

EXPLORING ART AND CRAFT IN TEACHER EDUCATION WHILST GOING TOWARD A PERFORMATIVE APPROACH: SOME REFLECTIONS ON RE-TURNING AND ENGAGING DIFFRACTIVELY WITH FELTING WOOL

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Abstract

Since 1997, I have returned to and revisited textile materials through different types of approaches. As an artist, I have been working with soft sculptures and immersive installations. As an artist-teacher, I sought to (re-)introduced wool felting tradition to teacher students in Norway. As a researcher, I re-turn (Barad, 2014) my approach to wool felting and engage diffractively (ibid.) within teacher education.

I am now still exploiting a performative approach to the subject of arts and craft within teacher education. This approach is conjointly inspired by contemporary visual art form of expressions and by Barad's performative ontology.

In this text I attempt to convey my working processes as I relate how I started to engage with a performative approach to drawing in the field of arts and craft in teacher education, and how I now aim to enact further a performative approach to wool felting. This approach is inspired by post-humanism perspectives. Consequently, traditional binaries or dichotomies one can find in assumptions related to the humanities, as subject-object and theory-practice (Van der Tuin & Dolphijn, 2010), are here deterritorialized to be simultaneously and differently reterritorialized (Deleuze & Guattari, 1980). My approach goes thus beyond the theory-practice division to hold an intra-active pedagogy (Lenz Taguchi, 2010) and an ethico-onto-epistemological framework (Barad, 2007). This implies a set of mind considering an intimated relationship between making, being and knowing: all those aspects are present under a creative process, not isolated and nor independent of the process. Adopting a performative approach with my students, I do not necessarily privilege a linear approach and I do not necessarily privilege human agency above non-human entities. Following an ethico-onto-epistemological framework means here to merge the phenomenon of felting (beings) and its written study and analysis (ways of knowing).

Keywords: arts and craft, teacher education, performance, performative teaching, wool, felting

Exploring Art and Craft in Teacher Education Whilst Going Toward a Performative Approach: Some Reflections on Re-Turning and Engaging Diffractively with Felting Wool

Since 1997, I have returned to and revisited textile materials through different types of approaches. As an artist, I have been working with soft sculptures and immersive installations. As an artist-teacher, I sought to (re-)introduce wool felting tradition to teacher students in Norway. As a researcher, I re-turn (Barad, 2014) my approach to wool felting and engage diffractively (Barad, 2014) within teacher education.

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In this paper I attempt to convey my working processes as I relate how I started to engage with a performative approach to drawing in the field of arts and craft in teacher education, and how I now aim to enact further a performative approach to wool felting. This approach is inspired by posthumanist perspectives. Consequently, traditional binaries or dichotomies one can find in assumptions related to the humanities, as subject-object and theory-practice (Van der Tuin & Dolphijn, 2010), are here deterritorialized to be simultaneously and differently reterritorialized (Deleuze & Guattari, 1980). My approach goes thus beyond the theory-practice division to hold an intra-active pedagogy (Lenz Taguchi, 2010) and an ethico-onto-epistemological framework (Barad, 2007). This implies a mindset considering a close relationship between making, being and knowing: all those aspects are present under a creative process, neither isolated nor independent of the process. Adopting a performative approach with my students, I do not necessarily privilege a linear approach and I do not necessarily privilege human agency above non-human entities. Following an ethico-onto-epistemological framework means here to merge the phenomenon of felting (becoming) and its written study and analysis (ways of knowing).

Re-turning the act of making and engaging diffractively with a making process

To re-turn, according to Barad (2014), is different from going back to something. For Barad re-turning is to put things up-side-down and intra-act with materials or entities anew/diffractively. Re-turning as such is not "returning as in reflecting on or going back to a past that was, but re-turning as in turning it over and over again – iteratively intra acting, re-diffracting, diffracting anew, in the making of new temporalities (spacetime-matterings), new diffraction patterns" (Barad, 2017, p. 168). Re-turning things over and over again is an attempt to reach a richer approach and acknowledge other entanglements, other possible ways to intra-act, and other optics. Re-turning wool fibres, in my case, means to not simply go back, repeat or replicate the traditional felting technique I learned for 20 years ago. By re-turning wool fibres I wish to practice felting and convey diffractively the practice/making of felting to my students.

The concept of diffraction, beyond reflection, is also borrowed from Karen Barad (Barad, 2004), to distinguish it from the idea of reflection, by having a more explicit understanding of what is more than just a displacement. Diffraction is dissimilar to reflection when one look at the

sameness of a phenomenon displaced in time or space, as for example reflected on a mirror. Barad proposes an understanding of diffraction as to be(come) aware of and responsive to the differences and what those differences can do.

In this project, diffraction as more than just a displacement, means to alter earlier relationship between the wool fibres and my making. That is a new, becoming *in situ*, relationship between the materials and the making that take place. I address diffraction when I work with felting wool as I see the affect is produced when we value the process itself, relegating the final product (the terminated felted object) to a less predominant position. Concretely that means that when my students and I undergo a performative approach to wool fibres, we are not necessarily only interested in the finale/finished object. But we give attention to what wool can do with us, as the affect and effect it produces, the way we intra-act, and how different relationships arise within the groups of students.

These last years, I have worked with a performative approach to art and crafts subject: I look at the values that lie in the process (not just the finished product), such as aesthetic experiences, non-verbal communication, social relations, and material transformations. My initial step toward a performative approach to the subject of arts and craft within teacher education was made through collaborative drawing sessions, first by using a method I called “visual dialogue” (Jamouchi, 2017) as a way to unveil student’s personal experiences of the city. And a few years later by using performance drawing, as a way to involve the students bodily and emotionally in the act of drawing (Jamouchi, 2018). In both cases I consider artistic and didactic approaches as an essential and joint parts of my practice as an artist-teacher.



Figure 1. A performative drawing session with my students at the Oslo Metropolitan University in 2018.

Written feedback I collected earlier, from students with whom I undertake performative drawing, underline the evocative and emotional experience we had during a drawing session. Some students expressed those experiences as the following: “I became a part of the paper”, and “Silence and movements became art. Combining dance and colours” (Jamouchi, 2017). Those statements reveal the intra-action experienced during the phenomenon of drawing. It seems like the materials - both paper and bodies - became an entangled entity. And the making became the leading event. It was not only the human hands that created the drawing.

Bodily engaged with the task, we performed drawing on a large space in the classroom, we evolved collaboratively on wide-ranging craft paper displayed on the floor and the wall, and we explored this two-dimensional form of expression through non-verbal communication. The students hardly mention the final product (the finished drawing itself) in their feedback. But they emphasized the drawing process as a prevalent moment. A moment under which they could explore the material, become aware the relations that occur between both material, students, musicality, temporality, and moments of flow.

Re-turning drawing processes, drawing anew and diffractively was a rewarding way to reposition the working process and give it the more valuable status it deserved. I believe that a performative approach to wool felting can help to look deeper into the complex relationships we can have with malleable materials, with ourselves and each other. I do not believe so only because we can work on a large-scale project, using our whole body, and evolving freely in a larger space. I believe so also because the plasticity of wool fibres hold natural material that allows metamorphosis and entanglement.

Repositioning the felting process as experience and experiment

Stimulated by my earlier experiences of visual dialogue through drawings to unveil personal urban experiences, and performative drawing with teacher students when emphasising the drawing process, I wish now to approach the arts and craft subject through felting wool fibres, looking for how to allow fruitful experience and experimenting. From a post-humanistic and new materialistic perspective, I am interested to look further at the metamorphosis, entanglement and intra-action that occur between the materials and the students.

Art as experience (Dewey, 1934/2005) and experimentation (Deleuze & Guattari, 1993, p. 371, cited in Parr, 2010) seem to be given less attention than teaching methods focusing on foreseen outcomes or products. In September 2017, the Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training published a first proposal for school subjects.¹ In the subject of arts and craft, this first draft seems to largely concentrate on predefined approaches through established techniques and methods. The teacher team from the university of Kristiansand in Agder (South Norway) responded critically to the proposal by calling for a new curriculum that meets what they regard as relevant for a contemporary arts and crafts subject. They mentioned sensory form of experiences, they emphasis approaches that are closer contemporary art strategies as meaning

¹ See this link for the core elements in art and crafts: <https://hoering.udir.no/Hoering/v2/151?notatId=227>

making, questioning and wondering, participation, as well as dissent and interaction.² This critical response is in line with my views of an artist-teacher position and my wish to not only teach about materials or techniques, but allow aesthetical experiences.

Experience is a central and crucial moment in the art and crafts subject at school (Dewey, 1934/2005). And experimenting 'Without goal or end' (Deleuze & Guattari, 1993, p. 371, as cited in Parr, 2010) is essential to a creative process and aesthetical experience. It is indeed during the making of something, the process of becoming that we can make experiences and experiments. It is under the working process that we can explore, discover, make sense, as well as seize and capture different aspects of materials. It is also during a working process that we can relate to both the materials and other participants. As well as we can experience intra-action and relational aesthetic.

Engaging diffractively with wool involves to constantly re-explore the possibilities that this malleable material offers. In addition to the strictly technical aspects of felting, it is a unique sensory approach that takes place. I want to explore and convey some of the sensory aspects experienced during the process of felted wool. Sensory aspects as for instance the changing texture of the fibres, tactility going from soft to harder structures, alternation between wet and dry fibres, and the change of temperature we experience with our hands. Embodiment and imaginative approaches are intimately connected to the felting wool process. It is those forms of tactile, visceral and first-hand experiences I wish to invite my arts and craft students to become a part of. I deem those unique moments of sensory experiences as great potential to undergo experience and experimentation.

Felting wool and intra-action with different entities

Engaging diffractively with felting wool, as I recently started to do with my students, involves intra-action with different materials and other than ourselves. When we engage together with a felting process we bring a togetherness that involve our material bodies and the materiality of the wool. A togetherness that engender also immanent trajectories, experiences and experiments, memories, gestures, and identities while approaching and investing ourselves in a transformative intra-action.

The plurality of the students and materials do not merge. The plurality is rather more explicit and its complexity expand in the classroom. It is, as Barad express it, a generative process. A moment of becoming as “an iterative (re)configuring of patterns of differentiating-entangling” (Barad, 2014, p. 168). When voices and sounds, combined with ideas and acts, (be)come through a variety of different agencies, those intra-actions entangle with each other and participate equally to the becoming moment of making in a shared “spacetime-matterings” (Barad, 2014, p. 168).

² Author translation of the abstract send by the teaching team from the university of Kristiansand to the Norwegian national conference organized by *Nasjonalt senter for kunst og kultur i opplæring* in January 2019. The teacher team was composed by Helene Illeris, Monica Klungland, Lisbet Skregelid, Anna Svingen-Austestad.



Figure 2. A performative approach to wool felting with my students at the Oslo Metropolitan University in 2018.

The picture in figure 2 shows the students using the weight of their bodies and their feet working collectively to step on, pack and flatten a large piece of wool on the floor covered with bubble plastic to felt a large mass of natural fibres under their bodies. The space is intimately shared and gestures made of combined rhythms, repetitions, and different cadences create a qualitative space and moments of duration and *ritournelle* which emanate from their working process.

“The world is not populated with things that are more or less the same or different from one another. Relations do not follow *relata*, but the other way around. Matter is neither fixed and given nor the mere end result of different processes. Matter is produced and productive, generated and generative. Matter is agentive, not a fixed essence or property of things” (Barad, 2007, p. 136-137). This approach to relations and things, as Barad states it in that quote, underlines the performative approach to wool we experienced together. Our session with this felting process is a performative act. (I shall come back to performativity in the next section).



Figure 3. A performative approach to wool felting with my students at the Oslo Metropolitan University in 2018.

The picture in figure 3 shows repetitive and non-identical movements of twisting, turning and throwing large pieces of wool on the air and on the table. Those movements made by the students are not anticipated and not foreseen movements, thus they result in non-identical recurring movements. The movements in this felting process create waves of rhythms between the different student groups. The groups work simultaneously individually and conjointly. This is because the groups work individually since each group focuses on its own process, by creating their own time-space-actions through iteration, following the bodies and wool in motion within the group. At the same time the overall aspect in the classroom (visually and auditory) gives the impression of an ensemble bringing together similar actions in the workshop. Movements and sounds that create the felting process contribute to create a time space rooted in the making (felting process).

Spatially and temporality are also intra-acting in this felting process. The notion of space can be considered as something more than its metric definition. Space can be identified through our behaviour and daily creative processes, like tactics and strategies (de Certeau, 1990). Space can be defined as a topological entity related to aesthetic and our body (Trageton, 1995), or as poetical and oneiric (Perec, 2000; Bachelard, 1957), or identified from the concept of duration (Bachelard, 1957, and Bergson, as cited in Van der Tuin & Dolphin, 2010).

Space can also be seen through its temporality. Lefebvre (2004) used rhythmanalysis related to repetitions, frequency, and the human body own rhythms as a reference of unity and in relation to everyday life and urban space. With Kevin Lynch (1976), time and place has been looked at from a human sense of time, a biological rhythm that differs from an objective/external calculation of time. With the concept of duration, instead of linearly or scientific time inspired by

Bergson, one can focus on metamorphosis or transformation. “What endures, what is fundamentally immersed in time is not what remains unchanging or the same over time, a Platonic essence, but what diverges and transforms itself with the passage of time (Grosz, 2005, p. 110, as cited in Van der Tuin & Dolphin, 2010, p. 164). The wool fibre undergoes a metamorphosis, but it simultaneously remains the same entity. Going from a loose fibre it becomes a part of a smooth, felted material.

Away from a mindset promoting stabilization (of time) and standardization (of objects), my students and I find ourselves elsewhere. Space becomes more qualitative than metric. Working away from a table, leaving small scale projects for larger formats, and not sitting on a chair but standing freely in the room enable us to freely use our whole body, enable us to use large movements. This also enables improvisation and cooperation not only based on our fictive idea, but generated by the actual making during a creative process.

The intra-action between all those entities, as space, time, bodies, wool, water, floor, table, air, soap, etc., shaped the performative process and our experience of it.

Performance related to visual art and performative ontology

A performative approach to arts and craft can bring powerful experiences into the classroom. As I am now starting to work toward a performative approach to the subject of arts and craft by using wool fibres, I see that performance and performative approaches can be related to both visual contemporary art-working processes and Karen Barad’s ontological framework.

Performance, in art history, has evolved from happenings, interventions, simulacra, action art and relational art (Ferrier, 1990). Hence, within visual arts, forms and categories of performances are constantly evolving. My intention here is not to give a definitive definition of what a performance is in the context of visual arts. My purpose is to recognize features that can be fruitful to articulate the way I work with performativity in teacher education. To that aim, I find the discussion of performance/performativity relevant. Inspired by performance in contemporary visual art I have been questioning a dominant way of teaching the subject of arts and craft in our universities. A teaching practice mainly focusing on technical and methodological instructions and artefacts production. This seems to be, still today, the “regular way to teach”. I have myself been practicing teaching like that for years. I have previously been working as a pedagogue teaching about art education, rather than an artist-teacher training students through the arts. Today I see that creative and critical inquiry during experimentations, process-oriented training and relational aesthetical experiences are fundamental aspects in the subject of arts and craft. Without those aspects, we risk failing our mandate as arts and craft teachers.

The works of the visual artist Marina Abramović using her body and other materials as a medium is clearly inviting the public into intra-action. Her work changes the traditional position of (passive) viewer to (intervening) actor. Especially her performance “Lips of Thomas” (1975) created an intimate and unpredictable relationship between the artist and the spectators. The

object of the performance was not a fiscal item nor the production of an artifact. The object of performance art is the ongoing action itself. Her performance differs from a theatrical representation. The event that occurs is not a dramatic representation as one can find in traditional theater performances. The artist is not playing a role as an actress would. Marina Abramović's performances are ones of the works within visual art that mark a fundamental shift in our understanding of a piece of artwork independent from the artist. This transformation from a traditional work of art into an event is named "the performative turn" by Fischer-Lichte (2008, p. 23).

The classical formality established by having the exhibited object on a specific place of the gallery and standing spectators in front of it has vanished. The close contemplation of the other, the artist, involves consciousness about oneself, our own being. An alternative approach to the traditions and standards of the visual or performing arts that stresses the "the present, live moment" (Fischer-Lichte, 2008) and that challenges a classical interpretation focusing on the artefact and its visual components is what is relevant here.

The works of Marina Abramović enrich my understanding of what a performance can be within a contemporary art context and have an impact on how I can engage with a performative approach to my work in school setting context. I use the word performative, not performance, to distinguish between how I understand a performance related to the art world, from my didactical use of it related to the subject of arts and craft in school settings. My aim is to first and foremost deal with the event or phenomenon of felting as the main element of a teaching session.

From another perspective, performative research has been stated to be a "new" paradigm in scientific research, succeeding to the established quantitative and qualitative research methodologies. Haseman (2006) and Bolt (2016) identify it as a new paradigm, mainly related to the field of artistic research. They both call attention to the characteristics of performative research that distinguish it from earlier way of conducting research projects. Performativity, with its iterability and differentiation as Bolt (2016) puts it, is a possible way to explore and investigate a felting process ongoing a transformation, when the wool intra-act together with our hands.

By introducing performative research, which Haseman (2006) and Bolt (2016) identify as new research paradigm, they do more than adding or formulating a new working method after the well-known quantitative and qualitative research methods. Performative research has a more profound *raison d'être*; -it deals with fundamental beliefs about the nature and value of research that practice-led researchers have struggled to formulate within the binary of quantitative and qualitative research (Haseman, 2006, p. 1). Haseman stipulates that his contribution is confined to performative researchers who carry out practice-led research, which is "intrinsically experimental and comes to the fore when the researcher creates new artistic forms of performance and exhibition" (Haseman, 2006, p. 3). In my work, the idea of performance does not take place in an art gallery, but in the classroom with my students. My research is located (in time, space, and the making) everywhere I meet my students when we perform wool felting diffractively.

Haseman writes also that the practice-led researcher starts with “an enthusiasm of practice” (Haseman, 2006). That means that the research is not driven from a problem or an issue. In my case, it is an enthusiasm for the artistic practice and a concern for the teaching practice of arts and craft that drives my curiosity and will to engage with this performative approach to arts and craft. Note that the word concern in my case do not mean to find a normative solution to a problem, but a desire to question and reflect on the possibilities that reside in a performative approach to the subject of arts and craft in our universities. In other words, the issue here is related to my concern and care for the students I meet every day and with whom I endeavour to explore what the art world can be about in school settings. Concretely, I wish to look for an alternative way to teach in the subject of arts and craft by choosing an explorative performative approach to wool felting, rather than a traditional felting procedure guiding us safely on how to obtain a felted object. It is less a performance than an iterative intra-action with diffraction. After years of different felting experiences, I now want to re-turn to wool fibers as a known material to differently reiterate the encounter between us. I envisage this encounter close to a performative act (not a representational performance) in line with what Haseman and Bolt introduced as a new paradigm. This re-encounter with wool is not a repetition or mimesis of what I can do or what I know about wool, but a search for intra-action and creative play with it.

As in dance, like for example salsa involving two partners, the relationship between the partners emerges during the dance. Following each other’s intentions and movements and “operating according to repetition *with* difference” (Bolt, 2016, p.139) other intentions and movements will appear. That idea of repetition with difference is comparable to the concept of intra-action introduced by Karen Barad (2007).

Barads’ idea of intra-action produces an echo to my work. Her posthumanist performative framework that proposes an ontology in which entities are not taken as given, but as constituted through material entanglements contesting classical dualist view in scientific research (as object/subject, material/discourse, nature/culture). Her concept of intra-action describes the phenomenon as a relationship that emerges between entities from within their relationship (not prior or outside it). This acknowledges agency I have seen in the classroom when the students work with performative drawing and express this experience as “I became a part of the paper” they were drawing on.

For Barad (2007)

“Discursive practices and material phenomena do not stand in relationship of externality to each other; rather, *the material and the discursive are mutually implicated in the dynamic of intra-activity*. The relationship between the material and the discursive is one of mutual entailment. Neither discursive practices nor material phenomena are ontologically or epistemologically prior. Neither can be explained in terms of the other. Neither is reducible to the other. Neither has privileged status in determining the other. Neither is articulated in the absence of the other; matter and meaning are mutually articulated” (Barad, 2007, p. 152).

Barad proposes “a *posthumanist performative* approach [...]. The move toward performative alternatives to representationalism shifts the focus from questions of correspondence between descriptions and reality (e.g. do they mirror nature or culture?) to matters of practices, doings, and actions” (Barad, 2007, p. 135). This movement from representationalism to agential realism involves the idea of no pre-existing phenomenon in the world we are a part of. For my study this means that the phenomenon of felting is a process involving wool fibers and our hands equally in what happens during that process. When I use the word equally here, I refer to Barad’s position of posthumanism when she intend to: “... not calibrate to the human; on the contrary, it is about taking issue with human exceptionalism while being accountable for the role we play in differential constitution and differential position of the human among other creatures (both living and nonliving)” (Barad, 2007, p. 136). We, equally human and non-human entities, are reciprocally constituted and intimately entangled in the world of which we are a part. Barad sees phenomena as material-discursive practices, this implies the idea that material as well as discourse are constructed, as we are embedded in it.

My engagement with Barad’s (2007) work is grounded in my interest of diffracting and enacting non-representational knowledge of making practices. Her posthumanist, performative conceptualisation of knowledge production and practice suggests taking material and body simultaneously into account, as she acknowledges a relationship between the material and the discursive with no Manichean dichotomy between them. Matter is considered as agential and dynamic, not as subordinated actions established by human hands. Similarly, in my teaching, I wish to encounter wool with our hands and allow experimentation rather than reproduction.

A performative approach to the subject of arts and craft? Still asking questions

The following suggestion for teaching program in arts and crafts is published on the website of the Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training: “With this task pupils will become familiar with wool as material. They should felt seat pad in an ice box using water, soap and colorful wool. They can sew large stitches around the edge of the seat pad surface when it has dried. Pupils will learn where we get wool from and how it can be used”.³ As mentioned previously, the new proposal published by the Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training in the subject of arts and craft seems to largely concentrate on predefined approaches through established techniques and methods. As for instance in the way it is mentioned here when the pupils are simply expected to (re-)produce felted seat pads.

By exploring a performative approach to the subject of arts and craft when felting wool fibers, I mean to relegate in the background the recipe-like teaching practices that mainly use a technique to achieve the finale product. A performative approach to arts and craft materials should deal with the imaginative and creative forces a person can reach when intra-acting with transformable materials. When a student immerses herself/himself in the material this allows her/him to perceive, explore, feel and comprehend a creative process.

³ This suggestion for teaching program is proposed for 1st and 2nd grade in primary school. Retrieved (in Norwegian) January 2019 from <https://www.udir.no/laring-og-trivsel/lareplanverket/fag/kunst-og-handverk/>

A performative approach to the subject of arts and craft puts the event as the focal moment. That central element can be understood as the intra-action between the (teacher's and student's) hands and the materials. Performativity is also a central element in the work of Karen Barad. For Barad "A performance...is just such an intra-action among internally related components" (Bryan, 2016, para. 14). And "In the case of an ontological performance, the being *is* the result of this performance or intra-action" (Bryan, 2016, para. 20). A performative approach includes experiences and experiments of different possible ways of transformations, in terms of textures, sounds, temperatures, movements, duration, rhythms, odors, and so on, as those elements are parts of a working/creative process. The intra-action invites the students to a togetherness allowing relationships immanent within/from the performance. It is then the performance as an event, beyond the teacher only, which invites students to an experience of what the subject of arts and craft can be.

Drawing from a couple of teaching sessions with my students engaging with a performative approach to felting wool, as shown above in figures 2 and 3, I see that the essential quality of an experience does not reside in the repetition of the same, it is rather contextual and therefore unique. It is characterized by its ability to be experienced in different surroundings, and yet it is intimately related to the space, moments and people that found themselves there.

Some of the questions that have brought me further in my practice are: How can artist-teachers in arts and craft invest the space of the classroom differently? How could I invite students to experience felting, not only apply a felting technique? How could I invite students to immerse themselves in *feeling* wool fibres, more than only *felting* wool fibres?

Repetitions of an arts and crafts teaching session and displacement from a classroom to another are actually a feature of our daily meeting with our students. Questions that might bring our teaching practice further are: How can we allow for the students to meet again, and again a material diffractively? How can we "enter the phenomenon" in the classroom by bringing the essential quality of an experience?

Those are the questions I address in my teaching. Those questions might also be relevant for others working within educational contexts in the subject of arts and crafts.

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