

*“In the pervasive atmosphere of conservative democracy, it might be seen as an encouraging sign that today’s widespread enthusiasm for Public Art has been tempered from the beginning by uncertainty about the definition of the term. Artists and critics have repeatedly asked what it means to bring the word public into proximity with art.”*

Rosalyn Deutsche, 1998

## For public art: An interdisciplinary link

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### The Public:

Contentiousness between aestheticians, dealing with Public Art, and social scientists working in urban studies, begins at the most elemental level. When the art theorist says *public* the rejoinder from the social scientist is, more often than not, *which public?* It is a valid question and typical of the communication discontinuities between the disciplines. The artist, the arts administrator, the museumologist, and the vast bureaucratic organization of art funders<sup>1</sup> tend to think of the *public* as *audience* and have developed a stereotypical model based upon that assumption. What their statistical methodology has produced is a simulacrum of a *public* that has expressed an interest in the subject art form and has made an agreement to be audience. When art moves from the protection of its cloister within the museum, or from private collections or commercial galleries, when it is stripped of its *knowing* audience and placed in a public space, it has entered the Public Sphere and the rules of art *audience* become irrelevant.

The Public Sphere, a.k.a. The Public Realm is not a new arrival on the academic scene. Jurgen Habermas<sup>2</sup> adapted it to the bourgeois politics of Marx and Engels; Hannah Arendt<sup>3</sup> expanded its sociological context and many other social scientists have used it as a bridge to other areas of research<sup>4</sup>. The use of the Public Sphere as a construct, within which an interdisciplinary link might be defined between Public Art and the social sciences, particularly urban studies, awaited the trenchant baseline work of William H. Whyte<sup>5</sup> and Lyn H. Lofland.<sup>6</sup> Neither dealt with Public Art directly, but both saw the Public Sphere as a social device, a place of lively discursive and contentious interchange of ideas, a place of political diversity, a place of inclusion, amenable to democracy.

This essay addresses the concept of the Public Sphere as it is currently argued amongst aestheticians, urbanists, and the artists creating, what we have come to classify as Public Art in our technical society. The view is through a matrix created by radical social changes in spatial politics preceding the start of the second millennium and the movement of boundaries within that sphere caused by the impact of technology on individual lifestyles and the resultant privatism of modern social life.

Before considering the theoretical aspects of the problem further, it is appropriate to examine an actual case history where the inability to communicate across disciplinary boundaries was the seminal causality for a Public Art fiasco. Absence of the spatial political and social skills necessary to conduct meaningful discussion of the space, place, or art in the Public Sphere resulted in the loss of an important

<sup>1</sup> The Nation Endowment for the Arts (NEA) one of the major sources for government support of the arts in the United States, has demonstrated a remarkably myopic view in responding to diversity of audience, and their public policy of audience, or the *public* for art, continues to be addressed to their idea of a stereotypical public. A recent sponsored study by Peterson, Hull and Kern (2000) *Age and Arts Participation, Research Division Report #42* is typical of the narrow view that cripples understanding of the *public* of Public Art.

<sup>2</sup> Habermas, Jurgen 1999, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, Translated by Thomas Burger, The MIT Press, Cambridge MA. The work, written in 1966, was published in German and French considerably earlier than this, the first English translation

<sup>3</sup> Arendt, Hannah, 1958, *The Human Condition*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London. Unlike the work of Habermas, Arendt’s analysis treats the social ramifications of the subject rather than emphasizing the political.

<sup>4</sup> The use of the public realm in this manner has been a continuous stream, the most well noted consisting of Gregory Stone (1954), Jane Jacob (1961), and Erving Goffman (1983)

<sup>5</sup> Whyte, William H. (1980) *The Social Life of Small Urban Space*, The Conservation Foundation, Washington, D.C. and (1988) *City: Rediscovering The Center*, Doubleday, New York

<sup>6</sup> Lofland, Lyn H. (1998) *The*

piece of art, devalorization of an urban space, vitriolic discourse between the United States government and the art community and extensive litigation through the United States Federal Court System.

The case of Richard Serra and his sculpture, *The Tilted Arc* is probably the most critically documented Public Art controversy in modern times and specifically represents the typology of the pernicious problems that are often encountered in major Public Art undertakings.<sup>7</sup> In the process the terms *use* and *public*, and their specific meaning entered the common vernacular for the first time, but not necessarily in a clearly defined or understood manner.

In 1979, Richard Serra<sup>8</sup>, a sculptor well known for his massive works using huge, raw steel plates, was commissioned to create a site-specific piece of Public Art for the east plaza of the Federal Building at Foley Square in New York City. In his own words, Serra aimed:

*...to dislocate or alter the decorative function of the plaza and actually bring people into the sculpture's context.*

And his personal attitude toward the public and his work is specific when he says:

*...trying to attract a bigger audience has nothing to do with the making of art.*

*It has to do with making yourself into a product to be consumed by people. Working this way allows society to determine the terms and concept of the art; the artist must then fulfill these terms. I find the idea of pluralism art-defeating.<sup>9</sup>*

It is not difficult to sense the underlying problem in this communication for the urban planner, and yet, it is representative of most successful the artists' elitism and their sincere belief that a principal function of creative art has always been to confront the viewer with social truth and propaganda, political or religious, regardless of personal cost. Without this enabling concept, creators of Public Art would see themselves as decorative craftsman, a reversion to the artistic philosophy of the quattrocento.

Serra's design was approved by the funding government agency and installed in the plaza in 1981; the artist was paid in full (\$175,000). A photograph of the installed, completed work is shown in figure 1. It was a fait d'accompli, or so it seemed.

Almost immediately after placement, the work was the subject of derision, ridicule, vitriole, and aggravation. A campaign for its removal was initiated by Judge Edward Re of the Court of International Law, who had to pass the piece every day on his way to work and claimed that it was an insult to the government and all government employees. Serra ignored the complicated issue of discourse between the *public* and Public Art. As the art historian Erika Doss posited, Serra's narrow frame of reference blinded him to the oppositional political and social forces that were gathering against him<sup>10</sup>.

Although initially unsuccessful in his efforts, Judge Re continued his unrelenting attack through two federal administration periods. Finally, he found a powerful ally within the bureaucracy, a newly

*Public Realm: Exploring the Quintessential Social Territory*, Aldine Gruyter

<sup>7</sup> The synoptic review of the Serra case contained in this essay is provided to whet the intellectual appetite. For rigorous analysis see: Weyergraf-Serra, Clara, and Buskirk, Martha (1991) *The Destruction of The Tilted Arc: Documents*, MIT Press, Cambridge MA. *Richard Serra vs United States General Services Administration*. 847 F.2d 1045, 1048, 1049, (2nd Cir. 1988). Hoffman, Barbara *Law For Arts Sake in the Public Realm* Critical Inquiry 17(Spring 1991). For discussion of related Moral Rights or Le Droit Moral, see *Moral Rights, First Step or False Start?* Art in America 79 (July 1991): 37-45. For a critical review of the arguments cited in the foregoing literature, particularly the GSA and Serra arguments relative to site specificity see Deutsche (1998:260 – 70) Note 14

<sup>8</sup> Krauss, Rosalind E., (1986) *Richard Serra/ Sculpture*, the Museum of Modern Art, New York. Serra has had installations of his sculpture in steel, lead, and concrete throughout the United States and Europe, including *Concrete Curves* (1982-1984) at La Verneda, City of Barcelona, Spain.

<sup>9</sup> From an interview between the artist and the art historian Harriet Senie, *The Right Stuff* Art Bulletin 75 No.3, 1993:433-66.

appointed administrator of the original funding agency, the General Service Administration (GSA), who was anxious to undo some of the previous administration's public work. Together, they were able to leverage the system to have public hearings for the purpose of considering removal of the piece. In this case "removal" was a rhetorical nicety; some claimed that it could only be removed by destructive dismantling, but regardless, the piece had been created site specific for Foley Square.

The open hearings were held and 180 interested persons spoke before an ad hoc board. The speakers who provided testimony were a diverse group, ranging from low-level federal employees to an elite cadre representing the art museums of New York. The final tally - 122 speakers in favor of retention - 58 favored removal. The board voted for destruction despite the overwhelming weight of opinion for retention, and with no input from the real *public*, the thousands of people, mostly *strangers*, who use the building annually in the course of doing government business. The chairman of the board, in a textbook demonstration of *authoritarian populism*, as described by Lauria and Soll<sup>11</sup>, and with unconscionable political aplomb, announced to the press:

*The people have spoken and have been listened to by their government<sup>12</sup>!*

On 15 March 1989, Richard Serra's *Tilted Arc* was removed. Rosler<sup>13</sup> posits that, in the absence of a political public - or even the conception of that space in which political dialogue and decision-making takes place - government sponsored art can only be seen as government imposed art. Government imposed art has characteristic sameness when it is sourced by a bureaucracy that has a fixed percentile of building construction cost which by directive, it must spend on art and a regulatory *fact sheet* that determines the range of aesthetics. The resultant "cookbook" Public Art is generally somber, completely lacking in *joie de vive*. Despite protestations of site specificity, it can be best classified as "plop" art.

### ***The Public Realm:***

The space that Rosler felt was missing in the Tilted Arc debacle, where a political dialogue and decision making process could have taken place, was the Public Realm. That mystical place, the Public Realm, which Habermas conceived as a safe place for political dialog and discourse, has been the subject of serious reconsideration in the



<sup>10</sup> Doss, Erika (1995) *Spirit poles and Flying Pigs: Public Art and Cultural Democracy in American Communities*, Smithsonian Press, Pg 44

<sup>11</sup> Lauria, M. and Soll, M.J. (1996), *Communicative Action: Power and Misinformation in the Inner Harbor Canal Lock Site selection Process*, Journal of Planning Education and Research.

<sup>12</sup> *Trying to Move a Wall*, New York Times, 13 March 1988, Sect I, Pg 48

past several decades. It is a place whose very existence has raised serious doubt, a place that has been ridiculed as mutually exclusive with democracy, impugned as an invention to further subjugate feminism by exclusion. And finally, a space under attack by political forces diametrically opposed to each other but unified by their animus toward, and fear of an uncontrolled, *undisneyfied* public space harboring strangers rather than audience. A space that is under most virulent attack, not by evil forces but by the wondrous advances of technology that have encouraged our public to forego the use of public spaces and seek a hermetic privatism in their homes. Many writers, including Michael Sorkin<sup>14</sup> and Rosalyn Deutsche<sup>15</sup>, see the battle for the control of these traditional spaces, the streets, the squares, the courtyards and parks as a key to the exercise of free speech rights. In fact, they see the effort to reclaim the city as the struggle of democracy itself. There are no political, or social, demonstrations in Disneyland. Even a mildly untoward gathering in the Mall of the Americas would engender an instantaneous response by corporate police who monitor the space with an electronic shield that would cause George Orwell to shudder. A cursory inventory of the places formerly considered as *public* that are now controlled by the economic and political elite, can be surprising. This is not an ahistorical development. Control of the public space has been a concern of the ruling class and later of the well-to-do bourgeois. Scholars have argued for generations about the underlying motivation in 18C urban design. One consistent argument offered was that the layout of the streets in both Wren's London and Baron von Haussman's Paris was primarily about protecting the power and economic elite from intrusion by the rabble.

The Private Realm was not well developed until very recently and was materially impacted by the industrial revolution. Leisure and the division of labor accelerated the growth of the home as other than a place to sleep and procreate. Nevertheless, despite the growth of the Private Realm we know that, recently as the *fin de siècle*, American and European culture generally embraced the public space- it was critical for societal interface and communication. What does this mystical space look like today?

Is it still available, or as some suspect, has it dissolved? This essay posits that it is alive, not too well at this time, little understood by either the media or government at all levels, but despite these adverse symptoms, with a favorable prognosis because of the critical need for it if our society is to have a 21C democracy.

When one speaks of the Public Sphere, the thoughts of Jurgen Habermas are essential. His statement of the concept is concise and lucid: *the bourgeois public sphere may be conceived above all as the sphere of private people come together as a public*. In developing and honing that concept, Habermas (1966:28-56) traced the history and prehistory of *public* through its etymological and political development from medieval sovereignty to Marxian theory. In treating the social aspects of his hypothesis he drew freely from the work of Hannah Arendt (1958: 22-78), even though the theme of her work could hardly be classified as Marxian, but today, nearly fifty years after its publication, her book *The Human Condition* is still relevant and predictive. As onpoint as studies of the Public Sphere can be with sociology and politics, their

<sup>13</sup> Rosler, Martha (1987) *The Birth and Death of the Viewer: The Public Function of Art in Discussions in Contemporary Culture* ed. Hal Foster, Norton, New York

<sup>14</sup> Sorkin, Michael, (1992) *Introduction: Variations on a Theme Park* in Michael Sorkin, ed *Variations on a Theme Park: The New American City*

relevance to the study of Public Art has been a stretch beyond the limit of the argument. Lyn Lofland's *The Public Realm: Exploring the City's Quintessential Social Territory* lays out a map of the realm that offers a matrix which can include Public Art, perhaps explicate where it can fit naturally and possibly ameliorate some of the unneutralized vitriol amongst the players. We will follow Lofland into the *Regio Incognita* of the *Public Sphere*, a social space for *strangers*.

According to Lofland, *the Public Realm is constituted of those urban settlements in which individuals in copresence tend to be personally unknown or only categorically known to one another*. It is only in the city where we find the social-psychological environment supportive of the fecund space necessary to nurture a Public Realm. To maintain that environment on a permanent basis, only a city can provide collections of persons who are personally unknown to one another or composed importantly of strangers. As the city develops, so too the discrete Public Realm. Leaving safe private space, the domicile, and venturing into the Public Realm, the street, is to experience a world of many unknown *others* who do not share the same values, history or perspective. Following the work of Albert Hunter,<sup>16</sup> Lofland uses a trichotomous distinction between the realms in society, rather than the dichotomous categorization used by many other authors in the field. She divides social space into three distinct parts. *The Private Realm*, is characterized by ties of intimacy among primary groups including members located within households and personal networks. *The Parochial Realm* is where members are associated by community, neighbors, acquaintance, workplace, or mutual interest. And finally, *the Public Realm*, the space of strangers or at best casual acquaintances, the street, a place for discussion, a non exclusive space, a safe place for decision, or the practice of democracy.

Now that we know what each of these realms should contain, where are they? This answer is not quite so straightforward, because realms are not geographically or physically rooted pieces of space- they are social and they are fluid. So, might not one expect that a public park would be a Public Realm at all times? No, not so. Whether a space contains any realm at all and which of the three types it is, remains changeable depending upon the proportions and densities of relationship types present and those proportions and densities are fluid. Cultural or legal designations notwithstanding, it is always a matter of the social relationships present. Rosalyn Deutsche (1998: 276-77) offers a fine example of this fluidity in her essay on *Agoraphobia*. Jackson Square Park, a small triangular park in the Greenwich Village neighborhood of New York City was a public space, dating back to the 19C, used by local residents from nearby upper-middle-class apartment houses and by a substantial number of local residents sans apartments - the homeless. The park was a public space by designation and fulfilled the *Public Realm* requirement by being occupied by strangers most of the time. After a \$1.2-million reconstruction of the park, a neighborhood group- The Friends of Jackson Park- decided to lock the newly installed gates at night. The City Department of Parks welcomed the assistance in protecting public *space*, a defense they equated with evicting homeless people from the city park. The New York Times and other media strongly supported the action<sup>17</sup>, consistently mistaking a parochial group for the *public*. In the context

and *The End of Public Space*  
The Noonday Press .N.Y

<sup>15</sup> Deutsche, Rosalyn, (1998),  
*Evictions: Art and Spatial Politics* MIT Press, Cambridge, MA  
<sup>16</sup> Hunter, Albert (1985) *Private, Parochial and Public Social Orders: The Problem of Crime and Incivility in Urban Communities in The Challenge of Social Control: Citizenship and Institutional Building in Modern Society*, ed. Gerald D Scuttles



and Mayer N. Zald, Ablex,  
Norwood, N.J. Pd 230-42

<sup>17</sup> Roberts, Sam *The Public's*

of public space, what transpired was that a designated public park had been *appropriated* by a parochial group under auspices of the city government, and by denying use of the park to certain “undesirables”, the homeless, the strangers, created an exclusive, gentrified, parochial, “better” space. This is not an action unique in New York City and is considered as an appropriate, legal and socially responsible action to deny access to these *intruders*<sup>18</sup>. Similar exclusions are present, to mixed reviews, throughout the newly renovated city parks that dot the city. Aesthetically, there is no argument that order and pleasantness are improved and confrontation with the city’s social failure is minimized, but legal targeting has not reduced the homeless problem and there is no evidence that conversion of public space to exclusive parochial space will palliate it.

*Right to Put a Padlock On a Public Space* New York Times, June 3, 199 B1 and Siegel, Fred *Reclaiming Our Public Spaces*, The City Journal 2, No. 2, (Spring 1992):35 -45

<sup>18</sup> Amorosa, Elizabeth, *Personal Communication*, July 11, 2001

In the context of the planning for The Greater Globalized New York City, the homeless are classified as social detritus. This attitude pervades not only the real estate cabal that wields the economic power of New York development and redevelopment through its cryptopolitics, but is also demonstrated by the city planning department’s feckless treatment of these marginalized citizens under the guise of creating social harmony. Increasingly, we find that conservative urbanists, either ignore or misunderstand the spatial politics of the Public Realm with its inherent, conflictual terrain, and are supporting the transformation of public space into proprietary or parochial space. In most cases the intention is improving the domestic tranquility but, in fact, their attitude tends to obscure social disharmony. So, must the urban planner be a social worker? This essay does not argue for that, but it does follow Deutsche (1988)<sup>19</sup> and does suggest a need for increased awareness, amongst professionals, of the impact of the planning act upon the social fabric.

<sup>19</sup> Deutsche, Rosalyn *Uneven Development*, October 47 (Winter 1988) 36

### **Birth of a Public Realm**

The diversity of the United States is obvious in San Diego, California where the Mexican-American barrio of Logan Heights became the largest *Chicano*<sup>20</sup> community in the country. The very existence of the neighborhood became problematical in the 1960s and 1970s when socio-political events associated with city redevelopment, including political rezoning, splitting the neighborhood with a super freeway, encouragement of industrial and state facilities construction, and developing a spider-web of approaches to the new San Diego/Coronado Bridge. Planners and politicians had certainty that there was no alternative but the dissolution of the neighborhood and dispersion of the population. For many residents, however, this had been their home since the turn of the century and they were not to be moved that easily. Initially, what was at stake was a six-acre area under the approaches to the bridge<sup>21</sup>. The community claimed the land as the public space that the city and state had promised to cede to the barrio as a park, innumerable times. Certain of their legal and power position, the State of California began their first project on the disputed ground, construction of a State Police station and parking lot for 300 automobiles. It was not to be. Faced with rings of outraged citizens and students who locked hands and surrounded the construction crews. Work stopped and negotiations began.

<sup>20</sup> Chicano is a derivative of the Spanish word *Mexicano* assumed by many Mexicans in the 1960s to replace the term Mexican-American. It is not universally accepted by the Hispanic community because of pejorative connotations.

It took a full three years, but in the end the *Chicanos* had their public space and then began a truly remarkable Public Art project, in a Public Sphere, and under democratic community auspices. Artists came from all over Southern California to participate. Later, the art was designated as a San Diego Historical Site<sup>22</sup> and acclaimed as the finest set of murals outside of Mexico City.<sup>23</sup>

That was not accidental or surprising. Salvador Torres, the leader of the team<sup>24</sup> selected by the community to paint the murals, saw the massive pylons that support the bridge as the perfect ground upon which to continue the tradition of social consciousness exemplified by Diego Rivera, Jose Luis Orozco, and Alfor Siqueiros the post-revolution Mexican muralist. Torres was most attracted to Siqueiros because he felt that his work, particularly his most recent, the *Siqueiros Polyform*, pointed the way to the pylon murals.

In 1973 when the city finally gave permission to start the murals, hundreds of spectators watched the transformation of these support columns into a statement of their traditions, values and their success in creating a Public Sphere where strangers were welcome. At first, in their enthusiasm of winning the prize, the young residents began a program of graffiti, much to the chagrin of the muralist team. With a little guidance they were turned to more productive painting. Now over thirty years old, Chicano Park, impeccably maintained, continues to be a physical demonstration of a truly public space. On several recent surveys of the park, I found the facilities well occupied by diverse individuals and small groups obviously known to each other, but generally the park was habituated by persons going about their own business and unknown, or only casually known, to each other. One of the conditions that Lofland felt was important to the growth of a truly Public sphere was the existence of a condition of *mild anarchy*. The original manner in which the community obtained their rights and the content of the murals leaves no doubt about the existence of that condition in their neighborhood. The space is open everyday to any user - no exclusions.

### Keys to the Public Realm:

In our early discussion of the Public Realm, it was specifically said that only the city, rather than small towns and villages have the raw material to create it. How do they manage to create civility in the face of heterogeneity? Lofland (1998:236-41) argues that the city teaches *tolerance* - it is the substance of survival in the city; it is the catalyst that transforms the residents into cosmopolitans; when mixed in equal parts with strangers, it can produce a Public Realm. Although it sounds simplistic, it is a sound hypothesis and does not stand on brittle legs but sits firmly on a foundation of social science research.

The body of that research argues that the qualities of urbanity, civility and tolerance, in oneself, are linked to distance in the relationship of self and the relevant *others*. That is, the different *other* is tolerable, perhaps even worthy of appreciation only if, psychically or physically, that *other* is sufficiently distant to pose no threat. Those qualities are about the fact that humans differ significantly along important lines

<sup>21</sup> Delgado, Kevin A *Turning Point: The Conception and Realization of Chicano Park*, The Journal of San Diego History 33, Winter 1988

<sup>22</sup> Ferree, Pamela Jane, *The Murals of Chicano Park*, M.A. Thesis, San Diego State University, (1994)

<sup>23</sup> The murals have been a continuing community project since their inception and have expanded from the pylons to include approaches to the freeway and the athletic venue. The work has been maintained by community generated conservation.

<sup>24</sup> Principal artists of the original team: Salvador Torres (leader), Victor Ochoa, Guillermo Aranda, Coyote Tonacatecutli, Mario Acurdo, Armando Nunez, Arban Quevedo, Salvador Barajas, Guillermo Rosete, Jose Cervantes, and Arturo Ramon. The names are listed upon a side panel of one pylon and signed on the individual works.

The base is very broad and could use a subject bibliography, these are several milestones on that path-

Park, Robert E., (1925), *The City: Suggestions for the Investigation of Human Behavior in the Urban Environment in The City* ed. By Park, Burgess and McKenzie, Chicago University

and that these differences matter to them. Urbanity, civility and tolerance create the possibility of living civilly with that reality. The learning of tolerance requires repeated experience with *nonintimate* (non-private realm) and *noncommunal* (non-parochial realm) relationships. The Public Realm is one of the few social territories where this can occur and people can act together without being the same.

Lofland (1998:242-3) is very specific about the physical characteristics of the city, that together with social characteristics, are able to produce a Public Realm:

- The city must be small in area, compactly settled, and preferably mass- transit-oriented.
- The segregated areas should be proportionally small.
- The difference amongst citizens must be viewed by them, as meaningful differences. Cleaned-up, tidy, purified, Disneyland cities, where nothing shocks, nothing disgusts are pleasant but unlikely to create tolerance.
- The city must have a sharp edge, and an underpinning of mild anarchy, which means that occasionally its public space should generate *mild* fear. However, should the streets and public spaces be viewed as *too* dangerous, no lessons can be learned.

### Conclusions:

Even under the extreme pressure generated by modern *technology* and its encouragement of an expanded hermetic private realm, *tourism* and its inherent power lobby for purified, disneyfied cities, and *timidity* which begets fear of *others* and prevents tolerance, the Public Realm persists. Had the *Tilted Arc* controversy been addressed in a Public Realm social space it is only mildly speculative to anticipate a less authoritarian outcome. Chicano Park and its renowned murals came into being because virtual strangers came together and created a real public space. At other locales in the world, the corporate need for tranquility and controlled space to operate their ventures, is putting daily pressure upon the public to release control of their public space. Simultaneously, development of technology is offering us a choice of becoming voyeurs of life rather than participants. It does not bode well for the Public Realm.

In the area of our interest, placing the matrix of the Public Realm over Public Art controversies could offer surprising solutions. Each time it is invoked, interdisciplinary barriers appear to crumble and it becomes obvious that these intellectual moats separating the disciplines are ego and self-interest driven. Most importantly, just to be conscious that public space does not originate by government decree or on the planner's drawing board, but in the mind, is a step in the right direction.

## ***References***

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