Horizontalising Roles: Indiscipline and Carnivalism*

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Hands On

The term "global art" has often been employed in the past to describe contemporary art across the planet at any given moment. However, in recent years this category has come to stand for a kind of art that transcends territorial borders, national cultures, regional heritage of theme, style and ideological preoccupations. It seems inevitable, perhaps, that globalisation should have produced such an art whose exponents, although located in countries of differing economic attainment and cultural background, are linked by common concerns. Among these are the major effects of globalisation: the consequences of the communications technology revolution; modified conceptions of community, mobilisation, individual identity; and, principally, the horrors of war, environmental degradation and neo-civil conflicts. Formally, the new global art is richly varied in its tonal gamut, hybrid in its combination of media, and versatile in the techniques by which it makes images and constructs a public for itself.

A work of art is a social construction that relates to our everyday experience. It is therefore not an aesthetic or cultural praxis, rather a socialisation of aesthetics within a framework determined by the conventional concept of the given art practice. As a social construction, the work functions as a *portal* or interface, creating a formal relationship with the public. The artwork as portal creates transitions mapped out by a theoretical blueprint which shows this two-way relationship as the structure in which art works. The relational characteristics embodied by art as a social construction have been changing radically, especially since the beginning of the 90s.

A disperse group of artists began working with the idea of social artworks during the late 80s, through the 90s and into the present. Identifying a trend towards art which involves interaction, gift, and interpersonal connection, Nicolas Bourriaud¹ discussed a number of these artists in his book *Relational Aesthetics*.²

Currently there is a profusion of collaboration and cooperatives working in the social sphere. The idea of

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use inverts the notion of art from a hierarchical, one-way communication from artist to audience towards a model which is more participatory and experiential, where what the artist has provided and what the audience makes of it form equal parts in the equation. Bourriaud, in his more recent book, *Postproduction*, asks: "Why wouldn't the meaning of a work have as much to do with the use one makes of it as with the artist's intentions for it?" Or, Bourriaud again, quoting artist Rirkrit Tiravanija, quoting Ludwig Wittgenstein: "Don't look for the meaning, look for the use."

How has this tendency in the art world come about over the past, say, ten years? Bourriaud insists that we are trying to live better in this world—an attainable goal if we accept the fact that so-called "historical evolution" was, after all, fallacy. In other words, artists no longer contribute to the formation of a farreaching utopian reality, but rather show how to live here and now in real time, how to inhabit culture by doing-it-yourself, recycling and inventing the everyday.

This implies an urbanisation of art—in both its function and the way it is exhibited—which contrasts strongly with the former notion of art as a luxury item existing within our urban setting. Art now hops down from its aristocratic pedestal and, what's more, even exits the humidity-controlled environment constructed by its former collectors, to merge with the city and live among everyone, offering itself openly to all who dare "use" it. Art *encounters* us and insists on an *exchange*, so that the central theme becomes spending time together, getting to know one another, co-existing in order to *collectively* arrive at some kind of meaning. This exchange remains judged by aesthetic criteria—it is, after all, still art—: first by its form, then the importance the piece has for us within our world, and finally how our relationships with one another and the world are modified by our encounter with the piece.

The idea of an art made from the social, from people participating in social interactions sounds vaguely familiar. Indeed it should. Think back to the Dadaists, revolutionaries, and utopians, infusing various strands of artmaking in the 50s and 60s, including John Cage's Black Mountain events, Alan Kaprow's happenings, Fluxus, Gutai, the Situationist International, conceptual, body and performance art, and the work of Joseph Beuys, who coined the term "social sculpture", referring to how we shape the world we

live in. Beuys felt that the promise of participatory art forms (dada, fluxus, happenings) could only be realised by a complete artistic and social revolution, but he also frequently acknowledged that what social sculpture could be or could become was still largely unexplored and unrealised. So it seems that relational aesthetics was pretty much mapped out by the beginning of the 70s, although as-of-yet unnamed.

Merging Spaces

We now see art working in and with many different kinds of spaces—public, social, private, virtual—and it often creates its own space by readjusting everything we have been taught about visual and physical perception. By merging spaces, art throws the aesthetics of perception and knowledge into a zone of uncertainty, a grey zone. Such an uncertain condition, however, is one that promotes the appearance of newly *merged spaces* transformed out of the old ones. The use of different media is merely the formal way for artists to work with this new material situation.

Here we confront a crisis of the individual as a spectator of art. The exhibition space has changed so that the focus is no longer just on the artwork, but rather on a play between artwork, spectators and the narrative of the curator(s). Exhibitions, with their multiple voices and viewpoints, critically question the institutional metaphors and move emphasis towards the self. In such merged spaces, art is not static, but reflexive: it makes contact between the institutional and the individual layers of culture and, at the same time, it creates the experience of difference between conceptual systems. It insists that we de-merge and re-merge layers of aesthetic judgement.

I am reminded here of Gilles Deleuze's ideas regarding difference, multiplicity, disunity and change so that I would venture to relate his writings to merged spaces. Deleuze believes that time and being never repeat themselves and that we ought to conceive of being always as becoming. His philosophy of becoming—the view of life as a continuous possibility for change, that stasis is repressive in that stability

represents the denial of the creative power of life to evolve, mutate and become—points to a concern not with the extremes, but the middle.⁵

Dis-Operative Art in a Society of Extras

By now it is clear that the notion of the artwork is less a descriptive than a normative term, and as such, inadequate for making sense of the increasingly process-based proposals characteristic of contemporary artistic production. More and more artists today are deploying strategies which undermine the defining parameters of the notion of what an artwork is by favouring an art which remains open-ended and process-based, showing little concern for the usual criteria of exhibiting and disseminating—i.e. promoting—artworks. Our strategies are various: cultivating a process of permanent modification; inviting (even informal) collaborators to become co-authors; exploiting chance occurrences; questioning the idea of inherent value in a symbolic exchange economy. Though we may have little or nothing in common formally, Pascal Nicolas-Le Strat would argue that artists share a common desire "to emancipate creation from its conclusive apparatus, and to put forward another modulation, at once more intensive and more extensive."

Today, "artwork" designates immaterial as much as material objects, but it always implicitly designates a completed proposition. The notion of work implies a hierarchy between process and finality, a difference between two stages, the former being subordinate to the latter. And it is this temporality, specific to artworks, that is increasingly thrown into question. Much of today's art is not determined by the mere appearance of the work, but is synonymous with the creative act, its finality being coexistent with the process. It does not present the outcome of a labour; it is the labour itself.

Not so long ago, artwork embodied a surplus value conferred upon it by the artist. But in a time of diffuse creativity like the present, the production of quality images and objects is no longer the principal concern of artists, and artistic activity has shifted from the definitive production of works toward more open-ended processes—the management of moments now approaches and overtakes the production of artworks. We

are entrepreneurs of the self and of signs, managers of moments, labourers of the immaterial, our trait being to "carry...[our] work tools within...[ourselves], because these 'tools' are directly related to...[our] intellectuality and...creativity, to...[our] inspiration and...sensibility."⁷

I think this dis-operative turn in contemporary art has little to do with the exhaustion of traditional forms, as some have insisted. There are, after all, many artists who continue and will continue to produce works in order to resolve issues as of yet unresolved. But, for the artist today, producing works has become only one option among many others: the artwork is only one type of artistic proposition among other possibilities. Rather, I think it has more to do with the position occupied by art within the global system of the economy: the artistic economy could scarcely remain unaffected by the growth of immaterial activities so profuse within the general economy. Artistic activity is structured by the new anthropological composition of labour, by dematerialised labour in a post-Fordist capitalist society.⁸

In "The Artist as Ethnographer", Hal Foster speaks about artists and critics as carrying out fieldwork in order to reconcile theory and practice. Among his arguments explaining the driving force behind the ethnographic turn in contemporary art and criticism, he points out that "anthropology *already* participates in the two contradictory models that dominate contemporary art and criticism: on the one hand,...the linguistic turn in the 1960s that reconfigured the social as symbolic order and/or cultural system and advanced...'the death of the author'...; and, on the other hand, in the recent longing for the referent, the turn to context and identity that opposes the old text paradigms and subject critiques. *With a turn to this split discourse of anthropology, artists and critics can...take up the guises of cultural semiologist and contextual fieldworker, they can continue to condemn critical theory, they can relativize and recenter the subject, all at the same time."*

Just what are we doing our fieldwork on? Bourriaud's idea of society as being structured by narratives, immaterial *scenarios* that are enacted by lifestyles, provides a possible insight. Human beings, their actions, relationships and possessions materialise these narratives and produce communal scenarios which promote collective values. No longer passive consumers of mass media, we have become the

"extras" in Guy Debord's society of spectacle, or Michel Foucault's "infamous man": the ordinary individual thrown into the spotlight for our fifteen minutes of fame. Of course, we must keep in mind that our fifteen-minute free-for-all on stage is only permitted within the limits that society has previously staked out.

Horizontalising Roles: Métissage

If the 80s was the decade of the dealer, then the 90s belonged to the curator. Or perhaps we should say the "curatorial spirit" because, as artists' careers became more international and their methods more diversified, progressive gallerists took on a manager-like position rather than merely dealing. People connected across professional borders and things became interdisciplinary, not only in terms of artistic strategies, but also in terms of the art scene's social structure: we could say that the 90s ushered in the horizontalising of roles. As the provincialisation of urban culture and the urbanisation of art began to meet, the agents of the art circuit have grown exponentially and the field itself has diversified in terms of artistic practice and presence.

It should be noted that disciplinary innovation is often of a formal nature, since the disciplines are defined primarily in terms of form. Also, we often think in terms of technological innovation. Interdisciplinary or nondisciplinary practices innovate on other levels too: at the level of audience construction, notably, and artistic intervention in contexts not traditionally reserved for art, the exploration of new content, and relationships between art and other constituents of society, questioning the role of the artist as an agent of social change.

The 80s, with its democratisation of computers and musical sampling, produced two new cultural figures who paved the way for current notions of postmodern art: the computer programmer and the DJ. These two figures contributed to the de-flowering of art's supremacy and its subsequent democratisation, making appropriation and the reprocessing of fragments a widely accepted—and expected—act. In fact, use of deconstructed fragments from previous artworks, popular culture, history or science are now considered building blocks in what Suzi Gablik calls a "reconstructive" version of postmodernism. For her, art

reframes our world view and its Cartesian traditions, moving it away from a "Eurocentric, patriarchal thinking...toward an aesthetics of interconnectedness, social responsibility and ecological attunement." ¹⁰

With the 90s came decentralisation: so many artists and artistic languages have been introduced that the music of the decade carries a tune of diversification. We encounter the contemporary martyr in many avatars: exile, victim of aggression, poorly remunerated labourer. We also pass through scenes of genocide and border warfare, natural disasters and state-sponsored "irregularities", environmental degradation and minority marginalisation. All show the human subject as debilitated. These situations point to the individuals and communities: there runs through them the theme of identity or position in flux. I would venture to say that even the most meditative and seemingly abstract of works are deeply tinged by these preoccupations.

Artists today are ambassadors of the periphery to the centre, bearers of news from abroad, metaphorically speaking. We have become diasporic figures playing native informant and prospector on behalf of the Third World, while pursuing our own agendas of dismounting the supremacy of the artwork in favour of the political and cultural contexts of its production. While we challenge Euro-American ascendancy that dominates the global art circuit, we produce under the sign of disciplinary reconceptualisation: we have shifted from the expressive to the discursive, from a politics embodied in aesthetic form to a demonstrative politics of which the artwork is only one possible outcome.

Vera Frenkel employs the word *métissage*¹¹ to the kind of art that asks questions as opposed to making statements. Rather than artworks constituting pieces of world views fitted neatly together to produce a final global image, she presents the idea of the work of métissage as a "poly-voiced force-field of oscillating contradictions, an exploratory journey"¹³ resulting in artwork that provokes by questioning, thereby avoiding finality. It is left up to the audience to revise and diagnose the artwork before being able to prescribe meaning to it. The artwork evolves out of testimony and the testimonial process which does not offer a completed statement or conclusion, but rather presents tentative languages to be tried out. We

should remember that to be a witness and testify is to effect a shift in the very framework one is witness to.

Indiscipline: Convergence and Turbulence

Many of the practices currently classified as interdisciplinary are in fact non-disciplinary in that they remain outside the disciplinary framework. In these practices, such disciplinary concerns as advancing a set vocabulary or developing the mastery of established techniques come well after other concerns, and these are the practices that have the most trouble with the institutions, which tend to see everything from a disciplinary perspective. Non-disciplinary artists are sometimes obliged to translate their true intentions into disciplinary language, but often the most interesting and innovative aspects of their projects are lost in this translation. Their work can even be denied acknowledgement as an artistic practice on the pretext that it doesn't correspond to the traditional criteria of what constitutes art.

This is the case of practices of non Western origin in general, artistic practices from cultures where disciplinary divisions are non-existent, or at least different from those of the dominant Western division. In 1995, W. J. T. Mitchell wrote that during the 60s and 70s the term *interdisciplinary* was used to identify more radical political and theoretical practices, like those reaching out to various "others"—the new forms of subjectivity—including feminism, Afro-American issues, popular and mass media culture, gay and lesbian subjects, etc. In short, interdisciplinarity proposed an important critique of the hegemonic vision of history, and conducted a revision of university curricula so as to include those practices that had previously remained on the interstices of reality and culture. However, interdisciplinarity appears to be less destabilising today. In fact it is frequently treated as a discipline in and of itself, one having various subcategories.

He says that a prime example of this is the appearance of "visual culture" programs. Studying how visual experience is socially constructed, this program provides a common ground where disciplines such as art history, media and literary studies and fine art meet, and in turn affect philosophy, critical theory and

political discourses such as identity, sexuality, otherness, fantasy, the unconscious. In short, it is the fertile ground from which interdisciplinarity sprouted and from which conversations between disciplines continue to grow.

But rather than interdisciplinarity, it is really *indiscipline* that interests Mitchell, those acts and explorations on the fringe of a given discipline, at the point where disciplinary continuity breaks down, throws the practice into question and reveals the framework as inadequate. Some manage to "penetrate so deeply into the practices of their discipline that they seem to cause an implosion of its boundaries that sends shock waves into other disciplines and even into various forms of public life." Julia Kristeva's work posite that rupturing or shattering the linguistic code can do just that.

Her work talks about—among other things—the rupture or disintegration of artistic code via *dialogism* (comparable to Mitchell's interdisciplinarity) and *carnivalism* (comparable to his indiscipline), both terms being coined by Mikhail Bakhtin. Applying notions of carnivalism to art, it would be the space in which artworks meet and contradict one another through repetition, illogical construction and non-exclusive opposition, all of which break the rules of the visual, normally denominated by form and technique. The laws governing these last two structures create the "false illusion" that art has limits, making it thus appear conjoined with the social or symbolic order. But the order these laws create is just an illusion—art has no limits even when the interpretation of the piece makes us believe we can know the precise definition of its symbols. Composition, colour and support, or any other basic element of a two- or three-dimensional picture plane, are not the point. The point is communication, and interdisciplinarity is art understood as communication.

What dialogism does not strive for is transcendence or supremacy of the artwork; on the contrary, it absorbs concepts within relationships, working toward harmony while implying the idea of *rupture* as a form of transformation. As Kristeva says: "all functions which suppose a frontier...and the transgression of that frontier...are relevant to any account of signifying practice, where practice is taken as meaning acceptance of a symbolic law together with a transgression of that law for the purpose of renovating it."¹⁵

The artwork and other visual structures provide, then, the basis for new intellectual structures in such a way that interest in subversive effects of artistic production can produce possible interests in the politics of marginality.

But it is not enough to exist in a state of transition. Something more is required of us to explore this transitional zone, and it is here that the concept of dialogue as transport becomes important. Art nowadays offers situations of transition, or passages, in such a way that everyone has the possibility of climbing aboard—all can access a play on memory in the form of a dialogue.

Case in point: the Palais de Tokyo, co-directed by Nicolas Bourriaud. The Palais is open twelve noon to twelve midnight, a simple proposal that transforms the gallery into a social space and applies relational aesthetics at the institutional level. If you can't change the white box, you can somehow shift the time to allow for a different kind of social interaction in order to diminish the contrast between the hours of the museums and their purpose. It's not just the work that is interdisciplinary. It is a complete overlap between all forms of art and entertainment that need new and more open spaces to exist. They are no longer separable.

The Ultimate Punishment is Exclusion

The members of disciplines investigating cultural phenomena are limited in their ability to communicate with each other: they prefer to leave members of other disciplines to do their work as they see fit. As a consequence, the study of culture is conducted in fragments. Furthermore, specialisation sets intellectuals apart from other public spheres because they define themselves as above the amateur public. Critique is thus disabled.

Michel Foucault has shown that discipline as a strategy of social control and organisation began at the end of the Classical age and came into dominance in the modern period. What is characteristic of disciplines is their paradoxical capacity to normalise while hierarchising, to homogenise while

differentiating: norms are carefully maintained so that any deviation can and will be measured on a scale. The goal of a professional in a discipline is to move up this scale by differing only in appropriate ways. To be part of a discipline means to ask certain questions, to use a determined vocabulary, and to study a narrow set of issues, all of which are enforced by institutions through various rewards and punishments pertaining to hierarchical ranking. The ultimate punishment is exclusion.

Interdisciplinary-based visual arts programs encompass a wide range of mediums and forms, from installation to performance, from photo-text combinations to new media works, from text to sound explorations, all of which acknowledge the gaps that fragment culture. With the perception of art as journey rather than property, the paradoxical idea of transmitting the untransmittable becomes thinkable. But unfortunately indeterminacy, hybridisation and fragmentation are feared because of risks of degeneration of traditional visual culture. If métissage and indeterminacy are metaphors for our postmodern condition, then the conservatism of those fighting against both are more than obvious.

The criteria and framework of interdisciplinary programs are often ill-defined and consequently few students identify with them. The boundaries of disciplines, on the other hand, are relatively well defined, and students tend to gravitate toward the programs of their discipline of origin, even for innovative and/or risky projects, and even in the face of rejection. Students thus defend their projects within the theoretical framework of their discipline, which forces them to translate into a disciplinary language projects that are nondisciplinary both in their intent and their strategies. To correct this situation, we must first of all support innovation within the disciplines themselves, and we must create interdisciplinary programs whose lines are well defined.

To identify emerging practices and to define the terms of specific programs for teaching interdiscipline, one would be well-advised to consult the artists, critics and curators who are involved in interdisciplinary circles, as well as to read the texts which inspire these individuals. It is also worth noting that a lot of these emerging practices are currently present in other universities, which play an increasingly important role in fostering innovation. Traditional criteria for assessing artwork—such as professionalism of the artist

(difficult to prove in a non-disciplinary field), mastery of disciplinary language, quality of formal research, universality of target audience, intentions, and so on—often exclude aspects essential to interdisciplinary work. We must look at the artists and at the intended strategies employed to achieve their objectives.

But beware: "While these movements often begin with a critical perspective, they retreat from radical critique as they become more successful. To the extent that...movements resist disciplines, their seriousness is questioned...their enterprises are written off as mere fads. ...[T]he idea of interdisciplinarity...becomes a means for practitioners to challenge a particular hierarchy, but it...[does] not offer an alternative to hierarchical order." This is understandable to a certain degree: we can not forget that human rationale formed by a hierarchical economy seeks to order cultural objects starting with "the best", that is, those that most represent the essence of western culture. Even the introduction of a new interdisciplinary program, no matter how novel or subversive, will replicate a hierarchical view of culture in that it is presenting what the institution feels is important. The task of the interdisciplinary program and institution alike is to embrace the belief that cultural objects are disposed of relationally, not hierarchically.

Resisting Intellectuals

I think there remain two points we must recognise if we are to contribute to an interdisciplinary social transformation. First, it is obvious that the university has a certain relationship with and within society: its purpose is to legitimate knowledge and relationships of the dominant power relations. But, as with all institutions, there exists resistance within the university itself, a healthy zone from which oppositional discussions and practices could theoretically grow. Second, a constructive language of critique and possibility must be used in order to deconstruct the form and content of disciplines used to legitimate the dominant culture. Recognising that the structure of universities is currently connected to the very interests that suppress critical concerns of those intellectuals willing to fight for oppositional domains, is the first step in understanding that such interests can only be dismantled through a collective effort on the part of resisting intellectuals.

Notes

- Nicolas Bourriaud is currently co-director, along with Jérôme Sans, of the Palais de Tokyo Centre d'Art Contemporain, Paris.
- Bourriaud's theory of *relational aesthetics* refers to works that take place within interhuman relationships in a deliberate and articulate ways, by building alternative social models, producing concrete interactions, collaborating with other people, or even examining social exchanges in a critical way. "Over and above its mercantile nature and its semantic value, the work of art represents a social *interstice*....The interstice is a space in human relations which fits more or less harmoniously and openly into the overall system, but suggests other trading possibilities than those in effect within this system. This is the precise nature of the contemporary art exhibition in the arena of representational commerce: it creates free areas, and time spance whose rhythm contrasts with those structuring everyday life, and it encourages an inter-human commerce that differs from the 'communication zones' that are imposed upon us". *Relational Aesthetics*. Trans. Simon Pleasance, Fronza Woods and Mathieu Copeland. Paris: Les presses du réel, 2002 (original French 1998), 15.
- Nicolas Bourriaud. *Postproduction*. Trans. Jeanine Herman. New York: Lukas & Sternberg, 2002 (original French 2000), 14.
- 4 *Ibid.* 11.
- Gilles Deleuze. *Dialogues*. Trans. H. Tomlinson and B. Habberjam. New York: Columbia University Press, 1987, 39.
- Pascal Nicolas-Le Strat. *Une sociologie du travail artistique. Artistes et creativité diffusé*. Paris:

 L'Harmattan, 1998, 55. His other two books, *Mutations des activités artistiques et intellectuelles*(L'Harmattan, 2000) and *Pour Parler: Entre art et sociologie, rencontre avec Slimane Raïs* (Presses Universitaires de Grenobles, 2002), also provide further reading on this subject.
- 7 Ibid. 87.

- Of course we still need cars, and the 3000 employees of Ford's St. Thomas Assembly plant—
 representing 10% of the population of this, my home town—rely on their monthly incomes. Located between the shores of Lake Erie and London, Ontario, St. Thomas Assembly has produced more than 7,000,000 vehicles since it opened 35 years ago (1968). St. Thomas Assembly is a 243,000 m² (2.6 million ft²) plant that houses a body shop, paint facility, and a 19-km long assembly line.

 Last year, this plant produced 202,000 vehicles, virtually an equal split of Crown Victoria and Grand Marquis models, of which it is the global source.
- 9 Hal Foster. *The Return of the Real. The Avant-Garde at the end of the Century*. Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1996, 182-3.
- 10 Suzi Gablik. The Re-enchantment of Art. New York: Thames and Hudson, 1991, 22.
- Édouard Glissant, a poet from Martinique, coined this term to refer to the intertwining of cultural forms and the hybrid nature of Creoles, individuals of European descent born especially in the West Indies or Spanish America and preserving their speech and culture.
- 12 Vera Frenkel. "A Kind of Listening. Notes from an Interdisciplinary Practice". Penser l'indiscipline.
 Recherches interdisciplinaires en art contemporain / Creative Confusion. Interdisciplinary Practices
 in Contemporary Art. Lynn Hughes and Marie-Josée Lafortune, eds. Montreal: OPTICA un centre
 d'art contemporain, 2001, 35.
- W. J. T. Mitchell. "Interdisciplinarity and Visual Culture". Art Bulletin. December 1995, Volume 77, Issue 4, 540-544.
- Bakhtin's dialogism presents the literary word as an intersection of textual surfaces rather than a fixed meaning; it is a dialogue among various texts. Each word (or text) is an intersection of words or texts where at least one other word or text can be read. Any text, therefore, is double.

 Carnival activities make sense from nonsense and nonsense from sense, turning logic itself inside out and upside down. For Bakhtin, carnival was situated on the border between art and life, but not life as a spectacle that one watches, rather life itself, the one in which everyone participates.

 Kristeva sees carnivalism as challenging official law: the ambivalence and laughter of carnival is able to turn old hierarchies upside-down and generate new potentialities.
- 15 Toril Moi, ed. *The Kristeva Reader*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1986, 29.

- Henry Giroux, David Shumway, Paul Smith and James Sosnoski. "The Need for Cultural Studies: Resisting Intellectuals and Oppositional Public Spheres" Online posting. February 2003. http://eserver.org/theory/need.html
- * Article written for the compilation celebrating the 10-year anniversary of the Centro Nacional de las

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