

PEERS 2010 Critic's Report

Tracing Progress

The KHOJ Peers Residency programme is known to have artists from diverse backgrounds, and it was the same case this year for the Peers 2010 too. With artists from various disciplines and with me as a critic the term diverse needs to be looked at very sensitively. A residency always demands artists or writers to step out of the regular ways and methods of working and their individual practices, to be a part of a prescribed group such that this act of “being a part” hints at a formation of a situation for intellectual osmosis against that of an isolated working practice. The term “diverse” too needs to be thought about carefully, because this diversity invariably provides opportunities for the members to learn something more, which falls apart from their precincts of knowledge. Therefore the term “diverse” hints not at the dissimilarity but in the possible productive outcomes this assemblage can bring about.

Reading Through Layers

The Peers Residency Programme to us was not just a month long event of working, but of blending along with the new spaces and also of fine-tuning our own working methods. Therefore the residency needs to be read in layers – one, as another **milestone in the creative trajectories** of the respective residents who have been practicing independently, and the other as their interaction with various physical **spaces**. The first one, not only maps the ways of working of the artists, from the conceptual level to that of the final / produced works, over their individual timelines, but encompasses the cerebral osmosis an artist constantly undergoes, their close engagement with all that influences their works either directly or those which have left their faint shadow. Such that the residency becomes an event, another cause and a stimulant for their works, works either made for it (residency), or as ideas to be taken forward, which then become specific points to be placed on the same timeline.

Each of the artists have been working in their own capacities, and have a decent volume of work which provides / gives a clear understanding of the artists interest / intent through her / his works. The works done prior to the residency act as points of reference from where the artists have taken a cue, and moved ahead (moreover their selection for the Peers 2010 was done on the basis of these pre-residency works) and therefore need due attention. By employing the term “milestone in the creative trajectories”, I do not intend produce a bald narration of their earlier – to- current works or a text (an explicatory guide) to support the visuals; but to speak about the conceptual core of the works (further their working methods), as framed by the artists and critically analysing the same. Then, the timeline, takes a totally different connotation, moving away from its documentative significance to that of comprehensively sketching or tracing the intellectual brewing, physical involvements / efforts, behind every work (a body of work).

Similarly for the residency, considering its open structure, the works made here seem like a subsection of their creative experiments undertaken in the stipulated time-period of four weeks, and therefore need to be looked upon, - not as final, finished works but as “works in progress”. Corresponding to which, while undertaking the curatorial project for the Open Day I had to conceptualise it at a visual and textual level, dually. Considering the progressive character of the

works of the artists the curatorial note too was titled as “Working Title”, as it had to hint at the inherent character of ongoing experimentation, evolution and progression. At a visual level, there was no one particular thematic thread in which their works could be woven together; each artist had a different domain of interest and terrain of enquires. This loose title provided a large umbrella under which the works could be justifiably be clubbed together. And yet some surprising connections emerged out of the boundaries of the chosen concepts and working methods of the artist which had to be emphasised. Considering their backgrounds, the five artists seemed like an assortment of different disciplines and evidently did not form a co-ordinated project team, or a homogenous group. The rooted heterogeneity led to views and fresh perspectives, such that the contrast existing between them became the enhancing element – further the juxtaposition of their works drew each of them into sharper focus.

In a snapshot the residency seemed to be much more than an integration of - some predetermined ideas, some thought, some dropped / abandoned, some tried and failed, some which took form and were placed for viewing on the open day and some which were thought about but would be worked on later; all the possibilities, which seem to be a congruent part of a residency structure. A structure which not only provides space to experiment – but is well prepared / equipped to accept successful works, just as the failed ones.

Moving to the issue of spaces - for most of the artists their stay in Delhi played an instrumental role in the formulation of their works. The stay according to me needs to be divided in three parts – the **guest house** where we resided together, the **Khirkee studio** where we worked “individually” (yet holding a sense of sharing the space) and **Delhi, itself as a new city** (to most of us). The reason for such a division is that, each of these spaces individually contributed to the associative experience in their own unique ways. The guesthouse acted as a home, a temporary address, a space which housed all the dinner time discussions / arguments (depending on the direction the talks took), which in a way provided pointers to ponder on. Further Bhavin’s work came straight from the room on the terrace, which he felt was perfect to shoot his video in.

The Khirkee Studio provided an interesting space to work in. Located nearly a road-cross away from the chic “Select Citywalk Mall, at Saket”, one of Delhi’s largest malls, the Khirkee Village seemed like a contrasting image; and then the central road seemed like a line separating the two worlds, than a functional road, exposing the sharp contrasts co-existing in extreme proximities. The clean white Khirkee Studio structure starkly stood (like an odd one) out in the near-dirt-lane, lined by less impressive structures, nearly shanties. This sense of contrast was further deepened by the presence of historical monuments from the Sultanat period, dotting the same vicinity. Most of these were being refurbished, for the Commonwealth Games. Neha was fascinated by the number of such monuments which speckled across the city, and aligned her work accordingly. Most of these monuments underwent a sudden status transformation – from once nearly abandoned / neglected spaces, to those of high historical value, unexpectedly coming in spotlight.

Even as we started living in our prescribed spaces - at the guesthouse and the studios, a dual / contrasting feeling of attachment and detachment was subconsciously playing in our minds. A small / soft clause was told to us – The studio spaces and the guest house must be returned as it was given. (The clause certainly and justifiably seemed to have been framed on the basis of the

extreme freedom which artists tend to take.) The thought of departure in the very first place, hurdled the thought of settling in the space. And at the same time the creative studio space demanded a constant engagement with it. These individual studios, by standing witnesses to the trails of advances and withdrawals in the works, got a status of brooding / breathing spaces for the artists. The architecture (the studio) itself provided various possibilities to explore. I am using the term “architecture” and not a bland label as “building” as this interesting built form lent itself to most of the final works. For the Open Day, these spaces of intimate interaction had to be opened-up to a large audience, as viewing spaces. Further works were designed keeping in mind possibilities offered by it. Moulding / adaptation, of the space, made the space an integral part of it. (explanation for the same is provided below through the description of the individual works)

I mentioned about the Khirkee Village, and the glamorous Citywalk Mall, similarly Delhi itself provided many such spaces / places which hit a chord as we moved through them. For instance in Old Delhi, at a point near Chandani Chowk, I read a board which said “Mirza Ghalib Ki Haveli, Ballimaran” – and that was it. I was sure that I wanted to go there. All the descriptions in Ghalib’s poetry seem live and real. To me it was like a pilgrimage site. Similarly Neha was driven into an ittar shop, and Rabindra and Bhavin to the electronics market. There were many such spaces which lured us, which we visited and re-visited, nearly setting up a cycle of deeper exploration, of a search – and later Rabindra gave an expression to this cycle, through his works.

Noted Down

To me the blog, for the PEERS 2010, had been a tool to note down not just events but what I would call the step by step progress, advancement in the works of the artists individually and also as an associated group, giving an insight to their personal side too. Be it the presentation at the FICA Reading Room, or the walks through Old Delhi, or our studio visits, each day had something worth noting down. By the time I got down to write the curatorial note, the blog entries made it easy to discern – some evident linkages at the experiential and mental level of the artist with their works. The blog had a change in its title from the Absent Ones to that of Do Deadlines Do. The earlier title was thought of, as there was no photograph in which all six of us were together, and therefore I had even thought of introducing the artists on the blog through their absence as “the missing ones” and not through their presence in the group snaps. As time passed the work pressure started surmounting and evidently the new title for the blog was coined. Further this latter title seemed absolutely appropriate as the open day approached, as the definition of deadlines became cleared than ever.

For the Last Lap

Neha Thaker’s work came in direct relation to – one, the residency programme and the other to her stay in Delhi. A constant mental tug-of-war, as mentioned earlier, of attachment and a conscious withdrawal from the space granted to her was seen in her work titled, Sanitised Air. Cartons filled with her experimental works and her paraphernalia, placed outside her studio showed her act of shifting out. Neha set the room, just as the way it was when seen (given to her) at the first time. She took the idea of returning a neat room to another extreme by eliminating all

her possible traces, by even purifying the air, by using / choosing camphor – a substance which has a strong religious as well as scientific connotation. The need to do this rose from her experiments with fragrances and different odours. In Unknown Cell she made an attempt to recreate a temporary structure (from cloth), which looked like a structure within a structure. This to her was like the many unknown / ignored monuments dotting the landscape of Delhi. The constructed structure was in a way inspired by the small viewing gallery space outside her studio. She intended to install it in the lower courtyard, but due to technical reasons had to abandon the thought. Further she installed a fragrance in this work made by her. It was of burnt rose petals; again a fragrance to which one is familiar with, which the viewers would have to pump in-order to let it trickle. This work nearly took a different dimension as the viewers interacted with it. Though not intended but the deep red stains of the burnt rose liquid on the cloth, and some of it spilling over the floor, created an intense visual, which stood in contrast to the light pleasing fragrance which spread within the structure. A note Leave Your Trace, told the visitors to leave a written comment of their experience. The functional aspect of the work was not achieved as expected, therefore Neha intends to rework on it post-residency.

Neha Thaker has done her Masters in Painting from M. S. U. Baroda. She has a particular interest in understanding and capturing the ‘process of transformation’, in her works. Earlier she had worked with ice sculptures and has also played with the idea of senses through intangible medium like scents which she has experimented with, some which were made by her.

Rabindra Patra was another artist who strongly reacted through his works to this new space of the residency, and the experiences shared with his Peers. Rabindra who has studied his Bachelor’s at the College of Arts and Craft, Dhauli, Orissa has been working with electronic parts and sensitively conjures them in formulating his visual vocabulary; therefore the idea of power and its play seems to captivate him. The city was not new to him, as he shifted here a couple of years ago and is currently working at the Gardi Studio. He remembers the times he wandered through the city, then the presence of imposing buildings predominantly the structures of political importance, having an inherent character of immense power struck him. Further his act of wandering aimlessly and at the same time the challenging idea of search became crucial to him. According to him a search has varied connotation, from that of - patience, determination, power, to a more philosophical one, which he derives from a quote from the Bhagwat Gita – Karm karte jao, fal ki apeksha mat karo (which may be roughly translated as ‘keep working without expectations’). But re-visiting these lanes with us - a journey through the layers of Delhi, its lanes and by-lanes, the intense desire of searching, of finding the intended and the unintended, was a story which he wanted to narrate through his works.

Through the open book – reading this story, hands, etc. covered, rather mindfully set with the electronic parts, which he chooses considering its practical functionality, he associates the idea of power to that of his search (ones strength to search). And it is for the same reason that along with his works, even the simple / trivial objects find space as displayed objects – he exhibited a black polythene bag, which to him stood as a symbol for the objects searched for and found. The door of his studio covered with the photographs clicked (pasted like thumbnails) while he was on constantly on the road, capture people in a state of flux – a state in which he himself was while clicking them. The door itself acting like a structure providing / opening up, further possibilities – results, paths or even a reasons to search further. The notion of transition and non-stagnancy,

energy, all to Rabindra have dominant role to play. Rabindra had partially painted his studio – an act which he feels was necessary in order to ‘set the stage’, to narrate this story of search.

It was for the first time that Rabindra had used photographs directly for his works. Speaking about experimentation, Bhavin and Sajad too used different mediums.

Bhavin Mistry’s strong point is his drawing. Bhavin has done his Masters in Painting from M. S. U. Baroda. His works carry a strong metaphysical tone. In his (earlier) drawings, he has been using ubiquitous and found-objects and further he works on them to give rise to nearly hybrid forms. For the residency he centred his concerns on the aspect of claustrophobia (seen in his drawing too). Bhavin interprets it in multiple ways – its literal meaning - as an abnormal fear of being in enclosed or narrow places, to that of being mentally suffocated. He feels that artists we believe that they can work with a sense of freedom, but in actuality they carry a certain burden of prescribed, unquestioned and accepted rules, which strangle and suffocate one unknowingly.

In his current work he intended to partially deviate from his earlier ones, mainly, technically. He claimed to have abandoned his regular drawing, sketching and painting tools, as he worked on the video for the first time as a complete work; therefore he chose his body as his medium. The act of layering himself with charcoal, to him, is a near imitation of his regular methods. But what is interesting is that, the visual language of this work still remains closely rooted in his drawings. He engaged himself in creating, structuring, drawing a space within another. Interestingly Bhavin tried to create a similar sense of depth, and a space with a deep perspective by making drawings on the walls of his studio, a physical translation of the same was obtained by criss-crossing nylon thread around the viewing frame (for the video). He titled his works Line Form and Composition, though line and form still held relevant, the concept of composition seemed unsettled.

Though this was the final work which was displayed, Bhavin was working on the same idea of claustrophobia, but by viewing it from a different perspective, that of, survival in dire circumstances. He had designed a robe, which was meant to accommodate one’s necessary paraphernalia. For the same Bhavin sought help from Agat, who is from NIFT, Delhi. Bhavin through this work wanted to question the term necessary, as he looked at its constantly changing version. He dropped the idea for the residency, as he found his video work more interesting to experiment with, but intends to carry it forward later.

Sajad Malik has been persistently working on what has become his core concern - issues related to Kashmir. Sajad who has done his Bachelor’s from college of Fine Arts, Srinagar, works as a cartoonist for Greater Kashmir (a daily newspaper, from Srinagar). While working on his art works and his cartoons he makes sure that none of them overshadow each other. He refrains from employing a sardonic in his art works, which is a necessity for his cartoons and doesn’t allow the mildness of his art works to trickle in his ironic cartoons. To Sajad, who has had first hand experience of all that he tries to portray, it is not the idea of conflict, but the life within the conflict that holds a deeper meaning. There is always a stark difference in working mindfully and sensibly, and in the worst extreme selling sensitive, political issues. He says that by the time of his birth in the late 80’s, Kashmir was already in the grip of crisis, and so he has never experienced peace personally. Peace to him has always been a picture, which he creates in his

mind, and re-creates through his works, through nostalgia, i.e. through the narrations of his parents. He has worked on graphic novels on the same theme.

His video titled, Hopscotch is a construction, in which he sensitively used the idea of an innocent game played by a child, to hint at the larger political issues. Here the line plays a central role – at a primary level it seems a part of a harmless game, and he furthers it by portraying its negative form – as that of one dividing nations. The motifs chosen, initially seem de-contextualised, arabesque motifs, barbed wires, innocent animals and the map of Kashmir; but these nearly detached elements slowly interwove, as the film reeled, to lend a conjoined meaning. In a short and succinct manner Sajad mindfully speaks about things which he has been living through. A shattered mirror was placed on the floor, but it somehow seemed incongruent to the sensitivity of the animation. It is for the first time that Sajad has experimented with Cel Animation, to make this 2min movie.

Agat Sharma too transformed his unkempt studio into an attractive, spotlessly clean space filled with cosmetics designed by him, like a cosmetics section within a mall, which housed his interactive work titled, I Guarantee In The Next 15 Minutes You Will Change & You Won't Know. The work played with the idea of human emotions and sentiments through the use of cosmetics. He assigned various emotions to each of these cosmetics and assured its effect (inculcation of the quality within the user) after its use, as per the prescribed instructions. Generosity, Grace, Honesty, Elegance, Guilt, etc. were filled in attractive tubes, designed by Agat, further he chose specific colours which he felt appropriately portrayed the emotion. The design of the tube and the instructions coined by him, nearly called the viewers to pick them and read them. Agat had refrigerated these tubes to further add on a comforting feeling. The intention of the work was to actually make the viewers use the products, - use the soaps, both cakes and liquids, wash them off and to view themselves. Due to some technical problems the viewers couldn't use the products, but nevertheless were keen enough to carefully read the instructions, and many actually asked Agat if such cosmetics were available in the market. He also hints at, rather teases, the thought of desire of the consumer for instant results, that is, a use of a simple cosmetic, can improvise a human personality, by washing off guilt, adding grace, installing optimism, expecting ease, etc.

As seen in his earlier works, the city again played an important role in his current work. He observes and analyzes the changes a city undergoes and its obvious ripple effect over various faculties including its inhabitants. Through which he addressed the idea of consumerism and human sentiments, as seen in this work too. Well packaged products, placed in a spotlessly clean space, spaces to try out the products, all focused on the idea of saleability. He feels that there exists a vicious circle – as to what a city and its residents have to offer each other, and they get invariably caught in it. Agat has done his Masters from the National Institute of Fashion Technology, Delhi, which perhaps explains why his work makes a constant reference to the human body. In his earlier works Agat studied the changes in the city and even the technology and how largely assumed and accepted notions, definitions and ideas alter drastically with different spaces.

At the end of it, the residency could be put together as more than a summation of multiple episodes and events, which had a near to causal / reactionary effect on the residents, leading to

the body of works of the artist and also to the text written by me, which slowly took shape. To me it's more like a filmstrip edited together, such that the chronology of the events loses its importance but what remains, rather crops up / out is their preferential / selective assemblage of events. The experience at the residency came to all of us as not just a different space to work in but as of a space which allowed us to take path slightly diverging from the regular one; of exploring things which would have not been possible while sitting in our respective studios. The act of moving out of our cushy territories, and to enter an un-ventured working ways, yet justifying the divergence as it still remained within their respective ideological spectrum. Then the thought of success or failure was not of as much importance as that of the mental shift and of realignment required while undertaking the newer ways of working – being ready to take its criticism (both positive and negative) in a balanced and right sense. Then the need for presenting final works (art works and texts) for the residency and the open day seemed irrelevant as, it evidently has been more of an experimental span – which witnessed the executions of ideas which were brewing on our minds, and required a neutral / unprejudiced working space, which the residency provided, than a working span aimed at achieving a specific finished work.

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Peers 2010 Artists' Talks

FICA Reading Room, 21 May, 2010

The Khoj Peers Residency programme is known to have artists from diverse backgrounds, and it is the same case this year for the Peers 2010 too. With artists from various disciplines and with me as a critic the term diverse needs to be looked at very sensitively. A residency always demands artists or writers to step out of the regular ways and methods of working and their individual practices, to be a part of a prescribed group such that this act of “being a part” hints at a formation of a situation for intellectual osmosis against that of an isolated working practice. The term “diverse” too needs to be thought about carefully, because this diversity invariably provides opportunities for the members to learn something more, which falls apart from their precincts of knowledge. Therefore the term “diverse” hints not at the dissimilarity but in the possible productive outcomes this assemblage can bring about. The presentation at the FICA Reading Room was a good platform through which the artists could speak about their works in a public space. Regular discussions at the guest house are certainly beneficial but a discussion with people apart from the group needs a bit of a preparation.

Neha Thakar who has done her MFA in Painting from the MSU Baroda, was the first one to present her works. Thakar through her works plays with the idea of a ‘form’ and the change it undergoes. Her core concern is that of capturing a ‘particular process of transformation’, that is a shift, a move, from existence to non-existence; such that the form becomes or gets a status of a language. In order to show this transition Thakar has been using ice as (one of) her medium and moulds different forms from it. The ephemeral character and the tendency of ice to return to its original form is what appeals Thakar the most. During the presentation Thakar was questioned about the selection of the material (ice), to which she said that it accurately caters to her need for understanding and capturing the notion of temporality; further she grants a sort of symbolic connotation to them, as in her work titled Process - Dark black apples slowly melt, losing their form and finally disappear. In Delivered, ribbon tied - gift boxes, made of ice, lie “delivered”, and finally what remains are the ribbons which were once wrapped around the gifts, through this work she looks at the idea of growing commercialization.

An interesting aspect of her work is that of its final result. When asked about it she said that since there remains no physical evidence of her works, the documentation of the process itself becomes an art work or what can be called as the final tangible product; which she usually does through videos and photographs like in her works titled Process, Purified and Delivered. Apart from these works, some of the works which Thakar has been working with and intends to carry further in the Khoj residency is that of fragrance/ various scents. In the post presentation sessions, Thakar was told by a member from the audience, that a process is just a part of the entire work; there is a lot more to it.

After Thakar, Sajad Malik presented his works. Malik has been working as a cartoonist for Greater Kashmir, a Daily English Newspaper from Srinagar, for nearly eight years. He has done his BFA from the college of Fine Arts, Srinagar. Coming from a region which has a highly

volatile political and social background, Malik's works address various issues – spanning from wider political one to those of absolute personal experiences. Being a cartoonist the idea of narration stands out as a dominant element in his works.

Further being a cartoonist the need for a sardonic tone becomes necessary element in his works too. In the work titled 1990, the underlying political unrest is evident. Few photographs, showing 'Old Kashmir', show armed men standing in a square, and a bridge on which one could once stand fearlessly. Some of his works which account his personal experiences hint and question the widely accepted notions of identity and of censorship. During the talk Malik mentioned that he has been inspired by Marjane Satrapi and Spiegelman. Apart from these works, Malik has published a few graphic novels too. For the residency Malik intends to work with animation.

For this presentation, while choosing the order in which the artists would present their works, one point of caution was noted, that no two artists with the same visual language were placed correspondingly. Rabindra Patra, who has done his BFA from College of Arts and Craft, Dhauli, Bhubaneswar, shifted to Delhi a couple of years ago and is currently working at the Gardi Artists Studio, New Delhi. While presenting his works Patra gave a background to his works – saying that in his hometown, every child is told to fund their own studies after basic schooling. So like others Patra too took up a job which dealt with electronics. What is of importance is that he uses this knowledge of his as he sensitively conjures it in formulating his visual vocabulary. Since Patra shifted from a town like Bhubaneswar to a Metropolis like Delhi, he could evidently feel the strong pulse of the city – which oscillated between its commanding power and its lively energy. His works like Ande ka Funda and Jo Jita Wohi Sikandar, too revolve around the idea of survival and the understanding and experience of power-play.

When questioned about the need for the employment of electronic parts in his ceramic works, Patra says that he is well versed with the fundamental functioning and properties of every component that he chooses; and he uses the parts accordingly/symbolically. For instance in his landscapes, Patra uses various parts to construct a city. Further provides an aerial view, and renders a nearly abstract form to the scape. Therefore the intention is not to erect a particular city, but to suggest the inbuilt character of power (it possesses or lacks) at various nodes within a given space. He claims to have an (personal) outsider-insider experience of the Metro; earlier as an imagined space in which he was intending to shift and the actual experience of the city in which he is living.

Most of the artists from the Peers 2010 have attended Art Schools but Agat Sharma, has done his Masters from NIFT, Delhi and therefore his works need to be looked at from a slightly different angle. Sharma through his study has been looking at the changes in the city and even the technology and how largely assumed and accepted notions, definitions and ideas alter drastically with different spaces.

Through his works like Fear and Fashion, Panoptic Modernity of the Metro, he addresses the facts about surveillance in public spaces. In the Metro (railways) he examines various signage systems which nearly install a feeling of fear. How does technology for example the X-Rays, which was once invented for the benefit of humans, today is used against them. Further he looks into the definition of a commuter, which is nearly framed in a manner that every individual

person is looked upon as an object of suspicion, as individuals capable of spoiling and causing damage (therefore constantly frisked), to the space around her/him, and he tries to relate this to the notion of guilt and nostalgia. Considering this the body invariably rather subconsciously becomes a central part in his work. Sharma's works like 11th Hour and Geek Gods were part of his master's works. During his presentation Sharma was questioned about two things - one that all his works seem to be currently at a conceptual level, and since he is a student of design, how does he imagine an actual expression, a tangible form to it. And second one was regarding his project on the Metro, that his work intends to speak against rather replace the existing model, but he too is intending to go against a system by setting another one, which is like a vicious circle, since there would never be a system which is complete on its own.

Bhavin Mistry was the last presenter. Mistry has done his Masters in Painting from MSU Baroda. His earlier works were focused on attaining a particular textual quality. He would observe various patterns and textures formed on the walls, and would capture them to give a landscape like feel, and moved ahead to explore various intuitive aspects in them. Over time, Mistry's work has undergone a considerable change, but one cannot say that it is completely divided from its past. Now he uses ubiquitous and found-objects and works on them in a way that he gives rise to nearly hybrid forms. Various tools and objects of utility undergo a process of distortion – rather recreation to attain a new form. Most of his works are Untitled. He gives these new forms a sort of an unrecognisable character such that they can be granted – nearly supernormal or an alien like status.

The post presentation session went on with the artists interacting with the audience on a personal basis. Going back to the beginning of this writ-up and carrying it further, I feel that this residency will act like a space in which we all can take a step back and let those people look at and speak about our works with whom we are sharing most of the working time together. Considering the questions which were raised during the presentation and the personal talks it is evident that each one of us would be forced to rethink about one's work. Further – be it about artists or writers- it is taken for granted that one must continuously experiment, but we need to understand that all experiments need not necessarily succeed, however high the probability of success be. But a residency like this with its open structure provides space which nearly justifies the process of such experiments and even its outcomes.

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