New age radicalism and the social imagination: welfare state international in the seventies

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‘New Age’ radicalism and the social imagination: Welfare State International in the Seventies

Introduction: aesthetic, visceral and political

Lancelot Quail, Britain’s new folk hero (a working-class hermaphrodite strong man) was presumed lost on Her Majesty’s submarine Andrew…after following a mermaid on a ley line trail across SW England last September. Lancelot Quail is living on a rubbish tip in NW Lancs. Rebuffed by the Department of the Environment, he is trapped in a labyrinth, but is constructing home-made wings and an elaborate radio telescope. Although Lancelot has lost the mermaid for ever, he is still seeking Beauty. The Beast and the Winter Tree King are hunting him down, but with luck on Spring Bank Holiday Monday, he will escape in one time or another. 1

In 1973, Welfare State International (WSI), a nomadic collective of artists, musicians, poets, performers and engineers, set up their touring caravans and lorries on a reclaimed rubbish tip at Heasandford quarry in Burnley in Lancashire. They ended up staying five years as part of Mid Pennine Association for the Arts’ (MPA) innovative community programme which included people such as the social-documentary photographer Daniel Meadows who toured England in his Free Photographic Omnibus from 1973-74. 2 In one of their first performances, *Beauty and The Beast*, WSI created a labyrinthine junk environment through which the audience were invited to roam. MPA’s press release of the time made no attempt to hide the incongruities of locating this *New Age* vision amidst the industrial dystopia of Lancashire,

On a plateau above a polluted river skirting green houses, allotments, new factories and NCB sludge, the Welfare State settlement – a cross between a Bolivian tinmine, TS Eliot’s ‘wasteland’ and an Inca stilt village – is growing and extended through scarecrows, subterranean tunnels and living vans decorated with mythical paintings of *Beauty and the Beast*. 3

Emerging from the radical politics and culture of 1968, WSI was largely the creative project of its founder and artistic director, John Fox, then a lecturer-librarian at Bradford College of Art. The collective’s adopted name, Welfare State, represented their dedication to “the assistance of the national imagination rather than agitprop.” 4 With their commitment to the need for ceremony and theatrical celebration in everydaylife, they were part of a range of alternative experimental UK-based performance practices in the 1970s which included groups such as the Yorkshire Gnomes, John Bull Puncture Repair Kit and the People Show. Active for almost forty years, WSI was particularly important, however, because they pioneered the idea of temporary *site-specific* multi-media performance, celebratory feasting and new forms of processional art using fire, ice, sound and light as raw materials for transient installations and events.

As Tony Coult commented in 1976,

…in many ways, Welfare State are the most daring of the Alternative Theatre companies because they are in the business of yoking together the aesthetic and visceral nature of theatre with a developing political analysis and at the same time of making that powerful conjunction available to people who have no interest in theatres or plays. 5

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2 See Daniel Meadows, *Living Like This - Around Britain In The Seventies* (1975) and *How We Are, Photographing Britain*, Tate Britain, 2007.
3 Mid Pennine Association for the Arts, press release, March 1973
5 Tony Coult in *Plays and Players*, (May 1976), 20-23.
Over the decades, they made community films such as *King Real and the Hoodlums* (1983) and created large-scale pyrotechnic spectacles such as *Parliament in Flames*, ran educational workshops and engaged with ordinary people on housing estates, in workplaces and schools.

This paper is part of a major research project which will explore the legacies and networks of influence of WSI’s extensive activities. That aims to situate their practices within the context of recent communitarian discourses, a post-politics ethical turn and the focus on participation, collaboration and collectives which emerged as key critical debates in the 1990s. The writings of Nicholas Bourriaud, Grant Kester and Claire Bishop ⁶ on issues to do with participation, in conjunction with the ideas of Jacques Rancière, Giorgio Agamben and Jean-Luc Nancy ⁷ on politics, aesthetics and community, offer significant insights for re-framing WSI, which continued to develop alternative models of participative art amongst a diverse range of communities and international locations.

Here though, I specifically want to examine the radicalism of WSI’s practices and artforms and, specifically if tentatively, consider some of the social, political and cultural questions raised by their artistic residency in Burnley between 1973 and 1978. How did WSI’s participative events operate with and within communities? What were (and are) the aesthetic, ethical, political and social aspects and implications of such collaborative practices? Did WSI’s ephemeral performances and events acquire a place in the social imagination and cultural memory? Indeed, how, if at all, was WSI an agent of radical social and political transformation – how did they effect and affect social and cultural relations? Where was the political located? What—if anything—was radical about it?

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1968 and the Seventies

WSI was founded in 1968, a moment currently undergoing reassessment, forty years on. The significance of 1968 sits uneasily in the popular imagination, bound by myth and cliché yet profoundly marked by liberationary discourses and revolutionary politics. Kristin Ross has iterated the “moment” of May 1968 as a “discursive and syntactic jumble” which has come to incorporate “everything and therefore nothing”. Ross discusses sociological interpretations of May 1968 which verge on the tautological: answering the charge that “nothing happened”, she comments that “everything happened”. Undoubtedly, the apparent failure of 1968 had considerable repercussions and ramifications for social, cultural and political imaginaries.

Most importantly for our purposes here though, it was the following decade, the 1970s, which was profoundly marked by the confusions and disappointments, reversals and desertions of 1968. Despite the extensive attention paid to it, rather than in 1968 itself, real politics came in the aftermath of the failed revolution—in the neglected undecade of the Seventies. Certainly, a range of art practices in Britain in the 1970s were highly politicised, as John A. Walker has outlined in some detail in one of the few surveys of this period. John Hilliard commented in 1981,

It was a decade of austerely radical art, severely ascetic in its uncompromising purity, the product of a cultural moment when a generation of young artists genuinely seized the time, exerting seminal influence in an international arena…what remained consistent was a determined commitment to the present, an egalitarian spirit and an almost cavalier disinterest in money…

Marxist writings, Althusserian revisions and Maoism were particularly influential and informed cultural practice. Art itself became, to cite a clichéd but contemporaneously pertinent phrase, a site of struggle. Revolutionary politics was sectarian and divisive in the 1970s but some activists asserted that art did have a role in initiating or executing social change: Victor Burgin put up posters on housing estates in Newcastle; David Medalla, John Dugger and others started The Artists’ Liberation Front in London, unfurling banners with Marxist-Leninist slogans. For others, the ultimate political weapon was to make no art at all: in 1974, Gustav Metzger called for an art strike to take place 1977-80 with the aim of “crippling the capitalist system”. A special 1976 issue of Studio International, devoted to “Art and Social Purpose”, reflected the range of political positions adopted. The editorial warned that artists could not afford to operate in a “vacuum of specialised discourse without considering their function in wider and more utilitarian terms”, arguing,

…never, ever forget that means must have an end and that this end is inextricably bound up with art’s responsibility to contact and nourish the wider audience it now ignores at its peril…the short-winded, rootless history of modernism’s attempts to evolve an art directly expressive of its own zeitgeist will terminate in a cul-de-sac overpopulated by myopic, self-obsessed artists with nowhere, finally, to go.

Whether this was political engagement or dilletantism is not my concern here, but it does provide plenty of evidence of emergent political avant-gardes and artistic activism, much of it reflecting and responding to industrial strife and political violence on an international scale, exacerbated, for example, by the struggles for civil rights in Northern Ireland and the campaigns of the Angry Brigade in the UK.

8 Forty years on, the phenomenon of ‘1968’ was revisited both academically and in terms of popular culture – see, for example, the inter-disciplinary conference, 1968: A Global Perspective, University of Austin, Texas, 10-12 October 2008.
11 See Walker, ibid. for a year-by-year account of practices and events.
12 Hilliard, quoted in Walker, ibid., 2.
13 In the summer of 1976, Victor Burgin put up his posters, What does possession mean to you, around Newcastle upon Tyne; David Medalla and others showed at Gallery House, an experimental space run by Sigi Krauss, 1972-73. On Medalla, see Guy Brett, Exploding Galaxies, The Art of David Medalla, (London: Kala, 1995)
The aftermath of 1968 provided an intensified political context in Britain with the 1970s characterised by increasing working class militancy. In a short article published in 1979, David Widgery pondered the political legacies of 1968. By 1979, revolutionary fervour had dissipated into the winter of discontent: the miners’ strikes in 1972 and 1974, along with waves of industrial action by dockers and engineers, had brought down the Heath government and Labour had been installed in 1974 with their most radical post-war election manifesto—provoking Widgery to comment that “revolution did seem in the air somewhere.” All this had achieved little but mass unemployment and, with whole regions “slipping off the industrial map”, he remarked,

Go to Liverpool Wigan or Skelmserdale and see the bleakness in the streets and the despair in the faces… jobs gone for good, skills made useless, redundancy pay that melts away...now the cuts are a codeword for a social counter-revolution...[...] One doesn’t have to be a punk or gay to feel that the UK in 1979 has turned out rather less appetising than the menu promised in 1974 of Social Contract flambed in ‘the red flame of socialist outrage’. Our new Jerusalem has turned out a harsher meaner poorer Britain.

And, reiterating the bleak lyrics from a track on Tom Robinson’s album, The Winter of 79,

Conternation in Mayfair
Rioting in Notting Hill Gate
Fascists marching up the High Street
Carving up the Welfare State...

Welfare State International in Burnley

Late Sixties’ activism, anarchism and 1970s militancy provided key British contexts for WSI but the creative techniques and aesthetic vision which they adopted were rooted in the radical political ethos of international groups such as el Teatro Campesino, San Francisco Mime Troupe and the US-based Bread and Puppet Theatre. WSI proclaimed an “alternative aesthetics”, a hybrid approach which brought together Jungian archetypal myth-making, a Blakeian vision typically reflected in Sixties’ Pop and English counterculture along with a “New Age” rhetoric of magic and ritual, as seen here in their 1972 manifesto,

The Welfare State make images, invent rituals, devise ceremonies, objectify the unpredictable, establish and enhance atmospheres for particular places, times, situations and people...[...]

We will continue to analyse the relationship between performance and living, acting and identity, theatre and reality, entertainment and product, archetype and need.

We will react to new stimulus and situations spontaneously and dramatically and continue to fake unbelievable art as a necessary way of offering cultural and organic death.

Variously described as “dream-weavers, purveyors of images, sculptors of visual poetry, civic magicians and engineers of the imagination” WSI’s activities were an amalgam of feasting, music-making and performance which resonate with the amorphous notion of New Ageism, a cultural phenomenon particularly, though not exclusively, associated with the Seventies – and one yet to be

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Ibid., 162.

Ibid., 163.

Lyrics from Tom Robinson’s ‘Up Against the Wall’, quoted in Widgery, ibid.


From The Welfare State Manifesto, 1972

extensively researched and theorised. The eclectic set of activities and practices which constitute the New Age – or the Age of Aquarius, as it was labelled in the 1960s and 70s – does not lend itself to precise definition and tends to be used as an umbrella term. For Paul Heelas, a fundamental characteristic of New Ageism is a shared *lingua franca* to do with *self-spirituality* – and he outlines and explores a resurgence of teachings and practices associated with “the mystic, magician and shaman” which he suggests was partly a response to a cultural loss of certainty but, paradoxically, was also “a product of established orders of modernity.” Despite the slipperiness of the term and the spectrum of practices which it can incorporate—from “wilderness events” and Zen meditation to “enlightenment intensive seminars” and management training events - Heelas asserts that,

...in large measure, New Age is a *radicalised* rendering of more familiar assumptions and values......The prosperity wing aside, the New Age provides a *spiritual* – and thus radicalised – rendering of the assumptions and values of humanistic expressivism. 26

The imagery and narratives used by WSI certainly resonated with traits and values associated with the *radicalised* wing of New Age culture outlined by Heelas. In 1973, a reviewer for *Theatre Quarterly* wrote,

The Welfare State is in many ways the most mind-blowing group of all. It contains many elements…art school, rock culture, music, pagan ritual…all fused into a poetic, Dyonisian vision of man liberated by revolution. 27

Despite the references to ritual, myth and magic, it is evident from their early statements and activities that WSI was rooted in the revolutionary politics and emancipatory ideals of 1968. Herbert Marcuse’s writings on cultural impoverishment and the ideas of the Situationists, with the primacy they gave to the role of *play* in social life and the idea of the urban environment as a space for participative performance 28, were particularly influential on WSI’s founder. Although WSI used the political form of the *manifesto* to explain their aims through the Seventies, they had a whole range of activities dedicated to play and emancipation through self-expression and creativity.

WSI’s repertoire was extensive but the kinds of multimedia practices they adopted were well established by the start of the Seventies. Besides drawing on popular traditions such as mummery and pantomime, WSI also incorporated the avant-gardism of Fluxus, Joseph Beuys and John Cage. WSI’s happenings, events and assembled environments involved acrobats, wrestlers, musicians, fire-eaters and dancers with performances often improvising and expanding on a basis of rehearsed material. In 1972, Jamie Proud’s alter-ego, Lancelot Quail, later billed as “Britain’s new folk hero (a working-class hermaphrodite strong-man)” 29 appeared at Surrey Hall in Brixton and became a recurring reference point for the company. In September 1972, the company spent a month conducting the *Travels of Lancelot Quail*, a kind of processional theatrical event which roved from Glastonbury through Somerset, Devon and Cornwall, to end on a submarine off Land’s End. A year later, after an aborted plan to hold an exhibition and event at the Serpentine Gallery in London, 30 WSI drove their entourage of vehicles into Burnley—a Northern working-class mill-town with a rapidly growing Asian population and a rapidly declining industrial base 31 and initiated their five-year residency as artists in the community.32

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26 Ibid., 115.


28 See, for example, Sadie Plant, *The Most Radical Gesture; Situationist International in a Postmodern Age*, (London: Routledge, 1992).


30 It failed to materialise when the Department of the Environment refused to allow performances and moving sculptures in the gardens at the Serpentine Gallery.

31 In the mid-19th century, Burnley was the largest producer of cotton cloth in the world. Its industrial strength attracted a large immigrant population in the 1960s and early 70s and today Bangladeshi and Pakistani communities make up approximately 9% of its 88,000 inhabitants.

32 The collective of various artists and musicians included Boris Howarth as Associate Artistic Director and Lol Coxhill, improvising jazz musician/composer, as WSI’s Musical Director.
In the 1970s, Burnley was a community in transition, in a state of becoming. As Jean-Luc Nancy has noted, “community is always coming, endlessly, at the heart of every collectivity.”33 Into this, WSI took its own nomadic community of artists, musicians and performers—a self-contained and self-sustaining community of growing families. Symptomatic of this communitarian ethos and with a commitment to contemporary ideas on Seventies progressive education and the burgeoning Free School movement, WSI set up its own school. Some members of the collective registered as home teachers and the company opened its own school in April 1975. 34

In November 1973, WSI created its first large-scale bonfire installation which later evolved into Parliament in Flames, staged in Burnley in 1976 with an audience of 10,000 people and then restaged in various other towns through the 1970s. 35 Whilst at Burnley, in 1974 WSI also made their first permanent earthwork at Gawthorpe Hall and their first giant icework at Wath-upon-Dearne. The following year, they created Harbinger, a large-scale sculpture from scrapyard junk and rusty cars, for the International Performance Festival in Birmingham city centre. Besides outdoor site-specific projects, they also worked in galleries - for example, with Bob Frith of Horse and Bamboo Theatre, they constructed a fully operative Ghost Train at the Mid Pennine gallery in Burnley in January 1977.

One of the major processional performances staged in Burnley, Alien, was filmed by Michael Kustow for London Weekend TV’s flagship arts programme Aquarius. Kustow’s documentary-style film is particularly evocative: the narrator gives a brief history of WSI, the camera scans the town and focuses in on the encampment at Stoneyholme, a particularly socially-deprived area of Burnley. Subsequently, the production team film the instigation and development of Alien, following WSI’s “blood-soaked colonial band” through the terraced streets at dusk to the finale, the ritualistic burning of

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33 Nancy, The Inoperative Community, 71
34 The company itself was used as a primary educational resource and the ethos was based around providing a well-structured child-centred educational experience that developed creativity and imagination. One of the troupe, Catherine Kiddle, recounted the school’s history and educational roots in Catherine Kiddle, What shall we do with the children? (Devon: Spindlewood, 1981), see 25 and 32
35 It was also staged at Milton Keynes (1978), Ackworth (1979), Tamworth (1980) and, finally, Catford (1981) with 15,000 spectators.
an ice-figure (containing Lancelot Quail’s lost spirit) and a scene which incites the swarming local
crowd to destroy a giant slug representing the capitalist “forces of oppression”. An interesting scene
shows a group of local children on the WSI site, enthusiastically and imaginatively engrossed in
making props, building a tower and flying kites. The group giggle self-consciously as the well-spoken
interviewer quizzes them about their activities. With natural spontaneity, one of the young boys
suddenly becomes quite serious; he looks up into the sky and says he would love to fly up with the kite
and feels sure that, if he did, he would be able to see Blackpool. It is a moment of penetrating
poignancy.

The Burnley residency culminated in Barrabas, a six-week project, described as a “total theatrical
environment” in which daily performances included film, sideshows, processions and the “ritual,
dismembering of The Dead Man (and his culture).” By 1978, a series of aesthetic and directional
differences developed within the group and a number of individuals split off to form IOU.
Subsequently, the nomadic school folded, the Burnley base was dismantled and, eventually, WSI
moved on to develop a more permanent base in Cumbria. WSI passed through and into the space of
cultural memory. These hybrid multimedia performances and improvisational events brought together
a New Age miscellany of ancient mythologies, traditional folk and contemporary popular and avant-
garde cultural forms. Ascertaining its impact on the cultural and collective memory of participants and
audiences will be a complex task and further research will address this. But what exactly was radical or
political about WSI’s activities?

A nomadic space of possibility

Although myth is often seen as a reactionary, conservative form, in the 1930s, Georges Bataille and
Roger Caillois developed a discourse around the revolutionary potential of myth. They shared George
Sorel’s understanding of myth as a form of activism. According to them, myth’s stroking of “the
primordial longings and conflicts of the individual condition transposed to the social dimension” could
move subjects to action. They argued it could initiate a “psychological activism” and facilitate
what Gavin Grindon calls a “leap into the impossible”, an idea to which I will return.

The very practice of working collaboratively could be seen as a challenge to the political status quo
and the primacy of the individual—and WSI’s collective ethos was part of what Baz Kershaw has
alluded to as “a rare attempt to evolve an oppositonal popular culture.” Collectivist tactics can be a
political statement and there are plenty of historical incidences in which collectivism is employed as a
strategy to purposefully combat individualism. But some caveats are needed here: the radicalism of
the collective is undergoing a fashionable reiteration currently in academic and critical circles, as Blake
Stimpson and Gregory Sholette contend in their recent book on collectivist art, modernism and the
social imagination. In terms of contemporary practice, Grant Kester has written on the disparate
network of artists and artists’ collectives working at the intersection of art and cultural activism. He

36 Coult and Kershaw, Engineers of the Imagination, 245.
37 Initially, the Fox family went on a residency to Australia. WSI established itself first in Liverpool and then from
1983 onwards in Barrow-in-Furness and, finally, Ulverston where it had a long-term base, Lanternhouse. For
further information on WSI’s subsequent activities see, Radical Mayhem: Welfare State International and its
Followers, exhibition catalogue, Mid Pennine Gallery, Burnley, 26 April -7 June 2008 and Coult and Kershaw,
Engineers of the Imagination. Also see http://www.welfare-state.org/ and http://www.bris.ac.uk/theatrecolleciton/welfarestate.html
38 For Sorel’s comments on myth and references to the Caillois ‘college of sociology’ (1937-39), see Gavin
Grindon, “The Breath of the Possible” in Erika Biddle, Stephen Shukaitis and David Graeber, eds., Constituent
39 Ibid.
41 For example, in the 1960s, the San Francisco Diggers (an influence on Welfare State) with their hotch-potch
philosophy of social anarchism and direct action, employed guerrilla theatre, argued for a ‘university of the
streets’ and worked to erase the boundary between art and life through manifestoes and strategies such as
bartering, ‘liberating goods’, the daily distribution of free food and burning money. See Emmett Grogan’s memoir,
42 Blake Stimpson and Gregory Sholette, Collectivism after Modernism: The Art of Social Imagination after 1945,
(University of Minnesota Press, 2007), 9.
43 See Grant H. Kester, Conversation Pieces, Community and Communication in Modern Art, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004).
also reminds us that artists hold a compromised position in society and that a healthy scepticism is needed about claims that aesthetic experience can transform consciousness. Nevertheless, Kester argues that there are still artists committed to the idea that culture has emancipatory potential: they seek to activate this potential through processes of dialogue and collaborative production. 44

The collective, per se, then, is not intrinsically radical or revolutionary—communes in the Seventies were often isolating and regressive places as inequities embedded within gender power relations often persisted despite a rhetoric of sexual liberation. WSI did not liberate the nuclear family unit within its own community—nevertheless, it was much more than just an artists’ collective as it did represent an attempt to envision and enact new radical ways of living and relating.

With its commitment to self-sufficiency, the development of ecological and alternative rites of passage and a de-schooled emancipatory education it was as much a social as an artistic experiment. They created alternative prototypes for weddings and funerals—their first naming ceremony was in 1969, and they were investigating “green” funerals and working on an alternative technology project on a residency at Machynlleth in 1978. 45 Certainly, many of WSI’s ethical and ecological practices have become absorbed into mainstream culture.

For me, another primary site of Welfare State’s radicalism was the framework which they provided for the exploration of the potentially insurgent and subversive power of the social imagination. As cultural catalysts, their activities highlighted the potential for art to emancipate individual human creativity and initiate or contribute to socio-political change. The idea of the radical imagination is connected to its potential for envisioning beyond one’s current situation and circumstances, thereby opening up potentiality and possibility. By exposing audiences to sensations that go beyond everyday perceptions and opinions, art practices are able to open up new ways of thinking about and engaging with the world: they offer a space of “creative criticality”—both for the individual and for a community of individuals, with all the caveats about what might constitute a “community”. Of course, in the Seventies, these ideas resonated with the ideas about the liberation of the imagination in Herbert Marcuse’s highly influential One Dimensional Man (1967). Although difficult to assess, WSI’s transitory performances undoubtedly had a profound effect on particular participants and there is evidence that it has remained in the cultural memory and popular imagination, within and outside the communities touched. They created environments in which anything seemed possible and constructed events which assaulted the senses. They produced affect, “a non-conscious experience of intensity...a moment of unformed and unstructured potential” and, as Deleuze and Guattari have contended, an aspect of art which is potentially revolutionary. 46

Grindon comments on these kinds of experiences in his essay The Breath of the Possible,

The open nature of these vital moments of affect allows us to grasp the virtuality and possibility of the space of practical political engagement...[they enable us] a way to navigate the space between bare-faced utopianism and blank impossibility... 47

Finally, and perhaps more controversially, there is the revolutionary power and merits of disorder. In his classic study of city life, The Uses of Disorder, Richard Sennett argued for the paradoxical fruitfulness of disorder and disruption in everyday life as a positive, energising and creative force. 48 WSI catalysed disorder with their processions, festivals and spontaneous performances—they were agents of, in Bhaktian terms, and as Baz Kershaw has argued, “carnivalesque resistance.” 49 Hence, the festival or carnival is viewed as operating as a form of resistance, it represents non-conformity, the dishevelling of order. It is worth being circumspect here though: this notion is susceptible to romanticisation and nostalgia for alternative forms of historical oppositional activity must not suppress the possibility that these can act as safety valves to avoid any real social and political change being initiated.

44 Ibid., 153.
45 See note 37 for sources and also John Fox and Sue Gill’s website at www.deadgoodguides.com
47 Grindon, ‘The Breath of the Possible’ in Biddle, Shukaitis and Graeber, Constituent Imagination, 106
49 See discussion of alternative/community theatre as radical cultural intervention in Kershaw, The Politics of Performance.
That said, with their capacity to disrupt the everyday order of things, in my view, WSI created what Hakim Bey has described as a Temporary Autonomous Zone, or TAZ, a transitory pirate utopia—a space which enables the fleeting suspension of usual rules and mores. For a brief moment, WSI provided not only a space of creative criticality but also a nomadic space of possibility, facilitating an alternative temporary zone of transformatory potential.

Gillian Whiteley

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