

Subtle
schemes
to derail
funds
but
by no means
structural
solutions

by Alina Lupu

‘If we as artists can be of service to society, why don’t we?’

Alina Lupu’s art takes many forms, but in this case, that of social practice, supporting and working together with social initiatives. The initiative in question is Helen’s Free Food Market (HFFM), a project which is anti-food waste and simultaneously supports people with a lower income.

Helen’s Free Food Market was founded in 2019 with a single pickup—by Helen van

der Bilt and a befriended neighbour. The principle was straightforward: take food that is about to go to waste from local supermarkets and hand it out to neighbours that need it. The initiative has gained increasing attention and support, especially during the 2020 lockdowns, going as far as to be supported by the Amsterdam municipality which says HFFM reaches a segment of Amsterdammers it fails to reach.

Alina volunteered at HFFM during the COVID-19

pandemic, and took things further by researching and reflecting on the role of the artist as a ‘public servant’, as a means to also direct attention to the HFFM initiative.

The bakfiets

It is a truth universally acknowledged that if you’re a Dutch kid in the year 2022 you might have at a certain point been driven around in a bakfiets—aka a cargo bike— by either your primary caregivers, your school’s staff, or random friends taking you to, let’s say, governmentally mandated swimming lessons and back home. A bakfiets is one of those contraptions with two wheels at the front and a container in between, alternatively one wheel in the front and one back, the container remaining a constant. The steering is usually done on

under the container and it's simple in construction but not stable, which makes it difficult to control at high speeds. The container can be an open flat container, but also a box with a lid or a large basket. Aside from children, the bakfiets also carries pets, groceries, furniture, you name it!

Being driven around in a cargo bike is a practice which might not be as old as time—the most popular sightings of a bakfiets as a common means of transportation for one's offspring could be dated to around the 1990s—but it has become as embedded into the Dutch day to day and urban landscape as to no longer be questioned.

If, on the other hand, you're an adult in the year 2022 and live in the Netherlands, you might know how to maneuver a bakfiets down the street and the act of doing so might be as second nature as the above-mentioned swimming. You might be hard-pressed and fail to manage, if asked, to deconstruct the steps that are needed to teach another person how to ride a bakfiets. You'd think it's a little bit like walking. Comes naturally! Naturally, you'd be wrong.

Curiosity eventually led me to craft my own bakfiets story. I took to the streets riding a bakfiets with the grace of a bulldozer in October 2020, after a brief Messenger exchange with Helen van der Bilt. She was looking for volunteers to supplement the ever more flexible pool of 40 people that she relied on week to week to help out with her free food market. I was looking to learn to handle a bakfiets and to give a hand. It's worthy of note to mention that at the time I also didn't know how to swim. By then I'd been living in the Netherlands for eight years.

My first trip around Amsterdam North-East, picking up leftover bread and vegetables had me going to around six shops, small and large, sweating profusely despite it being a quite cold and wet October, being looked at in awe—"we honestly thought you'd give up!"—and halfway through getting the hang of it after being given the basics, by an American, of how to use gentle leverage to counterbalance the beast, rather than throw my whole body into it. The same, I was about to eventually find out, would apply for swimming.

And, if we're to wax philosophically, for most things in life.

My introduction to helping out at the free food market and learning to handle a bakfiets was followed by almost two years of assisting, once every few weeks. I'd also switch roles, helping out with pick-up with the van from the wholesale food market, sorting, home delivery, or, more recently, refurbishing one of the cargo bikes in the fleet.

I could weave myself seamlessly into the larger team and watch the weekly routine as ever bigger numbers of food got salvaged and more and more people in Amsterdam North-East were reached with the help of the food market. A tally at the end of 2021 counted 41,200 kg of saved food, 80 families, and other initiatives helped, with an average of 858 kg per week, up from 511 kg per week in 2020.

Though obviously, the aim was not growth. Growth signaled things going wrong across other systems, but one can both help out and be critical of those failures simultaneously.

My artistic practice, in its more traditional sense—performances, objects, texts—weaved itself with my volunteering, and at a certain point, from the simple curiosity of learning to ride a bakfiets, I wondered what more I could do from my position as an artist within this configuration.

I n t e r m e z z o — f o r a d d e d c o n t e x t

There is a precedent to this. I'm used to deconstructing systems in my practice, and to illustrate this I'll dive into an artwork I made in 2020, right before the pandemic hit. It's a piece that I exhibited during Prospects and Concepts, a show part of Art Rotterdam, and which was meant to be a culmination of my year of working with the support of a Young Talent Grant offered generously by the Mondriaan Fund to boost my practice.

The Mondrian Fund listed my participation in the show as such:

'Lupu mainly exposes the merits, expectations, and working conditions for artists. For that, she is inspired by the book "Wages against artwork"

by Leigh Claire La Berge. Lupu:
“The payment of the work is one of the most important parts of the performances I make, highlighting the lack of payment for artistic work on the regular.” During *Prospects & Concepts*, a handyman or woman will be commissioned by Lupu to hang prints with shots from her desk. The things on the desk are the silent witnesses of the events and performances that Lupu has been working on. Actions that have never been fully documented because they often take place outside the art circuit or the classical studio.’

When setting up an exhibition things go in parallel. One meets with the curator months in advance. One sends the catalog text to print weeks in advance. And before one knows it, they still have a work that is clear in theory, but unfinished in practice. I had my concept completed a couple of months before *Prospects and Concepts 2020*. I had my printer chosen even before that. What I didn’t have was a completed piece, because my work tends to reflect on working conditions and artistic precarity, but, actually more importantly, on context. I didn’t have my ending until I received

the practical information for the exhibition setup from the Mondriaan Fund, which practical information contained a couple of puzzle pieces that would allow me to streamline, in conversation, what the 2019 working period had been about. The following message hit my Inbox on January 10th, 2020:

‘Herewith I send you some practical information about Prospects & Concepts.

— All participating artists will receive from us 1 crew badge, the moment you will come to deliver your work at the Mondriaan Fund. With this badge, you have free admission to Art Rotterdam and the P&C exhibition. From Wednesday morning 5 Feb, you will need this badge to enter the fair. Artists who are collaborating with performers or assistants will receive a badge for them too, with which they can enter the fair for free on all days.

— All participating artists will receive 1 Art Rotterdam ticket to give away. This ticket gives free admission to the opening or one of

the other days. This ticket you will also receive the moment you come to the Van Nelle to deliver or install your work. More tickets we do not have, but if people ask you can refer to www.artrotterdam.com for tickets for 6 until 9 Feb (online discount of €3 and students can get an extra discount on Thursday and Friday). Art Rotterdam does not sell tickets for the opening.'

This email was preceded by the notice, on the 13th of December 2019, of our artist fee for participating in the show (yes, there was one!):

'Fee

In a former mail, I wrote every participant can send an invoice for an artist fee. In the meantime the official artists' fee is slightly increased up to 208,- Euros ex btw.

Travel expenses will be reimbursed based on train tickets 2nd class or €0,19 ct per kilometer.'

I found myself at the time worrying not only about the content of the images I was about to display, but more about who would

be putting up those images. The worry was first of all financial—since commissioning a wallpaper professional reaches into the 30 Euros per hour. At five days of show and ten images that is one painful sum to cover! Commissioning a flyering company would be cheaper, but also would not guarantee weekend work. Besides, my worry was mainly conceptual. Would any of these professions make sense for the piece? And then there was my position in the show itself: after one year and a generous subsidy, due to the nature of my practice, I would find myself in the configuration of a show which allowed few of the people that have offered me support the means to see it, and with financial support for putting up the show which wouldn't cover my working costs, never mind my presence during five days of work. Funnily enough, I already took out a no-interest-loan for this very piece. This meant the printing would be covered. But so... taking into account that the cheapest worker for my pieces tends to always be me, I asked myself how could I both use the conditions of the show, extract myself from the direct line of labour, highlight those conditions and their paradoxical nature for others, and get to share my show experience with those that supported my practice since its beginning?

The following description ended up being the piece itself:

‘10 individual wallpapers will be put up, strip by strip, with the help of paid art workers. 9 strips are making up a wallpaper. There is a 208 Euro participation fee given to each artist that exhibits in the Prospects and Concepts 2020. This fee will be divided into the total amount of art workers needed to put up the wallpapers throughout the five days of the exhibition in an attempt to illustrate the fragmentation of labour that takes place during art production.’

I invited one hundred art workers. Sixty showed up. Each art worker became an official performer during the show for the duration of their labour, granting them full access to both Art Rotterdam and Prospects and Concepts 2020. Each art worker would receive a fee of 2,30 Euro and the equivalent of a ticket, estimated at 19,50 Euro, for a total of 15 minutes of work.

Result: 60 strips of wallpaper, totaling almost 7 images, out of the total 10 images

broken down in 90 strips, were put up by 60 individual art workers during 5 days of exhibition, making up for a loss of revenue of 1,170 Euros for the organizing team of Art Rotterdam, but also a maybe more fair artist fee than the originally proposed one of 208 Euros.

The piece I made got a review in the Volkskrant written by Anne van Leeuwen:

‘Prospects & Concepts. Van Nelle Factory, Van Nelleweg 1. Sun - Fri 11 am - 7 pm.

Also in the Van Nelle factory: the annual exhibition of the Mondriaan Fund. Artists who have previously obtained a “Young Talent Work Contribution” from the art grant provider show their skills here. This time it is 66 artists and the extensive exhibition is crazy, with for example a skater-ramp, a chocolate fountain, a living sculpture, and a porn film without sex (but with a lot of shaving cream). Yes, artist Alina Lupu has a photo wallpaper installed and anyone who helps will receive a “fair share” of the fee that the artist

herself received for her participation in the exhibition: 208 euros. A sharp, smart commentary within a cheerful art circus.'

U n e x p e c t e d f o l l o w - u p

One interesting thing happened once I made clear to the Mondriaan Fund what the format of the work will be, including listing the 208 Euros for visitors to see (and later on for the Volkskrant to quote). I got the following reaction:

'Because you mention the participation fee in your text, we realise that you didn't ask for a fee for the performers. There is a small budget for this available. We can offer you a budget of 400 euros a day, which you can divide over the performers.'

You can imagine my surprise as to how random budgeting can be in a show the magnitude of Prospects and Concepts. It seems once you ask, money instantly materializes. It is though a matter of personal responsibility to ask, never to be asked what you need. Even in this context money though was still relative.

5 days x 400 Euros = 2,000 Euros
2,000 Euros / 60 workers = 33,33 Euros per
person + the initial 2,30 Euros out of my own
honorarium = 35.63 Euros per person

With this calculation in mind, I decided to
propose a small detour.

The above sum could have a limited impact
on an individual level, though it will always
make an impact, it could contribute to a bit
more systemic support when applied to a
community. A game of paying it forward if you
will.

I proposed to my 60 art workers to bundle
up their fees and donate these to two
community spaces—one in Amsterdam (Salwa
foundation—a platform for artists, designers,
and creative thinkers who want to study or
work in the Netherlands and are looking for
support in finding their way and building
their network) and the other one in Rotterdam
(varia—a collective infrastructure maintained
by members which work with free software,
organise events and collaborate in different
constellations).

I sent emails to my art workers and ended
up with an overwhelming majority of them
deciding to give away their fee, and proving

in the process that highlighting precarious conditions can bring about some form of mutual support, small but stubborn. Those that couldn't forego their fee also really appreciated its increase since by the time the news came in we ended up smack dab at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic.

It was March 2020.

C r i s i s

Despite the sheer optimism of the above-mentioned piece, or maybe because of it, and the restrictions that followed, the pandemic brought about for me a crisis in understanding what it is that I do and would like to continue doing as an artist.

The following piece encapsulates the crisis itself, as it was unfolding and I had the luck to write it within the context of a commission from Stichting TAAK in the second half of March 2020, bound to the indoors due to a worldwide pandemic with an unpredictable course. The piece is called 'Day 51—Art Practice', and it goes a little something like this:

I spent the whole day yesterday crying this deep cry that I've been holding inside of me for the past two months.

I felt like an enormous child. I couldn't help myself. This sort of bodily cleansing and mental stop felt like: equal parts sadness, equal parts lack of perspective, and equal parts frustration at how change seems to be both happening and stalling. At how we want to go back to normal despite normal having failed us and instead of digging our way out of this, we make these wide ranges of movements that are only allowing the ground to swallow us up further. And by we, I mean me. But I'm certain that I'm not alone in this. These days are some variations of quicksand.

I'll attempt to dig myself out of it by trying to define what it is that I've been doing over the past few weeks.

I'll start by trying to define what a "practice" is. We artists all tend to have an 'art practice', don't we?

According to the first result on Google 'practice' can be defined in three different ways:

— the actual application or use of an idea, belief, or method, as opposed to theories relating to it;

- the customary, habitual, or expected procedure or way of doing something;
- repeated exercise in or performance of an activity or skill to acquire or maintain proficiency in it.

While recently discussing the field of ‘social practice’, a subcategory within the arts and one which is very close to my way of making, embedded as I usually am into dialoguing with institutions, questioning labor relations, and working to make collaboratively, I got confronted with the following statement, from a young artist that dipped her toes into the social and came back exhausted:

‘(The project) was a lot of work to maintain. We really did social work. It was almost overshadowing my own practice.’

In this I believe the quote’s author referred to the second definition above: practice as ‘the customary, habitual, or expected procedure or way of doing of something.’

You see, within the art field, despite its infinite discussion of freedom, there are certain ways in which things are done. Rigid ways. Artworks

look in a certain way, exhibition spaces take certain shapes, publics behave according to prescribed modes. Contemporary art is pretty much an embodiment of the phrase that was used in 1964 by United States Supreme Court Justice Potter Stewart to describe his threshold test for obscenity in the *Jacobellis v. Ohio* case: 'I know it when I see it.'

This is why, when confronted with working on a project which is steeped in the 'social', most young artists tend to experience a deadlock. They come up with those all too often encountered questions:

'Am I still an artist if I dedicate my time to issues that relate to the social?'
'While I'm meaningfully socially engaging with a community am I doing this from the position of the artist or simply of a community member?'

In short:

'But is it art?'

And I come to this question and I stumbled across this dilemma even more so due to our current predicament, stuck as we are in our homes, gradually opening up to the world again, having abandoned exhibition spaces

for online conference rooms and viewing rooms, studio time for home time, talks with curators for talks with family and friends, live gigs for simply trying to stay afloat, clay and MDF for sourdough and seedlings. On March 18th a terribly poetic essay entitled ‘The year I stopped making art’ surfaced online. It was written by Paul Maheke and argued for solidarity with the arts in times of need, and solidarity with artists in general, otherwise, they’ll end up quitting their profession.

It went something like this, in several variations:

‘The year I stopped making art, it was before COVID-19. It didn’t take a global pandemic to end my career. I just didn’t manage to pay my tax return on time. It was 2019 and I had a bike accident on one of my shifts when I delivered food to people’s door. The year I stopped making art, it didn’t take for the wealthiest parts of the world to go in total lockdown, to be made redundant from the arts industry.’

The sentiment was echoed in political positioning in Dutch society:

‘The House of Representatives is deeply concerned about freelancers in the cultural sector who are out of work due to the corona crisis. The House fears that they will be forced to do something else.’

The comment came after 300 million Euros were announced as an initial support package for the arts, meant to go primarily to larger institutions like the Rijksmuseum, Van Gogh Museum, and the Concertgebouw, from where these funds were somehow expected to trickle down to individual freelancers within the cultural sector. The package, clearly too small to cover the needs of the sector and bridge over months of unpaid assignments, strangely distributed to already very well-endowed institutions, was felt to not be the type of support that could help artists. Therefore, the artists would switch professions.

And it wouldn’t have been that far off to make such a statement. Notices of people that had lost a couple of gigs and therefore were completely reconsidering their standpoint on whether they wanted to be artists, had popped up in my social media feeds a couple of weeks into the quarantine in the rush of not knowing how long this crisis will last and what long term impact it will have.

But let's take a moment now and get back to 'practice', the first and third definitions:

—the actual application or use of an idea, belief, or method, as opposed to theories relating to it;

and

—repeated exercise in or performance of an activity or skill to acquire or maintain proficiency in it.

If one is to limit an 'art practice' to the 'I know it when I see it' kind of art, then one might be excused for proclaiming that they can no longer carry on making as they used to before the crisis. Conditions have changed. But we change with them. And what good is it to constantly try to reinvent a field as we've been striving with the art field if we end up bailing at the first real sign of a challenge?

What we must do is to truly allow our practices to mean applying an idea, belief, or method and repeatedly exercising that. And if we do that, then it doesn't matter where the idea springs from or what shape it takes or where it's displayed, or even if it's displayed at all.

The coronavirus crisis is a challenge to our very sociality. From the individual body right through to the collective body, and in many cases the body of the nation concerning other nations. This crisis is a chance to reconsider what priorities look like, what relationships should be, how we should make and for what purpose, to reconsider the true potential of what art can be. At the end of all this, and through it, what should we bring with us and become proficient in through repetition, now that the world has been put on pause and will start anew?

In other words, if you're not forced to make for a particular market, what would you make? If you're not pushed into deadlines what would your practice produce? If you're not asked to attend openings and live lectures, how would you socialize around art instead? What kind of artist do you want to be and what kind of art do you want to make if you're being personally honest? Is there room within art practices for thinking smaller scale, thinking humbly, thinking while respecting the environment we're embedded in, thinking in different media, and relating differently to space and other people?

So, in that framework in times of challenge, an art practice doesn't disappear, rather it shifts, it mutates, and it turns into new things

one can become proficient in and share with the world. Artists shape their practices as mirrors of themselves and in relation to the world. And this act of sharing and this act of opening up is a wonderfully vulnerable way of emphasizing something other than infinite growth, and of disregarding the worry that there are gaps in our CVs, and five hours spent daily in gardens tending to plants and 24-hour bread making sessions, or time spent fundraising for domestic workers and advocating for housing as a human right, or days spent playing video games, or in Instagram DM's exchanging pictures of loved ones and building relations that will last long after this crisis is over, or simply hours upon hours of staring into space for no good reason whatsoever since making and non-making are both facets of what forms us as artists and they both allow us to engage and be a part of the world, meshed up in its folds, following its rhythm.

I spent the past three days ignoring all of my obligations, refusing to respond to emails, refusing to engage in dialogue, and failing to grasp the present. I spent yesterday with red eyes, walking around without a particular goal. I'll spend tomorrow refusing to pick up my phone, watching the rain, and considering

what job to take up during the summer to pay rent.

None of that, however, makes me any less of an artist.

A s e r v e r n a m e d R o s a

‘Our practical struggle become[s] what it must be: the realisation of our basic principles in the process of social life and the embodiment of our general principles in practical everyday action. And only under these conditions do we fight in the sole permissible way for what is at any time “possible”.’

—Rosa Luxemburg

‘Memories of our lives, of our works and our deeds, will continue in others.’

—Rosa Parks

In June 2020 I received an email from varia:

‘Dear Alina,

our apologies for the late reply,
by now our available spaces have

extended to the parks and maybe studios again. Hoping your spaces have expanded a bit too!!

The truth is that we were very surprised by the large sum of the donation (largest one we've ever received) and we have been having—still ongoing—discussions on how to best make use of it. It is so helpful in these moments when some of the members are losing their work, so we will dedicate part of this money to establishing a fund that covers for the monthly contributions for those who cannot pay. Seeing as this COVID situation will have long-standing consequences, we suspect it will extend into the future.

We were trying to find a way to thank you and all the performers involved for your generous contribution and we came up with an idea:

we will buy a second hand computer that we'll turn into a server which will be used for various projects, both in and around Varia. There are currently multiple threads that could benefit from this: there is the Digital Solidarity Networks group

(<https://pad.vvvvvvvaria.org/digital-solidarity-networks>), the Feminist Hack Meetings group (<http://varia.zone/en/feminist-hack-meetings-feb-servers.html>) and an ongoing research thread for the Autonomous Fabric. We're trying to establish contact with more organisations to evaluate how we could build a digital autonomous fabric together, not only for us but also for the community around us.

In all of these threads, the server would be a valuable space for experimenting and trying to build something together, so we were wondering if you and the performers would like to give a name to this server. It could be a kind of server monument ;-)

Thanks again to you and all of the performers for this generous contribution, it means a lot to us. And of course, you are all invited to get an account on it once we have it :-)

Hoping we can meet and enjoy life in a not so distant future :)

In solidarity always,

Julie and Cristina channeling
Angeliki,
Danny,
Dennis,
Joana,
Lidia
Luke,
Manetta,
Mathijs,
Niek,
Roel,
Silvio,
Thomas,
Yoana'

The server was inaugurated, in Rotterdam, at the end of March 2022. Their name became Rosa. They went on to travel to Brussels, Bucharest, Athens and Graz, ultimately residing on the internet.

T H E A R T I S T A S P U B L I C S E R V A N T

The crisis was for me a start. It wasn't an endpoint. Not only would my initial reflections during the pandemic continue to resurface with regularity across the two years that followed, but I would also continue getting stuck in what it is that I do, trying

to rationalize, trying to untangle, trying to focus.

I kept my habit, picked up from the Prospects and Concepts piece, all throughout the pandemic. With every situation that allowed it, I shared my artist fees. I made it a habit to pay it forward to those that helped me produce content, those that inspired me, and those that I knew might need support. I gave—time mostly, otherwise also money—out of a need to know that others will give further, though never checking in on them, sometimes them following up. The question of how much I needed for myself—both time and money—regularly came up, and the answer varied, but always seem to surprise me as less than I expected.

What allowed me to give both time and money during the pandemic were unexpected support structures. Initially, it was the pressured Mondriaan Fund, which saw itself questioned to the core and decided to act in generosity. Later on, there would be fast-acting governmental support structures like the TOZO (Tijdelijke Overbruggingsregeling Zelfstandige Ondernemers or Temporary Bridging Scheme for Self-Employed Entrepreneurs) or TONK (Tijdelijke Ondersteuning Noodzakelijke Kosten or Temporary Support for Necessary Costs), or, once again the Corona financial

scheme that the Mondriaan put together with the help of government funds (Corona-overbrugging kunstenaar, curator en beschouwer).

To get a picture of how things looked like for artists pre-pandemic one need not look any further in the Netherlands than the report from the Central Bureau of Statistics: Monitor Kunstenaars en Andere werkenden met een creatief beroep, 2021.¹

¹ <https://www.cbs.nl/nl-nl/longread/rapportages/2021/monitor-kunstenaars-en-andere-werkenden-met-een-creatief-beroep-2021>

In 2017 - 2019, artists had on average a personal gross annual income of 32,000 Euros, 9,000 Euros less than the employed labour force as a whole.

If one is to zoom into my profession— that of a visual artist— incomes hovered around 10.000 Euros per year with lower ones as well, while the higher ones reach towards 20,000.

Artists and other creatives working as independent entrepreneurs relatively often have no provisions for disability or pension. The provisions which came up during the pandemic, for lower-earning artists, offered those artists—me included—more stability than they had encountered in the previous decade. By consulting photographer Eline Benjaminsen's income stats in a recent article

published by NRC Handelsblad, I realised I'm not the only one that noticed an income improvement for artists during the pandemic.

“Net monthly income before corona—€700
Net monthly income 2021—€1,500
Monthly fixed costs (rental studio and house, telephone and subscriptions)—€435
Financial support 2020 (TOZO)—€4,208
Received emergency aid 2021 (Mondriaan Fund)—€13,200”²

² Het huishoudboekje van de culturele zzp'er, by Lucette ter Borg, NRC Handelsblad, 26 January 2022

With the generosity of temporary pandemic funding, I could focus my energies where I believed there was an urgency, an urgency I could decide on. One could in turn qualify my gestures as an illustration of effective altruism.³

³ 'The philosophy of effective altruism applies more broadly to the process of prioritizing the scientific projects, companies, and policy initiatives that can be estimated to save lives or otherwise improve well-being.' Doing Good Better: Effective Altruism and How You Can Make a Difference, by William MacAskill, 2015.

Effective altruism functions as a bit of an outlier when it comes to a field as notoriously poorly paid as the arts. Even so, it's undeniable that one can get more done by giving to communities rather than personally hoarding.

You do what you can when you can.

Eventually, both Salwa and varia received more structural funding from the local institutions. Meanwhile, I did my best to provide them with temporary derailed funding. What sprouted as a result of this was never planned, but I welcomed it with curiosity.

Back to the bakfiets

In April 2021, an article was published on the National Institute for Public Health and the Environment's website. This was part of broader research into the impact of compliance with the corona measures on people's daily lives and how they tried to deal with it as best as possible in different environments and contexts. While trying to map resilience during the pandemic, the article also touched upon the need to tackle systemic issues, such as urban poverty, through a more grassroots approach. The article was authored by Carla Kolner. I'll quote it in full:

Free Food Market: in or out of the shadows?

Helen van der Bilt, the driving force behind Helen's Free Food Market in the Vogelbuurt area of Amsterdam North, never expected her food market to draw as many people as it has. What began as a spontaneous initiative against food waste has grown into an indispensable lifeline for the most vulnerable people in the neighbourhood. With the pandemic dragging on, this form of 'social shadow work' is filling a gap between the informal and official forms of assistance.

For this story, we spoke with Helen van der Bilt, who launched the initiative, as well as Jeanette de Waard, community development worker with Diaconie Noord, and Saskia Welschen, senior researcher in the Urban Social Work research group at the Amsterdam University of Applied Sciences (HvA) and co-author of this story.

Free Food Market as a phenomenon

Helen's Free Food Market (HFFM) started small, and — just like similar initiatives in many other

communities in the Netherlands — arose from a personal interest in taking action against the tremendous volumes of food waste. “I was deeply concerned that there was still so much food being thrown away when people around the world are still going hungry”, Helen recalls. “By starting the food market, which I launched in summer 2019 with another local resident, we were trying to do something about it. This Amsterdam city district is home to lots of people who are undereducated and don’t have much money. Some extra food makes a real difference in their lives.”

The fact that her Free Food Market had become an indispensable resource for vulnerable people just one year later was also related to the coronavirus pandemic — although it did initially look like the lockdown might mean the end of her initiative due to safety concerns. “During the first lockdown, we had to change things fast”, Helen says, “switching from a food market where people could pick up food for free to a grocery delivery service. Some people didn’t even dare to leave their homes, that’s how scared they were. And we didn’t want the market to become a source of infection, even though we were among the first to wear face masks and ensure distancing. But we

saw right away that there were tremendous amounts of food going to waste. All the restaurants, and a little later the wholesalers too, had so much food and no customers.”

B a c k g r o u n d

There are more than one million people living below the poverty line in the Netherlands (Statistics Netherlands, 2018). Official food banks and informal food initiatives help the people who need assistance the most by providing temporary food packages at no cost. In many cases, a food project begins as a small private initiative and later expands to become a full-fledged food bank; if they meet the conditions, they can join the national association of food banks. That organization now oversees 171 food banks with 10 distribution centres. In 2020, 160,500 people obtained food assistance through one of these official food banks. These efforts rely on partnerships between various organizations, governmental agencies, and private parties. Some 13,000 volunteers are engaged in organizing and distributing the food.⁴

Facebook as a trigger

It was only when Helen posted a Facebook message and attracted media attention that she really came to understand how much her initiative filled a serious need. “The registrations just kept coming in”, she recalls. “The delivery service, which I got off the ground as fast as I could with the help of the Sorgbasis initiative, was the answer.” With a few cargo bikes and a handful of volunteers, the groceries could get to the people who needed them. “We had no trouble finding volunteers; so many people in the community were sitting at home and eager to do something good.”

Free food to feel good

Helen has seen the target group of people who need food shift over the past few years. “Before the pandemic, it was primarily the low-income members of this community, people who had always lived here, along with people who believed in fighting food waste”, she says. “But during the first lockdown, we saw more and more people with an immigration background coming in.

Undocumented people are now also part of our target group, though this is not something we can prove because we don't check. These are mainly people who don't have the right papers to access the official food bank, people who were previously doing informal work with no guarantees. All that work is gone now.”

Gradually, Helen says, she also started seeing more freelancers, small business owners, and students. “For these people, the step to a regular food bank is much bigger. Shame is a real factor here.” By maintaining an emphasis on the Free Food Market's original concept of fighting food waste, Helen has helped people accept the help they need. “Last year we rescued over 20,000 kg of food that would otherwise have been thrown away”, she says. “Without our customers, that food would have had nowhere to go. I'm trying to make it a feel-good experience. People feel like they're doing something for the planet while benefiting themselves as well.”

B a c k g r o u n d

The number of people using the official food banks has increased, due in part to the COVID-19 pandemic. The association for food banks in the Netherlands reports that the number of

households using food assistance has risen by 7.2% (reference date 31 December 2020). Amsterdam has not only seen a surge in the use of official food banks; the number of informal food banks has also spiked, MUG magazine reported in early 2021.

At present, food assistance offered through informal channels is reaching about 24,000 people at 70 locations in the city. This includes all the food initiatives set up by independent organisations, charitable institutions, local residents, and church-based groups. Here, too, the COVID-19 pandemic is considered the cause of the major increase in alternative food banks. Undocumented people are said to represent a majority of those served by these facilities (75%).

Meanwhile, a survey of participants at seven food banks in the nearby city of Utrecht showed that many people who rely on food assistance report striving for a balance between ‘giving and taking’ and reciprocity⁵. The researchers reported

5 Kromhout, M. & L. van Doorn (2013). Voedselbanken in Utrecht. Deelnemers in beeld. Utrecht: Utrecht University of Applied Sciences, Research Group on Innovative Social Services. <https://www.internationalhu.com/research/innovative-social-services>

that many of those surveyed were embarrassed about relying on food bank assistance, and struggled to maintain self-respect. These people emphasized that they wanted to do something in exchange for the free food package. For many

of them, this took the form of volunteering with the food initiative.

O u t o f t h e s h a d o w s

A sharp-eyed official of the municipality of Amsterdam caught wind of HFFM. “The area coordinator paid us a visit, and was enthusiastic about what he saw”, Helen says. “He said, ‘I see people here who I don’t see at the regular food bank.’” After six months of dialogue, the Free Food Market was able to go forward as an authorised facility with municipal support. “But with the commitment from them that I could continue using my own approach, staying autonomous and keeping the focus on the groups in this community who really need it”, Helen says. The initiative to establish a dialogue between all food initiatives in Amsterdam North, the municipal authorities, and official care systems came from Diaconie Noord, a volunteer platform for community engagement operated by the diaconate ministries of several Protestant churches in that part of Amsterdam. Other organizations, including the regular food bank, Human Aid Now, and the Red Cross, soon came on board. This created a strong network supporting

food assistance and helped them pinpoint the people who need it most.

S o c i a l s h a d o w w o r k

The Free Food Market can be seen as a form of ‘social shadow work’, in which informal assistance (in many cases initiated by active locals) fills the gaps left in the official assistance infrastructure. “COVID-19 increased the need for this kind of assistance”, says Saskia Welschen, whose work at the Amsterdam University of Applied Sciences has long focused on researching the phenomenon of ‘social shadow work’ and the relationship between informal and official facilities and initiatives. “That’s not to say that official facilities are not successful, but what is clear is that they are not completely succeeding in answering the needs of some people.”

HFFM reveals that new groups of people are now struggling as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. People who would normally be just barely managing to cover their basic needs are now falling below the minimum subsistence level. “And it’s these target groups in particular who feel the need to stay in the

shadows, often out of shame or because they are undocumented”, Saskia says. “But many of these people have also had bad experiences with official assistance and are suspicious of institutions. The people running the informal facilities sometimes succeed in reaching these groups and bringing those people’s assistance needs out into the open. Cooperation between informal and official facilities can ensure that people can be channelled towards the right assistance. But it’s important to tread lightly because you can’t risk losing their trust.”

Helen wholeheartedly agrees with that last point: “I am very careful and never ask for personal information. If people tell me in conversation that they need help, then I always first ask whether I can put them in contact with an official institution. And I report the trends that I see to the municipality. But no specifics, just general trends. People need to know that they’re safe with me.”

B a c k g r o u n d

Since the decentralisation of the welfare state and the implementation of the Social Support Act (Wet Maatschappelijke Ondersteuning,

WMO) in 2015, there has been a strong emphasis on individual resilience and self-sufficiency, and the degree to which they can offer each other support within social networks. This takes place within the ‘informal domain’, ranging from active locals, churches, and mosques to migrant ‘self-organisations’ and sports teams.

Informal actors often initiate food projects, sometimes for reasons other than food assistance. In recent years, the Amsterdam University of Applied Sciences has studied^{6 7 8 9} the role that

6 Veldboer, L., & Hoijtink, M. (2019). “Hybridisering van wijkteams en vrijwilligersinitiatieven lijkt nog ver weg”. <https://www.socialevraagstukken.nl/hybridisering-van-wijkteams-en-vrijwilligersinitiatieven-lijkt-nog-ver-weg/> 7 Welschen, S., Lucas, P., Hoijtink, M., & Veldboer, L. (2020). Licht op sociaal schaduwwerk: Literatuurstudie naar (Nederlandse) informele sociaalwerkpraktijken die plaatsvinden onder de radar. Amsterdam University of Applied Sciences. 8 Welschen, S., Lucas, P., Von Meyenfeldt, L., Hoijtink, M., Rijnders, J., & Veldboer, L. (2020). “Toegankelijkheid in divers perspectief. Bewoners, verbinders en professionals over de sociale basis in een ontwikkelbuurt”. Final report on accessibility of basic facilities in Geuzenveld, Amsterdam. Amsterdam University of Applied Sciences, Werkplaats Sociaal Domein Amsterdam en Omgeving. 9 Welschen, S., Metzke, R., Haijen, J., & Rijnders, J. (2018). “Met elkaar of naast elkaar? Wijkteamprofessionals en informele krachten in Oud Noord over kwesties bij de gezamenlijke ondersteuning aan huishoudens in kwetsbare posities.” Amsterdam University of Applied Sciences.

these informal actors play as sources of care and support, specifically for local residents who may be reluctant or unable to access official care and welfare facilities, for various reasons.

Many of the insights from this research are reflected in the example of Helen’s Free Food Market. For example, informal initiatives are often perceived as low-threshold and are

not based primarily on providing assistance. These initiatives can be seen as a form of social shadow work.¹⁰

10 Schrooten, M., Thys, R., & Debruyne, P. (2019). *Sociaal schaduwwerk. Over informele spelers in het welzijnslandschap*. Brussels: Politea.

They succeed in winning trust through their approach, their first-hand knowledge, and their proximity to the target group. In this role, they can act as bridges between distrustful local residents with a need for assistance or information and the official facilities.

On the other hand, the interaction between the official and informal domains is not without its own tensions, and establishing connections with the official apparatus is not always an objective of the actors in the informal domain. We can also see aspects of this in the example of Helen's Free Food Market. Unfamiliarity, or even mistrust, between the two domains, can play a role. This also applies to the relationship between informal actors and the government. Informal actors frequently feel that their contributions are not being sufficiently acknowledged and would like to see more support in this regard. At the same time, that support cannot come at the cost of their autonomy, which is what enables them to maintain their own approach.

M e a s u r e s t h a t d o n o t m a k e
t h e w o r k a n y e a s i e r

“COVID-19 brought people to the Free Food Market, but they are telling us that following the coronavirus measures, and sticking to them, is an extra burden on people who already had it tough before the pandemic”, says Jeanette, a community development worker with Diaconie Noord. As a community organiser, networker, and supporter of numerous poverty-related initiatives in the neighbourhood, she saw how the 1.5-metre distancing requirement caused many problems. “I’ve seen a lot of food initiatives arise, but most were organised from a house or a garage box. Not much room, of course, and it’s really impossible to keep distancing, not least because people know each other and treat each other ‘like family’. I’ve been engaging with them about this issue.”

Jeanette says that especially at the start of the pandemic, a lot of people didn’t understand how serious it was. On the one hand, there were people who panicked and were too afraid to leave their homes, becoming extremely isolated; on the other, there was the group that didn’t seem to pay attention to the measures at all. “They didn’t see anyone in their communities getting sick, so they thought it wasn’t that

bad, or that it was just a flu”, Jeanette explains. “That’s different now, because a lot of people living here got COVID-19, and then it sank in. But I only started to see more people wearing face masks here once it was really mandatory.”

Jeanette says that one important factor among the group that does not take the measures seriously is that these people have already been living in poverty for many years; they are used to a complex existence full of problems and often had to go without even the basic necessities. “At that point, a virus doesn’t make much difference, and they won’t let it scare them off”, Jeanette says. What she says it takes to get them to take the measures to heart is generally a face-to-face discussion that really conveys what the measures are and why they are important. “Which is really too bad”, says Jeanette, “because the government thinks that a press conference makes everyone understand, but that’s really not the case. For us, that’s only the start.”

B a c k g r o u n d

Face-to-face contacts in a safe and informal setting often present good opportunities for preventive measures, because they can be

an important way to identify needs. People who are having a hard time can be referred to assistance through official channels. In addition, informal key figures can play a role in communicating information about safety during a crisis, such as the coronavirus measures, and lead by example. This is why it is important for municipal authorities and these key figures in districts and neighbourhoods to understand and acknowledge this role.

One example of another form of informal assistance to people who are struggling with a lot of problems are the listening groups that have been launched by Diaconie Noord. These are small groups in which local residents meet to share their concerns. These listening groups were set up based on the Integrative Community Therapy (ICT) methodology. This is a preventive, community-based mental health intervention developed in a Brazilian favela^{11 12}. This form of community

11 Thys, R., Branca Prado, C., & Brandão Cruz, A., "Een Brusselse zelforganisatie voor gemeenschapstherapie of AETCIS. Een schoolvoorbeeld van 'vermaatschappelijking van de zorg'". In: Schrooten, M., Thys, R., & Debruyne, P. (2019). Sociaal schaduwwerk. Over informele spelers in het welzijnslandschap. Brussels: Politea. p.80-86. 12 Bonilla, A. (2008). "Revitalizing the Human Spirit Together: A Case Study of Movimento de Saúde Mental Comunitária do Bom Jardim in Bom Jardim, Fortaleza, Ceará." Independent Study Project (ISP) Collection 3, https://digitalcollections.sit.edu/isp_collection/3. <https://core.ac.uk/reader/232724690>

therapy brings local residents together to share their day-to-day experiences, listen to each other and learn from each other.

This initiative by Diaconie Noord answers a growing need for psychosocial support because problems have been piling up throughout the pandemic for many people living in this area. The groups are generally led by people who are already leaders in the neighbourhood or community.

Challenges in connecting the official and the informal

Saskia says that the Free Food Market is emblematic of what is needed, but also shows where the current system is failing. The COVID-19 pandemic continues to reveal new groups of the needy who do not meet the criteria for participation in the regular food bank system, and are therefore falling between the cracks. Informal and semi-informal facilities like HFFM are filling some of these cracks and becoming an essential part of the day-to-day support for large groups of vulnerable people. As such, they are more than an extension of the official assistance apparatus. This is due to the individual character and unique approach behind these initiatives.

The trick will be to acknowledge and support this valuable role and to ensure that the spheres of informal and official social work complement

each other even better in the future, while retaining the unique qualities of the informal initiatives, like the low threshold for people who mistrust the official channels. “The drivers, the community organisers, the innovators like Helen and Jeanette deserve every support we can give them, but they have to be able to keep their own specific values and keep reaching the people who really need that approach”, says Saskia.

At the end of all this, and through it, what should we bring with us and become proficient in through repetition, now that the world has been put on pause and will start anew?

The way the free food market was put together was shaped by an actual lack, but also by the dynamics of a pandemic that its initiators and current supporters couldn't have anticipated. There is an obvious lack of adequate social security in the neighborhood in Amsterdam North-East where the market takes place. There is also a real wish to help out. And for a short time, due to temporary governmental support structures, those

that could help out had the chance to escape regular working life and shape this initiative in their image.

They had to contend not just with lending a hand, but reframing what lending a hand means, due to the inherent stigma that has been associated with needing help.

I've experienced this personally, after a few hours of volunteering that the wish to take something for myself — perfectly acceptable within the rules of the initiative, since everyone is entitled to a bag of goods based on what they need — is usually thwarted by the acknowledgment that someone needs these things more than I do. Strangely, in a society as generally prosperous as The Netherlands, there's always the feeling that someone needs things more than you do. Precarity however is relative. This is why it's hard to measure it across countries. There's relative poverty and there's absolute poverty.¹³

13 "What is an example of absolute poverty and relative poverty? For example, someone in the US would have to earn less than \$13,000 per year to fall into relative poverty. However, that works out at \$35 per day, well in excess of the \$1.90 threshold that the World Bank sets to define absolute poverty." <https://boycewire.com/absolute-poverty-definition/>

While there shouldn't be, there's a stigma associated with both conditions, alongside internalized shame.

The other dynamic that the free food market touches on is that of how we spend our time, how we work, and for what purpose.

Anthony Klotz, a professor at Mays Business School in Texas, coined the phrase ‘The Great Resignation’ when predicting the huge number of workers likely to quit their jobs. This is a development that happened under the influence of the COVID-19 pandemic, where a generalized search for meaning, amplified by exploitative working conditions, made workers leave their jobs.

‘The Great Resignation, also known as the Big Quit, is an economic trend in which employees voluntarily resign from their jobs en masse, beginning in early 2021, primarily in the United States. It started when the American government refused to provide worker protections in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, resulting in wage stagnation amid the rising cost of living. Some economists have described the Great Resignation as a kind of general strike.’¹⁴

A recent video segment on Lubach in the Netherlands also points towards a national staff shortage, with some 400,000 people ‘missing’ from industries that were booming before the pandemic.¹⁵

15 Bevrijdingsdag & personeelstekort | De Avondshow met Arjen Lubach (S1), May 5th, 2022

To quote Kim Kardashian: ‘It seems like nobody wants to work these days.’¹⁶

16 Kim Kardashian says ‘it seems like nobody wants to work these days’ after sharing her advice for women in business, Insider, March 10th, 2022

Kim K. is absolutely and involuntarily on point. People don’t want to work — in exploitative, intense, meaningless, ungrateful, badly paid positions. I’ve met some of these people while volunteering for the free food market. What they want is agency over their lives, the ability to invest their efforts where they see fit, the satisfaction of meaningful work, and the acknowledgment that the end goal shouldn’t be financial accumulation, but a balanced existence.

With the pandemic disappearing from sight, there will be a matter of how the free food market will be reshaped by people needing to step back from volunteering, due to the urgency of

supplementing their income. This is a challenge that will come up in the following months. But so far it seems there's a strong desire for autonomy from those looking for meaning, a desire which overrides purely financial concerns.

And then there's the dynamic of the Amsterdam North-East neighborhood itself.

In January 2022 news hit the papers.

'After four years, the city beach, meeting place, and daytime activity spot De VerbroederIJ has to leave the beloved site next to the Oostveerpont in Noord. Much to the chagrin of the initiator. "We've been closed longer than open."¹⁷

¹⁷ De VerbroederIJ moet verkassen: 'Amsterdam zou dit moeten koesteren', Het Parool, Dionne van Lint, 5th January, 2022

It was announced that De Verbroederij must make way for the TechSchool, a school for technical pre-vocational secondary education profiles. The school itself would be placed on the same terrain for four years, expected to relocate in 2026.

⁵⁴ De VerbroederIJ is the space that hosts HFFM, alongside a small beach,

a restaurant, a community garden, a shelter for a couple of pigs, play spaces, and events spaces. It's an overall thriving community, to which some are simply clients and others grow their lives around. It's one of those types of initiatives that the municipality of Amsterdam would love to be able to initiate under its banner. It simply just works, but it does because many put their work into it. It would have worked even better if there wasn't a pandemic in between, but even with a pandemic to have dragged it down, its fortitude is admirable. So far more than 5,000 signatures have been gathered in support of the space. Given what de VerbroederIJ is, not just a gathering space, but a garden, a beach, it sounds ridiculous to want to relocate it for yet another temporary construction. Some even proposed having the school built as an annex of De VerbroederIJ, though as far as city planning goes, this mixed-use might not be yet taken as an alternative.

Besides De VerbroederIJ being relocated, there's also the issue of the entirety of Amsterdam North-East being planned

to be redeveloped en-masse. Further down the waterside, the former industrial areas such as the Draka factory which is currently temporary artist studios is planned to transform into 1,700 one-hundred-percent-energy-efficient homes. Out of the ashes, “Embrace the future”, the real estate developer’s website says.¹⁸

18 ‘Draka Amsterdam, In Amsterdam Noord, we are working with Hines to build a 150,000 m2 residential area with sustainable housing’, Provast, Real estate developer in the Hague

The temporary artist studios in the Draka factory are set for eviction in the summer of 2022.

Artists, undoubtedly, alongside strong bottom-up initiatives, have been the pioneers of reframing what Amsterdam North can be, and they will be the ones to be taken out of the neighborhood on the first occasion of high-scale redevelopment.

One need not look any further than the other side of Amsterdam North — NDSM — which suffered a facelift in the past decade, which pushed out lower income residents, and is now peppered with designated graffiti spots for those that can still color, but only inside the lines. Or Overhoeks, in which Yvie, a set

of high-rises welcomes you while you cross the IJ river:

‘I’ve got what you’re looking for. So, you’re looking for a place to call home? A place where you can find the best things in life, all nearby? You just found it! My name is Yvie and I’m moving in on Overhoeks. I’m located right in the heart of the creative centre of Amsterdam. Let me show you all the possibilities that I have to offer. I can’t wait to see you!’¹⁹

19 <https://yvie.com/>

Spoiler alert: what Yvie has to offer are 176 luxury rental apartments in various sizes and shapes, one luxury hotel and 2,000m² of office space. A bit of a bummer!

Knowing that Amsterdam North also contains pockets of relative poverty contrasts redevelopment plans and the reality on the ground becomes even more striking.

At the end of 2021, I realised my contribution to HFFM could move beyond offering my time and physical labour. Thinking in the spirit of sustainable social initiatives, I saw parallels between Helen's weekly practice, my efforts, and the larger field of social practice art. This field focuses on process, rather than the outcome, it aims to inspire debate, expose hierarchies, and highlight the need for meaningful durational work. I realised I could frame my work as a volunteer as social practice, and Helen's entire initiative as the same.

But first, a caveat. The personal bone I have to pick with social practice initiatives, because there is one, and one of the main criticisms of the field is the fact that they can, and most often do, deteriorate into avenues for exploitation of small communities. An artist can easily sweep in, 'activate a community' the artist doesn't know and doesn't have time to get to know, at the demand of an institution or local authority, and then leave at the first chance of applying the same model elsewhere. The goals tend to be to build

their artistic profile, and/or hand in hand with property and municipal developers, to make an urban area attractive. An artist can be a knowing and committed agent of gentrification, at times going to extremes of also getting their share—of funds, of living, or studio, or exhibition space—and/or up their profile. As mentioned, Amsterdam North-East is currently on the brink of redevelopment. What we're now seeing there is gentrification in action.²⁰ And it's fast enough as to not raise any questions as to what it is.

20 "The buying and renovation of houses and stores in deteriorated urban neighborhoods by upper- or middle-income families or individuals, raising property values but often displacing low-income families and small businesses.", dictionary.com

In the grand scheme of things, it's assumed that artists have an innate sensitivity that can be put to work in the spirit of a higher cause. 'The True Artist Helps the World by Revealing Mystic Truths', as per Bruce Nauman's 1967 neon wall piece. The artist is seen as a joker, being able to speak truth to power, as a lateral thinker, as an activator, as a teacher, as an activist, or as Mikolaj Sekutowicz, CEO and Curator of Therme Art framed it during the first Wellbeing Culture Forum Symposium at the Serpentine in the UK: 'Every true artist is not only an artist, but also a botanist, or a scientist, sociologist or psychologist. We

are creating all these boxes, but actually, the true value happens in between these boxes and maybe without boxes at all. A true artist is somehow also a healer.’ and so forth. But that’s honestly just a bit of opportunism.

When, as an artist, you’re not asked what you paint, you’ll simply be asked what kind of creative new angle you want to use to reframe an initiative. It’s a great power that comes with great responsibility. And rather than question their position, artists most often than not do go along with such framing, since it first and foremost flatters the ego, and secondly, it can prove a solid way to earn a living.

I tried to consider this overall odd configuration when, with the assistance of Commons Network and Stichting TAAK, I applied for artist funding at the Mondriaan Fund to carry out a work and research period at HFFM and incorporate my artistic practice and social work. My already existing profile and the profile of the organizations that backed me helped us secure 5,500 Euros as a direct donation to HFFM. The donation is basically my artist fee.

I refuse however to claim any transformative powers. I have no direct involvement in the framing of Helen's initiative. I aim to make no structural or aesthetic decisions within her project. I simply want to do the volunteering work that I was doing before managing to fundraise, and enjoy riding a bakfiets for a cause I believe in.

The closing down of De VerbroederIJ is planned for December 2022. That is when the land must be cleared to make way for the temporary Techschool.

On May 10th, 2022, after three years of existence, HFFM got incorporated as a stichting, allowing me to pass along my donation.

I don't see this donation as a structural solution. The issues that exist in Amsterdam North-East will not be alleviated by my meager attempts, and I also don't believe they should fall on the shoulders of Helen and her overall team of volunteers to manage.

Rethinking how work is done in Amsterdam North should though be challenged at the very core, by the

public servants of the Municipality of Amsterdam, and here's to hoping that these grassroots efforts help to highlight ways of rethinking how we spend our time and where we give our efforts.

I remain ultimately hopeful.

Colophon

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