

The Speculation of Conceptual Art

—*The "Dematerialization of Art" Phenomenon and the "End of Art"*
in the 1960s

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ABSTRACT

[Background] In the 1960s of Europe and America, the styles of art were diverse and showed a strong "decentralization" trend, among which the "dematerialization of art" was particularly important.

[Objective] This paper aims to deeply analyze the philosophical implications of conceptual art in the contemporary era.

[Method] Taking the phenomenon of "dematerialization of art" as the starting point and combining it with Danto's theoretical perspective, this paper explores the art philosophical issues triggered by conceptual art and engages in speculation on Danto's assertions and pluralism.

[Results] The study finds that conceptual art emphasizes the core value of a work shifting from the sensory level to the intellectual level, posing philosophical questions about the nature of art, weakening the framework structure assigned to art itself, and striving to make art more diversified.

[Conclusion] Conceptual art plays a role in promoting artistic innovation within the context of art. This issue will continue to spark debates in the present and even the future.

Keywords: Dematerialization of Art; End of Art; Lucy Lippard; Arthur Danto

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1 Introduction

In the history of art, almost every initiation of an art movement has triggered criticism and debates from within and outside the art world. However, few art movements have generated such intense and sustained controversy as conceptual art (conceptual art). To this day, people still have a very divided understanding and attitude towards it. While some people find the diverse works of conceptual art refreshing, this type of art still cannot be widely accepted. Both art professionals and the general audience include some who think that they are merely creating surprises or being deliberately obscure, lacking real artistic value. This divergence largely stems from the characteristics of conceptual art itself. One of its meanings is precisely to provoke thought and debate through the work, to question the existing assumptions about art in a radical way. This includes not only the concept of artworks but also the roles of artists and audiences, as well as the functions of art critics. Thus, researching conceptual art is challenging. On the one hand, it is difficult to define the boundaries of "conceptual art." Since this type of art emphasizes non-visual concepts rather than visible forms, it cannot be defined by standardized visual experience and material media. At the same time, the topics involved in concepts are almost infinite, and it is almost impossible to capture any specific common points. On the other hand, conceptual art questions the boundaries of art and poses philosophical questions about the nature of art, forcing us to rethink the concepts of "art" and "artworks." That is, what makes people consider an object as an artwork? If everything can become art, then how can we ensure that the concept of art is not dissolved? In what sense is the concept valid?

In a general sense, conceptual art is an art movement that emerged in the mid-1960s and waned in the mid-1970s. This movement was centered in Europe and the United States but was actually an international phenomenon. Its representative artists include Joseph Kosuth, Robert Morris, Sol LeWitt, and Bruce Nauman. In 1968, art critic and curator Lucy Lippard, together with John Chandler, published "The Dematerialization of Art," one of the first texts to define conceptual art. Lippard believed that the art of the time was showing a trend of "dematerialization," which was likely to continue to prevail and eventually replace material works. This statement immediately sparked a lot of controversy because even though artists abandoned painting and sculpture, the paper, photograph, and ready-made objects used in the works were still material. Five years later, Lippard compiled "Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966 — 1972." In the book, she revised the concept of "dematerialization of art" and used it as the core concept to define conceptual art, that is, the artistic core of the work is not in the material medium but in the intellectual level. Conceptual art is the art of ideas replacing sensory and aesthetic art.

2 The Meaning of "Dematerialization of Art"

From the perspective of the art creation process, "dematerialization of art" refers to the negation of the material result of art creation, that is, the terminal of the creation process. Artists place the creation process and action at the forefront as the core value of art and put the material entity in a secondary position. The value of an artwork lies in the creative process, not in the material entity of the artwork.

This shift in understanding has gone through a developmental process and became one of the common creative methods for conceptual artists in the 1960s. In traditional visual art, whether it is two-dimensional painting or three-dimensional sculpture, an artwork is equivalent to an art material entity. The artist's creation involves applying different techniques to different media to reproduce or express specific content through different forms. The audience then gains a sensory experience through the visible and tangible material entity. However, in other types of art, such as music, performance, and language art, the creation and reception of art are obviously not on the material level. An artwork (artwork) cannot be equated with an art entity (art object).

After World War II, artists represented by Jackson Pollock assigned significance to the process of painting, making the artwork not entirely equivalent to the art entity. Although what Pollock created was still a material painting and what the audience appreciated was still the form composed of pigments on the canvas, the artist did not aim primarily to create a clear content or express a specific emotion. Many times, Pollock would directly splash paint onto the canvas, fully unleashing the unconscious automaticity of the body and using chance mechanisms to form the work. In 1952, art critic Harold Rosenberg, in his publication "(Zhu,2018)The America Action painters," argued that the "action" in the painting process of abstract expressionist painters like Pollock was more important than the finished work. "The canvas began to present itself as an arena for action to one American painter after another. What was going on in the picture was no longer a picture but an event." The core of creation lies in the process, and the final material form is merely the carrier of the action and event.(Rosenberg, 2021)

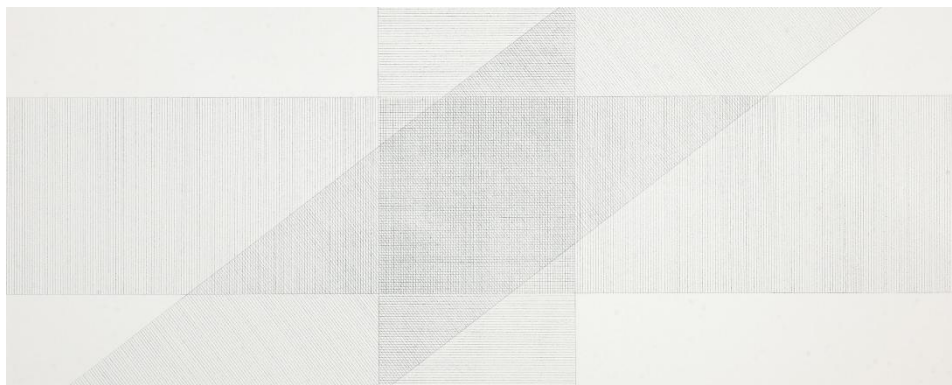


Fig 1: 1969 Black pencil Bands of lines 12 inches (30 cm) wide, in three directions (vertical, horizontal, diagonal right) intersecting.Sol

LeWitt

Image source:Internet

Not only in painting, but also in performance art, happenings, and process art that emerged after World War II, the logic of action and creative process being greater than material form was followed. As Rosenberg interpreted Pollock's painting, compared to creating a material artwork, they cared more about action, event, and process. Sol LeWitt's wall drawing series, which he began creating in 1968, is considered a classic conceptual art piece, although it is a painting. The reason is that the artist created a set of drawing rules. He pre-established the rules and instructions for the painting, and the work was completed by draftsmen. For example, "Draw ten thousand randomly arranged straight lines within a range of 120 inches (304 centimeters), with the drawer painting a thousand lines per day for ten days." "Wall Drawing 16" (Fig 1) is a mural drawn with black pencil. LeWitt stipulated that the picture consists of three bands of lines, each 12 inches (30 centimeters) wide, arranged horizontally, vertically, and diagonally. The work was erased after the exhibition and redrawn according to the painting rules when exhibited again. For traditional art, the artist usually plays the role of a performer, the completer of the final presentation of the work. However, for conceptual artists, creation is the process of composing music, and it does not matter who realizes the work.

Sol LeWitt's understanding of conceptual art is that "the idea becomes a machine for making art." This is also another meaning of "dematerialization of art"—taking concepts and ideas as the core of creation, thereby guiding the creative process and action. At the beginning of "The Dematerialization of Art," Lippard wrote, "In the 1960s, the art creation that had highlighted anti-intellectual, emotional/intuitive processes over the past 20

years began to give way to an extreme conceptual art (ultra-conceptual art) that almost exclusively emphasized the thinking process. As artworks were designed in the studio but made elsewhere by professional craftsmen, and as artworks became pure products, many artists were losing interest in the physical process of art-making. The studio was becoming a research place once again."Later, she cited the stages of art evolution proposed by American minor cubist Joseph Schillinger, believing that art at the time was in the transition from the fourth to the fifth stage of development, moving from rational aesthetics to post-aesthetics. Rational aesthetics corresponds to the modernist art theory advocated by Greenberg, in which artists create purely according to rules, detached from reality and life. After this process, art entered the "post-aesthetic" stage, in which art transcended the process of progress through self-criticism and "provided a kind of novel utopianism that should not be confused with nihilism."

The so-called utopianism that is not nihilism means that art does not completely abandon the pursuit of specific values and enter a purposeless state of nothingness. Instead, it no longer accepts being defined by a single standard or value orientation, moving towards diversity and freedom.

Conceptual art does not present the laws of form or the particularity of media. It can be said to be an art of the "blind," removing visual expression. It opposes the pursuit and infatuation with form and returns to the content of the work. However, this does not mean a return to narrative content that describes reality. It is a "suspension of realism," a metaphysical and intellectual content that emphasizes the process of thinking. In Lippard's view, Duchamp is the most effective prototype of this non-visual, intellectual art.

He once said in an interview in the 1920s, "I tried to keep as far away as possible from 'pleasing' and 'attractive' physical painting. I wanted to get away from the physical aspect of painting. I was interested in ideas, not merely visual products. I wanted to put painting once again at the service of the mind."The "dematerialization of art" also means a shift in the traditional understanding of the artwork (artwork). Creating a work is not about making an object but producing a concept and disseminating an idea. Creation is not the work of the hands and eyes but the work of the mind. When the idea takes the lead, the medium becomes insignificant. Artists do not need to first consider whether they are going to make a sculpture or paint a picture. Lippard wrote, "The idea can determine the means of production without affecting the finished product itself." The material left behind by the dematerialized work, like words, is a necessary carrier for the dissemination of concepts and ideas, not the work itself. Therefore, as long as an artist has an idea, he can no longer be limited to existing art categories and choose from an almost infinite range of media as the carrier for the work, or even not realize his idea at all. For example, in 1956, architect Frank Lloyd Wright planned to build a skyscraper one mile (1600 meters) high. The idea of building this tower was not realized due to numerous doubts and practical obstacles, but this did not prevent it from being established as a conceptual art piece.

The concept of "dematerialization of art" includes a series of negative descriptions, such as dematerialization of results, vision, sensation, form, and media, but it cannot provide much positive argumentation for the conceptuality it emphasizes. According to Lippard, the advocate of conceptual art, conceptual art itself is an anti-essentialist art. "It is art about criticism, not art-as-art, or even art about art."When the writer gives it a clear positive description or sorts and summarizes concepts into categories, it deviates from its core of embracing endless possibilities and imagination. If it is to accommodate all ideas, it means that there are as many definitions of conceptual art as there are conceptual artists.

3 The Philosophical Issues of Conceptual Art—Re-examining the Definition of Art

3.1 The Non-Visual Nature of Conceptual Art and the Dilemma of Defining Art

Based on the research shown above, the most important core of conceptual art, which is dematerialized art, lies in its non-visual nature. Conceptual art works usually aim to convey specific meanings rather than depicting a scene, person, or event. Even if the work involves descriptive representations of the above, they are merely externalizations of its semantics. In other words, conceptual art intends to express what cannot be seen with the naked eye. The task of conceptual artists is to become "makers of meaning."

Due to the non-visual core of conceptual art, the question of the nature of art becomes more thorny. If we cannot judge what is an artwork and what is not with our eyes, and if we cannot distinguish art from the myriad of non-art things, nor can we clarify what the commonality between Duchamp's urinal and a Romantic painting is, then what are the sufficient and necessary conditions for something to become an artwork? Neo-Wittgensteinians argue that defining art in an essentialist way is wrong. Art needs to be an open concept. Although art cannot be defined, the family resemblance method can be used to solve this problem. Just as the concept of gourmet food is universally present in the world, with a wide variety of gourmet foods throughout history, there is no clear standard to define the quality of gourmet food. Art is the same. We do not rely on definitions to recognize art but on the similarities of objects that have already been recognized as artworks. We start from what everyone agrees is an artwork and examine whether a candidate for an artwork has similarities with them. If there are similarities, the candidate can be legitimately called an artwork.

3.2 The Dual Examination of the Social and Intrinsic Attributes of Art

This answer is reasonable, but it does not apply to the problems brought by conceptual art. Although conceptual art assumes that any object has the potential to be designated as an artwork, not all things can become artworks. There is a great similarity between a ready-made object in an art gallery and an ordinary object used by people, yet the two are generally recognized as belonging to art and non-art, respectively. Perhaps we can use the Institutional Theory of Art to solve this new problem. Something is an artwork because it depends on social relations and because the art world (art circle) has granted this object the legitimacy to become an artwork. A person who is not in a social relationship cannot be an artist, and an object outside the exhibition space or exhibition context cannot become an artwork. The reason why Duchamp's urinal could become an artwork is based on the act of exhibition. It was placed in the exhibition system by someone with an artist's identity, viewed by the audience, published in newspapers, commented on by critics, and annotated by people with sufficient art theory. The same is true for conceptual art works in the 1960s. Those happenings, appropriated ready-mades, and non-narrative images became art works because they were written about by critics and curators like Lippard and exhibited in art galleries and museums by art dealers like Seth Siegelau, entering the exhibition and collection system. (Rancière & Wang, 2014) However, we can still ask, what are the criteria for becoming an artist, critic, or museum director? Usually, the establishment of these art practitioners' identities must go through a series of procedures, such as being from an art major and obtaining a degree. But this can only be an external criterion for becoming an art worker. In fact, the art world does not have a set of rules like running for a specific position. Its operating rules are quite ambiguous, and there are no hard and fast rules and assessments. Art is not purely a system within a social institution, and we still cannot escape the need to establish non-social intrinsic attributes for art. If it cannot distill a universal law, perhaps it can be some kind of structure.

Man-made objects rely not only on social relations but, more importantly, on the examination of "art theory" and "art history knowledge" to become artworks legitimately. The philosopher Plato proposed the theory of art imitation, viewing art as a mirror of nature, an imitation of the real world, which in turn is an imitation of

truth. Therefore, art is separated from truth by three layers. The Renaissance art theorist Giorgio Vasari also followed this idea, dividing the history of art into childhood, youth, and maturity based on how perfectly artworks could reproduce natural objects. From Plato to Vasari and other traditional narratives of European art history, they all described a story of art gradually becoming lifelike. Artists discovered and mastered techniques such as perspective to make artworks increasingly perceptual equivalents. However, later on, people invented cameras and movies, which conveniently and efficiently recorded and even replicated the real world. The new technology replaced the task of imitating reality that traditional art media had shouldered, and art had to turn to the fields of expression and emotion. For example, the works of Henri Matisse, with their concise, exaggerated, flat, and decorative styles, would not have been allowed into art galleries if they had appeared 100 years ago because they were far from the real world. Therefore, in the early 20th century, by shifting the goal of art from imitation to expression, Matisse's works gained legitimacy as artworks. In this way, art can move to a new stage, and painting can become more vital and emotionally valuable.

3.3 The Style Matrix and the End of Art

Based on existing art theory and art history knowledge, we can envision a "style matrix" (Table1). In Danto's 1964 version of the style matrix, he set F as "being representational" and G as "being expressionist." "+" represents affirmation, and "-" represents negation. Thus, four combinations and four art styles can be formed: "representational and expressionist (e.g. Fauvism); representational and non-expressionist (Ingres); non-representational and expressionist (Abstract Expressionism); non-representational and non-expressionist (Hard-edge Abstraction)." If a new art breakthrough occurs and a new predicate, an attribute, is added after F and G, then the style matrix will become eight rows with eight art styles. In this way, each art breakthrough not only increases the possibilities of art but also adds geometric multiples of relationships to each art style, enriching their artistic qualities. In his 1964 "The Artworld," Danto did not yet have a clear awareness of the "end of art." According to the logic of his style matrix, both art theory and art styles could potentially continue to evolve. Danto argued that Andy Warhol's Brillo Box, although indistinguishable from a regular Brillo box, is considered an artwork because it has a place within the art world. However, he did not specifically explain in this article what attribute it added to the art world or its position within the style matrix.

Table1 Style matrix

F	G
+	+
+	-
-	+
-	-

To continue the discussion, it is necessary to address what historical narrative Andy Warhol's Brillo Box provides, how it relates to previously acknowledged art history, and how it responds to the existing art historical context. Tracing the art of the 20th century, avant-garde movements such as Fauvism, Cubism, Futurism, and Dadaism have all openly reflected on and challenged the nature of artworks. Against this historical backdrop, Warhol's Brillo Box participates in the process of questioning "What is art?" through the work itself. Unlike previous art movements, however, the Brillo Box pushes the inquiry to a deeper level. It not only questions the essence of art as painting but more importantly, directly addresses what transforms an ordinary object into an artwork and why an object that is visually identical is not considered art. In other words, Warhol's Brillo Box

expands on the acknowledged artistic trajectory by raising these questions, thus earning its status as art.



Fig 2: 1968 , Untitled (Figurative) Harper's Bazaar, Dan Graham

Image source:Internet

When artworks begin to pose philosophical questions about the nature of art from within the art itself, art reaches its end. From a superficial observation, art did not end after Warhol's Brillo Box; instead, it flourished with new forms and innovations. Particularly with the rapid advancement of technology, contemporary art has become even more diverse. Although the declaration of "the death of painting" has echoed through the art world, art as a whole, rather than a specific medium, has never exhausted its forms and has even extended into the realm of the "immaterial" in a practical sense. In Danto's words, the "end of art" means that "no matter what kind of art it may be, it does not need to be created because of the benefit of a reliable narrative; in which narrative, this art is seen as an appropriate next stage in the story. What ends is the narrative, not the subject of the narrative."By posing questions about the nature of art through artworks, art discovers itself and becomes itself. It is like a person who, after washing away all the makeup, suddenly realizes that the most essential self is the true self. He no longer pursues the meaning and value of life as seen by others but focuses on his own growth. All external standards of judgment become invalid for him.

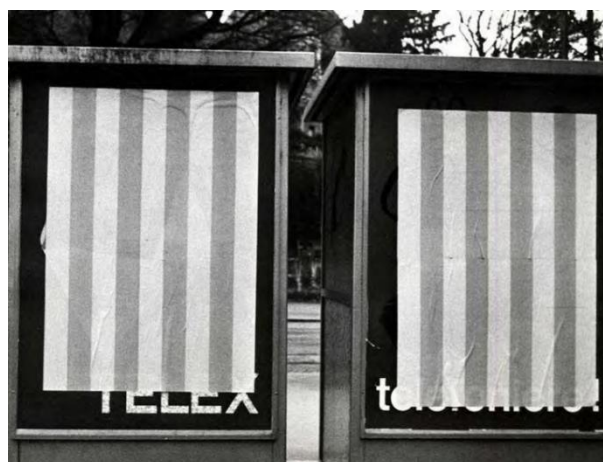


Fig 3: 1968 - present Affichages Sauvages (Wild Postings),Daniel Buren

Image source:Internet

The old answer to the question "What is art?" was that it strives for perceptual equivalence, or it conveys emotion, or highlights the characteristics of the medium. Danto argued that after centuries of development, art reached its end with Warhol's Brillo Box, fulfilling the plan attempted by Duchamp. It no longer needs philosophy, history, or social institutions to give it meaning; art itself can produce meaning. In fact, art has always been a powerful philosophical form, originally possessing the ability to create meaning. However, philosophy constructed its disinterested identity until the 1960s when art finally recognized its own value.

This understanding of the nature of art is very suitable for explaining conceptual art. Art seeks to provide some meaning about a certain topic, simply put, it makes thinking interesting. Taking Warhol's Brillo Box as an example again, what the artist does is not to make an object but to endow an object with a specific meaning. The significance of the Brillo Box lies in questioning the nature of art and provoking thoughts about the boundary between artworks and commodities. In addition to questions about the ontology of art, artists can also use their works to address issues related to philosophy, society, politics, and everyday life. The British conceptual art group "Art & Language" is dedicated to philosophical speculation, Hans Haacke directly engages with political issues through his work, and On Kawara treats life itself as art, prompting the audience to reflect on the meaning of life and time. The space where art occurs is not limited to galleries; it can also intervene in society. For example, Dan Graham, under the guise of placing an advertisement, published an incomplete supermarket receipt in Harper's Bazaar (Fig 2), allowing it to appear inexplicably among commercial advertisements. This plain, rough, crooked, and incomplete receipt forms a stark contrast with the refined and fashionable advertisements on either side, humorously satirizing the illusory consumerism. Daniel Buren believes that the city itself is an exhibition space and an infinite canvas. Since the late 1960s, he has been posting regular striped paintings in public places, covering the billboards in public spaces with minimalist stripes (Fig 3). These striped paintings, on one hand, make people aware of the pervasive image bombardment of consumerism in public spaces and, on the other hand, critique the art establishment. Art does not have to occur only in galleries and museums; it can interact with the environment and the public to draw attention to specific social issues and provoke thought.

4 Art Criticism in Conceptual Art

Where does art go after its "end"? In Danto's view, one direction is that it becomes more theoretical, or rather, more like philosophy. Art emphasizes cognitive value rather than visual aesthetic value. For artists, they transition from being creators of form to being more like intellectuals. They do not have to provide complete research or rigorous arguments like theorists, but they should at least have the ability to discover and pose questions, using actions and the physical forms that carry concepts to provide public connection points for ideas outside academic journals.

The theorization of art also brings new problems for art criticism. Theorization means that the establishment of an artwork relies more on interpretation. So, how do we interpret artworks, especially conceptual art pieces? If conceptual artists are "producers of meaning" and the artist's intention determines the meaning of the work, then the creator's intention should be an important factor in interpreting the work and cannot be replaced. Art critics should reconstruct and enrich the creative intentions of the work based on the artist's provided texts and personal history, that is, the meaning of the work, so that the audience can understand the meaning the artist intends to convey. On the other hand, conceptual art also emphasizes stimulating the audience's thinking. It usually only poses questions, refuses to provide clear answers, and pushes the power of interpretation to the audience. Thus, a significant part of the work's meaning lies in the hands of the receiver. The questions extended from these two

interpretative approaches are whether multiple appropriate interpretations can be given for a single work and whether there are distinctions of quality among these reasonable interpretations. If we follow the core of conceptual art, the concept proposed by the artist is the source of the artwork's artistic value, so an interpretation that fully explains the artist's concept is a better one. However, for most conceptual art, the audience's interpretation is actually also part of the work's meaning. The meaning of conceptual art is diverse and fluid, and its artistic value does not depend solely on the points raised by the artist but is continuously generated in open understanding and interpretation. In the 21st century, we can still look back at conceptual art from the 1960s or 1990s and reinterpret their meanings, thus providing new perspectives for understanding the world.

Another characteristic of art after its "end" is pluralism. We can analyze traditional painting with representational standards and modern painting with formalism, but we do not have a unified standard to analyze contemporary art. All art historical narratives are useless for contemporary artists, and art is not just one path; all art is art, both equal and ordinary. This means freedom in creation; contemporary artists can freely choose any topic, any medium, and any creative method, and everything can be transformed into art. At the same time, it also means that artists must clarify and provide independent meaning. They do not have to follow the path of a great artist and make breakthroughs on that path. However, they must understand who they are and what the meaning of their life is. In other words, this means that contemporary artists must be self-aware and have the ability to think independently in an era without unified value standards.

5 Conclusion

If all art is equal and there is no right or wrong in art, then the role of art critics is no longer that of connoisseurs who classify works into grades but interpreters of the meaning of works. However, although we can accept the idea that there are no distinctions in art, in the real art world, we still make judgments based on intuition and knowledge systems, thinking that some works are better and more thought-provoking while others are relatively mediocre. Good concepts often inspire more and newer ideas, while clichéd concepts have been seen too many times. Danto pointed out that "today's art criticism focuses more on whether the meaning of the work is also authentic." So, what are the principles for judging the authenticity of meaning? It seems that we are back to the original proposition: if everything can be considered art, then the inevitable result is that there can be no principled distinction between art and non-art. If we provide a clear principle of judgment, then it may once again assign specific boundaries and norms to art, making it exclusive. Perhaps the value of conceptual art does not lie in telling people what to do or how art should exist, but rather in choosing not to do certain things. Its role is more about encouraging each of us to have the ability and courage. The following is the ability and courage to question. Whether in art or in life, it is not just about passively accepting norms but about each individual having the right to pursue what they deem valuable and to provide new answers for understanding the world and constructing the meaning of art. In this sense, the contemporary art world should be a space that embraces heterogeneity and fosters encounters. Ideally, it transcends boundaries of class, race, gender, nationality, and language imposed by society, allowing differentiated groups to interact as equal subjects and recognize one another.

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