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## 17 Filling in the Blank Art, Politics, and Phenomenology

Christian Grüny

While the couplings of art and politics, art and phenomenology, and phenomenology and politics seem to make immediate sense, the combination of all three creates a somewhat uneasy impression. Does politics have to come in when phenomenology speaks about art? Is phenomenology the right approach when dealing with the relationship between art and politics? And last, but certainly not least, is art a necessary topic in the phenomenology of the political? In brief, my answers to these questions are as follows: There might be good reason to; yes, with some qualifications; and absolutely, yes. It is true that not all art is overtly political. But there is a political dimension to the very act of making art and to the way it articulates the world and our relationship to it: It is part of our political episteme, the way we shape, reflect, and understand ourselves and our relations to each other and the world.

If this is true, any investigation of art should be aware of its object's (and also of its own) political aspect and any theory of the political should throw more than a side-glance at art. But it is the second of our questions that this chapter will be dealing with explicitly; the qualifications I mentioned will be spelled out in the following sections. The first of these will look at the current situation and discussions in contemporary art, focusing on the problem of artistic intervention and on Peter Osborne's concept of the postconceptual. The second will try to sketch a flexible, open understanding of phenomenology that relies on Husserl and Bruno Latour. The third will apply these ideas to two case studies, namely the controversy on Dana Schutz's painting *Open Casket* and Christoph Schlingensiefel's *Please love Austria!* The final section will return to the opening questions and relate them to Jacques Rancière's idea of the distribution of the sensible, which phenomenology can complement in an important way. While presenting an elaborate theory or engaging in detailed analyses of the works in question are beyond the scope of this chapter, I hope to open some perspectives that can inspire future investigations.

## 1. Intervention and Radical Blankness

Once upon a time, there seemed to be a natural affinity between phenomenology and aesthetics. A philosophical discipline that directed its attention to the modes of appearance, analyzed the logic of perception, and stressed the role of embodiment for the experience of the world seemed well fit to deal with objects whose primary purpose is to be perceived and with events that involve and challenge the viewers and listeners. This time appears to have passed.

It seems to me that there are two developments today that present the greatest challenge to a phenomenology of art: the recent call for an activist art that intervenes into society and the conceptual dimension that is all-pervasive in the visual arts and is gaining importance in other fields as well. The former has its roots in several artistic movements since the 1960s, among them performance and community art (Jackson 2011; Bishop 2012a), and might be summed up by Tania Bruguera's call for "useful art," a type of art that should "enter people's houses, people's lives." From this point of view, the task is "the immersion of art directly into society with all our resources" (Bruguera 2011). We find exactly the same stance in the recently formulated "Ghent Manifesto" by Milo Rau and his team at the NTGent theater: "It's not just about portraying the world. It's about changing it. The aim is not to depict the real, but to make the representation itself real" (Awde 2018).

A number of artists who would subscribe to these views have found a somewhat unlikely home in the worldwide biennial circuit. The biennials have been associated with a prominent position of the curator, sometimes at the expense of individual artists and artworks; they straddle a somewhat awkward position between a globalized jet set of curators, critics, and capital and an explicitly political stance of "criticality" of many artists and curators who thrive upon the biennials' at least partial independence from the art market (Brisbin and Thiessen 2018). With the Venice Biennale and Documenta, their oldest and most important incarnations, biennials have been subject to extensive study (Filipovic et al. 2010; Kompatsiaris 2017). The tension between the professed criticality that finds its expression not only in works but increasingly also in talks, conferences, and workshops on the one hand, and the self-contained nature of the biennial-centered art world whose real social effect tends to be gentrification instead of increased equality on the other is hardly resolvable. Klaus Speidel called "the current hype around 'being political' as a *sine qua non* for art-shows, festivals and Biennials, where *political artmaking and curating* are often *substitute gratification* in place of real political action" (Speidel 2017), the primary malady of today's art world. The 7th Berlin Biennale tried to cut this knot by turning itself into an outright activist platform (foreseeably, this move was reversed in the following editions). As curator Artur Żmijewski wrote:

Art needs to be reinvented, but not as some crafty option to aestheticize human problems in a novel way by turning them into a formal spectacle. What we need is more an art that offers its tools, time, and resources to solve the economic problems of the impoverished majority. (Żmijewski 2012, 15)

It is obvious that this stance has its own problems, among them its dangerous proximity to "the social democratic instrumentalization of art as a mere tool for social work and as an appeasement strategy" (Malzacher 2014, 25). Żmijewski himself recently revised his position on precisely these grounds when he lamented the instrumentalization of art by politics, which only had to take its proclamation of its own usefulness at its word (Żmijewski 2018). But the main effect that concerns us here is, that the presented works or actions will pay less attention to their aesthetic side lest they turn into just another one of Żmijewski's "formal spectacles." "Spectacle," of course, refers to Guy Debord's famous critique of modern capitalist society as a society of the spectacle that turns its citizens into passive consumers of their lives (Debord 1995); evoking the danger of a "formal spectacle" seems to suggest that *any* art that remains within the gallery walls or even the art world in the broadest sense is nothing but an aestheticist spectacle.

This relative loss of importance of the aesthetic is not confined to activist art but can be observed in other types of critical art as well, and it finds some theoretical justification in Peter Osborne's concept of the postconceptual state of contemporary art, even though the art Osborne is referring to has little in common with Żmijewski's activist stance. For Osborne, the postconceptual is not an artistic movement or style but describes the state of things that any art that lays claim to being contemporary must relate to. It is characterized by an acknowledgement and embrace of the conceptual dimension of all art, which precludes any exclusively or even predominantly aestheticist understanding, radical openness as far as materials are concerned, and a peculiar kind of unity of the work that Osborne calls *distributive*, meaning a historically open network of instances, none of which can claim material originality (Osborne 2013, 48). All of these features will be proven to be important in the analysis of my two examples.

The merit of Conceptual art was to show that all art has a conceptual dimension. However, its bold declaration that "objects are conceptually irrelevant to the condition of art" (Kosuth 1991, 24) failed. As Osborne somewhat begrudgingly acknowledges, there is a material and thus an aesthetic dimension to all art but, he continues, while Conceptual art failed to expunge the aesthetic, it succeeded in showing its "radical emptiness or blankness" (Osborne 2013, 49). So while there has to be some sort of material, perceptual realization of the conceptual, without the latter there wouldn't even be anything to look at, or at least nothing that

would demand further attention. The art that Osborne has in mind does stay within the gallery walls but remains critical in a fundamental way. Indeed, the very idea of the contemporary, as he understands it, guarantees reflection of the geopolitical situation since the projection of a single historical time of the present, which is in fact internally fractured and disjunctive, is designated as a fiction, albeit a necessary one. All contemporary art finds itself situated within this disjunctive temporal unity and must reflect it, and, despite their shortcomings, biennials are the primary locus of this fractured global contemporaneity.

While in the case of activist art, phenomenological attention to the perceptual and bodily side of the events seems completely out of place – at best useless and possibly detrimental to its explicit aims – with Osborne’s version of postconceptual art, phenomenology just misses the point. As Arthur C. Danto put it, writing about Marcel Duchamp’s paradigmatic conceptual artwork *Fountain*: “What would have provoked Duchamp to madness or murder, I should think, would be the sight of aesthetes mooning over the gleaming surfaces of the porcelain object he had manhandled into exhibition space” (Danto 1981, 94). *Fountain* is a gesture whose physical presence adds little to nothing to its documentation. While contemporary artists might not be as exasperated (and Duchamp himself might have been amused rather than angry), most of them would agree that the analysis of structure, perception, and bodily involvement won’t get the critic or theorist anywhere. Hence a phenomenological approach may seem anachronistic and naïve, insisting on a dimension of art that is absent or irrelevant.

But is this the last word? While even in Duchamp’s case the neutral, non-retinal character of his ready-mades may be doubted, in postconceptual art the material and aesthetic dimensions cannot be disregarded even if there is indeed “the critical necessity of an anti-aestheticist use of aesthetic materials” (Osborne 2013, 48). The question would then be whether phenomenology can help elucidate the specific relation the aesthetic and conceptual dimensions assume in particular works. We need to grasp the conceptual in order to make sense of the aesthetic, but could it be that this dependency works both ways? This may even be true for activist and participatory art. As Claire Bishop argues,

participatory art . . . has the capacity to communicate on two levels – to participants and to spectators – the paradoxes that are repressed in everyday discourse, and to elicit perverse, disturbing, and pleasurable experiences that enlarge our capacity to imagine the world and our relations anew. But to reach the second level requires a mediating third term – an object, image, story, film, even a spectacle – that permits this experience to have a purchase on the public imaginary.

(Bishop 2012b, 45)

Even if it proposes to have perceptible or even measurable real-world effects, it will most likely not want to be *reduced* to these effects. The title of the volume that contains Bishop’s essay seems to capture this particularly well: *Living as Form*. The point is neither a reduction of life to form nor an obliteration of the dimension of form altogether, and the actions activist and interventionist art performs must always also be understood as exercises or *displays* of ways of reimagining the world. In order to analyze these displays – Bishop’s “mediating third term” – we might need a phenomenological approach after all, albeit one that does not purport to be able to grasp the work in its entirety: a phenomenology that is flexible and open for other approaches to complement and enrich it.

## 2. The Principle to End All Principles

If a theorist or cultural analyst draws on phenomenology today at all, she is bound to rely on the heretics – be it those within phenomenology, a heterogeneous group that comprises, according to Ricœur, everyone after Husserl (Ricœur 1953), or those who distanced themselves like Derrida or Lyotard. Husserl’s own texts might provide an indispensable background for any phenomenological endeavor but will rarely be referred to directly, with the possible exception of the *Phenomenology of Inner Time Consciousness* and *Phantasy, Image Consciousness, and Memory*. In this light, it may come as a surprise that I want to draw on the founding text of transcendental phenomenology, the first volume of the *Ideas*, as inspiration for an investigation of contemporary art. What is more, the passage I will refer to appears as the epitome of a subjectivist philosophy that bases itself squarely on immediate subjective intuition (*Anschauung*). It is the paragraph that Husserl entitles “The principle of all principles,” which unambiguously prepares the reader for the fundamental importance of what is to follow.

The paragraph starts with the words “but enough of erroneous theories” and offers no transition or further introduction but immediately follows this up with the promised principle itself:

No conceivable theory can make us stray from the principle of all principles: that each intuition affording [something] in an originary way is a legitimate source of knowledge, that whatever presents itself to us in “Intuition” in an originary way (so to speak, in its actuality in person) is to be taken simply as what it affords itself as, but only within the limitations in which it affords itself there.

(Husserl 2014, 43, italics removed)

If this principle is followed, the philosopher can be sure that she starts from an “absolute beginning” that provides a firm base for further

investigation. If it isn't, her philosophy will be built on sand – in other words, groundless speculation.

If we were looking for a passage that captures what Derrida calls the “metaphysics of presence” in a nutshell, this would be it. One might say that almost all of his early writings are directed at deconstructing this principle. While the very idea of a philosophical principle is problematic, Husserl's formulation can be seen as the epitome of the specifically modern version that bases this principle on contact, immediacy, intuition, experience, in short: presence. As is well known, Derrida proceeds to show that the whole idea of presence is in fact flawed because it is always undermined by a shift that refers any presence to its repeatability: “The presence of the present is thought beginning from the fold of the return, beginning from the movement of repetition and not the reverse” (Derrida 2011, 58). There is thus no categorical difference between experience and signification because there is no originary that can serve as an absolute beginning. Everything relates to and refers to something else, and we make sense of the world from within this web of references and relations, not from some absolute vantage point.

Now Husserl's own casual reformulation of the principle seems to make a much weaker statement: “All knowledge of facts is to be justified by experience” (Husserl 2014, 43), the crucial question being how we understand experience. If we accept Derrida's criticism, we have to abandon the idea of an absolute originary, which doesn't necessarily mean scrapping experience as such. Husserl's important point is that when we deal with a situation as phenomenologists, we cannot rely on unexamined preconceptions, and we have to accept that there is only one level of inquiry. When he insists that we have to accept everything “as what it affords itself as, but only within the limitations in which it affords itself,” I take him to mean that we have to be open to whatever we find within this sphere and not limit ourselves to a specific type of entity or a particular method of dealing with it. Otherwise our ontological and methodological commitments might result in missing something, misconstruing it, and/or tacitly assuming a certain type of relation to be dominant or exclusive. But, in fact, when we approach something, we just don't know what we'll find. If Husserl's “principle of all principles” is a methodological statement, it stipulates an anti-method, really nothing more than a suspension of all preconceptions – a principle without content. There is only the willing suspension of belief, to reverse Coleridge's famous dictum, coupled with an ethics of attentiveness and the will to carefully describe what is found (Grüny 2012). None of the other tenets of transcendental phenomenology, like the centrality of the ego, the search for essences, and so on, are implied in this minimalist program of phenomenology. Formulated this way, Husserl's non- or anti-method is very close to one of the most important schools in contemporary sociology, Actor Network Theory (ANT). In his *Reassembling the Social*, Bruno Latour

stages a dialogue between a student and her professor who might well be a phenomenologist:

- P: Just describe the state of affairs at hand.  
 S: ‘Just describe.’ Sorry to ask, but is this not terribly naïve? Is this not exactly the sort of empiricism, or realism, that we have been warned against? I thought your argument was, um, more sophisticated than that.

(Latour 2005, 144)

It would indeed be naïve if what the professor was advising were just to continue with one's everyday casual observations and fragmentary descriptions. Obviously, that is not the point. What is at stake is a rejection of the idea that eventually an explanation would have to supersede the description, and that truly understanding something would mean being able to explain it by moving to another level “behind” or “underneath” the surface that offers itself to description. Latour puts it this way:

The explanation emerges once the description is saturated. We can certainly continue to follow actants, innovations, and translation operations through other networks, but we will never find ourselves forced to abandon the task of description to take up that of explanation.

(Latour 1991, 129–130)<sup>1</sup>

Following actants, innovations, and translation operations through networks is certainly a far cry from our quotidian way of regarding the world. Still, it is a kind of observation that abstains from drawing on any preconceived methodological tools and that tailors its “methods” to what it finds. This is how I understand the famous ANT slogan “follow the actors”: not to do as the actors do because they know everything anyway but to *follow* them, paying attention to their actions and all they involve with a sharper, cooler, less partisan eye.

There is no telling what we find when we do this, and Latour's insistence on suspending all preconceptions concerning the types of objects and relations we may encounter is just as firm as Husserl's but possibly even more explicit. The decisive move made by ANT was to include entities as possible actants or mediators that aren't usually granted this status – technological artifacts, concepts, bacteria, architectural features, institutions – since we simply don't know in advance what kind of entities plays what role in a given situation: “I want to situate myself at the stage before we can clearly delineate humans and nonhumans, goals and functions, form and matter, before the swapping of properties and competences is observable and interpretable” (Latour 1994, 35). A network must then be conceived as a mobile constellation where what something is, and what function it has, is determined by the relations it finds

itself in or assumes and the actions it performs. In short, everything must be taken “as what it affords itself as, but only within the limitations in which it affords itself” (Husserl 2014, 43).

I believe we can even find an equivalent to the phenomenological reduction here. As is well known, this strange but fundamental operation leaves everything in place but radically changes its status from self-evident reality to a field of phenomena. One could say that it transforms the questions we ask concerning the world from “what” to “how” – how does something appear? How does it act and how does it interact with others? – without presupposing any kind of ontological commitment. I think that following the actors amounts to exactly this. What the sociologist sees is not something that happens behind the actors’ backs or under the surface of their actions, and in this regard the observation changes nothing; but, on the other hand, following themselves and their fellow actors by meticulously observing how relations are assumed and transformed is precisely *not* something actors usually do, so there is indeed a fundamental transformation involved. What I am trying to say is not that ANT is really a type of phenomenology or that Husserl’s philosophy is a type of crypto-ANT. My point is that if we read Husserl through Latour, we may discover a different, more flexible way of doing phenomenology that is still in line with his own original impetus. And we may find that ANT (whose proponents have shown little sympathy for phenomenology) may be closer to this impetus than the explicitly phenomenological school of sociology. There will be moments when this flexibility, this process of following the actors, will lead us to ways of observation and theorizing that cannot be called phenomenological even in an extremely generous sense. But so what? In my view, the crucial lesson from phenomenology is the necessity to tailor one’s method of observation and description to its objects. If these objects call for a different type of gaze, so be it. What’s important is that there are no clear boundaries, no radical switch of the field or method of observation.

### 3. Two Scenes

To put some flesh on these meager bones, I would now like to turn to two works and the controversy around them. They are not randomly chosen nor are they paradigmatic. However, they are good examples for the challenges the conceptual and the activist turns in art present to a phenomenological analysis, and they can serve as touchstones of a modified understanding of phenomenological investigation.

#### 3.1. *Not Your Casket: Dana Schutz Under Fire*

The 2017 edition of the Whitney Biennial in New York City included a painting by Dana Schutz, *Open Casket*, which caused a brief but

extremely fierce debate. It depicted the upper part of the body and the disfigured face of Emmett Till, a 14-year-old African-American boy who had been brutally maimed and murdered by two white men in 1955 after allegedly harassing one of their wives (which turned out not to be true). Mamie Till Mobley, Emmett’s mother, decided to have an open casket at the funeral service so the world could see what had been done to her son. The images of the face that was hardly recognizable as human circulated widely and helped spark the civil rights movement in the United States. Schutz’s painting referred to these (black-and-white) images, which she rendered in bright colors in a semi-abstract manner. It is more than obvious that no examination of the painting can ignore this background or the context of violence against young black subjects today. In fact, the shootings of unarmed black people and the Black Lives Matter movement were among the motivations for Schutz to choose this image. A strictly phenomenological analysis that exclusively deals with the visual side of the painting would thus be completely misplaced; it is striking, however, that a lot of the critics all but ignored this side completely, exclusively focusing on the question as to whether Schutz, being white, had the right to paint Till in his coffin. As philosopher and art critic David Carrier wrote: “I haven’t yet seen this exhibition. But I do not think that viewing the show or the painting would change this argument” (Behrendt 2017). The most outspoken and radical of these critics was the artist Hannah Black who published an open letter in which she called for the painting to be removed from the exhibition and ultimately destroyed. Black accused Schutz of appropriating Till’s death and turning it into a spectacle for “profit and fun.” If, as Schutz might claim, the motive for the painting were white shame, this was “not correctly represented” because it merely reproduced the “habitual cold calculation” (Black 2017) of the white gaze upon black suffering.

Black’s dogmatic and generalizing statement has, in turn, been widely criticized as leading to a “representation monopoly” or “representational segregation” (Speidel 2017), most convincingly by fellow artist Coco Fusco, who also warned against censorship and wrote: “Her argument is laced with an economically reductionist view of artistic practice and completely avoids consideration of the visual strategies employed by Schutz” (Fusco 2017). This does not mean that Fusco or anyone who criticized Black found Schutz’s painting very convincing, and it seems like we find ourselves in a situation “where the choice is between a flawed and misconceived painting and a shrill, almost vicious demand for its destruction,” as David Cohen put it (Behrendt 2017). The harshness of Black’s words may have worked against her intervention because they became an easy target for other critics who could position themselves against censorship without taking Black’s points as seriously as they deserved – including Cohen who in calling her statement “shrill” employs a highly gendered metaphor that points to the disparaging image of the hysterical woman.

It would be preposterous to claim that analyzing the aesthetic qualities of the painting itself would resolve any of this. The discursive and political stakes are clear, and they cannot be reduced to or captured by an investigation of the canvas. But maybe this is precisely the point: Any investigation of the canvas finds itself in this context, part of which can actually be *seen* by an informed eye – the strategy of the painting and its failure. So maybe it does make sense not to treat it as a merely discursive Duchampian intervention but to return to the painting and see what it *does*. In order to do this, we have to trace a few historical lines to give it some context in the history of art. We might say that Schutz's painting reenacts the development from an art that conforms to the Greenbergian idea of medium specificity<sup>2</sup> to the postconceptual in a strange and mostly inadvertent way: It presents itself in a very traditional sense as a painting that might well be from the 1960s, and despite its reference and the discursive space it intervenes into, Schutz seems to have no intention of acknowledging this space as a dimension of the work. However, the discursive returns with a vengeance in the discussion that followed it. *Open Casket* poses as a painting that found itself in a discursive storm it had nothing to do with in the first place, but that is obviously nonsense. Simply ignoring the conceptual will not make it go away. The most basic dimension of this is the very fact of pictorial reference. Schutz's painting obviously does not stand on its own, so the comparison with the original images of Till is built into it. This may not be so when we view the painting without any hint of what it's about, but the title should make things clear to most people with some knowledge of American history. Today the uninformed viewer is clearly a fiction. If the painting's creation of an image is also the transformation of a previous image, there is no sensible way of looking at it that could ignore this pre-image and its history.

This afterlife of images is the topic of David Joselit's *After Art*, which can provide some important background for our discussion. It is not, contrary to what the title may suggest, yet another proclamation of the end of art; instead, the "after" refers to the fate of images in an era of universal circulation that far exceeds anything Warhol could have imagined, a circulation that art cannot ignore. From this point of view, simply creating new images without any reference to existing ones and without taking into account the subsequent circulation of what one creates could seem increasingly naïve or parochial. If the standard case is that of images being transformations and appropriations of other images, Joselit suggests, in an almost Latourian vein, that "works of art must develop ways to build networks into their form by, for example, *reframing, capturing, reiterating, and documenting* existing content" (Joselit 2013, 94). We could say that Schutz does exactly that, albeit not in a very reflective way.

To clarify this, we might look at two classic examples, namely Andy Warhol and Gerhard Richter. (As far as the question of representing

suffering without neutralizing it, ignoring its context, or becoming complicit in the depicted violence is concerned, which is clearly central to a discussion of *Open Casket*, Haroun Farocki's work might be even more illuminating [Karambeigi 2018]; I have chosen Warhol and Richter because they were painters, or situated their work in the tradition of painting, and I want to focus on the aspect of reframing that Joselit points to.) In a way, Schutz has very little in common with Warhol and Richter, but it is precisely their differences that are instructive. Warhol, of course, used publicly available images in most of his works. His pictures, with their emphasis on the aspect of mechanical reproduction and its neutrality, cannot really be called appropriations. His techniques, mainly coloring and multiplication, do not so much make the images his but rather put them back into circulation after a few strategic interventions. Traditional categories like artistic technique, sensibility, differentiation, and emotion are hardly applicable to these strategies, and the instant recognizability of his works are those of a brand rather than an artistic personality. This works only because the original images are public domain, as it were; this is true even for overtly political works like the 1963 *Electric Chair* series and the *Race Riot* series (1964), which comprise powerful history paintings, as Anne M. Wagner calls them, precisely because of their neutrality or "his brand of deadpan" (Wagner 1996, 104). The images that Richter relies on are different, sometimes more personal but often contain some historical or political reference: His series *18. Oktober 1977* (1988) uses footage of the arrest of the German terrorists known as the *Rote Armee Fraktion* and police photographs of their dead bodies after they committed suicide (or were murdered) in prison, some of had even been published in *Stern* magazine. Richter's paintings use his signature style of blurring, which has a very specific effect: The paintings do not look like technological reproductions as Warhol's works do, but they don't exactly invoke the figure of the painter either. They are made by hand but this hand is itself almost impersonal. It steers clear of any expressiveness and remains neutral. Like in Warhol, we do not see the original images *through* or *behind* the work but *in* them, where they seem to hover halfway between extreme proximity and detachedness, between a mass medial image and a memory – not anybody's memory in particular, just an image that has the peculiar general quality of a distant memory or even a dream.

We could say that the obvious conceptual dimension that *Race Riot*, *18. Oktober 1977*, and *Open Casket* all have in common is that they all reference particular political and discursive contexts and relate to them in a manner that may appear clear on a pictorial level but is nevertheless difficult to interpret. This does not mean that they are all successful examples of postconceptual art (which in the case of Warhol and Richter would have to be *avant la lettre*) – the existence of a conceptual dimension does not mean that the artist necessarily reflects and controls it. In

the case of *Open Casket*, it is not the image itself that is dreamlike but the way Schutz approaches her subject: She was seemingly caught off guard by the precariousness of her intervention and the fierceness of the debate. Before the controversy ensued, she seems to have considered the picture a purely personal and emotional reaction instead of a conceptual intervention into an intense and highly charged debate: “‘I don’t know if it has the right emotionality,’ she said. ‘I like it as a painting, but I might want to try it again’” (Tomkins 2017). The naiveté of this statement is almost shocking, but it is confirmed by the painting. It seems that Schutz did not use a particular photo but rather a memory, which leads to the effect that the picture doesn’t so much reference the original photo but replaces it, as it were. We see a face that is painted in a strangely deformed way that we might identify as disfigured, but we don’t see Emmett Till’s face. The bright colors and the planar character of the clothes and the pillow the head rests on have no counterpart in the black-and-white photo. They create a clearly structured picture that uses very few colors: black and white for the clothes, red for a rose that seems to be placed on the lid of the coffin, brown for the head, yellow for the pillow, pink for a band that stretches across the top of the picture and that may represent flowers or the ruffled inside of the coffin, and a little bit of blue here and there. If this were all there were, the painting would be calm and pleasant. But the most striking feature is, of course, the face, as it was and is the main subject of the picture. Here Schutz used thick brushstrokes of brown, some black, and a little red, which seem to define a landscape rather than a recognizable face. I should note that I haven’t seen the actual painting “in the flesh” (this translation of the Husserlian *leibhaftig* takes on a strange tone where the disfiguration of *black* flesh is the object of representation and controversy). Since the reproduction appears to miss a lot at this point, let me quote another observer: “The buildup of paint on the face is a couple of inches thick in the area where Till’s mouth would be. Although there are no recognizable features, a deep trough carved into the heavy impasto conveys a sense of savage disfigurement, which is heightened by the whiteness of the boy’s smoothly ironed dress shirt” (Tomkins 2017). The savagery of the painterly technique is obviously meant to reflect the savagery of the violence inflicted on Till – but it appears violent *in itself*. What we see are the traces of deeply physical handling of paint, evidence rather than the representation of a disfigurement.

The face recalls those of Francis Bacon – although his are made using a different technique – who might be called the twentieth-century master of painterly disfigurement. Again, it is revealing to look at the differences. The models for the faces Bacon paints are not themselves disfigured, even though some of the paintings echo the pictures of terrible mutilations we know from the First World War. In the multiple portraits he painted of people, like his lover George Dyer and his friends and fellow artists Lucian Freud and Isabel Rawsthorne, there is a peculiar balance of brutality and

tenderness. Their faces are invariably distorted and deformed, but one never gets the feeling that the artist is doing this to them. He is showing something that may spring from a warped or almost supernaturally acute perception that senses violence where others do not see it but never acts as the agent of that violence. His tenderness and his sense of balance even bring out a certain beauty in the deformations we are presented with. In Till’s case, the violence was very real and has to be dealt with. The question is *how* – using what technique and, more fundamentally, assuming what relation to it. The painter could adopt the position of a witness who knows that the best way to make a case for the victim is not to display her own involvement but to neutrally record what has been done. That is what the photograph does. Meticulously copying it in paint would convey a completely different message than we have here: It could say “we need to be reminded of this, and I take it upon myself to present a picture of it that is as clear and unambiguous as possible, curbing my own pain and recording all the gruesome details.” The question as to whether a white woman is the right person to do this would still be asked but the answer might not be as clear. Another stance, which is the one Schutz actually assumed, is that of someone who allows herself to be moved by the sight and paints from the impulse of this experience. This approach tends to occlude the actual scene and replace it with one’s own affective involvement for which then the appropriate painterly means must be sought. In a way this implies inhabiting the violence instead of observing it, and one result could be a violent picture that hurts the viewer just as much as it hurt the painter. There is a thin line here between presenting the violence and inflicting it, inflicting it on the viewer but also, by recreating it, on the subject of the painting. This might still result in a very powerful and impressive painting, which according to many viewers *Open Casket* is. But it would also make it dubious, which might explain why even those who defended Schutz were uncomfortable with the picture.

Warhol’s work can be called cool and technical, Richter’s is discreet, but Schutz’s is neither; rather, it is expressive and emotional. Unlike the others’ work, hers is an appropriation in the literal sense of the word: She makes the image hers, using her own technique to convey her own feelings. She really is “infusing it with subjectivity” (Livingstone and Gyarkye 2017), as two critics observed, and it is a very confused subjectivity. Black’s verdict that Schutz’s shame is “not correctly represented” is certainly objectionable – it sounds like it was issued by a Jacobin art-police officer. But a closer look at the painting shows that Black does have a point. We would expect an artistic attempt to convey one’s own shame and empathy to approach its subject with some care and humility; what we see are the actions of a painter who focuses on her own reaction and lets it mask the original image, of which little remains. The painting says too little about Till or about the contemporary situation and contains too much self-expression even if we disregard its dubious brutality.

As Aruna D'Souza writes: "The issue is not that Schutz cannot engage with a particular history in her art. Rather, it's that in her position as a nonblack person, her artistic choices failed to rise to the level of historical and political understanding needed to meet the work's own social and artistic ambitions" (D'Souza 2018). There is indeed "more narcissism than empathy" (Baker 2017) and no trace of shame.

What I have not yet mentioned is that there was another critique by a fellow artist that was much more convincing and effective than Black's open letter: Parker Bright's vigil-like performance in front of the painting, where the artist donned a T-shirt that said "Black death spectacle" on the back and had a crossed out "Lynch mob" sign on the front. Bright felt just as strongly about the work, but instead of calling for its destruction he did exactly what Joselit describes: He reframed it and thus radically transformed it. There are numerous photographs on the Internet of Bright standing there facing the painting, and we could say he inscribed his performance into the picture itself. He stood in front of it for hours on end, obstructing but not completely blocking the view, placing his own live body in front of the painted one on the wall, sometimes turning around and talking to the viewers about the context of what he was doing and about the painting. The writing on his T-shirt introduced a paratext that recontextualized the work, opening a perspective that many viewers might not have had otherwise. No matter whether they agreed with Bright or not, they would have been introduced to the possibility of seeing it as a spectacle of black death and finding themselves in the uncomfortable position of the voyeur. What is striking here is that he placed his intervention exactly within the field that is immediately accessible through a phenomenological analysis even in the most traditional sense, and it's precisely this that made it so effective. By seeing this black body bearing a statement that reframed the painting, we invariably see the two of them as belonging together, one commenting on the other but also visually informing it. The live black body in front of the picture of the dead one did not appear as an aggressive or authoritarian figure but as a vulnerable real counterpart whose sheer physical presence lent additional weight to the words on his back and could not be dismissed so easily. His statement was: Look at this! If you do, you will *see* that the conceptual and political issues at play cannot be sidestepped.

### 3.2. *Catch Me If You Can: Christoph Schlingensiefel's Container Logic*

In 2000, Austria was shaken by a political constellation that had been thought unthinkable but foreshadowed what was to come fifteen years later: The ÖVP, the conservative party, decided to form a coalition with the FPÖ, a nationalist party with strong xenophobic and racist tendencies. In reaction, the other EU countries ostracized Austria – a political

boycott that lasted barely more than six months. Within the country itself there was a lot of dissent, most conspicuously embodied by the weekly demonstrations against the government in Vienna.

In this situation Luc Bondy, one of the directors of the Wiener Festwochen, an arts festival focusing on theater, opera, and music, invited German artist, theater, and film director Christoph Schlingensiefel for a public performance right in front of the opera house. Schlingensiefel decided to stage a twisted version of the *Big Brother* television format popular at the time: He set up containers in which twelve asylum seekers from different countries would be living for the six days of the performance under constant surveillance by several video cameras that transmitted live on the Internet. Every evening the viewers were invited to vote out their two least favorite participants; according to Schlingensiefel these would then be taken straight to the border and deported. The "winner" would receive 35,000 Schillings (today about \$2,500). The containers were decorated with a huge banner saying "Ausländer raus!" (Foreigners Out!), a banner of the extremely influential rightist newspaper *Kronenzeitung*, an FPÖ flag, and multiple racist quotes from FPÖ politicians. There were public German lessons for the refugees on the roof; other artists and politicians came to visit and spoke to the crowd; Austrian playwright Elfriede Jelinek staged a puppet theater show with the asylum seekers. The artist himself was there all day for the duration of the performance, sometimes on the roof with a microphone, sometimes in front of the containers with a megaphone. Even though the actual presence of the containers and their inhabitants in the middle of Vienna was its epicenter, *Bitte liebt Österreich* (Please Love Austria) was a multimedia event whose Internet presence was just as important. Shortly afterwards, Matthias Lilienthal and Claus Philipp edited a volume of documents (Lilienthal and Philipp 2000); two years later, a documentary called *Ausländer raus! Schlingensiefels Container* by Paul Poet was released, which contained footage from the event itself and interviews with Schlingensiefel, colleagues, a philosopher, and even ÖVP and FPÖ politicians (Poet 2003).

This project is a good example of what Osborne calls "distributive unity": The work consists of the Vienna event, the Internet videos, the documentation in book form, *and* the film, to say the least. Since it is impossible to delimit the actual event, one could say that the repercussions it had in public discourse on the street, in people's homes, in the media, and elsewhere – and even the multiple lawsuits that were filed against the project – are part of it as well. The documentation is thus not a derivative version of something that has passed forever but a legitimate part or dimension of the work. In this regard, it is interesting to compare film and book: While the film creates more of a linear narrative, the book assembles a heterogeneous mass of materials that seems better suited to capture the messiness of the actual event. Taken together, they are the main source for any discussion of the work today.

So, what was it that Schlingensief did or created? Was it, as Denise Varney put it, “a paradigmatic aesthetic representation of contemporary politics” (Varney 2010, 117)? I find this characterization highly debatable. Calling it a representation of contemporary politics suggests a pictorial or theatrical work of art whose maker was in complete control, identified a paradigmatic contemporary political constellation, and produced some kind of likeness of it. Furthermore, describing it as “aesthetic” seems to ignore the obvious interventionist character of the event. So what was it? An activist intervention where the results are of far greater importance than the aesthetic dimension? Surely not. First of all there was a lot to see, and the way it was presented and staged was extremely important. Second, the work was far too ambivalent to be an example of Bruguera’s “useful art”: It failed to produce any clearly identifiable results and never aimed at doing so. In fact, Schlingensief mocked this kind of activist stance as ridiculously naïve – without giving up the idea that it would have *some* effect precisely because of its ambivalence. He described his aim as follows: “What interests me is to invite different systems to dance together. And that becomes the image. And the image is there for seven or rather six days. And it will be there in ten years and also in a hundred years” (Poet 2003). Whatever one may think about this slightly overblown idea of his own legacy, what he describes is exactly what Bishop called the “mediating third term” between the artist(s) and the participants (in fact *Bitte liebt Österreich* was one of her examples). This “image” consists of a whole web of images that can be looked at and analyzed; the actions and reactions of those involved have become part of it. What it felt like to be drawn into the project can only be reconstructed, and the documentation has become the prime source for this. So while a performative event that takes place in the middle of a European city and involves hundreds of people may surely be called an intervention, it wasn’t an artistic act of activism; and while the image it created may count as a representation that reveals something about contemporary Austrian and European politics, it is not an aesthetic representation in any traditional sense. And it was deeply ambiguous and ambivalent.

The containers were situated at one of the most prominent spots in Vienna: next to the opera house on the corner of Kärntnerstrasse and Opernring. When approaching the opera house from any side except from the west, you couldn’t miss them. In front of the neo-Renaissance building they looked like an improvised construction site and thus really stuck out from their surroundings. Schlingensief had made no effort to give them the appearance of an art installation, which might have obscured the overdetermined character of the container as such. That way, the associations with construction, international trade, refugee camps, and the *Big Brother* format, all of which have to do with transience and displacement, were all clearly present (Klose 2015). Towering above them was the huge “*Ausländer raus!*” sign, which must have been

shocking to anyone who saw it: As familiar as this racist slogan was, seeing it written in huge letters on a billboard was highly unusual, to say the least. I imagine almost all viewers would have felt the impulse to take it down, some because they abhorred it politically, others because they felt they were being mocked. Supposedly there were actual asylum seekers and illegal immigrants inside but they were shielded from view, except if you actually looked through the peepholes and thus placed yourself in an extremely awkward and uncomfortable position.

The presence of all this in the middle of the Austrian capital produced a subverted image in a very immediate sense, and also figuratively. During the European political boycott of Austria, it often seemed as if people were more worried about the image their country created than about actual political developments. Also, politicians all over Europe were careful to place the compounds and detention centers asylum seekers were forced to live in well out of sight of the general public. Housing a container full of refugees in the middle of Vienna was a disruption of this political attempt to retain a clean, homogeneous image. The way Schlingensief staged this disruption, however, took the form of travesty. Spying on people living in containers and then conducting a popular vote on who had to go seemed offensive enough, but placing actual asylum seekers in this situation must have appeared tasteless and cruel, unless it wasn’t real. But was it? The inhabitants of the containers were obviously foreigners who didn’t seem to speak German very well (or not at all) but were they real? Or actors? And were they really deported? It seemed hard to believe. Acting as a kind of master of ceremonies, Schlingensief did his best to heighten this ambivalence. He constantly switched between various positions: harshly criticizing Austrian politics, saying that all he had done was to make visible the realities of the FPÖ and the *Kronenzeitung* who had made the slogan “*Foreigners Out!*” socially acceptable, acting as a representative of this very attitude, cheering on rightist agitators who mistook the event for an expression of their political convictions, sometimes handing them the microphone, cheering “*Ausländer raus!*” himself, claiming that the FPÖ and the *Kronenzeitung* were themselves behind the project, or inviting passers-by to partake of the “free peepshow” where they could see the foreigners in the containers. What made matters worse was the fact that he was German, a “*Piefke*,” and the Viennese weren’t too happy about this Kraut insulting them or making fun of them or lecturing them – or whatever it was that he was doing. After the media and the *Kronenzeitung* itself had picked up on the event and started covering it in numerous articles, the crowd grew from day to day. The discussions among the audience were evidence of their confusion. Supporting the project or criticizing it, praising it or damning it to hell could both be done with conflicting motivations.

It was almost impossible to remain untouched, or perhaps better to say untainted, by the event. The way that inhabitants were kept out of sight

in containers in the middle of the city but could be watched online or through peepholes implicated the viewers and turned them into voyeurs no matter what their attitude toward the whole project was, while the “*Ausländer raus!*” sign gave their applause of whatever was going on a strange twist. Whoever entered the gravitational field of the event could not remain a neutral spectator but was turned into a participant and became part of the image. Schlingensiefel appropriately called his creation “a machine to disturb and disrupt images,” something that he wanted to introduce into the Austrian public “like a virus” (Poet 2003). This virus infected the public debate but also seemed to affect the people who came to watch and were drawn into the event: It made them lose their composure and react in unforeseeable ways. The affective energy that the presence of the containers released in the spectators/participants was stunning: Discussions quickly turned into arguments and sometimes into shouting contests. The physical presence of the containers and the invisible presence of their inhabitants reminded the public that at the core of the political there is an interaction of bodily beings and that however abstract and general political decisions are, they finally result in actions upon bodies, in their control and displacement. Being confronted with this bodily dimension apparently provokes strong affective reactions, and in the end it is rather surprising that there was no actual violence among the spectators and no serious violent attack on the containers themselves.

One can only speculate how people who followed the events on the Internet reacted. Their perspective was different in several ways: First, it obviously lacked physical confrontation, and second, since they were able to follow the live stream of videos from the containers, they had no experience at all of the *concealed* presence of their inhabitants in Vienna. The shocking and offensive character of the containers’ real presence could not be reproduced online and the videos from their insides were as vacuous as any reality TV show. Still, by visiting the website many more people could follow the events than could have ever been physically present, and in fact thousands did. And the question what to make of what they were seeing must have been just as difficult to answer. Silvija Jestrović called the event “a complex interplay between real and simulated that not only challenged the political views of Austrians, but also at times tested the intelligence of the viewing/participating public” (Jestrović 2008, 59). That is certainly true but somewhat downplays how radical this challenge was. Trying to describe the relation of his project to political activism, Schlingensiefel said: “Resistance is over. You have to produce contradictions” (Poet 2003). Why would resistance be over? There certainly was and is a lot going on in the world that calls for resistance. What he is pointing to is the ineffectiveness of political activism in art but also the problem of self-righteousness that could be seen very clearly in the demonstrators – does anyone really have any solutions? Resistance always sounds good, but what exactly does it mean? Are things really

so unequivocal that there is one clear line of resistance? Is it possible to escape one’s assigned role even as a protester? It is certainly true that “Schlingensiefel’s project draws attention to the contradictions of political discourse in Austria at that moment” (Bishop 2012b, 44), but his statement is more fundamental. There are contradictions in any political situation, and it could be one of the tasks of political art to uncover them. *Producing* contradictions, as he is suggesting, could be the method to do this: create situations that are unclear or even contradictory and provoke people to react without any certainty about what it is they’re reacting to.

There were two situations that illustrate how successful this strategy was. At one point an elderly woman, whose exasperation was well out of control and whose shouts “Krauts out! Foreigners in!” could be heard in the background as German leftist politician Gregor Gysi publicly damned nationalism and racism, screamed “You German swine!” at Schlingensiefel and followed this up with an insult that seemed to sum up all her rage and confusion: “You *artist!*” Almost every article written about the work mentioned this incident, which is very funny indeed but also rather revealing. This wasn’t the usual rant about artists using public subsidies to produce filth that no one wants to see. The event obviously made her very angry, but what made matters worse was the fact that it eluded all definition in an irritating way. What she seemed to be saying is that here was someone who just refused to be pinned down, someone who created situations that implicate the viewers in ways that are so uncomfortable and irresolvable that they become unbearable. Meant as an insult, this angrily shouted designation was in fact a very accurate description of Schlingensiefel’s understanding of his own role. “The task of art today is to bring chaos into order” (Adorno 2005, 222). Of this, Schlingensiefel was the master.

The other situation took place a little later and was much more spectacular; in fact, it might be called the culmination of the whole project – and the nadir of political activism in Vienna. Schlingensiefel had repeatedly invited the FPÖ to take down the “Foreigners Out!” sign and thus get rid of this stain on the clean image of Austria, which they wisely (or out of caution) declined to do. But another group stepped into “the Schlingensiefel trap,” as Armin Thurnher, editor of the magazine *Falter*, put it (Poet 2003): When on the Thursday of the event the weekly demonstration against the government passed the installation, the participants decided to storm it, tear down the sign and “free” the inhabitants. The situation escalated to the point that the asylum seekers, fearing for their lives, had to be evacuated. The self-righteous elation on the faces of the self-appointed liberators as they tore at the sign and joyfully told the inhabitants of the container they were there to free them is symptomatic and hard to watch. When they learned that nobody wanted to be liberated, they were dumbfounded. Thurnher is right in noting that just like the *Kronenzeitung*, they turned out to be more concerned

about salvaging the image of their country than about its political reality (Thurnher 2000).

Schlingensief seemed to have successfully “blurred all traces of ideological determinability” (Poet 2010) by staging an event that was too obviously satirical to be real and too obviously real to be satirical. On the next day, everyone was back and a new sign had been printed and set up, accompanied by the increasingly dubious applause of the crowd. But Schlingensief turned it up a notch: Below the original sign it now said “*Unsere Ehre heißt Treue*” (Loyalty Is Our Honor), the slogan of the German SS. Nobody took it down.

#### 4. Articulating the Sensible

The last sentence of Adorno’s “*Vers une musique informelle*” sums up his view of the task of contemporary art: “The form of all artistic utopia today is to make things of which we don’t know what they are” (Adorno 2012, 322, translation modified). In a way this applies to both Schutz’s and Schlingensief’s works, albeit in different ways: While the latter deliberately created a situation that took on a life of its own, the former really didn’t seem to know what she was doing and what she had produced. There is of course much more to be said about my two examples, as there is a lot to be said about political art, its possibilities, hubris, and pitfalls – all of which exceeds the scope of this chapter. In this final section I would like to return to the role of phenomenology in the investigation of art in a situation where any artist has to relate to the question of the political and the fractured space-time of contemporaneity and where Greenbergian medium-specificity is obsolete while the conceptual dimension of all art has come to the fore.

What we see in both of these examples is how they worked on different levels and in different dimensions at once, immediate physical perception being only one of them. This is the situation that any philosophy of art today has to deal with. If phenomenology was limited to encounters “in the flesh,” it would have to recognize that it isn’t equal to the task. While it is true that an exclusively phenomenological approach will not do justice to the complexity of the situation of contemporary art, its strength has always been to distinguish between different ways of appearance and their relations. If there is a conceptual dimension informing the aesthetic and interacting with it, analyzing exactly how this interaction plays out in experience is a genuinely phenomenological task, as is the difference and interaction of different medial dimensions of a piece. In my understanding, phenomenology is as much about difference as it is about identity and presence.

Taking the cue from what the editors of this volume called the “political episteme,” this can be grounded in a phenomenological or phenomenologically informed analysis of the way works of art bring into play, question, and subvert the very texture of the fundamental political institutions

in their contingency and apparent naturalness. There is a certain proximity here to Jacques Rancière’s idea of a “distribution of the sensible” as the aesthetic dimension at the basis of the ontology of the political. (The complete indifference of Rancière and his followers toward phenomenology and vice versa could be the subject of another essay.) He defines the distribution of the sensible as “the system of self-evident facts of sense perception that simultaneously discloses the existence of something in common and the delimitations that define the respective parts and positions within it” (Rancière 2004, 12), thus referring to the locus where perceptibility is grounded in an ontology that is inseparable from questions of legitimacy and social order. Art occupies a special place in this thinking because it can question this political episteme of the sensible by its redistribution; what he is looking for is “an art that questions its own limits and powers, that refuses to anticipate its own effects” (Rancière 2010, 149). While this seems to be a perfect description of Schlingensief’s *Please Love Austria!*, it also seems appropriate to say that Mamie Till’s decision to have an open casket resulted in a very powerful redistribution of the sensible that took place outside of art but within what we might call image politics. When Dana Schutz took up Till’s image, she unwillingly performed another redistribution, and it was this redistribution that was the primary object of criticism, not the aesthetic quality of the painting or the authenticity of her affective involvement, as she appears to have thought.

This brief glance at one of the most influential theories of the political in art shows some affinities to phenomenology; however, there are also some important differences. Rancière’s actual analyses of specific works tend to be rather formal and global, and it could be the task of phenomenology to call attention to the *articulation* of the sensible. This process of articulating can be understood in several ways. First of all it refers to the specific aesthetic form of the work, a category that is important even in works that lean as heavily toward the discursive and the conceptual as Schlingensief’s. Second, there is an articulation between the different layers and dimensions of the work, namely the conceptual dimension, the immediate physical event or object, its documentation and medial distribution, the discourse around it, and so on. As much as in the specific content of these layers, the work consists of the way it articulates them, i.e., holds them together and keeps them apart, achieves and blocks transitions between them. Lastly, phenomenology itself performs a verbal articulation of the works in all their complexity, not in order to replace them with discourse but to trace their own articulation and unfold their implications. In this, it is part of the “forms in which their process crystallizes: interpretation, commentary, and critique” (Adorno 1997, 194). Rancière can remind us that a lot of the articulations we are dealing with are in fact redistributions. They concern the very texture of our political episteme, and what they show is not so much the world *in statu nascendi*,

as Merleau-Ponty would have it, but the contingency of any instituted world with its particular ways of distributing positions and relations.

What neither Rancière nor a phenomenological approach, flexible as it may be, can adequately theorize is the concrete historical situation art finds itself in. Rancière's category of the aesthetic regime of art is too vague and general to be of any real use in a critical analysis of contemporary art and its exigencies. For this, we have to turn to a theory like Osborne's that links a sophisticated perspective on the history of art with an awareness of the sociopolitical situation in a globalized world. It remains doubtful whether this is within the scope of a phenomenological perspective. Simply following the actors will not do: We need a more sophisticated philosophical theory. But like Rancière, Osborne's discussions of exemplary works remain scant and sketchy. Here phenomenology can do more than to fill in the blanks – in analyzing specific works it might question some of the broad generalizations he makes and thus inform a theory of contemporary art and its political implications. Osborne speaks of “the conjointly philosophical, empirical and political task of grasping and constructing the possible political meanings of new and internally complex sets of temporal relations in uneven and rapidly changing spatial distributions” and concludes that “‘art’ remains the emblematically privileged site of such relations” (Osborne 2018, 58). Any philosophy of the political would be incomplete if it ignored contemporary art as it is an important mode of articulating the political. And as I hope to have shown, an undogmatic phenomenology that doesn't willingly turn itself into “mere phenomenology” (Adorno 1997, 335) is an indispensable part of any such endeavor.

## Notes

1. In Actor Network Theory, the term “actant” designates any entity that acts or mediates action, be it an object like a key or a gun, an organization, or a human being. Actors are considered to always be hybrid beings consisting of networks of multiple actants.
2. Greenberg first formulated the idea that the task of all arts is to achieve purity by staying within the boundaries of and exploring their medium in 1940 (Greenberg 1940). Since the 1960s it has been heavily criticized to the point where Rosalind Krauss called the concept of medium “critical toxic waste” (Krauss 1999, 5).

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# Political Phenomenology

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and Steffen Herrmann**

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