

How to Conserve a Ritual: Reconsidering the Past and Future of Performance Art

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Beginning in 1970, but repeated throughout the decade, artist Charles Simonds used the abandoned clay pits of Sayreville, New Jersey as a staging ground for three actions that he considered fundamental to his practice. The clay pits had formerly served the region's brick-making industry; in the 1970s, they provided Simonds with the clay that he used for his sculptures – and that served as both stage and substance for what he called his “Mythologies” (figs. 1-3). For *Birth*, the first action, Simonds immersed himself in the heavy, wet clay of the pit and then slowly, painfully reemerged from within it, his skin and long hair caked gray. In *Body ↔ Earth*, the artist, having been thus born from the earth, returned to it and pressed his body into the clay. Finally, for *Landscape ↔ Body ↔ Dwelling*, Simonds, having been created, became a creator in turn: lying on the ground, he covered his body in clay so that it resembled the terrain around him. Then, forming tiny bricks, he constructed a miniature building on the landscape he had become.

Though Simonds's “Mythologies” have left only light footprints in the art historical record, it is not difficult to place them within it. The 1970s – particularly in downtown New York City, where Simonds lived and worked – are well-established as a period of explosive experimentation in the still fresh and unstable medium of performance. Though such art historical contextualization is not wrong

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for Simonds's work, it nonetheless presents a problem: Simonds adamantly denies that his "Mythologies" are performance art. Instead, he claims, these symbolically charged, repeated actions should be considered *rituals*. He insists that "It's not a performance. It's just a kind of ritual."¹

Simonds is not the only performance artist of the 1970s to refer to his works as ritualistic, or whose work was described that way by critics attempting to make sense of the diversity of early performance practices. A wide array of performance pioneers have invoked ritual in their work. But is this simply a question of terminology? As is well-known, "performance" is just one of many terms that were used in the 1960s and '70s to denote artists' diverse experiments with artworks that were adequately described neither by the traditional visual arts genres of painting and sculpture nor by the performing arts genres of theater, dance, or music. Perhaps, in describing his performances as rituals, Simonds was simply expressing a preference – as other artists might have preferred to call their work "body art," "actions," "happenings," or "living sculpture."

Yet there is particular significance both in Simonds's rejection of the term "performance" and in his insistence on "ritual." What began as a catch-all term for diverse experiments that defied artistic categorization gradually congealed into yet another category – that of *performance art*. Simonds rejected the cultural and historical specificity of that category, instead linking his activities with ritual, which is transcultural, transtemporal, and transformative – thus defying definitions of art that depart from a stable, finished object, or perhaps even transgressing the concept of art itself. While performance art designates the activities of a few individuals working within the particular framework of late twentieth-century western art, the study of ritual assumes fundamental importance across human societies. And whereas this concept of art had become, by the '70s, so abstruse as to be unintelligible to all who were not its direct initiates, ritual is believed to have accompanied human beings from their earliest days into the present. Therefore, to understand Simonds's "Mythologies" as rituals is to embed them into a historical, critical, and even praxis-based lineage that not only changes how we understand their meanings today but also suggests methods for preserving them for the future.

¹ Oral history interview with Charles Simonds, 2012 July 31-August 14. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.



Fig. 1. Charles Simonds, *Birth*, first enacted 1970. Photograph 1971 by Rudy Burckhardt.



Fig. 2. Charles Simonds, *Body ↔ Earth*, first enacted 1970. Still from 1974 film by Rudy Burckhardt.



Fig. 3. Charles Simonds, *Landscape ↔ Body ↔ Dwelling*, first enacted 1970. Photograph 1973 by Rudy Burckhardt.

To ignore ritual's role – or reduce it to a mere reference – in works by Simonds and other artists like him would be not only to misunderstand the nature of their work, but also to miss something fundamental about the history of performance art in this crucial, open, early moment of its development, prior to its ascendance and eventual canonization: that performance was, at least for some, not a new way of making art, but an escape from the very concept of art, an effort to seek its lineages outside of art history. Understanding performance as ritual also opens new pathways for approaching the endurance of historical performance today and in days to come: I propose that ritual and its histories imply a method for the conservation of performance art, often considered to be beyond the conservator's grasp. In short, I believe that the notion of ritual might not only radically reconfigure performance's past, but also its present and future.

In what follows, I delineate a provisional framework for approaching certain works of performance art as rituals, addressing the implications of this perspective for both art history and conservation. In its present state, the project should be understood as an experimental treatment – both theoretical and practical – of performance works that hopes to catch and hold onto central aspects of these that are otherwise missed and, ultimately, lost. I introduce three interrelated concepts of ritual's relationship to performance that I propose as both productive and necessary for understanding performance's past and for ensuring its future. First, I summarize relevant positions from the anthropological and religious study of ritual. I then show that the notion of ritual allowed performance artists to see their work in an expanded time scale, undermining the common understanding of performance as an invention of the 1960s (or, at the earliest, the first decades of the twentieth century). For this reason, as will be made clear, performance was seen by some artists not simply as a new kind of art, but as an alternative to art itself, a rebellion against the increasingly well-defined systems of the art world and its emphasis on dematerialized and conceptual practices – an emphasis that continues to influence or even define the interpretation of performance today.

Finally, I propose that ritual can be used as a conservation methodology, by shifting our understanding of performance as a fragile, vanishing medium to that of a powerful and enduring one. This discussion borrows abundantly from conservation theories and practices in the field of Indigenous heritage preservation, which has for several decades accepted the validity and even necessity of ritual within and around institutional contexts. I argue that, in learning to care for the works of performance art that have begun to enter museum collections, conservators of contemporary art may need to embrace an understanding of performance

– or at least certain performances – derived from ritual.² Against many prevailing interpretations, this understanding refuses to see performance as either a faulty object or an embodied work of conceptual art, instead locating the mechanisms for performance’s continuation within the practice of performance itself.

Performance artworks as rituals

The term “ritual” has appeared frequently in discourses about performance art, but its meaning is often unclear within art history or art criticism (more on this below). I first turn, then, to the discipline of ritual studies. Rooted in late nineteenth-century efforts to ascertain the essence and origins of humanity, ritual studies is a hybrid field encompassing aspects of history, religious studies, classical studies, anthropology, psychoanalysis, and – beginning in the 1960s and ’70s, the period at issue here – performance studies, as well as other fields of scientific and social inquiry. My concern here is not whether the performances I discuss here truly – according to any given schema, and there are many from which to choose – constitute rituals. Rather, my interest is in exploring how frameworks of ritual change the meaning of these works, their place in (art) history, and ultimately, the way they are conserved for the future, opposing the still common conception of performance art as inherently ephemeral. For these purposes, rather than any ill-fated attempt to define ritual itself, it is enough to understand *how ritual has been understood*, particularly in the period in question, which was an especially rich one in ritual studies.

Ritual scholars have used diverse methodologies – linguistic, textual, biological, sociological, ethnographic, and beyond – to try to define ritual activities and to explain their significance for the origins and the subsequent development of human culture, as well as to make sense of other, for them related phenomena, notably art. If ritual is understood, as some scholars have argued, to be a or even *the* fundamental human activity, uniquely tasked with and capable of bridging culture and nature, then other spheres of human activity are seen to descend from or revolve upon it in some way.

As Erika Fischer-Lichte points out in her study of the relationship between theater and sacrificial ritual in the early twentieth century, Nietzsche had already

² For the present, it is sufficient to concern ourselves with performance works that clearly use ritual as a structuring concept, as Simonds does. But it may be that very different works of art also benefit from the attention I propose to give the examples presented here.

theorized ritual as the source of ancient Greek theater in the nineteenth century, a lineage that was rejected by his contemporaries as demeaning to the transcendence, sophistication, and beauty of Greek drama.³ Yet by the early twentieth century, Jane Harrison advanced a notion of “primitive” (meaning elemental) ritual as a source not only for drama, but indeed of all art.⁴ For Harrison, as for James Frazer and others inspired by their work, such theories had clear and meaningful implications for modern western culture and its concepts of art: art was in some way superior to (more advanced and intellectual than) ritual, but also profoundly dependent on it.⁵ Harrison’s “ritualism” thesis is no longer current in ritual studies, but artists have taken inspiration from ritual practices as well as from their theorization in scholarship.

Ritual is notoriously difficult to define, but certain generalizations from its study will allow us to understand its potential for a reconsideration of performance art. Rituals are apparently common to all human societies and may even be practiced by animals.⁶ Though they are usually goal-oriented, a ritual’s goal is not to create an *object*, but to bring about a *state or situation*. In this way, they are inherently transformative, and inherently performative – meaning that they must be enacted to be effective. While some religions, notably many forms of Protestantism, may focus on an individual’s inner belief over exterior action, the logic of ritual stresses the sometimes painstakingly precise performance of particular actions, usually within a communal context. In this way, the ritual moves performance away from conceptuality and towards a form of practice that can only be expressed through the body. Indeed, the notion that performance should be seen as fundamentally embodied and experiential, rather than dematerialized and conceptual, parallels early debates in ritual studies about the primacy of ritual versus myth. While Edward Burnett Tylor advanced the idea that rituals merely act out the content of preexisting myths – that the verbal precedes the performative – scholars such as William Robertson Smith, Frazer, and Harrison argued that

³ Erika Fischer-Lichte, *Theatre, Sacrifice, Ritual: Exploring Forms of Political Theatre* (London: Routledge, 2005), 17–19.

⁴ Jane Ellen Harrison, *Ancient Art and Ritual* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1913).

⁵ James George Frazer, *The Golden Bough: A Study in Comparative Religion* (London: MacMillan and Co., 1890).

⁶ “Ritualization” is used by ethologists to describe the certain performative animal behaviors, such as in combat or courting. This use derives from the work of influential animal behaviorist Julian Huxley. See Julian S. Huxley, “The Courtship Habits of the Great Crested Grebe (*Podiceps Cristatus*); with an Addition to the Theory of Sexual Selection,” *Proceedings of the Zoological Society of London* 84, no. 3 (September 1914): 491–562.

myths were created to explain primal rituals.⁷ The terms of this debate reflect a longstanding prejudice in western scientific traditions for text over act, word over deed. While performances are unquestionably related to the conceptual practices of '60s and '70s art, recovering these early debates' relevance to artistic production can remind us that they are not subordinate to those practices, instead following a logic of enactment that defies verbal articulation.

Other formative ideas in ritual studies can prove fruitful for understanding performance in art. Rituals, which are often performed in special places, induce what Arnold van Gennep, who coined the term "rite of passage," theorized as "liminal" spaces and periods in society, allowing otherwise impossible or forbidden transitions and transformations to take place.⁸ Victor Turner later elaborated the idea of liminality, using it to describe a variety of situations in which existing hierarchies might be abandoned and power dynamics reversed.⁹ Rituals rarely include a passive audience; spectators are to some degree participants, whether they engage in performative actions or are simply moved – we might say "activated" – by them.¹⁰ Rituals make use of repetition, though at different scales – a ritual might be repeated multiple times a day, or only once in a lifetime – and they involve the formalization and abstraction of behaviors and movements drawn from more mundane realms of life. Similarly, through ritual, normal objects, garments, and foods take on special meanings and powers. It is also significant that rituals are at once real *and* symbolic action: the communion wafer represents the body of Jesus but is also meant to transform into his flesh.¹¹ Whatever one's belief, the chewing and swallowing of the wafer are entirely literal.

Part of the trouble with defining ritual, as Catherine Bell has noted, is that "At one time or another, almost every human activity has been done ritually or

⁷ Edward B. Tylor, *Primitive Culture: Researches into the Development of Mythology, Philosophy, Religion, Art, and Custom* (London: J. Murray, 1871); William Robertson Smith, *Lectures on the Religion of the Semites* (London: Adam and Charles Black, 1889); Frazer, *The Golden Bough*; Harrison, *Ancient Art and Ritual*.

⁸ Arnold van Gennep, *Les rites de passage* (Paris: É. Nourry, 1909).

⁹ Victor Turner, *Drama, Fields and Metaphors: Symbolic Action in Human Society* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1974).

¹⁰ Fischer-Lichte makes much of this connection in Erika Fischer-Lichte, *The Transformative Power of Performance: A New Aesthetics*, trans. Saskya Iris Jain (London: Routledge, 2008).

¹¹ The supposed opposition of "science" with "magic" is discussed in depth in Stanley Tambiah, *Magic, Science, Religion, and the Scope of Rationality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

made part of a ritual.”¹² This is partly because ritual activities are often more a question of context than content. As Jonathan Z. Smith has argued, taking up the language of Emile Durkheim, “there is nothing that is inherently sacred or profane.”¹³ Rather, ritual is a way of forging a space for human activity beyond the everyday, for bracketing out and marking as special certain actions – even if those actions are at times identical with activities that we consider either normal and unremarkable or forbidden and taboo. Eating food, for example, is an everyday activity, but in the context of Catholic communion or a ritual meal like the Jewish Pesach, it is laden with significance. Violence is forbidden in many societies outside the frame of ritual actions in which blood – or even life – is taken as a necessary aspect of fulfilling the ritual.

It is not the actions themselves that make the ritual, therefore, but the frame around them. If we return to art history, we may note that this is precisely the situation in which art found itself in the 1960s, and out of which performance arose. The eating of a meal – for example in ritualistic works by Barbara T. Smith – or the drawing of blood – as in works by Gina Pane, Marina Abramović or, later, Ron Athey – are not inherently “artistic” activities, anymore than they are inherently spiritual ones. They are made thus by the frame of the performance. Therefore, it is not merely the case that works of performance art have frequently shared or deliberately borrowed elements from various rituals; the connection is not merely aesthetic, cultural, or symbolic. Rather, performance art and ritual share a *structural* similarity in their transformation of activities and objects – if not from profane to sacred, as in the case of ritual, then from life to art, as performance art can do. Ritual performance and art performance thus often operate according to the same logic.

I am hardly the first to make this connection. Fischer-Lichte relies on ritual to construct an “aesthetic of the performative,” and details the entwinement of theater studies and ritual studies over the first half of the twentieth century.¹⁴ And early scholars of ritual practice and theory not infrequently commented on its re-

¹² Catherine Bell, *Ritual: Perspectives and Dimensions* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 91.

¹³ Jonathan Z. Smith, “The Bare Facts of Ritual,” *History of Religions* 20, no. 1/2 (1980): 115. For Durkheim, ritual’s role was to separate the sacred (special, otherworldly, religious) from the profane (regular activities and everyday life). *Les formes élémentaires de la vie religieuse: le système totémique en Australie* (Paris: F. Alcan, 1912).

¹⁴ Fischer-Lichte, *The Transformative Power of Performance: A New Aesthetics*.

relationships to contemporary art. In *Totem and Taboo* (1913), Sigmund Freud relates his notion of the “omnipotence of thoughts,” which he sees as an essentially primitive belief in the physical power of ideas, to the transformative power of art in modern western societies. As Freud notes, “Only in art does it still happen that a man who is consumed by desires performs something resembling the accomplishment of those desires and that what he does in play produces emotional effects—thanks to artistic illusion—just as though it were something real. People speak with justice of the ‘magic of art’ and compare artists to magicians. But the comparison is perhaps more significant than it claims to be.”¹⁵ With typical prejudice, Freud assumes that ritual functions by deception or artifice (“magic”) rather than by real transformation (again, the communion wafer *becomes* the body of Jesus – even as it remains a symbol of it).¹⁶ Yet his focus on illusion as the locus of art’s power was being complicated by the experiments of contemporary artists, who had become increasingly interested in transforming everyday reality into art. Indeed, the year of *Totem and Taboo*’s publication also witnessed the birth of Marcel Duchamp’s first readymade – the transformation of a bicycle wheel and a wooden stool into the artwork *Roue de bicyclette* – which brought art’s transformative power out of the realm of illusion and into that of concrete reality. This tendency may have reached its apotheosis in the 1960s. Certain strands of performance art are well-known for their refusal of illusion; Marina Abramović famously declared that in performance art, unlike in illusionistic theater, “the knife is real, the blood is real, and the emotions are real.”¹⁷ Still, despite his evident bias against “magic,” which he compares with “illusion,” Freud identifies the underlying logic shared by ritual and certain kinds of art.

By the 1960s, Richard Schechner was connecting anthropological studies of ritual, particularly those of Turner, with the performance practices of art and experimental theater, actively seeking to apply one field of inquiry to the other. For Schechner, an innovator of avant-garde theater as well as a thinker, ritual was one of a number of types of performance that might run a gamut between functional

¹⁵ Sigmund Freud, *Totem and Taboo*, trans. James Strachey (London: Routledge, 1950), 236–37.

¹⁶ For a discussion integrating Indigenous ontologies with conservation concerns, see Aaron Glass, “What Are Indigenous Ontologies?,” in *Conserving Active Matter* (Bard Graduate Center, 2022), <https://exhibitions.bgc.bard.edu/cam/>. What it might mean to take magic seriously is explored in Tambiah, *Magic, Science, Religion, and the Scope of Rationality*.

¹⁷ Sean O’Hagan, “Interview: Marina Abramović,” *The Observer*, October 3, 2010, <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2010/oct/03/interview-marina-abramovic-performance-artist>.

power and aesthetic enjoyment. Both rituals and performances involve “restored behavior,” actions repeated and set apart from ordinary life. He argues that both create transformative liminal spaces where normal roles dissolve, though rituals often aim for lasting social change, while performance art is more likely to generate shifts in its audience’s perception or consciousness. Performance art borrows from ritual’s structure, using endurance, repetition, and audience participation to achieve *efficacy*—producing real effects rather than mere representation. He also describes how performance art functions as a modern, secular ritual, addressing themes of identity, spirituality, and social critique while blurring the line between art and lived experience. Performances that hew close to ritual might thus effect real change through symbolic or illusionistic means.¹⁸ From the perspective of ritual studies, therefore, there is ample precedent for taking Simonds seriously when he insists that his performances are rituals.

Ritual and Art History

Many art historians and critics have made use of ritual in discussions of early performance art, yet often, the relationship posited between the two is aesthetic or referential—essentially superficial.¹⁹ But for some artists, at least, ritual’s continuity with ancient traditions and relevance across cultures allowed it to function as an alternative to performance art practice, rather than a mere subgenre. For commentators of Simonds’s actions, the term “ritual” seems to stand for a set of general concepts relating to nature, ancient cultures, and universal meanings—a collection of qualities that comprise the western practice of cultural primitivism. “Perceived as a ritual of initiation,” one writer noted of *Birth* in 1975, this action “is as close to primitive ritual art as any modern man’s experience can be.”²⁰ For Edit DeAk, editor of the alternative magazine *Art Rite*, *Birth* recalls “ancient myths of man arising from the bowels of a mother earth.”²¹ An exhibition catalogue entry

¹⁸ Richard Schechner, *Between Theater and Anthropology* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1985).

¹⁹ RoseLee Goldberg, *Performance: Live Art 1909 to the Present* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1979), 106; Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* (London: Routledge, 1993), 154; Cynthia Carr, *On Edge: Performance at the End of the Twentieth Century* (Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 2008), 29.

²⁰ *Primitive Presence in the '70s* (Poughkeepsie, N.Y.: Vassar College Art Gallery, 1975), 19.

²¹ Edit Deak, “Vernacular Myth,” *Art-Rite*, no. 6 (1974): 10.

describes Simonds as a kind of “first man” performing primitive rites.²² Lucy Lippard described the “Mythologies” as “private rituals” in which “Simonds traces human evolution in personal microcosm.”²³ What these critics miss, however, is how Simonds used the concept of ritual as an alternative to art.

Indeed, primitivism – the West’s appropriation of non-western culture from within and in service of its own ideologies – is often mobilized as a critique of modern industrialized societies. Therefore it is logical that for Simonds, the importance of the category of ritual – rather than performance – also relates to his rejection of the art scene. “The art world is very small compared to all the different situations I’m entangled with,” Simonds has frequently repeated.²⁴ His works – not only the “Mythologies,” but also his better-known *Dwellings*, tiny clay architectures built on the streets of the Lower East Side – were deliberately made without the structural or conceptual frame of the art scene, and so were open to be interpreted via other frameworks.²⁵ Art was a limiting factor from which he wished to free himself. His language suggests art’s ritual-like capacity to emerge from everyday circumstances even while distinguishing itself from them: “Art can, or should be able to enter the flow of life.”²⁶ For Simonds, ritual is a framework for action that escapes narrow art categorization by appealing to a type of activity both eternal – beyond the incremental timekeeping of art history – and universal – accessible outside the modern western concept of modern art that he had inherited as a university-trained artist. He spoke of developing “a personal/universal mythology,” which he used “as an investigative tool to fracture the present.”²⁷ In relating his practice to a seemingly ancient past, Simonds rejected interpretations of the “Mythologies” as of-the-moment performance art, instead connecting them to continuities of tradition across cultures.

²² Charles Simonds, ed. John Hallmark Neff (Chicago: Museum of Contemporary Art, 1981), 40.

²³ Lucy R. Lippard, *Overlay: Contemporary Art and the Art of Prehistory* (New York: The New Press, 1983), 57.

²⁴ Charles Simonds and Lippard, Lucy, “Microcosm to Macrocosm / Fantasy World to Real World,” *Artforum* 12, no. 6 (1974): 39.

²⁵ I discuss these aspects of Simonds’s work in *Charles Simonds and the Seventies* (Berlin: Hatje Cantz, forthcoming).

²⁶ Simonds and Lippard, Lucy, “Microcosm,” 39.

²⁷ Daniel Abadie, “Charles Simonds Interviewed by Daniel Abadie,” in *Temenos* (Buffalo, New York: Albright-Knox Art Gallery, 1977), 13–14.

Elisabeth Jappe assigned ritual a privileged position in her 1993 book *Performance, Ritual, Prozess*, among the earliest performance art histories. As she wrote, “Action as a form of expression for an idea, be it religious, social, artistic – in short, for an outlook on life – is as old as human culture. Rituals and rites existed long before humans left behind the first permanent visual traces of their cultural activity.”²⁸ Nonetheless, for Jappe, as for many other writers, performance’s primary historical lineage is to be found in recent art history: “the previous generation’s doubts about the significance of museum artworks led inevitably to a radical renunciation of them: what remained for posterity were relics, instruments, documents, and at best, legends.”²⁹ In this reading, performance is aligned with or even elided into conceptualism as an anti-object response to the conditions of the art system. And like in conceptualism, performance’s primary attribute is seen here to be its resistance to materiality. Yet ritual practices demonstrate an insistence on the material that complicates this narrative and casts a different light on early performance.

Flesh as Material

Jappe’s celebration of radical artists’ “renunciation” of traditional art objects represents a well-worn narrative in the history of twentieth-century art. Indeed, performance is often both historicized and theorized as a principal thread in the avant-garde “dematerialization” of art that took place in the 1960s and ’70s.³⁰ In this narrative, performance is an essentially conceptual practice. Yet artists who invoked ritual did not only question performance’s status as something new, they also insisted on its materiality. For ritual artists, whether they were connecting to their own ancestral past, appropriating someone else’s, or like Simonds, inventing an entirely new culture for themselves, performance was not simply the next logical step in an avant-garde evolution from painting and sculpture to dematerialized practices, but a way of standing outside or even actively refuting this progression. As noted, rituals must be enacted to have meaning and power. Similarly, performances are not mere ideas whose realization is a secondary concern, but concrete actions that are manifest only through bodily enactment. Ritual shows

²⁸ Elisabeth Jappe, *Performance, Ritual, Prozess: Handbuch der Aktionskunst in Europa* (München: Prestel, 1993), 9. Translation mine.

²⁹ Jappe, 9. Translation mine.

³⁰ Lucy R. Lippard and John Chandler, “The Dematerialization of Art,” *Art International*, no. 12 (February 1968): 31–36.

us that it is a fallacy to understand performance as dematerialized. It shifts our understanding of performance from a cerebral art genre determined by the history of modern art towards an embodied, transcultural *alternative* to art that claims to bypass such linguistically determined models of culture by appealing to scholarly frameworks of ritual that propose it as a fundamental, even prelinguistic form of human activity.³¹

For Simonds, as for other artists who deliberately engaged ritual dimensions in their performance practice, performance represented not just a rejection of painting and sculpture, but also of the purely idea-based art that succeeded it. In *Birth*, Simonds's emergence from the earth was both symbolic and real: the heaviness of the clay made this action a genuine struggle, lending real drama and risk to the metaphor of rebirth. The insistence on the transformation of the body and mind through enactment shifts these performances away from discourses of dematerialization, enlarges their discursive fields, and opens them to the tools of ritual analysis.

Though some ritual artists, Simonds among them, escaped canonization, examples of ritually-engaged practices can be found among the best-known works of performance art. Read through the lens of ritual, Carolee Schneemann's iconic 1975 performance *Interior Scroll* asserts the power of performance by articulating a refusal of purely conceptual content. In painting her skin, rather than a canvas, and reading from a scroll of paper that she had embedded within her body, Schneemann refuses to sacrifice flesh and action to thought and word. The text she reads is addressed to an interlocutor who rejects, among other things, her focus on the body and on her "primitive techniques." Schneemann's rebuttal is figured not only or even primarily through the text itself, but through its exaggeratedly embodied performance. Here, as in other works like *Meat Joy*, Schneemann explores "flesh as material."³²

³¹ Richard Schechner has explained his concept of the "universal" by reference to the example of language: "This ability to make and use language is not specific to any particular culture; it is the property and the ability of the species as a whole. In other words, there is no human society without language, nor is any particular language the same as any other. What is true of language, I believe, is true across the incredibly wide range of human cultural activities." Richard Schechner, *Performance Theory* (London: Routledge, 2003), xii.

³² Carolee Schneemann, *More than Meat Joy: Complete Performance Works and Selected Writings* (New Paltz, NY: Documentext, 1979), 2.

Schneemann was particularly inspired by the matriarchal goddesses and ritual elements of what she called “primary” cultures, seeing in them an inherently erotic and female alternative to the (phallocratic) culture and art system that dominated her own time and place.³³ For her, as for many other feminist artists, performance aligned to ritual opened a fundamental connection to experiences based within the female body that were older and deeper than the patriarchal concerns and hierarchies of modern art.³⁴

Ritual as Radically Old

Though the concept of ritual in art need not recall a distant past, many artists, Simonds and Schneemann among them, understood their work to channel or even continue traditional practices. When praised by an interviewer for his “radical conception” of what it means to be an artist, Simonds rejoined that his is rather a “reactionary conception.” As he explained, “I think I’m so much more rooted to what traditionally artists in other cultures may likely have been when you say art, you’re talking about now or in the next or last 50 years. ... And my time version is millennia.”³⁵ Simonds rejected the designation of performance because it represented, to him, a narrowly contemporary genre, whereas he understood his work as part of a tradition vastly wider in both time and geography.³⁶

Simonds’s use of ritual to transcend late-twentieth century categories of art – along with the preference for rite over artifact discussed by Jappe – finds an echo in the work of a contemporary theorist of ancient art. The influence of George Kubler’s *The Shape of Time* (1962) extended far beyond the academic circle of art historians and archaeologists to which the scholar belonged. It was read and regularly cited by both artists and art critics of the period, Simonds included.³⁷ Though Kubler is concerned primarily with objects – he specialized in a field

³³ Carolee Schneemann, “The Obscene Body/Politic,” *Art Journal* 50, no. 4 (1991): 31.

³⁴ Jennie Klein, “Goddess: Feminist Art and Spirituality in the 1970s,” in *West of Center: Art and the Counterculture Experiment in America, 1965-1977* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012), 224–38; Julia Pelta Feldman, “Female Imagery,” *Cache*, no. 01 (2020), <https://cache.ch/blog/femaleimagery>.

³⁵ Oral history interview with Charles Simonds, 2012 July 31-August 14. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

³⁶ Anchoring a contemporary practice with appeals to the past, always an ideological gesture, can also be a reactionary one. See E. J. Hobsbawm and T. O. Ranger, eds., *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

³⁷ Conversation with the artist.

where written accounts are scarce and the principal actors may have died eons ago – he nonetheless de-emphasizes their objecthood in a manner that has striking ramifications for the art of his own time. For Kubler, objects are primarily indices of the actions that created them: “However fragmentary its condition, any work of art is actually a portion of arrested happening, or an emanation of past time. It is a graph of an activity now stilled, but a graph made visible like an astronomical body, by a light that originated with the activity.”³⁸ Though this point is left implicit, Kubler’s argument serves to dismiss the notion that any art object transcends time. In fact, they are caught in multiple *kinds* of time – and should be understood as time solidified: “Things, which may be compared to fossil actions, display several kinds of simultaneity.”³⁹ In addition to stressing the process of creation over its result, Kubler also deemphasized the importance of the art object by focusing on the geographical and chronological contexts in which it was made and by insisting on works of art not as isolated products of genius, but as instances of ongoing cultural production. In short, Kubler advanced a theory, however implicit and incipient, of object-based art as performance.

Kubler’s notion of the fossil action allows for the deemphasis of object in favor of action to be located not in the balletic paintings of Jackson Pollock, as in Allan Kaprow’s influential interpretation, nor even in the Dada performances that Roselee Goldberg, Rebecca Schneider, and other scholars have identified as the roots of performance art, but rather in an ancient past.⁴⁰ This may be an apparently lost past that artists seek to make contemporary through reinterpretation and renewal – the artistic practices of primitivism often belong to this effort – or one that has remained present through generations of tradition.

Performance artist Guillermo Gómez-Peña argues that “Every culture has had a space allocated to the renewal of tradition and a space for contestation and deviant behavior. Those who occupy the latter are granted special freedoms. ... In indigenous American cultures, it was the shaman, the coyote, the Nanabush who had permission from the community to cross the dangerous borders of dreams, gender, madness, and witchcraft. In Western culture this liminal space is occupied by the performance artist ... We know this place exists and we simply

³⁸ George Kubler, *The Shape of Time: Remarks on the History of Things* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1962), 19.

³⁹ Kubler, 96.

⁴⁰ RoseLee Goldberg, *Performance: Live Art 1909 to the Present* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1979); Rebecca Schneider, *The Explicit Body in Performance* (London: Routledge, 1997).

occupy it.”⁴¹ In this reading, standard art histories of performance ignore the importance and continuity of non-western, non-art traditions for contemporary practices.

In emphasizing the “renewal of tradition” and the performance artist’s structural similarity to the figure of the shaman, Gomez-Pena frames performance art not as a radically *new* practice, but rather as a radically *old* one. The frame of ritual thus destabilizes conventional genealogies of performance, allowing contemporary artists to see themselves as not only connected to present-day ritualists, but also to ritual practitioners of distant times and places. It points the way toward understanding performance as continuity, a practice that inherently encompasses both tradition and change. This point is relevant not only for histories and theories of performance, but also for conceptualizing the preservation and long-term care of performance works now entering museum collections at an ever-increasing pace.

Ritual as Conservation

Jappe, as quoted above, asserts that action is as old as human culture, but she nevertheless believes that performance is fundamentally ephemeral. Like Peggy Phelan and other early historians and theorists of performance art, she not only assumes but insists that performance’s resistance to the object necessarily ordains a fleeting lifespan. It could only survive, she writes, through relics, documents, and “legends.”⁴² Like Tylor, Jappe gives more weight to myth than to ritual. Legends might be told about a past performance, but the legend’s performative corollary – the ritual – is, as a type of performance, a vanishing form unsuited to posterity. What Jappe ignores is that rituals themselves demonstrate an astonishing power of endurance.

I have thus far argued that ritual might serve as a model for understanding some performance artworks as embodied and embedded in a history, discourse, and performative framework earlier and other than art. I also propose that this framework has significant implications for how we might conceive of these artworks in the future. As art museums increasingly seek to commission, exhibit, and even acquire works of performance art, the care, conservation, and afterlives of

⁴¹ Guillermo Gómez-Peña, *Ethno-Tecno: Writings on Performance, Activism, and Pedagogy*, ed. Elaine Peña (New York: Routledge, 2005), 42–43.

⁴² Elisabeth Jappe, *Performance, Ritual, Prozess: Handbuch der Aktionskunst in Europa* (München: Prestel, 1993), 9.

these works have in recent years become a problem of increasing concern and urgency in the art world.⁴³ Yet many museum professionals and art theorists still assume that performance's relative ephemerality forecloses any possibility of conservation, relegating the live act to whatever traces may remain as documents, objects, or memories. In this understanding of performance, which is highly influenced by the rhetoric of dematerialization, performance artworks cannot survive and should not survive, because they are not objects. Yet the clear distinction between object and action, artwork and performance, is merely conventional: even seemingly traditional sculptural objects often suggest performative qualities that transcend static materiality. We find one example in Simonds's miniature *Ritual Objects* (1987), a set of mysterious implements in an apparently ethnographic array that compel the viewer to imagine how they might be used by the fictional people who, according to his personal mythology, crafted them (fig. 4). But with real relics, real rituals and performances, we can often do more than imagine. We can bring them to life through performance.

Ritual allows us to shift our understanding of performance from a fragile and disappearing medium to an enduring practice of breathtaking robustness. Though rituals may sometimes be tied to a particular place or to particular objects, they have the power to transcend these, extending over centuries and millennia, even as temples of stone crumble into dust. This is already a powerful conceptual tool for conserving performance by attending to the medium's strengths, rather than its weaknesses. As Rebecca Schneider has insisted, "performance remains;" its

⁴³ See Pip Laurenson and Vivian van Saaze, "Collecting Performance-Based Art: New Challenges and Shifting Perspectives," in *Performativity in the Gallery: Staging Interactive Encounters*, ed. Outi Remes, Laura Macculloch, and Marika Leino (Bern: Peter Lang, 2014), 27–40; Pip Laurenson, "Tino Sehgal, This Is Propaganda, 2002," in *Inside Installations*, ed. Tatja Scholte and Paulien 't Hoen (Amsterdam: Foundation for the Conservation of Contemporary Art / Netherlands Institute for Cultural Heritage, 2007); Hanna B. Hölling, "Exhausting Conservation: Object, Event, Performance in Franz Erhard Walther's Werkstücke," in *Object - Event - Performance: Art, Materiality, and Continuity since the 1960s*, ed. Hanna B. Hölling (New York: Bard Graduate Center, 2022), 62–84; Louise Lawson, Acatia Finbow, and Hélia Marçal, "Developing a Strategy for the Conservation of Performance-Based Artworks at Tate," *Journal of the Institute of Conservation* 42, no. 2 (2019): 1–21; Hélia Marçal, "Rites of Passage: A Conservator's Perspective on the Incorporation of Performance Artworks Into Collections," *Revista de História Da Arte* 6 (2017): 115–24; Eva Rieß, Carolin Bohlmann, and Ina Hausmann, "From Action to Object. On the Preservation of Performance-Based Installations by Joseph Beuys," *Journal of the Institute of Conservation* 42, no. 2 (May 4, 2019): 79–93; Hanna B. Hölling, Jules Pelta Feldman, and Emilie Magnin, eds., *Performance: The Ethics and the Politics of Conservation and Care*, vol. 1 (London: Routledge, 2023).

traces and gestures endure by traveling from body to body, even without conscious attempts to preserve them.⁴⁴ Ritual is both proof of this endurance and a clue to achieving it: as rituals' efficacy requires them to be enacted, conserving ritual performance means finding a way of bringing past performances back to life through action. Yet for ritual to endure, it must necessarily change, as illustrated by the work of Gomez-Pena, who freely adapts and reconfigures traditional elements in his performances. This is apt to make us uncomfortable if we approach performances as if they were particularly brittle objects, hoping somehow to fix them permanently in a singular state, whether as documentation or by some other means. While valuable, text and image records of performance – scripts, scores, post-facto accounts for the former, photographs and videos for the latter – constitute flat, fixed forms that fail to account for the course of ritual – or performative – change. Performance is inherently dynamic, and its conservation demands a dynamic approach.



Fig. 4. Charles Simonds, *Ritual Objects*, 1987. Clay, sand, wood, and feathers, 7.5 x 9.5 x 1 in.

⁴⁴ Rebecca Schneider, "Performance Remains," *Performance Research* 6, no. 2 (2001): 100–108.

If we permit ourselves to see performances art practices as meaningfully continuous with traditional ritual practices, contemporary art conservation can benefit from incorporating some of the ways that ritual has been approached in ethnographic and anthropological contexts. Museums do collect and conserve items that are used in rituals or imbued by them with special meaning. But they do not collect the rituals themselves. Such living practices, historically and ontologically speaking, are not considered to belong in museums. In 2023, dancer and choreographer Sophiline Cheam-Shapiro attempted to perform a ritual dance before a Khmer statue of the god Harihara at New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art, but was asked to cease by a security guard. Even though, in Cheam-Shapiro's words, the statue was "created by my ancestors for this very purpose," the museum's classification of it as an art object foreclosed the possibility of ritual practice.⁴⁵

Nonetheless, museum practices have shifted in recent years in acknowledgment of the living cultures that produced these objects, however old or new they might be.⁴⁶ For example, in 2019, Hawaiian cultural practitioners performed a ceremony at the Peabody Essex Museum in Salem Massachusetts following the museum's reinstallation of a sacred wooden carving representing the god Kūka'ālimoku.⁴⁷ Members of the communities for whom costumes, musical instruments, water vessels, jewelry, amulets, and other items retain ritual meaning and ritual function are now widely acknowledged to have a right to engage with them, to activate them in rituals and performances, and to participate in determining the proper conditions for their care and exhibition.⁴⁸ The ritual items in museums may

⁴⁵ Sophiline Cheam-Shapiro, "Met Museum Kicked Me Out for Praying to My Ancestral Gods," *Hyperallergic*, March 21, 2023, <http://hyperallergic.com/809442/met-museum-kicked-me-out-for-praying-to-my-ancestral-gods/>.

⁴⁶ See Miriam Clavir, *Preserving What Is Valued* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2002); Shadreck Chirikure and Gilbert Pwiti, "Community Involvement in Archaeology and Cultural Heritage Management: An Assessment from Case Studies in Southern Africa and Elsewhere," *Current Anthropology* 49, no. 3 (2008): 467–76, <https://doi.org/10.1086/588496>; Oana Florescu et al., "Integrative Participatory Conservation of Museum Artefacts. Theoretical and Practical Aspects," *International Journal of Conservation Science* 11, no. 1 (2020): 109–16.

⁴⁷ Andrea Shea, "Kū, A Fierce Living God For Many Native Hawaiians, Now Faces His Homeland," WBUR, June 28, 2019, <https://www.wbur.org/news/2019/06/25/ku-hawaiian-god-peabody-essex>.

⁴⁸ I have elsewhere argued for the relevance of the conservation of Indigenous collections to the conservation of western clothing. Jules Pelta Feldman, "Conserving Performance, Performing Conservation: Kim Kardashian x Marilyn Monroe," *Studies in Conservation*,

be fragile relics, but the rituals that activate them have endured and even thrived without (often, despite) museological assistance.

In deference to the traditional methods of conservation noted above, some conservators at museums that house ritual items have themselves become ritual practitioners, providing forms of care to items in their collections – including feeding them, burning incense, reciting prayers, or observing certain rules in their handling – that are not part of, and may even contradict, the scientific principles of conservation as it is most frequently practiced in the West. In fact, these practices, conducted in close collaboration with experts from the cultures to which the items in question belong, entered into the field decades ago – yet their implications for the broader field of western conservation are only beginning to be appreciated. How might our understanding and exhibition of items left over from performances change if we began to see them not as deactivated theatrical props, nor as sculptural objects reminiscent of a past performance, but rather as tools to be engaged within a living performance practice? Conservators as well as curators of modern and contemporary art might consider ethnographic strategies for conserving these so-called performance relics, emphasizing not only their historical use in a particular performance instance, but perhaps also their claims to a longer ritual trajectory. Perhaps most significantly, this shift in perspective would validate, if not demand, that these objects come alive through performance once more.

Rituals are, of course, not merely protocols surrounding the use of – and thus secondary to – objects, but themselves cultural expressions that might find their own distinct place in museums. Indeed, in many cultural contexts, the object is clearly of less importance than the ritual, and is meant to be used in service of the latter, to be used until it is no longer functional and must be replaced. The lesson for the conservator or curator tasked with caring for a performance artwork that fits the ritual schema outlined here is that the performance might take precedence over the relic. In the case of Simonds, taking seriously the artist’s claim that his “Mythologies” are rituals might involve exploring ritual modalities for the preservation of these works. To be concrete, this would mean, in some way, performing them – bringing (back?) to life the ritual activity that constitutes their primary aspect, and understanding any physical materials – such as the clay Simonds used – as subordinate to that performance. Reframing performance artworks as rituals also frees them from their reliance on art ontologies primarily concerned with objects without distorting their embodied materiality. If this can be a problem in the

theory and art history of performance art, it is much more consequential within museums, which are largely unequipped for the practical realities of taking care of artworks that do not primarily adhere in objects.

The above arguments are not intended to prove any absolute relationship between ritual in its religious or anthropological sense and the ritual-type performance art of which I take Simonds's "Mythologies" to be exemplary. Rather, at issue here is how similarities and connections between the two categories of performance might allow for a reconsideration of how performance art is embedded in time and history – and how its life might be extended into the future. For while performance art is often considered to escape the techniques and approaches of art conservation, ritual contains within it the mechanisms for its own perpetuation.

In itself, the recognition of this potential is, of course, no guarantee of a given performance's continuation, though western institutions are slowly learning to activate it. The UNESCO category of intangible cultural heritage (ICH), codified in 2003, was developed to create a framework for maintaining performance practices and other cultural activities that cannot be preserved the way buildings and paintings can. ICH is meant to encompass such practices as ritual, dance, music, oral storytelling, and artisanal techniques (as opposed to the items that may be produced by such techniques).⁴⁹ Like the performance artworks discussed above, ICH is poised between durability and evanescence. As Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett notes, "It follows that intangible heritage is particularly vulnerable, according to UNESCO, precisely because it is intangible, although the historical record does not necessarily bear this out. Though the situation today is of a different order, Australian Aborigines maintained their 'intangible heritage' for over 30,000 years without the help of cultural policy."⁵⁰ Kirshenblatt-Gimblett points out not only the evident endurance of performance traditions, countering the assumption of their vulnerability, but also the disruption and destruction of colonialism and imperialism that have weakened these existing preservation systems – thus the need for external "safeguarding" efforts such as those of UNESCO.

⁴⁹ UNESCO, *Basic Texts of the 2003 Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage* (Paris: Living Heritage Culture Sector UNESCO, 2018).

⁵⁰ Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, "Intangible Heritage as Metacultural Production," *Museum International* 66, no. 1–4 (2014): 171.

ICH follows on UNESCO's earlier category of "folklore," which was used to acknowledge that cultural practices, and not only cultural products, are to be valued and cared for, even if mechanisms for doing so can prove elusive or destructive – such as when they patronizingly supplant community efforts, or attempt to freeze in place traditions that are wont to change over time. At least in theory, approaches to ICH strive to avoid the earlier paradigms of so-called "salvage anthropology," in which researchers – "etic" observers from outside the cultures they studied – sought to "capture" via documentation the performance practices of cultures then understood to be in danger of disappearance, often due to both direct and indirect colonial oppression (and frequently on the part of the cultures to which these researchers belonged). Instead of "saving" such performances as discrete cultural products, or charging outsiders with the task of documenting them, ICH approaches ideally support the communities that practice them, so that living traditions can be maintained – even, or especially, as they continue to change over time.

This shift in thinking is sometimes challenging for heritage specialists or conservators, whose concepts of preservation have often revolved around arresting change.⁵¹ Even identifying a given performance practice for UNESCO's infamous "lists" of heritage to be preserved tends to define it in such a way as to hamper its future evolution.⁵² Nonetheless, at its core, safeguarding ICH is about supporting the individuals and groups who *do* it, rather than understanding preservation as a mere recording or formal fixing of a living tradition.

The protocols and processes of ICH cannot be straightforwardly mapped onto the performance practices of artists. Primarily, this is because ICH focuses on communities and cultures – groups of individuals, but groups nonetheless – whereas artists might be seen as cultures of one. Simonds is a pointed example of this: his "Mythologies" derive from the imagined beliefs of the "Little People," but despite his mischievous claims otherwise, he also recognizes that he himself is truly the only "Little Person."⁵³ How, then, are we to conceive of a community that might receive these performance works, claim them as their own, and continue them into the future?

⁵¹ See Natsuko Akagawa and Laurajane Smith, eds., *Safeguarding Intangible Heritage: Practices and Politics* (London: Routledge, 2019).

⁵² Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, "Intangible Heritage as Metacultural Production."

⁵³ Daniel Abadie, "Charles Simonds Interviewed by Daniel Abadie," in *Temenos* (Buffalo, New York: Albright-Knox Art Gallery, 1977), 2.

One answer lies near at hand, for it has already been put meaningfully into practice. Increasingly in the past few decades, artists themselves have become interested in studying, reviving, and actually performing works of performance art by their peers as well as by previous generations. Such practices, which are sometimes termed “reperformance” or “reenactment,” reject the paradigms codified by Phelan and Jappe, infusing ritual practice back into the legends left behind by previous works. Marina Abramović is perhaps the best-known exponent of such revivals, but she is far from alone; in the past few decades, artists have taken diverse approaches to reperformance, from careful reconstruction to free reinterpretation.⁵⁴ Whether commissioned by curators or, as is most often the case, inspired by their own impulses to engage with performance history, artists have already begun to use the tools of ritual and of ICH to continue the life of performance works often thought to be lost to history.

Each of these works is inevitably a new performance, but change is woven into the preservation paradigm that the concept of ICH seeks to delineate. I do not mean to imply that artists constitute a kind of “tribe,” or that one artist’s interpretation of another’s work occupies the same semantic category as a new generation’s interpretation of their culture’s ritual. I do propose, however, that the similarities are significant enough to provide not only theoretical tools for conceptualizing the future of performance art, but might even suggest practical methods for ensuring that future. If ICH shifts the focus from conserving objects to supporting practitioners, the ritual qualities of certain performance artworks might encourage us to think about *supporting artists* – rather than simply commissioning, acquiring, and documenting artworks. Professionals involved in performance and its afterlives – conservators, curators, registrars, art historians, and others – would be able to benefit from policies, programs, and methods already tested by those engaged with ICH. This would constitute something of a paradigm shift in museums and other art institutions, but it would be to the benefit of the contemporary art ecosystem, by making not only the artworks themselves but the artists’ careers more sustainable. And such a shift may be simply necessary to safeguard – to borrow a term from heritage studies – works of art considered both precious and elusive.

⁵⁴ A useful list can be found in Amelia Jones, “Timeline of Ideas: Live Art in (Art) History, A Primarily European–US-Based Trajectory of Debates and Exhibitions Relating to Performance Documentation and Re-Enactments,” in *Perform, Repeat, Record: Live Art in History*, ed. Amelia Jones and Adrian Heathfield (Bristol: Intellect, 2012), 425–32.

Further, while communication with other worlds, magic, and spirituality are often important to ritual and to artists' engagement with it, these are not necessary to understanding ritual as a transcultural human activity and as a potential model for the conservation of performance art. Amy Brost, a conservator of new media art, recently proposed ritual as a model for understanding how performances might be consistently enacted without needing to be *reenacted* (painstakingly reconstructed). Brost encourages us to "Consider the celebration of a birthday, in which a child is the central performer. Some material elements are always present, such as the cake and candles, but every birthday is a personally defined authentic iteration, not a reenactment. His future birthday celebrations will be just as authentic as the ones in his past — an example of repetition and recollection as one movement in opposite directions."⁵⁵ For Brost, ritual casts the continuation of performance as a natural aspect of its lifespan, since recurring instances are now seen as native to its ontology.

In the case of Simonds, Brost's perspective allows us both to understand the artist's repetition of his "Mythologies," which in most instances were not documented, and to at least consider the possibility that they might one day be performed again — not as recreations, a form of dispassionate documentation, but as ritual enactments. In appealing to the past, then, ritual also suggests possibilities for its own future. Through it, we may take seriously artists' claims to being part of timeworn lineages while revealing their works' inherent power of endurance. Ritual — as theory, practice, and ongoing debate — not only recharges the interpretation of modern and contemporary art performance, but also reconceptualizes emerging challenges and possibilities for conserving what is often seen as unconservable.

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⁵⁵ Amy Brost, "Reconciling Authenticity and Reenactment," in *Over and Over Again: Reenactment Strategies in Contemporary Arts and Theory*, ed. Cristina Baldacci, Clio Nicastro, and Arianna Sforzini (ICI Berlin Press, 2022), 187.

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