

**Exhibitions in Life and Death:
The Photography of Lucinda Devlin, Gunther von Hagens' *Body
Worlds*, and the Disassembly of Scientific Progress**

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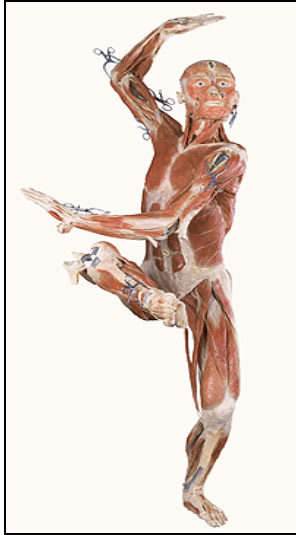
The line that demarcates art and science is a tenuous one. Recent exhibitions by artists such as Gunther von Hagens and Lucinda Devlin attempt to challenge this traditional demarcation by suggesting that thanatos, the death instinct, lingers at the core of both projects. The first half of the analysis assesses the damage that these exhibitions render to modern rationality by reducing human beings to the traces they leave in a world where mechanics define the boundary between life and death. Once these imprints puncture the membrane between art and science, the constituent parts that form the basis for epistemic representation come into stark relief against the aesthetic background. The second part of the analysis disassembles these discursive components into a collage of images that, rather than expressing unity or equilibrium, create a counter-narrative of conflict and transgression that resurrects the specter of thanatos rather than represses it. Here art and science clash in a realm of semblance where the body no longer establishes authenticity, but becomes the primary symptom of epistemic failure.

The boundary between science and art is often defined by semblance. While the aesthetic subject is understood as a product of interpretation, scientific investigation proceeds from the assumption that the symbolic and the real can be collapsed. Certainly literary and philosophical movements such as Romanticism have emerged to challenge the epistemic rejection of art as distorted replication, yet the presumption that science provides unmediated access to objects of investigation is central to the modernist enterprise. In perhaps the most ecstatic embrace of scientific discourse as a benevolent force in modern society, Marie Jean Condorcet asserts that the concerted attention to the real is a natural step toward political progress. Art may certainly play a role in this new society due to its capacity to produce affective pleasure, but the capacity of science to generate mechanical and medical progress—to effect direct environmental and material change through its social practices—lends authenticity to its means of signification (Furst 2000). About a century and half after Condorcet fell victim to the upheavals of the French Revolution, Sigmund Freud expressed deep pessimism about the systematic violence and ennui he perceived in countries widely considered to be the most civilized and progressive on Earth. In *Civilization and its Discontents*, he sought for the origins of this instinctual barbarity that he now recognized could express itself through the most rational of institutions, and he identified this destructive impulse with the death instinct (*thanatos*). From this standpoint, the nexus of life and death is where civilized progress and barbaric retrograde collide. Indeed, if the mastery over this dialectic forms a pivotal point in the bulwark that holds the forces of brutality in check, then, seemingly, the membrane between art and science must be carefully maintained.

During the past few decades members from both the art and science communities have challenged this barrier in some startling ways. In programs such as Indianapolis artist Lucinda Devlin's *The Omega Suites*



http://www.paulrogers9w.com/artists/l_devlin/lucinda.html and German physician Gunther Von Hagens' *Body Worlds*, <http://www.bodyworlds.com>



the combination of technology and aesthetics blurs the boundary among rationality, fact and semblance. In *The Omega Suites*, Devlin uses photography to explore the relationship between humans and machines by depicting execution chambers throughout the United States. She uses a Hasselblad with tripod under long exposure time, exploiting only the available light and rendering the prints with a minimal amount of color manipulation. These haunting images are often interpreted as attempts to grapple with the distance that these lethal technologies create between ourselves and death (Usborne, 2001, pp. 23). While Devlin offers little in the way of commentary about state-sponsored execution, most of the criticism about the exhibit originates among death penalty supporters (Tan, 2001, 64). Sustained focus on this controversy misses the point that her presence within this sphere violates the traditional boundary between the public and the institutional interior of the prison. One of the hallmarks of scientific rationality is the transformation of barbaric spectacles into invisible, sterile medical procedures. In contrast von Hagens is a physician at the Institute of Pathology and Anatomy of Heidelberg who has gained recent fame for exhibiting cadavers that have been subjected to a process called plastination whereby people, animals, and body parts are submerged in a polymer solution under a high-pressure vacuum. At the most recent exhibition visitors were exposed to 200 specimens, both diseased and healthy, with 25 full cadavers, each posed to accentuate various components of human anatomy such as the digestive, muscular, and vascular systems. The stated goals of the display are to encourage physical health as well as to break the traditional boundary between the pathologist and the public. The use of educational *topoi* to counter potential criticisms of macabre exhibitionism is certainly nothing new to the field of medicine (Simon 2002). Yet the primary controversy seems to stem from whether these cadavers are to be interpreted as art or science since they seem to be at home in the gallery as well as the science and technology museum.

The regulation of death is central to the medical technologies that have emerged around it, as health professionals grapple with new vocabularies designed to reduce cultural anxiety. Yet the shadow of Freud's *thanatos* continues to lurk beneath the surface of these otherwise rational institutions, threatening to derail the progressive *telos* that Condorcet perceived as the ultimate product of the modern enterprise. In his series

of essays exploring the relationship among representation, aesthetics, and ontology, Walter Benjamin (1996) writes, “no work of art may appear completely alive without becoming a mere semblance” (224). Often the closer that one comes to collapsing the spheres of signification and the real using the vocabularies of verisimilitude, the more intensified the possibility for ruptures in the extended systems of rationality. As the membrane between art and science is pierced from both sides, the capacity for science to maintain systems of civilized behavior in the face of instinctual violence becomes increasingly tenuous. While Devlin probes penal institutions from the outside to reveal the technological apparatus of death, von Hagens explodes into the public consciousness by rendering the autopsy as an aesthetic process. Both meet in the realm of exhibition. The following essay explores the promise of science to regulate instinctual violence by sanitizing death and the ultimate failure of this endeavor once the line between reality and semblance—between science and art—is breached.

The first half of the analysis assesses the damage that these exhibitions render to modern rationality by reducing human beings to the traces they leave in a world where mechanics define the boundary between life and death. Once these imprints puncture the membrane between art and science, the constituent parts that form the basis for epistemic representation come into stark relief against the aesthetic background. The second part of the analysis disassembles these discursive components into a collage of images that, rather than expressing unity or equilibrium, create a counter-narrative of conflict and transgression that resurrects the specter of *thanatos* rather than represses it. Here art and science clash in a realm of semblance where the body no longer establishes authenticity, but becomes the primary symptom of epistemic failure.

Human Traces

Ralph Waldo Emerson envisioned a world of aesthetic and epistemic harmony where poetry and science would blend into one divine ethical practice, creating a more humane society (Walls 426). In recent decades, this harmonic optimism has been replaced by institutional subjugation and the loss of individual agency. In what is sometimes called the “posthuman” crisis, individual freedom is minimized by the mechanical superstructure that threatens to consume every human endeavor including both art and science (Thacker 2003). While most critics of posthumanism view it as a problem of reduction, it may be more productively understood as a byproduct of inscription. In their work *A Thousand Plateaus* Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guatari (1987) speculate that the modern body exists in a matrix of fetishes and containments where it attempts to deterritorialize its own interior by purging the miasma of failing organs that have been injected into it through the capitalist economy of signs and conquest. If one reverses this cultural dynamic, the human is no longer understood as an extension of the machine, but the technological realm becomes a sphere where human ontology is inscribed. The contours of these remnants belie the formal qualities that these technologies impose by rendering visible the molds that the human leaves upon them in both life and death. Once science and art meet in the realm of exhibition, these traces become gateways to revealing the extent to which the decentralizing of the human subject seems to contradict the naïve narratives of scientific progress.

While the lack of rhetorical flourish that one sees in Devlin's work renders her photos politically ambiguous, her mere presence within this institutional matrix is itself a transgression. Throughout much of his lifetime Benjamin speculated that humans are primed to explore the underlying truth of photography, that each snapshot contains some fragment of an unconscious truth that observers are primed to uncover (Jay 1994, 132). The photographic unconscious is a sphere where spectacle creates the grounds for truth by repositioning the observer as an interpreter. During the age of public execution, the spectacle was intimately bound to the process of knowing as Michel Foucault (1977) so vividly observes when he writes that the tortured body equals "the truth of the crime" (35). As Enlightenment precepts came to dominate social policy, state-sanctioned executions became increasingly privatized. In an analysis of the dramaturgy of the public killing, Dwight Conquergood (2002) writes, "beginning in the 1830s, execution rituals moved from the public square where they drew diverse audiences numbering in the thousands to inside prison walls where, withdrawn from public view, they became private performances for a small, homosocial, invitation-only audience of elites" (342). The spectacle of the execution is now reduced to exercises in legal maneuvering where the photographic depiction of the condemned in newspapers and on the Internet might produce some empathy if the subject is photogenic, but in most cases draws little comment (Beckman 2004). As she moves from electric chair to gas chamber, from gallows to gurney, Devlin's languid photo essay demonstrates that her transgression is not one of privacy, since the victims have long since disappeared and their fluids have been cleaned, but a crime of epistemology.

When displayed, her photographs are usually placed in plain black frames with white background to create minimal distraction and perform an aesthetic of hyperrealism. The collection constitutes topography of death and the technologies used to manage it at the state level. With the exception of the beautiful composition, the photos themselves are unexceptional. In Nevada we see the gas chamber shot from the outside with the door open so that the viewer can see the stool upon which the condemned sits waiting to asphyxiate. In Virginia the electric chair is situated in a long shot so that Devlin can position the institutional clock that hangs behind it. The upright gurney in Colorado demonstrates how prisoners can be loaded and unloaded with a minimum of effort. One sees the remnants of those who participate in the executions as well. In Connecticut the supply closet door is open so that one can see the convenient proximity of the materials needed to complete the execution and then clean the site. Perhaps most haunting about her photos is the seemingly empty nature of the spaces that she elects to frame. Leonard Shlain (1991) observes that Leonardo Da Vinci was among the first painters to produce landscape portraits that were devoid of all human images, revealing his fascination with the purely formal qualities of particular images (78). For Devlin the body is not understood through its presence, but through an absence that is highlighted by the traces that humans leave behind—dents in the formal qualities of our technological world. These inscriptions are not devoid of humanity, but in fact mark the curvature of experiential immediacy and intimacy.

Contrary to Devlin's aesthetic minimalism, *Body Worlds* moves the viewer into the realm of hyperbolic spectacle. During the previous century, the movement of bodily

dissection from the public sphere into the security of the institution served to reconfigure the process of mutilation as a systematic methodology for legal or scientific edification (Burney 1994). Thus the transgression committed by von Hagens is similar to Devlin's, but involves the normalization of death by positioning the corpse as an ideal model for human physical and social activity. Many critics of *Body Worlds* argue that the cadavers violate deeply held principles dealing with the sanctity of human individuality. Rabbi Baruch Frydman-Kohl argues that the "exhibit distances us from the sense that we are viewing real people. The exhibit wants us to see the body as a natural organism. But even as we gain awe, we lose it. The body becomes dehumanized" (Goodden 2006). These sentiments have plagued the practice of anatomical studies for centuries. In an examination of 19th century literature dealing with the dissection of the human body, Michael Sappol (1996) writes that once the corpse has been rendered an object of scrutiny "the cadaverized body (living or dead) can then be assessed according to utilitarian principles, for the convenience of the mind/anatomist, without superstitious awe or obfuscating sentiment" (162). By locating critics in the realm of superstition and antiquated moral philosophy, they are able to present the anatomical spectacle as a product for mass consumption. Ironically, while Devlin's work is often viewed as having a more politically subversive quality, *Body Worlds* presents its audience with a more clearly articulated polemic against its potential detractors.

The process of plastination involves skinning the corpse or extracting the desired organ, soaking it in chemicals that remove the fat, and then subjecting the body to a process called "forced impregnation" where the polymers are directed into the body under high pressures. The total time needed to create one of these "plastinates" is about 1500 hours for a full-bodied exhibit. They are posed in positions that demonstrate natural human activities such as swimming, or riding a bike, culminating in von Hagens' masterpiece, a completely plastinated man riding a horse that is rearing up on its hind legs. While the exhibit seems to provide a deeper understanding of what it means to be an anatomical human, Petra Koppers (2004) notes that this comes at some cost, writing, the "family background, name, exact cause and time of death are subjugated to the structuring process of the scientific gaze, exposing muscles and flesh, not individuality...the density of the flesh itself obscures any structural factors that led to the death of these individuals" (137). After rendering the individuality provided by hair and skin a mere artifice, these ahistorical bodies are depicted in the most common of human endeavors such as working and playing. In an analysis that borrows from the work of Emanuel Levinas, Bernadette Wegenstein (2002) focuses on the skinning of the face as one of the key features that causes the plastinates to move from being actual humans to semblances of humans. Yet one of the primary attractions of the exhibit is the perverse thrill of looking at a real dead person whose body once engaged in the activities that this frozen form illustrates. A literal shift in ontology from human to plastinate becomes a translation from one mode of authenticity to the other—one that is natural and the other that occupies an empty space left by the absence of the natural.

This raises the interesting question of how audiences can enjoy an exhibit that depicts the most bizarre forms of mutilation as educational art. In his extensive analysis of the portrayal of wounding and pain in the spheres of both art and science, James Elkins

(1999) distinguishes between two forms of wounding for the purposes of illustration—those dealing with metamorphosis and those dealing with metaphor or geometrical shifts. When one looks at a flayed cadaver, the ripped muscles and tendons can often produce a strong affective response involving empathy. This is one of the reasons that Vesalius often portrayed his flayed bodies as if they were asleep and thus denied the pain that such injuries would produce (Elkins 132). *Body Worlds* takes this strategy to the next logical step. While the split-man has undergone a severe wounding to illuminate his digestive tract for the onlookers, the geometrical nature of the wound and the subject's oblivious demeanor allow the viewer to see him as an intellectual exercise rather than a mutilated corpse. In the case of *Body Worlds*, this mediating technique of geometric wounding becomes a vehicle for entertainment. Psychological distance can be perceived in both of these exhibits, as the injury is either absent or masked within an aesthetic veneer that makes it more palatable. This form of verisimilitude creates a schism between the aesthetic and the epistemic that ultimately highlights the human subject's presence as a trace or remnant of its embodiment within the technologies that render it visible. Because there is no individual persona to link the constituent parts together into a seamless whole, the fragmentation of the human subject into a constellation of images creates a violent space through which *thanatos* can reemerge as a threat to civilized progress.

Dis(A)ssemblances

In perhaps one of his most flamboyant exhibits, von Hagens plastinates a man who walks triumphantly with his skin held aloft as if in victory. By denuding him of his euphemistic covering, the plastinate celebrates this transformation as a life-enhancing victory. Wegenstein notes that *Body Worlds* is largely synechdotal in nature—that once you remove the face and all identifying characteristics, any part of the body can come to stand for the entire organism (222). Yet as one moves through the exhibits, which usually begin with a set of full cadavers, then disassemble into individual pieces of anatomy, climaxing finally with some of the grander full body exhibits, one is struck as much by the parts as discrete objects as by their ontology as components in the larger system. As the parts are highlighted and centralized to the exclusion of the whole, the nature of human identity with relation to its technological environment comes under careful scrutiny. In an analysis of the composition of the human form in a technological apparatus, Athena Athanasiou (2003) suggests, “to bring into question the technologies through which the biopolitical body is fabricated in late modernity entails bringing into question the technologies through which bodily entanglement among—and disentangled from—the singularities of the various others—including, ultimately, our Other selves—is effected in discourse” (126-127). For both Devlin and von Hagens, this process of disentanglement involves the extraction of constituent components through the gap that each creates between the spheres of scientific rationality and artistic semblance and setting them in conflict with one another in a way that renders the modernist teleology an impossibility.

For Devlin the discord is easily overlooked if one is lulled by the languid, repetitive nature of the photos, but careful inspection reveals that the sources for the anxiety that her work generates may stem from her destabilization of progressive

teleologies more than some latent critique of state-sponsored executions. One recent controversy surrounding the implementation of the death penalty in recent months deals with the role of physicians in conducting executions. One paradox physicians' presence creates in the death chamber is the use of sterilizing fluids to clean the arm of inmates once they have been strapped into the gurney—drawing attention to the contradiction between life-saving and life-taking technologies (LeGraw and Grodin 2002, 381). When contemplating the elaborate sterility of Missouri's lethal injection machine, the similarity between this image and a hospital operating room draws stark contrasts among the various purposes that these apparatuses represent to the humans who inhabit and use them. Similarly, contemplating the photograph of the Indiana electric chair where the curtains are parted just enough to reveal the radiator in the corner of the room, demonstrates the seamless coexistence of technologies that are designed to both enhance physical comfort and efficiently kill. Even the spaces themselves are a study in contradiction through their sheer, pedestrian functionality. Note the fake wood paneling in Idaho that looks similar to a suburban den where one might expect a ping-pong table rather than a gurney. Outside the Arkansas death chamber, the bright red walls lead one to believe that the colors of the state university's athletic team provided the inspiration for this institutional interior. Rather than exceptional spaces, these interiors are often utterly common, resembling any public school or perhaps a waiting room at a post office. Thus the irony in Devlin's title *Omega Suites* becomes clear, that these are spheres where everyday human life practices come into contact with death such that the functionality of these spaces accentuates the violence of this collision.

In contrast von Hagens' background as a physician leads to an almost naïve faith in the power of functionality to capture the essence of human life. In an exhaustive treatise on the relationship between originals and replications in visual culture Hillel Schwartz (1996) suggests that we live in a world where authenticity is defined through simulation. He writes, "copying is assimilation, reenactment is appropriation, appropriation is creation" (246). The overt rationale for the cadavers' striking poses comes from von Hagens, who suggests that activities such as basketball and cycling make the exhibit more user-friendly by providing the audience with a familiar context through which to understand the anatomy lesson. Yet these aesthetic decisions also have ramifications for how the bodies are being disassembled. Not only are the bodies being dissected, but these activities become an extension of this process. During the previous decade, controversy surrounded the creation of the *Visible Human* project where a death row inmate allowed his body to be frozen, cross-sectioned at the micron level, then scanned into a database for medical research and pedagogy. One of the primary justifications for the use of a prisoner was the idea that by making himself productive, his death served a higher, functional purpose (Waldby 2000). In his analysis of *Body Worlds*, Van Dijck (2001) suggests that the plastinate "is neither natural or artificial, but the result of biochemical and mechanical engineering" and that these technologies "have given scientists the ability to modify life and sculpt bodies into organic forms that we once thought of as artistic ideals—models or representations" (124). What von Hagens presents is not life itself, but a vague collection of semblances that mimic the ideal human existence where people interact in perfect functional harmony with their environments. In this world mechanical capacity attempts to mimic harmony.

By piercing this boundary between the natural and the artificial then deconstructing the vehicles used to achieve equilibrium, the exhibits themselves become spectacles that draw attention to the fusion between semblance and action. For Jean Baudrillard (1993), the French Revolution places an interesting twist on this observation, dividing the machine mode into two differing functionalities that involve the competing realms of art and technology. He writes, “the automaton plays the man of the court, the socialite, it takes part in the social and theatrical drama of pre-Revolutionary France. As for the robot, as its name implies, it works; end of the theatre, beginning of human mechanics” (53). In von Hagens’ walking man, we see the layers of muscles pulled back to expose the internal dynamics involved in this most human of activities, reducing these human actions to the dynamic agencies that are used to achieve them. This strategy is equally applicable to the chess player whose back and skull have been removed to reveal the central nervous system—the mechanical system used to achieve victory in games that involve cerebral conditioning. Here the mind/body split so central to the Enlightenment project is violently fused as the flayed body becomes a vehicle for equating mechanical and cultural activity. Rather than the end to the theatre suggested by Baudrillard, the idealized vision of life presented by von Hagens becomes a theatre of the reflexive. During the early stages of experimentation with electricity, doctors would often perform shows where they would demonstrate muscular contraction by using the human body as a conduit for moderate electrical charges (Elsenaar 2002). Just as these spasmodic bodies demonstrated the reflexive nature of human convulsion, the spectacle of *Body Worlds* suggests that the cultural enterprise is itself a reflexive, disconnected movement that inhabits the space provided by mechanical agencies.

By reducing a body or artificial environment to its constituent parts they become studies in semblance. While von Hagens unwittingly mechanizes human social activity by eliding culture and biomechanics, Devlin uses her photographs to examine the hidden recesses of the prison in order to reveal that death is a process of reenactment. In his study of the European penal system, Foucault (1977) notes, “the prison must be an exhaustive disciplinary apparatus” that assumes complete authority in maintaining the prisoners’ functionality. “Its action on the individual must be uninterrupted: an unceasing discipline” (235-236). When Devlin takes the viewers into the witness areas, these specialized spaces indicate that this is a spectacle that has taken place numerous times—a performance that has already been defined as a recurring sequel. Once the notion of institutional discipline has been linked to the reenactment of death as a technological habit, this retreat into semblance equates progress to the routine repetitions dictated by institutional space. These spectacles are not marked by their originality, but by their repetitive reenactment. In an essay describing the contours of necropolitics, Achille Mbembe (2003) writes, “the commitment to the abolition of commodity production and the dream of direct and unmediated access to the real make these processes—the fulfillment of the so-called logic of history and the fabrication of humankind—almost necessarily violent processes” (20). *The Omega Suites* demonstrates that violent actions directed against the human body are not the result of sublimated instincts, but are literally structured into the objects that comprise the technological fabric where contradictions abound.

The idea that science can be disassembled into a collection of semblances is also demonstrated by von Hagens, who finds delight in imitating works of art such as Rodin's *Thinking Man*, complete with skull cap removed to highlight the brain. Early on in the *Body Worlds* project, von Hagens' nationality and his fascination with mutilating and manipulating the human body according to aesthetic clichés led to inevitable comparisons of his work to the death fetishes of the Nazis (Van Dijck, 2001, 102). Certainly these concerns may have been overstated, but the dissonance of Rodin's original and von Hagens' flayed cadaver render the concept of contemplative unity a disjointed act—that human intelligence and creativity emerge from the violent contrast between the aesthetic and the real—that scientific progress is a product of this divestment of self. While von Hagens' attempts to mask this conceptual violence with precision flaying and geometric cross-sectioning, Devlin draws attention to the brutality inherent in extracting an authentic origin from this technological assemblage. In death houses such as those in Alabama and Texas, the sterility can barely conceal the chipped paint and falling plaster. This disregard for precision is reminiscent of Erol Morris' Fredrich Leuchter, the engineer who designed a great deal of the death equipment throughout the United States and was later embroiled in a Holocaust denial scandal. Here Leuchter speaks of the profound nostalgia that many states have for their electric chairs, even requiring that the original parts from turn of the century apparatuses be used in the safety updates. These repetitions reveal semblances that leave only traces of the original—a piece of wood here, some sinew there. Within these spaces questions remain unanswered and *thanatos* continues to lurk, moving from the cave to the matrix of modern society. As the activities that have come to define modern scientific progress are subjected to aesthetic disassembly, the promises of a rational civilization defined by equilibrium fall victim to the byproducts society produces by its own internal violence turned spectacle.

Conclusion

While Freud viewed violence as a matter of instinct, the clash and convergence of art and science shows that the question may be substantially more complicated. Rather than the civilizing impulses of modernism being able to repress the instincts of *thanatos*, Devlin and von Hagens provide a forum for its ultimate expression by literally weaving it into the fabric of everyday life. In both *The Omega Suites* and *Body Worlds*, death is not animated through its personhood, but through the ability of formal apparatuses to manipulate and mold it to meet the functional needs of the larger culture. By examining how human traces are negotiated through the dialectic between life and death, then how the breaches between science and art serve to deconstruct these human activities into a collection of semblances, the destruction of the human body becomes a routine enterprise. Much as the human subject has been decentralized in posthuman experience, death finds multiple conduits and forms of expression through the semblances that challenge the boundary between science and art. Other literary and artistic forms have attempted to negotiate this rupture by creating new genres. Colin Milburn (2005) describes the promise of nanosplatter, this disintegrating body as “not a logocentric solution to a panic inducing absence, but rather an effort to grow beyond the very logocentrism that would make life itself a unity of full presence and death the only

alternative” (299). Perhaps such attempts to channel rather than to actively repress *thanatos* can prove fruitful for managing the violent ruptures produced at key junctures in the postmodern culture. While this remains to be seen, the repression of *thanatos* that drives the modernist progress narrative continues to mask death within the simulations of institutional apparatus—an obfuscation that will continue to leave spaces wherein art and science produce startling revelations for a hungry mass-witness that revels in its own deconstruction.

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