RE-DRAWING THE ART MAP OF "NEW EUROPE"

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This text was previously published in European Cultural Foundation's *Narratives for Europe* at http://ecflabs.org/narratives/readingroom

Notwithstanding the long asserted crisis of the legitimacy of metanarratives, the "battle" of the narratives for Europe is still being fought on all fronts. Whereas the problems of reconstructing and rewriting the recent histories of Central and Eastern Europe have been exhaustively examined by historians and social scientists, the shifting art-historical interpretations of the visual arts of the "other" Europe have until recently escaped an in-depth scrutiny. Moreover, in spite of Arthur Danto's infamous end-of-art thesis, entailing the end of art history too, narratives about the art of Europe's former East have been proliferating since 1989. The newly written art narratives of Central and Eastern Europe, however, have been caught in a peculiar ontological trap. On the one hand, Central and East European art evokes the history of this part of Europe; on the other hand, the history of Central and East European art itself has been largely shaped by the Cold War and ideologies. Groping for a way out of this trap, the emancipatory quest for new narratives about Central and East European art has become further enmeshed in a complex web of predicaments.

Whereas the most immediate reaction of Eastern curators after the fall of the Berlin Wall was to try to accommodate Central and East European art into the master narrative of universalist Western art history by emphasizing similarities and parallel artistic developments, the opposite strategy was to accentuate on local and regional contexts, on the plurality and distinctiveness of Central and East European art, by highlighting the incomparability between the artistic processes on both sides of the Iron Curtain. Taken a step further, the latter approach towards a "horizontal, polyphonic, and dynamic paradigm of critical art-historical analysis",[1] privileging comparative and transnational examination of local canons and value systems, along with their stylistic variations and mutations, situated in the context of diverging historical processes and political circumstances in the individual countries of the former Eastern Bloc, eventually faced the risk of dissolving any narrative structure at all.

This essay looks into the curatorial narratives underpinning the exhibitions of modern and contemporary, socialist and post-communist, visual art from Central and Eastern Europe, put on display after 1989 in different parts of the world. Positing that these exhibitions may be examined as powerful tools for remapping the art geography of "united" post-Cold War Europe, I have tried to single out a set of master narratives that have been recurrently brought into play.[2]

Why deal with **exhibitions** in the first place? The importance of exhibitions as the medium through which most contemporary art becomes known and its cultural meanings are established and administered has been widely acknowledged. As Reesa Greenberg,

[1] Piotrowski 2008, 4.

[2] This essay is based on research carried out during my stay as a Körber Junior Visiting Fellow at the Institute for Human Sciences in Vienna from January to June 2007.

Bruce Ferguson and Sandy Nairne, editors of the *Thinking About Exhibitions* anthology, maintain, "[e]xhibitions are the primary site of exchange in the political economy of art, where signification is constructed, maintained and occasionally deconstructed."[3] Writing about exhibitions and their curatorial concepts rather than the works of art within them is further justified by Boris Groys' claim that "the traditional, sovereign authorship of an individual artist"[4] has been replaced by a new regime of authorship – that of multiple authorship, co-shared by artist, curator, gallerist, and funding institution. Under this new regime of authorship, the elementary unit of art today is no longer an artwork as object but, as Groys claims, an art space in which an object is exhibited: the space of an exhibition. Consequently, artists are no longer judged by the objects they have produced but by the exhibitions and projects in which they have participated.

The **curator** appeared as a completely new figure on the Eastern and Central European art scene in the post-communist transition period. Although it was usually the art critics, art historians and sometimes artists, who took up this position, they were gradually to adapt to an essentially new system of art production and art presentation while developing this system at the same time. Paradoxically, the curator, a figure that is admittedly a product of the (Western) contemporary art system, happened to be a "curator without a system" in the Eastern part of Europe, as Viktor Misiano argued.[5] The power of the curator in the East, however, extended beyond that of constructing intellectual, aesthetic, and practical context for the presentation of art. The lack of an adequate art system turned the new-born East European curator into a one-person orchestra, a "multifunctional mediator", as Iara Boubnova put it, for he/she had to take up tasks, usually performed by a whole array of institutions in the West.

Post-colonialist narratives

Apart from institutional hindrances, the task of curating the art of Central and Eastern Europe has been burdened with the power-bound tensions between the East and the West in the course and in the wake of the Cold War, evoking justified, even if not unproblematic, post-colonialist parallels.

The first shows exhibiting the art of the European East to the West were primarily concerned with the issue of "how to integrate the region's art practice into the universal art canon, or, more precisely, into Western art history."[6] The paradigmatic exhibition for the art relationship between the East and the West and "its ambition of inscribing the art of Eastern Europe […] into the universal context of modern art history"[7] is the exhibition *Europa, Europa* (1994) in Bonn, curated by Ryszard Stanislawski and Christoph Brockhaus. This exhibition, as Piotr Piotrowski points out, "subjected the art of Eastern Europe to an inspection of the West, an inspection that used its own language and its own value system as the criteria of significance and excellence."[8] East European cultures are often described as "self-colonizing" cultures, i.e. cultures which "import alien values and models of civilisation by themselves and […] lovingly colonize their own authenticity through these foreign models."[9] Similar concerns about the "selfcolonization" of the East are often guiding the curatorial narratives of East European curators, as the curatorial statement of the exhibition *Body and the East* (1998) in Moderna Galerija, Ljubljana, succinctly illuminates:

> If we talk about art creativity in Eastern Europe, which until recently was relatively isolated from the world, as being a separate phenomenon, we risk pushing it even further into the world of otherness. We risk making its otherness even more evident, even within institutionalized frameworks, since we mostly present ourselves – consciously or not – in the way we believe the Other world want to perceive us. But we would be risking more if we simply

[3] Greenberg/Ferguson/Nairne 1996, 2.

[4] Greenberg/Ferguson/Nairne 1996, 96.

[5] Misiano 1999, 2.

[6] Piotrowski 2009, 12.

[7] Piotrowski 2009, 24.

[8] Piotrowski 2009, 19.

[9] Kiossev 1999, 114.

> forgot about its otherness and presented ourselves – in the spirit of the newly united Europe – as being equal, and if we pointed to those cultural-historical characteristics which comply with the recently very popular slogan that we have always been part of Europe.[10]

Post-colonialist curatorial narratives, incorporating a range of self- and neocolonialist claims, are ardently engaged in questioning and problematizing the positions of the center and its peripheries, the mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion, the construction of otherness, and the negotiation of geopolitical hierarchies and boundaries. The title of the inaugural First Prague Biennale (2003), *Peripheries Become the Center*, clearly demonstrates the emancipatory standpoint taken by its curators, pronouncing the dissolution of the dichotomy of the center and periphery concepts and thus alluding to "a liberation of plurality in terms of both identity and artistic practice."[11]

Post-colonialist curatorial narratives employ different means of legitimizing the new positions they assert – often times through apologetic claims about the East's "underdevelopment" because of its totalitarian past, viewed as a historical "injustice", as illustrated through the tropes of "severed avant-gardes", "interrupted" or "impossible histories", and combined with victimization rhetoric based on accounts of the totalitarian repressions against Eastern artists. Postcolonialist narratives also feature emancipatory art-historical claims, which attempt to challenge the postulates of Western art theory, typically presenting socialism as the factor putting an end to modernism, as essentially "low" culture in comparison to the "high" Western culture of neo- and post-isms.[12] The arguments intended to restore East European art's "high" status abound: tracing historic avant-garde's origins back to the East; challenging Western modernism's exceptionality through the notion of co-existence of parallel modernisms in the East and the West; emphasizing the similarities between American Pop Art and Soviet Sots Art; underscoring the concurrent development of conceptual art in the East and the West; interpreting body art, performance practices and conceptual art in the East as innately "progressive" and antitotalitarian; examining links and contacts of East European second avant-garde artists with Western neo-avant-garde movements such as Fluxus and Wiener Aktionismus; "rehabilitating" the art of Socialist Realism as a legitimate successor of the early avant-garde, and others. The exhibition *Dream Factory Communism* (2003), curated by Boris Groys, had a particularly strong resonance in endorsing the continuity between the Russian historic avant-garde, socialist realism and sots art. This whole array of complementary sub-narratives comes to support the upgrading of the status of East European art in relation to its Western counterpart.

A revealing example of an exhibition inscribed in the post-colonialist discourse is *Living Art – On the Edge of Europe* (2006) at the Kröller-Müller Museum in Otterlo, the Netherlands. The exhibition's concept highlights its aim of restoring "justice" to the previously marginalized East European artists, rightfully comparable to Western European ones:

> *Living Art – On the Edge of Europe* (2006) aims to give centre stage to those artists who have not received the artistic recognition they deserve because for too long they had no access to the international art scene (or market). Due to political circumstances they were sidelined from the international artistic canon, but are now once again ready to take up a central position.

A range of supplementary narratives go along with the post-colonialist curatorial narratives I have outlined above, such as narratives informed by the concepts of a-historicity and post-historicity, particularly popular with the "end of history" and "end of art" discourses. Such narratives posit the fall of the Berlin Wall as the new point zero in history and are often coupled with post-colonialist rhetoric implying the dissolution of the

[10] Badovinac 1998, 9.

[11] Prague Biennale 1.

[12] Peraica 2006, 475.

center-periphery model into a more complex constellation of power relations and the replacement of "grand narratives" by small and fragmented ones.

The most recent development of the post-colonialist master narrative is seen in the concept of de-colonial aesthetics endorsed by the Transnational Decolonial Institute – a group of artists from the former Eastern Europe and the"Global South".[13] De-coloniality implies "de-linking" from capital and power, tied in with the contemporary processes of coloniality and capitalism, rather than opposing or overturning them, thus divorcing itself from post-colonialism.

[13] Transnational Decolonial Institute, "Decolonial Aesthetics (I)", http://transnationaldecolonialinstitute.wordpress.com/decolonial-aesthetics/ (accessed December 14, 2011).

[14] For instance, the so-called April Plenum of the Bulgarian Communist Party in 1956 which gave rise to a new generation of poets and artists in Bulgaria, the "April Generation".

Contextualizing narratives

Curatorial narratives employing strategies of relativization and (re-)contextualization are an off-spring of the post-colonialist narratives. Contextualizing narratives entail the deconstruction and demythologization of both regional contexts of art production by focusing on the diversity and specificity of national and local contexts. Such narratives are inclined to introduce country-specific art-historical taxonomies and periodizations, marked by the political events that influenced the entire Soviet Bloc (the events in 1956, 1968, etc.) or the individual countries.[14] These narratives are also based on the disparities in the repressive regimes, on the varying status of artists in society, as well on the specificity of local artistic traditions. Furthermore, contextualizing narratives attempt to break down clear-cut dichotomies by arguing for their relativity. For instance, they are likely to draw attention to the ambiguity of the distinction between official or state art, and unofficial or dissident art, through introducing in-between categories, such as semi-official art or semi-nonconformist art, and by pointing at the compromises that both official and unofficial artists were to make in their work and life.

Instead of underlining the similarities between artistic developments in the East and in the West, which is an approach common for the post-colonialist narratives, contextualizing narratives insist on the specificity of Eastern art in terms of its particular content and context of production, nevertheless acknowledging certain similarities, at least in the realm of artistic forms. Contextualizing curatorial narratives typically focus on the characteristics of artistic practices in culturally and historically distinctive regions such as Central Europe, the Balkans, the Baltics, and the countries of the former Yugoslav Federation.

Another curatorial strategy which attempts to overcome the post-colonialist rhetoric by going beyond the local and national specificity, stylistic tendencies, East-West parallels, etc., is one guided by the specific problems that engaged individual artists across the region, such as social critique, recent history and collective memory, personal and artistic subjectivity, body and gender, around which the iconic *After the Wall* (1999) exhibition in Moderna Museet in Stockholm, for example, revolved.

Strategies of historicization and institutionalization

The efforts made at historicizing, institutionalizing and musealizing East European art have been directly correlated to the post-colonialist ambitions of Eastern artists and curators. The fledgling art market in the East and the interests of the well-established Western art market in the East might have also come into play here. Consequently, the number of collections, archives, museums, art biennales, and research institutes dealing with the presentation, historicization and preservation of the late socialist and post-socialist art of Central and Eastern Europe has dramatically increased in recent years. The major outcome of these undertakings is the establishment of an East European art canon.

There is already a solid number of works and artists that are repeatedly represented in the larger topological, thematic and media-focused exhibitions. Furthermore, the firmly established positions of certain curators indicate the formation of new centers in the East European art scene, which in turn brings about new tensions and power struggles, this time within the East.

The largest artistic/curatorial project of historicizing East European art is the *East Art Map: A (Re)Construction of the History of Contemporary Art in Eastern Europe*, initiated by the Slovenian artists' group Irwin in 2001. The project addressed the lack of a "referential system for the art-historically significant events, artifacts and artists that would be accepted and respected outside the borders of a given country,"[15] which is observed in Eastern Europe. The aim of *East Art Map* (EAM), as its authors assert, is "to present art from the whole space of Eastern Europe, taking artists out of their national frameworks and presenting them in a unified scheme."[16] Such an aim is justified by the need for an in-depth study mapping the developments of East European art and its complexities and situating it in a larger context. Still, as the members of Irwin acknowledge, their ambitions were not so lofty:

> We do not seek to establish some ultimate truth; on the contrary, our aims are much more modest and, we hope, more practical: to organize the fundamental relationships between East European artists where these relations have not been organized, to draw a map and create a table.[17]

Apart from a web-based platform where East European art relations were visualized, the project also resulted in an exhibition, *East Art Museum*, held at the Karl Ernst Osthaus Museum in Hagen, Germany, in 2005. The East Art Museum had been envisioned as a proposal for the establishment of a Museum of Modern East European Art, critically reflecting on the Western model of a museum of modern art, embodied by MOMA in New York.[18]

Another project that operated with the concept of historicization of East European art is the *Interrupted Histories* exhibition (2006) which took place in Moderna Galerija, Ljubljana. The exhibition presented itself as a tool for creating history in the context of the West's domination in establishing its art history as the only internationally valid canon. The invited artists and groups thus acted themselves simultaneously as archivists ("of their own and other artists' projects or of various phenomena in the national history"), curators ("who research their own historical context and establish a comparable framework for various big and little histories"), historians, anthropologists, and ethnologists ("who record current and pertinent phenomena in the interaction between tradition and modernity as well as rapid change in the local landscape").[19] The purpose of these self-historicizing strategies, however, was "not to establish yet another collective narrative such as the Western world is familiar with."[20] As Zdenka Badovinac, curator of the show, remarked, "[t]hese artists are not interested in creating a new big history, but are rather interested in the conditions that sustain the tension between small and temporary histories and what is defined as big history."[21]

The establishment of specialized collections with a focus on art production from Central and Eastern Europe and the extension of the collecting scope of existing collections has played a defining historicizing and institutionalizing role, for in comparison to exhibitions, collections have a more lasting impact on the way art history is framed in stable narratives.

Kontakt. The Art Collection of Erste Bank Group, set up in 2004, is one of the most ambitious collecting endeavours in this realm. Kontakt's collecting strategy combines elements from the narratives of contextualization ("its aim is to develop a collection with a sound art-historical and conceptual basis that deals with artistic positions rooted in a

[15] Irwin 2006, 11.

[16] Irwin 2006, 12.

[17] Irwin 2006, 12.

[18] Fehr 2006, 471.

[19] Badovinac 2006, 11.

[20] Badovinac 2006, 11.

[21] Badovinac 2006, 11.

specific location and context"), Europeanization ("[the collection] aims to present works that play a decisive role in the formation of a common and unified European art history"), and postcolonialism ("reformulating art history and thus questioning the Western European canon of art"),[22] although it has also been "accused" of employing a neo-colonialist approach. The collection vehemently rejects such allegations by organizing exhibitions not only in Austria but also in the countries where the collected artworks originate from, such as this year's *Kontakt Sofia* (2011) exhibition in Bulgaria.

ArtEast 2000+ Collection, started in the 1990s, pursues goals similar to those of Kontakt ("to help the idea of Eastern Europe as a blind spot of history to finally disappear from the map of Europe"[23]), the difference, however, being that the initiative comes not from a financial group in the West, but from an art museum in the East – Moderna Galerija in Ljubljana. Despite of its seemingly "politically correct" statements ("[we] dedicate our new collection to the newly established dialogue between the East and the West",[24] etc.), the collection and the exhibitions based on its artworks, have been subjected to some criticism from the East. The exhibition *ArtEast 2000 + Collection* (2000) in Ljubljana, for instance, which took place in the same year Ljubljana hosted the third Manifesta biennale, did not present a single Slovenian artist, which gave grounds to the critics to interpret is as "prepared precisely for the international audience, counting on Manifesta 3 in Ljubljana."[25] With the recent opening of the Museum of Contemporary Art Metelkova in Ljubljana in November 2011, housing the *ArtEast 2000+* collection, a certain phase in the historicization and musealization of East European art has come to a close.

Heroic narratives

Heroic narratives are to be found both in Western and Eastern contexts alike, but they are most common in the United States where many of the Soviet dissident artists emigrated in the 1980s and where several large private collections of non-conformist art from the former Soviet republics are hosted. The Norton and Nancy Dodge Collection at the Zimmerli Art Museum in New Brunswick, N.J., for example, claims to be the largest and the most comprehensive collection of its kind, comprising of more than 20 000 works from some 2 000 artists.[26] The collection and the museum take great pride in embodying "the purest rationale for the creation of art: the struggle for freedom of self-expression in spite of – and in defiance of – a repressive government."[27] Heroic narratives thus often go hand in hand with strategies of victimization and martyrization, bestowing an aura of sainthood upon the Eastern artists and presenting them as martyrs in the struggle for freedom of self-expression, unquestionably a major factor in the development of modern art. Not surprisingly then, it is the term "non-conformist art" that plays a central role in this narrative. The term itself was introduced in the United States against the term "unofficial art" and the variations on the avant-garde (neo-, post-, retro-, etc.) used in Europe.

Here is how a typical heroic narrative sounds like:

> It has not been emphasized nearly enough that the history of nonconformist art is one of the great heroic stories of the last half of this century. It is the story of several generations of artists who had learned their skills in the rigorous state-supported system of training, but who insisted on the kind of interior freedom that was anathema to the authorities… The desire to create from a sense of utter necessity and honesty prompted their refusal to accept the authority of the state in matters of art.[28]

Another representative example of an exhibition based on this premise is the *Artists Against the State: Perestroika Revisited* (2006) show at the Ronald Feldman Gallery, New York, a gallery that prides itself in its historic association with non-conformist Russian

[22] Marte 2006.

[23] Badovinac 2001, 62.

[24] Badovinac 2001, 59.

[25] Gržinic-Mauhler 2002.

[26] The Jane Voorhees Zimmerli Art Museum, "Introduction to the Dodge Collection", http://zamweb.rutgers.edu.audios/files/Introduction.mp3 (accessed June 22, 2007).

[27] Dodge/Rosenfeld 1995, 7.

[28] Baigell/Baigell 1995.

artists, dating back to 1976 when it put on an exhibition of smuggled works by the founders of the Soviet Sots Art movement Alexander Melamid and Vitaly Komar. The concept of *Artists Against the State* focuses on the survival strategies of non-conformist artists:

> Working outside the parameters of government sanctioned art, unofficial artists developed various strategies for survival that ranged from public confrontation to withdrawal into the private sphere. Subject to persecution, the underground existed at great risk. […] Nonconformist art evolved with its own systems of signage characterized by: text and commentary, the deconstruction of Soviet ideology, banalities of daily life, fictional mythologies and shifting truths, and arcane hermeneutics – an anti-utopian conceptualism laced with irony and biting satire.[29]

Frequent references in the heroic curatorial narratives are the Gulag and Stalinist terror. One of the first exhibitions to address the history and mythology of the Gulag through contemporary art is *Territories of Terror: Mythologies and Memories of the Gulag in Contemporary Russian-American Art* (2007) at the Boston University Art Gallery, curated by Svetlana Boym. Although the artists presented in *Territories of Terror* do not refer directly to the Gulag experience, they offer a space where such reflection can take place.

Europeanization narratives

Last but not least, Europeanization narratives were unsurprisingly triggered by the European integration process throughout the 1990s and by the two waves of European enlargement in 2004 and 2007. The first enlargement wave in particular was accompanied by an unprecedented number of projects and campaigns aiming at presenting the art and culture of the ten new European Union members to the old ones.[30] Similarly, although a significantly smaller number of projects showcasing contemporary and modern art from Romania and Bulgaria followed in 2007.

The huge wave of exhibitions on the so-called "New Europe", some of them celebrating individual member states' Presidency of the Council of the European Union, others commissioned by various European institutions, made use of a specific curatorial narrative, very close to the clichéd "European talk", emphasizing the role of art and culture in bridging the differences between the two parts of Europe, culturally and politically divided during the Cold War. Bridges, passages, crossing borders, transcending frontiers, and erasing walls, in fact appeared as central metaphors in the curatorial statements of these exhibitions. Whereas most of these exhibitions underscored the diversity of artistic processes in Europe, both diachronic and synchronic, they also insisted on the idea of Europe having a cultural and political identity of its own, as the title of the exhibition © *EUROPE EXISTS* (2003) most unequivocally asserted. The curatorial claims of aesthetic heterogeneity and homogeneity, independence and interdependence, oftentimes remain irreconcilable, simply reiterating the formula "united in diversity" and thus reproducing the major predicament of European cultural identity narratives as a whole.

As a prime example of the Europeanization curatorial narrative one might take the exhibition *Passage Europe: A Certain Look at Central and East European Art* (2004) at the Musée d'Art Moderne de Saint-Étienne, curated by Lorand Hegyi, who situated the exhibition in the context of the new chances, hopes and expectations for rebuilding the broken historical ties between the various European cultural centers and constellations, opened up by the European Union enlargement:

[29] Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, "Artists against the State: Perestroika Revisited", http://www.feldmangallery.com/pages/home_frame.html (accessed December 14, 2011).

[30] These are some of the major "Europeanizing" exhibitions on display in the first half of the 2000s: © *Europe Exists*, Thessaloniki, Greece (2003); *Breakthrough: Perspectives on Art from the Ten New Member States*, Hague, The Netherlands (2004); *Instant Europe - Photography and Video from the New Europe*, Passariano – Codroipo (Udine), Italy (2004); *New Video, New Europe: A Survey of Eastern European Video*, Chicago, United States (2004); *Passage Europe: Realities, references*, St. Etienne, France (2004); *The Image of Europe*, Brussels, Belgium (2004); *The New Ten: Contemporary Art from the 10 New Member Nations of the EU*, Duisburg, Vienna, Mannheim, Oostende (2004); *Who if Not We Should at Least Try to Imagine the Future of All This? 7 Episodes on Ex(Changing) Europe*, Budapest, Amsterdam, Utrecht, Rotterdam, Ljubljana, Vilnius, Warsaw (2004); *Positioning - In the New Reality of Europe: Art from Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Hungary*, Osaka, Japan (2005); *The New Europe. Culture of Mixing and Politics of Representation*, Vienna, Austria (2005); *Central: New Art from New Europe*, Vienna (2005), Sofia (2006); *Check-In Europe: Reflecting Identities in Contemporary Art*, Munich, Germany (2006).

> Shortly before the inauguration of this exhibition, Europe celebrated the official accession of ten new members to the European Union. This rings in a new chapter in the history of the continent. Separation and mistrust, hostility and tension, will make way – or so we hope – to a new era of construction in a new European community.[31]

The exhibition highlighted the role of artists in the process of re-opening and re-establishing of what its curator called the "connecting passages" of Europe – "metaphorical meeting places, where the specific messages and forms of communication of the diverse cultural and intellectual constellations can be shared and compared in the authentic, fell founded statements of artists, writers, philosophers, architects, film and theatre experts, and musicians."[32] In fact, many "Europeanization" exhibitions seem to embody the utopian ideas of the authentic and subversive nature of creative work and the borderless potentials of contemporary art practices. Whereas contemporary art's unchallengeable power of subversion and deconstruction comes very handy when it comes to addressing the controversial nature of post-Cold War Europe's identities, it is still doubtful whether it has the potential for constructing and endorsing new ones.

As marginal as it may seem, the debate over rewriting Central and East European art histories and redrawing the art map of Europe after the fall of the Berlin Wall, only sketched out in this essay through curatorial narratives and strategies, does in fact relate to larger issues, including the limitations of narrativity in critical (art) historiography, the contestation of power relations embedded in artistic practices in a transnational, postmodern world, as well as the legacy of the modernist project and its place in the construction of "European cultural identity".

[31] Hegyi 2004, 7.

[32] Hegyi 2004, 11.

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