TIM PLAMPER AND FILIPPO BOSCO

MAPPING THE UNDERWORLD
A CONVERSATION ON EXIT II

I. Tim Plamper, *Europe After the Rain*, 2017, pencil on paper, 196 × 283 cm

II. Tim Plamper, *Security I (Hingabe)*, 2018, performance, 04 August 2018, 07:51 am, Oracle of Hypnos, Greece

7/10/2024 – On Narrative

Filippo Bosco: Hello, Tim. I'd like to begin by linking your project *Exit II* to a quote from Alice Bennet's *Afterlife and Narrative in Contemporary Fiction* (2012): "Life after death is a fiction [and] fiction is also a kind of life after death." Why do you find it necessary to conceptualize the underworld and the afterlife as narratives?

Tim Plamper: My contemplation of the underworld began with a drawing, *Europe After the Rain* (2017, Figure I), where I introduced two openings: one, a canalization leading into the depths, and the other, an imaginary access point to my inner world. I was at a point where I felt I'd exhausted large-scale drawings, which I'd been creating since completing my studies. Faced with this creative block, I asked myself, "What now?" I decided to metaphorically descend into these openings, entering the unknown. By closing my eyes and drawing, I was propelled inward, and from that silence, a narrative began to flow.

FB: How paradoxical—a narrative begins only after you close your eyes and cease outward activity. Death, as a concept, might represent a "dead end," yet it catalyzes so many stories...

TP: Exactly. Another starting point for me is a quote from James Hillman's *The Dream and the Underworld* (1975): "Underworld images are nonetheless visible, but only to what is invisible in us. The invisible is perceived by means of the invisible. That is psyche." Psychic images, Hillman argues, transcend pictorial or sensory imagery; they exist metaphorically. They resonate with the "inner ear," much as music and poetry do. The *Exit II* cycle is a kind of diary, a record of my inner explorations through the subconscious, mapping a mental terrain akin to the underworld, rich with narrative and archetypal figures.

FB: You began with a drawing, an image embodying simultaneous temporalities, and evolved into performance and video art, marking a passage between temporal planes. This is intriguing, especially as your first stage of *Exit II* was a performance, *Security I (Hingabe)* (2018, Figure II).

TP: Indeed. I was deeply intrigued by the entrance to the underworld, so I researched and found that, of the three mythological entrances to Hades in ancient Greece, the one Orpheus entered was at the southernmost tip of the Peloponnese – Europe's end. It was astonishing to realize one could actually visit such a site. I spent eight weeks in the Peloponnese, performing blind drawings each day in a trance-like state. At some point, I drove south to a tiny village by the bay where the road ended. It truly felt like the threshold between worlds. My only guide was an internet image of a grotto, which led me to the *Oracle of Hypnos*, the god of sleep and twin to Thanatos. I discovered the cave with surprising ease, and being there felt uncanny, as though summoned. It was early morning, and I was alone, in a place steeped in surreal quiet, with the soil and temperature acting as sensory portals into the unknown.

FB: Fascinating—your experience already feels like a narrative. You described *Security I (Hingabe)* as a "prologue" to *Exit II*, in the sense that it "preceded the logos," or rational discourse. This echoes Hillman's effort to restore logic to myth, reconnecting us to pre-rational narratives.

TP: Precisely. *Security I (Hingabe)* has two notable aspects: First, I felt compelled to interact with the soil physically, almost like a ritual of intimacy. Later, I recognized this as my first true performance. Second, drawing with closed eyes sensitized me to my body, allowing me to "see" not with my eyes, but with my entire being. This was my way of engaging with the underworld, a visceral experience rather than an intellectual exercise. I performed this ritual four mornings in succession, eventually leaving a Euro coin as an offering – a symbolic exchange to honor the spirits. The term

Hingabe is challenging to translate; "devotion" captures part of it, but it also implies a physical surrender of oneself.

FB: Every narrative needs characters, and you returned to the classic figure of Orpheus along with other mythological archetypes. How do you engage with myth in your work?

TP: I was drawn to myths from a young age, often treating them as historical narratives despite their fantastical elements. In my blind drawings, human figures started to morph into hybrid forms, reminiscent of centaurs and other mythical beings. When we personalize myths, they gain new relevance – they're not relics but dynamic lenses through which we explore our place in the world. In Greece, I read Jung's *Man and His Symbols* (1964), which resonated deeply with my work around images.

FB: The structure of **_Exit II_** reads like an index, with distinct chapters and turning points. What structure guides your work in performances and videos?

TP: When I began writing the script in late 2017, it naturally took on ten chapters, which then expanded. At one point, I nearly lost my grip on the framework, so I consolidated what I had and mapped the potential for further development. Structuring is vital for me, enabling a creative flow or trance without losing coherence. In performance, the aim is to suspend rationality and embody the figure fully. The audience is not watching a traditional stage performance; they're immersed in a shared experience. The same principle applies to blind drawings, where I lose myself in the process and "wake up" to the results.

FB: What temporality is embedded in this structure? A script may suggest a linear timeline, but alternative models, such as loops, suggest a more spatial or cyclical approach.

TP: I've always been skeptical of linear storytelling, perhaps due to my work with images, which lack clear beginnings or endings. My process expands horizontally – I sometimes compare it to a garden, with roots and sporadic growth. My films, too, are exhibited as loops, allowing viewers to enter the narrative at any point, as it doesn't rely on a strict ending. This reflects my approach to myth: while Orpheus' story has a formal conclusion, it doesn't feel final. The afterlife, similarly, is entwined with memory, creating a narrative loop of sorts – a story that continually reshapes itself.

FB: This resonates with your drawing practice, where layers of images create a temporal depth.

**TP**: Exactly. A friend once remarked that the layers in my drawings produce a virtual depth of time, as if all frames of a film were simultaneously present. This "sedimentation" of imagery is precisely what I aim for.

FB: So, your critique of linear storytelling brings myth and the afterlife together, not as fictions but as transformative experiences.

TP: The etymology of "fiction" speaks to something crafted or "made," rather than imagined. In that sense, myths aren't fictional; they emerge from collective creativity. This is what I aim to achieve: finding analogues in our contemporary world. Figures like Charon, for instance, reappear in our society as the security bouncer of a club. Thus, the myth serves as a vessel where form and content merge. On a formal level, I replicate this in my large-scale drawings by using lighter, less graphite-laden areas to form figures. These figures act as apertures within the drawing, open to being filled by the viewer's own emotions and perceptions. Similarly, during my performances, I become the vessel, embodying archetypal concepts or narratives.

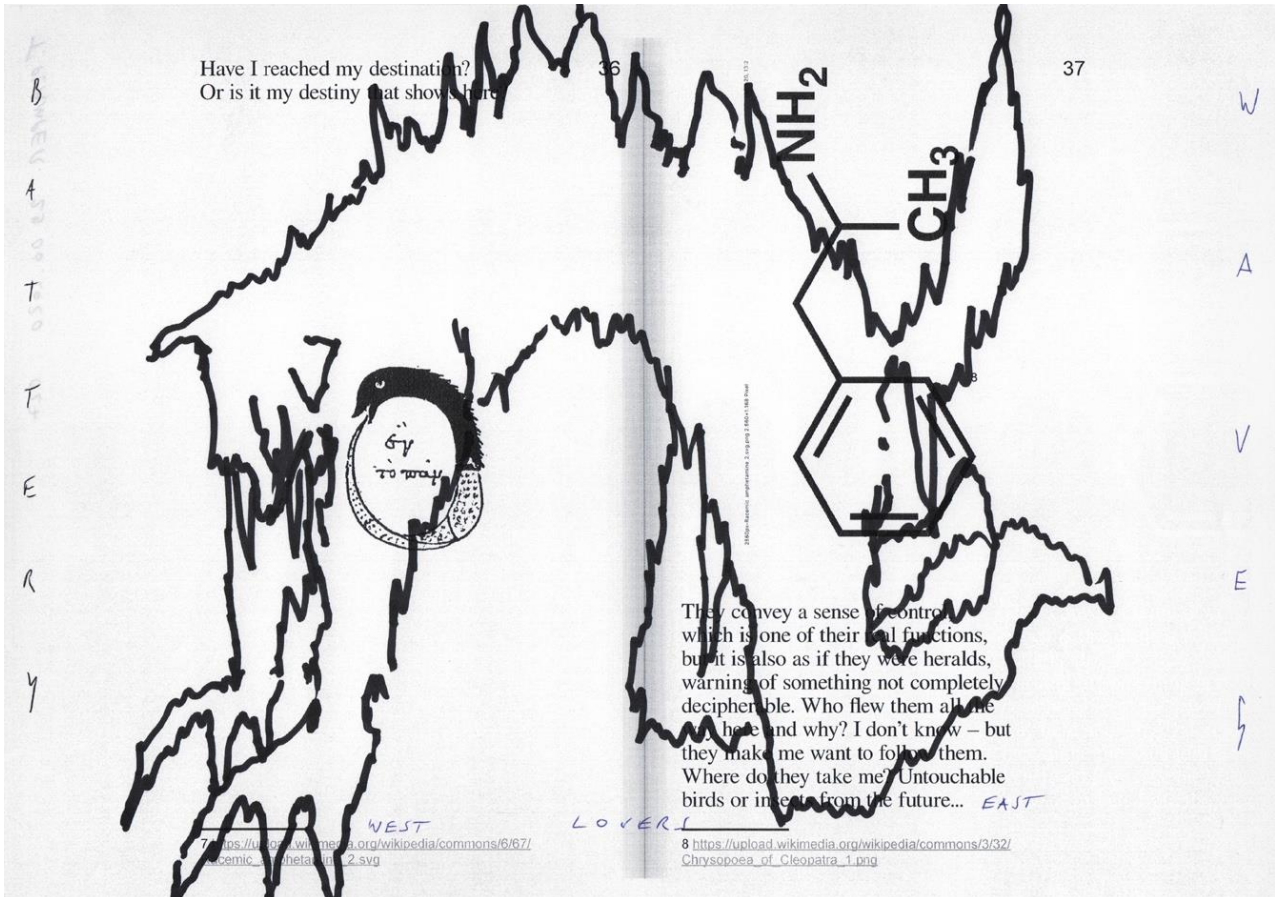III. Tim Plamper, *Goccia*, 2021, marker on steel, 200 × 200 cm
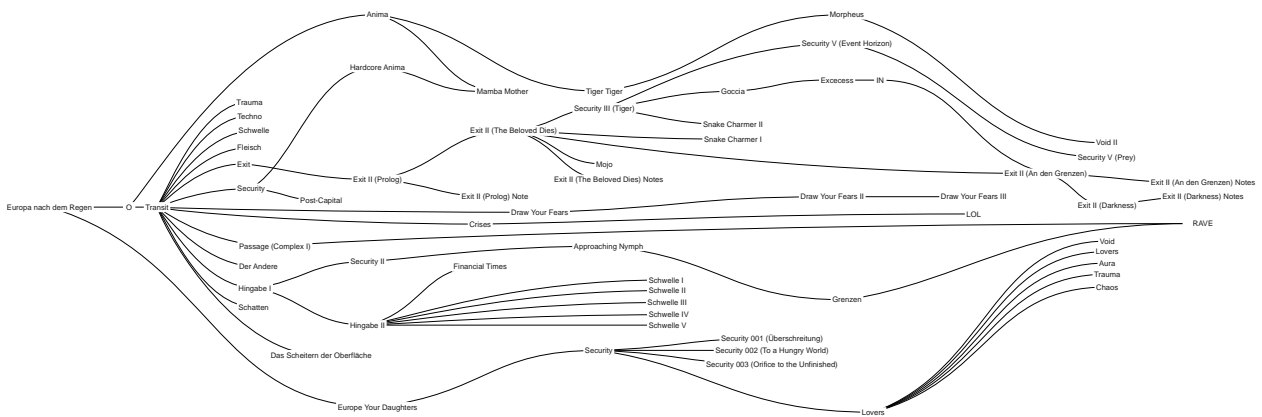
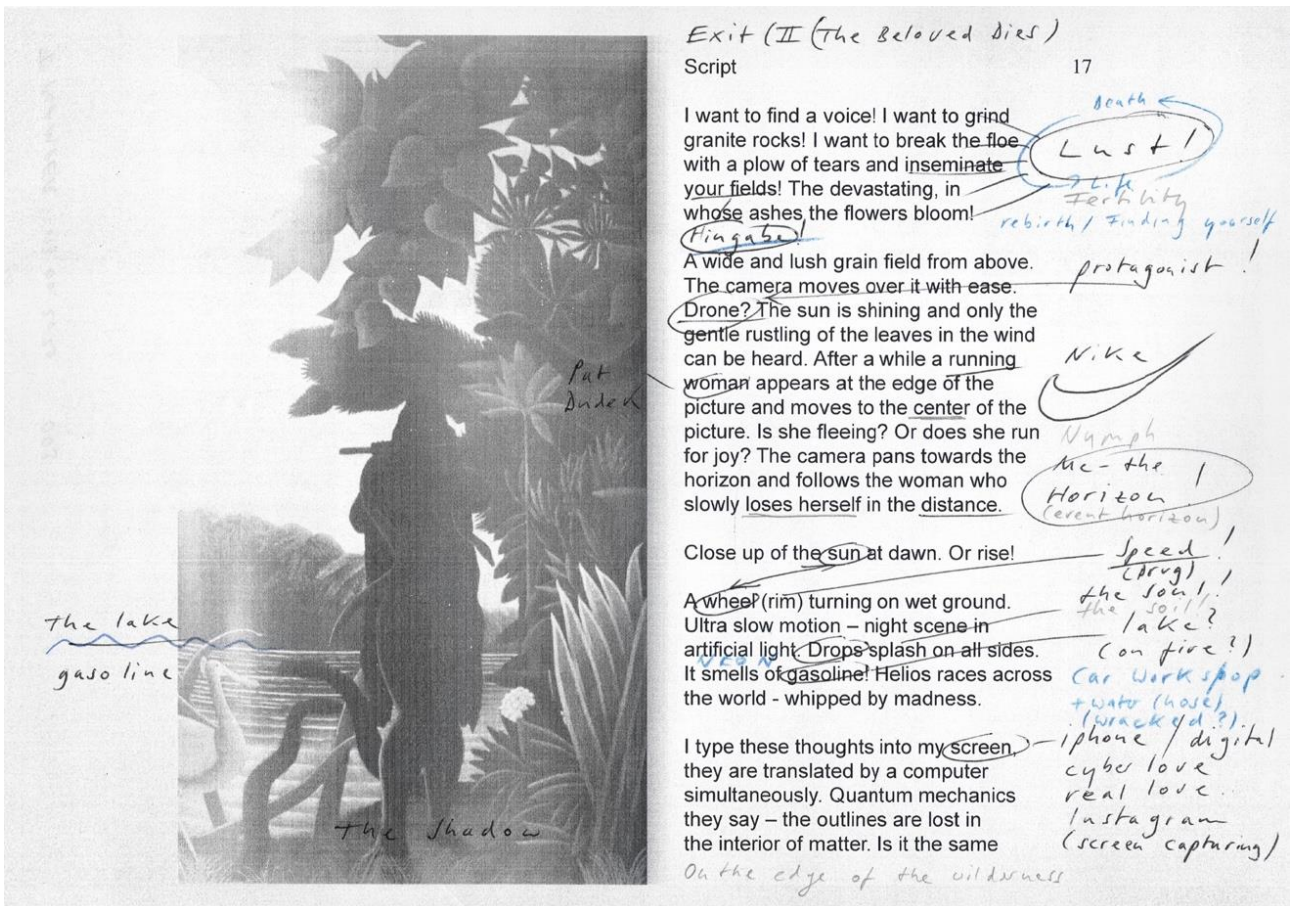IV. Tim Plamper. *Genealogy (Complex II)*, digital diagram, 2022–2024
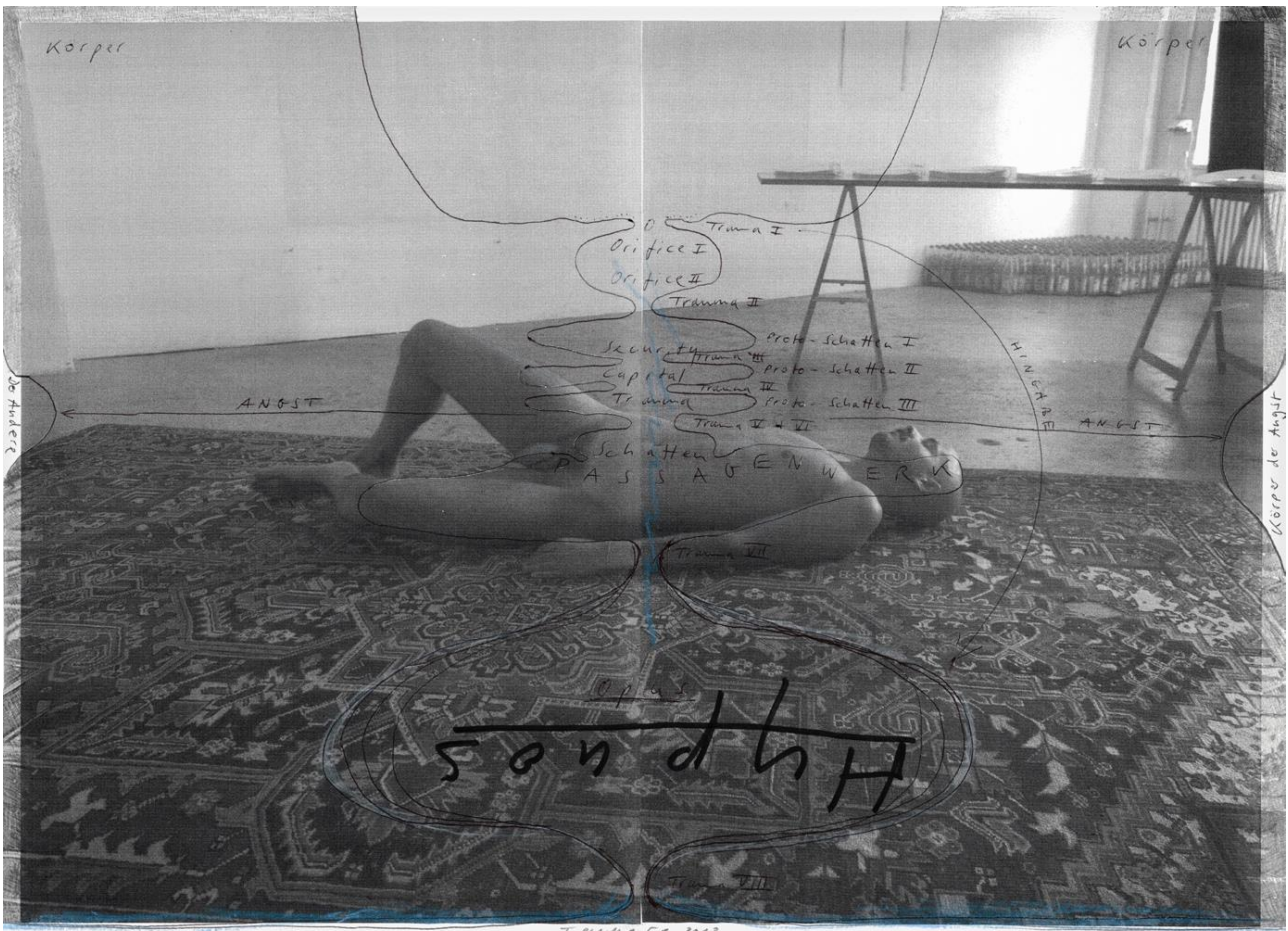
V. Tim Plamper, *Passage (Complex I)-00029*, 2018, pencil, pen, crayon and marker on laser print, 29,7 × 40,4 cm

VI. Tim Plamper, *Security III (Tiger)*, 2021, performance, 02:13:58 minutes

VII. Tim Plamper, *Exit II (The Beloved Dies) Note 028*, 2020, ball pen and marker on laser print, 21 × 29,7 cm

VIII. Tim Plamper, *Exit II (The Beloved Dies) Note 003*, 2020, ball pen and colour pencil on laser print, 21 × 29,7 cm

11/10/2024 - On Thresholds

FB: The concept of the threshold is central to your work. How do you relate to this concept? Is it a metaphorical "dwelling place" for you?

TP: Crossing into the underworld equates to traversing a threshold, one guarded by the ego as the mind's gatekeeper. In a previous interview regarding ***Security IV (Event Horizon)*** (2022, Figure XI), I mentioned, "My inner world and my outer world converge within me, and this zero-point is my ego (self)." The self resides on a threshold, expanding outward in both directions. It's akin to the "singularity" at the event horizon of a black hole. This concept of a threshold fascinates me precisely because it is abstract, elusive, and keeps both the mind and body in motion.

FB: Given the title ***Exit II***, one could question it in terms of escapism. The threshold to the after- life can seem to deflect from the present moment and its societal or political concerns, yet your work incorporates contemporary symbols of collective life.

TP: Indeed, when I first conceived of the project in 2017, "security" was perceived differently. Living in the UK, I became hyper-aware of how everything is meticulously regulated, with warnings and instructions at every turn. I found this level of control unsettling, even oppressive, and wondered why modern society gravitates toward such "securing mechanisms." I view this as a form of diminished individual responsibility – a collective behavioral phenomenon. For me, the bouncer as a "security" figure is especially intriguing: they obstruct and permit access, both roles rooted in the dynamics of control. Exit signs, while ubiquitously utilitarian, are also aes- thetically mundane; I leverage this "ugliness" in my work to provoke a reconsideration of these norms.

FB: You seem to explore the tension and danger inherent in thresholds. This concept manifests in the Tiger, the figure in your performance of the same name, ***Security III (Tiger)*** (2021, Figure VI).

TP: Precisely. The Tiger originated in sketches I made while preparing for ***Security III (Tiger)*** (Figure VII). This arched figure evokes both a crawling stance and a bridge-like form – a structure imbued with tension, visually enhanced by a lightning-like silhouette. The Tiger becomes a bridge across the threshold, akin to Charon as a liminal figure.

FB: This transformation process involves your own embodiment. In the performance, you paint yourself blue and engage in an actual struggle with a bodyguard, preventing you from completing a drawing on a steel plate. The threshold here becomes a battleground, akin to Hercules' descent into Hades.

TP: Yes, the Tiger embodies danger and raw energy. Later, I learned that in Indian mythology, blue deities are avatars who intervene when the universe is in peril – a sort of deus ex machina. In Europe, blue was historically seen as akin to divinity, associated with gold, rather than as a "color." This symbolism is present in the Tiger.

FB: In some pages of your script, heavily annotated, you ponder the meaning of crossing the threshold to the underworld (Figure VIII). Is Orpheus pursuing Eurydice, or is he ultimately searching for himself?

TP: I perceive them as a symbolic pair, embodying transition. This approach aligns with my project's focus on performances as rites of initiation. I'm drawn to the shaman figure, who traverses realms, engaging in ritual death to return with new knowledge. Orpheus and Eurydice both undergo a metaphorical death to be reborn in another form.

FB: The shaman appears directly in your performances, through visual motifs like fur and music evocative of trance.

TP: Club music, particularly its strong rhythmic pulse, resonates with my drawing practice, providing a cadence and a guiding force. In a way, the music becomes the shaman's voice – a hypnotic element that physically connects, aligning heartbeat and frequency to environment. And, of course, Orpheus himself is an artist by virtue of his music; he gains entry to Hades not through force, but through subtle artistry – a trickster rather than a hero.

FB: Given that you're the central figure in your performances, your practice has an intense subjectivity. This brings with it risks of egoism or an overemphasis on personal agency.

TP: This is always a tension. The most resonant moments in performance often emerge from a state of fragility and fluidity. Moving from one character to another requires a certain openness and relinquishing of control. The Tiger, for example, is meant to transcend the ego, devouring it and forming a bridge. The hero figure is, by contrast, often driven by ego – a forceful willpower that either prevails or is defeated. My approach departs from this monolithic perspective.

FB: In this light, the piece *Goccia* (2021, Figure III), created during *Security III (Tiger)*, could be seen as a residue or release of ego, or a contrast between you and the figure of the bouncer.

TP: That's precisely its intention – a means to confront my own ego. Art inevitably carries ego, but the less it centers on that, the richer the outcome. The security figure, in this case, became an embodiment of ego, acting as a diversion. It's about finding ways to yield control and remain curious about the outcome. This was also why I used a liquid medium. The work invites questions of authorship – who "owns" the performance? Everyone involved shares in the authorship.

FB: Your films, included in your exhibitions, act as thresholds, with the screen as a diaphragm, and projection as a transitional act.

TP: Yes, films introduce voice and rhythm into the space. The terms I incorporate visually – exit, security, and more unusual phrases like expand – mirror societal commands. I chose Arial font for its blunt, even vulgar public presence. There's a divine dimension to this: who "speaks" from these screens, signs, or advertisements? Is it society itself, or some form of modern divinity?

IX. Tim Plamper, stills from Exit II (The Beloved Dies), 2021, 4K video, 19:34 minutes
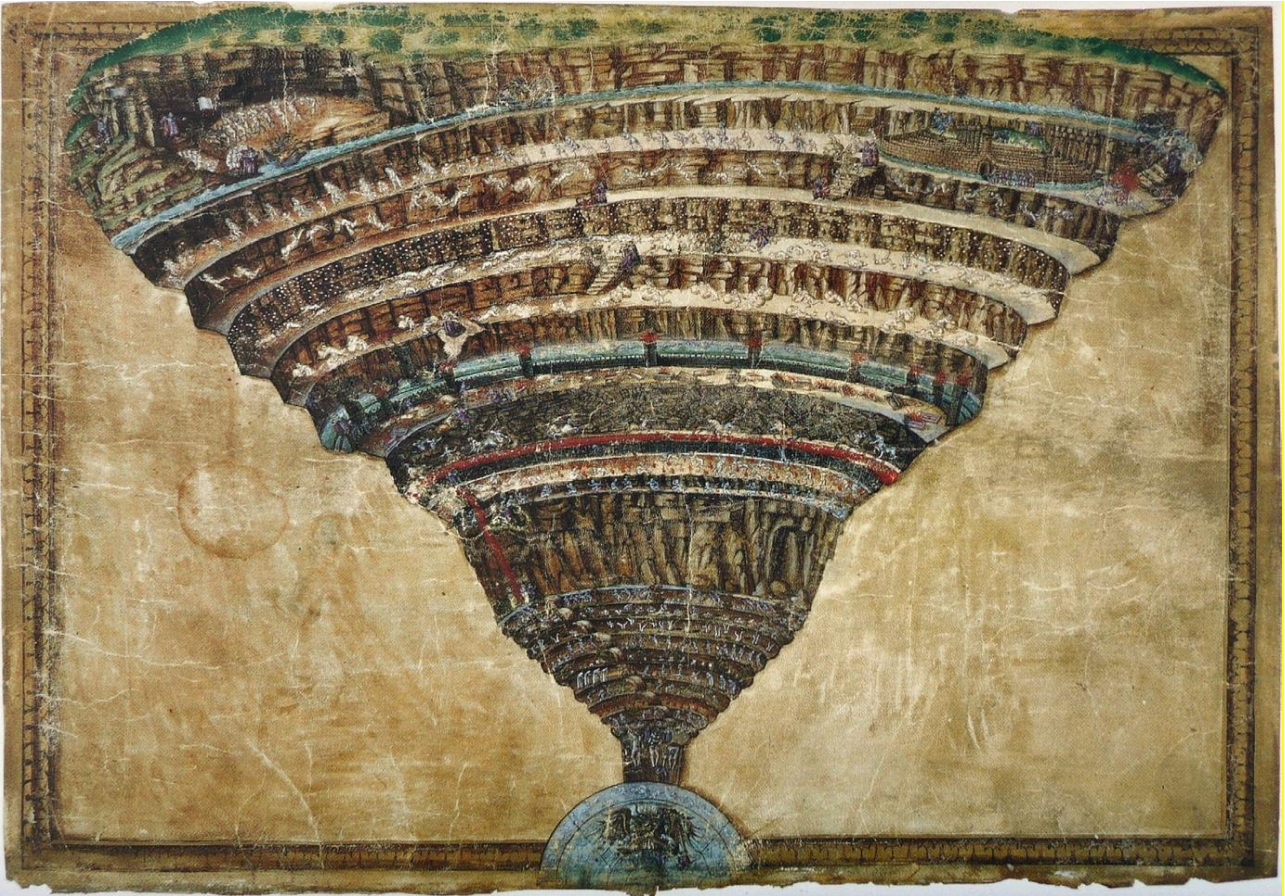
X. Sandro Botticelli, *La Voragine Infernale*, 1480-90, silver point, ink and tempera on parchment, 32,5 x 47,5 cm, VaticanLibrary

XI. Tim Plamper, *Security IV (Event Horizon)*, 2022, performance, 03:00:00 minutes

14/10/2024 - On Dreams

FB: Your practice engages directly with your own dreaming activity, akin to Hillman's analogy between dreams and the underworld. Could you elaborate on how dreams shape your work?

TP: My fascination began with an image from Henri Rousseau's *The Snake Charmer*, which I encountered in Jung's Man and His Symbols. The snake charmer embodies mastery over danger and complexity—reflecting what I was grappling with on multiple levels. When I began working on *Exit II (The Beloved Dies)* (2021, Figure IX), my daughter was born prematurely and spent weeks in intensive care. Shortly after, COVID-19 struck. It was a harrowing time, amplified by what Jung describes as synchronicity. My mind became hypersensitive, perceiving connections everywhere, and dreams emerged as crucial influences. Dreams appeared before and after performances, seeming almost summoned. Before *Security IV (Event Horizon)*, I dreamt of a black figure resembling the snake charmer, and afterward, my great-grandmother appeared in a dream, dressed in white. These dual figures – black and white – symbolized the union of opposites, a theme central to the event horizon concept.

FB: Your repertoire combines paintings, drawings, and various collected materials, creating a kind of visual atlas. The connections between these elements seem to flow through metaphor and formal echoes.

TP: Yes, alongside my own footage, I record scenes in daily life that resonate symbolically. For instance, *Exit II (Darkness)* (2023) includes stock market footage sourced from news platforms. Recently, I've incorporated drone footage from the conflicts in Lebanon and Gaza. My next film, *Exit II (An den Grenzen)* (2025/26), might integrate similarly political material, highlighting parallels between ancient myth and current geopolitics.

FB: Metaphor and analogy seem to construct narratives and motifs in your work, like the evocative comparison between the structure of a black hole and Botticelli's drawings for Dante's Inferno (Figure X).

TP: Dreams function similarly, constructing stories through analogies rather than linear connections. One element follows another without logical sequencing, held together by resonance rather than by straightforward narrative. This is especially true in my own dreams.

FB: Do you record your dreams? How does this practice intertwine with your sketching routine?

TP: I maintain a dream diary, archiving each recalled dream. Occasionally, I even reference these dreams directly in my work. It's fascinating – dreams feel like messages from beyond one- self. This raises the question of authorship: dreams feel distinct from something I've consciously written; they arrive from an external source.

FB: I resonate with the challenge of catching dreams as they slip away...

TP: Yes, "catching" is precisely the term I would use. Sometimes, I feel like a fisherman casting a net into dark waters, waiting to see what surfaces. During my studies, I kept a dream diary and practiced remembering my dreams each morning; over time, my memory improved. It's as if you have to prepare your consciousness to retain them.

FB: So, notes on dreams seamlessly integrate into your sketching, which is typical for an artist's process.

TP: Exactly. Sketching resembles daydreaming, almost like the "doodles" one makes on the phone – an automatic, uninhibited process. Strange forms emerge, origins unknown. Dreams function similarly; we don't truly understand where they originate. In addition to fully realized drawings, I value this freedom – this nearly unconscious state. By letting go and shifting my focus, I allow my hand and body to express freely.

28/10/2024 - On Embodiment and Maps

FB: Literature on the afterlife often considers the degree of bodily representation for inhabitants of the underworld, ranging from incorporeal "shades" to Dante's vividly embodied souls. In your performances, what role does the body play, and how do you highlight the physicality of certain materials? I'm thinking of lube in *Security IV (Event Horizon)*, fur, and body paint in *Security III (Tiger)* and *Exit II (The Beloved Dies)*.

TP: The physical aspect of art has always been essential. Art embodies ideas; it always has a tangible form. I pursue this distinction in my drawings, focusing not just on the image depicted, but on its material presence. In my performances, I approach the body from two perspectives. My first experience in *Security I (Hingabe)* was extremely sensory – the texture of the soil, the dampness, even a sense of pleasure.

FB: Did this experience guide your subsequent works? Did you aim to recreate that sensation?

TP: It became a lesson in what performance touches upon. Presence is paramount; what I love about this practice is that it creates an experience with the audience and collaborators in real time. It's ephemeral, like a capsule that blooms briefly and then dissipates. My performances aren't recorded and cannot be recreated.

FB: Am I correct in sensing that you aim to affect the audience physically more than intellectually? I think of the visceral impact of sound and intense physical actions, like the struggle with the bouncer.

TP: Absolutely. My goal is to bring to life an environment reminiscent of the landscapes in my large-scale drawings. I construct a kind of tableau vivant, introducing contemporary, material elements. With *Security II (The Fall)*, I took what I learned in *Security I (Hingabe)* – to approach a concept physically, not just mentally. This remains central to later performances, where repeated keywords reinforce this focus on bridging the Western dichotomy of body and mind.

FB: Mythical visitors to the afterlife, such as Aeneas or Dante, often try to embrace their loved ones, only to encounter their spectral nature. Could this desire for bodily contact be seen as an attempt to transcend that dichotomy?

TP: We're indeed anchored to our physical experience. Imagining ourselves without a body is almost impossible; we are inherently hybrid beings of mind and body. Even language has a physical dimension: vocal vibrations convey emotion and are essential to communication. The prevalent phrase "mind and body" in Western discourse is increasingly absurd to me. Linguistically, it's easy to separate them, but experientially, it's unfounded.

FB: The mention of tableau vivant recalls Pasolini's *Decameron*, where he stages the Final Judgement as a living tableau inspired by Giotto's frescoes.

TP: Yes, and broadly, Pasolini's films are full of scenes that crystallize into striking images, powerful and seemingly autonomous.

FB: Those scenes convey a potent materiality, as though their two-dimensionality calls attention to the physical effort on set...

TP: Exactly, you can sense the flux of the vision forming – a living entity or a higher presence.

FB: This recalls another feature in Pasolini's work, the rigor of structure. *Salò*, for instance, is structured after Dante's Inferno.

TP: I recently watched *Salò* and found it fascinating that one of the final frames includes a bibliography – a rare sight in film. This resonates with my approach, where I see art as a theoretical dialogue with other cultural forms.

FB: The bibliography acts as a kind of map, a structure imposed over chaotic material. How do you approach maps in your work? Are they tools for imposing order?

TP: There's always that risk, yes. But maps intrigue me because they're a blend of language and image, conveying dense information. As a child, I drew maps of imagined landscapes, envisioning myself walking through them. When working on the ***Exit II*** cycle, I began mapping the project to maintain orientation. Each time, the maps evolved as the cycle expanded. They became dynamic, sometimes even organic – like digestive organs, complete with mouths or openings, merging anatomical imagery with maps. Movement is inherent to my blind drawing practice, akin to a "camera drive" that zooms out, and in that process, the figures appear to dance.

FB: Maps in fiction often "create" spaces. This might explain why the afterworld has been mapped so richly in various traditions.

TP: Absolutely. The labyrinth is one of humanity's earliest symbols for depicting otherworldly or spiritual journeys. It's distinct from a maze; it symbolizes an inner journey toward self-discovery. I included the labyrinth in ***Security IV (Event Horizon)***, drawing a link to a black hole's other side. Recently, I read a reinterpretation of the Minos Labyrinth: Theseus, as the ego, meets the Minotaur – his repressed self – and unites with it at the labyrinth's center.

FB: In myth, Ariadne's thread is both a map and a drawing, guiding Theseus through the labyrinth like a tangled scribble he must untangle to return.

TP: Exactly. It's both an act of knowledge and a tangible object. In ***Security IV (Event Horizon)***, I drew a similar "map" on the bunker floor, marking the performance spaces in front of the audience, reminiscent of how I mapped spaces as a child.

FB: How much do you disclose to the audience about the unfolding of your performances?

TP: A core principle is to keep the audience unaware of what's to come, allowing for a raw encounter. I aim to meet them where they are, crafting a shared, often unpredictable experience. This openness applies to myself and my collaborators; while I set a general framework, I remain uncertain about how the performance will unfold. This is why I would never restage a performance – it's not theater but a genuine, collective experience unique to that moment.

FB: Where do you see this practice evolving?

TP: At a recent performance festival in Berlin, I was struck by the risk of repetitiveness in performance art. With my next project, I want to push toward something more personal, vulnerable, and real. I'm also interested in teaching, as lectures or classes can be performative spaces where ideas are explored collectively over time, akin to a film cycle. Recently, the concept of a cathedral resonated with me. Cathedrals are long-term, multi-generational projects, and I see parallels with my practice – especially in how each element contributes to a greater whole. In Gothic architecture, for instance, you find fractal structures, where intricate details echo the entire form. This organic quality feels almost alive, mirroring forms in nature.

FB: That brings us back to your "living maps." A cathedral is also a threshold to the afterworld and an expression of collective devotion.

TP: Yes, and a testament to intergenerational dedication. This ethos is lacking today, where plans often span only a few years. Cathedrals were built over centuries by individuals who knew they wouldn't see the finished structure. We need this kind of long-term thinking. I recently watched a documentary on the *Sagrada Familia* and learned that Gaudí designed elements only realizable with modern technology. He anticipated unknown advancements, trusting future generations to complete his vision. This kind of foresight and humility, entrusting what we cannot fully imagine, is inspiring – a rare combination of faith and creative courage.

FB: This approach aligns with creative processes grounded in long-term practice. It contrasts sharply with the immediacy and ephemerality of performance. ***Exit II*** serves as an overarching framework, allowing discrete events to emerge and be reabsorbed.

TP: Exactly. As a child, I loved long films that allowed time to develop, with no rush. I remember my first epic film experience, which lasted six hours. I was fascinated that a director would ask for such commitment from the audience. This applies to literature, too, especially with Russian authors like Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov.* After enduring its length and slow rhythm, you sense a deep, pulsing subtext. In my performances, I take all the time needed. Some viewers may lose interest, but that's part of the process.

FB: Do you think the afterlife could be conceived in such temporal terms?

TP: Absolutely. Though some, like Christians, have quite definitive views, envisioning an eternal waiting period before the Last Judgment.

XII. Henri Rousseau, *La charmeuse de serpents*, 1907, oil on canvas, 167 × 189,5 cm, Musée d'Orsay

XIII. Tim Plamper, still from *Exit II (The Beloved Dies)*, 2021, 4K video, 19:34 minutes

Index

		Performance & Exhibitions	Video work
2018	Transit	Security I (Hingabe), performance, Hypnos Security II (The Fall), performance, Berlin	
2019	Exit II (Prolog)	Exit II (Prolog), exhibition, Mega Mélange, Cologne	Exit II (Prolog), video
2020		Security, exhibition, Eduardo Secci, Florence	
2021	Exit II (The Beloved Dies)	Security III (Tiger), performance, exhibition NOD, Prague	Exit II (The Beloved Dies), video
2022		Security IV (Event Horizon), performance, Spazio ORR, Culterim Gallery, Berlin	
2023	Exit II (Darkness)	Exit II (Darkness), exhibition, Groove, Berlin Security V (Prey), performance, Berlin	Exit II (Darkness), video
2024		Anti Body, exhibition, Anti Space, Berlin	

Map

Fig. 1

Fig. 2

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Fig. 7

Fig. 8
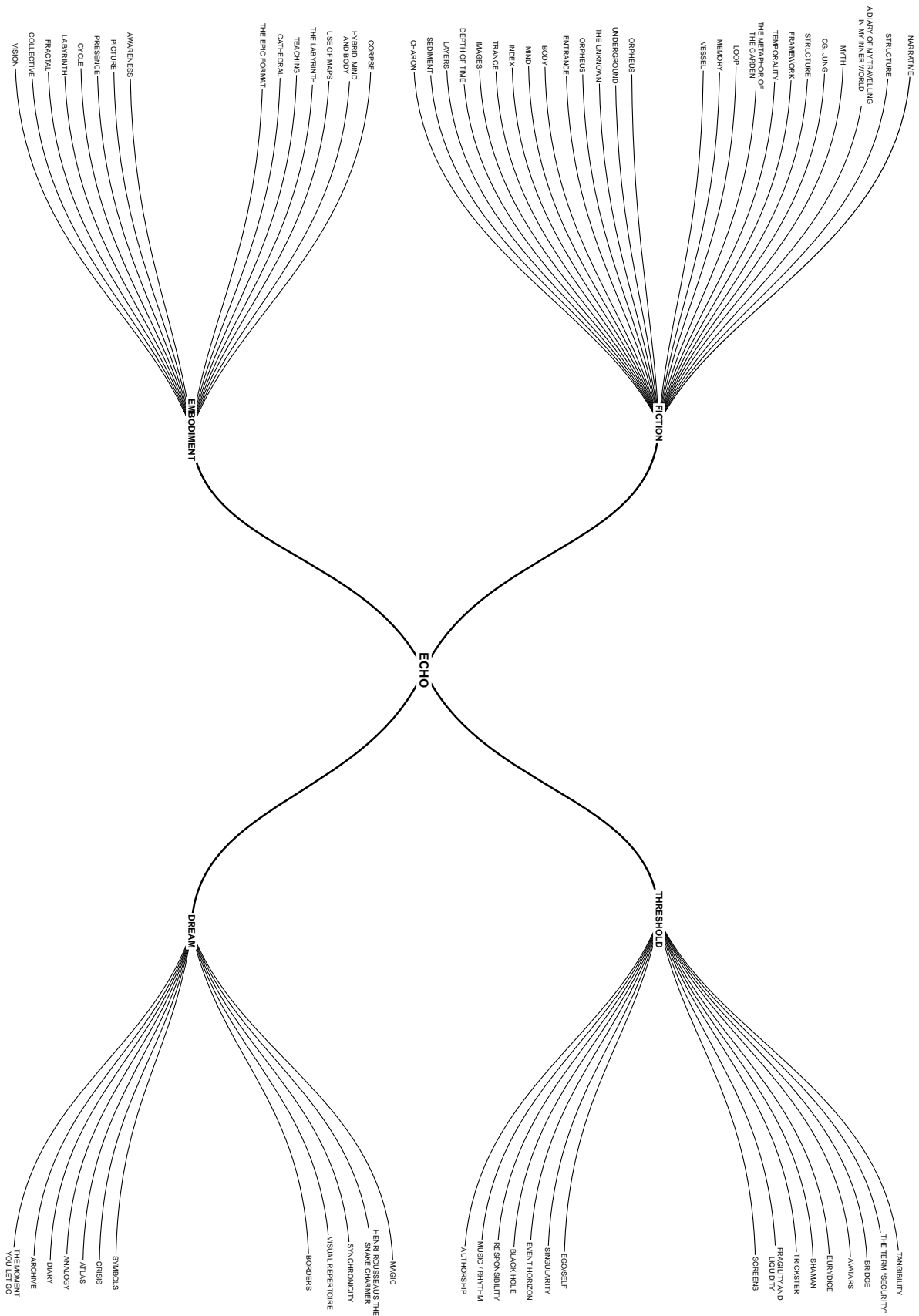
Fig. 9

Fig. 10

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Fig. 13
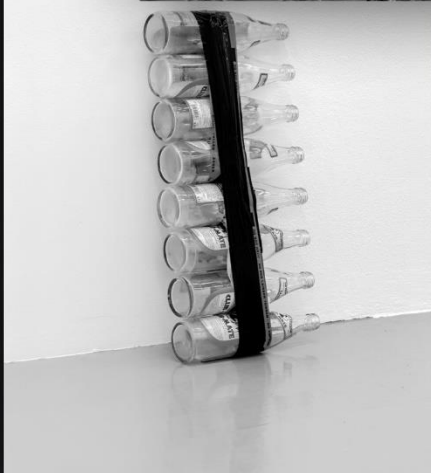
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Fig. 15
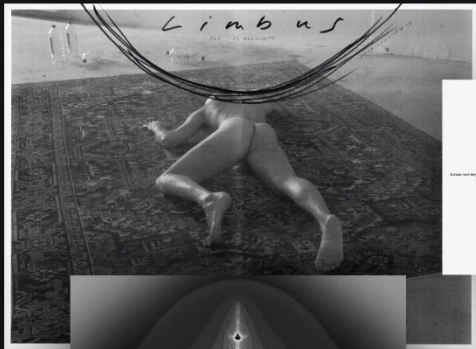
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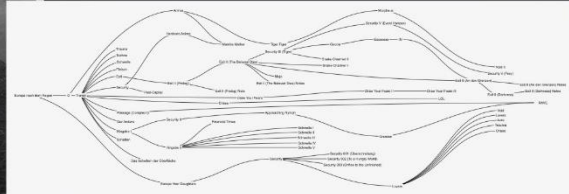
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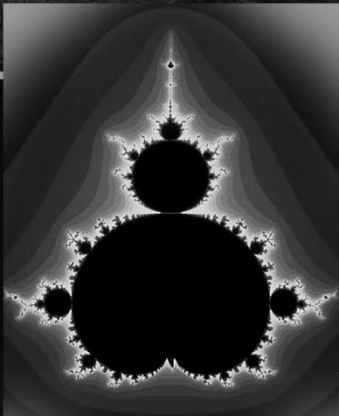
Fig. 18

Fig. 19

Fig. 20

Fig. 21

Fig. 22

Fig. 23

Fig. 24

Index

Links

Tim Plamper, *Exit II (Prolog)*, 2019, HD Video, 10:42 minutes
https://youtu.be/ONQAa86876s
Tim Plamper, *Exit II (The Beloved Dies)*, 2021, 4K video, 19:34 minutes https://youtu.be/Xvn165zPP74
Tim Plamper, *Exit II (Darkness)*, 2023, 4K video, 03:41 minutes
https://youtu.be/1QEFskfM_EE
Tim Plamper, *Security III (Tiger)*, 2021, performance, 02:13:58 minutes
https://youtu.be/q3hQq5hECBY
Tim Plamper, *Security IV (Event Horizon)*, 2022, performance, 03:00:00 minutes
https://youtu.be/44HmQBdDojM

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