

Rochester Institute of Technology  
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The College of Art and Design  
School of American Craft  
In Candidacy for the Degree of  
MASTER OF FINE ARTS in Furniture Design

“When It Clicks”

by

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## THESIS APPROVAL

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## **ABSTRACT**

“When It Clicks” examines my relationship to the chaos, discomfort, and anxiety of traveling through life, and the moments of calm, understanding, and clarity that intersect and juxtapose with my journey — those moments when things seem to click together and allow me to see a path through the complexities and ambiguity of life.

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## INTRODUCTION

My experience over the last 50 years of being alive has been, like many others, mixed: I have had many good things and many bad things happen, but throughout it all — among all of my successes and the failures, all of my highs and the lows — always there, ever present, has been anxiety. I have lived with anxiety since I was a young child, it is something that is a part of my understanding of the world and of life itself. Anxiety can take many forms, but for me anxiety is a delightful cocktail of claustrophobia, dread, rumination, depression, and social anxiety. It has affected more of my life than I care to admit: it has been a constant bedfellow in my brain.

The work that I have done during my MFA Furniture Design Thesis has been the first time in my life that I have both acknowledged and embraced how my anxiety affects my creative practice. I have always felt a formal and methodological understanding of what my work is exploring, but I have always been hesitant about the conceptual basis of the work; I have often dismissed the deeper meaning behind my work by suggesting that “it is just about itself, and nothing else.” After my experience over the last 4 years of working on this Master’s degree, I am now able to understand that while my work is not *about* anxiety, it is *because* of anxiety: reconciling with anxiety is the catalyst that starts my creative process. Anxiety is the conceptual framework that I place my formal and methodological interests into, and my work explores how my own experience with anxiety can translate into physical work that can be experienced visually.

## CONTEXT AND CREATIVE PRACTICE

My work leading up to this Thesis has been varied. Previously, I studied architecture at Syracuse University in Syracuse, New York. While at Syracuse I became consumed by “deconstruction,” an architecture movement started in the 1980s that “..is characterized by the use of fragmentation, manipulation of ideas of a structure’s surface or skin, re-

definition of shapes and forms, and radical manifestation of complexity in a building.” (Widewalls).

This work would prove to be not only something I became excited about and interested in, but would inform the basis of my entire creative practice up to today. I did not know why (at the time), but I knew that I connected with this work deeply, almost innately as part of my humanity: the work itself just feels “right” to me.

In 1994 I left the architecture program at Syracuse without graduating and headed back home to work retail jobs for many years. During that time my practice focused primarily on designing for the web, as well as some acrylic paintings. At the age of 31 I went back to school at Rhode Island School of Design and received my BFA in Graphic Design in 2006. After graduation my former partner and I opened Hypothesis, Ltd doing a variety of client work. During this time took an Assistant Professor position at RIT.

Eventually I started focusing less on client work and much more on my own practice, focusing on wet darkroom photographic images, specifically



JEWISH MUSEUM BERLIN, DANIEL LIBESKIND, 1992



VITRA FIRE STATION, ZAHA HADID, 1993

the photogram. Photograms are made by placing objects directly on top of unexposed photographic paper in a darkroom, briefly exposing it to light, and then developing the paper using traditional darkroom chemistry. This creates abstracted, unpredictable, highly graphic black and white images that are also unique art objects and not prints I can recreate. I was creating this kind of work when I entered the MFA program at RIT.



"MATERIAL INTERRUPTION" EXHIBITION WITH NANCY BERNARDO. MITCH GOLDSTEIN 2017

During all of my creative practice to date, I have always worked both physically and digitally: in a wet darkroom, taking photographs of physical materials to create visual setups, digitally juxtaposing typography and photographic images, painting, collage, etc. I have never wanted to work in a purely digital space, I need to keep my hands in an analog place as well, using digital tools and techniques as a supplement when it can add to my work. This masters' degree represents another opportunity to apply these ways of working and these conceptual and formal concerns in a new way, this time rendered through the language of furniture and the materials of wood and light.

## WHEN IT CLICKS

Conceptually, this work is a visual manifestation of my search for pathways through the chaos and unpredictability of life. It visualizes the moments of clarity and understanding inside of the confusion. To me, experiencing this work is the same as putting together

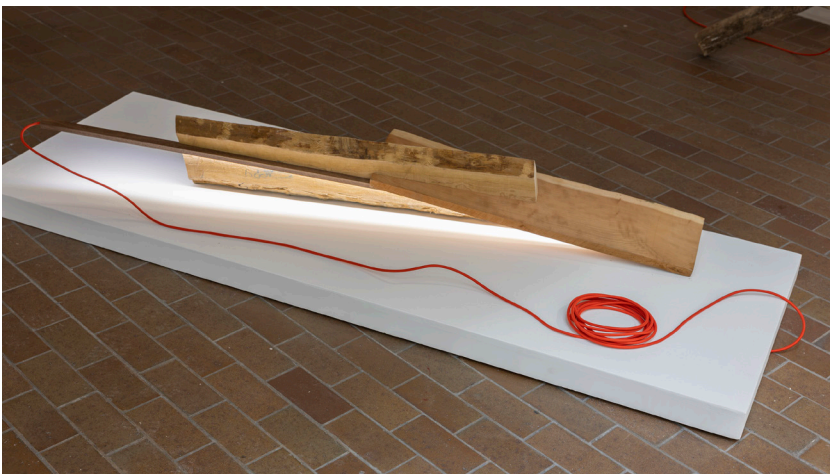


"WHEN IT CLICKS" INSTALLATION VIEWS, MITCH GOLDSTEIN 2023

a jigsaw puzzle: that feeling when a piece fits into the right spot, that tactile, haptic moment of “clicking” in just the right place. To my mind, this work is the exact same feeling of clicking into place — and that is a very satisfying, calming, good feeling. I get the same feeling when I assemble a piece of IKEA furniture or put together a LEGO model. “When It Clicks” is about that feeling of satisfaction, clarity, and understanding. It is worth noting that to me this clicking has nothing to do with creativity, or originality, or discovery — it is purely about comfort, control, and tangibility; it is something I can point to as either right or wrong. The IKEA dresser either holds together, or it does not. That puzzle piece fits, or it does not. The satisfaction and clearly defined right-ness of the click is something I find endlessly satisfying and soothing; it provides a moment when everything makes sense.



Formally my work and my own visual tastes lead towards recurring shapes, colors, and textures: all of my work is angular, with hard edges and sharp angles, with many fragmented and broken looking compositions. I have always been interested in this visual language and rarely use curves, circles, or organic forms in my visual work: I am much more interested in more artificial or constructed moments of elements in juxtaposition, in an aggravated synthesis with each other. In my work elements often operate in sharp angular relationships with each other, and different materials or textures are connected or placed within close proximity of each other. I enjoy seeing things that do not make sense together being put into dialog: rough things and smooth things, dark things and light things, solid things with diffuse things. I react strongly to fractured and fragmented forms, breakage, and complexity in visual art and design.



"ARTIFACT NO. 34." HARDWOOD, ELECTRICAL CABLE, LIGHT. 71" X 10" X 8". 2022

## THE BODY OF WORK

There are three primary visual elements at play: The "rough" materials represent the chaos, the confusion, and the unpredictable. This material is usually hardwood but can also be plywood, fiberboard, etc. These materials are given as little processing as possible, and still retain paint on the raw cuts, chalk and marker notes, staples, labels, mold. They are as true to how I first saw them as I can retain. The "clean" or "ordered" materials represent clarity and the pathway through the chaos. These are also hardwood ele-

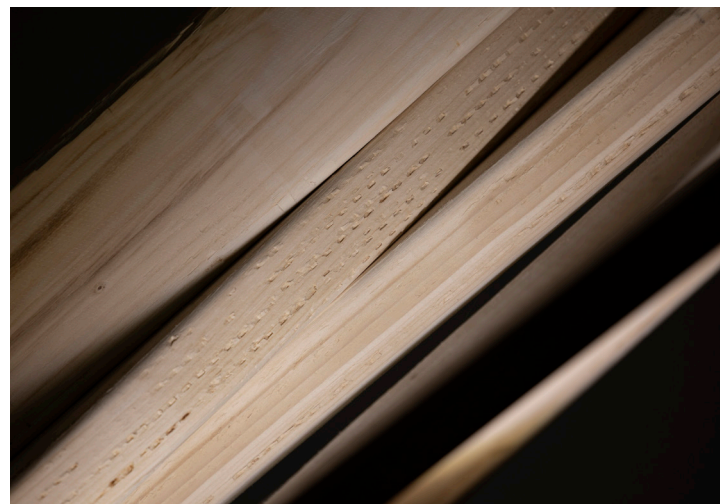
ments, however now they are treated with care: milled, planed, cut, sanded, and finished to a pristine state. These clean elements also contain the light itself.

Lastly the light and the red cable represent the lifeline, the soul of myself navigating through the confusion. The lighting is all LED strip lighting, which allows for a very even, very clear, very consistent light with no flickers or temperature changes. In this body of work light is not treated as a function, but is instead treated as a material, the same as wood, or clay, or paint. The material of light comes with it's own set of specific attributes that make it a unique material to work with: light is diffuse and will fill up whatever space you allow it to exist in; light has no actual volume, which means it can have infinite volume. Light is also alive, it reacts to the environment it is in, changing in temperature and quality depending on exactly what it is shining against or who is looking at it. Light is both clean and ambiguous at the same time — it is a wonderful material to work with. I am only concerned with the quality and feel of the light within the work, not with how well it lights up the room. This work is not “a lamp”; it is sculpture that contains light. This is an important distinction: I am not trying to illuminate a space, I am treating light as a material and using its physical properties to help form and inform these artifacts.



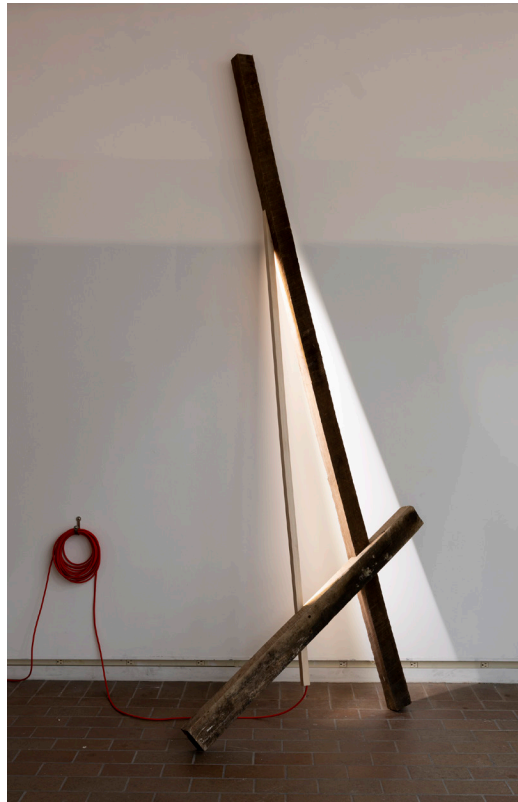
**"ARTIFACT NO. 35" HARDWOOD, ELECTRICAL CABLE, LIGHT. 43" X 13" X 2". 2022**

The electrical cable itself is enhanced and celebrated, rather than being hidden or downplayed as a necessity for making the light turn on and illuminate. All of this work uses very high quality woven fabric electrical cable, and each artifact has about 35 feet of cable. While this cable is technically necessary to make the lights illuminate, it becomes a far more graphic, visual element within the work. The cable is bright red, and it is looped and displayed on a silver hook next to body of each work — not as an afterthought, or a necessary evil — but as a clarification that many things must come together in proximity to make the work click together.



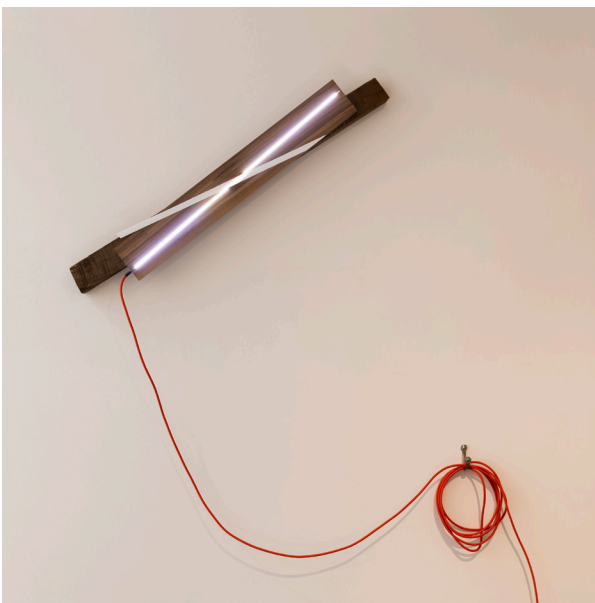
**DIMENSIONAL LUMBER, HARDWOOD, ELECTRICAL CABLE, LIGHT. 105" X 27" X 8". 2023**

When you see this work it alters your perception of the space. Within the dimly lit room, the scale of the larger pieces is close to 9 feet tall — the work appears like a totem, or a statue, or some sort of iconic figure that you are intended to treat with reverence. Other pieces hang on the wall or sit on the floor or on a pedestal. Light appears in strange places and sometimes from indeterminate sources as it leads the viewer through the composition of the work: your eyes move across the angular, fractured forms of differing materials and textures at play with each other. Much of my work relies on opposition and contrast: sometimes the light is diffuse and washes over the wall, or at an oblique angle to the raw wood it sits with. Other times, the light is contained, sharp, and helps to redefine the space of the work: these pieces can fill more space than their physical sizes indicate. These forms help redefine your perception of the work as you witness it — for some, the work adds to their own anxiety: this work feels awkward, uncomfortable, aggressive and subversive as you gaze upon it.

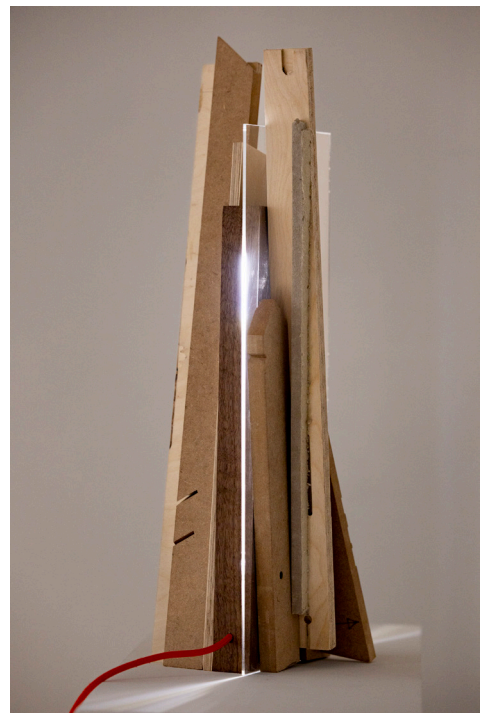


"ARTIFACT NO. 37", HARDWOOD, ELECTRICAL CABLE, LIGHT. 109" X 50" X 6", 2023

The methodology of creating this work has also been created specifically to relate to the above ideas: there is very little sketching, no model making, and no technical drawing. Instead, the work is created “gesturally” — much like a charcoal gesture drawing is made quickly, intuitively, and without much consideration for the final outcome. Working in this intuitive, off-the-cuff kind of way has always been a major challenge for me as a Furniture Design MFA student: I do not like to work slowly, precisely, and with the exceptional craft that is normally expected when designing and fabricating fine furniture. This work has finally allowed me to find a place of ‘appropriate craft,’ a level of craft that makes sense for what I am trying to accomplish with the work, but is not all about delicate joinery, perfect surfaces, and precise cuts. Instead, the skills and knowledge I have built over the past four years allow me to know when that level of craft helps, and when it is not needed.



“ARTIFACT NO. 38”, HARDWOOD, CORRUGATED PLASTIC, ELECTRICAL CABLE, LIGHT. 29” X 40” X 4”, 2023



**"ARTIFACT NO. 39", PLYWOOD, MEDIUM DENSITY FIBERBOARD, PLEXIGLASS, ELECTRICAL CABLE, LIGHT, 26" X 10" X 10", 2023**

## REGARDING "ARTIFACTS"

Starting in the late 1970's, Anthony Wilson and Alain Erasmus's Factory Records out of Manchester, England has brought incredibly important and influential musical artists to the world, most notably Joy Division, New Order, and Happy Mondays. Factory used

a unique numbering system that is applied to anything and everything they create or make, where each item gets a catalog number in loosely consecutive order. This includes obvious things like every album and single Factory released, but also more abstract entities like a party (FAC 208), a club venue (FAC 51), office stationery (FAC 7), and even more unexpected things like a lawsuit (FAC 61), a pet cat (FAC 191), and, upon his death in 2007, Wilson's coffin (FAC 501). (Factory Records)

I am using a similar system, where each entity I have created over the past four years is cataloged as an "Artifact" — a word I prefer to use when referencing any of my art objects and anything else I have created, as it is neither media, material, nor discipline specific.

**Factory Records: The Periodic Table of Factory Records**

001	002	003	004	005	006	007	008	009	010
011	012	013	014	015	016	017	018	019	020
021	022	023	024	025	026	027	028	029	030
031	032	033	034	035	036	037	038	039	040
041	042	043	044	045	046	047	048	049	050
051	052	053	054	055	056	057	058	059	060
061	062	063	064	065	066	067	068	069	070
071	072	073	074	075	076	077	078	079	080
081	082	083	084	085	086	087	088	089	090
091	092	093	094	095	096	097	098	099	100
101	102	103	104	105	106	107	108	109	110
111	112	113	114	115	116	117	118	119	120
121	122	123	124	125	126	127	128	129	130
131	132	133	134	135	136	137	138	139	140
141	142	143	144	145	146	147	148	149	150
151	152	153	154	155	156	157	158	159	160
161	162	163	164	165	166	167	168	169	170
171	172	173	174	175	176	177	178	179	180
181	182	183	184	185	186	187	188	189	190
191	192	193	194	195	196	197	198	199	200
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211	212	213	214	215	216	217	218	219	220
221	222	223	224	225	226	227	228	229	230
231	232	233	234	235	236	237	238	239	240
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251	252	253	254	255	256	257	258	259	260
261	262	263	264	265	266	267	268	269	270
271	272	273	274	275	276	277	278	279	280
281	282	283	284	285	286	287	288	289	290
291	292	293	294	295	296	297	298	299	300
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321	322	323	324	325	326	327	328	329	330
331	332	333	334	335	336	337	338	339	340
341	342	343	344	345	346	347	348	349	350
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371	372	373	374	375	376	377	378	379	380
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391	392	393	394	395	396	397	398	399	400
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441	442	443	444	445	446	447	448	449	450
451	452	453	454	455	456	457	458	459	460
461	462	463	464	465	466	467	468	469	470
471	472	473	474	475	476	477	478	479	480
481	482	483	484	485	486	487	488	489	490
491	492	493	494	495	496	497	498	499	500
501	502	503	504	505	506	507	508	509	510
511									

The Durutti Column	Happy Mondays
Wim Mertens	Section 25
The Railway Children	Quando Quando
A Certain Ratio	Joy Division
Factory Classical	New Order
The Wake	Factory Edifices
A Factory Quartet	Not allocated/unknown

This is a full list of artifacts from my time in this MFA program:

- |    |                                 |    |                                      |
|----|---------------------------------|----|--------------------------------------|
| 1  | First workshop space            | 20 | Presentation on making presentations |
| 2  | Hand tools only mallet          | 21 | Pizza at Rolf's                      |
| 3  | Marble maze                     | 22 | Fuck Off Light                       |
| 4  | Hand tools only coffee table    | 23 | Paper collage 1                      |
| 5  | Machinery response coffee table | 24 | Paper collage 2                      |
| 6  | Red grid bench                  | 25 | Paper collage 3                      |
| 7  | The reliquary                   | 26 | Artifact No. 26                      |
| 8  | Salt cellar                     | 27 | Artifact No. 27                      |
| 9  | Dining table                    | 28 | Artifact No. 28                      |
| 10 | 2x4 seating                     | 29 | Artifact No. 29                      |
| 11 | Pizza at Rolf's                 | 30 | Tripod sculpture                     |
| 12 | Second workshop space           | 31 | Grid lamp                            |
| 13 | Small sculptural collage 1      | 32 | Paper lamp                           |
| 14 | Small sculptural collage 2      | 33 | Thesisbot puppet                     |
| 15 | Small sculptural collage 3      | 34 | Artifact No. 34                      |
| 16 | Small sculptural collage 4      | 35 | Artifact No. 35                      |
| 17 | Dining chair                    | 36 | Artifact No. 36                      |
| 18 | Orange bookshelves              | 37 | Artifact No. 37                      |
| 19 | Second workshop space           | 38 | Artifact No. 38                      |
|    |                                 | 39 | Artifact No. 39                      |
|    |                                 | 40 | This thesis paper                    |
|    |                                 | 41 | Pizza at Rolf's                      |



This naming system is important as it reconfirms the idea that all of this work is part of an iterative journey, and not a series of stand alone items devoid of context. This consecutive numbering of work also references El Lissitzky's series of "Prouns," an ongoing series of formal compositions, each with a number. (Birnholz). I do not like to keep my work contained or siloed, as I feel that all of my work, be it visual, written, spoken, or even teaching, is all an equal part of my creative practice. Therefore setting up my workshop spaces (Artifacts No. 1 and 19) are every bit as important to my overall body of work as the actual gallery viewable "art" objects themselves. Cataloging the work the same way Factory and El Lissitzky did, not only positions my work along a historical continuum, but also helps me to be constantly reminded that my work does not exist isolated in a vacuum: each artifact has a dialog with the other artifacts in its family.



EL LISSITZKY, PROUN 19D, 1921

## **THIS IS NOT A CONCLUSION**

I have finished nothing; I have only started.

This MFA thesis work represents a beginning, not an end. I now have a much deeper and much more honest understanding of the work I have made and want to make next. This entire experience has been tremendously important as it initiated a transition of my creative practice to now focus on the conceptual, as well as the formal and methodological elements of my work. Instead of leaning away from the conceptual focus of my work like I have in the past, I am now ready to confront it head on. To me, an MFA thesis is not the answer to anything, instead it raises more questions and ideas and leads to new directions. In addition to helping me much more clearly understand the conceptual nature of my work, this experience has opened me to new mediums and dimensions as an artist and designer — I have never worked in three dimensions before, and I feel like this was an enlightening moment for me as an artist. As a professional art and design educator, the past few years being a student again have been particularly valuable and will help me from a pedagogical standpoint..

This MFA experience represents a watershed moment in my life and in my creative practice: I now understand what I have been trying to talk about with my work over the past 30 plus years, and I also have new processes, media, materials, and disciplines to continue investigating as I continue making my work. I am excited to consider how I keep investigating these materials (wood, light) and my ideation process (working gesturally and intuitively.) I am interested to further consider both scale and environment in my work: what happens when these are smaller? Larger? Alone in a large space? Crammed together in a small space? I am also very curious what will happen when my practice breaks from “furniture design” and exists inside another context or medium — what will my work look like when I change my circumstances? What is the next media or material? What are other ways of thinking about light and its effect on both emotion and physical space?

I move on from this MFA program feeling invigorated, excited, thankful, and more than anything: ready to try and tackle what comes next.

## **ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

I thank everyone at RIT as a whole for allowing me the incredible opportunity to pursue another Master's degree, and more specifically Andy Buck and Rolf Hoeg, who in addition to agreeing to having me join the MFA program, have been incredible teachers and mentors over the past few years. I also want to thank John Aasp and Rebeca Aloisio for serving on my committee and all the perspective and criticism they brought to my work, and William Tracey for vast and seemingly endless knowledge and insight. Lastly, I want to thank School of Art and American Craft Director Elizabeth Kronfeld, as well as Associate Dean of Graduate Studies Chris Jackson and Dean Todd Jokl for allowing me the gift of pursuing another MFA.

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