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## Art on a Trashcan: Art for Life with a Twist

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## Introduction

The marriage of art and life can take many forms. I have always been fond of the great variety of the products around us that have reproductions of artworks on them. To me, touring in the art museum shop at the end of a museum visit is like icing on a cake. As an art lover, I cannot resist the temptation of items that are decorated with works I have seen. When I use a Van Gogh's *Iris* cutting board; a Monet's *Water Lilies* umbrella, or wear a Klimt's famous *Kiss* t-shirt, such products promote my aesthetic experiences even though they have practical functions. Using them has brought me closer to artworks that I love and perhaps makes me feel more sophisticated. I believe such a marriage of art and life helps us think about art in a daily basis and maybe intensifies our appreciation of it.

This form of the marriage of art and life has always seemed an ideal one to me, until a recent children's art contest in town prompted me to rethink it. In January 2013, the City of Richland, in Washington State, held a Trash Can Art contest for all ages (see Picture 1). The art commissioners and park director intended to provide an opportunity for community members to beautify parks. The winning artworks were printed on new stand-alone trashcans at a local children's playground.



Picture 1: Art Contest Flyer, City of Richland, 2013.

I was interested in the many different reactions of students, friends, and colleagues, to this and I will discuss in this article the limitations of the marriage of art with life. My discussion is drawn from objects submitted in the children's art contest, observations of conflicting examples of public art, conversations about the role of public art and the reasons for both positive and negative perceptions toward public art. Questions such as: should there be a limit for the marriage of art and life and what are the reasons for the perceived conflicts about public art, serve as focal points for my discussion. I wish to bring awareness of the many factors affecting our perceptions of art-for-life and to make suggestions to promote aesthetic appreciation in art instruction in that context.

## The Trash Can Art Contest

Viewing the Trash Can Art Contest as a learning opportunity and a chance to help bring art into parks, I encouraged my studio art students to participate. However, I was surprised by the conversations, many of them negative, it provoked among my students. Most of them were puzzled or disturbed by the idea of putting their art on trashcans. They said that they believed trashcans are not the right place for artworks, especially when it came to there being an award for the winning pieces.

For example:

Student-1: I don't want my art on a trashcan!

Me: Why not?

Student-1: It will get stained by smelly trash.

Me: I am sure it will be printed as a banner with adhesive. They won't put your original artwork directly on the trashcan.

Student-2: I will finish the artwork, but I am not going to enter.

Me: Why not?

Student-2: Well. I will be embarrassed if my friends see my art on a trashcan.

Me: Why will you feel embarrassed?

Everyone: Because it is *on a trashcan!*

Me: What if it was displayed on a different object, would it still embarrass you?

Student-2: I don't know. Maybe, maybe not.

Me: What if, say, it were on a park bench or a swing, would this change your mind?

Student-3: No. I *don't* want my art on a bench or swing!

Me: What makes you say so?

Student-3: Because...I don't want anyone to sit on my artwork.

(The class broke out in laughter.)

Me: In that case, where do you think the winning artworks should be displayed?

Student-3: On the wall of course, in a museum.

Student-4: Hallways at my school. Where art should be!

Student-5: The mayor's office.

(Personal communication, January 28, 2013)

While most students believed art should have so-called proper locations for display, some students believed the location of the artwork does not matter. For example:

Student-6: Well, I don't care where it will be displayed. I am entering the contest no matter what.

Me: Really?

Student-6: Yes. It is a competition and I want to win!

Me: Even if it will be on a trashcan?

Student-6: I don't care. A winner is a winner.

(Personal communication, January 28, 2013).

A few weeks later, I received an email informing me that my daughter, Emilie, won first place in the trashcan art contest, for her age group. It was such delightful news that as soon as Emilie got off her school bus that afternoon, I congratulated her:

Me: Congratulations! You won the first place for the art contest!

Emilie: Really! What did I win?

Me: Well, you know, you get to display your art on a trashcan in the park for a year.

Emilie: Oh...that...What else?

Me: That's the prize.

(Obviously she expected something more. She was quiet for a while.)

Emilie: Really?

Me: I am so happy for you! You won the first place!

Emilie: Yeah... But, mom, this is the... *strangest* prize for a winner!

Me: Is it because of the trashcan?

Emilie: Kind of.

(We both fell into silence.)

Me: You know what, your art will make the trash can very pretty!

Emilie: Right. (Rolling her eyes). Whatever you say.

(Personal communication, February 21, 2013).

After I proudly spread the news that Emilie won, my relatives and friends also gave mixed responses. Some were proud of Emilie's winning, but at the same time, they felt they had to justify the use of trashcans. Her piano teacher said, "Many people use the trash cans in the park. Your art will be seen by many people in town. You will be famous!" (O. Adams, personal communication, February 22, 2013). Others had reservations about the trashcan, like her uncle: "I love the art. I would love to commission a piece for my home. But I promise *not* to put it on a trash can" (D. Cooper, personal communication, March 1st, 2013). A friend of mine, who is a professor of semiotics in the arts, reflected: "Imagine what could happen if such *an opportunity* were open to the authorities [for] communication. Henceforth, pictures of the mayor, school directors, and others would be displayed on the trash bins. They would immediately understand that there is a tiny problem of *respect*." (B. Darras, personal communication, February 21, 2013).

Judging from these reactions, perhaps there is a limit to the marriage of art and life and the idea of placing artworks on trashcans is beyond the limit. These conversations made me ponder: does the idea of functional art *devalue* the artwork or the appreciation of it? Under the big umbrella of public art, is there always a harmony between art, life, and community? What are the factors affecting these preferences? And, as an art teacher, how should I address such incidents in aesthetic instruction?

### Defining Public Art

The first question to ask is, what is the purpose of public art like this trashcan art? Pam Bykonen, the Executive Assistant for Community & Development Services in the City of Richland, WA, said, "Public art is a *place maker*; it acts as a glue to provide citizens a social outlet" (personal communication, March 7, 2013). She believes, if given a choice, successful public art can serve as a gathering place, drawing people in.

In teaching literature to children, Sumara (1999) held a similar notion. She proposed that commonly encountered (public) texts offer various decoding possibilities for interpretation. She believed that *they* can help improve students' interpretation, for they call on "the complex and ever evolving intertextual relations that collect around a particular text" (p. 2). When texts are shared with others, the common location creates opportunities for interpersonal and intertextual interpretation.

I believe interpreting public artworks is analogous to decoding texts. When we see an artwork, we inevitably begin to make associations derived from our prior experience and knowledge. In the moment when we make connections, the artwork becomes a *common location*

or a place maker, allowing possible opportunities for new interpretations. If a public artwork becomes a topic of conversation, even if it stirs up controversy, it forms a kind of *common location*, where ideas are exchanged.

In fact, the function of public arts as a place maker has been an asset in several successful city makeovers. For many cities, art has become a tool to help revive a stagnant downtown. Whether it is a water installation (such as Douglas Hollis' *Water Works*, which successfully transformed Seattle's Capitol Hill neighborhood into a popular gathering ground) or an annual art prize competition (such as Grand Rapids' *Art Prize*<sup>1</sup> that has become a buzzing sensation in the art world, attracting one million visitors since its debut), public art often is a savior. With art, yesterday's eyesore can become today's crown jewel. But the question remains, does that extend to trash cans, receptacles of our refuse?

### Public Art and Controversy

Is there a limit for what can and should be public art? From the Richland city art commissioners' perspective, there is. When it comes to using public funds, the city needs to take into account many factors. First and foremost, according to Ann Roseberry (personal communication, March 7, 2013), the Richland Public Library director, public art should place safety over aesthetics. Art commissioners and artists should critically examine factors that may endanger citizens; such as obscuring the view for traffic, dark corners for possible crimes, and sharp edges that may be harmful to passersby. Interestingly, Roseberry believes that decision makers are quick to agree on safety aspects but rarely reach a common ground on aesthetics.

Roseberry's remark reminds us that the history of public art is filled with controversies and conflicting perspectives. Perhaps one of the highest profile examples is Richard Serra's controversial *Tilted Arc*. A site specific public artwork, it was installed in 1981 at the Foley Federal Plaza in front of the Jacob Javits Federal Building in Manhattan, NY. It received harsh reactions from New Yorkers. The artwork had no relation to the public space, a busy plaza, or the people in it. It sliced the plaza in half, so that one had to walk around it. Many citizens complained about the design, which was totally abstract. This giant \$175,000 minimalist piece impressed the judges but got few popular votes. Despite protests from some art lovers and the artist himself, the heated controversy eventually caused *The Tilted Arc's* removal and recycling in 1989 (Hein, 1996; Senie, 2001).

Incidents such as this still happen today. The City of Richland itself encountered a similar situation when the city council voted against the installation of a \$48,000 metal sculpture in 2009. The proposed 18' high and 15' wide metal sculpture symbolizing the past, present, and future of Richland, did not appeal to the public (*Public Comments*, 2009). Roseberry recalled, "One of the city councilors demanded public art be only representational, because the children need to see fish to understand what they mean. So, abstract art is disqualified" (personal communication, March 7, 2013). The scale and cost of the decommissioned sculpture in the City of Richland was a fraction of the *Tilted Arc*. Yet the message is the same: popular taste matters when it comes to deciding which artwork to purchase or which stays or goes.

Most people would agree that beauty and meaning are in the eyes of the beholder. Our diverse and sometimes heated differences in perspectives on artworks reflect that. My conversations with my daughter, my students, and the reactions from friends to the *Trash Can*

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<sup>1</sup> Information on the history of the ArtPrize and images of artworks can be accessed via <http://www.artprize.org/>.

*Art Contest* are a microcosm of the battle over public art. Each person's position reflects a specific view, connecting body and mind. It is obvious that a person's beliefs and preferences are derived from their specific experiences and aesthetic assumptions.

### **What Causes the Great Divide?**

Aesthetic preferences have been an intriguing topic for scholars. A person's preferences toward art could be influenced by his/her personality (openness vs. conservativeness) (Ausman & Mathews, 1973; Furnham & Walker, 2001), exposure to arts (Meskin, Phelan, Moore, & Kieran, 2013; Markovic, 2011; Bohrn, Altmann, Lubrich, Menninghaus, & Jacobs, 2013), social class (Bourdieu, 1996), education (Young, 2010; Locher, 2003), and neuroanatomical correlations (Vartanian & Goel, 2004; Cupchik, Vartanian, Crawley, & Mikulis, 2009). Reflecting upon these readings and observations of controversial incidents in the art world, I believe there are three fundamental conflicts centered around: *style*, *appropriateness*, and *function*. First, there seems to be at least two contrasting perspectives on *style*: representational vs. abstract. Second, the relevance and meaning of the subject matter and location (i.e. *appropriateness*) can be crucial factors. Last, *function* is about whether art needs be purposeful. I believe these three aspects influence how we perceive and make judgments of public art.

### **Style: Representational and Abstract**

Whether art should be representational plays an important role in our perception of beauty. Derived from Plato, who viewed art as an act of Mimesis (an imitation of nature), and Aristotle, (who believed art and beauty only exist when artworks represent the ultimate order) (Hofstadter & Kuhns, 1976), art in this schema is beautiful only when it represents something. It should mirror reality, whether it is natural or manmade. The councilor from City of Richland who vetoed the abstract sculpture undoubtedly agreed that art should be representational. Indeed, to some people, representational art is more acceptable, more comfortable, and more natural than non-representational art. Of course, the advantage of representational art is that viewers can easily understand literal representation, quickly connecting it with their life experiences.

For example, in the Tri-Cities (Richland, Kennewick, and Pasco, in Washington State), there are three public artworks with the same motif: *story*. The first one, Gary Price's *Story Time*, is a sculpture of two children reading (see Picture 2).



Picture 2. Gary Price, *Story Time*, 1993. Richland Public Library. (Photographed by the author).

Located in front of the Richland Public Library, Gary's piece of art received a warm welcome from library patrons. According to Roseberry (personal communication, March 7, 2013), many say that both the location and the motif of children reading under maple trees highlight the function of the library (i.e., it is both representational and appropriate).

The second piece is Tom McClelland's *Stories*, located on the Washington State University Tri-City (WSUTC) campus parking lot median. This piece commemorates veterans. Using a metaphorical approach it depicts a book with pages falling from the sky (See Picture 3).



Picture 3. Tom McClelland, *Stories*, 2012, Washington State University, Tri-Cities Campus. (Photographed by the author).

Each page features a quote from a fallen soldier, surviving family, or veteran (McClelland, 2013). WSUTC welcomed this donated artwork from the Veteran's association; however, the general public does not regularly view it due to the remote location.

A third piece, *Seven Story Circles, Confluence Projects* was created by the renowned Maya Lin (see Picture 4).



Picture 4. Maya Lin, Confluence Project, 2010, Sacajawea State Park, WA. (Photographs by the author).

During the celebration of the installation in 2010, Lin detailed her design concept. The site was an historical Native American gathering ground. Lin intended to re-tell Native American tribal stories by carefully bringing in native plants to blend with the concrete circles (M. Lin, personal communication, April 17, 2010). However, the crowd had mixed reactions. While they found the sculpture to be stimulating and inspiring, puzzlement and uncertainty also followed. This group of non-representational circles, despite their well-defined shapes and well-intended meanings, was hard to accept for some, partly due to the 1.6 million dollar price tag (Pihl, 2010). Many expressed their disappointment upon viewing the circles; many expected something more spectacular, more visible, and more *representational*.

When I asked my studio art students about their preferences for these artworks, the majority favored the semi-abstract, Tom McCelland's version. Their responses suggest that too much abstraction may be detrimental to the acceptance of an artwork. They enjoyed the narrative quality of the artwork and the suggestion made by open books. Following are some of the students' written statements about these works:

- I like it because it actually tells a story; it's not just a statue. ~ Student-7, Age 11.
- The paper flying in the air provides a sense of awe; the quotes give viewers something to connect to the art. It gives elements of wonder and realness. ~ Student-8, Age 11.
- *Stories* is the best statue because it actually means something. ~ Student-9, Age 10.
- It is a good design that tells real stories. ~ Student-10, Age 11.
- The falling pages could be falling soldiers. . ~ Student-11, Age 10.

Out of a total of 30 students, only 1 student picked Maya Lin's work. Here is her reflection:

- I like it the most. To me, the plants growing in them symbolize something. The plants remind me of strength and hope. ~Student-12, Age 12.

A similar result was found after I presented the same three artworks to groups of college students in three different countries: the US, Taiwan, and Malaysia. So, by losing the popular vote, does it mean that Lin's work is worse than the other artworks? I believe instead that it implies only that abstract approaches, despite containing social and cultural messages, tend to distance audiences who believe art should be representational. To them, when art fails to

represent our surroundings, it conveys nothing but farfetched ideology, a tale, or even a salesman's pitch to justify its existence. Maybe this is a question of education.

### **Appropriateness: Subject Matter and Location**

But sometimes representational art is criticized and rejected by the audiences without hesitation. For example, as soon as Tony Matelli's *Sleepwalker* was installed at Wellesley College, a prestigious all-girl institution, it stirred up controversy (Reiss, 2014). Standing in an open field behind the campus museum, this life-size, realistic sculpture depicted a middle-aged man, wearing only underwear, stretching his arms out in a dream-like state. According to Reiss, to many students this sculpture is the beginning of a campus nightmare. While the curator and the artist intended to bring thought-provoking artworks to form a place for discussion, some students believe this particular sculpture *crossed the line* and caused students fear and stress.

Controversies such as the one surrounding *The Sleepwalker* are not new. When two naked Happy Buddhas appeared overnight clinging to residential buildings in Jinan, China, it brought no happiness to the neighborhood (Jou, 2014). The restaurant owner was playing with the pun "Buddha climbing over the fence" to promote his restaurant's famous pork entrée, but instead, he left his neighbors calling for respect for Chinese tradition and better education. As a result, the naked Buddhas were removed within days.

In November 2013, a crime-theme inspired Lego mural by Malaysian street artist Ernest Zacharevic was deemed to be damaging the image of City of Johor Bahru (O'Brien, 2013). Depicting a robber hiding around a street corner, awaiting his next victim, the mural intended to bring awareness to tourists and citizens of its crime-ridden reality. To city officials, it was bad publicity and a slap in the face for their fruitless effort in combating crimes. The mural ended up being whitewashed.

Whether a work is representational or abstract, appropriateness of subject matter certainly plays an important role in our perception and judgment of public art. These three examples highlight that subject matter and location play important roles in shaping the public response.

### **Function: Art for Art's Sake or Art with a Purpose**

#### **Art for Art's Sake**

Kant's idea that art should have *purposiveness without a purpose* led the judgment of beauty being independent from any emotions, reasons, and morals external to the work itself, for its own sake (Hofstadter & Kuhns, 1976). Ultimately, it became the foundation for the *art for art's sake* movement, which gradually blossomed into the *Formalist Movement*, where the emphasis lies solely in the art elements and principles of design (Costello, 2013). The idea is that art should not carry any utilitarian, moral, or educational functions. If it does, it is only craft or propaganda. This idea is compatible with both representational and abstract art, though the abstraction perhaps makes it more obvious.

Richard Serra and many *Tilted Arc* supporters rely on this idea of art for art's sake and believe that as the creators of the artworks, artists have the ultimate decision on what art should be and where it should be. My students' opinion that the winning artworks should be only at a museum is derived from this perspective. To them, art is a symbol of class and taste; if art is functional, it is demeaned.

## **Art with a Purpose**

On the other hand, these formalist views about art and function, even if they are still strong in popular opinion, are denied by most contemporary postmodern thinkers. Dissanayake's (1990) idea of *art is making special*, for example, tells us that art should be interpreted within its own social and cultural context, and that judgments of its aesthetic value should consider its function, which includes its meaning. Asking questions such as, *what is the work for* and *why is it in this place*, can provoke meaningful connections between the work, the viewers, and the culture where the art is shown. In this process, art becomes a means of communication, and sometimes a cultural ambassador to connect one person with another (Anderson & Milbrandt, 2005). From an educational standpoint, this approach gives students more opportunities to interpret artworks, objects, and images in their daily lives. The inclusion of cultural, social, political, and personal points of view to interpret art or cultural forms diminishes the distance between us and the objects.

### **Is There a Limitation for Art for Life?**

So, what is the big deal if a winning art piece is printed on a trashcan in the park? The difference seems to lie in what trashcans signify. Trash is useless and usual thought of as being dirty. To associate art with trash may well carry a negative meaning. The Richland art council intended it to beautify the park, but my students saw it as demeaning the artwork. They did not want their art associated with trash, period. My friend's suggestion, that members of the council would probably not want their portraits printed on the trashcans, puts my students' negative view of art on trashcans in perspective. After all, they would be happy to have their portraits on advertising/campaign posters, but on trashcans, maybe not so much.

This reveals, I think, the importance of context in relation to meaning in our response to art. Those who do not think the context of the trashcan is relevant think of the competition as beautifying. Those for whom the trashcan context is significant think it is derogatory. And the viewer ultimately decides. It is after all *public* art.

Derived from psychology and human communication, the Double Bind theory (Peterson & Langellier, 1982) highlights how interpretations sometimes are constrained by distinction and classification, especially when messages are ambiguous, paradoxical, and controversial. Contradictions are inevitable when two logically validated messages forming a relationship to decode a certain text or situation (in this case, the visual representation of the winning artworks and the function of trash cans). However, Peterson & Langellier (1982) warned, "Because one must choose and yet cannot choose one alternative without the other, double bind presents a real rather than apparent paradox" (p. 245). Further, when decoding messages (visual or text), double bind signifies ongoing evolving interpretations rather than a more direct linear transmission of information. The complicity of the process only intensifies how interpretation is affected and formed by the relationships between text/visual text, self, and others. The boundaries of the function of art, the meaning of art, and the interpretation of the art can only be free through creative aesthetic inquiries, where one acknowledges meanings are never pure and welcomes layers of ambiguity and possibilities of controversy.

### **Critical Thinking through Arts**

The Trash Can Art Contest created controversial waves at my studio. I believe that such occasions, and perhaps public art in general, offer art teachers excellent opportunities to lead students to ponder, analyze, debate, and form their own opinions, which makes the character of interpretation much more apparent and relevant to children. In this context, I think that we should recognize that aesthetic inquiry is more than just making simple judgments; it can teach important skills, such as critical thinking, awareness of different perspectives, and can foster reflection on one's own assumptions about and understanding of artworks.

The following are my suggestions:

1. Aesthetic inquiry, including art criticism, should be more than what, how, and why. The emphasis should provide students with a point to initiate conversations on *what if* and *why not*. These approaches give students the opportunity to look beyond what is present and directly in front of them, to understand objects, art, images, media, and information can be decoded based on time, environment, culture, and personal experience; to realize they have the ability to define or redefine, to accept or confront, to critique or compromise in certain situations. These are eye opening learning experiences for them to associate, digest, understand, and connect the outside world and their inner awareness and self-identity.

2. Providing interdisciplinary experiences, to reflect students' opinions toward artworks, are important steps to broaden students' communication skills. Students can begin by connecting their experience using a writing prompt such as "The artwork reminds me of..." and gradually move to a descriptive account such as "Based on the design elements, I believe the artist's intention was..." then advancing to an argumentative style "The artwork is best for the purpose of ...because...". These conversations provoke deep thinking with reasoning skills. As Alexander (2003) stressed,

Artistic expressions and inquiries exist within communities, and grow from traditions. To say that a work is beautiful, among its other meanings, entails that it is good art. Artistic and scientific communities enjoy complex relationships with ethical conceptions of goodness that govern the larger communities in which they reside. Sometimes they support, and other times they challenge, the values of these communities, pushing the limits of culture while exploring new ideas and ideals. (p.10).

Thus, applying aesthetic pedagogy in curriculum will ultimately strengthen the foundation for holistic education, where knowledge and creativity work as one.

3. Cultivating creative ideas is just as important as sharpening artistic skills. To do so, teachers need to select a wide range of art for students to ponder and draw inspiration from. Starting with themselves, teachers need to embrace diverse works of art to be able to discuss the complex nature of the art world. While representational forms of art may provide direct responses, we cannot ignore representational forms in contemporary art, which can be a means to decode hidden messages. These forms along with abstract ones should be included in the curriculum, as *the common locations*, to welcome possible interpretations and develop new relationships. Art could be a social statement, such as Ai Weiwei's *So Sorry*<sup>2</sup>, 2009, which was made of 9000 backpacks to form a text, "She lived happily in this world for 7 years", to commemorate the earthquake disaster in 2008 and to bring awareness of the safety regulations for public structures. Art could be an emotional outlet, such as Candy Chung's *Before I Die Art*

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<sup>2</sup> Information on Ai Weiwei's *So Sorry* can be accessed via [http://archive.org/details/So\\_Sorry\\_en](http://archive.org/details/So_Sorry_en)

*Project*<sup>3</sup>, providing a therapeutic place maker for people to examine and reflect on their desires, dreams, and hopes. Art could be humorous and cynical like Richard Jackson's *Bad Dog*<sup>4</sup>, bringing smiles and puzzlement to mind at the same time. And of course, adorning oneself with a *Bad Dog* tote bag is a must to complete such a unique aesthetics experience.

### **Conclusion**

Art educators can embrace their surroundings and circumstances, such as the trash can art contest, as a way to introduce aesthetic inquiry and practice critical thinking. To some degree, it may turn into a double bind, where conflicting messages occur. However, this is the exact moment for educators to stimulate, guide, shape, or clarify our complex ways of thinking. It is valuable to teach students be aware of our reality is mixed with constant internal contradictions (democracy vs. dictatorship; capitalistic vs. socialistic economies; freedom vs. suppression; obedience vs. rebellion).

After all, “aesthetic education, in other words, has a unique ability to transplant the roots of one's belief from the outside (an external reality that is closed off to scrutiny) to the inside (an interiority that is open to revaluation and revision)” (Azzarelo, 2012, p. 67). Yet, one should not ignore the fact that there is always a gray area in any interpretation, even within a double bind. It is not only about the art, it is about our perceptions of it. A tug of war or a compromise is not necessary. What matters is that we learn to understand our bias and preference through aesthetic inquiry with hopes to develop a level of transparency to further appreciate our art and life or art for life.

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<sup>3</sup> Information on Candy Chang's *Before I Die Project* can be accessed via <http://candychang.com/before-i-die-in-nola/>.

<sup>4</sup> Information on Richard Jackson's *Bad Dog* can be accessed via <http://www.laweekly.com/2013-02-28/art-books/richard-jackson-orange-county-ocma-painting/full/>

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