From Object to Performance in Israeli Art

A Historiography

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My historiographic research into the emergence and development of performative art practices—environmental activities, actions, and performance art—in Israel in the 1960s–1970s is founded on four premises: First, a performative turn took place in Israeli art during the 1960s, manifested in the dematerialization of the art object, a transition from object-oriented art to an art of process and action, and the erasure of the conventional division between the work of art and its creation. Second, this turn is an “emergent” cultural moment, to draw on Raymond Williams’s distinction (1977:121–27); that is, a moment of emergence that materialized in reaction to the dominant aesthetic convictions as well as to the specific sociopolitical conditions of the time. This cultural moment reflected both the exposure and responsivenes of (mostly) young Israeli artists to new trends in Western art in the 1960s and their need to respond to sociopolitical circumstances questioning Israeli national collectivist

1. This research was supported by The Israel Science Foundation (grant no. 555/14).
2. Williams explains: “By ‘emergent’ I mean, first, that new meanings and values, new practices, new relationships and kinds of relationship are continually being created” (1977:123).
ideals. Indeed, it is not unreasonable to suggest that the transition from object to action- and performance-based practices (and ultimately to the artist’s self) marks the 1970s as a distinct period in Israeli art. Third, the performative turn in Israeli art was gradual, from the mid-1960s to the second half of the 1970s, culminating in Meitzag 76 of June 1976, the first exhibition-festival of Israeli performance art. This dense period can be divided into three major phases, reflecting the performative characteristic peculiar to each one and paralleling three distinct periods into which a more general Israeli history of the 1960s and the 1970s can be divided. Fourth, while art critics and curators of Israeli art have not quite neglected the performative art of the 1970s, they have failed to theorize it from the point of view of performance theory, foregrounding its ontological, phenomenological, and embodied values, nor have they paid attention to this art’s historical development. Because my research deals with performance activities that were not always documented, or insufficiently documented (see Harari 2012), I depend greatly on oral history: interviews with key historical figures who made their mark in the arts in the 1960s and 1970s.

While the American and (mostly Western) European “major” history/ies of this evolving “performance mentality” (Kirby 1965:41), its trajectories and products, are well explored, forming the accepted canon and genealogy of what has become “performance art,” its origins and early manifestations in Israel are relatively unexplored and, except for a few publications in English on Israeli art (see for example Barzel 1987; Ofrat 1998; Zalmona 2013), are practically unknown and inaccessible to researchers outside Israel. Because this performative turn in art started to show its globalized effects in different off-center locations around the world in the 1960s (Israel included), expressing compelling idiosyncratic local reactions, and forming globalized articulations that contested national-cultural paradigms and identities, it is important to explore these “minor” histories to fill in missing parts.

1962–1970

Performative Actions of Painting

Heralding the onset of the first phase of the shift toward performance was, somewhat emblematically, Georges Mathieu’s almost forgotten live action painting at the Bezalel National Museum in Jerusalem in March 1962. Mathieu, the French abstractionist (famed for his flamboyant style and painting technique), was invited by Yona Fischer, then a young curator at the museum and well educated in French culture and art, to hold an exhibition (Fischer 2015). During his 10-day stay in Israel he executed 18 action paintings, some performed live in front of spectators at the Bezalel National Museum, most of them invited students from the nearby Bezalel Academy of Art.3

During this first phase a new generation of young artists, many of whom were native-born Israelis, brought new techniques, materials, and exhibition formats to the local art scene. These artists challenged the aesthetic imperative of modernist abstraction zealously embraced by the painters of Ofakim Hadashim (New Horizons). The Ofakim Hadashim painters had quit

3. Mathieu’s action paintings were exhibited immediately following his visit: in March–April 1962 at the Bezalel National Museum and in November–December 1962 at the Tel Aviv Museum.
the League of Painters and Sculptors in the Land of Israel due to managerial and aesthetic disagreements and formed the new art group in November 1948, a few months after Israel attained statehood. Ofakim Hadashim spread its ideological and aesthetic wings over Israeli art through the 1950s and most of the 1960s. Most of its members were European Jews who had studied at art schools in Europe before immigrating to Palestine in the 1920s and 1930s. Even though the art world’s center of gravity had shifted from Paris to New York due to World War II, and new artistic trends had evolved, the artists’ orientation remained European, focused on Paris as the capital of contemporary art and the French style of abstract painting as the most progressive form of painting and the culmination of modern art (Shefi 1997:284). This adherence to universalist abstraction and the rejection of localism in Israeli art is noteworthy, given the fact that the period during which Ofakim Hadashim gained prominence was critical in terms of building the nation and forming its national identity. Ofakim Hadashim’s authoritative position was acknowledged both inside and beyond the art world. Indeed, historian of Israeli art Gila Ballas observes that Ofakim Hadashim’s success led to “abstract artists [...] springing up everywhere” (2014:15e).

Inspired by trends in European and (later) American art, such as Pop Art and New Realism, and eager for exhibition opportunities and public attention, the emerging new generation of young Israeli artists experimented by introducing elements of time, spatiality, and interactivity into their works. A performative sensibility was employed to question the “characteristic methods of [the] discipline,” its operative “procedures,” which according to Clement Greenberg was the essence and imperative of good modernist art (1993:85). While in some cases the process of creation was exposed and object-viewer relations were encouraged, the production of art objects for traditional aesthetic consumption remained ultimately the main goal during this phase. Pioneering performative manifestations took place predominantly within the framework of organized group activities and exhibitions in museums and galleries. As group events with an eye towards public exposure and recognition, these activities adopted a performative sensibility that was employed operatively in a self-aware fresh and light manner, in contrast to the solemnity that characterized the devout abstract painters of the previous generation. In this respect, it is worth mentioning that this changing of the (avant)guard took place during the second decade in the life of the young Israeli state, considered by historians as the “peaceful decade” (Shapira 2012:262). In the 1960s, the economic and security burdens of statehood were a little bit less taxing than in the 1950s, allowing the young state to constitute and perform its identity and ethos.

Many young artists active during this phase were informally and intermittently affiliated with one of two important, albeit short-lived, art groups. While tagged and referred to as a “group,” Eser Plus (Ten Plus, tagged also as “10+”) was, in every practical sense, an entrepreneurial framework for a rising young art clique. Led by painter Raffi Lavie, whose organizational skills proved to be effective, 10+ mounted 10 group exhibitions in Tel Aviv’s new art galleries. Rather than adhering to and promoting a specific artistic style, medium, or technique, each of the exhibitions between 1965 and 1970 revolved around a chosen theme pertinent to the history and practice of the visual arts—for example, scale (Large Works, February 1966 and Miniatures, October 1966); color (In Red, March 1967); material (Mattresses, September 1970); content (The Flower, December 1966 and The Nude, November 1967); and history (10+ on Venus, May 1967)—inviting the participating artists to creatively respond to the shared theme in unpredictable, playful ways. Although pluralistic in attitude, the stylistic orientation of many of the works was a mixture of American Pop Art and Abstract painting (which most of the

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4. Ofakim Hadashim ceased to exist as an active group after its final exhibition in 1963. However, its impact continued to resonate for a long time. For a comprehensive history of this group, see Ballas (2014).

5. Unless otherwise indicated, all quotations from Hebrew-language texts are my translations.
artists could not quite relinquish, given their training in that tradition). Compared to Ofakim Hadashim’s stringent modernist ideology, what is significant about the 10+ group is its rejection of art’s ivory tower. In Israeli and modern art curator Dorit Levita’s words: “The group considered itself as a sociological factor rather than an artistic one. Contact with social reality was a keyword in the sociology of 10+” (1980:251).

On 10 February 1966, the opening night of their inaugural exhibition, Large Works, at the Tel Aviv Artists House, the participating artists painted together on the gallery wall while an audience watched. This was undoubtedly a minor, probably whimsical, moment, and yet a significant one. It was the first time in Israeli art that the creative act had been performed live in front of viewers, the first time that the act of painting, rather than the painting itself, was the focus of attention. In addition to the collective live painting, some of the works displayed in the exhibition encouraged interaction between viewers and the artworks. For example, painter Aharon Witkin presented an object that invited viewers to arrange and rearrange, in whatever shape they desired, colorful square and circular discs placed on a wooden board. Large Works also included a program of poetry readings, electronic music, theatre, and movies, thus injecting other media into the exhibition. One of the special events was a fashion show. Parading among the artworks, the models displayed dresses made of fabrics painted by the artists. Benno Kalev notes that Large Works was the 10+ group’s most invested exhibition: “meticulously prepared for a long time in order to impress the audience and display not just ‘another exhibition’ but, rather, something different, young, wild, and special” (2008:29). The group’s 10th and final exhibition, Mattresses (10 September 1970), comprised an environment made of used mattresses that filled the entire Ha’Kibbutz Gallery in Tel Aviv, not unlike earlier American performative ventures such as Allan Kaprow’s Yard (1961). The visitors could interact with the found objects in whatever ways they wished.

In 1968, as the 10+ group exhibitions were vitalizing Tel-Aviv’s growing gallery scene, attracting the attention of both critics and the general public, the Mashkof (Lintel) group, active until 1970, was forming in Jerusalem. Considered in retrospect by one of Mashkof’s founders, the artist Dedi Ben-Shaul said of the group: “Politically, grouping together gave us a lot of power [...] We were disappointed in the establishment” (in Avron Barak 2015a). By “establishment,” Ben-Shaul referred predominantly to the veteran coterie of painters, mostly German immigrants, who for many years dominated the Jerusalem art world, and to the newly established Israel Museum (1965) that oriented itself, so the young generation claimed, towards international art. Mashkof, says Ben-Shaul, knowingly appealed to the general public by making art that was “more impressive and attractive than solo exhibitions” (in Avron Barak 2015a). Mashkof was spontaneously formed by young artists from various disciplines — plastic arts,
Among those who lived and/or studied in New York in the 1960s were poet Yossi Ofek, painter Tzivia Weinman, painter Zvi Tolkovski, and musician-composer Yossi Mar-Haim. Weinman recalls: "It was 1964–1966 [...] an incredible experimental atmosphere of theatre, music, Jazz, art, everything." And Ofek adds: "And Happenings, everywhere and all the time. This is how we got the idea of being together and doing artistic happenings" (in Avron Barak 2015c). Mar-Haim recalls seeing John Cage and Robert Rauschenberg at the Armory Show, dance works at the Judson Church, and Meredith Monk’s 16 Millimeter Earrings (Mar-Haim 2015).

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and Shatz were joined by Bezalel students and other members of the group (who brought food and wine). The abstract painting remained on the bulletin board for the duration of its rental period, one week—a trace and material evidence of its production—later to be covered by layers of ads and posters (and probably forgotten). For the duration of its rental, the bulletin board changed its function, turning into a temporary outdoor gallery. This unpretentious but critical Happening was to my knowledge the first case in Israeli art of performance-based artistic intervention in a public sphere, of art taking place outside the artist’s studio or a similar venue and presented outside the museum or gallery; a simple act of place-making. In fact, I see it as heralding the change from the first phase in the transition from object to performance in Israeli art—performative actions of painting—to the second phase, that of outdoor activities.

It is interesting to note that by the end of the 1960s the term “Happening”—which at first was imported into the local art discourse without being translated into Hebrew—became a buzzword on the Israeli art scene. Menachem Talmi, a cultural columnist for the Maariv daily newspaper, wrote on 26 December 1969 that the Happening “bug” had arrived, infecting “conservative Jerusalem, which readily and joyfully welcomed the news” of the new artform. After explaining to his uninitiated readers that this bug had been engendered in the USA in the 1950s by avantgarde artists, Talmi went on to sarcastically remark that the term “Happening” was being attached to various artistic occasions in order to attract the public “who did not quite know what a Happening was but sensed that it should be something very interesting and audacious” (1969:14).

1970–1974
Outdoor Activities

During this second phase, the shift from object to action extended beyond traditional exhibition venues, as artists started to intervene in the environment, experimenting with social, ecological, and ultimately also personal processes. Gaon and Shatz’s action painting on the bulletin board was, to my mind, a pioneering move in that direction. However, it has been largely forgotten, as manifestations of conceptual art gained more prominence in the art historiography of that period, overshadowing the supposedly less distinctive and less serious activities of the Mashkof group.

Artists moving from museums and galleries to specific outdoor environments was a manifestation of the need to liberate art and artists from the grasp of traditional aesthetic forms, functions, effects, and sponsors in favor of a less mediated involvement in reality, its conditions, and its circumstances. Particularly after the Six-Day War of 1967, this reality was seething and hotly debated as Israeli society was split with regard to territories occupied during the war. The Six-Day War signified for many Israelis the omnipotence of the young state that had turned into a regional superpower after a swift victorious campaign. For supporters of the Biblical ideal of “Greater Israel,” the war—whose results were considered also in theological terms as miraculous—marked the realization of the mythic Eretz Yisrael (the Biblical “Land of Israel”) and hence the end of (a diasporic) history and the beginning of a new national historical order. This sense of potency and overconfidence did not last for long. After the Six-Day War the situation along Israel’s recently expanded and disputable frontiers with Egypt, Jordan, and Syria was continuously inflammatory and violent. In March 1969 the War of Attrition broke out between Egypt and Israel along the Suez Canal. This caused the national mood to backslide because while euphoric feelings prevailed, disillusionment was beginning to sprout. Thus, for instance, in April 1970 a group of senior high school students, prior to their compulsory military service, sent an unprecedented letter to Prime Minister Golda Meir expressing their reservations.

7. Yafa Gaon, the widow of Izika Gaon, claims in an interview that “the spirit of Mashkof was Happening. They considered everything they did as Happening. Israeli Happening began in Mashkof” (in Avron Barak 2015b).
regarding the territorial occupation, the prolonged War of Attrition (ending with a ceasefire in August 1970), and the government’s unwillingness to negotiate with the then president of Egypt, Gamal Abdel Nasser.

During this phase, Israeli artists started to seriously question the relevance of art to social life, initiating outdoor artistic activities as a proactive intervention. Performative art strategies were employed to criticize Israeli collectivist and chauvinist beliefs, values, and norms. These outdoor activities transgressed the accepted, culturally regulated boundary between artistic procedures and social-political ones, encouraging a dialogue between artists, artisans, scientists, politicians, and other citizens. These were manifestations of what Israeli visual culture theorist Ariella Azoulay has termed “art outside the place of art,” which “sought to abolish the monopoly of the art field over artistic activity, and in this way to return art to its role as an art of needs” (1993:73, 75). Going outdoors in the late 1960s—after the Six-Day War and the occupation of extensive territories in the Golan Heights, the West Bank (Judea and Samaria), and the Sinai Peninsula—had a particular significance for Israeli art, since what lay outside the autonomous territory of the museum and gallery (“the place of art”) with its self-contained, untroubled narrative of art history was a complicated historical situation and a disputed territorial reality. Gideon Ofrat quoted artist Efrat Natan, who had said: “Here the land is a national myth. [ Whereas] Land Art in the USA was cosmopolitan, here it was Eretz Yisrael.” Ofrat pointed at the political charge of such works and concluded that “[Israeli] Land Art became an art of (occupied) territories” (1993:127). It is in this regard that curator Ellen Ginton understood the successful admission of conceptual strategies—such as action art, body art, and land art—into Israeli art after the Six-Day War:

The altercation over Israel’s national borders paralleled a challenging of boundaries generally in conceptual art as it evolved in the art centers of the West, and soon in this country as well, adapted to the local political and cultural parameters. (1998:323)

Ginton convincingly observed that “Conceptual art proposed strategies and practices which were far more adequate to the ‘fluid’ circumstances than traditional painting and sculpture” (322). Contemporaneous with the revival of utopian aspirations among the younger generation in the West—protesting against the prevailing world order and the Cold War—at the turn of the 1970s Israeli performative conceptual artworks reacted, with some delay, to the unfolding conflictual sociopolitical circumstances in Israel after the Six-Day War, conceptualizing a different reality.

Joshua Neustein’s by now canonical The Jerusalem River Project (1970) has been recognized as the first Israeli conceptual art outdoor activity. The Jerusalem River Project took place in a wadi, a
dry riverbed, in Jerusalem, facing the Judean desert. Neustein, in collaboration with Georgette Batlle and Gerry Marx, placed flowerpots with hidden loudspeakers emitting the sounds of flowing water along the wadi. “There is an unconscious as well as a real need for a wet element in the landscape of Jerusalem,” he wrote. “In the Bible, ancient maps, and folklore of Jerusalem, a river is shown or mentioned [...W]e will create/invent a river in Jerusalem, a ‘sound’ river” (in Fischer 1971:n.p.). While conceived by the artists as a “sound sculpture,” this project can also be distinguished as the first Israeli participatory outdoor Happening, inviting viewers to journey alongside the arid wadi and fantasize a flowing river.

Between 1971 and 1974 Pinchas Cohen Gan performed a series of environmental projects that he called “activities,” which scientifically, aesthetically, and biographically experimented with integrating two contrasting concepts/elements/environments. For instance, in Exhibition of Etchings in the Cowshed of Kibbutz Nirim (1972), Cohen Gan displayed 22 etchings in a cowshed over the cows’ manger; in The Dead Sea Project (1972) he attempted to “introduce life where none could be sustained” (Cohen Gan 1974:43) by transplanting fish into the Dead Sea; in 1973 he traveled alone to Alaska to see if he could assimilate into a different physical environment—“to travel from one end of the earth to the other, to reach your own end, end of geography” (1974:38); and in the Cape of the Good Hope Project (1974), Cohen Gan traveled to where the Indian Ocean and the Atlantic Ocean merge, transporting two gallons of Dead Sea water, which he emptied at his destination. All of Cohen Gan’s activities in the first half of the 1970s employed transplantation as a performative method, and all of his projects, like Neustein’s fantastic Jerusalem River, were futureless from the start, because they contradicted nature’s laws: Fish could not be transplanted into the Dead Sea, nor could the Dead Sea be connected to the oceanic water system, nor could Cohen Gan be assimilated in Alaska. Neustein, Cohen Gan, and other conceptual artists who expropriated the fantastic image from the confines of conventional artistic venues and transplanted it into real outdoor environments not only shed light on the politics of the art field and its monopoly over artistic creation, but also challenged nature, concretely and symbolically, and thus, I maintain, critically responded to the sociopolitical situation in Israel at the time. While in the late 1960s many thousands of young Europeans and Americans had taken to the streets in protest against the prevailing post-World War II world order and its devastating effects, and were calling for major social reforms, the situation in hubristic Israel was quite different. These outdoor activities were a disillusioned critical antutopian response to the euphoric mood that had enveloped Israel after the Six-Day War. In his lecture “The End of Utopia,” given at the Freie Universität Berlin in 1967, Herbert Marcuse maintained that utopias, in their quintessential intention of transforming repressive societies into free ones, “signify a break rather than a continuity with previous history” (1970:65). Such would be the case, he stated, “when a project for social change contradicts real laws of nature” (63). Marcuse further stressed that “only such a project is Utopian in the strict sense, that is, beyond history” (63). In light of this, all of the outdoor activities during this phase were conceptual in that they were futureless from the start—unable to contradict “certain scientifically established laws, biological laws, physical laws” (63)—implying that no new historical order had begun after the Six-Day War.

In terms of mobilizing art for sociopolitical ends and fulfilling human needs, Avital Geva’s outdoor activities and initiatives were doubtless the most progressive, both artistically and politically. Geva, a member of Kibbutz Ein Shemer, performed many of his environmental projects between 1971 and 1973 in collaboration with other artists or students, introducing an alternative way of artmaking and a different perspective regarding what should be the top priorities of ordinary people.\[8\]

8. The critical ideas developed by Marcuse—the Jewish-German philosopher who visited Israel between December 1971 and January 1972 and whose opinions regarding the Arab-Israeli conflict were published in Hebrew in Haaretz (2 January 1972)—were familiar to the young Israeli generation, particularly radical leftists.
art as a sociocultural activity. “It is one big triangle,” said Geva: “The art, the industry, and the living human being. The art intermediates between these elements by inventing some kind of a process that causes the seeds to sprout” (in Sharon 1973:37). Settlement Experiment was the title of a series of conceptual art activities that Geva conducted in his kibbutz, Ein Shemer, between October and December 1970. As part of this series he covered the streets in the kibbutz with paint and some weeks later covered the painted streets with fresh green stalks harvested from the surrounding fields: “The contours were thus eliminated for a period. The transfer of the material from the fields created an illusion of environmental unity [...] the neighborhood came into direct contact with the green agricultural background of the environment” (in Fischer 1971:n.p.). Another experiment, on 5 October 1970, included the connection of the kibbutz to the main Tel Aviv–Afula road extending the painted single yellow line that in Israel marks the edge of intercity roads; and on 26 January 1971, shortly before the Concept + Information exhibition at the Israel Museum in February 1971, Geva performed a sequel action in which he connected the museum to the main entry road of Jerusalem with the same yellow painted line, and thus, metaphorically, to his kibbutz. This action engaged with the relationship between periphery and center, between art institution and kibbutz, between the ideals of a productive and self-actualizing kibbutz society and the aesthetic ideals of city dwellers. It also parodically responded to the debate over the state’s unsettled borders (The Green Line) following the Six-Day War and the occupation of the West Bank.

A repeated concern of Geva was to investigate the indispensable relations between art and real needs. Azoulay explains: “An art of needs [...] is an art which will be produced, consumed, and distributed within a particular social community that needs it, and not in the superstructures (economic, social and political) in which art is only one more commodity in the commodity market” (1993:75). To that end Geva envisioned an “Artistic cooperative for public works,” as he described it in a 1972 letter to artist Moshe Gershuni (in Ofrat 1993:85). Although he failed to materialize this vision, between June and October 1972 artists Micha Ulmann, Yehezkel Yardeni, and Gershuni had followed Geva’s initiative and carried out a series of events near Geva’s kibbutz (they were joined occasionally by other artists), an area that contains Jewish settlements and Arab villages, factories and educational institutions, industry and agriculture. The main purpose of these outdoor experimental actions was to allow the participants to artistically respond to specific geographical, ecological, and demographic factors, bringing to the process innovative and creative ways of thinking. These young artists were very much inspired by the ideas of sculptor Yitzhak Danziger, with whom they used to meet in Geva’s kibbutz. Danziger had been a member of the abstractionist Ofakim Hadashim group but later became the most instrumental Israeli artist in reformulating the role of the artist in society, and an advocate for the environment as a legitimate medium for art. Danziger’s most prominent environmental project was the Rehabilitation of the Nesher Quarry (1971). Collaborating with scientists from the Israeli Institute of Technology in Haifa, Danziger initiated a program whose aim was to revitalize the quarry by reintegrating it into the surrounding topography and flora.

The group of artists used a derelict bus as a temporary, mobile studio where they held meetings (among themselves and with invited visitors) and made preparations for what later came to be known as the Metzer-Meiser project. During the four months of this outdoor project, the artists visited local factories and schools, set up meetings with members of the kibbutzim, organized symposia on ecological issues, and experimented with various materials and found objects (e.g., used books) to create sculptural elements and conceptual works. All these activities were environmental in both the strict and the broader humanistic sense of the word, as they intended to establish reciprocal relations between nature and industry, to encourage collaboration between Jewish and Arab inhabitants of the region, and, of course, to minimize the gap between art and life. These socio-ecological actions “in” and “on” reality emphasized the tension between the pragmatic and the aesthetic, and stimulated discussion of the ontology, the epistemology, the role, and the meaning of art among the participating artists (Gershuni 2006). In
their interventional artistic activities, the group of artists questioned the notion of autonomous, object-oriented art, challenging the idea of the individual artist producing works of art as a commodity. Instead, they tried out and created art that was inspired by and responded to environmental specificities, immersed in physical labor, driven by creative energy, and with the potential to transform reality.

As part of the project, Geva made an agreement with the local recycling paper factory to load used books into open containers and place them at various locations in the area in order to create open-air mobile libraries accessible to everyone, Jews and Arabs, farmers and urbanites. Micha Ullman performed his famous, politically charged piece *Metzer-Meiser* (which later gave its name to the whole project): He had dug two square pits, identical in size, one in the Arab village Meiser and one in Kibbutz Metzer located nearby—and exchanged the dug-out soil. Ullman’s conceptual act of soil transplantation-exchange was a critical response to the Zionist-Israeli territorial imperative, a rebuke of the arrogant Israeli leadership who after the Six-Day War rejected any solution based on “land for peace” (particularly UN Security Council Resolution 242).

In another action, artist Dov Or Ner provided inhabitants of Meiser and Metzer with plastic bags (which were also mailed to people in Israel and outside it), asking them to put “fragments of their life [...] that hinder their development” in the bags (in Tamir 2014:281). The filled bags were then hermetically sealed and deposited in an open pit 20-meters deep, left to be covered by natural processes.

Israeli critical theorist Sarah Hinski deconstructs the political import of Geva’s environmental projects. She contends that while on the surface they seem antiestablishment—specifically anti-Zionist—in fact, they reflect and share the ideologies of the establishment. She asserts that Israeli land art was another version of territorial occupation that transforms historically specific land into a “landscape.” Hinski argues that these artworks are a form of Orientalist depoliticized appropriation, of colonization via artistic reconceptualization. Furthermore, Hinski is critical of the seemingly social interventional stance of Geva’s collective projects, stating that while opposing individualism and related social power relations, the notion of collectivism, in the Israeli case, refers to the specific, dominant, and privileged collective that “defines the identity of Israeli Zionist society” (1993:108).

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9. While the original title of Ullman’s action was *Metzer-Meiser*—the name of the Arab village connoting the Hebrew word for message or moral lesson (*meser*), implying the need to talk over and solve the territorial question—it later came to be better known as *Land Exchange*.

In light of Hinski’s reading, I think that Cohen Gan’s conceptual outdoor activities enacted an individualism that undermined the Israeli collectivist ethos. His futile transplantation projects reflected his personal biography: his uprooting from his native Morocco and his migration to Israel in 1949, a year after the state’s establishment. Migrating from a Muslim country, Cohen Gan, the Arab Jew, “Easterner” (in Hebrew, Mizrahi), was struggling to find his place in the newly born country whose cultural identity and social hegemony were utterly European-oriented. Although he has lived in Israel for most of his life, Cohen Gan still considers himself to be a Moroccan Jewish refugee who has lost his home, and, like the fish of his Dead Sea Project or himself in the Journey to Alaska project, he cannot assimilate into a new environment (see Harari 2015).

The transition from object to performative practices during this second phase was also reflected in the introduction of new terms into the Israeli art discourse. These were either used in their English original or translated into Hebrew. Thus, for instance, one can find “Happening” as well as its translated version, hitrubasbut; and pe’ilot (activity), pe’ula (action) eruat (event), and mo’afe (performance).

1973–End of the 1970s

Performance Art and the Body

Not unlike the two previous phases but in more inextricable ways, this final phase in the transition from object to performance in Israeli art of the 1960s–’70s bears the scars of historical circumstances. The Yom Kippur War of October 1973 traumatically cracked the foundation of the

11. Cultural theorist Ella Shohat writes: “[O]fficial Israeli/Zionist policy urges Arab Jews (or, more generally, Oriental Jews, also known as Sephardim or Mizrahim) to see their only real identity as Jewish. The official ideology denies the Arabness of Arab Jews, positing Arabness and Jewishness as irreconcilable opposites” (1999:5–6).
Israeli experience. Even though the war was not unexpected, hubristic Israel—overconfident of its military supremacy and power after its successful Six-Day War—was caught off guard. This political shortsightedness, strategic misconception, and military unpreparedness is known as Ha'mechdal (The Failure). The magnitude of the existential distress that gripped Israel during the war was articulated by the then Defense Minister Moshe Dayan’s comment comparing the calamitous situation to the destruction of the “Third Temple” (see Harari 2015:83). In his review of the emergence of action-based art, Paul Schimmel relates the transition from object to action in 20th-century art to the experience of loss and the sense of transience that gripped many after World War II, the Holocaust, and the atomic bomb (1998:17). He argues that the artists, embodied and present in their acts of creation, aspired to an existential presence-ing of their being (here and now) via live acts. Likewise, the increase in performance and body art in Israel after the Yom Kippur War expressed the existential insecurity that had taken hold of Israeli society.

In May 1973, a few months before the war but in a tense military situation that many had feared would quickly escalate into violence, Gabi Klasmer and Sharon Keren, students at the Bezalel Academy of Arts and Design, executed several guerilla and protest actions in response to the IDF military parade that was scheduled to take place in Jerusalem on Independence Day 1973. One such guerilla activity was Parade (May 1973). Klasmer and Keren used stencils to paint white images of marching soldiers, tanks, and airplanes, as well as the phrase “Who needs a parade?” on the streets where the troops were expected to march. This graffiti guerilla art action, executed shortly before the parade, left no evidence as to the identity of its initiators and appropriated military signs to denounce the fabricated heroism of the approaching military spectacle.

The high cost of human lives in the Yom Kippur War and the realization that the smug political leadership and military command were blind to the acuteness of the escalating situation were unbearable. The radicalized art actions after the war reflected the trauma, grief and, most significantly, abhorrence for the establishment (see Ram 1998:342). Many were carried out by art students and by artists who returned from the war battle-scarred.
Distrust of authority (sociopolitical, artistic, and aesthetic) led artists to undermine collectivist ideals, interests, and identities by turning to and presenting the body as a contested and ideologically regulated social site. The fabricated “we” of collective Israeli identity was ripped apart as the work of these artists exposed suppressed identities and personal experiences. The Israeli conceptualization of the body, “the chosen body” (Weiss 2002:1) born from the Zionist idealization of the vigorous “new Jew” and exalted after the Six-Day War, was shattered. In his analysis of early modern Hebrew literature (late 19th and early 20th century), Michael Gluzman claims that the bodily conceptualization and representation of the Zionist “new Jew” was specifically masculine, decisively repudiating the properties of the exilic “old Jew” who was depicted as debilitated and feminine (2007:13).

After the Six-Day War very few artists dared challenge the ethos of the chosen Israeli body—emblematically represented in the image of the young, wholesome, and robust Israeli soldier who sacrificed himself for the greater good of the nation. One such critical response to the heroic depiction of the invincible Sabra (native-born Jew) was Yigal Tumarkin’s sculpture He Walked through the Fields, first exhibited following the Six-Day War in 1967. This is a grotesque portrait of a Sabra soldier composed of an assemblage of bronze and parts of machine guns, showing his mouth open in horror, his sex organ protruding from his military trousers, and his body dismembered. Also significant in this respect were the satiric cabaret plays by the prominent Israeli playwright Hanoch Levin—You, Me and the Next War (1968), Ketchup (1969), and Queen of a Bathtub (1970)—satirizing Israeli militarism, its culture of bereavement and Sabra heroism. To say that these works outraged many Israelis would be an understatement.

After the devastating Yom Kippur War, more and more artists rejected this heroic image up front, staging instead grotesque representations of moral and physical imperfection and impotency—antihegemonic representations of the Israeli-Zionist body shown as vulnerable, disabled, imperfect, Mizrahi, feminine, bleeding, and injured.

Several 1975 exhibitions showed how much Israeli artists were concerned with the self and the body, a subject that until then had been out-of-bounds. These exhibitions needed to be explained by art critics. For example, reviewing Gideon Gechtman’s landmark exhibition Exposure (1975), Sarah Breitberg-Semel wrote:

This exhibition belongs to an art form that has been barely shown in Israel and is called Body Art. Body Art is characterized by the fact that the artist’s body becomes his raw material—no more canvases, marble, brushes, or paint; the artist’s body, his physical and most intimate experiences have turned into the subject of the work.

(Breitberg-Semel 1975)

With these exhibitions, the concept of body art and of the self as a source for artistic creation increased in the Israeli art discourse, albeit not without reservations: “This activity is related to a set of concepts that belong to the art world lying beyond our borders,” wrote one reviewer who cautioned that “we should keep in mind that not everything that is legitimate in a foreign

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12. Israeli critical anthropologist Meira Weiss writes that “The Zionist revolution that aimed to create a new people fit for a new land had a unique bodily aspect. Zionism was not just a national, political, and cultural movement of liberation, but also a bodily revolution” (Weiss 2002:1).

13. Likewise, legal feminist critic Orit Kamir, following George Mosse’s theory, shows that Zionism was specifically a national liberation movement of the Jewish man (2011:445).

14. The title of Tumarkin’s grotesque piece is a critical-parodic allusion to Moshe Shamir’s canon play by exactly the same name, which itself was an allusion to a line from the ballad-like lament The Third Mother by the prominent Israeli poet Natan Alterman. Shamir’s play premiered on 31 May 1948, only two weeks after Statehood was obtained and while many young Israeli men and women were participating in the battles of the 1948 Arab-Israeli War. The main character, Uri, embodies and glorifies the ethos of the Sabra—a young, socialist, agricultural laborer and warrior—who heroically sacrifices himself in battle in order to save his comrades and the nation.
culture is acceptable in our culture” (Flexer 1975). Another unsympathetically observed: “There are artists today who are not content with the work of art—they want to attract public attention by exposing their intimate scars” (Natan 1975). Rather than recognizing the politics of this new (for Israel) art that pits the existential embodied “I” against the abstract, collective, and disembodied “we,” many critics thought the art was egoistic: “This is supposed to be a fresh and free of conventions art, which it is not. These [young] artists hang on to psycho-artistic phenomena in order to relieve themselves” (Baharuzi 1976).

Gideon Gechtman’s *Exposure* was an autobiographical exhibition that openly dealt with his heart disease and his 1973 open-heart surgery. While there was no live element in this exhibition, its dramaturgy relied on revisiting and reenacting the events and procedures related to the surgery using real and fabricated documents, thus making the exhibition a reconstruction of sorts. Among *Exposure*’s objects were close-up portraits of the medical staff, a display in jars of the monthly dose of drugs he consumed, a detailed list of the quantities of food, liquids, and medicines consumed per day during one week in December 1972 and of the urine excreted, a display of his shaved head and body hair piled separately in Perspex boxes of various sizes, an x-ray of his thorax showing Gechtman’s artificial heart valve, a sample of an artificial heart

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15. A photo document of one of Schwarzkogler’s *Aktions* was presented at the Debel Gallery in Jerusalem in 1975; the myth of his self-castration fueled the local artistic imagination (see Ronnen 1976).
valve, photographs of the hospital building and bed, and the patient’s discharge letter. A recording of the sound of Gechtman’s artificial valve heightened the exhibition’s medically autobiographical ambiance. Two of the items strongly added an ethical-political overtone: a video showing the naked Gechtman being completely shaved. The videoed reenactment of the original procedure confronted the gallery visitors with a man embarrassingly exposed, being further stripped of his manhood, identity, and power (shades of Delilah giving Samson his haircut, but also resonating images of prisoners of the 1973 war, and of the concentration camps during the Holocaust).

The second item was a fabricated medical record allegedly written and signed by the intern who had admitted Gechtman for his surgery in 1973, detailing the history of the disease. The record suggested that the cause of Gechtman’s acute medical condition was his neglect as a child by his biological parents who, not being able to cater to his needs, sent him to grow up in a kibbutz. When he fell sick while on the kibbutz he was embarrassed to tell anyone that he did not feel well. Gechtman is cited in the medical record as saying: “The kibbutz society is unsympathetic to weaknesses” (Gechtman 1975). While the accusations refer specifically to his parents and the kibbutz, they seem to be directed in general to the insensitivity of Israeli society towards whoever falls short of its standards.

Motti Mizrahi’s exhibition New Faces (1975) at the Sarah Gilat gallery in Jerusalem comprised a series of photographic documentation including what Philip Auslander terms “performed photography”: “performances [that] were staged solely to be photographed [...] and had no meaningful prior existence as autonomous events presented to audiences. The space of the document [...] thus becomes the only space in which the performance occurs” (2012:49). Mizrachi was one of the pioneers of Israeli body and performance art. Already as a student at the Bezalel Academy of Arts and Design in Jerusalem, his work was

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16. With respect to this observation, it is important to mention that many young Israeli artists in the early 1970s, particularly students of art, who heavily counted on art journals as a major source of knowledge and inspiration, encountered performance mainly as documentation in the form of still images. In other words, although enthused by the new artistic trends they discovered in those journals, they did not make the ontological distinction between the live act and its documentation, which they accepted as (the) performance per se. Consequently, artists who thought in terms of action or performance engaged in one of three methods of performance-making: either executing their work live in front of invited spectators; or in the presence of occasional spectators, usually outdoors; or for a future spectatorship as a single staged photographic image (performed photography).
17. Mizrachi said that *Via Dolorosa* started off as a parodic attempt at forming a personality cult; an act of self-presencing that responded to the Bezalel freshmen’s indifference to his status as head of the student association. Sometime before performing *Via Dolorosa*, Mizrachi produced screen prints of his self-portrait, which he scattered at school. On another occasion he placed one of his printed portraits next to a mirror on the school’s bulletin board (Mizrachi 2005 and 2016). *Via Dolorosa* was an amplification of this motif, an act of self-mythologization.

18. These two performances for the camera were shot on the same occasion creating a series of photographs together titled *Sacrifice*. Later that year, as a direct response to the calamitous Yom Kippur War, Mizrachi staged two performed photographs in the Judean desert: *Bindings* and *The Binding of Isaac*. Exempt from military service because he was disabled, Mizrachi’s reactions to the war were his first attempts at staging photographic self-portraits. In *Bindings*, he is seen leaning against a boulder, half-naked, eyes shut, and rope-bound. In the better-known *The Binding of Isaac*, Mizrachi is seen lying face down in an arid ravine, his naked body more or less in the center, long strips of black nylon connoting parachute cords attached to him and stretching from his body along the surrounding slopes to beyond the photographic frame. The aerial angle shot of one of the photographs establishes Mizrachi’s helplessness but, at the same time, implies the presence of some exterior onlooker or witness who might yet save him or testify about the event.

The photograph as a singular mode of representation/recording/reporting is at one and the same time, ontologically, a document of something that happened, and, epistemologically, a testimony. It bears political ramifications that exceed the ordinary strategic function of the photograph as documentation, as a material conservation of some real happening outside the place of art, in the tradition of conceptual art.

Yocheved (Juki) Weinfeld’s 1975 exhibition *Pains* at the Debel Gallery in Jerusalem reflected her growing interest in synesthesia as well as her concern with body art:

One of the hardest things to communicate in words is sensations. How do you share with someone else your sensation when you prick yourself with a needle? And I thought that it could be done synesthetically, for example to communicate a tactile sensation via visual or musical stimulation. (Weinfeld 2016)
In contrast to the national pains of the Yom Kippur War, Weinfeld’s *Pains* dealt with “daily pains,” anecdotal “unpleasant sensations,” like the stinging one experiences under the eyelids when tired or the minor pain of having one’s nails trimmed (2016). Each exhibited pain consisted of three elements: a scientific explanation (when available), Weinfeld’s description of her personal experience of the pain, and a visual object that captured and synesthetically communicated the pain.

Weinfeld’s next exhibition, *Yocheved Weinfeld* at Debel Gallery in May 1976, was even more personal, addressing her recent divorce, her family’s biography, and the death of her mother. This multimedia exhibition comprised family photographs, images from her *Stitches* series—processed photographs depicting parts of her body, face, and palms that appeared to be stitched together, and a video artwork responding to excerpts from Yosef Karo’s 1563 codex of Jewish laws, *Shulchan Aruch*.

In this exhibition, on 16 May, Weinfeld gave one performance of a piece that consisted of a sequence of 19 scripted actions alluding to Jewish mourning and women’s cleansing rituals. A female performer who resembled a mikveh (Jewish ritual bath) attendant aggressively performed the actions on the passively seated Weinfeld. While Weinfeld asserts that *Yocheved Weinfeld* was not intended to be feminist (2016), images of abjection and the insensitive manipulation of her passive female body inevitably imparts such a reading.

Like Weinfeld, Efrat Natan studied privately with Raffi Lavie in whose library she saw writing about and pictures of the body art of Bruce Neumann, Klaus Rinke, Vito Acconci, and Rebecca Horn. In 1972 Natan started to document her experiments with body art, which she saw as a new strategy of conceptual art and a more straightforward means to express herself. In 1973, a day after the grandiose and provocative IDF military parade in Jerusalem, Natan performed *Head Sculpture*. Natan paraded in Tel Aviv wearing on her head a T-shape plywood sculpture she had built, alluding variously to the cross, an airplane, and a minimalist shaman’s head mask. This solitary and introverted outdoor piece questioned Israel’s imagined collectivity and extroverted self-confidence.
Natan’s performances of 1974 and 1975 were very different. Natan considered these works as Happenings because of their narrative structure and theatricality: “Happenings seemed to me as the means that most suited my personal inclination towards content and dramatic forms in combination with skills in the plastic arts” (2006). In these works, she offered her personal response to historical circumstances: “After lyrical abstraction, minimal sculpture and painting, the advent of the autobiographical was something new, and we wanted to join [...] for instance in [Joseph] Beuys works [...T]his was a proposition to attend to the autobiographical...” (Natan 2016).

Milk, a Happening to Staircases, was performed in May 1974 at the Art Teachers Training College in Herzlia, in response to a terror attack that had taken place shortly before in the northern city of Kiryat Shmona. Natan poured milk down a staircase and watched it form a puddle at the bottom of the stairs where spectators stood. Natan then descended the staircase, wiping up the milk, and then squeezed it back into the milk churn. The whole sequence took approximately 15 minutes. It was accompanied by Karlheinz Stockhausen’s mournful vocal piece *Stimmung* (Mood; 1968). Acknowledging the effect it had on the audience and her debt to Beuys, Natan thought of Milk as a shamanic ritual. She performed it again in June at the Bezalel Academy of Arts and Design. Several Israeli art historians pointed out the strong influence of Beuys’s art, persona, and myth on multiple Israeli artists in the 1970s. Mordechai Omer, for instance, viewed many of the works discussed above, including the land art of Micha Ullman and Pinchas Cohen Gan and the body art of Gideon Gechtman and Motti Mizrachi, as attempts to heal an ailing society. Omer specifically refers to the Hebrew Kabalistic notion of *tikkun*: “to mend, to repair, to participate in the reformation or reintegration of the *havayah* [Being] and raise it to a higher level of wholeness and unity” (1998:508). He adds that “expressions of *tikkun* in Israeli art have often been compared to the concept of the artist as a shaman in the art of the sixties and seventies in Europe and the U.S.A.” (506). Looking into Israeli art of the 1970s with respect to Beuys, Kobi Ben-Meir distinguishes “actions” from “performance art” on the basis of their respective efficacy. He maintains that in contrast to the representational quality of the latter, certain 1970s performative manifestations, particularly Mizrachi’s, were actions because they intended to produce a real effect in society (Ben-Meir 2009).

In 1975 Natan staged The Jordan Bridges at the Artists House in Tel Aviv. This work was more an autobiographical, surrealist, visual theatre piece than a Happening: “There was not much difference between this and theatre, apart from the fact that I did it with my very own body” (Natan 2006). With various objects she had brought from her kibbutz on the bank of the Jordan River (e.g., boots, a pail, a barrel, milk churn, red flag, bed and mattress, cow bones and skin) and with fragments of texts, Natan performed a collage of actions and images alluding to her childhood memories. The objects were displayed on a long sheet of black nylon representing the Jordan River, and indeed in a few of her actions, fluids flowed as she staged images of urination, laundered clothes, and watered plants.
Gechtman, Mizrachi, Weinfeld, and Natan performed the grotesque, imperfect, and changeable body to contrast the standardized image of the perfect or perfectible Israeli body (see Weiss 2002). While the chosen body complies with the logic of dualist ontology (stable/fluid, abled/disabled, live/dead), the changeable body defeats termination and death because it is liminal and open: alive and dead at the same time, sacrificed and redeemed. Performing the “unchosen” body was at one and the same time a critique of the heroic (but dead) chosen body and its vital, generative alternative.

June 1976

Meitzag 76 — The First Festival of Israeli Performance Art

In November 1975 live action and performance art were admitted into the Israel Museum as part of the Open Workshop exhibition curated by Yona Fisher in collaboration with Serge Spitzer, who had just graduated from Bezalel. The exhibition was conceptualized to allow the participating artists to “work in situ for several weeks, aiming to make contact with the audience throughout their creative process” (Fischer 1975). Fischer, curator of Israeli and modern art in the Israel Museum and aficionado of the avantgarde, played a decisive part in fostering the performative turn in Israeli art (Harari 2017). In some of the exhibitions he curated — e.g., Labyrinth (February 1967), Concept + Information (February 1971), and most significantly in Open Workshop — he replaced the conventional “archival” logic of the museum, which accumulates and presents “tangible items supposedly resistant to change” (Taylor 2008:92), with the contingent methodology of what Diana Taylor recognizes as the “repertoire,” that is, performance and “embodied praxis” (2003:17).

Seven months after the Open Workshop exhibition, in June 1976, Gideon Ofrat curated Meitzag 76 at the Tel Aviv Artists House, focused mainly on artists performing a scheduled...
program of events for attending audiences. Ofrat graduated from the Departments of Theatre and Philosophy at Tel Aviv University and as part of his postgraduate studies in philosophy he spent a year in the late 1960s at Brown University. While in the United States he became enthralled by the power of student protests as well as the innovations and potentialities of alternative theatre. Upon his return to Israel in 1971, Ofrat taught in the Theatre Department of the Hebrew University in Jerusalem and at the Bezalel Academy of Arts and Design (Ofrat 2006). One of Ofrat’s courses at Bezalel drew on his doctorate, which he published as The Definition of Art, and his notion of the “performative conception of art” (1975:157). In this class he examined conceptual art, including works by Beuys and Acconci. Ofrat also introduced his students to the notion of Kirby’s “new theatre,” the aesthetics of Happenings, as well as to the methods and ideologies of American alternative theatre groups such as the Living Theatre, the Bread and Puppet Theater, and the San Francisco Mime Troupe. The fusion of these discourses, on aesthetic performativism (his terminology) on the one hand and on radical performance on the other, added to the changing sociopolitical and aesthetic agendas of the early 1970s, and fed the proliferation of performance-based practices in Bezalel in the years following the Yom Kippur War. Most of the artists who participated in Meitzag 76 were new graduates and young teachers at Bezalel. This exhibition marked the culmination of the transition from the art object to performance art.

For Meitzag 76, Ofrat coined the Hebrew term meitzag (meaning performance art), constituting, as he wrote, “a hybrid of the nouns mutzag [item on display] with its connotations of a visual art object [...] and hatzaga [staged theatre play] with its overtones of theatrical action” (1976:n.p.). Meitzag 76 provided a legitimate, institutional stage for performance art. Ofrat’s neologism was a way to create a special Hebrew term to reflect, conceptualize and, no less important, highlight the growing presence of performance art in 1970s Israel.

Meitzag 76 was generally well received by critics and spectators. Three years later, another exhibition of performance art took place—Meitzag 79. This was a long-awaited event: “I have been waiting every year since 1976 for an artistic gathering of this medium, which holds enormous possibilities. It has finally arrived,” wrote art critic Zlila Orgad (1979a:9). However, as the laconic title of her review following the event reveals—“Performance art...boredom” (Orgad 1979b:9)—the shows did not meet her expectations. Indeed, Meitzag 79 was met with mixed reactions. Critics pointed to the artists’ mishandling of time structuring, and the fact that many works were too simplistic, superficial, amateurish, and meaningless. Nonetheless, most critics praised the endeavor and indicated it should happen more frequently. It did not.

Marc Scheps, director of the Tel Aviv Museum of Art, wrote in his preface for the catalogue of A Turning Point—12 Israeli Artists exhibition, curated in 1981 by Sarah Breitberg Semel, that by the end of the 1970s the local art scene had shifted back to the art object: “In the last three years it has become clear that we are in a time of radical change, and by the end of 1981 there is no longer doubt that the 1980s in Israeli art will be greatly different from the 1970s.” Scheps added: “Basically, the new era marks a return to the experiential essence in painting” (1981:3). Moreover, the difference was a response to major changes in Israel’s politics in the second half of the 1970s—most significantly, the political upheaval in the elections of 1977, the Likud Party defeating the Labor Party for the first time, and the signing of the Egypt-Israel Peace Treaty in March 1979. Under changing circumstances of this magnitude, it appeared as if performance art’s avantgardism had run its course, becoming a past fashion or fad. Many formerly enthusiastic artists (among them teachers and students of art), who at the beginning of the 1970s had sown the seeds that sprouted into an exciting performance art scene, renounced it by the end of the decade.

19. Ofrat’s contribution to performance activity in Bezalel was expressed in several interviews (see for example Keren 2005; Klasmer 2016; Mizrachi 2005 and 2016).
But performance art did not disappear. A new generation of artists in the 1980s considered it legitimate, if marginal. Some younger artists studied under teachers who had made performance art in the 1970s, while others returned from abroad where they had encountered new trends in performance-making featuring theatre, dance, and media. Finally, in the 1980s Israeli performance art was featured regularly along with more orthodox art and theatre events. Performance art had become a vital and permanent part of the Israeli art world.

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