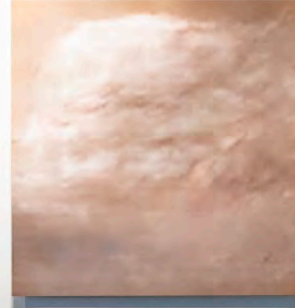


MARY FLANAGAN

HOPE IS THE THING WITH FEATHERS

May 13 - July 9, 2022







Puddle, 2021
[Grace:AI] Daydream Series, Dye Sublimation print on aluminum
48 x 48 inches

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Hope is the Thing with Feathers

Some projects open a window into the past. Others draw us towards the future.

In “Hope is the Thing With Feathers,” Mary Flanagan presents three new projects that speak to our collective imagination: *[Grace: AI] Daydream* (2021), *[the Mirror Book]* (2022), and *[Colors of Remembrance]* (2020-ongoing). Through magical collaborations and algorithmic daydreams, these projects together make visible the humans in our technology, re-imagining the present and suggesting more empathetic possibilities for the future.

[Grace:AI] Daydream

What if there were an algorithm biased towards, instead of against, women artists? This is the question that underpins Flanagan’s long-term research-based collaboration, *[Grace: AI]* [2019-ongoing]. As a Deep Convolutional General Adversarial Network (G.A.N.), *[Grace: AI]* uses a deep learning model to generate new data from training data, which could either be selected by humans or scraped from the internet. The Daydream series is the second installment in that project.

During the past few years of intense techno-isolation, explains Mary Flanagan, the simple act of staring at the sky felt like freedom. One day, she began to imagine, what do machines dream? Specifically, she imagined how *[Grace: AI]*, trained on images from female artists, would render that cloud-filled sky.

Flanagan was inspired by both physical and virtual experiences.

At a residency at the home of French Surrealist Dora Maar, Flanagan was intrigued to find only two of Maar’s paintings exhibited. Where were her life’s work (an impressive oeuvre including thousands of paintings, photographs, collages and collaborations)? A quick Google Search for, “Where is Dora Maar’s work?” returns the artist’s “spouse” of eight years (Picasso) above her profession.¹ Even Maar’s sketchbooks are in the Picasso collection, rather than her own.

¹ Maar was integral to the early Surrealist movement, both as an individual artist and collaborator; the “d” in Andre Breton’s Gravidia gallery even stood for “Dora.” The popular *The Art Story* website reveals Maar’s intentional erasure from the popular narrative, and the weird, misogynist justification often attached—because, simply, she had it coming: “Maar’s career in its later stages was unfortunately tainted due to this tumultuous affair and as such stands as a warning for others.” “Dora Maar Artist Overview and Analysis,” 2022. Content compiled and written by Kristen Osborne-Bartucca. <https://www.theartstory.org/artist/maar-dora/>





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Bubbling, 2021

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48 x 48 inches

Poet Marie Ponsot observed, “This dawns on me: no cloud is measurable.”² Searching for artwork by women seems to turn up the same problem. If you search “Painting by a woman,” the top 20 results are: two De Koonings, a Vermeer, two Leonardos, a Whistler, a Manet, a Monet, a Kahlo, two Klimts, a Sargent, a Picasso, a Boticelli, a Hopper, a Degas, a Klimt, two paintings by a Pre-Raphaelite named John William Waterhouse, Matisse, and two Rafaels.

As a recognized scholar in the field of game theory, Flanagan set out to collaborate with historical archives to create a new, intentionally biased smart machine—one that would flip the gender bias of our current technology.

She began contacting global museums and archives, only to find that much of the work by women hadn’t been prioritized for digitization, or was confusing to access. What Flanagan discovered was even bigger than her initial vision: an entire missing database, made up of the artwork of women. Historical paintings by women of color in the West were especially underpreserved (despite many commendable new initiatives to address this).

For search algorithms, if something isn’t properly digitized, it doesn’t exist. The historical archive of women’s art is largely, in effect, invisible. Flanagan began to assemble that database herself, contacting global museums, archives and foundations to begin to put together the missing archive.

In the first series, *[Grace:AI] Origin Story (Frankenstein)* rendered new images, inspired by female painters and Mary Shelley, resembling Frankenstein portraits.³ Today, in *[Grace:AI] Daydream*, Flanagan turns her attention to tropes of creativity. She’s letting the machine daydream.

Each piece begins with a set of potentials. *[Grace: AI]* is trained four times, using different datasets: the first three involve works by female-identifying artists from global archives, pre-1950. The last set includes images of clouds.

In the arts, clouds carry a rich symbolic history (as does daydreaming). They can suggest isolation or ecstasy, a romantic reverie, or the wrath of the heavens. For Joy Harjo, a cloud can lift souls to heaven. In “A Daydream,” Emily Bronte laments the fleeting joys of seasonal rebirth: “When winter comes again, Where will these bright things be?”

² Marie Ponsot, “This Bridge, Like Poetry, Is Vertigo,” 2005.

<https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/bridge-poetry-vertigo> The epigraph, a quote from William Blake, also speaks to this project: “In a time of dearth bring forth number, weight, & measure.”

³ Mary Flanagan, *[Grace:AI] Origin Story*, 2019. <https://maryflanagan.com/grace-ai/>





[Colors of Remembrance], 2020-2022
Custom computer software, projector, and computer
Dimensions variable

Tiny Clouds, 2022
[Grace:AI] Daydream Series, Dye Sublimation print on aluminum
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Do machines, indeed, dream of electric sheep?⁴ It depends on the dataset they've been trained on.

There are invisible histories all around us. Our current archives don't show them to us, yet, but *[Grace:AI] Daydream* can give us one glimpse. This is a speculative project, bridging the bias of our present with a possible vision for the future. To get there, today, you still have to dream.

[Colors of Remembrance]

May 13, 2022, Johns Hopkins University reported a tragic milestone: 1 million Covid deaths in the US. The enormous tragedy of that single number is impossible to process.

[Colors of Remembrance], a computational drawing, is a solemn monument to those individuals. The work is executed using the artistic language of minimalism and geometric abstraction, with a nod to the ancient tradition of representing numbers directly with hashes. By rendering the data into a visualization of those who perished, the memorial creates space to consider the tragic immeasurability of the pandemic.

Each drawing represents one day, and each unique colored hash represents one life lost, as recorded that day by public data. The drawings begin on the first recorded day of the Covid pandemic—for the US, that was February 29, 2020. There are a total of 2161 Pantone colors, enough to create a unique base color for 2161 days. Each hash a unique saturation and value, derived from the day's Pantone base. There are 16,777,216 possible colors total. Flanagan initially hoped the project might end after a few months; today, she reports, it seems unending.⁵

Attempting to fully come to terms with this tragedy, at the scale of recorded losses, is an impossible task. *[Colors of Remembrance]* is therefore an compassionate, poetic, yet still impossible challenge, an attempt to embody the dehumanizing data of grief.

[the Mirror Book]

In this installation of *[the Mirror Book]*, Flanagan collaborates with Emily Dickinson to create a dynamic, hybrid poet across time and consciousness. To the left are poems by Flanagan, 2006-present. To the right, Dickinson, 1858-65. Words flow between, creating surprising flashes of language.

⁴ Paraphrased from Phillip K. Dick's 1968 novel, *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep*, used as the basis for the 1982 film *Blade Runner*

⁵ Mary Flanagan, *[Colors of Remembrance]*, 2020. <https://maryflanigan.com/colors-of-remembrance/>

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Death of my Dungeonmaster

Three years ago
we rolled a D20
You
took damage, they said
heartburn, they said
some reflexed, reflux
already stage four
while you whistle-
biked to work
you spun for us
the grand tale, where
good battles evil, druids
know something about nature, you said
good wins. We didn't see it
coming for you
bleak, bombing
the stomach-dragon
cried "you are mine"
we threw firebolt
after firebolt

[the Mirror Book]: Emily 1, 2022

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Flanagan's poems were written around and in the decade and a half following the financial crisis, a moment notable for the collapse of traditional infrastructures, the rise of digital identities and cryptocurrencies, and political polarization. Dickinson's were written in a time of fractured national identity, Emancipation, and hyperinflation, the years leading up to and during the American Civil War.

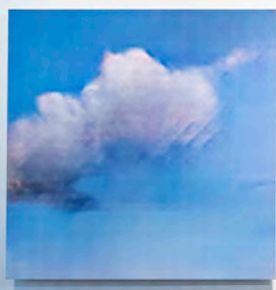
It's an exercise in juxtaposition and projection, a program playing out through language and time. Mary Flanagan through the headset of Emily Dickinson, Dickinson through the headset of Mary Flanagan. Meaning occurs as a relational flow through the living texts, one floating word at a time.

Pay attention to position, momentum, a trading of context and consciousness. The book itself is mesmerizing. Look out for gems like, "Hope is the lot with feathers / That perches in the corner."

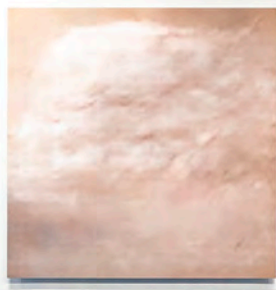
This is a magical notebook, full of fire and potential. It's also a tender and humbling experience. "If I read a book and it makes my whole body so cold no fire can warm me," Emily Dickinson wrote once to her editor, "I know that is poetry. If I feel physically as if the top of my head were taken off, I know that is poetry. These are the only way I know it. Is there any other way?"⁶

Katie Peyton Hofstadter
May, 2022

⁶ From a note written to editor Thomas Wentworth Higginson, 1870. <https://www.emilydickinsonmuseum.org/emily-dickinson/biography/emily-dickinson-the-later-years-1865-1886/>



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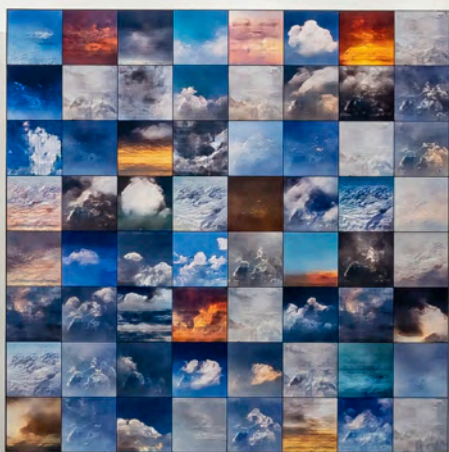


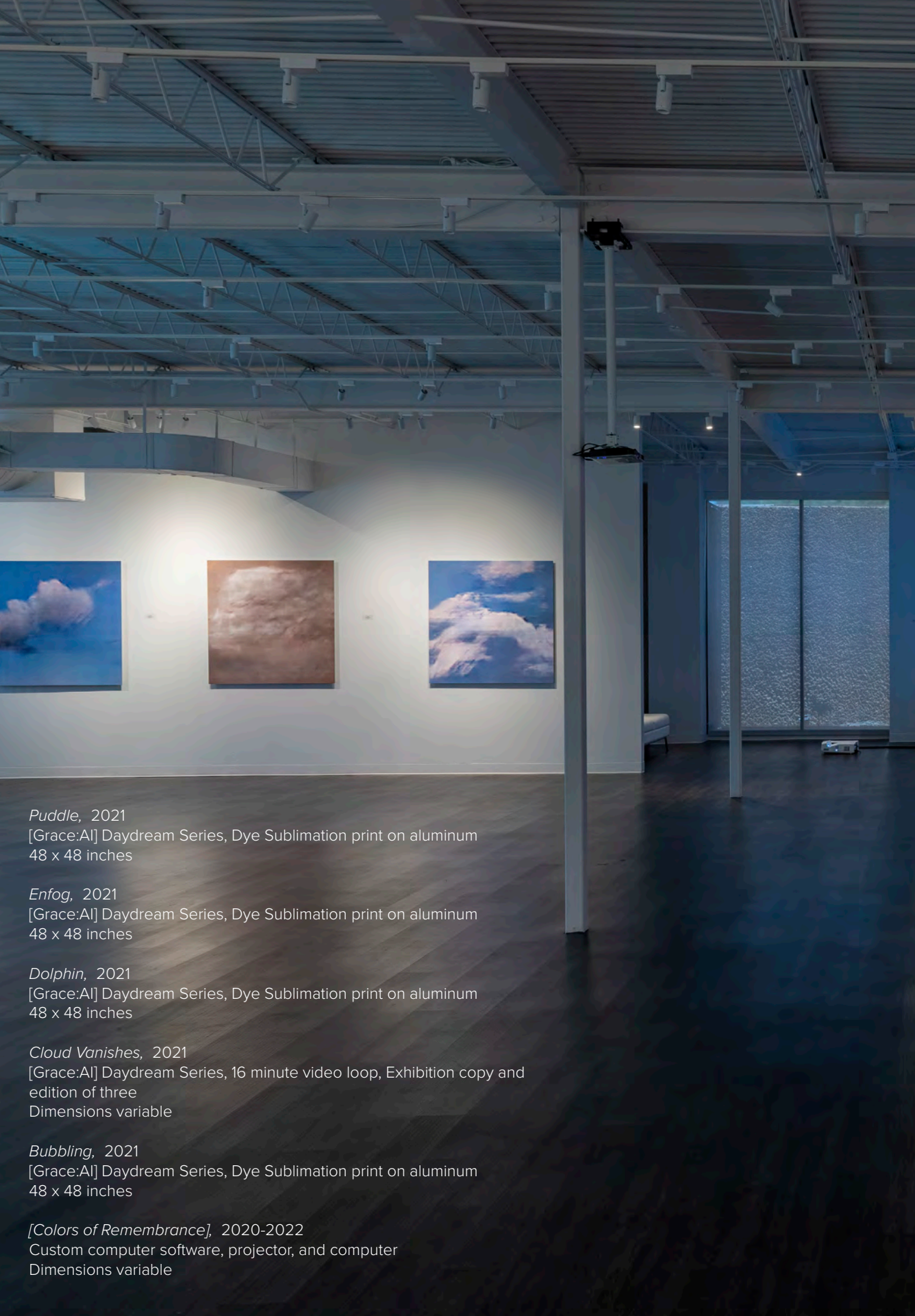
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[Colors of Remembrance]

Computational Drawing: Custom software, CDC COVID Data, Projector dimensions variable 2020 -

This project is a virtual memorial.

In this series, Flanagan has created a drawing machine that acts as a memoria. to those who have tragically lost their lives in the 2020- Coronavirus pandemic. Digital drawings begin with the Pantone color of the year for Spring 2020, starting with the first death in the COVID pandemic. In the United States, that date was on February 29, 2020.

This version showing in the gallery shows two years of the count for deceased people in the USA from April 1 2020- April 1 2022.

Each drawing is one day in the epidemic. The date appears briefly on the lower right. The project can memorialize one community through time, a city, or a country's death toll. Each line represents a person. Each line in the entire project is given a completely unique color.

Flanagan takes the formal language of minimalism and reintroduces narrative by seeing these daily drawings as visualizations, with each line representing a person lost to the pandemic. By creating drawings that act as both a visualization and a memorial to those lost to the coronavirus pandemic, she hopes to engage us, to make a space for each person lost, with all their uniqueness.

This project is written in the computer language javascript, with data pulled from publicly available data at the New York Times. The colors are set via HSV settings. The days cycle through Pantone colors, sorted by hue. Each year we go through the whole set of hues. The background hue is taken from 180 days from the current day color. The code takes the saturation value of the color of the line color, and juxtapose light and dark colors on the spectrum. For example, if March 5th's hue value is above 70% brightness, the background will be offset to 20-30% brightness, with the hue pulled at a 180 day offset.

The software loops through hue values every year, but each line color is unique based on its saturation and value. The limit on when the software would run out of colors is based on how many HTML color codes there are. That gives a theoretical limit of 16,777,216 colors; Each day is started with a Pantone color, however, and there are only 2161 Pantone colors, so she will only count 2161 days for the whole project, if it comes to that.



The Mirror Book: Emily 1

In [the Mirror Book] series, the texts of a poet artist are computationally combined in a computational collaboration. Nouns, verbs, adjectives slowly move from one author's poems to the other, creating new poems. This process is projected onto a blank book. The poems exchange words in time, morphing and changing the poems in their meaning by the shifts in language. As Flanagan is a writer, she often uses her own poetry in iterations of [*the Mirror Book*] and virtually collaborates with dead writers. Flanagan calls the work a 'computational collaboration' with poets long gone.

At its premier exhibition, [*the Mirror Book*] featured the poems of surrealist artist Dora Maar and Mary Flanagan. They merge and swap language with their poems using custom software she developed to identify parts of speech.

In the second book, "Emily 1," premiering at Nancy Littlejohn Fine Art, Flanagan is collaborating with classics from Emily Dickinson. There are 10 poems from each writer that exchange words. Flanagan's poems are always on the left.

[Grace AI] : Daydreams Series

What happens when an AI trained only on the artwork of women artists daydreams? In *Daydreams*, [*Grace: AI*]— an Artificial Intelligence trained on the works of global women artists— looks at images of the sky above, the rich clouds dancing, furling, hovering, lifted by lightness or weighted down with a future rain.

Each image produced by [*Grace: AI*] is unique and artificial. They are completely original products of her processes, her imagination. [*Grace: AI*], employs a Deep Convolutional General Adversarial Network and is trained to "see" from a dataset Flanagan continues to create that contains tens of thousands of paintings and drawings by women artists from around the world; in effect, a history of global women's art in thousands of images. The artists she has chosen as her 'teachers' are outspoken, strong individuals from countries ranging from Korea to Greece to Argentina to Nigeria who worked or work in the male-dominated art world.

Flanagan trains the AI on all the works by women, then specifically portraits created by women, before then training her with images of clouds. The AI goes through six rounds of training to produce the images.

The video in the gallery, *Cloud Vanishes*, inspired this particular set of training for the AI. In *Cloud Vanishes*, a 16-minute, slow moving video, a cloud sits perfectly formed in the sky where there was no cloud, and then vanishes without the camera moving at all. Occasional insects remind the viewer that the image is slowly moving. This is video of an actual sky-bound cloud that Flanagan recorded in France. While recording, it slowly vanished in front of her eyes. In this final video, meant to be looped, she runs the video forwards, then backwards, creating a slow infinite image sense of the cloud forming and dissipating.



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Mary Flanagan has a research-based practice that investigates and exploits the seams between technology, play, and human experience. She explores how data, computing practices, errors / glitches, and play reflect human psychology and the limitations of knowledge. Flanagan's approach to art-making and games occupies both onscreen space as well as physical spaces and actions, moving away from the screen to foster reflection regarding familiar relationships to the everyday through playful approaches.

Her work has been exhibited at museums and galleries around the world such as The Whitney Biennial, The Guggenheim, Tate Britain, and institutions in Spain, New Zealand, South Korea, Mexico, Germany, Cyprus, China and Australia. Flanagan's work is featured in public and private collections, including The Whitney Museum and ZKM | Zentrum für Kunst und Medien Germany, and has been covered by Wired, MIT Technology Review, ArtForum, Neural and Mute Magazine as well as numerous books on art. Flanagan won the Award of Distinction at Prix Ars Electronica in Interactive art+ and is the recipient of the American Council of Learned Societies Digital Innovation Fellowship, the Thoma Foundation Arts Writing Award in Digital Art, a John Paul Getty Museum Scholar, a Senior Scholar in Residence at Cornell, and Distinguished Visiting Scholar, University of Toronto. She has been awarded residencies with the Brown Foundation, MacDowell, Bogliasco, and the Robert Rauschenberg Foundation. Flanagan has lectured widely including MoMa, the World Economic Forum, Oxford, Cornell, Columbia, Harvard, and the Sorbonne, and has published 6 scholarly books including *Critical Play* (MIT Press), as well as art books and poetry.



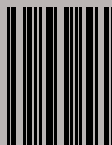
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