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Who Thinks the Future?
a Peer Sessions Project curated by Tom Trevatt
2014

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with:

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The prevailing conditions of contemporary financialised neo-liberalism have limited our collective navigation towards a future. What was once the assumed function of the avant-garde modernist artist has been lost, forgotten or occluded in the ferment of recent theorisation. This important task of thinking a future needs new forms to orient away from recent practical and theoretical cul-de-sacs. Conceived as an exhibition examining these logics of orientation, *Who Thinks the Future?* utilises the methodological tool of synthetic thinking, as developed by Peer Sessions, to combine multiple ideas into complex wholes. Produced from a series of workshops, discussions and group readings, this exhibition proposes a discursive, collective practice that maintains complexity rather than flattening it in consensus, as a tool to produce common futures that can imagine forward again. This practice could be adopted to connect and represent positions across a spectrum, enabling an ecology of ideas to be engendered and enacted, and to rethink the role of the artist in social transformation.

Peer Sessions is a non-profit crit group founded in 2009 by artists Kate Pickering and Charlotte Warne Thomas, as an educational support network for practicing arts professionals.

Peer Sessions holds monthly meetings, where two artists present their recent work to gain useful feedback from peers. Sessions are moderated by Kate Pickering and Charlotte Warne Thomas, and provide a forum for reflection and dialogue, which is focused on viewers' response to the artworks. The resulting discussions are lively, thought-provoking and beneficial to both artists and participants. Peer Sessions is always free for artists and participants to attend.

Over five years, Peer Sessions has grown to become a valued regular space for post-grad level art education, peer mentoring and research. Peer Sessions has gradually expanded its remit to include residencies, exhibitions and educational workshops, bringing its unique approach of feedback-led discussion to a wider audience.

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How is the Future Thought?

Tom Trevatt

Broadly speaking, it is possible to distinguish two apparent trends relating to the figure of the artist as inherited from modernism; the avant-gardist thinker of futurity and the individual hero. While the avant-gardist has fallen out of favour, the individualism of the artist figure has been, across many spectrums and in many ways, maintained. Ratified by the political and economic nexus of neoliberalism,¹ the subjectivity created by and privileged by art, prioritises, on the one hand, an individualism and on the other a cleavage from the universal (the capacity for art to produce axiomatic claims across the broad spectrum of the episteme). If art necessitates and is given meaning by a personal response, is created under the aegis of an authorial figure and produces forms of subjectivity that prioritise multiple individuals occluded from interpersonal connection, art is precisely the form most favoured by the current prevailing conditions. As such, it is important to ask whether the very structure of art itself will preclude a thinking of the future aligned with the common task of creating a better world.²

For this to occur we need to attend to both the way art is made and the way it is viewed. The way art is made can become a model for action, indexing a set of tools, it is a processural prototype that articulates a set of normative methods for the structuring of society. In the modernist model above, what is narrativised is the lone artist, separated from society, creating works of individual genius. These works are then presented as eventual sites for the re-ordering of thought through subjectivation. As we are aware, recent art practices have included all sorts of communal or collective activities, many of which draw people and ideas together in real or fictional groups. These collaborations articulate commonality and, as is often the case, consensus – the flattening of disagreement into a singular outcome, which operates at the level of the one off artwork as event. If every occasion of art operates at a symbolic level, that is it tells us something about the world or the way it should be, then these practices seem to legislate for the continued operative mode of consensual governance. That is, the occlusion of particularity in favour of the hegemonic manufacturing of consent. This can be seen as a foreclosure of politics in the name of pre-determined agreement. While many collective practices struggle with these very issues, I am interested in ways to make evident the complexity of multiple competing positions in the production of exhibitions.

¹ In a telling passage in *Capitalism and Freedom*, Milton Friedman (economist and chief intellectual progenitor of the neoliberal ideology), declares the necessity to separate economic policy from ethics - "a major aim of the liberal is to leave the ethical problem for the individual to wrestle with" (18 Friedman). In no small part thinkers such as Friedman and FA Hayek were responsible for giving birth to the ideological structure of neoliberalism, and their concurrent economic policies. Individual freedom was considered the zenith of neoliberalism, as such, the figure of the artist represents precisely this form of agency.

² The term common task has recently been given new life by design strategist Benedict Singleton in his essay "Maximum Jailbreak", where he revitalises Nikolai Federov's work. For both essays see *#ACCELERATE: The Accelerationist Reader*, eds. Mackay and Arvanessian, Urbanomic//Merve Verlag

Precisely, because the regime of contemporary art prioritises the local occurrence of subjective transformation through the paradigm of the individual encounter, because it personalises experience and understanding, shorn from a relation to the generic, it is unable to adequately produce universalisms in complex ways. Aesthetic experience, then, is precisely the production of individualised subjectivity related to the universal only through a category of pre-determined openness - "art can be anything", "art means what you want it to mean". This myopic¹ relation to the universal claim that contemporary art can be anything or mean anything² is twinned with the local function of subjective transformation, as such there is no dialectic between the two poles. Only, as Boris Groys declares in a telling example of this type of myopia, universal aesthetic rights.³ Groys understands images to be interchangeable tokens of the abstraction of equality, as such, they index the infinite succession of images as they are divorced from their particularity. One image could just be any other.⁴ This situation for art precludes it from producing universal axioms; as such, an occasion of art, or exhibition, is tragically unable to engage in the hegemonic struggle for power. If we are to imagine a new model for art or exhibitionary practice it needs to be one that thinks beyond this tragic localism. The claim of this essay is that the site for this operation beyond the local is found within the curatorial. Precisely the name given for the operation of the vertical project of representation that art requires to ratify and synthesise its claims is "the curatorial". Let us examine how.

If we wish to not just think the future, but to navigate beyond the prevailing conditions, we must ask in what orientation we want to travel. To do this we need to conceive both the abstract and concrete simultaneously. If contemporary art not only reflects but ratifies the conditions of current neoliberal capitalism, then to think a post-capitalist society would be to concurrently imagine a post-capitalist art. In fact, there is a necessity to do this, art is contingent on societal forms and as such requires a contextual shift to post-capitalism before it can make the transition itself. Art might historically have been one of the conceptual motors behind imagining alternative futures, offering societal transcendence, creating axiomatic claims in symbolic or conceptual registers, but tragically this function has been lost or, more precisely, dissolved by art's foreclosure of its own relation to the universal. If art cannot make claims to universalism, it is destined to maintain only its local occasions of utterance, forever going round in circles. If, however, a post-capitalist future can be constructed (and I think it can be), it may be necessary to call on art for assistance. And for this art needs to change.⁵

In their "#ACCELERATE: A Manifesto for Accelerationist Politics", and *Inventing the Future* (forthcoming 2015) Nick Srnicek and Alex Williams outline the project of accelerationism as a universal emancipation, the production of a counter hegemony capable of thinking the global abstractions inherent to financialised capitalism, but also to direct the left away from relying on what they call "folk political" formations that are content with having short term local effects.

¹ Robin Mackay and Reza Negarestani name the trivial relation to the universal a "myopia", it is in this sense that I utilise this term. See Mackay and Negarestani "A Barker Topos"

² Suhail Malik refers to this as art without criteria, see, for example Malik *On the Necessity of Art's Exit from Contemporary Art* (forthcoming Urbanomic)

³ Groys, "Equal Aesthetic Rights" in *Art Power* MIT Press 2008

⁴ See Trevatt "Structural Violence in Boris Groys' Equal Aesthetic Rights"

⁵ It is worth noting here that Suhail Malik's talk "On the Necessity of Art's Exit from Contemporary Art" deals with this same necessity, and is very much worth engaging with.

For them, there is a necessity to resist the allure of the proven failure of local, or direct action protest, small scale community organisation and the fetishisation of horizontality when dealing with large scale, abstract issues. None of these tactics are deemed ultimately adequate when faced with current conditions. This idea of folk politics described by Srnicek and Williams can be mapped almost directly on to art or exhibitionary forms, whereby art comes to operate as a local phenomenon unable to think the transit to the global in anything but flawed ways. In her essay "Institutions as Sites for Agonistic Intervention" Chantal Mouffe is less pessimistic about art's capacity to engage in politics.¹ Following Mouffe we can accept that the world is constructible through politics, a power play known as the hegemonic operation, and that what we take as natural, neoliberalism for example, is merely a contingent sedimentation of those politics. However, her claim for art is limited to "the reproduction of the common sense that secures a given hegemony or to its challenging".² Art thus continues to operate as a symbolic prop for politics proper, a conceptual or affective mode of producing subjectivity that, I suggest, may or may not sediment into a counter-hegemony. It is this chance element that is left unaccounted for in Mouffe's theory here (although, as we shall see later, her theory of the institution could be seen as a partial response to this criticism), art is left unchanged; a special agent, only contingently capable of producing subjective transformation. For me, this still is not adequate to the task before us, art cannot only be a producer of subjectivity without concern for its externalities,³ a cheerleader for politics, the cultural wing to a movement, nor lend an aesthetic edge to activism (Mouffe's "artivism"), but must be considered a player on the stage of politics proper. This can only happen, I suggest, through constructive instituting.

Peer Sessions has been in operation for just over five years. In this time it has brought together groups of artists, curators, thinkers to discuss either finished artworks/exhibitions or works in progress made by its many contributors. It performs a vital service to postgraduates in a time when collective engagement and discussion are much needed, but unfortunately lacking (much of postgraduate life in art is marked by a competitive spirit of individualism, structured, it seems, by the unregulated market of the artworld and its attendant inequalities).⁴ Peer Sessions performs a key function that can be utilised in the production of occasions of art or exhibitions; it synthesises multiple ideas into complex and non-consensual wholes. It is this process of synthesis that I am interested in here. If we are to build models for the common subject of the future, they must follow truly synthetic trajectories. The synthetic rejects both harmony and purity, embracing instead complexity, contingency and continuity. Following Reza Negarestani's work on CS Peirce, we can understand the synthetic as an interweaving of the particular and the universal in non-trivial ways, articulating both particular, discontinuous, local contexts and global, abstract, universal themes.⁵ Synthetic thought, thus, is capable of ratifying and overlaying multiple claims as a stepwise procedure towards the universal. This stepwise action is taken to be the constructive process of revising and amending the

1 Mouffe "Institutions as Sites of Agonistic Intervention", in *Institutional Attitudes: Instituting Art in a Flat World* Pascal Gielen (ed.), Antennae, Valiz, Amsterdam 2013

2 67 *ibid.*

3 As we know from economics, externalities are the cost of benefit to the party that did not chose that cost or benefit, see, for example, "The Problem of Externality", Carl J. Dahlman and "Externality", James M. Buchanan and Wm. Craig Stubblebine, it is my claim that most theories of aesthetic experience do not think their externalities, most of my work is an attempt to understand and account for this missing aspect of art theory

4 See Malik and Phillips "Tainted Love: Art's Ethos and Capitalization"

5 Negarestani, "Where is the Concept?"

description of, in Negarestani's work, the human.¹ It is only through synthetic and stepwise processes that structural transformation can occur, and through the instituting of change through the revision of political forms. If art can have some part of this, for me, it is not only in the way it locally produces subjectivity, or propagandises for politics, but through the frame of inventive strategy it can offer. That is, exhibitionary practice – the curatorial – produces sites within which invention and construction is possible, where the synthesis of multiple projects or interventions can occur and engagement in a hegemonic procedure can operate non-trivially. Mouffe recognises this need to strengthen and conjoin institutions, the role that the institutional can play in constructing the future, yet it is foregrounded in a logic of agonism, thus maintaining art's critical agenda rather than upholding its constructive capacities. Within this logic, as we discussed above, art remains unchanged, continuing to perform a critical function in society; if we are to build the future from here, we need to think abstractly and concretely, globally and locally, axiomatically and performatively through an institutional mode rather than a critical mode. Critique plays a part, but only as a way of clearing the ground for construction. It is in this way that Peer Sessions can operate as a model for conceiving of the futural figure within modernism, saving and reinscribing it into contemporary practice while jettisoning the model of the fetishised individual.

¹ See Negarestani "The Labor of the Inhuman" in *#ACCELERATE: The Accelerationist Reader*

Species of Futurity in Business, Law and Finance

Emily Rosamond

I want to lay out a bit of scaffolding for this exhibition. No, that's not quite right: it's more like a parallel track, a spate of scenarios that do a bit of contact improv with the show: vignettes that describe a few of the ways in which management practices in business, law and finance think the future. That said, the phrase "think the future", here, might be an understatement. Over the past several decades, the ever-expanding practices of data analysis have, in the names of efficiency and control, produced, enacted and actively experimented with fundamental problems concerning the representation of futurity on general populations of citizen/consumers. Under what conditions can a depiction of the future hold claim to truth, to accuracy? In what senses might a claim about the future – say, a prediction – alter the very future to which it speaks, by performing and producing certain kinds of potential while preventing others from emerging? In what ways might an individual be justly held accountable to a representation of the future used in, say, the penal system? In what Bernard Harcourt calls our "actuarial age", statistical analyses of risk permeate ever more areas of life; and individuals often bear the weight of these predictions. For representations of citizenship (be it merely consumer citizenship conceptualized as "voting" through spending, or a broader, classical definition including rights and responsibilities with respect to law, nation and the commons) increasingly bear the marks of data analytics' surgeries on the future: its pre-emptions and prunings, its nudges and steerings.

Pain Points in the Datascape

As Karl Palmås (2011) has shown, businesses increasingly base their success on their ability to foresee customers' intentions. Wal-Mart, the world's largest corporation, is able to price out competitors in part due to its ability to effectively use analytics to forecast future sales and stock stores accordingly. Their analytics take into account even the effects of weather patterns on customer spending; they might, for instance, rush order Kellogg's Strawberry Pop-Tarts® right before a hurricane, since statistics show that customers stock up on ready-to-eat food right before a storm.

Similarly, the American casino chain Harrah's tracks each of their customers' gambling habits through loyalty cards. From the data they amass, they calculate a "pain point" for each customer: "the level of gambling losses that will send the visitor home, and possibly make them not come back for a while" (Palmås 2011, p. 348). Pain points might be vastly different from person to person; the point is to know precisely how much money might successfully be extracted from each individual. When gamblers go over their pain points, "luck ambassadors" on the casino floor respond in real time, sympathizing with the gamblers' losses and offering to take them out to dinner on the house. In this way, Harrah's micromanages consumer emotion (p. 348) to ensure maximum profitability; their doing so hinges on a truth statement about

the consumer that governs and predicts their future responses. As Palmås points out, such analytical practices increase power differences between large and small corporations, since the larger ones are far more likely to reap the rewards of sophisticated analytics. They also increase power differences between corporations and consumers. By calculating pain points, companies can claim, quite convincingly, to know something about their customers that the customers do not know themselves. In a political climate in which governments increasingly view tax revenues from casinos as substitutes for general tax hikes, slot machine interfaces – which are carefully engineered to be addictive (Schüll 2012) – perform an important supplemental role in state funding that preys upon, and cultivates, individuals' compulsive need to "gap out" and lose awareness of their everyday problems. While there are many forms of future-oriented calculation – such as, say, predicting climate impacts on ecosystems – that could be used in service of the commons, pain points and other corporate forms of calculation prey upon consumers, cultivating tactical advantages over them.

Towards a Political Economy of Propensity

When the concept of consumer credit emerged in the late nineteenth century as a structuring economic force, techniques used to deem creditworthiness were explicitly "character-driven". Lenders would look into potential borrowers' eyes, scrutinize their dress, their manner, and their wives' degree of extravagance for signs of dependability (McClanahan 2014 p. 34). In the 1970s, quantitative models of credit scoring replaced these earlier forms of assessment, in part due to accusations that earlier forms of discerning creditworthiness perpetuated racist, classist, ageist and sexist lending practices. Credit companies began to algorithmically analyze customers' spending habits and assign credit scores. These scores were meant to be perfectly "factual", unbiased and objective; yet, as McClanahan argues, seemingly "objective" scoring methods would often merely launder various forms of institutionalized racism and ageism. (As it turns out, people of colour and the elderly routinely receive lower credit ratings in the US than their similarly qualified white/non-elderly counterparts.) Further, credit card companies would base their ratings, in part, on statistical correlations between certain kinds of spending (for instance, on marriage counseling, night clubs and massage parlours) and a decreased likelihood of paying back loans (McClanahan 2014, p. 39). New customers' credit ratings would go down if they spent money on items and services similar to those correlated with other customers' tendency not to pay. What justifies the use of normative statistical measures to govern individuals' access to credit, and to creditworthiness? As lending practices continue to shift – new mortgage lending laws in the UK, for instance, necessitate a grueling hours-long personal interview in addition to numerical scoring, thus blending qualitative and quantitative techniques for granting access to credit (Dunkley 2014) – the question must be raised: is the use of statistical correlation to govern individuals' access to credit any less biased than discerning their "character"?

Whatever the answer to this question might be, such correlative practices have only gained footing since the 1970s, as new research bolsters them with a "truth value". Increasingly, "big data" places less emphasis on free will, autonomy, personal decision-making and self-expression as it models new ways to link what people actually do with what they are likely to become. As MIT scientist Alex Pentland enthusiastically puts it,

Who you actually are is determined by where you spend time, and which things you buy. Big data is increasingly about real behaviour, and by analyzing this sort of data, scientists can tell an enormous amount about you. They can tell whether you are the sort of person who will pay back loans. They can tell you if you're likely to get diabetes...They can do this because

the sort of person you are is largely determined by your social context, so if I can see some of your behaviours, I can infer the rest, just by comparing you to the people in your crowd. (Naughton 2014)

More and more predictive research emphasizes the importance of “imitative rays” of behaviour (Tarde 2007, Thrift 2008) coursing through social networks over self-determination. This statistically aggregated representation of futurity, which comes to inform selfhood and regulate individuals’ actual horizons of fiscal, personal and legal possibility, has come to be viewed as both justifiable to many researchers because of the profound impact of context on an individual, and highly profitable as an area of research for corporations and financial institutions – so much so that Nigel Thrift (2008) argues that we are witnessing the emergence of a new “political economy of propensity”, the outlines of which have yet to be fully written. Within this new political economy, it is difficult, if not impossible, to separate the value of a truth statement about the importance of context in determining, say, an individual’s future from the machinations of power that would use such a truth statement as a form of control. As Deleuze famously argued (1992), the emerging structure of power which replaces Foucault’s disciplinary society is the society of control, which functions not through institutional boundaries and strict behavioural prohibitions, but by computers tracking everything in the background, making “dividual” persons – who are controlled by debt – subject to flows of trans-personal information. Given the NSA leaks of 2013, Deleuze’s essay seems ever more prescient.

The Probabilistic, the Possibilistic and the Pre-emptive

As Evgeny Morozov points out, technology already exists which can track vast amounts of personal data in order to predict, for instance, the likelihood of an individual committing a crime at a particular time. Given the rapid rate of technological change, it is entirely conceivable that in the near future, police forces will use algorithms gleaned from personal data to try to pre-empt breaches of the law (for instance, by sending more police to potential problem areas). Such logics have a long prehistory; as Bernard Harcourt demonstrates, statistical analyses have modeled the future in criminal law ever since 1935, when the Illinois State Penitentiary hired its first-ever actuary to use the “Burgess Method” for determining the likelihood of an individual’s success or failure in parole based on group recidivism rates. Fast-forward several decades, and actuarial logic – the employment of statistical, rather than clinical, methods to determine risks of criminal behaviour or to administer justice – completely “permeates the field of criminal law and its enforcement” (Harcourt 2007, p. 2). For some, the use of actuarial logic to, say, more “smartly” target tax audits or routine vehicle checks is simply a necessary efficiency in a landscape of limited police and legal resources. For Harcourt, on the other hand, actuarial logic distorts the very concept of justice itself. It also produces biases in the carceral population, and can even increase crime in certain instances, as when, for instance, white drivers in the US accurately perceive that they are not likely to be targeted in routine checks.

While the Burgess Method was based on statistical probabilities, such predictive methods fall short in certain contexts. Counter-terrorist tactics and risk assessment for nuclear power plants require the analysis of extremely improbable events that – if they occur at all – are certainly not likely to be repeated. For such analyses, possibilistic thought becomes a more valuable tool than probabilistic thought, which focuses on that which is most likely. Possibilistic thought (Clarke 2008) focuses on analyzing events that fall outside of probability’s range of focus, and is sometimes blended with probabilistic modeling – for instance, in financial

institutions' Value at Risk calculations for the derivative market – in an attempt to give a fuller picture of the blend of continuity and contingency that characterizes a cultural conception of the future. As John Hogan Morris describes them, calculations such as Value at Risk act as “a way of governing future instability in the present” (2014).

Yet the analysis of the extremely improbable is also implicated in a broader set of tactical shifts. As Brian Massumi describes it in his work on U.S. military tactics (2007), there has been a shift from preventative to pre-emptive logic since the cold war. Whereas, say, a cold war nuclear arms race aims to prevent future attacks by matching the enemy's weapons arsenal in order to prevent attack, pre-emptive logic does away with such balancing acts. Pre-emption, for Massumi, is performative in character; in an era of uncertain enemies and improbable, ever-shifting forms of attack, enemies must first be smoked out of their holes, actively created through acts of aggression which will invite retaliation along the lines that the U.S. can then say their enemies always already would have done. The future, as it were, moves into the present: potential enemies are actualized, actively created in the present, by performative acts and statements that will be retroactively “proven true” through combat. While Massumi focuses on the military here, it is worth asking how pre-emptive logic makes its way into all areas of life through uncertainty, possibilistic logic, and the drive to render the future known. What is the difference, for instance, between preventative and pre-emptive measures in medicine? In education? In his book on what he calls “technological solutionism” (Silicon Valley's “there's an app for that” attitude to seemingly all social problems) Evgeny Morozov (2013) points to some interesting potential answers. App-based, individualistic solutions to everything from nutrition to medicine, exercise and environmentalism tend to encourage people to micromanage their own behaviour, but pre-empt any discussions on a broader, systemic level (for instance, holding the food industry accountable for its roles in destroying public health). What is pre-empted, it seems to me, is an address to the commons, in favour of either an atomized individuality, or an active production of antagonisms.

Duration and the Free

I would like to conclude (however provisionally) by looking backwards, pinpointing a particularly salient representation of futurity from the late nineteenth century.

There is a stunning passage at the end of Henri Bergson's *Time and Free Will* (1889). As Bergson has meticulously argued throughout the book, duration – the essence of time as multilayered, teeming with minute qualitative shifts and heterogeneous, rhythmic flows – is completely antithetical to measurement. To count a clock's pendulum swings and conclude that, say, ten seconds had passed would be to abstract time, to falsely quantify what can only be qualitative: the minute, rhythmic shifts in the continuous experience of the pendulum's swing (2005, p. 104). Writing in an era of increasing scientificity, in an era which witnessed the early signs of what is now a wholesale management and regulation of life and futurity by calculation, Bergson's argument for the illusory nature of quantification had high stakes. For in duration, he concludes, we are free. If “our action was pronounced by us to be free, it is because the relation of this action to the state from which it issued could not be expressed by a law, this psychic state being unique of its kind and unable ever to occur again” (p. 239).

For Bergson, the free, unique and singular decision (which is not a human property per se, but a property of duration) emerges from all that is heterogeneous and singular in experience. The realm of the measurable – which describes a regular, predictable world – is a mere abstraction. Bergson's argument is by no means airtight. As Mary Ann Doane argues,

even this identification of freedom with the contingency of duration is ideological; given the increasingly routinized, mechanized conceptions of time that apparatuses such as cinema and factory work made possible, "chance and the contingent are given the crucial ideological role of representing an outside, of suggesting that time is still allied with the free and indeterminable" (Doane 2002, p. 230). More recently, Ray Brassier (2011) has argued that Bergson, however sophisticated his thought may be, falls prey to the "myth of the given" – the belief that phenomenal experience can reveal an ontological real. Whether or not this criticism really speaks to the heart of Bergson's argumentation, or whether or not Bergson's intense desire to align free will with qualitative heterogeneity is ultimately more ideological than philosophical, is not for me to say. That said, if we view his passage as an important moment in the conceptual pre-history of an era of hyper-quantification, Bergson's point seems all the more pressing. Can qualitative heterogeneity escape the machinations of control-society quantification? Can the kind of futurity for which Bergson advocates – an uncoded futurity understood as potential, not possibility – stand alone amidst the giants of probability, possibility and pre-emption? How might both qualitative and quantified representations of the future play into control society tactics? With what form of futurity do artists wish to align themselves today?

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