

NORMALITY



HITO STEYERL

Hito Steyerl *Normality*

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Introduction

Normality centres on earlier works of Hito Steyerl, in which the artist examines the diverse societal dynamics and tensions that emerged following German reunification in the 1990s and early 2000s. Steyerl's video essays and documentaries explore the political interplay of burgeoning nationalism and neoliberalism at a time when West German managers were stripping East Germany like a bankrupt company, Berlin's new centre became a capital and investment project built on wage dumping, and politicians from the conservative camp rekindled debates around cultural hegemony. The political developments of that era are presented in the exhibition as one of the breeding grounds for the rise of right-wing movements and the increase in far-right violence that persists to this day. The exhibition notably emphasises the intricate historical relationship between antisemitism and racism in Germany, highlighting how these forces continuously interact.

The exhibition is deliberately staged in the last quarter of the 2024 election year, when the AfD (Alternative for Germany), a far-right extremist party, has made significant electoral gains in Saxony, Thuringia, and Brandenburg. Within this context, the exhibition confronts the now normalised rise of right-wing parties and populists, through Steyerl's artistic and cinematic analysis of the social backgrounds and historical prelude to their success—an event which must now be understood as part of societal normality, not just in Germany, but globally.

Normality is commonly perceived by most people as a positive category. The familiar course of things is to be preserved at (almost) any cost. However, the exhibition raises the question of what it means when what some perceive as normal becomes a threat to others. What happens when the everyday experience of xenophobia and racism is seen as a passive or active acceptance of these phenomena? What if the AfD wins with the slogan “Germany. But normal.”? Is it not time, then, to question the very concept of normality itself?

Hito Steyerl (*1966 in Munich) is an internationally renowned artist, filmmaker, and author. Her installative environments, essayistic documentaries, and writings engage with questions of media power structures and feminist critique of representation. Her work sits at the intersection of film and visual art, as well as theory and practice. Currently, her focus is on the impact of Artificial Intelligence.

Søren Grammel
Curator of the Exhibition & Director Heidelberger Kunstverein

Normality

Normality is a series of short documentaries addressing everyday antisemitic and racist violence in Germany and Austria from the mid-1990s onwards. Steyerl originally conceived the work as a limited piece of documentation, but the unfolding events and social developments led it to expand into an ongoing series—an unsettling chronicle of a new German normality. The title itself, *Normality*, encapsulates a highly problematic concept, which offers an analytical key to the understanding of the work. Normality in German society functions not merely as a passive state but as the active result of repression, instrumentalisation, and social control. Steyerl describes it as “a silent declaration of war that transforms what is considered normal into a scenario of threat, unnoticed.” Normality thus becomes a category of violence, rendering society’s handling of neo-fascist and racist attacks as ultimately acceptable because they appear commonplace. The claim to normality, as reflected in the events Steyerl documents, carries the danger of rendering the continuously inflicted and experienced violence invisible—concealed beneath the guise of the everyday and societal order.

The starting point for the series was the bombing of the grave of Heinz Galinski, former chairman of the Central Council of Jews in Germany, in September 1998. Steyerl’s camera documents the public reactions to the incident. Normality, Steyerl argues, is not merely the result of inaction, but a conscious mechanism that serves to stabilise an ideologically charged status quo. Here, the concept of violence is extended: it encompasses not only physical assaults but also the structural and media processes of repression, trivialisation, and reconciliation with the intolerable.

A paradigmatic moment of this analysis occurs in the sixth episode of the series. Here, Steyerl documents a neo-fascist march in Berlin on 12 March 2000. The right-wing demonstration passes by the construction site of the Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe—a site symbolising the remembrance of the Holo-

caust. Steyerl positions her camera in the neutral zone between the right-wing demonstrators and the left-wing counter-protesters—a security corridor guarded by the police to protect the far-right. This spatial division itself becomes a symbol of normalisation and acceptance: the state security forces act as neutral mediators, ensuring the right to assemble for a group that openly espouses racist and anti-democratic positions.

The camera angle chosen by Steyerl stands in stark contrast to the usual aesthetics of television reporting. Instead of focusing on symbolic details like the notorious combat boots—a visual trope that marginalises neo-Nazis as fringe groups and distances them from the normality of the viewers' lives—Steyerl shows the faces of the demonstrators. By portraying the right-wing demonstrators in their full presence, she denies the audience the opportunity to distance themselves. This normalisation of the faces is a critical statement: neo-Nazis are not merely the Others—they are part of the social fabric, embedded in the core of society.

Another example of this media-theoretical perspective appears in the eighth episode, where Steyerl shows an initially inconspicuous scene: the back of a Schlecker supermarket in the town of Guben. The long, static shot of this desolate, grey concrete surface might seem utterly insignificant at first glance. However, the context Steyerl provides through sober intertitles reveals the true meaning of the location: in Guben, the Algerian refugee Farid Guendoul was chased through the town by a group of neo-Nazis on the night of 13 February 1999. Guendoul died when, in panic, he attempted to jump through a glass door to escape and fatally injured one of his arteries. Through the apparent banality of the visual language, which avoids the heroic, the dramatic, and the sensationalist appeal of typical news reporting, Steyerl exposes the violent space in all its ordinariness. There are no disaster images, no elevation of the events. The visual language remains matter-of-fact, forcing the viewer to draw their own conclusions. Instead of creating an emotional shock effect, which would be displaced by other sensations in the news cycle the next day,

Steyerl demands careful observation and reflection on what is seen, as well as the conditions that make this type of normality possible.

The video is informing the viewer of the repeated defacement of a memorial stone erected by a left-wing group for Guendoul. There are frequent calls for video surveillance, but these are consistently rejected by political authorities. Particularly revealing is the inclusion of a statement by the then-Brandenburg Interior Minister Jörg Schönbohm, which exposes the absurdity and coldness of German asylum and migration policy: Schönbohm refused to grant residency to a friend of Guendoul's, who had also been chased by the neo-Nazis that same night, on the grounds that a traumatised person could not easily integrate into the society in which they had been traumatised.

Jörg Schönbohm, a former lieutenant general and later Brandenburg's interior minister, was known for his hardline stance on asylum and migration policy. His argument reflects with chilling precision the societal normalisation of violence and the systematic exclusion of those who become its victims. Rather than acknowledging the trauma as a consequence of racist violence and taking responsibility for protecting and supporting those affected, the responsibility is shifted onto the victims themselves. This is a perverse mechanism: the rejection becomes a sign of a law-and-order normality that allows no deviation from its own rules and standards. By refusing to recognise the traumatised victim as part of a community worthy of protection, but rather as a disruptive or risk factor that does not fit into the invoked normality, a brutal reversal of the victim-perpetrator dynamic is enacted. Schönbohm's stance exemplifies the exclusionary logic of a normality that denies legitimacy to those affected by racism and far-right violence to remain in society. The rejection of the traumatised refugee symbolises a society that dismisses to acknowledge the consequences of its own violent structures. Instead, the perceived inability of the victims to integrate becomes the argument for their removal, establishing a disturbing form of normality.

By neglecting to grant Guendoul's friend residency, normality becomes a space in which violence against marginalised groups is not only rendered invisible but also serves as the basis for their exclusion and delegitimisation. This normality legitimises and even perpetuates the continuation of violence by integrating the perpetrators into the social consensus and further marginalising the victims.

By showing everyday sites of violence and emphasising the monotonous regularity of these events on both the visual and montage level, Steyerl denies the viewer the feeling of estrangement from these occurrences. The viewer must admit that this is part of their own reality. This perspective brings societal responsibility to the forefront: the cracks and contradictions that emerge within the supposedly stable normality become visible in Steyerl's work, highlighting that it is not enough to expel the perpetrators as fringe elements. Rather, it is normality itself—as a space where political forms of violence not only occur but also flourish—that must be questioned, deconstructed, and radically rethought. Steyerl's video work is thus more than just a documentary account of right-wing terror: it is a media intervention that reveals the mechanisms of visibility and invisibility, of normalisation and repression, and fundamentally questions the boundaries of what is considered normal.

Normality 1, 1999, 3 mins.

Normality 2, 1999, 5 mins.

Normality 5, 1999, 4 mins.

Normality 6, 2000, 6 mins.

Normality 8, 2000, 6 mins.

Normality 9, 2000, 7 mins.

Beta SP, colour, sound, transferred to DVD

Supported by Stefan Landorf, Jochen Becker, and many others

The Empty Centre

The sharp clang of chisels striking concrete sets the tone as *The Empty Centre* opens. We are immediately confronted with images of Berlin's former death strip, just after the fall of the Wall that separated the German Democratic Republic from Western Germany from 1961 until 1989. Once a desolate wasteland, this strip of land—emptied of its original function in 1989—suddenly became the most sought-after real estate in a reunited Germany. As Hito Steyerl notes in the film, the centre returned. But this centre became a battleground for competing economic and political interests, and it serves as a canvas upon which Steyerl explores the social tensions and upheavals of the post-reunification period. Taking the transformation of Potsdamer Platz as a key example, *The Empty Centre* reflects on the creation of a new order and the recurring cycles of exclusion and discrimination that run through German history.

The film blends documentary footage with sampled television clips and historical detours, explained through photos, filmed documents, and illustrations. Steyerl's video essay also includes interactions and interviews with people in public spaces. She overlays archival footage of the Berlin Wall with images of the new construction sites at Potsdamer Platz, illustrating the conflicting interests during the transition period after the Wall came down. Where military force once erased the centre of the city, now the dictates of corporate growth and global investors dominate the space. Steyerl draws striking parallels between the German history of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. A prime example of this is the planned administrative building by Daimler-Benz. This company was part of Hitler's motorisation programme, announced near Potsdamer Platz in 1933. After reunification, Daimler-Benz acquired large areas of land at low prices, which led to the eviction of a left-wing protest camp briefly occupying the former no-man's land. This episode reveals how, throughout German history, similar social dynamics resurface, with the same power brokers benefitting under the guise of official policy.

The chisels are soon replaced by the deafening roar of jackhammers as Steyerl shows how the former death strip became Berlin's new centre, mirroring the city's post-World War I reorganisation. But this centre is neither neutral nor devoid of history: the rapid transformation of Berlin from wasteland to commercial hub creates winners, but also new losers. On one side, we see migrant workers toiling for low wages; on the other, union members of the IG Bau hunting down their foreign colleagues. The film features migrants speaking out about their experiences, and their testimonies—along with footage of attacks on migrants and neo-Nazi demonstrations—highlighting how deeply rooted xenophobia remains. Rather than showing solidarity with the marginalised, society turns to hostility as a response to its own powerlessness. Hatred becomes a mechanism to protect the wealthy and powerful from the inequalities they perpetuate. Steyerl notes the eerie similarity to the outrage over the employment of foreign workers during the Reichstag's construction, when social discontent was once again misdirected towards migrants rather than those in power. Steyerl draws a powerful link between past and present forms of racism, showing how exclusionary tactics have historically been used to deflect social tensions and maintain the status quo. Her film highlights the cyclical nature of power interests, exploiting vulnerable groups while keeping them pitted against each other to maintain control.

The Empty Centre demonstrates how the economic and social changes after 1990 fuelled a resurgence of nationalist and racist sentiments. Rising unemployment and a sense of inequality, particularly in East Germany, led to widespread disillusionment with democratic institutions and the free market. In this atmosphere, societal spaces emerged around strikes and leisure activities that allowed far-right groups to present themselves as an alternative, with racist slogans providing easy answers. Neo-Nazis from West Germany deliberately moved east after reunification to exploit the frustrations of the local population. The film shows that this social insecurity didn't lead to political reflection but instead deepened nationalist and racist ideologies. Nationalism,

Steyerl argues, became a form of ideological escape, a way to avoid confronting the real political and economic causes of people's declining social status.

In a powerful historical parallel, Steyerl examines the Berlin Customs Wall, which encircled the city from the 18th century and classified people based on their origins. Like the Berlin Wall, this earlier barrier divided people, reducing some to mere commodities. A chilling entry in the Rosenthal Gate's records lists "six oxen, seven pigs, and one Jew"—a stark reminder of how dehumanising attitudes have long permeated society. Steyerl connects this episode to the history of the Mendelssohn family, whose music serves as a recurring theme in the film. Moses Mendelssohn once passed through Rosenthal Gate after initially being turned away, treated as subhuman. This echoes the experience of migrants today, who, like the Mendelssohns in the 18th century, are marginalised despite contributing to society. Steyerl further explores how the Mendelssohn Palace, once a private residence, became a provisional home for the Reichstag after the fall of the German Empire. This transformation symbolises the erasure of Jewish cultural history and its absorption into the broader narrative of German nationalism. The episode challenges far-right conspiracies claiming "Jewish influence", showing instead how the power structure co-opted and erased Jewish contributions to Berlin's heritage.

A particularly striking sequence in the film revisits the Berlin Conference of 1884, where European powers drew colonial borders across Africa with rulers, dividing its resources and people to serve their own interests. Steyerl draws a parallel to multinational corporations modern economic colonisation of Berlin. Just as Africa's wealth was exploited, Berlin's land has been claimed by corporate giants like Daimler-Benz after reunification. Steyerl challenges viewers to reflect on these connections and consider how colonialist and capitalist interests shape the urban landscape until today. Through this essayistic approach, Steyerl critiques the extractivist mindset that views everything—whether

urban space, human beings, or natural resources—as exploitable. This mentality explains why foreign workers have been continuously recruited to Germany but never fully integrated into society. She highlights how, during both World Wars, colonial subjects and foreign soldiers were used as cannon fodder for German interests. The film documents the life of Bayume Mohammed Hussein, a Tanzanian who served in the German colonial army in World War I and later worked as a waiter in Berlin. Despite his service, Hussein was confined to the margins and eventually murdered in a concentration camp during the Nazi regime. His story, like those of many others, shows how foreign workers were always exploited but never accepted as equal members of society.

In focusing on Potsdamer Platz, *The Empty Centre* reveals how quickly the void of the death strip was filled by capital and power interests, reigniting social inequality and xenophobia. Steyerl uncovers unsettling historical parallels to colonialism and fascism, raising the question of whether anything has truly changed in Berlin's new centre—or if invisible walls of exclusion still persist.

The Empty Centre, 1998, 16 mm transferred to DVD, colour, sound, 62 minutes

Music:	Felix Mendelssohn, Friedrich Hollaender
Producer:	Su Turhan
Voice-over:	Hatice Ayten
Recording:	Meike Birck, Hito Steyerl, Boris Schafgans
Texts by:	Siegfried Kracauer, Friedrich Hollaender
Produced by:	University of Television and Film Munich
Protagonists:	Dong Yang, Huan Zhu, squatters at Potsdamer Platz, construction workers' union, and many others

Babenhausen

Babenhausen is a short video film recorded in 1997, addressing the antisemitic incitement and violence against the Jewish Merin family in Babenhausen, Hesse. The work draws on the speech of an antifascist activist delivered at a rally that same year, recounting the story of Tony Abraham Merin. For decades, his family had been the target of intimidation, vandalism, and death threats. These attacks culminated in an arson attack on the family's house, shortly after Merin—as the last Jewish resident of Babenhausen—had emigrated.

Steyerl uses the audio recording of this speech as the soundtrack, combining it with imagery that takes on an almost reportage-like quality. The camera shows the family's house, defaced with antisemitic slogans and swastikas, and burned down by right-wing extremists. Rather than renovating or demolishing the house, Merin decided to leave it as a ruin. In Steyerl's work, this is portrayed as a form of resistance; an unintended memorial that forces the village community to confront its own past and the persistent antisemitic attitudes. By placing the ruin of the house at the centre of her depiction, the building becomes a symbol of the resilient presence of Jewish memory and, simultaneously, of the village's failure to actively engage with this history. For instance, Adolf Hitler was not officially stripped of his honorary citizenship in Babenhausen until 2021. Historically, this work can be placed in the late 1990s, a time when far-right violence and antisemitic attacks in Germany and Austria once again became the focus of public attention. Steyerl had already documented such events in other works, such as the video series *Normality* (1998–1999), also shown in this exhibition, which critically reflects on society's response to right-wing violence. In *Babenhausen*, Steyerl shows that such acts are not isolated incidents but are deeply embedded in the social fabric of German communities. The work highlights how elements of the Nazi past continue to live on in the collective consciousness of post-war society and exert an influence on the present.

*Babenhause*n can be seen as a precursor to Steyerl's later works, which repeatedly explore the connection between history, collective memory, and contemporary violence. Formally, *Babenhause*n employs a reduced, static visual language, already foreshadowing the style of later works from this period. The work uses simple, restrained camera shots that invite the viewers to reflect on the depicted violence, deliberately avoiding sensationalism. This visual restraint reinforces the sense that the violence shown is part of a normality that has become entrenched in everyday life, reflecting the characteristic presence of right-wing violence in post-reunified Germany.

*Babenhause*n, 1997, Beta SP, colour, sound, transferred to DVD, 4 minutes

Is the Museum a Battlefield?

Hito Steyerl's lecture-performance *Is the Museum a Battlefield?*, presented at the 2013 Istanbul Biennial, examines the connections between art institutions, flows of capital, geopolitical power dynamics, and the instruments of violence used to enforce these structures.

The material from the lecture was developed into a video installation presented as a two-channel display: on one screen, the artist is seen performing her lecture, while on the other, images and videos—both self-recorded and sourced from the internet—appear complementing the spoken narrative. This material was slightly edited in post-production. The design of the installation itself makes a powerful statement, with sandbags serving as seating—a deliberate symbol evoking military defence, visually reinforcing the allegory of the museum as a battlefield.

At the start of the presentation, Steyerl poses the central question: Can a museum be a battlefield? This seemingly provocative question leads to an in-depth analysis of the entanglement between cultural institutions and the structures of global capitalism as well as the interests of the arms industry. Steyerl demonstrates that museums and exhibitions do not operate in isolation but are intricately linked to economic and political power structures.

The ostensibly neutral space of art is, in reality, a site where social and global power struggles are played out—sometimes covertly, sometimes overtly. Although this issue has been explored through the art form of institutional critique and its various iterations, Steyerl's approach is particularly personal. It draws on the story of her friend and former fellow student Andrea Wolf, who was killed in 1998 as a member of the Kurdish Workers' Party (PKK) in a clash with the Turkish military in eastern Turkey. On a later journey to the scene of this event, Steyerl found an empty bullet casing. This casing became the starting point for a line of inquiry

that led her to the American arms manufacturer Lockheed Martin. The chilling connection between the ammunition used in the conflict that claimed her friend's life and the sponsorship activities of the manufacturer in the art world unfolds gradually: Lockheed Martin was a co-sponsor of the Istanbul Biennial, for which Steyerl developed the first version of her work. The manufacturer also had links to the Art Institute of Chicago, where an earlier work by Steyerl on Wolf had been exhibited before—a connection the artist was unaware of at the time.

These interconnections almost form a closed circuit, which Steyerl describes using the image of the loop (also a reference to the video technique of looping). The ammunition used on the battlefield returns as a symbolic entity to the art and museum world, which benefits from the financial support of this industry. The figure of the loop eerily exposes the economic entanglements that connect seemingly separate spheres such as art and war. As museums and biennials are also funded by arms manufacturers, the art world inevitably becomes part of a system that supports the very structures of violence it aims to critique.

This toxic cycle reveals that even the material foundations of art production are embedded within the mechanisms of global power and capital flows. The use of CAD software, common to both art and the military, further blurs the lines between artistic and military practice. The same technology used to design sculptures, exhibitions, or museum buildings is also employed to construct weapons and surveillance systems.

Lecture-performances offer a hybrid form that allows artists to combine theoretical discourse with aesthetic narrative strategies. Steyerl uses this format to further blur the already ambiguous boundaries between documentation and storytelling, reality and fiction. The actual connections and coincidences seem almost too spectacular to be true. Whether this can be objectively answered is ultimately secondary to the aesthetic experience, which is shaped by this uncertainty. Instead, Steyerl's approach

demonstrates that artistic practice, theoretical production, storytelling, and political activism do not need to be viewed as separate domains.

Is the Museum a Battlefield?, 2013, Documentation of a lecture delivered at the 13th Istanbul Biennial, 13 September 2013, Two-channel digital video, sound, sandbags, 39 minutes, 53 seconds

Research:	Necat Sunar
Translation:	Kawa Nemir, Erkal Ünal
Crew:	Selim Yildiz, Tina Leisch, Ali Can, Neman Kara, Siyar, Sahin Okay, Apo, Christoph Manz, Maximilian Schmötzer, Leon Kahane
Music:	Brian Kuan Wood
Special thanks:	Bilgin Ayata, Esme Buden, Lisa Dorin, Vül Durmosoglu, Fulya Erdemci, Hendrik Folkerts, Kevser Güler, Human Rights Film Festival Istanbul, Diana McCarty, Rabih Mroué, Andrea Phillips, Oliver Rein, Necati Sönmez, Anton Vidokle, 13th Istanbul Biennial

Strike

Strike is an example of contemporary critical video art, engaging both with media history and political discourse. The work begins with a title sequence quoting Sergei Eisenstein's famous 1925 film *Strike*. By referencing Bolshevik cinema, Steyerl positions herself as an artist within a specific tradition of critical cultural production and media reception. While Eisenstein used film as a revolutionary tool for social change, Steyerl adopts this strategy within a completely transformed media-technological context.

As the video progresses, we see the artist striking the surface of a museum-like LCD monitor with a hammer and chisel. The impact destroys the display matrix—the structural arrangement of liquid crystals—which dissolves into a kaleidoscopic pattern. This matrix, usually responsible for displaying images and videos, becomes visible in its destruction as the underlying framework of media representation. Each pixel of an LCD monitor consists of a layer of liquid crystals controlled by electrical currents. This technology enables light to pass through or be blocked at varying intensities, creating the image points that together form the visual figure we perceive. Steyerl's intervention reveals the matrix structure of the monitor, serving as a metaphor for how media shapes and influences reality. The monitor, placed on a plinth, embodies both aesthetic and societal authority, which is symbolically questioned and literally broken by the artistic act.

The deliberate destruction of the monitor in *Strike* recalls a long tradition of deconstructing visual media in video art. As early as the 1960s and 1970s, artists such as Nam June Paik and Wolf Vostell explored the destruction of media. Their works often used technical manipulation to raise awareness of materiality and ideology behind media images. Paik, for instance, would cut up or alter television sets to demonstrate that the form of the image is not natural but shaped by the technical apparatus. Steyerl draws on this tradition, yet updates it for the digital age, where the LCD panel has become the universal medium of distribution.

Media theory describes screens as interfaces that unite both materiality and immateriality. In Steyerl's *Strike*, this transition is made visible: the breaking of the LCD monitor highlights the tension between digital image production and physical reality. The fragility of the liquid crystals, emphasised by the hammer blow, is not just an aesthetic event but symbolises the fragility of the media construction of reality itself. Steyerl suggests that control over image production also means control over society's perception and interpretation of reality.

At a time when digital images have achieved unprecedented omnipresence, circulating in real time and on a massive scale through social media, Steyerl's act of destruction represents a symbolic response to the flood and overwhelming power of these media images and their impositions. Her gesture can be interpreted as a call to question the technological foundations of this image world and to break through the social conditions that manifest in the displays. The fragmentation of the matrix points to the potential for destabilising the existing media order and developing new forms of visual and political critique.

Strike, 2010, High-resolution single-channel digital video, sound, flat-screen on two floor-to-ceiling poles, 28 seconds

Team: Christoph Manz

Imprint

Exhibition

Hito Steyerl: Normality

Heidelberger Kunstverein

27 October 2024 – 19 January 2025

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Installation: Manuel Reinartz, Christian Schmuck (Prisma Fine Art Services, Karlsruhe),

Roman Anokhin, Joscha Thorn

Exhibition Address: Hauptstraße 97, 69117 Heidelberg, Germany

All loans are kindly provided by the artist and Esther Schipper, Berlin/Paris/Seoul.

In cooperation with

Rent Event Tec GmbH & LEDitgo Videowall Germany GmbH, Mannheim

Supported by

Volksbank Heidelberg

Stiftung Landesbank Baden-Württemberg

Publication

Texts: Søren Grammel

Proofreading: Fabienne Finkbeiner

Graphic Design: Benjamin Kivikoski, Bureau Progressiv, Stuttgart

Printing: ZVD-Druckerei Heidelberg

ISBN: 978-3-948096-92-2

Cover image: Still from Hito Steyerl *Die leere Mitte*, 1998, 16mm film transferred to digital video (colour, sound), duration: 62 minutes, Courtesy of the artist and Esther Schipper, Berlin/Paris/Seoul, © the artist / VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn 2024

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