

On the Funny Side of the Street ¹

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“Humor: A comic, absurd, or incongruous quality causing amusement.”
Random House Kernerman Webster’s College Dictionary ²

“A great power; humor was a sort of savior so to speak because, before, art was such a serious thing, so pontifical that I was very happy when I discovered that I could introduce humor into it. And that was truly a period of discovery. The discovery of humor was a liberation.”

Marcel Duchamp ³

“I’m not being purposely humorous. I do think the world is absurd.”
John Baldessari ⁴

Conceptual art has been variously described as one of the most austere, coolly rational, and highly cerebral movements of modern art. And yet, it contains absurdist elements and a wonderful irreverence that can be traced back to the Dada movement in Europe and New York City, epitomized by Marcel Duchamp’s “readymades”.⁵ Duchamp (1887-1968) has been called the forefather of Conceptual art, but according to the art critic, Martin Gayford, in his 2008 article for *The Telegraph*, he could also be considered the ultimate prankster. Duchamp, in fact, carried out “the practical joke that launched an artistic revolution”⁶ when he took a porcelain urinal, laid it on its back, and, by bestowing it with the signature “R. MUTT 1917” and the ironic title of *Fountain*, declared it as a work of art. Duchamp’s decision to submit *Fountain* to a New York exhibition in 1917 was not only provocative, but also a humorous attack on the prevailing art conventions of the time. This one revolutionary act called into question what should and could be considered “art” and whether the artist had to

(Opposite) Alfred Stieglitz
Fountain (photograph of
assisted readymade by
Marcel Duchamp). 1917.
Gelatin silver print. ©Suc-
cession Marcel Duchamp
(2015), ADAGP/Paris,
SODRAC (2015)/Mon-
tréal, © Georgia O’Keeffe
Museum (2015).



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create the actual art object with his own hands. In addition, by presenting the urinal as a “work of art”, Duchamp also asserted that the artist’s idea or concept held greater importance than the finished object.

Marcel Duchamp’s readymades were the product of a discourse initiated by the Dadaists who questioned the nature of art as well as the notion that the art object is more important than the idea behind it. This discourse is continued today by the Conceptual art movement where, as Lucy Lippard has described it, the dematerialization of the art object⁷ has found its apogee. The humorous and absurdist elements that both the Dadaists and Duchamp employed have been taken up by a number of Conceptual artists, in particular, the California-based American artist, John Baldessari (1931 – present). In my opinion, he is Duchamp’s “prankster in crime” and a worthy successor to Duchamp’s ironic sensibilities and impish wit, bringing much needed humor and irreverence into his Conceptual works. This can be seen in two of his videos from the 1970s: *John Baldessari Sings LeWitt* and *Teaching a Plant the Alphabet*. The incongruous nature of their subject matter and their ostensible simplicity that borders on the banal gives both videos an absurdist quality that is laugh-out-loud funny. As with Duchamp’s readymades, these videos illustrate that humor can be just as cerebral, subversive, and thought-provoking as the sometimes dry, intellectual instructions and theories that are prevalent in LeWittian-based Conceptual art practiced by other Conceptual artists. It is my contention that humor – particularly of the absurdist, ironic, and irreverent variety – is a much needed “liberator” for works of art, specifically Conceptual art. This type of humor has been used to great effect by John Baldessari throughout his Conceptual art practice.

In order to trace the origins of absurdity and humor in Conceptual art, it is necessary to examine the direct lineage between the Dada movement (1916-1924) and Conceptual art of the 1960s and 1970s, using irreverent, ironic, and absurd elements as the key. In addition, an exploration of the correlations between the socio-political conditions, surrounding Dadaism during and after World War I and Conceptualism during the turbulent 1960s and 1970s, will be necessary. Both movements were a reaction to their tumultuous periods of history and yet they each appear to have established many of the same irreverent and humorous anti-aesthetic art strategies.

While Dadaism was a relatively short-lived art movement, it was international in scope with branches in Zurich, Berlin, Hanover, Cologne, and Paris, as well as in New York City. In the art historical canon, it was one of the few art movements (until Conceptual art) to use irreverent humor and parody as an art strategy. Dada as a group was provocative and politically

subversive, as well as being anti-capitalism, anti-rationalism, anti-bourgeois, anti-aesthetic art, and against art's commodification.⁸ Not surprisingly, they were vehemently nihilistic, particularly in Europe where, because of World War I, the socio-political climate was both tumultuous and chaotic. Laurent Le Bon, the curator of the Dada exhibition that took place at the Centre Pompidou Paris in 2005, made the key point that without World War I, there would have been no Dada.⁹ The catastrophic horrors of World War I (1914-1918), ironically named "the war to end all wars", was fought on European soil by 65 million soldiers, of which 8.5 million were killed and a further 21 million were wounded.¹⁰ It signaled the end of the euphoria associated with the Machine Age, which the Dadaists believed was responsible for producing the "War Machine" and its ensuing industrial-scale carnage.¹¹ To escape the horror, many artists and poets flocked to neutral Switzerland, where they formed a club at the Café Voltaire in Zurich. This became the birthplace of Dada, where like-minded individuals united by their revulsion of the war, used provocative and absurdist performances, such as reciting verse without words, nonsensical sound poems, and chance poetry readings comprised of random selections from a phone book, with the stated intent to shock their bourgeois audience out of their complacency.¹² These were the precursors to Conceptual art's "happenings" and "performance events" of the 1960s.

Unlike other art movements, there was no one "Dada-style" per se, this aspect which Dada has in common with Conceptual art. Yet, in spite of the diverse range of their artistic output, the group was unified in their contempt for the prevailing traditional and rational art conventions, the so-called "High Art". They manifested this disdain by undermining and stripping away the aura of "art" itself, with the use of highly political and subversive subject matter, along with satirical and humorous wordplay.¹³ Another innovative and influential art strategy employed particularly by the Berlin Dadaists was through the appropriation of found objects such as rubbish from the streets (bus tickets, discarded toys, cigarette packets, and candy wrappers) for their artworks, and in so doing, they developed a new collage technique that they called photomontage.¹⁴ In typically nonsensical Dada fashion, this type of art strategy served to elevate "trash" into the Dadaesque version of "High Art".¹⁵ Owing to the chaotic absurdity of their times, it was only natural that they would produce art works that not only reflected this absurdity, but which were also humorously infused with satire, irony, and irreverence.

The New York Dada group, which included such artists as Marcel Duchamp, Francis Picabia, and Man Ray, was less overtly political than their

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European counterparts, but it had a similar ironic and irreverent sensibility, in addition to sharing the same “anti-aesthetic, anti-rational and anti-idealistic” viewpoints as the European Dadaists.¹⁶ The New York Dada group also issued a challenge and critique to the prevailing conventions of “High Art” and notions of good taste, by producing art works that appropriated found objects, amongst them Duchamp’s infamous urinal, the aforementioned *Fountain*.

When Duchamp submitted *Fountain* to the Society of Independent Artists exhibition in New York in 1917, it was refused, not only because it was a man’s urinal and therefore “vulgar”, but also because it had not been created by the artist “with his own hands.”¹⁷ *Fountain* ended up hidden behind a screen for the duration of the exhibition.¹⁸ Not long after, Duchamp took *Fountain* so that it could be photographed by the American photographer Alfred Stieglitz. The resulting photograph (figure 1), is the only remaining image of *Fountain*, as the original urinal was purportedly thrown in the garbage at Stieglitz’s studio.¹⁹ Duchamp, using the pseudonym “R. Mutt”, responded to the controversy surrounding *Fountain* by writing this in the 1917 Dadaist publication, *Blind Man* (which included the Stieglitz image):

*Whether Mr. Mutt with his own hands made the fountain or not has no importance. He CHOSE it. He took an ordinary article of life, placed it so that its useful significance disappeared under the new title and point of view — created a new thought for that object.*²⁰

By irreverently naming the urinal *Fountain*, Duchamp ensured that it would no longer simply be a urinal in the eyes of the viewer, but an art object that was unintentionally (on Duchamp’s part) aesthetically pleasing. When looking at Stieglitz’s image, one must admit that *Fountain* does possess an incredible beauty in its form. Furthermore, in the most amusing and paradoxical twist of all, given the urinal’s controversial origins, a survey was conducted in December 2004 amongst 500 artists, curators, critics and dealers, in which *Fountain* was acknowledged as the most important and influential work of art of the 20th century.²¹

As previously mentioned, Duchamp has been acclaimed as the forefather of Conceptual art, in that for him the artist’s idea was the key aspect rather than any resulting visual output. This was the premise behind Conceptual art of the 1960s and 1970s, where the concept and the process was paramount, rather than the material object itself. In fact, with some Conceptual art, there was at times, no finished object. This strategy is clearly outlined in the Conceptual art manifesto, Sol LeWitt’s *Sentences on Conceptual Art*.²² In addition, a work’s title, which was often a pun or play on words, became one of the key components of a Conceptual artwork, as

it had been previously for the Dadaists and Marcel Duchamp. The title of an artwork invites the viewer to step into the space between a work and its name, and come to their own conclusions and as Duchamp suggests, “create a new thought” about that work.²³ The other key legacy of Dada and Duchamp is that both the artwork and particularly the title can also include elements of nonsensical humor, irony, and irreverence.

Why did Conceptual art embrace those same Dadaesque strategies? In 1964, Bob Dylan sang the protest anthem, *The Times They Are A-Changin’* which was a reflection of the social upheaval taking place during the 1960s in the United States.²⁴ The emergence of Conceptual art in the 1960s coincided with civil unrest and demonstrations on an unprecedented scale – protesting against racism and for civil rights, for women’s rights, as well as the anti-Vietnam War movement. Student protests on university campuses went from peaceful “sit-ins” in the early 1960s to violent conflagrations, culminating in the shooting deaths of four students by the National Guard at Kent State University in 1970. The Sixties also saw a five year period from 1963-1968, where key American figures such as President John F. Kennedy, Malcom X, Martin Luther King and Robert Kennedy were assassinated.

As had happened during the Dada period, war became the predominant socio-political factor during the 1960s and early 1970s. With the advent of nightly television news, the Vietnam War (1965-1973) became the first televised war. Thus the war and all its horrors, including the atrocities on both sides along with the mounting number of American casualties, entered into people’s homes on a nightly basis. As Marshall McLuhan so succinctly put it: “Television brought the brutality of war into the comfort of the living room. Vietnam was lost in the living rooms of America - not on the battlefields of Vietnam.”²⁵ Given this tumultuous backdrop, it is hardly surprising that, as the art critic and curator Jorg Heiser suggests, Conceptual art emerged in the mid-1960s because purely aesthetic and commodified art was no longer appropriate against the horrific backdrop of the Vietnam War.²⁶ Interestingly, like the Dadaists before them, some Conceptual artists looked at the social turmoil and absurdity swirling around them and turned to humor in all its many facets to create humorously ironic and irreverent art. One of those artists was John Baldessari, who is widely acknowledged as one of the leading Conceptual artists of his generation.

Baldessari’s Conceptual art practice began in earnest in 1970 at a local Californian crematorium where he cremated all of his paintings created between the years 1953 and 1966. He entitled this performance event, the *Cremation Project* (1970). Over 100 paintings were incinerated. The resulting ashes were placed in an urn and even baked into cookies.²⁷ Typical

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Fig. 2. JOHN BALDESSARI, *Everything is Purged...*, 1966-68, Acrylic on canvas, 68 x 56.5 inches. Courtesy of the artist and Marian Goodman Gallery.

of Baldessari's deadpan and playful sense of humor, he later wrote (in a letter to a critic): "I really think it is my best piece to date."²⁸ In the early 70s, he began to embrace the then new technology of experimental video and in 1972 he created two iconic Conceptual videos: *John Baldessari Sings LeWitt* and *Teaching a Plant the Alphabet*.

In *John Baldessari Sings LeWitt*, in a deadpan and serious manner, he sings a cappella all thirty-five sentences of LeWitt's *Sentences on Conceptual Art* to popular tunes from the Great American songbook.²⁹ At the beginning of the video, Baldessari explains that his reason for singing LeWitt's Conceptual art theories is that he wants these sentences to "escape" because they "have been hidden too long in the pages of exhibition catalogues," and by singing them, he would help them reach a much larger audience.³⁰ Baldessari insists that his performance is a tribute to Sol LeWitt,

but one cannot help feeling that a punchline is waiting to be revealed. By using humor and song, Baldessari is indeed “liberating” LeWitt’s words from the printed page. The incongruity of taking this seminal Conceptual art manifesto and juxtaposing it with popular music, by singing each of the sentences to a different popular song, including the *Star Spangled Banner*, *Some Enchanted Evening*, *Singing in the Rain*, amongst others, is hilarious. However, there is a deliberately gentle silliness to the whole exercise and I concur with Russell Ferguson when he suggests, that it “reflects Baldessari’s doubts about his own (or anyone’s) capacity to speak from a position of authority on art.”³¹

Baldessari’s fascination with the absurd is even more pronounced in a second video, *Teaching a Plant the Alphabet*, which as the title suggests, is an exercise in futility. In the video, a very ordinary plant is perched on top of a stool and the artist holds up a series of twenty-six flashcards, each with a letter of the alphabet. He repeats each letter to the “pupil”, a common houseplant, who unsurprisingly does not display any interest in, or comprehension of, the rote instruction. Humor is often created by putting numerous incongruous elements at play and this video is a clear example of that technique. But despite the humor, is there a message behind Baldessari’s self-described “educational” video? He has suggested in a number of interviews that in spite of being a highly regarded and influential art professor at the Californian Institute of Arts (CalArts) and University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) for four decades, he has concluded that it is impossible to teach art. I would suggest that perhaps *Teaching a Plant the Alphabet* reflects the view that teaching the alphabet to a lowly houseplant is as futile and impossible as trying to “teach” art to people. However, according to Baldessari, it was done during “the hippy times” when there were books available on how to communicate with plants, so this video was simply a reflection of the times.³² Nevertheless, he did push communication with plants to its most nonsensical and amusing extreme by deciding, in his words, to “start with the alphabet and then we’ll talk.”³³

Much of Baldessari’s early Conceptual works were language and text-based paintings. Using Conceptual strategies, the words on these canvases are mostly appropriated text and drawing a direct line from Duchamp’s practice of appropriation, even the writing on the canvases is not done by his hand; instead he employed professional sign writers to paint the words on plain stretched canvas. Once again, he employs his deadpan, impish and ironic humor to great effect in the text-based painting from 1966, *EVERYTHING IS PURGED FROM THIS PAINTING BUT ART, NO IDEAS HAVE ENTERED THIS WORK*, (figure 2). When first reading the mischievous

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and comic title, it is hard to keep from giggling, as it seems that Baldessari is lampooning Conceptual art pretentiousness. What makes the painting so hilarious at first glance is that this is a Conceptual art work mocking itself and even denying that it is actually Conceptual art.³⁴ Ultimately, this work questions not only the conventions of how art should be made and the craftsmanship aspect (did the artist's hand touch it?), but it also revisits the essential question that Duchamp had posed with *Fountain* and that is, "what qualifies as art?" Like Duchamp, Baldessari's work is always a little bit off-center, where the familiar has a slight twist, and challenges the viewer to think about things differently. Or, as Baldessari said about Duchamp, "he plants the bomb and runs" leaving the viewer to interpret the work.³⁵ The same can be said about Baldessari's work. He also "plants a bomb" with the intention of allowing the viewer to come to their own conclusions about his work once they have finished chuckling. Baldessari accomplishes this by employing an absurd and irreverent world-view to his Conceptual art works, unlike the austere rationality utilized by other Conceptual art practitioners.

In conclusion, as Heather Diack suggests, the study of art history appears to have a certain reservation about taking humor in art seriously or "as an issue of aesthetic consideration and art historical research."³⁶ This is rather ironic, given the central role that humor, in all its aspects, has played in the art practices of Dada, Marcel Duchamp, and John Baldessari. As we have seen, the socio-political conditions during the Dada era and during the 1960's when the Conceptual art movement began were so tumultuous and chaotic that the liberating power of humor and satire was injected into their respective art practices and used as a mechanism to point out the absurdity of the world around them. Baldessari has described this as the "serious unseriousness" of his art.³⁷ His Conceptual art works have illustrated that humor can be just as cerebral and thought-provoking as the more rational, drily intellectual works that have been produced by other Conceptual art practitioners and I would suggest, perhaps even more so because they draw the viewer in by making them laugh. From the beginning of his Conceptual art practice, John Baldessari has always walked on the "funny side of the street", and this continues to guide and govern his art practice to the present day.

Endnotes

- 1 The essay title is a twist on the song title *On the Sunny Side of the Street*, 1930, from the Great American Songbook. It is in tribute to John Baldessari's song

- selections when he is singing LeWitt.
- 2 Free Online Dictionary, Random House Kernerman Webster's College Dictionary, © 2010 K Dictionaries Ltd. Copyright 2005, 1997, 1991 by Random House, Inc. All rights reserved. Accessed October 10, 2014. <http://www.thefreedictionary.com/humour>
- 3 Transcript of Radio Canada television interview with Marcel Duchamp July 17, 1960 (translated by Sarah Skinner Kilborne), accessed October 11, 2014. http://www.toutfait.com/issues/volume2/issue_4/interviews/md_guy/md_guy.html
- 4 Julie Belcove, "Interview with artist John Baldessari", *Financial Times*, September 6, 2013, accessed October 11, 2014, <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/2/3a58622a-13c0-11e3-9289-00144feabdco.html#axzz3FZPkgVRF>
- 5 Marcel Duchamp, "Apropos of Readymades," in *Marchand du Sel / Salt seller: the writings of Marcel Duchamp*, ed Michel Sanouillet and Elmer Peterson, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973), 141-142.
- 6 Martin Rayford, "Duchamp's Fountain: The practical joke that launched an artistic revolution", *The Telegraph*, February 16, 2008, accessed September 25, 2014, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/art/3671180/Duchamps-Fountain-The-practical-joke-that-launched-an-artistic-revolution.html>
- 7 Lucy Lippard, "Escape Attempts," in *Six years: the dematerialization of the art object from 1966 to 1972*, (New York: Praegar, 1973), vii-xxii.
- 8 Ernestine Daubner, Lecture Notes –ARTH 367: "Aspects of 20th Century Art – Modernism, the Historical Avant-Garde and Other Revolutionary Art Practices", (Concordia University Fall semester 2012).
- 9 Paul Trachtman, "Dada. The irreverent, rowdy revolution set the trajectory of 20th-century art", *Smithsonian magazine*, May 2006, accessed October 18, 2014, <http://www.smithsonianmag.com/arts-culture/dada-115169154/?no-ist..> "Without World War I there is no Dada," says Laurent Le Bon, the curator of the Pompidou Center's show. "But there's a French saying, 'Dada explains the war more than the war explains Dada.'"
- 10 PBS: *WWI Casualty and Death Tables*, http://www.pbs.org/greatwar/resources/casdeath_pop.html, accessed October 10, 2014. Note that the total

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- figures vary and are in dispute, but these figures seem to be consistent with most sources.
- 11 Lecture Notes –ARTH 367: Aspects of 20th Century Art. SEE COMMENTS IN FOOTNOTE 8
- 12 Ibid. Also Trachtman, “Dada. The irreverent, rowdy revolution set the trajectory of 20th-century art”.
- 13 Daubner, Lecture Notes – ARTH 367: Aspects of 20th Century Art.
- 14 Fred S. Kleiner, *Gardner’s Art through the Ages: The Western Perspective*. 13th ed. (Australia, Brazil, Japan, Korea, Mexico, Singapore, Spain, United Kingdom, United States: Wadsworth Cengage Learning, 2010). 707.
- 15 Ibid., 708.
- 16 “Dada and Surrealism, Introduction”, *Oxford Art Online*, accessed October 4, 2014, <http://www.oxfordartonline.com/public/page/themes/dadaandsurrealism>
- 17 Marcel Duchamp, “The Richard Mutt Case”, *Blind Man* (New York) 2 (1917): 5.
- 18 Rayford, “Duchamp’s Fountain: The practical joke that launched an artistic revolution”.
- 19 Ibid. Author’s note: in email correspondence with Antoine Monnier of the Association Marcel Duchamp in Paris, it seems that photos exist that show *Fountain* in Duchamp’s atelier. There is some uncertainty as to whether these photos were taken before or after the Society of Independent Artists exhibition in New York in 1917. Antoine Monnier feels that is probable that the original *Fountain* was still extant after the exhibition and after Stieglitz’s photo.
- 20 Duchamp, “The Richard Mutt Case”, 5.
- 21 “Work of art that inspired a movement ... a urinal”, *The Guardian*, December 2, 2004, accessed October 4, 2014, <http://www.theguardian.com/uk/2004/dec/02/arts.artsnews1>
- 22 Sol LeWitt, “Sentences on Conceptual Art”, *ART LANGUAGE: THE JOURNAL OF CONCEPTUAL ART*, 1.1 (May 1969), 11-13.
- 23 Duchamp, “The Richard Mutt Case”, 5.
- 24 Bob Dylan, *The Times They Are A-Changin’*, Copyright © 1963, 1964 by Warner Bros. Inc.; renewed 1991, 1992 by Special Rider Music, accessed October 25, 2014, <http://www.bobdylan.com/ca/node/25833>
- 25 “Vietnam War.” *Oxford Essential Quotations*, edited by Ratcliffe, Susan.: Oxford

- University Press, accessed October 25, 2014, <http://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/aref/9780191735240.001.0001/q-oro-00011177>
- 26 Jorg Heiser, "Emotional Rescue: Romantic Conceptualism", *Frieze Magazine* 71 (Winter 2002): 146-149. Heiser writes, "... one of the reasons why Conceptual art developed in the mid-1960s was a disgust with the beautiful commodifications of art in the face of the Vietnam War."
- 27 Jennifer Mundy, "Lost Art: John Baldessari", Tate Gallery website, accessed October 25, 2014, <http://www.tate.org.uk/context-comment/articles/lost-art-john-baldessari>
- 28 Ibid.
- 29 Great American Songbook Foundation, <http://www.thecenterfortheperformingarts.org/Great-American-Songbook-Initiative/About-the-Great-American-Songbook>, 4 October 2014.
- 30 Words taken from watching the video clip, *John Baldessari Sings LeWitt*, accessed September 27, 2014, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q6eSfKeJ_VM
- 31 Russell Ferguson, "Unreliable Narrator", (excerpt) in *John Baldessari. Pure Beauty*, eds. Jessica Morgan and Leslie Jones (London: Tate Modern; Barcelona: Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona; Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum of Art; New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2009), 93. Note: this excerpt was found on the website for the Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona, accessed October 19, 2014, <http://www.macba.cat/>
- 32 Jessica Morgan, "Interview. Somebody to talk to, John Baldessari", Tate Gallery, 1 September 2009, accessed October 12, 2014, <http://www.tate.org.uk/context-comment/articles/somebody-talk>
- 33 Jessica Morgan, "Interview. Somebody to talk to, John Baldessari", Tate Gallery, 1 September 2009, accessed October 12, 2014, <http://www.tate.org.uk/context-comment/articles/somebody-talk>
- 34 "No More Boring Art John Baldessari's crusade", *The New Yorker*, October 18 2010, accessed October 11, 2014, <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2010/10/18/no-more-boring-art>
- 35 Interview with John Baldessari (1973) by Moira Roth, X-TRA online, accessed October 18, 2014, <http://x-traonline.org/>

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- article/interview-with-john-baldessari-1973/
- 36 Heather Diack. "The Gravity of Levity: Humour as Conceptual Critique", *Revue d'art canadienne / Canadian Art Review* [Online], Volume 37 Number 1 (13 August 2012): 75.
- 37 Moira Roth, X-TRA online, accessed October 18, 2014, <http://x-traonline.org/article/interview-with-john-baldessari-1973/>

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