

Peder

Ellsworth
Kelly

Postcards

September 30 – December 16, 2023

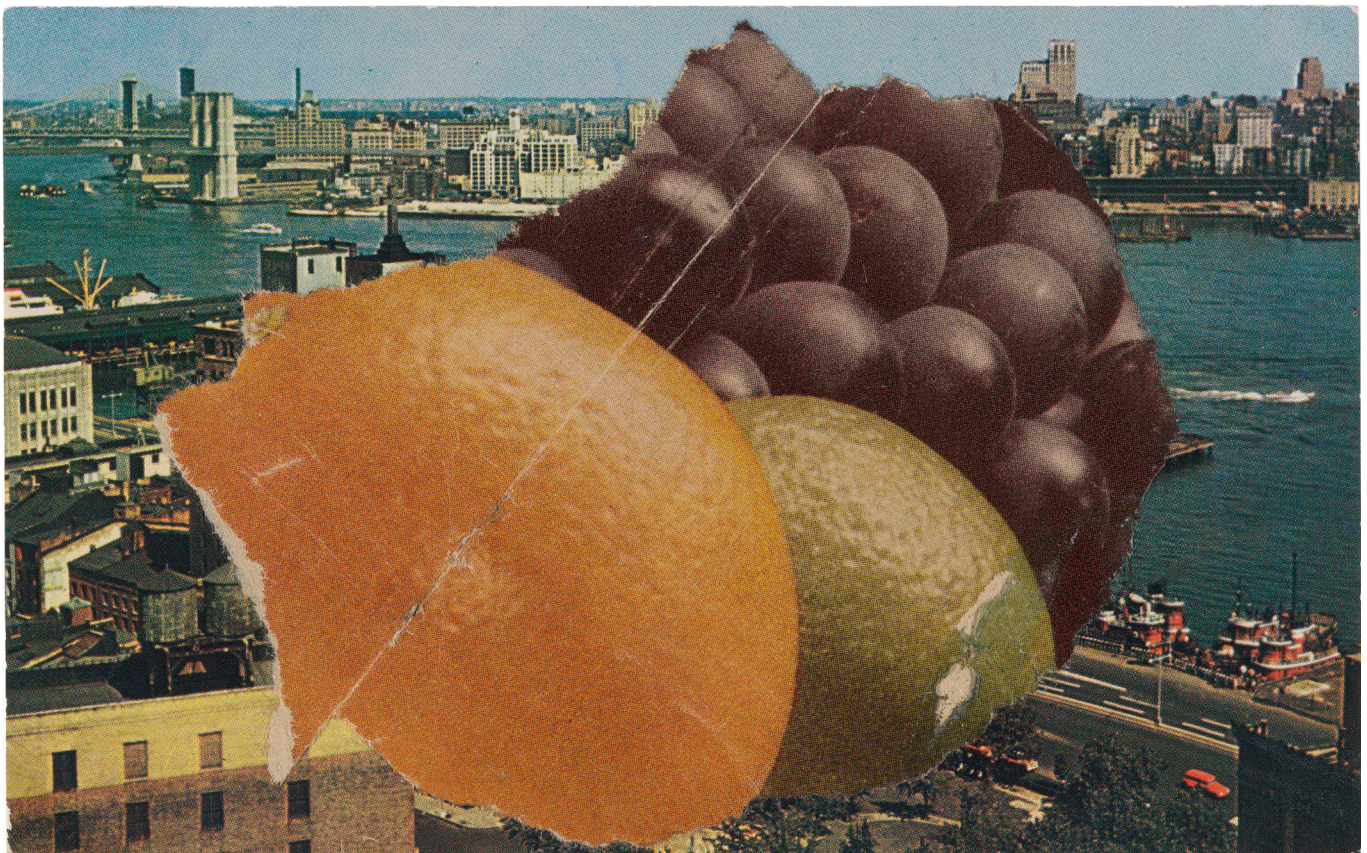
Lund



Peder Lund is delighted to announce the exhibition *Postcards* with works by the American artist Ellsworth Kelly (1923-2015). The exhibition opens on September 30th and continues through December 16, 2023. An opening reception will be held on September 30th from 12-4 pm.

Ellsworth Kelly is one of the most important figures in the history of modern art. His inventive practices as an abstract painter and sculptor were accompanied by a lifelong passion for objective drawing. Through his persistent interest in the perception of the natural world, the artist created an impressive and truly unique body of work. Presented here, for the first time in Scandinavia, are twenty-two of Kelly's delightful postcard collages – private studies that brim with anarchic humor, surrealist juxtapositions, and formal virtuosity. Here, in miniatures that Kelly sometimes sent to friends but that have rarely been displayed, he played intricate games of perception, challenging the eye to decode depth, relative size, and the meaning of an allusion. The postcards served as a diary of sorts – or, as the critic Barbara Rose suggests, "an outlet for the wit, whimsy, and nostalgia he leaves out of his immaculately abstract art."¹

Ellsworth Kelly's remarkable body of work is often presented to the world as a parade of perfectionism. His paintings elegantly distill the messiness of nature into concentrated fields of color cut into geometric shapes. A green rhombus echoes a pasture as seen from the air. A red pie slice might be a lone petal plucked from a rose. They seem to have issued fully formed, freshness and finish fused in one vibrant surface. However, through these miniature masterpieces, Kelly's postcard collages, we are ushered behind the curtain of genius, to see how seemingly simple interventions would lead to innovative, fully formed paintings and sculptures.

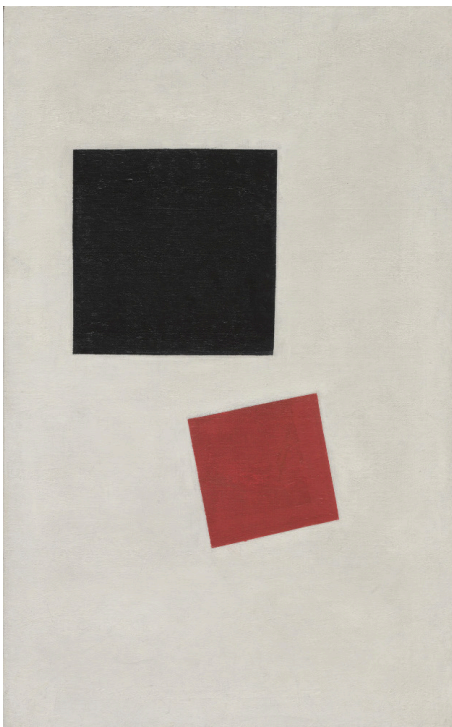


The first postcard collage Ellsworth Kelly made and mailed featured a cut-out sphere of red paper pasted against a blank background, upside down; along with a scrap of blue paper torn from a pack of Gauloises cigarettes. It was 1954, in the first week of Kelly's return to New York City. He stamped it and sent it to his friend Ralph Curn, an artist he'd known in Boston, who was then living in France. When Kelly collaged this first postcard, he joined a long list of artists who have engaged in a dialogue with this popular medium. Since becoming a collectible in the 1890s, the postcard has served as a site for innovative artistic practices in a variety of ways that have interrogated its unique characteristics. For early twentieth-century artists, the postcard was, in turns: the originator of a particular photographic "view" aesthetic; a work on paper that has provided opportunities for artists to launch careers or innovative styles; a marketing tool that has enabled collective practices; a propaganda weapon that has spurred performances, happenings, and ideological engagements; and a driver of experimental aesthetics that has engendered appropriation in a productive dialogue between high and low art.



In 1954, Kelly was thirty-one years old, back in the United States after a transformational six years in Paris, and finding his way into abstraction. In Paris, he'd met John Cage, Sophie Taeuber-Arp, and Jean Arp. In his 1990 essay "Fragmentation and Form," Kelly noted how Kasimir Malevich's squares blocked religious material so that "color became his content" – the abstraction of Russian icons signaling the artist's commitment to "picturing transcendental realities." He was exposed to Surrealist automatic drawing, Schwitters's collages, and also the work of the Arps, whose collages were "my first introduction to fragmented forms arranged by laws of chance."

During the Second World War, prior to his years in Paris, Kelly had enlisted in the army. He did this "to get away from his family, especially his mother," Jack Shear, his longtime partner, once said. Kelly served in the Ghost Army, a tactical military unit comprised partly of artists. Kelly and his comrades created inflatable tanks and entire fake military camps – illusions and obfuscations in the landscape, designed to throw the German army off course.



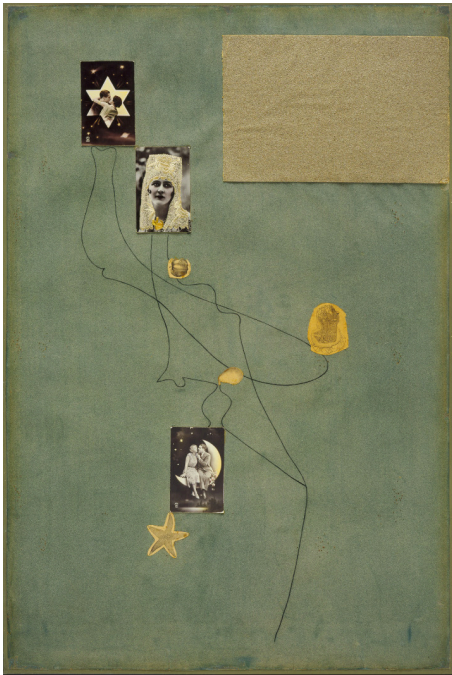
On one level Kelly's postcards can be thought of as a kind of Ghost Army correspondence. The opposite of camouflage, his cutouts insert themselves in unlikely settings, winking at the presence of the surreal. His forms and fields of color create imaginary portals in banal postcard landscapes: a bounty of fruits floats above a street in lower Manhattan, or a detail of a woman's soft navel replaces the Eiffel Tower. Panels of black, white, yellow, red, and green descend on grainy, washed-out images of well-known monuments, crashing seas, or vistas of European cities.

For Kelly, postcards were a vacation from the studio. They were both outlet and outline, made quickly and intuitively: Some were places to work out ideas, and a few loose compositions would lead in more obvious ways to larger, more fully realized pieces. Others were just to escape, play, and have fun. All of Kelly's postcards, though, were equally sketch and message – a brief transmission from wherever he was in the world and in his mind, a glimpse into his creative daydreams, and an invitation for the recipient to see as he saw.

Kelly's abstract shapes were often pulled from the natural world. He framed and isolated snatches of reality much in the way a photographer attempts to do. "I want to catch one thing that's a flash, a mysterious thing, the beginning of something, a primal thing," Kelly said in 2008. But even as he acknowledged this desire to stop time, to freeze and distill the every day, he surrendered to and celebrated the impossibility of doing so. Growing up, Kelly was a birdwatcher, perpetually looking out for fleeting, uncanny colors and markings. After his death in 2015, one of his famous quotes kept circulating: "What I've tried to capture is the reality of flux, to keep art an open, incomplete situation, to get at the rapture of seeing." His postcards contain the surprise of a well-delivered punchline: interruptions in otherwise stale depictions of beauty.



For artists, postcards are often attractive propositions – semi-intimate and semipublic, their audience largely accidental and mostly postal. They possess inherent formal restrictions and their own strange vernacular. Art historian, author, and curator Lynda Klich discusses in her essay for the outstanding catalogue *Ellsworth Kelly: Postcards* the fascinating history of this humble object. When the postcard first began circulating in Europe, at the tail end of the 1860s, it was purely as a communications technology, and it was a revolutionary one. Designed to democratize the mail - a postcard cost much less to send than a letter - these small cards embodied the changing world and the global expansion of modernity. With one side for the address and prepaid postage, and the other side designated wholly for the written text, "postal cards" found immediate popularity. Around the world, postal services adopted this new means of communication, and millions of cards made their way through the local and international postal systems.



By the end of the nineteenth century, cards traveled speedily within major cities throughout the world via networks of pneumatic tubes, so that a card sent in the morning could arrive at its destination by early afternoon. Along with other unifying developments, such as standard time zones, the metric system, railroad gauges, and electrical grids, this global mail circuit, and the postcards that traveled through it, heralded a changing world.

Indeed, everything about postcards seemed fast and new, and they were greeted with alarm in some quarters. Essentially letters without envelopes, postcards raised privacy issues among traditionalists. Moreover, the format encouraged pithy correspondence, bringing concerns about breaches of the decorum of language and social propriety reminiscent of the early twenty-first-century debates about Twitter's 140-character limit. Their resulting shorthand, the ignoring of grammatical rules, and a perceived vulgarity in their openness signaled larger fears of societal degradation and demise that often accompany democratizing processes. Resisters considered the postcard to be the lazy person's form of communication. Nonetheless, nothing could contain this new medium's popularity, which overwhelmed national postal systems unprepared for the millions of postcards that circulated worldwide.

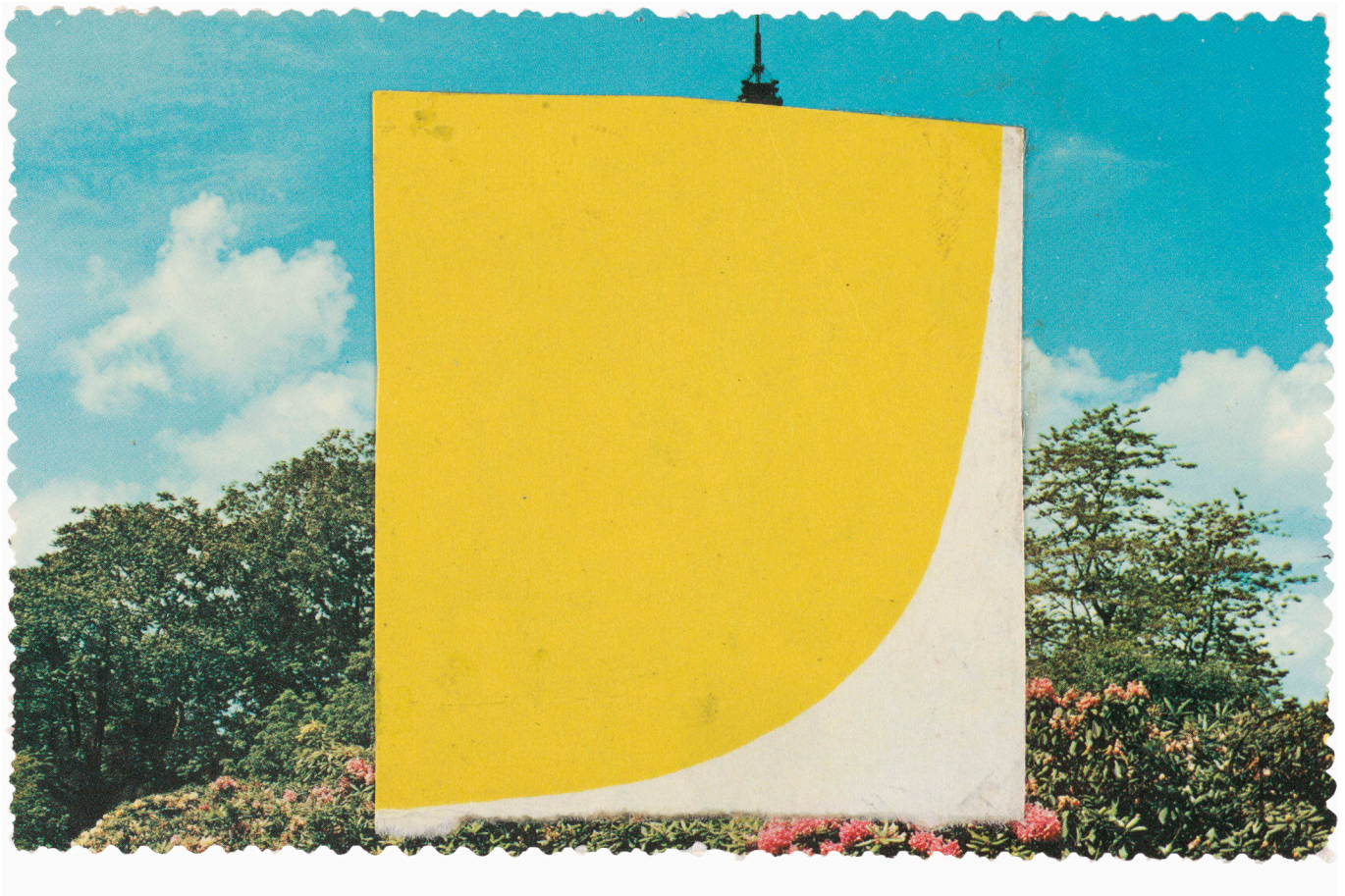
The inclusion of the image expanded the postcard's currency. In the 1890s, world's fairs introduced diverse series of cards to document their grand, yet largely ephemeral pavilions, manicured grounds, and colorful spectacles, spurring a collecting craze for picture postcards that endured until just after World War I. As emblems



of modernity, postcards went hand in hand with the showcasing of industry and technology at world's fairs. Indeed, one of the earliest picture postcards bore an illustration of the brand-new Eiffel Tower, built for the 1889 Exposition Universelle in Paris; the card could be purchased at the foot of the tower, and mailed from a post office specially installed in the tower's top floor. A product of the nineteenth-century boom in print culture, picture postcards share a history with the poster, an object of another *fin de siècle* craze, as an experimental medium for enterprising artists.

The Dadaists and Surrealists variously engaged with the postcard for the same characteristics as Kelly - for its "wit, whimsy, and nostalgia." Though these artists employed the medium from World War I through the 1930s, after the postcard had declined from the peak of its popularity, they had come of age during the height of the craze. The postcard medium, therefore, had cemented their visual literacy indelibly from a young age. As their turn-of-the-century predecessors had during the original craze, they, decades later as mature artists, formed their own collections of postcards, traded and exchanged them, corresponded on them, and had their portraits made on them. In 1937 the Surrealists even published *La carto postale surréaliste garantie* (the guaranteed Surrealist postcard), their own set of twenty-one sepia postcards, each by a different artist, as a means of promoting their works. For members of these two movements, postcards not only preserved captivating reminiscences of a prior age but also functioned as a source of inspiration - and pictorial strategies - for their aesthetic revolutions. Their preferred genre, the type of card known as the "fantasy card," in particular deployed forms of visual inventiveness, largely using photography, that included doubling, multiple exposures, distortions of scale or shape, and what we today call "photomontage" popularizing nineteenth-century photographic techniques that postcard scholar Clément Chéroux has styled "avant l'avant-garde." Fantasy cards also contained collage, notably with tactile elements such as fabric, thread, or feathers. Topics included fanciful flying machines, human-animal hybrids, and miniaturized women. Thus, these postcards, among the most pop-





ular and visually compelling cards that were tucked into albums in the *fin de siècle* bourgeois home, provided clear visual foundations for the works of the artists in these movements. In addition, this particular genre of postcards embodied erotic fantasy and provocative sexuality (especially for artists who first experienced them as pubescent boys). Paul Éluard, who amassed a collection of more than five thousand postcards (mostly depicting women), and penned one of the earliest texts on the genre for the Surrealist journal *Minotaure*, elaborated on the draw of fantasy postcards: "Anything is a pretext to show us female nudity."² The photographer Walker Evans was engaged with the medium in quite a different manner, amassing a collection of more than nine thousand cards from the first two decades of the twentieth century. Rather than erotic fantasy, Evans favored postcards that depicted the main streets and storefronts of small-town United States. Evans reveled in the images' banality, their sameness. In their quotidian anonymity, which he categorized as "lyric documentary," he found the roots of his own photographic vernacular - a straightforward, simple, and concise style.

Kelly hewed to the tradition of postcard pieces made by the likes of Miró and Duchamp, who often used similar elements of humor, eroticism, tactile elements, and deliberate, wildly inaccurate scales. He also acknowledged the influence of Ray Johnson's mail art. Sometimes Kelly collaged recognizable representations of people onto his postcards - his partner, Jack, and Marilyn Monroe were both among his recurrent subjects, while other postcards feature typically "Kelly-an" polygons - dark specters lingering over bright beaches - or a marmalade label hovering over a Mediterranean island like a hot-air balloon. These items of torn and salvaged bric-a-brac, applied onto generically idealized views, reintroduce the rough edges of experience.

Kelly began his career around the time that jet travel and a strong dollar put the entire world within reach of middle-class Americans; postcards showed them what to see, allowed a few square inches for an envy-inducing message, and packaged the whole experience compactly enough for discount postage. Kelly's collages violate that neat arrangement with a spirit that's variously mysterious, acerbic, and wry, and allow us glimpses into this singular artist's visionary genius.



Ellsworth Kelly is one of the most celebrated American artists in history. Major solo exhibitions have been held by renowned institutions such as The Museum of Modern Art (1973), The Metropolitan Museum of Art (1979), The Whitney Museum of American Art (1982), and the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York (1996). In 2002, his plant drawings were shown alongside those of Henri Matisse, whom Kelly had long admired, at the Musée national d'art moderne, Centre Pompidou, Paris. A major retrospective of his plant drawings took place in 2011 at the Pinakothek der Moderne, Munich and traveled in the same year to the Louisiana Museum of Modern Art, Humlebæk, Denmark, and The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. In 2021, the Frances Young Tang Teaching Museum and Art Gallery, Skidmore College opened *Ellsworth Kelly: Postcards* which received much critical acclaim. The exhibition subsequently traveled to the Blanton Museum of Art, University of Texas at Austin in 2022.

Kelly's works are owned by the major artistic institutions of Western Europe and America, including the Reina Sofia, Madrid; the Tate Modern, London; the Centre Pompidou, Paris; the Museum of Modern Art, New York; the National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., and many others. Additionally, he created numerous important artworks for public spaces. During his lifetime, Kelly was honored with several awards, including the Praemium Imperiale award for painting, which he received in 2000 from the Japan Art Association, the title of Commandeur des Arts des Lettres, which he received in 2009 by the French government and, in 2013, the National Medal of Arts, presented by President Barack Obama.

To mark the centennial of Kelly's birth, Peder Lund is honored to hold *Ellsworth Kelly: Postcards* in conjunction with the related suite of commemorative exhibitions, including *Ellsworth Kelly at 100* (Glenstone, Potomac, MD; Fondation Louis Vuitton, Paris; and the Fire Station, Doha, Qatar), and *Ellsworth Kelly: A Centennial Celebration* (Museum of Modern Art, New York, NY).

Ellsworth Kelly: Postcards is the gallery's second exhibition of this pioneering artist's work and has been organized in concert with the Ellsworth Kelly Foundation and its president Jack Shear. Before his death in 2015, Peder Lund worked directly with the artist to place artworks of supreme quality in public and private collections in Scandinavia.

List of notes:

- 1 Tricia Y. Paik, *A palpable vision: Ellsworth Kelly in New York, 1954-1969* (Ann Arbor: UMI / ProQuest, 2009), p. 80.
- 2 Paul Éluard, "Les plus belles cartes postales," *Minotaure* 3-4 (December 1933), 85-100.

*Portions of the text were excerpted from the essays "Postcard as Muse" by Lynda Klich in *Ellsworth Kelly: Postcards* (Ian Berry, Jessica Eisenthal, eds.), DelMonico Books/Tang, 2022: pp. 324-331; "Postcards from Ellsworth" by Rebecca Bengal, *The Paris Review*, May 19, 2022 (online); and "Ellsworth Kelly: postcards from the artist's psyche" by Ariella Budick, *Financial Times*, May 18, 2022 (online).

List of illustrations:

- 1 Portrait of Ellsworth Kelly.
- 2 Ellsworth Kelly, *Coenties Slip*, 1957.
- 3 Ellsworth Kelly, *Statue of Liberty*, 1957.
- 4 Kazimir Malevich, *Painterly Realism of a Boy with a Knapsack - Color Masses in the Fourth Dimension*, 1915. Museum of Modern Art, New York, NY.
- 5 Installation view, *Ellsworth Kelly: Postcards*, The Frances Young Tang Teaching Museum and Art Gallery, Skidmore College, Saratoga Springs, New York, NY, July 10 – November 28, 2021
- 6 Joan Miró, *Drawing-Collage*, 1933. Museum of Modern Art, New York, NY.
- 7 Marcel Duchamp *LHOOQ*, 1930 (large scale replica). Private collection, Paris, on loan to the Musée National d'Art Moderne, Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris.
- 8 Ellsworth Kelly, *Farragut*, 1985.
- 9 Ellsworth Kelly, *La Dune du Pyla III*, 1983
- 10 Ellsworth Kelly, *Yellow Piece*, 1966. Museum of Modern Art, New York, NY.
- 11 Ellsworth Kelly, *Study for a Yellow and White Sculpture for Le Tour Eiffel*, 1964.
- 12 Ellsworth Kelly, *Manhattan Skyline at Night*, 1985.

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