



**MITES OF PASSAGE:
A CONSERVATOR'S
PERSPECTIVE ON
THE INCORPORATION
OF PERFORMANCE
ARTWORKS INTO
MUSEOLOGICAL
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RITES OF PASSAGE: A CONSERVATOR'S PERSPECTIVE ON THE INCORPORATION OF PERFORMANCE ARTWORKS INTO MUSEOLOGICAL COLLECTIONS

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ABSTRACT

Despite the growing interest in performance artworks, museums worldwide still show some reservations when it comes to incorporating such works into their collections. This paper aims to explore the conservation challenges that these works present for museums.

Through the analysis of the relevant literature, the practices and theories surrounding the conservation of performance-based artworks are contextualized and examined. Notions of the conservation of performance artworks are reassessed in the light of ideas relating to archives and repertoires (Taylor 2008), which can be considered essential to the study of these works. By combining reflections about performance art acquisition and performance art conservation, a new conceptual framework based on an expanded view of conservation, which regards preservation as a process that includes presentation strategies, is proposed. In order to illustrate this examination, two case studies are presented as examples: *sexyMF* (2006) by Ana Borralho and João Galante (f. 2002, Lisbon) and *Ad Verbum* (2010), by Vasco Araújo (b. 1975, Lisbon).

KEYWORDS PERFORMANCE ART, MUSEUMS, CONSERVATION, INCORPORATION, DOCUMENTATION

RESUMO

Apesar do interesse recente na aquisição de obras de arte da performance, a incorporação destas obras em coleções museológicas ainda é uma prática relativamente rara. Este artigo procura refletir sobre os desafios que estas obras apresentam à sua preservação, nomeadamente em coleções museológicas. Neste sentido, através da análise de bibliografia relevante, práticas e teorias da conservação de obras de arte de natureza performativa são contextualizadas e examinadas. A conservação destas obras é reconsiderada de forma a espelhar a dicotomia entre arquivo e repertório (Taylor 2008), que é considerada essencial para a arte da performance. Desta forma, repensa-se a conservação e incorporação destas obras a partir uma visão expandida da conservação, considerando que estratégias de apresentação podem promover a conservação efetiva destas obras. Para ilustrar esta reflexão, apresentam-se exemplos de dois casos de estudo: *sexyMF* (2006), de Ana Borralho and João Galante (f. 2002, Lisboa) e *Ad Verbum* (2010), de Vasco Araújo (n. 1975, Lisboa).

PALAVRAS-CHAVE ARTE DA PERFORMANCE, MUSEUS, CONSERVAÇÃO, INCORPORAÇÃO, DOCUMENTAÇÃO



I N D E X



E D I T O R I A L



D O S S I E R



P R I N T

Because rites of passage are essentially about change, there can be no exact way or absolute method for creating them. Rather, opportunities exist for embracing that which is locally true and for healing that which has been torn individually and collectively.

(Meade 1996, xxiv)

Despite performance art's originary stance against art commodification and institutionalization performance artworks are slowly finding their way into museum collections. From the Museum of Modern Art, in New York, which launched a curatorial department dedicated to Media and Performance Art, focused on the exhibition and preservation of *time-based media*,¹ to the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam, which recently devoted a full year to the presentation of several performances by the artist Tino Sehgal,² amongst other efforts by a number of museums worldwide, the presence of performance-based works inside the museum sphere has been growing, challenging museum procedures and long-accepted notions about this art genre. But in which ways do art museums have to change in order to accommodate this new art form inside their collections? What are the *rites of passage* that these works undergo in their transition to the museum space?

This paper aims to reflect upon these questions, especially regarding the conservation of such works. In this context, two case studies from the Portuguese scene are presented as examples: *sexyMF* (2006) by Ana Borralho and João Galante (f. 2002, Lisbon) and *Ad Verbum* (2010) by Vasco Araújo (b. 1975, Lisbon).

1. Performance art and conservation

Performance is an art genre that appeared in the 1960s as a reaction against the art market, commodification and capitalism (Goldberg 2001). It “has been considered as a way of bringing to life the many formal and conceptual ideas on which the making of art is based” and at the same time, “has become a catch-all for live presentations of all kinds” (Bishop 2012). Generally speaking, performance artworks can be defined as unrepeatable events, specific in time and space, which remain only in the memories of those who experienced them and/or in documents, ultimately becoming a trace of past experience.

Performance art's early stance against commodification led to the opposition between this art form and its perpetuation in time (Phelan 1993, 146). The main feature of the antithetical dichotomy between performance art and conservation (or preservation, or documentation)³ consists of the different bonds that these concepts have with time. If conservation's ultimate goal is to preserve cultural heritage for the future, performance art exists only in the present, is untraceable, and “becomes itself through disappearance” (Phelan 1993, 146). If documentation aims to

¹ For more information, please consult <https://www.moma.org/explore/collection/departments/media>

² The curatorial program called “A Year At The Stedelijk: Tino Sehgal”, and held at the Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam between 1 January and 31 December 2015, included the presentation of 16 *constructed* situations, which occurred in several spaces of the museum. For more information, please consult: <http://www.stedelijk.nl/en/exhibitions/a-year-at-the-stedelijk-tino-sehgal>.

³ In performance studies and conservation literature these terms are used interchangeably.

record, preserve and store the intangible (and tangible) features of an artwork in its multiple representations, performance art is non-representable and non-describable by any means of language.

This clear opposition is one of the reasons why it is only now that museums are opening their doors and collecting these works (Wheeler 2003). At the same time, as museum incorporation policies change, questions about the preservation of these works are starting to emerge.

1.1. On conservation

In recent years, the notion of conservation as an object-oriented discipline has been reviewed by several authors, including the conservator Salvador Muñoz Viñas, who argued in his *Contemporary Theory of Conservation* (2004, Routledge) that the emphasis in conservation has changed from objects to subjects and that “objectivism in conservation is replaced by certain forms of subjectivism” (Muñoz Viñas 2004: 147). Many authors (Macedo 2008, among others), considering the trend of art dematerialization as a growing reality, also suggest that modern preservation needs to focus on the artwork’s intangible features, inasmuch as the core of the artist’s intention lies on them, rather than on materiality. Moreover, several research projects working on the preservation of performance-based artworks have emerged. Amongst other efforts, namely in the museum community, some projects held in cooperation with Tate Galleries are worth exploring: “Performance and Performativity” (2011-2012), “Collecting the Performative: A research network examining emerging practice for collecting and conserving performance-based art” (2012-2014), and “Performance at Tate: Collecting, Archiving and Sharing Performance and the Performative” (2014-ongoing). Similarly, in The Netherlands, academic projects such as “New Strategies in the Conservation of Contemporary Art” (2009-2015) and “New Approaches in the Conservation of Contemporary Art” (NACCA) (2015-ongoing) were seminal for the development of this subject within the field of conservation. In Portugal, although there has been a growing

awareness of the conservation of contemporary art, such as installations and multimedia works, there have been no visible efforts regarding the preservation of Portuguese performance art, with the exception of some scattered academic studies on art history (Metello 2007, Brandão 2016), cultural studies, and sociology or anthropology (Madeira 2007, for example).

Documenting Portuguese performance-based artworks from the 1960s is becoming an increasingly difficult task as memories of the events fade away, and due to the fact that there was no tradition of documentation among the artistic community. Artists from the 1980s onwards, on the other hand, tend to produce their own documentation, as documentation resources are democratized and the importance of documenting these ephemeral works has been made visible through the years. This difference nourishes the discussion about the purpose of documenting these works and the roles of the *actants* — agents or actors that may change an artwork’s trajectory (Saaze 2013, Vall *et al* 2011) — involved in the documentation process. After all, documentation can comprise several documents, produced by several different people inside and outside the art institution, in different media, and for different purposes (including loans, conservation, exhibitions, among others).

Relevant literature often offers retrospective remarks about the documentation process while trying to solve some problems. Those remarks (even if retrospective) are, however, rare,⁴ as much of the relevant literature focuses on the results of documentation, and the documented works are usually material works with some performative elements. As such, the study and development of strategies for preserving performance-based artworks is still at an early stage. At the same time, this is also happening because only now are museums collecting such works, so that the significance of this debate is becoming increasingly pertinent.

⁴ In conservation literature very few papers discuss the documentation process of performance-based artworks. Relevant literature is usually focused on the documentation of selected case studies or on discussing documentation techniques, such as artists’ interviews (Beerens *et al* 2012), or even documentation frameworks or projects. More recently, some publications, such as those by Vivian van Saaze (2009, 2013) and Annet Dekker *et al* (2010), were dedicated to reflecting upon the documentation process. The special issue of *Revista de História da Arte, Performing Documentation in the Conservation of Contemporary Art* (Lisbon: 2015; available online at: <http://revistaharte.fcsh.unl.pt/rhaw4/RHaw4.pdf>) is one of these publications. In this case, some authors rethink the documentation process of performance-based artworks (for example Gordon, 2015; Nogueira and Marçal 2015; Saaze 2015; Stigter 2015; and Vall 2015), while making some remarks on problems with documenting performance-based artworks inside art institutions (Barbuto 2015; Müller 2015; Nogueira and Marçal 2015; and Saaze 2015).

1.2. Collecting performance art and rethinking the role of museums in their preservation: documentation and re-enactments

Indeed, the issue surrounding performance art documentation, its re-enactments and its place in art institutions first emerged with the growing interest in performance preservation that occurred in the mid-1990s. There were several aspects associated with this newly identified issue. First, a strong nostalgic response to performances held in the 1960s emerged, leading to a “process of historicization” of these works. The idea that these works were presented with a clear intent against commodification and in favour of an absolute ephemerality led to their resurrection into “art history” and their re-performance “as a generational legacy” (Chalmers 2008). The relationship between art institutions and performance art shifted as they started to contribute towards the historicization of this genre (Chalmers 2008). One example of the important contribution made by institutions is the exhibition “Out of Actions: Between Performance and the Object”, held in 1998 (Schimmel *et al* 1998). A consequence of this growing tendency for the acceptance of performance art inside the museum space was the occurrence of multiple performance presentations and re-enactments of past events held since then. Laurensen and Saaze explain that, however, performance art only started being collected by museums and related institutions in the 2000s. According to these authors, until that time, collecting performance artworks meant acquiring their material remains, instead of ensuring the possibility of their re-performance (Laurensen and Saaze 2014). This happened “first due to the attachment of the museum, the market and conservation practice to the material object, and second, the perception of performance as being conceptually bound to the live ephemeral event” (Laurensen and Saaze 2014: 27-28). Even with a growing number of performance artworks being acquired by institutions, there are still some problems with their incorporation, as re-enactments are often seen as appropriations⁵ or as institutional devices lacking authenticity,⁶ while documentation is often considered a lacunar process that cannot truly capture the event.

But what is the solution? Should performance works be only shown outside art institutions?

In general, the main difference between performance documentation and re-enactments is that while performance documents share the temporal context with the event (although they can also be produced afterwards), re-enactments occur after the original event. At the same time, while performance documents are mediators of the work, re-enactments, specially produced by people other than the artist, are based on these documents or on testimonies, which are already mediated: re-enactments can be considered a product of mediation of documents. The temporal distance between re-enactments and the original event can be problematic considering that the embodied knowledge of the performance (that is, the practice, the movement of the performance, the intrinsic knowledge of the performance — not only of the performer but also of the audience and, for example, conservators) is likely to be diluted with time. As stated by Sydney Briggs, Associate Registrar at MoMA (quoted by Saaze 2015: 61), referring to re-enactments of Tino Sehgal’s *constructed situations*, if “a dancer works less, if you cannot actually dance and repeat a choreography, you will forget it”. This echoes the words of art historian Amelia Jones, who states that re-enactments can be considered “an activity that preserves heritage through ritualized behavior”, adding fruitful contributions to history as long as they are not based on a premise of “retrievable original meaning and artistic intentionality” (Jones 2012, 16).

However, if documents exist as material remains of the performance artwork, from photos or videos, to narratives, descriptions, technical and legal documents, re-enactments can be considered immaterial representations of the work — neither documents nor re-enactments aim at being the “real thing”, or even at being vehicles of a fixed “truth”. Both media share the inherent subjectivity that the

⁵ Regarding the documentation of Marina Abramović’s *Seven Easy Pieces*, a work where the artist re-enacted five works by other artists, for example, R. Blackson considers it as a possible act of appropriation that could ultimately jeopardize the authenticity of the re-enacted works. He states that it challenged and reassigned “the authorial agency of the (re) performed works”, and that the artist “has taken steps to potentially eclipse the works she re-enacted in *Seven Easy Pieces* by meticulously documenting each of her performances” (Blackson 2007, 39).

⁶ In the field of performance studies, performance art authenticity is strongly connected with its ontology. The main problem is that performance art ontology is still clearly undefined, with several authors arguing different (and valid) perspectives. For more information about this subject please consult Amelia Jones and Adrian Heathfield (eds.), *Perform, Repeat, Record: Live Art in History* (Bristol: Intellect Lda. 2012); Gabriella Giannachi, Nick Kaye and Michael Shanks (eds.), *Archaeologies of Presence: Art, performance and the persistence of being* (New York: Routledge 2012); Gundhild Borggreen and Rune Gade (eds.), *Performing Archives/Archives of Performance* (Copenhagen: Museum Tusulanum Press 2013); and Matthew Reason, *Documentation, Disappearance and the Representation of Live Performance* (New York: PALGRAVE MACMILLAN 2006).

process of producing documentation entails; however, when producing narratives in a written form, oral testimonies, or even re-enactments, subjective constructions of memory and language take place. In 1997, Amelia Jones, regarding the study of historical performances through those documents and narratives, explained that “while the experience of viewing a photograph and reading a text is clearly different from that of sitting in a small room watching an artist perform, neither has a privileged relationship to the historical “truth” of the performance” (Jones 1997, 11).

In her first statement, Jones thus regards the analysis of performance documents (or traces) as an experience that is not absent of “historical truth”. If that is true for narratives produced via these documents, can it also be true for performance re-enactments based on documents? According to the philosopher Adrian Heathfield, the answer is yes. This author proposes that the association of authenticity with the original event, with the mediated event, or any other mediated trace of the event, has no relevance considering the “recursive condition of all events of interpretation” (Heathfield 2012, 31). According to this author, the recursive condition of interpretation, which is drawn from Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology, implies that performance can only be constructed through its discursive practices. In other words, performance art is not necessarily coupled with the original event, but is a rhizomatic and “viral” (Bedford 2012, 85) phenomenon, with several manifestations. If this thought is acknowledged in the context of performance documentation and re-enactment (with each and every document or event being a (lacunar) manifestation of a given work), it is possible to assume that documentation produced with a conservation purpose is also part of the work’s biography — in this case, not as an instantiation⁷ of a given work, but as a subjective and interpretative discursive practice which might potentiate other interpretations and preservation strategies. In this context, the main problem with documentation lies in the focus that is clearly given to performance materialities, which dissolves the embodied practice of performance art, or what the philosopher Diana Taylor calls *the repertoire*. This dichotomy

between *archive* and *repertoire*⁸ (Taylor 2003) is essential in the preservation of performance-based artworks. According to this author, some problems emerge when the repertoire (being rituals, acts of language, or performance art) is materialized into any archival form: it goes against the nature of these works and ignores the knowledge that is only transmitted through the corporealization of practices (Taylor 2008, 97). But how can documentation practices, which are clearly focused on the archive, recall the embodied knowledge essential to performance artworks? And how can the acknowledgement of this dichotomy aid the transition of performance artworks into the museum space?

2. Beyond the archive: conserving two portuguese performance-based artworks

In order to allow these works to thrive both as archival remains and as corporeal practices, preservation strategies need to be analyzed. Among these strategies, ways of handling documentation need to be reassessed, and the intention behind these documentation practices needs to become visible.

In the context of this research, two Portuguese performance-based artworks were documented. The documentation was produced in order to promote the works’ future reinterpretation or re-enactment. This means that it was not produced to be presented instead of the performance artworks, but to historicize them, to value them, and to improve the possibility of their (re-) presentation.

This was not an uncontroversial option. As explained before, there are several and divergent perspectives on the documentation and re-enactment of performance artworks. Besides Peggy Phelan’s opposition to performance documentation, many other authors presented convincing arguments in favour of and against performance documentation and representation. Moreover, these perspectives tend to change with the typology of the performance work in hand,

⁷ In the field of conservation, this term was coined by Pip Laurenson (2006).

⁸ According to the author, “[t]he repertoire (...) enacts embodied memory-performances, gestures, orality, movement, dance, singing — in short, all those acts usually thought of as ephemeral, non-reproducible knowledge (...). The repertoire requires presence — people participate in the production and reproduction of knowledge by ‘being there’, being a part of the transmission. As opposed to the supposedly stable objects in the archive, the actions that are the repertoire do not remain the same. The repertoire both keeps and transforms choreographies of meaning” (Taylor 2003, 20).



FIG. 1: *Ad Verbum*, 2010 (created by Vasco Araújo). Panoramic view. Courtesy of the artista.

namely in the case of works which are close to what Claire Bishop calls “delegated performances” (Bishop 2012), a category in which the work *sexyMF* by Ana Borralho and João Galante can be found.

2.1. *sexyMF*, Ana Borralho and João Galante, 2006

sexyMF (2006) is an example of a delegated socially-engaging performance artwork, as it is performed by participants chosen through a workshop developed with the local community. When the workshop ends, they select a variable number of participants to be performers in a public showing of *sexyMF*. In this work, performers are naked, their genitals exposed, and their faces are characterized in order to represent a different sex. Men have their faces characterized as women, and women as men. This hybrid subject interacts with members of the audience who are seated in front of a particular performer. Each participant has a pair of headphones that plays romantic music, which changes depending on the place in which you are sitting. Spectators have a direct influence on their own experience by choosing the performer to establish

that relationship and by determining how long it will last. While an intimate relationship between performer and participant slowly unfolds, other participants watch the interaction. These participants are either waiting for their turn or just watching. After the performance, videos and photos circulate on the web, either uploaded by participants, by the artists, or even by the gallery.

Although this piece is not executed by the artists, but by performers chosen in the workshop, the artists provide guidelines to workshop participants, allowing them to enact a persona of their own creation, which inspires fictional or sometimes even real⁹ relationships with participants through rituals of flirtation and mutual gaze. In order to allow the creation of different characters, each performer participates in the decision about the music playing through the headphones.

Although the workshop is clearly important for the work's execution, as people from different backgrounds are called into the process of making art, the artists showed some flexibility in that regard. Indeed, there was one situation where the artists participated

⁹ Ana Borralho and João Galante, interviewed by Hélia Marçal (Espaço Alcantara, Lisbon, 25 May, 2015).



FIG. 2: *Ad Verbum*, 2010 (created by Vasco Araújo). Detailed view. Courtesy of the artista.

actively in the performance and another occasion where performers were not chosen through a workshop, as they had performed in previous events.¹⁰ This flexibility and the fact that different performers are used to execute the piece gives it a set of circumstances that, on its own, could facilitate the passage of the artwork to a museum collection (meaning the acquisition of the artwork documentation, including essential instructions on the development of the workshops and the re-enactment rights). There is, however, a risk that the variability of this piece (which comes from the workshop and consists of the execution of a performance in different cultural contexts) may be lost in the *passage*. On the other hand, recognizing this as an essential characteristic of the artwork promotes a search for proper solutions that allow that variability to survive in

future presentations. The documentation produced in order to preserve this work for future generations, for example, would need to encompass not only the performance of the work, but also the planning, production and execution of (more than one) workshop. In this case the conservator, working as an ethnographer and as a documentary film director, would act as an observer-participant and document the workshop itself as part of the artistic process. On the other hand, the conservator could participate in the workshop and, perhaps, in the performance itself, documenting the work in a process of autoethnography (Stigter 2016).

Another important characteristic of this work lies in the way in which these artists engage with their local community, which is called to participate in the workshop and then in the public performance event. Participants' interaction with the work, either by direct engagement with the performers, by behaving like *voyeurs* during the flirtation, or even by wandering around the exhibition space, is a key feature of the work that needs to be visible in future instantiations of *sexyMF*. This is also the case with *Ad Verbum*, created by the Portuguese visual artist Vasco Araújo, which, like *sexyMF*, promotes an intentional relationship between artwork, place, performance and the local community.

2.2. *Ad Verbum*, Vasco Araújo, 2010

Ad Verbum, created by the artist Vasco Araújo, can be considered a hybrid work, floating somewhere between installation, performance and public art (see Figures 1-3). Araújo has been gaining recognition on the Portuguese contemporary art scene for the last decade. He works with a wide variety of different media, from text, objects or sculptural elements to video, photography, installation and performance. In this case, *Ad Verbum* was produced as part of a collective exhibition in Lisbon's prominent nightclub Lux Frágil, and it consisted of several illustrations and sentences painted with ultraviolet paint on the club's dancefloor. The artist carefully executed the work, from outlining all sentences and illustrations to asking several people to handwrite them in

¹⁰ Ana Borralho and João Galante, interviewed by Hélia Marçal (Espaço Alcantara, Lisbon, 25 May, 2015).

order to have a wide range of handwriting styles, printing their negatives in vinyl, and defining their place and position. Each vinyl was filled with paint and removed afterwards. The club had to install special lights in order to activate the work at specific moments in the night. According to the artist, this work aimed to provide nightclub users with a completely new experience, who visited this public space without expecting to be faced with art.¹¹ Although it was intended to last ten months, *Ad Verbum* was part of the nightclub's environment for two years, with every night presenting a new experience to a new set of spectators.

The work ceased to exist in 2012, when Lux Frágil decided to re-paint the nightclub, thus removing any material trace of *Ad Verbum*. Although the work does not materially exist any more, it can still be acquired, documented (even if only partially) and presented.

Its *passage* to a museum collection would imply a full reinterpretation of the work by the artist, as both the public and performative elements of this work would be lost. Therefore, in order to preserve the context of the work, creating a *black box* in an art institution could be a solution for historicizing these elements, at the very least. It is, however, important to state that this would be a fetishistic way of looking at *Ad Verbum*: as material remains, involved in an economy of experience. Re-materializing this work in a context of a festival, ephemeral in itself, or even inside a nightclub or another leisure venue, would be closer to what the artist intended, which also holds true if that re-materialization happens to be an exercise of historical remembrance.

The act of incorporating this work would thus necessarily imply an appraisal by an interdisciplinary team that involves conservators, representatives of the artwork owners, the artist and members of the institution, including curators and collection managers. In this context, the members of the institution team would also have to guarantee the existence of enough human and financial resources to ensure the maintenance of the artworks as minimum requirements for their incorporation (which depends, obviously, on the ability to preserve the artwork).



3. Presenting performance art for future generations: a broad vision of conservation

This article has discussed the status of performance artworks within museums, reflecting upon their place there and the difficulties regarding their conservation. The presence of these artworks in an institution undoubtedly requires a change in conservation procedures, which necessitates an evolution in ways of thinking and doing documentation.

FIG. 3: *Ad Verbum*, 2010 (created by Vasco Araújo). Detailed view. Courtesy of the artista.

¹¹ Vasco Araújo, interviewed by Hélia Marçal and Maria Guimarães (Lisbon, 9 April 2014)

By considering an expanded vision of conservation, one that considers that conserving cultural heritage means to conserve its materialities along with its immaterialities (including its cultural significance and the social-political context of production, among other aspects), it is possible to foresee an institutional future to performance works. By bringing together the production of an extensive and flexible archive with the knowledge acquisition commonly understood as repertoire (as for the production of technical documentation, or the active participation in the creation and presentation of these performance artworks), an expanded vision of conservation articulates a (sometimes contradictory and always lacunar) strategy that joins documentation to presentation for the effective preservation of these works. In other words, by introducing the museum team to performance processes, together with the documentation produced by conservators, new forms of collective memory emerge.

More than ever, conservation practices must be considered a process of negotiation between the subversive context of creation of these works and their normative institutionalization. In the same manner, an expanded vision of conservation promotes better communication with artists. Usually resistant to the notion of conserving their works, artists will be invited to participate more actively in the conservation process (that is, beyond the artist's interview), by transmitting the repertoire, making them more aware of this vision, which acknowledges change and variability as an essential part of performance works.

Finally, back to the issue introduced in the beginning of this essay, *rites of passage* of performance works to the museum sphere are essentially about change: change in the works, change in their trajectory (or biography), but also, change in museum conservation procedures, and change in their presentation strategies. The question, thus, should not be so much about the *rites of passage* that performance works undergo in order to enter museum collections, but more about the changes that institutions need to accommodate in order to incorporate these works.

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