

Jeff Koons and Damien Hirst, The Masters in Disguise

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ABSTRACT

Jeff Koons and Damien Hirst are two of the most influential artists in the contemporary art, stemming from the East Village Art movement and Young British Artist who have both followed in the footsteps of Andy Warhol, to create a niche in the art market that doesn't just satisfy the artistic needs, but also increase the value placed on the artwork created. Both artists have been at odds with the art world, and stirred up controversy, being reviewed as a disgrace to the artists and cultural entrepreneurs, and lambasted by critics due to not making their art. Koons and Hirst have a knack for self-promotion and recognize the potential to promote art for the sake of money, disguised as an art, and that necessarily does not make them less of an artist. The review looks into the life, and work of both artists, and attempts to review the work in light of the definition of contemporary art.

Keywords: Jeff Koons, Damien Hirst, Contemporary Art, Influential Artist, East Village Art movement, Young British Artist, Controversy, Cultural Entrepreneurship.

INTRODUCTION

'Art is subjective.' is one of the most prominent concepts, which may or not be true, but has always initiated a constructive debate in the art circle. The history of the philosophy of art is filled with the 'failed attempts' to formulate a definition, and thus we have a litter to choose from. Essentialists have introduced 'concepts' that follow 'a set of necessary and sufficient conditions', that possess classical structure. Damien Hirst and Jeff Koons are two of the most influential, yet controversial artists in contemporary neo-Pop art. Damien Hirst has made a fortune out of shocking the public through his mind-boggling imagination. From his antics in *Treasures from the Wreck of the Unbelievable* (2018), *The Miraculous Journey, Doha, Qatar* (2018), *For the Love of God* (2007), *The Physical Impossibility of Death* (1991), to the allegations of *Spot Paintings* (1986-2011), Hirst has made headlines with every display. Jeff Koons has been known for imbuing his work with 'sex' that is on the cusp of pornography, as in *Made in Heaven* (1989-91). Starting from *The Pre-New* (1979), *The Equilibrium Series* (1983), *The Puppy*, and *Celebration series* have one thing in common; overpriced art and controversy, which has done nothing but help Koons to sell his work *Balloon Dog (Orange)* for \$3.5m.

The rise of consumerism is not only manufacturing-centric but rather the Hirst and Koons' art has been called out for being shallow, over-priced, and subjectively controversial. Hence, there is a greater need to explore the questions; 'Does society has assigned too much value to the neo-Pop icons of the 70s and 80s?' and 'Are Hirst and Koons, even legitimate artist or merely a

symptom of a distorted market?' Looking into the facts, figures, and an exploration of the definition of art, the work is well within the bounds of contemporary arts, and specialists are divided on the subject of authenticity, but the artwork itself satisfies the basic requirements of vision, intentions, and mastery of the medium. While the greatest of thinkers like Leo Tolstoy believe that art needs to be a bridge between subjective and objective, the work of Hirst and Koons's art resonates with the audience, which makes it valid as an artwork, regardless of the quality, form, and structure. The popularity of both artists validates that the targeted audience receives the portrayals, and just like the philosophy of art cannot be defined, the subjectivity of the work cannot be negated. While there is no benchmark for the measurement of an artwork, the artwork cannot be questioned on merit, especially just because of the artist's inclination to stir up controversy to get the art community talking about a specific piece.

Contemporary art came to prominence during the nineties, and the medium has received an outpouring response, creating wide-scale shifts in art markets at an accelerating rate, supported by the museums, market, and galleries in mediums of pop art, photorealism, conceptualism, minimalism, performance art, installations, earth and street art. While the contemporary art has become sensational, burgeoning, and enriched with historical ingrained, 'the academic status remains ambiguous' and goals, procedures, and structure is radically untheorized (T. Smith, 2010). In philosophy, Giorgio Agamben digs deeper into 'What is the Contemporary?' and he states it as 'A timelessness that opens out the contemporary to thinking meta-critically

on it. Smith, (2009) suggests a methodology, symptomatic of the conditions of contemporary; by introducing three streams of contemporary art. Aesthetic of globalization, subject to 'modernizing instinct which is both strategic and nostalgic, retro-sensationalism, and a combination of retro-esthetic of globalization. The systematic exploration of 'contemporary' sets the stage for art that is 'of its time'. Smith suggests that global condition Contemporaine briefly notes in the art are; 'time, place, mediation, and mood.' (K. A. Smith, 2014)

Art is subjective is not just an expression, but it is as far as art professionals have agreed on the subject of what makes an artwork good, or what is bad. The interpretation of the artwork is dependent on the viewer's personal experience, knowledge, style, and perception (Cupchik, Vartanian, Crawley, & Mikulis, 2009). The diversity of the opinion is staggering, but the established institutional framework suggests some boundaries; following uncontroversial facts; aesthetic or non-aesthetic interests of the entities that are comprehensible, and exist in the cultural sphere, with or without moral, social, environmental, economic, or political power; inside the parameters of time, and has experimental creativity, genres exploration, and conceptualize evolution. In essence, artwork lies in an area of consumerism, that is dependent on the imagination, and perception, hence values cannot be assigned merely based on conventional measurement. Art is valued based on concept, aesthetics, appreciativeness, communicative, historical parameters and above all, the artist's value. Artwork can be appraised and assigned value based on its beauty (color, patterns symmetry, texture, proportions, and placement, crops, and composition, framing), uniqueness, skills and technique, and an inherent meaning (representational, story or statement based, metaphor) (Cupchik, 1992). If we were to compare the strategies used by the leading politicians, as compared to Koons, and Hirst, there is a certain symmetry to the kind of self-promotion being employed, so by logic, the outrage on the subject of the work is irrelevant if it resonates with the intended target audience.

JEFF KOONS

Background

Jeff Koons, born in York, Pennsylvania (1955), studied at the Maryland Institute College of Arts (Baltimore), and awarded an honorary degree by the Art Institute of Chicago, is one of the most prominent art figures of contemporary art, in the neo-Pop genera with a variety of work in painting, illustrations, and sculptors (Koons, 2020).

Inspired by the Salvador Dali, but influenced by Jim Nutt,

a founding member of the Chicago Surrealist Movement (1960) in 1974, Koons got closer to the Chicago Imaginist; Karl Wirsum, Ed Paschke, and after taking a job at Museum at Modern Art (selling memberships) in 1977, explored New Wave and Punk scene, mingling with David Salee and Julian Schnabel. He appeared on the East Village Art. He took leave from MoMA in 1980 and began selling stocks, and mutual funds, allowing him to fiancé his initial body of work, The New.

Koons is widely known for his most iconic sculptures, Balloon Dog (Orange), Split-Rocker, Rabbit, and Puppy. Some other pieces are Three Ball Total Equilibrium Tank, Art Magazine Ads series, and Balloon Flower. His work is influenced by Neo-Pop Art, Neo-Geo, styles, and is highly validated in the East Village Art movement (Koons, 2020).

Jeff Koons as an Artist

Koon's work is littered with the concepts of Sexuality, and Popularity (Wainwright, 2020). From the display of Michael Jackson with his per monkey Bubbles to Pink panther doll being caressed by a topless woman, to St. John cradling a pig, and a penguin in Banality show for The Nations, in 1989; the critics crucified the artists for his shallow and bigger-than-life-size sculptures. Then came to his Made In Haven series, featuring his then-wife, and Italian pornstar, Ilona Staller two years later in a Baroque and Rococo settings, where Koons is featured in a vulnerable way, whereas Staller is reviewed as 'Faking It' marginally by critics (Koons & Rothkopf, 2014).

Koons had begun his career of instant notoriety in the art world with the launch of The New (1980), featuring a variety of vacuum cleaner displayed in Plexiglass cases. He used almost the same concept, five years later, capitalizing on his previous success in his Equilibrium series (1985), displaying a series of basketballs in an aquarium, with the backdrop of football stars. Sanctuary series (1986) depicted an inflatable plastic rabbit, and Bob Hope, moving on to the Banality show in 1989.

Where his work garnered the attention and stirred up controversy, his later work did more than creating a buzz. The Puppy was a major record-breaking hit, followed by the release of celebration Series, containing large-scale sculptures and paintings, with works like Cracked Blue, diamond pieces, Tulips (1995-2004), Balloon Flower (1995), Moon Series, Balloon Rabbit (2005-2010), and Balloon Monkey (Sischy & Leibovitz, 2014).

Eastfun and Easyfun-Ethereal, Split-Rocker, Popeye and Hulk Elvis Series, and his recent collaborations as a curator, designing for BMW, and collaborations with Martin Kippenberger, Lady

Gaga, Louis Vuitton, impacted on maintaining the Koons' legacy as a contemporary artist.

Koons' exhibitions have always been able to draw in the audience and inspired a generation of artists. From his solo exhibitions at the Museo Archeologico Nazionale di Napoli (2003), the Astrup Fearnley Museum of Modern Art in Oslo (2004), the Helsinki City Art Museum (2005), the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago (2008), and Château de Versailles in France (2008–09), to his private auctions, his artwork is one of the highest value garnering records for a top-selling artist with €81.3 million in June 2008. He also received record auction prices for Balloon Dog (Orange) \$58.4m in 2013, and Rabbit \$91.1m in 2019.

Pros.

Koons is a pro when it comes to recognizing the potential of art as a business, and even more so, he does it on his terms. In his own words, "The job of an artist is to make a gesture and show people what their potential is. It's not about the object, and it's not about the image; it's about the viewer. That's where the art happens," he likes 'interacting with people', and when asked if he wants to clarify the sense of falseness that is being spread about his work, he suggests to be content; 'I am pleased that there's a dialogue about my work.' The misrepresentation of his work has not deterred him from creating artwork that is borderline on the aesthetics of nudity, and sexuality. The fact that his focus is on the artwork, and considers the business a by-product, displays his sense of intention (Sollins, 2009). Salmon, (2014) calls out Koons for being an 'impossible artist' with a knack of creating fantastic artwork. He values his viewers, and understand the concept of failure before success. His success is based on the capitalization of the patronage model, where his focus is to turn money into art, as opposed to 'turning art into money.' Where some professionals call it 'exploitation', he believes it is a mark-to-market mentality. The sanctity of commoditized artworks only if the prices keep rising, and for Koons, the drop has yet to come, with his collection being valued based on his ability to self-promote. Artsper, (2019) cherishes Jeff Koons for his mastery in the art of self-promotion, by highlighting is diligence. The magazine shares the recipe for Jeff Koons phenomenon, as a success meter in seven crucial milestones; determination, opportunist, conceptual appeals, recognition of the market, collectors, and dealers, reconciliation with the institutional world, perfectionism, and above all a master of creating a buzz.

Cons.

While Koons believes in his work, and consider it a source of communication deeper than anything else, art professionals

are divided on the subject of his intent, and aesthetics. Eyre, (2019) explores the question of whether a ten-foot-tall balloon is worth \$58.4m and if it does, what is the merit for such a 'great art'. The success of Balloon Dog despite the lack of meaning for the art community proves that monetary value and lack of meaning can coexist. Galenson, (2006) analyzes Koons' work and "stresses that his work has no hidden meanings."

Salmon, (2014) praised Koons' on his ability to recognize the business potential of the art market, but it is indeed a form of exploitation, and manipulation to gain money, for the sake of making more money. Collectors view Koons; art as a monetary value. While he attempts to justify the sapphire-spheres as 'objects trying to communicate with the views', the collectors are faced with the choice of investment that can be worth more in the future. The Price of Everything shows Stefan Edlis describe \$2.5m Koons' Gazing Ball painting as 'modestly priced' which may be true given that the concept is a rip-off of Gustave Courbet's (1866) Le Sommeil. He further adds, 'To be an effective collector you have to be shallow – you have to be a decorator. You want this thing to work with the rugs and the furniture.' CNBC's Cappellazzo calls the collector market as 'futures; trade, with the mode of buying and selling promissory notes for the artwork that have not been produced yet (Tallman, 2019). Timberg, (2014) slams Koons' for being called Dad and an heir to Duchamp, quoting Perl;

"The Koons retrospective is a multimillion-dollar vacuum, but it is also a multimillion-dollar mausoleum in which everything that was ever lively and challenging about avant-gardism and Dada and Duchamp has gone to die... Koons's overblown souvenirs are exactly what Duchamp warned against, a habit-forming drug for the superrich."

Koon's has also been in hot waters on the subject of 'not being authentic' artist. (Rusak, 2014) callout Koons' work as; 'Toys. Overpriced, pristine, compromised by an owner's physical touch, thus dirtied, thus devalued.' Another aspect is the use of a manufacturing factory with pawning off the work of his 100 assistants based in Chelsea, endless repetitions, extremely alienated, and 'a surrogate if meaning and justice.'

Koons & Rothkopf, (2014) calling out Koons's work, and blasted Koons for being 'shallow', and Staller for being 'Fake' but it does not essentially mean that th concept of art prevents someone from the 'Fake it till you make it' philosophy. The art critics have been on Koons for his 'materialism' and even quoted the words by a security guard at his Balloon Dog auction as; 'baloney'. Brockes, (2015) interview sums up a few of the criticism that Koons has faced over the yeard before moving on to talk about his work as; 'baloney' (the New York Review of Books), imbued

with a 'deadly smugness' (the Spectator), and full of 'cheap, tone-deaf, misogynistic images' that look 'dreadful' (The Guardian). He has also been called "the slimy assurance, the gross patter about transcendence through art, of a blow-dried Baptist selling swamp acres in Florida'. Meanwhile one of the most accomplished art critic Robert Hughes lambasted Koons, 'you can't imagine America's singularly depraved culture without him'. While his critics are busy roasting his work and calling it worthless, Koons does not seem to take any criticism to heart, but instead points out the most his philosophy; 'People respond to banal things – they don't accept their own history'.

In response to Roberta Smith's The New York Times article. 'Stop Hating Jeff Koons', Lipsky, (2020) argued that the hatred towards Koons is warranted because his creativity is nothing, but a fiend cultural entrepreneurship where his sculptures, paintings, and art illustrations are 'produced by legions of studio assistants'. Lipsky believes that connecting the contemporary art of Koons to any artist is an absolute concern, and especially on the subject of Rabbit, he believes that the sculpture does not have any beauty, aesthetics and does not inspire anything. He sums it the Rabbit as; It is a fad, an emblem of wealth.

McVeigh, (2019) weighs in on the subject of why the art world 'loves to hate' Koons, that he mirrors the 'worst qualities of the artwork', in the form of an 'unsettling perfection, the brashness, the extravagance, the emptiness'.

DAMIEN HIRST

Background

Damien Hirst, born in Bristol, England (1965), grew up in Leeds, studied at the Jacob Kramer College, and achieved a degree in Fine arts at Goldsmith College (1986-89), is an avid art collector, entrepreneur, and possibly the UK's richest living artist according to the Sunday Times Rich List. His work is most cherished in the contemporary art circle, despite the use of 'Death' as his central theme in aesthetics. Coming up as one of the most prominent leaders of the Young British Artist, Hirst has surpassed Fiona Rae, Sarah Lucas, Ian Davenport, Laim Gillick, Michael Landy, with earning awards countless awards including Tate Britain's Turner Prize (1995), which is the premier award for contemporary art. Hirst's art is considered fascinating to some, while others consider it a product of 'morbidity'. His genera are unique where he uses dead animals featuring a glass-enclosed case filled with formaldehyde. Hirst has also done a variety of work in conceptual art, installation art, painting, and sculpture (Hirst, 2020).

Hirst came from a humble household, and his first inspiration

came from Francis Davison at a display in Hayward Gallery (1983). He struggled to get into Goldsmith College, and it was then he got under senior tutor Michael Craig-Martin. His fascination with the concept of death originated from his placement at a mortuary, which influenced his imagination to propose themes that are outright considered 'outlandish', and 'devoid of meaning.'

Hirst is widely known for his most iconic sculptures, The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living (1991), Mother and Child Divided (1993), For the Love of God (2007). Some other pieces that helped put Hirst's name on the map are Here for a Good Time, Not a Long Time (2018), The Unknown (Explored, Explained, Exploded) (1999), Believer (2008), and Small Lie (2017). Hirst is the darling of the Young British Art movement and no matter the degree of the controversy he stirs up, has managed to stay in the art market with his unique style and form of intensions.

While he is the richest artist alive, he is also considered a cautionary tale for the up and coming generation of artists. The darling of the art galleries, and art collector in the nineties and early two thousand, got in over his head and decided to auction off his work bypassing dealers, which created a rift, resulting in a value drop on his artwork. However, Salmon, (2017) presents his November auction as an example which secured a valuation of \$330m. The time of Hirst is not gone, and his work may have been sold at private auctions but he has created a niche for himself by securing collectors who invest in his work without reservations. The reason for his success is buried within his concepts, and he has a knack for self-promotion, along with creating artwork that is commercially motivating, captivating, and is valued in millions. Nate Freeman, a collector shares that he is interested in artwork that is seen, the response should be 'Wow' and in that element, Hirst is a master.

Hirst has faced critique on his work, and has been called 'con artist' disguised in 'conceptual-art' and 'seriously worthless'. Spalding, (2012) suggests that for him, Hirst's work 'isn't art.' He writes;

"The emperor has nothing on. When the penny drops that these are not art, it's all going to collapse. Hirst should not be in the Tate. He's not an artist. What separates Michelangelo from Hirst is that Michelangelo was an artist and Hirst isn't." (Spalding, 2012)

Robert Hughes claimed that Hirst's artwork is 'tacky' and 'absurd' while calling his most valued work as 'the world's most over-rated marine organism.'

Damien Hirst as an Artist

Hirst's artwork is a shrine of death, and he has found a clever disguise theme, 'life and death.' His fascination with the concept of death and morality is ingrained in his work. From subtle use in the 'Til Death Do Us Part series to the launch of the Spot series, he has created a shrine. From his organization of Freeze to the display of his work, Hirst has gone above and beyond to recreate an 'ultimate victory over death' in contemporary art, with a focus on experimental art, stirring up controversy with his use of dead animals in his art without any reservation, and reverence to exploitation. His worst has garnered attention but at the same time, it is pushing the limit of decency in experimental art.

His career took off with the launch of In and Out of Love (1991-94), and it was the patronage of Charles Saatchi that gave him the break of his career with the procurement of The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living (1991). Hirst has a morbid sense of mortality, and it shows in his work in Two Fucking and Two Watching (1995), which was taken off display, showing rotten corpses of cow and bull. He has gone on to present his sculptures Hymn at Ant Noises (2000) at Saatchi Gallery. While the nineties have seen some of his best work, it was post-nineties that Hirst expanded his horizon of the art market and bypassed the dealers to stage private auctions. His most prized work For the Love of God is the encrustment of 8,601 diamonds on a human skull created in platinum, and known to communicate 'maximum celebration you could make against death.'

His fascination then led him to create The Cure series, The Spot series, and paintings influenced by Francis Bacon in No Love Lost (2009). Hirst also provided the Union Flag counter piece for Summer Olympics (2012), designed the Brits Award statue in neo-Pop style, and displayed his Schizophrenogenesis collection that was made up of large-scaled pills, capsules, and medicines.

Huang, (2015) explores the integration of the animal elements into the work of contemporary artists, for the sake of reframing, under the basic concept of ethical integrity. On the subject of whether the display of animal carcass could at the very least be 'abject-art', the definition and the casual representation of his work is too crass. Case in point, on his shark piece, he interprets the tank full of formaldehyde as a memento mori (remember that you will die). To which it is argued that there is no need to add the huge weight of the carcass to the tank, and there is still meaning to it. Similarly, when his first shark piece started to disintegrate, the experts decided to 'remove the shark, skin and stretch it over a fiberglass mold'. Hirst

responded when asked about the decision that it does not look 'frightening enough' and 'weightless' which suggests the lack of ethics if cared enough about the animals being put on display. There needs to be a line drawn on the subject of killing animals, just to put them on display for the sake of making a point, or as a metaphorical figurine (Baker & others, 2006).

Pros.

We live in an age of science and technology, and there are a greater need and more demand for a medium of propagation for contemporary art. (Enhuber, 2014) presented that Hirst is a cultural entrepreneur when the notion is explored on the criteria of being able to create and generate viable economic space, that has the potential to blend the horizon of artistic needs to meet the expectation of the art market and expert opinions. On merit, he satisfies the 'the creation and economic exploitation' (Moss, 2011), which gives birth to the experimental marketing strategies into creating brands (Pine, 1998), with the ability to foresee, lead, and manage effectively and efficiently (Virtanen, 1997). Stirring up the controversy kept the debate going for Hirst, and his driver, cutting edge techniques, innovative spirit, created an energetic entrepreneurial sphere. To his credit, East London is one of the most advanced cultures and art producer as compared to another metropolis.

Galenson, (2007) researched a much-needed part of the artist's life concerning the art market, the money. The concept of patronage is dated back to the Italian Renaissance, but the difference lies in the artist's desire to not disclose it openly and maintain decorum, not displaying care about the money. Andy Warhol broke the wheel when he stepped into the limelight to charge his worth, and both Hirst and Koons followed in the footsteps. The fact that an artist is aware of the business aspect, does not necessarily mean that its materialist, but evidence of the recognition of the worth. While Hirst is breaking the norm, the art community has still to catch up to the concept that money is not taboo, and that price and importance of an artist are unrelated.

Cons.

Since 1987, there have been over eighty solo exhibitions of Damien Hirst and he has been known to have sold his work in over 260 shows. With such a massive following, and being a huge influence for the East Landon art community, and as a winner of the Turner Prize, the art community expects to hold Hirst to an institutional standard. The art community is furious with Hirst for not making his art. According to Willet, (2013) out of nearly 1,400 paintings sold, the artist has painted only 25 himself. Hence, it is inconsequential to the art world,

if he is content with 'every single spot painting contains my eye, my hand, and my heart.' Hughes criticized Hirst for "The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living, the shark piece in harsh words; One might as well get excited about seeing a dead halibut on a slab." (Katz, 2009)

Such harsh critique is expected given that his \$78m diamond-encrusted, a human skull made in Platinum has been made by the Bentley & Skinner, and stuffed shark has been at multiple occasions credited to the MDM Props of London, and spot paintings, painted by assistants. This essentially reflects that he considers himself more of an entrepreneur than he does an artist. While in-talk with Artlog, Hirst credited Rachel Howard for some of the best spot-painting techniques. Hirst values his work, according to his artistic value as per the collectors and patrons. While asked by one of his assistants to paint for her, his response shows what he believes;

But the only difference, between one painted by her and one of mine, is the money.

Golden Heads displayed at the Venice Biennale, was lambasted for the historical rip-off of the Nigerian ancient brass work; Head of Life (1983) (Bowley, 2017). Damien Hirst has no qualms in plagiarizing his work, not painting his art, outsourcing his work to technologists, and involve manufacturing units, which reeks of the capitalist mentality. While he calls himself an entrepreneur, the art community is right to not call him an 'artist'.

Hirst is a businessman and on top of being morbid, he lacks the ethical consideration of killing animals for the sake of encasing them in formaldehyde or canvassing over 9000 butterflies for the sake of art. The concept of life and death can be portrayed without having to put on display a piece rotting in tanks, and that is the same mentality and lack of consideration that has always put Hirst in the crossfire from the art community, and it is the same controversy, that has maintained his stature among his patrons over the decades.

CONCLUSION

Jeff Koons and Damien Hirst are two of the most influential artist in contemporary art, art, and following in the footsteps of Andy Warhol, they have both crafted a niche, that is to maintain their stature. Koons and Hirst recognize the potential of the adoption of technology in arts and have been known as perfectionists, which necessarily does not make them less of an artist. The institutional definition of art includes the conception and clear vision, the application of intentions, and achieving the mastery of the medium. In essence, both

artist's work has displayed the mastery of the medium they represent, regardless of the quality, form, and structure.

The work acclaims value in the collector's interest, because of the mastery of self-promotion and there is no doubt that despite the controversy surrounding the artwork of Koons and Hirst, they have made a mark, and will continue to do so, as long as their work is inspirational enough for the targeted audience. The value assigned to the artwork is due to the valuation of the artists, and there is nothing wrong with the concept of creating a buzz, as long as the collector, dealer, and the audience is satisfied with the piece.

On the subject of being called a symbol of the distorted art market, it is partially true, but not everything is always black or white. There is a grey area, and that is the business aspect of the art world. Recognizing the potential of art, by the artist himself, is not distorting the market, but merely creating a niche which is profitable to the artist. At the end of the day, no matter what critics, experts say, Jeff and Koons have a following, means to keep creating, and intentional enough to keep employing technology for the sake of materialistic gain, it still does not make them any less of an artist.

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