The year in arthouse movies

What is an “arthouse” movie in the age of streaming? The term’s origins define it by where it isn’t: showing at your mainstream cineplex. While (like “indie”) it’s just as often a marker of aesthetic or ambition, that pragmatic distinction has faded as more films get their first run online. But in a world where people lament the rise of monoculture and say things like “superhero fatigue” in casual conversation, the underlying division seems very much alive. In 2023, you could argue arthouse is the stuff that shows up not on Netflix and Max but on services like Criterion Channel and Mubi: decidedly niche movies from auteurs, with a strong emphasis on work from outside the US.

It was a good year for big movies, but maybe an even better one for the small ones. And with the arthouse streamers picking up distribution, these films have never been more accessible, especially to people without a local indie theater.

I set some rules for picking the best of these films in 2023. Entries had to be released in fewer than 1,000 domestic theaters during the calendar year, not counting festival premieres. They couldn’t be produced by deep-pocketed major streamers. (Netflix gave *The Killer* an awards-qualifying theatrical run across 56 theaters — but while I liked it, a David Fincher-scale production is probably not an arthouse movie.) I’m excluding documentaries, usually an arthouse staple, because I don’t feel like I watched enough this year to have a good opinion on the strongest ones. (Of the ones I did see, my favorite was *Rewind & Play*.)

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Tr□n Anh Hùng has made the food movie to end all food movies. Set in late 19th century France, famed chef Dodin Bouffant (Benoît Magimel) and his cook Eugenie (Juliette Binoche) finally reckon with their on-again-off-again relationship, after two decades of working together, side by side in a hot kitchen.

The plotting here is straightforward and mostly gets out of the way so you can just watch people cook decadent French dishes in a rustic kitchen. *The Taste of Things* is an extraordinary sensory experience: the crunch of a knife through

flaky pastry; the sizzle of aromatics frying in hot oil; and of course, the visual feast of watching every delectable meal plated, served, and devoured. Whereas a show like *The Bear* is frantic, *The Taste of Things* gives you time to admire the copper pots and pans, without making you watch anyone wash them afterward. This is the cinema-length version of #TradWife on TikTok, minus the conservative gender role connotations.

Magimel and Binoche have some chemistry (even though she greatly out-acts him), but *The Taste of Things* is more interested in demonstrating their love than convincing you of it. If making dinner for a partner is an act of service, then it's also one of creativity and surprise — an expression of providing pleasure to a loved one. I mean, how romantic is that?

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franklin [&>a]:shadow-underline-black dark:[&>a]:shadow-underline-white”>The Eight Mountains

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In Cambodian-French director Davy Chou’s

second feature, Freddie (Ji-Min Park), an adoptee from Korea, ends up in her home country mostly by accident. She's 24, likes to drink, and loves to push people even more. That's not to say she doesn't have a lot of baggage. During her trip, she goes to her adoption agency to try to locate her biological parents.

She’s not sure what she expected, but ends up frustrated with her father’s well-meaning, drunken promises to make things up to her; she is even angrier with her bio mom, whom she’s never met and who won’t respond to the agency’s attempts to reach her, if she’s even receiving the messages.

All of this weighs heavily on the performance of Park, who had no IMDB credits before this film. She proves versatile and compelling as she moves through the many phases of Freddie's life – and sports terrific haircuts in all of them. *Return to Seoul* is an intimate and believable film (bar maybe one odd subplot

about arms dealing), benefitting from a clever structure that heightens its rich character tensions. More than anything, though, Chou’s film is about being a shithead in your twenties and everything that comes after.

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streaming on Paramount Plus

Kelly Reichardt's films often get called "anti-capitalist," which isn't inaccurate but

treats her movies as more overtly political than they are. Because, truly, Reichardt works with a much subtler, more

perceptive eye than that. *Showing Up* is a crowning achievement from a filmmaker with an already remarkable canon. And it’s

also one of the most Portland-ass movies I've ever seen.

Lizzy (Michelle Williams, a Reichardt mainstay) is a sculptor

preparing for her upcoming exhibition. Everything else in her life is a distraction, especially her family, job, and landlord (a

rival played by Hong Chau). Lizzy is surrounded by artists because of her job at a local art college, everyone a bit

idiosyncratic and petty. (Andre 3000’s flute obsession reared its head here nearly a year before his surprise album dropped.)

Most stories about art-making offer a simple binary: to be great, you have to be an obsessive monster. Lizzy is obsessive

but, as we understand throughout the movie, is not a monster. She might be prickly at times, yet she has plenty of energy to

take care of the people she loves and to be kind to them in her own way. Maybe more surprising: she’s not a great artist either. The act

of creativity sustains her, rather than the potential of recognition or money. Lizzy is not a tortured artist; this is simply her way

of life.

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Mubi

At the wrap party for his

latest film, a director (Franz Rogowski)

cheats on his husband with a woman.

He’s frank about it and convinces

his partner that he should be allowed

to explore his newfound desire.

Things get messy.

Like any good

story with a love triangle, *Passages*

is concerned with power and attractio

n. But what starts as a delicate

film is, by the end, a full on melodrama

– a turn that will either frustrate or

delight you, depending on how much fun

you want to have. Ira Sachs' film has

less to say and more to show its viewer

about the psychic damage of relations hips, but

Rogowski's menacing performance

carries the three-way to its satisfyin

g, inevitable conclusion.

Passages **may grate on those who can't deal with**

stories about monstrous people. A friend

texted me after she saw it: “It was a horror

movie!” she said. To which I replied,

“I know!!!”

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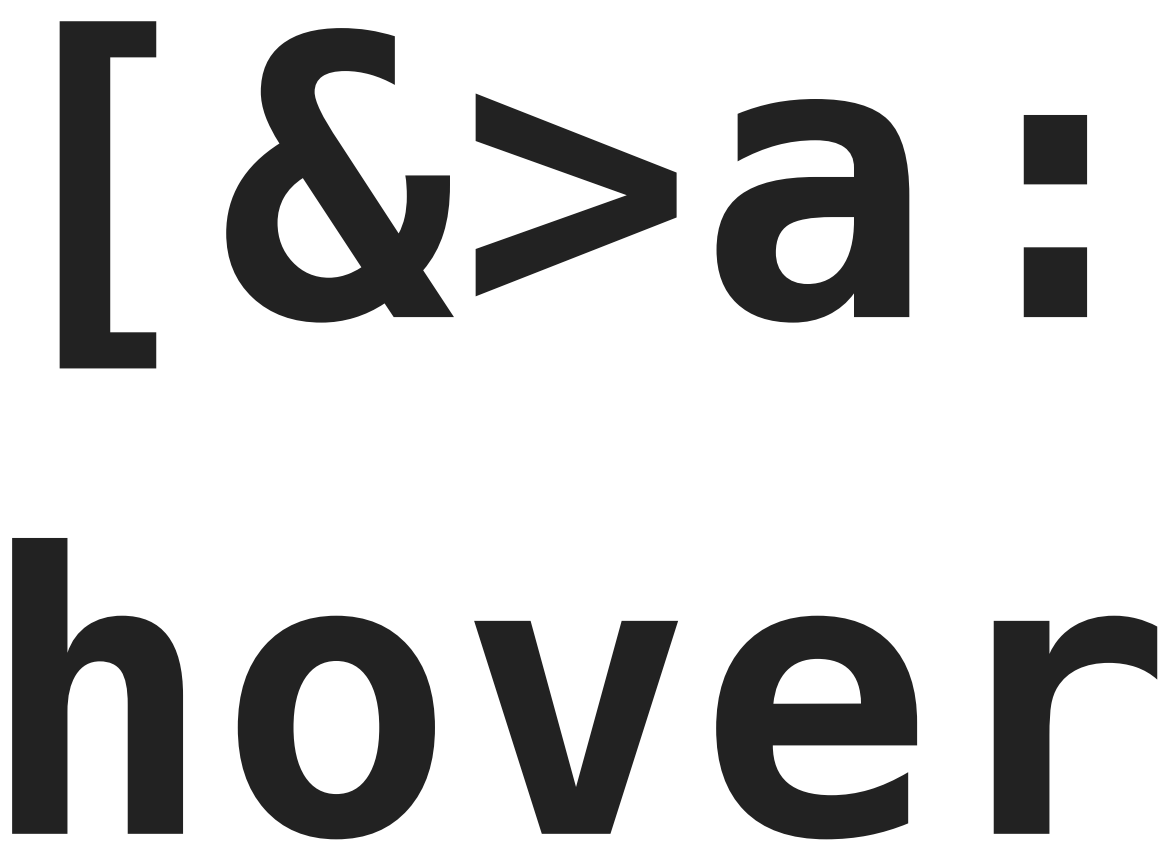
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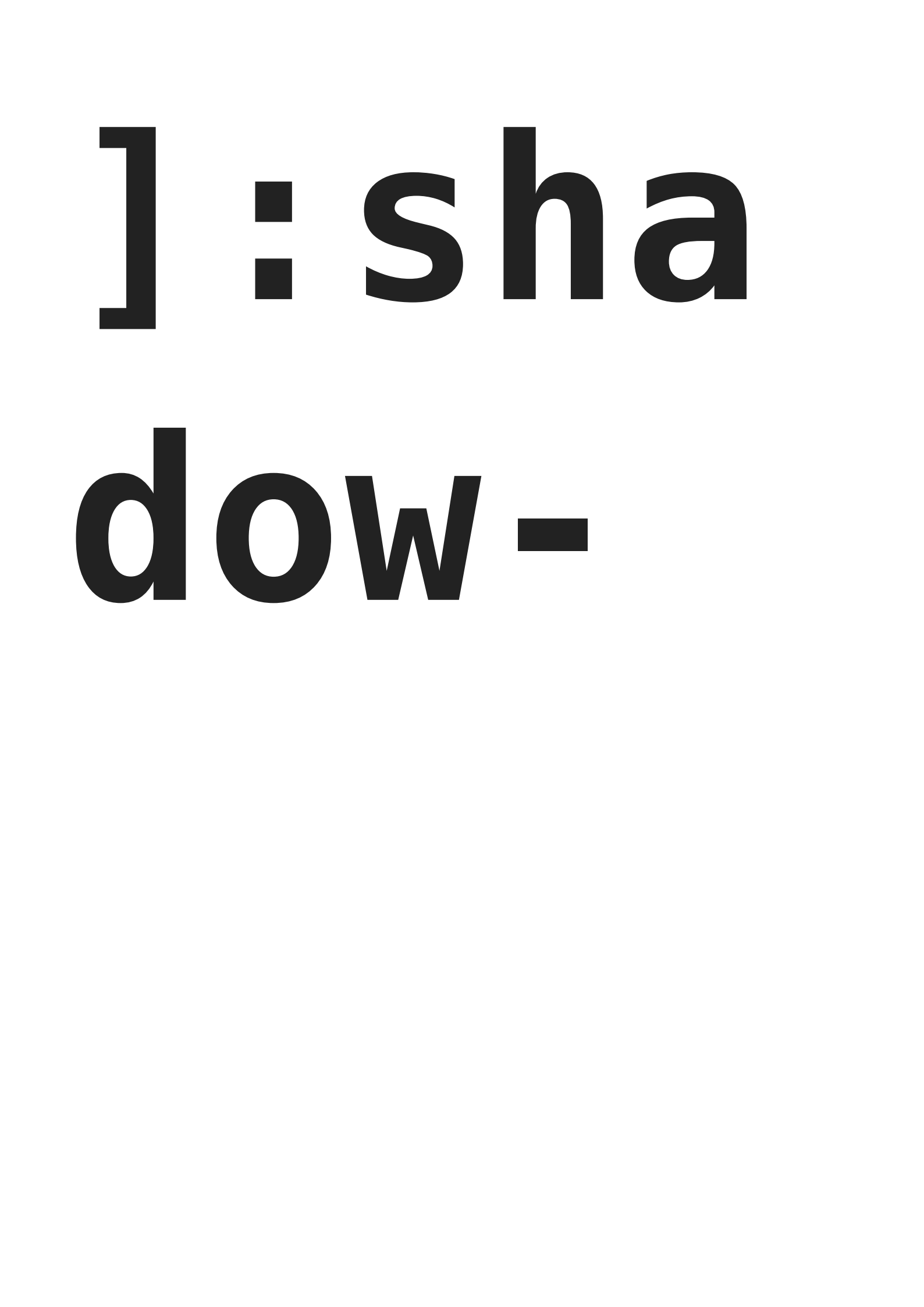
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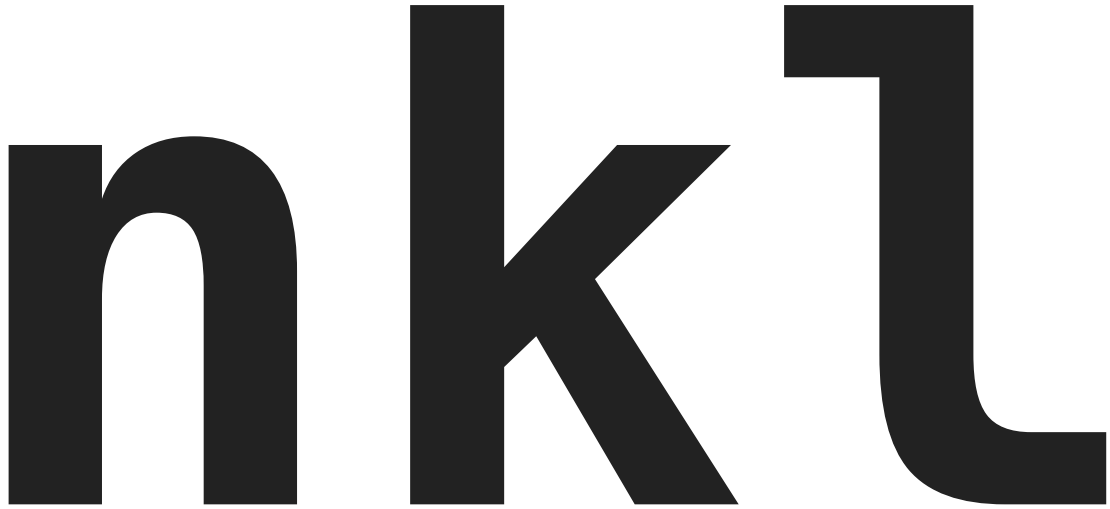
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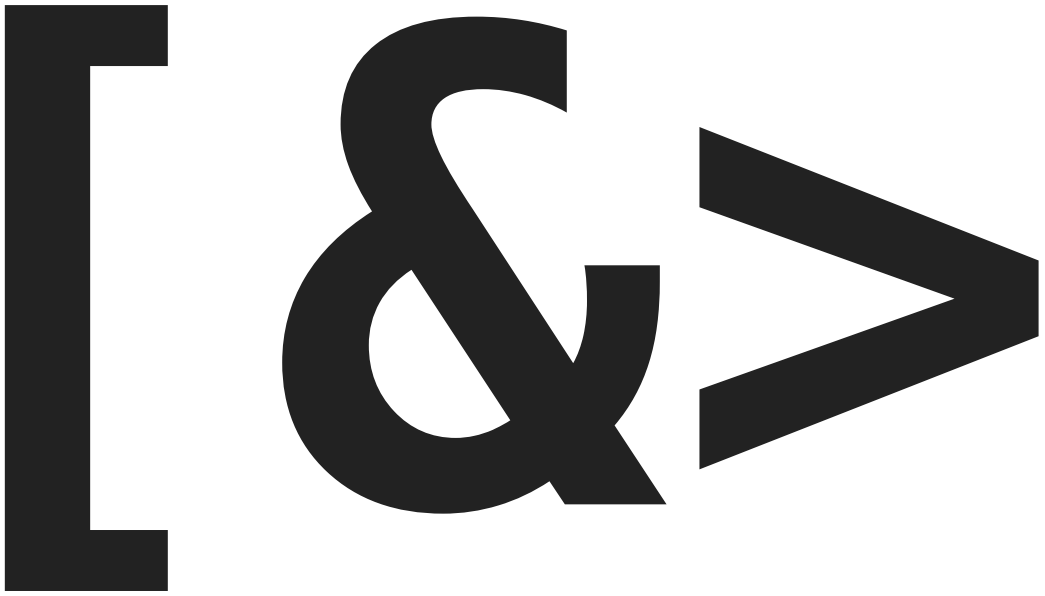
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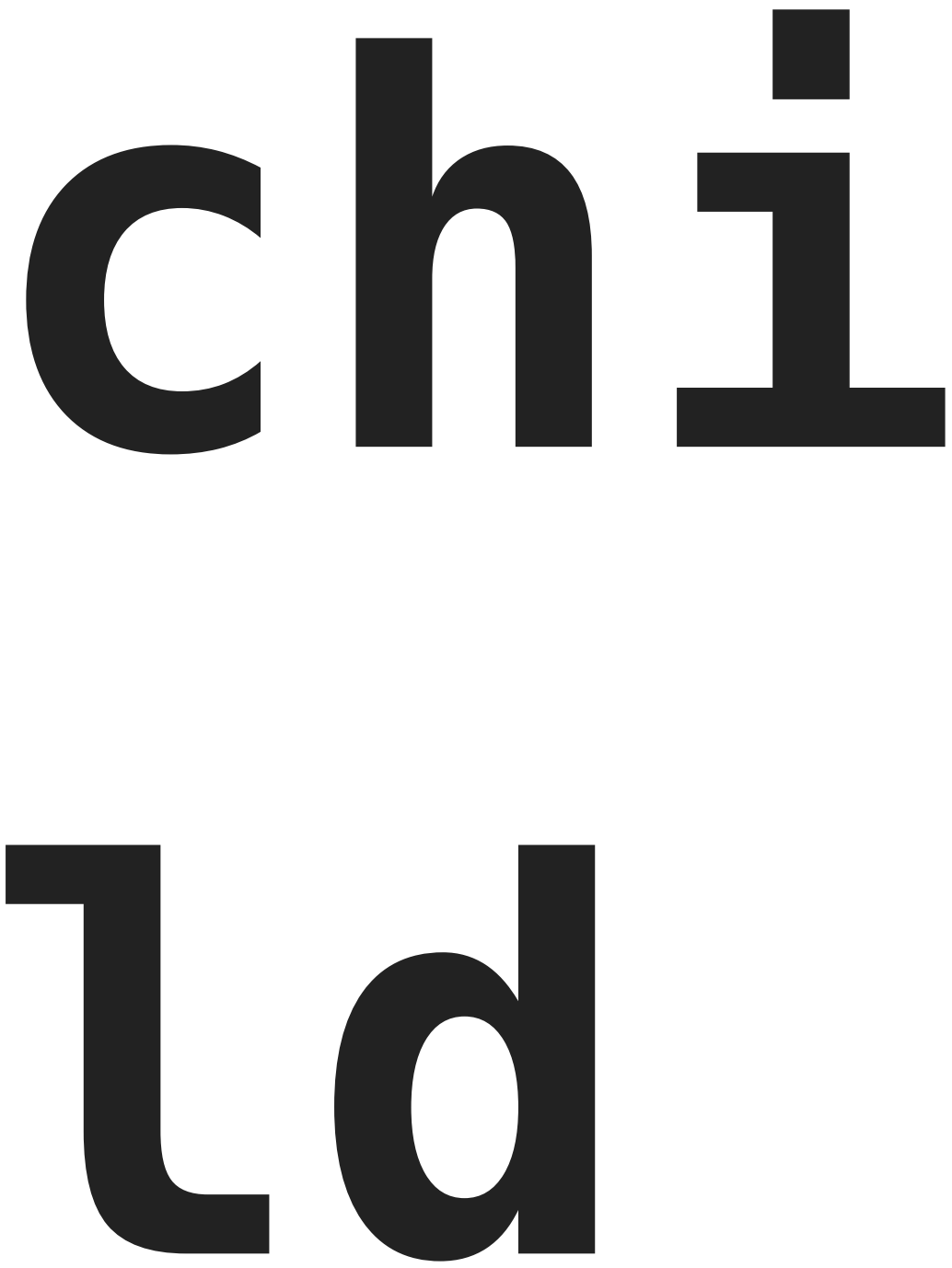
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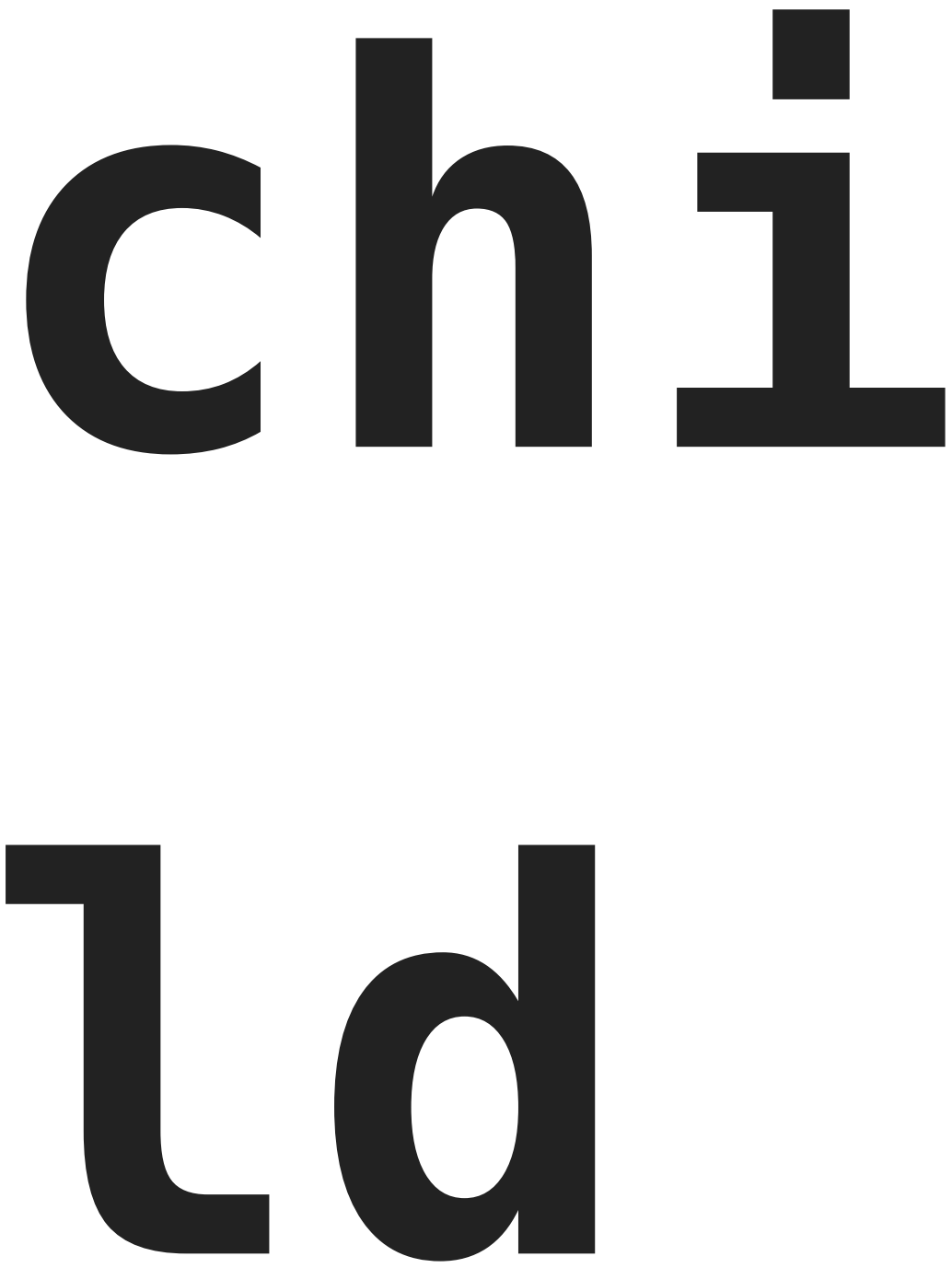
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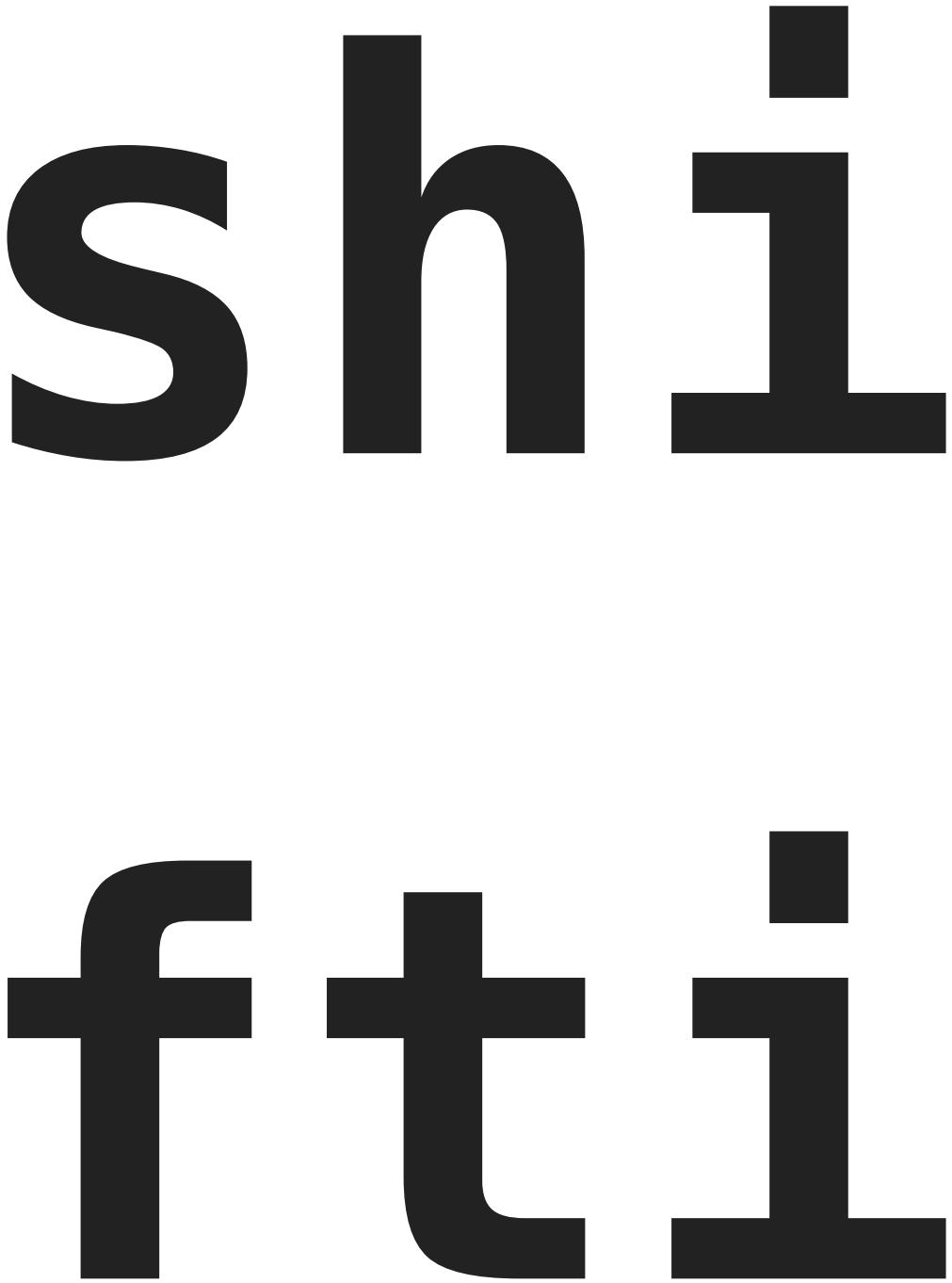
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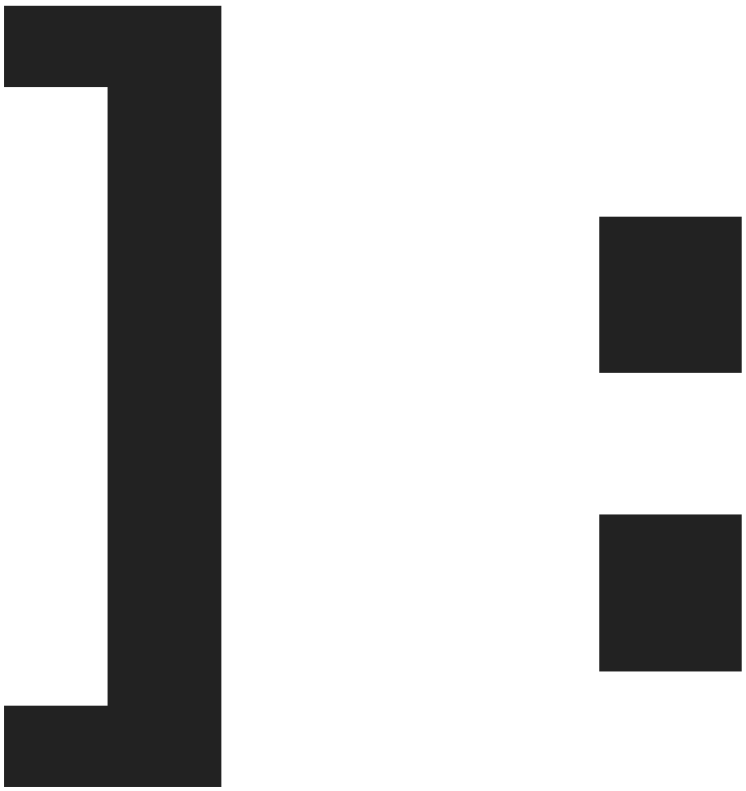
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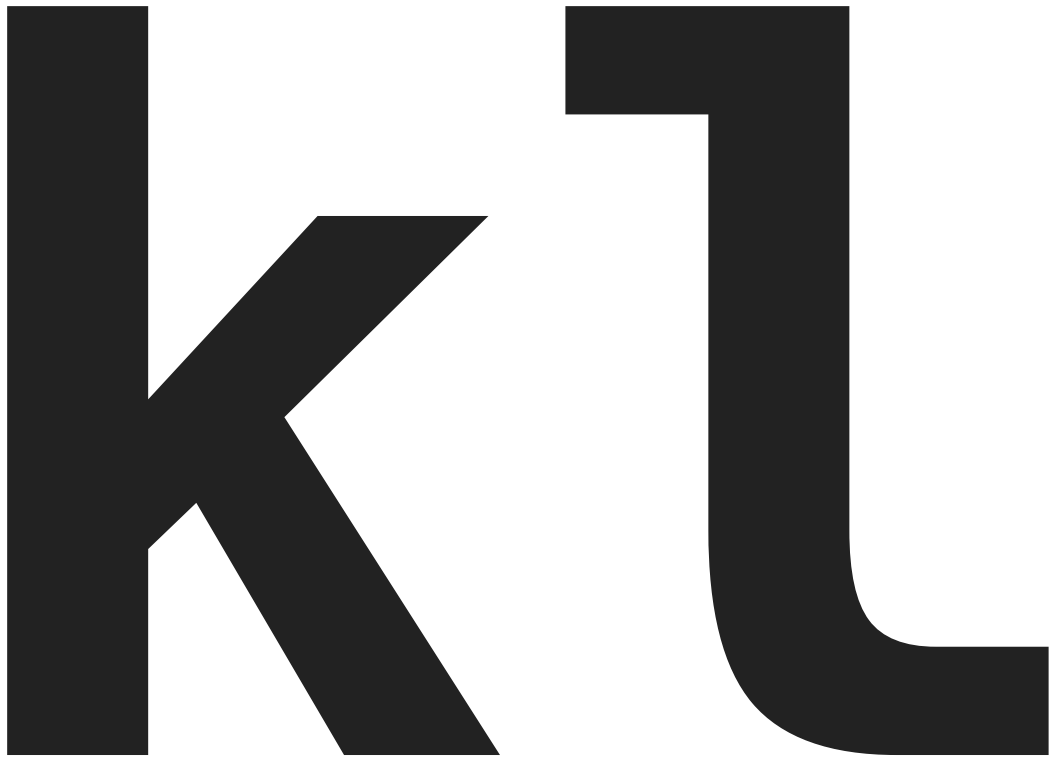



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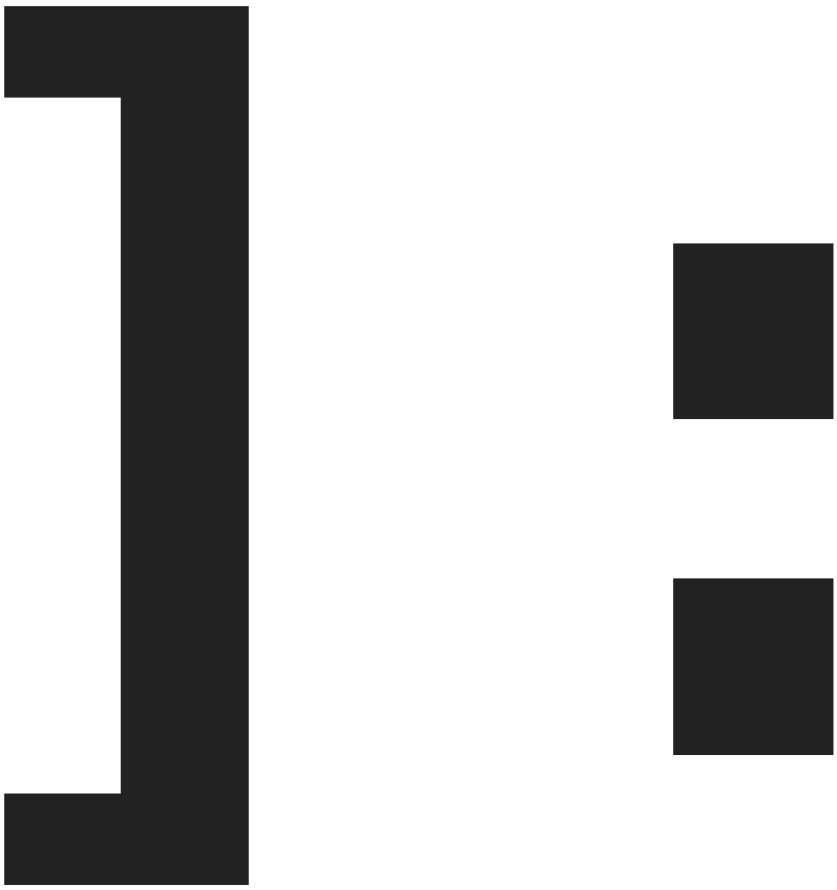
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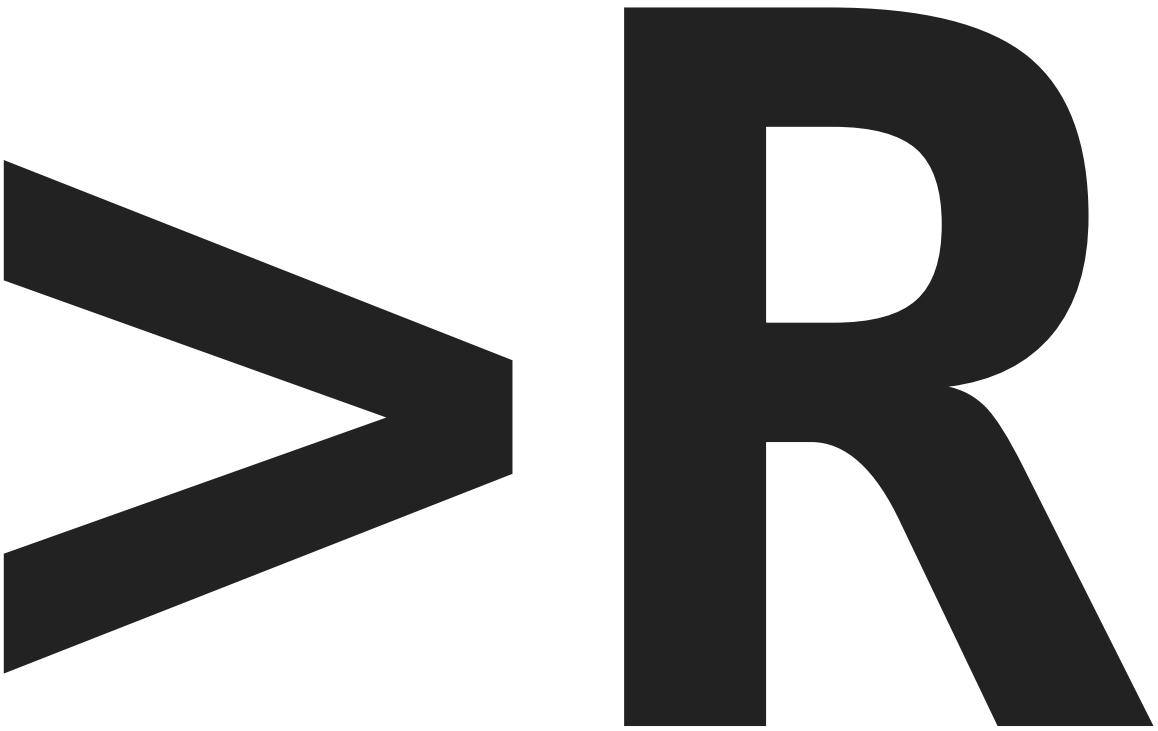
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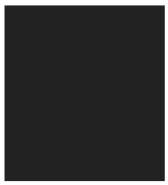
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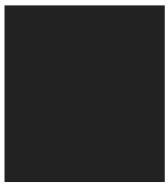


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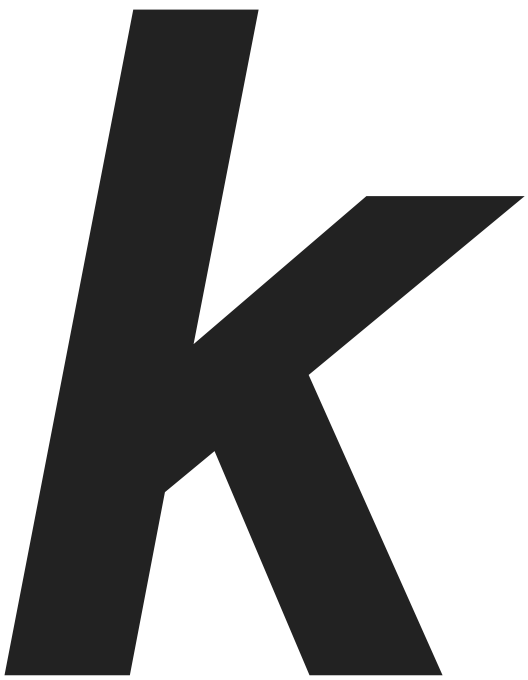





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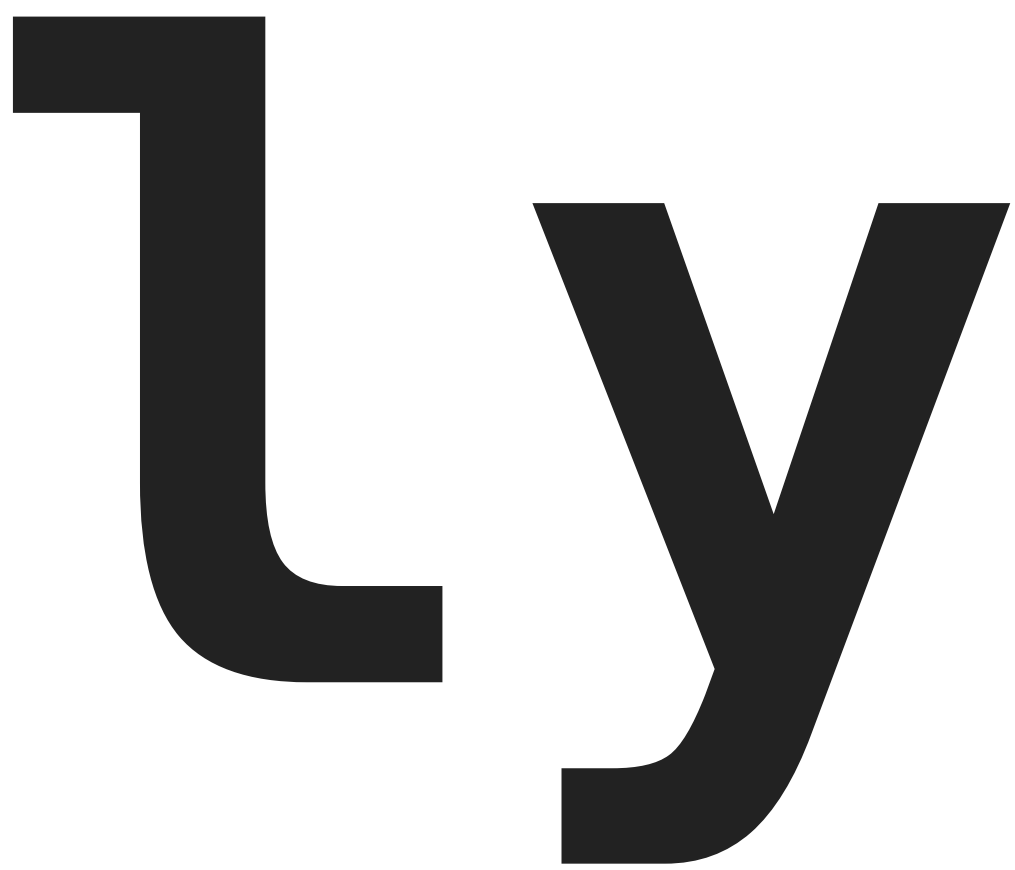
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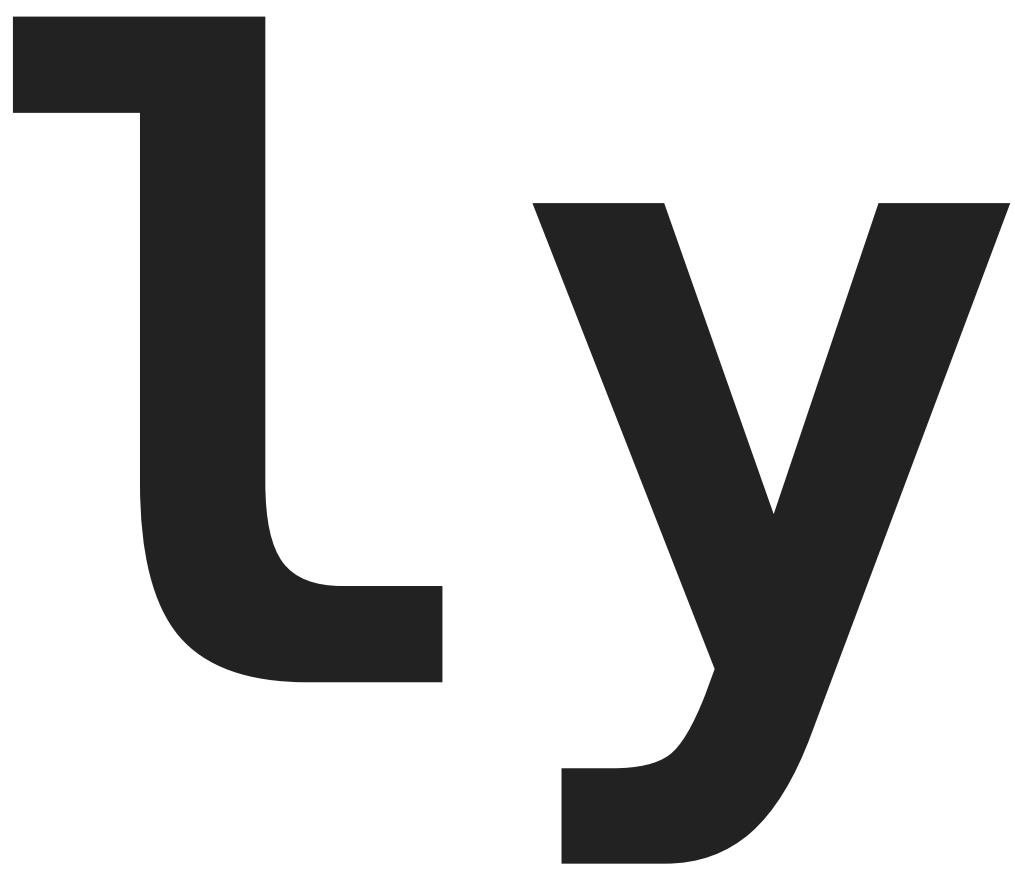
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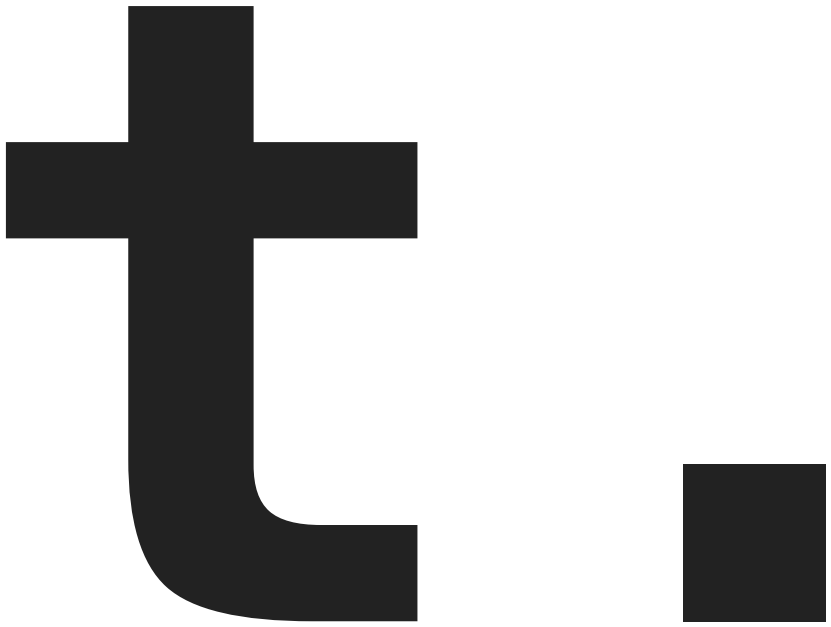


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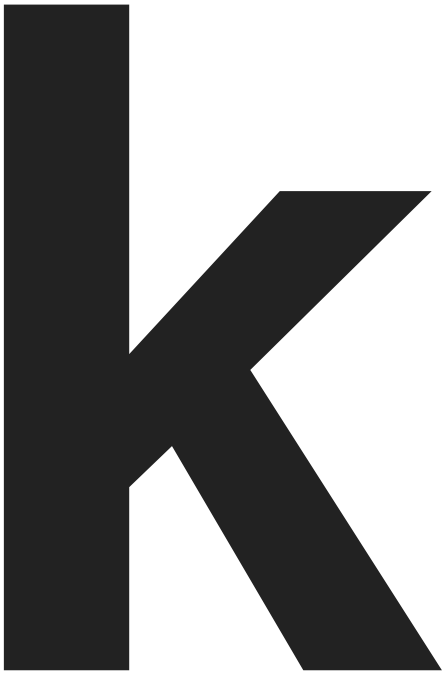
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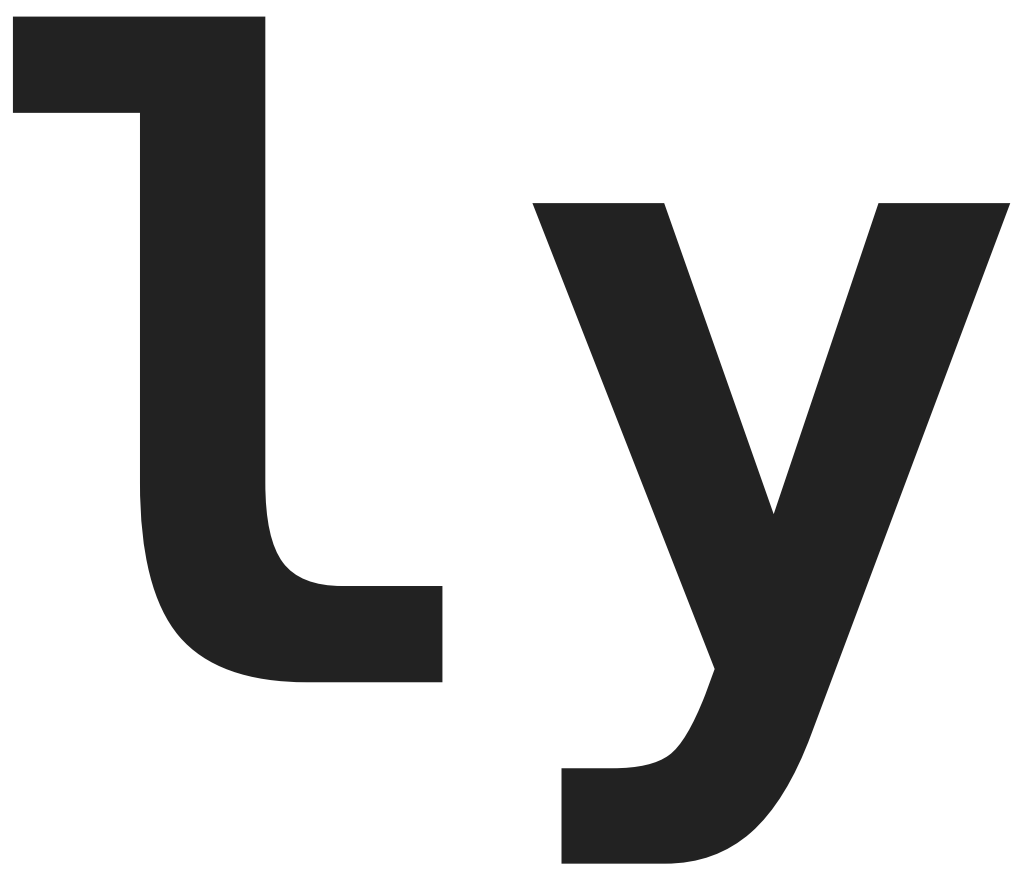
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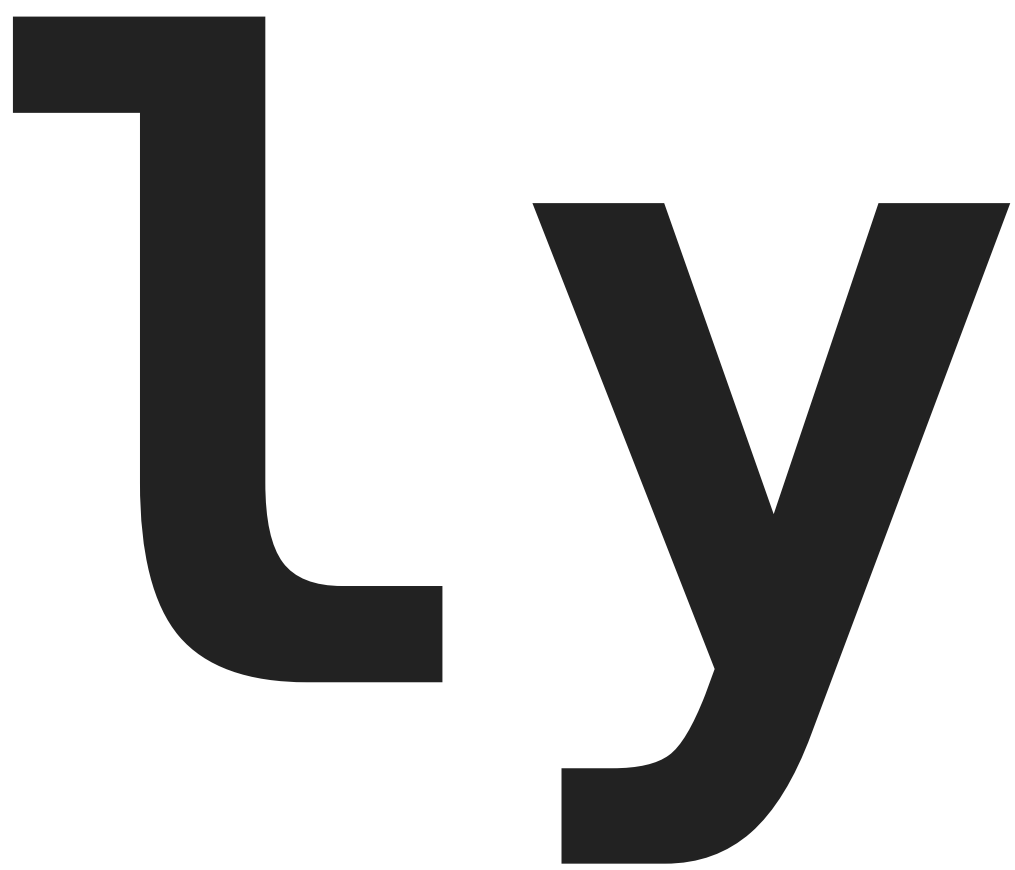
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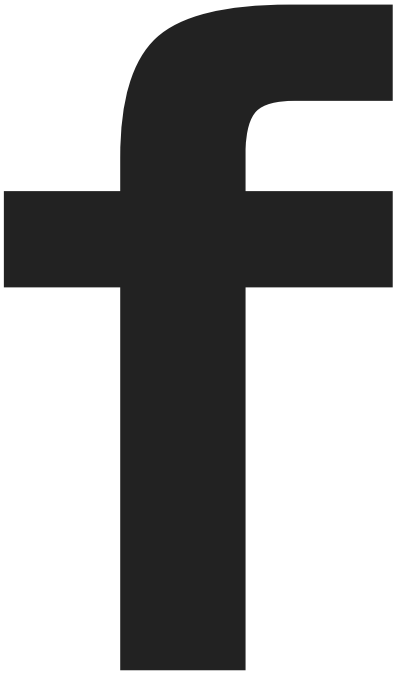

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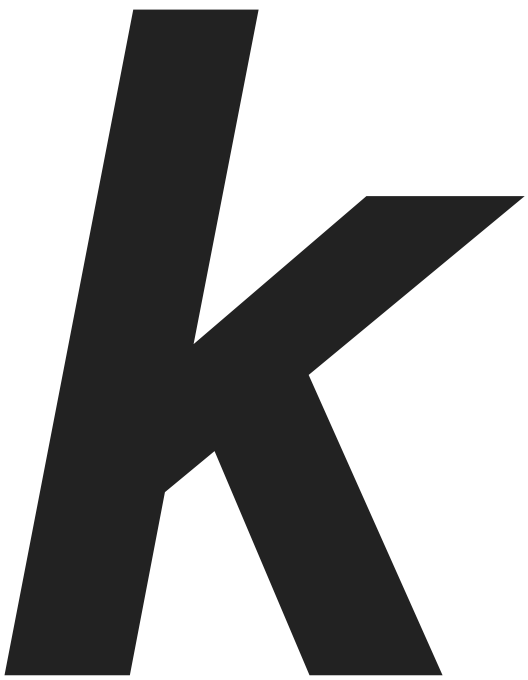





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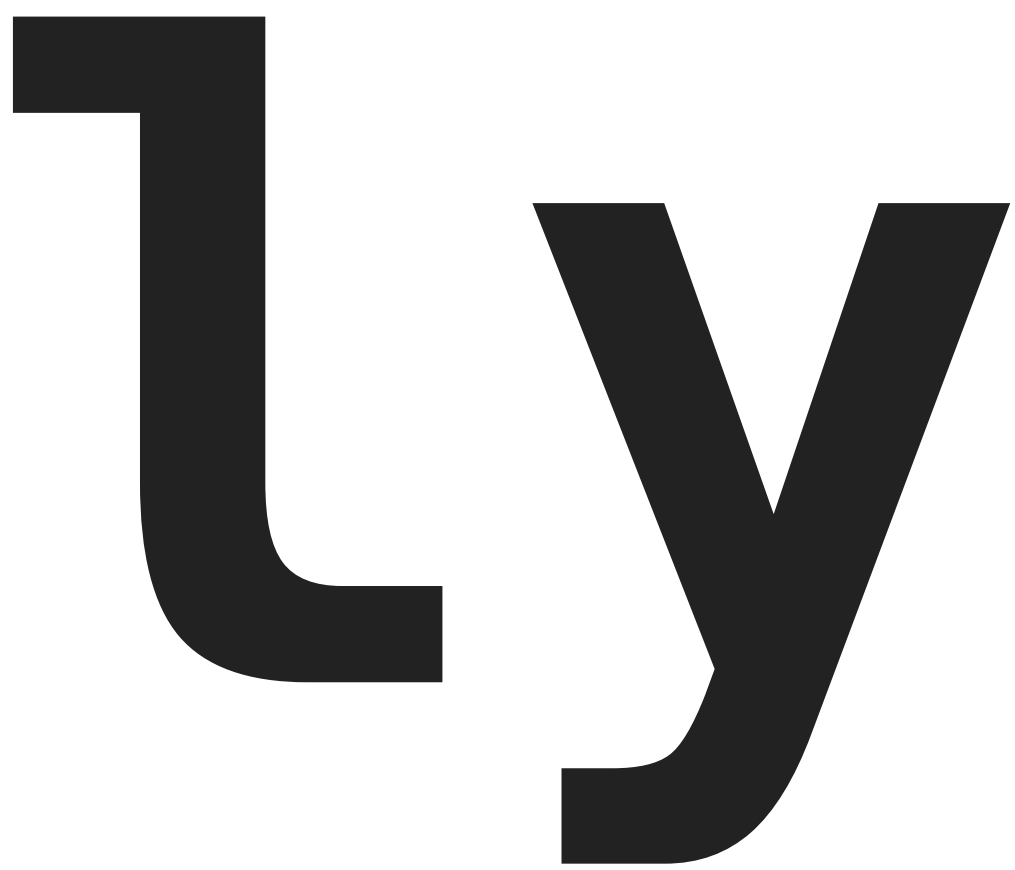
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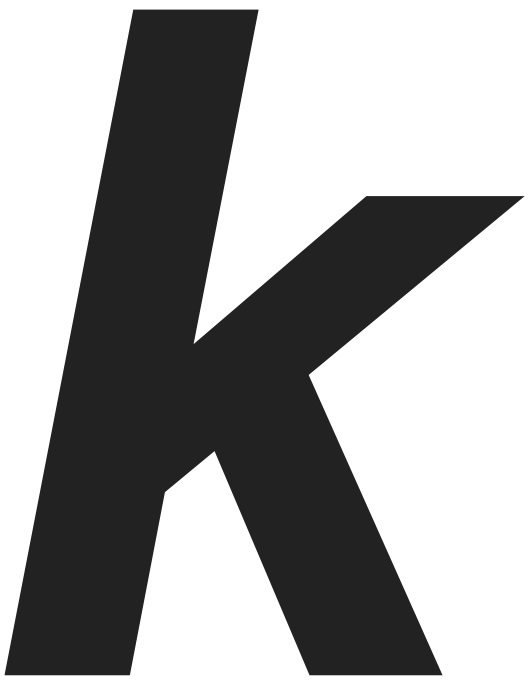





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