

The voice from within

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Abstract

This paper presents the research fellowship project *Second Hand Stories* with which I took part in the Norwegian Artistic Research Fellowship Programme from 2007 to 2011.

Second Hand Stories focused on the artistic potential of prefabricated ceramics as a raw material in the production of art. The actual work in the studio formed the core of the project and the written part served as a close reading of the creative process. Looking for verbal alternatives to the detached, academic voice I sought a language that brings us up close to the intuitive processes and deeper motives that are often embedded in creativity. I was interested in how the contents of a text is influenced by the style, genre or tone in which it is written and I explored subjective writing as a means of accessing the knowledge development that takes place in practice when a work of art is created.

KEYWORDS: artistic research, subjective writing, second hand ceramics

Introduction

I am standing in a doorway. It's dark in front of me. I can't make out how large the room is. A dim light is visible in there. The light falls upon various kinds of objects, but everything is vague, unclear. I am drawn to the light, drawn into the room.

I approach the point of light, and put my face close to it. Something happens as I view the objects – the haze disappears, colours brighten. Eventually, one of the objects becomes so clear that I can grasp it. I lift it up, feel its weight in my hand, its surface under my fingertips. As I do this, more of the room emerges. A light that was not there previously is switched on, and new objects become visible. The contours of the room become more defined.

But I am the only one here. Those standing outside cannot see what I see, they can't get close enough. So I start to speak. I describe what I see as precisely as I can: the details of every object, the room in its entirety, and the relative position of everything in it. The more I speak, the more enthusiastic I become, for it is as though the connections between the objects become increasingly distinct as I speak – as though everything in here is linked, and all I need to do is to look around carefully.

While I have been speaking, the room has grown brighter. I can move around freely. Some shaded areas remain, as always in a room, but the open surfaces are now clear of anything to stumble on. I can either stay here or move on. The room now belongs to me.

When writing about my own art, I often get the sense that words and work don't quite match. Like equal magnet poles, they repel one another; as if moved by an invisible force they slide apart. Only by the utmost coercion, and only for short moments at a time, do I ever manage to bring text and work together, surface to surface.

And yet, it was right here, in the quest for satisfactory verbal counterparts to the artistic process, that I came to linger. I sought a voice that truly says what I mean, a voice whose inner timbre I can recognise, the voice of my unarticulated ideas. This captivated me to the degree that it became one of the central areas of exploration during my time as a research fellow.

In "Lighting from the Side: Rhetoric and Artistic Research" Aslaug Nyrnes underlines the importance of paying attention to the impact that the style or genre of a text have on its contents:

[V]erbal language may be a help or a hindrance; it may strengthen, clarify, diminish or even prevent the artistic project from unfolding. The researcher has to be wary to ensure that the verbal language does not govern the situation. (Nyrnes, 2006, p. 20)

How, then, can the artist-writer make sure that the language used follows ones thoughts – and not the other way around? If the aim is to achieve a close resemblance between the unarticulated thought processes leading up to an artistic result and their verbal manifestation – how should the writing be approached?

Second Hand Stories

In an international perspective, the Norwegian Artistic Research Fellowship Programme puts particular emphasis on the artistic element of the projects. Developing artistic skills at a high level is an explicit goal, while the demands for “critical reflection” are more loosely formulated. The approach to the concept of artistic research within the Norwegian Artistic Research Fellowship Programme is characterised by the conviction that:

“[a]rt practice – both the art object and the creative process – embodies situated, tacit knowledge that can be revealed and articulated by means of experimentation and interpretation.” (Borgdorff, 2006, p. 23)

The explorative element inherent in creative work is a constant theme in the discussion on research and artistic practices (Borgdorff, 2006). The nature of the creative process is one of striving towards lucidity, and it is therefore legitimate to claim that all artistic activities, regardless of context, contain this movement – from open exploration, towards a greater understanding.

In the course of working on my project *Second Hand Stories* (Norwegian Artistic Research Fellowship Programme, 2007-2011), this development towards clarity was both a strong personal incentive and my express objective. I was striving for a greater understanding of my own artistic decisions and thematic preferences – and I embarked on the written part of the development project both as an instrument for experiments and as a learning process in its own right.

“Closeness” was a key word and the written part of my research fellowship project served as a form of close reading of my creative process. The purpose of my text was to monitor the artistic development, to follow the creative process like a shadow, and thus to make the concrete artistic-practical exploration comprehensible to the broader public. By writing very close to the creative process I am offering information that no one else could have offered. This is crucial. If someone else could have performed the same study, possibly with greater success – then I can see no reason why it should be done by me.

In the studio

I am seated at my grandmother’s new, round dining table. It is new because she has just moved from her house in the country to a small flat in the city. The chairs are also new, upholstered. From where I am seated, I have a clear view of the kitchenette.

Grandmother is treating us to a little something. Always a little something. And always the small plates. We each get one. They all have the same landscape. I quickly turn the plate so that the landscape is positioned in the right direction. It shows a man fishing, water, trees, clouds – flowers along the edges. We never talk about the images on the plates.



Figure 1. From the series *Under Blue Skies*, 2009. Reworked second hand ceramics, Ø 20 cm.

Mundane objects from the private realm constitute my main raw material and inspiration. It was at the end of a fairly traditional higher education in ceramics some ten years ago, that I first began to approach the fired ceramic object as a potential raw material for a work of art. This was for a number of different reasons. In hindsight, the ones that seem most crucial were, partly, a strong wish to enter into a dialogue with a material that spoke back to me more distinctly than clay did at that time, and partly, an attraction of a more physical nature towards working in a hard material, a material that provided resistance. Little did I know that this was only the first step of a long journey – and that for the years to come the reworking of found materials, and above all second-hand ceramic tableware, would come to influence my practice to the extent of almost complete domination.

Objects from our private sphere evoke feelings and connect us to our past. They are

tangible reminders of what has been. In this way, even the most commonplace object can be seen as a bridge into an individual's world of memories. Some objects, moreover, have been so widely spread that a larger group of people, one or more generations within a particular cultural sphere, for instance, may have a relationship to them. This is particularly true of one of my most important raw materials: plates decorated with landscape prints.



Figure 2. From the series *Landscape Multiple*, 2012. Reworked second hand ceramics, Ø 24,5 cm.

Taking the *Landscape Multiple* series as an example. In this series I stacked landscape plates from different times and different factories. Through openings cut in the middle sections of the plates it is possible to see through the different layers. As a result of the stacking, a new landscape emerges – in the perforated middle section the different motifs are blended.

It all started with the blue-and-white, copperplate-decorated dinner service *Maisema* (Landscape) manufactured in Finland by Arabia in 1882-1975. Similar motifs, pastoral landscapes with a floral border, have been produced in most European countries. Since Arabia's *Maisema* was in production for so many years, the service is still found in many

homes belonging to older generations in Finland. Most countries take pride in their domestic ceramic output and the *Maisema* service is regarded as being typically Finnish – it's “genuine Arabia”.

This seemed paradoxical to me. When you start to study an object such as this, you soon discover how intertwined our cultural history is. Firstly, it becomes clear that the depicted landscape is a fictive composition bearing no relation to any existing Finnish landscape. The fact is that Arabia received the design from its Swedish parent company, Rörstrand, where exactly the same pattern had been used. Rörstrand on the other hand originally obtained the copperplates for its production from England, and *Maisema* is a direct adaptation of the popular English motif *British Scenery*.

The technique of transferring a copperplate print to ceramic goods was developed in Britain in the 1740s and was at its most popular in the 19th and 20th centuries. This method made it possible to decorate large quantities of ceramic goods with a whole range of patterns, and was vital to the development of the European ceramic industry. If we retrace the history of blue-and-white porcelain even further back in time, we end up in the Far East, with its ancient tradition of decorating porcelain objects with cobalt oxide.

Through its layered referential content the blue and white semiotic offers rich possibilities for narrative interventions. According to the British artist Paul Scott:

Blue and white landscape patterns carry complex stories, messages and meanings in their very fabric. [...] They are embellished confections, industrial objects with a visual, cultural, thematic weave of appropriated, recycled images and patterns. (Scott, 2011, p.45)

Paul Scott calls to attention the role this type of commercial ceramics play as an unconscious point of reference – a “cultural wallpaper in our minds” (Scott, 2011, p. 45). The cultural/historical context outlined here is relevant to my project because it provides a narrative fullness to the objects I use as raw material. However, highlighting the historical background of the objects as part of the contents of my work has never specifically been part of my agenda. Instead, I strive increasingly to achieve transformations that do not favour one particular reading, consequently making way for an interpretative openness, so that the frame through which the objects are normally viewed is changed or expanded.



Figure 3. From the series *Going Blank Again*, 2010. Reworked second hand ceramics, Ø 25 cm.

My working method is relatively straightforward. I rework second-hand materials directly by carving, sanding down or modifying it in other ways. The series *Going Blank Again* originated in an intention to “empty” a plate of its decor, removing all traces of the printed decor and thereby achieving a white-on-white effect. But the edges of the blue print were not quite sharp, the cobalt had bled into the glaze surface forcing me to relate to a fuzzy boundary between blue and white. A great deal of blue remained after my first attempt. To my surprise, the image on the plate now most of all resembled a sketch made with a ballpoint pen on white paper. It had the same shade of blue and the same thin, faltering lines as a hastily scribbled drawing.

The *Going Blank Again* series draws attention to the connection between the process behind a visual result and its interpretation. A physical erasure inevitably reveals so much more than merely an absence. In that way, an object that is physically “emptied” of information will never go *blank* again – in fact, the process merely adds a new layer to the object’s expressive contents.



Figure 4. From the series *Unidentified View*, 2009. Reworked second hand ceramics, Ø 22 cm.

My work contains a good measure of exercises to perceive slight nuances, to focus on the intimate. The small format obviously entails certain limitations. What it does not limit, however, is the effect of the objects, their intensity. *Unidentified View* incorporates a striving to make something unreal real, to step into the picture on the plate in one's imagination – like a child, unreservedly, ardently.

The ceramic material of the plates I use is normally four to eight millimetres thick. This is the volume I have at my disposal when building up the details. I start by sanding down the area around - so that the motif is higher than the background. When that is done, I slowly carve out every detail of the building. I work for long periods of time on very small surfaces, constantly comparing the detail with the original. The sculpting progresses through countless small actions, adjustments and changes, until, in the midst of everything, as if by magic - everything is in place. This is something I see. I see when the detail is there, when it has arrived.



Figure 5. From the series *Unidentified View*, 2009. Detail of original plate (left) and plate with sculpted relief (right).

Material-based art

In my day-to-day artistic work, I make decisions based on focused attention, visual testing and careful observation of these tests. I consider the visual, tactile qualities of the material, along with its conceptual, ideational impact. A combination of these two aspects – the sensual, perceptive on the one hand, and the conceptual, associative on the other – also forms the basis for my choice of references and my fascination for the field in contemporary visual culture that fall under the umbrella concept of material-based art.

To me choosing a material-based starting point means allowing the work process to take the form of a discussion. It means accepting a certain number of limitations. My main reason for doing so is that I find it intellectually challenging. I set myself a task, and the task is to follow the direction that the material indicates, to allow myself to be led.



Figure 6. *Untitled (cracked)*, 2014. Reworked second hand ceramics, 54x38 cm.

In recent years contemporary ceramic art has undergone a transformation. The typical progression from clay to finished object via forming, glazing and firing is no longer universally prevalent. Today, the production process can be interrupted at any stage and the final work can just as well consist of fired as of unfired clay, or a combination of both (Twomey, 2007, Adamson, 2009, Veiteberg, 2009, 2011). The Norwegian art historian Jorunn Veiteberg emphasises the term ‘upcycling’ – “[t]he upgrading in status and value that [...] an artistic transformation process entails” in describing a key tendency in contemporary ceramics (Veiteberg, 2011, p. 27). Upcycling refers to a practise where already existing things and trash function as raw materials for artistic work. According to Veiteberg the post-industrial situation, with it’s slow-motion collapse of the European ceramic industry, is the frame against which to read what she calls “one of the few trends in craft that can be seen as something completely new” (Veiteberg, 2011, p. 7).

One of the artists that I refer to in my project is the Swedish ceramic artist, Kjell Rylander. His material has for some time now been generic industrial porcelain - recently in combination with other materials as well. Explaining his working method Rylander states that his intention is “to mess with my education and myself, but also to question the nature of what craft art can be.” (Rylander, 2012, p. 47)

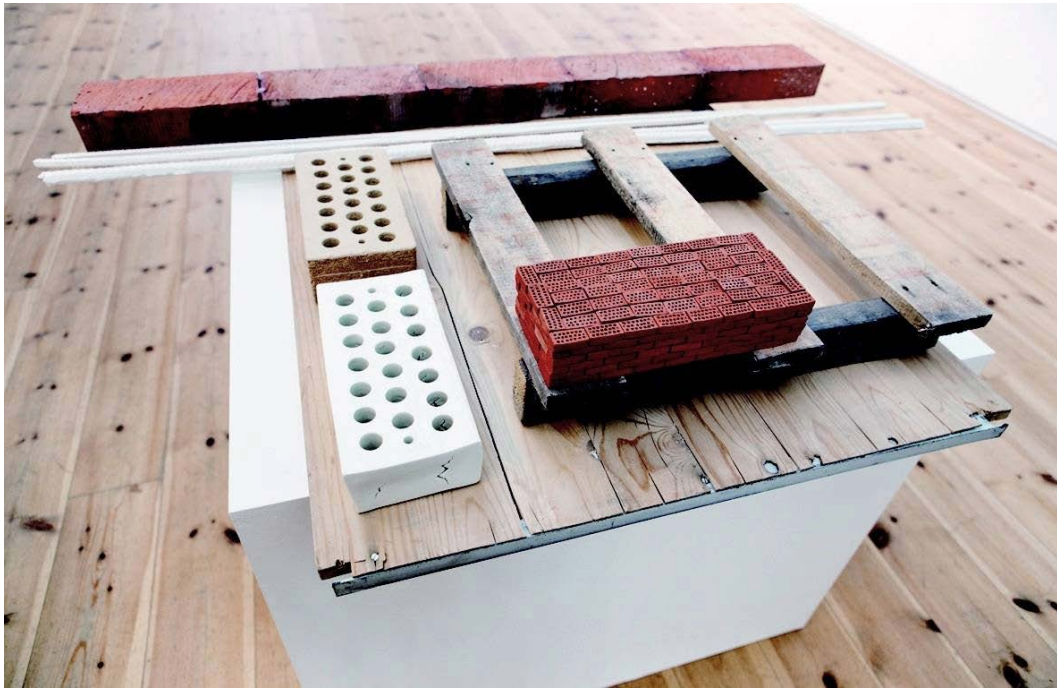


Figure 7. Kjell Rylander, *untitled (portraits of the anonymous)*, 2010. Porcelain, bricks, glue, wood, 88x80x73 cm.

This is the forum of half sentences. An encounter with Rylander's works is an encounter with something that is still wordless and does not easily take the form of words. There is no abundance in them, and therefore there is nothing in them that seeks to please. This is one of their strengths, that muteness, immutability. For just like some sentences in a conversation are left unfinished, and never need to be finished, because we understand each other anyway and the essence would wither and die if we tried – Rylander's works give us a beginning, never more than a beginning. That does not make his works easy to decipher. The viewer simply has to put up with many loose ends, a great deal of uncertainty. And yet, it is precisely what is not there but is left open that makes all the difference, that means that something tangential to the work vibrates, is alive.

In Rylander's works, nothing is taken for granted. What we accept at first glance to be coincidental factors often turn out to be carefully thought-out elements. The sharp gaze, the one we use when we want to understand – and which we often routinely aim at the facade, at the object on top of the plinth – in Rylander's works, that gaze goes astray, is discreetly corrected and gently adjusted. Rylander resets the focus for us, he suggests a sensitive wide-angle perspective.

Kjell Rylander encourages us to consider what is primary and what is secondary, what is front and what is back. More than anything, an encounter with Rylander's recent works is

therefore an exercise in conscious perception, an exercise in manoeuvring our gaze towards the hitherto overlooked, towards that which appears at the edges of our field of vision.

Progressive writing

Within the Norwegian Artistic Research Fellowship Programme there is - or at least was still when I was a part of it - a high degree of open-mindedness regarding both the form and content of the so-called “critical reflection”. For the individual research fellow, this open-mindedness presents an opportunity – it could even be interpreted as a challenge, to experiment with text, to explore different kinds of textuality. What kind of text is meaningful in relation to my project? How can I, as a practitioner, contribute specifically by writing? In what way, in what voices, or in what genres, is this best achieved?

My aim regarding the written part of my project was to lay bare and shed light on a thematic area I was already working in, but which nevertheless appeared obscure to me. The potential of text to reduce the distance between beholder and work of art was my guiding idea. The role of writing was explicitly to facilitate understanding, to bring the visual, concrete result closer to the beholder and, consequently, closer to myself.

In the opening paragraph of *The Writing Life* the American author Annie Dillard vividly animates the writing process as both an explorer’s tool and a road to understanding:

When you write, you lay out a line of words. The line of words is a miner’s pick, a wood-carver’s gouge, a surgeon’s probe. You wield it, and it digs a path you follow. Soon you find yourself deep in new territory. Is it a dead end, or have you located the real subject? You will know tomorrow, or this time next year. (Dillard, 1989, p. 3)

Throughout my research fellowship project I was striving for a deeper understanding of what I do in my practice, and why I do it. If this now sounds as if I did not know what I was doing before, there may be some truth in it. Art production consists of many small and large considerations, with regard to both practical challenges and conceptual, thematic issues. At times, these decisions appear to come easily and spontaneously, but just as often, decisions are made after careful deliberation. In both cases, this process usually takes place tacitly, decisions are made in a silent inner dialogue. To put words to these processes is an effective way of raising them to a conscious level, making them visible. In that way, I regard the writing element in my project to have largely concerned

making already existing, hitherto unarticulated knowledge accessible.

Closeness and distance in language

Art is created through a sequence of minor and major decisions. In these practical, visual, tactile, conceptual and aesthetic considerations, we find what could be called the artist's expertise. This is knowledge that is not directly accessible to anyone else; it is the practitioner's own territory. The term "tacit knowledge" is often used in this connection. "Tacit knowledge" implies a special intimacy with the work, it is understood as something that is hard to verbalise and therefore hard to convey to others. I believe this is a modified truth. Most things can be expressed in words if we really want to. And the artist has nothing to lose by such a demystification. Making this tacit knowledge visible, for instance, by using more adaptable and detailed language, would instead demonstrate the underlying specialised skills and experiences needed for creative work.

The exploration of a subjective narrative voice occupied me during my period as a research fellow. As a writing artist, my approach is that I both can and should say something about my work that could not have been said by anyone else. It cannot really be ignored that when artists write about their own practice they are in the middle of what they are describing. It would be strange if this were not to influence the writing. Couldn't it even be said to be the point, that the artist, thanks to this inside perspective, has access to information that would be out of reach to a more detached eye?

In my textually based work, my approach was one of attentive listening, curiosity and acceptance. I searched for common territory in the things I attempt to describe: the art works and the process by which they were made, and my way of doing it: the language, the voice in which I spoke. I submerged myself in the theme, and trusted that my intuition would move the exploration forward. In consequence, parts of the text I produced emanated from the same source as the art, that is, they were virtually fictional. Thus, language becomes something that does not behold the art phenomenon at a distance – but something that shares the same origin.

By allowing texts to evolve spontaneously in the genre that comes naturally, various levels of the creative process are made visible. In this approach lies an acceptance, a recognition that artistic work may originate in widely disparate aspects of human

existence, and that different text genres may be needed to do justice to this fact.

The way we write determines what we can say. When it comes to really getting close to the artistic process I eventually found the traditional academic text style alone to be somewhat inadequate. The expectations of objectivity, clarity and logical consistency following academic-scientific papers actually have little in common with the driving forces behind artistic work. The reasons for and methods of creative practices are multifaceted. In the same way that there in art is room for irrationality, surrealism and ambiguity – for all the inconsistent and complex sides of human existence – one could posit that texts that aspire to describe art projects, *closely*, also should be able to acknowledge this complexity. I have therefore come to argue for the use of alternative text genres alongside the academic. If verbal proximity is to be achieved, the artistic process requires text genres that are more pliable, that can adapt to the essence of creativity more closely.

However, I did not exclusively engage in subjective writing and I have no interest claiming that one text style is superior to another, or that a subjective, literary or poetic tone could entirely replace the more traditional academic text. My main aim was to develop an awareness of the different textual genres or voices available and to use them with consideration, keeping in mind that “[t]o be unaware of the verbal language is to be ruled by it” (Nyman, 2006, p.12).

Basically, what I propose and hope to exemplify in the written part of my research fellowship project *Second Hand Stories*, is a fruitful interplay between detachment and closeness in writing - a juxtapositioning of texts from different genres. Between these different categories a great deal of friction might well arise and that is in fact just what is intended. As Jan Svenungsson states, “... the existence of contradiction and ambiguity is crucial to good artists’ writing.” (Svenungsson, 2009, p. 5). Through the use of tension and conflict language is given a chance to embrace the complexity of art. Still, there will surely always be blind spots in descriptions of art and art processes. In fact, as artists we should regard this as an encouragement – there are indeed parts of our practices that language cannot reach.

Conclusion

One might imagine that a period as a research fellow would impact on future artistic practices, and especially in such a way that the reflective, analysing elements would continue to play a key role. Although I myself have presented writing close to the process as the most valuable discovery made during my research fellowship period, my practice has by no means become dominated by critical scrutiny. On the contrary, the research project has taught me the importance of differentiating between the various phases of creative work. In consequence, I now have greater confidence in the intuitive, wordless search that usually occurs in the beginning of a project than I had before. This is a vulnerable moment in the work process, and an excessively rigorous, analytical stance can be detrimental. I am convinced that non-questioning, rambling explorations are crucial to the artistic end result – that the complexity and integrity found in good art are qualities that simply cannot be worked out entirely with the mind, and thus, that the artistic output becomes truly interesting only when a sufficient degree of blind groping is involved.

In my research fellowship project *Second Hand Stories*, I expressed myself about a practice that is on the periphery of the established field of ceramic art – the artistic potential of prefabricated ceramics as a raw material in the production of art.

Concerning the written part, however, I have come to see that it is how, rather than what, I have written that has perhaps contributed most to development in the field. By writing close to the creative process the artist presents information that no one else could have provided. This has been an essential aim for me: as a writing artist I have access to a perspective that other writers in the field haven't. The writing artist provides a voice from within – a peep hole into the creative process.

Maintaining an acute awareness of the qualities and potentials of different types of text made it possible for me to remain in charge of the writing process, ensuring that the verbal language did not govern the situation. By choosing to explore verbal alternatives to the detached, academic voice, I consciously took advantage of the freedom provided within the Norwegian Artistic Research Fellowship Programme. (The fact that it was fully possible for me to appoint the Norwegian author Hanne Ørstavik as my second supervisor might serve as an example of this open-mindedness.) This free approach to text genres and an acceptance of a personal narrative voice is something that did bring me

decidedly closer to the very core of creativity. As an artist, if I am to feel any incentive to express myself in words, this is something I do not wish to lose sight of.

If I believed it were possible, if I thought I could explain.

Then I would write about how the objects we live among and the rooms we reside in establish themselves in our minds, inhabit our memories and become part of us. I would write about how they stay with us, as images, as tableaux. How they can come to assume meanings, be associated with a sentiment, a mood, an important or unimportant event. Or simply exist there without distinct meanings.

I would write about how our life journey, our movements in time and space, with others or alone, lingers within us as faintly resounding echoes. How the objects and places, as people, grow familiar and dear to us. And I would write about how the places we once knew but never returned to leave the most distinct images. How the memories that are left in peace lose touch with reality over time, becoming symbols, signs. Thus, we all bear within us a collection of dimly-lit tableaux. And without these, existence would be unbearable – but neither do we know exactly of what use they are to us.

So, if I believed it were possible to describe, that I could explain, I would write about all these images within me – I would say that they are who I am. And hence, that I constantly carry with me a low varnished beech-wood coffee table, a far too pink wallpaper, a gravel walk with sharp pebbles, a Volkswagen that smells of petrol, a brass fish-shaped corkscrew, a pale yellow Finnish post-war prefab with a roughcast facade, a lump of butterscotch in a small box, a blue terrycloth gymnastics outfit, a potato cellar with a cold earthen floor, a staircase with a prickly light-brown carpet, a beach with heavy, warm sand, an asphalt road, a living room suite in brown corduroy, a rusty bus wreck, a dark-blue velvet waistcoat, a playground surrounded by modern terrace houses, a plate with a grey landscape scene, a ditch full of nettles, a backyard with a tall white fence.

This is what I would write about if I believed it were possible, if I thought someone could understand.

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