TRAILS AND TRIBUTES

SOPHIE THUN

Entering the Elusive Estate of ZDZ, 2021
Photographs by Zenta Dzividzinska interpreted
by Sophie Thun

COMPLETING AN UNFINISHED SENTENCE: ON THE COLLABORATION BETWEEN SOPHIE THUN AND THE ARCHIVE OF ZENTA DZIVIDZINSKA

ALISE TIFENTALE

Zenta Dzividzinska
Untitled (Self-portrait),
1965

Zenta Dzividzinska
Untitled (Self-portrait
in the reflection of the
hubcap of her father's
Moskvitch car), from:
House Near the River,
1965

It was a cool, greyish spring day. All was quiet outside an industrial-looking two-story building with a self-service carwash on one side and a storage facility on the other. The driveway to it led off a busy highway running alongside the Daugava River in Riga, Latvia. We arrived in separate unmarked ride sharing cars. I came alone. The other car dropped off the artist Sophie Thun and the curator Zane Onckule. In the small parking lot in front of the building, Onckule introduced me to Thun. Using a keyless entry app on my smartphone, I proceeded to open three different gates of the storage facility, and finally we found ourselves looking at a view that is captured in Thun's artwork *Alise's storage in Riga for ZDZ on April 21, 2021, red.*[1] This life-size (c. 300 × 200 cm) color print depicts an open storage room, its metal door raised to give a glimpse into its inside, full of cardboard boxes containing negatives and prints, paintings wrapped in bubble wrap, pieces of furniture, and other random items that had belonged to my mother, Zenta Dzividzinska (1944–2011), a Latvian artist and photographer active locally and internationally in the 1960s.

The print, alongside many of the boxes depicted in it, later became part of Thun's solo exhibition, *I Don't Remember a Thing: Entering the Elusive Estate of ZDZ* at the Kim? Contemporary Art Center in Riga, Latvia (July 15 to September 12, 2021).[2] Onckule as its curator had envisioned an exhibition of the work and the estate of a deceased artist, and the work and practice of a contemporary artist, later adding the labor of an archivist. Onckule's invitation resulted in Thun not only exhibiting her own work but also deciding to use the show and it's duration to study Dzividzinska's archive and print new images from her negatives onsite. The art historian and librarian Līga Goldberga listed and described the contents of the archive boxes during the exhibition and helped Thun with the selection of negatives for printing.

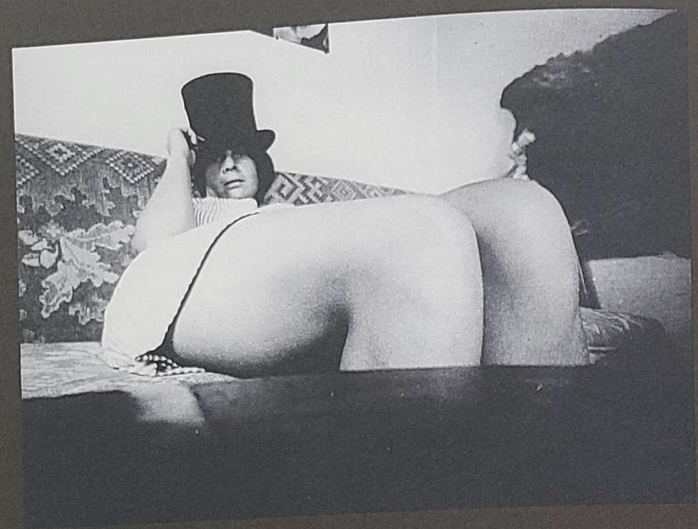
At the center of the exhibition at the Kim? Contemporary Art Center was an installation of darkroom equipment with an enlarger, chemical and paper supplies, baths, and other accessories. It was Thun's temporary darkroom where she worked several days a week throughout the run of the exhibition. Meanwhile, the presence of the archival boxes pointed to the invisibility of Dzividzinska's work, as most of her images had never been printed, or printed only in the format of a contact sheet, and very few images had been exhibited during her lifetime.

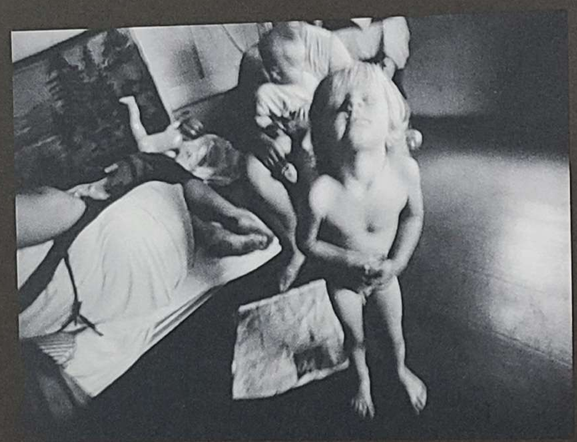
Thun's involvement, however, is more than just printing—she rather interpreted Dzividzinska's negatives.[3] I think about this process as similar to completing a sentence: one artist started saying something in the late 1960s but was interrupted and did not have a chance to finish the sentence.The other artist in the early 2020s kindly offered to pick up and complete the sentence in the absence of the first artist. I saw this process also as extremely difficult to define. For me, it is slightly uncanny to see, for example, my mother's self-portraits exhibited or published under the name of Sophie Thun. The art-historical term »appropriation« does not fully address what is at stake in this collaboration between Thun and Dzividzinska's archive. Thun's approach differs in so many ways from the more well-known cases of photographic appropriation such as the ones by Sherry Levine or Richard Prince or even Louise Lawler. This article aims to highlight some of the issues that this unusual collaboration raised, at the same time providing a glimpse into Dzividzinska's life as an innovative and radical woman artist who had been forgotten, overlooked, and misunderstood during her lifetime.

1 The abbreviation »ZDZ« here is a reference to the artist's preferred signature, which came about from her frustration at people's inability to correctly spell her last name. See Zane Onckule, *I Don't Remember a Thing: Entering the Elusive Estate of ZDZ*, https://kim.lv/en/dont-remember-thing-entering-elusive-estate-zdz/.

2 The title of the exhibition combines the title of Dzividzinska's last major solo exhibition *I Don't Remember a Thing* that took place in Riga in 2005 and the title of the article Entering the Elusive Estate of Photographer Zenta Dzividzinska that I wrote for *MoMA Post*, commissioned by the curator Inga Lāce, Contemporary and Modern Art Perspectives (C-MAP) Central and Eastern Europe Fellow at the MoMA. See Alise Tifentale, *Entering the Elusive Estate of Photographer Zenta Dzividzinska, MoMA Post*, March 24, 2021, https://post.moma.org/entering-the-elusive-estate-of-photographer-zenta-dzividzinska/. The exhibition's wall text, labels, press release, and installation shots are archived and available on the Contemporary Art Library website: https://www.contemporaryartlibrary.org/project/sophie-thun-and-the-estate-of-zenta-dzividzinska-at-kim-contemporary-art-centre-19974.

3 »I took the term from music, because there is a work and then it gets interpreted,« says Thun. Ieva Raudsepa, *We Can See Her Being Seen, Arterritory*, August 26, 2021, https://arterritory.com/en/visual_arts/interviews/25733-we_can_see_her_being_seen/.





Zenta Dzividzinska
Self-Portrait, 1968

Zenta Dzividzinska
Untitled, from:
House Near the
River, 1968

Zenta Dzividzinska.
Untitled, from:
House Near the
River, 1968

Beginning the sentence

In 1964 Dzividzinska, a student at the Riga School of Applied Arts, took an extracurricular photography class taught by Gunārs Binde (born 1933), one of the most visible champions of creative photography at the time. Binde soon became her mentor and friend, and one of their collaborations include a life-size nude photogram portrait of Dzividzinska. She began participating in photography exhibitions locally as well as internationally. However, most of her creative work was leading to a more experimental visual language that did not fit in the dominant understanding of »good photography« at the time. Dzividzinska's approach to photography embraced spontaneous snapshots, female subjects that defy the mainstream understanding of »prettiness,« blurred or unfocused images, seemingly random and oblique angles, dangerously slanted horizons, fragmented or distorted reflections, and purposefully incorrectly exposed and/or processed images.

At the center of Dzividzinska's oeuvre is a vast collection of images which were made in and around her parents' home on the outskirts of Iecava, a village less than an hour's drive south of Riga. During the 1960s, while studying art and working in Riga, Dzividzinska often visited her parents and extended family there. In the 2000s, looking back at her archive, Dzividzinska titled this collection *House Near the River*. It comprises hundreds of negatives (and a few prints) depicting the daily life of three generations of women as it unfolded in and around their small house in the Latvian countryside. Most of these images had not been exhibited at the time of their making, and those that were had been met with rejection and ridicule. What was shocking for Dzividzinska's mostly male peers in the field of photography was the fact that women in her images do not present themselves as »pretty«—as objects for the visual pleasure for a heterosexual male spectator, as was common in the photographic art of the 1960s. Instead, they appear as self-sufficient individuals, preoccupied with their chores and not performing for the camera at all.[4]

Today, most of Dzividzinska's images can be thought of as artistic gestures or statements with zero likely spectators at the time of their making. Photographic art, as it was understood in the Soviet Latvia of the 1960s, was not supposed to look like this. There was no institutional framework or intellectual context in which a young woman from Riga could exhibit such images and expect to be appreciated.

Nevertheless, Dzividzinska continued independently working with photography for approximately a decade, intrigued and excited by the possibilities of the medium to both capture and defamiliarize the visible reality. Arguably, the excitement faded away when she faced the need to prioritize paid work over creative experiments. In 1969, she married painter Juris Tifentals (1944–2001) and became the sole breadwinner of the family. Tifentals was a radical nonconformist who soon chose the path of a recluse, not only rejecting any employment possibilities but severing all ties with the art world and society in general, except his mother and a few friends. He spent the rest of his life in Dzividzinska's parents' house in Iecava where he continued his artistic practice, tended the garden, and collected history, philosophy, and art books. Meanwhile, Dzividzinska chose a relatively mundane, but at least more secure career at the margins of the art world—that of a graphic designer at the state-owned company Māksla (Art), where she worked from 1967 until the company's dissolution in 1993.

Interrupting the sentence

Focusing more and more on the graphic design work that paid the bills, by the early 1970s Dzividzinska completely abandoned her creative practice in photography. She put all her negatives, prints, exhibition catalogues, books, equipment, photo magazines, and everything else photo-related away in the attic of the Iecava house where they stayed untouched until the late 1990s.

At that time, during one of his research trips to Latvia, art historian Mark Allen Svede selected a collection of Dzividzinska's prints for the Norton and Nancy Dodge Collection of Soviet Nonconformist Art which currently is housed at the Zimmerli Art Museum at Rutgers University. At approximately the same time, the curator and art historian Inga Šteimane encouraged Dzividzinska to organize what became the artist's second solo show since 1965, an exhibition of her work from the 1960s entitled *Black and White* in Riga in 1999.

4 See Inga Šteimane, »Version of Time Machine,« in: *Black and White*, by Zenta Dzividzinska (Riga: Čiris, 1999), n.p.; and Inga Šteimane, »Autobiográfiskā arheoloģija,« *Studija* 9, no. 4 (1999): 100–105.

Interaction with Svede and Šteimane convinced Dzividzinska to revisit her archive more thoroughly. This revisiting resulted in her third solo show, *I Don't Remember a Thing* (2005) and an eponymous photobook (2007).[5] Although the exhibition and book received formally positive reviews in the local art press, they did not bring a notable change in the general attitude toward her work. The public as well as a large part of the art world still regarded Dzividzinska's images (and by implication also the people depicted in these images) as »not pretty«—that is, as unsightly, unattractive, and ridiculous.

Although Dzividzinska had revised part of her archive in the 2000s while working on photobook *I Don't Remember a Thing*, at the time of her passing in 2011 the exact content of her estate was unknown. No systematic research had ever taken place, and such neglect has several reasons. First, until recently, Dzividzinska's work was not considered »art« at all because the Soviet professional art world did not accept photography as a legitimate art medium. All creative pursuits in photography retained the lowly status of hobby and amateurism.Thus, in the eyes of the society, Dzividzinska was not even a »real« artist. This perception, sadly, did not change after Latvia regained independence in 1991 and the art world took up a seemingly more liberal position.

Second, she was not perceived as a »real« photographer either: reminiscent of what sociologist Pierre Bourdieu observed in France during the 1960s, the cultural status of photographers also in the Soviet Union was measured by the cultural status of their subjects.[6] As opposed to well-known artists, actors, and other public figures and celebrities of her time, Dzividzinska chose publicly unknown individuals as her protagonists, such as her mother, her sister and nieces, and her art school friends. For this reason, she did not rank as a notable or respectable photographer to her peers, and her creative work was perceived to have little-to-no cultural value. This attitude also did not change much after 1991.

Finally, most of her images remained unseen by anyone at the time of their making also because making prints required an investment of time, labor, and money, all of which were in short supply. Dzividzinska developed most of her film and printed most of her images in a makeshift darkroom in the Iecava house kitchen, on a time borrowed from art school and work. Until the mid 1970s, she continued to take photographs and develop film on a regular basis, and most of the time even make contact prints. But only a few works exist as proper »exhibition-size« prints (c. 30×40 cm), while most images are printed as small test prints (c. 10×15 cm), and hundreds of frames had not been printed at all.

Reading the sentence

Thun's exhibition *I Don't Remember a Thing: Entering the Elusive Estate of ZDZ* made visible the photographer's labor as well as gradually revealed the products of this labor as they materialized over time. Two large metallic panels dominated the opposite walls of the gallery's largest space. On the day of the opening, they were empty. Taking time to work in the darkroom, Thun began to cover the panels by fresh prints, attaching them to the metallic surface with her signature system of elegantly minimalistic magnets.

It is significant that the very first images that Thun chose to print were from a roll of film containing Dzividzinska's self-portraits in a studio setting where she held a temporary job at the time. Dzividzinska herself had printed only a few select shots from that film, but Thun printed all frames, including all »failures« or »unsuccessful« shots along the way, thus providing an insight into the artist's creative process and her sense of humor in relation to both the photographic medium and her self-image.

For Dzividzinska, her photographs did not need to be »pretty«—even when her subject matter was herself. Looking at her *Self-Portrait* (1968), Svede observes »an artist too bemused by self-portraiture's potential for self-aggrandizement to even bother sitting up straight or addressing the camera.«[7] Dzividzinska's self-portraits, predating the subgenre of self-portraiture known as the selfie by some forty-five years or more, subvert the idea of performative presentation of an idealized, marketable self. Instead, they offer visually intriguing, unusual renderings of the artist's face

5 Zenta Dzividzinska, *I Don't Remember a Thing. Photographs 1964–2005* (Riga: Artist's Union of Latvia, 2007).
6 See Pierre Bourdieu et al., *Photography: A Middle-Brow Art*, trans. Shaun Whiteside (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990), first published in French as *Un art moyen: essai sur les usages sociaux de la photographie* (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1965).

and body, employing photographic and optic means such as fish-eye lenses or distorting reflections. That these renderings can appear to be unflattering is simply a sign that the viewer is reading the images using a completely different visual dictionary than the artist.

Completing the sentence

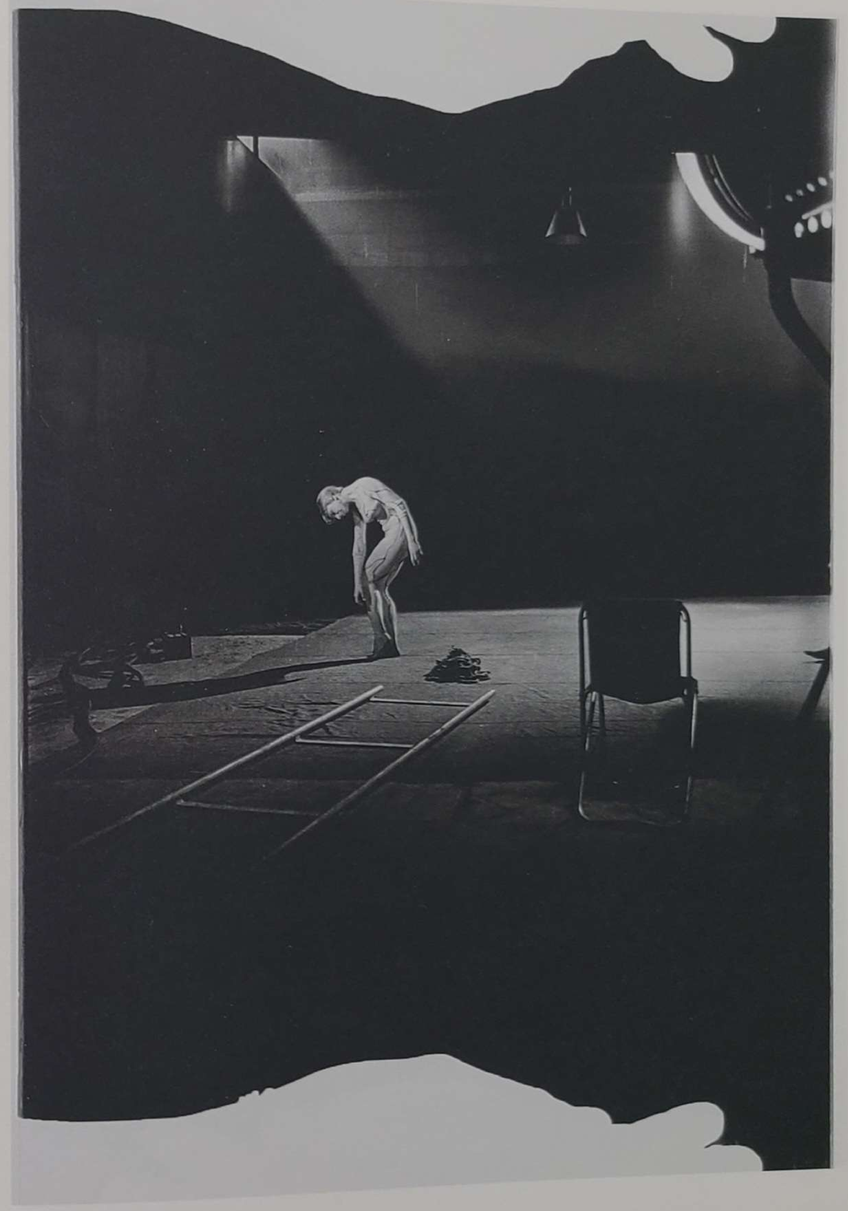
Today, we cannot possibly know what Dzividzinska herself would have thought about someone else printing and exhibiting these self-portraits and other images from the days of her youth now. However, I would like to think that she would find it exhilarating that now, in the early 2020s, another artist who is attempting to complete the sentence that she began to speak in the late 1960s. Time collapses in this process, as Thun puts it: »Some of the negatives have stains, some have marks of the storage. The passing of time from the moment she took the images to now will also be visible, which is also interesting, for me. […] In this work, if I inscribe myself into the prints, it's at the same time a piece which was made in 1960 and in 2021.«[8]

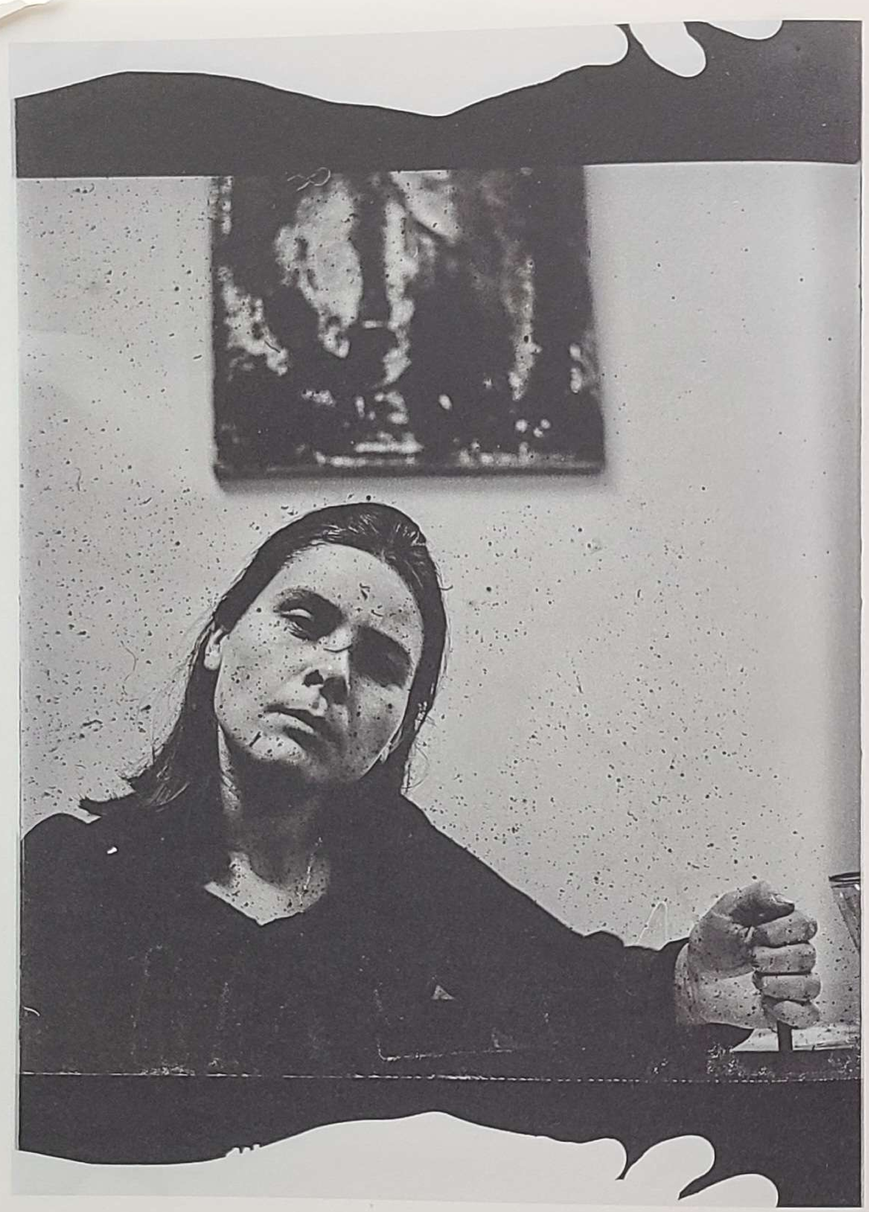
Thun continues to use Dzividzinska's images in her subsequent projects thus raising awareness of her work. For example, Thun included works based on Dzividzinska's images in her solo exhibitions *Merge Layers* at the gallery SOPHIE TAPPEINER in Vienna (January 14 to February 26, 2022) and *Trails and Tributes* at the Kunstverein Hildesheim (May 8 to July 17, 2022) as well as publications such as Thun's photo essay *With Zenta* published in 20 Seconds magazine (issue 5, 2022, coauthored by Līga Goldberga). Installation shots from the exhibition in Kim? Contemporary Art Center and some interpretations of Dzividzinska's self-portraits from there are included in the photobook *Sophie Thun*, published in the Phileas *First Monographs* series (Berlin: Distanz, 2022).

Following Thun's exhibition, the largest part of Dzividzinska's archive (mostly negatives and papers) found a permanent home at the Latvian National Library that will preserve it and make available to future researchers under the supervision of Goldberga. Latvian National Museum of Art had already purchased some prints by Dzividzinska earlier, and after the exhibition the museum received a significant collection of vintage prints as a gift from the artist's family.

In general, Thun's engagement with images from Dzividzinska's archive has created an evolving space for much needed, caring conversations—including conversations about the visibility of overlooked and forgotten women photographers' work and the cultural status of experimental photography as well as the possible meanings of collaboration, appropriation, and interpretation.

7 Mark Allen Svede, »On the Verge of Snapping: Latvian Nonconformist Artists and Photography,« in: *Beyond Memory: Soviet Nonconformist Photography and Photo-Related Works of Art*, ed. Diane Neumaier (New Brunswick, NJ, and London: Jane Voorhees Zimmerli Art Museum and Rutgers University Press, 2004), 237.
8 Elīna Ruka, »Giving Thanks to the Past. Interview with Zane Onckule and Sophie Thun«, in: *FK Magazine*, July 27, 2021, https://fkmagazine.lv/2021/07/27/giving-thanks-to-the-past-interview-with-zane-onckule-and-sophie-thun/.





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Christin Müller is majored in cultural studies, works as a freelance curator and author with a focus on photography and lives in Leipzig. She takes care of exhibitions of the Wüstenrot Foundation's Awards for Documentary Photography, among other projects, is assistant of the collector Thomas Walther and has been lecturer at the Universities of Leipzig and Hildesheim as well as the University of Applied Sciences and Arts Hannover.

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