Materialising HIV/AIDS in the *Keiskamma Altarpiece*

Brenda Schmahmann

Professor, Visual Identites in Art and Design Research Centre,
Faculty of Art, Design and Architecture, University of Johannesburg

brendas@uj.ac.za

ABSTRACT

Made by the Keiskamma Art Project in Hamburg in the Eastern Cape, the *Keiskamma Altarpiece* (2005) speaks of a community negotiating the devastating impact of the HIV/AIDS virus. The work is modelled after the *Isenheim Altarpiece* (1512-1516), which was commissioned by the order of St Anthony to provide hope and comfort to victims of ergotism, a gangrenous skin condition, and which (prior to being disassembled) comprised two sets of folding wings with oil paintings by Matthias Grünewald and a central "shrine" with sculptures by Nikolaus Hagenauer. The *Keiskamma Altarpiece* substitutes the oil paint and limewood carvings of the Renaissance source with embroidery, beadwork and digital photographs.

In this article, I use the idea of "*pointure*" as the starting point for suggesting how the choice and treatment of materials in the *Keiskamma Altarpiece* might be read in associative terms. Drawing on the theories of Bracha Lichtenberg Ettinger along with work by Norman Bryson, I also explore how the treatment of materials affects the ways in which the work may be comprehended, and propose that a series of visual devices are used which encourage the beholder to experience a sense of being invited into a nurturing milieu associated with a process of healing, which is orchestrated and managed by women.

Keywords: Keiskamma; altarpiece; embroidery; gender; materiality; HIV/AIDS.

The Keiskamma Art Project, an initiative from Hamburg in the Eastern Cape which involves over 100 people, completed the *Keiskamma Altarpiece* midway through 2005. Comprising two sets of folding wings and offering three different views (Figures 1, 3 & 5), the *Keiskamma Altarpiece* was modelled on the *Isenheim Altarpiece* (1512-1516) (Figures 2, 4 & 6), a work featuring paintings by Matthias Grünewald and incorporating sculptures by Nikolaus Hagenauer. Commissioned for the high altar of the church of the Monastery of St Anthony in Isenheim, the *Isenheim Altarpiece* appears to have been intended to provide hope and comfort to the victims of ergotism, a gangrenous

FIGURE **Nº 1**

Keiskamma Art Project, *Keiskamma Altarpiece*, 2005. The closed altarpiece. Mixed media. Centre panel: 298cm x 326cm; each side wing: 250cm x 93cm; predella: 75cm x 340cm.

Courtesy of the Keiskamma Art Project.

FIGURE **Nº 3**

Keiskamma Art Project, *Keiskamma Altarpiece*, 2005. First opening of the altarpiece.

Courtesy of the Keiskamma Art Project.

FIGURE **Nº 5**

Keiskamma Art Project, *Keiskamma Altarpiece*, 2005. First opening of the altarpiece.

Courtesy of the Keiskamma Art Project.

skin condition known as "St Anthony's Fire", which resulted from a fungus infecting the rye used to make bread.[1] The *Keiskamma Altarpiece*, made in response to the impact of HIV/AIDS on Hamburg, also alludes to a potentially lethal contemporary disease, and seeks to provide reassurance to a community suffering its impact.

The *Keiskamma Altarpiece* has been exhibited in churches as well as gallery or museum spaces, both in South Africa and abroad. Unveiled in the Cathedral of St Michael and St George in Grahamstown at the beginning of the National Arts Festival in 2005, and then moved to the Allan Webb Hall on Rhodes University campus, it was exhibited at the University of Johannesburg Art Gallery prior to being shown at the Fowler Museum at the University of California Los Angeles (UCLA), as well as at various churches during its tour of Canada, the United States and the United Kingdom which commenced in July 2006 and lasted over two years.[2] Shown subsequently at, amongst other venues, the Slave Lodge in Cape Town and the Faculty of Theology at Stellenbosch University, it would once again travel overseas in May 2013 – this time being shown in the Lutheran Church in Wandsbek in Germany.[3]

1. For detailed investigations of the Isenheim Altarpiece, see Scheja (1969), Mellinkoff (1988) and Hayum (1993).

2. Starting its journey by being displayed in Toronto's Cathedral Church of St James during the World AIDS Conference in July 2006, it was subsequently on display in the Episcopal Cathedral in Chicago from 20 August until 20 September 2006. Following its showing at the Fowler Museum from 10 January to 11 March 2007, it would be displayed only at places of worship – at the First United Methodist Church of Santa Monica from 12 to 23 March 2007; Grace Cathedral in San Francisco in May 2007; St Mark's Episcopal Cathedral in Seattle in September 2007; the (Episcopal) Washington National Cathedral from 16 January until 9 March 2008, and the Southwark Cathedral in London in October 2008.

3. The Keiskamma Altarpiece was purchased by GT Ferreira of Rand Merchant Bank towards the end of 2012. At the time of writing, the altarpiece has returned from Germany. Hofmeyr and GT Ferreira will discuss options for where it might be permanently housed.

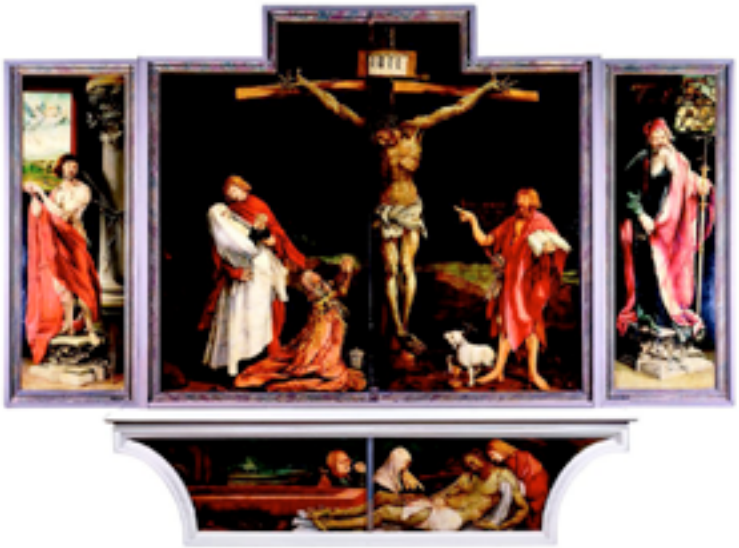

FIGURE **Nº 2**

Matthias Grünewald (b. Würzburg, 1475-1480, d. Halle, 1528), *Isenheim Altarpiece*, 1512-1516. The closed altarpiece; originally on the high altar of the church of the Monastery of St Anthony in Isenheim. Oil on wood. Centre panel: 298cm x 326cm; each side wing: 250cm x 93cm; predella: 75cm x 340cm.

Collection of the Musée Unterlinden, Colmar. ©Musée Unterlinden, Colmar, France.

FIGURE **Nº 4**

Matthias Grünewald, *Isenheim Altarpiece*, 1512-1516. The first opening of the altarpiece.

Collection of the Musée Unterlinden, Colmar, France. ©Musée d'Unterlinden, Colmar, France.

FIGURE **Nº 6**

Matthias Grünewald, *Isenheim Altarpiece*, 1512-1516. The second opening of the altarpiece, revealing centre shrine by Nikolaus Hagenauer. Shrine in painted and gilt limewood.

Collection of the Musée Unterlinden, Colmar. ©Musée Unterlinden, Colmar, France.

The imagery in the *Keiskamma Altarpiece* and the processes followed to make the work are discussed briefly by Carol Brown (2006) in a short essay included in a booklet that accompanied its 2006-2008 tour. I subsequently developed discussion of what I described as 'the significance of the treatment of subject matter in terms of the individual points of view of women who made the work, the specifics of the Hamburg context … [and] Hofmeyr's experience with needlework collectives prior to setting up the Keiskamma Art Project' (Schmahmann 2010:35). In her unpublished Honours thesis, Anthropology candidate Amy Shelver (2006) focused on the context in which the work was made, and there have been brief commentaries on the altarpiece in a short catalogue (Downs *et al*.) as well as reviews (Hollands 2005; South African Press Association 2006). But while it might seem that the work has been comprehensively interpreted, there is, in fact, an aspect of it to which neither I nor other writers have previously given attention.

The *Keiskamma Altarpiece* substitutes the oil paint and limewood carvings of the *Isenheim Altarpiece* with embroidery, beadwork, photographs and wirework. The shift in materials and media is observed, but has not been explored as being especially meaningful or having impact on how the work might be interpreted. This would seem, in retrospect, an oversight. If one reads the work in light of Linda Hutcheon's (1985:6)

definition of parody as 'repetition with critical distance, which marks difference rather than similarity', it would seem, in fact, that the materials deployed in the *Keiskamma Altarpiece*, by being distinctly *unlike* those of the *Isenheim Altarpiece*, are afforded particular focus, and indeed are highlighted.

The focus on *pointure* in this publication offers a starting point for attending to the meanings of materials and their impact on viewing. Figuring as a key concept in Jacques Derrida's "Restitutions of the truth in pointing (*Pointure*)" (Derrida 2009 [1978]), an essay which responds to Meyer Schapiro's (2009 [1968]) critique of Martin Heidegger's "The origin of the work of art" (1998 [1950, 1957, 1960]) where the examination centred on Vincent van Gogh's painting *Old Shoes with Laces* (1886), Derrida (2009:301) provides the following definition for *pointure*: 'Old synonym for prick. Term in printing, small iron blade with a point, used to fix the page to be printed on to the tympan. The hole which it makes in the paper. Term in shoemaking, glovemaking: a number of stitches in a shoe or glove'. The *Keiskamma Altarpiece* might be understood to manifest related practices. Containing appliqué, stumpwork (a form of raised embroidery) and an assortment of embroidery stitches on a hessian support, it also includes beadwork as well as digital photographs which have been reproduced on canvas. It thus incorporates techniques that involve puncturing the surface of the work (embroidery and beadwork), while also "cobbling" together diverse media and materials within the context of its wooden frame.

Derrida (2009) uses the idea of "*pointure*" associatively to engage with the implications of a *parergon*, or boundary, which ruptures the divide between the "inside" and "outside" of a work of art. Complying with his belief that, as Donald Preziosi (2009:272) explains, 'both visual and verbal practices were fundamentally heterogeneous, never existing in any pure and unmediated form', Derrida's essay serves as an exploration of how an '"otherness" always inhabits a work, and no artistic expression can ever be an unmediated manifestation of emotion or thought'. The *Keiskamma Altarpiece* serves as a particularly effective metaphor for this heterogeneity. The work is not only the result of making processes which have involved puncturing or stitching but it can also be *literally* opened up and indeed folded out, thus highlighting on an associative level the idea of an intersection between "inside" and "outside".

The notion of "*pointure*" emerged from an exchange between three male authors (Heidegger, Schapiro and Derrida) and, as Leora Farber and Ann-Marie Tully remark (Farber & Tully 2013), it might thus be argued that this concept 'has limitations in terms of addressing a field of visual practice strongly allied with notions of "women's work" and "femininity"' and that it should rather be understood as associated intrinsically 'with the figure of masculinity and western conceptions of philosophy

and aesthetics'. But, as they observe, *pointure* can nevertheless 'also be considered in close association with Bracha Lichtenberg Ettinger's matrixial theory, which is characterised by an interstitial relationship between art-making and academic writing that challenges the phallic structure of western aesthetics and discourse'. Ettinger'swork, which as Noreen Giffney, Anne Mulhall and Michael O'Rourke (2009:2) observe, operates 'at the intersection or borderline between feminism, psychoanalysis and aesthetics', enables a focus on *pointure* practices to complement feminist work on the historical significance of sewing and its impact on contemporary feminist art practices.[4]

In this article, I suggest how the choice and treatment of materials in the *Keiskamma Altarpiece* might be read in associative and metaphorical terms. Drawing on the theories of Ettinger along with work by Norman Bryson, I also explore how the treatment of materials affects the ways in which the work may be comprehended by viewers. In this regard, I propose that a series of visual devices are used which encourage the beholder to experience a sense of being invited into a nurturing milieu, one where healing (physical and psychic) is orchestrated and managed by women.

Prior to engaging with the materiality of the work, I provide essential background on the Keiskamma Art Project as well as considering – necessarily concisely rather than expansively – ways in which HIV/AIDS had affected Hamburg when the work was made. I also contextualise my exploration by providing an overview of the procedures followed to make the *Keiskamma Altarpiece* as well as a brief introduction to the iconography of the work.[5]

The Keiskamma Art Project and the Hamburg context

Adjacent to the mouth of the Keiskamma River and about 96 kilometres south-west of East London, Hamburg was formerly part of the Ciskei, a "homeland" which became self-governing in 1972 and achieved supposed independence in 1981.[6] While including some holiday homes owned by white South Africans, Hamburg lacked developed infrastructure and much of its permanent population were extremely poor and dependent entirely on the income of family members employed as migrant labourers in cities outside the homeland.[7] Lack of work opportunities for people in Hamburg and surrounding villages would unfortunately remain a challenge following democracy and the reincorporation of the area into South Africa.

When medical doctor and artist, Carol Hofmeyr, settled in Hamburg in 2000, she sought to address this issue by establishing the Keiskamma Art Project. Introduced to needlework with the assistance of Jan Chalmers and Jacky Jezewski, two friends

4. A particularly influential example is a study by Roszika Parker (1984).

5. For more detailed discussion of these procedures and the work's iconography, refer to Schmahmann (2010).

6. Hamburg was one of a number of settlements founded by German legionaries whom Sir George Grey, Governor of the Cape Colony, persuaded to settle in the area between the Kei and Keiskamma Rivers and the Amatola Mountains in 1857 (see Schnell 1954).

7. For discussion of social conditions in the Ciskei, see Charlton (1980).

who became acquainted with Hofmeyr's efforts, the group exhibited their first series of embroideries at the National Arts Festival in Grahamstown in 2002. Working thereafter on the *Keiskamma Tapestry*, their first large-scale work[8] which was unveiled at the National Arts Festival in 2004, and then on the *Cream Tapestry* and the *Democracy Tapestry*, which were offshoots of it, the Keiskamma Art Project began planning and working on the *Keiskamma Altarpiece* in December 2004. While the focus of the *Keiskamma Tapestry* was on the history of the amaXhosa people and the impact of colonialism and apartheid on South Africa, the *Keiskamma Altarpiece* addresses another issue of crucial significance – the impact of HIV/AIDS on the Hamburg community.

South Africa has a larger number of HIV/AIDS positive people than any other country. The following figures appear on the Keiskamma Trust (2013) website:

> There are 5.6 million people living with the disease and it is estimated that over 2 million adults and a quarter million children still require treatment. Despite the largest treatment programme in the world, the ARV (anti-retroviral) coverage rate is only 52%, and in 2011 there were 380 000 new HIV infections, and 270 000 South Africans died due to AIDS related illness. Over 2.1 million children have been orphaned by AIDS.

Slow to respond to the crisis, the government in South Africa only approved the rollout of antiretroviral treatment programmes towards the end of 2003.

The highly inappropriate responses of the government to the pandemic have been well publicised. Influenced by dissident scientists who questioned the link between AIDS and the HIV virus, Thabo Mbeki and his health minister, the late Manto Tshabalala-Msimang, were influenced by views that AIDS was a hoax concocted by the pharmacy industry and that, rather than antiretroviral treatment being necessary, those manifesting signs of the condition might be treated simply by eating a healthy assortment of vegetables. Jacob Zuma has had even less credibility. His explanation at his trial for rape (which commenced in December 2005) that he showered after condom-less sex with an HIV-positive woman to prevent himself from contracting the virus meant that even before he took up the position of president, his ignorance about the disease was of profound concern.

Zuma has also been an especially poor role model in regard to addressing unequal relations of power between men and women which have underpinned the spread of the disease.[9] As is well documented, many women in impoverished communities are not only unable to refuse sex with their husbands but also to insist on condom use, and because condoms are, in fact, most likely to be abandoned with primary girlfriends or wives, women who are monogamous are actually the most likely to be

8. While best known for their large-scale works which are the outcome of collective work, the Keiskamma Art Project also provides a forum for members to produce small items individually. The project owns a property overlooking the mouth of the Keiskamma River that accommodates its main studio. While some small items are sent to various retailers of arts and crafts in centres such as Johannesburg, Cape Town and Durban, others are marketed at the shop attached to the main studio.

9. Zuma alleged that sexual relations with the accuser were consensual, arguing that she had indicated her sexual availability by wearing a kanga when she said good night to him. As Dean Peacock and Bafana Khumalo (2007) indicate: 'Zuma's claims that sex between he and the complainant was consensual should sound alarm bells about men's understanding of what constitutes sexual consent and their sense of entitlement to women's bodies.'

infected (see Da Cruz 2004). Even more invidiously, women may avoid disclosing their HIV-positive status not simply for fear of being ostracised by their communities as a whole[10] but also because they may suffer retribution by their partners – that is, the partners who infected them in the first place.[11] Disadvantaged by being biologically the sex more receptive to HIV-infection (see Karim 2005:245), women are more usually left to care for those sick or dying from AIDS-related illnesses and take responsibility for bringing up children orphaned by the disease.

Such scenarios have affected Hamburg, as they have other impoverished communities. Like in many outlying areas in South Africa, HIV infections were probably first introduced by returning migrant labourers in the 1980s (see Bayrd 2006), when the disease was little known. By the new millennium the situation was dire, and it was extrapolated that the AIDS incidence in the district comprising the towns of Hamburg and Peddie along with the surrounding villages was 17.5%.[12] Furthermore, not only were no HIV treatment services available in the village in 2000, when Hofmeyr settled in the town, but there were also no trained doctors residing in Hamburg. In an attempt to address the dire need for medical services in the area, Hofmeyr began working in various rural clinics in 2002 and, in 2003, employed a project manager, Jackie Downs, to take over day-to-day work on the art project.[13] She also began collaborating with Eunice Mangwane, a widow and AIDS counselor who had moved to Hamburg at the end of 2001, to assist educating people to prevent the spread of HIV-infection and to care for the increasing numbers of people who had become ill.

The period in which the *Keiskamma Altarpiece* was made was one which began to see a turnaround in the village's negotiation of the disease. While government antiretroviral treatment had not yet reached Hamburg by 2004, Hofmeyr raised funds to enable her to secure antiretroviral treatment for eight people. Improvements to the health of these recipients were evident by early 2005. Also, government-sponsored antiretroviral treatment finally became available to Hamburg by early 2005, enabling greater numbers of people to receive treatment. This period also saw Hofmeyr establishing the Umtha Welanga (meaning "Rays of Sun") Treatment Centre, a facility offering personalised care to HIV-positive patients, in the centre of the town, as well as setting up the Keiskamma Trust to oversee the various initiatives to upgrade the lives of people in Hamburg that were being undertaken.

The *Keiskamma Altarpiece*: production and iconography

When Hofmeyr saw the *Isenheim Altarpiece* during a trip to Europe in November 2004, she thought of a work modelled on it but which substituted allusions to ergotism

10. As project member Nozaliseko Makubalo (2008) commented, 'In our tradition if you died like that [i.e., from an AIDS-related cause], you will think you were bewitched'.

11. Nkosazana Veronica Betani (2008) explained to me how women's motives for suggesting condom use have a propensity to be misunderstood: 'When we talk to a woman about condoms, she says: "How can I talk about this with my husband? No I can't because he is going to hit me and say that I have a new boyfriend"'.

12. These figures, available at http://www.keiskamma.org/health in 2008 and 2009, when I was first doing research on the Keiskamma Altarpiece, have subsequently been removed from the website – presumably because the increased availability of antiretroviral treatment means that they are no longer relevant.

13. Florence Danais took over as manager when Downs moved to Johannesburg in early 2007.

with reference to HIV/AIDS.[14] While it is difficult to establish exactly how the specific content of the work was devised, it seems that the process commenced with Hofmeyr showing members of the project – the five people who would be responsible for its drawing and design[15] as well as those in management positions – a large number of reproductions of the *Isenheim Altarpiece*. Hofmeyr also made suggestions about how they might be substituted with local people, providing photographs as reference material, but others also had the opportunity to contribute their own ideas to the work. As Nokupiwa Gedze (2008), one of the designers, emphasised: 'She told us what she wanted but she knew that, as artists, we wouldn't just do what she wanted and would also add our own ideas. … She showed us the Grünewald altarpiece first and we said, instead of this we will put in that, and so on.'

The cloths thereafter went to the embroiderers, who worked in groups of about ten people. Noseti Makubalo, head designer, probably showed individual embroidery groups the overall design but focused specifically on the section each was required to embroider as well as providing them with any reference photographs that might be needed. Prior to working on the altarpiece itself, the embroiderers underwent training in stumpwork via workshops conducted by Chalmers and Jezewski, and this technique is employed extensively in the final work.

Tanya Jordaan, a graduate in Fine Art from the University of Cape Town who was assisting the project, took photographs that feature in the second opening and which respond to the sculptures by Hagenauer in the *Isenheim Altarpiece*. Beadwork, done under the auspices of a group headed by Caroline Nyongo working from the adjacent village of Ntilini, was added after the embroideries were completed. Once the frame for the altarpiece had been completed (it was built by Hofmeyr's husband, Justus Hofmeyr), these various elements were consolidated into a single entity.

Grünewald's image of the Crucifixion, visible when the *Isenheim Altarpiece* is closed (Figure 2), is substituted in the *Keiskamma Altarpiece* (Figure 1) by an AIDS widow with a cross – a symbol of faith – behind her. Around her are children orphaned by AIDS. The figures of St Sebastian and St Anthony, on the left and right of the *Isenheim Altarpiece*, are substituted by two respected women in the Hamburg community. On the left is widow, Leginah Mapuma, and on the right, Susan Paliso, who had taken on the care of her grandson, Lihle, after her son, Dumile, had died of an AIDS-related illness at the age of 35 in 2002. Paliso's circumstances are also the theme of the predella which, in substitution of the Lamentation in the *Isenheim Altarpiece*, represents the hospital ward where Dumile spent his last days (on the left) as well as his burial and the accompanying church service (in the centre and on the right).

14. In 1998, Hofmeyr had worked with Paper Prayers, an initiative organised by Artist Proof Studio in Johannesburg, which involved groups of embroiderers (see Schmahmann 2010:39-40).

15. The Keiskamma Art Project sponsored two young women, Nokupiwa Gedze and Nomfuzi Nkani, and two men from the area, Cebo Mvubu and Kwanele Ganto, to study towards a three-year Diploma in Fine Art at Walter Sisulu University of Technology in East London. The four, who all graduated in 2006, worked on the designs for the Keiskamma Altarpiece during their summer vacation in December 2004 and January 2005. They worked with the project's lead designer, Noseti Makubalo.

The first stage of opening of the *Isenheim Altarpiece* (Figure 4) reveals imagery associated with the revelatory and the miraculous. On the left is an Annunciation (indicating Christ's incarnation as human), while the central panel shows an angelic concert and an iconic image of the Virgin Mary, and the Resurrection (indicating Christ's departure from the corporeal form) is depicted on the right. The *Keiskamma Altarpiece* (Figure 3), while offering a counterpart to this focus on the visionary, does not depict a left-to-right chronological progression. The far left panel of the *Keiskamma Altarpiece* shows a large and leafy fig tree in Hamburg, which signifies continuity. The far right panel, which parallels the circular aura surrounding the resurrected Christ in the *Isenheim Altarpiece*, replaces the representation of Christ's incarnation and death with a spiral of animals, flowers and fish and thus alludes to what Brown (2006) describes as 'a never-ending cycle of life'. The centre panels feature, on its left, women wearing formal uniforms of various churches with a following in Hamburg as well as a sacrifice of a bull, and thus alludes to the coexistence of Christian and customary belief systems in Hamburg. The right central panel depicts Vuyisile Funda, known locally as "Gabba", a holy man who – for a time – would run along the dunes on the beachfront in the morning, producing patterns in the sand with his footprints, in what he understood as a gesture of thanksgiving to God.

The second opening of the *Isenheim Altarpiece* (Figure 6) reveals Hagenhauer's sculptures of St Anthony and the Fathers of the Church, St Augustine and St Jerome. These are replaced in the *Keiskamma Altarpiece* (Figure 5) with life-size digital photographs printed on canvas representing three local grandmothers with their grandchildren, some of whom have been orphaned through HIV/AIDS. Susan Paliso and eight-year old Lihle appear in the left niche. Eunice Mangwane is depicted with nine-year old Akona and three-year old twins Lithemba and Thabo in the centre. Caroline Nyongo is represented in the right niche with two-year old Nomaxabiso, three-year old Siphamandla, four-year old Siphosetsu and seven-year old Aziwe (see Brown 2006). The side panels of the *Isenheim Altarpiece*, which show St Anthony's so-called "Temptation" on the right and on the left his meeting with Hermit Paul in the desert, are substituted in the *Keiskamma Altarpiece* with representations of the Hamburg landscape, described by the project as 'a final resting place for … community members who have fallen to illness and who can now be remembered with dignity and peace' (Downs *et al*. 2005).

Meaning is not, however, only conveyed through choice of subject matter: also significant are technique and composition, and how these may be read and interpreted by the viewer.

Materialities and the process of viewing

In the early sixteenth century, the monks in the Monastery of St Anthony took a particularly active role in caring for sufferers of ergotism – a process that was primarily one of providing spiritual guidance to sufferers of a condition that was incurable and, at the time, of unknown cause. The monastery for which the *Isenheim Altarpiece* was made was subject to the 1478 reforms of the Antonite order which advocated that 'each patient be required for every canonical hour to say twelve Our Fathers and as many Ave Marias, and in the church if it is possible' (cited in Hayum 1993:28), and such prayers would have in all likelihood involved viewing the *Isenheim Altarpiece* on the main altar. For these sufferers of ergotism, Hervé Grandsart (2008:13) indicates, an experience of the altarpiece in its church setting would have conveyed a specific message: 'Christ suffered so that all men who in their hearts are with him and his intercessors the saints can find hope of salvation, despite all their moral and physical infirmities.' Because of the position of the altarpiece above the altar, Grandsart (2008:20) suggests, when viewed closed (Figure 2) 'the nail driven, with terrible vividness, through Christ's feet would have been more or less at the centre of the beholder's visual field, thus becoming a symbol of the inextricable bond between man and his saviour'. But for the stricken viewer with compromised mobility and who might have required assistance visiting the church and be unable to stand, the centre of the visual field might well in fact have been the horizontal body of the deceased Christ in the predella (see Figure 7) – a figure with limp hands and mangled feet bearing traces of the terrible torture inflicted on them.

A message that enduring pain and misery in this lifetime might bring one closer to God was likely also conveyed through various aspects of the composition. The crucified Christ (see Figure 2), whose contorted body seems to be spilling the last of its life blood through the wound in his side and who speaks of devastating pain that many viewers themselves experienced as a result of their own contorted and gangrenous limbs, is accompanied by a collapsed – almost melting – Mary Magdalene along with the Virgin Mary who swoons in the arms of John the Evangelist. John the Baptist's gesture of pointing at Christ forms a dramatic counterpoint to the wringing hands of the Magdalene and the clenched hands of the Virgin. Indeed if the eye was to start at the nailed feet, it might perhaps then move to the finger of John the Baptist, the wound in Christ's side, and the hands of the two females – almost in a anti-clockwise circular direction – before heading down to the predella where the knot of the loincloth in some sense reiterates the Virgin's hands. For a viewer experiencing terrible agony and thus seeing the altarpiece in terms of *mutual* suffering, an emphasis on hands and feet would likely prompt an engagement with Christ's sacrifice not simply as the means to everlasting life but also a hereafter free from physical torment.

FIGURE Nº 7

Matthias Grünewald, *Isenheim Altarpiece*, 1512-1516. Detail of the predella.

Photograph by Paul Mills.

Movement across and between figures is encouraged through the treatment of paint. While atmospheric perspective and modelling of form offers the illusion of volume, the altarpiece might simultaneously be read in terms of its surface effects. Traces of the pigment-infused brush are visible, thus providing signs of the work's actual construction. This is especially true of the predella (Figure 7), where the knot of the loincloth and the folds of the shroud form sinuous patterns (almost as if this exquisiteness was a counterpoint to Christ's mangled body), while the specks of red and blue across the torso and legs read not only as blood and bruising but as flecks of paint which have been loosely applied to the surface.

Viewing Renaissance art, certainly altarpieces, is normally a process in which the viewer is not only transfixed by an iconic image but is also encouraged to *lose* a sense of his or her own body in temporal time and space. Bryson (1983) suggests that such viewing is encouraged when a work blots out signs that it is a constructed object – in other words, when pigment is applied in such a way that it erases evidence of the surface and masks signs of changes the art object might have undergone during the making process. Through such blotting out of traces of process, the image is able to 'encourage a synchronic instant of viewing which will eclipse the body, and

the glance, in an infinitely extended Gaze of the image as pure idea' (Bryson 1983:94). The *Isenheim Altarpiece* would seem, in contrast, to operate in terms of what he terms 'the glance'. For Bryson, a work which elicits the glance is one in which signs of process are manifest and which reveals traces of how the artist may have made various adjustments to the image as he or she sought out a representational solution. The glance, Bryson (1983:94) suggests, 'addresses vision in the durational temporality of the viewing subject; it does not seek to bracket out the process of viewing, nor in its own technique does it exclude the traces of the body in labour' (Bryson 1983:94). In the *Isenheim Altarpiece*, the labour of the artist's body is indeed made manifest through the visibility of the making process, the technique. The viewer is in a sense invited to re-experience the making of the work by tracing marks in process, and thus to be aware of his or her own body as he or she follows that process through and in time. Assuming that such shifts were also in evidence in the sixteenth century and are not simply the outcome of deterioration, cleaning and/or restoration of the work, this quality would have meant that the victim of ergotism experienced a type of double bodily identification with the work: while the patient's own physical infirmities would have encouraged a perception of the suffering of the represented bodies in empathetic terms, this would have been simultaneous with an associative re-experiencing of the labour of making the image itself.

A sense of mutuality is also invoked in the *Keiskamma Altarpiece* – but in ways that are very different to its sixteenth-century prototype. Insofar as the treatment of subject matter is concerned, the main and side panels in the closed view of the altarpiece (Figure 1) represent, along with orphan children, widows and grandmothers – individuals affected by the scourge of HIV/AIDS but who, in diametric contrast to the swooning and collapsing femininity in the *Isenheim Altarpiece*, seem unyielding, tenacious and reliable in ensuring the sustenance and protection of their community and families. Also, while the predella establishes a connection between the body of the AIDS victim covered with pustules (Figure 8) and the tortured body of the deceased Christ in the *Isenheim Altarpiece* (Figure 7), the primary focus of this panel is on the image of the Hamburg community together negotiating the impact of AIDS. But if the viewer is shown the mutuality of the Hamburg community through the work's iconography, he or she is also enjoined to experience a sense of accord and identification with the represented figures or with the sentiments and concerns at play in the narrative through the ways in which materials and form have been treated.

On one level, this has something to do with materials in the *Keiskamma Altarpiece* being associated with the domestic, the familiar and the everyday. Including not only embroidery but also beadwork which, rather than being used for small items or garments, has been deployed to refer to the elaborate tracery of the *Isenheim*

FIGURE **Nº 8**

Keiskamma Art Project, *Keiskamma Altarpiece*, 2005. Detail of the predella.

Courtesy of the Keiskamma Art Project.

Altarpiece (see Figures 5 & 12), as well as sepia photographs of family one would normally associate with the private album (see Figure 5), the work in a sense relocates making practices usually associated with domestic contexts (whether in Africa or the west) into the realms of the public museum or the church. While they may be understood to constitute a feminist challenge to the historical denigration of needlework and other domestic arts to the level of "craft", that is, something below the level of "Fine Art" (see Parker 1984), this deployment of creative processes associated with the home has the additional advantage of investing the altarpiece with a certain quality of approachability.

On another level, the work is also one which encourages the beholder to experience its making as the result of a process occurring through time. Much of the altarpiece is comprised of tactile surfaces (see Figures 9, 10 & 11), including areas where not only broad stitching but also raw patches of the hessian support are in evidence. One of the upshots of this, to use Bryson's ideas, is that the *Keiskamma Altarpiece*, like the *Isenheim Altarpiece*, lends itself to being read in terms of a series of "glances" rather than the viewer being transfixed, as it were, by its imagery. But while signs of

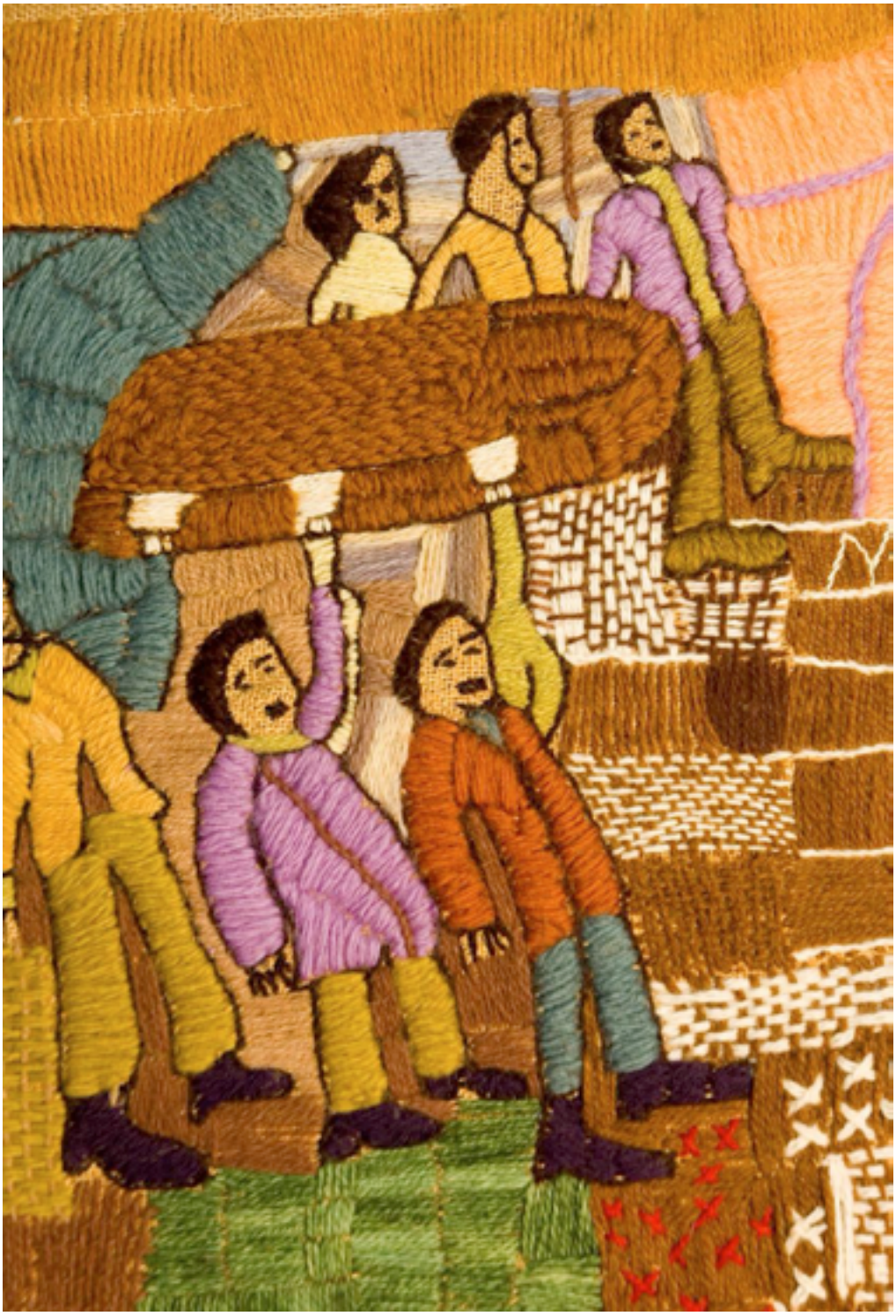

FIGURE **Nº 9**

Keiskamma Art Project, *Keiskamma Altarpiece*, 2005. Detail of the predella.

Courtesy of the Keiskamma Art Project.

FIGURE **Nº 10**

Keiskamma Art Project, *Keiskamma Altarpiece,* 2005. Detail of the right side panel in the first opening.

Courtesy of the Keiskamma Art Project.

FIGURE **Nº 11**

Keiskamma Art Project, *Keiskamma Altarpiece,* 2005. Detail of the right side panel in the first opening.

Courtesy of the Keiskamma Art Project.

process are made manifest, these are not those of a single maker. Nor, as was usual in the Renaissance workshop, has idiosyncratic "mark-making" on the part of different people been suppressed in favour of achieving a single style. Rather, as one's eye travels across the work, noticing its different stitches along with shifts from embroidery to photography to beadwork (Figure 12), it becomes immediately evident how different hands have been at work, side by side, in the making of its various panels and components. This is then a work which, while inviting the viewer to "collaborate" with the producers of the work in imaginatively re-experiencing its making, is also explicit about how that process of making was itself the product of collaboration.

One also experiences mutuality associatively. Besides emphasising process, when deployed in the context of a work focusing on HIV/AIDS, stitches coupled with raw hessian seem to invoke the idea of sutures and bandages, and thus refer to a community focused on enabling healing and care of those who are injured. But this focus on nurturing and enabling the recovery of the wounded is not only at a physical but also a psychic level. The background to the figures in the closed view of the altarpiece (Figure 1), rather than providing an illusion of depth, largely consists of multi-coloured blocks of colour which call to mind a woven or knitted blanket or

FIGURE **Nº 12**

Keiskamma Art Project, *Keiskamma Altarpiece*, 2005. Detail of the central panel in the second opening.

Courtesy of the Keiskamma Art Project.

perhaps a patchwork quilt. Although an altarpiece would normally encourage sentiments of deference on the part of the viewer and thus encourage him or her to maintain physical and psychological distance from the object, the *Keiskamma Altarpiece* seems to challenge such boundaries. Invoking a sense that one might actually wrap oneself in the work, almost as if it were a domestic bedcover, it conveys an imaginative sense of warmth and comfort.

The idea of mutuality as well as the embrace is conveyed especially clearly in the central three panels of the second opening (Figure 5). In the *Isenheim Altarpiece* (Figure 6) Hagenauer used scale hierarchically to differentiate St Anthony, St Augustine and St Jerome from ordinary people at prayer for whom the former serve as intercessors and intermediaries. Also, one imagines that the sculptures of saints, which are covered in gilt, must have seemed miraculous and mysterious apparitions when gazed at in a candlelit church. The grandmothers in the *Keiskamma Altarpiece* are, however, much more earthy presences. While the photographs have been taken at a low angle, so that the women seem iconic, this does not make them overbearing or overassertive: rather, by increasing a sense of their physical size, the viewer may experience the idea of the breadth and scale of their embrace. Indeed, while the central image of Eunice Mangwane wrapping Lithemba and Thabo in her arms and providing her shoulder to Akona may make reference to Renaissance images of the Holy family, photographic details convey a sense that the figures have immediacy and palpability. Also, while the images are in sepia, these tones imbue the images with warmth rather than implying that the photographs are aged or invoking a feeling of nostalgia for values and experiences which are implied to be rooted only in the past.

There is a further aspect of these images which is important – and that is the sense of exchange between them and us, as viewers. Not simply looking outwards but almost seeming to be in a *dialogue* with us, the three grandmothers seem to draw the viewer into their nurturing milieu. When previously attempting to explain the sense of mutuality conveyed by these figures, I referred to *ubuntu* – the concept that 'each one of us can only effectively exist as fully functioning human beings when we acknowledge the roles that others play in our lives' (Magadlela 2008) and, as I added, 'when we act to sustain this social interconnectedness' (Schmahmann 2010:48). But while the idea of *ubuntu* may be apt to suggest something about the work's iconography, it does not really explain the impact of the work on the viewer and how he or she may experience a sense of being invited into a nurturing environment. To glean a fuller sense of how the figures may potentially relate to viewers, it is helpful to consider these images in light of Ettinger's matrixial theories – that is, her ideas about the formation of subjectivity and its impact on the making and reading of artworks.

Rather than thinking of subjectivity through an essentially phallic model, Ettinger posits it occurring within a prenatal feminine space which she terms "the Matrix". Thus, in replacement of a Lacanian model in which '"castration" by means of the symbolic phallus is the model for *every* passage into the universe of culture and society, *for every passage into the symbolic realm*' (Ettinger 2006:43), she 'invites us to consider human subjectivity beyond the effects of Oedipal, pre-Oedipal and even anti-Oedipal mechanisms' (Pollock 2006:14). The acquisition of subjectivity within the Matrix, Ettinger postulates, is a process of encounter between 'the co-emerging *I* and the unknown *non-I*. Neither assimilates or rejects the other, and their energy consists neither in fusion, nor repulsion, but in a continual readjustment of distances, a continual negotiation of separateness and distance within togetherness and proximity' (Ettinger 1993:12 cited in Pollock 2006:13). As Pollock (2009:8) explains, for Ettinger the prenatal experience is

> a shared event whose impact is different for each partial-partner of the primordial encounter. The pre-maternal subject is a becoming-mother only as a result of the encounter with the unknown pre-natal subject-to-come. Yet she was herself once in a comparable severality as a pre-natal subject, co-affecting with and co-affected by an unknown pre-maternal subject whom her own prenatal becoming was, as it were, maternalising just as the maternalised other was effectively humanising her.[16]

Ettinger (2006:143) uses the term "metramorphosis" to describe a 'co-poietic[17] activity in a web that "remembers" these swerves and relations, inscribes affective traces of *jouissance* and imprints of trauma and encounter, and conducts such traces from *non-I* to *I*, from one encounter to further encounters' (Ettinger 2006:143). Crucially for the present purposes, artworks can enable such metramorphosis. The artwork, she suggests, has 'the potential to transform the amnesia of lone traumatic events into a memory that can only emerge in sharing with an-other, a memory that can only be glimpsed in languishing com-passion, in relations of separateness-in-jointness' (Ettinger 2006:150-151).

The *Keiskamma Altarpiece*, I suggest, has the potential to elicit the compassionate "remembering" which Ettinger discusses. The photographs in the second opening of the altarpiece are profoundly compelling not simply because of what is literally represented (that is, women's gestures of protection towards their grandchildren), but also because of a mutuality that is inferred: there is a feeling that, in looking outwards towards the viewer, the adults and youngsters are engaging with a beholder about the negotiation of traumatic events (in this context, terrible losses of life which are a result of HIV/AIDS infections) that are somehow jointly grasped and experienced

16. Pollock (2009) emphasises that Ettinger's matrixial theory is not about allying female subjectivity with the womb or proposing a form of physiognomic essentialism. As a psychoanalytical theory, it is instead 'attempting to think about subjectivity as a plaiting of the Real (the traumatic), the Imaginary (the realm of fantasy and images) and the Symbolic (words and thought), a weaving of the corpo-Real, the fantasised and the signified' (Pollock 2009:12). What Ettinger is ultimately proposing 'is that we might acknowledge that the maternal-feminine could be a source of meaning. It could be understood as a thinking apparatus for human subjectivity that goes way beyond the utilitarian process of generating little humans. It is a matrix for other logics, for ethics, for aesthetics, for poetics, and even for social relations perhaps' (Pollock 2009:13).

17. Pollock (2006:35) observes: 'Autopoiesis is the theoretical construct of Francisco Varela and Humberto Maturano, who worked at the borders of biological and cognitive science to propose that *each living system constructs its environment through the 'domain of interaction' made possible by autopoietic organisation. Drawing on this recognition that the world we inhabit is constructed according to a system which includes that which observes or reflects upon it, Ettinger expands the celibate imaginary of isolated autopoietic organization to imagine the psyche as also a co-poietic organization, transsubjectively constructing shared worlds ….*

even if their particularities are not spelled out. In keeping with what Ettinger terms a 'matrixial gaze' (and which she distinguishes from the phallic gaze theorised by Lacan), the process of viewing becomes one which enables the viewer's 'participation in a drama wider than that of our individual selves' (Ettinger 2006:153).

Also contributing to the beholder's experience in significant ways is the act of revealing different views of the altarpiece. Whereas the visibility of panels in the *Isenheim Altarpiece* was dependent on the liturgical calendar, and visitors to the church at the monastery would encounter only one of three views,[18] exhibitions of the *Keiskamma Altarpiece* have always involved programmes or sessions in which the work is ceremonially opened for the benefit of viewers (see Figure 13). Such occasions make evident that the impact of the work depends not only what is made visible but also the sense of expectation that the beholder experiences prior to each view.

There would seem to be three significant effects of this process of unfolding the work. First, this process of disclosing the initial opening and then the second involves physical effort and care in ensuring the altarpiece be kept stable and upright. The process thus reminds one that the work is a construction and the product of physical labour, complementing the signs of process evident in its stitching, noted earlier. Second, the process of opening the altarpiece and revealing its different views enhances the impact of its subject matter. By encountering imagery sequentially, the viewer experiences the Keiskamma Art Project's representation of the impact of HIV/AIDS on Hamburg as a narrative that unfolds chronologically through time: imagery which speaks of suffering caused by disease (the closed view), is followed by a focus on religious practices and belief patterns of the community, thus suggesting endeavours to come to terms with the effects of the disease through faith (the first opening) and finally a community in which the strength and selflessness of grandmothers has enabled it to survive the devastation of the virus (the second opening). Third, and perhaps most crucially, deploying the topic of HIV/AIDS within a work which is opened in stages conveys, formally, the idea of disclosure. Made in the context of a community where there has been a long-standing stigma against talking about the disease, an emphasis on revealing hidden views is an elegant trope for speaking about efforts to counter this silence.

18. This is not the experience of the current viewer, however. The altarpiece has not only been removed from its original church context but, even more crucially, it has been disassembled: its various components, separated out from one another within the space of the gallery in the Unterlinden Museum, are thus displayed as discrete works which the viewer is invited to assemble imaginatively.

FIGURE **Nº 13**

Opening the *Keiskamma Altarpiece* during its exhibition in the Allan Webb Hall on Rhodes University campus, National Arts Festival, 2005.

Photograph by Nick Stavrakis.

Conclusion

It would seem that, for the viewer of the *Isenheim Altarpiece* in the sixteenth century, the establishment of a relationship between the bodies of depicted figures and those of beholders enabled particular emphasis to be placed on mutual physical suffering. Presenting a message that an afterlife free of torment might be available through Christ's sacrifice, the work was presumably profoundly comforting to victims of ergotism – a devastatingly painful condition that was incurable. Bodily identification is not only between represented holy figures and the viewer, however. Using Bryson's ideas, I have suggested that painted sections which reveal signs of the process of making the work enable a type of empathetic physiognomic connection between the artist (in this instance Grűnewald and those who worked with him) and the viewer: the beholder's eye is drawn across the work in such a way that he or she not only focuses on hands and feet but also sustains full awareness of his or her own body in time and space rather than adopting, to use Bryson's (1983:94) words, 'a synchronic instant of viewing which will eclipse the body'.

Encouraging a sense of mutuality and interaction is also a feature of the *Keiskamma Altarpiece*, as I have indicated. One might glean, for example, almost a sense that the altarpiece (at least in its closed view) is a blanket or quilt in which one might imaginatively wrap oneself. Also significant would seem to be meanings and associations invoked through the process of opening the altarpiece: pointing to the idea of the work's constructedness while encouraging the viewer to comprehend the represented experiences as different stages of a narrative, the act of moving to different views may also serve as a metaphor for disclosure of HIV infections and an increased impetus towards openness about the impact of the disease.

Further, as in the *Isenheim Altarpiece*, there is a sense that the viewer is being invited to imaginatively re-experience the work's production. Tactile surfaces, including areas where not only broad stitching but also raw patches of the hessian support are in evidence, encourage the viewer to be alert to the process of making – and emphasise that in the case of the *Keiskamma Altarpiece*, making involved collaboration. If one were to extend Bryson's ideas about looking via the "glance" (as opposed to the "gaze") to experiencing the work via Ettinger's concept of a "matrixial gaze" (as opposed to the "phallic gaze"), one may glean a sense of the specifically compassionate form of looking which this twenty-first century altarpiece encourages. The *Keiskamma Altarpiece* might be understood in fact, to facilitate what Ettinger terms "metramorphosis". It enables the viewer to "remember" trauma and, through the deployment of memory, to view the account of HIV/AIDS in the work as having mutually experienced import.

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