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Spontaneity on Parole. Participation, Interactivity and Performative Spectatorship

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Spontaneity on Parole. Participation, Interactivity and Performative Spectatorship

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Abstract

In recent years, participation and interactivity have become two key words in the vocabulary of art criticism. It is not by chance that both these models insist on a form of performative spectatorship, based essentially on three concepts: presentness, immediateness and unframedness. The challenge posed by this type of spectatorship concerns a fundamental concept for aesthetics (already with Kant's *Critique of the Power of Judgment*), and that is that of spontaneity. In fact, the creation of an "unframed" space and an immediate experience precisely at increasing the "spontaneity effect," fuelled by the active involvement of a spectator "immersed" physically (and emotionally) within an environment/work that is programmed to welcome and receive its intervention. Except that spontaneity is, by definition, something that cannot be achieved if sought intentionally. This is precisely the challenge posed by interactivity.

Keywords Interactivity Spontaneity Performative Spectatorship Participation Art

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The performative spectatorship of Interactivity

"Collaboration is the answer […] But what is the question?"[1] Hans Ulrich Obrist's famous quote, also cited by Hal Foster in *Bad New Days*, perfectly sums up the orientation and main terms of the contemporary critical and artistic debate. "Collaboration" is indeed another way of saying "participation." And "participation" has now become a key word in the vocabulary of art criticism, the term that better than others captures and describes one of the dominating trends in artistic production in the last few years. The interest in participation in the artistic sphere is not a very recent phenomenon. In this regard, Nicolas Bourriaud's successful essay on *Relational Aesthetics* published in 1998 had framed and helped to launch a type of art oriented towards the production of encounters and relationships through which the meanings of "works" could be collectively constructed.[2] However, since those first seeds, the interest in participation quickly transformed first into widespread enthusiasm and then into a veritable obsession till it has contaminated spaces and institutions. Participatory are in fact the artistic practices, or at least many of the most relevant ones in the contemporary scenario. But so too are curatorship, museums – from which those same practices dreamed of escape –, art school Master's degrees and the public programmes of state and private institutions of art and culture. "Participation," in short, has become not just a

1 H. Foster, *Bad New Days: Art, Criticism, Emergency* (London-New York: Verso, 2015): 150.
2 We cannot provide an account of the critical debate on the "social turn" of the contemporary arts and the differences between "relational art," "participatory art," "dialogic art" and "collaborative art" which, since the early 2000s, has involved, among others, Nicolas Bourriaud, Grant Kester, Claire Bishop, Hal Foster, Jacques Rancière and Stewart Martin. See at least G.H. Kester, *Conversation Pieces: Community and Communication in Modern Art* (Berkeley-Los Angeles-London: University of California Press, 2004); C., Bishop, "Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics," *October* 110, Fall (2004): 51-79. See also A. D'Ammando, F. Natale, eds., "Estetica e partecipazione. Prospettive critiche su arte, politica e spettatorialità," *Pólemos. Materiali di filosofia e critica sociale*, no. 2 (2021), in part. G.H. Kester, "Variations on a Theme: Consensus and Dissensus in Contemporary Participatory Art:" 19-32.

keyword but almost a watchword, from which the arts seem unable (and unwilling) to escape. The label "participatory art," of course, designates an endless field of practices and projects that are often very different from each other, but all united by the desire to overturn the traditional relationship between work, artist and audience and to transform the concept of "spectatorship." Participative practices, due to Bishop in *Artificial Hells* – the text that has so far provided the most effective and exhaustive account of the participatory phenomenon in contemporary arts –, aim "to place pressure on conventional modes of artistic production and consumption under capitalism," by radically rethinking the roles and relationships between producers and users: the artist is seen no longer as an individual producer of objects but as "a collaborator and producer of *situations*; the work of art as a finite, portable, commodifiable product is reconceived as an ongoing or long-term *project* with an unclear beginning and end; while the audience, previously conceived as a 'viewer' or 'beholder' is now repositioned as a co-producer or *participant*."[3] Considering these peculiar aspects, the step from participation (and participatory practices) to interactivity (and interactive practices) seems short, especially considering the very close relationship between interactive performances and immersive virtual environments, which increasingly accompany and amplify their possibilities. As commonly understood, "interactivity" generally denotes a relational mode (with environments, images, and objects) that contrasts with a passive attitude, much like how immersivity contrasts with representational or symbolic models. Particularly in more intricate instances, attributable to new technologies and electronic interfaces, it entails a distinct type of engagement compared to the "interpretative cooperation" demanded of viewers by

3 C. Bishop, *Artificial Hells. Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship* (London-New York: Verso, 2012): 2.

"traditional" texts and artworks. Therefore, no longer, or not only, an interpretation that "simply" integrates and actualises a text or a work – even if "open" and indeterminate – but an actually active and productive interaction, able to act on the environment and on the image (predisposed to respond to the input of the user-user) to the point of altering its nature and configuration.[4] It is, therefore, a mode of fruition and creation that, like the participatory mode, calls into question the classical oppositions (active/passive, author/spectator, production/reception), radically transforming the statute of spectatorship and of the "work" itself (assuming we can still speak of "work"). Up to this point, we are in the realm of similarities, more or less strong depending on the cases and levels. But, between participation and interactivity – or, rather, between so-called "participatory art" and interactive practices – there are also some important differences. Bishop herself marks some of these differences. The definition "participatory art" is preferred to other similar ones, says Bishop, because it directly refers to the involvement of many people "as opposed to the one-to-one relationship of 'interactivity'", which is based on the fundamental idea "in which people constitute the central artistic medium and material, in the manner of theatre and performance."[5] In this perspective, the gap between participation and interactivity is linked to a political issue – the collective dimension and social impact of participatory projects, inspired, as Paolo Virno noted, by the post-Fordist network of social cooperation –[6] and to a technical issue – concerning the medium of participatory art, which is people. Not by chance, in the history traced by Bishop there are almost no references

4 For a detailed and philosophically grounded analysis of the nature of interactivity, see P. Montani *Bioestetica. Senso comune, tecnica e arte nell'età della globalizzazione* (Carocci: Rome, 2007) and *Tecnologie della sensibilità. Estetica e immaginazione interattiva* (Milan: Cortina, 2014).

5 C. Bishop, *Artificial Hells*: 1-2.

6 See A. Penzin, "The Soviets of the Multitude: On Collectivity and Collective Work: an Interview with Paolo Virno," Mediations, no. 1 (2010): 81-92, 89.

to the relationship between arts and digital technologies (and images), and thus to the entire universe of interactive and immersive practices. From a certain point of view, this comes as no surprise, if it is true, as Bishop does not fail to point out, that the main theoretical reference point for many participatory artists is Guy Debord, the leader of the 20th century "iconophobic" intellectuals. Even Foster, in the already mentioned *Bad New Days*, not only leaves out "digital" from the terms chosen to try to delineate a map of the most representative trends and strategies within the broad and heterogeneous scenario of contemporary arts (the five terms selected, which denote the arts' interest in confronting reality and history, are "abject," "archival," "mimetic," "precarious" and "post-critical?"), but in the last chapter, discussing the contemporary obsession with user activation and participation, he does not refer to interactivity and immersivity at all.

Yet, it is precisely the last chapter of Foster's book – dedicated to the concept of "presence" and its increasingly marked relevance in contemporary arts – that can help to better understand the paradoxical closeness between participation and interactivity. The "presence" Foster speaks of is characterized by an uncertain status, oscillating between the immediate relationship with reality, the impression of "presence" characteristic of a hyper-media era – with specific reference to the *reenactment* of performances from the Sixties and Seventies, which introduces a suspended and unreal temporality into museums – and the ability to map different orders of experience and temporality. However, I am not interested in commenting on this analysis, which deserves to be discussed seriously and in-depth. What matters most is that this "presence" directly refers to the performative register. And it is precisely "performative" and "presence" the two concepts around which the intertwining of similarities and differences characterizing

the relationship between participation and interactivity in contemporary arts seems to gather. "Performative" is, indeed, the model of spectatorship emphasized by both participatory and interactive practices (especially considering the possibilities offered by the development of virtual and immersive environments): a model founded, precisely, on the power of the effect of presence or "presencing," which openly opposes the "classic" paradigm of representation (the "image-of" something, to which the theory of mimesis refers).

In both cases, presentness is associated with the "unframedness" which refers to the suppression of the boundary that separates and distinguishes between the space of representation and the space of reality ("actual" or "simulated"), capable of fostering the immediacy of the experience – which seems, or aims to seem, precisely "real," unmediated – and the intervention of the spectator-actor-coauthor involved in this experience. It is evident how it is precisely the (ideal) removal of the "frame" that proves decisive. By eliminating, or at least weakening, the boundary between the "work" or image and reality, the spatial-temporal continuity that is established facilitates the emergence of a profound sense of presence. This includes the emotional engagement of the spectator. Certainly, the "unframedness" is never total and effective because the user, however willing to surrender to immersion and a more or less strong sense of presence, is always aware of being within a fictional environment (and thus a frame). This is one of the most discussed points in the critical and philosophical debate on the new forms of performative spectatorship. However, without delving into this debate – which revolves around, among other things, the role (and tyranny)[7] of emotions and a "reflective consciousness" in the aesthetic experience – the appeal to the feeling of presence, emotions, and (also

7 See P. D'Angelo, *La tirannia delle emozioni* (Bologna: il Mulino, 2020).

physical) involvement of the spectator remains a trait that unites interactive and participatory practices. In this sense, while for the former, one of the (many) possible paradigms is represented by "immersence," the neologism coined by Char Davies – which combines, as evident, the concepts of immersion and presence – to describe the experience offered to the user by her pioneering works of immersive and interactive virtual reality, for the latter, an indication that helps understand their nature – and the reference models – still comes from Bishop's text on participatory art, which in the title, *Artificial Hells*, explicitly picks up André Breton's account of the Grande Saison Dada of 1921 because it "appeals to bolder, affective, and troubling forms of participatory art and criticism."[8]

Naturally, it could be argued that such a parallel overlooks the difference between the physical presence inherent in participatory practices – directly linked to performativity through the idea of the body as a medium – and the "effect of presence" in virtual reality. Erika Fischer-Lichte, for instance, in her now "classic" text on the aesthetics of performativity, draws a clear distinction between the radical presence of an "energetic body" as an "embodied mind" (explicitly referencing the paradigm of enactivism), capable of producing an energy perceived by the spectator immersed in it, and the "*impression* of presentness" of technological and electronic media products, which do not "bringing forth these bodies or objects as present."[9] In fact, Fischer-Lichte argues that the emphasis on corporeality ("the corporeal being-in-the-world of the actor/performer") in theatre, action art, and performance art from the 1960s onward should be seen as a reaction to increasing mediatization and the "resulting fantasies of the virtual body,"

8 C. Bishop, *Artifiical Hells*: 6-7.
9 E. Fischer-Lichte, *The Transformative Power of Performance: A New Aesthetics* (London-New York: Routledge, 2008): 98-100.

"the technologically reproducible astral body."[10] From this perspective, which draws on Eugenio Barba's studies of Indian and Eastern theatre, the gap seems unbridgeable. However, things are different, at least when considering more recent virtual technologies (which Fischer-Lichte does not seem to address). As Diane Gromala and Yacov Sharir, along with Marcos Novak, anticipated in their 1994 work *Dancing with the Virtual Dervish: Virtual Bodies*, an artwork that "challenges the presumed disembodied and immaterial nature of VR,"[11] the body is indeed the starting point and the primary medium through which virtual environments are experienced, even when corporeality is denied, displaced, manipulated, or "sabotaged" in its sensory automatisms (as in Alejandro González Iñárritu's *Carne y Arena: Virtually Present, Physically Invisible*). The presence in these contexts is a material and sensomotor presence, tied to the ability to respond to the affordances provided by an environment capable of reacting to user input (following a principle very similar to the "self-referential feedback loop" that Fischer-Lichte sees as characteristic of the never fully predetermined relationship between actors and spectators in performativity).

Unframedness, immediateness, and presentness. These are the fundamental properties of virtual images in the study of digital virtual environments – properties that render them "anti-icons," or "images that, paradoxically, strive to negate themselves and their status as images to present themselves to us as if they were the reality they represent."[12] These properties create the conditions for performative spectatorship, uniting participatory and interactive practices. We can thus revisit Obrist's quip mentioned

10 Ibid.: 92-93.
11 E. Modena, *Immersioni. La realtà virtuale nelle mani degli artisti* (Milan: Johan & Levi, 2023): 29, my translation.
12 A. Pinotti, *Alla soglia dell'immagine. Da Narciso alla realtà virtuale* (Turin: Einaudi, 2021): XV, my translation.

earlier, modifying its terms only slightly: Performative spectatorship is the answer. But what is the question? Why are presentness and interactivity, along with participation, so sought after and prevalent in the contemporary art scene?

Exemplarity and arts' sociality: the challenge of spontaneous spectatorship

The question presented can be answered in several ways. One might invoke the (often overused) metaphor of the mirror: contemporary arts, with their focus on participation, interactivity, and performative spectatorship, reflect the general mobilization – performative and interactive in nature, based on the active engagement of the consumer and citizen – that permeates and shapes contemporary life at various levels. Alternatively, from an opposing yet complementary perspective, it could be argued – as Foster partially does – that participation, interactivity, and performative spectatorship in artistic practices aim to fill a gap in the social and political sphere, attempting to promote a collective spirit and a more open and inclusive society.[13] On one hand, an alignment with the dominant economic and social model; on the other, an attempt to oppose that model. In both cases, however, the mantra seems to be the same: we have no option but to engage in participation, interaction, and performance. There is also a third possible answer, which starts from recognizing the exemplary status of art (understood in the modern aesthetic sense) and its vocation to encompass and reorganize the meaning of our experience and the way we organize it.

13 "Perhaps discursivity and sociability are in the foreground of art today because they are scarce elsewhere. […] Even an art audience cannot be taken for granted but must be conjured up every time, which might be why contemporary exhibitions often feel like remedial work in socialization: come and play, talk, learn with me. If participation appears threatened in other spheres, its privileging in art might be compensatory – a pale, part-time substitute." H. Foster, "Chat Rooms," in C. Bishop, ed., *Participation* (London-Cambridge MA: Whitechapel-MIT Press, 2006): 190-195, 194.

From this perspective – as, for instance, Alva Noë suggests – the interest of contemporary artistic practices in participation, interactivity, and performative spectatorship can be attributed precisely to this exemplarity (both reflective and operative), and thus to the role of art as a reorganizing practice capable of revealing and bringing to light (putting "on display")[14] our relationship with the world and with an increasingly technologically infused environment. Perhaps this is the most promising path to attempt to answer the question we started with. However, this approach requires not bypassing the complexity and critical aspects associated with such a perspective, but rather delving into its problematic areas.

Indeed, it is true that, at least since the eighteenth century (when both the modern system of fine arts and modern aesthetic reflection, initiated by Kant's *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, emerged), aesthetics has recognized in art an exemplary referent, capable of concretely exhibiting the conditions of meaning in our perception and operation in the world, as well as our discourse about the world.[15] It is also true, however, that this philosophically "grounded" exemplarity, though contingent – nothing guarantees that this connection between aesthetics and the arts must continue – has been questioned throughout the twentieth century from various quarters, including the arts themselves. The arts have progressively exacerbated elements of risk and contingency (beginning with the early avant-garde movements) or have simply been absorbed into the artistic and cultural entertainment market. Equally true

14 "Works of art put our making practices and our tendency to rely on what we make, and so also our practices of thinking and talking and making pictures, on display. Art puts us on display. Art unveils us to ourselves." A. Noë, Strange Tools (New York: Hill and Wang, 2015): 124. In this regard, it is interesting to note the proximity between Noë's philosophical perspective and Emilio Garroni's (Kantian) one, highlighted by S. Velotti, *The Conundrum of Control: Making Sense through Artistic Pratcices* (Leiden-Boston: Brill, 2024), in particular: 38-45.

15 For this view of the relationship between aesthetic reflection and art (in the modern aesthetic sense), reference is made to E. Garroni, *Estetica. Uno sguardo-attraverso* (1992) (Rome: Castelvecchi, 2020), in particular: 43-111.

is that this crisis of art's exemplarity has been accompanied by a crisis in art's "sociality," its circulation and social and cultural impact. Considering this situation – assuming our hypothesis is plausible – the interest of contemporary artistic practices in performative spectatorship seems to be an attempt to reclaim that exemplarity and cultural relevance by pushing their boundaries towards greater spontaneity. The challenge posed by performative spectatorship is precisely this: to ideally eliminate the gap between representation and reality to open a space of spontaneity capable of embracing and "valorising" the contingency and indeterminacy inherent in the relationship between an active viewer and a work/image/environment willing to accept their intervention.

It is no coincidence, then, that artistic practices appeal to spontaneity in an attempt to reclaim their exemplarity and social relevance in crisis. "Spontaneity," in fact, is a fundamental concept in aesthetics that allows us to grasp the peculiar characteristics of aesthetic experience and the "exemplary" nature attributed to the arts by aesthetic reflection since the eighteenth century. In the *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, Kant identifies the first formal requirement of the judgment of taste – which concerns its principle of determination (*Bestimmungsgrund*), and not the actual judgments –[16] as its connection to a type of pleasure different from the pleasure of the "agreeable" and the "good," both of which are determined by some interest in the object (utilitarian or moral). The pleasure of the beautiful is a pleasure that does not refer to any practical involvement or a determinate concept (or purpose) but is a free and disinterested pleasure. However, this freedom does not coincide with the freedom of individual will, that is, the freedom to choose something, but is a freedom from inclinations,

16 On this crucial issue of Kantian aesthetic reflection, see E. Garroni, *Kant and the Bestimmungsgrund/'Principle of Determination' of the Aesthetic Judgement* (1989), trans. H. Hohenegger, S. Velotti, in G. Schlüter, H. Hohenegger, eds., *Kants Schriften in Übersetzungen* (Hamburg: Felix Meiner Verlag, 2020): 491-502.

intentions, and determinate purposes, a freedom that is not at our disposal and that happens: it is a freedom understood, precisely, as spontaneity. This is the characteristic dimension of an aesthetic experience, linked to the encounter with something contingent (a representation, an event, an image, a "work") that appears as purposive or final for our faculties, and that makes us "feel" the possibility of making sense of our experience and our relationship with a world that "comes to meet us." This peculiar freedom of the judgment of taste and of aesthetic experience corresponds, on the other hand, to the spontaneous and unprogrammable nature of artistic production. Just as it is not possible to intentionally achieve an aesthetic experience – it is not possible to deliberately choose to access a dimension (and a freedom) that happens, to feel spontaneously that things "work" – it is equally impossible to aim at producing directly and deliberately something (an artwork, for example) that should elicit that same feeling. Following Kant further, if the pleasure of the beautiful is without concept, then the production of "beautiful" works cannot be based on determinate rules and concepts. Indeed, Kant claims in §45 (titled "Beautiful art is an art to the extent that it seems at the same time to be nature") that "the purposiveness in the product of beautiful art, although it is certainly intentional, must nevertheless not seem intentional; i.e., beautiful art must be regarded as nature, although of course one is aware of it as art":[17] that is, beautiful art is only such if it is judged as spontaneity, and not based on some purpose or concept (a rule) as a criterion of judgment. Of course, the artist/producer starts with an intention to produce something, and thus from a concept as the purpose of the product. But it is not that concept or intention that makes the artwork "beautiful." Simply intending to produce an artwork is not

17 I. Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment* (1790), trans. P. Guyer, E. Matthews (Cambridge-New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 5: 316-317.

sufficient to create it. What is necessary is what Kant himself identifies with the notion of "genius," understood as a particular relationship between the faculties – understanding and imagination, on which the production of aesthetic ideas depends –[18] that is not intentional and has to do with what the subject is ("the nature of the subject"), rather than with what the subject can do intentionally. The "genius" is a talent of imagination that "displays itself not so much in the execution of the proposed end in the presentation of a determinate concept as in the exposition or the expression of aesthetic ideas, which contain rich material for that aim." And the even more significant point is "that the unsought and unintentional subjective purposiveness in the free correspondence of the imagination to the lawfulness of the understanding presupposes a proportion and disposition of this faculty that cannot be produced by any following of rules, whether of science or of mechanical imitation, but that only the nature of the subject can produce."[19] In short, the aesthetic dimension is inherently marked by the dialectical tension between spontaneity and control, between indeterminacy and rules (to follow and to discover).[20] This very tension is what performative spectatorship appeals to, which is connected to the interactive (and participatory) turn of recent years. In this context, immediateness, presence, and unframedness aim to enhance the "effect of spontaneity," fuelled by the active involvement of a spectator who is physically (and emotionally) "immersed" in an

18 An aesthetic idea, Kant writes, is "that representation of the imagination that occasion much thinking though without it being possible for any determinate thought, i.e., concept, to be adequate to it, which, consequently, no language fully attains or can make intelligible." Ibid., 5: 314

19 Ibid., 5: 317-318

20 On the relevance of the notions of "spontaneity" and "uncontrollability" in aesthetic experience as analyzed in the *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, see S. Velotti, *The Conundrum of Control: Making Sense through Artistic Practices*, in particular: 30-45.

environment/artwork designed to welcome and respond to their engagement.

The risks inherent in such a model are evident. On one hand, there is the danger that the "work" might lose its normative status (its ability to guide the relationship with it through that interplay of rules and indeterminate openings of meaning) and turn into a mere "game" – a free game, "too free," very different from Kant's free play – resulting in a "playful spontaneity" that is more or less "fun" and engaging but unable to foster a re-understanding and reorganization of our experience (even that which is technologically mediated and integrated). On the other hand, the very nature of the concept of spontaneity itself creates problems. How is it possible to achieve something that, by definition, eludes when sought? Is it enough to "enrich" the space of the image-environment with the intrusion of an active participant's presence to increase the degree of spontaneity? Or isn't it true that perhaps, that spontaneity – as a space of "meaningful" understanding and interaction – is something that "happens," and that does not necessarily coincide with greater freedom of action and production (including collective and participatory)?

An interactive spontaneity

In her book on participatory art, Bishop dedicates one of the final chapters to the so-called "delegated performance," which replaces the live presence and immediacy of the artist's body with the engagement of non-professional performers or specialists from other sectors who act on behalf of the artist, following their instructions. To describe the nature of these performances, Bishop speaks of "outsourced authenticity." It is clear how such an expression closely relates to our discussion. The word "authenticity" can indeed be easily replaced with "spontaneity." In

delegated performances – consider Tino Sehgal's famous "situations" or Dora García's performances – the spontaneity of the performative is reflectively suspended, staged in a mediated manner, almost explicitly emphasizing its "orchestrated" and "programmed" nature through the more or less meticulous instructions provided by the artist to the performers. In recent years, another significant example (among many possible ones) has been provided by the performance *Sun & Sea (Marina)* by the Neon Realism collective. At the 2019 Venice Biennale, within the spaces of the Italian Navy, they set up a beach crowded with performer-bathers, who sang (about their stories, their problems, and more) while spending an ordinary day at the beach. Beyond the various aspects of the work and the multiple levels of interpretation that can be invoked, the interesting thing is that this performance asks the performers to behave as if they were normally at the beach, thus simulating a consciously represented spontaneity (which is simultaneously broken by the singing of the performers).

Indeed, it may be along this path – a spontaneity that distances itself from itself and systematically reduces the illusion of presence, immediacy, and "frame-breaking" – that interactive artistic practices (and thus performative spectatorship) can find a more production, at least in an aesthetic sense. From this perspective, it's not just about "declaring" and showcasing the medium, but critically engaging with the mechanisms that govern the creation and consumption of interactive (and immersive) spaces. The aim is to reveal their potential to genuinely enhance our abilities to interact and relate (with the world, with others, with the technical prostheses that shape our perception), without reducing it to a "hypermedia play." It seems that only in this way it is possible to escape the risk that interactive and immersive practice might stop at the simple reduplication of the existent (of the technological capabilities, although

increased) and ordinary experience (now mediated without much residue by technologies). In short, not just spectacular "machines" for empathy or immediate, unreflective emotional engagement, but above all, "machines" for reflecting on how we meaningfully organize our experience, even the most technologically integrated and mediated. This, in effect, is the experience of our contemporary environment-world.

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