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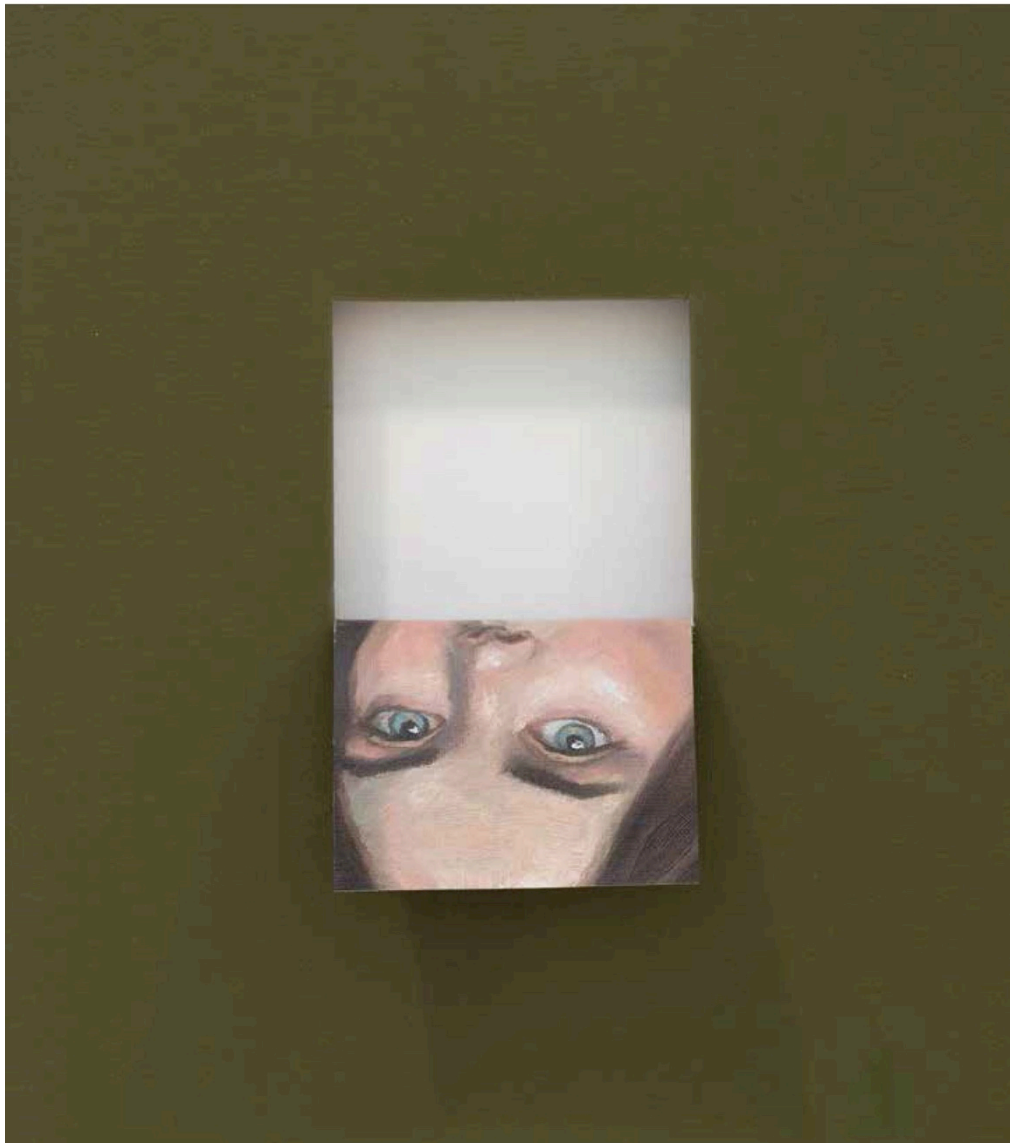
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A Journal of Brazilian Art and beyond

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Jacaranda - Nº 5

Profile: Poetic Images

* Suazana Velasco

Valeska Soares



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Stainless-steel plaques polished like mirrors mark both sides of the fence between Tijuana Beach in Mexico and the Border Field State Park in San Diego, in the United States. When drawing closer, the impression one has is that the border has some unmonitored passage holes. However, on closer inspection, the illusion of “escape points” vanishes. The paradise that supposedly awaits on the other side is nothing but a mirage. It is impossible to pass. Spectators are faced with the image of themselves and the city where they are reflected in the mirror, while they can also see the other side, because the fence can be seen through.

On the American side of the border, a stretch of text from Italo Calvino's book *Invisible Cities* is printed in English, clearly legible on the metal surface, and then inverted in Spanish, as though it were reflected in the mirror. On the Mexican side, it is the Spanish version that is legible, and the English cannot be made out. Calvino speaks of Valdrada, an imaginary city that, on account of being located by a lake, ends up creating a twin but asymmetric city, because it is born from an image, from a reflection:

“Even when lovers twist their naked bodies, skin against skin, seeking the position that will give one the most pleasure in the other, even when murderers plunge the knife into the black veins of the neck and more clotting blood pours out the more they press the blade that slips between the tendons, it is not so much their copulating or murdering that matters as the copulating or murdering of the images, limpid and cold in the mirror.”

In *Picturing Paradise*, exhibited at the inSITE 2000 project, Valeska Soares presents a piece about the folklore which each city (with its inhabitants) instills upon other; cities that, like Calvino's Valdrada, unavoidably reflect each other. It's not (just) about Mexicans being on a quest to find their paradise in the United States. Mexico also has a place in United States folklore, interrupted by a physical barrier which, from afar, might appear to be a passage doorway.

On both sides, an im/possibility of transgression is insinuated, a “space for potential”, as Tobias

Ostrander puts it: “The border establishes a series of dichotomies, but the person who encounters these polarities within the border-mirror inevitably seeks to unify them. This desire is played out within the additional space, the gap, that the mirror constructs”.¹

Executed almost a decade after Soares having moved to the United States, the piece carries an extensive repertoire drawn from her 30 years' experience in artistic production, such as the mirror, the spectator's reflection, the text, nature tamed by human beings. More than that, it synthesizes an idea that is recurrent in her work, the establishment of frontiers that at once separate and unite, they bewilder and yet they open up opportunities for each one to follow their own subjective path. They are at the same time rigid and fragile, limits and links. They establish enigmas, labyrinths, and it's up to each person to find their way out. How to sit together in four chairs whose seats are joined by lattice forming a cross (*Lugar comum, or “Commonplace”*, 2016)? Where to go when the spiraling staircases don't lead anywhere (*Spiralling*, 2014)? It is possible to have a conversation in two seat-less glass chairs (*Conversation Piece*, 2010)?

Valeska Soares is from Belo Horizonte, in Minas Gerais, and she moved to Rio de Janeiro in the 80s after living in London for a number of years. After graduating in Architecture at the Universidade Santa Úrsula in 1987, she started a specialization course in art and architecture at the Pontifícia Universidade Católica, the Christian Pontificate University (PUC) in 1988, and started to frequent the School of Visual Arts at Parque Lage. Founded in 1975 by artist Rubens Gerchman, the space became a point of reference in terms of creation and artistic gatherings in Rio de Janeiro, an island of freedom of sorts in the midst of the repression brought about by the military dictatorship. In the 80s, a decade that was marked by the return of painting, the school produced artists such as Luiz Zerbini, Daniel Senise and Beatriz Milhazes, who partook of the emblematic exhibition *Como vai você, geração 80?*, or “How are you doing, generation 80s?”, which was curated by Marcus Lontra and Paulo Roberto Leal in 1984.

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Categorie
Event

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Publication
Author
Cataloguing

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COD.VS.0010

Jacaranda - Nº 5



Valeska Soares

Soares speaks of how she felt isolated at the time, not on account of being detached from painting, but because art in Brazil was still highly linked to phenomenology, while her calling was to make art “about life”. At the end of the 80s, at the School of Visual Arts, a group that strayed from the production that prevailed at the time started to recuperate conceptual art influences from decades past, while creating more subjective, intimate work. In this way, in 1988, together with fellow artists Rosângela Rennó, Eduardo Coimbra, Ricardo Basbaum and João Modé, Soares created the Visorama group, the idea being to facilitate a space for thought between Brazilian artists whose creation differed from what was acknowledged as art by the country’s critics.

“At the master’s degree at PUC, Art History would always end in all things pop and Richard Serra. Because of this, at the time there was a certain desire by the younger generations to discuss other types of artistic strategies that were taking place outside Brazil, by artists like Barbara Kruger or Sherrie Levine. That was not discussed in Brazil”, says the artist, who also mentions Antonio Dias and Ivens Machado’s oeuvre as important references of that time. “I remember a lecture by (*art critic*) Ronaldo Brito in which he claimed cinema was not art, and that if you placed an Amílcar de Castro next to a Hélio Oiticica, Amílcar’s plastic qualities were superior. One of the reasons behind creating Visorama

was to allow ourselves a language with which to debate as equals. I have heard critics say that I did not know what my work was, that they knew it better than I did.”⁷²

Valeska Soares’ work already represented poetic images.

A poetic image: dozens of red roses laid out in circles, upright, forming spirals with layers of cotton. With the passing of time, they wither. The pleasant scent becomes unpleasant. *Preserve*, 1991.

A poetic image: white roses vertically joined by two planks of iron on the corner of two walls, like a casket bottom. *Gathering*, 1991.

A poetic image: perfumed oil runs down the wall, stemming from a hexagonally-shaped skin, like a vagina, a black hole, a passage to the other side. *Intimates*, 1993.

Despite little by little having found her peers, and the Brazilian critics opening up to the art of the turn of the 90s, Valeska Soares did not want to have to do any parallel work in order to survive. The Brazilian art market was still incipient, and there were few important galleries, such as Thomas Cohn and Luisa Strina. In 1992, Brazil was undergoing a process of hyperinflation and public financing cuts for culture, so Valeska Soares decided to move to New York to do a master’s degree and a PHD, but chiefly to live in an international hub of contemporary art, to “see what I had seen in magazines, only live and in full color”.

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Conversation Piece, 2010
Glass, 33" x 31.5" x 17.25"

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Author
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Jacaranda - Nº 5

On the very same year she left the country, Marcantonio Vilaça – who would become one of the most important representatives responsible for the popularization of Brazilian art abroad in the 90s – opened a gallery. Camargo Vilaça started representing artists who had shone during the previous decade, such as Angelo Venosa and Leda Catunda, in addition to others who were starting to make a name for themselves in the art circles, like Ernesto Neto and Valeska Soares – who remains linked to the gallery to this day; it has since changed hands, and is now called Fortes D'Aloia e Gabriel. In 1994, she partook of the 22nd São Paulo Biennial, curated by Nelson Aguilar, presenting *Untitled (Fall)*: red roses covering the floor, and a niche made from bee's wax on the wall, with nothing inside it.

Her work was being recognized in Brazil, but Valeska Soares never did come back. In 2003, she started to create larger, more complex artworks, and she held her first exhibition in a North American institution, namely the Bronx Museum of the Arts. Since then, she has exhibited her work in two São Paulo biennials, the Venice Biennial and dozens of museums and galleries throughout the world. Her work has been shown at New York's Guggenheim's collections, the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden in Washington, the Tate Modern in London, the Inhotim Institute

in Brumadinho, Minas Gerais, and the museums of Modern Art in Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo.

In her 25 years living in the United States, the artist has managed to escape the labels that would have her fit into the categories of being a woman/Latin American/Brazilian. She continued to create her poetic images, in equal measure sensual and conceptual. She beckons the spectator to experience sensations, without them being merely about a physical interaction. Her work moves between the (apparent) solidity of the outside world and each person's experience, made up of memory and yearning, ephemeral and fleeting. In a dance between the recognizable and the personal, Valeska Soares operates in a space between concrete stories and abstractions, between what is marked by time and what may be re-determined. As the artist herself puts it, "any material possesses an inherent meaning. In the case of antique objects, they have gone from hand to hand, they have lived through stories unknown to us. I am interested in bringing these objects back into circulation and creating new stories through them, with a different set of characters who would be the spectators".

A bed, for instance, that object we spend a large portion of our lives in, where we sleep, dream and love, each of us in a different way. It may be found back in

Valeska Soares



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Date/Issue
Categorie
Event

Magazine
2017 | n. 5
Article
Valeska Soares - Work

Publication
Author
Cataloguing

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COD.VS.0010

one of Soares' first productions, *Doll's Bed* (1989), where beans germinate on cotton in an untreated wood bed with the springs exposed. In the *Duet (from After)* series, of 2007, 2008 and 2011, pillows sculpted in marble appear sunken, as though people who had been lying there had just got up. Beds are a recurrent theme, be this in marble, wood or metal, in headboards or bed frames.

A bed in another poetic image: holes in a polished metal divan, so impersonal, let through a floral scent that can be pleasant, but which may also be unpleasant if excessive. If the smell starts making the spectator nauseous, perhaps they might faint on the hard divan, which has a pillow made of fabric. And they will be even more affected by the scent. Each one must create their own way out of the labyrinth. *Fainting Couch*, 2002.

Perfume is another of the elements in Soares' repertoire, oftentimes drawing a faint line between the attraction and repulsion it provokes, seducing while also intoxicating. In *Vanishing Point* (1998), the smell blends with another image that is recurrent throughout her oeuvre – that of a garden. On arranging a space of polished stainless-steel tanks filled with perfumed water – once again, reflective surfaces – the artist reminisces of renaissance gardens, only using minimalist elements. During the assembly of the piece at the Camargo Vilça gallery, bees were attracted by the smell and fell in the water.



Duet I (from After), 2007
White marble
12" x 6.3" x 16.9"

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Jacaranda - Nº 5

Valeska Soares

Three years after *Picturing Paradise*, the artist created another site-specific display in Mexico. In *Puro teatro*, or Pure Theatre in English (2003), in the outside area of the Rufino Tamayo Museum, spectators were beckoned to take off their shoes and walk around in a "lagoon" whose circumference was almost 40 meters, made from reflective acrylic, looking at their own image reflected and that of the trees in the park. In the center, a glass pavilion surrounds a bed, creating a romantic space for contemplating nature and for dreaming. The bed, however, is made of cake – the largest cake created to date by the century-old patisserie Pasteleria Ideal, in Mexico City. With the passing of time, it dries out, breaks up and collapses.

On tumbling down into ruins – remains of food, withered roses, bee suicides – Soares' creations do not cease to be beautiful, but they break away from the idea of idealized spaces. "Nature is yet another fictional construction that we have been idealizing since the idea of paradise. Paradise – what is it? It is a contained, organized section of nature in its origins, and there are rules, one mustn't eat the apple. In our original idea of nature's ideal space, the ideal is already organized, it is an excerpt, with rules and control, in an uncontrollable universe", she has stated.

Fiction was very important from early on in the artist's life. The house where she lived in with her mother, artist Teresinha Soares, and her father, journalist and lawyer Britaldo Silveira Soares, was a "beehive of people coming and going"⁴. But when she was a teenager, she would spend her afternoons alone watching old black and white Hollywood movies, and she soon formed a tragic vision of the world. When she was about 12, the young girl that felt "a prisoner in the world of Belo Horizonte" would use literature as an escape route, whether it was Monteiro Lobato, Agatha Christie or a book on archaeology her mother had given her. "The written word, in stories and music lyrics, which for me were the closest thing to poetry, were important during my development process", says Soares, who, at the beginning of her career, created many artworks inspired by the poems of Brazilian poet Ana Cristina Cesar.

Even when words make their way into her work, Soares suggests; she does not state. Like poetry, they are an elicitation – of senses, memories, desires and personal fictions. Literature and wordplay are recurrent throughout her 30 years of artistic production, be this through the content that inspires her conceptually – like Calvino's *Invisible cities* – or materially, by the use of phrases, titles and pages from books.

With each use of the word, the artist reveals something of the original text, and leaves the rest to the spectator. In the *Love stories* series (2008), the book spines on the shelves have titles related to love in different languages, but inside there are only blank pages. In *For to* (2008), the only pages on show are the dedications, but the book is unknown. In the *Edit* series (2012 and 2013), pages from the English translation of Roland Barthes' *A Lover's Discourse – Fragments* are reproduced featuring sections painted in black, covering entire paragraphs. The stretches that are "left over" gain a renewed prominence, as the reader-spectator imagines who that editor is, highlighting and marking pages, creating new meanings. The same text by Barthes is transformed into pure matter when 4480 of its characters are sculpted in ceramic and piled up on the floor, in *Fragmentos*, or "Fragments" in English (2007).

All these pieces deal with the idea of juxtaposition, a build-up which, though excessive on first inspection, does not manage to reflect the sense, as there is something missing. Like in *Tabled* (2017), where she gathered 31 tables belonging to the collection of the Wadsworth Atheneum – the oldest public art museum in the United States, in Hartford – around a fountain dating back to 1600. In spite of the tables being from the 17th to the 20th centuries, they were made equals in age by being covered in red, black, white and grey felt. The artist hides the story that inhabits behind each one of them by transforming the tables into pictorial abstractions. For the same show at the museum, *Unfold*, Soares bought 20 headboards, painted them partially and screwed them together, creating links of objects that are alike in terms of function and form, but that stray from each other by the aesthetics of different eras, creating *Unhinged*.

Medium
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Categorie
Event

Magazine
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Article
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Love Stories 1, 2007
125 acid free paper and linen bound unique books
Each book: 9.45" x 6.3"

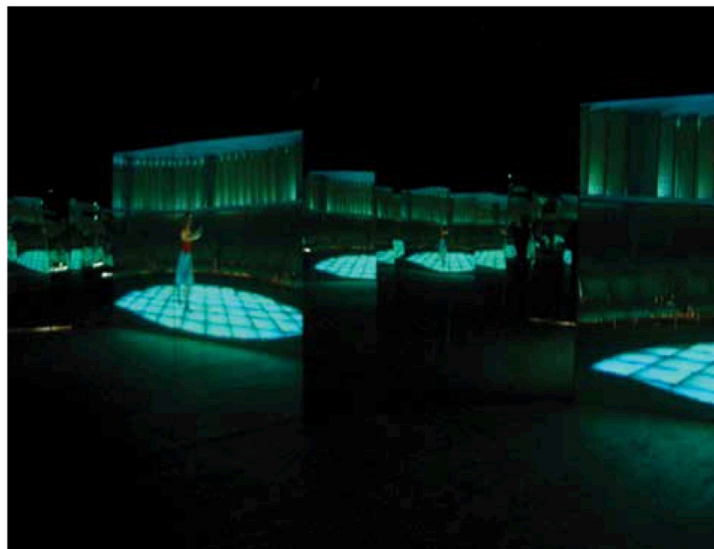
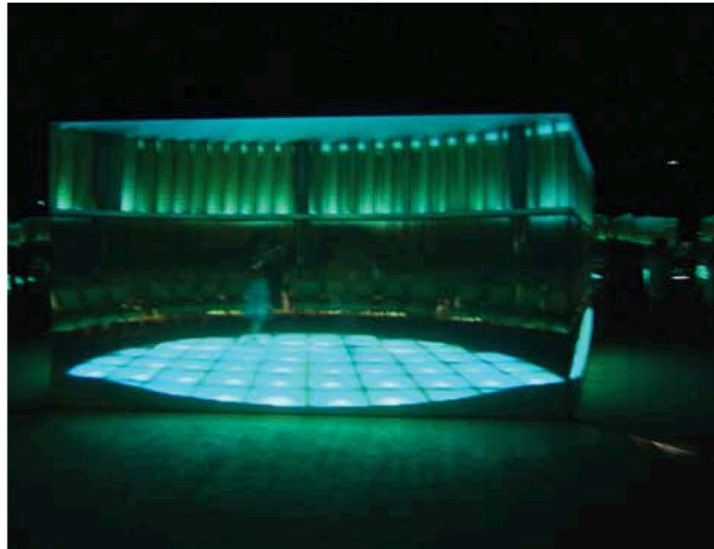
Medium
Date/Issue
Categorie
Event

Magazine
2017 | n. 5
Article
Valeska Soares - Work

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Jacaranda - Nº 5



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Event

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In *Doubleface* (2017), the most recent series of the exhibition she is preparing in Santa Barbara while this very text is produced, Valeska Soares seeks to rescue forgotten people, instead of objects. The reverses of oil portraits are painted in a single color, also in oil, and they become the front of the painting. A cut-out in the canvas makes a part of the face painted on the original picture on the reverse project forward, revealing a gaze. The artist explains that the idea for the series came when she wanted a portrait of herself aged 14 or 15, made by a painter, and she found out her mother had lost it.

"I started to think that, much like myself, many women must be lost throughout the world; family portraits that end up in a basement when the relatives die, and which nobody knows what to do with. So I thought to myself, 'how could these people be rescued?' How do we give a new lease of life to people who no longer have any affective relationships? It is more or less what I do with objects, giving them a new meaning. All while thinking about the idea of making portraits, of *portraiture*. In this way, bringing together abstraction and figuration, you manage to live with these images, because in spite of being specific people, they are mysterious, unresolved".

Looking at those fragments of faces that look back at us is like seeing the other side of the frontier, it is like lying on a bed someone else has just got up from, leaving behind their smell, or a hollow in the pillow, it's like reading the dedication to Jane without knowing her face, or just knowing a book from its spine, it's like walking

on a lake without sinking, going up spiral staircases that don't lead anywhere, sitting in backless chairs or on a divan made from sugar and yeast, gradually tumbling.

Looking at those fragments of faces is like mixing with the dancers of the video *Tonight*, shown at *Folly*, a pavilion that is mirrored both inside and out, where the spectator, whose image is reflected, becomes part of the dance filmed at the Cassino Pampulha, in Minas Gerais. *Folly* was shown at the 51st Biennial in Venice, in 2005, and four years later became a permanent pavilion at the Inhotim Institute in Brumadinho, Minas Gerais.

At the time when she used to frequent the School of Visual Arts, at the end of the 90s, Valeska Soares created a project consisting of a copper tower that was to be set up at the Parque Lage, on occasion of the Open-Air Sculpture Biennial, curated by critic Frederico Morais. The exhibition never did take place, but being selected brought about financing to kickstart the career of an artist who did not boast a single exhibition on her resumé at the time. The piece was not executed, but it could be in a garden, somewhere in the world, 30 years on. In the artist's project, the copper would have changed colors, blending in with the park's vegetation, but a light would always point at the fact that the tower was there.

(Endnotes)

1. OSTRANDER, Tobias. Picturing Paradise. In: SOARES, Valeska. *Follies/Capricho*. New York: The Bronx Museum of the Arts; Monterrey: Museo de Arte Contemporaneo de Monterrey; Ontario: Art Gallery of Hamilton, 2006
2. This and the following statements are from Valeska's Soares interview with Suzana Velasco, 2017
3. Valeska Soares interviewed by Hans-Michael Herzog, in SOARES, Valeska; MEIRELES, Cildo; NETO, Ernesto Neto. *Seduções*. Zürich: Hatje Cantz, 2006
4. This and the following statements are from Valeska's Soares interview with Suzana Velasco, 2017

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