## BEHIND THE "BOOM" IN CONTEMPORARY ASIAN ART

(1995)

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## THE PITFALL OF "ASIA'S DIVERSITY"

1 Tanaka Sanzō, "Ajia bijutsu būmu: Fukuoka, Hiroshima nado de tenrankai" [Asian Art Boom: Exhibitions in Hiroshima, Fukuoka etc], *Asahi Shimbun*, October 5, 1994, evening edition, 5.

"THE BOOM IN CONTEMPORARY ASIAN ART"—so ran the headline attached to a certain newspaper's feature on exhibitions across Japan of contemporary art from Asia this year (1994), which centered on the 4th Asian Art Show [Dai yon-kai ajia bijutsuten] (September-October 1994) at the Fukuoka Art Museum, as well as the Asian Art Now [Ajia no sōzōryoku)] (September-November 1994) at the Hiroshima City Museum of Contemporary Art and other venues in the city. Thanks to the Hiroshima exhibition opening around the same time, we at the Fukuoka Art Museum are finally taking honest delight at having made our debut in the national media after fifteen years of obscurity. At the same time, as curators who have unstintingly carried out our duty of introducing modern and contemporary Asian art in Japan since our museum opened in 1979, we cannot help but feel, yet again, the media's flippancy and Tokyo-centrism in this framing of a "boom." And we think that artists throughout Asia who have spent many years practicing their art would share our sentiments.

What further complicates our reaction is how the media's reception of the 4th Asian Art Show reproduces clichés we thought had long since been overcome. One of these is the phrase "Asia's diversity." Indeed, yes, we do not fail to notice that both the Fukuoka and Hiroshima exhibitions appeared to intentionally highlight this diversity, and we do recognize that there may be positive significance in affirming the existence of "Asia's diversity" as a means of acquitting Okakura Tenshin's "Asia is one," which became the slogan of Japanese colonialism undertaken in the name of a Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity

Sphere. However, there are three pitfalls in using this phrase (and there are a great many pitfalls in the ways that contemporary Asian art is understood). The first lies in thinking that what one beholds covers the entire span of what "diversity" encompasses. Doing so overlooks the politics created in the process of how exhibitions categorize, select, and sometimes discriminate against works of art. The second is that in Asia generally, unlike in Europe and the United States, "contemporary art" is not clearly defined, and moreover, the difficulty of applying modern Western standards in distinguishing what art is and is not means that the diversity of works currently being created (or produced) by Asian artists cannot be grasped by the compartmentalization operating as common sense in Japan's art world. The third is how diversity as a concept is frequently yoked to that of chaos, which leads to the cliché of "Asian chaos," a phrase commonly used to depict Asian cultures.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, yes, Asia is geographically vast, possessing massively complex histories along with a huge range of differences among its ethnic groups, languages, religions, and cultures. Nevertheless, the danger of invoking "chaos" is that it puts oneself on the side of order, rationality, modernity, and progress, while Asia then signifies disorder, mystery, premodernity, and stagnation; in short, it recalls a form of Orientalism that unconsciously relegates Asia to a place of Otherness. I am hardly ignorant of how categorization, as a means of comprehending "chaos," runs the risk of stereotyping others in authoritarian fashion. Yet even so, it is hard to pass over the intellectual sloth and arrogance involved in trotting out "Asian chaos." Such a shorthand summary ignores the individual lives of the peoples residing in Asia and the historical and social logics inherent in their various communities and fails to reflect on how people across Asia are attempting reforms in their lives according to their own ideas, no matter how obdurate the traditions surrounding them.

I have previously elaborated on the Japan-centrism that pervades Japanese people's views of Asia and gives rise to such clichés, but simply put, there are two aspects to this ideology. One of these, as mentioned above, is a perspective that views Asia as an Other from the outside, which is also the attitude of Europeans and Americans. The other is, on the contrary, a perspective that seeks to forcefully assimilate Asia into Japan. This latter aspect, as it were, upends the

- 2 Refer to, for example, the essay by Enomoto Ryōichi in the previous issue of this magazine. Enomoto Ryōichi, "Ajia no āto kaosu: Ajia geijutsu tenrankai-hō" [Report of Asian art exhibition], *Kikan Āto ekusupuresu* [Quarterly Art Express], no. 5 (December 1994), 131.
- 3 See the following two essays by Kuroda
  Raiji: "The Other side of the Other: Asian
  Artists in the West," paper presented at *The*Potential of Asian Thought: Contemporary
  Art Symposium 1994, organized by The
  Japan Foundation; "Practice of Exhibitions in Global Society for Asians, by Asians, and Some Associated Problems," Global
  Visions: Towards a New Internationalism
  in the Visual Arts, ed. Jean Fisher (London:
  Kala Press and INIVA, 1994), 140–151.

logic of "Japan is Asia" through the formulation of "Asia is Japan"; by obscuring the suppression of that which resists assimilation or which is difficult to understand, it is even worse than the former. Particularly in the field of art, we should be on the alert for this perspective of "Japan equals Asia," which exclusively treats the relationship between both sides on cultural terms without considering its political or economic dimensions.<sup>4</sup>

4 For example, Yanagita Kunio only describes rice from a religious perspective, which conceals its connection to agricultural policies in Japan's colonies. See Murai Osamu, Nangoku ideorogī no hassei Yanagita Kunio to shokuminchi shugi [The emergence of an ideology of southern countries: Yanagita Kunio and colonialism] (Okayama: Fukutake Shoten, 1992).

- ASIAN CONTEMPORARY ART SET IN MOTION
- **5** There were 23,192 visitors to the 4th Asian Art Show in Fukuoka and 15,127 visitors when the exhibition traveled to the Setagaya Art Museum, Tokyo.
- **6** This exhibition received 1,071,352 visitors.

NOW, IF THERE IS NO REASON to think that Japanese understandings of neighboring Asian countries have decisively changed, why has the national media paid this much attention to exhibitions of Asian art, which draw an insignificant number of visitors<sup>5</sup> compared to blockbuster events like The Barnes Collection Exhibition (National Museum of Western Art, January–April 1994)<sup>6</sup> or *The Grand Napoleon* Exhibition (Tokyo Fuji Art Museum, October 1993–March 1994)? First, it is obvious that politically and economically, the sharp growth and liberalization of China and Southeast Asia have begun to exert great influence on Japanese society. Second, in the last few years, art professionals in Japan have begun to perceive a sluggishness in art from Japan, as well as from Europe and the United States. There are those who lament that Japanese artists, no matter how many pep talks they receive, remain no more than obsessive otaku or honor students, or those who have exhaustively consumed the colorful art of '80s Europe and the United States that blossomed (!) in the era of

postmodernism, and now feel fed up with how succeeding trends in those Western societies have been either venomous pessimism or mere ostentation about their relentlessly strong international competitiveness. It may certainly be the case that such people in Japan's art world are enticed by this new generation of Asian artists' indomitable and unabashed rechanneling of traditions, their youthful spontaneity that makes one abandon comparisons with Europe and the United States, and the brilliant energy they retain even as they earnestly confront their respective societies. Third, encountering the art worlds of Europe and the United States has become an everyday experience for Japanese people, and while they are being asked to play a role commensurate with their economic power in post-Cold War international society, they have also become aware of their need to make cultural contributions as a constituent of Asia. Some may object that the aforementioned phenomena are not based on any essential changes in the Japanese art world, but we might still take honest pleasure in how encounters with Asia have opened up the possibility of more concretely critiquing Western-centrism in art, as well as the emergence of a generation of curators and journalists unburdened by feelings of guilt or prejudice towards Asia.

However, without the development in Asian art argued below as the fourth factor, it is likely that the phenomena mentioned above would have failed to produce a boom like this year's. In other words, what we are currently seeing is only possible because artists from China and Southeast Asia have begun engaging in modes of expression especially representative of "contemporary art"—creating works with commonplace objects, installations, performances, or conceptual art, among other means—which have, with only a slight lag in time, been transmitted to Japan (of course, this development has historical precedents in various localities in Asia, but it only started becoming a general trend around the end of the 1980s).

Information on contemporary art from China has abruptly started flowing into Japan, and it has, moreover, been startling. The waves of Chinese art which had developed rapidly for less than a decade reached its pinnacle at a large-scale contemporary art exhibition held in Beijing in February 1989. However, these artists' challenges were immediately suppressed shortly before the protests and massacre at

Tiananmen Square in June. The news of the incident at the exhibition was swiftly conveyed to Japan by Chinese artists residing in Japan and through exhibitions at two galleries in Tokyo.8 Thus the Chinese practices of avant-garde art, which as a concept seemed to be on the verge of extinction, were reported in great detail and with extensive documentation. Furthermore, Cai Guo-Qiang, who had been based in Japan since 1986, began to continuously present his works in Tokyo after 1991. The magnificence of how he reconsidered human history as a whole by overcoming the binary opposition of East and West, his free-ranging imagination untainted by the academism of technical training, the spectacular nature of his explosive projects, and the Chinese references in his use of gunpowder, along with his interest in feng shui, all contributed greatly to cultivating Japanese viewers' visions of the possibilities in Asian art. Then from August to September 1991, the Exceptional Passage: Chinese Avant-Garde Artists Exhibition held in Fukuoka, which was organized by the Museum City Project and the Mitsubishi-Jisho Artium, featured Fei Dawei as a guest curator and provided a large-scale introduction to the works of five Chinese artists, including Cai.9 Although this exhibition took place in a city far from the capital, the grandeur of these works' philosophical and physical scale, as well as their artists' defiant stance, freely dealing with the very methods of conceptual art and earthwork they traversed, provided ample material to draw the attention of art critics and journalists in Tokyo.

Alongside such introductions to avant-garde art from China, we must not overlook how the ASEAN Cultural Center, established by the Japan Foundation in 1990, began continuously showcasing the contemporary art of Southeast Asia and created another opportunity to raise interest in Asian art within Japan. Despite its small gallery that was inadequate as a space for contemporary art, the ASEAN Cultural Center's prowess in international logistics through its association with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the cooperation it received from art critics (Tani Arata and Nakamura Hideki) given the chance to write for national media outlets, and above all its location in Shibuya, Tokyo allowed it to reach far greater audiences than a regional municipal museum such as the Fukuoka Art Museum. The ASEAN Cultural Center teamed up with curators, including Ushiroshoji Masahiro of

7 A reference to the *China/Avant-Garde* exhibition held in February 1989 at the National Art Gallery in Beijing (now the National Art Museum of China), a landmark event for the emergent scene in Chinese contemporary art newly freed from the restraints of the Cultural Revolution (circa 1966–1976). Authorities shut down the exhibition twice during its fifteen-day run due to controversial performance works and a bomb threat. See "*China Avant-Garde*," *Encyclopedia of Contemporary Chinese Culture*, ed. Edward L. Davis (London: Routledge, 2005), 127–128.

- **8** Toward the 1990s: Documents on Contemporary Chinese Art, April 10–15, 1989, Gallery K and Gallery Kobayashi.
- **9** Other participating artists included Gu Wenda, Huang Yongping, Wang Luyan, and Yang Jiechang.

the Fukuoka Art Museum and the two critics mentioned above, to hold an exhibition two years after its founding titled New Art from Southeast Asia 1992. This exhibition was held at the Fukuoka Art Museum, the Hiroshima City Museum of Contemporary Art, and other venues in Tokyo and Osaka. I think the show's success was ultimately due to its timely grasp of the new generation of artists who had emerged in Southeast Asia, its ability to navigate challenges including the bureaucracies of participating countries and the difficulties of transportation, along with, for better or worse, its selection process focusing on works in the style of "contemporary art." Among the artists showcased in this exhibition, Thailand's Montien Boonma and Supachai Satsara, the Singaporean performance artist Tang Da Wu, and Indonesia's Heri Dono, along with Malaysia's Zulkifli Yusoff and Tan Chin Kuan, are all considered exemplars who have decisively transformed and enlarged the paradigms of Asian art, consisting of traditional art (including gouache painting, crafts, etc.), art in the European style (e.g. realism in oil painting), and modernism (e.g. cubism, abstraction). And the 4th Asian Art Show took, as its basic thrust, a focus on the social consciousness inherent in these artists' expressions using commonplace objects and/or installations, all while seeking similar trends across Asia as a whole.

# THE VIEWPOINT OF FUKUOKA'S ASIAN ART SHOWS

HAVING SAID THIS MUCH, when discussing the 4th Asian Art Show, Fukuoka, which displayed works by forty-eight artists from eighteen

countries, the first thing to take note of is that, in spite of its appearance of extreme "diversity" among the included works, the exhibition was not planned as a comprehensive introduction to the state of art in all of Asia, but rather within the constraints of a theme and a specific method of exhibition.

**10** In May 1973, the International Association of Art (IAA) held its 7th congress in Bulgaria and resolved to emphasize "cultural identity."

The 1st (1980) and 2nd (1985) Asian Art Shows had no designated themes, and moreover the selection of artists and works was left entirely up to the governmental institutions of participating countries, with the number of exhibited works extraordinarily large in contrast to their physically unimpressive qualities (due in large part to restrictions on exhibition space and transportation), which intentionally sought to present a general overview of Asian art; or rather, that was the sole exhibition format available to its organizers. From the third edition in 1989, we began implementing reforms in setting a theme and limiting the number of artists. Another important reform in the fourth edition in 1994 that emphasized its thematic nature was that the exhibition and catalogue both abolished categorization by country in favor of the following sub-themes: "Society as Reality," "Nations, Nationality, History," "The City and Consumption," "Images of Communities," "The Natural Environment," and "Intimations of Violence." Doing so enabled us to correct a mode of presentation that tended to reduce individual expression to stereotyped national characteristics. Furthermore, by abandoning the format of a general overview, we were able to reduce the number of artists to a tenth of those in the 1st Asian Art Show, thus allowing each one a larger space.

On Ushiroshoji Masahiro's suggestion, approved through curatorial meetings of museum staff and the exhibition's executive committee, the 4th Asian Art Show's theme was set as *Jidai o mitsumeru me* [Eyes on the Times], but its English title, *Realism as an Attitude*, hewed closer to his original intent. The phrase "as an attitude" stood in conceptual opposition to "as a form," and "realism" may also be understood in oppositional relation to the 3rd Asian Art Show's theme of *Symbolic Visions in Contemporary Asian Life*.

For Asia's artists, their consciousness of pursuing "cultural identity" first developed as they absorbed modernism via the norms of twentieth-century art from Europe. However, as we understand it, even as the works created in this process claimed to pursue "cultural"

identity," in their use of traditional motifs or their sense of form (as in decorative patterns) and symbols (like those used in Hinduism), the artists largely did not go beyond formal compromises with the modernism of Europe before the 1950s; instead, they merely glorified traditions of yore and reflected little about the actualities of their various societies in the present day. Thus, the theme for this latest Asian Art Show spotlights what we see in the previously-mentioned New Art from Southeast Asia 1992, which features materials and ideas from rapidly changing everyday lives, or which actively engages with present-day Asian societies. 11 In my personal interpretation of Ushiroshoji's perspective and my own reading into Realism as an Attitude, I see this theme's significance as not only about overcoming the two kinds of realisms of Western academism and the dogmatic formalism of socialist ideology; it also suggests the possibility of calling all forms of expression "artworks" spontaneously arising from an "attitude" that has yet to deem them "art," by returning existing materials, styles, and methodologies to a tabula rasa.

For the adequate introduction of such lively and genuine faces of Asian art in Japan, it was impossible to simply choose works easy to transport (paintings) and line them up in the manner of conventional juried exhibitions; we had to invite the artists to make their creations on-site. That was enabled by a Workshop program during the exhibition with one artist from each country participating (two from Japan; none from Brunei). We invited the artists to use the museum's studios, galleries, storerooms, and other spaces to create their works, conduct performances, and give lectures within a period of twenty days. This endeavor far outstripped the museum's estimated costs and manpower, leaving many problems in the wake of its execution about how it had gone beyond the institution's concept of artwork; however, it was also seen as an experiment of exceeding value that compensated for those problems.

At the artist workshops, some artists silently worked on the canvases before them, but as expected, those that made an impression possessed the initiative to incorporate the stimuli they received from their sojourn in Fukuoka into their creations. One such artist, Thailand's Navin Rawanchaikul, was the youngest at that edition of the Asian Art Show. Born in Chiang Mai, the northern Thai city, in 1971, where he

11 For details see Ushiroshoji Masahiro, "Taido toshite no riarizumu: Kyūjū-nendai no Ajia bijutsu [Realism as an attitude: Asian art in the Nineties]," exh. cat., *The 4th Asian Art Show*, Fukuoka (Fukuoka: Fukuoka Art Museum, 1994), 33–38. also received his art education, he nonetheless displayed incredible sophistication in the experimentalism of his works and had generated high expectations since being selected. Navin completed a work where he interviewed residents of a nursing home for senior citizens in Fukuoka, put monochrome photographs of these elderly people into bottles, and stored them in holes of blank books filled with soil. With the words "I, my, me, mine, myself" displayed on the bottles and the walls, this seemed to express the instability of a self that interacts with people from unfamiliar communities.

The largest-scale work was *Chair*, a performance by Heri Dono, who is particular even among Indonesia's artists for having inherited the legacies of the unique traditions of his country's performing arts. Katsura Kan, a butoh dancer from Kyoto, collaborated with him on Chair, along with college students, who wore masks and costumes made by Heri Dono, and local musicians in one such performance whose theme concerned how both kings or overlords and those controlled by them are no more than manga characters or wayang puppets, resulting in a grand pageant that was the complex fusion of stage performance and shadow play, as well as human bodies and puppets. Moreover, Heri Dono's exhibited work Gamelan of Rumor consisted of about thirty electrically-wired gamelans that would randomly play sounds, a familiar yet eerie creation that drew many lingering gazes. I consider it a work that displays the artist's prime area of expertise, which lies in seeking connections between fine art and its cognate areas of culture, and an excellent creation that will secure a lasting place in the history of Asian art.

The exhibition's latter half was enlivened by Singapore's Lee Wen in his performance *Journey of a Yellow Man*, for which he painted his entire body yellow. While sometimes shifting locales to a park and downtown, he performed mainly in his installation space, using slow movements to patiently create diagrams, maps, and words with rice grains on the floor whose messages changed every day: references to a Japanese artist who had refused to participate in the exhibition due to her disagreement with the museum's "educational considerations"; a symbol reminiscent of the designs drawn on the ground in Indian villages; a direct message about the unequal distribution of food resources on the Earth. Motifs such as a cross, a red chain, or a cage

with a feathered object in it did not remain static symbols, as their meanings were constantly called into question through encountering the works of other artists, the museum's environs, and urban spaces. Lee's character, who demonstrated his cultural background without making it an imposition and silently contemplated serious issues amid a diversity of contexts, was pathetic, humorous, and moving.

Another artist in the show's latter half who carried out work especially worthy of attention was the Philippines' Antonio Leaño, whose masterpiece of a large-scale installation deserved a longer display time than a handful of days near the end of the exhibition. He took a high-ceilinged room usually used for storage and turned it into a jungle-like space by filling its concrete walls with attachments of tree branches and dried leaves. In the middle of this he placed a transparent acrylic case with water running over it into which the audience could enter. On the walls he projected slides showing photographs he had taken in Fukuoka. The work represented the claustrophobia that urbanites feel when isolated from the ferocity of nature, which he integrated with his experience of visiting Japan for the first time to express. He also exhibited paintings in the gallery of the main exhibition, whose depictions of strange beasts radiating a fiercely violent energy was sufficiently fascinating, but if he had not taken part in the Workshop, it is likely that he would have been viewed as no more than a common expressionist painter.

### UNMISSABLE FOLK ART

LET ME REPEAT that the 4th Asian Art Show was a themed exhibition that narrowed its focus, as much as possible, to emerging experimental tendencies. Since this was the case, works in Western modernism or academism and those that displayed tendencies to the symbolic or fantastic were not included, with few exceptions; traditional "high" arts (i.e., aimed at the elite) and crafts such as miniatures and murals still practiced today, as well as folk art, being fields which fall out of the scope of "contemporary art" in the Western sense, were basically excluded.

In the abovementioned categories, we cannot overlook folk art, among others, as a living art form which is rooted in the lives of common people, far more than most contemporary art. For instance, *minjian yishu* (folk arts) in China such as *nianhua* (New Year paintings) constitute an officially recognized genre at the quinquennial National Exhibition of Chinese Art, while in India many fascinating forms of folk art live amidst the religions and customs traditional to its various regions, including Mithila paintings and tantric art, the latter drawn with amazingly minimalist beauty on coarse paper. Such art is no soulless repetition of ossified traditions; it keeps evolving in response to current changes wrought by globalization and technology. A typical example of this is hyperreal contemporary *nianhua* made with offset printing. Lü Sheng-Zhong, who developed *jianzhi*, the Chinese art of paper cutting, and Roberto Feleo, whose works reference Catholic images commonly found in Filipino communities, are among the many

contemporary artists whose works are stimulated by folk art, revealing its importance in the Asian contemporary art scene.

Moreover, paintings from Bali and rickshaw paintings from Bangladesh, introduced as special sections at the 2nd and 4th Asian Art Shows respectively, which are born from common people's lives and circulate in societies, may be considered as examples of popular art peculiar to the contemporary era even if such art is not rooted in customary practices, as in the above Chinese and Indian cases, and even if it is not seen as "untainted by the West." Balinese art, which depicts dense spaces of religion, is one thing, but the unabashed readymade poster copies of rickshaw paintings and their cheap gaudiness may deter those who expect "pure tradition" from Asia; some may even claim that they are not art. But how can we deny the possibility that these works express the real dreams and desires of Bangladesh's inhabitants far more than the "tradition" that Westerners expect?<sup>12</sup> In this context, we may recall minjung misul (people's art) in South Korea after the 1980s as a peculiar example that could be deemed as "contemporary art" (even if old-fashioned in style) compared with folk art and kitsch art. We should refrain from denying even such art, which functions as political propaganda, simply because it resembles the art of a certain era (e.g. the 1950s in Japan) or because it lacks stylistic originality; instead, shouldn't we start listening to the fervent voices of our Korean neighbors in minjung misul's vast reach as a social movement, along with its criticisms of modern art in referencing traditional folk art and the idea of collective production?<sup>13</sup>

Other issues in Asian art include the relationship between political and social restrictions and exhibition practices; the positionality of Japanese art in the context of Asian art<sup>14</sup> (the roles of two Japanese artists, Fuji Hiroshi and Nakamura Masato, were particularly significant in the 4th Asian Art Show); and a comparison of the activities of Asian artists who have emerged in recent years based in Europe and the United States with those in Asia. Much more remains to be argued, but I have already exhausted the given space. I would like to end this terribly half-baked essay with a quote from Ushiroshoji, who is currently on a research trip studying the history of modern art in Southeast Asia, <sup>15</sup> which represents how curators at the Fukuoka Art Museum feel half-pleased and half-perplexed by the idea of a boom in contemporary

- 13 See the following two essays in the same catalog: Shireen Akbar, "Rickshaw Painting from Bangladesh," and Tsuzuki Etsuko, "Daughter of Modernism: A View of Rickshaw Painting," in *Rickshaw Painting from Bangladesh*, exh. cat., ed. Tsuzuki Etsuko (Fukuoka: Fukuoka Art Museum, 1994): 92–95, 96–98.
- **14** Kuroda Raiji, "Something Strange in the Cities: Three Japanese Artists Living in Japan," Ibid., 39–43.
- Asia: Artists and Movements (Fukuoka Art Museum, 1997). This exhibition was the first large-scale exhibition in Japan to introduce modern art from Indonesia, the Philippines, Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam. It toured to the Hiroshima Prefectural Art Museum, the Shizuoka Prefectural Museum of Art, and the Tokyo Metropolitan Teien Art Museum.

Asian art: "If it is a boom, it will eventually end. As was the case with *shochu*, <sup>16</sup> booms end when they destroy their subjects. Only a 'steadfastness' that is properly organized and systematized will be able to resist a boom." <sup>17</sup>

- **16** *Shochu* (Japanese distilled liquor made from wheat, potato, rice, etc.) was produced mainly in southern parts of Japan (e.g. Kyushu and Okinawa), but it gained nationwide popularity in early 1990s.
- 17 Ushiroshoji Masahiro, "Dai yonkai Ajia bijutsuten o oete" [On the conclusion of the 4th Asian Art Show], *Nishinippon Shimbun*, October 22, 1994, evening edition, 15.

This text was originally published as "Ajia gendai bijutsu: 'Būmu' no omote to ura" in *Art Express*, no. 6 (Spring 1995): 32–42. Translated by Shi-Lin Loh.

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