



JAN BANNING LECTURE

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Portraiture Lecture

By Jan Banning

This is a series made between 2000 and 2002 about what you would call “Romusha”. So people who were forced to work. Well, basically work as slaves, forced labors, unpaid labors, again during World War II. Maybe it’s good to make it clear briefly that although this again is about people being abused under Japanese occupation, I am not an anti-Japan man. So, I’m not trying to make you hate Japan or something like that.

[Romusha work slideshows on the screen]

My reasons for coming up with these subjects are that both my parents were born and raised in Indonesia before the second World War. And my father and my grandfather, so his father

[pointing to the photograph depicting Jan’s father]

Both work as slave labors as *Romusha* during the second World War. So again what I said earlier, your choice of subjects, at least in my case, starts from the heart and from there you work on with your mind.

I started this project for that reason. But then of course you have to, it started with a very vague idea. I would like to do something photographically with the past of my father and all of his colleagues. Right, so what you’re going to do? I started asking myself of why, what is the reason of doing that and in this case, one vital point for me was that although my father had been talking a lot about this with me, he had never spoken one single word about it with his own father.

Very strange of course. I mean they had both been working on a railway, one in Burma the other on the Pekanbaru railway in Sumatra, but they had never discussed it. So two people with the same experience having a very different reaction. So, okay that was the starting point. So there is a very different reaction to these experiences in the past. So basically this what I want to do is about bridging past and present. Aha! So then I have to try visualize that. So in my image or in this whole project, I have to try to make a relationship between the past and the present and in this case this is how I solved it.

So if you would look at the few photographs, there are either taken by the Japanese in the time between 1942 and 1945 of this *Romusha*, or made immediately after the war, you will see that these men were almost naked. And the explanation is very simple, they had the clothes that they had on them and then you had to start working in the jungle, you have to carry very heavy pieces of wood and rails, etc. Well, it’s generally not very good for your clothes. So they would be worn out very soon and they were not given new stuff. So they had almost nothing, maybe some improvised shorts or sometimes even pieces of Karet.

So what I decided to do was asked these men, who now were in their 80s, some of them in their 90s to pose as they were at the time. So that's how I try to visually bridge the gap. And then you try to think about it more. Okay so I'm going to ask them to take off their shirt but then, what do you do with your light? Well, they were working under tropical circumstances. So let's try to translate this tropical atmosphere in the light. So here, I used the silver umbrella to get a sparkling kind of light and then I was wondering about the background. What are you going to use as a background?

Of course you can photograph them in their houses. But are the houses relevant? What would a house tell you about a person? They would probably tell you a lot. But I didn't think it would tell anything relevant. A house would tell about are they poor or are they rich, but that didn't matter. I mean, the people who were taken as *Romusha* more of them were poor than rich, but some have become richer or... Anyhow, I think the social economical situation of these people didn't matter.

Okay, so we have to get a neutral background. I don't want this redundant information. I don't want to know, I don't want people to see what chairs they have, what furniture they have, etc. That's not relevant. So okay, we have to get kind of a neutral background but then you can of course use, let's say these paper roll background or something like that. But would that be fitting?

Let's see... well, these people were working in very rough circumstances. So let's find some material that relates to that. So I started to experiment with bamboo and in Holland you can go to a kind of building shop and just buy a roll of bamboo. So I took a roll of bamboo and I asked my neighbor, who has nothing to do with the whole project but who was available, "*Would you please stand in front of the bamboo?*" And I made some shots, a bit further, a bit closer and the conclusion was that bamboo was one of the material, it was very relevant of course, they were working sometimes along reefs, etc.

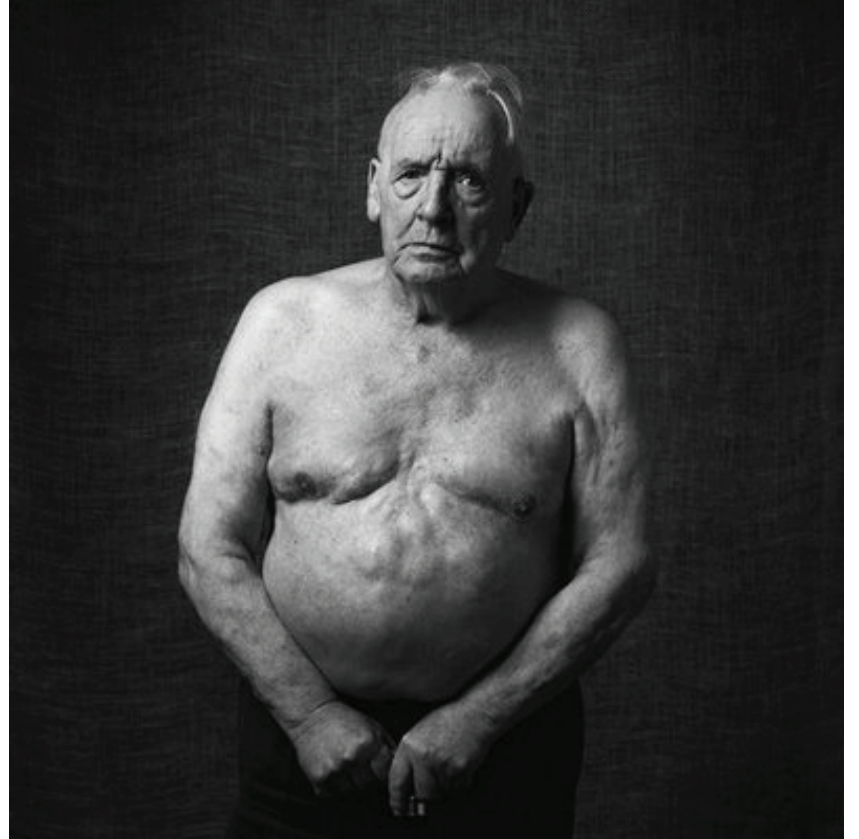
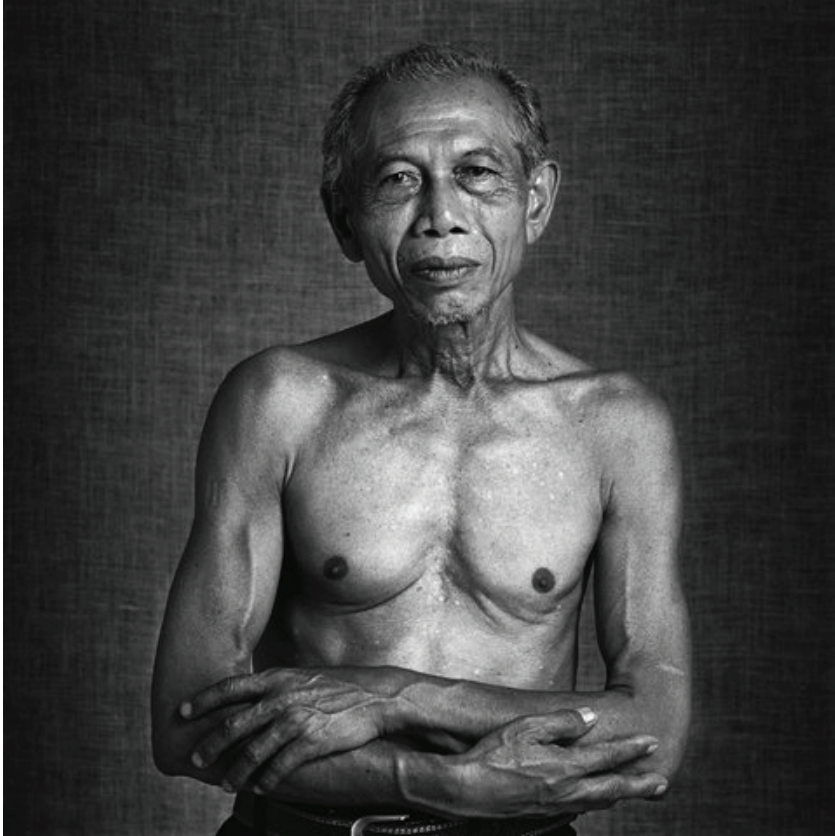
But visually it didn't work. Unfortunately I can't show it because I at that time I didn't think of it, I just threw it away. Failure ... hopta. But visually it didn't work. It became half unsharp. Well, anyway, so I had to find some other material and I came up with joote*

Oke, so what I'm basically trying to make clear to you is that the way I do it, I try to think of all the different elements that one has as a photographer. Now let's first briefly look at this series.

This is my father.

[*Slideshow plays. Screen starts by showing Jan's father in the Romusha series*]

* Joote: a material used for rice packaging (karung goni).



Romusha Series - The Traces of War

And what is good to say that some of these people are Dutch, some of them are Indonesians, some of them are mixed and for me it was important to have people not only from the West but also from here because there were far more Asian people being used as *Romusha* than Westerners.

But very much struck me is, there is a very clear difference I think between the people living in The Netherlands and most of the Indonesian people. And that's become very clear in the answer of one question. I would ask these people, "*What work have you been doing?*" They would all be retired, *right?* At least in the Netherlands, being 85 or 90 or so. So they would say, "*I was a sailor, I was a director of a medical center.*" If I would ask that to the Indonesian people, they would say, "*I am a farmer*" And you can see that the body, these people are still working.

So I told you about these difference. Let's say, technical elements which I tried to think of but then I think after that, that whole preparation. But I think then you come to the vital point, "*what is a portrait?*" I think it is basically a meeting between two people.

When I started to work as a photographer, I thought portraiture was the most difficult thing. Because at that time I think I made a big mistake and I thought I have to somehow grasp what this person is. Now how are you going to grasp what a person is if you don't know him? And I didn't manage to solve that in my head so I didn't like to make portraits. I started more as a reportage photographer.

“I’m not just behind the camera, I’m a person”

I think the solution was discovering that this is not only about that person, the person on the other side of the camera. This is about us, what is happening between these two people. So, I’m not entering a room to photograph someone as a photographer, but first of all I am entering as a person. So the way the other person is going to react to me has a lot to do with how I behave. I’m not just behind the camera, I’m a person.

Interestingly for example, Richard Avendon in his later work was not even behind the camera. So he worked with an assistant who was focusing, etc, etc, and changing the plates, working with a huge camera. But he was standing next to it because he wanted to be vulnerable, to be seen and not to hide behind the camera.

So I think that’s an absolutely vital thing in portraiture. You’re meeting someone and you have to realize that. So the way the person will be in the photo later has a lot to do with how you behave. And I think it’s very easy to understand once you realize that. Of course if you come in and you try to make the atmosphere, lights, and you play around, try to make some jokes the reaction will be completely different than if you come in and take with you a kind of serious atmosphere.

Wait a moment.

[Jan’s picking up a digital SLR camera]

This is a digital camera. Now, what I quite often see people do is, they’re going to take a portrait.

[imitates a photographer taking a picture vertically and see the LCD preview screen afterwards]

There’s no contact!

For portraiture, the digital camera I think is one of the most difficult things and I tend to think you should throw it away and start to use an old camera because you cannot (*looking the images right away) so you will be contacting people. That do that among yourselves and you will notice the difference in your own reaction.

If you work like this ...

[imitates again]

There’s no contact !

**“ You have contact with your camera but not with the person.
That will never lead to a good portrait ”**

You have contact with your camera but not with the person. That will never lead to a good portrait. So if you use a digital camera, I think you have to really disciplined yourself and not keep on looking at the back. No, you have to be busy with the person in front of you and all these technical things. You have to do your preparation right and solve that basically before you are interacting with the person you want to portray. What I'm thinking now, let me just suggest that to you Hilde...

[speaking to Hilde Janssen]

Maybe it's a nice idea if you would tell the people because you've seen how I worked here, about my approach. Because this project, **The Comfort Women**, I did together with Hilde. I was asking Hilde if she can explain how I was working there.

Firstly it's easy because she can do it in Bahasa Indonesia, but also because she observed it and it maybe nice to hear from somebody who was looking at how I was working. But to begin with I want to say something about this cooperation. I've worked together with Hilde on this and I think if you want to do a big project together, it can be incredibly helpful to do it with a good writer/journalist/researcher, what ever, which in this case came together.

So Hilde was based here in Jakarta. I'm living in Holland. All these comfort women, all the ones that were prepared to meet us are living in Indonesia. So she did all the research, but I think as a photographer you cannot, then step - out and leave all the contents to the writer. You, yourself also have to know what you're doing. So you have to read, not just get basically on the internet, but really get into it, you have to know what you're going to do. But of course also in that area it can be extremely helpful to do it with someone else. You both reading books, you discuss it, what is this about. So, of course, this whole thing, this whole talk basically is about projects, this is not about assignments. But I will show you later a bit about the assignments too.

A lot of it is voluntarily work, which I started myself, which is maybe sometimes a little bit different than an assignment.

[Hilde speaks in Indonesian]

So Jan asked me to explain a bit about how he worked. Because this is a collaboration project so we traveled together. And he said earlier that this is a project together and it is sometimes rather easier to work together with a writer or a researcher because he or she can give inputs to the topic that you are going to photograph.

Last night and just before he praised me because he can work well together with me because I know much, but actually that is also the case with him and he also reads a lot. So when I told him about **Jugun Ianfu (The Comfort Women)**, he instantly started read books about its history and had so many questions.

It became an interesting discussion and motivated myself because he is so serious to what he wants to portray. He really get into it and think hard how to approach it. And there is also a difference between taking a portrait for a newspaper and for your own project. So the approach is totally different and later he will show you his earlier work that he started himself and the assignments.

Last time, when we worked on the *Jugun lanfu* project, we have this kind of approach that I interviewed and after it's finished and Jan's had setup his makeshift studio in a different spot, I would escort the old ladies to the studio and Jan would take over. But the most important thing were during the interviews which last sometimes between 1-2 hours, when they were in condition thinking about my questions, about their past and the consequences.

Although after an hour or two people would be rather 'full', but at that time we had to hold ourselves not to make jokes that would make them calmed because they had to still be in the same state of mind, thinking about what happened to them and shown in their faces when Jan take photograph of them. When I came in, in general he would take over from me. I delivered the old ladies to him and he said *'Please sit down here, slowly here'*

So he with a very relaxed kind of way talked to them. He looked at them and tried to speak in Dutch and sometimes with a bit Indonesian to say *"You sit here"*, *"I'm now using a polaroid to do a test"* and show them the test shot to them before using the other camera.

And there are many of the ladies that use veil and Jan asked them politely if they mind to take it off. All of that is still in a relaxed atmosphere so they would still be in the same state of mind. So there were a lot of interactions but always in a serious manner. So we avoided jokes although their mind started to think out of focus of their experiences.

In this, Jan always in contact and he constantly try to speak with them despite the language barrier. Also with his physical approach in gesture, treating them respectfully so they would not be feel threatened and think *'What is this guy want from me?'* Because they have to sit and surrounded with the studio equipments. So It's like getting into a 'bunker', it's hard for them to move around but they didn't see it that way.

They really looked to Jan and sit for sometimes half an hour and sometimes longer. And they were relaxed and didn't feel *'I had enough, let's make it quick'*. So during the meetings, I was at the back so they couldn't see me, no one was allowed to pass behind Jan. Because then they would see and get distracted. If the lady got distracted I would approach them and give them a bit instructions. But otherwise I was not there. So although a big space, the main contact was only between Jan and the old lady.

“ There is also a difference between taking a portrait for a newspaper and for your own project. The approach is totally different... ”

“ The most basic thing in a portrait, you are there as a person first and only second as a photographer ”

[Jan is back speaking]

Ok, well my Bahasa Indonesia is not extremely good.

[chuckles]

So, I picked up a few of the things that Hilde was saying. Fortunately she also works with her hands which was to some extent what I was trying to do with the some though much slower but I think you said that. So I think try to realize that. Absolutely for me that's the most basic thing in a portrait. You are there as a person first and only second as a photographer. You have to relate somehow and you have to realize how you're going to do it. Because all of this is subjective as is any interaction.

If I started *[imitates a panicky attitude]* to you or If I go like this ...

[imitates an intimidating gesture of photographing]

Your reactions will be completely different. Okay anyway, so it thought it was nice to hear an idea of the studio. So, this is roughly what it'd look like ...

[Screen shows a makeshift studio in a open living room. Consisting of a small chair, a studio light, a reflector, a gray backdrop and a large format camera]

And as you can see there are a couple of practical problems. I have quite often pain in my back because all of this is so heavy and we have to travel with a car or whatever.

[Hilde speaks]

Or a small airplane and then they said 'Only 15 kilos allowed,' and we had like 40-50 kilos with us.

[Jan and Hilde chuckles]

[Jan speaks again]

So let's again go back to the portraits series. And what I did here was put the posters, that I was briefly mentioning earlier between the photographs. Earlier I explained to you how in these *Romusha* project, which officially called **“The Traces of War”**, how I tried to create a relation between past and present.

This story again, of the **Comfort Women**, is also about past and present. How does the past influenced their lives up to now. So again I have been searching very strongly to put that relationship in the images. And I could really never find a way to put it into the portraits. I think it's easy to imagine. These people were sexually abused. You can hardly asked these ladies, "Well, it's a nice idea if you would... I would like to photograph you naked because that is related to what happened."

So in the beginning I basically focused on these portraits and the way they are framed was roughly the way their identity photos were presented to the Japanese soldiers. They would come to a brothel, there would be photos there and they goes "Well, I like this one". It would be more or less this kind of framing.

So there is a very vague relationship. But that was just a very vague relationship. At some point, the idea came up to combine it with the Japanese propaganda posters. I started to search for them. I can't even remember how I came to the idea. But I started to search for them and it struck me that in some cases, in this context, they get a completely different extra meaning. The idea of getting of looking for these posters was mainly based on, let's say, what happened to these women was the absolute, let's say, terrible reality of a war.

Now maybe we can juxtaposed that to propaganda. The ideology, this idea of 'Let's go to war!', 'We men enjoy this', and 'This is all right' and etc, etc. So let's say contrast on the one hand. Propaganda against reality. And the other side, the male aspect of war, opposite the female side of war. Then I think. Okay so I found that and it struck me that, like I said, some of these posters get a different meaning. Yes, let's just go through it.

[Playing the Comfort Women slideshow on the screen]

Here's for example.

[Screen shows a Japanese propaganda picture depicts a line group of PETA soldiers]

To me this is like 'There they are' or "To the war". But this is basically of course the men that were abusing the comfort women.

[Screen shows a Japanese poster depicts a big rocket shaped bomb facing downwards]

Well this of course like a phallus, symbol of male war ...

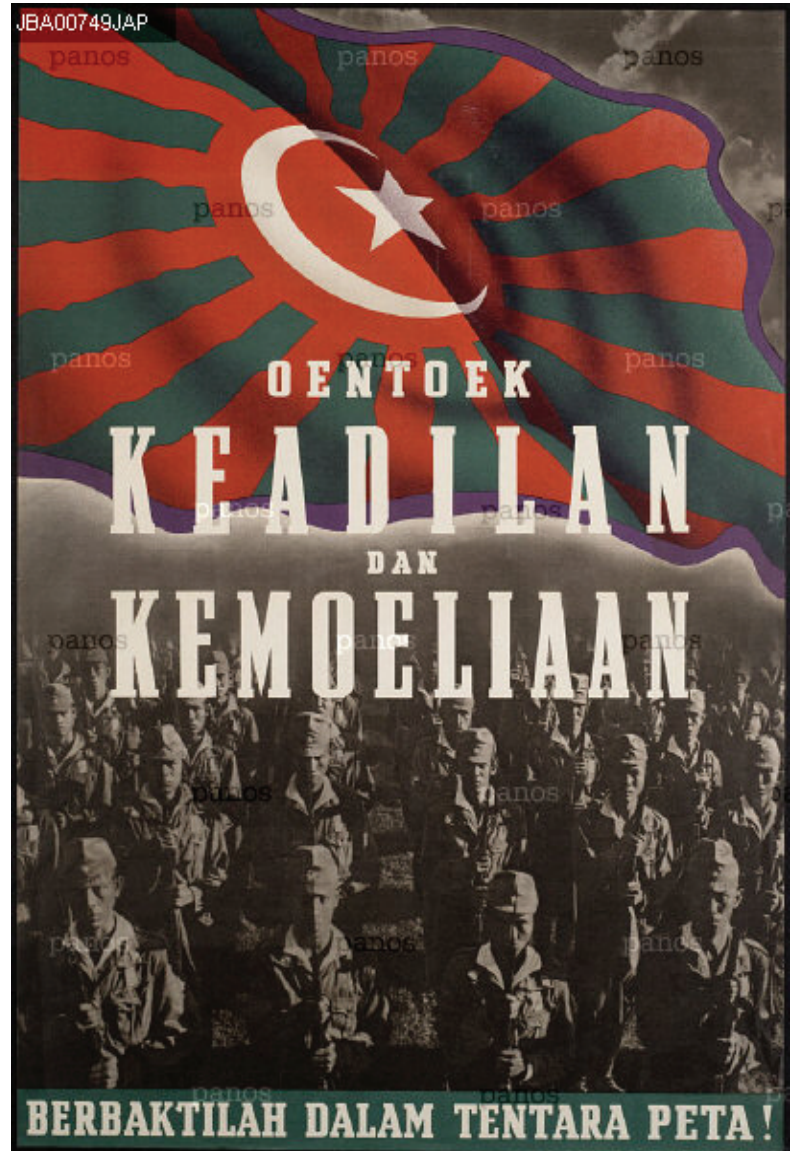
[chuckles] [Rosa Verhoeven added]

And it goes down.

“ Propaganda against reality. And the other side, the male aspect of war opposite the female side of war ”



Poster 1: Defeat for sure.
Our inattention gives the enemy a clear shot.



Poster 2: For Justice and Glory.
Serve in the PETA* army!

[Jan speaks]

That's a touch of irony there...

[chuckles]

And later on I think it's good to say something about the order of this. But there are sometimes in the series you can play with associations which have nothing to do with content whatsoever. But sometimes use aesthetics simply as a means of getting people's attention for the contents. Now here, there's a small rhyme between red here and you get some red here in the clothes. Ah, so it has nothing to do with the story as such but you use aesthetics.

* The PETA army is the Indonesian voluntary army that was to support Japan.

So for me, combining these portraits and the propaganda posters makes it into an anti-war project. Now maybe it's nice to say. Although this is not specifically about portraiture but about thinking, let's say about the way you present your material.

First of all this, as you may have seen we ended up with two books and you may wonder why two books? Why not simply put the photography and the posters and Hilde's stories together in one book? To me that's quite clear. If you imagine how do you read a book. Well, at least how would people in Holland read a book? You might want to take it on the train, when you go to work. Some people travel for half an hour. Well, like you do here in the *macet* (*traffic jam). Or on the motorbike, yah.

[chuckles]

So we do it in the train. So it's a good place to read. Some people take a book to bed. That means that for reading it's quite an advantage if your book is not too big. You can put it in your pocket and your bed is like this. But of course for photography or for any images in a lot of cases it's nice if the book is somewhat bigger. This is not easy to take on the train. You're not gonna read it like this.

[Hold his A4 size books and flapping through the pages]

So that's for me is one reason but also I think reading is a very different activity from looking. So especially for this combination of, let's say, portraits and this propaganda you want people to, let's say, use that part of the brain which is for looking. But of course to tell a story you want people to concentrate on what's being written. So I think that's a very good reason to split it up. So if you would look at the books that are downstairs there's the smaller and nicer to read text book which has photographs but basically as illustrations. It's very clear this is about reading and you can get some extra photographs to see what the people look like. And on the other hand there's the visual book which has texts to give contents but you can concentrate on looking.

And then of course you have to somehow help the people who were looked at your project in understanding what you're trying to do. So you've seen those different posters, this is not exactly the order in which it is in the book but what is vital to me is that this poster is in the beginning.

[Showing a poster depicts a graphic illustration of a person putting his index finger to his lips, a gesture to keep silent]

It's in the book. It's the first poster. It is important in the exhibition. Here I put it as the first poster because I think this helps the spectator to understand what I'm trying to do with these posters. I explained to you earlier, this poster is about a warning against espionage. But here, in this context, it is also referring to these women never talking about their stories for many decades.

So what I'm hoping, what I'm trying to achieve is that by putting this poster first, people would get an idea how to look at those posters and how to look at the combination. Aha! So these posters are not simply and only propaganda posters but also they comment on the portraits, they comment on the whole situation here.

And I think the last thing I want say about is it might interest you to compare the way the posters are used in the book and the way they are used in the exhibition.

[Opening The Comfort Women book a page showing a poster]

This is, let's say, more less the natural color of the poster. So we used different paper to get this kind of poster feeling to it. Strong colors, basically the original colors. Now if you look at the exhibition you will see that the posters have been made very pale because if you would do it like this in the exhibition, they might dominate the portraits. Which doesn't play a role here (in the book) because you look first at the portraits and then you turn the page. So it doesn't harm each other.

So I think you always have to realize what is your presentation and not simply transposed the way you do it in a book to the way you do it in an exhibition or the way you did it in one book, do it in the other book, or the way you do it in a book, also do it as a slideshow. You have to think about this is different medium. How do these images react to each other. Do you all see them at the same time as in an exhibition or do you go from one to the other as in a book.

Okay, I think it's time to do some looking without much comments. And earlier I said, in my opinion, you roughly have two sorts of portraits, the more mental portraits or psychological portraits versus the environmental portraits. I will show you the Bureaucratic series and I think it's quite well known also here.

So not talk about it much, we'll just go and have a brief look. Only it will be immediately clear this is about what a person is.

[The screen shows a photo of a wide shot of a police officer in his office]

He is a policeman. He is a policeman in a specific country. This also relates to everything behind the person not only literally but also this is... He is a representative of the state. Behind him is the state. The state is presenting himself there. So in that sense I think it's very different from the first two series that I've showed you.

[Screen plays the slide show of the Bureaucratic series]



Bureaucratic series

First here the photo are from Bolivia.. Is it too fast or it's okay?

This one is from China.

And this in France.

These photos are from India.

And these were taken in Liberia, in Africa.

And these photos were taken in Russia, in Siberia. In winter as you can see in the background. And it's quite obvious where these were made.

[Chuckles]

[Screen shows a portrait in an office with animal heads hanged in the wall as hunting trophies]

This is in Texas.

These photos were from Yemen.

And we're back in Bolivia. I propose that we have a short break. Have some coffee maybe some snacks and what I would like to do after the break is one last series which was an assignment. So in that sense it's different from this which was free work with no one asking me what to do or telling me what to do. Yah? Okay.

[Break]

Second session starts]

So like I said all the previous work was basically free work. This was an assignment. So I was asked by the Dutch National Museum, The Rijksmuseum, to do something about the reconstruction. So there's a big building from the late 19th century. It's the museum where ... let's say it's the most famous Dutch museum where the Night Watch of Rembrandt is and well all the... let's say all the classical Dutch paintings as far as they are in Holland.

And this building has been changed over the years and now they basically want to take it back to the way it was when it was opened in 1885, if I'm not mistaken. Roughly speaking. So the museum has been closed from several years. And it's a terrible mess basically but they wanted to present something to the outside. So they asked me to do a book and the only instruction I was given was it had to be related to the reconstruction. In fact the director said the way we know you it doesn't make much sense to ask you to do something specific so please feel free and do what you'd like.

[Rijksmuseum series is playing on the screen]

So the whole project has several aspects. For example, I photographed basically the traces of the workers on the walls and I did some interior shots but now I think we should concentrate on the portraits which is the main part of the book.

And thinking about it and walking around, you have to imagine it's a very strange thing, it's a huge building which is completely stripped and in the bottom it's absolute mess. Because Holland is so low, well compared to Jakarta you start to make holes and it fills up with water and it becomes muddy. It's the same thing in Amsterdam. And it's a bit dark and you go through these rooms and then suddenly you see a huge copy of the Night Watch which is obviously not the original but they use it. In these lonely rooms very strange atmosphere.

So what I decided to do was to use again this mobile studio and look for interesting places and nice backgrounds and move it through the whole building and then ask people to pose in front of that background. One photograph then move to another background and stylistically I wanted to do two things. On the one hand, I wanted to show very clearly that these are workers. *Grrhrrm*, strong, workers, but in a kind of a vulnerability.

So let's say, these people work with their hands and their bodies. So I wanted to show on the one hand photos where you can actually see a good part of their body. But not necessarily getting this macho atmosphere.

So I basically approached it the way Hilde was probably telling about what I've done earlier. Again try to imagine you have these rather dark rooms and then there is the studio and for the studio I used a different kind of flash which has stronger lights. It's not easy to travel with but that doesn't matter you can just drive from where I live and get your stuff out of the car and it doesn't matter if it's a lot of stuff.

So it's almost like a theatre. Big dark room and there is a corner where there are some lights. So it's a bit lighter. It's almost like a stage. So you get the kind of atmosphere that something special is going to happen here. And I like that... and I think it works well. It gives a kind of concentration. It's not like, well, their neighbor is taking a photograph, or their child, or their wife. No, we're going to do something special. The two of us, you and me, we are going to make something. Okay, so that was how I traveled around.

And so stylistically, like I said, on the one hand I wanted some photographs like this one where you can actually see the body they work with. And next to that as you will see I did some more close-up portraits. And again I have been thinking about the way to use my light. This National Museum, The Rijksmuseum is especially well known for its classical Dutch painting collection, 17th century painting collection. And a lot of the 17th century painters used a very classical kind of light, which maybe I should comment on when we see it, so you get these two kinds of frames.

Here for example, I like the guy is standing like this but there's a vulnerability in the face. What was interesting by the way, which has nothing to do with the way I photograph, but what I found very interesting is... maybe I should tell it later, it's gonna confusing.

[Slideshow plays on the screen]

The previous person was somebody from Germany. This is a man who originally is from Turkey.

[Screen is changing to the next photography]

He's a Portuguese. Let's concentrate on what I'm wanted to say. You see, this is another way of framing and what I was using here as a light, is this kind of light which was used very often for the 17th century paintings. So you have the light from one side. On the dark side you have this kind of triangle and in the background there is.. on there, here the light side of the face, the background is a bit darker and on the dark side of the face, the background is a bit lighter.

So, very classical approach which obviously is also used a lot in photography, but it's based on the way people, many portrait painters in 17th century were using their light. And what I was try to do is start with the contents. I hope that was clear from what I said about earlier series also. Again here, I chose that light because its the 17th century, painting is so important for The Rijksmuseum.

This is a Moroccan man.

[Screen is changing to the next photograph]

“ We as photographer or whatever we are, I think we have a role play in society and I think we should try to take that responsibility ”

She's from Serbia. A fantastic side which has nothing to do with this photography. But you see, she has this pencil, anyway and there's a huge space and you see three or four of this ladies drawing this tiny line to reconstruct how it was in this enormous space.

So, the last thing I want to say about this series is working there, I discover that this dutch cultural symbol, I think you can say that this Dutch Museum, The Rijksmuseum, is probably the strongest Dutch cultural symbol. And I found it very interesting that this building is being reconstructed by people from so many different countries. And at this moment, the political situation in Holland is not exactly very friendly towards foreigners. There's a kind of xenophobic atmosphere.

So I thought it an interesting statement in this book to add not only their names, their age, and their job but also the place where they were born. And again because of course this book only went - it was not on the market, it was just for the people who have relationship with The Rijksmuseum, I thought it interesting to also published that in a magazine. So, finally it was a small selection of course was published in the magazine that Michele is working for, De Volksrant, including those indications. So I try to make it part of the public discussions about such topics.

So I think, before I gave you the opportunity to ask questions, if you want sentences about that, I think we as photographers or whatever we are, if we are artists or photojournalists, I think we have a role to play in society and I think we should try to take that responsibility. So, whatever we are doing, it is used, it is presented towards the public.

So let's be aware of that role in society and let's play, let's not just be decorative or it's not only about earning your money, obviously that's an important thing but I think we have a responsibility towards the society that we are part of and whether it's about portraiture or whatever kind of photography, let's try to play that role and be aware of that. And I think that is what I want to say at the end of my part. If you have any questions please go ahead.

Q & A

Question: *You say you earlier work on reportage, and what motivates you like to switch into like more a portraiture?*

Answers: To be honest I think it was like probably more less like coincidence. It was, I'm looking for the right way to express a subject or a certain theme and apparently it's switch from reportage as a medium, hmmm... ya to portraiture as a medium but it's not really satisfy my self the answer to be honest. One of the things I was struggling with is, there is of course a kind of classical approach to reportage and it was a trap that I thing I fell into somehow.

Reportage, what is reportage? You start with overview, and then you take some details, and some medium length shots and maybe a portrait in between, and this whole approach in my opinion and for my self, had become a big *cliche*. So I more less try to get away from that and this has been more less the outcome. But as you have seen in bureaucratic s and there are also other stories whether it's a kind of a mix, it's not really like reportage but there's also surrounding that you would normally also use in reportage.

So it's not strictly divided, but these the whole thing has become more conceptual. I think that's another thing also. In reportage you basically react to what's happening, you don't know what is happening. Which I thing it's quite suitable approach to news stories but this of course is very conceptual. Normally I start to think about not only what I'm going to do, but how I'm going to do it. And these subjects are more under the surface. They are slow, they are hidden and you have to think of how you bring it across. And apparently there this kind of either let's say a mental of psychological portrait or this environmental portraits are a good means for me. But it's a good questions, I mean... it's very logical question and I myself should think more about why this is the case. And it's not completely over this reportage.

[Screen shows reportage work]

I show you just a few photographs from malawi and this was again combined with environmental portraits , but in a way I would say this is more like reportage style. So in my selection for today, I of course also concentrated on the portraits and a lot of what I do is portraits but as you can see it's not entirely finish with reportage like things. So, but you have another question?

Q : *Question: How do you make yourself comfortable like in the Comfort Women story you spent like two hours for each women and how do you comfort yourself and they feel comfortable with you. and what's your trick to make them lose their guard. I mean like Arnold Newman or Richard Avendon have their tricks. Or Philippe halsman told his subjects to jump. Something like that. What's your...*

A : I think if there's a trick it's probably being yourself and realizing what I said earlier. First of all, you're human being that enters and not a photographer and I think that's how you should try to relate to the other people. Now that's maybe a bit abstract, to make it concrete with the comfort women. Maybe I'm telling you things that Hilde already told.

But I'm, well as you know Bahasa Indonesia. So, I try to make contact to them in whatever ways. Sometimes Hilde would drive in the kijang to pick them up and I would come along and just simply look at them and maybe help them get in the car, support them, things like that.

Sometimes my presence as a man in the interview was okay. So I would sit and I would look at them, I would make eye contact, and maybe smile at them, and things like that. So even though I couldn't exchange a lot of words with them from my lack of Bahasa Indonesia, not to mention Javanese or other languages, there are other ways to make contact to a person. So that's maybe gives you an idea of how I did it. So I also needed time before the portrait even though I couldn't talk to them, but I needed sometimes so that we could get used to each other.

[Hilde Speaks]

I think it's true if he tells to be yourself, Jan is a very serious man because if he's going to photograph or approach his subject. He is well-prepared, his reading and he knows a lot about it. So it felt. He is calm but he knows how to do things because he reads a lot and think about meanings, the person, what the person has gone through. I also saw from his way approaching people, that he already knows a lot about people. He respect people and its emotion. I think it's very much influenced Jan's relation with people.

Q : *Actually my question is related to the second question from the first speaker, but you said before, the portrait is a meeting between the people. So the keyword for the sentences is maintaining the intimacy from the subject and then I try to make a portrait and I'm still learning about this photography but sometimes I approach the subject by making some joke with them but I know that the picture's taste is quite different because the emotional is distract because you said also to keep up the atmosphere on the situation on the past to the present, in the current it's how to keep the emotions stable like you said two hours interview. You have the studio is free from the people. So, I'm just questioning sometimes it's difficult for me maintaining the intimacy with my subject. Is there anyway for us because sometimes is quite difficult to keep there more than two hours?*

A : Of course this is a very specific situation, if you would go and portrait a manager of a company there's not a big chance that they give you two hours. What I normally try to do is, I make the appointments, well especially, people that have the least time are generally these managers, etc.

So, in a lot of cases you have to make the appointment with the secretary. Be nice to the secretary, the secret weapon is the secretary. So, be nice. And then very often this people are spoiled because they are used to photographers coming in and taking a photo in five minutes. So normally if I make that appointment, nowadays it doesn't happen very often anymore, but that's how I did it in the past. I make that appointment, I try - without boasting, i try to make it clear or give them the idea that I'm kind of a special photographer and I tell them *"Well, I know you probably used to five minutes but I work in a different way, I need an hour."*

You probably not going to get the hour but then you can start negotiating and try to somehow make it clear by what you have already done to give a good image of yourself to them so that they also take you seriously. And what I'm usually did was simply try to make it clear to the secretary that I absolutely wanted that time and I try to get information.

A practical information sometimes, does he wear glasses, etc, how long is he, things like that but also other things that you can talk about with the person, anything. Does he like music? What kind of music? Try to discover things about the person so that you can start the conversation and I think that helps very often. Most people have some kind of vanity and when they discover that you have been trying to discover something about them and you invested time in finding out who they are, they feel flattered ... So I think that will help very often. You have simply have something to talk about with them that interest them.

And lastly I think, prepare the situation. So, I would normally go, I would tell the secretary, look I want to be there half an hour or sometimes an hour before I do the portrait. So I can look at the spot, I know where to put my light, if possible I would bring an assistant to pose there. I can put my lights and all that is finished, is ready. So I can concentrate on the person and not like *“oh yeah...shit... how am I going to do this...where... indirect flash.”* [act panicky]

That's not going to work. So, prepare all those practical things really concentrate on the person. And then a lot of case you don't need that much time but you do need the concentration and sometimes very elaborate things can help. I very often work with a very big camera. What I said earlier what I did in The Rijksmuseum, this whole theatrical kind of thing, it also makes the whole situation special. And I think that helps, try to make it special.

[A women speaks]

Can I say something about this? I was working with Jan in The Rijksmuseum and there, the people were not high (physically-wise). They were the workers. And because Jan made such a special studio for them, they suddenly felt seen and I think that is also a very important action that you really, this person feel seen, you really feels like *“Oh, he's really going to make a good portrait of me”* and that is also an important energy specially with the workers, I thought they really felt made special because of the attention you gave to them and you work very shortly with them, maybe five minutes - ten minutes. But they felt important and that is I think also something that works.

Q: *Okay my question, It seems to me that why you choose portraiture probably because you see that the body is important. And it seems that the face is particularly more important for you. I see the way you execute The Rijksmuseum project, you choose to portray the body in two combination. One is from the chest and the other fashion is half body so you can show all the equipment but not the whole body. In the way you execute the Comfort Women project, you only choose, from the chest to the face and you really emphasized in the eye. So I really need to understand how do you choose to execute the body and why do you always, for your special project, always choose to present as one person, meanwhile in your like assignment project where you can make a group photo. So, also one more, do you really think that for your photo the eye is really important so that it will be more stronger if face directly to the lens or actually it can also facing another direction?*

A: It's a lot of questions, so remind me if I forget to answer some but let's say the question about the way I understand it is that you also want to know why didn't I show more of the body in the Comfort Women photograph or maybe the whole body.

Interesting because I've been really struggling with it and there are test photos of Hilde - entire body, white background. Would that be an option? Because if you look at the contents, you absolutely right the body was very relevant and well, probably the answer is the same as what I was saying earlier about the bamboo background. It has to work visually and sometimes you do things which rationally are excellent and well thought out but they don't work visually.

My problem in the case of the **Comfort Women** was the distance was getting too big. I didn't feel close enough and I wanted to be close and how are you going to... In fact I used quite a short tele lens so that I could be really close because I almost wanted to be up this distance

[imitating a photographer gesture in front of someone's face]

... to feel contact.

And photographing the whole body, also for me, physically, men, you don't want to do this in extreme white angle... it's ridiculous. So it means that you have to take too much distance and I was losing the feeling of relating to them. So, it's wonderful question, you absolutely right the body is relevant but I couldn't relate to them anymore. The physical distance between us was too big. That was, I think, a very important reason. But you put the question more general. Am I particularly interested in the eyes of the face? Yes, yes I am, and you were mentioning The Rijksmuseum

[showing something]

To me here also, the face is vital. it's still of course concentrates in the face. So for me is fright but it's also interesting and also another photos of this series almost the kind of the contradiction between this strong body and the face which is in a way soft... So, yeah you can play with that. In the end, I think it's really hard to say why did I photograph this man, this way, and this one not. Very subjective I think. Sometimes you just do, sometimes it's clear if you go back here... this guy for example with all the equipment, you don't wanna lose that. That's very interesting but sometimes it's ... I think your mood or something a bit vague. It is as it is. Yeah, the mood of the day or something like that.

The other question you said you came up with about the people on their own, that's not completely true. It's a matter of what I concentrated on, but this for example is another part of the Malawi series and here it is a family or as far as they're at home. Again, you can say this kind of environmental portrait but what I did here was I simply went into these huts in a Hamlet where we have been living in a couple of weeks and I photograph whoever was there. Sometimes there was just one person at home, sometimes the family or part of the family. So it depends on the situation, it depends on what you're trying to achieve. In the case of Bureaucratic for example there were a couple of examples where there were two people working in the office, just very few but all right then I photograph too. Is that more or less (explain the question)?

Q : *How about the eye... you seems to choose to make them the facing towards the lens?*

A : Yeah, interesting thing, I have been wondering about that myself, and it's hard to say why i'm simply so interested in this confrontations and the confrontation of course is strongest if you look at each other.

But again sometimes I've been thinking, *"oh come on why don't you do something else, why don't you in this let the person look away."* But that's just a subjective answer I think, I like that contact and recently for example I have started to experiment with an even shorter lens just because I'm so interested in getting so close to a person, what is happening, you can see everything.. it's so incredibly interesting. But it's there's no absolute or rational answer to that I think. But of course the closer you get, the closer you get to the face..Yeah.

Yeah, those who were also saying that I also wanted the Comfort Women to look back to the world. Yes but then again if it would have worked with the whole body, they might still be looking... but I lost that feeling of intimacy of being so close to someone cause basically you, as the people who look at the photograph, are virtually just as close as I was with the camera. So of course it is intimacy if I've been very close to them then all of you and all the people who see that are also close to them and I thought that was important also in the case of the Comfort Women.

Q : *Just because to be close is really you have all the emotion that they have ? Like that?*

A : Yes yes, but not only for the camera also for me as ... I'm handling this camera but I like to come so close, it's so incredibly interesting. There's like a kind of barrier between people and for one person the barrier is there and for some maybe is at the door. But it's interesting to play with that barrier, where do you cross the barrier of comfort... what's happening.

Q : *Because from many people the comfort zone is different. Most Asian people, it is natural to be close side by side. But maybe different for people from Europe, from the Western countries.*

A : But it's so interesting to play with that. Where this is start? where is comfort? where is not comfortable? and if it's not comfortable can you make it? Maybe not completely comfortable but there is tension, things start to happen there.

[Hilde speaks]

And I also think what you said when you were taking portraits of some of the women, Jan was saying that I can completely focusing on their eyes, I can look through them, they're so open, they don't have anything to hide, so they feel like they decided that, *"Okay at this moment you know already everything about me, so go ahead, take my picture the way I am, I have nothing to hide for you."*

And that is in the eyes because sometimes he was saying *"Look at her, look at her, you can look through her and she's so confident."* And they didn't mind even because in one specific case I remember, the *Ojeks* (Motorcab drivers) were waiting for us and they were hoping

[imitating a motorcycle horn repeatedly]

... we want to go back because we had to drive still for an hour or more. There were lots of people around, inside it was very too dark so we had to go to the veranda, and people were all around her and she was just sitting there, and she didn't hear anything, she didn't see anything. We didn't need to tell people to be quiet because she didn't care. She was just focusing on Jan and Jan was focusing on her and that was it

[back to Jan]

It's not the ideal situation, you try to avoid that. But it worked in that way.

[Hilde speaks]

So it's sometimes also some person are also more open than others.

[Jan]

In a specific situation etcetera, etcetera...

Q : *I asked it because from many literature, or many photographers always said that the eye is important. So this probably really emphasize, really a good example of what it is. I also interested if you use, you try different lens, what kind of equipment do you usually bring? It seems that you not only use one lens to do the pictures. But you changed many times when you face the subjects.*

A : Well, In the case of the portraits of The Comfort Women, I was using just one lens. So again, I try to be clear about that before I start to work. And experimenting I do with other people, like here, preparing for the comfort women series. I've been experimenting with portraits on Rosa, with portraits on Hilde and then you can play around, that doesn't matter. And then I'm not talking about huge portraits sometimes something nice comes out, but that's not the job, then I am working technically. But once the series work starts, then I have to be clear about it.

Your question about the camera you can see it here and that thing is huge and it's breaking my back. But there's a good thing about it being big because that makes it very different from what people are used to. And what I said earlier is, I want to convey the message, *"Look we together, you and me, not just me, you and me, we together are going to do something very special, very unique. This is not photography the way you know, this is not snapshot."*

It's almost like making a sculpture. This is serious business. And the big camera helps and of course it can be very intimidating so you have to work on that, but it's certainly conveys the message, *"Look this is not photography the way you know it, this is special"* So that's a very important reason and then there are some practical reasons also because using a bigger camera means you have a bigger viewfinder which when you look through it give you much more visual contact. I don't like this small SLR windows, it's so small... I want to feel it and this is a 6 x 8 camera so the viewfinder is also big. So I can really see what's going on there.

Q: *You've been telling us the lighting is the key of the successful portrait, important factor. But a your work is beyond than, more than good picture. On The Comfort Women, especially on Emma portrait (referring to one of the portrait in the Comfort Women series). Even people who don't know about it, when see that picture, people will think Emma is a pretty woman when she's still young. On some other portraits you've done you're using photographically side light, some are using front light and my question is how you justify when you're going to use a sidelight or... Because it's really bring the character about the subject..How to justify that?*

Answers: I'm not sure I understood the first part of your question right. What I try to say you mention the light, what I'm trying to say is that for me the most vital thing in portraiture is making contact with the person. That's above everything, but when you talk about lighting, yes photography is writing with light that's what it basically says, so light is vital. Now, probably I gave the impression here, well yes... I do think about all the means I'm using, but it doesn't mean that sometimes there is kind of coincidence in it. In the case of The Comfort Women, well as you can see here, I started with the idea that this should be their drama and I as a photographer wanted to be a neutral, mind you.. me as photographer not me as a person but me as photographer. So not use any tricks of style. All the emotions that came out of it should be theirs. It's their story, it's not my story, I don't want to influence the situation with photographic means. As a person that's okay, but not with photographic means.

So, I wanted to be, to have very very frontal light but it doesn't always work because to really get completely frontal light I would even have to bring more equipment because as you can easily understand, here is the lens of your camera... it's a big camera you have a tripod and how do you get the umbrella exactly in front of the camera, you cannot put two

tripod exactly in front of the camera so you would need something extra and it's already so much weight that I couldn't do it. So I started to put it very close to the lens, almost next to the lens, a bit in front of the lens with this idea of not using any light effects.

But then sometimes it change because I saw the women and I thought ... Yeah but in this case maybe I should put it little bit more to the side anyway and again I didn't want to be very dogmatic so I started with the very strict idea but then I start to play around little bit. And so that's I think what's happen quite often. There is a clear idea but I don't want to be a complete bureaucrat my self when handling that idea. I want to give my self a bit of space, so I didn't want to use, for example, I didn't want to use that kind of light that I use in The Rijksmuseum, that would have been too strong of photographic influence. But a bit to the left, a bit to the right... yeah that was okay. Yeah, and the difference was not very big, it's a little bit to the left, a little bit to the right. If you look at the photographs it's not like you put the light to the side... it's just a tiny bit.

Q : *Do you have a special reason to choose blue background or just a blue ambience? (referring to the blueish background of The Comfort Women portraits)*

A : Yes, that's right. Well interesting enough, I thought I was buying more or less neutral grey background, that's how it looks. And well, I'm not a textile specialist, I don't know what happen but when I put light on it, it become much bluer more than you would expect. But I thought it worked out fine, it was cool colors so it recedes and it went well with everything... But that was a strange luck because in the beginning for the reason I was giving you, I thought *"Okay as photographer I'm not going to influence this with this stylistic means. so let's start with grey."* And then the grey turn out to be rather blue and I thought, *"Yeah this's okay, it works well."* So it was like a present.

Thank you very much for your attention, for your patience and good luck with your own work and I hope we have a chance to meet in the future and maybe the other way around you show me and tell me about your work. But good luck and let's meet again in the future.

* The **Comfort Women** project is a joint initiative of journalist Hilde Janssen and photographer Jan Banning. The first research preparations started in mid 2007, while the interviews and portraits sessions took place between May 2008 and July 2009. The project resulted in the photo exhibition **Comfort Women** and the publication of two books, i.e. the photobook **Comfort Women/Troostmeisjes** by Jan Banning with text by Hilde Janssen and the Dutch language book **Shame and Innocence: The Suppressed war past of comfort women in Indonesia** by Hilde Janssen with photographs by Jan Banning. The Dutch documentary filmer Frank van Osch followed Janssen and Banning several times during their journeys with his camera resulting in the documentary **Because we were beautiful**.

The photo exhibition was first opened in the Kunsthal in Rotterdam and will start traveling in The Netherlands and elsewhere.

** **For more information:** www.janbanning.nl; www.hildejanssen.nl

*** This transcript were made based on a recording of the lecture session at Erasmus Huis Jakarta on August 14th, 2010.

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