

The Image Object Post-Internet Artie Vierkant

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Preface Being Post-Internet

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This PDF is to serve as an extended statement of artistic purpose and critique of our contemporary relation to objects and images in Post-Internet culture. More than anything, it poses a survey of contemplations and open questions on contemporary art and culture after the Internet.

“Post-Internet Art” is a term coined by artist Marisa Olson^⓪ and developed further by writer Gene McHugh in the critical blog “Post Internet”^⓪ during its activity between December 2009 and September 2010. Under McHugh's definition it concerns “art responding to [a condition] described as 'Post Internet'—when the Internet is less a novelty and more a banality. Perhaps ... closer to what Guthrie Lonergan described as 'Internet Aware'—or when the photo of the art object is more widely dispersed [&] viewed than the object itself.” There are also several references to the idea of “post-net culture” in the writings of Lev Manovich as early as 2001.^⓪

Specifically within the context of this PDF, Post-Internet is defined as a result of the contemporary moment: inherently informed by ubiquitous authorship, the development of attention as currency, the collapse of physical space in networked culture, and the infinite reproducibility and mutability of digital materials.

Post-Internet also serves as an important semantic distinction from the two historical artistic modes with which it is most often associated: New Media Art and Conceptualism.

New Media is here denounced as a mode too narrowly focused on the specific workings of novel technologies, rather than a sincere exploration of cultural shifts in which that technology plays only a small role. It can therefore be seen as relying too heavily on the specific materiality of its media. Conceptualism (in theory if not practice) presumes a lack of attention to the physical substrate in favor of the methods of disseminating the artwork as idea, image, context, or instruction.

Post-Internet art instead exists somewhere between these two poles. Post-Internet objects and images are developed with concern to their particular materiality as well as their vast variety of methods of presentation and dissemination.

It is important to also note that “being Post-Internet” is a distinction which carries ramifications beyond the art context as a societal condition at large, and that it would be antithetical to attempt to pinpoint any discrete moment at which the Post-Internet period begins. Any cultural production which has been influenced by a network ideology falls under the rubric of Post-Internet. The term is therefore not discretely tied to a certain event, though it could be argued that the bulk of the cultural shifts described herein come with the introduction of privately-run commercial Internet service providers and the availability of personal computers.

⓪ Régine Debatty, *Interview with Marisa Olson*, *We Make Money Not Art* (2008), <http://www.we-make-money-not-art.com/archives/2008/03/how-does-one-become-marisa.php>
⓪ Gene McHugh, *Post Internet* blog (2009-10), <http://122909a.com>
⓪ Lev Manovich, *Post-Media Aesthetics* (2001)

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Art is a social object.

From the rise of a liberal market economy through the build-up and ubiquity of the “middle class,” art has matched and excused itself with the social conditions of its production. The rise of the “industrialized arts” gave way to lofty notions of art-after-object as late capitalism approached, all the while explaining itself as obligated to echo existing cultural conditions rather than move to shape them.

Where are we left now? Art and arts pedagogy has become so inextricably linked with a variety of interpretations on the Conceptual art doxa that it would be impossible to argue *against* any artistic gesture being automatically tied to its reception and the language surrounding it. At least from a historical perspective, Conceptual art assured its own legacy by the overwhelming volume of language produced within and around it at a time when summary-through-language was the easiest means of disseminating an object (profoundly simpler, even, than reproducing a photograph).

We find ourselves in radically different times. Increasingly the majority of both our cultural reception and production is mediated through some descendant of a Turing machine—taken now both technically and culturally for Turing's “universal machine,” a “single machine which can be used to compute any computable sequence.”¹ In cultural terms, assuming a certain level of access which does not yet exist in all cases,² the ubiquity of these devices and their massively interconnected nature signifies two realities which are crucial to an understanding of art after the Internet.

First, nothing is in a fixed state: i.e., *everything is anything else*, whether because any object is capable of becoming another type of object or because an object already exists in flux between multiple instantiations. The latter is a schema already intuitively arrived at by artists in recent history, prompting writers as diverse as Rosalind Krauss and Lev Manovich to proclaim a “Post-Medium Condition”³ and the rise of “Post-Media Aesthetics”⁴ (Krauss using it as a vessel to decry art marooned in medium specificity, what she calls “technical support;” Manovich uses it to offer a sketch of how one might categorize different types of art in an environment without traditional notions of “medium”).

The former, an art object's lack of fixity in *representational strategy*, is less often explored. This is not to say that artists are not involved in exploring the relationship of many copies and variations of a single object to one another. Artists like Oliver Laric and Seth Price routinely present multiple variations of the same object—Laric's *Versions* exists as “a series of sculptures, airbrushed images of missiles, a talk, a PDF, a song, a novel, a recipe, a play, a dance routine, a feature film and merchandise,”⁵ Price's *Dispersion* “[taking] the form of a widely reproduced essay, an artists’ book, a freely available online PDF, as well as [a] sculpture.”⁶ These works are emblematic as Post-Internet gestures and have surely been influential in different ways, but step only lightly away from the tautological

1 Alan Turing, *On Computable Numbers, with an application to the Entscheidungsproblem*, in Proceedings of the London Mathematical Society, Series 2 Volume 42 (1937)

2 http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Global_digital_divide

3 Rosalind Krauss, *Reinventing the Medium* from Critical Inquiry Volume 25, No. 2 (1999)

4 Lev Manovich, *Post-Media Aesthetics* (2001)

5 *The Real Thing*, interview with Oliver Laric by Domenico Quaranta, Art Pulse Magazine (2010), <http://artpulsomagazine.com/the-real-thing-interview-with-oliver-laric>

6 Lauren Cornell, Seth Price artist page in The New Museum's *Free* catalogue (2010), <http://www.newmuseum.org/free/#sethprice>

rationale of Conceptual art (typified in Joseph Kosuth's 1965 *One and Three Chairs*, an arrangement of three versions of the same object, each signifying "chair," and language surrounding the piece to assert that nothing is being missed and the art is in the idea—Kosuth's "Art as Idea as Idea").

In the Post-Internet climate, it is assumed that the work of art lies equally in the version of the object one would encounter at a gallery or museum, the images and other representations disseminated through the Internet and print publications, bootleg images of the object or its representations, and variations on any of these as edited and recontextualized by any other author. The less developed stratagem for pointing to a lack of representational fixity is that of taking an object to be represented (to be more direct, *presented*) as another type of object entirely, without reference to the "original." For objects after the Internet there can be no "original copy."

Even if an image or object is able to be traced back to a source, the substance (substance in the sense of both its materiality and its importance) of the source object can no longer be regarded as inherently greater than any of its copies. When I take a moving image and represent it through an object (video rendered sculpturally in styrofoam for example), I am positing an alternative method of representation without ever supplying a way to view the source. A source video exists. The idea of a source video exists. But the way the object is instantiated denies both the necessity of an original and adherence to the representational norms that follow the creation of "video" as both technical device and terminology.

The possibilities for these transformations, alternative methods of viewing "media" which essentially amounts to an arbitrary assemblage of data, has thus far been most thoroughly examined in the field of "information aesthetics," a field as distanced from Post-Internet art as it is close to design, cartography, and indexing. Its fault is in its attempt to encapsulate large amounts of data—practical information, experience—into an aesthetic and understandable shorthand. In other words, information aesthetics provides in one object both a representation and the components which make up its source in an attempt to illustrate or arrive at knowledge. While Conceptualism as outlined by Kosuth may be limiting in its reliance on art propositions as enclosed tautological systems, its foundations—delineating progressive art with the same zeal Greenberg applied to ascribing modernism its "purity"⁷—hold true: "art's viability is not connected to the presentation of visual (or other) kinds of experience."⁸ For us to receive a piece of art and determine from it some piece of empirical information about the world at large would seem almost a bewildering proposition, even in a cultural climate where we have accepted that the singular qualification for the moniker "art" is the intention of any one individual to label it as such.

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The second aspect of art after the Internet deals with not the nature of the art object but the nature of its reception and social presence.

To be "progressive" in art is a fundamental impulse which seems to pervade the majority of our judgements of the quality of art propositions. This leads to the use of such terms as the "avant-garde," which in the twentieth century held as its central project the delineation of a cultural space for art to occupy in relation to "mass media." However the nature of mass media is now profoundly different, in that we are both its subject and the engine behind it.

Attention has always been a currency, but with the proliferation of networking methods and infinitely alterable and reproducible media, that attention has diverged and become split amongst anyone and everyone who wishes to

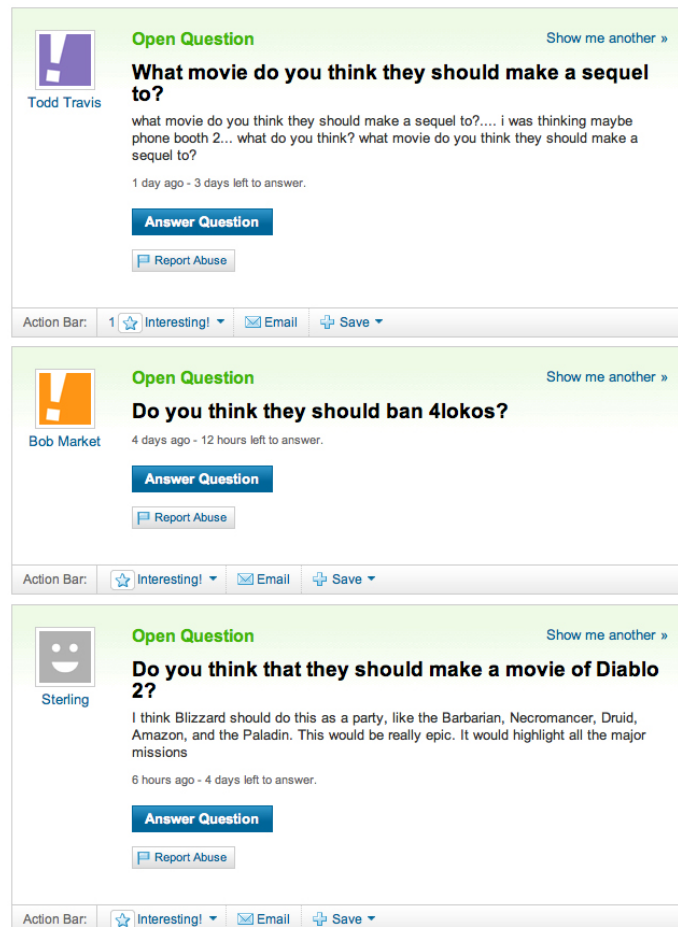
⁷ Clement Greenberg, *Modernist Painting* (1960)

⁸ Joseph Kosuth, *Art After Philosophy* (1969)

seek it. Fixed (which is to say, physical) media once imposed an economy to the image and object, a value driven by scarcity which necessitated a one-to-many system of distribution. Over time this spread and democratization of image and object production tools has led to a perpetual iconoclasm, each successive volley of formats breeding a new dogma and its own particular set of aesthetic principles. Hyperreal tableau photography gives way to the fetishized imperfection of the polaroid, tape hiss is abandoned for ironic autotuning, &c.

What has remained through each iconoclasm is an inability to fully break the mentality imposed by a one-to-many system of distribution. The continual use of “They” in language: “They should make a second one, They should have done it this way, They should stop doing this,” &c., can be seen as sort of philosophical litmus test in which our method of discussing cultural production continually falls short.

“They” implies an alienation from production, a continuous deferral to action. It is a vacant critique, either proposal for the perpetuation of the same image unchanged (“They should release this on another platform”) or proposal for an iconoclasm which will never take place, the genesis of the proposition being encased entirely in a passive mode of reception. This deferral is an act which accepts dogma, accepts a dominant image paradigm as an unchanging absolute rather than the result of a complicated history of new approaches. “They” venerates this absoluteness, sanctifies it, while its opposite, “We,” postures towards the creation of an alternative and constitutes an actual schism; Baudrillard writes: “One can see that the iconoclasts, whom one accuses of disdaining and negating images, were those who accorded them their true value, in contrast to the iconolaters who only saw reflections in them and were content to venerate a filigree God.”⁹



Open questions.

The use of “We” is not to advocate solely for participatory structures of art but to insist on a participatory view of culture at large, and ultimately of taking iconoclasm itself as a quotidian activity. Whereas in previous times it was

9 Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation* (1985)

legitimate to conceive of culture as a greater system with impassible barriers to entry and a finitude of possibilities, culture after the Internet offers a radically different paradigm which our “They” idiom does not allow for. This is not to say that we have entered a fully utopian age of endless possibilities but simply to claim that culture and language are fundamentally changed by the ability for anyone to gain free access to the same image-creation tools used by mass-media workers, utilize the same or better structures to disseminate those images, and gain free access to the majority of canonical writings and concepts offered by institutions of higher learning.¹⁰

These are conditions endemic to Post-Internet society, allowing for a ubiquitous authorship which challenges notions of the “definitive history” or the “original copy.” Just as Barthes’ proclamation of the “death of the author” is in fact a celebration of the “birth of the reader” and the “overthrow[ing of] the myth,”¹¹ culture Post-Internet is made up of reader-authors who by necessity must regard all cultural output as an idea or work in progress able to be taken up and continued by any of its viewers.

With this comes new issues, though. As Alexander Galloway and Eugene Thacker point out, “the mere existence of networks does not imply democracy or equality ... [we] suggest [that] rhizomatics and distribution signal a new management style ... as real as pyramidal hierarchy, corporate bureaucracy, [&c.].”¹²

While art may no longer have to contend with an idea of “mass media” as a fixed, monolithic system, instead it must now deal with both itself and culture at large as a constellation of diverging communities, each fixated on propagating and preserving itself. This condition is espoused in the writings of Nicolas Bourriaud as “constructing archipelagoes ... a voluntary grouping of islands networked together to create autonomous entities” as a means of proclaiming that “the universalist and progressive dream that governed modern times is in tatters.”¹³ Elsewhere Critical Art Ensemble (CAE) explain similar ideas, expressing culture as already beholden to a “bunker” ideology, a self-preserving and replicating tendency towards the formation of specified bureaucratic structures, a tendency CAE pinpoints equally in “community-based art”¹⁴ and traditional mass media. CAE write, “While mass media brings its viewer the world, the world is also held at bay while the viewer commits h/er gaze to the screen, forever separated from others and from communal space”¹⁵

Increasingly though, mass media and the world of “the screen” is our communal space. And with it comes new fragments with their own particular hierarchies. As reader-authors navigating these fragments, where now would we find a space within which to delineate “art”? Or, if the new “mass media” is as distributed and varied as our social networks themselves, and in fact driven by them, is that delineation even necessary? Ironically, the most radical and “progressive” movements of the Post-Internet period would be those who either pass by either largely unnoticed due to a decision to opt out of any easily-accessible distribution networks, or else would be composed of a community of people producing cultural objects not intended as artistic propositions and not applying themselves with the label of artist.¹⁶

10 The majority of texts researched in preparation for and cited within this writing are available as free PDFs on the Internet through some combination of Google searches, AAAARG.org and Gigapedia.com. For more see this interview with Sean Dockray, founder of AAAARG.org, The Public School, Telic Arts Exchange, and more: <http://127prince.org/2010/10/04/sean-dockray-interview-by-randall-szott/>

11 Roland Barthes, *The Death of the Author* (1967)

12 Alexander Galloway and Eugene Thacker, *The Exploit* p.13 & 39 (2007)

13 Nicolas Bourriaud, *The Radicant* p.185 (2009)

14 Critical Art Ensemble, *On Electronic Civil Disobedience* p.39 (1996)

15 *ibid.*, p.37

16 For a case study in a networked community engaged in artistic production without adherence to self-proclamation as “artists” see Brad Troemel’s anonymously released essay *What Relational Aesthetics Can Learn from 4Chan* (2010), <http://www.artfagcity.com/2010/09/09/img-mgmt-what-relational-aesthetics-can-learn-from-4chan/>

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The “bunker” of art and artist persists, however. The goal of some Post-Internet practices is to engage with this proliferation of images and objects—“general web content,”¹⁷ items of culture created without necessarily being described as art—and proclaim an authorial stance by indexing / curating these objects. These projects are as wide-ranging as Jon Rafman's “Nine Eyes of Google Street View” project¹⁸ and some of the earlier works done by Surf Clubs¹⁹ and their participants, among them Guthrie Lonergan who was one of the first artists to release works in the form of YouTube playlists. Artists after the Internet thus take on a role more closely aligned to that of the interpreter, transcriber, narrator, curator, architect.

This is often broadly ascribed to traditions of artists dealing with the banal, the everyday: “surfing as art” articulating quotidian Internet-user “tactics”²⁰ or the artists acting, essentially, as ethnographers who would chart and explain the new variety of images found within visual culture.²¹ I would argue for a slightly different case.

In his essay *On the New*, Boris Groys writes:

... art can [become unusual, surprising, &c.] only by tapping into classical, mythological, and religious traditions and breaking its connection with the banality of everyday experience. The successful (and deservedly so) mass cultural image production of our age concerns itself with attacks by aliens, myths of apocalypse and redemption, heroes endowed with superhuman powers, and so forth. All of this is certainly fascinating and instructive. Once in a while, though, one would like to be able to contemplate and enjoy something normal, something ordinary, something banal as well. ... In life, on the other hand, only the extraordinary is presented to us as a possible object of our admiration.²²

But just as any object is conceivably any other object, our ubiquitous authorship marks a point in cultural production at which the extraordinary is now also the ordinary—the myth is also the everyday. In many of my video works, I make a point to appropriate imagery from recent popular films, mass media spectacles made with all of the fervor and resolution of an empire that only partially realizes its own decay. The striking thing about these images is not their content but their availability and the context within which they are now received. Where once an experience of cinema was that of receiving an absolute, fixed icon—a definitive copy, inaccessible and precious—that is now far from the case. Cinema now becomes encapsulated, transferrable and transformable in the same vain as everything else, a “file” to be treated with all the levity we reserve for any other file.

The images I deal with in my work, authentic unauthorized copies of spectacle films, thus represent the absolute collapse of the mythological and the quotidian into a single indistinguishable whole.

The goal of organizing appropriated cultural objects after the Internet cannot be simply to act as a didactic ethnographer but to present microcosms and create propositions for arrangements or representational strategies which have not yet been fully developed. Taking a didactic stance amounts to perpetuating a state of affairs of art positioned in contradiction to an older one-to-many hierarchy of mass media. For the new hierarchies of many-to-many production, the cultural status of objects is now influenced entirely by the attention given to them, the way they are transmitted socially and the variety of communities they come to inhabit.

Thus in the same way that all cultural images and objects become general—the film *Independence Day* being not dissimilar in homogeneity and degree of spectacle from any individual's photos of their newborn child on Facebook—so too does the authorial stance of the artist become general. Any sorting of images or aspects of culture, applied with a declaration or narrative gesture, becomes not dissimilar to our experience of everyday life, regardless

17 http://www.google.com/#sclint=psy&hl=en&safe=off&site=&source=hp&q=site:rhizome.org+%22general+web+content%22&aq=f&aqi=&aql=&oq=&gs_rfai=&pbx=1&fp=1bde53b2ade8e603

18 <http://www.googlestreetviews.com>

19 See Marcin Ramocki's *Surf Clubs: organized notes and comments* (2008), <http://ramocki.net/surfing-clubs.pdf>

20 A term adopted from Michel de Certeau's *L'invention du Quotidien* (1980)

21 See Hal Foster's *The Archive Without Museums* (1996)

22 Boris Groys, *On the New* (2002)

of the degree to which the images are spectacular. What comes to matter is not that an artist has presented some aspect of the spectacle and how it fits neatly into some aspect of a linear historical trajectory. What matters is that in the presentation they have created a proposition towards an alternate conception of cultural objects.

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If, in Post-Internet culture, artistic production must deal with arrangements and representations of images and objects taken from any cultural context, how do we conceive of sorting the artists themselves? How do we judge the spaces in which this work is exhibited, on the Internet and off?

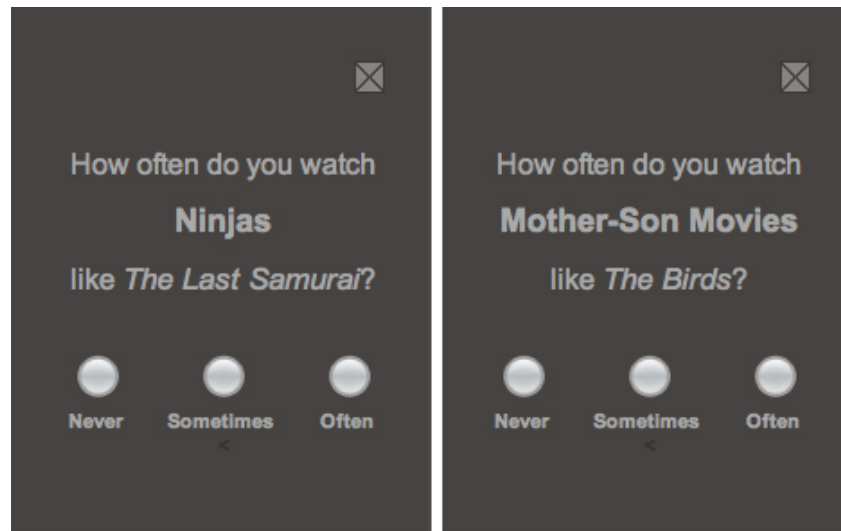
As Lauren Christiansen writes, “with today’s burgeoning potential for digital mass viewership, transmission becomes as important as creation. Contemporary online artists are aware of this fact and seek to actively make use of its potential.”²³ As artists come to self-sort and form international communities based on mutual investigations, it is absurd to think of being able to act with any curatorial agency in selecting from the vast array of “contemporary artists” without being in some way tied directly to those artists’ social networks. The methods of transmission these artists use become imbricated with the work they create, who accesses it, and the spaces they ultimately show in.

This is a complicated turn, as communities are for the moment more likely to form based on aesthetic principles than conceptual or ideological ones. Whether these aesthetic principles mean a preference for sleek geometric shapes with gradient overlays or mean a preference for a particular blogging platform, the underlying segmentation is the same. Posting an image of a gradient implicates an artist within a particular aesthetic mindset in the same way that having a Tumblr adheres an artist to a particular format of transmission. In either case, the architecture of the Internet—an arrangement of language, sound, and images in which imagery is the most dominant, immediate factor—helps facilitate an environment where artists are able to rely more and more on purely visual representations to convey their ideas and support an explanation of their art independent of language. This is a crucial point of departure from recent art history, as arguably it marks an abandonment of language and semiotics as base metaphors for articulating works of art and our relationship to objects and culture.²⁴

This should come as little surprise as, especially after the Internet, the far more instantaneous and safe method of communication is through imagery. Dealing with language can too forcibly illustrate the thoughts behind an image, or belittle a work if the text is not as clever or aesthetic as the image itself. Language can also be excruciatingly limiting for those who trained to think beyond the fixity of “mediums,” especially as the involvement of language in most average Internet use comes down to having a keen memory for appropriate search terms, keywords, tags: a simple but nevertheless grossly limiting architecture.

²³ Lauren Christiansen, *Redefining Exhibition in the Digital Age* (2010)

²⁴ Haim Steinbach describes his relationships to objects as such: “objects, commodity products, or art works have functions for us that are not unlike words, language. We invented them for our own use and we communicate through them”—interviewed by Joshua Decter, *Journal of Contemporary Art* (1993), <http://www.jca-online.com/steinbach.html>



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Further, it marks a denigration of objects and our relationship to space: if an object before us in a gallery is only one of an infinite multitude of possible forms that object could take, its value to the viewer becomes little more than a curiosity. The viewer can judge it only by visually and conceptually relating it to every other project they are aware of by said artist and the other artists within their aesthetic community.

The strategy employed by myself and others towards this physical relationship has been to create projects which move seamlessly from physical representation to Internet representation, either changing for each context, built with an intention of universality, or created with a deliberate irreverence for either venue of transmission. In any case, the representation through image, rigorously controlled and edited for ideal viewing angle and conditions, almost always becomes the central focus. It is a constellation of formal-aesthetic quotations, self-aware of its art context and built to be shared and cited.

It becomes the image object itself.

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