mumbai metropolitan area (Table 1), which were known to exhibit primarily of contemporary artists. The study was conducted over the period of two months and galleries situated in the art districts of South Mumbai (Kala Ghoda and Colaba) were visited. Out of the 23 galleries, we visited 8, out of which, only 4 of them agreed for interviews (Fig1). Many of the shortlisted galleries were closed for renovation, and some were closed as they were in the process of putting up new exhibitions. Additionally, we also attended public art events - 'Run as Slow as you Can' at the NMACC center, (*Toiletpaper Magazine*, 2023) and 'art Mumbai' at Mahalaxmi Racecourse in Mumbai.

The study involved visiting the gallery, noting and observing its ambience, presentation and the number of exhibits and visitors they have. A set of qualitative questionnaires was

prepared for the 3 participant groups – the art gallery personnel, artists and the visitors, and with informed consent, the participants were interviewed, and audio recorded. If the participant expressed hesitation with the audio recording, notes were taken. The recorded interviews were then transcribed and coded, and common themes were identified between same and different participant groups.

#	Gallery Name	Locality
1	'Effection' by Hansika Mangwani at Method gallery, Kala Ghoda	Kala Ghoda
2	Institute of contemporary Indian arts - Kala Ghoda	Kala Ghoda
3	Jehangir art gallery	South Mumbai
4	Piramal Museum of art	Lower Parel
5	Jehangir Nicholson art Foundation	Fort
6	The National gallery of Modern art	South Mumbai
7	gallery Chemould	Fort, Colaba
8	Project 88	Colaba
9	DAG	Colaba
10	Gallerie Mirchandani	Fort
11	AKARA Modern and AKARA contemporary	Colaba
12	Chaterjee and Lal	Colaba
13	art and Soul	Worli
14	Jhaveri contemporary	Colaba
15	Sakshi gallery	Colaba
16	Tao	Worli
17	Cymroza art gallery	South Mumbai
18	gallery 7	Kala Ghoda
19	Dr. Bhau Daji Lad	Byculla
20	gallery Maskara	Colaba
22	The Designera	Parel
23	The Museum of Living History by Mahindra	Worli

Table 1. Shortlisted art Galleries

4. Art Galleries in Mumbai and the Barriers of Elitism

Most of the galleries were situated in the South district of Mumbai. Coincidentally (or not), South of Mumbai, and especially the area that the art district is concentrated in, is one of the most expensive areas of Mumbai (Figure 1) (*Kala Ghoda Association, 2023*). It is an interesting point to note, as mentioned in the literature, the art sphere likes to associate with

the notion of ‘good taste’, and hence this shallow correlation with old money and the good taste is perhaps the reason why the galleries are established in this space. Even the art events were attended, which were broadly advertised on social media and other streams of media, were situated in richer areas of Mumbai, despite ‘Ran as slow as you can’, having a relatively affordable ticket price. Even more appalling was the location of DAG gallery. The gallery, although open to the public, is located inside an expensive 5-star hotel - ‘Hotel Taj’. To enter the gallery, one must enter the hotel from the lobby, walk through a passage lined with designer outlets and then reach DAG, which is situated at the very end of the passage. Setting up the gallery in this space, is effectively identifying that an art gallery is for the rich. We believe location-based segregation is extremely prevalent in cities like Mumbai with large economic disparity, and setting up of these public institutions in these areas will continuously ensure this divide. As mentioned in the literature, most of these galleries are privately owned, either by an individual or a trust. However, even the publicly owned art gallery - National gallery of Modern art, is situated in the South of Mumbai.



Figure 1: The Kala Ghoda art district. This area has a concentration of contemporary art galleries of Mumbai, and hosts an annual art Festival since 1999

The locational barrier is just one of the obstacles that an individual might encounter when trying to enter the art sphere in the city. During our study, it was noted that most of these privately owned galleries were small sections of buildings, without any obvious signage. That is - if one is not specifically looking for a specific establishment, they are not going to find it. To add to that, most of these galleries had no windows and had locked doors. To enter these, one would need to ring a bell, call an intercom or knock. We walked past a few galleries thinking they were shut, realizing in the aftermath that this is just the nature of these establishments. This is the antithesis of a gallery - which is supposed to be open to the public. The owners are not willing for people who are outside the sphere to even realize about the existence of the space, and hence the divide between the lay man and contemporary art is bound to only grow.

The galleries that were visited were all small privately owned spaces. Almost all of the participants asked not to be mentioned or associate the name of the gallery with their interview, which is why the names of the galleries visited are identified separately. Hansika

Mangwani, (*Experience*, 2023) one of the exhibiting artists at Method gallery, consented to be quoted in the context of her exhibition 'Effection'. Some of the galleries had active exhibitions by solo artists, while some displayed a collection of curated pieces. Two of the galleries had immersive experiences on display, one being Method with the 'Effections immersive experience' and the other being Toilet Paper studio with 'Run as Slow as you can'. Immersive exhibits are an emerging medium for contemporary art, and it was interesting to observe, how the Indian audience reacts to it. Furthermore, it was also noted that gallery curators despite being advocates for freedom of expression and innovation, had mixed feelings about immersive media in the art sphere.

5. Immersive Exhibits

Immersive in this context refers to any experience that evokes a sense of presence inside the experience. It refers to the state of the audience wherein they forget their reality and perceive themselves to be a part of the experience. The standalone galleries usually had close to no visitors when visited. The two galleries with the immersive experience were quite popular, and the fact that they were immersive was the main advertising point of the exhibits. One of these exhibits was present at 'Run as Slow as you can', (Figure 2) in the form of a Virtual Reality experience. It consisted of a 3D visualization of the space and the exhibit, and the viewer would be taken on a visual tour of the said space. The headset used was Meta Quest 2. It was not interactive. The exhibit was extremely sought after, with people queuing for it in long lines. When the overseers were asked why they think this is the case, they mentioned that the audience really liked the novelty of Virtual Reality. Minors were not allowed to view the experience, despite it having no explicit content. A lot of minors seemed interested however and came up to the overseers trying to persuade them to let them view the experience, a few times.

'Effections' consisted of a live-sized audio-visual installation, with the participant having to experience it one on one, by wearing a heart tracking device (in my case it was a fit bit) and sitting inside it. The installation was interactive, with it being responsive to the participants breath and heartbeat. After the experience, the participants were emailed a detailed heart chart. The overseer mentioned that one of the participants got back to her saying that she caught a heart abnormality after looking at her heart charts. When speaking to the artist about the audience's overall reaction to the exhibition, the artist said it was overwhelmingly positive and the group was surprisingly diverse. Interestingly, since the exhibition turned out to be much more popular than anticipated, a lot of the viewers were not from the art field. The artist expressed that although she is pleased by this outcome, she noticed that some individuals just came to take photographs for their social media, using her artwork as a backdrop, and not even experiencing the immersive aspect of the piece. This aligns with an article published by Anastasi, which discusses contemporary art as being used as a spectacle, or a backdrop, completely stripping all meaning from the piece. (Anastasi, 2020) However, the large attendance exhibited the avid interest of the Indian audience for immersive experiences.

An interesting exhibition to note was the 'Baad Me Aana' by Imtiyaz Ali, at Method gallery Kala Ghoda. In theory, this was a non-immersive fine art exhibition, as all the art displayed were paintings and craft pieces. However, what made this exhibit 'interactive', was the nature of viewing the space. All the participants were given a lit candle. The whole space was dark with no natural or artificial illumination. The only light source were the candles given to the visitors. Therefore, the visitors formed somewhat of a 'candle march', walking around in

groups holding the candles. What makes it compelling was that the nature of the art, as it was deeply inflammatory and controversial, given meaning to this whole procession. Consequently, the audience became a part of this performance. They were immersed and they were interacting with the exhibit to add more meaning to it. This is important to establish, as the notion of interactiveness and immersion is usually used in the context of digital media, but it could apply to an array of scenarios, thus its definition can be a point of discussion.



Figure 2: Promotional Poster for ‘Run as Slow as You Can’ exhibition

The Self-Perception of Art Galleries - A Thematic Analysis

The thematic analysis was carried out by conducting in person qualitative interviews to the three user groups identified. The participants were screened merely based on their association with art and art galleries, that is - they should have been associated or a part of the art sphere in some capacity. A total of 8 interviews were taken, (Table 2) out of which 4 were gallery staff that comprised curators, owners and overseers; art visitors and one artist. The recorded interviews were then transcribed and coded. About 50 common codes were created which outline the ideas the participants wanted to share. Based on these codes, sub themes and overarching themes were identified (Figure 3).

Participant Group	Number of Participants	Mode of Data Collection
art gallery Staff	4	Audio Recording
art gallery Visitors	3	Audio Recording and Notes
Exhibiting artists	1	Audio Recording
Total Interviews	8	

Table 2. Details of the Participants

One of the main themes that arose was what was also discussed in the literature- the fact that elitism is prevalent in the art spheres of Mumbai. Most of the participants agreed that exclusivity adds to the appeal of art. They also discussed that lay people of India might have

a feeling of exclusion due to physical (discussed above) as well as mental barriers. Most identified the mental barrier to be the feeling of being out of place or fear of looking/sounding unaware due to lack of knowledge of art. Interestingly, although this statement was prevalent, one participant disagreed and said common people will also find aspects of contemporary art appealing, especially the ones that high class people might not even notice. Furthermore, the interviewed artist, although acknowledging the possible divide in awareness about art, eluded that she as an artist feels that the Indian art scene is becoming more welcoming and accessible both for the artists and the audience.

One of the curators was very adamant about the fact is the essence and value of art comes from its inaccessibility, and that a collection of art is majorly a status symbol:

“... Not everybody can drive a Volkswagen. Not everybody can have a Lamborghini. You have to make yourself or build yourself to the point where you can understand and appreciate that. So, art definitely is a differentiator in that manner. You can't... You can't compare a Rolls-Royce to a Maruti, right? Maruti is for everyone. A Rolls-Royce is for a select few. Right. So, 100% there is an exclusivity in that manner. And unless and until it is not exclusive, the price of that art will not have a value.”

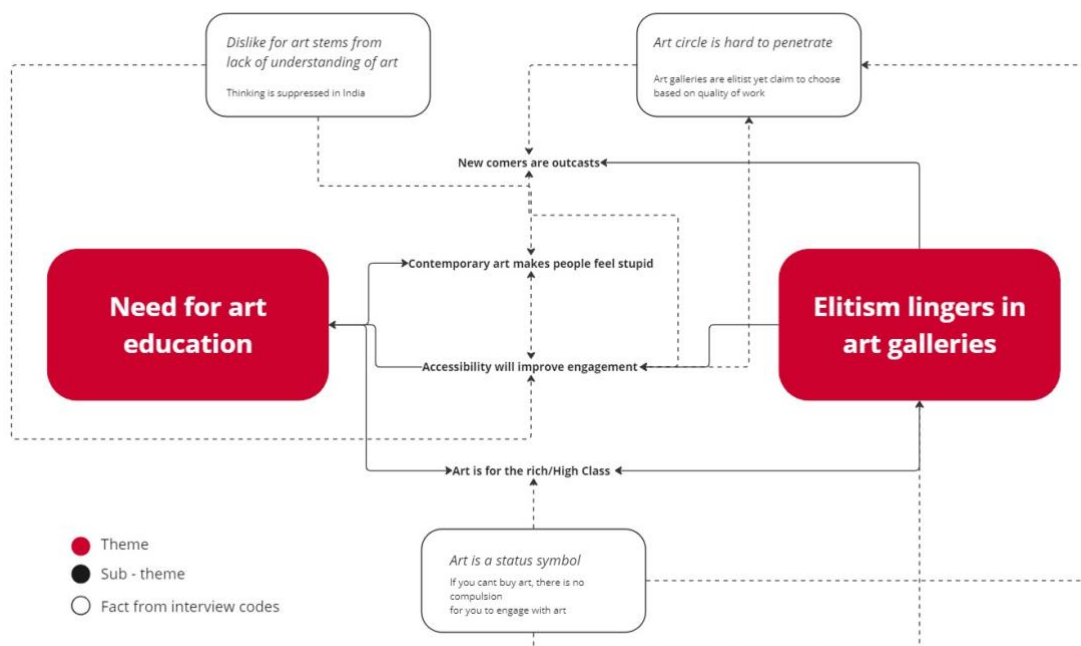


Figure 3: Thematic Map of Self Perception of contemporary art Galleries

However, another curator disagreed with this take, mentioning that they are frustrated with art being treated like a status symbol, and that she wishes buyers would buy art because they really liked it instead just because they have money and for the sake of having it. This correlated to the ‘businessman scapegoat’ phenomenon by Viegas. (Viegas, 2001)The other 3 curators were not as clear about their take on exclusivity and seemed illusive when talking about it and its significance in the art world. They did outline that most of their visitors are people with intent to purchase art, or are avid art collectors/enthusiasts, thus implying they are mostly higher-class individuals. This was further confirmed by interviewing the art gallery visitors, who were all older individuals, signifying that perhaps younger people might feel out of place much like people from lower socioeconomic backgrounds.

When asked about what would engage the larger Indian population with contemporary art, all participants stated that allowing the art events, art exhibitions and galleries to be more open and accessible for the public will improve the situation. Quoting lack of education and knowledge as a force shooing away newcomers, allowing exhibitions to be open spaces wherein people can exist and be exposed to art might eventually improve the layman's perception. Furthermore, art education from an early age might alleviate the feeling of alienation and lack of knowledge, according to the participants. To them currently, art can only be enjoyed if it's easily interpretable and aesthetically pleasing, which is always what art is. Lastly, a few of the curators mentioned that the Indian public shies away from contemporary art as it raises issues, and promotes thinking, and in our current society, thinking is suppressed and inherently looked down upon. Hence, when the audience is faced with something that forces them to think, their first response is repulsion, confusion, and contempt.

Interviewer: "...The argument is that why should we do that (care about art). Why would people care about art when they have so many more issues to care about in a country like India?"

Participant: "What are these issues? Who is creating these issues? I think art is going to save us. art is going to save us because the fact of the matter is, why are people struggling to put food on the table? Late stage capitalism. Where is the messaging that tells people that we're in late stage capitalism? It's in art. That's why art is being kept away from people. art is systematically being kept away from people. Because it will save them."

6. Conclusion

From this brief study, it can be understood that the nature of the Mumbai art sphere remains strongly closed off and exclusive. Most of the smaller privately owned galleries prefer to allow a select few to partake and admire the art they exhibit. However, speaking to the people involved, revealed promising interest in making art spaces more open and welcoming, with the condition that those who enter come with prior knowledge of art, or acquire 'good taste'. The art sphere is still very apprehensive about people whose only motivation to be in the space is mere interest in art, as they do not add any value to the space, be it in terms of buying it, admiring it or creating it. This is where the notion of the Viegas' 'Businessman scapegoat' manifests. The only reason this notion is tolerated over the former 'bad taste' individual, is in this world of art where the notion of good taste matters, the businessman is let in, as he has something to offer - money, value and progress. However, in this context someone who has 'no good taste' as well as doesn't outwardly seem to add any value to the sphere, is simply excluded. They are not even made aware of the sphere, and even if they would like to be a part, their entrance would be extremely tumultuous. Thus, this exclusivity is only limited to shallow notions of value and familiarity. Another notable outcome is the rise of immersive experiences in the contemporary art Sphere in Mumbai. Three immersive exhibitions were examined, and all three of them had a significantly larger footfall as compared to the fine art galleries. Furthermore, these spaces also appeared to be more inclusive, with open doors and more affordable ticket prices. These exhibitions seem more impactful and meaningful for the viewer. However, what could be classified as an immersive experience, is broad and undefined.

Lastly, in this study, the groups examined were a part of the art sphere. Very few people agreed to participate and for a more conclusive outcome a larger level study is needed. However it was observed that galleries in South Mumbai are illusive and it is hard to communicate with them without a strong internal network. Additionally, a few questions dealt with the opinion of the interviewees of how the perception of contemporary art is of the Indian layman. Those are speculative, and an in-depth qualitative study of the interviews of people not associated with the art field can be done for future work, the results of which can be compared with the results of this paper.

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