Interview with Clémentine Deliss

Clémentine Deliss

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Art school, museology, ethnology, museography, learning, contemporary art, architecture, design.

ABSTRACT:

The author presents a series of case studies detailing her initiatives within educational institutions, namely art schools and museums of ethnology and contemporary art. The objective of these initiatives is to affect a renewal of contemporary museology. The author then provides a concise overview of the options defined for a museum that encourages critical interventions by both guest researchers and artists, and by visitors. These options include furnishings, tables and chairs that have been specially designed by architects.

L'autrice illustra le sue diverse esperienze nelle scuole d'arte e nei musei di etnologia e arte contemporanea per rinnovare la museologia contemporanea. Riassume le opzioni definite per un museo che favorisca interventi critici, sia da parte dei ricercatori e degli artisti invitati, sia da parte dei visitatori, attraverso arredi specifici, come tavoli e sedie appositamente progettati da architetti.

L'auteure rend compte de ses différentes interventions dans des écoles d'art et dans des musées d'ethnologie et d'art contemporain pour renouveler la muséologie contemporaine. Elle résume les options définies à propos d'un musée favorisant les interventions critiques à la fois chez les chercheurs et artistes invités et chez les visiteurs, grâce à des mobiliers spécifiques, tables et chaises spécialement dessinées par des architectes.

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Clémentine Deliss is a curator, publisher and cultural historian. She studied contemporary art and semantic anthropology in Vienna, Paris, and London and holds a PhD from SOAS, University of London. Between 2010-2015, she directed the Weltkulturen Museum in Frankfurt, instituting a new research laboratory to remediate collections within a post-ethnological context. Exhibitions she curated at the Weltkulturen Museum include Object Atlas - Fieldwork in the Museum (2011), Trading Style (2013), Foreign Exchange (or the stories you wouldn't tell a stranger) (2014), and El Hadji Sy - Painting, Politics, Performance (2015). From 2002-2009, she ran the transdisciplinary collective Future Academy with student research cells in London, Edinburgh, Dakar, Mumbai, Bangalore, Melbourne, and Tokyo. Since 1996, she has published the itinerant and independent artists' and writers' organ, "Metronome" that was twice part of documenta in Kassel (1997, dX and 2007, d12). She has held guest professorships at the Städelschule Frankfurt, the University of the Arts in Kassel, and was Reader at the Edinburgh College of Art between 2003-2009. She has acted as an expert consultant for the European Union and was on the Scientific Council of the Musée du quai Branly in Paris between 2011-2019. In 2017-18, she curated four international roundtables on "Transitioning Museums" in South East Asia for the Goethe-Institut. The Dilijan Arts Observatory, which she curated in 2016, was a gathering of artists, historians, and scientists in a former electronics factory in Armenia. The results were exhibited in Portable Homelands. From Field to Factory as part of Hello World. Revising a Collection (National Galerie im Hamburger Bahnhof, Berlin, April-August 2018). In 2017-2018 she was Visiting Professor at the Ecole Nationale Supérieure d'Arts Paris-Cergy. During this time, she held an International Chair at the Laboratoire d'Excellence des Arts et Médiations Humaines, Université, Paris 8 and Centre Georges Pompidou. Between 2020-2023, she was Associate Curator at KW Institute for Contemporary Art, Berlin where she ran her Metabolic Museum-University (mm-u.online) and curated the exhibition Skin in the Game. She is currently Curator at Large at KANAL-Centre Pompidou, and Guest Professor at the Academy of Fine Arts Brussels. She is Honorary Professor of Global Humanities in History of Art at the University of Cambridge. She lives in Berlin.

In your book, The Metabolic Museum, first elaborated at the Weltkulturen Museum in Frankfurt am Main, you wrote that "the new model for the museum would be the house itself, a renewal of a domestic environment of repose and reflection, of living, dialoguing, researching, and production in contrast to a corporate site of consumerist culture".[1] So you intimately link the ethos of care with domestic design. How can we think about the intimacy of care within public space, and in the framework of the welfare state over the last decades of liberal democracies, where anonymous functionalism seems to characterize all effective care structures?

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When I deploy the term "domestic", I am pointing to the effects that space has on behavior and on the performance of research. I pay attention to the architectonic agency of museums because I regard the institution like a body, built from a constellation of interdependent organs that come together to produce a venue, a metabolism.

This notion of "metabolism" is absolutely fascinating, but it has been worked on in a different way before, in literature in particular. Without multiplying parallel or opposite evocations, the comparison between the museum and the brothel became a classic in the literature of the interwar period and beyond, best represented by the ethnologist writer Michel Leiris. A chapter of *L'âge d'homme*[2] is entitled "Lupanars and Museums", in which the author writes that "nothing seems to me to resemble a brothel as much as a museum. There's the same shady side and the same petrified side". Indeed, Michel Leiris goes on to develop his observations, and writes that in museums "certain lost corners must be the scene of hidden lubricity". In contrast, the photographs of the Museum-University you are working on and designing suggest a sanitized white cube, nothing "louche" at all. How do you see this?

I am glad you mention Michel Leiris. I wrote my PhD on his contribution to the Musée d'Ethnographie du Trocadéro in the 1930s while he was alive, and more specifically on the journal "Documents" (1929-31). Since that time, I have been obsessed with the notion of the publishing organ – as a vital vehicle for the expression of artists and writers. In one issue of "Documents", Georges Bataille illustrated the entry on "Dust" (Poussière) with a photograph of two mannikins leaning against a wall in a storage room of the ethnographic museum. In oth-

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er texts, he spoke of the museum as the lungs of the city.[3] A further reference for me is Olympia Press, the notorious publishing house of Maurice Girodias that produced both seminal books such as *Lolita* as well as a quantity of pornographic texts. His hybrid jazz cellar and hotel in 1950s Paris was notorious. I too launched my publishing organ, *Metronome* No. 9 and Metronome Press in a hotel near l'Opéra in Paris. In 2005, I hired all the rooms for one night for the sum of 1500 Euro. For 24 hours, the contributing writers, artists and guests filled the rooms with activities that were private. I had forgotten to remove the keys from the locks, with results that you can only imagine.

However today, museums are formatted to provide a maximum of publicly accessible areas that correspond to an increasingly consumerist imperative. Only very rarely do we find a private apartment for artists-in-residency within the parameters of a museum building. Likewise, rooms in which collections can be brought into contact with one another, placed in assemblages and reflected upon prior to an exhibition are kept to a minimum. The digitalization of holdings and the use of databanks as the foundation for curatorial elaboration works to minimize the backstage of the museum. In Frankfurt at the Weltkulturen Museum, domestic research was facilitated by the simple fact that the buildings were 19th century villas. In other words, they had been constructed with the intention to provide shelter for people to live together. Until I arrived there in 2010, this aspect had been denied. The rooms of the three villas had suffered a form of scenographic camouflage, an attempt to hide from sight the original functions of the houses. During my time there – which ended in 2015 – guest researchers and artists could move freely between their apartment on the top floor, the studio spaces right below, the laboratory on the ground floor with its specially designed furniture by Mathis Esterhazy, and the

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photographic archive in the basement. There was a daily cyclical experience of sleeping, working, reading, and observing the assemblages of artefacts, all on site in the museum. The moment I left, the structure was closed down by the city and I was accused of running a hotel! This may seem an extreme judgement, yet I recognize models for this type of work in the "halfway house", and even the "maison de passe". The villa-museum was intended as a site for the activation of desire and remediation that would be collection-centric, recursive, and domestic in scale.

The need for museums to develop infrastructure to enable "multidisciplinary inquiry" poses an architectural and design challenge that you feel is essential. How would you characterize it?

It is a challenge to rework the spatial parameters of museums in terms of design and inquiry. I've never understood why patterns of use remain so entrenched. In the past there were more chairs and sofas strategically placed for people to relax on while looking at an artwork. Today we are asked to follow a plan of consumption, to walk through exhibitions, stand upright and still for the time it takes to read a panel, and then are made to move on through the café and bookshop. This phenomenon is closely related to the ergonomy of the department store where consumerism requires moving through rather than spending hours at one counter or sitting down. Airports, department stores and museums are growing in similarity. The public is browbeaten to follow the route with its overbearing explanatory devices.

As an antidote to this state of play, I work on the concept of a Museum-University. The image it conjures up in my mind is of a wave of inquiry that gently floods the everyday practice of the museum-goer. No one needs proof of education to enter a museum, unlike its sister civic institutions such as the university or the art college. In the Muse-

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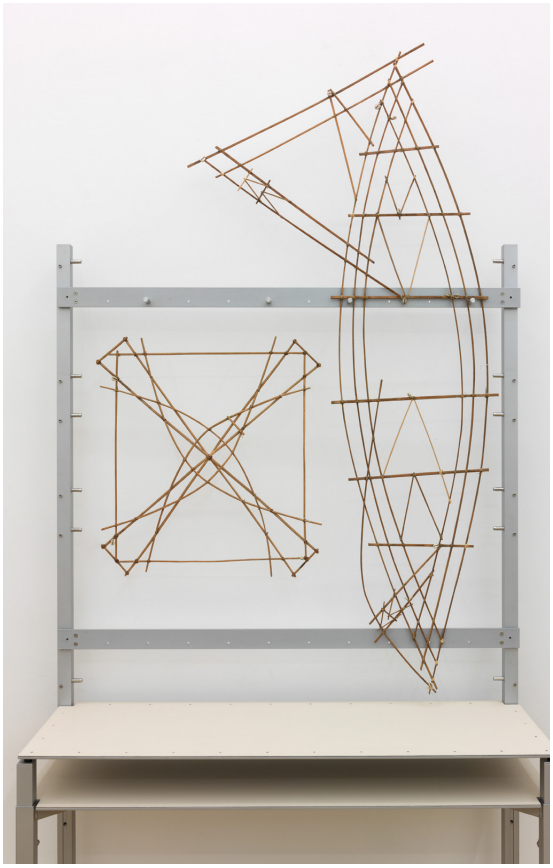
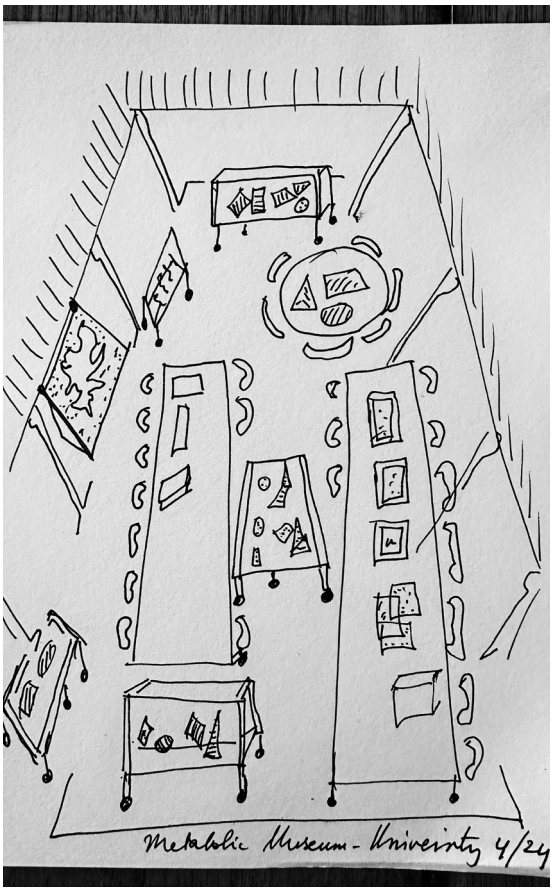
um-University, visitors are encouraged to stop, sit down, spend time and study in the society of artworks and collections. Multidisciplinarity describes the visitors' heterogeneous backgrounds, the diversity of collections brought into the museum-university, and the forms of interpretation and future meanings that can emerge out of this exercise.



Efficient furniture, lighting are actors of all the liturgies, manifestations of reverence, attention, ceremonies – to which the museum is often referred. How do you imagine an alternative to these devices?

I often speak about scenography as a drug for curators and museums. I mention addiction because the industry is so compelling and seductive that the curator of a Kunsthalle, not to mention a museum, will prefer to spend a considerable portion of their budget on building and painting temporary walls rather than allocating expenditure to artistic production or artists' fees. Institutions rely on scenography believing that artworks are simply not enough, or that they are, by nature, inaccessible. Lighting and temporary wall structures are part of this process of psychological compensation. The artwork overwhelmed by textual explanations recedes into the background or has to fight against scenography. The artist's intentions and the artwork's semantic power are diminished to little more than the illustration of a theme.



Furniture however is something different. It has a function that may contradict the draw of consumer-

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ism. Tables and chairs are rarely introduced into exhibitions unless as a cosmetic gesture. I'm interested in how we can change the parameters of human experience within museum spaces. For that we need to think about what can be achieved in a museum and how artworks can form the basis for a flourishing of the democratic intellect. Every visitor has the right to form their own opinion and should be encouraged to engage in a form of poaching between disciplines and cultures to quote Michel de Certeau.[4] The visitor can be a "braconnier" of visual representation rather than a flâneur of exhibitions.

In some cases, the artist wants to hide his work inside a museum, forbidding access or at least reproduction, making it an inaccessible object. Christian Boltanski, for example, has buried some of his installations or concealed them in various hiding places in some museums.

This is a specific work that problematizes the archival. However today access to storage areas in museums is kept to a minimum implying that any visit must operate through a go-between in the shape of a curator or keeper who has the authority to guide and control knowledge. I'm concerned with the sequestration of collections, the categories used to classify them, and the value they may have for the education of future generations. I have written a manifesto on this question.[5] I don't believe that the fashion for open storage design is an option here. Open storage – which you can find in neo-universalist museums such as the Humboldt Forum in Berlin, or the soon to open V&A East in London's Docklands, actually entrenches taxonomies from earlier times. It allows for superficial observation and gloating but prevents any mobility within collections in favor of a static display.

You created a Laboratory in the museum, a workshop space, studios and apartments. Is that reminiscent of the Alexandria Mouseion? Did the workshops held in Dahlem prior to the opening of the Humboldt Forum relate to your project? Likewise, are there models in curatorial studies programs that work on similar lines as yours?

The model I developed has not been explored in other contexts. Nothing that was organized by the Humboldt Lab ahead of the Forum's opening can be compared to the activities and research models that I enabled in Frankfurt. It also differs from the University Museum in the US that is increasingly made to cater to large audiences rather than internal teaching and research. But take the Schaulager in Basel as a further model. It is an extraordinary project constructed around rooms for individual artist's collections ranging from Christian Boltanski to Andrea Zittel or Matthew Barney. This is definitely a research-based museum. However, when I visited the place, eager to see how research was undertaken, I was told that 90 minutes was the average time spent in the room of a specific artist. There would be a curator watching over you, and no table. The idea was to observe, take notes standing up,

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and then move to the library next door and write. What I did in Frankfurt was much more extreme. There was no curator watching the artists and we trusted them. We gave them 24 hours access over four weeks. No one in the laboratory broke or sabotaged anything from the museum's collection. We trusted our guests and they were respectful of the situation.

You explain the power of a collection in terms of mobility: multiple reconfigurations and new and varied meanings. What are the main challenges in this respect in terms of caring for the public, their comfort and their expectations?

I like to believe that imagination is a faculty of care and well-being. The Museum-University is about empowering the imaginary of the individual visitor through visual thinking. Constellations of artefacts from different collections are created in order to encourage a cross-fertilization of meanings across disciplinary boundaries. This can be liberating for the public. The dogma of explanation so well described by Jacques Rancière in *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* is suspended.[6] Instead, there is a sense of emancipation in the minds of visitors, of heightened curiosity. It's another form of fieldwork in the museum in which chance and desire are kindled.

Beyond practical necessities and the need for depots and storage, the issue of museum logistics is becoming a political one. It accompanies a turning point in art history with regard to the transportation of works of art and of course with respect to museums of migration, museums of ethnology and so on. What does this situation inspire in you?

I would like to see greater circulation between and within museum collections. I'm not interested in col-

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lection vanitas! In Brussels where I have been researching dormant, secondary collections, I encounter the presence of vanitas in each museum I visit. It's about cultivating exception and masterpiece value. In the minds of politicians and funding agencies, the character of a museum and its collections has to be preserved. But I would like to see more host-guest situations, where museums within a city exchange materials, are gracious in their lending of holdings that may not be top quality but can, once placed in another museum context, contribute to public education and empowerment. Today I walk out of rooms in museums in which a masterpiece is displayed like a pornographic carcass. It feels necrophiliac to revel in the consumption of one work pumped up to a value of millions. This same masterpiece will succumb to an appalling dissection of fragments and details reproduced on a gigantic marketing scale but also commercialized as fridge magnets, mugs, and silk scarves. That's exactly what I mean about scenography – a veiling of historical detail and an obfuscation of the violence that accompanies this museum.

The opportunity to sit down for several hours and study seems to be one of the aims of your design of museum-universities. Are you betting on slowness rather than speed, which Paul Virilio described as one of the perils of the contemporary, in all the movements required of us today? And how can the simultaneous insistence on slowness and mobility be understood?

That's an interesting tension. I would like to see people sitting down to look at artworks for longer than is usual, getting out their laptops, making their own cross connections. In 2019, my students at the University of Art and Design in Karlsruhe, Germany, produced what we called "Metabolic Chairs".[7] Members of the public could sit down in one and use a mini-projector to beam their own images onto the blank wall between paintings. We called this "spamming the hang". It was a form of auto-curatorial intervention that actually supported the appreciation of art through adjacency. The eye would take in the paintings either side of the projection. Perhaps we can think of spending less on the shifting of major masterpieces for blockbuster exhibitions with their exorbitant insurance costs and consider another form of mobility, a local exchange of less recognized collections, an upscaling of secondary materials?

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Museum care can be seen from a number of different points of view, and applied in a number of ways. If we start with ethnological collections, part of the notion of care is to be taken seriously in the first degree, i.e. the challenges of protecting objects from the toxic treatments to which they have been or may have been subjected. Is this a real concern?

The argument of toxicity is a decoy to prevent access. Yes, it is true that curators at ethnographic museums used to spray arsenic and DDT onto the objects they brought back from expeditions. It is likely that traces of these poisons can be found on certain pieces more than on others. It is the duty of the former colonial museum to do all it can to remove these traces. The argument of toxicity is an attempt to shift attention from the analogue artefact to its digital representation. Another contemporary chimera is the claim that the microbiome found in animal and human particles located in masks or ritual paraphernalia can unleash latent diseases from the past and trigger future pandemics. This is part of the obfuscation produced by ethnographic museums in order to keep people out of the reserves! If toxicity is present, it is up to the museum to find a quick and efficient way to deal with it to avoid delays in repatriation.[8]

You seem very concerned about ensuring face-to-face meetings in museum-style negotiations. Could the museum be, and at what cost, an agency for this kind of dialogue?

We've all become accustomed to working with emails and Zoom, and I actually appreciate this move. However, I've always been interested in the transmission of initiate knowledge, in those moments when artists wish to mediate ideas to each other or to trusted interlocutors and not to a broad public. For this reason, I produce a publishing organ called "Metronome" that is not online but simply passed from hand to hand.[9] It vehicles the early stages of research, the foreplay of production, and is like a code between artists. Your question also references the condition *after* an exhibition is produced or a meeting has taken place. This is what Paul Rabinow once called "exiting the field".[10] It refers to the value placed on withdrawal, on diffusion after the act. Sometimes you'll find that a show has a *finissage*, but generally, little attention is paid to the aftermath of an exhibition and what it implies for the artist or the visitor. That is why I critique the timing of curatorial structures such as exhibitions. They don't make sense today and are barely sustainable. Why stick to a 3-month rote when other temporal models can work too? What alternative timings might be considered that could dislodge the stagnancy and unsustainability of this treadmill of exhibition-making and prove equally productive for audiences?

According to you, "Today, expeditions take place in the (museum) where the aim is to understand what has been collected and why, and to discover the different paradigms that signified the research of the museum's former directors

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and curators".[11] How can we imagine staging or exhibiting the museum's explorations in these terms?

In his recent book on Sigmund Freud's "figurative psychoanalysis", German historian Horst Bredekamp describes the Musée Charcot at the Salpêtrière hospital as a "Bild- und Objektlabor der Psychologie" (an image and object laboratory of psychology).[12] Like Charcot, Freud also had trinkets in his library, 2-3000 pieces in total made up of Etruscan figurines, African art, and various paintings, which he began collecting during his first travels to Italy in September 1896. In Vienna, Freud knew all the antiquarians and in 1917, he writes of his "Abenteuerlust" when he visits them searching for something new. Freud gathers so many trinkets, that when he moves to a new apartment, he needs three furniture carts to transport his familiar items, or as he called them, his "Dinge der Vertrautheit". Bredekamp claims that Freud's collection was integral to his practice, like a medium of communication between the doctor and patient. The statuettes represented an intermediate space for the gaze of both parties, a divergent ground where their eyes could settle but never meet.

My model also requires artefacts and artworks. It is conceptual and empirical rather than academic. Imagine the wing of a museum in which the exhibition space is filled with long tables and chairs for visitors to gather, sit down, and study at their pace. Surrounding this furniture are racks with historical paintings, mobile media stations, and artefacts in vitrines that can be moved into different configurations. All artworks and objects are pulled from the oblivion of secondary museum collections. With no masterpiece value, they are revitalised into hybrid configurations, intentionally crossing cultures, disciplines, and time frames. A baroque painting, riddled with holes and cavities, too damaged to exhibit, is positioned next to an 18th century condom made from sheep's gut, embellished with an erotic drawing. Adjacent is a set of slave shackles, some elaborately engineered fish traps from Africa and Oceania, and an artwork by Andreas Slominski, which like a seductive decoy lies somewhere between a sculpture and a functional object.[13] Such assemblages confuse the borders between art history and other disciplines, fueling new imaginative conversations based on visual relationships. The public encounters an ecology of art and ideas based on the afterlives of marginal collections and duplicate items that fill the reservoirs of every museum in Europe. The effects, both beautiful and enigmatic, offer the foundation for critical fabulations, designs, and inventions for future generations.

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Endnotes

1 Deliss 2020, p. 17.

2 Leiris 1939.

3 “Documents” 1930, p. 300.

4 Certeau 1924.

5 See *The Metabolic Museum* for the English version of “Manifesto for the rights of access to colonial collections sequestered in Western Europe”, and on the website of the journal “Multitudes” 2018.

6 Rancière 1987.

7 https://mm-u.online/project/university-of-design-hfg-karlsruhe/

8 https://www.documenta14.de/en/south/456_occupy_collections_clementine_deliss_in_conversation_with_frederic_keck_on_access_circulation_and_interdisciplinary_experimentation_or_the_urgency_of_remediating_ethnographic_collections_before_it_is_really_too_late

9 “Metronome” is an artists’ and writers’ organ that is both a collective artwork and a research methodology. It was conceived in 1996 by Clémentine Deliss and has been researched and published for over ten years in a number of cities and locations in the world including Dakar, London, Berlin, Basel, Copenhagen, Oslo, Stockholm, Malmö, Bergen, Frankfurt, Vienna, Biella, Edinburgh, Paris, Oregon, Tokyo and Stavanger. Acting as a critical alternative to conventional art publishing, “Metronome” operates like a prologue or creative tangent to an exhibition, generating new work and debates between artists and thereby triggering short circuits between art scenes in different locations. See the interview of Clementine Deliss in Paris INHA : https://www.canal-u.tv/chaines/inha/la-revue-critique-et-culturelle-dans-le-monde-revolution-subversion-et-emancipation-8

10 Rabinow, Stavrianakis 2019.

11 Deliss 2011, p. 201.

12 Bredekamp 2023.

13 https://www.guggenheim.org/artwork/11104

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