

Master of Fine Arts Thesis

**Folds**

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## **Prologue**

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## Introduction

I was in the living room, conflicted. In front of me stood my mother and the rest of my blended family. People were yelling, fighting, and pulling each other apart. My mother was caught in the middle, undefended. I desperately wished I had the power to do anything to help the situation but I was too young. I remember thinking to myself “there is nothing I can do, nothing I could be, I am stuck in a seven-year-old body.” I should have left the room, but I did not. Even if the only thing I could do was to bear witness helplessly, I wanted to remain by my mother’s side. Standing silently in the opposite corner of the room was my way of letting her know that I was with her. For the first time in my life, I felt the urgency to exceed my own body and transcend my entity.

The memory of this experience remained vivid and contributed to define my art practice. I investigate the relationship between intimacy and identity through the act of concealing and revealing myself. Operating through the presence and absence of the body, my work bears a significance that is both physical and emotional. It speaks of a state of mind, but more importantly of a state of being.

This paper discusses the different layers of meaning through which concealment and revelation are present in my work. The first section addresses the notion of wearables and the act of physically obscuring the body. The subsequent chapter explores the process of interiorizing and exteriorizing oneself through language and words. Lastly, this essay delves into the spiritual stance of

revelation by establishing a relationship between my methodology of work and the search for an emotional and intellectual transcendence.

## Permeable Layers

I understand wearables as extensions of the body where the boundary between the two is permeable. The concepts of layers and skin constitute metaphors that allude to a broader system of identities and social construction. They operate through a push-and-pull involved in the act of covering oneself and shedding layers.

Textiles echo the softness of our flesh, but also the blankets we cover ourselves with. These covers are ubiquitous in our lives and they become an inherent part of our social habits. From the moment we are born, we are wrapped in a blanket that symbolizes the comfort and the protection of our mother's womb. During funeral ceremonies, clothes are commonly used as symbolic elements that seal the deceased's transition from life to death, from presence to absence. We spend a lifetime making countless decisions defining how we want to cover ourselves and what we desire to reveal. I am interested in the physicality of the materials we use, but also in what sense these habits – sometimes rituals – inform the way we negotiate identity and intimacy.

These aspects are explicit in Ann Hamilton's immersive installation *Habitus*, which took place at the Fabric Workshop and Museum in 2016. Combining textiles, text and performances, the installation was created as to foreground the viewers' tactile apprehension by allowing them to activate the large-scale cylindrical curtains throughout the space. In her exhibition catalogue the artist discusses the importance of textiles in her work. She cites:

“Coat and tent are the first portable architecture of the body; a flag carries the symbol of nationality; a folded blanket is a story of trade... We speak of tightly or loosely knit social fabric, of a complex tapestry of cultures, of political and technological webs. Not all relations and not all fabric are woven.”<sup>1</sup>

By establishing a relationship between clothing and social experiences, the artist blurs the boundary between skin as a biological envelop and that of a social construction. In this context, the distinction between skin and cloth is permeable as they interchangeably define one another, sometimes simultaneously.

What are the implications of metaphorically wearing your own skin? This question has brought me to create a series of banners in 2018, a piece called *(Un)Covered*. The scope of this project evolved from a painting by Gustav Klimt titled *The Three Ages of a Woman*. It represents the symbiotic relationship between a mother and child, as well as an older figure standing in the back. I was always fascinated by the presence of the three figures in the painting and how the older woman in the background appears to be receding, which contrasts the mother and child who hold on to one another, rejoiced. The old woman is depicted fully naked, which alludes to the fragility of her matured body. She presses her hair to her face with her hand, covering her face simultaneously. The posture of this woman invokes in me an existentialist and sorrowful feeling. Despite her nakedness, she covers the most singular part of her being: her face.

1. Phillips, Patricia C. *Ann Hamilton: Habitus*, Fabric Workshop and Museum, 2017, p.5



This led me to a series of photographs where I re-enacted the pose, naked, until I managed to get a photo where my posture was fairly similar to the painting. I printed one of the photographs onto a life-size piece of fabric and documented the performance of wearing it. This led me to realize that I could duplicate the process of printing a life-size image of myself – wearing the fabric with the print of my body – onto a new piece of fabric. Slowly, this process evolved into a series of iterations, comparable to a recursion of portraits where each layer references the previous one.





Each print manifests a temporal density that draws the viewer into the complexity of its composition. The layering of images alludes to the element of time involved in the generation of each photograph. Altogether the juxtaposition of the prints constitutes a broader narrative that speaks of the evolution of the image of the figure over the recursion. The alteration process of the body creates an evolution where each print can be contextualized in relationship to the previous one. This development is categorised by an increasing abstraction and recession of the figure. In the first image, the body is equally present and absent. Despite its distortion, it remains identifiable as a full body.

Around the top part of the head, four fingers are curling up as to follow the curve of the forehead. They are placed against the hair which covers the face of the figure creating a veil behind which the identity of the subject is obscured. Looking closely at this detail, the fingers are absolutely flat and lack any volumetric quality suggesting that they are printed and embedded in the fabric of the image. Around the hips of that same figure, two hands are stacked upon each other as if they were simultaneously caressing and holding the fabric. In the second iteration of the image, however, the flesh becomes literally absorbed into the fabric of the work until some sections of the skin completely recedes from the overall image. In the lower half of the composition, the figure seems to be levitating off the ground as the legs have gone absent. Similarly, the shoulders appear contracted as if the figure was trying to exceed its own envelope, leaning backward. The only detail that grounds the image into the same relationship to

reality as the viewer is the hand resting against the head. It chaotically holds the fabric against the figure.

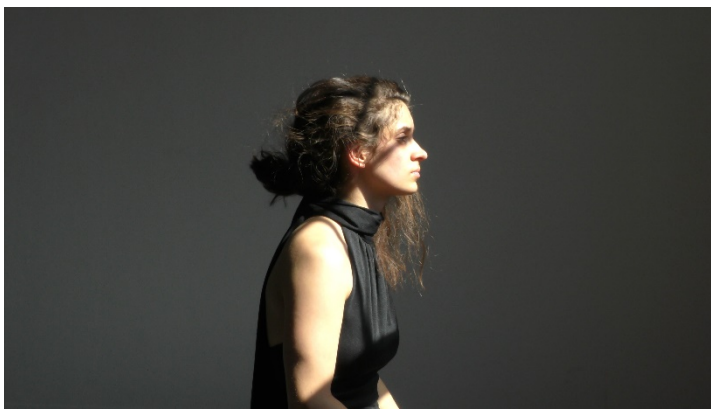
Nudity reinforces the rawness of the gesture and foregrounds the immediacy of the flesh in the viewer's encounter with the work. In each print, the folds in the fabric create a sense of push-and-pull that alters the initial image of the figure as to create a dysmorphic body. It is the tension of the skin and the malleability of the flesh that urge the viewer's investigation. The relationship to the body is granted, but not ruled. In this series, the boundary between the particular and the general is disrupted. The ambiguity of the subject is fundamental as it breaches the hierarchy between the singular and the universal. In *Of What One Cannot Speak* (2010), author Mieke Bal investigates the shifting perspective between the self and the other in relationship to metaphoring. She cites "the political must account for dialogue between the particular and the universal in favor of the singular, so that what affects only a few now affects all of us, and political indifference can no longer be an option."

In the video *Forever Renewed Yet Forever the Same* I further investigate the dynamic of the give and take in the act of concealing and revealing myself through the use of fabric. In this performance, a black segment of fabric of approximately 25 yards unfolds behind me as I am facing towards a source of

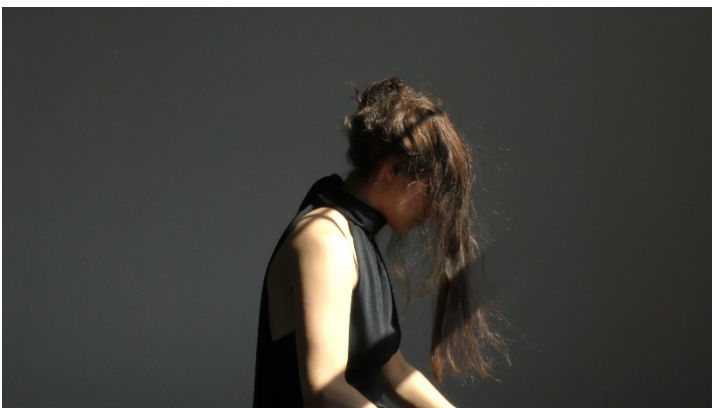
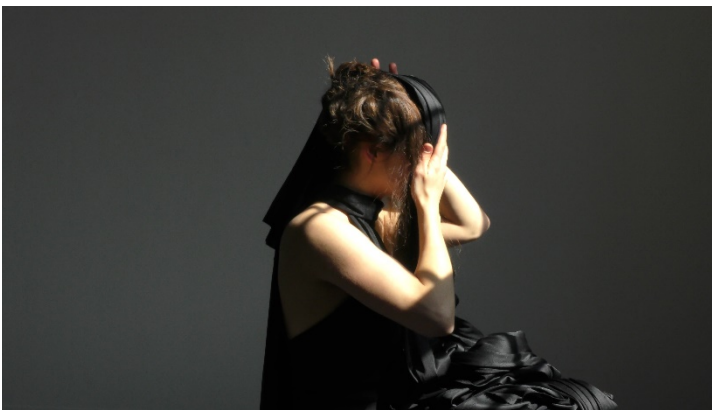
2. Bal, Mieke. *Of What One Cannot Speak: Doris Salcedo's Political Art*. University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2010, p.89

light, my profile to the camera. The frame of the video is restricted to the upper part of my body in order to foreground the importance of the gesture and the movement across the head. The viewer can assume that I am kneeling down, similar to a praying position. As the video starts, my hands slowly but continuously pull the fabric from behind me across my head. I repeatedly move my hands across the textile and drag it towards the source of light while simultaneously obscuring my own profile. In this video, the head acts as the very pivotal point from which the movement occurs. In the process of holding on and letting go of the cloth, there are moments where my hands are simultaneously pulling my hair, creating an analogy between my own body and the textile. The cloth becomes an extension of my entity, both physically and metaphorically. Bathing in sunlight, my hands cast shadows along my arms as they cyclically move back and forth. These moments of darkness along my skin are reminiscent of the black tone of fabric and reinforce the analogy between the cloth and my body.

This shift in the dynamic between the performer and the fabric is emphasized by the second half of the video where the sequence is playing in reverse. At this point, the gesture is ambiguous and the relationship between the act of pulling and pushing against the cloth is blurred. It is only at the very end of the video – and thus beginning – that it is fully removed from my body.







## **Streams of Consciousness**

The dynamic involved in the process of asking questions and negotiating answers – whether that be with other people or ourselves – has shaped how I approach my work. In the process of choosing the specific words that I want to communicate with my viewer, countless of rolls of papers filled with text remain unrevealed.

The state of concealment is embedded in my studio writings, which represent the compulsion of my mind to generate answers in regards to social construction, religion, and philosophy. Most of these questions are kept alive as they remain unanswered. They become surfaces of reflection on which I can project myself and seek an escape for my mind. Engaging in large-scale writings is a method of thinking through writing where the gestures of my body become the authority to which I respond. The accumulation of text and its iteration become a bodily experience from which I generate words, step back, and try to make sense out of the thoughts that flood my mind. My studio embodies a physical manifestation of my thought process, symptomatic of my obsessiveness to understand my role and my purpose, both as an artist and a human being.

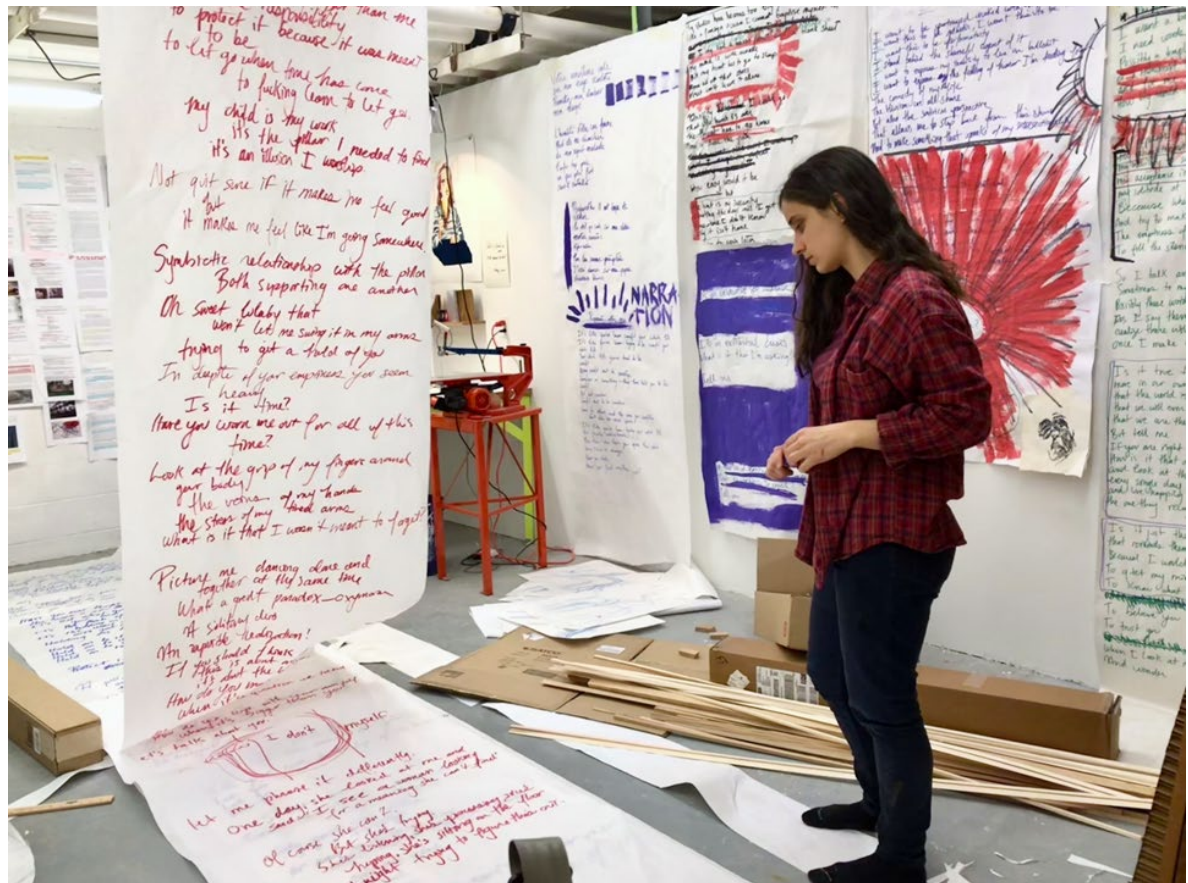
In my studio, giant rolls of paper unfold throughout the ceiling and the walls as to create an architecture of thoughts like streams of consciousness compulsively stacked up against the wall. While some of these writings have been displayed on the walls for as long as I can remember, new ones are constantly being produced and layered on older ones. I remember seeing visitors

on their toes as they were trying to read the flow of words unfolding throughout the ceiling of my workspace. Even when the door is closed, there exists a sense of the immenseness of text from the roll of paper that is wrapped above the door which reads, *Let's start from the beginning...* The door opens to a giant scroll that is systematically hanging from the pipes above the room, creating a series of arches underneath the bold light. As the roll of paper reaches the end wall, it drops to the floor and keeps unfolding towards the door, creating a circle of thoughts that my studio is barely large enough to contain. Over time, the paper that lays on the floor started to bear indexical prints of my passage due to the numerous footsteps that now cover it. The usage of distinctive colors demonstrates the several phases of iteration and the different mediums such as paint, ink, and even drawings that I impulsively taped onto the sheets. Despite my attempts to cover sections of the text, you can still discern the letters beneath as the marker permeates through the medium. This extensiveness of these paper works points to the cyclical nature of my thoughts as similar words keep coming back and sporadically appear in the texts. Altogether, the rolls of paper that cover the walls and the ceiling of my studio bear a significance that is both physical and conceptual.









The writings in my studio share a devotional undertone where the repetition alludes to a form of commandments that I claim for myself. It is almost as if I was trying to discern my thought process by establishing rules for thinking and speaking. Compulsion comes across the extensiveness of the writing itself, but also the necessity to exteriorize the questions that orchestrate my mind until they become nearly tangible. Interrogations are addressed to the audience in spite of the fact that I am the only person who truly reads them. These questions are self-reflective and they demand immediate answers. The word *REPEAT* is sporadically present, as if the text was referencing the compulsion of my mind as I generate queries and try to figure out their meaning. I find myself repeating my own questions, trying to make sense out of everything while I keep reading. When I finish writing, I take a moment to step back before I read out loud and record my voice while I am doing it. At once, I occupy the roles of reader and narrator. The shifting voice forces me to step back in order to conceptually rearrange what I think I know.

Tell me:  
When Narcissus stares at his reflection  
And falls in love with his image  
Is it the image itself  
Or the act of looking *for* himself  
That he worships so much?  
Tell me

A friend of mine came to my studio one day and sat quietly for a long period of time. He was staring at the role of paper arching throughout the ceiling and admitted that he never read the text in spite of the fact that he had been in my studio several times before. This made me realize that the text was not only personal, that the environment it created became hostile to other people. It took me a while to be able to translate the compulsiveness of my writings into a piece that could exist in the gallery. Instead of trying to convey the energy of my studio writings outside of my personal space I decided to translate this moment of retrospection to the viewers by asking them specific questions. I do not wish for my audience to find immediate answers but rather to contemplate the scope of their meaning. This shift allows me to share with the viewers the same questions as the ones that shape my work:

Flow of power bathing in pure light.

I need to know:

What is the topology of your intimacy?

What is your architecture of thought?

Increasingly in my practice, intimacy becomes a catalyst for a moment of empathy where it embraces contemplation rather than confrontation. I pay attention to children and the way they hold their hands against their ears when someone screams and requires them to listen in spite of themselves. I also try to remember and re-enact the most powerful moments when I was younger and

someone would kneel down in front of me to address a conversation. The act of vulnerability involved in the difficulty of communicating both verbally and non-verbally – between the person who speaks and the one who listens – is another reason why I now think of my work in terms of whispers. This metaphor between the act of seeing and listening transposes in my work through the intimacy that governs the relationship between the artwork, the figure, and the viewer.

No one listens to someone yelling.

## Until It Transcends and Transforms

I come from a family where money is not granted and hard work rules. *Each minute counts*. No one in my family ever attended university and both of my parents struggled to make financial obligations each month. I watched my parents going to work wearing nearly the same clothes every single day. During their absence, I remember feeling like a lifetime would go by. Outside the time spent trying to make a living, it always seemed like there was little room left for *living*. My father always told me to get a job that pays well because he always wanted me to have the quality of life he never had. Albeit romantic, all I ever wanted was to come home every night with a sense of fulfilment. I have always created with the conviction that I must dedicate myself to what I believe in and to fully give myself to my artistic practice. There has not been a single day in my studio where I have not felt a deep gratitude for the opportunity that I have of simply sitting in front of my desk and ask myself: what needs to exist?

Labor is the emotional stance of concealment in my work. It is manifested in the cyclicity of my process and the act of systematically repeating actions in the faith that they will transcend and transform themselves. It is a devotional practice through which I interiorize myself and remain at peace with the thoughts that flood my mind. Making is my manifesto. In my commitment to the work, I cherish the sensibility to details and the relationship between the physicality of the work and that of my own body. I am devoted to the time it requires, to the meticulousness it necessitates, and to the precision of my hands. I believe that

the labor involved in the making of an artwork is just as important as the conceptual discourse that frames it. In this regard, my practice bears the seed of this ideology.

For a very long time, I avoided as much as possible the act of being physically present in the work because I was contextualizing my practice exclusively through the lens of labor. In fact, I was afraid that using my body and my image in the work would never be enough – I was caught in the false anticipation that the work always needed to be more than what I could provide it with. I did not know where to begin, stuck between the apprehension that my entity was simultaneously too restrictive and too elusive.

The foregrounding of my image is a drastic change from my earlier practice where I was paralyzed by the fear of being an integral part of the work. It encourages me to expose myself in a way that challenges my insecurities. I keep using my body and my image as materials because the act of physically revealing myself pulls something out of me that requires to be addressed. It allows me to negotiate the push-and-pull between intimacy and identity. Using myself as a surrogate forces me to engage with my work in a way that I aspire to be present in life: to let go of my mind and to trust my *being*. The work happens at the moment where I strip away the perception of anxiety and inadequacy to engage with the camera. ‘Stripping away’ the feeling of fear is both what my process attempts to achieve and what the work itself addresses. Tell me:

How fragile is the fabric of your intimacy?





Next to me a continuously growing pile of thousands of soft blue threads cover the floor. A life-size print of fabric unravels in front of me, feeding the pile continuously. I am sitting in my studio and I systematically unravel my own image, one thread at the time. As I pull them out, the saturated colors turn into an ethereal landscape that vaguely suggests a human presence beneath. Above my head a soft light illuminates the gesture of my hands as I systematically repeat the same movements. I stop for a moment and look around my studio, resting my eyes from the lasting row of nearly indiscernible threads. On my laptop in the background, Julian Rosefeldt's *Manifesto* series is playing on repeat. I must have watched each one of the 12 videos at least five times. While simultaneously focusing on the flow of my hands across the fabric, I repeat after the voice of the narrator in the video:

"Truth never occurs outside of our own self.

Things have no intrinsic value and their poetic parallels only flourish in an inner dimension.

We seek truth not in the reality of appearances but in the reality of thought.

We. Must. Create."<sup>3</sup>

The sound of these words coupled with the act of systematically deconstructing my own image paradoxically seem to complete one another. As I pull the threads off the edges of the textile, I notice the skin tone coming across

3. Rosefeldt, Julian. "Manifesto (4)." *Manifesto*, 2015.

the blue. I contemplate the flow of colors along the thin, hair-like thread I am holding in my hands. Each one of them embodies a part of my image, body, and identity. I keep unravelling and start thinking about my mother being dragged in front of me when I was a child. I contemplate the pile of residue and ask myself:

Do I bear the responsibility of these threads?

I stare at the image and I think about the endlessness of the blue that surrounds the figure. The saturated blue is so exquisite, bold and assertive. Staring at the image I see a woman, submerged in an ultramarine background that blends with the folds of her blue dress. The distinction between the figure and its surrounding is nearly indiscernible, giving the impression that she is simultaneously vanishing and coming into being. Her legs are absent, reinforcing the ambiguity of her position and her relationship to reality. She appears to be upside down, falling, dissipating from the fabric that is holding her.

The image of the figure is not fixed, neither is the support of the material itself. I want to address the labor that was dedicated to the process of systematically unravelling one's self-image from the fabric they are embedded in. The work acts as a surface of reflection – a point of entry – to talk about stances of concealment and revelation with the viewer.









Aisle of suspended walls

floating banners

ethereal columns

dissipating bodies

Across my body is a slope

the sense of completeness

holds me together

Even I

can't control

my

nature

## Conclusion

The reason why I held on to the use of contextual elements in my work is because they allow me to enter a persona in which I perform. The use of the garments speaks of the fictional and metaphorical nature of the role assumed in my work. It embodies the illusion of being responsible to hold things together – to be the missing piece of a conflictual situation that surpasses my physical and emotional entity. Ultimately, the role taken speaks of insecurities. However, it remains a role.

When I contemplate my surroundings, whether they are friends or family, I question the sense of inadequacy felt within those social dynamics. When we assume that we are responsible for being the mediator between real-life situations and hypothetical scenarios – whether that be outside of ourselves or in the intimacy of our hearts – there is a constant movement of back and forth. There is a struggle involved in the awareness of the state of otherness and the perception of a higher self that we project. This dynamic is both what holds us back and pushes us forward. But sometimes, this translates in the impossibility to let go of our own self.

*OK, maman, je sais pas t'es où, ni quelle forme tu peux ben avoir, mais aide-moi, maintenant. Donne-moi du feu, de la fureur, donne-moi du génie. Appelle les grands vents du courage. Maman, le temps se suspend, une brèche hurlante s'ouvre. La vie me commande d'arrêter tout et de me consacrer juste à ça, alors que j'ai aucune idée comment faire... Allumée au grand complet, maman, maman...*

*OK, Mom, I don't know where you are or what shape you can have but you need to help me now. Give me fire, fury, give me genius. Call the great winds of courage. Mom, time is suspended, a howling breach opens up. Life demands that I stop everything to devote myself to this moment, when I have no idea how to do so ... Wholly illuminated, Mother, Mother...*

*Venir au monde, Anne-Marie Olivier*



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