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Presence Through Process:
Cultivating Embodied Understanding

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Abstract:

In *Presence Through Process: Cultivating Embodied Understanding*, I set out to re-conceptualize how art can function, situating it within a framework of the idea of importance. I suggest an understanding of importance as a figment of conscious experience, locating various personal notions of importance within a working model. Within the model, I accredit the “cosmic self” to be responsible for the impulses behind my art practice. I identify the art process as a means towards presence, going further to explore what kind of embodied understanding can be garnered through it. Invoking my work in performance and etching, I demonstrate how the longevity of the making process promotes an iterative exploration towards three “poles of importance”: attending to the qualia of experience, understanding the ontology of experience, and destabilizing societal notions of reality. I conclude with an admission of the impossibility of providing a comprehensive account of how my art functions, ending with a contemplation on how framing the world through an art lens generates boundless understandings regarding where importance is to be found in art.
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Introduction

Coming into my own understanding of what art can be for required a deconstruction of my acculturated understanding of the word *art*. I have felt as though accepted understandings of art have occluded my conception of what it means to follow the creative impulse, shaping my visions of final products before allowing me to engage in the process of creating. Drawing upon Fluxus attitudes that “the bounds of art are much wider than they have conventionally seemed, or that art and certain long established bounds are no longer very useful,” I have sought to recognize these established bounds in order to move past them towards my own understanding of what a broadened conception of art can yield.¹ Ellen Dissanayake suggests that we do away with the word “art” as a descriptor of what we’re referring to, and re-imagine it as “the faculty for making and expressing specialness,” this specialness being relative to what humans have found important.² Combining Fluxus ideas with Dissanyaké’s proposal, I have sought to shift my art practice to align with my own understanding of importance, notions of which are grounded in visceral experience.

To clarify the framework that this “making special” functions within, I outline what I currently understand importance to mean. Despite a likely disagreement between people on what is considered important, I think we can all agree that we share an acceptance of the idea of importance. I suggest that this shared notion of importance claims no ontological objectivity, but exists as an aspect of our attitude towards things, a figment of our conscious experience of the universe. This understanding of importance as a product of conscious experience is in line with the worldview of John Cage, where “the world, the real is not an object. It is a process.”

Rather than seeking an ontologically objective understanding of the world, he claims we can reach a better grasp of reality through the idea that the world ‘presents itself’ through the process of our perception.”

Understanding importance as a subjectively felt aspect of a perceived, experienced universe, we can build a clearer idea of the framework that art functions within.

**Chapter 1: What is art relative to?**

In considering importance to be a product of the experienced world, I look to my own visceral experience to locate the intuitive feeling it refers to. As I understand it, this intuitive feeling is that which compels me to act or think on something further. Reflecting on my actions in art and in life, I have begun to create a framework to understand the various ways that attitudes of importance have directed where I devote my attention.

![Figure 1. McCloud, Scott. 1993. From: Understanding Comics (p. 51). 1993.](image1)

![Figure 2. Morris, Zoë. Diagram of Importances, 2020, drawing](image2)

I have found it helpful to visualize my notions of importance as poles on a spectrum that I feel, in a sense, magnetized towards (Illustrated in Fig 2). I adopted Scott McCloud’s visualization of the realm of visual vocabulary (Fig. 1) from his book *Understanding Comics* as a structure on which

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3 John Cage, quoted in Maria Popova, “Where the Heart Beats: John Cage, Zen Buddhism, and the Inner Life of Artists,” Brain Pickings (Amazon Services, February 27, 2020), https://www.brainpickings.org/2012/07/05/where-the-heart-beats-john-cage-kay-larson/
to place my notions of importance. McCloud identifies each vertex of a triangle with the ideals of *reality*, *language*, and *the picture plane*. The space within the triangle represents the spectrum of human attempts to capture the meaning of each ideal. He states: “when an artist is drawn to one end of the chart or another, that artist may be revealing something about his or her strongest values and loyalties in art.”

Adapting McCloud’s diagram to suit a broader understanding of art making, I open up the possibility for there to be an indeterminate number of vertices defining the scope of the spectrum, each one adding a new dimension, in the geometric sense, to the shape. I also replace McCloud’s vertices with broader concepts of my own. My model retains the idea that a predilection towards any given corner of the diagram is revealing about things like values, loyalties, and attitudes of importance, which may govern one’s actions even without their conscious awareness of it. Visualizing importance as magnetic poles in a spectrum helps me situate my thoughts, actions, and art within a framework that begins to make sense of the question: what compels me to make art? I seek further clarity in Mihalyi Csikszentmihalyi and Eugene Rochberg-Halton’s notion of the “cosmic self,” described as “the portion of the self whose ultimate goal is the larger harmony of things. One might say it is the portion of the self involved in the creation, discovery, or embodiment of the laws of the universe, the cosmos.”

Understanding my actions within my proposed framework of importance gives shape to the goals of the “cosmic self,” grounding a search for an ineffable understanding of my relationship to the universe within intelligible terms.

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It is specifically the poles of importance that are of concern to the cosmic self (as opposed to the personal and social selves) that I am concerned with within the scope of my art practice. That is to say, I am concerned with the impulses to understand the nature of experience as, put concisely by Carl Sagan, “a way for the cosmos to know itself.” I take this quote to refer to an individual effort to understand the larger harmony of things through attention to one’s own experience of it. To offer legitimacy to the claim that we can know about the universe by attending to the nature of our experience, I bring up Csikzentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton’s claim that “just as electromagnetic laws govern energy, so these laws direct psychic energy,” where psychic energy refers to attention. Put metaphorically by Alan Watts: “you are something the whole universe is doing in the same way that a wave is something that the whole ocean is doing.” What I take from this comparison is that as products of the forces of nature, our bodies and conscious experiences have been built by and are actively governed by universal laws. Understanding conscious experience as a part of the universe in all its complexity calls to question our role as conscious experiencers to acknowledge the staggering improbability, yet lived reality, of our circumstance. An acquaintance with “the truth, or God, or Reality, or whatever jumble of letters and noises you care to attach to the Namelessness, the ultimate Essence of all things [that] is already within” is what I understand to be at stake in paying attention to the aspect of our conscious experience that is importance.

Chapter 2: Art process as tool

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When understood as a non-definable entity, art liberates the artist to engage in a process of discovery towards felt poles of importance. As described by John Cage, “art becomes important as a means to make one aware of one's actual environment,” emphasizing the interconnectedness of the role of art within everyday life. In his book *Art as Experience*, John Dewey says that “sometimes we journey to get somewhere else because we have business…and would gladly, were it possible, cut out the traveling. At other times we journey for the delight of moving about and seeing what we see. Means and end coalesce.” The coalescence of means and end indicates a privileging of both process and goal, recognizing that we cannot escape the present, so the process must be honored and considered as important in its own right. The potentiality of process as a means towards presence is central to my argument that art can be treated as a tool to set aside time for active presence.

Jill O’Bryan’s *11,904 breaths between September 27 and October 15, 2007* (Fig. 3) is an example of art used as an opportunity to cultivate presence through the making process. During the process of making the piece, she drew a tally for each breath she took. The process-product relationship in *11,904 breaths between September 27 and October 15, 2007* clearly displays my own preoccupation with process. O’Bryan describes her approach to making as “I’m not going to make art. I’m

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11 John Cage, quoted in “Fluxus Movement Overview” (n.d.)
just doing this activity.”\textsuperscript{13} This approach has informed my own in allowing my understanding of art to include something so ultimately focused on the artist’s experience of the process.

My approach towards process shares with O’Bryan an understanding of the potentiality of the making process to be one of personal meditation. Unlike \textit{11,904 breaths between September 27 and October 15, 2007}, which exists in its final form as the product of her meditation, my approach to process has been as a means to engage with the my present experience as a source of wisdom that can be explored through focused attention. As stated by Marcel Duchamp, “art is a road that leads towards regions which are not governed by time and space.”\textsuperscript{14} Conceptualizing art as a road is very similar to the Buddhist understanding of the path to enlightenment, in the sense that when asked “‘What is truth?’ a master of Zen Buddhism replied, ‘Walk on!’”\textsuperscript{15} What I take this to mean is that one cannot access these metaphysical regions of the goals of art or Buddhist practice without an active pursuit along their respective “roads.” Seeing the necessity of the active pursuit, I am not just engaging with the process for the sake of experiencing visceral presence; rather I am considering visceral presence as a state of being where feelings of importance can be accessed. This approach is mirrored in Paul Schimmel’s description of the 2005-2006 exhibition \textit{Ecstasy: In and About Altered States}, where artists were guided by a “utopian faith” in the capacity of art to expand and alter perception and


\textsuperscript{15} Humphreys, “Walk on!”, 7
consciousness.”¹⁶ My own “utopian faith” is grounded in a trust in my artistic intuitions as a product of nature to orient me towards felt importance.

My recent performance Drawing a line to figure out why I’m drawing a line (Fig. 4) was expressly centered on this idea of treating process as an opportunity to engage with my present experience, recognizing the potentiality of the space to yield important thoughts. While I intended for it to be a meditative experience, that was not all that I expected of it. Originally intending to spend 24 hours drawing a single line around the perimeter of the room, I surmised that the longevity of the experience would spark thoughts that I could not predict before performing the piece.

Differing from pure meditation, drawing the line (ultimately lasting 11 hours) was an exercise to examine how my conscious experience would be affected by the speed at which I move. O’Bryan says of her breath drawings that “each mark really has to correlate to one breath, or the drawings don’t work.”¹⁷ In the same way, the success of my piece lies not in the creation of a line, but in my focused attention on the imperceptibly slow movement of my pen. Considered this way, the line is merely a byproduct of an elongated practice of focused attention on a single moving point in space. My interest in attending to this imperceptible movement came from a feeling of existential awe towards noticing the subtle movement of celestial bodies, like the moon’s trajectory across the sky. I was

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¹⁶ Paul Schimmel et al., Ecstasy: in and about Altered States (Los Angeles, CA: Museum of Contemporary Art, 2005)), 29
¹⁷ Nackman, “Jill O’Bryan in Conversation”
interested in the disparity between the experienced reality of such imperceptibly slow movement compared with the ontological reality of its unfathomable speed. Through embodying the experiential reality of slowness, I was curious as to what kind of sensitivity to the natural forces of the universe I might inhabit. Drawing the line was a means of offering myself time, recognizing that importance is a facet of conscious experience, which necessarily exists in a world of passing time.

I understand the video’s relationship to the viewer in a similar way to O’Bryan, where centering the work in the body is considered a way to access “qualities of universal experience and interconnectivity.”18 The video of the process serves to provide evidence of my experience, implicating the viewer in my piece to question what their own experience of a similar endeavor might be like. The notion that my experience of the line is channeled from a collective place (in that we are all manifestations of the same universal forces) supposes that the physical manifestation of the work will be grounded in the body as something everyone is connected to; as Dewey puts it, “what is true of the producer is true of the perceiver.”19 The work functions “to arouse empathy in the viewer” through the communication of my own efforts to “explore the liminal space between the conscious and the unconscious, the perceptible and the imperceptible, the self and the other.”20 I understand this empathy not as a removed appreciation for my personal endeavors, but as a realization of the viewer’s own potential to undergo it as well.

Contact Improvisation (pictured in Figure 5), a form

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18 Nackman, “Jill O’Bryan in Conversation”
19 Dewey, Art as Experience, 212
20 Schimmel, “Ecstasy”, 30
of postmodern dance based in maintaining contact with the people and objects in one’s
environment, provides a helpful way of thinking about how the kind of process-based art I
propose is relevant to the viewer. Often referred to as an “art-sport,” Contact Improv functions as
art in its potential to be performed for an audience while primarily being focused on the
experience of the movers involved. Contact Improv’s founders experimented with a blurring
between “art” and “life,” focusing on communal experimentation rather than the pursuit of a
goal. Nancy Stark Smith, one of the founders, describes how “it was like we had offered
something to people as a way of looking at movement and a way of experiencing movement that
was very new and healthy, very vital and life-supporting.” In offering a new way of looking at
and experiencing bodily movement, something absolutely ingrained in peoples’ every day,
Contact Improv was able to acquaint viewers with an experiential possibility that also existed
within themselves.

Chapter 3: Accessing importance through art

In this chapter I will specify three of the “poles of importance” that I have felt compelled
to explore through the process of art making. In three sections, I demonstrate how my art
embodies an impulse to I) Attend to the qualia of experience, II) Understand the ontology of
experience, and III) Destabilize societal notions of reality.

Section I: Attending to the qualia of experience

21 Cynthia Novack, “Sharing the Dance” (University of Wisconsin Press, 1990.), 8
22 Novack, “Sharing the Dance,” 64
23 Nancy Stark Smith, quoted by Novack, “Sharing the Dance,” 72
One aspect of experience that demands attention is its qualia, a concept that can be described as *what it is subjectively like to undergo the experience you are having.* The impulse to attend to the qualia of experience comes not from a place of wanting to understand, but to simply experience what it feels like. The sense of importance surrounding this impulse is magnified by a recognition of the unlikely particularity of human experience. Conceptualizing our conscious experience as completely subjective to its perspective from the human body, the urgency of experiencing the qualia of experience stems from a recognition that we are, in effect, giving rise to qualia through our subjective human capacity to have a conscious experience.

In my video *Quarantine Contact* (Fig. 6), I filmed myself practicing Contact Improv (with an understanding of the practice that extends it beyond the necessity of practice with other people) as a means to draw attention to our bodies as subjective mediums through which we can explore the qualitative possibilities of our experience of the passage of time. In the same way that *Drawing a line*... functioned as a suggestion for the viewer to imagine a parallel experience, allowing the dance to exist in the persisting format of video serves to question the reason for the dance’s existence, considering it does not serve the traditional dance purpose of creating an aesthetic experience for the viewer. Embodying a trust in basic instincts grounds the practice in a human universality, making the experience vicariously accessible to everyone with a body. As described by Rudolf Arnheim “what distinguishes the experience of happenings from that of things is not that it involves the perception of passing time

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but that we witness an organized sequence in which phases follow each other meaningfully in a one-dimensional order.” In witnessing the happening of the dance (as both doer and observer), one becomes aware, not quite of time passing, but of the meaningful possibility that is built into our experience of time passing. That is to say, Quarantine Contact is built upon an awareness of the human-centric subjectivity of the experience of time passing, and serves as an exploration into how we can acknowledge this specific subjectivity of how it feels to move in a human body. As the cosmic self that is aware of itself as the universe, I ask, how can it feel to experience moving in a human body? What can the humanly subjective experience of directional time be like?

Section II: Understanding the ontology of experience

Another pole of importance that commands my attention is the ontology of experience, or the physical and/or metaphysical nature of the universe as it presents itself to my consciousness. When orienting myself towards this pole of importance, the impulse is to understand, intellectually, what Cage means when he refers to the reality of the world as a process.

Thought Train (Fig. 7) is a series of 17 etchings adapted from a journal spread that explores the ontological relationship between thoughts and physical reality. The adapted journal pages present an attempt to capture a train of thought

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that follows what it means to physically express the subjective experience of thoughts in physical reality. Unlike my concern with qualia in Quarantine Contact, I don’t journal for the experience of journaling. I journal as a service towards the ideas I am dealing with. I am compelled forward by a belief in the importance, not of what I’m doing for its own sake, but of what kind of intellectual understanding the process might allow me to encounter. Formally, each successive etching in the series introduces the next articulated thought in the chronological trajectory of my train of thought. This presentation serves to mimic the way in which thoughts arise and progress during the process of thinking through journaling, thus bringing the piece to be about the nature of thinking itself. It is worth noting that when I am compelled by the impulse to understand ideas, to make progress on my philosophical understanding of how things relate to each other, I almost always revert to writing as my chosen mode of expression. Writing allows for a kind of precision that makes it feel like the most effective channel for building upon an intellectual understanding of ontology. However, I often find that the writing process raises questions that are better answered in mediums other than writing.

By recreating the writing process through the process of etching, I imbued the thought train with a certain gravitas owed by the time and labor that went into the etchings’ creation. In other words, the existence of the thought train in the form of an etching asks the question: what meaning do the thoughts gain when their physical existence has resulted from substantial time and labor? For me, the juxtaposition of the physical permanence of the medium with the ethereal ephemerality of the thoughts they depict brings the piece to function as a meditation on questions such as: How do thoughts become shaped by their external expression? Where do thoughts, as a facet of experience, exist relative to space and time? The drawn-out etching process served as a
sort of armature for the pursuit of these questions, my devotion to the process reflecting my sense of importance I feel towards these lines of inquiry.

Section III: Destabilizing societal notions of reality

One final pole of importance I will discuss is the deconstruction and destabilization of societal notions of reality, stemming from a supposition that this type of understanding infringes upon our ability to connect with the cosmic self.

Matt Mullican’s scrutiny of the relationship between art and everyday life brilliantly uses art as a symbolic act to bring to light the equal symbolic-ness of what we refer to as everyday life.26 Mullican’s Signs, an ever-growing collection of the type pictured in Figure 8, depict the many and varied objects of his world in a style of universally understandable symbolism.27 With regard to the human form in the images, it is “counted as one type of object amongst others — can be seen to represent the ‘self’ in precisely this presubjective way of understanding.”28 This “prescriptive” way of understanding refers to a primitive level of psychological development that conceptualizes the self as object rather than subject.29 Representing the world through this prescriptive perspective, Signs proposes an understanding of the world that erases the societally-

27 McCollum, “Matt Mullican’s World”
28 Ibid.
29 Ibid.
induced boundaries of knowledge in favor of a more universal perception of the world.\textsuperscript{30} I see Mullican’s notion of presubjective understanding to be in intimate conversation with the notion of the cosmic self in their similar attitudes towards the human form as object rather than subject, something to be experienced rather than as subjective experiencer in its own right.

My piece \textit{Unspoken Rules} (Fig. 9) deals with a similar tension of societal knowledge versus a more universal kind of knowledge. The piece consists of eight 10-minute videos of myself in eight different elevators practicing Authentic Movement, a somatic practice built upon moving one’s body in accordance with internal impulses. While the goal of Authentic Movement is to do away with inhibitions and expectations about one’s movement and allow the body to take the lead, the tendency in an elevator is to follow a very rigid set of rules (stand facing towards the door, press a button upon entering, leave as soon as the door opens, space oneself maximally from others in the elevator, generally do not speak.) In this piece, I take the codified behavioral expectations of the elevator as representative of a larger socially agreed upon reality. Understanding the eight videos as evidence of underwent experiences, the importance of this piece lies in my own experience of performing a deviant notion of reality, as well as the experiences of my unsuspecting spectators who witnessed it. Allan McCollum’s description of Mullican’s work as

\textsuperscript{30} Ibid.
“a play within a play” duly describes my process in *Unspoken Rules* as “an acknowledged form of symbolic creativity set against an unacknowledged, but equally symbolic form of creativity we unquestioningly refer to as everyday reality.” However, as the art was a performance of Authentic Movement, a principle I consider to be in touch with notions of universal embodied wisdom, my performance suggests that my embodiment of “symbolic creativity” is perhaps a truer, more presubjective “real” than the one we unquestioningly accept.

**Conclusion**

In the Introduction and moving into Chapter 1, I defined art as being relative to what I find important, going on to explain my understanding of importance as a subjectively felt figment of experience. I then proposed a framework in which to organize ideas of importance, where importances exist as poles in a multi-dimensional structure. Finally, I grounded my felt “poles of importance” as concerns of a “cosmic self” that is aware of its existence as that of the universe experiencing itself.

In Chapter 2, I presented the process of making art as an opportunity to make progress towards the poles of importance, appealing to the work of Jill O’Bryan as an exemplary way to conceptualize the potentiality of process to ground the artist in the present. Invoking my own work, I elaborated on the idea of process as mediation to reach an understanding of process as an embodied pursuit along a path guided by importance. I concluded the chapter by discussing the relevance of this process-based art to the viewer as a call to recognize their own capacity to undergo the same, body-centered process.

31 Ibid.
In Chapter 3, I specified my feelings of importance directed towards attending to the qualia of experience, understanding the ontology of experience, and destabilizing societal notions of reality. Drawing from the work of myself and other artists, I demonstrated how one can make progress on these poles of importance through an engaged experience of the art process.

At this point I would like to take note of the incomprehensiveness of this thesis statement in fully describing the work that my art is doing (a task that I imagine is quite impossible.) Looking at it in a similar way to Matt Mullican, any effort to simplify my understanding of the world through art ends up creating “new orders of complexity,” where introducing a work of art into the everyday world makes the world a more complicated network to understand.\textsuperscript{32} This paradoxical statement stems from a notion that art and life are “two aspects of the same symbolic system.”\textsuperscript{33}

While never offering a comprehensive understanding of what it means to be experiencing the universe, art nevertheless offers a more comprehensive understanding than we might’ve previously held through its capacity to be comprehended as important in various ways.

To return to Thought Train, the iterative progression of the piece stemmed from its capacity to be discerned with

\textsuperscript{32} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{33} Ibid.
Morris 20

respect to multiple importances. That’s to say, the etching of the thought train served to examine
the importance of the thinking process, while each individual thought was itself granted
importance as a starting point for a new line of inquiry. In the same way, and to think I almost
got a diet coke // there is no difference between black and silver in their absence (Fig. 10)
emphasizes the possibility of understanding what we are doing from new, and perhaps
unexpected perspectives. The piece was born out of the failure of another project that involved
using balloons as a base for a paper mache dome. Without going into detail, my balloons kept
popping in the process of trying to realize my vision. At my breaking point of popped balloons, I
cut my losses and took a complete change of direction by displaying the remnants of my failed
attempts as a piece in itself. As a finishing touch, I leaned my now-empty Coke Zero bottle (that
I had been drinking throughout my mounting frustration) against the pedestal. With this final
detail, I irreverently titled my piece and to think I almost got a diet coke, a recognition of the
unexpected pertinence that now arose from what would’ve otherwise been irrelevant. When I
returned to studio in the morning, much of my purposefully placed balloon debris had been
swept up, along with the black cap to my Coke Zero (Diet Coke sports a charming silver cap.)
Rather than present a partial version of my piece, I decided to acknowledge this new
development within the work itself, folding this second failure into the piece. Hence me with a
broom in the trashcan, and the addition of // there is no difference between black and silver in
their absence to the title.

and to think I almost got a diet coke // there is no difference between black and silver in
their absence can be understood as a rejection of failure as a concept, choosing to instead
understand it as an illuminating occurrence with regard to the previous framework of thought, a
critical point of contemplation over what it means to proceed. Framed through Buddhist thought:
“circumstances are the product of our own past action—or else creation is a sorry and blasphemous conceit. Then let us accept them, we who created them, and use them for our own high purposes… it is surely wiser to welcome them as the apparatus of our soul’s development than to complain of them and blame them for the faults of character which spring from our laziness of will.”34 In understanding art as a process oriented towards notions of importance, points in the process that seem like dead ends can be re-contextualized by looking at the totality of the experience from an expanded point of view, folding the process thus far into a new iteration that looks at all components with potential importance.

![Figure 11. Morris, Zoë. Screenshot of Thesis, 2020, digital image](image)

With that, if you will, consider this paper as art in the same way as the work it discusses: as the product of a process engagement with the informative interaction with the art object, directed towards a fuller understanding of the nature of experience. As this statement now exists in physical reality, it presents itself as a piece of the universe to be observed through a lens of subjective importance. Ever iterative in nature, my artistic-philosophical inquiry into process as a space to process will likely never be fully self-descriptive, but rather continue to function as a

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34 Humphreys, “Walk On!”, 12-13
way of looking at and experiencing the objects of the world in a way that is oriented towards felt notions of cosmic importance.
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