Performance Art at the (Virginia) Margins
Anthony Restivo’s Far Off and All Aflame

Carey Sargent, Rachel Thompson, and Wendy Hsu

In the foothills of the Blue Ridge Mountains, across a coal train bridge that divides an artist enclave from downtown Charlottesville and the University of Virginia, sits a squat building made of red bricks that have been painted a deeper brown and embellished with a mural of silver swirls. The building was once a convenience store, a history recalled by the beer bottle caps embedded in the pavement of its small parking lot. It is now the Bridge Progressive Arts Initiative (The Bridge PAI), and those who pass by on their daily commute often peer into its large plate glass windows, curious to see an alternative arts exhibition in this relatively sleepy college town.

In February 2011, passersby saw an empty gallery space occupied only by Anthony Restivo, a local writer. He was living in the gallery with just a few necessities, which included a World War I–era wood-and-canvas cot and a bag of 22 apples—one for each day of his stay. When Restivo wasn’t sleeping or perched on the deep window ledge, observing the play of light, he sat on a spindle-backed chair at a wobbly table constructed from unfinished wood in front of a Royal Junior typewriter salvaged from the Great Depression. Inside the table’s drawers he kept stacks of weathered paper and envelopes that looked like they must have been long stored away in a box with the typewriter. On top of the table he arranged an assortment of glimmering silver thumbtacks, single-edge razor blades, and a spool of cotton twine.

The austere setting of the gallery evoked a retreat from the pace of contemporary life and its digital media and communication overload. Restivo created a visually cohesive array of objects that made material connections to the past. He recontextualized the grassroots gallery’s rickety table—normally used to display an email subscription list and promotional stickers—as a piece of vintage, artisanal furniture. He had painstakingly stained each envelope and sheet of paper with tea. In this space, Restivo sought to create an environment “just odd enough to disarm [visitors]” and allow for “a more honest interaction than what would otherwise be possible” (Cedarmark 2011).

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Throughout the month, Restivo encountered friends and familiar strangers—those recognizable but unknown faces that populate the small college town and its arts scene. These encounters were not only reframed by the gallery setting, but also by Restivo’s decision to refrain from speaking, using only the typewriter to communicate. A typed note on the door asked readers to enter, sit in a chair across from Restivo, and receive a “one question interview.”

The visitor’s chair was placed on the opposite side of the typewriter table, about two feet from Restivo, who gazed into the eyes of each visitor with a look that was neither aggressive nor voyeuristic but insistently probing. His mouth formed a faint but not untroubled smile, assuring visitors that he was “available” to them, as one participant later described. The power of Restivo’s gaze visibly rattled people. Many, somewhat unexpectedly, began to cry. Some evaded his eyes by toying with a loose thread on their clothing. Others checked their cell phones in search of a more mediated and comfortable form of interaction. Those who were perhaps the most disconcerted interrupted the silent exchange with idle talk about the rain, mud, and gray February skies.

After observing each individual visitor’s response, Restivo began to type. The keys fell with a rapid thud-snap that resonated against the gallery’s exposed beams and unadorned white walls. For each visitor, he etched a simple, yet pointed, question onto tea-stained paper. Some examples:

- What are you afraid of?
- What do you wish you could tell her?
- What can be gained from loss?
- What could you not live without?

Visitors sat, often for a long time, pondering whether to expose truths that are normally too personal for public conversation. Some avoided the dilemma of exposure and offered an immediate and inconsequential answer, or laughed off the question with an ironic comment. Regardless of the choice, Restivo imprinted each answer onto the stained paper and haphazardly cut off a lock of his hair with a razor, as if exchanging a piece of himself for the visitor’s efforts. He tore each response into a neat and narrow strip, placed it in an open envelope so that it remained visible, and tacked each envelope to the wall in a straight and growing line. From each tack Restivo hung a short length of string, tied around a lock of his shorn hair.

Over the course of 22 days, the wall was filled with 244 envelopes containing 244 answers detached from the questions that provoked them:

1. Interviews with gallery patrons were conducted anonymously.
I think there is only one answer. For her to be happy.
Compassion.
That I might lose my sanity.
Their toenail clippings. Little snips of hair from when they were born.

This exquisite corpse of disjointed phrases both exposed and masked the emotional vulnerabilities of gallery visitors. Through strategies of persistence, repetition, and emotional presence Restivo elicited and strung together the open secrets of a relatively small community of artists, friends, and familiar strangers.

A Writer and an Opportunity

*Far Off and All Aflame: Pushing Against the Real* (2011) was the first documented performance art exhibition in Charlottesville, Virginia. Restivo, an unassuming 23-year-old assistant to an artisan bread baker, would seem an unlikely candidate for introducing performance art to Charlottesville. Though he has a penchant for writing, he remains 12 credits short of a creative writing degree. He has never been to art school and admits that his awareness of performance art history is minimal.

At first glance, *Far Off and All Aflame* may seem to echo Marina Abramovic’s *The Artist is Present*, which was exhibited at MoMA in New York City in the spring of 2010: both artists sit across from visitors and look at them for an extended period of time. Yet the subdued, austere environment Restivo created in a community arts space was in stark contrast to Amelia Jones’s description of her session with Abramović at MoMA:

Surrounded by a barrier like a boxing ring, itself surrounded by dozens of starring visitors, cameras, and lit by klieg lights [...] I primarily felt myself the object of myriad individual and photographic gazes (including [Abramović’s]), and the experience overall was very strongly one of participating in a spectacle...a simulation of relational exchange with others. (2011:18)

While MoMA visitors, as Jones describes, experienced the Abramović performance under the glare of the news media, MoMA’s in-house photographers, and throngs of fellow visitors, attendees at the Charlottesville gallery were privy to a more intimate, understated encounter with performance art. Visitors who sat with Restivo during *Far Off and All Aflame* characterized their experiences as “heavy,” “raw,” “cathartic,” “intense,” and “deeply moving.” They described the performance as generating “wellsprings” of emotion and offering “connection to the community.” How did a writer, living in a small town and working at the margins of performance art, generate such responses?

The concept for *Far Off and All Aflame* began as a joke between Restivo and Greg Kelly, executive director and cofounder of the Bridge PAI, where the piece was ultimately installed. Restivo had just moved to town from Richmond, Virginia, and was looking for a place to live. Kelly offhandedly suggested that Restivo live in the gallery space. While Restivo initially laughed it off, Kelly later offered Restivo the month of February with the request that he “do something” with the space. This kind of playful informality characterizes the curatorial approach of the Bridge PAI, which Kelly describes as a “DIY academy” that allows emerging artists and curators “to take the reins...fall on their face and learn things” (in...
Howsare 2009). The result is a meeting ground for alternative and community-based creative practices—from experimental film and noise shows, to site-specific art installations, to youth empowerment programs.

Given this license, Restivo originally envisioned his stay as an exercise in endurance, complete with fasting and seclusion that would lead to walls covered in his writing. As Restivo worked out the concept for the piece, Kelly provided gentle direction and guidance, lending Restivo books on the work of Joseph Beuys, Chris Burden, and Abramovic.

Restivo explained to us his mixed reaction to the work of these artists. He was dubious about the element of spectacle and felt alienated by “high concepts” that “lacked interaction” between the performer and audience (Restivo 2011). He was fascinated, however, by Abramovic’s *Rhythm 0* (1974), in which she stood passively before her audience, allowing them to use a variety of objects to inflict pleasure or pain on her body. From Restivo’s perspective, this piece foregrounded interaction, while subjecting the performer to the mercy or cruelty of the audience.

*Rhythm 0* and other endurance pieces, such as Burden’s *White Light/White Heat* (1975), resonated with Restivo’s curiosity about the nature of human relationships, suffering, and compassion. During our interview he explained the origins of this curiosity. His mother, a feminist, was often in search of meaningful spiritual experiences, and she encouraged him to join her in various New Age practices and retreats. At 10 years old, Restivo accompanied his mother to a Lakota Sundance Ceremony in West Virginia, lead by Leonard Crowdog, a famous medicine man and leader in the 1970s American Indian movement. The Lakota Sundance Ceremony has been sensationalized in white popular culture, most notably in Elliot Silverstein’s 1970 film *A Man Called Horse*. In particular, the ceremony’s ritual piercings have piqued curiosity: men pledge to be pierced on the chest or back, while women are pierced on the arm; they are then suspended from a cottonwood tree by animal bones that are threaded through the wounds. While there is a complex spiritual context surrounding the ceremony that lies beyond the scope of this review, New Age practitioners and counterculturalists searching for alternative forms of community have been drawn to the ceremony for its intersection with their environmentalist beliefs and the altered states of consciousness that the ceremony often provokes in its participants.

As Restivo took part in the sweat lodges, fasting, and meditation that prepare participants for the ceremony, he became fascinated by the limits of human deprivation. He also was drawn to the spiritual significance of personal suffering, represented by those who had pledged to pierce and hang. While *Far Off and All Aflame* was not intended to be a restaging of the Sundance Ceremony, Restivo sought to inhabit the role of one who takes on the suffering of the community in order to excise it. Through this position, Restivo reconceptualized the role of writing, from secluded individual authorship to collaborative writing for which he would act as a “filter or sieve” for the emotional weight that visitors carried into the gallery space (Restivo 2011).

**Suffering in Search of Honesty**

Restivo began his ritual on 5 February 2011, fasting and keeping silent. While he allowed himself to open the gallery door to catch a breath of fresh air, he would not step beyond the threshold. The atmosphere of deprivation was intensified when he contracted the flu. He described his experience of those first days to us as long and slow. He admitted that during that time he was in a near-constant state of panic, plagued by doubts about his ability to sustain the piece and about the legitimacy of the piece itself. He had imagined visitors were there to simply “see this crazy guy living in a gallery” (Restivo 2011). Certainly some visitors misunderstood the piece, or failed to understand it as a performance at all. An acquaintance of Restivo dropped in and attempted to start a conversation with him, only to leave in frustration after Restivo silently, patiently stared him in the eye.

By the fifth day, the clouds dispersed and the sun emerged. Restivo found a sense of calm as he settled into a basic routine: wake up with the sunrise, eat an apple, take a shower in the sink, open the door, sit down at the desk, type simple observations of what happened out-
side the window, walk around the gallery, and watch the light creep up the gallery entry ramp. Restivo cultivated a focus that allowed him to pose questions based on his observations of the people he encountered. Many visitors we spoke with were unnerved by Restivo’s ability to pinpoint emotional stress that lay just below the threshold of what they were willing to share with others, or to even admit to themselves. Restivo explained, however, that he does not consider himself particularly intuitive: “if you really just look someone in the eye, for a long period of time [...] you start to see things that you can’t normally see” (2011).

As Restivo began to observe his visitors, he focused on discerning whether they admitted their emotional stresses or avoided such admissions. He explained the distinction to us in terms of “honesty” and “dishonesty.” One visitor, for example, made small talk and cracked jokes for nearly 20 minutes before sitting down to answer a question. Restivo asked him “Where does your nervousness come from?” The visitor’s body language became relaxed. After a long pause, he told Restivo, “I really want people to pay attention to me but whenever I get that attention, I’m sorry I got it.” Restivo explained this encounter as an example of a visitor’s struggle with emotional defenses and his subsequent ability to “be honest” by confronting the source of his nervousness (2011).

Other visitors were less willing to directly discuss the emotional stresses manifested by their interactions with Restivo. In his observations, Restivo began to catalog various forms of “dishonesty” as visitors avoided the expression of difficult emotions. Some visitors would offer socially acceptable answers, or laugh off the question before departing abruptly, as in this interaction:

How would you mourn the death of your lover?

[Laughter] I’d get over it.

Restivo describes feeling crushed under the weight of visitors’ responses as they projected their fear and anger onto him. He was horrified by the lack of empathy that he observed in some of his visitors. One sat and talked at length about her desire to do a performance art piece like *Far Off and All Aflame*, while never looking Restivo in the eye. He asked her a question about emotional intimacy. Restivo described her response:

“I’m a solipsist. I don’t believe in intimacy as a real thing. And this is a projection. You’re not real. None of this is real. Intimacy would just be some sort of misunderstanding I was having with myself.”

Then she was like, “OK, bye!” And she left. (Restivo 2011)

Restivo learned that she was a magistrate for the court and her job was to determine whether those convicted of crimes could see their families before incarceration. He found this interaction particularly unsettling given the depth of her defenses relative to her line of work. In the final days of the project, Restivo began to buckle under the emotional weight accrued over the preceding weeks. He describes suffering from physical tremors as the envelopes of “honest” and “dishonest” responses filled the gallery walls around him.

Yet the artist did not suffer unnoticed. Going into the piece, Restivo explained that he was open to receiving food from visitors if they felt moved to offer it. He kept a list of meals he received that included: a tea ceremony, a steak grilled in the gallery parking lot, and espresso and bread from the baker who employs him, among others. We offered him heart-shaped, Valentine’s Day cookies and Chinese hot pot leftovers. These moments of exchange were sometimes powerful for Restivo and for his visitors. One woman visited each day bearing a spinach and green algae smoothie with an attached Post-it that advised him “choke it down!” Though she never sat in the visitor’s chair, she cried each time she visited.

Restivo saw the success of the piece in moments of reciprocity, and also in moments of transformation where visitors became “honest.” One visitor returned a few hours after her seating with Restivo to tell him, “I lied,” and asked to revise her answer. An acquaintance of Restivo who misunderstood the point of the piece in the first days returned later in the month to share his life story, talking from the early afternoon until sunset.
Media(ted) Refuge

When a new and relatively untrained artist performs in a small southern town, the performance is at a remove from the “industrial-strength institutionalization of performance histories” with which artists in major art centers must contend (Jones 2011). The Bridge PAI facilitated a writer’s venture into performance and introduced performance art to new audiences. It is nearly impossible, however, for a performance to be completely isolated from the institutionalization of performance art.

The tension between media representation and physical presence was also at play in Far Off and All Aflame, despite Restivo’s attempt to create the space as a refuge from the noise of everyday life.

Local press coverage consistently situated Far Off and All Aflame in relation to pieces by Abramović (see Cedarmark 2011; Canino 2011). Within the gallery itself, magazine cut-outs of Abramović’s tearful audiences at The Artist is Present hung from the bulletin board in the back office where gallery staff, local photographers, and documentarians converged. For anyone paying attention to local media or local conversations about the performance, it was difficult not to experience the event, to some extent, through the lens of contemporary performance art.

Charlottesville’s culturati is oriented toward New York City, yet the city’s residents also take pride in distinctively local, homegrown cultural productions. Charlottesville’s arts and music scenes are infused with romanticized images of southern folk art, and local artists and audiences both affirm and critique tropes of southern cultural authenticity. As gallery-goers sat across from a Charlottesville artist in an intentionally rustic and austere setting, some could understand themselves as experiencing an “authentic” staging of performance art, of the kind that is imagined to take place within the New York art world, yet infused with distinctly local characteristics.

Restivo cultivated personal deprivation and an engaged, emotionally aware presence by cutting himself off from outside media. Many of his visitors, however, encountered him face-to-face after “seeing” the performance as it was documented by local photographers and filmmakers, in the local and university papers, and promoted through social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter.

A reclusive local writer (who does not publish on websites or in print, preferring to distribute his work to a selective email list) generated one of the most provocative representations of Far Off and All Aflame. Observing the performance primarily through the window from the gallery parking lot, the writer created a daily series of lengthy, sometimes obsessive, email commentaries that critiqued performance art practice and offered inside jokes about the personalities of Restivo, Kelly, and others in the arts scene. Among visitors, discussion of these email commentaries, and about who was and who was not on the email list, was nearly as prevalent as discussion of Restivo’s performance.

In his artist statement, as rendered by the local press, Restivo explained his desire to create a space for honest and direct communication while recognizing the impossibility of maintaining such a space (in Cedarmark 2011). In the initial days of his stay in the gallery, his self-doubt was fueled by the knowledge that in the age of Facebook, visitors were motivated in part by seeing their own words represented on the gallery wall for all to see, rather than by a desire for direct human connection. As he sat in silent observation, communicating only through typewritten statements in tea-stained envelops, he found fleeting moments of honest connection.

On the 22nd and final day of the installation, Restivo placed his last apple stem onto a makeshift calendar on the windowsill. It was his last quiet moment. Thirty-three people came in that afternoon, one after another, while his friends hung out in the parking lot or talked among themselves inside. As the sun began to set across the coal train bridge, casting its bright pink and yellow hues onto the gallery floor, 25 people gathered around Restivo. The heavy silence in the room was broken only by the buzz of clippers as Restivo shaved off what remained of his unwashed hair. Kelly helped him to clean up the spots he missed. Restivo looked around sheepishly, unsure of what he was supposed to say after 22 days of emotional

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Critical Acts
silence. He mustered a modest and raspy, “thank you,” through weakened vocal chords.

References

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An Invitation to Pillage
Witness Relocation’s Heaven on Earth

Sarah Kozinn

What are we left with after the world ends? Though Harold Camping’s 21 May 2011 doomsday prophesy did not come true, his predictions, broadcast to millions of listeners from his Family Radio compound in Oakland, California, captured the attention not only of a faction of Christian believers eagerly awaiting the rapture but also of those of us who perhaps wondered (sometimes with tongue in cheek) what was going to happen on that auspicious day. But maybe what is most tantalizing to think about is not what happens on the day the world ends, but what happens in the days that follow. In his play Heaven on Earth, Charles Mee imagines just that: “Our world, too, has come to an end—and: life goes on” (Mee 2011b).

In 2011 Charles Mee became the resident playwright with Witness Relocation, an ensemble-based theatre company under the direction of Dan Safer. The success of Mee’s previous work has garnered him recognition in the off-Broadway theatre scene; he has won the Award of Merit Medal in Drama from the American Academy of Arts and Letters and two Obie awards, for Vienna: Lusthaus (1986) and Big Love (2002). His plays have been produced around the world and directed by off-Broadway and regional theatre titans such as Ann Bogart of the SITI Company (bobrauschenbergamerica, 2003) and Les Waters, associate artistic director of Berkeley Repertory Theatre (Cardenio, 2008; Fotos De La Nuit, 2005; Wintertime, 2002; Big Love, 2001). Discrediting the protective tendencies of most playwrights and embracing the countless possibilities of what Umberto Eco would call “open texts” (1979:7), Mee invites artists to “pillage” his plays (2011a). He wants the resulting performance to be a conversation between his text and the artist’s intervention with it. He states this objective on his website, which is aptly named “the (re)making project”:

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Please feel free to take the plays from this website and use them freely as a resource for your own work: that is to say, don’t just make some cuts or rewrite a few passages or re-arrange them or put in a few texts that you like better, but pillage the plays as I have pillaged the structures and contents of the plays of Euripides and Brecht and stuff out of Soap Opera Digest and the evening news and the internet, and build your own, entirely new, piece — and then, please, put your own name to the work that results. (2011a)

The openness of Mee’s writing is a good fit for the quirky style that has become Witness Relocation’s signature. Their stylization is hardly in conflict with Mee’s authorship and exuberant call to “pillage,” a call that embraces the art of energetic attack and violent thievery — exactly the kind of zealous appeal the company likes to heed. Witness Relocation has been on the New York theatre scene since 2000. Cowering from labels that might give the impression of inaccessibility, such as “experimental theatre company” and “dance theatre” (a descriptor frequently used to identify the company [see Witness Relocation 2001]), Safer prefers to think of Witness Relocation as a group who puts on entertaining shows:

I don’t only want “theatre people” to come. If you say it’s a show that’s got some dancing girls in it, that’s way more accessible than saying something is avant-garde or experimental. And I don’t think we’re experimental. I’m not trying to do anything experimental. I just want the thing to work. It goes back to Brecht. You can have your politics. You can have your message. But you better be fucking entertaining or no one is going to watch. So how am I going to make it entertaining? (Safer 2011).

*Heaven on Earth* opened in February 2011 at LaMama’s Ellen Stewart Theater. Directed by Dan Safer, the performance was a collaboration between actors from the French theatre collective Ildi Eldi and Witness Relocation. The two groups began working together during a 2009 residency at Les Subsistances, a cultural centre outside of Paris.

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1. However, Mee does put in a notice about copyright: “But, if you would like to perform the plays essentially or substantially as I have composed them, they are protected by copyright in the versions you read here, and you need to clear performance rights” (Mee 2011a).

center and performance laboratory for circus, dance, and theatre in Lyle, France, and then at a 2010 residency at the Emelin Theatre in Mamaroneck, New York.

The stage is fully visible to the audience as we enter. There are no curtains, scrims, or stage set walls so we have an unobstructed view of the entire space. The downstage area is open and free of set pieces and props. The small set configuration upstage, a hodgepodge pile of furniture and lighting equipment that creates a raised playing area, makes the space feel cavernous. The pile appears to be made of cast offs from previous shows, and I am surprised to recognize the silver-tasseled backdrop from the last Witness Relocation performance I attended, 5 Days in March (May 2010), lying on top as if someone had cut the wires keeping it suspended. It drapes over the backs of some chairs and falls behind a tower of televisions arranged into a stunted pyramid to the right of the pile. The pile is messy and the cables, chairs, and lights are strewn about as if a tornado has struck a storage warehouse. Parked diagonally at the far left is an old bicycle with a giant headlight. A strip light lies slantways on the floor in front of these larger items, half of its form receding underneath the left side of the pile, as if it had stage fright.

All the set items are placed within a white square painted on the stage floor, a geometrical choice that delineates what will become the playing space. Even the borders of this white square are messy, as if painted with chaotic brush strokes instead of clean lines. The floor outside of the white square is painted black; the floor looks like a giant, prone Malevich painting. During the show the actors who are not involved with a scene watch the action from these black margins. The actors are almost always visible to the audience even when they are not the central focus.

In his script Mee describes how the set should look by referring to Giovanni Battista Piranesi’s 18th-century drawings of the fallen Roman Empire:

Big chunks of ruin, chunks of Roman columns and capitals with vines growing out of them and around them,

—in like the etchings of Piranesi: the ruins of the Roman Empire, the world has come to an end—and yet: life goes on; [...] (Mee 2011b)

What follows in the text is a description of post-apocalyptic New York City, the collapsed Brooklyn Bridge covered in vines and remnants of skyscrapers left to decay. Like Rome, New York City has also fallen.

Jay Ryan’s set and lighting design interprets Mee’s ruins in relation to the company itself by creating a set that represents Witness Relocation’s end-of-the-world. Their decrepit ancient city is made of artifacts from past shows, and old equipment and props create the deteriorating landscape of their new theatrical domain.

My contemplation of the set is interrupted by a sudden and jarring “power outage” sound, almost like the cloying whistle of a bomb falling. The sound blares as the theatre goes into a full blackout, a device I read as signifying the end of the world. All that is visible are the Exit signs whose ominous red glare makes the theatre look even larger and emptier than it did with the lights on. After a pause a single pin light comes on far upstage and bounces in the air, getting closer and closer to the audience until I can see that the light is attached to someone’s head: a man wearing a business suit. He moves downstage until he stops at what looks like a generator or a car battery. He takes out two jumper cables, fidgets with the battery, and touches the cables together. Accompanied by a loud “power on” sound, the TVs and two fluorescent lights flicker to life. Their brightness is like a beacon signaling our entrance into the “after” (as in “after the world ends”), where we will remain for the performance’s duration.

A few beats later Heather Christian comes onstage dressed in what looks like a ballerina-inspired wedding dress (lots of taffeta) and does a dance with a chair to the rock band Blonde Redhead’s song “En Particulier.” The dance is in rhythm with the music, yet Christian’s graceful and clunky gestures seem to come from an idea or image outside the song. The
light catches her long fake eyelashes as she turns slowly on the seat cushion like a music box figurine. Mike Mikos enters, dressed in a business suit, and picks her up mid-twirl to carry her piggyback-style offstage. Two other actors come on to clear the chair and the fluorescent lights as Sophie Cattani walks down center dressed in a pink cocktail dress too young in style for her sophisticated demeanor. The music abruptly stops.

Cattani holds a bouquet of flowers and addresses the audience as naturally as she would a friend: “A summer evening in a Greek island. I am naked on a rock.” She describes sun bathing and then diving into the water to speak to a fish. In this dreamscape she recounts her conversation about Sartre with the sea creature, alternately speaking in French and English, a device Safer plays with throughout the production. She leaves the stage as the lights come up and Mike Mikos enters to the sounds of a flowing river on a summer day and is soon joined by Sean Donovan. They set their respective chairs on a diagonal facing the audience; they stare in the audience’s direction, but at no one in particular. They settle back in their chairs and look upward, as if they are lost in their own thoughts. In their reflective states, Donovan and Mikos move in sync into pensive positions: legs cross and uncross, arms stretch up, heads drop back to look up. The actors’ personal reflection becomes a simple, shared gesture-based dance, suggesting that our personal moments are far from unique.

At this early stage it is difficult to find a thematic line connecting these disparate scenes, but this lack of cohesion is not frustrating. I am comfortable with not trying to make sense of what I am watching because I am being bombarded with so much stimulation at once. Actors dance, lights flicker, characters sprint across the stage, music suddenly...
starts and then stops — there is hardly time to tabulate what has happened moments before. Safer keeps the stage action moving in such a way that it is difficult for me to focus anywhere but in the moment. He uses this technique in most of his shows and my experience is similar to Kélina Gotman’s when she saw Dancing vs. The Rat Experiment (2007): “If it was hard to follow at times, it was too lively for that to matter” (Gotman 2007:70). Part of this energetic display comes from the actors’ playfulness. They are all in on the same joke and baiting the audience with the promise of a punch line they are really excited to tell. This under-riding energy keeps the stage pictures alive and vibrant, even in their stillness.

The first section of Mee’s script abstractly sketches out dialog-free concepts for several mise-en-scènes, a potential trap for artists who perform it as a series of tableaus. He even tells the artists that for “visual inspiration” they should look to the paintings of “Nabis, of Edouard Vuillard, Aristide Maillol, Maurice Denis, Felix Vallotton, Paul Ranson, Pierre Bonnard, Georges Lacombe”:

A guy brings out a rattan chair, puts it down to one side, in the dirt, and just sits in it facing the audience, smiling.

A few minutes later
a guy comes out of the mobile home carrying a gas can;
he sits in a chair,
puts the gas can on the ground next to him,
lights a cigarette,
enjoys it,

and a woman comes out and,
sitting in a chair, or seated on the ground,
puts on her stockings; [...] (2011b)

However, Mee leaves many of these descriptions unfinished and requires the artists to complete them. Erin Mee describes her father’s playwriting style as “blueprints for events. For spectacles. For festivals” (Mee 2002). Mee turns the mid-century avantgarde theatre’s penchant for deconstructing plays (e.g., The Wooster Group’s production of LSD: Just the High Points [1984] and The Performance Group’s The Tooth of Crime [1973]) into a writing style. By offering up his plays to be “pillaged,” Mee gives directors permission to do what was once a renegade act. He demotes the primacy of his own texts, enticing artists to take them apart and use them to serve a purpose that is perhaps different from his original intention. One of the ways he does this is by presenting a text that is still in the process of being put together, sometimes even casting off concluding descriptions by writing, “whatever”—a tactic that forces performers to fill in the blanks. The artists performing Mee’s text have no choice but to write it with him because Mee’s style makes it impossible to know for certain how he would want it to be performed. Like Suzan Lori-Parks, Mee leaves grammatical openings for the artist to fill.

and then:
another dance piece
another dance piece
another dance piece
another dance piece
another dance piece
[...]
another dance piece
another dance piece
maybe with a
song
song
song
song
song
song
song
song
song (Mee 2011b)

Safer tends to fill in Mee’s text with comedy. He heeds Mee’s call to pillage by injecting the comical and the stupid into what could become maudlin theatrical still lifes if taken literally. Safer resists stillness and heaviness with childish comedy and kid-like play, like when Donovan comes onstage dressed in an ass-less tree costume. When he turns to leave we are faced with his bare ass, mooning us as he hob-

3. “a pair of children play in the dirt / a woman hangs out laundry / whatever” (Mee 2011b).
bles offstage as if his feet are tied together. This is not in the script, but is emblematic of the kind of absurd embellishment Safer and the performers from both companies put onto Mee’s text.

Safer says that he “loves the balance between this really cheap thing with this really beautiful philosophy in Chuck’s text” (Safer 2011). I experienced this less as a balance and more as a resistance to the kind of deep meditation that contemplating the end of the world often involves. For example, during the play’s first monologue delivered by the Gas Man (Sean Donovan), a monologue about love being the most important accomplishment in one’s lifetime, Safer directs his cast to enact other parts of Mee’s text simultaneously and in competition with Donovan’s delivery. While Mee’s text describes a croquet game that follows the monologue, the Gas Man’s monologue, literally coming between Donovan and Cattani. To add to the ridiculousness of the game and to make it even more difficult for the audience to keep their attention on the Gas Man’s monologue, the actors use a golf club instead of a mallet, a lopsided ball of tape for a croquet ball, and one of the performers gets onto all fours to become a human wicket. The game looks truly absurd. So, while Donovan tries to have this very serious conversation about love and the meaning of life, the silly croquet game casts its incongruous shadow on the exchange.

Towards the end of the play the Gas Man has another long monologue about the end of the world in which he wonders what our civilization will leave behind:

You have to wonder
if there has ever been a civilization as advanced as our own
because, you know, there could have been and we would never know

because after they have brought themselves down to ruin
and
after the records have disintegrated
after the clothes have turned to dust
after the bones have turned to ashes
after the buildings have fallen back to earth
what lasts longer than anything else is red pottery
it is the only evidence we have of the very oldest civilizations
and red pottery lasts only 30,000 years
so you have to ask yourself
do we, today, have anything that lasts as long as red pottery?
and the only thing we have that would last that long is:
Styrofoam (Mee 2011b)

The image of our legacy being Styrofoam strikes me as the metaphorical core of the play. Styrofoam is a hazardous material invented with no concern for its perilous environmental impact. The compulsive dance and stage actions, within the context of the play, seem also to take place without the characters’ forethought. This kind of punctiliousness is both pleasurable and dangerous. It is instant gratification that lasts only for the instant.

Figure 3. The cast does a playful and childlike dance. From left: Antoine Oppenheim, Francois Sabourin, Mike Mikos, Heather Christian, Abigail Browde, Sophie Cattani, Sean Donovan. (Photo by Lee Wexler)
Witness Relocation’s anti-psychological, task-based approach favors the spontaneous and sometimes convulsive giving in to impulse for the sake of being entertaining. In *Heaven on Earth* no character can get out a full thought without interruption. There is no patience or time in this staging for grappling with some character’s philosophy of life or its end. Safer considers these interruptions realistic. “I don’t see naturalism onstage as realistic. Real to me is that there’s always distractions” (2011). Safer’s sentiment echoes Mee’s, who on his website writes: “I like plays that are not too neat, too finished, too presentable. My plays are broken, jagged, filled with sharp edges, filled with things that take sudden turns, careen into each other, smash up, veer off in sickening turns. That feels good to me. It feels like my life. It feels like the world” (Mee 2011a). Beyond the performance’s association with the text, I interpret Safer’s method as a cultural commentary on a society that lives with truncated communication, immediate access to information, and instant gratification. The sometimes spastic and impulse-oriented approach to the scenes feels like the result of too much content, too much speed, and our shrinking attention spans.

Though on Witness Relocation’s website the play is described as “a dance/theater piece about how life goes on after the end of the world,” the production feels more like a reflection on why the world ends and why it must end—because we lack the attention span to consider the impact of our actions on the future (Witness Relocation 2011).

Witness Relocation and Ildi! Eldi’s performance of *Heaven on Earth* resists the potential sentimentality and dread that comes from thinking about what happens next. Their presentation of this afterlife is not brooding; instead, it is exuberant. Their cacophonous, comic, and high-energy style is both a harbinger of the end and a living portrait of the many afters of each passing micro-world. Yes, we all might be on the path toward oblivion, but, as the show seems to say, it is a lot more fun to enjoy the ride than to worry about what happens on it.

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Art Is Magic/It Cannot Succeed
Christoph Schlingensief’s Via Intolleranza II

Matt Cornish

The man himself finally “appears” 80 minutes into the 90-minute performance, looking like a hologram: a man sitting in a chair, with an image of the same man (white robe, white hat) walking through a village in Africa projected behind him onto a sheer curtain. But this image of the man in a chair is itself a projection, beamed onto that same curtain. We’ve heard from his emails, even seen video footage of him in Africa. Earlier, a representative, a man performing as this man, told us that “Art is magic,” though a projection contradicted this: “Life is that which does not succeed.” Now Christoph Schlingensief seems to sit before us, the layers of projections making him appear three-dimensional. He addresses us directly for the first time. But can the deceased Schlingensief, for whom personal presence and failure created the magic of his art, make himself present?

Schlingensief’s absence becomes an almost overpowering feature of Via Intolleranza II, which premiered at the Bavarian State Opera in Munich in late June 2010. At first, Via Intolleranza seems to be another self-aggrandizing charity event for Africa: Issoufou Kienou, a native of Burkina Faso dressed in a pale suit and blue bow-tie, quietly sings in French and plays guitar for the audience (we clap along with him, off beat). After he exits, the charming Brigitte Cuvelier, in a chic black dress, takes the podium to ask for our contributions: the project, Cuvelier reports, has already raised a whopping 380 Euros! But as the production continues, curtains lift to transform the stage into a rehearsal space for an adaptation of an opera, complicating the charity narrative. Led by a controlling director figure, actors from Europe and Burkina Faso sing and dance, with occasional monologues from the Burkinabé, all amid a forest of small, colorfully painted huts, a hospital bed, and a separate raised stage enclosed by a large glass box. But this intercultural fest regularly breaks down; Schlingensief seeks to embrace his (and, by extension, our) well-meaning racism—postcolonialism gone amok—while the Burkinabé attempt to express their own voices in the mess. Via Intolleranza ends when Schlingensief takes the stage, disrupting the event and bringing the evening to a close with a depressing and self-centered, but also at times generous monologue. Speaking quickly about quotidian complaints (his demanding schedule, buying bread), he addresses “his” Africa, his need to be loved, and his hope that the audience has become more united.

When Via Intolleranza premiered, Schlingensief was still healthy enough to perform in person at the end of the evening. Two months after opening night, on 21 August, he died of complications from lung cancer at the age of 49. Throughout his career, Schlingensief appeared in almost all of his controversial works, casting himself as himself: a narcissist, a clown, an anarchist, an enfant terrible who interrupted and tore down what he was simultaneously building up. He managed to achieve all of this in his television series Talk 2000 (1997), a talk show that featured Schlingensief disrupting interviews by insulting his guests, complaining about his personal problems, and even


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leaving the studio entirely and descending into the Berlin subway system. A Schlingensief is not a Schlingensief without the man himself. Knowing he would likely not live out Via Intolleranza’s theatrical run, Christoph wove the paradox of a production without him into its complex fabric, casting an actor to “play” him and including hologram-like footage to give him a voice at the end of the performance—while building into the piece the failure of these measures to replace him. When I saw it at the 2011 Theatertreffen, an annual festival in May that brings to Berlin the 10 “most noteworthy” Austrian, Swiss-German, and German productions of the year,¹ Via Intolleranza had to contend with and contain Schlingensief’s absence.

At the time of his death, Schlingensief was widely considered to have entered the pantheon of German “genius artists,” alongside such figures as Heinrich von Kleist and Georg Büchner (who also died young). Even more conservative newspapers like the Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, whose chief theatre critic Gerhard Stadelmaier had never written fondly of Schlingensief’s antics, praised him at his passing. But before his cancer diagnosis in 2008, before his bestselling 2009 memoir about the illness (So schön wie hier kanns im Himmel gar nicht sein! [It cannot be as beautiful in heaven as it is here!]),¹ before the sycophantic obituaries following his passing, Schlingensief was anything but beloved or honored.

Christoph Schlingensief was born in 1960 in the West German town of Oberhausen, a mostly Catholic area. The high ceremony—and guilt—of Catholicism influenced all of his work, especially later pieces like the “Fluxus Oratorio” Eine Kirche der Angst vor dem Fremden in mir (A church of fear for the stranger in me; 2008), a funeral “anti-mass” with Schlingensief as high priest, Jesus, and corpse. Influenced above all by the action-artist Joseph Beuys and film director (and playwright and theatre director) Rainer Werner Fassbinder, Schlingsief created assaultive, unbalanced, and often uncat-

2. Via Intolleranza II appeared at several other festivals, including the Holland Festival and the Helsinki Festival, in the summer of 2011, and in Dresden in November 2011.

3. All translations are mine unless otherwise noted.
egorizable works: films like *100 Jahre Adolf Hitler* (100 years of Adolf Hitler; 1989), a hysterical and deliberately inaccurate “depiction” of Hitler’s last hours in his bunker; and stage productions like *Rocky Dutschke ’68* (1996), which began outside of the Berlin Volksbühne, as Schlingensief, dressed like 1960s-era leftist leader Rudi Dutschke, led the audience in a protest against rampaging fake policemen. In the art-action *Ausländer Raus!* (Foreigners Out!; 2000), people voted asylum seekers out of a container placed in a central Viennese square, while the world could watch the events 24 hours day from a website on a live video feed. Schlingensief liked to incorporate layers of aesthetic and political contradiction into his work, making satire and seriousness indistinguishable, enjoying his loud voice while confessing his ego (the sins of pride and arrogance) in using it and drowning out others.

*Via Intolleranza II* incorporates these aspects of Schlingensief’s projects as well as his last obsessions: illness, death, saying goodbye, and, above all else here, his dream of creating an “Opera Village” in the West African country Burkina Faso. This *Operndorf*, a project now led by Schlingensief’s widow (and costume designer, for this production and others) Aino Laberenz, will include a hospital, a school, and arts spaces, with a performance venue at its center. The idea is to encourage cultural exchange—the Europeans will learn Burkinabé arts, the Burkinabé will learn European opera—while creating opportunities for creative expression in a place where more basic needs often take precedence.

Half ironic, half in earnest, Schlingensief sets up *Via Intolleranza II* as a charity event to raise money for his Opera Village. This begins when the audience enters the building: collection baskets sit in the lobby; all proceeds from the selling of programs go to the Opera Village. And it also happens performatively. After Kienou charms us with his song, Cuvelier jokes (or is she genuine?) about the performance’s grand ambitions, which have been reduced from a cast of about 300 to importing just the 10 artists from Burkina Faso we will see tonight. She asks for our help to realize the full project.

As Cuvelier speaks, the performance shifts to become a rehearsal for an adaptation of Italian composer Luigi Nono’s opera *Intolleranza 1960* (1961). In the “stage-action,” as Nono preferred to call it, a refugee from southern Italy experiences prejudice and hatred while trying to find a job in northern Europe; the police toss him in a concentration camp, and he dies trying to cross a river back into his homeland. (Classically avantgarde, Nono aligned himself for most of his career with Karlheinz Stockhausen, but always with an eye towards political engagement.) Unfortunately, we’re told, Schlingensief did not secure permission to perform the Italian composer’s opera, so we never hear Nono’s music; instead, the actors perform bits of songs and dances from their various cultural traditions. Despite this setback, among others (including the 2010 Icelandic volcanic ash cloud, which Cuvelier says disrupted flights and shortened the rehearsal time), the actors and crew have gathered to begin working on Schlingensief’s vision of an opera-like performance, with people from Burkina Faso taking the major roles, as a benefit for and showcase of the Opera Village. A crude director’s table sits downstage center, with a lamp and a microphone so the director can reference texts and shout instructions. Longtime Schlingensief actor Stefan Kolosko (appearing as himself in *Hamlet* [2001] and *A

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4. This website is now archived at: www.schlingensief.com/backup/wienaktion.
Church of Fear for the Stranger in Me, among others) plays the Director, serving as the representative (or the representation) of the absent Schlingensief. Together, on one level, they rehearse for the performance we are watching, pushing the audience to reflect upon the process of creating a live performance piece to “represent” and “benefit” Africa.

Schlingensief cannot build his village unironically. He does not just bring us dancing Africans and ask for our money, the way a telethon fundraising event might. He attempts to incorporate, and thereby avoid or at least abjure, the whole terrible history of European-African “cultural exchange” into Via Intolleranza. In a similar way to Suzan-Lori Parks in plays like Venus (1996) and Jean Genet in The Blacks (1958), Schlingensief uses metatheatrical techniques to comment on colonialist representations of Africa, even as he (a privileged European) puts Africans onstage as “African” characters and, thereby, represents them. Ultimately, Schlingensief has in fact brought dancing Africans to his European audience and asks for our money.

Having cast himself as a new colonial adventurer—traveling to Africa with a camera (both images of him with his camera as well as the footage he gathered are shown in video projections) and a floppy straw hat—Schlingensief (played onstage by Kolosko) begins the rehearsal by screaming at the actors, especially the Burkinabé. They cannot seem to get right the representation he wants. “Get away from me, you black monster!” he squeals at an African man with whom he had been playing a game of tag. An older white German woman, Kerstin Graßmann, later scolds Kienou for costing the production so much money: his dark skin is more expensive to light than pale skin. Projected on the curtains behind them, horrifying images of voyeuristic colonialism play out: the “Hottentot Venus” and early National Geographic–style travelogues. We cannot escape these images as we gaze at the Africans performing for us. The Europeans onstage shift between kind-hearted but colonial charity—teaching an African how to perform Tänztheater-style dance, for example—and short-tempered outbursts of ugly racism, like those from Schlingensief/Kolosko.

The Burkinabé are in some moments objectified as art objects and in others able to grab opportunities to express their individual,

Figure 3. The performers “rehearse” an adaptation of Italian composer Luigi Nono’s opera Intolleranza 1960 in Christoph Schlingensief’s Via Intolleranza II. From left to right: Brigitte Cuvelier, Arno Waschk, Jean Chaize, Johannes Lauer, Olivia Stahn, Issoufou Kienou, and Stefan Kolosko. Kunstenfestivaldesarts Brussels, May 2010. (Photo by Aino Laberenz)
complex identities. To distant, threatening string music, Kandy Guira slowly twirls around inside a full-body modernist (primitivist, in fact) paper-maché cone mask: “The whites mean well. They’re artists and they mean well... We are all African exhibition objects.” But Amado Komi, who looks 12 and has been “kidnapped” by Schlingensief to play the role of the opera’s boy refugee, demands to be recognized as the 30-year-old man he is. Of course, even these moments of “emancipation” exist within Schlingensief’s framework — when not explicitly scripted by Schlingensief, then certainly designed by him. And it’s impossible to think that repeated racist incidents, from explicit insults to primitivist dance, do not cause emotional damage on some level for the Burkinabé. But the Burkinabé are not simply the victims of a neocolonialist exploiter. At several points in Via Intolleranza, we get the impression that they may be taking advantage of this show to leave Africa for the comfort and wealth of Europe. Several of them sell their skills and creative output on the stage and in the program; Kienou announces that his albums are available in the foyer.

With the soundtrack, Schlingensief juxtaposes and mingles the classical and modernist European tradition with various Burkina Faso forms. Breaking into rehearsal, the Fönix trio (a group of awkwardly dressed white people, the leader wearing a short-sleeve collared-shirt with mismatched tie) play dissonant, squeaky trombone, clarinet, and cello music, while the soprano Friedrike Harmsen sings modern opera, apparently composed but unidentifiable, at least to me. Several Burkinabé line up in front of a projection screen (showing scenes from Giuseppe de Liguoro’s 1911 silent film adaptation of Dante’s Divine Comedy) and begin to chant political slogans in French, pushing Kolosko, who tries to silence them, offstage. As Kader Traore, a young Burkinabé man, grabs a mic and begins to rap loudly in French (“my life is full of cries, now you can take notice through my crying songs”), all of the sounds pile up on one another and the production spins momentarily out of Kolosko’s control. A few minutes after Kolosko reasserts his power, a wild techno dance-party breaks out, strobe lights and all, and everybody, European and African, bounces to the beat.

At times, all of this sound, movement, projection, and language becomes overwhelming. At one point we hear the opening monologue from the movie Taxi Driver, while Jean Chaize performs abstract, modern dances of “poverty” and “hunger,” and Komi discusses his past and abduction in French with German surtitles. Then an actor quotes Theodor Adorno, not once, but twice. It is often too much to take in, requiring each audience member to carve his or her own way through all the material.

In exposing the political and aesthetic contradictions of his project and by engulfing the audience in more ideas and images than they can process, Schlingensief embraces the

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5. See www.myspace.com/kandymamusic for more on Mamaounata “Kandy” Guira, for example.

6. According to Laberenz, Schlingensief called a 2007 adenovirus infection, which caused his eyes to swell shut, his “Adorno Virus” (Laberenz 2011). Schlingensief long felt that his physical health was closely tied to his work, and often blamed his cancer on having directed Richard Wagner’s Parsifal at the Bayreuth Festspiele (2004).
complexity involved in European-African relations, and tries to make an end-run around the dangers of colonialism that accompany such endeavors. Making the production discernible as the product a European shaping African traditions through rehearsal for consumption as a crass charity event, Schlingensief frees the audience to question his intentions and the consequences of the performance, as well as of his Opera Village. Which I am happy to do.

This is a project essentially doomed to failure. Schlingensief cannot escape colonialism while trying to raise money for his charity with dancing Africans. Still, he plows ahead, designing the entire event, the Opera Village itself as well as this project, as a work of art. He performs the uneven European-African cultural exchange, as well as his confused feelings in attempting to help develop a small village in Burkina Faso (hope for the future of Africa, desire for a legacy, guilt for his privilege and colonialism, frustration with everybody in his way). Schlingensief articulates two key axioms that help to define his life’s work and this performance: “Life is that which does not succeed” and “Art is magic”—the former projected on the curtain, the latter said by Kolosko as Schlingensief. Via Intolleranza expresses both axioms eloquently: Schlingensief believes that first, this performance can transform individual lives; and second, that the performance cannot change anything.

This delicate balance between art and neo-colonialist charity began to break down with Schlingensief’s death. The Opera Village is no longer part art-action, part intercultural education project, part European charity. It’s now entirely European charity, with board members including a major politician from the German Green Party (Antja Vollmer) and funding from the German government’s Foreign Ministry. The layers of irony Schlingensief incorporated have disappeared, especially because his loved ones naturally want to achieve his Opera Village dream, and cannot do so without seriousness. But Via Intolleranza manages to maintain Schlingensief’s project by playing with his absence, and his presence.

“Schlingensief will not be coming tonight. He won’t be here ever again,” Kolosko says just before the curtains close and the final video plays. When Schlingensief appears at the 80-minute mark, seeming almost (but definitely not) “live,” Via Intolleranza has the potential to become an act of mourning for its creator. In fact, that is exactly what happened with the opera Schlingensief was preparing to direct when he passed away: Metanoia, composed by Jens Joneleit, which premiered in the Staatsoper Berlin in October 2010. The artistic leadership of the Staatsoper did not appoint anyone to take over Schlingensief’s role as director, and the production became a sentimental disaster. With videos by Schlingensief playing randomly in the background, the singers made their best attempt at the complex libretto (by director/playwright Rene Pollesch), but stumbled through it, clearly not able to understand the text, moving without purpose into and out of the performance space.

Via Intolleranza makes a joke out of Schlingensief’s absence instead of wallowing in self-pity. (Kolosko, playing the role of Schlingensief, repeatedly trips up: “Christoph is, I mean, I am...”) When Schlingensief delivers his final lines as the “hologram,” they become more powerful in his absence than they would have been were he still alive and present: “I want you to eat my dead body, digest me, and shit me out. I want you to spread the shit on plants as fertilizer, and nourish yourself again.” In this moment, the video becomes, to use Roland Barthes much-cited phrase about photography from Camera Lucida, a kind of “emanation of a past reality: a magic, not an art” (1981:88). As an emanation of a past reality in this particular way, in this particular production—his dying body foreshadowing his decaying corpse (and our own), the series of curtains visible on the real stage and in the video triggering us to imagine him here, in front of these curtains, while reminding us of his absence—Schlingensief becomes present to our present. Use what I’ve given you; I have no more to give.

In discussing the performance with me afterwards, a former intern of Schlingensief’s, who has seen much of his work, commented that for the first time she was able to see what Schlingensief wanted on the stage. In other words, Schlingensief was unable to get in the way of his own work. This is
regrettable. Ultimately, a Schlingensief is not a Schlingensief without the man storming the stage and driving the performance into anarchic fits, messing up his own, often contradictory messages. But the late director does become present, if only for the duration of the performance, through Via Intolleranza’s fervid, intellectually and emotionally invigorating paradoxes—not the least of which is Schlingensief’s own absent presence. Art cannot succeed in bringing Schlingensief back to us—nor can it solve the problems of European charity in and representations of Africa, much less pull Burkina Faso out of poverty. But art sure is magic.

References


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