

Nam June Paik I Don't Want to Be Overwhelmed by Glory

In the mid-1960s, Nam June Paik was living in a run-down studio in SoHo, struggling to make ends meet. But even as he joked about his ongoing battle against cockroaches, he was building his network, seeking out support for his artist friends, and always experimenting with form. Paik's vibrant personality is on full display in a letter from this period to musician David Tudor. Partially typewritten, partially handwritten, and full of wild punctuation and inside jokes, the letter's main purpose is to help find work for his friend, Japanese musician Takehisa Kosugi.

In this episode of *Recording Artists: Intimate Addresses*, you'll meet the wildly charming artist whose theories on technology and our relationship to it remain eerily prescient today; the man who coined the phrase "electronic superhighway" and advocated for artists to be at the vanguard of using the newest tech; and the person who tirelessly looked out for his friends. Host Tess Taylor unpacks some of Paik's best-known artworks and traces his evolving thinking about art and tech. Anna Deavere Smith reads the letter. Korean American artist Sueyeun Juliette Lee and art historian and conservator Hannah Hoch help you make sense of Paik's networks—both personal and electronic—and his legacy.

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Transcript

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Anna Deavere Smith: KOSUGI IS COMPLETELY OUT OF MONEY / CAN YOU HELP HIM TO MAKE 150 \$ through concert performance???

Tess Taylor: How do you build networks on behalf of your art and community? And, if you're living a threadbare artist's life, how do you seek out support?

Welcome to Season 2 of *Recording Artists*, a Getty podcast dedicated to exploring art and artists through its archives. I'm your host, poet Tess Taylor. In this season, called *Intimate Addresses*, each episode examines one letter by one artist, looking deeply at what it means to make a life in art. Anna Deavere Smith performs the letters as we travel the globe and the twentieth century. You listen as makers collaborate, fight for justice, ask for money, work through pain, and affirm their resilience. What emerges is a sweeping panorama of artists in dialog with one another, and six distinct portraits in creativity.

Today's letter is from Nam June Paik, a multimedia artist who disrupted his era's cutting-edge technologies. He's most famous for his elaborate television sculptures, but he often made art out of refashioned radios, alarm clocks, and tape recorders. Paik was an inventor and theorist, always thinking about connection. He staged a "proto-zoom" satellite conversation from Los Angeles to New York as early as 1970; he invented the term "electronic superhighway" in 1974; and on January 1, 1984 he launched a rare global satellite broadcast called *Good Morning Mr. Orwell*. Paik's work across decades leaves open the question of whether technology would liberate us—or become *our* Orwellian overlord.

But today we meet Paik in an undated note sent sometime between 1965 and 1967. He's writing to David Tudor, a musician he'd met at experimental music festivals in Germany nearly a decade before. Paik's letter contains a plea for help: he is trying to secure funds for another friend, Japanese Fluxus musician Takehisa Kosugi.

Here's Anna Deavere Smith reading the letter.

Deavere Smith:

Dear David...the invisible man,

It is nice to hear that you are in New York.

I wonder, if your study about Cockroach has made significant advance....

Despite of my fear for being unfortunate,, I had to kill most part of my abundant cockroach reserve at home, since it reached some saturation point.

I bought several Roach-trap, from China town, but it required some experience and technique to kill only as much that I see only one or two of them in one or two days a week, to assure myself that I am relatively lucky man, but not too much.... I don't want to be over whelmed by glory, but I don't want to borrow money any and every Wednesday,

KOSUGI IS COMPLETELY OUT OF MONEY

CAN YOU HELP HIM TO MAKE

150 \$ through concert performance???

He will go alone, anywhere to perform

he will go back to Japan

in July, but this one

month is trouble, actually

he wants to stay more, but

so far it didn't work

Sorry

Paik

KOSUGI

9250187

349 West Broadway

PAIK

226 7187

359 Canal St

Welcome to MY STUDIO ANYTIME.

Hanna Hölling: My first response was to want to call those numbers. You know, there is a number for Kosugi and a number for Paik.

Taylor: That's art historian Hanna Hölling, a former conservator who now teaches at Bern University of the Arts, talking about the visceral intimacy she felt reading the letter.

Sueyeun Juliette Lee, an experimental Korean American poet and video artist, also felt a deep personal connection to the letter:

Sueyeun Juliette Lee: The idiosyncratic use of the English language just felt really familiar to how a lotta people in my family speak, especially when they're speaking in English. So for me personally it closed the gap between this great international, incredibly influential, consequential artist and like family connection. I could hear like resonances of my mother, in the way he was writing that note.

Taylor: This letter made Hanna and Juliette feel somehow closer, more personally connected to Paik. And I could see why. This particular note is not just textual, it's visual, flamboyant.

I mean, it's never *not* incredible to hold an artist's letter in your hand. You always look deeply at each pen stroke, each word. But more than any other letter I worked with this season, this letter from Paik felt like *more* than a letter. It's also a visual document, made of shifting margins, excessive commas, interesting text boxes, huge banners in all caps, and finally, an effusive mid-sentence break from typescript into flourishing ballpoint-pen handwriting.

This visual pleasure doesn't translate when the letter is read aloud. How do you vocalize a line with and ellipses and eight commas? "Dear David dot dot dot the invisible man comma comma comma comma comma comma comma comma."

Lee: I could see him just kind of falling into, like, a experience, pleasuring in the mechanical noise of the typewriter, with that stroke.

Taylor: Juliette noticed a rhythmic exuberance about all the commas, as if Paik, who, like Tudor, was a classically trained musician, had been playing the typewriter keys just for fun.

Lee: What this shows me is his appetite to express, to be, to make. It trickles all the

way down into these small forms of communication—a card to a friend, a postcard. Everything was an occasion for experimentation, for expression.

Taylor: Paik’s play with the typewriter is an act of machine and hand at once. That reflects Paik’s wry and witty projects, which were often about machines and humans and our relationships to our shared future. This merging of technical and manual also caught Hanna’s attention:

Hölling: The kind of visual pleasure that I experience in relation to this letter, while looking at this letter, is really related to the kind of almost collage of technological and human means. We might see the world of a kind of technological device, which Paik uses in order to type up the perhaps three fourths of this letter. And then we see the human hand, with which he tells Tudor that Kosugi is in financial need.

Taylor: Integrating the acts of a machine and a human hand seems fitting for an artist who hoped that we’d be more than passive consumers of one-way media, whose life vision was for us to “talk back to TV,” as he put it. Seeking help on behalf of a friend also makes sense from the artist who believed so deeply in networks—both a network of humans working together, and a electronic networks of communication that he saw as the future of art and of the planet.

But I’m getting ahead of myself.

Nam June Paik was born in 1932 in Seoul, Korea—at a time when Imperial Japan occupied the country, and before it split North and South. He was the youngest of five children, and the third son, in a prosperous business family. During his childhood, Japanese forces were rapidly modernizing Korea by building trains, ports, and roads, but also suppressing democratic protests and symbols of Korean culture, so much that Paik remembers teachers asking students to “repent” for speaking Korean in school. Still, Paik’s father was a member of Korea’s business elite and cooperated under Japanese rule. He may have sympathized with the Japanese because he supported modernization efforts or because he wanted to maintain his career. But that put him in a precarious position. After World War II ended Japanese occupation, Korea split in half. When the Korean War broke out, the Paik family fled. They moved first to Hong Kong, before ultimately settling in Tokyo in 1950.

Many biographies of Paik gloss over his childhood in Korea, but for Juliette, whose family was also deeply affected by the Japanese Occupation and Korean War, it sets the stage for understanding an artist whose medium was very deeply about communication and connection.

Lee: When I look at the context for him, his childhood, his experiences, the Cold War, the threat of nuclear, like, destruction and devastation, he was of a generation that lived through, intimately, that panic. He survived through all that. To me, the most radical part of his work and his offering is this joyous optimism, is this vigorous belief in our profound goodness, if we could only touch it.

Taylor: Living through a succession of repressive regimes would have given Paik a deep and probably grim awareness of the powers of technology to disseminate and control information. But he responded to dictatorial control with a vision of activating technology to subversive ends.

In Tokyo, Paik rebelled against his father by becoming a leftist. He was also fascinated by all things modern—from technology to philosophy. At the University of Tokyo, he studied art history, music, and aesthetics and wrote about the Austrian American

modernist composer Arnold Schonberg. He then moved to Germany to continue his studies at the University of Munich in 1956.

When Paik arrived in Germany, the Cold War was raging. Amid the lingering rubble of post-War West Germany, Paik met David Tudor, Joseph Beuys, John Cage, Benjamin Patterson, and other artists interested in avant-garde disruptions. At the time Paik was experimenting with tape-recorded collage compositions. Cage encouraged him to experiment further. Paik developed something he called “action music.” Performances involved eggs, whistles, and smashing a violin. At a 1960 piano performance in Cologne, after playing Chopin, he rushed into the audience and attacked Cage and Tudor, cutting their clothes with scissors and dumping shampoo on their heads. He was soon dubbed “the world’s most famous bad pianist.”

The work caught the eye of George Maciunas, who invited Paik to join the group that would soon become Fluxus. This rag-tag anti-establishment, anti-art group was dedicated to creating upending, participatory experiences. More importantly, they thought about art as a network rather than a single act of genius. In this way, Fluxus provided a foundation for Paik’s later large-scale projects built by networks of collaborators.

Within Fluxus, Paik found a particular role: the artist of altered technology. Paik re-made record players, alarm clocks, tape recorders, and increasingly, televisions. The first critics of Paik’s work didn’t really understand what he was doing. But for Juliette, the way Paik worked with technology is what calls her in, again and again:

Lee: At heart, I think our orientation to technology is an orientation to our own human condition. Do we see ourselves as inherently faulty, horrific, unkind, cruel, malevolent? Or do we see ourselves as inherently beautiful, kind, thoughtful, innovative, generative, regenerative? And you know, these technologies are always mirrors of ourselves. I think that his orientation to his technology comes from this really deep, lovely, joyous humanism that’s just, like— Who knows where that came from? That’s profound.

Taylor: The work crossed disciplines and also languages. The poster for Paik’s first solo exhibition in 1963 at Gallerie Parnass in Wuppertal includes phrases in four languages. It promises “A study in German Iditology;” “How to be Satisfied with 70 percent;” and “Sonorous Objects.” Paik invited visitors to the gallery to play at the human/technology interface. In a piece called *Random Access*, audiences made their own ragged, but participatory music by moving the head of a magnetic tape player across sections of magnetic tape strips on a wall. In *Zen for TV*, a TV turned on its side and altered with magnets broadcast a single vertical line. In *Participation for TV*, passersby used pedals to create patterns and sounds.

These pieces broke technology into component parts—magnet, ion, cathode ray tube. They reminded audiences that technological devices could be repurposed with simple alterations. They also reminded people that they could be more active and less passive about how they used the technology around them.

In 1964, Paik brought his exuberant self to New York, where he continued to think about altered technologies and kept making art with Fluxus. A 1965 leaflet from an exhibition at the New School offers this dazzling array:

I Electronic TV and Color TV experiments

II 3 Robots

III Pop sonata

IV 2 Zen Boxes and 1 Zen Can

Around the time of this show, in the mid-60s, Paik acquired one of Sony's Portapak cameras, an early video camera. He recorded the New York visit of Pope Paul the VI from a cab window, making art out of the somewhat goofy and democratic possibilities of the handheld device. Today, with endless Instagram reels of almost anything under the sun, this may not seem extraordinary. But the claims Paik made about the future of the video camera in 1965 feel eerily prescient. He said that the recorder might make it possible "not only to see yourself instantly" but to find out "what kind of bad habits you have" and to "see yourself deformed in 12" electronic ways. That feels like a portrait of social media to me.

At any rate, Paik was off and running, making friends, experiments, music, and robots all at once. Hanna describes those early New York years:

Hölling: When he lands in New York in 1964, after one year in Tokyo, he mixes up German, English, sometimes Japanese, Korean, and other languages. He kind of approaches others, you know, with huge amount of respect, with huge amount of sense of humor, as well.

Taylor: The Paik of this letter is at the hub of a global art scene, though perhaps one of its few Asian members. He's charmed people with his playful language and unconventional ideas. And he's begun collaborating with Charlotte Moorman. She was a classically trained Julliard cellist who'd been hailed as "the Joan of Arc of new music." Moorman and Paik made a dramatic duo. She'd perform in the nude or, later, wearing bras made out of televisions. Paik called these pieces *Opera Sextronique*, the *TV Bra for Living Sculpture*, and *TV Cello*. He often sent out hand-crafted flyers promoting their shows. Like his letter to Tudor, many of these flyers are half typed, half written, and somehow collaged together.

At the same time, Paik was living (alongside his cockroaches) in a studio slash apartment on Canal Street, which was partially funded by Fluxus ringleader George Maciunas. And he was preparing to lobby one collaborator on behalf of another, in this case, David Tudor, on behalf of Takehisa Kosugi.

Deavere Smith: KOSUGI IS COMPLETELY OUT OF MONEY / CAN YOU HELP HIM TO MAKE 150 \$ through concert performance???

Taylor: David Tudor, the experimental musician Paik had first met in Germany, was living about 40 miles north of Paik's SoHo apartment, at the Gate Hill Cooperative in Stony Point New York. This was the community Tudor had helped found alongside M. C. Richards and John Cage.

Takehisa Kosugi was another Fluxus musician who had moved to New York from Japan. He often collaborated with Paik and Moorman. At the time of this letter, the three were in the process of building a piece called *Instrumental Music* in which Moorman would play cello while Kosugi attempted to cut out Moorman's silhouette projected onto a screen by spotlight. The piece would appear at New York's Town Hall in 1967.

Here's Juliette on Paik's gesture to connect these two artists:

Lee: What I see someone who's just leveraging his network to help out a comrade who's also in the hard straits, trying to make it work. Like, that request is in all caps.

And it's not masked over. Like, 'Oh, he's having a hard time.' It's like, 'HE'S COMPLETELY OUT OF MONEY! HELP!'

Taylor: For Hanna, this kind of appeal on behalf of others felt true to Paik's entire life:

Hölling: This letter is not a one-off. One of the evidences might be found in his kind of relationship with Charlotte Moorman. At a certain moment Charlotte became very sick, you know, Paik seeks different means to kind of support her in her fight with cancer. Paik was evidently someone who deeply cared for others.

Taylor: At the same time, Paik wasn't much better off than Kosugi financially. The new technologies he worked with were expensive and using them was labor intensive, often requiring him to collaborate with experts. In other cases, he was working to create open-source technologies which yielded him no money. And although he came from a wealthy family who'd supported him for a while, he also experienced deep poverty. Living in New York as an avant-garde artist was not easy. Despite stints as an artist in residence at WGBH and grants from the Rockefeller Foundation to develop new work, he had few collectors. Daily life was precarious. The cockroaches were a long running in-joke with Tudor, but they were also surely, a tiresome reality.

Deavere Smith: Despite of my fear for being unfortunate, I had to kill most part of my abundant cockroach reserve at home, since it reached some saturation point.

Taylor: We don't really know whether Paik was able to get Tudor to set up a concert for Kosugi. We do know that elsewhere in Getty's archive there's a postcard Paik sent from Stockholm to Tudor in New York. Under a drawing of a face smoking a pipe with the words Kant, Hegel, and Sartre forming the eyebrows and nose, there's a simple plea: "PLEASE, Help Kosugi!" It's bald, unvarnished, and sort of charming. Here's Juliette:

Lee: What I appreciate about this is just the openness. The directness of it and the enthusiasm of it, there's a sort of like earthiness and candidness that I really respect.

Taylor: Whatever the pleas, whatever the outcomes, Kosugi did eventually leave New York for Japan in 1967, but he didn't stay put for long. In 1969, he formed the Taj Mahal Travellers, who voyaged by Volkswagen van from the Netherlands to India, stopping in the UK, Italy, Germany, Scandinavia, and Iran, staging outdoor performances and happenings.

In some ways, Paik's entreaties for funds did not keep his collaborator nearby. On the other hand, Paik's networking on behalf of his friend did work well over the long term: in 1977, Kosugi returned to New York to be composer in residence at the Merce Cunningham Dance Company. He was there alongside David Tudor.

Meanwhile, Paik himself had to continue to find ways to make ends meet. In 1974, he had a sort of breakthrough, designing an iconic work, one he'd replicate again and again. The piece, *TV Buddha*, consists of a statue of a Buddha watching itself on television in a feedback loop. Here's Juliette describing the work:

Lee: The *TV Buddha* is so fascinating because you have a statue, a small figurine image of a Buddha, and then this camera set up to film it. You have this juxtaposition of this technology and like this deity-type figure that's very ancient, that's meant to sort of represent transcendence from the material world. It's so cheeky. When I first saw it, I fell down laughing.

Taylor: Juliette's right: *TV Buddha* is deeply calming, oddly meditative, strangely irreverent and hilarious. It pokes sly fun at our current altars, the places we go to zone out, and also somehow reminds us of the power of mindfulness. The work is now one of Paik's most iconic offerings.

Still, not everyone thought *TV Buddha* was a good idea at first. Here's Hanna describing the perspective of Paik's wife, fellow Fluxus artist Shigeo Kubota:

Hölling: He spends \$10,000, according to her. And, you know, she was very upset that in this precarious time, he did it. But then they laughed together that, you know, the work basically multiplied in many versions and was the first work that Paik actually sold to a museum. So they could make a living from this antique Buddha sculpture.

Taylor: Not only was *TV Buddha* one of the first pieces Paik would sell to a museum, it was also one he'd replicate and riff on—something he'd do increasingly across his career. In *TV Garden*, for instance, luminous televisions are scattered among potted ferns, juxtaposing the natural and the technological. And just as he made many *TV Buddhas*, Paik made many *TV Gardens* in repeating series. Hanna explained this mode of working:

Hölling: Paik quite often conceived of his works not as singular artifacts, but as entities that evolve, change over time, but also multiply. You know, he was known for the fact that he created artworks, different iterations for each continent on which he was working or exhibiting. *TV Garden* exists in Düsseldorf, in Germany; it exists in collections in South Korea; it exists in collections at the Guggenheim Museums, so in the US collections; and elsewhere. And how do they, so to say, relate to each other? And they form some kind of network of referentiality.

Taylor: As Paik's work got collected, he built bigger and bigger installations, and bigger and bigger networks of collaborators. In the 1980s he worked on something called *Family of Robot*. These were his first larger scale video sculptures, and they consist of three generations of family members—a grandmother and grandfather, mother and father, aunt and uncle, and children. The anthropomorphic sculptures are made of different media hardware from the different parts of the twentieth century—grandparents made of radios and 1940s televisions; parents, aunts, and uncles made of progressively newer TVs; and youngest members, the babies, made of the most modern TVs, those of the mid-1980s.

The very same year he launched *Family of Robot*, 1986, Paik also made a piece called *Chicken Box*, *Chicken Farm*, where even some chickens nestle on hay inside the reclaimed box cabinets of a TV, which has become their coop. They are gently lit up, inside, by what else? Another television, around which, naturally, they have gathered. The piece is wry and tender, and a bit rueful, too. After a day of looking at Paik's work, somehow this, particularly, stayed on my mind.

As Paik built TV families, TV farms, TV flags, TV Noah's arcs, he required an ever more sophisticated level of collaborator. Here's Hanna:

Hölling: Paik possessed to a great extent the ability, actually, and the labor of creating social relations and connections with others, and knowing, actually, how one can exploit their competencies, talents, abilities, in order to create or cocreate something. This is what made him such a successful media artist. I cannot even enumerate the many collaborators even, you know, for video pieces that he created. He had his video guy, right; and for laser pieces, he had his laser guy.

There is, I think in the catalog for the Venice Biennial, you know, when he basically exhibited in the German pavilion, his works, he says, you know, sometimes he's just this man that brings in coffee and tea and muffins at 3 o'clock in the morning you know and see what of the work is done.

Taylor: Sometimes Paik was just the man bringing middle-of-the-night snacks to the people tasked with building an enormous new robot or wall of televisions he'd envisioned, technological works that demanded a great deal of human manual labor and human problem solving. When these works were done, they were dazzling, zany, and gorgeous. They also seemed to carry some reminder that we should be gently wary of our relationship with the things that dazzle us. In 1981, in a 10-word postcard to collector Gilbert Silverman, Paik described his understanding of what he was doing in his art with Fluxus:

Marx: Seize the production medium

FLUXUS: Seize the distribution medium.

Paik imagined a world of broadcast or transmission. But it was more than this. He wanted to help us find ways to intercept and disrupt that transmission. Paik believed that artists are necessary for designing the technology that makes us *human*. And because he was a philosopher, he left the question of what being human *is* open, a bit troubling, something we, his audience, would need to keep working out.

Today, in this era of algorithm and fake news, in a moment when we have some freedom to express ourselves but our attentions are monetized and click-baited to the millisecond, there's something haunting about Paik's art. Much of the world he predicted has come to pass, and yet it is not without its dangers, too.

I talked to Juliette about how sometimes these days I'm alarmed by where this thing "technology" is going. She told me that Paik reminds us that technology is always only ourselves, our family, our network, our body, our hopes, our aspirations, our project, and possibly our means of liberation.

Lee: There's a playfulness, there's a joyfulness, there's a childlikeness. It's not naive; it's choiceful. You know, it's like relishing the mysterious beauty of what it means to be alive. And he's doing that, also, through like his work. And that is actually probably the most radical, more than the technological innovations that we're looking at. That's, like, written into him. No one could have trained that into him. And I think we could even see that in this letter.

Taylor: Paik's outrageous zest for life still shows in the work. But rather than feeling dazzlingly new, the work feels mortal, too, its components fleeting. Within a few decades, some of his works have become hard to display—for instance, the TV sets that were cutting edge at the time are no longer produced. There are no spare parts when things break. The actual children of the 1980s are 40 now, and the televisions of which their robot counterparts were made are in landfills. Conservators scour junk shops and estate sales for replacements. Paik's future can feel nostalgic.

Hanna, who first experienced Paik's art while working as a conservator, had this to say about his chosen medium:

Hölling: The materiality of this technology kind of succumbs to technological obsolescence. Nowadays, you have to imagine that all these works that are on display in institutions or private galleries or private collectors' houses, they have been, in one way or another modified: the cathode ray tube was replaced; the video was digitized;

the laser disc player was replaced by newer technology. Time passes through those technologies, and that those technologies are very time-sensitive, or even time-specific. Those devices carry all this time specificity, you know with them, the entropy, the decay, and degradation which is embodied there and is embodied in everything that we do and every cultural or artistic object we produce.

Taylor: Hanna had a conservator's take on the longevity of one of Paik's more basic materials, the paper letter:

Hölling: If you hold these kind of fragile, you know, pieces of paper in your hands, you're also aware how time passes. The only way to experience it fully will be to kind of hold it in your hands, and take into account that you contribute to the entropy of things that you touch. The fatty acids of your fingers will stay in it. Even if invisible at this moment, they will for sure stay in it and contribute to its decay and disintegration.

Taylor: Paik made a practice of partially destroying technology so it could be set free again. "I use technology to hate it properly," he said. I love Paik's invitation to take something readymade and touch it until it comes alive to new possibility. I am awed by the ways Paik predicted so much of the future we're living in today. The question of how we talk back to the technology around us hasn't stopped mattering. If anything, it matters more.

Nam Jun Paik's exuberant work got under my skin. One long day, studying Paik at the Getty archive, I read his mid-1960s prediction of a future with proliferating media, radio stations, screens, and content. He said we would soon "have enough radio stations to afford Mozart-only stations, Cage-only stations, Bogart only TV stations, Underground only TV stations etc etc etc." As I walked home from the archive, each of my children video-called me from separate iPads from separate rooms of our home to inform me that they each had the same cold. The hotel where I was staying was lit up against the dusk, its rooms like so many screens. Somewhere, far away, I imagined that even our four chickens were watching their own TV.

Paik's work still invites us to critique our technological present, to think about how to build and unbuild it. I leave with a piece of writing from his 1974 essay called "Media Planning for the Post Industrial Age." It notes with urgency that there are only 26 years left until the 21st Century. Paik says the electronic superhighway is coming, and he envisions that there needs to be a prototype group offered the chance to study it.

Unsurprisingly, Paik suggests that *artists* are the ideal people to test new technology.

Here are his five reasons why.

1. *In recent history the artist's instinct has often functioned (sometimes better than the computer) as an early warning system for forthcoming social change.*
2. *The artist is by definition a specialist in trans-media manipulation and meta-verbal language.*
3. *Artists have already invented a brand new art genre: "Video Art"*
4. *John Kenneth Galbraith predicted over-average growth in the art-related market.*
5. *Artists don't work on a union scale—*

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