

On the Evolution of a Peer-led Programme: Tate Forum

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An understanding of democratic participation and the confidence and competence to participate can only be acquired gradually through practice; it cannot be taught as an abstraction.

R. Hart 1992¹

How are young people enabled to participate in gallery culture and contemporary art? To answer this question I shall relate the history of [Tate Forum](#), the peer-led youth group at Tate Britain, drawing on the various (and differing) recollections and responses of a number of the people involved. These are currently being compiled in the form of interviews with former and current Tate Forum members, along with education curators, artists and other members of staff at Tate Britain who have worked with Tate Forum in some way.

As the opening quotation suggests, participation is not a simple process of conveying models or theories, and nor is it enough just to hand over the reins. An anecdote recounted by Martin Myrone, Curator of Eighteenth- and Nineteenth-Century British Art at Tate, illustrates what he sees as a profoundly socially invested distinction, affecting people's access to, or engagement with, culture. Some years ago he overheard two young students in the central Duveen Galleries at Tate, locating themselves: 'What's over there? That's the modern art, Picasso and stuff. And what's over there? Oh that's the posh stuff!' A perception of the historical works as 'the posh stuff' is something that Tate Britain continues to work within and against through its exhibitions and displays, interpretation and education programmes, and publications. At the same time, a populist refrain questioning the understanding and value of contemporary, particularly conceptual, art (often heard around the announcement of the Turner Prize), ensures that Tate's mission – to increase public knowledge, understanding and appreciation of British art from the sixteenth century to the present day and of international modern and contemporary art – is an ongoing project.

Recognising that museums and galleries have sometimes served to perpetuate exclusivity, the learning department at Tate sees art as a way to examine, challenge and transgress notional boundaries. One way to do this is by getting young people actively involved in gallery culture.

Young Tate

Tate has been working with young people beyond the schools sector since 1988, using methods whereby young people contribute to the programme (and the institution) through consultation and peer-leadership. Established at Tate Liverpool by Toby Jackson and Naomi Horlock in 1994, [Young Tate](#) is now the umbrella name for the youth programme across all four gallery sites, as well as a dedicated online space.²

Although each of the four sites has a distinctive programme of activities and often a particular targeted audience focus, developed through discreet local partnerships, Young Tate has devised a common set of aims:

- To provide long-term benefits for young people who are already committed to visual culture, to draw in those who are not and to enhance the lives and career potential of all Young Tate participants

through deeper and more varied involvement in Tate and their local galleries.

- To create a space for the exchange of new ideas in which young people are consulted, have opportunities to participate in Tate's cultural process and can take control of their learning.
- To be inclusive and diverse both in programme content and in the young people who participate in these programmes.

These were devised and agreed in 2006, through a series of meetings between the youth curators from the different sites, drawing together their experiences of building, developing and evaluating peer-led programmes over several years. In this sense, they mark a way forward and cannot necessarily be retrofitted to all previous practice. Nevertheless, I shall use them here as a framework to review the development and outcomes of Tate Forum.

Tate Forum at Tate Britain

A programme called Tate Extra was established in 2001, with local government (Study Support) funding from Westminster and Lambeth Councils, to create opportunities out of school hours for young people. One of their key aims was to improve engagement, motivation and achievement through after hours' activity, so there was a very direct link to formal education.³ The curator worked with teachers drawn from schools in areas local to Tate Britain to recruit young people who were already showing signs of disaffection towards the formal curriculum, but who found art a subject they could relate to. For Tate Britain the aim was to bring more young people into the galleries, for the gallery to respond to the concerns and interests of young people and for them to gain access to the gallery and the collection, in many cases for the first time.

After several years of running these annual programmes, there was a clear need to create a way for these young people to retain and develop their relationship with Tate. As Marijke Steedman, Youth Curator at the time, remembers it:

It just became more and more apparent that young people were feeling left out in the cold at the end of that project. We'd been successful enough to develop a relationship with them that was independent from school and we wanted to continue it, and that's when we started to think about a peer-led programme.

So Tate Forum was set up in 2002 as a peer-led youth advisory group, initially drawn from the participants in Tate Extra.

At this point [Raw Canvas](#), Tate Modern's Young Tate group, was already established, initially recruiting most of its participants and audience through the website. Many of them were art students, already involved in gallery-going and no longer in secondary education. In contrast, Tate Forum was targeting a slightly younger and less confident audience, with an interest in art but not a history of gallery attendance. It was felt that working with schools would reach a more socially and culturally diverse audience.

Tate Forum has developed over six years and now draws in young people aged 13–25 through a range of different events and projects, many directly targeted, others open to all young people across London. The six month projects are still funded through Study Support and, recently, through the John Lyons Charity. For several years we have also worked with Children's Services teams in Westminster and Harrow, to develop creative opportunities for looked-after children (LAC) and young people leaving care, as well as with Cardinal Hume drop-in centre for young homeless people.

The other programmed drop-in activities and events are for a broad audience of young Londoners, marketed through the Young Tate website, e-bulletins, MySpace, local radio spots, club flyers, schools and colleges. The biggest annual event, Loud Tate, one of three Saturday events sponsored by BP, attracted 2,500 young people in 2007. Many of these young people were visiting the gallery for the first time, drawn in by the promise of a free concert by DJs the Coconut Twins and young grime MCs Boy Better Know.



Fig.1
Visitors to 'BP Saturdays: Loud Tate 2008' take part in 'Life Drawing with a Twist'.
A contortionist modelled for life sketches in the BP Exhibition *Drawn from the Collection*.
Photograph
© Richard Eaton

The present Tate Forum structure consists of bi-weekly, two-hour evening meetings throughout the year when members meet and plan projects and events. There are a number of recruitment events in spring, known as Taster Days, in addition to the longer targeted projects. Attending two or more of these leads to an annual twelve-session training course – in a weekly, two-hour evening slot over the summer – inducting members into the various aspects of the gallery including curating, marketing, conservation, health and safety, visitor services, art-handling and education. Having completed this, members take an active part in youth-programme development and production. Those over 16 are also invited to become involved in other departmental events such as Late at Tate or Education Open Evenings, for which they are paid.

Over the year Tate Forum plans a number of short, public events, programmed for young audiences, including artists' talks, creative art workshops and online projects. Devising, marketing, running, documenting and evaluating the projects is the responsibility of the young people, in consultation and with support from the Youth Curator and other relevant members of Tate staff.

In terms of being peer-led, Tate Forum has largely migrated from rung six, to the current structure between rungs seven and eight, on Hart's ladder of youth participation:⁴

1. Manipulation
2. Decoration
3. Tokenism
4. Young people given assigned role but informed
5. Young people consulted and informed
6. Adult-initiated projects or programmes, shared decisions with young people
7. Young people-initiated and directed, supported by adults
8. Young people-initiated projects or programmes, shared decisions with adults

In several cases the early members of Tate Forum have grown with and shaped the programme's evolution and their comments, along with those of more recent recruits and those who have left, offer a reflection on Tate Forum in relation to the overall aims for Young Tate.

Aim 1: To provide long-term benefits for young people who are already committed to visual culture, to draw in those who are not and to enhance the lives and career potential of all Young Tate participants through deeper and more varied involvement in Tate and their local galleries.

As noted, Tate Forum was established to provide a relationship with young people, beyond the timeframe of any particular event or project and it seems largely to have offered this.

Many of the original group of recruits joined through their involvement with GCSE Art, and initially the link between Tate Extra and developing GCSE coursework was quite explicit, so the group was largely people interested and actively involved in art. For these students Tate Forum offered the space to think beyond the confines and conventions of art as a curriculum subject, to develop and discuss ideas with peers and to have a broader understanding of art's forms and functions:

We're young, we need help or we want inspiration. We could go to the Tate and

come back feeling like we've got a lot of work done, and process it for Art (GCSE) and it was really helpful. But it also helped with stuff outside of art ... it was a real eye-opener to a world outside of art and how there are other types of art than just paintings... we learnt that art isn't just whatever you would say was a painting, a drawing or a sculpture. Art is whatever you make it to be because art is an expression of yourself. (Sean Labode)

The structure of Tate Forum as a peer-led group based in a gallery offered freedom from a formal model of art education for Charlotte Allen, who loves art but hated the way it was taught in school. She prefaced this by noting, 'My family are not artistic in any shape or form':

I've lost interest in art in the classrooms. I don't see why I have to be in a classroom to draw or do anything. Why do I have to be regimented? Why do I have to do what my teacher says when surely art is an opinionated subject? ... I see coming here as what I think art should be. It shouldn't be in the classroom – it should be in galleries, it should be outside ... That's what I think is the problem with art in schools.

Recently the make-up of the group has shifted so there are more people in Tate Forum now who are not studying art but still see enormous value in being involved, such as Raphael Oyelade, who took Art GCSE but is now studying Maths, Physics and Music.

Interviewer: So now you're doing those Maths and science subjects, do you still feel like you're interested in Art and that you can still take part in these kinds of things?

Raphael: That's one thing why I think I love being part of Tate Forum because it still allows me to liaise with the art world and get back to something that I ... I haven't actually drawn in a while, and this was something I used to love to do, so coming back to Tate and these Taster Days gives me the opportunity to do a bit of artwork and remember the good old days before hard work! ... So I'll just try to stay in touch really because it's a good environment to be in even if you're not interested in art. It's a way to be down to earth as well, to get to know a few people and get to think about art in general.

In many ways this makes it a more interesting and inclusive group, and a non-threatening space for debating different points of view. As Nivek Amichund says, 'I think I have a different mindset because I'm not an artist ... I don't think art is only for artists.' Nivek joined the group in order to meet more people of his own age. Arriving in Britain from South Africa in 2004, he took work as a gallery assistant because he needed a job. He was not interested in art and had not studied it. In fact, it was taken off the curriculum in his school in South Africa and was not valued as an educational subject or a profession. But Nivek has taken an active role in Tate Forum, and subsequently in Tate's Visual Dialogues project.⁵ He clearly sees Tate Forum as a door to other opportunities, as well as valuing the social aspect of the group, 'I saw I'd get free training in public speaking, learn about organising events and marketing, getting to know the right people. Tate Forum does all of that. It opens up the doors.'

Widening participants' knowledge about the role and form of art and the complex business of running a large cultural institution were seen as very valuable aspects of the programme. Equally valuable were the transferable 'life skills' such as confidence, problem-solving and communication. 'I feel that I have learnt to talk to others, approach people, e.g. ask if they need any help etc. It has really helped me to be confident around others.' (Nahid Begum)

Many members see it as their responsibility to get more young people involved and to advertise events to their peers, feeling disappointed when events, such as Taster Days have a low turnout:

Our job was to bring more young people into the art gallery. I was always trying to remind people that we're not creating things for ourselves. We're trying to cater for people out there. And if it's too weird or wacky, is anyone going to be interested is anyone going to turn up? ... So then we'll go ahead with the idea anyway and have an event for, like, five people. (Chris Wareham)

But, in reality, marketing and recruitment is an expensive and time-consuming business that cannot be the sole responsibility of the Tate Forum's young members. Tate Forum and the curator work closely with staff in the marketing and design teams, to ensure one-off events are publicised through the Tate Gallery Guide, the Young Tate website and the regular youth e-bulletin. This can sometimes create tension, between Tate's regulation of its brand image, the quality of visual communication and the autonomy of the young people who want to create their own visual style.

The link between Tate Forum and academic or career opportunities is a complex, and not directly causal, one. But several members cited specific examples where an insight into the institution, the confidence built through being part of the group, or the connections and conversations with professionals had been significant. For instance, through the youth programme's connection with University of the Arts London, Widening Participation initiative and the National Arts Learning Network (NALN), one or two Tate Forum members met and had informal discussions with tutors from colleges where they went on to make an application and ultimately gain a place. The relationship works both ways: NALN sees Tate Forum as a model of good practice and has employed members as student ambassadors at events such as Portfolio Advice Day.⁶



Fig.2
Tate Forum and young people from London schools and colleges worked on *Enslaved*, a ten-week fashion project exploring liberty, revolution and slavery. In partnership with UAL Widening Participation and Arts Aimhigher London, this culminated in a fashion show at Late at Tate, Tate Britain, July 2007.
Photograph
© Richard Eaton

Like any voluntary group, Tate Forum has natural wastage. The main reasons given for people leaving or dropping out are time – especially the pressures of A-levels, other exams or jobs – and distance, people moving home or moving away to college. Meetings have around ten to twelve members, more for event planning. Current active membership is around 30, and total membership since 2003 is 85. The flexible nature of the group allows people to dip in and out, which several have appreciated, but this really only seems to work once people have become established members of the group. One of the early members said: 'There was a lull where the original people stopped turning up so I stopped, too. I had started a BTEC at college and I couldn't commit the time.' (Stefan Yap) But Ellen Turnill, a later member who joined in 2006 and continues to attend for social and creative reasons, said:

Sometimes I feel that as I'm going to University now maybe I should step aside and let other people have their time. Last year it was me and another few members who were the main ones who turned up each week and took control and sometimes we felt like we should step aside and let other people come along. But then I like to come and see those people!

Youth Curator Mark Miller, says this flexibility is important to convey:

Some people join and they pick and choose when they're going to come. Obviously, they have exams and other commitments but I think it's a matter of making them aware that that's alright as well ... It's just a matter of getting young people to understand that that's just the nature of the programme - and it's the nature of young people and their lives.

And as recent member Diana Agunbiade-Kabuole points out, 'when we have dinners, everyone turns up!'

Aim 2: To create a space for the exchange of new ideas in which young people are consulted, have opportunities to participate in Tate's cultural process and can take control of their learning.

This social element of the group is a key to its success. The loose, informal nature of Tate Forum seems to accommodate many types: the confident and not so confident, those pursuing art as a career and those with a more oblique interest.

One of the key things about TF is that it's not a formal meeting. It's a social meeting and the ideas come from that. There's no pressure on us ... I think we're free to express ourselves however we want ... Nobody tells us you HAVE to do this ... We know what we need to do and we do produce stuff at the end of the day.' (Nivek Amichund)

A common response from many of the current and previous Tate Forum participants was how the discursive nature of the group – talking with each other, with artists and curators, and hearing a range of opinions – really opened up their interests and understanding of art. Several of them mentioned how, where previously they might have automatically rejected a piece of work or idea, they could now find a reference point. They still might not like it but they could now articulate why.

Even things that wouldn't inspire normal kids of our age today, we could actually talk to each other about why it wouldn't inspire us. And from that point onwards, being part of Tate, I never actually found a hate of certain art as in 'I do not like this artist. I do not like this design' ... we might not like it, but we could actually talk about why we didn't like it and the actual techniques in the art. (Sean Labode)

These aspects of developing critical confidence, self-motivation and personal achievement, not being impelled to do certain things in a particular way, but being given the responsibility to produce events of their own devising, has evolved over time. Initially, the group were younger and in the pilot stages, were more curator-led. The former curator recalls some 'awful teacherish moments' when the group were acting up and she felt the need to tell them off but realised with hindsight that perhaps they needed more opportunities to make their own mistakes and learn to take responsibility.

The transition from the first to the second curator provided a natural opportunity for progression which has allowed this to happen. In addition, the responsibilities demanded by the more challenging aspects of programming, such as the production of the annual BP Saturday Loud Tate, has propelled many of the members into roles of marketers, designers and production managers.

On Loud Tate I didn't get to do anything except work, work, work. But just to be part of something that was so successful, the fact that I could be, like, 'Yeah Coconut Twins came and they're working for us!' ... to put the things together ourselves, for us to be able to do something that worked, was quite good! (Diana Agunbiade-Kabuole)

Not all of them relished this responsibility – some clearly found it more stressful than enjoyable on the day – but it has certainly given them a real insight into how a large cultural institution stages such events.

It was sort of liberating, well for everybody else it was liberating. I was sat there thinking, ‘Oh my God, what if it goes wrong – they’ll blame us.’ I felt a bit worried at times – it’s a lot to put on 16-17 year-olds running around dealing with schoolwork at the same time. We got better as time went on. (Tom Bailey)

The early events and activities in the gallery were a new challenge for the institution as well as the young people, and there was even a little hostility in some quarters. One former member (from the pilot year) recalled that: ‘At the time I found the staff at Tate Britain distinctly unfriendly to anyone under 30. This is a common experience among galleries.’ (Eddie Barnett)

This has certainly improved. Through the training programme, Tate Forum gain an insight into the complexities of the institution. At the same time, other departments become more familiar with Tate Forum and other young audiences. One of the security staff felt that initiatives like this would help interest young people in museums, who might otherwise assume they were boring places. They also generally raise staff awareness. ‘Even for other departments who wouldn’t normally have opportunities to deal with such groups, it creates awareness in you to develop your skills, for instance in diversity and customer service.’ (Daniel Elombah)

But the visibility of Tate Forum within Tate is still quite low, certainly lower than that of Raw Canvas at Tate Modern, which has a larger group and programmes more frequent events. An early intern on the programme, who worked on the pilot year noted: ‘It did feel quite self-contained though, almost separate from the rest of Tate’. This segregation has largely disappeared within the Learning department where Tate Forum is now well embedded, as well as being familiar to most regular visitor services staff and managers. But beyond those members of staff who are actively involved in Tate Forum training or events, it seems there is little knowledge of exactly who they are and what they do, more broadly across the institution. A curator from the Exhibitions and Displays team was unclear as to the nature and role of Tate Forum, although when explained, he supported both the aims and the increased visibility of young people’s work in the gallery. Commenting on the prominent placing of the ‘Stolen Sanity’ project display he noted:

Imagery is a way of being critical and raising issues. There’s a kind of critical thinking with pictures that becomes possible ... The work itself was big and visually strong and the fact that it transformed quite a big chunk of the gallery was a very positive thing ... it actually made good use of that space, which can be quite neglected. (Martin Myrone)



Fig.3
Tutu Benson and Montana Williams talk about Tate Forum’s ‘Make Your Own Horror’ video at the *Gothic Nightmares* Education Open Evening, Tate Britain, February 2006.
Photograph
© Richard Eaton

This work was created by young people from Westminster and Harrow working with artist Faisal Abdu'llah, exploring themes from Tate Britain's display *1807: Blake, Slavery and the Radical Mind* and related ideas. This was not a Tate Forum project, but a number of participants have subsequently attended Tate Forum meetings and events. The work was displayed for three weeks in the main building, in transit galleries just between the Rotunda information desks and the Duveen galleries, as well as in the Clore foyer. In reality, this was a significantly raised profile for young people's work. Tate Forum members have differing views on how visible their work is in the gallery:

I think already what they do with the young people's workshops when they give them the chance to exhibit their work, even if it's not for long, that's really good. (Helena Foster)

It's conveniently situated in a place where you could easily walk past. And it's to tick the box to say 'we are catering for these people but we're going to put them in a place that's not mainstream'. They can tuck you away and tick the box. [There should be] more representation for young people. (Nivek Amichund)

The politics of whose work is displayed at Tate, for how long and in what context is a complex evolving issue, too intricate to go into here, but the curatorial debate should take account of and ideally involve this younger audience.

Aim 3: To be inclusive and diverse both in programme content and in the young people who participate in these programmes.

Creating access for young people who do not have a tradition of museum and gallery-going beyond school could be characterised as worthy, even part of the tradition of the 'civilising ritual' (museums as public spaces to foster moral and social improvement).⁷ But an important aim for these programmes is reflexivity: to introduce other voices into the debates around Britishness, including what it means to be a British artist, and how a national institution like Tate reflects, represents or fails to address this. Excerpts from a recent Tate Forum debate explored this:

NS: Is it true that only British Art is relevant to Tate Britain?

HF: No. Britain is such a diverse country. I think it's relevant to have artists from other countries exhibit their work at Tate.

SY: Tate Britain has stepped up – it has changed its layout ... you come into the Rotunda and it's the first room on the right ... they're British artists but they're British artists from different backgrounds.

HF: But they're still British.

SY: Yeah but Black British, Asian British ...

NA: It's an institution that keeps British artwork, that's what it's known for. Tate Britain is an institution that is supposed to uphold Britishness.

NS: But then you've got to ask what does British mean?

DA: People that are British from different backgrounds. Everyone's here anyway so that's something everyone has got in common ... At the end of the day we're all still British ...

NA: Chris Ofili is an example. He's British but his work is not stereotypically British.

DA: My parents are Nigerian, but I feel Nigerian as well as British. It depends where I am.

NA: If you come here [to England] you have to act a certain way. It's like when you go to Tate Britain you have to act a certain way, you have to talk softer,

you have to hold your head up a bit higher. Tate Britain is an imposing figure – it has got all of this history.

SY: Maybe that's what we need to do, break down that entrance into Tate Britain. Break down people's need to be so intimidated by the building.

DA: We still have to respect the people who actually come here. However much we complain about stuff, there are still a core group of people who love Tate Britain and who come here for that reason.

NS: So do you think that when people come into Tate Britain they feel it doesn't reflect those different cultures?

SY: Yeah exactly. Tate Britain is associated with certain people. It's upper class, it's not for lower class, middle class whatever. It's basically for very traditional British people and there has been a very slow change to get people who are not of that status to come in.

Targeted youth projects, especially those with looked after children in Harrow and in Westminster and with young homeless people at the Cardinal Hume drop-in centre, have drawn harder-to-reach young people into Tate's orbit and, crucially, provided an important platform where their work was created, exhibited and valued. But individual participants from these projects have not, so far, become long-term members of Tate Forum. The complex lives of those young people living in local authority or foster care, and older young adults who have left care and are now living on their own or, in some cases, are homeless, can be huge obstacles to taking part in what might seem like non-essential leisure activities. From experience we know the enormous value these projects can provide in terms of creative stimulation, social networks, achievement, aspiration and self-esteem – something the Government has also recognised. And while they can offer the chance to meet other people with similar experiences, the focus is on art. 'You're there to do art, not really thinking you're in care. That was good.' ('Hidden Text, Real Words', young participant).

Local authorities are now expected to transform 'the availability of positive activities for children and young people in care, including free part-time access to extended activities' and to ensure 'that leisure activities form a key part of care planning and that children and young people are well supported in getting involved in these activities.'⁸ Tate Britain commissioned an internal research report that revealed the large number of people and organisations responsible for the care, well-being and education of LAC. Recognising the importance of key statutory and voluntary agencies (and the individuals who work there), we shall continue to work in partnership trying to ensure we build accessible and sustainable routes into the institution, including through Tate Forum.

Working with local schools and local authorities and with other drop-in public events has also ensured a diverse range of activities and a much broader audience. But is there a tension between doing targeted work, building relationships and trust with necessarily small groups of people, and offering a regular wider public programme to all young people? As Anna Harding has noted: 'Many institutions struggle to find meeting points between a top down and bottom up view of culture and cultural entitlement and much policy is confused because the terms used to understand quality and impact of art, swing between aesthetic and accounting terminology.'⁹

Youth curator Mark Miller feels that broadening young people's knowledge of cultural industries in relation to work or creative opportunities is more of a priority than audience development: 'I think if you've come as far as joining Tate Forum, you'll always have a relationship with Tate Britain and will become its audience anyway ... for me it's about those people who do join Tate Forum having more information about what actually goes on within the art industry and all the related careers.'

The notion of 'audience development' is invariably interpreted in demographic terms, but could it also be seen as the depth and quality of the audience's relationship with or investment in the institution? Ideally, the time-intensive work with smaller groups will be part of a framework of progression, whereby they

become both the programmers of, and the audience for, public events such as Late at Tate, as well as regular gallery visitors.

The exciting thing about Loud Tate is the way it involves young people programming events across the gallery, transforming not only the building but how one exists in and experiences that space: troubling for some, liberating for others. Contributions such as loud music are absolutely valid creative activity and Tate Forum clearly feels ownership of both the space and the event. Being a diverse group of young people, inevitably they propose, and argue about, a varied range of events and activities, illustrating the reality of democratic participation in gallery culture:

What I liked about it was that we did almost every type of medium: we did film, sound, and we did a lot of fine art and contemporary art. There was a range... I don't mind catering for other people. I think that's what working as part of a team is, trying to compromise.' (Chris Wareham)

It has to be acknowledged that Tate Britain is not the obvious destination for many young people, given the choice of cultural, educational or leisure activities in London. But if the institution's project includes the desire 'to understand our audiences better, to broaden their socio-economic and ethnic mix and to improve the quality of the visitor experience', then including young visions and voices in the culture of the gallery is a good place to start.

One thing I like about this gallery is that it has a mixture of things. It's not like Tate Modern where everything is Modern ...it's a mixture of old and new ... You feel like you're part of a place when you have a favourite room. Like mine is Room 9, or you know where things are so much that people can come up to you and you're like 'it's there, there, there ...' That's when you feel like you're part of a place. And when you're in the Duveens you don't feel so small, you feel like part of it. (Charlotte Allen)

Notes

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