Strategies and Impact Assessment of Contemporary Art Practices

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Abstract Public art and art for sustainability play an increasingly significant role in the overview of contemporary artistic practices. These are related to the social, cultural and economic fabric of the communities' reasoning around burning issues of the present time such as climate change or gender equality. Firstly, this paper aims to highlight some differences and analogies between public and sustainable art by showing some examples and considerations concerning the definition of Sustainable Development promoted by the Bruntland Commission and the objectives of the UN 2030 Agenda; secondly, it intends to analyse the birth and spread of these practices, from the movements of the 1960s and 1970s to the relational aesthetics of the 1990s. Against the background of these experiences and in collaboration with Ca' Foscari University, Gayle Chong Kwan has developed her project discussing some issues related to the concepts of food and waste. Therefore, the chapter will also focus on contemporary art and food, from the innovations promoted by the first historical avant-gardes such as Futurism to the conceptual artwork of Joseph Beuys up to the aesthetics of Rirkrit Tiravanija. Sharing and discussing is at the heart of the poetics of these artists, as well as of Gayle Chong Kwan, who tries to act in the context in order to modify it through new interpretations. Finally, the last part of the paper examines some case studies and which strategies can be adopted or observed to understand the impact of these artistic practices.

Keywords Public art. Sustainability. Public engagement. Participatory practices. Impact assessment.

1 Reflections Stirred by an Art Project Named Waste Matters

Gayle Chong Kwan's artistic project Waste Matters, developed with Ca' Foscari University community, took shape in the wake of global events, unfolding around some compelling issues including the multifaceted and difficult relationship between food and sustainability. The artistic intervention may be framed in the context of public and participatory art, since it is focused on the involvement of multiple actors, from students to researchers and other players belonging to the art system. The project carried out by the artist was able to survive stormy times: uncertainties and programme changes have marked its path, but they have not stopped its willpower. At a time when our bodies could not embrace each other and relationships were dematerialised - inexorably becoming virtual, fast, and abstract - Gayle Chong Kwan led our community to think about important issues connected to art and sustainability, doing so in a delicate yet untiring way, working inexhaustibly on the process. While the entire globe was caught up in the fight against a virus, the old and dear concept of 'normality' collapsed, sweeping away our most docile certainties that anchored lame securities towards an era of pandemic. At the beginning of the twentieth century, when certainties were already wavering, literary and artistic avantgardes were strongly influenced by scientific discoveries, by the ferment that led to two World Wars, as well as by the dissolution of the concept of time and space. In a battle of fury, of pure rage that spread when certainties faltered, everything became suddenly 'Dada' – meaningless – like a nude portrait that comes down the stairs done in fragments (Foster et al. 2016). The same ferocity and anger that led to those world conflicts find a different dimension today, one that is difficult to understand: if we allow ourselves to be overwhelmed by anger, we will not be able to find valid solutions. In a time that seems suspended, and in the urgent need to come back to a different as well as more human dimension, art emerges on the contemporary scene as a means to create relationships, in a desperate search of those bonds we have not been able to cultivate. Save - perhaps - the relationships built in the digital bubble, a place that, despite the mistrust on the subject, has nevertheless proved to be a vector and catalyst of emotions. Gayle Chong Kwan's project is located in this deeply human dimension in which art is a vector for relationships and awareness in the wake of previous artistic movements that are part of the wider realm of Public and Relational aesthetics. Therefore, it is now necessary to turn the attention to some significant experiences related to public and sustainable art that form the background of Gavle Chong Kwan's practice in Venice.

2 Connections and Contaminations between Public Art and Sustainability

First of all, it is crucial to focus our attention on the last two decades when a growing number of scholars and artists began to deal with issues of sustainable development centring their research on the ecological crisis we are still experiencing. Since then, issues such as climate change, global warming, and the impact of human action on the environment became increasingly widespread. This is highlighted by the emergence of some recent trends such as the pioneering experiences of the wellknown curator Lucy Lippard, in 2007 in Colorado, USA, or some European initiatives such as those promoted by Julie's Bicycle in the United Kingdom, COAL in France or the Pan-European Green Art Lab Alliance. These studies are also linked to multiple scientific publications like for instance Art and Sustainability by the scholar Sacha Kagan or "Form, Art and the Environment" by Nathalie Blanc and Barbara Benis, which aim at highlighting the importance of these issues in the present time at an international academic level.

In connection with this, the overall aim is to observe some contemporary artistic practices connected to public art that revolve around the term of 'sustainable art' and ponder about the impact that similar actions have on the environment. When we look at Public Art practices that relate to sustainability, the questions we must ask ourselves concern how these projects really affect the cultural fabric they try to question and what role collectivity plays as public, curators or artistic operators. A heightened attention to the context and the process lies at the heart of the poetics related to these practices, although it may well happen that such contributions eventually are not so effective in the given context. In the latter cases, indeed, the artistic act remains exclusive and unintelligible. Therefore, the artist continues to place himself outside society, in a dimension ranging from brilliant and misunderstood. As a matter of fact, there are numerous public art experiences that highlight these problems, including the installation Ago, Filo e Nodo (2000) by Claes Oldenburg and Coosje van Bruggen in Milan, which was conceived not only as a symbol of Milanese industriousness, but also as a reference to a desire to metaphorically mend different local areas of the territory, though it did not seem to fully meet the initial expectations (Mazzucotelli Salice 2015, 9-12). Furthermore, if we are to study early attempts at making Sustainable Art, then it is necessary to compare this somehow peculiar art category with Public Art in general, strictly keeping the meaning of the term 'sustainability' in mind. The latter concerns many areas including social inclusiveness, gender equality, responsible consumption. and – obviously – the environment, as highlighted by the definition of "sustainable development" promoted by the Bruntland Commission in the report Our Common Future published in 1987.

Sustainable development was thus defined as the development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs, while another major contribution to this discussion was granted by the objectives of the 2030 Agenda signed by all 193 UN countries.

Under the multifaceted range of artistic practices relating to Public Art there are also actions close to sustainable development. Considering that the themes explored in Public Art can take up multiple forms, these artistic expressions can intertwine their paths and suggest examples of common reflection to those who wish to deal with such topics (Mazzucotelli Salice 2015, 136). However, it must be noted that, while some more or less established definitions already exist for Public Art, the field is still quite open for Sustainable Art. In fact, as seen above, it is only since the late 1980s that the term 'sustainability' began to be used in connection with culture (Braddock et al. 2014). As is well known, the expression 'Public Art' refers to those artistic works that take place in cities and natural landscapes and therefore located outside institutional spaces such as museums and galleries, although the possible interpretations of the underlying concepts are much more multifaceted (Mazzucotelli Salice 2015). Some early examples can already be found in the nineteenth century embellishment or in the propaganda and social concepts of the 1920s and 1930s. However, the ideological experiments of the 1960s and 1970s were surely more significant and then merged into the relational poetics of the 1990s. Among these experiments, we might mention the first happenings, the Fluxus experience, Process Art, and further movements that fought to bring art closer to life - to one's own and to others' daily life (Le Donne 2012). Therefore, these considerations impose an open approach for the understanding of today's Public Art, which, above all, consists of a principle and a process (Birrozzi, Pugliese 2007.1) that artists employ through their own vision actively engaging with the environment and collaborating with the public in the creation of awareness and common platforms (Comunian 2006).

As for Sustainable Art, however, scholarly research is more recent, even if the historical-artistic references are linked to the above-mentioned experiences, as much as they were inspired by Minimalism, Conceptualism and Anti-form (Pancotto 2010, 35). In particular, with Land Art artists began to use the natural element as the core of their research, although at times in an invasive way and disregarding the landscape itself, as in the case of the famous *Spiral Jetty* (1970) by Robert Smithson or *The Lightning Field* (1977) by Walter De Maria. Also significant was the *Earthworks* exhibition (1968), in which artists including Claes Oldenburg, Richard Long, Günther Uecker and Hans Haacke presented at the Dwan Gallery in New York some works that caused a sensation and were too strong or not suitable to be sold, since most of them had been exhibited in the form of photographic documentation because they were actions that took place in large and natural spaces

(Pesapane 2012), Furthermore, during the mid-sixties there was the Italian Arte Povera, which thanks to the poetics of artists including Michelangelo Pistoletto and Mario Merz – with his famous Igloo – became the mouthpiece for issues related to the fragile condition of humankind and the environment (Celant 2011, 96). These can be considered some of the influences that led to the development of artistic instances linked to sustainability. Moreover, in 2002. researcher Hildegard Kurt organised a conference at the Akademie der Künste in Berlin, and published a collective publication on the relationships between sustainability, culture and art. The year before, in 2001, she was involved in the organisation of a conference entitled Aesthetics of sustainability, at the Evangelical Academy of Tutzing. The participants in Tutzing signed a *Tutzinger* Manifest, which is now recognised as one of the early calls for the recognition of culture as a fundamental basis for sustainability. Subsequently, the keyword 'sustainability' became increasingly widespread, generating reflections and practices that explore the interplay between social and ecological criticism and contemporary art. However, members of the art world at the time tended to limit the topic of sustainability to restricted environmental issues, but some scholars such as Maja and Reuben Fowkes proposed the "principles of sustainability in contemporary art" hence broadening the perspective. They stated that Sustainable Art "draws on radical critique of art and society and the dematerialized practices of conceptual art to offer sustainable alternatives in art and life" (Fowkes, Fowkes 2006), pointing at the reflexive and critical qualities involved in the search process of sustainability. The arguments and concepts of Kurt or Fowkes, although often cited. are however not taken for granted or generally recognised by the contemporary art world (Kaghan 2011).

3 From Relational Aesthetics to Food Art as a Participatory Experience

Moving the focus to the artistic practices that spread since the 1990s, it is important to remember the role of relational aesthetics to understand the artistic process of Gayle Chong Kwan. The term Relational Aesthetics was "created by curator Nicolas Bourriaud in the 1990s to describe the tendency to make art based on, or inspired by, human relations and their social context". Some projects linked to Relational Aesthetics have highlighted the relationship between art and food, such as in the case of Rirkrit Tiravanija's works. In his performances, food is specifically shared with the participants in a process of exchange and relationship-building. As a matter of fact, sharing a meal with others is a way to move towards the aesthetic realm, shifting the attention from a finished object to the process of its making, as well as to the mechanism of sociability that derives from it (Bourriaud 2010,

69). Among the most important issues highlighted in Chong Kwan's project for Venice, there is indeed the relationship that occurs between food and art, since in the workshops held with the students a reflection emerged, particularly on how we perceive and experience food waste. However, the link between art and food is even stronger, as it was addressed by numerous artists during the 20th century. For instance, early avant-gardes such as Futurism advanced a 'new way to think about food' by staging performative events, opening a restaurant, launching a dedicated manifesto, and writing a cookbook. These strategies aimed at stimulating emotional and intellectual responses through the performance and the deconstruction/reconstruction of the concept of traditional food. Still today, artists who choose to incorporate food in their work tend to do so as a way to challenge mainstream expectations, thus food art discloses a potential as a form of counterculture, an attitude already evident in Dadaism and Futurism (Bottinelli. D'Ayala Valva 2017, 372). Moreover, since the 1960s, European and North American neo avant-gardes – among which Fluxus, Eat Art and Arte Povera – returned to the incorporation of food in art projects that adopted a confrontational approach. While at an iconographical level food inhabited still lives and banquet scenes for centuries, the avant-gardes - old and new - legitimised the entrance of food into the palette of artistic materials. Since then the actual experience with food as sculptural material, as well as the performative acts of eating or processing food, became part of the artistic language, particularly in the context of the avantgardes. During the 1960s and 1970s, Food Art reinvented the role of the audience, turning it into active participants in projects of edible art, feminist performance, or installation art, like the collaborative pieces created for Womanhouse (1972) in Los Angeles revisited the domestic space of cooking and dining to question accepted gender roles (Foster et al. 2016). Subsequently, since the 1990s practices in Relational Aesthetics often include food as a generator of sharing, generosity, and giving, such as to counter the culture of isolation that characterises capitalist societies. In many cases, food is used as a tool for community building with artists deliberately referencing post-structuralist studies from the 1960s and 1970s (Lévi-Strauss 1983). Moreover, the impact of food on ecology, economy, and sustainability is suggested by several works of Joseph Beuys. Joseph Beuys became an exemplum virtutis, since his artworks tried to give an answer to society's exertion towards equality, further attempting to reconnect organic materials with human life. Indeed, some of his sculptural projects included edible ingredients – honey or lard – that were put in connection with episodes from the artist's biography:

Beusyan art conceptualizes food in a number of ways. Selfcooking both as an important change maker and as a convivial and creative activity available to everyone every day; the use of

foodstuff as material for artistic work; the production of food as an essential issue of global economy and politics, particularly with regard to the fundamental link between agriculture and eating culture in terms of ecologically sustainable relations to nature. (Bottinelli, D'Ayala Valva 2017, 633)

Over the last three decades, curators and even philosophers explored the ethical connotation of food, many of them feeling the pressure to shop and eat responsibly, healthfully and sustainably. In particular, the exhibition Eating the Universe (2009-10) in Düsseldorf, Germany, focused on food as a metaphorical appropriation of knowledge where the artists presented food from various perspectives (Bottinelli, D'Avala Valva 2017). In addition. contemporary art practices are shaped by an ethnographic attitude, as defined by Hal Foster, that aims at understanding the social context and modifying it through new interpretations (Foster 1996). Such influences are evident in artists such as Chong Kwan, yet it is not easy to place oneself in a condition that counters the isolationism of capitalist alienation (Bourriaud 2010, 111). As a matter of fact, these premises may seem convenient, but it is important to ask ourselves whether these artistic practices really have consequences on the human and natural environment.

4 Ways and Standards to Assess the Impact of Art on Sustainability

Be it Public Art or, specifically, art projects addressing sustainability issues, it is paramount to explore how much they can lead to an effective behavioural or societal change. For this reason, it is necessary to consider what options could be useful to assess the impact of similar projects in a given context. The crucial point is that there is no data capable of measuring the real impact of these experiences and art struggles to be a true tool for governance or an expression of social, cultural, and political resilience for the creation of new models. However, observing the artist's role from an interdisciplinary perspective comparing art, archaeology, and sustainability studies, it might be possible to produce a few original considerations. In particular, if we consider the sustainability studies, we could focus our attention on three categories often adopted to steer sustainable behaviour such as tools, guidance, and certifications. Tools are usually online calculators and databases that offer automated but targeted information, such as carbon auditing and footprint results for arts and the wider cultural sector, or a specific creative industry. Three examples of these tools are Julie's Bicycle's Creative IG Tools. the Carbon' Clap, and Eco Art South Florida. Julie's Bicycle's Creative IG Tools are a set of free carbon calculators designed

specifically for creative industries with the help of environmental experts, taking into account all possible measurement challenges, hence accurately assessing the impact in terms of energy, water, waste, travel, and resources. The Carbon' Clap is a French carbon measurement tool for the evaluation of audiovisual productions,4 while Eco Art South Florida uses a GIS mapping tool developed by Dartmouth college students to help identify sites with the highest potential for establishing so-called 'Eco Art nodes', which host and run community environmental art and education programmes. 5 With regard to guidance, they usually involve publications, websites, and apps that gather best practices, advice, worksheets, templates, and case studies to inspire improved environmental performance. Three examples are: Sustainability and Contemporary Art, Sustainable Event Management System (SEMS), and Curating Cities. Sustainability and Contemporary Art is a blog exploring the deepening relationship between contemporary art and notions of environmental sustainability. The aim is to both track the recent history of these ideas and highlight current developments in the field of sustainability and contemporary art. Sustainable Event Management System (SEMS) is a comprehensive sustainability management system designed for all event and meeting organisers. Implementation of SEMS reduces the economic, social, and environmental impact of an event and provides a reporting mechanism for attendees, staff, customers, and shareholders. Finally, Curating Cities is a database that maps the emerging, yet increasingly important field of eco-sustainable public art. It was developed as a resource for researchers, academics, artists, curators, and educators promoting sustainability via public art. In addition to descriptive information, the database evaluates the aims and outcomes of each project as well as the external constraints – and subsequent negotiations – that influence the production of public artworks.8

Certifications, standards, and awards are developed to assess, reward or simply assure that a product or service meets predetermined environmental criteria. There are various awards aimed at green, ecological, environmental, and sustainable art or arts activities that function as incentives or rewards for incorporating sustainable thinking in the arts, specifically at an environmental level. For instance, the Arts Council of Wales identified the Green Dragon Environmental Standard, a stepped standard recognising effective environmental management, while the Environment Awards promoted by European Environment Foundation is a database of environmental awards covering many sectors, some suitable also for arts and culture.

The Sustainable Art Prize promoted by Ca' Foscari University with the ArtVerona contemporary art fair may be included in this overview, because it is an attempt to deepen the involvement in society and to go beyond the borders of academic institutions. In 2017 Ca' Foscari University connected with ArtVerona to launch

a prize that could foster greater awareness and encourage the commitment of artists to major global challenges. The prize is awarded to artists that are active in the promotion of sustainability and it entails the commission of a new work involving students, researchers, and the wider Venetian community, thus providing a unique opportunity for dialogue between different stakeholders. So far, the winning projects reflected on specific sustainable development goals, but overall they focused on the urgency to solve the clash between human beings and their natural context. In a sense, the prize revealed the perspective of contemporary artists, whose aim was to pose new questions and generate challenging reflections on social, political, and ecological issues. Since 2013, the Sustainable Ca' Foscari Office has been working on projects that connected the world of art and sustainability, involving a variety of players – students, artists, professors, and researchers, as well as the local and international communities – and helping to increase awareness of global change by disseminating scientific knowledge and sharing solutions. One of the reasons behind these projects was to emphasise the value of art as an emotional language per se, as opposed to rational approaches, and its role in reaching out to students and the general public to share and communicate sustainability principles (Barea, Gaeta 2020). On this background, Gayle Chong Kwan developed the project Waste Matters at Ca' Foscari as the winner of the Sustainable Art Prize 2019. Together with selected students she explored food waste as a topic, our relationship with food, the city, our bodies, and the life of waste, through research, online workshops, and various activities online and in Venice. The project photographed, mapped, and collected food waste, drawing on the traditions of the herbarium and paper production, thus connecting to the 12th goal of the 2030 Agenda of the United Nations for the Sustainable Development devoted to "Responsible consumption and production",13 which reflects on the value of food waste, while stimulating a debate on the importance of reducing waste in order to reduce our impact on the environment.

5 Impact and Involvement in the Wake of Preventive Archaeology

Drawing towards an end, by broadening our reflection on assessment methods to an interdisciplinary field, it is possible to appreciate the *Report on progress towards the SDGS in an EU context* (2018), ¹⁴ which provides an analysis and impact assessment index around each goal of the 2030 Agenda. It is therefore legitimate to try to understand how and if an artistic intervention can be linked to these indicators. Sustainability reporting, as promoted by the GRI Standards, is an organisational

practice of reporting publicly on economic, environmental, and/ or social impact, hence measuring the contribution – be it positive or negative - towards the goal of sustainable development. In the GRI Standards, unless otherwise stated, 'impact' refers to the effect an organisation has on the economy, the environment, and society, which in turn can indicate its contribution – again, positive or negative – to sustainable development. The reporting principles are fundamental to achieve high quality sustainability reporting and an organisation is required to apply them, if it wants to claim that its sustainability report has been prepared in accordance with the GRI Standards. These principles could also be applied to an artistic organisation for its own projects, but also to individual artists during the planning of a specific artwork or project. In addition, it is also significant to consider - as a further source of interest – the study of the environmental impact as highlighted in some academic studies relating to environmental assessment. For instance, the Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) (1985) is one of the oldest pieces of EU environmental legislation and over the years proved to be one of the most important ones. 15 All this comes with the aim to reduce their environmental impact and make the projects more sustainable, thus contributing to sustainable development. Previously, the National Policy Act (NEPA) (1969) in the USA¹⁶ promoted deliberative and collaborative approaches to planning and decision-making processes within the framework of sustainability, while also the EIA pledges to be an integral part of any project development and design processes. These examples suggest that even in art it would be preferable to work more constructively with the proponents and stakeholders of a prospective project, in order to develop a process that meets the needs of all parties, and in so doing results in works that are consistent with the environmental and social aspirations of local communities (Morgan 2012). Finally, drawing on disciplines close to the art history field, such as archaeology, we might resort to archaeological practices in terms of prevention and impact assessment. Just as preventive archaeology is concerned with predicting the results of its actions, for instance pondering whether it is better to protect an existing site or leave it as it is by not interfering or enhancing it through intrusive practices, art interventions could also research on its reception by the public and its effects on the context in due advance (Calaon, Pizzinato 2011). These considerations might well apply to contemporary art by simply carrying out a preventive impact research activity, or one that is able to foresee the action's repercussions on the existing social, economic or environmental structures, perhaps by studying the context itself from a historical and artistic point of view.

In conclusion, it is perhaps quite complicated to give a univocal answer on the impact of projects linked to public and sustainable art, as these artistic practices involve different players in a given community, as a matter of fact, the relationships between the

stakeholders are defined by their interaction and the ways they present themselves can vary a lot. Artistic practices linked to sustainability see the artist transforming their identity from an individual to a plurality, not only because the artist acts within a creative group, but also because he or she is the one who develops an attitude of engagement and dialogue with the public. To help the artist and the entire art system make a turn for the better, all citizens should take measures that help understand how a place really is in relation to our experience, identity, and memory – that is, a context in which art itself acts looking for an impact in its own way, even though this impact is quite hard to measure (Rossi 2016, 20). It would also be equally important to highlight the contradictory system that governs exclusive policies, to overturn the opposing mechanisms of our culture – hence, the role of art is precisely that of revealing what is deeply hidden and imperceptibly intertwined in this realm (Barea 2019). The outcome of this necessary dialogue is usually unpredictable, and sometimes even conflicting, because the artist needs to give space to another entity beside themselves. It takes a special kind of artist, one who knows how to connect collective sensitivities to territorial necessities by means of an artistic process that involves a continuous dialogue between academic research, creative experience, and theoretical reflection (Balzola, Rosa 2011, 12-15). Gayle Chong Kwan's project for Ca' Foscari was developed in a pandemic, a time of change in relationships and of rediscovery of the other. The final result was born out of a long and intricate participatory process, thus highlighting the perseverance and continuous redefinition of meanings around the concept of food, art, and waste in such a delicate, urgent, and collective dimension.

Notes

- 1 For further information see the Report of the World Commission on Environment and Development: Our Common Future on http://www.un-documents.net/our-common-future.pdf.
- For further information about the definition of Relational Aesthetics see https://www.tate.org.uk/art/art-terms/r/relational-aesthetics.
- 3 See Julie's Bicycle's Creative IG Tools https://juliesbicycle.com/reporting/.
- See the *Ecoprod Guide for Sustainable Film and TV Production* https://www.ecoprod.com/images/site/ECOPROD_GUIDE2017_EN_NUM.pdf and a carbon calculator, fact sheets and testimonies https://www.ecoprod.com/en/.
- See "Programs and Service" of EcoArt South Florida: https://animatingdemocracy.org/organization/ecoart-south-florida.
- See the blog published by Sustainability and Contemporary Art: https://artandsustainability.wordpress.com/posts/.
- See Sustainable Event Management System (SEMS): https://www.sgs.com/en/sustainability/management-and-compliance/organization-and-events/iso-20121-awareness-course-sustainable-event-management.
- 8 See the Curating Cities platform: http://www.niea.unsw.edu.au/research/projects/curating-cities-database-eco-public-art.
- See the Green Dragon Environmental Standard: https://www.greenbusinesscentre.org.uk/green-dragon-environmental-standard.
- See Environmental Awards: https://www.european-environment-foundation.eu/en-en/awards/environmental-awards.
- See IFACCA, *D'art Report, 34b the Arts and Environmental Sustainability: An International Overview, 2014: https://ifacca.org/media/filer_public/ae/39/ae3972ff-4e7c-43a5-a02d-33c08df8dd43/ifacca_dart_report_34b_final.pdf.*
- 12 See the Sustainable Art Prize: https://www.unive.it/pag/31128/.
- **13** See the page dedicated to the *Waste Matters* artistic project: https://www.unive.it/pag/40903/.
- See Report on Progress Towards the SDGS in an EU Context (2018): https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/products-statistical-books/-/ks-01-18-656.
- See *Environmental Impact Assessment* EIA (1985): https://ec.europa.eu/environment/eia/eia-legalcontext.htm.
- See *The National Environmental Policy Act* (NEPA) (1969): https://www.energy.gov/nepa/downloads/national-environmental-policy-act-1969.

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