

Tilting Images: Toward a Dialectical Theory of the Artwork. Including a Postscript on a Performance by Florentina Holzinger

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ABSTRACT. The concept of the artwork (or ‘work of art’) has been repeatedly challenged within philosophical aesthetics. Performative and post-autonomous art practices, as well as post-metaphysical philosophies, have shifted the paradigm from artefact-based to event- and experience-based models of art, and have questioned the very possibility of isolating art as a distinct ‘work’. To address these challenges, this paper proposes a dialectical reformulation of the concept of the artwork: rather than being defined by fixed properties, the artwork exists with interrelated yet opposing qualities. Namely, it is bound to a finite temporality (event-like structure), its reception (inseparability from experience), and to the art-external world (oscillation between mimesis and transcendence). Drawing on art-theoretical debates and Florentina Holzinger’s performance art as a test case, the paper illustrates how such a dialectical approach offers a more nuanced understanding of contemporary art than both traditional theories that center the concept of the artwork, and contemporary theories that dismiss it.

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1. Introduction: Florentina Holzinger Fades Away – and So Does the Artwork

In May 2022, Florentina Holzinger and her performance collective staged a one-time show in an abandoned parking lot somewhere in the middle of nowhere in West Berlin.² A few hundred spectators – including the author of this paper – gathered on a sunny early evening for the roughly one-hour-long performance with the suggestive title *Étude for Disappearing*. Standing behind makeshift barriers, they could observe Holzinger and her group performing dance, spectacular stunts, choreographed fights drenched in fake blood, and a musical performance on eight harps. After some time, Holzinger herself – naked and already covered in paint and dust – performed a strangely beautiful dance with a leopard-print car (Figure 1). While the car at first drifted around her in circles – making the audience noticeably concerned about the vulnerability of Holzinger’s body –, after a few moments, she climbed onto the roof of the car, striking various poses on the moving vehicle. During all of that, the car blew pink dust into the air, forming a surreal yet fascinating visual arrangement. The encounter between woman and car, at first seeming ominous, even dangerous, quickly tilted into a weirdly symbiotic connection between machine and human.



*Figure 1: Florentina Holzinger’s dance with a car, snippet of *Étude for Disappearing* (2022).*

Photos by Emil Egenbauer, © the artist/Schinkel Pavillon.

² Florentina Holzinger: *Étude für Disappearing*. Komposition für acht Körper, fünf Harfen und ein Auto. 22.05.2022, Disappearing Berlin/Schinkel Pavillon Berlin.

Holzinger's dance with the leopard-print car is a paradigmatic example of the artistic style she has perfected over the last few years: she and her all-non-cis-male performers predominantly perform naked, and their style is located within a spectrum of modern dance, musical theatre, circus artistry, extreme sports, body-mutilation, and sketch comedy. Her art, however, is *not* concerned with creating enduring objects or a clear boundary between art and spheres of non-art. On the contrary, as virtually no documentation of the *Disappearing* show was produced, it vanished into nothingness as quickly as the pink dust emanating from the car, so that only the few hundred attendees of the event even remember that this 'artwork' has ever existed.

This *Étude* provides a perfect example to explain why the concept of an 'artwork' (or 'work of art') has virtually vanished from academic discourse in the last decades (cf. Adajian 2024, Rowe 2017): when art does not predominantly appear as an isolated artefact but rather as an ephemeral event, many theorists have argued that it might be better to abandon this concept altogether. In this paper – concerning questions of the *ontology of art*³ – I will argue against this strategy. My hypothesis in the following is that the challenges contemporary art poses can be a starting point for developing a more convincing concept of the artwork. Rather than conceptualizing it as a spatiotemporally extended, enduring substance, we must think of it as *dialectically* torn between extremes – between itself and its own opposites. The *artwork* is (a) an *event* we collectively experience, and (b) its ontology lies within (and only within) our *collective experience* as an event. Moreover, it can (c) be described as a *tilting image* – an appearance oscillating between *mimesis* and *transcendence*. To argue for these claims, I will reconstruct three contemporary challenges for the concept of the artwork (section 2), and, subsequently, conceptualize a dialectical notion of the artwork, learning from these challenges (sections 3–4). To illustrate the challenges and test my conceptualization, I will – occasionally during the conceptual parts of this paper and in depth within its postscript (section 5) – return to Holzinger. Readers who are uninterested in art ontology but want to know how Holzinger's shocking and fascinating aesthetics can be interpreted from a philosophical perspective may therefore wish to skip directly to the postscript.

3 I.e., the question of what art is: How does it appear? What are its qualities? What does it do?

2. Art Without Work: Contemporary Challenges to the Concept of the Artwork

The challenges the concept of the artwork faces within theory today can be roughly condensed into three groups: (1) the *performative*, (2) the *post-metaphysical*, and (3) the *post-autonomous* objection.

2.1. The Performative Turn and the Event-Structure of (Contemporary) Art

The performative turn within art since the 1960s has been broadly researched (cf. Davies 2011, von Hantelmann 2014). As performances create temporally finite, unrepeatable events rather than artefacts, many theories of performative art conclude that the concept of the artwork should be abandoned altogether. Holzinger's Disappearing-performance really was a disappearing performance: since it was not conceived for re-performances and no documentation was published, there simply was nothing that remained of the performance. This finitude is, as Erika Fischer-Lichte argues, precisely the point of performative art:

the ephemerality of the event, its uniqueness, and singularity [are] a focal point [...]. Materiality is not given as an artefact but occurs as the result of the performative generation of corporeality, spatiality, and tonality [...]. The performance's aestheticity is manifested in its nature as event [Ereignis] (Fischer-Lichte 2008, p. 162).

According to Fischer-Lichte, performative art *en bloc* eludes the category of the artwork. While this category suggests spatiotemporally extended and enduring materiality, performances rely on a fleeting 'materiality' of co-presence of bodies, sound, and space. Thus, Fischer-Lichte argues for a replacement of the category of the artwork with the category of the *event* within the field of performance art: performances are something that *happens* rather than *is*.

Fischer-Lichte's objections can be extended beyond the field of performance art, as very similar problems occur within fields like jazz (cf. Okiji 2018), installation art (cf. Rebentisch 2012); and even within more classical fields like plastic art, where reception *also* exhibits an event-like structure (cf. Davies 2004, Lyotard 1988). The more materially we think about what art *is and does*, the less convincing the artefact model seems.

2.2. Post-Metaphysical Philosophy and the Paradigm of Experiential Aesthetics

If art exists only – or at least *primarily* – as an event, then the act of reception becomes increasingly important: events exist not as artefacts but within (and *only within*) the *experiences* of those who attend them (cf. Fischer-Lichte 2008). This is the second challenge to the concept of the artwork. Contemporary pieces of art, like performances and self-destroying or decaying artworks, rely heavily on the subjects' perception of them – as they will, sooner or later, only exist within their memories.

This shift within art coincides with a shift within theory. Many contemporary philosophies of art operate within a *post-metaphysical framework* – i.e., they define aesthetic objects not via a metaphysical definition of 'the' artwork, but via the experiences we have with them (cf. von Hantelmann 2014, Seel 2004, Deleuze/Guattari 1994, Rebentisch 2012). Aesthetic theories in general shifted from object-centered to experience-centered approaches, analyzing the cognitive, affective, or even neurological effects triggered by the reception of art (cf. Truran 2022, Kappelhoff/Lehmann 2019, Kappelhoff 2018, Robson/Currie 2024).

Within German aesthetics, Rüdiger Bubner has set off this methodological shift from *art-work* to *art-reception*. Rather than “committing art to the presentation of truth” (Bubner 1989, p. 19, my translation), Bubner claims that philosophy ought to “methodically [...] depart from aesthetic experience”: “The analysis [...] strictly sticks to the impact stemming from the aesthetic phenomenon, in which ‘art’ alone comes to consciousness” (ibid., p. 34, my translation). Within the experience we have with art lies what Bubner regards as the point of art: a critical self-reflection of our judgments. Juliane Rebentisch has updated Bubner's neo-Kantian framework as follows: “All art confronts us with the historical and cultural dimensions of our judgment practices, because art is never fully absorbed in any of our definitions [Bestimmungen]” (Rebentisch 2013, p. 55, my translation). Hence, the shift toward experiential aesthetics is motivated by a deeper interest in what art actually does. Rather than looking for a metaphysical truth within 'the' artwork, so the post-metaphysical claim goes, philosophy ought to concentrate on what actually happens when human beings experience art.

2.3. Post-Autonomy and the Border-Crossings of Contemporary Art

The specter of post-autonomy may be *the* challenge not only for the concept of the artwork but for modern theories of art as such. As has often been noted, modernism constantly produced “artworks that were perceptually indiscernible from non-artworks” (Rowe 2017, p. 484).⁴ And Juliane Rebentisch has convincingly argued that the common characteristic of the so-called “contemporaries” is to “cross borders” between art and non-art (cf. Rebentisch 2013, cf. also Marchart 2019, Bishop 2004) – Holzinger’s absorption of practices other than art (such as circus, trash-movies, extreme sports, etc.) is again a good example of this. ‘Post-autonomous’ is the concept that aims to describe this wide variety of modernist and postmodernist art that deliberately blurs the lines between art and non-art – ranging from Duchamp’s *Fountain* (1917) to Tiravanija’s *untitled (free)* (1992).

Post-autonomy poses the third challenge the concept of the artwork faces today. The term ‘artwork’ serves, not least, the purpose of differentiating art from non-art and containing it inside a sealed-off artefact. However, within an artistic situation where this limitation is constantly undermined by art itself, this endeavor seems at best pointless, and at worst ignorant of what art has done within the last 100 years (cf. Lopes 2014). Hence, many theorists have – instead of defining art via features of the artwork – fled to contextual definitions, such as defining art via the institutions that stage it (cf. Fischer-Lichte 2008, Dickie 1984, Danto 1981). These renunciations of defining art substantively – i.e., by stating what art *does* – show how much the concept of the artwork has lost its self-evidence.

3. In Defense of the Artwork: A Dialectical Re-Conceptualization

As announced at the beginning, I think that the concept of the artwork is capable of meeting the challenges I have identified in the previous section – the *event* challenge, the *reception* challenge, and the *post-autonomous* challenge. However, the concept of the artwork must therefore be re-conceptualized for this purpose. But before doing that, let me briefly elaborate

⁴ It is one of the central paradoxes of modernism that it at the same time brings forth and negates art’s autonomy. Adorno has conceptualized this paradox as “[a]rt’s double character” (1997, p. 5).

why we should do that: What is at stake? What does art theory lose when this concept is abandoned?

Frankly speaking: a lot. Not only is the concept of the artwork at the center of virtually all philosophical aesthetics from Schelling to Adorno. Even worse, a series of philosophical categories⁵ necessary for the interpretation of art seems to rely on this concept – first and foremost: the category of *form*. Without a concept of an *artwork* as a formed entity, it seems impossible to uphold the notion of form. Consequently, many theories of art that denounced the concept of the artwork (cf. Fischer-Lichte 2008, Bubner 1989, Davies 2004) also abandoned the notion of form.

However, the loss of this concept puts not only *art criticism* but also mere *art interpretation* at stake. Moreover, art *as* criticism is denounced. As a wide range of theories has (convincingly) argued, art criticizes societal practices via its formal interventions: the artwork's form questions our forms of life, our forms of thinking, our societal forms, etc. (cf. Adorno 1997, Bertram 2019, Rebentisch 2013). If art no longer appears as 'formed work', it is hard to argue that it criticizes our forms of living.

Yet another problem of letting go of the category of the artwork lies in the fact that it almost inevitably implies a certain arbitrariness with regard to aesthetic phenomena. Without this concept, many theorists concerned with the definition of art take refuge in the nominalist strategy of stating that something is art whenever it is *received*, *declared*, or *experienced* as art (or, in the institutionalized variation: declared to be art by gatekeepers like collectors, curators, etc. [cf. Dickie 1984, Danto 1981] – an even more problematic notion as it relies on the questionable authority of these gatekeepers). This strategy, however, poses its own difficulties. Let us turn back to Bubner for a moment. His intervention aimed, as shown, at doing justice to art, namely the experiences we have with it. Paradoxically, this intervention seems to have the opposite effect: when focusing primarily on the experiences that art triggers, art is reduced precisely to that – a mere trigger for a subject seeking experiences (e.g. to authentically *feel*⁶). This is especially vivid in the broad trend of philosophical aesthetics to dismiss art as a privileged mode of having aesthetic experiences – a dismissal which has led to a broad interest in, for example, aesthetics of everyday experience (cf. Saito 2007), and nature aesthetics (cf.

5 Such candidates may be: coherence; mediation (resp. unity/fragmentation); necessity; material; etc.

6 For a meta-critique of such approaches and the artworks they favor cf. Kornbluh 2024.

Carlson/Berleant 2004). These approaches are symptomatic of how the abandonment of the notion of the artwork leads to a de-valorization of art – a tragically ironic effect of the attempt of philosophers like Bubner to shift our focus to the experience of art.

To avoid these inconvenient effects of abandoning the term ‘artwork’, I will propose a dialectical re-formulation. By ‘dialectical’ I mean that the artwork is best defined as torn between extremes – between itself as a stable object and its opposites (*event, experience, non-art*). Hence, my point is *not* to refute the challenges, but, on the contrary, to learn from them.

3.1. The Artwork as a Fleeting Image

Sometimes revolutions reveal something that has always been true but could only be fully recognized through that very revolution. This is also true for the revolutions within art (cf. Adorno 2006). Something like that may have happened through the performative turn within the arts: it tore down the notion that artworks endure infinitely and revealed their event-character.

However, this revolution – and the *event-challenge* as such – is misunderstood when it is delimited to the performance arts only (cf. Fischer-Lichte 2008), and it is also misunderstood when it is read as a destruction of the notion of art as an object – or as *objective* (cf. Davies 2004). Instead, it draws our attention to *how* this object ought to be thought of. It is an *appearing* object (cf. Seel 2004). An appearance is always temporally finite, an event: something that appears vanishes sooner or later. We receive *all* artworks not as artefacts, but as appearing, fleeting phenomena; and not only are performances unrepeatable, but every act of art reception is. The act of looking at a painting and receiving its moments – letting the colors enchant us, deciphering figures, etc. – is as temporally finite and unrepeatable as the act of attending a performance. The opposition posited by performance theorists like Fischer-Lichte – object art here, event art there – is a false one.

The appearing artwork is an event – this statement, however, is not one of identity. We must understand it as a dialectical proposition, expressing an inherent contradiction. Within the artwork lies the contradiction between itself as art-*work* and itself as the (art-)*event* of its *appearing*. If the event-side of the artwork is the fleeting, vanishing side of it, its dialectical counterpart is

its stable, fixed, enduring one. Adorno has put this contradiction in the pair of terms “image [Bild]” and “*apparition*” (French for ‘celestial phenomenon’). He writes:

If *apparition* is that which illuminates and touches, the image is the paradoxical effort to transfix this most fleeting instant [...]. [The artwork’s] *apparition*, which makes [it] an image, always at the same time destroys [its] imagery [Bildwesen]. (Adorno 1997, pp. 83-85, transl. revised)

The tension between apparition and image is the tension of the artwork with itself, between its work-properties and its event-properties – Adorno compares the apparition of artworks with fireworks: appearing and disappearing at the same time (cf. *ibid.*, p. 81). Performances radicalize the event-properties (and thereby shed light on the event structure of all art), yet also create artworks that appear and vanish simultaneously. Not without leaving traces, though: when we attend a performance, certain images will stick in our minds – leaving lasting traces of finite events.⁷ The parts of the artwork – performative or not – temporarily assemble in a way that allows us to analyze and experience it as a ‘work’. Fleetingness (event) and imagery (work) form a paradox – artworks are fleeting images.

3.2. The Artwork as a Collective Experience

This solution of the first challenge already hints toward the one for the *post-metaphysical* challenge: the *work*-qualities of the artwork exist within – and *only* within – its reception, i.e., within the *experiences* the recipient has with it. Bubner is correct: everything important about art lies within the experiences it triggers. But again, the elimination of the term ‘artwork’ from philosophy is the wrong reaction to this insight.

Instead, we should think of artworks as *experienced entities* – i.e., the artwork is neither merely an object nor merely within the subject but *oscillating between subject and object* (cf. Rebentisch 2013). Artworks and aesthetic experiences are mutually constitutive: the artwork exists only through its reception (subject), while the recipient’s experience depends on the material work-character (object) of the received art.

⁷ Analogously, in non-visual art media like music, melodies or auditive impressions will stick in our minds.

Yet again, both sides – subject and object, experience and work – are conflicting. This becomes explicit in conflicts about interpretations (cf. Bertram 2019). The artwork exists only in and through its reception, yet the recipient is not an isolated subject but always part of a collective of recipients. Thus, the subject’s interpretation – and even their perception of what the artwork *is* – is always situated within a multiplicity of other interpretations that may differ fundamentally from their own. These divergences express the underlying tension between subject and object: between the individual act of interpretation and the objectivity that every interpretation presupposes. The ontology of the artwork is a *collective experience* – it exists within those who receive it; it is torn between collective and individual reception. Whenever one side is isolated, the conception is wrong: either an object-uninterested experiential aesthetic; or, conversely, experience-uninterested art history. This conception must be combined with the fleeting-image definition: the artwork is a *collective experience of a fleeting image*. It consists in this double contradiction – stable and fleeting, collectively and individually experienced.

3.3. The Artwork as Tilting Image

The third, *post-autonomous* challenge questions if art can be delimited from non-art, and thus if one can answer the question of what art *is* – or better: what art *does*. In the following, I sketch out a dialectical conception of art’s course of action: *Art oscillates between world-representation (mimesis) and transcendence (utopia)*.

(i) *Mimesis*: Art is not sealed off from non-art. On the contrary, it reflects the outside world and critically engages with its forms of life (cf. Bertram 2019, Jaeggi 2018). And it does so mimetically (μίμησις), i.e., art imitates non-art, transforms itself into it, “appropriates [it] in a differentiated manner” (Bertram 2019, p. 127). This mimesis has a critical aim: art represents (or *repeats*) the world as it is, in order to expose its flaws. *Within every artwork lies a – however marginal – mimetic, realist impulse.*

(ii) *Utopia*: At the same time, art transcends the existing. It creates a non-place (οὐ τόπος), a non-existent reality: its fleeting images catapult the recipient out of her mode of everyday experience (cf. Seel 2004). Art’s constructions make the familiar seem unfamiliar (cf. Cavell 1988) and let ephemeral fragments of possible – of *better* – worlds appear (cf. Adorno 1997). We can subsume all these aspects – which, of course, have very diverse forms within the concrete artworks –

under the category of *transcendence* (or *utopia*): art departs from everyday life and lets something else appear. *Within all artworks lies a – however marginal – anti-representational, utopian impulse.*

Clearly, (i) and (ii) contradict each other. However, both are dialectically intertwined, i.e., the artwork oscillates between them. Specific artworks may tend more to one of the poles (while Brecht's *Dreigroschenoper* [1928] is mainly concerned with a mimesis of capitalist demoralization, Kandinsky's *Yellow-Red-Blue* [1925] releases the spectator from her everyday experience). Still, every artwork possesses both features (Brecht's revolutionary acting techniques, after all, aimed to escape everyday ways of interacting with the world; and Kandinsky's art critically reflects the geometrical rationalization of life under Fordist capitalism).

This double-faced nature of the artwork is also observable in the way we perceive it. At the same time, artworks confront us with a representation of the world as it is, *and* a utopian defamiliarization. For this strange and estranging appearance of the artwork, I want to propose the *metaphor of the tilting image*. Tilting images, as popularized within philosophy by Wittgenstein, are pictures that capture two mutually exclusive figures within one picture – famous examples include images that show both an old and a young version of a woman's face, two faces and a vase, or a rabbit and a duck. The interesting aspect of tilting images lies in their phenomenology: when we look at a tilting image, we can only see one of the two figures, but occasionally our perception 'tilts' and we see, within a sudden shift, the other figure – Wittgenstein calls this moment the "change of aspect [Aspektwechsel]" (Wittgenstein 1972, p. 195 [II/xi]). Our experience when perceiving an artwork functions analogously: in one moment, what we experience seems like a copy of what we know all too well (the infamous 'mirror' art holds up to us); and yet in the next moment, what we experience is totally distinct from our everyday life, be it horrific or enchanting, be it abstract or estranging – everything seems unfamiliar. Just like within the observation of a tilting image, it is very hard for us to see both at the same time (after all, mimesis and transcendence are mutually exclusive). Instead, our perception tilts between the extremes: mimesis and transcendence – world-representation and utopian otherness.

This re-definition can solve the problems caused by post-autonomy: the fact that art is not clearly delimited from non-art now appears as a commonplace. Art – not exclusively, but constitutively – mimics reality, hence it is not sealed off from non-art. Again, contemporary art confronts us with something that is true for all art: the boundary between art and non-art is not

only porous (cf. Rebentisch 2013), but also functions as a semi-permeable membrane, constantly allowing exchange between these two spheres. Such exchange (*mimesis*) is as much a constitutive characteristic of the artwork as the utopian departure from non-art (*transcendence*).

4. Conclusion

In this paper, I have argued that – despite the challenges of contemporary art – it is still possible and useful to refer to pieces of art as *artworks*. My investigations have led to two theses about the artwork – one regarding its (i) *ontology*, one regarding its (ii) *appearance*:

(i) *Artworks are collectively experienced events.* The ontology of the artwork lies within the collectively experienced event of its reception. We experience works as ephemeral events, yet within our (collective) memory something remains: something we can call – and analyze as – artworks.

(ii) *Artworks appear as tilting images – oscillating between mimesis and transcendence.* Artworks copy the world and transcend it at the same time. Thus, we experience them as paradoxical appearances that tilt between extremes: representing the world as it is *and* envisioning a utopian otherness.

My definitions – as they make claims about what art *is and does* – can also substitute for tautological or institutional definitions of art (‘art is what is perceived as such [by gatekeepers]’). They contribute to specifying the conditions under which an entity can be considered an artwork.

5. Postscript: The Tilting Images of Florentina Holzinger

Let me now turn back to Florentina Holzinger’s performance described at the beginning to analyze it further and thereby test the framework of the artwork developed in this paper. To state the obvious first: Holzinger’s dance with a car within a cloud of pink dust is not an artefact but, like every artwork, a *fleeting image existing in collective experience*. Its ontology is situated within a double contradiction: appearing as a finite event *and* possessing work-like, persisting

characteristics; existing in the outside world *and* being accessible only through the experience of its recipients.

Furthermore, the artwork performed by Holzinger appears as a tilting image oscillating between (i) *mimesis* and (ii) *transcendence*:

(i) Holzinger's performances circle around the *relation between society and the (non-cis-male) body*. Her starting point is the (potential or actual) violence inflicted upon that body – it is staged as endangered and potentially destroyed. During Holzinger's dance with a car, the audience was notably worried about the safety of her body. The moving arrangement mimicked the way the female-coded body is exposed to the violence of a gaze of (predominantly male) spectators in everyday life, often together with cars (as in sexist commercials and calendars). Holzinger exposes the violence incorporated in these regimes of enacting for the gaze by making actual the latent: by bringing her body into danger. She thereby unveils what is usually hidden in art and society – its potential and actual violence – and turns it into fleeting images that mimic the dystopian status quo of societal body mutilation and patriarchal voyeurism.

(ii) This, however, is only half the story. The scene appears at the same time as the exact opposite. The way the danger and the violence are staged by Holzinger is distinct from the uninterest we usually show toward them: audience and co-performers care for the security of this body. Even more, we as spectators – exactly *because* of the violence threatening these bodies – cease to see these bodies the way we are used to seeing them: we are briefly emancipated from the societal gaze regimes in which we are inevitably engaged every day. Rather than seeing the body as a signifier for power structures (age, beauty, gender, etc.), we see it as endangered and precious flesh. And moreover, we appreciate this weirdly beautiful symbiosis of machine and human body as what it is – and not as what it could stand for. At moments, the naked bodies presented by Holzinger escape labeling, meaning, and classification: they simply *are* – and as existing, living entities, they appear valuable to us.

My short interpretation shows the following: within Florentina Holzinger's performances, the body becomes a tilting image – oscillating between social violence and freedom, mimesis and transcendence. It is crucial to note that the utopian and the mimetic aspects of the artwork are essentially *the same aspects* (just like a tilting image is one image and not two). Thus, the perception tilts between the extremes: violent conditioning of the female body under patriarchy *and* our

ability to escape the gaze structures that enable it. Holzinger's dance on the car oscillates between representing a dystopic reality and imagining a utopia. It tilts back and forth between extremes – a fleeting, tilting image.⁸

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