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**EDITED BY
LUCIA PATRIZIO GUNNING
AND PAOLA RIZZI**

**INVISIBLE
RECONSTRUCTION**

**CROSS-DISCIPLINARY RESPONSES
TO NATURAL, BIOLOGICAL AND
MAN-MADE DISASTERS**

UCLPRESS

FRINGE

Series Editors

Alena Ledeneva and Peter Zusi, School of Slavonic
and East European Studies, UCL

The FRINGE series explores the roles that complexity, ambivalence and immeasurability play in social and cultural phenomena. A cross-disciplinary initiative bringing together researchers from the humanities, social sciences and area studies, the series examines how seemingly opposed notions such as centrality and marginality, clarity and ambiguity, can shift and converge when embedded in everyday practices.

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Invisible Reconstruction

*Cross-disciplinary responses to natural,
biological and man-made disasters*

Edited by

Lucia Patrizio Gunning and Paola Rizzi

 **UCL**PRESS

First published in 2022 by
UCL Press
University College London
Gower Street
London WC1E 6BT

Available to download free: www.uclpress.co.uk

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A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from The British Library.



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Gunning, L. P., and Rizzi, P. (eds). 2022. *Invisible Reconstruction: Cross-disciplinary responses to natural, biological and man-made disasters*. London: UCL Press.
<https://doi.org/10.14324/111.781800083493>

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ISBN: 978-1-80008-351-6 (Hbk.)
ISBN: 978-1-80008-350-9 (Pbk.)
ISBN: 978-1-80008-349-3 (PDF)
ISBN: 978-1-80008-352-3 (epub)
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.14324/111.9781800083493>

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Heritage assets, fairs and museums Places of encounter and presence in times of pandemic

Alessandra De Nicola, Piero Magri and
Franca Zuccoli¹

Since February 2020, our everyday habits have undergone a process of radical change. Initial news stories from China about the COVID-19 outbreak seemed far removed, and this perception of distance made us feel safe. However, as time went on, the situation evolved into an unstoppable crescendo that has ultimately impacted all aspects of billions of lives. Everything came to a halt: work, school, culture ... to be progressively restored via the only viable strategy available: the deployment of distance modes of delivery. As the emergency escalated, governments around the world identified different levels of response. Social isolation arrangements meant that people would be confined to their homes for an unquantifiable length of time. Many parts of the cultural sector were particularly and severely affected by the lockdown, given that they are usually perceived as the places of encounter and exchange par excellence. Some workers were offered temporary unemployment relief, while others had their contracts put on hold. Cultural institutions began to redefine themselves and reprogramme the immediate future, choosing between suspending their activities while waiting, and working to identify the most appropriate means by which they could remain active at a distance. They set out to invisibly heal a breach perceived as irreparable, via a process that saw each individual cultural operator seeking to establish new expressions of the notion of sustainability, as evoked in *Agenda 2030*.² This document, produced by the United Nations in 2015,³ called for all actors, collective and individual, to pursue change in the form of 17 sustainable development

goals. It offered a guide to determining what was truly sustainable, necessary and meaningful at this time of uncertainty, as well as to revisiting existing prospects and plans – *Agenda 2030* suddenly took on new relevance. Cultural institutions were now faced with a novel challenge to their priority status as public services. The extraordinary time of the pandemic forced us to pause and consider the importance of such places as open spaces of exchange that are part of, and facilitate the construction of, our collective identity. Here, in the dual role of organisers and citizens who missed the cultural interaction with museums, we examine the case of *Fa' la cosa giusta!* (Do the right thing!)⁴ – an event on the themes of critical consumption and fair trade. This example is compared to other international initiatives, to reveal how, in a moment when it became impossible for people to visit museums, museums took themselves to the people.

In recent years, *Fa' la cosa giusta!* has encouraged the participation of museums and cultural heritage sites with a view to jointly exploring an alternative approach to the cultural experience, as well as slow, sustainable forms of tourism, and rendering culture more participatory. Here we present a chronological account of the steps that led to this event being cancelled and reprogrammed on an entirely different basis as a result of the COVID emergency. Its example provides a starting point for examining the strategies adopted by some of the participating museums to engage their communities during the lockdown and the early phases of recovery in 2021. International examples of cultural initiatives launched during the public health emergency are also analysed, to understand the different strategies adopted and their longer-term implications.

Fa' la cosa giusta!

A fair as a place for a live encounter

On Saturday 22 February 2020, almost all the preparations were in place for a fair that was to host 700 exhibitors and 518 events, including conferences, debates and workshops; 3,600 students, from kindergarten through secondary school, were ready to take part in tours guided by a hundred students on work experience; and 300 volunteers were ready to assist the expected 70,000 visitors. The 17th edition of *Fa' la cosa giusta!* – Italy's leading fair on critical consumption and sustainable lifestyles – was scheduled to take place in the 32,000 m² of Milan's exhibition centre, Fieramilanocity, from 6–8 March 2020.

Fa' la cosa giusta! was launched in 2004 by the publishing house Terre di mezzo, itself founded to tell the story of the 'in-between lands where all people meet,⁵ where the social, beautiful, and ugly dimensions of our world all come together, where fragility has become, and goes on becoming, a resource'. With the aim of disseminating 'good practices' and showcasing examples of ethical and sustainable consumption and production, the fair is organised in collaboration with the local government, associations and businesses. A place of encounter and dialogue between exponents of organic farming, critical fashion, responsible tourism, cooperation, sustainable mobility and circular economies, it promotes a contemporary lifestyle that lays the ground for a sustainable future. It represents a responsible way of doing business: organising our purchases, conceptualising work and using our planet's resources, while generating new connections and opportunities and thereby creating a new culture.

It is a melting-pot of encounters and initiatives, a breeding ground of ideas: La Grande Fabbrica delle Parole (the great word factory), a creative writing laboratory for primary and middle school children, has seen over 10,000 children participate over the course of 10 fairs; FuoriCastello (outside the castle) has brought the suburbs into Milan's Castello Sforzesco; Scuola delle buone pratiche (school of good practice) offers local administrators a place to learn and share innovative administrative practices. SFIDE – La scuola di tutti (challenges – a school for everybody) helps schools to become more inclusive, play a leadership role in their communities and participate actively in disseminating culture. In 2019, SFIDE addressed the theme of museum heritage. Schools visiting the exhibition had the opportunity to learn about recent research and innovation projects in museums.

The themes of the 2020 event were the environment, justice and sustainability. A special space had been reserved for museums to narrate their projects. The seminar 'What does sustainability mean for museums? Past experience, ideas and future prospects', had been jointly organised by the Lombardy regional government, Milano-Bicocca University and ICOM-International Council of Museums Italy.

On Sunday 23 February, due to the COVID-19 emergency, the regional government issued an order mandating the cancellation of exhibitions. The fair was rescheduled for November. The emergency began to be seen as an opportunity to 'reconceptualise' the event, in case nothing could ever go back to being exactly as it was before COVID-19.

The starting point was the fair's objectives: 'narrating ethical consumption and production practices, offering knowledge about

sustainable lifestyles, creating a space of encounter to give life to new projects'. In parallel, we wanted to apply what had been learnt from a three-month period of home confinement, especially the need to build alliances to overcome the effect of the virus. We concluded that it would be possible to deploy an alternative set of means of narration, all of which remain intricately connected and interdependent:

- A cultural programme beginning well in advance of the dates of the fair and continuing long after, in spaces other than the exhibition centre and involving the exhibition's partners, including museums, in different districts around the city. This would have the advantage of spreading the narrative of the fair over a longer timeframe, and of bringing additional visitors to the museums. The museums would have the opportunity to run the activities they had originally planned, albeit with the additional health and safety measures required because of COVID-19. These encounters could be held in part or entirely online, making it possible to participate from anywhere in the world, and enabling far larger audiences to be reached.
- A live fair hosting a limited number of preregistered visitors, offering thematic tours based on visitors' interests – including the environment, critical fashion, ethical tourism and 'resistant communities' (such as small villages and small enterprises in inland areas) – with the opportunity to meet exhibitors in person and purchase products already presented.

The museums involved in the fair's cultural programme

In the months leading up to the fair, the organisers, along with a team from the Department of Human Sciences and Education at Milano-Bicocca University and representatives of the cultural department of the Lombardy Region had issued an official call to museums to apply to take part in the fair. The purpose was not just to make museums known to a wider audience, but to showcase projects that were in keeping with the fair's theme for 2020: 'Museum projects promoting slow, participatory, sustainable, and inclusive tourism'. In other words, a 'slow' time was to be dedicated to museum heritage, which would contrast with the frenetic pace that has become the everyday norm, offering an opportunity to consume heritage in a way that is participatory, sustainable and truly

inclusive. Different types of museum applied to take part, ranging from the Museum of Contemporary Photography in Cinisello Balsamo⁶ to museum networks such as the Museums of the Diocese of Como;⁷ from museums linked to landscape heritage, such as the Lombard side of Lake Maggiore, designated as a MAB (Man and the Biosphere) reserve by UNESCO,⁸ to museums about the lives of artists and/or craftsmen and other traditional occupations that are now close to extinction, such as the Casa Museo Pietro Malossi;⁹ museums that are the homes of famous collectors, such as the Museo Poldi Pezzoli¹⁰ and Museo Bagatti Valsecchi;¹¹ and even natural science museums such as Civico Museo di Scienze Naturali 'G. Orlandi'.¹² The institutions involved were invited to participate in three preparatory meetings that were characterised by a high level of combined expertise, with the goal of involving and including all segments of the population. Each of the museums asked themselves how they could continue to actively contribute to the social and cultural life of their community. With all regular activity suspended, all those with a professional role in the cultural heritage sector were faced with the question of what they could do instead, with what purpose and meaning, and by what means. The museum closures were so generalised that the only parallel in recent history is the Second World War period. Nevertheless, soon after the initial lockdown, the first signs of an invisible 'reconstruction' of this sector began to appear, and the production of digital materials of various kinds grew steadily day after day. In the words of Claudio Rosati:

Museums had never been closed down like this since the Second World War and never had they projected their contents outwards on such a vast scale ... They say that museums are more oriented towards broadcasting than towards exploring the potential for authentic interaction with their audiences. But the most important thing, right now, is the sense of public service that they are displaying in this way. They are in any case offering a useful starting point for a future that will certainly be challenging for museums. The highest quality offerings have mainly come from institutions that historically, in their everyday practice, from their reception area to their exhibition rooms, concretely prioritized the relationship between people [visitors] and collection.¹³

Interestingly, the key themes originally chosen for the event in 2020 re-emerged as predominant. Museums that had already prioritised the needs of their audiences in presenting their heritage assets and collections,

in designing their offerings and deciding what to do and how to do it, continued their efforts to keep their relationship with the public alive and value the voices of their audiences. As an example, GAMEC, the Gallery of Modern and Contemporary Art in Bergamo, one of the Italian cities most seriously affected by COVID-19, implemented a bold strategy designed to make its presence visible despite the lockdown, deploying innovative techniques¹⁴ to remain in contact with its audience and to reach segments of the population who had never visited the museum prior to the public health emergency. The 'DNA' of these museums, in terms of their determination to be in touch with their audiences despite the emergency, was remarkable. In contrast, when the desire to remain active and visible was essentially a marketing strategy, museums tended to produce products that were not designed to invite audiences' reactions and interpretations, rather to be consumed via a single click.

From presence to distance

A brief overview of museum offerings during the first waves of the pandemic (2019–20)

Through an exploration of how museums can be a social resource, a node in a network of relationships, engage in activism and function as educational agencies,¹⁵ this chapter aims to show how the #quarantineculture phenomenon has accelerated a process that was already underway.¹⁶

Museums deployed diverse strategies to remain in touch with communities, leading to the development of new forms of mediation. In the uncertainty surrounding the pandemic, they sought to keep culture alive by producing new content or offering safe means for audiences to discover or rediscover, in digital form, cultural heritage assets that are geographically both close and distant. This mirrored a pattern already observed during emergencies such as environmental disasters or brutal acts of terrorism, where heritage assets serve as key identity markers for communities actively seeking to re-establish their identities. It is at times of crisis such as these that the public perceives assets held in museums as a key resource, with the power to reinforce the local community.¹⁷

Given the unprecedented scale and diversity of the digital cultural content produced during the emergency, this section attempts an analysis of the aspects that are most salient to our purposes. The rich variety of

output was facilitated by the fact that the cultural sector was more prepared than others, as it had been engaging for some time with the themes that came to the fore during the social isolation phase of the emergency. Digital technologies, physical versus virtual, the educational value of digital surrogates,¹⁸ fixed versus mobile locations, open versus closed systems¹⁹ and the space in which cultural products are consumed had long been the object of reflection and study.

We have been witnessing what Nancy Proctor, in different times and with different aims, defined as the transition from the ‘distributed museum’²⁰ to the ‘museum of everywhere’.²¹ To keep their communities alive, museums have used formal channels of communication and social media to become creative platforms designed to inspire and encourage critical and participatory dialogue. Many institutions have published videos on their YouTube channels offering walk-throughs of their museums and explanations of the most important works in their collections. In parallel, museums have made their presence felt in other ways, albeit mainly in offline mode. For some, it has been challenging to produce livestreamed events due to a lack of expertise in managing live broadcasts and a lack of funding. Offering workshops is costly and a number of organisations, such as GAMEC in Bergamo, Italy, and looking afar, the Detroit Institute of Arts (DIA), Kalamazoo Institute of Arts (KIA) and others in the US, partly covered this expense by charging a participation fee.

Some galleries have made their most unique pieces available for consumption. The Broad in Los Angeles put together a series of YouTube videos offering a close-up look at the material masterpieces in its *Infinity Mirror Rooms* by Yayoi Kusama, coupled with music to provide a more deeply immersive, multisensory experience.²²

The Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA) rebranded its website to include a virtual tour, soundtracks and live recordings, and online teaching resources. Its gaming initiative entailed working with Minecraft, the Microsoft video game, to develop the theme of the museum’s spaces and exhibits. M9 Museo, an Italian multimedia museum, leveraged its experience in the field of distance learning by offering its partner schools access to educational video games taking advantage of free licences offered by Microsoft for teachers during the emergency. At LACMA, the virtual reconstruction of the museum’s spaces had already been developed, making it possible to quickly provide educational games set in the various sections of the museum on the themes of landscape, travel, identity and robotics.

Art in the age of new normal was the title of a webinar, jointly organised by three Michigan museums – DIA, KIA and Grand Rapids Art Museum (GRAM) – which had each identified different means and methods of accompanying their audiences throughout the pandemic. The DIA offered a programme called Access to art online,²³ a music programme via SoundCloud and a catalogue of educational offerings divided into units, lesson plans and self-guided materials for families, teachers and young learners (as did other major museums, such as the National Gallery of Art in Washington, the Met in New York, and the Tate in London). Another key project launched by the DIA targeted older adults,²⁴ with the aim of keeping senior citizens learning, exploring and connecting with the institute.

The National Gallery Singapore is a case that invites reflection on the different timescales observed during the lockdown. Invited by the government to support educators, this museum introduced an experimental blended learning programme that combined online resources with on-site visits and targeted the families of 4- to 12-year-old children with a view to fostering more creative approaches to everyday life. Virtual tours replaced on-site visits with ready-to-use teaching packs – discussion guides were sent to schools so that children could continue to benefit from the museum’s educational offerings via distance-learning modes. The museum became a platform for diverse and accessible education in which artists became a resource and art a means of coping with mixed emotions. Putting itself forward as a place with a responsible, care-oriented ethos, the museum has been hosting a biweekly online interview with an artist on the themes of wellbeing and creativity as tools for coping with the emergency.²⁵

Institutions with limited resources have tried to take advantage of their accumulated learning experience by digitalising it. The Botanic Gardens Network in the Italian Lombardy region used its tried-and-tested educational materials to design online encounters to be offered to schools to support their regular teaching–learning activities. A similar strategy was pursued by the MUVE Fondazione Musei Civici di Venezia network of museums in Venice, through a newsletter offering both educational and play activities to regular visitors and the Chinati Foundation in Marfa, Texas, created a set of stories about the works in its collection.²⁶

This has been a period rich in events that have had a significant impact on communities around the world. The global movement in support of Black Lives Matter also found its expression online, through posting a black square on Instagram or publishing messages of solidarity on social media platforms. Also in this case, museums have played an

activist role, as seen at the Brooklyn Museum of New York, whose bonds with the local community and African-American culture go back to its founding and are part of its mission.²⁷ The museum interviewed its audience to explore their needs and found that the hunger some community members were experiencing was more physical than intellectual. In response, it became a hub mobilising its sponsors and organising a system for serving healthy meals in the open spaces adjacent the building. Museums have also taken an activist stand for minority rights and acted in support of local communities. New York's Cooper Hewitt Smithsonian Design Museum intercepted the voices of audiences via its website.²⁸ The section entitled 'A message to our community' offers a rich range of resources and tools for teachers, families and the general public that are both specific to the pandemic and in addressing perceived social and racial intolerance. Finally, it is worth citing one of the initiatives launched by GAMeC in Bergamo. The project²⁹ 'Non recidere, forbice, quel volto' ('O scissors, do not cut that face') embodies the significance of education based on art, beginning with the project title, which is a verse by the Italian poet Eugenio Montale. GAMeC launched a cycle of free workshops on creating memory and narrating identity as a means of processing the city's collective experience of the COVID-19 crisis. With the input of mediators from the charitable organisation Caritas,³⁰ creative and artistic work became a secular rite with cathartic value. This had necessarily to be performed in the museum, the place par excellence where action transcends use and becomes a memory with the capacity to survive into the future.

Conclusions

The article: 'People trust museums more than newspapers. Here is why that matters right now'³¹ published in 2017 by Colleen Dilenschneider, referred to the role of museums vis-à-vis the abundance of fake news found on the internet. The statistics it reported help us to understand the role of museums during the #quarantineculture. They show that the public health crisis has forced the acceleration of a process that was already underway and resulted in the even speedier adoption of new paradigms. Dilenschneider set out to show that people trust museums as custodians of culture because of their scientific credibility, research activity, mediation of collections, educational outreach and provision of entertainment, as well as their engagement with audiences in promoting active citizenship and social cohesion, and thereby reinforcing the

identity of their local communities. The Guide edited by the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and the International Council of Museums (ICOM)³² supports our view that the organisations, whose mandate it is to conserve cultural heritage, have extraordinary potential to function as invisible (re)builders of communities, thanks to their emphasis on sustainable and integrated development. In such an uncertain time, the leading sustainable priority has become seeking to minimise new forms of social exclusion, which are almost always a function of economic factors, with a focus on the environment. For museums, one of the greatest challenges in this regard is clearly identifying ways to support the communities around them, and to further reinforce their cultural role as constructors and facilitators of awareness and knowledge in relation to the current emergency. Access to a computer and a good internet connection alone are enough to support a wide range of formats, including webinars, performances, meetings, posts, podcasts and radio art. Museums have used formal channels of communication, but more frequently social media, to become creative platforms that are designed to inspire and encourage critical and participatory dialogue, and most importantly, to keep their communities alive. From the examples given, it is possible to say that during the lockdown museums showed that they are prepared to take up a role as changemakers with respect to individual behaviours and collective decision-making from an independent position that is neutral vis-à-vis political factionalism. In short, we have witnessed the realisation of what, in 2015, Elizabeth Crooke identified as a challenge: the realisation of the 'active museum'. The museum that, in close relationship with its community, understands its needs and produces actions and content collaboratively. In this new context, the audience is no longer the end user, but has become part of the process.³³

Against this backdrop, our fair on sustainable consumption, facilitating a new mode of community building, appears to be a particularly farsighted initiative. Hence, looking back today at the major debate surrounding ICOM's efforts to come up with a new definition of what a museum actually is, we can see that initiatives made by museums to 'operate within a system of relations at the service of society and its sustainable development', are merely first steps toward a new interpretation of their role. The changes imposed by the pandemic have made this fundamental role much more evident.

Notes

- 1 This paper was jointly planned by all the authors but the writing up of the various sections was divided between them as follows: Alessandra De Nicola: Abstract, section *From presence to distance*, Conclusion; Piero Magri: Abstract, section *Fa' la cosa giusta!*; Franca Zuccoli: Abstract, Introduction, section *The museums involved in the cultural programme*.
- 2 This Agenda is a United Nation plan of action for people, planet and prosperity. It also seeks to strengthen universal peace in larger freedom. Accessed 14 June 2022. <https://sdgs.un.org/publications/transforming-our-world-2030-agenda-sustainable-development-17981>
- 3 United Nations, 'Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development', 2015.
- 4 Fa'la cosa giusta! Accessed 14 June 2022 <https://www.falacosagiusta.org>
- 5 Terre di mezzo. Accessed 14 June 2022 <https://www.terre.it/en/>
- 6 It is the first public museum of photography in Italy. The mission is the conservation, cataloguing, study and promotion of photography, with a particular focus on the relationship between photography and other arts and the current technological transformations.
- 7 Accessed 14 June 2022 <http://cultura.diocesidicomo.it>
- 8 'The MAB is an intergovernmental scientific programme that aims to establish a scientific basis for enhancing the relationship between people and their environments.'
- 9 The museum hosts the collections left by the Brescian antiquarian Pietro Malossi.
- 10 The house-museum, opened in 1881 in Milano from the collection of Gian Giacomo Poldi Pezzoli.
- 11 A historic house museum that is the fruit of the collection of Barons Bagatti Valsecchi at the end of the nineteenth century.
- 12 The exhibits are dedicated to naturalistic and archaeological aspects of the Voghera and Oltrepadano (North of Italy) area.
- 13 Rosati, 'Musei dopo il corona virus', 2020, 4.
- 14 Colombo, *Musei e cultura digitale. Fra narrativa, pratiche e testimonianze*, 2020.
- 15 On this widely researched topic, we propose the recent reading Delgado, Cuenca, *Handbook of Research on Citizenship and Heritage Education*, 2020.
- 16 Copeland, *European democratic citizenship, heritage education and identity*, 2006.
- 17 De Nicola, 'Scommettere sul pubblico. Arte e Scienza. Quando non è bello ciò che è bello, ma è bello ciò che capisco', 2016.
- 18 Rhee, 'Mediation between digital surrogates and viewers based on the technology acceptance model', 2018.
- 19 Bautista & Balsamo, 'Understanding the distributed museum: Mapping the spaces of museology in contemporary culture', 2011.
- 20 Dewdeney et al., *Post critical museology. Theory and practice in the art museum*, 2013.
- 21 Proctor 'Mobile in Museums: From Interpretation to Conversation', 2015.
- 22 This project is no longer available online: <https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLmqI00MJ9v8XNKKBKsVlnMmn7DG-iVjQM>
- 23 Accessed 14 June 2022 <https://www.dia.org/art/collection>
- 24 DIA project targeted older adults. Accessed 14 June 2022 <https://www.dia.org/thursdaysathome>
- 25 Webinar "Musei, Famiglie e Bambini verso un Futuro Insieme: accessed 14 June 2022 <https://bit.ly/lilliputyoutube>
- 26 At the beginning of the pandemic, Chinati education initiated a series of online learning programmes, producing four distinct virtual curriculums.
- 27 'Our Mission: To create inspiring encounters with art that expand the ways we see ourselves, the world and its possibilities. Our Vision: Where great art and courageous conversations are catalysts for a more connected, civic, and empathetic world.'
- 28 'A message to our community' <https://www.cooperhewitt.org/2020/06/04/a-message-to-our-community/>
- 29 The project *Non recidere, forbice, quel volto* <https://www.gamec.it/non-recidere-forbice-quel-volto/>
- 30 Caritas is the pastoral body of the Italian Episcopal Conference for the promotion of charity; Caritas Bergamo operates in the field of education and promotion of culture, charity, protection of civil rights and social and sociomedical assistance.

- 31 Dilenschneider, 'People Trust Museums More Than Newspapers. Here Is Why That Matters Right Now (DATA)', 2017.
- 32 OECD/ ICOM, 'Culture and local development: maximising the impact: A guide for local governments, communities and museums', 2019
- 33 Crooke, 'The 'Active Museum': How Concern with Community Transformed the Museum', 2015.

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