

THE STAMP AND STAMP ART



(DEATH TAXES)

PLACE
STAMP
HERE

I
Stamp activity and its antecedents are among the oldest forms of human communication. One of the early predecessors of stamping was the cuneiform writing of the Near East several millenia prior to the birth of Christ. We see the first true use of stamps in the seals and signets used in China and Japan, as well as in the Middle Eastern and Greco-Roman cultures. Woodcuts and guild marks in the Middle Ages contributed to the activity in its basic form. In the Renaissance, stamping flourished in the form of emblemata, easily reproducible verbo-visual statements of allegorical significance. In German they have also been called Gemälpoesy, a term which can be associated with concrete poetry in the twentieth century. These emblems usually follow a tripartite structure which can later also be found in the artist stamp: 1. Pictura (icon, imago, symbolon), 2. Inscriptio (motto, lemma), 3. Subscriptio (words above or beneath the visual statement). Its master, and perhaps the great-great grandfather of rubber stamp art, was Alciatus, "emblematum pater et princeps," known to scholars in the field through his Emblematum Liber (1531). Works of art as well as other objects of use were "decorated" with these heiroglyphics, but only those initiated could fully understand and appreciate their use.* The stamp made of rubber first came into use during the 19th century. The prominent early uses of rubber stamps were legal and commercial. These included post-marks, date-marks, validation of documents, and the numbering and pricing of objects. Soon thereafter, stamps were available for personal use. Today it is the rare household which does not have at least one rubber stamp for name and address, as a child's toy, or for some other purpose.

The early history of stamping and related activities is a full study in its own right. While it is important to be aware of the long history of stamping, which goes back to antiquity, it is our major purpose here to focus on the stamp as a significant phenomenon in contemporary art. Kurt Schwitters was the first artist to use the rubber stamp in a prominent series of works, in his Stempelzeichnungen (stamp drawings). In major works dated as early as 1919, and possibly earlier in incidental studies or sketches, Schwitters used stamps alone and in combination with other media.

The introduction of the stamp into contemporary art has been traced to 1949, when Ben Vautier used the stamp LART CEST in conjunction with a great number of works. The first major series of works comprised basically of stamps were the mid-fifties projects of French artist Arman and German-born artist Dieter Roth. The late fifties and early sixties saw the systematic introduction of the stamp into projects by artists such as Joseph Beuys, George Brecht, Robert Filliou, Ken Friedman, Dick Higgins, Milan Knizak, Nam June Paik, Daniel Spoerri, Saul Steinberg,

Timm Ulrichs, and Wolf Vostell. Allan Kaprow used stamps in the production of books and multiples. Emmett Williams used stamps to achieve a large number of his visual poems. Two groups of artists are almost exclusively prominent in stamp activity through the mid-sixties - the Nouveau Realists, including Arman, Spoerri, Manzoni and Klein; the Fluxus group, represented not only by individual members' works, but by group-published stamp works such as Vautier's Certification of Fluxart or Friedman's Fluxpost Cancellation Mark.

In the middle and late 60's, several well-known artists brought the use of the stamp into their work. These include Fletcher Copp, Jochen Gerz, Ray Johnson, Terry Reid and Andre Thomkins. The next well-known groups to become identified with the use of the stamp were Ray Johnson's New York Correspondence School and the Canadian Image Bank.

Prior to the world-wide explosion of rubber stamp art and its wide critical acceptance as an aesthetic medium, a group of artists emerged in the last years of the 60's and the early 70's who became identified as the first generation of rubber stamp artists to be particularly well known for their involvement with the stamp as a major, rather than as a secondary, activity. These artists include Herve Fischer, J.H. Kocman, Geza Perneczy, and Peter van Beveren. Other artists of this period were known for other activities, but have assumed prominence in the area



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EXTRA FANCY

of stamping, including Dieter Albrecht, Charles Amir-khanian, John M. Armleder, Anna Banana, Dadaland (Bill Gaglione and Tim Mancusi), H.P. Huber, Hanns-Werner Kalkmann, Mauricio Nanucci, and G. de Rook. Large numbers of artists have also used stamps in their work in less systematic ways. These include Eric Andersen, Claus Boehmler, Felipe Ehrenberg, On Kawara, Piotr Kowlski, Les Levine, Panamerenko, Robert Rehfeld, Jock Reynolds, and Bill Vazan.

During the early and middle years of the 70's, the use of rubber stamps became a rapidly expanding international phenomenon. Thousands of artists around the world use every type and variety of stamp, in all patterns and forms of usage. The rubber stamp has moved from its early pre-figuration as generalized stamp activity into a wide-spread and widely-accepted medium for contemporary art.

II

The bibliographic history of rubber stamps may be said to begin with such publications as commercial catalogs, but the first book of rubber stamp works was the Sturmbilderbuch IV, executed by Kurt Schwitters in 1920. In contemporary art, rubber stamp books at their inception tended to be hand-made single or limited edition publications, such as those made by Dick Higgins in the late 50's. It is probable that a number of artists were making similar experiments at the same time. While it is likely that artists whom we do not discuss in this article have also made some published use of rubber stamps, the presentation here is limited to systematic work in which the stamp plays a significant part.

Of singular importance are two widely visible books which were made with the use of rubber stamps. Allan Kaprow set the text of his Assemblage, Environments and Happenings (New York, 1966) with rubber stamp type. Dieter Roth's Mundunculum (Hanover, 1967) is a literary and poetic work illustrated almost entirely with stamp drawings.

By this time the first rubber stamp multiple had appeared, though it was not widely known or available. Emmett Williams' 13 Variations on Gertrude Stein, released in 1965, was produced through the use of rubber stamps. In 1966, the first multiple to include rubber stamps as physical objects was published by Fluxus in New York, the Fluxpost Kit containing stamps by Ken Friedman and Ben Vautier. In 1968, one of the best-known multiples in which stamps are presented as objects for use appeared, Dieter Roth's Stempelkasten, published in Düsseldorf by Gerstner and Spoerri. The stamp as sculptural object was presented by Arman in the multiple Accumulation (1973). Arman had also used stamps as sculptural objects in earlier, singular works.

During the decade of the 60's, most of the artists associated with the emergence of the stamp had used stamps in conjunction with published works, multiples, or in hand-made rubber stamp editions. These included Beuys, Brecht, Filliou, Knizak Maciunas, Spoerri, Ulrichs and Vostell. But the end of the decade, the rubber stamp was respectable enough to have appeared in a main-stream New York multiple.

The project, Stamped Indelibly, was published in 1971 by Multiples, Inc., and included work by Grooms, Indiana, Jones, Marisol, Oldenburg, Warhol, Wesselman and others. One series of rubber stamp works was widely visible during the entire decade - the witty cartoons and drawings of Saul Steinberg, many of which appeared in the venerable New Yorker.

By 1971, critical reception of rubber stamp activity had begun. Jean-Marc Poinot, who had organized the communications art section of the Seventh Biennial of Paris, released his book Mail Art, Communication a Distance, Concept (Editions C.E.D.I.C., Paris). Poinot's book does not deal specifically with the rubber stamp, but because of the stamp activity in which so many of the artists included in the book engaged, the rubber stamp is prominently portrayed in the works illustrated in the text.

The first true anthology of stamps and their use by artists was the book Stamp Activity published by Czech artist J.H. Kocman in 1972. The book is an extremely rare limited edition of 30 copies, including the work of 25 artists, both early figures in the medium and others who had become major new figures in the medium. Kocman's anthology is a beautifully produced book printed directly from the original rubber stamps, bound and presented in the finest tradition of Eastern European "samizdat" ("Selbstverlag" or "hand-made") publishing. Kocman's book is of great historical and aesthetic importance. It is the first anthology to present stamp activity, sui generis, as a significant development in the fine arts.

In 1973, Ken Friedman produced a large rubber stamped narrative text. The book was published by Henrik Have, the Danish publisher of Edition After Hand, entitled A Ready Hand Novel.

In late 1973, the first critical documentary on the use of rubber stamps in art appeared as a radio program on station KPFA of Berkeley, California, organized, produced and directed by Charles Amirkhanian - a poet who is also recognized for his stamp activity. The program included a tour of the H.R. Ellis Rubber Stamp Company of Berkeley, California, and a lengthy discussion with Ken Friedman. The program was heralded in the KPFA Folio with a suite of rubber stamp drawings executed by Bay Area printmaker, Carol Law, using stamps made by the Ellis Company and stamps borrowed from the Fluxus West stamp museum.

**Dada is
everywhere**

1974 saw the publication of the first attempted encyclopedia of rubber stamp work, Herve Fischer's Art et Communication Marginale, Tampons d'Artistes. Fischer's book is the most widely available publication in the field. Aimed at a large audience through an introduction published in three languages, Fischer attempts to present an overview of stamp activity along with a large number of stamp artists and their work.

The 14-page introduction contains a mass of information, but has several flaws. Fischer offers no historical context for the stamp, either in earlier forms, or in the art of this century prior to Arman. While he alludes to artists such as Duchamp in a general philosophical way, the absence of Kurt Schwitters from the introduction or the text itself is a glaring omission. One of the notable features of Fischer's introduction is an attempt to "establish a typology" of rubber stamp art.

Interested as he is in the sociology of the phenomenon, however, Fischer fails to offer a structural typology, but employs instead a technique known to sociologists as content analysis by organizing his material in formally descriptive categories. Fischer deals with twelve categories, which he lists as:

- Theme of Communication
- Counterinstitutions
- Protest
- Various Statements of Values
- Numbering
- Certifications
- Appropriations
- Prints
- Science
- Visual Poetry
- Works of Art
- Playful Activity

In each of these categories, Fischer lists a number of artists and representative works.



I AM NOT IN FISCHER'S BOOK

Following Fischer's introduction are two short essays written by figures connected with the development of rubber stamp art. The first, by Ken Friedman, is a personal discussion of his involvement with rubber stamps, with some attention paid to related historical material. Starting with his first set of rubber stamps, given to him in 1956, he continues through his contemporary activity, connecting it to the work of others in the Roth-Fluxus-Kocman chronology. While he alludes to an objective historical or chronological synthesis, he does not deal with much material outside the personal perspective. The second statement, by Jiri Valoch, attempts to create an ordered understanding of contemporary rubber stamp activity, starting with the work of J.H. Kocman, Eastern Europe's leading exponent of the medium. Valoch's essay contains the only reference to Schwitters to appear anywhere in Art et Communication Marginale.

Art et Communication Marginale is the largest work available in the field of artists' stamp activity. It is so far considered the standard text in the field. Its failings tend to be the failings of many pioneer attempts; its achievements far outweigh them. In a sense it tries to do for stamp art what Henkel and Schöne have done for emblems.

In response to Fischer's book, Georg F. Schwarzbauer published in the German Magazin Kunst (14, 3, 1974) an extensive critical essay entitled "Künstlerstempel." Schwarzbauer in his article points out Fischer's uncritical treatment of rubber stamps in isolation, rather than in the contexts in which they originally function. According to Schwarzbauer, Fischer can, therefore, only arrive at formally descriptive categories rather than at the sociological interpretation of the phenomenon which he sets out to achieve. Despite the length and weighty scholarly apparatus employed by Schwarzbauer, however, he himself is burdened with several significant omissions and failures. As Robert Rehfeld pointed out in the subsequent issue of Magazin Kunst (14, 4, 1974), Schwarzbauer neglects the discussion of many major figures, of whom Rehfeld particularly discussed Friedman. In the same issue, Fischer himself replied to Schwarzbauer's article, stating again that the most important aspect for him is what Fischer has called the sociology of communication. Therefore, he claims, he cannot be interested in the subjective opinions of the artists. He suggests that stamp activity should be looked at as a total phenomenon unrelated to other phenomena. In such an analysis the anti-bureaucratic use of the artist stamp will become manifest. He suggests that the playful stamp activities by Ken Friedman, Dadaland, and Galerie Ecart are clear political statements against the official bureaucratic use of the stamp. More than in his introduction, Herve Fischer in his response to Schwarzbauer's article singles out the subversive and political application of the rubber stamp used by artists. At this point he also criticizes

McLuhan's political attitude, I.E., his lack of an ideological position. In this context, he uses the English statement that stamps are basically "interrogative teaching." Schwarzbauer's article is negligent in its use of illustrations, where works by major artists, including Arman and Friedman, are not properly identified. While he correctly singles out Kocman as a major primogenitor of rubber stamp activity, he fails to deal with significant predecessors to Kocman's work.

Schwarzbauer's article is characterized by several major achievements. The great advantage of Schwarzbauer's contribution is to have laid out a critical foundation necessary to the comprehension of rubber stamp activity. Where Fischer provided an exuberant documentation and pictorial history without a necessary evaluative critical framework, Schwarzbauer provides a more sound critical attitude, which unfortunately lacks documentation. Some of the lack can be accounted for, however, by the brevity of the article. and by the fact that many basic documents are quite rare and still only accessible in limited copies or private collections.



PLEADINGS

The first substantial historical account of stamp activity was written by Timm Ulrichs, one of the major German artists known for the use of the rubber stamp. In an article entitled "Stempel. zur Kunst gestempelt" and sub-titled "Kommunikationsmittel par excellence" (Magazin Kunst, 15, 1, 1975) Ulrichs provides history, etymology, and a discussion of related phenomena such as daktyloscopy. These are followed by a chronology of his own stamp activities in an extensive illustrated account. Ulrichs singles out as the pioneers of stamp art Kurt Schwitters and Dieter Roth. Regretfully, he ignores Arman. His attitudes toward stamping can be described as an attempt to democratize the arts and to militate against "elitare Druckmittel" (the elitist means of printed communication). For Ulrichs, the rubber stamp is a means of communication suited to the use of wide varieties of people, artist and non-artist alike. One wishes that Ulrichs had been given the space to treat the work of other significant contemporary artists involved in stamp activity as brilliantly as he presents his own work. With a thorough and systematic approach, Ulrichs offers one of the clearly exemplary articles in the area of the rubber stamp.

Recently, new and interesting anthologies of rubber stamp activity have begun to appear. These include projects by de Rook, Ecart publications, and the University of Colorado at Colorado Springs, often the catalogs of projects or exhibitions. One of the most beautiful of these is the Stempelboek organized by Jan Brand and Peter van Beveren (Middleburg, Netherlands, 1975).

A special area of rubber stamp publishing is the unique self-published edition. As we noted, Dick Higgins' earliest stamp works took this form. Many other artists have made such publications, including Imre Bak, Gary Lee-Nova, and Jiri Valoch. A specific form of this work is the "archive" or "monograph" comprised of whole collections of the stamps used by artists. Various forms include single stamps, stamps in sequence, or stamps used in a series of pages, as well as stamps presented in some of the contexts in which they appear elsewhere. Friedman's Rubber Stamp Archive, produced in various forms since 1966, now fills several large volumes totalling over 1500 pages. Kocman's Monography of My Stamp Activity is a single volume released in 1974. Other such monographs have been produced in similar manners, but under less well defined circumstances, by John M. Armleder, Jiri Valoch and Dadaland. A characteristic feature of these publications is that while the stamps themselves are used and shown widely, the monographs or archives are usually produced and shared only with other artists, frequently in trade for similar works. To a lesser degree, they are sold as special items to collectors or institutions.

III

In order to comprehend the vitality and meaning of the stamp phenomenon, it is necessary to structure a framework which deals with the stamp in several ways. One needs to account for the phenomenon:

1. Historically, both prior to and since the introduction of the stamp into art;
2. Aesthetically, as an arena for significant art activity;
3. Through the vehicle of a sociology of the arts, as a human activity within the arts;
4. In the wider sociological context which places the stamp and stamp art in the framework of society as a whole.

Fischer attempts to do this in the partial manner we have discussed. Schwarzbauer organizes the phenomenon into a limited typology comprised of five major categories:

- Stamps with informative messages or references,
- Stamps advertising their own existence,
- Stamps as pure action,
- Stamps as postal objects,
- Stamps as artificial products.

Schwarzbauer himself points out that his typology is neither full nor entirely useful, but states clearly that an adequate understanding of this multi-faceted phenomenon must eventually rest upon a substantial typology. Ulrichs creates a form of typology in his contribution, but this typology largely derives from history and the functional precedents of the contemporary stamp, rather than being based on the aspects of contemporary form and usage.

Angelika Schmidt
Heuglingweg 15
7000 Stuttgart
W. Germany

*What are they talking about? Write (draw etc.)
it down and send it to Angelika*



In order to create a comprehensive structural typology of stamps, it is necessary to account for all of these factors. The subtly interwoven strands of history, meaning, form and function - so closely overlapped as they often are, - require a structure which is both delicately balanced and open enough to account for the entirety of the field. Such a structural typology presents difficult and elaborate problems, but remains the goal of research in the area of the stamp. The present writers are engaged in the development of a substantial typology and plan to use it in a forthcoming book about the stamp and its uses in art.

Crates of Bananas



IV

In discussing contemporary stamp activity, a brief look at the history of the stamp sheds light on some of the implications bound up in the phenomenon of stamping. The earliest forms of stamping, such as cuneiform and signets, were acts of communication. This fact is common to all stamp activity since that time. Of particular interest is the political implication of early stamps. Communication, the hiring of scribes, the possession of signatures and individualizing marks was the province of the aristocratic classes. In a limited way, this aspect of communication is still evident in many nations where only the privileged classes have access to communications media, whether by legislative action and censorship or by economic control. In the stamp, this phenomenon was presented by Beke Laszlo in his unrealized stamp project, "Je n'ai pas de tampons, parce-que en Hongrie, il n'est pas permis de faire tampons par personnes prives." ("I have no stamps because in Hungary, unauthorized persons are not allowed to make stamps, or to have stamps made for them.")

Other early implications still invoked by the stamp revolve around the identification of ownership and production. Even though the use of the stamp gradually expanded, a relatively small class of privileged individuals - those who owned, or those who produced - made use of stamps and marks. This usage still survives today, though paradoxically expanded to the use of millions. It is the advent of mass technology which today makes possible the situation toward which Ulrichs and others point: that the stamp has become a medium available to and truly useful by the people, a reversal of the earliest context of the stamp.

The introduction of aesthetic and philosophical content into the stamp arrives with medieval woodcuts and Renaissance emblemata. The advent of the stamp composed of rubber coincides with industrialization, mechanical reproduction and the rise of the modern nation state. Rubber was introduced to the Western world during the Spanish conquest of the Americas in the 16th century. Rubber was first produced commercially in a Viennese factory established in 1811. We see the bureaucratic use of the rubber stamp prefigured in the discovery of rubber by a colonial power and its production within the framework of the industrial system.

Chicago

The first uses of the rubber stamp took place within **the bureaucratic and commercial contexts**. Stamps were used to validate and to certify documents. No human activity in modern times is possible without the intervention of bureaucracy, and its arm, the stamp. The **stamp proves on the birth certificate that one is indeed among the living**. The stamp validates on the marriage license the union of woman and man: what God and the stamp have joined together, let none tear asunder... until, of course, divorce proceedings take place, certified on papers marked with one form or another of the stamp. Whenever we pass from one realm to another, whether from nation to nation or life to death, **stamped impressions on the passport or death certificate bear witness to our departure**. It may be noted that **not all of these stamps or seals are composed of rubber**, but since the rubber stamp came into wide production, the vast majority of certifying seals formerly created by various embossing devices have been rubberstamps. The continuing parallel between rubber stamps and commerce in mass society is reinforced by the fact that only rubber stamps can be made swiftly enough and in large enough quantities to certify and channel the vast amounts of paperwork involved in all aspects of the contemporary world. Stamps not only give value... they de-value. Stamps are used in the postal system to remove the franking privilege embodied in the frank-mark, most commonly through the cancellation

Winter Banana

of the postage stamp. In commerce, stamps may not give value or remove it: they may simply indicate value or facilitate a commercial transaction through numbering, pricing, or the identification of individuals and products.

Stamps first came into the hands of the common man in the form of personal name and address stamps. Where the past, functional history of the stamp ends and the contemporary history of the stamp begins is with the arrival of rubber stamps used by the wide public. The availability of the rubber stamp gave to some unknown genius the idea of using a stamp to convey a slogan or message, probably political or commercial. In a certain sense, this gesture was the grandparent of contemporary stamp art.

Whoever the grandparent of rubber stamp art may have been, we know the name of the father: Kurt Schwitters. At the time that the principle of the ready-made was introduced to art by Marcel Duchamp and Man Ray, Kurt Schwitters found in the stamp another ~~ready-made~~ vehicle for art activity. This fertile period in the history of art is typified by the act of transformation (Duchamp's theory of displacement). Just as during those years and since, art moved forward by the introduction into the art context of phenomena previously belonging to the world at large, Schwitters spawned a new art medium by transforming the rubber stamp into a tool for drawing and collages. As early as 1919, Schwitters produced rubber stamp drawings and included stamps in his collages. In 1919, only one artist used rubber stamps. Today - over half a century later - thousands of individuals in the arts use rubber stamps in conjunction with, or as a major feature of, their work.



V

We have already referred to Fischer's concept of "interrogative teaching" implicit in this specific art form. We also quoted Timm Ulrichs' understanding that rubber stamps used by artists have a "subversive" character, a clear political dimension. Very few critics so far have been able to treat "experimental art," which really is not marginal once one is willing to take it as a serious manifestation, systematically and in its proper framework. But one critic ought to be mentioned, although he does not discuss rubber stamp activity. Instead, he specifically addresses himself to the phenomenon of easy reproducibility and impact on the art scene. Walter Benjamin, in his still unsurpassed Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit (The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction, translated by Hanna Arendt) has formulated a theory of art where decreasing aural qualities of art are to be related to increasing reproducibility which has to be seen as connected with increasing politicization. Benjamin says that:

has always been the powerful arm of authority. This is inherent in the etymology of the word in various languages. To stamp is a powerful movement of the foot. The Greek word sphragis refers to words such as "to seal, to shut up, to seal as stamp with approval." It can also be translated as "to limit, to define, to determine," all words with authoritative connotations. The German language has developed a most interesting metamorphosis of the term in the statement "stempeln gehen," to go to the welfare or unemployment office to be certified to receive a minimal amount of money to guarantee basic survival. Literally, it means "to go and get a stamp," to be able to prolong life. It is certainly no coincidence that the only way to subvert the authoritarian use of the rubber stamp was to use it in the context of art. We are aware, of course, that by introducing exhibition value to such a phenomenon as the rubber stamp, which essentially militates against aural and exhibitional commodification, these stamps are increasingly regaining an aural quality. But this is a phenomenon which is unavoidable until art is redefined totally. Duchamp tried this by playing chess instead of making art. Beuys, more and more, discusses art in a political context rather than making art. In this sense, Benjamin again predicted accurately: "One of the foremost tasks of art has always been the creation of a demand which could be fully satisfied only later." For the time being, the task of art is to destroy the artificial boundary lines between life and art.

YOUNG AMERICA

VI

We have offered this brief study on the stamp and stamp art as an introduction to the stamp exhibition organized by the LA MAMELLE ARTS CENTER in San Francisco. The history of the stamp prior to the rubber stamp, and the history of the rubber stamp prior to its inclusion in art, shed light on the meanings and implications of the stamp in an art context. The wide variety of stamps and stamp activities created by artists since Schwitters' seminal work early in this century are reflected in our brief bibliography, and can be studied further through its use. The study of the stamp, particularly the rubber stamp, and its use by artists has grown in interest and significance over the last decade. When Schwitters' stamp activity began over a half a century ago, he was unique. With the growing use of the stamp by artists launched in the mid-50's by Arman and Dieter Roth, and carried forward by a small significant group of artists through the 60's, the rubber stamp became a medium of interest to historians and critics concerned with contemporary art. Today, the use of the stamp by artists has blossomed into a major international phenomenon.

Thousands of artists are now involved in stamp activity. The stamp is used as a tool for drawing and sculpture, as a medium for publishing and printmaking, as an educational device in the teaching of design and poetry, and as artistic subvention of politics. The stamp is used by the most famous artists and the least known. Important works are created with stamps as well as inconsequential and mediocre productions ...just as with any medium. Unlike other media, however, which have had the benefit of proper exploration and the development of a substantial critical framework for future study, the stamp is still somewhat neglected. It is the purpose of exhibitions and articles such as this and of books such as those discussed, and of our forthcoming project, to remedy that neglect. Like any other medium, the stamp offers a large and significant opportunity to the creative human being involved in the arts. The study of stamp activity will reveal work of all sorts and qualities. As the study of any medium must, particularly the study of a medium still in its developmental stages, research into stamp activity will shed valuable light on human activity as reflected in the fascinating area of the arts.

- Ken Friedman / Georg M. Gugelberger



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