

Visitor's Guide

21.09.2019 – 26.01.2020

Evelyne Axell, Pop Methods

Derek Boshier, Pauline Boty, Antony
Donaldson, Niki de Saint Phalle, Erró, Jane
Graverol, Peter Phillips, Martial Raysse,
Martha Rosler, Andy Warhol



EVELYNE AXELL, POP ARTIST

This exhibition brings together paintings, preliminary drawings, collages and documents, some of which have never been shown publicly before. They reveal the artist's work methods, making it possible to explore her particular work process, including her abundant use of photographic self-portraits. As an active witness of her time, Evelyne Axell employed the newly available materials to break out of the restricted framework of the canvas and to experiment, for example, with the transparent qualities of Plexiglas. Among other things, this work process enabled her to strengthen the meaning of her works and of this material, which even became somewhat of an obsession.

The project called Musée du Plastique (Museum of plastic) is an edifying example of this. The preliminary drawings of this vast project, which never got beyond the stage of the idea and was acquired in 2018 by the Province of Namur, make it possible to give life, 50 years later, to this imaginary department of the *Musée archéologique du XX^e siècle (Archaeological museum of the twentieth century)*.

Evelyne Axell is an emblematic representative of pop art* in Belgium. Her pictorial work covers a short eight-year period that corresponds to the great period of cultural globalization of the 1960s.

Born on 15 August 1935 in Namur into a bourgeois, Catholic environment that she did not much care for, Evelyne Devaux studied classics, but also followed a course in ceramics at the Academy of Fine Arts of Namur. And yet it is to the stage that she turned after graduating from the Conservatoire of Dramatic Art in Brussels. She would also work for a time as an announcer on Belgian television.

In January 1956, she married Jean Antoine, a young documentary film-maker. Having escaped the family fetters, she gradually opened herself to the world thanks to him. Working together on occasion, he filmed her while she interviewed artists and other artistic figures from all over Europe.

In late 1963 she decided to turn to painting to emancipate herself professionally from her husband. She then visited René Magritte twice a month to perfect her oil-painting technique. At the same time, she went to London to shoot the documentary film *Dieu est-il pop? (Is God pop?)*, directed by her husband. It is in London that she discovered British pop art.

In 1965 Axell found herself confronted artistically with the realities of her time. She was particularly affected by the arrest of Belgian playwright Hugo Claus for public indecency at the performance of his play

*Maascheroen**, in which three naked men portrayed the Holy Trinity. From that moment on, she decided to engage in a form of protest against artistic censorship and for sexual freedom. Her art also advocated the sexual liberation of women, to the point of exhibiting her own image in the role of the muse, emancipating her body and her sexuality.

Sensitive to the dynamics of her time, she naturally abandoned oil painting to explore the range of plastic resins and in particular Plexiglas, the symbol of a change in society, of the transition to the post-industrial world already explored in France by artists of the Nouveau Réalisme (New realism).

She died prematurely in a road accident in 1972, leaving behind her a body of work that reflects her life: dazzling, demanding and uncompromising.

POP METHODS

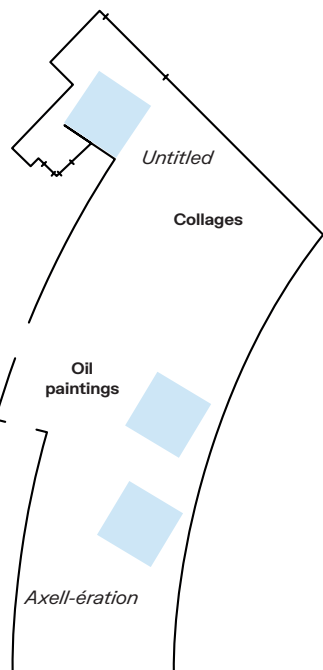
Beyond the acquisition of the preliminary studies for her Musée archéologique by the Province of Namur and the contemporary appeal of the issue of industrial materials, it is the extraordinary discovery of 17 early works dating from 1964 that provides an opportunity to explore the beginnings of her visual work that is at the origin of this exhibition.

Initially, her work was imbued with the concerns of pop art, both in terms of the techniques she used and in the themes she addressed. Later, however, she would detach herself from pop art to focus her interest on the critical power of materials rather than on their form.

Cover. *Le Peintre*, 1970, enamel on plexiglas, 147 x 51 cm, ADAM Brussels Design Museum collection

Before 1967
First works
and influences

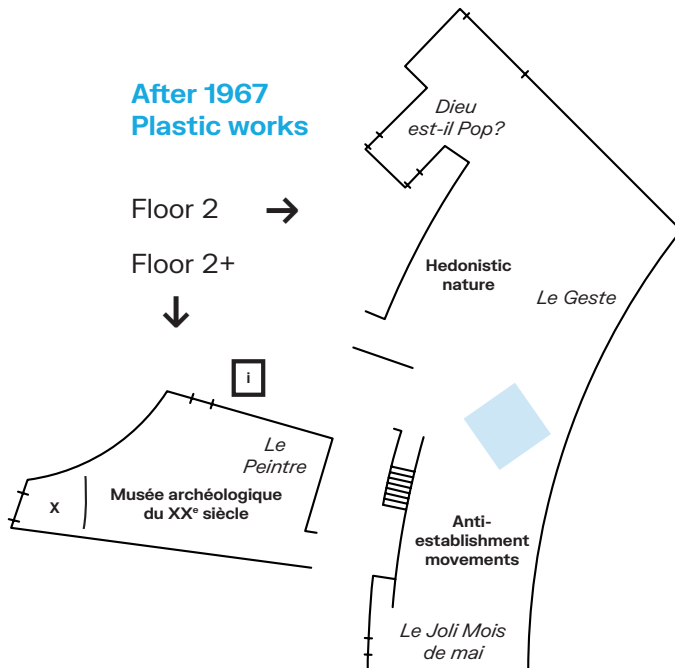
Floor 3 →



After 1967
Plastic works

Floor 2 →

Floor 2+ ↓



01

POP AND SURREALIST IMPULSES

In 1964 Evelyne Axell took part in the shooting of *Dieu est-il Pop?* in London. The film was intended to reveal pop art to the world. It therefore allowed the young Belgian to get to know this new aesthetic, among others through the works of Pauline Boty, who claimed the right to pursue an active female sexuality. The definition of pop art in the 1960s is still valid today: 'the art of the commercial object and mechanical reproduction, a coldly impersonal style', in which the sexualized female body is over-represented and objectified like any other consumer good. Symbolizing progress, the disposable, the mercantile and the media, pop art showed the general public realities that spoke to it : everyday objects, with marked contours and fluorescent colours, sources of entertainment and pleasure.

Axell's work resonates with that of Pauline Boty, a female representative of British pop art, with whom she maintained not only pop synergies, but also feminist ones, thus distinguishing herself from the work of those considered as the main representatives of established, exclusively male pop art (Andy Warhol, Roy Lichtenstein, etc.).

These 17 early works, abundant and colourful, never shown publicly before, demonstrate Evelyne Axell's particular interest in collage*. Dating from 1964, these pictures taken from magazines and pasted on gouache drawings are thought to be Axell's earliest works. And yet collage is precisely the form of appropriation of images drawn from 'popular culture' most valued by pop artists for their immediate attachment to mass culture and the image of modernity they reflect.

UNTITLED, C. 1964

Her first works are a form of appropriation that could hardly be more pop, the images being taken directly from the media and addressing such themes as the body and pleasure through saturated colours and repurposed, direct and obvious forms. But, to distinguish herself from the previous generation of dominant, male pop art artists, Axell here prefers to playfully mix low and high culture, confronting her own cut-out image imprisoned in a frame with a



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work by Giorgio de Chirico*, like a tutelary figure, posing with a sculpture of Minerva (the goddess of warfare) and his painter's equipment. Embracing at the same time her own status as a painter, Axell retains in her assemblage a delicate composition, voluptuously painted shapes and an idealized sky that evokes her encounter with the surrealist painter Magritte a year earlier.

1. *Untitled*, c. 1964, mixed media and collage on paper, 26,9 × 35,8 cm, Philippe Axell collection / 2. *Untitled*, 1964, mixed media and collage on paper, 26,9 × 35,8 cm, Philippe Axell collection / 3. Pauline Boty, *Untitled*, c. 1960/1, collage and paint on paper, 39,7 × 37,2 cm, Terence Pepper Collection



2.

UNTITLED, 1964

Advertisements, magazine images and newspaper headlines are also the most effective means of evoking reproduction and multiplication, which are characteristic elements of this new industrial society. Duplicated, repeated, these images in Axell's collages also stand out through their ability to produce a reinforced symbolism of the frenetic consumerism of her time. In this work, whose eye-catching slogan has been borrowed from the media ('Comment vous inscrire!' – 'How to subscribe!', which may also mean 'How to fit in!'), four identical young girls, differentiated only by the colour of their dresses, are impaled on a barbecue skewer, thus becoming as consumable as pieces of meat. Axell contrasts the carnal colour of the models' bodies with a flat, synthetic ultramarine blue background

which the faces blend into. Lips and eyes, the female face's most seductive features, are thus dissociated from the rest of the visage. We can already find here the aesthetics and themes that she would later develop and that she would pursue in paintings such as *Ice Cream* (1964) and *Axell-Eration* (1965): the eroticized female body and the consumer object appear as emblems of this newly emerging society, distinguishing between realistic and synthesized forms to mark a distance between the represented elements.



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02

REVITALIZATION IN PAINTING

Indeed, the craze for the aesthetic of the 1960s stimulated the artist so much that in fact she fully identified with it, to the extent that she gave up her first job as a media icon and devoted herself full-time to the visual arts. Axell then returned exclusively to oil on canvas in order to assert herself, in a still somewhat traditionalist vision, as an artist in her own right. Thanks to the influence of the surrealist painter René Magritte and his wife Georgette, who took her under their wing, she first painted realistic figures.

2.



AXELL-ERATION, 1965

The car is here the emblem of this rapidly changing society. Its objectness is heightened by flat tints, marked contours and pure colours. The English pop artist Antony Donaldson had, just before her, repeatedly dealt with the theme of the racing car and this major representative he adored: Jim Clark. It was also an opportunity for her to explore movement and speed through the treatment of colour, as an optical displacement crossing our field of vision.

From a technical point of view, Axell's painting provides clues about her compositional methods. For example, we can perceive the

mark of the tip of the compass that she was already using to draw her geometric shapes. However, in this first phase of her work with oil painting, Axell still leaves brushstrokes visible, adds volume by overlaying tones and shades, letting sensuality shine through the fine bone structure of her own feet. *Axell-Eration* thus becomes the reflection of her hedonistic and liberating viewpoint of the modern woman. She drives, dominates the road, moving at the same speed as the man, if not faster (given how her foot is pressed down hard on the accelerator pedal, to the extent that she has lost her red court shoe, a property of the strong and seductive femme fatale). Axell is all the more captivating because of the subtlety of this provocation, this repurposed exposure, the fiery exuberance and the orgasm implicit in this image.



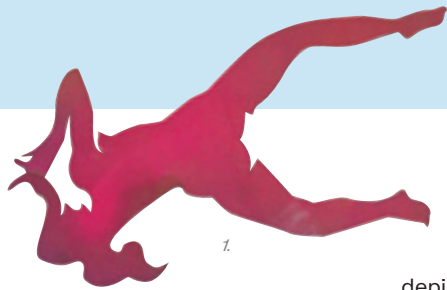
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1. Antony Donaldson, *Medal for Jim Clark*, c. 1939, oil on panel, 162 x 155,5 cm, Leicestershire County Council Artworks Collection / 2. *Axell-Eration*, 1965, oil on canvas, 52,5 x 63,5 cm, Philippe Axell collection

03

SELF-PORTRAITS

A figure recurs throughout her work: her own image, derived from photographic self-portraits that she transposed onto cardboard by means of a pantograph*, creating silhouettes that serve as a shape as such or as a stencil. The photographic self-portrait played a decisive role in her artistic process. It is first of all a technical advantage – taken by her husband, these available images were a handy model for her – but very quickly this pictorial double covered other issues and enabled her to investigate the theme of female individuality as well as the double.



LES AMIES II, 1969

In Axell's work, woman adopts sexualized poses. However, man has here disappeared from the picture. This fascination with the theme of the mirror, of the double, also announces the subject of female homosexuality, which is still underlined by ambiguous titles. In *Les amies II*, Axell

depicts two variations of herself, versions that begin to blend and merge as a kiss is imminent. Her auto-erotic gaze heralds the women's sexual liberation movements that emerged in the 1970s. Moreover, in this very personal feminist vision, her self-portraits fundamentally break the painter/muse relationship of the male painterly tradition, since she fulfils both these roles.



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04

CREATIVE PROCESS

Evelyne Axell always had a passion for drawing. Many of these are stand-alone works, but they often also served as the first step in the realization of a more ambitious work. In such a case, a tracing sheet is used as an intermediate support between the study and the work.

During the last two years of her life, she produced many works on paper that no longer served the role of aesthetic study: cut-out drawings, coloured with felt and glued on cardboard that had already been coloured or silvered. Thus, her versatility appears both in her drawings and in the works themselves.



3.

1. Template for the silhouette of « Plongée », 1966-1967, paper / 2. *Les Amies II*, 1969, enamel and spray on plexiglas, 42 x 65 cm, Philippe Axell collection / 3. Creation process for « *L'italienne* », 1969, photographic selfportrait, copy on tracing paper, pencil and pen on paper, final work with enamel on plexiglas

LIFE IN PLASTIC

Like some of her contemporaries, Evelyne Axell also turned to new materials that were becoming widespread at the time, particularly plastic and its derivatives, which promised her many possibilities. In 1967 she discovered Clartex* and, filled with enthusiasm, overlaid the cut-outs, playing on their transparency. This allowed her to develop a more sculptural aspect of her work. When the Clartex factory closed down, she turned to opaline Plexiglas and Perspex*. To enhance her work with light and dimension, she also painted with car-body enamel, rested her transparent plates on aluminium or formica* supports, and used synthetic fur to highlight parts of her models' bodies. Her experimental nature was therefore technically innovative compared to almost exclusively male American pop artists like Andy Warhol. Indeed, for Axell the use of plastic was not an opportunity to explore the seriality of a work of art like Andy Warhol did with silkscreen printing, since each of her paintings remains unique and non-reproducible. However, this transition did bring her closer to one of their features, since she would use mechanics and the non-expressiveness of matter to erase her artistic touch as much as possible.



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LE GESTE, 1967

This material innovation is found in the work most representative of this sculptural aspect, *Le Geste*. The Clartex sheets that Axell uses are three millimetres thick. She uses the transparency of the material and its thickness to overlay shapes and give depth to her painting, and even a sense of perspective given the multiplication of the figure. These repeated silhouettes are sealed between Clartex sheets, held firmly all the while leaving a thin intermediate space. At work here is a play on transparency,

opacity, reflection, shading, overlapping colours. A changing work in the face of three anonymous bodies, whose gesture has been frozen in time. Thanks to the use of plastic, she also reinforces the objectification of the female model. Thus, the evocative force of the raised finger of these naked silhouettes turning away from us is increased by the use of pure and artificial colours.

1. Andy Warhol, *Portrait of Joseph Beuys*, 1980, silkscreen - multiple 41/150, 102 x 80 cm, collection of the Province du Hainaut - dépôt BPS22 - Charleroi, (multiplied by 3) / 2. *Le Geste*, 1967, clartex and enamel, 48 x 42, 5 cm, Philippe Axell collection

06

ANTI-ESTABLISHMENT MOVEMENTS AND HEDONISTIC NATURE

Axell's work draws its anti-establishment force from an existential dynamic, a revolutionary setting, the liberating atmosphere of the 1960s. At that time, eroticism, like art, had changed perspectives: from aesthetics to criticism. This choice for an erotic unveiling was evident from the very beginning of her work. In works such as *L'Irlandaise*, *Femme-homard*, *La Belle endormie* or *La Petite féline rose*, Axell asserted, in a relaxed way, her right to express female pleasure. But, sensitive to the events of May 68*, she deliberately transposed the solitary sweetness of desire to the dynamics of collective movements, thus affirming that one should never go without the other.

LE JOLI MOIS DE MAI, 1970

The triptych titled *Le Joli Mois de mai* (1970), a masterpiece in Plexiglas, is the culmination of her political commitment. Each of the three panels presents a form of protest against the previous generations. It represents a group of young people, dominated by the silhouette of a young girl waving a red flag (Caroline De Bendern*, a legendary activist nicknamed the 'Marianne of May 68', whose image at a student demonstration featured prominently in the media). We are far from Delacroix's revolutionary voluntarism, since it is no longer freedom that guides the people but an expression of collective desire, of the mass erotic dynamic resulting

from the assembly of young undressed hippies. Axell personalizes this discourse through her side panels. The panel on the left is a portrait of Pierre Restany* (influential art critic, defender of the most innovative arts) with his hand raised, whom she represents as a liberation guru. In May 1968 he had asked for the Musée National d'Art Moderne in Paris to be closed 'for lack of public utility'. Having chosen to tie his destiny to that of the emerging practices, Restany was also interested in the work of female artists, a battle she herself led. On the lower right edge, we can in fact see a portrait of herself, nude and holding her painter's gear, representing her own battle for recognition as a female artist.



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1. *Le Joli Mois de mai*, 1970, enamel on plexiglas, 200 x 350 cm, Provinciaal Museum voor Moderne Kunst, Ostende

LE MUSÉE ARCHÉOLOGIQUE DU XX^e SIÈCLE

(THE ARCHAEOLOGICAL MUSEUM OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY)

« Project for an archaeological museum of the twentieth century

Department : age of plastic

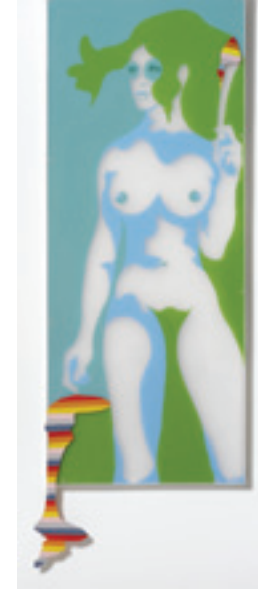
Results of the excavations undertaken in the so-called « AXELL » burial mound
(Northwest of Asia in the region formerly called « EUROPE »)

This 'environment'* designed in 1970 for the Apollinaire Gallery in Milan had been accepted at the time by its director but was never realized. For the artist, the challenge of this project was not only to 'show visitors of the future that this material had entered our lives in the most varied forms and for the most diverse functions', but also to reveal its limits (since she presents it as a material that has vanished and has long been forgotten).

In this environment devoted to plastic, Axell had imagined bringing together original works and copies, everyday plastic objects, but also her own plastified mummy!



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contributes and adds value to the study of the work. Indeed, this painting can be read as an a posteriori manifesto of her artistic vision: Evelyne Axell portrays herself naked, brandishing her brush like an attribute, letting traces of paint with artificial and synthetic colours drip down. It is through the woman's body, and first and foremost her own, that Evelyne Axell asserts her style. It immediately emerges from the outline of the forms and the choice of the attitude that the painter intends to give to these nudes the image of a free woman, unashamed, confident in herself and her femininity. She assumes the role of her own muse, but also, and doubly, that of the historian, since she inscribes herself on her own initiative in the history of art, by displaying her self-portrait in a museum of the future, itself her own creation.

LE PEINTRE, 1970

Her self-portrait, *Le Peintre* (1970), was chosen to replace *La Vénus aux Plastiques*, initially planned by Axell but never made. Only one drawing remains, representing the naked goddess holding four pieces of Plexiglas in her hand. In consultation with Philippe Axell, Evelyne Axell's son, the scenographer and the curator agreed to present *Le Peintre* in order to remain as faithful as possible to the forms of the original Venus. This one is bordered by a 'period copy' of this Venus, as well as a current copy, as Evelyne Axell wished.

Le Peintre therefore does not disrupt the original project, but nevertheless



3.

1. Map for *Musée archéologique du XX^e siècle*, drawing on tracing paper, markers, 29,5 x 42 cm, collection Province de Namur / 2. *Le Peintre I*, 1970, enamel on plexiglas, 147 x 51 cm, ADAM Design Museum collection, Bruxelles / 3. Study for the *Venus of Plastic - Musée archéologique du XX^e siècle*, drawing on tracing paper, marker and pencil, 42 x 29,5 cm, collection of the Province de Namur

GLOSSAIRE

Pop art: Abréviation de Popular art, mouvement artistique et culturel s'inspirant d'objets de la vie quotidienne et des médias de masse et caractérisé par des œuvres colorées, décalées ou kitsch. Bien que né en Grande-Bretagne, il s'est étendu à tous les pays industrialisés. Andy Warhol en reste une des figures emblématiques.

Maascheroen by Hugo Claus: A provocative Flemish poet and playwright, he caused a stir with this play at the 1967 Knokke-le-Zoute International Experimental Film Festival by having three naked men portray the Holy Trinity. Given the experimental setting of the festival, the spectators were not shocked in any way. The judiciary, on the other hand, charged Claus with affront to public decency. This accusation caused an outcry in the Belgian artistic and literary world, which no longer tolerated these acts of artistic censorship.

Pop collage: Accumulation of news photos, advertisements, comic strips, cinema posters, art reproductions, political documents, etc., assembled in collages reproduced in saturated, colourful compositions made up of discrepancies and oppositions. Often produced in series and with a focus on current events.

Giorgio De Chirico: A pioneer of modern art, at the source of Belgian surrealism, in particular of René Magritte. These artists were inspired by his lyrical approach, his mysterious atmosphere and some of the themes that permeate his work.

Pantograph: A drawing instrument in the shape of a double compass used for reproducing a motif on a different scale, whether enlarged or reduced.

Clartex / Perspex / opaline Plexiglas: Clartex, a type of polyester board, manufactured in Brussels, commercialized for a short period. Translucent and available in various colours, it was usually 1 to 1.5 mm thick, its light transmission was optimal. Plexiglas was used as an acrylic glass, a plastic material more resistant and flexible than pure glass, but with the same transparent qualities. It was also more resistant than Clartex. When opaline, Plexiglas takes on a milky hue with iridescent reflections like those of an opal. It is therefore more opaque, but always lets light pass through. Perspex is a British equivalent of the registered trademark Plexiglas.

Formica: Laminated resin sheets. This material became very popular on the European market in the early 1950s, particularly for covering the tops of kitchen furniture. It became a symbol of the post-war industrial renewal thanks to its very modern appearance and because it was practical and easy to maintain.

May 68: In May and June 1968, in France and neighbouring countries, a series of revolutionary demonstrations were held against capitalism, consumerism and American imperialism. May 68 is defined above all by numerous student demonstrations, general and wildcat strikes, and a vast anti-establishment revolt of a social, political and artistic nature.

Caroline de Bendern: Young British activist who became a muse in spite of herself, when, tired of walking during a demonstration, she climbed onto the shoulders of her friend, the artist Jean-Jacques Lebel, who asked her to hold his flag (the flag of Vietnam, then at war with the US). A photo of this moment taken by the reporter Jean-Pierre Rey and published on the cover of Paris Match made it the symbol of the revolution, the 'Marianne of 1968' (the cliché being presenting formal similarities to *Delacroix's Liberty Leading the People*).

Pierre Restany: French historian and art critic. A hugely influential figure, he initiated the creation of the Nouveau Réalisme (New realism) group, to which several women were close, among them Sonia Delaunay, Séraphine de Senlis and Niki de Saint Phalle. He thus largely integrated female artists into his history of art. He commented on the cultural significance of the student demonstrations of 1968, following which, on 22 May, he called for the closure of the Musée National d'Art Moderne, considered a dusty and 'useless' museum.

Environment: A variant on the artistic installation. However, while the visitor generally moves around an installation, here the visitor enters an environment to immerse themselves in the work of architectural dimensions; it is a space created on the basis of visual and artistic ambition.

This book is published on the occasion of the exhibition

EVELYNE AXELL, Pop methods

Derek Boshier, Pauline Boty, Antony Donaldson, Niki de Saint Phalle, Erró, Jane Graverol, Peter Phillips, Martial Raysse, Martha Rosler, Andy Warhol

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