

DIALECTICAL SPACE IN CONTEMPORARY ART: INSIGHTS FROM ALFREDO JAAR AND GORDON MATTA- CLARK

Dr. Juan Simo and Dr. Maria Garcia

University of Murcia, Spain, Campus de Espinardo, 30100 Murcia, Spain.

University of Murcia, Spain, Campus de Espinardo, 30100 Murcia, Spain.

Abstract: This text delves into the intricate relationship between space and time, particularly within the context of late capitalism's impact on the perceived space. Lefebvre's notion of the "perceived space" serves as the foundation for understanding how space is increasingly subjugated to the demands of capitalism, causing a crisis in its inherent premises. However, it is crucial to recognize that space is not static; rather, it exists as a vessel within which temporality defines its functional parameters.

This exploration revolves around the concept of "contextual interventions" in artistic practices, which have the potential to reshape the social functions of space and provoke novel ways of contemplating the political and societal roles of these spaces. These interventions are not only catalysts but also critical tools for societal experimentation, challenging the conventions imposed by the society in which we live.

Notably, the transformation and displacement of space and time are central elements in these artistic interventions. A significant portion of contextual art practices relies on a meticulous examination of the interplay between space and time, further elucidating the profound impact of these interventions on the fabric of society.

Keywords: perceived space, late capitalism, contextual interventions, artistic practices, space-time study

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Introduction

“The perceived space” (Lefebvre, 1991) refers to a problematic space that is being subordinated to an imposed functionality by late capitalism and the placing in crisis of the premises in which they were enabled. However, the space itself is a container where the temporality defines and gives its functional framework. That is why the purpose of this text manages two inseparable frequencies to analyze the transformations and displacements of a place, an image and a specific context: the space and time.

The thesis starting the text is based on the “contextual interventions” within the artistic practices that are able to transform the social uses of space and provide ways of thinking in order to change their political and social functions. Hence we can consider them as a catalyst and a critical means of experimentation around the society that produces us as individuals. But altering the temporality and spatiality as a cornerstone of the changes and transformations to which these intervention spaces have been exposed has configured these artistic interventions. And we can say that a great part of the contextual art practices methodology is based on the space-time study.

For this purpose this text is meant to analyse, define and investigate the transformations and displacements of a context under production rhythms and spatio-temporal consumption that are grafted on it. In this way Alfredo Jaar reproduces the “heterochronic space” that enables a temporal multiplicity where the rhythms of production and consumption causes the latent temporalities to collide in order to articulate other features of space. And finally the “invasive space” in the case of Gordon Matta-Clark is meant to reactivate the forces of the context of intervention developing stratified spatialities to articulate a hybrid dialogue.

This is managed by these recurrent alterations of temporality and spatiality that constitute modes of resistance to a conception of time and history. Since temporary architectures provide a discursive framework for analysing convulsions and transformations to which the discourses of space are subjected, thus addressing social, political and economic issues from a perspective where these ideals are not self proclaimed, nor are they decreed, but instead

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they are inserted into the production process and configuration of space in the way that relations with the context are made and thought. It is these relationships that release their ideological characteristic, in short, those who develop a representational problem that delve into the confrontation of latent temporalities in space.

In this sense we cannot ignore the interpretations of Edward Soja (1996) that open the way to a possibility of a socio-spatial dialectic to reconsider the notion of place versus space as closed expression. In short, what is meant is to interpret space and spatiality as an interdisciplinary matter. Whereas considering spaces as social, cultural constructs, political and essentially experimental and capable of being lived in. Thus, the three spaces proposed by Soja from the contributions of Henri Lefebvre (2008), attempt to deconstruct the binary logic of traditional spatial thinking.

Soja proposes a first space that belongs to the physical, verifiable material world; a second space referring to the realm of ideas, imagination and mental and subjective performances, and a third space in which the author proposes a new way of thinking about space and social spatiality.

The third space is derived from the definition of urban space in which the symbolic imagination or spatial contextualization is possible and is characterized by the narrative created by politics and culture, but that is also inseparable and interdependent of the other two spaces. As a critical strategy, this third space implies what Soja called the “critical thirdness as otherness” or “the third as other” whereas the third introduces an “other” critical, a choice that speaks and criticises through its otherness (Soja, 1996, p. 75). Soja also breaks the purely binary descriptive nature of spatial planning as a historical, ideological, economic, ecological process, in which space does not act or does not mean more than what it actually produces. In “the third space” Soja advocates a dynamic spatial construction where spatiality is taken into account as an element by itself. The third space alternative expands the scope of the previous two, particularly in its complexity of spatial geographical imagination, which is given by the factor of time experienced and lived, similar to a historiographical proposal of the urban spaces. In this sense Soja says:

Understanding the lived space can be compared to writing a biography, an interpretation of lived time of an individual, or more broadly to historiography, i.e. the attempt to describe and understand the lived time of the collectives or the human societies (...) The best we can do is to selectively investigate, the more subtly as possible, the infinite complexity of life through their intrinsic interrelated spatial, social and historical dimensions and its spatiality, sociability and historicity (Soja, 2008, p. 4041).

2. The spatiality of the political subject: Alfredo Jaar

Rosalyn Deutsche compares the artist Hans Haacke with the next generation of artists that includes Cindy Sherman, Barbara Kruger and Sherrie Levine. Haacke's work, says Deutsche: (...) Invited viewers to decipher relationships and to find content already registered in the pictures, but he was not asking them to examine their own role and participation in the production of images.

Instead, the next generation of artists saw the image itself as a social relationship and the viewer as a subject constructed by the subject hitherto claimed to be separate (Deutsche, 2006).

In this sense, the work of Alfredo Jaar is committed to construction of the subject through the object and space, especially the subject's relationship with the political and social space. Thus, it begins to dissect the image, casting up crucial questions in contemporary artistic creation. Some of these questions are formulated in a continuous process whose answers always are restructured. But if anything characterizes his work, it is critical reflection, or rather the constant doubt about the critique of images. The combination of excitement and media manipulation spread throughout his work from its inception, or put in another way, confrontation, merger and concatenation of artistic practice and political practice in its political-spatial dimension.

In this sense, some works by Alfredo Jaar embrace the form of performances and interventions in public space, materializing in furtive signs, even negligible in the urban landscape, and revealing impossibilities, censorship, abolition of fundamental rights, etc., by the ruling dictatorship in Chile. The declarative and spatial strategies also reflect the idea of replacing a story to mean something else, so characteristic of dictatorial regimes. However

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this process is done with a clear intention to “dialectize” the image, where his creations try to arouse emotions and generate thinking about the appropriation of public and political space. In *Telecomunicación* (1981), through a press clipping, he shows women in Belfast using the old ritual of hitting the road with trash can lids to vindicate the death of an activist. Alfredo Jaar in downtown Santiago aligned six can lids to take a picture. And that is all. The problem here lies in how to deploy spatially that which cannot be represented literally in a particular historical context. Although, maybe it is in *Estudios sobre la felicidad* (1979-1981) where one of his work strategies, repeated throughout his work, is fermented, creating devices in public spaces where people can play a role and whose outcome is unpredictable. The creation of spatial and temporal relational contexts allows a triggering of events that exceeds its significance. Alfredo Jaar proposed transforming the image linked to the spatial discourse, to the social production of space, as Lefebvre would say, and to the reinterpretation of the image from the coordinates of an artistic discourse based on the historical space that becomes social and political time, that is to say historical discourse.

This sociability and historicity is found in the media. These questions often reveal a journalistic setting where you try to generate the voice and presence of a people who had lost their place, their social space. Didi-Huberman explains it as:

A work resists, in this sense, if it knows how to “dislocate” the vision, that is to say involve it as “that which concerns us”, while rectifying at the same time the approach itself, i.e., explain and deploy, explicit, or criticize, by a concrete act (Didi-Huberman et al., 2008, p. 41).

These records lead him to an approach that allows him to articulate his thoughts on the manipulation of images. Thereby he begins to draw press images or advertising modified by his framing from their spatial and temporal context and recontextualizes them through multiple strategies: insertion deviation, spatial relocation, where he makes that duality between the observed and the observer appear, creating distance and what concerns you directly.

Thus, in *You and Us* (1984), he reverses the CBS phrase “If it concerns you, it concerns us” for “If it concerns us, it concerns you” revealing, as noted by Nancy Princenthal “the power

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structures operating in the dissemination of information” (Didi-Huberman et al., 2008, p. 25). This work, carried out in the subway in New York, operating the original version posters coined by him, is one of his first interventions in public space.

And so begins a line of investigation where the presence of the subject in space is the beginning of a process in which the document of a particular situation fluctuates in achieving images before returning to build and shape criticism of that of which the artist has witnessed. On a trip to the gold mines of Serra Pelada, he filmed and photographed the Garimpeiros (independent miners who come in search of fortune), and from these images come the movie *Introduction to a Distant World* (1985), a public intervention in the metro, *Rushes* (1986), the installations *Gold in the Morning* (1986), *Frame of Mind* (1987), *Out of Balance* (1989) and *Unframe* (1992).

The various concerns in the development of these pieces focus on spatiotemporal contextualization of the image by choosing the frame and the assumption of a form-scene where theatricality stops or starts moving our eyes by moving the viewer.

The strategy is then to articulate vision models that change the symbolic relationship and activate another way of meaning. Thus, the first work devoted to the slaughter in Rwanda was a spatial intervention in situ *Signs of Life* (1994). He acquired many tourist cards showing animals from natural parks and sent them to some friends with some brief information on each card including the name of a victim and his condition as a survivor of the genocide. This seemingly small gesture displays a poeticism where the fable and the litote develop an elliptical shape that by its explicit absence convenes a palpable presence.

Another piece of this project is *The Real Pictures* (1995) a work in which the artist buries the images in boxes on which he writes the description of the image it contains. In this image inaccessibility manoeuvre he singles out each of the deaths and dignifies them in the face of the anonymous masses, putting into practice the motto:

“An omission is stronger than an action”.

Another work that emerged from this project is *The Eyes of Gutete Emerita* (1996), which consisted of a million slides representing a million people from minority Tutsis killed in a few weeks. The slides up close all showed the same image: the two eyes of a survivor with

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whom the artist had met. Jaar uses metonymy to articulate a strategy, where he doesn't show the thing but instead shows the effect it produces. This repetition of a look, the look that alludes to memory, but especially the emotion of a recreated event, restructured, made visible in its effects as George DidiHuberman points out: "The myth of Medusa first recalls that the real pain is a source of impotence (...) but the reflected horror, extended, reconstructed as image (...) can be a source of knowledge (...)" (Didi-Huberman et al., 2008, p. 28).

This ellipse resource used by Jaar offers an absence that builds an intersubjective presence on the visitor. This is especially evident in *Lament of the Images* (2002), which brought the aforementioned work together as a whole. However, we should note that in this series of papers Jaar does not delete the images but instead he redistributes them ideologically and emotionally, preferring to formulate a story and make the names visible. Here the investment procedures extracted from the media revert our relationship with the image and deploy a number of tools that allow us to establish a dialectic between the documentation of what is real and the management carried out by the media, thereby modulating our eyes in an appropriate direction to the dominant ideology.

In his installation *The Sound of Silence* (2006) he registers our relationship as spectators and the consumption we make of them, producing new images. In this way, he explores blindness and understanding in one plane of interaction, trying to clarify a particular event through multiple viewpoints. In doing so, Jaar is rethinking not only the limits of the unrepresentable but also the very problem of liability in the face of the images of both photojournalism and the industry that controls the distribution and circulation of images.

Using a text that tells the story of Kevin Carter, a South African photojournalist who became famous for his photograph of a starving child crawling on the floor under the eye of a vulture, captured in a report in Sudan in 1993, Jaar implements an installation. By inserting flashes on a liquid text flowing through the wall, he modulates standard perceptual systems and connotes the industrial character of the images, but he also inverts a political program where words slide under things and things under words.

In this sense, the construction of spaces and times articulated by devices that operate outside of the dominant ideology is subverting distribution channels and is bringing an idea to

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“produce image” that opposes dynamics of hegemonic power. So it should be remembered here what Edward Soja tells us about the construction of postmodernism in his study of spatiality. The idea of image production and manufacturing by the media of hegemonic powers is addressed by the artwork of Jaar in the same sense as Soja discusses space and time: “The postmodern confusion of time and space, in which the temporal continuity collapses in extent and spatial dimension is lost for duplication, it transforms urban culture into a giant hologram able to produce any image in an apparent void” (Soja, 2008, p. 460).

Therefore, the iconicity of image production in which both media producers and passive spectators act and become the artistic process of Jaar, in representing scenes in the same manner as in the game of spatial meanings in postmodernism in which “(...) the time and space become icons themselves and consequently become scenarios” (Soja, 2008, p. 460).

The production image system and art installation that generates the work of Alfredo Jaar is designed from the interpretation of history generated by the media.

This historicity of the media where Jaar finds the subject of his works builds “biographies”, as noted by Lefebvre, and is socially and historically connected with space, even beyond politics, and thus reconstructs the significance of thought and spatial reflection in the work of Jaar.

Perhaps the work of Alfredo Jaar responds to the third space proposed by Soja, in the debate between space, politics and the reception of his works by the viewer. The way in which he deconstructs the meaning of the images and media narratives and restores it to the viewer diversifying their meanings, confusing their identities and proposing an endless game of symbolic metaphors that expand without a final conclusion. As Soja points out, the third space “is not simply derived from an additive combination of their binary background but from a disorder, from a deconstruction and provisional reconstruction of their alleged totalization, producing an open alternative that is both similar and surprisingly different” (Soja, 1996, p. 61).

Soja uses this strategy in his concept of the third space. Breaking the dialectic between binary to display a knowledge that goes beyond opposites, to build an imaginative otherness based on the thirdness, on the third visual and temporal space.

The third space is (...) build even more, to move forward, to continuously expand the production of knowledge beyond what is currently known, Lefebvre organizes the production of space around only to the third in his own long interest in the dialectic of the lived and conceived, the “real” and “imaginary” material world and our thoughts on it (Soja, 1996, p. 70).

The contrast of the images, the dialectic between the experience, the mediated and the simulated in the historical image of the media is the way of processing images that Alfredo Jaar performs in his work.

3. Gordon Matta-Clark: the invasive space

Gordon Matta-Clark is known especially for his artistic interventions in buildings and in certain urban areas. His work was carried out between the sixties and seventies in relation to practices, strategies primarily site-specific, process art, minimalism and conceptual art. His range of proposals extends from cuts in buildings, architectural fragments, and experiments in the kitchen, performances, and appropriation of sunken ruins of urban objects. Matta-Clark and his work were at the forefront of the boldest discussions during these two decades: property, urban planning, architecture and the agenda in the role of institutions in the strategy of the art exhibitions of the seventies.

What is interesting to note in the work of Matta-Clark is the violent gesture of cutting physiognomy in space and of the invasion in the space. This appearance of the invasive cut is one of the hallmarks of the work of Matta-Clark; and we would like to underline its history and the interdisciplinary approaches that can be made from the “spatial choreography” of the section line, separation, fragmentation and invasion following the cut made in space. His gesture causes and conditions the status of the artwork in its ontological security and traditional notion in Western aesthetics in the sense of something perceived as a whole, centrality, concluding, self-determined and rational.

Matta-Clark was referring to his main activity with the term “deconstruct”, pointing out in two directions the reception of his work. First, split buildings without hermetic sealing exist today only as waste and fragments of the photographic record, documentary or movies. But

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this feature is intrinsic to the design of their interventions and is something wanted and desired. Cuts made in buildings, in their most intimate parts, i.e. rooms, stairs, doors and in the same rational structure of the house: entrance, first floor, roof, bearing walls, spatial division into units, etc., make an appeal to the interpretative resistance as something established, defined and stable. These interventions are designed so that the in situ viewer could experience decentralization, vertigo and synesthetic passage through their boundaries, ultimately for the viewer to invade, occupy and penetrate the space.

In 1974 Matta-Clark made a proposition to his dealers Horace and Holly Solomon: he wanted to cut a house. Horace Solomon had bought a house in a neighbourhood in decline, not for the house but for the buildinglot. This opportunity to have a home within reach helped him develop his *Splitting* project. What was a crude act of speculation by Solomon along with the drama that in only a few months it had to be demolished, became added ingredients for Matta-Clark in the artistic intervention, and also meant that his work would not be finally permanent. The House on Humphrey Street in Englewood New Jersey had a prosaic narrative before and after the cutting that Matta-Clark incorporated into his documents. The house was a standard, single-family box type with front and rear porches and the floor was completely symmetrical and rigid. The centrality of the house and the sharpness of its gestalt are decisive in the cutting action. Matta-Clark emptied the whole house and all the debris and objects left by the previous occupants. He was now the new occupant and invader.



Figure 1. Gordon Matta-Clark, *Splitting*, 1974. Source: <http://camilayelarte.blogspot.com.es>. Creative commons.

With this emptying of any human reference Matta-Clark refuses to work with any idea of anthropomorphism. After emptying the house he made two vertical cuts with a chainsaw through the midpoint that divided the house into two halves. This event was recorded with photographs and a film documenting the whole process of partition. Matta-Clark described the process of cutting the house as something akin to a “juggling with the syntax” (Lee, 2001, p. 28). And this is a valid metaphor for intervention, as Matta-Clark plays with the signs of architectural experience, breaking the unity and stability that organizes all the perception of domestic architecture. Cutting, fragmenting, sectioning, mauling, these are the weapons used by Matta-Clark and it is inevitable to interpret the reception of his work as an act of violence and invasion with their interventions.

That brings us to the reflections of Henri Lefebvre about the production of space (2008), which suggest that the “Conceived space” that is projected, reduces experience to the visible and legible. This produces what might be described as the fallacy of “spatial transparency”. The public space is shown as completely transparent, innocent, with no secrets and no surprises in which the actors are appropriate to the areas of consensus. Lefebvre’s spatial

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concern leads to a conception of civic space consensus of public space as a continuation of domestic space.

In this sense, the performative action of Matta-Clark can be understood as the opening of the domestic space outwards to the exterior, to the civic space and consensus that Lefebvre speaks about. But this spatial and gestural transposition of Matta-Clark contrasts with the position in space of consensus, to perfectly match the gesture of appropriation of domestic space to imbalances, differences, the conflict space separations, contradictions and segregation of the cultural and political of public space. As he points out:

The space itself simultaneously a product of the capitalist mode of production, and economic-political instrument of the bourgeoisie reveals its own contradictions. The dialectic emerges from time and is performed; it works unexpectedly in the space. The contradictions of space, without abolishing those from the historical time, emerge from history and convey the old contradictions to another level in global simultaneity; some are tempered, others are worsened, and contradictory set takes on new meaning and comes to designate “something else”, another mode of production (Lefebvre, 2008, p. 182).

Lefebvre's thesis on the production of space is formed on the basis that it is in “space and the space where capitalist relations of production reproduce” (Lefebvre, 1974, p. 223). Therefore the new relationship between the body and the society are defined, as points out Lefebvre, through a dialectical system that covers the entire space, between the dominant space and the dominated space. The contradiction, the dialectics arise from space and violence manipulation as resources of power and the social relationship that develops from the contradiction of treating large-scale space and private ownership of space. Matta-Clark used these contradictory and dialectical effects of space in his work, which connects the space and society, the urban and architectural territories and starts from some of these contradictions to operate the urban space as a criticism towards the fragmentation of the experiences and spaces.

Lefebvre speaks of a negative appropriation of public space and in general about the urban space as being a space domination of capitalism. His proposal to socialize space, open to the participation of the inhabitants can be interpreted and translated into the spatial gesture works

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of Matta-Clark. To open the space of buildings and appropriate them positively i.e. socialize them and eventually occupy the spaces. The appropriation of space is also inserted in the process of dislocation and transposition which is essential to the processes of collage and involves some violence: the construction process begins beyond the pictorial field in a destructive act, gutting and uprooting, and the quality of the act naturally plays a decisive role in determining the nature of the fragment (Parisier, 1983, p. 132).

So says David Rostand on using the cut in the collage. He also says the neat, clean and incisive act of cutting forms is a deliberate act of deconstruction anticipating the reconstitution processes following amputation. We must, however, make a distinction between sectioning and tear: Matta-Clark clearly cleanly severed his objects in a preconceived way, based on the idiosyncrasy and the history of the subject, respecting its functional, formal and allegorical concept before and after cutting.

The post-partition is as important as the integrity of the building before the intervention, because the dissection of the building is based on a pre-existing totality that reinforces the physical and rhetorical act of cutting, opening and invading its privacy. His way of proceeding is not to tear or gut the building but stays true to a plan that has conditions of scale, volume and precision cutting.

In this sense there is a minimalist theatricality in performance. The shape of a regular cut of Matta-Clark is one that allows us to mentally reconstruct the fragment and leaves a visual icon on the place and space imprinted on the retina. It is in this sense that the work of Matta-Clark has a clear conjunction with the neat cut of some collages made by Picasso or Schwitters, or even the type of design of Lissitski or Rodchenko. In an interview Matta-Clark made the marks of his work very clear, his work was “(...) all but Illusionist (...) it is rather a direct physical activity and not to make associations with something outside the own work itself” (Lee, 2001, p. 21). The close relationship Matta-Clark had with Robert Smithson, was of paramount importance; bringing together the notions of Smithson's “site and non-site” and the concept of entropy.

These proposals, however, are based on the work done “in situ” by the possibility of producing the work in locations and spaces outside the continent of the gallery or museum.

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Besides its metonymic displacement of reintroducing fragments in the enclosed space of the gallery, with all kinds of photographic, film and explanatory documentation of the work done. Smithson gave rise to a kind of “entropy of architecture” and certainly Matta-Clark’s work of sectioning the buildings reminds us of this entropic idea of the architecture of Smithson. But the contribution of MattaClark in this sense is overcoming the concrete framework and defined in the work of Smithson, since according to him, it needs a particular place and an entropic monumentality in the form of a ruin.

The work of Matta-Clark as in the case of the work *Day's End* or *Conical Intersect* (1975), in which the intervention is made with simple holes, is separated from the work of Smithson and does not recycle a certain place, but instead it is based on the temporary loan of a physical space within the social and urban fabric of the city. No need for a real and lasting framework. It is the negation of monumentality, as understood by Smithson that stands for an idea of randomness and vacuum material. The idea of Matta-Clark spontaneously reopens the concept of cubism spaces and overlapping planes. At *Day's End* and *Conical Intersect* (1975) the arcs of the holes intersect to form an overlapping withdrawal of circles and arcs. This juxtaposition is far more evident when cutting through the different floors and rooms of the building. This juxtaposition in collage form also refers to the way of inserting “social spaces” through the cuts made by Matta-Clark.

4. Conclusion

Alfredo Jaar's strategy is to propose a scene, an encounter between a public and a picture that reveals the structures of a media world that is disabled by suffering. Thus, it proposes to generate the possibility that acting is possible and desirable. The creation of encounters in his installations takes the viewer into the abyss through the disclosure of a trauma. But here the invisible, the unnoticed and the sign are tense relations not only meaning the actual fact but symbolizing an idea of country, state, nation exposed to colonialism and cruelty. These processes that Jaar modulates in his works are configured as heterochronic spaces using spatial and temporal dimensions of the rhythms of advanced capitalism and mass media that make the latent temporalities break up to articulate other qualities of space.

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In the work of Matta Clark a jump to the social space, to the substrate of time and real space of everyday life is proposed. And that's basically what Matta-Clark explores. By directly intervening in the real social and spatial basis Matta-Clark makes life and the everyday his true artistic matters. Like most artists in the sixties MattaClark puts the value of his work in real time and work as a force in contemporary life. And this is where the inclusion of social, spatial and politics of neo-avant-gardes of the 60s and 70s begins, which in this case we have illustrated with the invasion and occupation of real and imaginary space in the work of Matta-Clark.

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