



INTERVIEWS

Performative Resonances

Hiwa K in conversation with Anthony Downey and Amal Khalaf

Anthony Downey and Amal Khalaf

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Hiwa K's work fundamentally interrogates the position of the artist, formal education systems and the resonances, both literally and aurally, of historical events. In this far ranging conversation, Hiwa reflects upon his most recent work *The Bell* (2007–2015) and previous performances. Highlighting how his use of sound – a primal, organic medium of direct engagement and influence – produces performative acts and explaining how he utilizes humour to reinvigorate the friction of reality; and how, as an 'extellectual', he is challenging the standardized notions of artistic knowledge production.



Hiwa K., *The Bell*, 2007–2015. Courtesy the artist and Promoteo Gallery.

Anthony Downey: Let's start with *The Bell* (2007–2015). This is a project that came out of an encounter with Iraqi-Kurdish entrepreneur Nazhad, the owner of a foundry in Iraq that melts metal war waste and exports it to other countries. *The Bell* took eight years to develop and involves a dual screen video, interviews and an actual bell forged in a foundry. It also involved a number of people. Can you talk about *The Bell* – how the work developed over time and its manifestation at the 56th Venice Biennale?

Hiwa K: In 2007 I was researching mines in the mountains between Iraq and Iran. We have five million Kurdish inhabitants and 15 million mines, which were set by the Iranians and the Iraqis. Because of this research I got to know where the mines are deactivated and where they are taken and through that I met Nazhad, who oversees the trade in the munitions. He is an entrepreneur who makes all his money out of these munitions, but he is also an archive of sorts. He's become very rich not only from mines but also from buying a lot of metal from the army. The metals from weapons are the most expensive because the metal is very different from the

kind you get with cars and so on. I started filming without knowing what I was going to do and I started asking Nazhad questions. I am always interested in this kind of organic interaction with materials – how the material starts to give me questions and answers at the same time. In 2007, when I started filming, I realized that Nazhad was very knowledgeable. As I'm also very interested in informal knowledge and 'learning by doing', I made this one of the aspects of the project. Throughout the film that you see, you realize how much Nazhad knows about where the munitions come from, what countries were involved in supplying them and what each material is called. Yet he's illiterate, so he doesn't write or read.

AD: So the majority of the munitions relate to the Iran-Iraq war of 1991?

HK: Yes, and also the Kurdish civil war between the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) and Kurdish Democratic Party (KDP). Nazhad traces where the metal comes from and what it contains. The munitions do different things: some kinds of mortars stop vegetation from growing because they contain phosphorescent powder. There are things that paralyse you and burn your skin.

AD: Similar to the phosphorescent-enriched munitions that were used in Fallujah?

HK: Yes, exactly, the same stuff. So he goes to these auctions and buys these precious metals from the American army sometimes for €50,000 or \$100,000 and then he comes back and cuts them and melts them down and he sends the metal to other countries. As far as I know western countries don't buy from him because they are afraid of radioactivity and that was also a problem for making *The Bell*, which used these melted down materials. It took a long time before the foundry accepted that the metal was clean.

AD: If I understand correctly, to make the actual bell that we see in your film, they had to extrude copper and tin from these munitions?

HK: Every weapon is made of different kinds of metals. I needed exactly 79 per cent of copper and 21 per cent of tin and to have 300 kilograms of bronze to have that exact sound of B flat minor chord where you have the notes B flat, D and F. So the metal needed to be very pure. There are other people in the market in Iraqi Kurdistan who sell bronze with 97 per cent of copper that is not clean, and three per cent of other metals. In Italy, they wanted 99 per cent of copper and 99 per cent of tin and that is what we managed to get from Nazhad.

AD: Did you have the idea to make a bell when you met Nazhad or did that develop over time?

HK: No, the bell is actually one of the stages in the work. It started with the project *What The Barbarian Did Not Do, Did the Barberinis* (2012) in Rome and it was connected to the story of the Vatican melting down the bronze from the ceiling of the Pantheon. People also say that they took the bronze to make a sculpture for Maffeo Barberini (the bellicose pope Urban VIII of the seventeenth century), which is now in the Vatican. We couldn't realize *The Bell* at the time because it had a lot of costs so we started the work *What the barbarians did not do, did the Barberinis*, for which I made a sand sculpture instead of an actual bell. The second station was when Okwui Enwezor was interested in producing *The Bell* for Venice, so I started to do that. There were a lot of

processes before we got to the work that you now see.

AD: So Enwezor commissioned the bell for the 56th Venice Biennale?

HK: Yes. It was still on paper and it was a very expensive project so I couldn't actually do it on my own. There were a lot of different people involved.

AD: So all of this raw material comes together into 300 kilograms of copper and tin to get the bronze and is then transported to Milan to a foundry where they've been making bells since the thirteenth century – how long did it take to make the bell?

HK: It took almost five months. At that time we had the issue of ISIS and the government was very alert to anything leaving or entering the country, so that's why I had to try over and over again until they finally let the materials go out of the country.

AD: This was in 2014?

HK: Yes, it was the end of 2014 and *The Bell* was finished and installed exactly five days before the opening of the 56th Venice Biennale. I transported it myself – I went with the bell to the Arsenale and we put it in. I watched it all the time – I didn't want any scratches or anything on it or on the wooden structure.

AD: The video is dual screen: we see the bell being produced – material being collated, collected, extruded, produced and sent to Milan. When we see the bell being made, a number of symbols are being attached to it. One of the artefacts from the Mosul museum recently looted by ISIS actually appears on the bell.

HK: Exactly, so the decoration on the bell includes an artefact that was broken in the museum in Mosul. I took the images of the sculpture and gave it to a wax master to make so as to produce a clay mould. We have no proof that the other artefacts, such as the tigers and the armies, have been broken but they are all threatened and are still in danger of being destroyed.



Hiwa K., *Country Guitar Lessons*, 2005–2011. Copyright and courtesy the artist.

AD: Could you talk about more about what those symbols are? I thought it was the insignia of Venice but in fact it has some other resonance.

HK: Yes, it was not my intention, but this project is very rounded – all the elements are connected by accident. When we were making the bell, ISIS started to break down the artefacts in the Mosul museum. Every bell needs decoration so the people in the foundry asked what I wanted – they had Jesus and Maria and those things because that's what they normally use. That's when I thought it would be interesting if we could register what was going on in Mosul on the bell. What we call ISIS is what we would describe as 'evil' but I also wanted to uncover this thing that we call 'ISIS' – this self-made thing that we don't know anything about. The western world created ISIS in Syria to fight Bashar al-Assad but it slipped through and spread into Iraq and took over a large area in just a few days. They also have a lot support from unknown sources and that's why they are strong. So I was thinking about the whole market of metal and weapons and how ISIS are included in that

trade, especially in the looting and trade of artefacts.

AD: When the bell was finally complete it was placed in a structure. Can you talk a little bit about that structure? It looks very confined – like it has been demobilized or immobilized.

HK: In the beginning we were thinking about making a bell around 1.5 metres high and around 1.5 tonnes, but that would have been unaffordable to produce. It was also quite a surprise when I went for a functioning bell inside the structure because I was thinking it would be a sculpture. But through the process of making *The Bell* I was always changing my mind – I am never fixed on one idea and the material always has needs and I adapt myself to them. So we made the bell with a circumference of one metre. It could either be hung from the ceiling, which we couldn't do in this case, or to hang it on a structure. For this structure we needed a very special kind of oak tree for the resonance because the wood contributes a lot to the sound.

AD: Sound is a key element in a lot of your work and I know that you trained as a musician when you first sought political asylum in Germany, teaching guitar lessons in order to make money. But sound seems to be an entry point into a process of producing work in conjunction or collaboration with other people, and I am thinking specifically here about *This Lemon Tastes of Apple* (2011), which was performed in northern Iraq (Kurdistan). Could you talk a little bit more about the function of sound and the function of music in generating a performative act?

HK: That's a good question. For me, sound is the first thing you hear when you're in the womb of your mother – the heartbeat and all the other sounds that you hear through the cerebral cortex. And the ears are also always connected to an enslavement of sorts, in German we say 'gehorsam' – somebody who can listen and who is submissive. I'm not opportunistically using that in that way but ears are very strong and for thousands of years have been used as a medium of influence. I think the best medium for direct engagement is through the ears. Seeing is the function of God because God can see and command there to be light but ears and sound are the function of organic material.

AD: This is exactly what you feel with *This Lemon Tastes of Apple*. In the performance, you walk into a market on Azadi Sarai square during the final days of the Kurdish revolution in Sulaymaniyah in northern Kurdistan and you start playing the opening chords of Ennio Morricone's score from the movie *Once upon a time in the West* (1968), which sounds like a siren but has a resonance that engages the audience who are there and they start to get involved. There was gunfire and tear gas but you walked into the market square and you started playing Ennio Morricone with the crowd already at pitch fever – how did you feel in that moment?



Hiwa K., *Inappropriation*, 2009. Copyright and courtesy the artist.

HK: It was 60 days into that protest movement and the security forces in Sulaymaniyah were shooting at us. By that day there had been nine deaths and around 500 casualties but that was the last day and they came and attacked our stage where we had been speaking. They burned it down and started shooting people. The people were scared and they didn't want to lose their lives but after this attack they started to go back and I thought it was the moment that we could revitalize the protest one more time. Sometimes, I feel like some projects that I do are positioned on the edges and somehow I have to try to take them back to that moment of reinvigorated protest rather than let things fizzle out. So I had this harmonica and my friend Daroon had a guitar and two megaphones, which meant we could hear ourselves a bit louder and it also gave the performance another aspect of activism – it's the medium of protest. We have always been brainwashed by the western media with this image of the western person coming to save us, as in Sergio Leone's 1968 movie *Once upon a Time in the West*. In Kurdistan, they never say the 'invasion' they say the 'liberation process' and that's very interesting. By 2011, people started to realize that these promises were not being fulfilled – they did not bring democracy as

they promised. The gap between rich and poor was getting bigger and there was social disorder. There was a different kind of elite – business elites where we started to see not just millionaires but billionaires and at the same time people were really starving and were not getting paid for their work for months. So people started to revolt.

AD: And they also agitate right at that moment too, when you start doing your music to build the momentum in the protest.

HK: Yes, they do. In the beginning you see the cameraman whom I got to know at the protest. Incidentally, this guy was later captured by ISIS and has since disappeared, which is incredibly sad. I didn't organize any cameras for the performance because nowadays the real event is when you are not filmed, so being filmed is something we take for granted: you are filmed everywhere. I collected the materials from all the cameramen after that protest. But when you play *Once upon a Time in the West*, the melody has a death rattle. I somehow lost the rationality in myself and just sent my body out there as improvisation: there is a moment where you just do what you do regardless of fear and your body is not that rational. When tear gas is being fired at you and when you play the harmonica, you must inhale and exhale to make that melody, so that was also a death rattle of sorts as I was breathing in gas. Somehow, most of the people got the message and were identifying themselves in this situation with that song, because the film was played many times in our cinemas and many people watched it.

AD: The title is also a reference to a 1988 attack by Saddam Hussein's forces on Halabja, also in the Kurdistan region of Iraq, which your family survived. The survivors of the gas attack on Halabja reported that the gas smelled of apples. The title, if I remember correctly, also refers to the more recent deployment of tear gas against the protestors in Sulaymaniyah, who used lemons to counteract the effects of the gas.

HK: Yes, that is right.

AD: There is playfulness to *This Lemon Tastes of Apple*, albeit a deadly one, which we should not forget. It is not just about agitating or stirring up the crowd – you go in and you play the harmonica, which is almost like something a teenage boy would do to annoy people and get them started. This makes me think about the way in which playfulness allows you to engage with people in a way that aggression or abrasiveness simply wouldn't. I want to go back to the first work of yours that I encountered, *Moon Calendar* (2007), which I saw in Bolzano as part of Manifesta 7 (2008). There was an extraordinary cyclical element to that work whereby you tap danced in a former Iraqi security building where people had been tortured and killed. You tap dance and at the same time you listen with a stethoscope to your heartbeat and the heartbeat dictates the rhythm of your feet and it becomes almost a cycle, based on sound, that cannot be fully achieved and that is doomed to failure. I'm thinking about sound again, going back to what you said about the first sounds being the heartbeat of your mother, and also the playfulness of that.

HK: Absolutely. As I said, as you can see also from my language, I like jokes and I like the twists in languages. This is also characteristic of people from Sulaymaniyah: they always try to see things in a twisted way.



AD: Do you think that is a coping mechanism – a way of dealing with the destructive reality that you were living through at that time?

HK: Yes – people are so numbed by the monotone of violent language and images, it has saturated our sub-consciousness. So I have always seen jokes as an important element to disintegrate and discomfort you somehow and enabling oneself to again somehow feel the friction of reality. That's the importance of playfulness. But with regards to the heartbeat, for me it was not very clear what I wanted to do – as I always say 'I never refer with my index finger but I do refer with my pinky'. I start with the indirect: I began with the material and my heartbeat. But at the same time I was dealing with research on Bowerbirds – this species of bird collects coloured objects and creates nests out of them, trying to create a feeling of belonging. And also, I didn't mention it in the film because it would be too much like victimizing myself, but I have a personal connection to that space in Sulaymaniyah. In 1991 when I visited, they were attacking that space. I never talked about it. But I visited that space and, for me, there was something happening inside this interior architecture and alongside the heartbeat – something in how you resonate in that space and its connection with memory. I was trying to dig around this. It has developed into different projects and in some other works with Jim White, who appears in *Country Guitar Lessons* (2005–2011). For me, these are not works but rather terminologies or words from my lexicon that I use. Each time I pick up a part and put it somewhere else – I contextualize it somewhere else.

Playfulness is very important for me, it's not on purpose but it is something I cannot avoid because I don't come from critical theory, from Derrida and Badiou, for example. I refer, half-jokingly, to myself as an 'extellectual' guy and playfulness is important here. I learned from the streets of YouTube, I always say, and also from the teahouses of Iraq. So also, for me, it's very important to use an accessible language for people and every day I

am compiling this populous language. When we made *Chicago Boys: while we were singing, they were dreaming...* (2010–ongoing) on the Edgware Road in London, we had to develop it in normal, everyday language. When I make presentations for my family at home I am so happy that everyone understands it. I am happy that I can show it anywhere.

AD: Perhaps Amal would like to comment here on the subject of being an 'extellectual'?

Amal Khalaf: I love the idea of the 'extellectual' because that's one of the many words I learned from you. I wanted to ask a little more about your background because in your work there is a critique of formal art education such as in *Inappropriation* (2009). There is this idea that we are learning from each other and that there is this knowledge production going on. I wanted to ask about that and about your criticisms of this idea of artist-as-genius and art education and the industrialization of art.

HK: Yes, that is a good question. For *Inappropriation* I talked about the fact that when I applied for art school I applied with a false portfolio because I hadn't made work for six years before that. I had a friend (painter) who was very enthused by my paintings and when I stopped painting he started to use my figurative works and people noticed that these looked like my work. When they pointed that out he would say 'But he's a musician now, he doesn't need it'. I needed 20 works to apply for this art school so I used works from him and then got accepted. This is how I explain my position as an 'extellectual'. Then, when I started at the school I had a white wall that I was supposed use as an Arbeitsplatz (studio) and put my work on. I did nothing on it but defended it eight hours a day. There were four walls, one for each of us, and there were a lot of works, but mine was clear.

AD: So you kept it completely blank?

HK: Yes. Of course, in the school the teachers said, 'If I come back next time and you have nothing on it, then I'm going to kick you out.' I was thinking about what to do, so I put a clock on my wall and a black glove was attached to the wall with the fingers arranged in a victory sign. The middle finger was fixed in place and the index finger was connected with a thread to the minute hand of the clock and each half an hour it was going up and was making the shape of F* and going down to make a victory sign again. I was supposed to talk for one hour about my work and this was the hour. I was actually kicked out from that class after that.

AD: Which school was that?

HK: It was Mainz Academy of Fine Arts. They are very traditional. During this time I slowly started to engage with my mum over cooking and I also met Jim White, who I started to teach country guitar from scratch and we had a lot of gigs. After four and half years of studying I had all of these people on Skype and many others like Simon Starling, who had been defending me; Bart de Baere from MuKHA; Aneta Szylak from Wyspa Institute of Art; and the guy from whom I borrowed the paintings and an advocate – it was the moment for confessing that the original portfolio had not been mine.

AK: And that was the final defense?

HK: Yes, and I talked about the whole process of education and how I hadn't even learned artistry and didn't even know what was going on in the art world. But then Jim White played a Johnny Cash song for the teachers. I got the best mark actually – a 1.0. That was an attempt of bringing informal modes of thinking into the institution and I did the same by extending our kitchen from Iraqi Kurdistan to that institution in *Cooking with Mama* (2006–ongoing). We did it in many places with the Occupy movements as well. So this is it for me. I don't identify myself with intellectuals and I was just thinking there must be another word for this – 'extellectual'.

AD: This also is about, to a certain extent, art as a form of generating speculation, which doesn't have to go anywhere – it can fail. And, in fact, often when art fails or refuses that is when it becomes more interesting than producing yet another object or producing yet another show. It's something that holds back and questions the very structures that produce art as an artefact or commodity.

HK: I have a big problem with symbolic art when it starts with very good intentions and it gives up very easily when difficulties arise. I think it's important to keep a performance continuing as much as you can, even in an environment that is really against your work, or to make small compromises while continuing. Continuing is important for me otherwise we would be trapped in symbolic art works.

AD: So it's sustaining the form of engagement?

HK: Yes, exactly.



Hiwa K., *Cooking with Mama*, 2006–ongoing. Copyright and courtesy the artist.

AK: I like how you are talking about stamina and projects and how they morph because *Country Guitar Lessons* actually comes from this moment in Mainz when you had this relationship with Jim White. And *Chicago Boys: while we were singing, they were dreaming...* has now had so many different iterations and moved and changed and grown. I found the genealogy of the relationship with Jim White when you were in this art school really interesting. Could you talk about that relationship and who he is and how that happened? He's one of your many collaborators, I know.

HK: When I met Jim White I was playing in the corridor. The corridor was my main studio in the art school – the corridor was a space between the professors and the classes where I never felt I belonged and was always being thrown out of. So I sometimes practiced guitar in the corridors or taught my students there. Then Jim came along one day and we got talking and he said he'd really like to play. So I asked him if he'd ever played before and he said he never had. I said we could start and asked if he'd like to learn something like country

guitar and he said that would be the best because he loves Johnny Cash.

AK: And he was at the art school because he was working there?

HK: Yes. When I was getting to know him he was speaking German to me with his strong American accent. So I asked him, 'What's your story?' He told me that he was a soldier in one of the American bases in Germany but that he had had a motorbike accident where he lost two of his ribs and was in a coma for about two months. And so he somehow ended up being a facility manager of the art school because they retired him as a soldier. It was interesting for me and we developed a good relationship with one another and we started going out together and talking and I started to learn more about him. Then I showed him how to play the chords on guitar.

AK: So this goes back to this idea of teaching. With *Chicago Boys: while we were singing, they were dreaming...* that was the thing that struck me the most and it was really interesting working with you on the Edgware Road project. You really shifted what the artist could be and what forms art could even take. But it was always about learning – not only were you learning but every member of *Chicago Boys...* was learning. We were watching videos together; we were having lots of different people from different backgrounds coming together not all from a musical background; there was an exchange of ideas about neoliberalism and music – there were just so many people involved. I want to ask about this idea of collaboration in your work and how knowledge is constantly produced at every iteration.

HK: First of all, I was thinking about how I could make an environment where I could be taught from my own art projects. I thought that we could create this interdisciplinary environment but also in an informal way so that we could involve that community from Edgware Road and other places. So when we met we started to work and asked people to come and each of us was teaching one another – we were not using notes because when you are you playing from notes you go home and practice it alone, but when you don't know notes you need to be face-to-face to learn the instrument. Again, for me, the traditional notion of the artist is not present here; this idea of a person who is coming to teach. It was somehow structured but in a way that it could change and be adapted to create a space for each one of us, including me, to happen in that project. Recently, I was just talking with the whole band about the big shifts that happened between the 70s and the 80s and it depended on the country where it developed from Keynesian economic policy to neoliberalism. That is what was fruitful for me, I live from that – these are my schools and this is my education, where people come and show you things from another perspective that you didn't see before. So that's, again, completely different from making a statement with the index finger.

AK: You mentioned the idea of memory before. In your biographies you always describe yourself as 'based on your feet' when asked about your geographical location. Do you still say that?

HK: Once in London I was asked where I was based and I said 'On my feet' and they asked 'Well, where are your feet based?' and I responded 'Feet are never "based"'. I still say that.

AK: We were talking earlier about some more projects that you are working on. There is a lot of work where you retrace your steps and you made a very long journey that we haven't discussed yet. You are also doing

some works on the *Mirror* project (2010), thinking about walking and journeys and going back to places you've been before. What is it that you are doing – is it a revisiting of your memory or inviting people to maybe teach you about another way to think about them?

HK: This notion of being based on the feet first and foremost is basically because, as you know, I came walking (from Iraq to Europe). On the map you can see the long journey. I over-walked actually – I overdosed on walking. The idea of walking teaches you how you are happening now – while walking, all the time you are saying 'now'. It is the most crucial thing actually – it doesn't matter what you read or what you are thinking but when you come into a state of walking your body just starts to become quite spiritual and you are thinking about the present all of the time. This walking has shaped my thinking and my practice a lot. This tap dancing in *Moon Calendar* was a bit like walking. But with *Country Guitar Lessons* it was about how culture circulates and doesn't belong only to one person or to a local. For me it's like how the Islamic civilization took the antique philosophy of Aristotle and then translated it and reintroduced it to Europe. I find that very interesting – how all the culture develops through other things, such as Islam; how that culture from Europe then went to the USA; how it came back through different forms to my country again with things like western films and cowboys; how I then heard it as a child; how I was forced to leave my country; and how I met an American guy in the art school where I didn't want to make art and he couldn't be a soldier anymore so he had to be a facility manager. I am very much interested in a kind of translation and how you translate culture all the time and the notion of home. For example, when I go home now to Iraqi Kurdistan I always lose my way because there are always new buildings. So there is a new amnesia that is coming from outside of you. This is not amnesia from becoming an old man when the amnesia comes from inside of you, like dementia. The younger you are the more affected you are by this amnesia. Then you start to think, where is home? Is there 'home'?

AK: Can you talk about the *Mirror* (2010) project? There is a striking relationship to space and the constantly different perspectives, walking with that and being constantly in the present.

HK: This mirror actually showed me a lot about that journey. I'm about to produce it again in Greece.

AK: So you are going to retrace your walk?

HK: Yes, exactly. But I have a text for that as a voiceover and it says something like: 'Walking through spaces to which I don't belong, scattered spaces, puzzled spaces, spaces with no overview. Spaces with which I am quite unfamiliar. One cannot have a relationship with those spaces – only affairs.' I am thinking about how you don't always have the luxury of gazing at images but, rather, you see them as possibilities to penetrate, survive and pursue walking. It's like what you see in the moment – you have to survive, if they fail you then the whole game is finished. When I was on a very high building, the highest in Porto, and on the edge I looked at the city through the mirror and said that what you see in the moment of panic is the pre-image – it is not an image, it is the pre-image. And that's what I think about with these reflected 'images', they are shaky and have a swinging centre and you are not very stable at the centre. So this work has this text and it's very much about those spaces that you try to get in and somehow you still feel like an outsider. Again, I don't want to victimize myself as an immigrant, but this non-belonging is always an issue and then when you go home you are still not belonging. You are always in this space in between and so what remains as 'home' for you is this space under

your feet – and feet are never based.

Watch Hiwa K's *This Lemon Tastes of Apple* on the [Ibraaz channel](#).

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Anthony Downey and Amal Khalaf

Anthony Downey is an academic and writer. Recent and upcoming publications include *Dissonant Archives: Contemporary Visual Culture and Contested Narratives in the Middle East* (I.B. Tauris, 2015); *Art and Politics Now* (Thames and Hudson, 2014); *Uncommon Grounds: New Media and Critical Practice in North Africa and the Middle East* (I.B. Tauris, 2014); *Slavs and Tatars: Mirrors for Princes* (JRP Ringier, 2015); and *The Future of a Promise: Contemporary Art from the Arab World* (Ibraaz Publishing, 2011). He is currently editing *Future Imperfect: Building Institutions through Art Practices in the Middle East* (forthcoming, I.B. Tauris, 2016) and *Becoming Communities: Performance, Collaboration and Curatorial Practices* (forthcoming, *Third Text*, 2016).

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