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MOVING PICTURES: RESTORING ROY LICHTENSTEIN'S FORAY INTO FILM

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Three Landscapes, 1970–1971, is the one and only film installation created by American Pop artist Roy Lichtenstein (1927–1997). It was commissioned in 1968 by the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, California (LACMA), for an exhibition called *Art and Technology*, which was conceived by curator Maurice Tuchman. The idea for *Art and Technology* began in 1966, when Tuchman thought to pair leading artists of the day with some of California's foremost industries. Lichtenstein's film grew out of his collaboration with Universal Studios. It was first shown in 1970 in Osaka, Japan as part of *The New Arts: Expo 70*, organized by LACMA, in association with the United States Information Agency. There, it joined eight other experimental artworks, among them Claes Oldenburg's (b. 1929) *Giant Ice Bag* (1970) done in collaboration with Gemini G.E.L., Robert Whitman's (b. 1935) twenty-three foot mirrored dome and Andy Warhol's (1928–1987) *Daisy Waterfall (Rain Machine)*, 1971 along with works by Newton Harrison (b. 1932), Rockne Krebs (1938-2011), Boyd Mefferd (b. 1941), and Tony Smith (1912-1980). Very few still images of Lichtenstein's film exist from that time; only one remains in now-fading color, taken by the photographic team of Harry Shunk (1924–2006) and Jean Kender (1937–2009) (fig. 1). The only other existing images of the work in situ were taken by filmmaker Eric Saarinen (b. 1942), who went to Osaka to document the works in the United States Pavilion.

Lichtenstein's work for Osaka consisted of two continuously looping 35-mm rear-projected films on two theater-sized screens. In Lichtenstein's oeuvre, it was an unprecedented step into filmmaking and certainly into the high-tech world, but its subject closely mirrored the comic-inspired landscapes that followed his cartoon Romance and War Era imagery (fig. 2). That same year the artist began a series of optical collages from the polycarbonate material called Rowlux, which is composed of thousands of optical lenses rotated to form three-dimensional patterns (fig. 3). Rowlux had been invented to compete with the reflective sheets developed by industrial supply company 3M for use on stop signs, but the material was so distracting that its end use entailed mountings on snare drums, trophy plaques, and hair barrettes.

The three-dimensional patterns of Rowlux instantly appealed to Lichtenstein, who thought the material's vulgar appearance would help him achieve his aims. He most likely found it on rolls in the shops along Canal Street near his studio on the Bowery in New York City. Between 1964 and 1967, he made hundreds of landscape-themed collages from Rowlux and Mylar, often juxtaposing colors or patterns horizontally on board or layering them under colored paper to simulate nuances of sky and water. In a number of the works, he added slight touches of Magna paint, cut-out vinyl tape, photographs, or printed Benday dot paper to indicate the most basic notations of land.

In 1966, Lichtenstein began to add small, rotating Synchron motors to the back of his Rowlux collages, complete with an electric plug and toggle switch (fig. 4). When the motor is turned on, the Rowlux sheet on the bottom half rotates. The effect looks like water gently bobbing up and down. In a series of other Rowlux collages begun that year, the artist attached his own, invented, separately-operable picture lamps with rotating bulbs to the top of each framed work. The bulbs were painted with thin stripes of different-colored theater gels, so when the lamps were turned on, the Rowlux appeared to change color as if the landscape were being

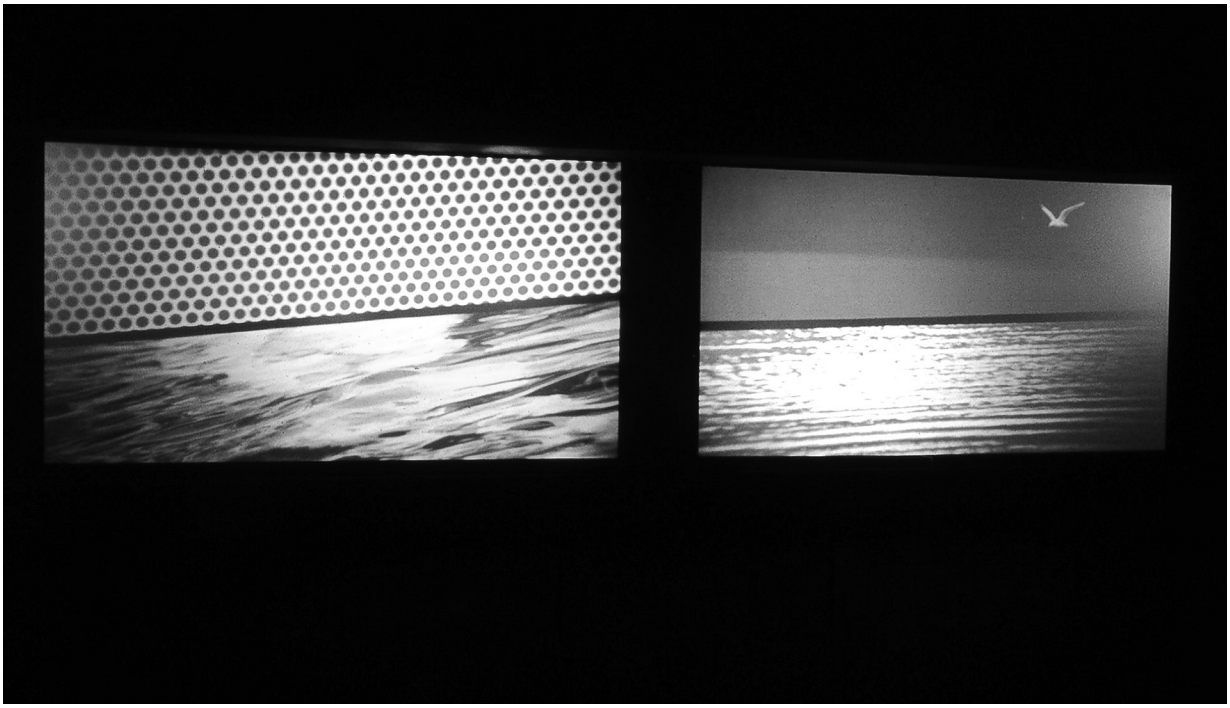

Fig. 1. Roy Lichtenstein, *Three Landscapes*, 1970–1971, Installation view at *The New Arts: Expo 70*, Osaka, Japan, United States Pavilion, Japan World Exposition, March 15–September 13, 1970. Photo: Shunk-Kender. ©Estate of Roy Lichtenstein. Courtesy The Roy Lichtenstein Foundation.

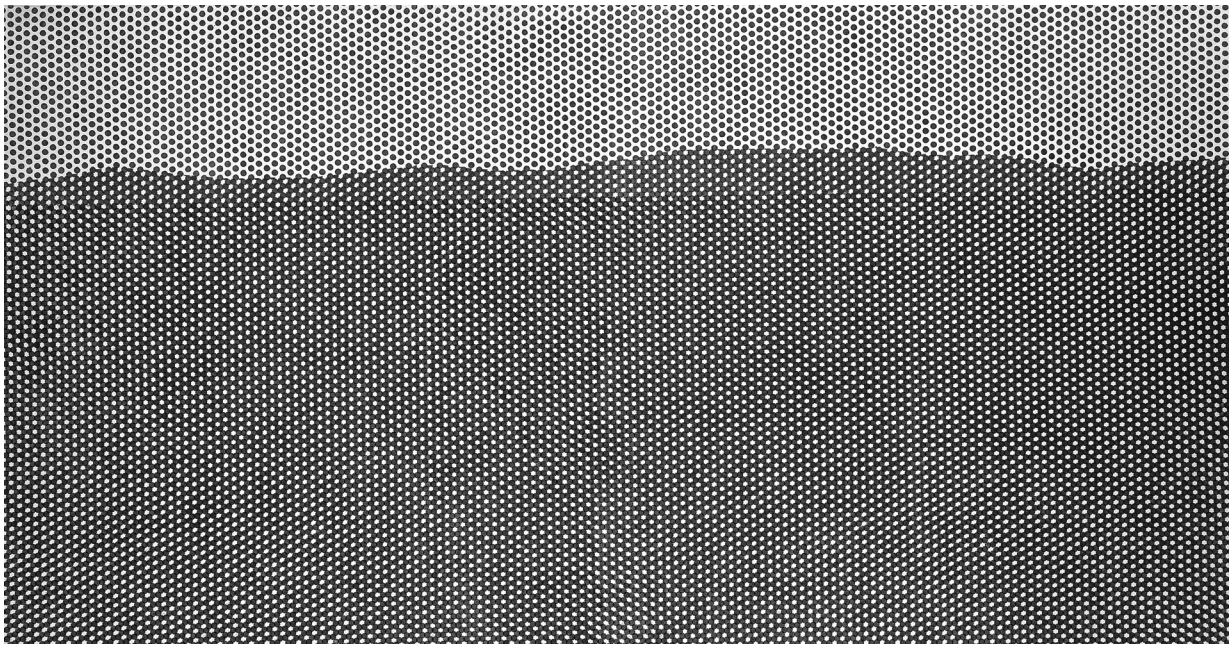

Fig. 2. Roy Lichtenstein, *Littoral*, 1964 (1965), oil and Magna on canvas, 91.4 x 172.7 cm, Private Collection. ©Estate of Roy Lichtenstein. Courtesy The Roy Lichtenstein Foundation.

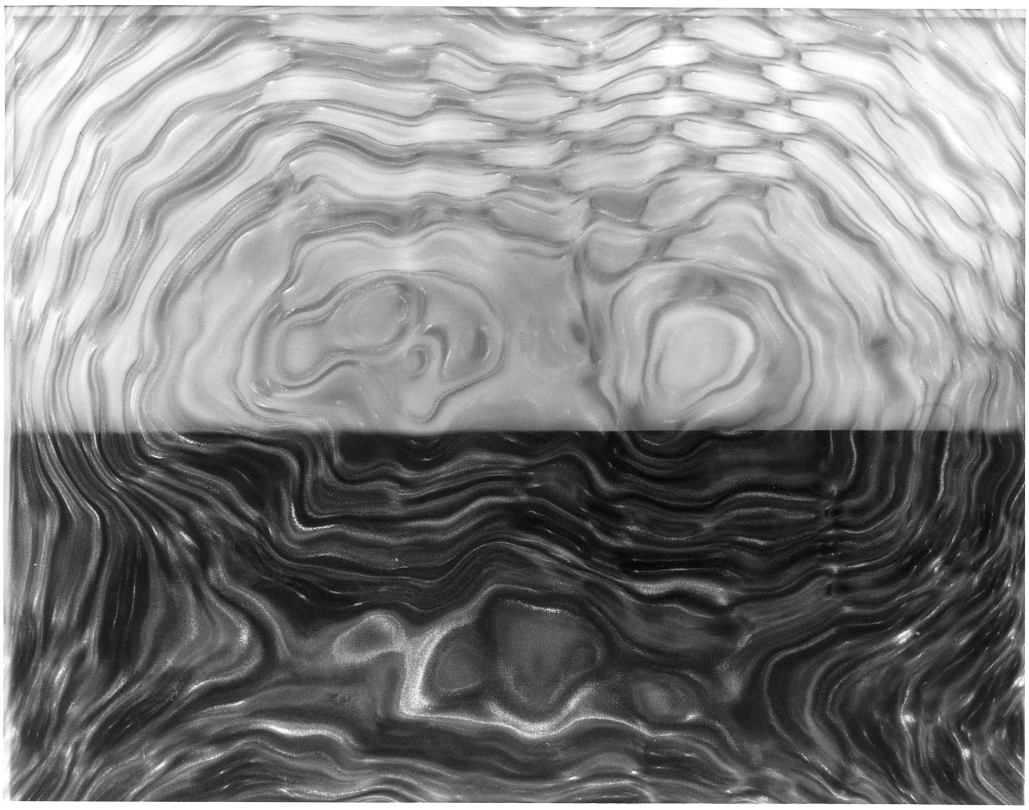

Fig. 3. Roy Lichtenstein, *Red Ocean Motion*, 1966, Rowlux and mixed media on board, 47 x 57.2 cm. Private Collection. ©Estate of Roy Lichtenstein. Courtesy The Roy Lichtenstein Foundation.

seen throughout different times of the day (fig. 5). While Lichtenstein also developed modern motifs based on the 1930s Art Deco style in his paintings and sculpture during this time, these moving landscapes continued to figure strongly in his work well into 1968.

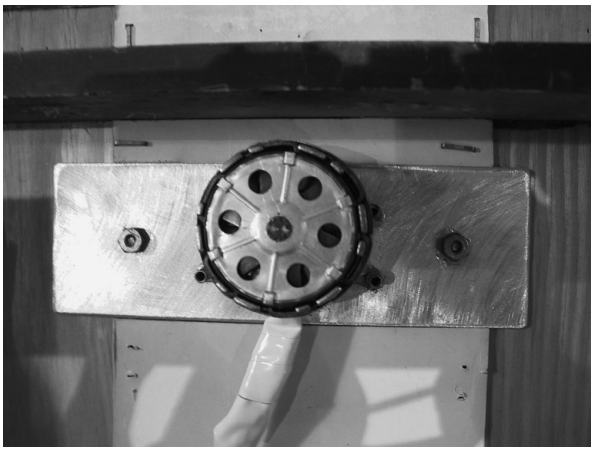

Fig. 4. Synchron motor and electric cord as seen on the verso of Roy Lichtenstein's *Kinetic Seascape #2*, 1966, Rowlux, acetate and vinyl on board, 67 x 57.2 cm, Private Collection. ©Estate of Roy Lichtenstein. Courtesy The Roy Lichtenstein Foundation.

Fig. 5. Roy Lichtenstein, *Seascape #14*, 1966, Rowlux with electric lamp, 55.8 x 66 cm, Private Collection. ©Estate of Roy Lichtenstein. Courtesy The Roy Lichtenstein Foundation.

If Lichtenstein's landscapes looked tacky, they were meant to be just that. Lichtenstein's work always took its cue from the surface quality of graphic art and the depicted image. Viewers perceive his works as landscapes because of, not despite, their deadpan quality. Composition is always privileged over subject in his work. His film loops are no different in this respect. The black line that divides the composition in each filmed vignette is immediately perceived as the horizon, its rocking motion instantly understood as a force of nature. Filming Benday dots would most certainly have appealed to the artist's sense of irony. Their lowbrow reproduction of sky, land, and water only helps to crystallize them as symbols for the real. But like so much of Lichtenstein's work, what appears to be simply executed is in actuality a series of complex operations that are expertly masked.

In June 1968, Tuchman asked Lichtenstein to think about working with Universal Studios in California to conceive of an idea for a possible work for his next installment of *Art & Technology*. That fall, Lichtenstein took his first tour of Universal Studios, which was located in the San Fernando Valley. He then told Tuchman that he would think about making a film. Lichtenstein first proposed the idea of shooting a woman's face using contrasting green and red lighting or Benday dots. These ideas clearly derived from his series of ceramic female heads from 1965 done in collaboration with potter Hui Ka Kwong (1922–2003), a fellow teacher at Rutgers University, New Brunswick, New Jersey (fig. 6). The idea of using heads was summarily dropped, as the artist, upon reflection, felt they would be too "zippy" (Tuchman 1971, 194). In February of the following year, Lichtenstein took a rare break from his established routine of studio painting to

Fig. 6. Roy Lichtenstein, *Head with Red Shadow*, 1965, glazed ceramic, 38.1 x 20.3 x 21 cm, Private Collection. ©Estate of Roy Lichtenstein. Courtesy The Roy Lichtenstein Foundation.

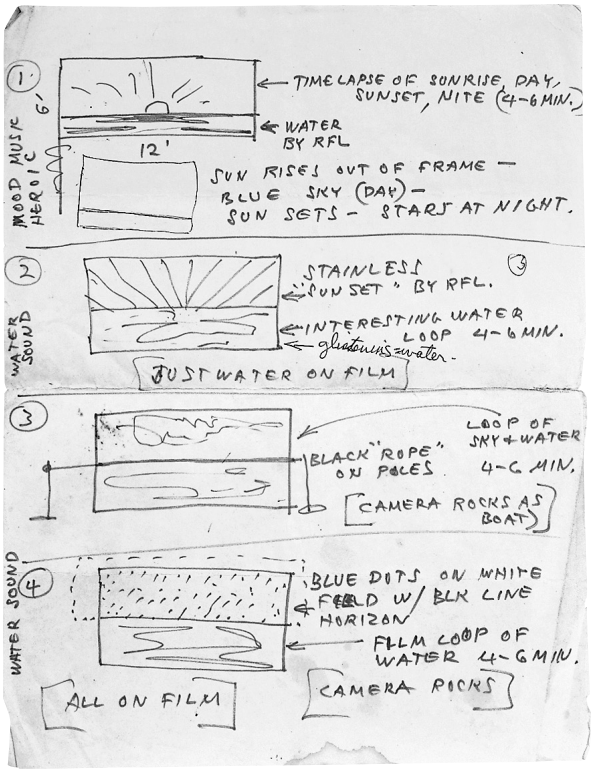

Fig. 7. Roy Lichtenstein, *Three Landscapes (Studies)*, 1969, marker, ballpoint pen, and graphite on paper, 27.7 x 21.3 cm, Private Collection. ©Estate of Roy Lichtenstein. Courtesy The Roy Lichtenstein Foundation.

spend two weeks at Universal Studios, where he stayed in comedian Jack Benny's old dressing room. According to Tuchman, the artist discussed various methods of filming landscapes with studio technicians so that the "film would appear to exist autonomously, as a painting; and that the images be exceptionally clear and precise" (Tuchman 1971,195). Lichtenstein also specified his wish for rear projection, but the only system Universal could suggest required at least 40 feet between the screen and the projector, which would have been impractical in most settings.

Lichtenstein returned to New York and sketched 15 vignettes for 15 separate films, designating which ones would have a rocking motion and which would not (fig. 7). "Each seascape," the artist wrote, "should be thought of as a simple conventional picture—a collage with moving parts" (Tuchman 1971, 195). He also commented that each "seascape has a sky and water and a black line in between." While most were conceived to be in color, some of the split images were to be in black and white. Most of the sketches indicate that the images would be filmed, and some even specified various time-lapsed sequences. There were also several sketched sequences where Lichtenstein planned to combine film with a "quilted stainless steel 'sunset'" (not on film), and another where a filmed, time-lapsed sunrise would appear above a frosted acrylic Plexiglas construction. It was not the first time the artist proposed working with these kinds of materials; he had created a series of explosions in porcelain-enameled steel beginning in 1965 (fig. 8) and had briefly used Plexiglas as a support as early as 1964, when he made several pieces painted with Magna.

Though the sketches were seemingly simple, the technology to execute these ideas was beyond Lichtenstein's scope of knowledge. Preferring to work from his studio in

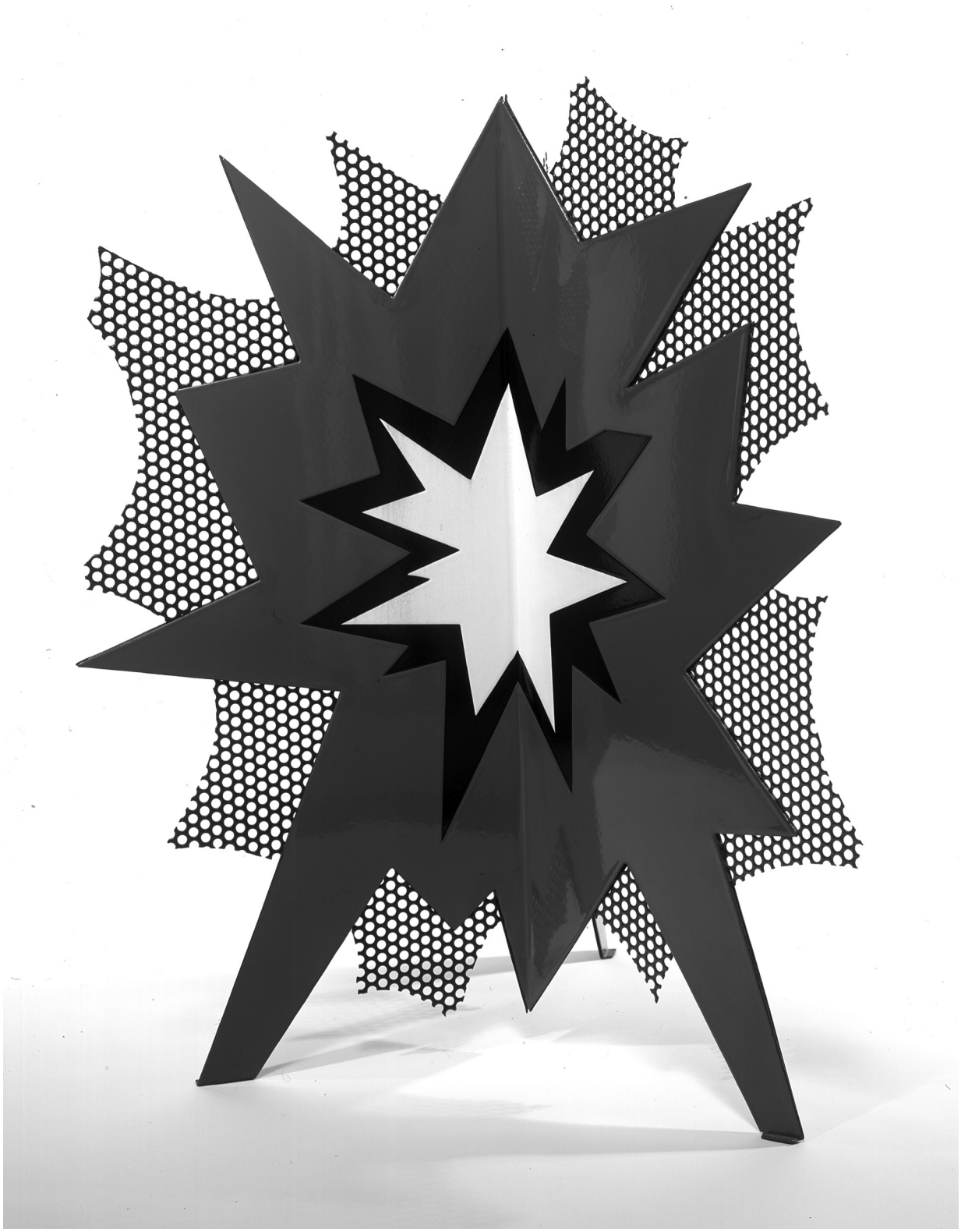

Fig. 8. Roy Lichtenstein, S*tanding Explosion (Red)*, 1966, porcelain enamel on steel, 91.4 x 63.5 x 68.6 cm, Private Collection. ©Estate of Roy Lichtenstein. Courtesy The Roy Lichtenstein Foundation.

New York, he decided to enlist the help of independent filmmaker Joel L. Freedman, whose production company, Cinnamon Productions, Inc., was based in the city. Lichtenstein's wife, Dorothy, had introduced the two a few years earlier. The pair met in Montauk near the artist's second studio in Southampton, New York and, along with Freedman's assistant, filmed a sunrise and sunset over a period of 24 hours. According to Freedman, the resulting footage was too shaky to be of any value. At one point, Freedman recalled he spoke with technicians at the National Aeronautics and Space Administration, who told him the project would require a highly calibrated telescope mounted to the camera, an endeavor the filmmaker and artist quickly deemed too expensive to pursue.

Lichtenstein returned to Los Angeles that July and selected aerial footage of planes and clouds that he and Freedman couldn't shoot themselves from Universal Studios' archives. By that time, the Osaka World's Fair proposal was taking shape, and he was told that only two screens would be possible in Japan, as opposed to the 15 he proposed. He decided to return to his New York studio, where he could continue painting and working with Freedman. Both filmmaker and painter agreed that the only way to achieve proper color correction and synchronization was to bring the films to an optical lab.

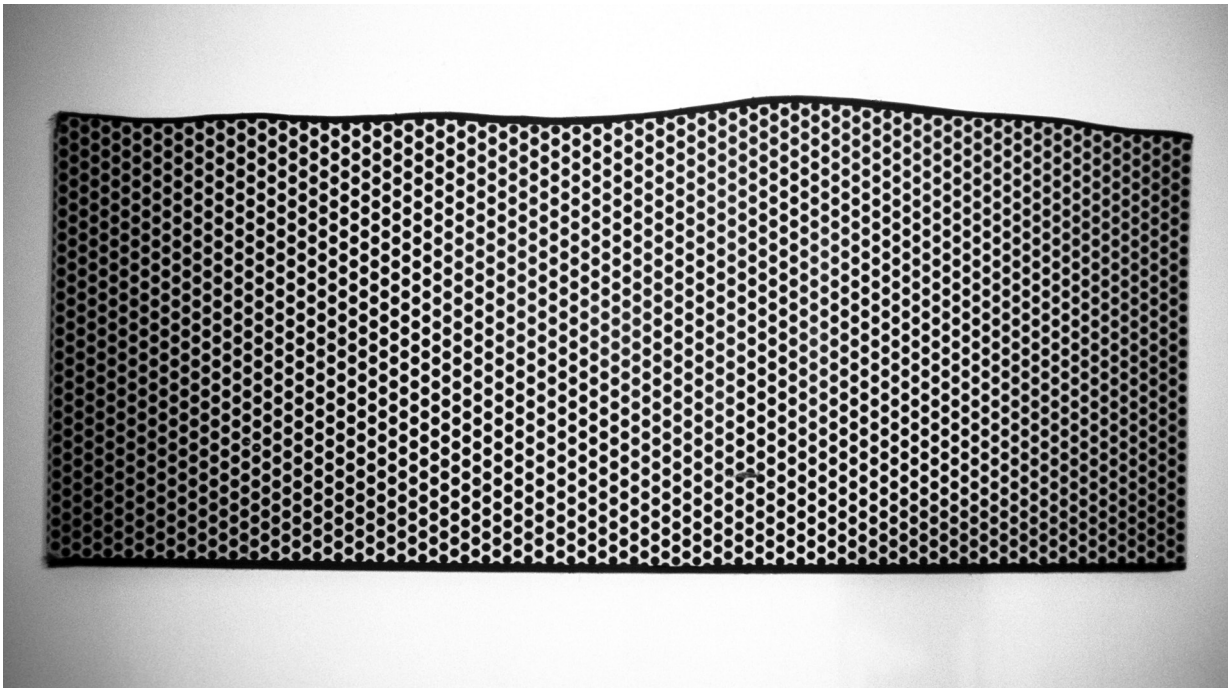

Fig. 9. Roy Lichtenstein, *Prop for a Film*, Magna and tape on Masonite, 109.2 x 243.8 cm, Private Collection. ©Estate of Roy Lichtenstein. Courtesy The Roy Lichtenstein Foundation.

Next, the pair tried propping a painted Benday dot Masonite screen held by a wooden easel over the water, but the exposures could not be adequately controlled. When the Benday dot field was in focus, the ocean water was out of focus, and vice versa (fig. 9). Freedman recalled that they just started shooting various imagery the artist

Freedman suggested Vi-D-Art, owned by special effects expert Hugo Casolaro, and located on West 45th Street in New York. Finalizing the two films, however, turned out to be a more tedious and laborious process than the filmmaker, artist, or curator had anticipated. The operation took over nine months to complete because all work had to be done frame by frame on an Oxbery animation stand, and even a slight calibration mistake would cause the horizon line to change in thickness. Freedman reported they had to go through the process five or six times for each frame before getting it right.

For the Osaka showing, the artist wanted the specific color of Kodak Kodachrome blue for the sky with the seagull in the upper right corner. As planned, the seagull's wings were supposed to flap to achieve the tacky imagery the artist desired. However, in order to saturate the frame with color, the blue had to be set underneath the seagull. This meant the seagull had to be cut out from the frame, and flapping the wings became too difficult. For the second film, he chose to use a blue and white Benday dot pattern that had to be collaged into filmed footage of sunlit dock water, once again separated by a black horizon line moving exactly the same way in each frame. Looping requirements magnified the difficulty of the frame-by-frame work, as the ending and beginning frames had to be exactly spliced. Freedman recalled it was akin to animation without the aid of computers.

Neither artist nor filmmaker went to see the film installation in Osaka in March 1970. Technicians in Japan designed a rear-projection system to accommodate two films at their intended projection size of 7 x 11 feet. Each loop was one minute long. United States Information Agency staff were sent numerous loops, which repeatedly broke after short periods of use. More loops were ordered during the run of the World's Fair.

In 1971, a third film was installed and opened in Los Angeles that May along with the two other films. Due to space considerations, the three film loops had to be reduced from 35 mm to 16 mm, although the installation requirements were the same. Neither Lichtenstein nor Freedman went to see the Los Angeles installation, and no known photographs exist. The content of the third film has remained a mystery, with the exception of a brief description by one Los Angeles-based critic, who described an aquarium of tropical fish underneath a cloud-filled sky. If you watched them "for too long," he wrote, "these seesawing bits of film might either make you seasick or put you to sleep . . . to watch them for a few minutes is basically a calming, relaxing experience" (Seldis 1971, 47).

Between its debut in Osaka and its run in Los Angeles, little else was said about Lichtenstein's work after *Art and Technology* closed that summer. Lichtenstein rarely spoke about the piece. In an effort to collect material to use in the exhibit catalogue, Tuchman sent a letter to the artist dated April 1970 asking him to relay his thoughts on the project overall. When asked why he was initially interested in participating in *Art and Technology*, Lichtenstein responded, "I was not interested but I am highly suggestible" (Tuchman 1970). Other questions posed by Tuchman in the same letter regarding what Lichtenstein thought of the organization, of the program, how the corporation and their personnel worked with him, and his views of the end result elicited the answers, "Good," "Fine," "Nice," and "Yes," in that order (Tuchman 1970). After *Art and Technology* closed, most of the original materials and outtake footage were sent to Freedman for storage. One single reel of film stock that included endless loops of the Osaka images remained in the artist's studio, and it was severely discolored (fig. 10).

Cassandra Lozano, former Managing Director of the Roy Lichtenstein Foundation, New York, and at one time Roy's administrative assistant, recalled that in 1995 Lichtenstein was approached by Freedman to preserve the films. Freedman had the original 35-mm footage from Osaka, but only a 16 mm reduction print of the third film. With the artist's permission, Freedman engaged

the film editing company Horn Eisenberg to compile a digital demo reel of five sequences representing the total number of scenes the two had filmed in 1969. In a letter dated September 4, 1995, Freedman stated that sequences one to five were edited versions of the artist's

Fig. 10. Detail of Roy Lichtenstein, *Three Landscapes*, 1970 (1996), From Horn and Eisenberg 3:00 hour film transfer. Private Collection. ©Estate of Roy Lichtenstein. Courtesy The Roy Lichtenstein Foundation.

original sequences and that, "we placed sound on the gulls so you could get an idea of how sound might work with the images" (Freedman, 2012, 13). The footage was sent to the artist in VHS and DVD formats that year in the hope it could be re-released as a digital edition, but Lichtenstein declined to pursue it any further.

For many years, Freedman's re-mastered copy was the only physical manifestation of the work. By the time of the artist's death in 1997, the film was being shown primarily as documentation. While videotape was critical in moving Lichtenstein's imagery to a more stable support, this was simply an act of technical duplication rather than preservation of the artwork itself. The Horn Eisenberg demo reel provided access, but it did not provide the culture and context of Lichtenstein's film installation, which had been remastered and edited in its transfer to a digital platform. Careful consideration of the artist's intentions and research into the work in its original installation state led to a restoration approach that sought to privilege his use of film over attempts at digitized versions. To do so meant examining the complexities between conservation, restoration, and film preservation.

While Freedman had taken great pains to store the films in temperature- and humidity-controlled conditions and had used them sparingly when he made the demo reel in 1995, the acetate's condition was beyond repair. Deterioration, discoloration, and lack of the third 35 mm original reel made it impossible to attempt any true conservation of the original materials. Thus, the Lichtenstein Foundation turned to the idea of moving image restoration, which would allow an authentic reconstruction of the work as film. Working with Chrissie Isles, Film & Video Curator at the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, the Foundation embarked on a year-long examination of all the surviving materials, including production and exhibition records, and collected oral histories to interpolate the films' original state.

Isles and I led the project, working with the film restoration house Cineric, Inc., located in New York City. Known for restoring Hollywood classic films, as well as films by visual artists, Cineric began the task of migrating the original acetate celluloid to digital and back again to more stable Mylar. Freedman was adamant that the artist had insisted on Kodachrome blue for the sky with the seagull. This had to be completely restored by Cineric's in-house team, which also reinstated the correct sunlit water. The entire fish and sky sequence had also suffered from vinegar syndrome. Scratches on the original reels had to be painstakingly erased.

Like the original optical work done in 1970, the reconstruction proved an arduous process that involved hours of technical fine-tuning and eventually splicing to recreate each looped sequence as a digital negative. In order to achieve the new loops, each original one-minute continuum was altered slightly to three minutes to make it

as seamless as the original. Figure 11 outlines Cineric's process from the original footage to the two editions of the work that the Lichtenstein Estate commissioned.

Forty-one years have passed since *Three Landscapes* has been shown in its original 35 mm, three-screen format. Thanks to efforts by the artist's estate, The Roy Lichtenstein Foundation, and the Whitney Museum of American Art, in association with the expertise of Cineric Inc., Lichtenstein's three films were fully renovated and displayed in 2011 using the same specifications for rear-screen projection loopers he outlined for their debut in Osaka and Los Angeles (fig. 12). However, preservation questions remain, as access to this work will constantly be redefined according to managerial, financial, and technical limitations. At the Whitney, heavy use caused the projection loopers to break quickly, and QuickTime MOV files had to be created by Cineric so the work could remain available to the public. The Art Institute of Chicago, Illinois, did not have the resources to show the work on film as part of the recent traveling retrospective in May 2012. The decision to allow QuickTime MOV files in the show demonstrates how the Estate and the Foundation attempt to balance the artist's intended format with the work's ongoing availability.

Having saved *Three Landscapes* as a film yields a better starting point to evaluate the artist's intentions for the work. For an artist whose materials have typically encompassed oil and Magna on canvas, the journey of Lichtenstein's films from acetate to Mylar will continue to be a fascinating and painstaking tale.

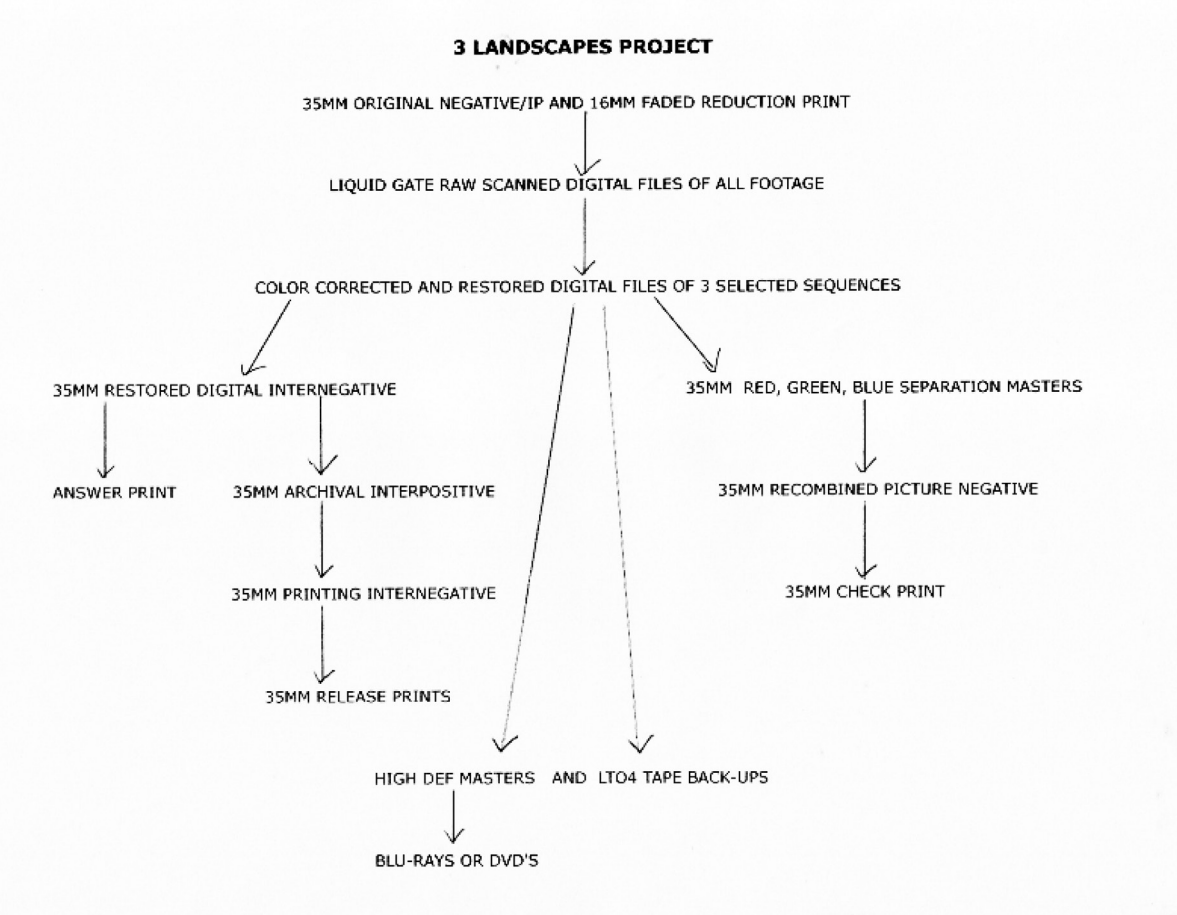

Fig. 11. *Three Landscapes* Project Outline by Cineric, Inc. Courtesy The Roy Lichtenstein Foundation.

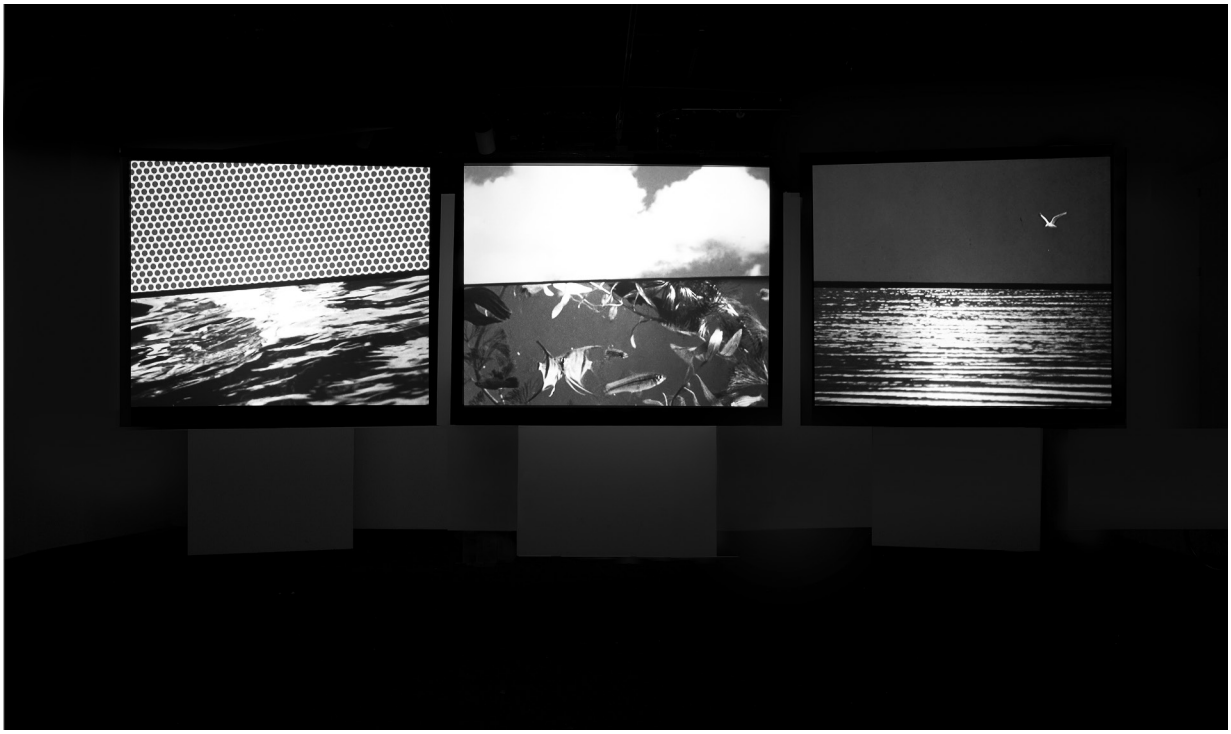

Fig. 12. ***Three Landscapes: A Film Installation by Roy Lichtenstein*****, October 6, 2011–February 12, 2012. Whitney Museum of American Art, New York. ©Estate of Roy Lichtenstein. Courtesy The Roy Lichtenstein Foundation.**

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