

ARTISTS **SNOWY**NONO

A *Rifleman* Exhibition

Lucifer Over London

Monday 21 September to
Saturday 21 November 2009





Three dialectical inversions: images and afterimages of Artists Anonymous

by JJ Charlesworth 2009

SHOCK TOLERANCE. Contemporary art is nothing without its 'art world'; that complex and mobile interaction of participants, makers, audiences, institutions, media, curators, collectors, galleries, museums, 'alternative' spaces, critics, theorists, academies and discourses which give visibility to the work of art that operates in its midst. And one of the most vivid features of the contemporary art world is the diversity of practices that are now tolerated within its circuits of circulation and exchange – tolerated and encouraged, by a cultural system that is now open to anything, by anyone, from anywhere. This is not the age of the modernist avant-gardes, no longer the epoch of conservative order of art, to which and against which those avant-gardes raised their questions and their objections. Questions such as, why painting? Why not photography? Why realism? Why not abstraction? Why the artist as individual? Why not art as a collective practice? Why skill and craft? Why not technology? Why refinement? Why not mass culture? Why the material object? Why not art as idea? In their time, all these questions were direct challenges to the self-preserving definitions that art had made for itself. And while, if we look back, the outrage provoked by these questions now seems quaint to us, it's important to note that in their first instance, these were shocking events, which challenged art's aesthetic, cultural and social legitimacy. Today, the idea that art can and should produce strong reactions, that it should transgress the limitation of normative culture, is treated with caution and ambiguity. It is easy to know how to shock, and who to shock. Harder to know why to shock...

How do the question of shock connect with the work of the group Artists Anonymous? Perhaps it has to do with the fact that among the ranks of contemporary artists working today, Artists Anonymous are distinct in the way that their work provokes fresh and substantial reflection on the nature of transgression in contemporary art, without resorting to clichés or recognisable formulas that would make them simply another gang of enfants terribles, fit for the entertainment and consumption of a mass public. But at the same time, Artists Anonymous do not pander to the new mode of tolerance that exist inside the artworld, which sustains a huge range of apparently sophisticated, often highly specialist art practices. Artists Anonymous are not satisfied with making art which becomes the object of the artworld's assent and agreement from within

its specialist public – art as a form of intellectual minority culture – but nor do they want to make work which exploits the spectacle of art's flirtation with mainstream, mass or popular culture. Instead, their work attempts to articulate the conditions of separation that exist between the culture of contemporary art and the wider culture – and the way in which art currently attempts to manage the tensions that are produced from this state of distinction and separation. Critically, what is of interest in the work of Artists Anonymous is how their apparently aesthetic strategies in fact address themselves to institutional conditions of art's distinction from mainstream culture. What Artists Anonymous experiment with is the actual, current conditions of the boundary between the art world and mainstream culture, in ways which produce effects of shock that are not gratuitous, but are rather the result of discovering the limits of the expectations and assumptions that the current artworld maintains, even when it believes itself to be tolerant. The way they achieve this effect – this sensation of difficulty and collision with the 'norm' – is by a combination of techniques and operations that work as dialectical oppositions, which while distinguishable from each other, come together in a vivid and excessive recognition of the terms of contemporary art's separation from the wider culture it nevertheless addresses.

Because if the world of contemporary art has become more tolerant, as it has done so the experience of shock has become attenuated, more empty of meaning, and increasingly seen as a cynical tactic to be employed by artists, rather than the outcome of an encounter between the work of artists and the prejudices of others. In Britain, for example, since the rise to fame of the generation commonly known as the 'young British artists', the idea that contemporary artists exploit offense or shock in order to claim notoriety and visibility has become a common complaint. What mainstream commentators often fail to observe is that these tactics of offense and shock are strongly parasitical on the circuits of media distribution that they themselves provide. And when such art appears to transgress the norms of decency, or public morality, or common sense notions about what art should look like, it really exposes the fact that these boundaries of taste and propriety are no longer very strongly defended by the culture of the majority. The mainstream now appears much more tolerant than it ever did of the apparent transgressions of artists, while at the same time, within the art world itself, pluralism, diversity and tolerance is the ruling order. Everything is tolerated; nothing shocks anymore.

The emptying-out of the experience of shock is such that today shock is seen as a cynical provocation which 'we' – the public – consciously refuse to respond to. That it is easy not to respond to such provocations is to do with how such provocations have become highly formulaic – sex, death, violence, obscenity, triviality, are all recognisable tropes which, historically, have provoked censure and exclusion from public culture, yet which no longer produce much hostility because attitudes to what is representable in public have changed profoundly over the last few decades. At the same time, it is also ironic that such forms of transgression have come to acquire culture license precisely because of a changed attitude towards the status of art as part of contemporary culture; it is now understood that contemporary artistic practice will invariably probe the terms of transgression, but that for as long as this operates within the institutional confines of the 'art world', this is acceptable – artists are no longer seen as dangerous revolutionaries or moral dilettantes, but instead healthy eccentrics whose activities, while usually incomprehensible to the mainstream public, are innocuous precisely because of their relative seclusion from it. At the same time, the 'art world' itself is in many ways bored of shock; it is interesting, when surveying gallery shows or the wandering the ranks of stands at the latest international art fair, how little contemporary artistic production seems to wish to confront, antagonise or upset the dominant consensus among collectors, curators, critics and art's other specialist audiences.

To unravel the critical nature of transgression as it operates in the work of Artists Anonymous, then, it's worth sketching out a theory of shock that pays attention to the relationships within culture at the moments when shock occurs, instead of necessarily examining the content that is supposed to be shocking. As suggested earlier, the reason that transgressive art has become hollow, unconvincing and formulaic today is that the nature of public expectations towards art has changed. This has a lot to do with how society now attaches importance to what is expressed in public, in contrast to the more repressed – and repressive – climate against which earlier avant-garde movements reacted. It is strange today to recall that in the past, public taste regarding could be offended as much by abstract painting as it could by explicit pornographic representations. What connects such apparently divergent reactions is the dominant attitude towards what constituted order, both aesthetic and moral, and how that sense of order translated itself into what could or could not be said or seen in public. What distinguishes today's liberal culture from the conservative, traditionalist society of the

past is that the distinction between public and private spheres of life has become blurred. In terms of personal morality for example, what people do 'behind closed doors' is no longer a matter for censure in public discourse. Nowadays public mass culture is cheerfully full of the voyeuristic genre of 'confessional' TV, most explicitly found in such 'reality' shows such as Big Brother, in which the viewing pleasure is derived from watching the exposure and lack of privacy of others.

This changing nature of how the public sphere is regulated has also changed the effects that art's presence has in the public sphere, and as the mass media have become increasingly important in how reality is mediated, so art has in many instances been drawn into the spectacular forms of distribution that the mass media offers. There is no better explanation for the success of the spectacular art of the last decade, or of the rise of the celebrity artist, than the part the mass media have played in integrating the production of art into a broader culture of mass-visibility. And that visibility is defined by art's explicit otherness; that to be visible as art in contemporary culture, it should appear different to other forms of culture, in some ways apparently alternative, and transgressive only in forms that are already sanctioned as acceptable.

These questions of division and interaction between type spectacle, mass-culture, aesthetic form and institutional separation are in many ways key to the strategies employed by Artists Anonymous. Where they succeed is by troubling one form of recognizable division between art and culture with another form of division. And with each division, we find it split by a further internal opposition, that speaks of a different question in the encounter between art and life, or mass culture and the artworld.

The most striking of these, and the one that most immediately draws us into the complex operations of their work, is the use of doubling and reversal, in and through painting and its mirroring in photography. Unlike so many photorealist painters of the past, Artists Anonymous bring painting and photography into direct contact with each other. Instead of the absent photograph providing the model for the painting which is present, their paintings are presented in pairs with their 'afterimages', photographs of the painting in negative colour-reversal, presented at the same scale as the painting. That the paintings are produced from photographic sources, then doubled through reversal in the paired photograph, sets these pairings as dialectical loops, in which the original image is no longer important. Colour negatives, in contrast to black and white negative









images, have a visual interest that goes beyond their status as 'negatives'. What is striking about the photograph-painting pairings is that the idea of the 'negative' itself becomes inverted; there is no longer a negative image of a positive image, or a painting of a photograph, but a painting and a photograph that stand as inversions of each other, dismissing any idea of an original photograph and a subsequent painting. This is further complicated by the fact that in many of the paired works, the painted which suggests itself as the 'positive' is already full of passages of negative inversions, in many cases as if the physical subjects themselves had been painted with their own inverted colours. In the diptych *Drugs*, these doublings, reversals, and inversions are pushed to extremes, as the space in which the subjects are seen is itself a mirror room, where every wall is a reflection.

This tactic of endless inversion, the negative of a negative which is not a positive, is a perceptual issue which becomes a conceptual problem, an aesthetic encounter which becomes a cognitive experience. We have become accustomed to the experience of a painting of a photograph, just as we have become accustomed to the experience of a colour photographic negative, so Artists Anonymous push us to experience the categories of reality and representation as something more than can be guaranteed by either of these technological criteria. That is to say, if we recognise the colour image as a 'negative' we usually assume that there is, somewhere, a 'correct' positive image of reality. Or, if we look at a photographic painting, we assure ourselves of the origin of the painting in the reality of the source photograph, if not necessarily the reality of the place represented through the technology of photography. In each of these technological relationships to reality there is an assumption of a normal functioning of representation, where reality and image exist in a hierarchy of verifiability. The doubling-inversions that Artists Anonymous deploy in the paintings and photographs present us with a shocking experience regarding the conventional distinction between painting and photography. As photography has tended to assume the privileged relation to reality in modern visual culture, painting in its contemporary forms has moved further towards representation that operates in imaginary or fantastical modes. But the shock offered by Artists Anonymous is that, now, neither technology of representation offers any guaranteed access to a prosaic reality.

This shock is, it seems, deployed in the service of a more substantial notion of reality than either photography-on-its-own or painting-on-its-own can

deliver. In the exhibition-installation '*Drugs*', one wall next to the diptych was scrawled with this slogan: "I paint negative abstract photorealistic paintings. What the fuck are you doing?" What stands out here is that what is painted are abstract, not simply negative, photorealistic paintings. Here again, Artists Anonymous set out to collapse an apparent opposition in the history of avant-garde painting, the conflict between figurative and abstract painting that preoccupied so much of the modern period. While this was in the end superseded by the incursion of photography into the rhetoric of painterly representation, an aspect of abstraction remains important. It was abstraction that could properly liberate the experience of painting and looking at the effects of the medium itself – colour, gesture, speed, non-illusionistic space, flatness etc. – properties which might offer the optical presence of materiality – a reality in itself, and not merely the image of a reality elsewhere. By invoking the abstract in their complex inversions of painting and photography, Artists Anonymous suggest that these images should be seen as an aesthetic reality in and for themselves. What counts is the experience of the doubling and inversion for itself – an experience which doesn't prompt the viewer to search for the 'origin' of the image, but rather encourages us to be aware of the artwork's capacity to overcome the subordinate relationship of artwork to reality – whether painterly or photographic. AA's images do not represent, but present the condition of the image when art attempts to address reality.

Of course, as the infinite doubling and reversal of image-making, painting and photograph is set into motion, the next loop opens up. What kind of world is it, in the end, which is being represented here? The world of AA is strange, but recognisable. A world of fantastical figures, or of figures in clown masks (but not masked clowns), of erotic or pornographic encounters, of bodies that are disguised or transformed, all bathed in the acidic, kaleidoscopic light of AA's inverted palette. But while the subjects often seem exotic, these scenes cannot be described as fictions. They do not pretend to refer to a self-contained reality elsewhere, whether fictional or fantastic. They are instead stagings, forms of orchestrated display, like arrested theatre. They are scenes of excess and violence, play and disaster. Scenes steeped in the visual forms of the commodities of urban mass culture – although these are the trash of commodity culture, not the slick products generated by brand industry and the corporate media.

Again this proposes a doubling-up, an internal complication in the identity of the protagonists: these wayward bodies are the eccentric manifestations of the all that is non-orthodox. In another century, these

might have been the figures of bohemia and the sub-culture of the avant-garde, which opposed themselves to orthodox, catholic propriety. Today these are the bodies of an extended, popular subculture, which has released itself from the constraints of puritan orthodoxy. But if bohemian bodies are now part of a bigger community that no longer requires the marginal social status of bohemia, this affects how we understand these subjects in relation to the status of art as a cultural alternative. What we find in these scenes are figures that represent the heterogeneous bodies of the popular, different to the orthodox images projected by corporate mass culture, but also distinct from the now-no-longer bohemian sub-culture of contemporary art. They are not simply 'incursions' or 'appropriations' of the image of the popular into the sub-culture of contemporary art. That would be to leave the demarcation line between mass culture and art intact. Instead, because these figures and these scenes are generated through the two technologies of photography and painting, this synthesis foregrounds the cultural problem of that demarcation. These different technologies – painting and photography – operate with different allegiances to the mass media on one hand, and popular culture on the other: while the technology of photography tends to project the authoritative image of corporate culture onto everyone, painting is a form of handcraft that ambiguously aligns itself both with aristocratic exclusivity, as well as with excluded forms of popular visual expression. It is not surprising that tattoos, graffiti and body-paint appear in these images, re-presented through the technique – the 'skill' – of the photorealist easel painter.

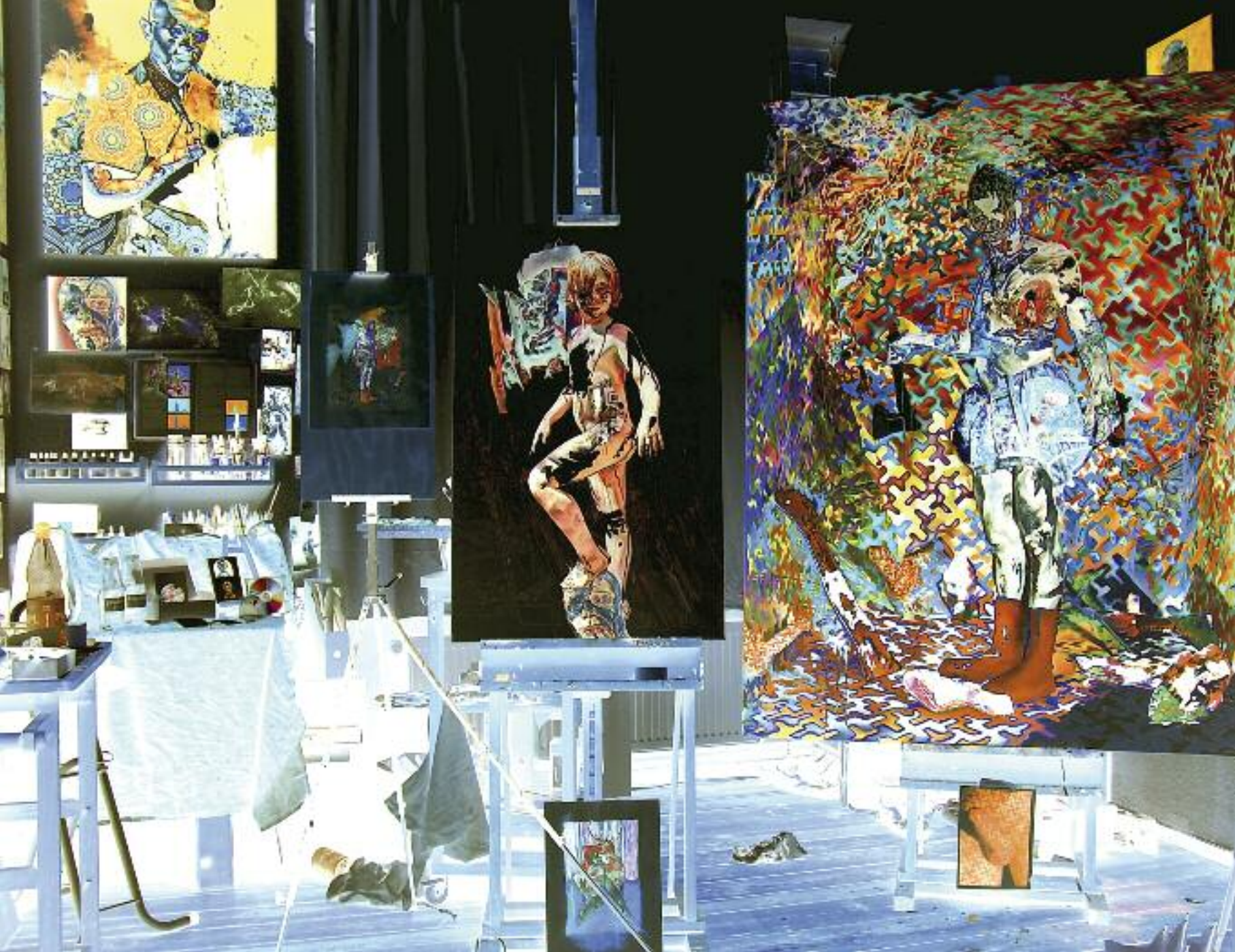
But while a resistance towards the imposition of corporate culture is common both to artists and non-artists, Artists Anonymous do not seem to offer any easy resolution, or wishful coming-together of these two distinct communities. Artists Anonymous neither advocate popular culture within the culture of contemporary art, nor propose art as a culture that is distinct and indifferent to what is outside of it. These are not figures of real people, then, or of a particular social 'body'. They are rather symbols of the conflict between the self-representation of art and of people against the power of a normative, manufactured culture. If the protagonists of these scenes are in a sense lacking in identity, it is because the real subject here is the violence necessary to break the hold of manufactured media culture, and how it imposes secure, immobile identities on both popular culture art.

This is perhaps why, in the end, the protagonists we see are always in a

state of disguise, of masquerade, of costume and bodily modification – the final inversion of identity and non-identity. In the landscape of manufactured culture, all identities are immediately visible and transparent, nothing is obscure or enigmatic, nothing may be hidden; everything must be represented. With Artists Anonymous, everything is hidden, is a secret, and only reveals itself to contain its opposite. This is why although a single body, they remain plural, yet still maintain a certain uncertainty about the extent of their plurality. Hidden behind masks and first names, they attempt to keep the attention on the work, and not the 'identity' of the artist, that totem of art's spectacularisation, its extreme visibility. As the techniques of artistic tradition are fused with the visual excess of an uncensored popular aesthetic, and every possible refuge of secure representation – identity – is dismantled through its dialectical opposite, Artists Anonymous seem to return, with huge energy, to the modernist project which once looked to bring art and life together. But instead of fantasising of some false resolution of art and society, or retreating into an erudite art that wants nothing to do with the broader culture, the inversions, reflections and doublings serve to show that art really has no secure identity, and that its special difference is offered to it on the condition that it cuts its common ties to the broader culture. It is because it is impossible to securely identify these figures as neither outside nor inside the culture of art that they appear threatening – shocking in some sense – to art's comfortable, sanctioned distance, the shock of an experience which intermingles popular and artistic technique in common opposition to the spectacle of manufactured culture. What Artists Anonymous suggest, perhaps, is that rather than pretend to find a sentimental meeting point for art and mass culture, artists might reveal the violence that produces the separation between art and non-art in the first instance. The shock, then, is in the force necessary to allow art and mass culture to speak into and through each other, so that while the division may be stubbornly defended by the arbiters of the 'art world' and the media – anxious to maintain art's difference and identity – the falsehood of that distinction, is made vividly, violently clear.

























ARTISTS ANONYMOUS debut exhibition at Riflemaker *Lucifer over London* opens on Monday 21 September. Artists Anonymous is an artists' group based in Berlin whose work generally consists of two components, the 'image'; a painting in the negative, and the 'after-image'; a positive inverse photograph of the same composition. Derived and informed by the group's own performances, installations and video, the completed work evolves as an integrated and socially-engaged whole

V like Art
 R like Riot
 I like Time
 I like Intensity
 S like Science
 I like Telepathy
 S like Snakes

V like Abnormal
 N like Narcotics
 O like Oxygene
 N like Naked
 A like male DNA
 W like Mutation
 O like Octopus
 N like Unique
 S like Sex

Touching the border between the worlds between rich enjoyable nature and the actual destruction through humankind as well as the fine line between the worlds of matter and spirit

"A new prince, in a City or Province of which he has taken possession, ought to make everything New." Niccolo Machiavelli, Discourses on Livy

"Today, "practice" is simply what artists do. The term is weedy in writing about contemporary art to the point that we barely notice it; arguably it has lost its meaning. It has managed to camouflage itself so thoroughly into the ecology of art terms no one, scholarly or otherwise, seems to recall exactly when we referred to artists' activity otherwise." Alix Rule

"First rule is; there are no rules. Second rule is: there are some."
 Clinton Storm

"...I'll be always laughing like a clown; Won't someone help me..."
 Bob Marley (Concrete Jungle)

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