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Illustration List

Fig 1. Mallarmé, S. (1897). *Un coup de dés jamais n'abolira le hasard (A Throw of the Dice will Never Abolish Chance)*. [Poem].

Fig 2. Arp, J. (1917). *Untitled (Collage with Squares Arranged according to the Laws of Chance)*. [Collage].

Fig 3. Duchamp, M. (1917). *Bicycle Wheel*. [Sculpture].

Fig 4. Ray, M. (1922). *Rayograph*. [Photogram].

Fig 5. Ray, M. (1920). *L'Enigme d'Isidore Ducasse*. [Sculpture].

Fig 6. Christo (1961). *Package on a Table*. [Sculpture].

Fig 7. Christo and Jeanne-Claude (1985). *The Pont Neuf Wrapped*. [Sculpture] Paris.

Fig 8. Cage, J. (1951). *Music of Changes*. [Sheet Music].

Fig 9. Ader, B. (1971). *Broken fall (organic)*. [Silver gelatin print].

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Fig 11. Debord, G. (1955). *Psychogeographic guide of Paris*. [Print].

Fig 12. Oliver, A. (2019). *Dicing*. [Photographic Sculpture].

Fig 13. Duchamp, M. (1914). *3 stoppages étalon (3 Standard Stoppages)*. [Wood, glass and paint on canvas].

Fig 14. Baldessari, J. (1973). *Throwing Three Balls in the Air to Get a Straight Line (Best of Thirty-Six Attempts)*. [Photograph].

Fig 15. Henry, D. (1964). *Untitled*. [Mechanical pen and ink drawing].

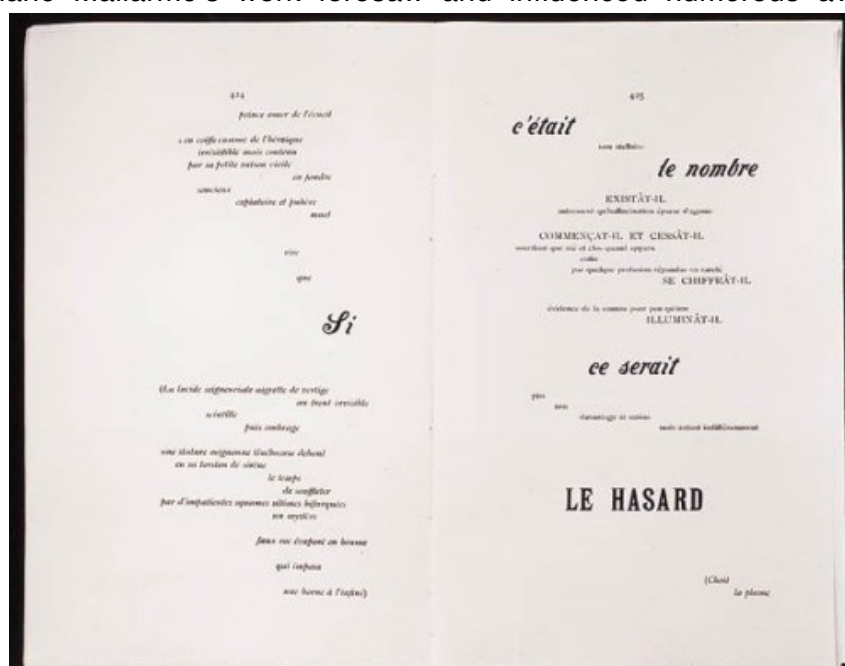
Fig 16. Mohr, M. (1985). *Divisibility I*. [Ink on canvas].

Why is the concept of chance still a key strategy in artists' investigations into the contemporary world and how has the introduction of digital processes and the Internet affected the use of chance in art?

The art of chance, whether it is used as a method to produce art or as the subject of investigation, has been central to many artists' practices across a variety of forms, including; fine art, sculpture, conceptual photography, film, music and performance art. Artists working either in the Dada and Surrealist movements were some of the first to realise the potential of chance characteristics in the medium of art. The method of using chance in art is something I am very interested in, not just academically but within my own conceptual practice also. I hope, in writing this essay, to deepen my knowledge of the use of chance and learn more about the potential techniques to produce art. In my dissertation I want to explore the history of chance in art, specifically why a century after the Dadaists and Surrealists first questioned it, is the use of chance still a key strategy in artists' work in the contemporary world?

The concept of using chance in art began with the Dada movement in the late 1910s, when artists started to explore the elements of chance in both their methodology and the presentation of work. 19th century poet Stéphane Mallarmé's work foresaw and influenced numerous avant-garde, artistic movements in the early 20th century.

poem, *A throw of never abolish freeform poem in typographic embrace the art of*



early 20th Mallarmé's *the dice will chance, is a which he uses methods to chance.*

Such methods continued into the work of others, for example, Marcel Duchamp's piece *Bicycle Wheel*, which was made from attaching a bicycle wheel to a chair in a chance encounter. Another example is when artist, Jean Arp, tore up a failed drawing and when the pieces of paper fell to

Fig. 1

the ground, they created a whole new composition. This gesture-born work, like

Duchamp's, came out of anger, as they found a sort of solace in this randomness and chancery, which contrasted with the mechanistic modernity of warfare in World War I. Duchamp, more so than Arp, managed to take away the hand of the artist from his process, allowing the randomness of a chance encounter to take control. His work was less about making and more about encountering readymade objects. His technique of appropriating mundane artifacts and pronouncing them 'art', caused controversy and unsettled the centuries of thinking and views that art should be beautiful and not resemble the contents of your garden shed. Instead, it was argued, that 'an ordinary object could be elevated to the dignity of a work of art by the mere choice of an artist.' (Breton, 1938) Whether it is Arp's discovery that the use of chance to produce art can be compelling on its own, or Duchamp's decision to re-encounter objects and declare them art, these acts merge the line between art and the controlled decision making of an artist.



Fig. 2

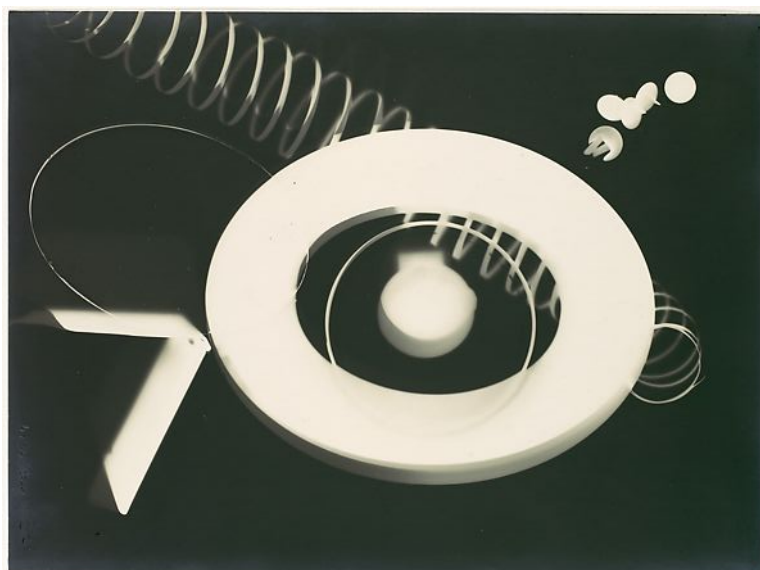


Fig. 3

The outcomes were unpredictable and revolutionary for the time; art had not been made like this before. Arp and Duchamp stopped following the rules, and allowed the art of chance to take them adrift. As the French writer, Jacques Rivière said, 'The Dadas consider words only as accidental: they let them happen. Language for them is no longer a means, it is a being.' (Rivière, 1937)

In the 'First Manifesto of Surrealism', Breton said 'to you, who write, these elements, on the surface, are as strange to you as they are to anyone else, and naturally you are wary of them.' (Breton, 1924).

This holds true for the techniques used by Man Ray's more photography, for appearance that they accident. In fact, technique of arranging sensitive paper and



experimental surrealist artists. experimental example, has the were made by Ray's famous objects on light exposing them to

the sun was discovered by accident.

Fig. 4

This method of chance encounter allowed Ray to move away from the preconceived notion of what a 'photograph' should be. But Man Ray also worked with a sculptural technique similar to that of Duchamp's. For example, his piece *L'Enigme d'Isidore Ducasse*, was made up of a sewing machine that was wrapped in a blanket and tied up with string. Man Ray's method of using a mundane object like a sewing machine was inspired by a simile used by the French writer, Isidore Ducasse, 'Beautiful as the chance encounter, on a dissecting table, of a sewing machine and an umbrella' (Ducasse, 1869). It was a phrase that was valued greatly by the writers and artists in Paris that formed the core of the Paris Dada and later Surrealist movements.



Fig. 6



Ray's act of hiding the objects creates the sense of mystery that goes hand in hand with chance and serendipity. As a viewer of the photograph, we don't know whether there is a sewing machine or possibly an umbrella under the blanket, like Duchamp, giving the mundane items a new meaning and mystery. His approach anticipates Christo's wrapping of objects. For example, Christo's *Package on a Table*, 1961, uses this idea of masking an object to generate feelings of uncertainty between what we can actually see and what we think may be under the material. Christo plays with chance encounter with his *Wrapped Objects*, but also in his monumental installations, like *The Pont Neuf Wrapped*. Due to the nature of the materials he chooses to work with, he can't fully control the way the fabric folds or drapes over the objects; he can't control the variations of natural light, leaving the way that his installations form up to the chance of nature and gravity.



Fig. 7

The use of chance procedures in art carried on into the 20th century, for example the avant-garde composer, John Cage, who used experimental methods utilising chance encounters to produce music. Cage worked with aleatoric music, which comes from the Latin word *alea*, which means 'dice'. Aleatoric music is made when some elements of the composition are left to chance. Most commonly he used the 'I Ching' method, which is based on a Chinese classic text that is commonly used as a system for predicting the future. The I Ching was applied to large charts of tempo, sounds, time, notes etc. For example, works from the collection *Music for Piano* were based on paper imperfections, where the imperfections on the paper were translated into different pitches and notes. Another example of this method can be found in his *Music of Changes*, where the method of tossing coins was used to determine the note or playing technique. These methods leave the musical outcome up to chance. Another aspect of his aleatoric music that interested me is the indeterminacy. Indeterminacy leaves certain parts of the piece unspecified so that the outcome of that part is up to the performer's interpretation, so the performance will vary each time it is played. As David Ingram said, 'Music thus arises out of the chance sonic encounter between human performer and the natural material of the instrument itself. It is as if nature is being allowed an equal role in the process of composition' (Ingram, 2006)

69 = ♩ = 2 1/2 sec. ACCEL. **MUSIC OF CHANGES** John Cage

176 RITARD.
(NO 2nd SUSTAINED)

Fig. 8

An Artist who was working at a similar time to Cage was the Dutch conceptual artist, Bas Jan Ader. Due to the performative nature of his work, a lot is left up to chance and serendipity. Much of Ader's work was centred around the act of falling. For example his piece *Fall I*, 1970, documents the artist sitting in a chair on the roof of his house. In the sequence of photographs, he loses his position, tumbles down the roof and falls into the bushes below. Similar pieces feature the artist cycling into a canal and falling out of the tree. Ader stated that 'when I fall off the roof of my house or into canal, it was because gravity made it self a master over me' (Ader, 1971). Bas Jan Ader's performance of pointless tasks that set himself up for a sort of failure is an act of relinquishing control and is a strategic decision to leave his fate up to chance. In his final act of succumbing to chance, he left his fate up to the natural elements and tried to cross the Atlantic Ocean in a very small boat, never to be seen again. This lack of control that Ader uses is a slightly more dangerous version of chance and serendipity, like when Arp tossed his torn up painting on the floor, Ader uses his own body to see what chance will make of it.



Fig. 9



Fig. 10

The Situationists were part of an international organisation made up of revolutionary avant-garde artists, writers and philosophers. The leading figure of this organisation was the Marxist philosopher, Guy Debord. In 1955, he published his 'Introduction to a critique of urban geography' in which he defined the concept of psychogeography as 'the study of precise laws and specific effects of the geographic environment, consciously organized, or not, on the emotions and behaviours of individuals' (Debord, 1955).

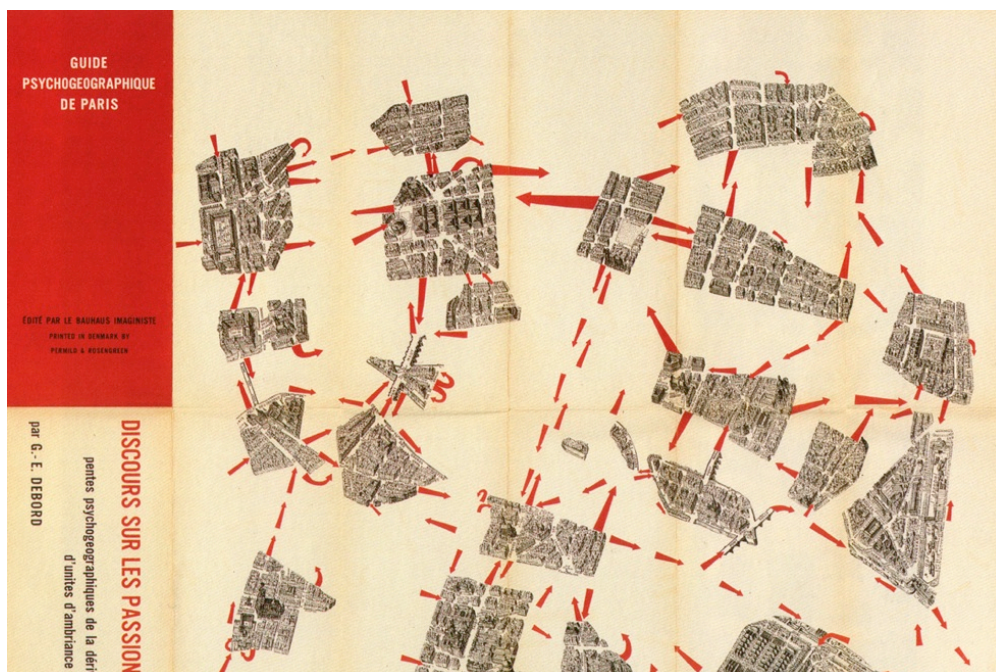


Fig. 11

Debord's concept was inspired by the 19th century poet and writer Charles Baudelaire's notion of the flâneur, which is essentially an urban wanderer. Debord suggested playful and inventive ways of moving through the urban environment in order to examine it in its deepest form. Debord used the term 'dérive' to describe 'a mode of experimental behaviour linked to the conditions of urban society: a technique of rapid passage through varied ambiances.' (Debord, 1956). The Situationists were interested in moving away from what society expected, and encouraged people to come up with their own trajectories. They believed that society was trying 'to control everything and leave as little room

as possible for uncertainty. Chance is then some kind of balance: one we can't predict but that we try to reduce constantly' (Ascher, 2009). Philosopher, Walter Benjamin suggested that Baudelaire's 'flâneur' was an endangered species due to the urban environment changing. Perhaps the slow, serendipitous wanderings of the flâneur are no longer possible:

A man who goes for a walk ought not to have to concern himself with any hazards he may run into, or with the regulations of a city. But he cannot do this today without taking a hundred precautions... If he tries to collect the whimsical thoughts that may have come to mind, very possibly occasioned by sights on the street, he is deafened by car horns, and stupefied by loud talkers. (Benjamin, 1982)

But Debord's original concept of a *dérive* was that 'the action of chance is naturally conservative and tends, in a new framework, to reduce everything to the alternation of a limited number of variants and habit' (Debord, 1956). It seems important to just touch on these notions but I plan to examine them further in my actual dissertation. Debord's concepts have been a great influence on my own practice and the use of psychgeography to produce experimental work really interests me. For example I came up with a concept based around the unpredictability of a die, and the act of 'dicing' (Rhinehart, 1971) which



Fig. 12

is a term from Luke Rhinehart's book, 'Dice Man'. Dicing is when people leave their choices up to a die and chance. I assigned a list of instructions to the faces of the dice, and left my decisions up to chance. Using a random starting point I allowed the die to take me on a psychogeographical *dérive*. I gave myself the same amount of minutes, as the number that I rolled, to take a photograph. This act helped me to see that the medium of photography is as equally premised on 'event' as it is on the 'picture'.

Following the Situationist International's dissolution in 1972, John Baldessari produced a body of work entitled *Throwing Three Balls in the Air to get a Straight Line (Best of Thirty-Six attempts)*. This was part of a crucial time period for photography as an art and Baldessari was one of the key conceptual artists fighting the medium's autonomy, beginning to recognise the aesthetic possibilities of photography. Baldessari was greatly influenced by Duchamp, particularly his piece *Three Standard Stoppages* which was an experiment like Baldessari's to 'imprison and preserve forms obtained through chance, through my chance.' (Duchamp, 1964) Baldessari's *Throwing Three Balls* essentially carried on where Duchamp had left off. Baldessari hoped to produce an ideal geometric form but inevitably fails; he could not control how the balls would fall. *Throwing Three Balls* is a representation of photography as a social form, the phrase he uses 'best of thirty-six attempts' alludes to the 36 frames to the standard roll of film. Like other photographers of the time, Baldessari had thirty-six opportunities to capture what they wanted. And from his thirty-six attempts he selected his best one,

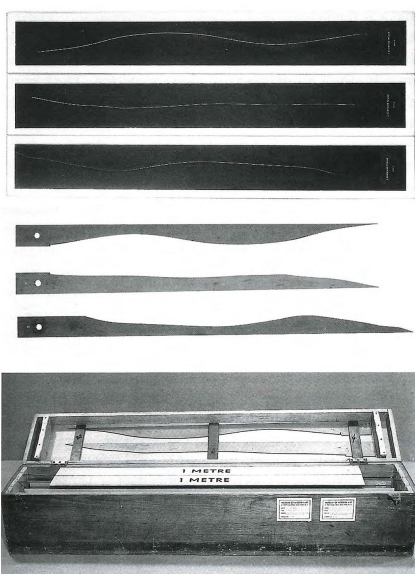
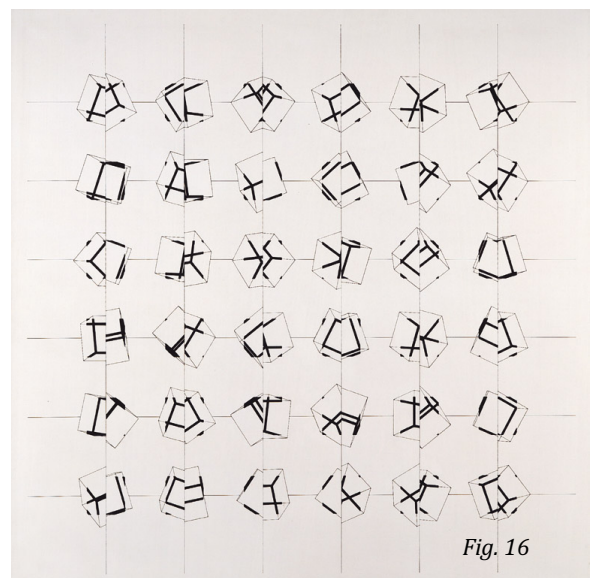
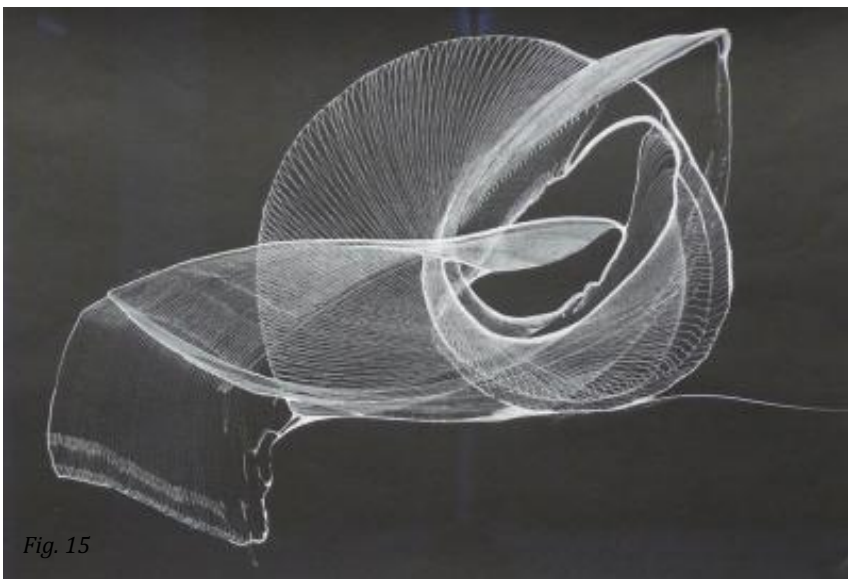


Fig. 14

which is essentially what we do now with our digital cameras. Baldessari has tried to eliminate the possibility of chance by repeating the process.

Moving into the later 20th century and the 21st century, the invention and accessibility of computers and the Internet have had a huge affect on art. Since the 1960s, artists have used computers to create digital artworks often using these technologies to explore aspects of chance and control. After World War II there was a lot of new mechanical technology that lead to the creation of art. For example, the artist Desmond Paul Henry, was a pioneer of early computer art. Henry built drawing machines out of the cutting-edge computer technology used in World War II. Henry's drawing machines weren't like the other computers of the time, they could not store information or be pre-programmed; instead, his machines relied on the 'mechanics of chance' (Peiry, 1997). What the drawing looked like depended on the arrangement of the mechanical components. Any alterations to the machine, like a loosened screw, could completely change the outcome of the drawing. The unpredictable nature of his machines was due to 'faults in the assemblage and parts of the machines. And quite a lot of my productions came from my own lack of skill in assembling the sub-parts of the machine' (Henry, 2003)



The development of computer technology lead to algorithmic art, also known as computer-generated art, and also generative art, which is made using a predetermined software that often includes elements of chance. In the 1970s, Manfred Mohr was one of the first to use generative techniques to digitally produce art. Mohr was the first artist to allow computers to fully generate a piece of art, rather than using a computer to help execute an artwork. He leaves his final outcome completely up to chance; he has no control over what will appear on the paper. Mohr was fascinated by the generation of geometric shapes using computers. Through using the computer's ability to algorithmically produce endless streams of data he was able to explore a form of art that hadn't been seen before. His work often revolves the concept of a cube, a surprisingly minimal shape but to him it held endless amounts of algorithmic possibilities. In his body of work, *Divisibility I*, Mohr uses the cube as a fixed structure to generate signs. He divided the cube into four sections by digitally cutting it both horizontally and vertically, he then placed them randomly back together; the cut up cubes created systematic, geometric patterns. In my dissertation I will further expand on other techniques and more contemporary artists using computer technology, such as Pascal Dombis and Marc Lee. The use of algorithmic and generative art is something I am very intrigued by and I hope to look into these techniques in my own practice in the next academic year.

In this proposal I have covered how the use of chance in art has evolved over the 19th and 20th centuries. When writing my dissertation, I want to further explore how chance is used as a method in contemporary art and how it may progress in the future. Moving forward, I want to look into the notion of chance, both academically and conceptually within my own practice. Through my writing, I want to uncover how acts of chance influence experimental work and want to understand how contemporary technology, such as digital processes and the internet, effect this notion of chance. Have they increased the use of chance in art or ironed out the possibility of unpredictability?

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Well done _____ : this is an excellent, well-researched proposal.

Very good use of source material, both artists' work and supporting theory. Very well structured and paced so that ideas are developed and presented logically.

The idea of commenting on different fields of creativity under your chosen subject is very well realised.

Considerable evidence of subject knowledge and understanding. This allows you to make value judgements about your subject and support them with research.

Very complete research structure with illustration and bibliography, demonstrating a thorough enquiry into a complex subject.

Your proposal leads very well toward its conclusions with an appropriate question for ongoing investigation.

Evidence of a significant understanding of the work that exemplifies your thesis and the links between those varied bodies of work.

Complex arguments are handled well and always return to your underlying theme of chance as a strategy.

This proposal is a good read that doesn't get bogged down in the complexity of some of the work referenced.

Some phrasing could be improved: "the use of chance procedures in art carried on into the 20th century ..." follows a paragraph that is already about 20th century art (Christo, following Duchamp and Man Ray). And maybe 'procedure' is the wrong word, sounding a bit medical. Also, the segue from Bas Jan Ader into the Situationists is a bit sudden given how well the essay flows as a whole. This is, as your mark suggests, just nit-picking, though I'm sure you want to know about any areas for improvement.

This is exemplary in its presentation, use of illustrations, quality of language, referencing and bibliography.

Very well structured and beautifully written, promising an excellent dissertation to follow.

