

AiRCAST #12

WANG RUOBING

NTU CENTRE FOR
CONTEMPORARY
ART SINGAPORE



Tamares Goh and Wang Ruobing recording AiRCAST, 31 January 2023. Courtesy NTU CCA Singapore.

Nadia Amalina: Welcome to the second season of AiRCAST. On this podcast, we visit the Residencies Studios of NTU Centre for Contemporary Art Singapore nestled on the fringe of a vibrant rainforest in Gillman Barracks. In this series of open-ended conversations, we invite different guests to probe the mind of our Artists-in-Residence and unfold some of the ideas, materials, processes, influences, and research methodologies behind their practice.

My name is Nadia Amalina. I am the Programmes Manager at NTU CCA, and I co-edit this podcast alongside Dr Anna Lovecchio, curator and Assistant Director of Programmes at NTU CCA Singapore.

In this episode, we hand over the microphone to curator Tamares Goh to interview our Artist-in-Residence Wang Ruobing. Ruobing and Tamares share a long history of working together throughout their careers, one that goes back to 2004 and will continue on in the years to come. This conversation between peers shines a spotlight on Ruobing's practice rooted in materiality, the importance of found objects in her art-making process, as well as her ongoing research into the symbiotic relationship between environmental sciences and visual arts. They also touch upon the collaborations Ruobing has activated with deep-sea divers and marine scientists, and how these collaborations continue to shape the trajectory of her artistic practice.

Now, a few words to introduce them. Committed to exploring new ways of seeing and methods of knowledge production, the artistic practice of Dr Wang Ruobing stretches from drawing to photography, sculpture, kinetic art, and installation. With a diverse range of methodological approaches to present her ideas, her body of work addresses environmental issues and transcultural discourses on identity and hybridity.

Tamares Goh is the deputy director of Audience Engagement at National Gallery Singapore, overseeing festivals like Light To Night, Painting With Light and the Gallery's Childrens Biennale. She was the former head of Visual Arts at Esplanade – Theatres on the Bay, and co-headed the Programming department overseeing festivals and programmes. She was also the Producer for the Singapore Pavilion at the 57th Venice Biennale in 2017.

[Audio excerpt from *Three Planks (Sampan)*, 2021. Courtesy the artist.]

Tamara Goh: Hi Ruobing, thank you for meeting on this really strange, you know, rainy, afternoon. It's really great to see you here. Just a moment ago, we heard the folklore song *Dayung Sampan* that was hummed by Fran Ho Fei Fan, which you have used in your work *Three Planks (Sampan)* (2021), which was a kinetic work. If I recall the work, it exists in isolation on its own, quite haunting because the song is haunting as well as the rowing of the boat without any human being there. You told me that is made up of planks, pallets actually. I'm really interested to hear from you, as we are discussing your practice here, how this work came about?

Wang Ruobing: This work titled *Three Planks* is very much influenced by where my studio is. So, my studio is in an industrial building. My neighbours, they do various business, some are importers, some are exporters, and some are hardware shops or wholesale sellers. Pallet wood is one of the common things that come with goods that are imported. Very often, those wooden pallets are used just

once and then discarded at a dustbin. I think artists are always influenced by the environment where they spend most of their time, so it was inspiring to see the future of those pallets. And some pallets would look really nice! As artists we are always being resourceful, we salvage materials from our environment and make it into something. So I got two to three pallet wood from our neighbour who is a game importer. I told him: could you save a few good-quality pallets for me, because pallet wood has various qualities. Some pallets from Europe are made from pine tree and they receive a heat treatment, so I asked him: if you got a few such pallets, can you save them for me? That's how I got them. And when I got them from my neighbour, I wanted to make it into a boat. The reason is: the pallets came by boat, and it's one-way. Often, they come to us and then they end up here because they end up in the landfill. So I thought I want to make them into a boat, maybe they can go home, with the boat. But, you know, during the process, I realised that the fabricators when they make pallet wood, they use fastener nails. The fastener nails are basically made in a way that does not allow those pallets to be reused. When I plucked out all the nails, I loved the holes very much, so I thought I wanted to leave the holes as is. Not really to put [the boat]



Wang Ruobing, *Three Planks (Sampan)*, 2021, installation view, Esplanade - Theatres on the Bay, Jendela Visual Arts Space. Courtesy the artist.

on the water, but to expose the traces of how those pallets come to us. Then I did some research about the boat. Of course, everybody is familiar with the *Dayung Sampan* song. I discovered that the song is actually a folk song written by an Indonesian songwriter but the word sampan, translated to three-piece plank [boat], in fact, in Hanyu Pinyin, came from China. *Dayung Sampan* became very famous in China because Tian Mi Mi made the song. I really enjoy how the words, in the migration of culture, have been transformed and landed in some place very different. They have a different fate, a different future. So I invited my old neighbour; she is a singer. She came from Taiwan and she built her home and raised her children in Singapore. I thought it would be really nice to have her hum the song without any language and this is what you heard in the beginning. The artwork is really dealing with the material that the shipping industry uses in one-way way and very often the material has been used once but not being recycled. I want to bring this to attention. Then another point I wanted to talk about with this song is about the culture

of migration. That is how the work came to being and yeah, it was shown at Esplanade's Jendela [Visual Arts Space] for a few months.

Tamare Goh: That's such a rich history! I can really see that, in a literal sense, [you are] unpacking the pallets, but also, unpacking the history. We take it for granted that it is a Malay folk song, but the trajectory could be quite animate, you know, it is not what we imagined it to be. But also, I think, interestingly, it is really discussing also how porous the ocean is, and how the tides and the lands and the demarcation of borders are also drawn. I find that very rich. I know that there is something that you always look for, that's quite particular in your artwork, as you shared with me, something that is owned once by people, used by people. What makes you so seduced by these kinds of materials in the very first place?

Wang Ruobing: I am very much attracted by the materials that have been used by somebody before. You may not necessarily want to know who the owner was, but, the products or the materials, are being produced for a purpose. People purchase [things] for a purpose, and people throw it away for a purpose, right? Or people pass it to another for a purpose. There are always multiple reasons and objectives that come with the objects that you may have found in the shop, or you may pick up on the street. For me, that is fascinating. The artwork where I used thousands of library books is really about... When I was a student, what you have the most is books, library books. I was wondering how and why writers and publishers think that a particular kind of a topic or content should have a greenish cover. So I did a few installations in different countries. We used books borrowed from the libraries. I was looking into how those books were being produced for a certain purpose, and how those books have been purchased by librarians for reasons that they think they should be read by the public. And then amongst those books in the library, there is another selection process: when the users come to the bookshelf, what book do they choose? From the borrowed books, I shifted my interest to man-made objects. In many of my works, I would either buy from second-hand shops or I pick them up from a dust bin, or I pick up from the seaside. I like to study those objects. They always come with my imagination about who had them before. I collected thousands and thousands of marine debris; they are a large part of my recent practice. Some of the objects that are found on the beach may not necessarily belong to Singaporeans. They may come from Thailand, from Indonesia, from Malaysia. There was also a lot of toys and water bottles, and this makes me think: how did they end up there? Right? I found

a lot of milk formula spoons. So I wondered, is it because people went to the beach for a picnic with their children, and when they finished the milk formula container, they just threw it away. What happened? Why did they end up on this beach, you know, and it could be from any part of the world?

Tamare Goh: So, Ruobing, about collaboration. This wonderful space that I visited before, where I witnessed so many small but I would say very important exhibitions, by artists of a great range in the past two years. Tell me more about how this space got started. It's really fascinating and I understand that it is also your studio space.

Wang Ruobing: Comma Space was established in 2020 just before the pandemic. I don't know if this is a right time or a bad time. What happened is that Sai [Chen Sai Hua Kuan], my husband, and I, we are both artists and we moved into our new studio at 51 Jalan Pemimpin, in an industrial building. It happened that there was a small space in our studio. So Sai and I were thinking, shall we reserve the space for experimental ideas? Then, if we can afford it, let's try it for a year. And now, we are in our third year! This is how we started. Coming out from being artists, we want to support other artists and we all know, as artists, we always have pockets of ideas in our bags. And we are looking for opportunities to explore and to display and exhibit. But sometimes, the opportunity from the gallery or from the museum, may not come as easily and you don't know when, so having a space as such would be really great. That's how we started. And we also think artists don't practice alone. The community is important, and it's important that we support each other and move forward together. The reason we call it "comma" is because we think the space can function as a collecting point, collecting ideas, collecting thoughts, collecting people. So we want Comma Space to be a platform for this purpose.

Tamare Goh: Wonderful! I'll go and visit again these days to see Sai's exhibition. When I went to Comma Space, there was this really, I would say, very engulfing kind of experience with your work. With collecting marine debris, you said specifically that they're not small bottles anymore, they are large, big, vessels. And when I went into the space, I felt I was swimming in the sea. And, you know, just the sheer sound when I operated the mechanics, the sheer sound of the bottles, the vessels hitting on one another. I felt I was in another space altogether. Would you like to share a bit about the project?

Wang Ruobing: The project is called *Off Shore On Tide* (2021). That project draws a linkage to the development during my NTU CCA Singapore residency; my NTU CCA residency intends to create this immersive space that allow the lungs to function in filtered mud. In *Off Shore On Tide*, I am actually drawing from a similar approach. I created a room that is kinetically pulling all the debris. You see what is there, the shoes, the pails, the fishnet. I make them move like waves so that when you enter the room at Comma Space, you enter my work. You are not looking at it, you'll just be part of the wave. Then, with large objects that are swimming, shaking, making loud pumping sounds, that feeling of danger is what I am intending to create. Also, in order to stimulate the feeling of what [would happen] if you had to swim around with all those large objects that don't belong to the sea, but belonged to us. How would you feel about it? Yes, so I could actually draw the linkage between what I'm developing now and the approach that has been adopted for *Off Shore On Tide*.

[Audio excerpt from the installation, *Off Shore On Tide*, 2021. Courtesy the artist.]

Tamare Goh: An adaptation of this work will be at the National Gallery of Singapore's Children's Biennale opening this year, in 2023, in time for the June holidays... so an adaptation of this work will be shown for children. What are some of the challenges you think you have to work with alongside the process of showing for children or is there no difference whatsoever?

Wang Ruobing: Children are generally very interested in those objects. At Comma Space, we received many children audiences and they love to play with it. But then again, it is a worry for us because at the National Gallery, it is a larger space and they are many more audiences who also come from various backgrounds. One thing I am concerned the most are the safety issues at the Children's Biennale, but I am sure that children looking at such a work will be very, very curious.

Tamare Goh: I am sure it's going to shed a new light as well when they see the readymade objects...

Wang Ruobing: ...covered with barnacles growing on it, and oysters!



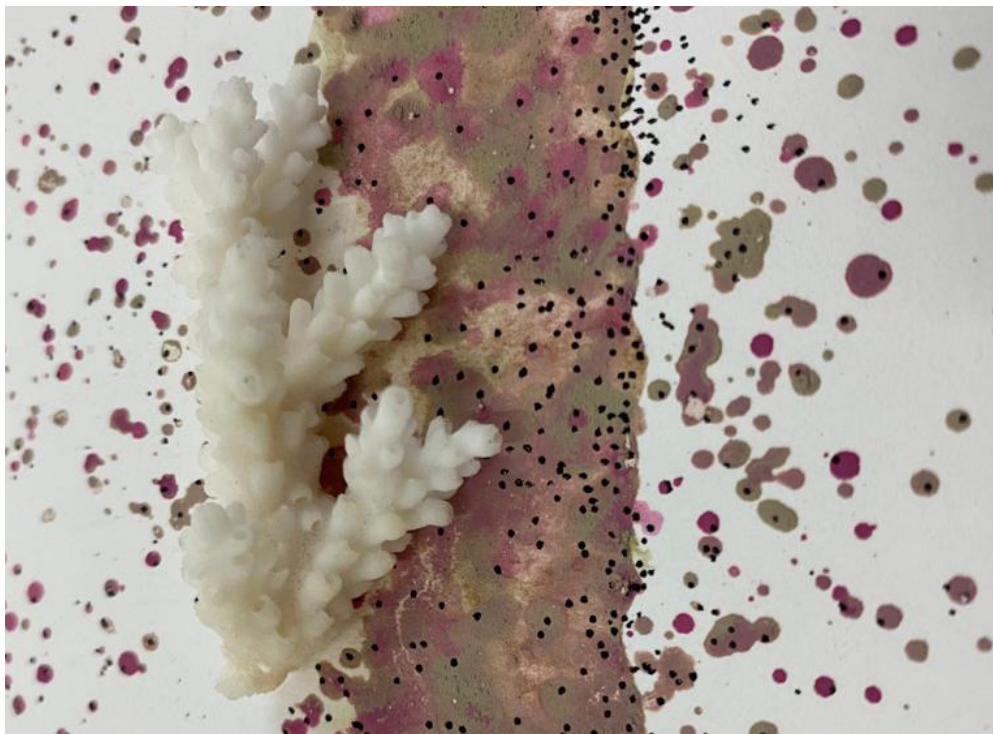
Wang Ruobing, *Off Shore On Tide*, 2021, installation view, Comma Space. Courtesy the artist.

Tamare Goh: I find it really fascinating. What has also impacted me when I saw your work is how you, as an artist, make the choice of not over processing the materials that you found but show them as they are by sheer cleaning or arrangement, and very subtle ways to bring them to the surface. This is what has also interested me, to see the found objects as they are. Yesterday, when I was in your studio, I had the same thought as well, I saw big tires filled with barnacles and objects filled with barnacles. But I also saw a bicycle that was pulled out from the water, so amazing. I also wonder how these objects end up in the deep sea. You worked with a group of marine divers for this project, could you share a little bit about what happened, because this is so interesting?

Wang Ruobing: About the use of objects as they are, this is very much because I want to have this confrontational feeling for the audience. Children see the bicycle and they know it's bicycle, they see a scooter and they know it's a scooter. But they are not normal scooters, they have been sleeping in the sea for a number of days, so you can see the traces of the sea. I want them to be able to relate immediately. I have been very fortunate that through my project, I met wonderful people who love our nature, who have such a deep passion about how

to protect our nature. In particular, recently, I worked with this group called Our Singapore Reefs. They are a group of scientists who formed this group when they were students. They are researchers and they are divers. They are committed to deep sea cleaning, but they do beach cleaning as well.

Whenever that they go out, or they have some events, recently they had one in Sentosa and they will let me know [that they] found a huge tire [and asked] do you want it. Or they will message me: I've got a drone for you. And it's so, so, wonderful to receive all those objects, which is beyond my own capability. Also, for them, they run education workshops. Sometimes they would receive the question: what do you do with the rubbish that you collect and claim from the sea? So besides dumping it into the dustbin, they will show that they give it to Ruobing, an artist, and she could give a second life to this rubbish and pass on a positive message. So I thought this is really a two-way collaboration. Beyond Our Singapore Reefs, I also work with other institutions and groups such as Nature Society (Singapore), and coastline cleaning groups as well.



Wang Ruobing, work-in-progress, detail of coral on watercolours mixed with mud sediments, 2022. Courtesy the artist.

Tamare Goh: I feel that you are also wearing the hat of yourself being an educator as well. Really wanting to find out what's there as a kind of research, and of course, interwoven it into your practice as an artist as well. To be able to work with multiple people, there's a very keen sense of forms of collaboration with people out there. And you acknowledge it very much in your work, that there are people who have contributed to the work that you do. For example, first and foremost, the things that are already owned by people, used by people, cobbled up by people, pointed out by experts, to the various things that you discover along the way. This component of collaboration is such an important feature in your work. Even stemming from the library pieces as well. You know, just to really, pick up the green books and to question what actually green means in a very literal sense and in a very embedded psychological sense, as well. I feel that is so heartening. And you keep wanting to look for on collaborators intrinsically in your work. What have you discovered during this NTU CCA Singapore residency program?

Wang Ruobing: I joined this program with a mission that I want to do something new. I wanted to do something that is beyond my knowledge, so I proposed this idea of living with trouble. What is the trouble? And how much do we know about our trouble? And this is a trouble created by us. I approached the Earth Observatory of Singapore (NTU), and they opened the door for me. They understood what is my interest and linked me up with coral specialist Asst Prof. Kyle Morgan. I had the opportunity to understand what he is researching about. I visited his laboratory, and we had a good chat. [As] part of his research, he collects this sediment from the water, it's like suspended mud. He would extract the muds to understand what they are, and to understand how this affect the corals growth as well as the water condition. Over the years, he has done a lot of data collecting in different locations around Singapore. So I thought, wow, how come I've never paid attention to that? I humbly asked him to give me some mud sediments, just for me to have a sense of what it is and of what I can do with it. I brought the mud back to my studio at NTU CCA and, like all artists do, we start playing with mud like pigment. I mixed the mud with water and paint, living plants, and flowers. Then I mixed it with the blue pea flower's pigment that I extracted from a garden where I collected [blue pea] as well as water and ink to see what will come out. I also received a lot of research done by Kyle and he also showed me a number of diving videos of how he collected those suspended mud. Again, interestingly, he is also a diver. So I think that somehow he reaches the layer of

sea, because I don't really able to dive yet, he opened the door for me. I still vividly remember the videos where he is swimming in a muddy water. During playing with the mud I was thinking that what happens if the coral, the fish and, you know whatever is living in the sea have to filter the sediment every day, every moment, every second? How do they feel about it? So I thought, okay, what about I create a bubble? I'll create a bubble and I'll grind the mud into very fine particles, and use a blower to blow the particles, and make people breathe it. But of course, it's a health hazard! I did an experimentation during this residency programme just to give a view of it. What happened if we have to live in this condition that is created by us. As we all know, the sediment in the Singapore Sea is quite intense because it's a big city, and because of land reclamation. Also because we are a major ship harbour, we receive a lot of ships, and our waters cannot be as calm as our neighbours. Many divers don't really dive around Singapore sea, but they will go to other places like Thailand or Indonesia.

Tamares Goh: I'm thinking that you are looking for these great opportunities to work with people from different professions. I think there is an immediate correlation with the way you think about your work, your practice, in all of that. There is a symbiotic relation with... whether it's science or whether it's art, but I'm just thinking, Our Singapore Reefs' divers, what do they think? And how does Kyle Morgan think of this experiment? I mean, they're not wearing the immediately the artist's hat. They're thinking of themselves very much as scientists. Do they think of you as being quite eccentric? Or, you know, how does it come about? I am quite interested to hear their views. What do they think?

Wang Ruobing: Let me think about it. [In] my conversation with Kyle, one of the things he mentioned is—and I think probably many scientists would agree with that— most of the research is not able to reach out to the general public. Very often, they end up in peer-reviewed journals with limited readers. And if the research would be more “communicatable”, that's exactly in his words, “communicatable”, for him [it would make it] even more worthwhile to do his research. He was telling me about the sediment muds, right? Over the years, he collected a lot of them. But, in fact, he told me that he only uses just small samples for his research and that's enough. And to throw it away, that feels not right. If I can use it for a different purpose and make it into something else that brings a positive meaning to it, for him, I think, he will feel his efforts become more worthwhile.

Tamares Goh: That's wonderful. I also feel that scientists and artists are urgently looking at the subject of environmental change and the effects that it would have on us, you know. So I feel that this is also something that is quite refreshing, in a way that both professions are putting together their concerns on a plate, to share their views on the same platform. I feel that it also goes back to your initial intent on finding what is already owned and processed by people. And, as an artist, your function really is to cobble them up in the most sensitive way, I would say. You do not interrupt too much, but really draw out the main elements of what you want to find within the objects. I find that you are also inspired by Donna J. Haraway's theories of symposium, that is the idea of “making with”, it's really to live with. To make with, to live with and, also, your title “living with trouble” is not to escape from trouble but really to acknowledge what's already out there. And it really surfaces simply by calling in and to say that, hey, I'm aware of this, and what do I do with it? This is really inspirational for me. You have been in this NTU CCA Singapore Residency for five months now. How do you feel about the need for artists to be involved in residency programmes?



Wang Ruobing recording AiRCAST, 31 January 2023. Courtesy NTU CCA Singapore.

Wang Ruobing: What I can say is that is just a wonderful programme. One of the subjects I teach at my college is called 'professional practice'. I always embed residency elements in there and introduce [my students] that one way to improve yourself, to open up yourself and explore more things is to take up a residency programme. As a mother of two, this NTU CCA residency is really, very, very needed today for artists like me who have a family to take care of. I don't live too far out from town and I am given a space where I can think, I can lay out my materials, I can rediscover from my materials, and I could build up collaboration with Earth Observatory of Singapore. I think this is a wonderful program, I really hope that it will continue.

Tamare Goh: I really agree with you. I feel that residencies are often able to give artists time for them, to create space and time as well. And a bit of dwell time to really look and to spend time with even their own work. I feel that is a very important component. Your work has always been...I would say the recent work, I would say it travelled from land to sea with, you know, the work that's being derived from the sea. Like, of course, the plastics that you collected. And, you know, I'm going back to the work that you did at Esplanade Concourse, the installation where you had the bottles, and there's a flowing using mechanics. It felt like waves going up and down the sea. And the way I'm reminded of the first work that you talk about, in this interview about this kind of rowing in the ocean, and even the plastics being swept up on the shore. So there's this relationship with the tides, with what has landed on our shores. What has landed on our shores has also, I mean, in the same way that you mentioned earlier that there are immigrants coming, migrants, the migratory kind of relationship. The migration is an important component that is not about terrains and borders, but it's about a situation, it is about working in tandem with nature. In relating back to the mud that you are talking about, there's also an interest in foreign bodies, for foreign materials being in the objects that you collected. Would I say that that's also an investigation you are interested in?

Wang Ruobing: Yes, certainly. Of the thousands of marine debris, I have collected, what percentage is actually from local sources? Perhaps the majority of them actually comes from foreign seas, right? Same for mud. And we all know that Singapore purchases sand from neighbouring countries... how much foreign materials have entered our sea? That's the reason I am really fascinated with the materials. The materials have their own 'career', their own history, and their own social and political contents.

Tamare Goh: The materials alone, they are not in isolation. Materials are made up of many, many foreign beings as well, as humans are, I suppose.

Wang Ruobing: I think one of the things about art, like you mentioned just now, is that living with the trouble doesn't mean to encounter trouble passively. It could be a way to think about how to cope with trouble, how to deal with trouble, how to change trouble. I think art actually has this powerful, inspirational ways that can change one's mindset. Just like you mentioned, [the kinetic installation] *Over the Horizon* (2016) at the Esplanade Concourse, if you look closely, it is basically a plastic wave. Because it's on a timer, it only moves twice per hour. You can see people queuing there to see plastic waves. That will make them think, why do we queue to see waves that made from our own rubbish? I think that is what art can do and it makes artists continue to produce work.

Tamare Goh: You made me look at the sediments in a very different way, yesterday when the objects that you collected where in your sphere you created, the plastic ball sphere that you created, with the different materials being inside expelling what you call debris and mud. You were saying, imagine if the human lungs are expelling these kind of lumps. So we do have to deal with foreign bodies and it's how we process them on a day-to-day basis within ourselves, we are composite of many entities. I think that relates back to the symbiotic relationship that we are having to live within. And to be really aware that, you know, our existence is not in isolation, in itself. I'm very much looking forward to your next project. Maybe you can let us know a little bit on the path that you'll be probably looking at in the next few months or so.

Wang Ruobing: Well, I hope that the NTU CCA's residency project can eventually develop into a more complete work. During the open studio, I was showing an experimentation. Eventually, I hope it can be enlarged in a room-size bubble that allows people to enter, so as to offer the participants an immersive experience. I am also currently working on the Children's Biennale, where I am using hundreds of marine debris, some collected during my residency period, some collected before. So I am creating a kinetic installation for Singapore Children's Biennale at National Gallery Singapore in May.

Tamare Goh: I really look forward to that. It will be fascinating to see how children will interact with your work as well.

Wang Ruobing: Thank you Tamares.

Tamares Goh: You are welcome.

Nadia Amalina: You listened to AiRCAST, a podcast of NTU Centre for Contemporary Art Singapore, a national research centre for contemporary art of Nanyang Technological University. To find out more about our programmes, visit our website at www.ntu.ccasingapore.org, you can sign up to our newsletter, or follow us on your favourite social media platforms. And of course, if you'd like to hear the voices and thoughts of our other Artists-in-Residence, do subscribe to this podcast.

AiRCAST is produced by NTU CCA Singapore with the support of National Arts Council Singapore.

This episode featured artist Wang Ruobing in conversation with Tamares Goh. I am Nadia Amalina, the programme manager and co-editor of this podcast. AiRCAST is conceptualised and co-edited by Dr Anna Lovecchio. The Audio Engineer is Ashwin Menon.

The intro and the outro were composed by our previous Artist-in-Residence Yuen Chee Wai with field recordings of our non-human neighbours in the beautiful forest around us.

This episode was recorded on 31 January 2023. Thank you for listening.



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